

The Golden Chain

Alumni Journal of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education



THE STORY OF OUR SCHOOL

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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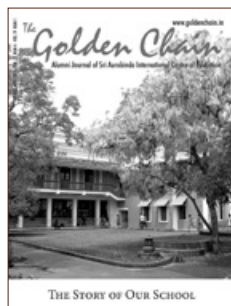
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The Golden Chain

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THE EDITORS' PAGE

by Sunayana Panda '79

As this anniversary issue goes to press, we, the former students of the School, are in the middle of preparations to mark 75 years of our alma mater. We are rehearsing for the cultural programme that will be part of the get-together or seriously practicing our drill for the 2nd December programme. The Sportsground and the Theatre are full of the old and the young, busy preparing the shows everyone is eagerly waiting for. The Golden Chain office is crowded and the phones never stop ringing. Thanks to Facebook and WhatsApp everyone is being informed about every new development, almost by the hour.

This re-union with old friends is also the occasion for making new bonds with former students of batches other than ours. The seven and a half decades over which students have come out of this institution cover almost a lifetime. We belong to different generations but a common thread of love for the Mother and Sri Aurobindo binds all of us. And it is that love which has pulled all of us here. The enthusiasm is infectious and I have heard several times people say, "This is my last chance to be at such a celebration because in 25 years when the School celebrates its centenary I may not be alive."

The important dates are just round the corner and it feels as if we are going back to our childhood, as if we will relive those days when we lived as carefree birds. There is an illusion in our hearts that, as we push the high iron gates of the School, we will see our teachers as they were forty or fifty years ago, that our classmates will come running to us and that we will find the School courtyard as it was all those years back. Alas, with a thud in our hearts, we realise that those days will never come back. The physical space is more or less the same but the psychological space is completely different.

Looking back will bring us some happiness

surely but the future is where we are headed and it will be more useful to think what will happen in a decade from now. The Mother had immense hopes about the future of the School when she started it but we are quite far from the great seat of knowledge that she wanted it to become. What precisely did she visualise for the School? What was to be its nature and scope? What can we do to realise her dream? These are the questions that we should ask ourselves as we reach this important milestone.

This 75th anniversary of the School also marks the 25th anniversary of *The Golden Chain* magazine. In fact, we have not had the time to celebrate our own anniversary! The magazine was started as a keep-in-touch platform, with each other and with the Ashram. Today we are happy to say that our readership extends well beyond our alumni members and I would like to point out with pardonable pride that we are sometimes told how our magazine is eagerly read from cover to cover, allowing the Ashramites and devotees to see an aspect of Ashram life which otherwise would be invisible to them.

All over the world there are alumni associations which keep their members connected to their alma mater and which organise regular get-togethers. But there is something that differentiates us from all others in that we are still continuing to learn. All that the Mother wanted was living souls, so it is a lifelong course that will never end. And only when we become living souls can we feel that we have shown our gratitude to the Mother.

All is said in that smile the Mother has as she cuts the ribbon in that well-known photograph taken on the day when she inaugurated the School building. Let us meditate only on that smile of hope and love, and let it fill our hearts. ❧

A CLICK THAT BINDS FOR ETERNITY

Krishna Chakravarti '66

It was some time in the early 1990s that Dyuman-da suddenly asked me if I had any photographs with the Mother. I said, “No.” When we settled in the Ashram, the Mother was attending regular activities and was accessible but never a thought occurred to me to get a picture taken with the Mother, in case... though a few of my friends had taken theirs. And he replied that a split second click would have bound me to the Mother for eternity.

I really felt sad. I was then passing through a very trying time and needed some solid help to tie me to the Mother. Perhaps Dyuman-da had felt my difficulties and asked about such a photo as that physical reality with Mother would help carry me through hard times. I felt the need but there was no solution to my regret of not having any photo with the Mother.

Soon the Golden Jubilee of our School came. Dyuman-da, who started the whole idea of celebrating the event, and was most enthusiastic, had left us the previous year, in 1992. The celebrations were held in a grand way and being a student of the 1966 batch I participated in many events. Our 1966 batch made dinner-set table mats in tatting and painting for the occasion. There was an exhibition put up in the Exhibition Hall with lots of old records and photographs. I went to see it and it was when I had nearly gone through all the photographs that suddenly a photo came off from its frame and fluttered and fell near my feet. I picked it up and went back to put it in its frame. The person in charge came and took it from my hand. As I turned back to continue my round of the room my eyes suddenly fell on the photo next to the one that had blown away and I stood thunderstruck.

How could this photo have escaped my notice in my round of the room? How on earth... how

could I have told Dyuman-da that I had no picture with the Mother? There I was praying to Mother with folded hands. And like a film the whole story of that photo of thirty years earlier unfolded in my mind. Only the background music was “How could I forget this picture?”

Each year Chiman-bhai, the French teacher in our School, used to write a drama in French for the Mother’s birthday, to be performed by students under his direction. One day, some time in Oct 1961, he told me that he had a role for me in the drama he would stage on Feb 21st the next year and asked me to meet him in Room No.12 of the School at three o’clock. It so happened that I had a Bengali class in that room in the 6th period, and as I was always late in doing my homework I decided to go early and do my homework in that class-room and then meet Chiman-bhai.

As I approached the room I found that Chiman-bhai was already sitting there. He looked at me sternly and asked, “Why have you come early? Your time is at three.” I got nervous seeing him angry and stammered that I had a class in the 6th period in that room so I had come early to do my homework. He looked surprised and said that he thought this room remained vacant in the afternoon, so he had chosen the room so as not to be disturbed.

“As you have come”, he told me sternly, “go and sit on the last bench, in that corner, and do your homework. Don’t try to see or hear what I do.” I nodded very obediently, went to the last bench and concentrated on doing my homework. After sometime he called me and said “You can come now; it is your time.” I went and sat in front of him on the first bench.

He looked at me and said, “You see, the drama that I have written has two main roles. One role



Krishna Chakravarti sitting in the centre, in front of the Mother.

is that of the princess — that's the most important role. The other main role is that of a Guru, then there are some smaller roles. As the role of the princess is the most important I called that person first, then comes the second important role, that of the Guru — that I kept for you — so I called you next. But as the person chosen for the first role did not turn up, I think that the role should go to you instead, as you came first. I will call you later when I have chosen people for the other roles." There the discussion ended, as the other students came in for the class.

After three days he told me that he had a problem, "I had chosen T for the role of princess and as she did not turn up I gave it to you and kept the role of Guru for her. But she is refusing to do that role and asking for the role of the princess. She said that she just slept off that afternoon! But I will not change the role now. Can you suggest anyone for the role of the Guru?"

As my friends already knew about the drama and R was interested I told Chiman-bhai about

her. Finally the cast was decided and practice started in the unfinished Art Gallery with only the asbestos shed, the flooring was rough and dusty, being the roof of the ground floor.

It is the story of "Une Âme Souveraine". Twelve angels want to take birth on the earth as they find a great possibility of progress in terrestrial life. Each one chooses his place of birth and the drama unfolds. The angels dance happily in heaven before coming down. Anu-ben was asked to help compose the dance and teach the participants. The first practice was held in the Art Gallery after the group activity. This was followed by the practice of the drama under Chiman-bhai's supervision in the same place. It started with the small princess getting educated under the guidance of the Guru in the palace.

She then grows up and goes to the forest to hunt. There she meets the prince — the son of her father's arch enemy. The cloud of a bad omen hangs over the kingdom and the villagers are worried. They blame the prince for bringing bad

luck and want the princess to cut off all relations with him. The princess with a golden heart cannot understand the turmoil in her heart and the antagonism of the villagers.

She goes for advice to the Guru who tells her to follow her golden aura – the Divine Mother who resides in her and guides her. She goes to the forest not to hunt but to introspect. An old villager comes and requests her not to leave the palace and go away with her prince whom she loves. She must listen to the loving words of the villagers and stay back for them. A little later the prince comes but she refuses to go with him, choosing to follow her inner dictates. The drama ends with all the participants sitting in a semi-circle praying to the Mother and She replies,

“Sincérité! Sincérité! Voici Ma force toute puissante.

Sincérité! Sincérité! Voici Ma joie la plus pure.

Sincérité !Sincérité! Voici Ma victoire certaine.”

That day on Mother’s birthday in 1962, after the March Past, Pranab-da announced that all the participants in the drama could go to Bratati for make-up. We came out from our individual groups, all teenagers, and rushed to change. In the Playground the programme with the Mother continued. She walked up to the middle of the Playground with Pranab-da. He announced, “Bonne Fête à Douce Mère”, the whole Playground resounded with our voices. She looked frail, fairy-like, beauty incarnate, an angel from outer space.

Millie-di asked me to go to Neel-bhai for my make-up. He asked me who I was. I replied, “Krishna”. He immediately got up and rushed to Millie-di saying there must be a mistake, “How can you have two Krishnas of the same age in one drama? The other girl also said she was Krishna when I asked her who she was.”

Millie-di solved his problem by saying, “They have the same name – one is the prince and the other is the princess.” This was the dilemma that

the spectators also faced. The drama took place in front of the Mother who sat in front of the map of India, the group members stood according to their groups on the sides, the spectators were seated on the northern side having only the rear view. All twelve of us were girls of the same age and only the old man was male. The spectators wondered who was the father, the queen, the prince and the princess. The king looked younger than his daughter the princess. Only by their dress or make up could one discern. After the drama we all rushed home to change because there was also a dance programme at the theatre by Chandralekha.

I was still standing stunned in front of the picture – the whole anecdote passing like a film. The next day, the first thing I did was to try to get a copy of that photo for myself. I got one after a few days and the first thing I did was to avidly look for my family members. There was Didi standing tall with her head held high, I could discern clearly my younger sister with that mischievous smile on her face, already planning how to tease me at home about the drama. I could, with difficulty, discern the fair face of my brother managing to peep through all the heads, only by his Elvis Presley hair style which took him hours to fix. They all were in their respective groups. I shifted my eyes to look for my mother among the spectators who were not in group. Alas, the photo was blurred and I could not make out anything. And then suddenly like a breath of fresh air the thought struck me – though invisible she was there among the spectators, so she is there. We are all bound by one click together with the Mother. We all will be always together for eternity with the Mother.

What Grace, what Mercy, what benediction that the picture was taken with all of us with the Mother because it would be the last one of its kind, as the Mother stopped coming out and “Une Âme Souveraine” was the last drama seen by Her. ☚

GUIDING BEACONS

Maurice Shukla '75 remembers some of his teachers

As we are into the 75th year of the S.A.I.C.E., it is probably an apt moment to give expression to something that has been stirring inside me for quite some time now: to remember those influences of my school-life that have shaped and made me what I am today. This process of becoming clearly continues. Beside that very special atmosphere that pervaded the school I was blessed and privileged to grow up in, I was very fortunate indeed to have walked those formative years of my youth with some teachers who have left an indelible imprint on my life. And even today, almost a good five decades on, they keep lighting lamps along my way. Allow me today to personally salute and thank them for what they managed to accomplish in my life, first of a student, then of a teacher and finally of a human being, in sometimes subtle, and at others direct, ways.

I will start with Tanmaya-da.

He was the pillar of the “Libre Progrès” and a beacon of unwavering enthusiasm and optimism! Despite all the internal resistance to the setting up of the Free Progress system in our school, he never ceased to believe in it. Led by hope and a very deep-seated faith, he marched on fearlessly on this extraordinary adventure in the world of pedagogy that goes way beyond Montessori or the Steiner system. The ‘Libre Progrès’ has been the “Heart and Soul” of the S.A.I.C.E, for it

mirrors most faithfully the vision of the Masters with regard to the conception of the child and his deep-rooted need and longing for knowledge. I was among the 60-odd students who chose to take the plunge into this new school of “learning” and what a fortunate decision that has been! Today as I stand on the verge of “retirement” from my teaching life (if it were possible, that is), I can say warmly with Robert Frost:

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.*



Tanmaya-da

The ‘Libre Progrès’ would never have flourished had the Mother not got this “column of strength and perseverance” called Tanmaya-da as Her instrument. His ever-bubbling energy, his constant support and understanding of our longing for new paths of learning, his trust and confidence in his children’s ability to make the best use of the freedom on offer, and his gentle ways of nudging us to the “Source” of that élan and enthusiasm, have remained my life-long escorts. Like the good shepherd, he would always help me get my scattered flock of ideas and thoughts

organised together and shape them into worthwhile tools of heady, enlarging knowledge and joy. Often in my experience of a modest teacher, I have had to fight the ghosts of cynicism, despair

and discouragement too. Tanmaya-da's face has always appeared before me with that unmistakable, contagious glimmer of faith in his eyes, to egg me on with renewed hope and vigour. Thank you, Tanmaya-da, for your reassuring presence beside me as I totter along towards an ever-receding horizon of a truly "worthy" teacher.

Three teachers in the 'Libre Progrès' stand out in my heart and mind and to these I owe a great deal too: Luc Venet, my teacher of 'Mathématiques modernes', Guruprasad or "Goupi" as he was lovingly nicknamed and last but not least Nandita-di. All the three have continued to shine on my life and give direction to my teaching.

Let me start with Nandita-di, then. I landed in her lap, as it were, when I was barely 14! And what a stroke of luck it has been. Having left my Hindi classes mid-year, I decided to learn Bengali. Bengali poetry had always had great appeal to my ears and I would wonder if I could ever pick up enough of the language to relish it fully. And what an amazing teacher she turned out to be! She is the kind of teacher who encourages a child to "hitch his wagon to a star", I guess and so within six months I was reading Rabindranath Tagore, Michael Madhushudhan Dutt's *Meghnad Badh*, Bankimchandra and Saratchandra's deeply moving novels! And I was thoroughly enjoying them too. Nandita-di also initiated me into the love of Indian classical music and dance which has turned out to be such an enriching element in shaping my sensibility and sensitivity. And since she was remarkably fluent in Hindi, I managed to keep in touch with a language that I had almost completely abandoned for Bengali. But that is not why I still cherish her today. I cherish her for all the other things that she subtly inculcated in me. Nandita-di was a person with whom I could discuss just about "anything", whether it was academic or touched domains beyond the School. She had that very rare capacity of truly "listening" to you without ever trying to impose her own thoughts or ideas. And thank you also for your immaculate "dignity", for never did I hear, even once, escape from your lips a critical comment



Nandita-di

or anything disparaging about any of your colleagues or anyone for that matter.

And in matters that were related to my personal problems too, of growing up through my adolescent years, my dreams and anxieties, heartbreaks and idealistic delusions, never was she ever "judgmental"! She was a mother, a friend, a teacher, all rolled into one. There was something about her that taught me "integrity" because she was a very clear, honest, straightforward human being who had her values but without ever flaunting them. None of those moral ones at all but what I would qualify as values of "consciousness". Thanks to her "non-judgmental" open-minded and open-hearted approach, her refusal to quote from hallowed texts and sermonise, I began to truly understand and appreciate our Masters' vision of things and they became an enduring and invisible presence in my life's journey. And I feel that is how They too would have loved to be kept vibrantly living. For me, these values of consciousness are our school's most unique strength, values that no other school, to my knowledge, imparts. Schools elsewhere do impart moral values, religious values, values of 'academic' excellence but nowhere do we get fired with values that rise from the "soul" and which meld into our very breath and way of being. So, Nandita-di, a heart-felt bow to you for this most invaluable gift you gave a child who was groping for some enduring light to walk the path of life.

Guruprasad, or "Goupi" as he was endearingly called by one and all, was another pillar of the

‘Libre Progrès’. He really incarnated the kind of teacher Mother wanted for her school: a personification of purity, humility, child-like enthusiasm and fraternity. One never felt the conventional teacher-student relationship with him but one of co-explorers. There was no sense of hierarchy in his presence, we were fellow-travellers on this exciting journey of happy discoveries at every turn of the marvellous path. Whenever I was asked what Goupi was teaching me, inevitably I would exclaim, “l’émervaillement”! This capacity of infecting us with his child-like sense of constant wonderment was what marked him out and we walked happily along together for several years until he left the Ashram in 1977 to join the adventure of Auroville, but his eyes still shone with that same energising and happy “enthusiasm” as we crossed him cycling all over, bare-torsoed, chanting merrily away “om namo bhagavatey, om namo bhagavatey...”

Michael Zelnick who became my teacher in ‘Knowledge’ was another very strong influence in my growing up years. Michael was American and always rather blunt in his manner and style of expression and communication. “My job is to help you become conscious of your mind and to push you to use it intelligently, critically, that’s all! Your psychic opening is none of my business but the Mother’s!” he would say. We spent the most thrilling time with Michael discovering this exhilarating potential of the critical mind as we explored together *Tragedy* and *Hamlet*, *Moby Dick* and *Lord Jim*, *Scarlet Letter* and *Death of a Salesman*! The “joy” of the mind’s power of searching analysis I experienced with Michael, that joy has remained with me to this day when I read a book or watch a film or launch into the study of a play or novel with my students. He was a no-nonsense teacher and tore through any pretence or lies right in front of everybody. We learnt to respect that sterling forthrightness in him by obeying his sense of discipline and order. So the 1000-page *Moby Dick* had to be read in one week’s time and not just read but remembered in its minute details to be able to savour the deep symbolism that ran through the breadth and length of this

extraordinary novel. When we had finished exploring *Hamlet* over a period of almost 6 months, he just had one small regret, “I wish we had recorded our exchanges, it would have made such a fascinating analysis of the play and worth publishing, my boy!” Thank you, Michael, for bringing me to the threshold of my mind and then letting me fly freely in its inebriating skies!

Luc Venet shines bright in my mind’s and heart’s sky even almost 50 years on. He joined the School in the late 1960s to teach us “Mathématiques modernes” in the ‘Libre Progrès’. At first, he appeared rather cold and distant but as I continued to struggle with this new approach to maths, I realised I was in the presence of what Mother would have qualified as a “yogi-teacher”. Luc had this awe-inspiring capacity of unwavering calm. I was not especially bright in mathematics and could not understand the concepts very fast. Now Luc would endeavour to explain to me, once, twice, thrice, four times but what was extraordinary was with each additional attempt at getting the concept across, he would become doubly gentle, more patient and more compassionate! I had never seen this kind of serenity and persistent goodwill in a teacher. Well, I did not learn much about maths but I surely learnt once again about a value of consciousness that has remained with me. It acts as a “reminder”, an “alarm bell” as it were, whenever I get impatient, angry or enervated with slow-witted pupils or people around me. Of course, his abandoning the Ashram to follow in Satprem’s footsteps was rather astonishing to me, but when 30 years later, he realised what he had actually lived through and broke away from that hypnotic spell (without, however, giving Satprem his rightful due), I was deeply moved to see him regain that loftiness of attitude and perception and I found him once again in that “yogic” poise I had so admired in him. It’s so beautiful and moving to have re-connected with him after so many years, and when we meet today it’s as if time had stood still.

Thank you, teachers, for being there with me all along the way. I would not be where I am today without you. ❧

GO AND TELL IT TO THE TREE

A TRIBUTE TO SAICE

Tirthankar Chanda '78

I studied in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram School in the 1970s, from 1969 to 1978. Forty years later, memories of my School and “Knowledge” days remain engraved in my mind as if it was yesterday. I remember fondly my teachers (all), my classmates and also... the tree in the school courtyard. This tree is a presence, a metaphor... The place has been refurbished since then, but the tree remains as the heart of its architecture like some kind of sylvan deity overlooking the ebb and flow of human dramas which have played out under its luscious leaves. It is probably only appropriate that the stage for cultural functions in the School courtyard has been built around this tree, transforming it into a trusted and eternal *dramatis personae* which the organizers of cultural programmes in the courtyard need to keep in mind while rehearsing for their performances.

I begin these lines by talking about the tree, because this tree is probably the reason why each time I have come back to Pondicherry after graduating in 1978, I have found myself pushing the iron gates of the School. I stop a while at the courtyard to say hello to the familiar tree. Believe it or not, it responds. Leaves salute back. Their greenness is the reminder of a joyous past whose memory, as I grow in age, tends to get lost in the labyrinth of exile. There is also a special texture in the light and in the air of the School courtyard which attracts me, a soothing radiance of peace and harmony which I have not found anywhere else in the other emblematic Ashram places. The SAICE courtyard is, for me, probably the most luminous place in the Ashram.

I like to think that this radiance has something to do with the quality of the knowledge that is imparted in this school year in year out, transforming the students, but also the teachers

themselves who are not the ordinary people most of them become once outside the school compounds. This process of transformation probably still happens today, since some of the teachers who taught me 40 years ago continue to teach at the School or participate in its activities. Nandita-di, Jhumur-di, Ravi, Nirata-di and Lata-di are some of them whose teaching extended the horizons of my mind and contributed to making me what I am today: a reader, trying to find my intellectual and material sustenance in books and stories, from here, there and everywhere.

I shall try to say in the following lines a few words about each of the teachers I have mentioned, hoping to capture what makes them so special. This tribute is partial because it leaves out the dead and the gone. I have deliberately left out those who are no more, like Yatanti, Srimayee, the Khanna brothers (Jagdish and Ravindra) who also meant a lot to me, because I did not want this article to become a sum of obituaries, with its servitudes and clichés.

JE SUIS... TU ES... NOUS SOMMES...

For me, it all began with Lata-di. In the early seventies, Jharna-di and Lata-di used to teach French to adolescent beginners joining the School in the middle of the curriculum. Jharna-di kept me for a couple of months, before sending me for some reason to Lata-di's class. It was my age probably: I was already 12, and Lata-di knew the secrets of handling turbulent adolescents!

It was a “cours accéléré” and we had 12 to 15 hours of French language classes. *Cours de langue et de civilisation françaises*, also known as le “Mauger bleu” was our Bible for the next 10 months. We learned “Je suis... Tu es... Nous sommes...”, different verbal groups and complicated tenses, trying to understand the mysterious

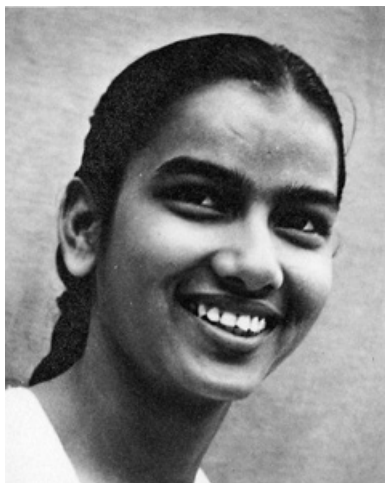
“concordance des temps” which has something to do with the genius of the French language, that even many of my French colleagues find difficult to master.

However, there was more to it in Lata-di’s class than just learning the “conjugaisons” and other niceties of French grammar. On Tuesdays, we

used to spend an hour in the music room, with dainty Olga accompanying us on the piano while we sang in breathless hurry French rhymes for youngsters, imagining Frère Jacques making the church bells ring in mythical Notre-Dame de Paris or Marlborough going away to war to never come back. We obviously got the melodies

wrong, to the utter despair of both Lata-di and Olga who, I think, looked forward with grim horror to the prospects of having to listen to the “monsters” sing again, in another week’s time!

But it was the conversation classes with Lata-di which were probably the most significant moments that we spent with her. In the eerie, sun-crushed afternoon of Pondicherry, we used to go up to her room, behind the Playground. I remember the room used to be decorated with artifacts brought from France during a stay in Paris for doing a teacher’s course. A cuckoo clock, posters from Paris, a Grecian urn... Lata-di’s room was probably my very first intimation of the silence and sophistication of Westernized houses, subject of so many post-colonial novels and essays which today I read and write about to earn a living. There was something of the Kiplingian *Ballad of East and West* in that small Guest House room where the twain did seem to meet, without “the Earth and Sky having to stand at God’s great Judgement seat”!



Lata-di

“LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI »

Nirata-di who has taught English literature at SAICE for ages, if not centuries, was another exceptional teacher. I do not know anything about her personal and family backgrounds. I think her mother tongue was Kannada. Or was it Marathi? No, it was Telugu. This did not matter in those days when, in India, and pioneeringly in the Ashram School, we were trying to grow out of our narrow linguistic and cultural identities.

Let us come back to literature. Nirata-di taught us English Romantic poetry. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Byron... She was a *passionaria* of poetry, quoted extensively and said it was not important if we did not know if “daffodils” were birds or flowers. What was important in poetry, were music, imagination and the voice, she said. She read, recited, explained words and sentences, before launching with us into the formidable history of the Lake and the poets and how they transformed British literature.

I think Keats was her favorite poet, probably because of his scientific temperament. I remember having begun my Class VIII English year with Nirata-di with an early poem of Keats: *On first looking into Chapman’s Homer*. At the end of the 45-minute session devoted to the poet’s discovery of Chapman’s translation of Homer and Keats’ passion for astronomy, she read out the last six lines of the sonnet, forgetting to tell us that it was not Cortez who discovered the Pacific, but Bilboa, another conquistador. This did not really matter, because at the end of the class, sitting on the coast of the Indian ocean, we had all identified ourselves with the Spanish expedition members staring with wonderment into the Pacific “with their eagle eyes”. This was no mean achievement.

We read with Nirata-di *Ode to a Nightingale* (“My heart aches and a drowsy numbness pains...”) and *La Belle Dame sans merci* (“O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms”) which was probably her favorite poem. In those days prior to the advent of Xerox machines, she had made us copy 100 short English poems which we were expected to learn by heart. Since then, schools have abandoned learning by rote, but rehearsing and reciting on my bike on the way to school verses from



Nirata-di

far-off 19th century England are certainly some of the memorable moments of my school days. There was a time when I could recite all these verses from the beginning to the end, but now that I myself am growing old, my memory has begun to falter. I probably need another session of poetry with Nirata-di...

AN INSPIRATIONAL SHAKESPEAREWALLAH

Some associate Shakespeare with Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, but for me each time I think of the bard, it's Ravi-da's classes which come to my mind. *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Othello* were some of the plays which we read with him. We read the plays literally, learned about human frailties, about "jealousy, the green-eyed monster" and the dangers of unbounded ambitions. We were made to act in class short passages from the plays, attempting to capture and express the emotions that the words contained. Strict taskmaster, Ravi-da made sure that we had prepared for the class by reading the plays ourselves at home, taking notes about the Elisabethan era and reading up some of the literature by Shakespeare's contemporaries: Ben Johnson, Edmund Spenser...

Ravi-da's classes were a lesson in humility.

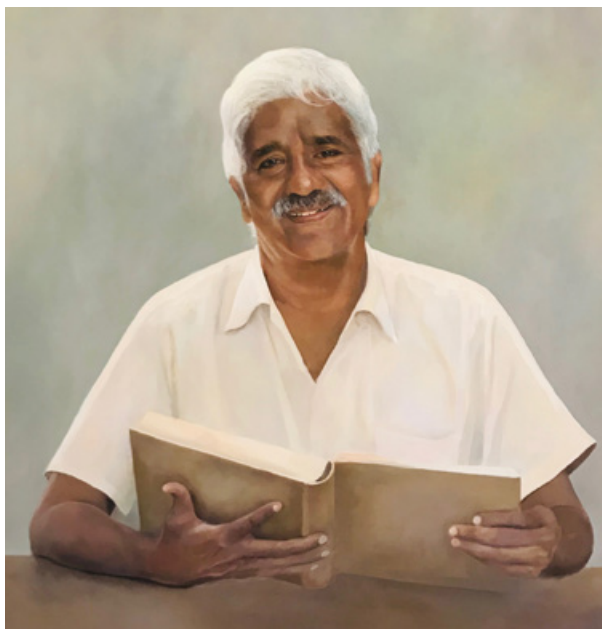
He taught Shakespeare like one plays Meccano (Lego), building the class with each student's individual understanding of the play. He gave importance to what we had to say about the characters, their tragic flaws, intervening discreetly in the discussion not so much to correct our readings but to bring in a new dimension, completing the interpretational structure that the students had built.

Eternal adolescent, Ravi-da is a man of few words. Questions are answered by questions, the process ending with a mischievous smile lighting up his face. Modesty, humility, softness are his trademarks, both inside the class room and outside. It's a way of being which Ravi-da seems to practise at all time, with students as well as with the world in general. That's what probably makes him the inspirational model that he has become for so many of his ex-students.

A MILLION-DOLLAR QUESTION

Yes, I had the honour of being Jhumur-di's student. One of the sharpest minds that I have come across, she can teach with equal insightfulness and maturity any subject. She can hold a class of 20 students enthralled by reading out *Cyrano de Bergerac* for three-quarters of an hour, before gliding into another classroom where she is expected to speak on the French Revolution and the beginning of modernity in the West. Jhumur-di's way of teaching is of the level of the best university teachings that I have attended during my student days in France.

I remember having attended Jhumur-di's classes over several years. I have studied French plays with her, British modernist poetry, Satprem's *L'Aventure de la conscience*, Sri Aurobindo's poetry and plays. Never less than intelligent in her interpretation of books and ideas, she spoke for long minutes, expecting the students to come up to her level, which we obviously failed to do. I have always been amazed by her stamina and also the breadth and depth of her knowledge in literature, history, philosophy and social sciences in general. This must have required a lot of reading and an enormous capacity of analysis and assimilation in order to reach



Ravi-da. Painting by Amrita Pai.

the high level of understanding of the world and its rumblings that her teaching displayed. Hence, my million-dollar question: living in a small provincial town like Pondicherry where light from the world's intellectual powerhouses took aeons to reach in those pre-Google days, how did she manage to get hold of the background books that she required?

In a class of her own, Jhumur-di is not only a teacher, but also a very talented actress who has played with a lot of sophistication some of the lead roles from Sri Aurobindo's plays. Her languorous gait and her hieratic face are a combination of Ingrid Bergman and Sophia Loren. Fortunately, for us, no Fellini had cared to stop by!

LITERATURE IS LIFE & LIFE IS LITERATURE

Last but not least, Nandita-di. I cannot speak of her as a teacher only, because she has been a

very close family friend, a "mashi" before being a teacher. But I must speak of her because I owe her a lot in terms of understanding literature and life. For Nandita-di, both are inextricably connected. "Literature is life and life is literature", could be her motto.

Nandita-di taught me Whitman, Joseph Conrad and especially Tagore. I am immensely grateful to her for having introduced me to this giant of Indian literature, spending hours telling us about what he owes to the Bengali mystic traditions and his universality. She is undoubtedly one of the best Tagore scholars in SAICE. She teaches his literature with both admiration and a deep understanding of what he represents for the Indian psyche. At 80 past, Nandita-di is probably one of the most popular teachers of SAICE, with all her periods booked, in the morning as well as in the afternoon. When I asked some of her students why they were keen on taking up classes with her, they said it was for the conversational format of her classes, the informal exchange where life is never too far from literature.

However, Nandita-di's popularity with students is in contradiction with her institutional status in the school. A very senior professor who has been connected with the SAICE from its inception and who has built her life around the ideals of the Ashram, she is of the stuff that headmistresses are made of. Her recognition would also be a positive signal to the crowd of students who queue up every December 16 before her desk for a chance to study with her. But it would also deprive the students of a good teacher, since, as headmistress, she would probably have less time for them, as my Tree friend was telling me last time I spoke to it. It has a point.

What a dilemma! ❧

To learn constantly, not just intellectually but psychologically, to progress in regard to character, to cultivate our qualities and correct our defects, so that everything may be an opportunity to cure ourselves of ignorance and incapacity — then life becomes tremendously interesting and worth living.

The Mother
(CWM, 16:430)

THE STORY OF OUR SCHOOL

Sunayana '79 presents a brief historical overview of the formative years of SAICE

1940s – THE BEGINNING

Sometimes an unexpected difficulty brings about a new positive growth. The creation of our School is one such story. During the Second World War when the Imperial Japanese Army Air Force began bombing Calcutta, some devotees who were living in Bengal, fearing for the safety of their children, wrote to the Mother asking her if they could send them to the Ashram. This request was something unusual and unprecedented as there had been only a few children in the Ashram before this. Naturally, the Mother accepted them.

Till then the Ashram had been a place of very intense spiritual practice within a dedicated group of *sadhaks* and *sadhikas*. So the arrival of children and families completely changed the way the community lived and it changed the nature of the Ashram forever. Once the Mother found herself with this group of children under



Children's classroom in the 1940s

her care she felt that the inevitable next step was to give them a good education. So she took permission of the French Government and opened the Ashram School. It happened to be December 2nd, 1943.

It seems it took the Mother about a year to put together the resources to open the School. The property which was bought to house the School was what has now become the bodybuilding gym in the Playground. The name of the School when it was opened in 1943 was "l'École de Sri Aurobindo Ashram" and Pavitra-da was the "Directeur". There were about 38 children. Four batches were created out of the group of children of different age-groups who were under the Mother's care. These became the first classes. As they grew older, new levels were added to the School; but for some years the children were grouped according to their capacity for each subject rather than being grouped according to age.



Children of the Ashram before the School was started: Jhumur, Gauri, Chum and Lucy

THE MOTHER'S CLASSES

In 1950 the Mother herself began to take some classes for the younger children in the Guest House three times a week after their group activities. She taught them French. From 1951 she took classes for the older children in the Playground where she read passages from her writings or Sri Aurobindo's and answered the children's questions. A number of Ashram sadhaks also sat at the back listening to the Mother during these classes.

In 1945, the Physical Education section started, headed by Pranab-da. The physical education programme included the adults of the Ashram too and in this way it grew and developed as something that was independent of the School and has remained so. The interesting thing was that in the beginning children and adults competed together and later gradually the competitions were organised according to age-groups. The physical education programme became more and more complex and comprehensive with time.

In 1945 another old house which was connected to the then School building, and which is the northern part of today's Playground, was offered to the Mother to be made into the first boarding. It was called "Dortoir" and all the children whose parents were not living in Pondicherry lived in that boarding. The boys were downstairs and the girls were upstairs. Two Parsi ladies, Gulben and Shireenben, were given the responsibility of looking after them.

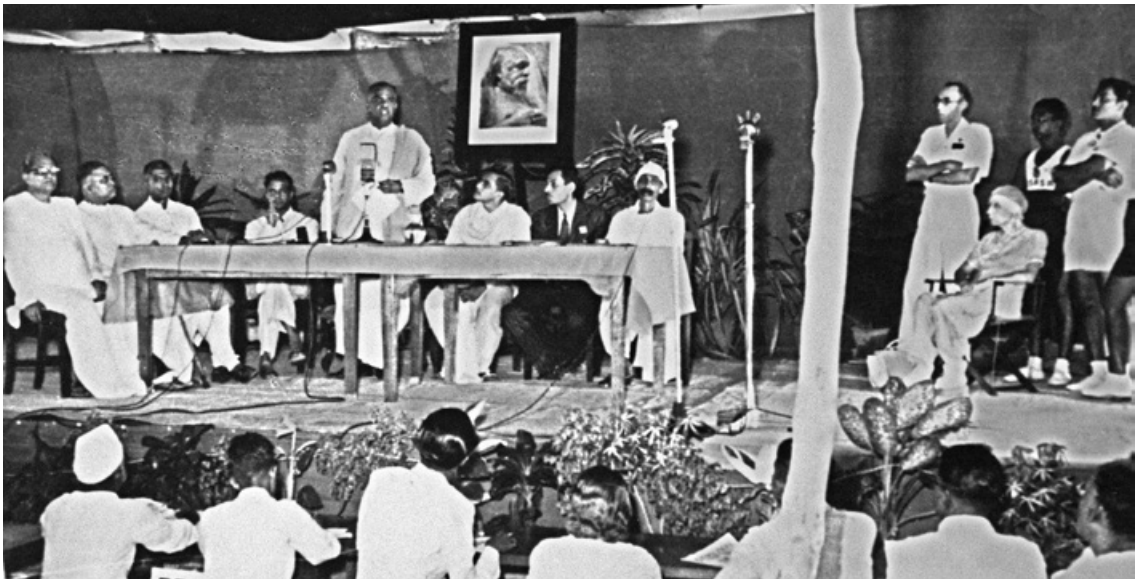
In this way the School, the Playground and the only Boarding were all in the same place. Some years later the performance of the School's anniversary was also held on a temporary stage that was erected on the western side of the Playground, which was dismantled when the programme was over.

1950s - YEARS OF GROWTH

Seven years after the School had started, Sri Aurobindo left his body in 1950. At that point the Mother thought that the best memorial to him would be a university. The project of starting a university had already been discussed with Sri Aurobindo when the then French governor François Baron and Mr. Maurice Schumann had met him. This happened soon after the independence of India from the British and the French knew that sooner or later they would have to move out of Pondicherry and were interested in making the city "a meeting place between France and India". It is reported that Sri Aurobindo also suggested establishing a university where pupils from all over the world could come to study Indian culture.



The first students of the School in what is now the Playground. The day began with a prayer.



The Convention held on a make-shift stage at the Tennis Ground.

A few months after Sri Aurobindo left his body, on 24th and 25th April 1951, the Sri Aurobindo Memorial Convention was held to announce the intention of starting a university. The Mother invited eminent citizens and scholars to attend. Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee presided over the convention. The Mother opened the convention with the following words:

“Sri Aurobindo is present in our midst, and with all the power of his creative genius he presides over the formation of the University Centre which for years he considered as one of the best means of preparing the future humanity to receive the supramental light that will transform the élite of today into a new race manifesting upon earth the new light and force and life.

In his name I open today this convention meeting here with the purpose of realising one of his most cherished ideals.”

Plans started being drawn up for the Sri Aurobindo International University Centre. A new property was bought for the centre. On 6th January 1952 the School section of the University centre was inaugurated by the Mother by cutting a ribbon (captured in the well-known photo). Classes moved from the Playground to where the School is now. However, at that time, the area that the School occupied was only the southern half of the whole block, what we now know as the

teachers’ room block and the part which extends from the south-eastern gate. A new plaque was put up and the name of the School at that point was changed to “Sri Aurobindo International University Centre”. The University Centre also got its own symbol.

The School building has undergone a lot of changes and it is difficult to describe how it was at that time and how it evolved. Just as the Ashram Main Building is made up of several smaller properties which were bought one after the other and joined together, so too the School which is now the entire block was made up of four separate houses and their gardens.

The part which is now on the north-western side, where the younger children have their classes and where there is the soup varendah, was a separate house and it was already being used as a residence for Ashramites. The ground floor of that house was where the flower service used to be and the first floor was the residence of *sadhikas*. When the School moved into its new and present location, there was a wall where the stage is located now and it divided the School from what was there to the northern side. There are many photos of the Mother where we can see her distributing prizes or watching cultural programmes in front of that wall.

The East Wing and the West Wing were open

terraces and these were converted into rooms with windows on all sides. There was no Hall of Harmony at that time and a large terrace separated the “Teachers’ Room block” from the “Sisir-da’s Room” block. Very soon the rooms of the first floor of the south-eastern block became the music and dance sections and the other half became the Library, looked after by Medhananda.

The 1950s was a period of expansion for the School. A steady stream of students continued to come to join the School. One by one, new hostels were opened for them. The 1950s saw the acquisition of the land for the Sportsground and its transformation into a proper ground for athletics and field games. In 1956 the swimming pool was ready for use. The same year the Theatre Hall was also constructed and the Science Laboratory was set up. The year of the Supramental descent brought a new level of accomplishment in the Mother’s efforts at making the School a unique institution.

The growth continued steadily and the Library moved to where it is now. The Kindergarten

THE PRIMARY SECTION

After the School moved to its present premises, the classes for very small children were first held there and in 1953 moved to Delafon. A sadhak named Pran-bhai was given charge of the Kindergarten and the primary section. A few years later, Padma, a lady from Switzerland, joined the teaching staff. She, like Pran-bhai, was trained in the Montessori system. She worked by taking instructions from the Mother on every detail. The other teachers who worked with her learnt from her. Padma herself invented many games so that children could learn as they played. As the number of children grew, the need for a separate place for the Kindergarten was felt, so in 1963 the youngest children moved to where they are now.

and Primary sections moved to Delafon House. Tanmaya-da and Padma arrived and started new



The Mother inaugurating the School building on 6th January, 1952.

THE HIGHER COURSE

As the children grew older and higher classes were added to suit their needs, the Higher Course was started. The classes were at first held in the Library. Jugal-da was made in charge of Higher Course in 1968. It was only in 1971 that the Knowledge Building was constructed and the Higher Course classes moved there and Manju-di and Kamana-di joined Jugal-da as his assistants. At that time there were only the ground and first floors. Later, one by one, the other floors were built and the various sections

such as the Computer Centre, the Biology Section etc., were allotted separate areas.

When the Higher Course was started, the classes were informal and there wasn't much stress on the volume of work done by the students. Their studies were more focused on a better understanding of Sri Aurobindo's writing and perhaps a certain attention was given to literature. With time the Higher Course became more and more structured and more subjects were added.

experiments and new methods of teaching under the guidance of the Mother.

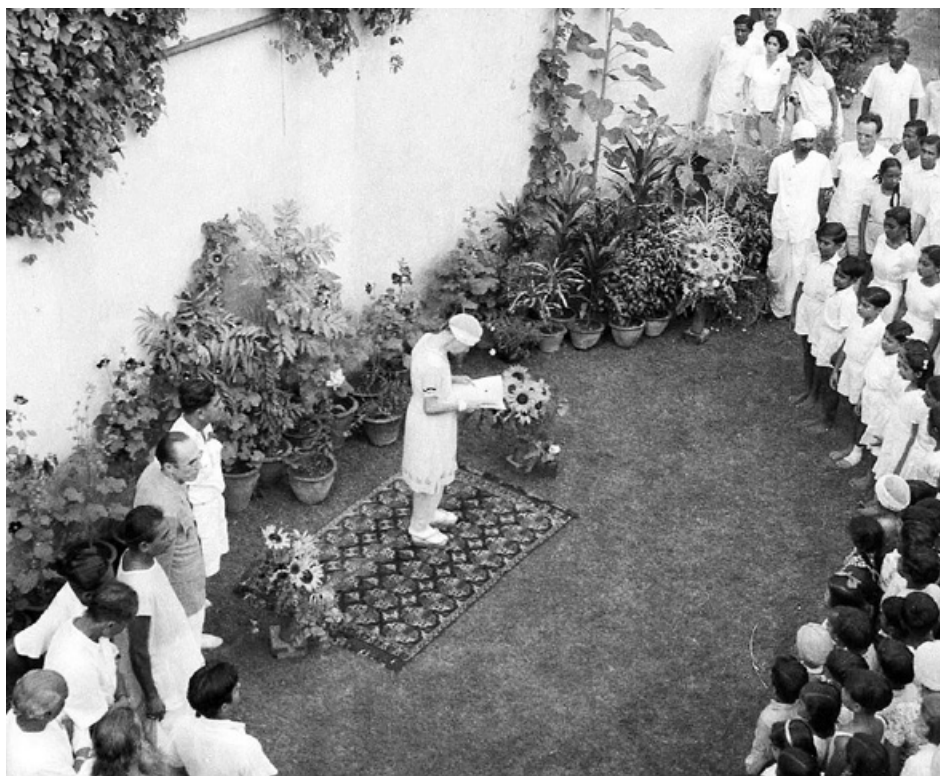
Something else also happened in the mid-1950s that gave another turning point to the School. The French decided to leave Pondicherry and the process of the integration with India started. But it wasn't until 1962 that Pondicherry

actually became a part of the Indian Union. This fact, that Pondicherry was Indian territory and not a town ruled by the French, changed something in the way the people saw themselves and their institutions.

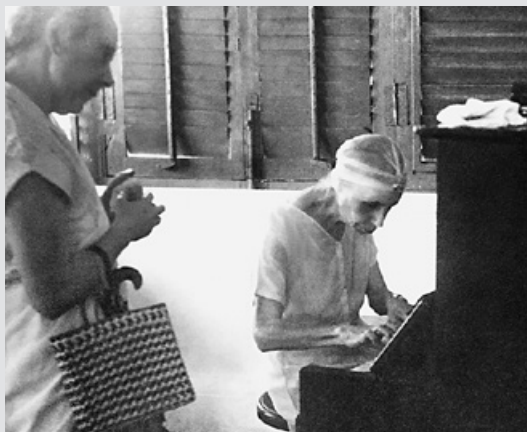
In 1959, the word "University" was dropped due to technical reasons, as we did not fulfil the

Government criteria of a university. The centre then became "Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education". Meanwhile Kireet-bhai and Joshi-bhai of the Lab were asked by the Mother to re-organise the classes and the method of teaching etc. Kireet-bhai was good at organisation and his skills were very useful at this juncture when the number of students continued to grow.

The children with whom the School had started



The Mother in the School courtyard, 1953. The wall is where the stage is now.



The Mother inaugurating the music section in the School.

MUSIC

Music was all around the students as they grew up. There was Mother's organ music, Sunil-da's music, Sahana-di's classes for the adults, Olga's classes for the small children, Nirata-di's singing sessions organised by Tara for green group children, Ira-di's singing sessions, morning and evening, in her boarding, and regular music concerts were all present in the background of the students' lives. There were many good singers who were ready to teach students and Ashramites, and students were busy with music and singing mostly for programmes which were put up on the stage.

At the beginning, the vocal music classes were not as organised as they are now. At first students went to Sahana-di to learn and there was also Marie-Amélie's choir singing. Later various other teachers started teaching but it was on individual choice and free time. In 1965 Shobha-di was given the charge of the music section and gradually the classes were more systematically arranged. Music rooms were created within the Dancing Hall so that there would be a special place for music classes. Now singing classes are also held at Sohini which is on the

first floor of what used to be Sanyal-da's clinic.

It was around the early-1980s that the western instrumental music classes became organised and regular. Probably before that the only regular instrument classes were Tarun-da's tabla class and the sitar classes by Romen-da which followed the Indian classical style. Since then many more instruments and teachers have been added.

ARTISTIC ACTIVITIES

In the early years of the School, the children learnt drawing and painting from accomplished artists such as Sanjiban-da, Jayantilal-da and Krishnalal-ji.

In 1970 or 71 the Art Room in the School was built and Amita-di was in charge of it. She created a very beautiful space with art books and art material and handmade papers. Art teachers had a place where they could teach and the unfinished works of the students could be kept there for them to continue working on when they came back the following week. The small room on the left was used for exhibiting paintings and photos. Some older students went to learn to draw and paint at the Art Gallery which was looked after by Krishnalal-ji.

In the 1970s a large number of children were taught to paint on fabric. Embroidery was also a hugely popular activity. Classes were held in the afternoons in one of the ground floor rooms of Delafon. There were students of all age groups and there were many boys also who learnt embroidery. In the early years the students offered what they had painted or embroidered to the Mother on their birthdays. All the work produced in these classes was sent to the Embroidery Department and sold there. During the exhibitions held before the February and August Darshans, there was and still is a special section where the students' works are displayed.

had grown up and to answer to their needs the Higher Course had been started. Once again teachers were found among the *sadhaks* and *sadhikas* of the Ashram. Whatever was their

capacity they offered to the Mother. When these older students finished their studies they were absorbed into the Ashram. Some of them became teachers in their turn.

HOLIDAYS

To begin with, the School remained closed only for a week. This grew to two weeks to prepare for the 1st and 2nd December programmes. Finally the holidays were extended to a month and a half.

Until 1973, as long as the Mother was in her physical body, the children of the boardings mostly stayed in Pondicherry because the Mother disapproved of children going out. Special permission had to be taken from her to go out. A few did go but it was not the norm. But after the Mother's passing, the children began to go out regularly during the holidays.

Since there were so many children and the 2nd December or 1st December practice was only in the late afternoon, the Physical Education Department organized a series of competitions. They included board games such as chess, carrom and Chinese checkers but also creative writing, embroidery, clay modelling and painting.

Finding teachers for the School and the Higher Course had one difficulty: the teacher had to be in harmony with the thought of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. So they were found from among those who were already there in the Ashram or among the new ones who joined the Ashram or among the devotees who were living in Pondicherry and wanted to offer their services. This aspect was more important than their qualification.

By the end of the 1950s the entire institution had reached a certain level of excellence. There was a school, a science laboratory, several grounds for sports, a swimming pool, a theatre, a special space for dance and music, an art gallery, an exhibition hall, regular film shows, a good health service. This growth has to be seen in the background of the conditions that existed at that time in India and the world. In

comparison to what was available to the average student in India and elsewhere, this school, even from a material point of view, was something exceptional.

What was important though, was that through this period of outward expansion, the core values and spirit of the School remained strong. This happened very naturally because the physical presence of the Mother was everywhere. The Mother was physically present among the students in the Playground, in the Tennis Ground and the Sportsground. She would come to the School and the Theatre.

1960s – INCREASE IN NUMBERS

The 1960s was the time when many things changed radically. The Mother stopped coming out and would guide people from her room and through those to whom certain responsibilities were given. Pondicherry officially became a part of India and from then on a link had to be established with the Indian government. The number of students continued to increase and touched 800 in number by the end of the 1960s. Many more boardings were opened and people appointed to look after them. The Corner House was opened to centralise all organisation around food. And finally, the Auroville project was started and this had an impact on the School as it was



Early years of the Laboratory

1ST DECEMBER

The first few celebrations of the anniversary of the School were put together in a short time. The cultural programme used to be in fact a variety programme. There were songs, recitations, dances etc. The main participants were students. The physical education demonstration was similar to what it is now: drills and a show of skills.

With time the performance of the 1st December programme became more focused on one main play. At first French plays were chosen for the 1st December programme, even French comedies. There was once even a performance of a simplified version of the ballet "Swan Lake".

Then the Mother started writing her own plays which could be performed on the anniversary of the School. Right from the beginning some short extract from Sri Aurobindo's writings had been performed on stage. This later developed and entire plays were performed.

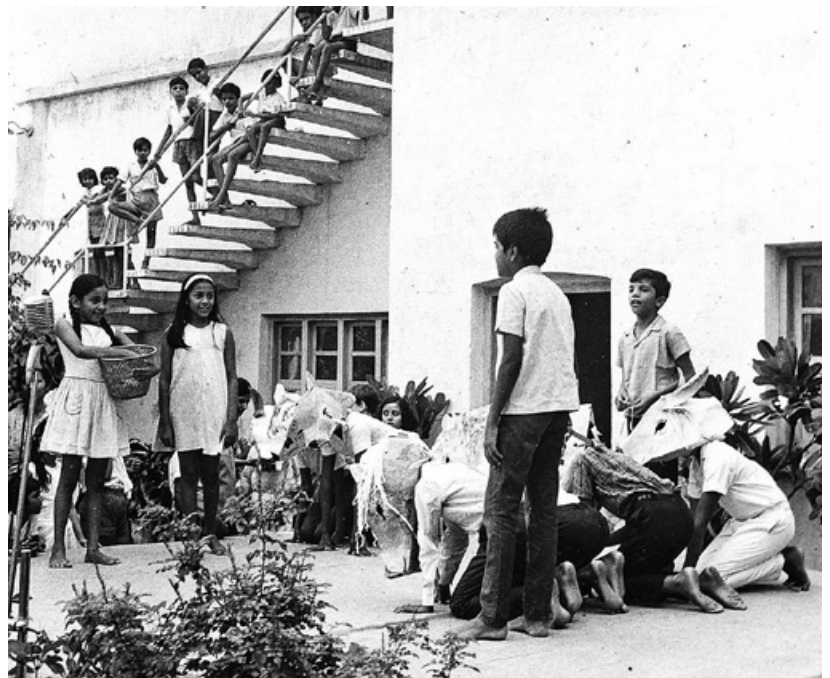
members joined as *sadhaks* and *sadhikas*. The resources were limited but the Mother saw to it that things ran smoothly. The Physical Education department however had always been a very well-organised department and the general level of interest and high level of performances was probably at its peak in the 1960s and 70s. The student community had a strong link with the Ashram members as many of the students were from Ashramite families. It was a time when although new children were being admitted, the old guard made up of the first Ashramites such as Nolini-da, Amrita-da and veterans like Nirod-da and Amal Kiran were still very actively involved in the day-to-day life of the Ashram and the School.

1968 saw some major structural changes in the School organisation. There was more scope given for the implementation of the principles of Free Progress. The structure defined then of 3 years of *Jardin d'enfants*, 3 years of *l'avenir*, 3 years of *Progrès*, 6 years of *En avant vers la Perfection* and 3 years of *Cours Supérieurs* is still largely being followed today. The unique system of Free Progress followed in Knowledge [see box on page 22] was also initiated then.

fully involved at the time of the foundation.

It was also during the 1960s that some students who had finished their studies in the Ashram expressed the wish to go and follow higher studies abroad and the Mother at times helped them get admission in universities outside India. She probably wanted some of these men and women to then come back and put their new knowledge to good use within the centre of education and take it forward. That did not happen very often though.

This was happening while the Ashram itself continued to grow and many new



Variety programme, 1970. Staircase going up to the old Hall of Harmony.

LEARNING METHOD

At first the Ashram School followed the pattern of French Schools in many ways. In 1943 Pondicherry was a part of French India and it was normal to follow that pattern. Text books were in French and all subjects including History and Geography were taught in French. The classes were structured as they were in French Schools.

A few years after the School began, the practice of having quarterly tests was started by some teachers. The Mother saw that this system of having quarterly tests was causing a lot of harm as some students fell ill because of the anxiety and some others felt tempted to cheat. So she stopped the tests. In the new organisation more importance was given to the daily activities and its monitoring and the quarterly progress report became a way of recording at regular intervals the progress each student was making.

It was perhaps after the re-organisation of 1959 that some other changes took place. The language used for teaching Science and Maths continued to be French but History and Geography were taught in English. The decision to keep French as the language of instruction of some subjects was taken by the Mother. But from then on English gained importance and the School became effectively a bilingual school.

Indian languages were added in a more organized way. The teaching of Sanskrit also started with a lot of emphasis in the mid-1960s,

with every child attending Sanskrit classes in addition to an Indian language. These classes were generally held in the afternoon.

In the mid-1950s with the arrival of Tanmay-da and Padma, the Free Progress method of learning was started. This was a method where the student was given great freedom to follow the lines of study and the pace of study that he wished, where he was encouraged to take responsibility for his progress based on his own inner need and truth. The Mother followed very closely its activities as Tanmay-da used to regularly see the Mother regarding these classes.

The principle of Free Progress was again an important aspect of the reorganization that happened in 1968. Part of the restructuring involved the implementation of a new, more student-driven system for the Higher Course. In the system that Jugal-da put in place and that still functions, students had the freedom to choose their teachers who usually present or give in writing the subjects which they will teach and how they will work. Students also choose the number of hours that they will devote to each subject. They are free to take any combination of subjects, some of which are studied at a lower level than the level of the Higher Course. Though everyone chooses to study one or more of the major works of Sri Aurobindo it is not a compulsory subject. The number of students in a group is 15 at the most and students can also choose individual classes with a teacher.

At the end of the 1960s a very large number of children came to join the School. Their parents wrote to the Mother and she accepted them. The School could expand, creating new spaces for the new students, even new boardings were opened to accommodate them but the Physical Education structure was such that only a limited number of children could be taken.

This problem was solved by creating the New Group. Children of the New Group were supervised by some teachers and Ashramites who were not regular captains. The children had a uniform

which was different from the regular group uniforms: light blue shorts and white shirt. At first the New Group children played in the School courtyard (which at that time had a cemented surface) instead of in PED grounds. Then a ground was found for the older children which was the empty plot where later the “Knowledge” building was constructed.

When the construction of “Knowledge” was started the children went to play in Nandanam. This was a larger property a few kilometers away from the Sports Ground and which the Ashram

PHYSICAL EDUCATION

The one aspect of the education at the Ashram that we have always taken great pride in, is the physical education and its wide range of activities. But all this didn't happen overnight. The development happened in stages. At first there was only the Playground but soon afterwards the Tennis Ground was added to the area available. Tennis courts were made on one side so that the Mother could play tennis and the wrestling pit and boxing ring on the other end of the ground. The basketball courts came up in the centre. From the Tennis-ground there was access to the sea so regular sea-bathing was started. Around the same time a special place was acquired for volleyball.

In 1952 when the Sportsground was ready for use, the next step was taken in the growth of the physical education. Now the whole range of athletic events could be practised, which included the track items, the throws and the jumps. Field games such as football and hockey could be played and once the swimming pool was constructed, swimming and diving were added to the programme. The rooms in the Playground which had once been classrooms were re-arranged so that gymnastics could be practised on the various apparatus such as the



The Mother taking the salute in Sportsground

beam, the parallel bars, the asymmetric bars, the horizontal bar etc. The gymnasium as we see it now was built in the late-1970s.

The aim of the physical training was not only to build a body that would be supple, agile and strong but also to develop psychological qualities such as perseverance, courage, equanimity, team spirit and discipline. The variety of activities ensured that each one developed in an all-rounded manner. This system of aiming for all-rounders rather than excellence in only one item or one line of activity, also gave the opportunity to the students to find the sport for which they had a natural aptitude and talent. This gave each one a sense of self-worth. In the 1950s the Mother was present during the competitions at the Sportsground and

her presence inspired everyone.

As the programme got more organised, captains and coaches were chosen among the *sadhaks* and *sadhikas* so that the groups could be managed independently and could be given the specific activities that were required for them. In the early years, those who were still students were made captains of smaller children. When the Mother came to the Playground she would sit and watch as Pranab-da taught exercises to the captains.

had taken on lease. Children would go there by bus accompanied by supervisors.

1970s – THE END OF A PHASE

One of the important developments at the beginning of the decade was the construction of the

ground and first floors of the Knowledge building. The Higher Course then moved there. This was also when the Computer Section started.

In 1972 it was clear that the School could not expand indefinitely. At that time the number of students in the School had reached 800. So the

BOARDINGS

Although the School was started for the children of the Ashram, with time, devotees living outside also wanted their children to receive this education given by the Mother. The boardings provided a home which was in every way linked to the Ashram and gave the children a sense of belonging to the larger community. At first for more than twenty years the boardings had children of all age groups, and boys and girls were together. This was done so that children could grow up in an environment that was as close to a family as possible. But in 1972 the boardings were re-organised and boys and girls were separated and there were only boys or only girls in each boarding and also the board-

ings were divided according to age groups. The girls were brought closer to the Ashram and the School and the boys were sent to the boardings which were further away.

CORNER HOUSE

The Corner House was set up in 1967 and turned out to be the place where students spent time together and got a sense of the wider group, irrespective of age. Being there for breakfast, lunch and dinner, the students could share each other's lives. The Corner House then became the fourth pillar of the students' lives, the other three being the School, the Playground or the various grounds and the boardings.

intake of students was limited to the Kindergarten level only. It took a while before all the students of the New Group could be absorbed into regular groups and the additional arrangements made for them could be completely stopped. From that time onwards the number of students in the School began to diminish until it stabilised at about 400 children. This meant that there was no need for such a large number of boardings and one by one most of them were closed down.

An important event of 1972 was the announcement the Mother made that at the age of fourteen a child was old enough to decide if he or she wanted to continue to be in this School. She said that this should be told to the children who were not yet fourteen so that they would be aware. Knowing that the system was so unusual that there was not going to be any official paper that could be

recognised by any institution outside, the Mother wanted the children to understand that they were free to leave if they wanted a career in any professional line for which they would need grades and universally recognised degrees.

The 1970s was a landmark decade for many reasons because in 1973 the Mother left her body but also this decade saw the beginning of the outflow of students who finished their studies and left the Ashram. On the one hand the selection of the students had to be done by the senior teachers, something that used to be done by the Mother herself earlier, and on the other hand they had to deal with the outgoing students who were increasingly interested in making a life for themselves outside the Ashram. This would mark the end of a phase in the history of the School and the beginning of another. ❧

I am perfectly sure, I am quite confident, there is not the slightest doubt in my mind, that this University, which is being established here, will be the greatest seat of knowledge upon earth.

It may take fifty years, it may take a hundred years, and you may doubt about my being there; I may be there or not, but these children of mine will be there to carry out my work.

And those who collaborate in this divine work today will have the joy and pride of having participated in such an exceptional achievement.

The Mother
(CWM, 12,112)

MY MEMORIES AS A CHILD AT MAISON DES PETITS

Vishnu Roche '75H remembers his years in a boarding from 1964 to 1970

I landed up in the Ashram at the very young age of 10. I remember being on the same train as Shernaz Daruwala from Bombay and little did I know that Shernaz would be my boarding mate.

The boarding, La Maison des Petits, was located at that time opposite Jacques Dhandania's house (now beside the Golden Chain Office). I distinctly remember crying incessantly on reaching the boarding to the amazement of my two lovely guardians Michèle Lupsa and Urmila Pandya who pacified me like two mothers soothing their only child.

I cooled down and was introduced to my boarding mates: the three lovely brothers Dilip, Laxman and Prakash Mahtani, Bharat Mistry and Gita Pandya.

One of my vivid memories as a child was the wonderful meals we had which came from Ganpatram-ji at Cottage. We did have delicious and very nutritious meals on a daily basis.

I do remember walking with Shernaz everywhere we went. Be it school or group. A lot of our students thought we were brother and sister as we were of very fair complexion at that time. I was like a little stalker following Shernaz everywhere she went. I used to follow her like a bumble bee.

One of the fondest memories I have is of when

I used to fall sick. I had an aversion to taking any pills or medication. I remember the good old days when Michèle would literally force it down my throat and I would vomit. Then came Urmila-ben who like a loving guardian tried again but with no success. I was a stubborn boy and just refused medication.

But I made it up to Urmila-ben by making her a nice shelf when I took carpentry lessons at Prem-bhai's and she appreciated it so much. I could see the joy on her face when she said, "*tum mere liye banaya!*"

I remember being very naughty. Once Urmila-ben told me to be very quiet and not to disturb anybody. During the afternoon nap, I practically went and woke up everyone and threw water at them. Boy did I get a scolding. Oh là là!

Those memories will never fade away. My beautiful boarding mates will always be remembered for their support and the outpouring of their love during my stay at the "Maison des Petits". I give them all my reverence and am grateful to them forever.

I congratulate my guardians for their incessant love and patience. Thank you Michèle and Urmila-ben! You were extremely patient with me as your naughty boy.

My memories will never fade away. You were both true children of the Mother. ❧

NOSTALGIA

Sammita Mohanty '75

We, Rachita (my sister) and I, arrived at Pondicherry on 16th December, 1965. The very same day our admission in SAICE and accommodation in different hostels were confirmed. Rachita was to board and lodge in Comfort Home while I was put in Jhunjhun Home under the able care of Pramila-di, the erstwhile incharge.

My mother was a little perturbed on hearing that her daughters, so far away from home, would be growing up in different homes. She brushed away the anxiety and without any fuss went ahead and dropped us off in our respective boardings.

After my mother and my uncle, who had accompanied us all the way from Cuttack to stand by my mother's decision, had left, the reality of living all on my own hit me. All the excitement of baggages being packed and the fun of travelling by train to a far off place had waned. I was totally unprepared for this situation, but there was no turning back because the Divine Mother had chosen us to live in the Ashram in her loving care.

Didi (Pramila-di) immediately realised my confusion and insecurity. She knew that comforting or trying to make me feel at home would make it worse, so she asked me to unpack and arrange my clothes in the cupboard allotted to me. Once I was all by myself in the box room, I sat down and cried copiously, venting my feelings and longing to be back with my mother.

It was after quite some time that I heard a knock on the door. I opened it to find Didi

standing with four girls in their group uniform. Four pairs of eyes checked out the new kid on the block. Didi introduced them to me. There was Savita Srivastava, Mita Roy, Aradhita Ghosh and Rupa. She turned to the girls and said, "This is Sangeeta (my name, then). She can speak only in English and Odiya, so all of you will speak to her in English since none of you knows Odiya". Secretly, Didi was very happy that the children would polish their English in this way. Later on I was also introduced to Rubi Roy (sister of Mita Roy) and six boys, namely: Anirban and Amitava Ghosh (brothers of Aradhita), Kalyan Ghosh, their cousin, Satyajit Bagchi, Jayashankar and Aditya Srivastava (Savita's brother).



Pramila-di with some students. Sammita is in the top row, second from left.

The very next day I was caught up in a flurry of activities such as embroidery class, vocal music class, clay modelling class, dancing class etc., etc... apart from the regular school and sports activities.

In those days the beginners in SAICE were placed in the Non group to get acquainted with the different sports conducted in the Ashram. We mostly played games and got a taste of gymnastics, athletics and swimming. Since I was the only one in my boarding attending Non group, I had to eat tiffin in the boarding. The others had theirs in the Playground. I was privileged because Didi used to get all the best baking delights from the Ashram Bakery, where her brother Jotin-da worked. So I got to eat a special white bread (one that was baked specially for the Divine Mother) slapped generously with butter.

Talking of food, Jhunjhun Home was the envy of many other boarders, because we, at Jhunjhun Home, were served non-vegetarian food every day. We had mutton curry for lunch every Tuesday and Friday and fish curry the remaining days of the week. Egg curry was served at dinner every single day. The mutton curry was cooked by Marie, an Indo-French maid. I still remember the aroma and flavor, but for the life of me, can never replicate it. The only discordant note in this gourmet rhapsody was the Dining Room vegetable which was mandatory. It was a kind of red or green broth depending upon the vegetables and to me was so distasteful that I couldn't swallow it. Didi did not commiserate with me in my misery, when she found that I threw up mid-meal every day. She pronounced that I wasn't fit to continue in the Ashram and she would write to the Divine Mother about me. This got me so scared that I stopped throwing up for the next couple of days, but not for long. Those days I was a fussy eater. Now I relish the Dining Room vegetable.

Didi was a stickler for discipline and cleanliness. Our study hours and resting hours were strictly monitored. Many a time, I had had to sleep in Didi's room, along with others, because I had been caught reading a book or chatting with friends during siesta time. Meditation in the Playground on Sundays was a must. We went with Didi and sat with her. Drawing on the sand during meditation was forbidden. We had to sit straight and listen to the music or Mother's talk.

No occasion was missed out by Didi to showcase Jhunjhun Home which was a beautiful

building and maintained extremely well by Didi. The lily pond was our pride. Red, blue and yellow lilies created a remarkable ambiance in the boarding. There were fishes too. Didi encouraged us to hold cultural programmes and decorate the boarding on Christmas day. Our friends eagerly waited for our birthday parties since Didi, who had wonderful culinary skills, offered a delectable spread on the table.

Over the years some boarders left Jhunjhun Home and some others joined us. Another girl Sangeeta Chowdhury was admitted in Jhunjhun Home. Didi asked us both, since there were two Sangeetas now in Jhunjhun Home, if we wanted a name given by the Divine Mother. I grabbed at the opportunity and wrote to the Mother to give me another name and this is how I became Sammita from Sangeeta.

During my stay in Jhunjhun Home I was especially close to Savita Srivastava, my mentor. With Mita it was pure childish fantasy filled with innocence and adventure. Indrani was a very talented girl, full of fun. We would wait for our study hour to be over, to listen to her play a beautiful lilting melody on the guitar. She regaled us with spicy and witty Bengali jokes. We used to listen wide-eyed to Didi's stories of the great sadhaks, the pillars of the Ashram and also how Didi came to the Ashram surmounting all obstacles.

Jhunjhun Home celebrated its inaugural day on the 9th of December, a very auspicious day. We went for a special darshan of the Divine Mother, taking with us beautiful cards, handkerchiefs and clay models as an offering to the Divine Mother. All the boarders made something themselves for the offering.

We were a bunch of happy and playful kids enjoying our friendship, companionship and even tiffs in a healthy attitude. We never get tired of revisiting those days to relive the joy of growing up.

I can ramble on about my days in Jhunjhun Home. They were my formative years. I learned how to express myself and found my identity. There was never a dull moment in Jhunjhun Home. That age, those companions and the excitement of so many experiences were a heady combination. ❧

JHUNJHUN BOARDING

PEPE, POND, AND PEERS

Priyamvada '00

As my 10-year-old-self stood in front of it, back in 1989, little did I know that this large red-brick building would hold some of the fondest memories of my life at SAICE.

The Jhunjhun boarding door with its tinkling bell opened on a small garden and an oval pond with a large study room on the right and Pramila-di's room on the left.

I had five roommates. Each of us had a bed with a green and white bedcover, a wooden cupboard with colourful marbling paper on it and some personal goodies inside: chocolate, pickle, snacks and other little indulgences from back home. From the windows at the back of our room I could see golden bunches of Imagination flowers, and every afternoon I would hear a marmalade vendor (or so I thought) shouting out "malate marmalade", when in fact he was selling groundnuts "malate malatay".

There were three bathrooms on the ground floor. Like the dwarfs in Snow White, they were named after their characteristics: Bada (Big), Chhota (Small), Beta (Short).

Of course, we all wanted to reserve the Bada for ourselves. I remember when we were in A3, as we would walk back from Tennis Ground to Playground behind the Group Captain, we would call dibs on "Bada" as we neared JJ Boarding, much to Prashanta-di's (as it was often she who walked us back) displeasure.

PEERS

When I was in Jhunjhun boarding, I think the hostel had 16 girls. The older ones (EAVP6 and Knowledge-going girls) were on the first floor, while we younger ones stayed downstairs.

I have fond memories of my peers: whether it

was Maitreyee's sitar practice, the which-books-you-must read by Mala, Srijita's "you should hit back with the umbrella" advice against rowdy boys on cycles, or the very practical suggestion that Lopa gave me on how to orient myself in Pondy.

I got lost walking from school to boarding. Yes, as incredible as it may seem, I was 10 years old, very new to the place, and the buildings looked all the same to me.



With Baby-di. Priyamvada is on the right.

Lopa found me wandering somewhere near Corner House, and accompanied me back safely. She said, "If you ever get lost, walk to the beach road and turn around, and you will see the parallel roads of Pondy. Orient yourself with the Secretariat building". Super advice, I give it all the time to tourists. Never fails you.

Of all my memories, there's one incident that I remember very well, because it was one of my



The lily pond. Priyamvada is second from right.

first “we did what we were not supposed to do” moments. Our bed-time was 8.30 p.m. -- lights out etc., and Baby-di would do the rounds to make sure we were tucked into our beds under the grey-blue mosquito nets. But that night there was a plan to sneak out or rather up, all cloak and dagger, chalked out by one of our peers. I am not naming her, as I don’t know the statute of limitations of such crimes...

As the sweet smell of Transformation flowers filled the air, we sneaked out one by one, in the darkness of the night, and made our way to the staircase that leads to the first floor and terrace. The terrace door was always locked at night, but the plan was to go there via another route.

We tiptoed over the dividing wall between Vibha’s house and our hostel, over the bathroom roofs and onto the terrace.

WOW! What an adventure that was, navigating through the Protection flower branches and Victory flower buds... There we were, on the terrace, in the night.... my first hostel clandestine-experience.

POND

Whoever has visited Jhunjhun boarding has admired the pond with its lilies, its gold fish and the fine pebbles that surround it. Baby-di maintains it meticulously along with the surrounding garden, truly the cynosure of the place. In

hindsight, I wonder how she found the time to look after a dozen odd girls, a garden and a pond, when I can barely keep alive the five plants on my balcony.

The pond came with its beauty and its beast. 8.00p.m and breaking the silence of the night, numerous little frogs would croak in cacophonous unison. I don’t know if it was the air, the place or the people but even the frogs bring back fuzzy fond memories. I recall Deepu (Deepti) yelling back at the frogs “normuyee kappa!” (“Shut up frogs!” in Telugu), and once every now and then, they would oblige.

PEPE

The fruit bag and the papaya (or Pepe in Bengali). Baby-di made it mandatory for the younger ones to have “Pepe” every single day before Group. She would cut them in crescent moon slices, or in cubes. With 16 girls to think of, she sure made time to care for each of us.

She would pick Chaitu (Chaitanya) and me up from the back entrance of Playground, she would walk us to the beach, she would help us buy our clothes, teach us how to clean our shoes and arrange the clothes rack, and remind us to make a special something (an embroidered handkerchief or a bag) to offer to Sreema on our birthdays. She was there when we were ill, she knew who was love-sick, and once a year like Sabrina-the-good-witch, she would take out a cauldron-like vessel and boil our group shirts and kitty-caps till they were white and crisp.

Replacing a mother must have been a daunting task, but Baby-di balanced the strict-but-kind role perfectly. She was and is the ever-fit lady in a white saree with perfect skin who busied herself making sure we were always well looked after. And like a true mum, she never expected anything in return. Twenty-six years on, whether I remember her birthday or not, she never fails to remember mine.

I don’t think I can ever thank Baby-di enough for making me feel at home at Jhunjhun boarding and guiding me in a new place, in a new school with new friends, to a new life. ☘

MY FAIRY-GODMOTHER

Himanshu Mistry '91 remembers Arati-di

Life is full of coincidences. On the 8th of August, something happened, which reminded me of Arati-di, very fondly... and within a couple of days Sunayana-di asked me to pen something about Arati-di....

8th of August 2018, I had just finished my short presentation at the AMAI 2018 Chlor-Alkali Processes. Some of the eminent people from the chemicals and processes business were gathered for this event. Some clapped, some thumped the table. As I made my way back to my seat, there were some who tapped me, showing their appreciation.

I was content, but this happiness was not because of all the appreciation shown to me by these people, it was because I felt something else... I had a feeling that I had made Arati-di, proud. I knew she was there, looking down at me, from above.

If I had to describe Arati-di, in two words... She was a 'Fairy-Godmother' to me. We shared a special bond which went further than that of a kid and his favourite teacher.

It all began when I was a child in our School.

The few blocks around the Ashram were my neighbourhood; I seldom ventured anywhere else. I spent most of the time in the School, even during holidays. The School building was my second home. I was in the School when it opened, and went out when Kailash-bhai tracked me down and chased me out.

I often had the opportunity to help out with all the small and big activities that go on, even when the School is closed for Holidays. As a student, I must have been a difficult kid. Maybe the class-teachers had situations with me which were difficult to handle. I used to be sent often to meet our venerable Paru-di (the Registrar), but we got used to each other very soon, as the visit to her office changed from 'often' to regular. This is



Himanshu with Arati-di

when Arati-di took me under her wing.

I loved running those small errands, whenever she asked me to. I accompanied her often from the School to her home in Nanteuil. All this was a very sweet part of the best time of my life.

When I grew older, Arati-di became my Chemistry Teacher, and the way she taught the

subject, I began to love it. So much so that I decided to pursue Chemistry in Knowledge. Arati-di agreed to have me as a student and I studied with her, eight years in a row. I asked her if it was possible to learn applied chemistry or Industrial Chemistry, she told me this is something which has not been done so far, but she would be interested in taking this up with me. That is what we did, studied Hydrocarbon processes, Methanogenesis, Chlorination, Bromine, Extraction of metals, minerals from solutions, and a myriad of other things.

One of the best moments, I recall, when once during the annual holidays, some extremely old mothballed books were being removed from the School Library. I was giving a hand in piling these up in a box placed just under the notice board. Arati-di called me and told me she had something really special for me. She gave me three books, a book on Organic Chemistry, a book on Inorganic Chemical Processes and Material Science and an old University Edition of *Savitri*. I still have these books, which are a part of my personal cherished treasure.

I was usually prone to severe colds, mainly during the swimming competition season. Every time I had a cold she used to get made some lovely tea with ginger and masala to ease my throat. She was caring, affectionate and always advised me about staying in good health. Tea-time was often at her place, usually there would be a piece (a very

large one) of cake, to go along with the tea. She tried to share all her knowledge of chemistry and material science with me, she tried to let me know all that she knew. And just like a sponge I soaked up all the knowledge and information and have managed to retain it. I still have my notebooks with my class-work with all her comments and corrections and also the notebooks I filled taking down notes, which I still refer to sometimes.

I met Arati-di for the last time during my one-day visit to Pondicherry in the beginning of this year. She was at her place, old and frail, but the twinkle in her eyes was bright and shining. She recognized me almost instantaneously; she fondly remembered all the lovely memories and the many incidents which had happened during the course of my life as her student. She wanted to see my kids, but it is unfortunate that I had not been able to make her meet them in person, though I did show her their photos.

Arati-di was one of the many people whose continuous efforts helped me to build a firm foundation for my future; someone who made my childhood in the Ashram so special and will always be a part of my fondest memories.

Today, I am in the evening of my career, a career filled with all the ups and downs of professional life. At every point of my highs and lows I have always remembered, with a lot of reverence, all those whose unconditional love and efforts have made all of this possible. ❧

An aimless life is always a miserable life.

Every one of you should have an aim. But do not forget that on the quality of your aim will depend the quality of your life.

Your aim should be high and wide, generous and disinterested; this will make your life precious to yourself and to others.

But whatever your ideal, it cannot be perfectly realised unless you have realised perfection in yourself.

The Mother
(CWM, 12:3)

REMEMBERING PRATIJNA-DI

by Sachidananda Mohanty '75

In the winter of 1965, at the initiative of my mother, our family paid a visit to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry. My mother was keen to get her children admitted to the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education (SAICE). She was hopeful that two of the older children would get admitted first. The visit was primarily to acquaint herself with the system at Pondicherry.

The next day, after our arrival, we visited a boarding opposite the Ashram Playground. This was a small boarding, we learnt, managed by Manoj Das and Pratijna Devi. We spent limited time here since there was soon going to be a film show at the Playground. There was palpable excitement in the air, endemic of show timings at the Ashram Playground, as I learnt later. Coming from a somewhat puritanical background where cinema was taboo, a strict no-no, it was a marvel for me to watch the first English/American film of my life, a Western called "Billy the Kid". I was transported to a magical world of imagination and fantasy replete with cowboys, out-laws, prairies and canyons. I decided that if there was ever a place for me to study, it would have to be the Ashram School! At least, for the sake of the films I would get to watch!

I nursed this feeling in me when I returned to Bhubaneswar and resumed my school life.

Towards the end of October 1966, my sister and I returned from school around 4:00 p.m. and were greeted by my mother: "The Mother has heard your prayer and soon you will join the Ashram School," she said. I was absolutely thrilled, especially because I had heard that there was no corporal punishment, nor any exams at the Pondicherry School. Needless to say, I hated both the practices as uniformly evil.

* * *

In December 1966, a year later, our family made a return trip to Pondicherry. This time, my

sister Minoti and I joined a newly created hostel called "The Home of Progress", popularly called "Orissa Boarding". It was managed by the same guardians I had earlier met, namely Pratijna Devi and Manoj Das. I would spend the next four years under the care of Pratijna Devi. At the time of bidding farewell in 1966, my mother had said: "From today onward Pratijna Devi

and Manoj Das would be your parents!" How apt and prophetic were her words!

* * *

The experience at The Home of Progress, it turned out, was truly transformative. It changed me forever. The credit for this would clearly go to Pratijna-di.



Pratijna-di (Apa)

Pratijna-di, who came from the princely state of Kujanga, was aristocratic by temperament, but like her own parents, Narayana Birabara Samanta and Ratnamali Jema, noted Gandhians and freedom fighters, Pratijna-di was absolutely down to earth. She had a brother, Biswambar Samanta and a sister, Dr Bani Samanta, both notable personalities in their own right.

Known universally as “Apa”, Pratijna-di was truly angelic and out of the world with matchless love and generosity showered upon those who came in contact with her. It was the singular good fortune of boarders like me to have been brought up under the care of Pratijna-apa and Manoj-babu in The Home of Progress, from 1966 onward, till the Home made way for a new incarnation.

Home of Progress was a full-fledged hostel. The dining and reading rooms were on the ground floor. The children lived on the first and the second floors. On the ground floor, we had food, studies and games. The house was self-contained. We played pranks, hide and seek and completely forgot the background we came from. I received the first prize in cleanliness from the hands of Apa.

Apa’s room on the first floor was Open House. We entered and exited merrily at our own sweet will completely oblivious of her need for sleep and rest. She never complained.

Manoj-babu had his study-cum-bedroom on the second floor, where the older boys lived. Every night, inside the mosquito curtains, we waited for the approaching footfalls of Manoj-babu. He would make sure that all of us were asleep. During the day, when he did not step out for work, he was lost in the world of his books and writing.

It is doubtful if our own parents would have taken such care of us at bed-time. In the Home of Progress we forgot our own parents, such was the divine ambience.

Most of us never visited our parents in Odisha during the so-called vacation time. It was also the Mother’s wish that children ought not to be influenced by outside forces during their study at the Ashram School. Apa instilled in us the need to follow the Mother strictly. We had the *Darshan* of the Mother on the anniversary of the Home of Progress.

At Home of Progress, we learned the value of freedom and discipline, imbibed the best of Odia culture with the cosmopolitanism of the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education at Pondicherry. Apa nursed our body and soul; she kept in close touch with our parents.

She treated all with a deep sense of equality and affection, and took interest beyond our stay at Pondicherry. She would unfailingly call us on the day of our birth anniversary and ask: “Hope you are at Pondicherry. You must come home for dinner. I will wait for you. What time are you coming?”

We remained her children even in our fifties!

On the terrace of the Home of Progress, on holidays, we had story-telling sessions. Apa would read out words of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, and the immortal parables of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, and Swami Vivekananda. She instilled in us the importance of a moral and spiritual life, the value of courage of conviction and the need to be frank, upright and honourable. She was never given to any claptrap; she discarded all forms of pretentious behaviour.

* * *

Apa taught Odia to some of us, in later years she taught Psychology to the students of the Higher Course. She had passed her Matriculation from Ranihat High School Cuttack in 1954 and did her post-graduation in Psychology in 1961. In 1959, she got married to Manoj Das, who was at that time a Professor of English.

Manoj-babu by then had acquired a formidable reputation as an outstanding writer. His works dealt with the frailty and foibles of human life seen through the prism of gentle humour and irony, his trademark style. He was also widely recognised, in his earlier years, as a budding left-wing revolutionary, who had attended the legendary Youth Meet at Bandung, Indonesia.

At Pondicherry, it was a momentous experience for the couple to have had the *Darshan* of the Mother in 1962. Deeply moved by the experience, they aspired to join the Ashram and were granted the permission to do so in 1963 by the

Mother, thus marking a completely new turn in their life.

* * *

While Manoj Das established himself as a literary genius and became well-known internationally as a novelist and a short story writer (acknowledged by no less a person than Graham Greene), Pratijna-di wrote a collection of stories named *Galpa Ananya* and *Chinha Achinha*, two

adapions called *Sadhu Sangha* and *Jahaku Rakhile Ananta*. She wrote under the pen name *Phalguni* and *Sabyasachi* and produced many translations; she contributed regularly to the popular children's magazine, *Jahna Mamu* (the Odia version of *Chanda Mama*).

For the children of the Home of Progress, our guardians were no mere celebrities; they were our foster parents who brought us up. Could there be anything more precious than this? ❧

PRATIJNA-APA

Ajit Panda '76

We called her Apa (elder sister) but she was a mother to us. She actually brought us up from our childhood. I was eight years old when I came to the Ashram in 1963 in the month of November. At first we (myself, my cousin Ashok Panda, Apa, and I forget who else) stayed, as far I remember, in the house of a relative of Benimadhav. Benimadhav and his parents were among the first persons from Odisha to come to the Ashram. Then we were shifted to a house near the Playground. Nowadays there is a shop there. The house where we were accommodated was beside, or one or two houses away from, where the shop was then. The house was also near the Governor's House. The two daughters of the Governor of those days studied in the Ashram School. Through them we had a glimpse of the Governor's House. After a few years we moved to 'Home of Progress' which was near the old Nursing Home of the Ashram. It was a new building. I believe this building was donated by the then Chief Minister of Odisha. He did this for the convenience of the children coming from Odisha.

We were all clustered around Apa. She was the centre of our life. She was also very keen that we connect with the inner life of the Ashram. She used to encourage us to go to Pujalal-ji in the early morning to learn Sanskrit *shlokas*. We used to

also wait for Pranab-da who used to come down from the Mother's room and give us each a rose. Pratijna-apa wanted us to come in contact with persons like Pranab-da who was almost always in the physical presence of the Mother and also come in contact with old sadhaks like Pujalal-ji so that we could learn and grow with them. She was trying to mould us in the way that the Mother would want us to be. Pratijna-di endeavoured to make us worthy children of the Mother. Such were her ways. She had studied Psychology and knew very well how to deal with the children's psychology.

We had *Bulletin* Classes every Sunday. There she used to read out selected portions of the magazine of the Ashram which was published on every Darshan Day. She created this spiritual atmosphere in the boarding as the Mother wanted her children to imbibe the special atmosphere of the Ashram. At every step she wanted to follow the Mother and she wanted us to do the same.

Pratijna-apa was also our teacher of Odia literature. Savitri Mohapatra '75 and I were the only students in the class. Later on, when I moved to Odisha, I came to know that the books in Odia literature that we were following in her class were being studied by students in Odisha at the level of post-graduation and above.

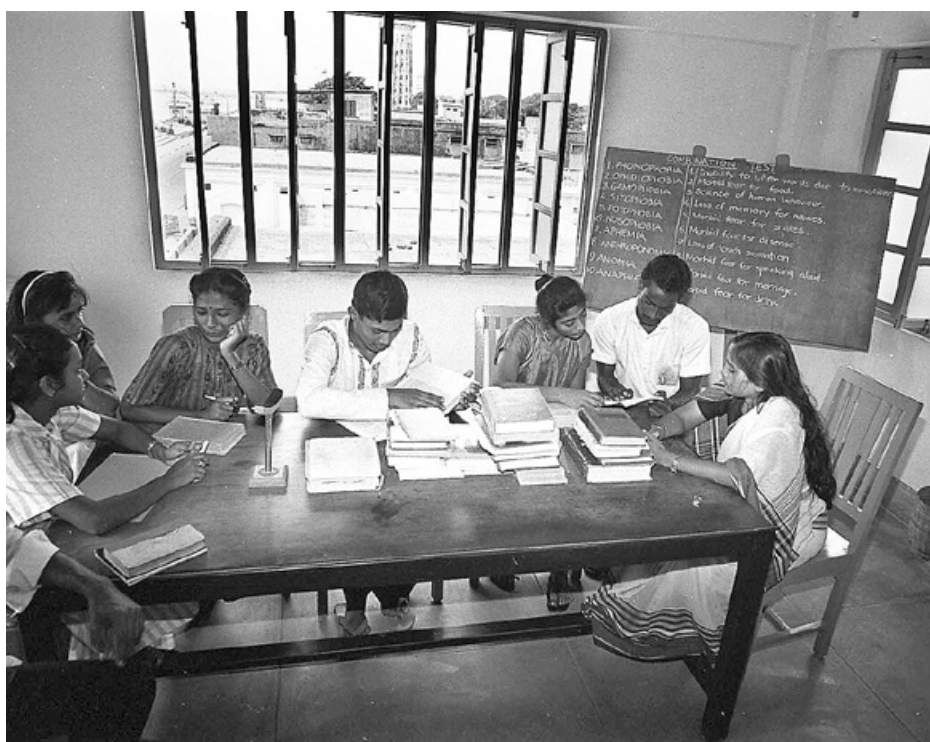
My birthday is on the 12th of February. Once

in the 60s, on the evening of the 11th, I had gone to the market with her brother, Biswambar-da, to buy new clothes for myself as children of the boarding wore new clothes on their birthdays. In the market we heard some noise and there was a great commotion. We realised that a fire had started somewhere nearby. So we returned in a hurry to the boarding. At night some Ashramites came to our boarding and took us to the School. Riots had erupted in Pondicherry. It was an agitation against the Hindi Language.

One day we were playing on the terrace of the boarding. We were playing hide-and-seek. There was a small accident during the game and I had a cut above my nose, on my forehead. From then onwards there was to be no playing of hide-and-seek on the terrace. These were the two incidents which I remember regarding our boarding.

My parents came to the Ashram for the four Darshan Days. They stayed in the Ashram for a few days. But my relation with Pratijna-apa was more spontaneous and close. She goaded me many times to write letters to my parents. In my letters also I was not as close to my parents as I was to Pratijna-apa.

After completing the three years of my studies in 'Knowledge' I moved to Odisha. Since then I have been going to the Ashram every year. I used to naturally visit Pratijna-apa and Manoj Das. It



Pratijna-di (extreme right) taking a class in Knowledge

was always a reunion of a mother and her child. The moment she saw us (the children who were with her in 'Home of Progress') she would start recounting the old memories. We used to enjoy remembering the old days in the boarding and the Ashram. We would share the reminiscences with the visitors or the Ashramites who were present. In this way years passed by until a few years ago when she became unwell.

Pratijna-apa brought us up as the Mother wanted Her children to be. There was always a spiritual atmosphere in the boarding. Now, as I remember her after her passing away, I am trying consciously to relive and build that atmosphere around me. If all of us (who were staying in 'Home of Progress' when Pratijna-apa was in-charge) could try to relive and build that spiritual atmosphere around us and try to become the children of the Mother as She wanted us to be, it will be a fitting tribute to Apa's departed soul. ❧

MUSICAL MEMORIES

A programme of songs written and composed by Ashram artistes over the years was presented on 20th August by the Vocal Music Section of the Ashram on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of SAICE. Shobha-di answers questions asked by Gaurishankar '80 regarding the programme and about Ashram music in general.

How did the idea of a music programme based on songs by Ashram inmates germinate?

You will be surprised to know it. It is very personal. But since you want to know it I will tell you.

Ever since the vocal music section opened in 1965, children of different age groups started learning singing. And very soon, more and more students, also from the Higher Course, chose to learn vocal music. I was the only teacher then. I taught them various types of vocal music: children's songs for the very young ones, Hindustani vocal, Hindi Bhajans (of Mirabai, Surdas, Tulsi-das and many other saint-poets of India), Rabindra Sangeet, Nazrul Giti, Shyama Sangeet, Kirtan, Baul, Bhatiali and other folk styles of Bengal. But I always felt the need for something more, to teach them some songs of our own, some Ashram songs. I had learnt music from Dilip-da and Sahana-di and knew many of their compositions. But their songs could mostly be taught only to fairly

advanced students and they were in Bengali.

Mother wanted all her children to learn music, some sort of music... She had asked me to help all those who approached me if I had the time and from the beginning I accepted Ashramites and others in the larger Ashram community who wanted to join *Sangitayan* (Vocal music section). These classes were mostly held in the early morning or after school hours. I used to teach them too all the different styles as I did to the school-students. But I always had a strong feeling that we had to have something more than these for the Ashramites. Some songs which would be our own, which would embody our life here, would express our difficulties and our aspirations, would be a musical form of our love and gratitude for our Masters and their vision of the future, and would help us to strive towards "the inner opening" that the Mother never tired of underlining.

The Mother had told me that she wanted my music to come from me. I began working on





myself, started searching for new musical material. I started composing, sometimes only OM chanting, or I would set to music some poems of Pujalal-ji, or some poems of Kokil-ji, some hymns from the Veda or the Upanishads. At times my love and adoration for the Mother and Sri Aurobindo would flow out of me, as a song rising from deep within me. When I started teaching these to my students, the result was very moving. They got something new and there was a new atmosphere in the class – an atmosphere of our Ashram – many felt an immediate connection with these songs, and they became the means by which they could express what was deep within them. They all liked the experience very much. Gradually, over the years, many wanted to learn and sing only this kind of songs which we call today our Ashram songs (*Auro Giti*).

Gradually other teachers like Vimal-ben, Mohan, Chinmayee, Arun Bishnu joined the music section. And they also began to set to music the poems and lyrics of various Ashram poets and taught these. Ratna joined the music section. She had learnt singing from Tinkori-da for many years and she began teaching Tinkori-da's compositions to the students and Ashramites. Pranab-da's compositions were being taught by some teachers and captains to the children of Groups A and B and they were performed on some special occasions in the Playground. Through Saturday

programmes and occasional programmes in the Hall of Harmony and in the School courtyard many of these songs were presented to a wider public and entered the Ashram mainstream. So, now, we have *Auro Giti*, an ever-growing and considerable body of work in various Indian languages like Sanskrit, Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Gujarati, Odia, Tamil and a few in English and French as well.

When we were thinking of celebrating the 75th anniversary of our School it was most natural for us to remember this musical journey and so that is what we tried to present.

How long did it take you to work on this theme and did you have any criteria in mind while choosing the songs, the poets and composers?

It was in my mind for a while, but I began to work on it seriously during the 2017 vacation when I had a little more time.

As for choosing the songs, the poets and composers, we chose whatever was available and could be presented within the one-hour-twenty-minute duration of our programme.

The projection of the photos of persons who have been so much part of our cultural life recreated the atmosphere of the bygone days. How did you work on them?

I gave the responsibility of the selection and preparation of the photos for projection to Ashok

and he got everything done. I am glad you felt that it recreated the special atmosphere that we wanted it to.

We observed that it was a rather large group of singers and the group-songs must have taken a lot of practice. How did you go about it and how long did you practise?

We started our practice from the first week of January 2018 and it went on till the 19th of August 2018. We used to meet thrice a week: Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and work for between 45 minutes to an hour. Uttam and Debjani conducted the rehearsals.

May I ask why we did not see any students participating in the programme apart from one musician?

To celebrate the 50th year of *Sangitayan* (the Vocal music section), we had presented a musical programme and it was entirely done by the *Pragati* group (the School students). That is why we thought it would be nice to give a chance to the *Agami* group (the adults), this time.

However the *Pragati* group also presented a Saturday programme in the Hall of Harmony on 20th of October 2018. All the songs presented in various languages were written and set to music by the students themselves.

How many of the musical works of all the different composers in the Ashram that were

presented in this programme are preserved?

It is also well known that for many years you have been working on recording your songs and musical compositions and trying to preserve them. Can you tell us how many such songs/ compositions have been archived? A few details of this project please.

Probably most Ashram songs composed by Dilip-da have been recorded in his own voice and the musical notations of these songs have been published in *Geetashree*.

Musical notations of most of Sahana-di's songs were published in *Prasadi*. Some of her songs, sung by Smriti Ghosh, are available on a CD titled *Prarthana*.

Tinkori-da had got all his songs recorded by Projector Room in his own voice and they are available. Some of his songs sung by Ratna Chakravarty are available on a CD titled *Gitiratna*.

Vimal-ben had sung her own compositions and got a cassette recorded by Sebastian. Later a relative of hers got some of her songs recorded professionally and released on a CD.

Many of Pranab-da's songs were recorded in the 1970s, first on an LP record and later on some CDs.

Both Chinmayee and Arun Bishnu had done private recordings of their compositions to preserve them.



Mohan has recorded most of his Ashram songs and released them in several commercial CDs and they are all available.

As far as my own works are concerned I don't remember the actual number of songs that we have recorded. So I will share with you the number of projects we have completed and what is still in the pipeline and that should give you an idea.

1. Durga stotra and Invocation to Mother India (1972) -- LP Disk
2. Esho Gaahi Gaan (Songs in Bengali for children) -- 1 CD
3. Kavi Nishikanto (Songs and poems of Nishikanto in Bengali -- 2 CDs
4. Om Namo Bhagawate (Slokas and Hymns in Sanskrit of T.V. Kapali Shastry) -- 1 CD
5. Vandanam (Songs in Sanskrit of Pujalal) -- 1 CD
6. India and Her Future (Songs and Hymns on India with commentary on India from Sri Aurobindo and the Mother) -- 1 CD
7. Sharanam Mama (Songs in Hindi by Vidyavati Kokil) -- 2 CDs
8. Anjali (Songs in Bengali, Lyrics: Robi Gupta and other poets) -- 1 CD
9. Laha Pranam (Songs in Bengali, Lyrics and Music: Shobha Mitra) -- 1 CD
10. Pujar Argha (Songs in Bengali, Lyrics and Music: Shobha Mitra) -- 1 CD
11. Upohar (Songs in Bengali, Lyrics and Music: Shobha Mitra) -- 1 CD
12. Notun Bhorer Alo (Songs in Bengali, Lyrics and Music: Shobha Mitra) -- 1 CD

Some Musical compositions:

13. Salutations
14. Invocation
15. Adoration
16. All we owe to Thee
17. Towards a Luminous Future

18. Aspiration
19. Vers un Avenir Lumineux (for Unesco)
20. A Century's Salutations
21. Our Gratitude

In Preparation:

22. Offrande
23. Musical Memories (the recent programme)
24. Chorus songs in Sri Aurobindo Ashram

How do you propose to pass on and perpetuate this valuable body of songs to both the school-students and Ashramites?

First of all, the teachers need to value them. They ought to feel that these songs, *Auro Giti*, have something unique, something precious which must be taught to the students and adults here and must be sung and presented to the Ashram public on different occasions. Only then will they take root.

The Mother spoke about a different genre of music to be created here. To what extent is an attempt in this direction visible in these creations?

I do not know about the others. I have tried it partially. And it is such a marvellous experience!

But I realised that the way I lead my life now -- my habits, my present musical activities, my work in the music section -- everything has to change and take on a different dimension to create music of a different genre. One has to become a different person!

One last question. Over the years we have seen how the vocal music classes have improved in their organisation and their reach. It is certainly a result of your hard work. Any thoughts about the difficulties faced and the collaboration received in this domain?

The growth and the success of *Sangitayan*, the vocal music section over the years, lies solely in the harmonious and sincere working of all the teachers and students and the Mother's infinite Grace upon them. ❧

AWAKENING - A BALLET

Surabhi Nandi '81 tells us about the programme that brought together all the dance students

We are indeed fortunate to witness the 75th year of our wonderful Centre of Education, SAICE. We are also extremely grateful to be happy participants in the various cultural programmes offered at the feet of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, on this auspicious occasion.



On this occasion students of the Dance Section presented 'Awakening', a ballet that brought together dance students of various styles – Bharat Natyam, Kathak, Odissi and Ballet – in a joint presentation. This was a tribute to SAICE from the Dance Section, a section which started under the Mother's presence and was nurtured by the late Anu-ben and Ira-di.



Where did the idea of such a grand programme come from? Well... it all began one fine day, sometime in Feb 2018, with a wake-up call from Mamta-ben, presently the head of our Dance Section. She expressed her wish, which was also a long cherished dream, to present a dance program, with creative inputs from all dance teachers of various dance forms, classical as well as contemporary.

Thereafter, a series of meetings followed, where the theme, the supporting texts, creative ideas, selection of music pieces, costumes, props, slides and video projections, sound and light, practice schedules, transport to the Theatre and back, snacks for all participants was looked





into. Every big and small work was systematically planned and executed. This was indeed a team work headed by Mamta-ben, Anurekha, Ila-di, Jayati, Jyotsna, Kannyakumari, Madhumita, Sangeeta, Sumati and myself. This project was whole-heartedly supported by various departments of the Ashram, devotees, parents and well-wishers.

The supporting texts for the programme were passages from *Savitri*, which were carefully selected by Nandita-di. They expressed the aspiration of the Earth for the Divine Manifestation upon it. Sanskrit *shlokas* describing the beauty, divinity and grandeur of the Elements (Sky, Air, Fire, Water and Earth) were selected with Archana-di's help. The depiction of the richness of the six Seasons: Greeshma, Varsha, Sharad, Hemant,

Sheeta and Vasant were also evoked by Sanskrit *shlokas*.

We saw the growth of 'Awakening' over four months of intense rehearsals, wherein the students put in their precious time and effort, regardless of fatigue after their regular sports. Hence, as the day of the final performance gradually drew nearer, we could feel the collective aspiration and see the happy result of dedicated collective work.

On 3rd July '18 the red curtains slid apart to the auspicious sound of the traditional Gong and a deep chant of Aum, Aum, Aum... thereafter it was pure magic... celestial voices, beautiful lights, rich music, graceful dances, colourful costumes, magical and graceful moves... and above all a spell-bound audience!

The ballet was a visual treat, unfolding beautifully, smoothly, flawlessly... it was as though some Divine power had taken charge of it.

'Awakening' is still a dream come true for most of us. The presentation was the result of collective *tapasya*, not of four months but of years, since the time when the Dance Section was blessed by the Mother. We are humble instruments in Her hands and our hearts are filled with profound gratitude towards Her.

The earth's prayer, the great event and some unseen hands were weaving the tapestry of the Divine creation. ❀



ALUMNI ART AND PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITION 2018

Dilip Patel '76 H

Once again we had enthusiastic participation in our art and photography exhibition 2018. Sixteen artists and photographers took part and the variety and the standard of work was impressive. To name but a few artists: Vrinda-di, who won



glowing accolades for her stunning embroidery on silk sarees and stoles; Devashish, with his creative solutions to recycling materials, especially turning cardboard into artifacts and artwork; and the new-comers

Shreya, Seema and Aradhita who also contributed impressive work. Bitasta once again displayed her block-printed textiles. Vishwajyoti, Manoj and Dilip had, as usual, canvases and watercolours. Habul and Mina contributed exquisitely sculpted terracotta heads. Alpa and Sangeeta displayed their colourful papier maché creations, which are available at Nava Vihan. The photographers



Ritarpan and Sanjay had memorable wildlife experiences captured in beautiful photographs. The spiritual tone was set by the Mother's signatures set in floral frames. There was also some beautiful artwork made from material that She had used. All in all a great display of creative work, well worth spending a few moments for. ❧



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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CLASS OF 2018



Third Row (L to R): Eric Smith, Pentela Sri Aravinda Prakash, Pentela Raja Anand, Anshul Das, Akshaya Vinayagam, Debayan Mukherjee, Chinmay Patnaik, Snehanjit Pattnaik, Sayan Dutta, Shreyas Sadugol, Tharan Sivaram Rao Tandle.

Second Row (L to R): Monica Dalal, Satyamayee Pattnaik, Kituu Reddy, Dilip Mehtani, Manoj Das Gupta, Jhumur Bhattacharya, Swadesh Chatterji, Rajalaxmi Pradhan, Aninda De.

Front Row (L to R): Mira Sharma, Ivara Srivastava, Ratil Joshi, Sanchari Chowdhury, Shakti Sharma, Tanushree Balyarsingh, Madhumalati Sahoo, Sudakshina Das, Gayathri, Nishitha Tyagi.