

The Golden Chain

Alumni Journal of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education



Coping with Covid

How the Ashram faced the challenge of the Covid-19 pandemic

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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On the Cover:

Diyas at the Ashram gate on April 5th 2020, at 9 pm. The entire country lit lamps at this time to 'dispel the darkness' of Covid and as a symbol of unity and solidarity.

On the Back Cover:

Class of 2021 with some of their teachers.

The Golden Chain

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The last two years have been tumultuous. Before December 2019 who would have thought that the world would come to a standstill with everyone battling a new virus? It would have been laughed off as science fiction! The reality of the Covid-19 pandemic, however, hit us hard. Lives and livelihoods were lost on an unprecedented scale. Even for those of us who were less impacted, it disrupted our activities and lives in ways we would never have imagined.

How did Covid-19 affect the Ashram? How did it face the virus and deal with the lockdowns? The Ashram is a close-knit community with many seniors. What were the unique challenges a community like ours faced and how were they overcome? In this issue, we attempt to know and document how the Ashram coped with the Covid crisis. Some time has elapsed since the worst days of the pandemic and we are in a position now to look back and better understand the events.

The Ashram's Covid response had many aspects: the preliminary collection of data on Ashramites to be able to plan and organise the response, the distribution of food and other essentials to the community during the lockdown, setting up of the Whatsapp/SMS broadcast and the Helpline to aid communication, protecting seniors in a bio-bubble in Ashram guest houses, keeping essential activities – like harvesting farm produce – functioning with volunteers, testing those who showed Covid-like symptoms, tracing their contacts to prevent the spread of the virus, caring for those who tested positive in home quarantine and in hospital, tracking Covid containment zones and screening maids and workers to be able to re-open departments safely, taking

SAICE classes and PED activities online, vaccinating seniors and constantly studying and defining the medical policies and protocols to be followed. The list is long and we have tried to cover each aspect in some detail.

The crisis was unexpected, but on the whole, the Ashram was able to handle it remarkably efficiently. Young Ashramites and volunteers were at the forefront of the effort. Happily, former students came forward unhesitatingly to help during this emergency. We spoke to a number of those involved to try to get a picture of all that happened. Naturally there were many others whom we were not able to speak to and whose names may not be mentioned, whose quiet contribution was invaluable. Finally though, along with the sincere dedication of many was the unmistakable touch of Grace!

Crises become occasions when we understand ourselves better, when we learn to draw on our reserves and rise to the challenge. Let us hope that the learning and growth from this experience, both at a personal level, at the level of the Ashram, at the level of humanity at large, stands us in good stead for the future.

*

Covid had its role to play in the long hiatus of *The Golden Chain* magazine too. The other reason for the long delay in bringing out an issue is that *The Golden Chain* is short of staff. We need to re-invigorate the magazine with new ideas and new energy. We invite all of you who would like to participate, in any capacity – as content generators, editors, graphics designers – to drop us an email at goldenchainfraternity@gmail.com. We look forward to hearing from you. ☸

High on the Holy Hill

Devika Murthy '81

As I steadily climbed the steps of the Shankaracharya Hill towards the temple at the top, I remembered Sri Aurobindo at every second, and how almost a dozen decades ago, he had ascended the same stairs towards the sanctum sanctorum. It was here “while walking on the ridge of the Takht-i-Sulaiman” that he had “the realisation of the vacant Infinite”. Describing the experience that left a deep impression on him, he wrote evocatively:

“One stands upon a mountain ridge and glimpses or mentally feels a wideness, a pervasiveness, a nameless Vast in Nature; then suddenly there comes the touch, a revelation, a flooding, the mental loses itself in the spiritual, one bears the first invasion of the Infinite.”

Kashmir is no doubt one of the most beautiful places on earth. Endless snow-clad ranges, swift-flowing rivers, rolling meadows, rich forests of pine and chinar, and fruit and walnut trees are a joy to residents and tourists alike. And the select saffron, sought across the globe for its inimitable taste and subtle aroma, has made a name for itself and is even costlier than gold!

The Kashmir Valley is 5,000 feet above sea level and the Shankaracharya Hill on Zabarwan’s

slopes on the eastern side of Srinagar city is another 1000 feet higher. The hill offers breathtaking views, and I, a little like Sri Aurobindo, felt in some sense like I was at the rim of space.

Emperors and commoners have considered the hill and the shrine on top of it sacred from the start, and will continue to do so till the end of time, which does seem to stand still when one is enveloped in the magnificent vistas.

Amazingly, even Alexander the Great for some inexplicable reason did not destroy it! Nor did the Moslems raze it, thus making it the oldest shrine in Kashmir and an archaeological treasure.

From late May to mid-September of 1903, Sri Aurobindo had accompanied the

Maharaja of Baroda to that Princely State, when he was in the Gaekwad’s service. And the poet in Him spontaneously awakened to the grandeur and the pristine surroundings, which would have been more untouched then than it is at present, for visitors have thronged the Valley thereafter. In the early 1900s there may perhaps have been a hundred houseboats, while today there are 3000 of them moored in the Dal, and hundreds more tied in nearby inlets catering to different sizes of groups and budgets!



The Shankaracharya Temple

Sri Aurobindo and his companions must have walked by the waters, taken leisurely rides in the shikara, or “adjourned in a body... to the Maharaja’s green-cushioned boat and set out on the broad bosom of Lake Dal and through the lock and a canal into the Jhelum”.

But it was not all holidaying for Aravinda Ghose as he was known at the time, for the Maharaja saw absolutely no reason why work should lag! “Unfortunately there was the over-industrious Gaekwar to cut short the Paradise! His idea of Paradise was going through administrative papers and making myself and others write speeches for which he got all the credit” mused Sri Aurobindo later.

Still, one can safely assume that it must have been a heavenly few months in that Eden as Sri Aurobindo himself put it subsequently. The cool environs, the lotuses abundantly abloom especially in July and August, and the good Kashmiri food would have added to their delight.

And Sri Aurobindo was full of appreciation for the local royal abode and commented, “The Maharaja’s palace by the river in the true quaint Hindu way of building was the one building which struck me in Srinagar...”

Sri Aurobindo would have driven by the islands of weeping willows and ‘floating markets’ on the way to and from the Shankaracharya hill. During that period, horses could be ridden up to the small plateau at the foot of the steps, and carriages drawn up the incline as far as the road allowed them. It is approximately 250 steps to the entrance, and Sri Aurobindo who weighed just 50 kilos in those days and was pretty fit, would have easily reached it in ten minutes!

Lately though, due to the increasing number of visitors and for security purposes, one has to leave one’s vehicle at least half a kilometre to a kilometre away on the winding route, depending on the rush, and walk the rest of the distance before one gets to the base. Thousands go up daily



Sri Aurobindo, while in the Gaekwad's service, with his colleagues in Kashmir, 1903



for darshan and to offer their prayers, for everyone is permitted to enter no matter which religious tenet he follows.

The ancient Shiva temple, which is also known as the Jyoteshwara temple and stands in the midst of thickly wooded groves, is made of natural grey stones, and is estimated to have been built circa 371 B.C. Its octagonal structure has been there for centuries, and has gone through several renovations under Dogra Kings and Sikh Rulers. The Shivalinga in the temple, however, was installed much later.

During the rule of Muslim dynasties, and for centuries thereafter, the hill was known as the Takht-i-Sulaiman, or as referred to by Sri Aurobindo, the Seat of Solomon – for Solomon was borne by his men even as he continued sitting on the throne! It is also commonly referred to as Shankaracharya Hill in memory of the famous seer Adi Shankaracharya who made a memorable trip to Kashmir and is said to have meditated there and attained enlightenment.

It is believed by some that Jesus too spent some years in Kashmir, consequent to his resurrection, roaming incognito and known to the locals as Yuz Asaf. Persian inscriptions on the stairs leading up the hill, it is said, vouch for that fact. Myriad books and articles have been written about him preaching and proclaiming his prophethood before passing away there.

There is also the much revered Hazratbal Mosque, popularly called Dargah Sharif, with the relics of Prophet Mohammed in the capital, and Guru Nanak Dev Ji spent many years in the Valley of Flowers, which made Kashmir a harmonious confluence of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian presence.

A great deal of water has flowed since...

As a student in the Ashram studying Sri Aurobindo's works, I might not have fully understood his poem "Adwaita" or many of His other poems, but when I beheld the Temple, I could begin to glean a little of what was meant as He gazed at the panoramic sweep below.

Of course, none of us has the Consciousness that Sri Aurobindo was steeped in, but we can significantly appreciate the mood reflected in the sonnet that was a direct result of that visit:

ADWAITA

*I walked on the high-wayed Seat of Solomon
Where Shankaracharya's tiny temple stands
Facing Infinity from Time's edge, alone
On the bare ridge ending earth's vain romance.*

*Around me was a formless solitude:
All had become one strange Unnamable,
An unborn sole Reality world-nude,
Topless and fathomless, for ever still.*

*A Silence that was Being's only word,
The unknown beginning and the voiceless end
Abolishing all things moment-seen or heard,
On an incommunicable summit reigned,*

*A lonely Calm and void unchanging Peace
On the dumb crest of Nature's mysteries.*

The 'Spiritual Flag' designed by the Mother was hoisted atop the Sri Aurobindo Library on 8th August, 2019, to honour the return of Jammu and Kashmir at par with the rest in the country, though currently reorganised as two Union Territories. One can only hope that slowly but surely, all the separate parts merge into one whole in a peaceful, progressive and prosperous way, fulfilling Sri Aurobindo's prophecy of a united India. ❧

A Teaching Framework

A proposal

Lopa Mukherjee '94 is an author of several novels and short stories and writes regularly for Ashram magazines. She is a teacher at SAICE teaching Indian culture, psychology and related subjects. She teaches soft skills, creativity, dreamwork and conducts workshops on psycho-spiritual topics in the larger community. Here she shares her thoughts on education.

The recent break from regular schooling has created an opportunity to look at educational systems and ask some important questions. Given the profusion of self-learning tools easily available online, is the teacher's job redundant? What is the aim of education? How close are schools to achieving that aim? Online teaching has taught many lessons – to students, teachers, parents and educationists. One thing is clear. Children want to get back to school – so schools are here to stay. But schools have to adapt to the changing times. New frameworks or teaching styles will need to be explored. And it will take effort from teachers, much more than from students. This essay proposes a framework to teachers that I would have liked to have around when I was a student. A lot of my ideas are synthesised from my teaching experience and my student life at SAICE and in Indian and American universities.

Let's do a quick exercise. Let's write down the formulae we remember from our school days, such as Newton's Laws, chemical compositions, conjugation rules, who fought in Panipat... Now

let's write down events and experiences we remember, such as that gruelling race, harvesting groundnuts, rehearsing for a play. Beside each event, let's write down a one-word summary of why we remember it. Now let's tick the ones from both lists that we still apply in our lives. Chances are that the 'episodes' list is longer, and has more things we have carried forward, because experiences teach more than classroom lessons. Moreover, what schools classify as subjects to be taught are only a small portion of the things that are learnt. Team spirit or compassionate speech for example are not taught directly, but acquired by studying people's behaviours and copying good examples. A school is a safe container which enables one to learn life skills and practice them. It also allows one to fail and try again without suffering consequences.

Let's say trigonometry did not show up as a subject we apply in our adult life. If we had been given a second life as a student, and had the freedom to choose subjects, we would probably skip trigonometry. Now if we were told a secret – that we don't learn a subject, we develop a faculty; and trigonometry



Please note, the usage of pronouns for teacher and student is random and not a reflection of reality or any personal bias.

is an excellent tool to learn three-dimensional visualisation, we could be persuaded to take trigonometry. Similarly, if we look at the meta-knowledge behind every subject, we can usually find a reason why we were taught the subject in school. If we keep at this exercise, we will find many other faculties that we wished were taught in school – which is why learning has to be a lifelong practice. A school can do only so much – its primary purpose is to create a thirst for knowledge. The education system has evolved over millennia, and it will always evolve. Which also means it will not satisfy all, all the time, and will need to try out various teaching methods.

The framework I would like to propose has three parts:

1. Layered teaching
2. *Swadhyay* or Self-learning
3. Group dynamics

Layered teaching is doing several passes over the subject, every time in greater detail. It starts with a big picture view of the subject. The next layer is a shallow dive into the topics that will be covered during the session. The third layer is a deep dive into each topic. The final layer points at material for further studies. The *swadhyay* part of the framework equips children with core values that will enable them to be their own teachers. Group dynamics helps to develop interpersonal skills. Now let us look at each aspect of the framework in detail.

LAYERED TEACHING

When reading a non-fiction book, we look at the index or the table of contents to get an idea of the topics covered. Then we look at the number of pages per topic to get an idea of the relative weightage among the topics. This exercise gives us a bird's eye view of the subject matter. If we were given such a view at the start of the session for each subject, we would be holding a map. A map also tells us if there is an alternate path to reach our destination. The teacher gives the map at the start of the session. It is the syllabus she has laid out with dates and milestones. If a student wants to chart his own course, this is the time.

The teacher reviews his programme to make sure he is somewhat covering the subject and has set up challenging milestones for himself. There are ways a teacher can accommodate self-learners in a class that otherwise follows the teacher's programme.

The milestones and dates in the syllabus are important. Milestones are opportunities to summarise key learnings, and test what the student has grasped. It is not about being able to search for an answer on the internet, but being able to think critically and present one's thoughts clearly within a given amount of time. It shows how alive the mind is. Presentations before a peer group can be a milestone activity.

Subjects don't need to remain locked within boundaries. Multidisciplinary programmes are closer to how the mind functions - associating seemingly disparate things, searching for common patterns, classifying, connecting the dots. Milestones also help in a continuous assessment process. The framework suggests a three-way assessment for every student – self-assessment, peer assessment and teacher's assessment. Twice during the session students give feedback about the course and the teaching style, which could be used to modify the programme in that very session.

In a layered teaching framework, making the syllabus is the first layer. The next layer is diving into each topic. A first pass is an acquaintance study, the following pass is a detailed study. The final layer is providing references for a deeper and wider study beyond the scope of the syllabus. Here teachers could also offer project ideas or refer the students to specialists.

In this framework, a student could veer away from the teacher's programme and specialise at any point without losing sight of the big picture. A balanced view of things saves one from falling into traps such as fundamentalism, unhealthy patriotism, hyper-individualism and so on. There is much to say about an unbalanced outlook, but we have to leave it for another day.

SWADHYAY OR SELF-LEARNING

The second principle of the framework aims at kindling higher order faculties of the mind and

heart. Once a student has these faculties he can teach himself any subject. They are many: discrimination, compassion, creativity, motivation, responsibility, critical thinking, concentration, curiosity, enthusiasm and other core character values.

Right at the start, a student is made aware of the fact that education is his responsibility. A teacher holds one of the tinders, the student holds the other. Whether he will catch fire or not depends more on him than his teachers, parents, heredity, or circumstances. This means he cannot blame the boring subject or the uninteresting teaching style. He should introspect about his own motivation. The framework allows him to change learning methods, but discourages dropping out.

Most of the subjects can be learnt online, including extra-curricular ones like cooking and embroidery. But so can one binge watch serials and movies. Or one could learn harmful things, get lost in a maze of websites, abuse people one sees as the “other” on the many social media platforms. Consumerism is an addiction, and since digital consumerism is free, it can become harmful. Not only is over-consumption a time sink, it also depletes one’s creative capacities, and makes one mentally and physically lazy. To guard against it, the education system teaches discrimination. It tells a student what he should choose to engage with, and for how long. If he is learning a new skill, he needs to balance it with practicing that skill. Access to knowledge should not be too quick, nor too effortless either. Our minds need time to internalise the learning. Anything gained without any pain tends to be forgotten soon. Where we have invested time and effort the rewards are delayed but well cherished when they come.

The student is taught time management so that he can set boundaries around each of his engagements. He can split up a big task into smaller chunks of work. He can track if he is slipping. He can reach out for help at the right time. This



part of the education teaches him responsibility. He does not read or see trash. He conveys the right thing in the right way to the right person. It makes him choose inspiring role models and friends who will uphold him and whom he can uphold.

The student is encouraged to design his own learning programme that breaks subject-wise silos. He is given critical thinking tasks that help him arrange his thoughts logically. He is given creative writing and contemplative projects that exercise his emotional thinking. He is given projects that help him connect with nature and people compassionately. Since experiential and creative learning spark joy and teach better than textbooks, the school could make spaces for such activities. A library is such a space, as is a dance floor, a theatre, a playground and a tinkering workshop.

One could ask why these faculties are taught in every subject and repeated over the years. The answer is that every subject teaches a different facet of a core value. For example, there is a different kind of ethics that applies to history than to biology. When teaching appreciation, in music class it is training the ear, in physics it is appreciation of the laws of nature. Each year the same skills are revisited at a higher level of complexity. Concentration for example means a two-minute silence for children, but could be hours of deep

work for a college student. Different concentration techniques can be taught to students of different age groups.

Since it may take time for teachers to incorporate these meta-learning exercises in their programmes, a separate class could be created to teach these faculties. The class could also teach some additional core faculties such as compassionate thinking, ecological thinking, efficiency, a little bit of psychology, working with constraints, precision in presentation, confidence building, leadership and so on.

GROUP DYNAMICS

The third element in the framework is facilitating group interactions. It is not only to develop communication skills, but also the ability to listen to others and reflect from their perspectives. Class interactions are the playgrounds to find out how well students have learnt *swadhyay* techniques. Are students non-violent negotiators? Are they compassionate thinkers? Are they holistic thinkers? Are they able to disagree amicably? Are they able to appreciate diversity?

Classmates are one's social safety net. Each one has to nurture friendships and find ways to live harmoniously with fellow beings. Face to face interactions allow the flow of energies that audio and video calls cannot mimic. Children need to be able to read faces and body language. They need to ask intelligent questions and get real-time answers. Curated answers have their merit, but they may not reflect the authentic voice of the speaker. Expert opinions and majoritarian views pressurise one to conform, even if that's not the right thing to do. The voice of *viveka* has to be awakened, which tells what is right. Group work also teaches teamwork and collaboration, when to ask for help and when to offer help. Leadership skills can be taught here as well as skills to follow instructions. The community that nurtures the school could participate in group work with the children. Self-learners would join the group sessions because interpersonal skills cannot be learnt on one's own or through books and the internet.

The framework encourages group dynamics

PRINCIPLES OF EDUCATION

The first principle of true teaching is that nothing can be taught. The teacher is not an instructor or taskmaster, he is a helper and a guide. His business is to suggest and not to impose. He does not actually train the pupil's mind, he only shows him how to perfect his instruments of knowledge and helps and encourages him in the process. He does not impart knowledge to him, he shows him how to acquire knowledge for himself. [...]

The second principle is that the mind has to be consulted in its own growth. [...] Every one has in him something divine, something his own, a chance of perfection and strength in however small a sphere which God offers him to take or refuse. The task is to find it, develop it and use it. The chief aim of education should be to help the growing soul to draw out that in itself which is best and make it perfect for a noble use. [...]

The third principle of education is to work from the near to the far, from that which is to that which shall be. The basis of a man's nature is almost always, in addition to his soul's past, his heredity, his surroundings, his nationality, his country, the soil from which he draws sustenance, the air which he breathes, the sights, sounds, habits to which he is accustomed. They mould him not the less powerfully because insensibly, and from that then we must begin. We must not take up the nature by the roots from the earth in which it must grow or surround the mind with images and ideas of a life which is alien to that in which it must physically move. [...]

Sri Aurobindo

among teachers too. In these sessions teachers can share the methods that worked and those that did not. Teachers could share the discoveries they've made with online tools, and how these could be used as teaching aids. Teachers can discuss challenges such as accommodating self-learners with the others in the same batch. If a child wants to

explore a topic from multiple perspectives, several teachers could come together in these sessions and figure out how to cooperate. Teachers can discuss how to make classes interactive, keep students attentive and encourage them to participate in the class. Teachers will get a chance here to practice their methods on other teachers and get feedback and suggestions for improvement. When teachers feel they are learning something new their work will not become a routine job.

The National Education Programme 2020 (NEP) that the government of India circulated has many aspects discussed in this framework, such as interdisciplinary subjects; experiential learning; moving away from lecture-based to interactive teaching; no big stakes exams; year-round evaluation milestones; three-way assessments. Learning opportunities for teachers are given a lot of emphasis in the NEP.

It is not easy to be a teacher, which is why there is a full-length course teaching one how to be a teacher, and a process to ensure teachers are aware of the latest developments in their fields. All these attempts still cannot make a good teacher. Teachers have to communicate with the heart to be examples to their students. They have to behave well all the time, since they probably



are role models. They have to encourage and applaud. They cannot compare children and make one feel less adequate than another. They need all the skills taught in the *swadhyay* programme, which also means they are in a self-development programme themselves. They need to be able to solve interpersonal issues. They have to be psy-

chologists and above all spiritual seekers. They are the ones who are nurturing the new generation and are helping in shaping our common future. There is a lot at stake being a teacher because of the important and delicate nature of the work.

In the inner flap of every notebook that SAICE provides for the students, there is a quote from the Mother

where she reminds the students that one studies to know, to understand the world, and for the joy that it gives. This same joy is the reason one teaches. In addition, teaching is an opportunity to practice yoga. For how else can Their vision be accomplished? This vision for the School is so high it inspires us all – students, teachers, parents, guardians – to stand tall on our toes and reach out for the sky. This vision is also printed on the front cover of every SAICE notebook: “*The children should be helped to grow up into straightforward, frank, upright and honourable human beings ready to develop into divine nature.*” – Sri Aurobindo. ❧

DISCIPLINE

Constraint is not the best or most effective principle of education. The true education should open out and reveal what is already there in these developing beings. Just as flowers open out in the sun, children open out in joy. Obviously joy does not mean weakness, disorder and confusion, — but a luminous kindliness that encourages what is good and does not severely emphasise what is bad. Grace is always closer to the truth than justice.

The Mother (CWM, 12: 193-194)

Sri Aurobindo: A New Dawn

Shivakumar, Director of SAFIER and AuroYouth – educational and youth initiatives of Sri Aurobindo Society –, answers our questions about the movie being made on Sri Aurobindo by the Sri Aurobindo Society in collaboration with volunteers from Auroville. The movie which is a 2-D hand-drawn animation film is titled ‘Sri Aurobindo: A New Dawn’.

How did this idea of creating an animation film on Sri Aurobindo arise?

The idea of making an animation film on Sri Aurobindo came from a youth, as a request, during an AuroYouth online interaction. The idea was very appealing, as animation is a medium that the youth are very much open to and if we can reach out to these youth in a medium of their favour while at the same time maintaining a high quality, it can be a beautiful offering to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

Next, the choice of the genre as a 2-D hand-drawn animation film became an important one, as we wanted this Film to be an artistic rendering where a group of trained artists will portray every frame in as conscious a way as possible.

evolving so fast, we are drowning in information and innovation without much wisdom. There are growing ecological, economic, social, psychological and existential crises. Life doesn't gaze any more beyond the instant gratification of the impulses, desires and ambitions of the moment and short-lived social media viral posts, amidst breaking relationships, loneliness and depression.

Sri Aurobindo foresaw this human crisis more than a century ago when he was a revolutionary freedom fighter in India. In that context, he saw that India's rebirth, freedom were only the preliminary steps in resolving the evolutionary crisis.

He saw that India holds a treasure trove of experiential wisdom in the field of spiritual evolution gathered over thousands of years by the Rishis, Seers, Sages and Yogins of the past. He rediscovered and synthesised the profound riches of India's spiritual inheritance and through his own radical spiritual transformation, created a new pathway and process for the future evolution of humanity. He developed a life-affirming vision of the spiritual evolution going beyond mind, integrating both Spirit and Matter, East and West, in an integral vision and transformational practice which he called 'Integral Yoga'. We wanted to portray a glimpse of this journey and unfoldment and share it with the youth all over.

This animation film will trace the unfolding of Sri Aurobindo's vision and works in the context of his role in establishing the Will to Freedom in India and his initial spiritual journey, leading to his departure for Pondicherry where he will embark upon his global mission with his spiritual collaborator known as the Mother.



Still from the trailer

Can you tell us about your movie? The period of Sri Aurobindo's life that it covers, its basic concept and intent, the length....

This Film is for the youth of India and the world who are searching for answers to the troubling questions of our time. Our technologies are

We decided to keep the length of the Film to around 20 min. instead of a full length feature film, focusing more on the pre-Ashram period, as the purpose is to inspire the youth through what Sri Aurobindo did to re-awaken India to its destiny, and encourage them to turn to the reading of the words of Sri Aurobindo directly.

How are you going about bringing this project to life? What are the stages? What is the work involved at each stage?

With the help of an animation studio in Mumbai, we came out with a trailer on 15th August, 2021, in order to 1) gather feedback from the community of devotees and experts, 2) introduce the medium of 2-D hand-drawn animation to the audience and 3) generate funds for the making of the Film.

After the trailer launch, in order to process and assimilate the feedback and creative inputs from several sources, the animation studio team visited Pondicherry, met several prominent people related to the Ashram and held several rounds of intense discussions with the content team at Pondicherry. After 5 months of intense work, we have now come up with an enriched script capturing what we would like to communicate through the Film.

Currently, this script is being converted into a storyboard of sketches. And then these sketches will be converted into animated frames. The background music & voice-overs will then get added into it.

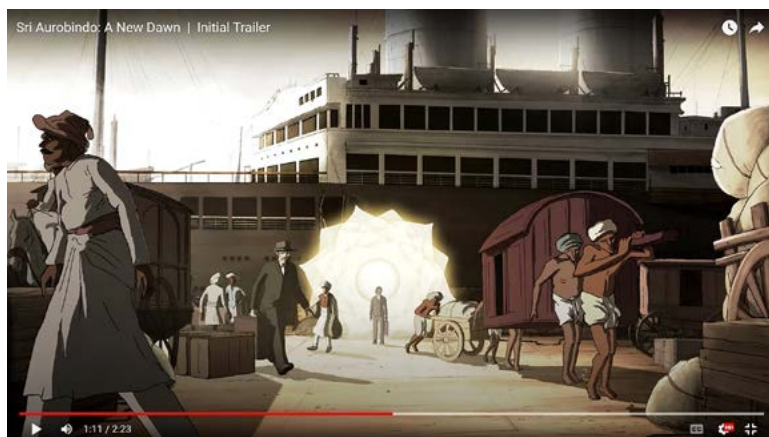
Who are the people who make up your team here in Pondicherry and what is your role? Can you also tell us something about the animation studio you have chosen for executing this film?

The Project Core Team is composed of members from Sri Aurobindo Society and Auroville, and a team of devotees. I am the central co-ordinator for this project. Here is a brief profile of this core team: <https://www.anewdawn.in/project-team>.

The making of the Film has been commissioned to one of the best animation studios in

India – Studio Eeksaurus, Mumbai – which has been around for 13 years with more than 150 films to its credit and has won more than 200 international and national accolades for its work.

Its Founder & Creative Director Suresh Eriyat, an alumnus of the National Institute of Design, has over two decades of experience in the field



Still from the trailer

of design and film direction, especially animation films. When we had our initial discussions with him, he felt inspired to make this Film and went out of his way to offer his full support in making it a worthy offering to Sri Aurobindo.

A brief profile of the technical team is given here: <https://www.anewdawn.in/animation-studio>

While a professional animation team will ensure technical expertise, how do you ensure that the film is able to convey something of the Sri Aurobindonian spirit and not have a commercial feel?

During the stage of making of the trailer, we had a series of interactions with the animation team members explaining to them the significance of the Film and fielding questions on the importance of Sri Aurobindo's role in India's freedom and its renaissance. Our internal core team has been in constant touch with the team in Mumbai, to ensure that the spirit of the Film is captured adequately.

Further, the core team was invited to spend about 5 days in Pondicherry during which they had not only interactions with a few notable

members of the Ashram community but also an opportunity to soak in the atmosphere of the Ashram. This in fact has been instrumental in elevating the overall approach to the Film to a whole new level of expression and now the script for the full Film has been developed based on this.

Animation is sometimes seen as a children's medium. What would you say to those who feel it is an inappropriate medium for a film on Sri Aurobindo?

A medium by itself is only a medium, and the purpose for which it is put to use and the people behind it are what will add value to it. When photography was becoming popular and the question was put to the Mother about its value, the Mother had replied, "Photography is an art when the photographer is an artist." We took our cue from this and are making our best efforts to ensure that the artists involved in the process of creating the animation film are inspired by its content.

The medium of animation is a relatively new form of expression and we are still discovering its use in multiple fields of human endeavour. It is an evolving medium. Many of the animation films involve a type of illustration called cartoon films, with a series of images intended for satire, caricature, or humour, at times with an inspirational message too. This genre is very popular.

And then came a bold deviation from these sub-genres, the animation film *Loving Vincent* (2017). *Loving Vincent* was realized by Dorota Kobiela, a painter herself, after studying the techniques and the artist's story through his letters. Each of the film's 65,000 frames is an oil painting on canvas, created using the same techniques as Van Gogh by a team of 125 artists drawn from around the globe. The film premiered at the 2017 Annecy International Animated Film Festival. It won Best Animated Feature Film Award at the 30th European Film Awards in Berlin and was nominated for Best Animated Feature at the 90th Academy Awards.

Our Film derives its inspiration from the above technique of the experimental animated biographical drama genre, and engages a group of artists who are inspired by the story of Sri Aurobindo. This type of art-based animation

survives the test of time and borders on being a piece of timeless art. This is our aspiration behind the Film, to use this artistic medium to portray something beyond the limited, finite realm of our everyday experiences.

We also recall the Mother's words, "New words are needed to express new ideas, new forms are necessary to manifest new forces." The youth especially are more open to this evolving medium.

What were the challenges in depicting Sri Aurobindo? How do you ensure that it does not become a caricature?

This has been a truly challenging task and we also know how the Mother was particularly cautious about Ashram artists portraying direct sketches of Sri Aurobindo. Only a few have done it. Considering the sanctity of the visual portrayal of Sri Aurobindo and also the feedback that we have received from a few devotees about it through our trailer, we are evolving a script where Sri Aurobindo's message comes out in an inspirational way without focusing on the direct sketch-portrayal of Sri Aurobindo. The Film will be driven by his words, his poetry, imagery from Nature, supplemented by his available photographs.

What is the audience you are keeping in mind for this movie? If it is meant for a wider audience and not just devotees do you have to keep matters of faith out of it?

Our audience is that section of youth which is grappling with the problems of modern life and yet are not tied down by narrow rationalism or rigid belief systems or the constantly evolving tenets of modern science that limit the scope of life, but are open to receiving a New Light, a New Hope, a New Possibility of a more beautiful future. Sri Aurobindo offers that possibility and fresh insights into life itself and its grand possibilities. We can only aspire to be humble instruments for sharing this possibility, without enforcing it on the viewers in any way. The Truth will have its resonance with all eventually, and we won't make any effort at segregating matters of faith and matters of experience. We pray for Their guidance and feel our way and make this Film as our aspirational offering to Them.

History is often seen or interpreted differently by different people. How are you ensuring authenticity of facts and of the way you are depicting them visually on screen?

True. An honest and sincere effort is being made by the core team to rely as much as we can on the words of Sri Aurobindo, without having to interpret them too much. We have not spared any effort in diving into the ocean of the words of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. The animation team has done intense research on the part of Sri Aurobindo's life covered in the Film, in order to arrive at authentic portrayal of the scenes belonging to that period. Besides these, we will also be making use of symbolism, imagery from Nature and our own creative rendering, where needed, to depict things of an internal or psychological nature.

How is the work progressing?

We have gathered excellent feedback through our trailer released on 15th Aug. 2021, and have developed a beautiful working script for the Film by including this feedback.

With the script ready, we have moved on to making a visual storyboard and this will then be rendered into hand-drawn animation frames. We are looking at the creation of about 18,000 hand-drawn frames for this 20-minute long Film!

The Film is being made at a budget of INR 2.25 Crores and we hope to make it through the generous contribution of those who are moved by this cause. We are already touched deeply by the good wishes of several devotees, and it is this collective aspiration that will make this Film possible. As of today, we have generated 1.58 Crores for the Film.

What platforms are you planning to screen the movie on? Television? OTT?

Since we are still in the early stages of the making of the Film, we have not yet started reaching out to the OTT platforms and television channels, though they will be part of our outreach. The Sri Aurobindo Society has more than 350 Branches

& Centres all over India and this Film is meant to be showcased through all their programmes. We are also planning to reach out to schools and colleges where this Film can be shown to the higher secondary students upwards.

Besides this, Sri Aurobindo Society has its own social media channels through which the Film will be shared with all those who love India and resonate with its renaissance on a spiritual foundation.

Since the Film will be of 20-minute duration, it could be shown on any programme focusing on nation-building.

Anything else you would like to add?

During my interaction with the youth of India for more than 20 years, I know how little



Shivakumar (left) and Suresh Eriyat (right) during the animation team's visit to Pondicherry

they know of Sri Aurobindo, his role in India's renaissance and his work in its freedom as a first step towards a still greater freedom that awaits humanity. This Film is only a humble attempt towards reaching out to the youth with this forgotten chapter of India's re-awakening and Sri Aurobindo's role in it. If the youth of this country turn directly towards Sri Aurobindo for more Light and Guidance, the purpose of this Film would have been served.

The website for this animation film contains the full details of the Film and the progress being made in its making: <https://www.anewdawn.in/>

Those who wish to be part of this collective aspiration can write, for more information, to anewdawn@aurosociety.org ❀

Coping with Covid

In the following article we uncover how the Ashram community handled the Covid crisis during the past two years. The text is based on a chat with the core team – Bhrata '83, Chaitanya '95, Devdip '04 and Satya '83H – which was formed under the aegis of Abhipsa '88, trustee in charge of Ashram's Covid response. Additional inputs were received from Amit '98, Jasmin '03, Shilpi '03, Nihar, Vigneshwar '99, the Dining Room staff among others, and from notices issued on the Ashram Broadcast and "Reports on the Quarter" of the Bulletin.

PRELUDE

In December 2019 the world woke up to a new threat that was to change the way we live, work, learn and interact with others. COVID-19, the new coronavirus originating from Wuhan, began spreading rapidly across the world. In a few weeks countries around the globe began to report cases and deaths. A small group of former students – Aurobrata '00, Kanav '00, Gawa '02 and Amal '96 – who had come together spontaneously were

among the first to realise, in early March, that this dangerous virus would reach us sooner rather than later and that we'd have to begin preparing for it. They discussed possible developments with the trustees and senior Ashramites, including Abhipsa, Satya and Devdip.

The Ashram normally lives in its own cocoon largely insulated by external events. It has certain well-oiled routines that have been functioning the same way for years. The Ashram is also a close-

The silent empty streets around the Ashram during the Covid lockdown



knit community dependent on centrally provided services and with many vulnerable seniors. With this new threat looming we could not afford to be complacent. We would have to be nimble-footed and ready to adapt quickly.

Bhrata, after many years in medical services in the US, had providentially joined the Ashram medical team just days before the pandemic and became the voice of the fledgling group. He remembers the presentation that was made to the trustees detailing the risks and the measures to be taken. He says, “We told the trustees: in the ’70s, when there were riots and the Ashram was attacked we rallied our folks and organised everyone to face the challenge. This is no different. Instead of a physical threat, this is an invisible one, a medical threat. And like we did then, we have to rise to the occasion.”

It was a little like the calm before the storm. There was uncertainty about what this imminent threat would mean for us, what measures the Government would announce, but there was a feeling that we should start taking precautions. On 17th March, even before the Government lockdown was declared, the Ashram announced the closing of the School and collective meditations. A Covid response team was formed with Abhipsa as trustee in charge.

DATA COLLECTION

It was clear very soon that in a lockdown any effort at protecting the community and providing essentials would have to begin with data. Prosperity had the names, addresses and ages of



all Ashramites. A massive data collection drive followed. Vighneshwar recalls how difficult it was initially as people were not very forthcoming, probably because they couldn't foresee the scale and urgency of the task at hand. However, as mobile phone numbers were collected, starting with seniors above 65, all Ashramites were called to know their arrangements with regard to water, food, ability to cook, cooking facilities and regular requirements of medicines.

The essential information was gathered shortly before the lockdown began.

LOCKDOWN AND HOME DELIVERY OF COOKED FOOD

A 'janata curfew', or a voluntary curfew, was declared for March 22, 2020, Sunday, from 7:00 am to 9:00 pm. This was a prelude to what was to come. Arrangements were made for Ashramites to pick up their food – breakfast, lunch and dinner – between 5:15 am and 6:00 am from the Dining Room. On the evening of March 23, the Government of Puducherry announced a curfew till March 31. The Ashram Main Building and all Ashram Departments, except for those providing

Delivering “Essential Supplies”

Ambi '93 shares his experience of delivering food and other essentials to the community

A few days before the lockdown, Kanav invited me to a meeting where other Ashramites and ex-students were also present. In the meeting we heard about the new virus, how it was affecting humans, how it was spreading, how the world was dealing with it, how to “flatten the curve” and much more. A total lockdown was inevitable. Before leaving we noted down our names, phone numbers and how we were willing to help.

Very soon the lockdown was announced and we were called to the Dining Hall at 2:30 am to go around town in small groups to deliver food to Ashramites. The plan was to finish everything by daybreak and get back home. There were many delays and unforeseen problems because of which we finished only at around 9:30 am.

A heavy cloak of silence enveloped the town and I felt as if we were in some apocalyptic movie where everyone had shut themselves up at home. At several places there were barriers

blocking off major roads but no one was around, not even policemen.

After the first day we changed the starting time to 7 am and stuck “Essential Supplies” stickers on our vehicles. Very soon the number of people to be served was split into three batches: Mon-Thu, Tue-Fri and Wed-Sat. On Thursday, Friday and Saturday people were given food for an extra day because on Sundays we did not serve food.

In the Dining Hall we had demarcated three zones. The highly protected inner zone consisted of the kitchen, the inner halls, the office and the washing area. The outer zone was made up of the toilet area and the passage till the milk chilling room and the main courtyard at the entrance. The buffer zone was the area between the inner and outer zones where the exchange of supplies could take place. Some volunteers brought the food from the kitchen and kept it in the buffer zone close to the border of



Ambi (left) on one of his delivery rounds

essential services, were asked to remain closed. The local administration allowed Ashramites to pick up their food from the Dining Room in two time slots – between 7:30 am and 9:00 am and again between 5:00 pm and 6:30 pm.

On March 24, in a televised address at 8:00 pm, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a nationwide lockdown for 21 days. The Ashram

had to work quickly to ensure that the community remained safe and food and other essentials were provided to all. Since everyone was under lockdown, the core team decided to deliver cooked food to Ashramites in their homes. And all the logistics had to be worked out practically overnight!

Thankfully, a little before the lockdown was

the outer zone, others collected it from there and loaded it into the vehicles. Each vehicle had a team that went around doing the deliveries. Any food that was taken to the outer zone was not allowed back into the inner zone so we had to keep track of how much came back after the distribution and make adjustments for the next day in order to minimise the surplus that was sent off to the Lake Estate or to the Corner House. The volunteers were split into two batches. Each batch was to work two weeks and stay home the following fortnight. This meant that there was a back-up if any of the volunteers was infected and members of the team had to quarantine. Each batch had a few leaders to organise, supervise and ensure the smooth functioning of the work. I happened to be one of the organisers of one of the batches.

After a few months we made satellite centres for distribution where people could go and collect their food on their particular days. Later we staggered the serving timings at the satellites so that extra food from one satellite could be sent to the next and thereby reduce the surplus that finally came back from the satellites.

There were many other strict systems in place in order to minimise the possibility of a viral outbreak at the Dining Hall because, being the centre of distribution, any infection there could very easily spread to the rest



Home delivery of food

of the Ashram. It was not always easy to ensure that people followed the protocol because while some thought they knew better, others thought themselves to be invincible and there were even some people who believed the “virus story” to be a hoax. On the nicer side, we had some senior Ashramites who were so happy and grateful that we were serving them food that exchanging a few words with them made our day. On one hand we had people with various demands who were difficult to satisfy and on the other, people who didn’t want us to go out of our way to serve them.

A small world in itself, the Ashram is a mix of all sorts of people, and to me, dealing with each individual’s needs, ways, requests, demands and whims while striving to maintain the overall harmony was the greatest challenge.

announced, the core team had sought volunteers. A number of young people, many of them former students, had come forward. A meeting was held in the Hall of Harmony and the volunteers were briefed with the limited information at hand then.

On the eve of the lockdown the Dining Room management was called to the Trust office for a

meeting. The DR kitchen would have to function with only the absolutely essential staff and these sadhaks would have to remain in the Dining Room 24 hours a day without any interaction with the outside world. The Dining Room’s sanctum would be a completely sanitized zone. The cooked food once ready would be kept in a waiting area from where volunteers would pick it



Loading the delivery vans at the Dining Room early in the morning

up for distribution.

Ten members of the Dining Room staff volunteered to take up the responsibility. They would run the kitchen and other related services unassisted for the next two months.

On March 25 when the food distribution was to start at 4:00 am, Dining Room kitchen staff started work at about midnight.

Meanwhile a war room was set up at the Ashram Trust Office in Grace, opposite the Mother's balcony, to coordinate the food delivery. Those early days were, by all accounts, quite extraordinary. It was as if things simply fell into place by themselves, with people pitching in without being asked. "It was all coordinated in a way you can't explain, practically by itself. It was like magic!" says Devdip. For the next week things worked at break-neck speed, the core team barely slept. There was much going on, day and night.

While the Dining Room staff cooked the food, the core group had to devise an efficient system for food delivery to all the Ashramites. Four delivery teams were formed, vans were procured and vessels arranged for and based on the data collected

previously, areas were demarcated and routes were assigned to the delivery teams. After permission from the local authorities, the teams were issued with ID cards and Essential Services stickers for vehicles, so they could ply unhindered.

A helpline was also set up to resolve any issues that Ashramites faced. Early on 25th the deliveries started. Initially, naturally, there were hiccups. The data was not entirely accurate, so at some locations there were more people than expected, sometimes less. The vessels were not optimised for door delivery. The deliveries, which were done with all safety protocols based on the science then available (e.g. no contact between vessels etc), were taking much longer than expected.

But over the following days, things began to sort out. There was a clearer understanding of the routes and more precise time estimations. Vessels were modified, for example taps were fitted on milk cans, which was more appropriate than ladles. Volunteers on motorbikes rode ahead of the delivery vans, calling people to their gates making the process more efficient.

The teams were carrying rice, dal, milk, bread, bananas, eggs, raw veg and fruits according to the list and number of persons they were delivering to. Initially there was a certain average measure



The war room at the Grace Office



Provisions being packed

of rice and dal which was given to everyone. Later volunteers became more flexible giving a little more or less accordingly to individual needs and things evened out. “We reviewed how much was going out and how much was coming back on day to day basis; it helped us figure out where there were shortages,” says Jasmin. “Over time, the teams got to know better how much they needed to carry. This meant there was less wastage and less food that needed to be cooked,” adds Amit.

Smart phones and real time data updates were also important factors behind the improved efficiency. For instance, if according to the delivery schedule food had to be delivered for six persons and the team discovered that actually only four people resided in that building, they immediately corrected the data on the delivery sheets via their smart phones; they also marked delivery completion and other statuses. Thus, the war room could track deliveries real time. If an Ashramite had been missed out inadvertently, they could call the helpline, and because of the real time information, the core team could commission the nearest delivery van and relay the estimated time back to the Ashramite. “Ultimately the system became so efficient,” says Bhrata, “That if we were falling short of milk in one area, within literally 5 mins it could be redirected from another area so that the needs were fulfilled. That is remarkable.”

PROVISIONS AND COOKING AT HOME

While the system of food delivery became more efficient, there were other issues too. It was logistically demanding. There was also significant spillage while serving and onlookers staring while Ashramites were being served hot fresh food in public areas. So it was decided to transition to a system of delivering provisions, instead of cooked food, along with home delivery of bread, milk, fruits and vegetables. This system fell into place on March 29.

Amit explains, “Dining Room’s Jagannath-bhai, along with others decided the provisions and the quantity that needed to be distributed per month. It included 3 kgs of raw rice, 1.5 kgs of daal, 2 kgs of atta, 500 ml of cooking oil, 1 kg of sugar and salt, masalas (haldi, dhanias powder and jeera powder). We coordinated with Neelkanth of Honesty to ensure these provisions



Provisions ready for delivery

were stocked. Meanwhile the Bakery also modified its recipe to make a special bread that could last longer by two days, which made the Ashramites happier too!”

While things were evened out, Amit also recalls unexpected instances. “Many unexpected requirements arose too. For instance we suddenly



Queue with social distancing at Terrain Jalad

had to make thousand packets of sugar. We were able to immediately mobilise volunteers to make these packets. And because of Covid protocols, people had to work in different locations. For me what was amazing was how whenever volunteers were needed people pitched in.” says Amit.

Ashramites would eventually shift to a bi-weekly cycle for receiving the delivery of perishable food items (Monday-Thursday, Tuesday-Friday, Wednesday-Saturday). The town was divided into three zones and every day the delivery teams had to service only one area, making it less demanding on them. There were pick up zones too. For example those residing north of S.V. Patel Salai (Kuruchikuppam, Vaithikuppam, Muthialpet) were asked to pick up the perishable food items from Terrain Jalad, a residential complex in the area.

The system of cooking at home also encouraged people to help each other; some cooked for their friends and neighbours and shared their fridge to store food. There were times when the helpline made pro-active calls to coordinate this.

SHIFTING OF SENIORS

While many people helped or were helped, there were several seniors who were dependent on maids or needed cooked food. The core team decided to create a safe zone for these vulnerable seniors in Park Guest House and New Guest House, since both these guest houses were empty. This bio-bubble of sorts would be insulated and safe. Cooked Dining Room food was delivered to these guest houses while following Covid protocols. This was supplemented with some extras from the guest house kitchen. Initially some of the seniors needed convincing and cajoling to move to these guest houses. Ultimately they all agreed and were happy and grateful for the new arrangements. [See Shipra-di and Devashish's articles on pages 55, 56]

A dedicated team helped 70 seniors shift to PGH and NGH. The seniors had a peaceful and pleasant stay and were looked after well. The sense of a small family and a collaborative spirit – cooking together, cleaning together, lifted their spirits.

There were a few very elderly persons who could not be shifted and cooked DR food continued to be delivered to their residence. The Boardings and the Ashram Nursing Home also got food from Dining Room.



Food distribution counter at the Terrain Jalad 'satellite'

The Volunteer Strategy

Amal Sud '96

In most cases when volunteers come together they are allocated into groups and teams for specific tasks. However, in this particular case we were confronted with a much more complex problem. We had learnt that the disease was virulent and highly contagious, we knew that it took a couple of weeks of isolation to recover, therefore, every volunteer who joined the team had to be prepared to put himself or herself in harm's way.

Very quickly it was decided that we could not use students for this, so the ever ready boys of the Big Boys' Boarding were not an option.

Adults who volunteered had to be fully aware of what they were getting into. As a result a tracking sheet was created. This helped track and ensure that each volunteer attended an initial presentation and sensitisation session so as to know what they were signing up for. Further, in order to define the exact role and profile of the volunteer, contact details and a multitude of other information was requested:

- Whether the volunteer was a caregiver to or lived with any person above 65 years of age – in case of infection, would he potentially put a senior in danger.
- Whether the volunteer had his or her own room with a separate bathroom – in case of infection, he/she could be quarantined there.
- Whether the volunteer was ready to move

out of his place of residence – in case the contagion was high, volunteers would be housed in an isolated residence in order to protect others.

- Whether the volunteer had access to / license for a two wheeler or a four wheeler – ability to be mobile or help with driving duties if required.
- Ascertaining the appetite of the volunteer to support higher risk or other activities based on his or her skills, such as:
 - Food delivery to the general population
 - Food delivery to quarantined population
 - Driving sick patients if required
 - Cooking for a home if required
 - Working as a nursing support staff if the medical staff was compromised.

This information for the 120 or so volunteers helped ascertain where he or she might be able to participate.

In addition, it was abundantly clear that very quickly we would have to break up into teams that did not have overlapping volunteers. This would help us create backups in case of infection in one team while preserving the other. This structure was only put into place after about one week of operation.

The final fail-safe if all teams got infected was to call upon some of the seniors for an emergency action for a few days while the first two teams recovered. This was discussed with some of our senior captains.

"SATELLITE" COUNTERS

From May 2020 onwards, after the Government announced certain relaxations in the lockdown measures, Ashram Departments were re-opened in a phased manner.

A home pick-up and delivery service was introduced for the Ashram Laundry on May 13.

Only bedsheets, bedcovers, towels, and pillow covers were taken for washing and home delivered. From May 20, the Laundry began to function normally and the Ashramites could drop and pick up their clothes themselves.

The slight relaxation in rules also precipitated a few changes. The core team, which had realised



Food distribution counter at Ambika House

that some Ashramites were finding it difficult to cook from provisions for an extended period of time, decided to create eight satellite counters where cooked food would be brought and served. These counters could serve the entire community. So, from May 18, fresh cooked food from the Dining Room, along with milk, bread, fruits, and vegetables was provided daily to all Ashramites from these eight different food counters. Each Ashramite was allotted a specific food counter based on their location. The eight satellite counters were: Ambabhikshu House, Ambika House, Castellini, Guest House (Play-



Food distribution counter at Ambabhikshu House



Food distribution counter at the Guest House (Playground)

ground), Kindergarten, La Clinique, New Creation, and Terrain Jalad. Food was supplied once a day in the morning for all three meals. This system continued till the first week of June, when the Dining Room gradually reopened for Ashramites.

BACK IN THE DINING ROOM

By June 8, 2020, the satellite food counters were closed and Ashramites returned to the Dining Room to pick up their food. Four counters were opened and people from each area were allotted

different times to pick up their food. Later, the timings were relaxed. From October 5, 2020 people were allowed to eat in the Dining Room. Separating tables and allowing only one or two persons per table to honour social distancing were also put in place. The Dining Room remained open after that. But when the second wave peaked, in the summer of 2021 and in-dining was prohibited again, tiffin-carrier pickup was reinstituted.

Even though the Dining room reopened for food pickup and dine-in resumed, home delivery of food continued



Food distribution resumes in the Dining Room

for two categories:

1) People who were quarantined. A team led by Basu '88 delivered food, with strict protocols, to those who were at home with Covid, or were contacts of Covid patients or because they had returned to Pondicherry from out of town. Those who were quarantined in Cottage were served by a different team.

2) Elderly Ashramites who were dependent on their maids to get food from Dining Room. Since Dining Room no longer permitted maids, the tiffin service for seniors which used to deliver food to 30 persons pre-Covid was expanded to cover 120 persons now.

FUNCTIONS AND TEAMS

At the start of the pandemic, various teams were formed to perform and oversee different functions – a coordinating and organising team, the food delivery teams and the helpline team. But over time many other teams formed naturally.

While food delivery was among the most important and immediate tasks, the core team had to also look into the distribution of drinking water, medicines and other essentials such as soaps, toothpaste, detergents etc. Teams were formed for that. There was also a team to respond to any ad hoc requirements, for instance some elderly sadhaks or others who needed something specific in their diet. And once the Covid cases started to rise in the community a contact tracing team was formed.

There was also a group of volunteers who regularly visited various

Ashram farms and gardens such as Lake Estate, Vanur, Irumbai, Maret Garden, Periple D'or etc. to help with farm work — harvesting of crops, plucking of fruits, sorting and transport of vegetables, and dairy work. [See Dhwaneet's article on page 48]

The medical team studied the latest science, and kept track of the development of the pandemic, the new health protocols and defined the precautions that needed to be followed to keep the community safe.



Four food distribution counters in the Dining Room



The Ashram Main Building remained closed during the lockdown.

Because of the nature of the pandemic only those below 60 and who were at lower risk could be considered for volunteering; all the volunteers were provided with training in basic medical protocols that needed to be adhered to and were given Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

In all, about 75 former students of SAICE joined Ashramites in playing a pivotal volunteering role, right from the beginning of the lockdown and about 25 students of the Higher Course also volunteered. It was heartening to see the enthusiasm and wholehearted dedication with which the present and former students of SAICE participated in these volunteering efforts along with the Ashramites.

Throughout the Covid period, Manojda and other trustees were kept informed of the developments, and they gave a free hand to the young volunteers to work things out under Abhipsa's supervision and guidance.

BROADCAST AND HELPLINE

One of the first things that the core team did was to create WhatsApp broadcast groups to disseminate information rapidly. Those who didn't have WhatsApp received information via SMS. This was made possible because of the drive to collect mobile numbers just before the lockdown; a team worked throughout this

period to collect and update all kinds of relevant data, including phone numbers, addresses, place of work, etc. While the broadcast of information was vital, so was a helpline, especially since things were moving fast and many Ashramites had doubts and difficulties. The Helpline Team was available 24 hours a day and the three helpline numbers were manned by about half a dozen volunteers, who would forward calls and requests to respective departments and follow up when re-

quired. The team comprised Autoshi, Datta '84, Gayatri '77, Pragya '85, Shilpi '03, Somdutt '90 and others. At times the helpline had to make calls pro-actively, for instance to help find nearby kitchen facilities for some when cooked food distribution was stopped, or to convince dependent seniors to shift to Park Guest House or New Guest House. They also made regular calls to Ashram Covid patients in hospital to enquire about their wellbeing and to check if they needed anything. This was particularly required during the second Covid wave. The Helpline members



The Samadhi was then accessible only to a small team for cleaning and decoration



The silent Meditation Hall.

also made calls to the older Ashramites during the full lockdown to check on them and talk to them once in a while. Some of the older students were also involved in making these calls. On the whole, there was so much gratitude from the older sadhaks for all these arrangements.

SAMADHI ACCESS AND DARSHAN

During the initial full lockdown, the Ashram building was closed and the Samadhi was inaccessible. But a small team of young sadhaks made sure that the Ashram premises were kept clean and that the Samadhi was decorated simply.

The first Darshan day under the lockdown was April 24, 2020, which also marked the Centenary of the Mother's final arrival in Pondicherry. The Ashram Main Building remained closed and the usual Darshan programme was not held. However, the Meditation Hall and the Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's Rooms were prepared as is normally done for every Darshan. And since it was not possible to hold the usual morning meditation around the Samadhi, a live camera feed was arranged and broadcast via the Ashram website. At 5:55 am a few pictures of the Ashram Main Building, taken from outside, were streamed and then the silent meditation followed between 6:00 am and 6:30 am. The Samadhi was shown in the live feed from two angles. "There was a lot of angst in some people about not being

able to go to the Samadhi for more than a month. So, Chaitanya '95, Shashwat '93, Sandeepan '17 and others facilitated the live stream and people could finally 'see' the Samadhi. Since this was a trying and difficult time, seeing the Samadhi was greatly appreciated by many. The live stream benefitted thousands of devotees around the world," says Devdip.

The Ashram Main Building reopened on June 8, 2020 after being shut for two and a half months. In accordance with Government guidelines, a number of measures were put in place, including contact-less checking of temperature at the gate, sanitising of hands and feet, frequent disinfection of passages, and noting down the names and contact numbers of all visitors. People were allowed to file past the Samadhi at certain fixed times. No sitting for meditation was allowed.



Later people are allowed to have Darshan of the Samadhi from a distance

For the August 15, 2020 Darshan, devotees could visit the Samadhi from 7:00 am to 12:00 noon and from 4:00 pm to 6:00 pm, while maintaining the required social distancing norms. Since the usual morning meditation around the Samadhi was not held, once again a live streaming was arranged, showing the Samadhi from three angles.



The Ashram's Smithy Service made UV sanitisation boxes for the police and sanitiser dispensers for departments

From October 16, 2020, the visiting hours for the Samadhi were extended: 6:00 am to 8:00 am, 8:30 am to 11:00 am, and 4:00 pm to 9:00 pm.

For the Darshan days that followed, all were allowed to visit the Samadhi during fixed hours and there was a distribution of the Darshan message in the mornings. Meditations were to be done individually at home. From the beginning, music for the Thursday, Sunday and special day meditations was uploaded on the Ashram website and a link sent via the Ashram Whatsapp Broadcast.

The meditations around the Samadhi resumed in a controlled manner from January 4, 2021. Only a limited number of persons were allowed on a first-come basis in order to ensure adequate social distancing. Sunday and Thursday Playground meditations resumed from the first week of March 2021.

From April 24, 2021 onwards, lockdowns were again progressively enforced by the Government to control the spread of the second wave of Covid-19 and the Ashram Main Building was closed again. It reopened on June 9, 2021 with restricted visiting hours. By December 2021, with more easing of restrictions, devotees were allowed to touch the Samadhi and were allowed to visit the meditation hall. Collective meditations in the Playground also resumed.

Access to Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's rooms for Darshans and birthdays had been closed during this entire period. At long last Sri Aurobindo's room was to re-opened for the Darshan of 24th April, 2022.

DEPARTMENT WORKERS AND MAIDS

Even during the initial lockdown a handful of departments, such as the Dining Room, Bakery, Granary, the farms, medical services, the house maintenance services for plumbing and electrical emergencies, Atelier and Petrol Bunk for transport services, banking services continued to function with minimal staff and Covid protocols because they were considered essential services.

When the lockdown began to ease, from June 2020, other Departments began to function. These departments were provided with training regarding standard medical protocols to ensure a



safe and hygienic environment. Volunteers from the medical team visited each department to sensitise workers and to suggest ways to make the department processes as Covid-safe as possible. Departments were also equipped with PPEs when required.

Many departments had to close again from the end of April 2021 till June 2021, during the peak of the second wave. The Ashram Guest Houses reopened on July 5, 2021, and guests were required to either have a vaccination certificate or a negative RT-PCR Test taken 72 hours before checking in.

It is important to note that throughout these many months of full or partial closure, the Ashram paid all workers in all departments full wages.

In the initial days of the lockdown, household maids were also not allowed to work, (though they were paid full salaries). Their absence naturally created serious problems for elderly Ashramites who were dependent on them. When the lockdown was partially lifted, at the end of May 2020, maids were again allowed, though they had to undergo daily screenings as a precaution. Maids and domestic workers were asked to report daily to the Workers' Dispensary or Sanitary Service where their temperature was checked, hands were sanitised, and a mask provided in case they did not have one. At the Worker's Dispensary they could also tell Dr. Jagannath if they were not feeling well. Every day a slip was provided to the worker which had to be handed over to their employer indicating that the person had undergone these basic checks. Over 50,000 such slips were issued in over a year and a half. This system continued till November 2021.

CONTAINMENT ZONES

In May 2020 as cases began to rise, instead of a total lockdown, the Pondicherry Government began to block off containment zones, where clusters of cases developed. Ashramites confined in Containment Zones needed to be helped with basic amenities. Also department workers from high-risk zones could not be allowed to attend work. This meant that these fast changing Containment Zones needed to be tracked and mapped against the workers' addresses.

While initially the areas demarcated as Containment Zones were published by the Government, the increase in such zones meant lapses in information. So, volunteers made trips twice a day to reconnoitre and find these red zones. Initially the Containment Zones were marked on a physical map that was put up in the Grace office. But a more efficient solution was needed.

This is when a volunteer developed an online application called the Containment Zone App [see interview with Hemal on page 30]. The addresses of department workers, domestic helps and maids were geo-located on the app by student volunteers. At the same time, new Containment Zones were also geo-coded on the app based on



Hemal (right) with his team of students working on the Containment Zone App

information from the Government website, and on ground surveys conducted daily. Every morning at 6:30 am, a mail was automatically sent to the concerned Department in-charge / Employer indicating if any of their workers was in or within 50 m of a Containment Zone. The persons identified could then be asked to stay at home as a preventive measure. Working on this app was also an interesting hands-on learning experience for the Higher Course student volunteers. The app was discontinued when the government abandoned the containment zone policy.

TESTING

Despite all the measures, the Ashram couldn't stay insulated for long, and by mid-2020, Covid cases began to spread within the community. Those who displayed symptoms had to stay at home and call the Ashram doctor and get tested if the need arose. The patients were taken in the Ashram ambulance to either Jipmer or Indira Gandhi hospital for a Covid RT-PCR test. This would sometimes require a long wait in the queue and so patients were instructed on what to expect and what to carry with them when going for a test. The result would typically be available online the next day. The patient would have to isolate till the result came in. Though RT-PCR is considered the gold standard for Covid testing, occasionally even a patient with classic Covid symptoms tested negative. In such cases people were considered possible Covid cases (P-) and kept under isolation/observation.

In the later stages of the second wave, when cases rose rapidly and rampantly, private home testing was organised for those with symptoms and contacts of Covid-positive patients. This made things a little easier. Testing was ramped

Tracking Containment Zones

Hemal tells us about the software system he developed for identifying workers residing within COVID-19 containment zones.

Can you describe for us what your app did exactly?

It provided a daily report to department managers stating which of their workers were in a COVID-19 containment zone.

What is a containment zone?

“Containment zones” were areas, often sections of streets, where there were positive cases of COVID-19. During the re-opening phase after the initial lockdown, Pondicherry’s local authority implemented these zones as a measure to contain the spread of the coronavirus. Anyone residing in a zone had to stay in quarantine until the restriction was lifted. The local authorities created new zones each day and removed those where cases had reduced. As such, the zones were very dynamic, changing on a daily basis.

Can you describe the actual workflow? How was the data fed into the app? What were the reports generated?

The system relied on a central team to oversee the data, consisting of students from our School who were divided into two sub-teams focussing on (i) active containment zones and

(ii) department worker address data.

The workflow and data-management process was as follows:

a) The central team on-boarded each department with their account and password

b) The department manager entered their workers’ data (name, address, map location if known)

c) The central team added a map location to all worker addresses which did not have one, using Google Maps to geo-locate the address

d) The central team also updated containment zones based on a list provided by the government every 2-3 days and a list published online by local volunteers

e) Once department worker data was entered and verified,

each department manager would then receive a status report for their workers via email every morning at 6am. The status report showed which of their workers were either in or within 50m of a containment zone.

What were the primary challenges to such an app programming-wise?

From a programming perspective it was quite straight-forward. The moving parts



up overall in response to the growing number of cases in the community, and a large number of persons were quarantined. Chaitanya remarks, “When there was a cluster of cases in Care, over 300 persons, including Ashram medical staff, Care, Nursing Home and Desiree inmates were blanket tested; this helped contain the spread.”

CONTACT TRACING

Isolating the contacts of the person who has tested positive for Covid is essential in a close-knit community like the Ashram to prevent asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic contacts from spreading the virus to others.

When an Ashramite, volunteer, or employee

included a database structure for the data (departments, workers, addresses, containment zones), some geolocation calculations to check if a worker was inside or near a containment zone, and then daily email reports for the department managers. The technology stack, Ruby on Rails, meant the development went quite quickly.

What was the time frame in which the solution needed to be ready?

Overall the system took just over a week to get up and running. Development started on 18th May 2020 and department managers were online on 27th May. The system was then improved over the following few weeks with new features added to improve ease of use.

What were the improvements in the app over time?

Improvements were made to the 2 main areas: the department managers' side and the administration side used by the central team.

For department managers:

- The ability to drop a pin on a map when adding an address for a worker, rather than relying on a street address which was often not accurate
- More succinct daily status emails highlighting which workers were considered at risk.

For the administration team:

- Streamlining the geo-coding workflow where students had to convert worker addresses into latitude/longitude coordinates.

After a few weeks, address data for the department volunteers was also added.

What were the practical difficulties in keeping the data up-to-date and reliable?

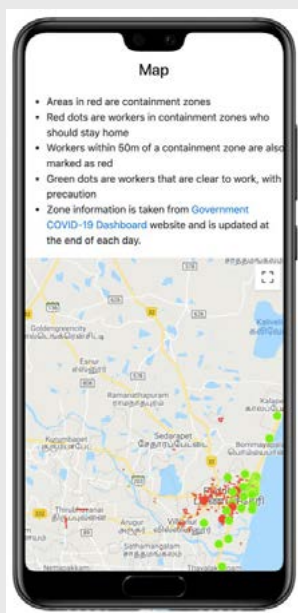
Simply put, if the input data wasn't reliable then the output reports wouldn't be reliable. The input data consisted of (i) reliable address data for workers, which turned out to be harder than imagined and (ii) reliable containment zone data, which would often be 2-3 days out of date as there was no official real-time source of active zones.

On the whole how well do you think this solution worked for everyone?

The system was only as useful as the containment zones themselves and the containment zones became impractical after around 3-4 weeks once COVID cases increased and were located everywhere. So naturally, once containment zones were abandoned so too was the system.

During the period when containment zones were in place and the number of COVID-19 cases were relatively low, the system did prove useful in providing visibility to department managers on which workers were exposed by a local outbreak, and thus help them to plan their work accordingly.

In total, the system monitored the containment zone status of 2,872 workers and volunteers across 99 different departments.



displayed Covid-19 symptoms, or tested positive for Covid-19, (or even sometimes if they had Covid symptoms but had tested negative), extensive contact-tracing was undertaken. Ashram's contact tracing and quarantine policy was based on Government mandates and international best practices.

Whether someone was considered a "close contact" depended on factors like how frequently and for how long the persons met, the date of their meetings, the distance between them and if masks were worn or not. Typically if someone had met the Covid positive person for 15 minutes or more without a mask on or after the onset of

symptoms, or up to 5 days before, he or she was considered a close contact.

A dedicated team would first call up the Covid positive person (P+) to ascertain those he or she had been in close contact with. Then P+'s contacts were called. In this way three levels of contacts were traced. Contacts A were those who had had close contact with P+. Contacts B were those who had come into close contact with any Contact A. Contacts C were again those who had come in close contact with any Contact B. A detailed database was maintained to track the Covid cases and their contacts. This whole exercise was done respecting the privacy of the individuals involved.

Contacts A and B were quarantined for 14 days at home (if their rooms were self-contained) or on the second floor of Cottage Guest House. Contacts C were allowed to continue their usual essential activities but were asked to minimise their interaction with others. Later, following changing Government norms, only contacts A were quarantined. In the later stages of the second Covid wave many first level contacts were tested after six days of the contact and those who tested negative were allowed to resume normal activities.

All Ashramites returning to Pondicherry after the nationwide lockdown was relaxed were asked to remain in quarantine for 14 days at home. Those who lived in accommodation with shared facilities were housed in Cottage Guest House where food was provided three times a day in their rooms.

"Ashramites were generally cooperative with both the contact tracing exercise and following the quarantine requirement," remarks Satya.

CARING FOR THE COVID POSITIVE

July 3, 2020 saw the first Ashram case. In the first weeks of the first Covid wave all Ashram patients who tested positive were taken charge of by the Government, and like all other Covid patients were admitted in hospitals. Later as the hospitals began to fill up, not all patients were hospitalized. The Ashramite or volunteer would have to visit the Government hospital for an evaluation by the doctor there. During the peak of the first



Munna (left) in an overcrowded Covid hospital

and second waves this also meant a long wait with other Covid patients. Based on age, co-morbidities, severity of symptoms, the doctor decided if hospital admission was required (which had to happen immediately) or if the patient could be sent for institutional or home quarantine.

Once the patient was admitted in the Government-assigned hospital, he or she was basically the hospital's responsibility. Being hospitalised in some of these Government hospitals with a host of other Covid patients was a trying experience for many. Gradually the attempt was made to prepare the patient better for it and to help where possible. Based on previous patients' experience, guidelines were given out and checklists were made of what patients needed to carry while being admitted. The core team also created a system whereby things could be dropped off at the hospital. Sometimes patients needed fruits or they had forgotten to carry some regular medicine. Volunteers had to leave the item with the hospital watchman, giving their name and ward details. Sometimes it was also possible to visit the patient in hospital with full PPE to deliver what they needed or to help them. Knowledge students with adequate PPE gear were also involved in hospital duty. Munna and Nihar of the Ashram's medical service showed great courage in making repeated

trips to the hospitals to admit patients, visit them and provide for their needs. Occasionally, paid attendants were organised for some frail patients.

As the second wave hit the country in April, May and June 2021 a greater number of Ashramites contracted the virus and were hospitalised. The most serious cases were generally admitted to Jipmer; the 24*7 dedication of doctors was exemplary. At the peak of the second wave, it was sometimes difficult to get a bed in any hospital, but the Ashram was able to admit those who needed it. *[See interview with Salila-di on page 34]*

Those with milder symptoms were requested to quarantine at home. Those who could not isolate at home or those who still needed to isolate after a stint in hospital were given a room in New Guest House. “When Covid cases started rising in town and hospitals started filling up, we realised that we needed a Covid isolating and treating facility of our own. New Guest House was chosen to house Covid positive patients, because of its proximity to the Nursing Home with doctors on call and because it had two entrances – one of which could be reserved for the Covid facility making it independent of the rest of the guest house,” says Bhrata. Close-contacts who lived in buildings with shared spaces were also housed in a separate wing of New Guest House.

These patients were sent food from the Nursing Home. Some special items were sent by Corner House. Some volunteers made fruit juice for them. Sometimes idlis were sent. “We also tried to fulfil any special request by patients. For instance if they wanted fruits or any snacks, or if they needed an electric kettle for hot water, or any medicines”, says Nihar, who was coordinating on behalf of Nursing Home. The patients were asked to monitor their temperature and SpO2 levels and the Ashram doctors, Dr. Mandeep or Salila-di would visit these patients once a day, attired in full PPE kit. A high speed WiFi was also set up so patients could stay connected.

In all, in the first and second Covid waves, over 500 Ashramites or Ashram-connected persons were tested. Of them about 164 were found Covid positive. The worst period was in April-May during the peak of the second wave. Regretfully,



Nihar helping a senior patient in hospital

12 Ashram patients, most of them seniors, passed away during the pandemic. It has to be noted that these figures are approximate, as a number of persons got tested and treated on their own.

Initially the Government authorities were very strict about not releasing the bodies of those who died of Covid. And only a few people could be present at a distance. However, later it was possible for the Ashram to give a cremation; the cremation team had to be trained to follow certain protocols.

MEDICAL RESPONSE

Along with the existing Ashram medical service, a medical team was formed; the team worked on Ashram's Covid-related policies and protocols.

Bhrata explains, “Every protocol we put in place had to be based on respectable data. If somebody asked us why they had to wear a mask or why we considered 15 minutes without a mask as sufficient contact for quarantine, we had to have a solid explanation and supporting evidence. Aurobrata and Amal were part of that team. We all spent hours and hours looking at everything we could get our hands on – CDC, Johns Hopkins, WHO and other trusted government sources. Naturally the Government orders also

Working as a Team

Salila-di tells us how Ashram's medical service faced the Covid challenge

When the lockdown was announced, what were the challenges to ensure that the Nursing Home, Care, Desirée Home and the Dispensary functioned properly?

We had to enforce Covid protocol — mask-wearing, social-distancing and sanitization — in all our units. We had to restrict unnecessary patient crowding and contact with staff. Visitors were restricted entry into Nursing Home, Care and Desirée unless they were close relatives and even there preventive protocol was followed. Patients were not allowed to go outside.

To keep the units working in these conditions the medical staff had to do extra work. We could not give leave to staff unless they were sick. Ultimately all units functioned well.

During the lockdown regular medicines needed by Ashramites were delivered by messengers and volunteers. Volunteers worked with much sincerity.

Any patient with symptoms was not directly admitted in the units. They had to contact one of us doctors over the phone and get some initial treatment and if not better they were to report to us again and then they were taken for Covid-19 RT-PCR test. They were admitted only if they were Covid negative.

There was a situation right in the beginning when Mr. Paolo Tomasi, who was in his 90s, was admitted in the Nursing Home and then turned out to be Covid positive...

That was the first case we got. We were told Mr. Paolo cannot eat or drink so we admitted him. Only on the 2nd day of his admission he developed fever. When we found Mr. Paolo was Covid positive, all the Nursing Home staff who were in contact with him were put in isolation

for 14 days, including the hired nurses. We stayed in Nursing Home and looked after the patients as usual and see the miracle — not a single person was Covid positive.

As the first Covid wave reached us more people began developing Covid symptoms....

The main symptoms people complained of were fever, repeated cough, breathlessness. In cases where there was a drop in oxygen saturation and chest signs for pneumonia they were referred to hospitals. The patients who were fit for home quarantine either stayed at home or in New Guest House. At that time New Guest House really came to our rescue.

What happened to Ashramites when admitted to hospital for Covid? Was there any period when the hospitals were overwhelmed?

It was a difficult time. The Government had made the rule that all patients were to be shown in Government hospital for deciding whether they can be allowed for home quarantine or need hospital admission.

We started the initial treatment and then sent them to hospital, mentioning the details of their medical history specially their co-morbidities. Admitting them in hospital was challenging. In the beginning private medical colleges were admitting cases. PIMS was more approachable as we had good friends there. The doctors were helpful. But gradually private hospitals refused admission, we had to practically be on phone 24 hours requesting different doctors and sending patients whenever the doctors assured a bed.

Very sick cases were sent to Government hospitals like JIPMER or Indira Gandhi Hospital. There admission was most difficult. Till the patient was proved Covid positive by

guided us. While the Government is motivated by a lot of things including public health, economics, politics, etc., we were willing to be more cautious

in protecting our community.” Ashramites were repeatedly reminded about the importance of following basic protocols such as: wearing masks,

RT-PCR he had to be in an intermediate ward, with many patients even sitting on the floor for a long time. No attendant was allowed in the ward. Attendants were made to wait on the ground floor. Once the patient was admitted, no attendant was allowed unless the attendant himself or herself was Covid positive.

The people who were in hospital for Covid were looked after well. The Government colleges like Jipmer, (where we admitted very sick cases) were looked after in the best way possible. So also Indira Gandhi Hospital. The private hospitals like PIMS, Venkateshwara Medical College, Laxmi Narayan Medical College and the Mahatma Gandhi Hospital and also New Medical Centre were very cooperative and helpful.

The 2nd wave was more serious. PIMS completely stopped admitting patients. In Indira Gandhi Hospital some old people faced problems at this time which we could not help. We were communicating with them intermittently with the help of attendants and our people going to JIPMER and through doctors.

Can you tell us about the Covid patients housed in New GH? They were directly under your care. How were they taken care of?

Patients with mild symptoms and those who had got treated in hospital for 10 days and then discharged were housed and looked after in New Guest House. We took rounds every second day, and more frequently if they developed fever. If their oxygen saturation fell below 94 % we sent them to hospital — either JIPMER or Indira Gandhi.

Three times a day food was taken for them

from Nursing Home by two attendants and our workers cleaned their rooms and clothes, of course with mandatory masks and Covid protective garments. Corner House gave some extra vegetables for their meals.

How were those in home quarantine cared for? What was the medical protocol followed?

Home quarantined patients were cared for by telephonic contact and medicines were delivered by volunteers. If they had more serious issues doctors visited them. This was rare.

What do you see as the role of vaccination in ending this crisis?

We feel vaccination is a tremendously helpful measure and the result is obvious both in the Ashram and in the country.

We are very grateful to frontline doctors (like you and Dr. Mandeep) and medical helpers (like Munna and Nihar). What would you say about the spirit in which the Ashram medical service handled this crisis?

We have worked as a team and we are not complete without each

other. We tried to do our duty as well as we could relying on the Mother's Force. It is Her Grace we have passed through this crisis and in the future also whatever happens She will guide us.

Victory to the Divine Mother!

Anything else you would like to add?

I must mention the names of doctors like Dr. Lopamudra, Dr. Reba, Dr. Ashok Das, Dr. Kadambari, Dr. Gopal, Dr. Dinker Pai, Dr. Parija, Dr. Mahadevan and so many others who helped us at the time of need. We are ever indebted to them.



Salila-di (right) during a vaccination camp in the School

sanitising or washing hands with soap regularly, maintaining distance from others, avoiding going to public places, and avoiding socialising.

Sahana-di's department, with the help of a group of Ashramites and volunteers led by Maya '85 and Jayati '84, took up the responsibility of

stitching cloth masks. Volunteers and all Ashramites were provided with two re-usable double-layer cloth masks.

“We had to be strict with medical protocols,” explains Devdip, “For instance, those without masks were not allowed into the Dining Room. If they had forgotten their mask, we immediately provided one, and insisted that they wear it while collecting their food from the counters. That sent out the message that this was to be taken seriously.”

The medical team also created zones, depending on how essential an activity was and what level of precaution needed to be taken. There were high safety Green Zones for core activities like the Dining Room kitchen, Care, Desirée and Nursing Home. Orange zones were the intermediate zones where people in the green zones interacted with those outside of that zone. The red zone was open to all. And there were different protocols for each zone.

The medical team also had to look ahead and plan for any eventuality. What if things got worse or buildings like Ambabhikshu House or New Creation got barricaded off in a containment zone? These places needed to be able to stock enough dry provisions in case it was required.

The team also decided not to run both the Dining Room and Corner House simultaneously. Corner House was to remain as a backup, if the Dining Room kitchen staff went down for some reason.

The decisions of the Covid team over the course of the pandemic were determined by their understanding and perception of the threat the virus posed at different stages. They had to be dynamic and responsive to an ever changing and evolving situation. Different strains of the virus posed different challenges, and the response was accordingly tempered. The subtle balance between ensuring safety for the community at large, while opening up progressively was an interesting and continuous challenge.

The Ashram’s primary medical service also had to adapt. The Ashram Dispensary and Nursing Home put into place various protocols for managing patients during the pandemic. Anyone experiencing symptoms was asked to call the Ashram doctors instead of coming straight to the Dispensary or Nursing Home. Two ambulances were reserved for ferrying patients for Covid testing and admission to Covid hospitals. There was a plastic partition put in vans to segregate the driver from the patients. There was a protocol to disinfect the ambulances after each trip.



Bhrata (right) explains Covid protocols to volunteers

During the initial lockdown public transport was unavailable, so a number of nurses and other employees in the Ashram Nursing Home faced difficulties in reporting to work. An arrangement was also made for them to stay and eat in Oriya Nilayam and Karnataka Nilayam so that they could come to work easily and safely.

Bhrata remarks, “Everyone rose to the occasion. Throughout the crisis, Salila-di was there, stepping up to the challenge, full-time, reliable. She held the medical team together. And she was ably supported by Dr. Mandeep, who was brave to initially volunteer to take care of positive patients. They played a crucial role in safeguarding the community. Without them it would have been difficult to sustain. I remember there was a case in Nursing Home when Ashramites and paid staff had to quarantine. And they quarantined in Nursing Home itself and continued their work. That was truly commendable. And during the peak of the second wave, things got pretty crazy. We were all getting barely any sleep. The whole medical service was stretched to the limit, but continued to work as a team. People like Munna, Nihar and Justin too worked tirelessly and were exceptionally brave.”

SAICE AND ONLINE CLASSES

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns enforced by the Government, all activities of the Centre of Education, including Physical Education activities, were suspended from March 17, 2020.

From then on, the 2020 SAICE session was, for many students, at best a patchy affair. The lockdown was sudden. Digital facilities were not in place. Not all teachers were familiar with technology or online-class models. All students, especially younger ones, did not have access to a smart device. The administration's primary focus was on providing essentials to the community and many of the older students were volunteering for those activities. Nobody knew for sure when classes would resume. What all this entailed was that while some teachers who were tech savvy and had the means took the initiative and conducted online classes and some other teachers gave

assignments, there was no organized and concerted effort to conduct online classes in a systematic way. And just like that it was October 31 and the end of the academic session. Most of the Boarding children had by then returned to their homes. For the students of the final year of Higher Course, a short meditation near the Samadhi was organised. The group-photo sessions of these students with some of their teachers and physical education captains were also arranged. The Knowledge Programme was presented online and shared on the Youtube channel. The cultural programme for the School's 77th anniversary – L'Aspiration de la Terre – was also uploaded on December 1, 2020 on www.saice.in.

By the time the 2021 academic session arrived SAICE was much better organised. All the missing elements were put in place. Broadband internet wifi was setup throughout the School, laptops were bought or upgraded where required, teachers were trained, contact numbers of students or parents were collated and Whatsapp groups created and the School was ready to go online! [*see interview with Vikas on page 52*]

The experience of online classes, like all over the world, was rather mixed. The positive part was that even the older teachers, who had sometimes never handled a smart phone before and had just been trained, were willing to make the effort to transition to an online medium of instruction. They were also sometimes helped by the students themselves who would create groups and initiate online classes. The teachers also began to include more digital material into their classes.

It was however not always easy to engage with kids who had been sitting idle at home for a year and had lost the ability to focus for long periods of time and were not used to an online learning environment. For many teachers it was difficult to cover as much in an online class as they would have in a physical class. “For the bright students, I think it was all right. For the average or weaker ones who need more personal attention I think three online classes would be equivalent to one physical class. Also initially they were more engaged but as the online format went on and on, the attention level dropped,” says Amit.



Volunteers - ready to deliver

Another issue, for younger children specifically, was the over-involvement of parents. There were also cases of children who were smarter with these digital devices than their teachers; they played pranks by switching off the teacher's video, muting others, "kicking out other students" from the class. Some students would cut off their video when asked a question on the pretext of a weak internet connection or cite audio issues! It was sometimes difficult to know if the child was actually there at the other end or was busy with something else. And there were some hilarious situations too. Says Jasmin with a smile, "I once made a call for an online class and one of the students managed to wake up with the call! The video was on and we could see the student still in night clothes and struggling to switch off the video! Finally the phone disconnected." The 2021 session started with online classes, but as the Covid situation improved, physical classes resumed in a phased and limited manner from February 2, 2021 for EAVP 4, 5 and 6. Class schedules and group activities were suitably modified to comply with the medical protocols for the safe conduct of activities. Students' participation was voluntary and with the parents' consent. However, a majority of students were more than happy and relieved to resume normal activities.

Very soon, however, the second Covid wave hit and physical classes were again suspended from March 22, 2021. And everyone shifted back to online classes.

During the many months of School closure, children living in the Boardings were kept engaged with various activities: Vikas '02 and Nina conducted exercises and learning activities, Devdutt took small groups for walking and cycling trips once lockdowns were eased, Rajesh and others took children for farm work and harvesting, Asana got them to cook together and they prepared noodles and dumplings.



Devdip at the Terrain Jalad counter

PED ACTIVITIES

From March 2020 and for the rest of 2020 physical education activities remained closed for students. Group Captains and coaches issued exercise quotas, which were shared with members of the older groups including A2, A1, B, C, and D through WhatsApp or email, with probably limited success. Daily video coaching was organised for members of Group D for a few months, with the last year students pitching in to take the online group in rotation.

After the initial lockdown, Tennis Ground reopened for Ashramites on August 1, 2020. Other grounds remained closed.

The 2nd December programme for 2020, which had for its theme, Faith, was held under unprecedented circumstances. Students were not permitted to participate, but a group of 169 group members pushed away all fear and were undaunted by adverse conditions. They performed the programme in the Sports Ground. No audience was present and all necessary precautions were taken. The programme was streamed live on the School website.

In February 2021 physical activities resumed



Registering for vaccination

partially and in a phased manner without swimming or contact sports. Older groups and Ashramites started regular group and then, younger groups joined in. However, the group activities for children were stopped once again from March 22 and only members of Group C and Group D who were in the Higher Course were allowed to continue on an optional basis. Physical Education activities were resumed from July 12, 2021 for members of Groups B2 and above.

No competitions could be held for the past two years, though things are gradually getting back to normal, and the competitions for 2022 are being held as usual.

VACCINATION

Vaccines for Covid 19 started becoming available in India from January 2021. They were initially meant only for health and frontline workers, then for seniors and later all adults were eligible. As the months passed and the second wave hit the country, the Government increased its drive to get people vaccinated to prevent serious disease as far as possible. This was true of Pondicherry too.

Bhrata explains: “The Puducherry Government put out an order that was very clear. It said people working in establishments had to be vaccinated or else face shut down. There was no ambiguity. All that the Ashram trustees decided was that we will follow the law. Like a number of Ashramites, even among the trustees and the administration not everyone was keen to get vaccinated,

but when it was decided that we have to follow the law everyone got vaccinated. And what was said then is that you are not forced to get vaccinated but if you want to come for work you will have to do so.” “Later, it became mandatory for every Pondicherry citizen to get vaccinated,” adds Satya.

The Dispensary helped a number of Ashramites to get vaccinated, taking them in groups to vaccination centres. Later, with the help of Government health officials, vaccination camps were held in the School premises to make it easier for Ashramites to get vaccinated. Government medical staff along with the Ashram’s medical team administered vaccines to almost 200 Ashramites, volunteers and older students.



Vaccination in progress in the School premises

CONCLUSION

It is two years since the Covid crisis began. While looking back now at how the Ashram handled the situation we can ask ourselves a few questions: What has this crisis revealed to us about the Ashram community? What are the learnings from the whole experience? Are there any long term positives that have accrued?

From a purely practical and administrative point of view there is now more comprehensive and up-to-date data on all the Ashramites, volunteers and other connected people who serve



the community. Useful information like their contact numbers, where they live, whether they have drinking water and cooking facilities or not, whether they need regular medicines etc. is now available. During this period a proper comprehensive database was also made of medical service personnel, both Ashramites and paid workers, with their designations and other important details. ID cards have also been issued.

The situation regarding issues like drinking water provision in various Ashram buildings is clearer now and the authorities are working on corrective measures.

Various WhatsApp groups were created during the lockdowns – the Ashram Broadcast group, medical groups, student/parent-teacher groups etc. Consequently communication is seamless now.

While these may be useful learnings, perhaps the biggest, though intangible positive was the sense of community, a sense of “we’re in this together”. Ashramites and former students, young and old, neighbours and strangers all came together to help each other and the community. “There was a strong feeling of truly coming together that I have not felt so strongly in all these years,” says Devdip, “All of us also got to interact and know people, some of whom we would have rarely interacted with before. And through it all a global picture emerged of the community which

was very beautiful.”

Former students are sometimes seen as a privileged lot with a sense of entitlement. But here they were, from the beginning, volunteering to deliver food and essentials, to shift and help the elderly, to fine tune and implement the medical protocols, to harvest fruits in farms... They came forward without being asked to. When it was needed, when there was a crisis, they were there and offered themselves. “For jobs like driving the milk van, which has to be done on a daily basis and at odd hours sometimes, it wasn’t easy to find people. Former students came forward and did it for months on end,” says Bhrata.

Ashramites, Ashram volunteers, former students, students, the entire larger Ashram community rose to the Covid challenge. People gave their time and energy, sometimes working exceptionally hard. Some gave money and materials, quietly, without a fuss. And it is because of this wonderful spirit that the work got done smoothly.

“In those first days when everyone needed to be fed and provided for, even when we missed out something or an Ashramite needed something urgently, some volunteer would come forward to help and we were able to get it done,” says Chaitanya. “It was wonderful to see the willingness of everyone to jump in and put their shoulder to the wheel,” adds Satya.

Naturally when dealing with so many individuals with their varied natures, some difficult moments did arise. Volunteers encountered individuals who demanded certain services as if it was an entitlement. There were also stray instances where people were not willing to follow protocol, or stay in quarantine as mandated, or cooperate as necessary. “In such a situation, looking the other way does not help... the problem only grows bigger and bigger,” says Bhrata. “As I keep saying, ‘what you permit, you promote.’ If you do something necessary and with the right approach and then you stay firm and clear, you have a good outcome.”

Ultimately though the general goodwill and sincerity saw us through. Even when sometimes there were differences in the team, things final-

ly worked out. All came together as Mother's children.

This sense of a larger Ashram community extended to the services rendered during the lockdown. "During the initial lockdown, the emergency period, we did not discriminate between Ashramites and non-Ashramites. We tried to help the full community. There were even people who were not on any list but Ashram connected and reached out for help. We then did what we could. Later as things started going back to normal, we had to realign ourselves to what the standard practice was earlier," says Devdip.

Everyone perhaps also became more conscious of how privileged they were to be fully cared for by the Ashram, especially when people elsewhere were struggling. "We sustained one litre of milk per person per day. We had no shortage of any kind," says Chaitanya. "I remember the thought occurred to me once when I saw all the fresh fruits and vegetables that we were getting, 'What have we done to deserve all this bounty?!'" remarks Satya.

That is why many felt that along with human



effort and cooperation there was something more that was helping. It was as if the Grace was silently orchestrating the effort. "During the first few days after the lockdown was announced, you felt completely carried. No one had the full picture. Everyone was doing their bit and everything just fell into place," says Devdip. "Yes, it was as if

Photos on both pages: some of the vounteers who made it all happen...



someone was guiding it and making it happen,” adds Satya.

The Dining Room core staff remembers how they felt a special energy during those early days. Not only did the small team cook for all the Ashramites, they even took up a thorough cleaning of the kitchen. Even when unexpected challenges presented themselves they had the energy and the ability to respond. For instance initially when everything was closed there was suddenly a request to provide food to 1,500 security personnel rushed in by the Central Government to maintain peace. Even with the minimum staff, they were able to prepare Khichadi for them for two or three days.

The Grace helped in various ways. There were so many small and big “coincidences” where things just fell into place. Devdip remembers, “For instance just before the lockdown it so happened that I had gone to the Airtel office for something quite unconnected and the lady at the store said casually ‘Oh your plan is eligible for two free sim cards. Just keep them even if you don’t need them.’ So later that day, hours before the complete lockdown was announced, when we were brainstorming and realised we would need to set up a helpline, it suddenly struck me that

I had these two new free sim cards! Those were then used for the helpline.”

Bhrata adds, “During the peak of the second wave, hospitals were full. Just imagine the situation. It’s the middle of the night and there are no beds for Ashram patients. Then in some hospital Salila-di’s friends help out. In others, somehow the right person comes along to catalyse the situation or to help and a hospital bed is arranged. In another instance, I meet a doctor or health official and then he becomes instrumental in helping us with the vaccination camps.

“When you always get the help you need, when coincidence follows coincidence you know that the Grace is there. Only you must be open to it. You will miss out if you are too stubborn or too full of yourself.”

These two years have been difficult for everyone all over the world but it must be said that the Ashram community was able to handle this challenge with poise, while ensuring that its members were properly looked after. This was possible thanks to all those who came forward to help and most of all to Their Grace.

What the future holds is anybody’s guess. But one thing is certain, the Ashram community is ready – whatever the challenge. ❧



An Opportunity to Serve

Amal Sud '96, who, along with his brother Kanav '00, was a key member of the first organising team that responded to Covid here in the Ashram, tells us how he got involved in the effort.

The Mother works in mysterious ways. She ensures that all Her instruments are where and when they are meant to be.

Looking back, since April 2019 circumstances around me were being forced with a clear intent that was completely unknown to me. The force was unexpected, brutal and unexplainable. Neither I nor anyone in my entourage had an explanation. As Covid-19 began, it became clear. I felt fortunate to have had the opportunity to serve Her.

I came to India for two weeks in January 2020. However my father's health deteriorated and therefore I stayed on in Amritsar. As his health stabilized, I was able to travel to Pondicherry for a week in the second week of March.

Since Feb 2020, I had been keeping abreast of the developments of Covid-19 and upon my arrival in Pondicherry, I was happy to find out that Kanav '00 and Aurobratra '00 were both not only pro-actively engaged in studying the upcoming pandemic but also sharing and talking about the possible challenges. We exchanged notes and had numerous discussions.

On March 19th, when our Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi, announced a one day Janata Curfew on Sunday 22nd March 2020, I realised that this was going to be a challenge for Ashramites and others alike, especially collecting 3 meals from the Dining Room in one morning while maintaining social distancing and using sanitizers.

I knew that Kanav had been in touch with Manoj-da and the trustees regarding Covid and sharing inputs and studies. I donned my volunteer hat and reached out to him regarding the preparations for coping with the lockdown and how I could help.

Interestingly this volunteer hat is the same one Rajkumar-da had so sweetly enticed us into wearing in A3 to help manage Darshan queues. Since then, it has always been on standby 24x7 and ready to be worn instantly whenever called for. It has taught me so much and has had a significant impact in moulding me into who I am today.

March 20th and the 21st were spent studying Covid and past pandemics in detail. Kanav and



Amal in the Grace office war room

Auro had already started working on a presentation and I was pulled in to provide my inputs. On the 21st, Kanav informed me that a meeting was held at the Grace office under the leadership of Abhipsa to discuss the response to Covid both for the Janata Curfew of the 22nd as well as a more general response. Bhrata and the medical team had already put 8 people into quarantine – those that had traveled and come from outside Pondicherry. Key actions had been identified and a focus was put on protecting the 65+ of the Ashram. Bittu, in particular took up the task of collecting the relevant data on the 65+ of the Ashram – it



was a tall order as he had to build a team to get the data and time was very short.

Later that evening we would spend hours discussing various elements of the response. A lockdown was potentially imminent and we had to be collectively ready.

In the afternoon, the action began. The first task at hand was to prepare the Dining Room for the next day's distribution. DR staff, Prashant-bhai, Girish-bhai, Sudhir-bhai, Satya, Hari, Kanav, Auro, many others and I got together with Rajkumar-da to prepare the DR counters, draw social distancing markers on the floor and define a good flow of queues in order to manage a one-time 3 meal collection by all Ashramites.

There was uncertainty about Covid-19, what it meant and what was about to happen. Nevertheless, there was clarity in action – a focus by each member to meet the task at hand and do it to the best of their ability. A spontaneous teamwork that evolves into a quick collaborative organisation.

On the 22nd of March, the day of the Janata Curfew, everything started early. By 5:30 am DR teams were ready for the day. Hari had roped in the boys from the Big Boys' Boarding. Everyone gathered in the DR courtyard – I remember a wonderful exchange that ensued. Kanav who in some sense was asked to lead the action in DR, respectfully requested Rajkumar-da to take the

lead. Rajkumar-da, ever so sweetly, thanked Kanav and said, "My time is past, I hand over the baton to you. I will help you in whatever way you need". Kanav graciously accepted and shared the plan for the day focusing on the fact that the whole morning would be done as a prayer, in silence. Once done, he requested Rajkumar-da saying, "You are our senior, could you please call for the concentration?". Rajkumar-da smiled... "Section Garde à vous!"

The morning went smoothly. We opened the DR counters a little before time at 5:50 am and by 7:00 am the food had been distributed to all Ashramites. No maids were allowed to come, about 530 Ashramites came and collected food. Even though many people had difficulty maintaining social distancing, everyone cooperated actively. The volunteers' signals to keep distance were mostly met with a smile and an attempt to move back. The person would not realise that the ones behind had already moved forward so it wasn't really possible to move back to create the distance – rather one had to wait till the line moved forward. This created sweet moments shared between the volunteers and the Ashramites.

One of the senior captains was very touched by the whole experience – she shared with me that she was so happy that she would tell Douce Mère about it.

The 23rd of March was to be a normal day for DR operations. I arrived early before DR opened and noticed that the volunteers had not arrived at the opening. Furthermore, everyone seemed to have forgotten what they had learnt the day before and were proceeding as if all was back to normal. It was interesting to hear some of the Ashramites say that the Janata Curfew was only for one day and that social distancing etc was not required anymore. As soon as the queue started, I requested people to maintain social distancing. Covid





Photos on both pages: Volunteers in action for food distribution

had just begun, we needed to continue what we had learnt the day before and keep applying it. Realising that I was all alone, I started recruiting my older teachers, captains and friends from the queue. Bharat-arya, Habul-da, Sachikant and others were quick to walk away from the queue and help out in managing the Ashramites. Very soon Gawa joined and following him came the army – boys of the Big Boys' Boarding led by Hari and some other volunteers. We were collectively able to maintain the new protocol for a second day.

The gravity of the situation was better and better understood. The first Janata Curfew had been handled, but a more complete lockdown was a likely possibility and it was clear to everyone that this would be a much more complex exercise. The presentations that we had worked on were ready and sessions for volunteers were organised. Bhrata, Kanav, Auro, Uday and I made the presentation about Covid, its risks from a medical perspective, what the Mother had to say about the previous pandemic of 1918, its possible impact on the population and an operational view of the possibilities that lay ahead of us. Numerous volunteers joined the presentations. Given the shortage of space, multiple sessions were organised. Following the presentation, details of those who wished to volunteer were taken. In all, over 60 people volunteered in just one day. In addition to this we kept getting calls from

numerous others. All the details of these individuals were noted and within two days we had another 60 or so volunteers ready to participate.

Later the same morning, Auro came to me and asked me to join them at the Grace office. Kanav and he were aware that my professional focus for almost 20 years had been insurance and health-care and within these domains, I had pioneered the implementation of Process Management systems to manage claims including those during a crisis. I had also had the opportunity to contribute in the design and build of some of the largest global claims systems across dozens of countries. Unknown to me at the time, my foundation at the Ashram and my professional background would very soon come together and make it possible for me to contribute in coordinating a massive collective effort that was a robust response to the pandemic.

This is how I got involved in the effort. ❧



The Ashram Dabbawalas

Jahnavi '86 tells us about the service to home deliver food to seniors during Covid

The first Covid-19 lockdown was announced in the third week of March, 2020. That was when we realized with a shock what a far flung community the Ashram was. Not the conventional Ashram where all are sheltered in the same compound, and so much easier to handle in any critical situation!

Food had to be delivered to all those living in different areas of the town. Bread, milk, raw provisions (raw rice, dal, tea, sugar), vegetables were initially distributed. In June 2020 as the lockdown eased a little, the eight different satellite counters of food distribution started. Then came the realization that our community has quite a few elderly people who are housebound and unable to pick up their own food. Pre-lockdown they were dependent on maids to do so for them.

Thus started our own Ashram Dabbawala system!

Ruju and Gawa, the pioneers of this movement, with a team of volunteers (Karnav, Amal, Adit, Hansa, Basu, Bishu, Abhijit Baliarsingh, Naga, Uschi and many others) organized and then evolved a door delivery system by means of two wheelers. Tiffin carriers were bought, as many Ashramites did not have two sets. Two sets were required so as to facilitate the delivery. One set would be in use, while the other would be washed and sanitized, ready for use the next day. Then the name of each person had to be inscribed on each of them, to avoid a mix-up of carriers.

Bags were procured from Gauri-di and later from Prosperity, for the distribution of bread and bananas along with tiffin carriers. Empty tiffins and bags were brought back, washed, dried, sanitized, put into separate trays, stacked, ready for filling the next day.

Once the food for three meals was filled in the

carriers, (every morning, from 8.15 to 9am) food was delivered door to door, on two wheelers.

For years, it had been my hope that Dining Room would be free of maids who mill around the DR to pick up food. They were loud, noisy and were fighting most of the time in Dining Room premises, generally vitiating the atmosphere. And something needed to be done about it. This new tiffin system was the ideal solution to avoid maids coming into DR. And that is how I got into the Dabbawala team of the Ashram.

Slowly the number of people requesting home delivery increased and we were delivering close to 150 tiffin carriers a day. Along with carriers,



Volunteers at work filling and packing the tiffin carriers. The full team currently consists of: Basavraj, Rajnish, Surabhi, Ilavati, Madhusmita, Rajan, Prabhu, Mahadev, Sheshadeb, Kiran, Sukanto, Sunil, Rani-di, Gita, Nirmala-di, Prashant, Srikant-bhai, Dharitri, Bipin, Tituni, Jahnavi.

fresh vegetables and fruits from our gardens and farms, sugar, tea, monthly ration (for those who had the sanction) were also delivered. From two wheelers, this system evolved into a van delivery system, which continued for 8-10 months.

Gradually, as Government restrictions eased, we were told to request people to resume their pre-Covid routine and come to DR and pick up their own food or send their maids. Those who were being delivered food at home had got used to it, and many resisted going back to the old routine. It required quite an exercise in firmness, coaxing and tactfulness! Some had genuine problems, as they were dependent on maids bringing their tiffins, and maids were not permitted to come inside Dining Room.

So we hit upon this idea, to fill up the tiffin carriers, load them onto a van and put them in a central place, out of DR premises, where the maids would be able to pick them up and leave the empty ones for the next day. This was similar to what Ravindra-ji used to do in the old days.

We identified (Subhash-da's) Electricity Department (erstwhile Padmasini's department) as the ideal location. So, out of the 150 tiffins we were delivering, about 40 were now to be deposited in the Electricity Dept. The rest - about 100 or so - we split into 3 vans and home delivered.

Jayanta da was doing this home delivery service, untiringly, in all weather, for more than 10 years, with the help of volunteers. He returned to his old routine of home delivery. We divided the rest of the home delivery list into two other vans, with volunteers who man it 7 days a week, rain, shine, cyclone or tsunami.

In this whole endeavour, there was so much joy in reaching out to our elders and lending a helping hand. Sometimes, we came across people who would complain about insignificant issues, and demand undue services. But at the same time, we came across others who were so full of gratitude for the little that we were doing for them, accepting everything with a smile.

The thing I learnt here was to appreciate each occasion and moment and person for all that they are and do. I felt that it is so sad that we have forgotten to appreciate each other, to encourage and pat each other on the back. Even a simple thank you would go a long way in energizing and bringing a spring in the step of the volunteers. This whole tiffin carrier service, has been a work-in-progress training ground for my



Gawa, on one of his rounds in the early days of the lockdown

fiery nature, to react less, to accept many unpalatable issues with calm, to raise my level of tolerance, use more the heart and gut feeling than the mind to make decisions.... Above all, it has been, on a daily basis, an occasion to appreciate and be grateful for such a wonderful team, for their enthusiasm, their hard work, their unfailing good humour.... Douce Mère used to appreciate every single, minute thing that all Her children did for Her or showed Her, lauding, encouraging and infusing such energy in them with Her Divine smile. If only each of us could do even one hundredth of what She has done for us, with such limitless love and compassion!

This entire endeavour is also propelled by the untiring efforts of the Dining Room workers, (Girish, Sudhir, Prashant, Bhagavati, Prasanna, Pappu and many others) who have been magnificent throughout the lockdown days. There were many helping hands during the crisis, but the Dining Room core team bore the main responsibility. Long after all helpers have gone, their job continues, of preparing food for the Ashram community on a daily basis, without any rest or time to stand and stare.

I come out of this experience with an overwhelming feeling of gratitude to the Mother for the opportunity given to me. I am also thankful for the great support and free hand Abhipsa gave me to create and run a team and put in place a system. And with great humility I renew my efforts to appreciate our entire Ashram family... to support, appreciate, energise. ❧

Working in the Farms

Dhwaneet '02 tells us about volunteering in the Ashram farms during the Covid lockdown



Chiku harvesting in Casanove

Once the lockdown was announced, there was a meeting called for those interested in helping out or volunteering. There was no clarity on what we would be required to do, but all of us came forward with a sense of purpose to help in whatever way we could at that uncertain time. There were Ashramites of course, also a large number of ex-students turned up. There was a sense of community, and also a sense of giving back to the environment that played such a significant role in nurturing us.

It became clear that the primary function of the volunteers would be to deliver food to the inmates of the Ashram. There was also a call from the farms that required help, first from Irumbai, then others. Farm workers had stopped coming

due to the lockdown and standing crops needed urgently to be harvested. There were two sets of teams delivering food on alternate days. On their day off from food delivery, volunteers would go for work on the farms.



Black gram harvesting in Irumbai farm



Groundnut harvesting in Lake Estate

There was a Whatsapp group created for all those who wanted to help and a request would go out mentioning the work to be done, the timings and number of people that could be taken. Those



Relaxing after Mango harvesting

who wanted to come would reply and within a short time the number required was achieved. This number was limited by the vehicle that we had, which was also driven by volunteers. In



Mango plucking

order to avoid the heat, work would begin early – typically departing from the Ashram at 5 am and returning usually around 11 am.

Initial work at the farms included black gram harvesting at Irumbai and banana harvesting at



Acrobatic coconut plucking at Maret. Don't try this at home :)

Rizière. Almost all of us were novices at farm work, and what we lacked in skill we made up for in enthusiasm and energy. It was mostly repetitive and laborious work, such as pulling out black gram, collecting cashew fruit that was already ripe.

All the volunteers did the work in high spirits. A close camaraderie had formed and each one put as much effort as was possible. Many expressed



Loading the mango harvest



Saag (greens) harvesting in Rizière



Black gram harvesting/transporting at Irumbai



Breakfast break during harvesting

the great joy they felt in doing the hard work in the hot sun, a joy found in collective work, in giving one's best, and being part of a cause larger than oneself. Some reminisced about the idealism and ardent effort in the ashrams of the years gone by, this new experience having galvanised

volunteers into being willing workers for a higher purpose.

On a more practical note, the farm work also gave an opportunity to those who would otherwise have been mostly indoors during the lockdown, to step out into Nature. The value of being in the open air, amidst green trees and the lush landscape is better appreciated now as the world adapts to living with Covid.

During our trips, for our breakfast we relied on provisions from the Bakery. The items supplied deserve a mention. There was bread, rusk, small buns in different shapes and sizes, perhaps with a little butter and sugar to make them fluffy. These were prepared by Rajesh at the Bakery itself, along with his special curd-garlic chutney, which has become the staple favourite of all at outings. There was also jam from Corner House.



Turmeric harvest at Lake Estate



There was almost a picnic feel to the breakfast break. At times some would get something extra to enjoy at breakfast.

Personally for me, it was a time for concentrated and focused work. Giving up the importance of the individual, it was a time for all energies to be dedicated to the task at hand. There was a feeling of a torrent of Grace coming down during the whole period that the volunteer effort was on, perhaps in response to the ardent aspiration, and, although one doesn't talk of these things, I shared quiet words with others who had also felt the same.

Volunteers were initially required at the farm as long as farm workers could not come. This lasted for around 3-4 months. After that, although farm workers had resumed duty, there was still an opportunity to harvest fruits, mainly mangoes. According to many, the harvest for 2020 set a record for the highest number of fruits and vegetables collected and distributed. Mangoes, chikus, papayas, green coconuts, bananas, mosambis, greens and other items were part of Mother's green bounty that were given in large numbers at the Dining Room.

Eventually the lockdown was lifted, departments resumed work and life tried to limp back to "normal".



Although it was not possible to do farm work regularly, there remained an enthusiastic team that persisted, that went for mango plucking and for harvesting other items for many months after the lockdown ended. Even today, after many members have joined and left and so many places visited, a volunteer effort to harvest fruits and vegetables is still alive in some form.

The first few months of Covid and the resultant lockdown led to an outpouring of help from Ashramites and ex-students. It was a time when the larger Ashram community came together in an emergency; a time of remarkable mobilisation, with remarkable work and organisation being effected. Everyone felt the joy of being part of something larger, and working for a higher purpose. ❧



Saice Online

Vikas '02 answers our questions regarding online classes during the Covid lockdowns

What were the initial thoughts about online classes? Any reasons why there was no concerted effort at starting online classes for the 2020 session?

In the beginning of the pandemic, because of the lockdown restrictions, the Ashram community was putting in place systems for the delivery of food and other essential items. Every few months, there was a progressive re-opening and changes were being made in the delivery and collection mechanisms of essential commodities. The younger teachers who could have put in place an online education programme, were involved in both the planning and execution of these besides taking their classes. So they didn't come together to explore aspects of online education.

Also in 2020, at regular intervals, we were under the impression that physical classes were going to start soon. However, the regular postponement of the starting dates for the re-opening of schools in 2020 and the ensuing uncertainty meant that we didn't consider starting online classes in a concerted manner. In the meanwhile, teachers had improvised methods to exchange notebooks, digitally correct the assignments and communicate with the students via WhatsApp, e-mail. A few teachers were in touch with their students via video calling platforms such as Skype, Google Meet & Zoom. Moreover an online education would require a device and hi-speed internet for both teachers and students, and we were not sure whether parents would provide these to their children. Most of our teachers were also not equipped to make the shift to online classes by themselves and in the early days of the pandemic, we couldn't conduct any collective training programme. So in 2020, we let the informal online education continue.

For the 2021 session things became much more organised. Can you tell us about the different aspects of the preparations



Conducting an online class training in the Hall of Harmony

that were made?

Before the 2021 session began, it was clear that we had to put in place a general online education programme for all the sections and teachers at the school. The first task was to get in touch with the parents and all the teachers to create an organised database of contact numbers in order to create official WhatsApp groups to communicate with them. By the end of 2020, most teachers and students had access to a digital device.

We had to also set up a broadband internet network in all the SAICE premises i.e. Kindergarten, Delafon, School, 'Knowledge' and the boardings. Setting up this physical infrastructure for broadband internet was a major work and was undertaken on a war footing in November 2020 by Chaitanya and Sandeepan. The lack of such an infrastructure was another reason why we didn't start online classes in 2020.

Next we had to prepare a modified time-table of 24 fixed periods per week compared to the usual 42 periods so as to limit the screen time as per the Government recommended guidelines.

The periods allotted per subject were reduced proportionately.

A big challenge must have been training our teachers, especially our senior ones in the use of digital platforms. Can you tell us more about it?

Setting up a digital infrastructure at SAICE was very important, however we also had a large pool of teachers with varying degree of technical expertise and access to digital devices. So we put in place two training programmes — basic and intermediate/advanced.

In the basic programme we helped teachers who had just got used to smartphones, to use WhatsApp to communicate with their students. We had to teach them how to save mobile numbers, create WhatsApp groups, send text / audio messages, and make group audio/video calls. There were a few teachers who found touch-screens difficult to handle, for they had only used feature phones where one gets a tactile feedback upon pressing a button.

In the intermediate/advanced programme, we taught teachers to use Skype as the video calling platform which included the possibilities of sharing one's screen.

Why was no standard platform fixed for all the classes?

Many teachers who could use a video-calling platform had already got used to the interface of Zoom, Skype and Google Meet, so we let them continue doing so, as some of them had climbed a steep learning curve in order to take video classes. So we did not recommend any one platform.

How successful do you think the online classes have been? How difficult has it been for the teachers to keep the students engaged? Has it been easier for some types of subjects and more difficult for others?

Internet connectivity issues at both the teachers' and students' ends came in the way of learning. Teachers found it challenging to keep students engaged especially if the classes were entirely lecture-based. Students would keep their video off citing connectivity issues. Thus very often there was no visual feedback for teachers to judge the engagement.

Subjects that are usually taught through

interactive discussions such as the humanities were more suited for the online mode. Science subjects such as physics and chemistry, where in-class experiments are a very important part of the engagement and discussions are likely to have been more difficult to teach. For maths, the blackboard is a very important tool for a proper understanding and application of concepts. Most teachers did not have an input tablet device with a stylus to write on the virtual white-boards of the video platforms, so maths-teaching is likely to have been a challenge.

How do you think online classes have worked for different types of students — younger students, older students, brighter students and less gifted students?

Some students found staring at a screen tiring for the eyes and the home environment would have surely affected the concentration and engagement. The youngest age-group I interacted with were 12 year-olds and I thought they adapted and engaged well in online classes. Students for whom instant and personalised feedback from teachers in physical classes is very important



Creating a video on his terrace for online group.

would have surely found online classes difficult. Over the course of the year, most students eventually adapted to the online classes.

Do you think the physical infrastructure and training put in place for online learning and the use of digital media can prove to be a lasting asset even after Covid?

For teachers who can make use of some of the online learning tools and videos that help visualisation especially for subjects like maths and science, the access to the internet will be a very useful asset even after Covid. Educational video streaming platforms such as Curiositystream and even Netflix and Amazon Prime would be possible. We should also be able to tap into resource persons through video calling to enrich the learning experience of our students.

On a lighter note, the possibility of online classes will mean that the notice “No School, no group” because of strikes, or VVIP visits will evoke a different response from students and teachers!

Could you also tell us about any online follow up for group activities? Can you tell us more about the workout videos you created? Do you know if they were effective?

Conducting an online follow-up of group activities at the Green Group level was very difficult. Some of us coaches and captains did make short exercise videos and sent exercise quotas, but left the parents and children to actually

practice them. Some children did work out at home regularly but most children would have either not done any physical exercise or would have played games like badminton and cricket. We could not put in place an effective feedback mechanism. The lockdown period, however, was an occasion for us captains and coaches to explore new kinds of exercises and fitness programmes.

Any other thoughts you would like to share?

The pandemic has opened up new avenues of learning both for teachers and students and greatly accelerated the access to the internet in the Ashram community and the School in particular. It is my hope that the students and teachers will explore the digital tools in order to enrich their teaching and learning experiences and learn and grow together.

For students, the possibilities of self-directed learning have only increased and there are some students who have made remarkable progress not just academically but in pursuing their interests and passions. For teachers, it is a great opportunity to reimagine the way some of the conventional subjects are taught. Their focus could shift to the development of the higher order faculties of critical thinking, application of knowledge, analysis and developing creativity along with helping the students develop the discrimination required in order to make responsible use of digital devices and the internet. ❧

STUDY

My dear child,

The true wisdom is to be ready to learn from whatever source the knowledge can come.

We can learn things from a flower, an animal, a child, if we are eager to know always more, because there is only One Teacher in the world — the Supreme Lord, and He manifests through everything.

With all my love.

*

Message for the inauguration of a course in technology:

When you feel that you know nothing then you are ready to learn.

The Mother (CWM, 12: 129)

Sixty Days of Fire and Water

Fire and water are often used to symbolize purification. Devashish '82 tells us about the experience of hosting seniors at Park Guest House during the Covid lockdown.

Only two years ago, we were all living normal lives, busy in our routines. Then suddenly, a tiny virus, Covid-19, invaded our lives. It affected millions of people across the globe, and the whole world came to a standstill.

At the end of March 2020, a total lockdown was imposed in India. Silence fell on the streets of Pondicherry, a silence broken only by the barking of dogs on one side and the breaking of waves on the other. Many felt the silence burdensome and demoralising. But every crisis is an opportunity. Each of us experienced a pause, and it gave us time to think about those aspects of life that are truly important to us. This was the time for new beginnings and change.

*

Our story starts when a few of the dependent individuals of the Ashram were shifted from their residences to Park Guest House so that they could be fed and taken care of while remaining safe from Covid. We in the guest house welcomed these 25 mostly senior guests. They all stayed in the sea-facing rooms and many preferred to stay on the ground floor. We were altogether 42 members



Seniors having their meal in Park Guest House during their stay there.



in Park Guest House – 25 guests, 12 staff, 4 security personnel and a cook. The situation at hand was sensitive and needed mature handling; we felt we were responsible for their safety.

We had the privilege of interacting with a few residents each day in our restaurant, in the garden and their rooms. Each person had a different story. Some shared their stories right away, others let the story unfold over time. We got to know them when we accompanied them at their slow pace or when we took them around in the garden on a wheelchair, or even when we went to their rooms to deliver their meals. What we realised was that their 'two minutes' invariably stretched to twenty minutes! Thus, whenever we had to meet them, we kept a fair amount of time on hand. While part of my work was to cut and peel the vegetables, lift heavy cooking vessels, clean and run errands, a larger portion of my time was devoted to offering the guests companionship. All that they wanted was someone to listen to them, and we did. We learnt something from these wise individuals that we will keep with us for the rest of our lives. We owe them a deep gratitude not only for their stay without any demand but also the parental care they bestowed on us.

These sixty days passed very harmoniously, and we felt we were all part of a big family: a

A Unique Sojourn at the Park Guest House

By Shipra-di

All of us are familiar with the Park Guest House on the southern end of the Beach Road. During the pre-sixties almost all first-time visitors to the Ashram were invariably sent to “Parc à Charbon” for lodging. In those days it was a barrack-like space, with a big lawn but everything else was very primitive and sparse. Now it is a veritable delight of beauty, with an artistically landscaped garden in an unusual style, in keeping with a deep environmental consciousness. Just being in the garden can be an education and instill love for nature! For us twenty-five Ashramites, it was a home full of love, joy and comfort for fifty-six days during the Corona lockdown!

On 24th March 2020, at around 6 pm, we were told to stay indoors for a few days with immediate effect. Obviously all of us did what we were asked to do. On 25th evening we received a call, asking if we would agree to be taken to Park Guest House for a few days. Not being able to fathom the gravity of the situation, we agreed, and a few days would end up in 8 weeks! On 26th evening two of our former students came with broad smiles to take us. We reached Park Guest House a little after 5 pm. Kusumben, who is really the inspiration and visionary behind the present-day Park Guest House, came to give us a warm welcome which instantly took away our apprehension. Later,

Deva and Smita welcomed us and informed us about the timings for meals, etc.

After the first night, we felt a real sense of bonhomie! Each one of us is deeply grateful and appreciative of the entire team of our hosts, right from the watchmen to the senior-most Sadhak, in this case Kusumben. The younger ones, inspired and nurtured by Devashish, are a marvel of fine sensibility, a bundle of energy, warm loving care-givers and spontaneously service-oriented. It is really not easy to handle nearly two dozen unknown elderly people and, in this case, Ashramites! Park Guest House’s young team of Smita, Namita, Madhu, Vivek and Chaitya displayed tremendous patience and forbearance with our varied requests and needs. They would always oblige with a smile, whether it was for a hot water bag or for drinking water, fixing mobile phones, helping to do something online or any other sundry request.

Deva was invariably on the phone ordering medicines and other essentials through the Ashram volunteers’ team apart from taking full responsibility for the kitchen and our wellbeing. All this he did with perfect equanimity and love. Apart from this dedicated work he would make those on wheelchairs walk, help some with stationery cycles. He made every effort to make us cheerful, even organized video shows which started with the 24th April Darshan and

family with the same goal and aspiration.

Two valuable lessons were learnt. One from the kitchen and the other by interacting with the seniors.

LEARNING IN THE KITCHEN

We salute all the women who work tirelessly in the kitchen every day. There cannot be any ‘holiday’ for the kitchen, it cannot be shut down! We admire the women who selflessly serve their families.

Felicitations to our Ashram Dining Room team too, who provide us with food every single day under all circumstances. Here are some thoughts and experiences of working in the kitchen:

Most of our time revolved around food – breakfast, lunch, tea-time and dinner. One does not realise how much time goes in organising these four meals. Well, one cannot avoid it! That is the reason why our Divine Mother organised a Dining Room. So we save a lot of time for other

then BBC's Planet Earth Nature shows.

The meals were a feast with the Dining Room dal and new menus cropping up from the fruits and vegetables that came from Lake Estate. Mallika amma was the chef, an excellent cook with tremendous goodwill and equanimity. It was a delight to see Vivek chopping vegetables and paneer almost like a professional cook. Smita and Chaitya served not only at the counter but even took bowls of hot milk and at times the entire dish to the tables lest the elderly topple! Namita always had a warm smile while performing varied tasks. Madhu of course was indispensable for multiple functions and true to his name ever sweet. Deva would not allow us to wash dishes, naturally we would have made a mess! The washing and wiping in the kitchen were a huge teamwork with Madhu, Kripasindhu, Sunil along with other guests Poornanand, Murli, Nirmala joining in. Nirmala, a wonder worker cleaned some of our rooms, washed clothes for those who were unable to. She also kept the canteen's dining room spotlessly clean, Abala usually helped Nirmala in the cleaning work. Murli, Nirmala and Avanti also took dishes for the elderly who were unable to come to the canteen. A lovely collaboration. This was an amazing display of Mother's working!



This lockdown did bring out the best in us. No one had any reason to complain or grumble even if they tried. Every moment was an occasion for thanksgiving. We enjoyed walking in the beautiful garden by the sea. Its spiral 8 shaped pathway laid with chips from tiles in different hues and shapes is designed by Deva, and even Kusumben was among those who actually laid the chips in a pattern, later to be professionally fixed by the mason. We had our different individual timings for being in the serene ambience of the garden right from 5 am, and later in the evening the place was full of life. Apart from the comfort and luxury of this unique abode gifted by the Divine and physically manifested by talented, inspired instruments, this was a great time to reflect, study or just be.

Both the Park Guest House members and we who were brought for our protection will cherish this experience with gratitude and wonder!

Besides the commendable service of our hosts we must acknowledge gratefully the untiring, admirable and meticulous work done by our former students and volunteers. Truly, an efficacy of Mother's vision of Karma Yoga! We are grateful and full of admiration to each and every volunteer. Indeed, Corona has been confronted with courage, fortitude and smiles with Mother's Grace!

constructive things. (For those who are working in the Ashram Dining Room, it is the most constructive work.)

To keep the mind composed while working near heat and fire was challenging.

Our cook was handling hot vessels with ease, whereas I could not. I found the utensils extremely hot! Were my hands too delicate?

Keeping track of the ingredients (spices etc.) was quite a task. Things seemed to be getting over

pretty fast, including the gas cylinder!

Storing food in the fridge was another challenge. I had no idea what to keep outside and what inside the refrigerator!

Cutting and peeling of vegetables was another learning. It was important to use the right tool to peel, and it was essential that a good knife along with a chopping board be kept handy to cut and chop.

Cooking is a very different art. Sprinkling the

CHOOSING ONE'S FAMILY

You have come into the world in a certain milieu, among certain people. When you are quite young, but for a few rare exceptions, what surrounds you seems altogether natural to you, because you are born in its midst and are quite used to it. But when, a little later, a spiritual aspiration wakes up in you, you may quite possibly feel yourself completely ill at ease in the environment where you have lived, if, for instance, the people who have brought you up don't have the same aspiration or if their ideas are the very opposite of what is developing in you. Instead of saying, "You see, I belong to this family, what shall I do? I have a mother, a father, brothers, sisters...", you can set out in search (I don't mean necessarily travel), set out in search of spirits who have an affinity with yours, people who have a similar aspiration and, if you have the sincere aspiration to find those who like you are in quest of something, you will always have the occasion to meet them in one way or another, through quite unexpected circumstances; and when you have found one or more people who are in exactly the same state of mind and have the same aspiration, quite naturally there will be created bonds of closeness, intimacy, friendship and, among you, you will form a kind of brotherhood, that is to say, a true family. You

are together because you are close to one another, you are together because you have the same aspiration, you are together because you want to create the same goal in life; you understand one another when you speak, you have no need to discuss anything which is said and you live in a kind of inner harmony. This is the true family, this is the family of aspiration, the family of spiritual inclinations.

The Mother (CWM, 4: 258)

OLD AGE

Old age does not come from a great number of years but from the incapacity or the refusal to continue to grow and progress. I have known old people of twenty and young people of seventy. As soon as one wants to settle down in life and reap the benefits of one's past efforts, as soon as one thinks that one has done what one had to do and accomplished what one had to accomplish, in short, as soon as one ceases to progress, to advance along the road of perfection, one is sure to fall back and become old.

The Mother (CWM, 12:259)

(One of the verses from the Dhammapada read out by the Mother in her Friday class:)

For one who is respectful to his elders, four things increase: long life, beauty, happiness and strength.

right amount of ingredients and spices needs experience. I stayed away from it!

Delegating work to individuals was again a task. There were several odd jobs to be done, such as boiling hot water for the seniors for various needs, for drinking as well as for hot water bags. Lemons were to be cut according to their convenience, food to be room-delivered, etc.

The serving of food was an art. In a couple of days, we could estimate the exact quantities consumed by our guests. The trick was to keep eye contact with them while serving. A gentle nod of their head was the signal to stop! However, we could never serve the right amount to a few

guests because they themselves were not sure how much they actually needed!

Not to forget, there was the back-breaking job of the washing of dishes, utensils and some big vessels. On the other hand, working with water was a process of purification!

An interesting thought came to my mind. How can fire and water occupy the same space in the kitchen?

LEARNING FROM THE SENIORS

Seniors can be a source of wise words and sage advice on dealing with life to its fullest. Just living for so many years gives them the advantage of

having seen the world over a long period and in depth and having a better understanding of people. They offer priceless wisdom that can sustain you in the long run – if one listens keenly. Being in their presence fuelled our enthusiasm for life, hence we wish to share some of their wisdom with you. Each person has a different story. Here are a few highlights:

It's not until we find ourselves in a conversation with a senior that we realise, that we have a long, long way to go in understanding how things work in life. It is humbling to learn from a long, rich life of experience.

Our seniors know that life has a rhythm, and nothing ever stays all-bad or all-good. It is the bitter taste that makes life sweeter, and no one understands that difficult lesson better than them.

Sharp-witted seniors have the experience to know that taking things too seriously will only wear you out, and the key to being able to sustain any storm is being able and willing to laugh in the rain! The happiest seniors were those who found humour in the little things.

An important lesson we learnt from the seniors was to be kind and humble. They remind you that you do not know what people may be going through. Simply observing them can help us empathize with others in various situations. Kindness is more powerful than indifference; it does not cost you anything and yet has a strong, positive impact on relationships. We were touched by their care for us!

Mobility and independence is something to be cherished and feel blessed about.

Many have faith in a higher power that is going to lead them forward.

The seniors have had to deal with the loss of many loved ones. They have had to go through many hardships and have learnt to adapt to the joy and sorrow that inevitably come with life.

They have to deal with the loss of health as well. Whether it is the loss of hearing (which is common), or the inability to take care of daily ablutions; it is not easy to accept that their body does not function the way it used to.



In Park Guest House's meditation hall.

Help. Dependence. Need. Many seniors live with these realities of life and accept the simple fact that they need help from others. For some, the transition from independence to dependence is difficult. So why not take care of our teeth and ears, exercise regularly, and eat healthy, chemical-free food? Make the right choices today for a fit and healthy tomorrow.

Being patient in difficult situations can be exhausting, but showing our seniors respect is always the best choice.

We are reminded what Rachel Naomi Remen, the teacher of integrative medicine, once wrote: "Listening is the oldest and perhaps the most powerful tool of healing. It is often through the quality of our listening and not the wisdom of our words that we can affect the most profound changes in the people around us. When we listen we offer sanctuary for the homeless parts within the other person. That which has been denied, unloved, devalued by themselves and others. That which is hidden. When you listen generously to people, they can hear the truth in themselves often for the first time."

*

Covid posed various challenges for all of us. Perhaps this attack has come to teach us something. Perhaps this is Nature asking us to pause and do things differently from now on, to do a reboot of our modern civilization. Any change, however, begins from within us and the reboot required is perhaps of our priorities, our attitudes, our consciousness. Let us learn the lessons that this experience has come to teach us. ❧

Covid Diary

Glory Pal '91 recalls her experience at Gloria Land during the lockdown of the first Covid wave and recovering from Covid in New Guest House during the second one.

For my 49th birthday my class (of '91) had decided to come to Gloria Land to celebrate with me for the first time since graduation. But 2 days before that, on 20-03-2021, PM Modi announced the Janata Curfew to curb the outbreak of the Corona Virus. The next afternoon an emergency meeting of managers of Ashram farms and dairies was held in the Hall of Harmony to discuss a plan of action and by the time I was driving home a full lockdown had been announced starting from 24th March.

We suspended all farm activity and continued dairy work alone. Apart from dairy workers we shortlisted 2 men and 5 young women for dairy-related work like grass cutting with the machine, grass loading, chaffing, feed mixing and transport, clearing dung and washing cattle sheds and calf-pens, tractor driving etc.

We were 6 members in Gloria Land. My aunts Shubhra and Shikha, my sister Alo and her children and I. Someone had enquired if we needed volunteers, I asked them if the volunteers could weigh, mix, bag, transport 6 tons of cattle feed weekly, cut 2-3 tons of grass daily, milk 60 cows/600 litres daily, clear dung and wash the sheds daily... there was a brief awkward silence... so I reassured them we'd manage with our workers. We realised volunteers would be extra mouths to feed. Everything on a farm is larger than life and we had to continue doing our normal farm/dairy duties in addition to the mammoth domestic work which turned out to be physically and mentally demanding.

We had divided the tasks between ourselves. Alo cut vegetables, cooked and washed all stainless steel vessels with Ameya; the aunts also cooked, swept and mopped the meditation hall and their own rooms; Ameya and Aurelie did the laundry, cleaned the toilets and made the beds; I washed all the crockery and did the sweeping

and mopping of the entire main building (kitchen, dining, library, living area, office, terrace, 2 bedrooms and 2 bathrooms) 2 sections a day in rotation. It was extremely hard but we learnt a lot, became more efficient and devised methods of streamlining. We even took out time to do mosaic work with broken tiles, collective meditations in the field praying for rain and exercised collectively too.

We braved a series of health crises. I came down with loose motions and fever. Before I could recover fully Shikha had breathing difficulties and had to be taken to Jipmer. My uncle Swapan got a major heart attack and had 3 stents put. Shubhra came down with clinical depression. Our bull butted Subramani (our frail and senior-most milker) who had to be admitted in Jipmer with hairline rib fracture and internal bleeding. And Alo came down with a violent fever and cough. Srma carried us safely through these ordeals.

We followed protocols advised by the team of former students who by Srma's design were back in the Ashram at the right time and could offer their services during the pandemic. All interaction with workers was done outdoors with social distancing.

By June 2020 we had to start getting our paddy fields ready and we needed our full work force. We took down addresses of all our workers and plotted them on Google Maps. The work force was divided into 3 batches; their working hours were staggered and their work spaced out. For their own safety I asked the workers to report to me all Covid cases in the village. If there were workers living within 50m of a Covid positive case we suspended them for 2 weeks. We relied on the honesty of our workers.

Wave one subsided. In March 2021 life was almost normal. Convinced by foolish optimism I

was certain there would be no 2nd wave in India. Somehow our base immunity would prove to be a miracle. I was so wrong!

In mid May 2021 an exhaustion began taking me over. I thought it was *tamas* and laziness. I wasn't being able to work as hard. I could barely keep up with Alo and the children when we went for walks in the evenings. There was pain in my lower abdomen radiating down my thighs, I was convinced I had a urine infection. I informed Dr. Archana in the afternoon of 17th May, by night I was running a fever of 102. I called Dr. Archana again and she asked me to isolate myself, take Dolo and get a Covid test done. The result came on 18th night and to my utter disbelief I tested positive!

Munna picked me up in the Ashram ambulance. I had decided to stay in New Guest House if advised home isolation. My heartfelt admiration and gratitude for those who set up the isolation facilities in New Guest House!

I settled into my upper floor room in New Guest House. I had the medicine kits that Indira Gandhi Hospital gives to all patients. I had taken my own thermometer and oximeter. We had to monitor temperature and oxygen levels and doctors were available on call. Sometimes Salila-di or other Nursing Home staff did the rounds and enquired about our well-being in person. I admire their courage. Every day, 3 times a day, like clockwork, I could hear the food trolley being wheeled in the corridor. The boys Justin and Parthivan knocked on the door. We put our plates and bowls on a stool outside and they gave us wholesome food and filled our water bottles. Such dedicated courageous lads. We got milk, bread, bananas, mosambi, rice, dal, vegetable, eggs, curd, idli on Sundays, special items like noodles from Corner House and other fruits like apples pomegranate and red jambu.

No patient knew who were in the other rooms or other floors. We didn't see or talk to anybody apart from the staff on duty. I was likening it to a modern-day solitary confinement in a cellular jail and tried to imagine what Sri Aurobindo and other revolutionaries felt like.

In the beginning all I wanted to do was sleep and wondered if I was meant to survive and continue Srma's work or was it time to go? And if it was time to go how complete could my surrender be? I expressed these thoughts to Alo and got a sound scolding from her. I decided to suspend these thoughts (that I believe stemmed from fear) and utilise my time the best way possible. I used to wake up early, call Gloria land, assign work on the phone and attend to work calls, shower, have breakfast by 8:30am and fall asleep by 9 am. I requested my family and friends not to call me unless it was for work. I kept them updated on Whatsapp. I used to wake up again at around 10:30am and start reading *Savitri*. During most of my waking hours that is all I did and read the epic poem 1.5 times during quarantine. I did prona breathing twice a day, *udaana mudra* and the 6-minute walk test. A couple of times when I



Glory (first from the left) with the rest of Team Gloria Land

spotted an Ashramite on the road below I shouted out their names while they looked around wondering who called. I never felt a moment of loneliness or boredom. In the last 16 years I have never had so much time to myself and it was a very interesting experience to observe my fears, attachments and efforts to surrender. ❧

An Ode to Joy

Jyotsna Singh '85 and family remember Hasit Moitra (Joy) '86

Not too many children had the privilege of joining SAICE back in the day. Some were lucky and others not so much. And then there was Joy who somehow, even after being refused admission, charmed his way into our school. He was all of two and a half years old when he went to visit Douce Mère. He turned to his mother and whispered “Ma ke bolo na ami Mayer schoolé podté chai.” This caught Douce Mère’s attention who looked at the child and wanted to know what he was saying. Drawn by his innocent words, the Mother immediately wrote to the School administration. And before you knew it, Joy was on his way to kindergarten.



Born on 27th May 1965, weighing nine pounds, a boy came into the world with a big heart and a beautiful smile. Although we all knew him as Joy, Douce Mère had named him Hasit (the ever-smiling), a name that truly resonated with his personality.

Joy was sweet, loving and extremely fond of stories as a child. He would always ask his mother to read to him before going to bed. His love for stories evolved as he grew up and began exploring different art forms. Ira-di was among the first teachers to introduce him to acting. She would recount stories and make the boarding children enact small skits where they would also sing and dance. Joy loved participating in these activities and thoroughly enjoyed his life in the boarding, especially at Millie home, where the Didis, Kiran-di and Anu-di were extremely affectionate towards him.

It was during this time that Joy discovered his passion for theatre and singing. Amita-di played a

big role in helping him find his calling. Joy would often say – “I wouldn’t be where I am today without Amita-di.” She inspired and motivated him to pursue his interests and he was forever grateful to have had her as a teacher. Similarly, Sahana-di and Tarit-da helped Joy build a strong foundation in singing, particularly Rabindra Sangeet which he enjoyed very much. Interestingly enough, when Joy applied for the teaching position at Lycée, he had an edge over the other applicants because the man interviewing him was an ardent fan of Rabindra Sangeet. So Joy was truly grateful to his teachers because they helped him in some way in every phase of his life.

While Joy did have unconditional support and mentoring from his teachers, he was also committed to the craft. He would spend hours listening to BBC on the radio to work on his diction, read voraciously to gather all the knowledge he could and watched lots of plays and films to study the nuances of acting. When he stood on stage, he embodied every role with perfection. From his subtle expressions to his resounding bass, he kept the audience mesmerised with his performances. While in School, no Ashram program was complete without him in it. Some of



Anandamath: his last performance in the Ashram



In the play *Ilion*

Joy's most notable performances were under Cristof's direction with whom he shared mutual respect and love.

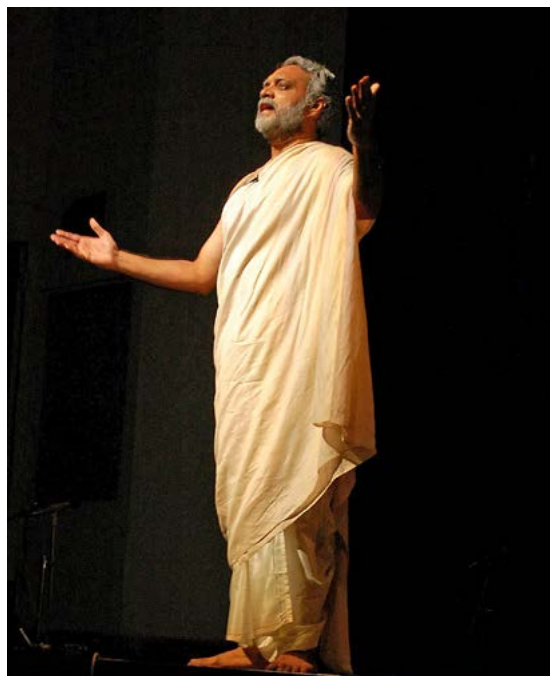
"My way of directing is not to tell each one what to do exactly. I give actors the freedom to explore and this freedom, I must say, Joy used wonderfully. I distinctly remember working with him on three plays – Illion, Viziers of Basora and Savitri. He was absolutely extraordinary, especially in Ilion where he acted alongside Manoj-da. We had two giants of the stage performing in front of us and it was enthralling to see the way Joy gave himself entirely to the play and identified with the role. It was something I'll never forget." – Cristof.

By the age of 17, Joy had grown to become a big, handsome lad touching 6 feet. Not only was he a good actor, but he also excelled in almost every field. He was a good student, a great sportsman, and an excellent singer. Every teacher and coach had a lasting impact that he carried with him throughout his life. Be it the fondness he shared for Nolini-da whom he referred to as dadu, the respect he had for Pranab-da, the 'adda' sessions he had with Ramu-da, Siddhartha-da and Basab or the admiration he had for his elders like Jhumur-di, Chanda-di, Ravi-da, David, Priti-di, Manoj-da, Manoj Das da, Ajanta-di, Arup-da (Tagore) and many others in the Ashram. Joy truly valued every person and relation that came into his life.

Even when Joy joined the Lycée as a teacher, he knew he wasn't just going to teach the children. He wanted to be more than that – a mentor, an empathetic listener and a friend. When students came to him with obstacles (that were often outside school), he would listen to them, help them and really try

to solve their problems as if they were his own. He was prepared to do anything if it meant that the child could have peace and happiness. This was also why the students trusted and adored him because Joy impacted their lives in so many ways and they knew he truly cared for them.

Over the years as we grew older and dare I say bigger, so did Joy's family. He first came into my life then gradually made his way into the hearts of my brothers and sisters. He found love, affection,





a sense of belonging, and everything that he always longed for. Soon enough he was our family and we, his. As our family continued to grow he was there to support us and raised my nephews and niece as his own with utmost love and care.

ABHIJIT BALIARSINGH '06:

Joy mamu was always there to support me in any way he could. Owning a computer was quite a luxury when we were younger. But realising rather early on that it would become essential for our studies he went ahead and invested in one. All my classmates would be huddled around that monitor whenever they came home, either for research or to watch a movie. No matter how many of my friends came home, everyone was always welcome.

Since Joy mamu was an excellent sportsman himself, he was very invested in my physical education. He never missed any of my athletic events and always encouraged me to strive for excellence. I remember he would be there during every Road Race driving by my side along with my mother and cheering me on. An avid player and fan of tennis, he lent me his own Prince racquet when he noticed my interest in the sport.

Besides guiding us in academics and sports, Joy mamu also stressed the importance of family values. He would often say “a family that eats

together stays together” and tried to inculcate this habit in all of us. During meals, he would make the effort to ask us about our day and share what was going on in our lives. You don’t have to be a father to be a good parent and Joy mamu was exactly that to us. He impacted our lives in more ways than we can count and he will forever remain close to our hearts.

APARAJITA BALIARSINGH '06:

Joy mamu was a friend, a mentor and a shield who protected me from all external problems. I cannot put in words what he meant to me. He was so fond of all of us. He loved singing with us, pulling our leg and took every opportunity to put a smile on our faces.

He pampered us with all the luxury and comforts he could provide. As his only ‘daughter’, I had the privilege of never being scolded in his presence. He loved me like a father loves his daughter and showered me with all the affection in the world. He was the greatest admirer of my cooking. Even during my teenage years when I’d cook something that wasn’t good, he’d still make me feel like I was the best chef in the whole world.

The lockdown turned out to be a blessing in disguise because it brought us all together and I feel lucky to have spent that time with him. We shared a lot of thoughts and feelings during this period and I discovered a different side to him that I hadn’t seen before. I recall he would eagerly wait for me to return home to chat and watch TV together.

I miss watching TV with him and I miss hearing his voice on the phone. It’s the small things that constantly remind me of him. Even today, every time the phone rings, there’s always a glimmer of hope that it could be Joy mamu.

BISHWAJIT BALIARSINGH '12:

While most of my siblings called Joy “Mamu, Dada or uncle”, I was the only one who’d call him “Joy”. In fact, the first word that I spoke was not “Mama” or “Baba” but “Joy” or more specifically “Daai” That’s how intimate and special our relationship was. An excellent singer himself, Joy was delighted to learn I had an ear for music. At



L to R: Bishwajit, Gyandeep, Jyotsna, Abhijit, Aparajita, Joy

the tender age of 4, I began recording and performing songs and shlokas with him. As I grew older, I developed a strong love for cricket and table tennis and seeing how eager I was to play, Joy gifted me a TT racquet as well as an MRF Genius Bat which was used by Sachin Tendulkar himself. These are memories I will cherish forever.

Our childhood would have been incomplete without Joy, who supported, taught and guided us to become the people we are today. I remember sitting on his bike riding around town and feeling absolutely secure and happy. Even though Joy isn't here with us today, I still feel as secure and happy because I know he's somewhere out there, watching over us.

GYANDEEP SINGH '16:

Joy dada would often say blood is thicker than water in jest, however, he was the very antithesis to this statement and nothing made him happier than spending time with us, his children. From picking me up after school to attending all my year-end exhibitions and programs, he ensured I never missed my parents who were away most of the year and showered me with love and affection. He introduced me to the world of cinema by handpicking movies from the Ashram library, recording movies on TV and encouraging me to

watch quality content, a practice that has largely shaped my career choice in the media.

Growing up, I discovered we had a lot in common and while Joy-da was still my guardian, we also began bonding as friends if I may say so. We'd chat about our lives, discuss movies together and eat out quite often. Joy dada's love for food was legendary, his appetite hearty and the way to his heart was definitely through his stomach! Even when I was in Bengaluru, Joy dada would call me up to have some of his favourite delicacies delivered home, which makes me smile to this day.

On the rare occasions that I'd choose to cook something special at home, he'd look forward to my preparation and sing praises no matter how inedible it was. I may not have been the best chef, but I do make a decent cup of chai and nobody enjoyed it more than Joy dada, who jokingly called me Modi to appreciate my tea brewing skills.

Not a single day goes by when I don't think of Joy dada. I miss making that extra cup of tea, I miss watching him shouting slurs at journalists on the TV but most of all I miss sharing heart to heart conversations with him. However, it gives me a sense of relief to think that he spent the last few months of his life surrounded by family, with all his children by his side, content and satisfied.

Douce Mère, permets que nous soyons, dès maintenant et pour toujours, simplement tes petits enfants.

"De petites graines poussées par le vent de toutes les directions avaient rendez-vous dans un jardin que leurs cœurs avaient connu. Elles ont été plantées, elles ont grandi ensemble pour devenir les feuilles d'un même arbre. Tout était beau, joyeux, amical. Soudain, une feuille s'envola vers le ciel. 'Où es-tu partie?' ont crié les autres. Pour appeler la pluie de Grâce, je reviendrais vite. Elle se reposa dans les bras de notre Mère. Le temps passe... tiens, une feuille toute neuve a poussé sur notre arbre. Notre amie est revenue pour être parmi nous, et grandir ensemble vers La Lumière." – Shilpa Desai '86 ☸

Project Susthiti

Reducing Stress and Raising Well-being in Covid Warriors

Arnab Bishnu Chowdhury '95 recounts his experiences as composer and therapist of the award-winning online therapy program he initiated and led.

GENESIS

In late May 2020 during the peak of the 1st Covid wave in India, we got to know from a resident doctor of a known public hospital that a couple of young doctors serving in the Covid ward had attempted to commit suicide. Luckily they were saved. This got us thinking about the stress that Covid warriors are facing and how, as human beings, they too need healing and care. Our argument was that if the caregivers are not in a state of well-being, how can they offer treatment and healing to the care receivers? Aren't we all emitters of vibrations that we carry within ourselves? This was the genesis of Project Susthiti. Susthiti signifies harmonious stability in Sanskrit.

Given the enormous deluge on mainstream and social media about the Covid pandemic, we had to find threads of knowledge and practice, while trying to know the unknown.

CHALLENGES

From May 2020 till August 2020, the Project Susthiti team began discussions with over 30 Covid healthcare workers including doctors, paramedics and nurses across India to understand the challenges they faced while serving in isolated Covid-19 wards. They were working on average 8-10 hour shifts across the week that often led to tremendous stress and burnout.

Four prominent challenges emerged:

- Stress with symptoms of insomnia and indigestion since their circadian rhythms were

being disrupted, especially with continuous long night-shifts across weeks with few days to rest and quarantine themselves.

- Other stress-related symptoms included chronic back and knee pain and extreme dehydration due to wearing the uncomfortable Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) kit during their multi-hour shifts.
- Burnout due to chronic fatigue which affects physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual health.
- Anxiety about carrying the Covid-19 virus when they returned home to their families which included children or ageing relatives.



Arnab Bishnu Chowdhury - Playing with Sunlight - Re-imagining our world beyond Covid

WORDS OF WISDOM

The following words of wisdom became our guideline for creating Susthiti, our online methodology and therapy programme:

"They [the forces of illness] first weaken or break through the nervous envelope, the aura. If that is strong and whole, a thousand million germs will

not be able to do anything to you. The envelope pierced, they attack the subconscious mind in the body, sometimes also the vital mind or mind proper—prepare the illness by fear or thought of illness.” (Sri Aurobindo. CWSA, Vol 31, p. 569.)

“The role of music lies in helping the consciousness uplift itself towards the spiritual heights”. (The Mother. On Education. CWM, Vol 12, p. 240).

“In reality illness is only a disequilibrium; if then you are able to establish another equilibrium, this disequilibrium disappears.” (The Mother. CWM, Vol 5, p. 121).

Perhaps illness can be considered as a disequilibrium of rhythms. If so can we proactively find, know and re-establish our rhythm so that a raised equilibrium is established and as a result effective therapy happens. This always has been the vision and approach of Know Your Rhythm, a training program and methodology which I have been exploring, researching and training over a decade. It was clear that Project Susthiti had to be based on that experience.

THERAPY PROGRAM ARCHITECTURE

What emerged was a 3-hour online therapy program encompassing elements of Yoga Therapy consisting of *asana* (postures from Restorative Yoga), *mudra* (finger posture), meditation and Yoga Nidra and elements of Music Therapy in the form of *mantra yoga* (chanting), Guided Imagery and Music (GIM) with our specially composed Raga-based music to induce deep relaxation and help reduce stress and burnout.

After an assessment, we selected Raga Maru Bihag, a Raga expressing Shringar Rasa which can be described as empathy, happiness and love, a key emotion for self-healing to take place. This Raga is also traditionally to be performed and listened to late at night, which matched the timing of our online sessions with Covid warriors. Given the varied age group and musical taste of our Covid warriors, we ensured that the composed music blended a contemporary feel while



The musical trio - Arnab, Bryce, Suzanne after a music composition session

remaining centered on the specific Raga. (Here is an audio excerpt: https://www.ninad.in/Orchestral_Maru_Bihag_excerpt_applied_as_therapy.mp3)

Our three sessions were centered on empathy, equanimity and bravery.

SUCCESSFUL PILOT STUDY

For a pilot project, we collaborated with Dr. Bhalendu Vaishnav, Prof and Head, Department of Medicine, who led the Covid management at Shree Krishna Hospital, Sri Pramukshwami Medical College, under Bhaikaka University, Gujarat, India. Dr. Bhalendu bhai and his family are devoted to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

Our first pilot study with 19 Covid healthcare workers was conducted across a week at Shree Krishna Hospital in August 2020. The emotional well-being of participants was recorded in an investigator-designed questionnaire wherein subjective experiences of 7 parameters viz., happiness, calmness, alertness, stability, clarity of thoughts, control over anger and self-observation were recorded on a Likert scale. On the third consecutive day of our therapy session, 68% participants recorded significant change in alertness followed by calmness and control over anger. All participants registered improvement in one or more parameters of emotional well-being on

several days of the week. 52% of the participants recorded consistent beneficial effects throughout the study period. Our pilot study as oral paper titled ‘The Effect of Music on Healthcare Professionals Working in Covid-19 Isolation Wards – A Pilot Study’ was presented at the 5th Medicine Annual Conference Virtual 2020, Department of Medicine, Christian Medical College (CMC), Vellore, India, November 2020.

Subsequently, 280 Covid warriors have received our 3-hour online therapy program.

RECOGNITION

With the Divine’s Grace, in June 2021 on International Yoga Day, Project Susthiti received the 2021 SEVA award from the International Association for Yoga Therapists (IAYT, USA) at the Symposium on Yoga Therapy and Research (SYTAR) 2021. (A short interview while receiving the award: <https://youtu.be/E2qG5vGJE-w>)

Project Susthiti has been well-received in the form of articles, interviews, lectures and presentations at various international and national conferences including the article ‘Yoga and



Music for Healthcare Workers’ Mental Health – the Rhythms Within Us’, published by WONCA (World Association for Family Physicians) in their newsletter dedicated to World Mental Health Day, September 2021. www.globalfamilydoctor.com/News/Yogaand-MusicforHealthcareworkers-MentalHealth.aspx

A scientific report will also be submitted to our Ashram’s Annual Report of Research Activities which gets submitted to the Indian govt.

Project Susthiti brought together an international team of musicians and therapists, some of whom are

associated with Integral Yoga and our School, including Bryce (flute), Suzanne (cello), Sevastiana (violin), Dr. Ramesh Bijlani (Delhi Ashram). Merci to all our team members and gratitude to Them for this opportunity to serve.

‘Playing with Sunlight – Re-imagining our World beyond Covid’, a music composition dedicated to Covid warriors of the world, premiered at SYTAR 2021, Symposium on Yoga Therapy & Research, USA: <https://youtu.be/u2p8w>

To know more, all of you are welcome to tune into our website: <https://www.ninad.in> ❧

MENTAL SILENCE

I don’t know whether you have tried to get mental silence.[...]

At first nothing happens. You must stay like that: not actively — be in an aspiration towards the Divine. There must be no movement in the mind; it is not even surrender, it is a movement of perfect... something between self-giving and self-abdication. And if the mind makes an offering of its way of being, one day the answer comes spontaneously. It falls like a light.

The calmer you are, the more confidence you have, the more attentive you are, the more clearly it comes. A time comes when one has only to do that (gesture of opening)....

The Mother (CWM, 12: 129)

The Free Progress Method

Sunayana Panda '79, with inputs from Purushottam Agarwal '80

Now that SAICE has completed more than 75 years, we are tempted to ask what really makes this institution stand apart from all other schools. The one natural question that arises is this: Does the education imparted here have a spiritual dimension? Or we can rephrase and ask: What did the Mother, a spiritual figure of her stature, add to the system of education here which is not there anywhere else?



Tanmaya-da and Padma

The School was started in a situation which was unexpected. When children started coming to the Ashram for their physical safety during the

Second World War, it became necessary for the Mother to open a school. So she started it with whatever limited resources she had and it was run like any other school for several years. But every few years she made some important and radical changes to the system of education until it had all the characteristics of Integral Education and then finally she tried out the experiment of Free Progress.

The experiment of Free Progress which was carried out in the late 1960s and early 1970s, headed by Tanmaya-da, was indeed quite special. Sadly, a large part of the correspondence and other notes regarding this experiment have been damaged and lost, so there is not much documentation left about the whole process. We have tried to recreate that period and that specific experiment by speaking to some of the students who were a part of it.

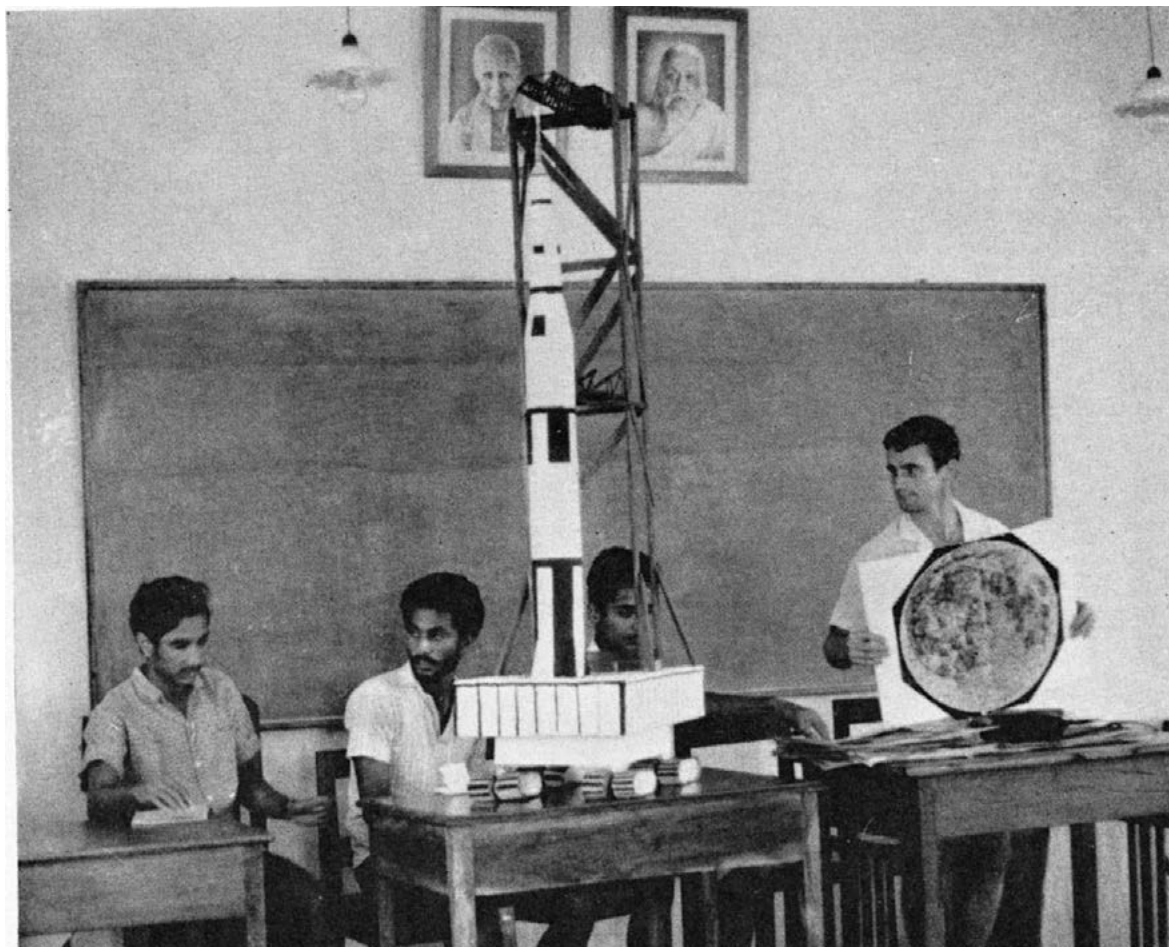
We have to remember that it was a time in world history when many new things were attempted which had never been attempted before and it seemed as if we were stepping into a new world. It was the period when Auroville was being planned and created. There was an enthusiasm in the air which had never been felt before. One of the defining events of that time was the moon landing.

During that period when the Apollo 11 was being prepared for landing on the moon, it became an all-consuming passion among the teachers and students of the School to follow every detail. Talks were given and models of the spacecraft were displayed so that the students could better understand what was going on. And it was the Free Progress section which took the lead in gathering and presenting this information and that is perhaps what attracted many students to the Free Progress section at the time.

We revisit the exciting and innovative years of the first Free Progress experiment.

ACTIVITIES DONE IN THE FREE PROGRESS SECTION:

- Learning by oneself and taking help of the teacher (whoever was available) only when needed. The teacher's role was to point to the source from where information could be gathered.
- Learning how to learn, so that one could ultimately teach oneself anything.
- Trying to also think together and learn together, being open to suggestions from everyone, collaboration in a project, etc.
- Learning without cutting up the subjects into compartments, moving from one subject (physics, math, language, history, etc.) to the other as the project required.
- Learning without giving oneself time limits.
- Becoming aware of the different parts of the being, even learning to be aware of one's subtle body.
- Trying to develop the different, even higher, faculties of the mind, such as observation, intuition, the power to will something to happen, to invoke a higher power to go beyond one's limitations, etc.
- Turning to the Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's writings in the context of what was being studied or what was being felt as a personal difficulty at that time, instead of reading their books without a context.



Talk on the Moon Landing in the old Hall of Harmony

THE TEACHERS

The group of teachers who came together at that time was truly exceptional. Tanmaya-da was at the head of the section but Padma participated fully in the projects at the beginning. Soon after that Goupi (Guru Prasad) joined them and after that Jean Legrand and Pierre Legrand, his brother. Kake (Promesse) was already there and taught in that same method even when all the others left.

The group was very harmonious and they collaborated very closely, complementing each other in the subjects that were their fields of knowledge.

They had to manage the different domains that the students wanted to do their projects in, and they also had to manage the different levels of the students because it was not such a homogenous group. Their friends from Auroville or other departments of the Ashram would come and help.

ONE OF THE EXPERIMENTS

One of the activities of the group was to learn relaxation. The students would lie down and relax the body, becoming conscious of the different parts and relaxing every muscle. Then Tanmaya-da would ask them to use their imagination and go out and see what was happening around them, see the world and come back while their bodies were lying in that room relaxing. They had not been told that they were learning to be conscious of their subtle bodies.

One day one of the students said that he had gone out of the School, in his imagination, and gone into the Ashram Main Building, that he had then gone up to the Mother's room. He then described what the Mother was wearing and the colour of her dress. Then another student, whose birthday it was and who had been to see the Mother that day, spoke about his conversation with her. To everyone's surprise, when he described what she was wearing, it was exactly what the first student had told the class.

INTUITION

Another regular activity was to develop intuition. One student would stand at the blackboard and think of a single-digit number. Then the



Goupi (Guru Prasad) whose birth name was Jean-Pierre

others would try to guess the number and their guesses would be written on the board. In the end the student would tell the others what the number was which he had thought of and they would see how close they had been to it.

THE BATHYSCAPHE (SUBMARINE) PROJECT

The students had been told to find a subject for doing their own research. Each one found something but soon one of the projects became more elaborate and everyone participated in it. It started with a simple question of how things floated on water but it developed to such a degree that the whole class decided they had to make a working model of a bathyscaphe.

When it was ready they took it to the Mother. At first she named it "Essai". The whole class went up to her room taking the model which weighed 28 kgs. There the Mother saw it in detail and she was told the whole process by which they had been able to create the model. After that they all meditated together and she then gave the name "Hardi" to it.

The whole project was put in writing and diagrams were added to it. There were photos of the various phases of the construction of the model. The album of the project is still there in the School.

THE END OF A PHASE

This group of teachers worked together for several years. In 1976 or 1977 many of them (Goupi, Jean, Pierre) left the School and moved to Auroville. That particular phase of the Free Progress experiment ended there. When asked if they had ever tried repeating the same Free Progress method in Auroville, both Goupi and Jean said that they had not even attempted it because it would have been impossible to work in that way over there. It was possible at SAICE because the structure was there and all the circumstances were just right. Even though it is all about freedom of the students, this system is possible only when there is a self-imposed discipline which is constantly present and which sustains the whole process of learning. If this underlying discipline is not there everything can fall into chaos.

SPIRITUAL EDUCATION

The Free Progress method is only one part of the education at SAICE. The general system which the School follows, the Integral Education, creates the right atmosphere required to carry out the Free Progress Method of teaching. The Integral Education aims for a complete growth of the student and includes the most important element of spiritual education. One must not confuse “spiritual education” with “religious education”. Spiritual education is invisibly there in the entire education system of SAICE, without there being any particular class for it. The spiritual truths are woven into all the subjects. The very fact that the School is a part of the Ashram is itself important, because the spiritual pursuit of the people around becomes an example. The Ashram

is all around the students, in the atmosphere, in the attitude of the teachers who are themselves spiritual seekers or spiritually inclined and everyone is aware of the forces which guide our lives. The students can imbibe these subtle vibrations which are constantly present.

Whereas other systems of education insist primarily on some of the more evident faculties of the mind, such as memory and logic, Integral education also puts an emphasis on the power of concentration, imagination, intuition and observation. The Mother has spoken at length on the power of concentration, revealing to us how fundamental it is for doing any work. The morning music with which we start the day is a way to silently concentrate and gather our thoughts before starting the classes. This gathering of our thoughts and energies is so important that we have a short concentration even before and after our sports activities. It helps us to be conscious and to focus on the activity we are about to begin. It is also an opportunity for the students to invoke the Mother’s help in the work and to be receptive to it.

The Mother wanted the students to always keep the aim before their eyes and she explained to them why they were learning. She put before them the spiritual principle that gaining knowledge is in itself an uplifting activity. The thirst for knowledge then becomes something valuable which remains with a human being throughout his life. She summed up everything when she said that one must learn for the joy it brings. She connected education to the fundamental principle of Ananda which upholds everything in the universe. ❧

What you should do is to teach the children to take interest in what they are doing — that is not the same thing as interesting the students! You must arouse in them the desire for knowledge, for progress. One can take an interest in anything — in sweeping a room, for example — if one does it with concentration, in order to gain an experience, to make a progress, to become more conscious. I often say this to the students who complain of having a bad teacher. Even if they don’t like the teacher, even if he tells them useless things or if he is not up to the mark, they can always derive some benefit from their period of class, learn something of great interest and progress in consciousness.

The Mother (CWM, 12: 171)

Experiments in Telepathy

by Arup Mitra '73H

One day in 1967 Tanmaya-da brought up the topic of telepathy in our French class. He spoke about an experiment that the Americans would conduct shortly about communication by thought. The plan was to exchange a set of numbers through telepathy between two individuals separated by a big distance. A naval nuclear submarine, the 'Nautilus', was attempting to cruise underneath the northern polar cap to emerge on the Russian side of the ocean. Taking advantage of this chilling underwater odyssey, a man at the American naval headquarters would try to communicate a set of numbers at a given time to a counterpart participating in the deep underwater adventure.

The story electrified us instantly. And Tanmaya-da quietly suggested that we try out first-hand the merits and demerits of this new science. Being a former journalist who had to first sell his news reports to his employer and then to the public, Tanmaya-da possessed great skills of persuasion and motivation. Therefore, through his artful machinations not only did we take up his proposal immediately, we pursued it with a good amount of zeal!

Soon I found the three shortest members of our class - Geeta Lall, Gita Dolia and Ambadas-si - sitting opposite me. Pen in hand and with a notebook open, they were ready to take down my mental dictations. Tanmaya-da then gave me a piece of paper containing only the digits 1, 2 and

3 and told me to mentally communicate to the three girls the different possible numbers that can be created by changing their sequence. For example: the numbers 1,2,3 could become 321 or 231 or 312 or 213 or 132 etc. But I had to stick to the digits 1,2,3 only. I was given a minute to send out the silent messages after which we would all note down the first number of my choice and compare our notes.

Inhaling deeply, we set about our experimentation. I remember communicating individually with each girl as if writing down my pattern of numbers on the blank blackboard of their minds. As agreed, I committed in writing the number that I had sought to communicate and compared with those of the girls at the end of the minute.

Ultimately it emerged that the success of this exercise lay more in the choice of the person sending out the messages than those receiving them. I might add here that I turned out to be the best medium who could

communicate successfully through telepathy with the other members of the class. Also, the physical distance that separated the sender from the receiver was inconsequential. I remember experimenting later with the simple names of flowers. But as expected, nothing conclusive was ever reached and the interest in such occult sciences is hard to sustain in the absence of tangible results. And the Nautilus experiment showing a similar rate of success as our own, Project Telepathy was laid to rest as abruptly as it was taken up. ☞



Integral Education and Free Progress

By Anjan Sengupta '79H

Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's philosophy of an integral education, allowing a self-directed learning process where there are no external pressures of exams or comparisons of mark sheets is something which has evolved over the years. Within this system another specific experiment called the "Free Progress System" was introduced and developed in the 1960s. One of the pioneers who steered "Free Progress" into our education-system and implemented it in the School, was Tanmay-da.

I recall the initial days of my classes under the Free Progress System to be of much exasperation. Tanmay-da had named our class 'Amolanjan'! Notwithstanding the ingenuity of the Frenchman in creating an Indian portemanteau word, from Amola and Anjan, I was considerably annoyed, perhaps more embarrassed to find my name morphed with a girl's!

But surely, Free Progress and Integral Education in general have much more to do with growth and development than teenage fuss and its much ado about nothing! And so I decided to go back 50 years in time to introspect, and to write with clear evidence, how Free Progress helped us discover our true selves and follow our dreams. Take, for example, the case of Baniprasanna Patnaik. A soccer aficionado at 13, his only ambition then was to be a football player as good as Pele. In 1970, after Brazil's convincing 4-1 World Cup win over Italy, where Pele played a central role in Brazil's road to the final, Bani's enthusiasm for football peaked.

He would be found in the Sports Ground for a good two hours or more every afternoon, using up all of the 5th, 6th and 7th periods, practising his game. He could be seen dribbling, feinting, improvising, sprinting and running – working hard to be the complete footballer he so much aspired to become. During those formative years, at 13 or 14, Bani's determination to attain his goal must have caught the unfailing attention of

Mona-da who became his coach and trained him hard. I was secretly following the coach and his trainee and I can tell you Mona-da had an extraordinary perception of the game. He brought out the best in Bani.

The extensive and unceasing football practice got Bani to build up his stamina and speed enormously. That year, or perhaps the following year, during B-group's annual athletics competition, Bani broke several age-group records in the running events. The one that is forever etched in my memory is the 800m run. For I was present physically in the Sports Ground that day to cheer and watch him reach the finish line leaving all other competitors very far behind. As a boy of 14, he had created an age-group record clocking 2 minutes and 8 seconds, getting very close to Montu-da's Ashram record of 2 minutes and 4 seconds in the men's category. Fifty years on, Bani's age group record in the 800m run still remains unbroken. Such is the true essence of Integral Education that yields results that last a lifetime!

From the mid-1960s through all of the 70s, our teachers enthused us to get a grasp of important global events and motivated us to participate by creatively representing that event in our own special way. There was no television available then and definitely not today's much hyped social media. Yet, I can say convincingly that we experienced the globalisation of cultures here in our School decades before it made its appearance in the country and across international borders.

The screening of the 1965 film, "The Sound Of Music" had such a telling effect on our minds that our 'Saturday programmes' in the School, all through the year, were filled with songs of the Von Trapp family that encored for more! In 1969, as the first man to land on the moon, Neil Armstrong's message, "That's one small step for [a] man, one giant leap for mankind" inspired our teachers and students to build a lunar model of 'Apollo 11', which received well-deserved all



round acclamation. Then in 1976, a 14 year-old girl called Nadia Comaneci from Romania arrived gracefully at the Montreal Olympics to win over our hearts with a perfect score of 10 in gymnastics. Popularising the sport worldwide, the Comaneci effect soon caught up with our women gymnasts in the Ashram. It inspired them immensely to persevere hard to perform better.

The integral education in our school encouraged aspiring students to excel, beyond academics, in music, dance, theatre, painting, embroidery and several other crafts. Some names, amongst my peers, that automatically pop up in the head are Gautam Mitra's innovative quests in theatre, Anurekha's passion for dance, Ashish Roy and Subroto Gupta's relentless pursuit of body building. One of the best things about our School is the existence of world-class equipment and facilities which are freely available to students to benefit from. This is a privilege, I might add, that makes our school unique in comparison to any other institution.

Towards the end of the 1970s, my brother, Abhijit, while pursuing an important assignment

in Western History, sought to familiarize himself with the musical style of that given historical period, and in the process began to take a liking to Western classical music. As it happened, at that time, some enthusiastic teachers took the initiative of encouraging students to attend the recorded sessions of Western classical music, twice a week, at the Ashram Library. My brother became a regular attendee among other like-minded friends and has never strayed away from classical music since then.

On that note, I have an interesting anecdote to share. I was going through a bout of Pink Floyd mania then and decided to get my brother to commit to my taste in music. So, I got hold of his 'rough' notebook and wrote on it longhand the full lyrics of the track, 'Time' by Floyd, hoping that the song, distinguished by philosophical ideas, especially the part, "Plans that either come to naught or half a page of scribbled lines...." would stir him up considerably. But without fear or favour, he quite simply tore up the page from his notebook and handing it back to me, said, softly yet firmly, "I'd prefer to stick to Schubert!"

This continued loyalty, stretching over four decades, makes him the disciplined listener he is today and, with acquired powers of perception, he has ensured a legacy in the appreciation of classical music which is being carried forward seamlessly by his next generation!

In my case I discovered that Lilamoyee-di's classes of my mother tongue in vernacular Bengali interested me the most. Her special ability to engage most of us in her class in dramatics, had a gripping hold on me. Lilamoyee-di and her husband, Bhabesh-da, collaborated with each other to write scripts, score music and direct Bengali plays. They would turn their house into a mini theatre workshop and inspired us to participate collectively and whole-heartedly. The afternoon sessions, measuring the duration of her Bengali

classes, would be spent in their house rehearsing for the plays. All round the year, between 1968 and 1970, there were multiple dramas staged in the School Courtyard. Truth be told, I was so consumed by the creative dramatics of Lilamoyee-di and Bhabesh-da that the progress of my main subjects in school suffered badly. Everyday I waited eagerly for the afternoon session to begin, so that I could connect with Lilamoyee-di and her special curriculum classes. There was no better way to learn a language and apply it effectively than the theatrical arts. I, as many others, thrived beyond the boundaries of the four walls of our class rooms. This was possible because we had the Integral Education system allowing us to discover ourselves and follow our passions quite early in life. ❧

Enjoying the Journey of Discovery

Interview with Abhijit Sengupta '83

The Free Progress system of education was an ongoing experiment when you joined SAICE. Can you tell us about those teachers who helped in the implementation of its process?

There were many teachers who were working in their own way when I joined. Tanmay-da along with Kake, Prakash-bhai and some others were the main persons. Srikant-bhai, Tarun-da and Krishna-bhai were doing something experimental in their section too. Amita-di and Richard also had similar activities in "Progrès".

Can you tell us something about your teachers, their approach to teaching and the methods applied in language learning?

Given that I spent most of my time at SAICE trying to learn English, Bangla and French from a host of wonderful people, nothing could be more difficult than trying to answer your question. In the initial stages of language learning, when my teachers, if I recall correctly, gave us a lot of exposure to/in the target language, each had his or her method. Brajkishore-da believed that having "l'occasion de bavarder" in the language was a great way to acquire the language. Tanmay-da

made us conduct "formal" classes on different subjects in peer-group sessions. One had to deliver a sustained lecture in French for an entire period (I remember teaching my peer-group about the preparation of Sodium Chloride and driving them to tears of boredom). With Pushan, it was facing "press conference" style interviews in French in all kinds of imagined avatars/personae. One had to answer rapid-fire questions from one's peers. And, boy, some of the questions could be wicked! Ravi-da could actually give a learner what he/she needed depending upon the learner's predilection – and he could design his course for the individual student, even a whole group of students, so that they could relate in the English class to what they were learning in the science class. When we were in E.A.V.P-6, he made us read and analyse essays dealing with science/scientific methods, even essays on science, logic, etc. There were essays by Chesterton, excerpts from Bacon and Albert Einstein, explaining the Theory of Relativity in layman's language. It was much later that I discovered that he was probably exploring with us the possibility of English for educational

purpose in a specific context. (Teaching us, in the English class, what might be termed the language and the methodology of the scientific temperament – as much as we could grasp, that is!) In the same way, he taught us how to analyse literary texts. Much later, in my post graduate years, I discovered that he had been teaching us Practical Criticism à la I.A. Richards. Or take Jhumur-di's *Savitri* classes. I expressed a wish that I wanted to attend all her *Savitri* classes that particular year in Knowledge. She simply smiled and told me that I was welcome. And without further ado, I began to attend all her classes with her 1st year and 2nd year students, besides my regular classes with her. That is definitely a very strong instance of the Free Progress method – it allows you to start/continue with something at any given point of time.

Incidentally, I am really grateful to Arya Vishnu because in my final year at Knowledge he insisted that I learn Sanskrit, and he introduced me to Kalidasa's *Meghadutam* in such a manner that after almost 40 years, I remembered how he taught me to untie the text of the poem, and thanks to him I have been able to translate the poem "for my own satisfaction" in terza rima. Thank you, Arya Vishnu. And all my teachers at SAICE.

Did the Free Progress system of education help you to nurture your creative side?

Oh, yes, it did! Particularly that of listening to classical music, which I have nurtured since my mid- teens.

How did you find your passion at such an early age?

I was encouraged by my teachers. Actually, in 1979-80 a series of informal programmes on Hindustani classical music was started by Kake, Prakash-bhai, and Matriprasad. Deviprasad gave me the impetus to explore further.

Tell us more about this exploration?

The informal programmes in classical music took place in the Hall of Harmony twice a week during class hours, during the 2nd and 3rd periods. Deviprasad would introduce us to the different ragas. It became very popular and several students and even many of the teachers attended

regularly. Anyway, I got so interested that I looked for opportunities to listen to all kinds of classical music. So I started going to places where recorded music used to be played regularly: the Hall of Harmony where Romen-da arranged Hindustani and sometimes Carnatic music on Monday evenings, the Library where Debranjana-da played Hindustani classical music every Wednesday evening. There was Western classical music also. Actually, I didn't understand Western classical music at all at that time but loved listening to it all the same – on Tuesdays and Fridays at the Library. My Sunday mornings were also often spent listening to music in the Hall of Harmony.

So, this prolonged exposure to classical music 6 days a week must have been a special habit with you.

The least I can say about this habit now is that throughout my senior years at SAICE, my days, especially my evening, were filled with beautiful music. The only real point here connected to the Free Progress system is the exposure our teachers gave us to Hindustani classical music when we were in our mid-teens. And I am extremely grateful to them for instilling a love for music in me.

Do you remember other experiences of your contemporaries?

Some superb examples of activities started by the Free Progress system, in which students participated, are: deep sea diving, the lake project and gardening at Nandanam. The last one was definitely Kake's initiative. You will surely get a lot of details on this from my friend Mihir Ravikanti.

Did you set yourself any academic goals in the Free Progress system?

Actually, I really discovered the charm of the Free Progress system when I entered the Higher Course. I was given full freedom to explore the subjects and areas that interested me. And like everyone else, I did precisely that. Of course, I made mistakes. Of course, I wasted my time which I could and should have spent more usefully. But I also learnt to work unassisted, to set my goals for what they were worth. I realized that quite often the journey towards the goal is more important than the goal itself. ☞

David

My Friend and Teacher

Arup Mitra '73H remembers

Born in the state of New England, USA, on the 25th of May 1937, David Frederick Slaney was the older sibling among two brothers. David's love for travelling made him leave home and move to Asia where he put into practice his skills of teaching English as a profession. He travelled to new places during his holidays and it was on one such trip that he landed in India sometime in the second half of the 1960s.

At this stage, fate intervened in its ever-subtle way to put him in contact with a fellow passenger who was on his way to Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Forever used to living frugally, David had boarded a third class sleeper coach from Howrah in which Harimohan Basu, father of my dear friend, Shaupon, was also travelling. After growing familiar with each other, they engaged themselves in a friendly chat involving the Ashram. Accepting the invitation extended by Harimohan Basu, David promised to pay an early visit to Pondicherry, which he did soon afterwards. Although his stay was brief, Shaupon introduced me to him and we became instant friends. But even if David liked the Ashram, he did not reveal it then.

In an unfortunate incident David's life took a dismal plunge during his return journey. While travelling through the Middle East very soon after the 1967 Arab-Israel War, he was arrested on suspicion of being an Israeli spy. The clinching evidence of his 'culpability' was the Star of David

that some of his books carried, which was none other than the emblem of Sri Aurobindo! Sadly, the resemblance between the two symbols continue to confuse people up to this day!

Returning to Pondicherry in 1969, David surprised me by becoming a teacher of our school and remained rooted here for a fairly long of time. He began to give lessons modestly to just two students, namely, Aruna Nandi and myself.

He was allotted the tiny room that earlier served as a store for keeping garden tools. This miniscule attic, sandwiched between the then Information Centre run by Norman Dowsett senior, on the East, and the steep staircase leading to an empty terrace that later gave way to the Salle de Progrès, on the West, had neither window, nor electricity! But keeping up with his reputation of large-heartedness, David happily accepted the small cubicle and turned it slowly into an oasis of learning.

We began by studying the works of Chaucer and followed it up by reading the other classics of English literature. Noticing my penchant for writing, he gave me a novel task: each day I had to submit a page of prose on any subject that he would correct meticulously. Today, two generations later, I remain indebted to him for providing me with a solid grounding that has stood me in good stead. I stuck on to him for five years between 1969 and 1973, before graduating from SAICE.





GROUP PHOTO OF 1ST DECEMBER 1976 AT THIRUVEHENTIPURAM, CUDDALORE:

Front row: Indrani, Ashalata (my grandmother & Shobhadi's mother), me, Aruna Mitra (née Nandi), Shobha-di & Minakshi. 2nd row: Gita Mitra (my mother), Gita Dolia, Renée Thacker, Jayashree-ben & Chetana Arya. 3rd row: David, Bhavin, Ranajit, Ashwin Barai & Shaupon. 4th row: Chandrakant-bhai, Kameshwarji. Robu-da (my uncle) Kunjalal Saha & P K Barua.

During my marriage to Aruna Nandi in December 1976, David not only attended the ceremony held at the temple town of Thiruvehentipuram near Cuddalore, but he also presented us the unforgettable gift of his personal Yashica pocket camera! We moved out of Pondicherry after this and settled down temporarily in Calcutta for 14 years during which our only daughter, Ananya, was born. In the meantime, in an unfortunate development, the US government rescinded the visas of its citizen residing in India and David fell victim of this unfortunate fall out and had to return to America.

During this period of unsettlement, he accepted the best option that would allow him to live close to India. He promptly got himself enrolled in the Salvation Army and chose to be posted in Nepal. And in the summer most probably of the year 1980, he came down to Calcutta and spent a week with us at my ancestral home. It was a happy time for all of us. And although little Ananya and David met each other, he was unaware then that in future he would also give English lessons to her just as he did to her parents.

Soon after this, the US government lifted its ban on issuing visas to long-term settlers in India which paved the way for David's return to Pondicherry. But in the meantime, Panab-da, who had got wind about his involvement with the Salvation Army, a body masquerading as the propagators of Christianity but nefariously involved in spying for the CIA, summoned him to his office for a fact-finding meeting! David openly admitted that although he had no previous knowledge of the Salvation Army's clandestine activities, he was shocked to find out the truth that it did indeed have a dual agenda! David's candour and innocence soon got over Dada's doubts and David came out unscathed from the ordeal.

For nearly two decades David lived on his own, meeting his expenses despite giving full-time service to the Ashram. Reacting to this injustice, he was persuaded to become a member of the Ashram's Prosperity, which he accepted ultimately to the relief of all.

On our relocation to Pondicherry in 1990, when I faced the problem of disposing my somewhat unmanageable collection of books

REMEMBERING DAVID

Today has been a heavy day since we lost one of the best teachers we ever had... David. Almost every Knowledge student admired the person he was and was greatly impacted by his classes.

I wish to express my gratitude to him by writing some verses in Sanskrit. (I recall many occasions when he enquired about my Sanskrit studies with interest, fascination and concern.)

यद्वात्सल्यं मधुरहृदयं छात्रमैत्री पवित्रा
साम्ये मौने सुनियमयुते शासनेऽपि स्फुटाभा।
शान्तो धीरः सुमितललितस्पष्टवाग्वित् प्रकर्मी
सोऽयं चोर्ध्वं प्रियगुरुवरो मातृपादान् प्रयाति॥
स्वच्छात्राणां हितमविरतं चिन्तयन् कर्मयोगी
यश्चैकान्ते प्रयतनपरो भात्यनाडम्बरोर्जः॥
अध्येतृणां भवति युगपन्नो गुरूणां कृतेऽपि
प्रादर्शोऽयं प्रियगुरुवरो मातृपादान् प्रयाति॥
कश्चायत्यां सुहृद्वनियमे मार्दवानन्दमायाम्
जानीयाद्वा सममविरतं शान्तनिष्कामकर्म।
इत्याशङ्कं परमशरणे तां विसृज्येह सद्यः
श्रद्धापूर्वं सजलनयनश्चानतोऽहं कृतज्ञः॥

His kindness and care, his true friendship gleamed even in his silence, impartiality and his well-disciplined instruction.

Calm and poised, he worked indefatigably and knew the art of expressing oneself with precision, brevity and elegance.

‘Tis he, our most beloved and revered teacher, who journeys upward, today, to the feet of the Mother.

He was indeed a Karmayogi, as he relentlessly sought the good of his students, and toiled in solitude, with a splendour of unpretentious zeal. Thus, he was, at once, a bright example for students as well as for teachers.

‘Tis he, our most beloved and revered teacher, who journeys upward, today, to the feet of the Mother.

Who, in future, will know that magic of joyful tenderness even in the frame of strict discipline? Who will ever know of that relentless, poised and detached work in silence?

Let us forego these queries and leave them to the Divine.... For now, let us bow low, with tears of love and respect in deepest gratitude...

Aneesh Raghavan ’14

(From a Facebook post)

comprising essentially of classics of English Literature, David, the keen promoter of healthy reading, stepped in voluntarily. He not only arranged for their transfer to the lending section of the Sri Aurobindo Library but brought along a hand-cart and carried away the books personally in several lots!

When I wrote *Uttara Yogi*, David went through the copious manuscript thoroughly despite his usual workload. And for this particular help, I shall forever remain indebted to him from the bottom of my heart. However, when I met him accidentally on the road a couple of years ago and spoke to him about my second book and its correction, his reply jolted me. ‘We shall see,’ he said,

‘if I am still alive when you complete it.’ Sadly, the dubious tentacles of cancer had already started to spread across his body and it was a matter of time that it would carry him away for good!

So, I increased the pace of writing with the hope of making him read my life-work even if it meant only receiving his feedback without gaining his valuable corrections. But alas, David faded away into eternity on the morning of the 23rd of September 2021, after putting up a brave fight for two and a half years! And although my dream remains unfulfilled, I realise now that relying on David’s teaching of becoming ably independent is more important than receiving the mere approval of the man. ❧

A Homage to David

Thirthankar '09

David left us this morning. I wouldn't exaggerate it if I said that he was one of the most brilliant professors and wonderful human beings I have ever met. As academics, we know only too well the passion that drives us to interact with students and learn more about our subject. But we have our own ambitions and motives that also drive us. With David, it was different. He embodied a passion for teaching with the most selfless attitude. He cycled wherever he went, even when he was left quite frail with cancer. He wore a simple attire: in shirt and shorts and his signature kharam, and during the cooler months, he wrapped a sweater around his neck. His classes were extremely popular: almost all the undergraduates sat huddled around his desk in small groups during the morning sessions, discussing everything from Ancient Greek tragedies to world epics, Indian novels, modern poetry, contemporary theatre, short stories, creative writing, translation, and a lot more... based on texts that he himself carefully selected, photocopied, and kept ready for every fresh batch of students.

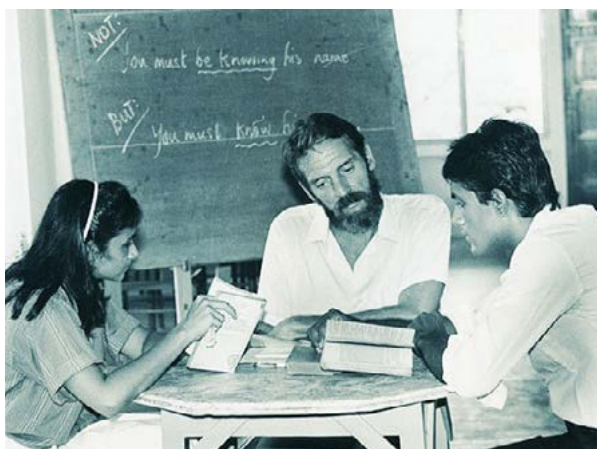
In the acknowledgements at the start of my doctoral thesis, I thanked David for teaching us "how not to write". What I meant was that he was one of those rare teachers who helped us unlearn things we "learnt" at school, e.g. flowery language, weird notions about things literary, unsystematic thinking, and so on. "WOW" was one of the most

popular abbreviations he used when marking our papers: waste of words. Each of us submitted over eighty essays and bits of creative writing over the course of the three years of college: assiduous work but immensely fulfilling when handing it over to him at 7:00am in the morning. And the attention and care he took to correct and mark the fifty plus essays that we submitted every single week for nine months each year helped us all in numerous ways no matter what career we later decided to pursue. We never noticed it then, as students, but looking back now, as a teacher, I can only marvel at the amount of care and dedication he put into his work. Not for money, not for fame, but as his personal form of yoga, or sadha-

na, or however you might want to see it.

He never spoke about himself, unless we specifically asked him to share with us something about his life. Like during a night out at Chitra-di's farm which he frequented over the weekends, we learnt that his favourite piece of music was the Moonlight Sonata, only

when we happened to play that music, and that he once worked in an amusement park. It was only after I completed my doctorate that he told me that he too had written a thesis on some obscure writer, and that he may have a copy of it lying somewhere at the back of his cupboard, or maybe he had lost it. Even these bits and pieces came to us as if they were unworthy private affairs, but I feel, even as I write about them now, that I am in some way betraying those best guarded secrets

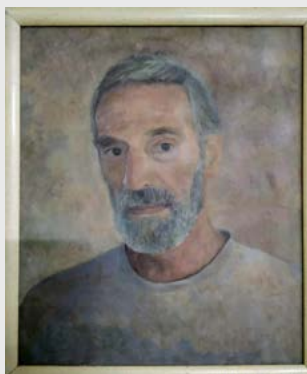


AN SAICE LEGEND

You disliked any waste of words, but today I find I have no words at all to express the deep sense of loss, love, gratitude, admiration and reverence I feel, as I'm sure do the countless others whose lives you touched.

Quiet, gentle and matter-of-fact, you were the English teacher who taught us, without words, the meaning of discipline, perseverance, hard work, patience, and equanimity. You were a legend, David, and you will live on in our hearts and lives for a long time to come.

I know I had promised you I'd write a



book (and also complete the one I'd started writing in your class and which you were so proud of) and I mean to keep that promise. I only regret not having done it sooner so you could have had the pleasure of holding it in your hands.

I'm glad I got to visit the land of your ancestors for you, and show you the photos I took for you standing on the bridge over the river Slaney.

And I'm glad I got to paint your portrait all those years ago while I was your student — one of my first portraits in oil.

Amrita Pai '10

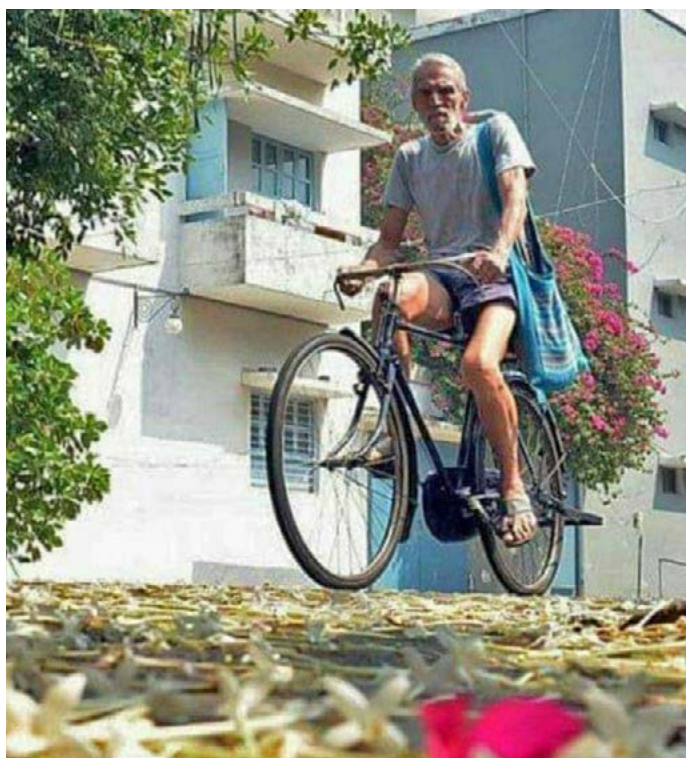
(From a Facebook post)

that he hardly ever spoke about.

Instead, he was driven by this quiet sense of curiosity. He loved to hear from his former students and he would ask me about all the courses I taught at Kent and later in India and ask for various suggestions regarding his own seminars whenever I met him. He was also the best critic of my attempts at creative writing, which he read meticulously, over and above all the student assignments. He had no need to, but he did, and his insightful comments made me think more closely about my work.

(Quick search, and I see I haven't used the words "very" and "many" so far: well, that's David for you... still with me and all of us who knew him. And I hope he forgives me when I say:) Thank you very much for the many memories you have left us to cherish and for all that you have taught us not only through your classes, but also by simply being amongst us. ❧

(From a Facebook post)



A Final Assignment

Ayan Chatterjee '10

I met David for the first time in December 2006. His reputation as a teacher preceded him. His former students revered him and everyone spoke about how much work they had to do for his classes.

I wasn't the best of students and had poor relationships with most of my teachers. I can count on one hand the few teachers I connected with and who had a deep impact on my life. David is on top of that list.

The first time I met him, he was busy scheduling his classes and I was fortunate to enrol in his class; we barely spoke and it was uneventful. I took his English classes for all three Knowledge years.

During the first year I had two hours per week with him, while the second and third year I just had one hour. Quantitatively, it doesn't seem like a lot but qualitatively it was inestimable.

In our first class together, he laid out what he expected from us — a weekly essay of five hundred words, a bunch of reading and a few projects. He was the first person, who I felt, didn't force this on us. Rather, it was a matter of fact: If we were going to participate, completing our part

of the task was essential. If we didn't, we were free to leave anytime. It was the first time I felt I was treated like an adult during my schooling.

Over the three years, he taught me how to observe, how to question and encouraged my curiosity. He taught me to consider the audience I was writing for and how to convey my ideas more simply by demonstrating them, but above everything he always asked me pertinent questions that really made me think.

Whether it was during class or when I would go disturb him while he was correcting papers, he always had time for me and our conversations always ended with something for me to ponder about.

His approach was gentle, and I can't recollect a moment when he ever got angry or flustered. He would just tilt his head to one side, lean in and almost whisper a question that sparked ideas, thoughts and imagination. He would then equip us with the tools to express those views concisely and effectively.

If it weren't for him, perhaps I would never have had the confidence to pursue any form of academics.



IMMENSE GRATITUDE

It's taking time, and might take a very long time, to acknowledge that I won't see you sitting in that corner, when I visit Knowledge. I won't see you cycling by near Golconde. And I won't have the chance to discuss my books with you!

Your classes were among the highlights of my Knowledge years. They inculcated in us the art of observing, questioning and understanding literature in greater depth. I remember your gentle probing questions, and the steady stare, that made us question our opinion, not to change it, but to explain further until our thoughts transformed from confusion to coherence. I remember the hours spent on the reading competition, the camaraderie formed with my two other classmates over projects, the constant striving to excel, and your continued encouragement.

Even after graduating I would visit Knowledge, to talk to you briefly in the afternoons, while you sat all alone in the hall, diligently correcting your students' work. The image is forever etched in my mind.

The years, the moments, keep flashing by... some tinged with regrets, some with nostalgia, but most with immense gratitude for being such an important part of my journey.

Ishita Deshmukh '04
(From a Facebook post)

Today he left us for a better place. I would have loved to speak with him one more time and pick his brain and hear more about his experiences, but it wasn't meant to be. The only thing I can do now is honour his memory with one last five hundred word essay. I can almost anticipate his corrections on this piece of writing. It's almost like I've left the mistakes there on purpose so I can remember and relive what he would mark.

David this one's for you. I hope you rest in peace! ☸

(From a Facebook post)

ONE OF A KIND

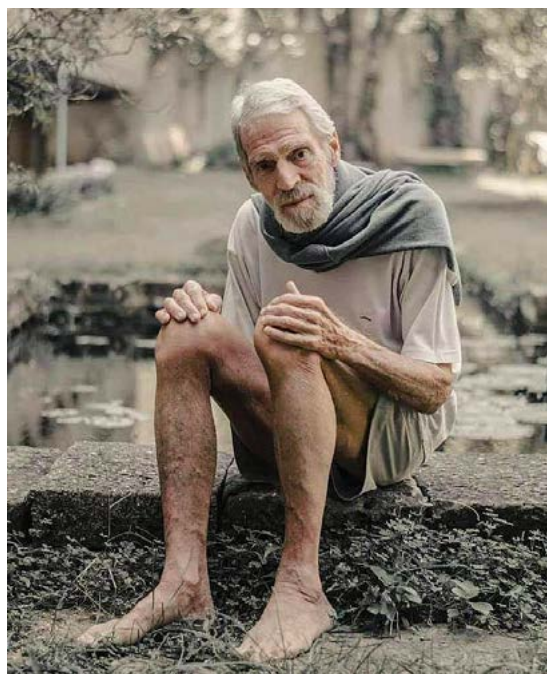
David was a one of a kind teacher... and a Sadhak. He quietly but surely instilled in me the ability to clearly express my thoughts and feelings in English prose. I have carefully held on to those precious old notebooks corrected by him, as a tribute to a true teacher who practically helped in my growth — career-wise and otherwise.

David planted a tree in our garden many many years ago. It has been flowering, and has made our home beautiful and fragrant for as long as I can remember. Ironically earlier this year it gradually dried up leaving a void in our space. But a new sapling will be planted soon in its place.

Always wished David could be around to teach my kids English... and gardening... and also what's redundant and what's not in life.

With sincere gratitude, my dear teacher.

Samir Sarkar '94
(From a Facebook post)



Children Loved Grant

by Ramakant Navelkar

Grant and his elder brother, who was only two years older to him, were brought to India by Grant's father. Grant was only 14 years old then. After travelling around to a few places, Grant was brought to Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry in the year 1954.



The Mother was informed that Grant wants to study in the Ashram School. She accepted Grant as a student. The Ashram School and its various activities were just taking shape. Only one boarding for children had just been started. It was called 'Dortoir'. Perhaps there was no place for an additional, and totally new boy – Grant. So the Mother told Pranab-da to be his guardian. Thus, Grant's life in the Ashram began under the watchful eyes of Dada. And later, when Grant grew up and started working, he became a great asset to the Physical Educational Department.

During his school days, Grant showed a distinct preference for physical activities, which he was good at; mental activities were only secondary

to him. Simultaneously, a love and understanding of Music – Western as well as Indian – began to flower.

Afterwards, for many years, Grant taught our children how to read the musical score and play the recorder (Western flute). Sometimes, musicians visiting the Ashram came without their usual accompanists on the Tanpura, Tabla, Pakhwaj, Harmonium or Saram, and in such cases our Ashram musicians came to the rescue to support them for their performance. We have seen Grant many times on the stage, sitting with a Tanpura, beside a great musician.

When he reached the age of 18, Grant was eligible to drive a car. He learnt to drive, not only cars, but big Ashram School buses to the Sports-ground, Lake Estate, during picnics, etc. He was a regular driver every Tuesday and Saturday morning to Lake Estate. He also liked to maintain strict discipline and would not start the bus one minute early or one minute late. Thus, those who reached the starting point a minute late could not go to Lake. Similarly, while returning to the Ashram, those who lingered here and there at Lake Estate would miss Grant's bus. They would have to make their own private arrangements for returning home.

Grant was a captain of Group A4 (30 children aged 8 to 9 years). Besides teaching the children their regular lessons in gymnastics etc., he was particular that children maintain good habits of personal hygiene, like getting their nails cut regularly, getting their hair cut to size etc. He maintained records and gave prizes to children who deserved it. In group activities, Grant was helped by Viji, his assistant captain.

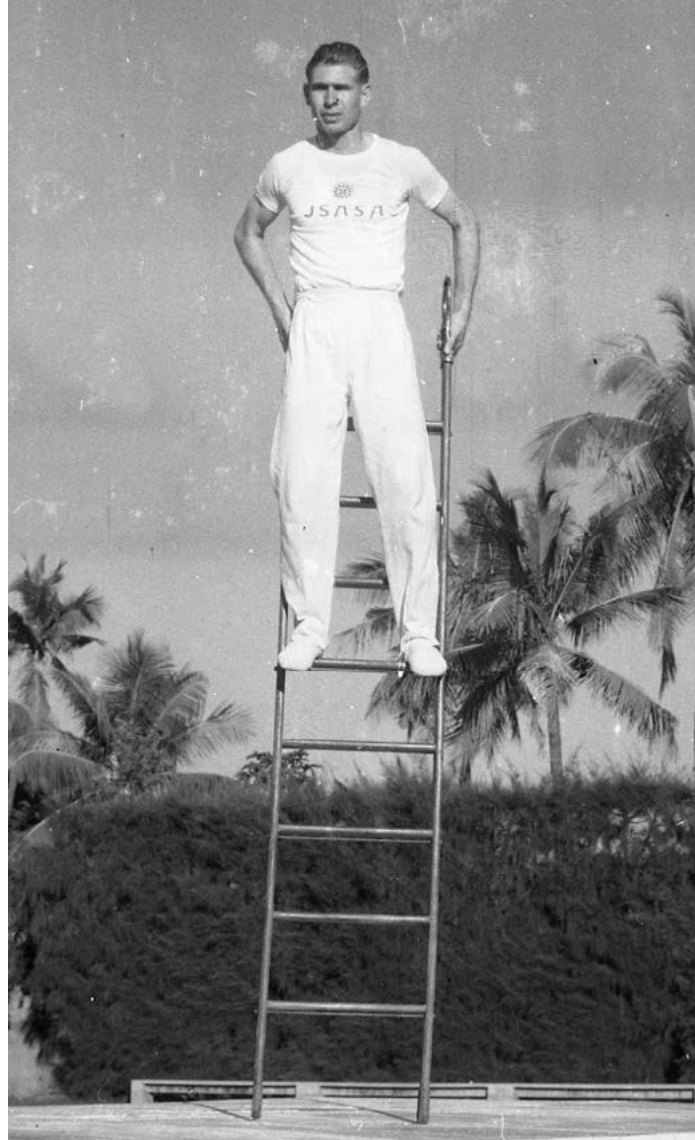
In the Ashram's Playground, the western portion, the courtyard of the Guest House building, serves as the play area for children aged 6 to 10 years in the evenings from 4.30 to 6.30. There about 90 children enjoy playing – on the jungle



gym, the slide, the merry-go-round, the seesaw, in the sandpit... Grant took charge of this activity. I used to always be there with him, teaching table tennis to children aged 8 to 10 in the two rooms in the house. The children loved Grant very much.

The work of taking care of 90 children was not a single person's work. Grant was helped by Sheela-di right from the beginning. There were also one or two other helpers.

As Grant and I were together in the children's play area for more than 25 years, we developed a cordial brotherly relation. We met in Corner House for food. Often we sat in the same room, if not at the same table! Whenever he read some interesting 'quotation' from the works of Sri



Aurobindo and the Mother which I had written on the Corner House Message Board, he would request me to note it on a piece of paper and give it to him. He would then send that quote to his sister in Australia by email.

Grant spent 68 years of his life in the Ashram of Rishi Sri Aurobindo and the Divine Mother. Did he have an inner life, some sort of sadhana? Or was he merely passing his life in doing the same routine duties? This question that may arise in the mind of some outsiders. It was answered by the following conversation I had with him in the Playground.

Grant had just returned after his stay in Jipmer Hospital for about 15 days. He had undergone surgery for some ailment. A few days afterwards,

I had to be admitted to Jipmer for some ailment. I told Grant that now it is my turn to spend a week or two on the hospital bed. Grant said to me, "You will be simply lying in bed with nothing else to do. Do not waste that time in reading magazines or newspapers. Try to remember the Mother, think of Her all the time; Her Grace is helping us". It was an important reminder for me.

Whenever Norman Dowsett came to the Ashram from Australia to stay for a month, Grant was seen in an extraordinarily cheerful mood. Grant trusted Norman very much. Besides, Norman brought him first hand news about his sister in Australia.

In his later years, Grant's blood sugar level started rising and he began to get irritable. Aruna-ben (A5 captain) personally sat near Grant every day, and served him fruits etc, to help him to regain strength. Sadly, due to this state of mind, Grant's interactions with Sheela-di and me also began to deteriorate and the harmonious atmosphere was disturbed!

At this juncture, one night I saw in a dream that I was walking in the children's play area.

Somebody came from behind me, put his palms on both my eyes. I heard Grant's voice behind me. He told me, 'Now I have closed your eyes, you will walk where I take you'. I woke up from the dream quite shaken up. Then I sat and brooded over the dream. I took the decision not to have any more confrontation with Grant, even if I found his suggestions unreasonable. Whatever he asked me to do from then on, I did with a smile. And harmony was established again between the two of us. I was reminded of the words of a great servitor of the Divine Mother – Bula-da – who was Head of the Electricity Department of our Ashram. He used to say that, often, harmony between two persons takes place when one of them accepts his defeat (in Bengali, Har-mani).

A few days later, Grant fell down in his room in the School at night, due to weakness. He was hospitalized till he passed away just four days after the passing away of Gangaram-da. That was on 5th February, 2020.

I cherish all his memories. I still feel he is walking in the street with his white shorts and white sleeveless banian. ❧



Savita

Sunayana Panda '79 remembers Savita Srivastava '75

In the Mother's French short story "Les Vertus" she describes the gathering of various virtues in a grand hall. One of the virtues mentioned in this gathering is "Prévenance". This word can be described in English as "thoughtfulness" and "consideration for others". The French dictionary describes it as "anticipating the needs of others". This is something quite alien to our current global culture of individualism. Many may not even be aware that such a thing as thinking of others' needs before one's own, exists. This is something which belonged to the old world.

But this was a quality which Savita embodied. Her sudden passing away in December 2020 left us all in a state of shock.

She and I were not of the same age-group when we were in school but we had lived in the same boarding – the famous Young Girls' Home – for a year, so we knew each other well. But there was something else which brought us together. And that was our common passion for theatre.

In the mid-1990s theatre had died a natural death in the Ashram. Perhaps the golden period of theatre in the Ashram was in the 1970s when not a week passed when there wasn't a play in the School courtyard. There were about 800 students in the School. When you come to think of it you realise it was half a century ago. It was a time when there wasn't even a permanent stage in the courtyard. A makeshift stage was fitted together by placing several planks together. There was a cemented floor and it took no time for people to just gather and sit down.

By the mid-1980s television was making its presence felt and by the end of that decade, for reasons best known to them, the School administration started to discourage not only theatre but all cultural programmes. Perhaps there were too many of them. Not only were there too few programmes but also the number of spectators

diminished over the years.

In 1997 a few of us just got together and made a group and whenever it was possible, we put on plays. It wasn't easy in the least. There were only a few former students around who were free to engage in cultural activities. We started with Sri Aurobindo's long poem "Ahana" which was accompanied by dances. There was so much work to do in training the younger participants. When Amita-di was the head of the dramatics section she regularly presented recitations and taught us proper diction for the stage. But once she stopped no one took up that work and very few students or ex-students were proficient in recitation.

We continued to work with our small group. Others came and went but Savita was always there with me. Sometimes we put up small programmes of recitation and sometimes there were very serious plays performed at the Theatre Hall. We also performed on various stages in Auroville. There were happy moments and there were difficult times. 25 years rolled by and we did not even notice it as we were so busy making copies of dialogues, matching costumes, getting everyone's phone numbers and all those small things which are such an integral part of putting up a play.

Even though we worked on many plays together often there were no roles for Savita. Even so she helped out with back stage work. Whether it was with costumes or sets she was always there to lend a helping hand. There are a lot of things which have to be done before a play is actually performed on stage. Even such a small thing as informing others, in the days when Whatsapp was not there, could create difficulties for the organiser. Savita was always there to help with these nitty-gritties.

In the very last play where Savita was part of our group, she had no speaking role on the stage, but when I asked her if she could help me with the costumes of the other two actresses who were

in the play, she unhesitatingly accepted. I don't think I could have asked anybody else to come during the last run-throughs and dress rehearsals to help with the costume change.

We were presenting the Bengali version of the French play *Le Malade Imaginaire*. There was a scene where the actress playing the main role had to go into the wings and five minutes later come back onto the stage in another costume. Within five minutes she had to go back again into the wings and change her costume to what it was earlier and come back on to the stage. In order to do this costume change without any difficulties we decided that she had to just put on a large

rehearsed it two or three times, we managed to do it without any mistakes. It was Savita-di's long years of experience of back stage work and also her sang-froid which helped us through those stressful minutes. This costume change was crucial to the play and we had to be absolutely sure that it happened smoothly. This kind of help I could not have got from anyone else. It is like being on a trapeze. You have to be absolutely sure that the other person will hold you when you are flying through the air.

It is the unexpectedness of her death that is so hard to bear. One day she was there, sending a message on our boarding Whatsapp group and then a few days later she was gone forever. The pandemic kept us isolated and apart and it was only through phone messages that we kept in touch. Only a week before she left us she sent me a message wishing me "Bonne Fete". I thanked her and told her we would have dinner together as soon as she was better, because by then I knew that she was not well. I would never have imagined that it would be our last exchange.

How to deal with this loss and come to terms with it? There is only one way for me: to focus on her good qualities and try to live them. I too would like to be that friend whom

one can count on, the one who anticipates your need even before you can say it. So many times she had appeared out of the blue, giving me the help I badly needed, sitting with a sick member of my family in the hospital while I went home for a shower, or turning up with a tiffin-carrier full of hot food when there had been a death in the family and we were in no condition to cook. Such kind of help one cannot forget till the end of one's life.

I give consolation to myself by thinking that in a few years Savita will be reborn in a new body and come back to the Ashram. ❧



Dinner after a performance in 2010

Kimono-type dress over her sari and also wear a turban to cover her hair. Once she finished the five-minute scene she had to remove all these. So the costume change had to be done very quickly and carefully. I even re-edited the dialogues to give her little more time.

That memory will always stay with me: Savita-di and I quickly but carefully changing Manimala Bhattacharjee's costume and getting her ready in time for her entry. We had to make sure that we remained calm so that Manimala did not get disturbed out of her role. We had to also make sure that her turban was secure and would not fall off on stage. But on the final day, since we had



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*Beyond words, above thoughts
the flame of an intense
aspiration must always
burn, steady and bright.
My love and blessings
are with you*
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Photo by Rajavelu; Quotes: "A Dream" by The Mother and selections from her flower messages

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beyond all doubt.*

- The Mother



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