

The Golden Chain

Alumni Journal of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education



Life in the
Armed Forces

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)

Contents

VOL 23 NUM 2, 3, 4 & VOL 24 NUM 1 FEB - MAY - AUG - NOV 2023

3 THE EDITORS' PAGE

4 COVER STORY: Life in the Armed Forces

Ratan '85, Asit '94, Nijananda '88, Ayesha '11, Shubhankar '16,
Mohar '99, Kittu '57, Anup '04, Pankaj '90, Sucharu '90
tell us about their life in the Services.

46 Expressing the Beauty of Nature

Kiran Mehra '65 tells us about her painting and art work.

52 Baji Prabhoo

Priyanka '17 on the 1st December programme.

59 My Passion for Odissi

Swarnaprabha '15

60 Vijayendra-bhai – the Unsung Hero

Jahnvi '86 remembers the teacher and captain.

The Golden Chain

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



EDITORIAL TEAM:

Gopal '90, Divyaprakash '99, Meera '95

EDITORIAL ASSISTANCE:

Anurupa '86, Giridhar '79, Seema '89
Gaurishankar '80, Prabha '80

ART DESIGN:

Saroj Kumar Panigrahi, Mansee Pratap

PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE:

Pranati '83, Kiran '72,
Brahmananda '79, Swadhin '70, Siva

Frequency of Appearance: Quarterly.

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

Address for correspondence: The Golden Chain,
Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry 605002.

Phone: 91-413-2233683

e-mail: office@goldenchainfraternity.org

URL: www.goldenchain.in

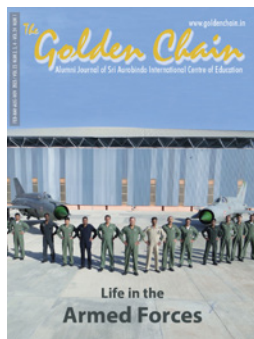
Publisher:

Ramraj Sehgal

for THE GOLDEN CHAIN FRATERNITY,
2 Rangapillai St., Pondicherry.

Printer:

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



On the Cover:

Sucharu '90 (centre) – proud commander of a fighter unit.

On the Back Cover:

Class of 2023

Divyaprakash Pal '99 (Dibbo)

Fight for the sake of duty, treating alike happiness and distress, loss and gain, victory and defeat. Fulfilling your responsibility in this way, you will never incur sin.

The Bhagavad Gita (2:38)

My earliest memories of valour and chivalry were as a six-year-old! Even though I was still scared of the dark and terrified of spiders, when seated on my grandfather's lap, I absorbed the rich lines of the poem *Birpurush* by Tagore. In those mesmerizing lines lay my fascination for a breed of men a cut above the rest. I can still hear the cries of the bandits, with blood-red hibiscus in their unkempt hair, letting out a frightening war cry "Ha re rerere re..." and charging at the palanquin, and I imagined myself protecting my harrowed mother in a desolate, foreign land.

As I grew into adolescence, the lines of the "Charge of the Light Brigade" never ceased to haunt me:

*Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die.
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.*

What makes soldiers put the thought of self away from them? What immortal hand or eye frames the sinews of their hearts?

As a youngster, I used to devour stories of bravery and the life of men in uniform. My favourite column was the *Reader's Digest's* Humor in Uniform. Men and women of distinction with steely exteriors suddenly came across as human, even humane. In the early 1990s, we were fortunate to have a few Chiefs of Army Staff visit the school. General B.C. Joshi's visit to the Ashram in February 1994 is still vivid. General Joshi was closely associated with the Mother and Sri Aurobindo's vision of India, and he often relied on their words for solace and inner strength.

The SAICE with its stress on all-round development, especially on physical culture and discipline, makes the Defense Services a natural

professional choice for its alumni. In the ensuing pages, we feature accounts of former students who have had the privilege of serving the Motherland and we raise a toast to their achievements. From the barren heights of the Himalayas to the forests of Jaffna, from Lebanon to Abu Dhabi, the Mother's hero warriors have braved it all. And the Mother has put a Golden Chain around their necks.

The rhythm of life in the army, says Ratan (Datta) with a smile, is generally not too different from that in the Ashram of yore. One rises early to play sports – tennis, sea swimming, or running – followed by office/courses and a siesta, which no other profession gives you! Then there is always sports every evening. Three good meals and generally taken care of just like here!

Yes, being in the army does require a sense of humor. "Nothing happened, I was kicked by a donkey," Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw famously said to his surgeon after being shot nine times during operations in Burma in World War II. The integrity, honesty, discipline, joie de vivre, and panache with which men in the Services lead their lives are worthy of emulation. The Defense Services are an amazing institution that provides officers with means for continuous self-development which helps them gather inner strength and self-mastery which in turn helps them make decisions for the betterment of the group and the nation.

As the Indian Army celebrates its 75th Army Day on 15 January 2024, we express in these pages admiration and gratitude that we as a nation owe to our bravehearts. In 1969, when there was a conflict somewhere between the police and the Army, the Mother told the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi: "For heaven's sake, support the army. It is India's only hope. The army is good, but it's not supported." In today's world undergoing great flux, the Indian Armed Forces continue to stand as a bedrock of strength and hope, where the only class, caste, and religion are devotion towards the country. Its ethos of "Nation Above All" will be echoed and re-echoed for eons to come across the lands, seas, and skies of India. ❧

An Officer and a Gentleman

Ratnadeep Datta '85 (Ratan) tells us about his stint in the Indian Army.

CHILDHOOD DREAMS

I am not sure if I was the first ex-student of SAICE to join the Armed Forces. But at the time I applied, I had not heard of anyone else who had joined the Army as an officer from our school. My career in the Army was a short one. There are quite a few who joined after me and most of them had a longer and more distinguished career in the



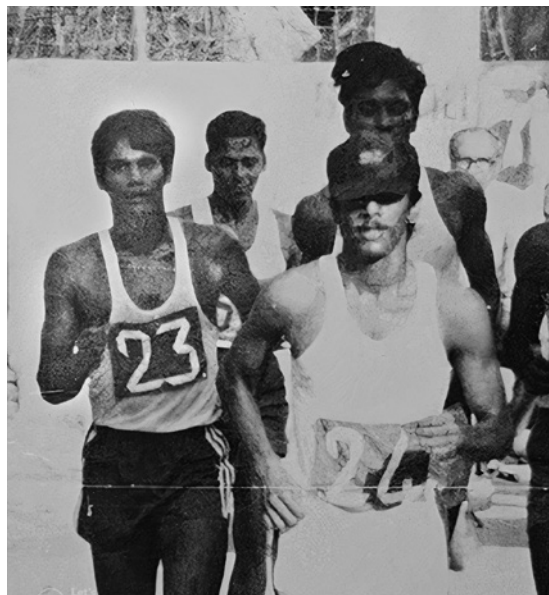
As a student, in D group, on the hockey court (fourth from right) ▲
and running the Road Race (first from left) ►

Armed Forces. My early motivation to join the Services was because I was keen to fly. I remember visiting Assam during the annual holidays, in 1975, and seeing Army and Air Force personnel in uniform. This left a lasting impression on me. My father took early retirement, and in those days for a boy from a middle-class background, one of the more realistic ways to make a career out of flying was to join the Air Force! I cleared the written exams for all three Services and my interview was in the Mysore Air Force Service Selection Board (SSB) centre. Among the tests was a

simulator test that I could not clear. I was told by the instructors in the SSB centre that if I joined the Indian Military Academy (IMA), there could be opportunities for flying as the Army was in the process of building an aviation corp. The Indian Army already had helicopters and we were told they would soon acquire planes. I therefore decided to join the Army in the hope of still being able to fly someday. While I could never fulfil my dream of becoming a pilot, it was truly gratifying when a few years later Sucharu (Rai), who had occasionally sought clarifications from me about applying to the Armed Forces, became an ace jet-fighter pilot in the Indian Air Force.

THE INDIAN MILITARY ACADEMY (IMA)

I joined the Indian Military Academy (IMA), Dehradun, a military institute of global repute.



The core objectives of the training are to impart knowledge in military studies and train future leaders of the Indian Army in the art of warfare. The institute is programmed to develop physical and mental toughness, with an emphasis on high standards of integrity. The training was tough mentally, emotionally and of course physically. But hailing from an institution like SAICE with its stress on all-round development gave me a definite edge. In a group of 300, to be noticed, be it through sports, communication skills or studies, is of immense benefit. Thanks to our upbringing in SAICE, I was able to distinguish myself to a great extent. I am sure those SAICE-ians who have joined the Armed Forces after me have felt the same way. Sports and professional competitions play a big part in the IMA. The IMA is divided into 10 companies, which in turn are organized into 4 battalions. Competitions happen at the company level, and a company's performance in turn contributes to the battalion's standing. Anybody who makes it to a company team is given many special privileges. Usually this could mean skipping some tough parts of the training. Most of all it keeps one in good stead with one's seniors and with the instructors. I made it to 7 or 8 such teams, from cricket to athletics, hockey, basketball, football, cross-country, etc. There are many



brilliant sportsmen who join the IMA. But usually, the all-rounders are those who come to IMA from the National Defence Academy (NDA), where they undergo rigorous military training while doing their Bachelor's degree. There were just a handful of us among the direct entries from colleges who were also all-rounders in the sports field. I dare say, some of the instructors and seniors were a bit surprised with my "Jack-of-all-trades" abilities. But as I said there are also brilliant sportsmen who join the academy and being a "Master-of-None" can have its consequences. I learnt this the hard way when I reached the semi-final of my weight class in boxing, where I was facing a course-mate who had made his mark at the national boxing level. I must consider myself lucky to have escaped that fight with an embarrassing technical knock-out (KO). It brought back bitter-sweet memories of a similar technical KO in B1 boxing finals in the hands of my dear friend Bhupi (Maru), the undisputed lord of the ring of our times. The training itself was manageable. My love for long distance running in the Ashram, other than giving me good endurance levels for the training, also helped me make a mark with my seniors. There are certain sports where sheer participation at a good level is seen kindly in the academy. Long distance running and boxing were two such sports. But these anecdotes apart, the core of training is participation – overcoming all inhibitions and fear and giving it your best. Participation with zeal is what the Army training is all about. The goal is to transform you in 18 months from a college graduate into a military leader.



As a cadet in the Indian Army ▲▲

A lot of the mental toughness comes with training. That is the de facto trait that they want you to develop. Training pushes an individual to situations outside one's comfort zone. I recall a commando course in Belgaum, which was extremely physical. The programme was designed to restrict your sleeping hours to around 3 hours a day. The course was designed to push one to the limits of one's physical capacity. Among the highlights of the course for me was to jump into a muddy pool from 20 meters hanging from a rope.

SRI LANKA

Upon completion of training, I joined the Infantry. I chose this branch for two main reasons. The first was that if one wanted to opt for the Army Aviation Corps or the Para Commandos later, it was easier to get selected if one was part of the Infantry. Secondly, at that stage of my life I also wanted a little more adventure, and the infantry seemed to be the right platform for that.

My very first assignment was overseas in Operation Pawan as part of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka. I got to be in the thick of action right away. In fact, I was in combat zones for four out of the total five and half years that I served. The IPKF was inducted into Sri Lanka in July 1987 with the aim of disarming militants, restoring civic amenities and ensuring communal harmony. I was in Sri Lanka for about a year and a half and got to see combat up close. It was a very different experience. We went on patrols in semi-urban and rural areas almost every night. Sometimes we faced ambushes or laid ambushes. On some occasions the skirmishes resulted in casualties on either side. I was lucky in the sense that by the time I joined my battalion, the battalion had already spent time in the warzone. I therefore had the advantage of joining a unit that had already acquired considerable familiarity with the environment and were battle hardened in the warzone.

MAYOR OF GULMARG

My last posting was at the high-altitude pickets in the Pir Panjal Range in the Gulmarg Sector, where I served for two winters. During winter we experienced 20-30 ft of standing snow in the passes, with temperatures dipping to -20°C.



In Gulmarg, I was appointed the Adjutant of the Battalion, which means running the administration of the battalion and reporting directly to the Commanding Officer. In this capacity I was posted at the base in Gulmarg but would go to the pickets for a few weeks if some officer was on leave. The insurgency in Kashmir in those days was at its height. There was virtually no civilian administration in Gulmarg. Sometimes villagers would bring their problems to me. I recall, as a 24-year-old rookie, having to

adjudicate in family feuds of villagers. We provided locals with healthcare, rations and other help. During those days a fellow officer was visiting the base and remarked that I was the de facto "Mayor of Gulmarg". The tongue-in-cheek accolade stuck to me for a while. There were conflicts and regular infiltration bids. Among my duties in Gulmarg was to lead a convoy to the Division headquarters 2 to 3 times a week to bring mail, ration and other logistical supplies. On occasions we faced ambushes by militants during these convoys.

It was also during my tenure at Gulmarg that I learnt skiing and golf. The caddies in the famous Gulmarg Golf Course had virtually no income in those days as tourism had come to a standstill. They were glad to teach us golf and to allow us to use the facilities in exchange for some income and for the odd rations. In winters we took advantage of being close to the Army's High Altitude Warfare School and some of us learnt to ski.

Apart from these two postings, I was also stationed at Pune and enjoyed my tenure there as we had lots of sports and that is where I got back into programming. There were only a handful of officers who had computer programming experience

and thanks to Vijayalakshmi-di and Kamal-da's lessons, I was pulled into software projects for the Army in the areas of managing logistics.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

I often get asked if I was ever injured in the Army. No, I was not. The closest shave I had in live operations was when a bullet hit the butt of my rifle, which I was holding in front of me. At the time I just felt a shock in my hands. I later discovered the chipped wood on the rifle butt.

As far as armed conflicts were concerned, there were more than a few intense moments where we had to deal with comrades who lost their lives or were grievously injured.

Among the psychologically intense episodes I remember an incident in the mountains in Kashmir. Two of our comrades had gone to repair the telephone lines and never returned. They had come under an avalanche. As a general rule, in winter we never move in those areas from 9 am to 6 pm as snow gets loose when the sun is shining. We had only 2 to 3 hours to rescue them. We went looking for the two soldiers with highly trained dogs from the Army's dog unit. After much desperate digging, we did find them, but unfortunately both had succumbed to their injuries by then.

THE ARMY AS A CAREER

There were certain similarities between the rhythm of life in the Army and the rhythm of Ashram life when we grew up. In our growing days in the Ashram, we usually woke up early to

do sports, be it tennis, sea-swimming, or running practice. Similarly, intense physical exercise in the early mornings was part of Army life. In both scenarios after a few hours of school or office we could sneak-in a quick post-lunch siesta. One went back to the office in the afternoon for about an hour or two just like our afternoon classes and then there was always sports in the evenings. Even at high altitudes, we tried to do sports every



◀ As an officer in the Indian Army ▶ (front right)

day, if circumstances allowed for some activities. I used to play basketball at Gulmarg. In the higher altitude posts, there was provision for volleyball in the summer months. The nights of course were different. In a peace station, we had frequent social engagements or training, while in the forward posts we would go out for patrols.

From a developmental point of view, the Army is an amazing institution. An officer who makes it to the higher ranks of a brigadier or higher would have attended many advanced courses both abroad and in India. There are world-class institutions such as the Defence Services Staff College at Wellington or Senior Command School in Mhow, MP. There is also a lot of fun and camaraderie in the Army. One picks up new interests

and hobbies along the way. At the academy, most cadets break a few rules and some get into more trouble than others. But irrespective of one's own appetite of risk-taking the one golden rule is to never betray one's comrade, often at the peril of facing the brunt of mass punishment.

OPTING OUT

After I joined the Army, it dawned on me that this was for the long haul. I had signed up for the next 15 years and leaving prematurely in those days was a difficult proposition. One day, during my holidays, I was having tea with Manojda (Das), my English teacher in Knowledge and a close family friend. He asked me if I was happy in the Army. I told him, while I was happy, I also wanted to explore other options. He asked me to come the next day to meet a friend of his from Delhi. I was introduced to a senior bureaucrat serving in the Defence Ministry, who agreed to guide me and help my case of resigning. Within a month, my resignation was processed through proper channels. The ease at which my resignation was approved surprised many of my colleagues. My decision to leave was both pragmatic and emotional. At that time I felt a strong urge of coming to Pondicherry and staying in the Ashram atmosphere. The pragmatic reason was my love for programming. From EAVP 4 onward, we were exposed to computer programming. Not many people in India, in those days, had that kind of exposure to computer science from an early age. When I re-engaged with programming in the Army during my Pune days, I realised that computers were becoming a major force in India (this was in the early 1990s). I was keen to get back to software development. Even at that point I did not realise that I would later build a full career in the technology sector. In fact, my first break in technology, after leaving the Army, was also through my former teacher in SAICE. This time my teacher of electronics, Kim, helped me. One day I talked to Kim about some of the programmes I was developing by myself. He made a recommendation through which I got my first assignment after leaving the Army with Nexus Computers, a computer firm in Pondicherry.

CONNECTING THE DOTS

Just like I had felt a connection between life in the Ashram and Army life, I later felt certain foundational traits that I had picked up in the Army helped me in furthering my career in corporate life. For example, sometimes we make a big deal about adapting to new occupations, about moving from one place to another, about finding oneself in unfamiliar situations. For me the somewhat bohemian type of life in the Army, continued even at work. I travelled a lot. At one point of my career, my CEO asked if I could take on more responsibilities and move my base to Manila in the Philippines. Without a moment's hesitation I agreed. The notion of saying no to a task was not there. By no means is this unique to Army training, but all the same adaptability is a core ingredient of a military experience. In most cases partners and families of Armed Forces personnel also imbibe a high degree of adaptability. Networking is another core trait of the Armed Forces. Thirty years after leaving the Army, I am still in touch with my course mates and unit officers. The friends that you make in the Armed Forces remain for life, and with the advent of social media there are groups formed that help us keep in touch.

FROM BORDERS TO BOARDROOM: LIFE LESSONS

"Borders to Boardroom" is a borrowed term from the title of a book written by Major Habib Rehman, who in the early part of his career had served in the same battalion as me and who later went on to make a highly distinguished career with the ITC Welcome Group. By no stretch of imagination do I mean to compare myself with him, but I find the title an apt way to define my journey. Serving five and a half years in the Armed Forces was an extremely important experience enriched by unique situations that called for high levels of camaraderie and teamwork. For me the biggest takeaway from the Army that I could apply effectively in corporate life was the aspect of trust and delegation. It helped me tremendously to do more with my time. Typically, in companies like ours, we come across two genres

of managers: those who shine through the direct application of their personal effort and skills and then those who are comfortable in delegating and getting the work done through others. Both types



The CEO ▲

are needed for the success of an organisation. The Army experience perhaps allowed me to transition from being the former type to the latter type quite seamlessly. In the Army, one's survival is built on trust and delegation. In the early part of one's career there is no mad rush for promotions. Promotions are predictable until a certain rank, therefore there is no tearing need to outshine others within one's own battalion. On the other hand, there are great benefits in surrounding oneself with talented people, as the success of operations hinges on the sum of actions of each member of the collective unit. Looking back at my days as CEO of Straive, I feel that building a talented management team around me and then letting the managers go about their objectives with minimal interference allowed us to grow as a business. Delegation along with measured risk-taking were important ingredients of my management style. To the extent that it ultimately led me to realise that the best way to advance the company's interests was to replace myself with a person with a different set of credentials to lead us into the next phase of

our journey. The board of directors agreed with my views and helped us find a new CEO for the company. They were kind enough to ask me to continue to serve on the board of the company.

TO YOUNG FRIENDS

If one wants to join the Army, being inclined towards sports helps as the training is physically and mentally tough. Outlook wise, being an introvert in the Army can be a bit of a challenge. There is no need to be a compulsive extrovert either, but it surely helps to be able to embrace teamwork, trust and camaraderie. Personally, I would like to see someone from the Ashram join the Armed Forces and climb the ladder to the top echelons. Service chiefs, Army commanders, sector commanders have significant influence in defining and safeguarding our national interests, both on the ground and in spirit. But notwithstanding that, it would be just good to see many more join the Armed Forces. Nowadays, it is easier to opt out after a few years of service. Leaving the Armed Forces midway allows people to bring the ethos, discipline and training of the Armed Forces to other parts of society. The Armed Forces offer a structured, well-rounded development. They expose officers to a rich mix of corporate and management courses. It is great to see that nowadays, the new generation is not in a mad rush to settle into something permanent. In that context to have a military experience in the early part of one's career is very doable and can contribute to building a solid foundation. ❧

THE ANCIENT IDEAL OF THE WARRIOR

[...]War considered as an inevitable part of human life, but so restricted and regulated as to serve like other activities the ethical and spiritual development which was then regarded as the whole real object of life, war destructive within certain carefully fixed limits of the bodily life of individual men but constructive of their inner life and of the ethical elevation of the race. That war in the past has, when subjected to an ideal, helped in this elevation, as in the development of knighthood and chivalry, the Indian ideal of the Kshatriya, the Japanese ideal of the Samurai, can only be denied by the fanatics of pacifism. When it has fulfilled its function, it may well disappear [...] but its past service to the race must be admitted in any reasonable view of our evolution.

Sri Aurobindo [CWSA, 19: 51, 52]

How's the Josh!

Asit Mohanty '94, an officer in the Brigade of the Guards of the Indian Army, on his life in the Forces.

FOLLOWING THE DREAM

During school days, everybody is energetic and wants to do something for the country. And the idea of being a soldier and of firing a gun from the shoulder is exciting. Also, during our formative years, a number of generals paid a visit to the Ashram and spoke to us students, and that influenced me to dream of the Defense way of life. As children, we had unlimited opportunities at SAICE, including the right balance of studies, games, and extracurricular activities, and I for one participated in various fields such as fine arts, music, pottery, carpentry, as well as badminton and table tennis. I was therefore looking for a similar well-balanced lifestyle, and the Army provided the perfect ecosystem.

About a year before graduation, I had already started meeting former officers to better understand the selection process. I got hold of the book that I needed to study and along with my schoolwork and all my other activities began preparation for the exams in a focused manner. The written exams were followed by the SSB (Services Selection Board) tests, in which only a handful

are selected from among thousands of aspirants. I met many candidates who had tried and failed several times but had not given up. In fact, one of my course mates only made the cut on his ninth attempt! The SSB tests one's communication skills, adaptability, social interactions, and leadership potential and also consists of psychological and physical tests. Thanks to the Mother's Grace, I was one of the lucky ones to qualify.

TRAINING AND LIFE IN THE ACADEMY

Initially, I thought of going through the IMA (Indian Military Academy), which was a full-time commission. However, I later decided to opt for the OTA (Officers Training Academy), as it provided me the opportunity to reconsider my tenure after 5 years. I joined the academy, and once I donned my uniform and had my crew cut, we were part of a large unit where everyone was the same. The physical aspects, also known as 'ragda' (ragging), were challenging, but at the end of the day if you take things in the right spirit, even the ragda becomes enjoyable! I remember being asked to do 50 push-ups, and such was my fitness level I could complete this without any difficulty. On one occasion, a senior officer asked my friend and myself to hold his mosquito net all night long while he slept peacefully. After a while, however, we decided to give our tiring hands a break and attached the net to a flap. The next step was to try and catch some sleep and we connived to take turns at sleeping under the bed. As luck would have it, a dog had already set up camp right under the bed and was rudely awakened by my presence. It yelped and ran out, leaving the two of us to fend for ourselves. The officer woke up abruptly and immediately questioned us. We convinced him that we were very much on duty and that we had only tried to chase a dog that had strayed



Pillars of Platoon (Asit at far right with his course mates)

in. The officer was mightily impressed, so much so that he made sure we were given an extra portion of samosas and sweets during tea break the next day.

Ragda toughens the mind. Before undergoing jungle duties later in my career, I had to undergo a 1.5 months commando training course. This is to break all mental and physical barriers, including our sleep cycle, eating patterns, etc. You have no time for yourself. You are taught navigation and survival skills in extreme conditions. We had to slither down helicopters in the middle of muck fields and do all kinds of drills to toughen mind, body, and spirit, just as you see in movies. The last phase is when you have to run a marathon late at night with a 20 kg load and a rifle weighing 4.5 kg. All of this boosts your self-confidence immensely and by the time you complete the training you feel like the boss of the universe.

Life at the academy is a continuous learning process. The morning hours consist of drills, running, and classes, where one learns about military technology. The training is so thorough that by the end of it you can disassemble and re-assemble your weapons within a matter of 15 seconds. Evenings are mostly dedicated to games and sports, followed by sessions on military etiquette, table manners, and other social graces. This lasts for 10 months at the OTA, and within this period you are turned into a gentleman officer. During my academy days, I was quite popular as I used to excel in sports and fine arts competitions. The type of exposure to sports and physical activities that I had received at the Ashram ensured that I played alongside my seniors and was able to make a mark for myself. Every time you played well, you garnered points. I remember vividly a handball match against the Air Force Services Team, where we were up against tall, well-built opponents. In the first game, I was able to breach their defenses and score more than 20 goals. In the next game, I was a marked man. Two of their players fell on me causing multiple fractures to my ankle. I was admitted to military hospital for some time and



With fellow officers (second from right)

would have, under normal circumstances, been relegated to the next course, but thanks to my prominence in sports, the commandant made me pass along with my course mates.

THE UNIT

Upon passing out of the academy, I was a little confused as to which branch to join, as I did not have a background in the forces. I relied on my instincts and finally settled on the Guards, as they had the smartest uniforms! The Brigade of the Guards is a mechanised infantry regiment. It is an elite arm that carries infantry along for frontline operations and is known for its mobility and speed and is well protected when advancing toward the enemy. The regiment is well equipped with advanced weapons and vehicles and therefore also requires its officers to have in-depth knowledge of the mechanised systems. I was part of a mixed battalion unit, basically hill troops from the Northeast and Uttaranchal area who were obedient and hardworking. The unit is the first family in the Army as one spends 10 months every year with the troops and only 2 months at home. It is a well-organised structure and support system that looks after you until retirement.

POSTINGS

My first posting was in Bhatinda. I was in the recce and support unit covering the plains of Punjab, Jammu, and a bit of Rajasthan. We had a lot of equipment and vehicles with heavy firepower



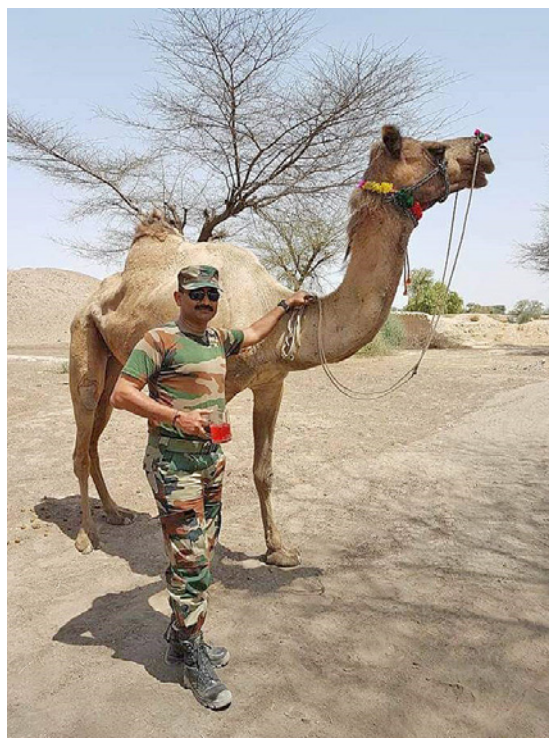
In the deserts of Rajasthan (left)

and quick mobility. In case the enemy attacked, we would be the first to engage them, ahead of the infantry. During peace time postings, you continue to pursue your courses, learn about new weapons, and update your knowledge on military matters. Operational tenures are more interesting as every sector has its own challenges. One of the most difficult was my tenure in the Northeast in Tripura. I was part of several operations against terrorists coming from Bangladesh. I have seen my colleagues fall just beside me and have survived enemy bullets. I remember the case when we received inputs of someone we suspected to be a dreaded terrorist having stopped for tea at a stall. As I looked like a Bengali and was fluent in the language, I went in plain clothes and struck a conversation with him. My men were following at a safe distance. After some time, it seemed clear to me that he had no weapons on him and I decided to let him go! Incidentally, later on our company shot him in active operation.

Thereafter, we moved to Arunachal and being young and fearless, I volunteered for the toughest post. We had to patrol the border areas and trek through dense forests for days on end to make our presence felt. There are stone pillars and small monuments demarcating the border,

and we had to keep stuff from India such as jam bottles, incense packets, etc. to indicate our arrival. The Chinese on their part would do the same, thereby maintaining status quo with neither party ever having met the other. The routine was to walk for 8 to 9 hours with a 20 kg load, and after all that hard work we had to build huts, cook, and only then did we finally get to rest for a few hours. I suggested to my seniors that we build staging huts along certain tracks to save our men work and give them time to rest and recuperate, and eventually the idea was acted upon. I was also instrumental in setting up a helipad atop the mountain in that area for swift mobilisation of troops and equipment, something that had not been thought of for the last many years. There was also the case when a few Chinese soldiers had crossed over and as the weather had changed suddenly they were stranded on our side. After keeping them captive for some time, we arranged for their release as they had clearly crossed over accidentally.

During my journey, I have been posted in all



Cheers!

parts of India except Gujarat. I have even served abroad as part of the Blue Helmets at Lebanon. Before leaving, we were trained and oriented on various cultural and social aspects. Wearing the Blue Helmet and serving one's nation on a global scale was a matter of great pride. The Indian contingent is very highly regarded and is one of the best. There were several battalions such as the Polish, Irish, Fijian, Nepalese, etc., and every battalion had its area of responsibility. I was part of a centrally located unit called the Force Mobile Reserve, which served as a backup force in times of emergency. We had to know the entire area thoroughly and track all ongoing activities carefully. The experience was an eye opener as we observed from close quarters how different armies operate. The next batch of Indian soldiers saw a lot of action, but in my tenure there was nothing much. The UN forces get the best of rations and a wide spread of world cuisine is served in the mess. I really had a good time!

CLOSING THOUGHTS

There are many people who motivated me during my journey. There were tough postings but finally what matters is how well you adjust



Bidding adieu to our commander (second from left)

and adapt to situations. If you can do that, you are happy anywhere however tough the conditions may be. I am currently posted at the NCC Directorate at Bhopal, which looks after cadets in Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh. There are more than 1 lakh cadets and we have to monitor their activities and motivate the youngsters to bloom to their full potential.

The Army gives you a well-rounded lifestyle. After work hours, I play tennis and I love to cook, paint, do gardening and play with my pet dogs. Anyone willing to join the Army can always approach me and I will do my best to help them. It is important for the students of SAICE to imbibe the values that the Ashram inculcates and apply these in the outside world. Keep the negatives aside and focus on the right path and She will do the rest. ❧

THE KSHATRIYA

War typifies and embodies physically the aspect of battle and struggle which belongs to all life, both to our inner and our outer living, in a world whose method is a meeting and wrestling of forces which progress by mutual destruction towards a continually changing adjustment expressive of a progressive harmonising and hopeful of a perfect harmony based upon some yet ungrasped potentiality of oneness. The Kshatriya is the type and embodiment of the fighter in man who accepts this principle in life and faces it as a warrior striving towards mastery, not shrinking from the destruction of bodies and forms, but through it all aiming at the realisation of some principle of right, justice, law which shall be the basis of the harmony towards which the struggle tends.

Sri Aurobindo [CWSA, 19: 52]

Challenging Yourself

Nijananda Bableshwar '88, who was an officer in the Indian Army's 9th Gorkha Regiment, answers our questions.

What inspired you to join the Armed Forces?

A calling. Having been brought up in an environment that stresses a higher cause I felt it was the most natural thing to do. When your formative years have been charged with a message of dedicating your life to something more than the ordinary it was natural for me to turn my gaze towards the Army.

Here was a profession, a line of work, that tapped into your physical, mental and emotional being for protecting something that is generally taken for granted – freedom. I found this extremely compelling, so my decision to join.



Starting young

Army training can be quite intense. Do you remember any really challenging aspects of it? Do you feel that the physical education at SAICE helped you in coping with it?

Intense is an understatement. I consider my five years in the Army to be a series of challenges too numerous to cover in a few lines but by far the biggest challenges physically, mentally and emotionally were during my training at the Officers' Training Academy (OTA), Chennai, and Commando Training Centre, Belgaum. And I have no doubt in my mind that if I made it through these two training centres it was only due to the physical education in the Ashram.

I am still amused by the memories of being termed 'talented', 'exceptional', 'gifted', in the Academy for something you would consider mundane in the Ashram. For example, the ease with which I could swim all four strokes, dolphin/butterfly, back crawl, crawl and breast stroke was breath-taking to a lot of training cadets who had never had swimming lessons in their life. When I did a dive from a three-metre board I had a small fan base. By the time I played basketball, hockey, football, volleyball they were ready to turn me into a demi-god!

One thing to remember – I was nowhere near exceptional in any of the group activities in the Ashram. Not for me the breaking of records or awards. Not for me the finish tape of the fastest runner or swimmer. I was the most average kind you would see. But one thing I did and I did better than most is give my full in whatever I did. I turned up every day on time and put my everything in my activities, whether it was games, gymnastics, swimming, boxing, athletics or studies. And I can say with the utmost conviction – if I was successful in the Army it was because of this sense of discipline that was inculcated in me in the Ashram. I have to admit when I became standard bearer



In a play as a student at SAICE

in Group B and Group D it was not that I was exceptional but I believe my captains saw something more than a record breaker to entrust me with the privilege of holding the flag – an honour I cherish to this day.

After completing your training you became part of the Gorkha Rifles. Can you tell us something about this regiment?

If there is one word that defines the Gorkha Regiment it is loyalty. You can measure an Army by the strength of its armaments, sophistication and fire-power which have their place in the bigger picture but when you come down to the basics what matters most is the loyalty of your men. The Gorkhas display a fierce loyalty that defies any amount of reasoning as to why they do what they do. The candidness, selflessness and spontaneity by which they serve is indescribable. You have to live it to believe it.

The Gorkha Regiments are broken down by battalions. I was part of the 4th battalion of the 9th Gorkha Regiment. In short, 4/9 Gorkha Rifles.

The history of the 9th regiment stretches over 200 years as it was originally formed in the early 1800s. 4/9 Gorkha Rifles is also known as 'Chindits.' 'Chindits' were special operations units formed of British and Indian troops that operated in the jungles of Burma. Their objective was to penetrate deep into Japanese lines in Burma and destroy operational, logistic and communication chains. 4/9 Gorkha Rifles has also a rich history of participating in both World Wars as well as the two wars with Pakistan in 1965 and 1971.

It will not be out of place to mention how the

loyalty of the Gorkhas was misused and taken advantage of by the British, masters of deception and intrigue. A not-so-known fact about the 4/9 Gorkha Rifles is that they were the troops used in the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre that killed hundreds of peaceful civilians. Not that they were willing or complicit but the power structure of the day left them with little choice but to follow

orders. General Dyer mindfully chose them for his diabolical venture by tapping into their sense of duty, selflessness and allegiance, knowing that once the order went out, they would not flinch in executing it, as opposed to any other Indian unit which might have balked at this unreasonable and cowardly command.

In fact, much before the Jallianwalla massacre, the East India Company ensured that the Gorkhas were kept away from the rest of the Indian Forces. The British made sure that the officer

cadre commanding the Gorkhas were always British. They wanted to maintain a total monopoly over the Gorkhas lest they get influenced by the other Indian regiments.

Another instance that comes to mind is the subduing of the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857. There again the Gorkhas played an instrumental role under the command of the East India Company to suppress the revolt, though there is no record of 4/9 Gorkha Rifles being a part of it.

I believe you were posted in Bhuj. What was daily Army life like there?

Bhuj was considered a peace posting. Every battalion in the Army alternates between field postings and peace postings. Field postings are



Captain Nija: 4/9 Gorkha Rifles

postings where you can expect a degree of danger – LOC, Siachen, border with China, etc. Peace postings are mainly non-danger areas focused on training. Bhuj being close to the International Border was somewhere in between.

What was striking about Bhuj was the desert – white pristine sand that stretched for miles around. The nights especially were breathtaking as one could lie on one's back and watch the spectacle of stars unfold in millions in front of you. Especially with no hindrance from city lights this was a sight to behold.

A word about the term 'peace posting.' Peace posting has a different meaning in the Army. For one, it still means getting up at 5 am, putting on your camouflage uniform and undergoing two hours of intensive training. This would be followed by shooting practice, strategy sessions, discussions and war games. War games could mean staying in the desert for weeks with nothing but a radio to keep in touch with the outside world.

You were also posted in the Uri sector? What are your memories of that posting?

I was actually posted in the Poonch sector. In fact, it was my first deployment after graduation from OTA. My first memory is of winding roads rising into the clouds as the Army bus slowly inched ahead going round hairpin bends while my fellow passengers, true to spirit, hardly batted an eyelid while I tried my best to hide my nervousness. Of course, the prayers on my lips were no less fervent. Personally, it was quite an experience as I thought to myself, here was a boy from Pondicherry, the highest he had climbed was Krishnagiri in Gingee and now was going up the slopes of the Himalayas on the Pirpanjal!

Once I reached camp it was night patrols, replying to enemy fire across the LOC and lots of moments of camaraderie with my men. I get asked a lot whether I killed anyone. Hard to answer as I was never part of a close combat but firing with a machine gun across the LOC in retaliation might have caused casualties.

Any memorable moments of your life in the Army that you would like to share? Any

interesting incidents or anecdotes? Any particularly challenging moments or exciting adventures?

One of the interesting times came on a wintry night when we heard a loud explosion in the distance. Till today I remember the echo that reverberated across the valley. It was similar to the roll of thunder. The thought immediately crossed my mind, this could only mean one thing – a bomb. I got up and began to put on my fatigues. Within moments somebody knocked on my bunker door. It was the night guard. I was summoned by the Commanding Officer. Five officers gathered in the commanding officer's bunker. The information that came in was a bomb had gone off in the village. I, along with one more officer and two men, was assigned to go to the site.

When we arrived, there was a small crowd of civilians that had gathered around a house. Wading through the crowd we went to the site of the explosion. At the back of the house there were two electric boxes attached to the wall. A bomb had been detonated destroying one. Leaflets lay scattered with anti-India and Free Kashmir slogans. After doing a preliminary search we summoned the canine unit as we found clothing at the scene that did not belong to anybody in the house. The dog immediately took off up a hill. Halfway up the hill we heard a deafening explosion go off. I looked back and saw smoke coming from the back of the house where we were moments ago. The second electric box had been booby trapped, timed to go off when investigators were around. A classic move straight out of a movie. Fortunately, everybody had cleared the area. But had we stayed there a few minutes longer, the results could have been starkly different.

I continued with the search dog. We went up and down hills and valleys for most of the night and finally at about day break we came across a stream where the canine lost the scent. As hard as it tried it could not retrieve a lead. The perpetrators had crossed the river. Disappointed and dejected we trudged back to the scene. By this time RAW (Research and Analysis Wing) had taken over the case. We briefed them of our search and left the area.

Back at the base I was left wondering.... What if we had spent a few more minutes at the site of the first explosion? Would we have survived? Who amongst us would have survived or been severely injured? What Hand pushed us away from the site just in time? Why were we destined to come out of it unscathed? I can say with utmost conviction at that moment I felt the Presence, the Love and Power which has brought us together in the Ashram and which really never leaves you even though you might leave the Ashram. How many times do we say, “the Mother will protect us.” Let me assure you, at that moment I felt it, lived it and decades later I still cherish it. That is one message that clearly tells you that your life is not in your hands but in Theirs – something that can never be reinforced enough whatever you do or wherever you are in life.

Do you find that life in the Services has some similarity to life in the Ashram (i.e. a disciplined life-style, a sense of community)? What do you feel is the best part of that life?

Life in the Ashram inculcates in you a discipline that you can carry forward to the Army and life in general. That is the beauty of being brought up in the Ashram. You grow up being disciplined without the pressure of being disciplined. It is not a boot camp but a simple willingness to listen to people wiser and older to you, i.e. your teachers and captains who have had the privilege of dedicating their lives to something bigger and higher, and in my time, when every one of them had been in the presence of the Mother. Personally, I feel the discipline in the Ashram surpasses the discipline in the Army as the willingness to follow

“orders” is not forced but inculcated, nurtured and developed.

Can you tell us a little about where you are now and what you do? After all these years how do you look back at your stint in the Armed Forces?

Has it left an impact on how you live your life?

Since leaving the Army I moved to Canada. I went into the Investment and Finance field and currently work for a financial publication that also provides education to financial advisors and professionals. I manage the education component.

Anything else you would want to add?

The Army is a unique place. You can never know what a soldier goes through till the time you don that uniform and pull up those boots. This is not a 9 to 5 job where you can clock out and take sick leaves. You are called to give not your life but every waking and sleeping moment of your life to something most people will never understand. The mental challenge of isolation for months on some peak up in the Himalayas, the physical challenge of being summoned any time of day or night, the skills required to operate weaponry and lead your men, puts you, your personal emotions and feelings in a secondary spot. You are not you anymore. Your happiness, your satisfaction, your source of achievement will not be defined by rank, pay or profession which is way more in any other field outside of the Army, but simply by the joy of knowing you are doing something bigger, loftier and higher – giving others the joy of freedom to live, act and be. ☸



The other side of life: Mr. Financial Educator

Life in the Navy

Ayesha '11 tells us about life as a naval aviation officer.

As a student was it your dream to join the Armed Forces?

I had nearly always dreamt of joining the Navy. There was a time when I wanted to be an astronaut, a swimmer, even Spider-Man, for which I briefly but dedicatedly even kept a green spider as a pet! But these were all phases. And when they passed, I again wanted to join the Navy. Somehow that stuck on. When I was in Knowledge, I wanted to pursue Astrophysics as a career. But by the time I finished Knowledge, I wanted to join the Navy again. So I joined. And since then, I've never really looked back or regretted that I could have done something else.

Why were you not allowed to join the Air Force?

I wasn't allowed to join the Air Force because they did not accept my certificates. However, with the help of then Group Captain Sucharu Rai '90, we managed to put up a case at the HQ, and we worked it out and now our certificates should cause no more trouble. By the time the whole situation was sorted out, my letter to join the Navy had come. I decided to go ahead as I was getting both, wings and waves, in naval aviation. I believe it was a wise decision. I truly enjoy where I am and what I am doing.

Can you tell us some anecdotes about the initial six months of training you had to undergo and how they prepared you mentally, psychologically and physically for a life in the Armed Forces?

Every day in the initial six months of the training has an anecdote. And when I look back, I just laugh and laugh and laugh and truly believe there couldn't have been a better time.

Our day began at 0500 and officially finished at 2315. The whole day was a mixture of exercise, running, swimming, parade, firing and classes. The training motto is very simple, "One for all, all for one". With 250 of us being part of the



Ayesha (left) with course mates

"One", there were just too few days when one of us didn't do something out of the box and everyone was not put on hands for push-ups or just plain made to roll on the road. This not being part of the curriculum, these extra sessions nearly always happened at night, after 2315, and could continue... the only restriction being the clock striking 0445 on the morning of the next day. It was not so bad when you had friends beside you and everyone was enjoying and secretly laughing. It was during those sessions, where everyone is at his or her worst and still having a totally awesome time, that I made the best of friends. Only in the

initial phases was the training a little hard. Later it would just reveal to me that I could do that much, be so exhausted and still enjoy it.

The training breaks you down completely, leaves you with no ego; my companions saw me at my worst, like I saw them at theirs. You are completely shattered physically, mentally, psychologically and giving up is so easy, with absolutely no consequence. But one can't give up, because the first thing that is imprinted on your mind is that YOU have chosen the naval way of life and here, there is no giving up. As time goes by, the effort of pushing yourself a little more with absolutely no motivation makes you very strong mentally and also gives the confidence that you can take on anything. I believe now that limits are mentally made. Nothing can really stop you from achieving so much more; all that is required is a little discipline.

There was this one day when in a hurry I forgot a T-shirt on my bed and an officer came on a surprise check. In the academy everything has a place and everything should be in its place. Every room looks exactly the same, the same cupboard arrangement, the same number of clothes in the cupboard, the exact same bed cover which was folded exactly the same 5 inches at the top, revealing exactly the same ¼ inch of the white bed sheet below. It is quite easy to imagine what followed. The horror that a folded T-shirt left on the bed can cause was discovered by my whole course that day. My whole course was called on a session of extra physical training at night. We had a place with a lot of pebbles and my whole course was put on hands there except me. I was made to stand in front and count while they did push-ups. With every push-up they were to say "Thank you, Ayesha". It was a good 30 minutes before I was removed from my podium and made to join them. Till date those have been the longest 30 minutes of my life. It hurt me so much that I decided that my room would never again be found with a single thing out of place. Till the end of my training my room was always in a demo state. And at the end my room was chosen for all families to visit. I am proud to say, the Raksha Mantri also visited my room.



Sweating it out at the Naval Academy (third from right)

Where were you first posted and what was your responsibility?

After my training I did various other courses in Hyderabad, Pune, Kochi, Mumbai and Lonavala. I was then posted at INS Hansa, Goa, as an Air Traffic Controller. My work was to separate aircraft in the air. It sounds way easier than it actually is. Life becomes complicated when you have 8 different types of military aircraft only. That is 8 different rates of climb, rates of descent, speeds and capabilities. The airfield in Goa is also an international airport with civilian flights coming in throughout the day. Those too were being controlled by us. We had 40 civilian flights coming and going within 4 hours. In 24 hours you can do the math. And along with that we had at least 30-40 military aircraft sorties.

The job of an Air Traffic Controller is considered extremely stressful. How demanding is it?

Work is very hectic. At every point you are playing with lives. There is absolutely no room for error. And when you reach the tower, put on the headset, you have to leave the whole world behind. It requires full attention and presence of mind. Every moment situations are changing, no two being the same, and you have to adapt. The adrenaline rush is exhilarating. But when you leave the headset at the end of the day, you carry



A recent photo of Ayesha (in the foreground) with her colleagues

nothing along except a happy feeling. No matter how demanding the work may be and how thankless, it truly is satisfying. We have a beautiful quote in our office, “You have Air Traffic Controllers, so that pilots can have heroes too.”

After your posting in Goa, you were at the Naval base near Rameshwaram. You were then posted at Kochi and you are back in Goa now. Could you tell us something about each of these postings? Their particular challenges? Have you taken on any additional responsibility?

The operations from all three bases are actually very different and I am very lucky to have had the privilege of having seen such different facets of the Indian Navy in my relatively short career so far. Goa is the epitome of naval aviation and as a very junior officer just learning my profession, Goa was very challenging with respect to the quantum of air traffic we handled there. On the contrary Rameshwaram had negligible flying operations but posed a different challenge altogether because I learnt about various forms of official correspondence and other admin aspects that an officer should know. Additionally, it was an endearing experience serving at a remote location with only 20 officers or so. As a relatively senior officer in my

cadre, Kochi synthesized both aspects in a beautiful manner. For instance we were working with two live runways simultaneously and handling projects such as modernisation of the airfield. The one common thing I take from all these postings is amazing friends and lovely memories.

Now I am again in Goa and I handle the Flight Planning Section along with my duties as a radar controller.

Did Covid-19 change anything in the way your naval base functioned?

Covid was a hard time for all but nothing really changed in our routine. We maintained all protocols of social distancing, wearing masks with our uniforms but other than that life at work remained unchanged. At times it was more taxing than usual because of stringent state quarantine rules and excessive Humanitarian Assistance Disaster Relief (HADR) missions.

Can you tell us a little about the Indian Navy and its current role and aims? Does it try to dominate the Indian Ocean and its shipping routes? How is it preparing for the Chinese intrusion in the Indian Ocean?

The Indian Navy's aims and interests are varied and they range from securing our seas and shores to being able to project our force in the Indian Ocean region, from deterring conflict to pursuing peace, stability and security in areas of India's maritime interest. While the predominant aim is to ensure safety from threat emerging from the sea front, the Indian Navy is working towards strengthening ties with friendly foreign nations and also providing humanitarian relief to the Indian diaspora.

Every country is aiming to control the international shipping lanes (ISLs) because in case of war the same will dictate the reach of the country and her capability in being able to sustain operations abroad. The Indian Navy is building its own “string of pearls” to counter the Chinese. While we continue to increase our assets with a sense of Make in India, the Indian Navy continues to carry out joint naval exercises with various countries of strategic importance. We are continuously

developing our maritime domain awareness through various platforms too.

What would you say about the lifestyle in the Services? Does it allow you to pursue activities and hobbies that would not have been possible otherwise? For instance you have always been an excellent swimmer. In the Services could you have pursued swimming at the national level?

When I had just joined the Navy, amongst the first things that we were taught was that the Navy is not just a job, it's a way of life. From waking up in the morning to sleeping at night, you can never forget you're a naval officer. Discipline, I realise now, is not really difficult.

Oh yes, you get a lot of encouragement to try new things, to widen your horizon. We are made to do so many things. In the academy itself we had a club for firing, diving, horse riding, para-gliding and I do not remember the rest. I chose something that was close to my heart and joined the swimming team and participated in many events.

You have been in the Navy now for a few years. Can you tell us about the highs and lows of life in the Services? What would you advise a young person who is interested in joining the Navy?

I have completed almost a decade in the Navy and have understood only one thing.... There are highs and lows in every aspect of life, in every job, in every place. I have got so much from the service that, to be honest, I have overlooked the lows. Because life in the forces is not a job but a way of life, it's a constant high. The respect, the courage, the strength, the high morale, everything that the

Armed Forces are based on and which our life revolves around are all the highs I need to be able to soldier through the occasional lows. Enjoying every moment and knowing that the lows shall pass is something I carry with me from my days at SAICE.

You may call me biased but there is something very charming about the hardships of this life. And when you look back, they make cherished memories. So, my advice to anyone asking me whether they should join, yes absolutely!

From the age of 3 when you got admission in SAICE to now it has been a long journey. What do you think the 18 years in our School have given you? How does it reflect in your life today?

I truly owe everything to my education here at SAICE. It's not just about the schooling, but everything that I've learned outside the classroom. In the academy I was named "Smiley" because I pretty much laughed and enjoyed everything, even being punished. My fellow members could never understand that. I enjoyed everything because I always thought it was helping to build me up physically or mentally. Nothing done in the right spirit can be degrading. This is just one of the things I've got from here. Eternal faith in the Mother and the belief that everything happening to me was for the better made it possible to see things from a different angle. I truly enjoy what I am doing and am really thankful for where I am today. ❧

This is an enlarged and updated version of an interview which appeared in the Nov 2014 issue of The Golden Chain.

*Endure and you will triumph. Victory goes to the most enduring.
And with the Grace and divine love nothing is impossible.
My force and love are with you.
At the end of the struggle there is Victory.*

The Mother [CWM, 14: 165]

Living Among Soldiers

Our Trip to Kashmir

*In December 2015, some Knowledge students visited the Kashmir Valley to experience life in the Army. They ate with soldiers, trained with them, and imbibed the discipline of one of the finest Armed Forces in the world. Kashmir was not only a paradise on earth, it was also a gateway to their dreams. Below are a few excerpts from a chat with **Subhankar '16**, who was part of the group.*

What prompted you to make the trip and how did it materialize?

The desire to experience Army life started sometime early in our school years when we heard of our seniors visiting Army camps during the holidays. As a young boy, I admired the sense of heroism and patriotism that soldiers exuded. Ever since, it had become an ardent wish of mine to someday live among soldiers. The opportunity



Shoulder to shoulder

presented itself when I was in the Higher Course. One of my friends was in touch with a retired Air Force officer, whose son was none other than the Commander of the Chinar Corps in Kashmir, Lt. General Satish Dua. The father had been a devotee for many years and readily agreed when requested to help organize a trip.

Tell us something about the journey. What was it like travelling during the Chennai floods?

We embarked on our journey on 3 December 2015 in the middle of the Chennai floods and were left stranded on the very first leg at Villupuram Junction Railway Station. No one, not even the stationmaster, was aware if trains were plying! The thought of travelling in this situation seemed daunting and one of our comrades decided to return, but we were in no mood to give up. We took a bus and reached Hyderabad and then took a flight to Delhi, followed by another round of bus and cab to finally reach the other end of the country. We were tired but exhilarated; the never-say-die spirit of the Army man was beginning to take hold!

Describe your stay with the Army.

The Army received us with utmost warmth. The officers were kind and hospitable and treated us as brothers and sons. The interaction was enriching and fulfilling. We were mostly based at Srinagar and made a couple of sorties to Gulmarg and Uri. The high point of the trip was our visit to Uri. We were taken to the Kaman Post, one of the highest military posts in India. One of the charms of this place is witnessing the barter system that happens between India and Pakistan. The Kaman Aman Setu built by the Indian Army acts like a gateway for the exchange of handicrafts, spices, fruits, vegetables, etc., between the two nations. On one side was this friendship bridge and on the other were bullet holes caused by Pakistani firing at bunkers. We were told to be watchful as we were under the direct surveillance of snipers from

across the border. Any faux pas and we would be history! Being so close to the border was a thrilling experience. The time in the camp was memorable. We had a strict schedule to adhere to and the planning and arrangements were impeccable.

How was the physical training?

Our bodies were already conditioned to handle the exercises thanks to the physical education program at SAICE. None of us were top athletes and neither did we undergo any specific routine before the trip. The tough part, though, was acclimatization, as we would wake up at 6.30 a.m. to jog in -1°C with complete winter wear! The training consisted of obstacle courses, shooting drills, climbing a ladder and walking on a narrow bridge, jumping from heights, and rock climbing to test coordination, agility, and endurance. The challenge for me was to overcome my fear of heights and adapt to the situation. The training gave me confidence and made us experience a cadet's life in all its rigor and discipline.

Any memorable experiences?

I still remember the experience of firing a real rifle for the first time. My hands were all sweaty

and I was breathing heavily. Pulling the trigger needed arduous effort. We had to fire 10 rounds at a target 100 m away. While two of my shots were on the mark, the rest were lodged in my neighbour's account. Only later did I realize that due to my myopia I had been firing at the wrong target all the time!

Any closing comments?

On 18 September 2016, four heavily armed terrorists attacked the Indian Army brigade headquarters in Uri in a pre-dawn ambush. This was the deadliest attack on security forces in Kashmir in two decades. Eleven days after the attack, the Indian Army conducted retaliatory surgical strikes. As young men who had just returned from the forward post, we were thrilled at the Army's response and felt a sense of pride. It is now 8 years since the trip. We remain ever grateful to Lt. General Dua, his family, and the larger fraternity of the Indian Army for their kindness. Upon our departure, we were gifted Army jackets and caps as souvenirs. We cherish these gifts and salute the brave officers and jawans who remain forever vigilant, so that we can live in peace. ☸



My Experience at RAW

Mohar '99 recounts the experience of joining and working in the Research and Analysis Wing, India's foreign intelligence service, during the period 2006 to 2008.

I was searching for a full-time Central Government post when an advertisement at the corner of *Employment News* caught my attention. Under the heading “Cabinet Secretariat”, a little notice was put up for the job of interpreters. The minimum qualification was B.A. in any of the following foreign languages: Arabic, Persian, Chinese, French, German or Russian, with an equal proficiency in English. I had completed my M.A. in French from JNU and was pursuing a Ph.D., and I also had an M.A. in English. There was no harm in applying, I thought. It was 2005, and letters only arrived by post. So came my admit card for the preliminary examination which was to be held inside the Army cantonment area at Kolkata. The examination paper appeared quaint, asking for translations from English to French and vice versa. The question paper was mostly translation and grammar, everything from *passé simple* to *subjonctif*. If you were taught the advanced levels of “Cours de langue et de civilisation françaises” or simply “Mauger et Bleu” by Chimanbhai, you could breeze through the test.

After almost half a year had passed by, and I had given up waiting for the result, another intimation arrived announcing the date and time of an interview. There were 120 candidates or so at the Kolkata centre in the Army cantonment area. A whole panel of examiners arrived from New Delhi in vehicles with flashing blue lights and wailing sirens announcing their presence. The hall where the candidates were waiting became silent all of a sudden. The hot and humid June

afternoon weighed heavier now with the tensed look and worried whispers of the waiting crowd.

I was among the first five candidates to be called. Inside a marbled colonial style hall, six examiners sat around a mahogany conference table. An elderly officer handed me a short text on a French missile programme written in English which I had to read and interpret simultaneously into French. The second text was on nuclear armament and India's naval fleet. I was fluent with

the French but did not know a few words specific to the subject such as “frigate”, “nautical miles” which I translated in general terms such as “navire militaire” and “mile nautique”. I fumbled on a passage on treaties and armaments. Three other panellists, especially the chairman, interrogated me on foreign affairs and India's relationship with China and its neighbours which I answered well due to my reading of current affairs. The interviewers were appreciative and the Chairman even suggested that I should have sat for the Civil Services Exam. That remark assured me that I had

done well. It also brought back memories of my JNU days.

A small booklet arrived soon afterwards asking detailed questions on my journeys abroad, a short history of my relatives, my medical history, and the socio-cultural and political linkages of my family. Only those who have applied for the US visa can vaguely imagine the tedious work of completing those forms. Then, for almost nine months, all was quiet, and I wondered if my file was lost or forgotten on some bureaucrat's table.



Agent Mohar

After a year, in May 2007, I received a letter of appointment. I had to join service within 15 days.

Though the post was advertised under the “Cabinet Secretariat”, the actual office was inside the Central Government Offices Complex at Lodhi Road, New Delhi. One was not allowed to carry mobile phones, pen drives or electronic gadgets inside the office building and every employee was checked thoroughly at the entry point. Inside the 15-storey building, life had its own pace, it was a world of its own. I had to undergo a one-month initiation course. I learnt how intelligence was collected through various methods and human agents played only a small part in the process. The most important source of data came from various interception centres set up along India’s coast and border areas, from Arunachal Pradesh to Kanyakumari, Jammu and Kashmir to Kerala, as well as overseas intelligence outposts. Even while the world slept, messages sent from ships, aircraft, and mobile phones, criss-crossed the earth and were caught in machines, scripted, sorted and sent to various interpretation centres. The foreign language office at New Delhi received the bundle of data, and interpreters worked through them to make notes on known and unknown suspects and track activities of various organisations from various tangible and intangible sources. All this was then categorised and sent to the Defence Ministry and the PMO each day as a short report. The various ministries coordinated their action based on this input. While an entire unit worked each on China, Bangladesh and Pakistan, gathering data from newspapers, electronic media and intercepted telecommunicated messages, work related to Europe and Russia was also important.

After a month I had to report at the Training Centre at Gurgaon, where among many other skills, methods of data collection, interpretation and classification were taught to the trainees. The library and sports facilities were of excellent quality and I still remember the training session in

physical fitness that we received during the early hours of the day. The training period taught me about the various departments of RAW which worked closely together. We were also made to sign a bond not to reveal any information regarding the service. No one was allowed to disclose the nature of one’s work even to close family members. One’s email contacts and telephone numbers were to be declared to the office as well as permission sought for visiting libraries, especially foreign embassies or foreign nationals even though they may be close relatives. There was no personal relationship which could be prioritised over work.

Surveillance relies on a lot of research and sifting of information. One has to go through various media, books and classified data from earlier records. When names of terror organisations and secret agencies start popping up frequently, a careful study can often predict the action of militants or other agencies by simply finding connections and patterns in the classified data. Though popular film and media show the great part played by human agents or spies in order to capture our imagination, in reality human agents can be quite unreliable and often supply data to various, even rival, organisations at the same time and come at a high price and risk. On the other hand, electronic data is considered reliable. Every conclusive report has to rely on various sources, seconded by repeated findings. Yet, when at the end of every day, each department’s work is summed up and a final briefing is made at the Defence Ministry, it is the administrative authorities who take the decision to act on the intelligence provided by RAW. There have been plenty of cases where a delay in the decision-making process has resulted in political unrest, terrorist attacks, complication in foreign treaties, or souring of relationships with other countries, but RAW always remains at the background, untiring in its work and obedience, never impinging on the authority vested upon sister organisations or executive bodies. ❧

My Work with the Indian Army

*In his book, My Work with the Indian Army, **Kittu-da** (Professor Kittu Reddy in the Army) provides a personal account of his experiences working with the Indian Army. He refers to the role that the Armed Forces are playing in the preservation of the higher values of India. He speaks of the motivational and leadership talks he gave to officers of the Indian Army based on the psychological vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. He talks extensively of his interactions with the late Chief of Staff, General B.C. Joshi, whom he calls a Brahmin by birth and a Kshatriya by profession — a Brahmin in the very best sense of the word, a deep lover of knowledge with a profound humility; and a Kshatriya who has shown absolute integrity and strength of character. Kittu-da also speaks of the challenges he encountered in introducing spirituality in the Army and explains that this experience helped him understand with great clarity the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in its application to life. In the following pages we cover some highlights from the book.*

*Heaven awaits the patriot who
dies for his country, the saint
who passes from this life with the
thought of God in his heart, the
soldier who flings his life away at
the bidding of his nation, all who
can put the thought of self away
from them.*

– Sri Aurobindo

THE BEGINNING

“It all began in August 1987,” reminisces Kittu da. “Arvind Habbu, a former student of SAICE, would regularly visit me and discuss his ideas and plans to make India a powerful nation. He often brought up the Army for discussion. In November the same year, he introduced me to Major-General Ajay Singh, who was then commanding the 31st Armoured Division at Jhansi. I was invited to present a talk titled ‘A Vision of India’, which struck a chord among the officers. This exposure helped me come in contact with a large number of high-ranking officers and I was invited to give talks at different centres around the country. By June 1990, I had established contact with Lt. General Ashok Chatterjee, who had settled in Auroville after retirement. This

friendship propelled me to higher echelons, culminating in my becoming a personal consultant to the Chief of Army Staff.”

THAT SINGLE MOMENT

Kittu-da stresses the importance of his first meeting with Lt. General Joshi, then Army Commander of the Southern Command, in late 1990 and how the General was deeply touched by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother’s words. The General came across as a man with an intense spiritual aspiration who felt a deep sense of sorrow at the degradation of the country but retained a strong faith in the future of India. He was convinced that the Armed Forces had a key role to play in the fulfilment of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother’s vision of India’s destiny, making spirituality the central motive force of all life. “He was like a little child full of ideas and started working on himself enthusiastically in the effort at self-improvement. On one occasion, he told me in his disarming manner that he was trying to get rid of his ego and would surely succeed!” Kittu-da describes how General Joshi took keen interest in the Vedas and in Sri Aurobindo’s works and was particularly moved by his message of 15 August 1947 in which Sri Aurobindo speaks of his five dreams. “General Joshi often said that he discovered spirituality

after coming in contact with South India, and this first meeting signalled a major shift in our relationship,” he says. “We were now bound together in our love for India, in our aspiration to make the Army aware of the greater destiny of the nation.”



Forming future leaders: Kittu-da (front row, third from left) at a masterclass

GETTING STARTED

“General Joshi was wary of raising the salaries of senior-most officers, fearing that the disease of consumerism would erode the ethos of the Army.” The Chief wanted spiritual values to be inculcated in the Army but insisted that it be only an exposure and not a compulsion. He was keen on improving the quality of education in Army Public Schools and was very interested in environmental and ecological development, particularly promoting medicinal plants for Ayurvedic medicine. He also strove to improve the quality of life for the jawan.

SPIRITUALITY IN THE ARMY

The introduction of spirituality in the Army was met with some resistance by senior officers as it was believed that this might lead to religious practices and thus disturb the secular fabric of the forces and Kittu-da suggests that they had to swim against the tide. “I stressed that spirituality would provide officers with inner strength and self-mastery that would help them make decisions for the betterment of the group and the nation. I then presented the content of the courses to the top brass and convinced them that the introduction of spirituality was not to divide the Army but to allow it to draw out the force and energy of thought and action arising from communion with that deeper power within us.” A few days later, General Joshi asked me to modify the content to make it more understandable. He wanted it to be written in a less philosophical

manner and adapted to the Army language without diluting the content. Within a few months, I received an invitation to give 13 talks to the gentlemen cadets at the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun. The talks covered diverse subjects such as “Core values of Indian culture and society”, “Patriotism and nationalism”, and “Performance enhancement of a leader,” and were well received. It seemed that a breakthrough had taken place.

VISIT TO THE ASHRAM

Kittu-da talks about General Joshi’s visit to the Ashram on 3 February 1994 as though it happened yesterday. The Chief addressed the students and teachers and shared four mantras to help the young generation shape their destiny. He encouraged students to pursue excellence in everything, to take calculated risks, and to be audacious. Second, he asked them never to do anything out of temptation or fear but to uphold the path of dharma and lead from personal example. The third ingredient, he said, was to convert problems into challenges to conquer. This would help one grow and make life meaningful. Finally, he reminded the audience not to deny oneself the great joy of living, to pursue happiness and help those less fortunate. In conclusion, he asked each and every one to make a conscious effort to act as catalysts to make India great again. “The General meditated in Sri Aurobindo’s room and came out visibly moved,” says Kittu-da. “He also met Amal Kiran and Nirod-da to hear directly

from them what Sri Aurobindo had said about India and the ultimate unification of India and Pakistan.”

MOTHER AND SRI AUROBINDO'S ADVICE: THE ARMY'S WORLDVIEW

During the last decade of the twentieth century, Kittu-da was a close witness to the Army's evolution. Unsurprisingly, he often guided the Chief with the Mother and Sri Aurobindo's words. "On one occasion," he says, "the Chief seemed particularly perturbed by conflict between the police and the Army in Punjab. I shared Mother's remarks, which had been sent to Mrs. Indira Gandhi in a similar context in 1969: 'For heaven's sake, support the Army. It is India's only hope. The Army is good, but it's not supported.' Quite naturally, this gave him immense confidence to resolve the situation."

CHINA

General Joshi visited China in July 1994 and he asked Kittu-da to brief him on the Mother and Sri Aurobindo's remarks. From among the notes, an article written by Sri Aurobindo in 1908 made a strong impact on him. Below are some extracts from that article.

The awakening of Asia is the fact of the twentieth century and in that awakening the lead has been given to the Mongolian races of the Far East. In the genius, the patriotic spirit, the quick imitative faculty of Japan; in the grand deliberation, the patient thoroughness, the irresistible organization of China, Providence found the necessary material force which would meet the European with his own weapons and outdo him in that science, strength and ability which are his peculiar pride.... The vision of a China organized, equipped, full of the clang of war and the tramp of armed men,

preparing to surge forth westwards is the nightmare of their dreams. And another terror of economic invasion, of the Mongol swamping Europe with cheap labour and stifling the industries of Europe adds a fresh poignancy to the apprehensions which convulse the West....

The position of India makes her the key of Asia. She divides the Pagan Far East from the Mahomedan West, and is their meeting place. From her alone can proceed a force of union, a starting-point of comprehension, a reconciliation of Mahomedanism and Paganism. Her freedom is necessary to the unity of Asia. Geographically, she occupies an impregnable position of strength commanding the

East of Asia as well as the West, from which as from a secure fortress she can strike the nations of the Persian or the Chinese world.

General Joshi was amazed at Sri Aurobindo's foresight. His visit to China was a great success. He was able to create greater understanding with the Chinese mili-

tary leadership and government. Such was the rapport he had created that when he was leaving for India there were tears in the eyes of many Chinese diplomats.

THE UNITED STATES

General Joshi visited the United States in September the same year. Again, he asked to be briefed on the Mother and Sri Aurobindo's views on America. Below is an extract from a message of Sri Aurobindo to America.

The East has always and increasingly put the highest emphasis on the supreme truth of the Spirit; it has, even in its extreme philosophies, put the world away as an illusion and regarded the Spirit as the sole reality. The West has concentrated more and more increasingly on the world, on the dealings



General Joshi with Pranab-Da (Dada): Eye to eye

of mind and life with our material existence, on our mastery over it, on the perfection of mind and life and some fulfilment of the human being here: latterly this has gone so far as the denial of the Spirit and even the enthronement of Matter as the sole reality. Spiritual perfection as the sole ideal on one side, on the other, the perfectibility of the race, the perfect society, a perfect development of the human mind and life and man's material existence have become the largest dream of the future. Yet both are truths and can be regarded as part of the intention of the Spirit in world-nature; they are not incompatible with each other: rather their divergence has to be healed and both have to be included and reconciled in our view of the future.

The message created a deep impression on General Joshi and he used it to convince the defence establishment in the United States of the importance of the two nations working together. In other words, says Kittu-da, the idea of a strategic relationship between the United States and India was initiated by General Joshi.

PAKISTAN

General Joshi was totally convinced that Pakistan was born in sin and that a peaceful reunion of the two nations should be brought about. He was prepared to take any steps to further that cause, though he was wary not to be caught off guard. As a thinking general, he had made a detailed study of Chanakya and drew inspiration from him. But even here, he was one step ahead, as exemplified in his talk at Pune in November 1994:

Have we really studied our present and prospective enemies? Even Sage Kautilya, when he made Saptang theory of state, I believe and I say it with great reverence and great humility and not with criticism, left out the eighth ingredient, i.e., the knowledge of the enemy. Should we not be studying Pakistan and China in an institutionalized manner?

Consequently, he set up a study group on Pakistan to see how it was formed and assess its strengths and weaknesses.

On his visit to the Ashram School in February 1994, General Joshi was asked whether India and Pakistan would reunite. In his words:

It is my belief that in spiritual terms the territory that is Pakistan is already India's. Yet Mr. Radcliff in 1947 gave an arbitrary award and his knowledge of geography was so weak that instead of following what is called the thalvic principle whereby the middle of a water channel is taken as the natural boundary between states, he left enclaves on either side. But the story doesn't end there. In this artificial partition of a piece of land, unfortunately our leaders of the time also connived. I am not being wise after the event but history will judge them very harshly for the indecent haste as also for the unthought-of-through process which could have been averted had we been a little more patient.

CONCLUSION

General Joshi passed away on 18 November 1994 of a cardiac arrest. In his last hand-written note, he had scribbled: "My friends, when you go away from this mother earth (as one day we all will), let it be said by your peers: 'Here was a person who lived life as god gave courage; and he lived it well.'"

General Joshi ignited the spark of integral development in the Army. His vision is sustained by the General BC Joshi Army Public School at Pithoragarh, Uttarakhand, which provides holistic education to the wards of defence personnel and civilians. Kittu-da now serves as an independent freelance advisor to the Army Welfare Education Society (AWES). His motto remains the same: to help the Army in strengthening their ethical and spiritual base through self-awareness, leading to self-control and ultimately self-mastery. ❧

The Apache Man

Anup Kumar Singh '04, who was in the first batch of Indian pilots to fly the Indian Air Force's Apache attack helicopters, shares his experiences.

What prompted you to enlist in the Air Force?

I had not decided on anything definitive until my final year in Knowledge. I do not remember being ambitious or working with any long-term plans for the future. I just wanted to fly. I do not remember exactly when it was between the end of my second year and the early months of my final year that I decided. I thought that the disciplined life of a soldier along with the regular games and physical activities that are part of the routine in the Forces would suit me.

What is your rank and role now?

I am a Wing Commander. Since the Apache fleet is establishing itself in India, my role is to train the pilots who are posted from various other helicopter backgrounds onto the machine.

You were part of 12 pilots from India to have been trained by the US Army to fly Apache helicopters. Tell us about the experience.

I was part of the last batch of pilots, and yes, it is the US Army that flies Apaches over there, not the Air Force! This is because the US Army had asked for a replacement for another aircraft which was aging and they were looking for an aircraft with better firepower, performance and range to combat the envisaged enemy at the time. Of all the companies that came forward with the designs, the Apache AH-64 was selected. The AH-64 was named the Apache in late 1981, following

the tradition of naming Army helicopters after American Indian tribes. As far as training is concerned, there were pilots from other countries too who were oriented along with us. One thing became very clear to me: the Indian brain is much sharper than the rest. From what I remember, we flew about 60 hours on simulator and 70 hours in



With family in front of the Apache helicopter

the aircraft. The initial days were tough because of the schedule. I would get up at 3:30 and drive down to the office to be on time for the pre-flight briefing at 5:00. Reaching on time was critical as you were also representing your country and culture. Flying would end at 11:30 and classes would follow and end around 15:15. This continued for two months and then gradually became more relaxed.

The greatest challenge for me, though, was the food! I love having spicy food, but spices were scarce, and we had to go to another city to buy them. Even the vegetables and fruits, though big in size, were, I felt, completely tasteless. The bananas available in the market were so raw that they would take eternity to ripen. I used to joke that even monkeys from our country would not eat such bananas!

The Apache has often been described as a flying tank. What is it that has made this acquisition by the IAF so popular in the military community?

The Apache is a gunship to destroy tanks. It weighs approximately 9 tons when fully loaded and can fly at a maximum speed of 300 kmph. The Americans have managed to sell the concept well and the chopper has become well-known in popular culture. An AH-64 was used in an attempt to suppress the Hulk in the 2008 film, *The Incredible Hulk*. The Russian gunship Mil Mi-24 is the most menacing-looking chopper and the Mi-8 is probably the most produced helicopter in history. But how many even know about it?

Was it easy to transition to the Apache?

Flying a helicopter is extremely complicated as it is an unstable platform which does not inherently want to fly unlike a fixed wing aeroplane which is more straightforward to fly. It is almost like trying to balance on a balloon! When I want to control the helicopter using my right hand, every control input has secondary or side effects and to compensate for this I need to use my left hand and feet simultaneously. Before flying Apaches, all choppers that I had flown required me to apply rudder with my right foot when I increased power. This had become an instinct. With the Apache one has to apply left rudder while increasing power. This was one of the biggest challenges during the initial days. This apart, purely from a pilot's perspective, the Pilot Night Vision System is fabulous. The image that the machine gives you while flying at night is really a 'see-it-to-believe-it' experience. Even though I had already flown a fair number of hours with Night Vision



The Boeing AH-64 Apache is an American twin-turboshaft attack helicopter

Goggles on various aircraft, I could not imagine having an image of that quality in front of my eyes until I experienced it. In addition, the helmet-mounted display lets you fly and do targeting without having to look at the instruments. The gun follows movements of the head and allows you to designate targets just by looking at them. People often joke that we will soon be able to blink to fire! (*ankhiyon se goli maare!*)

Share some memorable experiences in your career with us.

Although I have spent nearly the majority of my active career in attack helicopters, my most memorable flying has been from my other postings. Flying in the Siachen Glacier is an otherworldly experience. Purely from a piloting point of view, you have to fight extreme weather (cockpit heating does not work well enough) and control engine lag due to low air density. You are forced to understand and appreciate your aircraft better. Additionally, the aircraft is loaded to the limits of its power margins, which is what makes it even more challenging, not to forget that it is the highest battlefield on the planet, so the risk of getting fired upon is present even during peace time. But in spite of all these difficulties, it is indeed a humbling experience because of our interaction with the Army troops over there. Flying to remote parts of Ladakh and J&K amidst the scenic beauty of the Srinagar Valley and other parts of the Jammu region during spring season has been a blessing. The terrain

and fauna in the East is not as colourful, but I have fond memories of my flying over there too. As regards any specific experiences, fortunately or unfortunately I do not have any specific memorable experiences.

What is a day like in the life of an Air Force officer?

That depends on your background and where you are posted. Even though I have had all of my postings so far in operational units, I have myself had different routines from posting to posting. At present, I get up at around 5:30 so that I can be in office at 6:25 for the pre-flight briefing at 6:30. Thereafter, I am involved in flying till about 12:30 with just about adequate time to squeeze in a quick breakfast. If any of the aircraft I have to fly has any issues or delays, this time could easily get extended. If I have to fly for the night that day, we leave office for lunch and rest at 14:00. If not, we return after lunch for ground training and other flying-related work, if any.

After night flying, the next day starts a little later. Between 08:00 to 09:00 depending on when you ended. It was more relaxed and varied in other units that I have served in.

As a helicopter pilot, you can expect to be flying on at least 2-3 Saturdays/Sundays in a month. Being in an attack helicopter unit, we are spared Saturdays and Sundays.

How did your days at SAICE prepare you for life in the Air Force?

Physical activities of course helped. I, for one, took part in nearly all the physical education activities, events, and competitions without restricting myself only to those in which I was decently good or successful. I had no qualms about struggling or toiling in anonymity. I feel that has helped me the most.

Which place was your favourite posting and why?

I cannot really choose between my postings in Pathankot and my posting in the East. In both of these postings, I could devote adequate time to



Anup, second from left, running the Road Race as a student at SAICE

playing games in the evenings. I enjoyed flying in the East more than from Pathankot though.

What connections have you discovered between the Mother and Sri Aurobindo's teachings and life in the Air Force?

Perhaps unlike in the private sector, it is important in the Services to be aware that your individual actions contribute towards the greater goal of the collectivity (organisation). One may not always be able to appreciate it but one must have faith. This is one teaching that I try to remember.

At SAICE we were taught that we are part of a larger evolution. We are helping build a greater future. Similarly in the IAF, we are responsible and accountable (at least supposed to be) for what follows us.

What advice would you give students who aspire to join the Air Force?

I feel the students are smarter than I am, so I can't really think of any advice to give to a student interested in joining the Armed Forces. I would just urge them to pursue an activity or join a field because they enjoy doing it and not with the aim of becoming a star. ☼

Eye in the Sky

Pankaj Rai '90 on being a fighter controller in the Indian Air Force.

When and how did you decide to go into the Armed Forces?

When we were in school, I had an inclination to read magazines, especially articles related to defence. So that interest was there in me from EAVP 4 onward. Prior to that, I also have vague memories of reading war narratives in Hindi. Coming to Knowledge, I always had it at the back of my mind, and in the last year I made a concrete decision that if I had to go out, it should be from one fold into another. Our senior Ratan was already a serving officer, and on one of his visits we had met him to seek his advice. I was initially more inclined to join the Army but in the flow of it somewhere I changed and decided to prioritize the Air Force.

What was the procedure to qualify and join the Air Force? Did you face any difficulty because of the lack of a proper degree?

Our degree is of no hindrance in taking up this walk of life. Moreover, if there is a precedent, it becomes easier. Many in the Ashram, and Pranab-da in particular, were happy to see its children taking up this kind of a vocation, and we were given special permission to undergo the written examination which was held while we were still in our final year at Knowledge, sometime in Sep/Oct 1990, so that we don't lose a year in between. This was just like any of the other entrance exams where one's knowledge of English, current affairs, and some logical thinking and basic mathematics is tested. Once the written exams were cleared, we received call letters for the Services Selection Board (SSB) in the next year. The SSB is a selection criteria where you are evaluated based on your psychology. These are time-tested methods to select suitable candidates. You are put into teams and given group tasks under the constant supervision of experts who monitor how you coordinate and cooperate amongst yourselves to

achieve a particular task. So you cannot hoodwink them. There are very many institutions that provide some sort of coaching to clear the tests, but you cannot change your psychology. You might mug up a certain kind of answer or a certain activity for a given scenario to be able to display there, but then there will always be newer things that will be put up wherein your original self will come out. It is a pretty fool-proof testing procedure for all three Services. The physical aspects at this stage were not that demanding as this is something that you can always build up. Once you clear the SSB, there is an additional test for Air Force candidates, which is the PABT (Pilot Aptitude Battery Test) to test out motor skills. It is like trying to control a ball that is going haywire and that you have to keep on track. After completing these tests, the candidates are medically screened and finally based on a pan India merit list they are subsequently called for their training.

Can you tell us something about the training? What was the routine? What are the aspects that were particularly challenging?

We were trained at Begumpet Air Force Base near Hyderabad for a period of 1.5 years. The first 6 months were mainly an indoctrination into the way of life of the Armed Forces: toughening, discipline, drills. Our day began at 5 am with a "health" run and some freehand exercises. We would then get 5 to 10 min to freshen up and a quick breakfast before landing up for our drills. We were made to do marching drills with rifles for an hour or two; this is taken very seriously, akin to the marching etiquette that Mona-da had instilled in us during our growing years. Naturally if you are not performing then you are made to do forward-rolls in the hot sun irrespective of the temperature levels! The sense of working in a group is inculcated right from the beginning. We used to be three of us sharing a room, and all had

to come out together, wait together, go for lunch/ dinner together. So you always had to be in your group... a continuous jog, jog, jog. At 10.30 am there were theory classes. You had to keep awake as in many of these classes we had small tests on basic knowledge of service, rank structure, organizations, etc., which lasted up to lunch time. After lunch, the seniors took over and gave you "ragda." The ragda is actually a physical-mental training where the seniors give you extra duties and tasks! This is followed by a tea break – you might not actually get a break, as the tea break is only for the seniors. This is straightaway followed by PT classes. PT is again like in the morning schedule, perhaps tougher. It starts with a health run and then sports activities such as basketball, hockey among many other sports – anything that will keep you really active. After PT, around 7 pm, the seniors take over again. We were lucky as we used to play basketball with the seniors as they wanted good players for company. However, some of the others were not as lucky and would have to undergo ragda while we played basketball! After dinner, you are put under the care of seniors again for what is known as "patti" parade. This kind of parade is still in vogue. We were taken to a grassland infested with mosquitoes from where you are not supposed to move. You are made to do exercises in the middle of the grassland along with your seniors, pushing your limits against the fittest of them: push-ups, sometimes crunches after meals. This continues till about 10 pm. Depending on the whims and fancies of the seniors, the dress code at the patti parade could vary from a full mess dress with tie, cummerbund, and other things or just shorts and shoes!

Training was about breaking psychological barriers, accepting the word of command without questioning. I feel here in the Ashram we are built for it. We also have our group exercises, and you don't question your teachers and captains. Life during training was a constant jog. There was no time to walk or meander. Every step taken was purposeful.

Can you tell us how they determine who will be pilots and who will be ground crew? You missed out being on the flying side by just a



little bit. How were you able to handle that?

When you go to the next stage of training, which is basic flying, not all make it. Not everyone will have the right kind of motor skills, especially when sitting in an aircraft which is getting airborne or maneuvering in the air, the G-force, the fear of heights and so many other things, you have to manage all of this to achieve solo flight. The instructor has to deem you fit enough to undertake a solo flight, and this has to be done in 14 hours (or 14 sorties). If you have managed to achieve this within the stipulated 14 hours then you are selected for solo. Even if you are not selected, it does not mean you are deficient of the sought skills. It is just that somebody might be a slow learner and require 20 hours and the Air Force does not have the wherewithal and luxury to spend so many more hours on training. Within

a limited period and a limited testing facility they need to get the required number of pilots. That is how the cutoff is done. Somewhere I missed out and did not catch up that fast.

Even if you do not make it in flying, the defense services have invested in you and selected you on the basis of written examinations and SSB, and the material is already there. They do not want to let that go. They want to utilize you in other branches. In my case, I went into the profession of fighter controlling.

What role does a fighter controller play and what kind of synergy is required between a pilot and a fighter controller?

A fighter controller's domain is purely air defense oriented. There is an asset called the ground radar system that maintains an electronic eye over the entire Indian airspace. It might be in pockets by several radar systems, either linked or independently. When a fighter controller is manning a radar screen he or she is in direct radio link with the fighter, and in case of an air violation by the enemy side they guide the fighter to look into who has come in. Based on this input, the other tactical actions follow. You must understand that a fighter aircraft has very limited radar capabilities in terms of range in comparison to ground radar system. It can only scan the front area, but it cannot scan all round. The fighter pilot is not simultaneously watching everything. His air situation awareness gets curtailed by this limiting factor of the radar. In this, he is assisted by the ground person who is known as a fighter controller. The controller gives the friendly fighter continuous updates as to what is around him. These updates are crucial for the pilot to be able to take tactical actions.

If you have read and followed what happened after the Balakot airstrike in 2019, this was perhaps the first time that the domain of air defense controllers was spoken about in the mainstream media, and people came to know there is a big game behind the scenes. When you are controlling fighter aircraft in a combat scenario, your one decision can cost many lives. For you to be able to understand which one is actually threatening, what should be the correct tactical action,

how to safeguard your own people and also if possible to make a countermove, all these things have to be performed with an élan. The job of a fighter controller entails a complex set of tasks requiring high levels of technical expertise and practical application of specific skills relating to cognition (e.g. information processing, logical thinking, spatial perception, etc.). The scope has now increased with the induction of newer air surveillance systems. With the advent of AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System), fighter controllers now man workstations on board the airborne platform, taking the pilot-controller synergy to a different level.

Fighter pilots of yore were deemed flying aces depending on the number of enemy aircraft they downed single-handedly. In an era of “beyond-visual range” missiles, however, situational awareness is a must for survivability for any modern-day pilot, and this can only be achieved by excellent pilot-controller synergy.

How much into enemy territory can this radar see? What is the quality of the radars that we use? Also how is the Air Force preparing for the next level of warfare involving unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs)?

The airborne radar can see the full depth of Pakistan into Afghanistan. It can cover an area of up to 400 km into Pakistan, so anything that just gets airborne will get picked up. There are also systems that have been produced indigenously under the Atmanirbharta scheme of the government. We have in our arsenal Rafales, which have a greater beyond-visual-range (BVR) capability making our fighters more potent than the F-16s and also the fighters that China has. It gives us an advantage. The Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) is also developing Astra missiles, which are as good as what France has to offer.

Coming to drones or UAVs, when you design a radar, you design it with certain parameters. A fighter at a distance of 30 to 40 km presents itself as a 4 square meter target. A radar emits certain amount of energy. This energy gets dissipated in the complete area. Only from that 4 square meter some energy gets reflected back and so you

are able to detect it. In the initial days, the idea of drones was to have aerial vehicles which are unmanned so as not to invest human lives into it. The drones were very large but today they are much smaller. Your receivers should therefore be highly refined to be able to detect them. So drones in modern times usually do not get detected. Also, we get mesmerized by just seeing one technology. I remember a very good lecture by our National Security Advisor, Ajit Doval, where he says it is not that the older .303 gun is useless. In a close quarter battle the AK-47 has superiority, but a .303 has better range (approx. 2.5 km compared to 350 m for an AK-47) and accuracy from a certain distance. Snipers generally use an aggrandized version of the .303. So any arm should not be seen in silos. It's about how the air battle is conducted: planning, linking, communication, air situation. Just drones cannot win you battles. Also, if you know that you will be taken by a UAV kind of an attack, then you position other countermeasures which are getting developed.

The Indian Air Force is working closely with DRDO on its anti-drone systems. DRDO has already developed anti-drone systems to engage aerial targets at 1 to 2-km range, but they are yet to be produced in large numbers. Some of these systems were displayed at the Republic Day parade on January 26, 2020. The weapons were deployed to secure VVIPs during the parade – the first instance of India attempting to neutralize the growing threat from UAVs.

Following the drone attack on the Jammu air force station on June 27, 2021, the security establishment has ordered Indian-made anti-drone systems that will have both the hard and soft kill capabilities. Soft kill refers to jamming the incoming drone, thus rendering it ineffective, while a hard kill destroys the drone with a direct hit.

What role does tactical strategy and technology play in your field?

Technology plays a very crucial role. You need to understand that to counter an enemy fighter one needs to consider numerous aspects – radar, missile and aircraft capabilities of both the enemy fighter as well as that of one's own.

Is there any situation that comes to mind

where there was a scramble?

We have seen many scrambles, especially when I was posted in Srinagar. Scrambles actually take place when you see something intruding in your radar airspace for which you do not have advance information. Many a times the scrambles are instigated by our western neighbor to test our reaction time. They want to know where our fighters are positioned. This is a never-ending game!

Which are the bases you have been posted at? Has there been any particularly challenging or interesting posting?

We get posted out every 3 or 4 years. The posting profile is sometimes vacancy based, but otherwise every officer should be exposed to all sorts of terrain and professional areas be it a peace location, front-line location, etc. My first posting was at Jammu after which I served in the Bikaner sector. From there I moved to Amritsar and actively participated in Operation Parakram, which involved mass mobilization of troops along India's border with Pakistan in retaliation for the 2001 Parliament attacks. I was then posted in Hyderabad followed by Srinagar and then Chennai to Delhi to Tejpur and back to Chennai, and now I am at Air Force Station Amla near Nagpur. When you are in an operational area, you relish it more. You are doing things which you like. Everything is done with an operational mindset. There is no laissez-faire.

My most memorable posting was in Srinagar as I was commanding the unit there. As a commanding officer, you instil your passion in your personnel. You plan and execute your ideas.

In peace postings, one's role could vary and after some time with seniority one's post becomes more administrative. For example, when I was at Chennai I was posted at the Mechanical Transport Training Institute (MTTI) at Avadi, which trains Fauji drivers and technicians for maintenance of vehicles. In my current posting, I will be supervising the station administratively and not be managing the radar per se.

You had a serious motorcycle accident a number of years ago. You came out of it really strongly. How did the defense forces take care of you then? Do the services make you feel like you



are part of a larger family?

I was 3 or 4 years in service and was at my first posting in Jammu when I had the near-fatal accident. I was put under DIL (dangerously ill list), but I was able to come out of it due to Her grace and the support of the Air Force establishment. While staying in the Ashram, I always felt part of something much bigger and while stepping into the defense establishment it did not give me a psychological break. It was like moving from one family to another family. You can never have a national defense force where it's use and throw. It's not a factory where people are laid off. Here people will be placed elsewhere if they are incapacitated. Even when you move to civilian life, the fauj family still takes care of you. Whenever the unit has its big events, they will remember you and send for you, all those things will be done. If any help is required, like in the case of veterans, there is an entire organization, and the defense forces look after their veterans extremely well.

What is your rank now and what are your plans, post retirement? Looking back, how would you evaluate your life in the services?

I am a Group Captain, which is equivalent to the rank of a full colonel in the Army. I still have 4 to 5 years of service left. For many of us, irrespective of which part of India we are from or what we did in the world outside, Pondicherry is and will always be the home base.

Ultimately the essentials of a life in the



Services are simple. This profession is about leading men into situations of life and death and leading by example. When as a group a slated task is assigned to you, your decision of getting certain people to execute it may mean that these boys will never come back.... In which profession is it that way? We are playing on a very different pitch! It cannot be compared with any other profession. Comparing this activity and the satisfaction level to any other walk of life seems to me inappropriate. It is just that the nature of the profession and the way of life is very different. So it all depends on what kind of taste and what kind of mission you have.

What would you say to those youngsters who are interested in joining the defense services?

If anyone wants to know something about defense, I can surely speak to him or her. I will not influence their decisions. It is for them to decide what they want to pursue. I am not rating my domain of activity as something exemplary. This has been my way, somebody else will have his or her own way. ☸



Flying High

We chat with Sucharu Rai '90 about life in the Indian Air Force.

You are the first former student to join the exclusive club of fighter pilots. When did you know that it was what you wanted to be?

As students, we were quite confused as to what we wanted to do in the future. Right from being inspired by our teachers and having thoughts of emulating them, to being told of the possibilities in the world outside, the gamut of options for a youngster of the time was fairly large. But somewhere down the line, the prospect of serving the nation in a direct capacity was inherently appealing and something that we as students in the SAICE always looked up to. Around the time we were in the Higher Course, two of our seniors, Ratan and Nijanand, joined the Indian Army. This led us to believe that we had a chance to serve the nation in a similar capacity and gave me the necessary fillip to apply.

Why I applied specifically for the Air Force?

Well, it was pure providence. It is not that I was born to be a fighter pilot. In fact, I was totally focused on joining the Army. However, as nobody from the Ashram had joined the IAF and it appeared exciting, when I filled the application along with some of my classmates, I ended up opting for the Air Force, always thinking that the Army was the Service most suitable for me. The respect, awe, and admiration a fighter pilot commands was always attractive and before I knew it, I was made to go from a bicycle in Pondicherry to an airplane in the Air Force. I started fighter flying at the age of 21 and formally earned the coveted “wings” at the age of 22.

What was the procedure to qualify and join the Air Force? Did you face any difficulty because of the lack of a proper degree?

No difficulty because of the lack of a proper

degree. Our seniors had already paved the way for us. Our certificate is recognised by the Central Government and as the exams were conducted by the UPSC, which is a Central Government institution, I faced no roadblocks. The selection process itself was quite manageable. We had the written tests consisting of three papers (English, Math/Physics, and General Knowledge) followed by the AFSB (Air Force Selection Board) testing at Mysore, consisting of psychological tests, group tasks, and a final interview. Those selected for the flying branch had to undergo a Pilot Aptitude Battery Test (PABT) and an extensive medical examination that lasted about a week.

Can you tell us something about the training? What was the routine? What are the aspects that were particularly challenging?

The training lasted for a duration of 1.5 years starting at the Begumpet Air Force Station, Hyderabad. There was a little bit of emphasis on everything, focused on shaping novices in the defense way of life. The first 6 months were an orientation on military ethos, history, discipline and an introduction to Air Force-related subjects such as aerodynamics, aero-engineering as well as physical training and fitness. This was followed by basic flying training at the Air Force Academy for 6 months and eventually advanced flying for the final 6 months before we graduated as officers with “wings”.

The challenges faced were the same for all. Physically, I was in very good shape having been a Standard Bearer in Group D. So there was no difficulty on the physical front at all. What however was my main advantage was the SAICE way of doing things sincerely with a focused and passionate approach. During my career, I have seen many peers who were probably more naturally skilled but could not sustain due to a lack of focus and passion.

What did it feel like when you took to the skies as a trained pilot? Was there a high? Was it stressful? How much longer does it take to be a fighter pilot?

More than the stress, there is a lot to adjust to, understand, and learn. The initial step in flying requires a lot of hard work in terms of studying the machine which one is trying to master and handle in the air. This involves a lot of reading about the airplane and the technical issues that make a weapon platform as well as developing decisive decision-making skills in very short time frames. The ability to deal with any unfortunate circumstances while ensuring the safety of the flight is something that has to “get into the blood”, has to be fully internalised. It takes almost 4 years for one to be thorough with all these aspects, and it is only then that you qualify as a fully capable fighter pilot who can go to war.

At what point do you go into training other young pilots?

Training of young pilots runs concurrently with your flying career. At 6 years of service, I underwent training to become an instructor. The Air Force believes that the best time to impart the



Motivational talk to the team

knowledge gained is when you are at your prime level of skill. So you become an instructor when very young and this also helps build maturity in you as a fighter pilot, as it is only when you share your knowledge that you learn more.

When you go for a sortie, how does it feel to be seated inside the cockpit?

If you are alluding to joy of flying as described by St. Exupery, definitely not, at least not in military operational flying! Because that kind of free flying is not why we take to the air. You are monitored meticulously and each and every aspect of your flight is stored, recorded and analysed. There is almost no leeway to use the aeroplane as a kite and be romantic about it.

Where have you been posted and what is a day like in the life of a fighter pilot?

I have been posted at many bases across the country, but mainly at forward bases as we call them. The motto always remains the same: to train for war and be ready for any eventuality. As the adage goes, the more you train in peace, the less you bleed in war. Suffice it to say that military flying, much like any other arm of the Forces, is serious business. Fighter squadrons are



Interacting with our Brothers in Arms

constantly practicing new ways to beat the enemy and these range from something as simple as a 1 versus 1 dogfight to large exercises involving dozens of aircraft across the entire airspace.

Planning for such missions takes hours and pilots have to learn to plan a mission meticulously, catering for all contingencies, though the actual time spent fighting in the air could be only a few minutes.

A typical day in the life of a fighter pilot starts with various briefing sessions, including a refresher brief for the day's flight that you would have planned in detail the day before. This is followed by the sortie/exercise and then the debrief. The debrief is a signature element of a fighter pilot's culture. This can sometimes take hours together and it is where the real learning happens. A threadbare analysis of what could have been done better is carried out to help the fighter squadron grow professionally. These debriefs simulate a mission and are utterly transparent and brutally honest and are unique to the services. This is done meticulously as it needs to be appreciated that lives are at stake in this very risky business. Thereafter, we move on to the next day's planning and before one realizes it may have become evening/night.

You have flown several different types of fighter jets and have had more than 2000 hours of accident-free flying! Can you share some challenges and difficult moments that you encountered? What kind of preparation/skills lead to these many hours of accident-free flying?

Let me first tell you that accident-free flying refers to cases where you have not made a mistake and blame is not attributed to you for a mishap. If the machine fails on you, it is not your fault. Accident-free flying does not mean you have not faced any difficult situations or have not had any dangerous experience.

Personally, I have had many difficult moments in the air: sometimes it was a malfunction in the machine, sometimes a scary close miss and sometimes the onset of sudden bad weather. Some life-threatening situations remain etched in memory. Once, I was flying all alone during the dark night phase in the remote deserts of Rajasthan. The desert in the region is sparsely populated and with very few lights. It was pitch dark with more stars in the sky than lights on the



Breathing in the beauty that is Bharat

ground. The initial few minutes were uneventful. However, I suddenly had the feeling that I was descending while the aircraft instruments indicated that I was ascending. In flying parlance, this is termed as disorientation. Without going into technical jargon, disorientation occurs due to a lack of adequate visual cues, an abrupt movement of the head and/or abrupt aircraft turn causing confusion for the body to correctly sense the flow of fluids in the semicircular canals of the inner ear. The thumb rule to follow during disorientation is to trust the aircraft instruments but with darkness all around there was a sudden feeling of loneliness and fear of vanishing in the vast deserts of Rajasthan. I gripped the cockpit wall firmly, removed my hands from the aircraft controls (lest my feelings overpower me and I end up crashing the aircraft) and set my aircraft on to autopilot mode, waiting for my orientation to come back. Fortunately, after a while, I was able to view the lights on the runway and I got my orientation back and landed safely. Sticking to the basic tenets of flying and discipline saw me through and saved the day.

Like all defense jobs, the life of a fighter pilot is full of commitment and challenges. However, fighter flying has its own dynamics, which makes it unique. Fighter pilots are the masters of their own destiny, as they have to take split-second

decisions about life and death without much assistance from others. Every day is a new challenge and it takes meticulous planning, hard work, and a great bit of luck to have accident-free flying, from mastering the laws of thermodynamics, human physiology and technical knowledge about the aircraft to perfecting the art of flying. In a nutshell, a fighter pilot has to be a scholar warrior with a decisive mind, adventurous spirit, and never-say-die attitude and to always believe that not even the sky is the limit.

How did your career shape up after your operational flying days? You were presented two presidential awards for displaying total dedication and professionalism of a high order when carrying out your duties as a Commanding Officer of a MiG Operational Flying Training Squadron and as a Base Commander of a forward base in the Kashmir Valley. What did you do differently to motivate your men?

For the initial 20 years of my career I was directly involved as a pilot carrying out active operational flying. In 2013, I was promoted to Group Captain, and my responsibilities widened from a frontline pilot to a larger decision-making role.

I received my first presidential award, the Vayu Sena Medal, for my tenure as a Commanding Officer (CO) of 101 Squadron, which is now



With the President after the Vayu Sena Medal Awards Ceremony.

Your wife and her sister are the only siblings flying fighter helicopters in the IAF. India has now a number of women fighter pilots, including the first woman Rafale fighter jet pilot, Shivangi Singh. How do you see the rise of 'Nari Shakti' in the Air Force?

India has been one of the pioneers in treating women equally, especially in the military field. For any country to be great, equal importance has to be given to women. In terms of capability, nothing stops women from becoming great fighter pilots. There have been incorrect portrayals in popular media of biases in the Air Force, but I can assure you that my wife never encountered any such treatment.

incidentally equipped with Rafales. In the 2 years that I commanded the unit, it achieved 6000 accident-free sorties, with an average of 800 sorties every quarter. This quantum of flying was among the highest flown by a fighter squadron at the time, when compared to any other fighter squadron in the IAF and there was not a single accident or incident during this period.

The second presidential award, the Vishisht Seva Medal, came after my stint as the Base Commander of a very frontline fighter base. Those were challenging times. My prime concern was to secure the base, and I was able to put procedures in place to avoid any mishap. I was not the first one to do this, neither would I be the last. But I was able to galvanize the base security to ensure innovative utilization of resources and, in spite of repeated attacks on security forces in the Valley, all personnel under my command were always secure. My motto, or the directions to my staff, was to create such tight-knit security measures that it would instil fear in the enemy and make them realise that the cost of an attack would be too heavy and thereby to deter them from attacking our base.

In fact, women in the Air Force want to be treated on par with their male counterparts and request not to be mollicoddled or treated with kid gloves. On a personal note, my wife had to cut short her maternity leave and rejoin her duty 3 months before her leave was to end, with our one-month-old baby in her arms, when the country went on high alert at the time. She never asked for any special favours and none were given. This illustrates the caliber of women in the IAF and the Services only empower them to become tougher.

We have inherited the entire Armed Forces from the British post Independence. Obviously a lot of our training for a long time continued to be provided by British bases. How has the scenario changed today for an officer in the Armed Forces? Do you think that our Armed Forces have carried a colonial legacy in the mind and have we been able to shrug it off?

Firstly, there is no denying that we have had a lot of British influence in our system, in terms of concepts of modern warfare, tactics, strategy, and ways of working. However, over a period

of time, as was the case with our society as well, we started becoming more and more independent. Today, we have tweaked many British-era customs to suit our own environment and have indigenized several concepts, resulting in successes in the wars that we have fought. I would like to believe that after 75 years, we are well past those days when we placed the British military on a pedestal. In fact today, it is the other way round, wherein they want to engage with us, knowing that we are emerging as a great power. The Indian Armed Forces today train other friendly foreign countries, and now even the British want us to train them!

How is the Air Force preparing for the next level of warfare?

This is indeed a big challenge, and top minds in the defence services are at work focusing their energies on the future of warfare. In fact, some time ago, the Army Chief General M.M. Naravane was quoted as having said at a seminar that India is witnessing “trailers” of future conflicts and that its adversaries would continue their efforts to achieve their strategic aims by using grey-zone activities instead of a full-fledged war. Speaking at the same seminar, our Air Chief Marshal V.R. Chaudhari and Chief of the Naval Staff Admiral R. Hari Kumar also called for a whole-nation approach in developing multi-domain military capabilities to prepare for future wars in a synergized manner. To quote ACM Chaudhari: “The traditional domains of land, sea, and air have further expanded to include cyber and space domains which will be the battlegrounds of the future.”

How would you compare the lifestyle in the defense forces to a civilian way of life?

It is a very fulfilling life because whatever you do, you do it for something bigger than yourself,

for something that many can only aspire for. I must tell you that when we joined the Air Force, it was never for the money. If you do the math, in those days, for every sortie that we flew we got a samosa worth of money! Today, things have improved. Pilots are paid well but it is not a patch on what people earn on civil street but that's totally acceptable to all of us in uniform.

The aim in the defense forces is not to crave for money; it is rather to experience life to its fullest while always having a higher goal. As I was posted in different regions of the country, I have tried to explore what the countryside has to offer. I remember running along water canals every evening when I was posted in Punjab and watching fishermen catch river fish. In Assam, they have a totally different way of catching fish which was also very interesting. So in this way, you get to



Colours in Camouflage!

discover the entire country, understand its people, breathe in the culture of each place which is unique... and also get paid for it!

We have heard of the camaraderie in the military and the pranks that are played. What were some of the pranks that you or others would pull?

One of the standard pranks in the Air Force is on new recruits. When a fresher comes into



Saluting the leadership - Welcoming the Vice President

the unit, he does not quite know who the Commanding Officer (CO) or the Flight Commander is. On the first day in office, everybody gathers in the crew-room, but everybody is dressed as somebody different. The wife of the CO may dress as a young officer and offer the new recruit a drink. The young chap has to figure out on his own who is who and this can lead to a comedy of errors!

You were deputed by the Indian Foreign Ministry to the UAE as Defense Attaché (DA). Could you tell us about this new role? How were you chosen for this and what kind of orientation did you have to undergo?

The role of a DA requires a totally different skill set, which has nothing to do with one's flying capabilities. I would like to believe that they choose the best for such roles and I am grateful to the IAF for this recognition and opportunity. To prepare for the assignment, I had to learn Arabic, both written and verbal. However,

English is widely spoken in the UAE and I had no problems communicating with my Emirati counterparts.

My role as DA was to enhance defence cooperation with the UAE in general while also with other countries, through their DAs. In recent years, we have been able to do some very good work with the UAE. In fact, the UAE provided the IAF with mid-air refuelling at 30,000 feet for our Rafales thus ensuring the fighter jets fly non-stop to India from

France. This first-of-its-kind gesture exemplifies the bonhomie and political rapprochement between New Delhi and Abu Dhabi.

You have completed 30 years of service in December 2022. How did you celebrate this phenomenal milestone and what next?

I personally do not believe in such landmarks as it is really nothing special. It's just a number and I will continue doing my work the best I can. That is exactly what we have been taught here in the Ashram, isn't it?



A soldier diplomat



A day in the office

Looking back now, how do you think your days at SAICE prepared you for life in the Air Force?

This school gives you many intangibles, which we don't realize. There is no stress in education resulting in a fairly deep knowledge of subjects rather than a superficial brushing up in order to pass exams. This works as a clear advantage, and I can say with conviction that whatever I learnt here was in fair depth since we like what we do, but what I saw with my counterparts was that they had learnt things only to pass exams, forgetting everything the very next day. Another aspect that is a given for us is sincerity. The way we are brought up here, and the perseverance and dedication of our teachers, makes sincerity second nature to many of us. In the context of the Armed Forces, sincerity may not guarantee good performance, but sincerity will ensure that you can give your best. The rest is destiny.

In moments of great stress, does the faith that you have in the Mother and Sri Aurobindo sustain you?

Big time! And this is not restricted to stressful periods only. There have been lots of moments when I felt that things have happened due to an unexplained intervention. At one point, due to a certain medical condition, I could not fly and

was languishing by the wayside in an administrative office somewhere in Delhi. And just see how things panned out. I was at a gathering and suddenly an officer walked up to me and picked up a conversation with me, straight out of the blue. The officer was curious to know why such a fit pilot was into administrative duties and after a few initial enquiries, he asked me to send my personal application for flying along with my files to him. When I asked him who he was, the gentleman in question said he was none other than the Assistant Chief of Air Staff (Medicals), the one who takes a final call on who flies and who does not, in the IAF. The very next morning, I sent him my files and within a week I was cleared to fly a fighter aircraft again after a period of 4 years, something that had never ever happened in the past



The welcome smile - at the beginning and end of a mission

anywhere in the world! How did this gentleman come to me and why did he so passionately pursue my case? There have been a huge number of such instances, and I can't explain this other than a higher force being there, always. ❧

Expressing the Beauty of Nature

*Kiran Mehra '65, born in Kolkata on the 8th of August 1944, has been teaching in the mornings at the Kindergarten of SAICE since 1962, and painting in the afternoons as advised by the Mother. Her paintings and "collages" were exhibited in the Ashram Exhibition Hall, in Auroville and also in the USA, where her paintings were stolen and this heart-breaking incident stopped her from exhibiting her work. She has also participated as an invitee in Art Exhibitions held in Pondicherry with several other local and Ashram artists. She spoke to **Harshitha Gunasekaran '21** about her journey as a student of art, and shared Mother's remarks on some of her paintings.*



best. She replied: **"Send me back all the paintings and if I find one that is good, I will put my blessings on it."** From those paintings, She chose one of a vase of roses on which She wrote in French **"Blessings: This one is the best because it is free in its execution."**

The second time She saw my paintings, She commented about a portrait I had done: **"The face looks wooden, the body looks as if it is made of cotton, but the expression is good,"** and taking a pencil She corrected the eye and the nose.

MY CONTACT WITH MOTHER THROUGH PAINTING FROM 1962-1972

I started painting with Krishnalal-ji in 1962 during my school free periods and continued with him till 1979.

Mother took a keen interest in my painting. She was not only enthusiastic, but also encouraged, explained, guided and even taught me directly throughout. I had not thought of becoming an artist but it was Mother's encouragement which inspired me to paint.

The first time that I sent Her my paintings, I asked Her to write 'Blessings' on the one She liked





Once I had sent Her a painting of a flower and asked its significance. She wrote the significance: **“Attachment to the Divine.”**

After studying Chinese painting with Hu-Hsu for three to four years (with Mother’s permission), She commented on seeing my paintings: **“You have gained strength by doing Chinese painting.”** In 1965, on my birthday, She told me: **“This year I have chosen a Chinese card for you.”** On it She wrote: **“With my Blessings for the realization of true beauty.”**

Once I was disturbed by questions as to why I did not do paintings in detail, so I wrote to Mother asking what I should do. Here is Her reply:

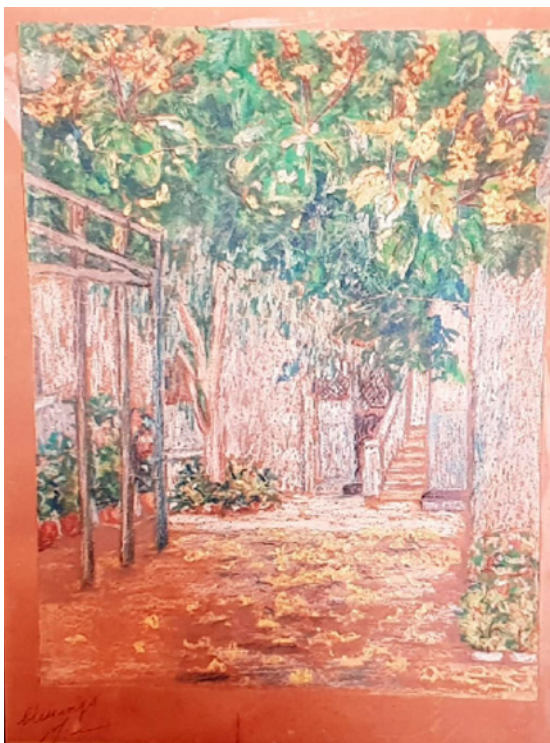
Kiran, ma chère enfant,

Why do you want to do the details? They are not at all necessary. Painting is not done to copy Nature, but to express an impression, a feeling, an emotion that we experience on seeing the beauty of Nature. It is this that is interesting and it is this that has to be expressed, and it is because you have the possibility of doing this that I encourage you to paint.”

Every year for my birthday, I made a selection of eight to ten paintings which I took to the Mother. I used to be called either last in the morning, or in the afternoon to see Her, as She used to take a lot of time seeing each painting in detail. Each time I handed Her a painting, She would place it on Her lap to look at it. Sometimes She would exclaim: **“Oh this is nice.”** Often, She commented on the medium used: **“This is watercolour, this is tempera...”** etc.

Sometimes She passed Her hand over it saying: **“This is good.”** At the end, as mentioned earlier, I used to ask for Her Blessings on the one She liked the most. On 8-8-66, my twenty-second birthday, She selected the painting of a Realization tree, which She liked so much, that She asked Champaklal-ji to give Her a red felt pen, with which she wrote: **‘Blessings,’** in French.





When She recognized the painting I had done of the Ashram courtyard, She was very happy. She said: **"Oh, this is down below,"** and She put Her Blessings on it.

On another occasion regarding a painting I had done of the light-house, She remarked: **"The clouds are so heavy, they look as if they are going to break the branches."**

I used to go to Mother on many other occasions, accompanying either my mother or father or some other family member. She would invariably ask me: **"Your painting continues?"** and I would always say: "Yes, Mother, I'll show them to you on my birthday." But on one occasion when She asked me that, I replied: "No, Mother,

nothing comes, I don't know what to do." Then Mother pointing to the things on Her table said: **"You see this pencil, this clock, you see this, you see that, you can draw anything. Once you start, little by little, it will come. Ask your mother to sit for you, and you do her portrait."**

In 1971, before I went to England, Mother told me with great joy: **"You will see the red roofs there through the fog and the trees; it is so beautiful!"** When I returned in January of 1972 and showed Her the paintings that I had done there, She was delighted with a winter landscape, and exclaimed, shivering and laughing: **"Oh the snow, the snow, it is cold!"** Even now, I can see Her laughing...

THE CONTINUATION OF MY WORK FROM 1972 ONWARDS

I continued painting, and water colours and colour pencils were my favourite medium, but around 1978 the colours, designs, textures and forms of all sorts of objects began to interest me. Seashells, sand, stones, butterfly wings, the bark of trees, threads, mica, dried flowers, etc., became so interesting for me that I began to use these very things to do collage.

And thus, I continue finding both painting and collage most stimulating and full of possibilities and Nature is my biggest inspiration.



de faire cela que je t'encourage à peindre
 avec mes
 tendres
 sentiments
 Kiran, ma chère enfant,
 pourquoi veux-tu
 faire des détails ? Ce
 n'est pas du tout nécessaire.
 La peinture n'est pas
 faite pour copier la
 Nature, mais pour
 exprimer une impression
 un sentiment, une émotion
 que nous éprouvons en
 voyant la beauté de la
 Nature - C'est cela qui
 est intéressant et c'est
 cela qu'il faut exprimer et
 c'est parce que tu as la possibilité

Mother's reply to Kiran-di's letter written on 25th August 1963



A FEW DETAILS

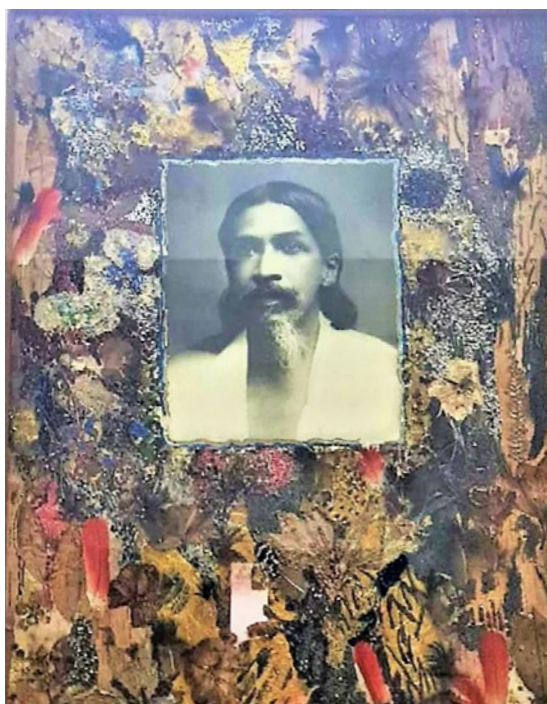
During the exhibition that I had put up at the Exhibition Hall in August 1990, many people asked me if I have any idea or composition or

arrangement in mind before I begin a painting or a “collage.”

This is a difficult question to answer as the process varies with each painting or “collage.” However, in general I have no preconceived idea or plan. But a painting may be inspired by a butterfly’s wing or by a seashell, coral, or a seascape or even the pattern left on a wall by an extinguished fire.

The “collages” often start with something that I find such as a wing, a dried flower, etc., but then I also search and look for these things because I want to express a certain feeling that I have within. Often, I collect sand from different places that I visit, mix them with powdered colours, mica etc. to create an effect. One thing suggests and leads to another, the work continues, changes, develops till something emerges.

I do not give titles to my work as I prefer that the viewers see and experience the work for themselves without any suggestion from me. ☼





MEMORABLE MOMENTS WITH KRISHNALAL-JI:

Krishnalal-ji never insisted that I do what he wanted; he let me do what I felt like, but advised as and when necessary. While I was doing something he would always stand beside me and just watch, and when he felt that he should guide he would explain how to proceed and correct. Often, he used to stand beside me and watch.

The Golconde Mural:

Krishnalal-ji did the whole painting himself and he suggested that some of us paint the plants and the flowers.

Ashram Service tree and Samadhi painting:

In the afternoons I used to go to the Ashram and sketch the plants, the courtyard, the people sitting around the Samadhi, passers-by, etc. Often, one of the old disciples would come to me and say “Will you not draw my moonlike face?” and she would sit for me with great pleasure. One day Krishnalal-ji came up with an idea; he composed this tableau, and then both of us started working on it. Krishnalal-ji painted all the sadhaks, the Samadhi, the palm tree and the Christmas tree. Each sadhak came at his or her own time, but each had a fixed place. In order to compose this tableau he drew all the sadhaks together in their usual places.



Baji Prabhou

This year's 1st December programme saw the enactment of Sri Aurobindo's narrative poem 'Baji Prabhou'. Priyanka Bardhan '17, who directed the much appreciated presentation, answers our questions.

How and why did you choose Sri Aurobindo's narrative poem 'Baji Prabhou' for the 1st December programme?

It was a unanimously agreed upon choice by the Knowledge 3rd year students. Janaki had been keen on presenting 'Baji Prabhou' since last year, and proposed it again this year. In May, a core group of 8 students read the poem with Ravi-da. They were very moved, many of them experiencing goosebumps at several moments. This reinforced their decision and they launched themselves into the project.

You must have studied the poem to understand the context and period in which Sri Aurobindo wrote it, and what it is trying to capture, etc.

Can you tell us something about it?

The poem is based on the historical 'Battle of Pavankhind' which unfolded on 13 July 1660 at Pavankhind, a pass or 'the fatal gorge' as Sri Aurobindo called it, near the Vishalgad Fort in Maharashtra. Following countless defeats against Shivaji's army, Adilshah mustered an alliance of 10000 soldiers, steered by his commander Siddi Johar. The Maratha resistance divided themselves into two — one half led by Baji Prabhushinde (spelt Baji Prabhou by Sri Aurobindo) staying the invasion at the pass, while the other ensured Shivaji's safe passage to the fort. The former fought heroically, inflicting ten times the casualties on their enemies, succumbing only once their mission was successful.





Incidentally, a Marathi film was brought out in 2022 on this very event. We watched it together with the cast to gain some context and understanding, on a day that happened to be the 363rd anniversary of the battle.

In his rendering of it into a brilliant literary work, however, Sri Aurobindo did not restrict himself to historical accuracy. For instance, he makes the strength of Baji's army 50, whereas the original number is believed to be 300. Instead of shuttling between the limitations of fact, his expansive treatment of the legendary valiance and indomitable spirit of Baji and his men is ablaze with imagery, imbued with *veera rasa*, graphic and poignant, fiery and divine. If Baji Prabhau is the story of how a handful of warriors, outnumbered manifold, resisted against all odds an assault on their Motherland, it is equally the story of their unwavering faith in Bhavani, 'the goddess formidable who watches over India till the end'. It is the truth that Sri Aurobindo himself was living, at the heart of the freedom struggle, when he wrote the poem. Here too, we find the emphasis on the inner godhead as the Light, the strength of Bhavani as the Force, and complete surrender to the Divine as the only assured path to true Freedom.

'Baji Prabhau' was published for the first time in 1910 in the *Karmayogin*.

Converting a narrative poem that describes a battle into a theatrical performance must have had its share of challenges. How did the concept evolve?

It certainly had its share of challenges. The first

version of the script was rife with comments in the margin that read something like 'Here more people enter from the wings' and 'Then they all die'. Indeed, that is exactly what we find in the text. Sri Aurobindo has at least nine distinct movements of attack and repulsion. We had to convey each of them in varied enough ways for it to remain stimulating for the audience and sustainable for the participants.

The entire cast was quite large. How did you choose the participants and the roles?

It was entirely thanks to the persuasive skills of the three organisers — Janaki, Ramyak, and Aurokrishna. They addressed different classes and groups with their infectious zeal and enthusiasm, and succeeded in recruiting three impressive armies and a stellar cast. They were keen to include Ashramites and ex-students along with the students as the 1st December, like the 2nd December programme, is a celebration and remembrance of the whole community. The division of roles came about quite naturally, based on capability and availability.

When did you start practising and what kind of rehearsal schedules did you have?

While the core group started meeting in April, and the script and music work were well underway by June, the actual practices started in





In the movies, epic battle scenes are typically depicted with an opening aerial shot of two armies charging across a sprawling battlefield, then alternating between the protagonist's and antagonist's determined, bloodthirsty faces, before cutting to a sword slashing ruthlessly through flesh and bone. Fight scenes on stage are a whole different ball game. And as mentioned earlier, we didn't have to choreograph only one or

August. We began with the Marathas, then roped in the Rajputs and Moghuls midway through September. These were the three armies, and we worked with each twice a week till October, at which time EAVP 6 and Knowledge practices took over. Come November, the whole cast met every day, the students both in the mornings and evenings, the Ashramites in the evenings. During the month, we focused first act-wise and scene-wise, building up to run-throughs, and then pointedly addressing the details. Aurokrishna was our schedule manager and he helped us stay on track. Although many members of the team had a very intense schedule along with 2nd December practices and were carrying over exhaustion from the previous months, they remained present and dedicated throughout.

two, but multiple battle scenes. Most often, the lines informed the rhythm — 'Yet by paces slow the lines advanced with labour infinite' or 'They with a rapid royal reckless pace came striding over the perilous fire-swept ground' — as well as the form — 'The main tremendous onset of the North came in a dark and undulating surge' or 'Down they fell with huge collapse, and, rolling, with their shock drove back the few who still attempted'. To make it interesting and diverse, we used lathis in one scene for swiftness and precision as well as for sonic effect, a big red cloth for colour and flow, symbolising at once battle, bloodshed, and Bhavani in another, as well as

The stylized interpretation of the battle scenes was dynamic, flowing and beautiful. Some effects like creating freeze tableaux, having the narrators move into and out of the scenes, added an artistic touch... Tell us about the creative process behind the choreography.





tableaus to depict the harsh reality and lasting effect of war imprinted on our minds. We even left one fight scene entirely to the narrators, letting them captivate the imagination as active witnesses.

The narrators had a big role to play. Was it challenging for them to learn all those lines? And did they receive any training for diction and to successfully express the underlying emotion?

We envisaged the narrators as *sutradharas*, literally the ones holding the strings, weaving through the scenes, as they fed the warriors with the power of the narration, and were nourished reciprocally by the energy and the action. They had not only to memorise and internalise the 500-odd lines, but to also time them perfectly with the music and choreography, all while respecting their entrances and exits, of which there were many. Anshul proposed some exercises to boost the process, and both he and Vignesh had several inputs from their previous experience of theatre. All three narrators worked together tirelessly, until they developed the synergy of a unit, seamlessly picking the narrative thread from one another. Everything depended heavily on the narration. At the same time, every element depended on the other. As Vignesh put it, we were all intricately woven strings, and the words were the pearls we

were (up)holding together.

Who worked on the music? And where was the music chosen from? Was there any original composition?

Ever since the inception of the project at the beginning of the year, Ramyak began collecting music which he found effective, most of it from Original Sound Tracks (OST) of movies and the work of famous composers. Once we got down to the conception, we sat together and selected tracks that would provide the appropriate mood for different scenes. The music had to complement the words, and would determine the movement, energy, and tone of every sequence. What followed was long hours of putting it together, with Ritam Mondal helping us for the more complex edits. We set the music to a recording of the poem in Anshul's voice. This served as reference for the narrators to rehearse their lines with the music.

For the last scene, which we call the Bhavani scene, we wanted the music to be special. We requested Jerry '07 to make an original track for us, and he kindly obliged amidst his busy schedule. We shared rough ideas of what we were envisioning. After a few iterations, he created a ten-minute track for the scene which sprouted many wonderful new ideas. We couldn't have imagined a better culmination to the presentation.



Tell us something about the sets and the costumes.

The moving sets offered a layer of dynamism which was very exciting to play with. It also meant they needed their own choreography which had to be linked with the rest. Aadya designed the sets, and along with an able team of helpers, transformed the structures Praful-bhai's department had built for us into a stunning mountainous landscape. There were three symbolic shifts the



sets conveyed over the course of the poem — one, the gorge became steadily narrower, representing the waning resources of the Marathas; two, the gorge came closer to the audience, marking the advance of the assault, which first approached from behind the galleries; three, the mountains which were wielded by the Marathas all along, a sign of the ease and mastery they possessed over their terrain, were in the enemies' hands at the end, indicating the transfer of dominance.

The costumes were handled by Ahana and Sumitaa. They were designed to be comfortable and conducive to movement. Each army had distinct colours — pearl, crimson, and olive green — and distinguishing features, which created a bold, dramatic effect. The narrators were in the desert

sand shade, suggesting they were an animated extension of the landscape which supported and sustained the action.

You used the stage as well as the audience portion in front of it, creating an immersive experience. What was the thinking behind this?

We needed to bring in the perception of depth, space, and distance, so we extended our definition of the stage. We wanted the audience to be close to the narrators when they introduce the story, and to establish that they are its intended listeners. By having the assailants march through the audience in the beginning, the idea was to convey that they have come from far, and for the audience to feel the rush in the air as the masses storm by, almost as though they were a part of the onslaught. For the most part, the foes had their backs to the audience, so that its empathic connect was always with Baji and his Marathas.

Did the new lighting set-up help to create the effects you wanted?

Absolutely. The lighting really enhanced the mood in every scene. This year, the Theatre acquired a set of DMX lights, which can produce the entire RGB range of colours. As superstars often do, these new lights made a late entry, arriving ten days before the final day. Fortunately for us, Sandeepan and his team sweated it out to get them up and running in just a couple of days. These along with the previous lights were programmed into an entirely digitised control system. The new system allowed us a world of possibilities. We could revisit different queues to refine colours, tones and luminosities, as well as time transitions to the music. We worked with Vinay, who gained quick familiarity with the system he



designed, and like a wizard metamorphosed what we were seeing.

What were the primary challenges you faced during the months of preparation? And which were the memorable moments?

The biggest challenge was to honour the beauty of the poetry and remain true to the vision. Along the way, we had several practical challenges. The wheels on the sets gave us some trouble, and were essential since the scenes depended on their changing composition. The red cloth presented fascinating prospects, but also frustrating problems. We were fanatically experimenting with ways to drop the cloth till the last day, attempting to find the surest way to get a beautiful arc over Baji. Raising the cloth to reveal Bhavani was another challenge. After some brain wracking, we finally devised a relatively reliable mechanism, and Akash built us a multi-pulley system to help us execute it smoothly. Although it lasted less than a minute, the Bhavani reveal was crucial — Sri Aurobindo described this Divine vision ‘passing out of him [Baji]’ with surreal clarity. The slightest error would break the spell, and we couldn’t have

that. To create the desired impact right through, the four elements — narration, action, music, and sets — had to be coordinated to perfection. This was the crux and the bulk of the work.

What was the feeling like on the day of the performance? And immediately after it?

It was indescribable. There was a strong, tangible presence in the air. Several participants said they experienced magic. After months of sheer grit and toil, we found ourselves capable of a rare surrender on the final day. One of the prompters said later that she put down her script and allowed herself to be transported by what was transpiring before her, such was the trust that the narrators would not forget a single line. And they didn’t. Praketa was no longer himself, but embodied Baji for that one hour. The warriors were charged with an energy that was beyond them. It must have permeated the Theatre, because many in the audience felt it too.

What was the feedback you received? What do you think brought it all together into such a powerful experience for the audience?

The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Our interpretation was somewhat unconventional, and we did not expect it to be received with so



much openness and appreciation. What brought it together was collaboration and commitment. The poem was a profound source of inspiration and remained our guiding light all along. Every individual who was part of the offering, onstage and offstage, believed in the creation, contributed their ideas, inputs, and energy on a daily basis.

us had only to show up with the right attitude. The rest was Grace, so palpable at so many moments. On the final day, there was a photo of Mother directing the 1st December arranged beautifully in the green room, and we filled ourselves up with the atmosphere of love and quiet strength that exuded from it.



All of you brought a lot of passion and energy into this performance. Preparing for this must have been an intense experience too. On looking back, what do you think it has left you with?

To be part of a 1st December programme is an opportunity like no other. The learnings have been abundant, on multiple fronts. Collaborating with this team, recognising the strengths in each one, has been very rewarding and nourishing, and it was a joy to work in harmony, aligning towards a common vision. Dwelling on a text of Sri Aurobindo's this extensively is in itself a transformative experience. It has been an incredible journey of growth for all of

There was positivity and sincerity from the very beginning, and it is in that spirit that the process unfolded. The choice of poem, to come back to the first question, was also opportune. The sanction was there, the roles were meted out. Each of

us. We wish more students and members of the community participate in this adventure in the future. More than anything, we are deeply grateful for what we experienced. It will stay with us forever. ❧

*“Thirty and three the gates
By which thou enterest heaven, thou fortunate soul,
Thou valiant heart. So when my hour arrives,
May I too clasp my death, saving the land
Or winning some great fortress for my lord.”*

From “Baji Prabhou” by Sri Aurobindo

My Passion for Odissi

Swarnaprabha Behera '15

I have a passion for Odissi. It began when I was 7. I've always been fascinated by classical dance as it is highly structured, complex and aesthetically pleasing. Dance also gives us an insight into India's rich art and culture.

Let me tell you about Odissi a little bit first. Odissi, considered one of the oldest Indian dance forms, originated around the 2nd century BC in the temples of Odisha, a state which is famous for

its rich art, culture, music and dance. It is the dance of the Maharis, the temple dancers, that spurred the development of Odissi and its spiritual and religious origins are reflected in the statues on the outer walls of temples in Odisha, especially the Konark temple.

Odissi is tough, honestly. It is performed in two major postures: chowka and tribhanga.

Chowka is the squat position with elbows horizontally bent at 90 degrees. Tribhanga is the posture where the body bends in one direction at the knees, the other direction at the hips and then again at the shoulders and neck. The Tribhanga is the key posture that makes Odissi graceful, lyrical and sensuous. The dance is to be entirely performed in a half seated position. The richness and beauty of this dance lies in its fast paced and complex footwork and the subtle facial expressions conveying different emotions, with a variety of hand mudras with deeper significances.

Classical dance has always been associated with women because of their physique, which is

inherently graceful, subtle, and feminine. Naari (Sanskrit for woman) has the capacity to be soft, gentle, calm, and composed like Saraswati or Lakshmi depicted in Hindu mythology. When required, she can also take on the role of the strong, bold, fierce, and intimidating Kali. It is simply mesmerizing to see how a woman can take up different avatars depending on the situation. Over the years, an increasing number of male dancers have appeared and broken the stereotype. They manage to dance gracefully, retaining their masculinity. It is a tough yet beautiful combination.

Another thing I noticed as a student of SAICE where, as we know, physical education is given a lot of importance. As dance helps one to develop coordination, physical strength, flexibility, a sense of rhythm, and subtlety, it automatically helped me in gymnastics, asanas, and other sports and physical activities. As the saying goes: "No knowledge ever goes in vain." Through dance, we also learn to appreciate the finer things and have a deeper understanding of the different aspects of life. Subconsciously, it shapes our character, way of thinking, and lifestyle.

On a personal note, I am an introvert. So it was indeed a surprise when I found out that I had no stage fright! Funnily enough, I researched a bit and found that introverts use their 'alone time' by channelizing their mind and energy to discover their underlying talents, and unleash their power of imagination and creativity. There are studies which reveal that many introverted people are creative and artistic.

I feel everyone should get the opportunity and make the effort to learn and explore dance. The best part about it is that as there is no age barrier; one can express oneself without limits. Dance is undoubtedly the best stress buster, fun workout, and it liberates you physically, mentally and spiritually. It will always make you feel young and alive in your body, mind and soul. It is the ultimate source of happiness and freedom. ❧



Vijayendra-Bhai

The Unsung Hero

Jahnavi Ravikanti '86

Vijayendra-bhai.... Or Vijji as he was fondly called, is synonymous with excellence in coaching and teaching.

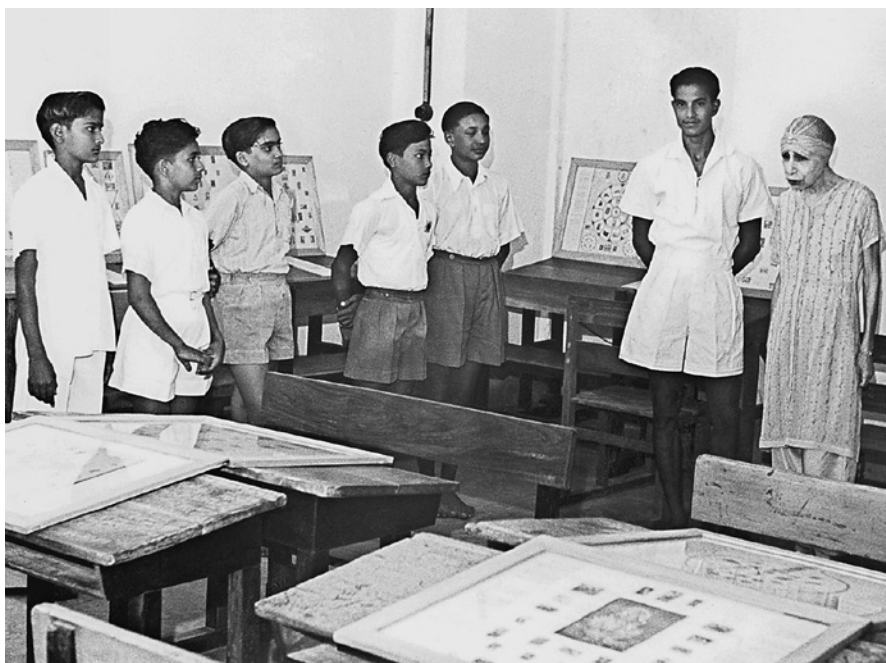
His dedication and unending passion for sports is legendary. He was a strict disciplinarian, hard taskmaster and inspiring instructor. He made us look beyond and envision our capacities and possibilities, keep our gaze at that seemingly unattainable pinnacle, and he unerringly guided us to that goal. All he asked in return was discipline and willingness to work hard.

He taught us the essence and spirit of education, how to meet challenges and surmount them and never to forget that all we do is an offering to Douce Mère.

He had an unerring eye to pick out who would be good in which position in a game and trained them for it. He was indefatigable in the drills he made us do. Throwing softballs for catching practice, challenging us to do superlative fielding and catching. His reward, if we hit the softball “Chez Mounnousamy” (we never figured who he was, just some vague guy, who lived beyond the northern boundaries of Sportsground!), we would get “un grand raskadam”! Till date we could not manage a “grand raskadam”!

His nicknames were legendary too. From which recesses of his fertile imagination he would concoct such names is a mystery to all of us. To name a few:

Babru — Debrani (to sync with his sister’s name)



The Mother at the Philatelic Exhibition in the Ashram Playground on Christmas day - 25.12.1951. From left: Pravin V Nagda; Vijayendra S Patil; Arunkant R Patel; Bibhash Mutsuddi; Chandrakant J Shah; Debakumar.

Vimaura — Charlie (as she walked like Charlie Chaplin, we supposed!)

Pragya — Shraddheki behen

Jyoti — Shraddheki behenki behen

Chida — Srisrisrisrichidanandaswami

Mihir — Mihirswami

Datta — Naik

Jyotsna — Josie



Class at the Laboratoire. Some of those in the picture: Vijayendra S Patil; Ratna Chakraborty; Bihi Roy; Brajkishore Singh; Chanda Poddar (Chandralata); Pravash Mutsuddi; Yamuna Siva; Udita Bhattacharya (Jhumur); Behram Minoo Solena.



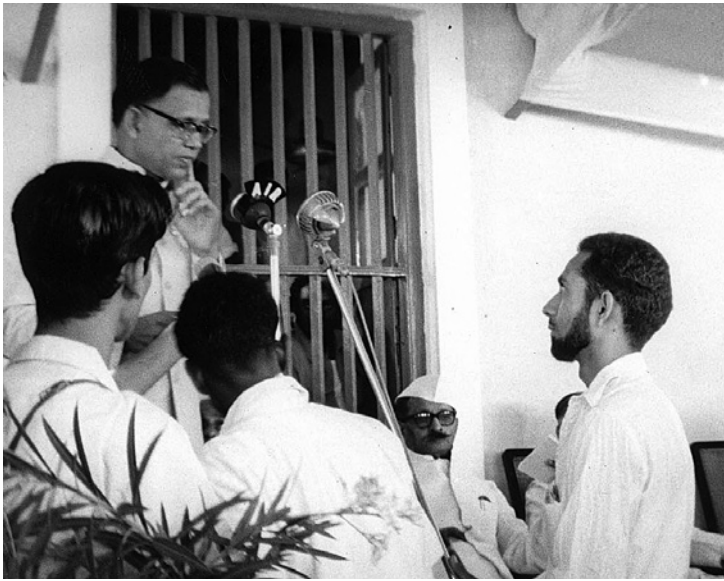
Vijayendra-bhai (left) playing in the Ashram Band, 1964

Manas — Monie
Sanjeev Ghosal — Shivaji
I could just go on...!

As a teacher he had the infinite patience to din in any concept that a student didn't understand in physics, till he/she understood. He was so organized he would go through the yearly calendar, mark out the holidays falling on his class day, and which of his students' birthdays fell on his class day, what story to read on that day.... all his corrections were in his signature green ink, an indecipherable squiggle, done with a flourish! His drawings on the board were a masterpiece of precision, though at the end of the class, the blackboard looked like a tornado-hit area with his explanations! Another thing we tried to copy was his technique in the dotted line drawing. In vain did we use numerous chalk pieces to master the ease with which he used to do it!

And woe betide those who gave a wrong answer in class! He would frown in mock anger, throw a small piece of chalk or look in pained reproach and say, "Espèce de Paoli!" or "Barnabé!" Or "Casimir!"

Once, in the days he was still playing basket



Darshan day - 15.8.1964: Release of Sri Aurobindo's stamp. Vijayendra S Patil is on the right. Madanlal Himatsingka is the speaker.

ball, he fell and broke his collar bone. Like all students, we were rubbing our hands in glee, sure that we would not have class the next day. Imagine our amazement when he walked into our class the next morning, with two huge padded rings around his shoulders (that was how fractured clavicles were treated in those days) and a brown shawl thrown over them, and greeted us calmly, as if nothing had happened and took his class. That speaks volumes about his dedication and commitment to his classes.

Encouragement was his medal for students be it in group or school. Often he would recount tales from the past and hoped to pave the way in front of us as an inspiration.

Right from C group to E group, he has guided, goaded and inspired countless generations of group members, not only to perceive their hidden possibilities, but to do so with the right spirit of sport.

He owned an original (imported) Raleigh cycle (bought for Rs.10/- in those days!). He would take great care of it by wiping it clean at

the end of each day and keep it in shining, smooth-rolling condition.

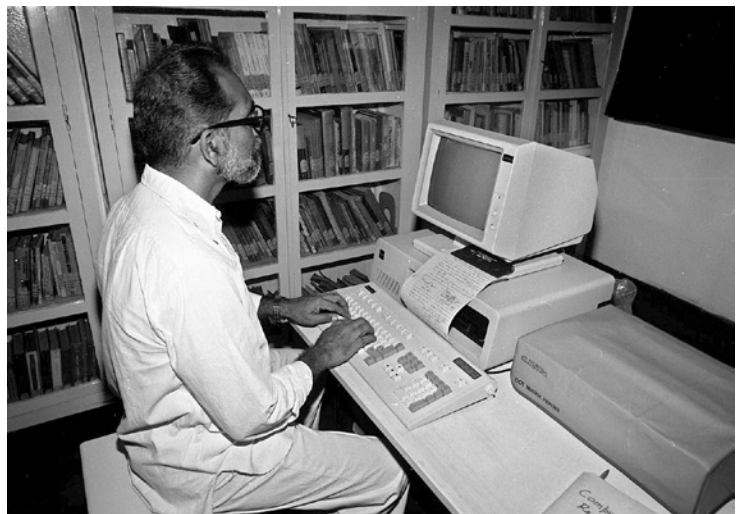
To this day the image of Vijayendra-bhai in his group uniform, with a whistle in one pocket, a stopwatch in the other, long football socks, cycling full speed, his brisk "ting-a-ling" warning pedestrians to jump out of the way is fresh in my mind.

Another of his hallmarks was the Hablik woven bag slung on his shoulder which he would use for years till the shoulder strap was frayed and unusable.

He was there in all my track runs, quietly encouraging, and if by chance I did not do as well as I expected, he would say, "on the given day, in the given circumstances, you only need to ask yourself if you have given your best effort, the rest doesn't matter"... "ch-

aque épreuve ou course que tu as, fais la comme une offrande à la Mère" Golden words, etched in my being forever.

He urged me to continue to do gymnastics



Vijayendra-bhai in SAICE's computer room, 1988

for as many years as I could. He said gymnastics keeps the body agile and supple, which would help in all other sports.



Captain and volleyball coach

How many post group discussions we have had, near Sportsground! He could discuss any topic, from sports to music, to the world situation, and to the subject closest to his heart, the Mother, the Ashram of yore.

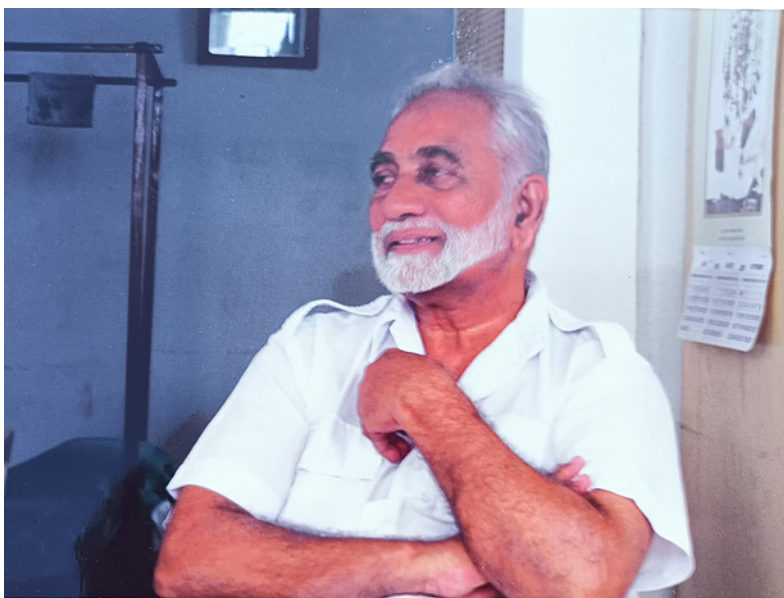
If anyone of us got a correct movement in a smash or hit or throw or even in any field item in athletics, he would say “absorb the right movement, let it sink in, so that you can reproduce it again and again.” He would show us innumerable sports videos, to watch and be inspired, to imbibe and absorb the movements, to be able to translate into ourselves when we play.

Vijayendra-bhai was a simple, sincere sadhak with an indomitable will, a quick, straight-faced wit and limitless stoicism. Teaching and coaching were his life’s sadhana. He has poured his undying enthusiasm on his group members, his free spirit roams in the

green swards of his beloved Sportsground.

Endless stories....enduring memories....

“Gurur Brahma, Gurur Vishnu, Gurur Devo Maheshwarah.” ❀



The characteristic smile

Class of 2023



Fourth Row (L to R): K Narendran, Jishnu Parayil Shibu, Auro Krishna Silveri, Aniket Deb, Swarnojit Bhattacharjee, Aditya Kumar Mahapatra, Aniruddha Paik

Third Row (L to R): Praketa Kumar Behera, Ranyak Samantaray, Shubha Sanket Samantaray, Vibhu Dalal, Ritam Lenka, Kush H Patel, Smruti Ranjan Sahoo, Sayuri Mima, Arryan

Second Row (L to R): Devdatta Chatterjee, Markendeya Achille Morsiani, Jhumur Bhattacharya, Manoj Das Gupta, Swadesh Chatterjee, Dilip Mahtani, Harshita Nilakantan, Sephali Priyadarshini Nayak

First Row (L to R): Meera Joshi, Sumitaa Ghosal, Abeni Manzar, Janaki Pande, Aditi Sharma, Svaha Myannan, Kirtiparna Swain, Aditi Mandali, Anushka Mitra, Ahana Ghosh, Sreevidhya