

MOTHER INDIA

MONTHLY REVIEW OF CULTURE



MAY 2021

Owner: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust

Printer: Swadhin Chatterjee

Publisher: Manoj Das Gupta

Published from: Publication Department, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 605 002

And Printed from: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press,
No. 38, Goubert Avenue, Pondicherry, 605001, India

Editor: S. Ravi

Registered with the Registrar of Newspapers for India: RNI No. 8667/63

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MONTHLY REVIEW OF CULTURE

MAY 2021

PRICE: Rs. 30.00

SUBSCRIPTIONS

INLAND

Annual: Rs. 200.00 (or 2 years – Rs. 400/-, 3 years Rs. 600/- etc.)

For 10 years: Rs. 1,800.00

Price per Single Copy: Rs. 30.00

OVERSEAS

Sea Mail: (valid for USA and Canada only)

Annual: \$35

For 10 years: \$350

Air Mail:

Annual: \$70

For 10 years: \$700

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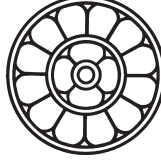
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Lord, Thou hast willed, and I execute,

A new light breaks upon the earth,

A new world is born.

The things that were promised are fulfilled.



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All correspondence to be addressed to:

MOTHER INDIA, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry - 605002, India

Phone: (0413) 2233642

e-mail: motherindia@sriurobindoashram.org.in

Publishers: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust

Founding Editor: K. D. SETHNA (AMAL KIRAN)

Associate Editors: HEMANT KAPOOR & RANGANATH RAGHAVAN

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Vol. LXXIV

No. 5

“Great is Truth and it shall prevail”

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‘IN MATTER’S BODY FIND THY HEAVEN-BORN SOUL’

At first out of the busy hum of mind
As if from a loud thronged market into a cave
By an inward moment’s magic she had come.
A stark hushed emptiness became her self:
Her mind unvisited by the voice of thought
Stared at a void deep’s dumb infinity.
Her heights receded, her depths behind her closed;
All fled away from her and left her blank.
But when she came back to her self of thought,
Once more she was a human thing on earth,
A lump of Matter, a house of closed sight,
A mind compelled to think out ignorance,
A life-force pressed into a camp of works
And the material world her limiting field.
Amazed like one unknowing she sought her way
Out of the tangle of man’s ignorant past
That took the surface person for the soul.
Then a Voice spoke that dwelt on secret heights:
“For man thou seekst, not for thyself alone.
Only if God assumes the human mind
And puts on mortal ignorance for his cloak
And makes himself the Dwarf with triple stride,
Can he help man to grow into the God.
As man disguised the cosmic Greatness works
And finds the mystic inaccessible gate
And opens the Immortal’s golden door.
Man, human, follows in God’s human steps.
Accepting his darkness thou must bring to him light,
Accepting his sorrow thou must bring to him bliss.
In Matter’s body find thy heaven-born soul.”
Then Savitri surged out of her body’s wall
And stood a little span outside herself
And looked into her subtle being’s depths
And in its heart as in a lotus-bud
Divined her secret and mysterious soul.

SRI AUROBINDO

(*Savitri*, Book VI, Canto III, CWSA, Vol. 34, pp. 488-89)

A CHAPTER FOR A WORK ON THE VEDA

Chapter I.

Since our earliest ages the Veda has been, in the invincible tradition of our race, the bedrock of all our creeds; in this our goddess of veiled and ancient speech we have always persisted in seeing the fruitful mother of all our Indian spirituality. For it is nothing but the simple truth, evident whenever we look below the surface & beyond the details, that every creed, sect, school of philosophy which has had any roots in our Indian temperament or any vitality of survival in our Indian surroundings has been in its secret nature, if not in its open features, a child of the eternal Vedic inspiration. All the outbursts of religious life that have helped to maintain or renew through the course of several millenniums the vitality of our race, the eternal richness and fruitfulness of our ancient culture, the fineness and profound sincerity of our undying spiritual attainment and endeavour, were derived, if we trace them to their remote sources, from the word or the substance of the Veda. All our religious innovators, restorers, systematisers, wittingly or unwittingly, of good will or against their grain, have been stirred to their task by some vibration that reached them from those far-off ages. Our Darshana, Tantra and Purana, our Shaivism, Shaktism and Vaishnavism, our orthodoxy, heresy and heterodoxy, even when they have been the most perfect misunderstandings of each other, have always been imperfect understandings of one Vedic truth. Shankara clasped the head of Vedic truth, Ramanuja embraced its heart; but both the great disputants were dazzled by their adoration of the body of one veiled deity. Our greatest modern minds are mere tributaries of the old Rishis. This very Shankara who seems to us a giant, had only a fragment of their knowledge. Buddha wandered away on a bypath of their universal kingdom. In our own day Ramakrishna lived in his being and concretised in his talk, Vivekananda threw out into brilliance of many-sided thought and eloquent speech the essence of ancient Veda. The Veda was the beginning of our spiritual knowledge; the Veda will remain its end. These compositions of an unknown antiquity are as the many breasts of the eternal Mother of knowledge from which our succeeding ages have all been fed.

Yet, of these our mighty origins, how much do we really understand? The four Vedas, written in a language which has ceased to be intelligible to us, couched in a vocabulary which, by its resemblance to classical Sanscrit as much as by its difference, offers an unequalled vantage-ground no less for natural misunderstanding than for the deliberate ingenuities of the scholar, using for their expression of deep religious and psychological truths a scheme of terms and symbols of which the key has long been withdrawn from us, remain to us even now a sacred but a sealed

volume. Imperfectly understanding their secret even in our more ancient epochs, we have allowed them, as the current of time carried us farther away from our beginnings, to fall into a sacred neglect and almost into a revered oblivion. Only those whom a strong and unquestioning orthodoxy dispenses from the obligations of the critical spirit, can for a moment imagine that Sayana holds for us the key to their meaning. The advent and labours of European scholarship have rescued these divine hymns from a long secrecy and neglect, but have thrown no trustworthy illumination on their secret. Rather, if Indians hardly understand the Vedas at all, the Europeans have systematised a radical misunderstanding of them. Their materialistic interpretation, now dominant in cultivated minds, translated into our modern tongues, taught in our universities, diffused unquestioningly by pen and tongue, has been more fatal to Vedic truth than our reverential ignorance. For, passed through a mentality at once modern and alien, these ancient writings present themselves to us in a strange and disillusioning garb, no longer obscure, indeed, to our fancy, but to our understanding crude, shallow and barbarous. They appear to us as the work, incoherent in utterance, arbitrary in fancy & void of intellectual content, of early savages, — savages with a singularly warped and insincere mind and a gaudy and incompetent imagination. In reality, these strange trappings are a modern masquerade. The scholars of Europe have constructed for themselves by a study from outside of degenerate humanity at the point of lapsing back into the animal, a fanciful psychology of prehistoric humanity; they have read into this psychology the most ingenious Alexandrian conceits possible to the richly stored and rapidly creative modern scholastic imagination, and this compound they have presented to us as the ascertained meaning of the Veda. They base their version on the inchoate sciences, so-styled, but not so admitted by serious scientists, of Comparative Philology, Comparative Mythology and Archaeology, — branches of conjectural learning which may well be the obscure dawn of a great and illuminative knowledge, but, as yet and in themselves, are so inchoate, so imperfect, so devoid of sure fundamental laws that they can be no more authoritative to future enquiry than the early gropings of Paracelsus and his contemporaries to the modern chemical analyst. And if they are not to be authoritative to future enquiry, neither can they be binding on the living seeker after knowledge. Anyone of Indian birth who wishes to occupy his life or his leisure with Vedic enquiry as it is at present conducted, may enjoy the pleasures of an interesting and liberal branch of speculative research, in which he will find ample sport for his imagination and a delightful satisfaction and freedom for the most extravagant gambols of his ingenuity; but more serious results need not be expected from his labour. After the ingenious toils of Roth & Max Muller, as after the erudite diligence of Yaska & Sayana, the Vedic mantras remain for us what they have been for some thousands of years, a darkness of lost light and a sealed mystery.

Driven from its ancient reverence for the mystic Veda, Indian spirituality under

the stress of that modern scientific materialism which takes the savage for its basis and for its culmination the perfectly-equipped human ant or bee, felt the need of some ancient retreat in which it could cherish a profounder knowledge and a more delicate ideal, some anchor by which it could still fix itself, even in this invading flood, to its immemorial past. It found what it sought in the Upanishads. For the Europeans, our modern authorities without whose sanction we cannot trust ourselves to believe anything, know anything or so much as initiate a fruitful experiment, have admitted the subtlety, depth and sublimity of the Upanishads. Therefore we feel ourselves safe in honouring the Vedanta, even if we have to renounce the Veda. Moreover, we have here the comfort of being able to assert truthfully that Indian & European authorities agree. The Upanishads, accepted by Schopenhauer, have been explained by Shankara; they have shaped the Particularism of Ramanuja and influenced the transcendentalism of Emerson. Great philosophies have been born of them, which, as Europeans have noted with an admiring or patronising wonder and Indians with a sort of obsequious pride, are on a level or almost on a level with the metaphysical ideas of Kant and Hegel! Apart, even, from these baser concessions of the subjugated Indian mind, it has been with a feeling of sincere relief and consolation that truly spiritual Indians, distressed by the clamorous pressure of Occidental scepticism, have found in the Upanishads a rock of refuge on which they can await securely the inevitable subsidence of these devastating waters. They find here an authority of which even European rationalism has been compelled to speak with some respect and a light which even this wild Western wind has been unable to extinguish.

But these are secondary and transient considerations. When we put them aside and look face to face, using the critical reason and without prejudice, at these sacred writings, when we have perused carefully & thoughtfully the twelve great Upanishads from end to end, how much have we understood of them? I think if we are honest with ourselves, we shall have to say, "Of half of what I have read, nothing at all; of the other half I understand uncertainly and at second hand a large portion, and, certainly and perfectly, a lesser portion more or less considerable." If we dwell a little upon the eighteen verses of the Isha Upanishad, — one of the briefest, simplest and plainest of these Scriptures, — we shall soon realise how little we have really understood. We understand of the first three slokas what Shankara has explained to us about them, with the addition possibly of a few associations from the Gita awakened by such expressions as *kurvanneveha karmáni* and *na karma lipyate nare*. We acquire from the next two verses a vague idea of the supreme universality of the Brahman without however attaching any very exact significance to the powerful and striking expressions of the Upanishad. We understand clearly enough, if a little superficially, the great idea of the sixth and seventh verses because of the exact consonance of the expressions with familiar lines in the Gita and the prominence which this particular discipline has received in the life and practice of the famous

saints and Yogins of mediaeval and modern India. From the eighth verse we get again a vague idea of God and the Brahman. In the six slokas that follow we wander in the half darkness created by the strange perversions of Shankara and the commentators. In the remainder of the Upanishad we understand, again with sufficient clearness, the central Vedantic idea conveyed in the phrase, *Yo asau purushah so'ham asmi*, but, for the rest, nothing. We can attach no clear idea to the golden vessel by which the face of Truth is hid, to the marshalling and drawing together of the rays of the Sun or to the revelation of its "most auspicious shape of all". We have no key in our own ideas or experience to the association of Agni, the lord of fire, with the removal of sin and with the travelling of the good path to felicity. For these are Vedic figures and the European misinterpretation of the Vedas, which alone we know or accept, offers us no clue to these ancient ideas and their associations. Throughout the simpler and, as we suppose, the later Upanishads, we shall have the same experience; we shall find that we understand clearly only so much as has entered into the more prominent tenets of the later Vedantic philosophies or is familiarised to our minds by the lives of our great saints and teachers or intertwined with the associations of comparatively modern scriptures like the Gita; that we understand less clearly and certainly so much of the less familiar ideas as Shankara has chosen or been able to explain to us; but that there is always a residuum of which we have not the slightest comprehension.

In the lesser Upanishads, however, with the exception of the Prasna, the residuum is not large enough in quantity or strange enough in character to produce any impression of bewilderment. But in those great & profound Upanishads built on a larger plan, which form the bulk of the early Vedanta, the Chandogya, the Brihad Aranyaka, the Kaushitaki, the Taittiriya, even the Aitareya, this unintelligible residuum becomes the major portion, sometimes almost the great mass of the writing. Often we feel ourselves to be in a mighty tropical jungle of strange intellectual flora and fauna, a jungle through which there is no road or bypath, in which indeed there are fortunate clearings and brilliant & familiar stars shine down upon us, but everywhere else only a luxuriant wilderness of foliage, deep scented unknown flowers, strangely-brilliant fruits and labyrinths of festooned roots and interlacing branches in which we are caught or over which we stumble. There is here a depth and strangeness of symbolism, a luxuriance of ancient and unfamiliar expression, a richness of elusive psychological experience inexpressible in less figurative and concrete language, which baffles our facile and active but shallower and more superficial modern experience. We have a right to suppose that this forest is worth entering, that it is no wilderness of flowery brambles, but full of profitable riches; for where we can understand, we find ourselves confronted by some of the deepest and most suggestive ideas that mankind has ever had about the mysteries of existence. Which of us can entirely enter into and identify himself with the ideas and images of the second chapter in the Brihad Aranyaka? Yet there are few profounder thoughts

in philosophical literature than its great central idea of Ashanaya Mrityu, Hunger who is Death, as the builder of this material world. But who will be our guide in this forest? who can illuminate for us that which is dark in these Upanishads or, conquering the rapid and deafening surge of modern thought, plunge deep into the remoter, silent depths of our human experience and recover for us the divinations, perceptions, experiences of the early Rishis?

Not certainly our European guides, on whom we rely so implicitly for the sense of the Vedas. For they have a very summary method of dealing with whatever in Oriental thought they cannot appreciate or cannot understand. These portions are to them a mass of rubbish; they are, a great admirer of Vedanta has said, “the babblings of humanity’s nonage”. It is easy to get rid of the difficulty by a brilliant literary antithesis between the unexampled sublimity & wisdom of the higher speculations of the early Vedantic thinkers and the childish and savage stupidity of the bulk of their thinking. This method saves the trouble of farther inquiry; but apart from the danger to truth and to patient and impartial thinking involved in the rash and arrogant supposition that what *we* cannot understand or believe, must necessarily be rubbish, it involves also a psychological difficulty which cannot be lightly accepted. If indeed the admittedly valuable parts of the Upanishads were merely brilliant intellectual speculations, we might suppose that the human mind, emerging from its first barbaric inefficiency, rose above itself in a series of brilliant flashes, without being able to get rid of the smoke & obscurity in which it was still for the most part enveloped, and in this way we might explain the apparent intermixture of sublime wisdom with futile *niaiserie* in the Upanishads. But what we have is something much more solid, profound and durable. We find ourselves in the presence not of intellectual speculations which do not lead beyond themselves, but of an enduring system of permanent & always verifiable spiritual experiences. The system is not only deep, but carefully developed, not only surprisingly penetrative but regular and well-ordered; the experiences depend on a perfectly grasped and long-established science of practical psychology, which may or may not be justified by modern psychological investigation, itself as yet only in its infancy, but has at any rate stood the test of thousands of years of practical experiment by men passionately in search not merely of speculative truth, but of actual, vital, verifiable experiences, to them of a more than life-and-death importance. Wherever it has been tested, this ancient system has always been justified by its results. In any field of scientific research such constant justification would be held conclusive of the validity of the system. But, in any case, it is the truth that the writers of the Upanishad were not infantile thinkers making happy uncoordinated guesses; they were, rather, careful inquirers in possession of a great system of thought, intuitional, no doubt, rather than logical, but still reposing for its material verity on a method of strenuous experiment & searching observation. This aspect of Vedantic thinking is not likely to be grasped by the European mind to which our Indian experiences seem foreign,

fantastic and inadmissible; but to those of us in India who know anything of the ancient practice and experiment upon which the truths preserved in the Upanishads have been erected, this character of the old Vedanta is real, patent and undeniable. It is the contemptuous pseudo-rationalistic dismissal of the foundation, while admitting respectfully the superstructure, which seems to us fantastic and inadmissible. The Upanishads, being what they are, cannot be a mixture of perfect wisdom and childish babble; such an unusual & bizarre combination becomes, under the circumstances, not only a paradox [but] a psychological impossibility. Only this is true that they are expressed in an imagery the key to which is lost and contain a great number of important ideas of which later metaphysical speculation has allowed itself to lose hold. If the Vedas are dark to us except in their outer ceremonial, the Upanishads are clear to us only in their central ideas and larger suggestions.

But how then can writings so obscure or at any rate so imperfectly understood have exercised over the thought of millenniums the vast and pervasive influence of which we know, so pervasive that all positive Indian thought, even Buddhism, can be described as Vedic in origin and shaping spirit when not Vedic or even when anti-Vedic in its garb and formed character? Thought has other means of survival and reproduction than its ordinary overt and physical instruments. After it has been deprived of propagation by speech and writing, even after it has disappeared out of the conscious mentality, it can return and recover itself not only in the individual, — that is common enough, — but, by a very similar act of memory, in the race. The workings of our psychology are as yet ill understood and we do not know precisely by what means or forces the subconscious operations of mentality are conducted; but some of the processes used by the great Universal in His more secret works are becoming apparent. Physical heredity is certainly one of them. It is true that thought is not inherited; but types of mentality and mental tendencies are, apparently, handed down with the physical plasm, and out of a persistent type of mentality there is always a possibility of the emergence from age to age of a recurrent type of thought. The Vedic mental type was fixed in the Indian race at an early period of its formation and throughout all external variations has never really changed. There is, therefore, in the Indian mind a predisposition to the recovery of the fundamental Vedic ideas; those directions of mentality which are most natural to the Vedic mental type, easily recur and a slight suggestion is all that is needed to set thought spinning in the old grooves.

But the physical inheritance is not sufficient in itself, nor is it even the only subconscious instrument in the persistence of human and national mentality. As psychology progresses, I think it will be more and more clearly recognised that just as men live in one physical atmosphere and are affected in their physical conditions by its state, currents and contents and by the physical condition of others near to them, so also and even to a greater extent we live in one mental atmosphere and are

affected in our mental condition and activities by its state, current and contents and by the mental condition and activities of others similarly affected in our near vicinity. The dynamic action of the mental atmosphere is evident enough in the psychology of crowds, in the rapidity of development of great thought-movements & general tendencies of corporate action and in their contemporaneous efflorescence in widely divided countries. These phenomena have given rise to a vague idea of thought-waves resembling the waves of electricity in the physical parts of Nature. But if, instead of confining ourselves to these superficial and striking phenomena, we go deeper down into the normal and obscurer action, we shall find in addition to the dynamic movements a constant static condition and pressure of the mental atmosphere which varies but seems hardly to change substantially from age to age. For waves and currents presuppose a constant sea out of which they rise and into which they again sink to rest. It is the pressure of this atmospheric sea that more permanently determines the constant mentality of a continent or a nation. Into it, after all revolutions and dynamic activities, humanity tends to sink back with whatever riches it has gained and often long periods are necessary for their absorption and assimilation. The mind-atmosphere has its needs and its conditions; it alters into its own image whatever is new and foreign and assimilates even when it seems to be assimilated; it rejects everything that would too radically disintegrate its enduring composition. It is at once infinitely yielding & plastic and infinitely persistent in its general character. It casts essential Buddhism out of India and replaces it by a huge phantasmagorical complex Hinduised Buddhism; it constantly purges mysticism out of Europe and replaces essential Christianity with its sublimely tender and delicate Oriental psychology by a strenuous, external, dogmatic, materialistic and practical creed. Individual men and even men in the mass are ready enough to change under a comparatively slight impulsion; it is the compelling pressure of the mental atmosphere which prevents them from changing too radically so that when we think we have effected a revolution, we find that we have only effected an external readjustment or new dress of an old reality. The soul of things in us tends to remain the same. For steadfastness in mobility is the sound law of our being & the condition of healthy survival; Nature keeps us to it on peril of prolonged disorder, deterioration or fatal decay. Into this circumambient mental atmosphere in which we live & by which we draw our mental inspiration and respiration, all the old thoughts have entered, are lying obscure, many of them disaggregated, but none entirely lost. Under the proper conditions they may, they even tend to reconstitute themselves, to reappear.

In India such returns upon our past are more common than in any other country, partly from certain external causes, from the persistence of certain external suggestions, but much more because of the constant practice of Yoga by a large number of typical and central souls who act, overtly or silently, upon the general mass of Indian humanity. The discipline of Yoga renders a man much more sensible to the surrounding mental atmosphere, than in his ordinary state. He becomes

consciously aware of it, feels intelligently its impacts, stirs more quickly to its deep buried secrets and obscure suggestions. And as he becomes more quick to receive, so also he becomes more powerful to impart. Practising forms of the old Vedantic disciplines, he recovers also forms of the old Vedantic thought and mentality and, modifying them in expression but not in essence by his own present personality, he pours them out on his surroundings. This has been the secret of the persistent Vedism of Indian thought & spirituality from the earliest ages to those modern movements of which we are ourselves the witnesses or the partakers.

Outward aids have powerfully confirmed the effect of these inward processes, — the reign of Vedic philosophies, the dominance of religions rich with the sap of the old Vedic spirit, the traditional teachings of particular Yogic schools, the theory & practice of the Guru-parampara. It would be as great a mistake to exaggerate as to belittle the importance of any of these aids in themselves. Vedic knowledge was rich, many-sided, elastic, flexible; but the metaphysical philosophies are limited by the very law of their logical structure. They are compelled to select and reject, to systematise only what can be harmonised in a single logical formula; and a logical formula, however wide, is always too narrow to contain God's truth which is universal, complex and many-faceted. The dominance of particular metaphysical systems has tended to preserve fragments of the old Vedic truth, but to disfigure and dissolve it as a whole in its comprehensiveness and catholicity. Moreover, a metaphysical system by itself can never lay powerful hold on a people. We of the present age, who are excessively intellectualised, are apt to attach too great an importance and power to the works of the pure intellect. Systems of pure metaphysics which have no connection with the constant psychological experience and practice of men, are apt to become, like the modern philosophies of Europe and unlike the old Greek philosophies, merely noble pastimes for the intellectual few. They influence the generality of men, but by a slight and indirect process, not profoundly, not puissantly, not permanently. The Indian metaphysical systems have influenced the whole mentality of the Indian people profoundly, puissantly, permanently, not because of their logical subtleties, not even so much by the force & loftiness of their general ideas, but by their close dependence on powerful and widely-practised systems of psychological discipline, — systems, as we say in India, of Yoga.

The influence of religion has been yet more dynamical; it is always indeed more dynamical than the influence of philosophy, because religion appeals to the higher, secret, unattainable parts of our nature through the emotions and sensations which are better developed in humanity than the pure intellect. But even the religious emotions & sensations, though strong, swift and tenacious of a satisfaction once given, yet eventually tire and change; for this reason religions tend after a time to decay and perish. But in India the Vedic religions do not decay and perish; they change and are reborn. And they have this good fortune precisely because of the Vedic element in them. Their ritual, forms, worship, ceremonies, high days are not

Vedic; even if they enshrine old Vedic ideas, they do it ignorantly and under a disguise; but all these religions have in their recesses some core of constant psychological practice and discipline, in a word, some form of Yoga by which they live; and always it is, in essence, a Vedic practice and a Vedic discipline. Religions think that they live by their dogmas, their sacred books, their ceremonies, but these are all aids and trappings; they live really by the men who practise them, by their clergy and mystics and much more by their mystics than by their clergy. So long as a religion has in its fold a sufficient number of souls who can retire within themselves and live there with God, so long it cannot help enduring, even though all the rest of the world is against it; once it loses this core of life, no amount of temporal power and prestige, of attractive ceremonial, of passionate belief & stiff dogmatism or even of wise & supple flexibility, savoir-faire & self-adaptation can save it from its inevitable disappearance. The great Vedic religions in India have always had this nucleus of mystics; they have always been rich in men capable of living with God; but they have not left the preservation of the indispensable nucleus to chance, they have attempted to secure it by a traditional practice and discipline, usually of what is known in India as Bhaktiyoga. By this Yoga and the experience of the saints and Sadhus who have practised it, much more than by Puranic legend and outward devotion, — though these also have helped, — our religious systems have done much to preserve the thoughts and experiences of the early Rishis to their distant posterity.

This vitalising core of philosophy, this saving essence of religion, Yoga, has itself an inner reality and an outer body. It has organised and variously summarised its different parts of experience and various methods of experiment in a great number of schools; and it preserves in all its schools a common fund of essential experience which goes back to the ancient Vedic sources. In these days, when the natural ignorance of Europeans about this characteristic Indian discipline has been successfully acquired as a part of their enlightenment by educated Indians, there is a tendency to identify Yoga with the Rajayogic system of Patanjali, because that alone is known to the European scholar. But Yoga cannot be confined to a single school or a single system. Patanjali's Yogashastra is concerned only with Rajayoga and only with one system of Rajayoga; there are a hundred others of which a few have their written rules, practices or aphorisms, but the rest, among them some of the most ancient and august, like the school of Dattatreya, have been handed down from an early era by the long linked generations of its Guru-parampara. This profuse ramification of Yogic systems, like the inexhaustible fertility of religious sects and orders, is a sign and an unflinching accompaniment of the richness, power and freedom of spiritual life in this country. It is not only an accompaniment, but a necessary condition. If, for instance, Yoga had allowed itself to formalise into the strict tenets and stereotyped methods of a single school, even a sound and great school like Patanjali's, it would long ago have perished or become, like much of our religious

observance, a soulless body. The Infinite within us demands an infinite freedom, of various experience, of various self-expression, of various self-realisation. It loves order and arrangement, but will not long brook a confined immobility. It is only the material, the inert that depends for its stability on blind obedience to iron and immutable processes, the stability of inner things rests rather on a regulated, but still free and variable activity. Therefore, whatever in the mental world formalises too rigidly, is preparing its own decadence; the movement towards rigidity too long persisted in, is usually a sign that the infinite Life is about to withdraw from the body it has been informing. India has not been exempt from the immobilising tendency even in that Yoga which has been its hidden wellspring of life and the secret of its perennial vitality; there has been a disposition to formalise into one school or another and repeat from generation to generation its methods & experiences. But the Indian mental atmosphere tends always, by a return upon that which is most vital in it, to bring out great souls who, like Buddha, like Chaitanya, like Nanak, like Ramdas, like Ramakrishna, belong to no school, owe their knowledge to no spiritual preceptor, but go back to the Source of all within themselves and emerge from it with some perfectly realised truth of the eternal and universal Veda. As their source is universal, so too they tend to cast out their gains universally upon mankind, so far at least as their surroundings & times are able to bear the truth and live, — thus they revivify and preserve the spirituality in our mental environment. Great are the Yogins who, faithful to some long-established school of spiritual discipline, renew perfectly in themselves its perfect results and hand down their sacred gains as in a sealed and jealously guarded vase to the most worthy disciple; but those have a greater effect on the world who break the vase before they depart and pour out its content of life-giving sweetness on the world around them. Here too, as in philosophy, as in religion, the outer & systematised forms have done much to preserve the ancient truth, in its parts, if not in its fullness; they have served the purpose of flasks for keeping a little of the Soma wine of the Veda. But it is to those who have gone back most freely to the inner source that is due the perpetual reflooding of the Indian mind with Vedic truth and its immortal permanence and unfailing reappearance in philosophy, in religious teaching and observance and in personal spiritual experience and discipline.

None of these puissant exterior aids to the permanence of the Veda would have been entirely effective without another, yet more characteristic of our Indian organisation, the guruparampara or unbroken succession of the human vessels of divine knowledge. This Indian institution, ill-understood by the mechanical rationalistic temper of our modern times, is founded upon a perfectly correct appreciation of the essential conditions indispensable for the transmission of a difficult knowledge. All human knowledge consists of three necessary elements, the thing itself which is known, the word or form in which it is expressed and the sense of the word or form which is the link between the thing and its expression. The thing itself,

existing always, is always and at any given time capable of being known; the word or form can also be constantly preserved and may, then, always and at any given time yield up its secret; but that secret lies in the right sense to be attached to the symbol and needs for its preservation an intermediary, a vessel, a fourth element. The existence of the thing to be known is not sufficient for knowledge; the existence of the perfect symbol is not sufficient; we need in addition as a receptacle of its sense the competent knower who is termed technically in the language of our philosophy, the aptajana, the expert and adept. The aptajana transmitting his knowledge to a fit disciple is our Indian guru. To take a simple scientific instance, it has always been true and will always remain true that the mixture of oxygen and hydrogen results in water; the chemical formula expressing the truth, may, having been once settled, remain permanently written; but unless there is also the competent knower who understands the sense of the formula, has submitted it to the test of realisation by experience and is able to hand on his knowledge and his method to his successors, the existence of the formula would not save the knowledge from disappearing for a time from the grasp of humanity. The formula would then come to be regarded only as an incomprehensible superstitious jargon & abracadabra, as the mantras of our religious & Yogic schools are now regarded by many modernised Indians. In the things of the spirit this necessity of the human intermediary is a hundred times more keenly felt than in any material process; for the thing itself is more remote from daily experience, the methods which bring it into the range of intelligent realisation are much more difficult and delicate and the formulas in which it is couched, are necessarily elusive and with difficulty intelligible. Therefore India, supremely sensitive to the importance of spiritual knowledge and experience, unequalled in its instinct for the right spiritual method, has organised the institution of the guruparampara as an essential instrument for the survival of Veda. The truth of Brahman is the thing to be known, the Veda and Vedanta are the word-symbol and formal expression of the Brahman, — shabdham Brahma, the guru is the human receptacle of the knowledge who transmits it to his worthiest disciples. Thus the guruparampara forms the succession of spiritual torchbearers, who, as in the ancient Greek festival, hand on the light of truth from generation to generation so that the sacred knowledge received in the morning of our national daytime may last, even though with diminutions and obscurations, not only into its evening but on through whatever night of time is intended, to the dawn of another golden age of spirituality. Who shall say out of what distant twilight of time the Veda was first revealed to mankind? Who shall say to what pre-cataclysmal undreamed consummation of our present humanity it shall endure? But we Hindus believe it to be an eternal message which God will have preserved by his chosen vessels as the secret thing out of which all human activity dumbly emerges and to which it is destined by a conscious fulfilment to return.

It is this wise and necessary institution of our forefathers to which we owe the

preservation of Vedic truth in our midst even after the actual words of the written Vedas have ceased to bear to us their original significance. Without its aid the abstruse and difficult generalisations of metaphysics could not have prolonged their vitality nor so powerfully propagated themselves that even the beggar in the streets and the peasant in his fields are permeated with some portion of their truth; the living truths of religion could not have maintained so persistent and so puissant a vitality; the schools of Yoga could not have transmitted the essence of their knowledge, methods and experiences from early Vedic times onward into the darkness of our own era. But like all external forms the guruparampara is liable to vicissitudes, to formalisation, to loss of its perfect original virtue. The orthodox formalist supposes that by the mere mechanical act of transmission the unimpaired vitality of the truth is automatically secured. But there are many accidents to which that security is liable. The guru may not always find a perfect disciple; he still imparts his knowledge, but the vessel can only hold according to its capacity: then the truth is obscured, if not permanently, then for one or more generations. There are also more general mishaps incidental to the general law of periodicity & decay which governs many parts of Nature. As the mental & vital atmosphere in which we dwell becomes thickened with obscurations, the general capacity of men diminishes and a time comes when the essential office of the guru is only fulfilled in the exceptions and the name becomes ordinarily prostituted to the mercenary priest or the unworthy physical heir of ancient Masters and knowers who either hands on the formula without any knowledge of its sense or is unable even to preserve the formula itself in its purity, — as if the scientific formula for the mixture of oxygen & hydrogen were to be mumbled faithfully from generation to generation without any slightest knowledge or practice of the actual experiment which constitutes its value. Even when this extreme degeneracy does not happen, the transmission is subject to the play of individuality & the varying tendencies of thought from century to century and under that influence this part of the truth may be overstressed, that deprived of its emphasis, much may be sacrificed as no longer useful to the actual practice of the new generations or too high for its attainment and what is preserved may be manipulated, extended, diverted by the enthusiasms of individual thought and experience. What is thus lost or blurred, may not be recovered or restored to its purity for long ages. Nevertheless the institution always preserves something of its value. Much of the body of the truth tends to survive even the worst vicissitudes, and in the body something must always remain of the spirit; even a formula long unintelligently repeated may, by passing into the possession of an alert & curious mind or an ardent & sincere nature, be a suggestion or a starting-point for the recovery of the old lost experience which it keeps as its secret. Here again, as with the other external aids, we come back to the perennial source of the truth, the experience of the strong souls who passing beyond the school, the formula, the belief, the aid, the letter, go back into themselves for the light, respond to those buried suggestions ever lying in ambush for us in the mental

atmosphere from which we draw our inner sustenance, and are strong enough to emerge with something of the ancient truth which gave so ineffable a vastness and profundity to the spiritual life of our forefathers. Behind and beyond all human gurus there dwells within us all the World-Teacher, the universal jagadguru of whom human teachers are only the masks and nominal representatives. He keeps for us the complete book of the Veda written in our secret being, *nihitam guháyám*; veiled, but accessible, He awaits our reverential approach and our questioning and, sincerely & constantly questioned, lights the fire of Agni in our hearts and makes Surya to rise upon our darkness.

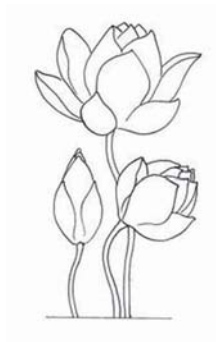
From these considerations there arise two apparently conflicting, but really complementary truths, — first, that in spite of powerful external aids, by the inexorable vicissitudes of Time, we have lost the sense of Veda and do not possess the full sense of Vedanta, secondly, that both these capital losses can, though with difficulty, by the methods of Yoga & the revelatory experience of great souls, be repaired. We possess intellectually the general truths of Vedanta, the transcendental unity of things and the universal unity, *ekam advítýam Brahma* and *so'ham asmi*, the secret of divine renunciation of the Ascetic and the secret of divine joy of the Vaishnava, with much else that is sovereign, vital, a priceless heritage. We possess many symbolic forms of religious application by which we enter into possession of the eternal truth through the emotions, through the intellect or through active experience in our inner life & outward relations. We possess numerous methods & forms of psychological discipline by which we repeat old profound experience and do even actually possess many apparently lost details of Vedic truth preserved in another form and couched in more modern symbols. All this is much; it has kept us alive through the centuries. But it is only in its totality that the Truth can work its utter miracles. Otherwise, if we live on her broken meats we tend either to lose ourselves in the outer formulae or concentrate dogmatically on fragments & sides of the living truth; when great spirits arise to give us their deep & vast experience, we prove ourselves limited and shallow vessels and are unable to receive more of the truth than is in harmony with our confined intellects and narrow natures; and, if powerful floods of materialism invade us, as in the present European era of humanity, we have not the strength to resist, to hold fast to that which is difficult but enduring; we are overborne, lose our footing and are carried away in the vehement but shallow currents.

Perfection of knowledge is the right condition for perfection of nature and efficiency of life. The perfect truth of the Veda is the fundamental knowledge, the right relations with the Truth of things, on which alone according to our ideas, all other knowledge can receive the true orientation needed by humanity. The recovery of the perfect truth of the Veda is therefore not merely a desideratum for our modern intellectual curiosity, but a practical necessity for the future of the human race. For I believe firmly that the secret concealed in the Veda, when entirely discovered, will

be found to formulate perfectly that knowledge and practice of a divine life to which the march of humanity, after long wanderings in the satisfaction of the intellect and senses, must inevitably return and is actually at the present dawn, in the impulses of its vanguard, tending more and more, but vaguely and blindly, to return. If we can set our feet on the path, not vaguely and blindly, but in the full light that streamed so brilliantly and grandiosely on the inner sight of our distant forefathers, our speed will be more rapid and our arrival more triumphant.

SRI AUROBINDO

(Vedic and Philological Studies, CWSA, Vol. 14, pp. 80-98)



**‘O LIGHT, LOVE, INEFFABLE FORCE,
ALL THE ATOMS CRY TO THEE . . .’**

July 12, 1914

In all the states of being, in all the modes of activity, in all things, in all the worlds, one can meet Thee and unite with Thee, for Thou art everywhere and always present. He who has met Thee in one activity of his being or in one world of the universe, says “I have found Him” and seeks nothing more; he thinks he has reached the summit of human possibilities. What a mistake! In all the states, in all the modes, in all things, all worlds, all the elements we must discover Thee and unite with Thee and if one element is left aside, however small it may be, the communion cannot be perfect, the realisation cannot be accomplished.

And that is why to have found Thee is but a first step on an infinite ladder. . . .

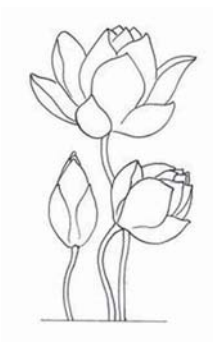
O sweet Master, sovereign Transfigurator, put an end to all negligence, all lazy indolence, gather together all our energies, make them into an indomitable, irresistible will.

O Light, Love, ineffable Force, all the atoms cry to Thee so that Thou mayst penetrate and transfigure them. . . .

Give to all the supreme delight of the communion.

THE MOTHER

(Prayers and Meditations, CWM 2nd Ed., Vol. 1, p. 200)



THE IDEAL OF MORAL PERFECTION

Sweet Mother, what is an ideal of moral perfection?

There are thousands of moral perfections. Everyone has his own ideal of moral perfection.

What is usually called moral perfection is to have all the qualities that are considered moral: to have no defects, never to make a mistake, never to err, to be always what one conceives to be the best, to have all the virtues — that is, to realise the highest mental conception: to take all the qualities — there are many, aren't there? — all the virtues, all that man has conceived to be the most beautiful, most noble, most true, and to live that integrally, to let all one's actions be guided by that, all the movements, all the reactions, all the feelings, all . . . That is living a moral ideal of perfection. It is the summit of man's mental evolution.

Not many people do it . . . but still . . . there have been some and there still are. This is what men usually take for the spiritual life. When they meet a man of this type, they say, "Oh! He is a great spiritual being." He may be a great saint, he may be a great sage but he is *not* a spiritual being.

And yet it is already very good and very difficult to realise this. And there comes a time in the inner evolution when it is very necessary to try to realise it. It is obviously infinitely higher than to be still guided by all one's impulses and ignorant outer reactions. It is to be already in a way the master of one's nature. It is even a stage through which one has to pass, for it is the stage when one begins to be the master of one's ego, when one is ready to let it fall away — it is still there but sufficiently weakened to be nearing its end. This is the last stage before crossing over to the other side, and certainly, if anyone imagines that he can go over to the other side without passing through this stage, he would risk making a great mistake, and of taking for perfect freedom a perfect weakness with regard to his lower nature.

It is almost impossible to pass from the mental being — even the most perfect and most remarkable — to the true spiritual life without having realised this ideal of moral perfection for a certain period of time, however brief it may be. Many people try to take a short-cut and want to assert their inner freedom before having overcome all the weaknesses of the outer nature; they are in great danger of deluding themselves. The true spiritual life, complete freedom, is something much higher than the highest moral realisations, but one must take care that this so-called freedom is not an indulgence and a contempt for all rules.

One must go higher, always higher, higher; nothing less than what the highest of humanity has achieved.

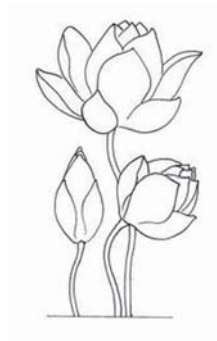
One must be capable of being spontaneously all that humanity has conceived

to be the highest, the most beautiful, the most perfect, the most disinterested, the most comprehensive, the best, before opening one's spiritual wings and looking at all that from above as something which still belongs to the individual self, in order to enter into true spirituality, that which has no limits, which lives in an integral way Infinity and Eternity.

1 October 1958

THE MOTHER

(Questions and Answers 1957-1958, CWM 2nd Ed., Vol. 9, pp. 408-09)



A CONVERSATION OF 7 APRIL 1929 AND SOME EXPLANATIONS

Will you say something to us about Yoga?

What do you want the Yoga for? To get power? To attain to peace and calm? To serve humanity?

None of these motives is sufficient to show that you are meant for the Path.

The question you are to answer is this: Do you want the Yoga for the sake of the Divine? Is the Divine the supreme fact of your life, so much so that it is simply impossible for you to do without it? Do you feel that your very *raison d'être* is the Divine and without it there is no meaning in your existence? If so, then only can it be said that you have a call for the Path.

This is the first thing necessary — aspiration for the Divine.

The next thing you have to do is to tend it, to keep it always alert and awake and living. And for that what is required is concentration — concentration upon the Divine with a view to an integral and absolute consecration to its Will and Purpose.

Concentrate in the heart. Enter into it; go within and deep and far, as far as you can. Gather all the strings of your consciousness that are spread abroad, roll them up and take a plunge and sink down.

A fire is burning there, in the deep quietude of the heart. It is the divinity in you — your true being. Hear its voice, follow its dictates.

There are other centres of concentration, for example, one above the crown and another between the eye-brows. Each has its own efficacy and will give you a particular result. But the central being lies in the heart and from the heart proceed all central movements — all dynamism and urge for transformation and power of realisation.

What is one to do to prepare oneself for the Yoga?

To be conscious, first of all. We are conscious of only an insignificant portion of our being; for the most part we are unconscious. It is this unconsciousness that keeps us down to our unregenerate nature and prevents change and transformation in it. It is through unconsciousness that the undivine forces enter into us and make us their slaves. You are to be conscious of yourself, you must awake to your nature and movements, you must know why and how you do things or feel or think them; you must understand your motives and impulses, the forces, hidden and apparent, that move you; in fact, you must, as it were, take to pieces the entire machinery of your being. Once you are conscious, it means that you can distinguish and sift

things, you can see which are the forces that pull you down and which help you on. And when you know the right from the wrong, the true from the false, the divine from the undivine, you are to act strictly up to your knowledge; that is to say, resolutely reject one and accept the other. The duality will present itself at every step and at every step you will have to make your choice. You will have to be patient and persistent and vigilant — “sleepless”, as the adepts say; you must always refuse to give any chance whatever to the undivine against the divine.

Is the Yoga for the sake of humanity?

No, it is for the sake of Divinity. It is not the welfare of humanity that we seek but the manifestation of the Divine. We are here to work out the Divine Will, more truly, to be worked upon by the Divine Will so that we may be its instruments for the progressive incorporation of the Supreme and the establishment of His reign upon earth. Only that portion of humanity which will respond to the Divine Call shall receive its Grace.

Whether humanity as a whole will be benefited, if not directly, at least, in an indirect way, will depend upon the condition of humanity itself. If one is to judge from the present conditions, there is not much hope. What is the attitude today of the average man — the representative humanity? Does he not rise in anger and revolt directly he meets something that partakes of the genuinely divine? Does he not feel that the Divine means the destruction of his cherished possessions? Is he not continually yelling out the most categorical negative to everything that the Divine intends and wills? Humanity will have to change much before it can hope to gain anything by the advent of the Divine.

How is that we have met?

We have all met in previous lives. Otherwise we would not have come together in this life. We are of one family and have worked through ages for the victory of the Divine and its manifestation upon earth.

THE MOTHER

(Questions and Answers 1929-1931, CWM 2nd Ed., Vol. 3, pp. 1-3)

* * *

Explanations by Sri Aurobindo in answer to queries posed by disciples.

The Mother asks: "What do you want the Yoga for? To get power?" Does "power" here mean the power to communicate one's own experience to others? What does it precisely mean?

Power is a general term — it is not confined to a power to communicate. The most usual form of power is control over things, persons, events, forces.

The Mother says: "What is required is concentration — concentration upon the Divine with a view to an integral and absolute consecration to its Will and Purpose." Is its Will different from its Purpose?

The two words have not the same meaning. Purpose means the intention, the object in view towards which the Divine is working. Will is a wider term than that.

"Concentrate in the heart." What is concentration? What is meditation?

Concentration means gathering of the consciousness into one centre and fixing it in one object or in one idea or in one condition. Meditation is a general term which can include many kinds of inner activity.

"A fire is burning there. . . . It is the divinity in you — your true being. Hear its voice, follow its dictates."

I have never seen this fire in me. Yet I feel I know the divinity in me. I feel I hear its voice and I try my utmost to follow its dictates. Should I doubt my feeling?

No, what you feel is probably the intimation from the psychic being through the mind. To be directly conscious of the psychic fire, one must have the subtle vision and subtle sense active or else the direct action of the psychic acting as a manifest power in the consciousness.

"We have all met in previous lives."

Who precisely are "we"? Do both of you remember me? Did I often serve you for this work in the past?

It is a general principle announced which covers all who are called to the work. At the time the Mother was seeing the past (or part of it) of those to whom she spoke and that is why she said this. At present we are too much occupied with the crucial work in the physical consciousness to go into these things. Moreover we find that it

encouraged a sort of vital romanticism in the Sadhaks which made them attach more importance to these things than to the hard work of Sadhana, so we have stopped speaking of past lives and personalities.

SRI AUROBINDO

(Questions and Answers 1929-1931, CWM 2nd Ed., Vol. 3, pp. 301-02)

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From the Conversion of 3 February 1951

“What do you want the Yoga for? To get power? To attain to peace and calm? To serve humanity?”

“None of these motives is sufficient to show that you are meant for the Path.”

The main trouble is that you think with words, but these words are empty of meaning; most of the time they are mere words — you talk of the Divine, you talk of the Supreme, you talk of Yoga, you say many things, but does all that correspond in your head to something concrete, to a thought, a feeling, a clear idea, an experience? Or are they simply words?

It is said that Yoga is the “final goal of life”, but what do you expect from this final goal? Some say it means to know oneself; that is the personal and individual aspect. If it is pushed a little farther it means to be conscious of the truth of one’s being: why are you born and what should you do? And if it is pushed still farther, you may become conscious of your relations with other human beings; and a little farther yet, you may ask what is the role, the aim of humanity in the world? And yet again, what is the condition of the earth from the psychological standpoint? What is the universe, what is its goal, its role? In this way, you move from stage to stage and finally you see the problem in its totality. You must see the thing, the experience behind the words. Here we speak of Yoga but elsewhere one would speak differently; some would say, “I am seeking my *raison d’être*”, and so on. Those who have a religious bent will say, “I want to find the divine Presence.” There are fifty ways of saying the thing but it is the *thing* which is important; you must feel it in your head, in your heart, everywhere. It must be concrete, living, otherwise you cannot advance. You must come out of words and get into action — get into the experience, get into life. (*Mother turns to a child*) Do you intend to do Yoga?

Yes, Mother.

Why do you want to do Yoga?

To feel the Presence of the Divine.

And you?

To realise the Divine, and for that one must perfect oneself.

And you, why does Yoga interest you?

Because I am able to know myself.

And you?

To do what one feels as the inner truth.

And you, are you doing Yoga?

At times.

You are honest, but why at times? . . .

(Addressing another child) Do you have any idea as to what Yoga is?

I think it is a way by which . . .

What is there at the end of the way?

The constant Presence of the Divine.

(Turning to another child) In Yoga what is it that interests you most?

I do not understand what Yoga is. Is it in concentrating on you?

It is a good symbol.

Anyway, happily nobody has said that he desired Yoga to obtain power. There are countries and people who know vaguely that there is something called yoga, and they begin it with the idea that they will become superior to others, will get a greater power than others and consequently will be able to dominate others — this is the worst reason, the most selfish, that which brings the most harmful consequences. Others who are greatly troubled, who have a very difficult life, who have worries, sorrows, many cares, say, “Oh, I shall find something that will give me peace, tranquillity, and I shall be able to get a little rest.” And they rush into Yoga thinking

they are going to be quite happy and satisfied. Unfortunately, it is not altogether like that. When you begin the Yoga for reasons of this kind, you are sure to meet great difficulties on the way. And then there is this great virtue in men's eyes: "philanthropy", "love of humanity"; so many people say, "I am going to do Yoga to be able to serve humanity, make the unhappy happy, organise the world in the happiest way for everybody." I say this is not sufficient — I do not say that this is bad in itself, although I have heard an old occultist say wittily: "It won't be so very soon that there will be no more misery in the world, because there are too many people who are happy to live on this misery." It was a witticism but it is not altogether wrong. If there were no misery to soothe, the philanthropist would no longer have any reason for his existence — he is so satisfied with himself, he has so strong an impression that he is not selfish! I knew such people who would be very unhappy if there were no more misery upon earth! What would they do if there were no longer any misery to relieve, what would be their activity and what their glorification? How would they be able to show people "I am not selfish!", and that they are generous, full of kindness?

"Do you want the Yoga for the sake of the Divine? . . . If so, then only can it be said that you have a call for the Path.

"This is the first thing necessary — aspiration for the Divine."

The first movement of aspiration is this: you have a kind of vague sensation that behind the universe there is something which is worth knowing, which is probably (for you do not yet know it) the only thing worth living for, which can connect you with the Truth; something on which the universe depends but which does not depend upon the universe, something which still escapes your comprehension but which seems to you to be behind all things. . . . I have said here much more than the majority of people feel about the thing, but this is the beginning of the first aspiration — to know that, not to live in this perpetual falsehood where things are so perverted and artificial, this would be something pleasant; to find something that is worth living for.

"The next thing you have to do is to tend this aspiration, to keep it always alert and awake and living."

Instead of telling yourself once in a while, "Oh, yes! I am thinking of finding the Divine", just when there is something unpleasant, when you are a little disgusted because you feel tired — indeed, there are very many flimsy reasons — all of a sudden you remember that there is such a thing as yoga, something like the Divine to know who can get you out of this flatness of life.

“And for that what is required is concentration — concentration upon the Divine with a view to an integral and absolute consecration to its Will and Purpose.”

This is the second step. That is to say, you begin wanting to find and know the Divine and live it. You must feel at the same time that the thing is so precious, so important that your entire life is not sufficient for acquiring it. Then, the first movement is a self-giving; you tell yourself, “I do not want any longer to belong to myself, for the sake of my little personal satisfaction, I wish to belong to this marvellous thing which one must find, must know, must live and for which I aspire.”

“Concentrate in the heart. Enter into it; go within and deep and far, as far as you can. Gather all the strings of your consciousness that are spread abroad, roll them up and take a plunge and sink down.”

Naturally, when I speak of the heart, I do not mean the physical organ, the viscera, but the psychological or psychic centre of the being.

[Mother then reads a question asked during her talk in 1929:

“What is one to do to prepare oneself for the Yoga?”]

I replied to the person who put this question to me: “Become conscious first of all.” So the person tried to become conscious and a few months later came and told me, “Oh, what a nasty present you gave me! Formerly, in my relations with people, they all used to seem so nice; I had goodwill, they were so nice towards me, and now, since becoming conscious, I see all kinds of things in myself that are not quite pretty, and at the same time I see in others things that are not at all beautiful!” I answered her, “Quite possible! If you do not want trouble, it is better not to come out of your ignorance.”

The first step therefore is to find out whether one wants to see and know the truth or wants to remain comfortably in one’s ignorance.

“What is the attitude today of the average man? . . . Does he not rise in anger and revolt directly he meets something that partakes of the genuinely divine? Does he not feel that the Divine means the destruction of his cherished possessions?”

This means very clearly that so long as you remain in your small individual egoism, you will never be ready to make the gesture, to take the plunge, which will enable you to identify yourself with the Divine.

In this connection I could tell you something: long ago there were people who came here because they thought that joining the Ashram was sufficient to make one immortal. And they aspired much for immortality. Naturally, they were old people who did not see a very long road before them and desired to extend it indefinitely — for that is what men understand by “immortality”, an indefinite prolongation of what they are. So, to the first person who made this remark, I replied, “I do not know if everyone can become immortal — probably not — but even among those who have the capacity of becoming immortal, how many are ready to pay the price for it?” Because the number of things which have to be left behind is so considerable that perhaps half-way they would say, “Ah, no, the price is too much.” I remember a painter with whom I had a talk about the possibility of immortality and who asked me what a new world would be like. I told him things would be, for instance, luminous in themselves and there would no longer be this kind of reflected light which comes here upon earth from the sun. And as I was speaking I saw his face becoming longer, more and more grave; finally he said, “But then how can one do painting without the shadow which brings out the light of things? . . .” I told him, “You have given exactly the key to the problem.”

There were many people, a very large number, who asked me what the new life would be like and to whom I said, “There will be an interchange of forces, a circulating energy; the structure of the body will be quite different, all these ungainly organs will disappear and be replaced by psychological functions; and the necessity of eating, always eating, will disappear.” Once again I saw faces getting longer and longer! People said, “Oh! And all the good things we eat, all that will go?”

These are small instances, there are many others, things more important. The most important, the most difficult thing is to renounce one’s ego, for to somebody who is not ready, to renounce his ego is like dying and dying much more than a physical death, for to him the death of the ego is like a dissolution of the being — this is not correct but it begins by giving this sort of impression. To be immortal one must renounce all limitations and the ego is the greatest of limitations; hence if “I” am not immortal, what is the good of that?

[In the same talk someone had asked Mother how all those then present had happened to meet, and Mother had answered:

“We have all met in previous lives. Otherwise we would not have come together in this life.”]

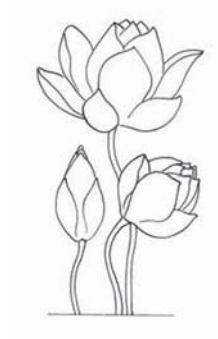
It can be said that it is chance or that it is because we have always been together, and both are equally true. As this lady liked occultism I told her also, “We have met in a previous life” and that is true, isn’t it? But it is a way of seeing things. Also, “We all belong to the same family”, this too is true but not in the way in which human

beings look at it.

I also said, “We have worked together through the ages for the victory of the Divine and His manifestation upon earth.” This is quite evident, for the universe has been created for that and therefore every part of the universe, whatever it be, works for it, knowingly or unknowingly, but works for it all the same.

THE MOTHER

(Questions and Answers 1950-1951, CWM 2nd Ed. Vol. 4, pp. 64-71)



“INCARNATION” — CORRESPONDENCE WITH SRI AUROBINDO

Sri Aurobindo —

How do you find this poem? May I learn from what plane and in what style it is written?

INCARNATION

Would you conceive her Self? A sheer abyss Of reverie existing by its own calmnesses¹	}	Illumined
Grandeur of inexhaustible silences That know all secrets through a light unknown!	}	Illumined inspired
Nor her divinity the clay ensheathes: Those pure immitigable joys unblind Each human pore and her whole body breathes The large illumined odours of her mind. A large and lustrous odour of her mind.*	}	Effective illumined

*This is the sole variant that strikes me; perhaps it is better than the original.²

Sri Aurobindo’s comment:

1. [*Sri Aurobindo crossed out “calmnesses”.*]

2. No, not with “a”, but with “the” is better.

[*In the margin Sri Aurobindo drew 2 brackets and indicated 3 styles, i.e., “Illumined”, “Illumined inspired” and “Effective illumined”.*]

It is very good. “Odours of her mind” sounds a little queer at first. I think in the singular it sounds better. Such inversions as in the fifth line should not be too often used, as in modern English they are apt to be puzzling.

28 September 1934

* * *

Sri Aurobindo —

1. When you wrote “Illumined”, “Illumined inspired” and “Effective illumined” against the various lines of my poem, did you indicate the styles only or

the planes as well? Thus, “illumined” might mean illumined style or illumined mind-inspiration. I ask this because I had inquired from what plane the poem had come.

2. Will my last line be better with “luminous” instead of “lustrous”? All depends, I suppose, on the atmosphere of the whole poem.

“The large and lustrous odour of her mind.”
luminous

Sri Aurobindo’s answer:

1. I had meant the styles only. It is from the illumined mind that the inspiration of the poem as a whole seems to have come. Most of your poems now are from there.

2. Lustrous seems to me better here.

29 September 1934

(Version from *The Secret Splendour* —
Collected Poems of K. D. Sethna [Amal Kiran], 1993, p. 170:)

INCARNATION

Would you conceive her self? A sheer abyss
Of reverie existing by its own
Grandeur of inexhaustible silences
That know all secrets through a light unknown.

Nor her divinity the clay ensheathes:
Those pure immitigable joys unblind
Each human pore and her whole body breathes
The large and lustrous odour of her mind.

AMAL KIRAN
(K. D. SETHNA)

PILGRIMAGE TO AMARNATH

Ever since the previous batch of pilgrims came back from Amarnath last year (1980) they have been speaking of their trip in such glorious terms that we did not take long to catch the contagion. Letters and telegrams flew back and forth between Pondicherry and Delhi, and once Tara assured us of a place in this year's trip we began our frantic search for the equipment necessary for the journey to Amarnath. In Pondicherry, even the severest winter does not warrant anything warmer than a light woollen sweater, and a thick cotton sheet is more than enough to keep out the cold at night; so the demand for "heavy woollens" to combat the Himalayan cold did indeed pose a problem for most of us. But the Ashram being a family of more than two thousand persons, most of whom are only too eager to help us out, the problem got solved in record time. We put our gear together, bought our tickets, survived the suffocatingly hot and tedious train journey and at last managed to land in Delhi. Almost at once we got a taste of Tara's excellent organisational ability. (Of course it was nothing new to those of us who have known her from our childhood.) There was the bus from Mother's International School waiting to transport us safely from the New Delhi Railway Station to the Ashram in South Delhi, where we would be comfortably lodged and boarded for the next three days.

There were thirty-one of us from Pondicherry — the oldest member being our seventy-one year-"young" intrepid Suren-da. According to medical science, he suffered from a number of debilitating diseases including diabetes, and so must follow a strict regimen and take only mild exercise. But his indomitable spirit did not see eye to eye with that verdict and he ended up by walking the entire thirty-mile 'up hill and down dale' distance to Amarnath; and, not to be outdone by the twenty-five-year-olds, he even did surf riding on the Dal Lake. But all that must be told in the proper sequence.

Well, of these thirty-one Pondicherrians, thirteen, six boys and seven girls, had just hit their quarter century mark, the rest being forty-five and above. Of the nineteen others who made up the party of fifty, almost all belonged to or were connected with the Delhi Ashram, except for the two drivers. There was the strong-willed Mrs. Venkatraman with her two charming teen-aged daughters; Tapan, a happy young man who was Tara's aide-de-camp; quiet and soft-spoken Raj; the eminently capable but self-effacing Dr. Matthews; the exuberant Dr. Bisht with his sweet-natured wife; our loving chacha-ji; Miss Sharma; Sarala and her parents, *et al.* The most colourful characters in our party were the huge driver Sardarji with his striking attire and strange eccentricities, and the human dynamo, Ramkishan, a small, dark, smiling parcel of inexhaustible energy. Looking back I find that in that group most of the Indian states were represented; in Tagore's words — "Punjab,

Sindhu, Gujarat, Mahratha, Dravid, Utkal, Banga”! We had come from different states, different social and cultural backgrounds, but our life during those twenty days, when we lived in such close proximity, sharing everything with one another from food onwards, proved to be a model of peaceful and mutually profitable co-existence. Even the hardships that we had to face in the later stages of our journey could not make a dent in our harmonious living. Of course our life in the Ashram under the guidance of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo had already prepared us for this. But that only proves the truth once more that people who are inspired by a noble ideal can easily overcome all the forces of disruption and disharmony.

But let us get on with our narration. Since for many of us this was our first visit to Delhi, we spent the next two days, *i.e.* the 17th and the 18th of June, sight-seeing in Delhi and Agra. Although the mercury was showing 105° and we were oppressed by the sun’s “tyrant glare” during the day the revelation of a tiny portion of India’s glorious past, especially the ethereal beauty of the Taj by moonlight amply compensated us for all our discomfort.

After a day of rest and final preparations, our journey began on the 20th of June, Saturday, at 8 a.m. instead of the scheduled 4 a.m. because of the vagaries not of Nature but our more unpredictable Sardarji. However, he proved to be a very good driver and we were thankful at least for that. In the bus, Tara, ever watchful for our comfort and enjoyment, organised group singing with the help of Miss Sharma, Sarala, Gautam, Raj, Praveena, Minakshi and others — not so much to break the tedium of the journey, for there was none of that, the landscape being so new to most of us — but to enliven things a bit, like adding raisins to the cake.

The more we saw of Tara during this trip, the more we marvelled at the quiet unobtrusive manner with which she was conducting the whole tour. Even after the most arduous journey we found her full of vitality, organising meals and accomodation for everybody, planning the next day’s programme and looking after the well-being of each individual member. And all this without once getting irritated, without once raising her voice.

Dr. Bisht soon established himself as our public relations officer. Be it our recalcitrant driver, or some mule-headed *pony-wallah* or a difficult bureaucrat, he got round them by virtue of his effusive friendliness, his medical treatments, his generous tips or in extreme cases by pulling his rank.

While we kept ourselves entertained singing, chatting and munching the tidbits which were being passed around, the bus was quietly devouring the miles. Soon we arrived at a motel built on the bank of one of Sutlej’s numerous canals. It was a clean little place and we had breakfast on the trim lawn. Then we boarded the bus but had to stop again when the cool waters of a wayside stream beckoned to us. We had a refreshing bath here before resuming our journey to Ludhiana.

In Ludhiana our party was accorded a very warm welcome and given a sumptuous lunch by Mr. K. C. Singhal and some other devotees of the Mother and

Sri Aurobindo. The warmth and hospitality that we found here was repeated, if not surpassed, at the house of Mr. M. S. Sud in Amritsar where we arrived at 6 p.m. Mr. Sud, his sons and his two charming daughters-in-law, went out of their way to make us as comfortable as possible. Their tastefully furnished house with its spacious lawn was thrown open to us, all of whom except Tara, were total strangers to them. Mr. Sud's mother insisted on cooking some of the dishes with her own hands. That was her way of serving the Mother — by feeding Mother's children. I have met many hospitable families but such unstinted generosity is very rare indeed.

Next day Mr. Sud himself acted as our guide in Amritsar. With much care he took us round the famous Golden Temple and then to Jallianwala Bagh, patiently explaining everything. We were much impressed by the cleanliness, the quiet inner discipline and the philanthropy that we found in the Golden Temple where more than 2,000 hungry people are ungrudgingly fed everyday with food prepared entirely by voluntary labour. How wonderful it would be if the greedy priests and "pandas" who infest our Hindu temples learnt a few lessons in courtesy and true brahminical nobility!

Thanking Mr. Sud profusely, we left Amritsar at 3 p.m. and after an uneventful journey reached Jammu in the evening. Here we met another sweet, gentle and hospitable lady, Mrs. Sethi. She was all alone in the house except for two servants, but nothing daunted her, and she set about the gigantic task of feeding and lodging fifty tired guests. She placed her whole house and garden at our disposal.

Next morning after we had bathed in the river Tawi, she took us to the famed Bahu Fort and on the way gave us eye-witness accounts of Pakistani air attacks during the last Indo-Pak war on the Tawi bridge which provides the sole link between Jammu and the rest of India. She also told us about the firm faith of the people that the goddess Durga, whose temple is in the Bahu Fort, always protects the bridge. After visiting the fort we saw the famous Shiva temple and the Raghunath temple in the centre of the town. Some of us did a little shopping while Chandrakant and Dr. Bisht supervised the repair work which had to be done on the radiator of our bus.

At 7 p.m. we took leave of Mrs. Sethi and set out for Katra where we arrived at 10 p.m. An urgent council of war — and it was decided to take advantage of the cool weather and undertake the ten mile climb to Vaishno Devi that night itself. Soon our party of fifty broke up into small groups as we began the trek in the dark. Ramkishan and Kantilal decided to establish a new record for the climb while at the other extreme some were content to regard it as a leisurely nocturnal stroll. Well, the journey was pleasant enough but what came as a rude shock was the news that there was precious little chance for us to have the darshan of Vaishno Devi. A crowd of over 5,000 people had already been waiting for over twenty-four hours for the darshan.

Sorely disappointed, Ramkishan went down to guard our belongings which we had left behind in the bus in Katra. But when he had gone more than halfway, a

sadhu told him not to return without having the Devi's darshan. So Ramkishen began the climb back and joined us at mid-morning.

Our problem was one of time. We had made our reservations at the Verinag Tourist Bungalow for Wednesday the 24th June and we would have to keep to our schedule. Hoping against hope, we hung around and every few hours made enquiries at the temple office. At 4 p.m. there was a sudden hailstorm which brought down the temperature but it cleared up in half an hour. Again we went to the temple to try our luck but to our disappointment learnt that our turn would come only after another twenty hours. However, a Sikh gentleman promised to get any three members of our party in for the darshan that night itself. On our side the selection was unanimous — Ramkishen, Miss Surinder Sharma, the lady teacher from Delhi school, who had been fasting the whole day and preparing herself for the darshan, and Dayavati-ji. They returned from the temple at 1 in the morning with an air of fulfilment. We spent the night at the none-too-clean guest house where the public conveniences were filthy in the extreme, and left for Katra the next morning.

From Katra via Kud and Batote we reached the famous Banihal tunnel. A marvel of modern engineering, this tunnel (8,356 feet) is the longest in India. At 8 p.m. we reached Verinag for our night halt.

Talk of love at first sight! That was what happened to us — we just fell in love with Verinag. May be after the discomfort of the guest house at Vaishno Devi, the excellent arrangement at the tourist bungalow here was a contributing factor. But what actually won our hearts was the paradisaical beauty, quietness and peace that we found in Verinag. I am sure that had Coleridge seen this place he would have changed his 'Kubla Khan' and written:

“In Verinag did Jahangir
A stately garden of peace decree
Around Vitasta's sacred source
Whence she begins her placid course
To meet her sister Iravati . . .”

Again and again we made our pilgrimage to the source of the Jhelum (Vitasta in Sanskrit), drank her sweet water, saw the carp gliding in the pool and strolled on the soft green grass on the two banks of the paved channel that cradled the infant river until she was big and strong enough to take the plunge and be on her own. We would have liked to feast our eyes on the sylvan beauty of Verinag all day long, but that tyrant of a taskmaster, our tight schedule, forced us to board the bus.

We stopped for lunch at Kokernag, another beautiful, spacious, but more forested garden. Being a recognised picnic spot it was over-crowded and noisy. Of course, that did not prevent us from enjoying its gorgeous flowers and sparkling fountains. From here on to Achhabal, another Moghul garden where the accent was

more on tall majestic trees than on flowering plants and where the fountains and water cascades were even more striking and more copious. Here we spent about an hour before proceeding to Srinagar.

The road abounded in scenic beauty. Bordering it were the tall poplars and chinars and beyond these, the thick walnut trees. In the middle distance were the orchards — apple, orange, cherry; and beyond them the snow-capped green mountains with their firs and pines. And running in and out of all this greenery was the silver ribbon of the Jhelum.

Srinagar, however, disappointed us, perhaps we had expected too much from her. But what we found was just a shabby town, hot and noisy and crowded and none too clean. The Dal Lake and its canals were picturesque but a closer scrutiny revealed a lot of filth. Our spirits lifted the next morning when we set out for Gulmarg — minus our unpredictable Sardarji, who had “melted into thin air” leaving “not a rack behind,” or as much as it is possible for a Sardarji of his massive proportions to melt into thin air. Our second driver Hukam Singh stepped into the breach but soon it was apparent that he was rather inept in negotiating the hairpin bends and the dangerous curves in which the Srinagar-Gulmarg road abounds. However it must be acknowledged that we did not suffer any mishap under his charioteering.

I said our spirits lifted because once again Nature had taken over and we were “far from the madding crowd’s ignoble strife”. It proves the dictum, does it not, that in Nature every “prospect pleases but man alone is vile”?

In Gulmarg our party got divided. Because the chair lifts were not functioning some were content to stick to the shopping centre while three of the adventurous ones, Krishna, Prabir and Baniprasanna hired ponies and went off to Alpather to have their first encounter with snow. The rest of us undertook a trek to Khilanmarg. Here our grand old man, Suren-da established his eligibility as a future Amarnath trekker.

On our way back to Srinagar we had a picnic lunch by a crystalline stream, and shared our repast with apple-cheeked cherubs. It was indeed idyllic. That evening we had other “unreproved pleasures” in store for us. We visited the famous Mughal gardens — the Chasma Shahi, Nishat Bagh and Shalimar and witnessed a romantic “Son et Lumière” spectacle.

Next morning began on another note. The serene solemnity of the Shankaracharya Hill filled our hearts with peace. No wonder that Sri Aurobindo had his experience of the Vacant Infinite here! From the Shankaracharya Hill we went down to the Dal Lake and set off in *shikaras*. After a bit of surf-riding where all who took part, including our ever-young Suren-da, acquitted themselves creditably, we lolled on the cushions like the Mughals of old and day-dreamed on the shimmering lake as the *shikaras* wove in and out of the lily and lotus groves and circled the Char Chinar garden in the middle of the lake. An afternoon spent shopping for the exquisite Kashmiri handicrafts brought our sojourn in Srinagar to a happy finish.

Sunday, the 28th June found us in Pahalgam. At that time, for most of us, Pahalgam was merely the spring board that would launch us on our trek to Amaranth. So instead of spending any time sight-seeing, we set about hiring the necessary equipment for the trek such as raincoats, rucksacks and iron tipped sticks. The post lunch hours were spent in fierce concentration, selecting our most essential belongings and readying them for the pony packs. On that occasion we had little time to devote to the beautiful river Liddar which flowed past this picturesque hill town, situated at around 7,500 feet above sea level, and which would be our constant companion during the next two days when we would see her in her various moods changing from placidity to turbulence as the whim took her. Pahalgam too, (the name literally means first village), we found on our way back was an ideal mountain resort, combining as it did scenic excellence with all the modern conveniences.

On the morning of the 29th June we trekked to Chandanwari, at a height of 9,000 feet, a little hamlet ten miles away from Pahalgam, that did not know what a post box looked like. But to compensate for that there were wild flowers in profusion, romantic pine forests and innumerable “sunny spots of greenery”. On our right the river Liddar kept us company all the way becoming more and more boisterous as she neared Chandanwari. It was quite cool when we had started but we had hardly covered a mile or two when we began to feel very hot and removed our pullovers. The road wound on and on. Our party got divided into small groups according to everybody’s pace of walking. After a while the pony riders, all of whom were elderly and who had started after us, overtook us and went forward with a wave and a smile. The pack of ponies too passed us by. Dayavati-ji was in a dandee. Her five bearers caught up with us, rested, allowed us to get ahead and again caught us up. It was almost a game with them. But there were two persons with whom there was no catching up — that human horse Ramkishan and Kantilal! Whenever we set out on a trek, they would take the lead right at the beginning and reach the destination long before the rest of us. I wonder where Kantilal got his energy from, living as he did entirely on fruits and nuts. But Ramkishan went one up. For, immediately after reaching the next halting place, he would collect firewood and prepare a hot meal for us. And all this he did with a ready smile on his face.

Meanwhile the leisurely walkers had ample time to drink in Nature’s beauty, and Tara, Ashatit and Gautam to click away with their cameras. We saw the Himalayas in many aspects, fortunately all of them were pleasant ones. By the Mother’s Grace we were spared any unpleasant experiences such as blizzards, landslides, avalanches. Even the Rain God was most considerate. Except for that one occasion when we left Chandanwari in the early morning, we did not get any rain on the way, it rained only at night when we were snug under our blanket. In Chandanwari too, the rain seemed to realise its mistake and sheepishly withdrew within fifteen minutes.

Well, we saw such typical Himalayan scenes as snow-capped peaks overlooking dark, mysterious pine forests, or a misty purple range cradling an emerald green

meadow, or golden sunlight “gilding all with heavenly alchemy”. At times Nature put on merely different shades of green; but this monotony was relieved by rosy-cheeked, colourfully-clad children and bright-eyed Gujjar belles.

On reaching Chandanwari, some of us decided to have a bath in the river. The water was freezing, originating as it did from the melting ice of the famous snow bridge of Chandanwari. It is a permanent fixture here, even the hottest summer does not melt it completely. Most of us spent a comfortable night in Chandanwari, except for some of the young men who had decided to sleep in a tent. There was a sudden downpour from which the tent could offer little protection. The youngsters abandoned their tent and sought shelter in the verandah of the tourist bungalow where the rest of us were.

Next morning when we set out for Sheshnag it had stopped raining. But as soon as we stepped on the snow bridge over which passed our route, it began to rain again. The bridge became slippery, the journey hazardous and some of the trekkers even turned back. But as I told you earlier, the Rain God realised his mistake and quickly withdrew. Otherwise we would have had a trying time indeed! After this one occasion it never rained in the day time when we were trekking. As usual, the divine Mother had spread her protective wings over us and she continued to do so throughout the trip. Little incidents made us aware of it constantly.

Our journey continued. On the way we came across large herds of shaggy-haired mountain goats driven by their handsome bearded goatherds. Then there were the ever-hopeful *pony-wallahs* trying to frighten us with tales of the rigours of the journey and coaxing us to hire their ponies. Declining them politely we reached the highest point of this phase of our trek — the Pissu Top 11,000 feet above sea level. Here a dismal sight awaited us. A horse had fallen from the ridge above and was lying dead on our path. The sight was all the more pitiable because it was such a young and beautiful beast. Its owner was heartbroken. We were quite taken aback but later we learnt that this was nothing uncommon in these parts. In fact, first in Sheshnag and later in Panchatarani we found white bones of dead ponies strewn all over the place. This is Nature, beautiful and grim at the same time.

Around 2.30 in the afternoon we reached the deep turquoise waters of the Sheshnag lake where the river Liddar has her source. Three majestic snow-capped peaks, locally known as Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh, brooded over the serene lake. It was a magnificent sight, even though the vegetation had dwindled to mere bushes, for we were now standing at a height of 11,750 feet.

We had another pleasant surprise awaiting us. From a distance we spied the yellow banner of a Khalsa Dhaba. Now we were given to understand that after Chandanwari we would not find any food stalls anywhere upto Amarnath, because the season for the Darshan had not yet begun officially. Imagine our surprise then, when on reaching the dhaba we saw the same Sardarji who had served us in Chandanwari! Well, the mystery was explained soon enough. These enterprising

people, seeing our party at Chandanwari, had trekked to Sheshnag in the evening and set up their dhaba there! But we had to disappoint them on that occasion because our indefatigable Ramkishen was even then giving the finishing touches to the “khichari” in the kitchen of the Tourist Bungalow in Sheshnag.

We passed the night uneventfully enough, except for the fact that it rained heavily and that we got a scare because suddenly the Tourist Bungalow filled with acrid smoke. On investigation we found that in order to keep out the cold, Ramkishen had kept a fire burning (with wet logs, of course!) in the closed up kitchen where he was fast asleep. Despite his protests we opened the windows, got rid of the wet logs and cleared the air.

Miraculously the rain stopped the next morning when it was time for us to start. The most difficult part of our journey was before us. The “road wound up-hill all the way”. We were entering more and more “the land of ice and snow” which formed beautiful patterns and intricate designs all around us. The vegetation had been completely scared away by the snow. “The ice was here the ice was there, the ice was all around,” only unlike Coleridge’s ice it did not “crack and growl”, thank god! Rather it was all very serene and still.

Before us now was the highest point of our journey — a formidable climb up to 14,500 feet. This was then the Mahagunas Top, a peak entirely covered with snow, soft at times, hard at others, which we had to negotiate with utmost diplomacy. One wrong move could produce the most serious consequences. The climb uphill with our feet sinking in the soft snow took its toll on our lungs, and the hard snow that we encountered during our downhill journey tested our physical equanimity. Many of us were slipping and sliding about in a most ignominious manner. The lot of the pony riders too was not enviable. Especially on the downward journey their situation was equally bad if not worse than ours, staking everything as they did on the surefootedness of their mounts. The sinking feeling at the pit of their stomach was plainly visible on their faces.

The slopes of the Mahagunas came to an end but our tribulations did not. After trudging through all that ice and snow, the prospect before us was to wade through a freezing stream. We really felt as though our feet were being amputated. There are five of these streams between Mahagunas Top and Panchatarani, but fortunately for us three of the bridges across them had withstood the tyranny of the previous winter and a very risky snow bridge was still spanning the fourth. These at least spared us further amputations.

Ourselves and our *pony-wallahs* made up the entire population of Panchatarani. We did not see another soul there till the next day when another group of *pony-wallahs* joined us. Most of us were accommodated in a *sarai* — a piece of architecture consisting of two long dilapidated halls perched one atop another and built of grey stone and cement. The *pony-wallahs* occupied the ground floor, while the younger members of our group spread their sleeping bags on the upper storey.

Ramkishen set up his portable kitchen on the landing at the entrance of our sleeping quarters. The elderly members of the party, such as our intrepid Suren-da, who incidentally had kept pace with us, doing the whole trip on foot, were housed in a more comfortable wooden bungalow. Panchatarani is a little valley about five miles away from Mahagunas Top, located at a height of 11,500 feet above sea level. Here there were long stretches of grassy plots, a few shrubs and plenty of wild flowers. Of wild animals we saw only one species — the marmot, resembling the American prairie dog, a brave little animal of the rodent family with its strange bird-like cry. The sole avian specimen was the raven. And of course, we had two shaggy mountain dogs — one was a local resident while the other had accompanied us all the way from Chandanwari, a distance of sixteen miles! The latter often created the eerie feeling in us as though we were embarked on the “Path of *Maha-prasthanā*”.

We spent a very restless night as after we had retired for the night the *pony-wallahs* began their cooking downstairs and in the process almost smoked us out. After the smoke died down, they began an incessant chatter.

Well, the night at last came to an end bringing us the dawn of the second of July. As soon as light appeared on the eastern horizon we got ready to start on the last lap of our journey. It was now almost entirely an uphill climb, a major part of which was over ice fields. The landscape was stark and at times gave the impression of cubist art. We now found the holy stream of Amar Ganga on our right and followed it towards its source. Suddenly our path took a sharp turn to the right and after a steep ascent — “behold the last tremendous brow” — the holy cave of Amarnath.

A winding flight of steps led to the cave, at the foot of which the Gujjars had set up temporary tea stalls. Leaving our rucksacks here we mounted the steps and entered the holy cave — 70 feet long, 70 feet deep and 80 feet high.

Before us in all his stark and serene majesty stood the ice lingam of Amaranth, the holy of holies!

Science takes pains to explain the miraculous phenomenon of this ice lingam by telling us that it is a giant stalactite which gets this particulate smooth shape from the action of the air currents which go round it modelling it as they pass. But none can explain why it should wax and wane corresponding to the phases of the moon.

Be that as it may, for a while we could only stare in awe and wonder. An indescribable peace descended upon us. One by one we stepped forward and reverently touched that smooth form of celestial white radiance.

Our hearts brimmed over with a sense of fulfilment.

ANIRUDDHA SIRCAR

INTERVIEW WITH BIREN PALIT

On 11 January 1987

[Birendra Sekhar Palit (27.02.1906-16.06.1987) came to the Ashram on 25 July 1930 at the age of 24 and died at the ripe age of 81, a few months after this interview. Biren-da spent a lifetime doing binding work, which he first learnt in Chittagong upon the instructions of Sri Aurobindo. After he settled down in the Ashram, he started the Binding Department of the Ashram on the ground floor of the Guest House. Later, when the New Bindery¹ was opened in the south-east corner of the Dining Room, Biren-da was shifted to the Binding Section of the Ashram Press. People remember him as a short old loveable man with long curly hair, proceeding slowly on the beach road with a twinkle in the eyes. Clad in a white dhoti that covered his upper body, he represented quintessentially the first generation of disciples who dedicated themselves to the Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother without any reserve, and yet claimed to be only humble seekers on the way. Biren-da was also a poet and knew Bengali well — Nolini-da used to give his Bengali articles to him for proof-reading. He left his family at the age of 14 and joined the Prabartak Sangha of Motilal Roy in Chandernagore. His contact with Sri Aurobindo, at first through Barin Ghose and later through Nolini-da, began in 1922. After coming to the Ashram, he had the privilege of corresponding directly with the Master. What is of special interest in this interview is Biren-da's narration of the early days of sadhana in the Ashram under the direct guidance of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. At the same time, one cannot but admire his remarkable adaptability to the later phases of Ashram life during which he never lost his unflinching optimism.]

Meeting with the Mother

Raman: What did you say to the Mother when you met her for the first time?

Not much could be said to Mother, as Mother spoke very little during an interview. When I first went to Mother on my birthday, Nolini-da told me, "Look here, don't speak unnecessarily with Mother." I thought that as it is, I speak less, even when I am made to speak; why should then I speak to Mother on my own? When I was

1. The person who was given charge of the New Bindery was another Biren-da, Biren Chunder, (1915-1997) a boxer and Physical Education trainer. He was also Pranab-da's teacher. He had, besides, many more sides to him.

coming out after meditating with Mother, our physician came there. His name was Dayashankar, Sri Aurobindo had named him Esculape. Dayashankar could go to the Mother anytime to tell her about his patients. As I came out, Dayashankar was waiting there. Mother used to sit in a small room [*which later became the Darshan Room upstairs*] at the end of the verandah. She would lean back and keep both the legs raised. I went and told her [*Biren-da speaks very softly*], “Dayashankar wants to see you.” Mother told me, “He can come.” Then I went to Dayashankar and told him, “You can go.” So this is what I first said to Mother. Although Nolini-da had forbidden me to speak, I too could not speak much with Mother. I usually don’t speak on my own initiative.

Afterwards there began some talk. When you went there, Mother engaged you in some way or the other. Once when I went there, Mother asked me, “Would you like to listen to music or meditate?” I asked her, “Which is better?” She said, “Both are the same.” Then I said, “I would like to listen to music.” Mother then asked me, “Do you like music?” I replied, “Yes.” After some time Mother asked me, “Do you really like it?” I replied once again, “Yes.” Then Mother said, “Good, let us go.” The organ was kept where a chair was kept later near the exit [*of the verandah upstairs*] and Mother would sit there. The organ was there, covered with a cloth. Mother got up and I too went with her. Mother told me, “Hold the cloth.” I lifted the cloth which covered the organ and Mother folded it and kept it aside. Then Mother played the organ for a short time. After that I went back to the same room with the Mother.

* * *

Which year did you come?

R: I came in 1961.

In '61, had Mother stopped coming to the Playground?

R: Yes, she had stopped.

In the Playground too Mother used to give a bouquet. [*Turning towards Sachinda²*] You too must have received that bouquet? Earlier it was not like that. Mother had flowers all around her and she herself chose the flowers. She would give whatever was necessary for the individual. Mother selected flowers from here and there, as she desired, and she gave it to you and placed her hand on your head as you did pranam to her.

2. Sachindra Nath Chatterjee, an elderly sadhak who worked in the Ashram Press.

Sachin-da: Nishikanto used to say humorously, “When I went to the Mother on my birthday, Mother scolded me instead of being affectionate to me. She scolded me. (laughter)

Finally, when people increased in number, Mother sent bouquets to those who had their birthdays — Jyotin-da, Nolini-da knew whose birthday came on which date.

S: Mother had told him [referring to Biren-da], “By bending the neck, you are always thinking of your bad health.”

R: What is that?

In my case, I came here in a sickly condition. I was not well from even before coming here.

S: He came here with an unhealthy body and always suffered, though at present he does not suffer that much.

Amrita had already informed the Mother about my condition. At that time I had very long hair and it came down till my hips. Mother liked my hair a lot. When I did pranam, Mother’s entire lap was covered with my hair. This happened before the Playground was started. Those days it was common to keep long hair in the Ashram. So whenever I tried to cut my hair, Mother always stopped me from cutting it. Once Mother told Nolini-da, “He has such beautiful hair, why does he want to cut it?” It is at that time that she said, “With long hair stretching behind and a long face looking down, you are always thinking of your bad health.”

Soup Time

S: Tell us the story about taking soup. The doctor had not given you permission to go for soup and Mother said, “He came to me.”

Oh, that!

S: That is a very interesting story.

That happened not many days after I came here.

R: You came in 1931?

1930. Mother gave us soup at that time in the present Reception Room. What now is the Reception Room used to be the Soup Hall. These buildings were not there — Nirod’s room, etc. There was something like a wall³ there. Around six o’clock in the evening, Mother came by that wall from the house where she and Sri Aurobindo stayed. She came and sat in what is presently the ‘Prosperity’ Room, from where things are distributed now. There she decided about who has to be given what the following day or signed chits, etc. It is at that time that she spoke with a few sadhaks. At about 8 Mother descended by that staircase and entered the Soup Hall. She came and sat on a chair that was kept on the eastern side where there is now a photo. Have you not heard of all this before?

R: I have heard about the soup, but I don’t know the details.

Mother sat there and we all meditated for a short time. Now Champaklal had a brother called Kantilal. He brought the soup vessel and kept it on Mother’s right side. After meditation, Mother blessed the soup vessel with both her hands. Then, one by one, all went with a cup in their hands and did pranam to Mother. As you gave the cup to Mother, she poured the soup into it and gave back the cup. I forget who, Nolini-da most probably, was the first one to do pranam. [*In the morning Datta was the first to do pranam, then Nolini-da.*]

So, I was unable to come for the soup distribution because I was not well. Dayashankar, whom I mentioned before as our physician, was taking care of me. He went to the Mother to inform her about my condition. After soup, as he was about to inform her, Mother told him, “You need not tell me anything, he has already come to me and taken the soup.” Dayashankar said, “No Mother, he has not come, he is at home.” Mother said, “No, he came and took the soup.” Then Mother left and went back to her house by the Meditation Hall staircase. She went up by that staircase [*Meditation House*] and came down by this [*Prosperity*] staircase.

After Mother had left, Dayashankar came and asked me, “Did you go to Mother to take soup?” I replied, “No, I did not go.” “But Mother told me you had taken soup from her!” Then I did not answer further. For I had felt something different at soup time, I felt as if the whole atmosphere of the room had changed. I thought why I am feeling like this. So when Dayashankar told me this, I knew this must have been the reason, and there was no use telling anything more.

S: He concentrated at the time of the distribution of the soup, and Mother received his prayer.

3. Biren-da seems to be referring to the half-demolished building of the Old Secretariat (circa June 1931) on which the Mother walked temporarily to go to the Library House. This was before the New Secretariat (consisting of what later became Nirod-da’s room, etc.) was built. See “The Mother’s Bridge” in *The History of the Ashram Main Building*, pp. 78-79.

I don't know exactly what happened.

R: But did you feel anything?

I felt the whole atmosphere of the room had changed.

R: Did you like the soup ceremony?

That is for sure.

R: Did you feel a presence?

Something like that. The atmosphere of the room changed.

R: Was it like Darshan?

(Avoiding the question) Mother gave a lot of importance to soup. All could not go for soup as soon as they came. Those days everything used to be like that.

The Dining Room

Even for the Dining Room, permission was not given to anyone to go anytime he liked. After the sadhaks came, sometimes Mother let them stay here for two or three months, and the servants brought their food. Then after some time Mother allowed them. Of course, those days the Dining Room was inside the Ashram. Once the Dining Room was shifted from the Ashram, everything stopped. The Dining Room [*in the Ashram main building*] was small, as we were only a few.

R: Did Mother herself serve?

Mother served earlier than that. The people who served at that time were myself, Dyuman, Pujalal and Jiban. Once even Nolini-da came for a few days — perhaps Dyuman was unwell at that time. Then Nolini-da also served along with us. *(After a pause)* It was wonderful. The serving was done in a different way. We served all the dishes together and kept them in their respective places, where each one sat. Each sadhak had a fixed seat. We covered every dish with a cloth, and before sitting down we had to lift the cloth and hang it. It was all very disciplined.

R: Who did the washing?

Washing was done by Khirod-da.

S: Khirod-da was also in this house. [Referring to Guest House where Biren-da stayed]

Khirod-da was a professor or teacher in Calcutta.

S: Khirod-da was the elder brother of Jalad-da.

Have you seen Jyotin, the one who gave flowers? You have seen Bihari, I suppose.

R: Yes.

They did the wiping. Once or twice, I too went to help them.

R: After having food, did everyone . . .

They had to go and give the dishes.

R: They did not leave them there?

There was no place there to leave the dishes. We had to even sit twice because of lack of space. What is now Prithwi Singh's office used to be the Dining Room. There was a gate on this side — where we get things now from Harikant's Prosperity. We went out by that gate. At that time we got *payas* thrice a week — one day *chirer payas* [made of flattened rice], one day *chaler payas* [made of rice] and one day vermicelli *payas*. The Ashram kitchen was where the Service tree is now; cooking was done there. But the *payas* was made in Prasad House. One pot of *payas* was enough for all of us. Jiban and myself would come out [on Rue Saint Gilles] by that gate and carry the pot from Prasad House to where we were serving.

There was a gentleman called Nolineshwar — he made the *payas*. Mridu had not come at that time. Nolineshwar made *rasagulla*, *pantua* and other sweets for Mother and Sri Aurobindo. And sometimes when visitors came . . . Visitors did not come as they do now, they could come only if they were permitted. They had to take permission and they were solely devotees. So when visitors came, they gave Nolineshwar two Rupees and he sent the two Rupees to Mother. The visitor decided what he wanted to offer to Mother — *sandesh* or *rasagulla*. Nolineshwar prepared the sweet and sent it to Mother and Sri Aurobindo. They tasted it and gave it back as *prasad* and sweets were sent to the person who gave the money. In that way, we partook a lot. Three days a week we had *payas*, and one day we had coconut rice. They squeezed the juice of the grated coconut and added that to the cooked rice.

And on Sundays we had *khichudi*. When I came here, in the beginning a maid-servant did the cooking — her name was Rajam. After that . . .

R: Two Gujarati ladies?

The two Gujarati ladies cooked inside the Ashram. That was later on. Then I have to tell you the story.

S: Tell us the story.

When the maid-servant was still cooking, Kodandaram wrote to Sri Aurobindo, “One person has left your Ashram because he could not take the food.” Sri Aurobindo replied, “If the person could not take the food here, it is good that he has left my Ashram. If he cannot take Ashram food, how will he do my Yoga?” Sri Aurobindo then said, “Why do we need servants to cook our food when we have so many sadhaks and sadhikas in our Ashram?” So after Sri Aurobindo said this, sadhaks and sadhikas started cooking. The person who was asked first to cook (he could be called Sri Aurobindo’s own companion) was Bijoy Nag. Have you heard the name of Bijoy Nag?

R: Yes.

Bijoy Nag and Savitri. You may not have heard the name of Savitri?

R: No. Savitri Agarwal?

Savitri De. The person who first taught us how to make bread and started the Bakery — his name was Sanchi. His wife was Savitri. So Savitri and Bijoy Nag were the first sadhaks who started cooking in the Ashram. After some time, it became a sort of a competition. One day Tripura also cooked — the one who passed away a few days back.

S: Tripura, wife of Kodandaraman.

Yes, Doraiswamy’s niece, Tripura. Then there was a person called Maanu-da, he was Dilip-da’s mother’s uncle, and he too cooked one day. And every one showed his culinary skill. (*laughter*) Maanu-da’s dal was praised by Sri Aurobindo — he prepared it from gram dal. So there ends the story of how the sadhaks started cooking. After that, Tara and Lila started working in the kitchen and they worked for many years, even after the Dining Room was shifted from here. At that time Ambu used to wash the dishes.

Prabartak Sangha

R: Did you ever speak with Sri Aurobindo?

No. When I came here, he had already retired. But my connection with Sri Aurobindo goes back to long before I came here.

R: How did that happen?

It happened in this way. Motilal Roy had a very close relation with Sri Aurobindo, you know that?

R: Yes, we know.

The Prabartak Sangha was started by Motilal Roy. It was named after the *Prabartak* magazine, and on top of the magazine was written: “Whether I myself write or not” (*tries to recollect*) — it is better not to tell in case I make an error. Sri Aurobindo’s name was written on the cover — Sri Aurobindo Ghosh — “God through me is making me write.” Motilal Roy’s name was not there. “Spiritually, *Prabartak* is my own magazine — Sri Aurobindo Ghosh.” I think I am not making too many errors, it was more or less what I am saying. So we always knew Prabartak Sangha as Sri Aurobindo’s Sangha and, because of this, there was a big revolutionary group in Chattogram [*Chittagong*]. After the publication of the *Prabartak*, the revolutionary group broke into two parts. The group that merged with Prabartak Sangha was our group. The other group consisted of those who did the [*Chittagong*] Armoury Raid.

S: Ambika Chakravarty, etc.

Master-da, etc. Surya Sen, the head of the group, was known as Master-da.

S: Master-da — Surya Sen, Loknath Bal, Ganesh Ghosh, Amrita Sen.

They again broke into two groups, Anushilan and . . .

S: Yugantar.

So we came to know of Sri Aurobindo through Prabartak Sangha, but we did not have any direct connection with Sri Aurobindo. In 1922 or the beginning of 1923, Prabartak split into two and, after the split, one group got directly connected with Sri Aurobindo. At that time Barin-da was here and he wrote to us letters on behalf of Sri Aurobindo. From 1922, a few of us started writing letters to Sri Aurobindo.

S: When did Sri Aurobindo sign as Kali in his letters to Prabartak Sangha?

That I don't know.

S: I have seen the letter, but I don't know the exact date, whether it was before or after the Prabartak Sangha split.

Prabartak split that very year — either the end of 1922 or the beginning of 1923. That very year a person, who was earlier in the Prabartak Sangha, came here and began to write to us about the Ashram.

R: Who was that person?

His name was Manmohan Dutta. One could say that he was the one who was responsible for the split.

R: How did you come in contact with Sri Aurobindo?

We were in the same group. Manmohan too was with us in the Prabartak, and he came from there to Pondicherry. When he came to Pondicherry, he began writing letters directly to us because the Prabartak had split again. We wrote to Sri Aurobindo and Barin-da replied to our letters.

R: Did Sri Aurobindo reply to your letters?

He did not correspond with outsiders. Once he even wrote to me here, “You know that I don't correspond with outsiders.” I replied, “Yes, I know that quite well.” It was difficult to get a reply from Sri Aurobindo even after writing several letters to him. After Barin-da left, Nolini-da started replying. I did not receive many letters from him because I came here soon after Barin-da left, perhaps in 1930 or slightly earlier.⁴ But there were many letters of Sri Aurobindo through Barin-da.

The Story of the Easy Chair

R: Tell us about some incidents.

What to tell? I don't recall anything. (*After some time*) I will tell you about one incident. The easy chair that you are seeing there, that has been given to me by one

4. Barin Ghose left the Ashram on the eve of Christmas in 1929.

gentleman who came here from Burma. It is made of teak wood. Teak wood at that time was very cheap in Burma, it may be so even now. These chairs were sold in Burma in the ports from where the steamers left. The chairs were sold for 2 to 2-and-a-half Rupees, and they bought them to relax on the steamer. This is in 1931. A gentleman named Dakshina came here from Chattogram. When he was leaving, he told me to keep the chair. I replied, “No, I will not keep the chair.” Then he said, “If you don’t want to keep it, you can dispose it off, as I cannot take it back with me.” Those days we did everything after taking Mother’s permission. So I wrote to Mother, “Dakshina wants to give me this chair.” Sri Aurobindo replied, “You can take the chair from Dakshina, but remember, it is not Dakshina’s chair, it is Mother’s easy chair.” Such incidents happened quite a few times.

The Story of the Shawl

Another incident happened in 1931. A lady whom I knew came here. Those days Bengali ladies belonging to good families rarely came out of their houses, and if they came out on the street, they wrapped themselves properly with a shawl — it was not like what they wear nowadays. I wrote to her saying, “Buy a shawl for me, which you can use on the way to Pondicherry.” So she bought from Calcutta a shawl called ND *chador*, made of Assamese silk. She got it very cheap. When she came here she told me, “Biren-da, you take this shawl now.” I said, “I can take it provided you accept from me the cost of the shawl.” At that time, as a rule, we did not keep any money with us. Even then we had some money since we received 2 Rupees from Mother on the first of every month. Do you know about it?

R: Yes, Mother gave you pocket money.

Yes, Mother gave us 2 Rupees. So I told the lady, “If you are ready to accept the cost of the shawl, I can take it.” Then I wrote to the Mother about the shawl. Sri Aurobindo wrote to me, “Don’t take the shawl if you have to pay money for it.” (*laughter*) Her name was Sitabala. “Take it only if Sitabala agrees to give it to you free, as that is the Mother’s shawl.”

R: Was that Mother’s shawl?

That was Mother’s shawl! Sri Aurobindo wanted us always to be immersed in the Mother’s consciousness. Since the time we came here, the notice was there, “Always behave as if the Mother was looking at you, for indeed she is always present.” To remain in her consciousness — what you see, hear, everything should be done with her consciousness.

Pocket Money

R: What were you doing with the pocket money?

Then I have to go back to what I was saying. One day Amrita came to my house early in the morning with two new French notes. He said, “Mother told me to give you these two notes. Mother forgot to give you the money yesterday, on the first. That is why she has sent it today.” I said, “I don’t take money, I don’t need the money.” Amrita replied, “But Mother told me to give it to you even if you don’t take it. Mother told me, ‘He feels shy and if he needs something, he hesitates to ask me.’” Then Amrita said, “You don’t need it now, but you might need it next month. That is why Mother sent the money. Keep it with you, and if you don’t need it, you can return it to Mother. Or else buy something for her.” Do you know Sanjiban?

R: Yes, the artist.

Sanjiban had a friend whose name was Bhupati. He once brought a few brushes for Sanjiban. Looking at one brush, Mother said, “I myself don’t have this kind of brush.” And she started praising the brush. Sanjiban was my co-worker.

R: In the Press?

There was no Press then.

S: He was in the Binding section. The Binding section which is beside the Dining Room now, that section used to be in the Guest House.

Where the ping pong table is kept now — it was there, and it was started by me. Perhaps I have already told you that, before coming here, I was told to learn either of the two works — book binding or watch repairing. I had already seen how binding was done in a shop in Chittagong, so I first started doing it there. I didn’t know it so well. But I got it by practice here.

R: You were telling something about Sanjiban-da.

Oh yes, about the brush. When Mother said she did not have that kind of brush, I thought I should buy a brush for her. But even to give something to Mother, you have to ask Mother. So when I asked Mother, Sri Aurobindo said, “It is true that Mother said so, but where does Mother have time to paint? Moreover, the price of the brush that you are thinking of buying for Mother is two Rupees here, but in Japan it is sold for only two paise. *(laughter)* So go and buy instead a nice mat for Mother.”

S: Mat from the market?

Yes.

R: Why was a mat necessary?

I don't know what Mother did with the mat. It was perhaps used upstairs. The condition of the Ashram at that time was not as good as you see it now. There were no carpets at that time. Jayantilal told me once to bring a *paati* from Chittagong to spread where you see the carpets now. I don't think you have seen that.

S: Paati is a mat made of palm leaf woven together, very comfortable for the summer season.

So I bought one mat through Benjamin and gave it to Mother.

R: You never used your 2 Rupees pocket money for eating something?

No, we were not permitted to buy eatables. At that time there was a notice in the Reading Room. The Reading Room used to be where Ravindra's Fruit Room is now. Mother's notice was there, and it said that if those who eat in the Dining Room eat elsewhere, the responsibility is theirs.

R: Really?

Yes.

R: It means get out of the Dining Room?

It means I am not responsible for them. It is not "Get out of Dining Room"; they are allowed to take food, but Mother is not responsible.

S: For any harm caused by the food from outside, she is not responsible. Dining Room food has the protection of the Mother.

There was a sadhak named Haradhan. He was the first person in the Ashram who was infected by small pox. No one had it before him. At that time Mother said that he got small pox because he was going out and eating. Not only food that came from outside; even here, Mother never encouraged cooking. To say that she never encouraged is incorrect; on the contrary, it was not permitted.

S: She rather discouraged it.

It was still more strict than “discouraged”. Later, the mother of Sanjiban, Hriday’s mother, Bibha, Pushpita — they all came in 1941. When they came, Sanjiban’s mother and Hriday’s mother wrote a letter to Mother, “We have not met our sons since a long time, can we feed them? They are saying that they will not eat without your permission. If you grant us permission, we can cook for them.” Then Mother gave them permission and we perhaps had for the first time food cooked from outside the Dining Room. This happened after 11 years of my stay here. Sanjiban came here in 1932.

S: Hriday’s mother is Chinmoy’s mother?

Chitta’s mother, Chitta who gives rice in the Dining Room.

Circus in Pondicherry

The present park that you see now used to be a football field. Circus groups came from outside and presented shows here. A very big circus group came here once.

S: In this very park?

Yes. The manager of the Circus knew Sri Aurobindo because he had brought a big Circus group to Pondy in 1911.

S: Sri Aurobindo came here in 1910.

This is what the manager told us. The conversation took place on the pier which used to be totally empty at that time, without a single soul. I was working in the Dining Room. By five o’clock in the evening, all work was over, including dinner. So I closed the Dining Room and went to the pier. The manager requested us to come and see the Circus, free of cost. He called Sri Aurobindo ‘Kakababu’. He said that one day he had told Kakababu to come and see their Circus. Sri Aurobindo replied, “It is enough for me if Moni and Nolini see it.” I am not sure whether Nolini-da went to see it or not. But the interesting thing was that Mridu had a great desire to see the Circus. (*laughter*) She started pleading with the Mother everyday to go and see it. Mother did not disallow her, but she kept postponing it to the next day. And one day we came to know that the Circus had left. Mridu then went weeping to Mother, and Mother had a good laugh.

Mridu

S: Mridu once said, “Mother, give me permission to beat him.” (laughing)

R: Which is that incident?

It happened in the Playground.

S: Mridu-di had an unpleasant experience with Pranab-da and was annoyed with him. So she asked for permission from Mother, “Give me permission to beat him, Mother.” (laughter)

There are many stories about Mridu. For instance, Mother used to come and stand on the staircase for interviews. Mridu went there when Sanjiban was showing his paintings to Mother. He offered his paintings to Mother — most of the paintings on the Ashram are done by him. Mridu was wiping her tears and as she could not speak in English, so Mother told him to ask her why she was crying. Mridu answered, “I will stop crying if Mother takes off her sandals and I am permitted to put them back on her feet.” *(laughter)* Have you understood?

R: Yes.

Then Mother said, “It is ready.” Mother took off her sandals and Mridu put them back on her feet. Sanjiban told me later, “I felt like giving a good slap on Mridu’s cheek because there was not a single drop of water in her eyes. *(laughter)* Mridu could have told you more than what I have told you. The relation between Mridu and Mother was unique. There were many such incidents.

Before she came here, she asked for permission to see Mother. She was the wife of Anilbaran’s nephew — she had become a widow and she offered all her ornaments to Mother. But Mother was reluctant to give her permission. Mridu then wrote a letter saying, “If Mother does not give me permission to come, then I want my ornaments back.” Mother told Anilbaran to write to her that she can come and collect her ornaments.” So she got the permission to come here. After she came here, Mother told her, “You can leave after taking your ornaments.” Mridu replied, “Did I ask permission for only getting back my ornaments? I actually wanted to come here.” *(laughter)* So Mridu’s play with Mother started even before she came here.

Another day Mother was about to leave by car and as usual Nolini-da, Amrita, Chandulal, Pavitra, they were all there, and Mother too was eager to play a game. A

pot was placed as a target and all were asked to aim at it — who can hit the pot? Everyone tried and failed, but Mridu hit the bull's eye.

(To be continued)

SACHINDRA NATH CHATTERJEE, MUNINDRANATH SHARMA, RAMAN REDDY

(Translated from Bengali by ALOKA GHOSH)

... in the integral view of things these three paths are one. Divine Love should normally lead to the perfect knowledge of the Beloved by perfect intimacy, thus becoming a path of Knowledge, and to divine service, thus becoming a path of Works. So also should perfect Knowledge lead to perfect Love and Joy and a full acceptance of the works of That which is known; dedicated Works to the entire love of the Master of the Sacrifice and the deepest knowledge of His ways and His being. It is in this triple path that we come most readily to the absolute knowledge, love and service of the One in all beings and in the entire cosmic manifestation.

Sri Aurobindo

(The Synthesis of Yoga, CWSA ,Vol. 23, p. 40)

“LIFE OF PREPARATION AT BARODA” — SRI AUROBINDO, THE PERFECT GENTLEMAN

(Part 16)

(Continued from the issue of April 2021)

SECTION 2. SIMPLICITY AND AUSTERITY

After Sri Aurobindo left England and joined the Baroda State Service there was a reversal of fortunes. He now earned a handsome salary, but strangely, after the financial privations in England he barely spent any money on himself other than purchasing books to fulfil his passion for reading and constantly acquiring knowledge. Dinendra Kumar Roy writes:

... if he had continued to work in the Baroda State Service, his monthly salary would have been two or three thousand rupees. But Aurobindo never cared much for money. When I was in Baroda, Aurobindo was earning a decent salary. He lived alone and was not addicted to luxury. Not a paisa was ill spent.¹

Elsewhere too Dinendra Kumar Roy remarked that Sri Aurobindo “had no attachment to money”.² Barin Kumar Ghose reaffirmed: “My brother had never any attachment to money.”³ Dinendra Kumar Roy notes: “For the money he was paid he could have got a nice house in Calcutta,”⁴ but Sri Aurobindo did not acquire any property or assets. It is common practice, even amongst the noblest, to save money and have a healthy bank balance, in order to secure one’s future. Instead, Sri Aurobindo readily gave money to others and causes like the Swadeshi movement, so much so that he was often seen borrowing money from his friends at the end of the month.⁵ Later in his life in Bengal and Pondicherry, finances were always scarce and circumstances trying. A book covering Sri Aurobindo’s political tour to Maharashtra in January 1908, stated:

1. Dinendra Kumar Roy, *With Aurobindo in Baroda*, 1st Ed., 2006, pp. 10-11 (Dinendra Kumar Roy, *Aurobindo Prasanga* – Translated from Bengali by Maurice Shukla).

2. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

3. Manoj Das, ‘Sri Aurobindo: Life and Times of the Mahayogi’, *Mother India*, May 2012, p. 349.

4. Dinendra Kumar Roy, *With Aurobindo in Baroda*, 1st Ed., 2006, p. 25.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Babu Arbind was so generous and charitable a man that out of 700 (his salary) he could not save anything. Now we learn he spends Rs. 50 per month. So much is the curtailment.⁶

Rajaram N. Patkar, the young brother-in-law of Sri Aurobindo's intimate friend Deshpande, was deeply touched by Sri Aurobindo's detachment from money, his faith in God and the trust he had in people. His impression of Sri Aurobindo was so embedded in his consciousness that even after fifty years he recalled:

Another important thing I observed about him, was his total absence of love for money, for which he never seemed to care. We all know that he was working as Professor of English Literature in the Baroda College. He was getting a decent salary of Rs. 500 a month. It was his practice to receive his salary once in three months. In those days, payment was made in cash and not in currency notes as now. He used to get the lump sum for the three months in a bag which he emptied in a large tray lying on the table in his room. He never bothered to keep it in a safe box, under lock and key as most of us do, and it lay there open until it was consumed. He never cared to keep an account of what he spent. This struck me and one day I casually asked him why he kept his money like that. He simply laughed and I still remember — though after a lapse of over fifty years — the reply that was given by him. He said, “Well, it is a proof that we are living in the midst of honest and good people.” I asked him again, “You never keep any account which may testify to the honesty of the people round about you?” Then with a serene face he said, “It is God who keeps an account for me. He gives me as much as I want and keeps the rest to Himself. At any rate He does not keep me in want; then why should I worry?”⁷

Sri Aurobindo was close to the Maharaja, but he never took advantage of his proximity nor focussed his energies on material gain or career advancement.⁸ Such was his indifference to money, comforts, position and power that he could be forthright with the Maharaja and resisted when his personal time was encroached upon by the Maharaja.⁹

Despite his generous nature, Sri Aurobindo was aware that money was an extremely sensitive issue with others. In June 1914, he wrote to his brother-in-law, Saurin:

6. *Sri Aurobindo: His Political Life and Activities*, compiled and edited by Anurag Banerjee, p. 181.

7. A. B. Purani, *The Life of Sri Aurobindo*, 2001, p. 62.

8. See Dinendra Kumar Roy, *With Aurobindo in Baroda*, 1st Ed., 2006, pp. 10, 42.

9. See Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 2, 2009, p. 951; See CWSA, Vol. 36, p. 43.

As for your loans, my point was not about a legal process or any material trouble as the result of non-payment. It was that those who give the loan should not have any feeling of not being rightly dealt with, if we should fail to repay them, any feeling that advantage had been taken of their friendship. I have had too bad an experience of money-matters & their power to cool down friendly relations not to be on my guard in this respect. Therefore, I desire that there should be no ground left for future misunderstanding in any matter of the kind, & loans are the most fruitful of these things, much more than money asked or taken as a gift.¹⁰

At Baroda, Sri Aurobindo had a plain lifestyle and this was apparent to many. His student at Baroda College, Mr. Ganesh Hari Gokhale, remarked:

As we could observe, he lived a very simple ascetic life. Although he was getting a good salary for those days I do not think he was spending much on himself. . . . He seemed to believe in plain living and high thinking.¹¹

Let us reflect a bit on this adage of “plain living and high thinking” through the lens of a couple of Sri Aurobindo’s articles written in 1909 in the *Karmayogin*. Referring to organisation of life in ancient India, Sri Aurobindo wrote about its simplicity as also about its magnificence:

We are too apt to forget how noble, great and well-appointed a life it was. There were no railways, telegraphs or steamships, it is true, and democracy was beginning to go out of fashion in favour of a centralised bureaucratic monarchy. But in spite of these drawbacks, the ancient life of India was as splendid, as careful, as convenient, as humane, as enlightened in its organisation as that of any modern society or administration.¹²

The ancient Indian civilisation was followed by the classical age — of which the Gupta period from 300 to 600 CE stands out. Sri Aurobindo gives us a wider perspective when he writes about the classical age in a piece titled ‘Asceticism and Enjoyment’:

. . . our attention was arrested by a slight illustrated article on Railways in India and America. The writer contrasts the squalor, indigence and discomfort of railway travelling in this Paradise of the efficient Anglo-Indian with the lavish

10. CWSA, Vol. 36, pp. 251-52.

11. Reminiscences of Ganesh Hari Gokhale, sourced from papers at Sri Aurobindo Archives.

12. CWSA, Vol. 8, p. 450.

comfort and opulence of railway furnishings and appointments in the United States. The contrast is indicative of the immense gulf between the teeming wealth of America and the miserable indigence of India, once the richest country in the world. America is the land above all lands where enjoyment, bhoga, is frankly recognised and accepted. India, many would say, is the land above all lands where bhoga is sternly refused. That is the common view; we are not inclined to think it the correct view. The asceticism of India is a phase, a characteristic of a civilisation dominated by an unfavourable environment and driven in upon itself. The classical period when India was full of life, activity, development, abounding vigour, defending herself successfully against the impact of the outer barbarian, was a period of frank and lavish enjoyment far more intellectual, artistic, perfect than anything Europe has ever been capable of, even at its best. In yet older literature we find the true spirit of India, a splendid capacity for bhoga and tyaga in their highest terms, the utter enjoyment of the householder, the utter renunciation of the sannyasin. To take the utmost joy of life, to be capable of the utmost renunciation of life, at one and the same time, in the same mind and body, to be master of both capacities and bound by neither, — this was the secret of India, the mighty discipline of which Janaka was the traditional exemplar. “Renounce all that thou mayest enjoy all,” — this is India’s characteristic message, — not Buddha’s absolute renunciation, not the European’s enslavement to his bodily, vital and intellectual desires and appetites. Tyaga within, bhoga without, — Ananda, the divine delight of the purified soul, embracing both.¹³

In a 1926 conversation with his disciples, Sri Aurobindo interestingly reveals the difference between asceticism and Puritanism:

Asceticism has a beauty of its own; there is a spiritual life behind it — the lower life is renounced for a higher life. But as pleasure suppressed gives rise to pain, so beauty suppressed leads to ugliness. Gandhi has made asceticism ugly. That is not asceticism but Puritanism.¹⁴

After Sri Aurobindo gave up a lucrative career in Baroda to enter the political field, his financial resources dwindled and became scarce. His sacrifice was not lost on many. The Nationalist leader Bipin Chandra Pal wrote:

Had Aravinda cared for earthly honours or wealth, he had a very splendid opening for both in Baroda. He was held in great respect by the Maharaja. He

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 449-50.

14. *Sri Aurobindo’s Talks of 1926*, recorded by Anilbaran Roy, 1st Ed., 2020, p. 42.

was loved by the educated class in the State. He was exceedingly popular with the general public. All these opened very large possibilities of preferment before him in the service of his premier Native State in India. . . . He gave up his place in Baroda, worth £560 a year, to take up duties of Principal in the college started at Calcutta under the new National Council of Education on a bare subsistence of £10 a month.¹⁵

Here is an excerpt from a proscribed book:

Endowed with rare gifts, with rare care and diligence turned to good account, Babu Aurobindo Ghose might, if he cared, lived in as much ease and affluence as at least some of the men who will sit in judgment upon him today. Even while almost intentionally giving up the chance of being a member of ‘of the greatest service in the world’ he might have easily taken up the honourable profession of law and simultaneously, make his pile and play the patriot with perfect ease. He might even take service in the Government Education Department which can boast of few men of his scholarship and attainments, and be counted among the respectability that “has a stake in the country”. He might at least have continued in the service of the Native Prince who was paying him a decent salary and offered to pay more if he chose to remain with him. But there was a new quickening in Bengal, a new movement of freedom among her people . . . There was a need for prophets, statesman, educationist and valiant practical workers for the new cause. Endowed by nature with rare poetical gifts and large prophetic enthusiasm, fitted by training and culture, received in one of the most advanced seats of modern learning as a great educationist, with experience in educational work in the premier Native State of India, Aurobindo Ghose saw that his place was among his own people, in the leadership of the new movement, at the head of the new National College in Bengal; and sacrificing his larger pay and greater prospects at Baroda even without a moment’s hesitation he came to Calcutta on a salary which was barely sufficient, and not always even this — to meet the barest necessities of life. Like the spirit of the old Brahmanical culture, reincarnated, clothed though in the classical gown of Greece and Rome, Aurobindo Ghose took up, what his sister describes as the vow of poverty with a view to devote himself body and soul to the service of that country which he always addressed as the Mother. Many there are, many there have been, who have rendered their service of their leisure hours to their country’s cause; many there are who are playing at politics as a pleasant pastime after the day’s work is done and day’s money is

15. *Sri Aurobindo: His Political Life and Activities*, compiled and edited by Anurag Banerjee, pp. 414 (Written by Bipin Chandra Pal and published in his journal *Svaraj* which he was editing in London in 1909-10).

earned, many who are helping the national cause with the overflowing of their huge purse; but show us the man who like Aurobindo Ghose, has consecrated his body, his mind, his heart, his soul, his active hours of the day and his waking watches of the night, in the service of the country.¹⁶

Arun Chandra Guha, himself a participant in the political movement and later a Central minister, writes of Sri Aurobindo's life in Baroda and Bengal:

Having spent the formative years of his life from early boyhood to full maturity in England, Aurobindo was then leading a very simple and austere life with other workers. Even while he was in service at Baroda, he used to send to Calcutta the major portion of his salary for revolutionary work, living a very austere life. Austerity was a cult for the revolutionaries of those days; but the austere and dedicated life of Aurobindo was of a higher order.¹⁷

About Sri Aurobindo's departure from Baroda, Nolini Kanta Gupta writes:

If he continued he might have advanced, progressed in his career, that is to say, become Principal of the College, even the Dewan of Baroda, a very lofty position, a very lofty position indeed for an Indian, become another R. C. Dutt. But he threw all that overboard . . .¹⁸

Sri Aurobindo once told his attendants:

If I had stuck to my job I would have been a Principal, perhaps, written some poetry and lived in comfort like a bourgeois.¹⁹

On leaving Baroda, Sri Aurobindo was initially unwilling to accept any salary in his new assignment as Principal of Bengal National College, but finally agreed to accept Rs 75 a month. But as it was impossible to maintain himself on that amount he was ultimately persuaded to take Rs 150 as a monthly salary.²⁰

Whilst at the aforesaid college, Sri Aurobindo was simultaneously editing the *Bande Mataram*. Referring to this period Suresh Chandra Deb writes:

16. Manoj Das, *Sri Aurobindo in the First Decade of the Twentieth Century*, 2nd Ed., pp. 210-11; quoting from *Bande Mataram*, Vol. II – Printed and published by Hari Raghunath Bhagvat, Vande Mataram Press, Poona City, 1909.

17. Arun Chandra Guha, *First Spark of Revolution*, 1971, p. 136-37.

18. Nolini Kanta Gupta, *Collected Works of Nolini Kanta Gupta*, Vol. 5, 1st Ed., 1974, p. 11.

19. A. B. Purani, *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, 4th Ed., 2007, p. 353.

20. See R. C. Majumdar, *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, Vol. II, 1962, p. 80.

Financial difficulties had always been dogging this paper. Except in this extremity, the management did not generally pester him with them. And the majority of us were taught to treat them as part of the day’s work, the “Chief” preferring to forego any “salary” that he now and then drew; the others followed the example.²¹

Sri Aurobindo himself has stated:

Nor have I ever received any payment for any political work except occasional payments for contributions to the Calcutta *Bande Mataram* while I was on its staff.²²

On the other hand, when *Bande Mataram* was going through a financial crisis in September 1906, Sri Aurobindo dipped into his meagre resources and made a contribution of Rs 300.²³

Upendranath Banerjee writes in his *Aurobindo Prasanga* that he was very surprised to learn that Sri Aurobindo left a Rs 800 monthly salary to join as Principal of Bengal National College at a monthly salary of Rs 150. He writes: “When I asked how he could manage with such inadequate wages, he replied with positive assurance that Rs 10 was left with him after sending to everyone else.”²⁴

Soon after Sri Aurobindo left Baroda, his student, Mr. G. H. Gokhale, accidentally met him on a train. He asked how was it possible to live so sparingly after being accustomed to an easy life. Sri Aurobindo replied: “Mr. Gokhale, Rs 10/- are quite enough for a man.”²⁵

As regards marriage, Sri Aurobindo felt it “was an expensive luxury”,²⁶ but in his case Mrinalini Devi too had to live on a tight budget. In 1905, he told her: “If I spend everything for myself, for my pleasure and luxury, I am a thief.”²⁷ And two months later, in a letter, he expressed his appreciation that she, unlike Sarojini, was practising self-denial.²⁸ However, after Sri Aurobindo left his Baroda job, Mrinalini Devi had to undergo economic hardship. She bitterly complained about it to him in several letters in 1907-08, whilst she was staying with Sri Aurobindo’s family at Deoghar.²⁹

21. Suresh Chandra Deb, ‘Sri Aurobindo as I Knew Him’, *Mother India*, November 2002, p. 949.

22. CWSA, Vol. 36, p. 266.

23. See Sri Aurobindo: Archives and Research, April 1979, p. 121 (Hemendra Prasad Ghose, *Reminiscences of Sri Aurobindo*).

24. Upendranath Banerjee, *Aurobindo Prasanga*; sourced from papers at Sri Aurobindo Archives (translated from Bengali).

25. *Reminiscences of Ganesh Hari Gokhale*, sourced from papers at Sri Aurobindo Archives.

26. Dinendra Kumar Roy, *With Aurobindo in Baroda*, 1st Ed., 2006, p. 10.

27. *Sri Aurobindo in Baroda*, 1st Ed., compiled and Edited by Roshan and Apurva, 1st Ed., p. 61.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

29. Sourced from papers at Sri Aurobindo Archives.

K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar writes:

When Sri Aurobindo took the plunge into politics after 1906, gave up the security of the Baroda job, and invited the rigours of privation, persecution and incarceration, Mrinalini’s unease only deepened all the more. For a girl, it is always a cross between glory and penance to marry a man of genius; and Sri Aurobindo was more than a man of genius.³⁰

Interestingly, in the judgment of the Alipore Bomb Case C. P. Beachcroft refers to a letter dated 20th December, 1907, by Mrinalini Devi to Sri Aurobindo when he was staying in Chaku Khansama’s Lane with Barin and Abinash Bhattacharya. The judge states: “Ex 288, dated 20/12/07 is a letter from his wife, in which she shows resentment because he will not provide her with a house to live in and there is reference to the house, apparently 19-3 Chaku Khansama’s Lane.”³¹

Soon after, in February 1908, Sri Aurobindo shifted residence to 23, Scott’s Lane and Mrinalini Devi joined him there and they lived very simply. Besides they had very little money. Interestingly, Sri Aurobindo was getting more absorbed in Yoga and Vishnu Bhaskar Lele came as a guest, much to Abinash Bhattacharya’s consternation, since he wanted Sri Aurobindo to concentrate solely on politics. When he saw that even Mrinalini Devi had started hearing Lele’s lectures on Yoga, he questioned her: “Now even you have joined in, *Baudi*.” She replied: “What am I to do, brother? I do not want to hold him back. I’ll do all I can to follow after him.”³²

On 28th April 1908 Sri Aurobindo, Mrinalini Devi, Sarojini, Abinash Bhattacharya and Sailen Bose shifted to 48, Grey Street. It was here that the police arrested him, implicating him in the Alipore Bomb Case. At the time of arrest, the police officer, Cregan, tried to ridicule Sri Aurobindo. Sri Aurobindo writes:

Cregan asked me: “It seems you are a B.A. Is it not a matter of shame for an educated person like you to be sleeping on the floor of an unfurnished room and in a house like this?” “I am a poor man and I live like one,” I said. “Then you have worked up all this mischief with the idea of becoming a rich man?” Cregan replied in a loud voice. Knowing how impossible it was to explain the love of motherland, sacrifice or the sublimity of a vow of poverty to this thick-skulled Briton I did not make the attempt.³³

30. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Sri Aurobindo – a biography and a history*, 5th Ed., 2006, p. 66.

31. ‘C. P. Beachcroft’s Judgment in the Case of Arabinda Ghose at the Alipore Bomb Trial’, dated 6.5.1909, *Mother India*, August 1998, p. 543 (Bejoy Krishna Bose, *The Alipore Bomb Trial*).

32. Abinash Bhattacharya, ‘Sri Aurobindo’, *Mother India*, July 2012, p. 532.

33. Sri Aurobindo, *Tales of Prison Life*, 2014, pp. 3-4.

After a year’s incarceration Sri Aurobindo was acquitted. On his acquittal from the Alipore Bomb Conspiracy the *Bangabandhu* eulogised Sri Aurobindo’s self-sacrifice for the country:

O favourite son of Saraswati! Lakshmi, choosing you as one of her own, wanted to put the mark of ease on your sacred forehead — you wiped that off, and voluntarily sought out the cottage of the poor. How few choose poverty like this in the world?

This voluntary vow of poverty has not been able to dim your lustre.³⁴

Once, in reply to a disciple’s query Sri Aurobindo wrote:

Poverty has never had any terrors for me nor is it an incentive. You seem to forget that I left my very safe and “handsome” Baroda position without any need to it, and that I gave up also the Rs. 150 of the National College Principalship, leaving myself with nothing to live on. I could not have done that if money had been an incentive.³⁵

K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar notes:

Sri Aurobindo seems to have been equally indifferent to money as to personal comforts, food or clothes.³⁶

Dinendra Kumar Roy observed that Sri Aurobindo was not at all materialistic, so much so that he was unconcerned even about necessities or conveniences:

His bed was as simple and ordinary as his clothes. Even a clerk would have thought it below his dignity to lie on the cast-iron bedstead he slept on . . . He wasn’t accustomed to sleeping on a soft, thick mattress. On account of its proximity to the desert, Baroda has severe summers as well as winters. But I never saw Aurobindo use a quilt even in the cold of January. Instead of a quilt he used an ordinary blanket. During the winter he wore a blue shawl worth half a dozen rupees.³⁷

Elsewhere, in a Bengali article, ‘*Sekaler Smriti*’, Dinendra Kumar Roy writes that Sri Aurobindo was a born Sannyasin; and he was never lured by luxury. He

34. Sujata Nahar, *Mother’s Chronicles*, Book V, p. 496 (*Bangabandhu*, 18th May 1909).

35. CWSA, Vol. 35, pp. 22-23.

36. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Sri Aurobindo – a biography and a history*, 5th Ed., 2006, p. 50.

37. Dinendra Kumar Roy, *With Aurobindo in Baroda*, 1st Ed., 2006, p. 17.

spread a thin mattress on a five rupee iron cot and a blanket over it and slept for a few hours during the late hours of the night.³⁸

In the same article Roy writes that Sri Aurobindo would study and compose poems well past midnight. Thereafter he went to sleep on his narrow iron cot, resting his head on a small and thin pillow. As he got up in the morning, he drank a glass of isabgul mixed in cold water as his daily routine.³⁹

Subsequently, Sri Aurobindo changed his bed from an iron one to a coir one. Rajaram N. Patkar, writing of a period after Dinendra Kumar Roy returned to Calcutta, reveals the reason why Sri Aurobindo slept on a hard bed:

He never slept on a soft cotton-bed, as most of us do, but on a bed made of coir (coconut fibres) on which was spread a Malbar grass-mat which served as a bed-sheet. Once I asked him why he used such a coarse hard bed and he said with his characteristic laugh, “My boy, don’t you know that I am a Brahmachari? Our shastras enjoin that a Brahmachari should not use a soft bed, which may induce him to sleep.” I was silenced but I thought to myself that he must be a great man.⁴⁰

About Sri Aurobindo’s simple lifestyle, Rajaram N. Patkar also wrote:

One would observe that even at that young age he had denied to himself the ordinary comforts of a common man’s life but herein lay the germ of his future life as a great Yogi.⁴¹

During the Swadeshi movement, Sri Aurobindo appealed to wealthy Indians to abstain from luxurious articles from the West, whilst asking the middle class not to indulge in luxuries at all. In a *Karmayogin* piece titled ‘Practicable Boycott’, he writes:

The first principle we would suggest is to make a clear division between articles of necessity, interpreting the word in a broad sense, and articles of luxury and to have an absolute interdict of the latter unless they are of indigenous manufacture. The first reason for the interdict is that many articles of luxury are produced in India, but find it difficult to maintain themselves because they depend on the patronage of the rich, who are wedded to European vulgarity

38. See Dinendra Kumar Roy, *Reminiscences of the Days of Yore* (Translated from Bengali article *Sekaler Smriti*); sourced from papers at Sri Aurobindo Archives.

39. *Ibid.*

40. A. B. Purani, *The Life of Sri Aurobindo*, 2001, p. 62.

41. *Reminiscences of Rajaram N. Patkar* dated 30 September 1956; sourced from papers at Sri Aurobindo Archives.

and want of taste in the appointments of their life. The poorer classes cannot indulge in luxuries; the middle class, in the present condition of the country, should not. An organised preference of Swadeshi arts and crafts by the rich would revive and stimulate a great source of national wealth and reopen a field of national capacity. Articles of necessity can be divided into those indispensable for life and a decent existence and those necessary for our work and business. In the former we can always prefer an inferior but usable indigenous article, in the latter no such self-denying ordinance can be imposed. I cannot be called upon to use an article or implement which cripples my business or puts me at a serious disadvantage with my competitor, merely because it is produced in the country, just as in my own home I cannot be called upon to use a pen which will not write, a lamp which will not give light, a cup which cracks and breaks after a few days' use. But if the home article is usable or if the business implement is only slightly inferior to its foreign rival, then it would be unpatriotic and a violation of the boycott oath to prefer the foreign to the indigenous production.⁴²

Though Sri Aurobindo could afford a high standard of living, Dinendra Kumar Roy was amazed by Sri Aurobindo's other simple habits. His carriage at Baroda was old and his horse shabby that even a whip did not boost its speed. “Everything about Aurobindo was peculiar — his clothes no less than his carriage and his house,” remarks Dinendra.⁴³ He also writes that Sri Aurobindo's other belongings too were quite simple:

Since he wrote poetry late into the night, he rose rather late. He always kept a cheap, open-faced watch with him. A small clock stood on his reading table.⁴⁴

In spite of his plain style of living and quiet nature, Sri Aurobindo's charming personality was palpable. Dinendra noted: “Everyone who knew him respected him. The educated people of Baroda had a high regard for his uncommon genius.”⁴⁵ On Sri Aurobindo's stay in Baroda, Nirodbaran said:

He had a few chosen friends, lived a very simple life, and yet he could command the respect and honour of almost all the people there, high or low, with whom he came in touch or who heard his name. Even the Maharaja held him in high esteem.⁴⁶

42. CWSA, Vol. 8, p. 400.

43. Dinendra Kumar Roy, *With Aurobindo in Baroda*, 1st Ed., 2006, p. 25.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

46. Nirodbaran, ‘Sri Aurobindo – Perfect Gentleman’, *Mother India*, August 1970, p. 408.

Sri Aurobindo’s undemanding nature and sincerity comes across in a June 1895 letter to the Sar Suba of Baroda State about an official trip to Ooty:

. . . I have also the honour to state that as I desired a peon rather at Ootie than on the journey & even so it was not *absolutely* necessary, I did not think myself justified in taking advantage of your kind permission to engage one at Bombay as far as Ootie.⁴⁷

Sri Aurobindo has said that he “was sent for to Ooty in order to prepare a précis of the whole Bapat case and the judicial opinions on it.”⁴⁸ It was a complicated legal case where Sri Aurobindo’s acumen was used by the Maharaja. Interestingly, the Maharaja gave Sri Aurobindo a generous and significant 25% salary raise, from Rs 200 to Rs 250, w.e.f. 1st October 1895.⁴⁹ Nirodbaran has alluded to the Bapat Case:

Once in the evening the Guru and the shishya had a long talk, for more than an hour, on an old legal case (Bapat case?) that must have taken place during Sri Aurobindo’s stay in Baroda, and must have been famous for Purani to remember it and discuss it with Sri Aurobindo. He was lying on one side and Purani was sitting on the floor leaning against a couch opposite. It had the air of a very homely talk, as between father and son.⁵⁰

V. S. Bapat was a land settlement officer of the Baroda State whom the British had charged with corruption and who was to be tried by a special commission. The charge was actually false, and solely intended to malign the Maharaja’s administration. In the long-drawn-out trial, Bapat was ably and voluntarily defended by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, who was a close college friend of Bapat. Bapat was later acquitted but did not live long after the case. After his death Tilak took charge of his son and helped him settle down in life.⁵¹

Let us briefly delve into the houses that Sri Aurobindo stayed in at Baroda. Educated and cultured people are sensitive to the standard of their lodgings but Sri Aurobindo was equal to each house he lived in, whether it was a palace or a hovel. When Sri Aurobindo arrived at Baroda on 8th February 1893, he coincidentally met at the railway station his old friend from his England days, Bapubhai Mazumdar, a

47. CWSA, Vol. 36, p. 152.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

49. See *Sri Aurobindo in Baroda*, compiled and edited by Roshan and Apurva, 1st Ed., p. 18.

50. Nirodbaran, *Twelve Years with Sri Aurobindo*, 2005, p. 218.

51. See website: <https://threadreaderapp.com/thread/1093141990257025024.html>; dated 22.01.2021 (sourced from Ram Gopal, *Lokmanya Tilak, A Biography*); See Sujata Nahar, *Mother’s Chronicles*, Book V, p. 19.

barrister. “He took me to his house and I stayed there for some time,”⁵² Sri Aurobindo said. Six years later Bapubhai stayed with Sri Aurobindo for some time as a guest.

From 1893 to 1897 there does not seem to be sufficient accurate data to ascertain where exactly Sri Aurobindo stayed. Altogether he resided in about half a dozen houses where he either privately rented a house or was provided one by Baroda State. Amongst these were the ones in the Camp near the bazaar, the Government quarters behind the college on the way to the Camp, Mir Bakarwali’s wada, near Shiapura, and Killedar’s wada, on the way to Makepura Palace — the Maharaja’s second residence on the outskirts of the city.⁵³ However, for a large part of his stay from 1897 or 98 to 1906 Sri Aurobindo resided in the mansion of Khaserao Jadhav. Sri Aurobindo “made the acquaintance of Khaserao two or three years after reaching Baroda.”⁵⁴ Dinendra Kumar Roy writes:

He had become very close to the Jadhav family of Baroda. Srijut Khaserao Jadhav, graduate of an Agricultural College in England, a close friend of the Maharaja and Suba or Magistrate of Baroda, looked on Sri Aurobindo as a brother. Khaserao’s younger brother Lieutenant Madhavrao Jadhav was Aurobindo’s most intimate friend.⁵⁵

Khaserao’s bungalow at No. 15, Dandia Bazaar, near the Maharaja’s Lakshmi Vilas Palace, was actually a red brick two-storeyed mansion, especially constructed for him by the Maharaja in 1896.⁵⁶ Sri Aurobindo stayed in the upper floor of this mansion, in between he moved out to another residence and then returned on two instances. Sri Aurobindo has himself stated that he lived in the Jadhav house “most of the time he was at Baroda.”⁵⁷

Khaserao’s mansion has now fittingly been converted into Sri Aurobindo Nivas. After considering a request, the Government of Gujarat donated this bungalow to Sri Aurobindo Society in 1971, to develop it as a memorial to Sri Aurobindo. The Mother granted them the relics of Sri Aurobindo, which were enshrined on 24th November 1972. Sri Aurobindo Nivas has 23 large and small rooms and is surrounded by open land and a garden.⁵⁸ There are sign-boards in the bungalow indicating the rooms where Sri Aurobindo stayed or studied.

52. A. B. Purani, *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, 4th Ed., 2007, p. 265.

53. See *Sri Aurobindo in Baroda*, compiled and edited by Roshan and Apurva, 1st Ed., pp. 9-10.

54. CWSA, Vol. 36, p. 37.

55. Dinendra Kumar Roy, *With Aurobindo in Baroda*, 1st Ed., 2006, p. 13.

56. See *Sri Aurobindo in Baroda*, compiled and edited by Roshan and Apurva, 1st Ed., pp. 10-11.

57. See CWSA, Vol. 36, pp. 38-39.

58. See Website: <https://auronivas.org/sri-aurobindo-nivas-the-national-memorial/dated-27-November-2020>.

When Dinendra Kumar Roy first came to Baroda in October 1898, he accompanied Sri Aurobindo from Deoghar. He writes:

When we went to Baroda we stayed at first for a short time in Khaserao-saheb’s house. This was a large, red, single-storied mansion on the main road. It was quite beautiful. Rao-saheb’s family was not staying there at that time. He had been posted as the magistrate of Kadi or Amreli district of the Baroda state. His family lived there too. When he came back to Baroda as magistrate, we left that house and went to another locality where we stayed in a *waada* that belonged to a Muslim.⁵⁹

The locality was dusty and crowded, situated in the city centre, and they stayed there at Mir Bakarali’s wada — a large old single-storied house. The houses around them belonged to Maratha families. When the plague broke out in 1899, they moved to the outskirts of the town and stayed at the Killedar’s (a kind of local governor) Bungalow, adjacent to the Killedar’s very large mansion which had a lawn on one side and a flower garden on the other. It was thanks to Lieutenant Madhavrao’s relations with this family that they got this tiled house for which they did not have to pay rent. Madhavrao visited Sri Aurobindo at this house at least once a day. The house was very isolated and was surrounded by huge trees beyond which lay a large stretch of wilderness.⁶⁰

After his summer vacations in 1901 Sri Aurobindo arrived at Baroda from Nainital in July with his wife and sister and stayed at Khaserao Jadhav’s house. Soon after, Barin suddenly appeared unannounced and stayed with them. He was given a room downstairs in a corner of the lawn and this was the daily meeting place of the family foursome. Barin describes Khaserao’s mansion thus:

A rather big hall, facing the lawn, beyond which ran the main street from the railway station to Lakshmi Vilas Palace, two rooms on its right and a covered inner courtyard, with a dining-room on one side and servants’ quarters on the other, this was how the house was built. The same number of rooms were repeated upstairs, of which the hall was Sri Aurobindo’s study. A table, a sofa, a number of chairs, all heaped pell-mell with books and a revolving book-case groaning under their weight — all thinly covered with dust . . .⁶¹

Subsequently Sri Aurobindo took privilege leave from 28th April to 29th May 1902 and it appears it was during this time he took his wife and sister with him back

59. Dinendra Kumar Roy, *With Aurobindo in Baroda*, 1st Ed., 2006, pp. 13-14.

60. *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14, 30-31.

61. *Sri Aurobindo in Baroda*, compiled and edited by Roshan and Apurva, 1st Ed., p. 11.

to Bengal. Later when Manmohan threatened to stop sending his share of the allowance for their mother and sister, Sri Aurobindo offered to increase his share of the contribution. From this letter dated 15th August, 1902, to his uncle, we can ascertain that Sri Aurobindo was staying at Khaserao’s house. Here he writes to his uncle: “Sarojini suggests that I might bring her or have her brought to Baroda with my wife.”⁶² However, there does not seem to be any record of Mrinalini Devi or Sarojini ever returning to Baroda.

Another house that Sri Aurobindo stayed in for a short while was a bungalow on Race Course Road, for in response to a request from King’s College, Cambridge, who were updating the records of their alumni, he gave, in September 1903, his address as “Race Course Road, Baroda, or the Baroda Officers’ Club, Baroda Gymkhana.”⁶³ The Club address seems to have also been given because the Race Course Road house was temporary. Sri Aurobindo refers to this house in a letter dated 25th June, 1902, to Mrinalini Devi: “I am staying now in Khaserao’s house. When you come we will go to the ‘Navalakha’.”⁶⁴ From a certain document we can establish that the house on Race Course Road, near the railway station, is called Navlakha Bungalow.⁶⁵

At the Killedar’s Bungalow, Dinendra Kumar Roy complained of his utter discomfort of living in this long uninhabited run-down tiled bungalow. During the summers, the heat was unbearable as the intense sun rays made the tiles fiery-hot. Furthermore, the tiles in the house were so old that water leaked through onto the table during the rains. And the biting cold winters almost froze Roy’s blood. But Sri Aurobindo seemed undisturbed by these oscillating extreme temperatures. Roy was further harassed by flies in the morning and mosquitoes at night. An exasperated Roy states:

Many a Bengali aristocrat’s cowshed was better than that dwelling! But Aurobindo never complained or showed unwillingness to live in such a terrible place. He lived undisturbed in that dilapidated house for a long time. Aurobindo would sit on a chair beside a table under the light of a “jewel lamp” and, untroubled by the awful mosquito-bites, would read on till one o’clock.⁶⁶

62. CWSA, Vol. 36, p. 138.

63. See *Sri Aurobindo in Baroda*, compiled and edited by Roshan and Apurva, 1st Ed., pp. 9-10.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

65. Letter of Mansimharao Y. Gaekwad dated 13 January 1978; sourced from papers at Sri Aurobindo Archives.

66. See Dinendra Kumar Roy, *With Aurobindo in Baroda*, 1st Ed., 2006, p. 35.

Sri Aurobindo has said:

. . . Freedom without the discipline and detachment is given to few. The Mother and myself went for years through the utmost self-imposed bareness of life.⁶⁷

(To be continued)

GAUTAM MALAKER

67. CWSA, Vol. 32, p. 97.

Correction

In the April 2021 issue of *Mother India*, it was stated on page 74 that T. Kodandarama Rao was present in the Ashram at the time of Sri Aurobindo’s siddhi day on 24th November 1926.

Although T. Kodandarama Rao was there in the Ashram in the early 1920s, he was not present during the siddhi day. The names of those who were present are given below:

(1) Bijoy Kumar Nag, (2) Nolini Kanta Gupta, (3) K. Amrita, (4) Moni (Suresh Chakravarty), (5) Pavitra (Phillippe Barbier Saint-Hilaire), (6) Barindra Kumar Ghose, (7) Datta (Miss Hodgson), (8) K. Rajangam, (9) Satyen, (10) Purani, (11) Lilavati (Purani’s wife), (12) Punamchand, (13) Champa Ben (Punamchand’s wife), (14) Rajani Kanta Palit, (15) Dr. Upendra Nath Banerjee, (16) Champaklal, (17) Kanailal Gangulee, (18) Khitish Chandra Dutt, (19) V. Chandra Sekharam, (20) Pujalal, (21) Purushottam Patel, (22) Rati Palit, (23) Rambhai Patel, (24) Nani Bala (25) Haradhan Buxi.

(Source: A. B. Purani, *The Life of Sri Aurobindo*, 2001, p. 217 and papers at Sri Aurobindo Archives)



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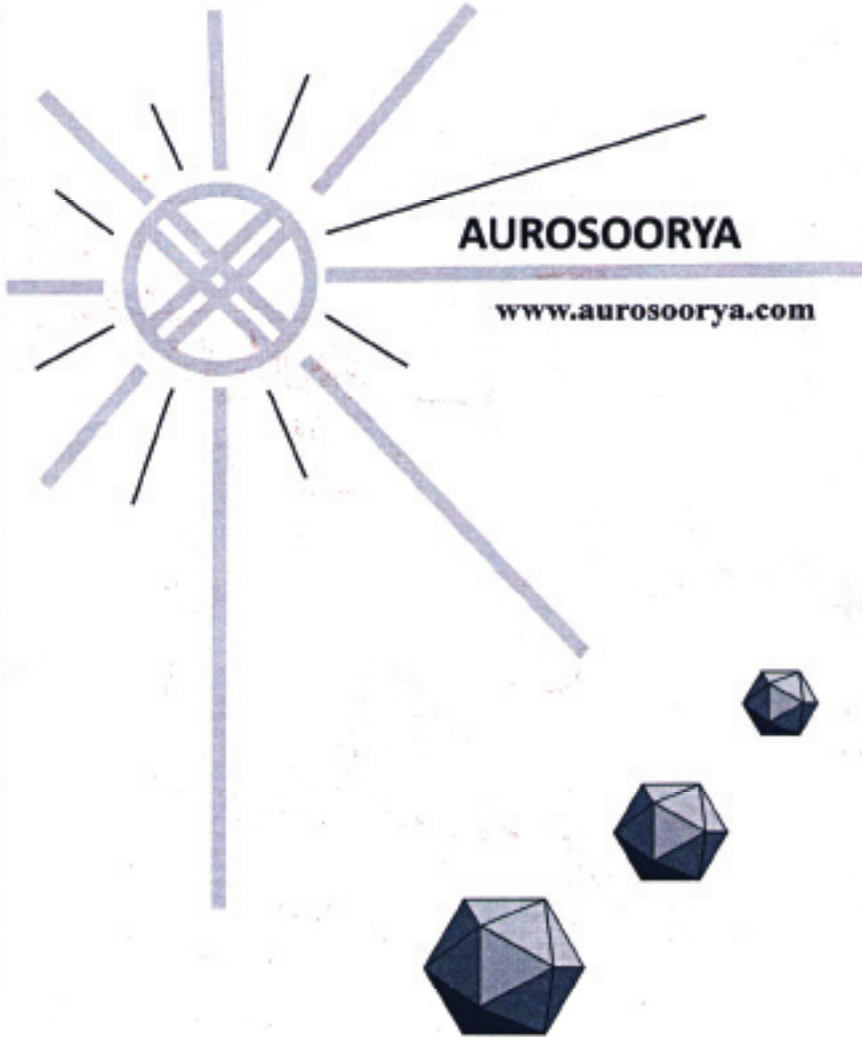
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