

AMONG THE NOT SO GREAT

**Among
the
Not So Great**

PRABHAKAR (Batti)

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INTRODUCTION

I write this about some old Ashramites — interesting people, who I feel should not be lost, buried in the past. I write of them for they are, or were, so garbed in their ordinariness that their coming, going and even their short sojourn here went unheralded, unnoticed and unsung. Maybe I use words too high-sounding, but I would that you let that pass. They did not achieve anything great (in the usual sense of the word) — for no poetry, prose or philosophy spewed forth from their innards. They created no piece of art nor did they even put up a block of masonry. But they achieved this — when you by chance thought of them a bubble of joy rose from your stomach, tingled its way up like a soda-induced burp. What more can one ask of another but this moment of joy? This is reason enough for me to bring them back from the past.

These that I mention here were quite closely associated with me, and I think it would interest many who have not had the good chance to rub shoulders with them, nor even see them, probably. This is a homely “Who-is-who”.

I first started writing this series with no idea whatsoever as to what I was going to do, once I had written. It was just for the fun of pushing my pen. As such I gave it first to Swadhin of the Ashram Press to read — and enjoy it if he could. Evidently he did — and persuaded me to publish it. He took on himself the responsibility of getting it published in Mother India. Much later some friends mooted the idea that the series be brought out in a book form, with some photos. This too happened. Not being a pucca writer, some shortcomings may stand out which the readers, I hope, will bear with me and overlook them and read on. Some of the facts may not be absolutely precise — they are gleaned from memories, mine and others, of events of long ago — 30-60 years ago or more. But, all are, in their essence, true. Also many of the photographs may not tally with my descriptions (e.g. Rajangam, Prashanto, etc..) — evidently a time gap of again 30-60 years separate the click and my pushing the pen. But, often enough the eyes will bear out the essential character of their owner. (Well understood that the photo has to be clear.)

A word about the title of the book. I saw somewhere a book by Dilip Kumar Roy titled “Among the Great”, wherein he has written about some well-known persons he met like Bertrand Russell (if I remember right) and others. That title gave me the cue for this book — as I have spoken mostly of persons who were not much in the “public eye” so to say. A few, of course, were “Great” (Kobida, Sunilda) — but they were too close to me to be ignored. Moreover I did try to bring out an “ordinary” facet of their lives along with their already proven “greatness”. Also, I am sure in my mind, that one of the great traits of their “greatness” is not to be “insular” from their fellow humans. (not only sadhaks.)

So my thanks to all of them.

There are a few more such persons. Unfortunately I know so very little about them, to fill even one page. Maybe I can do justice to them in days to come. They have the patience. I hope they can keep kicking up the embers awake in me, for some more time. To them my apology. I hope to redeem them from the Past and so myself from the Present.

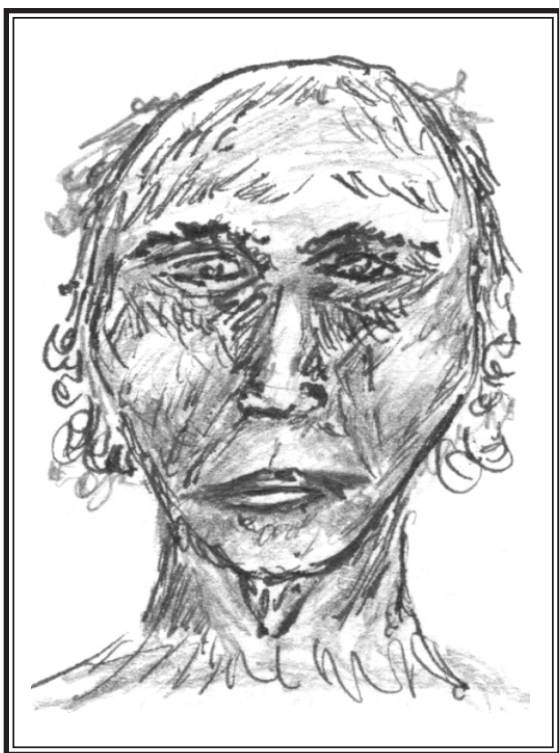
With this chance idea of retracing some old friends’ footprints on the field of my memory, I cast about and the ones I could first discern were Manibhai’s. So I start rummaging the Past with him — though he is no more.

PRABHAKAR (BATTI)

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MANIBHAI

My belief is that to have no wants is Divine.

SOCRATES

MANIBHAI hailed from Old East Africa. He was a Postmaster there, well respected for his work and as a person. He happened to read some literature on Sri Aurobindo and the Ashram and decided to come over — way back in 1929. He visited this place and then pulled out his African roots and set them here in 1930. He ventured out for a short duration, but came back around 1945. That's when I first set my eyes on him. Before he arrived here, he was, it seems, very fastidious as far as his dress was concerned. When I saw him he was anything

but fastidious (in dress) — rather its negation.

He was a big, powerfully built man, slow of speech and action, but sure of both. The first look at him was not very reassuring. Big, dark, bushy eye-brows with deep-set eyes, further deepened by high cheek-bones and a sharp nose — nothing to relieve the feeling of foreboding — not until he smiled. His face creased up and his eyes shone and lit up the face. This was the outer man. He was in charge of the Smithy. The Smithy was where now stands the Post Office delivery section. A man of iron, he worked on the same metal. Let's now take a peep inside — maybe you could find some gold!

I go back a few years before I met Manibhai and recount at random a few anecdotes of his life. These have been told to me by others who knew him. They all agreed upon this — that his sincerity was unquestionable as was his simplicity complete. These two complemented each other to make a tremendous worker but they often complicated matters. I just recount, you may draw your conclusions. In charge of the Smithy — as mentioned before — he adhered strictly to one rule, “No chit from the Mother — No work” — as good a practice as any. One day the Bakery Room lock was jammed, and it had to be opened to start the work early to have the bread ready. So Manibhai was called. He came, saw and shook his head negatively, “No chit, so no work.” The Mother could be seen only later — so? Manibhai was as obstinate as the lock. What to do? Someone took up courage, and did need quite a bit of it to rub Manibhai the wrong way, and broke open the lock. Manibhai was very displeased, to say the least. But the Mother later said it was alright, so that appeased him.

Once even Pavitra-da was at the receiving end. He wanted to get some work done — and he did not bring the Mother's chit. “No” was the answer, until the Mother wrote that henceforth he could do Pavitra-da's work when he asked for it.

There was once a servant-strike at Padmasini-amma's, some trouble was brewing (Electric Dept. where maids now wait, seeking domestic work). The Mother told Manibhai to go there and shout. He did just that, and the strikers ran away. It seems sound could break walls, so why not a strike!

In those days the Bakery made loaves of bread of bigger dimensions — maybe a foot long, about 12cm-15cm broad and 8cm high ta-

pering towards both ends and rounded up. It cut up to about 36 slices. Well, Manibhai would have one of these loaves for dinner! No extra milk or vegetable. Ravindraji offered extra milk, but Manibhai would have none of it. He softened the bread in water and gulped it down. It seems someone told of this phenomenon to Sri Aurobindo and he jokingly remarked, “Oh, humanly impossible!”. When Manibhai heard of it, he in his simplicity and limited knowledge of English missed the “joke” part of it and thought to himself, “I am not human.” He stopped eating the full loaf. This was again reported to Sri Aurobindo. The Lord was moved and sent someone to explain to Manibhai that the remark was all a joke, and he should revert to his old diet.

There was this strange happening (to Manibhai, M1) back in 1942 or 43 (War Time). He got into his head to go out. He told the Mother and went to Bombay. There he met another Manibhai (M2 for our reference — he was Kumud’s, Chandrakant’s father). He asked M2 for some money, which was given. He went and bought himself a big basket, filled it with mangoes and went round hawking them. Why? I don’t think even he knew. Then he enlisted himself in the army. In a few days he developed an acute pain in the lower abdomen. The army doctor diagnosed it as appendicitis and said an immediate operation was necessary. Manibhai would not be rushed. He said, “No, I have to first inform the Mother.” The doctor was nonplussed — he tried to persuade the patient to consent. The patient would not budge. The doctor let him be. Manibhai then sent a telegram to the Mother. A reply “blessings” was wired back to Manibhai. All this took 3-4 days. Manibhai was now ready for the operation and surrendered himself to the doctor. The doctor examined and to his amazement found no cause for an operation. Gone was the pain too. Manibhai was all smiles. All’s well that ends well.

There is an interesting story about Manibhai-2 (of Bombay). He was a businessman and was still “busy” there though his three daughters and a son (Kusum, Kumud, Mridula and Navin) were in the Ashram. The others of the family settled later on. Manibhai came and went on occasions. He was a devotee of long standing. He came to know that Sri Aurobindo was partial to pomegranates. The fruits were hard to come by locally in those days, more so in that War-period. Manibhai made contact with some Middle East merchants and some-

how kept an unbroken supply of the fruit for Sri Aurobindo — who promptly prefixed (for identification purposes) Manibhai with the fruit he supplied. Pomegranate Manibhai. (There seem to be a surfeit of Manibhais in Gujarat.) This Manibhai also known as “Pehelwan” — it seems had done some wrestling — he did look like one, big and burly, quick-tempered too. Curiously pomegranate in French is grenade — appropriate.

1945 — Manibhai came back, changes were taking place — Harpagon got started — so no old Smithy. He was now transported to Ambabikshu Garden. At that time it was considered a far-off place, a rural area, on the outskirts of Pondy. He had a pet monkey which searched for lice in your hair if you put your head in front of it. Once two bullocks were locked in a fight, Manibhai pulled them apart and was rewarded with a broken arm. He then shifted to Cazanove and finally to the third garden of Le Faucheur.

Le Faucheur consists of three gardens. Two are close to the main road. The third is quite a way in, reached in those days by a very sandy pathway, bordered with cacti. (Now the road is tarred.) Once, as a group of us was going there ploughing our way on cycles through the sand, Dhanavanti landed in the cacti. Manibhai applied some age-old medicinal powder kept in an open earthen saucer. She survived the treatment without complications. A trained doctor would have been mortified.

The third garden was actually a large field — a lonely place. Casuarina trees filled most of it. A portion consisted of rice paddies. A number of coconut trees bordered two sides. The Ariankuppam river and its back waters formed its eastern border. A very picturesque place it was and still is. Near the entrance was the local crematorium. Snakes including some cobras co-existed with Manibhai. The other denizens of the place were half a dozen dogs: Brownie, Mousy, Kakudi, etc. His and the dogs' abode was a small mud-walled hut — 3m x 4m. At the centre the thatched roof stood at maybe 2.5m. You had to bend double to enter. A charpoy (rope-cot) was the main and only piece of furniture. Pots and pans and a primitive stove occupied one corner. The other corners were filled with a few clothes, hurricane lanterns (1 or 2), 2-3 lathis of various sizes, a coconut knife etc. An old lady's cycle had also to fit in. The few clothes were the

simplest the Ashram supplied — dhotis, shirts and gamchas (gamcha is a very thin usually coloured, very absorbent towel, popular in Bengal, Bihar, etc.). He himself sometimes fashioned and stitched an extra shirt out of a gamcha. He just folded it in half, cut a hole for his head to go through and stitched up the sides (by hand) leaving a gap on either side to let his arms through. He remodelled a three-cell torch into a six-cell one by bandaging up a long tin to the original barrel. The switch was a piece of GI wire. He hung it when in use on one of his shoulders much like a sub-machine gun. His duties were only at night as a watchman. You can well imagine the apparition — a big dark man, lathi in one hand, the torch hung on the other, draped in all those nondescript clothes. 3-4 dogs trailing him completed the picture. This is how we met him when we went to help him out after a paddy harvest or any such time when extra personnel were required as night-watchmen or when we just chose not to waste a beautiful moonlit night at home in bed. He received us with a warm “Hello, Captain Mona”. (Mona used to be quite a night-watchman in his younger days and led us on these night forays.) We entered his hut and he would offer us everything: tea, some blankets (given to him by some kind-hearted friend) and some pillows. The last were gunny bags stuffed with coconut fibre and sawdust. If guests were more than the pillows, he would gently say, “Kakudi, Mousy, please give your pillows to the guests.” And our canine hosts would get up and go lie under the charpoy. We accepted such hospitality with as much sangfroid as each could muster. Personally I had no problems.

Manibhai was conscience-driven and a man of duty. A batch of us were at his place on “night duty”. We plucked a few coconuts on one of our rounds and left them on the path to be picked up on the way back. As we moved on, much to our consternation, we saw Manibhai coming along with his retinue of dogs and his search-light-torch. He would certainly see the coconuts (it was a moonlit night too). We tried to talk him to going back to his hut — showing some concern for him, saying “Why do you want to go round when we are here? You can rest this one night peacefully.” etc. etc. At first he was insistent in doing his duty. Then it must have hit him — the false note in our concern for his wellbeing. He reluctantly turned back with a parting shot, saying, “If you want some coconuts, you may take some.” It

must have been very hard for him to bypass his conscience to allow us to pilfer those nuts.

Once — at day time — two of us went cycling to Le Faucheur. We asked Manibhai if we could have a coconut apiece. Again he was in a dilemma. He mulled over it (our request) and came up with a circumventive answer. He said pointing to a corner of his hut, “There is a knife” and pointing outside, “there is a coconut tree” and then added an after thought, “I am only a night-watchman.”

Norman Jr. and I were frequent visitors to Le Faucheur. Manibhai would offer tea in a chipped old cup, along with his brand of ‘Rothi’. Rothi was a thick chappati-like affair made of dough which itself was Dining Room bread resoaked (a reverse process). If Norman refused the Rothi he would say “O, don’t be so British, come on, have one.”

The lantern had a chimney like a jigsaw puzzle of a dozen pieces stuck with cement. I asked him why he couldn’t get a new one. He smiled and asked me: “Can you say the new one will not break?” I just returned his smile, having no guarantee card for a chimney.

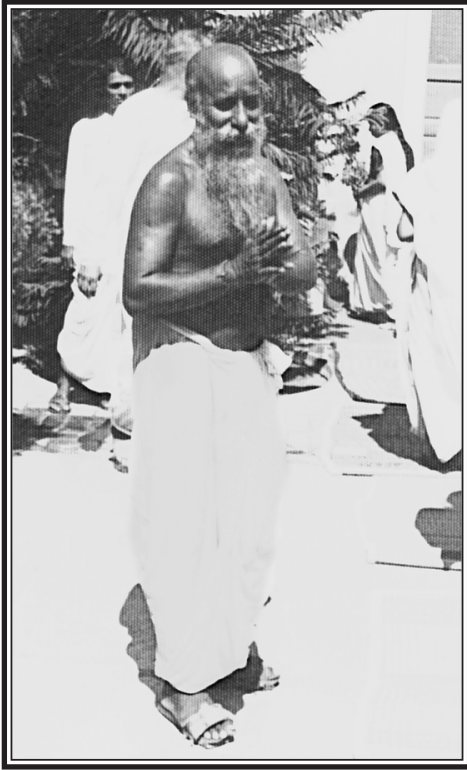
The man was of such a brand, that when he said, “Batti, nothing can happen without the Mother’s permission, not a leaf can fall without Her permission,” one could well believe that he was convinced of it, whatever one’s own belief.

One day I heard that he had fallen and broken his thigh bone. He was taken to Madras to have it set right and get a steel pin put in. The setting was not well done. He was in great pain and came back home, back to Le Faucheur, smiling. (By now he had a larger room with brick walls and a tin roof.) He could not walk, but was advised to do so. He set up a waist high parallel bars-like apparatus with casuarina poles to learn to walk. All his efforts failed. The pain increased. He used to drag himself on his seat, legs stretched out in front. He was confined to his hut. For his evacuation, he had a small pit dug in a corner of the room, did the job on some paper sheets, to be thrown out later. The paper sheets were of note-book size, so I supplied him with old newspaper — *The Hindu*. He appreciated my help and remarked, “Batti, I get all the World-news and better packets afterwards.” The papers were of course a month or so out-dated. Some time later, he suddenly left trying. The decline was rapid, and soon on 12th January 1967 he passed away without a ripple. We were 4 or 5 at his funeral.

This was but in conformity with his life.

What say you? Was he a great man or at least a man worth knowing, worth remembering? He left nothing behind — no book, no disciple, just fond memories in a handful of people.

In his real life he could not impress any sign of his passing — the path he chose was bare and hard but straight. Maybe straight paths tend to be hard and bare. So only in our minds may we invoke him and his kindred for that moment of pleasure.



HARADHAN-DA

*The man is great, and he alone,
Who serves a greatness not his own,
For neither praise nor pelf:
Content to know and be unknown:
Whole in himself.*

OWEN MEREDITH (A Great Man)

ANYONE entering the Ashram Courtyard couldn't miss Haradhan-da — not only because he was there almost all the time the Ashram Gate was open, but more because the sheer physical presence of the man was striking; so were his doings and his ways. We kids looked at him with curiosity, awe and some caution.

Haradhan-da, like Manibhai, was big — bigger. He was of impressive proportions, tall and broad, a mid-riff to match, that lent dignity without detracting from the whole. A great head adorned by a beard long but not too thick. Calm eyes with a gleam in them. A large nose. A larger forehead, with a 1/2 rupee-size vermilion mark (kumkum), that merged into a great bald head, itself fringed with sparse shoulder-length hair. The attire was simple. Just-below-knees length dhoti, coarse and not too white. A chudder of the same material and colour as the dhoti was usually thrown over one shoulder and under the other arm and round the chest. This was enough to compel anyone to pause in mid-step and take note. But there was more. A string hung around his neck. What hung on to the string, hidden by the chudder? When perchance the chudder slipped, if alert you may catch a glimpse of a large folding knife. He wore thick “khadams” — wooden sandals — which must have seen decades of service. His footprints were deeply etched into them. The wood was polished to a glossy sheen by wear. No one saw him change those for new ones. He carried a kuja of water every day from the Ashram to his room. The kuja was an ordinary one, but bore his mark. It also shone like polished granite by constant, careful and long, long use. This too I have not seen him change. The lid must have broken and was replaced by half a coconut shell — as polished as the kuja. He used an umbrella when needed. Not the usual “Stag” brand nor the new-fangled midget spring-loaded folding one. What he carried was a bit more awkward but more effective — alas we don’t see the like any more. It was a large dome-like affair made of palm leaves and bamboo strips, no closing or opening, always open. The handle too was bamboo. (We see pictures of our ancients, like Vamana Avatar, using this model.) He looked all of a Tantric of a couple of centuries back, who had stepped into our lives. He was a tantric in his previous life and he continued to be so this time — a worshipper of the Mother. Small wonder the awe and caution he inspired in us. Later the feelings were deeper — of respect and wonder.

Haradhan-da first came for a short visit long, long ago, in 1916. He hailed from Chandernagore (then a French colony). I heard he first went to meet Sri Aurobindo in our “Guest House”. He saw the Master washing his face at the tap (outside, near the back-stairs).

Haradhan-da stood by, reverent, quiet. Sri Aurobindo, when he had finished washing, just glanced up and softly said, “Would you make me a cup of coffee?”

Haradhan-da was a soldier in the First World War (1914-1918). He fought in France. He stopped a bullet with his belly. It got embedded there. As often happens, things most needed are not found and this was not the best of times to complain — a dirty war was on. This time there was no anaesthetic available — so he was just laid flat and the bullet dug out! Such were his guts. Taken prisoner, he was being shipped off to some POW camp. He jumped overboard when the ship was some distance off the coast of Algeria and swam ashore. (Must have landed with a fish in his mouth as any Bengali worth his salt would.) Later he wrote a book on war strategy in Bengali — “*Lo-dayer Notoon Kayeda*” (New Strategies of War).

He finally came and settled here at the end of 1930 — actually on 30th December 1930. I first set eyes on him in the Ashram Courtyard. He loomed large on the scene. His work? He boiled water for the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. (The boiler still stands, retired — a happy relic of the past.) It’s in the little room where flowers, and dhoop etc. are kept by Vishwabani-di in front of the Cashier’s office. He moved around in the courtyard cleaning, sweeping, keeping an eye on the Fruit Room (erstwhile Pujalal-ji’s room). He was there to guide and help people and regulate the flow of ‘Q’s, (daily Blessings, Darshan Days etc. as Rajkumar with his hordes does now on Darshan Days). He did not speak much. He didn’t need to. He usually took the flower that the Mother gave at the head of the ‘Q’ and then stood at the turning in front of Bula-da’s room. (Mansukh is the present occupant.) He stood, hands in ‘namaskar’ and just waved you to your place in the ‘Q’. He stood until the Mother got up and went upstairs. He was the sole barrier and guide. No chalk lines or ropes.

Rarely did I see him flare up. Once a visitor, a galling type, wanted to beat the system, would not pay heed to his guidance. Haradhan-da had to raise his voice and his eyes took on an ominous glint. The man shrivelled down to size, so did many near by. A mantle of hush settled over the area.

One of his jobs was a strange one. Don’t know why he did it. Never thought of asking him. He would espy an insect, spider, cen-

tipe de etc. and ‘bang’ his palm would go down on it. He would then carefully wrap his handiwork in a leaf and tuck it in the fold of his dhoti at the waist. Later he would offer it up at a nest of black ants. Why — is anybody’s guess.

The last of his duties was to accompany the body of any ashramite who passed away to the burning-ghat. Relatives and friends may return after some time, but Haradhan-da would stay back till the burning was well over half-way through. He probably saw to it that the ghat attendants were not tempted to remove some of the fuel to resell for the next funeral. Be that as it may, he would come back much later and if he happened to meet any of the departed’s relatives or friends, he would do a ‘namaskar’ and say with some solemnity “Bhalo Pudeche” — “He burned well.” I received this information after my uncle’s cremation.

Haradhan-da lived many years here. He lived where Biren-da (masseur, ex-boxer) now lives, i.e. groundfloor of the Archives building. Yet in all those years he had seen and walked just two or three streets of Pondy — rue François Martin and rue d’Orléans (Manakula Vinayagar Street). His unchanging path was: Home to Dining Room (François Martin). D.R. to Ashram via the Ganapathy Temple (rue d’Orléans). He got off his khadams and made obeisance in front of the temple. Got on to his khadams and off to the Ashram. Then, back home via François Martin at night. Of course the road leading to the burning-ghat was known to him. He also walked through the Park when time permitted, to tell stories to some children who played there — Kiran Kumari (Jiji), Sujata Nahar. And, just once, I think, he had been to the Beach road.

1950 — The Second World War was over in 1945. The world had hardly caught back its breath, the Korean War was on. This meant people’s ears were itching for news. A radio would ease the itch. But who had one? Not one of the 700-800 Ashramites of that time could boast of possessing one. We didn’t even know enough to think of having one of these gadgets. It was out of reach for most. Haradhan-da was one of the few who listened to a radio — Where? When? Pavitra-da’s room had a radio — maybe there. He would repeat the news to those who wanted to hear. My uncle (Pantulu — who appears later as an ‘Among the Not So Great’) being old but interested,

sent my brother and me news-gathering to Haradhan-da every night. We usually sat in the corner where Vishwabani-di distributes flowers and dhoop for the Samadhi (this was Haradhan-da's work before her). There is a little platform, Haradhan-da sat up, we two down. He would settle down comfortably and start with, "This is what the radio said," and repeat that as closely as possible to the radio announcement. Then, "This is what I made out of it" and proceed to give his views and interpretation. We went home and regorged all this.

Once, after this "double news" he told us a story — an adventure he had gone through. He was known to be fearless. He had roamed the Sunderbans. In those days the forests were thick, teeming with animals. I will let him narrate: "One day a friend of mine came along, toting a gun and an ambition. He asked me to take him to the Sunderbans, to bag a tiger. So we went. We dug a pit about 5 feet deep, 4 or 5 feet across. We got into it and stood back to back, he with his gun, I with a thick, strong lathi (stick) — waiting, watchful. Soon enough a tiger appeared, as luck would have it, on the side the friend was facing. That "father of the gun" promptly fainted to the floor of the pit taking the gun along with him. I had just time enough to look round to see the tiger make a leap. I ducked, and the tiger landed, fortunately, a pair of paws on either side of the pit. I was most upset with the friend and the tiger. Having the lathi in my hand, I did the obvious — gave a mighty upward shove under the tiger. The tiger was thrown away some distance, recovered, and started pacing to and fro." I suppose he wouldn't let a dinner go cheaply. The tiger must have been greatly taken aback, never having been treated so inhumanly and from such an angle.

Haradhan-da continued: "I was trying to keep the tiger at a distance, keeping both eyes on him and swinging my lathi to match his pacing. At the same time I was trying to rouse my friend with my foot, hoping he would pick up some courage and his gun and end this stalemate. This was not to be. Fortunately the tiger decided to quit."

The tiger must have learned that all men are not equal and decided to seek an easier meal elsewhere.

I heard long back, but could get no recent corroboration, that Haradhan-da helped the Mother in giving significances to flowers (what help and how much I couldn't find out). But it is true that he

never threw away a flower given by the Mother. He dried and kept the flowers. It seems there was a heap of them under his cot.

He fed crows in the afternoons from his window. They would alight on the window sill and pick up the bread crumbs. Sometimes a street urchin too may get a piece of bread. One day Parul (Capt.), under the able tutelage of Chitra Jauhar, stretched out her hand without showing the rest of herself and got a piece of bread. Next Chitra did the same. To her dismay her hand was caught. A struggle ensued. Chitra got away, but the game was up. Haradhan-da had seen her. He caught Chitra's hand and not Parul's — why? Not that he was kind to one and not to the other — no — Chitra forgot to remove her wrist-watch. Those days beggars could not afford wrist-watches.

A visitor once asked Haradhan-da, "Who is the foremost sadhak here?" Haradhan-da tried to sidestep, but the man was persistent. Finally Haradhan-da took him aside and in a stage whisper told him, "First you, then I," and left him more puzzled than enlightened.

In the earlier days a young aspirant on his first day or so here was reading a newspaper in the Reading Room (now the Fruit Room). He was a bit overawed to suddenly find this big Tantric-looking man beside him. More so when Haradhan-da, for it was he, spoke to him and ended with some advice. He said to the young man: "You have come to live under the Mother's wings. She will give you many opportunities to ask, and have anything. Things useful and even of luxury. Refuse all. Ask only for a leaf of Tulasi (Devotion)." The young man has, inevitably, grown older. But the imparted wisdom stood him well and is still fresh in his mind. The young man was none other than our Ravindra-ji.

Time passed, and Time knows no great, no small, no good or bad. All are sooner or later taken up. I don't know exactly how or when Haradhan-da took ill, nor what the illness was. I went to attend on Kavi Nishikanto — (Kobi a great and interesting man if ever there was one) — in the General Hospital. (Jipmer was not yet in existence.) There I found Haradhan-da in the next bed. He was already too far gone. He was not speaking — probably could not. His bed and he had to be cleaned every now and then. Kobi jokingly remarked: "Oré Batti, Hitler o erokom treatment payeni" (Batti, even Hitler didn't get such treatment). Soon after, Haradhan-da left us. The Ashram Court-

yard was suddenly empty — for a while. Time blunted memories. New events and new people quickly filled in the empty spaces. Yet one may verily say, “Where or when another like him?”

Haradhan-da’s life and work seem slow and spent within a small circle. Would you judge him as rigid, uninterested or uninteresting? The times were different. Life flowed slowly, between banks. These men were different. They never knew what it is to be “bored”. They minded their own business at hand. The future for them was the next day or the next “yuga”. Maybe they looked inward and found many untrod ways.

Let us not judge at all. Rather let us, sometimes, light a small lamp in the shadows of the Past and pay homage to the likes of him who preceded us. They build the steps we climb later — maybe to add one more of our own.



MRIDUBHASHINI (Mridu-di)

*Be to her virtues very kind —
Be to her faults a little blind.*

ONCE upon a time there was a “Prasad House”. Walk along the North footpath of the Ashram on what we, by long usage, know as the “Old Balcony Road”. On the opposite side you will see a construction marked as “Prasad House”. It is a new building that has for our convenience and some remnant sentiments, usurped that name. The building is crammed with piles of papers and dog-eared files,

and some computers and their masters — all trying to keep track of where all the money flies — i.e. “accounts”. In an age gone by, in this place stood an old charming little house — The Prasad House. It was indeed house to real ‘Prasads’ (in the truest sense) and the Prasad-maker — Mridubhashini (or simply Mridu-di) along with her old cranking-up-type gramophone and discs, numerous stoves (13 if I remember right), delightfully tasty khichuri, rasagollas etc. and lastly walls festooned with Sri Aurobindo’s writings to Mridu-di, all framed. What a change — or what a fall!!

Mridu-di, born in Bengal in 1901, was widowed when quite young — a nasty experience at any age and time, much worse in those days. But she struggled through much and arrived here in 1930 and found a haven at the feet of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

Mridu-di, like the two previous ‘not-so-greats’, was a big person, but only in two dimensions i.e. width and depth (girth). She sadly lacked the height. She was maybe 1m 40cm tall and almost a metre across! Always dressed in a white saree, the “anchal” (the loose end of the saree) covering her head, as with many Bengali and Oriya ladies (the custom seems to be losing its foot-hold, rather head-hold. Maybe it will make a come-back as a new fashion), she waddled along from the Ashram to her house giving everyone she met a genuine happy smile from amid two big cheeks. The eyes joined in for good measure. Understandably she wheezed a bit. Her voice usually stood on the higher octaves — very effective for most occasions. The mind was of the simplest nature, but could be adamant once it chose to be. Still this was only the mind, the ripples on the surface. What lay in the depths? Maybe we can venture a guess when we have seen a little more of her.

I was introduced to her within a few days of my arrival here. My brother Narayan, a veteran of a year here, saw to it. For, knowing her put you in line for some rewards — that Prasad. And, what a Prasad! It came — as we used to say — from “Up” — meaning from the Mother or Sri Aurobindo. Mridu-di was a great cook, one of the greatest, for she cooked for the Lord for 16 years. She would make choice dishes for Him and He had no choice but to have them, at least taste them. Once it happened that He did not partake of some dish, and she came to know of it. Someone had thoughtlessly informed her

that Sri Aurobindo had not tasted one of her dishes. She was grief-stricken and expressed it in no uncertain terms. The ‘informer’ was told “knowing Mridu, you should have kept mum about the dish”. The Lord had to personally console her, as you would a small child. Sometimes she would even tell Sri Aurobindo that she would commit suicide. He would say, “No, no, Mridu. Who will give me *luchi* then?” Sometimes, she would bow down to Him, and demand He place His right foot, or left foot, on her bowed head.

Many children, including my brother and I, would work ourselves into her good books, and get invited to her house. She was all smiles and prattled on and on in her high pitched voice and took us to her kitchen. Therein were ranged rows of stoves, vessels and ladles. They did not interest us. What we went for was kept in small cups — the Prasad. It was some *khichuri*, or a sweet that Sri Aurobindo had tasted. She gave a bit to each of us. We ran home happy and more blessed than we ever realised. But it was not always that she gave Prasad. She could easily be teased. Some like Amarendra did just that, for the fun of it. Then — no Prasad. One could not even approach her house. He, Amarendra, would accost her in the street at an odd hour (maybe 10 or 11 a.m.) and plead, “Mridu-di, please, some Prasad”. She would say, “Na, na, *ekhun na*” (no, no, not now). He would insist and follow close on her heels. She would scream at him — yet he would follow her. In desperation she would raise the pitch of her scream and call “Nolini-babu, Nolini-babu!” Amarendra and whoever was his accomplice would run — only to repeat if possible the whole scene or leave it for another day. Why did she shout for Nolini-da? For some unfathomable reason she was unquestioningly obedient to him and looked up to him. The following drama proves the above statement but leaves us further bewildered.

The drama unfolds in the days when the Mother came every day to the Playground. At 7.15 p.m. the Mother came out of Her room and stood in front of the map of India for the March Past. The March Past, then, was well attended. All the groups (from the youngest to the oldest) took part — every day! After the March Past all the other groups except the elders — group H — dispersed. Group H continued their 1/2 hour of gym-marching. Then followed the Concentration followed by groundnut distribution. On this particular day, just about

7.15 p.m., all the groups stood ready for the March Past. The Mother was ready to come out from Her room. In came Mridu-di, puffing and panting. She was sorely disturbed, full of indignation and frustration. She came and plumped down on the door-step of the Mother's room. The door was effectively barricaded, the Mother could not come out. We all stood ready outside and the Mother stood inside and Mridu-di sat in between, immovable. Half an hour passed. Several people, Pranab-da, Puraniji etc. tried to plead, cajole, convince Mridu-di to move. Nothing doing. Finally the Mother came out of the other smaller door (side room) and the March Past started off. Mridu-di had not budged. Then — someone hit on the idea of calling in Nolini-da. Nolini-da came through the Guest House, looked at Mridu-di, said in a normal tone and volume, “Mridu, chalo,” turned round and started back towards the Guest House, without even a backward glance!! Wonder of wonders, Mridu-di got up and followed Nolini-da out — just like that — not a squeal of protest, regret, nothing. Quite an inexplicable denouement. What had happened to her and how did it un-happen? Maybe someone can give the answers. Such incidents were rare. Barring them, Mridu-di was the usual jolly fat person, butt end of some of our pranks and remarks. She didn't always take them lying down. She often took a swing at us. One of her favourite targets was Runu Ganguly. She would call him, “Hey, Burmese” (such were the features he bore). He got pricked and would shout back, “Kumdo” (pumpkin). (To call someone Mridu-di was to condemn him/her to ‘Fadom’.) But, if anyone went too far, she could always fall back on her shrill call of “Nolini-babu” and scare away Amarendras and the like.

Around 1932 Mridu-di shifted to Prasad House. Earlier she had lived in a house near where Laljibhai lives now. It is from then or a little later that the new house was called Prasad House. A new phase in her life was in the offing. Some time around this period Mridu-di took it into her head that no morsel of food would pass into her mouth until she had the Darshan of the Mother. And, so it happened, an event of great import to all of us. The Mother consented to appear on the “Old” Balcony — so Mridu-di could see Her from her window. Hundreds of others were the beneficiaries. It would almost seem the Gods await some excuse to bless us only if we would keep

still and maybe lower our heads and raise our eyes. Maybe Mridu-di was the excuse. The Mother used to appear on the Balcony at 6 or 6.15 a.m. (As time passed the timing varied. The Mother could not make it sometimes even by 10 a.m.) Most Ashramites, and many other devotees, assembled on the street below the Balcony for the Darshan. When the Mother appeared a hush would settle and all eyes turned upwards to let the 'Sight' and the lack of sound sink in. But come The Darshan Days (21st Feb, 24th April, 15th Aug & 24th Nov) and Mridu-di would give us a special "Audio-treat(ment)". Her gramophone would be ready, cranked up, and as soon as the Mother appeared, 'Vande Mataram' (the song) would crash in on everyone's ears. This early morning musical dose did not go down well with most. I don't know if anyone suggested to her to spare our ears from this onslaught. If they had tried, their failure would have been a foregone conclusion. Mridu-di's convictions were not so easily shaken. Even when the Balcony Darshan was discontinued, Mridu-di would wait upstairs for the Mother to put the first morsel of food into her mouth, before starting her day.

There was once a move to extend Harpagon to include Prasad House. The process was well on the way in spite of Mridu-di's shrill protests. She could, even would, have been bulldozed. But she at last pulled out her trump-card. She showed a note written by the Lord himself stating "Prasad House is Mridu's." All were forced to back-track — stymied, well and good. The house had a reprieve. Later, it met a drastic fate, demolished, turned into rubble, a victim of utilitarianism. Up came the present usurper. Happily for Mridu-di she demised before it.

September — 1962 — Mridu-di was quite herself, active, talking and smiling. But in mid-September, it was observed by some that she no more did an ordinary pranam at the Samadhi. She would almost lie down, press as much of her body as possible on the Samadhi. Someone even remarked that something was happening to her, within her. On 20th evening she chatted with Lallubhai (her good old neighbour) on the footpath, then went to bed as usual. On 21st morning her doors did not open. She did not wake up. She had left us peacefully, quietly, without "protest". That night of 20th, around 12 Sri Aurobindo had come to the Mother and said "I am taking Mridu." Thus on a cloud of

glory was she taken to her heavenly abode.

Can we now venture the “guess” as to who was Mridu-di? what was she? I still wouldn’t. I would rather raise my arms in surrender and my hat in a salute. Rather than question and seek answers about Mridubhashini and her peers, let the wonder of them sink into our minds, and let us bask awhile in the mellow afterglow of their brief sojourn here and their passing.



NISHIKANTO ROY CHOWDHURY (KOBI)

A man who walked in his shadow

*He ceas'd; but left so pleasing on the ear
His voice, that list'ning still they seemed to hear.*

HOMER (*Odyssey*; Translation: Pope)

HE IS an exception to the series of "Among the Not So Great". For, long before I thought of writing on him, he was great and well-known. He was commented upon by our Lord Himself. He called Kobi (Poet) a "Brahmaputra of Inspiration"! I was and am overawed and I nearly shied away from writing on this giant of a river, I, who may just be a trickle privileged to run for a short while along the banks of this Brahmaputra. A fond hope or wish that something may rub off led me on. Moreover did I think of a rarer part of him not much discussed

or written about? I cannot say anything about his poetry. You could find out about that from Bengali literateurs like Nirod-da, Jugal-da etc. — or better still find out what our Master said of him. The part of him I speak about is not so well-known, more down to earth business, where we met and enjoyed each other's close encounters.

Nishikanto was just Kobi for us (no “da”-appendage). Kobi was not an inspiring figure to behold. The head seemed too narrow towards the top. It was covered with long hair hanging in curly locks, well-oiled. The nose too long and straight to enhance anything but itself — it even tilted ever so slightly upward. He sniffed in a bit of snuff — that didn't help matters. Round cheeks that gave him a “baby” look. Mouth usually ajar — to help intake of oxygen. This help was needed to combat a chronic cold, a nasal blockage. Narrow sloping shoulders atop an immense pot-belly completed the picture. No redeeming feature it would seem. But what of the eyes? They were large, dreamy, benign and smiled at all he saw. And what did he see? Certainly more than what most of us see. He was a poet, a seer, a visionary. He often walked down to the “old Balcony” (Ashram) at an hour when for us the Mother was apparently not there. Surely he did not go just to see the Balcony. It is said he could see the Mother there.

Let us now travel back down the corridors of Time to Shantiniketan. Kobi spent a few years there. Rabindranath Tagore was there. They could have revelled in each other's poetry (if they would). Kobi was at that young age (and till the end) not only a great poet. He was also an excellent painter and a good cook and lover of good food and plenty of it. Many of the escapades then and later, and their effects on his body, had their cause and beginnings in the cooking pot. The earliest exploits I know of were at Shantiniketan. He had an able companion and conspirer in his brother Sudhakanto.

The first story starts with the Shantals of the area. They had killed a tiger. The two Kantos heard of it and hurried to the Shantal village. They bargained, pleaded, coaxed and got one of the hind-quarters of the tiger, smuggled it home, set about cooking this choice piece of meat. They boiled it a long time, yet it was tough, sort of chewy. By then the news got around — the Kanto brothers were eating a tiger — “tiger-eating men”! All were horrified. Some tried to dis-

suade them from this ultimate “carnivorism”. But the two would not let such a bargain go waste merely because of the queasiness of a few mere men. Finally the Guru himself — Rabindranath Tagore — had to intervene.

The next gastric outing was at the expense of one of their neighbours. That young man planted a coconut seedling, tended it lovingly. The plant grew into a tree. First the flowers, then the fruit appeared. The care doubled. He planned to offer the first fruit to Gurudev. The nut grew, and grew, under the dotting eye of the owner. Then, one day he noticed that the fruit seemed to be shrinking. The next day showed a further wasting away. The third day the alarmed man went up the tree and to his dismay found a hole on top of the fruit — all the water gone! I leave you to guess who drained the fruit (from the top) — certainly not gravity — though the episode had some gravity (for the owner).

Nishikanto broke on the Ashram scene in 1934. I say “broke on”, but it was nothing of the sort. No one broke on the Ashram scene then or now. There was no fanfare or garlands. The contrary was nearer the truth — at least in those days. Kobi arrived and had to stay a few days on the footpath in front of the Ashram, awaiting Sri Aurobindo’s permission to enter for Darshan or for joining the Ashram. He sent word “Up” through Dilip-da (Dilip Kumar Roy) about himself and his intentions. A few days later Nolini-da came out, and talked to him. The following is a gist of their conversation.

Nolini-da: So you want to stay in this Ashram?

Kobi: Yes, Sir.

N: But do you know this Ashram is not like other Ashrams you have been to. Here great and equal freedom is given to all — boys and girls, men and women alike. You have not seen the like before. It may go against your sensibilities and moral standards. That will not do.

Kobi: (Just heard and digested — no comments, no answer. Then slowly) Yet I would like to stay here.

He gave me the above conversation to counter and silence some remarks I had made on his sense of morals — all this half in jest — a dig and counter dig we often had.

I knew Kobi from the early days i.e. 1945-46, just as an elder, who was a friend of my uncle. He dropped in, at our house, when

invited for lunch on some special occasions. We had heard Kobi was a great poet and a great cook. My uncle too was a good cook and scholar. They got along well. To my aunt he was just “Nidra Moham” — sleepy face — because of his dreamy eyes. What interested us children was his eating. He ate with deep-felt delight. Once he was served hot vadas (what the Bengalis call bada) on his banana leaf. He liked them well as they slipped down his gullet. Thinking of reliving the experience later he quietly slipped some into his kurta pocket. My sharp-eyed uncle caught him in the act and, “Hey, you fool, they are oily. They will ruin your kurta.” Kobi smiled sheepishly and reluctantly stopped filling his pocket. My aunt brought him a can to fill and take home. He was so glad.

He had, as most of us do, several photos of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo in his room. But, unlike most of us, one of the Mother’s photos was always smudged with a patch of oil. It was called “Mecho-Ma” — Mother of Fish. The oil patch was from his well-oiled hair, where his head touched in pranam as he prayed to her: “May good and big fish be caught today. I am going to the market to buy some.”

He was inducted into our group (now ‘group D’, at that time ‘group C’) sometime in the late fifties — for his abilities as a cook. (No sports for him, his body couldn’t and his mind probably wouldn’t.) It all started like this. Our group went to the Lake for a daylong picnic. In those days the Lake was considered a beautiful enough, far enough and rare enough place to go for a day’s picnic! Times and values have changed. Kobi was taken along. He naturally took charge of the kitchen. Breakfast was simple and frugal — a round bun with condensed milk or butter and tea. Tea was made in a big — very big brass vessel. Some miscalculation — and quite a quantity was left over. It would be a pity pouring it to the plants — what to do? A problem? — Not with Kobi around. He just cooked the “Dal” for lunch in it. We were none the worse for it. Kobi was then and there adopted by our group as an honorary member. He wore grey shorts, sleeveless banian, attended the Mother’s distribution (ground-nuts etc.) standing in our line. All the groups stood in a line, each in its place along the perimeter of the Playground. The Mother walked in front of the lined groups and with a wooden ladle gave the ground-nuts into our cupped hands. We had to tell Her “plein”, “moitié” or “très peu” (full, half or very little) and

She would give accordingly. Kobi was not keeping well (we will see later about his health). He had not to specify. She gave “très peu” every day as “prasad” only. Kobi wanted more than just “prasad”. He went about the procurement very methodically. He stitched himself a bag from a “Kurta” sleeve. Then contacted some sympathetic children (mostly girls — they always were afraid to eat well) who would normally ask for “très peu” or “moitié” and told them, “Ay — tora roj ‘plein’ nibi” (ask for full every day). He then stood with his bag at a pre-arranged spot. His suppliers would drop into his bag the extra they got from the Mother. This well-knit network served him well — for some time. The Mother came to know of it and quietly put an end to it. Later Kobi’s health deteriorated, his quota was further reduced to just ONE nut. It is said “prasad” should be in such quantity as not to even reach the stomach. It should be absorbed before that! Kobi now realised how true the saying was. From that deprived stomach welled up a couplet: “Play Grounder Madam — aar dayna badam” (“Playground’s Madam, no longer gives groundnuts”). Such was the situation, not going Kobi’s way at all, when one day a rare treat was in the offing for Distribution. Instead of the usual paper were piled up on the Distribution tray. That day the Mother was in a hurry, so the groups formed two parallel rows facing each other. The Mother walked in between giving away alternately left then right. Kobi’s sixth sense warned him of the approaching events — so he planned ahead. He asked two of us boys to close up. He himself stood a step behind stretching out only his joined palms through the gap between us, his two conspirators. He hoped thus to elude divine detection. On came the Mother. She came fast not looking left or right, gaze more turned down, only placing the chocolate on our joined palms. Kobi shrunk himself as much as possible. He stood a very good chance it seemed. The Mother picked up a chocolate, was about to place it on these disembodied outstretched hands. All on a sudden She stopped — in mid-action — , looked up. Oh Goddess! it was complete disaster. Kobi got all muddled up, his mind was, for once, benumbed. All he could blurt out, in desperate tones was, “Mother, Mother, I will take it in milk.” The Mother broke into a beatific smile — and all was saved — She placed the chocolate in Kobi’s eager palms.

Of Kobi’s kobita (poetry) I can’t say anything but of his paint-

ings I could venture an opinion. To me he was one of our best artists. I have rarely seen him paint, (maybe only once) but I have seen his paintings, mostly of Nature. He used to walk to the Lake, long before we ever did, and roam around the countryside in those days when much of it existed — it in fact started right from the Boulevards' (North, West and South) outer edges. He was slow, slow as can be and, with those large 'seer' eyes of his, must have drunk in slowly and deeply all that beauty, come home and transferred it onto canvas. His paintings were heavy. He painted layer on layer and took a long time over them. They had to be kept on heavy stands and so they were. They would be ruined if dismantled from the stands. (Wonder where they are all now?) Later he stopped painting. I asked him: "Why don't you paint? You are not too well and can't roam around. You have time on your hands. I will help you gather the materials." He said: "Aar na!!" ("No more.") I asked why. He replied, "It takes a great amount of concentration, thus energy, and I have not much energy." He was already suffering from quite a few ailments.

1956 — Kobi never was in full, good physical shape. He suffered constantly. Only the degree of suffering varied every few days. When he first arrived he was told by Nolini-da that if he stayed here, he would have to undergo great physical suffering. Fame too would not come his way. But if he chose to go into the wide world, he could achieve fame (as a poet). He chose to stay here. Later even in great pain, he would say that it did not matter (the pain), for it is the Mother's word coming true! We could only admire him, helpless, unable to do much to alleviate his pain. Some time in 1956 or 1958 his diabetes became acute. He went into diabetic coma. Dr. Sanyal pronounced that the end was near — maybe a few days! Everyone had given him up. But some spark which did not register on the doctor's instruments nor on his "know-how" was there. That took over where the doctor left off. He came out of the coma and improved. Bed-ridden he needed constant help. His sister, Aparna, arrived and looked after him during the day. Some of us boys were called in for the nights. We talked deep into the night. He told us tales, tall ones and true ones. He told of his escapades, hilarious encounters with other men, ghosts and doctors — often heavily spiced with unmentionable comments. He could bowl us, young men, over on our own 'home-ground' (of speech and

thought). He did not modulate his voice, raise it in excitement, no gesticulating — nothing. All would flow, slow and steady in a husky monotonous drone! Yet he held us captivated, as he did all who came into contact with him. He held us, but himself, eluded us. His sister protested, saying, “The doctor has forbidden so much talking.” He replied “*Dactar ki jané?* (“What does the doctor know?”) I am talking with my group boys,” and continued. He recovered enough to move about indoors, and later to come outdoors.

One morning after the Balcony Darshan I noted Kobi standing at the back edge of the crowd that was funnelling itself into the Ashram. He was smiling, I noticed, at someone in front of him. I approached and asked “What’s so funny?” He pointed in front of him — Khodabhai and Mr. Wellinkar were having a *tête-à-tête*. Their “*têtes*” often shaking in the negative. Their talk was audible to us. The topic was the general condition of their diabetes and the hard time coping with it (diet restrictions etc.). Kobi said: “Hear them. A simple diabetes and so much palavering. What if they had, like me, a whole catalogue of problems?” He was amused by their negative head-shaking and the mutual concern evinced on their faces.

Once when he was ill again, again seriously enough to cause concern, he asked to be taken to see the Mother. He was taken on a stretcher to the Meditation Hall and laid at the foot of the stairs. The Mother came down and looked long at him. He could not rise but prayed to Her to press Her foot on his chest, and She did so. What a sight it must have been! What a feeling for Kobi to lie under Her foot! Again he recovered, was up and about (at his same old speed i.e. 2-3 km/h).

Kobi had to undergo the group medical check-up. He was already playing host to various illnesses. A new doctor happened to be checking us. The gentleman looked Kobi up and down and asked, “What have you got?” Kobi in his slow, somnabulist tone started reciting, “Diabetes, high B.P. . . .” then thought better of it and said, “Doctor, ask me what I haven’t got. I am a zoological garden of bacteria.” Kobi had in fact high B.P., acute diabetes (ants would swarm to wherever a drop of his urine chanced to fall. His night-pot had to be islanded by a ring of DDT), TB, thrombosis (leg or somewhere else), ulcers, the usual cold. The doctor was completely lost. Mona (Captain) or some-

one stopped him before he ran out to consult his big books, reassured him: "It is OK to give a cursory check-up, for the rest is already taken care of." Now, who took care of the rest? Many a doctor can claim to have been Kobi's caretaker — rightly so — from their point of view and level. But what Kobi himself knew and most of us believed was a bit different. Why did we think so? The following should justify these thoughts.

Jipmer came up and many of our more serious cases were taken there. The doctors, who came to know Kobi, loved and respected him, but could hardly fathom him. He was admitted in his now habitual condition — flat on his back. He was x-rayed, probed and percussed — the usual reception you get in a hospital. He joked and talked with all around him, doctor, nurse, me, etc. as if it was someone else undergoing all this. He was finally wheeled into his ward. The condition was not very good. The high B.P. and diabetes were taking their toll. Darshan was a few days away. The Mother would appear on the new Balcony. Kobi wished to have the Darshan. The doctor gave a firm "No" and said, "You can't be moved in this condition." Kobi persisted. The doctor was friendly but would not budge. Then Kobi struck on one of his "hallowed" plans. He told the doctor, "You sit in the car with me and hold my wrist, feel the pulse. We start for the Ashram. If you feel any deterioration (in the pulse) we turn around and back to bed. But, if no change, then we both have the Darshan of Mother." The doctor gave in to this simple, strange solution to the impasse. He probably thought it an easy way out — he was in for a surprise. The car was brought and off they went, a strange duo — a smiling sick man and an anxious doctor, holding hands it seemed. As the car approached the Ashram, Kobi's smile grew broader, the doctor's eyes wider, amazed. The pulse got better and better. The Mother appeared and both had Darshan. Their hearts were full, the doc's mind felt empty. Both went back (to Jipmer) the richer by the experience. Such was Kobi — always down, never out!

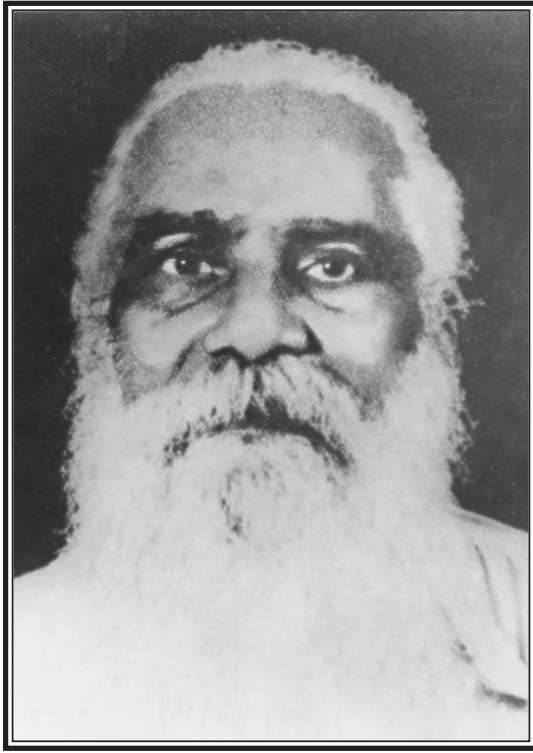
We have seen now Kobi the poet, the painter and the cook. He relished cooking and relished too what he cooked. But may none make it out that his main occupation was cooking and eating. These were only two of his outward activities — most visible to most of us (and understood by most). Probably the greater part of his activities were

inward oriented, not suspected, not felt by the casual onlooker. (Like the writer who had a hard time convincing his wife that he was actually working when just looking out of the upstairs window!) Maybe my story shows much of Kobi's outer and more surface facets. Those who would, could look elsewhere for a deeper look into Kobi-da.

He carried on for nearly four decades with the same sleepy smile, slow of pace and speech. The ups and downs (mostly downs) didn't seem to affect him greatly. He seemed much the same in 1945 as in 1970. Yet his playing host to so many illnesses had a telling effect on him. The decline was slow but steady. The body was giving way, but not the spirit. He quipped even in the presence of Yamaraj. He used to say, "Bujli Batti, Jom niyé gechhilo. Dékhé bollo — é niyé ki hobé — aar phirod niyeshché!" ("Batti, Yama took me, had one look and said what to do with this wreck and returned me.") Does this sound a sad and discouraged Kobi? Not when you heard it from Kobi. You rather felt he was patting Yama in sympathy. Having lived so close for so long with Death, there was no room for fear. Yama came when he wanted, and Kobi quietly slipped away with him. This was on 20th May 1973. Someone called me to his room. He was having breathing difficulty. Some others were there, a doctor too. We tried to ease his pain by giving an oxygen (or air) bag (much like a bag-piper's bellows. You put a nozzle into your mouth and gently squeezed the bag to pump air into your lungs). Feeling better he told me to go have dinner and come. When I returned he was gone — to lay himself down again under the Mother's feet — to a greater awakening!

He used to say, "Batti, I am going to die, but I will come back here. Do find me a nice, young, healthy couple who can bring me forth here." Suggestions were given, maybe he has taken one. "Look out," he said, "for a boy with big eyes and a penchant for sweets."

Twenty years or more have passed — yet can we measure our Kobi? His mind dwelt in and drew inspiration from some higher world. The light he lived in we could not see, but he threw a shadow, we saw the shadow. I suspect now, that he never stepped down from his heights to meet us, just stooped to conquer. So lives Kobi, a seer, in our minds, a dreamer in our dreams. The mighty Brahmaputra flows yet along the little streams.



ROOPANAGUNTA SUBRAMANYAM PANTULU

*How happy is he born and taught,
That serveth not another's will;
Whose armour is his honest thought,
And simple truth his utmost skill.*

SIR HENRY WOTTON
(*The Character of a Happy Man*)

ROOPANAGUNTA Subramanyam Pantulu was known as “Pantulu”, a suffix short, convenient, meaning “teacher” or “school master”, or an honorific title. Subramanyam is another name for Kartikeya, son of Lord Shiva, general of the armies of Heaven, a name befitting Pantulu (as we will see).

Pantulu from afar seemed just an ordinary “Madrasee”. He was always clad in a white dhoti (South Indian style) and a shirt. What struck the onlooker first was his great beard. Neat, lush and long, it covered his front nearly up to the belly. The longish, curly hair of his head was gathered into a neat little knot at the back. A good nose and full enough cheeks. A closer, second look struck harder and dazed you with the fire in his eyes. And next what could really floor you, if you happened to be around and the occasion right, was the thunder of his voice. Some can yet catch the echoes of it — long after the Thunderer is no more. The overall impression one gathered from the eyes, the beard, the hair-do, the simple attire was one of ancientness. Then, if you knew his ways, views and his works, the impression carried further — that of an ancient Rishi. When and if the hair-trigger temper went off and the voice (content and volume) hit like a thunderbolt, the impression only grew stronger and stayed longer — a Durvasa on the move.

Pantulu was born in a Brahmin family on 14 June 1887 in the village Anakarlupudi in Nellore District of Andhra Pradesh (no A.P. in those days — only Madras Presidency). He was the eldest child. Father Venkatasubbayah and mother Sheshamma, three brothers Chandramouli, Srinivasulu (my father), Venkateswarulu and last, a sister, Tulasi, comprised the family. The family lived and led a village life — teaching or engaged in small time business. Pantulu, after his father’s demise, took up the family burden. It was he who came out and brought the family out from the village life. He studied and worked hard, reached Ongole, and then moved to Guntur for his matriculation (English medium). His hard work paid off. He got admission into the Engineering College at Madras. It was probably the only such college in the whole of the Madras Presidency. Only the best could get admission. There, after three years of diligent work, he passed an exam called “Upper Subordinate”. He got a job as an overseer in Cuddappa District. This was the year 1910. He was 23 years old. The family moved to Cuddappa. He was now the sole earner; two brothers studying for matriculation, another in class IV — and wife Annapoornadevi (he was married by then), the sister Tulasi and his mother were all his dependants! He worked from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. with just a short lunch break. His reputation slowly built up on solid

foundations — his diligence, forthrightness, honesty — all backed by a Vesuvian temper. He was like a keg of gunpowder with a short, very short, fuse. The explosion could and would come at very short notice. The blast could catch anyone — all were equally treated — “Beware all, big or small, peon, boss, friend or foe.” Even the “white sahibs” were not spared. He was not foolhardy. He relied on his sincerity to ward off any retribution.

Time passed. He worked hard — so did his mother. Her heart was larger than their purse. She never turned anyone away without treating them as one of the family. Such open hearts and minds inevitably put a mere overseer under great financial strain. But neither he nor his mother ever let go their principles, nor did they change their minds or shut their hearts. It was at this time that Fate chose to strike, hard and fast. First the youngest brother died. Next, the sister Tulasi, now married two years; then his wife Annapoornadevi passed away — all in quick succession. At this time Pantulu was already a follower and admirer of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda. He had shaved clean his head and went about with a large Vivekananda-type turban and attended lectures at Ramakrishna Samaj. When he walked along the streets, children used to shout, “There goes Swami Vivekananda.” Now, after the three deaths he was somewhat depressed and had half a mind to become a Sannyasin. He lost, to some degree, interest in family life.

It was at this time, around 1914 (one family version says 1914, another says 1919) that Pantulu came across the first issue of *Arya*. He fell for it, and through it for its author. He came to Pondicherry as soon as he could and had the Darshan of Sri Aurobindo. The path was set; henceforth he was a marked man. He never missed a chance to come for a Darshan. In fact he hardly left it to chance. He rarely applied for leave from his office. But on 2 or 3 occasions when he applied for leave to come for Darshan and it was not granted, Pantulu unhesitatingly handed in his resignation and came away. His British superiors were good enough or practical enough to request him to rejoin. It seems he was usually the last to arrive for the Darshan. Sri Aurobindo would remark, “Pantulu has come, now we can close the doors.” Nolini-da recounted to me that Pantulu would somehow make it (for Darshan). If he missed the train, he would catch a goods-

train, sit with the guard and reach here. Such was the urge or Force that led Pantulu and his likes here. (Sadly, I overheard much later, in 1971 or 72, when the Mother with great difficulty appeared on the New Balcony — a gentleman, a resident of Pondy, saying, “Oh I could not come for the Darshan. You see my driver was absent!” The gentleman held a valid licence to drive the car!)

Pantulu came and went. He was as yet a widower. Once in the course of a conversation, Sri Aurobindo said to him, “You could remarry.” He set out to do so. His mother was naturally quite happy. The quest was strange, short and successful. At this time there lived in Cuddappa a Tehsildar, Chittamoori Krishnayya. His eldest daughter Meenakshamma was deemed to be of marriageable age — she was 10 years old. Krishnayya consulted an astrologer. The astrologer told Krishnayya not to look too far or too hard. He further said that someone would soon approach him for the hand of his daughter. The bridegroom, he added, may be somewhat old, but that should not matter. Soon enough, Pantulu, now about 30, and his mother, approached Krishnayya for the hand of 10-year-old Meenakshamma. Krishnayya readily agreed and the marriage was solemnised in 1918. (Incidentally — Meenakshamma had a younger sister named Venkatalakshamma. Pantulu had a younger brother Srinivasulu. Matters were brought to a marital conclusion — they were later married.) They say, opposites attract. Pantulu and his wife were living examples — he was a live volcano and she was a vast cool glacier. What mysterious hand — Fate, Providence or Divine Plan, brought them together? Whatever the mystery it was a happy event for us — the family and others. She was a shield for us, a deflector, and a saviour for some others.

Pantulu then shifted to Madras. He was by now an Assistant Engineer in the PWD. A few incidents would show the stuff the man was made of.

There was a time when Pantulu possessed a walking-stick of rosewood; in its hollow length lay hidden a sword (I hold it now, unused, in my custody). He, for a short period went to office in a horse-drawn carriage (Jhatka). One morning, Pantulu got on and the driver started off. The horse took a few steps, then shied and reared up on its hind legs. Reflected rays from a puddle of water had hit its eyes (it had rained the previous night). Pantulu slid back on to the

road. No corporal damage. But, the jolt set off the short fuse. He walked into the house. His mother, surprised, asked him, "What's the matter?" He said, "Get me a glass of water to drink." She went in. Pantulu drew out the sword to punish the horse. The driver was horrified and frightened, but stood in his (Pantulu's) way, begging his master to pardon the horse. Pantulu shouted, "Get out of my way!" This delay was enough to bring a reprieve to the condemned horse. His mother appeared, and this strange scenario met her eyes — a frightened driver with folded hands and tearful eyes, confronting an angry master, sword in hand, and fire in his eyes. A horse in the background. She was after and above all his mother. She took in the situation — *Dies Irae* (Day of Wrath) — and stepped in, barring Pantulu's warpath. Pantulu simply said, "I am going to kill the horse." She as simply said, "After me," and stood. What could Pantulu, or anyone, do? He cooled down, sheathed his sword and retreated. Thus was a horse sacrifice averted.

On yet another occasion, a similar eruption nearly ended the life of a cow. The Pantulus like many others had their own milch cows. One of the cows contracted some disease of the milk ducts. When milked, blood spurted out, not milk. Pantulu saw red, shouted for his peons. He ordered them to belabour the cow with sticks. They were unwilling, but fear of Pantulu overcame their better senses and sensibilities. They were about to start their job, when on the scene appeared Mrs. Pantulu. Her concern for the cow roused a cold anger and courage in her. She shouted at the peons, calling them fools who could not discern a wrong order given in anger from a right one. She ordered, "Get out." The poor blighters — they were waiting and praying for just such an intervention. They dropped their sticks and ran away from the spot.

As the horse, so the cow was saved, both by female forces — Shaktis — only they could counter and douse this fire. One bore him and brought him up, the other married and took him over. (Against the superiority of another there is no remedy but love. — Goethe)

Not so fortunate (as the horse and cow) was a Sahib boss who chose to ignore or could not correctly gauge Pantulu. Neither his rank nor colour was enough to save him. Pantulu did not run him through with a sword or have him beaten. It all happened this way. Pantulu

was, as mentioned, a follower of Vivekananda. He had a shaven head and an equally clean face. Then a strange occurrence took place. Whenever he shaved he would dream that hair was coming out of his mouth! He stopped shaving and the dreams too stopped. He let his beard and hair grow and did away with shaving. But his boss, the Sahib of the story, did not believe such 'tales'. He pooh-poohed the whole episode and derided the shabby appearance of this subordinate. The fuse was lit — an explosion — Pantulu cursed the man that he would die soon! It so happened that the poor man was gathered up within a month. Pantulu felt sorry. He regretted and promised to himself to be more careful with his words thenceforth.

Pantulu, it would seem, had an intuitive sense of the future. For often, events followed his foretelling them! He did not "tell" in so many explicit words, but we could conclude so by his premonitions and couched warnings to those around. When his mother called him home from a 'camp' for the "thread ceremony" of his youngest brother Venkateswarulu, he asked her not to go through the ceremony. He said: "It is not necessary and moreover I have to come home soon enough." He did not go for the ceremony. His mother performed it. Soon after that the boy met with an accident on the playing field. He died in a few days and Pantulu had to rush home — as he had foreseen.

Maybe this "feeling into the future" made him a good astrologer. His old notebook is full of astrological castings, his own and of each one of his family members. There is one even of our late Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. For some here in the Ashram he had foretold some events — eventually proven correct. (I think the late Khoda-bhai was one of them.)

Pantulu himself faced danger often enough. As a PWD engineer he was assigned to various jobs like building bridges, canals, etc. He had to move into quite remote areas, often through jungles. His party moved by bullock cart, beating tin cans and waving torches — if dusk overtook them — to keep away wild animals. Even an encounter with a tiger was very much possible (a distant dream now even for animal lovers seeking it). He sometimes lived in a houseboat and travelled up and down canals and rivers. Once, when he was working from a small boat, the boat capsized. Pantulu did not know swimming — not

a stroke. He managed to grab a wire stretched taut across the river and held on for dear life. Some people threw him a rope and hauled him ashore. Even his umbrella and sandals were rescued. These were washed ashore downstream and picked up the next day. What was remarkable was that he had warned his co-workers not to go on the boat. But they had insisted, saying the work was urgent — so he went. The wire too snapped after he was rescued.

Pondicherry — Ashram: Pantulu frequently visited the Ashram till his retirement in 1942. Even after he retired, the PWD offered him a job as EE (Executive Engineer). They wanted him to take charge of building an airport. Not many Indians were in such high posts in those days of British Raj. Pantulu refused the job. He had his future chalked out. He moved to Guntur with his family, wife and three children, Suniti, Bhavatarini and Narayan. The eldest son Vishnu had joined the RIAF (Royal Indian Air Force) and gone off to War. The next, daughter Prabhavati, was studying. He pooled all his resources and bought some arable land near a remote village named Nedutippa. His younger brother Srinivasulu was to look after the land. After a brief period in Guntur, Pantulu with his wife and three younger children came over for good to Pondicherry in 1944. They went back to Guntur in 1945 for a few days and on their return trip I too was brought over. The Ashram school had just opened. There were a few departments like Dining Room, Building Service, Sanitary Service, Harpagon, Garden Service. I don't know if Pantulu worked in any of these. In 1945 our Printing Press was started. Pantulu was made in-charge of the Binding Section. He was back in his element — work.

Pantulu was a giant in his work. It was difficult for any of us to really satisfy him in quantity as well as quality. The standards and pace he set left many panting. But they had to keep going, for he was usually a step ahead, leading. Punctuality and regularity went hand in hand with him. Parikshit, Pantulu's longtime underling, got his initiation from Pantulu. He avows it was tough going, but rewarding and enriching (to shape iron, you have to heat and soften it and then hammer it). Pantulu would start for his work soon after the Mother's Balcony Darshan, maybe around 6.30 a.m. He would wait in front of the D.R. (Dining Room) in the Park for Parikshit, who was expected to hurry through breakfast and join him. The two would walk

down to the Press, the earliest birds. They caught no worms but were caught up in the work. They dusted and arranged all the work-tables of other sadhaks who would be arriving later. When they trickled in, in ones and twos, they had to just slip in between their seat and table and start working — no chance or necessity to talk. Usually there was not much talking. Surface fear and deep respect kept that to the minimum. When all the workers left, Pantulu would rearrange everything, knives, folders, etc. — close the Section and walk back home. Lunch, 1/2 hour rest and back to work, by rickshaw usually. He returned home at about 6 p.m. After putting back everything, he would write a report of the work done and also the work planned for the next day, close the Section and walk back. He would show these reports to the Mother every day.

Peace and quiet reigned — the deterrent was present. Once in a long while a storm broke loose. It happened like this one day: It was a normal, fine day. The numerous machines (printing, monotype, etc.) were setting up their usual racket (all pre-war models). All of a sudden, above this din a great noise, a shout was heard. All over the Press people felt the shock-waves, switched off their machines and rushed to seek the source of the noise, towards the Binding Section. Someone had blundered — who? — and Pantulu thundered. They arrived in time to see Ravindra-ji making a hasty exit — that was who. And why? Ravindra-ji had the new job of appointing workers to various departments. The same thankless job he is at even now. He was younger then, and used to accompany the new recruit for the introductions. He had just done that, but unwittingly overstepped into Pantulu's jurisdiction and received a well-aimed Pantulu 'broad-side'. The Mother was told about the incident, I think, by Ravindra-ji himself. Result — early morning, a knock on Pantulu's house-door and in came Ravindra-ji. Pantulu and he melted into each other's embrace. The past was effaced.

Quiet and peace prevailed at Pantulu's house too, as in his workplace — even when we boys were present. We did whatever boys do at that age, but out of his sight. Some reports must have reached him, but not often did he come down on us. He quietly forgave and forgot. For not only did he have a towering temper, but bore some other towering qualities as well. He earned a pension which he

offered to the Mother. She gave him back or permitted him to retain Rs. 20 a month. This sufficed to buy some vegetables (Rs. 2/week), some grocery (monthly) and our yearly quota of clothes. One day his son Narayan, after long self-persuasion and encouragement, asked him if we could ask for butter from the Ashram. In those days every Sunday butter was distributed from the D.R. to those who had the sanction. Pantulu asked, "What are you doing so much or so great for the Ashram, that you want to ask for butter?" There the matter ended.

Biren-da used to come to our house every night after our dinner in the D.R. Pantulu would be home just lying down or teaching astrology to some (like Arun-da of the D.R.) or just talking on any subject with Dr. Nripendra, Sisir-da, etc. They would all go for the night meditation in the Ashram later. He was probably most relaxed during this period of the day. One night Biren-da was at the receiving end of his mood. Biren-da had very recently shown on Dec. 2nd a "rope trick". He was tied up, upper arms and chest, with a stout rope. He was to get out of his bonds. (Actually he failed as the rope was, it seems, dipped in oil and it tightened so well that it cut into the flesh.) But this night Pantulu said, "It seems you showed some rope trick in the Playground?" Biren-da grinned and nodded and said, "Yes, yes." Pantulu called us two brothers. "Okay, tie this fellow up. I want to see how he gets out." We brought a strong rope and started to tie up Biren-da (embarrassed and helpless). We went round the body, but Pantulu said, "No, no, not like that. Make a figure of eight under each arm each time you go round the body." Biren-da meekly protested, saying the rope has to go just round. Pantulu had a good laugh and said, "Let him go — no need to tie him. Anyone can get out if you tie as he wants."

A batch of us boys used to go on outings to Lal Pahar (Red Hills, what is now Auroville) or Lake or First River (Ariankuppam) with Biren-da. Pantulu was interested — he having seen a good bit of outdoor life as an engineer. One day he told Biren-da, "Let us arrange a two-day outing to Gingee." Gingee was then farther than the Moon, and two days — it was unheard of in the annals of the Ashram. We were feverish with excitement. But how do we get there? A bus was hired for Rs. 90 or 100. It was a steam-driven one (petrol was not

available just after the War). The bus was to pick us up early in the morning from the D.R., drop us at Gingee, and return the next day (afternoon) to bring us back home by evening. Next problem — where to get Rs. 100? We boys didn't have ten rupees between us and we wouldn't make a busload. So, others were recruited. Krishnaya (Pantulu's old friend), Niranjana-bhai (Albert-da's brother), Anil Bhatta the artist (Pavan's grandfather), Ardhendu (cat-lover and chemist), Krishnalal (artist), were some of the recruits. They all contributed yet could not make up the Rs. 100. Vishnu, Pantulu's eldest son (RIAF), happened to be there. He made up the shortfall.

We had breakfast in the D.R. and loaded the bus with vessels and food, etc. Off we went, watched by a crowd of Ashramites. It was a great expedition into the unknown. We reached Tindivanam. The bus stopped — we wondered why. The bus-walla said we had to change buses, as he had no permit to go further! Pantulu let go a volley of grape-shot, but was persuaded to make the change. We transferred all the 'saman' and sat in our places. Pantulu was to board last and occupy the front seat. As he was about to get in, he saw a police officer sitting in the front seat. He asked the bus-walla, "Who is he? — Why is he here?" The driver replied that police officers are permitted. Pantulu had had enough of this. He blew up — this time it was heavy artillery. All were hushed. He shouted at us, "Get down — unload — no Gingee. We will take the train back home." We sat still, hoping something would save the trip. The next volley crashed amidst us. We jumped to obey. Seeing all this the police officer was unnerved. He beat a retreat. We all breathed a sigh of relief. We reached Gingee. We were put up in a small school that was closed for vacation. A long shed served as kitchen and dining-room and two rooms for sleeping. Most of the older people stayed to rest, but we boys, with Biren-da, went up Krishnagiri before lunch. And in the afternoon we went up Rajgiri. Rajgiri and Krishnagiri are two of the three hills comprising the Gingee Fortress. It was dusk when we came down and soon it grew dark. We tried a short cut that delayed us longer. Gingee was just a small village and there was quite a scrub jungle around and leopards were rumoured to be there (it was 1946 or 48). Pantulu was filled with anxiety. Biren-da was the first to enter the camp. He took the full blast as Pantulu opened up. We just melted

into the dark corners. There were only the wood fire and a hurricane lamp. Dark corners were aplenty. Biren-da took all the blows quietly (boxer that he was). He was saved to some extent by — literally — a ‘diversionary fire’. Krishnayya, who was cooking, got his “gamcha” (towel) on fire and started a merry jig when the heat reached him (he was at first unaware the towel had caught fire). We were a subdued lot for the rest of the night.

The next year, there was a plan to visit Mahabalipuram by sea! The idea was to hire a motor-launch from Pondicherry Port, chug along the shore and reach Mahabalipuram. Somehow the plan fizzled out — we didn’t hear of it again!

Pantulu was a good cook and scholar (as mentioned in Nishikanto, the last article). He was a born teacher and supervisor. He could run a kitchen sitting on a stool. In 1952 Pantulu, my father (Srinivasulu) and I went to Nidutippa to inspect the fields. We went round the fields in the morning, came home and started the day’s cooking (no women-folk, only the three of us). We were getting along. One day the timing went wrong. It was brinjal ‘sambar’, the brinjals were very much under-cooked, hard and tasteless. During lunch my father pushed aside the harder pieces. I followed my father. Then spoke Pantulu, “Who did the cooking today?” “I,” replied my father. “Whose fault that the brinjals are hard?” — was the next question. “Mine,” replied my father. “Why should you then not eat them rather than waste them?” My father pulled back all that he had pushed aside and ate everything. So did I and so did Pantulu!

The D.R. had some problem. For quite a period the rice was not being cooked properly. Several cooks tried and failed. Pantulu took it upon himself to set matters right. He marshalled his forces, i.e. his family members, a few from the Department (Press) and one or two others. He set his stool near the oven (choola). In those good old days, no steam boilers and gas ovens. Wood, heat, smoke, soot and sweat were the normal kitchen requisites (the food tasted as good then as now). The D.R. kitchen felt as if some military manoeuvres were on. We did conquer the rice problem.

Pantulu was a scholar. By training and profession he was an engineer, but his mind was not to be fenced in in that field only. It ranged far and wide in the fields of Sanskrit, Telugu and English literature

(of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo). He translated many works of Sri Aurobindo into Telugu and started the magazine *Arka* in that language (printed in our Ashram Press even today). He had read in Sanskrit the Puranas, Upanishads, etc. It is a wonder how and when he and many others of that period did all that they did. The sheer volume and variety of their achievements is astounding — more so when you see the quality of their doings. They imbibed much and let much seep out again. The only limit for Pantulu was the time and tide of his life. 66 years were too short.

We four as children (Bhavatarini, Suniti, Narayan and I) were pulled into this seepage. For a time, during 1942-43, daily after lunch, we sat erect, Padmasan, arms crossed on the chest and repeated or read aloud slokas from Balaramayan or Taittiriyaopanishad (Sanskrit in Telegu script). Pantulu would be sitting or reclining on the cot conducting the proceedings. We remember the scene well — Bhavatarini and Suniti do still remember some of the slokas, I none.

Thus days turned into weeks, months and years. Came that fateful year 1950. On December 5 early morning we were all jolted by a rude shock. We were told that Sri Aurobindo had left his body. We as children were quite upset. But the older people were shaken to their very foundations, completely demolished. Their bewildered minds took a long time to settle, to reorient themselves. Some could not and left. Some did set themselves firmly back on the Path, looked up and found a firm light to guide and sustain them — the Mother. Pantulu was one of these. He worked on till his body succumbed to the double disease of diabetes and high B.P. (as did his friend Nishikanto — Kobi). For diabetes Kobi had grown a medicinal plant given to him by a Himalayan sadhu. The leaves were to be crushed and the juice taken with milk. The juice was slimy and tasteless. Kobi passed on this knowledge to Pantulu. I plucked and brought the leaves from Kobi's house — Santal. Pantulu was fussy and this concoction did not suit his taste buds. He made a modification. The crushed leaves were mixed with some 'dal' powder and fried into vadas! Kobi had a good laugh and, conceding a point, said, "Pantulu amarché ek kati uporé." (Pantulu has outdone me.) The leaf did not have its desired effect. Pantulu's health slowly deteriorated. We had to help him even to walk. He stopped his work in the Press. As days passed he got

worse — he was bedridden. The flesh wore away, the cheeks once full were now hollow. He lay there for about 10 days — no speech, not much movement, fed spoon by spoon of liquids. Probably the last to fade away was the fire in his eyes. The end came one afternoon — on 29 December 1953. My father was here at the time. He wanted to perform the traditional obsequies (mantras, etc). The Mother was asked if such rites could be done. She said, “You can if you want.” She further added, “These mantras are meant for the good of the departing soul. Pantulu’s soul left him ten days back.” So departed one more ‘not so great’, an ancient one who left deep foot-prints on our shifting memories. They may be often covered by wayward winds but are too deep to be effaced. Pantulu walked through life unafraid. His sword was forthrightness, kept sharp by his temper, and sincerity was his shield. He had much to give, but it was often served near boiling hot. We had to wait, cool it and then sip. Then what seemed a bitter medicine lost the bitterness and slowly seeped into our minds, dissolving there many a stubborn stumbling stone. He steeled our minds and spirits (bodies were steeled by another ‘not so great’ Biren-da, boxer, masseur and outdoor man, now old and disabled). Pantulu and his likes lived by one great motto. They always asked themselves: “What can we give?” — (to the Mother and Sri Aurobindo) They never asked or thought: “What can we get?” — maybe that is the reason they got in great measure. But that too they gave.

Mrs. Pantulu — Meenakshamma

The Pantulu story would be only half told if Meenakshamma is not brought on the stage from the wings she long — nay, right through her life — occupied. For if Pantulu was a storm, she was the ‘calm after the storm’.

Meenakshamma was a great woman in her own right. Married at the age of ten with just class two education in Telegu, she tackled life unperturbed and was a model wife, housewife and mother. She and her compeers could teach a thing or two to their more modern, educated versions. She worked hard, never rushed around, yet got things done to each one’s satisfaction (even though some were often



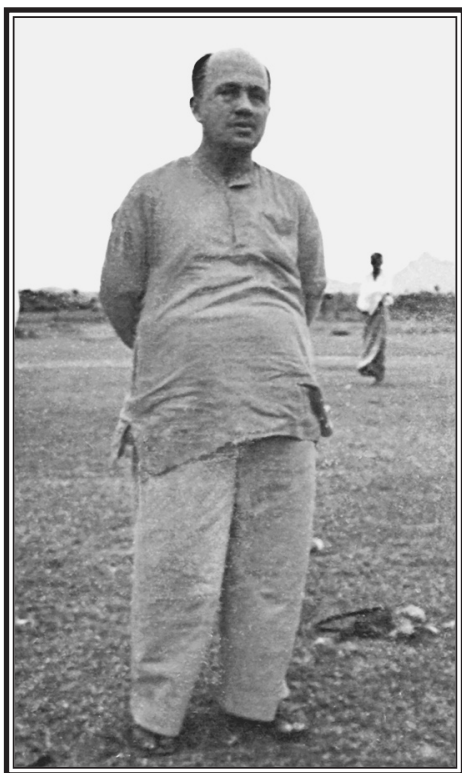
Mrs. Pantulu — Meenakshamma

demanding ones). She was called “Kamadhenu” (the wish-fulfilling Cow) by some neighbours. They never knew her to say, “No, I have not got the item” when they would approach her to borrow some dal, rice, oil, etc. She came to the Ashram along with Pantulu, her husband. She worked at the Servants’ Office — Padmasiniamma was her boss. (Arvind Sule continues to sit there daily for a short period.) She picked up enough English, all on her own, to maintain the ‘absence-presence register’. She even learned to read Tamil just looking at cinema posters, equating known names of films to the letters on the posters. She was a cinema buff and that helped her in her linguistic achievements. Sometime in the early sixties she developed cancer. Colectomy followed. She carried on life as usual for more than twenty years. No fuss over plastic bags nor colectomy societ-

ies giving helping hints and psychological boosts. Just old-fashioned cotton and bandages and still older-fashioned common sense and grit. Her patience and a strength born of that patience saw her through to the end. The end came of some other complication in her intestines. A few days bed-bound. Doctors said they had to take her to Jipmer. She must have sensed, or at least expected vaguely, the approaching end. She asked us to call Narayan (her son) and my mother (her sister). They arrived. Surgery (supposed to be exploratory) was done. She was a day or two in the IC (Intensive Care) ward. We then decided to bring her home, against the doctors' wishes and advice. Slowly, with a team of doctors in attendance, we brought her back (drip bottle & all). We brought her home around 5.30 or 6.00 p.m. and made her as comfortable as possible. She was quite conscious. She stayed with us, at home, for a brief hour or so. Then as she had lived her 70 and odd years, so she passed away — in peace. I went to inform Nolini-da immediately. He said: "Oh! cholé gèché — kono koshto neyi, kono dukkho neyi." (Oh! she has gone — no suffering, no sadness.) For a moment I wondered at what Nolini-da said. Who was suffering? Who was sad? It then struck me it was on her, Meenakshamma, that he was commenting. I felt that she lived, worked and died doing her duty to the best of her knowledge and capacity, lived by her dharma. Then what else matters? What more can one expect of another?

This is as told by an old, old sadhika of our Ashram, who is simple, quite uneducated (no academic life), of village upbringing. (She is now near 90 years old). She, as is the custom among our communities, made it a point to visit and pay her respects, and pray for any deceased, before the body was taken to the crematorium. She went to see Meenakshamma. What she saw, and/or experienced was quite unusual (to say the least). She saw hovering around, some angels or lesser gods or maybe some gods' messengers. They seemed to be vying with each other, as to who would take away Meenakshamma to their respective regions. She came away happy and quite taken by what she had seen.

What tributes to pay to such as these? Enough to remember them in our quiet moments, uncovering their footprints on the dust of forgetfulness. It could help to measure our own footsteps with theirs. They are our pathfinders, part of the way. Oblivion cannot be their resting place.



BHOLANATH GHOSH

Well done, thou good and faithful servant; thou has been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things.

NEW TESTAMENT

BHOLANATH GHOSH hailed from old Benares. Born on 4 December 1923, he was neither very old nor was he an ancient arrival here. He joined the Ashram in 1949, a day before the February Darshan, and expired on 18 July 1989. Even his life in the Ashram was not too long — just over 40 years. Yet the many happy memories he left in so many prevailed on me to include him as one of the “Not so Great”.

**Bholanath was a treat to watch,
to hear and to know**

He stood all of 1m 50cm or less, solid, of fair complexion. He cut a neat figure not easily forgotten. A layer of baby fat clung to him, impartially spread all around — but not too much of it. There was not any ‘extra’ to hang or bulge unexpectedly. All angles were effaced, leaving a form of smoothness and roundness — much like a healthy toddler. Let us start at 1m 50cm — we meet a large well-formed head set on a good neck, shoulders and chest. Working downward — a beauty of a tummy, just ample enough to merge with the general contours of the bodyscape, meets the eye, without hurting, yet making its presence felt. This whole beautiful edifice was firmly set on two solid well-formed legs. (Had the Creator added a crown, a trunk and large ears, we may have had a living Nritya-Ganapati.) Bholanath had a handsome face too — a good nose, clear happy eyes, round cheeks, a smile that seemed to be perpetually playing on his lips even when he dozed! To top it all was a great ‘taak’ (bald pate) — fair and smooth as the rest of him. The ‘taak’ was ringed by a ribbon of fine black hair — looked like a bird’s eye-view of an atoll. He was always clad in a white dhoti, worn short for convenience — for Bhola-da was a good worker — and a half-sleeved shirt. This dress was discarded in the evenings. He then donned the Playground group uniform — blue shorts, sleeveless banian, half-sleeved white shirt, as well as white tennis shoes for great occasions (Darshans or Demonstrations). Then, there was the ‘ever-companion’ umbrella. It was deployed above him, a shield against sun, rain, cold, tan, and naughty boys. The skin on top was very sensitive. Some boys, knowing this, would sneak up to him from behind and blow gently on it to send a shiver down Bhola-da’s spine. Obviously the umbrella was not overhead, but it was not far away. It was rolled up and tucked under one arm. Bhola-da could, and would, take a swipe at his tormentor. That was Bholanath for an eye-ful. To know him well would be difficult, but talk to him and you could have an earful of pleasure. There may not be much said, but much was oft repeated — like classical music — for Bhola-da was a great stammerer! This was an added endearing trait in him.

Bhola-da worked in 2 or 3 departments. The earliest I know of

was the old Bindery. This was the first, original bindery, set up in the Guest House in the big room near the drinking water place (Children's Table-Tennis Room No. 2). Many old long-forgotten sadhaks worked there. Biren Palit of long hair, probably started the department and headed it. There was also Chiman-bhai — big burly man built like a wrestler — a Malkhamb adept (he lived where I live now); Sudhir — bob-haired Sarangi and soccer player (Ashram Team, full back). Bhola-da also lived and worked in the Guest House. Bhola-da lived where is now Table No. 1 — the room was then partitioned into two. He was a children's favourite. They came to play in the courtyard and, being ever hungry, relished Bhola-da's "toasted bread". This was but Dining Room bread well dried in the sun!

The Ashram Printing Press — *Imprimerie* — was started in 1945-46. Sometime later the Bindery was closed, rather absorbed into this Press. The workers (Biren-da, Bhola-da, Chiman-bhai) too were absorbed.

Bhola-da: his works and his ways

He had three engrossing preoccupations (two of them preoccupy us too — work and food). The third one was Mass Exercises — it was a passion. He attended them with all his mind and body, with a deep sincerity. He was simple, straightforward, innocent... and slow — slow of action, slow of speech and slow of thought. If this was a drawback there was absolutely no remedy. So, all concerned soon realised it was best to accept matters as they were and learn to live with them (maybe this was good for them). There was no budging Bhola-da, so his bosses, including the redoubtable R.S. Pantulu, gave way to Bhola-da; but more than that they came to be fond of him.

The Guest House was taken over as *Dortoir Annexe*. Its old residents were shifted to other houses. Bhola-da was given a place quite a distance away from the Ashram. He relied on his two legs for any movement — to and fro from work, D.R., Playground, etc. The speed the legs generated belied the term 'speed'. He never had touched a bicycle — never could or would. The change of speed would have upset everything — his body, nerves and his very nature. So Bhola-da

went at the same steady “speed” — whether he aimed to cover half a km or 20 km.

Bhola-da had to go to the Dining Room for his meals. He somehow made it there before closing time. He would take whatever was given in good quantity, could be more but never less. He ate as he moved, with the same slowness. He enjoyed each mouthful; while he ate he had a blissful countenance — the bliss probably welled up from deeper down. Time did not matter.

When Bhola-da finished his breakfast he gathered himself up, his umbrella, etc. and wound his way towards the distant Press. He arrived there and set himself to his work, then he was unmovable, not only his body but the mind as well. Others left for lunch, but Bhola-da would continue working, to finish what he had started. Then back on the road — D.R.-bound for lunch. Watching him you wondered if he had 36 hours in the day!

Bhola-da had another duty. In the olden days, long, long ago, very few sadhaks wrote letters from the Ashram. Very few kept any cash. When they wanted to write, the procedure said: take the post card or envelope from Nolini-da, write and leave the letter open on Nolini-da’s table. He would go through the letter and post it. Long ago we only took the post card or envelope from him, but just posted it ourselves. It’s a far cry — the procedure now! But some old sadhaks continue to leave their letters open. Dyuman-bhai was one such till his last days! Nolini-da had stopped going through the letters long back, but his office continued to post the letters. Bhola-da was given this duty — sticking stamps, closing the envelopes and posting. He arrived at 3.15 p.m. sharp at Nolini-da’s room. He would sit down with the pile of letters on the floor, in front of Nolini-da’s room — legs apart and stretched out in front, and start his work, methodical and concentrated: Any other pose or position would keep the letters out of his reach — the body’s proportions and promontories were such. He made a pretty picture, like a child at his serious play. Nolini-da often walked past Bhola-da. Once he wanted to ask Bhola-da some question (maybe a clarification on Mass Exercises) and started: “O, Bhola....” That’s as far as he got. For Bhola-da cut him short, saying, “Na, na, kajer shomaye disturb korben na” (“No, no, don’t disturb me while I am working”). Poor Nolini-da had to go away, his

query postponed. On another occasion Nolini-da had to suffer with a smile Bhola-da's chiding. Nolini-da had stuck a wrong denomination stamp. Bhola-da saw this and ... "Eto pada, lekha lekhi kore, ki tikit lagate janen na?" ("After all the reading and writing you have done, you don't know what stamp to stick?") Nolini-da was very fond of Bhola-da and Bhola-da too loved Nolini-da. He used to often get indignant and disapprove of so many people going to Nolini-da's room.

After all these doings Bhola-da would trudge home to prepare himself for the evening. He changed the dhoti and shirt for group uniform. This was a new Bhola-da now. His step higher, the look and smile more confident (like the change that came over anyone sitting on the ruins of Vikramaditya's throne). He was about to call on all his mental and physical faculties to learn and teach the Mass Exercises. This was a year-long passion, from the day the Mass Exercises book was out, around the 16th of December till the 2nd of December the following year, the day of Demonstration at Sports Ground. It (the Mass Exercises) was at once a challenge, a mantra, a ritual that guided and shadowed his physical activities in the evenings.

Bhola-da himself quickly learned the 16 or so figures of Mass Exercises. He had to, for he had a small band of shishyas (disciples) waiting to learn from him. One is tempted to think, how can Bhola-da, this roly-polly, slow, somnambulist, learn and teach anybody Mass Exercises? But, surprise of surprises, and your judgement takes a tumble — for Bhola-da mastered the Mass Exercises and was as good a teacher as any. He considered it a sort of sin making mistakes in Mass Exercises. He himself knew the figures well and performed neatly, without mistakes. The rhythmic figures were his forte — all his sluggishness disappeared, those well-built legs came into full use — he bounced around like a ping-pong ball. It was a feast for the eyes. But it was more fun hearing him teach. He was a strict and demanding teacher. He sat a bit aloof. His comments had a cutting edge and his advice was strong medicine but had to be swallowed.

He tried to teach the late Biren Bose (of Flower Room and Garden Service). The man was aged, thin, awkward with knobby joints, but was game and persistent — so Bhola-da tried to teach him. When some well-meaning passer-by suggested to Biren-da to straighten his

arms, Bhola-da let go a barb from his seat, “Shara shorir ańka beńka, hat ki shoja hobe?” (“The whole body is full of bends — what of the arms?”) No cause to flinch. One could not be too soft-minded if Mass Exercises was to be perfected. Both Bhola-da and the students knew this, so bore each others’ shortcomings — the end was a rich enough reward. We the younger, smarter lot, with even one tenth of a similar attitude and fortitude, would have achieved great things.

Pratibha-di of Laboratoire approached Bhola-da for ‘diksha’ (initiation) in Mass Exercises. Bhola-da looked her up and down and said, “Na — eto science, ońko kore, Mass Exercise mushkil.” (“Having studied so much science and maths, Mass Exercises will be difficult.”) No logic in this, but Bhola-da must have seen many an intellectual fail in Mass Exercises. But he was gracious. He did not reject her completely. He said, “Learn from some other teacher, I will correct you!” You can gauge Bhola-da’s supremacy in this field. He was a full five-star guru.

He advised another aspirant, who failed to do the rhythemics well, to eat less rice.

His key advice to all his students was (to others too): “Shokale uthe ekbar, ratre shobar age ekbar figureguno kore nebe.” (“Repeat the figures once when you wake up in the morning and again before going to bed.”) There lay the secret of success.

Every story has to have a villain. So there was one in Bhola-da’s Mass Exercises story. The villain was our Brass Band! They appeared late on the scene — just a few days before the 2nd of December. Bhola-da had practised hard through the year. The body and mind were set to a certain rhythm and speed — especially the rhythmic jumps. He had now trouble changing all that to suit these new-comers — the bandwallas. “How is it,” he asked, “they come at the last moment and we have to dance to their tune? They should adjust to us!” None could answer his question. He had to try to change, and he did pretty well too.

2nd of December over, Bhola-da could relax, forget the old Mass Exercises, forget his disciples and wait for the new Mass Exercises. A fortnight of pleasurable days — for, the group picnics were on. Year-round Bhola-da (and a few others) just went about their routine work, group activities, and had the routine diet too. They did not

ask for any change or any more of anything. So when something unusual did come their way, they were overjoyed — a boyish thrill filled them. A bus ride to Gingee, Kanchi, or anywhere, filled their eyes with wonder. Then (for them) the exotic food — khichuri, potato curry, chutni, fried brinjals, sweets, etc. — all this in a single day — this was simply a miracle.

Bhola-da, easily satisfied, was on such a day overfilled, stomach and spirit — the mind stopped thinking. He could tuck in any amount with ease, and no noticeable change in shape, even through the years. The digestive system too seemed to carry on quite well.

Once some boys invited Bhola-da to Corner House, put a bowl of 'payas' and a dish of 'luchi' in front of him. He started to work on them. Then one boy came up to him and offered him two luchis saying they were too much for himself. Bhola-da accepted them, they were put in his dish. A while later another boy came with 2-3 more luchis — they too were accepted. This was repeated several times — and the pile grew, overflowing the dish. Then came another similar offer. Bhola-da looked sadly at the boy and said, "Dekchhoto ar jayga nai..." ("As you see, there is no more place...") Then, when the boys were about to feel they had measured Bhola-da, he said, "Achha arekta thala niye esho!" ("All right, go get another dish!") Where did all this food go? It's a mystery for science.

He usually topped off his picnic with a song — on popular demand. The song was the same every year. The refrain goes, "Ami biye korbo na." ("I will not marry.") Maybe a popular song Bhola-da had learned in his boyhood days.

Bhola-da was later shifted to the Good Will Home, near the Ashram. He did not like it much here. He felt ill at ease, but he had no choice. He put up with the new environment and carried on life as before. After dinner he would not go home, though tired and sleepy. He sat at the Ashram Gate on one of the chairs, stretched legs out on another chair in front of him and went off to sleep, until Bruno (minding the gate) or Matri played pranks with him (hiding his umbrella) or else it was closing time. Bhola-da then trudged home to continue his sleep. Then somewhere on the way something went wrong. Bhola-da took ill and had to take the doctor's help and advice. He came under Dr. Dutta's care. The good doctor advised him to slowly reduce the

quantity of food. Bhola-da was not at all happy or convinced. He could not believe that much food could be the cause, or less of it the cure, for his ill-health. He remarked, “Age daktar khaiye lokeder shasto bhalo korto, eto na khaiye bhalo korbe bolche!” (“In old times doctor used to feed people to get them well, this one says he will starve them to good health!”) He concluded Dr. Dutta was not a good doctor. He doubted if at all he was a doctor, or had passed his exams. In any case, his health deteriorated. He suffered a stroke — a partial paralysis followed. His condition worsened. He passed away on 18 July 1989.

Bholanath left our shores — leaving an emptiness behind not easy to fill, nor forget. Where has he gone? What was he? When he was amongst us, it was difficult to place him. Mentally he lagged behind us. But, if we see him without the mind — maybe he is ahead. Whatever the debate, his simplicity and innocence were enough to see him safely on that last journey, to land him on vaster and brighter shores. I would picture him getting into a coracle in his usual dhoti and shirt, unfurl his umbrella, catch a seaward breeze and quietly sail away. Coracles leave no wake — but on the sea of our thoughts gentle happy eddies linger on... “There goes the true Bhola.”



POORNANANDA SWAMI

*Wealth I ask not, hope nor love,
Nor a friend to know me;
All I ask, the heaven above,
And the road below me.*

R. L. STEVENSON (*The Vagabond*)

What's in a name?

POORNANANDA was a colourful character — literally and otherwise. He left us very recently. Many present now must have seen him, even if just a shadow of his former self. Some would have heard of him.

He was given the name Poornananda by his guru, meaning Poorna=Full and Ananda=Joy. The ananda, if any, was well disguised or hidden deep within — not to speak of the “fullness” (poorna) of it. He was irascible, critical and seemed ever dissatisfied. A name or sobriquet nearer the mark, relished by the boys (the authors), unrelished by the gentleman himself was “ORANGE”. A kindlier appellation was ‘Swamiji’. Why all this ado about a name? Let us proceed, and maybe find him a name he can fit into. (Rare is the head that is big enough for the crown it wears — so it is with names we tag onto people for a life-time.)

Poornananda was not an inspiring figure. Small, dark and scrawny, with a small head, with longish sparse hair ending in an apology for curls. A pair of small close-set eyes that flanked a nose of sorts. Hardly any cheeks—only bones covered by skin. A mouth filled with large, irregular, well-spaced teeth. Not an ounce of fat to spare anywhere. Not a beauty by any stretch of kindly imagination. He could be a man not worth a second glance, met anywhere in our country — but for the dress. This dress claimed that second glance and earned him the name ‘orange’. He was clad (with never a change) in an orange dhoti (South Indian style) and an orange kurta. His handkerchief was orange, even his gamcha (towel) was often orange. This orange is more meaningfully termed ‘Ochre robes’ — fashionable in ‘Sadhu’ circles. Poornananda was indeed a sadhu — so was he called “swamiji”. All his life he wore khadams (wooden sandals) except for the last one or two years of his life. He too, like Bholada and many of the old lot, carried an umbrella. He too used it as a multipurpose tool, i.e. support, sun-rain shade, weapon and extended appendage. What next struck one was his walk — the frequency, the speed and the style. He always walked. Never took a vehicle, no car, no cycle, no rickshaw. He always moved at a fast unrelenting clip. The lower gears did not exist. One could hear the ‘clack-clack’ of his khadams as he sped by — 3 or 4 to a second. He was fuelled and propelled by an impatience. He covered his area of work — from near about the Press to the Sports Ground — an unmistakable dark figure, orange robes flying, curls dancing to the ‘kadam’ (rhythm) of his khadams. Yet, what really set him apart was a raspish tongue with two cutting edges, honed by regular and impartial use. This spiced the man — he was one of

those last angry men — sincere, intolerant and outspoken.

Poornananda was born sometime in 1902 — so say some records. Others claim 1893 as the year! The dates are very uncertain. He himself would not clarify, saying, “Sadhur abar jonmodin kiré?” (“What is or what for a birthday to a sadhu?”) All that we know is that he was pretty old when he departed.

Poornananda left home at 16 and joined the Vedanta Ashram, a creation of Swami Abhedananda who was a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and a co-disciple of Swami Vivekananda. He was initiated along with four other youngsters. It was a cold winter night. They had to start on the right note — strip and dip in the cold Ganga, and not much to wear. Then followed the daily life of the Ashram. No ready-made meals with servers and dishwashers. The five boys went out in the morning in five different directions. They carried a ‘jhola’, a vessel slung on the shoulder by a hammocklike piece of cloth. They had to beg at three different houses each day, and only three, accept whatever the housewife offered into the one jhola. You may well guess what a pot-pourri of meat, fish, rassagolla, etc., made up the day’s takings. When the five young initiates returned, all five jholas were emptied into a large vessel to make a super-pot-pourri. This was doled out to each as the fare for the day. “Mondo chhilo na!” (“It was not bad”) commented Poornananda.

After some years, Poornananda set out from the Vedanta Ashram to traverse the length and breadth of the Motherland. Many sadhus had strict discipline or codes to follow when undertaking such perambulations. They carried no money, nor made any effort to earn or beg some on the way. They did not take recourse to free rides on vehicles either, offered or stolen (ticketless travel). They neither cared where or what they ate, or whether they ate at all. They put up where they could — under a tree, a verandah or a shed. Thus did Poornananda travel, from the Himalayas of Kashmir to Kanyakumari, and from the eastern border with Burma to Kabul in Afghanistan. It’s a pity that none of us were thoughtful or curious enough to know more about his travels — Grand Padayatras. They must have been very eventful, beyond our modern conception — no roads, jungles with animals abounding, uninhabited areas free of noise and pollution and unspoiled simple villagers. Once he reached a Shiva temple somewhere

in the North. He was asked to give pooja to the deity. He agreed, and as he approached the deity to offer some flowers, he was rather stunned to see the figure of Sri Aurobindo sitting in place of Shiva. (It is not certain whether this happened before his first visit here or when he went back from here after a short stay.)

Sri Aurobindo Ashram — Poornananda wished to come and settle here. He sought the permission and blessings of his Guru Abhedananda. The Guru readily gave him both, saying, “Go, my son. My blessings will be with you wherever you go. You must be as devoted to Sri Aurobindo as you were to me, else no need to go.” He arrived here on 15.1.1935. He tried to adapt himself to this Ashram’s way of life. It was difficult. His old sense of morals was rubbed the wrong way. In the Dining Room men and women ate together. Everyone used spoons to eat with. Such shahebi (Western) mores roused his ire. He left Pondicherry — just walked away, all the way to Calcutta! He reached Chandernagore in 30 days!! There he had a forced break-journey. He was arrested, suspected of being a spy of the Freedom Fighters (Terrorists, to the British). He was put in jail. For him probably it was just another wayside shelter. He settled in for the night. An Indian inspector who came on his rounds peered in and called out: “Swamiji, what are you doing in here? Why have they put you in?” It so happened (why it happened — who can say?) that the inspector was an old acquaintance of Poornananda. He had him “freed”, took him home, fed him and wished him well to continue his journey. Poornananda used to say, even in the 80s, that in India people still respected sadhus and would always give them food. He had a strong faith in his Motherland — so he could walk away from anywhere to anywhere — untrammelled by luggage and apprehensions, undelayed by planning sessions. He may have roamed and revisited his old haunts, but his mind would not rest. It was haunted by the Presence of Pondicherry. Poornananda’s feet retraced the outward journey and he reached here on 9th February 1938 — end of one search, start of another.

Poornananda was always a man on the move. He had to be always doing some work. At that time the greatest and biggest work (in Ashram) was going on — the construction of Golconde. Times were different. Attitudes were different. Means were less but meanings

were more. The sadhaks, therefore, achieved much with very little. Their assets were faith, devotion and persistence or perseverance.

Yogananda was Poornananda's friend. Both were very good workers, working in B.S. — Building Service. Yogananda was to allot work to Poornananda. The latter pestered the former for work, for a great deal of energy was being dammed up inside that frail frame. It had to be spent! Yogananda took his friend to a godown full of old iron items — rods, hinges, nettings, etc. They were mostly used items salvaged to be re-used. Those days, and for a few years after, nothing was thrown away, even nails were extracted, straightened out and put in barrels according to size for "re-use". The "throw-away" mode of life was not yet the craze. Yogananda put a wire brush into Poornananda's hands and asked him to clean all the rust off the old steel items. He hoped the work would take a month or a month and a half, and he would have peace. He was hopelessly off the mark — in half the estimated time Poornananda was again after Yogananda for work. Yogananda, a little surprised, a little more suspicious, went to inspect. He was in for another kind of surprise. All the old iron was shining like stainless steel (this was before the advent of stainless steel). Yogananda, himself a hard worker, was often moved to say (in later years), "O to daityar moton kaj koré" ("He works like a Titan").

Many were they who worked at building Golconde. Tulsibhai, Lallubhai, Khirod-da etc., and of course our Poornananda. They were the stalwarts of those days. Work for them was not something to be got over with and forgotten. Work was for them life and life was to do the Mother's will — their sadhana. The Mother took keen interest in every detail and stage of the work. They, whether engineer or plain worker, poured not only their sweat but also their heart-felt love into the job. They took great pride and derived greater joy working. They could, after long years, say with the same pride and joy: "I was there." Purnananda was given the job of keeping stock and taking care of all the steel rods used for the building. It seems the rods were always neatly stacked according to size and there was not a spot of rust on them! He needed no assistant (anyway none could have satisfied him) and kept no stock-book. He had it all in his head. Any item moved or removed at once caught his eye — or was it some other sense that was teased? It was common knowledge then that his

godowns were so well kept that even rats — familiar co-habitants in many a household — could not find accommodation there. He often claimed, referring to the construction of Golconde, that no other work had been done with the same spirit since then in the Ashram. Nothing that we do now can match that period's fervour, meticulousness and sincerity. He used to say that often when a day was fixed for a concreting job and the weather seemed to threaten (with rain) either to force a postponement or the ruining of the newly poured concrete, the engineer or whoever was in charge would approach the Mother and pray for her intervention. She would look up at the sky and say: "Go on, proceed with the work." The workers forgot their worries and set to work — and lo — no rain!

Another interesting fact recounted by Poornananda with a mixture of nostalgia and indignation was what the Mother expected then and what or how work is done now: The steel for the Golconde construction was brought by ship and unloaded on the shore. The old faithful bullock cart—now losing ground to more noisy, polluting but speedier modes, was the only transport available. The carts brought the steel to the site. The Mother had stipulated that there should be no noise when unloading the steel! So it was done! Tons of steel bars, not just a dozen or so, — brought down from the carts without noise! How they did it I cannot envisage. I can only lose myself in admiration. Then Poornananda continued: "Aar ekhon dèkh — Dining Roomé bashon majé, jèno biér bajna bajé!" ("Now — just go to the D.R. and see them wash the vessels; sounds like a wedding party's band is on.")

Often Poornananda took a short cut to one godown through the Sports Ground (Back Gate to Front Gate). The godown is situated in front of the Sports Ground across the M.G. Road (now under Jagadishbhai's care). His ever critical and sharp eyes would swoop down on any bit of rust (or other defect) on an iron handle, pipe or door. He would stop dead in his tracks, look around for me and — "Ei shala (a preamble of endearment) — é loha noshto hochché kèno? Ma dékhlé, érokom kortish ki?" ("What sort of work are you doing here? This iron is rusting. Would you let this happen if the Mother were looking on?") I usually kept silent. I knew the answer. Fortunately he knew that I knew. So, he did not wait for a reply, but hurried on. I, on my

part, tried to remove that offending patch of rust before the next inspection. He was a good man and it did one only good to pay heed — a lick or two with that raspy tongue was good medicine. Moreover he liked me and our work in the Sports Ground. Sometimes, being an old hand, he would call me aside and say: “O godowné lohar netting podé aché. Swimming Poolér jonné kéna hoyéhhilo — niyé né.” (“There is an iron netting in that godown. It was bought for the Swimming Pool, go — take it.”)

A friend of mine was once teasing me in his presence. He said, “Batti is now in charge of the Pool. Soon he will be moving around well dressed — trousers and...” Poornananda cut him short saying: “Hobé na, or ar Pranaber kokhuno full-pant hobé na.” (“It won’t happen. He and Pranab (Dada) will never wear trousers.”)

Poornananda was a terror to the local rickshawallas, coolies, beggars, etc. They in their country-side innocent ways would squat down on any roadside to answer nature’s call. If Poornananda happened to be anywhere within striking distance — woe to the squatter! For, all on a sudden, he would find his neck hooked to an umbrella handle and he was pulled up like a hapless fish. At the other end of the umbrella would be Poornananda spitting, like a cobra, choice Bengali and Tamil vocabulary. He would drag the squirming victim to the nearest Ashram house, get him to fill a bucket with water and drag him out again to flush the polluted patch of earth, and then only let him go. This could happen in those old days, until Democracy took over and razed all, the good, the bad, the mediocre, to the same level. None now can be better than the other without being tripped up or bowled over. So, Poornananda’s umbrella was laid to rest. It only served the usual, mundane, less violent purposes.

Much of what has been said about Poornananda shows only one aspect of him — the angry critical side of him. But one should not conclude that he was devoid of joy and that his face never succumbed to a smile. It is just that a great deal of what met his eye could not pass muster. Yet it was not very difficult to please him. One had only to work hard and he would stretch a smile and a helpful hand towards the worker. Some of us were privileged to witness and feel this other mood of his, when he would visit us (Mona, Kittu, Vishweshwar and some others), when and if we were working after 11 p.m. We were

working at building Parikshit's House. (Mona, Kittu and Vishweshwar were the appointed workers, and the "some others" were willing or shanghaied volunteers. This House has since been demolished to make place for its three-storied successor.) It was then that he would get into a great mood, settle down and talk sense into us or tell some old stories. His laughter rang true, childlike. But this privilege was granted only to a few and that too seldom.

Time passed, and the Ashram grew. More and more departments came into being. The old Building Service was split, so were the stores. Poornananda was moved around a bit. For a while he was, I think, in charge of all the brass in Harpagon. He slept in the Harpagon Office Room as a night watchman. It was no hardship for him. This place was a palace compared to his "Room" — if room it could be called. The Room where he lived for 50 or more years is worth a mention. It was a small hole of a place 2m x 2.5m (maybe). The ceiling was within one's reach. The entrance was the only opening. A cot, a table and chair were filled in and then the man too fitted in. A table fan was a much later addition. The Room itself is situated in an enclosed backyard of the old Building Service building — now our Drawing Office. Not much could a gale do to steal in a whiff of itself into that room. In the present day to suggest that cubby hole as living quarters would raise a storm such as never entered that place. It may do good to most of us to go and see the place. One may gauge better the man who lived there and also oneself and maybe also to sift our needs from wants. It now serves as lavatory cum bathroom for the new tenants of the building — the Patil Brothers.

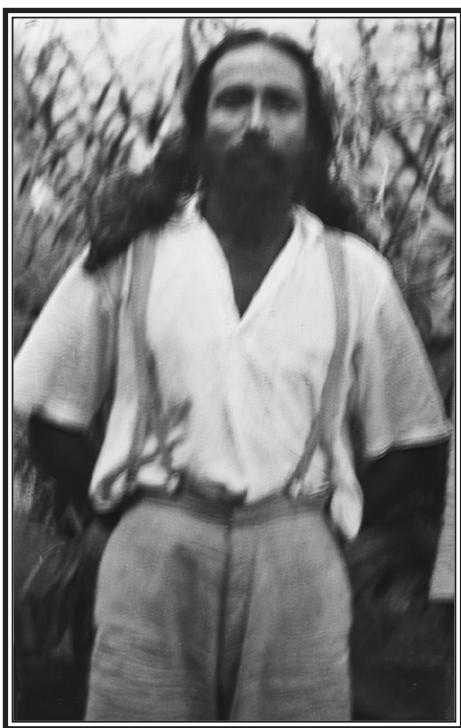
Days passed. Days into months, months into years. Poornananda for a long time seemed not to be weighed down by the passing years. Then one day we heard that he had been taken to JIPMER. There, he was well looked after. The doctors knew him and respected what they knew of him. They took it on themselves to serve him. He came out of that bout a winner. But something had left. Probably some of the heat was turned inwards. He resumed his work, but the work did not seem to befit him.

Time flowed on and by and by Poornananda too was caught up in the flow. He was nearing 100 years! His scrawny figure grew emaciated. His mind too wandered. He lost all sense of time. He moved

around, but aimlessly. The feet could not hold on to his famous khadams (he had to take to chappals). Only now did he shift to a slow sedate speed of locomotion — yet walking — no vehicle. For a long time one family (late Raghunandan's) took care of him. He was their family friend. Later he had to be shifted to the Senior Service Home (under Dr. Dutta's care). He tarried not too long there. He passed away peacefully on 3.9.96 — reputed to be 100 years old — without that hurried step he had practised a lifetime. It was a quiet departure noticed by only a few. Those few had a feeling of emptiness in their hearts and minds.

His “ananda” seemed always “Ardha” — half, for, he always gave away half to make ours “Poorna”.

Hail Swami Ardhananda Orange.



YOGANANDA*

Chasing a Dream — Fulfilling a Destiny

Hearts that are delicate and kind, and tongues that are neither — these make the the finest company in the World.

SMITH LOGAN PEARSALL

I SPEAK of another Ananda right after the last one, i.e., Poornananda. One may begin to have some qualms about this surfeit of ‘Ananda’ — but again what’s in a name?

* A tribute on the occasion of the birth-centenary of the one who chased dreams and fulfilled destiny, lived in the Mother’s Light and Love, did what She willed him to do.

I speak of Yogananda as a close friend, colleague, boss and assistant all bundled into one. He was a close friend and boss of Poorananda too. They had much in common — both were sadhus, short-tempered, hard workers and umbrella wielders (a third Ananda, Dhirananda, as short-tempered, was their friend, a sadhu like them. We will make acquaintance with him later). As with Poorananda the ‘Ananda’ was not so evident. It was deeply hidden. Perhaps if one lived long and close enough, with sympathy, to feel and go through the heat barriers he wore, one may feel the joy he felt.

Yogananda (né Jotindra) was born in Kargaon village near Kishoreganj of Mymensingh District, Bengal. He was born on the 17th of August 1898. A sister preceded and four brothers followed him. They lost their mother early. Their father and his mother brought them up. Around 1918 Jotindra came under the influence of one Bharat Brahmachari of Bairati (not to be confused with Birati, another village near Calcutta). The Brahmachari had founded an ashram — the Gauri Ashram. The Brahmachari was an unconventional and not a tradition-adhering sort of guru. He did not mind Jotindra joining his ashram and yet continuing to study in the high school. Jotindra was initiated and he received the name Jogdananda. At about this time news came from home that his grandmother was seriously ill. Jogdananda rushed home, his grandmother saw him and soon after passed away. Within 19 days tragedy struck again. Jogdananda’s father also passed away. Jogdananda was not very willing to take up the family burden. While all this turmoil was going on, one night the police arrested Jogdananda, accusing him of being the leader of a secret society. The police commissioner, a Dick Sahib, asserted that Jogdananda and many of Bharat Brahmachari’s disciples were anarchists. No proof was found nor was it necessary in those days. Jogdananda was put in jail for one and a half months in Mymensingh and then shifted to another jail somewhere in West Bengal. A year passed and he was released in January of 1920. He returned to the ashram. In jail he had ample time to think and ruminate over the same thoughts. There was nothing else to do. He confronted his guru with questions and doubts. He asked: “Baba, you often talk to the Mother. You know everything. Please tell me if all this, our struggle for freedom, is for nothing. All our prominent leaders are arrested. With none to lead, the movement

has lost its impetus. What has the Mother said about India's freedom? You told us that there would be a great upheaval in the world (First World War) after which India will gain her freedom. The upheaval is over but India's freedom seems to have receded!"

The Brahmachari replied: "Aré béta; (O my son), the Mother has with all Her 'Devashakti' manifested Herself to bring peace on earth. You ask about India's freedom. That is assured. All this revolutionary activity is Her will and Her work. Her Shakti is working in you. Yes, this upheaval is over, as you say — but there will be another in 20 years' time, a greater one. India will attain freedom after that. You ask what my adesh is. My wish is that you should know the Mother, know Her will and work for Her."

All this was a revelation to the young Jogdananda. He decided at that moment he would take sannyas, go and find the Mother and do Her will. (Sri Aurobindo later said that it was a change of consciousness.) He told this to his guru and the guru silently accepted and blessed him — just with a smile.

Jogdananda went on a pilgrimage with his guru's consent. He travelled through Kashi, Haridwar, Hrishikesh, etc. Throughout he was dogged by an oft-recurring dream in which he was holding an infant in his arms. Long ago his guru had told him to get married, but he did not. Was this an indication that he should have? Now his mind was troubled. He wrote to the guru. Bharat Brahmachari asked him to come back. From Hrishikesh he returned to Bairati and went straight to his guru, who assured him that his dream had nothing to do with his refusal to get married. He explained that the infant represents Wisdom and Jogdananda should be like the infant in the Mother's lap, demanding Her love. Maybe, the Mother is pleased with you but wants to hear you call her again, and so keeps silent. You should not then fret, fall off Her lap, and feel sorrow and pain. Rather surrender and call Her patiently, lovingly. Understand you are Her child, in Her lap. Your sorrows will disappear. Jogdananda stayed for some time in Bairati and worked, for now the ashram was developing a few working departments, teaching some young students trades like weaving, stitching, etc. These changes irked Jogdananda and some others. They ran counter to their traditional ways. The last straw was that Bharat Brahmachari had admitted women, to live and work

there. Three of the inmates — Mukhananda, Dhirananda and Jogdananda — revolted. They questioned the Baba. He replied: “They (the women) are also the children of the Mother, just like you — so why not?” The three were not satisfied. They left the ashram. But Jogdananda, hardly having gone a small distance, realised his folly. He ran back and apologised to Bharat Brahmachari. He wished to stay back. But it was too late. The guru said: “No. You have given me up; so be it.” Jogdananda left with a heavy heart. When Jogdananda left, Bharat Brahmachari remarked: “Koli amar shorbonash korlo.” (Koli = Kaliyug personified, has dealt me a good blow.) Jogdananda learnt of it much later and, after coming here to Pondicherry, learnt that this ‘Koli’ was termed “hostile Forces”. He roamed aimlessly, remorse gnawing into him. He went to Punjab, Kashmir, Haridwar, Hrishikesh — but carried the regret with him. His cup of misery overflowed, as news reached him that Bharat Brahmachari had expired. His guilt, blaming himself as one cause of the guru’s departure, increased doublefold. He rushed back, only to see an empty ashram where he was not welcome. Benumbed, he went to his family. There he stayed quite a few months. His brothers even arranged for his wedding. But that was not to be — a death in the bride-to-be’s house put off the event. He continued to stay, helping out the family by doing some clerical job. All was running somewhat smoothly. Then, one of his brothers, sharing the family trait of bad temper, reproached him for misplacing a key. This spark was enough to rouse the latent fire in Jogdananda. Then and there he dropped everything, picked up his “*jhola and gerua*” (bag and ochre robes) and left, determined not to return and to go to the South. He set out in 1928 — but went to the east — Rangoon and Chittagong. Back to Bengal, anger subsided, he visited home, and then moved to Calcutta, in June 1932.

In Calcutta he met a young sadhu. They talked and in their conversation the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry was mentioned. They hoped, both of them, to visit the place one day. That young sadhu was none other than Poornananda. Jogdananda knew of one old freedom fighter, Anilbaran Roy, now settled in the Ashram at Pondicherry. He wrote to him about his intention to visit the place and sought permission to stay there for the forthcoming 15th August Darshan. He stayed a few days in Calcutta and then, with two

rupees a kind-hearted gentleman had given him, pushed on to Puri. He boarded a train, was detained by the T.C. (Ticket Checker); but with the help of another more sympathetic T.C. he boarded another train and reached Puri of Lord Jagannatha. There he stayed 10-12 days and moved southward again. T.C.s were a regular nuisance; they detained him 3-4 times. But Jogdananda's pilgrimage urge was stronger. His inner compass was set South — so South he had to go. There were no strict time-bound schedules to stick to. The journey continued with stops, starts and false starts. Delays and T.C.s were of no great consequence. He crossed the holy rivers Godavari and Krishna spending a day or two at each place, and made it to Madras. He put up at the Ramakrishna Mutt in Mylapore. As there was time, he bypassed Pondicherry and went to Madurai and Rameshwaram with the intention of reaching Kanyakumari to see the beautiful form of the Mother. He could not make it to Kanyakumari. By then 15th August was near and he thought it wise to reach Pondicherry a few days before that date. He turned north and on 11.8.1932 arrived at Pondicherry. But, unfortunately his letter to Anilbaran Roy had not arrived. He could not enter the Ashram as per the rules of those days. He waited on the footpath during the day and took shelter in Hotel Amnivasam during the night. He sent word through Anilbaran Roy to Sri Aurobindo seeking permission for the Darshan. He was allowed.

Jogdananda had the Darshan of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. He was overwhelmed, filled with joy and a sense of fulfilment. He felt that he had at last arrived at the end of his seeking. His guru Bharat Brahmachari's words came flooding back. All indications given to him seemed to fit in. There in front of him sat the universal Mother of Bharat Brahmachari's vision — a vision given to him in Brindavan, in 1926, of a 'white' form of the Mother!

Jogdananda wanted at once to stay as a permanent member, to live with the Mother and Sri Aurobindo as his Gurus, to start a new life here, taking up the path of this Yoga. Sri Aurobindo told Anilbaran to meet Jogdananda and tell him: "...this is not an Asram like others — the members are not Sannyasis; nor is the object the same; it is not 'moksha' that is the aim of Yoga here. What is being done here is a preparation for a work — a work which will be founded on yogic consciousness.... Meanwhile every member here is therefore

expected to do some work as preparation, work often of the most ordinary and uninteresting kind and they do not spend their time in meditation and speaking about religion or spiritual things....” Jogdananda was told all this. (The above is quoted from Sri Aurobindo’s letter to Anilbaran Roy.) Jogdananda accepted and said: “ I throw myself at their feet.” Sri Aurobindo then wrote to Anilbaran: “You will tell Jogdananda that he can remain and we will try whether he can settle down into the atmosphere and life of the Ashram and way of this Yoga.” (Letter dated 16.8.1932.) Sri Aurobindo changed Jogdananda into Yogananda. So entered Yogananda into a new Life and Light — a day before his birthday.

Yogananda was given work on the second day of his becoming an ‘Ashramite’. Here “Yoga in action is indispensable.” He was given work in B.S. (Building Service), under Khirod-da, supervising workers and, later, in purchasing and keeping stores.

Yogananda was given a room in Budhi House on the sea front (near our Printing Press).

The lunch-break was from 12 noon to 1 p.m. Lunch itself was served in the Ashram main building. His house was too far for Yogananda to rest and return in time. He just stood under the Old Balcony (behind the Ashram). This was tiring and affected his work. What to do? Whom to tell? Haradhan-da (a veteran) lived on the groundfloor of Budhi House. Yogananda told him and he advised Yogananda to write to the Mother. Yogananda, emboldened, did so. The relief came, simple and fast. The Mother told K.D. Sethna (Amal Kiran) who was in charge of the Furniture Service to send an easy chair to B.S. Khirod-da was told to permit Yogananda to rest there.

A friendship developed between Haradhan-da and Yogananda. Yogananda helped him in his garden to grow flowers and vegetables for the Mother. Haradhan-da hailed from Chandannagar — a French colony. He knew French well enough to think of translating the Mother’s *Prières et Méditations* into Bengali. He wanted help and chose Yogananda for it. The Mother agreed on condition that the translation was shown to Her before printing.

Golconde work had started. Yogananda was kept busy. It was at this time that Poornananda appeared on the scene and joined Yogananda in the stores (B.S.). Yogananda had at times to go to some

outlying distant places to purchase lime, bricks, etc. He often went to Markanam, some 30 kms north of Pondicherry on the Old Madras Road. He was given 2 annas (1 anna = 6 paise) by Amrita-da — Ashram Manager — of course after obtaining the Mother's sanction. This was towards his day's expenses. Prices were going up even in those days. Yogananda requested Amrita-da for 4 annas. Amrita-da was shocked by such extravagance and chided Yogananda for it. The matter was taken to the Mother. She knew and understood, smiled and said: "It is all right. He can be given 4 annas."

Yogananda worked for a short while in the Reception Service. It was a far cry from what it is today — replete with showcases, full of books and photos for sale, fax machines and phones, etc. It was then quite a simple, unobtrusive affair. A chair for the man at the Main Gate or someone who would receive visitors or new sadhaks from the railway station; he would bring them in and maybe show them their place of stay and brief them where to go for meals and what to do. It may be recalled that all had to write in advance and get permission to come here on a visit for Darshan or to stay permanently. It was known who was coming. The Mother told Yogananda once that this sort of work had many pitfalls. One had to be careful and vigilant not to meet one.

Yogananda was a sincere and hard worker (like Poornananda) but, as it was for Poornananda, he too had to contend with a towering temper. Worse, others had to contend with it too and, to further complicate the situation, often an outburst of anger was followed with appropriate action. For that he often earned the Mother's displeasure and maybe it cost him his job. He changed departments often enough.

When I first saw him (1945), I think he had no regular job. That first time was at the Ashram Gate. The image of him that remained stuck is of a middle-aged man, well-built, knee-length khaki shorts (Bermudas of yesteryears) held up by a leather belt. The belt was necessary, for the middle-age paunch was beginning to assert itself. He was of medium height, deep-chested, and stood on two solid legs. The face was remarkable — small eyes, high cheek bones and a slightly Roman nose. He sported long curly hair and a little better than a goatee beard. He held under his arm a pith helmet of British origin. The helmet was atop him whenever in action outdoors or riding his

bicycle. He stood there alert, seemed ready for something to happen. Impressed me as a retired soldier good for one more skirmish. I learnt later that he was about to go on an expedition to gather lotus flowers for the Mother. Near him stood an old, much-used bicycle — his transportation for the outing. It served him for decades after that till he could not ride any more, i.e., when he was well past 80.

Flower-collecting was one of his passions. He took it very seriously (as do many sadhaks even now). The Mother, for reasons unknown to me, laid importance on the number of flowers offered to Her. On our birthdays we had to count the flowers gathered and arrange them in dishes (Service, Friendship, Aspiration, Patience, etc. — names of the flowers as given by the Mother), write the number on a chit and place it in the dish. During the War the Mother wanted one lakh Transformation flowers! Yogananda managed to gather the number and give them to Her! There were not many of those trees either. He must have searched far and wide to get the needed number. The passion was with him till the end — till he was bed-ridden.

In the very early days the sea was out of bounds for us Ashramites. We could not even wet our feet. Later (I think Birenda was the cause) the Mother permitted sea swimming. Large numbers used to go for a swim. There had to be some supervision. Yogananda volunteered. He stood on the beach, a motor-car inner tube tied to a long rope at the ready, a whistle in hand and a sash across his chest with a large 'LIFEGUARD' printed on it. How effective he would be in an emergency was never proved. But the sincerity, regularity, punctuality and enthusiasm were never in question. Later candidates did not impress as much.

The Swimming Pool was ready at last in 1957. The Mother inaugurated it on Her birthday, 21 February. Gerard (of Auro-orchard) and I were inducted into service, to take care of the Pool. Complete ignorance was our plus point. Gerard left after a few years. Yogananda, who may have volunteered or been recruited — whatever the means — came to replace Gerard. So started an interesting, long and fruitful partnership between us. He was nearly 65 years of age, experienced, having seen and suffered much and I was half his age, green, having seen very little and suffered nothing — though seemingly so disparate, we got along well till he retired and much later till his last days.

He was older, so he took charge. But, he knew I had a better know-how about the Pool than he — so there was more symbiosis than the nuisance of a hierarchy. His kind did not talk of ‘give and take’. Their concern rather was ‘give and give’ (offer). He often tried to rub into me the inherent values and virtues of work. He would say “Kajo ekta force. Kaj korlei, tar shathe shoktio ashe.” (Work itself is a force. If you work, you get the strength also with it.) If I hesitated to start a big job he would push me — “Shuru kore dao, bhebona. Shokti peye jabe, babostha hoye jabe.” (Start off, don’t think so much — you will get the strength and all arrangements will be made.) Work seemed to inspire him. Though now past 70 years, he would be ready for action — back into his old battle dress, khaki shorts, white shirt, pith helmet or umbrella. Sun or rain, if work was on, he would be there supervising and lending a hand where he could. When we were building the eastern compound wall in the Sports Ground (just a fence existed before 1968) we mixed the mortar inside the ground a hundred metres away from where it was required. He would watch over every mix (correct amounts of sand, lime, cement, water and the mixing), load it into a wheelbarrow and accompany it those hundred metres. All he needed in return was a punctual time out for lunch and even more correct time out for tea (4 pm). These were inviolable.

We often emptied the Pool in those early days. We sometimes worked through the night. He would enjoy being there, on deck, helping, and brewing that ambrosial drink — tea — for all the workers.

Work inspired him, but behind the inspiration there lurked his old enemy — his temper. The eruptions were often justifiable. The cause could be small or big, but the effect was usually big and immediate. The Sports Ground was big — as big as it is now — but too small to contain two departments with two managements. Yogananda and I ruled the Pool. Vasudev and Bikhabhai ruled over the Ground and Track. Shoulder rubbing was inevitable. For the usual reasons, known and unknown, Yogananda and Vasudev often went opposite ways and rubbed each other the wrong way. Friction, spark and fuel — resulted in a small ‘Boom’. The Mother caught some of the echoes. She questioned me. I had to explain. She asked: “How was it before, when Gerard was there?” I said, “Gerard and I steered clear, kept an insulating distance by drawing an imaginary line and a no-man’s-land

between the two units.” She said, “Draw it again and explain it to them.” I tried. Later Vasudev and Bikhabhai left the Sports Ground for safer if not greener pastures. Barun Tagore replaced them. The two units became one — yet Barun mainly looking after the Ground and Yogananda looking after the Pool. I was assistant to both.

Then did Barun blunder. The Annexe Ground was to be planned. It was to be done carefully after planning and preparations. Barun got impatient and suddenly decided to do it. He called for a tractor and got the ground ploughed! Neither Yogananda nor I knew about it. Yogananda came early morning to collect flowers, saw the messed up ground — his blood boiled over. Barun was in the lavatory. I was near the volley-ball courts. Yogananda saw me, jumped off his bicycle in front of me, face dark, eyes mere slits and lips trembling with rage. He fired volley after volley at point blank range. Not directly at me, but shots ricocheted off me at Barun. I wisely held my tongue during the quarter hour blitz. He finally said, “Tomake bole ki labh” (useless telling you), got up on his bicycle and pedalled off. Barun wisely emerged only after Yogananda left. The outcome was strange and fateful for me. Both Yogananda and Barun went to Pranab-da and tendered their resignations as ‘In-charge’, to step down and push me up as the in-charge. Pranab-da called me and gave me the information. I agreed to give it a try — there was nothing to try. The work was the same, only a change in the suffixes — meaningless in our situation.

On another occasion we the Sports Ground people had a problem with the Coco-Garden people. To settle the matter Pranab-da was called and all concerned met, sat around a table. As it happened the order in which we sat was Khirod-da, Chamanlal-ji (who was new, a visitor then, giving service in the Coco-Garden during his stay), Pranab-da, Yogananda, I and then Barun. This order was fortuitous. Each one was saying what he thought was right. Yogananda too was doing so, but with a little more heat and conviction. Chamanlal-ji happened to remark: “If he [Yogananda] keeps losing his temper, the Mother’s work will be disturbed.” Yogananda would not take that sitting down. He jumped up, raised his umbrella to strike, found it awkward, — with Pranab-da in between pulling him down and trying to pacify him. But he shot back, “Dui din age eshe amake Mayer kaj

bujhachche?” (He has come two days back and he is trying to teach me what the Mother’s work is!) Pranab-da saved the day. The meeting was over. Each one knew the other a little better.

Pranab-da himself was at the receiving end once. I cannot recall the reason why I was not present on the occasion. Yogananda told me of it, that he had met Pranab-da and told him: “I don’t care for anyone, not you nor any other. This is the Mother’s kingdom. None can hold me down. My ‘gerua’ (ochre robe) is ready. I can put it on and go away.” 2-3 days later I met Yogananda in the Sports Ground. He held out two Ganpatram toffees, saying: “Ei nao, Pranab diyechhe.” (Take these. Pranab has given.) He was in a good mood. I took them and asked what had happened. He said he and Pranab had made up, shaken hands — so the toffees.

There was another interlude with Yogananda, Pranab-da and Dhirananda. Dhirananda came to live here, through Yogananda, in 1947. He was very teasing, so we boys had a lot of fun. He and Yogananda had an argument. Yogananda said: “Sri Aurobindo is an Avatar.” Dhirananda said: “Mahapurush, Yogi, Rishi... Yes; but Avatar — No!” The inevitable took place. Yogananda was the stronger by his stronger convictions. Both lost their temper. Yogananda went into action. Dhirananda received a few blows (with a khadam “wooden sandal”, I believe). Yogananda finished with “Eikhane theke, kheyee, Sri Aurobindo Avatar noy bolchhish. Chole ja.” (Living and eating here you dare say Sri Aurobindo is not an Avatar! Get away.) Dhirananda went back to Mymensingh (Pakistan). Then in one of the exoduses from there to India, he too turned up as a refugee. He wrote to Yogananda if he could come here. Yogananda asked Pranab-da if his old friend (friendship not dented by a mere khadam) could come and work in the Sports Ground. Pranab-da said, “Yes”; then, more in jest, asked Yogananda: “Was it not you who hit him and sent him away?” Yogananda without hesitation or regret replied: “Jodi dorkar hoy, abar mere tadiye debo!” (If need be, I will thrash him and send him away again.) Dhirananda came, worked in the Sports Ground under me (probably did not recognise me as one of his tormentors of 1947). He was older than Yogananda. Soon after his coming here his eyes failed and he passed away shortly after that.

Whatever one may think or say about Yogananda’s temper, he

was usually very just. The servants were often singed by him. They bore him no grudge. He worked with them — that they admired.

Years passed swiftly by. Yogananda was getting old. We were no longer tenderfoots. He decided it was the right time to retire. He announced this, adding “Ami achhi, kono bodo kaj hole, dakbe amake.” (I am yet ready — if any big job is in the offing — call me.) He asked Nolini-da for a milder job. Nolini-da with all his goodwill suggested duty at the Filters (drinking-water tanks at the back of Children’s Dispensary). The duty was to open and close the water taps, so that all didn’t handle the taps. He declined, saying: “Am I an invalid?” He took up work in the newly founded “Sri Aurobindo’s Action” under A.B. Patel — delivering a magazine to subscribers living within range of his cycling. He decried the prevailing, prestigious but wasteful habit of posting the magazines even to the next-door man.

Yogananda next took upon himself the job of getting the “Jules House” (at present his sister-in-law and family live there) built. It was a demanding job. He did it; it was his last job. His health was failing; he was 80. Some years passed; he fell ill often, was taken to our Nursing Home. He was brought back to his Room in Arogya House where he had lived nearly six decades. His family members looked after him. He slowly sank — until 14th March 1991 when his soul departed to seek and sit on his Mother’s lap — at last — to realise his dogged dream of long ago!

Strangely enough that question of “marriage” — that unfulfilled advice of Bharat Brahmachari — resurfaced at the end of Yogananda’s life. He was a bit incoherent in thought and speech during his last days. He would then say that his bride was waiting for him and he had to go to meet her. Then again those words of the Brahmachari, “...the Mother is pleased with you but ... so keep silent. You should not fret, fall off her lap, and feel sorrow and pain...” seem to echo and re-echo in him during his life here trying to quell the impatience and fretting that dogged him. He often told me: “Sri Aurobindo amaye boklé amar shojjo hoto. Ma boklé amar ektu biroкто lagto.” (If Sri Aurobindo scolded me I felt alright, but if the Mother did so, I felt an irritation, and could not take it in the right way). Maybe the “chasing a dream” continues or would the Mother have turned round and gathered him up in Her arms!

Yogananda was a man of steel in body and mind. Therefore he was hard and could hurt, but also he could give support and strength — if close enough. Moreover, I believe, a vein of gold ran at the core. Again, if close enough in friendship, one could glimpse that gold through some chinks, for chinks he had, some borne unwittingly and some seen with a blind eye. All that we need to know is — steel rusts and perishes and gold endures.

BHARAT BRAHMACHARI

To better know and understand Yogananda and his life it is necessary to know more about his first Guru — Bharat Brahmachari. It is he who moulded, guided — one can say almost gave “re-birth” to Yogananda’s life, from 1918 to 1932, from the time he joined the Gauri Ashram to the day he met Sri Aurobindo and joined this, the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, when the Mother and Sri Aurobindo took up the “adolescent”, impatient and impetuous Jogdananda.

Yogananda had written to Sri Aurobindo about his first Guru, Bharat Brahmachari. Sri Aurobindo spoke highly of him. Some letters from Sri Aurobindo to Yogananda provide an exceptional testimonial to Bharat Brahmachari and reveal what he really was and achieved.

Letters to Yogananda from Sri Aurobindo

Have you a photograph of your former guru? If there is one, the Mother would like to see it.

*

Yogananda,

What you wanted to know was about your Guru being here or not or being one of those in contact with the Mother. For that the photo was necessary as it is by the appearance, not the name, that the Mother identifies those who came here to her — as she did from the photo of his Guru [Loknath Brahmachari].

May 1933

(Yogananda had great difficulty getting a photo of his Guru. He was considered a renegade by his old co-disciples. Finally he did procure one.)

*

The Mother saw with interest the photograph of your Gurudev. She had seen Loknath Brahmachari very often, but your Gurudev has always been near her for many years, long before you came, probably before his death even. When she saw the photograph a wonderful light appeared through it. And through his face is expressed a remarkable soul of aspiration, vision, faith and bhakti.

2.6.1934

*

In the following letters I quote only relevant portions from what Sri Aurobindo says about Bharat Brahmachari and his Yoga.

Your Guru's teaching and that of this Yoga are essentially the same; what he called 'chittasuddhi' is what we mean by the psychic change. The teaching here is more developed because it includes the Supramental means of creating the divine life....

19.6.35

*

...As to the details he gave from time to time, in all these prophecies of what is to come the main fact can be accepted but this or that detail may point to something that is trying to be but may take place with a slightly different turn to what the mind expected....

17.9.34

*

...I do not gather from what is quoted as said by your Guru that he claimed to be the Avatar. It seems to me that he claimed to be a Power preparing the way for the work of the Divine Mother....

25.8.1935

*

Bharat Brahmachari got an adesh in 1925-26 to go to Brindavan to invoke the Mother. He of his own volition never went anywhere, but since it was Her adesh, he went. He reached a lonely place and prayed and practised austerities. The Mother gave him Darshan. She was not the usual traditional Kali — black, naked and many-armed. She was a resplendent white form, sari-clad, the head covered by the anchal and wearing a golden diadem. She was two-armed, sitting on a lion. She told him that She would manifest on Earth with all Her Divya-Shakti. He called this form of the Mother “Bharateshwari”.

To us here the date 1926 evokes special memories. The 24th of November 1926 is the day of Siddhi — Descent of the Overmind in the physical. The beautiful sari-clad figure evokes even more special, near and fonder memories — we see our Mother on Darshan and Blessing Days. Are all these mere coincidences?

Bharat Brahmachari had a murti (idol) made, replicating this vision of the Mother. He installed this murti in the precincts of his Chitradham Ashram (another of his Ashrams). A reproduction of a painting of the murti is printed in Yogananda’s book titled Mahabirbhab — The Great Manifestation. Much of what I have written and all that I have quoted are from this interesting book.

Yogananda more than once asked Sri Aurobindo: “Is she, our Mother, the same Great Universal Mother of Bharat Brahmachari’s vision?” At first Sri Aurobindo, though he replied to more than a hundred letters in a single night, did not reply to this question — or later, replied in vague terms. But Yogananda persisted. He said to me: “Ami chhadbar lok noyi.” (I don’t quit easily.) Finally, he got what he wanted. Each one has to draw one’s own conclusions from all the material presented. The mystery deepens or the mystery stands revealed.

Later I got some information that could be a confirmation of the identity of Bharat Brahmachari’s vision.

Yogananda had described all that he knew and had seen (the Murti at Chitradhama Ashram) to late Sanjiban-da, one of the artists of our Ashram (Pondicherry). The latter made a painting based on that description and it was shown to our Mother. She said, “Yes, this is Kali who has come down on Earth amongst men to do Her work, down here, to uplift and enlighten them. And that is why She is seen

with two arms and not the usual four.”

The original is now somewhere here. I had seen it in Yogananda’s room often enough. I for one think the picture and the symbol are clear — and Yogananda’s question is answered.

Yogananda and others sometimes talked to Bharat Brahmachari about Sri Aurobindo. What he (Bharat Brahmachari) had to say about Sri Aurobindo is also significantly revelatory. Even before they brought in the name of Sri Aurobindo, the Brahmachari used to talk of a Mahapurush on some seashore. He did not mention the name of the Mahapurush or the place. When Sri Aurobindo the freedom fighter left Calcutta, many hoped he would come back and lead the nation. But Bharat Brahmachari shook his head and said: “From what I can see, this is not to be. Anyone who has reached the Upper World, He (Sri Aurobindo) is in, does not come back.”

Sometime in 1920 Bharat Brahmachari said that the Vishnu-Shakti had gone from Badrinath (the deity at Badrinath is Badrinarayan, a form of Vishnu) to settle in Gandhi. But two years later he said that the Vishnu-Shakti had retreated from Gandhi.

He added that Gandhi would not be able to bring about the freedom of India. A Mahapurush settled on some seashore would free India.

Bharat Brahmachari also asserted that there was no greater yogi than Sri Aurobindo this side of the Himalayas, so to say, and that Sri Aurobindo was the “elder” of Swami Vivekananda. Sri Aurobindo explained this last utterance: “No, certainly no physical relation. What he must have meant was a superior in knowledge or power or generally greater than Vivekananda.”(8.7.1937)

After this talk on Swami Vivekananda, Dhirananda brought out from somewhere a picture of Sri Aurobindo and showed it to Bharat Brahmachari who said: “Yes, this is Sri Aurobindo. If any of you see Him you will leave me, love me no more.”

Bharat Brahmachari once told Yogananda that one day he (Yogananda) was destined to meet this Mahapurush living on the seashore. As for himself, the Mother had granted him the inner vision; so he did not need to go to anyone. But IF for Her work She asked him to go — he surely would. And the one person She might ask him to go to was Sri Aurobindo. There were in this period quite a number of sad-

hus, sannyasis and gurus. Each guru's disciples hoped and claimed that their guru was an Avatar. One such guru was Prabhu Jagatbandhu of Faridpur. After his passing away, the disciples preserved his body, firmly believing that his soul would re-enter the body and he would live again. Yogananda and others talked or questioned Bharat Brahmachari about these claims. An hour or two after one such causerie, Bharat Brahmachari came out on to the verandah and said: "Mayer khata dekhechhi. Oi khataye kono nam nayi — ek Sri Aurobindo chhada." (I have seen the Mother's book. There no name was written but that of Sri Aurobindo.)

Bharat Brahmachari passed away in 1928. His guru Loknath Brahmachari passed away earlier. Now the Gauri Ashram hardly exists. Parul, Badol and their father Jogendra (Yogananda's brother) visited the Ashram in 1980. What they saw brought tears to Jogendra who had seen it in its pristine days. One old man was somehow carrying on as caretaker. There was nothing much to take care of. Before leaving the Kutir, Parul asked the old man if she could place a photograph of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo on the dais. The old man was overjoyed. He had heard much about the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, but never seen their photograph. Many of the Ashramites had been taken to a nearby river and mowed down in the name of religion.

Empires have come and gone — but Bharat Brahmachari lives on. He did not care as to who cared for him, knew of him, or who followed him. He lived in the Mother's Light and Love. He did what She willed him to do. That was all he cared for. That was his mission — THAT goes on. As Sri Aurobindo assured Yogananda in this context on 19.6.1935: "Nothing true in a mission can fail, either it persists or takes another form."



BIREN CHUNDER

*Better to hunt in fields, for health unbought,
Than fee the doctor for a nauseous drought.
The wise for cure, on exercise depend;
God never made his work, for man to mend.*

JOHN DRYDEN

The Legend

BIREN CHUNDER, better known here as Birenda, was born on 10.4.1915 in Baruipur — 24 Parganas. In the Ashram he was fondly known as Budo. He came here from Calcutta back in 1945, same year as I did, on the 11th of August. He was well-known there as a boxer.

He was Pranabda's teacher in Physical Education and more, he was a friend and even looked up to as an elder brother.

Calcutta — 1937-1945

During this period much of India was again seething, trying to throw off the foreign ruler. The war too was on (1939). There was unrest and uncertainty. Youth all over the country was roused to action. Birenda, a young man of 23, full of strength and energy was naturally eager to take part in some nationalistic movement. His youthful strength, based on a strong sense of morals, itself backed by fearlessness and a sense of duty, would have in all probability made of him a dangerous man in British eyes. But that was not to be. His guru, a fiery revolutionary named Alok, discouraged him from joining any movement. These movements, he said, were mixed with politics and self-interests. He wanted rather that Birenda prepared young men of strong and good character. This was more useful and important for the nation. So, Birenda started a club where the young could, through physical exercises and games, learn to be disciplined, know the values of collective organised effort, how to lead or follow, etc. They were at the same time taught some moral values and slowly infused with a national spirit. Birenda learned his boxing skills under J.K. Sheel and went on to become the champion of Bengal. He won all his fights decisively, that earned him a title of "K.O. King" — i.e. Knockout King. He went through some training in wrestling and picked up folk and Bratachari dances. He gathered quite a bit of knowledge on weight training and lifting, freehand exercises and drills and last but not least of all he learned some physiotherapy and massage. He refined and improved upon this last item and that served him and others greatly in the later part of his life.

During one of his wrestling bouts he broke one of his knees. That put an end to competitive boxing. This knee plagued him right through, till the end of his life. It was about this time that a young boy came under his influence — who later was to have a great bearing on his life. The young boy came to Calcutta for his studies around 1939. Birenda took him under his wing, saw great possibilities in him. Both were drawn to each other. Birenda often escorted the boy home. The

relationship developed into a brotherliness and gradually Birenda became a family member in the boy's home. The young boy was none other than our Pranabda (Dada) of the P. E. D. When Pranabda was to go back to Behrampur Birenda gave him the same advice that he got from Alokda — i.e. to prepare the youth — which he did. Incidentally — Pranabda and Birenda were once having a friendly boxing bout. Their skills were keenly honed. Pranabda landed a swift and hard blow and Birenda was k.o.'d. He was up in a few minutes, the fight continued and boom — Birenda landed one on the younger man's jaw — and down he went k.o.'d. Birenda was mighty pleased that his student had achieved what none of his opponents (usually British Tommies) could. He treated Pranabda to a sumptuous snack of sweets.

Birenda knew no fear. Once in Calcutta, when he was crossing a lonely area, he heard a woman's cry for help. He rushed to the spot and saw a man molesting a woman. He was obviously a man of some standing as he had a Gurkha bodyguard standing nearby — unheeding, Birenda rushed forward — the Gurkha ran away. Birenda grabbed the man and dealt him a pile-driver that put him down. Birenda picked him up, shook him and “wham” another blow and down he went. This treatment was repeated half a dozen times. Birenda left the place. Happening to pass that way after an hour or so, he saw a crowd of people but did not approach to enquire or see what held the crowd. It seems that the man was dead.

On another occasion Birenda went after a local goonda right into his lair. Birenda's friends had warned him not to, for the man had a gang and he was dangerous — more so in his own area. But Birenda went, dragged the man out, gave him a warning and went away. None moved in the goonda's defence and none dared touch Birenda.

In 1947, on the night of August 14th there was an attack on the Ashram, by a mob. Why? Who was behind egging them on? Probably politicians were behind for some motives of their own. Many knew an attack may take place. When it did come in the early part of the night, there was a music programme in the Ashram. (A few programmes were held in the Ashram in those days — Dilip Kumar Roy, Omkarnath Thakur, etc. had sung in the Meditation Hall.) Birenda and another person were going to the Playground. They were met by the

mob near the Post-Office corner. The mob fell on Birenda. He caught hold of two of his assailants by their chaddars — kept twisting the chaddars like a tourniquet and dragging them back towards the Ashram gate. All this while blows were raining down on him with sticks. One of his captives dug his teeth into Birenda's hand and managed to escape. For some reason the Ashram gate was closed — the only help came from one lone Nepali boy named Birsing. He jumped into the fray to ease some of the pressure off Birenda. Fortunately, some time later some young men opened the gate and rushed out. The mob dispersed. The police came to pick up the crumbs.

Pondicherry

Pondicherry, 1945 — Pranabda came here a couple of months ahead of Birenda, i.e. in May 1945 and took up the just nascent Physical Education (Ashram School). He invited Birenda to come and help him in this work. Birenda came, looked, and liked what he saw. Awhile he wavered. Common and worldly sense urging him to go back to family, friends, business, etc. and a small voice within equally urgent saying, "Stay, stay — there is more than meets the eye here." Fortunately for him and many of us here the "small voice" came out best in the tussle — and Birenda stayed. He joined hands with Pranabda and together they started building brick by brick, from the foundation, this great and beautiful edifice — "The Education of the Physical".

Birenda was an instant success. Young boys always admire physical prowess, and he embodied quite a bit of it. He was solidly built, but never looked heavy or moved heavily. In fact he bounced like a rubber ball, in the ring — "flitted like a butterfly and stung like a bee" (Cassius Clay — M. Ali). He was of average height or maybe slightly on the shorter side as per present standards — about 168 cm. He cut a clean muscular figure. Arms, shoulders and chest well formed — carrying terrific power. Not an inch of fat. Pinch him and the skin came up in a silky thinness and smoothness. Legs well- and long-sinewed. A well-chiselled head and features sat atop this body. The eyes gave away the man. They were shining, questing and held a sparkle of boyish merriment. The mouth too was ready to join the

eyes, laughter ready to tumble out. The jaws were a wee bit too large and square. This was what met the eye, but there was more that drew us, his students, near. He had in him what made a great teacher. He knew so much about so many subjects. He had much to give. As he could smile so could he growl. All this backed with patience and persistence made him into this “instant success”. Of course, his reputation as a “Knockout King” helped. He was an ideal teacher for a group of growing, strong and strong-headed boys.

Birenda was already past his prime when he came. Both knees were broken. Yet to us he was a giant. We had no equipment to speak of. The only ground was the Playground. A few balls did exist. Football was played when and if the Military Ground (Terrain Militaire — now Indira Gandhi Stadium) was allotted to us — once a week or once in two weeks. Otherwise some drills, a few exercises, Volleyball or Circle Ball formed our daily activity. But strides forward were being taken.

Birenda went to Madras and bought some boxing gloves, a vaulting box, a spring-board. A few mattresses were made. Never had we seen such apparatus. This heralded a new era of our gymnastics. An old barbell (Udar’s — yet in service) was also acquired. The next great advancement came when the Tennis Ground was created out of an ugly mound of garbage-dumping ground. Then the Body Building Gym was made ready — it was previously our kindergarten section and the children’s courtyard. Birenda was given charge of this Body Building Gym. He had by now stopped coaching any Group. This job was taken up by newer, younger members — now captains, who had worked up from the ranks, but all under Pranabda’s supervision. To crown all these steps and hops forward, came the Swimming Pool. A long cherished dream at last became a reality. On 21st February 1957 the Mother inaugurated the Pool. Birenda was one of the most ardent dreamers of the Pool and he pulled us into his dream. Long before 1957, in the late 40s he showed us the spot where now stands the “Le café” (in front of the Mairie on the beach road) as the site for our Pool! We believed, waited and watched. Nothing happened. Next he showed us the Park Guest House lawn as the site. There was a great hollow in the ground, constantly eroded by the sea. There was a broken wall. The waves came in under the wall and washed away the

soil. An engineer did come from Madras to construct a wall to contain the sea — but to no avail. The project was aborted. Then it was that the present site was chosen and the dream turned into reality. Birenda was appointed coach at the Pool.

Birenda was a teacher par excellence. To some his methods of teaching seemed harsh and old-fashioned. This was true for some, who had a first glance and turned away or were turned off. A lot depended on how much one really wanted to learn. Once the mind was made up, one had only to have full faith in Birenda, closely follow him and his instructions. One learned fast and for good. Experience, it is said, is a hard task-master. She gives the test first and the lesson afterwards. One would think of Birenda as this “Experience” personified. His lessons were given in a forthright manner. Bitter pills were often preferred to sugar-coated ones. The strong-gutted took them. The queasy ones shied away and quit. Thus were sown seeds of many a controversy and debate. But for me and many others nothing better could have happened. Even hindsight has not changed our opinion. A few examples could vindicate or further vilify the above opinions. Either way they are interesting.

Boxing

He (Birenda) shows you the basic stance, the straight left and a bit of footwork. He says: “Keep your hands up, head down and use your left — if your left reaches its mark, your right is sure to land.” Then for two rounds — two long minutes — you keep chasing him round the ring. He ducks, guards or slips your blows with minimum effort. He jabs you sharply if you don’t go for him or your guard is down. You are panting by the end of round 2. Come round 3 — the roles are reversed. He is chasing you all over the ring. Sharp taps on any exposed parts (nose, chin, stomach) rain down on you accompanied by his exhortations: “Hat tol, matha nama, amay dekh”, etc. (Lift your hands, keep your head down, look at me, i.e. — see where the blow is coming from). All this when your gloves seem to weigh 10 kg each and you can’t gulp in enough air. All you want to do is get out of the ring. The last minute seems an eternity. You come back for the next lesson or not? You have to pass your own muster — lily-livered

or lion-hearted, one with common sense to avoid the avoidable or brash, brave enough to come back for more?

Weight-training

The first day anyone above 16 years who comes along is told very casually, “*Ek sho dund, dui sho baithak*” (100 push throughs, 200 deep knee bends). No more is said, no word of encouragement, not even an enquiry — perhaps you don’t even know if he is looking at you. After you complete the quota — an hour or two after — you go to Birenda and say, “Birenda, I have finished (or I am finished).” Two words “*Badi jao*” (go home) and you are dismissed. If you endured this distant, cool treatment for a week or two, you were “admitted in”, i.e. given closer, more warm and personal attention. He then taught us many exercises with weights, insisting on correctness of style. He trained us in weight-lifting too. He would say carrying heavy weights is partly a matter of habit.

Swimming

The controversies may be more bitter in this sport. The element being foreign to humans, his or her true colours were more easily bared. Not many relished this. In the olden days, before the Swimming Pool was even thought of, swimming in the sea was not permitted. We couldn’t even wet our feet in it. It was with Birenda that a few of us started the sea-swim craze. It grew until even up to a hundred swimmers or bathers were in the sea on a Sunday or a holiday. Very often, after a good oil massage, Birenda and some of us walked upto the Park Guest House (all along the beach — there was a beach then) and swam back to the Tennis Ground Beach. We had also to jump off the end of the 4-m-high old pier into the sea. This when we had hardly picked up the rudiments of swimming.

In 1957 the Swimming Pool was ready. The Mother opened it on Her birthday, the 21st of February. Birenda taught swimming in the Pool. The methods of teaching were more or less of the same forthrightness. There you are hanging in the water at one end of a rope tied round your waist. Birenda, on the deck, is holding the other end,

supporting you to the degree he wants. This, on day one, two, three... till he judges that the rope can be discarded. Then, he is in the water and expects you to jump in and splash your way up to him or to the other side of the Pool. An involuntary gulp or two of water was of not much concern. If you had enough faith in him, you jumped in and no harm befell you. He saw to it. If no faith — and no jump... may the gods help you!

Outing

Birenda had great love for nature and the outdoors. That love he instilled into some of us boys. There it took root and grew. The first ever outing I remember was back in 1946. Birenda, Pranabda, Chimanbhai (teacher: de la Fond), Narayan (my brother) and I, set out at about 2 p.m. (God alone knows why 2 p.m.) I don't remember if we carried any water. I remember Narayan and I at least were barefooted. We set out actually to find out what, where and how is Lal Pahar. We entered a broad ravine — a dry riverbed. The cliffs grew higher and the bed narrower as we proceeded. The cliffs were a deep rich red, the sand quite clean white. Palm trees, dwarf neem, and some cashew trees grew here and there. It was beautiful but infernally hot. We were like biscuits baked from above and below. We scurried from shade to shade. When the ravine was narrow, Birenda shouted Jai, Jai Bombhola and we all repeated. There was none to witness our brief madness. We returned a hot, dirty, tired lot — but wiser and happier.

Birenda took a batch of us a few weeks later to Arikamedu (Roman ruins) settlement near the Arianakuppam village and the river of the same name. We didn't know about any route to the place. We took the shortest one. We got on to the beach beyond Parc-à-charbon and reached the ruins on the far bank of the river. We looked at the diggings. Someone suggested we take a brick and give to the Mother. The brick was about 28 cm x 40 cm or 45 cm x 7 or 8 cm. Birenda agreed with our plan. The brick was placed on one of our heads and we started back homewards. We had not taken into account the risen sun. No shade and no water. The brick changed heads often — but we reached Parc-à-charbon, guzzled down a gallon of water each and proceeded to the Ashram. We gave the brick to the Mother at the veg-

etable Darshan (near Nirodda's room). She used to inspect and bless the Ashram's garden produce everyday at about 12 noon. She smiled and accepted the brick.

The above excursion inspired us to go on more such outings. We organised ourselves, collected a water bottle or two and started going out every fortnight (on Sundays). We carried bread and bananas and milk in a brass jug to brew some coffee. Later the Mother sanctioned two tins of condensed milk a week. All this was done with Birenda reporting to the Mother and with her permission. Next we went to the Lake for a whole day. At about this time Birenda along with Atindra (Irena, Nivedita's father) and Hriday (Pranabda's brother) went on bicycle to the Gingee Fort. They took two days to do it. Birenda talked about it to us and also to my uncle Pantulu. He arranged that epic voyage of ours to Gingee — we became fullblooded explorers. (A more detailed description of this trip is given in the chapter on R.S. Pantulu.) We, of his original group, had grown up, and taken off on our own. Yet his interest never dwindled. He went, now by bus or train, to Mysore, Madurai, Rameswaram, etc. — all over the south.

Work

Birenda was a good worker. Some of us being very close to him followed him. Though it was difficult in the beginning, he pulling us along and we willing to be pulled — it became easier and later a good habit. He said and showed that no work is too low or demeaning. Much of this experience was gained during the regular "harvesting" that all we students and teachers and some others went for to Cazanove or Rizière or Highland (Ashram's rice fields). The school remained closed during those 4-5 days and we worked from morning to evening. Birenda was one who inspired us young ones on this occasion. It was backbreaking work — bending and cutting with a sickle and then hand-threshing the paddy, stacking up the hay, etc. — specially to those unused to it, like us. But we kept at it and soon were enjoying it. I dare say some of the girls were ahead of most of the boys. Pushpa, Kumud, Mridula and Bhavatarini were terrific with the sickle. All these girls and some of us, Pratip, Prabir, Narayan, Richard and I naturally gravitated around Birenda — it was a nice group.

Birenda is gone, but his pioneering spirit has broken quite a few frontiers. I believe it was he, with our batch of boys, who started sea-swimming and the picnics and outings. That “spirit” is still alive.

A new chapter in Birenda’s life opened. The New Bindery was opened with him in charge. He was older now — yet strong, active and enthusiastic enough. He did some good work there. He went every morning up to the Mother (at about 6 a.m.). Richard and I had the good fortune to accompany him up, first as his crutches (He had his leg in a plaster-cast) and later independently, as just Her children. She wrote a message in his Report-Diary. (These messages were brought out in book form by Borun Tagore.) Sometime during this period he cut off most of his connections with the Playground activities. Not many noticed his retreat — but a legend was lost.

The Legend Found — The Man with the Miraculous Hands

Birenda soon resurfaced — in the field of Physiotherapy — if I may dare use that name, risking a frown from the numerous conventional doctors. Here too Birenda’s methods provoked controversies, even condemnations. Here too his methods seemed crude, and old-fashioned and harsh. Yet some will swear by him and speak of the results with awe and admiration.

Birenda did not stumble on to physiotherapy all on a sudden. He had it already in his hands, mind and heart. I have seen him setting bones most casually, but surely, way back in the mid-forties.

One day Birenda and some of us were in the Dining Room ready for dinner (after the Mother’s Distribution in the Playground) — Jayantibhai was brought in, forearm held at a curious angle. We, still very young, were surprised. Birenda held the arm and showed us along with a commentary the why and how of the dislocation (for it was one). Sitting there, he just pulled, pushed and “click” — put it back in place. Off went Jayantibhai — no bandage, no fuss. Through the years I witnessed more such “resetting” of bones: my own knee, Arvind Sajjan’s shoulder (several times) were as easily reset by Birenda.

His massage, its varied applications, methods and results are nu-

merous, out of the common and wonderful.

I had tonsils (enlarged) — so said my medical check-up. Birenda said “Oh! that can be cured by breathing exercises.” He showed me some, to be done every morning. I did them. I don’t know when I stopped, but the doctors did not see the tonsils any more.

I had also a deviation of the nasal septum. This also was found by our doctors. This Birenda cured by massage.

His massage was often a tough one. He kneaded and seemed to be breaking the stiff, resisting muscle. The patient might wince with pain — but came back for more. As was the case of a small child I saw. He would massage and the child lay writhing in pain. But when he stopped for resting (himself and the child), the child hugged and kissed him and played with him. One would expect a child to cringe from him and even run away. An onlooker, a German, surprised, asked him, “Why does the child come back and submit itself to so much pain?” Birenda laughed and just said, “You must love the child!”

One of our girls here was suffering from a stiff neck, painful and unresponding to conventional treatment. She went to Birenda. He passed his index finger, hardly touching, down her spine. Suddenly he stopped and pressed between two vertebrae — a small twitch from her, and she found herself much better, her neck released. How or what did he feel? When asked he merely said it was quite simple — he could feel some vibration!

The following incident occurred when Birenda was quite old, past 70. He sat hunched, chin sunk on his chest. He was very deaf too. His fingers were all crooked and bony. A middle-aged couple came. The husband was bent to one side (fixed in that position). He had suffered a stroke. Birenda asked the husband to recount his woes, and closed his eyes and sat looking small and helpless in his chair. The man was talking. Once or twice the wife whispered into her husband’s ear. Sukhen (Birenda’s student) who was sitting nearby, could not hear, far less understand, what she whispered. Suddenly Birenda sat up, eyes burning, and shouted at her: “Get out — you don’t want your husband cured — get out.” Sukhen was, to say the least, surprised. The woman was taken aback and frightened. She apologised and quietly retreated. The man continued. Then Birenda asked him

to lie down and himself massaged and manipulated — and when he had finished with him, the man got up with the bend more than half straightened out!

On another occasion an old gentleman (a Bengali) came, accompanied by his doctor son. They came from Tripura. They said the old man had Parkinson's Disease. He shook all over. They had tried the usual, conventional medication. (They came here as one of Birenda's old acquaintances had met them on a train, and told them to try this Birenda whom he knew about.) Birenda hadn't much esteem for doctors. He asked the son, "What is wrong with your father's coccyx?" The doctor-son replied, "Nothing." Then Birenda with a twinkle in his eye and a smile on his lips asked Rajnish (a student of his) to give some vibration (by hand only — Birenda detested mechanical vibrations) to the old man's coccyx. Rajnish did so — and wonder of wonders — the old man stopped shaking. The doctor watched wide-eyed and stunned. Birenda burst out laughing and asked "ki holo — lèje kichchu hoyni bolle?" (what — you said there was nothing wrong with the tail — coccyx?)

Rajnish, knowing Birenda, was not as stunned, but not unmoved or unintrigued. He naturally questioned Birenda later. Birenda just looked at him and said "Tumi Gita podoto — bujhte parbe" (You read the Gita — you will understand). That was all — for the moment. Days later Rajnish, not much enlightened, got Birenda alone and asked him again. Birenda in a softer and more expansive mood explained about "Chakras" and centres, about how the coccyx is the "mooladhar", etc., etc. He further explained that suppressing some movements of the "vital" in man — without transforming them nor giving them an expression, i.e., venting them — often creates problems at certain centres; the idea is to release this suppressed energy etc., etc.

He used to say all good things, like happiness, tend to expand the person; even his face, eyes expand in laughter or merriment. But sadness, depression contract a person.

Similarly an injury or ailment contracts the muscle or organ. By massage he said we can dilate, thereby increase the circulation and reach oxygen to the ailing organ. Then there is every chance of cure. And, lastly and most importantly, remember the Mother while deal-

ing with a person. Feel him, his vibrations, and then take him. On one or two occasions he forbade his student to massage certain individuals — he himself treated them. He felt the young student would fall ill if he (the student) massaged.

A couple brought in their small girl to Birenda. They had taken her to different hospitals, and when they went to Cluny the Sisters there told them to try a certain masseur in the Ashram (Birenda). They were not sure if the man treated non-ashramites, but maybe he would. They said he was reputed to bring about some remarkable cures. So the couple came. The child was in a pitiable state. She was all cramped up, arms and legs folded stiff, tongue hanging out, eyeballs rotated up, the whites showing. She could not utter a sound. Any movement had to be helped. Birenda was sure of a cure but he warned the parents it would be a long, hard climb. They seemed to agree — but Birenda said (afterwards — aside) that probably they would leave before long.

Birenda started the massage. The head, face and throat, arms, legs — all were rubbed, vibrated (manually)... This went on day after day. Slowly the tongue retreated into the mouth. The eyes rolled back into focus. The arms and legs could be stretched, but often cramped back as of old. She could even utter some sound. She seemed to be responding well. Then they stopped coming. Why? None knew at that time. This often happened. Some doctor or adviser watching from the sidelines would turn people away, convincing or giving them hopes of an easier way. It was even found that it was a doctor who had tried, failed and brought them over to Birenda and then was mean enough to entice them away. Birenda knew of this and even predicted it. He did his best and let it go at that. I later learned that the parents were told that someone in Kerala could cure quicker — so they left! The move was proved unwise. They came back, but too late. Birenda had had an accident and was not able to take the case up again. The child too, later had an accident, broke her thigh bone...what a pitiful and miserable tale!

These and many more “stories” that could be told and retold. We believe what we want to believe. A proof is difficult to get, and convincing someone is more difficult. Birenda himself did not do much to convince others. If a person came to him he tried his best to help.

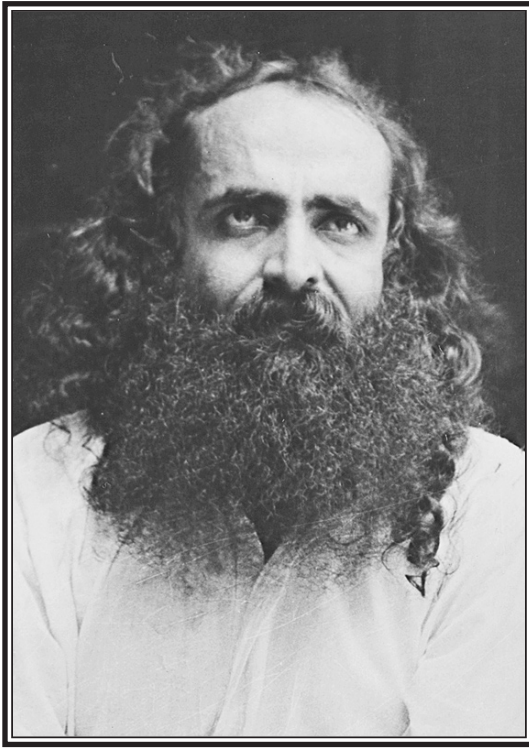
Birenda had faith in some methods and means — if anyone had the same faith he/she could come to him. The rest could and should stay away (what “faith” is it — that needs “proof”!) From where did Birenda learn, and get all his knowledge and his methods? Once, in the later days when he was in a “down” mood, he was in tears thinking aloud “E shob Mayer jinish — keu nite ashche na.” (These are all the Mother’s things — no one is coming to take them.) But I would think that all is not lost. He has left enough bits and pieces behind for another, who with some diligence, faith and love, can put together and carry on. He, I believe, gave to all his students as much as each could take (the more the vessel was empty the more he could fill!)

I have sung of the several faces of Birenda — as a tribute to the man who has given me much and asked for very little. There are others who have reaped as much as I from him. To me and to my sister Bhavatarini and brother Narayan he was more than just an instructor. He was a friend (family friend), a big-brother or fatherly figure. He instilled in us many higher and deeper values through sports and work. There was hardly any preaching. Rather he set an example or a challenge and teased, invited or dared us to pick it up. Only once in a rare while was it a useful drubbing. I once, in my childish ignorance, complained to him that someone (captain or referee) had been partial to another vis-à-vis me. He sharply reacted, saying: “Never say that and shed tears for yourself (self-pity)...strive till you get what you deserve — and you will get it.” (There is a French saying “L’amour propre et le plus sot des amours” — self love/pity is the most foolish of all loves.) Yet another day he said, “Never get angry in a game — you may lose it.” His goading us on then, to do more and better in the Body Building Gym and on the paddy-field, still goads us on. It is as if he keeps fuelling that small flame in those of us who worked alongside him. He steeled our bodies and minds.

I hope this use of first person is pardonable and justified. I had not much personal contact with his later massaging days. I have seen just a bit and heard much more from his students or shall I say “Chelas”. Maybe one of them will eulogise him and his achievements in that field too. I merely heard but believed what they told me.

I close with a final salute to this great person, with great hopes that some one — a “Chela” at least — will pick up what he has dropped —

both in the field of Sport and Physiotherapy. That would be a greater tribute than these few pages of praise. That would gladden his old heart no end. That brave old heart beat for the last time in the wee hours of the 17th of March 1997. But the Legend once lost — found — must live on — in us, through us.



DARA, CHINMAYEE AND PRASHANTO AND OTHERS OF A FAMILY

*Cling to the One who clings to nothing;
And clinging, cease to cling.*

TIRUVALLUVAR - KURAL

DARA was born into an aristocratic family of Hyderabad (on 24 October 1902). Hyderabad was then a princely state ruled by the Nizam. He was named Aga Sayed Ibrahim. When Aga was born, his grandfather consulted a soothsayer, to predict about the child's future. The soothsayer said "E apka ghar todega" (He will destroy your house). The grandfather thought "if he breaks this house, it is to build a more magnificent one." Aga — later as Dara — found it a great joke

and remarked “how mistaken he (the grandfather) was.” He came to Pondicherry for the first time in 1926. He was hooked, yet he went back several times, but finally settled here. Other members of the family too came here — around 1927 — Dara’s step-mother Tazdar Begum (a very beautiful woman), sisters Mehdi Begum and Zahara Begum and brothers Aga Sayed Ishaque and Aga Syed Yaqoob. Only Dara and one sister Mehdi Begum lived here, and served the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, till they breathed their last.

They were all given “Ashram names” by Sri Aurobindo — Sayed Ibrahim was renamed Dara. He was in one of his previous births Aurangzeb’s elder brother Dara Shukoh of the Moghul dynasty whom Aurangzeb imprisoned and killed. Dara Shukoh was a scholar. He translated the Gita and the Vedas into Persian. Dara Shukoh was, in a much earlier birth, in the 5th century B.C., Darius Hystaspes of Persia. He was the greatest of his dynasty. Tazdar Begum remained Tazdar, Mehdi Begum became Chinmayee and Zahara Begum was changed to Sudhira. The brothers Ishaque and Yaqoob were named Prashanto and René.

When Sri Aurobindo first saw Dara, He addressed him as “Dara”, the latter corrected Sri Aurobindo saying “I am Ibrahim.” Sri Aurobindo just smiled. Later we learn that the entire historical family of the Moghul Aurangzeb had come back. Of course we know Ibrahim was named Dara after Dara Shukoh.

I have not seen Sudhira or Tazdar. They and the others, when they arrived, were lodged in the part of the Ashram (main building) which is now the Mother’s Store Room (near the Rosary Gate, to the East — ground floor). Later, of course, changes took place. Tazdar and Chinmayee lived for a time in the corner house North East of the School block. Purna lives there now.

Chinmayee

Chinmayee came at the young age of 20 or 21 in 1927. She looked very “muslim” (at least that’s what we imagined a muslim woman would look like). She had a gentle-looking face, usually a smile played on her lips. We caught only glimpses of her when she accom-

panied the Mother when She appeared on the Terrace for what was called Terrace Darshan (over Pavitra-da's room). I think she held a parasol over the Mother. Chinmayee was the personal attendant of the Mother. She was a meticulous worker, and showed some others how



Chinmayee

things should be arranged for the Mother. She passed away, not very peacefully, a victim of cancer, sometime around 1953.

Sudhira and Tazdar Begum came and went but could not or would not stay here permanently. René was often here till, maybe, the early '50s. He even worked in our printing press. He was a handsome man, of fair complexion with a slightly Roman nose (in fact all the brothers had the nose said to be aristocratic). He was of an average build. He was a good worker. He often fell back to his old aristocratic style of living and working: pleased with someone (worker or friend), he

would reward him off-hand, off-account and off-proportion. He probably suffered from sleeplessness. In those days when he was living in the Mother's Store Room, he would restlessly pace the Ashram courtyard through much of the night. I heard it said that once he suggested to the Mother: "Mother, you have given very high and significant names to flowers. Why don't you do the same with fruits and distribute them to us? We will enjoy them much more." Not much is known about him. He left this place, as was his usual practice. But then he went over to Pakistan and never returned. He passed away there. I learned later, that he did come here from Pakistan and was in a bit of trouble having misplaced his visa or passport. Madan Poddar and friends had to help him out.

Dara was one of the earliest legendary figures that I got acquainted with — and what a figure! It was because of his figure that one came to hear of Dara. He was a colossus. It was proverbial to say of anyone of big dimensions, "He is a Dara." I too, when I saw him back in 1945, was, like many others, a bit awed and, being a 9-year-old, also amused. But there was more to Dara than just great size. He was as large-hearted as he was large. This fact was well-known. He helped many a person in need of monetary help. We kids too knew of his large-heartedness.

In 1945 Dara lived in the building to the East of Golconde, across the road. He lived on the first floor. The building is now named "Resuscité" (Resurrected — I wonder why). The name came much later. Dara hardly came out of his rooms, not even downstairs. Whether he wouldn't or couldn't was, and is, a very justifiable and unanswered question. Passers-by could see some of him, sitting at his window, filling its frame. He would sit there and hail someone he knew. He would then request him to come below his window and let down a string with a clothes-clip at its end. Clipped to it hung a newspaper or a chit that he would like to be passed on to someone or some place. Most obliged, for most knew Dara. We boys too did run such errands for him, but later we drew our wages. Once in a while two or three of us went up to his room and started a conversation, mostly about ourselves, all about what we did in school or the playground. Dara heard all we said patiently and with interest. He seemed very impressed and pleased. When we judged that he was sufficiently mellowed, we

struck! We pleaded with him saying, “Dara, please, we have not had toffees for a long time. Do give us some.” He was so touched. He would take a piece of paper and write: “Standard Stores — please give the bearer 1/4 lb of toffees.” Off we would run to the Stores (Standard Stores was a general stores, then newly opened, in the present Book Store below Ira Boarding — Dara had a credit-account there).

The few occasions that we had a close and whole view of Dara, were usually on these “toffee-procurement” ventures. What most people saw enframed in the window was, as the saying goes, “the tip of the iceberg.” What we saw when we entered his room was a white dhoti and kurta-clad colossus. The tip was impressive enough. The whole could have been unnerving — but no, it was not. The face though large, with the hooked nose, was charmingly reassuring. Two large kindly eyes, round cheeks and an innocent, trusting smile large enough to split those cheeks, took us close to him. He wore his hair long. He had, in earlier times, a thick well-groomed beard, now shorn off, leaving a clean shaven chin. His dress was always white dhoti and kurta — except for a short period when he joined the Playground and donned a pair of shorts and sleeveless banian — a further treat for our eyes. Why was he so fat? Probably physical inactivity and love of good food helped him attain those proportions. The short stint at the Playground didn’t do much to produce any changes. We never saw him or heard of him participating in any physical work. The only regular job I heard of, that he held, was supervising the milking of a couple (or more) of cows in a remote past (when cows were brought to the house and milked in front of the consumer/customer). This was done in the Ashram main building. (It had a very different topography then.)

Dara had other dimensions too — of a different kind. He was a poet of sorts. He often wrote 2-4 rhyming lines addressed to the Mother. Some are lost, one or two are remembered by a few:

Mother, Mother, come to the pier
Do not fear
I am here.

or

Mother almighty
Finished is all my tea.

He surrendered everything to Her. He sold a huge house, and much of the money from the sale he gave away to the Mother along with chuddars, and some of the furnishings like chandeliers, and other items that he brought over. (I believe some of the things are exhibited in “Sri Smriti” opposite the Playground.) But he was simple enough to ask her for some money to buy himself (and incidentally us) something more and different than that offered by the Dining Room. He would even send a friendly rickshawalla to get him some biriyani.

Dara had, in his student days, managed the canteen. Consequently he had formed his ideas as to the quantity and quality of food to be served to others and to oneself! This, coupled with his large-heartedness, often put him on a collision course with Dyumanbhai. A classic case of “the irresistible meeting the immovable”. It was as well they took different paths. Dara was given means to satisfy, at least himself.

He was very simple — maybe too simple. Once, troubled by mosquitoes, he bought some mosquito coils to repel them. But he did not know about or did not have the little tin stand that goes with the coils. So, he lit one, held it between his toes and lay down. Fortunately Puraniji came to know of this unusual method and told him: “Why don’t you ask the Mother for a mosquito net?” He asked for one, may have written “Mother, Mother, give a net for mosquitoes — else I’ll burn my little toes!” The Mother gave him a large blue net. He was so glad! He showed it off to whomsoever he met.

I mentioned that Dara’s physical activities were near non-existent. But it appears he *did* tend to some plants — watering them with cans, carried to and fro from a tank — no pump, no hose, — that too, he, a large man, on a pair of “khadams” (wooden sandals). He loved the plants and watched over them tenderly, thrilled when they flowered or bore fruit. But he was equally thrilled, if birds or squirrels got the fruits of his labour. He even hand fed them sitting in his armchair.

Dara spent much of his time in that armchair of his (apart from the hour or two spent in the watering effort). He filled it to overflowing, immobile, reading, writing, smoking or just looking at nothing or everything or just dozing in deep contentment. Often his paunch

would come in handy to rest his writing material — or even the table lamp. The table lamp needs special mention. It was a heavy one, all in metal — the base, stem and all. The shade was missing. When reading (Savitri) he would cover himself and the lamp with one white bed-sheet, a white hillock glowing in the dark. So far so good — but the lamp would give nasty shock to anyone touching it except Dara! When they warned him about this habit of his lamp he would give his usual reply: “Oh kuch nai hoga.”(oh nothing will happen). He seemed immune to electrocution.

Last, but certainly not the least of all, Dara was, let us say, the Adi-photographer of the Ashram. His father was a good amateur photographer and Dara learned enough from him to shoot away here and there, thereby leaving us a vast and valuable pictorial history of the old Ashram, its inmates, and the times. The photographs are surprisingly clear and well preserved to this day. This is one priceless contribution of Dara’s to us and to the Ashram. And this he accomplished with an ordinary box-camera! So lived Dara simply and quite peacefully.

One could look at Dara with some awe and respect because some people attributed to him some achievements in Sadhana. Dara himself disliked such notions — not out of any humility, true or otherwise. It just did not occur to him that there was anything special about him. His thought process never slipped into that groove. As his luck would have it, there came a Telugu gentleman named Subodh Krishna who considered Dara a Mahapurush! The man was endowed with a great amount of patience and persistence. He, one day, went too far — he prostrated himself full length in front of Dara — who was dismayed, annoyed and avoided the gentleman, and declared: “E admi pagal hai” (This man is mad). One day the man went to meet Dara, waited and watched patiently for one hour, while Dara was busy balancing lemons one on top of the other. Dara finally condescended to meet him, and even went with him in a rickshaw (no mean effort on the part of the passengers and the rick-puller), to be photographed. Dara modified his judgement on the man saying: “admi thoda pagal hai, lekin achcha hai”. (The man is a little mad, but a good man).

Dara had “large kindly eyes”. He saw what we all saw. Did he see something more? It appears he did, and in this too he could not think

it was a special capacity or gift he had — and others may not have. I narrate two occurrences:

Once some disciples gathered round Sri Aurobindo and during some very informal talking, Sri Aurobindo asked those around what they wanted. Dara asked for a vision of God. There was no immediate compliance to his wish. But when Dara went up on the Darshan day, he did not see Sri Aurobindo as a person, but saw him as a source of a bright white light. Dara thought at first that there was something wrong with his eyes. Then as he was returning, — on the stairs he saw the Raslila. It then struck him that he was being granted his wish of a few days back.

Then there was this happening in Dara and his extended family's house. (A Reddy father, mother and daughter. We will speak of them anon). One morning Dara confronted them (the Reddys) with a question: "Who was that lady who visited you last night. They were baffled. They had no visitors — night or day. Dara was sure — he described the lady and her movements. Little did it occur to him that what he had seen others could not see. Well, he saw a lady with a clean shaven head, wrapped up in a voluminous white sheet, stand beside their beds, then move on to the Mother's Room. There he saw the Mother and her discussing animatedly with gesticulations. What he could make out was that the lady was pleading for something and the Mother was not giving it. The lady persisted and finally the Mother relented. Then the lady, in great ecstasy, took off at great speed and disappeared. The identity of the lady dawned on the Reddys and they wondered at Dara and doubly so when... Let me first tell you the story of the white clad lady.

There was a simple lady (mendicant) who shaved her head wrapped herself up in a white sheet only, who lived under a thatch without any walls — she was called Chinnamma and the thatch and the area around was her ashram. She sat there and many people from all walks of life, gathered and sat around her. The Reddys too had lived there a month or so. Chinnamma always talked in the third person, when referring to herself. People asked her questions and she answered, gave advice and solace. She told them that while she was alive she could help them. She warned them that it is of no use this praying or performing puja to her photo once she is gone. Once she

leaves the body she would be dissolved in the Supreme. She would have cut all links, she said, that dissolution is not easy. One needs the permission of the Mahamaya, who does not like anyone leaving Her creation.

The Reddys received a telegram informing them that Chinnamma had left her body a few days back. The telegram reached them a day or two after Dara's vision, dream — or whatever! It was now possible to explain what Dara saw. Chinnamma approached the Supreme Mother, for Her permission to get dissolved. The Mother relented only after much persuasion and prayer. Chinnamma then took off in ecstasy into dissolution.

Dara was shifted from Ressuscité to a house near the present State Bank and then again to the house where the Oriya Karyalaya Press is now located. He lived more or less like a recluse. He was also afflicted by some rare disease. The Mother asked Prashanto to serve him and look after him. The Mother also asked a Reddy lady, Bharati Reddy (husband Venkata Reddy and daughter Jyoti) to help Dara. Actually this Reddy family was helped by Dara. They were new here, coming from Hyderabad. They got acquainted with Dara in the Tennis Ground where they had gone to watch the Mother playing Tennis. Dara learned that they were to vacate their present living quarters and were looking for a place to live. Dara was ever kind and helpful. He invited them to put up with him — *provided* — the Mother permitted. He dashed off a letter to the Mother, who granted the permission. The next ten years they shifted 5 houses along with Dara until his demise. One can imagine what the family's, which we would deem as Dara's extended family, feelings towards Dara were. Also one cannot but wonder how things work out, sometimes — whose is the Hand?

Bharati, the lady of the house, had a severe attack of jaundice. She was then just recovering (an astrologer had predicted that about that period of her life, she would be dangerously ill). Dara in a generous mood ordered a prawn curry and asked Bharati too to eat. She did. But some elders chided her saying she should have known better — she should have refused the prawn curry (spicy and oily etc). She ran to Dara and told him what the elders had said. Dara was unperturbed. He said the all familiar mantra: "Are, Bharati, kuch nai

hoga — I have informed the Mother.” True enough, Bharati never felt any ill effects.

Dara’s prayers to the Mother were two — (1) O Mother, fulfil my desire and (2) O Mother take away my desire. In either case the onus was on Her — once the prayer was voiced. He had full faith, so never protested or worried — so he could say “kuch nai hoga.” Though Dara indulged his palate with some non-veg dish — always informing the Mother — he relished the Dining Room food, licking the dish clean (to its original state, before use) and finishing off with the usual banana followed by its peel.

The disease whittled down Dara and, I think, also affected his speech. One day, I can’t recall how or who called me for help — I reached his house. When I reached there, Dara was sitting in the bathroom, a towel just draped across his thighs, and a minor cut on his forehead. A servant was there; he said Dara could not get up. Dara himself could not say much — he only made some incoherent noises and made signs with his hands. We tried to help him up, but he waved us away, with a bit of annoyance (so it seemed). For a while I was puzzled. Then a thought struck me — maybe prompted by his actions. I asked the servant to get out of our (Dara’s) sight. Then I turned to Dara; he smiled and let me help him stand with a support. I then wrapped a dhoti around him and helped him to his cot. I left after seeing that he was made somewhat comfortable. Later I got a letter from Dara, thanking me for my help — an unexpected and unusual gesture from a dying man, for indeed a short time after (maybe a month or two) I heard Dara was no more. (The letter, alas, was never preserved — I didn’t even think of doing it.) He passed away on 8 February 1966. The Great Helper of all had reached out and helped him “UP”.

What conclusions to draw on Dara? Or should we do so at all? To do so, looking at his physical life, may or may not amount to much. He did practically nothing — his life was rather notable for that. But the man was more than just his (rather big) physical self. There were depths in him which would be difficult to fathom. He had his share of difficulties and his share of experiences, all of which are borne out by his correspondence with his Guru. How did Dara come here and why? Let us go back two generations. His grandfather hailed from

Lucknow. He had a fortuitous misadventure in Bombay — he missed a ship — and had to wait for 15 days for the next one. (Something to do with the Haj pilgrimage.) So, for some reason or other he drifted to Hyderabad. There he had a fortuitous adventure, saving an influential and rich man from drowning, which led to a friendship and his writing up a petition for the newly-found friend. The letter was to a highly-placed governmental official or minister, who found the drafting of the letter admirable and called the author (Dara's grandfather) over to meet him. This event got him a good post. He rose higher and higher and settled in Hyderabad. Dara was now a Hyderabadi; during his studies he had a Bengali professor who presented to him a book of Sri Aurobindo. This small seemingly unimportant event brought about by a devious route through two generations (missed ship, drowning man, drafted letter, high post and shifting from Lucknow to Hyderabad) brought Dara in touch with Sri Aurobindo and changed the course of his life and of his family.

Dara wrote to Sri Aurobindo. The following correspondence took place between Sri Aurobindo and his to-be disciple (I have paraphrased it):

DARA: Sir, I would like to come to the Ashram to settle there.

SRI AUROBINDO: No, you are not yet ready.

DARA: When and how shall I know that I am ready?

SRI AUROBINDO: The "Call" will come to you.

Dara was then readying to go to England for his studies. So again a letter to Sri Aurobindo.

DARA: Sir, I am leaving for England for my studies. If in mid-ocean the "Call" comes, I will jump over and swim back.

SRI AUROBINDO: Now you are ready. You can come over to pursue your Sadhana.

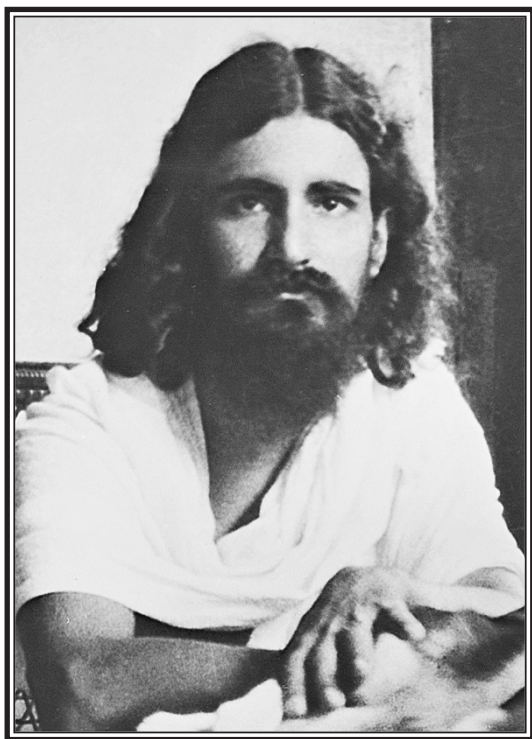
I think it is at this point of time that the soothsayers "breaking of the house" started, but I think too that the breaking was prelude to a new beginning.

Would this be a good enough pointer to the real Dara — his surrender and sincerity?

Dara may have let down a thought of his, clipped to a string, from a window UP THERE, and it hit me. So began this tale of a gentle giant and his family. The string is drawn up again — so passing on the story, I finish here my telling — until the string is down again!

Dara came to Pondicherry and Prashanto went to England.

Prashanto



Prashanto

Prashanto too arrived in 1927 but went away in 1936, or maybe earlier. He was not here in 1945, but came some time later — early 50s — that's when I met him. He was an interesting character. Physically, and I may venture to say even mentally, he was very “un-Dara”-like. Some facial resemblance persisted, but then, he was as thin as Dara

was fat. He would walk a mile while Dara took three steps.* Prashanto would be satisfied chewing a few peanuts while Dara may go in for a chocolate bar. When Dara, on a rare, rare occasion, thought of fasting to reduce, Prashanto chided him saying, “Aré theek sé khao, aur dund baithak lagao!” (Eat well, but do exercises, push-thrus and deep knee bends). Prashanto was himself scrawny, of good height and a fair complexion but tanned well (he roamed around with a banian or without it and a pair of shorts). Same aquiline nose as Dara’s. They both were soft-spoken but spoke of different things.

The dissimilarities did not end there. Prashanto would remain calm (mentally & physically) in all circumstances. Dara would not move physically, but often get agitated or activated and then he would move heaven and earth to reach his ends.

Prashanto had no desires — food, marriage, nothing distracted him. Dara was a gastronome. As for marriage, Dara had at one time written to the Mother about his urge to tie the knot. She did not pull him up short and abrupt. She gently applied the brakes, said “wait, what’s the hurry?” Dara simmered down. Again when the feeling came on him, he wrote to the Mother. Again the reply “No hurry” — and again... Time didn’t stand still — Dara turned 40. He reminded the Mother that he was not getting any younger. She asked him in reply: “Now that you are 40, where is the need for marriage?” The desire slowly dried up or was taken away from him.

Prashanto was a very qualified man. He had done quite well in his studies at Oxford. He returned to Hyderabad and maybe tried to settle down and failed. He was offered good lucrative posts but refused to accept them. When one to-be-employer raised the pay, Prashanto was

* I am reminded of the Puranic story of the competition or race between Ganesha and his brother Kartikeya — one fat, sitting on a rat, the other slim, seated on a peacock. The race was to start from Kailash, the abode of Shiva, three laps round the Universe and finish at Kailash. On the word “go” Kartikeya flew off in a flurry of bright feathers while Ganesha sat on his rat. After one lap Kartikeya saw Ganesha still in Kailash, and flew on. Second lap over, yet not much change. Third lap over, Kartikeya made a triumphant landing and saw Ganesha there waiting, no sweat but a smile broke out on his face — and he claimed to have won the race! Kartikeya protested, but lost the case. Ganesha’s circumambulations of the Universe were thrice around his mother Parvati, the Mother of the Universe, who contained the Universe, while Kartikeya in a hurry did what is usually done.

not very pleased. He said, “Mai kutta kya...? (Am I a dog?) that you hang a piece of meat in front of me and I am expected to run after you.”

Prashanto was also offered marriage proposals. He would not surrender his bachelorhood. Many a prospective bride and party had to leave disappointed. On one of these efforts to entice him into marital bliss, friends and relatives extolled the virtues and advantages of married life. Prashanto agreed and seconded all their ideas. He seemed to give in. People around were just sensing success when Prashanto dropped a bombshell. He smiled and said, “Look here, I too am a believer in love, marriage, etc. etc. But I have one weakness (or habit), that I cannot get over once it comes.” All, especially the bride’s party were thinking, “Oh, what now?” Prashanto continued, “From time to time I get an urge to travel. I cannot resist it. I leave everything, home, hearth, family, friend and wander off.” This put an end to all marriage proposals. Who would wed their girl to such a gypsy? This wanderlust must have overtaken him and he walked out of his house and arrived here again, probably in early 1953. He recounted that he would, when leaving a place, follow the railway tracks. His theory being that the tracks would lead to a station — any station was good enough. There you could get some food. His favourite form of food, on these wanderings, was “*munghalli*” (peanuts) and neem seeds. He would munch those and walk on and on. For most of his travels were done on foot, or ticketless travel. This time the “wanderlust” had a reason. The story took place in Hyderabad.

Zeba was Dara’s niece. She was a very turbulent, naughty girl. She had come to Pondy as a 12 year old. When she was around one could expect and be prepared for anything. She could apply some home made medicine, a mixture of lemon juice, salt and chilli on a boil or wound or pour some coconut oil into the mouth left partly open for snoring while at siesta. Dara was at the receiving end. He would chase her but never caught her. What if he caught her. He probably would have laughed and left her. Dara (and Prashanto) actually loved this lively, imaginative girl.

Prashanto was living at Sudhira’s (Zeba’s mother) house. All were at the dinner table. Zeba was very young, but was already very adept (and improving). She suddenly started smearing food all over

her own head and face! Her father thought this needed some corrective measure. He landed a slap on the young Zeba. Prashanto rose up and voiced his protest at this harsh treatment. The father said he very well knows how to bring up his child and told Prashanto not to interfere in what does not concern him. Prashanto did not say a word, got up and walked out of the house — headed straight to his familiar rail tracks, out of Hyderabad and ultimately reached Pondy.

It was all so simple — no dinner, no farewells, no plans, no luggage, no money and no tickets. He was sharing a meal with a gang of railway workers. They discovered the tramp knew English — reading and writing as well. They implored him to apply for a vacant job they knew of in the railways.

In two months he reached this place. Dara informed the family.

When he arrived here he was put up somewhere near Parc-à-charbon (if not at the Park itself, before it took its present posh form). He had many old friends here and Bihari-da of the D.R. must have been one of his closest. He joined him in his work, washing bananas and lemons. He worked and moved around, scrawny, in old khakhi shorts and sleeveless banian, shaved head and usually with an unshaven chin, hunched shoulders — he looked every inch the hobo that he was. He couldn't care less as to what he looked like. Not many would take notice of him, much less think of engaging him in conversation. He considered it a blessing that people did not take notice of him. He said, "As soon as people take notice of you — you are in trouble." But those who, undeterred by his appearance, did talk to him found him exceedingly interesting. He talked slow and soft. His English was as you may guess the "King's" — spiced with an occasional "sala;" or some other Urdu or Hindi word (expressive if not expletive).

His work in the D.R. over, he may come out and head East, West, North or South — as fancy took him. Once I happened to meet him heading North from the Ashram. I asked him, "Where are you going?" He replied, "Home." I said, "I thought you lived in Parc?" He said, "Yes, I do. But who says I should go by this road and not by that and reach by the shortest route?" He could be found walking away from his destination to reach it.

One day as I stood in front of the Ashram, enjoying a fine drizzle, Prashanto happened by. He was in his usual attire, but perched on

his head was a folded newspaper that he held pressed down with one hand. I plucked it off his head. He stopped and pleaded with me to return it. I happened to glance at the date — it was a recent — a “yesterday’s” — edition. Feigning surprise, I asked why he was wasting so recent an edition. Someone could still be interested in reading it. Prashanto in reply said, “What, you call this news? De Gaulle pulls Churchill’s nose. He in turn twists somebody’s ear.” Intrigued I asked him, “Then why are you holding on so dearly to this paper?” He smiled a bit shyly and said, “Oh, some well-wisher gives me the papers. When a sufficient number are collected, I sell them and Behari and I go eat some ice-cream.” I couldn’t but return his precious paper. I thought “How childlike — innocent and secretive these two old men are!” In fact they were two of the best men I came across. Not only I, but many who knew them hold the same opinion. I recount a strange paradoxical story. Each one has to draw his or her own conclusion.

The story unfolds in or around the D.R. There was a lady who took her breakfast in D.R. every day. She did not eat the bananas — but took them and gave them as alms. This was reported to the Mother. The Mother had, often enough, said that each one should take only what he/she needs. So the Mother instructed Ravindraji to stop giving her breakfast. She pleaded with the Mother. The Mother sent her to Ravindraji telling her to plead with him, as it was his domain of work. Be that as it may, what was more interesting and mysterious (or meaningful) was what followed. Prashanto and Bihari-da washed the bananas. Prashanto would keep aside the bananas which he thought were not good enough to be distributed at the counter. Sometimes there were quite many. On his way out Prashanto would distribute them to the urchins — just outside the D.R. This happened not long after the “lady’s” incident. So, Ravindraji dutifully reported the matter to the Mother. The Mother told Ravindraji, much to his astonishment, not to admonish him. “Simply tell him not to distribute just outside the D.R. He should go a distance away and do it.” She then added, “You just don’t know how lucky we are and from where we get all these things.” What to make of this? Maybe best not to use our ever fallible Reason — just swallow the information and wait.

Prashanto was an avid cricket fan. The Nawab of Pataudi had

been his classmate. He had seen him play (play more and study less). India's late President Zakir Hussain was also one of his classmates. Prashanto was, it is said, the much-disliked Aurangzeb in one of his previous births. Strangely enough he was given the duty of taking care of Dara — which job he did to the best of his ability till Dara's passing away. (Paying for sins committed 300 years ago!)

*The hurt you cause in the forenoon self-propelled
Will overtake you in the afternoon.*

TIRUVALLUVAR - KURAL

Prashanto spent his days simply, doing his work, taking walks and telling stories if and when we needed him. Then, one fine day, he just lifted anchor and walked away, again on his wanderings — bitten by the migration bug. It was probably not just the migration bug that bit him: He had an ear-ache that seemed to increase when he approached the Ashram and diminished as he went further away. One day he walked on and on and in a couple of months he found himself back in his home town, Hyderabad. Maybe he followed the railway tracks. We came to know that he reached his niece's house (Sudhira's daughter). But everything had changed, he was lost in the concrete jungle. He entered a dispensary to have his sore foot seen to. He casually asked the doctor if he knew of a (his) family. One million chance — the doctor knew — and so Prashanto walked into the family he had walked out from the dinner table. Sudhira was there. She passed away shortly after. Zeba was happy to look after him till his demise. He never asked for anything, didn't need much — just his meals, and a few beedies. Zeba described him as a "Fakhir", with no wants or desires. He lived a few years doing practically nothing (except smoking), then he too was gathered up — he may have followed a subtler "rail track" to reach his final Station and destination.



BULA-DA
(Charu Chandra Mukherjee)

Thunderer with a Song

*The inside of every cloud
Is bright and shining;
I therefore turn my clouds about,
And always wear them inside out,
To show the lining.*

ELLEN T. FOWLER

THERE was a time in the Ashram when everyone knew everyone. There is some truth (not all the truth) in the saying “Small is beautiful”. That was the time when we referred to the Ashram Depart-

ments as Khirod-da's, Mani's or Udar's. One such was Bula-da's. I am glad to note that some still call it Bula-da's. Surely Bula-da's is more homely, has more an old-time charm, than "Régie d'Électricité" or "the Plumbers". Who does not know Bula-da? Most Ashramites surely do — anyone who switched on an electric light or used a tap should remember him.

On the 9th of September this year (9.9.99), Bula-da would have been a hundred years old. This is a delayed tribute to a great grand old man whose eyes were ever so crossed, yet the vision straight, the views straighter and the strength of purpose, the unwavering devotion, the straightest and most constant.

Bula-da was born a hundred years ago on the ninth day of the ninth month of the 99th year of the 19th century. This number 9 seems to have dogged his footsteps through much of his life. He first arrived here in the ninth month of 1930. He did go back, but came and settled here in the July of 1934 — since then he never went out of Pondicherry, even for a day. In the olden days the Mother distributed soup to sadhaks in numbered cups — his was numbered 9.

Bula-da did not intend to stay in the Ashram. He had ideas about doing some business to earn money for the Mother. He did do some business in jute. But the Mother had other ideas. She gave him the flower "Aspiration in the Physical", saying this flower would bring him back. And so it happened. Sahana-di, his aunt — well-known in Bengal as the Nightingale of Bengal — was already here. Then others of the family, mother Amiya, aunts Nolina and Aruna and brother Kunal followed. It seems Nolina-di's husband, Dr. Ghosh, sent Bula-da to the Ashram to bring her back to Calcutta. Bula-da came and never went back, nor did Nolina-di. I wouldn't know what Dr. Ghosh did about it.

Bula-da was a big man, with a well built body (must have been very strong in his youth). Biggish cheeks, but slightly hanging. The eyes held a squint and a crease ran from between the eyebrows up the forehead. Not the handsomest person one can come across, not in the least. But he had a charm of his own (specially when he smiled or laughed) that could only be felt by a closer acquaintance. Let us make a closer acquaintance. Bula-da had his education at Shantiniketan, was quite close to Rabindranath Tagore. It seems he sang quite

well too — nothing surprising if his aunt Sahana-di was anything to go by.

Bula-da like many of the old sadhaks was uncompromising in quality of work. A straight line was a straight line for him. Any kink or deviation in thought, speech or action had to be immediately straightened out. This was usually done by heat-treatment. All in his Department knew this. Be it a paid worker, sadhak, or even some government official, he had to suffer this very democratic treatment. None could oppose him or challenge him. His sincerity and strength of purpose made him irreproachable. But he was not all fire. He never retained the heat he generated. One moment he may scorch you, and the next, reach out to you all smiles and sympathy.

Bula-da lived (except the first 2-3 years) in the main Ashram Building, in the room next to the stairs near the cashier's office (Mansukh lives there now). It may interest people to know that the original cashier was Satyakarma (Pavan and Varun Reddy's great grandfather). He lived there (in the Cashier's Office) contentedly all his Ashram life, in one corner of that office, just an area of 20 sq. ft. or so, curtained off from the rest of the room. A small story — to better know what it takes to be contented. Alexander the Great, conqueror of half the known world, found the world too small. Diogenes, his contemporary and an ascetic philosopher, lived in a bath-tub and found it enough. Alexander once went to visit Diogenes. He stood in front of the tub and asked Diogenes if he needed anything. The old man replied from the tub, "Just get out of the way, let the sun fall on me — nothing more."

Bula-da led an extremely simple life. His room contained practically nothing; the impression one got was emptiness. That's because it held not one bit of anything but the barest necessities — a small table, chair, cot and a kuja of water. Later one almirah was added to keep some things not belonging to him. A ceiling fan came much later (maybe in the 70s), hung there by his staff and his well-wishers. They forced it on him. I wonder if he used it much — if at all. He had for decades a hand-fan made from a section of a palm leaf. Chandubhai has inherited it and uses it even now in his Golconde room, in preference to a table-fan. Incidentally, it may be thought-provoking to note that Golconde has no ceiling fans, nor are any contemplated. It is the

Ashram's most "exclusive" guest house, also the oldest and most famous. (Except for Guest House where Sri Aurobindo and the Mother resided in the early days.) Fortunately Golconde is excluded from our usual list of guest houses.

There were many hurricane lanterns in Bula-da's room, well maintained and ready for use. A ladder too was there or close by, also ready for instant use. He needed it very often for electrical repairs. In his younger days (even when not so young) one might have seen him rushing with the ladder, to restore some light or power. He said, only he knew how to navigate it through a crowd, so it was risky offering to help him. It was best not to ask where, why, or why not. If you cared, just follow him and wait.

Bula-da's unchanging dress was a white dhoti, worn in Bengali working class style (not the Bengali Babu's) and a white half shirt. I don't think anyone has seen him differently dressed. It could be minus the shirt late at night.

Bula-da took his work as his sadhana, his lifetime offering to his Gurus. His devotion to it, through it to his Gurus, knew no bounds of time, weather or mood. He could not tolerate anything, be it a person, an event or a personal feeling, to come between him and its accomplishment. One may think all this to be a bit of an overstatement. Read on, then, draw your own conclusions.

Once the Mother was slightly indisposed. She had to go frequently to the WC. Sometime in the evening Amrita-da (or Pavitra-da?) informed Bula-da about the Mother's condition and added that the flush was stuck and water was constantly gushing out. It had to be repaired. Bula-da was in a fix. At that time of the evening, none could enter Her room, leave alone repairing a flush. Bula-da thought — and acted. The night passed uneventfully. Next morning the flush was repaired and Amrita-da (or Pavitra-da?) informed Bula-da that all went off well the previous night — so he thought. But how did it all go so well the night through? No one probably gave it serious thought. The fact (found out much later) was that while others slept, Bula-da was awake on duty. He had gone up, onto the terrace of the Mother's room. He sat near the overhead tank and kept watching the bathroom window. He closed the control valve on the pipe leading to the WC. When the Mother switched on the light he would open the valve.

When the Mother put off the light, he would again close the valve. Thus he passed the night, hand on the valve and eye on the window for the tell-tale light. Who knows, some other Light may have shone on Bula-da, for She surely Knew. The incident may well be a measure of Bula-da's devotion and loving concern for the Mother.

Once even Bula-da disobeyed the Mother!! We do it often enough for our sake. Bula-da did it for Her or Sri Aurobindo's sake. Even then it would seem actions will have reactions and consequences. It is probably a responsibility God has assumed, to absorb and mitigate some of the unpleasant consequences. (Else what buffeting would we be subjected to?)

The episode was of a long time back. There happened to be a strike or some such trouble (possibility of violence) brewing up in town. All Ashramites were forbidden to venture out into the market area. But, Bula-da needed urgently to buy (needed by the Mother) some part of an appliance. He, with his usual fervour, thought he would (or should) quickly sneak out, make the needed purchase, and return before any friend or foe, could take notice of his moves. But some One was vigilant — the Mother came to know. When Bula-da went up She pulled him into the bathroom, out of others' gaze. She was in an angry mood — raised Her hand to strike! Bula-da was paralysed stiff in front of what he saw — Mahakali. Sweat poured out of every pore. Then as sudden as the Mahakali appearance, the "Mother" aspect returned and the raised hand was lowered gently. Bula-da was shaken and pleaded "Ma — I will never do it again."

Dyuman-bhai and Bula-da were doing some heavy work in the store. They were quite tired. A strange but very logical thought crossed Bula-da's mind, "Mother resides in all of us. So if I am tired, She too should be feeling so." After the work he went up to Her and was wonderstruck — for She, was on the point of dropping Herself into a nearby chair, with deep intake of breath, as would an exhausted person!

Another touching scene was when Bula-da felt a child's hurt pride towards the Mother (for some childish reason). He had not given expression to his feelings, but when he did go to Her, She looked at him, took his hands in Hers, and pulled him into Her embrace — a soothing balm to the hurt as soothing as you ever get them.

Bula-da was a man of single and straight thought process. The following is puzzling or enlightening. I wonder which. The story in itself is rather simple. A bulb (light) went kaput in his room and there sat Bula-da for a time wondering “Who should I report to, about the bulb?” Then it suddenly occurred to him, “Oh, I should tell Bula!”

Such men like Bula-da seem at times to forget who they are, lose their identity, — or have they merged their individuality into a greater ONE?

Just listen to this and draw your own conclusions. The famous Anandamoyee (a great guru in her Ashram) from Bengal, once visited our Ashram with a few of her disciples. Bula-da had a great wish to see her (meet her). He could not, due to his duties. He hurried through his work, and would have made it just before she was scheduled to leave — so he thought. Suddenly there was a call from the Mother. He rushed up to the Mother, saw Her pacing the room. He stood by, awaiting Her command or wish — they never came. After quite a while She looked up, smiled and said, “O, you can go now.” Bula-da hurried out, a bit puzzled, but knowing somewhat Her ways, he thought no more about it — until he discovered that Anandamoyee had just left. He then re-aligned his thoughts.

The following episode gives an insight into another aspect of Bula-da. His room’s window opens on to the road in front of our Dispensary. I have seen or heard of people calling him, waking him up in the dead of the night for some urgent reason or other. On one such night, one of the Ganguli brothers (Manoranjan Ganguli’s son, probably Barin) woke up Bula-da. He seemed quite desperate. He requested Bula-da to go and report at once to the Mother about his sister’s condition. She was very ill. The others of the family were very anxious and nervous. Bula-da would have been justified had he said, “No, not possible — maybe tomorrow I can do it.” For indeed it was not possible for anyone to meet the Mother at that time of the night. But Bula-da could not just turn him away disappointed. He told him, “OK, now don’t worry. Go home and sleep well.” Bula-da’s thoughts ran on wider tracks than the usual — maybe they ran on Faith and Devotion. He went to the Samadhi and actually “reported” the sick girl’s condition — to the Samadhi! Thereafter he gave no more thought to the matter, and resumed his sleep.

The next morning one of the Gangulis went up to the Mother to tell Her about their sick sister — and before he could proceed, She said: “Oh yes, I know. Bula had informed me.”

Then there is this little story of Devendra’s (Electric Workshop). He was fortunate enough to work under Bula-da and so receive the “hot and cold” treatment. It has, I believe, had some effect in shaping and tempering him to some extent.

The day was Devendra’s birthday. There was a call for duty in the Ashram. Devendra went and Bula-da acted as his assistant-cum-supervisor. Bula-da kept pouring a constant stream of strong advice and comments on the working man. Fortunately Devendra knew what was good for him, kept quiet, and absorbed what he could. The work over, he left — a bit punch drunk but richer by the experience. Later Bula-da came to know that it was Devendra’s birthday. Bula-da found him, gave him some sweets, patted him on the back with a big smile and said, “Bhai, tomar jonmodine tomay khatiye, boke dilam. Kich-chhu mone korona.” (On your birthday I made you work and scolded you. Don’t take it to heart.) Devendra was moved and embarrassed by Bula-da’s gesture — genuine and loving.

Devendra was recipient of some more lessons from Bula-da of which two from the early days of his coming to the Ashram may be interesting and enlightening.

Sunday is, as we all know, taken for granted, and some even claim as a “right”, a holiday. Well, Devendra too was one who thought so. On Sundays he spent morning hours in the Library, reading. On one such Sunday, Bula-da had an urgent job for Devendra. He looked for him, naturally could not get him in the usual haunts, which for Bula-da were the 2 or 3 electrical departments, D.R. or the Ashram. When he heard that Devendra was in the Library, he was not very impressed. He rather in no uncertain terms impressed on Devendra that on such leave days he had more responsibility to attend to. Bula-da told Devendra to sit in his office upto 11.30 a.m. on Sundays, etc. I think Devendra still follows that directive.

A more interesting, with more connotations than the above episode, is the following one — again with Devendra as the “hero” under Bula-da’s hammer shaping. Devendra was newer. He had, he thought, some spare time early in the morning. He watched two old

sadhaks, namely Khirod-da and Biren-da (both late, one of the Building Service and the latter the Garden Service) sweeping the Ashram courtyard. Nowadays there are many such privileged sweepers — with some difference. Devendra approached one of them and asked, “Dada, I too want to sweep. I am free at this time and can help you.” Biren-da looked up and asked: “Bhai, tumi parbe ki...” (Bhai, will you be able to do this work...) and continued, “It is a difficult job. You see, Nolinibabu walks up and down, from the Meditation Hall to the Samadhi — and how can anyone sweep when he is passing by? You have to wait until he is out of sight and sweep the Meditation Hall side, stop when he comes round the corner, go sweep the Samadhi side, stop before he comes round again and go to the Meditation Hall side... can you do it?” Devendra said he could try. Then Khirod-da said: “All right, but I have to refer your case to the Mother. You may write down your name, your work and other details and give it to me. I will send it Up.” Devendra did so as early as he could. Khirod-da warned him thus: “I am sending this Up through Nolinibabu. I cannot say, nor can I ask Nolinibabu as to when the answer will come. I cannot even remind him, you too should not ask me about it.” Devendra was a bit deflated and mystified, but agreed to abide by these rules. A month passed by — no reply. Another fifteen days went by — same silence. I would sidetrack here with another short story.

Devendra used to go to Bula-da’s room usually at 11.30 a.m. and accompany him to the D.R. Bula-da usually occupied the same place for his meals. He took from the counter only what he could eat and always ate all he took with great relish. He cleaned up the plate with a piece of bread saved for the purpose (a habit of many old sadhaks, not much seen nowadays. I too had picked it up from them, but dropped it somewhere on the way). He took the empty dish to the washing place and to the first person he met there, he would remark, “Ah, ki ranna! Pet bhore kheyechi!” (Ah, what cuisine! I have eaten my fill!) He really meant it and this was a daily unailing programme.

Now to continue on the main track. After about one and a half months of imposed silence Devendra as usual went to Bula-da’s room at 11.30 to move on to D.R. No sooner than they came out of the Ashram, Bula-da’s salvo caught Devendra absolutely unawares, pants down. He for a few seconds did not know what hit him or why.

He was the only one within range, so he knew he was the intended target. Bula-da opened up with: “What cheek you have. What emboldened you?” Devendra was still wondering, and Bula-da continued: “How could you write to the Mother asking permission to sweep in the Ashram? Nolini-da asked me about you. Have you not been given a big responsibility by the Mother? You have to look after water and electricity supplies. So, stick to these — you should have no other considerations.” That settled it — quiet again. Normal conversation resumed — D.R. and eating as if nothing had happened.

I too was within Bula-da’s firing range on an occasion or two. I had by then learned to duck under cover (mentally) and wait it out until the ammo was spent. The storm over, fine weather was sure to follow. Moreover, I had seen people much older and more important than I, cowed to silence by Bula-da’s wrath. So nothing to feel belittled about. Also the cleansing was usually deserved and good — a bit rough though it was.

There was a railing to be erected at the swimming pool. I thought of saving some money — so took some “once-used” GI pipes (a spot of rust here and there). I and some others around thought the pipes would serve the purpose. In came Bula-da. He asked: “What for are the pipes?” I told him, unsuspecting and relaxed — when the blast came. “Tumi ki pagol? Buddhi, shuddhi nai?” (Are you mad? Have you lost your sense?) He went on: “Who taught you this false economy? What if the railing breaks, and a child falls, who will be responsible?” I did not offer any explanation. He cooled down as suddenly as he had burst out and said: “Why don’t you take some new pipes?” So a good job was done — the railing still stands and serves.

Years ago two Government officials came to settle a dispute as to what tariff should be paid by us on power consumption in the Swimming Pool. One was from the Centre, the other from the State, both of high standing. Bula-da was our representative. The higher one, from the Centre, had visited the place the previous day, when only I was present. He, like me, assumed the role of a passive onlooker. Bula-da had only the officer from the State to deal with. The gentleman had hardly set the ball rolling when Bula-da came down heavily on him and pinned him down — not on any technical point but on some common ethical points, that the gentleman had failed to observe. We, the

officer from the Centre and I, enjoyed the 20-minute one-sided battle. The “victim” too kept quiet, for he knew Bula-da was right, not just for that occasion, but as far back as he could recollect.

One may be led to think that Bula-da was nothing but a bundle of tinder, ready to catch fire at the least spark. True, to a certain extent — from a certain point of view. But one should also try to find out what sort of fire it was, what the fire burned and why the fire flared up at all. I suppose those singed by him could give better and truer answers. I for one would opine the fire was necessary to burn away some useless accoutrements that we let cling to us.

I read somewhere that a measure of a people’s culture is their attitude and feeling towards their children. Bula-da went all soft and weak, overcome, when he saw or talked to any small child. There were three little children on whom he doted like a grandfather — Hema, Prema and Mahi. His three “grandchildren” may have more to tell. He had another very human penchant — Tea. Bula-da, one fine morning, came to Parul’s room. He was passing by and just peeped in. He sat awhile and talked of old times. He then got up to leave. Parul and I pleaded with him to dally a while longer. He said, “No, no, I have to go — another day.” We then suggested: “Bula-da, ek cup cha kheyē jan.” (Have a cup of tea and go.) A half guilty smile broke across his face and he said, “Achcha — a cup of tea — maybe I can linger a little longer!” He sat down and we sipped a long slow cup of memories.

Bula-da was keenly aware of the difficulties of others too. He did not shut himself up in his “tower” (ivory was out of the question). It was on his insistence that the *Matrisharanam* was built, for he felt that the visitors must have a place with no charges levied to at least wash off the grime and weariness of their travel. (I leave to each one’s imagination the pleasure felt when one can answer one’s “call of Nature”, that too decently and discreetly. Moreover, what relief to the public.) During meditations he allowed people to occupy his room as sitting place was always scarce on such occasions. He did not even mind people leaving their chappals in his room. It seems he even promoted the cause of our students who wanted to stay back and join the Ashram after their studies. He wished they be given full facilities. Albeit these are small matters, they take birth from deeper

feelings — so I mention them.

Bula-da was not only in-charge of “Bula-da’s”. He was, as importantly, one of the three-member “Commando Force” within the Ashram (Dyuman-bhai and Haradhan-da being the other two). Dyuman-bhai and Bula-da had no day or night duties. They were on 24 hours alert. To us now those early days seem like some “Frontier days”, with hardly any amenities and back-up systems (fridge, generator, etc.), no regular services, no transport except an old bicycle. A shoestring budget completed the picture.

Bula-da was also a caretaker of the Ashram Main Building. Closing gates, doors, putting off lights, seeing to the orderliness of the Darshan crowds, shifting furniture, cleaning, polishing, fixing of curtains, replacing fused bulbs (sometimes, at odd hours, when no one was available or permitted — the Mother would hold the ladder while he climbed up), and keeping numerous hurricane lanterns filled (kerosene), cleaned and trimmed (in case of power failure) etc., etc., all these and more, came under the purview of Bula-da’s duty.

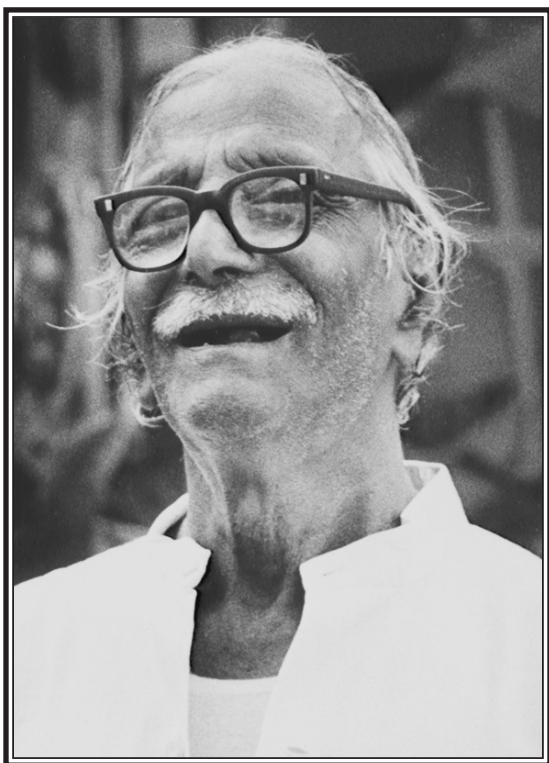
With so much to do he found it impractical to join in any function or programme outside the Ashram or, later, the Playground activities. On one occasion, long ago, Bula-da entertained a wish to go to witness a dance programme in Dilip-da’s (Dilip Kumar Roy) house (now the Tresor Nursing Home). He went to ask the Mother who was busy on the Meditation Hall stairs. She told him to wait and went upstairs. He waited and waited — the Mother did not come — the dance was naturally over. (It was like the Vindhya mountains waiting for Agastyamuni’s return from the South.) Bula-da took the hint. It was the last time he let such a wish enter him.

But a more exacting and satisfying duty Bula-da, Dyuman-bhai and Chinmayee had, and that was being the Mother’s personal “servants”. (Another team of equally dedicated “servants” for Sri Aurobindo was Champaklal-ji, Purani-ji, Nirod-da, Pujalal-ji, Moolshankar, Lallubhai, etc.) They had to be nimble-minded, nimble-footed and nimble-handed. Their jobs, small or big, were fixed to the minutest detail — as to how, who and when to do it. They took great joy and pride in satisfying their Masters. So the jobs, specially the cleaning and repairing, were to be done without disturbing Them — so quick — get in when They are out, and get out when They come in!

Bula-da, one of our old, old sadhaks, re-lives in us — a century old yet young in our minds and hearts. He was, and is, a path-pointer, one of those who trod the Path before us. For years, when down here, he showed the way — lantern in one hand and ladder in the other.

Bula-da was always optimistic. He was even quite sure he would reach a hundred years. But that was not to be. After a brief illness he left his body on the 28th of April 1986. On this Earth, when the Mother needed him he was always ready, Her willing servitor. If it was an electric or water problem, She depended entirely on Her Bula. His touch would set things right. The Mother once remarked: “Bula, they obey you, they listen to you.” One day during the War, when Sri Aurobindo had to have the news of the War, the speaker went dead. (The radio was kept in Pavitra-da’s room. A long wire connected the speaker in Sri Aurobindo’s room to the radio.) Pavitra-da was not around. Mother summoned Bula-da. He came running and said: “Mother, I don’t know anything about radio engineering.” She said: “Does not matter — go try.” He went and, maybe his hand was guided — he touched a wire joint — the speaker came alive! No wonder then, he left us earlier than expected. She must have called him urgently, held the Ladder — maybe some “light connection” problem, if not Up-there, maybe up-to-down-here. She may have set him waiting on the Path Beyond, to help us with another “lantern” and another “ladder” without a “last rung”. Not to be startled, if perchance a shout is heard — it is but an exhortation to move on.

I would end this saga of Bula-da with a final Hurrah! — a saga of devotion and dedication, of sincerity and simplicity, and an undemanding self-giving. He was a beautiful person — if we had the eyes to see! His Thunder was his song — had we the ears to hear!



BIHARI-DA

*I'm nobody! Who are you?
Are you nobody, too?
How dreary to be somebody!
How public like a frog
To tell your name the livelong day
To an admiring bog!*

EMILY DICKINSON

LONG I nurtured the thought of writing on Bihari-da. I had in mind just his silent and simple way of life, and a chance hearing of a comment made by the Mother and lastly a second-hand appreciation of his Bengali poems (some of them rendered into songs). I say

‘second-hand’ for I cannot read Bengali, so cannot comment on anyone’s writing in that language. But some Bengali friends assured me that they (poems) were of a very high order. What really nagged me was the Mother’s comment. She said: “He (Bihari) is one who has never troubled me!” It would seem, at first hearing, an innocent and a common enough remark. But its echo, and a wee bit deeper thinking should stun us by the mountain of meaning it carries. How many of us can claim this remark from Her? Moreover he never claimed it. She showered it on him. So, I thought that there must be some beauty of a butterfly wrapped in that cocoon of simplicity and silence. It was at first difficult to unwrap this cocoon. Not many knew much more about Bihari-da than I did, i.e. the outer wrapping. Even his close associates said: “Bihari-da to nijer shambandhe kichchu boleyi ni.” (Bihari-da never talked about himself.) Only when I met Vishwajit, his friend, neighbour and “tormentor”, did I glean a little something. Then I came across a diary of his (Bihari-da’s). That was a great windfall — or so I thought.

I will try to do justice to this old friend — as far as I can — and leave the rest for each reader to find out for her/himself as to who Bihari-da was. How far had he gone? where is he now? With these questions in mind I will quote later some pages from his diary (without corrections even in the spellings or constructions).

Now to get on with the story of Bihari-da. I begin at the beginning.

Beharilal Barua was born into, it would seem, a poorish family in Chittagong (Chottogram — now in Bangladesh) in a town called Muktnait on 29th of March 1909. (It is interesting that on the same date a few years later the Mother met Sri Aurobindo for the first time.)

Bihari-da in his early youth was not very spiritually inclined nor did he know about Sri Aurobindo. He was somewhat mixed up with a revolutionary group of young people. He did not take a very active part. The group was led by Manmohan Dutta. They were some of those involved in the famous “Chittagong Armoury Raid”. (Bihari-da had already reached Pondy when the raid took place.) Manmohan Dutta’s brother was Bihari-da’s teacher. It was he who introduced Bihari-da to Sri Aurobindo. He would take Bihari-da home and show him some books, talk about Sri Aurobindo. The seeds were sown. To get to the study circle that had some books by Sri Aurobindo,

Bihari-da had sometimes to foot it over two hills (wooded) to reach it and then walk back after dark.

Bihari-da was in touch with the Ashram from the age of 16. He wrote to Sri Aurobindo and received the replies through Barin-da (Sri Aurobindo's brother). But soon enough he felt the urge to leave everything (friends, family, etc.) and come to Pondy. This was around the year 1929. The Mother had by now taken charge of the Ashram, Sri Aurobindo had retired (1926), and Nolini-da was the secretary. Bihari-da wrote to the Mother about his intention of leaving home and family and seeking permission to join the Ashram. He was told through Nolini-da that he should take the consent of his guardian and then only come here. Bihari-da on the pretext of going to Calcutta for a few days to seek a job (that's what he told his parents) boarded a train straight for Pondicherry as destination and destiny. He did not even wait for the permission.

Bihari-da arrived on 31st of July 1929, early morning, at the Pondicherry Railway station — 15 days ahead of the August Darshan. There was none to receive him. He looked around and saw a strange-looking contraption on 4 wheels. He discovered it was a "pousse-pousse" (French for "push-push"), a local version of a rickshaw. It was shaped more or less like a rickshaw — a bit more commodious. The two front wheels were smaller than the two behind. The axle of the front two swivelled by means of a long curved handle held by the passenger. The motive force was a man behind the body of the vehicle, who just leaned his weight against a thick bar (often a beautiful brass one). The man could take it easy, close his eyes and leave to the passenger the bother of manoeuvring and safely reaching the address. These, alas, are things of the past. (There were hardly any faster vehicles to be met with — even bicycles were a rarity. Only bullock carts were a threat, I suppose). In the late 40s there were still 4 or 5 pousse-pousses around, mostly owned by the well-to-do. Then came the "front-wheel-drive" version (man as motive force) which pushed out of existence the "push-push", that was itself pushed out by the cycle-rickshaw now in turn threatened by the "auto-rickshaw". The craze for speed, a fast life-style, advancing technology seem to be the causes of all these extinctions. Now to come back to Bihari-da. He talked to the pousse-pousse-walla — who talked to Bihari-da who

understood nothing, but sat in the vehicle and took the “Danda” (as he recounted) into his hand. The vehicle moved forward and Bihari-da was on his way. I don’t know who directed the carriage to its destination — Ashram — but Bihari-da did arrive.

Bihari-da met Jotin-da — another native of Chittagong — who took him in, gave him a meal and took him to Barin-da. Jotin-da was then (and till his last days) incharge of the Garden Service. Barin-da arranged for Bihari-da to meet the Mother.

What did Bihari-da feel or experience when he saw the Mother for the first time? When asked, he was silent for a while, seemed to hesitate. Then he said that his mind was transported very high, very deep. His eyes were flooded by Her beauty — a Beauty he never imagined existed in this world. He had a similar experience when he met Sri Aurobindo (15th August 1929). I say “met” for, those fortunate 50-60 sadhaks were allowed, in those early days, to approach Him, to touch His feet. He would bless them too, placing His hand on the head. They could drown themselves in the flood of love and grace for an eternity of 3-4 minutes! Bhagirath must have done so in the days of yore when Ganga flowed down the matted locks of Shiva.

Bihari-da was given work in the garden under Jotin-da. He was later transferred to the kitchen under Dyuman-bhai. The kitchen was situated where the “Cold Room” is now (near Prosperity). The food was cooked by a maid. Bihari-da put the food into dishes and brought them to the “Dining Room” which was a tiled-roof shanty. It stood where the Samadhi is now. The sadhaks then ate here. The Mother moved about, unaccompanied, seeing to this or that other work or to see one of the sadhaks. She walked amongst them even when the Dining Room was shifted to its present premises.

I first saw Bihari-da, as did most others, in the Dining Room, getting ready to wash bananas on the verandah (eastern side of the front garden). Bihari-da looked very much like a character out of an old Bengali film, a common working villager. He was of an average height, well built, somewhat of a dark complexion. The features were neatly fashioned — rather a handsome man I would opine. He sported a well-trimmed thick moustache and never a bristly chin. The hair was worn in a neat-cut-bob, always well-oiled and combed down — remarkable was its glossy blackness. The grey hairs, — a few grew

so much later — I saw only in a photograph. More remarkable were the eyes — soft and kind, they lent a glow to his face. They seemed to gaze far away, or was it at a deep calm within him! — it is hard to say. Maybe it is all the same — looking far away or deep within. The man never seemed to change! — his body, face, his moods, his age, and, come to think of it, even his dress. The route to and from his work and the work itself were as unchanging as he. He could be seen with unfailing regularity walking down to the Dining Room every morning at 3.45 a.m. He was the first to arrive, come rain come storm. He was for a time Ravindraji's boss — if Bihari-da could ever be called a "boss" — and reproached him (Ravindraji) for coming only 15 minutes before the appointed time! His work was 'for ever' washing bananas and for a while serving at the counter. His dress was for ever a white dhoti worn high (like Bula-da — a working type) topped by an Albert-da haute-couture sleeved banian. The only change was for working purposes — i.e. a pair of oversized dark blue drawers pulled over the dhoti during banana cleaning, a blue beret-like cap and apron while serving. These were necessary — especially the cap — which I believe was a compulsory item for all cooks, bakers and servers — more compulsory for those with long hair. I believe too that this simple rule was enforced by the Mother for purely hygienic reasons. It would seem no such enforcement or Force exists nowadays — or has taken a back seat (I hope fickle fashion has not taken the front seat). Washing bananas was no mean or easy job. He did it for 50 or more years. Nothing deterred him — cold, rain, even illness (we may note that nothing deterred the consumers). The work was demanding. In the mid 70s Mahesh Sharma joined him as a helper. He considered it a great privilege and honour. Also it was for him an invaluable introduction to and a salubrious lesson for life here. The work meant simply keeping ready on any given day, 15,000 bananas for a rotation of 3 days, i.e. for a consumption of 5,000/day! The bananas had to be cut from the bunches, cleaned, counted and arranged in trays. The trays had to be lifted on to shelves. They would then be "fired" — a smoky fire was lit in the closed room, and the warm smoke helped the fruit to ripen. Bihari-da was the boss — with a difference. He believed that the Mother did appoint an "in-charge" but not a "superior". He (in-charge) had his work chalked out — to organise, arrange the day's

work and report to Her the progress, and any matter pertaining to the work. He also said that the Mother had given a great “freedom” to the workers and She never wanted them to feel they were walking a tight-rope. Bihari-da never asked his helpers about their absence (or sense or even nonsense). If none turned up he carried on alone. Mahesh, all admiration for him, avows, “We of half his years, were no match for him in endurance or output and performance. His body was like a spring. He was so palpably dedicated, conscious and so calm — he commanded our respect.” He added with a rueful smile that lifted his moustache an inch or so: “Gone Bihari-da, so gone are good bananas!” As he warmed up to the subject he said with feeling and conviction: “You name a good quality and Bihari-da had it!”

Bihari-da had a very puzzling bit of routine that he enacted every evening. He never joined our Physical Education, but at about 7.15 p.m. he would come to the Playground and hunker down, leaning his back against a pillar of the old verandah (it does not exist any more. It was demolished to make place for our New Gym.). He talked to no one — just kept looking in front. When the Group H dispersed after the concentration, he would get up and walk away. He didn’t seem to be interested in the “Old Men’s Marching”. So, what brought him there? I can only guess, at this distant date (for I never asked him then), that he saw something that I and most others around didn’t or couldn’t. Or, at least he was filled with a “feeling”. I would take a short diversion in this connection. Sisir-da, our late Headmaster, did the same. He too came and spent the H-Group “Marching time” in the Playground. Like Bihari-da he too was not very interested in physical activities. Unlike Bihari-da he had old comrades with whom he could, and did, indulge in some conversation. I asked why he came. He replied “Nolinibabu bolechhen ashte.” (Nolini-babu has told me to come.) That was reason enough for him, and now, for me too. This may help explain Bihari-da’s puzzling behaviour.

Let us now approach Vishwajit for what he has to say about Bihari-da. They were great friends though of different eras — but sages don’t worry about ages. Vishwajit’s opening remark was “Oh! Bihari-da ek bodo jogi chhilo, ar pondito chhilo.” (Bihari-da was a great yogi and also a pundit). Many knew that Bihari-da was a poet. He had written hundreds of poems in Bengali. But I was surprised

to learn that he had translated Sri Aurobindo's poem 'Jivanmukta' into Bengali way back in 1934! (see pp. 137-39) Sri Aurobindo's poem was published in 1934 in a book titled *Six Poems of Sri Aurobindo*. He also knew Sanskrit and picked up some Urdu from his friend Prashanto.

Vishwajit tried his level best to ruffle Bihari-da's calm or rouse his ire — all to no avail — except once when he fed him a well cooked dish of pork, camouflaged with plenty of masala. Both Bihari-da and his ever-close friend Prashanto (a Muslim by birth — decreed never to touch pork) ate it. The feast over, when the real nature of the dish was revealed, Bihari-da was a bit upset, but not so Prashanto, who took it in his stride or more appropriately into his stomach. He even teased Bihari-da, pouring salt into the fresh wound.

Bihari-da hardly ever fell ill, had no use for medicines. If he did feel out of sorts, he would fast himself back to health and/or consciously work on the illness to get rid of it. (Only once did I know him to submit himself to a doctor's attention — he was operated on for a cataract at JIPMER.) Maybe his regular habits, simple living, and more importantly, a clean, sound mind uncluttered by negative thoughts, all helped keep him in good health. He does mention in his diary about a chest pain. He did not attribute it to a heart condition, but to some subtler or higher reasons.

Bihari-da's life, it would seem to all appearances, was most ordinary and simple — no ups and downs, no bright and colourful happy times alternating with sad dreary days. One might even conclude that it was quite uninteresting or, at best, the most interesting facet to be the very simplicity and drabness and commonness. But, behind this façade or under this surface ran a much more meaningful adventurous, even extraordinary current of life. His mind and spirit seemed to be ever trying, experimenting and moving on untrodden ways to discover greater possibilities in this life of yoga. It is difficult for me without much such experience, to analyse, comment or criticise and judge what Bihari-da achieved or attained. Normally we believe only what we want to. Each one judges according to one's own capacity (of mind). I dare suggest that each one's judgement of others could be his/her yardstick to measure oneself. So — I choose rather to quote from Bihari-da's diary and let each reader's mind take over. He him-

self never spoke to others about these, his inner deeper thoughts. He probably kept these notes and records for his own benefit or use.

Bihari-da's Diary

1. Day by day the working of the Divine Shakti in this body-transformation is becoming clear. Actually it is a journey through an untrodden path, most dangerous and unaccountable, most uncertain and bewildering, but a journey towards a fulfilment of Mother Nature.

First I was bewildered (maybe in 1942) when I was going through physical agony (stomach and heart pain) but could not find the cause of the ailment. I was sure it was the action of the Divine Shakti in her working of transformation of the cells of the body. It was the first sign of the awakening of the cells.

2. When one comes in contact with the Divine Power, one at once can start thinking that he is an Avatar or Messiah. The human vital rushes up to capture the Divine by his vital, mental and physical power instead of giving oneself completely to that Divine Power — he wants to possess the Divine with his Asuric ego. This is the case of many seekers who have fallen from the Divine path. They become the instrument of the dark power that dominates the world.

They might have good wishes for the world, for the suffering of humanity, but they do not take the way of the Divine and bring the world to Truth.

They preach the Divine but in their admixture of falsehood and truth, they make the Divine in their own image.

3. A new society where every individual is given fullest freedom of action and expression is possible only when every unit of the society has transcended the present rules and ways and means of the society that have held together all the individuals. The laws of morality and compulsory rules will have no place in that society. The individual and collective life of that new society will be based on a totally transformed outlook. The spirit that is one and all will manifest itself outwardly and inwardly — even the feeling, seeing, dealing, etc. that every human being possesses will be changed completely. A

society free from all imperfection mental, vital and physical in which all human beings will embody the Truth of the One, individual and universal and transcendental.

4. Hostile Maya is difficult to surmount. Careful not to be dazzled by anything that imitates the Divine. Our surrender must be one-pointed to the inner guide and the Divine Mother.

I must not be disturbed by the victory of the hostile but wait for the Divine Mother's intervention. I must be empowered by Her Force, Knowledge and Love and surrender completely to Her. I must remember that the work bestowed upon me is not mine but Hers and nothing like attachment or personal desire for greatness can touch my being. I have offered myself to Her and I must remain true and nothing must come between me and Her.

5. The Maya of the ego is difficult to surmount. It appears with new dazzles when you think you are killing or surpassing it. Many yogis fell and many seekers broke their journey midway.

It is the Divine alone who can lead us without committing mistakes. So we must surrender ourselves unreservedly to Him alone and reject all desire and ego. A little sincerity in you is enough in the beginning and He will take advantage of it and lead you correctly.

6. In my life I have received the severest attack not from any expected sources, not from anyone from whom it is natural but from very unexpected sources on which I relied entirely, in whom I had perfect faith.

But at the same time the victory over these formidable sources was also the greatest and most complete. No doubt I suffered untold suffering but that suffering was nothing in comparison with the victory and conquest.

I know it was my test whether I would submit to the falsehood or fight for the truth. The attack became the cause of an ultimate victory that surpassed the suffering. The suffering was momentary and the victory was eternal.

7. Those who have never seen the sun, they want to show the sun by the lamplight. They are followers of falsehood. Those who have not seen the Truth, they want to show the Truth by outward human speech; that is a caricature of Truth. Truth is self-evident and even a flash from it can change a human being because a momentary flash of

the Sun of Truth can make a man conscious of a superior light.

To be a guru, to do yogic sadhana for power and position, to show to the world what one really is not, what one should be in spiritual Truth, is dangerous for the seeker, and these things can never be profitable to those with whom he has relations. By one's vital one manifests only the vital world and not the true spirituality, — because it contaminates the pure fire of the soul that wants nothing but the Divine.

8. In the noisy world those who can raise their voice over others' are heard, and they are thought to be the greater. In this way the world is becoming more and more noisy.

But is there none whose voice is eternally superior to any voice of man and world?

It is the supreme Truth, the Divine, who speaks through silence and sinks all other noise in the infinite.

Man of ordinary mind thinks he can be great by making noise and makes noise in the name of the Truth, the Divine; but when he has found the Truth Divine he shrinks from the ordinary way of thinking and no more makes noise. He speaks through silence and the Truth becomes revealed once more to mankind, and humanity turns away from the noise of Falsehood.

9. In India there was the conception of four distinct forms of individuality — Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra. Each man has got one or more of these inner rather than outer personalities. These forms consist of three Gunas, divided according to the Gunas...

In the West, people are considered to possess all these Gunas living together and each individuality is entitled to develop all these personalities together; for that there is ample opportunity. But in actuality these working Gunas in the individual create chaos and people do not find any inner contact in their external life and workings. The result is that they remain always externalised, having nothing to do with any inner consciousness.

Interesting it is that even in the most externalised social organisation of the West there is a class system. The fourfold class system (the four forms of the Indian system) has also roots in the society of the West. There are Brahmins who are thinkers, scientists and technologists; there are Kshatriyas who are engaged in the military sphere;

there are Vaisyas who are traders and industrialists, and there are Sudras who are engaged in all these spheres and help the growth of the four professions by their labour. But it is to be noted that, although people choose the professions of the four, they hardly represent the inner dharma, or..., or soul-desire. Many choose one or other profession because they have to make their livelihood out of the work they were forced to do by necessity.

10. In the future there will be no suppression of the individual as I have been suppressed by circumstances. I was never a free man outwardly — because for me the obstacles were insurmountable. I had nothing in the world to be able to stand on my own feet, free from others' domination. Family, country, politics, society, pecuniary conditions, the community, religion and all the modes of life were against me. There was moreover the second World War.

Because of the Mother I could grow in my quest for Truth. Her general protection and Her taking of me into Her family of many children was solely responsible for my spiritual progress. Otherwise it would have been impossible.

She has passed away but She has given us a world where we can stand freely, spiritually and psychically. Although India is not ready as yet, it is a certainty that spiritual India is emerging and true personalities are coming forward with Divine Truth. None will be able to hinder the work that is destined.

11. Ultimately I found the truth that to argue with the mind, to discuss a matter with it and try to teach others by mental reasoning is not the right way, — because the mind cannot bring out the underlying spiritual idea.

I have noted many times while arguing with friends or others, that either they do not understand my point or I do not understand their stand. While I drive my point home even in favour of their idea, they do not understand and think I oppose them.

Unless two minds are on the same level, this sort of disharmony is bound to take place.

The only remedy is that we have to go beyond mental reasoning; through silence of the Spirit we can really help others.

12. Two kinds of Beauty — Masculine and Feminine. Shiva represents the Masculine and Krishna represents the Feminine.

One Beauty manifesting in two forms.

Silent and grandiose, static and wide, a figure with the adornment of Nature's ornament, having no artificiality and softness, Shiva represents the Eternal Purusha.

Attractive, changing, dynamic, mild, bewildering in behaviour and adorned with rare riches and artistic garments, Krishna represents the feminine side of the Eternal Beauty.

13. Wings of a bird cover the whole world. They spread and spread till they will cover the whole Universe. They will unify, they will bring down the oneness of the One into the ignorance of the Inconscient.

First a few will know it, then they will come together — they are the elite of the Future.

Others will follow.

They will follow through the vicissitudes of Nature's action, through war and peace, love and hatred, ups and downs....

With the above quotes from Bihari-da's diary, and having read a few more, I tried to review my acquaintance with him. Was I any closer or wiser? To be honest I was neither. For, to tread where he did, one felt a bit "out-of-bounds" and, at the same time, maybe a feeling of "distance" from the Bihari-da we knew gnawed at me somewhere within. I rather retrace my steps for now, to cherish that Bihari-da we met in the Dining Room or the one sneaking away to eat ice-cream with Prashanto, leaving to the Future or some others to read the "Other" Bihari-da.

Is the sky high? "No," say some; "Yes," assert others. The "nays" look eye-level, straight ahead and around. The "ayes" look up above. Both, I suppose, are right on their own levels of perception.

We know that Bihari-da hardly ever spoke about himself yet some pressed him and managed to wheedle out some interesting telling comments and even strong views of his.

You are one of the early comers here. When you came here what did you expect from this place?

(Quite strongly voiced) Nothing, Nothing. Once I decided to

come and give myself to this life — that was all — take whatever the Guru gave — no demand of any kind. If he gives a slap take it with joy. It is not ours to decide — just go on doing what you have to. If you fail, it does not matter. If you succeed, it is alright. Those who come expecting something are failures — one and all.

What difference do you find between now after the passing away of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo and before?

I think, when an Avatar takes birth on earth, He can never leave it. Do you think Sri Krishna is gone and finished with?

Sri Aurobindo is still here, as the Mother has said. Now it is for the individual to find and feel. If you try with sincerity Their help is always there. You are young, you have energy. You have to be heroes, doing heroic work. It is needed.

Bihari-da then recounted a story — a true one — in a lighter vein (depending on how one looks at it). In the olden days, when the Ashram had just a few sadhaks, no departments, no playground, no children etc., etc., it was naturally a very silent place, with no movement or change. Some people came from outside for a visit (probably from Bengal). They went back and friends there asked them: “How was that place — the Pondicherry Ashram?” They replied — “Mrito, Mrito!” (Dead, Dead!)

But when bluntly asked about what experience(s) he had — especially when he saw Sri Aurobindo — he simply exclaimed in ecstasy: “Ah, apurbo; — ki sného — oh — bola jayena — express kora ashambhab!” (Ah — wonderful — what love, affection — beyond expression and speech!) ... Then?... there was nothing more coming. When gently needled for more, he as gently but with finality said “Aar ki, eyi, ar bola jayena. Bola uchit na. Bollé-o ki bujhbé — Bhul bujhté-o paro.” (What more, that’s all — can’t say any more and shouldn’t say any more. Even if I say, what will you understand? Maybe you will wrongly understand!)

Bihari-da was known not to go often for “Darshan”. Someone reported the matter to the Mother. She replied: “Bihari is always with me, I am always with him.”

When someone broached the subject of the time when many could

not accept the Mother, when Sri Aurobindo retired in 1926, Bihari-da countered with a query: “Who has known the Mother? Knowing Her — not as a machine or some nice person who gives us things — She is beyond all knowing. ‘Knowing’ is to become the Mother!”

Bihari-da used to say that maybe he could quite easily live a hundred years, meaning that his body’s sadhana would enable it to live that long doing its work. But at a certain period of his life, when he was about 80 years old, he said to Vishwajit: “Na — ar eyi shorir niyé hobéna!” (No, it is not possible to continue with this body.) When asked why, he did not clarify or elaborate — he just said: “Not this time, next time.”

Vishwajit asked Bihari-da just before leaving for Calcutta: “O Bihari, I am leaving, I hope you won’t leave in my absence.” Bihari-da replied: “No no, not yet. You can go without that worry.” Vishwajit went and returned, Bihari-da was there, no problems. Hale and hearty as usual. He was about 84 now. A few days went by — all normal. One evening Vishwajit, as was his habit, was going out to the Ashram. Bihari-da called out: “Vishwajit, where are you going—how long will you be gone?” Vishwajit told him he wouldn’t be long, just a short visit and back. He went and returned, and there was Mohini-da (he was Tinkori-da’s student in Bengal, looked after him till his death and was now looking after Bihari-da) very troubled, calling Vishwajit — “Shigri ésho. Bihari-dar kichhu hoyéché” (Come quick — something is wrong with Bihari-da). Vishwajit entered Bihari-da’s room. Bihari-da was lying quietly on the floor — no moaning, shaking or tossing about — just lying there. Vishwajit and Mohini-da managed to lift him onto the cot and sent for the doctor (Dr. Dutta). Bihari-da in the meanwhile opened his eyes, gave Vishwajit a beatific smile and again closed his eyes. The doctor came, but Bihari-da was already beyond the doctor’s or anyone’s reach or help. It would seem as if he had just willed himself to go, to prepare himself for the next coming. For us it may be more true to say “he put us to sleep and quietly shut the door and slipped away!” This was on the 5th of April 1993.

Years before he left he had told Vishwajit that he would leave no bondages with this world when he left for the next. He said this when Vishwajit quipped with him saying: “Bihari, whatever you do, when you die, don’t haunt this place!” Bihari-da replied: “Na, ami shob

mukti korieyi jabo.” (No, I will liberate [myself] from all this and then go.) Maybe it is as a sequel to this pronouncement that Vishwajit found nothing in Bihari-da’s room as regards correspondence with the Mother or Sri Aurobindo, or even with others. So it is a lucky stroke, and an unusual lapse in Bihari-da’s “bond-breaking” job, that I got a glimpse of his diary.

Bihari-da was a man who never strove for an identity. Except for some of our vague and unimportant memories — he is lost to us. But is he really lost? Whatever the case — ours is not to bemoan his departure. Rather “Triumph-March” him into the realms he so much dreamt of and prepared himself for — the Realms of his Divine Mother. He is lost — if ‘lost’ is the mingling of a drop with the ocean — a merging of one with THE ONE who is ALL.

JIVANMUKTA

There is a silence greater than any known
 To earth’s dumb spirit, motionless in the soul
 That has become Eternity’s foothold,
 Touched by the infinitudes for ever.

A Splendour is here, refused to the earthward sight,
 That floods some deep flame-covered all-seeing eye;
 Revealed it wakens when God’s stillness
 Heaven the ocean of moveless Nature.

A Power descends no Fate can perturb or vanquish,
 Calmer than mountains, wider than marching waters,
 A single might of luminous quiet
 Tirelessly bearing the worlds and ages.

A bliss surrounds with ecstasy everlasting,
 An absolute high-seated immortal rapture
 Possesses, sealing love to oneness
 In the grasp of the All-beautiful, All-beloved.

He who from Time's dull motion escapes and thrills
 Rapt thoughtless, wordless into the Eternal's breast,
 Unrolls the form and sign of being,
 Seated above in the omniscient Silence.

Although consenting here to a mortal body,
 He is the Undying; limit and bond he knows not;
 For him the aeons are a playground,
 Life and its deeds are his splendid shadow.

Only to bring God's forces to waiting Nature,
 To help with wide-winged Peace her tormented labour
 And heal with joy her ancient sorrow,
 Casting down light on the inconscient darkness,

He acts and lives. Vain things are mind's smaller motives
 To one whose soul enjoys for its high possession
 Infinity and the sempiternal
 All is his guide and beloved and refuge.

13-4-1934

Sri Aurobindo
 (SABCL, Vol. 5, p. 576)

জীবন-মুক্ত

আছে এক নীরবতা — ধরণীর মুক এ চেতনা
 নাহি পায় তল তার — অবিকম্প বিরাজে সতত
 সে-আত্মার মর্ম্মকোষে, শাস্ত্রের পুণ্য পাদপীঠ
 হয়েছে যে, লভি নিত্য অনন্তের অনন্ত পরশ।

হেথা আছে দিব্যজ্যোতিঃ — মর্ত্তদিঠি নাহি হেরে তারে,
 প্লাবিছে সে গূঢ় কোন অর্চ্চিঘেরা সর্ব্বদর্শী আঁখি;
 জাগি উঠে উদ্ধাসিয়া, ভাগবত সমাহিতি যবে
 ছেয়ে রহে নভসম স্পন্দহীন প্রকৃতি সাগর।

নেমে আসে মহাশক্তি, জিনিতে কি আলোড়িতে তারে
 অক্ষম নিয়তি, গিরি হতে স্থির, উদার — উদ্বেল
 অম্বুরাশি হতে, দীপ্ত প্রশান্তির অখণ্ড বিক্রম,
 শান্তিহীন আছে ধরি লোকসঙ্ঘে, যুগযুগান্তরে ।

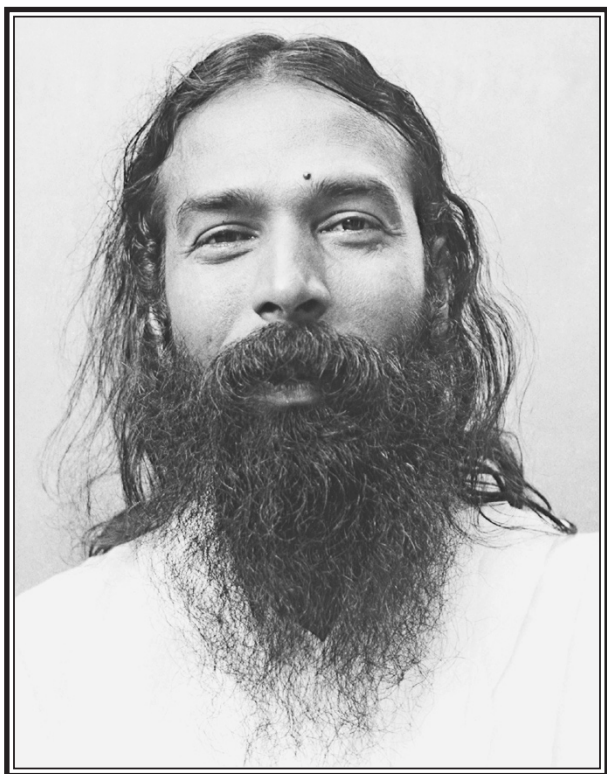
আছে ভূমানন্দ ঘিরি চারিদিক অফুরন্ত সুখে,
 উদ্ভাসীন মৃত্যুহীন তীর হর্ষ করে আত্মসাৎ,
 গ্রথে বজ্রপ্রেমবন্ধ, অভিন্ন অচ্ছেদ্য একাকার,
 বিশ্ববল্লভের সর্বসুন্দরের দুবর্বার আশ্লেষে ।

কালের মন্ত্র গতি উত্তরিয়া পুলকে শিহরে
 অনন্তের বক্ষলীন সেই জন নিশ্চিন্ত নিব্বাক —
 নিশ্চুঞ্চ করিয়া চলে সর্বাঙ্গির রূপ ও রূপক,
 উদ্বেগে রহি অধিষ্ঠিত জ্ঞানময় নৈঃশব্দ্যমাঝারে ।

মরতের দেহ হেথা যদি বা করিল অঙ্গীকার
 শাস্ত্রত সে অবিনাশী, নাহি জানে সীমা কি বন্ধন;
 কল্প কল্পান্তর তারি নিরন্তর ক্রীড়ার প্রাসঙ্গ,
 জীবন, জীবন ভরি কর্ম যত, তার দীপ্ত ছায়া ।

বহি আনে উর্দ্ধশক্তি প্রত্যাশিনী পৃথিবীর তরে,
 বিপুল শান্তির স্পর্শে তার ক্লিষ্ট ব্যথিত প্রয়াসে
 হয় সে সহায়, করে দূর যুগ-সঞ্চিত বেদনা
 আনন্দের ঢলে — ঢালে আলোধারা নিশ্চেতন ঘোরে ।

তাইত জীবন তার, কর্ম তাই — মিথ্যা তার কাছে
 মানস-সঙ্কল্প যত স্কল্প-তুষ্টি ক্ষুদ্র-অনুরাগী, —
 সমুচ্চের অধিকারী, অনন্তেরে সে করে বরণ,
 দিশারী শরণ্য প্রিয় সনাতন বিশ্বদেব তার ।



GANGADHAR

Mud with a little gold in it is often more highly prized than gold with a little mud in it.

AUSTIN O'MALLEY

GANGADHAR — “brother” to all and to whom all were “brother” or “sister”. Yet who was he? Do many remember him? Surely some do, when and if an occasion arises and then some have to untangle all those crowded, jumbled threads of the past to bring him back into focus in the present. That done, then what? Let our thoughts dwell a little bit longer on him and see what floats up.

Gangadhar was, to all appearances, just a Tamilian gentleman, bearded, long haired (both dark and thick). He was of normal propor-

tions. His face was gentle, with large semi-closed eyes that smiled when he smiled, at any and every acquaintance he met — often with a “good morning brother” in a gentle voice. The dress was the simplest, white dhoti wrapped around a small, forgivable paunch and a white chudder thrown over the shoulders. This dress never changed. That’s all that surfaced after the first stirring — nothing very remarkable or out of the way. One more trait — I have hardly heard him talk but for the “good mornings” and maybe some more in his work time at the department (Sanitary Service).

Gangadhar lived in Nanteuil (opposite the Playground) back in 1945. Nanteuil is a beautiful, majestic, spacious old building, one of those from the past, with its own history and interesting stories. The building housed, let us say, “Royalty”. In the past an American daughter of the Mother, Nishtha, lived (and died) here. She was the daughter of President Wilson of the U.S.A. A remarkable lady she was. When terminally ill and suffering, she could have received the best of treatment anywhere she chose. But, she remained here saying: “They will take care of my body, but who will take care of my soul?” Then came Hyder Ali under its roof. He was a big man from the old State of Hyderabad — with his wife (French) Alice, daughter Bilquis and son Adil (and two big dogs). After that Sanat Kumar Banerjee, Ex-Consul General of India to French India and his family, lived and passed away under the same roof. Now, as most would know, the first floor contains memorabilia — sacred and dear to us — of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. The place is named “Sri Smriti”. So where did the simple Tamil gentleman fit in? There was a small cubby-room at the back of the building, with a low ceiling, door and one window. Maybe it was meant to be a store-room (to which purpose it was put, after Gangadhar was shifted). Gangadhar lived there several years.

Veerampattinam is a village on the coast 5-6 km to the south of Pondicherry. A good-sized temple is situated therein. The deity is a form of Kaliyamman. Once the Mother had gone thereabouts and found the atmosphere unwholesome (there was a time birds were sacrificed to appease or please the deity). When the Mother’s car was leaving, a small boy ran after the car. How far he kept up the chase, or whether he met the Mother — I could not ascertain. But, I believe he

did come under the spell of her direct gaze. Whatever the facts of the chance meeting, one thing is certain — the young boy was marked; he was fated to serve the Mother. When the boy grew into a man of 20 years — on 24 July 1933 — he joined the Ashram. The young man was Gangadhar. No external needs goaded him. The inner ones compelled him.

Gangadhar was given work in the Ashram Sanitary Service. He served there (in the true sense of the word) till he could no more, i.e. the body's ageing was the cause. That was, I guess, in the late 80s or early 90s. He considered his work not just as a departmental occupation, but as the Mother's personal work. During his long tenure the heads (of the Department) changed, came and went, but he held them all with the same and utmost respect (many of them half his age). Were he late, he apologised to them. He said that the one sitting there (in the head's chair) was the Divine Mother Herself — not just a representative.

Gangadhar was a man with hardly any needs, let alone wants. He had whittled them down to the minimum. He never asked for anything extra, or even complained about anything. He used to say: "This is not my father-in-law's house." He did not believe in hoarding or collecting things, be they eatables or wearables. If a piece of bread was left over, he kept it in an old cardboard box and drew a ring of DDT to keep the ants away. Someone suggested: "Why not get a small meat-safe? Why this daily trouble of cleaning away DDT, putting on a fresh circle?" Gangadhar could not see the "trouble" part of it. He said he was doing a bit of necessary work! Some well-wisher offered him some money. He refused, saying, "Oh no, there will be no end to one's wants." (He did, I believe, accept a small amount for some specific purpose — but that was all.) He had an ancient mosquito net, patched up often enough, the threads somehow holding the holes in place. He took it to Prosperity for some more repairs. The people there had one look at it and referred back — 10-15 then 30 years, to their records — to find out when last he had taken a net. They then requested him to take a new one. He never asked for a servant, but later Counouma urged him to take one to help him out (in his old age).

Then blew up a storm. It was a period when it was thought that

Gangadhar was going round the bend. I am not sure if anyone knew what was really wrong. He shut himself up, would not eat and threw things about. Some boys were sent, and he was somehow induced to open the door and come out. Then he gave himself up. There was enough “reason” to send him off to Bangalore for psychiatric treatment. Gangadhar himself probably couldn’t or wouldn’t say much in his own defence.

There is an amazing sequel to the drama. When Gangadhar was admitted to the hospital (Bangalore), he was not in the least happy about it. Then a nurse, sweet and kind, came to him at night and saw to his needs, talked to him, soothed his mind, nerves and body, with her kindly words, companionship and compassion. She brought him round, away from that brink. He even started to look forward to her arrival. Then it was time for him to go, return home to Pondicherry. He was being discharged. Gangadhar was full of gratitude for that nurse — an angel in white. He wanted very much for her to come to Pondicherry, the main reason being that she should have a darshan of the Mother. He spoke to the hospital authorities, describing the nurse. He singled her out from among the others. So far so good — but, there was a problem and a mystery! The nurse denied having nursed this man. The fact was that she had been on leave and had just returned to her duties! But Gangadhar was sure about his statements and his identification. He was insistent that she accompany them (himself and those who would come from Pondy to fetch him) to Pondicherry. The nurse, — you can well imagine her predicament, — was as strong in her refusal to come to Pondicherry and also her denials of having nursed him. Many around thought: “Maybe Gangadhar is having a relapse.” Gangadhar was somehow made to understand the situation and the party returned. Gangadhar was very disappointed that he could not repay his “angel” — also he was puzzled by her denials. Gangadhar went to the Mother soon after he returned and poured out his sorrows. The Mother smiled and lifted the veil of that “mystery”. She said it was SHE who went to Gangadhar every night to soothe his pangs and deliver him from, god knows, where or what!

Gangadhar resumed his life from where he had left. The short storm seemed to have left him unscathed. But when he returned, he was transferred to another house. Why, and why to that particular

house I cannot answer. It was an old two storied building in a lane near Ambabhikshu garden (our cycle repair department is situated in that lane). Gangadhar had to live on the 1st floor. He had to come down for his ablutions, etc. The stairs were steep and his legs were not as strong as they were a few years before. So, the going up was on all fours. For the coming down his seat too had to participate. He progressed (downwards) lowering himself, supported by hands and feet, to sit on the lower step and so on.... He never complained. Then one day he fainted (whatever the reason). The doctor was called, who took him away for treatment. The good doctor spoke up for him, to get him a better place to live in. He (Gangadhar) was told about another place, a bit dark and damp (according to one of his well-wishers). Gangadhar agreed to move in, saying "Oh, it is alright, if Counouma has decided." The friend remonstrated, saying "Gangadharji, you will die there!" Gangadhar smiled and reassured the friend: "I am not immortal anyway." But better sense prevailed and he was given a room on the ground floor of Subbu House (our hair-cutting place). There he lived his last days, doing what he could in our midst. In what else, and where else, he was more active I cannot say much. But it does seem that his field of action was not just the department he worked in. The following may elucidate where lay his field of action, or at least give us a hint and allow a knowledgeable guess.

Once a person, who went to the Mother practically every day, mentioned to Her that Gangadhar came to Her only once a year. The Mother replied: "Gangadhar is always in my consciousness."

One day, it seems that Sri Aurobindo asked the 75 and odd sadhaks as to why they were here. He (Sri Aurobindo) liked best the answer that Gangadhar gave. (Alas! I have not been able to find out what that answer was.)

On another occasion when the Mother appeared on the Balcony for the general Darshan, she said that Sri Aurobindo's Grace was spread over the area like a mist and most had not felt or only vaguely perceived it. But one — that was Gangadhar — was very aware of it.

Gangadhar was in his room. He idly thought: "What is this Supermind? I don't understand anything, have no idea about it!" Then it happened; all on a sudden he saw the place around him was bathed in

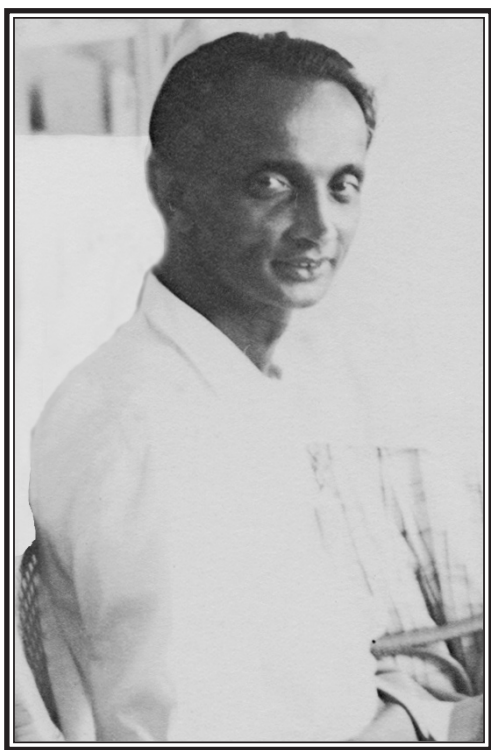
gold. Even the water he poured out of the kuja flowed out like liquid gold. This seems to be but the precursor of some more and higher experiences that he had — as he himself wrote about them later. He talks of how the “thousand petalled lotus Centre above the head opened due to the Grace of the Divine Mother. So too the Brahma-randram. He experienced being transported to many regions of Golden Light, into the presence of the Supreme Lord, full of peace and Ananda.

These are a few bits and pieces gathered and patched together by belated promptings from within me — incomplete and inadequate. Maybe someone else could add and shed some more light on this man’s life. But it would require a “keener sight” (or insight) both to shed the light and for others to “see” it.

As matters stand, Gangadhar could pass off as just another of the thousands of Mother’s devotees. He was the simplest of the simple. No distinguishing or distinguished characteristics or achievements in any field of physical, mental or vital activities (not even in any of the social or friendly ties such as we dilly-dally in) marked him. At best we could single him out for being “not one of us”, and then shelve him in a corner of our minds. So much for the vestiges of him, and his life in our memories. But his mortal remains — they are resting in another far corner of Pondicherry — they went back to where they began this earthly journey. His friends and family members from Veerampattinam requested and were given the body to be buried there (as per their custom). This earthly journey ended on 16 August 1992. He was not too old, but not too young either. He had developed some urinary problems, but refused to be taken to Jipmer, saying: “My end is near — so let me be.” But, insisted upon, he relented. I am told he passed away even before being admitted to the hospital. He had quietly shaken off his mortal shackles, leaving us to figure out their future. It was in the scheme of things that he be taken to his village. The body was kept there for three days for his people to pay homage. It seems there was no smell, and no deterioration of the body was seen. Slabs of ice were kept in the vicinity — yet it is unusual (to say the least) that the body lasted so long.

No bells tolled, nor were requiems sung — but I would say that we keep a clean little niche in our hearts and minds for this gentle giant, following whose ways could be rather rewarding.

The ONE Gangadhar is mighty Shiva whose matted locks could absorb the thundering fall of Ganga and imprison that flow. This Gangadhar is a tiny trickle from those matted locks, gentle, pure and clear.



KALYAN-DA
(A Sparkling Vintage Wine)

Whatever a man's age, he can reduce it several years by putting a bright coloured flower in his button hole.

MARK TWAIN

KALYAN CHAUDHURY or simply Kalyan-da was a man in a class by himself. Born into an aristocratic family — father a well known *shikari* (hunter) of those early years of the last century, another of his kinsmen an ex-Chief of the Army Staff of the Indian army, Gen. J.N. Chaudhury, and another a well known writer, Pramatha Chaudhury. Kalyan-da seemed to have inherited some of these traits in good measure. Top these up with a flair for sports and spinning yarns — and

what you have is a matchless man with a charm all his own, loved by all and a man who loved all. The tiger and leopard skins in Sri Aurobindo's room were all from Kalyan-da's or his father's hunting trophy collection. The elephant skull in our science laboratory was of the household elephant's. His name was Mohanlal. When he died they buried the body in their vast garden, as was usually done. Later the bones would be dug out and sold off or given away. As for the skull, I gather that the Mother was told about it, and She said it could be brought over here — it landed up in our laboratory.

Kalyan-da was born on the 28th of March of 1909. He was in his youth a bright student and later was sent to Europe to study engineering. I think he could already build tall stories — all in good fun, no serious implications.

Not much did I know about him, prior to his life here in the Ashram. He came here way back in 1938 and was at once captured by the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. He did have a heavy tilt (like the leaning tower of Pisa, for which he did have a remedy long, long decades ago. But there were no takers) towards this life (for which he had no remedy). He had two or three experiences, before he arrived here, when in England and elsewhere in India. I came to know of them only recently, and will speak of them anon.

I shall now go forward in time to 1945 and onwards, when I actually set my eyes on him, the "ordinary" Kalyan-da. The first impressions were also the last (so to say). Kalyan-da was an athletic-looking man — good height, wiry well-defined muscles, yet smooth and supple. His movements had a felineness. A kindly smile ever played on his lips. The nose — oh! the nose — was ever so lightly turned up and pointed, with a slight bump below the bridge. He dressed himself up smartly, always in white shorts, a white T-shirt or shirt with collar turned up to lend to the smartness. He changed to white trousers for cricket — a legacy of the Empire. There never was a hint of dandyism, only smartness. I spoke of 'first and last impressions being the same', for he was ever young physically and mentally (he often wore a rose in his button-hole), and his heart too was always ebullient, warm and generous. But (always there is a 'but'), his ire could easily be roused, but as easily doused. On occasions I happened to raise it to its full flaring. Later (even to this day) it is only I who seem to

remember the happening. He, the victim, seemed, not only to have forgiven me, but also forgotten the episode the very next day! We could sum up Kalyan-da as a ‘cavalier’ — colourful with a bit of dash, ever ready to fight but as ready to succour.

Kalyan-da was a good sportsman. He played good enough tennis and cricket. He was a stylist and played his strokes (tennis, cricket and verbal) correctly and gracefully.

Kalyan-da was an ‘Ashram renowned’ spin bowler — leg spin — if my cricket vocabulary is correct, and a correct and elegant batsman. He considered the game to be a gentleman’s game (this was before the era of match-fixing) and frowned upon any departure from the accepted norms and decorum of dress and behaviour — be it in player or spectator. As both, I rubbed him the wrong way, on occasions. Once as a spectator, I with the help of Alain (a French boy, an ex-student), was rooting, rather vociferously, for no one in particular. Kalyan-da was more than a bit annoyed, and exclaimed ‘Joto din e duto borbor ache, ami khelbona’ (as long as these two barbarians are there, I will not play). He soon forgot all about it. Again, when I, as a player, hit 3-4 consecutive balls of his famous leg-spin to the boundary, he said with some disgust and / or exasperation ‘E to spinner mormo bojhena’ (He does not even understand the value / intricacy of spin). Again once I was keeping the wicket and he was batting. He turned round (is it leg-side?) and hit the ball hard. I instinctively closed my eyes but put out my hands and caught him out. He was speechless, but soon recovered and said ‘Shala, Oldfieldo dhorte partona’ (even Oldfield could not have caught that ball). But for these small, insignificant, spicy eruptions, he was a great player and coach. He was a good tennis coach too. He helped many an upcoming youngster by coaching him and even giving a racket, shoes, etc.

Kalyan-da played some football too. There was a friendly match between the Ashram Veterans Team and the J.S.A.S.A. Team to mark the opening of our Football Field (Sportsground) in 1952. The Mother “kicked off” the match. Nolinida, Tejenda, Anilda (Jhumur’s father), Udaisingh, Vishwanathda (Drawing Office), Kalyan-da, etc. were of the Veteran’s Team. On the JSASA (Ashram 1st Team) team were Sunilda, Kanakda, Ranjuda, Mona... and I too was there. It was great fun, but for an incident — Kalyan-da tripped or was charged

and fell, broke an arm! So, sadly, this was the first and last time we saw Kalyan-da play football.

One evening, in a corner of the Playground, there was a lively debate going on, on the merits and demerits of Games vis-à-vis Gymnastics. Kalyan-da entered, and spoke up (he was a champion of Games) “What is there in Gymnastics? Even a monkey can be taught to do gymnastics.” So that was Kalyan-da of the flashy bat and sharp and ready tongue.

Kalyan-da took some classes too, for a few years. Physics and general science were his subjects (Sciences Appliquées). They (the classes) had a special air about them, for you could expect the unexpected. Once when a student, whose answers were marked ‘wrong’, pointed out that the text book we were studying supported him, Kalyan-da from his chair declared ‘Boi Bhool!’ (the book is wrong) — and that was that. Later he changed his occupation from culturing us to agriculture.

Kalyan-da took up the New Paddy Land, a paddy field acquired by him for the Ashram. He then called himself a ‘chasha’, developed it and produced a good amount of paddy to supply the Ashram. He often took us along in his jeep and showed off his fields and the bounty they produced. On one of these outings when I asked why the Ashram could not have a banana plantation of its own, he offered to buy some land and put me up as in-charge, with all the amenities like scooter, house, etc. He would have done it immediately had I said “Yes”. But I did not, as I was already working at the Swimming Pool. I told him I wouldn’t mind taking up the job, if he could relieve me of the job I was at. This was not possible. The idea fizzled out.

In the early “chasha” days Kalyan-da did have one or two helpers at the New Paddy Land. They were there each for short periods. So Kalyan-da would go in a jeep and supervise the work himself. Some of the workers resided on our land and worked in the fields. Later Kamal, a young man from Bengal, landed up in Pondicherry and fortuitously, was put to work under Kalyan-da. He continues to reside there and run the show. He enjoyed his initiation and tutelage under Kalyan-da and has a great regard for him. He told me that Kalyan-da used to come to the fields, make a short inspection tour and then sit in the room. He sat there silent and pensive and some sort of serenity

would pervade the place. He, Kamal, could not and dared not speak and break that pervasion.

One old and aged worker resided on the premises. He, on an occasion, for some (misguided) reason, took 4 or 5 casuarina poles, without asking (either one of the K's) and kept them in his hut. This, we would normally term as 'theft'. Kamal ferretted them out and removed them and informed Kalyan-da. Kalyan-da did not show any great appreciation for the piece of sleuthing. He smiled and was silent for a while. Then, in a quiet and kindly tone asked Kamal: "Tumi oke ato lojja dile keno?" (Why did you shame him so?) He continued in the same tone: "Kamal, think well and quietly, and tell me who amongst us is not a thief?" Kamal was nonplussed, but took time out to ponder over the matter. He finally came to the embarrassing conclusion that he could not think of a "non-thief".

Kamal's awe and admiration only increased in later days when he went to visit Kalyan-da in his house. Kalyan-da was then recuperating from an accident. He had a rib broken which would not permit him to lie down. He did not permit himself any medicines. So, he was sitting on a reclining chair for 3 days! There seemed to be no signs of fatigue on his face or body or any strain on his mind. He seemed cheerful and smiling — his usual self. When asked he said: "Oh! such things happen. One has to take them in one's stride."

Kalyan-da had another love — apart from teaching, sports and agriculture. He liked, owned and drove some good cars. He had a Jeep, a Jaguar and a vintage flashy red M.G. Sports. As all else he did, he drove too with élan and elegance. He did drive well, often steering with one hand. The other hand may be holding a bouquet of flowers as he once did and nudged a three wheeler. Fortunately for Kalyan-da, the three wheeler happened to be moving on the wrong side of the road and so had to bear the blame. The bouquet went unnoticed. I happened to see it, but kept mum. He also happened to back his car into a lamp-post. He cursed the Régie d'Electricité saying 'Shalara post kothay putte hoï janena' (they don't even know where to place a post).

Kalyan-da by his own account could smoke like a chimney. He had given it up in his earlier days here, but resumed it later — at least occasionally. He even asserted that the ensuing smoke would keep

away mosquitoes and other insects (so it would — if dense enough). He went through the Sundarbans, without hosting mosquitoes, by this simple (pleasant) ruse.

This was the Kalyan-da we actually saw, talked to and played with. At 80 he moved and drove around like a man half his age. The smile too never left his face, nor the mind and heart their warmth and ebullience. One may wonder why and how he was all that he was. Let us now go back in time to delve a little deeper into his life. The answer may lie there.

(Much of what follows about his experiences is in his own language. He speaks about himself in the third person. I have quoted him from the book *Breath of Grace*, his words indicated by quotation marks.)

Kalyan-da was for a short time in England, engaged professionally. One day as he was sitting by a window reading and looking out at a nearby cathedral: “A clear command came from somewhere he knew nothing about, a gentle but firm voice told him: ‘Why linger here any longer, go home.’ The more he turned it in his mind, the command he had received, the more insistent it became.” Kalyan-da arranged a release from the firm he was working with and “within a week he turned his steps homeward.”

“Back home he directed his steps towards his boyhood love — the forests. Once again the solitude he had missed for so many years was his. One day while waiting to go out, sitting close to the fringe of a dense jungle, all on a sudden he found the entire forest of trees, shrubs and the few persons moving about, including himself, were all merged in a vibrating dance of life, everything was a-throb with an inner pulsation that filled his heart with a joy he had never tasted before.”

The third experience was as follows: “As he was walking alone, by and by he came to a small hill, a sudden impulse made him climb to the top. It was just before sunset and as he sat on the top and looked at the sun, the surroundings seemed to be blotted out and he saw only the setting sun, as he kept gazing on it there came out of the sun millions of suns and they all rushed towards him entering into his heart in an unending stream.”

Kalyan-da later recounted the last experience to Sri Aurobindo

who explained it thus: “The Sun represents the Divine Truth, the same truth in infinite forms resides in the heart of man. Man in his heart has to find the infinite Truth hidden there. It is a clear indication to the seeker of the Truth.”

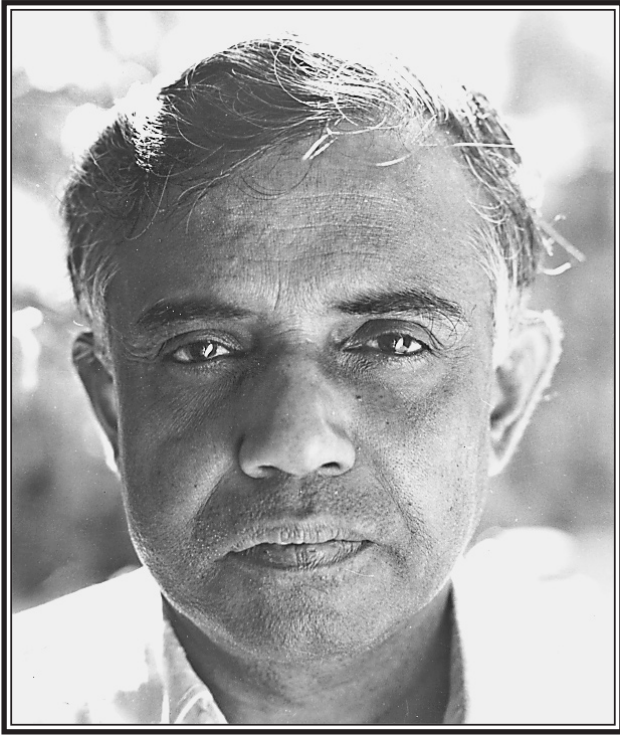
Kalyan-da’s father died in an accident — “The only person who could have checked his heart’s bent.”

“Then as soon as the family affairs were settled he began journeying from one religious centre to another — Dakshineswar, Benaras and others.” “He felt the chosen haven still eluding him. This went on for three years, till one day he learnt that his cousin Dilip Kumar Roy was coming on a visit to his home town. Dilip had left his home nine years earlier, and was residing at Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, having taken up a life of yoga.”

Kalyan-da, from his childhood, admired Dilip very much. Dilip was there for 5 months, during which Kalyan-da gleaned as much as he could about life in the Ashram. “A study of books by Sri Aurobindo began, heaping wonder upon wonder as he read, not only flooding his mind but his heart too began to stir and respond to the light of discovery rendering him very happy indeed. It seemed to him at that time a wonder why he had missed reading Sri Aurobindo’s books so far. Probably the hour had not yet struck, the striking being in the hands of Him who decides all.”

Kalyan-da’s first Darshan of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo was on 15th August 1938: “...Gladly and joyfully his head lowered at the beautiful feet of the Mother, feet like white lotuses, *sans pareil*, were they, and he felt a gentle touch as if reassuring him that to bow down next to the Master would not be such an ordeal. Then he turned to look straight into the eyes of the Master, with a mixed feeling of joy and reverence he placed his head on the feet of the Lord, beautiful and soft they were and his whole face sank into the very softness. Then a hand of great weight pressed his head deeper still into that softness. Lingering there for a while, a short while, he raised his head and once more looked into his eyes. What he saw there words cannot describe, even an infinitesimal part of it — the entire universe was there, his universe.”

No more may one wonder that Kalyan-da seemed happy and smiling — as would one who had “merged into a vibrating dance of



SUNIL-DA

(A Snowy High Kanchenjunga)

*“Saints and poets are hills touched with the dawn
whilst the valley is in darkness.”*

AUSTIN O’MALLEY

I MAY add to the above saints and poets a third category, that of musicians and composers — for Sunil-da was both, with a good bit of “saint” thrown in.

Here is a great man, in the true sense of the word, whom I reluctantly bring under the heading of “Not so Great”. He for one, I am sure, would just have smiled and not let it ruffle the quiet deep waters of his greatness. He was one of the most self-effacing men one comes across.

With that assurance backing me, I would start this, an eulogy of the great man who wouldn't be "so great".

Jhumur has already written about him in *Mother India* (June 1998). She being his niece had a close view of him, yet I would pen my views, also close, with often a clash (physical — in football). In my opinion he was a genius and what is my opinion worth — for the Mother herself said of Sunil-da: "He is a genius."

Sunil-da was born in Krishnanagar, Bengal, on the 3 of November 1920. Father a doctor (Homoeopath), mother, Anil the elder brother, Minnie the elder sister and Sunil formed a close and well-knit family. The father loved young Sunil and Sunil was very attached to the father. As a boy, he did what boys did — played, studied, fought with sister (only 15 months older, so did not deserve his respect). He was a bit short tempered — would shy anything handy if roused. He must have tamed this temper in later years, for I have never heard him raise his voice in anger — except once — in all the 50 years I have known him. I can't even recollect his showing any signs of impatience. What stood him out from the other boys was that he showed glimpses of his future brilliance even in those early years. Whatever he took up, he did better than most. Maths was already his forte. He even picked up a knowledge of horoscope reading (don't know from where or from whom). Chess came naturally to him (he excelled in it). He acquired a working knowledge of Homeopathy (like Eklavya — guru being his father). He would go to the slum area behind the house, diagnose, prescribe and administer — all free. He earned the honorary title of "choto Dactar". His father did keep a close watch, and checked on him (called him 'master').

The family later shifted to Calcutta and Sunil-da got admission into the prestigious St. Xavier's College. He shone out there too, took honours in chemistry, played some football and learned to play the sitar from Ardhenduda's brother who himself was a student of one of the Ustads (may be Mustaq Ali Khan).

Ardhenduda was Sunil-da's cousin, much older than him. He too was quite a genius — a good musician and also a good chemist. He came to the Ashram in the early 40s, lived on the 1st floor of our old Dental Clinic. He led a very retired or secluded sort of life. Rarely did he participate or attend any function. Only once did I hear him play on

the surbahar. He did consent to teach one or two students for a short period. He had great wit and humour — that is when and if he talked. All his genius and talents were well corked and hidden. The last few years of his life — he was overwhelmed by a horde of cats.

Cats remind me of Sunil-da's cats. He was not overwhelmed, but did, I suspect, reserve a soft corner of his heart for at least two of them — Tutu and her son Bañtul. I recount all this and digress, for Tutu was no ordinary cat, and she and Ardhenduda were close enough to Sunil-da. To make our acquaintances with them is quite worth the while.

Tutu was picked up as a tiny kitten near the Samadhi. She was brought to Sunil-da's house. She grew up to be "the lady" of not only their house but the whole block — Playground and the Mother's Room included. She came and went as and when and where it pleased her. She would come walking regally and lie in the middle of the Playground just as the daily March Past was about to start. In those days all the groups (A to H) took part everyday, as the Mother stood in front of the map of India. Tutu stretched her legs and lay relaxed. The files of hundreds of us had to make a detour of her. She was unperturbed, not an inch did she give. Sometimes she would take her cat-nap on the Mother's sofa (in the Room). The Mother would not have anyone disturb Tutu. If there is a "Feline-Divine-world" Tutu must have come down from there — what for, is hard to guess! Bañtul took no such liberties — he was more like an ordinary cat. Now back to Sunil-da.

Sunil-da took honours in chemistry. This information is quite irrelevant, for he could have shone in any subject he chose to and also in the sports he took up, and of course in the music he composed (that poured out through him).

Sunil-da was of a solid and proportionate build, with enough weight and strength to make his presence felt — especially in the play field. He could build up enough speed for added effect. He was of good height, and a neat figure, but for a slight hunching of the shoulders. A well shaped head sat atop the shoulders, fronted by a handsome face with healthy cheeks, cheerful large eyes that shone and smiled along with the generous mouth. A faint trace of the smile never left the eyes and lips. On the whole he impressed us as a man in a state of solid calm of body and mind and deeper within.

Sunil-da came to the Ashram for a short visit and went back. That was in 1940 or 41. He had no plans to settle down here. He was still studying. He came back with the family (elder brother Anilda and family, elder sister and her daughter and mother) in 1942. He would probably have gone back to continue his scholastic life. An idea that he could go in for the I.C.S. was also mooted. Applications were made which reached 3 days too late. He could have tried for the next year. It was discovered, he would be over age. He was painted into a corner — so — no I.C.S. Some subtle forces seemed to scuttle his plans (they, the forces, may not have been much evident then, but now, seen from a greater distance in time and the perspective of later events, they seem almost obvious). Then events got so arranged that Sunil-da and Gauridi got married. The Mother said that they both could stay in the Ashram. I suspect this, that both should be able to stay here, was although what the Mother wanted. Thus was the drama made to happen. The gods moved the human pawns.

Came December 1943 and our School was opened. Sunil-da was one of the first teachers. Through the years that he taught, we never felt that he was teaching. He soaked us, we either imbibed or we didn't. Sunil-da had an unique system of keeping a tag on us. (This was in the lower classes only.) It helped us to mark ourselves and it had an element of competitive fun and game. The system was much like "Snakes and Ladders", with the healthy difference that the ladders were dominant and could be long or short, whereas the snakes were of just one square or one step downward. The system worked thus: the students sat in an order 1,2,3... No. 2 may be asked a question. He answers correctly — all is status quo. If he fails, the next i.e. No. 3 has to try. If he succeeds he goes up to No. 2 and No. 2 steps down to No. 3. Supposing now 3,4,5 fail and No. 6 succeeds. Then No. 6 climbs up to No. 2 and all the others i.e. 2, 3, 4 & 5 slide down one step each (only the last No. could afford to be complacent — if he chose to be). I don't know if any other teacher imitated this system.

Sunil-da taught many subjects. He taught Mathematics, Botany, Zoology, Geology, Geography, Astronomy and last, for some of us — Football. I dare say, he could have taken some music classes — IF one had the ear and inclination and IF he himself was willing. He did teach 3-4 youngsters, but no classes as far as I know (quite intrigu-

ing, considering the fact he was a great musician and a great teacher). It seemed he had all the subjects at his fingertips. He hardly needed a textbook, and that made his classes all the more interesting. Keeping the textbook in the background we could meander away, in and out of the subject. Long before the School's lab was, we had botany practicals at his residence, where we sliced cross sections and peered at the inner workings of flowers through a microscope (incidentally that was the first microscope we had ever seen). Under his guidance we even charted the heavens. To do so, we devised an apparatus.

A large piece of glass was held on two heavy stands by adjustable clamps. The glass was held parallel to the constellation to be mapped. Lying behind or below the glass, we put an ink spot on it, in line with the eye and the wanted star. We got fairly good results! It was also Sunil-da's idea and backing that got us to build a big Sundial in the school. It stood on the (present) lawn, a few metres to the South-East of the stage. Come to think of it, it was a nice monument (in more than one meaning of the word) and also could have been educative. It had a beauty and an imposing presence of its own. Without shedding too many tears over "spilt milk", I wish it were still there today (some blame me for not opposing its demolition when renovations were in the offing).

The Sundial

(This is again an aside story.) Before constructing the sundial, there was the question of design. It was not meant to be a 'carry-around' clock. It stood about 2.50m or more high. A cube of 1m (of concrete slabs) set on a square pillar of about 0.60m/side (of brick work) with a pair of circular steps for base. On the top was the gnomon as also on all the four vertical sides (a gnomon is the pointer on a sundial, the length and position of its shadow indicates the time of the day at that place). I made a simple drawing of it, while some one of us approached Sanjibanda for a design. He made a drawing of an elaborate, intricately designed one. Both were shown to the Mother. She chose mine — the simpler one. I, for one, was naturally glad.

Sunil-da took our higher Maths class and may be the higher next

to ours. These were some of the last classes he took. It was about the time the great mathematician, Dr. Venkataraman, delivered a few lectures on higher or pure Mathematics (higher than what we were grappling with). (Dr. Venkataraman was a very fine human being, He later settled in the Ashram. He dressed, looked and was a simple south Indian Brahmin, complete with a small knotted tuft of hair hanging on to a shaven head. Ever smiling and absent minded, well-versed in Sanskrit and Tamil he lived his last days here in the Mother's service. His wife continues to live here as simple and inconspicuous as he. Dr. Venkataraman and Sunil-da were great friends, of a kind, they developed a great kinship). Now Sunil-da wanted us (the class) to attend these lectures. He said it would do our brains some good. He sent me to seek Pavitrada's permission for our class to attend. Pavitrada said "No, no, it will be too difficult for you." But Sunil-da was insistent, he said, "No, no, go ask him again, insist." So back I went, and badgered Pavitrada who finally gave in. We attended. I hope it did some good to some. To me it was soporific.

Sunil-da stopped teaching some time in the late 60s. Perhaps by now music was pouring down in a torrent from above or gushing up from within, deafening or swamping his old ardour for teaching Mathematics, Zoology, etc. When he came to the class he hardly sat on his chair. He paced about with his hands held behind, palm in palm. Then we saw his thumb incessantly moving from one fingertip to the next as if counting or giving rhythm in accompaniment to some music, unheard by us, but churning his mind and heart. I will come back to his music — now back to school.

Once long back, there was a teacher's meeting, held on the landing of the East block of our School. Not that such meetings were not held at other times than this once. But it was one that Sunil-da happened to attend and I too was there. Many aired many ideas and opinions, some longish rallies of points and counter points enlivened the proceedings. Suddenly after some discussions, Pavitrada looked at Sunil-da and asked, "Et, Sunil, que dites-vous?" (And Sunil what have you to say?) Sunil-da smiled and: "Oh! moi?...moi?" (Oh! Me? Me?)... smiled some more, got up and just walked down the stairs and away! I was quite amused — of the other's reactions, your guess is as good as mine.

This was the 'mental' Sunil-da. There was a metal one, i.e. hard and strong — the football player. (He also played some volley-ball.) He captained the Ashram football team for a few years. His speed and solid build were both used with telling effect, earning him the nickname of "Le Tigre". His play was more of the dashing, direct kind. No fancy foot-work, but good positioning, a break-through run with the ball and a powerful shot made up his game. He broke his wrist in one of the games towards the end of his playing days. He stopped playing but coached and managed the team for some more time. It was the hey-day of Ashram football. Then there was no "Ashram Team" to be managed, as all matches with other teams was stopped. Sunil-da moved on to other fields.

Sunil-da — The Musician

He was always a musician, he was born into a family of musicians. Elder brother Anilda played on the sarod. Cousin Ardhenduda and brother played on surbahar and sitar. Sister could sing well.

In the early days, 1945-1953 or 54, he composed music for our Programmes of 1st Dec. He even composed a music for a "Jungle-dance" for the physical demonstration of Dec. 2nd. But this was a one time effort only. The music for the dances and dramas was beautiful, catching, not too classical, in tune with us and the times. It went well with the occasion. It was great fun watching him and his orchestra (elder brother Anil and Harit on sarod. Harit also filled in as tabalchi. Ashok and Runu on clarionette and flute and Debou and Manoj on sitar). Kanak played on the electric guitar and played an important role in Sunil-da's orchestra. This guitar was to us, at that time (in the early 50s) a new unheard of instrument of music. It seems (to me) that Kanak and his guitar fitted in well into Sunil-da's later music, whereas other instruments disappeared from the scene?! Sunil-da would even want Kanak around when he composed. Then there were the vocals. Most noteworthy being his own sister Minniedi and Tarit Chowdhury. A third voice, one that Sunil-da had a high regard for was Ravibala's. Her participation unfortunately was very rare. But rare too was the pure timbre of her voice. Sunil-da played on the

harmonium or piano, both of which he played with just one finger. We watched with admiration and un-understanding. To me it seemed miraculous how he just watched the dancer and produced the right, suitable music. (Sunil-da was a maestro on the sitar but did not play on it. The wrist, ill-set after the football accident, pained and swelled up if he played for any length of time.)

All these activities were (as I perceive) slowly eased out of his life. I don't recall when exactly he stopped teaching — but why did he stop teaching?

All the years of teaching and composing told on Sunil-da. But, what really was the last straw was a mathematical problem. Its solution eluded many a mathematician. He too was wrestling with the problem. He had a feeling he was close to pinning it down — but it kept wriggling itself out, teasing his mind to near breaking point, his nerves tensed. The Mother then intervened. She told him to stop all mental activity — no maths, no chess even. She, as part of the cure, told him to come to pick up balls when she played tennis. She also told him to relax, go sit under a big tree. She said that a tree emanates a great deal of energy and it would help him recover. He used to, for a short period, go out for long walks to one of the Ashram gardens. Start was after lunch — 2 or 2.30 p.m. (Why he chose this unearthly hot time is beyond me). He, along with Gauridi and her sister, carried some tea and some eats, sat in some shady spot, had the tea and returned home with the dusk (*godhuli*) — an enchanting time in any Indian countryside. These short trysts with nature soothed his mind and nerves.

The Mother also gave Sunil-da some work in Le Faucheur, the garden by the river Arianakupam. His botanical genius came in handy. He set to experiment. It seems he worked some wonders — produced seedless lady's fingers, and some wheat, enough to make bread for the Mother. (At present Maheshwari working there has repeated the wheat growing in just a small patch.)

“One man's loss is another man's gain.” We lost a good teacher, but the world at large gained a great musician. As time passed Sunil-da seemed to retreat more and more from much of the outer happenings, drawn into some higher regions of music and maybe into other regions. He was all music and barely anything else.

What was his music? How and from where did it come? Who can answer these questions better than he himself. Better still the one who revealed to him the source, nay was the source, that swept him off in its deluge. Hearken to what he says about how his music was revealed to him. (The following is reproduced from *Mother India* June 1998 from Jhumur's article):

Some twenty years ago I heard for the first time the Mother of our Ashram improvising on the organ. In the beginning the music seemed strange to me. It was neither Indian nor Western, or shall I say it sounded like both? The theme She was playing came very close to what we know as bhairon, the whole closely knit musical structure expanding melodiously. Then suddenly, notes came surging up in battalions, piled one on top of another, deep, insistent, coming as if from a long way down and welling up inevitably the magnificent body of sound formed and gathered volume till it burst into an illumination that made the music an experience.

Thus She revealed to me the secret of a magic world of music where harmonies meet and blend to make melodies richer, wider, profounder and infinitely more powerful. I have tried to take my music from Her.

My music is my labour and my aspiration for the Divine and what I try to convey through it are the voices of my inner experience.

My grateful thoughts are with Her who has been my Guide, Guru, Mentor and Mother. One day it was Her Light that sparked my heart, it is Her Light that has sustained its glow, it is Her Light that I seek through my music. If this music brings some comfort, some delight or some message to someone, I have achieved that for which She has placed Her trust in me.

Sunil-da was now solely preoccupied with music. He thought and lived music in exclusion of all else — but for his love for the Mother and Her's for him. It was this two-way flow that buoyed and carried him through his life's endeavour — to compose Her music or rather be a channel for Her music. For that he was grateful and full of humil-

ity towards the Mother. These feelings are amply reflected and come through to us, when we hear of such touching happenings as the four or five I recount, as I came to know of them.

Sunil-da's studio where he recorded his music was just one of the rooms of his house. In the early days they just shut the doors and windows to keep out extra noises, and recorded. As time passed, a little more sophistication was added (equipment, instruments, etc.). But the room remained the room. When an idea to improve the acoustics was mooted, Chamanlalji was consulted. He, with some help and expertise, fitted up some blanketing for the walls and some other gadgetry, to improve the sound of recording. The floor was bare — so a suggestion was made, and his able assistant Victor wrote to the Mother. She was eager to help, and gave one of Her carpets. Now Sunil-da was in a quandary! He was reluctant to step on that carpet. He quietly changed the position of his organ so that he could circumvent the carpet and put his stool on a bare part of the floor.

Next came the question of cooling the room, at least to keep the musicians from sweating. Chamanlalji suggested installing an air-conditioner. Then Sunil-da said: "Oh! what is a little sweat? But Mother has to pay for the electricity." I don't know if they could get round him.

In 1972, Sunil-da had the New Year's music ready. The Mother had entrusted him with this work (some more details are given later). The Mother was to hear it in Her room. Sunil-da was there. Maggi and Nata too were called. After hearing the music the Mother was very happy and was showering Sunil-da profusely with praises. He was full of joy, but felt quite embarrassed. He looked this way and that and finally fell at Her feet — it seemed just to stem the flow of Her praises.

A few years back, a gentleman arrived at the Ashram. He went to the Samadhi. He knelt and bowed, prayed, but got up weeping silently. He looked around and spied Chamanlalji. He was a stranger to Chamanlalji, but somehow felt free enough to approach and introduce himself as a sculptor — by name Parasara (of some repute in the artistic circles). His tears were (it transpired) of a feeling of frustration and depression. He had heard and believed that Sri Aurobindo was an Avatar. Furthermore, he believed that along with the Avatar,

there came down artists (painters, sculptors, musicians, etc.) and he had not seen any as yet. The resulting frustration was too deep for him to bear. Could Chamanlalji help? Chamanlalji was on unfamiliar ground, but took him along to one of our artists, who was quite pessimistic and said: “There is not much art here.” Mr. Parasara grew gloomier than ever. Chamanlalji then took Mr. Parasara to Sunil-da the composer. Sunil-da, typically, said: “I am not a composer — I am just a receiver.” Mr. Parasara got to hear some of Sunil-da’s music. Then the two had a long talk (musician and sculptor). By the end of their talk, Mr. Parasara was overjoyed. He said: “At last my faith is restored. This (Sunil-da) is a great man, he is unique. He has saved my life.” Mr. Parasara was floored by Sunil-da’s music and also by his humility.

What did Sunil-da most cherish, strive for? A plausible and intelligent guess could be “Music.” A revisal of our thinking may not go amiss after the following. Once, some of his instruments went out of order, repairs were delayed and the date for the completion of the music was fast approaching. He (Sunil-da) in a moment of desperation and supplication wrote to the Mother: “Mother what do you want me to do? Things are not as they should be. As for me, I want you. This music and all else is yours. I don’t want any of these things. All I want is *You*.” Fortunately, the instruments got repaired soon after and the music got ready. (Sunil-da’s prayer given above in quotes is NOT the one he wrote. I have taken the liberty to write it, in my words, after having heard it from an admirer of his.)

Here is an exchange quoted from Sunil-da’s correspondence with the Mother.

J’ai une question à Te poser (I have a question to ask you):

J’ai souvent une sensation ces jours-ci, que c’est Toi qui a fait de moi un musicien — est-ce vrai? (I have often a feeling, these days, that it is You who has made of me a musician — is it true?)

Peut-être... (Could be...)

Si c’est vrai, est-ce que c’était prédestiné? (If it is true, was it predestined?)

Très certainement. (Most certainly.)

The following is the reply to a letter to the Mother, Sunil-da had written. I could not get to see the letter, but the reply is interesting and meaningful by itself. This is a free rendering into English of the reply written in French. I have tried to keep as close as possible to the meaning.

It is possible, that in a previous birth (life) you were my physical child (son). But, it is not that that has given rise to the deep emotion in you. It is your soul that has inspired your music. It is with your soul that I connect you when I talk of your music and that gets you in touch with your soul and also with me where I am always there at the centre of your being.

It is the intensity of this consciousness that makes you weep with emotion; they are tears of the psychic which dissolve obstacles and difficulties of the being.

THE MOTHER

The Mother used to play on her organ on New Years at 0.00 hours. That was long, long ago. She continued playing until the late 50s, though not at 0.00 hours. In 1959 she asked Sunil-da to orchestrate Her New Year Music. Thus I believe She opened a new door, and he stepped into newer, higher regions. Later she gave him the theme and left him to compose the New Year Music around the theme. Then She wanted him to compose music to accompany Her readings of *Savitri*. He was thus gradually drawn deeper and deeper into the realms of Music.

How much the Mother relied on him, and to what extent She could work in him, and his response, i.e. receiving what She gave and his reliance on her, his surrender to let her mould him — are all beyond our normal concepts and values. To know and appreciate Sunil-da and his music, one may read some of the letters the Mother wrote to him, ponder over them, let the import of them sink in, and then the understanding of the man that was Sunil-da may dawn on the reader. To this purpose I quote (again from the same source as above) the Mother's letters:

Sunil, my dear child,

We need music to accompany and frame my readings of passages from *Savitri* illustrated in *Meditations on Savitri*.

You alone can make this music the way it should be done.

Would you be interested in this work? It would make me very happy.

On another occasion, She wrote to him:

Sunil, this is genius! It is magnificent, with a deep and true emotion. It has made me very happy.

With my blessings.

29.12.64

Sunil, my dear child,

I would be very happy if you composed the music for the 1st of December, Anu's dance-drama. Because you alone can do it the way it should be done. Your music is, according to me, the music of the future and it opens the ways to the new world. Blessings.

13.8.65

My child,

Yesterday, at a quarter past twelve and (again) today, at the same time, I have heard your music with deep emotion and I can tell you that I have never heard anything more beautiful, in music, of aspiration and spiritual invocation.

This letter was written in English:

I heard the music — it is wonderful! Music itself pure and high and strong — It is delightful and leaves you waiting and wanting to hear more....

After listening to another composition, She sent him the following letter:

I heard it with deep emotion as something exceptionally beauti-

ful... I want to repeat again here that this music opens the doors of the future and reproduces admirably the musical vibrations of the higher regions.

8.12.65

Sunil, my dear child,

I have just heard what you have recorded. It is beautiful, very beautiful. It is the first time that I have heard music express true power, the power of Mahakali, the power of the Mahashakti. It is formidable and at the same time, so deeply sweet...

And specially, while listening to it, I had the impression of a door opening on to a still more beautiful future realisation.

Sunil, my dear child,

It was with impatience that I was waiting to listen to your music and I am so happy to have heard it today....

30.12.1965

This is recounted by Sunil-da in French — the English rendering is mine:

1967 — The music was composed and taped, ready for the Mother's hearing, somehow Sunil-da did not like it. He found it to be 'banal'. He said, "I would not listen to it then, but straight-away hear it along with the Mother." So it was taken up to Her room. There, in Her presence, the tape was started. Curiously enough he says, "even I started to appreciate the music." The Mother seemed to have gone into trance, eyes closed. Then eyes still closed, her lips trembling, she seemed to want to say something, but could not formulate it into words. Finally she exclaimed: "This is wonderful. It is the first time I have heard music coming down direct from the World of Harmony, without the intervention of the mind and vital." Sunil-da approached the Mother. She asked him how he liked the music. He shook his head. She said, "What! you did not like it? Oh, you want that something new should take birth?"

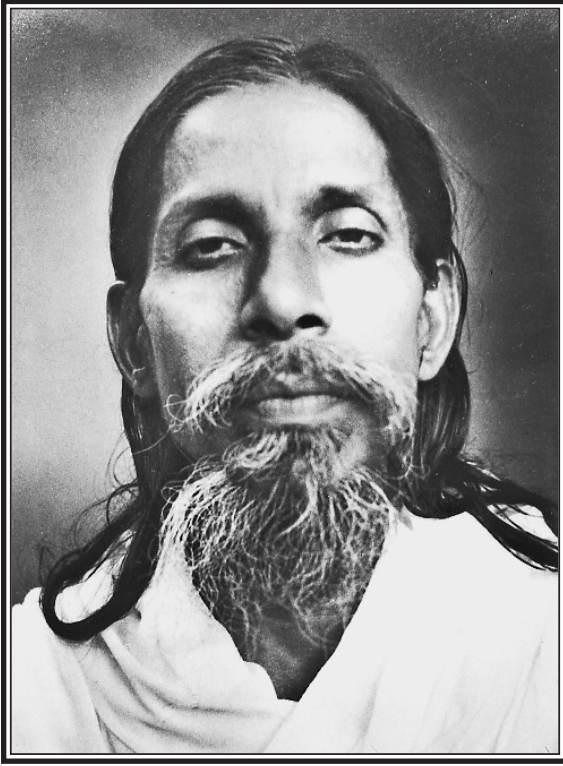
Sunil-da was a man, who, we may say, embodied too very noble virtues, so needed and so seldom seen, to tread this and his chosen path — which is to follow and be of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. They are *Humility* and *Gratitude*. I think it is these two that teased him to often recite the following lines of Rabindranath Tagore (in a slightly modified form) during his last days.

যাবার সময় এই কথাটি বলে শুধু যাই
 যা দেখেছি, যা পেয়েছি তুলনা তার নাই।

(At the time of departing I have but one thing to say:
 There is no way to match what I have seen, what
 received.)

I believe too that these two (virtues) would help cleanse our inner corridors of thoughts and feelings to let in nobler and higher ones. May I then suggest that Sunil-da was “an empty vessel that sounded much”. But what a Vessel and what Sound — a veritable cataract of Heavenly Music.

After this what is there to say of the man. Better watch and wait in silence for the Dawn that touched the hilltops, to descend into our valley — or — climb the hill to meet the Dawn.



RAJANGAM

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die, a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted....

OLD TESTAMENT

RAJANGAM was already an ancient when I first saw him. We could hardly visualise him otherwise — but whenever it was that he attained it, he didn't change much after that. Nature had no room to work on him — I would so suspect.

Rajangam was a man of the 19th century — born in a village (Agaramangudi) of Tanjore Dt. on 30th of April 1898. Not much is known about him till he joined the Medical College at Madras in the

early part of the 20th century. He was of a small stature — anyway you looked at him. He stood at 5' — give or take an inch or two. A slight stoop only emphasized the lack of height. He was thin as can be — only backbone and ribs wrapped up in a parchment-like wrinkled skin. The limbs matched the rest of him. The head was a bit more reassuring. A good amount of hair collected into a bun in true South Indian Brahmin fashion. The eyes were quite bright but small, carried some fight in them. Cheeks were no cheeks. A Ho-Chi-Minh beard completed his “ascetic-after-austerities” appearance. He was usually clad in a short dhoti and chuddar carelessly thrown over the shoulders. Wooden sandals lent an inch or so to the height. We hardly saw him socialise or talk, except with 2-3 chosen friends. He was one of the “Olds” — many of them were a silent lot, or at least sparing in speech. He lived a long time in the room at the head of the “Prosperity” stairs, at the left (the stairs near our “Reception Room”). Subhash of Electric Dept. is the present occupant.

Rajangam was a medical student in Madras back in the twenties of the old century. He came across some copies of the *Arya* and a booklet or two of Sri Aurobindo’s speeches, etc. and was at once captivated. He wanted to meet Sri Aurobindo and so made it to Pondicherry in April of 1921. He had the darshan of Sri Aurobindo in the Guest House. A short conversation followed during which Sri Aurobindo asked him what he had been doing. Rajangam replied that he was reading the *Ideal of Karmayogin* and practising it, taking his body as the chariot and Sri Krishna as the charioteer. Sri Aurobindo replied “Alright, continue.” Rajangam went home in an elated mood, and he had an experience. He felt himself a bird flying to distant places. It was all light and delight. He had lost all body consciousness. He recounted this to Sri Aurobindo, who said “Good, it is symbolic. The bird represents the soul, and promise of light to come.” Rajangam was over-elated — just then Sri Aurobindo quietly remarked “Oh, it is quite a common experience!”

Rajangam went back to Madras, finished his medical studies, and returned in 1923. Sri Aurobindo had told Puraniji, who was then acting as manager of the Ashram: “Yoke him when he comes.” And so he was yoked in that year. When later he told Sri Aurobindo about some light descending (an experience he had), Sri Aurobindo remarked that

the mind intervenes and there is a mixture. But Rajangam assured Sri Aurobindo that in his case there was no mixture. The Guru smiled and said: “After 30 years, I find there is a mixture — and you...” He must have shrunk a few inches then and there!

Rajangam had often the chance to meditate, along with some others, with Sri Aurobindo. One of them complained of noise (carpenters were working) downstairs during the meditation. Sri Aurobindo told them that one should be able to meditate on a battlefield.

Rajangam came decided to live in the Ashram. He claimed and brought away all that was due to him from the family, — his share of the money, his personal belongings (including brooms), all in bundles, and placed them at his guru’s feet. I heard it said that it was with that money that the part of the Ashram now called Library House (present Reception and Reading Room) was bought. The Ashram Main building is a combination of 4 houses, plus renovations and additions; these houses were bought one by one through the years.

Rajangam was yoked to — his work which was to make purchases, and running to the French Post Office, the Treasury, etc. He was given this work to bring him under the Mother’s influence.

Once when he needed some extra supplies, he had trouble getting them. Sri Aurobindo wrote to him: I am taking whatever the Mother gives, so you also take whatever the Mother gives.

How long he did this work I cannot say, but in the 40s he already led a semi-retired life. What we saw then was that he boiled and delivered to the Mother some water She needed. He had for this purpose a huge enamelled kettle. That his frail frame had the strength to carry it up was surprising. (The kettle should have been a museum piece even then. It must be lost now — junked off.)

Rajangam, though a medical man (we would expect a smartly dressed, scientific minded man) was simple — to the point of being naïve, and innocent. Going by present standards of thought, living and dressing, there would be no gauging him. Consider first his dress. There was no change from that short dhoti and chuddar (towel actually). He hung on to his Ho-Chi-Minh beard and long hair gathered into a knot (called a *kummudi* in Tamil and it was ever decreasing). I mention the beard for he was its faithful host as opposed to many old-timers who shed beards and long hair as encumbrances when they

joined the newly started Physical Education sometime after 1949 when the Mother put much of Her energies and creative powers into its burgeoning and growing. Then Rajangam had to discard his dhoti (at least for the time of the activities) put on knee-length shorts and white shirt. There was no waist line, the shorts had to be hitched on by a belt. (It was on our grapevine that Rajangam had no intestines. We were simple enough to take the fact in with some belief without a pinch of salt.)

If one does not plant in season, or does not pluck in time — the chances are one gets stalled, and has to retrace one's footsteps on the path, to plant and pluck.... So it was, I think, with Rajangam (and maybe with others). So he returned, armed with a tennis racket to redeem a part of himself.

Rajangam and some others like Anilbaran, Bansidhar, Madanlal of D.R., etc. took to some physical activities with unexpected zeal. Rajangam specialised in two items — Mass Exercises and Tennis. The Mass Exercises for the 2nd December Demonstration. The Mass Exercises was, and hopefully will remain, an item that all who wanted could join in. Rajangam could never learn even one figure correctly. He was willing but his mind was incapable of memorising, and the body given a chance, would have preferred to rest — but it was driven to participate. The result was a treat to watch, all knobby limbs jerking around, each of its own volition. He turned around, stretched, folded up, took a few steps whenever he saw the others do something similar — but all too late. It was even difficult for him to find his allotted place. Some good neighbour had to actually lead him to his “spot”.

Tennis was a different story. It was with some amusement and a little puzzlement that we saw Rajangam and his peers rouse themselves from a semi-reclusive way of life, and launch themselves into this activity in all earnestness and seriousness (too much in fact) that would put to shame a teenager (the late Anilbaran Roy and Bansidharji, etc. were of the same ilk). Rajangam, this wisp of a man would don his long shorts, tennis shoes with calf-length socks, tie back his little bun of hair — of course the Ho-Chi-Minh beard tagged along — shoulder his racket and jump on to his well-polished bicycle, pedal off fast (to reach the courts before others). Once there they (R & AB

Roy, etc.) got down to the real business. Every point had to be fought for, both in the real sense and vocally — the last recourse was usually necessary — an “out” ball could be shouted back “in”! Rajangam was at a disadvantage because of his size and age. (Not that the others were not old.) Come tournament, he was pitted against younger and fitter members. He got round his weak points as best he could. He first reduced the size of his racquet (the normal leverages were too much for him), by holding it somewhere in the middle of the handle! He could not run much so he made the opponent run — not with forehand and backhand drives — he had not the strength for that. He did instead an amazing chop, nearly sliced the ball in half! This he did with a queer “left-right” — one skip forward and one skip back. He met the impact of the ball with the forward skip and recoiled with the backward skip. The ball dropped into a corner or near the net and just bounced back, away from the opponent. It was very difficult to deal with it. Parul fell victim to him on many an occasion. I think — so does she — that Chandubhai the organiser took some pleasure in setting him against her, and he (Chandubhai) didn’t miss watching the match.

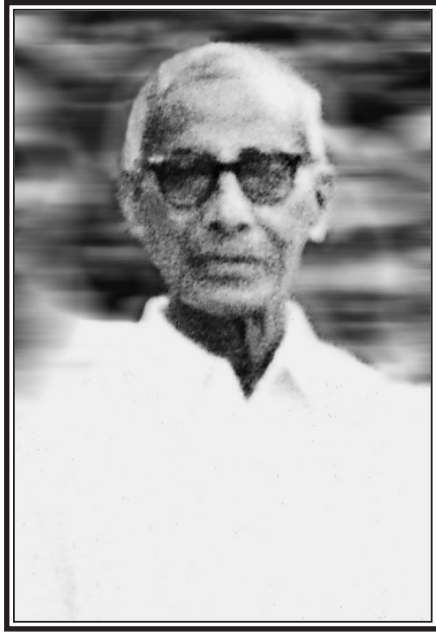
Rajangam did get too old for Tennis and Mass Exercises. He had to give them up. His work too was reduced. He was now left with one duty, that of opening of the Ashram Main Gate at 4.30 a.m. and closing it at 11.00 pm. This he did nearly until his last days. (The regularity, punctuality and an undiminished devotion persisting over decades of some of these old timers would seem unattainable nowadays. Another observable phenomenon is that when one of them passes away or has to retire (old age), two or three are needed to replace him — Rajangam, Bula-da, Khirod-da, some such old timers etc.) A few minutes before 11 p.m. or 4.30 a.m. one could hear him coming down the stairs, his wooden sandals beating a “khat-khat” on the wooden stairs. One night he missed a step and came tumbling down the last few steps. A minor miracle, no bone broke. Actually he was the least excited. He just picked himself up and moved on. It so happened one night that he did not come down. Someone went up and came down a bit alarmed! He called me and said “Battida, come quick, something wrong with Rajangam.” I went up to investigate. There was Rajangam in his night dress — a “Kaupin” (G-string)

gloriously snoring away — flat on the floor. There were books and papers strewn all around him and on the cot. Near his ear, a transistor radio was lulling him with some Carnatic classical music. (I think he had learned some Carnatic music in his younger days. He could be heard humming to himself when moving around.) Rajangam acquired this radio but never got to know how to handle it. The radio was tuned to Chennai and he switched it on when there was a classical music programme. When and if, by any chance touch, the tuning knob was shifted off Chennai, and music did not emanate from the gadget, he thought it needed repair. He would send it to our Radio Repairing Section. Mahi or Arun & Co. knew Rajangam well. They put the needle back to Chennai and returned the radio. It was probably easier this way than to teach him the intricacies of Radio Tuning. I shook him gently. He woke up with a start. I assured him everything was OK, and that he could go back to sleep, we would lock the gate. I forget what he did then. But those were the days of “beginning of the end” — which eventually came on the 5th of May 1984. He was 86 — quite a long rally.

The yoke, put on Rajangam way back in 1923, on Sri Aurobindo’s orders, by Puraniji, changed from time to time, but was never taken off, nor shrugged off. He breathed his last, yoked. The Mother had once told him that he was, in a previous life, the French Revolution leader Barat who later opposed Robespierre. I wonder what and how many “inner voyages” brought him from that violent way to this peaceful Haven. He did retain vestiges of that “Barat” fire till his last days.

Epilogue

Maybe we all, each one of us, are made up of many different streams flowing parallelly to merge into One Ocean. But each stream reaches individually, in its own time according to its flow — some stagnate, are muddy or clear, some flow fast within the banks, yet some flood their banks and lose their way to return later. Each Odyssey is over only when all the streams reach *The Ocean*.



TINKORI-DA

*On that Sea Shore,
Grammar, simplicity and sincerity,
Within them they bore.*

TINKORI MITRA was one of our favourite teachers. We loved him, so we vexed him. What he taught was English Grammar, a subject which was, for us at least, neither here nor there. (Now I wonder at its complexity and utility, but then when younger I was sure.) He was a “mastermoshai” to the core. He taught to any who was willing to learn and to some unwilling ones too. We called him “Tin-da”. (There was another Tinkori, a Banerjee, a music teacher of a much later era and of a very, very different ilk.)

Tinkori means three shells. I had presented three most ordinary looking seashells to him on one of his birthdays, and forgot all about it as it was done more in fun than any deeper reason or feeling. But he had preserved them many a long year. He was one of the simplest

of men, in dress, habits, eating or even thinking (except for English Grammar). He was small statured, short and thin — maybe more true to say “wiry” or “sinewy”. There was not much really to draw attention but for the nose. It was promontory of impressionable size and shape. It was big and hooked, pushing back the rest of the face. He often smiled a thin smile at nothing in particular. The eyes seemed to see only what should be seen and did not bother too much for all else. I would picture them to be a mixture of innocence and puzzlement. The legs were strong and well shaped. He could boast of no fat. He would have weighed, I guess, 50 kgs - 52 kgs. The dress was invariably a dhoti and shirt or “punjabi” (Ashram make). He would of course don shorts and banian for group activities.

Tinkori-da was born in 1892, probably in a place called Shibpur, Bengal. Not much is known about his early youth. It would seem he was always a “mastermoshai”. He lived for a period around 1913, with his brother’s family in Shibpur. He taught History, Geography and English. He was not bound to the family life and relatives. His work, i.e., teaching and its fulfilment seemed to be his main concern. All this may show him up as a non-caring and remote character. No — he was a very considerate and understanding person. He tried not to inconvenience anybody in any way. He usually went out early and returned late, for often he helped students individually. Once in a while if he happened to come back later than usual, and thought the others had all finished their dinner and were readying themselves to retire, he quietly returned to the school and spent the night there in some corner! He came home the next morning. He had not the heart to disturb or give cause for them to fuss over him. Even during the vacations he went about helping the students, sometimes calling them home.

The headmaster of the school (Shibpur) was a pundit. He knew even Latin and Greek. He was also acquainted with our Nolinida. Late Mohinida (who looked after Tinda towards the end of his life) was Tinkori-da’s student in Shibpur. Tinkori-da came to the Ashram in 1942 intending it to be a short visit. He stayed a month, then two and then decided to settle here permanently. The old headmaster did not appreciate this sudden move of Tinkori-da’s. Tinda never went back. In fact I don’t think he went anywhere more than 5 km from

the Ashram. Cazanove and Rizière were the distant places he went to, that too for harvesting with all of us — schoolchildren, teachers, etc. In those days the school was closed (or those who chose to work were exempted from attending classes) during those 3-4 days of harvesting. It is not that we bunked classes.

Tinkori-da continued his old profession of teaching grammar and English here in the Ashram School. He also worked in the Granary and I think in the Dining Room too. We met, back in 1947 or 1948 as teacher and student across the classroom. He was one of the very rare persons who saw poetry in grammar — in English grammar at that. He seemed to relish it like we would a bestselling novel. To us it was dry as dust and as unpalatable. Fifty minutes of it gave us “pins and needles” of the brain. Oh! But how he tried and how we resisted. He was too good, simple and kind-hearted for us. We arrived late, either playing games before the class started, or going out to pluck some mangoes to be distributed and eaten during the class (he didn’t know about it). Sometimes he saw us going out when he was entering the classroom. He would chide us, but to no effect — we went out. Once in a while as a desperate measure he would threaten to leave the class and go away. He did it once, but we ran after him and pleaded and said we would fall at his feet. Then he went all soft and felt embarrassed and quickly came back, sat on his chair and all was forgotten. I don’t remember how far past the front cover of that thick red grammar book we ever got — not very far one would suspect. But all this was just from “bell to bell” of that class. We met in the Ashram, Playground, harvesting, etc. — neither he nor we let the “grammar” come between us.

Tinkori-da was neither a sportsman nor a sports lover in his pre-ashram days. He considered football a game for savages. But here he did join the group activities (not games), just the marching and exercises in the body-building gym. He was naturally endowed with some strength. (He did heavy physical work in the Granary. It gave him quite some exercise and strength.) He and I had struck a deal. We all went to the Dining Room after the Mother’s Distribution in the Playground. The agreement was that he would carry me piggyback half the way and I would carry him rest of the way. I would jump on to his back outside the Playground and get down only at the crossing

of Jawaharlal Nehru Street and François Martin Street. Then I would try to pick him up. But he felt very embarrassed and pleaded not to be picked up. I think only once did I forcibly give him a lift — that too only part of the way. He was a great worker and more — he was a nice, gentle and a sincere person. His mind was ever a clean slate — nothing of the past, even of the previous one hour, was carried over. Once someone in a jocular vein asked him, pointing a finger at me: “Tinda, he was very naughty, and troubled you, did he not?” Tinkori-da cut him short saying: “Is that any of your business?” Actually we were great friends. He would ask me almost everyday in the Gym: “Tomaké èk chaud débo?” (Shall I give you a slap?) I would turn my bare back to him and say: “Yes, please give me one.” He would swing his hand, and gently lay it on my back.

Tinkori-da retired from school, I think, due to old age. Later he took ill, and his mind too wandered a bit. One evening someone told me, “Tinkori-da is missing.” It was around 8 p.m. I hopped onto my bicycle and went zigzag down one road and up the next. By good fortune or chance, I found him near the Railway Station. He was stopped by an open drain a foot wide. It appeared too wide for him to cross over. When I approached him, he asked me: “Dèkho to bhai, ami par hoté parbo ki?” (can you tell me if I will be able to cross over?) I asked him, “Tinda, where are you headed?” He pointed South (the wrong, the opposite direction) and said: “Home — but I can’t cross the water.” I got him to sit at a nearby tea-stall, called a rickshaw and brought him home. Not long after that I heard that he had crossed that last River — that was on 13th of June in 1978.

I can well imagine what might have happened on that 13th of June:

A knock at Tin-da’s door.

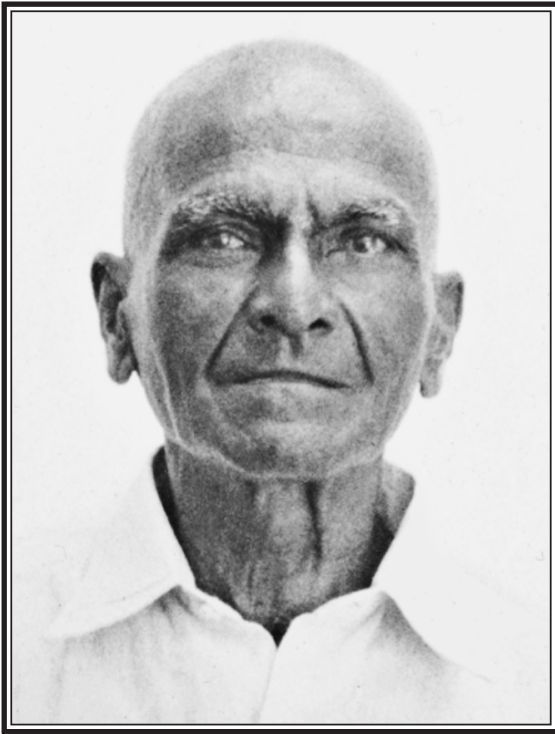
Tin-da: Who is there?

Yamaraj: It is me, Yamaraj.

Tin-da: O God! Come in — but you should have replied, “I Yamaraj” and not “me, Yamaraj”.

Yamaraj: I am sorry — but it was so long ago.

Then he slipped in with a smile and helped Tin-da up, and off they rode into the silent, soft sky.



KIRAN CHOWDHURY

A simpleton, a pundit

There is more simplicity in a man who eats caviar on impulse than in a man who eats grape fruit in principle.

G. K. CHESTERTON

KIRAN CHOWDHURY was born in Chottogram (Bangladesh) in 1912. He was a dear friend of mine. He was known to many and many more have heard of him (many anecdotes are orally passed on). He was a legend even in his lifetime. I write about this friend just to perpetuate (so to say) the memory of an interesting simple man. I could not ignore this old man. I cannot categorise him as “great” nor as “not great” so he fits in as “a not so great”. I was one of his favourites. He

had other favourites too, amongst whom should be included cows and goats.

A “pundit” it is said is one who knows something of everything and everything of something. Kiran-da knew something of everything or at least of many things but of nothing did he know everything. Because of the first trait he could have been and was a useful man. But somewhere in his makeup a complex, a mixture of oversensitivity, oversimplicity bordering on childishness got him into trouble. Not all (most) could be charitable to his shortcomings.

Kiran-da was not an impressive figure physically. He was short and compact, of dark complexion — a darkness enhanced by an abundance of dark body hair. The growth on top, where it mattered, grew sparse, but elsewhere the abundance persisted. A round face, nothing remarkable except for the eyes and eyebrows. He held his eyes wide-open as if staring and blinked less than is usual. It gave him a “surprised” look. The eyebrows were thick, bushy with no gap in between, seemed like only one, stretched from temple to temple. His voice was effeminate and seemed permanently hoarse. He liked to sing and went always for the classical. He floated off into a rapture by his own singing. He knew something about classical music of the North and practised it. (Some more about music later.)

Kiran-da joined the Ashram in 1938. In the early 40s he lived in the old Bakery House (now the North Block of our School). He was an enterprising man, strong and energetic, willing to work, with ideas crowding each other too fast for him to work them out. His ideas were not just fancy bubbles. They were backed by quite some working knowledge. He could and did put them into practice... but... we can conclude later. Let us first trace Kiran-da’s career through the 45+ years I knew him, with many ups and downs, but always interesting. I always wondered (still do) how he could gather all the knowledge into his not-so-bright a brain. I am led to wonder too — What is knowledge? What is intelligence? What in our cranium enables one or disables another.

Whatever my wondering Kiran-da too seemed to be dogged by these complexities and contraries. Luckily for him, I think he looked for the fault outside him (anyway most of us take umbrage similarly for what befalls us).

Kiran-da, as mentioned, lived in the “Old Bakery”. There was a very noisy milling machine in a common room of the building (hence the name). Kiran-da was the miller (in 1945-1946). He had some time and much energy left over, and many an idea clamouring to be let out. He and Sailen (Anil Baran Roy’s brother) joined hands and heads — they wanted to make some Hand Made Paper (HMP). This we might say was the great-grand-father of our present HMP. They collected old paper and soaked it to near rotting state. They laid their hands on an old pestle and mortar. The soaked paper was then pounded by hand in that mortar. It was heavy work. They then added some more water, spread the mess on some tray, drained the water and dried it. And lo — you got your HMP. Very soon the venture ran into trouble — not technical but “social”. The duo were free from their work only at night, so their pounding started then. One can imagine the plight of the co-dwellers who were trying to sleep, meditate or whatever else — they could not take this thumping. Moreover the town (at night) was silent — no traffic, no radio or TV. And people were more sensitive to noise — not, as now, deaf to it or benumbed by it. It was but a matter of days before they were asked to stop. But soon enough a solution was found. Jyotinda was incharge of Laundry (present location). He allowed the pounding to be done there. It was a more “away” place. They shifted. I have no idea of the quality or quantity of paper they produced. But soon for the same old reason they had to shift again. They resettled at the place that is now our House Maintenance Dept. on Aurobindo Street. That is where I saw it in 1945. Sailenda had left the job by then. He had gone on to become a teacher in our school. Sudhirda (Sirkar — Mona’s father) had stepped in. (Sudhirda cannot be dealt with so easily or offhand in this article. He is too great from all our points of view. Suffice it to say that he was a close collaborator of Sri Aurobindo and more, His personal attendant, friend and “son” in His political days in Bengal. Sudhirda was deported to the Andamans by the British and returned unbroken with the “fire” unquenched. He settled here to again serve his “father” and guru as before.)

Sudhirda and Kiran-da brought in some improvements in the HMP. The paper was now pulped by footwork (not arm strength). There was a thatched hut in front of their work place (now appropri-

ately Sudhirda's son Kalu has built his house on the spot). A cement cistern served as a mortar. A seesaw-like apparatus made of a beam (wood) with a vertically downward round wooden pestle fixed at one end, — was the new machinery. The seesaw went up and thumped down as a man/woman stepped back or forward on it. The pestle descended into the cistern with the seesaw's movement and pulped the paper. The pulp was taken across the road and made into paper. No rollers or hydraulic presses were around. So, we got soft, thickish, roughish papers. These were made into notebooks. We used only pencils in our school. We had to write very lightly, else the impression went on to the next one, two or three pages. It was like an etching. It was very difficult to read under a 25w bulb at night. Not that we read much.

Along with the paper-making the two friends expanded and diversified — into dyeing. That was the undoing. The smoke etc. brought some protests from the increasing neighbourhood population. By now Sudhirda had quit to take up pottery. Again Kiran-da got a reprieve. A new place was offered him, a big one — the present location of HMP.

This new place was bought by the late Khodabhai, I am told, and offered to the Mother. It was a coconut grove with just a front wall (South) and a gate. (There are some such gardens and groves outside town. They are fast disappearing, swallowed by the city. It is often said that cities are the graveyards of villages — buried too is the silence and serenity.) Kiran-da shifted to the new place. A tin-roof shed was built. Kiran-da lived in one corner, the rest was his working place. He started off in right earnest on several fronts. Many a night did we (some of us boys) spend there, and after many cups of tea came to know of Kiran-da's works and his dreams and his troubles.

He started to build a wall to surround the whole area (no New Creation's Blocks existed then) The job was big and he was alone. He went ahead — he would watch the workers, count the bricks being unloaded at night. Everything else, and other works, were then forgotten. At about that time he planned to prepare some essence of rose (attar). He needed, he said, 100,000 country roses. He could procure may be a few dozens per day. He spread them out on the floor, daily adding more. But the first lot would not wait (fresh) for

the 100,000! They started to dry or rot. The project was, as far as I know, abandoned. Then there were ideas to start ceramics, dyeing and what more I don't know. All started but none developed to any great extent. The surprising fact was he *did* have the needful know-how for all these projects.

There were two sitar boxes in a corner of his room. When we asked him about them he drew out one and played us a raga or two, regardless one or more missing strings. He even showed us a notebook where he had some notations given by the grand old man of Indian Music — Allauddin Khan (who had come to the Ashram and gave two concerts, one in Mridudi's house i.e. Prasad House and at night in Arogya House).

Such was Kiran-da's multisided genius, a bit erratic and muddled up. One can well imagine that a cloud or two would appear over Kiran-da's uneven horizon. There could be many reasons for someone to rub him the wrong way — and it inevitably happened (I do not know the details). Kiran-da was disturbed. He went to see the Mother, in the evening to talk to Her. It so happened she was indisposed and was not seeing anybody. So Amritada told Kiran-da that it was not possible to see the Mother. Kiran-da was angry, desperate and puzzled. He thought: "Why stay here, when the Mother is not solving my problem?" He went back to HMP, handed the keys of the place to the watchmen and walked away.

Kiran-da of many skills worked his way South, Trichy, Dindigul, Coimbatore etc. He took contracts from police for dyeing, and some other works and carried on for some time. He was used to hard times and hard work, but somewhere a dissatisfaction lurked. He was drawn back to this place — his Home. So one day he turned up. Things had changed here. HMP was a real factory with a different head and setup. So started a new chapter for Kiran-da — the same with a different diversity and setting.

Kiran-da's mind was ever casting about for new fields of action. He tried dairy farming (cows and goats), soap or shampoo making, growing seaweed or algae as food products and he tried too once again a steady job in Corner House which Pranabda tried to fix up for him, to give him a chance to settle down. He was given a room in Sports Ground. (Pranabda was one of those who understood and

befriended him and whom he admired, respected and loved.) I cannot recount all these events in their chronological order but that is of no consideration.

Dairy & Corner House (CH) — These two go together for some of the feed for the cows went from CH. Kiran-da had some good friends. I think they often helped him financially. He got a piece of land about 3-4 km down the ECR (East Coast Road). He also got 4-5 cows. He treated the cows almost as humans. If he got a bar of chocolate, the cows had the first go at them. He also had a few theories about what to feed them. He fed the food rejects and peels from C.H. but supplemented that with some news or other paper! He soaked these in water and fed the cows this slurpy concoction. 5 cows gave 5 litres of milk. I have never visited his dairy. He lost the cows. I think some were stolen or he sold them and got cheated too in the transaction.

He carried all the food rejects in a gunny on the carrier of his cycle. He could not ride the cycle (too old, both he and cycle) but he pushed it all the way. Some miscreant even made off with the sack when he parked the cycle to answer “a call”. Kiran-da tried to shout to the man that it was not worth his while to steal that sack, but the man ran. When he did realise the truth he dumped the sack but landed a slap on poor Kiran-da — probably angry at being cheated!

Kiran-da was ready for any common product — be it ink (for the fountain-pen days) boot-polish, shampoo, soap, ceramics etc. etc.

The factory that supplied the swimming pool with liquid soap had shut down. Kiran-da was at hand — he was ready to make it, if I gave him the raw materials. He had it ready in 2-3 days’ time. One of the best we ever had.

Some girls wheedled him to make them some shampoo. How could he refuse? It was easy to flatter Kiran-da. So the girls had their shampoo at a fraction of the market price. He also made some ink for our Prosperity distribution, for fountain pens.

Diet & Nature — Kiran-da worked in C.H. but I don’t think his heart was in it. He longed for open air and an open road in front where he could run freely his oft changing ideas. He left C.H. and consequently Sports Ground. His next interest and venue shifted to “Laundry Land” — what was till recently Autocare. His mind now was all

for Nature Cure. Natural way of life, of eating and of everything. He got interested in that new fad of seaweed diet, algae (spirulina) powder and what else I wouldn't know. He wrote to Sweden and got the seed or spore for their culture in sterilised & packed test tubes. He even sounded me to get him a certain sea-bird from Andamans that carries some sea-weed spores from its feeding grounds on the open sea to its nest on shore. I couldn't and wouldn't fulfil his wish. Following Nature's way he discarded footwear, went in for dew-bath, sand or mudbath, sunbath and, fortunately, a simple bath (did he use soap? — I can't be sure). Walking along, talking to me on our football field he suddenly stooped down and picked two or three mushrooms and popped them into his mouth. I asked him "What if they are poisonous?" He smiled at my ignorance and said "Don't worry. I know." He was getting older all these many years — he was still healthy enough. He took no medicines. One popular belief is that bacteria avoided him. Yet the inevitable was happening. He lost one, then two and more teeth. He would not take dentures — it was not natural. Moreover they were false teeth, so more the reason to avoid them. During some of the conversations we had he said he was convinced he would live 100-125 years. Maybe he saw a shadow of doubt in my eyes, he remarked very matter of factly but innocently: "Jāninā tumi thākbe ki nā" (I don't know if you will be there or not). He also believed that after 100, new teeth would grow to replace those falling off. He showed me his skin yet quite shiny and wrinkle-free. He asserted that his hair too would reappear in abundance. I peered over his bald pate and remarked that there was not much evidence of new hair. He said in reply: "As of now, I am not losing any hair." I had to content myself with that.

Music — I spoke of Kiran-da's two sitars — they were long neglected, so lost more wires and much else. He brought them over to Matriprasad and wanted him to get one ready by cannibalising and repairs. I don't think Matri could do it.

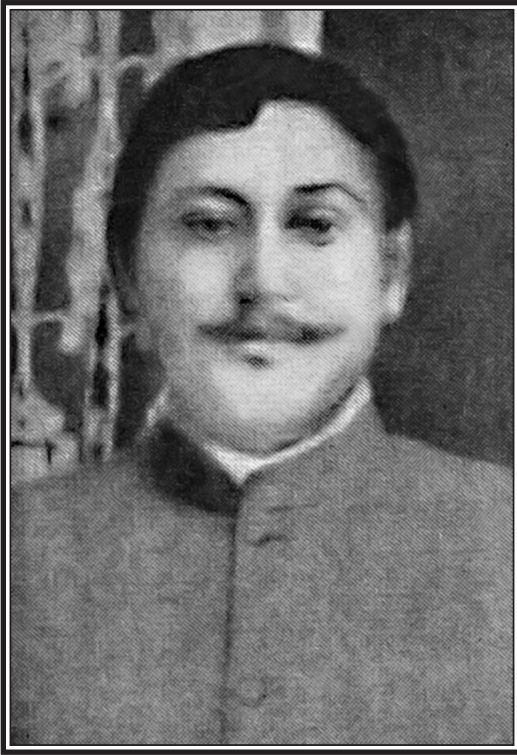
Kiran-da possessed a harmonium too (when living in Sports Ground). He wanted to give vent to his voice. Being an early riser, and 4.30 or 5 am a good time to sing, he opened up at that hour. His co-dwellers were non-appreciative and even non-co-operative, intolerant. Kiran-da could not understand them. He came to me. I told

him it is difficult to get people to change. It would be much easier and nicer if he did his singing out in the open. He could get on one of the galleries. He did so and was content. Sang for himself, his god and the sky.

Later — In spite of all he did, Kiran-da's health was giving way. He gradually weakened. His step shortened, barely went beyond the length of his foot. Yet he made his painful way to his land. But it had to stop. Then his speech slurred, and the hands started to shake. He was afflicted by Parkinson's. He was put in our Nursing Home and I visited him every 10-14 days and saw the slow decline. Yet he believed he would go home and work. He wanted me to look up his books, a few belongings and a microscope. The room was taken over by white ants. The books were half eaten up. Even the microscope was covered by them. I did gently break the news to him.

Kiran-da sank slowly and on 19.7.2001, in the evening, I was informed that he had quietly passed away. I was the nearest next of kin and had the dubious honour of anointing him before consigning him to the flames.

So lived amongst us Kiran-da — an interesting man, honest, guileless and too simple. He started but never ended anything — i.e. to our ways of thinking. He, for one, felt he had achieved much — so now where do we go? I would, we rather dwell on his honesty, simplicity and wonder at his ability to move from one thirst to another without quenching any. There lies his claim on me not to ignore him. So again I anoint him before consigning him to our collective memory.



DADOO (CHARU CHANDRA DUTT)

*Strong Sun of God, immortal love,
Whom we, that have not seen thy face,
By faith, and faith alone, embrace,
Believing when we cannot prove.*

In Memoriam, TENNYSON

DADOO he was to us, his students. He was known to others and the world at large as C. C. Dutt, I.C.S. or at least as Charu Dutt. The full name is Charu Chandra Dutt. He was probably quite well known in some older circles, i.e., in the early part of the last century. But of late not much is heard of him. So, it occurred to me — Why not rake up the still-warm interesting part, blow a little to let flare up the “fire”

of Dadoo? For, he was a man out of the ordinary (as testified by our Guru Himself). I know he was a “great” but again I thought — Why not another exception, with an apology and bring him under “Not So Greats” — just for us to be amongst them. It feels good to rub shoulders with the likes of Dadoo.

(Dadoo himself had written an article about himself, long ago, in answer to many queries. Much of what I have written comes from that article and what I have put between quotes are actually his or Sri Aurobindo’s words as reported by him. Except for the para in italics which is a direct quote from a letter by the Master to one of the sadhaks.)

Dadoo was one of the most endearing teachers we ever had. C. C. Dutt (Charu Chandra Dutt) sounds too lengthy and grandiose for a man like him — so Dadoo he will be in most of our minds and in all that follows, from 1940 to 1952.

Dadoo even as a teacher in our school was a legendary figure. Later when I learned more about him, the legend only grew. There are we may say two legends — one as C. C. Dutt, Charu Dutt of the old cadre of ICS of the Raj, and the other as Dadoo of the Ashram after he settled here in 1940.

I will take up the latter legend first.

He taught History to us youngsters in our old school. His teaching methods were most unconventional but flamboyant and captivating. He already looked an old man in 1945. He conformed to a picture-book idea of a grandfather with a large pinch of aristocracy added on. Dadoo was not a very large man — may be a bit heavy due to old age. When young he must have been quite smart, energetic, bright and handsome (purely my guesswork and extrapolation backwards). He was always neatly attired in short trousers (above ankles), bush shirt and a waist-coat, steel-rimmed spectacles brightened his merry eyes. A smile ever played on his lips and charmed all who chanced to meet him. A felt hat and walking stick were his constant friends (in need). He looked a pucca retired “Saheb”.

Dadoo would come to school walking slowly with short steps helped along by the stick. Once in the classroom he would deposit the hat and stick on the table — within easy reach — and ease himself on to his chair, wipe his forehead and cheeks, look up and give us

all a great smile with eyes, lips and more. Familiarity and happiness emanated from him. We were comfortable and ready. He would then launch off into his History lesson. We listened while he recounted history — after all history is story. Sometimes he would tell a story (Three Musketeers, Count of Monte Cristo, were favourites). It was not just recounting — but accompanied by vivid enactments (solo) with the help of hat and stick. They would be held aloft or in front or on the head or under the arm as the occasion demanded.

The hat would become a crown, halo, helmet, shield or just hat. The stick could be a gun, lance, sword, crutch, almost anything (of course a stick). Remarkable too was his ebullience, childlike and contagious and refreshing. He became one with and of the story and took us along.

I heard too that he took off a “false and flying” start in his job of and class-taking! Why — is anybody’s guess and imagination. The fact was he started taking History and / or Geography lessons right under the “Service” tree in the Ashram Courtyard! He probably got a little impatient. Sisirda our old headmaster even reported to the Mother that he (Dadoo) was taking these classes without textbooks. She said “that may be alright, these are just some practical classes etc. etc...” (I don’t know what else She had to say). Anyway he was soon taking classes in the classroom, in 1945.

More than taking classes, writing and translating, not much else was expected, and probably he could not and did not do anything else.

That was Dadoo from 1944 to 1952 in our School. But there is more to the story — how did he come here? Why? Dadoo retired from service in 1925. He was a mere 48 year old! (He was born in 1877.) We move on. He arrived here as a result of a few warm and warmer exchange of letters that culminated in his seeking and getting Sri Aurobindo’s permission to visit the Ashram. Along with the permission came a query from Sri Aurobindo: “Does he still smoke that old pipe of his? If so, how can he live in the Ashram?” Dadoo, not to be outdone, wrote back “Tell Sri Aurobindo that my pipe is my servant, I am its master.” So started Dadoo’s pilgrimage to the Ashram: So far, so good. But there was still a problem — it was the Mother! He was not too sure about “the French lady”. He had heard about Her,

both from Her devotees and detractors. He had known other remarkable European women like Annie Besant, Sister Nivedita — but there was no question of prostrating at their feet! — others did so at the Mother's feet — so what now? — all such thoughts were shooting and ricocheting in his mind when he was approaching Her on the eve of the Darshan Day, escorted by an Ashram friend. He decided that he would just do an ordinary 'namaskar', go back to his room, and write a letter to Her saying that as he could not follow the Ashram discipline, he was leaving Pondicherry. He approached, beheld those feet and a cry within him arose "Fool, fool, you thought those were human feet." He rushed forward to seize them. "A powerful current passed through my frame and the problem of the Mother's personality was solved for ever" (as confessed by Dadoo later).

The next day, Darshan day, Nirod-da met him and asked "What happened sir? Why did the Master say, 'so Charu did bow down to the Mother!'" Dadoo had only this to say — that the Master had saved him. Then came "face-off" day (i.e. Darshan Day). Dadoo crossed the threshold of the Darshan Hall with "trembling feet and fluttering heart, with closed eyes." When he faced the throne, he opened his eyes and beheld "a sky-blue face, beautiful and benign with a peacock feather on the head." He could not bear to look at it again and left with averted face. His one thought was not to break down. When Puraniji asked Sri Aurobindo "How did you see your old friend?" Sri Aurobindo replied "Charu would not let me look at him." This was the February Darshan.

Dadoo, before he came to Pondicherry, garlanded their family deity "Govindaji" with a garland of "Bokul" flowers (on Dol Purnima and Ras Purnima nights). He followed this ritual rather mechanically. It was done on his sister's request, who had taken a vow on his behalf (because he was cured of a severe knee pain when she prayed to Govindaji). This time, i.e. in March after his first visit to Pondicherry, he was met at the Calcutta station by his nephew who took him straight to their Govindaji for the garlanding. Dadoo approached the deity as usual. But... lo and behold, there was nothing usual about it. Dadoo saw the deity's eyes open and a gentle smile broke on the face — just as he had seen a few days back at Pondicherry. He picked up two handfuls of "Abir" (a red powder) and smeared Govindaji's

face. There is a beautiful sequel to this “Abir-smearing”. Later when Dadoo came to the Ashram, he brought a packet of Abir. He and his wife Leelavati desired, on a festive day, to smear some of it on Sri Aurobindo’s feet. But how? It was simple enough, because Leelavati went straight to the Mother and asked Her if She would do this for them, and the Mother agreed! Next day to their immense delight they got back the powder.

Dadoo even got his rosary or Rudrāksha mālā to be placed at Sri Aurobindo’s feet. Again it was the Mother who indulged her child. These were later events during the course of Dadoo’s stay here. But when he came back for the August Darshan (his second — after the first Darshan in February), he came with Leelavati and they gazed at Sri Aurobindo to their hearts’ content. And Sri Aurobindo too, as he remarked to Puraniji, “This time I had a good look at Charu, and I recognised Leelavati quite easily.” This was 1940. Dadoo realised that Sri Aurobindo had never forsaken him — a feeling that had gnawed at his heart for 30 long years. Dadoo did pour out all these feelings at the feet of the Mother. She asked him tenderly, “Do you understand now, why Sri Aurobindo came away here in 1910?” He answered, “Yes, I do Mother. As soon as I understood it, I ran up to you!”

Sometime in 1906 Dadoo had told Sri Aurobindo “You give so many good things to others. I have a request for myself. Let me have a copy of the Gita — one you have handled.” Dadoo used to read the Gita, but hardly ever discussed anything philosophical or spiritual with Sri Aurobindo. Once or twice when Dadoo did raise such topics, Sri Aurobindo would say “Not yet.” (They discussed political matters, poetry, history etc.) But when this request was made, Sri Aurobindo brought a well thumbed copy of the Gita and gave it to Dadoo. One gave it, the other took it — nothing much more was said. After 40 years, in 1946, Dadoo on an impulse, for no good reason, took the book (old and brittle) up to the Mother and said “Ma Mère (Mother mine), Sri Aurobindo gave this book to me 40 years ago. I would like you to keep it.” A few days later after the Darshan, Nirodda came to Dadoo with something, wrapped up, placed it in Dadoo’s hands — it was the Gita. He said, “I am repeating Sri Aurobindo’s words — “I gave you the Gita in 1906 and asked you to keep it. I give it to you again today and ask you to keep it.” Thus he got the book

twice, a doubly priceless book — once from a friend and the second time from his “Lord and Master”.

Dadoo — let us call him C.C. Dutt or plain Charu Dutt for the period — heard a great deal about Aurobindo Ghose, even in 1890, when Charu Dutt was in school in Calcutta. What astonished him and most others about this Ghose, was the complete Indianisation of one whose father was thoroughly Europeanised and whose education was in England (deliberately kept away from ‘native’ influence) and one who was not just educated, but reached its top echelons.

Later Dutt himself left for England. He too climbed very high the same ‘echelon’ as Aurobindo Ghose (not as high). He passed his ICS (unlike Aurobindo Ghose who chose to fail). But even when in England (1896-1899) Charu had already a foot in the revolutionary movement. He and a group of young men had pledged themselves to work for the freedom of their country and had, for this end, contacted some Irish revolutionaries. He continued such revolutionary activities even after joining the ICS. He was also implicated in the Alipore Bomb Case, but no charges were brought against him (I would not know why).

Charu Dutt was acquainted with Sri Aurobindo before 1910 and collaborated with Him. Sri Aurobindo often visited and even stayed in their house, in Thana and in Calcutta. Once, they were amusing themselves shooting at a target with a saloon rifle. When Sri Aurobindo entered, they persuaded him to try his hand. He agreed after a little bit of persuasion and technical explanation. It seems he got the target, the head of a matchstick at twelve feet, again and again.

There is also a story of a card game in which Sri Aurobindo after receiving a few instructions, partnered Mrs. Dutt and time and again beat the other pair of Charu Dutt and his brother-in-law Subodh Mallick. Sri Aurobindo seemed to know what cards the others held. It was a one-sided or more precisely no game at all.

These and more stories were told, which are repeated here just to impress upon us the most remarkable and fortunate nearness and camaraderie that Charu Dutt enjoyed with Sri Aurobindo.

Sometime Sri Aurobindo had passed remarks, semi-humorous, cloaked in ambiguity, during talks with Nirod-da and others, about

Charu Dutt being “imaginative” and “inventive”.

Charu Dutt speaks of a faculty he had even before coming to Pondicherry. This was a power to look inside his body and see his internal organs (heart, lungs, liver etc.), the blood coursing through his veins. This usually happened when he sat relaxed, absent minded, at dusk or after dark. One day he said to Sri Aurobindo: “Why don’t you give me some nice object to concentrate upon?” Sri Aurobindo said nothing though on previous occasions he would say “Not yet.” (Sri Aurobindo knew of Charu Dutt’s faculty to look inside himself, but had never encouraged it.) He (Sri Aurobindo) left for Baroda. After that, one day he had the experience of this old faculty — but — seated inside him, he saw “a luminous, entrancing figure of a Yogi sitting in padmasan”. He found it now easy to concentrate on this figure. By and by this figure got confused with that of Sri Aurobindo. Sri Aurobindo never admitted to having given such an image! He said “O! That image of yours! I know nothing about it.”

In 1925 Charu Dutt retired from service and went to Calcutta. Sri Aurobindo had left the political field and Calcutta. This sudden departure did not go down well with many — it was so with Charu Dutt. He whom Charu Dutt had recognised as “Chief” had let them down. In a great huff he broke all contact with Sri Aurobindo. He burned many letters he had from Sri Aurobindo. Somehow the Gita given by Sri Aurobindo escaped the mini holocaust.

Charu Dutt then dabbled in many a “trade” — wrote history, biographies, on science and tried his hand at art. But nothing really satisfied him. He was going through some rough weather too. Leelavati his wife kept telling him “go to Ghose Saheb, he will give you peace”. He would not pay heed — he could not bring himself to. It hurt him, but he suffered himself to carry the chip on his shoulder! Then came a break.

Once someone, a sadhak from the Ashram had written to Charu Dutt that “many here want to meet you”. He replied “I will not go to your Ashram to satisfy my curiosity. When I go, it will be to offer myself.” Then it happened that Charu Dutt had written a review of Jawaharlal’s Autobiography. This review was published in a magazine (*Vishwa Bharati*). It was shown to Sri Aurobindo. A sadhak asked “Did you, Guru, have contact with this gentleman of yore? Political?”

The reply from the Guru was the one which, when communicated to Charu Dutt, broke him down completely. A wound, kept open for 30 long years, suddenly started to heal. The Guru's reply was:

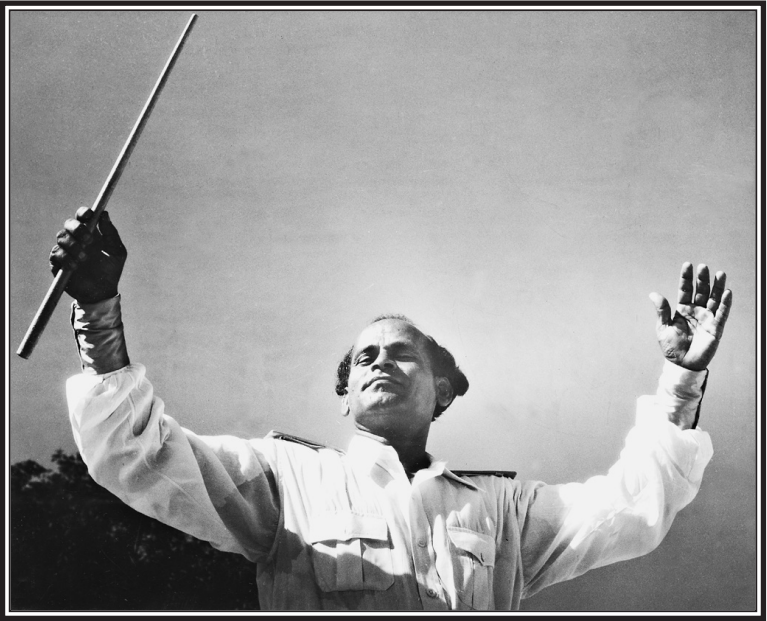
*Charu Dutt? Yes, saw very little of him, for physically our way lay far apart, but that little was very intimate, one of the band of men I used most to appreciate and felt as if they had been my friends comrades and fellow warriors in the battle of the ages and would be so for ages more. But curiously enough, my physical contact with men of his type, there were two or three others, was always brief. Because I had something else to do this time, I suppose.*¹

On seeing it "I was overwhelmed by a sense of shame and sorrow. I sat stupefied for a while" — as Charu Dutt himself wrote. Leelavati was naturally overjoyed. She said "I have told you so often before. Go to Him for a while. He will give you peace." Charu Dutt immediately wrote to the sadhak. The sequel, as we have seen, was Charu Dutt's pilgrimage to the Ashram — indeed one long destined and long prepared, for Charu Dutt again joined the ranks of his old "Chief" to resume the "Battle of the ages".

Dadoo the old "fellow warrior" left this visible Battlefield in 1952. How he fought here! Colourful and flamboyant like one of his Musketeers and tenacious as a terrier. We saw him as he lay in state, a faint smile as of old yet played on his lips. May be he hears his Chief's fresh order and call to arms on new frontiers.

We know so little about such matters of past and future and frontiers and fellow-warriors. Yet, with this little knowledge, maybe we can hope and pray to meet again on the 'right' side whenever and wherever the battle-lines are drawn.

1. From a facsimile of a letter in Sri Aurobindo's hand published in a book by Mrs. Leelavati Dutt titled: *Purono Kothar Upasanghar*.



SELVANADIN

*A tutor who tooted the flute
Tried to teach two young tooters to toot.
Said the two to the tutor,
“Is it harder to toot, or
To tutor two tooters to toot?”*

The Tutor, CAROLYN WELLS

THERE were, and there are, some very interesting people amongst us. Some are very well known, are very much in the limelight (for want of a better word). Some of them are remarkable but they are lost in the hubbub of everyday life. They are lost not only because they would not and needed not to step into any limelight, but also the rest could not (and needed not) to cast a keener glance at, or spend a precious thought on them. They were all seen as part of the general movement and noise, so in a way, lost to our memories.

I would just take them at random, as they occur to my mind. Not

much can be said about them. But what little I can recollect is, I think, remarkable, interesting even precious or at the least an enjoyable trait that can break a smile on us when in an idle moment we spare that thought on them.

Selvanadin — He was never an “Ashramite” — did not probably consciously aspire to be one. I think he was caught in the “Mother’s mood”. He was a pakka Pondicherrian. Served in the erstwhile French Military (Inde Française). We first saw him at close quarters in our Playground. It was long, long ago when our JSASA was in its infancy. I do not think we had even got that title. It was simply the Physical Education part of our school. We had no band of our own. But we did celebrate the school’s Anniversary on the 2nd of December. In 1945 there were a few items, like Sukol drill or Wand drill etc. The movements went along with Biren-da’s or Pranab-da’s counts or whistle! There was even at intervals a crank-up type gramophone pouring out some western music (78 RPM records). In a year or two we got some sophistication. We called in the Police Brass Band to play for us. Selvanadin was a frequent visitor to Monsieur Benjamin’s house. (Now Children’s Dispensary — M. Benjamin was an interesting character, an Ashramite. He taught French in our school, repaired umbrellas and mattresses, was incharge of the drinking water filter and the six or seven bicycles that our Ashram possessed and lastly he was for a short while the “President” of the newly formed J.S.A.S.A. He was one of our best football referees. He bore the brunt of many pranks we played both in school and Playground.) On one such occasion Pranabda too happened to go there, and the topic turned to the 2nd of December Demonstration. Selvanadin suggested that we should approach Capt. Bouhard (the Military Chief here, also a friend of our institution) to allow us to invite the police band to play for our demonstration. Capt. Bouhard agreed. Selvanadin was glad. He said, “On joue pour quatre groupes ensemble.” (We will play music for four groups together.) It was arranged so. Three or four groups did simultaneously four drills accompanied by the same music (unthinkable now).

Selvanadin was the bandmaster of the Pondicherry Police and Military. He was of robust build, short and more than slightly bow-legged. Somewhat dark of complexion. He was well muscled, specially the legs. He had a pleasant face, quite neat handsome features.

The eyes were bright and he had a very simple and innocent smile. His laughter was ready but it came out with a phlegmy gurgle, a result of smoking innumerable beedis and I dare say a habit of having a glass of some cheap wine (how much? how often? — enough for us to note, smile and let go and not enough to frown upon). He must have learned the music as a cadet in the military in Pondicherry and come up the ranks. He could play quite a few instruments but trumpet was the instrument of his choice. He was its master. He came along with his party for two or three years. Then it was, I feel, that the contact was made. He retired from service and immediately joined the Ashram's newly born brass band.

In the late forties the JSASA joined the “Flambeau” on the evening of the 13th of July i.e. the eve of 14th July that marks the French National Day. Most of the sporting clubs of Pondicherry joined this Flambeau which was a long march through the main streets of Pondicherry. On one occasion they marched under the Old Balcony and the Mother along with M. Baron, the then French Governor of Pondicherry witnessed the March Past from the Balcony. The Mother took the “salute” presented by our contingent. This was incidentally the first time our mode of the salute was presented — the same that we do now. Actually Pranabda had suggested that we present the usual salute practiced by most militaries (bringing up the palm to the forehead). But M. Bouhard explained that it was not correct to salute that way when you don't wear a cap. So this (our present) way of doing it was proposed. We participated may be for 2 or 3 years. Once our newly formed women's group took part. I speak of this march past, because the first time we took part, there was great excitement. The ranks were formed in the Ashram for the Mother to see and a rudimentary (1st) band — if one can call it so — was in the lead. There were just three pieces — one bass drum and two kettledrums! Birenda at the bass, Hriday-da and Debou at the kettledrums. The marchers must have been quite deafened and bored to death with just those three beating up the same ‘rote’ of a music through an hour or so of their march. Anyway that was our first band.

We got a few musical instruments. They were housed in a building that was actually one of our offices. The house was situated on Rue Lally Tollendal (in front of the house Promesse and his sisters

live in now). In the afternoon our young musicians would take their instruments and walk to the Tennis Ground, and down to the beach they would go (there was quite a beach then, until men disturbed Nature's rhythm. They are still trying to find if two "wrongs" can make one "right") to blare out with lung power or beat the drums. Many joined the band. Along with the instruments came a Bengali bandmaster, to teach. I do not know what the conditions of the contract were but luckily for us Selvanadin's arrival overlapped his tenure. I cannot remember the Bengali gentleman's name. We quizzed him on one or two occasions and egged him on to speak a lot of hot air. He thought he had us enthralled. He even gave us to know that Selvanadin was ok, so-so, but not good enough to take charge. When we asked Selvanadin to comment on this Bengali bandmaster he smiled and said "Sais pas — peut être bon joueur." (Don't know — may be a good musician.) Selvanadin took over after the other left — and it was the best thing that could happen to the JSASA band. Selvanadin took to us even as we did to him. The beach was our practice place for we could not blast the public's ears in town. Then we got the Sports Ground in 1951. The band shifted there and remains there in the band quarters. Selvanadin too moved in. He was for a time given a room in the white building there (the band quarters as they are now were built a few years later).

Selvanadin was a beautiful man. He, though military trained, at once fell into step with our (peculiar to Ashram) way of life. A mixture of tolerance and strictness, a elder-brotherliness in his approach to teaching, and last but not least — a devotion to the Mother (mixed may be with a sort of "military-obesance" which last he paid to Pranab-da too). He took on any newcomer — no matter whether musically dead or innocent. If the student was sent to him he tried, with never a hint of "you would be better off trying some other art" or "do not waste your breath and my time" attitudes. He was a simple man. I joined the band sometime before 1959 without any music worth the mentioning in me. He started me off with the bugle. The effort was to blow out five notes from low to high. He explained that the higher the note you want out of the instrument, the harder you press it against your lips. One-two-three were easy enough. The fourth was a bit more reluctant. My lips were a bit tired and also slightly

swollen. The air escaped from the sides of the mouthpiece. The fifth note was not yet attempted. I shifted the bugle a bit to a side (off the swollen part) held the bugle at a slant to a side (not straight ahead as any bugler would tell you is the right way to do it). Monsieur (as we addressed Selvanadin) left my side and went into his room. I did not wonder 'why'. He came out with a mirror in his hand, held it in front of me and said, "Regarde, comment joue" (see, how play). That was his brand of French. For him it was a musical misdemeanour, for me it was an exigency. Anyway I had to shift it back to the swollen part — and try. Two or three days later as I tried for the fifth note, he stood behind me, I facing the wall, the bugle between me and the wall. He got me to place the mouth of the bugle against the wall and pressed my head forward from behind. The instrument was thus wedged firmly, as also I was between the wall and his helping hand. I blew for all I was worth — out squeaked the fifth note. I could not even break into a smile. Perhaps he was smiling all the time behind me. The way was easy after that. He soon promoted me to an "alto" — something like a horn.

We in the band were treated specially. We got an egg each, every day (may be to augment our lung power). I do not think the (present) general egg distribution was yet in vogue. Most of us band players were not very regular once we got over the preliminaries. There were some (experts) who came one day in the week and took home the seven eggs "due" to them. I once told Selvanadin "Monsieur, ne donnez pas l'oeuf — pas de pratique, pas d'oeuf." (Monsieur, do not give the egg — no practice, no egg.) He smiled, shook his head, and said "Non, non, pas comme ça!" (no, that is not the correct way) I learned my lesson.

One day as I was entering the Sports Ground by the back door at about 2 p.m. I noticed the cherry tree in Annexe shaking heavily. Someone was up the tree. I quietly got off my bicycle and entered the ground to catch the thief. To my surprise I saw Monsieur plucking and eating the cherries. He saw me and gave a happy, half-guilty smile. I returned the smile and left. He used to feel hot at noon and the room on the first floor of the band quarters was an oven (made of hollow blocks, it retained the heat long after sundown). Monsieur found a very cool place for his daily siesta. The passage in the ladies

bathroom of the swimming pool, was like AC — the south breeze was funnelled in and cooled by the usually wet floor. He asked me if he could have an hour's nap there. I said "yes" and followed suit when I wanted to indulge in forty winks.

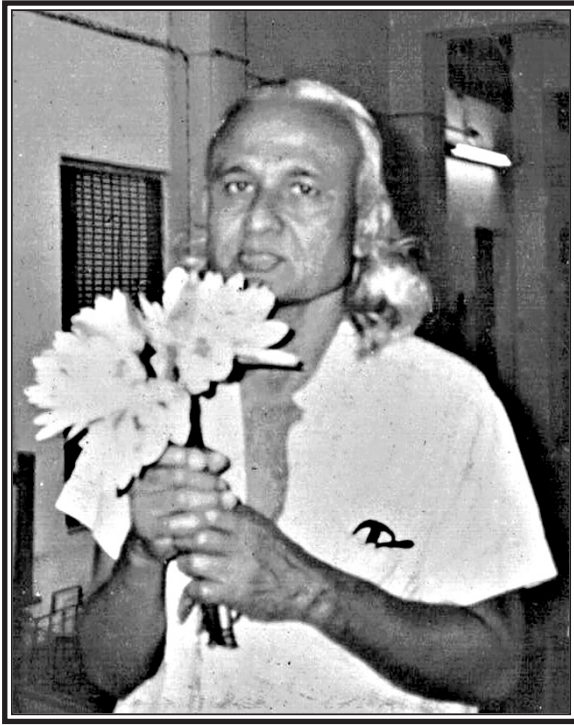
Once when I was still on the bugle, Monsieur was not satisfied with the power of the sound I was blowing out. He said "Comment joue? Avant quand je joue, le bugle devient droit!" (How you play? Before when I play, the bugle becomes straight! i.e the looped construction of the instrument would straighten out!) Then one day he showed me a unique skill he had developed — by which he had won some wagers — usually a bottle of Champagne. The skill was, he could blow a continuous note, without breaking, even for a second to draw in a fresh breath. It sounded quite weird to hear a long hiss or a sharp intake of air and at the same time the continuous "pooon" of the bugle!

Now for an appreciation of Monsieur's French. He had I suppose picked it up in his "sipahi" days. It was a French without grammar (I wish it was more appreciated) with a Tamil intonation and pronunciation. He often missed out some word. It was interesting and one had to get used to it to understand. We Indians could do it. It was beyond French pundits. When and if Selvanadin had to speak to the Mother, or She to him, Pranab-da had to act as interpreter. He translated Selvanadin's French into English for the Mother and translated into French Mother's reply in English for the bandmaster. Pranab-da knew English and bandmaster's French, and enough of the pukka French spoken by the Mother. Selvanadin knew no English. This triologue worked well, must have, for we watched from afar all three in smiles!

Monsieur was not only a music teacher for us. He was a great friend too. He played, even in his past-middle-age, football with us. He was, understandably, slow, but tough and hard as nails. He kicked the ball with his toes, toes turned back upward i.e. the ball of the foot made contact with the ball. No dribbling or run with the ball. He just ran as fast as he could towards the ball and kicked it as hard as he could in the general direction of a team mate. In his younger days, when in service, he was often inducted into the military team just to contain our Sunil-da who was a strong and good player, nicknamed

“Le Tigre” by some of the locals (two musicians clashed — one of brass, the other of silver).

Selvanadin was close neighbour of mine in Sports Ground (adjacent rooms above the band quarters). He was there the whole day — somewhere — down in the band quarters or in the field, ever ready for any student who could or would come to learn or practice music. More often none came — but he was there. He was a nice person to talk to, seemed to be well contented in life. A good wife, no children — one adopted son whom he managed to send to France (we had a send-off lunch which his wife cooked in my room). He worked on till he took ill and was admitted to a nursing home. I do not think it was a long illness. I visited him a couple of times there. Then we received news he had left us, crossed that threshold, to the sound of the final Bugle call — the Retreat.



SITARAM: THE SILENT SEEKER

Underneath all speech that is good for anything there lies a silence that is better. Silence is deep as Eternity, speech is shallow as Time.

THOMAS CARLYLE

SITARAM — not many of today know him. He is a man lost in the backwaters (or ‘washing waters’) of our Dining Room. I, since long, have wondered at the man but could hardly fathom him. I am trying again, now, with the help of others closer to him. Here is what little I could salvage, from the lesser depths, to share with others.

Sitaram was a Tamilian, born in the village Gobichetty-palayam in Coimbatore district on the 12th of December 1920. His father was

Sri Venkatakrishnan Iyyer (so a pukka Brahmin). Sitaram was a year old when his mother passed away. His father remarried. There were eight children in the family and Sitaram was the eldest. Sitaram later went to his uncle's (or grandfather's) at Bangalore for studies. He passed his B. Sc. at the Central College. He had a dear friend, Natesan Iyyer by name. The two friends came to hear of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo from a relative of Sitaram. They first went to Chennai (Madras) and then visited the Ashram. This event, a turning point in Sitaram's life, happened in 1940.

The Mother called Yogananda (our old friend: see *Among The Not So Great*, chapter 8) and told him that two good souls had arrived and he should take care of them every time they came for Darshan. (It may be recalled that Yogananda's work for a period was to receive the visitors to the Ashram.) I would wonder, in later years when Yogananda was my colleague at the Sports Ground and we had tea together daily, why he (Yogananda) would often call Sitaram (or Sitaram's brother) for tea and seemed inordinately fond of him — hovering over him like a parent would on a son's visit after a long absence. Some time later, Sitaram got a job in Chennai in Post & Telegraph Department — a step closer to "Home" and to his chosen deities.

Two years went by. Natesan was transferred from Chennai. Sitaram came alone to the Ashram. Sitaram one day decided to join the Ashram, leaving the family to the Mother's care. He wrote to the Mother. She gave him the permission. Sitaram thus came under the Mother's wing in 1948.

His Work

His first work was to learn by teaching (in our School). I was never in his class, so cannot say first-hand anything about his "teacher-ship". He didn't teach for too long. Soon the Mother, maybe on Ravindra-ji's suggestion, had other ideas for him.

The Dining Room washing section was in a disarray. Sitaram was eased out of the School and put in charge of the washing section. Mother used to call him "Big Head". (Why? I am not aware.) He stepped in there (the washing section) and left the organising of it only on the day of his passing. That would work out to five decades

or so in one place! Many of us have worked five decades in one place — but the similarity in most cases ends there. We will soon *try* to gauge the man by his works and more importantly by the *ways* of the works.

Sitaram was a true gentleman, as gentle as they come. To look at, he was just ordinary. He had a good compact figure with good enough features. Gentle eyes, an aquiline nose and a faint smile made up the face. As far as I can go back in my recollections, he was bespectacled. The eyes grew worse with time and the spectacles grew thicker. Perhaps he was an intellectual by temperament. But here, in the Ashram, he joined the Physical Education in khaki group with Biren-da as captain. He joined us in the Bodybuilding Gymnasium. We were his co-builders — Sailesh (late), Parna Kumar, myself and others. He built up a good, well-muscled upper body. He couldn't do much for his legs which was a pity, for, when lifting weights, he could haul up the weight to his shoulders, but could not hold it there long enough. The legs started to shake (akin to a good building with weak foundation). He tottered around and had to put the weight down sooner than the rules required.

He also took to a bit of running. He joined the 3000m and the 5000m runs — maybe for 2-4 years.

These, the classes, weight-lifting, running were but episodes on the Way. His path was fixed through the washing section and then came another Divine Dictum. It came about like this: Amrita-da was publishing a Tamil magazine — *Vaikarai* (meaning 'Advent'). Amrita-da had too much work and could not cope up with its publishing. The Mother (or Amrita-da) suggested Sitaram's name. He was called by the Mother to take up *Vaikarai*. He now found himself with three handfuls of work. That was when he was released from the School work.

These were his works — now for his ways.

His Ways

What amazed me and could have or should have amazed many others too, is that though I was acquainted with him for many years (not as student, but as a colleague and friend) I have not heard his

voice *ever* raised above the normal conversational levels — that voice needed sharp or attentive ears. Even the little conversation — *if* heard — was never unnecessary or loosely indulged in. One would think that managing the washing section would require, sometime or the other, that he raise his voice! And it was not that the workers were docile lambs or saints who needed no second telling. Yet the section functioned smoothly enough. I have heard that if a worker was absent, Sitaram would himself quietly replace him, do the work, in addition to his own. We did not know it then, but we often saw him going back late, perhaps the last one to leave, from his work — doubling up for some absentee?! He never took the bunker to task. But this sort of schedule often delayed him elsewhere, often even in reaching the general Blessings of the Mother. In those (g)olden days the Mother came down to the Meditation Hall and the ashramites and devotees passed in a queue to receive a flower from Her. She waited along with two or three others who attended on Her, and people like Sitaram (or even unlike Sitaram) were able to reach Her. Some thought this was not right. They reproached Sitaram for keeping the Mother waiting. She heard of their reproach and was not sympathetic to Her ‘well-wishers’. She asked *them* to keep quiet and said, “He is doing my work.” It also happened that in his hurry to get to Her, he would rush straight from his work, clad as he was — a bit untidy, a little sweaty. This too displeased some, who tried to advise him to be more presentable (if not chic). Nolini-da heard of this and advised the advisors to “leave him alone — no one need say anything to him!” What with his ‘softness’ for others and none for himself — (a total unconcern, we could say) — he often failed to find time to eat. Baba-ji (Ramkrishna Das) who had a soft corner for this young newcomer saved his dish of food for him, but often found the food untouched!

His work for *Vaikarai* too had its ups and downs. When he took it up, it had more of ‘downs’. He wrote to the Mother. She simply sent some ‘Prosperity’ flowers and Blessings. By and by, the paucity of funds disappeared but work had to be done. There was no letting up on that score (even miracles are the end-products of hard work done somewhere, some time). Later, a friend, Mahalingam, came in to help. He also was a bodybuilder. He too had a good upper body — also lacked a matching lower body. His source of protein was, if

I remember well — groundnuts; meat, the more popular source was not required.

The Dining Room expanded, changed in quality too. More young workers joined, some old ones left, but Sitaram was always around. But *Kaala* (Time) is a friend (or foe) of everyone, living or non-living. Sitaram was getting older and he would never say ‘No’ to work. Fortunately help did come. Vijayalakshmi (our teacher — physicist) rendered yeoman service at a crucial period; then came Mahalingam, then an energetic-looking young man Ananda Bharati. They were great supports in Sitaram’s publishing work. For the washing too, many came and went, some true ones stuck on, the chaff flew, the grain stayed. (Rani, Prashant and many more that I cannot name or recollect.) What *Kaala* could not change was the real Sitaram. He remained steadfastly “Sitaram” — never a word of complaint or very probably never an unnecessary word. Yet the body moved towards ‘Old Age’ without fuss or fretting. His eyes troubled him. One developed a problem — the retina dried. His friend (late) Dr. Venkataswamy Naidu did take him to Madurai, did whatever was possible — yet the eye lost its vision. Sitaram continued with one eye, which too was not in great shape — glaucoma was the culprit. He was again taken to Madurai; but nothing much could be done. Then the hearing too was impaired.

Sitaram continued but now seemed to feel the burden of the years. His achievements were many but not sung about, and most of us are not attuned enough to “hear” Silence! The adage “out of sight, out of mind” may be expanded by adding “out of earshot, out of mind”. So let us hearken to at least some faithfuls who watched him with awe, and then watched over him in his last days of failing health. I only recount as faithfully as I can what they said, with unshed tears in their eyes and love in their hearts: no names, no comments.

When Sitaram was working for *Vaikarai*, the Mother gave (for *Vaikarai*) the impression of Her feet with Her Blessings. I believe the magazine is doing well. He had another chore, done with love. *Everyday*, for over 40 years or more, one could have seen him, nearly lying on a blackboard, almost one with it, copying down a passage or a poem from Mother or Sri Aurobindo. This board is hung at the entrance to the main Hall — all can read as they “Q” past for the coun-

ter. He poured all his attention and care into this, as into all else he did — the regular lines, the word spacing, the handwriting etc. were remarkable, near perfect. Someone is keeping that tradition alive.

Sitaram did the washing of vessels for many years. He might have continued to do so longer, but he developed an allergy and Dr. Dilip Dutta prevailed over him to stop the washing. Fortunately he agreed to pass on the work to others (Rani, then Prashant took over). Prashant was also one of his trusted helpers who took care of him and accompanied him on his walks (exercise). Sitaram went for these walks and did his magazine work nearly till the last day. He carried on, with help, much of his work. But he was always apologetic saying, “Oh! I am disturbing your work.” He even told Prashant a few days before he departed, “Prashant, you have done so much for me. A little remains to be done!” How prophetic the statement was!

Sitaram’s heart too was growing weak and weary. He must have foreseen the approaching end. Sometime towards the end of January 2007, a thought crossed Sitaram’s mind; “I have not told anything to anybody. My time is approaching. Those close to me may feel sad!” So he did finally say some interesting things.

(Much of what follows is what he said in those one or two weeks or 10 days before he passed away. I have put some of it in first person, even though those are not his exact words — they were told to another who told me. Second-hand, one may say.)

The Journey’s End

“My days are coming to an end. You need not tell anyone. But when I am gone, keep my body for some time. Don’t take it away in a hurry! Cremate it and wait some time (at the cremation ground). Don’t come away in a hurry.

“The Mother’s music may be played. But whisper in my ear ‘Sri Aurobindo Saranam mama’. You may not tell or call anybody. Meditate 10-12 days — 4 persons like they did for Noren Das Gupta (Manoj’s father). When and if suggestions come for feeding on 10th or 12th day — don’t interfere, don’t say ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Keep silent.”

On his birthday, 12th December — Sitaram went upstairs, to Sri

Aurobindo's Room. He had difficulty (physical) but felt better afterwards. When the February Darshan was approaching, he said he would go "upstairs" although by now he was ill and weak. Those close to him said, "You can't climb all those steps. You said you are weak." Sitaram protested, "No, no, *I must go*." He even conspired with Prashant: "Let us run away and go for the Darshan." Anyway, he prepared himself, got ready the usual "offering" and was taken early on the 22nd (the day after Darshan). He expressed a wish to sit on the Mother's terrace for as long as he wanted to, — and not to be disturbed. He was there for 45 minutes. He came back and declared, "I have offered myself with the 'offering' (of money)!"

The days passed — 25th February — Sitaram was not sleeping much. He called Dr. Dilip Dutta and asked for some medicine; he wanted to get at least two hours sleep. (He could not sleep well those days — the last two months.)

A week went by. On the 2nd of March he went out for his usual walk — with help — came back to his room and said, "I will not eat anything." But later, he said, "Give me a small piece of toast and milk." That was the last nourishment he took before setting off on his 'Homeward' journey. He told his attendants, "Tell me when you come, where you go or when you sit here." (He perhaps wanted to know who was near him at all times.) Through all this he would do whatever he could — a little bit. He would sometimes say he was busy! When asked, "How are you busy, being indoors all the time?" he smiled and said, "*Boka* (foolish one) — I wake up early, finish my ablutions, take my Complian, wash myself and sit for prayer. I pray to the Mother and our Prabhou. I pray first for the whole world, for India, for Pakistan, then all the Centres, the devotees and Ashramites. I then pray for the Dining Room workers.

"I then go for my bath. After that I go to the Samadhi, the Meditation Hall and Nolini-da's Room, then I move on to the Reception Hall before I return to the Dining Room. Here I meet my '*Gundu*' (he was referring to a photo taken when the Mother was 3 years old. *Gundu* means 'chubby child'. This was his favourite photo. He had it all over the place in many sizes.) I then meet my friends, then back to my room." This programme sounds good enough and normal — though a bit unusual — for any well-meaning sadhak. But it is extraordinary

when you realise that *all this time Sitaram never left his room!*

He continued, "I then eat a little, rest, do the magazine work, lunch, walk (if fit enough), then I sit in my chair and repeat my 'prayer' of morning before dinner. Then I go to bed and pray for myself." (At last!)

He ended with, "*Boka*, — how then you ask me — 'How are you busy?'"

This is one of those unbelievable things you *have* to believe — because it is Sitaram who says it. He was one of those rare men *by* whom you judged the event.

On the 3rd of March, about 12:30 p.m. Sitaram evinced some pain in his stomach. He was given some medicine. The night came on and early morning at 4:30 a.m. — Prashant had to call Dr. Gayatri. Vishwabandhu too came later. He vomited a few times. The doctors said he should be taken to the Nursing Home. But Sitaram had already warned his close friends *not* to take him to the Nursing Home even if he suffered. So there he lay — his breathing became heavy. He then called softly to the Mother and Sri Aurobindo five times and left this world as quietly as he had lived in it. The day was a full moon day — *Holi Poornima* — a day when the gods of our town went for a sea-bath. Sitaram too took a holy dip, merging into that vast ocean of Love, into his Mother's arms.

I would like to add here a few unusual dreams Sitaram had during the first month of this year. Were they part of the buildup before the final curtain?!

The Dreams

(1) I was in the Dining Room courtyard, and had collected many flowers. The Mother appeared in front of me and said, "Give me the flowers." I gave Her the flowers.

(2) I was standing in the queue at the Counter, but my dish contained flowers. The 'Mother' appeared and asked me to give her the flowers. I understood that she was not the Mother. I said, "Go away, I will not give them to you." The figure disappeared — the face was veiled.

(3) Again I was in the queue with a dish. The Mother appeared smiling and said, “Give me” — and I gave Her the dish.

(4) I saw the Mother and Sri Aurobindo sitting together on the SIDDHI day — 1926. I went and lay down at Their feet. I feel I am always at Their feet.

(5) (*This was a month before he departed.*) I went running to the Mother after my work as in the old days. To my utter disappointment no one was there. I felt very sad. Suddenly the Mother appeared, and I said “Ma, I am very sorry I am late. Then Ma said, “I will not give you Blessings. I want something from you!”

I dipped my hand into my pocket, and into Her outstretched hand I laid my life!

I returned to the Dining Room. I thought, “As I have surrendered my life to Her, I have nothing. The Mother will take me away.” (End of dream.)

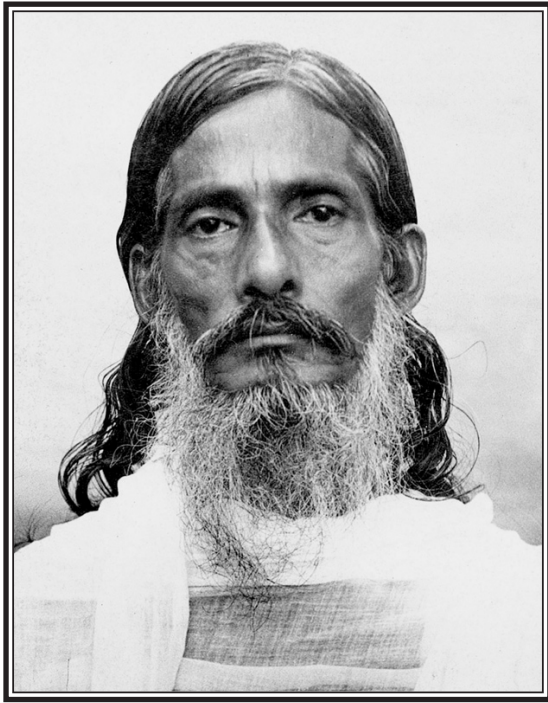
With that I would end my story of Sitaram the Silent.

One must read two writings of Sitaram’s — rather than just go through my story of him. The first one is a transcript of a radio broadcast (AIR). Sitaram was one of five chosen by the Mother for the talk. (Pavitra-da was another.) This talk of Sitaram’s gives us a glimpse of the inner Sitaram — albeit only the bit he reveals — it is quite a bit. Even that little shows a man of great depth of feelings, a man of simplicity and humility.

It is a pleasure and a privilege first to come across one such, and then be close to a beautiful person. We might easily have missed him.

Thankfully we didn’t.

The second — a free rendering of Subramanya Bharati’s poem on Kannan — makes one feel that Sitaram “enjoyed”, as did Subramanya Bharati, the suffering dealt out by Kannan (Krishna).



CHARU-DA — BHATER

(Charu Chandra Deb Sarkar)

*Who will pray, he must fast and be clean
And fat his soul, and make his body lean.*

CHAUCER, *The Summoner's Tale*

I COULD see his lean body, it couldn't be leaner. But his soul was beyond my ken. Let's hold judgment till later (if one can judge).

Who is this, another Charu Chandra? (We have already met two — C. C. Dutt, known as Dadu and C. C. Mukherji known as Bula-da.) This Charu-da is quite a bit different and quite a bit similar to the other two. The similarity, of course was — they were all devoted children of the Mother. We, the other children, gave him the title "BHATER

Charu” = Charu of the Rice. Actually Dadoo and Bula-da were never referred to as “Charus”. But there were some more “Charus”, so the title “Bhater”. (The why will be clarified later.)

Charu-da was born long, long ago in 1887 in the village Mala, in Bengal, on the 17th of November. His family was quite well-to-do, and possessed cultivable lands. In 1907, at the age of 20 Charu-da was in Calcutta (Kolkata). He was a student of Arts in the Intermediate course at the Ripon College. It was about this time that he came across the paper *Bande Mataram* — whose editor was Sri Aurobindo Ghose. One of the students of English used to read the paper aloud to the others. A spark was lit in young Charu — he did not feel its tingle yet, though he thought that this man, the author, was a very learned man. Those were the days when Khudiram was arrested and hanged, and the country was seething with unrest. Sri Aurobindo too was arrested. Some young men were collecting money to help Sri Aurobindo’s cause. When approached for a contribution, Charu said: “I don’t know the man, nor do I know much about his principles. Why should I pay for him? Why does he do such things as to land himself in jail?” But as his friends persisted, and seeing some others give Re. 1/- to Rs.10/- or even ½ a rupee — Charu said: “All right, because you have tried so hard, I will give you an anna (1/16 of a rupee = now 6 paise). If you are not satisfied I will not give you anything!”

Many of the students supported Suren Banerjee or Rashbehari Bose. (There were two factions in the Congress party then, one under Rashbehari and the other under Bal Gangadhar Tilak.) In one meeting in College square, Charu was present when Sri Aurobindo spoke. He spoke softly. Though Charu could not hear much, he was impressed. Something touched his soul. The spark was being fanned; Sri Aurobindo’s appearance and bearing also touched Charu. He found Sri Aurobindo to be simple and austere, tendencies which he had himself so admired.

Charu, though he was beginning to admire Sri Aurobindo, had more respect for the moderates — S. N. Banerjee and Rashbehari Bose. Sri Aurobindo and B. G. Tilak were in the opposite camp, extremists. Charu bought photos of S. N. Banerjee and Sri Aurobindo. He framed the first with an 8-anna (1/2 Rupee) frame and Sri Aurobindo’s with one of 3 Annas! He was as yet swayed more by

S. N. B. whom he took to be the leader of the nation. But slowly the tide in him was turning in favour of Aurobindo Babu. Below the picture it was mentioned that Aurobindo Babu had given up a job of Rs. 800/- and taken up one for Rs. 100/- — a great sacrifice. Another event went against S.N.B. At a conference that Charu had attended, S. N. Banerjee raised a sum of Rs. 10,000/-. This was to be spent for development work in the villages. Charu had a school in his village, and was expecting some funds to reach his school. But alas, nothing came. This annoyed Charu. Then he also heard that Sri Aurobindo had written about the Vedas and the Gita. So more “advantage” Sri Aurobindo! These were but the external reasons. Some inner chords were plucked and his soul was set astir, the flame was catching. Now Charu’s heart was moving on a new and different path. Charu subscribed to the magazines *Karmayogin*, *Bande Mataram*, *Dharma* — and he was fully convinced that Sri Aurobindo was the man to follow, that he was the Future of the Nation. Charu even went to an astrologer to find out if Sri Aurobindo, who was in prison, would be freed — so anxious was he. (The astrologer did assure Charu that Sri Aurobindo would be freed. The man himself seemed anxious that Sri Aurobindo be freed.)

Charu reading Sri Aurobindo’s writings, came across one, wherein it was strongly advocated that “...schools should be under national control”. Charu immediately resolved never to approach the Government for help, which would amount to Rs. 25/- anyway. He himself volunteered to teach without a salary and would give Rs. 3/- every month to the school. Some of his friends agreed with his plan, though some were not so convinced. A dividing line was faintly appearing. Incidentally, we have here, with us, a young man Charu had recruited as a teacher in his school. He is Benoy-da; he is an old Ashramite, now 101 years old. He used to work in the D.R. (Dining Room) filling sugar tins. He was quite a good runner — light on his feet and he had a good style. Now he is bent double, but moves about on his own power. He saw and sees the world around him quite well with one eye. The other gives a glassy stare — for it is of glass.

Charu continued to work in and for the school. All the while his admiration for and faith in Sri Aurobindo grew. He even started “Japa”, i.e. repeating Sri Aurobindo’s name in the evenings. He read

“Hymn to Durga” but was not sure he understood it. At that time he read an article on Hathayoga, but concluded that it was not an indispensable part of the yoga Sri Aurobindo practised (during His imprisonment). But Charu was puzzled. He thought: “Then what yoga is Sri Aurobindo practising? Sri Aurobindo is a Rishi. But where are his matted locks, where his ochre robes, his *rudraksha mala*, his *kamandalu*?” etc. Thus questioning, it dawned on him that the present-day Rishi needed not all these external signs. His achievements may be hidden. Charu concluded too, through all these clashing thoughts, that to “preach without practising” is to fail in any endeavour, to impart knowledge of Brahma without being a Brahmagyani was an impossibility. He thought of all the difficulties that the Nation was facing: “Who can solve all these tremendous problems? It needs an ideal man, a “Rishi”. Who is that Rishi? Sri Aurobindo — was the answer — He is that ideal man, the Rishi — but where is he?”

For Sri Aurobindo had disappeared from the scene. Some said he had gone to a lonely place to continue his yoga. Some others said that he had gone to a foreign country — even Germany! There was no pucca news about him.

It was now dangerous to take Sri Aurobindo’s name, or sympathise with Him or exhibit His photograph and read his books openly. Once the police did come to search Charu’s house. Someone unfavourably disposed towards Charu pointed out to the sub-inspector a photo of Sri Aurobindo in the meditation room. The SI looked and shrugged it off saying, “Oh! That has no great bearing on our search. These photos are sold in the open market.” The SI also noticed some copies of *Karmayogin* and *Dharma*. He later took Charu aside and told him to remove them. Charu thanked the SI and sent up a silent prayer to his Guru.

Those were troubled times. Charu tried to put into practice Sri Aurobindo’s ideas of Education. Charu introduced new books like *Brain of India*, *Uttarpara Speech*, etc. as text books. New concepts such as not to impose a mass of books on the students were tried out. Some of the teachers asked: “What — no books?” “Why is religion being introduced?” Those concepts bothered them. Charu himself had found it difficult at first to grasp what Sri Aurobindo thought, wrote and spoke about. It was doubly difficult to explain to others even what

he understood. Most of them (Indians) were used to think or were led to think and work under yokes — of foreign rule, or orthodoxy and tradition. Sri Aurobindo's thoughts were new, revolutionary and scary to most then (to many even now). The students were more amenable to the new, revolutionary ideas than the teachers. The latter were stuck with some old and orthodox methods. Some parents were afraid to enrol their children in such a school. But Charu persisted.

Some "incidents" (if we may so name them) buoyed persons like Charu. One of Charu's friends had an experience. Charu and some friends used to worship (perform *pooja*) before a photo of Sri Aurobindo. They offered some flat rice (*chidé*), puffed rice (*mudi*) and a banana. They often wondered how to know that the Lord had accepted the offering! One night one of them "saw" Sri Aurobindo and "heard" Him say: "I have accepted your offering." The devotee then addressed Sri Aurobindo: "I have heard you are a portion of Sri Krishna (Vishnu). Show me your four arms, like He has." He was amazed and through tears of joy saw Sri Aurobindo with four arms, with "*Shankha, Gada, Chakra* and *Kamal*" (Conch, Mace, Disc and Lotus). But he noticed with some consternation that the *mala* (garland) they had put on the photo was missing on the Lord of his vision. The dream-vision ended.

He got off his bed, lit a lamp and hastened to the Pooja Room. To his greater amazement he found that the *mala* had fallen off the photo, the string had snapped. He collected the flowers, restrung the mala and put it back where it belonged. (Some say "seeing is believing" — but often believing gives sight.)

Then there were some rumours trickling down that Sri Aurobindo had gone to Chandernagore and then "no — he has left Chandernagore and gone to Pondicherry" (out of British India). Then Haradhan Bakshi (known to us as one of the *Among the Not So Great*,) came over and took Charu along with some others to Chandernagore. The occasion at Chandernagore was the celebration of the 22nd birth anniversary of Sri Motilal Roy. Charu and his friends went there with an eagerness, hoping to meet Sri Aurobindo also. They were in for a great disappointment — for He was not there.

After the celebration Charu and friends returned to Mala. Haradhan Bakshi accompanied them. They brought some new land under

cultivation. Charu himself ploughed the fields. He was full of enthusiasm for he thought the produce could be sent to Sri Aurobindo. They (Haradhan too) wanted to start a new school named “Prabartak Sangha Vidyapith”. Then Haradhan slowly revealed to them that Aurobindo Babu had cut himself away, right from the roots, from all those Sanghas. They heard too that Sri Aurobindo had asked Motilal to stay back at Pondicherry. But Motilal went back to Chandernagore. Matters did not go so well and Charu broke off from the Sangha. A plan for Haradhan to go to Pondicherry to sort out matters also fell through. One Mr. Kirti Chandra Gangopadhyaya said he could go to Pondicherry — but had no money. He was given Rs. 15/- to go, but he did not go. Nothing seemed to be working. Then after all these efforts and false starts, Charu along with Haradhan left for Pondicherry on the Vijayadasami Day of 1925.

That was Charu in Bengal in the earlier part of the past century. It was but a preparation — a ploughing and a sowing. We will come to the “harvest” — reaped what? Who harvested? Maybe what follows could reveal the answers!

Charu-da at Pondicherry

Charu-da sallied forth from his old familiar haunts and origins towards his avowed Gurus and a new life. Charu-da came to Pondicherry on the 3rd of October, 1925. He met Sri Aurobindo and a new chapter opened. There is an interesting, very tellable story — could be related to this “new chapter opening”. Charu-da met Sri Aurobindo and was talking to Him. He (Sri Aurobindo), educated as he was in *pucca* British ways, kept repeating, at appropriate intervals: “I see... I see.” This puzzled and alarmed Charu-da, a *pucca* Bengali, much steeped in the traditions of rural bengal. Charu-da thought: “What is He seeing? Something perhaps not so good inside me.” (The story goes a step further — Charu-da, the next day, buttoned his *kurta* higher up so that Sri Aurobindo would not “see” too much. But, the Guru kept saying, “I see... I see” all the same! It was much later that Charu-da came to know that it was quite an innocent “*Angrezi*” way of letting the speaker know that he was with the speaker, that he was listening. Thus did Charu-da come under Sri Aurobindo’s scrutiny and care.

Charu-da was lodged in the room in Atelier near the Gate — to the right (ground floor). Next to him was another old-timer, a Telugu gentleman, the late Krishnayya — an interesting man himself. Charu-da did not stay too long, then left for Bengal. When in Bengal Charu-da fell quite ill. At that time, when he lay feeling physically miserable, he had a darshan (vision) of Lord Narayana. Charu-da identified Him as Sri Aurobindo. He returned to Pondicherry in 1928. During his first stay here, a Frenchman named Barbier Saint Hilaire arrived. He was later named “Pavitra” by Sri Aurobindo (all would, or should be knowing him. He was a great man by all accounts. Suffice it to say he was very close to the Mother, a yogi, Her “*sarathi*”, and the first Director of Education of our school. He was a scholar and scientist. He had already searched far and wide for a Guru — from France to Mongolia and finally found them (Mother and Sri Aurobindo) here — but all that is another story for another day. When Pavitra-da arrived, he was put to work for Charu-da!! (Can anyone imagine such a scenario now: a newly arrived sadhak given to work for another older sadhak!?) Pavitra-da humbly went about doing the work assigned to him. But Charu-da was not completely pleased. He did not very much relish the fact that a “Christian” should be his worker — specially touch his drinking water (*kuja*). He did allow the water to be brought, but later discreetly threw away that water and brought some himself! Then Charu-da left for Bengal, maybe to settle and finish some half-done work there. He came back in 1928 on the 4th of April. (Sri Aurobindo had arrived here on the same day 18 years earlier.) Charu-da came and enquired: “*Kothai amar shaheb chakor?*” (where is my white servant?) But by then Pavitra-da had passed his test and moved on, to be closer to and serve the Mother. (Pavitra-da had started a workshop — the precursor of present Atelier.)

Charu-da too moved on, he was put in charge of the Dining Room counter. He served then as faithfully as any. The brand of faith that some of the old-timers mustered, which ruled their lives here, which saw them through many ups and downs, would seem to us now too rigid, cumbersome and somewhat straight-laced. But then who draws, or where to draw the line between “good” and “too good” in such matters? Let’s move on with the story. Then came along a young man — (late) Ravindra-ji. He was made the “in-charge” of the coun-

ter in D.R. Charu-da stepped down and continued working, without even a whisper of resentment or dissent. It seems some know-all, a worldly-wise man, pointed out this irregularity in “appointments”. Charu-da snuffed such talk saying, “*Ma ekta kukoorko rakhleo ami amar kaj korbo.*” (Even if the Mother appoints a dog, I will continue my work.) At the D.R. counter was the place I first saw Charu-da, the day I arrived. I think he was serving bananas at breakfast time. At lunch he served RICE — unfailing, punctual and meticulous, thereby earning his title “Bhater”. I don’t remember seeing him at night, i.e. when we the young ones went there after the Mother’s Distribution at the Play Ground. (It is interesting to note that long before, in the days when the Mother was not coming to the Play Ground, the D.R. closed down by maybe 6.15 p.m. We had our dinner before 5.30 p.m., before going to the Play Ground. We were home by 7 p.m. — and off to bed.)

Charu-da, the man, whom I saw on that first day of my arrival, (nigh 60 years ago) was not very impressive; very soon I had to change my views. What I saw was an old wisp of a man. (He seemed the “same old” person decades later. He never through all the years changed size or shape.) He was quite tall — and not much else. An emaciated body may sound a bit strong, but it was so. High cheekbones, a cage of ribs and thin arms and legs all covered by a healthy skin. The eyes held anybody who cared to look and more so when someone happened to rouse his temper. That temper was ever ready to erupt (common in some of the *Among the Not So Greats!*). He wore quite a respectable beard and long flowing hair — always neatly groomed. Neither the eyes nor the lips held any promise of a smile — until years later. Rather they saw red and showed red when the temper blew. He wore a simple *dhoti* and a *chaddar* covering his upper body. A cloth was tied on his head during his serving in D.R.

(Could we, after all these years, dare a knowledgeable guess as to the reasons for the “short-fuse-temper”? It was perhaps that they threw themselves at their Gurus’ feet with full faith and conviction. In simple terms — to serve them only, the best they could — as a means of progress in their sadhana. They surrendered everything, and expected all to do the same. So they could not tolerate any lapses or half-way measures in themselves or in others. Any move out of

the straight path (narrow) in terms of discipline, timings, quality and quantity of work and even incapacity, were taken as weaknesses to be severely and instantly dealt with, without pity or self-pity. They got used to “no compromises”. Of course, short tempers are not uncommon now, nor were they ever non-existent. Only their triggering-off reasons are different.)

Charu-da was, for a long time, living “alone” here, as did most other sadhaks, i.e. with no other family members. But at the back of his mind he had an idea that he would offer his lands (at Mala — and he did) and bring in 101 devotees from Mala to the Ashram. He did attract many from that area. Many of his family members also were drawn in, nephews, nieces, grand-nieces and grand-nephews and...) Many of these had not even seen Charu-da. Arriving here they had their first glimpse and taste of him. They may have heard of him in awe if not plain fear but now (meeting him) the feeling was justified. Take that first meeting Sukhen (grand-nephew) had with him. The poor chap had just arrived from Mala and went to see Charu-da as a mark of respect. Charu-da didn’t give him a chance even to enter his room. He asked: “*Samadhi hoye eshchho?*” (have you been to the Samadhi?) Sukhen said, “No.” Then Charu-da, with signs of some rising heat, “Why then have you come here, — go, go to the Samadhi first.” Sukhen hurried off to the Ashram. Before Sukhen’s arrival (a very recent event), his aunts and many others from Mala were already settled here — many were here before 1945 — Benoy (teacher in Mala — sugar-tin filler here), Abinash, Surendra (Dairy), etc.

You could get into trouble with Charu-da for no apparent reason at all. (He must have had some reason.) This incident took place within 2-3 days of my arrival. I was very “*kuchcha*” (unbaked, innocent). I, along with my brother and two or three others (more *pucca* = baked) entered the Ashram, going in for the general daily Blessings of the Mother. As we went past the “gateman” who happened to be Charu-da at that hour, one of my older companions whispered to me, “say loudly ‘Charu-daa’.” I did as bid. Then someone said, “run.” I was bewildered, but ran and looked back. There was Charu-da, red-eyed, making straight for me. I was frightened; I ran, took the Rockery passage and ran out of the Ashram. He followed me out to the corner and there left off the chase. I think I sneaked in later. This

was my first encounter with Charu-da. He soon forgot and forgave — must have, — for he never took up the chase nor the topic again.

I have described Charu-da as “emaciated” for want of a better word. Thin and long as he was (when Sri Aurobindo said “I see...”, He must have seen right through him), he amazed me and my brother every once in a while. He was a friend of my uncle, Pantulu (another Vesuvius — see *Among The Not So Great*, chapter 5). Every time (on occasions) my aunt made some Payas, my uncle would keep aside about a litre of it and ask us to go deliver it to Charu-da. He could put it away in one go or two. This was before the days of fridges and before the arrival of any of his kin. Where did it all go? Apart from this luxury, he had only what was given in the D.R. Later, his nieces would make him some *Luchi*, fried brinjal and/or toast for breakfast. But you could never even speak of non-veg in his presence (including eggs). Sukhen again was at the receiving end when, unthinking, he said he would go and get some eggs. “*Beriye jao*” (get out) was the order given.

Charu-da worked on in the D.R. a long long time. I heard it said that he was never late, not a single day. But he was getting old. It was probably not easy for him to stand for long hours, all the while chopping up lumps of rice and serving queues of people. It was thought to ease him out of his work in the D.R. But how? He was too deeply attached to this work. He would be most unhappy to leave. But finally it was done — the Mother too cajoled him — a new job was found for him and She gave him a pair of new special *dhoties & kurtas* to wear when on duty — he was to be the gate-keeper (*Dwarapalaka*) of our Play Ground. So he was not retired completely. Then began the sweetening and softening of Charu-da. He came into contact with children and the youthful. This was a new atmosphere, a new current which soaked and softened Charu-da. Yet it was not as if a magic wand was waved and “behold”! an overnight transformation. Neither was it (the change) complete — but there was a beginning and a movement towards mellowing. We have heard and seen Charu-da of old. Now — for the new Charu-da.

New Charu-da

We the young befriended him and could now talk to him on somewhat equal terms. On occasions he would even concede a point in an argument — all with relative calm and a smile — quite unthinkable a few years back. Children who had not experienced the “Charu-da of old” were more free. Some of them even could stroke his beard, and one young girl even wove his beard into plaits!!

Once our first prime minister, Pandit Nehru came to visit the Ashram. In the evening he arrived at the Play Ground Gate with his retinue. Charu-da could recognise Nehru, his daughter Indira Gandhi, and make out that some others, Lal Bahadur Shastri and the Consul General, Kewal Singh were of the entourage. He let them in. Then came an ordinary looking man, dark-complexioned, in a plain white shirt and dhoti (South Indian style). He didn't look “official”. Charu-da stopped him. It was his bounden duty. Fortunately for all concerned, someone noticed the happening and succeeded in convincing Charu-da (it must have taken quite a lot of convincing) that the man was a V.I.P. — in fact it was the chief minister of Madras State (now Tamil Nadu) — Mr. Kamaraj. Charu-da stepped back and Kamaraj being what he was, all humility and understanding (I gathered so from a book on Kamaraj), smiled and entered the Play Ground and took his seat.

It made a very interesting, if not prophetic, photo of the Mother, Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Kamaraj and the Consul General of Pondicherry — i.e. one Prime Minister, two future Prime Ministers, a Chief Minister and a Consul General — all lined up with the Mother!

Charu-da was a man of rules — all very hard and very fast. Ideas and principles having once entered him found it hard to come out. But he was fair in that he imposed them on himself as much as he tried to impose them on others. There was a strip of lawn on one side of the entrance passage in the Play Ground. It was with some effort that it was grown there, on a slope, to prevent erosion of the Ground. To keep it green, effective and beautiful there was a strict rule: “DO NOT STEP ON THE GRASS.” But rules very few like, and understanding, obey them. The others have to be coaxed to obey. Charu-da had

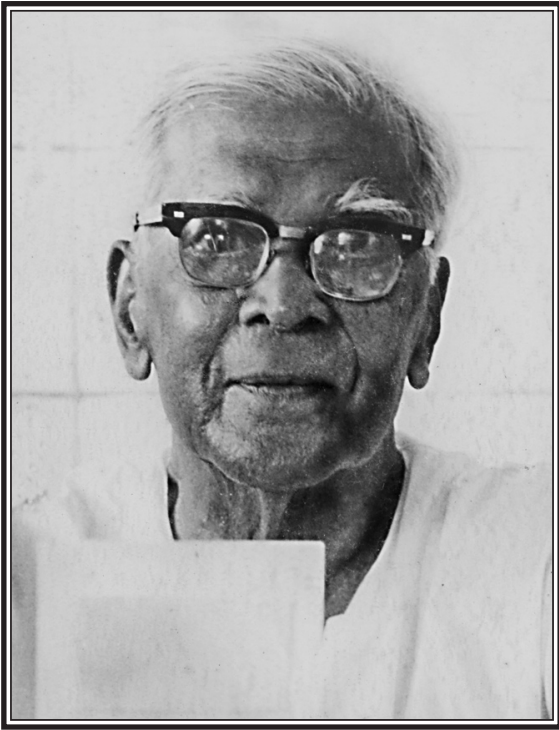
a busy time on this score. Some of the boys, just to tease him, would run right up to the edge and jump and cross over. This kept Charu-da on the red alert. He was a bit puzzled — was this jumping over within the law or not? Once in a way, someone blundered — he/she did step on the grass — by chance, by a studied chance, or plain ignorance, whatever the case, for Charu-da it made no difference. He would pick up his dhoti and give chase. I hate to think what could have been the outcome IF Charu-da had been strong and fast. As it was, if he could stop the miscreant there was a bit of verbal and moral scorching with a stiff dose of “discipline”. I was witness once when the trespasser was a new man, a visitor. He was standing with a foot on the grass. Charu-da came at him with burning eyes and gesticulating said something in some language. The poor man could not understand much as to what was happening, but he moved off in a hurry. I then approached Charu-da and said: “Charu-da, the man is new to this place, does not know our rules. So, you could forgive him.” Charu-da agreed and added: “amio na jene ekbar pa rekhechilam.” (I too stepped on the grass once, not knowing the rule.) I sympathised and said, “It’s O.K., since you did it unknowingly.” But Charu-da disagreed saying: “*na, na, Sri Aurobindo bolechen — agyan ekta pap.*” (Sri Aurobindo has said: “ignorance is a sin.”) The dialogue had to end there.

One of our ex-students, Prabhat, was often at the receiving end of some practical jokes played by his friends. He was (is) an affable type, usually wore a smile, except when he had to discard it for a look of bewilderment. On this day Prabhat was seen approaching the Play Ground for his group activities. The friends (group members) went up to Charu-da and told him “one of our group boys (Prabhat) is coming. He has the habit of drinking! See his eyes — red and drooping, and his sleepy smile.” Charu-da was convinced and ready. Prabhat stepped in and Charu-da called out, “*beriyee jao*” (get out.) Prabhat probably thought it was a joke or the order was for someone else, so tried to skirt Charu-da and enter, making matters worse. An angry Charu-da now made it quite clear that it was Prabhat whom he was ordering out. Prabhat was now a bit shaken out of his reverie — he looked helplessly on. The friends then came to “see” what the trouble was. They pleaded with Charu-da and assured Charu-da that they would take Prabhat in and see to it that he made no trouble. They

explained to Charu-da that Prabhat was actually a good and gentle boy. Charu-da then let him in.

Charu-da continued the Gate duty for as long as he could. Then that body, wasted as it was, could not keep pace with that fire-spirit within. It was slowly losing ground and gave up — Charu-da passed away on the 8th of February, 1974. The fire was extinguished, the embers glowed for a while, the ashes would soon cover them. But, we — some of his many relatives and I, could blow on our “long ago” memories, blow away some ashes — a few embers were alive... so were we able to bring back Charu-da to the warmth of our Present.

This was Charu-da who fattened his soul and made his body lean. There was not much that he had for people to sit up and take note. It would seem rather that he did much, went through a great many travails to arrive at the feet of his chosen Guru. Once there he melted into the melange of sadhaks. It was only the Guru who said, “I see..., I see...” Charu-da was right when he suspected the Guru is “seeing” something more than meets our eyes. Perhaps Charu-da himself did not “see”, yet fattened his soul — that led him surely and safely to this Haven.



DR. NRIPENDRA*

*An apple a day
Keeps the doctor away*

OLD PROVERB

AN OLD adage, but I speak of this doctor who provided the “apple” also! He is Dr. Nripendra — to us, simply Doctorbabu or Nripen-da. There was no confusion — he was the one and only doctorbabu. A thought may arise: “You had no choice” — but we did not need a choice!

In the early 40’s the Dispensary was a very homely and popular place — not because of the “need” of the patients or the aged —but

* Born: 1.9.1904 — 2004 was his centenary year.

from the children's point of view. Nripen-da loved children.

The building was unimposing, single storeyed, but clean and inviting. There were just 2 ½ rooms. A small open front-yard (the same as now) let you into a biggish room on the left, with white tiled walls up to 5 feet or so and a smooth black floor. I think a neatly laid brick floor pre-dated this. But it was not so cluttered up as it is to-day. One corner had a mobile tray of medicinal paraphernalia, a high bench in the far corner for patients, and in the centre, a little to the rear, a largish table behind which sat the smiling doctor, Dr. Nripendra. The next room, behind this one, was the domain of the "compounder". (This word "compounder" was very much in vogue then. The word means an individual, in a dispensary or hospital, who mixes or combines different elements or liquid chemicals to make up the doctor's prescription.) That was the time when the doctor's prescriptions had to be concocted on the spot. The compounder then poured the medicine into a bottle and stuck on the outside a strip of paper with notches cut at equal intervals. Each notch indicated the "dose" the patient had to gulp down once, twice, or thrice a day. Nowadays the practice is to just hand out ready-made pills. What the "handing out" person is called, I wouldn't know. The job is made easy and uninteresting. For every disease there is a pill packed in tinfoil (could we call the man a "piller" and the times a "pillage"? The beneficiary is of course a pill-popper). The pill, I admit, is very convenient for both, the doctor and the patient.

The compounder of those days was a young man named Salil (late). Salil later shifted to watch repairing. Another young man named Manilal also helped the doctor. (Manilal was the younger brother of Moolshankar. Moolshankar was a beautiful person. He attended on Sri Aurobindo. He was stabbed and died on the night of the 14th of August 1947, the eve of India's Independence, during a dastardly attack on the Ashram.) Manilal left the Ashram soon after. Next, a young man named Akhil was the compounder. He too left after shifting to our Electric Department. Then came Vasant-bhai, sometime in April, 1957. The late Madhav Pandit introduced him. He came IN and never got OUT. He has become now a part of the Dispensary. I suspect he is stuck at the centre of a whole network — like a spider caught in its own web! These days anyone can get himself caught in

any one of the millions of “Websites” festooning the globe.

The ½ room mentioned earlier was a country-tile-roofed verandah set to the East of the two above-mentioned rooms — where now the pills are stocked and dispensed. This is where Manilal worked. Here it was that Manilal distributed soup and sometimes a piece or two of papaya. We ran hither for these in the recess period (papaya was very rare, so a much sought after delicacy).

The Doctorbabu & the Apple

This apple was not just a fruit one munched and forgot the doctor. It is the fruit of all his labour and the man himself. There have been 2-3 doctors before him, a few during his time and quite a few after him. But he is the “Flag bearer”. He, Nripen-da is the one etched into our minds (of the early- timers, 1940’s to 1970’s).

The Doctor

Nripen-da sat behind that big table in the first room — a big man, with a big smile and a bigger heart. He stood tall and straight. A good face with a straight nose, spectacled kind eyes ready to smile along with the lips. (It was pointed out to me that the upper lip hardly had the vertical depression at the middle, like what we normally have. Why do some have it? Why some not?) He carried a headful of wavy dark hair the colour and quantity of which did not change much through the years. He was a solid, handsome man. He was very approachable! The reassuring smile made it easy for children and the old alike. His voice was strong and it carried far. In fact it could be intimidating but seldom was it so. His dress was ever the same — *dhoti* “Bengali way” and *kurta* — all white, Ashram-given.

Nripen-da came to the Ashram in 1941. He was Chitra-di’s (Chitra Sen — captain in the Department of Physical Education and also of the Trésor Nursing Home) maternal uncle (i.e. *mama*). Chitra-di’s father, Nolini Sen, happened to lend Nripen-da a typed copy of Sri Aurobindo’s *The Synthesis of Yoga*. (Printed books were then hard

to come by. The devotees had enough urge to get whole books typed to take home and read — a coveted possession.) Nripen-da read and was impelled to come to Them (The Mother and Sri Aurobindo). He was given charge of the Dispensary. The Ashram was small, both in extent and numbers. Most of it was limited by the Canal, the sea, Rangapillai St. and North Boulevard (Sardar Vallabhbhai Salai). So Nripen-da could and would walk to the patient when called or needed. Later he took to a cycle (pedalling — no motor). Much later, a car was given him. That (car) was the end of one era and the beginning of another. Nripen-da had also a younger community, so a healthier community to care for. I suspect too that we were more hardy and less concerned about ourselves.

The Apple (“CART”)

I add the “cart”, for Nripen-da did so much (so many projects) that it could not be just *one* apple. Any way one looked (especially if unwell) — the hand of Nripen-da was evident (obviously in the realm of health care). His the idea, and his the hand that gave the push and kept pushing — often against heavy weights.

Nripen-da’s first and foremost thoughts were probably for the children. One can understand the Dispensary’s popularity with the children for there was first the soup, then came, occasionally, a piece of papaya. Often one could get “Lithini” (I think that is the right word). This came in two small paper packets, one of ordinary paper, the other of cellophane paper, each containing a few grammes of powders. You mixed them in a glass of water and it started to fizz! One could add a little glucose and it was a great drink — our home-made soda. This was to be had on demand — not too often, though. One or two remedies which we don’t see now were common in those days. We derived some pleasure from them. They were “Throat paint” and “Eye-wash”. The first was sweet (glycerol +...?) which was applied to the back of our throats with a long swab. The second was literally an eye-wash. A saline solution (distilled water) which he or a “sister” poured in a steady trickle onto your unblinking eyeball while you held a kidney tray against your cheek to catch the overflow. There

was also *pora*, *Neem-pata* or *bhaja* — Neem leaves were deep-fried (I wouldn't know in what oil) and it was not only the children who took them home — to mix with a handful of rice — considered very healthy. I think some refinement or improvement was achieved by adding a few pieces of brinjal. Many took the *neem-bhaja* to the Dining Room at lunch time. These three items are no more part of the Dispensary's repertoire — a pity and a nostalgia.

Nripen-da it seems urged Jalad-da to start a poultry. The eggs were for the children. The first egg was sent by him, through the Mother, to Sri Aurobindo!/? He was happy that the Department of Physical Education later took it upon itself to open a tiffin-room for children where eggs were served. (This tiffin-room was in a way the precursor of our present day Corner House.)

We, at least the young ones, had no serious physical problems. (Usually a common cold or a common fever. The word "virus" was not yet in common use.) So if Doctorbabu came home on a visit he would sit down with a loud "*Ki holo?*" (What's happened?) Then the usual stethoscope, percussion, smile and "*Gorom Roshom khao, theek hoye jabe*" (drink hot mulligatawny — you will be all right). Sometimes it would be *Khichuri* instead of *Roshom*.

Nripen-da thought (rightly so — at that time) that the Dining Room (DR) was not adding sufficient greens (= spinach) to their cooking so he started a small kitchen and started cooking spinach. Children used to drop in (during the 9.30-9.45 recess in school) and have it along with soup. It was for long popularly known as "Vitamin". Some older persons also took this as an extra item to the DR at lunch. This kitchen now has grown tenfold in size and variety, and caters to many, not only children. The children have shifted to Corner House.

One child contracted the much-feared smallpox. The child had to be quarantined and even other members of the family could not approach her. But Nripen-da would visit the child every day, get into her mosquito net, and play with her. He would later go home and discard all his clothes and have a thorough cleansing bath. He had no fear or hesitation.

I wonder if a gadget, then very much appreciated, is lying somewhere forgotten if not neglected or has it been got rid of? It was a

bandage rolling, hand-driven machine, made of aluminium. All I can describe is that, the bandage's end was engaged and given an initial winding or two, then the cloth was spread out and held with one hand, the other hand was used to turn a handle. The spreading out was achieved through two or three other rods. The machine was fixed onto a table end. It was a work fit for an old lady. It may interest us to learn that a notice would appear every so often "Please give your old sarees and dhotis for bandages. The Dispensary needs them badly." Bandages were not bought, the Dispensary and many other departments hung on a shoestring budget.

If anything beyond Nripen-da's capacity — technically or equipmentally — cropped up, there was the Govt. General Hospital to fall back upon. But that hospital's general wards were more like cattle sheds — a tiled roof on pillars linked up by a three-foot wall, an opening or two for entrance. The beds were placed with no space wasted. Maybe an attendant could fit in a stool. A line of bedbugs could be seen making for the patient and attendant alike. (It reminded me of cars on a highway making for a filling station.)

I never entered the special wards or rooms until many years later. But I did attend on a patient in the above-mentioned general wards. But things have changed. And much later came JIPMER, then Apollo (at Chennai) and PIMS to fall back on!

Nripen-da moved on. He wanted to establish a well-equipped Nursing Home. For a beginning he ordered an X-ray machine from Germany. The customs held it up — he got round their regulations. When it arrived, it wouldn't work. He got Arun and Mahi (Projector Room) to look at it. They managed to get it going. And all the time he had to struggle to get some funds. His till was always empty. He was full of ideas and his hands were full of work. So it was often start and stop, start and stop — but it went on. He started a "Lab" with an old German lady who had some lab experience. Her name was Krista. When a sample of blood had to be taken, she would say, with big eyes and mock ferocity: "Come, I will suck your blood." And she really did! I gather the German way of collecting blood was to puncture the ear lobe and with a thin tube suck out the blood! The English puncture the inner side (i.e. palm side) of the forefinger. The French of course had to oppose the English — they puncture the nail-

side of the forefinger. (These three got us two WWs and more with their bickerings.)

All these activities and our increasing numbers needed more place. That old single-storeyed building was not enough. By now Nripen-da had to rent one or two houses. He also had to remodel the old Dispensary. He got permission to build another floor. There was some opposition (neighbours saying that there was too much noise and even that the view was being obstructed, etc.). But I think finally he got round all obstacles. (Even now some improvements are carried out but with less opposition.) Once Madhav Pandit came to tell Nripen-da that a neighbour was complaining about the breaking of a boundary wall. Nripen-da requested Pandit-ji to take a seat and went out, came back after 20-30 minutes and assured Pandit-ji that he had stopped the work — to everyone's satisfaction. Actually he had got the work completed (only the last bit was remaining).

We come now to Dr. Nripendra's *chef-d'œuvre* or *pièce de résistance*. It must have been an ever-present dream or even a mirage for a long time. For, to fulfil this dream, he had to run himself giddy. We often heard him in his moments of leisure — start off with a *Bujhle* (=listen to me, understand and dream with me....), then his eyes would shine and as he built the Nursing Home in front of us, a satisfied smile would break on his lips. It must be remembered that that period was quite different from the present, as far as the financial condition was concerned. There was not much money. He had to ask for donations from anyone showing a little sympathy and who had a little money to spare. In fact all his projects were undertaken in this manner. The ground was bought, plans were made, one floor was done. The coffers were empty. So just wait out the drought! Dr. Karan Singh also took interest and gave a great helping hand. Nripen-da had the satisfaction of seeing it function, though not completed. The two marble statues of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo that we see near the entrance, were got done by one Shobha-di.

The Nursing Home was probably the last of his achievements. He fell ill and had to keep to his bed. He was looked after by his new assistant, Dr. Dutta, who was already very much the incumbent doctorbabu. Nripen-da's condition got worse. He was shifted to the Nursing Home. Once I went to see him; he was not talking. He wouldn't

or couldn't, I can't say. I heard he had stopped eating too. I asked him why he was not eating. He just smiled. I then tried his recipe. I asked him: "*Gorom-gorom Roshom khaben?*" He did not speak, but nodded assent. I went home and got him some *Roshom*. That was but a short reprieve. He passed away on the 21st of July 1981 — not too old at 77. He never seemed to age at all in many years. His old faithful friends and assistants were on close attendance those last few days. They were Vasant-bhai, the present "compounder", Nripen-da's protecting hand (*Abhaya mudra*), and Manashi, his "giver of food" and cook, the giving hand (*Varada mudra*).

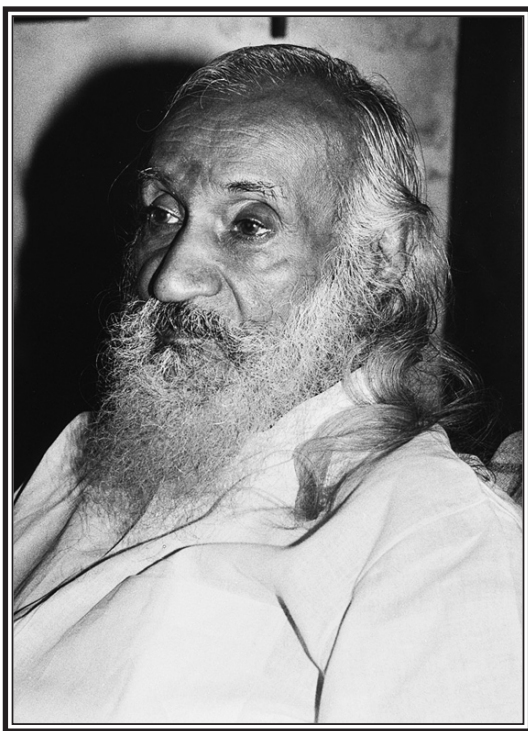
The last moments were interesting. Though he was lying inert for a long time, he suddenly made a great effort and swept his arms as if gathering something, at the same time he sat up, opened his eyes, looked and then just lay back with his hands on his heart, breathed his last of this earthly air and left for the greater Realms of Love and Labour.

For 40 years Nripen-da served the Mother by looking after Her children. He did so much with so little that one is left wondering as to how he did it. But on second and deeper thought, looking just a little behind the good doctor — or is it inside? — we no longer wonder, we are wonderstruck.

Tomar karmo tumi karo ma.

Yours is the work and you are the doer, O Mother.

That was probably an unspoken, unwritten but deeply felt motto by which Nripen-da (and many of his contemporaries) laboured on and on. It was a labour of love. It cast a spell on them — they ploughed and sowed. It casts a spell on us — we are reaping.



STRANGER*

*Be not forgetful to entertain strangers
Lest we turn away angels unawares.*

BIBLE

I HAVE not named the person. But I am penning my story to show how it was in those days when the Ashram was young and its rules rather unbending (for good reasons). When you came you were a stranger unless proven otherwise.

I refer to the friend in the story as “he”— for the time being. Now the story:

* The “STRANGER” of the title and the first para does not refer to the “angel” in the quote from the *Bible*.

Long ago in 1920 a young lad of 16 ‘chanced’ to attend a political or soap-box meeting (of patriots) somewhere in Andhra Pradesh, Ongole district. Again, it was ‘chance’ (seems more like a planned chance) that a young poet read out a poem wherein he addressed Mother India thus: “O Mother, why are you so sad, crestfallen, head bowed — when Sri Aurobindo is there to save you?” etc.... Our young man’s interest was roused. The first buzz of a bee in his bonnet. He thought, “Who is this Sri Aurobindo? I must see him.” He was too young to make any independent moves. But, when once the family (father, mother, brother etc.) came to Tirupati, he suggested, “Why not go to Pondicherry and see Sri Aurobindo?” The others did not evince any interest — the idea or urge went back into incubation.

In 1928 another occasion came his way. The family was travelling to Kumbakonam to see the family guru. This time his suggestion to make a slight diversion to Pondicherry was accepted.

The family came to Pondicherry, to the Ashram and knocked at the gate. The gate, in those days, was kept closed, to be opened only when someone called. It opened a wee bit, and a person from inside enquired as to what business brought them thither. Naturally, he replied, “We would like to see Sri Aurobindo.”

The person (inside): Do you have a reference or have you sought prior permission?

He: No sir, neither.

Someone: Sorry, then we cannot let you in.

The door was shut gently on them. Great disappointment. But they made the best of a bad situation. They went round the Ashram (*pradakshina*).

I think another chance went the same way — ended in another *pradakshina*.

Then one day, back in his village, he met a sadhu, walking with great steps northwards. He invited the sadhu home, offered him a meal and enquired of him, “Where are you going, swamiji? From where are you coming?” The sadhu replied that he was coming from Pondicherry and going to Bengal (walking!!) — it was not that he couldn’t have money to buy a train-ticket. Walking was the preferred way of locomotion and the only one he took — for this was none other than our old friend Poornananda (*Among the Not so Great*, chapter 7)

who after a short stay at Pondicherry was going back. Our “he” asked Poornananda if there was any Telugu-speaking person living in the Ashram at Pondy. The sadhu said, “yes, one Krishnayya is there.”

‘He’ started again for the Ashram. By now he was married. His wife too went with him. They met Krishnayya and introduced themselves and told him about their desire to meet Sri Aurobindo. Krishnayya, unmoved, said, “But, I don’t know you. You just introduced yourselves, that will not do. You must be introduced by someone who knows you and knows me.” Back again to Ongole after the usual *pradakshina*. Once there, he found out, to his great joy, that their family lawyer happened to know Krishnayya — again that “chance”! He got a letter of introduction and went to Krishnayya. This was in 1934. Sri Aurobindo had retired in 1926, saw devotees only four times a year, and the Mother had taken up the helm and the rudder of the Ashram. Krishnayya consented to take him to see the Mother. His perseverance paid off. He did not even know that there was now a “Mother” at the helm. He was nervous as he approached her. He had hardly ever seen an European (white) lady — let alone coming so close to her and then talking to her. He started by addressing her as “Sir” — he was all that shaky. Then he changed over to “Madam”, then by and by to “Mother”.

This was his first contact — yet no sightings of Sri Aurobindo. But a long-cherished and nurtured desire was at last bearing fruit.

The “he” was Kameshwar Rao.

After a few days’ stay, Kameshwar thought of going back to settle some matters. The Mother said, “Oh! you are leaving us?” Kameshwar mumbled some excuse and left. It was only in 1936 that he could ‘get a fix’ on himself vis-à-vis this place and settle down to this life. A voyage, with three false starts since 1920, had at last arrived at a midway point. The next leg of the pilgrim’s progress was about to begin.

How did I miss Kameshwar — all these many years? We had much in common. He was quite close to me and my family. I was indebted to him in other ways (I’ll speak of it later), yet I passed him over! Perhaps he was too close to come into the right focus... no matter, a confession is half an absolution. I will proceed with my story.

Kameshwar was a cheerful, strangely likeable and mild-mannered

character. He was born on the 7th of November 1904. I too share the day with him — 32 years later. He was all of a Telugu gentleman, a Brahmin (pukka). He was of medium height and build, rather on the slimmer side. Later, the all-too common middle-age paunch asserted itself. He did not do much to fight it. He was soft-spoken and his eyes too were soft and tinged with kindness. He wore a lush crop of hair and a beard — not too long but respectable. Both hair and beard did not grey much through the 80 years or so of his life. A small vermilion bindi came on long back. It grew in size (2 cm dia) (till he looked a tantric, starting from a small-time poojari). His dress was and remained from the start to the end a white dhoti and a white shirt. He would, on special days or function (Darshan, pooja), wrap on a chuddar; a “rudraksha” mala (beads) was a later addition. The picture is now complete — a priest, or a sadhu (no ochre clothes). That was the Kameshwar as I saw, from 1945 to his last days with the many small changes in the outer appearance. The man, his ways and his attitude were more unchanging. Deeper is not for me to probe.

Kameshwar lived very simply and happily. Life in general, in those days, was very simple, even bare. And most ashramites did with very little, most often by choice. Kameshwar’s house was small considering that it was also his department (maids, visitors, etc.). It was a typical Pondicherrian house — a seating place in front, an ante-room opening on to a three-sided pillared verandah enclosing an open-to-sky court-yard. The verandah itself gave access to 2-3 rooms and to a passage to a backyard with a well and the lavatories. His terrace was covered with a keeth (coconut leaf) shed. There was no running (tap) water for a very long time. I don’t know if later he got a connection. He got water from neighbours. He had a mongrel that usurped his heart and the best spot at home i.e. right under the single ceiling fan, on a table. Once when I saw this browbeating (dog) I teased him about it. He smiled resignedly and said, “Oh! this is not all. When there is a power cut, I am expected to fan the fellow!”

Kameshwar’s first work was to help in the construction work. Golconde was being built at the time. Kameshwar was to work under Chandulal, the engineer overseeing the work there. (Chandulal was Vasudha-ben’s — alias Akka of the Embroidery Department — brother. Akka was the Mother’s personal attendant.) Though

Kameshwar's father and brother too had come, they left. Only his young wife stayed back. They were given accommodation in what is now the "Grace" office (earlier the Mother's kitchen, behind the Ashram across the road). But he did not last long in the construction work. Amrita-da, then the Ashram manager, needed help, so Kameshwar was given that work. That too was not for long. He was given another work and shifted house too — a house on the rue Law de Lauriston where he lived for more than 50 years till the end of his earthly sojourn (except the very last few days when he took ill). The new work he was given was 'Liaison' work between the Ashram and the many Departments of the Government and the Town. He had another thankless job too — to provide maids or man servants to the many ashram houses. (There was already one department for this — Padmasini-amma, Amrita-da's relative, looked after it. But it was not enough.) This Liaison work suited him well and he took to it like a duck to water. We will see him at work.

Kameshwar also worked in the laundry for a period, under Jyotinda (late). They went collecting "to-wash" clothes, and delivered the washed ones from door to door! It was very nice of them, but only possible on those days when the quantity of clothes was small and the quality of the people concerned was different. Now we are more 'organised'.

The Liaison work took Kameshwar all over town and further, brought him into contact with many people, and of all sorts and levels — from governor to rickshaw puller, landlords, police, rich, poor — all. Naturally he came to be well-known, a most popular figure all over Pondicherry. His nature — mild, pleasant and straightforward dealings entrenched him in their hearts. It was a treat to move along with him down any street — everyone was greeted with either 'Bonjour', 'Namaskaram' or "How are you, bhai" — in Tamil, Telugu, English or French. (He never picked up any Bengali, Gujarati or Hindi? Something strange!) Usually it was an "Enna Thambi", a sort of "Hello, Brother" in Tamil, for his work was to do much with the working class, the police constable or a young officer or clerk — all were Thambis.

Kameshwar was a passepartout, it was a natural spillover of his general comportsment. He could walk into any office or even many

homes of those who had once come into contact with him, and be received with respect and fondness.

Kameshwar was a film buff. He got to know about all the films that came to town. He was quite knowledgeable about the actors and actresses. He enjoyed the old type of stories, legends and mythologies. But that did not exclude other types. Tamil and Telugu films were favoured — but he did not miss out on the English or other language films shown in our Play Ground. He could walk into any of the 4-5 film tents (only later halls) — of course — no ticket. Just the “*Enna Thambi*” password and the ticket collector or manager would show him to his chair. He could even choose to see the first half one day and come for the rest another day.

Sometimes, he would tell me, “*Orai* (a way of addressing a younger and/or close friend in Telugu) film *chchala bagaundhira* (that film is very nice)” by way of tempting me to go and share his little misdeed. I was not tempted, for I was too young and the formidable figure of my uncle loomed large in my mind and moreover, I was never a film buff. (My uncle was Pantulu — see *Among The Not So Great*, chapter 5)

(Those film tents were like circus tents. The floor was the earth — sandy and convenient rest-place for rickshawallas who had a pillow — their rickshaw seat. There were rickety old galleries, and chairs. There could be, and usually were, gaping holes, the stars were seen overhead.)

Many young and old went to Kameshwar with their problems. Be it to get a driving licence, a theft at home, a passport, etc. he would never refuse anyone coming for help. At the least he would say, when he had no immediate solution (like Kamraj — late chief minister of Madras State) — “*Paarkalaam*” (we will see what can be done). That would give him some time and the complainant some solace.

A long time back Kameshwar had to meet an old French lady — one of the old residents of Pondy. (I think her name was Mme. Garnier?) She lived somewhere near our Arya House. (I had accompanied Kameshwar once to the house. She had a horde of cats well cared for and pampered — each having a silken pillow for bed, with a mosquito net!) She was very pleased that an old ashramite had come. She opened an old wine bottle — genuine French make — none of these

IMFL (Indian Made Foreign Liquor) and offered some to Kameshwar. He a pukka Brahmin, an ashramite, was mortified, and as politely as he knew how, refused the “Amritam”. The poor lady was not a little unhappy. Kameshwar recounted the incident to the Mother. She laughed and: “Oh! Why did you refuse? You should have taken my name and taken the wine!” (I think, a truly French response.) She added, “You see, it is customary in France. It is a mark of hospitality. She would have been pleased if you had just sipped some.” (I couldn’t know if any such chance came his way again — and if it did, what did he do with it.)

I spoke of Kameshwar’s liking for films. That was not all. He must have imbibed something from them — for he liked to act (drama) and even dance. In the days of yore, when the Mother came to the Play Ground every day, many programmes were held in front of Her — dances, playlets, songs, magic shows, etc. It was on a darshan day, if I recollect correctly, that Kameshwar surprised us all. In walked a Ganesh — dhoti-clad, a mocked-up paunch, a mask complete with a crown and elephant trunk and — I can’t imagine why, a *mridangam* (a drum) hung round his neck. He came tapping on the *mridangam* in rhythm to a few ‘dancing’ steps, that I suspect, he choreographed himself. It was all good fun — but there is more. The Ganesh went and picked up a beautiful statuette of Joan of Arc astride a semi-rearing horse!! It was a piece of art, done in detail, in metal. How Ganesh was connected with Joan of Arc is difficult to figure out. Kameshwar (the Ganesh was Kameshwar) went up to the Mother and offered it to Her. She seemed to enjoy the whole episode — and why not? — one of her older children at play. The statuette today occupies a good corner of the Mother’s Room in the Play ground — on a tall stool in the South East corner.

On the 1st of November 1954, Pondicherry got her freedom (the French left) and joined the Motherland. There were celebrations in the town. The Ashram too took part. A cultural programme was held behind the Dupleix statue (now, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru’s statue has displaced Dupleix). One of the items was a dance drama, “Mahishasura-Mardini”. Anu-ben was Durga, Togo her lion and the asura was who — but Kameshwar (I think he had on two horns).

On one of the 1st December Programmes (School’s Anniversary)

there was a 6-hour programme titled “The Spiritual Evolution of India”. One of the scenes depicted the Muslim invasion of India. There was Kameshwar, a turban on his head and a sword at his waist, a glittering waistcoat, and of course his beard — he strode across the stage with conquering steps and disappeared. He looked good.

Kameshwar had an incurable “roaming trait” in him. Not a very serious or harmful kind. It was more a homely and pilgrim sort of urge. He roamed the countryside or near places of interest. Some time during the early stages of the War (1939-45) one such escapade led him into a lot of trouble. The cause was: a German Warship had run aground, off the coast somewhere south of Pondy, close by. There was excitement. Kameshwar took off on his bicycle in the afternoon. He got to the beach, waded across the Ariankuppam river taking the cycle with him, and reached the spot, hungry, thirsty and sweaty. No German, no warship — just an old tramp (French probably) somehow caught in a sandbank. Kameshwar had 4 annas (= 25 paise, dare not give it to a beggar nowadays!). There happened to be a man, surely an enterprising one, who was selling small packets of pills, 2 annas apiece. One pill dissolved in ½ litre of water — that much of milk! Our man bought one, had his milk and returned home, hungry but wiser (or so he thought). He relived the adventure for the Mother. She stood him on the carpet, saying, “Do you realise into what this thoughtless escapade could have led you? You crossed over into British territory. They could have arrested you, accusing you of being a spy, etc...” She took away the remaining “milk tablets”. Now, he was a wiser man. He had hoped she would return the tablets but no such luck.

Decades later, when retelling the story he was laughing. May be at that time he felt sorry for himself and sulked like a young lad. But his roaming propensities did not always spell trouble. The Mother made use of them. He had the duty often to escort people who needed help and guidance, maybe to Chennai or Cuddalore. He was sent to buy medicines or clear goods from the Customs. There was for a period an oldish French lady named Diana. She too had some inclinations to travel and “search” elsewhere. She went to Tiruvannamalai, Tirukkoilur (a 100-year-old sadhu lived here), and Kameshwar was deputised by the Mother to accompany her.

Kameshwar also helped negotiate and buy land for Auroville. His local popularity stood him in good stead at these times.

Kameshwar was always and remained a pious man, god-fearing as the saying goes, but I would term it god-loving. Yet as the years advanced he was more and more into poojas and meditation. He had a fixed time for his pooja or meditation, when he would close the door of his pooja-room. The instructions to his man were that he should not be disturbed at that time. Once when he went to the Mother he said, "Mother, these many years I am doing pooja and meditating on God. I am leading a pious life. How is it God never appears to me (Darshan)?" The Mother smiled and said, "But are you ready? Can you recognise Him if he does appear?" Kameshwar was confident enough. A good length of time went by then....

Kameshwar was closeted, meditating as usual. A couple, simply clad (as the locals) arrived at his main door. Kameshwar's man opened and enquired. They said they would like to see Kameshwar and insisted even though the man told them he could not be disturbed for a while. They said, "We are coming from afar and will leave soon. Please call him." The man went in and knocked on the pooja-room door. Kameshwar opened, somewhat annoyed. When told about the couple and their persistence, Kameshwar said, "Ask them their names and tell them to return later." The man did just that, Kameshwar returned to his meditation and the couple waited some more time and left giving their names. The gentleman was Shankar and the lady (I forget but it was one of the names of Parvati). It was then that Kameshwar was suddenly struck by some vague sense of unease or a sense of something missing. He rushed out. His man gave the two names.... By now Kameshwar was more stricken. He went out on to the road, made a few enquiries here and there along the road and neighbours. — "No," none had seen the couple! Kameshwar was now numb with remorse and feeling sorry for himself. When he went to the Mother and recounted the whole sorry tale, she said, "I told you so — you are not ready."!!

I wonder and the question arises: Did he, could he, get over the loss, of that once-in-a-lifetime, opportunity? Is it only ONCE? Have I, have others such close misses? Each one can ponder over such blindness and pray for sight and readiness.

There was an episode of a happier note — a quietly enlightening story. This happened in that good old golden period when devotees could go close to the Mother and Sri Aurobindo on Darshan days, and lay their heads on their feet — a real pranam. Kameshwar happened to be in the queue behind (a place or two) a man holding a huge garland of flowers that he would obviously place at the Lord's feet. A casual thought of concern crossed Kameshwar's mind, "Such a huge mala. Won't it weigh down the Master's feet? He will be so uncomfortable!" His turn came to kneel and bow down. The 'thought' led him automatically to move the mala off the Master's feet. Only then the next thought hit him, "What have I done? I removed one devotee's offering! What business had I to do it?" Fearfully from his pranam position, Kameshwar slowly peered upward.... What relief! The Lord was smiling at him. (I don't think many have seen Sri Aurobindo smiling! It was a rare glimpse.)

I have to be thankful to Kameshwar for more reasons than one. There is this "planned" coincidence of our birthdays falling on the same day. What follows is probably an offshoot of that coincidence. It had and has a long-range bearing on my life. It all happened after 1973 (The Mother had left her body). As is the practice both he and I went up to Sri Aurobindo's Room on our birthday (7th Nov.). We met again outside and wished each other "Happy Birthday". He then asked me, "Did you go and meet Nolini-da?" I said, "No."

Then K: Why don't you go and see him once?

I: But why?

K: Oh, for nothing. Just go for my sake and see him.

I went more to please him probably, or with no particular thought or expectation. I told Nolini-da that it was my "Bonne Fête", and approached him. He smiled and even through that great moustache of his, the smile broke out on me. It was after that, I believe, that the beginning of a relationship formed between us (I hope this is not assuming too much). It was a happy moment anyway and one to cherish. What started did continue later. So there is the debt I have to repay old Kameshwar. He himself was a great admirer, more — a disciple, of Nolini-da. He accompanied him (Nolini-da) on a daily visit to Sports Ground. They walked round the track or ground from 4 or 4.15 p.m. and left usually before the Groups started. Sometimes when we were

playing football and a stray ball went their way, Nolini-da could not resist, he would pick up his dhoti and shoot it back to us. (He was a good footballer in his youth. In 1952, he was in the “veterans” team. The Veterans played the young ones on the inauguration of our Football Field. The game was kicked off by the Mother.) I asked Kameshwar who never moved towards the ball, “You are much younger than Nolini-da. See how he is drawn towards the ball. You never do it?” He replied with a sad smile, but an admiring tone “Oh what is he? And what am I? How can you compare?”

This was Kameshwar of many “gunas” (qualities). You couldn’t probably choose out one that would set him apart above the common man. He was perhaps “the common man” — put into many an uncommon corner. He came out of them unscathed (so to say) without much realising the extraordinariness.

His centenary passed off without any fanfare (as must have many other centenarians’). Not that our bugle sounds are necessary. Yet would I rekindle a few fading memories in the minds of some old friends, his and mine, and maybe introduce him to some new friends.

His coming was so long ago, his sojourn here filled with the mundane, with a few bright happy streaks, and his going was the quietest after 88 years, on the 8th of December 1992. One may ask, “What realms did he reach?” Knowing him I would guess — took a false start and a detour and reached just in Time to say “yessir” to the Mother and enter those Pearly Gates left ajar for him. He needed now no references — a *Passepartout*.



MANORANJAN GANGULI

“It’s Dogged That Does It. It’s Not Thinking About It.”

TROLLOP

ONCE upon a time there was a dynasty — “The Gangulis”. (The word “dynasty” to be taken with a pinch of poetic salt.) It was well represented — numerically and qualitatively. Alas! time has taken its toll. There are very few of them today to complement our ranks.

Today’s story is of one of the elders (not the oldest) of the Ganguli’s — Manoranjan Ganguli. But I cast back a little more into the past, before Manoranjan. The patriarch was Nolini Behari Ganguli who probably never came here (Ashram). I have only seen his photograph. He looked a big and dignified man. He was a contractor, well known in the Calcutta of those days. He was well to do. His wife i.e.

Manoranjan's mother, was the lady of the House. She was here in our Ashram and I came to know and admire her. She was Sunilda's mother-in-law — a good enough reason to know her. (Sunilda — the musician & one of my best professors: *Among the Not So Great*, chapter 15). He put me in her care once a week for a tasty dinner so that I could be ready for his Astronomy class. Also she was Gauridi's mother, and came to lend a hand in the Mother's Room in the Play Ground, where I too did my bit. Her name was Saraladevi, a name befitting her nature. She was of a fair complexion, always dressed in white sari with the "Ghomta". Her eyes were large, black, peaceful & kind. They and the lip seemed to hold the beginning of a smile. I never heard her speak without necessity — silent and stately would be her demeanour.

Niranjan was one of the younger brothers of Manoranjan. It was he who first visited the Ashram in 1939. He inspired the others of the family and Manoranjan came for the February Darshan of 1942. They went and came again for the November Darshan. Their plans were to return to Calcutta after the Darshan. But the Mother had her own plans. She pulled on Her loving reins and stopped them. She simply said "No, you need not go. Stay here"! They were unprepared, but made do happily with what they had. Only Manoranjan went back to fulfil some contracts with the army (he manufactured small arms — knives, kukhris etc.). Niranjan and another brother Sudhiranjan used to visit often but did not live here. One brother Chittaranjan passed away sometime later. The rest Amiyoranjan, Kanakranjan and Robiranjan and sisters Gauri and Chobi lived close to the Mother. Manoranjan's family too settled here since 1944. His wife Jyotsna with children — Arun, Karobi, Ashok, Runu, Barin and Madhuri consisted the family. Chittaranjan's wife Minnie and daughter Chum also settled here.

Manoranjan was a giant of a man — in more senses than one — size and in character. He was tall and large and of dark complexion — could be (and was to us as children) intimidating. He looked serious and spoke little. A smile did break out now and then. Otherwise he was, as I am led to infer, uncompromising with himself and others. We gave him a wide berth (there was hardly a common reason or ground for us to interact or counteract). Manoranjan was also known

to many of us and one Governor at least for his thunderous snoring! The sound waves could make one falter in his steps, or step back, if caught unawares. It was so when we came round the corner from Playground, Saint Louis Street, on to Duplex Street (Nehru Street) where he resided (behind Raj Nivas). The story goes that one of the Governors whose sleep was rudely broken sent a man to find the source and nature of the sound!! Manoranjan finally settled in the Ashram in 1942. The Ashram then was in a developing stage (it still is) — with just a few departments and fields. Much of our “Ashram” was within the Boulevards (Beach, North, West and South Boulevards). There was already a field or farm far, far away (all of 5 km) in rural settings. Manoranjan was asked to take care of that farm — he, a contractor who would rather fashion a sickle than use it! I suspect there were some oldsters who were as surprised as Manoranjan (not to mention some apprehensions for the garden). But there was no escape. So Manoranjan bought some cauliflower seeds, buried them, watered and watched them sprout and grow into the sunlight. He felt happy. They grew up to be sizeable bushes. But no flowers — only leaf and stalk!! Manoranjan could not give up. He read up some more and asked around. Tried again, the next crop was more successful. Manoranjan was on the way to become a farmer. This was but a testing time, there was more in store for him. More farms were acquired and Manoranjan was given the charge. They — a six-acre plot in Rizière and much later a big complex of 5 fields, named collectively “Le Faucheur” on the banks of the river Arianakuppam (South of here in the road to Cuddalore) were bought and he was given their charge.

Le Faucheur actually is made up of 5 pieces of land —

1. Main garden with an old type bungalow right on the bank of the river, with extensive grounds (may be 3-4 acres) with mango, guava, coconut, jackfruit and a rose garden.
2. A small plot of 2 acres or so for rice, LF2.
3. A smaller plot where mainly vegetables are grown called Pillaitotam and further away where the river takes an S curve, a plot called Wamba, of nearly 40 acres. Here (Wamba) the soil is sandy — yet some rice, vegetables and casuarina are grown. (Here lived the first of *AmongThe Not So Great* — Manibhai the recluse.)
4. The fifth is a 4-5 acre piece across the main road opposite the Main garden wherein are the dairy and fodder fields. (We have now about

40 cows but at one time some beautiful and big buffaloes were kept. We could not adapt ourselves to their milk. Also it was, I believe, difficult to maintain them.) As if there was not enough, Manoranjan had a motor workshop going, and even took up the agencies of Fiat, Fargo and maybe more companies. You see what I meant by saying “a giant of a man”. This last venture of his was named Enterprises. By now Rizière and Cazanove were taken up by others — Cazanove by one Sudhir (a small, dark gentleman, always smiling) and Rizière by Anilda, elder brother of Sunilda, Jhumur’s father. He, Anilda, too was a musician, played the Sarod, and was a body-builder. Manoranjan’s shoulders could relax a wee bit. He now concentrated on Enterprises.

There were other works too, monumental ones, which yet stand witness to his diligence and are expressions of his faith and service to the Mother. He was an indefatigable builder. The two monuments I would mention are the Tennis Ground (Terrain de Tennis) and our Play Ground including the Body-building Section (old) and the Mother’s Room.

The area we call Tennis Ground was a dirty mound of earth used for dumping garbage. It was at the fag end of the town (North) with only the old Distillery and our one dairy, worth mentioning, beyond it. The Ashram took it on lease from the French Govt. to carve out a Playground (our needs were growing with our number and developments of Physical Education). It was a Herculean job. No bulldozer or JCB’s, even tractors were unknown — only men with spades and crowbars. Who would do the job — Manoranjan was the Hercules (Her coolie) chosen. I cannot describe how, what or when he did the job — but the results are there for all to see and feel — if one but paused a while to think! We are too often in a hurry and bustle to be aware. Recently the ground became Ashram property after long negotiations with the Govt. Great efforts by many (mainly Pranabda as a motive force) and exchanging part of one of our farms made this, that is, the acquisition of Tennis Ground, possible. All these efforts were put up because that Ground is for us a hallowed Spot. The Mother walked, played on it, her feet sanctified that earth.

The next task that Manoranjan took up (I witnessed it) was the building or more correctly the renovation of the Mother’s Room in

the Play Ground. It was originally an old godown. When the Mother started to come to the Play Ground She needed a room to rest, refresh herself and meet people etc. The godown was, in a hurry, made into Her room cum a store-room for the Play Ground (an old cupboard, a deal wood box were introduced, covered with a decent piece of cloth. The Mother sat on that box!). But She needed something more — washroom. It had to be done again in a hurry. Manoranjan took up the job. The work went on round the clock. There sat Manoranjan on a chair like a rock. I looked in (curiosity) two or three times — he had not moved or changed position!

A similar scene there was — where I was a closer witness. Once the Ganguli family (Amiyo, Kanak, etc.) fell victims to food-poisoning. I was called for helping out at night. There they were, all laid down in a row and there sat Manoranjan on a chair. I lay down on a mat and kept an eye and ear open to render help when called. But Manoranjan sat the whole night through!

Manoranjan did much or most of the work for PED. What he built was once for all time — solid, break-proof and needed no repairs or looking after, so it looks like. The benches in the body-building section — multi-generations guarantee. A parallel-bars was imported from England — a neat little one used by the lower groups in the Gym. I wondered at the bars — made of wood but reinforced by steel pipes or bars inside. It seems, even on close examination, that there are no joints (length wise), but a straight hole had been drilled through those 7-8 feet !! It was a workmanship to be wondered at — how did they do it? Manoranjan had a look at it and duplicated it — nay made a better looking one, for the body-building section!! How he did it? I never asked him. My wonder just transferred to him.

Age was overtaking Manoranjan as it does all of us and everything. He bore all the heavy responsibilities that the Mother showered on him with courage and faith. But he had to slow down. His eldest son Arun and youngest son Barin took up the agriculture and other works. The other children of his, Ashok, Lumière (Light), Runu and Bubu were not interested in these works. (We will speak of them later for all of them are worth noting.) The Mother gave the name Lumière to Karobi.

Amiyanjan was a responsible worker. He was for a long time

the manager of the Ashram Printing Press. He was a good runner too — only short sprints, no stamina. He played football too. He was not too hardy and did not last long. He was the Mother's ball-boy when She played tennis. One of his jobs was to precede or walk along with Mother, carrying the ground nuts or the toffees in their container from where She distributed to each one of us. One peculiar daily performance of his was to jump on his bicycle just as the Mother got into Her car to go back to the Ashram (after the Play Ground activities) and race the car to arrive before Her at the garage (Ashram). Pavitrada, Mother's "sarathi" may have seen to it that he won. Amiyoo passed away recently.

Kanakranjan was the next brother: he was slim, of medium build and not very strong. But he excelled in football — neat and clever player though slow. A playmaker. He was top in tennis and table-tennis. Played well the basketball of those days. He could sketch (floral art and painting in the Mother's Room once a week) and to top it all he was a musician of high calibre. Sunilda needed him in his orchestra. He played the guitar. He worked in the Printing Press. He is now bed-ridden.

Robiranjana is the youngest brother (Manoranjan's). He is a gifted photographer — one of the pioneers of photography in Ashram. He too excelled in tennis and table-tennis. Did not make much efforts to do well in other fields. Maybe he could have if he would have. He too worked in the Printing Press.

Gauri(di) is their sister. She is also Sunilda's wife. She was close to the Mother. Attended on Her when She came to the Play Ground. Gauridi was in charge of the Room. She arranged the flower vases, made it an art. We (my sister, Chanda and some others) worked under her, guided by her. She is now old and living in CARE (Home for the aged). She yet retains her old charm and verve.

Chobi(di) was the youngest sister. She was the quietest, and hardly came out into the open nor was she the mixing type. She was close to Gauridi and Sunilda. She was quite unknown and has left us as quietly as she lived.

The next generation were all Manoranjan's children.

Arun the eldest, until his last days an interested agriculturist. He looked after Le Faucheur after Manoranjan's passing away. Great

love for dahlias and roses. He grew them and exhibited them like a doting father. All who visit the Ashram must have seen them in the season (near the verandah at the Entrance). He had worked in Atelier under Pavitrada and then in the Press. He was one of our best goal-keepers in football. Tall and lanky, was a good spiker in Volleyball. My friend till his last days — passed away a year back.

Ashok — Arun's younger brother, was often ill. He passed away quite young. He was a good teacher (in our school). He played well the clarinet and took part in Sunilda's orchestra.

Runu — the next brother is ill and nearly blind. But in his younger days he was a good teacher, but somewhat touchy. He was a very sensitive musician and played the flute — also in Sunilda's orchestra.

Barin the youngest brother was an exception — no music, not much good in studies, mediocre in sports. He was my classmate. But he turned out to be quite an authority in cattle-rearing and agriculture. As a true son of Manoranjan he too grew to be of great proportion. He passed away quite young.

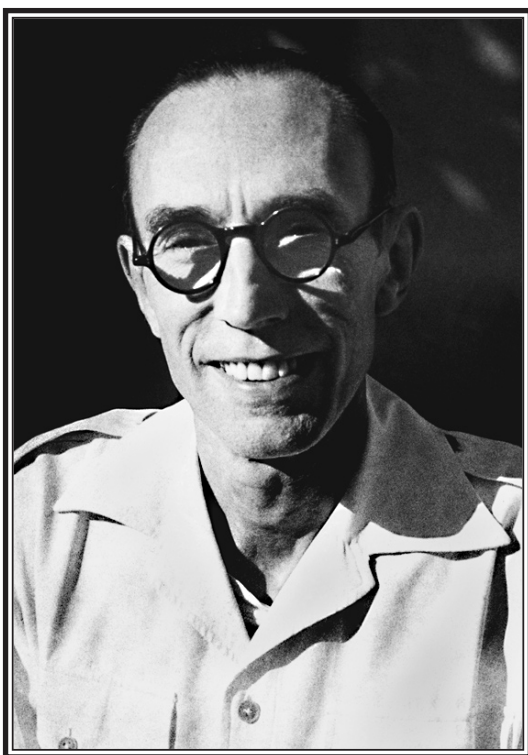
Lumière = Light is the name given by the Mother to their sister. The name well describes her with no exaggeration. She was fair and beautiful and gentle to all creatures. Smiling and sedate in her movements and moods, she was liked by all. She danced well. No wonder the gods plucked her away early in her life. She was the main flag bearer with Abhay Singh, when only two flags were taken out (as on Darshan Days even now).

Madhuri = Bubu was the youngest and the second sister. She was pampered by all her elder brothers and sister. She was a good old soul, lissome and gentle. She too passed away very young, the youngest of the dynasty. (I heard it said she was Noorjahan — Shah Jahan's queen — in a previous birth!)

Jyotsna (meaning moonlight) was Manoranjan's wife's name — and moonlight-like she was — (a full moon). She was also of a large build. She was as fair as Manoranjan was dark. She was beautiful, the source of the beauty of her daughters. She was dignified and gentle as far as I know. If one can see Manoranjan as a rain-bearing cloud, Jyotsna as the full-moon, and Lumière the silver lining of the cloud, it could be a summing up of the history of the "Dynasty"—"Beauty and Bounty".

Manoranjan took ill — probably afflicted by cancer. He bled profusely and had to have 15 or more transfusions. He passed away in September 1971. He lived by the motto: “Work in the workshop is worship.” Born on 12th of May 1905, he was only 66 years old when he left us. Too young we would say. But a life full to brim, rich and rewarding.

Before I end my chapter on Manoranjan there is one more revealing and endearing episode to recount. It was (I think) M’s last birthday before he passed away. He was unable to walk. Mona and I were called to carry him in a chair up to the Mother. She was in her room two floors up. The stairs were narrow, and Manoranjan retained much of his impressive size. It was tough going but the effort was more than amply rewarded. It happened thus: The Mother and Manoranjan were sitting next to each other on chairs. Manoranjan was too weak to stand up, let alone bow down to touch her feet. We placed Manoranjan’s chair right beside the Mother’s, arm-rests touching. The Mother was all smiles. She reached out with both her arms to pull down Manoranjan’s head on to her shoulder, all the while softly crooning “Ah! mon petit — Ah! mon petit” (Oh! my little one) like a grandmother would to a little grandson. I was struck with wonder and remorse. Wonder at Her love and its outpouring and remorse for my erstwhile judging and reading of him and his works. Many of us thought that Manoranjan spent too much money. (It was none of our business but it was/is easy to keep another man’s diary!) A thought then occurred in me: “Whose work? Whose money? Why judge when you know there is another JUDGE.



PAVITRA-DA

**(Philippe Barbier Saint Hilaire)
(1894-1969)**

The art of living consists of keeping earthly step to heavenly music.

NIKOLAYEVICH PANIN

PAVITRA-DA was a well-known figure in our Ashram. He was a multi-faceted genius, but managed to dissimulate all his brilliance under a layer of ordinariness and friendliness. At first the friendliness was not easy for most of us, to feel. There were several reasons for this. First he was a French man i.e. white man. We unconsciously kept ourselves (5-6 decades back) a little distanced — not just be-

cause he was 'white', but we were naughty young boys and it was prudent to keep away from serious looking elders. He was one such. There was real respect too — he lived in the Ashram, first floor i.e. close to Mother's Room. Also he was Her "Sarathi" whenever She was the Rathi. He was made the director of our newly formed school. We can read him, or analyse him better, after a closer acquaintance with him and his life.

Pavitra-da was born in Paris in the year 1894, on the 16th of January. His father — Paul Barbier Saint Hilaire — was typically French, cultured and a strict father, yet affectionate and understanding. Pavitra-da, as Philippe, at a very young age showed an aptitude to things mechanical. He got a bicycle as a birthday gift from his father when he was eleven years old. He dismantled it — his father watching him silently. Philippe could not put it together and asked his father if he could take it to a mechanic. "No" was the father's reply, but a booklet was given as a help. It took all of three weeks for the job. It left the young boy wiser, more sober and more skilful. All these events and attitudes (of Paul B. S. H.) helped mould the character of the young Philippe and also put him on the path of his Future — as we will see — as engineer — Ecole-Poly-technique. Then the Great War (W.W.I) was on them. All were sucked into its tide. Philippe was inducted into an artillery division. He served as a sub-lieutenant. Though it was a tough life, they did have quite a bit of leisure time. It was during these leisure times young Philippe came across some books on psychic phenomena, magic, occultism etc. dubbed as "non-scientific" and studied them. Inevitably he discovered India.

Philippe did not arrive straightaway in India. He first reached Japan. He started a laboratory which interested many and Philippe got to know many — including some Buddhist monks from Mongolia. He went and lived in a monastery in Mongolia. It was a hard austere life. Yet he was not inwardly satisfied. He had heard of Sri Aurobindo when in Japan (Our Mother had left Japan a little before Philippe's arrival there). He was attracted to Indian philosophy. He wrote to the Ashram (Pondicherry) but received no reply. Regardless, he boarded a ship, and after some delays and storm and detours reached Dhanushkoti and took a train to Pondicherry and arrived here on the 17th of December 1925 to start a new chapter of his life.

Pondicherry

Philippe booked into Hotel d'Europe. He then went to the Ashram. Sri Aurobindo was as yet meeting people and He agreed to see Philippe. The first day Philippe spoke to Sri Aurobindo. On the second day Sri Aurobindo spoke to Philippe — now PAVITRA. Philippe metamorphosed into Pavitra — the name given by Sri Aurobindo. I hope now to more than justify my dubbing him “multi-faceted genius”.

The Mother took him close — She trusted him and laid on him many responsibilities. His old training at home, in the military and in the monasteries, etc. now stood him well. He was the Mother's handyman. He was ever alert to hear the Mother's call: “Pavitra, Pavitra!” and he would answer “oui Mère, oui Mère (Yes, Mother) and hurry to do Her bidding.

Pavitra-da was appointed the Director of our School in 1943 — 2nd of December. He taught maths to the older students. He started the Atelier — Workshop — at the outset to attend to the Mother's car, but later developed to do other jobs — lathe work, tinning, smithy, and most importantly operate a fleet of cars for most of Ashram's ever expanding and varied types of departments (farms, building service etc.) who need transportation of food (vegetables, grains), personnel and material.

Pavitra-da's old training and hobby naturally prevailed on him to start a laboratory for our school. It was a small room at the East end of Play Ground with a partition dividing it into two sections — one for physics, the other for chemistry (the present ‘laboratoire’ is the “grown up” version of that old one. It (Old Lab.) doubled as the “Interview-Room” for the Mother in the evenings and it was also the modest precursor of the Mother's Adults' classes.

Pavitra-da had some tough tests to go through when he first arrived i.e. back in 1925 on the 17th of December. He had some free time and he volunteered to work — he told so to Sri Aurobindo. (He needed some money so he worked as a tutor to the children of a French family. This was when he arrived in Pondicherry.) Sri Aurobindo gave him the work of looking after a sadhak, a Charu Chandra who was ill and had requested Sri Aurobindo for a servant.

Pavitra-da was happy to do so, but Charu had his reservations — for this man was a ‘Sahib’ (a white), a Christian, a ‘mlechcha’! He tried hard to find some fault with his new servant but Pavitra-da was a perfectionist. Charu would even throw away the water that Pavitra-da brought from the Ashram, for it was “polluted”. Charu-da left for Bengal for a short duration and when he returned there was no sahib servant. The ‘servant’ had been given other responsibilities. A new phase in his (Pavitra-da’s) life here had started. (Charu-da to his credit did not make a fuss. He was given another sadhak to help who was not so amenable as the sahib.)

We, in the course of time, came to know Pavitra-da, what I think is the “real” Pavitra-da, much of it in the Body Building Gym. He would come regularly there when the Mother was busy seeing (interviews) others and he was not needed as a ‘sarathi’. He climbed the rope, hand over hand (no foot-support), performed a neat “Kip” on the Horizontal Bar (arms and legs straight) and also a “hip-circle back”, the Bar held at the small of the back. This last item was part of his military training with a loaded knapsack strapped on. He told us that these “stunts” kept him youthful and also served as a test and gauge on the advancement of Time.

There was, in our group of body-builders, a Gautam Das — older than us and somewhat touchy. He had developed quite an impressive body. His pectorals were well developed. They — the pectorals — came under Pavitra-da’s scrutiny. His thick glasses seemed to give his look a greater intimacy. Being French and young at heart, he made some very rather “intimate” comparisons of Gautam’s achievement. We had a good laugh at, Gautam’s expense, he naturally, was not at all amused but could only mutter his annoyance under his breath.

Pavitra-da’s youthfulness and skills showed up in some other ways too. He would sit on a bicycle handle facing backwards, (i.e. the seat) and push off and pedal down the street — well understood it was empty of traffic.

One day, seeing me on the foot-path in front of the Ashram, a gentleman asked me “Hey! you taken a French leave?” I did not know what the expression meant — I told the gentleman so. He spied Pavitra-da coming out of the Ashram and told me “Go, ask him”. I went up to Pavitra-da and asked him what French leave meant. He hardly

broke his step, and said “It is what we call “congé à l’Anglaise” = English leave! Pavitra-da moved on — I was left none the wiser. I learned the meaning much later though I was a practioner of the term for as long as I can remember.

Pavitra-da later took ill — it was diagnosed as cancer. When he told the Mother about it, it seems she said: “You know about it, the doctor knows about it and I know about it. Nobody else need know about it”! Pavitra-da never complained about the pain. He carried on his work quietly. He refused all medicines. Those around him knew that something was wrong only when the pain became acute and his movements stiff and slow. He took all of 45 minutes to go up to the Mother, but go he would. I have seen him come down slowly, past midnight to stand near the Samadhi. He must have taken a long time (my estimate would be, at least 30 minutes. I did not know his condition until much later). Until one day André-da (Mother’s son) informed Her that Pavitra-da would not be coming to meet Her . She did not say anything but gave André-da a red rose to be given to him. Pavitra-da passed away the next day. He had fulfilled his life’s mission, a mission he had promised himself when lying in a tent in the War Front — the mission was to serve the Divine, to consecrate his life to the Divine. To what extent he fulfilled that mission can be well appreciated by what the Mother had to say about his passing away. I quote:

“It is very interesting, the experience I had that night. Nothing like it I ever had in my life. It was the night before the day he passed away. The time was 9 o’clock. I felt he was withdrawing, withdrawing in an extraordinary manner. He was coming out of himself and gathering and pouring himself into me. He was coming out consciously and deliberately with the full force of a concentrated will. He continued to do so steadily, ceaselessly for hours. It ended at about 1 o’clock. I looked at the time.

“There was no slackness or interruption or stop at any moment. It was throughout the same steady continuous flow, without a break, without diminishing in strength. Such a concentrated undiminishing stream it was. The process continued until he was wholly within me as though he was pumping and exhausting all

he was in the body till the last drop. I say it was wonderful — I never experienced such a thing. The flow stopped when there was very little left in the body. I let the body remain as long as it was needed for the work to continue, till long, quite long after the doctors declared it dead.

“As he was in life, he could not have done the thing. I did not expect it of him, it must have been some past-life of his that was at work and did the thing. Not many yogis, not even the greatest among them could do such a thing. There he is within here, quite wakeful, looking in a rather amused way at what you people are doing. He is merged in me wholly, that is dwelling within me, not dissolved; he has his personality intact. Amrita is different. He is there outside, one of you, one among you people moving about. At times, of course, when he wants to take rest and repose he comes and lodges here. A remarkable story. A great and difficult thing Pavitra has done.”

An Epilogue

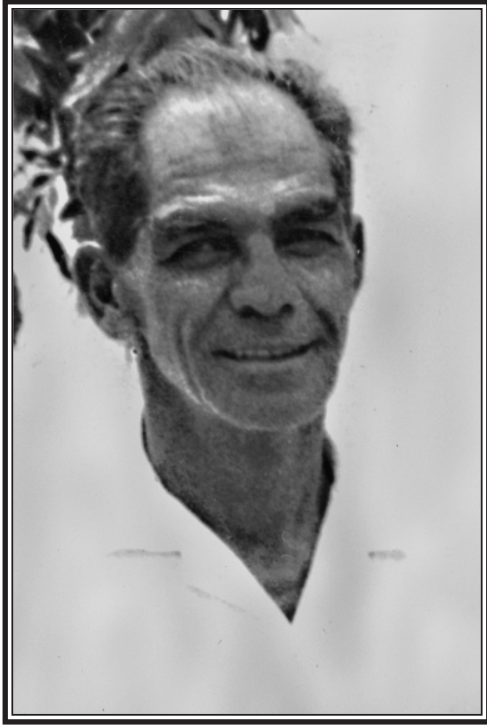
A remarkable epilogue to an equally remarkable story of a more remarkable man.

In the past (in Ashram) Pavitra-da was often addressed by many here as Ramakrishna. I gather that a portion of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa's being had incarnated in him. It would seem once possessed by Kali, always possessed by Her.

Who could have seen into this past life of Pavitra-da's? Only one guess — our Lord Sri Aurobindo.

My lover took away my robe of sin and I let it fall, rejoicing; then he plucked at my robe of virtue, but I was ashamed and alarmed and prevented him. It was not till he wrested it from me by force that I saw how my soul had been hidden from me.

Sri Aurobindo
(CWSA, Vol. 12, p. 491)



LOUIS ALLAN
(Lord Ousteri)

All are not thieves that dogs bark at.

A TIME was when (even) we were young and innocent. The times too were in tune with us. TV's were not heard of, Radios in the Ashram (i.e. belonging to Ashramites) were may be half a dozen. Any knowledge about the wide world was to be had from a few newspapers — Hindu, Indian Express and The Mail. These papers were strewn about on mats in the room which later was the Fruit-Room and now is, I think, a store-room for some publication. When it was with newspapers, I believe, the Mother once referred to it as the “Chambre de mensonges”, (Room of untruth or lies).

There was then an abrupt end to our “innocence” or “ignorance” as some would term it. The world became smaller. I think World War II had much to do with such changes. We learnt a good deal about other countries. England and France were already in our knowing as our masters and despoilers. The world became smaller and darker areas got lighted up. Different races and people came within our purview or at least within the circle of our horizon. We came to know some more facts about Africa. Africa was, in some recess of our brain, known as the “Dark” continent — inhabited by black people (all) and some of us knew that Tarzan lived/lives there. Gone was all that now. We learned about Boers (whites) who came over from Europe and settled in S. Africa (17th Century) elbowing out or subjugating the natives. They then developed the hateful system of Apartheid. (This system caused their Cricket, Rugby, etc. teams to be kept out of international matches. They had/have good teams.) And now comes along Louis Allan with wife Olga and sons John and Robert from South Africa!

Louis and family were not black, not white. We heard it said they were of a mixed lineage. They were may be a shade lighter than we (normal) Indians (I realise I could be questioned on this point — but most will smile and nod assent).

Louis was a civil engineer. He was a self-made man — i.e. not much formal education. Olga was a pianist. She gave piano lessons and accompanied the senior girls’ Free Standing Exercises, taught English in our school. She passed away here, a few years ago. (Fortunately for us, a few girls have been able to imbibe some of her piano-playing skills. John and Robert studied in our school but left for greener pastures a few years ago.

Louis was a thick-set man, heavy-boned with not an ounce of fat to soften the rugged looks he had. A slight stoop, a trace of rounded shoulders gave him the semblance of an aggressive stance. I believe he had done a bit of wrestling. But he usually smiled and worked and worked and... one could verily say: “No work — No Louis.” There was a nigh proverbial saying — but a disparaging one that stuck i.e. “Louis — demolish first and then think what next or how next to build!”

Louis and his works:

There was a three-storied building (going West down the Rue de la Marine i.e. Ashram street. It was standing upright and healthy enough, though old. Louis brought it down. This was his first work. The plot lay empty and forlorn for a long time (no funds, no plans, no “some-one” to take on the job).

Much later a building came up, a three-storied one, named Orissa Boarding or more popularly known as “Shekhar-da’s boarding” or “Young boys’ home”. It came under the aegis of SAICE. Two or three generations of young students have enacted its history.

The last work Louis did here, in Pondy, was the civil works of our Swimming Pool (1956-57). (The filtration, and circulation were seen to by Udar and Vishwanath-da (that is another story for another day). As for Louis, he was sent to the Lake Estate, 10 km away (Tamilnadu), a beautiful place bordering an expansive lake, with hillocks covered with pebbles, thorny bushes, dry rills carved by the rains and “denized” by snakes, porcupines, monitor lizards etc. (no big wild animals).

Lake or Ousteri — eri=lake in Tamil — the reason why I titled Louis in this write-up as Lord Ousteri — this lake is locally known as Ousteri.

It seemed that Louis was at last in his element. I am pretty sure the Mother **knew** (She is Trikalagnya — knows Past, Present and Future). She only bided Her time — the right “Muhurtam” as to when and where to settle Louis.

Ousteri was a lonely place much of the time, a playground for the rich of Pondy. As such there was, on a hillock overlooking the lake, a 2-3-room tiled cottage. We now refer to it as the Main Land. The cottage and area belonged to one Mme. Gaebler, a French devotee of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. Gone now is the country-tiled cottage. A concrete structure stands as its successor fortunately the “sloping roof” has been replicated forestalling further ambitions to build another floor (utilitarian considerations most often take precedence over those of beauty and environment).

The Main Land is of greater interest to us all (Lake-wallas in-

cluded) for another reason. It is the chosen location for signing of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust Deed by the Mother, along with witnesses, in the presence of a Tehsildar from Tamilnadu. The event took place in 1954 when Pondicherry Govt. has no provision for Trusts. The date was the 1st of May. The Lake-wallas celebrate the day as **their** founding day with song and other cultural programmes. It is a Hallowed Day.

Louis was now in his element. The Mother gave him 'Freedom' — he spread his wings — flew, never settled. He set to work. Mother gave with a lavishness that we, the hoi-polloi (of Ashram) could not understand — not that we needed to — such swift march of events was too much to keep up with.

Louis set to work out his pent up ideas and energy. He was alone, but that was of no great import — rather helped him by “no opposition” and/or hindrance. I wouldn't know if Louis had any knowledge of farming but that (i.e. the lack of it) was no hindrance to him. He started with locally available paid manual labour. He started with terracing the hillocks, removing the wild growth, and planting some hardy rain-fed plants like cashew. As more land was bought, where the hillocks flattened out and met the Lake, he planted coconut trees — nearly 3000 of them!

Once a week or so Louis came to the Play Ground for an interview with the Mother. Again needlessly we wondered: was he a prodigal or a prodigy?

One evening, after many years of Louis working in Lake Estate, news reached the Mother, thence us, that there was a strike by the paid workers at Lake. Louis was there to protect the property and oppose them if necessary. He was alone and had not eaten the whole day (a maid, I presume, cooked his meals on a normal day). The Mother asked 4-5 of us youngsters to go help him. We picked up some food and cycled off at about 7.30 p.m. (No motorbikes — the rage had not yet caught on). This was during the month of November. We reached there and this was the scenario we met with: a long thick bamboo lay across the pathway, as a barrier. On one side 12-15 workers were squatting and on the other side was Louis, erect, legs at “stand-at-ease”, arms folded across his chest. For how long this scene was in place I cannot guess. Louis said the strike was illegal — so,

even though they were ready to resume work on the old terms, Louis was adamant and insisted he would take them back as NEW workers. This was obviously disadvantageous and disagreeable to them. On this difference they stood — so the bamboo, so the standoff! Louis also declared that they could cross the bamboo only over his dead body!

We stood in his place and got him to eat the food we had brought. So the night passed. I returned early the next morning and went up to the Mother at 5.30 a.m. — my usual time to see Her, along with Richard and Biren-da (Chunder), and gave Her the whole “story”. She said “Ah! Louis cannot force them to any terms. It would be illegal. Moreover, just because they have gone down in their consciousness, we cannot do the same.” (She is the Mother of All.) “So, go and tell Louis that he should take them back on the “old terms” (i.e. as ‘old’ employees). Then She said: “You need not go. You have 1st and 2nd Dec. practices. I will send someone else through Amrita.” My role was over — I know nothing more about the episode.

Time went by as it has to. Some more Ashramites, some old and many new, were sent to work under Louis. It was hard to please Louis. A stream of workers or helpers tried and failed. Kittu had a short stint with me — Batti — as an “Also Ran” along with him. I did not quit at the time and lay dormant for many a year then rejoined in 2002 as an “Overall Helper” to all the other farms of the Ashram as well. Norman (Jr.) and Grant were next to come and go. Then came the “Pal” family (Pal — no allusion to milk — Pal is milk in Tamil). Manindra, Sudhangshu, Shobha, Dilip, Ashwini & Bharati — they all trod the same two-way path! Promesse J. suffered the same fate. Atmavadan was sent to work at the dairy. He is as of date running it beautifully but he has had a bout of hiccups too, the “Why” of which I cannot tell — I do not know. Through all these minor storms (in a tea-cup) work went on — one could say ‘smoothly’. Then Fate took a hand — a hard cruel blow She dealt — Louis had an accidental fall from a low roof that had no hand-rail or parapet. He had a bad spinal injury. We took him to JIPMER. The approach road (to our Lake Estate), a kilometer or so, was a rain denuded earthen road. The van (taking Louis to hospital) bounced and lurched. It must have been agonizing for the injured man — but not a whisper of a whimper from

him. This was the beginning of the end.

A long stint at JIPMER followed by one at our Nursing Home. Later he suffered a stroke, was partially invalided. He then gave up. (This was in the month of November of 1988. He was 85 years old. Working back, the year of his birth would be 1903. Assuming he started working at Lake in the late 50's (after or just before the S. Pool was inaugurated in 1957) he served the Mother at least i.e. 32 years 1956 to 1988 — not too long as many here would aver, but solidity and intensity of his service, much of it physical and of a practical nature, would be hard to match. Another Great entry into the ranks of Among the Not So Great's.

Epilogue

18 Louis(s) ruled France through some centuries (with time gaps). We had one Louis ruling for 32 years over Lake Estate — Lord Ousteri.

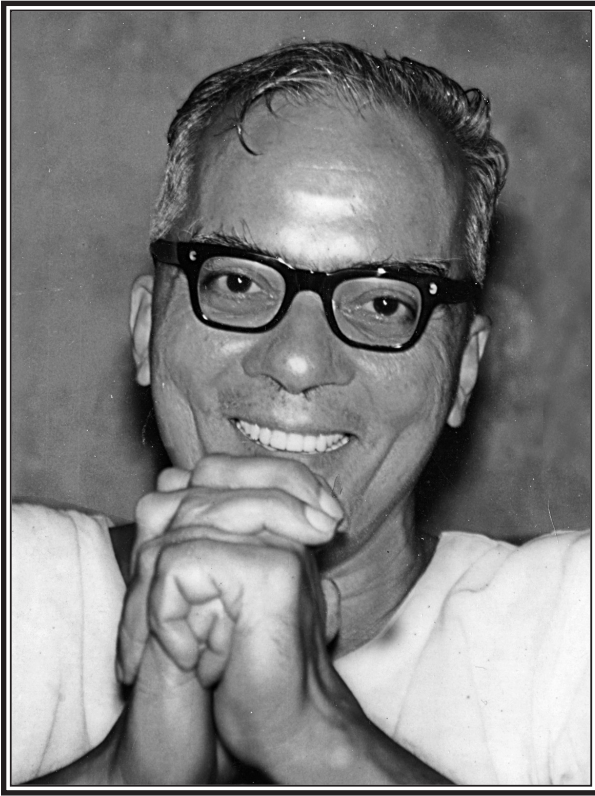
After Louis a triumvirate took charge and tried their mettle. Finally a somewhat loose Democracy worked. But, let us not forget that whoever carried the “Sceptre”, alone or collectively, for a long or a short period, is only a Regent (a glorified term) of the Mother who bestows Her bounty on all equally — to receive and absorb is the individual's endeavour.

Work — especially physical work is a great leveller, and a touchstone. But, work (any work) done for the Divine is much more — it is a Prayer, a stairway to mount towards Her.

There is no stage of the sadhana in which works are impossible, no passage on the path where there is no foothold and action has to be renounced as incompatible with concentration on the Divine.

SRI AUROBINDO

(*The Lesson of Life*, penned by the Mother on 8.3.1935)



RAVINDRA-JI
(Vandi-da)

“Writing always means hiding something in such a way that it then is discovered”.

ITALO CALVINO

WHO was Ravindra-ji? He was born at Etavah (U.P.) on the 26th January of 1917. He was schooled in Gurukul Kangri (H.P.) He seemed to have done quite well in his studies. He came to Pondicherry, to join the Sri Aurobindo Ashram at the age of 21— a strapping young man. He never left this place till his passing away on 24th of August 2001 at the age of 84 not too old. That would make out his

sojourn here a mere 63 years — not too long, not too short either. Whatever that length be, the amount of work he put up here is phenomenal in variety, quality and quantity.

We could now move on to have a closer look at him and his works — referring to him as just R.

A TREE

(poem by Sri Aurobindo)

*A tree beside the sandy river beach
Holds up its topmost boughs
Like fingers towards the skies they cannot reach
Earth-bound heaven amorous.*

*This is the soul of man. Body and brain
Hungry for earth our heavenly flight detain.*

Ravindra-ji (R) was a colossus — a tree with spreading branches offering shade to all and sundry. He was a colossus both literally physically and figuratively. I wonder at myself how I would have missed him out for so long! Our young eyes in the 40's saw him with mixed feelings of fear, dislike, wonder and much later some opposition. These may be the reasons for my missing him out. I gathered too late that his Centenary year has passed us by — none took notice of its passage (?) — so I was not the only one napping (small comfort is it?).

R was a big man of sallow features. His head was big even for him. A good crop of black hair and a luxuriant goatee beard adorned his face. Thick horn-rimmed specs completed the picture. Remarkable was the dress — for its simplicity and constancy. It was the same from the first day I set eyes on him till his last days (till death do us apart). It (the dress) comprised of a very loose “T”-shirt (this for want of a better name) overhanging an equally loose pair of pyjamas. Both were of course white cloth, made in Ashram. The pyjama never reached the ankles! He believed in bare feet and bare head (maybe in

much later days he took to a pair of chappals). I never saw him use a cap or umbrella. His residence was on the ground-floor, in a very small room forming the N.W. corner of the Ashram Main Building. He shifted to a first floor room built later over the same room. The old room is turned into a cold room to house (preserve) Manuscripts of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

The most remarkable feature of R's personality was his laughter. I have not heard a second one approaching it in quality and quantity. It could jolt you the first time but was enjoyable then onwards. Have you heard the kingfisher's challenging cry? It is a shrill *kaan kaan* — repeated rapidly 8-10 times (it has a very nasal ending). R's laughter would do any kingfisher proud. The laughter ended in a tired whimpering. One could hear the laughter a long way off, a furlong or more away!

There was a period that produced great workers. Karmayoga was the In thing it seemed. To mention a few of its practitioners: Manoranjan, Udar, Mona Pinto, Narayanprasad,... and Ravindra-ji. The Mother must have seen in R a great worker, on whom she could lay quite a burden (a joyous one). She did so, starting with a light one, gradually increasing it. He carried it well, I think to Her satisfaction. Let us now look more closely at the works he did.

The work(s)

1. R had the most pleasurable chore of preparing, daily, some fruit-juice for the Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

2. He would then have to hurry to D.R. (short for The Dining Room, also known as Aroumé to some old, old timers.) Once a high fever was raging through him, he went to D.R. taking support of the walls to steady himself. In that distant past, most sadhaks saw their work, usually given by the Mother, as essential to their sadhana. To miss it even a single day was tantamount to a retrogradation. I suspect attitudes have changed now. Time marches on or is it like Anatole France commented about the march of civilization, where he says: "On avance à reculons, avec nos regards fixés vers le passé (we advance back-walking with our sight fixed on the past).

3. R = Vandī-da (Cart Brother or Cartman — R was given in the early 40's a work that earned him this sobriquet of Vandī-da. Why? There was a large tyred hand-cart in D.R. It was equipped to transport tiffin-carriers, which were taken in this cart that stopped at predetermined street corners. Some aged sadhaks picked up their carrier from the cart. This service was in place for lunch and dinner. I am not sure about breakfast. This title of Vandī-da was not inherited by R's successors — Janardan and Damodar (Maharashtrian). May be people had lost their sense of humour and/or imagination.

A related story

Vandī-da, one day pulled a rickshaw (not a cycle-rickshaw but hand-drawn). He pulled it on the public road, just for the fun of it. Some local rickshaw-pullers who had seen R as Vandī-da became anxious. They thought he (R) might have in mind to run a regular rickshaw-service. This would lose them customers! A delegation of them approached Amrita-da, the Ashram's manager, to plead with R to desist from starting an Ahram Rickshaw Service (A.R.S).

4. R was part-time supervisor in Dortoir. He was a terror to the children because of his close inspection during meals — no talking, no running around, no wastage, — nothing but eating silently, finishing all one took. No finish, no school was the rule.

5. He had for a time to see to the working of the Laundry and Bakery.

6. One of the thankless, horrendous jobs R had was to maintain the silence and discipline of the place — mainly D.R. We, young and old feel lost too long in 'silence' and irked by discipline. The Mother had, into the bargain, instructed him to go about the job "Quietly"! So we would often see R walking past rows of us noisy youngsters, without a word, a smile on his lips, hands closed behind. He looked straight ahead or just stooped to pick up a morsel of food dropped often deliberately to tease him. I must admit he passed our muster — with credits.

7. I used to move around on a bicycle. I once rode into D.R. through the Main Gate. R. saw me and said: "You should not ride in.

You may walk the cycle in.” I countered with: “What is wrong with cycling in? The gate is wide enough for a lorry”. Luckily he gave in, saying: “I cannot argue with you. I don’t even know cycling — so!” I have never ridden in through the Gate after that day.

8. R crossed swords (words) with me again at a different venue, with a referee to boot (actually a “refereesse”). It all started in our Sports Ground in its “getting-ready”-days. Many of us ashramites worked there on Sundays. We were given lunch there, brought by R. I was having lunch using my hands to bring the food to my mouth — i.e. no spoon (what most Indians do). There was a notice in D.R. advising diners not to eat with hands. Now R found himself duty-bound to advise me to change over to “spoon-feeding”. I would not give in, and replied “Why not? This is not D.R!” He gave in or seemed to — for when I entered the Play Ground the same evening, he was there and told me: “Oh! Batti, we had an argument this noon at the Sports Ground — I spoke to the Mother about it. You may speak to Her!” When the Mother came round to our group, I broached the subject of R vs. Batti. She asked me to show my hands. I did — palms up and palms down. Her remark was: “Oh! They are quite clean for a boy!” and She moved on. (I must have had clipped my nails recently and washed my hands for the groundnuts.)

9. R had, it would seem, trained himself to be alert for trouble. There was a young fiery boy named Niranjan. He had an altercation with a boy named Shakti. It came to blows. Shakti was a cool type. They were separated by some older people. This was near the Play Ground after the Mother’s “Distribution”. We all proceeded to the D.R. Niranjan went to his room. We just reached the front verandah of D.R. when Niranjan ran up to Shakti saying (in Bengali) “come on, I will deal with you now”. He had an open penknife in his hand. We were all younger than either Niranjan or Shakti. We were too surprised to make any move. Fortunately R happened to be present. He caught Niranjan’s hand and led him off back to Play Ground to the Mother.

10. Next in horrendousness in R’s duties must have been being responsible for supplying personnel for the many Departments (Chitra-di & Co. now are at that) and keeping the appointees disciplined (regular, punctual and useful). It appears to me that as a general rule

of Nature, a man does not like the duty fixed up for him by another, or if he does like it the duty does not fit him or he is not befitting that work! It takes all sorts to make up our thus small world!

11. But by far the most horrendous duty that befell R was another. There were even in those “good old days”, unwanted individuals amongst us. The Mother, once in a rare while, required that person to leave the Ashram! R was the man chosen to see that the person is gone, or taken away. Interestingly he failed once — because of the Mother countermanding Herself! There was a tomboyish girl whose general behaviour warranted her being asked to leave. R was to make the arrangements. He was about to finalise the procedure. Just then Nolini-da came and said that the girl may be allowed to stay — the Mother had said so. Soon after the Mother queried to find out if the girl had been sent! This happened thrice in a few days’ time. R was peeved and puzzled. He went up to the Mother asking Her to enlighten him. She said that each time she had thought of sending her away her soul came to the Mother saying: “This is one chance I have to advance. If it is lost — when again?” So the Mother relented.

There was another somewhat similar case. It may not have been connected with R, but it is very instructive. There was a boy who was adjudged “Not Good Enough” for our institution. It so happened that the boy had just written to the Mother (it was just after one of the Darshans) asking Her: “Mother, who was that old man standing behind you during the general blessings?” The Mother said, “Sri Aurobindo was standing behind me. The boy “saw” what none of you saw, and you judge him “not good enough?” [Each reader to unclutter her/his own thoughts.]

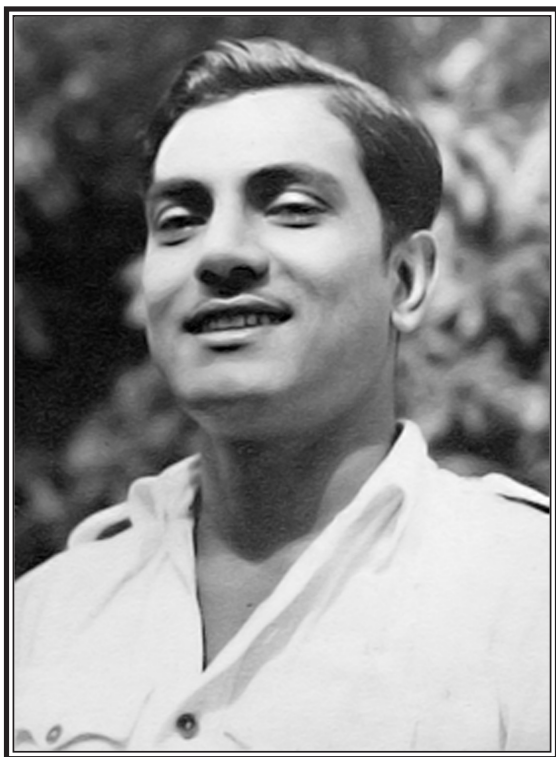
12. It may be remembered that R.S. Pantulu (R.S.P.) alias Durvasa Muni, alias my uncle, was in-charge of the Binding Dept. of our Printing Press. All — all feared and respected him in equal measure. R went to the Dept., may be to check on the labour force there. At some point he managed unwittingly to cross the limits of his duty and step into R.S.P.’s territory. He caught the full blast of R.S.P.’s fire-power. He literally ran out of the premises but reported the matter (as was his wont) to the Mother. She advised him to go and apologise to R.S.P. He did so early next morning. They melted into each other’s arms.

Age (Kaala) as he usually and inevitably does, slowed R and also mellowed him. Yet he took on new and lighter responsibilities. He edited the Hindi version of *Purodha* and *Agnishikha*. He was a lover of languages with a greater penchant for Hindi. He had a working knowledge of Bengali, Gujarati, Tamil, Telugu, maybe a smattering of French and Oriya. He took Hindi classes in our school.

A not so-long (26.1.1917 to 24.8.2001 = 84 years) but varied and fruitful (pun not intended) life was R's. He was bed-ridden for some time and shed his mortal coils on the 24th of August of 2001.

I would believe Ravindra-ji went up in a golden Vandi to the Mother who took him into Her embrace of love. He had passed Her muster with credits.

*Life only is, or death is life disguised,
Life a short death until by life we are surprised*
(“Life and death” by Sri Aurobindo)



PRANAB KUMAR BHATTACHARYA

(Pranab-da)

He is great who is most often in men's good thoughts.

THIS is another “Great” to be included in “Among The Not So Great”. In fact he is a colossus, on whom for long I have hesitated to write. I have pushed the event further for more than one reason.

I will begin where logically I should i.e. at the beginning. The story is long, spanning well nigh seven decades. Some memories are fresh and living. Others, long buried, are not so. One interesting fact is that he and I arrived here the same year. He in February of 1945 and I in July 1945. (I believe he had made a short visit earlier.)

Pranab-da was a well-built man — obviously exercised and

familiar with the care of the body and its material needs. He carried a good head with ‘frank’ open eyes which held a strength with the reassurance of a smile. A generous nose straight and not too broad. A mouth that normally smiled along with the eyes. In short — he was handsome. The voice was stentorian without being harsh — it served him well in his work and elsewhere too. What he lacked was fear and what was extra was his temper even through this last (dis)qualification served well at times, as long as it did not take control.

Pranab-da was a good worker. His first request to the Mother was to give him some “physical” work. So he was given work in the Ashram Laundry (Blanchisserie). Back in those days all washings of its 600-700 members had to be done by sheer muscle power. To make matters more ‘interesting’ these clothes were taken out of hot soap water where they had been soaked overnight. The method followed was simple: a good two-handful of clothes were taken, dropped down forcefully on a smooth concrete slab — and hit-hit-hit (banged down) and pushed on to the next man who dipped the lot in a tub of cold water and again hit-hit-hit and passed on to the next man. This was repeated via 4-5 men. This was done early in the morning at 4.30. It was like body-building exercises (My brother and I joined in on occasions for the fun of it). This was P’s work for the first few years (I gathered as much).

Pranab-da took interest in the Play Ground activities. We had just this one ground. The interest was nothing new, for in Calcutta he was running a club where young boys could come and learn some healthy exercises, get disciplined, spend time usefully. The Play Ground was where I met him for the first time, as an 8-year-old. I was sitting in one corner of the Ground sketching a bird or an animal on the sandy ground as asked by some older boys. P approached me and asked why I was not playing. I replied in broken English that I did not know I could. He gave me permission to join the boys playing Kabaddi or King and Fortress etc. There was not much organisation into groups or of timings.

Pranab-da then took charge. He called in Biren Chunder his erstwhile mentor and a family friend. Both P and Biren Chunder were wellknown boxers in Calcutta. Biren-da was known as K.O. King. Their aim was to K.O. as many Britishers (Tommies) as they could.

Pranab-da divided us children into two groups according to age. Biren-da took charge of the older ones and P of the younger ones. The Mother was informed of all the goings on. Her encouragement was there in full measure. She gave a free hand to P.

Expansion

We started with hardly any equipment to speak of. Maybe half a dozen balls, two sets of croquet and a volleyball net.

Biren-da was sent to Madras (Chennai) to buy some gym apparatus — a vaulting box, a spring-board (now old-looking to our eyes — one would hardly be able to guess that the square bucket-like wooden pieces now used as stools for sitting were actually supports for a spring-board. An oddshaped pommel horse, a buck, a few pairs of boxing gloves etc. We were all wonderstruck and wide-eyed. Harpagon, our workshop, made parallel bars mounted on a wooden platform, the bars made of rose-wood! It was a modest affair in use even today in the body-building gym.

Some new activities were added to our repertoire — some in the morning hours before School! (Latthi, Lakri patta, Boxing. Lakri patta was an imitation of sword-shield fight. The sword was a four foot long cane and the shield a thick leather, made about 20 cm. in diameter and decoratively built up. Purani-ji was its exponent and teacher. He looked somewhat fierce when showing us. He was agile for his age and build. All these were due to the push of Pranab-da. But boxing was the sport close to his heart. He and Biren-da were our teachers. We saw P knock out one Govindaraju in a practice bout — Govindaraju was near P's age, well-built but slow.

Pranab-da's constant pushing brought forth rapid expansions. We got, of course with time gaps, sometimes of a few years, new apparatus and facilities. Some equipments from U.K. not of any official standard but more than good for us. Then some more from U.S. — parallel bars, pommel horse, high bar etc. Fields for groundnuts and sweet potatoes and vegetables became the present beautiful Sports Ground and Swimming Pool, and Annexe, i.e. cricket and hockey grounds. The latest being three Basketball courts which were a garden for jasmine flowers. The Basketball courts were very re-

cently surfaced with a new Synthetic-Rubber. The story behind this last development is interesting. The courts, 3 in number, were of clay (with a bit of sand) with the court's areas being marked by sunken bricks — which were a constant nuisance by protruding out here and there after rains. We tried concrete, in blocks of 3m x 3m. But, casting of the concrete in blocks always caused problems at the joints. Praful and I tried quite a bit finding different ways to deal with this problem. Our enquiries led us to a company in Coimbatore (Tamil Nadu) that manufactures with raw materials from Australia a synthetic rubber to surface playfields. But the cost would come to about Rs. 5 lakhs. We hesitated to go ask Pranab-da — but it had to be done, no harm in asking. With such hesitations and doubts we entered the PED office and stated the facts, i.e. the financial involvement and waited with bated breath (so to say). Actually there was no waiting or bated breath. The answer was immediate and non-ambiguous: “Gangaram édér panch lakh taka diyédé” = Gangaram give them Rs 5 lakhs — and that was that. My conclusions after all these episodes would be that the Divine Mother was more and more manifesting in the Physical and Pranab-da served as the vehicle — the doer.

Pranab-da's temper as mentioned was both a boon and a bane. There was an episode where I was much involved. The story unfolds in the PED office. I was there doing some writing in the inner office. There was an old man (70+ years), a dentist. He was also in-charge of a guest house named Karnataka Nilayam. Dr. Patil and Gangaram of PED (assistant to Pranab-da) seemed to have had some earlier differences of opinion concerning Karnataka Nilayam. Dr. Patil came to the PED office to seek redress. He stood in the ante-room and was speaking in Kannada, obviously with some heat. Gangaram did not reply, he hardly raised his head. P it was who said “O.K. — now go.” Dr. Patil did not stop. Then P a little louder, “O.K. now get out.” The Dr. did not stop. He was blind to what was building up in front of him. Then P all of a sudden got up, fists clenched, eyes sparking and in a low rumbling voice “You bloody fool” — came striding out towards the Dr. I on an impulse jumped up and held P round the chest. He shouted at me: “Let go of me.” I said “No I won't.” In the meanwhile someone had led the Dr. away. I let go of P. He still seething said to me: “Tui bériyé ja” = you get out. I said: “I have work here, I will fin-

ish and then go!” I went out after a few minutes. The best part of the drama was that the next day P was telling to some friend: “Yesterday Batti saved me, else there would have been a disaster.” He was all smiles. One needs no great imagination to know what could have happened had Dr. Patil received a sledgehammer blow from P!

Pranab-da was a man frank and forthright with his opinions. He was also somewhat “perceptive” or could have premonitions of happenings. I will cite events of this nature. One was during our Athletics Competitions. The Mother was present. The event was pole vault. There were just two competitors left in the fray — Vishwabandhu and Jyotindra. All of a sudden P got up and told Jyotindra: “You have done enough for the day. You may stop now!” Vishwabandhu continued and won the event. All present were aghast and angry with P. Later when Mona, a group captain, asked the Mother, She explained: “There was dark cloud hovering over Jyotindra that bode him no good”. P was perceptive enough to see it and acted for Jyotindra’s good, while we were moved to judge by surface events.

The second episode unfolded near the PED office, in front of the archive’s office on Nehru St. There was a beggar sitting on the roadside with a cloth spread in front of him. He sat there in Japanese fashion, never talked or begged with outstretched arms. He sat through rain and sunshine. We all thought it an achievement — an opinion which someone expressed in the PED office. All were admiring him — not so P. He casually remarked “Ké jaané, ék smugglero hoté paré.” (Who knows, he could be a smuggler.) We all, including me, were silent, but our dissent was written large on our faces. Believe it or not, within 2-3 days after our discussion the “beggar” was whisked away by the Police! It turned out that he was a link in a chain of drug peddlers including some foreigners. They would even prostrate themselves in front of him passing on a packet of drugs or pick up a packet. We all were blind but P had a sort of intuition, or deeper perception.

Pranab-da felt that growing children and youngsters did need some more substantial food — especially as physical education was compulsory for all students. He started a separate kitchen named Corner House (separate from the Dining Room). The food would often be a bit spicy — so tasty and the variety was also there i.e. chappati,

puri were often served. Occasionally some non-vegetarian was on the menu. This facility i.e. Corner House was strictly for students and teachers and coaches.

Cinema halls are out of bounds for all Ashramites. If at all we wanted to see a “safe” film (Tarzan, Robin Hood) we asked the Mother and if She approved we went along with an adult, also approved by Her. (This was very rare — may be once or twice in a year.) Now we see a film every Saturday in the Play Ground. Early days P pre-viewed the film along with the Mother. Later he would see it, pass it or fail it. If passed we all saw it. Now one or two seniors do the job.

The Mother drew Pranab-da closer and closer. He became, as She grew older, Her constant support and helper. He was more or less fully, day and night, occupied with looking after Her needs. Much, nay all, the Physical Education work was shouldered by the captains and helpers (coaches).

Pranab-da was a supporter of girls’ (of all ages) participation with equal opportunities as their male counterparts. We can now boast of our girls taking part in events like Pole Vault, Hammer Throw, and distances longer than 800 m. etc., long before other sporting bodies came to the same conclusions. P was the doer and the Mother was the inspirer (conspirator) in all these developments.

The Mother used to give P some money every month to buy just one book on Physical Education. Starting with that P built the very useful PED Library, now containing a few thousand books and magazines. (The Library is very much underused — even the captains who are the ones allowed to borrow, don’t do so.) The Library also maintains all records — medical, Athletic Competition, Swimming Competition, etc. Pranab-da urges use but can’t tolerate any misuse. One day I witnessed the following drama. I was unaware, but he noticed two boys wrestling on top of a pile of Gymnastic mattresses. He came striding in and ‘smack’ one hard slap on an upturned bottom. The boy exclaimed “Ké sala ” (Bengali expression) and looked up, saw who was his tormentor and ran from there followed by his friends.

Pranab-da himself was always neat and clean in his handling of material things. Others fell far short of his expectations. He would urge us to be as “gentle” as possible with the barbells and dumbbells. Any repairs had to be attended to as soon as possible — delays would

only increase the costs and worse, may be dangerous to the users. I have seen a boy performing a giant circle on the High Bar go flying off when one stay wire, frayed and neglected, snapped. A good bit of spotting saved the boy.

Pranab-da had other talents too — tasteful ones. He liked good music — the classical Hindustani type. He played the clarinette fairly well — I believe self taught. The care he took of the instrument was a treat to watch and emulate — which very few tried to. Once a band player kept his bugle mouth down on the ground. P was sore with him, just asked him to pick it up (he got away very cheaply). P was the one who conducted the H group marching daily (Mona does so now). At times when in good mood, when the group was jogging its 12 laps, P would whistle into the mike some classical tune. It was quite pleasing.

Days into months into years passed by. The Mother stopped coming to the Play Ground or anywhere else. She kept more and more to Her room on the 2nd floor. She depended more and more on P for Her movements. She appeared on the 2nd floor balcony on the four Darshan Days, P always hovering behind Her within reach, but out of sight. Then those too stopped — came that Fateful Day the 17th of November 1973 — She left Her Physical Body — Mahasamadhi.

Pranab-da was now with much time on his hands. He took to motorbiking with a small group. His motorbikes too were shining and looked new till their retirement.

Pranab-da was getting older now and stopped motorbiking. He had a heart condition. He grew heavy and home-bound. All through Savitri, a young lady was a good support, attending to his needs. Doctors attended on him regularly. All this helped delay, but finally the end came — on the 8th January 2010. An era had ended. One is tempted to say: “When again one such?”

What can we now conclude about the man? He was practically a one-man show. One can even assume he was dictator, but a benign one. With his powers and understanding, he could take immediate action, get things done. (He did consult us when needed.) Now we are a committee of five who are to meet regularly and make the decisions — this does not happen on any regular basis — an attempt at

a democratic front. Happily for all concerned the existing organisation, so long-standing, is running without any serious hitches for the benefit of all.

Once when someone asked Nolini-da for some decision, he said: “If it is a question of discipline, go ask Pranab!”

Once when I was talking to the Mother about my personal problems, and that was over, the Mother told me: “Now I have something to tell you. I want you to completely co-operate with Pranab.” She must have known — I had never spoken about it, at the time I had not always “warm” feelings towards him. There was a “coolness” lurking somewhere inside me. Now I just nodded assent, and from then on tried to follow his directions. It is not that I never opposed him. I questioned sometimes and he answered — he did not object. I only hope I have satisfied the Mother. I am most grateful to Her for having kept a tab on me, my moods and movements.

I would end my write-up on Pranab-da with a short eulogy on Biren-da. He was my brother Narayan’s, sister Bhavatarini’s and my favourite. He it was who taught me boxing, lathi, weight-lifting, swimming, a bit of football and lastly all about outings to the countryside (when much of it existed). What now is Auroville was just Red Hills or Laal Pahar for us. We were given permission by the Mother to make a two-day trip to Gingee (hills) with him.

Biren-da was an expert masseur. He would set dislocated elbows, shoulders, fingers, by feeling, by touch without the aid of X-Ray. He had magic in his fingers backed with some inner guidance that he developed and learned to rely on as he aged — grew wiser. He read books on the Indian Chakras of the body and incorporated the knowledge into his curing methods. As age pursued him he became partially deaf. He was at times regretting that none was coming forward to learn what he had garnered for so long. Fortunately Rajnish, Sukhen and Cheta P. did imbibe some of his knowledge, though I can’t say anything about the magic in his fingers and the inner guidance.

Biren-da was a good worker and induced and influenced us to his ways. Any hard physical work like harvesting paddy or preparing the Play Ground (soil) was to be welcomed as useful exercise and experience. He worked for a time in our Printing Press. He then started a

small Binding cum Repairing Dept. for any Ashramite's books in 2-3 small rooms in the southeast corner of the D.R. This later he had to give up ceding place to some so-called important work. He was very disappointed and sort of retreated into himself and now paid full attention to massaging and physiotherapy in which he performed near miracles.

The years were catching up and he became more and more in-drawn, silent. His health too was on the decline. He passed away on the 17th of March 1997 aged 82 years.

My closeness to Biren-da taking him as a teacher (Guru) and an elder brother was probably the source of the unconsciously harboured "cool feelings" towards Pranab-da — for our (mine and one or two others) minds somehow "opposed" these two men. These feelings were those that the Mother saw and so told me to "completely co-operate with Pranab". Quite a roundabout way of knocking some sense into me, a hard nut to crack. So again my heartfelt gratitude to Mother. Mysterious are Her ways to crack a nut.

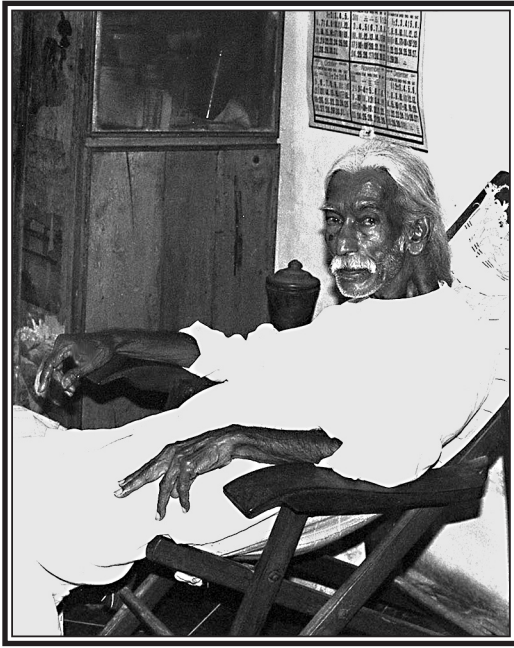
"In the days I was seeing the Mother everyday in the morning, I would, as a matter of routine and discipline, ask Her "permission" to go anywhere out of Pondy for the whole day (Gingee, Chennai etc.). Then, the Mother retired to Her 2nd floor room and I had to stop seeing Her every day. But, I was confident that Her Protection was always there. So, when Kurt the German gymnast was here, I planned a trip to Gingee, taking Kurt along. We planned to return before 6.30 Pm. so as to attend the Gym-class that Kurt was conducting. We got delayed (rain) and missed or were late for the gym-class. There was grumbling, justifiably.

I wrote to the Mother to check on the correctness of my "confidence" of having Her protection. She replied: "It is always better to inform. There is a difference in a general protection and a conscious protection. You can always inform me through Pranab."

I was doing that until Her Mahasamadhi. I continued taking Pranab-da's permission — not just giving the information. I had the belief that I could claim Her protection via Pranab-da. After Pranab-da's demise my claims for Her protection are the same.

The solar system has no anxiety about its anxiety.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON



BIRENDRA KUMAR PALIT

(Binder of Books)

Silence is the element in which great things fashion themselves.

THOMAS CARLYLE

BIREN Palit was from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) — Chittagong (many would prefer Chottogram). Diwanpur was his birthplace, may have been a small town or village.

Biren-da was an ordinary looking man in build and appearance — like many other Bengalees, i.e. of medium height, rather of the leaner category. He sported a thick black moustache, also common enough. What stood him apart were big black eyes that seemed unblinking, gazing at the world around and the unusually long hair, also thick and black, that hung below his waist (could be the envy of many a girl). I have no recollection of his hair turning grey (I have noticed

this phenomena in some others from Chittagong — not the length but the non-greying). Biren-da was born on the 27th of February of 1906. He arrived here — Ashram — on 27.7.30 at the age of 24.

Biren-da was a man after my heart. What in him that makes me say so is the Slowness with which he went through all his doings — talking, walking. Also I have never heard him raise his voice in anger or of necessity! I wonder to this day if he could at all shout! I almost forget one “hallmark” of Biren-da’s. He had, at most times, when outdoors or maybe even indoors a beret (cap) of cloth perched on his head — maybe to keep the hair out of any breeze’s way (a positive point of relief for the young girls!).

Biren-da worked in the Binding Department when it was a modest affair, situated in our Guest House (now a table-tennis room). This Dept. was absorbed into our Imprimerie (Printing Press). Biren-da too shifted to the Imprimerie. Why? I wondered at times — I thought that would be the natural sequence of events. Now I learn that the Mother, with Her all-encompassing mind, had sent Biren-da to Calcutta to learn Book Binding! It was from Biren-da that Soma-di, Niharika-di, Kusum-ben, etc. learnt the art and worked in the Imprimerie!

Biren-da was at first (or long ago) lodged on the 1st floor of our Guest House. The window in his room had glass panes which allowed light into the room. He thought it would be good if he could paint the panes to prevent the glare. He wrote to the Mother (I think) seeking Her permission. The reply came from Sri Aurobindo: “What luxury!” There ended the episode.

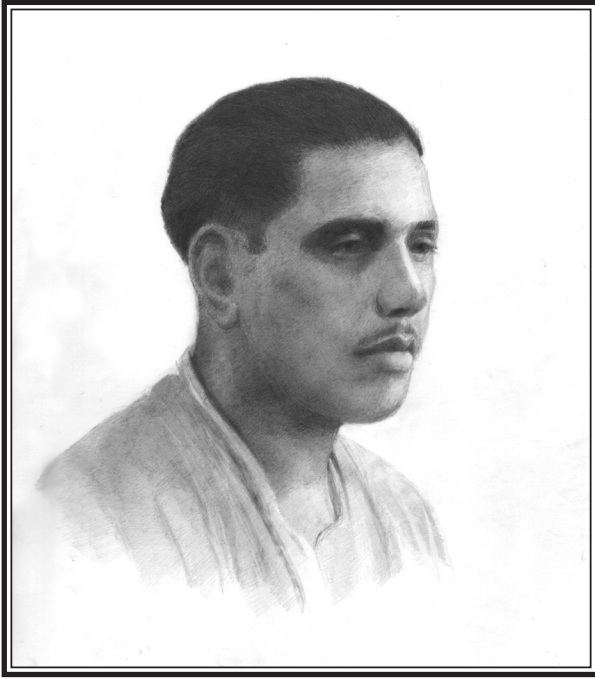
Biren-da and several others were shifted to various other houses (from Guest House) when the Mother decided to turn it into *Dortoir Annexe*. Biren-da was given a room in a new complex called *Ambika House*. He was allotted a room on the 2nd floor. He was well satisfied as was his wont. But someone had kept his “comfort” and welfare in his/her mind. So, when a room was available just behind the Ashram, across the street, he (Biren-da) was offered the place. He thought he should not have such ‘ease’ or ‘desire’. He declined the offer. He did not know, neither do I, to this day, who the benefactor was! What I do know is that Nolini-da told him: “Chupchap cholé ésho!” (come quietly or without protest). Biren-da could not protest nor ignore! One may think “Why all this fuss over him?” That is because

Biren-da was a gentle slow tortoise not racing the hares of the place! And what of the fact that it was the Mother who chose this tortoise to go to Calcutta on a mission? Biren-da was of the old, old stock of people. He never did learn to cycle. The speed would probably have upset his ways of thinking and maybe more. He moved at a slow, very slow pace. The pace was good enough for going to work, on long walks to lake or the countryside. He would at times even read a newspaper when walking (the traffic was neither so fast nor chaotic as today). Two young ladies Ajanta and Ellora often accompanied him.

Biren-da was born on the 27th of February 1906. Age might have just slowed him down a bit more. He shed his mortal shackles in June of 1987 aged 81, having lived here a mere 57 years.

I hope by now it is clear as to who is the tortoise and who the hare — and what or to which End is the Race?

The Mother has said that “The Tortoise is the Symbol of Immortality.”



BHEESHMADEV CHATTERJEE

*He ceased; but left so pleasing on the ear
His voice, that listening still they seemed to hear.*

The Odyssey, HOMER

BHEESHMADEV was known to many of us of the older lot of Ashramites, but many probably never gave him a second thought, nor did know something about him. He was just another “one” of them.

Bheeshmadev (Bisho-da) was born on the 8th of November of 1909 at Barrackpore — 24 Parganas, Bengal. He arrived here (Ashram) leaving his life there on the 2nd of August of 1931, aged 21. He was married and had a son. He was already a well known singer of classical Hindustani music. In fact, he was a child prodigy: There was an ongoing Kutchery — Sabha. One Ustad, i.e. maestro who was to sing did not arrive and the audience was getting restive. Someone had the bright idea to ask the 12-year-old Bheeshmadev to fill in for the

Ustad. The young Bheeshma more than satisfied the “disbelievers”!

I first saw Bheeshmadev— not as an acquaintance — but as a worker in the washing-wiping dept. of our Dining Room. I saw a well-built man of fair complexion of quite ordinary features with long hair, neatly combed, hanging below his shoulders. He held a pleasant smile on his lips and eyes. In short I could picture him as one of the followers of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu that are seen in some Bengali films.

One of the Bisho-da’s duties was to be gateman at the Golconde gate. There he showed an unexpected skill of his fingers. Ten marbles (playthings of young boys) were arranged 5 or 6 feet away and he was given one. He shot all ten with his one — those same fingers unmatched when playing the harmonium or tabla!

I heard it said that a singer of some repute who was already here, through professional jealousy, impressed on him (Bisho-da) that music and such arts are not conducive to the practice of Yoga. This may or may not have some truth, but it was also known that his throat (pharynx) was already affected and warranted his being asked not to sing. Bisho-da stopped singing — or never started even if he was thinking of doing so. This was tantamount to plugging down a fount that was begging to be released! It did sometimes find release in a minor form, which was what my brother and I were waiting for. Bisho-da would be bringing in a tray full of dishes, bowls and spoons from the wiping dept. The fount of music would find a partial release by an “expression” of his hands (and maybe also an inaudible humming). The result would be a crash of the tray spilling the contents. He quickly picked them up. He would then stand at the now empty table, and his fingers would fly to play out a beat on the tabla (table). This was the moment my brother and I were waiting for. In later years he did play the tabla for one of Anu-ben’s dances on the 1st of December. I have heard on some old gramophone records (78 p.m.) Bisho-da’s song and his playing on the harmonium. Both were nigh mesmerising.

Bisho-da left the Ashram on the 27th of September 1948. Why? I can only guess. Maybe the plugged fount forced him to leave and give free vent to music — his throat permitting. It may be also that this plugging was bothering his mind and heart.

I would now end my story of this for another great man who was lost in the usual din and bustle of our minds. To that din and bustle we have lost the fine-tuning of our ears to listen to great music (not noise and Jazz) and more — to hearken to Silence.

CONCLUSION

(To an Unconcluded Book)

I READ in some old book on Indian Medicine about a guru and his student. The student had, at the end of his studies, to pass an examination. The guru called him and sent him out on an assignment. He (guru) specified a few months' time and a large extent of the countryside, and asked the boy to find out a plant which had no medicinal property whatsoever. The boy went out and made a diligent survey, noted and studied all the plants (cultivated, wild, weeds, trees, etc.) and returned to submit that he could not find a plant as wanted by his guru. The teacher was well satisfied and passed his student!

The above story sets, I feel, an apt and happy background to the twenty or so friends and co-weeds of this — our "Garden". Most of them were quite close to me and helped me see and understand a bit more of the garden. I hope others too feel the same to a lesser or greater degree. If it can be so assumed, I would feel I have done a bit of my 'home-work' or 'spade work' — may be in a backyard. Yet it is our backyard.

There are more such friends that I wish would rekindle the memories of some, or be introduced to others. Unfortunately I myself was introduced, rather introduced myself to them very late. I did not have enough time to know them, get close to them. I do not have enough matter to justify and/or satisfy our collective effort to write, print, read and may be wonder and admire, or in some cases emulate. So I close this series for now, keeping ajar the door of a Past. Who knows some more old friends may just knock and enter our Present to rejoice us with a few moments of pleasure or even pass on some precious lesson they had garnered in their times. If I do not know enough, I would rather club two or three of them together to provide the reader a satisfying mouthful-bite — of a mental kind — rather than give them a complete go-by and lose them.

I have again foraged into our 'backyard' and found, to my great satisfaction, some more friends to get re-acquainted with. A good

thing I kept the door ajar. The friends did knock and enter. Going by the past developments of events, I thought not to write any more “CONCLUSION”, i.e. just leave the door of my memory ajar and let thoughts and ideas in and out freely, to be perchance trapped and fixed with paper and pen — so redeemed from the Past.

In this second edition of the book, I have added a few more “greats” and “Non-Greats”. Yet I would that the title *Among the Not So Great* be held on to, for all the reasons already mentioned. I think this would be like meeting an old friend — unlike sizing up a new acquaintance!

