

Mother's Chronicles

BOOK FOUR

Mirra - Sri Aurobindo

by

Sujata Nahar

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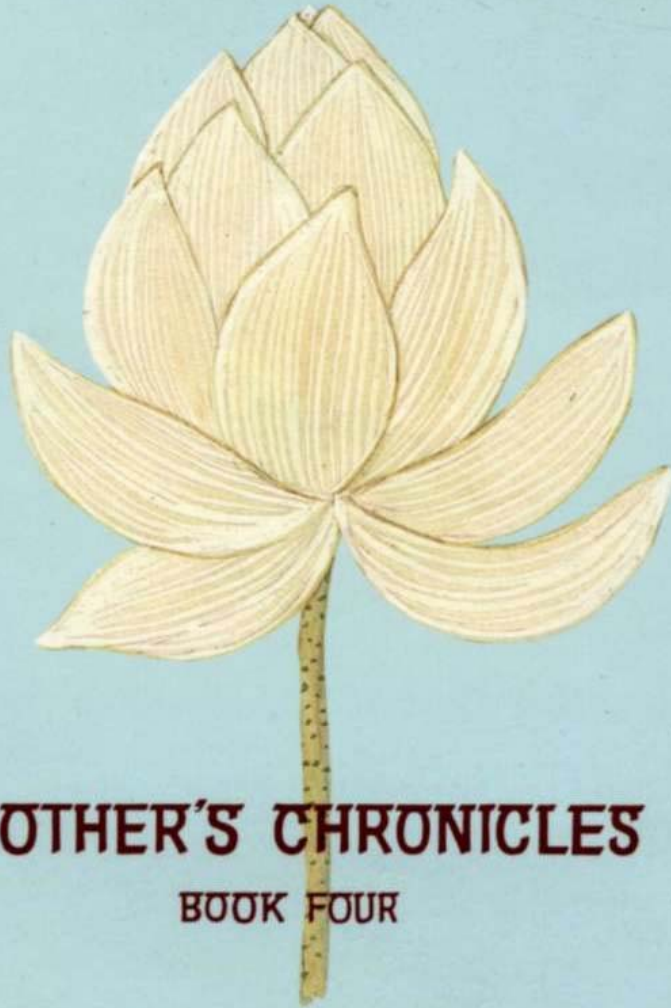
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BOOK FOUR

MIRRA – SRI AUROBINDO

*On Her Way to Ancient Times
On His Way to Modern Times*

SUJATA NAHAR

MOTHER'S CHRONICLES

- BOOK FOUR -



Mother's Chronicles

book four

MIRRA

SRI AUROBINDO

On Her Way to Ancient Times

On His Way to Modern Times

SUJATA NAHAR

INSTITUT DE RECHERCHES EVOLUTIVES, Paris

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*To pull her out of that tomb
was somehow our ambition.*

Sujata — Satprem

April 30, 1984

A Word With You, Please!

Salutations! We meet once again to walk a little more with Mother on her journey on this Earth.

It has indeed been long since we last met. If I was compelled to leave you so long without any news you must acknowledge that I am making up for lost time, and that I have brought you a right royal fare!

At least that was my original intention. But not wishing to give you an indigestion, dear Reader, we shall serve first just the entree, the real feast is to follow soon.

This is what happened. In all innocence, let me confess, I set out on a little raft thinking that I had only a small stream to cross. For, thought I, there will be but a life sketch of Sri Aurobindo to be written and all the elements for that are given in the book *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*. But then I found myself in the middle of an ocean, bobbing up and down on my ill -equipped raft.

Well, to make a long story short, I needed answers to the questions that began to pop up in my mind, which meant a lot of investigative work; and who was to do it ? I turned to my Calcuttan brother, Nirmal Nahar, who at one time was a journalist, accredited to the Press Trust of India. What a boon

that turned out to be! For, frankly, without his help in unearthing and supplying me with a wealth of material on Sri Aurobindo's political as well as early life, and other matters, I don't know what would have happened to this book. And then, there is the invaluable work of editing done by Michel Danino, an onerous task cheerfully done.

A crucial period in human history, 1914 was the year Mirra set out to meet Sri Aurobindo. It was the best of modern West that went seeking the ancient knowledge of the East.

For his part, Sri Aurobindo from the East was thrown into the cauldron of the West's Industrial Revolution in the second half of the nineteenth century. Sri Aurobindo grew up there getting a firsthand experience of the modern West.

Here I intend to take you back not only one century, to Sri Aurobindo's past, but many many more, to India's past whence sprung her fountain of Knowledge : the Veda.

Let us start wading upstream.

Godspeed.

"A time-made body
housed the Illimitable"
(*Savitri*, II. 1.101)

"Thou shalt bear all things

that all things may change."

(*Savitri*, XI. 1.700)

1

The Consecrated House

Mirra was seated at her desk writing in her diary which we know as *Prayers and Meditations of the Mother*.

It was 3 March 1914. She was going to set out to meet Sri Aurobindo.

She wrote, "As the day of departure draws near, I enter into a sort of calm collectedness; I turn with an affectionate gravity towards all those thousand little trifles which surround us and which have silently played during so many years the part of faithful friends; I thank them with gratitude for all the charm they have been able to impart from the outside to our life; I wish, if they are destined to pass for a long or a brief period into other hands than ours, that those hands may be gentle to them and may feel all the respect that is due to what Thy divine Love, O Lord, has made to emerge from the dark inconscience of chaos.

"Then I turn towards the future, and my gaze becomes still more grave. What it has in store for us, I do not know and am not anxious to know; outer circumstances have no importance at all; I would only wish that it may be for us the beginning

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of a new inner period, in which, more detached from material things, we may be more conscious of Thy law and more solely consecrated to its manifestation; that it may be a period of a greater light, a greater love, a more perfect devotion to Thy cause.

"In a silent adoration I contemplate Thee."

It was with a profound affection that Mirra was bidding goodbye to the house in Rue du Val de Grace. For it was here, in this house, that her intimacy with the inner Divine had grown. She poured out her heart to Him: "All appears to me beautiful, harmonious, silent, in spite of the din

outside. And in this silence, it is Thee, O Lord, whom I see; and I so perceive Thee that I can only express this perception as that of an unchanging smile. . . ." (8 August 1913)

Again, "In this falling dusk, Thy Peace becomes more deep and intimate and Thy Voice more clearly perceived in the silence which fills my being.

"O Divine Master, for Thee is our life, our thought, our love, all our being. Take back possession of Thy own, for Thou art ourselves in our real being." (15 August 1913)

Then after a summer vacation. "This return, after three months of absence, to the house which is consecrated to Thee, O Lord, has been an occasion for two experiences. The first is that in my outer being, my surface consciousness, I have no longer any feeling that I am in my own house or the owner of anything at all... .

"In the second place, the whole atmosphere of the house is charged with a religious gravity; here one descends immediately

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into the depths; meditation is more collected and serious, dispersion disappears and gives place to concentration; and I feel this concentration literally descending from my head to enter my heart, and my heart seems to reach greater depths than my head. It is as if for three months I had been loving with my head and only now I were beginning to love with my heart; and this brings with it an incomparable gravity and sweetness of feeling.

"A new door has opened in my being and an immensity has appeared before me!

"I cross the threshold with devotion, feeling hardly worthy yet to enter upon this hidden path veiled from the sight, and as though invisibly luminous within.

"All is changed, all is new; the old garbs have dropped and the new-born child half-opens its eyes to the light of the dawn." (7 October 1913)

Therefore, on the eve of leaving for Geneva, Mirra wrote on 4 March 1914: "It is the last time, it may well be for long, that I write at this table, in this quiet room steeped in Thy Presence. For the next three days I shall probably not be able to write. It is in an inner concentration that I contemplate this page which, as it turns, vanishes into the dream of the past and I regard this

other page, blank but in potentiality full of the dream of the future. And yet what a small thing it seems, childish and without importance, when looked at in the light of Thy eternity. The one thing important is to obey Thy law with love and joy.

"O Lord, grant that all in us may adore Thee and serve

Thee.

"May all have Peace!"

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2

On Board the Kaga Maru

Mirra had now procured all her travel documents. A man helped her much in obtaining those papers, and Mirra never forgot it. So the gentleman's sister in Pondicherry basked lifelong in the sunshine of Mother's kindness. Talk of the divine quality of gratitude? Well, Mother certainly had it.

On 6 March 1914, Mirra and Paul Richard were in Geneva. Why did they go there? Mother speaks of 'suffering' and of 'grief.' "Certainly this sentimental and physical attachment which produces a wrench when the bodies separate, is childish from a certain point of view, when we contemplate the impermanence of outer forms and the reality of Thy essential Oneness. ... I, assured of Thy victory and certain of Thy triumph, have confided to Thee their grief so that Thou mayest by illumining heal it.

"O Lord, grant that all this beauty of affection and tenderness may be transformed into a glorious knowledge.

"Grant that the best may come out of everything, and Thy happy Peace may reign over the earth."

Always, always her prayer was for the Earth.

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Then they must have taken the train for Marseilles.

"7 March 1914. On board the *Kaga Maru*. Thou wast with us yesterday as the most marvellous Protection; Thou hast permitted Thy law to triumph even in the outermost manifestation. Violence was answered by calm, brutality by the power of gentleness; and, where there could have taken place an irreparable misfortune, Thy power was glorified. O Lord! with what fervent gratitude I saluted Thy presence. It was for me a sure sign that we would have the force to act, to think, to live in Thy name and for Thee; not only in intention and will, but effectively, in an integral realisation.

"This morning my prayer rises to Thee, always with the same aspiration: to live Thy love, to radiate Thy love, with such potency and effectiveness that all may feel fortified, regenerated and illumined by our contact ..."

"8 March 1914. In front of this calm sunrise which turned all within me into silence and peace, at the moment when I grew conscious of Thee and Thou alone wast living in me, O Lord, it seemed to me that I adopted all the inhabitants of this ship, and enveloped them in an equal love, so that in each one of them something of Thy consciousness would awake. Not often had I felt so strongly Thy divine power, and Thy invincible light, and once again total was my confidence and unmixed my joyful surrender. ..."

"9 March 1914. Those who live for Thee and in Thee may change their physical surroundings, their habits, climate, 'milieu,' but everywhere they find the same atmosphere; they carry that atmosphere in themselves, in their thought constantly

fixed on Thee. Everywhere they feel at home, for everywhere they are in Thy house. No longer do they marvel at the novelty, unexpectedness, picturesque ness of things and countries; for them, it is Thy Presence that is manifest in all and Thy unchangeable splendour, which never leaves them, is apparent in the least grain of sand....

"O Lord, my sweet Master, all this I constantly experience on this boat which seems to me a marvellous abode of peace, a temple sailing in Thy honour over the waves of the sub-conscious passivity which we have to conquer and awaken to the consciousness of Thy divine Presence.

"Blessed was the day when I came to know Thee, O ineffable Eternity.

"Blessed among all days be that day when the earth at last awakened shall know Thee and shall live only for Thee."

"10 March 1914. In the silence of the night Thy Peace reigned over all things, in the silence of my heart Thy Peace was so powerful that no trouble of any kind could resist it. I then thought of all those who were watching over the ship to safeguard and protect our route, and in gratitude, I willed Thy Peace should be born and live in their hearts. ... I next thought of all those whom we know, of all those whom we do not know, of all the life that is working itself out, of all that has changed its form, and all that is not yet in form, and for all that, and also for all of which I cannot think, for all that is present in my memory, and for all that I forget, in a deep contemplation and mute adoration, I implored Thy Peace."

"14 March 1914. In the unchanging solitude of the

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desert there is something of Thy majestic presence, and I understand why one of the best means of finding Thee has always been to retire into these immense plains of sand.

"But for one who knows Thee, Thou art everywhere, in everything, and no one thing appears to be more favourable than another for manifesting Thee; for all things that exist — and many others that are not yet — are necessary to express Thee."

"17 March 1914." Mirra alludes to a 'physical indisposition.' Then goes on to note, "I have noticed that if we enter into an activity which requires a great physical endurance, what fatigues the most is the anticipation of all the difficulties to which we shall be exposed. It is much wiser at every moment to look only at the difficulty of the present minute; this makes the effort easier because it is always proportionate to the amount of strength and the resistance we can command. The body is a marvellous instrument, it is our mind that does not know how to use it, and, instead of encouraging its suppleness, its plasticity, puts into it a certain fixity arising from preconceived ideas and unfavourable suggestions.

"But the supreme science, O Lord, is to be one with Thee ... to be Thou. . . ."

With the passing of each day she was becoming more adept at giving up any preconceived ideas she may have entertained. And she gave in advance her "joyful and serene adhesion to the circumstances" that were to translate the Lord's law of Love, and manifest His Will.

Came Sunday, March 22. She saw the people attending

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the Sunday prayer on the ship. "They have made an effort to reach towards Thee," she wrote in her diary. However, her intellect, shining like the purest diamond, could see beyond or behind. "... But because of their ignorance it was probably not towards Thee that their prayers rose, and their false conceptions have barred the way to their aspiration." Then her own prayer rose from her heart. "O Lord, divine Master of love, enlighten their consciousnesses and their hearts. . . . May the supreme serenity of Thy sublime Presence awake in them."

As that 'sublime Presence' increased in amplitude in her, so did a happy confidence. And Mirra was "running with nimble steps towards the only goal worth attaining."

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3

A Schoolgirl's Travel Notes

Mirra saw new countries and peoples, observed everything, and wrote in her *Meditations*: "Those who live for Thee and in Thee ... no longer do they marvel at the novelty, unexpectedness, picturesque ness of things and countries."

But so few of us are like Mirra I The greater part of humanity loves to marvel. I confess that not only does the picturesque ness of things and countries attract me, but there is also in me a curiosity to know about peoples and their customs. In this jet age or supersonic age of the late twentieth century, very few of us can have any real idea of how people lived or travelled in the beginning of this very century. So when I came across the *Travel Notes* "of a schoolgirl who has just left high school," I heartily thanked Bharatidi.¹ She was, of course, a very young person when she set out for a tour of India in 1908, six years before Mirra, but her power of observation

was already finely honed. She was always ready to learn a little more and to understand a little better. Bharatidi did not take

1. Suzanne Karpeles, see Book Two, p. 77.

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a Japanese liner like Mirra, but the types she met and the sights she saw could not have been much different. She journeyed with her mother and her elder sister, Andree. Here are some excerpts from Bharatidi's notes.

"Tuesday, 17 November, Marseilles — Inside the museum two beautiful frescoes by Puvis de Chavannes. ..." *"Wednesday, 18 November, Marseilles —It is today that we are embarking. I haven't yet realized that I shall be leaving France for an unknown world! . . .*



A view of Marseilles' harbour early this century

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"I am guided across a crowded street where Blacks throng, glistening and grimy with coal; where the Chinese, with long pigtailed and a placid air, arrange their wares of footwear.

"The steamer, *Yarra*, is black, single-decked and three-funnelled; on the dock a mad bustle: people arriving at the last minute, and trunks that do not arrive! Families weeping. In the middle of all this commotion, a whistle-blast. We are leaving.

"Marseilles is lost in a blue haze, and we are at sea."

She goes on to describe the officers and some of the passengers on board —a Parsi couple, a Muslim family, a few English officers who pace the deck with a determined air, the eye adorned by a monocle.

"Thursday, 19 November, on the high seas—The sea continues to be boisterous, the sadness and regret at having left the motherland grow."

"Friday, 20 November (fifteen days before the Messina earthquake)— 5 A.M. We are on the bridge scanning the horizon with field-glasses; we are crossing the strait of Messina, there is moonlight; the port of Sicily comes into our view with its thousand little flickering lights, while the Calabria is darkly silhouetted against the transparent sky.

"At dusk we get up to see Crete, sad and barren." *"Sunday, 22 November* — The sea is dark blue, the sky is pure. Gradually everybody makes an appearance on the deck, the face more or less grey or yellow, leaning on the arms of a cabinmaid

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and with just enough energy to sink into a deck-chair. But the English regain their energy for the 'Holy Sunday' and in the saloon a priest celebrates the mass and all intone the songs with zeal."

"Monday, 23 November, Port Said, Egypt — 5 A.M. It is still dark; then suddenly broad daylight. In the port are other vessels flying English and German flags. Our steamer is immediately besieged and surrounded by small boats in which Arabs gesticulate and shout.

"Port Said has nothing attractive or impressive, and resembles a big toy for the Universal Exposition. The men are nothing special; the women, like lost souls, glide along the walls in their mournful black sacks, a black veil covering the lower part of the face and held in place over

the nose with a wooden rod; the children are very lively, very dirty, and almost all have their eyes devoured by flies.

"We go and pay homage to the statue of de Lesseps, who, in a welcoming gesture receives us at the end of the jetty. The beach is endless, boring; the sea is beautiful, calm; and far away, vanishing over the skyline, white and salmon-coloured sailing boats fade out of sight.

"The European quarter is made up of high, varicoloured houses from which strange blokes emerge; the native quarter is quite oriental with its narrow alleys and its cafes where some sip their small portion of coffee, and others smoke their hookah.

"We leave Port Said, and slowly enter the canal, its waters calm and grey; salt marshes on one side and on the other, the

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Port Said: an overview of the harbour early this century

desert, where a poor, hairless camel can be glimpsed now and then led by two or three men; here and there a thin feather palm that seems quite surprised at having come up amid this sea of sand. We pass big sailing boats of antique shapes, with long pointed sails listing gently and seeming to skim the water's surface, while the Arabs hoist or lower shorter sails.

"A tiny train runs between a row of thin greenery and, with a trail of smoke, breaks the monotony of the horizon. Several big vessels stop to let us pass and the passengers greet us.

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"In the evening, a superb sunset: a ball of fire sinking into the sea of golden sands.

"The young Parsi woman takes us into her cabin, and there she shows us dozens of 'saris': some embroidered all over with peach flowers, others spangled, yet others of soft silk bordered with a pretty Indian braid."

"Tuesday, 24 November, Red Sea —We sail along the coast and the Sinai mountains; the sea is calm and all the passengers friendly with each other. The sun, setting the whole horizon ablaze, disappears slowly behind a rocky island. In the evening, the sky is marvellously starry, the sea all luminescent; the breeze that accompanied us till now has died out and a languid heat is beginning to be felt."

"Friday, 27 November-The sea is rough and it is raining. Towards evening, the weather clears and a whole colony of white seagulls follows the ship. A superb moon illuminates us, before setting slowly; at one point all that can be seen is a crescent that looks like a golden boat floating on the dark blue water.

"The young Muslim woman is interesting; she tells us that she and her sisters are the first women from the Muslim society to have gone to study in London. They were the talk of the whole of Bombay, censured by newspapers, and for some time scorned by their friends and relatives. She has been engaged since the age of thirteen, she knows her future husband and has often talked with him. When she marries, she will don the red dress that symbolizes happiness and the green veil that symbolizes hope."

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"Saturday, 28 November, Aden-We reach Aden early, surrounded with huge tormented rocks. Strapping fellows row our boat; they are Somalis, their heads reddened by lime, with flat noses and thick Negroid lips. Glanders is raging among horses, so all the carriages are drawn by hairless camels that hold their head aloft impertinently. We ride across a rocky and sad part that

looks like the remnant of an ancient crater, in which long caravans of camels, each one's head tied to another's tail, slowly file past, laden with cane and big bundles. We pass a few women, some completely veiled, others wrapped in large, bright-coloured shawls, carrying big pitchers on their heads, their babies on their hips.

"Round the corner of a narrow road, carved in the pink rock, the entire old town comes into view, flat, multicoloured and swarming. The British town lies at the bottom of a crater, well isolated.

"At last we reach the famous reservoirs located in a gorge; a few wretched trees, growing laboriously, bear a sign, 'Touching plant is forbidden.' The reservoirs are formed by deep cement tanks in which green water stagnates. Above a well circled with frail shrubs, three bare-chested men pull up a bucket made of cowhide.

"On our way back, we meet a troop of British soldiers, as yellow as their khaki uniforms.

"A handsome blond young man, a British police officer, is delighted to have an opportunity of airing with us a few French phrases. He is sorry to be going to India as he detests Indians and would rather not know them: 'They are just good

enough to be got money out of,' he says, and very kindly gives us the sound piece of advice not to mix with those people, and this winter to come to Luck now during the season, for there are races and balls every day and it is really worthwhile.

"A young Englishwoman, who is going to meet her husband again, curses India and the Indians for, she says, she has to be separated either from her little daughter in England or from her husband who works in India.

"A Frenchman, whose white cap cocked over his ear goes to rejoin his enterprising Gallic moustache, is bound for Suze, where for six months he will direct the excavations with two other Frenchmen. They have the workmen believe that their finds are stones without much value, and so the Shah pays scant attention to their work."

"Thursday, 3 December — Today is the first time in my life that I have seen such a sunset: the sky took on successively all hues, from purple to orange.

"In the distance, a blurred and misty line announces Bombay."

*

* *

No, Bharatidi did not go to Luck now, although she toured North India extensively: Bombay was her first impact with the country; Ahmedabad was the next stop. It was followed by a tour of Rajputana. Her first visit was to Mount Abu: "How to describe the impression one gets, the enchantment that transports us when we find ourselves in the midst of a jewel in marble, yellowed by seven centuries?" These were the

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five Jain temples at Dilwara. Some were built in the thirteenth century while others as far back as the eleventh. The temple complex is an attraction to all with its marble carvings for, indeed, it is considered an apogee of refinement in Indian art. This is a pilgrimage centre for the Jains as the temples are dedicated to a few of their Tirthankars. Notable is a 2500-year-old image of Adinath, the first Jain Tirthankar. Then there is the legendary *agni Rund* (fire hole). It is from the Fire there that four great Rajput clans —known as the *agni kulas* — rose. Our family tradition has it that we, the Nahars, are descended from Parmar, the first to emerge from the flames.

Ajmer was the next halt, from where Bharatidi went to see the Pushkar lakes. There still exists a temple dedicated to Brahma the Creator— extremely rare! A myth has grown up around these three lakes. Brahma was once thinking of finding a nice place on the Earth for performing a sacred rite in order to make a new creation. The lotus he always holds in one of his four hands suddenly dropped to the Earth. Brahma came down and saw that the lotus had bounced and touched the ground in three places, and from each place water had sprung up and formed lakes. So he named the place Pushkar, which can mean a lotus or a lake.

From Ajmer Bharatidi went to Udaipur, the city of lakes, which many call the Venice of the East. Then to the pink city of Jaipur. Through her travels and meetings with all types of people Bharatidi came to know the history and the lore of the valorous Rajputs.

Then on to Delhi and its sights. TajMahal beckoned;

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in Agra she spent the last day of 1908, and saw the child 1909 enter the arena of the world.

After Agra she went to Gwalior, to Kanpur, and on to the sacred city of Benares where Vishwanath, the Lord of the Universe, resides. If you die there you go straight to heaven! whatever sins you may have committed. She spent one whole week there. From there to Calcutta. A hop to Darjeeling to watch the splendour of sunrise —the play of colours on Kanchenjunga. Back to Calcutta to take a train to Puri of Lord Jagannath on the eastern seaboard, in Orissa. That completed her tour of the North and the East. Bharatidi then went down south: Hyderabad in Deccan, Madras on the Coromandel shore, and finally to Pondicherry.

Her recital stops there abruptly as the rest of her notes got lost. What a shame, really! I thought. For her descriptions are lively and detailed: the sights she saw, the people she met — in a word, India as it then was, which even the Indians of today do not know.

However, we know that Alexandra David-Neel met the threesome in Benares in March 1913 on her own journey through India, as she recorded their meeting in her letters to her husband. She wrote: "The event of the week was the eclipse of the moon on last Saturday, March 22. According to popular belief, an eclipse is a fearsome thing, an ominous sign of some public misfortune. The gods must therefore be propitiated, pious ceremonies redoubled. In other parts of India, one must bathe in a holy river precisely at moonrise, as a result of which all of one's sins are erased. The French ladies I told

you about [Bharatidi, her mother and sister] rented a boat, and we picnicked on it for dinner, remaining on the river from 5 to 8 at night. The crowd on the *ghats* was huge. There were a hundred thousand people there, perhaps more. Whole villages had come. Special trains had been disgorging pilgrims for the past three days. It was worth the sight! At nightfall, under the moon, the setting became magical with the red glow of the burning *ghat*. . . ."

But Bharatidi did not meet Sri Aurobindo either in Pondicherry, where he was to come only in 1910, a year after her, or in Calcutta because Sri Aurobindo was still in prison, as the Alipore Bomb Case trial was going on. By nature she was not a politician, but she was a keen enough observer of human nature to notice the young Bengalis. "These young Romans, svelte of form,

with chiselled profiles, such distinguished air and a flaming look, make us sense that Bengal is awakening, and it is among them that India will find young heroes who will sacrifice themselves for 'Mother India'. ..."

4

Her Diamond Eyes

Mother, in her communion with her Lord, did not note down the exact physical events on board the ship. But sometimes, in the course of conversations, she would recall one incident or another, for her ironical look never missed any incongruity.

"The first time I came to India," recounted Mother decades later, "I came on a Japanese ship. And on this Japanese ship there were two clergymen, that is, Protestant priests, of different sects. I don't remember what sects exactly, but they were both English; I think one was an Anglican and the other a Presbyterian.

"Now, came Sunday." It was Sunday the 15th of March, 1914. "There had to be a religious ceremony on the ship, else they would have looked like pagans, just like the Japanese! There had to be a ceremony, but who should perform it? Should it be the Anglican or should it be the Presbyterian? They all but quarrelled. In the end, one of them withdrew with dignity. I don't remember now which one, I think it was the Anglican; and the Presbyterian performed his ceremony.

"That took place in the saloon of the ship. We had to

go down a few steps to this saloon. And that day, all the men had put on their suits —it was hot, I think we were in the Red Sea — they had put on their waistcoats, collars, leather shoes, well-set neckties and hats, and down they went, a book under their arm, almost in a procession from the deck to the saloon. The ladies had their hats on, some even carried a parasol, and they too had

their book under the arm, a prayer book." Mother kept a straight face while saying all this, but her tone of voice and the look in her eyes were like paint-brushes painting the picture.

"And so, they all crowded down into the saloon, where the Presbyterian gave a sermon, that is to say, preached, and everybody listened very religiously. Then, when it was over, they all came up with the satisfied air of someone who has done his duty. But naturally, five minutes later they were at the bar drinking and playing cards, their religious ceremony forgotten. They had done their duty, it was over, there was nothing more to be said about it." How Mother scorned insincerity!

"Then the clergyman came to ask me, more or less politely, why I hadn't attended. I told him, 'Sir, I am sorry, but I don't believe in religion.'

"Oho, you are a materialist!"

"No, not at all."

"Ah! Then why?"

"Oh, if I were to tell you, you would be quite displeased, it is probably better not to say anything!"

"But he insisted so much that I said at last, 'Just this. I don't feel you are sincere, neither you nor your flock. You all went there to fulfil a duty and a social custom, not at all

because you really wanted to enter into communion with God.'

"Enter into communion with God !But we can't do that! All we can do is to say some good words, but we have no ability to enter into communion with God.'

"Then I said, 'But that's just why I didn't go, for it doesn't interest me.'

"After that he asked me many questions and confided to me that he was going to China to convert the 'pagans.' At that I became serious and told him, 'Listen, even before your religion was born —it is not yet two thousand years old —the Chinese had a very high philosophy and knew a path leading them to the Divine. And when they think of Westerners, they think of them as barbarians. And you are going there to convert those who know more than you? What are you

going to teach them ? To be insincere ? To perform hollow ceremonies instead of following a profound philosophy and a detachment from life which lead them to a more spiritual consciousness? I don't think you are going to do a very good thing.'

"Then he was so flabbergasted, the poor man, that he said to me, 'Eh, I am afraid I can't be convinced by your words!'

"'Oh!' I said, 'I am not trying to convince you. I only described the situation to you. Besides, I don't quite see why barbarians should wish to go and teach civilized people what they have known long before you. That's all.'

"And that was the end of it!"

About the Christian missionaries Vivekananda could not have agreed more. "You train and educate and pay men to do what?" he asked his American audience. "To come over to my

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country to curse and abuse all my forefathers, my religion and everything. . . . And then you who train men to abuse and criticise, if I touch you with the least bit of criticism, with the kindest of purpose, you shrink and cry, 'Don't touch us, we are Americans. We criticise all the people in the world, curse them and abuse them, say anything; but do not touch us; we are sensitive plants.'"¹

His was the view of a true Yogi attentive to Truth.

Mirra too was a true Yogi. Truth-perception was her birthright.

Nothing was hidden from her burning heart. She measured the worlds with her diamond eyes.

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Mirra was going to India. And what were "the things I expect from my voyage to India" ? Her prayer was: "Grant that I may accomplish my mission, that I may help in Thy integral manifestation."

She did not know to what extent her prayer was going to be fulfilled.

For Mirra's destination was Sri Aurobindo.

And who was Sri Aurobindo?

Let the *Kaga Maru* take Mirra steadily nearer and nearer to him.

Let us begin at the beginning.

1. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda,*

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5

The Eternal Birth

"Surely for the earth-consciousness the very fact that the Divine manifests himself is the greatest of all splendours. Consider the obscurity here and what it would be if the Divine did not directly intervene and the Light of Light did not break out of the obscurity —for that is the meaning of the manifestation." That was Sri Aurobindo.

*

* *

15 August 1872.

"To the hill-tops of silence from over the infinite sea, Golden he came, Armed with the flame,
Looked on the world that his greatness and passion must free."

Mid-August. The heavens penetrate Earth's atmosphere in spectacular fiery showers of falling meteors —the Perseids — which appear from the constellation Perseus. Like Jupiter penetrating Danaë's brazen tower in a shower of gold, for the birth of Perseus. The slayer of Medusa. The deliverer of Andromeda.

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Calcutta.

Twenty-four minutes before sunrise.¹

A new dawn.

From many homes hymns were rising to the Lord of Light, for it was the *Brāhma-muhūrta* (the period of forty-eight minutes before sunrise). It is the time when the Brahmins silently recite the sacred Gayatri mantra. Gayatri is considered to be the mother of the Vedas.

From the ladies' quarters at 4 Theatre Road came the sound of the blowing of a conch. Its deep resonance filled the morning air, announcing a new birth. To Swarnalata and Krishna Dhan Ghose was born their third son.

It was a Thursday. The day named after Jupiter or Thor, the wielder of the thunderbolt.

Chance? Coincidence? or planned? I'll opt for the last, because had not the well-born come to "awake heaven's lightning from its slumber's lair"?

Six years later Mirra too was born on a Thursday.

In India, Thursday is considered to be the day of Brihaspati, the Guru of the Gods. The psychological power he brings is 'Wisdom (Word and Knowledge)!' In the Rig-Veda he is designated as 'the shining' and 'the gold-coloured.' He is the Master of the Creative Word. He is the Soul-Force.

It was strange that' the father, Dr. Krishna Dhan, chose for

1. The exact time of Sri Aurobindo's birth is not known. The time given above is probably based on a recollection of a member of Sri Aurobindo's family that he was born one *danda* (= twenty-four minutes) before sunrise. The local time would be 5:16 A.M.; or 4:52 A.M. Indian Standard Time.

his third son the name AUROBINDO. In fact, Bengalis had never heard of anybody with that name before. We wonder what invisible force whispered the name in the father's ear: AUROBINDO.

In Sanskrit, *aravinda* means a lotus. Constantly keeping its face turned towards the sun, the lotus spreads out its hundred petals to a hundred sides.

Sri Aurobindo's advent in the Indian political field inspired a Bengali revolutionary, B. B. Upadhyay (we shall meet him later) who waxed eloquent: "Have you seen the pure-white Aurobindo? The 'hundred-petalled' has blossomed in the inner lake of India.... This Aurobindo of ours is a rarity in the world. The heavenly grace of goodness is snowy-white. He is vast and great.... Such a full man and genuine — fire-wombed as the thunderbolt, yet with the charming softness of a lotus petal, a man so rich in knowledge, a man self-lost in meditation — you will never find such a man in the entire universe."¹

Aurobindo has a second meaning: a red lotus. Red is the colour of revolt. *And* the colour of Divine Love.

A third meaning: a blue lotus. The blue colour is associated with Sri Krishna — Krishna and his delight. "Pale blue light is my light," Sri Aurobindo was to say one day.

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* *

1. With my apology to the author for this poor translation. The original Bengali is so beautiful that it is well nigh impossible to render it into another language without losing a great deal of its beauty. This feeble attempt is just to give the reader unversed in Bengali a faint idea of the original.

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It was left to Mother to explain the real significance of Sri Aurobindo's birth, which, she said, was "eternal in the history of the universe."

Dilating upon it, she said:

"The sentence can be understood in four different ways on four ascending planes of consciousness:

- 1) Physically, the consequences of the birth will be of eternal importance in the world.
- 2) Mentally, it is a birth that will be eternally remembered in the universal history.
- 3) Psychically, a birth that recurs for ever from age to age upon earth.
- 4) Spiritually, the birth of the Eternal upon earth."

The "birth of the Eternal upon earth" is known in India as the descent of the Avatar.

In the Gita, Sri Krishna the Teacher speaks of the nature and purpose of Avatar hood. "Many are my lives that are past.... Whensoever there is the fading of the Dharma and the uprising of unrighteousness, then I loose myself forth into birth. For the deliverance of the Right I am born from age to age."

But the upholding of Law is not an all-sufficient object in itself. The Avatar comes to change the old Law.

"The Avatar," wrote Sri Aurobindo, "is necessary when a special work is to be done and in crises of the evolution."

Elaborating, he said, "Avatar hood would have little meaning if it were not connected with the evolution." Sri Aurobindo, like Theon, was wholly pro-evolution.

Sri Aurobindo took "the Puranic list of Avatars and interpreted it as a parable of evolution, so as to show that the

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idea of evolution is implicit behind the theory of Avatar hood."

Here is Sri Aurobindo's interpretation. "The Hindu procession of the Avatars is itself, as it were, a parable of evolution. First the Fish Avatar, then the amphibious animal [Tortoise] between land and water, then the land animal [Boar], then the Man-Lion Avatar, bridging man and animal, then man as dwarf [Vamana], small and undeveloped and physical but containing in himself the godhead and taking possession of existence, then the rajasic [Parasurama], sattwic [Rama], nirguna Avatars, leading the human development. . . . Krishna, Buddha and Kalki depict the last three stages, the stages of the spiritual development — Krishna opens the possibility of over mind, Buddha tries to shoot beyond to the supreme liberation but that liberation is still negative, not returning upon earth to complete positively the evolution; Kalki is to correct this by bringing the Kingdom of the Divine upon earth, destroying the opposing Asura force. The progression is striking and unmistakable."

The ancient Hindu "envisages this progression as an enormous movement covering more ages than we can easily count. He believes that Nature has repeated it over and over again, resuming briefly and in sum at each start what she had previously accomplished in detail, slowly and with labour. It is this great secular movement in cycles, perpetually self-repeating, yet perpetually progressing, which is imaged and set forth for us in the symbols of the Puranas."

The Fish Avatar rescued the Veda from the waters of the Flood. Sri Aurobindo rescued the Veda from the waters of obscurity into which it had fallen.

6

The Veda

OM BHŪR BHUVAH SWAH
TAT SAVITUR VARENYAM
BHARGO DEVASYA DHĪMAHI
DHIYO YO NAH PRACHODAYĀT

Thus runs the Gayatri mantra,¹ the chosen formula of the ancient Vedic search. It is addressed to Surya, the Sun, "as a God of revelatory knowledge by whose action we can arrive at the highest truth." This "sacred Vedic formula, of the Gayatri," observes Sri Aurobindo, "was for thousands of years repeated by every Brahmin in his daily meditation; and we

1. A translation: "O Lord, who pervades the earth, the intermediate world and the world of light, we meditate on the supreme light of the illumining Sun-god, that he may impel our mind."

To my father's queries Sri Aurobindo gave the definitions of the following planes (10 Sept. 1937): *bhurloka*= material world; *bhuvarloka* = vital world; *dyoloka* = mind-world; *swarloka* = highest region of mind-world. The Rishis preferred a concrete language to an abstract one. *Bhu*, to them, meant the physical consciousness, and not just the earth.

may note that this formula is a verse from the Rig-veda, from a hymn of the Rishi Vishvamitra."

Ages ago, in the mid-twenties, Sri Aurobindo once asked a would-be disciple, "Do you know the meaning of the Gayatri Mantra ?"

The man replied, "It is a great power, but I do not know the meaning."

Sri Aurobindo explained. "It means: 'We choose the Supreme Light of the divine Sun; we aspire that it may impel our minds.'

"The Sun is the symbol of the divine Light that is coming down and Gayatri gives expression to the aspiration asking that divine Light to come down and give impulsion to all the activities of the mind.

"In this Yoga also, we want to bring down that divine Sun to govern not only the mind but the vital and the physical being also. It is a very difficult effort. All cannot bear the Light of the Sun when it comes down. Gayatri chooses the Divine Light of the Truth asking it to come down and govern the mind. It is the capacity to bear the Light that constitutes the fitness for the Yoga."

Again, according to Sri Aurobindo, SWAR, the solar world beyond heaven and earth, is the world of the divine Truth and Bliss; "the fourth world, the supramental,"¹ after mind, life and body.

1. The quotations in this chapter are from Sri Aurobindo's *The Secret of the Veda*.

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Swar is the world of Yama, the guardian of the law of the Truth, the guardian of immortality. It is the world of immortality where is the indestructible Light. "Yama and the ancient Fathers discovered the path to that world which is a pasture of the Cows whence the enemy cannot bear away the radiant herds."

There are four Vedas: the Rig, the Sama, the Yajur and the Atharva. The Rig-veda is known to be the most ancient of these ancient scriptures. "From the historical point of view," writes Sri Aurobindo, "the Rig-veda may be regarded as a record of a great advance made by humanity by special means at a certain period of its collective progress."¹ Indeed, the symbolism of the Veda depends upon the image of the life of man as a sacrifice, a journey and a battle. This scripture is "the spirit's hymn of battle and victory as it discovers and climbs to planes of thought and experience inaccessible to natural or animal man, man's praise of the divine Light, Power and Grace at work in the mortal." Unlike latter-day saints who rejected material life to swoon into some rarefied air, the Vedic Rishis were very much concerned with the life of the living being. The Veda speaks of two oceans; one is the ocean of the subconscious, dark and inexpressive, the other is

1. Regarding the antiquity of the Vedas, archaeologists are increasingly veering round to the views held by Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, and others.

As to the theory of Aryan invasion, which imposes a very recent date on the Vedas, it's really all rubbish! The interested Reader may turn to the Appendix at the end of the book to find a few arguments demolishing that nonsensical theory.

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the ocean of the superconscient, luminous and eternal expression but beyond the human mind. The upper sea or "the superconscient, the sea of the subconscious, the life of the living being between the two —this is the Vedic idea of existence."

Although the hymns are the experiences of different Rishis, the Rig-veda presents itself as one in all its parts. "The Rishis differ in temperament and personality. . . . But these differences of manner take nothing from the unity of spiritual experiences."

The Rishi is the Seer and the Hearer of Truth. For seer-hood brings with it not only the far vision but the far hearing. As the eyes of the sage are opened to the light, so is his ear unsealed to receive the vibrations of the Infinite; from all the regions of the Truth there comes thrilling into him its Word which becomes the form of his thoughts.

Vedic Sanskrit represents a very early stratum in the development of language. "The word for the Vedic Rishis is still a living thing, a thing of power, creative, formative. It is not yet a conventional symbol for an idea, but itself the parent and former of ideas."

Thus the Rishi could, by the use of a single word, convey one thing to the profane mind and quite another to the initiate. In the Vedic texts words like cow, horse, wolf, etc. recur constantly. But what do they really mean? Of course, the Vedic hymns have both inner and outer interpretations. And the veil is elaborately woven by the Vedic mystics but vanishes like a dissolving mist before our eyes if we choose not to be blind.

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The goal of the Rishis is Swar, the solar world of the divine Truth and Bliss. The Truth is spoken of in the Veda as a path leading to felicity, leading to immortality. The Rishis yearn to emerge from untruth to Truth, from darkness to Light, emerge from a state of death to a state of immortality. But the achievement of Truth is an arduous task. "In the Vedic idea of the

revelation, there is no suggestion of the miraculous or the supernatural . . . Knowledge itself was a travelling and a reaching, or a finding and a winning; the revelation came only at the end, the light was the prize of a final victory."

The journey to the Truth is no easy march. The Rishi has to wage a fierce and relentless battle. He has "to labour and to fight and conquer, he must be a tireless toiler and traveller and a stern warrior, he must force open and storm and sack city after city, win kingdom after kingdom, overthrow and tread down ruthlessly enemy after enemy. His whole progress is a warring of Gods and Titans, Gods and Giants, Indra and the Python, Aryan and Dasyus." Old friends and helpers "turn into enemies, the kings of Aryan states he would conquer and overpass join themselves to the Dasyus and are leagued against him in supreme battle to prevent his free and utter passing on."

The Vedic deities are "names, powers, personalities of the universal Godhead and they represent each some essential puissance of the Divine Being. . . . Children of Light, Sons of the Infinite, they call man to a divine companionship and alliance; they attract and uplift him to their luminous fraternity,

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invite his aid and offer theirs against the Sons of Darkness and Division." Man responds. In their upward march, he is a close ally of the Gods from level to level of the great hill of being. This is the birth and ascent of Agni. "Agni, the Immortal in mortals."

Many are the Sons of Darkness. They are the dividers, plunderers, harmful powers. "There are Eaters and Devourers, Wolves and Tearers; there are hurters and haters; there are dualisers; there are confiners or censors."

Among the Sons of Darkness is Vritra the Python, the grand Adversary, "for he obstructs with his coils of darkness all possibility of divine existence and divine action." Vritra the Besieger prevents the sevenfold Waters of Truth from flowing down upon the earth-consciousness in which we mortals live. These streams of Truth do not flow upon earth, but in heaven. The Serpent coiled itself across the fountains of the seven rivers and sealed up their outflow. Then came Indra of the richly-various lustres; "he comes impelled by the thought, driven forward by the illumined thinker within; he comes with the speed and force of the illumined-mind power, in possession of his brilliant horses."¹ Indra, the God-mind, smites the Coverer with his flashing

lightnings. Indra's thunderbolt, made from the bones of Rishi Dadhichi, slays Vritra. At the same time a passage is cloven out on the mountain and all the seven rivers are released together and sent flowing down upon the earth.

1. *Ashwa*: Force, especially symbolic of life-energy and nervous force. The Vedic Rishis always insist on two requisites, Light and Power, the Light (cow) of the Truth working in the knowledge, the Power (horse) of the Truth working in the effective and enlightened Will.

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Thus the King of the Gods cuts out a passage on the summit of the earth-consciousness down which the waters of the Truth and the Bliss can flow. From the supreme ocean flow the sevenfold Waters and pour out on our life the honeyed wave. The seekers of Bliss and Immortality can now drink the Soma-wine from the uncovered well of honey, for they are now able to see Swar.

But hidden in the waters, released by Indra from the hold of Vritra, the gods find visible the divine Power, Agni. Agni, the child of the earth's growths, called the child of the earth and heaven, with his companion gods and the sevenfold Waters, enters into the superconscient. "In that entire meeting of these great ones Agni moves in all things; the rays of his vision are perfectly straight, no longer affected by the lower crookedness." There, in the unobstructed Vast where Truth is born, the shore less infinite, Agni's own natural seat in which he now takes up his home, there he finds the source of the honeyed plenty of the Father of things and pours them out on our life. Agni, the builder of form, is the son of Heaven by the body of the Earth.

"The whole Rig-veda is a triumph-chant of the powers of Light, and their ascent by the force and vision of the Truth to its possession in the source and seat where it is free from the attack of the falsehood."

But the Rishis spoke not only of an 'ascent' but also of a descent. This is *our* problem.

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The symbols and parables of the Veda are connected. But says Sri Aurobindo, "the conception of the Dawn and the legend of the Angirasas are at the very heart of the Vedic cult and may almost be considered as the key to the secret of the significance of Veda." That is the legend of the lost Sun and the lost cows and their recovery by our human Fathers.¹

The cows are the herds of the Sun. The lost cows are the lost rays of the Sun, their recovery is the forerunner of the recovery of the lost Sun.

Usha, the Dawn, was disconsolate. Where were her children, the cows, the shining herds of the Sun? And where was the Sun himself? When she went to take the cattle out to pasture, there was no trace of any of them. The steeds were gone too! Usha, the daughter of Heaven, the Mother of radiance, heaven-gold her hue, the sweet-spoken Usha, is beloved of all. The whole clan of gods rallied round her in her moment of distress. Sarama, the Intuition, the Hound of Heaven was there. So was Agni, the Seer-Will. Indra, dark as the rain-clouds, came armed with his thunderbolt; the Maruts, his forty-nine brothers, closed ranks with him. The Ashwins, the Riders of the Steed, were not late in coming; they are physicians, they bring back youth to the old, health to the sick, wholeness to the maimed. Soma, the God of Bliss, could not be left behind! Many were Usha's kingods, and now they came in battle array to combat the

1. This legend is an old one and widespread. We find it not only among the Vedic people, but among the Mayas of America where too the Sun concealed for many months in the darkness is recovered by the hymns and prayers of the wise men.

creatures of darkness. But the gods were still not sure of being able to vanquish unaided the untold number of their foes. So they called upon their allies, the Rishis; the seven Angirasa Rishis, our human Fathers who were the first founders of knowledge.

Thus assembled the hosts of heaven set out. They knew, of course, who the cow-stealers were: the Dasyus. But the road to their country was beset with peril. For this home of the Dasyus, which they themselves describe as the world of falsehood beyond the bound of things, is the stronghold of the Panis, the lair of Vala, the Titan. Who among the god kind is capable of guiding the others to the secret places of the confiners? Sarama. For she is the Intuition who "leads in the search for the radiant herds." On the way she meets the Night which gives place to her for fear of her overleaping it. The Night is Usha's elder sister, she is "a darkness carrying

morning in its breast." The gods follow their guide. Agni at the forefront, close to the guide, "Agni leading, Indra following, the other gods succeeding." Usha would not be left behind, she is with her brothers, her vision of all-round seeing restored by now. The Angirasa Rishis, led by their eldest Brihaspati, are very much the companions-in-arms of the gods. And with them all is Soma, to keep up their spirits.

The advance resumes under the cover of darkness. All night, stumbling and groping through wide defiles and rugged valleys, they follow the guidance of Sarama. Sarama, the fair-footed, who speeds in front of all towards the voice of the vanished herds of Light. The hosts of heaven find themselves in a black ravine with bare crags rising sheer all round them. Sarama

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has led the gods to the place where the hill, so firmly formed and impervious in appearance, is broken and can admit the seekers. When what she seeks is found, Sarama only gives the message to the seers and their divine helpers. Her task is completed with the finding of the home of the robbers. Now it is up to the Allies to rescue the lost kine. They must wrest possession of the wealth that rightly belongs to them, "the much wealth hidden within in the rock behind the fortress gates of the Panis."

A fierce battle ensues. The Angirases and their divine comrades fall on the enemy with their full battle-cry. Brihaspati, the Master of the Creative Word, the chief of the Angirases, "with his cry broke the hills," the stronghold of the Panis, the stealers, who had hidden the cows of Usha in the dark cavern-pens. The Panis who make the knot of the crookedness. Who have not the will to works, spoilers of speech — "Thou hast crushed with thy stroke the mouth less Dividers who mar our self-expression, thou hast cloven them asunder in the gated city." Misers that they are, they make no use of the coveted wealth, "preferring to slumber." Their fortress breached, their slumber broken, the impious hosts rush behind their chief, Vala, who comes out raging from his hole in the mountain. Brihaspati breaks Vala into pieces with his triumphant cry. Agni burns. Indra smashes up the strong places of the hill. Many thousand companies of the robbers of the Deep are crushed in their inaccessible dwelling. The Ashwins open the doors of the strong pens that hold the kine. The Rishis and the Gods enter the cave-pen of the Panis and drive upward the liberated herds of Usha. Under the alert eyes of the Ashwins the shining cows are driven back to their

own wide field: the great, manifold and blissful Field, Swar.

Our human Fathers, the Angirasas Rishis, pursue farther the enemy. They come to the darkest cave yet. The darkness within was engulfed in the darkness. They enter the cave on their hands and knees. And in that heart of darkness they discover Martanda, who had been concealed there by the Titans. The eighth son of Aditi —the all-creating infinite Mother —was seated there immense and alone. He is the black or dark, the lost, the hidden sun. The Sun hidden in Matter.

The treasure was found of a supernal Day.
In the deep subconscious glowed her jewel-lamp;
Lifted, it showed the riches of the Cave
Where, by the miser traffickers of sense
Unused, guarded beneath Night's dragon paws,
In folds of velvet darkness draped they sleep
Whose priceless value could have saved the world.

Savitri, I, III, 41-42

The Vedic Rishis, Sri Aurobindo said, "may not have yoked the lightning to their chariots, nor weighed sun and star, nor materialised all the destructive forces in Nature to aid them in massacre and domination, but they had measured and fathomed all the heavens and earths within us, they had cast their plummet into the Inconscient and the subconscious and the superconscient; they had read the riddle of death and found the secret of immortality. ..."

The hymns of the Veda are the triumph songs of the soul's battle in Matter, and its victory.

7

The Stream

Let us look again at our Lotus, Aurobindo. But that Lotus was not only a flower. He was a fruit. A fruition.

And what mighty Tree bore that Fruit? What seeds pushed forth that mighty Tree? How far-spread were its roots? Again, what soil nourished it, and sent the sap coursing through the Tree's mighty trunk and into its branches?

And in which jungle was that Tree to be found ?

The soil was the land known as India.

The jungle was the Indian society.

Shall we go into the jungle and explore? Who knows what we may stumble across!

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However, before we step into the jungle, let us be clear about one thing. For unless we are clear about that one thing, much that follows will remain obscure or unintelligible.

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Yes, I am talking about the Stream of Indian culture. The Stream did not dry up with the Vedic or the Upanishad Rishis. The Avatars still came, revelation still continued.

There was this Sanskrit.

The thread that linked the Indian subcontinent together was Sanskrit. And it was Sanskrit that made the land culturally one.

The language was studied through the length and breadth of the subcontinent. It ran like a forceful river, binding the peoples together, creating in them a sense of oneness, setting them one standard that was "at once universal and particular, the eternal religion." The eternal religion "is the basis, permanent and always inherent in India, of the shifting, mutable and multiform thing we call Hinduism."

But what is Hinduism? Sri Aurobindo replies: "One thing at least is certain about Hinduism, religious or social, that its whole outlook is God ward, its whole search and business is the discovery of God and our fulfilment in God. But God is everywhere and universal. Where did Hinduism seek Him ? Ancient or pre-Buddhistic Hinduism sought Him both in the world and outside it; it took its stand on the strength and beauty and joy of the Veda. ..."

This Hinduism was so deep-rooted in the peoples of the subcontinent that in the 1880s, James Rutledge¹ wrote a long article from which we quote a little: "The Mythology of Greece

1. A correspondent of *The Times*, and the editor of the *Friend of India (The Statesman)*.

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and Rome is nowhere. The bloody religious rites of our own forefathers cannot even be traced with any certainty or accuracy. But this faith of India goes back not to a ruder but to a purer period and present truths embodied in poems that humanity in all its future will not allow to perish. . . . Again Hindooism has produced immense charity and kindness, ascetic devotion almost unrivalled, and an endurance for the faith which no conqueror has been able to shake. When the Crusaders and Mussulmans were confronting each other in the name of religion for the possession of the 'Holy land' the faith of India inculcated a severe reprobation of blood-shedding even of the brute creation. . . . The devotion, too, running into every act of life is something that is entitled to the respect of all men." And look how the tide has turned! Those very barbarians now lecture Indians on humanitarianism. Rutledge went on to speak of "the thoughts of master minds to whom reflection was as their daily bread, if not more. We think that their faith has been cruelly calumniated. We revere its charity, its humanity, its gentleness, its endurance, its thoughtfulness, its friendliness, and much more. ... It is something to have such a grand antiquity and such a mighty grasp on the human mind that ages upon ages of disasters have not unloosened the hold. We can admire this. We wish we could follow the threads of its story into dark times, and study so great a marvel of the human mind."

Sri Aurobindo was to follow these 'threads of its story into dark times' and reach the very fount of Hindu 'religion.' "That which we call the Hindu religion is really the eternal

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religion, because it is the universal religion which embraces all others." He asserted, "If a religion is not universal, it cannot be eternal." Besides, "It is the Hindu religion only because the Hindu nation has kept it . . . But it is not circumscribed by the confines of a single country, it does not belong peculiarly and for ever to a bounded part of the world." He, however, distinguished the outer social structure of Hinduism from its soul. "There are two Hinduisms: one which takes its stand on the kitchen and seeks its Paradise by cleaning the body; another

which seeks God, not through the cooking pot and the social convention, but in the soul." Time and again Sri Aurobindo gave a call to break the present mould of Hinduism. He continued, "The latter is also Hinduism and it is a good deal older and more enduring than the other; it is the Hinduism of Bhishma and Srikrishna, of Shankara and Chaitanya, the Hinduism which exceeds Hindusthan, was from of old and will be for ever, because it grows eternally through the aeons." This was in 1910. Then in a letter some twenty-five years later, he gave his considered view of the present state of Hinduism. "Hindu religion appears to me as a cathedral-temple, half in ruins, noble in the mass, often fantastic in detail but always fantastic with a significance — crumbling or badly outworn in places, but a cathedral-temple in which service is still done to the Unseen and its real presence can be felt by those who enter with the right spirit. The outer social structure which it built for its approach is another matter." Finally, he cast an overall glance. "I regard the spiritual history of mankind and especially of India as a constant development of a divine purpose, not a

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book that is closed, the lines of which have to be constantly repeated. Even the Upanishads and the Gita were not final though everything may be there in seed. In this development the recent spiritual history of India is a very important stage . . ." As for his own role, Sri Aurobindo said categorically, "I may say that it is far from my purpose to propagate any religion, new or old, for humanity in the future. A way to be opened that is still blocked, not a religion to be founded, is my conception of the matter."

*

* *

Arising out of the womb of time, Sanskrit enabled the Vedic Rishis to reveal the stark Truth for posterity.

Past untold ages flowed the Stream. It saw the rise and fall of empires, it saw the making and breaking of societies, it saw the ebb and flow in the lives of men. And the Stream flowed on.

Down the bed of Time it flowed, ever widening, ever enriched. Of the few epics that have come down to us, two are written in Sanskrit: the *Ramayana* of Valmiki, and the *Mahabharata* of Vyasa. In the hands of Kalidasa at a later age, it became a thing of grace. But Sanskrit was not the language of poets only, of philosophers only, it lent itself equally well to the needs of science

and mathematics: astronomy, astrology, medicine including surgery, the science of life —each science developed its own terminology in Sanskrit. It is a precise language. And vigorous.

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Embodying the Truth of a purer age, Sanskrit, the life-source of this ancient land, flowed like an underground river in the Jungle, sustaining it against all onslaughts. And it kept alive the soul of the race.

Verily, Sanskrit is the language of the soul.

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8

The Jungle

When trees are cut and removed from a forest, it becomes a jungle. The first thing that happens is a tangled spreading of the underbrush. In the same way, the Indian society was almost choked with undergrowth. So much so that the sustaining nourishment of India —the Vedas and the Upanishads —were all but buried under a vegetation of ignorance and customs.

We have a shining example of the Vedic times in Rishi Agastya and his consort Lopamudra — man and wife together and as equals, "digging" to reach the Sun hidden in the depths of Matter.

Gargi, of the Upanishad times, is an example of educated woman of India. In the court of King Janaka of Mithila, when Rishi Yajnavalkya challenged the assembled learned men to beat him in debate, all those who tried had to concede defeat; then it was that Gargi took up the challenge, dared to stand up to the winner and matched argument to argument and logic to logic, till finally he stopped her with a threat: "If you persist in further questionings, your head will fall off your shoulders."

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Such then was the education of women in ancient India.

But, as Sri Aurobindo wrote in the *Bande Mataram* on 22 September 1907: "It is the nature of human institutions to degenerate, to lose their vitality, and decay, and the first signs of decay is the loss of flexibility and oblivion of the essential spirit in which they were conceived. The spirit is permanent, the body changes; and a body which refuses to change must die." The body of Hindu society could not adapt to its changing environment, and this led to its degeneration. Many perversions crept in. The classification in four human types based on quality — *varnāshrama* — became a rigid caste system based on birth, which was sharply criticized by Sri Aurobindo. He denounced even more sharply the caste-based politics which the British government introduced. Customs petrified into laws. This petrification weakened the nation.

The weakened old culture became dislocated and broke into regional fragments under the shock of the Mahomedan conquest. For the invasion of the land by the savage hordes, their orgy of wanton destruction, forced conversions, and desecration of temples on the one hand, and their propensity to molestation of women on the other, changed the open and free Indian society to a closed one. Most to suffer were the women: it was polygamy for men, it was *sati* for women; unimaginable harsh rigours of life were forced upon the Hindu widows; education was denied to women — educated women soon became widows, was the superstition! Luckily for us there were always some exceptions.

Islam's move towards becoming a world force began immediately after Mohammed's death in A.D. 632, and soon

large parts of Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia were conquered. It was only defeats suffered by Mahomedans in Constantinople (717) and in central France (732) that saved Christian Europe from succumbing to the sweeping Islamic wave. In India, it took the Mahomedans four to five centuries and repeated invasions before they could establish their rule over a significant part of the subcontinent. The Hindus had held them at bay from A.D. 638, when the Mahomedans made the first of a series of attempts to conquer Sindh. Even when they finally wrested it in 712 from its Brahmin king Dahir, the Pratihara empire, the last great Hindu empire in Northern India, checked their progress beyond Sindh for nearly 300 years. In spite of the establishment of the Sultanate at Lahore in 1206, the major part of India remained under Hindu rule throughout the thirteenth century.

The Rajputs, the Marathas, the Sikhs¹ and other Hindu kings continued to offer stiff resistance to the "Muslim invaders — the greedy barbarians who were attracted by the proverbial

1. In fact, Sikhism, founded by Guru Nanak in the fifteenth century, was at first a peaceful sect derived from among the Hindus. But the cruel policies of the Muslim rulers after Akbar alienated them. The fifth Guru, Arjan, was executed on Emperor Jehangir's order because, out of pity, he had given shelter to Jehangir's fugitive son, Prince Khusro. Arjan's son, the sixth Guru, Hargovind (1606-45), gave a military turn to Sikhism. Again, the ninth Guru, Tegh Bahadur, who preferred death to conversion, was beheaded by Aurangzeb. So it was left to Tegh Bahadur's son, the tenth and last Guru, Govind Singh (1675-1708), to make the Sikh sect into a militant body, the *Khalsa* (or Pure), determined to resist Muslim atrocities and forced conversions. Guru Govind was himself treacherously assassinated by an Afghan Muslim.

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wealth of the land."¹ Indeed, Babar, the founder and first emperor (1526-30) of the Moghul dynasty, which replaced the Delhi Sultanate, records in his *Babarnama*: "Hindustan is a country of few charms, its people have no good looks; of genius and capacity none; of manners none. ..." Why then was he attracted to the country? "The chief excellence of Hindustan is that it has masses of gold and silver."

But, to borrow a sentence from K. M. Munshi,² "We were far in advance of the world, physically, morally, mentally, but we lacked the art of organised destruction. We were vanquished." The Hindus had indeed neglected to materialize "all the destructive forces in Nature to aid them in massacre and domination." It's not that the Hindus were in any way militarily inferior to the Mohammedan invader. Quite the contrary. They defeated the Central Asian barbarians so many times. But the Hindus were much too civilized, and that proved to be their undoing. The Kshatriya, the warrior class, was trained in and upheld an honourable 'code of war.' Thus when a Hindu king vanquished the Mussulman, he sent him back to his home with presents befitting his position. When a Mussulman happened to get a Hindu he destroyed him. More often than not the invaders used base treachery to conquer. The Indians were not used to it.

The historian Will Durant sums up in his *History of*

1. *The Liberator* (1954), by Sisir Kumar Mitra. He was a professor of History at Vishvabharati, Tagore's University at Santiniketan.

2. Dr. K. M. Munshi (1887-1971), eminent novelist, writer, politician, and founder of the well-known Institute of Indian culture, the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.

Civilization: "The Mohammedan conquest of India is probably the bloodiest story in history. It is a discouraging tale, for its evident moral is that civilization is a precarious thing, whose delicate complex of order and liberty, culture and peace may at any time be overthrown by barbarians invading from without or multiplying within."

Naturally, the Mohammedans were not the first to invade India. Greeks, Huns and many other tribes had come to this rich land before them; and they had done what all invaders have been doing from the beginning of human history. But once they had settled down they had mingled and been absorbed into the culture of the land, enriching it. Islam was the first culture that could not, or would not, mix, as oil from the Middle East does not mix with water from the Ganges — or any other water of the world for that matter.

On what tenets is Islam founded ? The question rises in my mind today, in April 1990, as I write this chapter. What is this Islamic culture in reality? Swami Vivekananda put it succinctly: "There has not been a religion which has shed so much blood and been so cruel to other men. In the Koran there is the doctrine that a man who does not believe these teachings should be killed; it is a mercy to kill him!" In my simplicity, I had until now believed that God was love and joy and compassion. . . . "And the surest way to get to heaven, where there are beautiful houris and all sorts of sense enjoyments, is by killing these unbelievers."¹

1. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, II, 352-3.

And yet. Yet religions like Islam or Christianity — and most others — claim universal Brotherhood as their doctrine. "Mohammedans talk of universal brotherhood, but what comes out of that in reality?" asked Swamiji. And he answered his own question. "Why, anybody who is not a Mohammedan will not be admitted into the brotherhood; he will more likely have his own throat cut. Christians talk of universal brotherhood ; but anyone who is not a Christian must go to that place where he will be eternally barbecued."¹

That strange chimera, a rational religion! Is it not passing strange how every monotheistic religion claims to be the sole possessor of Truth? Then again, their attempt to shut up Truth in a

single Book! The "Book" being generally interpreted by a narrow brain that tries to box in God within its own limitation. Just let someone try to interpret it in a different way, and see the consequences! "All fanaticism," explained Sri Aurobindo, "is false, because it is a contradiction of the very nature of God. The Divine Being is eternal and universal and infinite. ..."

Be that as it may, it seems to me a quirk of fate that in India of today—which is supposed to be a Hindu-majority country —Muslims and Christians can "openly declare their pride in their religions when Hindus doing so are termed obscurantists, fundamentalists and zealots," as a clear-headed Indian so aptly put it.

At any rate, when the British came to India, they found the Hindu and Muslim masses —the latter mostly descendants of local converts — living amicably enough side by side.

1. *Ibid.*, II,380

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Raja Rammohan Roy

As for the British and the French, our historian, Sisir Kumar Mitra, says, "The last days of the Muslim rule were marked by political and social evils of the worst type undermining the integrity and morale of the administration, laying the country open to any aggression from outside. As a matter of fact, the British found it easy, without having to strike a blow, to establish themselves in India by sheer underhand means. Whatever challenge they had to meet was not of India but of their rival within her borders, the French."

All the same, the conquest of India by the British is an unparalleled achievement in the history of the world. "The country," wrote Sri Aurobindo, "which the mighty Muslims, constantly growing in power, took hundreds of years to conquer with the greatest difficulty and could never rule over in perfect security, that very country in the course of fifty years willingly admitted the sovereignty of a handful of English merchants and within a century went into an inert sleep under the shadow of their paramount empire."

By the 1800s, when the East India Company had secured

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its grip on the country, when de Lesseps had dug the Suez Canal, when steamships began plying between Europe and India, many Europeans had come. And under the impact of the culture they brought, the first reaction was a crude and confused attempt to imitate the ways of life it introduced. Under the cultural-political attack of Europe, Indians began to forget their own culture and many snapped the thin thread that linked them to their life-source.

There, in the east, on the Bay of Bengal, lies a land painstakingly created by Ganga. There she lets down her hair and, crisscrossing the land, holds her creation in a close embrace.

But now her children, the educated men of Bengal, were turning away from her, from the truth of their forefathers; many were becoming agnostic or embracing Christianity. The very fabric of the Hindu society was threatened.

Such was the scene when there appeared on the stage a rationalist and a great reformer, Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833). He is considered to be the inaugurator of the modern age in India. He was against all social evils and did a lot to end them. "Ram Mohan Roy arose with a new religion in his hand." In 1828 he started the Brahma Movement, which recognized only the Formless One. He insisted that true Hinduism was and should be based on the Vedanta. The Raja went to England in 1830 and visited France in 1832. In both the countries he ably presented India's views and was warmly appreciated. Rammohan acted as an ambassador of a new India to the Western world. While engaged in that work, he died in England on 27

September 1833. He died with a dream of a free India which, he told his French friend, Victor Jacquemont, he expected to happen after some forty to fifty years. His grave is in Bristol. The edifice raised by Dwarkanath Tagore in 1843 —his grandson Rabindranath visited it in 1920 — is now crumbling.

Raja Rammohan Roy never denied he was a Hindu; nor did his immediate successors. The Brahma Movement was considered by them to be an improved, a reformed version of Hinduism. The Movement was basically a social one; the reforms did not go far enough, but stopped with some alteration of social customs and social laws. Anyway, contrary to the orthodox who obstinately believed that to stand unmoved in the ancient paths is always good and safe, the

reformist believed that that immobility is the most perfect way to stagnate and to putrefy. The reformist could not understand the logic which argued that because a thing has lasted for five hundred years it must be perpetuated through the aeons. Thus, the Brahmo Movement stirred up the still and stagnated pond that the Bengali Hindu society had become.

Bengal had borne the first impact of Western culture, and it was the first to recover. In the wake of the crude movement of blind imitation, the "first impulse was gigantic in its proportions and produced men of an almost gigantic originality."

After Rammohan's death the Brahmo Movement slowed down. It was Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905), the Poet Rabindranath's father, who infused a new life into it when he took up its reins in 1843. His spiritual vision and generous character made his countrymen refer to him fondly as the Great Sage, *Maharshi*.

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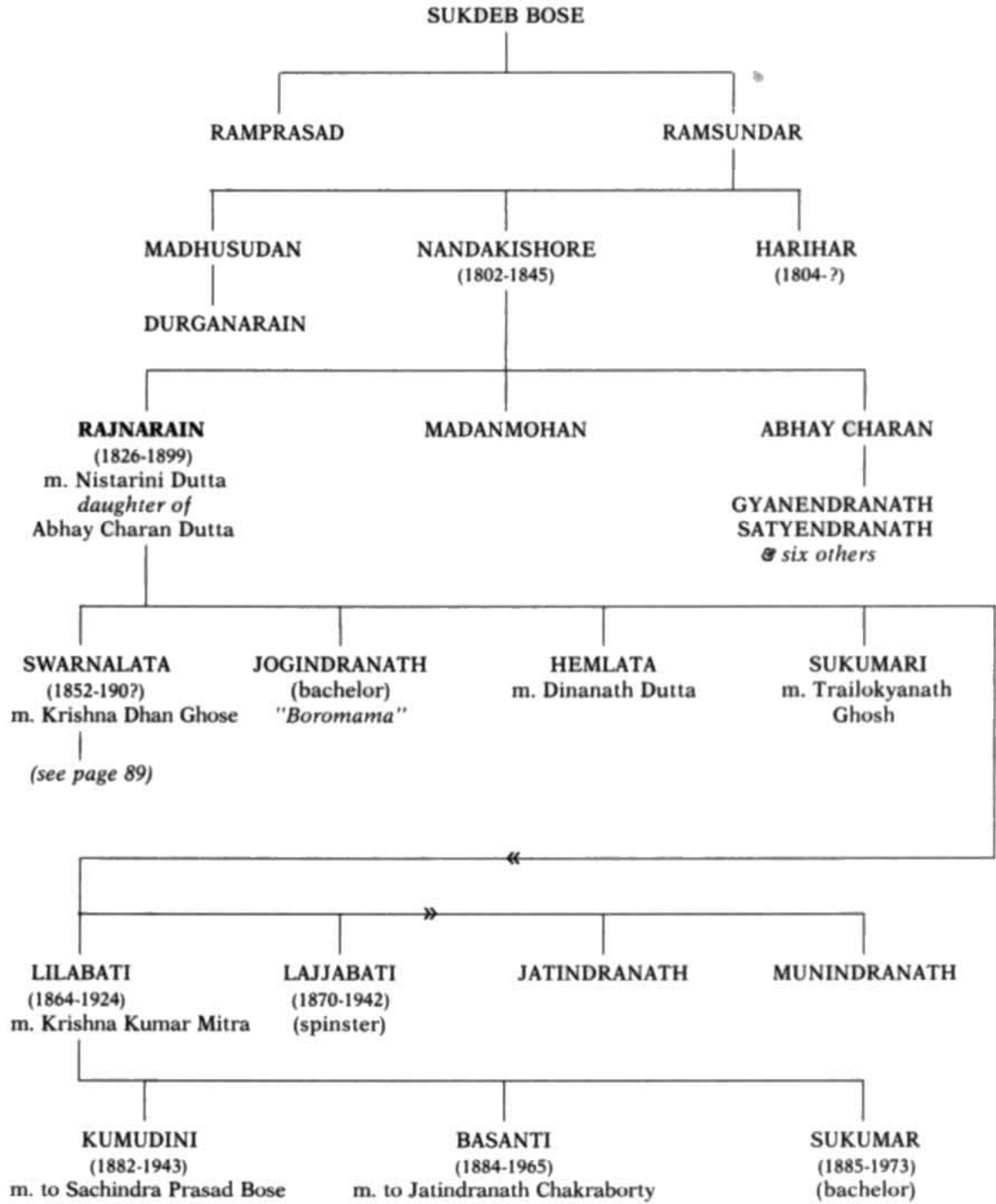
Indeed, by his erudition, bearing, character and contribution to culture, he made the Tagore family a centre of Indian culture. He was also uncommonly honest. His father, Dwarkanath Tagore (1794-1846), died in England. When alive, he had earned for himself the title of 'Prince' by his luxurious way of living. His lavish spending — offering costly presents and necklaces of rare jewels to Queen Victoria, who received him in audience — left the Tagores with more debts than assets. Then it was that Debendranath showed his mettle. He called all the creditors together and promised to repay all debt. He kept his promise.

Incidentally, when the news of his father's death reached him, Debendranath was away from Calcutta; he was on a pleasure trip in a pinnace, a two-masted vessel, with his family and his friend, Rajnarain Bose. There was a sudden storm that evening, and an accident caused Maharshi's nose to bleed.

Rajnarain Bose was Sri Aurobindo's maternal grandfather. He is our mighty Tree.

Now that we have explored the Jungle, shall we stop awhile under the Tree?

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10

Rishi Rajnarain Bose

Sri Aurobindo's Grandfather

We find the roots of this Tree in Rajnarain's Bengali autobiography, *Atmacharit*.

"My great grandfather, SUKDEB BOSE, received in dream the formula of a medicine," writes Rajnarain. And, as is to be expected, Sukdeb never charged anybody anything for it. Nor did his descendants.

"My grandfather, RAMSUNDAR BOSE, was a most generous-hearted man. Every morning, an umbrella slung over his shoulder, he would visit every house in the village and inquire if they had food for the day. And if there was no food in somebody's house, he would send some from his own. Also he would himself nurse the sick who came to him to be treated." Rajnarain adds in passing, "He was very fond of sheltering loonies."

Ramsundar had three sons. The second son, NANDA KISHORE BOSE, was the father of Rajnarain.

Nanda Kishore's younger brother, HARIHAR BOSE, was born in 1804. "Uncle was an expert in our system of medicine,"

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writes Rajnarain, "by feeling the pulse of a patient he could tell exactly when the person was going to die." The uncle had a soft spot for his nephew, without however approving of the latter's every action. "When the Alfanso mango tree planted in our house bore its first fruit, he put it in my hand saying, 'My planting this tree is justified today.'"

N. K. Bose was another character. "My father, Nanda Kishore Bose, was born in 1802. He seemed made of wax so fair was he. He was extremely lean. He never sat down to write, but always did it standing." The son outdid his father. We shall see how by and by.

Rajnarain writes, "He was one of the first disciples of Raja Rammohan Roy, and even worked as his secretary for some time after leaving school. My father was a believer in Vedanta; he died uttering OM, OM, OM. It was on 5 December 1845, at the age of forty-three."

Rajnarain Bose was born on 7 September 1826 in his ancestral village Boral, about twenty kilometres from Calcutta. He was a brilliant student of Hare School in Calcutta, which he joined at the age of eight; his answer papers were published in some of the leading newspapers. He was a favourite student of David Hare. In 1840 he joined the Hindu College (now the Presidency

College) on a scholarship. The Hindu College was the first English College that had the support of both the Hindu community and the British rulers.

"My first marriage took place when I was seventeen. It was with Prasannamoyee Mitra, aged eleven."

Rajnarain was a voracious reader. "While still a College

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student, several times I changed my religion: from Hindu to Unitarian Christian to Muslim to agnostic ... all depending upon the influence of the book I was then reading. At the age of nineteen, I met the greatly revered Babu Debendranath Tagore, and became a Brahmo, which I still am [in 1889]." Sri Aurobindo remembered, "My grandfather started being a Brahmo and ended by writing a book on Hinduism and proclaiming it the best religion. Debendranath Tagore became rather anxious and feared he might run into excess of zeal."

Then Rajnarain fell into bad ways. "As a College student, I took to drinking. After college, several friends and I would go to the nearby Goldighi Park. From a shop across the road, where they prepared meat Muslim-fashion —highly seasoned meat skewered on a wooden stick and broiled over a charcoal fire —we would bring a mutton leg and eat it. And along with that drink brandy, neat. We all thought this to be the best possible sign of showing how civilized we were, and of reforming our society.

"One night I got home so tight that my mother said in annoyance, 'I won't stay in Calcutta any longer, I'll go back to our village.' Then my father, coming to know about my habit of heavy drinking, adopted a stratagem which revealed to me for the first time that he too ate food prepared by Muslims.

"I shall describe the trick he used to make me a moderate drinker. He called me one evening to his study. He shut the door behind me. I didn't understand what the matter was. Then I saw him open a drawer and pull out a corkscrew, a bottle of sherry, and a wine-glass. He then opened the big tin

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box which was sent daily to our house by his Office Chief, and which we always thought contained official papers for Father to work on. But when Father opened the tin box I saw no official papers inside, instead it was full of *pulao* [rice dish], meatballs, chops, and rich meat or fish curry. Father said to me: 'Daily, after evening has set, you can eat all this first-class food with me, but you will not get more than two glasses of sherry. If ever I hear that you are drinking elsewhere, I'll at once stop giving you this food.'

"But that moderate drinking did not satisfy me." His excess brought on an illness along with a high fever. "For six months I was bedridden. My father lost all hope for my life. But by the will of God I was cured. It was because of this illness that after only five years of college I had to leave it." It was in 1845. He was a senior scholarship holder.

Then tragedy struck. "Just a little after that, my first wife died by drowning at her father's place. She had gone swimming in a pond with friends, went underwater, and never surfaced.

"And then my father died some time after that."

This shock treatment jolted Rajnarain back to moderation, till finally he entirely gave it up.

In April 1847, Rajnarain married again. NISTARINI was the daughter of Abhayacharan Dutta of Hatkhola. She wrote poetry, and in the 1870s some of her poems were printed. They had eight children, five daughters and three sons. Some of them were talented. The eldest son, Jogindranath Bose (Sri Aurobindo's 'Boromama') was a sought-after columnist, and the Bengal

correspondent of the Madras-based newspaper *The Hindu*. His articles regularly found a place of prominence in *The Bengalee* of S. N. Banerji, *The Indian Mirror* of Keshab C. Sen, *Hope*, *Amrita Bazar*, etc. The youngest, Munindranath, was also a man of letters. The youngest daughter Lajjabati Bose's (1870-1942) poems were a feature of many Bengali magazines of the time. Neither she nor Jogindra ever married. The eldest daughter, Swarnalata, was a lady of parts—she wrote stories and dramas.

Rajnarain Bose himself was a prolific writer; his themes were of course of a serious nature. He was equally well versed in Bengali, English and Persian. Bepin Chandra Pal, describing the life and thought of Rajnarain, wrote, "He represented the high-water mark of the composite culture

of his country — Vedantic, Islamic and European. . . . He also seems to have worked out a synthesis in his own spiritual life between the three dominant world-cultures that have come face to face in modern India."¹

He was an acknowledged leader in Bengali literature. Poems, essays, articles flowed freely from his pen. And he gave lectures. His words —from his pen or his tongue — always stirred up a hornet's nest, however innocent the subject might be. Complained Debendranath, "Whatever you say or write always generates much debate, even controversy." But Rajnarain was not one to be cowed down by his critics, of whom he had many to be sure. Not only did he speak or write on Brahmoism, but he lauded Hinduism ! The day at the end of 1872 when he gave a

1, *Karmayogin*, N°7, August 1909.

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lecture on the 'Superiority of Hinduism,' with Maharshi Tagore in the Chair, the hall was packed to capacity and overflowed across the street. Because, "people thought, what can anybody say in favour of this rotten Hinduism? It is our duty to hear him."

It was worth their while. The lecturer undertook to prove, in the face of the younger Brahmo body as well as Christian Missionaries, that Hinduism is superior to all other religions, because it owes the name to no man (let us add: no Pope, no Ayatollah either), in other words, it is the only 'religion' which is not based on a God-chosen personality; because it is the only 'religion' which knows no heresy; because while other scriptures inculcate worship for the rewards it may bring or the punishment it may avert, the Hindu is taught to worship God for the love of God; because, being unsectarian and believing in the good of all religions, Hinduism is non-proselytizing and tolerant, and possesses an antiquity which carries it back to the fountainhead of all thought.

Rajnarain concluded his lecture thus:

"... I see this rejuvenated nation again illumining the world by her knowledge, spirituality and culture, and the glory of the Hindu nation again spreading over the whole world." Bankim Chandra, greatly appreciative, wrote: "Let there be a shower of flowers and sandal on the pen of Rajnarain Babu."

Dayananda Saraswati (1824-83), the founder of the Arya Samaj, was a great reformer in the theological and social fields. A visit to Calcutta at the end of 1872 made a deep impression on him; for Calcutta was then a cauldron of new ideas. There he

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learnt the power of the printed word. At Calcutta he met people after his own heart who, like him, were concerned with the fallen condition of Hinduism. Among them was Rajnarain Bose, one of the makers of modern Bengal.

A wind, gentle or stormy, seemed to be blowing across the globe in 1872, suiting itself to the land over which it blew. If it was a budding nationalism in the East, it was a growing movement for Nature conservation in the West. If Bankim began serializing the novel *Ananda Math*, including the national mantra 'Bande Mataram,' with the first issue of his magazine *Bangadarshan* in 1872, the first national park in the United States, Yellowstone, was also established the same year. Sri Aurobindo's birth had stirred the Earth's air. And heavens too. In 1872 Halley's comet began its approaching journey to the sun.

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11

Midnapore

The Seed of Revolution

The fire that burned in Rajnarain's heart from a young age had reduced to ashes all moral fear that he may have had. When widow remarriage became a law in 1856, he at once got his cousin and his younger brother married to widows —the third and fourth such marriages. It was specially this act of his that his uncle Harihar resented most.

On 12 May 1849, Rajnarain was appointed to the post of Second Master in the English department of the Sanskrit College at Calcutta with a monthly salary of Rs.70. There he taught English not only to students but to men like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. After two years at the Sanskrit College, he resigned from the post of Second Master. "It was on 21 February 1851 that I

took up the post of Headmaster of the Midnapore School. My salary was Rs.150 per month, with free lodging in the school compound." For fifteen years Rajnarain stayed at that job. "From 6 March 1866, I went on a long sick leave, and finally retired on a pension from 1st January 1869."

He had fallen in love with Midnapore. While there, he

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carried out many improvements.¹ But more importantly, Rajnarain took great pains with his boys. He did not believe in corporal punishment but in interesting the students and capturing their attention. He encouraged them to read books and built a school library. He gained for the School such a high reputation among the inhabitants of the district that in spite of a Missionary school which admitted boys gratis, numerous poor people applied every month for admission to the Midnapore Government School under him.

The Local Committee of Public Instruction, made up of high-ranking officers and eminent Bengalis, was greatly appreciative of the school's Headmaster. Because Rajnarain bestowed care not only on the growth of the students' mind and intelligence, but also on their physical welfare. The way he went about it caused so much surprise in official circles that one officer, the Chief of the Irrigation Department (!) published an article in a newspaper.

"It is a common saying that the natives of this country will do nothing to help themselves and that they must be assisted by the Government or by the European community. An example has just occurred at Midnapore to show that this is not always the case and when kindly advised and shown how they can benefit their race, they are not slow. . . . These observations arise naturally when one sees as at Midnapore a

1. Among many works of public welfare, such as a night school for farmers and labourers, or a school for girls, Rajnarain founded — guess what! — a temperance Society! !

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large building erected in the school compound for the manly games of Fives and Rackets [*sic!*] and learns that it has been raised by subscription . . . and when asked whether they required the

aid of Gouvernement to complete the building, it is refreshing to learn that the reply was a respectful negative.

"Great credit is due to the Head Master, Babu Rajnarain Bose, and it is a certain proof of the esteem in which his character is held that he has been able to raise the necessary subscriptions. *Ce n'est que le premier pas qui compte.* [The first step is what matters.] Another subscription has been set on foot among the friends of the boys to supply backs to the forms and stools for the feet of the pupils, who will no longer be placed like notes of interrogation on the forms with legs dangling, a position that weakens and deforms the frame of a growing stripling who has thus to combat with physical weakness in pursuing his mentally wearying studies." Isn't it great fun to know how the students in India fared about a hundred years ago? The article also throws light on the two main characteristic traits of the English race: the Briton's sense of giving the devil his due; and his habit of looking down his nose at the 'native' —an attitude he extends to every other race. On the other hand, the native's sardonic eye did not miss the Briton's own failures and foibles.

Rajnarain had a fund of funny stories on the conduct of the British officers. As illustration, let us recall one concerning some members of Public Instruction. "Two members —the Magistrate and the Barrack-Master— came to a meeting and wrote in the register : 'It is past 4 o'clock. It is resolved that as the

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Secretary and other members are not present the meeting should be adjourned *sine die* with a vote of thanks to the chair. [*Signed:*] Mr. Bright, Magistrate.' After him the Barrack-Master, Capt. Short, wrote, 'The meeting having adjourned, it is proposed *en passant* that the boys anxious to become students be examined as to their physical prowess, the best being: to go head foremost through an inch saul¹ board. Vivat Regina.'

"While these were being written, the buggy of the Secretary, W. H. Broadhurst, Collector, was heard stopping at the gate. And instantly the two gents hastily fled by another door."

As long as he was in service, Rajnarain refused to change his post. "In 1861, the government appointed me to the post of Assessor of Income Tax. But I did not accept that despicable post. Another time I was offered the post of Headmaster at the Hare School (Calcutta) when it fell vacant, but I did not want to leave Midnapore and the work of its improvement so dear to my

heart. So then, when an eminent man suggested my name for filling up the vacant post of Headmaster of the Howrah School, the Director of Schools replied, 'Oh, don't talk about him! He is mad. He wants neither salary nor promotion.' "

Rajnarain it was who first conceived of national fairs for the revival of native arts and crafts to stem the flooding of European goods into Indian markets. The Hindu Mela (National Exhibition) was started under his inspiration "a full quarter of a century before the Indian National Congress

1. Or Sal, a valuable Indian timber tree.

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thought of an Indian Industrial Exhibition." The Hindu Mela was a public gathering held every year from 1867 to 1880, on the last day of the Bengali calendar. Patriotic songs and poems, lectures and the giving of literary prizes enlivened it, while an all-round review of India's depressing condition opened the eyes of many. Its popular features included an exhibition of indigenous arts and crafts from many parts of India, and performances of various physical and acrobatic feats. The Hindu Mela contributed in no small measure to getting life flowing again through sleeping Bengal.

Rajnarain felt the need to rebuild the life of the people on the basis of their own culture. But to realize this the first essential condition he envisioned was political freedom. So he was also the first to sow the seed of revolutionary ideas. Through his inspiration the 'Society for the Promotion of National Feeling among the Educated Natives of Bengal' was started in 1866 in Midnapore. Through his writings and speeches Rajnarain endeavoured "to create a spirit of self-respect and self-assertion in the educated classes."

The seed of revolution sown by Rajnarain in Midnapore's fertile soil was to yield a rich harvest. Midnapore was to become a cradle of the revolutionaries of Bengal.

Rishi Rajnarain Bose came to be known as 'the Grandfather of Nationalism.'

Sri Aurobindo confirms this: "Aurobindo's maternal grandfather Rajnarain Bose formed once a secret society — of which Tagore, then a very young man, became a member, and also set up an institution for national and revolutionary

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propaganda, but this finally came to nothing." The secret society was called *Sanjibani Sabha* (Life-giving Society) and code-named HAM-CHU-PA-MU-HAF (I) Formed in 1876, Sanjibani had several members of the Tagore family, including the Poet Rabindranath, then a boy of fifteen. Writes the Poet, "Jyotidada¹ formed a secret society. In a tumbledown house in Than than (north Calcutta) the sittings used to take place.... The book of Rig-veda, a dead man's skull and an unsheathed sword were the articles used for the ritual — Rajnarain Bose was its high priest — there, we were all initiated into Bharat-deliverance." This, according to Tagore, "was basking in the fire of excitement."

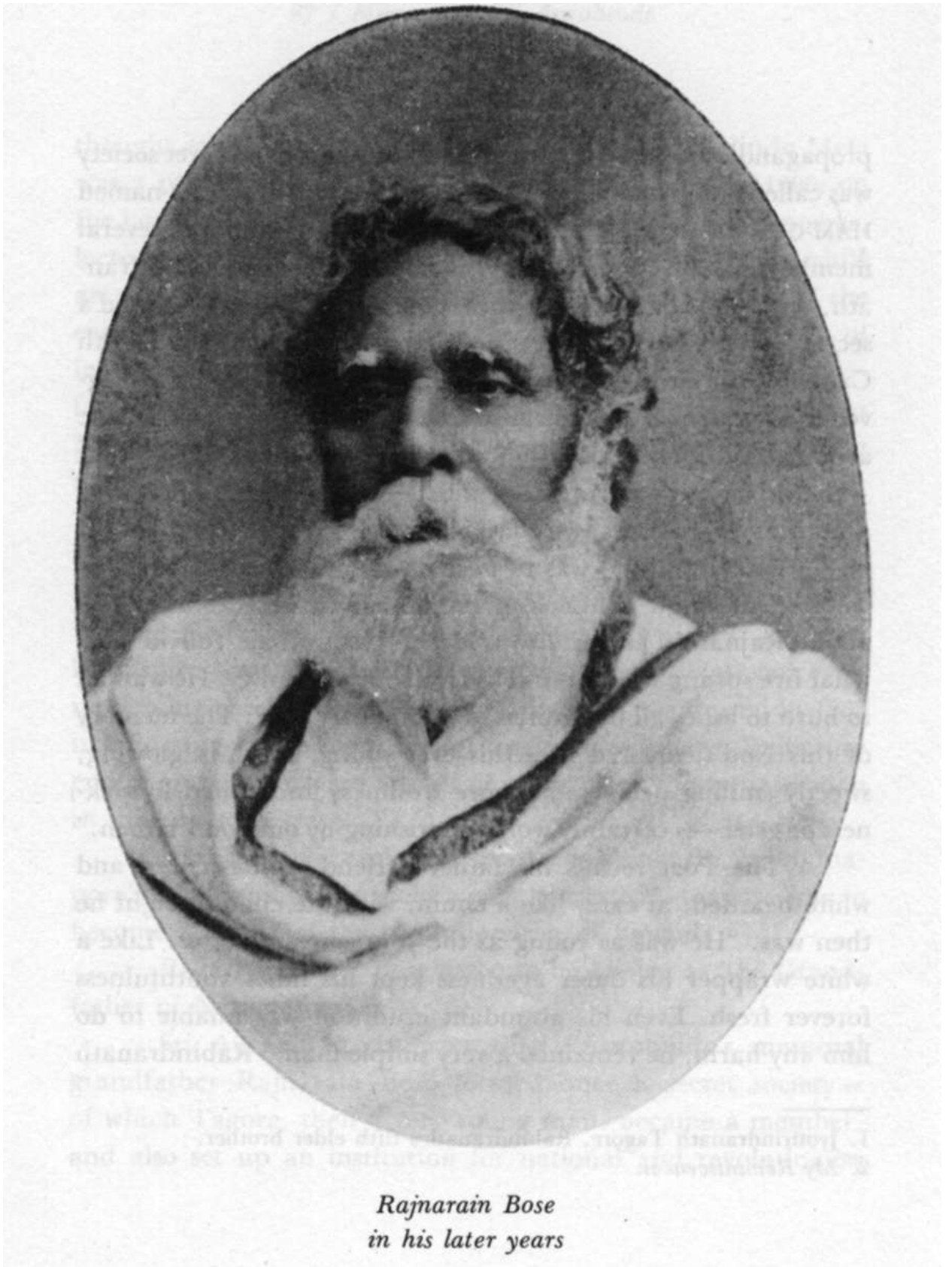
Sri Aurobindo was to *become* the fire.

"Although gentle and humane," wrote Rabindranath about Rajnarain in his *Jivansmriti*,² "yet was he full of fire. That fire sprang from his intense love of the country. He wanted to burn to ashes all indignities of his country.... The memory of this God-dedicated life, this ever-young, brightly glowing, sweetly smiling person —his pure freshness undimmed by sickness or grief—is certainly worth cherishing by our countrymen."

The Poet recalls his father's friend, white-haired and white-bearded, at ease, like a chum, with the child of eight he then was. "He was as young as the youngest among us. Like a white wrapper his outer agedness kept his inner youthfulness forever fresh. Even his abundant erudition was unable to do him any harm, he remained a very simple man." Rabindranath

1. Jyotirindranath Tagore, Rabindranath's fifth elder brother.

2. *My Reminiscences*.



*Rajnarain Bose
in his later years*

acknowledges that he owed his own love for children to his father and to Rajnarain. In 1924, after the death of Sri Aurobindo's brother Manmohan, Rabindranath delivered the Memorial

Address. "First, I looked upon poet Manmohan Ghose's maternal grandfather as one very near to me. It was from him that in my boyhood I first heard an interpretation of English literature, and he it was who first taught me how to rank and place English poets. Although there was a good deal of disparity between us in age, yet for a long time we maintained contact with each other. There were occasions when I was struck by the youthful vivacity and energy of this old man." The old man, said the Poet, had remained "uncorrupted by his immense learning." A picture had remained vivid in the Poet's mind: once on a stormy night, by the bank of the Ganges, Rajnarain joining their lusty singing with his feeble voice —"not that his voice reproduced all the seven musical notes in their purity" —his exuberance making up for all else, and the high wind playing joyfully amidst his wild beard.

Indeed, much will remain unknown of mid-nineteenth century Bengal without a proper study of Rajnarain Bose's work. It was that forward vision of his that was recognized in the title 'Rishi' — a vision of the unfolding eternal truth.

In September 1879 he settled in Deoghar, a place of pilgrimage, also known for its salubrious climate. There he lived till the end. And till the end the Fire in his heart blazed.

On 18 September 1899, Rajnarain Bose left his mortal
shell.

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From the pen of his grandson came this:

TRANSIIT, NON PERIIT.

(My Grandfather, Rajnarain Bose,
died September, 1899)

Not in annihilation lost, nor given
To darkness art thou fled from us and light,
O strong and sentient spirit; no mere heaven
Of ancient joys, no silence eremite
Received thee; but the omnipresent thought
Of which thou wast a part and earthly hour,
Took back its gift. Into that splendour caught

Thou hast not lost thy special brightness.
Power Remains with thee and old genial force
Unseen for blinding light, not darkly lurks:
As when a sacred river in its course
Dives into ocean, there its strength abides
Not less because with vastness wed and works
Unnoticed in the grandeur of the tides.

Aurobindo Ghose.

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12

Krishna Dhan Ghose

Sri Aurobindo's Father

"Everyone makes the forefathers of a great man very religious-minded, pious, etc.," said Sri Aurobindo correcting a misstatement by a biographer. "It is not true in my case at any rate. My father was a tremendous atheist."

Barin, Sri Aurobindo's younger brother, wrote, "Among my father's old, torn papers, I have found songs to the Mother Goddess, written by him, that are deeply devotional."

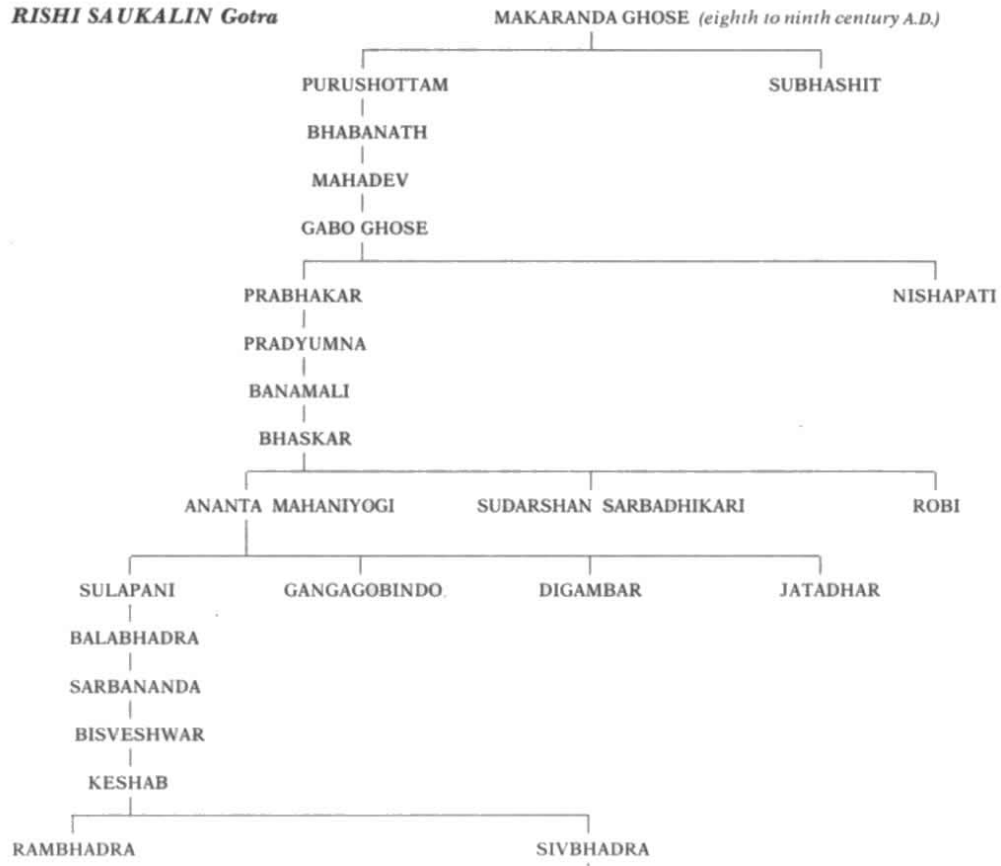
The apparently contradictory statements by the two brothers are not really so contradictory as all that.

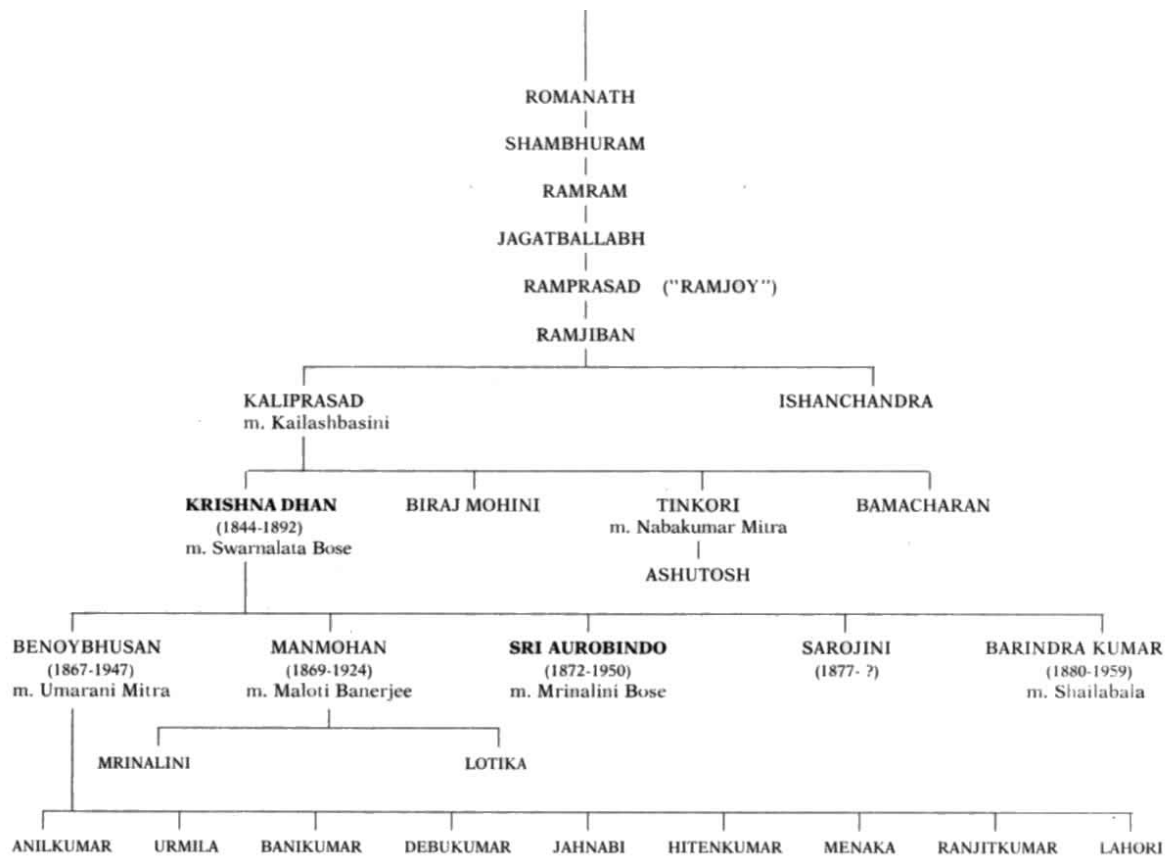
Dr. Krishna Dhan Ghose,¹ M.D. M. R. C. S. (Eng.), L. M. S. (Calcutta), was born on 21 November 1844 at Patna (now in Bihar). His ancestral home was, however, at Konnagar, in the

1. We give on the following pages the genealogical tree of the Ghoses of Konnagar, drawn up by Paresh Chakraborty and obtained through the efforts of Nirmal Nahar. Anybody with the surname of Ghose belongs to Saukalin Gotra, the descent line founded by Rishi Saukalin. Ghoses are of *kayastha* caste, and were traditionally cowherds (like Krishna's father Nanda Ghose).

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RISHI SAUKALIN Gotra





Hooghly District of Bengal. Konnagar is a small township, about fifteen kilometres north of Calcutta, on the west bank of the river Hooghly. Some of Bengal's remarkable leaders of religious and social movements —such as Raja Rammohan Roy —came from this fertile riverine soil, as did he in whom India's spirituality was embodied: Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa.

Around the eighth or ninth century A.D., the story goes, a king named Adisura is said to have invited to Bengal five Brahmins with five non-Brahmin attendants from Kannauj (near Kanpur in today's Uttar Pradesh), for the purpose of restoring the purity of Hindu cult and rites in Bengal. One Makaranda Ghose was among the five non-Brahmins. The Ghoses of Konnagar are the descendants of Makaranda. Some well-known sannyasins were born in his line, a few of them disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. Sivbhadra, sixteenth in the lineage, was the first to settle in Konnagar in the sixteenth century. Counting from Makaranda, Krishna Dhan's was the twenty-fourth generation.

Kaliprasad Ghose was K. D. 's father. Not much is known about him except that he seems to have had a good knowledge of English and worked as a civil servant in the East India Company, with a salary of Rs. 300 a month. The Ghoses had some property, land and a house. When K. D. was twelve years old, his father died. His family became impoverished. His mother, Kailasbasini, was very beautiful; she was also very devout and orthodox. Several years after the death of her husband she went to live in Benares. Her widowed eldest daughter, Biraj Mohini, was her companion. Every six months, K. D. used to go there to see them. His younger brother, Bamacharan settled

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in Bhagalpur where he found a government job as head-clerk to the Commissioner. Their youngest sister, Tinkori, was married to one Nabakumar Mitra; Krishna Dhan helped enormously in their son Ashutosh's education. Dr. Ashutosh Mitra later joined the Kashmir State service as the Chief Medical Officer; he was as civic-minded as his uncle. Maharaja Pratap Singh of Kashmir took note of the sterling qualities of his C. M. O. and, in appreciation, made him the Acting Chief Minister of Kashmir State. When Sri Aurobindo went to Kashmir in 1903, he met his cousin 'Ashudada' and his family.

K. D. 's second son Manmohan once confided in a letter to Laurence Binyon (July 28, 1887), "My father when a boy was very poor, living almost entirely by the charity of friends; and it is only thro' his almost superhuman perseverance that we have to some degree retrieved ourselves." Krishna Dhan did overcome the calamity of his father's death and passed the Entrance Examination in 1858 (2nd division) from Konnagar High School (Aided) when he was running fifteen.¹ Then he went up to join the Medical College of the Calcutta University.

As a college student K. D. Ghose became attracted to Brahmoism. As we have already seen, Rajnarain Bose was one of the leaders of the Brahmo Samaj. His eldest daughter, Swarnalata, was stunningly beautiful. So there is nothing strange that the young man from Konnagar should fall in love

1. Calcutta Gazette, April 1859. I feel that Krishna Dhan has generally been neglected by Sri Aurobindo's biographers, although he is worth knowing, which is the reason for this detailed account of him.

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with her, is there? Thus it was that while still a fourth-year student he married Rajnarain's daughter.

Rajnarain Bose writes in his autobiography that the first ceremony he performed according to Brahmo rites in Midnapore was when he married his eldest daughter Swarnalata to Krishna Dhan. "The function was a grandiose affair," he notes. "Both Debendranath Tagore and Keshab Chandra Sen¹ came to Midnapore. A harmonium, just as it was becoming popular in Calcutta, was brought from there and was played during the musical interlude. The marriage ceremonies were held with such pomp and grandeur that afterwards Deben babu told me that even kings' and princes' marriages come nowhere near it." Isn't there an echo of Mira Ismalun, Mother's grandmother ?

The marriage was solemnized in 1864.

Swarnalata was twelve and Krishna Dhan nineteen.²

1. Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-84) was to break away from the original Brahmo Samaj, form another branch and disclaim any relation with Hinduism. But ironically he was a great admirer of Ramakrishna, whom he met in 1875, and wrote glowingly about him in his daily, *The Indian Mirror*. This was a widely read newspaper among the young college students, and many of Ramakrishna's disciples came to hear about him through its columns. A street named after the paper still exists in Calcutta. And —pardon me for mentioning this —it was in the Indian Mirror Street that most of my brothers and sisters (including me!) were born.

2. It was the prevailing custom to marry very young. Rabindranath Tagore was twenty-two years old and his wife Mrinalini was eleven when they married ; Debendranath was twelve to fourteen while his wife was six years old; Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's age was eleven to his bride's five. And, it was around the age of twenty-three that Sri Ramakrishna married his little bride of six: Saradamani Devi.

In 1864, K. D. completed his medical studies at the Calcutta Medical College and became a Licentiate in Medicine and Surgery (L. M. S. 2nd Division). He was attached to the Medical College Hospital. Then came his first appointment. "The 16th June 1865 —Sub-Assistant Surgeon (3rd grade) Kristodhun Ghose¹ to be House Physician to the Medical College Hospital." Dr. Ghose was twenty years old.

Next year. "Orders by the Lt. Governor of Bengal. 20th April 1866 —The third Grade Sub-Assistant Surgeon Kristo Dhan Ghose to have medical charge of the Dispensary, Bhaugal-pore." The following year, the Lt. Governor of Bengal issued another order on 5th April: "Baboo

Kristodhun Ghose" to become "a member of the local Committee of Public Instruction at Bhaugalpore."

That is how Dr. K. D. Ghose came to Bhagalpur (then in Bengal). He went there with his wife, Swarnalata. Essentially a man of action, he became immensely popular in the districts he served. There were always those who frowned. Lotika Ghose² tells us that under his dynamic inspiration, there was formed the Bhagalpur Brahmika Society for women. This society was more radical than the one started in Calcutta a year earlier by Keshab Sen. The two were close friends. The *Brahmo Year*

1. The Reader should not get bewildered by the various spellings of the same name —of a person or a place. People of yore freely interpreted the sound and freely used their inclination. There were freer, weren't they!
2. Manmohan's younger daughter, Lotika Ghose, B. Litt. (Oxon), was a professor of English in the Bethune College, Calcutta. She edited several books of her father's work.

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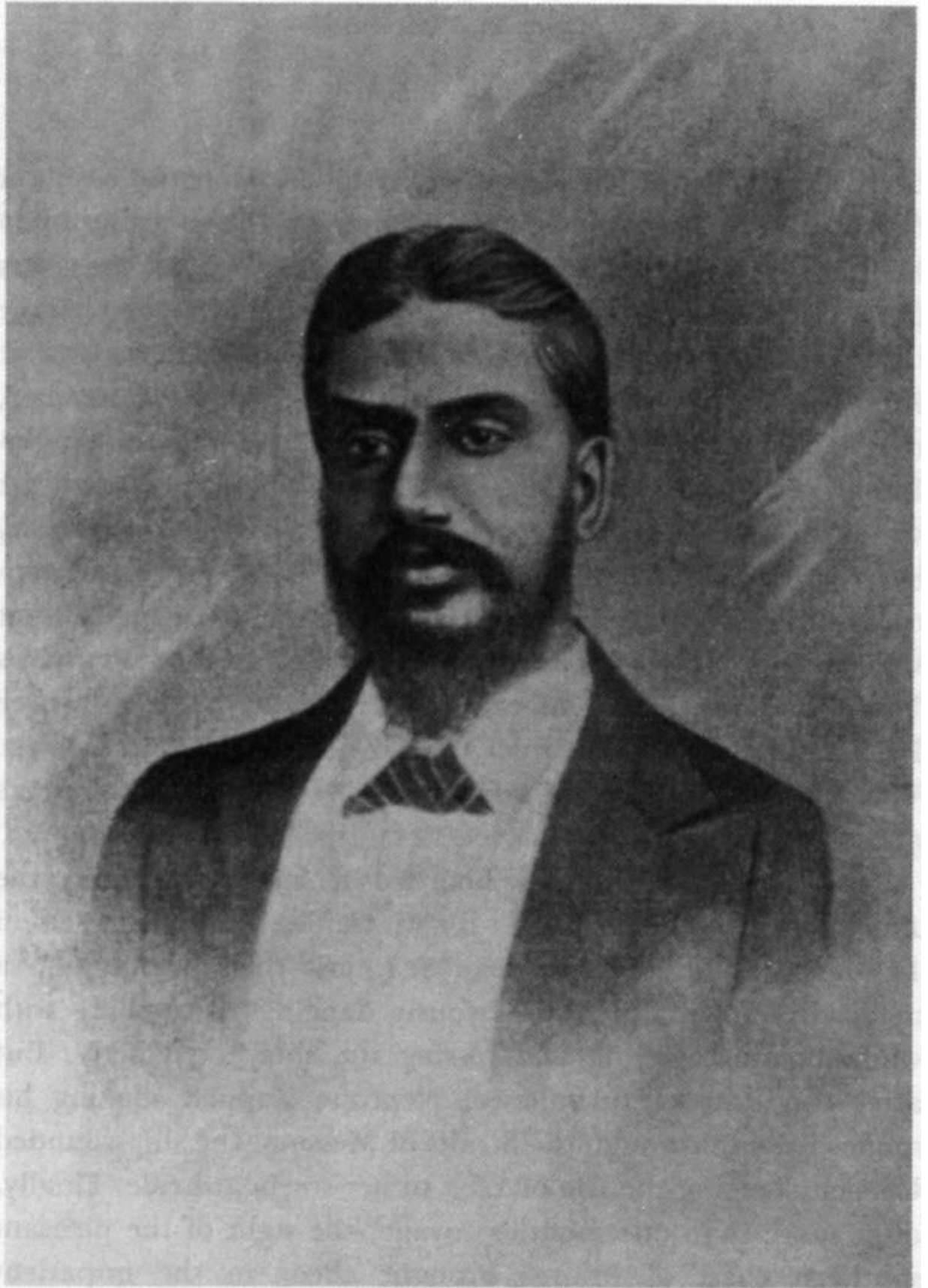
Book 1882 has this to report: "After Dr. Krishna Dhan Ghose had joined the Bhagalpur Brahm Samaj it received a strong impetus to work social reform. This was mainly directed towards the improvement of women.... In fact such was the attention bestowed by the Bhagalpur Brahmika Society to the improvement of ladies that in some quarters their actions were made the subject of unfavourable remark."

For all that, wherever Dr. Ghose served, he exerted great influence in all spheres of civil life: schools, hospitals, municipalities and other public bodies. He was even to produce a monograph, *Sanitary Outlook for Bengal*, which was appreciated by the authorities.

In February 1870 K. D. went to England for an advanced course of medical studies.¹ He was twenty-five years old and was the father of two sons: Benoybhusan (1867), and Manmohan (19.1.1869). Barin records that when his father first went to England, he put his wife and two sons in the care of his friend Miss Pigott.

Dr. Ghose was among the first few Bengalis to go to England after the opening of the Suez Canal, completed by F. de Lesseps a few months earlier, on 17 November 1869. He was one of a party of six Brahmicos, all well-known personalities of the day, including Keshab C. Sen. They shared a four-berth cabin in the steamer *Mooltan*, a P. & O. liner, which was

1. Granted leave without pay (his salary was Rs.100 a month) for eighteen months —from 15 November 1869 to May 1871—later extended by six months to 10 November 1871.



Krishna Dhan Ghose

berthed at the Garden Reach wharf in the Hooghly river, at Calcutta. The *Mooltan* weighed anchor on the morning of 15 February 1870. Steaming south in the Bay of Bengal, the ship's ports of call were Madras on India's Coromandel coast, Galle in Ceylon; then crossing the Arabian Sea she made a halt at Aden, in Persia; there they witnessed the "gigantic steamer, the wonder of the age," the *Great Eastern* laying the Anglo-Indian telegraph cable. The *Mooltan* then passed through the straits of Babel Manded, crossed the Red Sea, and finally entered the Suez Canal. The passengers disembarked on Egyptian soil and entrained for Alexandria. The Bengalis went sightseeing, which included Cleopatra's Needle, Pompey's Pillar, and the palace of the Pasha: "In the garden we see Paris fashion and a few fine African lions," noted K. C. Sen. Was that the fashion introduced by Mira Ismalun, Mother's grandmother ?

At Alexandria they boarded a smaller steamer, the *Bangalore*, which was bound for Marseilles. She put to sea on 14 March. The Mediterranean Sea, just then, was not in a meditative mood, but was joyously dancing and yelling with wild abandon, rolling and tossing the ship terrifyingly. But after two days of turbulence, Neptune stopped shaking his mane. Passing through the Straits of Messina, the ship rounded Corsica, keeping the Isle of Elba to her starboard side. Finally, after more than one month's voyage, the sight of the pleasant southern coast of France brought cheer to the impatient passengers. The *Bangalore* anchored at Marseilles' harbour on 19 March. The Bengali group entrained for Paris. "Southern

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France, from Marseilles to Paris, is indeed a very beautiful country," wrote Sen in his diary on 20 March 1870. "The railway passes through romantic regions, hilly but fertile, and likewise through several large French towns and hamlets mostly lighted with gas, such as Avignon, Orange, Montélimar, Livron, Chalon, Dijon." Before the break of dawn the next day they reached Paris. Two hours later they took another train from the Gare du Nord, and breakfasted at Amiens. "Leaving Boulogne behind, from where passengers by the tidal train cross over to Folkestone in England, we reach Calais at about 1 P.M. Fortunately the English Channel is exceedingly calm, and we cross it in a small but fast steam ferry commanded by a French Captain in two hours." Thus Sri Aurobindo's father made a rapid cross-country trip through France. The party landed at Dover and a two-hour train ride brought them to London on 21 March 1870.

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His Large Sympathies

Rajnarain, who had grown very fond of his son-in-law, wrote a set of four sonnets expressing his fervent hope that the latter would learn from the West without losing his own Indian identity. We quote a part of the first sonnet.

"Go, son belov'd! as pilgrim bold to lands
 Beyond the stormy ocean's wide domain, —
 Where Commerce, Art and Science freely rain
 On freeman blessings rare with liberal hands....
 Thy freedom I esteem though thy excess
 I check oft. Go, but still as ours remain.
 Be not like apes who change their manners, dress
 And language, of their trip becoming vain.
 They England for their home do shameless call,
 And reckon mother-land and tongue as gall."

Rajnarain Bose was a nationalist to the core; and he was disappointed in the young Bengalis who returned from England —or even from Bombay! —fully anglicized. He was in for a rude shock.

Krishna Dhan took his degree of Doctor of Medicine (M.D.) with honours from the Aberdeen University, Scotland. He returned to India, no later than early October 1871 by my reckoning. Because from 28 October he was the Officiating Medical Officer, Rangpur District. Very soon he was upgraded as the District's C. M. O. He was to remain at Rangpur (now in Bangladesh) for the next twelve years, holding a number of other posts.

But during those two years in England, K. D. had undergone a sea change. The young man who returned was completely anglicized, and had become 'a tremendous atheist.' The reception from the orthodoxy in his home town did not help any; the opposition he encountered from the society put his back up. It threatened to outcaste him unless he performed the expiatory ceremony for having gone overseas. The ban on crossing the oceans was that much more unacceptable to an

enlightened man like Dr. Ghose, who knew that in ancient times Bengali merchant ships used to ply the oceans. They sailed to Java, Sumatra, to Bali and Siam, and nearer home, to Sinhal (Sri Lanka). They carried finery from Bengal and came back loaded with spices and gems. Was it not a Bengali prince, Bijoy Singha, who had conquered Lanka and given the island, its people and its language his name which has come down to us —Sinhala? The early Bengalis had gone even farther a field, as Swami Vivekananda observed on 11 March 1898, after his visit to the Far East. "You may easily imagine my astonishment when I saw written on the walls of many Chinese and Japanese temples some very familiar Sanskrit mantras . . . they were all

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written in old Bengali script."

Krishna Dhan refused. Honest to the core, he did not feel it a sin to cross the 'black waters,' so why should he perform a ceremony of purification? He sold his property for a song to a local Brahmin, to whom he had given his word, spurning a more tempting offer made by a relation. Thus Dr. K. D. Ghose packed up bag and baggage, and left Konnagar for good. Sri Aurobindo's father and Mother's mother were both made of stern stuff: they believed in human dignity and refused to bow to the unjust demands of society.

Rajnarain Bose sorrowed at the change in his 'son belov'd.' "Although I am pained," he writes, "still I pray to God that he remains in happiness wherever he may be. He has many exceptional qualities: he is a gentleman, he is amiable and benevolent, and he has not lost these qualities by his sojourn in England. His heart is extremely sweet. And that sweetness is reflected on his face. When I was in Kanpur, the Army Chaplain, Rev. Mill, told me, 'I have never seen such a sweet face as his.' "

Barin in his autobiography (*Atmakatha*), gives a pen sketch of Krishna Dhan. "I still remember my father's face. Fair-complexioned, big swimming eyes, of medium height, his body erect and muscular, his nature as sweet as new molasses, his face ever clear and bright, yet an obstinate and powerful man. His renown as a doctor was plenty; people would come to beg for their lives as though begging a divinity."

Bepin Chandra Pal, one of the pioneers of India's freedom struggle, writing on Sri Aurobindo and his background, waxed eloquent when he dwelt on Sri Aurobindo's

father.¹ "SREEJUT ARAVINDA GHOSE. If his maternal grandfather represented the ancient spiritual forces of his nation, Aravinda's father, Dr. Krishnadhan Ghose, represented to a very large extent the spirit of the new illumination in his country. Dr. Ghose was essentially a product of English education and European culture. A man of exceptional parts, he finished his education in England, and taking his degree in medicine, entered the medical service of the Indian Government. He was one of the most successful Civil Surgeons of his day, and, had his life been spared, he would have assuredly risen to the highest position in his service open to any native of India. Like the general body of Indian young men who came to finish their education in England in his time, Krishnadhan Ghose was steeped in the prevailing spirit of Anglicism. But unlike many of them, underneath his foreign clothing and ways he had a genuine Hindu heart and soul. Anglicism distorts Hindu character, cripples, where it cannot kill, the inherited altruism of the man, and makes him more or less neglectful of the numerous family and social obligations under which every Hindu is born. But Krishnadhan Ghose was an exception. Though he affected the European's way of living, he never neglected the social obligations of the Hindu. His purse was always open for his needy relations. The poor of the town, where he served and lived, had in him a true friend and a ready help. In fact, his regard for the poor frequently led him to sacrifice to their

1. Reprinted in *The Karmayogin* (7 and 14 August 1909, N^o7 & 8) from *Swaraj*.

present needs the future prospects of his own family and children. . . . Keen of intellect, tender of heart, impulsive and generous almost to recklessness, regardless of his own wants, but sensitive to the suffering of others —this was the inventory of the character of Dr. Krishnadhan Ghose. The rich blamed him for his recklessness, the man of the world condemned him for his absolute lack of prudence, the highest virtue in his estimation. But the poor, the widow and the orphan loved him for his selfless pity, and his soulful benevolence.

"When death overtook him, in the very prime of life, there was desolation in many a poor home in his district. It not only left his own children in absolute poverty, but destroyed the source of ready relief to many helpless families among his relations and neighbours. His quick intellectual

perceptions, his large sympathies, his selflessness . . . these are Aravinda's inheritance in his father's line."

This anglicized Indian's umbilical cord had remained attached to the land of his birth and its culture. While he was the Civil Surgeon at Rangpur, he helped a Sanskrit scholar¹ to set up a Sanskrit school—which was still doing well when last heard of (1932-33).

Dr. K. D. Ghose was also a patron of arts. As a patron of the Star Theatre he bore the expenses of bringing the company every year from Calcutta to Khulna. The Star Theatre was one

1. Jadabeshwar Tarkaratna, who had expressed to Dr. Ghose the wish to found a *chatuspathi*, where Sanskrit grammar, poetry, laws and philosophy are specially taught.

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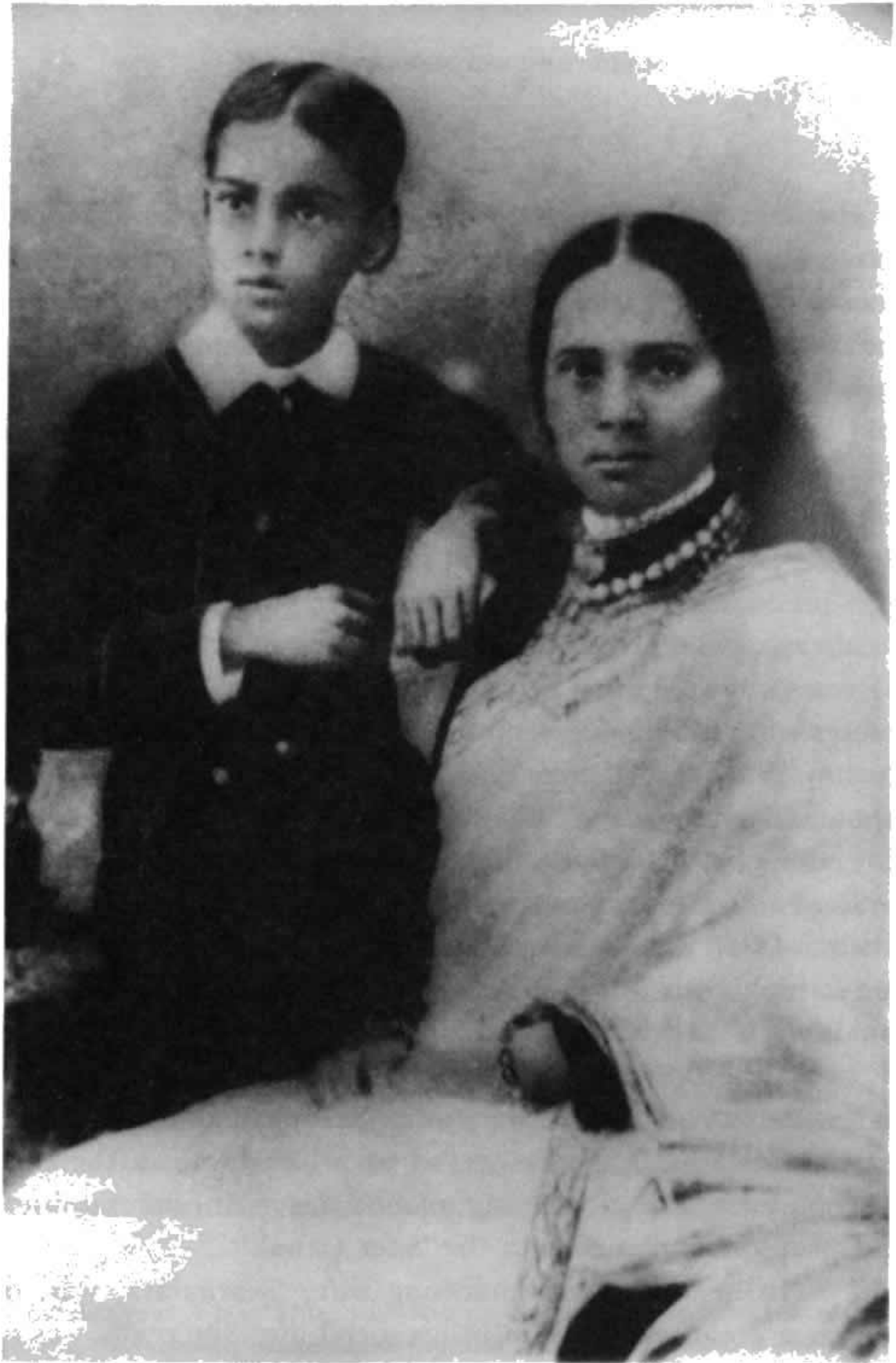
of the best in its day. On 20 September 1884 Ramakrishna Paramahansa went there to see a play on Sri Chaitanya, and blessed the actress who played the leading role. He also blessed the author-cum-director, Girish Chandra Ghose (1844-1912), who then became his disciple.

Every year a fair was held at Khulna. Once a week there would be a magic lantern show, and the doctor himself would speak on the subject ... in English; till a young Bengali patient of his said that he could understand nothing. "Yes, of course!" exclaimed the good doctor, and from then on he always spoke in Bengali.

A cultured man, Dr. Krishna Dhan Ghose was profoundly interested in Bengali literature. Bankim's youngest brother, Purna Chandra Chatterjee, gives a personal account of Dr. Ghose. "Every evening," he wrote in *Narayan*, a Bengali magazine edited by C. R. Das, "we would meet at Dr. Krishna Dhan's house. I was a deputy magistrate in Rangpur at that time. Dr. Krishna Dhan was an exceptional person, I have rarely met with one so highly educated, so spirited and with such a strong personality. He had not met Bankim so far, but through reading his books the Doctor had become a fan of his."

Being equally welcome to the European and the Bengali societies, Dr. K. D. Ghose served as a link between the two. His house became a meeting ground for both communities, and people nicknamed him the 'Suez Canal.'

His beautiful and charming wife, Swarnalata, was, of course, a great asset to him in his social life. She really was so beautiful that she became known as the 'Rose of Rangpur.'



Swarnalata with Manmohan around 1877

Darjeeling

"Up to the age of five I was in Rangpur," Sri Aurobindo remarked, contradicting a statement by a biographer, "as my father was in Rangpur, not in Khulna. I went to Khulna long after returning from England."

Sri Aurobindo reminisced. "Before the Swadeshi movement started, Debabrata Bose¹ and myself went on a tour of Bengal to study the conditions of the people. We lived simply on bananas. D. Bose was very persuasive and could win anybody round. We found the people steeped in pessimism, a black weight of darkness weighing over the whole country. Only four or five of us stood for independence. We had great difficulty in convincing people. At Khulna, we were given a right royal reception. They served me with seven rows of dishes and I could hardly reach out to them; and even from the nearer ones I could eat very little. I was not known as a political leader but as the son of my father K. D. Ghose. My father had been the all-powerful man there. There was nobody that hadn't received

1. Debabrata Bose was committed for trial in the Alipore Bomb Case, but was acquitted. He later became Swami Prajnananda. His sister, Sudhira Bose, was a bosom friend of Mrinalini Devi, Sri Aurobindo's wife.

some benefit from him and none had returned from his door empty-handed. He was said to have been a great friend of the poor. Previous to Khulna, my father was at Rangpur. There also he was like a king." The Doctor was far ahead of his time in his medical outlook; he was genuinely concerned with public health. Rangpur was swampy and malaria-ridden.¹ So, using his intuitive wisdom and his influence, Dr. Ghose got a canal constructed there; the drainage works were started in December 1877, with him driving the first stake. In gratitude people named it the K. D. Canal.

Sri Aurobindo went on. "When he was at Rangpur he was very friendly with the Magistrate² who did nothing without consulting him. It was with the friends of this magistrate — the Drewetts — that we stayed in England. This magistrate was transferred and a new magistrate came in his place. He found that he had no authority in the town, all power being in the hands of my father.

He couldn't tolerate it. He asked the Government to transfer my father and so he came to Khulna. But he was hurt by this treatment and lost his previous respect for the English people and turned into a nationalist."

It was in December 1877 that E.G. Glazier was transferred to Dinajpur. The new magistrate Sri Aurobindo alludes to may

1. When an article by Dr. Malcolm Moore, "Malaria vs. Recognizable Climatic Influences" was published in the *Indian Medical Gazette* (November 1881), Dr. K. D. Ghose boldly took up arms against that authority in an article in the same review (June 1882), "A Plea for Malaria."

2. Edward George Glazier, Bengal Civil Service. He served in various grades of Magistrate, then Collector at Rangpur, broadly between September 1867 and March 1877.

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not have succeeded immediately in getting Dr. Ghose transferred from Rangpur. Because, according to available records, it was only from the latter part of July 1883 that Dr. Ghose stopped working in Rangpur. There cannot be any doubt that K. D. was 'hurt' as again and again he was shuttled from one place to the next. On 30 October 1883 we find him C. M. O., Bankura District. Come January 1884, Dr. Ghose was the Officiating C. M. O., Noakhali District. On 10 February he was posted at Khulna. Again from March 1884, and for one year, the Government of Bengal appointed him "Superintendent of Vaccinations, Metropolitan Circle," meaning Calcutta. The Bengal Government made this appointment in spite of the many objections raised by the Government of India—which might have added to K. D. 's bitterness against the English. Then in July 1885 Dr. Ghose was reverted to Khulna. He was to remain there for the next eight years, until the end of 1892 when he died ... in harness.

It was in Bhagalpur that Benoybhusan and Manmohan



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were born. Calcutta was Sri Aurobindo's birthplace. After him one child, the fourth son, died. Then at Rangpur, on 3 September 1877, was born Sarojini, their only sister. The youngest brother, Barindra Kumar, was born in England. We shall come to him in due course.

"I was born in the lawyer Manmohan's house on Theatre Road," Sri Aurobindo replied in 1940 to a query. Lawyer Manmohan Ghose was no relation of Dr. Krishna Dhan Ghose's, but they were such friends that the latter named his second son Manmohan. M. M. Ghose's wife also bore the name of Swarnalata. The two Swarnalatas were bosom friends, and called each other 'Golap' (rose).

The day Sri Aurobindo's name-giving ceremony was performed, there was present at the lawyer's house a Miss Annette Susannah Akroyd. K. D. named his third son 'Aurobindo Akroyd Ghose.'

To an epistolary frivolity of Dilip's in 1934, about four different Aurobindos, Sri Aurobindo replied in the same light vein: "But look at the irony of human decisions and human hopes. My

father who wanted all his sons to be great men —and succeeded in a small way with three —in a sudden inspiration gave me the name Aurobindo, till then not borne by anyone in India or the wide world, that I might stand out unique among the great by the unique glory of my name. And now look at the swarm of Aurobindos with their mighty deeds in England, Germany and elsewhere! Don't tell me it is my fault because of my indiscretion in becoming famous." With his habitual Attic salt, Sri Aurobindo added, "When I went to the National College in

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the Swadeshi days which was my first public step towards the ignominies of fame, there was already an Aurobindo Prakash waiting for me there with the sardonic comment of the gods printed on his learned forehead. Aurobindo Prakash, indeed!" But we anticipate.

Annette S. Akroyd was a friend of Miss Sharpe's, who was a pen-friend of Rajnarain's. He sent presents to Sharpe through his son-in-law when the latter went to England in 1870. It was there that Dr. Ghose met the Akroyd family and became well acquainted with it.

When Annette came to India in December 1872, Miss Sharpe reciprocated Rajnarain's gesture and sent presents for the Bose family. One day, on 10 March 1873 to be precise, Rajnarain called on Annette at 14 South Circular Road, at the house of M. M. Ghose, whose guest she was. She was appreciative of the comforts provided to her, and was amazed at the large, spacious house. "The house is quite in the best part of Calcutta and is a very nice one . . . how comfortably they have arranged for me. Bless me! Since we wandered in wilds at Ferrara, I have not lived in so much space," she wrote to her sister.

According to Rajnarain, he was at the receiving end of her temper at their meeting, as was Keshab Sen on another occasion. "We were discussing about the customs and manners of our respective countries," narrates Rajnarain. "Then I asked her, 'Had it been we who had conquered England and greatly encouraged the local people to imitate our ways, would you have liked that?' She replied, 'No.' Outwardly she was agreeing with me, and I didn't realize that she was getting angrier by

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the minute. Then, unfortunately for me, I said, 'Do you consider English manners to be perfect?' At once she began to strike the table with her fist, stamp on the ground, her eyes emitting sparks of fire." Rajnarain hastily fled. But despite her short temper, the same year in November, Annette Akroyd did start a school for the higher education of women in Bengal. Later she married a district judge named Henry Beveridge. When he was posted at Rangpur, she often called on Swarnalata and met the three boys.

Swarnalata, however, had begun to show signs of abnormality just after the birth of her first son, Benoybhusan. Sometimes she would beat her children. Purani recounts, "One day she was in a fit of anger and was screaming and beating Manmohan mercilessly. Sri Aurobindo who was present got afraid and making an excuse that he was thirsty he went out of the room."

Man's cruelty to man ! Was it only fear? Was it only pain that the child felt ? "The feeling was more abhorrence than pain; from early childhood there was a strong hatred and disgust for all kinds of cruelty and oppression," replies Sri Aurobindo.

The frail little boy, Ara —as his family members called him —was timid to a degree. But when he was older, whenever he felt any fear he would do the very thing he was afraid of, even if it brought him the risk of a sudden death. However, if there was anything to do with cruelty then a feeling of revulsion would grip him. When young he could not even read anything that related to cruelty. "I could not kill an insect," said Sri

Aurobindo, "say, a bug or a mosquito. This was not because I believed in Ahimsa but because I had nervous repulsion. Later, even when I had no mental objection, I could not harm anything because the body rejected the act."

Sri Aurobindo's love for his mother was profound. He often referred to himself as 'a mad mother's mad son.' Even in the 1940s if something recalled him of his mother he would narrate the incident he had witnessed as a tiny tot. "Talking of Kabuli animals, I remember my mother had a Kabuli cat. She had asked a Kabuliwalla to bring her a cat: he brought one, the size of a small tiger. The first thing it did was to kill all the chickens in the neighbour hood. I don't know what happened to it afterwards." The tale sent the others into gales of laughter.

After his return from England, enamoured of English ways, Dr. Ghose decided to give his children an exclusively English education. At home he engaged an English nurse for them, Miss Pigott. From their butler the children picked up a smattering of Hindustani. Until the age of five little Ara spoke only these two languages. Although I presume that his parents spoke Bengali among themselves, as did his mother's family at Deoghar, which was occasionally visited by the family. Purani recounts that on one such visit, Jogindra, *Boromama* (eldest uncle), held up a mirror before his small nephew and said, "See, there's a monkey (*banar*)." Whereupon little Ara held up the mirror before *his* Boromama and said, "*Boromama boro banar*" (big uncle big monkey)! When questioned, Sri Aurobindo said, "My uncle told me that I was very bright, but I have no recollection of those days."

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When he was five years old, little Ara was sent to the Loretto Convent School at Darjeeling,¹ run by Irish nuns. His elder brothers, Beno and Mono were also students in the same school. This school was almost exclusively intended for the children of European officials. Therefore the schoolmates of the three brothers were mostly English, and English was the only language of communication in the boarding house as at the school.

Little information has come to light about the two years the Ghose brothers were at the Loretto Convent. However, Annette went to see 'the Doctor's little boys' in 1877. She wrote to her husband Henry (29 September) about her impression of the convent. "An amiable sister responded to my summons and ushered me into a room where flowers were arranged like Dutch flower pieces in quaint latticework dishes." She waited there, "and at length a lady appeared and had a long chat with me. She told me they (the boys) were very good and industrious and that the little one is now quite happy." It must have been a wrench for the 'little one' to leave home so young — he had just turned five. Anyway, as the three were long in coming from the boys' house which was considerably higher up, Annette left. But luckily she met them. "Coming up the very steep hill towards home I met the boys —all grown and

1. For the amusement of our readers, here is an advertisement found in *The Bengali Directory* (1878) : "DARJEELING LORETTO HOUSE (Boarding and day-school for girls and little boys.) Lady Superioress, Mrs. M. J. Hogan, assisted by twenty-nine religious sisters. Chaplain and spiritual director, Rev. Father Accurius, O. C." (From Sunil Bandopadhyay's *Kabita, Niswanga Prabas O Manomohan*, p. 19.)

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looking so well-dressed in their blue serges and scarlet stockings. The little fellow had a grey suit, very becoming —and is greatly *aged* — grown tall and boyish. I was struck particularly by the broadening of his forehead. He was pleased to see me I think but all were quite silent except for an extorted yes! or not I am going to see them again soon." Which she did. And several days later she had "Dr. G's boys to tea." She was woman enough to ask her husband, "Meantime please let the doctor hear this." She added that the ladies of the school asked her "if Dr. Ghose were a Christian and also Mrs. Ghose."

Of Darjeeling "Sri Aurobindo remembered," writes Purani, "the roads with golden ferns, and also one or two minor incidents. One was this: 'There was a long dormitory where children used to sleep. Manmohan usually slept near the door. One night someone was late and knocked on the door requesting him to open it. Manmohan replied: I can't, I am sleeping!!' "

Purani said to Sri Aurobindo, "M. R. has related that when you were five years old you got a vision of a great light at Darjeeling and you became unconscious." Sri Aurobindo replied, "All that is a legend.... And if you want the truth it was not light but darkness that I saw at Darjeeling. I was lying down one day when I saw suddenly a great darkness rushing into me and enveloping me and the whole universe. After that I had a great Tamas [inertia] always hanging on to me all along my stay in England. I believe that darkness had something to do with the Tamas that came upon me. It left me only when I was coming back to India."

During the holidays Beno and Mono went down to be

with their parents, not so their little brother, it seems. At any rate, an oft-repeated story —can't vouch for its gospel truth I — goes round that during a vacation, little Ara was taken to the Tiger Hills by the Headmaster— or was it the Chaplain? —to see the sunrise. The play of colours on the Kanchenjunga is a splendour to behold. Next morning the Headmaster was greatly astonished to read a poem written by his six-year-old student: "You will be a great poet one day, my child," he is reported to have remarked. Whatever be it, one thing is sure: from the Headmaster to the youngest pupil, all marvelled at the pure British pronunciation of the shy little Indian boy. As for Ara's teachers, they were astounded by the sharp intelligence of the child. And, one and all — from the Headmaster to the sweeper — were charmed by little Ara's sweet nature.

Lotika Ghose puts it this way. "We can imagine these boys with deep wistful eyes, earnest and thoughtful, for genius had marked two of them for her own, wandering amidst a band of English boys. In the shadow of the Himalayas, in sight of the wonderful snow-capped peaks, even in their native land they were brought up in alien surroundings."

That was not enough for Dr. Ghose. He decided to transplant these three saplings squarely from 'alien surroundings' to an alien land.

So, in 1879, after two years of studies at Darjeeling, Sri Aurobindo sailed for the British Isles. He was six, running seven.

Mirra was one year old.

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15

Swarnalata

Sri Aurobindo's Mother

In the middle of 1879 Dr. Krishna Dhan Ghose, now thirty-four, again left for England, but this time with his family. Wife Swarnalata was twenty-seven; sons Beno, Mono, Ara were respectively twelve, ten and going on seven ; daughter Saro was not even two. The Doctor had taken a 'Privilege Leave' for three months from 6 June.

This second trip was not for himself but for his three sons who, decided their father, should be educated in England. Another objective in view was Swarnalata: the 'Golden Creeper' was withering. The worm of hysteria was eating the Rose of Rangpur. Akroyd, barely a month after her arrival in India (15 December 1872), was already aware of the situation of "my dear Dr. Ghose who is impetuous." She penned her concern to her sister. "The poor fellow has been in worlds of trouble —his wife ill with a most alarming illness—fits of some kind —his work in arrears owing to his own absence, and he himself has had fever.... He feels himself also very much alone and I am so afraid of his fretting himself into real illness, with all his present worry." The letter was dated 22 January 1873.

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another obscure friend of mine
of whom I spoke to you when I was
at Mysore Rakhal ch. Roy.
I am sure I do not deserve so much
from them & I am at a loss how
I am to repay so much kindness
Keshub's paternal care is admirable

I am now passing my days
in sadness & confinement. I have
not sufficient strength to go
out & direct my attention from
the thousand & one things which
the prayers on my mind.

Kindly give my remembrance to
others. My love to my friends
there. As also to Hem Jagan
Shankar & others.

Thuristola gives her remembrance
to you.

I remain with love
Yr affectionate son
1. in a Ehem.

My dear Father

I have received your note
of Sunday last in due time
but it had terrors along with
it to pull down my heart.
Did I give you any offence
in any of my letters that
you prevent me from stopping
any religious discussions. I
cannot describe the dreadful
agony I am feeling on that
account. The cholera which
has not as yet allowed me
to get up from my bed has
not brought on such depression
in me as your letter of yours.
There is indeed in that
letter that I hurt me

that perhaps
in my way things
letters might
of the postscript
of your note. All the world has
become bitter & sad & every
thing has assumed a gloomy
spectacle. I do not know how
I am to console myself. I know
before now had by experience
that misfortunes never come single
Oh how many different things
have contributed to the state of
the simple & impious heart of
mine. Constant tears are become
my only companion. Beasts
& Father have lost one by one
away - the tears of my eyes with
even the border of sympathy
I am doomed to suffer & to be
tried by the various terrors the cholera
has given me. I feel blown
but your letter is a worse one.

Oh so dear Father relieve my
heart by a condescending
eye of forgiveness. Your poor
son is suffering & have put
burden upon his soul & forgive
him from the very bottom of
your heart. Every instant
now & then I ask forgiveness
of my God for my trespasses
against you but meet with
no consolation. Oh so
relieve my heart & investigate
I require repentance for God's sake
forgive my soul.

Dear Father there is no thing
more that is troubling me
awfully in my illness. The
obligation under which my friends
have left me. I really do not
deserve so much kindness, there
above all "I have been
by the bond of my obligation
Bram Babo what Babo

Trouble ? He was engulfed in a morass of trouble. Going by the reaction of his own father-in-law, Rajnarain Bose, we can make an educated guess as to what he had to contend with socially; the treatment he got at the hands of fellow Brahmos was, to say the least, shabby. An undated letter¹ from the son-in-law to Rajnarain may bring home the pain of the man.

"My dear Father," he wrote, "I have received your note of Sunday last in due time but it had tortures along with it to pull down my heart. Did I give you any offence in any of my letters that you prevent me from stopping any religious discussions. I cannot describe the dreadful agony I am feeling on that account. The cholera which has not as yet allowed me to get up from my bed has not brought on such depression in me as [that] letter of yours. There is [one thing] in that letter that has hurt me [. . .] of the postscript of your note. All the world has become bitter and sad to me, everything has assumed a gloomy spectacle. I do not know how I am to console myself. I knew before and now find by experience that misfortunes never come single. Oft how many different things have combined to break down the sinful and impious heart of mine. Constant tears are become my only companion. Dearest Father have I no one to wipe away the tears of my eyes with even the border² of sympathy. I am doomed to suffer and to be tried by misfortunes. The cholera has given [me a] deadly blow but your [letter] a

1. In tatters; hence the missing words and date.

2. A Bengali mother uses the border of her sari to wipe away her child's tears.

"facsimile of Krishna Dhan's

etter to Rajnarain

worse one. Oft do dear Father relieve my heart by a condescending eye of forgiveness. Your poor son is suffering and have pity upon his soul and forgive him from the very bottom of your heart. Every now and then I ask forgiveness of my God for my trespasses against you but meet with no consolation. Oft do relieve my soul dearest Father. I again repeat for God's sake forgive my soul....

"I am now passing my days in sadness and confinement. I have not sufficient strength to go out and divert my attention from the thousand and one vultures preying on my mind.

"Kindly give my pronams to mother and others. My love to my friends there. As also to Hem, Jogin, Shukumaree and Joteen.¹

"Shurnolota gives her pronams to you.

I remain with love

Your ever affn son

Krishna Dhun"

Worries? Aplenty. This beautiful wife of his, whom he loved to distraction, and for whom he had changed his religion — from a Hindu to a Brahmo — what was eating into her? She had been not only a social asset, an agreeable companion, she had also shared in many of his tastes including his literary ones. Indeed, Swarnalata could write stories and dramas, talents she had inherited from both her father and mother. But alas! All this was changing, and changing fast. Life was become a misery.

1. Rajnarain Bose's sons and daughters.

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The strong personality that melted at the sight of another's woe, the passionate heart athirst for love, that loving father who wanted to make of his sons 'giants,' he who healed the illnesses of others, was more and more a helpless spectator before this strange illness of his wife's. In 1877 (3 October), Henry Beveridge wrote to his wife Annette, who was in Darjeeling at the time to see the 'Doctor's boys,' that the Doctor "told me yesterday that his wife's eccentricity has entered a new stage and that she now is always laughing at herself." In that situation how could Krishna Dhan dare bring home his most favourite son, Ara, during the school vacation? He made up his mind finally to have a British doctor oversee Swarnalata's latest delivery. A change of scene would also do her a world of good, he thought. Hence the voyage to England in mid-1879 with his whole family. A typical act of an independent spirit.

The Collector of Rangpur, Edward George Glazier was, as we had occasion to see, a very close friend of Dr. Ghose's. He had a clergyman cousin, Reverend William Drewett, who lived in Manchester. It was to him that Dr. Ghose brought his family. He put the three boys in the care of the Drewetts. Rev. Drewett was Congregational priest of the Stockport (now Octagonal) Church, and lived nearby at 84 Shakespeare Street. Sri Aurobindo lived there from 1879 to 1884. It does strike me as rather symbolic that the first five years of his life in England should be spent at

Shakespeare Street, N°84, and then that 4 Theatre Road, where he was born, should be renamed Shakespeare Sarani (Street) N°8! What whim prompted the Calcuttan authorities to so change the number and to rename the road?

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I am no believer in random chance.... What then is the link between the Bard of Avon and Sri Aurobindo?

After making all necessary arrangements for the education and lodging of his sons, and promising the Drewetts to pay £ 300 a year for the maintenance of the three boys, Dr. Ghose left for London with his wife and baby girl. In London he found the medical help he was seeking for his wife. Dr. Matthew was to supervise Swarnalata's last delivery. He hoped that the supervision by an English physician would help restore normalcy—if not completely at least in some measure —in his wife's condition.

K. D. 's protracted leave was drawing to an end, and he had a long voyage ahead, so leaving his whole family behind in England he sailed alone for home. He reached India in August 1879, just when his little Ara was completing his seventh year on this earth.

Barindra Kumar Ghose, the revolutionary-to-be, was born on 5 January 1880. His mother registered her last son's name at Corydon as EMANUEL MATTHEW GHOSE. "Matthew was her doctor's name," explains Barin, "Emanuel was because I was born just a few days after Christ, and Barin was because I was born almost on the seashore." Actually he was born in a suburb of London, "at Norwood, in front of the Crystal Palace."

In March 1880, with a three-year-old toddler and a two-month-old infant in her arms, Swarnalata returned to India.

By now she was firmly in the grip of her ailment. Barin was then a babe, but as he grew up he noticed that his mother was a prey to storms. "Storms came alternately. A storm of joy

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Krishna Dhan, Swarnalata, and their four children (left to right: Benoybhusan, Sarojini, Aurobindo and Manmohan) in England in 1879

when she would laugh and laugh, followed by a storm of anger when she would pace about the room like a caged tiger, muttering curses under her breath." Seeing how utterly impossible it had become to live with her, her husband rented a bungalow for her in Rohini, a village not far from Deoghar where Rajnarain lived with his family.

Krishna Dhan was never again to see the three sons he had left behind in England.

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16

Manchester

Sri Aurobindo was to live in England for almost fourteen years, from 1879 to 1893. Which reminds me of an Avatar of another Age: Rama, the son of King Dasaratha of Ayodhya, was banished from the kingdom by his father for fourteen years. Did Dr. Krishna Dhan Ghose know that he was doing the same to *his* son? We don't know.

But what is known is that he placed his three sons with the clergyman and his wife with strict instructions that they should not be allowed to make the acquaintance of any Indian, or undergo any Indian influence. These instructions were carried out to the letter and Sri Aurobindo grew up in entire ignorance of India, her people, her religion and her culture. In Manchester, apart from the people at home he knew only the Bentleys of York who occasionally visited the Drewetts, and a sister of Rev. Drewett's who used to come to see her family. These visits were returned. And, of course, old mother Drewett lived with them. She seems to have been a woman with a streak of cheerless religiosity.

Manchester was then one of England's main industrial

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centres. Its dreary landscape was dominated by smoking factories and cotton mills, in whose shadows stretched bleak rows of thousands of workers' blackened and cramped quarters. This proud product of the Industrial Revolution, which sold its cotton all over the world, was built on depths of human misery and squalor, which were as much as possible kept out of sight of the residential areas of the wealthy middle class.



A street in the wealthier districts of Manchester at the end of the last century

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Sri Aurobindo was too young to join the Grammar School like his elder brothers, but was taught at home. "I never went to the Manchester Grammar School," said Sri Aurobindo, correcting an erroneous statement, "never even stepped inside it. It was my two brothers who studied there. I was taught privately by the Drewetts. Mr. Drewett who was a scholar in Latin (he had been a Senior Classic at Oxford) taught me that language (but not Greek, which I began at St. Paul's, London) and English, History, etc. Mrs. Drewett taught me French, Geography and Arithmetic. No Science; it was not in fashion at that time."

As he was studying at home the little boy got plenty of time to indulge his own tastes in books. He read the Bible, Shakespeare, Shelley, Keats and others. Young that he was he not only read poetry but composed verses for the *Fox Family Magazine*.

Percy B. Shelley was a favorite of Sri Aurobindo's. "*The Revolt of Islam* was a great favourite with me even when I was quite young, and I used to read it again and again —of course, without understanding everything. Evidently it appealed to some part of the being."

The boy was more book-minded than sports-minded. When a biographer stated, "He played cricket well," Sri Aurobindo denied it emphatically. "Never. He only played cricket as a small boy in Mr. Drewett's garden at Manchester and not at all well." Sri Aurobindo spelt out his attitude towards sports to Dilip K. Roy in a letter dated April 28, 1949. "I myself have never been a sportsman or —apart from a spectator's

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interest in cricket in England or a non-player member of the Baroda cricket club —taken up any physical games or athletics except some exercises learnt from Madrasi wrestlers in Baroda such as *dand* [push-ups] and *baithak* [deep knee-bending], and those I took up only to put some strength and vigour into a frail and weak though not unhealthy body, but I never attached any other importance or significance to these things and dropped the exercises when I thought they were no longer necessary. Certainly, neither the abstinence from athletics and physical games nor the taking up of those physical exercises have for me any relevance to Yoga. Neither your aversion to sport nor the liking of others for it makes either you or them more fit or more unfit for Sadhana."

When Dr. Ghose left his three young sons in the care of Rev. Drewett, the clergyman asked him, "What about the religious life of the boys?" Replied the father, "Wait till the boys attain the age of discretion; then they could choose their own religion." Over half a century later, Sri Aurobindo adopted the same attitude about us. He wrote to my father on September 29, 1934: ". . . The children. Most of them are too young to have an intelligent will of their own in such matters as yet and in a matter like sadhana there should be no pressure or influence of any kind. The delay will give some of them time to grow towards a possibility of a clear and willed choice."

However, old mother Drewett was a fervent Evangelist, and wished very much to convert the three Indian boys to Christianity 'to save their souls.' But her son would not hear of it. Nothing daunted, the old lady took her chance with the

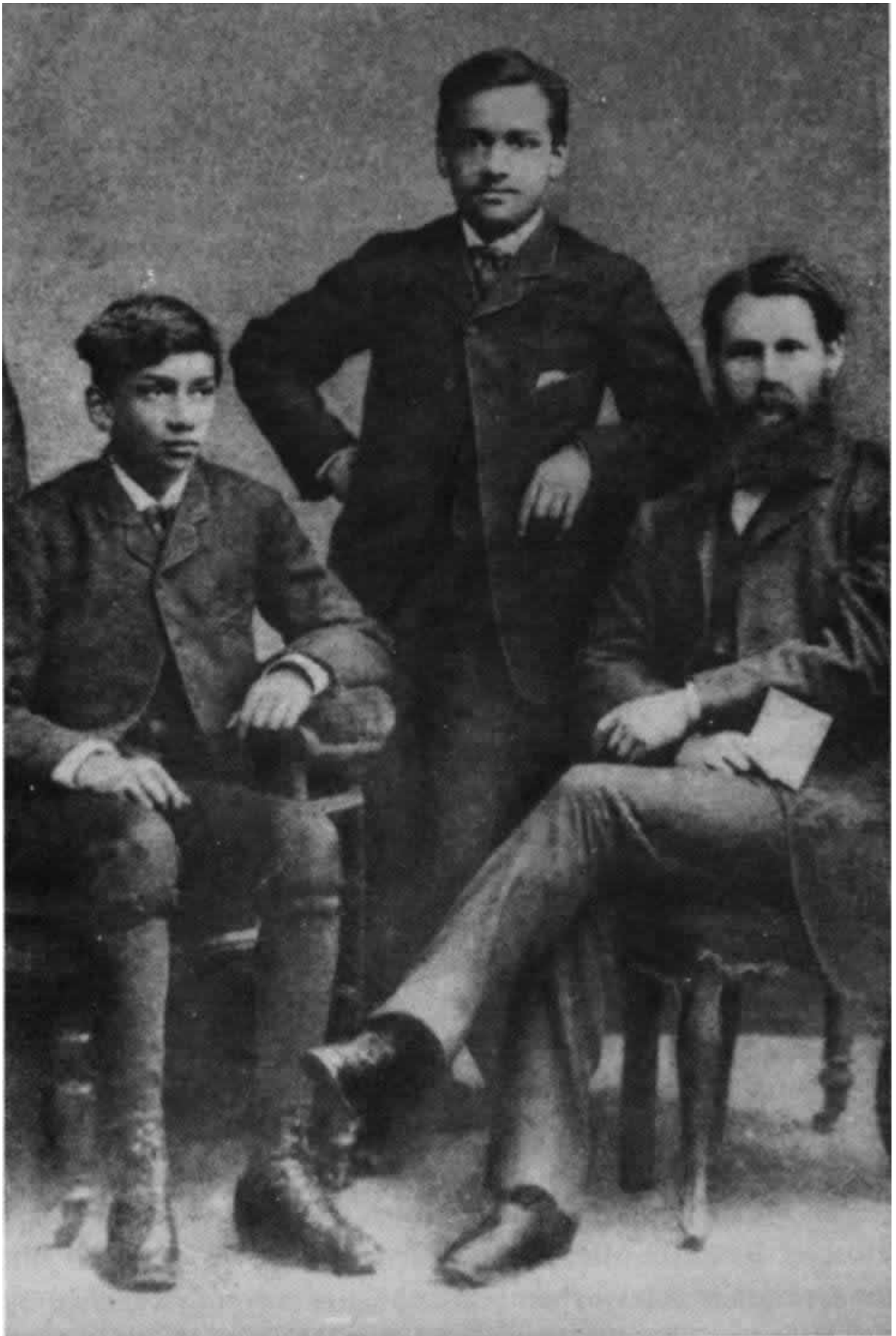
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youngest. Was he then converted? "What is all this legend?" protested Sri Aurobindo. "I never became a Christian and never used to go to Church. The only thing that happened was that there was once a meeting of Nonconformist priests at Cumberland when we were in England. The old lady in whose house we were living took me there. In such meetings, after the prayers are over all disperse and devout people generally remain a little longer afterwards and it is at that time that conversions were made.

"I was feeling completely bored. Then a priest approached me and put me some questions. I did not give any reply. Then they all shouted out, 'He is saved, he is saved,' and began to pray for me and offer thanks to God! I did not know anything. Then the priest came to me and asked me to pray. I was not in the habit of praying, but somehow I did it in the manner in which children recite their prayers before sleep, in order to keep up an appearance. That was the only thing. But I did not use to attend Church. I was about ten at that time."

By this time, the boys' father had become rather irregular in his remittances, so when the Drewetts emigrated to Australia they passed through Calcutta to collect their dues. Yes, the Drewetts went to Australia. When? The exact date is not known, except that it was sometime in 1884. They left the three boys in charge of the old lady.

We do not hear anything about the activities of the eldest brother, Beno, in Manchester. For instance, when did he join the Grammar School there? Was he also privately coached by the Drewetts, like his younger brother Mano, before entering



*Manmohan and Benoybhusan (probably with
Rev. W. Drewett) in Manchester around 1882*

the School? Because, they were in Manchester by the second half of 1879, and it was only two years later, in the Christmas term of 1881, that Mano seems to have entered the Upper First Form (Classics) there. He left the Manchester Grammar School at the end of the Midsummer Term 1884;¹ in that Term he won a Form Certificate when he stood fourth in his Form Order. Mano did equally well in English and Divinity and Classical subjects. It was at this School that he began writing poetry, and contributed poems to the Grammar School magazine *Ulela*, as well as to the *Fox Family Magazine*, to which his younger brother was also a contributor.

It was therefore after the Midsummer term of 1884 that old mother Drewett took lodgings for them in London, at 49 St. Stephen's Avenue, Uxbridge Road, Shepherd's Bush.

Now, pious Christian that the old lady was, every day in London she held family prayers in the chapel and passages from the Bible were read. The three brothers had to participate in them and sometimes Beno would conduct the worship. One day at prayer time Mano was in an insolent mood and he said that old Moses was well served when the people disobeyed him. This made the old lady wild and she said she would not live under the same roof with unbelievers, as the roof may fall down upon them. So she went to live somewhere else. Sri Aurobindo, after recounting the above incident to Purani

1. A copy of *Alcestis of Euripides*, which he used at the School, bears the inscription: 'M. Ghose, L. C. V., Midsummer 1884, Manchester Grammar School.' From M. M. Ghose's *Collected Poems*, vol. II.

and others, added: "I felt infinitely relieved and grateful to Dada.¹ We were then entering upon the agnostic stage in our development. The old lady's son, Mr. Drewett, never used to meddle in these affairs because he was a man of common sense. But he went away to Australia."

Sri Aurobindo explained how meek he was. "In those days I was not particular about telling the truth and I was a great coward virtually and I was weak physically. Only my will was bright. Nobody could have imagined that [later on] I could face the gallows or carry on a revolutionary movement. In my case it was all human imperfection with which I had to start and feel all the difficulties before embodying the Divine Consciousness."

17

Brother Manmohan

"Mislike me not for my complexion,
The shadowed livery of the burnished sun!"

"These words, spoken as if from some spontaneous compulsion in a voice low and thrilled that itself seemed to glow, caused all the class of school boys to turn their heads." Thus wrote Robert Laurence Binyon in his Introductory Memoir in *Songs of Love and Death*, a book of poems by Manmohan Ghose. "At the back of the room, behind the rest, sat a young Indian with thick hair falling about his forehead, and dark lustrous eyes. It was he who had startled us with his impassioned tones. Where had he come from? How had he mysteriously joined us? Perhaps I deceive myself, but to my memory this was my first sight of Manmohan Ghose —an unaccountable apparition from an unknown hemisphere. The legendary East seemed suddenly to have projected a fragment of itself into our little world of everyday things and humdrum studies, disturbing it with colour, mystery, romance. ... It must not be supposed that the words of Shakespeare were spoken out 'of the blue,'

deliberately challenging an interval of silence. They came with startling aptness, but they came in response to a question. The school was St. Paul's. ... I was then in the seventh form, under the Sur-Master Mr. Lupton, who on this occasion was reading with us the *Aeneid* . . . and on this particular occasion he suggested that livery might be a more sumptuous, Virgilian word than clothes or dress. Could not one of us recall such a use of the word in our classics? He paused for a reply, expecting no doubt that, as usually happened, he would be reduced to supplying the apt quotation himself. But the reply came, and I think he was just a little disconcerted when the Prince of Morocco's appeal vibrated with such intensity of tone through the silent and astonished class room. Its dramatic emotion was something un-English! We were not used to such things."

The 'apparition', Manmohan Ghose, had entered St. Paul's School in the VII form as a Capitation Scholar.

Binyon and Ghose became very close friends as time went on. Their friendship ripened into a lifelong one. And this has paid us a rich dividend. For, through the letters Manmohan wrote to Binyon, we get a wealth of information about the movements of the three brothers in England—all traces of which would have been otherwise obliterated. We shall surely dip into that treasure frequently. Just now let us proceed with Laurence's Memoir.

"He lived in lodgings with his two brothers, but what his actual circumstances were when he came to England, and how he came to be at St. Paul's, I do not think I ever enquired. As to the School, the High Master, a notable and formidable

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personality famous for his prescience in judging of a boy's future capabilities, would at times, for his own reasons, insert a promising pupil into one of the upper forms without notice, and in the middle of the term: hence my unconsciousness of having ever set eyes on Manmohan Ghose till all our heads were turned to the strange new-comer on that particular morning is not so improbable as it may seem. But of Ghose's background I scarcely knew anything. His enthusiasm for literature sufficed my curiosity."

Manmohan was already well versed in Greek and English literature when he joined St. Paul's School, London.

Aravinda A. Ghose and Manmohan Ghose were both admitted to St. Paul's School in September 1884. The original site of the school, which was founded in 1509, was near St. Paul's Cathedral. But as the original building was burned down, the school was moved to South Kensington in 1884, just before the two Ghose brothers joined it. It was within a mile or so from Shepherd's Bush, where ma Drewett had taken lodgings for them, so the two brothers would have travelled to school on foot or by bus.

We do not know if they felt happier at their new environment. London, then the world's biggest city and port, no doubt had better sights to offer than Manchester, with its palaces, museums, abbeys and cathedrals. But in all likelihood, the brothers had little opportunity to admire these, as they spent most of their time in the suburbs, where lines of stiff little houses stretched as far as

the eye could see; their cheerlessness, which garish colours vainly tried to hide, became complete when

London's celebrated fog wrapped everything in a blurred grey-ness. "Miles of soulless brick and faultless macadam" was the cold impression left on young Ara by the proud city.

However, the question remains as to who took the two boys to St. Paul's School in London? It is not known. But may I proffer my own conjecture ? The High Master, Dr. F. W. Walker, about whom Binyon speaks so glowingly, was elected to take charge of St. Paul's in 1876; at the time the school was not flourishing. The choice of the school's governing body fell on Dr. Walker who had distinguished himself in running the Manchester Grammar School. It seems quite plausible, therefore, that Walker and Drewett were quite well known to each other. And, surely, before departing for Australia, Rev. Drewett wanted to leave his wards in good hands, and had arranged for their admission to St. Paul's? And, again, he must have spoken of the brilliance of his youngest ward, Aravinda Akroyd Ghose?

Under the able stewardship of Dr. Frederick William Walker (1830-1910), St. Paul's School began to thrive. His brain, his toil and his devotion made the school an educational institution of renown. He had been the High Master of the Manchester Grammar School from 1859 to 1876, and served St. Paul's from 1876 to 1905.

From St. Paul's, Manmohan went up to Christ Church, Oxford, on a scholarship, joining it in October 1887. He obtained a Second Class in Classical Honour Moderations in 1889. He did not win any prizes or medals. He did not stay to take his final degree in Classics, cutting short his Oxford career in May 1890.



*A busy Fleet Street in central London
late last century*

However, he "migrated to the Delegacy of Non-Collegiate students in January 1893. In December of that year, he took examinations in Classics and History and qualified for B.A. Pass Degree. This Degree was conferred on him on 1 March 1894."

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St. Paul's School

The three terms at St. Paul's School begin in January, April and September; the largest number of entrants being in September. Both M. M. Ghose and A. A. Ghose entered the School in the Autumn term of 1884. While Mano's guardian was named as 'W. H. Drewett,' Sri Aurobindo's was listed as 'Mr. Ackroyd': GHOSE, ARAVINDA ACKROYD.

A. A. Ghose was elected to St. Paul's by competitive examination as a Foundationer. The Foundation Scholars received remittance of part of their fees, and were regarded as the intellectual elite of the school.

It was the High Master, Dr. Walker, who examined Sri Aurobindo and elected him. He found the boy so well grounded in Latin and other subjects that he "took up Aurobindo himself to ground him in Greek and then pushed him rapidly into the higher classes of the school."

Dr. Walker was "a heavy and formidable figure, with bushy white beard, gleaming eyes, resonant voice, a strong smell of Havannah leaf," recalls Laurie Magnum,¹ "immense

1. In an article, "St. Paul's School Fifty Years Ago" (1933), reproduced by Purani in *Sri Aurobindo in England*.

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kindness, intimate knowledge of everybody, an exact classical scholar, a rough enemy but a firm friend, untiring in energy and impatient of indolence."

Dr. Walker never took any of the ordinary classes. He had his own method of teaching and an uncanny insight into the strong and weak parts in a student. "Dr. Walker never had any fixed hours of teaching. But he took part in the teaching of the 'special' class, coming in and going out as he chose. . . . The 'special' contained two groups of boys: those who had just entered the

school, and those who were in process of transition from one part of it to another. They sat in the General Hall and they wrote exercises of various kinds by themselves and they received individual and not class teaching. Mr. Walker would go round and examine these exercises, and thus, at the very start of a boy's school career, he had the opportunity of forming a judgment as to his abilities. When these had been fairly gauged, he was put into a form, the standard of which was judged to be fitted for him. Thus no boy automatically began his career at the bottom of the school, and many boys were saved from spending a term or more in a form where the majority of the work was too easy for them. The majority, however, were boys of exceptional promise, who by one or two spells of individual teaching were enabled to move up the school more rapidly than they otherwise would by skipping one or two classes in the order upwards. This had at least three great advantages in the case of the best scholars. It spared them the wear and tear of working their way through every class; it prevented their interest from flagging by reason of

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their work being too easy for them; and it brought them quickly to the top classes, where the work done had an interest of its own."

Thus A. A. Ghose, who had not been taught any Greek by Rev. Drewett, was coached in it in the 'special' class, and as he was found to be exceptionally intelligent, he was pushed up rapidly into the upper forms.

The most formative years of Sri Aurobindo's life were therefore influenced by two Englishmen — Reverend W. H. Drewett and Dr. R W. Walker. When he left St. Paul's, Sri Aurobindo was a young man of seventeen.

During those six years at St. Paul's how was A. A. Ghose faring ? "Up to the age of fifteen I was known as a very promising scholar at St. Paul's. After fifteen I lost this reputation. The teachers used to say that I had become lazy and was deteriorating."

Nirod, one of the doctors attending on Sri Aurobindo, asked, "How was that?"

Sri Aurobindo replied, "Because I was reading novels and poetry. Only at the examination time I used to prepare a little. But when now and then I wrote Greek and Latin verses my teachers would lament that I was not utilizing my remarkable gifts because of laziness."

Even a cursory glance at some of his class reports will bear out Sri Aurobindo's own recollection of half a century later.

A. A. Ghose entered the school in the sixth class, was promoted to the seventh in 1885, to the Middle Eight in 1886, and then to the highest form, the Upper Eight, in 1887.

Class VII Christmas 1885

Latin & Greek	French	Divinity & English	Mathematics	General Remarks
7th Progress Excellent.	Very steady.	4th-3rd Good knowledge of History.	Upper V 12th Good.	A very promising boy; one of the best in History.

History seems to have been a favourite subject with the boy.

Class VII July 1886

3rd Highly satisfactory; composition Good.	Good.	3rd Very satisfactory.	VI 15th Fair.	Is the youngest boy in the Class; gives excellent promise.
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Then the boy was in Upper VIII, and fifteen.

Class U VIII December 1887

Latin	Greek or Science	French	Divinity & English	Mathematics
Deficient in knowledge,	Irregular: does extremely good work at times.	Very great progress; does not speak very fluently & accurately yet, is work-	English often extraordinarily good.	Improving.

That Sri Aurobindo gave his attention to the classics at Manchester and at St. Paul's, we now know. But "even at St Paul's in the last three years he simply went through his school course and spent most of his spare time in general reading, especially English poetry, literature and fiction, French literature and the history of ancient, mediaeval and modern Europe. He spent some time also over learning Italian, some German and a little Spanish." He spent much time too in writing poetry.

Class U VIII July 1888

Latin	Greek or Science	French	Divinity & English	Mathematics
Hardly maintains his old level.	Takes less pains, I think, than formerly.	Still very backward.	English good but too flowery.	Progress slow.

The fact of the matter was that "the school studies during this period engaged very little of his time; he was already at ease in them and did not think it necessary to labour over them any longer." As for mathematics, Sri Aurobindo jokingly said, "Euclid was bad enough. When

Riemann came in it was time for me to give up mathematics." And yet he was not only well grounded in algebra and plane geometry but also had taken two years of 'analytical conies.'

Then it was the last term, and he was seventeen. He now paid more attention to his studies, because he needed to obtain a scholarship to go to college.

Class U VIII Christmas 1889

Composition revived.	Doing more & better work in every way.	Decidedly improved this term.	V. Good.	V. fair. Has made considerable progress.
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All the same, in spite of his later disclaimer, Aravinda A. Ghose was able to win the Bedford Prize in History. In 1889 he was awarded the Second Prize in the Butterworth Prize Examination "for knowledge of English Literature, especially Shakespeare."

Only Shakespeare? No, no! He participated with distinction in a debate on 'the inconsistency of Swift's political views.' This was on 5 November 1889 at the meeting of the School Literary Society. On 19 November he took part in a debate on Milton. A. A. Ghose was an active member in the St. Paul's School Literary Society. Already in 1887, he had joined the Union, another school society. And, yes, in spite of his lack of fluency and accuracy in spoken French, he did speak in the School's French Debating Society, supporting the motion "*Que la langue de Volapuk devrait être étudiée par tout le monde.*" ["That the Volapuk language¹ should be studied by everyone"]. In fact, his knowledge of French literature was quite extensive, and in time he acquired such mastery of this language that he even wrote poems in French, at least two fragments of which have survived. In one of them, an eremite calls to the gods:

Vous qui brisez la loi de la nuit éternelle!

O vous qui appelez à vos sommets ardens

Les pantins de la terre. . . .²

1. An artificial international language like Esperanto, created a few years earlier.
2. You who break the law of the eternal night!

O you who call to your arduous summits
The puppets of the earth....

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Dr. Walker was once again proved right in his student. Aravinda Ackroyd Ghose secured many prizes, and won an open scholarship to King's College, Cambridge. We shall be coming to that. However, we must also know the conditions in which the three brothers lived in England during these years.

And, er, I was forgetting to mention the sweet secret Purani shares with us. He says that Sri Aurobindo "had with him for many years an illustrated edition of the *Arabian Nights* which he had himself selected as a prize." Dinendra Kumar Roy, who was in Baroda for two years to help Sri Aurobindo improve his Bengali, recalls with enthusiasm the deluxe edition of the *Arabian Nights*. "Never before had I seen such a voluminous edition of the *Arabian Nights*, it was like a sixteen-volume Webster 1 And with innumerable illustrations."

As for Dr. F. W. Walker, among all the boys of exceptional promise whom he had taught, he put A. A. Ghose above them all. B. C. Pal, in his *Character Sketches* writing on Sri Aurobindo, informs us that in 1908, "The old Head Master of this school is reported to have said . . . that of all the boys who passed through his hands during the last twenty-five or thirty years, Aravinda was by far and above the most richly endowed in intellectual capacity."

St. Paul's School showed its pride in its Old Pauline when it separated out Sri Aurobindo's class reports from the school's records, along with those of two other Old Paulines, G. K. Chesterton and Field Marshall Montgomery.

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Holiday Walks

What did the boys do during school holidays? From Manmohan's letters¹ to his poet friend, Laurence Binyon, we gather that at least during the long summer breaks they went to some hill or seaside resort. Getting away from London must have been a relief.

The first letter, dated August 10, 1886, Tuesday, is from Keswick (c/o Miss Scott, Ambleside Road) where the brothers were holidaying that summer. The two friends were still students at St. Paul's.

"I am sorry you cannot come to the Lake District—but I quite understand your difficulties in the way of expense and luggage, for we have been feeling the same. And Derbyshire, I can tell you from my own experience, is one of the loveliest counties in England if you only go to the right part. I stayed one whole Summer at Mallock Bank, and from there had a splendid walking tour—My brother, I, and another gentleman

1. *Collected Poems of Manmohan Ghose,*

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A view of the Lake District early this century

took the train to Monsel Dale and walked from there into Castleton Valley, slept at a very comfortable inn there, and next morning walked over Kinder Scout and into Hayfield and Chapel-on-the-Frith from where we took the train back. I advise you and your brother to take that walking tour. . . . My brothers are all right and enjoying themselves."

The next letter is also from Keswick, dated "Friday, Aug. 13th. . . . We are only thinking of staying here till next

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Tuesday and then going off to the seaside to St. Bees, where we went last year; for we have had great trouble in getting lodgings in Keswick.

"We have been having very rainy and unsettled weather of late ... a little while ago I and my younger brother went together to Thirlmere, with Helvellyn looming up on one side all the way, but we did not see the lake which is a very pretty one —for, being a bleak and misty day it came on to rain when we were a mile from it and we had to turn back."

There Manmohan, then in his late teens, would wander about, muse, or compose poetry if he so felt inclined. Sri Aurobindo remembered these walks. "Manmohan used to have at times poetic illness," he said with a reminiscent smile. "Once we were walking through Cumberland. We found that he had fallen half a mile behind, walking at a leisurely pace and moaning out poetry in a deep tone. There was a dangerous place in front, so we shouted to him to come back quick. But he took no heed, went on muttering the lines and came to us with his usual leisurely steps."

Mano's third letter from Keswick is dated "Monday, August 23. On Friday we went all three of us with a gentleman to Thirlmere —up to the middle of it along the western side which is wooded with firs. Thirlmere is a lovely lake, and wonderfully placid and calm, lying between Helvellyn on the east and a high range of fells on the west, and its banks all round the brink are beautifully wooded, the trees going some distance up the hill sides. We crossed the lake in the middle by the Bridges, and came back by the beautiful Vale of St. John

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and a path round Naddle Fell, getting home at 6 P.M. and eating a tremendous tea (the four of us getting through two considerable loaves).

"On Saturday we went to Watendlath, which is certainly the loveliest place I have yet seen in the Lake District. It was a very fine day, and the whole party of us started at 9:30. We had two ladies, and of course not much walking could be done. They went with my eldest brother for an

escort by coach through Borrowdale to Rosthwaite, and then walked over the fell towards Watendlath. My younger brother, myself, and the same gentleman walked along Lake Derwentwater and then up the Barrow woods, a steep hill-climb into Watendlath. The scenery in these woods is quite Alpine (with only the absence of snow) being a sheer rock at one place, densely wooded, from top to bottom rising one thousand feet from the Borrowdale Valley — while the hills above the woods are covered with the most lovely heather bloom We all met at a hill above Watendlath, had tea at a farm-house, and returned very leisurely by the Barrow Woods, reaching home at 10 P. M. . . .

Monday turned out to be a fine day and they went for a long walk to the Sty Head Pass. "We went on a most transparently clear day, with 'a live translucent bath of air' —and could see all along the Cumberland coast out to the sea."

He ended his letter with the news: "We are not going to stay at Keswick much longer, most likely till the end of this week. We shall be all broken up —My eldest brother will go to London to coach for an examination and we two to some place on the coast—most likely not to St. Bees."

Next year, when Binyon went to the Lake District for his summer vacations, Mano, after suggesting a particular walk, added, "You should do it all by daylight; for we, who came back by the Sticks Pass and went to Ullswater by the shoulder of Helvellyn, started too late and were caught by the darkness in the Pass, and came down by striking matches to find the path and the sticks set up to guide the quarrymen in the snow —at the risk of breaking our necks every step."

Haven't we had some charming walks and seen the enchanting sceneries that Sri Aurobindo saw more than a century ago? He was always a great walker, was Sri Aurobindo.

Another year, another place. This time A. A., B. B. and M. M. were in London, in the same lodgings that old Ma Drewett had taken. The next three letters to L. Binyon are from 49, St. Stephen's Avenue, Uxbridge Road.

"April 15. It is rather wretched here in the holidays, more so than in school-time, for there is no one to speak to. ... I never knew till lately that my father was a Buddhist, nor indeed that he had any religion; strange to say he is; his great interest in science seems to have led him to it partly.

He believes that all the forces of nature and human souls will merge into God, which seems to me a very strange theory. This is the doctrine of Nirvana." Hmm . . .

The next letter is dated "Wed. April 20th, 1887." Mano tells Laurence, "You are the only one who gives me any encouragement to write [poems] . . . My brothers are quite apathetic about them." Were they? For in another letter he says, "My brother once remarked to me that he thought I imitated Mathew

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Arnold in many of my poems." The final examinations were looming ahead. "But I heartily long for those days, when I shall leave this place and go to Oxford. May they soon come! But I don't think I shall get a scholarship so soon as you will." He was wrong, for he won an open scholarship that very year at Christ Church College, Oxford; while his friend, Laurence Binyon, went up to Trinity College, Oxford, only the next year, in 1888.

Months went by, it was July, M. M. Ghose was now an ex-Pauline, while his younger brother A. A. Ghose was in Class M. VIII and two more years to go before he too would complete his studies at St. Paul's School. But the hols were here! Mano's letter is again from St. Stephen's Avenue, and dated July 1.

"Thank you very much for your note and the addresses you recommend. Since you say Littlehampton is so expensive (with bad drains too) we have adopted your suggestion of St. Leonard's. I believe my brother has already written; but we shall not be able to leave London till the end of next week at the earliest.... I never knew 'Pan' could appreciate your poetry so well. In his character of me this time —he congratulates me for my scholarship and says I have made rapid progress — a strange inversion of my last character —which was 'slow but steady progress.' I never told you about the Farewell-supper at Cookson's. The fare was gorgeous and regal. . . . There were several drinking songs sung—some rather immoral I thought, and Cookson asked me very earnestly to give them an Indian song. I was on the point of reciting the opening lines of a Sanskrit Epic —but I thought better of it. The whole thing went off very well —and Cookson the last thing bade me farewell

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and wished me success at the University.

"My position, by the way, is very hazy just now: I do not know whether after all I shall be able to retain my scholarship, because my father is in some financial straits, and if he cannot help me £ 80 will not be enough to keep me at Oxford — the most expensive place on the face of the earth." He needed not "much under £ 200 a year" to stay on at Oxford.

"I am going to Oxford next week to find out if I cannot help myself in any way, or find help." Mano tried to get a job at the British Museum, but as they needed a man strong in Sanskrit, he was turned down.

His letter dated July 28 gives some further news about himself. "You may be sure I shall try all I can to get to Oxford. But I am in a rather strange position. My father wants me to go out to India, and slave as a barrister, and become a great man like himself. He is just now in difficulties and if he finds he cannot help me at the University he may consent to my staying in England, and trying for some Civil Service appointment just to earn some money. ..."

As St. Leonard's was full, the brothers wrote to another address in Hastings. "We have got the answer from Hastings and, terms being moderate, we have decided to go. My brothers most likely will go on Monday, but I am going to Oxford on that day, and shall not be able to get to Hastings till Tuesday. The place is 2, Plynlimmon Terrace."

His letter ends with a reference to the 'Gresidale walk' taken by Binyon. "It is one of the places I did not go to; but my brothers went and they at once remembered, when I told

them of the wrong way up which you describe; only they came down that way instead of going up."

Another letter from Hastings, Sussex, 1887, is full of news. "I was going to write to you at once, when your letter came (also Swinburne's *Byron*, for which many thanks). I have just had a letter from my father, and I wanted to tell you the joyful news that he has willingly consented to my staying in England, and working at literature since it is so in my line. He also says that he would like me to go to Oxford, but his means are not sufficient to keep me there long."

He continues. "You ask me to send you anything I have written. I have written a pretty long lyric (very bad) . . . and another poem —and also a terribly ethical sonnet which was specially written for the moral purpose of putting into a school magazine —I was asked to write something for the 'Ulula', the Manchester Grammar School Magazine."

The heat of the previous days was gone. "This morning there was a terrific thunderstorm. The thunder seemed to crack, crash, burst, and momentarily split the sky, and shook the house like a leaf amid a storm of groaning rainy and hurrying wind."

In his last letter from Sussex, Manmohan says, "We are going to stay at Hastings a little more than a week from today. I should like to go home earlier but money has to come from my father, before we can pay our rent here. So we stay a little longer. . . . We are going back next Tuesday to London."

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Hard Realities

"But what strange ideas again I —that I was born with a supramental temperament and that I know nothing of hard realities!" Sri Aurobindo replied to Dilip's complaint ("it is after all we who suffer, not you ... so aloof from the hard world of fact," etc.). "Good God! My whole life has been a struggle with hard realities —from hardships, starvation in England and constant dangers and fierce difficulties to the far greater difficulties constantly cropping up here in Pondicherry, external and internal. My life has been a battle; the fact that I wage it now from a room upstairs and by spiritual means as well as others that are external makes no difference to its character. But of course as we have not been shouting these things, it is natural, I suppose, for others to think that I am living in an august, glamorous, lotus-eating dreamland where no hard facts of life or nature present themselves. But what an illusion all the same!" Oh, the poignancy of it!

Even before the Drewett couple left for Australia in 1884, the remittances from Dr. Krishna Dhan Ghose had become irregular, and as time went on they grew increasingly

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rare, till finally they almost stopped. Thus, for years, the three brothers were thrown mostly on their own resources as their father was unable to provide them enough for their most necessary wants.

When the question of Manmohan's entering the University arose in 1887, instead of raising objections, Dr. Ghose encouraged his son to stand on his own feet. In one of his letters to Binyon from Hastings, Mano quotes his father. " 'However,' he says, 'I am ready that you should take your chance and depend on your own enterprise in the literary world. There is not much danger in one of these appointments of your starving, if you do not marry. But you must not give up the scholarship in the prospect of getting an appointment. You have to pass in Sanskrit and you must learn that. So I will try my best to give you a year or two at the University.... So you see I have no objection to this, provided *you can be sure of getting speedy promotion*. Perhaps if you can do that and have a home for your brother and sister in London they will have excellent facilities for education.'" Mano added, "I have given this in my father's own words, as you will be able to understand the position better. Perhaps you did not know I have a little sister (she is almost eleven years old now) and a brother eight years old in India at present. My father's character may well be called 'thorough'. He is determined to give them a good education, tho' he is toiling under difficulties. He must be a man of iron nerves. I could not tell you half the things he has suffered, but he is bent to go on. Indeed he says, 'My body is as stern as my mind to have survived all the trouble which I have endured.' I cannot but be proud

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with admiration at the sight of such dauntless self-sacrifice and heroic perseverance."

He asked his friend what he thought about his prospects, expressing his anxiety: "You see my aim is also to gratify my father in one project —try my best to make a home for my sister and brother as he suggests (after I have been to Oxford) — for I know their education is closest to his heart, tho' he does not say much about it. At the same time I want to get myself off his hands, and lessen his burden. So I would rather not stay too long at Oxford for this reason, tho' it would be an advantage if I could get a degree."

Manmohan Ghose's father was perhaps stern, but he was a reasonable man too. As Sri Aurobindo said, "He had great hopes of his sons, expected us to be Civilians,¹ and yet could be quite

reasonable. When Manmohan wrote to him that he wanted to be a poet, my father made no objection; he said there was nothing wrong in that. Only, he didn't send any more money."

Sri Aurobindo once told Barin that one year their father sent only £ 100 instead of £ 360.

At any rate the brothers could no longer afford their old apartment at St. Stephen's Avenue. Sir Henry Cotton² was

1. Members of the Indian Civil Service (I.C.S.).

2. Cotton, Sir Henry John Stedman (1845-1915): entered the Indian Civil Service in 1867, rose to be the Chief Secretary in Bengal in 1891, the Home Secretary to the Government of India in 1896 and the Chief Commissioner of Assam which post he held from 1896 till his retirement in 1902. Upon

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a friend of Dr. Ghose's. His brother, James S. Cotton lent a helping hand to the three foreign students. He was the Secretary to the South Kensington Liberal Club, and offered Benoybhusan the post of assistant, with a salary of five shillings a week and lodgings in the Club's office at 128, Cromwell Road. They lived there from September 1887 to December 1889.¹

In an undated letter about that time Manmohan describes the office of this Club. "I write to tell you my new address to which we have just moved from St. Stephen's Avenue. I will show it to you some day. It is very different from the old place, but I dare say my brothers will get accustomed to it in time. Of course, I (probably) will go to Oxford in a month's time. There is a confounded railway behind but as the trains go more gently than I have right to expect I can put up with that. There is here a reading room, a Club room where members meet and lectures are heard, and I don't know what not. This place you must remember is off Gloucester Road which is of course opposite the Broad Walk in Kensington Gardens."

Beno and Ara had their rooms at the top of the building. There was no heating arrangement or fire in the office where

assuming the last post, Sir Henry immediately took steps to improve the miserable condition of the tea-garden labourers of Assam. He was a most liberal Civilian and became a leading champion of Indian nationalism. He is the author of a book, *New India. India*. He was elected to be the President of the 20th session of the Indian National Congress held in Bombay in 1904. It was in his Presidential address delivered at this session of the Congress that he visualized for the first time the ideal of "a Federation of free and separate states, the United States of India."

1. Manmohan's letter dated 20 December 1889 is from the same address.

they slept. In fact, there was hardly a bedroom worth the name in the office. No overcoat to protect fifteen-year-old Ara from the harsh London winter. Their food? "During a whole year a slice or two of sandwich, bread and butter and a cup of tea in the morning and in the evening a penny saveloy formed the only food," as Sri Aurobindo succinctly put it.

Sri Aurobindo gives a graphic description of the way he and his brothers had to live. "We lived for one year on five shillings a week that my elder brother was getting by helping the secretary of South Kensington Liberal Club, who was a brother of Sir Henry Cotton's. We didn't have a winter coat. We used to take tea, bread and ham in the morning and some sausages in the evening. Manmohan could not undergo that hardship, so he went to a boarding house where he managed to get his food though there was no money to pay." Sri Aurobindo did his entire Upper VIII studies while living there and under the conditions just described. And he passed the final examinations with flying colours.

The brothers held their father in high esteem and great admiration. Only on two occasions did Sri Aurobindo express pain at his father's ways.

"Once when I was unable to pay the college dues," Sri Aurobindo continued, "the principal called for me; I told him that my father had not sent my allowance. He sent a letter to my father, on receiving which he sent just the amount of the College dues and a lecture on my extravagance. It pained me to a certain extent, as we were living on such a meagre sum."

21

Steal the Boy

From Sri Aurobindo and Manmohan we have understood clearly enough their father's financial difficulties. Yet it is on record that from 1884, when Dr. Ghose was first posted at Khulna as the Chief Medical Officer of the District, he was drawing a salary of Rs.625. By 1890 (by then he was also officiating as an Honorary Magistrate of Khulna and Satkhira¹), his monthly earnings

had risen to Rs.775 —a considerable sum in those days when one paisa was enough for a man to satisfy his hunger. So what was the matter?

There was, naturally, the Doctor's own establishment at Khulna to keep up in the European style he favoured. Apart from the main house where K. D. lived —a thatched cottage set

1. A look at the records reveals that Dr. K. D. Ghose had completed nineteen years of service by July 1892. By then he was holding several offices: "Drainage Commissioner, Member of Municipal Board; In-charge of Intermediate District Jail of Khoolna; Honorary Magistrate of Khoolna Sadar Independent Bench with Powers of 2nd Class Magistrate, Power to try summarily offences under Section 261; Empowered to take down evidence in criminal cases in English language and also authorized to sit singly."

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in a large ground — there were several outbuildings consisting of a kitchen, a poultry, a cowshed, a stable for the horses who pulled the tandem when the doctor made his daily rounds; and, of course, quarters for a bevy of servants he employed. A big front garden full of smiling flowers nodded cheerfully to the doctor's patients. Dr. Ghose bestowed his personal attention on the animals and the garden instead of leaving their care entirely in the hands of his retinue. In that he was different from most of his contemporaries.

But it was his own generous nature that could well be faulted for the financial straits of his sons. "He had his sons educated in England," writes B. C. Pal. "But his charities made such constant and heavy inroad into his tolerably large income, that he could not always keep his own children living in England, provided with sufficient funds for their board and schooling. Sons of comparatively rich parents they were brought up almost in abject poverty in a friendless country where wealth counts so much, not only physically, but also intellectually and morally."

Let us not forget that over and above the rest, Krishna Dhan had to maintain his wife and the two younger children, Sarojini and Barin. In Rohini, a village not far from Deoghar where lived Swarnalata's parents, he had rented a bungalow set in an extensive ground, with fruit-bearing trees, flower and vegetable gardens. There Saro and Bari were growing up wild. Their father seems to have been a rare visitor. Barin's first memory of his father is almost dream-like. One day the two children were playing outside in the garden when a distinguished-looking visitor came and went in. Sometime later the children were called

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in. "At first," recalls Barin presenting us with one of the earliest images that had remained engraved in his memory, "Didi [elder sister] and I kept running along the walls, to escape the outstretched arms of a big-bearded man, who kept coming towards us to clasp us to his heart. Then, I don't remember when, under a huge mass of toys and biscuits our sweet surrender took place. A faded, half-forgotten memory still lingers: I sitting in Father's lap, and his long beard falling over my body."

It must have gone right through the father's heart to see his two children so neglected, so timorous, so thin, half-starved, and then wearing such outlandish garments — Bari in ill-fitting knickerbockers and Saro in a peculiarly cut frock that their mother had made herself. And both completely illiterate. Barin says that he knew not how to write or even read until the age of ten.

Then one day in 1888, when Barin was going on eight, to put it in his own words, "a tiger fell amid the herd," and his Didi was gone. Swarnalata had let Saro be taken away to Khulna by her father. Barin was left all alone with his mother. For two years.

Krishna Dhan's heart's desire was the education of his children, about which he had written to Mano. It was unacceptable to the father that his ten-year-old son should remain unlettered. In late November or early December 1890, greatly distressed by a letter from Rajnarain Bose, the doctor replied to his father-in-law from Khulna where he was stationed.¹

1. This letter, dated 28 Agrahayan, is written partly in Bengali and partly in English (the latter in italics).

"Respected Father," ran the letter, "I have just received your letter. I write in mental distress; if you are hurt by any words please pardon me . . .

"Man is responsible for his own action. Spending one's life simply calling God is not religion. The world may go to hell, let my duty be done; it is not my creed that salvation, comes by repeating God-God. Duty is my creed, duty I must do. I have produced a son, he must be properly brought up.

"I have made my three sons lamps not only of India but of the world.

"I have vowed not to let my Barindra stay unlettered. It is my resolve that the son of Krishna Dhan Ghose shall not keep his head bowed in the world.

"The way Sarojini is now being educated gives me good hope that she will be able to introduce herself as her father's daughter. *Poor* Bari has no more time —now *or never is the case with him*. *A girl's education is ornament, but a boy's is his life*.

"In such a situation I cannot comply with any request. I shall try to do what I must, even *if I die in the attempt*. *What consolation shall I have in my deathbed if I leave such an important duty unfulfilled?* Your son."

But Swarnalata obstinately refused to part with her youngest son. Her husband, not one to give up either, planned to kidnap his Bari. He disclosed his plot in a letter (in English) to his brother-in-law —Sri Aurobindo's Boromama —as he needed the latter's connivance. The letter is full of despair and determination. We quote liberally from it.

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Khulna, Dec. 2, 1890

"My dear Jogen,

I got two letters from you last month and one from father enclosing three scraps from Swarna.... I don't write in reply to father as I could not forgive myself if anything that slipped from my pen or tongue offended him. I lost my father when I was first twelve years old and I went to the length of offending a dear mother by marrying as I did to get such a father as Raj-narain Bose. It is true, circumstances over which neither he nor I had control made me lose even him. But I would sooner cut my tongue off than offend him by any word.

"Yet you know I am not a child. I understand the responsibility of my own actions. If ever I had known what it is to procreate children, I am sure I could not have mustered courage enough to marry. ... As far as my reading goes I think that Darwin was an addendum to Moses. Moses said, Go and multiply; Darwin said 'Mind, only the fittest of those you multiply will survive.' Now turn and twist the principle of ethics as you like. Even your devotion to an Almighty God will not justify your procreating beasts or idiots. Look how far-reaching the consequences will be. You will not only be the progenitor of one beast or one idiot but, by their natural passions, you will multiply their kind to infinity. If brutes by *instinctive* sexual selection improve the breed, should man who has attained the age of reason so far forget himself as to procreate a species

behind his own? Two maxims I have followed in my life and they have been my ethics and religion, i.e. to improve my species by giving to the world children of a better breed of your

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own and to improve the children of those who have not the power of doing it themselves. That is what I call *devotion* — not attained by empty prayers which mean inaction and worship of a god of your own *creation*. A real God is God's creation, and when I worship that by action I worship Him. It is easy to propound a plausible theory but it is difficult to act in a world where you are hampered by a stupid public opinion and stereotyped notions of religion and morality. My life's mission has been to fight against all these stereotyped notions. God Almighty has strewn thorns in my way and I am ready to fight against his will. The three sons I have produced, I have made giants of them. I may not, but you will live to be proud of three nephews who will adorn your country and shed lustre to your name. Who knows what the next generation will achieve and if I can make three products of mine to take the lead in that achievement, what more can I expect in the action of a lifetime." Prophetic words.

Then the father made some predictions on his three sons. "Beno will be his father in every line of action. Self-sacrificing but limited in his sphere of action. Mano will combine the feelings of his father, the grand ambitions of a Cosmopolitan spirit that hate and abhor angle and corner feelings, with the poetry of his (*great*) grandfather Rajnarain. Ara, I hope, will yet glorify his country by a brilliant administration. I shall not live to see it, but remember this letter if you do. I tell you what Oscar Browning the great son of the great father said to him when he was at tea with one of the dons of his College. (He is at King's College, Cambridge, now, borne there by his own

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ability.)" We shall present Ara's letter to his father a few chapters hence.

Dr. K. D. continued his impassioned plea. "My dear brother, do tell me shall you not be proud of such a nephew? I have sacrificed my all to produce him and no less ones, and do you not think that you should feel it your duty to produce another ornament to your country? If the future is to be judged by the past, you can depend upon it that you shall have no reason to rue the day that

you separated a product of my brain from your sister for your country's sake. Poor Saroj, decrepit in health as she is, I have recovered from at least an untimely grave. Do —do, do if you can, save a boy who may yet be the grandest nephew that you could boast of. Why sacrifice the living for the dead. Your sister is dead to the world, to you, to all who have sacrificed anything for her sake. Now shall you sacrifice a boy who in your opinion is brilliant and may be the means of doing good to the world, for the sake of a brother's feeling towards a sister ? I have sisters and I can sympathise with you, but your sister's son is your own flesh and blood and what feeling is it that will enable you to sacrifice one whose claims to posterity are greater than of those who have lost their usefulness ?"

There is a postscript to the above letter, added on 4 December. "Since writing above I got a severe attack of fever. I also got your letter. I have sent my friend Baboo Chintamoney Bhanja. He will hand over a c. note of Rs. 500 to you to quiet down urgent creditors. This will be my last remittance if Barin is not sent, and I will wash my hands of the matter for you

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after this. You know very well that I cannot bring Swarna to me, having to work for the livelihood of a horde of people and the education of my sons and daughter.... I am no longer young and able to undergo all trouble and privation for anything in this world.

"Do all you can. I have sent my friend depending on your promise of serving me. He will go well-armed to steal the boy away if that were possible, and in that you must not resist. The father has absolute right over his children, so the police cannot interfere when they are commissioned by me.

"Believe me,
Yours affly."

Dr. K. D. 's friend duly went to Rohini and met Swarnalata. He tried to persuade her to let Barin join his father and offered her a large sum of money. But the mother absolutely refused to part with her youngest son.

Great had been Barin's astonishment to see a fatty gentleman in an overcoat come one morning to their bungalow. Because nobody ever dared to visit them as his mother was known all around for her unpredictable temper. The gentleman conversed for some time with the boy's mother.

Then, having failed in his mission he turned to the boy. "He gave me fruits and sweetmeats and so many other things," recalls Barin in his autobiography. "And before leaving he quietly put many searching questions and elicited several facts."

Next morning, the sun had just risen like a plate of gold on a wintry morning. Swarnalata was standing in the veranda

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sunning herself, and Barin was seated a little away from her enjoying the warmth of the sun. "I heard some crackling noise of footfalls. Suddenly a muscular man looking like a ruffian came along and said to Mother, 'Memsahib, will you take flowers?' Throwing a basketful of flowers at her feet, he grabbed my hands, and dragging me with him, ran. Behind us some ten or twelve rowdies ran making a racket. Mother was furiously angry. She ran inside and snatching a knife chased the pack of rowdies. These men were so afraid of Mother that they did not stop a moment to pick me up. As I was hauled over thorny bushes and rough ground, my feet got terribly scratched and, oh, how they hurt! The men stopped only when we got to the mango grove, beyond the compound, which was fifteen to twenty acres. They were panting. The fat gentleman was waiting there with a palanquin of eight bearers."

Thus Dr. Krishna Dhan Ghose got his son kidnapped.

A new life began for Barin. He came to know a father's love and care. He found his lost Didi. And, for the first time, the two children became acquainted with their paternal grandmother Kailasbasini, and aunt Birajmohini, when their father took them along to Benares.

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22

Darwinian Evolution

Dr. Krishna Dhan Ghose's letter set me thinking.

Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* was published in 1859. It was the most important book to come out in the second half of the nineteenth century; for it not merely opened a new era in

biology but, causing a sensation as it did, it helped transform attitudes to God and to the human race. To men of intelligence Darwin's theory of evolution — 'natural selection' or 'the survival of the fittest' — carried conviction. They shuddered to visualize what could happen in future under certain circumstances. Dr. Ghose speaks of the very real danger of multiplying to infinity beasts and idiots. What we don't realize is that when men of a lower grade of development — *tamasic* men — multiply in number they gather strength, and gathering strength they become hard and cruel. Inertia, *tamas*, the debile principle unwilling to use or incapable of using any kind of resistance to evil, is therefore more injurious than the principle of strife, for instance. It is the weak of intelligence who cry 'Destruction! destruction!' when they see Evil perish, for "Evil cannot perish without the destruction of much that lives by the evil," to quote Sri Aurobindo.

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Sir Arthur Conan Doyle presents another terrible point. In *The Adventure of the Creeping Man*, which has a central plot of the discovery of a rejuvenating serum, Sherlock Holmes muses : "There is danger there — a very real danger to humanity. Consider, Watson, that the material, the sensual, the worldly would all prolong their worthless lives. The spiritual would not avoid the call to something higher. It would be the survival of the least fit. What sort of cesspool may not our poor world become?" Now, a hundred years later, we have to acknowledge the truth of these fears. What sort of cesspool has the world indeed become; and who are these two-legged beasts and idiots who have the run of the Earth ? . . .

Twenty years after his father, Sri Aurobindo was to comment on these trends. "The unfit tend to multiply, the fit to be limited in propagation. This is an abnormal state of things which indicates something wrong in modern civilisation."

'Modern civilisation', at the end of the twentieth century, is well nigh synonymous with the civilization of the Dollar.

Is that the final goal of evolution?

Why then this deep longing in the race for Joy, for Light and Knowledge? Why this harping on Unity, hankering for Peace? Why this hunger for Beauty, this thirst for Love? Do we always have to grope in the dark, suffer pangs of separation ? Does the body have to be disease-ridden and pain-wracked? All to finally end in death? To begin anew the same sempiternal circle of life and death ? What an unjust law of existence!

Why are we told that "the image of the actual progress in cycles is the voyaging in space of the planets which describe

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always the same curve round their flaming and luminous sun, image of the perfect strength, joy, beauty, beneficence and knowledge towards which our evolution yearns"? But man, the crest of the Darwinian evolution, will man ever make it his business to evolve something greater in him than he is at the moment? Is there such a yearning in him? Or, will the world never change?

Need the formula of the material world, as the Darwinians rediscovered it —the eater eating is eaten—eternally remain the law of evolutionary existence? Oh, will the law of strife and destruction always govern the evolutionary existence ? Will its root never disappear out of humanity? Need pain and struggle and ignorance rule Life forever?

A rebellious Sweetness was on Earth. She said: It need not be.

A Revolutionary was on Earth. He said: It will not be.

Hand in hand they will open a new road for the race.

Their march will be more arduous than climbing unsealed mountains.

Their trail-blazing will be more dangerous than blazing the Amazon rain forest.

Striding across the barriers of time, listening only to the trumpet of God's victory, they will chart the chartless sea of Evolution.

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23

Neglected Childhood

It must have been sometime in 1933 that I saw my father reading a book several times. He then passed it on to me, saying, "Read it." It was a Bengali book written by Rabindranath Tagore, and entitled: *Aurobindo Ghose*. That was my first acquaintance with Sri Aurobindo, if my memory serves me right, for I was only running eight, and we were living in Santiniketan. I can't say that I understood all I read (I), but I did understand that Rabindranath was addressing Aurobindo Ghose as a Rishi. The childish impression persisted for long years in my life, and I took him as I found him: a Rishi. It never occurred to me that before becoming a full-fledged Rishi, he too was once a child like the rest of us I Frankly, I was quite ignorant about the passage of time. When my father wanted to get me admitted to Kalabhavan, the Registrar asked him, "What is her age?" "Seven," replied Father. After that whenever I was asked my age my invariable reply was, "Seven." Till one day when I was brought up short by a sneering girl of my own age: "You are always seven, aren't you!" Only then did I come to know that each passing year adds to our age.

But

in my inner heart I continued to live in some ageless time.

In his lonesome boyhood in England, did Ara's memories ever turn to some haunting scenes and incidents of childhood ? Did he see those scenes in his mind's eye, as did his Mejdada? "There was one Indian sight which left a vivid impression of interest on my mind," wrote Mano to his friend Laurence in May 1888 —"I mean those noble stone palaces, with gray balconies, stately pillared courts, and their breezy and murmurous environment of wood and water Not far from my father's house there was one of these Rajah's palaces, which I often observed with interest and wonder."

Did "forgotten faces of joy and terror" sometimes flit before Ara as they did before Mano? Ara's manners held a good deal of shy reserve and he did not easily give expression to his deep feelings. But being starved of his mother's love must have given him and Beno the same sense of loss as Mano felt, who was the more expansive of the three brothers.

It was on 18 February 1888, when he was a collegian at Oxford, that he wrote to his friend about his mother, ". . . What to others is the bright portion of their life, its heaven and refuge was for me bitterly and hopelessly blighted." He then confided a painful secret to Laurence. "You will not understand me, unless I tell you a circumstance of my life which is unhappily both painful for me to reveal, and for you to hear. I had no mother. She is insane," he said baldly. "You may judge the horror of this, how I strove to snatch a fearful love, but only succeeded in hating and loathing, and at last becoming cold. Crying for bread I was given a stone. My father

was kind but stern, and I never saw much of him. Thus from childhood I was subject to fits of gloom and despondence which grew with my age. I don't wish to dwell on this, and you need not pity me. I have quite outgrown that dead past, and look upon it without the least regret: indeed I should have forgotten it, but that the incidents are of an unforgettable nature. ..." Poor boy I It was when he married that he was finally able to pour out on his wife all the pent-up emotion of his heart.

Although Mano refers often enough to his father's sternness, yet it is rarely with any complaint. Among the numerous letters he wrote to his friend, we come but once upon a complaining note. "I am growing as stern as my father," he wrote on 27 February 1888, "who is so strangely unsentimental that I am assured he would vivisect me if he thought that my highest good."

That was really an exception. None of the children felt any bitterness towards their father. Rather it was a feeling of great admiration and a quiet pride that Dr. Ghose aroused in his children. One could feel that when they spoke of him. And despite his stern nature, they felt his inherent kindness and a deep affection for them. Sri Aurobindo said as much to his father-in-law in a letter dated 6 June 1906.

"I am afraid," he wrote from Calcutta, "I shall never be good for much in the way of domestic virtues. I have tried, very ineffectively, to do some part of my duty as a son, a brother and a husband, but there is something too strong in me which forces me to subordinate everything else to it. Of course

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that is no excuse for my culpability in not writing letters,—a fault I am afraid I shall always be quicker to admit than to reform. I can easily understand that to others it may seem to spring from a lack of the most ordinary affection. It was not so in the case of my father from whom I seem to inherit the defect. In all my fourteen years in England I hardly got a dozen letters from him, and yet I cannot doubt his affection for me, since it was the false report of my death which killed him. I fear you must take me as I am with all my imperfections on my head."

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24

Brother Benoybhusan

Dr. K. D. Ghose said of his eldest son, "Beno will be his father in every line of action. Self-sacrificing but limited in his sphere of action."

Sri Aurobindo said of his eldest brother: "He is a very practical man, the opposite of poetic, takes more after my father. He is a very nice man and one can easily get on with him. He had fits of

miserliness." And he added, "Manmohan and I used to quarrel pretty often but I got on very well with my eldest brother." Imagine ... Sri Aurobindo quarrelling!

And Manmohan? In a letter to Binyon (8 January 1890), he writes from his lodgings in Earl's Court, "I have been ill — stricken with this malady which is so prevalent in London—the continental influenza. ... I have had to stay indoors for the last week; and it was not very pleasant, as you may imagine. I saw nobody, and felt very lonely and miserable.... Perhaps you don't know what it is to fall ill in a lodging-house.... At last, to my joy, my brother came to see me, who, as you know, is a very matter-of-fact person, with a purely commercial mind, a person who looks at everything from a business point

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of view. And he began comforting me very cheerfully with the reflection that everybody must die some day, remarking how conveniently near the cemetery was (Kemp's Ford Gardens, I must tell you looks out upon Brompton Cemetery and funerals pass down it every day) and hoping that undertakers did not charge very high, as he had nearly come to the end of his last remittance."

Mano was lonely, to be sure — he was not living with his brothers at the Kensington Club; but his temperament seems to have been different too, less easy-going than his brothers, for instance. "Once Manmohan told me," said Sri Aurobindo relating an anecdote from the Baroda days, "I hear you have been living with M. J. Rao year after year.' 'Why not?' I said. 'How could you do that?' he asked. 'I could not live for six months without quarrelling with him.'"

Unlike his brothers, Mano seems to have acquired the habit of living beyond his means. In a letter (12 July 1889) to Binyon he speaks of "many debts to pay," and expresses the hope that his friend did not want "the 10 shillings back which you lent me ... I shall send them as soon as ever I can scrape something together," he promises. He was already at Oxford on a scholarship. When he first went up there Beno accompanied him. Here is briefly, in Mano's Own words, his first day at Oxford: "Christ Church, Sat. night, October 1887. I have eaten so enormous a dinner tonight that I am doubtful whether I should be equal to the toil of a letter.... We started from Paddington, my brother and myself, at —I think it was 10 A.M. and the train puffed up to Oxford through drizzlement of a

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bitter wind and sky at 12." We skip a little.

"At 2 P.M. there was to be the matric ceremony. So we went into the High and had lunch at a Restaurant; then my brother went to see about ordering some of the necessary articles [for M. M.'s rooms] while I proceeded to the Hall to be matriculated. We had to wait some time (about twenty freshmen of us) until all the Dons had assembled . . . the Dean called out the names of scholars first, then commoners. I was called one of the first and approached with somewhat faltering steps to the table. The Dean was very gracious and said in a mild voice— 'Mr. Ghose, I hear very highly of you from Prof. Max Müller;' I hope you will prove yourself worthy of your election.' Then I was handed over to my Tutor, Mr. Hobhouse, who again handed me over to the treasurer. The treasurer remarked coldly — 'Where is your fee?'" The sudden question utterly dazed Mano who had thought that *he* would be given £ 20 out of his scholarship for his immediate expenses! "While a chill perspiration broke over me, the treasurer said blankly, 'Haven't you brought it?' I could only say, 'No.' 'Bring it to me this afternoon.' At which I answered stupidly 'Yes' —tho' I well knew my brother hadn't more than £3 at most in his pocket, and as it turned out there is not more than £10 at the bank just now." Mano was requested to be ready in cap and gown by 4:15 to be marched to the Vice-Chancellor's and be enrolled in the University books. "I

1. The same Friedrich Max Müller (1823-1900), philologist and mythologist, who was mainly responsible for giving a racial meaning to the word 'Aryan' -not to be found in the veda or the Indian traditions. he also prepared and edited the series *Sacred Books of the East*.

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went back to my rooms agitated more than my wont, and explained the matter to my brother, who was cheerfully sitting by the fire." After much running about, to the brothers' relief some arrangement was arrived at for the money to be paid later. And at 4:15 the freshmen were finally matriculated and enrolled — "and also presented with a Statute-Book by the Vice-Chancellor. But the wearing of cap and gown in all weathers is a cruel practice. I was chilled to the marrow. For it is a bitterly cold air here.... My brother went back early to London; he had hoped to see more of Oxford —but the day was so cloudy and inclement with intermittent rain, quite inimical to sightseeing." Mano did not join any Clubs. "The only thing I have joined is the Junior Common Room where they have debates, cigarettes, stamps, sweetmeats etc."

The scholars at Oxford or Cambridge had to work hard if they did not want their scholarship of £ 80 reduced or taken away. Poor M. M. Ghose had also to contend with his health. He was often sick —no, not with hard work! —for he seemed to have developed "an almost constitutional weakness of the liver, and must be careful of the food I eat. The evil has been of slow growth, probably brought on by the rich and heavy dinners we have at Christ Church." To regain his digestion, he had to undergo strict dieting; but what made him feel even more wretched was the cold in the head that often laid him down. So, all in all, he feared it would be "a horrible disappointment if I fail;" but "should anything happen to cut short my Oxford career," Beno promised him help in finding a job. "My brother is looking out for my interest at the B. M. [British Museum]."

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In 1889 Mano obtained a Second Class in Classical Honour Moderations. But then, in May 1890, he himself cut short his Oxonian career. When Laurence remonstrated with him for that, Mano stoutly defended himself. "My dear Laurence!" he shot back, "What do you mean by these strange and unreasonable entreaties that I should go back to Oxford? If you knew how I loathe the place, and how unhappy I was there, you would not be so anxious to have me there. ... I do not see in what lies the great advantage of a degree. . . . Men who come down from Oxford with degrees find just the same difficulty in getting employment, as those who come without.... If you had read all my correspondence with the College, you would confess that it would be a piece of madness and most ignoble repentance after I have so finally and decisively refused the increase of Scholarship offered me by the College." Quirk of fate! Mano returned to Oxford in January 1893, and, as we have seen, obtained his B.A. a year later.

Mano was unable to endure for long the standard of life his two brothers were leading cheerfully enough. "I and my eldest brother, at any rate, were living quite a Spartan life," said Sri Aurobindo. "Manmohan was extravagant, if you like," he said with an amused twinkle in his eyes. "When I went to Cambridge, I was introduced to a tailor who made suits for me on credit. When I returned to London, he traced me there and got introduced to Manmohan also. Manmohan got a red velvet suit made —not staring red, but aesthetic. He used to go to see Oscar Wilde in that suit." What a dogged tailor that was, my friends! "When we came back to India, that tailor wrote to

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India Government about the arrears that Manmohan had not paid and to the Baroda Maharaja for my arrears. I had paid almost all except £4 5sh. which I thought I was justified in not paying as he had charged double the amount for our suits. The Baroda Maharaja said I had better pay."

Oscar Wilde had taken quite a fancy to the young Indian poet, Manmohan. "Mano used to visit him every evening and Wilde described him in his Wildish way, 'A young Indian panther in evening brown.' Wilde was as brilliant in conversation as in writing," continued Sri Aurobindo. "Once some of his friends came to see him and asked how he had passed the morning. He said he had been to the zoo and gave a wonderful description of it, making a striking word-picture of every animal. Mrs. Wilde who was all the time sitting in a corner put in a small voice, 'But Oscar, how could you say that? You were with me all morning.' Wilde replied, 'But my dear, one has to be imaginative sometimes.'" Sri Aurobindo's narration sent the others into gales of laughter.

Stephen Phillips, the poet, was also a very good friend of Mano's. "My brother Manmohan used to say," Sri Aurobindo recounted one day while on the topic of materialization, "he had heard from Stephen Phillips that the latter's mother visited him when she was on her deathbed at a distant place." A twinkle lurked in his eyes as he added, "But my brother was a poet, you must remember—very imaginative. And, moreover, he was friend of Oscar Wilde's." After the ensuing laughter subsided, Sri Aurobindo said, "When the French heard of Wilde's imprisonment they said about the English people,

'Comme ils sont betes!' [How stupid they are!]"

Oscar Wilde had taken an 'immense liking' to Mano. It was reciprocated by the latter with admiration. "He is a wonderful and charming being," Mano wrote to Binyon. "You are inclined to think him superficial, I know. You should know him as I do; and then you would feel what depth and sagacity there is behind his delightful mask of paradox and irony and perversity."

When he gave up College in mid-career, Mano tried to reassure his friend Laurence about his prospects of landing a job. "I have been to see Oscar lately," he wrote on 4 August 1890. "Oscar was as charming and affectionate as ever. . . . He upbraided me much for not coming to see him

before, and when he heard that I had been going about vainly in search of employment, was very anxious to do something for me."

Expressing confidence in his lucky star, he added, "I have at least succeeded in gaining one valuable friend, since I came to London . . . Lord Ripon has been exerting his influence in my favour in the British Museum business." So he thought he had "the strongest influence" to back him. Therefore he had a "fair chance of nomination after a year or two of work. I intend to do some tutoring work, and writing, in the meantime which will give me enough to live on, with a little help from my brothers ..." Mano was counting on Ara's stipend and Beno's salary at the Club.

As for Benoybhusan, we are unable to sketch in more details of his life in England. We would have liked to, because what transpires from the testimonials of his father and brothers

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is that he was indeed amiable; and despite his 'purely commercial mind' as Mano puts it, he was fully alive to the needs of his younger brothers. Let us be grateful to him for looking after his younger brother, Ara—our Sri Aurobindo.

"He went up for medicine but could not go on. He returned to India [in 1893], got a job in Coochbehar. Now I hear he has come back to Calcutta," Sri Aurobindo said in 1939.

The job in Coochbehar State was that of auditor and finance secretary. Coochbehar was then a princely State, in the north of Bengal, and he also was the prince's tutor. He married Umarani Mitra, rather late in life, in 1913, and had several children. The youngest daughter, Lahori Chatterjee, has been most helpful and provided us with several important gobbets of information, as well as presenting me with a set of her uncle Manmohan's books.

Benoybhusan died on 1st October 1947.

"He is a very nice man," said Sri Aurobindo.

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King's College

Sri Aurobindo was at Cambridge, "borne there by his own ability." Cambridge, "the nursery of blooming youth," as a poet saw it.

Following is the letter Sri Aurobindo wrote to his father when he went up to Cambridge in October 1890. "Last night I was invited to coffee with one of the dons and in his rooms I met the great O. B., otherwise Oscar Browning, who is the feature 'par excellence' of King's. He was extremely flattering, passing from the subject of cotillions to that of scholarship he said to me, 'I suppose you know you passed an extraordinarily high examination. I have examined papers at thirteen examinations and I have never during that time seen such excellent papers as yours (meaning my Classical papers at the scholarship examination). As for your essay, it was wonderful.' In this essay (a comparison between Shakespeare and Milton), I indulged in my Oriental tastes to the top of their bent; it overflowed with rich and tropical imagery; it abounded in anti-thesis and epigrams and it expressed my real feelings without restraint or reservation. I thought myself that it was the best thing I had

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ever done, but at school it would have been condemned as extraordinarily Asiatic and bombastic. The great O. B. afterwards asked me where my rooms were and when I had answered he said, 'That wretched hole!', then turning to Mahaffy¹: 'How rude we are to our scholars! We get great minds to come down here and then shut them up in that box! I suppose it is to keep their pride down!'" This was the letter reproduced by Dr. K. D. Ghose when he wrote to his brother-in-law on 2 December 1890.

Oscar Browning (1837-1923) was an educationist and a historical writer.

According to Sri Aurobindo's own estimation he was not at all painstaking like his poet-brother. "I could never go into the minute details. I read, and left it to my mind to absorb what it could. That's why I could never become a scholar." But what a mind I and what a power of absorption!!

There is no examination for passing out of St. Paul's School other than the Public examinations—at least it was so in the last century. Thus it was in December 1889 that A. A. Ghose took the Examination for Scholarships, Exhibitions and Admissions to King's College, Cambridge. The

Scholarship examination was taken at Cambridge under the supervision of the college authorities. There were several papers, such as translation from English verse and prose into Latin and Greek, and vice versa. Needless to specify that candidates were not accepted unless they had a good school record in examinations. As a result

1. Robert Pentland Mahaffy, who became a distinguished Kingsman (History Prizeman, 1891) and an eminent lawyer.

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*The main gate of King's College, Cambridge
(with the Chapel on the right), late last century*

of Ara's performance, he was elected by the College's Electors to Fellowships on 19 December 1889 to the first vacant Open Scholarship. This means that in the examiners' opinion he was the best of the candidates for scholarships. No wonder. English was to Ara like water to a duck; and he had so well mastered Greek and Latin that he passed the Scholarship examinations with record marks.

The Scholarship amount of £80 a year was paid from

the foundation of King's College, Cambridge, which was started in 1441 by King Henry VI.

However, it was only in the next academic year that a vacancy arose and A. A. Ghose could join college: "Ghose Aravinda Acroyd, admitted scholar at King's College, October 11, 1890 . . . Matric Michaelmas 1890 . . ." The feast of St. Michael, one of the archangels, is known as Michaelmas and falls on 29 September. Oxford, Cambridge and other universities in England have a Michaelmas term.

Dr. K. D. Ghose wanted his son to go in for the Indian Civil Service. So, while waiting to go up to Cambridge, Ara joined the I.C.S. Class organized by St. Paul's School—which had no official recognition from the I.C.S. — for a group of senior boys who were working for the I.C.S. entrance examination. That year there were five such boys, among whom A. A. Ghose was the only Indian; he stood second in the Class. In the Open Entrance Scholarship examination—the I.C.S. recruited its new members by public competition administered by the Civil Service Commission — out of all the candidates, A. A. Ghose ranked eleventh.

In his I.C.S. Class Report from St. Paul's School, for the half-year ending July 1890, we note that the teachers commented on his 'lack of energy,' although they found the young man's work 'good.' This was the period when the adolescent was living in the difficult conditions of the Kensington Club.

Thus Sri Aurobindo became, at one and the same time, a probationer for the Indian Civil Service and a Scholar at Cambridge. He was doing his 'duty' as a son.

During the two years, from October 1890 to October 1892, when A. A. Ghose was at King's, his quarters —'that wretched hole' in Oscar Browning's words —consisted of a bedroom facing north, a small kitchen with sink, stove and cupboard, and a sitting-room, or study. Sri Aurobindo's quarters were on the second floor of the building on King's Lane. Its rooms were reserved for the Scholars of King's College. The building has since been demolished.

But no matter. A flight of fancy can take us back in time. We see the young man in his study, relaxing of an evening after days of hard work —he was doing his Tripos. We hear him welcoming a friend who had dropped in. "The cigarettes are on the mantelpiece —excuse my laziness! — " he says, "and the lucifers¹ are probably stocked in the fruit-shelf. And here is coffee and a choice between cake and biscuits." Then before settling down more comfortably before a blazing fire for a talk, he says hospitably, "First let me give you a glass of champagne. I do not keep," he adds, "any of those infernal concoctions of alcohol and perdition of which you in Europe are so enamoured." The conversation between the collegians was no doubt all wit and elegance and, if we know our A. A. Ghose, wide-ranging and deep. *

In October 1890 Sri Aurobindo was eighteen years old. Several years later, when he was a professor at Baroda College,

1. Friction matches. Invented in 1827 by the English chemist John Walker. In 1829, a manufacturing unit was opened in London by Samuel Jones. 'Lucifer' means light-bringer, which is Satan's other function.

in an address to a students' Social Gathering held towards the close of the year, Sri Aurobindo harked back to his own college days. "I think there is no student of Oxford or Cambridge who does not look back in after days on the few years of his undergraduate life, as, of all the scenes he has moved in, that which calls up the happiest memories, and it is not surprising that this should be so, when we remember what that life must have meant to him. He goes up from the restricted life of his home and school and finds himself in surroundings which with astonishing rapidity expand his intellect, strengthen his character, develop his social faculties, force out all his abilities and turn him in three years from a boy into a man. His mind ripens in the contact with minds which meet from all parts of the country and have been brought up in many various kinds of trainings, his unwholesome eccentricities wear away and the unsocial, egoistic elements of character are to a large extent discouraged. He moves among ancient and venerable buildings, the mere age and beauty of which are in themselves an education. He has the Union which has trained so many great orators and debaters, has been the first trial ground of so many renowned intellects. He has, too, the athletics clubs organized with a perfection unparalleled elsewhere, in which, if he has the physique and the desire for them he may find pursuits which are also in themselves an education. The result is that he who entered the university a raw student, comes

out of it a man and a gentleman, accustomed to think of great affairs and fit to move in cultivated society, and he remembers his College and University with affection, and in after days if he meets with those who

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have studied with him he feels attracted towards them as to men with whom he has a natural brotherhood. This is the social effect I should like the Colleges and Universities of India also to exercise, to educate by social influences as well as those which are merely academical and to create the feeling among their pupils that they belong to the community, that they are children of one mother."

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Poets All

"Have you written any stories?" asked a curious Nirod.

"I have," replied Sri Aurobindo, "but they are all lost." He explained how it happened. "When there was the rumour that our house would be searched by the [Pondicherry] police, my trunk was sent off to David's¹ place. After some time when they brought the trunk back it was found that all my stories had been eaten away by white ants. So my future fame as a story-writer perished." The way he said that made everyone burst into laughter.

"But it is a pity I lost two translations of poems," Sri Aurobindo said more seriously. "One of them was a translation of Kalidasa's *Meghaduta* in terza rimas. It was rather well done."

"Yes, indeed a pity," sympathized the poet in Nirod.

"But the stories were nothing to speak of—except one. I can say something of this one because I have still two pages left of it. All my stories were occult."

1. David Rassendren. Some stories were found later, many of them incomplete, and have been published.

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One of his main occupations at Cambridge was writing English poetry to' which he had devoted much of his time the last two years he was at St. Paul's School. Sri Aurobindo's lifelong poetical career, let us recollect, began in Manchester when he wrote for the *Fox Family Magazine* — "an awful imitation of somebody I don't remember." Brother Mano was also a contributor to the *Family Magazine*. "Then I went to London," said Sri Aurobindo, "where I began really to write." He admitted later, in Pondicherry, when he was besieged with disciples and did not have much time to himself, that "in England indeed I could write a lot every day, but most of that has gone to the Waste Paper Basket." Whatever could be salvaged went in *Songs to Myrtilla*, which was published in 1895 from Baroda for private circulation. Also much of what he wrote in the first years at Baroda —poetry, translations from the Sanskrit in blank verse and heroic verse —"has disappeared into the unknown in the whirlpools and turmoil of my political career."

When he was seventeen, he translated from Greek a passage titling it *Hecuba*. Mano's friend Binyon happened to read it, then asked the young man why he was not writing more poetry? "I dare say," acknowledged Sri Aurobindo, "my brother stimulated me greatly to write poetry."

Stephen Phillips, a Victorian poet, made a considerable impression on Sri Aurobindo. Phillips (1868-1915), also a playwright and actor, was a cousin of Binyon's and a very close friend of Manmohan's. The three of them along with Arthur Cripps "who did not come to much in poetry afterwards, brought out a book in conjunction. It was well spoken of," recalled

Sri Aurobindo. This was *Primavera* (May 1890), and it was reviewed by none other than Oscar Wilde. "A young Indian of brilliant scholarship and high literary attainments who gives some culture to Christ Church," he wrote of Manmohan in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1890. "His verses show how quick and subtle are the intellectual sympathies of the oriental mind, and suggest how close is the bond of union that may some day bind India to us by other methods than those of commerce and military strength. Mr. Ghose ought some day to make a name in our literature." Oscar Wilde's glowing review had its impact, and *Primavera* ran into a second edition in no time at all.

At the Memorial Meeting held after the death of Manmohan Ghose in January 1924 Tagore, in his presidential address, paid him rich tributes. Speaking of his long-standing relationship with

the late Manmohan's family he said, "I was in England when Manmohan, Aurobindo and their other brothers arrived with their mother. So I saw them even in their earlier days." Rabindranath was there for his studies; his first sojourn in England being from November 1878 to late 1880; he was in fact in Manchester in 1879, when the three brothers came there. "I renewed my acquaintance with Manmohan after his return to India —through my own poetry. I was reading my *Sonar Tari (The Golden Boat)* on the verandah of our Jorasanko house and Manmohan made illuminating comments on the idea and metrical peculiarities of the poem. Even though unacquainted with Bengali, he could intuitively grasp the inner significance of the poem A poet is of no particular race," averred the Poet, "he is a poet of all countries." Winding up

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his speech, Tagore said simply, "Today I pay my respect to his memory. I have some acquaintance with his poetry which he would often read out to me. I used to listen in delighted wonder. ..."

Sri Aurobindo also fully appreciated his brother's poetic merit. In June 1890, one month after the publication of *Primavera*, when Mano asked Binyon to send him four more copies — "I want to send one copy to Lord Ripon" —he did not forget his young brother: "Would you also mind giving my brother a copy, with your name and Cripps' inscribed on it in your own handwriting?"

Prolific reader that he was, Sri Aurobindo knew Shakespeare and Milton to the full. "I read Shelley a great deal and took an intense pleasure in some of Coleridge's poetry." Keats too, specially his *Hyperion*. Among the Victorian poets, Stephen Phillips made a considerable impression on him. "I read *Marpessa* and *Christ in Hades*, before they were published and as I was just in the stage of formation then — at the age of seventeen — they made a powerful impression which lasted until it was worked out in *Love and Death*." Sri Aurobindo noted, "The only romantic poets of the Victorian Age who could have had any influence on me, apart from Arnold whose effect on me was considerable, were Tennyson perhaps, subconsciously, and Swinburne of the earlier poems, for his later work I did not at all admire. Still it is possible that the general atmosphere of the later Victorian decline, if decline it was, may have helped to mould my work and undoubtedly it dates and carries the stamp of the time in which it was written." These influences may

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have helped in moulding the 'poet' in Sri Aurobindo before he had entirely found himself.

Poets are born and not taught, goes the saying, and metre is not taught at school, so how did Sri Aurobindo learn it? "I have *never* studied prosody myself—in English at least; what I know I know by reading and writing and following my ear and using my intelligence." Sri Aurobindo later amplified his remark. "Moreover, my intelligence was inborn and so far as it grew before the Yoga, it was not by training but by a wide haphazard activity developing ideas from all things read, seen or experienced. That is not training, it is natural growth."

Sri Aurobindo explained what he meant by 'following my ear.' Alluding to the Alipore Bomb Case when he was undergoing trial, and on whose bench was his former friend Beachcroft, Sri Aurobindo said, "Another intimate English friend of mine, Ferrers, came to see me in the court when the trial was going on. We, the accused, were put into a cage for fear we should jump out and murder the Judge. Ferrers was a barrister practising at Sumatra or Singapore. He saw me in the cage and was much concerned and couldn't conceive how to get me out. It was he who had given me the clue to the real hexametre in English." It was his recitation of a very Homeric line from Clough that gave Sri Aurobindo the real swing of the metre.¹

1. Hugh Norman Ferrers was admitted scholar at King's College on 4 October 1889, became a barrister and practised in Malaya States, then served in the First World War.

But Sri Aurobindo's greatest debt was undoubtedly to his brother Manmohan. In 1899, after six years in Baroda during which he had delved deep into Sanskrit literature, he wrote his long poem *Love and Death* based on a theme from the Mahabharata, and dedicated it to his brother. He sent him an accompanying letter in which he tried to soften Manmohan's indictment of Hindu legend, which he found 'lifeless' compared to the 'warm' Greek myths. At the end of his long apology of Sanskrit literature, Sri Aurobindo generously concluded : "Will you accept this poem as part-payment of a deep intellectual debt I have been long owing to you? Unknown to yourself, you taught and encouraged me from my childhood to be a poet. From your sun my farthing rushlight was kindled, and it was in your path that I long strove to guide my uncertain and faltering footsteps. If I have now in independent surroundings departed from your guidance and entered

into a path perhaps thornier and more rugged, but my own, it does not lessen the obligation of that first light and example."

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Savitri

In Sanskrit, a Poet is a Seer. The Greek root of the word 'poet' means 'creator' or one who 'does.' Both Seer and Creator are words that go admirably with Sri Aurobindo. He was always very much aware of the power of the Word. "The Word has power," wrote Sri Aurobindo in an undated letter. "What kind of power or power for what depends on the nature of the inspiration and the theme and the part of the being it touches. If it is the Word itself, — as in certain utterances of the great Scriptures, Veda, Upanishads, Gita, it may well have a power to awaken a spiritual and uplifting impulse, even certain kinds of realisation...."

"The Vedic poets regarded their poetry as mantras, they were the vehicles of their own realisations and could become vehicles of realisation for others.... I have had in former times many illuminations, even initial realisations while meditating on verses of the Upanishads or the Gita. Anything that carries the Word, the Light in it, spoken or written, can light this fire within, open a sky, as it were, bring the effective vision of which the Word is the body." Sri Aurobindo invoked the Word:

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"O Word concealed in the upper fire,
Thou who hast lingered through centuries,
Descend from thy rapt white desire,
Plunging through gold eternities ..."

Titled 'Musa Spiritus,' this poem first appeared in *Poems Past and Present*.

Those were the early days of the Ashram Press. It did not then have all the sophisticated machinery that a modern press has. This printing press was started in October 1945 just after the Second World War was finally over.¹ Mother's aim in setting it up was to publish Sri

Aurobindo's writings, to print unpublished materials and reprint books that were out of print. My father, himself a literary man, had an abiding interest in all of Sri Aurobindo's writings. Father was also the one who had built up the Ashram's Book Sales Department from scratch, so he was one of the foremost disciples to put to Mother the great number of books that were out of print and the popular demand for them, as well as the need to bring out the wealth of material lying unpublished. We may note that Father typed many of Sri Aurobindo's manuscripts, including *The Life Divine* three

1. As far as I know, the setting up of the Press was largely made possible by Sir Akbar Hydari, the grandfather of my friend Bilkees, wife of Air Vice-Marshal I. H. Latif, retired Chief of the Indian Air Force. Along with the letterpress and other machinery from the Hyderabad Government Press, he sent its manager to teach the basics of running a printing press. Sir Akbar was the then Dewan of Hyderabad State, under whose stewardship the state had become prosperous.

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times, after Sri Aurobindo's corrections—all with three fingers and on a portable typewriter!

Mother's idea in setting up the printing press was that it would be run, if not entirely at least to the greatest extent possible, by Ashram inmates with a minimum of paid workers. She therefore encouraged us all, young and not so young, to go and work there. Thus we were a medley lot, two or three generations working together.

It was March or April 1946, and as I was saying, the Press did not then have all the sophisticated machines; there was no folding machine, for example. We did folding, and stitching too, by hand. The Darshan of 24 April was approaching—incidentally, it was on that day, 24 April 1946, that Satprem was to see for the first time Sri Aurobindo and Mother, a meeting that was to change his life. Anyway, there we were, about twenty of us, going full steam with the folding of a new book of poems by Sri Aurobindo, *Poems Past and Present*. While our elders meditated or gossiped as they went on folding, some of us young ones began to learn the poems by heart, without in the least slackening our folding speed. By the time all the forms were folded (it took several days as there were one thousand copies) some of us knew all the seven poems by heart! What a joy it was. And imagine how unbounded my joy became when Mother handed me a copy of the *Poems Past and Present* with Sri Aurobindo's signature and, in his handwriting, 'To Sujata with blessings.'

Of course, this was not my first acquaintance with Sri Aurobindo's poetry. There existed already a few books, notably

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Collected Poems and Plays. "What, Sujata reads poetry!" exclaimed Sri Aurobindo when the two volumes were put before him for his signature. I was not there, but one of those present told me. Anyway, after the publication of *Collected Poems* the critics began their criticisms, and some disciples wrote to Sri Aurobindo criticizing the critics. Sri Aurobindo replied at some length noting the sea-saw of eulogy and disparagement, praise and censure by different critics. He was not one to attach much value to contemporary criticism. "Or I may flatter myself," he added, "with the idea that this lively variation of reaction from extreme eulogy to extreme damnation indicates that my work must have after all something in it that is real and alive. Or I might perhaps take refuge in the supposition that the lack of recognition is the consequence of an untimely and too belated publication, due to the egoistic habit of writing for my own self-satisfaction rather than any strong thirst for poetical glory and immortality and leaving most of my poetry in the drawer ..." Sri Aurobindo said with gentle irony. "It is a misfortune of my poetry from the point of view of recognition that the earlier work forming the bulk of the *Collected Poems* belongs to the past and has little chance of recognition now that the aesthetic atmosphere has so violently changed, while the later mystical work and *Savitri* belong to the future and will possibly have to wait for recognition of any merit they have for another strong change."

Sri Aurobindo set forth in a letter the symbolism of his epic poem, *Savitri*. "The tale of Satyavan and Savitri is recited in the Mahabharata as a story of conjugal love conquering

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death. But this legend is, as shown by many features of the human tale, one of the many symbolic myths of the Vedic cycle. Satyavan is the soul carrying the divine truth of being within itself but descended into the grip of death and ignorance; Savitri is the Divine Word, daughter of the Sun, goddess of the supreme Truth who comes down and is born to save; Aswapati, the Lord of the Horse, her human father, is the Lord of Tapasya, the concentrated energy of spiritual endeavour that helps us to rise from the mortal to the immortal planes; Dyumatsena, Lord of the

Shining Hosts, father of Satyavan, is the Divine Mind here fallen blind, losing its celestial kingdom of glory. Still this is not a mere allegory, the characters are not personified qualities, but incarnations or emanations of living and conscious Forces with whom we can enter into concrete touch and they take human bodies in order to help man and show him the way from his mortal state to a divine consciousness and immortal life."

The birth of Savitri is a boon of the Supreme Goddess given to King Aswapati, the yogi who seeks the means to deliver the world out of Ignorance. The poem opens with the Dawn. Savitri, 'that strong silent heart,' awakes on the day of destiny, the day when Satyavan has to die.

"It was the hour before the gods awake."

I should not spoil the Reader's appetite by quoting extensively, but I do hope to whet it! Of outward action there is not much, so to say; it is all inner movement. Through the

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Yoga of King Aswapati, through the inner lands where Savitri adventures, Sri Aurobindo has expressed his own experiences of the uncharted inner worlds; over the years he cast and recast this poetic creation twelve times at least! Because he wished to express in the poem accurately "something seen, something felt or experienced" In it Sri Aurobindo opens for us a wide space of inner spiritual life, and shows us the boundless and innumerable riches that lie hidden and unexplored. "The door that has been shut to all but a few may open; the kingdom of the Spirit may be established not only in man's inner being but in his life and works." Savitri traverses world after inner world, following the God of Death who is carrying away Satyavan, and who tries to persuade her to return to the mortal world, to renounce Satyavan. In vain. Savitri spurns all his offers to tempt her, nor would she be cowed down by Death's dire threats. Finally it is Death who has to abdicate, and then it is his end! Savitri returns to the Earth with living Satyavan. Readers of *Mother's Agenda* know the intensity with which Mother followed the dialogue between Savitri and Death!

The theme of the conquest of Love over Death seems to have drawn Sri Aurobindo very early. We have seen that at the age of twenty-seven, while at Baroda Sri Aurobindo wrote *Love and Death*. It is a stirring poem in blank verse; this plot also is taken from the Mahabharata. Ruru descends into Hades to bring back to Earth and life his beloved Priyumvada —snatched untimely

away by Death—in exchange for half his life span. "The poem itself was written in a white heat of inspiration during

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14 days of continuous writing—in the mornings, of course, for I had to attend office the rest of the day and saw friends in the evening. I never wrote anything with such ease and rapidity before or after."

In his letter to Manmohan from which we have already quoted, Sri Aurobindo alluded to "the tale of Savitrie, the passion of a single woman in its dreadful silence and strength pitted against Death, the divorcer of souls."

As for the value of Sri Aurobindo's poetry, let us see if the contemporary judgements of adverse critics are not overruled by the "only two judges whose joint verdict cannot easily be disputed, the World and Time."

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28

The Brilliant Student

Who could believe that the shy young man, poet, brilliant scholar, with such a fine sense of quiet humour and so frail could ever be a revolutionary?

Most of his school and college mates had a very high regard for A. A. Ghose both as a person and as a scholar. "The present writer was at school with him," wrote an ex-Pauline, Phillip W. Seargent, "and can bear witness to his brilliant attainments as a boy. It would have been difficult in those days to regard him as a firebrand!"

"Fancy Ghose a ragged revolutionary!" exclaimed an Englishman in utter disbelief to his colleague C. C. Dutt, another I.C.S. who knew Sri Aurobindo. "He can with far greater ease write a lexicon or compose a noble epic." No, Sri Aurobindo never wrote a lexicon but he did compose 'a noble epic': *Savitri*.

Another Englishman, a fellow-scholar of A. A. Ghose at King's, gave the following reply to a query. "Though he was in my year, I saw but little of him so that I can give no information of interest. At the same time I did occasionally come

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across him. He was a very able Classical Scholar, easily first in this subject in the entrance Scholarship Examination. . . . With regard to his life at Cambridge a complete lack of interest in games must have lessened his enjoyment of the place." There speaks the Englishman, although

Sri Aurobindo may not have agreed with that opinion. "His interests were in literature: among Greek poets for instance he once waxed enthusiastic over Sapphic and he had a nice feeling of English style. Yet for England itself he seemed to have small affection; it was not only the climate that he found trying: as an example, he became quite indignant when on one occasion I called England the modern Athens. This title, he declared, belonged to France; England much more resembled Corinth, a commercial state, and therefore unattractive to him."

A. A. Ghose had a keenness of perception salted with a sense of humour. "If the Athenians were mushrooms," he wrote picturesquely, "and the lowland Scotch are oaks, the mushroom is preferable. To be slow and solid is the pride of the Saxon and the ox, but to be quick and songful and gracile is the pride of the Celt and the bird."¹

Though A. A. Ghose evinced no interest in taking part in games, he did take part in debates and discussions. "At Cambridge," reminisced Sri Aurobindo, "we were once discussing about physical development. Then one fellow, in order to show how splendid his health was, began to take his garments off. He took off his coat, waistcoat, shirt, one vest, then

1. *Beauty in the Real*, in *The Harmony of Virtue*, p. 68.

another, and still another and so on. We found that there were ten or twelve pieces of clothing on his body!"

Sri Aurobindo, like Mother, had an eye for anything funny or absurd and never forgot it. Dilip once wrote to Sri Aurobindo, "But we *all* lie, Guru! So why are we so profoundly shocked when others repeat our favourite pastime? Please elucidate." Which Sri Aurobindo did. "Lies? Well, a Punjabi student at Cambridge once took our breath away by the frankness and comprehensive profundity of his affirmation: 'Liars! But we are all liars!' It appeared that he had intended to say 'lawyers,' but his pronunciation gave his remark a deep force of philosophic observation and generalisation which he had not intended. But it seems to me the last word in human nature. Only the lying is sometimes intentional, sometimes vaguely half-intentional, sometimes quite unintentional, momentary and unconscious. So there you are! ..."

C. C. Dutt reports a glowing reference to Sri Aurobindo by another Englishman. "During the first year of my service I had a superior, a young man named Percy Mead. . . . He asked me, 'Dutt,

aren't you a Bengali?' 'Yes, but why do you want to know?' I asked. 'During my days at Cambridge there was an extraordinary Indian student, with a profound knowledge in Greek and Latin, named Aurobindo Akroyd Ghose. I was acquainted with him, a very fine man; I got a lot of help from him for my studies. Do you know him? He was perhaps a Bengali.'" At the time Dutt had not met Sri Aurobindo but knew his relatives, specially Benoybhusan at Coochbehar where Dutt's father was the Dewan.

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An Irishman, who later became a professor, was an undergraduate with Sri Aurobindo at King's College during 1890-91. He too acknowledged what a wiz his fellow student was at Classics. "I knew him in those days quite well, and have happy recollections of him as a brilliant young classical scholar, an open Entrance Scholar of the College, of marked literary and poetic taste, and as far as I ever saw a young man of high character and modest bearing, who was liked by all who knew him. He was, of course, also a student of Sanskrit, and having passed his Entrance Examination for the Indian Civil Service, as well as for Part I of the Classical Tripos. In the latter he secured a First Class at the end of his second year, a highly creditable success."

It was no mean achievement, we ought to say, considering that students normally took three years to complete the same course. Besides, our A. A. Ghose did not pass the grade just anyhow, he was one of the two best Classics scholars of his year. Yes, Krishna Dhan Ghose's Ara had a most brilliant academic career. At the end of the first year at King's College he won a prize for Greek Iambics. At the end of the second year he was awarded prizes for Greek Iambics again, as well as for Latin Hexameters. Having distinguished himself in the College Examination in Classics, A. A. Ghose was given "books bearing the College arms, to the value of forty pounds"—an amount equivalent to half his Scholarship stipend.

But he did not graduate at Cambridge in spite of passing high in the First Part of the Tripos in his second year. The First Part gave the degree of B. A. only if it was taken in the third year. He might have got the degree if he had applied for

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it, but he did not care to do so.

Let us not forget that given his pecuniary circumstances, A. A. Ghose could not afford to engage a tutor. Let us not forget either that he was at the same time a probationary candidate for the Indian Civil Service. He had therefore not only to fulfil the obligations of the Classical Scholarship—which he did surpassingly well—but also to study all the subjects which a future administrator of India had to master: British and Indian laws, history and geography of India, Political Economy, vernacular languages, and classical languages. A. A. Ghose's mother tongue, Bengali, "was not a subject for the competitive examination for the I.C.S. It was after he had passed the competitive examination that Sri Aurobindo as a probationer who had chosen Bengal as his province began to learn Bengali." He took Hindustani as optional. Sanskrit was the classical Indian language he chose: "I learnt Sanskrit by reading the Nala-Damayanti episode in the Mahabharata . . . with minute care several times." Actually, so well did he master the Sanskrit language that one day he was to unveil the secrets of the Veda for us.

"I don't remember having any teacher in Sanskrit," said Sri Aurobindo mildly contradicting somebody's statement. "I think I learnt it by myself. Many languages, in fact, I learnt by myself—German and Italian, for instance. In Bengali, however, I had a teacher." That was several years later, in Baroda. The course of study provided at Cambridge was a very poor one. Poorer still was their teacher! "Of course," said Sri Aurobindo, "we started learning it in Cambridge, the judge Beachcroft was

one of us, under an Anglo-Indian pundit ('Pundit Towers,' the students called him). He used to teach us Vidyasagar.¹ One day we hit upon a sentence of Bankim's and showed it to him. He began to shake his head and said: 'This can't be Bengali!'"

One of Sri Aurobindo's interests was in "learning languages" for which he had a natural aptitude. He learnt German and Italian so well by himself that he could study Goethe and Dante in the original. In Baroda he picked up Gujarati "as I had to read the Maharaja's files." It was also in Baroda that Sri Aurobindo for the most part learnt Bengali for himself; before engaging a teacher he "already knew enough of the language to appreciate the novels of Bankim and the poetry of Madhusudan." His engaging a teacher was for the purpose of familiarizing himself with spoken Bengali and its idiomatic usage.

Thus Sri Aurobindo had "mastered Greek and Latin, English and French and had also acquired some familiarity with continental languages like German and Italian," and a little Spanish; among the Indian languages were Sanskrit and Bengali, Gujarati and Hindi, some Tamil, and Marathi which "he spoke better than Bengali," remarked his Bengali teacher Dinendra Kumar Roy.

1. Pandit Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar (1820-91), was an eminent educationist and social reformer. His Bengali prose works earned for him the title of father of Bengali prose literature. An orthodox Hindu, he refused to attend Government functions where his garb of *dhota*, *chaddar* and slippers was banned, even though he was the Principal of the Government College, Calcutta. He was a great personality, charitable, benevolent, but unbending where self-respect was in question. He was one of the towering personalities of Bengal who significantly contributed to its re-awakening in the nineteenth century.

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A. A. Ghose found philosophy very dry. He tried to read Kant's *Critique*, "and after two pages I gave it up." Sri Aurobindo commented, "I made in fact no study of metaphysics in my school and College days. What little I knew about philosophy I picked up desultorily in my general reading.... German metaphysics and most European philosophy since the Greeks seemed to me a mass of abstractions with nothing concrete or real that could be firmly grasped, and written in a metaphysical jargon to which I had not the key. ... In sum, my interest in metaphysics was almost null and in general philosophy sporadic."

We see then that in England young A. A. Ghose almost excluded Europe's philosophy, and also science —"it was not in fashion at that time" —from his reading, but devoted his time to the study of her literature and history. History, let us not forget, is not a mere chronicling of who warred with whom and when, devastated how much land, and killed how many people. History becomes truly History when it chronicles the advance made by a people —the progress of a civilization. "But the real and perfect civilisation yet waits to be discovered," he wrote decades later, giving the net result of his studies, "for the life of mankind is still nine-tenths of barbarism to one-tenth of culture."

But it seems quite significant to me that from his very youth what interested Sri Aurobindo was the great movements of human consciousness through the ages.

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The Indian Majlis

There was, apart from poetry, another subject in which Sri Aurobindo's interest was far from 'sporadic' It was in 1891 that Charles Stewart Parnell (born 1846) died. He had led a movement in favour of home rule in Ireland. From A. A. Ghose's pen flowed the following lines:

"O pale and guiding light, now star unsphered,
 Deliverer lately hailed, since by our lords
 Most feared, most hated, hated because feared,
 Who smot'st them with an edge surpassing swords!
 Thou too wert then a child of tragic earth,
 Since vainly filled thy luminous doom of birth."

Appearances to the contrary, the youth was not only poet-dreamer, he was a poet-in-action.

The British Empire, we should remember, was at the height of its glory —and vainglory—and English intellectuals were often vying with one another to prove the superiority of the white race over others, of Christianity over other religions, and to demonstrate the inevitability of the 'success' of the

Western civilization. It was clearly the duty of the white man — and especially of the British — to bestow on his benighted brothers the high benefits of his enlightenment. Why, if he had taken such pains to establish his presence in barbarian regions of the world, it was purely from that selfless motive. How else could they ever be pulled from their hopeless quagmire?

It did not take Sri Aurobindo long to see through this self-satisfied glitter. Despite his limited contacts with his motherland, he soon came to understand the unique value of her civilization. "Look at the India of Vikramaditya," he wrote at the age of eighteen in *The Harmony of Virtue*, a dialogue in the manner of Plato between Keshav, a young Indian, and a few English students. "How gorgeous was her beauty! How Olympian the voices of her poets! How sensuous the pencil of her painters! How languidly voluptuous the outlines of her sculpture! In those days

every man was marvellous to himself and many were marvellous to their fellows; but the mightiest marvel of all were the philosophers. What a philosophy was that! For she scaled the empyrean on the winged sandals of meditation, soared above the wide fires of the sun and above the whirling stars, up where the flaming walls of the universe are guiltless of wind or cloud and there in the burning core of existence saw the face of the most high God. She saw God and did not perish; rather fell back to earth, not blasted with excess of light, but with a mystic burden on her murmuring lips too large for human speech to utter or for the human brain to understand. Such was she then. Yet five rolling centuries had not passed when sleepless all-beholding Surya saw the sons of Mahomet pour like locusts over the green fields of her glory

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and the wrecks of that mighty fabric whirling down the rapids of barbarism into the shores of night. They were barbarous, therefore mighty: we were civilized, therefore feeble."

"But was not your civilization premature?" asked one of Keshav's English friends. "The building too hastily raised disintegrates and collapses, for it has the seeds of death in its origin. May not the utilitarian justly condemn it as evil?"

The Indian boy replied: "What the utilitarian may not justly do, it is beyond the limits of my intellect to discover. Had it not been for these premature civilizations, had it not been for the Athens of Plato, the Rome of the Caesars, the India of Vikramaditya, what would the world be now? It was premature, because barbarism was yet predominant in the world; and it is wholly due to our premature efflorescence that your utilitarian can mount the high stool of folly and defile the memory of the great." Concluding, he said: "The utilitarian with his sordid creed may exalt the barbarism and spit his livid contempt upon culture, but the great heart of the world will ever beat more responsive to the flame-winged words of the genius than to the musty musings of the moralist. It is better to be great and perish, than to be little and live."

*

* *

In January 1941 some questions were put to Benoy-bhusan¹ concerning Sri Aurobindo's life at Cambridge.

1. *Sri Aurobindo (in Bengali) by Girijashankar Roy chowdhuri,*

His answers:

i) "Indians had a Debating Society at Cambridge called 'Cambridge Mejlis.' He took an active part in that. He met C. R. Das at Cambridge.

ii) "In the Mejlis he made a number of *strong speeches*, specially *about India*. That showed his interest. At that time the India Society was started. *The idea of terrorist activity (Bombing) came at that time.*"

iii) (G\ He helped in the election of some M. R — what do you know about this?) "Probably *Dadabhai Naoroji.*"

Dadabhai Naoroji (1825-1917), 'the grand old man of India,' belonged to the Parsi community and was a rich businessman of Bombay. Liberal in his outlook, he took great interest in the public affairs of India and was elected President of the Indian National Congress at its second session held in Calcutta in 1886. He became the first Indian to be elected a member of the House of Commons in England on a ticket of the Liberal party. This win was despite a pronouncement in bad taste of Lord Salisbury, who called Naoroji 'that black man of India.' Salisbury, an erstwhile Secretary of State, had also declared, "India must be bled." The Indian student community, including our A. A. Ghose, C. R. Das and K. G. Deshpande, reacted strongly to the public insult. In consequence Naoroji was elected and became a Member of Parliament, but in the process "I headed the list of the unsuccessful," as C. R. Das averred. Chittaranjan Das had gone to London in 1890 to study for the Indian Civil Service, and was turned down as a result of his protest.

A. A. Ghose followed closely all public questions and

began to keep a finger on the pulse of politics. It was in 1891, during his stay at Cambridge that the 'Indian Majlis' was started. It was an association of Indian students. The Majlis played an important part in the social life of Indian students in England and very often moulded their political outlook. It was during his college days that A. A. Ghose "began first to be interested in

Indian politics of which previously he knew nothing. His father began sending the newspaper *The Bengalee* with passages marked relating to cases of maltreatment of Indians by Englishmen and he wrote in his letters denouncing the British Government in India as a heartless Government." *The Bengalee* was the mouthpiece of Surendranath Bannerjee, a Moderate leader, who, at one time, was regarded as the uncrowned king of Bengal. But that was before Sri Aurobindo entered the political arena. "At the age of eleven Aurobindo had already received strongly the impression that a period of general upheaval and great revolutionary changes was coming in the world and he himself was destined to play a part in it. His attention was now drawn to India and this feeling was soon canalised into the idea of the liberation of his own country. But the 'firm decision' took full shape only towards the end of another four years. It had already been made when he went to Cambridge and as a member and for some time secretary of the Indian Majlis at Cambridge he delivered many revolutionary speeches which, as he afterwards learnt, had their part in determining the authorities to exclude him for the Indian Civil Service; the failure in the riding test was only the occasion, for in some other cases an opportunity was given for remedying this defect in India itself."

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Thus both Sri Aurobindo and Chittaranjan Das were 'excluded' from the Indian Civil Service, as was S. N. Bannerjee, by the British Government —exclusions that were to rebound on it.

Sri Aurobindo, however, avowed that it was he who chose not to appear for the riding test, for "they gave me another chance, and again I didn't appear. Then they rejected me."

A rejection that was to change the course of history.

On 17 November 1892 the Civil Service Commission informed the India Office that "although several opportunities have been offered to Mr. A. A. Ghose of attending for examination in Riding ... he has repeatedly failed to attend at the time appointed;" therefore they were "unable to certify that he is qualified to be appointed to the Civil Service of India." Whereupon a minute was prepared in the office of the Secretary of State 'for information': "Mr. Ghose obtained the 11th place at the open competition of 1890, was No. 23 in the First Periodical Examination, No. 19 in the Second Periodical and No. 37 in the final last August."

That quite shows A. A. Ghose's flagging interest in the Indian Civil Service.

"I appeared for the I.C.S.," replied Sri Aurobindo to a Gujarati doctor-disciple, Dr. Manilal, in December 1938, "because my father wanted it and I was too young to understand. Later I found out what sort of work it was and I had no interest in administrative life." He said frankly, "My interest was in poetry and literature and the study of languages and patriotic action." Then he let fall, "I didn't want to be in the British



Government Service. I had a strong dislike for the British."

"But then why did you appear for the I.C.S. exam at all?"

"I had no intention to do it," replied Sri Aurobindo. "It was my father who wanted me to be a Civilian. I had to play this trick [of appearing late for the test], otherwise my father and everybody would howl. My poet brother was horrified to see me along with my elder brother smoking and playing cards at the Liberal Club after avoiding the riding test. When they came to know they all asked me to try for another chance. But I didn't want it and I knew too that the British Government wouldn't give me another chance." '

"Why?"

"My record was too bad." "How?"

"They thought that I was a revolutionary, giving seditious speeches in the Indian*Majlis. There was a man named Mehedi Hussein, an Indian Deputy Magistrate —I don't know why he went to England—who used to come to the Majlis and was supposed to be a spy. He may have reported to the Government."

Thus the British Government — its India Office — dropped Sri Aurobindo like a hot potato. No, no, he was not 'hot'! Never. He was the Fire. During the Swadeshi days he came to be known as 'Fire-spark.' Or 'a volcano,' as Sister Nivedita saw immediately when they met.

Mother said, "A volcano upside down."

30

Dream or Destiny ?

"It was father's fault that I failed in the riding test," Sri Aurobindo said, recalling that particular episode in his life. It was 16 January 1939, and the conversation was recorded by Purani. "He did not send money and the riding lessons at Cambridge then were rather costly. The teacher was

also careless ; so long as he got his money he simply left me with the horse and I was not particular."

The final rejection of A. A. Ghose's candidature by the India Office was conveyed to him in a letter dated 7 December 1892. By the time the news reached Calcutta, Dr. K. D. Ghose was dead.

The Bengalee,

"We are very much concerned," it wrote, "to hear that Mr. Arabinda Ghosh, who so successfully passed the Civil Service Examination the other day, failed to secure the Service for want of a riding certificate for which he could not pay in time the trifling amount of £ 10 or so. Young Arabinda's loss is sad indeed. Not to speak of the expense which he had to sustain and the toil which he had to undergo during these years for preparing himself for the coveted Service and the bereavement

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on account of the sad death of his beloved father, the present disappointment resulting from so slight a cause must have proved too much for him.

"Is there none to represent his case, which is a peculiarly exceptional one, to the Secretary of State? . . ."

There was. Already two Englishmen had tried to intercede on behalf of A. A. Ghose. The first was James Sutherland Cotton, brother of Sir Henry Cotton, who as we have seen had already helped to provide Benoybhusan with a job. J. S. Cotton was born in India at Coonoor, in the district of the Nilgiris of the Madras Presidency.

In his letter dated November 19, 1892, J. S. Cotton writes¹: ". . . My present object in addressing you is to endeavour to arouse your good will on behalf of Mr. A. A. Ghose, who has been rejected by the Civil Service Commissioners as a probationary candidate for the Indian Civil Service. I went this morning to the office of the Commission, where I was confidentially informed of the circumstances of the case (which did not materially differ from the story he had already told me)....

"As you know, Mr. Ghose was disqualified for failing to pass his examination in riding, or perhaps I should say, for failing to keep the appointment made for him by the examiner, after he

had previously shown similar want of punctuality and disregard for the requirements of the examiner.

"His excuse (such as it is) is that want of money prevented

1. To Sir Arthur G. Macpherson, Secretary, Judicial and Public Dept., India Office.

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him from taking the needful lessons in riding, and that, at the last, anxiety and moral cowardice made him lose his head. He tells me that he did turn up at Woolwich for the examination, half an hour late.

"It happens that I have known Mr. A. A. Ghose and his two brothers for the past five years, and that I have been a witness of the pitiable straits to which they have all three been reduced through the failure of their father, a Civil Surgeon in Bengal and (I believe) a most respectable man, to supply them with adequate resources. In addition, they have lived an isolated life, without any Englishman to take care of them or advise them.

"I could tell you a great deal more if you would care to give me a personal interview. I must content myself now with stating that, should the Secretary of State feel himself able to give Mr. Ghose one more chance, I undertake to provide the necessary expenses of riding lessons, journeys to Woolwich etc., and further to do my best to see that his conduct to the Commissioners is regular and becoming."

The concern of the Englishman for the Indian youth is touching. He took, in fact, a strong interest in all the three brothers.

The other supportive Englishman was G. W. Prothero, then a Senior Tutor at Cambridge; he was a prominent historian, and was subsequently knighted. He dropped a letter to James Cotton the next day, that is 20 November 1892, which the latter forwarded to the Civil Service Commission.

"... I am very sorry to hear what you tell me about

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Ghose, that he has been rejected in his final I.C.S. Examination for failure in riding. His conduct throughout his two years here was most exemplary. He held a foundation scholarship, which he obtained (before passing his first I.C.S. Examination) by open competition, in classics. His pecuniary circumstances prevented him from resigning this, when he became a Selected Candidate, and the regulations of the scholarship obliged him to devote a great part of his time to classics, of course to some extent to the disadvantage of his I.C.S. studies. He performed his part of the bargain, as regards the College, most honourable, and took a high place in the First Class of the Classical Tripos at the end of the second year of his residence. He also obtained certain college prizes, showing command of English and literary ability. That a man should have been able to do this (which alone is quite enough for most undergraduates), and at the same time to keep up his I.C.S. works, proves very unusual industry and capacity. Besides his classical scholarships he possessed a knowledge of English Literature far beyond the average of undergraduates, and wrote a much better English style than most young Englishmen. That a man of this calibre should be lost to Indian Government merely because he failed in sitting on a horse or did not keep an appointment appears to me, I confess, a piece of official short-sightedness which it would be hard to beat.

"Moreover the man has not only ability but character. He has had a very hard and anxious time of it for the last two years. Supplies from home have almost failed, and he has had to keep his two brothers as well as himself, and yet his courage

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and perseverance have never failed. I have several times written to his father on his behalf, but for the most part unsuccessfully. It is only lately that I managed to extract from him enough to pay some tradesmen who would otherwise have put his son into the County Court. I am quite sure that these pecuniary difficulties were not due to any extravagance on Ghose's part: his whole way of life, which was simple and penurious in the extreme, is against this : they were due entirely to circumstances beyond his control. But they must have hampered him in many ways, and probably prevented him from spending enough on horses to enable him to learn to ride. I can fully believe that his inability to keep his appointment at Woolwich was due to the want of cash.

"In conclusion, I hope sincerely that your efforts to reinstate him as a Selected Candidate will prove successful, for I think, if he is finally turned out, it will be, however legally justifiable, a moral injustice to him, and a very real loss to the Indian Government. It may also perhaps be

suggested that to reject so able a Hindoo because he cannot ride is likely to give rise to serious misunderstanding in India, and to open the door to a charge of partiality, which is of course absolutely untenable, but which might be put forward by natives with some plausibility."

Such a testimony coming from his College teacher, unsolicited as it was, highlights the character of Sri Aurobindo as a student, and bears out the Spartan life he led.

Under moral pressure from J. S. Cotton and persuasion from his eldest brother, A. A. Ghose wrote on November 21 a letter to the Earl of Kimberley who was then the Secretary of

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State for India, requesting him to grant him another chance for the riding test.

But the Earl had already made up his mind, and refused to take a compassionate view of the case as the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for India, George Russel, urged: "The candidate seems to me a remarkably deserving man, and I can quite believe that poverty was the cause of his failures to appear." Rejecting all appeals to give the candidate one more chance, Kimberley added in his note of December 2: "I must add however as an 'obiter dictum' that I should much doubt whether Mr. Ghose would be a desirable addition to the Service — and if Mr. Prothero or any one else is under the impression that a Hindoo ought to have a special exemption from the requirement of being able to ride, the sooner he is disabused of such an absurd notion the better." Professor Prothero's good intentions had obviously raised the Earl's hackles.

In a letter dated 7 December 1892, the India Office informed A. A. Ghose about their final decision to reject him.

On 12 December, A. A. Ghose accepting the rejection — with relief and joy — applied "for the remainder of the allowance that would have been due to me as a Probationer. ..."

Following the request, a minute dated 14 December 1892 was prepared in the office of the Secretary of State: ". . . Mr. J. S. Cotton informs me that he has ground for hoping that Mr. G. will obtain at once an appointment in the service of the Gaekwar of Baroda.... As this is the first case of a candidate rejected after passing his Periodical and Final examinations on account of failing to pass his Riding Examination it is submitted

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that the allowance of £ 150 be paid to Mr. A. A. Ghose. . . .

"There is," observed the Judicial Secretary of the India Office, "in my opinion, no doubt whatever as to the propriety of paying this sum to Mr. Ghose. He went to Cambridge in the faith that he would receive his allowance, provided he behaved well, to defray the expenses of his residence in the University, and the fact that he has failed to pass in riding does not affect the obligation of the Sec. of State."

The authorization was duly intimated to A. A. Ghose on 20 December. On 22 December the Office of the Accountant General remitted a certain sum to him: "Passed for payment less Income Tax: University Certificate retained." A government must have its pound of flesh!

A. A. Ghose promptly paid the arrears to his landlady. "Our landlady was an angel," recalled Sri Aurobindo. "She was long-suffering and never asked us for money. For months and months we didn't pay. I wonder how she managed. It was from the I.C.S. stipend that I paid her afterwards. She came from Somerset and settled in London as a landlady —perhaps after she was widowed."

He then said, "My failure in the I.C.S. riding test was a great disappointment to my father, for he had arranged everything for me through Sir Henry Cotton. He had arranged to get me posted at Arrah [in Bihar] which was regarded as a very fine place and near Sir Henry. He had requested him to look after me. All that came down like a wall."

He continued after a pause: "I wonder what would have happened if I had joined the Civil Service. I think they would

have chucked me out for laziness and arrears of work!"

But the Gaekwad of Baroda with whom he took service (we first hear of it in the Minute of 14 December 1892) never even thought of "chucking him out" for anything during the thirteen years Sri Aurobindo worked for the State of Baroda.

"The thought of Baroda ..." Sri Aurobindo fell silent, then continued, "brings to my mind my first connection with the Gaekwad. It is strange how things arrange themselves at times. When I

failed in the I.C.S. riding test and was looking for a job, the Gaekwad happened to be in London. I don't remember whether he called us or we met him.... I think I applied for the job when the Gaekwad was in England. Sir Henry Cotton's brother asked me to do it and through his influence I came in contact with the Gaekwad-

"We consulted an authority about the pay we should propose. We had no idea about these things. He said we could propose Rs. 200, but should accept even 130, for that was quite a good sum. He was calculating according to the pound which was equivalent to Rs. 13; so he took £ 10 as quite a good sum. I left the negotiations to my eldest brother and J. Cotton. The Gaekwad went about telling people that he had got a Civil Service man for Rs. 200! But Cotton ought to have known better." Cotton afterwards came on a visit to Baroda and saw Sri Aurobindo who was teaching in the College.

However, a question persisted. What was it, I asked myself, beyond all these explanations, that made Sri Aurobindo wander in the streets of London when he should have taken a train to Woolwich ? Why really did he absent himself from the

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riding test? An insignificant act on the face of it, but oh, so unthinkably astonishing in its consequences . . .

The question had nagged at me for long when one day I stumbled on a short note in a Bengali book written by Motilal Roy. Here is an English translation.

"I note what I heard in 1913 from Sri Aurobindo himself:

" 'On the eve of appearing for the Riding Examination I became engrossed. Then, in a state of drowsiness, I had two dreams. First I met the presiding Deity of Britain's destiny. I was on the point of stepping towards the throne of the Emperor of India ; she (the Deity) greeted me smilingly, with many favourable words. The next instant a Sannyasin appeared with a trident in hand. Giving me the mantra of Indian culture he awakened me. His message I made my ideal. I absented myself from the Riding Examination.'"

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The Return

In one of his letters Sri Aurobindo wrote to his wife: "At fourteen the seed sprouted and at eighteen it established itself firmly." Commenting on it, many years later, Sri Aurobindo said, "At eighteen, I think we started in London the secret Lotus and Dagger Society. ... It lasted only for a day."

Correcting a wrong piece of information given by a biographer, Sri Aurobindo developed the point. "The Indian students in London did once meet to form a secret society called romantically the 'Lotus and Dagger'," wrote Sri Aurobindo, "in which each member vowed to work for the liberation of India generally and to take some special work in furtherance of that end. Aurobindo did not form the society, but he became a member along with his brothers. But the society was still-born. This happened immediately before the return to India and when he had finally left Cambridge. Indian politics at that time was timid and moderate and this was the first attempt of the kind by Indian students in England." Sri Aurobindo was to change that 'timid and moderate' approach in Indian politics. He had sharpened his pen to such a cutting edge that soon it

would start smiting the Moderates and the foreign masters with 'an edge surpassing swords'!

Sri Aurobindo's first turn towards spiritual seeking came in England in the last year of his stay there. The Bible was the only scripture with which he had been acquainted in his childhood. The narrowness and intolerance of Christianity repelled him considerably. "After a short period of complete atheism, he accepted the Agnostic attitude. In his studies for the I.C.S., however, he came across a brief and very scanty and bare statement of the 'six philosophies' of India and he was especially struck by the concept of the Atman in the Adwaita. It was borne in upon his mind that here might be a true clue to the reality behind life and the world." This referred to Max Müller's *Sacred books of the East* series. "At London," said Sri Aurobindo, "when I was reading Max Müller's translations of Vedanta I came upon the idea of Atman, the Self, and thought that this was the true thing to be realized in life. How do you explain this? You can't say it was the atmosphere of the place. It was in the blood or perhaps carried over from a past life." Otherwise, Sri Aurobindo made no study of Indian Philosophy. In fact, there was no positive religious or

spiritual element in the education he received in England. "The only personal contact with Christianity (that of Nonconformist England) was of a nature to repel rather than attract. The education received was mainly classical and had a purely intellectual and aesthetic influence; it did not stimulate any interest in spiritual life. My attention was not drawn to the spirituality of Europe of the Middle Ages; my knowledge of it was of a general character

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and I never underwent its influence." Sri Aurobindo "never once" attended the weekly meetings of the Fabian Society. Nor was he ever a Freemason. "My eldest brother was; from him I gathered that it was nothing. But Freemasonry had something when it was started."

It is strange that as soon as he reached India, a deliberate will for renationalization came "by natural attraction to Indian culture and ways of life and a temperamental feeling and preference for all that was Indian," as Sri Aurobindo put it. Incidentally, he who was left indifferent by European philosophy, was profoundly stirred by the Indian. "The first Indian writings that took hold of me were the Upanishads and these raised in me strong enthusiasm . . ." And he repeated, "I remember when I first read the 'Om Shanti Shanti' of the Upanishads it had a powerful effect on me."

Sri Aurobindo was not one to take his attraction or feelings upon trust. He would always test them to find out if they had any foundation upon truth. For he was that rarity who could winnow out junk from the good stuff.

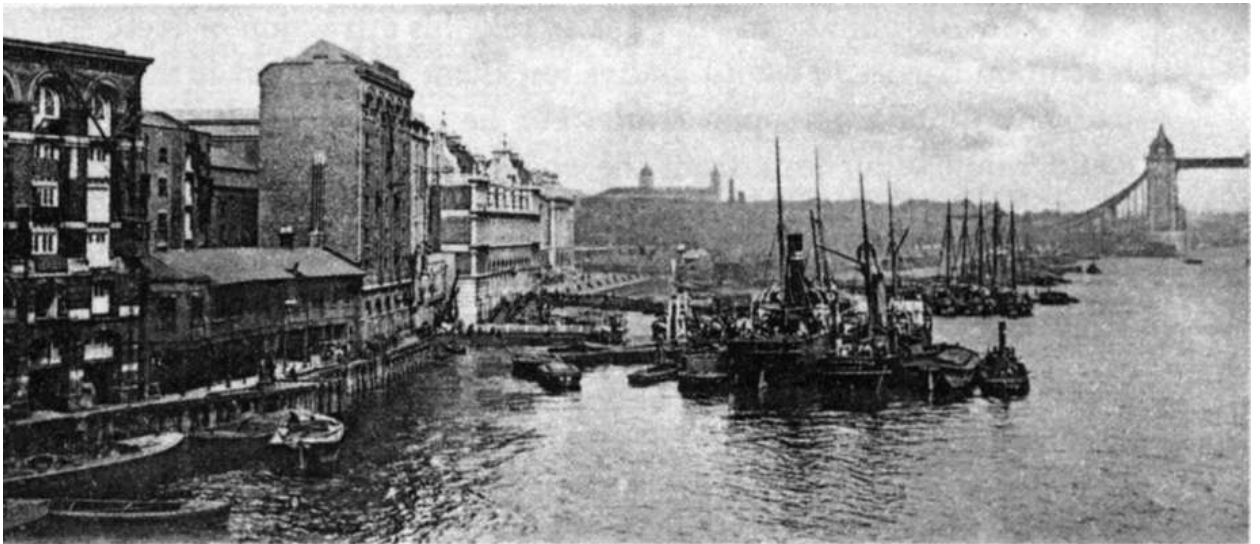
He had grown up among the "hard-headed, Pharisaic, shop-keeping Anglo-Saxon . . . His institutions," of which Sri Aurobindo had a first-hand experience, "are without warmth, sympathy, human feeling, rigid and accurate like his machinery, meant for immediate and practical gains." About the Western civilization itself he said that it had 'lowered' the moral tone of humanity. But his completely European education had fitted him admirably for his future tasks.

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* *

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The year 1892, like its predecessors, had gone with its burden of 'trifles light as air.' Singing its swan song it had disappeared for ever, giving place to the smiling new child: 1893. The youth was soon to pick up its drum of victory and the call of Mother India was to be echoed and re-echoed as it went forth. For this was the year when Swami Vivekananda went to America to take part in the Parliament of Religions at Chicago, in September, and Sri Aurobindo returned home in February. "The one to illuminate the West with the light of the East. The other to liberate the Mother and through her liberate the world," observed S. K. Mitra. Then in November 1893 came to India Annie Besant (1847-1933), who was to spearhead the country's Home Rule movement. A landmark year for India.



A view of the Thames, London, late last century

Sri Aurobindo was in the mailboat *Carthage* when she set sail for India on 12 January, Vivekananda's thirtieth birth anniversary.

He had driven from 6 Burlington Road, where he had taken lodgings after leaving Cambridge in October 1892, to the docks of Thames where his ship was anchored. The *Carthage* left the London's Royal Albert docks around 9 A.M. On her deck stood A. A. Ghose. After she reached the open sea, he gazed at the receding English coast. It was to be his last look at the country where he had passed his childhood and adolescence. He had been taken there when he was but a child of seven, and now he was returning to his own motherland, a young man of twenty. But he

had not spread his roots in England. His being was like the sacred tree of the Upanishads: roots in heaven, branches spread downward.

No, there was "no such regret in leaving England, no attachment to the past or misgivings for the future. Few friendships were made in England and none very intimate There was an attachment to English and European thought and literature, but not to England as a country." Ara had no ties there and did not make England his adopted country, as his poet-brother Mano did for a time. "If there was attachment to a European land as a second country, it was intellectually and emotionally to one not seen or lived in in this life, not England but France."

France. Mirra was growing up there. She was almost fifteen now.

Here is the itinerary of *Carthage*:

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London, 12 January 1893, 8:50 A.M.

Gibraltar, 17 January

Malta, 20 January

Brindisi, 22 January

Port Said, 26 January

Suez, 27 January

Aden, 1 February

Bombay, 6 February 1893, 10:55 A.M.

*

* *

After fourteen years Sri Aurobindo set foot again on Indian soil. The darkness which had enveloped him in Darjeeling and was always hanging on to him all along his stay in England "left me only when I was coming back to India."

A curious thing happened as soon as Ara landed at Bombay. He began to get the experience of the Self. "A vast calm descended upon him at the moment when he stepped first on Indian soil after his long absence, in fact with his first step on the Apollo Bunder in Bombay (this calm surrounded him and remained for long months afterwards)."

Sri Aurobindo explained, "I did not know, of course, that it was an experience. It was a sense of calm and vastness pervading everywhere, and I had not got it in the steamer."

That was how India welcomed her returning son Ara.

6 February 1893 is a date to remember.



Appendix

The Invasion That Never Was

Every Indian child who goes to school soon meets with that special moment when he is told about his early ancestors, their origin, their story, their achievements. A window suddenly opens, his small horizon strains to encompass those faraway and mysterious times. Being Indian seems to acquire a greater meaning —though one that will long remain as misty as what he is being taught.

And what is he taught? If anything at all, it will be that some 1500 years before the Christian era, hordes of semi-barbarian, Sanskrit-speaking nomads called 'Aryans' poured from Central Asia or thereabouts into north-west India, where they came upon the highly developed Indus Valley or Harappan civilization, which had been flourishing there for over a millennium and whose inhabitants were Dravidians. The invading 'Aryans' destroyed this civilization and pushed the Dravidians south, then over a few centuries composed the Vedas, got Sanskrit to spread all over India, and built the mighty Ganges civilization. That, in a nutshell, is what most 'educated' Indians know of their distant past, and is still today presented as solid knowledge, something no one need or should argue about. It is there not only in textbooks, but in 'authoritative' reference books and in the best dictionaries.

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The sun's revolving around the earth, too, was for centuries such a dead certainty to early European astronomers that Copernicus, Galileo and Kepler had to be dangerous heretics to think otherwise —luckily, that certainty is now dead indeed, as are the countless instances of human blindness that litter the ages. The 'Aryan Invasion Theory,' as it is called, is another such instance. As established and apparently indisputable as it may have become through decades of thoughtless repetition, it does not rest on a single solid piece of evidence. In fact, it has by now been thoroughly disproved by all the evidence brought to light by archaeology, astronomy, ancient geography and mathematics. Nevertheless, those in India who today argue against it are still eyed with considerable suspicion, as if they had committed some awful crime, and we can expect this venerated if crumbling pillar of ancient history to figure in our Indian textbooks for some more time, during which the roots of India's civilization and culture will continue to be

somewhere in Central Asia, just as the sun kept revolving around the earth for a few centuries after Copernicus, and species remained forbidden to evolve for decades after Darwin.

But how did this theory come to be so widely accepted if it is wholly groundless? To begin with, it was propounded by European scholars who could not help finding striking similarities between Sanskrit and Greek and Latin, pointing to an ancient link between these languages. And since the British Empire was then at the height of its glory and Europe as a whole was basking in her new-found Enlightenment, these proud scholars could hardly accept that they owed their languages and civilization to a benighted India —it *had* to be the other way

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round.¹ At the same time, the Indian mind had become largely subservient to the West (is it much better today?), and would rather listen to these worthy scholars led by the prestigious Max Muller (whose research work, interestingly, was commissioned and generously paid for by the East India Company) than to India's own savants and seers.

Swami Dayananda Saraswati was perhaps the first to reject the Aryan invasion theory, emphasizing that the word *arya* referred in the Veda to a moral or inner quality, not to any race or people. Swami Vivekananda followed suit with his characteristic vigour; in a lecture he remarked scornfully: "And what your European Pundits say about the Aryans swooping down from some foreign land snatching away the land of aborigines and settling in India by exterminating them is all nonsense, foolish talk. Strange that our Indian scholars too say amen to them." He added sadly, "And all these monstrous lies are being taught to our boys." They still are, a hundred years later. In another lecture, he concluded, "As for the truth of these theories, there is not one word in our scriptures, not one, to prove that the Aryan ever came from anywhere outside India, and in ancient India was included Afghanistan The whole of India is Aryan, nothing else." Then Sri Aurobindo, taking a straight look at the Veda, observed, "It did not take long to see that the Vedic indications of a racial division between Aryans and Dasyus and the identification of the latter with the indigenous Indians were of a far flimsier character than I had

1. Voltaire is a notable exception; he saw in India the source of much of Europe's civilization.

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supposed." This division was "a conjecture supported only by other conjectures ... A myth of the philologists." He forcefully refuted "the artificial and inimical distinction of Aryan and Dravidian which an erroneous philology has driven like a wedge into the homogeneous Indo-Afghan race." Some eighty years later, we know that the 'wedge,' driven now not only by scholars but also by politicians, has only gone absurdly deeper and, in South India for instance, has led to riots and taken lives : the Dravidians are India's 'original inhabitants,' while North Indians are 'Aryan invaders'! Yet Sri Aurobindo also showed that the original connection between the Sanskrit and Tamil tongues was "far closer and more extensive than is usually supposed" and that they were "two divergent families derived from one lost primitive tongue." More than anything else, Sri Aurobindo, in his *Secret of the Veda*, recovered its long lost symbolism and brought to light the Rishis' extraordinary experience.

But none listened —we Indians have long had the inexplicable habit of accepting change only if it comes to us from the West. Yet in recent years, some voices have begun to be heard, both in the West and in India, asserting that the time has come to chuck out this worm-eaten theory once and for all. The cumulative evidence from all scientific branches of knowledge, especially archaeology, has become simply too overwhelming to be ignored, except for historians with dubious motives.

Let us cast a glance at a few pieces of this evidence, making good use of the points established by Sri Aurobindo and supple-

meriting them with those brought to light by recent research.

What strikes us at first sight is that the Aryan invasion theory and its resulting contrived reconstruction of India's ancient history is in head-on contradiction with Indian tradition. To begin with, no Sanskrit (excuse me, 'Aryan') scripture makes any reference to an original homeland outside India; quite the contrary, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Puranas depict a highly developed civilization growing on Indian land and spanning several millennia, and a Great War waged around 3100 B.C. It is hard to imagine that the Vedic people, who had such a strong bond with the land, its mountains and forests and rivers, would not have carried into their culture the least memory of their supposed ancestral steppes in Central Asia. This is all the more

strange if we remember that the Epics and Puranas are regarded as based on historical tradition (*itihāsa*), considerably embellished, to be sure, but still with a kernel of historicity. Of course, this historicity is all rubbish in the eyes of the 'invasionists' (though they may put it more politely), since the civilization those scriptures refer to could only come into being a few centuries after the invasion, i.e. from about 1000 B.C. The Great War, therefore, is at best, in the words of a prominent Indian historian, the glorification of a 'local feud' between two Aryan tribes!

That brings us to the next aberration: these learned people ask us to believe that in just a few centuries, five at the most, the semiprimitive, cattle-rearing Aryans not only conquered North India, but established there a great civilization and created all over the subcontinent a unique philosophy and culture founded on Sanskrit and the Veda—quite a stunning

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development. Anyone with some historical sense knows that civilizations take millennia, not a few centuries, to evolve, mature and spread. As Sri Aurobindo puts it, "The time limit allowed for the growth of civilization is impossibly short."

These points alone are enough for an unbiased mind to reject the ill-conceived theory. But let us now see what archaeology has to say in the matter. Its first observation, a negative one on which all archaeologists agree, is that no findings have been made east of the Indus which could be associated with an Aryan people coming into India; surprisingly the 'invaders,' who swamped a large part of India, have left no trace of their arrival. Then, we have the first archaeological discoveries in 1921 of the Indus Valley or Harappan civilization, whose dates (3000-1700 B.C.) compelled most scholars to conclude that the Harappan civilization was 'pre-Aryan' and pre-Vedic. Yet seals depicting deities seated in yogic postures, fire and sacrificial altars, figures of the so-called Pasupati and the bull, worship of a Mother goddess—all these are strongly suggestive of Vedic culture. Moreover, recent research (in particular by S. R. Rao and Subhash Kak) has shown beyond doubt a strong affinity between the Indus Valley language and Vedic Sanskrit. Finally, were the Harappan civilization indeed pre-Aryan (Dravidian or not), we would have the strange paradox, cogently pointed out by David Frawley, of the Indus Valley inhabitants leaving behind no literature, though they were literate, but a huge physical presence now brought to light by archaeology, while the Aryans, who though illiterate gave us an

enormous literature, left no physical trace of any sort! All this has made an increasing number of Indian and Western archaeologists veer to the view that the

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Harappan civilization was late or even post-Vedic.

That is not all. The Veda, as we know, lavishly honours the river Saraswati. The great river has been found again —rather its long dried-up bed, traced in the early nineties by archaeologists (notably V. S. Wakankar), and confirmed by satellite photography. It flowed down from the Himalayas reaching the plains near Ambala in Punjab, then through Rajasthan and the Rann of Kutch in a course roughly parallel to the Indus, and finally into the Arabian sea. It was indeed a mighty river, six to eight kilometres in width, with the Sutlej, the Yamuna, and even at one time the Ganga as its tributaries. Detailed studies have shown that it changed course several times before drying up completely around 1900 B.C. As it happens, its location, its physical characteristics, even the stages of its drying, are all described in the Rig-Veda, the Mahabharata and several Puranas —scriptures which the invasion theory forcibly dates later than 1000 B.C., nearly a thousand years after the Saraswati went dry! Moreover, hundreds of Harappan sites have been found along its course (many more than along the Indus), further confirming the Vedic nature of the Harappan civilization. Indeed, some scholars are now suggesting that the Indus Valley or Harappan civilization would be better named the 'Saraswati civilization.'

Let us now pay a visit to Dwaraka, on the eastern tip of Saurashtra in Gujarat, the legendary town of Lord Krishna. Legendary? In the 1980s, the discovery of massive submerged walls revealed the existence of a major ancient port which served as a gateway to the subcontinent. This corroborated the story of the submergence of Krishna's city, regarded till now as a 'myth'

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from the Mahabharata. Although the Dwaraka findings, carbon-dated to about 1400 B.C., do not as yet fit with the traditional date ascribed to Krishna's time (let us however venture to suggest that further exploration will reveal more ancient remains), even this 'recent' date is incompatible with 'Aryan' tribes creating a great urban civilization in just a century! Or else, if the Dwaraka ruins are a late development of the 'pre-Aryan' Harappan civilization, what becomes of its

association with 'Aryan' Krishna, or at least (if Krishna is denied the honour of a physical existence) with the 'Aryan' Mahabharata ? Could this self-inflicted puzzle be the reason why S. R. Rao's rediscovery of ancient Dwaraka has not attracted the degree of attention which that of ancient Troy by Schliemann did?

Is further proof needed? Well, there is plenty of it. From astronomy, since certain *Brahmanas*, which followed the Veda, contain references to celestial events such as solstices and equinoxes which can be dated as far as 3000 B.C. From mathematics, as the mathematical knowledge at the basis of the remarkably planned Harappan cities (from 3000 B.C.) and their elaborate fire altars is contained in certain *Sutras*, themselves dating later than the *Brahmanas*. From metallurgy, from climatology, from . . . but this should be enough.¹

1. An unbiased study of all available elements from all these fields has now established that the Veda must have been composed between 7000 and 4000 B.C. See *the Myth of the Aryan Invasion of India* by David Frawley (Delhi, Voice of India, 1994), *The Astronomical Code of the Rigveda* by

Defendants of the Aryan invasion theory find themselves very much in the position of the geocentric astronomers who were compelled to assign highly convoluted and unnatural orbits to the planets in order to keep them revolving around the earth. Our historians are not shy of tying themselves into knots, as long as they can somehow preserve the non-Indian origin of India's civilization. But the moment we look at things simply, without prejudice, taking all the hard evidence into account, everything falls naturally into place, and the picture that emerges of India's ancient past is one of continuity through the ages: the Vedic Age maturing before 4000 B.C., followed by the Saraswati civilization which was its natural outgrowth, and by the Ganges civilization after the drying up of the Saraswati. India's ancient past has been delivered from the straitjacket of the invasionists. No doubt, much has to be integrated into the new perspective, and much more remains to be discovered, but we can now breathe a little more freely.

This picture is not wishful thinking: it is supported in a remarkably coherent way by both tradition and modern research. Nothing in our knowledge of those remote times warrants the fallacy of a sharp demarcation between Aryan and Dravidian races, languages, civilizations, even deities (Shiva is Dravidian, Vishnu is Aryan!). Whatever twists and

Subhash Kak (Delhi, Aditya Prakashan, 1994), and *The Politics of History* by Navaratna S. Rajaram (Delhi, Voice of India, 1995). This last work, besides giving irrefutable evidence against the Aryan invasion theory, relates its genesis and exposes in devastating fashion the intellectual dishonesty and camouflaged ignorance of nineteenth-century Western scholars and their Indian followers till today.

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turns the Indian civilization may have followed, whatever migrations may have taken place to and from India, a rigid break between pre- and post-Aryan India finds justification neither in the Scriptures nor in archaeology. It is safe to predict that future archaeological findings will further confirm the essential continuity of the Indian civilization.

Why, one may ask in the end, should we worry so much over debunking a theory about our remote past? Precisely because it denies that remote past. Because it turns the Veda into a largely meaningless hodgepodge of superstition cobbled together by aboriginal savages. Because it makes nonsense of what has been for millennia the source of India's spiritual life and strength. And because the past is never past, never dead, and often holds the key to the future.

"The recovery of the perfect truth of the Veda is not merely a desideratum for our modern intellectual curiosity, but a practical necessity for the future of the human race," asserted Sri Aurobindo. "For I firmly believe that the secret concealed in the Veda, when entirely discovered, will be found to formulate perfectly that knowledge and practice of a divine life to which the march of humanity, after long wanderings in the satisfaction of the intellect and senses, must inevitably return."

M. D.

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Mother's Chronicles

Book Four: Mirra – Sri Aurobindo

Chronology

- 1824 – Birth of SWAMI DAYANANDA SARASWATI at Tankara, Gujarat.
- 1825 – The first steam railway, in England.
- 1826, September 7 – Birth of RAJNARAIN BOSE, Sri Aurobindo's maternal grandfather, at Boral, Bengal.
- 1828, August 20 – RAJA RAMMOHAN ROY founds the first Brahma Samaj.
- 1833, September 27 – Death of Raja Rammohan Roy.
- 1836, February 18 – Birth of SRI RAMAKRISHNA.
- 1838, June 26 – Birth of BANKIM CHANDRA CHATTERJEE.
- 1843 – Rajnarain Bose's first marriage, with Prasanna-moyee Mitra.
- July 5 – Birth of MAURICE ALFASSA, Mother's father in Adrianople, Turkey.
- 1844, November 21 – Birth of KRISHNA DHAN GHOSE, Sri Aurobindo's father, at Patna.
- 1847, April – Rajnarain Bose's second marriage, to Nistarini Dutta.
- 1851, February 21 – Rajnarain Bose is appointed Headmaster of Midnapore Government School.
- 1852 – His daughter SWARNALATA, Sri Aurobindo's mother, is born at Midnapore.
- 1856 – Birth of LALA LAJPAT RAI.
- July 23 – Birth of BAL GANGADHAR TILAK at Ratnagiri, Maharashtra.
- 1857 – The Sepoy Mutiny sweeps over much of North India.

- 1857, December 18 – Birth of MATHILDE ISMALUN, Mother's mother, in Alexandria.
- 1858, November 7 – Birth of BEPIN CHANDRA PAL, at Srihatta, Bengal.
- 1859 – Publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*.
- 1861, May 8 – Birth of RABINDRANATH TAGORE in Calcutta.
- 1863, January 12 – Birth of Narendra Nath Datta in Calcutta, SWAMI VIVEKANANDA.
- 1864 – Krishna Dhan marries Swarnalata.
- 1867 – Birth of BENOYBHUSAN, Sri Aurobindo's eldest brother, at Bhagalpur.
- 1869, January 1 – Rajnarain Bose retires, and lives in Calcutta until 1879, where he contributes to the birth of nationalist feelings.
- January 19 – Birth of MANMOHAN, Sri Aurobindo's second elder brother, at Bhagalpur.
- October 2 – Birth of M. K. GANDHI.
- November 17 – Opening of the Suez Canal.
- 1870, February 15 – Krishna Dhan Ghose sails to England for further medical studies.
- 1870s – Acceleration of the Industrial Revolution in the West with the first commercial electrical generators, followed by alternators and transformers.
- 1871, Sept. or Oct. – K. D. Ghose returns to India.
- 1872 – Serial publication of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel *Anandamath*, which includes the 'Bande Mataram' song.
- August 15 – SRI AUROBINDO is born in Calcutta.
- 1873-74 – Widespread famine in Bengal and Bihar causes a large number of deaths.
- 1874 – The first Impressionist exhibition, in Paris.
- June 18 – Maurice Alfassa and Mathilde Ismalun are married in Alexandria.
- 1875 – Swami Dayananda founds the Arya Samaj in Bombay.

- 1875 – Madame H. P. Blavatsky founds the Theosophical Society in the U.S.A.
- 1876 – Bell invents the telephone.
- Otto designs the internal combustion engine.
- July 13 – Birth of MATTEO ALFASSA, Mother's brother, at Alexandria.
- 1876-77 – Five million Indians die in famines affecting the whole country.
- 1877 – Queen Victoria is proclaimed Empress of India.
- Edison invents the phonograph.
- Benoybhusan, Manmohan, and Aurobindo are sent to Loretto Convent School at Darjeeling.
- September 3 – Birth of SAROJINI at Rangpur.
- 1878 – Edison and Swan invent the incandescent filament lamp.
- February 21 – MOTHER is born in Paris.
- 1879 – Pasteur discovers the principle of vaccination, and produces several vaccines in the following years.
- June – Krishna Dhan, Swarnalata, and their four children, sail to England. The three sons are left in the charge of the Drewett family in Manchester. Sri Aurobindo is tutored at home until 1884.
- September – Rajnarain Bose settles at Deoghar.
- 1880, January 5 – Birth of BARIN at Croydon, England.
- March – Swarnalata returns to India with Sarojini and Barin.
- 1883 – SWAMI DAYANANDA SARASWATI passes away.
- First All-India National Conference in Calcutta.
- August 27 – Java's Krakatoa volcano erupts, causing darkness at noon and triggering tidal waves: 36,000 people are drowned.
- 1884, September – Sri Aurobindo is admitted to St. Paul's School, London. Takes lodgings at 49, St. Stephen Avenue, Shepherd's Bush, London.

- 1885, January 12 – A powerful earthquake on the Shillong plateau, with an intensity of 8.7, causes widespread destruction.
- 1885, December 28 – First Session of the Indian National Congress at Bombay.
- 1886, August 16 – SRI RAMAKRISHNA passes away.
- 1887, March 6 – Birth of MRINALINI BOSE, Sri Aurobindo's wife.
- 1890, July – Sri Aurobindo is admitted on a scholarship to King's College, Cambridge.
- 1891 – Stoney theorizes the existence of the electron (established in the following years).
– Creation of the Indian Majlis in Cambridge, which Sri Aurobindo joins and where he makes speeches advocating India's freedom.
- 1892, May – Passes the first part of the Classical Tripos, with First Class Honours.
- August – Passes the final examination of the Indian Civil Service.
- October – Sri Aurobindo leaves Cambridge and takes lodgings at 6, Burlington Road, London. In London, he takes part in the creation of a secret society, 'Lotus and Dagger.' He has his first 'pre-yogic' experience, the mental experience of the Atman.
- November – Sri Aurobindo is disqualified from the Indian Civil Service after failing to appear at the riding examination.
- December – Sri Aurobindo obtains employment in the service of the Maharaja Gaekwad of Baroda.
- mid-Dec. – KRISHNA DHAN GHOSE, believing his son Auro dead in a shipwreck, passes away.
- 1893, January 12 – Sri Aurobindo leaves England by S. S. *Carthage*. Travels via Gibraltar, Port Said and Aden.
- February 6 – Lands at the Apollo Bunder, Bombay, where a 'vast calm' descends on him.

Acknowledgements

To depict Sri Aurobindo's childhood and his life in England, I have drawn liberally from his own letters, in particular those published under the title *Sri Aurobindo on Himself*. I also found much information in his talks with disciples, recorded by Purani in *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo* and by Nirodbaran in *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*. My thanks to them for these precious records.

Ambalal Balkrishna Purani (1895-1965) was a revolutionary from Gujarat, who became a disciple of Sri Aurobindo's and stayed with him in his Ashram from 1923. He was also one of Sri Aurobindo's personal attendants from November 1938 to December 1950. Our Purani, eager to provide authentic information on Sri Aurobindo's life, not only recorded his talks, but also wrote two books, *The Life of Sri Aurobindo* and *Sri Aurobindo in England*, both of which have been of great help to me.

Dr. Nirodbaran Talukdar was also an attendant of Sri Aurobindo's during the same period. He settled in the Ashram in 1933.

I have also made good use of the review *Archives and Research* which has published many biographical documents, in particular with regard to Annette Akroyd's diary, Sri Aurobindo's school days, his reports at St. Paul's, etc.*

The research on Dr. K. D. Ghose was done by Nirmal Nahar, who found much information in the Bengal Civil List and the Calcutta Gazette, thanks to the kind help of Sri Biswanath Chakrabarty, W. B. C. S.,

* This review, as well as all the books mentioned above, are published by Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry.

The few extracts from K. C. Sen's diary are from *Keshub Chunder Sen in England* (Writers Workshop, 1980), very kindly lent to us by Mrs. Sushila Das, K. C. Sen's granddaughter.

For academic details on Manomohan at Oxford, the research done by Sunil Bandopadhyay came in useful.

Samsad's Biographical Dictionary of Bengalis (*Bangali Charitabhidhan*) has been my main source of biographical data on Bengalis.

Other acknowledgements are integrated in the text itself.

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Who is Mother?

I can hear you, dear Reader, wondering. You ask, "What is so interesting in the story of Mother?"

Let *me* ask you: Do you like thrillers that take you hunting for the hidden treasure? Do you like historical novels that take you back in time? Do you like space odysseys that take you forward in time? Do you like science fiction stories that break all bounds of space and time? Do you like scientific discoveries in which scientists painstakingly gather proof after proof and note meticulously their findings? Do you like the story of evolution? Evolution that never stops, evolution that has produced you and me—mankind. And finally, who does not like love stories, of love so fierce and absolute that it descends into inferno and confronts death in order to retrieve the beloved?

Dear Reader, if you like any or many or all of these things, then come with me. Let us walk together in Mother's Geography and find out.

Then, perhaps, we shall know: Who is MOTHER.

S. N.

MIRRA – SRI AUROBINDO is *book four* in MOTHER'S CHRONICLES. After having thoroughly explored the world of occult knowledge with the help of Max Théon, and seen the limitations of that dangerous world, Mirra now sets out on a voyage to the East. What lies at the end? Or rather 'who'? Sri Aurobindo. This book glances at the backdrop—India of the ancient times—where Sri Aurobindo was born, and traces his growth in England, where he could see the limitations of modern times.

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