

MOTHER INDIA

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“Great is Truth and it shall prevail”

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IN THE SILENCE OF THE MIDNIGHT

In the silence of the midnight, in the light of dawn or noontide
I have heard the flutings of the Infinite, I have seen the sun-wings of the seraphs.
On the boundless solitude of the mountains, on the shoreless roll of ocean,
Something is felt of God's vastness, fleeting touches of the Absolute
Momentary and immeasurable smite the sense nature free from its limits, —
A brief glimpse, a hint, it passes, but the soul grows deeper, wider:
God has set his mark upon the creature.

In the flash or flutter of flight of bird and insect, in the passion of wing and cry
on treetops,
In the golden feathers of the eagle, in the maned and tawny glory of the lion,
In the voiceless hierophants of Nature with their hieratic script of colour,
Orchid, tulip and narcissus, rose and nenuphar and lotus,
Something of eternal beauty seizes on the soul and nerves and heartstrings.

SRI AUROBINDO

(Collected Poems, CWSA Vol. 2, p. 679)

ON EDWARD CARPENTER

. . . BUT still the book [*New Ways in English Literature* by James Cousins] deals among contemporary poets with Tagore, A. E. and Yeats, among recent poets with Stephen Phillips, Meredith, Carpenter, great names all of them. . .

(p. 4)

. . . metre, by which we mean a fixed and balanced system of the measures of sound, *mātrā*, is not only the traditional, but also surely the right physical basis for the poetic movement. A recent modern tendency — that which has given us the poetry of Whitman and Carpenter and the experimentalists in *vers libre* in France and Italy, — denies this tradition and sets aside metre as a limiting bondage, perhaps even a frivolous artificiality or a falsification of true, free and natural poetic rhythm. That is, it seems to me, a point of view which cannot eventually prevail, because it does not deserve to prevail. It certainly cannot triumph, unless it justifies itself by supreme rhythmical achievements beside which the highest work of the great masters of poetic harmony in the past shall sink into a clear inferiority. That has not yet been done. On the contrary, *vers libre* has done its best when it has either limited its aim in rhythm to a kind of chanting poetical prose or else based itself on a sort of irregular and complex metrical movement which in its inner law, though not in its form, recalls the idea of Greek choric poetry.

(pp. 19-20)

The straining for a new power of rhythm is the first indication of the coming change. Not quite so marked, not by any means so successful as the change in the type and power of poetical expression, it is still indicative; rhythm is the subtle soul of poetry and a change in the spirit of the rhythm must come if this change in the spirit of the poetry is fully to discover itself and altogether realise its own characteristic greatness and perfection. Mankind is moving to another spirit in its thought and life founded on another and deeper and larger truth of its inner being than it has yet in the mass been able to see, hold and put into form of living. This change must find its echo and interpretation or even some of its power of revelation and initiation in poetry, and poetry to express this greater spirit must find out a deeper, larger, more flexible, or, if one may say so, more multitudinously expressive rhythm than the great poets of the past were under the necessity of using; something of the same change has to be achieved as has been successfully accomplished in music. We see accordingly some attempt to break or enlarge, deepen or subtilise the traditional moulds, to substitute others of a more delicate character or with a more varied and flexible principle, to search out new packed or dissolved movements. There have been

some considerable successes, but nothing of such a complete, sweeping and satisfying force as would quite content a certain eagerness and impatient urge of the arriving age to find a full rhythmic basis for its own way of self-expression. And so we find too the attempt to initiate a violent and unprecedented revolution in the whole fundamental method of poetic rhythm.

This tendency in some writers goes no farther than an irregular use of metre which does not really carry us any farther towards the desired result and is in no way an improvement on the past since it has no true artistic principle to guide us to freer and more consummate harmonies. But pushed to its logical issue it has created the still growing form of free verse of which we now find examples in most of the great literary languages and coupled with it a theory that this is the one future chance for poetry. Metre and rhyme are said to be played out, things of the past, which can no longer be allowed to chain and hamper the great and free movement which the enlarging spirit of poetry demands; as rhyme was in Milton's later view only a dainty trifle which he flung aside for the organ harmonies of his blank verse, so metre itself is a petty thing, half ornament, half fetter, which has to be flung aside for some nobly self-governed democratic anarchy that is to develop from this new type. That is a theory of very doubtful validity. In the hands of most of its exponents it seems to be in practice nothing but a licence for writing prose in variously cut lengths, prose breaking off at the end of a clause or in the middle of it to go on refreshed in the line below, — I have seen even a line of free verse consisting of a majestic solitary pronoun, — and that is more an eccentric method of printing than a new rhythm. But without accepting the theory in its intolerant entirety one can appreciate the motive which moved the greater masters and more skilful craftsmen of this form, if form it can be called, to make the innovation. There is something large and many-sided and constantly mutable in the life, thought and spirit of today which needs, to express it sympathetically, vast and flowing movements or on the contrary brief, sudden and abrupt paces or the alternation of these and intermediate and variant lengths and turns: there is something at the same time densely full and singularly and minutely subtle in the modern thinking mind which is with difficulty accommodable by the restricted range of subtleties, variations and fullnesses of any given poetic measure. Why not then break away from all the old hampering restrictions and find a new principle of harmony in accordance with the freedom, the breadth and largeness of view, the fineness of feeling and sensation of the modern spirit, some form which shall have the liberty of prose and yet command the intensified heights and fluctuations and falls of the cadence of poetry? There is no reason why not, if the thing can be done, — the proof of these things lies in the execution; but it may be doubted whether the method used is the right method. At any rate it has not been fully justified even in the hands of its greatest or most skilful exponents. It is used, as in Whitman, to give the roll of the sea of life or the broad and varying movements of the spirit of humanity in its vigorous experience and

aspiration, or, as in Carpenter, to arrive at the free and harmonious accession of the human intelligence to profound, large and powerful truths of the spirit, or, as in certain French writers, to mould into accurate rhythm the very substance and soul and characteristic movement of soul-states, ideas or objects described and seen. These are things that need to be done, but it remains to be seen whether they cannot be done in the recognised and characteristic movement of poetry, rather than in a compromise with prose cadences. The genius of poetic measure walking in the path opened by the ancient discovery of cadenced beat and concentrated rhythm has not yet exhausted itself, nor is there any proof that it cannot accommodate its power to new needs or any sign that it can only survive in an arrested senility or fall into a refined decadence.

(pp. 161-63)

... We may get some idea of the limitations of the form by one or two examples from the poetry of Carpenter I find quoted by Mr. Cousins in his essay. Carpenter with a poetic faculty of a high order, a prophet of democracy and of the Self, like Whitman, but of a higher more spiritual truth of the Self, has like him found it impossible to restrain the largeness of his vision and personality in the bonds of metrical poetry. In both we see that the prophet and thinker predominate over the poet and artist. Less rough and great than the epic voice from the other side of the ocean, his poetry has a more harmonious, limpid and meditative fullness. But the lesser abundance of force and drive makes us feel more the limitations of his form. The thought is not only great, but poetically great and satisfying, the expression as form of thought is noble and admirable, but we miss the subtler rhythmic uplift of the poetic enthusiasm which is given to minds of much less power by the inspiring cadence and the ordered measures of the poetic spirit, *chandas*. His flow is ordinarily of the middle kind with occasional choric turns and movements, but the latter do not carry with them the full force of the intenser poetic cadence. To cite one passage, —

There in the region of equality in the world of Freedom no longer limited,
standing on a lofty peak in heaven above the clouds,
From below hidden. Yet to all who pass into that region most clearly visible
He the Eternal appeared.

Whitman would have broken that up into five lines and got by it a more distinct and forcible effect, — for the breath of poetry best rises and falls in brief and intense lengths; so printed, it would be at once apparent that we have a varied choric movement, a little stumbling into half-prose just before the end, but otherwise admirable, with two sudden turns of great poetic force, where the movement is precisely that of the Greek chorus. But the total effect is the sense of what one might almost call a noble and chanting superprose rhythm.

This appears more clearly in another passage where Carpenter's movement is more at its normal level. He begins with a strain which is only just distinguishable from the prose strain, but suddenly rises from it to the beginning of a choric elevation,

As one shuts a door after a long confinement in the house — so out of
your own plans and purposes escaping, —

then comes the full choric rise,

Out of the mirror-lined chambers of self (grand though they be, but O
how dreary!) in which you have hitherto spent your life, —

where, if the line had only ended with the parenthesis, it would have been a strain of perfect choric poetry, magnificently thought, imaged and cadenced, but the closing words spoil the effect, for they are a sharp descent towards the prose level. There are too elevations rising up from a rhythmical prose cadence but lifted high by the scriptural nobility of phrase and spiritual turn which we get so often in Carpenter. These fluctuations appear then to be inherent in the form and it seems to me that being in their nature a constant fall from the striving after a sustained perfection, they take away altogether from the claims of this "free verse". In lesser writers there is a similar but much more pronounced inadequacy; they rise little and fall or drag along with the most easily satisfied self-content in lowness. But that poets of great power should be satisfied with these deficiencies of their instrument and their most cultured readers accept them without question, indicates an inferiority, almost a depravation in the modern ear, or at least a great remissness in the austerity of the search after perfection. It is now sometimes said that the lines of poetry should follow the lines of life, and life, it might be contended, is of this kind, thought itself is of this kind, and the rhythm of poetry gains in sincerity by following them. But art is not of this kind, the poetic spirit is not of this kind; the nature of art is to strive after a nobler beauty and more sustained perfection than life can give, the nature of poetry is to soar on the wings of the inspiration to the highest intensities and keep winging, as far as may be, always near to them. A form which in the name of freedom remits and relaxes this effort, whatever its other merits and advantages, means a laxity of effort and is a dangerous downward concession.

But there is another objection which may be denied, but seems to me true, that this kind of verse does not give its full spiritual value to the poet's speech. Carpenter has a power of substance, thought-vision, image, expression which is very rare and in all these respects he would have been recognised as not only equal but superior to many who have enjoyed in their own day the reputation of poets of the first rank. That he is not so recognised is due to the inferior form, a form legitimate enough for lesser uses, but not easily capable of the greatest poetic effects. Whitman too for all

his energy loses in this way; even his greatest things do not go absolutely and immediately home, or having entered they do not so easily seize on the soul, take possession and rest in a calm, yet vibrating mastery. The real poetic cadence has that power, and to make the full use of it is the sign of the greatest masters; it has in it then something magical, immediate and miraculous, an unanalysable triumph of the spirit. But this other movement has not that stamp, it does only a little more than a highly concentrated prose might do, and this is because of the three indispensable intensities of poetry it may have intensity of thought and soul-substance, intensity of expression, but the intensity of rhythm, which is poetry's primal need, is lowered and diluted, — even, one feels, to a certain extent in its choric movements: by that lowering the two other intensities suffer, the poet himself tends to loosen them to the level of his movement. If that is so, those who use the form to meet the demands of the new age, are on the wrong track. But a demand is there and it indicates a real need. It is evident that Whitman and Carpenter could not have expressed themselves altogether in the existing forms, even if they had made the attempt. But if the new age is to express itself with the highest poetical power, it must be by new discoveries within the principle of the intenser poetical rhythm. The recent or living masters may not have done this, though we may claim that some beginnings have been made, but the new age is only at its commencement; the decisive departures, the unforeseen creations may yet be due which will equip it with an instrument or many instruments suited to the largeness, depth and subtlety of the coming spirit.

(pp. 168-71)

The poets of yesterday and today, Whitman, Carpenter, the Irish poets, Tagore, but also others in their degree are forerunners of this new spirit and way of seeing, prophets sometimes, but at others only illumined by occasional hints or by side rays of a light which has not flooded all their vision.

(p. 173)

The truth which poetry expresses takes two forms, the truth of life and the truth of that which works in life, the truth of the inner spirit. It may take its stand on the outer life and work in an intimate identity, relation or close dwelling upon it, and then what it does is to bring some light of intuitive things, some power of revelation of the beauty that is truth and the truth that is beauty into the outer things of life, even into those that are most common, obvious, of daily occurrence. But also it may get back into the truth of the inner spirit and work in an intimate identity, relation or close dwelling upon it, and then what it will do is to give a new revelation of our being and life and thought and Nature and the material and the psychical and spiritual worlds. That is the effort to which it seems to be turning now in its most characteristic, effective and beautiful manifestations. But it cannot fully develop in this sense unless the general mind of the age takes that turn. There are signs that this will indeed be

the outcome of the new direction taken by the modern mind, not an intellectual petrification or a long spinning in the grooves of a critical intellectualism, but a higher and more authentic thinking and living. The human intelligence seems on the verge of an attempt to rise through the intellectual into an intuitive mentality; it is no longer content to regard the intellect and the world of positive fact as all or the intellectual reason as a sufficient mediator between life and the spirit, but is beginning to perceive that there is a spiritual mind which can admit us to a greater and more comprehensive vision. This does not mean any sacrifice of the gains of the past, but a raising and extending of them not only by a seeking of the inner as well as the outer truth of things, but also of all that binds them together and a bringing of them into true relation and oneness. A first opening out to this new way of seeing is the sense of the work of Whitman and Carpenter and some of the recent French poets, of Tagore and Yeats and A. E., of Meredith and some others of the English poets.

(p. 212)

A greater era of man's living seems to be in promise, whatever nearer and earthier powers may be striving to lead him on a side path away to a less exalted ideal, and with that advent there must come a new great age of his creation different from the past epochs which he counts as his glories and superior to them in its vision and motive. But first there must intervene a poetry which will lead him towards it from the present faint beginnings. It will be aided by new views in philosophy, a changed and extended spirit in science and new revelations in the other arts, in music, painting, architecture, sculpture, as well as high new ideals in life and new powers of a reviving but no longer limited or obscurantist religious mind. A glint of this change is already visible. And in poetry there is already the commencement of such a greater leading; the conscious effort of Whitman, the tone of Carpenter, the significance of the poetry of A. E., the rapid immediate fame of Tagore are its first signs. The idea of the poet who is also the Rishi has made again its appearance. Only a wider spreading of the thought and mentality in which that idea can live and the growth of an accomplished art of poetry in which it can take body, are still needed to give the force of permanence to what is now only an incipient and just emerging power. Mankind satiated with the levels is turning its face once more towards the heights, and the poetic voices that will lead us thither with song will be among the high seer voices. For the great poet interprets to man his present or reinterprets for him his past, but can also point him to his future and in all three reveal to him the face of the Eternal.

(pp. 221-22)

... The all-informing spirit, when found in all its fullness, heals the scission between thought and life, the need of a just balance between them disappears, instead there

begins a new and luminous and joyful fusion and oneness. The spirit gives us not only a greater light of truth and vision, but the breath of a greater living; for the spirit is not only the self of our consciousness and knowledge, but the great self of life. To find our self and the self of things is not to go through a rarefied ether of thought into Nirvana, but to discover the whole greatest integral power of our complete existence.

This need is the sufficient reason for attaching the greatest importance to those poets in whom there is the double seeking of this twofold power, the truth and reality of the eternal self and spirit in man and things and the insistence on life. All the most significant and vital work in recent poetry has borne this stamp; the rest is of the hour, but this is of the future. It is the highest note of Whitman; in him, as in one who seeks and sees much but has not fully found, it widens the sweep of a great pioneer poetry, but is an opening of a new view rather than a living in its accomplished fullness; it is constantly repeated from the earth side in Meredith, comes down from the spiritual side in all A. E.'s work, moves between earth and the life of the worlds behind in Yeats' subtle rhythmic voices of vision and beauty, echoes with a large fullness in Carpenter.

(pp. 246-47)

. . . The voice of the poet will reveal to us by the inspired rhythmic word the God who is the Self of all things and beings, the Life of the universe, the Divinity in man, and he will express all the emotion and delight of the endeavour of the human soul to discover the touch and joy of that Divinity within him in whom he feels the mighty founts of his own being and life and effort and his fullness and unity with all cosmic experience and with Nature and with all creatures. The note which has already begun and found many of its tones in Whitman and Carpenter and A. E. and Tagore will grow into a more full and near and intimate poetic knowledge and vision and feeling which will continue to embrace more and more, no longer only the more exceptional inner states and touches which are the domain of mystic poetry, but everything in our inner and outer existence until all life and experience has been brought within the mould of the spiritual sense and the spiritual interpretation. A poetry of this kind will be in a supreme way what all art should be, a thing of harmony and joy and illumination, a solution and release of the soul from its vital unrest and questioning and struggle, not by any ignoring of these things but by an uplifting into the strength of the self within and the light and air of its greater view where there is found not only the point of escape but the supporting calmness and power of a seated knowledge, mastery and deliverance.

(p. 271)

SRI AUROBINDO

(*The Future Poetry*, CWSA, Vol. 26)

‘O LORD, IGNORANCE MUST BE VANQUISHED . . .’

February 16, 1914

O SUPREME, sole Reality, true Consciousness, permanent Oneness, sovereign repose of perfect light, with what an intensity I aspire to be conscious of only Thee, to be only Thyself. This incessant whirl of unreal personalities, this multiplicity, this complexity, this excessive inextricable confusion of conflicting thoughts, struggling tendencies, battling desires, seems to me more and more frightful. I must emerge from this raging sea, land on Thy serene and peaceful shore. Give me the energy of an indefatigable swimmer. I would conquer Thee however great may be the effort needed for that. . . . O Lord, ignorance must be vanquished, illusion dispelled, this sorrowful universe must come out of its hideous nightmare, end its terrible dream, and awaken at last to the consciousness of Thy sole Reality.

O immutable Peace, deliver men from ignorance; may Thy plenary and pure Light reign everywhere!

THE MOTHER

(Prayers and Meditations, CWM 2nd Ed., Vol. 1, p. 76)

IMPRESSIONS OF JAPAN

YOU ask me for my impressions about Japan. To write on Japan is a difficult task; so many things have been already written, so many silly things also . . . but these more on the people than on their country. For the country is so wonderful, picturesque, many-sided, unexpected, charming, wild or sweet; it is in its appearance so much a synthesis of all the other countries of the world, from the tropical to the arctic, that no artistic eye can remain indifferent to it. I believe many excellent descriptions have been given of Japan; I shall not then attempt to add mine, which would certainly be far less interesting. But the people of Japan have, in general, been misunderstood and misinterpreted, and on that subject something worth saying remains to be said.

In most cases foreigners come in touch with that part of the Japanese people which has been spoiled by foreigners, — a Japan of money-makers and imitators of the West; obviously they have proved very clever imitators, and you can easily find here a great many of those things which make the West hateful. If we judge Japan by her statesmen, her politicians and her businessmen, we shall find her a country very much like one of the Powers of Europe, though she possesses the vitality and concentrated energies of a nation which has not yet reached its zenith.

That energy is one of the most interesting features of Japan. It is visible everywhere, in everyone; the old and the young, the workmen, the women, the children, the students, all, save perhaps the “new rich”, display in their daily life the most wonderful storage of concentrated energy. With their perfect love for nature and beauty, this accumulated strength is, perhaps, the most distinctive and widely spread characteristic of the Japanese. That is what you may observe as soon as you reach that land of the Rising Sun where so many people and so many treasures are gathered in a narrow island.

But if you have — as we have had — the privilege of coming in contact with the true Japanese, those who kept untouched the righteousness and bravery of the ancient Samurai, then you can understand what in truth is Japan, you can seize the secret of her force. They know how to remain silent; and though they are possessed of the most acute sensitiveness, they are, among the people I have met, those who express it the least. A friend here can give his life with the greatest simplicity to save yours, though he never told you before he loved you in such a profound and unselfish way. Indeed he had not even told you that he had loved you at all. And if you were not able to read the heart behind the appearances, you would have seen only a very exquisite courtesy which leaves little room for the expression of spontaneous feelings. Nevertheless the feelings are there, all the stronger perhaps because of the lack of outward manifestation; and if an opportunity presents itself, through an act, very modest and veiled sometimes, you suddenly discover depths of affection.

This is specifically Japanese; among the nations of the world, the true Japanese — those who have not become westernised — are perhaps the least selfish. And this unselfishness is not the privilege of the well-educated, the learned or the religious people; in all social ranks you may find it. For here, with the exception of some popular and exceedingly pretty festivals, religion is not a rite or a cult, it is a daily life of abnegation, obedience, self-sacrifice.

The Japanese are taught from their infancy that life is duty and not pleasure. They accept that duty — so often hard and painful — with passive submission. They are not tormented by the idea of making themselves happy. It gives to the life of the whole country a very remarkable self-constraint, but no joyful and free expansion; it creates an atmosphere of tension and effort, of mental and nervous strain, not of spiritual peace like that which can be felt in India, for instance. Indeed, nothing in Japan can be compared to the pure divine atmosphere which pervades India and makes of her such a unique and precious country; not even in the temples and the sacred monasteries always so wonderfully situated, sometimes on the summit of a high mountain covered with huge cedar trees, difficult to reach, far from the world below. . . . Exterior calm, rest and silence are there, but not that blissful sense of the infinite which comes from a living nearness to the Unique. True, here all speaks to the eyes and mind of unity — unity of God with man, unity of man with Nature, unity of man with man. But this unity is very little felt and lived. Certainly the Japanese have a highly developed sense of generous hospitality, reciprocal help, mutual support; but in their feelings, their thoughts, their actions in general, they are among the most individualist, the most separatist people. For them the form is predominant, the form is attractive. It is suggestive too, it speaks of some deeper harmony or truth, of some law of nature or life. Each form, each act is symbolical, from the arrangement of the gardens and the houses to the famous tea ceremony. And sometimes in a very simple and usual thing you discover a symbol, deep, elaborated, willed, that most of the people know and understand; but it is an exterior and learnt knowledge — a tradition, it is not living truth coming from the depth of spiritual experience, enlightening heart and mind. Japan is essentially the country of sensations; she lives through her eyes. Beauty rules over her as an uncontested master; and all her atmosphere incites to mental and vital activity, study, observation, progress, effort, not to silent and blissful contemplation. But behind this activity stands a high aspiration which the future of her people will reveal.

9 July 1917

THE MOTHER

(*Words of Long Ago*, CWM 2nd Ed., Vol. 2, pp. 152-54)

THE 1919 FLU IN JAPAN

I WAS in Japan. It was at the beginning of January 1919. Anyway, it was the time when a terrible flu raged there in the whole of Japan, which killed hundreds of thousands of people. It was one of those epidemics the like of which is rarely seen. In Tokyo, every day there were hundreds and hundreds of new cases. The disease appeared to take this turn: it lasted three days and on the third day the patient died. And people died in such large numbers that they could not even be cremated, you understand, it was impossible, there were too many of them. Or otherwise, if one did not die on the third day, at the end of seven days one was altogether cured; a little exhausted but all the same completely cured. There was a panic in the town, for epidemics are very rare in Japan. They are a very clean people, very careful and with a fine morale. Illnesses are very rare. But still this came, it came as a catastrophe. There was a terrible fear. For example, people were seen walking about in the streets with a mask on the nose, a mask to purify the air they were breathing, so that it might not be full of the microbes of the illness. It was a common fear. . . . Now, it so happened I was living with someone who never ceased troubling me: "But what is this disease? What is there behind this disease?" What I was doing, you know, was simply to cover myself with my force, my protection so as not to catch it and I did not think of it any more and continued doing my work. Nothing happened and I was not thinking of it. But constantly I heard: "What is this? Oh, I would like to know what is there behind this illness. But could you not tell me what this illness is, why it is there?" etc. One day I was called to the other end of the town by a young woman whom I knew and who wished to introduce me to some friends and show me certain things. I do not remember now what exactly was the matter, but anyway I had to cross the whole town in a tram-car. And I was in the tram and seeing these people with masks on their noses, and then there was in the atmosphere this constant fear, and so there came a suggestion to me; I began to ask myself: "Truly, what is this illness? What is there behind this illness? What are the forces that are in this illness?" I came to the house, I passed an hour there and I returned. And I returned with a terrible fever. I had caught it. It came to you thus, without preparation, instantaneously. Illnesses, generally illnesses from germs and microbes take a few days in the system: they come, there is a little battle inside; you win or you lose, if you lose you catch the illness, it is not complicated. But there, you just receive a letter, open the envelope, hop! puff! The next minute you have the fever. Well, that evening I had a terrible fever. The doctor was called (it was not I who called him), the doctor was called and he told me: "I must absolutely give you this medicine." It was one of the best medicines for the fever, he had just a little (all their stocks were exhausted, everyone was taking it); he said: "I have still a few packets, I shall give

you some”— “I beg of you, do not give it to me, I won’t take it. Keep it for someone who has faith in it and will take it.” He was quite disgusted: “It was no use my coming here.” So I said: “Perhaps it was no use!” And I remained in my bed, with my fever, a violent fever. All the while I was asking myself: “What is this illness? Why is it there? What is there behind it? . . .” At the end of the second day, as I was lying all alone, I saw clearly a being, with a part of the head cut off, in a military uniform (or the remains of a military uniform) approaching me and suddenly flinging himself upon my chest, with that half a head to suck my force. I took a good look, then realised that I was about to die. He was drawing all my life out (for I must tell you that people were dying of pneumonia in three days). I was completely nailed to the bed, without movement, in a deep trance. I could no longer stir and he was pulling. I thought: now it is the end. Then I called on my occult power, I gave a big fight and I succeeded in turning him back so that he could not stay there any longer. And I woke up.

But I had seen. And I had learnt, I had understood that the illness originated from beings who had been thrown out of their bodies. I had seen this during the First Great War, towards its end, when people used to live in trenches and were killed by bombardment. They were in perfect health, altogether healthy and in a second they were thrown out of their bodies, not conscious that they were dead. They did not know they hadn’t a body any more and they tried to find in others the life they could not find in themselves. That is, they were turned into so many countless vampires. And they vampirised upon men. And then over and above that, there was a decomposition of the vital forces of people who fell ill and died. One lived in a kind of sticky and thick cloud made up of all that. And so those who took in this cloud fell ill and usually got cured, but those who were attacked by a being of that kind invariably died, they could not resist. I know how much knowledge and force were necessary for me to resist. It was irresistible. That is, if they were attacked by a being who was a centre of this whirl of bad forces, they died. And there must have been many of these, a very great number. I saw all that and I understood.

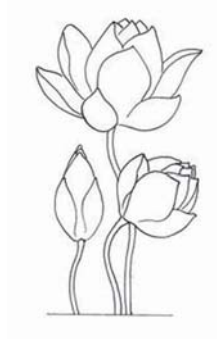
When someone came to see me, I asked to be left alone, I lay quietly in my bed and I passed two or three days absolutely quiet, in concentration, with my consciousness. Subsequently, a friend of ours (a Japanese, a very good friend) came and told me: “Ah! you were ill? So what I thought was true. . . . Just imagine for the last two or three days, there hasn’t been a single new case of illness in the town and most of the people who were ill have been cured and the number of deaths has become almost negligible, and now it is all over. The illness is wholly under control.” Then I narrated what had happened to me and he went and narrated it to everybody. They even published articles about it in the papers.

Well, consciousness, to be sure, is more effective than doctors’ pills! . . . The condition was critical. Just imagine, there were entire villages where everyone had died. There was a village in Japan, not very big, but still with more than a hundred

people, and it happened, by some extraordinary stroke of luck, that one of the villagers was to receive a letter (the postman went there only if there was a letter; naturally, it was a village far in the countryside); so he went to the countryside; there was a snowfall; the whole village was under snow . . . and there was not a living person. It was exactly so. It was that kind of epidemic. And Tokyo was also like that; but Tokyo was a big town and things did not happen in the same fashion. And it was in this way the epidemic ended. That is my story.

THE MOTHER

(*Questions and Answers 1953*, CWM 2nd Ed., Vol. 5, pp. 180-83)



“MOTHER OF NEW BIRTH” CORRESPONDENCE WITH SRI AUROBINDO

Sri Aurobindo —

MOTHER OF NEW BIRTH

Her eyes embrace all life;
 They are brimmed with love — [1]
 A weight which drew her down
 From heaven above.

~~Her breasts are nectar-clouds~~ [2]
 Two nectar-clouds are her breasts,
 Tipped with strange fire —
~~Their tips of fire~~ [3]
 A reverie of roses
 Unknown to the mire —

Roses of God that tremble
 Like budding suns
 womb
 Within her spirit's wombed [4]
~~Of omnipotence.~~
 Omnipotence.

Now that her sheen of clay
 Flows through the air,
 Time's secret destiny
 Lies glowing bare. [5]

Along each curve of dream [6,7]
 in
 Moulded to earth, [8]
 reach

We sweep on a wave of bliss
~~Unshadowed~~
 To shadowless new-birth. [9]

Unlike my usual practice I've not been able to keep a thoroughly self-consistent imagery. Does that not split up the poem too markedly into a number of separate parts? If my fear is unfounded, how does the lyrical note strike you?

[*Amal's questions and remarks written in the margins*]

[1] Should there be a comma after "love" instead of a dash? What does "A weight" go with? "Love" or the whole second-line phrase?

[2,3] Please don't forget to show your choice clearly here. If the first form of line 1 is preferred should there be "two" after "are"?

[5] A colon here?

[6] Is "her" required before "dream"?

[7] What about the form: "Along her each dream-curve"? Too flat?

[8] I have suggested "in" to avoid two "to"s in the stanza if the original version of the last line is kept.

Sri Aurobindo's comment:

[1] It might be either.

[2] [*Sri Aurobindo crossed out "Her breasts are nectar-clouds"*]

[3] [*Sri Aurobindo crossed out "Their tips of fire"*]

[4] [*Sri Aurobindo crossed out "womb/Of omnipotence"*]

[5] Perhaps.

[6] Not necessary I think.

[7] Yes.

[8] [*Sri Aurobindo crossed out "to"*]

[9] [*Sri Aurobindo crossed out "Unshadowed"*]

It is a very beautiful lyric quite equal to the others. I don't think there is the least sense of splitting — the images flow naturally one after the other.

4 June 1937

*

MOTHER OF NEW BIRTH

Her eyes embrace all life;
They are brimmed with love,
A weight which drew her down
From heaven above.

Two nectar-clouds are her breasts,
Tipped with strange fire —

A reverie of roses
Unknown to the mire —

Roses of God that tremble
Like budding suns
Within her spirit's wombed
Omnipotence.

Now that her sheen of clay
Flows through the air,
Time's secret destiny
Lies glowing bare:

Along each curve of dream
Moulded in earth,
We sweep on a wave of bliss
To shadowless new-birth.

AMAL KIRAN
(K. D. SETHNA)

If discipline of all the members of our being by purification and concentration may be described as the right arm of the body of Yoga, renunciation is its left arm. By discipline or positive practice we confirm in ourselves the truth of things, truth of being, truth of knowledge, truth of love, truth of works and replace with these the falsehoods that have overgrown and perverted our nature; by renunciation we seize upon the falsehoods, pluck up their roots and cast them out of our way so that they shall no longer hamper by their persistence, their resistance or their recurrence the happy and harmonious growth of our divine living. Renunciation is an indispensable instrument of our perfection.

Sri Aurobindo

(The Synthesis of Yoga, CWSA, Vol. 23, p. 326)

ITINERARY OF A CHILD OF THE CENTURY

Pavitra's Correspondence with His Father

(Continued from the issue of October 2009)

Chapter Five

Lama in Inner Mongolia (*Cont.*)

Ling-Shi-Shien, November 29, 1924

My very dear Parents,

Your two letters arrived on the same day. How happy I was to see your dear handwriting again and to get your news directly, even though you did not give me the details of your activities! In his letter, Papa does not speak at all either of himself or of La Minelle. After reading Maman's letter, I wonder if Albert has not returned to France. I have no news of him since my departure from Japan; I have written to him from Peking and also from here. The post is not very reliable; between the region where I am and the Capital, there is a zone of skirmishes between the soldiers of Peking and those of Chang-so-lin at Mukden and I know that several letters have been lost. It is annoying but nothing can be done. Meanwhile you must certainly have received my letter written at the end of September; the letters of this period have reached their destination.

I do not dare nor wish to undertake a point by point discussion of Papa's letter; because I think that nothing is to be gained from it either for him or for me. Rather, I shall speak to you simply of various ideas, but replying to the general trend of your thought. Papa's letter is remarkably logical and consistent with the experience of his own life and the ideas that I know him to hold. And yet, in spite of all the common sense and the logic that it contains, it hardly touches the real motives that make me act! And without an intuitive knowledge of these motives, it is impossible to rightly understand my actions which may, in fact, appear, as Papa says, the actions of a fool, "*à la Don Quixote*"!

Nevertheless, I need to point out the persistent mistake that you make in thinking that I was submissive to the Lubienskis. It is true, I admit it, that in the intensity and the suffering of my departure, I could have acted in a manner that may have given this impression, but nobody understood my state of mind at that time; even Madame Potel, who was better informed about the deeper turn of my inner life, was mistaken about it. But all that is of the past, already far, and I mention it only to tell you

simply and impartially that the judgement that you pass on those who have been my companions for three years, is truly erroneous. It is quite understandable, and the circumstances may even appear to support it, nevertheless it is completely wrong. It is my duty as an honest man to tell it to you frankly. As for the rest, I understand your ideas perfectly. Just as you respect mine, I respect and esteem yours; I do not love you any less because our ways of looking at life are somewhat different.

If I employ the “theosophical jargon” while speaking of certain matters, it is because I am compelled to use a particular vocabulary. . . . But I would like you to know that I am as free *vis-à-vis* the T.S.¹ as I am *vis-à-vis* the Lubieniskis. Just before leaving Tokyo, I founded a theosophical lodge and I have lived three years with these two people; however, I am independent of all of them. This is the truth and it should be easy to understand. When one is free of something, one does not necessarily reject it because if one acted in that manner, it would prove that it still had power over one.

The T.S. is for me one of the channels through which the occult spiritual force spreads in the world and I can work in its fold as I can work outside it, — it depends on the circumstances. And I know well its failings, the defective points, the errors, much more than Papa suspects, but I also see the good side and the great work that it has already accomplished. I could use another language, that of the *Mahayana* Buddhists, that of the *Tantra* which I like or, if I absolutely must, that of the alchemists, and for example, tell you that currently my aim is to find a universal solvent, which reduces all metals to their primary state, because it is said that a metal cannot be transmuted unless it is reduced into *prima materia*. I do not wish to appear to be joking, that is not among my intentions and it will be inappropriate. But, either I must resolve not to talk about these matters with you, or I must use some way of representing that of which I speak, and appropriate terms for that do not exist in the common language.

One of the findings which has been most comforting to me, has been to rediscover the same inner experiences among the mystics of all the countries: the path to perfection has been known and described by the sages of all epochs, and in clear enough terms for him who seeks his way and which he soon recognises if he personally experiences the inner mystic life, be it ever so little. Believe me, it is not my imagination which is making me assert this; it is enough to read, to study the texts that are available. But Papa knows all that well; if I attach to this letter some extracts I have copied out for him,² it is simply to emphasise that there is no need to

1. The Theosophical Society.

2. From *Le Grand Livre de la nature ou l'Apocalypse philosophique et hermétique*, (*The Great Book of Nature or The Philosophical and Hermetic Apocalypse*), published in 1790. Here is its opening quotation: “In every age there have been privileged beings who broke through the narrow circle of the knowledge of their contemporaries; these men were not only rare but were also obliged to remain silent or at least clothe their ideas in allegories whose meaning the common people never understood. If somebody was lucky enough to be initiated, the sacred law of silence was first imposed on him.” The last quotation is a well-known passage from *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius related to the initiation into the first stage of the mysteries of Isis.

go to Tibet to get some certitudes about the adepts and about the Initiation, and that Theosophy does not have a monopoly of these ideas. One could write an entire volume with quotations like that which, believe me, would be interesting. If the modern theosophists alone spoke about it, the suspicion would be legitimate, but because it concerns a truly universal experience — (to study the Jewish Caballa, the Neo-Platonists, Orphism and the Pythagoreans, the Alchemists or the Christian Mystics, the Sufis, the Hindus, the Buddhists, the Chinese and the Japanese), — one cannot explain this turn of the spirit as being a fraud.

At present, my ideas are evidently those that you may call theosophical, but they are strictly personal because I do not come under any church, nor under any external authority on the physical plane, and I draw from any source that pleases me; they have only one purpose, it is that of being the only manner in which, at present, I can perceive the truth. I must then obey them while modifying them constantly as the experiences increase. In my opinion, each man's ideal has the double character of evolving constantly and, at the same time, of being the sole rule of life that he has the right to accept, because it is thus that he perceives the noumenal world. And my ideas on many points, mainly those regarding the ideal and the mystic life, have become clearer and firmer. I have arrived at mine, not by a process of autosuggestion as Papa would be tempted to suggest, but by quite a few intimate experiences which are described in many books, theosophical or otherwise, simply because they are about real facts, as universal as are eating and drinking and one is bound to meet them on one's way.

If I have spoken of teaching others, that is in fact somewhat vain, but do you not always find a brother who knows less than you, who, moreover, is weary and fatigued and to whom you can lovingly offer a helping hand? But evidently that is not the word I should have used; since you have brought it up, I need to clarify it a little.

I cannot better express my ideal than by the word harmony; in what concerns action in the external world, it is harmony with Nature, the word Nature being taken, not in the material sense, but as a synthesis of all the physical, mental and spiritual forces of the cosmos. And it is the harmonious co-operation with Nature, in an intimate inspiration. And that includes many things, indeed, but all are not exactly alike and for each there is a law of life which determines the manner in which it must co-operate with the creative work; the rose and the salad both have their role in the garden. It follows that the ideal and all it includes — law of life, duty etc. — is personal (it would perhaps not be a good thing if this doctrine were too widespread, but there are dangerous things in truth and he who seeks it must know how to take risks.)

Another consequence is that I cannot co-operate with Nature unless my "I" no longer exists. And experience has proved this to me with such clarity and with such a force that the dissolution of my personality is part of the personal task to be

achieved. It is not an easy thing and he who has not seriously tried it, cannot realise the difficulty and the sufferings that it entails. I will be able to work in the world only when my individual being is sufficiently subdued so as not to be an obstacle any more. What will this work be? I have translated for you a Japanese poem written by a Zen Buddhist:

“I go with empty hands, — and look! It’s a fistful that my hand now holds;
I walk on foot — yet I am on the back of an ox;
Look at that man crossing the bridge, —
’Tis the bridge glides while the water is immobile.”

My present ideal is expressed beautifully in these paradoxical terms, but it is an ideal and I am far from it. And again another Japanese poem:

“The shadows of the bamboos sweep the stairs,
No dust is raised.
The moonlight reaches the bottom of the tranquil lake,
No trace it leaves in the water.”

Generally, the Japanese have well understood the illogical and paradoxical character that Truth assumes when one tries to express it. I could give you many quotations, because I love quotations, but it is not a book that I am writing. Again, compare it with the Gospel:

“The wind bloweth where it listeth and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth; so is everyone that is born of the Spirit.”

I hasten to add that I do not consider myself in the least as one ‘born of the Spirit’ just because I meditate on these words.

My work here is entirely an inner work — that was expected; if it were to be otherwise I would have remained in the world. And it is above all meditation and spiritual studies, very little of strictly mental activities. I am learning Mongolian because it is a must, but I am almost entirely absorbed by the inner life. Lao-Tzu has said:

“The scholars gain everyday, the Taoists lose everyday.”

And truly, when I shall leave this place, perhaps it will not be with a rich harvest from the point of view of the history of humanity and of religions! I shall probably be incapable of presenting a scientific (that is to say purely objective)

discourse on Lamaism. It is not that I do not observe, but my viewpoint is different; if I observe and assimilate, it is for the purpose of making my synthesis and not to produce a dictionary or an encyclopaedia. I try to make all experience and all human thought mine.

However, I must add that my mind is scientific in the true sense of the word, such as Henri Poincaré means, for example. Thanks to you, I have received a scientific education and I have understood this ideal. And if I am being paradoxical, it is simply in the realm of paradoxes. Has not Bergson said that the phenomena of life cannot be seized by the intellect? Is there any philosophical theory which is not destroyed by another philosopher? Let Papa show me a single explanation of the universe as plausible as the theosophical hypothesis (I speak of the general philosophical and metaphysical lines, and not of the details which do not have any value and which one is wrong to publish, because once out of the inner life they are dead and deceitful) and I shall examine it with equal interest. No, in this domain, I have found nothing but the mystic occult that satisfies me, at once as explanation for the great problems of life and as the prompters of action, or, if you will, as encompassing the triple ideal: the Beautiful, the Good, the True. And I am trying to build my synthesis on these three pillars, knowing that all one-sided development leads to a lack of equilibrium, to instability, to fanaticism. If you knew the deep satisfaction of knowing that one was on the right path (I do not mean possessing the truth) and of seeing the horizon brightening little by little around oneself! But in fact each one who listens to his highest aspirations, follows his ideal and obeys his innermost conscience, is on the right path. Was it not Plotinus who said that each man must make himself beautiful and divine to obtain the vision of the Beautiful and the Divine?

If you want to know what my deeper ideas are, they are expressed in *Towards Democracy* of Edward Carpenter, a book that I have cherished since long before my departure from France, but which, unfortunately, contains only the first two parts of the original work in English. Everybody has his favourite author in whom, moreover, he cannot but contemplate his own image and I can say that I myself am in the book. There are other books which are my companions, but that one is most dear to me.

In my spare time, I also study various subjects and that is why I have asked you to send me two scientific books, — one must be up-to-date. I have brought with me some fifty books which form the base of my studies. As yet I do not speak enough Mongolian to converse very philosophically with the lamas. But human nature and the human body are the same everywhere, and what can one expect from another if one does not already have it in oneself? One must walk by oneself and find the source of knowledge in oneself but one must not think that one's work counts for something or even that one is of any value. The only reality is the infinite ocean, behind one, very close; one does not lose oneself on entering it, one merely

removes one's clothes.

I must end this letter, already quite long. I shall speak to you about my life from a material point of view in one of the next letters. I have chatted with you in all simplicity; perhaps these words are not those which you would have preferred, but they are sincere and strongly felt! They have no intention of convincing you, but simply to create a little harmony between me and you whom I love tenderly and whom I embrace affectionately.

Your devoted son,

Signed: Ph. B. St Hilaire

P.S. The post which will carry this letter has brought me a letter from Papa and the book on Gandhi. I am very happy that Papa shares his ideas with me. I shall reply in my next letter because this letter must go today. The book on Gandhi too made me happy, even though I have read the English translation of one of its chapters in an American magazine and I know something of his beautiful personality, having had a Hindu living in our house and having discussed these questions with him at length. I know Tagore personally; he has invited me to stay in Shantiniketan and even to teach there.

(To be continued)

PHILIPPE BARBIER SAINT HILAIRE

(Translated by Aniruddha Sircar from the original French *Itinéraire d'un enfant du siècle* by Philippe Barbier Saint Hilaire, published by Buchet/Chastel, Paris, 2001. Our thanks for their permission.)

When I speak, the reason says, "This will I say"; but God takes the word out of my mouth and the lips say something else at which reason trembles.

Sri Aurobindo

(Essays Divine and Human, CWSA, Vol. 12, p. 423)

ITINERARY OF A CHILD OF THE CENTURY

Annexure A

(Draft of the Article:
From Peking to the Gobi Desert) ¹

WE leave Peking at the end of the heavy rains which mark the month of June in Northern China. This period is least favourable for a journey, because the badly maintained roads, often hardly existent, simple mud paths, are completely destroyed in places by these torrential rains. Also, to cross the five or six hundred kilometres which separate Peking from the lamasery where we are going, we shall require more than a month whereas in normal times this crossing takes twelve to fifteen days. Meanwhile, subsequent events have shown that if we had not started off at this, apparently the least propitious moment, we would have had no choice but to give up completely and postpone this journey till the next year, the civil war between Chang-tso-lin and the Peking government having made travel in the Jehol district unpleasant and risky for a stranger.

The Mongolian lama, my fellow traveller, serves me both as a guide and an interpreter for although I know a little Mongolian I do not speak Chinese at all. Once we reach our destination he will be my host, because it is at his invitation that I have decided on this journey to Mongolia with the intention of studying Buddhism in its aspect of Lamaism, after having familiarised myself somewhat with the different aspects of Buddhism in Japan.

Imagine a low and squat carriage, so small that even without any luggage two persons can hardly be accommodated there, with so little space under the canvas that covers it, that it is impossible to sit there otherwise than in the oriental fashion or with the legs stretched; think moreover that it is not provided with any suspension, that the passenger sits directly above the axle, and you will have an idea of the Chinese carriage. One has absolutely the impression of finding oneself at the bottom of a tip-cart, and on rough, rocky roads, the situation is truly unbearable. At least it is the impression of a person with the common European build! How the Chinese manage so well with this kind of transport is a mystery to me; I have seen them sleeping there, half lying, under such jolts that I feared for their heads. Our caravan consists of two such carriages drawn by three mules each. Personally, I have used alternately horse, donkey and my own legs, and it is again these last that I have preferred under these circumstances, to the great astonishment of the Chinese who

1. Draft of the article attached to the letter dated December 15, 1924. [The letter will appear in the December issue of *Mother India*.] Philippe wrote it for the magazine *Le Temps*, but he did not give a name to it.

have difficulty understanding that one can find pleasure in walking.

For the first hundred kilometres we crossed the vast sandy plains north of Peking. Appalling roads, transformed into rivers of mud and slime, inundations, rivers in spate and torrential rains, all contribute to make this part of the journey quite difficult. As there are no bridges, we have to ford all the rivers. And often we are obliged to take our luggage across on the heads of porters, to avoid getting it wet.

A monotonous and uniform landscape, with long barely varying undulation, alluvial soil, cultivated to its last little plot by this stable and hardworking population who give a strange impression of unchanging immutability. Immense fields of maize constitute the principal crop, with millet and a type of weed-grass whose leaves and grains serve as food for the animals, and the dry stalks for fuel. At this time of the year one also finds great quantities of different kinds of melons which are very much appreciated during the hot season. Each melon field is guarded day and night and one can get the fruits for a few coins all along the route.

The outside world hardly reaches here; had it not been for the cigarettes and, here and there, a clock and some other object of foreign origin, one could believe oneself to be a few centuries in the past. The towns are medieval and picturesque, surrounded by enormous fortified walls, the roads paved with immense paving stones on which the carts make an infernal din (it is then absolutely impossible to stay within), and when it rains, the roads are transformed into lakes or muddy torrents carrying away the accumulated household garbage.

Except in the towns, the Chinese houses are made of earth. The climate and the nature of the ground make only this kind of construction possible. It rains hardly a month and the interior is not humid. As the interior is covered with paper, it could be neat; unfortunately that is a very rare exception. The Chinese are remarkably indifferent, — it is something that I cannot share — to the numerous and various insects which swarm in their homes: flies and mosquitoes, fleas and bugs. In Japan, where these insects are extremely rare, they are known as Nanking insects (*Nankin mouchi*), but from Nanking they have spread all over China! This pest does not exist in winter and the journey would then be wholly pleasant if the cold were not so severe. One of the peculiarities of the houses is that one part of the rooms, often more than half, is raised some eighty centimetres to a metre above the floor, and constitutes an actual heating stove. Built in stone and dry earth, covered with a mat, this is the place where one lives and where one sleeps. In winter, in the empty space which is fitted with a chimney, one lights a fire with faggots; the heat is retained for a long time. I must say that at night, when one lies directly on the mat, this heating is very effective; in the daytime it is definitely insufficient.

Leaving the plain behind we enter the mountainous region which is the Jehol district. Often compelled to make long detours, the roads having been washed away by the floods, it was only on the twelfth day that we reached the Great Wall. This

famous fortification once stretched out for 2,000 km, the frontier of China proper and protected her from the Manchu and Mongol aggressions and invasions. It is a colossal work and a picturesque marvel. It runs through valleys, scales hills, clings to denuded mountains of this uneven land: and from a distance we see its isolated and deserted bastions that crown the craggy peaks.

The slow but continuous thrust by the Chinese population has little by little driven back the Mongols, and today the boundary between these two people has been pushed back much more to the North.

In the olden days, Jehol had a Mongol prince; now it is the home of the Chinese *tuchun*, that is to say of the provincial governor. It is a purely Chinese city, an old town of trade and commerce, an important centre of exchange and of transit.

We have lived there for a few days. I wanted to pay a visit to the *tuchun*, and I wanted to see the Buddhist monasteries around the town. The governor, a Chinese of the old school, with huge whiskers, received me ceremonially but cordially. On my presenting the letters of introduction which I had for him, he gave me others for the subordinate authorities of the places on my itinerary and for the place where I was going. After he had accepted the little gift brought for him, we chatted about this and that for about half an hour, the lama serving as our interpreter. The *tuchun* kindly offered us horses and soldiers for the visit to the monasteries. In addition, he expressed the desire that we be escorted on our journey, for he said the roads were not quite safe, and made me accept, even though I would have preferred to do without it, this body of guards which was becoming bigger little by little at every stage, the soldiers looking for a little profit, and skilfully demanding more when they were not satisfied with the money I gave them. It was thus that although I had started the journey in the company of three soldiers, I completed the last day of our travel with a solid escort of two officers and six soldiers.

The monasteries around Jehol, very important and renowned at the time of the Mongols, retain today only the vestiges of their ancient glory; in a few years they will disappear completely due to lack of maintenance and care. They are still inhabited by a few hundred Mongol monks, but no longer represent the faith of the country, Chinese Buddhism being very different from Lamaism. The revenues of the temples are meagre and the lamas live miserably. No money for the maintenance, no enthusiasm among the monks. This state of things is evidently regrettable because here, there are not only precious monuments for the history of religions and human thought but also works of art of great value. During the glorious period of Buddhism in this region, Jehol was a particularly sacred and holy centre. One of the monasteries is externally a replica of the Potala palace of the Dalai Lama in Lhasa, and, consequently, has a tall edifice in the Tibetan style, with its small regularly spaced windows and its slightly inclined walls in the Egyptian style. The shrines of all these monasteries contain, like all those of the lamas, innumerable statues of the Buddha, Bodhisattva and other divinities of the Buddhist pantheon.

A second monastery is a faithful copy of the Tashi Lampo, the residence of the Tashi-Lama of Shigatse, the spiritual head of Tibet, whom the Mongols and the Tibetans call Panchen Rinpoche, the great jewel of learning. The Dalai Lama was, till the entry of the British in Lhasa, moreover a political sovereign; the Tashi-Lama is still the veritable Pope of the lamaist church. The roof of the principal shrine is covered with a thin layer of gold and glitters in the sun.

In another equally famous monastery there is the temple of the five hundred *lohans* or *arhats* who spread Buddhism in northern China. There, there are five hundred aligned statues, a little bigger than life size; in them we see all the facial expressions and all the types of physiognomy: young, old, some are cleanshaven, others have long hair and beard, but all have a calm and joyous look and most of them smile. It is said that when Buddhism started declining, the *lohans* withdrew to other shelters.

Apart from a fourth monastery, still inhabited like the previous ones, the Ta Huo Se, which contains a huge statue of the Buddha having the uniqueness of being sculpted from a single gigantic tree-trunk, the other temples are abandoned or in ruins. The Mongols blame the Chinese for being the cause of the ruin of their temples. Even though there has never been any opposition or intolerance on the part of the latter (to suppose so would betray an ignorance of Asiatic peoples), it was before the tide of the Chinese expansion that the Mongols had to retreat; the cultural and religious islands that the Mongols left behind are now surrounded by an alien civilisation and are witness to their own gradual extinction. There are no Chinese lamas: the practical and down to earth spirit of the celestial population [the Chinese] whose virtues are pragmatic and moral, could hardly accommodate the multitude of metaphysical divinities, the abstract symbolism and the complicated ritual of Lamaism. And the temple of the lamas in Peking, like those of Jehol, left to their own resources and without the support of the faithful, is being degraded morally and materially.

We left Jehol with our small escort and move straight to the north. We are now in a country of more or less wide valleys and well-marked hills. The general aspect of the terrain is quite similar to that of Franche-Comté. More to the north, we find the landscape reminiscent of Champagne, between Reims and the Argonne. The hills are always barren, although formerly, it seems, they were wooded. No attention having been paid to their maintenance and preservation, these woods have disappeared. A little more to the west, the old imperial hunting grounds still retain their forest cover. The cultivation is still equally intensive: maize, millet and that edible weed-grass of which I have spoken, fewer melons, some oats, some buckwheat, some hemp, a few leguminous plants are what one notices the most. Herds of horses and livestock, unknown in the plains of Peking, are now seen frequently. The province of Jehol cultivates much opium. The harvesting was over at the time when we were passing through it, but here and there one could still see the dry poppy-

stalk gathered in heaps for use as fuel.

We made halts twice in one of these curious fortified farms of this region. Very important and built with the idea of being able to withstand a veritable siege, they formed small square villages, surrounded by earthen ramparts with slits for arrows, flanked by corner towers with heavy and solid doors. Brigands and armed bands are not rare in China and these farms are rich. The one we visited was well situated in a pretty, fertile valley, surrounded by tall poplars, employing more than three hundred labourers during harvest time, and the owner told me he paid an annual tax of 2,500 Yuan, which, at the current rate of exchange amounts to almost 30,000 F.²

I watched the preparation of alcohol from maize; the ground grain is fermented then distilled in big primitive alembics over an open fire. Corn alcohol is the Chinese strong drink and they drink it in great quantities; however I have never seen a drunk Chinese. In Mongolia, they drink a liquor made from fermented milk; it has a very special taste and is much weaker than corn alcohol.

The Chinese peasant, because of several traits of his character, his tastes and his life, would be much like the French peasant. He is sober, thrifty and hard working, and as attached to his land. In my opinion, there is a greater difference between the Japanese and the Chinese character, neighbouring races, than between the Chinese and ours. That is all the more surprising for us because the Chinese civilisation has indisputably exerted an enormous influence on Japan, but the latter was able to assimilate it after transforming it while preserving her own ideal and tendencies. Japan is at present in the process of absorbing our Western culture in the same way. Therefore we in Europe are making a big mistake when we identify the Chinese with the Japanese. The Japanese are infinitely more refined and conscious of their individual and national ideal. After my travels in China, I understand better why Japan has suddenly taken the lead of the Asiatic nations. My sojourn in the land of the cherry-blossoms and the chrysanthemum has enabled me to understand and value the very beautiful ideal of physical and moral purity of self control, of sacrifice for the family and state, and of real tolerance, based on respect for others which is that of the people as a whole, and which make them a great nation of the future.

Japan is developing and growing rapidly; China is still asleep, and there the forces of ancient tradition are falling apart. Will she be able to pull herself together and escape the corruption in which her qualities run the risk of disappearing? A great spirit of national or religious ideal is needed and the revolution, having been no more than the work of a few politicians, has barely aroused it. At present the privileged classes seem to be the most affected, the populace is still relatively healthy. It could be the widespread use of opium among the rich that has contributed to bring about a certain lack of moral dignity of which, unfortunately, I have had some

2. About 20,000 Euros.

personal examples. Opium is certainly a scourge; its effects may be less visible than that of alcohol, but it acts in a most pernicious manner by weakening the will and self-control, and leads to a physical and mental apathy.

The real cause of the degradation of this great people whose institutions, the most ancient on the earth, and have until now defied the ordeals of time, is, in my opinion, the absence of collective aspiration, of that ideal which gathers the energies of a nation in nerves of steel. At present China finds herself without a great directing principle, precisely at the moment when the forces of Western civilisation are attacking her and making inroads from all sides. One must admit that foreign nations, all of them, having no wish to see a strong and powerful China, are exerting, from our point of view, a rather harmful political influence. A nation is great by her ideal; the period when she really incarnates this ideal marks the apogee of her moral if not her physical power. Greece with Beauty, Rome with Law, the spirituality of ancient India, France of the Revolution, are examples; nations, like individuals, are moved by the profound forces of the soul. Perhaps China's safeguard, at this difficult epoch of her history, lies in the awakening of the national consciousness and dignity, as well as in the effort to satisfy the aspirations of the human spirit.

It is likely that my impression of Japan contradicts that of some other foreigners who have lived there; that is due to the fact that her racial characteristics are very different from ours, and if one does not make a real effort to penetrate into the soul of the people, one is stopped as if by a wall before her enigmatic character. And many are the foreigners who did not wish or did not know how to overcome this obstacle.

Olan hatan, in Chinese Tci-feng-shien, is quite an important town about four hundred kilometres from Peking. To the North, we begin to come across sandy stretches and once again the country changes its aspect. It gets more arid, cultivation is rarer here, and, in places rise great dunes, white and deserted, which some hundreds of thousand years ago were swept by the waves of the sea of Gobi while the whole of Central Asia was submerged by the waters.

The eastern part of the Gobi desert begins a little more to the west and we can feel it from here. The camel caravans moving slowly and solemnly on the sand remind one of Egypt, but the sun is less dazzling and the heat less torrid. Here and there a very blue lake faithfully reflects the deep azure of the sky, a few wild geese at its edge. Total silence, broken only by the cry of a bird of prey. In the winter, an icy cold spreads over the region, and the snowstorms and the sandstorms sweep the desert.

It is around this area that the thrust of the Chinese emigration which had extended till here ceases. The Chara Mouren, or Yellow River, approximately marks the frontier of the purely Mongolian territory. Naturally there are farther places much more to the North, but the obstacles set up by Nature — aridity of the soil and harshness of the climate — against the favourite occupation of the Chinese which is

agriculture, are too great. The Mongols, on the contrary, being shepherds, living on meat and dairy products, without a fixed habitation, move about freely in these desert regions which constitute the real homeland of their nomadic souls.

Olan hatan is occupied, at the time of our passing through, by a large number of soldiers; the conflict between Mukden and Peking is quite fierce. The general commanding the troops, an old man of seventy-six years, still vigorous and alert, whom I met, has, it seems, about ten thousand men under him. I have since learnt that this general was wounded during a raid carried out by Chang-tso-lin's soldiers in Olan hatan.

Apart from a few small incidents on the road, the last part of our journey up to Barin was made more smoothly than the first. The *tuchun*'s letters have made my journey much easier. In the present political situation, I would have found myself hampered by the ill-will of any odd authority.

The very length of the journey has given me the opportunity to observe and study. Therefore I do not regret the various obstacles that came my way. Having reached the goal, I am meanwhile happy to enjoy some rest in the calm of the monastery, in the midst of an arid and uneven land which is not without a stark beauty.

Barin (Inner Mongolia), September 15, 1924

PHILIPPE BARBIER SAINT HILAIRE

(Translated by Aniruddha Sircar from the original French *Itinéraire d'un enfant du siècle* by Philippe Barbier Saint Hilaire, published by Buchet/Chastel, Paris, 2001. Our thanks for their permission.)

Mother, what does "a well-developed psychic being" mean exactly?

... psychic beings develop slowly from the first divine spark to the formation of a completely constituted being, absolutely conscious and independent. So when we speak of a well-developed being, a well-developed psychic, we speak of a psychic being that has nearly reached the maximum point of its formation.

The Mother

(*Questions and Answers 1955*, CWM 2nd Ed., Vol. 7, p. 20)

GLIMPSES OF PAVITRA

From the Reminiscences of Pavitra and Mrityunjay

[We reproduce below parts 3 and 4 of an eight-part series published in Mother India in 1988-89.

Although a number of our readers will be familiar with it, we feel that more recent readers will find in it something to better appreciate the Itinerary of a Child of the Century currently featured in the journal.]

Part 3

After the War — France: 1918-1920

Pavitra narrates how he left the French army and became a junior engineer in Paris, then how he decided to leave France for the Far East.

In 1918 in France there was an epidemic of what used to be called ‘Spanish flu’, an epidemic which lasted quite a long time and killed twenty million people throughout the world. (I recently read a study on this.) Well, I had that flu just when the Armistice was called — in November 1918. I was at the Front; we had just broken through the German lines and were advancing towards Germany. I caught the flu in the German lines. But it was not restricted to Germany, it was everywhere, in every country. I can say that that was the decisive day of my life. In the camp-hospital where I was — at the Front, under canvas — people were dying. Every morning, three or four were dead. Well, I remember very clearly the very strong idea which took all fear of death away from me: it was a giving, a self-giving, an offering of myself for the fulfilment of my destiny, my spiritual destiny, whatever it might be; with the sincere offering of my life, if I was really supposed to die. And if I was to live, consecration to the Divine.

I was twenty-four then, just over twenty-four.

After that I was demobilised quite soon, and I had to take up my studies again. I did it to finish something that had been started, without much enthusiasm; but anyway, I had nothing else to do.

*

Mrityunjay adds:

When Pavitra was demobilised from the army, he returned to his parents in Paris. There he rejoined the Polytechnique, which he had left four years earlier. The School authorities permitted students who had gone to the war to take the final examination without going through the full term of studies. Thus Pavitra got the chance to finish the regular course within a few months.

But for his final year he had to specialise in one branch of engineering. He intended to become a mining engineer, for which he had to attend the École des Mines. In the examination his place in the order of merit was 16th out of 72 candidates, in spite of having been absent on war duty for four years. So he was certain to be accepted into the École des Mines. At the last minute, however, one of Pavitra's school fellows asked him for his seat. The classmate wanted to enter that course, but was not likely to be admitted because he was much lower down in the order of merit. Pavitra agreed to stand down, and applied instead to the Ponts et Chaussées, (the Roads and Bridges section of the Civil Engineering course.)

*

Pavitra continues:

So I finished the course at the École Polytechnique, in the Department of Civil Engineering, and was appointed as a junior engineer in Paris. Then a very strong feeling that I could no longer live that life seized me. In itself there was nothing about that life to repel me: an engineer's life, with quite a lot of interesting projects. A whole section of the River Seine, including Paris especially, was under my jurisdiction, with all the new projects, repairs, all that. But . . . how to put it? I had had enough — it no longer interested me. I did it because it had to be done, but my heart was no longer in it.

And then, in 1920, I took the decision to leave that life in order to devote myself to the search for my spiritual master, my guru. I knew ("knew" — for me it was a certitude) that my life was intended for spiritual realisation, that nothing else counted for me, and that somewhere upon earth, **ON EARTH**, there must exist the one who could . . . lead me to the light.

This was at the beginning of 1920, in the first months of the year. I went on for several months, with increasing inner difficulties, and finally I asked to be released.

You will understand that my whole family was against it. Quite naturally. I had a father, a mother, a brother — none of them could understand what I was doing, or why. My father understood me as far as he could — I mean that he had tried to understand the reason for my actions, and he gave me his sympathy. But he said, "Look here! If these things interest you, these psychic phenomena, it's all right, you

can . . . if you like, I'll give you whatever you need to become a doctor and study them as a doctor. You can study medicine as long as you need, and you can study those phenomena with all the science and methods of a medical doctor."

But what he could not understand was that I wanted to *live* that life.

"No, you shouldn't get involved; then you lose your critical outlook. You can't discover the truth if you adopt an idea and try to put it into practice."

These were the kind of difficulties that I met at home.

Of course, I was rather fanatical, like all beginners. For example, I didn't tell you that at the Front, since I was a junior officer, I was in charge of the Mess — the officers' dining room: I had to order the food with the cook and handle the accounts. Well, I had become a vegetarian — with full conviction. To be a vegetarian at the Front, in a French officers' mess, I can tell you it wasn't easy! Not at all! Everyone made fun of me — or else they pitied me and wished that I would return to common sense, to the traditional French ideas about food.

I must tell you that before the war I used to drink wine sometimes, like other young people of my age. I was not particularly fond of alcohol, but for the French wine is something absolutely normal. You must not think that it is completely bad. When I tell you this, you mustn't see it from the standpoint of your Indian tradition and think, "Oh, he must have been a very bad character" — because in India someone who drinks wine is usually a bad character. I don't want to blacken myself, . . . I am just telling you the truth.

So, I was a bit fanatical, and I was ready to smash everything to get out of that life.

Well, an opportunity presented itself. I had some friends who were leaving for the Far East — for Japan; and I decided to go with them. That brought me a step nearer. I didn't make any great distinction between Buddhism and Hinduism — the same spiritual truths lie at the heart of all the Indian religions. So I set off for Japan. And I went, not as an engineer, but as a private individual. So I had to earn my living there — which was not very easy. It is not very easy in an Asian country such as Japan, which did not want to take foreigners unless, just as in India today, they were well-known, or unless they brought money with them or were supported by business concerns. I had neither reputation nor money.

But anyway, after some wandering around, there were quite a few difficulties, and after a rather hard time, I did remain in Japan for four years. Lots of experiences: studying Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism, life in the temples, work in laboratories, — and at home in the evening going on with my studies — studies in Indian, Chinese, Japanese spirituality. With alternations of light and darkness, progress and stagnation: all the difficulties that come to those who are searching for the Light, and who are searching alone, or at least apparently alone.

Part 4

Japan: 1920-1924

Mrityunjay recounts some interesting details about Pavitra's four years in Japan.

Pavitra's trip to Japan from France was not made for the sake of pleasure; it was a real adventure based on an inner call. Pavitra was seeking his spiritual master, who, according to his intuition, was somewhere in the East. He felt that spirituality must be something other than what most people practised in Europe, and that for him it was something in the Oriental line. So behind his pilgrimage was the search for Truth. His country, his position as a young engineer with bright future prospects, his life-long surroundings — he left all these behind and headed towards the unknown.

Pavitra reached Japan in the middle of 1920, a few months after the Mother had left the country for India. So he did not see her there, but only heard of her from friends who had known her well. He lived in Japan for four years, from the middle of 1920 to the middle of 1924.

Several times Pavitra said that he liked Japan more than his own motherland. Whenever an opportunity arose to compare cultures, he would spontaneously refer to an example from Japan. He never forgot its people — their artistic nature, which expressed itself through a refined taste in every walk of life; their emotional self-control (they neither laughed nor cried aloud); their capacity for hard work; and above all, their honesty and truthfulness. More than forty years later, he would narrate small stories about the Japanese people, incidents from his own experience. One or two examples showing their honesty will suffice.

There are many mountains, big and small, in Japan. People often go to visit them on holiday trips. They take off their regular shoes and put on a special type of straw sandals that are convenient for climbing. And because these sandals sometimes wear out on the way, the seller leaves a number of pairs in a small shelter up on the mountain. The price of the sandals is marked, and a box is left nearby in which to put money. The mountaineer passing by the route takes a pair and puts money in the box. No one is there to look after it. The dealer returns once a week to collect the money and leave some more sandals. There is no theft or cheating. This kind of thing is unbelievable for us in our present surroundings.

Once Pavitra lost his purse and an important book in a tramcar; he forgot them when he got off. The next day he called at the Head Office and found his missing things waiting for him, ready to be verified and delivered. Such is the honesty of the Japanese.

Pavitra mentioned, incidentally, that children in Japan, who in those days had no idea about any other country, sometimes expressed their innocent curiosity by

asking him whether there were tramcars in France.

Because of his noble and affectionate nature, his refined manner, and his capacity of being kind to even the most ordinary people, Pavitra soon found a warm welcome in the hearts of the Japanese people. Friendly with all, whatever their walk of life, he was given a reception rarely extended so quickly to a foreigner. In the homes of aristocrats or in the huts of villagers and fishermen, he was a friend of the family. From a few photographs that are still in his album, one can see this. In the house of a very rich person, Mr. Misutoni of Atami, Pavitra is the honoured guest, taking their photos; in one photo the host and his family and friends are all dressed in the sacred dancing costumes of Kanikosan; they look so cheerful and in high spirits! There are also pictures of Pavitra with a picnic party in a car on a holiday trip to the countryside: in one photograph we see a remote village where a simple wooden bridge is being constructed; he, the qualified engineer from Paris, is helping the bridge-builders with his advice.

In November 1922, Pavitra had the opportunity of meeting Professor Albert Einstein, who was visiting Japan on a lecture tour. A photograph of the two, with a crowd of students and teachers from Tokyo's Imperial University, is the only record left.

Pavitra also had occasion to meet foreign dignitaries and visiting groups. In November 1922, for example, the Ambassador of Belgium arrived with a party on an economic mission; and some time afterwards, the "Escadre Française" came on tour. With Pavitra's help as translator, these groups were lodged and entertained on the estate of one Mr. Okada, an important man of Japan. This role was not always to Pavitra's liking, but when requested by the Japanese authorities he lent his help. Such were his unavoidable programmes from time to time; they had nothing to do, of course, with the real purpose for which he had gone to Japan.

On Christmas day in 1921, Pavitra spent the evening with a friendly group of Buddhists in Shimoshibuyo. It was an attempt to enter into the heart of Japan. He began to meet people who were devoted to Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism, and to take lessons in it.

In six months of State service as an engineer in Paris, Pavitra had saved enough money to undertake the journey to Japan, but since he wanted to remain there indefinitely, he had to earn his living. He could have taken up his own profession of engineering, as his friend Antonin Raymond had done in architecture, but that would have meant devoting most of his time to it. And if earning his livelihood had been his main aim, he would never have resigned his lucrative post in Paris. This being the case, the only way out was to try something new. He decided to start a chemical laboratory, which opened in 1922. (Perhaps the Ashram 'Laboratoire' had its beginning here — or was it in his mother's kitchen?)

Soon Pavitra's laboratory began to attract the attention of students and teachers; indeed, it turned out to be a seat of pilgrimage for people from all walks of life.

Students and teachers one can expect, but why did senior officers, dignitaries, members of the royal family and, most surprisingly, some Buddhist monks from Mongolia also come to see his lab? One can well imagine that it was his charm of manner, courteous behaviour, integrity of character and, above all, his atmosphere of purity and serenity which attracted all who were a little receptive. Sometime in 1923, his Imperial Highness S.A.I. Prince Chichibu came to visit the laboratory with some palace officials. Pavitra, with his thick beard and tall, handsome figure, explained his research projects to them. They were impressed and spent a long time with him. Though he was busy now with students and laboratory work, Pavitra still maintained his intimacy with members of the traditional aristocratic families, such as Dr. Ishizu and Viscount Skokuni Soga. Sometimes they would take him on excursions, especially during the spring, when Japan takes on a festive appearance with its famous cherry blossoms.

Pavitra was practising Shintoism at this time. There is a picture of him with a group of about twenty devotees of various ages, standing on the icy banks of a frozen river. It was bitter cold at that time, he said, and they had all fasted for twenty-one days; then they bathed in that ice-cold water! This was a method of body purification; after the fasting and bathing, they felt a sensation of lightness and purity in the very cells of the body.

In 1922 there was a tremendous earthquake in Japan, which devastated almost half the island country. It was an unforgettable experience for Pavitra. Late in the afternoon, when the earthquake began, he remembered that in his laboratory there were jars of acid and inflammable liquids which had not been kept with any special precaution. He decided to go to the lab, which was at the other end of the city, six miles from where he lived. Some students who were at his house enthusiastically offered to go with him. By that time it was almost evening. They wanted to go by tramcar, but there was none to take them as the electricity had failed. So they had to walk the whole way, in the midst of still continuing tremors. In the growing dusk, with the danger of a crack in the earth below their feet at any moment, these adventurers strode along the road. As they went, they saw the local families who had quietly come out of their houses and assembled in the nearby open spaces, from which they watched their ravaged homes: some were crumbling down, others were on fire. All the members of these families, young and old, were silent: nobody uttered a word of lamentation, nobody cried out to see their life's shelter destroyed by Nature's cruel whim; they simply looked on with stoic calm, almost with yogic indifference. They were used to such calamities from their birth; it was a part of their existence. This silent acceptance of fate's tragic play impressed Pavitra very much; he had never witnessed such a scene in his life. The police were there, but they were not bothered by any indiscipline. They merely prevented people from rushing into the shops of the cloth-merchants. These merchants, unable to save their stock, which had caught fire, had called people to take as much as they could.

But the police feared that such a move would create further difficulties and disrupt the public order, so they did not allow anyone to step inside the burning shops. Most of the traditional Japanese structures were made of wood and bamboo, so they were easily inflammable.

At last the chemists reached their destination. They went upstairs to the room where the acids were stored. There they found nothing in disorder, for such was Pavitra's way of doing things. The bottles of acid were shaking from time to time, due to the tremors. But the lab had been saved. Still, they took further precaution, separating the inflammable bottles and jars from the others. Having finished the work, they were just preparing to leave when they saw the wooden staircase collapse before their eyes. The only staircase! And the house was shaking again. But without panicking, they waited till they could hail a passer-by and ask him to bring a rope by which they could climb down. Late in the night they returned home safely.

Did they sleep comfortably that night? We don't remember what Pavitra said about that. What we remember is that two and a half years later, when Pavitra was living in Mongolia, one day he received a gift-parcel. Inside he found a small, genuine Swiss-made timepiece — a present from his Japanese friends, to mark their gratitude and appreciation for his courage during the earthquake. That timepiece is still in his room.

It was just after the big earthquake that Pavitra met the architect Antonin Raymond and his wife Naomi, who lived in Japan. Soon they became close friends. This Monsieur Raymond is none other than the architect of Golconde, a fifty-room residence in the Ashram. He and his wife came to the Ashram in 1939 when the Golconde construction was beginning, and remained for about three months. They spoke very highly of Pavitra, calling him their best friend in the world.

In May or June of 1924, when Tagore went to Japan for a second time, Pavitra met him in Tokyo's Imperial Hotel. There he got a photograph of Tagore autographed. Tagore signed his full name in Bengali for this unknown young Frenchman! On 22 June 1924, Pavitra addressed a large gathering of college students and teachers. His last meeting with the Raymonds took place just two days later. His time in Japan was ending.

Soon after, Pavitra left Japan for Mongolia via China. Here also his guiding star arranged things from behind the scenes. A delegation of Mongolian monks came to visit Japan. They could very well have visited some Buddhist temples and gone away! But that was not to be: they also paid a visit to Pavitra's laboratory. Pavitra was more interested in knowing what they were doing than in explaining his own work to them. He felt that a door was opening for him and so he made closer acquaintance with them. The greatest difficulty was language. They did not know French, and he did not know Mongolian. It happened that one of the delegation members, an ex-officer of the Russian army, was married to a Chinese lady who knew some English. Through her, with the determination that he was born with,

Pavitra succeeded in making the monks agree to let him live in their monastery for some time. He was always ready to face any difficulty in order to reach his goal.

PAVITRA AND MRITYUNJOY

(Compiled from their writings)

(Reprinted with some changes from the July and August 1988 issues of *Mother India*.)

For all problems of existence are essentially problems of harmony. They arise from the perception of an unsolved discord and the instinct of an undiscovered agreement or unity. To rest content with an unsolved discord is possible for the practical and more animal part of man, but impossible for his fully awakened mind, and usually even his practical parts only escape from the general necessity either by shutting out the problem or by accepting a rough, utilitarian and unilluminated compromise. For essentially, all Nature seeks a harmony, life and matter in their own sphere as much as mind in the arrangement of its perceptions. The greater the apparent disorder of the materials offered or the apparent disparateness, even to irreconcilable opposition, of the elements that have to be utilised, the stronger is the spur, and it drives towards a more subtle and puissant order than can normally be the result of a less difficult endeavour.

Sri Aurobindo

(The Life Divine, SABCL, Vol. 18, p. 2)

AN INTRODUCTION TO SRI AUROBINDO'S *RECORD OF YOGA*

(Based on a Talk delivered at the Cultural Integration Fellowship,
San Francisco, 2008)

(Continued from the issue of October, 2009)

II

AT this point it may be fruitful to reflect on the general questions that have arisen in our consideration so far: What are the overall goals that Sri Aurobindo is interested in with all these *chatusthayas*? What does he mean by general *siddhis* and *adhara siddhis*? What do the *bijas* of these *chatusthayas* encapsulate? Why the use of recursion in descriptions such as with the *Siddhi Chatusthaya*? The *Chatusthayas* are all about *Siddhi*. Hence the *Siddhi Chatusthaya* encapsulates the general goals of the entire scheme; we may say that the *siddhi chatusthaya* is the *bija* of its *bijas*. To understand the core of this *bija*, we must bring to mind once more the integralism of Sri Aurobindo, that his yoga may be thought of as an integral Vedanta, an integral Tantra and an integral Vaishnavism, all at once. In *The Synthesis of Yoga*, he says that his yoga is one in which one uses the method of the Vedanta to achieve the goals of the Tantra. In the *Siddhi Chatusthaya*, we see the *bija* of such an integral Vedanta and an integral Tantra, which combine as the basis of Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga.

The Siddhi of the Siddhi Chatusthaya

So when we concentrate more deeply on the *siddhis* of the *Siddhi Chatusthaya*, we find that the first two *siddhis*, *shuddhi* and *mukti* pertain to the method of the Vedanta and the last two, *bhukti* and *siddhi*, pertain to the goals of the Tantra — that is, in a nutshell, purification and liberation are the conditions for a perfect enjoyment and mastery of the world. Sri Aurobindo is saying here that the goal of human life is perfect enjoyment and mastery and the way to achieve this is a perfect purity and a complete liberation. To understand what a perfect enjoyment may mean, we must realise that all enjoyment, in normal experience, comes with its opposite. All pleasure is bounded by its duality of pain. This is because the seeking for pleasure is the fulfilment of a lack. Hence, enjoyment arises from a lack and is haunted by a lack even in its having. To lose or be deprived of the object of pleasure is an experience of pain and this experience and its fear accompanies every happiness as the nature of human temporal experience. This is what has made the Vedantic tradition veer

away from worldly experience and affirm *moksha*, liberation from all bondage or subjection to worldly forces, and cessation of rebirths as the goals of human existence. But Tantra, even though presently subordinated to the Vedantic goals of liberation, sees enjoyment, *bhukti* and control or mastery of worldly energies by the development of latent powers within us, *siddhi*, to be legitimate goals in themselves. The question — is it possible to have an omnipotent mastery over nature or a “shadowless bliss” (to use Sri Aurobindo’s phrase) — continues to nag the human mind, because it pertains to one of the central aspirations of man. Sri Aurobindo’s answer here is “yes”; for him, that becomes the very condition of the Supramental life, the very meaning of the Supramental life.

The riddling gist of the *Siddhi Chatusthaya* is that the perfection of Perfection is synonymous with a perfect mastery over all the forces of nature and the varied enjoyment of reality as the Lord, *Ishwara*, *Purusha* residing in the heart of all creation. But to attain to such a Perfection, one would need to fulfil certain conditions. Those conditions are purification and freedom. *Mukti* is the condition for *Bhukti*. Unless you are liberated, you cannot enjoy. It seems to be a paradox in terms because liberation implies freedom from any need. If no necessity binds you, then Delight is your intrinsic condition because if you are not happy, you are already bound by the seeking for happiness. Freedom and Delight are synonymous; Delight is intrinsic to Freedom. But if you are already happy, what is there to enjoy in the world? This, indeed, is the argument of the Vedantist and the trenchant nature of this argument has in fact convinced most modern philosophical formulations of Tantra, to subordinate its goals of worldly mastery and enjoyment to an eventual extra-cosmic liberation.

But Sri Aurobindo sees an independent justification in the aspiration for worldly mastery and enjoyment. This indeed, for him is the cosmic fulfilment of an evolutionary creation. Infinite Being could stay unmanifest or could choose to explore its infinite possibilities through a structured play of relations in Space and Time. This “tasting” (*rasagrahana*) of its own infinite variety of being and consciousness is a play of Delight, *lila*. Here indeed, we begin to see emerging the dimension of the integral Vaishnavism of Sri Aurobindo, which backgrounds the integral Vedanta and integral Tantra in the *Siddhi Chatusthaya*. On this basis, freedom, *mukti*, is the condition of *Purusha*’s play and enjoyment in this world of time and space. Perfect enjoyment based on perfect freedom is the essential *Siddhi*, the essential perfection. And so we find that the whole goal of the yoga is *Siddhi*, the *siddhi* of the *Siddhi* is *Bhukti*, *Mukti* is the condition for *Bhukti* and *Shuddhi* is the way to *Mukti*. So that’s how the equation of the *bija*, its internal morphology and teleology are worked out.

The Quartet of Being

It would seem from this that the entire yoga is contained here; then what was the need for the rest of the *Chatusthaya*s? This, indeed is the beauty of Sri Aurobindo’s

Integral Yoga, as I said, that every element in it contains all the rest. The *Siddhi Chatusthaya* gives us one formulation of the entire question of the yoga, one may say, a central one and a self-sufficient answer. But, we find that if we concentrate on any of the *Chatusthayas*, it yields a *bija* which answers this same central question — what is the Integral Yoga, in its own integral formulation. For example, if we take the *Brahma Chatusthaya*, which is about the realisation of Brahman, we may ask how this relates to the *siddhi* of the Integral Yoga. The four limbs of the *Brahma Chatusthaya* are given by Sri Aurobindo as *Sarvam*, *Anantam*, *Jnanam* and *Anandam* *Brahma*. *Sarvam* means “the All”. This refers to the realisation of everything as the One Reality. *Anantam*, on the other hand, means “Infinite”. Here, the realisation points towards the Infinity of the Brahman, rather than its Oneness. Brahman is One and Infinite at the same time. *Jnanam* means Knowledge, and *Anandam*, Delight. We see in this fourfold description, the sophistication of Sri Aurobindo’s understanding of Brahman, as well as the mental difficulties in grasping its dimensions.

One may say, realisation of the Brahman is the experience or realisation of the One Being. Immediately, the question becomes subdivided in the mind to which aspect of the One? Is it the oneness of the One or the Infinity of the One? Because if the One is an instance in an infinite Reality then it can’t be the only One there is. And if there is only One then how can we conceive of it as Infinite? This is the irreconcilable logical duality of *sarvam* and *anantam*, the One and the Infinite. Can we hold the ideas of radical Oneness and radical Infinity simultaneously in our minds? Here is where we come face to face with the transcendental reality of Brahman in its description as the Infinite One. To the mind, this description itself contains a bifurcation into two major schools of later Vedanta, *Kevala-adwaita* and *Vishishta-adwaita*, the pure advaitic non-dualism of Shankara and Ramanuja’s qualified non-dualism. Qualified non-dualism is saying that the One can only be realised through the many. In the infinite waves of the ocean, we intuit the presence of the one Ocean. *Kevala Adwaita* is saying that the many are false; there is only one. In Sri Aurobindo’s formulation of the *Brahma Chatusthaya*, both are equally true. But the question that then follows, is which one to realise? This problem arises because of the nature of Mind, a dividing and divided consciousness, the basis of what is known as *Avidya*, the Ignorance; and indeed, it is because of this that Sri Aurobindo points to a reconciling consciousness beyond Mind, the need for Supermind.

The Ignorance, *Avidya* as the domain of division has been created by a perspective of the One on itself. If I wish to conceive of myself as divided, I have the power to consider my head as a separate being, my body as a separate being, my arms as separate beings, etc. As if through an operation of intelligence or an operation of will, conscious-will, *Cit-Tapas* I can sunder the sense of the connections that exist between these parts or portions of myself. By this operation, I can have an independent sense of my mind as a reality, my body as a separate reality and of my

limbs as other realities. This is analogous to the experience of Brahman as *Avidya*, Ignorance and this experience marks us as participants of *Avidya*. This is the reason why we either experience the Brahman as one or as infinite but not as both at the same time. Now Sri Aurobindo is telling us in the *bija* of the *Brahma Chatusthaya* that it is possible for us to experience both at the same time, but we have to rise to another poise of operation of the *Cit-Tapas*. This the Supramental poise. Therefore, he presents us with this logical contradiction as with a challenge. Can we resolve it?

Sri Aurobindo challenges any simplistic proposition regarding the realisation of Brahman with the problem of *Avidya*. When we speak of realising the Brahman, are we conscious of which aspect we will include and which will get excluded, in our realisation? Will we wittingly or unwittingly end up supporting the *Vishisht-adwaitins* against the *Adwaitins* or vice versa? Ramanuja would say that Shankara was misled. In their mutual denial, Shankara asserts that all phenomenal experience of the world (*jagat*) is false (*mithya*) and Ramanuja declares Shankara to be an *asura*. *Asura* — it's a strangely familiar term, a convenience to banish whatever does not fit our conception of reality. Indeed, this is what marks the history of religion, even the more tolerant sectarian history of Indian spirituality. It explains why there are so many religions claiming the exclusive ownership of Truth and why they are always at war. Each of them is true but none of them is exclusively true. They are all partial aspects of the Integral Truth and they can't overcome their partiality because they are subject to the foundational problem of *Avidya*. To know God as God knows himself, not in the variety of mutually exclusive ways in which man may know God, was the epistemological project of Sri Aurobindo and the simultaneous affirmation of the radical unity and radical infinity of God is an index of its fulfilment. The condition for this fulfilment is referred to by the first two terms of the *Brahma Chatusthaya*, possible only in the border crossing beyond the *Avidya* and into the Supermind. Thus, this epistemological goal becomes the third term, *Jnanam*, Knowledge of the *Brahma Chatusthaya*, and the intrinsic Delight of the One in the self-knowledge of its own Infinity becomes the fourth term, *Ananda*.

Sri Aurobindo elaborates on the problem of contradiction in the aspects of Brahman, its Oneness and its Infinity, *Sarvam* and *Anantam*, in 'The Yoga of Integral Knowledge' in *The Synthesis of Yoga*. The two principal Chapters connected with this are Chapter Sixteen, 'Oneness' and Chapter Fifteen, 'The Cosmic Consciousness'. In Chapter Twenty-two of the same section, he deals with "Vijnana" or Gnosis, which has to do with *Jnanam*, the third element of the *Brahma Chatusthaya*. Gnosis is the Supramental Knowledge, which alone can abrogate the distinction between Oneness and Cosmic differentiation. The final element of the *Brahma Chatusthaya* is *Anandam*, Delight. In the following Chapter of 'The Yoga of Integral Knowledge', Chapter Twenty-three, he relates *Jnanam* and *Ananda*, 'Gnosis and Delight'. Further, this final term of the *Brahma Chatusthaya*, *Ananda*, is now also familiar to us in terms of the *siddhi* of the *Siddhi Chatusthaya*. There we have seen how this aspect

of Brahman relates to the integral Vaishnavism of Sri Aurobindo, a relation he expands further in the Chapters on 'The Yoga of Divine Love' in *The Synthesis of Yoga*. Here, Chapter Seven, titled 'Ananda Brahman' further elaborates this fourth element of the *Brahma Chatusthaya*.

In the Chapter titled 'Oneness', Sri Aurobindo gives us a mantric definition of the Integral Yoga in terms of the first two elements of the *Brahma Chatusthaya*. He says there, "The realisation of oneness and the practice of oneness in difference is the whole of the Yoga." "The realisation of oneness and the practice of oneness in difference" — this indeed, is *sarvam anantam*. And what are the results — they are *Jnanam* and *Anandam*, Knowledge and Delight. True knowledge is the self-consciousness of being. At the root of Ignorance is the loss of identification with the origin of Being. In *The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo has termed this the "Original Ignorance". As we noted earlier, Sri Aurobindo's epistemological project was to know God as he knows himself. Identity with Brahman in its origin is the key to such a Knowledge; thus it arises as an innate consequence of the realisation of Supermind, which alone can accomplish the simultaneous experience of the radical oneness and the radical infinity of Being. Equally intrinsic to this realisation is Delight. The Oneness being Infinite has Delight as its innate property. The Mother points out that the greatest delight that we as finite human beings have is in the experience of exceeding our boundaries. Whenever we experience something new about ourselves and our horizon expands, we have an expansion of Delight. If we extend this reflection as a thought experiment to its farthest limit, the experience of infinite Being, horizonless, free of all boundaries, we catch a glimpse of pure unalloyed Delight, Ananda Brahman. So that is the reason why a result of the realisation of oneness and infinity of Brahman also leads to the experience of Knowledge by identity and by extension, and causeless and shadowless Delight, which nothing can diminish.

The Quartet of Action

Again, we can conceive of the *siddhi* of the Integral Yoga in terms of Will, Works and Power. This leads to the third general *Chatusthaya*, the *Karma Chatusthaya*. This formulation is also very interesting since it bears the impress of Sri Aurobindo's personal experience, in certain aspects which he is hesitant to make public or generalise. Sri Aurobindo gives us the four elements of *siddhi* for this *Chatusthaya* as — Krishna, Kali, *Karma* and *Kama*. Here we see that he starts with two deities, Krishna and Kali. Of course, we know that these are the two most popular deities of Bengal and the godheads behind the two most common mystic traditions of that region, Vaishnavism and Shakta Tantra respectively. We hardly find explicit mention of either of these deities in Sri Aurobindo's more public teachings. Still, he has spoken quite openly of his realisation of Vasudeva Krishna in Alipore Jail; and

later, in 1926, of his realisation of Krishna's consciousness or what he also called the Overmental Consciousness in his physical being. In fact, the entire *Record of Yoga* is attributed by him to the Master of his Yoga, whom he equates in places with Sri Krishna. Kali, too, hardly appears in his other writings, except that he signed his letters from Pondicherry to revolutionary friends as "Kali", and refers to Mahakali as one of the four emanations of the Divine Mother in his later work *The Mother*.

The names Krishna and Kali are almost completely absent from his major works, such as *The Synthesis of Yoga* or *The Life Divine*; but these deities evidently play a pre-eminent role in his own diaries. This gives us a clear example of Sri Aurobindo's discretion in language use. Acts of communication occur in a domain of discourse where words have social histories and carry significance within certain boundaries. Moreover, the infinite appears to each instance of itself in different ways and in his translation from personal to public Sri Aurobindo facilitates this open-endedness of experience. He is scrupulous in avoiding the biases of cultic or sectarian narrowness in the formulation of his teaching. But in his own practice, these deities assume specific meanings as names and forms of the Divine. The impersonal *Parabrahman* takes on personal forms in these deities. Here again, we find the kind of paradox we encountered in the oneness and infinity of God. If we take Reality to be conscious Being, is this Being impersonal or is it a Person? And again is it one Person or many Persons, the monotheism of One God or the polytheism of the Many? Once more, as with *sarvam* and *anantam*, Sri Aurobindo raises these contradictions within the *bija* of the *Chatusthaya* to point to the integrality of its realisation. The Impersonal and the Personal, the One and the Many must be realised simultaneously as the Integral Divine. This is not possible in the Mind domain of *Avidya*, but appears as the natural truth in Supermind. The throbbing heart of the impersonal is a Supreme Person, *Purushottama*; the condition of divinity of this Person is the qualitative illimitability of its personality, in other words, its poised impersonality. Again, the monotheistic personal Oneness of God is at the same time the matrix of infinite personhood, polytheism. None of these names and forms, nor the nameless and formless may be seen as the exclusive self-definition of Reality, yet each of them could so appear to itself in a relational play. In later Vaishnava traditions, the One Supreme Person is seen as Krishna, but as the Bhagavad Gita brings out in its description of the *Vishwarupa*, the supramental self-definition of this Person is multiform, inclusive of all forms of the gods and creatures and also formless. Yet for purposes of finite relation, it takes on the specific form of the *avatar* and charioteer Krishna for his devotee Arjuna. Similarly, in Tantric traditions, the single creative Consciousness-Force which is at work in all manifestation takes on every form and aspect of the universe but is conceived by the *sadhaka* as the creating and destroying Mother of Time, Kali.

Sri Aurobindo assumes these Vaishnava and Tantric relations in a personalised form in the quartet of Action or Works, *Karma Chatusthaya*. In *The Synthesis of*

Yoga, in Chapter Eleven of the 'Yoga of Works', Sri Aurobindo deals with the element which he names Krishna. In the *Synthesis*, he translates this in the Chapter title itself as 'The Master of the Work'. This is the *Parameshwara*, the One to whom all the work in the universe is missioned and whom we feel as the presence behind our own highest sense of Self, receiving the works of the Shakti in and through us. Becoming conscious of this *Ishwara*, first as the Lord of our Works, then as the Self of our Works is the identification we are invited to in the *Karma Chatusthaya*.

In Chapter Eight of the same section of the *Synthesis*, he deals with what he calls Kali in the quartet of Works — here he refers to this element, again in the Chapter title, as 'The Supreme Will'. This is the will of *Parameshwara* which has gone forth and become the conscious force at work in the entire creation. This is the true doer of all our actions, the *Shakti* to whom we surrender all our works, the Active Brahman we are to realise in ourselves and in all things. So in these two Chapters we find the elaboration of Krishna and Kali in terms of the fulfilment of and through Action. The third element in this quartet, *Karma*, is again a recursive reference — *Karma* as a *siddhi* of the *Karma Chatusthaya*. Here again, Chapter Twelve in 'The Yoga of Works' section of the *Synthesis*, titled 'The Divine Work', corresponds to this element. And the final element of the quartet, as in most of the quartets, rounds up the integral fulfilment in terms of Delight as *Kama*, enjoyment.

In 'The Yoga of Works', there isn't any specific Chapter devoted to enjoyment. But Chapter Eleven, 'The Master of the Work' is a beautiful Chapter dealing with *Shakti*, what he calls Kali in the *Record*, with Krishna, the Master of Works, and about the very meaning of work. This indeed, is an important aspect of the *Karma Chatusthaya* — the meaning of work. We find that the whole universe is full of a sense of struggle, labour, travail. What is all this struggle about? It is the struggle of consciousness, trying to emerge out of Inconscience, and being challenged at every step. Thus the evolution of power is at the core of the evolution of consciousness. Intensity and urgency of Consciousness, the emerging Divine as Power, what Sri Aurobindo calls Mahakali in *The Mother*, is what gives the stamp of struggle to this Universe. And that's the reason why there is a special kind of delight connected with work. It is the glory of the Victory. This is the sense to what he calls *Kama*. *Kama* in general parlance means "desire". But Sri Aurobindo sees beyond the "need" in desire to its transformed and divine meaning. Purified desire is the urge towards the victory of the Spirit. The aspiration for delight in the victory, in the glory of spiritual victory becomes the essence of *Kama* in the *Karma Chatusthaya*.

Surrender

This accounts for the general *siddhis* in the *Record*. To conclude this overview, I would like to dwell a little more on the pre-eminent place of surrender in the *Record*. In the first of the *adhara siddhis*, the *Shanti* or *Samata Chatusthaya*, we have already

touched on the power of surrender. In this *Chatusthaya*, Sri Aurobindo presents the field of Equality in its entire spectrum, in positive and negative, or one may say, receptive and active terms. At first, we see equality as the development of a neutrality, that is the receptive aspect of it. One develops neutrality by being completely equal to all circumstances, as the Gita teaches. On the other hand, an active equality can develop into a glad acceptance of all things, and this can deepen into an unshaken happiness and finally into an ecstasy. This is how the receptive neutrality of Equality connects to the pole of Delight, running through the *Sapta Chatusthaya* as the *siddhi* of the Integral Yoga. But as the basis for this development, there is also what one may call an active pole to the receptive side of *samata*. Surrender to the divine, the unreserved acceptance of the Divine Will, is the basis of this transition from a passive to an active equality. Sri Aurobindo dwells on the power of this kind of equality as the joy of equality. The term he uses here is *Nati*, to lower oneself, bend oneself, to accept through surrender. This acceptance through surrender gives not only the neutrality of equality but the delight of equality. This is where the *siddhi* of equality connects with the delight, the stream of delight running through this *Sapta Chatusthaya*.

This element of surrender is again taken up very powerfully by Sri Aurobindo in the next *adhara siddhi*, which is the *Shakti Chatusthaya*, the quartet of the Divine Mother. In fact, the importance given to surrender in our general understanding of the Integral Yoga is largely derived from this *Chatusthaya*, through its elaboration in *The Mother*. The very first *siddhi*, *virya* of the *Shakti Chatusthaya* is developed in Chapter six of *The Mother*. This deals with the four aspects of the Mother and the qualities related to the four *Mahashaktis*. But in the *Record*, Sri Aurobindo also introduces four *Ishwaras* corresponding to the four *Mahashaktis*, something absent in *The Mother*. And the Supreme *Mahashakti* that he refers to as the Divine Mother in *The Mother* and that he elsewhere refers to as *Aditi* following the Veda, is referred to as Kali in the *Record*. Mahakali here may be thought of as an aspect of Kali, who is the Supreme *Mahashakti*; just as Krishna is the Supreme Lord, *Parameshwara* and *Purushottama*, the *Ishwara* of Kali. The four *shaktis* each, too, have an *Ishwara*. Maheshwari's lord is sometimes equated predictably with Maheshwara or Shiva but more often he is referred to by the name *Mahavira*. Mahakali's *Ishwara* is *Balarama* or Rudra, Mahalakshmi's is *Pradyumna* or Vishnu, and Mahasaraswati's lord is *Aniruddha* or Kamadeva.

If we seek for traditional sources for these lesser known names of the *Ishwaras*, we find that they belong to the *Pancharatra* cultus which is a rather esoteric early form of Vaishnavism. We may wonder where Sri Aurobindo got this terminology from. As touched on earlier, by his own telling, he received the lines of his yoga from the being he refers to in the *Record* as the Master of the Yoga and equates in places with Sri Krishna.

Krishna-Kali

Nevertheless, as *siddhi* related to *Mahasaraswati* here, Sri Aurobindo introduces *dasya lipsa* and *atmasamarpan*. *Atmasamarpan* refers to self-surrender, what may be called an integral surrender. *Mahasaraswati* is the aspect of the Mother related to work, labour, the careful re-construction of unity from the fragmented condition of individual and collective nature. We know how much importance the Mother has given to *Mahasaraswati* as the presiding aspect of the *Mahashakti* in the preparatory phase of the supramental manifestation, which is what we are passing through at present. The *swabhava* or soul quality manifesting from *Mahasaraswati* is that of the *Sudra*, the labourer. It is interesting to note how even Vivekananda refers to the contemporary primacy of this soul quality, saying that we are moving into an age when the *sudra* will be predominant. Even in a mundane and secular way, we can see this in the levelling process of modernity, an age of the dignity of labour. Modernity can be seen as an age of the measuring of all forms of activity in terms of the exchange value of labour in capitalism and the ideal of the international proletariat in communism. But from a spiritual point of view, the true gift of the *sudra* is desireless and loving Service, facilitated by a complete self-surrender to the Master of the Works.

This surrender is *atmasamarpan*, whose *siddhi* is the cornerstone of the later formulation of Sri Aurobindo's teaching as practised in the Ashram during the lifetime of the Mother. The entity within us which alone can make this surrender is what he later calls "the psychic being". Sri Aurobindo does not name this being in the *Record*, but its reality is implicit and pervasive in it. *Dasya lipsa*, another *siddhi* within this sub-quartet of *Mahasaraswati*, refers to this same surrender in terms of the *lipsa*, psychic willingness or ardour, for Service to the Divine. And though carried under the *siddhis* of *Mahasaraswati*, this ardour and active surrender belongs to the ultimate realisation of the active *siddhi* in the Integral Yoga. This is more fully brought out under another principal element of the *Shakti Chatusthaya*, known as *chandibhava*. *Chandi* is another name for Kali, the intense conscious form of the Divine Mother and the realisation of the *bhava* or integral soul quality of *Chandi* or Kali is one of the *siddhis* of the *Shakti Chatusthaya* or quartet of Power, Activity and Manifestation. But what is the central characteristic of this *bhava*? One may think it is the *ugra bhava*, fierce intensity in the accomplishment of the yoga and against all that stands in its way. This is certainly one of its aspects, one strongly present in the photograph of Sri Aurobindo reproduced in the published version of *Record of Yoga*. But even more central to this *bhava* is absolute surrender. Sri Aurobindo highlights this in the *Record* in his reference to Kali as the "*madhura dasi*" of Krishna.

"*Madhura*" translates to "intensely sweet" or "honeyed". "*Dasi*", we have encountered the term already in *dasya lipsa*, literally means "slave". An enchantingly sweet beloved slave and/or a slave to the embodiment of Sweetness or Honey is the

sense in which the soul quality of Kali is characterised. There is a line in *Savitri* which Richard Hartz has drawn attention to as corresponding to this discussion of Kali as the *madhura dasi*. It is a line that the Mother identified as her favourite line in *Savitri* — indeed a line she completely identified with. It encapsulates her essence and the essence of the Integral Yoga as performed by her in every instance. This line is “Forever love, O beautiful slave of God.” We also know well that the embodiment of Sweetness or Honey in the Vaishnava tradition is *Madhava*, Sri Krishna, here also the Master of Works and the Master of the Yoga. This embodiment of Sweetness is the Person aspect of the *Ananda Brahman*, the *Anandamaya Purusha* or *Purushottama*.

We thus get a clear image of the Integral Yoga from this conflation of terms. The Integral Yoga is performed by Kali, the intensely accelerated evolutionary force of Consciousness. It is initiated by the Lord and Master of the Yoga and addressed by Kali to the Master of the Yoga, Sri Krishna. The essence of Sri Krishna is Sweetness, Delight. The essence of Kali is complete surrender, slavery to the sweetness and Delight of Sri Krishna. It is from Delight that the yoga proceeds, for Delight that it is undertaken and to Delight that it returns.

In his *Thoughts and Aphorisms*, written in 1913, contemporaneously with the *Record*, Sri Aurobindo includes an entry which features Krishna and Kali in a context of complete yogic identification which bears repetition in the light of this discussion. I conclude with this entry:

I did not know for some time whether I loved Krishna best or Kali; when I loved Kali, it was loving myself, but when I loved Krishna, I loved another, and still it was my Self with whom I was in love. Therefore I came to love Krishna better even than Kali.

(CWSA, Vol. 12, p. 483)

(Concluded)

DEBASHISH BANERJI

“POWERS OF TEN”: GENESIS AND MYSTIC SIGNIFICANCE

“The Veda was the beginning of our spiritual knowledge; the Veda will remain its end. These compositions of an unknown antiquity are as the many breasts of the eternal Mother of knowledge from which our succeeding ages have all been fed.”

Sri Aurobindo ([3], p. 152)

INDIAN traditions recall the attainment of a high state of civilisation during a period of remote antiquity. All that was great and valuable in later periods was believed to have its ultimate roots in that idyllic past. This was an era when both the inner and outer life of the civilised countries had been guided by the spiritual impulse; when knowledge sprang from mystic insights. While the great mystics of antiquity could have belonged to any ancient civilisation, their doctrines have survived for us only in the Vedas. In this article, we shall discuss a few examples from Vedic literature which indicate that the roots of the decimal system can also be traced to that Age of Mysteries.

The decimal place-value system is widely regarded as a pillar of modern civilisation; in particular, it is a key to the efficient principles of modern arithmetic. A brief discussion on the importance and impact of the decimal system was made in the August 2002 issue of *Srinwantu*. We elaborate on some remarks made in that article regarding the genesis of the decimal system. We shall quote passages from Sri Aurobindo’s *The Secret of the Veda* on the symbolic significance of decuple terms like hundred and thousand, and of other relevant numbers like seven, fifty and ninety-nine.

Recall the relative chronology of Vedic treatises. The *Mantra-Saṁhitās* form the oldest layers of Vedic literature, and of the *Saṁhitās*, the *Ṛgveda* is the most ancient. The *Brāhmaṇas*, which consist of commentaries on the Mantras, descriptions of sacrificial rites, and narrations of legends, form the next layer. Already by the time of the *Brāhmaṇa*, the deeper significance of the Mantras had become obscure. Also note that, by tradition, our *Saṁhitās* represent only the closing stages of the Age of Mysteries. And while the *Brāhmaṇas* were composed much after the *Saṁhitās*, they still belong to a prehistoric period.

“Decimal Place-Value” and “Powers of Ten”

The key to the decimal notation is the concept of “place-value”, one of the greatest ideas in all science. The ingenious place-value principle assigns, to each of the digits in a number, a certain value (the place-value) by virtue of its position (place)

in the given number. For instance, in the number 1956 (in decimal notation), the digit 1 acquires the value “one thousand”, the digit 9 acquires the value “nine hundred” while the digit 5 acquires the value “fifty” (an abbreviation for “five tens”). Thus each place-value is a certain “power of 10”. All numbers are represented (in writing) using ten digits by the application of this “place-value” principle. The Sanskrit term for digit is *anka* (literally meaning “mark”).

In the decimal representation through words, terms for the “powers of ten” play the role of the place-value principle. Thus, central to the decimal place-value system is the concept of “powers of ten”.

How ancient are these concepts? In the *Vana Parva* of the *Mahābhārata* (III.132-134), there is an incidental reference to the decimal system during the narration of the tale of Aṣṭāvakra, the nephew of Uddālaka’s son Śvetaketu. In the midst of the famous verbal battle with Aṣṭāvakra in the court of Janaka, Bandi, the formidable scholar, says (III. 134.16):

navaiva yogo gaṇaneti śaśvat

“Nine is the precise number of signs (numerical symbols) that are always combined in calculations.”

The sufficiency of nine symbols (presumably with another symbol to denote their absence) is a clear allusion to the decimal place-value notation; for, without such a notation, nine symbols will not be adequate. As pointed out by Bibhutibhusan Datta in ([4], pp. 33-34), if the ancient names like Uddālaka, Śvetaketu, Aṣṭāvakra and Janaka truly reflect the antiquity of the legend, then it would follow that the decimal place-value system was in vogue during the *Brāhmaṇa* phase of the Vedic era. In this context, the use of the word *śaśvat* (perpetual) is significant — it has the nuance of “from immemorial time”.

As no written document of the Vedic period is available to us, we do not know how numbers were actually written during that remote era. However, in the orally transmitted Vedic literature, we do see the fundamental concept of “powers of ten” and the principle of expressing numbers verbally through “powers of ten”. We give some examples in the following sections.

A Verse of Medhātithi

The concept of “powers of ten” can be seen even in treatises of the *Samhitā* phase — the oldest layer of Vedic literature. Consider the verse of Medhātithi in the *Vājasaneyī Samhitā* (XVII.2) of the *Śukla Yajurveda*:

ima me ‘agna’ iṣṭakā dhenavaḥ santvekā ca daśa ca daśa śataṁ ca śataṁ ca sahasraṁ ca sahasraṁ cāyutaṁ cāyutaṁ ca niyutaṁ ca niyutaṁ ca prayutaṁ cārbudaṁ ca nyarbudaṁ ca samudraśca madhyaṁ cāntaśca parārdhaścaitā me ‘agna’ iṣṭakā dhenavaḥ santvamutrāmuṣmilloke

O Agni! These Bricks are my fostering Cows — *eka* (one) and *daśa* (ten); *daśa daśa a śata*; *daśa śata a sahasra*; *daśa sahasra an ayuta*; *daśa ayuta a niyuta*; *daśa niyuta a prayuta*; *daśa prayuta an arbuda*; *daśa arbuda a nyarbuda*; *daśa nyarbuda a samudra*; *daśa samudra a madhya*; *daśa madhya an anta*; *daśa anta a parārdha*. May these bricks be my fostering Cows in yonder world as in this world!

We may get some hints regarding the symbolic meaning of the verse if we recall that in Vedic hymns, “. . . the Cow is the symbol of consciousness in the form of knowledge” and that the wealth of cows is “symbolic of richness of mental illumination” ([1], p. 114, 42). Arya Vishnu of Sri Aurobindo Ashram pointed out to me the etymological significance of *iṣṭakā* as something useful or necessary for attaining *iṣṭa* — that which is sought or desired. The material brick is termed *iṣṭakā*, as it is used in building the sacrificial altar. One may then envisage the Mantra too as an *iṣṭakā* which supports and aids the inner sacrifice of the seeker in his quest for the desired Realisation.

But even leaving aside the mystic significance, this verse of Medhātithi is a crucial landmark often overlooked by scholars of the history of mathematics. Here Medhātithi explicitly describes a decuple sequence: *eka* (1), *daśa* (10), *śata* (100), *sahasra* (1000), *ayuta* (10000), *niyuta* (100000), *prayuta* (1000000), *arbuda* (10000000), *nyarbuda* (100000000), *samudra* (1000000000), *madhya* (10000000000), *anta* (100000000000) and *parārdha* (1000000000000). Not only is there a specific term for each power of ten up to a billion (1000000000000), each of these terms is perceived, in fact defined, to be 10 times the preceding term: *daśa daśa a śata* (hundred), that is, *śata* is defined to be ten times *daśa*; *daśa śata a sahasra* (thousand), that is, *sahasra* is ten times *śata*; *daśa sahasra an ayuta* (myriad), that is, *ayuta* is ten times *sahasra*; similarly, *daśa ayuta a niyuta* (lakh); *daśa niyuta a prayuta* (million); *daśa prayuta an arbuda* (crore); *daśa arbuda a nyarbuda*; *daśa nyarbuda a samudra*; *daśa samudra a madhya*; *daśa madhya an anta*; and finally, *daśa anta a parārdha* (billion¹). Thus the Vedic seer Medhātithi is the earliest known expositor of the concept of “powers of ten”.

1. Billion means 10^{12} (million million) in England and Germany but 10^9 (thousand million) in USA and France. Here we use it for 10^{12} .

Vedic number-vocabulary

In Vedic literature, there is a terminology for each of the nine numerals: *eka* (1), *dvi* (2), *tri* (3), *catur* (4), *pañca* (5), *ṣaṭ* (6), *sapta* (7), *aṣṭa* (8), *nava* (9); number-names for the nine multiples of ten: *daśa* (10), *viṃśati* (20), *triṃśat* (30), *catvāriṃśat* (40), *pañcāśat* (50), *ṣaṣṭi* (60), *saptati* (70), *aṣṭi* (80), *navati* (90); and a separate name for the notational place corresponding to each power of ten up to 10^{12} :

<i>daśa</i>	(10)
<i>śata</i>	(100)
<i>sahasra</i>	(1000)
<i>ayuta</i>	(10000)
<i>niyuta</i>	(100000)
<i>prayuta</i>	(1000000)
<i>arbuda</i>	(10000000)
<i>nyarbuda</i>	(100000000)
<i>samudra</i>	(1000000000)
<i>madhya</i>	(10000000000)
<i>anta</i>	(100000000000) and
<i>parārdha</i>	(1000000000000).

For nomenclature of the “powers of ten”, we have quoted Medhātithi’s list. Sometimes there are slight variations in terminology for the higher powers in other *Samhitā* and *Brāhmaṇa* texts. Further extensions (beyond 10^{12}) too occur in some of these treatises.²

Thus, even in the *Samhitā* era, any number (at least up to the order of *parārdha*) could be represented verbally by the nine word-numerals and the names indicating the position (i.e., names of the appropriate “powers of ten”). A momentous step had been taken by “the seers, our ancestors, the first path-makers” when they gave single word-names to successive “powers of ten”. Automatically, “place-value” got introduced in number-representation. As Swami Vivekananda put it ([5], p. 512):

“... the ten numerals, the very cornerstone of all present civilisation, ... are, in reality, Sanskrit words.”

How far back into the remote Age of Mysteries do we see the above terms for the nine numerals and “powers of ten”?

2. Details are given in the article *World’s Longest Lists of Decuple Terms* by R. C. Gupta in *Gaṇita Bhāratī* Vol. 23 (2001), pp. 83-90.

References in the Ṛgveda

The most ancient extant world literature is the *Ṛgveda Samhitā*. In the *Ṛgveda* itself, we find instances of decimal representation like *sapta śatāni viṁśatiḥ* (720) and *sahasrāni śata daśa* (1110) in verses I.164.11 and II.1.8. The terms for the nine numerals occur several times in the *Ṛgveda*. Among the terms for “powers of ten”, the *Ṛgveda* frequently uses *daśa* (ten), *śata* (hundred) and *sahasra* (thousand); *ayuta* (myriad) is also mentioned in a few hymns. We quote two examples from Mandala VIII (2.41, 1.5):

śiksā vibhindo asmai catvāryayutā dadat — aṣṭā paraḥ sahasrā

“O Vibhinda! Thou hast bestowed on me four myriads of wealth; over and above, a further eight thousand.”

*mahe cana tvāmadrivaḥ parā śulkāya deyaṃ
na sahasrāya nāyutāya vajrivo na śatāya śatāmagha*

“O Indra, wielder of the thunderbolt, Lord of countless wealth! I would not sell thee³ even for a mighty price — not for a hundred,⁴ nor a thousand, nor a myriad.”

We mention here that although there are variations in different Vedic texts in the terminology for the higher powers of ten, there is agreement in all these texts up to the term *ayuta*; and it is perhaps significant that the terms up to *ayuta* occur in the *Ṛgveda*.

Etymology of *daśa*, *śata*, *sahasra*

The etymology of the names of the numerals and powers of ten is tersely described by Yāska in *Nirukta* (*Naighaṇṭuka Kāṇḍa* III.ii.10). For instance, about *eka* (one), Yāska says: “*ekā itā samkhyā?*” — *eka* (derived from the root *e*) is so called because it pervades all numbers.

Here we should recall Sri Aurobindo’s caveat ([1], p. 17): “But Yaska the etymologist does not rank with Yaska the lexicographer. Scientific grammar was

3. This was perhaps a way of saying that “You are too precious for me; I will not abandon you under any circumstances, for any lure”.

4. The expression *na śatāya* occurs in the verse after *na sahasrāya* and *nāyutāya*. The somewhat anomalous ordering could have been made for the resonating sound effect *śatāya śatāmagha* and other poetic or metric factors. Alternatively, *śatāya* could also mean here hundreds of the preceding quantities (*sahasra* and *ayuta*). Or, it can be interpreted here as “numerous” — one of the meanings of *śatāya*. (For instance, *śatāmagha*, a name or attribute of Indra, literally means possessing or distributing numerous bounties or rewards.) Prof. R.Y. Deshpande (of Sri Aurobindo Ashram) pointed out another interesting possibility: *śatāya* could be an adjective for *śatāmagha* — “I would not exchange thee (Indra) even for a hundred *śatāmagha* (Indras)”!

first developed by Indian learning, but the beginnings of sound Philology we owe to modern research. Nothing can be more fanciful and lawless than the methods of mere ingenuity used by old etymologists down even to the nineteenth century, whether in Europe or India. And when Yaska follows these methods, we are obliged to part company with him entirely.” While one has to be careful when considering Yāska etymology in general, his statements on the etymology of the specific terms *daśa*, *śata* and *sahasra* sound plausible and also appear to be in tune with various remarks made by Sri Aurobindo on these terms.

The word *daśa* (ten) is probably derived from the root *das* in the sense of completing, fulfilling or accomplishing;⁵ *das* also has the sense of “getting exhausted”. Yaska says: “*daśa dastā dr̥ṣṭārthā vā*” — at *daśa*, the numbers close; hence it is called so.

The number hundred, being *daśa* times *daśa*, was named *śata* as an abbreviation of *daśadaśata* — “*śatam daśadaśatah*” (Yaska).

Regarding *sahasra* (thousand), Yaska says: “*sahasram sahasvat*” — being mighty, being a huge number, it is called *sahasra*. The word is derived from the root *sahas* which stands for “mighty”, “powerful”, “victorious”, “strength”, “force”, etc; thus, *sahasra* is a mighty, a huge number. The vibration of power in the sound *sahasra* can be felt in the famous *Puruṣa Sukta* (*Ṛgveda* X.90.1):

sahasraśīrṣā puruṣaḥ sahasrākṣaḥ sahasrapāt
sa bhūmim viśvato vṛtvā tyatiṣṭhad
daśāṅgulam

In the context of a certain hymn (*Ṛgveda* 1.5.9), Sri Aurobindo remarked ([1], p. 500):

I am convinced, however, that. . . *sahasra* meant originally as an adjective plentiful or forceful, or as a noun, plenty or force; . . .

Possibly because of the association of plenitude and force, and the powerful sound-effect, the Vedic composers appear to have a preference for the use of *sahasra*. For instance, inspite of the existence of a single-word name like *niyuta*, the number 10⁵ was often called *śata-sahasra* probably for greater impact. The number 60099 is described in the *Ṛgveda* (1.53.9) as *ṣaṣṭiṃ sahasrā navatiṃ nava*; here sixty *sahasra* is used instead of six *ayuta*.⁶

5. In the context of the Vedic epithet *dasra*, Sri Aurobindo says: “I connect it with the root *das* . . . in the sense of doing, acting, shaping, accomplishing, as in *purudāṁsasā* in the second Rik.” ([1], p. 76)

6. It is also possible that the word *ayuta* had not yet been introduced when this hymn was composed. Some hymns in the *Ṛgveda* are more ancient than others.

Sri Aurobindo on the Vedic Symbolism of Hundred and Thousand

The crystallisation of number-names for powers of ten might have been an offshoot of the special mystic significance attached to hundred and its multiples by ten. To get some feel for the number-mysticism of the era, we recall Sri Aurobindo's remarks on the symbolism of certain numbers that is implicit in early Vedic literature. In the context of a hymn to Agni (*Rgveda* V.18.5),⁷ Sri Aurobindo observes ([1], p. 404):

The Ashwa or Horse is the symbol of the Life-Force as the Cow is the symbol of the Light. Fifty, hundred, a thousand are numbers symbolic of completeness.

The mystic significance of fifty and hundred seems to derive from that of seven. In fact, among the several numbers treated as particularly sacred in Vedic literature, the number “seven” is considered specially significant — seven Thoughts, seven Lights, seven Waters, seven Words, seven Mighty Ones, seven divine Rishis, seven sacrificial energies, to mention a few principal ones. Sri Aurobindo says ([1], p. 92):

The number seven plays an exceedingly important part in the Vedic system, as in most very ancient schools of thought. We find it recurring constantly, — the seven delights, *sapta ratnāni*; the seven flames, tongues or rays of Agni, *sapta arcīṣaḥ*, *sapta jvālāḥ*; the seven forms of the Thought-principle, *sapta dhīṭayaḥ*; the seven Rays or Cows, forms of the Cow unslayable, Aditi, mother of the gods, *sapta gāvaḥ*; the seven rivers, the seven mothers or fostering cows, *sapta mātaraḥ*, *sapta dhenavaḥ*, a term applied indifferently to the Rays and to the Rivers. All these sets of seven depend, it seems to me, upon the Vedic classification of the fundamental principles, the *tattvas*, of existence.

Sri Aurobindo explains the mystic significance of seven ([1], p. 93):

“. . . The triple principle was doubly recognised, first in the threefold divine principle answering to the later Sachchidananda, the divine existence, consciousness and bliss, and secondly in the threefold mundane principle, Mind, Life, Body, upon which is built the triple world of the Veda and Puranas. But the full number ordinarily recognised is seven. This figure was arrived at by adding the three divine principles to the three mundane and interpolating a seventh or link-principle which is precisely that of the Truth-Consciousness, *ṛtaṁ bṛhat*, afterwards known as Vijnana or Mahas.”

7. “They who have given me in the moment of the laud the fifty steeds of swiftness create for those lords of plenty a great and luminous inspired knowledge, create for those gods the Vast, with its gods, O Immortal, O Fire.” — translation by Sri Aurobindo ([2], p. 231)

In his commentary on two verses (4,5) of Book IV.48 of the *Ṛgveda*, Sri Aurobindo explains the symbolic significance of fifty, hundred and thousand in the Veda and its connection with seven. We first quote the relevant portions of the verses along with Sri Aurobindo's translations ([1], pp. 301, 295):

vahantu tvā manoyujo yuktāso navatir nava

“Let the ninety-nine be yoked and bear thee, those that are yoked by the mind.”

*vāyo śataṁ harīṇām yuvasva poṣyāṇām
uta vā te sahasriṇo rathā ā yātu pājasā*

“Yoke, O Vayu, thy hundred brilliant steeds that shall increase, or else with thy thousand let thy chariot arrive in the mass of its force.”

We now quote from Sri Aurobindo's commentary on the two Riks ([1], pp. 301-02):

The constantly recurring numbers ninety-nine, a hundred and a thousand have a symbolic significance in the Veda which it is very difficult to disengage with any precision. The secret is perhaps to be found in the multiplication of the mystic number seven by itself and its double repetition with a unit added before and at the end, making altogether $1 + 49 + 49 + 1 = 100$. Seven is the number of essential principles in manifested Nature, the seven forms of divine consciousness at play in the world. Each, formulated severally, contains the other six in itself; thus the full number is forty-nine, and to this is added the unit above out of which all develops, giving us altogether a scale of fifty and forming the complete gamut of active consciousness. But there is also its duplication by an ascending and descending series, the descent of the gods, the ascent of man. This gives us ninety-nine, the number variously applied in the Veda to horses, cities, rivers, in each case with a separate but kindred symbolism. If we add an obscure unit below into which all descends to the luminous unit above towards which all ascends we have the full scale of one hundred.

It is therefore a complex energy of consciousness which is to be the result of Vayu's movement; it is the emergence of the fullest movement of the mental activity now only latent and potential in man, — the ninety and nine steeds that are yoked by the mind. And in the next verse the culminating unit is added. We have a hundred horses, and because the action is now that of complete luminous mentality, these steeds, though they still carry Vayu and Indra, are no longer merely *niyut*, but *hari*, the colour of Indra's brilliant bays. “Yoke, O Vayu, a hundred of the brilliant ones, that are to be increased.”

But why to be increased? Because a hundred represents the general fullness of the variously combined movements, but not their utter complexity. Each of the hundred can be multiplied by ten; all can be increased in their own kind: for that is the nature of the increase indicated by the word *poṣyāṇām*. Therefore, says the Rishi, either come with the general fullness of the hundred to be afterwards nourished into their full complexity of a hundred tens or, if thou wilt, come at once with thy thousand and let thy movement arrive in the utter mass of its entire potential energy. It is the completely varied all-ensphering, all-energising mental illumination with its full perfection of being, power, bliss, knowledge, mentality, vital force, physical activity that he desires. For, this attained, the subconscious is compelled to yield up all its hidden possibilities at the will of the perfected mind for the rich and abundant movement of the perfected life.

While discussing the 27th Hymn to Agni in *Rgveda* V — “A Hymn of the Strength and Illumination” — Sri Aurobindo mentions that the Life is perceived by the Rishi as having the complete hundred powers ([1], p. 416):

The Life-Soul on the other hand has given the hundred powers, the vital strength needed for the upward journey; the Rishi prays that this Life-Soul may attain to that vast strength which is the power of the Sun of Truth on the superconscient plane.

Sri Aurobindo explains the phrase “A hundred strong bulls of the diffusion” in *Rgveda* V.27.5 as ([1], p. 417):

The complete hundred powers of the Life by whom all the abundance of the vital plane is showered upon the growing man.

In the first hymn to Mitra-Varuna (*Rgveda* V.62.1),⁸ there is a significant use of *daśa śata* (ten hundreds). Sri Aurobindo explains the phrase “ten hundreds” as ([1], p. 466):

The entire plenitude of the divine wealth in its outpourings of knowledge, force and joy.

8. “By the Truth is veiled that ever-standing Truth of yours where they unyoke the horses of the Sun; there the ten hundreds stand still together; That One, — I have beheld the greatest of the embodied gods.” — translation by Sri Aurobindo ([1], p. 466).

In the context of the magnitude “ten thousand” occurring in the 27th hymn (*R̥gveda* V.27.1),⁹ Sri Aurobindo explains why thousand is multiplied by ten ([2], p. 241; [1], p. 416):

Thousand symbolises absolute completeness. But there are ten subtle powers of the illumined mind each of which has to have its entire plenitude.

This significance of the factor ten can again be discerned in the very next verse (*R̥gveda* V.27.2), in the utterance: “He gives to me the hundred and twenty of the cows of dawn;”. Sri Aurobindo points out:

There are again ten times twelve to correspond to the ten subtle sisters, powers of the illumined mentality.

Sri Aurobindo makes a reference to the ten subtle sisters in ([1], p. 80):

These sisters who dwell in the pure mind, the subtle ones, *aṇvīḥ*, the ten brides, *daśa yoṣaṇāḥ*, are elsewhere called the ten Casters, *daśa kṣipah*, because they seize the Soma and speed it on its way. They are probably identical with the ten Rays, *daśa gāvaḥ*, sometimes spoken of in the Veda.

In this context one may also recall the mention of “ten fingers” in the *Puruṣa Sūkta* (quoted earlier) describing the Puruṣa, with “thousand heads”, “thousand eyes” and “thousand feet” pervading and filling up the entire earth and space.

Egyptian System

It is interesting to note that another mystic civilisation, the ancient Egyptian, had special pictorial symbols, with possible allegorical connotations, for powers often up to 10^7 (ten million). For instance, the picture for thousand resembles a lotus; ten thousand was represented by a slightly bent pointing finger; hundred thousand by a tadpole (or a bird); one million by a kneeling man raising his arms to the heavens (as if in astonishment) and ten million by a rising sun. The pictograph for the million possibly signified vastness or eternity (before which man is overwhelmed with awe and wonder) and the sun could be an allusion to the powerful Egyptian deity — Ra, the Sun-god. However, the Egyptian system of hieroglyph (“carved sacred signs”) does not anticipate the crucial concept of “place value”: to represent “eight thousand”, the symbol for thousand has to be repeated eight times.

9. “He of the triple dawn, son of the triple Bull, has awakened to knowledge with the ten thousands of his plenitude.” — translation by Sri Aurobindo ([1], p. 416).

Observations

The “power of ten” principle of enumeration seems to have emerged out of the perception of mystic principles by ancient seers. Hundred was a significant mystic number representing general fullness. Ten layers of hundred were perceived to symbolise the full complexity, the entire plenitude, the absolute completeness; and the term for plentiful, *sahasra*, was adopted for it. Again ten thousand too was noticed to be special — for instance, the illumined mind has ten subtle powers each having an entire plenitude. Thus powers of ten acquired special significance in the Vedic era. Words charged with the sense of the extraordinary, of the surpassing of usual frontiers, were adopted as specific terms for different “powers of ten” — a word for the vast ocean (*samudra*), a word for the ultimate limit (*anta*) and finally the word for the luminous upper half of existence (*parārdha*) beyond the ordinary firmaments of our consciousness.

AMARTYA KUMAR DUTTA

“... I believe firmly that the secret concealed in the Veda, when entirely discovered, will be found to formulate perfectly that knowledge and practice of a divine life to which the march of humanity, after long wanderings in the satisfaction of the intellect and senses, must inevitably return and is actually at the present day, in the impulses of its vanguard, tending more and more, but vaguely and blindly, to return.”

Sri Aurobindo (*Archives and Research* Vol. 9, p. 168)

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- [1] Sri Aurobindo, *The Secret of The Veda*, SABCL 10.
- [2] Sri Aurobindo, *Hymns to the Mystic Fire*, SABCL 11.
- [3] *Sri Aurobindo Archives and Research* Vol. 9 (1985).
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LIBRARIES OF SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM

THE Library has been always an intimate part of the Ashram life. In the early days, when men and women in the prime of their lives had felt the call and had left everything to embark on the journey to the Unknown, whatever they brought with them was offered to the Mother. Their only access to the world of thoughts and events was through books, magazines and periodicals. There was no radio in the Ashram. TV was still undreamt of. So the Library and Reading Room satisfied this need in them, which as an enrichment of mind, could be a help, but also sometimes, a hindrance in their inner life. But as each member always sought to be guided by the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, there was no danger. Before we begin our journey through the corridors of time and trace the growth and development of the present Sri Aurobindo Library, let us first look through some extracts from *Aurobindo Prasanga*, a book in Bengali by Dinendra Kumar Roy. Dinendra Kumar, a distinguished man of letters in Bengal, stayed with Sri Aurobindo, in the same house, for a little over two years (from 1898). From his observations we get an authentic picture of Sri Aurobindo's reading habits and about his study in Baroda.

Sri Aurobindo would sit at his table and read in the light of an oil lamp till one at night, unmindful of the intolerable bite of mosquitoes. I saw him seated there in the same posture for hours on end, his eyes fixed on the book he was reading, like a Yogi plunged in divine contemplation and lost to all sense of what was going on outside. Even if the house had caught fire, it could not have broken his concentration. Daily he would thus burn the midnight oil, poring over books in different languages of Europe — books of poetry, fiction, history, philosophy, etc., whose number one could hardly tell. In his study, there were heaps of books on various subjects in different languages — French, German, Russian, English, Greek, Latin etc., about which I knew nothing. The poetical works of all English poets from Chaucer to Swinburne were also there. Countless English novels were stacked in his bookcases, littered in the corners of his rooms, and stuffed in his steel trunks. The *Iliad* of Homer, the *Divine Comedy* of Dante, our *Ramayan*, *Mahabharata*, Kalidasa were also among those books. He was very fond of Russian literature. . . .

After learning Bengali fairly well, Sri Aurobindo began to study the Bengali classics, *Swarnalata*, *Annadamangal* by Bharat Chandra, *Sadhabar Ekadashi* by Deenabandhu etc.

Sri Aurobindo read Bankim Chandra's novels by himself and understood them quite well. He had an extraordinary regard for Bankim Chandra. He would say that Bankim Chandra was the golden bridge between our past and

present. He wrote a beautiful English sonnet on Bankim Chandra as a tribute to his greatness. He highly enjoyed the Bengali writing of Vivekananda. He said to me that he felt the very warmth and pulse of life in his language, and that such splendour of vibrant force and fire in thought and word alike was, indeed, something rare. He had also bought and read the poetical works of Rabindranath Tagore. He held this nightingale poet of Bengal in high esteem.

I used to order many books from the Gurudas Library of Calcutta for Sri Aurobindo. He also purchased many of the books published by the Basumati Press in Calcutta. Two well-known booksellers of Bombay, Atmaram Radhabai Saggon and Thacker Spink & Co., were his regular suppliers of books. They sent him long lists of new publications every month, and sometimes every week. Sri Aurobindo would make his selections from the lists and place his orders. As soon as he drew his salary, he would remit by M.O. Rs. 50 to 60, sometimes even more, to the booksellers. They used to supply selected books on deposit account. He seldom received books by post: they came by Railway parcels, packed in huge cases. Sometimes small parcels came twice or thrice in the course of a month. He would finish all those books in eight or ten days and place fresh orders. I have never seen such a voracious reader.

(*Sri Aurobindo and Baroda*, pp. 32-33)

Sri Aurobindo arrived in Pondicherry on April 4, 1910. In the early years of the last century, Pondicherry, then the capital of French India, was a small, sleepy town. A place quite unknown to the general public of British India . . . and yet a group of young men who were associated with him in his political activities assembled here. They were drawn by the magnetic attraction of their souls, to be with their ultimate ideal . . . Sri Aurobindo.

By November 1910 four young men, Moni, Bijoy, Saurin and Nolini had joined him and lived with him. During 1910-1912 there was great economic hardship faced by this group. In one of his letters to Motilal Roy, Sri Aurobindo had written, "The present position is that we have four annas cash with us." Each of the four members of the household had to cook by turns. There was no servant. After 1914 a regular servant was engaged. "During this year (1911) Sri Aurobindo gave Latin, Greek and French lessons to Moni and Nolini." (*Life of Sri Aurobindo*, by Purani pp. 169-71). Their love for knowledge, their enthusiasm for learning new languages, the expanding of the horizons of their understanding made this young batch acquire some books which formed the nucleus of the later library of the Ashram. Purani in the same book says, "During this year [1911] books worth ten rupees were ordered every month."

Nolini-da remembers:

It will not be out of place here to say something about the sort of education and training we received in those early days of our life in Pondicherry. One of the first needs we felt on coming here was for books, for at that time we had hardly anything we could call our own. We found that at the moment Sri Aurobindo was concentrating on the Rigveda alone and we managed to get for him two volumes of the original text. He had of course his own books and papers packed in two or three trunks. It was felt we might afford to spend ten rupees every month for the purchase of books. We began our purchases with the main classics of English literature, especially the series published in the Home University Library and the World Classics editions. Today you see what a fine Library we have, not indeed one but many, for there is a Library of Physical Education, there is a Medical Library, there is a Library for the School, and there are so many private collections. All this had its origin in the small collections we began every month. At first, the books had to lie on the floor, for we had nothing like chairs or tables or shelves for our Library. I may add that we had no such thing as a bedding either for our use. Each of us possessed a mat, and this mat had to serve as our bedstead, mattress, coverlet and pillow; this was all our furniture . . . I should add that there were a few rickety chairs too, for the use of visitors and guests. And lights? Today you see such a profusion of electric lighting in every room and courtyard; we have mercury lights and flash lights and spotlights and torch lights; we are even getting well into the limelight! There is light everywhere, “all here is shining with light”, *sarvamidaṁ vibhāti*. In those days, on the other hand, we did not even have a decent kerosene lamp or lantern. All I can recall is a single candlestick, for the personal use of Sri Aurobindo. Whatever conversations or discussions we had after nightfall had to be in the dark; for the most part we practised silence. . . .

We were able to purchase some French books at a very cheap rate, not more than two annas for each volume in a series. We had about a hundred of them, all classics of French literature. I find a few of them are still there in our Library. Afterwards, I also bought from the second-hand bookshops in the Gujli Kadai area several books in Greek, Latin and French. Once I chanced on a big Greek lexicon which I still use.

Gradually, a few books in Sanskrit and Bengali too were added to our stock, through purchase and gifts. As the number of books reached a few hundred, the problem was how to keep them. We used some bamboo strips to make a rack or book-stand along the walls of our rooms; the “almirahs” came later. I do not think there were any “almirahs” at all so long as we were in the Guest House. They came after the Mother’s arrival, when we shifted with our books to the Library House. That is why it came to be called the Library House. . . .

At one time, one of our main subjects of study was the Veda. This went on for several months, for about an hour every evening, at the Guest House. Sri Aurobindo came and took his seat at the table and we sat around. Subramanya Bharati the Tamil poet and myself were the two who showed the keenest interest. Sri Aurobindo would take up a hymn from the Rigveda, read it aloud once, explain the meaning of every line and phrase and finally give a full translation. . . .

Sri Aurobindo has taught me a number of languages. Here again his method has often evoked surprise. I should therefore like to say something on this point. He never asked me to begin the study of a new language with primary readers or children's books. He started at once with one of the classics, that is, a standard work in the language. He used to say that the education of children must begin with books written for children, but for adults, for those, that is, who had already had some education, the reading material must be adapted to their age and mental development.

(Collected Works of Nolini Kanta Gupta, Vol. VII, pp. 417-21)

After 1910, Sri Aurobindo changed his residence a few times. He came to stay in 41, Rue François Martin in June 1913. After the Mother's final arrival on April 24, 1920, she too had her apartments there from November, 1920.

We get some additional information from Champaklal's diary notes:

In October 1922 they shifted to 9, Rue de la Marine, which now forms the southwest part of the main Ashram building. Thereafter some inmates and visitors resided at 41, Rue François Martin which came to be called the Guest House.

The present reading room to the east of the Reception Hall in the Ashram main building became Amrita's room after Sri Aurobindo and the Mother moved into this house in 1922. On 8 February 1927, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother moved to the first floor of 28, Rue François Martin, the house that now forms the northeastern part of the main Ashram building. Nolini and Amrita were given rooms on its ground floor. . . .

(Champaklal Speaks, p. 45, notes 1+2)

In her letter of 16 February 1927, the Mother writes to her son,

I think I told you about our five houses; four of them are joined in a single square block which is surrounded on all sides by streets and contains several buildings with courtyards and gardens. We have just bought, repaired and comfortably furnished one of these houses and then, just recently, we have settled there, Sri Aurobindo and myself, as well as five of the closest disciples.

(Collected Works of the Mother, Vol. 16, p. 3)

Amrita's room in [9, Rue de la Marine,] was then turned into a library and the whole house began to be known as Library House. Punamchandbhai was the first librarian; . . .

(*Champaklal Speaks*, p. 45, note 2)

Premanand was the next librarian of the Ashram Library. He joined the Ashram on May 11, 1927. He had the wonderful fortune of having an interview with Sri Aurobindo before his retirement.

It is through the Ashram Library that Premanand found most of his friends. For there he had his "headquarters" — or shall we say "heartquarters"? He was for 25 years the faithful and efficient guardian of this Library. It was a matter of moments for him to pick out any book, so well he knew the place allotted to each volume. With what meticulous care he guarded those "monuments of the mind's magnificence"! Neatness, cleanliness and order reigned in his kingdom of knowledge.

(*Mother India*, October 1963, p. 31)

In her letter of 23 August 1930 to her son, the Mother, while informing him about the developments of the growing Ashram, mentions ". . . a library and reading-room containing several thousand volumes, . . ." (*CWM*, Vol. 16, p. 5)

Both Shanti Doshi who arrived in 1930 and Nirodbaran who arrived in 1933 had met the Mother for the first time in this Library room. The Mother used to come to this room to meet the new arrivals to the Ashram.

Regarding the Library, here is the impression noted by a French savant, Maurice Magre, who visited the Ashram in 1936:

. . . The bindings of books shine out like swords from the shelves of the book-cases. Through the open bays one sees like great marble pieces the brows of the readers.

(*Mother India*, June 2005, p. 504)

This Library had not only a collection of books for the adults; for young readers it was like a Magical Place. As soon as you entered you knew you were coming to a special world of Light and Happiness. When we came in 1940, Premanand used to choose books for me, then a twelve-year-old girl. I was a frequent visitor to the Library, demanding always for more to read. Premanand was amused; he said one day, "What! You will read *all* the books we have here!" Truly, the Library was a treasure trove for youngsters. There were so many wonderful books to take us away to other worlds!

Amita remembers:

When we came to the Ashram for the first time, in 1940, I was just seven years old. My sister, who was 12 years or so, was quite a voracious reader. She read up all the books that were within her reach.

We were allowed to borrow books from the Ashram Library. It was a very well-kept room in the Ashram main building, with cupboards full of books all around. We went in very carefully stepping over the doorstep.

The librarian, a short gentleman in white dhoti and a coarse *punjabi* was sitting at the desk, a long table with side cupboards. He looked at us, "Come in," he said, "I was expecting you." He showed my sister the shelves from which to choose her book, while I kept looking around. I saw a smaller cupboard fitted on top of a normal cupboard, all full of books. I asked, "How do you get a book from there?" The librarian, Premanand, got up, came to me and showed a brass-rod on top of the lower almirah and said, "You see that ladder? I fit it like that and climb up!" I was satisfied with the answer and started looking around again. Then I heard him speak to my sister, "You have chosen?" "Yes," she said and showed him the book. He wrote down in his register the name and asked my sister to write her name in one column. Then he asked me, "You won't take any book?" At first, I just stared and kept quiet. I hadn't thought of it at all. I had just gone there with my sister. Then, I said, looking at the top shelves, "I want that book." There was a set of fat bound books, with a dark blue cover and golden lettering. "But that's too difficult for you," said the librarian. "I want that book," I insisted. He then fitted his ladder, brought down one book and went to his desk and asked me to write my name below my sister's, and gave me the book. It was one from a whole set of Conrad's writings. "It's a big book for you. It's about the sea." I held the book, crossing my arms over it and followed my sister out of the Library.

My sister was a fast reader. Within a day or two, she had finished her book and announced that she was going to the Library to return hers and get another one. I think I didn't go that day with her. . .

But the next time she had to return her book I followed her with the big fat book and went into the Library. "Oh, you have finished reading already?" "No." I said, "It's too difficult for me." He didn't say anything, kept it on the table, and said, "Come, I'll give you a book you'll be able to read." And, he gave me Charles Kingsley's *Water Babies*!

CHITRA SEN

BOOKS IN THE BALANCE

THE MAGIC SEVEN

A Booklet that Should Be at the Bedside of Every Child

Seven Dedicated Lives by Sunayana Panda, published by First Features Limited, London, U.K. 2009; Price Rs. 75, pp. 81.

IN recent years, Sunayana Panda, a former student of the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, Pondicherry, has shown single-minded zeal in bringing in the influences of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo through the lives of chosen devotees and disciples to our attention. Readers of the SAICE alumni magazine *The Golden Chain*, and the Ashram journals, would recall with gratitude the very dedicated manner in which Sunayana has traced the footsteps of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo in various parts of India and the world.

We travelled with her to Bengal, London and Japan close on the heels of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. If the adage “it is the people who make a place” is true, what could be more significant than the fact that the geographic locations Sunayana traverses become haloed because of their association with the Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

There is a context to Sunayana’s mission and that needs to be told. The Ashram boarding, *Home of Progress*, that Sunayana and others like me joined in 1966, was managed by Manoj Das and Pratijna Devi. The education we children received in this boarding in terms of listening to great parables and stories, especially from the Indian tradition, had a deep impact on all of us. It gave us an orientation in our day-to-day life and sowed in us a seriousness of purpose that got reinforced in the over-all education we received in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. It need hardly be said that the Ashram school had no separate existence then nor does it have now. It is an integral part of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

The fact that Ashram education is a privilege, that we must constantly introspect and move inward, that we must move beyond our share of worldly fortune and misfortune to discover and realise the central goals of our life — all these come from the ambience that the children in the Ashram live in. There cannot be a more idyllic place in the world to live in for constant progress.

In all her speech, action and example, the Mother left absolutely no doubt in our mind that there is no alternative to perfect surrender, sincerity or dedication. She said that we were in the Hour of God and that the choice was between Truth and the Abyss. Clearly, she was not using these terms as rhetoric or figures of speech; she meant them as an article of faith that we forget at our own peril!

It is not brilliant minds we need, said the Mother aptly, but living souls. She never criticised anyone but stressed the need to be an example, to believe in self-reliance and in introspection by constantly invoking the Divine Grace. We will do well to remember her advice in this regard: It is not by acquiring external smartness, trappings of wealth and sophistication that we will be worthy of an Ashram education, but by realising a modicum of their teaching in our daily lives.

In all the editorials Sunayana wrote in *The Golden Chain*, she stressed these very aspects and drew our attention to the task ahead. She lent a serious, intellectual turn to matters that would have remained at the level of old boys' / girls' association. In the prevailing atmosphere of levity, cynicism and materialistic existence, a serious approach to community life might appear somewhat odd, but if we are to rediscover our dreams and goals in the light of the Ashram ideals, then we must rededicate ourselves, as Sunayana says in her latest offering, *Seven Dedicated Lives*.

Beautifully written, full of feeling and spiritual ardour, this slim volume is a fine tribute to the legacy of seven outstanding individuals who dedicated their lives at the feet of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. It is a booklet that should be at the bedside of every child of the Ashram school and read by every spiritually-minded adult. Sunayana deserves our gratitude by bringing this to our attention. This is what Sunayana says in the preface:

Sri Aurobindo and the Mother are like two radiant suns and the light that shines out from their writings and their work is so brilliant that we cannot look at them with our naked eyes. It becomes much easier to understand them when we look at their image reflected in the lives of those who were closer to them, and who followed their path.

She adds:

The seven biographical essays included in this collection can give the reader an idea of the way Sri Aurobindo and the Mother worked to create a very special world around them and how they manifested the inner truth in the outer world. These *Sadhaks* and *Sadhikas*, most of whom I knew personally, were a part of that world and were actually involved in the day to day running of the Ashram. Not only did they live in close proximity to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother but they also lived lives which were inwardly consecrated to them. None of them are alive today but their memory lives on. We can draw inspiration from them as we try to follow the path of Integral Yoga.

First published in *The Golden Chain*, the essays in the booklet will be of great interest to inmates of the Ashram and spiritual seekers everywhere. Here we see Nirodbaran, physician-turned-poet who was blessed to be the Servitor of our Lord. There is Tehmi-ben in her immaculate white *saree*, a mystic poet par excellence

who enthralled generations of students in her mellifluous voice. There is Rishabhchand, the disciple-biographer whose work on Sri Aurobindo had the approval of the Mother. Then there is Millie-di who lived under the direct guidance of the Mother and was chosen by the Mother to act in the play, *Vers L'Avenir* ('Towards the Future'). She also designed costumes and did the make-up for stage performance in the Ashram.

Sunayana weaves in other sketches as well: the artist Krishnalal who was born in 1905 in Saurashtra in Gujarat and was guided to the Ashram by A. B. Purani, and would look after the art gallery of the Ashram in the sixties. His last major work was the mural at *Golconde* that was completed in August 1984.

There is Mona Pinto, worthy companion to Udar. Mona served the Mother by a complete dedication to the management of *Golconde*. She carried out, very admirably, the 'Christmas' celebrations of the Ashram year after year.

Udar comes to us as another dedicated soul who consecrated his life to the Avatars. An ace engineer, planner and a charismatic personality, he designed and executed engineering marvels like the *louvre*s of *Golconde*. Whether it was the designing of Sri Aurobindo's Samadhi or planning the competitions of the physical education under the direct guidance of the Mother or playing the Master of ceremonies at the foundation of Auroville in February 1968, Udar was the man for all seasons, Mother's Officer on Special Duty!

And finally, as the icing on the cake, we have an essay on the history of the 'Christmas' celebrations in the Ashram.

Seven Dedicated Lives follows the worthy footsteps of M. P. Pandit's *Breath of Grace*, (Dipti Publications, 1973; rpt. 2002). That volume, perhaps, the best in its category, comprised reminiscences by Ashram inmates such as V. Chidanandam, Ganpatram, Kanailal Ganguly, T. Kodandarama Rao, Maganbhai Desai, Mrityunjay, Pujalal, Dr. Rajangam, Rakhal Bose, Romen Palit, Sahana Devi, S. T. Shanti Doshi, Shivabhai Amin and K. S. Venkataraman.

Sunayana's booklet is smaller in comparison to M. P. Pandit's but is no less appealing, especially to children. Ideally suited for a magazine column, the portraits are appropriate to contemporary print culture. We have had two equally slim volumes of late. Dinendra Kumar Roy's *With Aurobindo in Baroda* (translated by Maurice Shukla) and T. Kodandarama Rao's *At the Feet of the Master* are inspiring tributes to the Master. Prabhakar's *Among the Not So Great*, that initially appeared in *Mother India* and subsequently in a book form, is an important throw-back to earlier times and would interest seekers of the Integral Yoga. Shyam Kumari's fascinating accounts of those who came to the Ashram would serve as crucial oral histories of the Ashram community.

Sunayana's offering, typified by the flowers on the cover of her book, symbolises the power of example. She is to be congratulated for this maiden venture.

SACHIDANANDA MOHANTY