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"Great is Truth and it shall prevail"

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BRIDE OF THE FIRE

Bride of the Fire, clasp me now close, — Bride of the Fire! I have shed the bloom of the earthly rose, I have slain desire.

Beauty of the Light, surround my life, —
Beauty of the Light!

I have sacrificed longing and parted from grief,
I can bear thy delight.

Image of ecstasy, thrill and enlace, —Image of bliss!I would see only thy marvellous face,Feel only thy kiss.

Voice of Infinity, sound in my heart, — Call of the One!
Stamp there thy radiance, never to part, O living Sun.

Sri Aurobindo

(Collected Poems, SABCL, Vol. 5, p. 103)

SOCIAL REFORM

REFORM is not an excellent thing in itself as many Europeanised intellects imagine; neither is it always safe and good to stand unmoved in the ancient paths as the orthodox obstinately believe. Reform is sometimes the first step to the abyss, but immobility is the most perfect way to stagnate and to putrefy. Neither is moderation always the wisest counsel: the mean is not always golden. It is often an euphemism for purblindness, for a tepid indifference or for a cowardly inefficiency. Men call themselves moderates, conservatives or extremists and manage their conduct and opinions in accordance with a formula. We like to think by systems and parties and forget that truth is the only standard. Systems are merely convenient cases for keeping arranged knowledge, parties a useful machinery for combined action; but we make of them an excuse for avoiding the trouble of thought.

One is astonished at the position of the orthodox. They labour to deify everything that exists. Hindu society has certain arrangements and habits which are merely customary. There is no proof that they existed in ancient times nor any reason why they should last into the future. It has other arrangements and habits for which textual authority can be quoted, but it is oftener the text of the modern Smritikaras than of Parasara and Manu. Our authority for them goes back to the last five hundred years. I do not understand the logic which argues that because a thing has lasted for five hundred years it must be perpetuated through the aeons. Neither antiquity nor modernity can be the test of truth or the test of usefulness. All the Rishis do not belong to the past; the Avatars still come; revelation still continues.

Some claim that we must at any rate adhere to Manu and the Puranas, whether because they are sacred or because they are national. Well, but, if they are sacred, you must keep to the whole and not cherish isolated texts while disregarding the body of your authority. You cannot pick and choose; you cannot say "This is sacred and I will keep to it, that is less sacred and I will leave it alone." When you so treat your sacred authority, you are proving that to you it has no sacredness. You are juggling with truth; for you are pretending to consult Manu when you are really consulting your own opinions, preferences or interests. To recreate Manu entire in modern society is to ask Ganges to flow back to the Himalayas. Manu is no doubt national, but so is the animal sacrifice and the burnt offering. Because a thing is national of the past, it need not follow that it must be national of the future. It is stupid not to recognise altered conditions.

We have similar apologies for the unintelligent preservation of mere customs; but, various as are the lines of defence, I do not know any that is imperiously conclusive. Custom is *shishtachar*, decorum, that which all well-bred and respectable people observe. But so were the customs of the far past that have been discontinued and, if

now revived, would be severely discountenanced and, in many cases, penalised; so too are the customs of the future that are now being resisted or discouraged, — even, I am prepared to believe, the future no less than the past prepares for us new modes of living which in the present would not escape the censure of the law. It is the *achar* that makes the *shishta*, not the *shishta* who makes the *achar*. The *achar* is made by the rebel, the innovator, the man who is regarded in his own time as eccentric, disreputable or immoral, as was Sri Krishna by Bhurisrava because he upset the old ways and the old standards. Custom may be better defended as ancestral and therefore cherishable. But if our ancestors had persistently held that view, our so cherished customs would never have come into being. Or, more rationally, custom must be preserved because its long utility in the past argues a sovereign virtue for the preservation of society. But to all things there is a date and a limit. All long-continued customs have been sovereignly useful in their time, even totemism and polyandry. We must not ignore the usefulness of the past, but we seek in preference a present and a future utility.

Custom and Law may then be altered. For each age its shastra. But we cannot argue straight off that it must be altered, or even if alteration is necessary, that it must be altered in a given direction. One is repelled by the ignorant enthusiasm of social reformers. Their minds are usually a strange jumble of ill-digested European notions. Very few of them know anything about Europe, and even those who have visited it know it badly. But they will not allow things or ideas contrary to European notions to be anything but superstitious, barbarous, harmful and benighted, they will not suffer what is praised and practised in Europe to be anything but rational and enlightened. They are more appreciative than Occidentals themselves of the strength, knowledge and enjoyment of Europe; they are blinder than the blindest and most self-sufficient Anglo-Saxon to its weakness, ignorance and misery. They are charmed by the fair front Europe presents to herself and the world; they are unwilling to discern any disease in the entrails, any foulness in the rear. For the Europeans are as careful to conceal their social as their physical bodies and shrink with more horror from nakedness and indecorum than from the reality of evil. If they see the latter in themselves, they avert their eyes, crying, "It is nothing or it is little; we are healthy, we are perfect, we are immortal." But the face and hands cannot always be covered, and we see blotches.

The social reformer repeats certain stock arguments like shibboleths. For these antiquities he is a fanatic or a crusader. Usually he does not act up to his ideas, but in all sincerity he loves them and fights for them. He pursues his nostrums as panaceas; it would be infidelity to question or examine their efficacy. His European doctors have told him that early marriage injures the physique of a nation, and that to him is the gospel. It is not convenient to remember that physical deterioration is a modern phenomenon in India and that our grandparents were strong, vigorous and beautiful. He hastens to abolish the already disappearing nautchgirl, but it does not seem to concern him that the prostitute multiplies. Possibly some may think it a gain that the

European form of the malady is replacing the Indian! He tends towards shattering our cooperative system of society and does not see that Europe is striding Titanically towards Socialism.

Orthodox and reformer alike lose themselves in details; but it is principles that determine details. Almost every point that the social reformers raise could be settled one way or the other without effecting the permanent good of society. It is pitiful to see men labouring the point of marriage between subcastes and triumphing over an isolated instance. Whether the spirit as well as the body of caste should remain, is the modern question. Let Hindus remember that caste as it stands is merely *jat*, the trade guild sanctified but no longer working, it is not the eternal religion, it is not *chaturvarnya*. I do not care whether widows marry or remain single; but it is of infinite importance to consider how women shall be legally and socially related to man, as his inferior, equal or superior; for even the relation of superiority is no more impossible in the future than it was in the far-distant past. And the most important question of all is whether society shall be competitive or cooperative, individualistic or communistic. That we should talk so little about these things and be stormy over insignificant details, shows painfully the impoverishment of the average Indian intellect. If these greater things are decided, as they must be, the smaller will arrange themselves.

There are standards that are universal and there are standards that are particular. At the present moment all societies are in need of reform, the Parsi, Mahomedan and Christian not a whit less than the Hindu which alone seems to feel the need of radical reformation. In the changes of the future the Hindu society must take the lead towards the establishment of a new universal standard. Yet being Hindus we must seek it through that which is particular to ourselves. We have one standard that is at once universal and particular, the eternal religion, which is the basis, permanent and always inherent in India, of the shifting, mutable and multiform thing we call Hinduism. Sticking fast where you are like a limpet is not the dharma, neither is leaping without looking the dharma. The eternal religion is to realise God in our inner life and our outer existence, in society not less than in the individual. Esha dharmah sanatanah. God is not antiquity nor novelty: He is not the Manava Dharmashastra, nor Vidyaranya, nor Raghunandan; neither is He an European. God who is essentially Sacchidananda, is in manifestation Satyam, Prema, Shakti, — Truth, Strength and Love. Whatever is consistent with the truth and principle of things, whatever increases love among men, whatever makes for the strength of the individual, the nation and the race, is divine, it is the law of Vaivaswata Manu, it is the sanatana dharma and the Hindu shastra. Only, God is the triple harmony, He is not one-sided. Our love must not make us weak, blind or unwise; our strength must not make us hard and furious; our principles must not make us fanatical or sentimental. Let us think calmly, patiently, impartially; let us love wholly and intensely but wisely; let us act with strength, nobility and force. If even then we make mistakes, yet God makes none. We decide and act; He determines the fruit, and whatever He determines is good.

He is already determining it. Men have long been troubling themselves about social reform and blameless orthodoxy, and orthodoxy has crumbled without social reform being effected. But all the time God has been going about India getting His work done in spite of the talking. Unknown to men the social revolution prepares itself, and it is not in the direction they think, for it embraces the world, not India only. Whether we like it or not, He will sweep out the refuse of the Indian past and the European present. But the broom is not always sufficient; sometimes He uses the sword in preference. It seems probable that it will be used, for the world does not mend itself quickly, and therefore it will have violently to be mended.

But this is a general principle; how shall we determine the principles that are particular to the nature of the community and the nature of the Age? There is such a thing as yugadharma, the right institutions & modes of action for the age in which we live. For action depends indeed on the force of knowledge or will that is to be used, but it depends, too, on the time, the place & the vessel. Institutions that are right in one age are not right in another. Replacing social system by social system, religion by religion, civilisation by civilisation God is perpetually leading man onwards to loftier & more embracing manifestations of our human perfectibility. When in His cosmic circling movement He establishes some stable worldwide harmony, that is man's Satya Yuga. When harmony falters, is maintained with difficulty, not in the nature of men, but by an accepted force or political instrument, that is his Treta. When the faltering becomes stumbling and the harmony has to be maintained at every step by a careful & laborious regulation, that is his Dwapara. When there is disintegration, & all descends in collapse and ruin, nothing can stay farther the cataclysm that is his Kali. This is the natural law of progress of all human ideas & institutions. It applies always in the mass, continually though less perfectly in the detail. One may almost say that each human religion, society, civilisation has its four Ages. For this movement is not only the most natural, but the most salutary. It is not a justification of pessimism nor a gospel of dumb fate & sorrowful annihilation. It is not, as we too often think in our attachment to the form, a melancholy law of decline & the vanity of all human achievements. If each Satya has its Kali, equally does each Kali prepare its Satya. That destruction was necessary for this creation, and the new harmony, when it is perfected, will be better than the old. But there is the weakness, there is the half success turning to failure, there is the discouragement, there is the loss of energy & faith which clouds our periods of disintegration, the apparent war, violence, ragging, tumult & trample to and fro which attends our periods of gradual creation and half-perfection. Therefore men cry out dismally & lament that all is perishing. But if they trusted in God's Love & Wisdom, not preferring to it their conservative & narrow notions, they would rather cry out that all is being reborn.

So much depends on Time & God's immediate purpose that it is more important to seek out His purpose than to attach ourselves to our own nostrums. The Kala Purusha, Zeitgeist & Death Spirit, has risen to his dreadful work — lokakshayakritpravriddhas

— increasing to destroy a world, — and who shall stay the terror & mightiness & irresistibility of Him? But He is not only destroying the world that was, He is creating the world that shall be; it is therefore more profitable for us to discover & help what He is building than to lament & hug in our arms what He is destroying. But it is not easy to discover His drift, & we often admire too much temporary erections which are merely tents for the warriors in this Kurukshetra and take them for the permanent buildings of the future.

The Pandits are therefore right when they make a difference between the practice of the Satya & the practice of the Kali. But in their application of this knowledge, they do not seem to me to be always wise or learned. They forget or do not know that Kali is the age for a destruction & rebirth, not for a desperate clinging to the old that can no longer be saved. They entrench themselves in the system of Kalivariya, but forget that it is not the weaknesses but the strengths of the old harmony that are being subjected to varjanam, abandonment. That which is saved is merely a temporary platform which we have erected on the banks of the sea of change awaiting a more stable habitation; and it too must one day break down under the crash of the waves, must disappear into the engulfing waters. Has the time arrived for that destruction? We think that it has. Listen to the crash of those waters, — more formidable than the noise of assault, mark that slow, sullen, remorseless sapping, — watch pile after pile of our patched incoherent ramshackle structure corroding, creaking, shaking with the blows, breaking, sinking silently or with a splash, suddenly or little by little into the yeast of those billows. Has the time arrived for a new construction? We say it has. Mark the activity, eagerness and hurrying to and fro of mankind, the rapid prospecting, seeking, digging, founding — see the Avatars & great vibhutis coming, arising thickly, treading each close behind the other. Are not these the signs and do they not tell us that the great Avatar of all arrives to establish the first Satya Yuga of the Kali?

For in the Kali too, say the secret & ancient traditions of the Yogins, there is a perpetual minor repetition of Satya-Treta-Dwapara-Kali subcycles, the subSatya a temporary & imperfect harmony which in the subTreta & subDwapara breaks down and disappears in the subKali. The process then begins over again [................................] for each new temporary harmony is fairer and more perfect than its preceding harmony, each new temporary collapse more resounding & terrible than its anterior dissolution. Already ended are the first five thousand years of the Kali which were necessary to prepare for final destruction the relics of the ancient Satya. Weakness & violence, error and ignorance and oblivion rushing with an increasing speed & rhythm over the whole earth have done for us that work. The morning of the first Kali-Satya is ready to break, the first few streaks dimly visible. So runs the not incredible tradition.

Yes. A new harmony, but not the scrannel pipes of European materialism, not an Occidental foundation upon half truths & whole falsehoods. When there is destruction it is the form that perishes, not the spirit — for the world and its ways are

forms of one Truth which appears in this material world in ever new bodies and constantly varied apparel — the inward Eternal taking the joy of outward Mutability. The truth of the old Satya that is dead was not different from the Truth of the new Satya that is to be born, for it is Truth that restores itself always and persists. In India, the chosen land, it is preserved; in the soul of India it sleeps, expectant of that soul's awakening, the soul of India leonine, luminous, locked in the closed petals of the ancient lotus of strength and wisdom, not in her weak, sordid, transient & miserable externals. India alone can build the future of mankind; in India alone can the effective Avatar appear to the nations. And until He appears, it is for India to gather herself up out of her dust & degradation, — symbol of the shattered Satyayuga — commune with her soul by Yoga and to know her past & her future. I have not here speculated on what we should build, what we should break, nor shall I now define my detailed opinions — but whatever it be, we must do it in the light and in the spirit of that triple principle of the divine nature; we must act in the reflection of God's Love, Strength & Wisdom.

We are Hindus seeking to re-Hinduise society, not to Europeanise it. But what is Hinduism? Or what is its social principle? One thing at least is certain about Hinduism religious or social, that its whole outlook is Godward, its whole search and business is the discovery of God and our fulfilment in God. But God is everywhere and universal. Where did Hinduism seek Him? Ancient or preBuddhistic Hinduism sought him both in the world and outside it; it took its stand on the strength & beauty & joy of the Veda, unlike modern or postBuddhistic Hinduism which is oppressed with Buddha's sense of universal sorrow and Shankara's sense of universal illusion, — Shankara who was the better able to destroy Buddhism because he was himself half a Buddhist. Ancient Hinduism aimed socially at our fulfilment in God in life, modern Hinduism at the escape from life to God. The more modern ideal is fruitful of a noble and ascetic spirituality, but has a chilling and hostile effect on social soundness and development, social life under its shadow stagnates for want of belief and delight, sraddha and ananda. If we are to make our society perfect and the nation is to live again, then we must revert to the earlier and fuller truth. We must not make life a waiting for renunciation, but renunciation a preparation for life; instead of running from God in the town to God in the forest, we must rather plunge into the mountain solitude in our own souls for knowledge & joy & spiritual energy to sustain any part that may be given to us by the master of the Lila. If we get that strength, any society we build up must be full of the instinct of immortal life and move inevitably towards perfection. As to the precise way in which society will be reconstructed, we have hardly yet knowledge enough to solve the problem. We ought to know before we act, but we are rather eager to act violently in the light of any dim ray of knowledge that may surprise our unreflecting intellects, and although God often uses our haste for great and beneficial purposes, yet that way of doing things is not the best either for a man or a nation. One thing seems to me clear that the future will deny that principle of individual selfishness and collective self-interest on which European society has hitherto been based and our renovated systems will be based on the renunciation of individual selfishness and the organisation of brotherhood, — principles common to Christianity, Mahomedanism and Hinduism.

Sri Aurobindo

(Essays Divine and Human, CWSA, Vol. 12, pp. 50-58)

(Editorial note in *CWSA*: Circa 1912. The first nine paragraphs were typewritten. Sri Aurobindo subsequently added five handwritten paragraphs to the last typed sheet. [These paragraphs are difficult to read and parts have been lost through mutilation of the manuscript.] The passage beginning "We are Hindus" was written separately and headed "For 'Social Reform". Sri Aurobindo left no indication where he wanted it inserted. The editors have placed it at the end, separating it from the main text by a white space.)



HINDUISM AND THE MISSION OF INDIA

[.....] [That] which is permanent in the Hindu religion, must form the basis on which the world will increasingly take its stand in dealing with spiritual experience and religious truth. Hinduism, in my sense of the word, is not modern Brahmanism. Modern Brahmanism developed into existence at a definite period in history. It is now developing out of existence; its mission is done, its capacities exhausted, the Truth which, like other religions, it defended, honoured, preserved, cherished, misused and disfigured, is about to take to itself new forms and dispense with all other screens or defender than its own immortal beauty, grandeur, truth and effectiveness. It is this unchanging undying Truth which has to be discovered and placed in its native light before humanity. Tad etat satyam.

There are many defenders and discoverers of truth now active among us. They are all busy defending, modifying, attacking, sapping or bolstering current Hinduism. I am not eager to disparage but neither do I find myself satisfied with any of them. If I were, there would be no need for any speculation of my own. There are the orthodox who are busy recovering and applying old texts or any interpretations, new or old, of these texts, which will support the existing order, — and ignoring all that go against it. Their learning is praiseworthy and useful; it brings to notice many great and helpful things which were in danger of being misprized, lost or flung away as worthless; but they do not seem to me to go to the heart of the matter. There are the heterodox who are busy giving new interpretations to old texts and institutions in order to get rid of all such features as the modern world finds it hard to assimilate. Their brainwork can hardly be too highly praised; it is bringing to light or to a half light many luminous realities and possibilities which, if they cannot all be accepted, yet invigorate and sharpen the habit of original thinking and help to remove that blind adherence to traditions which is truth's greatest obstacle. Still they too do not seem to me to have the right grasp and discernment. Then there are the ascetics mystical or rationalistic who call men to disgust with the world and point to the temple, the monastery or the mountaintop as the best, if not the only place for finding God, and most of whom, in order to honour the Maker slight and denounce His works. Their position and temperament is so lofty and noble and their solvent force on the gross impurities of a materialised humanity has been so invaluable that it is with some reluctance one finds oneself obliged to put them on one side and pass onward. But it seems to me that we must pass onward if we would know and possess God in His entirety and not merely in a side or aspect. There is a story in the Jewish Scriptures which relates that when God wished to show himself to Moses, he could only, owing to the spiritual imperfections of the Jewish prophet, reveal safely to him His hinder parts. Moses would have died if he had seen the front of God; he had not the dharanam, the soul-

power to support that tremendous vision. The story well illuminates the character of materialism generally and to its aggressive modern form, European thought & civilisation, it applies with a quite overwhelming appositeness. But it seems to me that the average Vedantist, too, has only seen, for his part, the crown of the Lord's head and the average bhakta only the Kaustubh-stone over His heart or the Srivatsa mark upon it. On the other hand, there are those rationalists who are by no means ascetical in their views or temperament and their name is legion; they insist on our putting religion and God aside or keeping Him only for ornamental uses in spare moments, leave that, they say, & devote yourselves to practical work for mankind. That rationalism is necessary too if only to balance the error of the ascetics who would make of God's world a mistake and of its Maker an Almighty blunderer or an inscrutable eccentric or an indefinable Something inhabiting a chaos or a mirage. Nevertheless, from materialism least of all, however philanthropic or patriotic, can our future salvation be expected. Finally, there are the mystics who are not ascetics, — the Theosophists. From one point of view I cannot find praise warm enough to do iustice to the work of Theosophy; from another I cannot find condemnation strong enough to denounce it. It has forced on the notice of an unwilling world truths to which orthodoxy is blind and of which heterodoxy is afraid or incredulous. It has shown a colossal courage in facing ridicule, trampling on prejudice and slander, persisting in faith in spite of disillusionment, scandal and a continual shifting of knowledge. They have kept the flag of a past & future science flying against enormous difficulties. On the other hand by bringing to the investigation of that science — not its discovery, for to the Hindu Yogin it is known already — the traditional European methods, the methods of the market-place and the forum, it has brought on the truths themselves much doubt and discredit, and by importing into them the forms, jugglery and jargon of European mystics, their romanticism, their unbridled imagination, their galloping impatience, their haste, bragging and loudness, their susceptibility to dupery, trickery, obstinate error and greedy self-deception, Theosophists have strengthened doubt and discredit and driven many an earnest seeker to bewilderment, to angry suspicion or to final renunciation of the search for truth. They have scattered the path of the conscientious investigators, the severe scientists of Yoga who must appear in the future, with the thorns and sharp flints of a well-justified incredulity and suspicion. I admit the truths that Theosophy seeks to unveil; but I do not think they can be reached if we fall into bondage even to the most inspiring table talk of Mahatmas or to the confused anathemas and vaticinations hurled from their platform tripods by modern Pythonesses of the type of Mrs. Annie Besant, that great, capacious but bewildered and darkened intellect, now stumbling with a loud and confident blindness through those worlds of twilight and glamour, of distorted inspirations, perverted communications and misunderstood or half-understood perceptions which are so painfully familiar to the student and seeker.

If these things do not satisfy me, what then do I seek? I seek a light that shall be

new, yet old, the oldest indeed of all lights. I seek an authority that accepting, illuminating and reconciling all human truth, shall yet reject and get rid of by explaining it all mere human error. I seek a text and a Shastra that is not subject to interpolation, modification and replacement, that moth and white ant cannot destroy, that the earth cannot bury nor Time mutilate. I seek an asceticism that shall give me purity and deliverance from self and from ignorance without stultifying God and His universe. I seek a scepticism that shall question everything but shall have the patience to deny nothing that may possibly be true. I seek a rationalism not proceeding on the untenable supposition that all the centuries of man's history except the nineteenth were centuries of folly and superstition, but bent on discovering truth instead of limiting inquiry by a new dogmatism, obscurantism and furious intolerance which it chooses to call common sense and enlightenment; I seek a materialism that shall recognise matter and use it without being its slave. I seek an occultism that shall bring out all its processes and proofs into the light of day, without mystery, without jugglery, without the old stupid call to humanity, "Be blind, O man, and see!" In short, I seek not science, not religion, not Theosophy, but Veda — the truth about Brahman, not only about His essentiality, but about His manifestation, not a lamp on the way to the forest, but a light and a guide to joy and action in the world, the truth which is beyond opinion, the knowledge which all thought strives after — yasmin vijnate sarvam vijnatam. I believe that Veda to be the foundation of the Sanatan Dharma: I believe it to be the concealed divinity within Hinduism, — but a veil has to be drawn aside, a curtain has to be lifted. I believe it to be knowable and discoverable. I believe the future of India and the world to depend on its discovery and on its application, not to the renunciation of life, but to life in the world and among men.

In these articles I shall not try to announce truth, but merely to inquire what are those things in Hinduism by following which we may arrive at the truth. I shall try to indicate some of my reasons — as far as within these limits it can be done — for my faith in my guides and the manner in which I think they should be followed. I am impelled to this labour by the necessity of turning the mind of young India to our true riches, our real source of power, purification and hope for the future and of safeguarding it in the course of its search both from false lights and from the raucous challenges and confident discouragements cast at us by the frail modern spirit of denial. I write, not for the orthodox, nor for those who have discovered a new orthodoxy, Samaj or Panth, nor for the unbeliever; I write for those who acknowledge reason but do not identify reason with Western materialism; who are sceptics but not unbelievers; who, admitting the claims of modern thought, still believe in India, her mission and her gospel, her immortal life and her eternal rebirth.

Sri Aurobindo

(Essays Divine and Human, CWSA, Vol. 12, pp. 59-63)

(Editorial note in *CWSA*: Circa 1912. Editorial title. The first pages of the manuscript have been lost; the first surviving sentence lacks its beginning.)

'THY PATH IS EVERYWHERE . . . '

February 10, 1914

With peace in our hearts, with light in our minds, we feel Thee, O Lord, so living within us that we await events with serenity, knowing that Thy path is everywhere, since we carry it in our own being, and that in all circumstances we can become the heralds of Thy word, the servitors of Thy work.

With a calm and pure devotion we hail Thee and recognise Thee as the sole reality of our being.

THE MOTHER

(Prayers and Meditations, CWM 2nd Ed., Vol. 1, p. 70)

'THE SAME IDEA, BUT DIFFERENT FORMS'

Sometimes while reading a text one has ideas, then Sweet Mother, how can one distinguish between the other person's idea and one's own?

OH! This, this doesn't exist, the other person's idea and one's own idea.

Nobody has ideas of his own: it is an immensity from which one draws according to his personal affinity; ideas are a collective possession, a collective wealth.

Only, there are different stages. So there is the most common level, the one where all our brains bathe; this indeed swarms here, it is the level of "Mr. Everybody". And then there is a level that's slightly higher for people who are called thinkers. And then there are higher levels still — many — some of them are beyond words but they are still domains of ideas. And then there are those capable of shooting right up, catching something which is like a light and making it come down with all its stock of ideas, all its stock of thoughts. An idea from a higher domain if pulled down organises itself and is crystallised in a large number of thoughts which can express that idea differently; and then if you are a writer or a poet or an artist, when you make it come lower down still, you can have all kinds of expressions, extremely varied and choice around a single little idea but one coming from very high above. And when you know how to do this, it teaches you to distinguish between the pure idea and the way of expressing it.

Some people cannot do it in their own head because they have no imagination or faculty for writing, but they can do it through study by reading what others have written. There are, you know, lots of poets, for instance, who have expressed the same idea — the same idea but with such different forms that when one reads many of them it becomes quite interesting to see (for people who love to read and read much). Ah, this idea, that one has said it like this, that other has expressed it like that, another has formulated it in this way, and so on. And so you have a whole stock of expressions which are expressions by different poets of the same single idea up there, above, high above. And you notice that there is an almost essential difference between the pure idea, the typal idea and its formulation in the mental world, even the speculative or artistic mental world. This is a very good thing to do when one loves gymnastics. It is mental gymnastics.

Well, if you want to be truly intelligent, you must know how to do mental gymnastics; as, you see, if you want really to have a fairly strong body you must know how to do physical gymnastics. It is the same thing. People who have never done mental gymnastics have a poor little brain, quite over-simple, and all their life they think like children. One must know how to do this — not take it seriously, in the sense that one shouldn't have convictions, saying, "This idea is true and that is false;

this formulation is correct and that one is not and this religion is the true one and that religion is false", and so on and so forth . . . this, if you enter into it, you become absolutely stupid.

But if you can see all that and, for example, take all the religions, one after another and see how they have expressed the same aspiration of the human being for some Absolute, it becomes very interesting; and then you begin . . . yes, you begin to be able to juggle with all that. And then when you have mastered it all, you can rise above it and look at all the eternal human discussions with a smile. So there you are master of the thought and can no longer fly into a rage because someone else does not think as you, something that's unfortunately a very common malady here.

THE MOTHER

(Questions and Answers 1955, CWM 2nd Ed., Vol. 7, pp. 92-93)

To the Readers

If in your reading you have come across different expressions of the same idea, you could send them to Mother India. These could be considered for publication in the journal.

DIALOGUE WITH A MATERIALIST

O Death, thou speakest Truth but Truth that slays, I answer to thee with the Truth that saves.

Sri Aurobindo Savitri, Book X, Canto 3

THE other day, in dealing with a question of work, I had occasion to explain my position from the standpoint of the materialists' conviction. I do not know where they stand now, for I do not concern myself with that generally.

For them, all the experiences that men have are the result of a mental phenomenon — it is that. We have attained a progressive mental development. They would be quite unable to say why or how! — but in brief, it is Matter that has developed Life, and Life that has developed Mind, and all the so-called spiritual experiences of man are mental constructions — they use other words, but I believe that this is their idea. In any case, it is a negation of all spiritual existence in itself and a negation of a Being or of a Force or of Something higher which governs everything.

I repeat, I do not know where they stand now, but I was faced with a conviction like that.

And so I said: "But it is very simple! I accept your point of view. There is nothing else except what we see, humanity as it is, and all the so-called inner phenomena are due to a mental, a cerebral action; and when you die, you die — that is to say, when the phenomenon of agglomeration reaches the end of its life and dissolves, everything dissolves. It is all right."

Probably if things had been like that, life would have appeared so disgusting that I would have gone out of it long ago. But I must immediately say that it is not for a moral or even a spiritual reason that I disapprove of suicide. It is for me a cowardice, and there is something in me that does not like cowardice, and therefore I would not. . . I would never run away from the problem.

That is point number one.

And then, once you are here, you ought to go to the end, even if the end is nothingness — you go till the end, and it is better to go in the best way possible, that is to say, the way most satisfactory to you. It happens that I had some philosophical curiosity and studied a little about all these problems. I found myself in the presence of Sri Aurobindo's teaching, and what he says is for me the most satisfactory of all. What he has taught (I should say revealed, but not to a materialist) is, among the systems formulated by man, by far the most satisfactory for me, the most complete, answering in the most satisfactory way all the questions that can be put, the one that

helps me most in life to have the feeling that it is worth something. Therefore I try to conform entirely to what he teaches and to live it integrally in the best possible way to live — best for me. It is all the same to me if others do not believe in it — whether they believe in it or not makes no difference for me. I do not need to be supported by the conviction of others; my own satisfaction is enough. Well, there is nothing more to say.

The experiment lasted for a long time. In complete detail, to all problems I answered like that. And when I had ended, I told myself, "But this is marvellous as an argument!" Because all the elements of doubt, ignorance, incomprehension, ill-will, negation, all those things that come — immediately they go away with that argument; they are annulled, they have no effect.

And afterwards, everything was securely grasped, solid. What have you got to say?

(Silence)

It is much easier to reply to materialists who are uncompromising, convinced, sincere (that is to say, sincere within the limits of their consciousness) than to people having a religion — much easier!

But naturally, from the intellectual point of view, all human convictions have an explanation and a place. There is nothing men have thought which is not the deformation of a truth. The difficulty is not there, but rather in the fact that for religious people there are things which it is their duty to believe and it is a sin to let the mind discuss them — and so they shut themselves up, naturally, and they can never make any progress. Whereas the materialists, on the contrary, are supposed to know everything, explain everything: they explain everything rationally. And thus (*Mother laughs*) by the very fact that they explain everything, they can be led to wherever one wants to go.

With religious people nothing can be done.

Yes.

But after all, that also is not good. If they have been clinging to a religion, it is because that religion has helped them in one way or another, it has helped in them precisely something which wanted to have a certitude, not to have to search but to be able to rest on something solid without being responsible for the solidity — somebody else is responsible (*Mother laughs*) and it goes on like that. It is a lack of compassion to want to pull them out of that — it is better to leave them where they are. I never dispute with someone who has a faith — let him keep his faith! I take care not to tell him anything that might shake his faith, because it would not be good — they are not capable of having another.

But to a materialist: "I do not dispute, I accept your standpoint; only, you have nothing to say — I have taken my position; you take yours. If you are satisfied with what you have, keep it. If it helps you to live, it is quite all right.

"But you have no right to blame me or criticise me, because it is on your own basis. Even if all that I imagine is simply an imagination, I prefer my imagination to yours."

There!

7 September 1963

THE MOTHER

(Words of the Mother – III, CWM 2nd Ed., Vol. 15, pp. 393-95)



THE MOTHER'S BLESSINGS — SOUL AND BODY — A GREAT MOMENT

Life with the Mother, life away from the Mother, life again with her — this briefly was my lot from the end of 1927 to the beginning of 1954. And running through that threefold movement of time was the basic theme: life in the Mother.

I say "basic" in a double sense: the support underlying all and the support not always showing itself through all the overlay. As I had appealed to the Mother never to let go her hold on me, no matter how much I might appear to deviate from the path, there was no question of her not being with me, but the possibility existed of my not being fully with her in my conscious parts. Here lies the relevance of the second meaning of "basic". And it is pinpointed in an exchange of letters between us some thirty-six [now sixty-seven] years ago in the context of a course of action on which I had launched and which she had dubbed "silly". Referring to a communication from her, I asked: "Why have you omitted those words which mean so much to me and with which you have always ended: 'Love and blessings'?" She replied: "It is purposely that I have omitted the words 'love and blessings', because I did not wish you to think that I am blessing your enterprise — I do not — just because I find it silly. So, do not be misled if I end by love and blessings. These words are for your soul of which you are not just now very conscious, and not for your exterior being." (18-6-1942)

A similar note is struck in another statement of the Mother's: "Understand that blessings are for the best spiritual result, not necessarily according to human wishes." The implication here is that the Mother's blessings may bring about in the exterior life even what we commonly consider misfortune. If seeming ill-luck figures in her vision as the shortest cut for the soul to evolve towards the Divine, the blessings will allow it to happen. Usually, they work for exterior good provided this good does not markedly go counter to the soul's profit. Most often the two are compatible and in many cases no special issue of a spiritual kind is involved, so that health, success, prosperity flow freely. But when blessings do not manifest themselves in a favourable outer consequence we must refrain from considering them inoperative: we must try to extract the golden honey of their grace from the core of an apparent disaster. Then the very difficulty will prove to be Sri Aurobindo crushing our ignorance with his mighty embrace.

*

The soul's benefit, the soul's progress are the Mother's central concern. No doubt, she does not pit the soul against the body in the life of Yoga. It is never her belief that in order to develop spiritually we should neglect physical welfare, as though with the waxing of the soul we should expect the waning of the body. The old asceticism, the ancient mor-

tification of the flesh, the puritanical disdain or rejection of external beauty — these have never been encouraged by her. Even fasting for the sake of chastising the body — leave aside for using it as a tool of moralistic blackmail against a supposed wrong — she did not countenance. Prolonged seclusion itself found little favour if its aim was a shying away from the challenges of outer existence. Indeed a Yoga called "Integral" could hardly subscribe to a lopsided growth of the being and would court failure if anything was deliberately done to harm the physical instrument of the evolving psyche: the final result envisaged of the Integral Yoga is a transformed, divinised body.

Yes, physical welfare is an ever-present objective for the follower of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. But it is an objective fundamentally linked to the benefit, the progress, of the soul. Apart from that central concern it loses ultimate importance. Simply to save one's skin and ensure corporeal happiness cannot, for all the acceptable common sense of it, be an imperative ideal. Otherwise no risks would be worth running for a great cause, no deadly struggles with a force like Hitlerism could be faced. And in a certain confrontation that I have observed between the psychic being and the body's life the Mother's procedure was unequivocal.

I recollect the time when a philosopher friend of mine lay unconscious with an attack of meningitis. A telegram came from his sister saying that only a miracle could save his life and that the Mother should be informed. The Mother very gravely received the appeal. Evidently it was a significant moment of crisis and not an ordinary phase of illness. The next day she told me: "I have put the decisive force." I asked what that would mean and whether it would mean a saving of my friend's life. She explained: "The decisive force should ensure that the soul's will would win. If the soul wants to stay in the body but somehow physical conditions tend to push it out, it shall not be pushed out. If, however, the soul wants to leave the body and somehow physical conditions are holding it back, they shall not prevail. The soul knows what is right and my sending the decisive force will give it victory." Obviously, my friend's soul had no wish to cut short its philosophising career. For, it made him survive the crisis, thanks to the Mother's intervention on its behalf.

I have spoken of "life in the Mother" with regard to my deep-down relation with her whether near her in the Ashram or at a distance from her in Bombay. The phrase has for me a special connotation. I shall elucidate it by recalling a brief talk with the Mother about the way I felt Sri Aurobindo's presence. Whenever I have been at his Samadhi I have not been aware so much of him in my heart as of myself within him. I told the Mother of this peculiar sense. "Sri Aurobindo is too big for my heart to hold him. I am conscious of being included in his great form. I nestle in his heart, a small creature enveloped by his huge divinely throbbing love. Always he carries me. I live in him rather than he in me." The Mother commented: "It is really the same thing, but what you have said is the truer manner of putting it." My "life in the Mother" is an identical phenomenon.

I seem to repose in her, either with a trance-like yet profoundly aware absorption or with a faint far-away feel of the real Me separate from the superficially engrossed

ego. In both experiences She the grandiose Goddess contains Amal the meagre Man, suffusing the latter with something of the truth the Chhandogya Upanishad enshrines: "There is no happiness in the little — immensity alone is felicity." A hint also of the truth treasured in the second line of that magnificent Sonnet-close of Sri Aurobindo's is divined:

My vast transcendence holds the cosmic whirl; I am hid in it as in the sea a pearl.

Lastly, the truth St. Augustine catches in his "confessions" to God has come home with a touch of its poignant depth to the world-wanderer who had sought with half-blind eyes through year on year the elusive ineffable to whom the poet in him had endeavoured to give name after mysterious name: "Thou hast made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee."

*

When I met the Mother during a trip to the Ashram, [...] I told her that I was tired of my life in the ordinary world and asked her to do something to pull me out of it. She smiled assent.

The great moment arrived in the afternoon of February 12, 1953. I was alone, resting in bed. Suddenly, in some bright amplitude above the head a silent command was given with the strongest emphasis to go and live in the Ashram. I felt one with the source of the command. I got up with a start and stood beside my bed. Almost simultaneous with the overhead impulsion which had strangely absorbed me into it, there was a pull from behind my back on a level with the heart and I seemed to exist no longer in the body but in some inmost profundity of flame, independent of my personal physical form. The words issued from my mouth: "I have made the crucial choice. May Mother and Sri Aurobindo help me!"

Sri Aurobindo has said that our true "I" is the Jiva or Jivatman, a non-evolutionary portion of the Supreme, an expressive part of the many-ness inherent in the One: it presides from the above-mind region of Cosmic Knowledge and ultimately from the Transcendence, over the series of births in Cosmic Ignorance and guides its own delegate or representative there, the Antaratman or Chaitya Purusha, what Sri Aurobindo calls the Psychic Being, the inmost Soul that develops from life to life through a new mental, vital and physical personality each time. Sri Aurobindo has also said that when the Jivatman decides a turn in our career the absolutely definitive step is taken. Automatically this turn is reflected in the Antaratman. My "great moment" appeared to be an action of the true non-evolutionary "I", immediately echoed by its evolving truth-image. A sense of something radical and undeniable hung about my being and I knew that the road to the Ashram had at last been victoriously cleared.

But the experience of that afternoon was not merely a short outburst of Grace. It

persisted for a number of weeks, during which I hardly had the sensation of living in my body. The body existed without its usual reactions to the world. Although it did everything as before, I lived exclusively high up and out behind. In this condition I visited Pondicherry for the darshan of February 21. I told the Mother that she had done what I had requested her to do.

In an attempt to catch the strange event in a poem plumbing the actual posture of things for pointers to things to come, I wrote:

Above my head I am one with God's huge gold, Behind my heart God's white-fire depth am I; But both these freedoms like far dreams I hold, Wonderful futures caught in a cryptic eye — A light without lids — suspended timelessly 'Twixt flickering glimpses of mortality. I am they and yet no part of body or mind Shares in their splendour: a nameless strength alone Possesses every limb. A block of stone Dead to all hungers, void of smile or sigh, The outer self endures the strokes of time, But feels each stroke flash from beyond, behind The world of man, a smite of the God on high And the God at my back to rouse from the rapt peace Of my stone-mass a shapeliness sublime That shall be God to the very finger-tips By the falling of brute superfluities. Treasuring that sculpture yet unborn, I wait For the luminous outflowering of my fate — Blindness that is a locked apocalypse!1

Of course, for the apocalypse to be unlocked must take a long series of years: the Aurobindonian fulfilment is a glory beyond the dreams of all past Yogas — the total divinisation of gross matter itself. Many lives would be required now that the Mother is not on the scene to carry us forward willy-nilly and to expedite the process of transformation. But after certain critical experiences one acquires an inner surety because one feels that, however slow the movement, there will be no turning back.

(From Our Light and Delight — Recollections of Life with the Mother, 1980, pp. 112-15, 120-21)

AMAL KIRAN (K. D. SETHNA)

'BABAJI MAHARAJ'

A Birth Centenary Tribute to Ramakrushna Das

IT was the 8th of November 1998. The 125th Birth Anniversary of Sri Aurobindo was being celebrated at Bhubaneswar under the auspices of the Government of Orissa. Since the auditorium including the spacious balcony overlooking the stage was completely packed with an audience that comprised not only of the elite of the city and the local devotees but also of those who had travelled from distant places for the occasion, many had to keep standing along the walls or sit down between the rows of chairs. They included top bureaucrats, intellectuals and politicians. The ministers themselves, by lending their hands, initiated the process of removing from the stage all the tables and chairs meant for them, as well as all the other stuff barring the marvellously decorated portraits of the Master and the Mother and the podium for this speaker, so that the floor could accommodate at least a small part of the overflowing audience. Loudspeakers had been arranged for those still streaming in to hear the proceedings from the passages and the lounge outside the auditorium.

But all these swift rearrangements were being carried out in complete silence, without the slightest murmur from any quarter, for the people had come to pay their homage to Sri Aurobindo. They would not allow any inconvenience to affect their mood.

After a brief spell of appropriate music with meditation and the formal introduction on behalf of the State Government, this author spoke on the significance of the celebration for about an hour, but just as he was preparing to sit down, Niranjan Pattanayak, a Cabinet Minister and the chief organiser of the event, quietly handed over to him a slip of paper. He had just received the news that Shri Ramakrushna Das, our beloved Babaji Maharaj, had passed away a little while ago.

The audience waited in an uneasy silence, anxiety writ large on its face because of Niranjan Babu's unusually hesitant gesture and my grim face. Only some of them knew that Babaji Maharaj was in a critical condition and he could leave us any moment. My announcement of the news seemed to spread yet another layer of silence on the gathering, this time with an almost palpable serenity. We meditated for some time. I am sure a profound sense of gratefulness for the departed soul filled the hearts of most of us.

During that vibrant silence this author was suffused with yet another emotion — a feeling of fulfilment which, he felt, the dear departed must have carried with him. A significant part of Babaji Maharaj's life was dedicated to arousing the people of Orissa to the Vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Love of the Mother. His was an incredible feat. Having spent his youth in Ayodhya, he hardly remembered his mother

tongue when he joined Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1945. But not only did he revive his knowledge of Oriya, but also learnt English with a vengeance to understand the works of Sri Aurobindo, no doubt with the unfailing help of his deep faith in the Supreme Guide and intuitive access to the truth that had been revealed to him. He produced booklets in Oriya explaining different aspects of the Yoga of Sri Aurobindo, as well as the basic issues of spirituality that moved the minds and hearts of his readers belonging to all strata of society. It was his dream to flood his home state with the effulgence of the Master's and the Mother's message and his leaving his body at the very moment when the Government, on behalf of the people, was acknowledging the greatness of the Master, appeared symbolic of the accomplishment of his dream. I do not know of a second person who, living hundreds of miles away from Orissa and rarely visiting the state, had won so much love and reverence of the people of the state and exercised such a lasting influence on their lives.

He was extraordinary in several ways. Born on the 14th of August 1908, in a village named Rairpur in what is now Jagatsinghpur district of Orissa, circumstances obliged him to take up a job in the Settlement Department of the Government at the age of sixteen. But inwardly he remained engrossed in the spiritual lore right from the time he had been able to read. One day he bade goodbye to his milieu and, in search of a guide for his Sadhana, reached the holy city of Ayodhya and was accepted as a disciple by a renowned Guru. Probably it was at this time that his original name, Krushnachandra Routray, changed into Ramakrushna Das, as demanded by tradition, indicating the end of one's old conventional identity and the beginning of a new life.

Before long, even though he never wished to be a Guru, seekers, attracted by his most amiable personality and transparent faith, were drawn to him. Among them were princes, judges and educationists of eminence. While he became a great support in their search for light, his own quest never stopped even with what we believe to be realisations of lofty planes of mystic reality. It is this blessed and rare quality of Ramakrushna Das — who could have easily presided over an ever-growing circle of disciples — that introduced him to the world of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, either through some of their works or through some authentic articles on them. It did not take his mature psyche long to recognise in them the ultimate he sought. Without the slightest hesitation he broke away from his hermitage and came over to Pondicherry and joined the Ashram on the 2nd of February 1945.

We can imagine the difficulty for one steeped in the traditional ideas of asceticism-oriented spirituality and occupying a position of mentor for numerous others, to join as one among so many sadhaks of Sri Aurobindo Ashram conforming to a radically different life-style, accepting the Mother as the supreme Guide and offering one's services in any field chosen by Her. For the greater part of his life in the Ashram, Babaji or Babaji Maharaj as he came to be lovingly called, worked in the Ashram Dining establishment, washing dishes. He rarely absented himself from the regular programme of physical education as a member of his group. But, with a keen

sense of discipline and an exemplary hold over time, he devoted himself to study, writing, answering questions from visitors whose number kept growing, and replying to a bulging volume of letters.

As time passed, his old admirers traced him to his new abode. Among them were the Raja and Rani of the principality of Ambawa. While Babaji Maharaj was at Ayodhya, they had offered him a precious gift of a large tract of land adjacent to the most celebrated spot in that city of unique antiquity, *Ram Janmabhoomi* or the sacred Birthplace of Lord Rama. Now the royal couple was keen to effectuate its resolve. Babaji advised them to offer the land to the Mother, which they happily did and the Mother graciously accepted it. (By the way, it was a conscientious gesture of the Government of India to exclude this property from its acquisition when the tumultuous developments around the *Ram Janmabhoomi* obliged it to take custody of the surrounding area.)

A smooth transition from the old to the new order of Yoga and from the undeclared position of a Guru to the position of a child of the Mother were no doubt remarkable achievements of this progressive sage, but no less remarkable were his humility, his austere way of living devoid of the slightest concern for personal comfort, his unfailing patience in satisfying the queries of visitors as well as his untiring guidance to hundreds of Study Circles formed in Orissa, inspired by him and executed by his worthy lieutenant, Prapatti (Prof. K. C. Pati in his pre-Ashram life).

I joined the Ashram early in 1963 and had the privilege of enjoying his never-failing company for long stretches of time, as those were days when visitors were rare. The education he imparted to me, never through preaching but through his conduct or only when I sought his advice on any issue, is among the most valuable I had ever received. If I were asked about the most memorable quality of this sage, I should say that he had the innate capacity to be spontaneously happy at someone else's happiness. Indeed, it speaks of one's nobility or humanity when one suffers at someone's suffering, but to be able to be quietly happy when someone else was happy, of course for a worthy reason, appeared to me a divine quality in this remarkable Yogi.

The current Birth Centenary Year of Babaji Ramakrushna Das has been marked by meetings, meditations, formation of new centres throughout the state of Orissa and the publication of his collected works (in a series of volumes of which two have already been released), and the process is still continuing. Thousands of seekers find in this occasion a confirmation of their faith that the Divine never deprived our good earth of dedicated messengers of His Word.

Manoj Das

RAMAKRISHNA DAS

'Tapobhumi' — the land of austerity — is the epithet ascribed to India which has been hallowed by severe austerities practised by the saints and the sages born in it through the ages. Conspicuous in this holy land is the region called Utkala (i.e. Orissa), whose heart bears Nilachala, the seat of Lord Jagannath. An Oriya poet has aptly sung:

bhārata sarase utkala kamala tamadhye keshara tuhi nilāchala,

which, rendered into English, reads thus:

In the lake of India
Shines the lotus of Utkala;
Thou art its core,
O Nilachala.

In this holy land whenever there is the decline of righteousness and the prevalence of wickedness God sends his Vibhutis, or the saints, or incarnates himself to restore righteousness to its right position by destroying the wicked.

In the early period of the twentieth century in Utkala, when it was under the sway of wicked forces and its people lost their virtue, followed evil ways and forgot their own religious duties, was born an exceptional child by the name of Krishnachandra Routray on the 14th August, 1908. His father was Markandeya Routray and his mother was Jhumki Devi. The name of the village where the child was born is Rairpur. It is under the Balikuda Police Station in the Jagatsinghpur Subdivision of Cuttack District. That child later to be known as Ramakrishna Das, who resided in Sri Aurobindo Ashram, in Pondicherry. In Orissa he was most popularly known as Babaji Maharaj.

While yet a child of five or six years, he often used to fall asleep in the arms of his mother. He would then go out of his body and rise up into the sky and a short while later enter into the body again. On re-entering the body he let out a cry of fear. He narrated the incidents to his mother and wanted to know their cause. But his mother was quite ignorant of these things and she only told him that they were caused by witches.

Young Ramakrishna's education started at the age of five in a village school called Chatashali. At school he was marked as a good pupil. In addition to the text-books, he devoted himself to the study of the Bhagavatam and the eighteen Puranas

which gave him an inclination towards the spiritual life. One of his favourite books was the *Dardhyatabhakti*. This work in Oriya contains the biographies of a number of saints. One day he came across the life of the saint Raghu Behera. He was only eight at that time. The saint's life influenced him very much. The story describes how the Lord granted a vision of Himself to Raghu Behera. Ramakrishna was so inspired by this fact that he made up his mind at that very moment to renounce the world and take to the life of a Sannyasin. But this decision would take material shape only later. He carried on his studies till the age of eleven. At the age of nine or ten he had been initiated by his family preceptor with the sacred word 'Ramakrishna'. He was thus accustomed to the repetition of the Mantra since then.

After completing his studies, Ramakrishna served as a teacher for a few months in a primary school near his village. His elder brother, Sri Baidyanath Routray, was then serving as a *gumasta* (agent) in the court of Alupada. From him he learnt the art of petition-writing. He then moved to Cuttack and worked there as a *moharir* (petition-writer). Not many months had passed when he was promoted to the post of a *munsarir* (secretary). Later, he left Cuttack for Ranchi and served there also as a *munsarir*. This was the last government service in his life.

Ramakrishna's spiritual life began at Ranchi. He resigned his government service and went straight to Ayodhya. On arriving there, he heard from a priest about the greatness of Mouni Baba and immediately proceeded to see him at his Ashram. He approached the Baba with joined palms and prayed to him to accept him as his disciple. The Baba granted his prayer and gave him the divine name 'Rama' as his Mantra. Ramakrishna formerly used to repeat the name 'Ramakrishna'. He now repeated only 'Rama'.

In his family he was called Krishnachandra. When he was admitted into the order of Sannyasins, his preceptor gave him the new name 'Ramakrishna' by which he was known thenceforth.

Ramakrishna rose early every morning and went to the river Sarayu to perform his ablutions. He had his bath twice daily — in the morning and in the afternoon. One afternoon, while he was having his bath in the river, he saw Lord Ramachandra in the form of a small child floating on its waters. Ramakrishna had the vision of Lord Rama thrice in three different forms at Ayodhya.

Ramakrishna's master had a number of disciples. Ramakrishna was one of the few who were engaged in his personal service. He belonged to the closest circle of the master. He was a Sannyasin of the Vaishnava sect.

The various sects of Hinduism such as Vaishnava, Ganapatya, Shaiva, Shakta etc. are often at variance with each other. But in the life of Ramakrishna we see a harmonious blending of all these. While repeating the joint name of 'Ramakrishna', he offered his devotion to Shiva too.

The boy Ramakrishna had some white marks (like leucoderma) on his leg. The part of the skin which carried those marks became insensitive. His brother advised

him to consult a doctor and to take the prescribed medicine. His father being a religious person advised him to worship Lord Shiva. On his father's advice Ramakrishna went to a temple about five miles from his village to worship the Lord. He remained at the temple for twenty-one days, praying for his recovery, determined not to budge from the place until his prayer was granted. As a result of this he was completely cured of his illness.

While at Ayodhya, Ramakrishna came across an article on the Mother and Sri Aurobindo published in the Hindi monthly *Kalyan*. This prompted him to get further information regarding the Mother and Sri Aurobindo and their ideal, and he wrote a letter to an inmate of Sri Aurobindo Ashram to that effect. The inmate sent him some Hindi translations of the works of Sri Aurobindo by mail. He was filled with delight as he went through these books. The ideal of Sri Aurobindo appealed to him so much that he dropped his idea of leaving for the Himalayas.

In the wake of reading the writings of Sri Aurobindo, there also arose a dilemma in his mind. He had been initiated into the Vaishnava cult and was a votary of Sri Rama. To abandon one faith for the sake of another would be a sin he thought. He then remained silent for a time. Now a couplet of Tulsidas flashed into his mind. The couplet said that however dear a person may be, if he stands in the way of Godrealisation, he should be eschewed like an enemy. Prahlad forsook his father, Vibhisana his brother, the Gopis of Vrindavan deserted their husbands for the sake of the Lord. Yet these persons are worshipped in the world as noble souls!

Thereafter he understood that the world was ever subject to change. God too takes different incarnations in different ages. Then why should it be a sin to change one's faith? Following this trend of thought, he wrote to the secretary of Sri Aurobindo Ashram giving expression to his feeling. The secretary handed over the letter to the Mother. The Mother told the secretary to send him her blessings. Accordingly, a blessing-packet containing rose-petals in an envelope was sent. On opening the letter, no sooner had Ramakrishna touched the blessing-packet, he was immersed in a divine bliss. He remained in this condition of bliss for a number of days and, at the same time, carried on his work in the Ashram at Ayodhya as usual. During this time he was not aware of hunger or thirst. He thought of how when a simple touch of the rose-petals could give him such extraordinary delight, what a delight it would be to see the Mother in person!

In those days it was a rule that prior permission of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo had to be obtained in order to see them or to stay in their Ashram. Accordingly, he sent a telegram to the secretary of Sri Aurobindo Ashram seeking permission to join the Ashram. "You may come" was the reply he received from the secretary through a telegram. Immediately he sat down to meditate and tried to repeat the word 'Ram'. But instead of 'Ram', the words 'Sri Aurobindo' came up spontaneously to his lips. He now found himself at the threshold of a golden opportunity. He began the preparation for this journey — to Pondicherry, his next abode.

Men generally hanker after name and fame. But the one who kicks them aside, is pursued by them like one's shadow. Ramakrishna's life is evidence of this. Had he remained in Ayodhya, he would have been the *mahanta* (abbot) of the Ashram in which he was living. But throwing away his prospects he came to Sri Aurobindo Ashram in the year 1945 . . . and settled there for ever.

With the Mother's permission he took up work in the common dining hall of the Ashram: it was to clean the utensils after meals. He did this work as his sadhana.

Praise and honour, to which he was indifferent, poured in at his feet. He was loving and kind to all. Thanks to his tireless efforts, the message of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo — the creators of the Supramental Future — has reached every corner of Orissa.

Gunananda Das

(Translated from Oriya by Gourmohan Mohanta)

In the way of ahaitukī bhakti, everything can be made a means — poetry and music, for instance, become not merely poetry and music and not merely even an expression of Bhakti, but themselves a means of bringing the experience of love and Bhakti. Meditation itself becomes not an effort of mental concentration, but a flow of love and adoration and worship.

Sri Aurobindo

(Letters on Yoga, SABCL, Vol. 23, p. 776)

ITINERARY OF A CHILD OF THE CENTURY

Pavitra's Correspondence with His Father

(1918 - 1954)

From the École Polytechnique to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, from Paris to Pondicherry via Japan and Inner Mongolia

by

Philippe Barbier Saint Hilaire

We begin in this issue the serialisation of portions of Pavitra-da's correspondence with his father.

The original book in French has been meticulously and lovingly edited by Pavitra-da's nephew, who, incidentally, bears the same name as his uncle, Philippe Barbier Saint Hilaire.

We are grateful to him and to the publishers, Buchet/Chastel, Paris, for their kind permission to bring out these letters in their English translation.

Our gratefulness also to Pournaprema for obtaining the permission.

We would like to bring to the readers' attention that the permission given is specially for publication in *Mother India*, and not for any other reproduction.

ITINERARY OF A CHILD OF THE CENTURY Pavitra's Correspondence with His Father(1918 – 1954)

Kundry: I have named thee, innocent, Fal Parsi, Yes, pure, . . . Parsifal . . .

> Parsifal, Act II, Richard Wagner

FOREWORD

Till his death in 1954, Paul had collected in a file all the letters he had received from his son Philippe, since 1921. That was the year Philippe had left for Japan to establish there a lodge of the Theosophical Society. After that he had spent a long winter in a lamasery, then settled down in Pondicherry near Sri Aurobindo Ghose. Sri Aurobindo gave him his new Sanskrit name, 'Pavitra', meaning the Pure One.

Philippe never returned to Europe.

A former student of the École Polytechnique, he was assured of a fine career and therefore of a pleasant middle-class affluence. This success was cause for satisfaction, nay, even pride, for his near and dear ones, and his family could never reconcile itself to his departure, a departure felt to be a disloyalty, if not a betrayal. None of his near relations ever visited him in India; I am the only one, to this day, to have gone to Pondicherry, but some forty years after his death!

The parents and the son, therefore, never saw one another again; they could only be in touch through letters. I have put together this correspondence here: Philippe's letters as well as Paul's rough drafts or letters abandoned in the course of writing and then resumed, asking Philippe to explain his conduct and commanding him to come back.

The authors of this book are then my paternal grandfather, Paul Barbier Saint Hilaire, my uncle Philippe and finally, myself... My father had chosen to give me the same Christian name so that I replaced — virtually — the runaway son or the brother! Thus I am called exactly like him, surname and Christian name; and I am a 'Polytechnicien' like him!

For the sake of clarity, whatever I have to say in this book is printed in italics, the correspondence itself being in the usual roman font.

What motives prompted me to publish these epistolary exchanges? There is one indisputable reason: there will never be a similar correspondence!

Although at that age, a letter — or a traveller — from France took six weeks to reach Japan, eight weeks to Inner Mongolia and four to French India, emotional relationships could be maintained only by post. In our day, the quality, the low cost and the ease of using telecommunication, have made them the principal instruments for sustaining love or friendship. Air travel has become rapid and less expensive. Hence I cannot imagine that members of a family do not meet one another for thirty years and use, during this lapse of time, nothing but the mail to communicate how they live and what gives meaning to their life, to confide their hopes and their fears with regard to the present human condition and with regard to the evolution of humanity. . . Correspondence then, since the middle of the Twentieth century, has been a kind of witness, a genre of literature and a tradition which is fast disappearing.

Paul's style of writing and that of Philippe have charmed me. I have been sensitive to their character and their reactions as they appeared in their writings, as well as to the metaphysical nature of their debate. I was particularly impressed by my uncle's spiritual evolution and his desire to follow his ideas to the very end, to dedicate his life for realising that which his inner voice urged him to accomplish, to achieve it with confidence and to declare day after day that he was satisfied with his progress.

How did I happen to get interested in this correspondence? During my early childhood, I was disturbed by the peculiarity of bearing the same Christian name as that of a relative, very close but perpetually absent, who was mentioned only in veiled terms, who was always blamed for his misconduct and who, moreover very strangely, lived in a territory surrounded by the land occupied by the English. But then, of whom did they speak when they pronounced the name Philippe in a conspiratorial tone? Perhaps about me, but of what crime was I guilty? Or could it be of another Philippe, a neighbour, a childhood friend, or perhaps the Marshal himself! What did I know of it? My age did not allow me to clear the ambiguity of these asides.

For a long time I knew almost nothing about my uncle: neither at that period, — because the matter concerned only the adults, — nor later, — because my parents and paternal grandparents did not speak a word on the subject! When, after the death of my father, I came in possession of my grandfather's dossier, I read it in order to come to know my namesake at last and to arrive, perhaps, at knowing myself a little better, by the difference between us.

A Note on the Methodology

Paul's dossier contains around one hundred and fifty documents dated from 1918 to 1954. In spite of disciplining myself to render a faithful transcription, I had to take a certain number of liberties to make the text more accessible or easy to read.

Paul, who had been an advocate, had the tendency of drafting his letters like a

counsel's address and of giving a rhythm to his prose with the help of semicolons. His son, too, used these punctuation marks very often. I have used the punctuation and style more common today.

Spelling mistakes or errors of syntax are very rare in their writings. I have chosen to standardise the transliteration of Sanskrit words in conformity with the choice that Philippe himself had made in his French adaptation of Sri Aurobindo's work in the book "Le Yôga de la Bhagavad Gîtâ" (Tchou, Paris, 1969), in accordance with the glossary of that volume. It is not an unimportant detail. To cite just one example, during the major part of his life, Philippe had used the word 'yoga' as a feminine noun (and with a circumflex accent on the o), giving it a sense very close to "mystic process or experience".

. . .

Finally, regarding proper nouns, particularly the names of esoteric Masters, I have adopted the spelling of the Larousse Dictionary in two volumes printed in 1950.

I have included a few documents here which, although they were part of Paul's dossier, do not, in a strict sense, belong to the correspondence between father and son. I have done so because they seem to me to furnish important information about Philippe's life. For the same reason, I have inserted some other letters from external sources, some of which were written even after Paul's death.

Chapter One

The War and the Discovery of Theosophy

Philippe, Etienne, François, Barbier Saint Hilaire, was born on January 17, 1894, at Corre in Haute-Saône. His parents, Paul and Madeleine Stumpf, were born in the region of Paris and had, till their marriage the preceding year, always lived in Paris. François Stumpf, rich glassware manufacturer of Pantin, had financially helped his only daughter and son-in-law to set up house at Corre, first in a Distillery then in an old mill, La Minelle, situated on the bank of the Saône and to set up a cheese farm there. Meanwhile the family passed more time in Paris than in Franche-Comté. Their second (and last) child, my father, Albert, \(^1\) was four years younger than the elder son.

Those who have known Philippe have described him as a brilliant but indisciplined boy. He was admitted to the École Polytechnique in the middle of 1913, i.e. before his twentieth year. There he formed a very close friendship with one of his

1. François, Marie, Albert in the Registry office.

room-mates: Henri Lang. This friendship continued until Henri disappeared, after being deported to Auschwitz in 1941. In 1914, during the mobilisation, the students of the École Polytechnique had first to teach the young recruits and they were then drafted, given some rudimentary military training and sent to the front. Till 1917, Philippe served in the artillery, firing 105mm cannons, then till the end of the war as an instructing officer of the artillery in the Staff of the IV Army. He completed his studies in 1920 and as civil engineer [Engineer of Bridges and Causeways] was appointed to the service of the navigation on the Seine . . . but he held the job only for six months, because in February 1921 he left for Japan. Strangely, his father has preserved only three of his wartime letters, (which I reproduce below), — could it be because his son expressed therein his interest in things esoteric? The earliest letter to dwell on this subject is one addressed to Henri Lang, which his daughter has very kindly given to me.

What sort of interest did the boy, Philippe, and Philippe, the adolescent, have in religious matters? His parents were Roman Catholic, but they never appeared to me to be practising Catholics. When I was at school, my parents sent me— as a substitute for my uncle— to my grandparents' house every Thursday for lunch. During these meals, they never once, as far as I remember, broached any religious subject in my presence. Moreover, Paul, as one will read later in these letters, professed to be a rationalist. As they lived a major part of the year at Corre, they were obliged to put their two sons, each in his turn, in a Hostel at Liancourt, which was a Protestant institution!

Philippe, therefore, had received a Christian education, but in his family environment the faith was rather tepid. When in 1917 he came in contact with the esoteric doctrines, he took at first a deep interest in the study of the Jewish Cabala, among them texts originally written in Spanish. In the following months, the more oriental doctrines of the Theosophical Society, which he found in the books of Rudolf Steiner and those of Charles W. Leadbeater would enthuse him to the point of attempting to convert his father.

* * *

June 3, 1917

My dear Henri,²

I received your letter on returning from my leave, for I have just returned (on the 28th). I am writing to you in Paris because I think that at this moment your case must be the same as mine has been a few days ago. I hope that your father and mother are

2. It refers to Henri Lang.

keeping well and that your brothers and sisters are growing in wisdom as in height. Please remember me to them.

What are you doing now? Are you still at your E.M. d'A.L., but of which C.A.?³ You must be in one of those rare Corps which has not yet moved into my Army. Shall I have the pleasure of seeing you there one of these days? And your diversions? For, as I know you, you have to keep your nose to the grindstone studying something or the other, what do I know of it? perhaps the Elliptical Functions?...

Did I tell you that I was learning Hebrew and working very hard at understanding the Cabala? I shall soon be very well-read in Esdras, Maimonides, the Zohar, etc. Would you be able to give me lessons? However, this must not spoil your leave which I would like to be very happy and full of love.

Au revoir, my dear friend. Let us try to write to each other a little more often. A hearty handshake from your old friend.

Signed: Philippe

* * *

January 1, 1918

My dear Papa,

I cannot wait a moment to reply to your letter, which, as you tell me, is for me the best Christmas gift that I could have hoped for.

I am also happy, whatever you may think, with the state of mind which brought about this result; it is preferable by far that you approach Theosophy remaining yourself and weighing the arguments with your reason rather than accepting everything in an outburst of enthusiasm. The point that must be well understood is the following; we have, at the present state of humanity, two means of acquiring knowledge: the first is our reason nourished by the outer realities and the second is intuition. You would readily see that their domains must be different although they may overlap freely. Particularly the laws of the spirit and of the soul, the rules of ethics and of morality, and even the great cosmic laws depend on the second mode of learning (but it is always possible to examine them with reason and they must never be contradictory).

If we are presented with one of these laws, our reason may find it consistent with facts, logical, but it cannot give us any certitude; that is the moment to call in intuition. The latter exists very unequally in individuals. Its power depends:

1) on the degree of development of the soul, on the power and the quality of the Ego (causal body);

^{3.} I suppose the abbreviation stands for: at your État-Major d'Artillerie Légère (Staff of Light Artillery), but of which Corps d'Armée (Army Corps)?

2) on the degree of "transparence" of the personality (mental, astral or physical body).

So you see that for making use of intuition, one must make oneself "transparent" to the rays of the soul. That is why Rudolf Steiner specifies for us a certain state of the spirit in which it is good to read his book. This state of the spirit may be summed up thus: read sympathetically while trying to penetrate the spirit of the author, suspending one's judgement **till the end of the book**. And it is this that frightened you so much! In short the causal body can transmit something to the normal consciousness only when the mind is sufficiently calm. But afterwards one can judge; I would even say that one must form one's judgement and it is here that reason comes in. One can read all sorts of books trying to conform to this. Some evoke a kind of response in you and others leave you absolutely cold and in the same book the same difference may recur.

There is a third means of knowledge above even the intuition, it is the direct knowledge. That is the goal of occultism, for that alone gives certitude.

Unfortunately it is not within our reach at this moment. It will be within the reach of humanity in general in a few centuries; for the time being, it is so only for a few men who have had the patience to develop these faculties. These psychic faculties were more developed in the races that preceded the great Aryan race, but in general they were unequal and not fully under the control of the individual.

We are now on the ascending curve of evolution and soon these faculties will again manifest themselves and they will be perfectly balanced and subject to our will.

So you see that in all this there is no question of ever abandoning reason.

What are the books that you have read since my departure? *The Occult World* must have been the fourth or the fifth book after the one that you were reading when I left. The letters of K. H.⁵ are well known amongst us and, moreover, *The Occult World* created a great stir (in England) at the moment of its appearance. I do not remember them well enough to discuss them with you.

As you know, it will be a great pleasure for me to introduce you to the Theosophical Society⁶ when I return to Paris. Apart from a well-stocked library and the lectures (I do not know them yet) which are sometimes very interesting, you will find there some very well-informed people who will help you to understand certain questions better than I can.

But before that I want you to read a few books on certain points of the history of the Society. It is good that you know them because the Society has had some detractors

^{4.} Whatever is printed in bold letters was found to be underlined in the correspondence.

^{5.} Koot Hoomi (Kouthumi)? Lal Singh, one of the "Mahatmas" of Madame Blavatsky. To read also: *Theosophism, History of a Pseudo-Religion*, polemical work of René Guénon, published by Éditions Traditionnelles, Paris, particularly page 45 of the 1982 edition.

^{6.} In Paris, 4 Rapp Square.

and it has gone through many attacks. I shall write to Maman⁷ to fetch for you a small book that I have in Paris, titled *H. Blavatsky and the Masters of Wisdom*. Read it. If only you knew how happy I am to feel that between us there is no intellectual wall which so often exists between our own thoughts and the thoughts of those who are dear to us, a wall which hinders the perfect understanding and the flights of the heart!

Well, it is a long letter, isn't it, and I am still far from telling you all that I have to tell you. We shall talk about it more comfortably during my next leave. Write to me all the same and share some of your thoughts with me; that will be a good thing for you and for me.

Goodbye for the present, dear Papa. I must leave you because I have a lot of work; just now I have been lent temporarily to the 3rd Office of the Army which is short of officers.

I embrace you affectionately while conveying to you my best wishes for the New Year.

Signed: Ph. B. St Hilaire

* * *

January 2, 1918

Dear Maman,

I had, as you can understand, an enormous pleasure on receiving Papa's letter. I am so happy that he has understood my grand and beautiful ideas.

For me, moreover, it was only a matter of time for I knew Papa to be frank with himself. You see, what often impedes many people is that they are afraid of new ideas, either because they will be obliged to think, or, above all, because they are afraid of being obliged to change their way of life which is so pleasing to their petty personality. They find it more convenient to conform their ideas to their actions than their actions to their ideas. And I was sure that this was not the case with him; I knew that the day he would believe a thing to be true, he would acknowledge it to himself. Besides, Papa is not a materialist, nor a sceptic by nature although he may be so by opinion, and it was that which gave me confidence. Indeed, we Theosophists are very tolerant, but we are, nevertheless, infinitely happy when somebody begins to catch a glimpse of what we think to be the truth. We never try to force another's conviction, but we must provide him, if he asks for it, with all the useful materials to establish his judgement.

It is so pleasant and so sweet to know that those who are dear to you think like you and that there isn't between their thought and yours that wall which is so difficult

^{7.} Paul was then at La Minelle and Madeleine, as will be seen in the next letter, in Paris.

to pierce and which so troubles the flights of the heart. This is why I am so happy with the Christmas gift that I have received. We shall talk about all that when I come on leave.

In the bookcase of our bedroom in Paris there is a book which I would like you to take to Papa if you return to Corre or give him if he comes to Paris. You will find it lying horizontally in front of the books of Musset. The title is *H. P. Blavatsky and the Masters of Wisdom*.

Au revoir, little Maman, thank you for your good wishes, you have already received mine. I embrace you tenderly.

Signed: Ph. B. St Hilaire.

* * *

January 12, 1919

My dear Papa,

I am somewhat taken aback by your opinion of the books of Leadbeater. I confess that my impression was entirely different. But basically, I can well understand the judgement that you were led to formulate. In these books, let us distinguish between the subject and the manner in which it has been treated.

I find the treatises of Leadbeater excessively clear and easy to read; is it this that makes you think of them as childish? You will see later that certain dry subjects are expounded by this writer in such a lucid manner that one understands them at once while other books explain them laboriously. Now, I must admit that the things about which Leadbeater speaks are unusual and it does not surprise me that to some extent they will appear to you somewhat "suspect". How could it be otherwise? He describes with such assurance a world completely outside the one that we know (I should say 'worlds' because he also speaks of the mental plane), that one is tempted to take these assertions for products of pure imagination. Could it be that I have felt it less than you because these books fell into my hands long after the existence of the astral plane became a theoretical conviction for me, and I read them at the time when I was searching avidly for details of these planes and the states of higher consciousness?

If you think that I **believe** all that they contain, no! Basically, I know nothing of these things. But all that Leadbeater says does not shock me in any way as I have cross-checked with the writings of other authors, Theosophical **or not**, quite a few of his affirmations; and on the other hand, many who know him personally have repeatedly reassured me about his intelligence and his perfect integrity, his capacities and his loyalty, therefore I have no reason to doubt what he writes.

Whatever it may be, I shall be very happy to talk about all that with you. And that will be soon; I am counting on leaving as soon as an officer of this section comes

back, i.e. most probably on the 18th. Where will you be at that time and what shall we do during my leave?

I have received the butter which has reached me in good condition and which is most welcome. See you soon, dear Papa, I embrace you affectionately, Maman and you, and also Albert if you see him.

Signed: Philippe

PHILIPPE BARBIER SAINT HILAIRE

(To be continued)

(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)

8. At La Minelle, Paul manufactured a butter of high quality because immediately after milking, the 5-litre cans of milk were chilled in a pond fed by a cold spring; he sent this butter to his son to supplement the ordinary army butter.

Many people who are here forget one thing. They want to begin by the end. They think that they are ready to express in their life what they call the supramental Force or Consciousness, and they want to infuse this in their actions, their movements, their daily life. But the trouble is that they don't at all know what the supramental Force or Consciousness is and that first of all it is necessary to take the reverse path, the way of interiorisation and of withdrawal from life, in order to find within oneself this Truth which has to be expressed.

The Mother

(Questions and Answers 1955, CWM 2nd Ed., Vol. 7, p. 350)

INTERVENTIONS: OPPORTUNITIES GIVEN TO INDIA

A CLINICAL psychologist who has emerged as a "leading social, political, cultural critic" in India and has specialised in the intricate areas of public conscience, political psychology, mass violence, nationalism and culture, recently made a rather startling comment on the interventions Sri Aurobindo made in the political arena after his retirement to Pondicherry in 1910. He expressed his reservations and indirectly questioned their advisability — calling them hash-making interventions — while writing a foreword to an otherwise admirable monograph on the intellectual history of India. Though he grossly violated the academic code of fair play by not qualifying his position we do not wish to name the polymath in question, nor do we aim to indulge in an intellectual nit-picking with his points of view and thus trivialise his contentions. We are not in the habit of resorting to polemics just for the sake of publicity and propaganda both of which we believe have their uses only in politics, in the marketing of patent medicines and now in the promotion of books too! But certain points need to be made; certain home truths call for constant reiteration even though they may seem repetitions of positions articulated long back. Thus the understanding of each of Sri Aurobindo's political interventions — which were initiated with the intention of securing a safe and united future for India, for safeguarding the progress of human civilisation and for clearing the way towards a spiritual destiny of mankind where the ideal of human unity would not merely be an utopian proposition but a reality — is of as much contemporary relevance today as it was six decades ago in the early years of freedom.

The time-warped notion that Sri Aurobindo ceased to have political interest post his retirement to Pondicherry and other skewed or motivated assessments of his immense political contributions continue to colour most 'non-hagiographic' reading of his life and work and define the many academic assessments that they have undergone. Our erudite protagonist in question is no exception, he too has been a victim of this warp and therefore questions Sri Aurobindo's later political judgments. We realise of course that this is not the problem of an individual but rather the malady of the age if not the century! It is seldom realised that "the revolutionary leader [may have] become the yogi of Pondicherry" but that even in that he was a revolutionary — he did not cease to have interest in life, country and world, he did not indulge in a withdrawal of the ascetic kind, [he] "may have retired from active politics but his days as a thinker on the problems of ethics and politics [and much more] were far from over." This is the point to be understood, the coextensive nature of Sri Aurobindo's life — no compartmentalisation, no false segregations between the spiritual and unspiritual, between the mundane and the sublime — that is perhaps

what led him to write in a political letter to a political associate a decade after his political retirement regarding politics, "I do not at all look down on politics or political action or consider I have got above them. I have always laid a dominant stress and I now lay an entire stress on the spiritual life, but my idea of spirituality has nothing to do with ascetic withdrawal or contempt or disgust of secular things. There is to me nothing secular, all human activity is for me a thing to be included in a complete spiritual life, and the importance of politics at the present time is very great. But my line and intention of political activity would differ considerably from anything now current in the field. I entered into political action and continued it from 1903 to 1910 with one aim and one alone, to get into the mind of the people a settled will for freedom and the necessity of a struggle to achieve it in place of the futile ambling Congress methods till then in vogue. That is now done and the Amritsar Congress is the seal upon it. The will is not as practical and compact nor by any means as organised and sustained in action as it should be, but there is the will and plenty of strong and able leaders to guide it. I consider that in spite of the inadequacy of the Reforms, the will to self-determination, if the country keeps its present temper, as I have no doubt it will, is bound to prevail before long." A brief analysis will reveal how well Sri Aurobindo kept himself updated regarding political developments. Sri Aurobindo was referring here to the 34th Session of the Indian National Congress held at Amritsar in December 1919 with Pandit Motilal Nehru as the President. C. R. Das, Sri Aurobindo's erstwhile political associate and counsel who continued to maintain a channel of communication with him was then one of the tallest figures in the freedom movement and moved the resolution which reiterated the stand that, "India is fit for full responsible Government," and repudiated, "all assumptions and assertions to the contrary wherever made." It expressed its disappointment with the inadequacy of the reforms; it was universally felt that the diarchy proposed was a sham in reality because of the non-devolution of true fiscal powers to the Provincial Legislatures and the reserving of certain important subjects such as industry and primary education; this is the inadequacy Sri Aurobindo probably had in mind when talking of the "inadequacy of the Reforms". The disappointment having been expressed, the resolution further urged, "that Parliament should take early steps to establish full responsible Government in India in accordance with the principle of self-determination."⁴ It is thus evident that Sri Aurobindo was remarkably well-informed about political developments even in his "seclusion" — in fact the *Times of India* did observe in its 6th December issue of 1950 that, "for a recluse he was remarkably well interested in and informed on politics" — and his reading of the political situation in the country continued to remain precise as his letter above goes to prove. The demand for self-determination that he had so resolutely championed from 1906 with the call for complete and unconditional freedom was at last being worked out with active cooperation from all sections of opinion within the Congress. Again, here too, his was a path-breaking formulation way ahead of its time and the whole movement had to eventually veer round to it in order to maintain its pace with the demands of the age. Though the responsive-cooperationist stand won the day, Amritsar signified the launching of the mass-struggle by a people with the "settled will for freedom" firmly planted in their minds; if Plassey had "laid the foundation of the British Empire, Amritsar [had] shaken it".⁵

Another of Sri Aurobindo's assertions made in the above letter, that he did not look down upon politics and political action, emerges from his outlook that there was nothing to him that was secular, all human activity, he believed, was to be contained in the spiritual sphere including politics; his thoughts and vision in every sphere possessed the integrative outlook and force. Needless to say that one ought to be on guard against interpreting the term 'secular' in its present conventional form. Strangely enough it is this integrative aspect of Sri Aurobindo's message that has been constantly missed by the liberal intelligentsia in their frantic quest for an inclusive and cohesive society. It was this vision of integration that led him never to look down upon political action throughout his life — though during a prolonged period he "made it a rule not to write anything about politics" — and therefore we see this constant interest and far-sighted analysis.

The first point thus, that he lost track of political developments and later lost interest in and judgment of political matters stands nullified. But it is the latter part of this letter which perhaps provides a deeper insight into his thinking then, "What preoccupies me now," he wrote, "is the question what it [India] is going to do with its self-determination, how will it use its freedom, on what lines is it going to determine its future?"6 In 1920, possessing a settled inner assurance that India was to be free, Sri Aurobindo was already thinking about the future organisation of freedom — a line of thought which if it had been given timely national recognition then would have perhaps better prepared the country to face the onslaught of problems at the dawn of freedom. It can also be observed that this interest in politics is not limited only to the early phase as some would have us believe — it continued throughout; till 1925 he kept receiving senior leaders who wished to meet him and ascertain his views and guidance on political and spiritual matters we know of C. R. Das, Lala Lajpat Rai, Dr. B. S. Moonje, Purushottam Das Tandon, Abinash Bhattacharya, Sarla Devi Chowdhurani to be among the stalwarts who called on him during this phase. After his complete retirement in 1926, though he did not meet any one further — Tagore who desired to see him in 1928 while passing by Pondicherry was one of the exceptions — he intervened in the political field whenever he believed India's and humanity's future to be in jeopardy. Since 1946 he remained available to the members of the Constitution Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly whenever any of them wired to him for light and guidance.⁷ In fact we see this interest extending as far as 1949 and 1950 — when he encouraged his disciples in Bombay to venture into the complicated field of political journalism and start the fortnightly *Mother* India which was to include among other things "comments on the political themes of the day". The Master did not stop just at that, each of the editorials written between 1949 and 50 were "sent to him for approval. Only when his 'Yes' was wired" did the publication start.⁸ It was to the editor of *Mother India* that he wrote lucid analytical letters as late as May 1950 on the situation in Kashmir, Pakistan's attitude *vis-à-vis* the state's accession to India, condition of the Eastern wing — surely not a sign of disinterested withdrawal! But these were of a later period and to counter the false charge an analysis of Sri Aurobindo's various interventions needs to be made and it is best to start with a brief review of those he made during his pre-Pondicherry days. A detailed look at this phase, which is for the moment beyond the scope of this discussion, will reveal again his ingenuity, his far-sightedness in political analysis, accurate reading of mass sentiments and his cogency in planning and power of organisation. We claim no recognised distinction in scholarship but an ignoring silence in face of such a charge, however shallow, shall belie the revolutionary spirit that Sri Aurobindo himself symbolised.

A brief survey will show quite a few firsts to be among Sri Aurobindo's early political initiatives; they may be mentioned here, even if repeated elsewhere. Sri Aurobindo first articulated the view that the political sense of the masses must be awakened if an effective movement for freedom is to be launched. He began writing a series between 1893-94 in the *Indu Prakash*, a Bombay paper edited by his Cambridge friend K. G. Deshpande, with the aim of "trying to awaken the nation to the ideas of the future".9

Within the first few installments he had created sufficient ripples among the leaders of the day for them to cry halt or for a toning down of substance. The strident criticism of the political methods adopted by the then Congress leadership, the call for including the masses, — for Sri Aurobindo saw that "the great mass of people" had not been touched and the demand for making the Congress a popular body were all thoughts quite foreign to the leaders of the day and proved to them "beyond measure unpalatable". The prevailing idea then was that because the masses were "still unable to articulate definite political demands that the functions and duty devolved upon their educated and enlightened compatriots to feel, to understand and to interpret their grievances and requirements, and to suggest and indicate how these [could] best be redressed and met,"10 but no attempt need be made yet to bring them onto the forum and to make their voices heard firsthand. It was this arrogating notion that Sri Aurobindo opposed right from the beginning, he believed that unless the then Congress made an effort to represent the masses it could never rightly own the defining term 'national'. This is what led him perhaps to articulate the demand for the inclusion of the 'proletariate', which he felt, was "sunk in ignorance and overwhelmed with distress". He clearly saw long before most of his contemporaries had even formulated such a stand that with the "distressed and ignorant proletariate . . . resides our sole assurance of hope, our sole chance in the future". 11 The usage of the word may have been made with its original French meaning in mind rather than the later colour it assumed¹² but it cannot be denied that Sri Aurobindo did use the word in the sense of the 'sunken masses' and was thus the first political leader in the country to apply the term while discussing prevailing political events and conditions.¹³ The idea of turning the movement into an amalgamative mass action was one of the principle objectives which Sri Aurobindo attempted to champion — through his writings and through the creation of the revolutionary network. Though he had few years to consolidate all his plans into concrete action, the seeds of ideas that he planted nationwide gradually made their way to the surface of the national consciousness. It was only when the 'proletariate' got included into the programmes of the Congress did the body really gain strength and credibility.

Continuing with the idea of the masses it is interesting to observe the effect Sri Aurobindo's political ideas had, among other things, on agrarian movements in the northern part of India — and we are not for the moment taking into account here the formidable impact it had on the region's revolutionary actions. In 1906 Jatindra Nath Banerjee (1877-1930), who had joined the Baroda state army at Sri Aurobindo's initiative to receive modern military training and become his 'lieutenant' in Bengal for organising revolutionary activities, disassociated himself from Barindra Kumar Ghose's revolutionary organisation due to temperamental incompatibility and went off on a tour of North India and came to Punjab. It was here that he began spreading again revolutionary ideas imbibed from his mentor and organised a group of inspired young men committed to the ideal of achieving Swaraj if necessary by violent means. Among members of the group were Lala Lajpat Rai, Sardar Ajit Singh and Kissen Singh, uncle and father respectively of the legendary Bhagat Singh, and others [in fact both Kissen Singh and Bhagat Singh revered Jatindra Nath Banerjee, who was initiated later into sannyasa and assumed the name of Niralamba Swami, as their political 'guru' and Jatindra considered Sri Aurobindo to be his foremost political preceptor]. Lala Hardayal of the Ghadar movement fame also became a part of this group on his return from England in 1908 and began organising another group of committed youth for revolutionary work.¹⁴

The idea that the revolutionary movement must be broad-based was an important point that all revolutionaries recognised; in fact it was with this idea of organising a broad network of revolutionary societies and through it to gradually spread disaffection among the 'proletariate' that Jatindra Nath Banerjee was sent by his mentor — the unassuming officer and hugely admired professor of the Baroda State Service and College — to Bengal and this was to be just one aspect of the whole movement. Thus we see that influenced by Jatindra Nath's ideas, (ideas which were inspired by Sri Aurobindo) the mass movement — the agrarian aspect of the operation — was initially put into action by Sardar Ajit Singh as early as February 1907, when he set up, along with Syed Haider Reza the Indian Patriots' Association for ameliorating the condition of the peasantry and to protest against the agrarian policy of the government. Along with Lala Lajpat Rai, Ajit Singh urged peasants to refrain from paying enhanced revenue and water rates, openly advocated rebellion against colonial rule and impressed upon them the fact that unless freedom was achieved, their grievances would never

really be redressed, thus we get here an example of how agrarian discontent was being gradually linked with the movement for freedom from colonial bondage. 15 Both Ajit Singh and Haider Reza are to be seen with Sri Aurobindo and Lokmanya Tilak in the famous group photograph of nationalist leaders at the Surat Congress of December 1907. That Sri Aurobindo closely monitored the movement is evident from a scrutiny of the pages of the Bande Mataram, supporting Ajit Singh's initiatives as another example of the application of passive resistance, Sri Aurobindo wrote that it was gladdening to see that "Passive Resistance is being boldly carried into effect in the Punjab". "So long as the political ferment created by the new spirit was mainly confined to Bengal", observed Sri Aurobindo in the same leader titled 'Passive Resistance in the Punjab' on 23 April 1907, "Anglo-India comforted itself by saying that the Bengalis were an unwarlike race unlikely to cause real trouble. Their main uneasiness was lest the agitation should spread to the martial races of whom alone they are afraid and whom they lose no opportunity of flattering and trying to separate from the Bengalis. Englishmen respect and fear those only who can strike and, being a race without imagination or foresight, they are unable to realise that national character is not immutable or that the Bengalis, who could once fight both on sea and land, might possibly revert to the ancient type and put behind them their acquired timidity and love of ease. Now, however, their fears are being realised. Anglo-Indian journals had already begun to perceive the truth that there is a real unity in India and that 'Lahore has become a political suburb of Calcutta.' . . . Sirdar Ajit Singh of the Lahore Patriots' Association has been doing admirable work among the masses. His most recent success has been to induce the Jat peasantry to boycott the Government canals as a protest against an iniquitous water-tax. As a result the Deputy Commissioner in imitation of the Fuller Administration, published this remarkable order, — 'Ajit Singh of Lahore is forbidden to address any public meeting in Multan district. If he disobeys, he will be arrested.' The only result was that Sirdar Ajit Singh addressed a meeting of 15,000 men in defiance of this ukase and the police stood helplessly by. We pointed out in our last article on Passive Resistance that Government by ukase would always be one of the methods the Government must instinctively resort to in order to snuff out our resistance and that it was the imperative duty of every patriot to resist such arbitrary orders. We are glad to see that the Punjab has promptly taken up the challenge thrown down by the bureaucrat." The active resistance of the peasantry in Punjab also kept being highlighted in the pages of the "notoriously seditious" Yugantar in Bengal which had at that time a wide readership and over which Sri Aurobindo exercised a general control.

We thus come full circle, the early nationalist movement as initiated by Sri Aurobindo had, apart from turning Punjab into a stronghold of nationalists, also given a successful push to the early agrarian movement in the province — but again this aspect of the analysis is often ignored and Sri Aurobindo's role in initiating it is overlooked. The stamp of failure on the mass action front is summarily and unfairly put on the early nationalist movement. The explanation that these movements did not

last long enough nor did they undergo a period of sustained application for them to have an impact have been the easiest and quickest ways of dismissing the utility and relevance of these attempts. A recognition that such early nationalist movements also served to arouse a province, to re-ignite in a people the ardour and discipline for mass movements, the point that since a province had been exposed to these ideas at an early stage it could much later automatically respond to the calls of mass civil disobedience and non-cooperation movements have all been ignored as if agrarian movements and peasants' resistance are the sole monopoly of a particular ideological brand and that the early nationalists were merely a bunch of misguided youth who relied solely on religion and religious symbols to whip up mass hysteria in order to attain nebulous goals and had no idea of the dialectics of class and mass struggles in the Indian context. A careful and unbiased reading of Sri Aurobindo's writings of the Bande Mataram period will prove otherwise, had the nationalist movement's mass mobilisation operations — agrarian and labour — been carried on for a sustained period they could have provided the much needed mass base considered in some circles to be a prerequisite for revolutions to achieve fruition. Simply because a Hem Chandra Kanungo, ¹⁷ totally bitter and disillusioned by his failures and limited in his understanding, blames the entire movement and its leadership for the collapse of the larger attempt at revolution in Bengal, must we accept it as the general assessment of the period — or was it because Hem Chandra displayed certain distinct ideological traits that his words must be acceded to as "fascinating" and "remarkable". Should we not remember how Jyotindra [Nath Mukherjee], Amarendra [Nath Chatterjee], Upendra [Nath Banerjee], Abinash [Chandra Bhattacharya]¹⁸ and many others continued without murmur, without protest or regret, in their own ways to keep up the spirit of revolution and to uphold the standard of revolutionary nationalism bequeathed to them by their 'Karta'? It would perhaps be worthwhile in this context to see the exhortation of another of Sri Aurobindo's revolutionary associates who later turned to the materialist philosophy of social evolution and took the "initiative in forming" the Communist Party of India at Tashkent on October 17 1920 and even later espoused the cause of "radical humanism". Narendra Nath Bhattacharya (known later as M. N. Roy) associated with Sri Aurobindo since 1906 called him the "Supreme Commander of the Revolution"; part of Jyotindra Nath Mukherjee's group, M. N. Roy was active in Bengal till about 1915. Roy concluded a long letter from Moscow dated 12 August 1920 addressed to "Arabinda Ghose, Pondicherry, French India" with the following appeal: "At last I take the liberty of imploring you to come back to active life, to take in your wise hands the direction of the revolutionary forces of India. The forces that are working in India and all over the world today are beyond the understanding of politicians and pacifists. People with great soul and spiritual vision are needed to lead the humanity to its salvation, — to real freedom and happiness. How I wish you can come here and see the old corrupted society destroyed, not by brute force, but by the dynamic power of a great idea, and a new world built in its

place. This is the goal of every revolution. Anything short of it is not worthwhile to shed blood and add more misery to already suffering humanity." The letter was sent through an emissary who was a representative of the 3rd International in the East. ¹⁹ It is interesting to note that this appeal was made by Roy at the height of his involvement with Communism — no disillusionment, no trace of bitterness of any kind rather a firm belief that with Sri Aurobindo lay the key to understanding the world forces then at work convulsing men, societies and creeds. This aspect of Roy's stand is never discussed — one of the firmest reiterations of faith in the "Supreme Commander's" leadership long after he was supposed to have forsaken his soldiers and fled! Whatever may have been the later assessments of Roy as a leader, thinker, nationalist and humanist, it would be useful perhaps to keep this point in mind while discussing Sri Aurobindo's interventions. A decade after his withdrawal to Pondicherry he was still called upon to help understand and control different and momentous forces that were at work trying to create a new society based on new ideals.

The other first that Sri Aurobindo initiated, apart from the well-known fact of his being the first one to openly call for complete and unconditional freedom from alien rule, is the introduction of the 'New Thought' in Indian politics. He undertook the exposition of a philosophy of nationalism and developed it and placed it on a scientific foundation. A series of articles written between April 11 and April 23, 1907 on 'The New Thought: The Doctrine of Passive Resistance' created the foundation for the future mass movements of civil-disobedience and non-cooperation. The articles were widely read and generated intense discussion — the first time a method of mass struggle was being introduced in the country. Sir Harvey Adamson then Home Member of the Governor General's Council considered the series to be "well worth reading, as a complete exposition of the doctrine of passive resistance, its limitations, and its ultimate methods of reaching the goal 'India for Indians.'" The then Home Secretary to the Government of India H. A. Stuart while inviting the Government's attention to the series found them to be 'a rather remarkable series of articles.' ²⁰ Maybe the future practitioner of the passive resistance method on a mass scale had read it too amidst his tumultuous political experiments in South Africa and perhaps therefore wrote to Sri Aurobindo in 1934 that "ever since my return to India I have been anxious to meet you face to face. . ."21 It also led his political disciple and heir to assess Sri Aurobindo's contribution to the nationalist movement in the following words, "he [Sri Aurobindo] shone like a brilliant meteor and created a powerful impression on the youth of India. The great anti-partition movement in Bengal gained much of its philosophy from him and, undoubtedly, prepared the day for the great movements led by Mahatma Gandhi."22

The formulation of the Doctrine of Passive Resistance was undoubtedly the Bengal school of politics' — the new school's — "most fruitful and potent contribution to India as a method" to be followed for "winning liberty". The Lokmanya perhaps summed up best the new direction given by Bengal in this respect when he acknowledged the province's leadership of the country by introducing the new trend in politics. Addressing

a public meeting at the famous College Square in Calcutta on 4 July 1907 he described why previous methods of petition and logical persuasion had failed; he said that earlier, when protests went "unheeded" it was the practice to accept the "settled fact" and that the Government was thus gradually tightening the bureaucratic chain by encircling the people with a series of settled facts but Bengal had "for the first time, refused to accept the settled fact and insisted on keeping a grievance open till it was redressed. This is what [he proclaimed, must be done] systematically in future. . . . This was what was meant by passive resistance; to make government under present conditions impossible by a peaceful but firm passive resistance".²³ It was this method that the new school advocated, the new school's chief advocate being Sri Aurobindo.

Another uniqueness in Sri Aurobindo's political action is his definition of the word Swaraj, till then rather loosely used and projected in the annual Congress sessions, his formulation has been considered to be the "clearest exposition . . . by declaring it [to be] synonymous with independence — 'a free national Government unhampered even in the least degree by foreign control".24 It was only two decades after this exposition that the term 'Complete Independence — Purna Swaraj' became enshrined among the foremost demands of the Congress at its session at Lahore in 1929. A re-assessment therefore of the whole anti-partition movement of 1905 can be done based on the series that Sri Aurobindo wrote on Passive Resistance and it will definitely go to prove the deep impression it had then created and the influence it wielded on subsequent movements.²⁵ Sri Aurobindo did not merely evolve a theory far removed from the ground realities of the day, he defined minutely each developing stage of the movement, clearly evolved the concept of self-help so as to render the alien bureaucracy redundant and even delineated future possibilities of the movement when he talked of the no-tax campaign which he felt could be initiated later only after "a close organisation linking province to province and district to district and a powerful central authority representing the single will of the whole nation" had been created.²⁶ It was only after the Congress transformed itself into such an organisation that it was capable of launching large-scale mass movements that posed serious challenges to the alien bureaucracy.

Swaraj having been defined, what was needed was a clear formulation of the methods that would make the goal achievable. The series on Passive Resistance did just that, enunciating in clear terms the objectives of the new movement. To highlight the points briefly:

The administration of India by aliens was sought to be made impossible:

- 1) By an organised and relentless boycott of British goods to render the further exploitation of the country impossible.
- 2) By an organised judicial boycott to make the bureaucratic administration impossible.
- 3) [By refusing] to send . . . boys to Government schools or schools aided and controlled by Government.
 - 4) [By refusing] to go to the Executive for help or advice or protection.

It is thus quite apparent that the 'New School of politics' laid down the goals of the struggle for Swaraj and the methods to be followed which contributed to success forty years later. It "will hardly be an exaggeration to say that India till the last [up to independence] followed the ideals and methods which marked the genesis of the new nationalism represented by the so-called Extremist School of politics", 27 the school's chief ideologue and proponent being Sri Aurobindo.

We leave aside for the moment Sri Aurobindo's epochal contribution to the concept of armed insurrection as a method for achieving national liberation because of its wide ambit of review and its being a subject by itself. But it suffices here to say that just about five decades after the revolt of 1857 it was he who dared first to visualise again the possibilities of acquiring freedom by the power of arms, this time not in a disjointed, arbitrary or loose manner but through careful preparation — the evolving of a cohesive all-India network of revolutionary groups, the arranging for the latest military training to be imparted to specially recruited youth, the spreading of disaffection among the rural mass, the inciting of regiments of Indian soldiers in the British Indian army to mutiny and then linking all of these in a general uprising. These were to be some of its aspects that had to be worked out in secrecy over an extended period of time. Sri Aurobindo's plan in this area of the struggle was to establish centres "in every town and eventually in every village" and to set up societies "of young men . . . with various ostensible objects, cultural, intellectual or moral and those already existing were to be won over for revolutionary use. Young men were to be trained in activities which might be helpful for ultimate military action, such as riding, physical training, athletics of various kinds, drill and organised movement."28 That the need for a preparatory period was clear to Sri Aurobindo is evident among other things from his review of the Bartaman Rananiti ('The Modern Science of War'), a stimulating book seeking to acquaint the general reader with the "nature and use of modern weapons, the meaning of military terms, the uses and distribution of the various limbs of a modern army, the broad principles of strategy and tactics, and the nature and principles of guerilla warfare . . ." and thus spread these. Speaking of the necessity of such literature especially when "the heart of the nation [was] rising to higher things" and when "the new-born nation [was] eagerly seeking after its development and organisation" Sri Aurobindo pointed out how it would serve to prepare the ground for the future, "it is perfectly true," he wrote, "that no practical use can be made of its contents at the moment; but the will and desire of thousands creates its own field and when the spirit of a nation demands any sphere of activity material events are shaped by that demand in ways that at the time seem to be the wild dreams of an unbridled imagination. Our business is to prepare ourselves by all kinds of knowledge and action for the life of a nation, by knowledge and action when both are immediately permitted us, by knowledge alone for action which, though not permitted now, is a necessary part of the future nation's perfect development . . . " and then the final hint, "When the earnest soul prepares itself by what Sadhana is possible to it, however imperfect, God in his own good time prepares the field and the opportunity for perfect Sadhana and complete attainment."²⁹

Whether it succeeded or not is another point, in fact Sri Aurobindo himself is on record having enumerated the reasons that led to the gradual modification of the line and why it was then [in the early 1900s] thought to be feasible, 30 but what concerns us here is his ingenuity, again a first, in thinking along these lines. And it is known what a stiff challenge was thrown to the colonial machinery by Jyotindra Nath Mukherjee and Rash Behari Bose who built up a pan-Indian revolutionary network based on these lines during the First World War and had succeeded in inciting regiments of the British Indian army to mutiny and in enlisting the help of foreign powers to assist in the war of Indian liberation.³¹ Records discovered later in the Soviet archives gave an insight into some of the plots that the revolutionaries — militant nationalists — had hatched to disrupt and uproot the colonial administration and showed how serious they were in their endeavours. On 6th February 1909 the Russian Consul-General in Calcutta who had been closely monitoring the political situation in India sent a report to St. Petersburg saying that despite the authorities' attempts to keep the incident secret "some details have come to light" and show the existence of a conspiracy "connected with the liberation movement which had been gaining momentum in India in recent years" and that "the conspiracy was nipped in the bud." It was revealed later — sometime in 1911 — that this conspiracy was planned by the Bengal revolutionaries who had established reliable contacts with the 10th Jat Regiment soldiers and had decided to decimate the entire colonial leadership in the winter of 1909 while they were busy attending a Christmas reception at the Bengal Governor's residence. The 10th Jat regiment was in charge of the security arrangements at the reception and a number of soldiers had been roped in to facilitate the whole operation. The idea was, as the Consul reported, to "arouse in the country a general perturbation of minds and thereby afford the revolutionaries an opportunity to take the power in their hands." A last minute betrayal undid the whole plot and the soldiers were arrested. This shows that the Bengal revolutionaries did not always act in an isolated manner and had to their credit a number of daring operations and the "fact that this conspiracy originated at a time when the national liberation movement of 1905-1908 was being crushed . . . is of great historical importance."32

Nor was it only "purification through blood and fire". Sri Aurobindo also paid adequate attention to moulding the intellect of the youth and the masses, his nationalist organs *Yugantar* and *Bande Mataram* were launched with that aim in mind. One [*Yugantar*] was to openly appeal for the overthrow of British rule if necessary by violent means — in fact at a stage its circulation went up to a whopping fifty thousand reflecting its popularity — and the other [*Bande Mataram*] was to set before the nation a clear path and method to be followed to achieve liberation. He also inspired the writing of books which were to create a great stir among the masses and became indispensable reading material for those wanting to work for freedom. Sri Aurobindo

requested the "illustrious Maratha patriot and writer Sakharam Ganesh Deuskar" (1869-1912), then assistant editor of the Bengali newspaper *Hitavadi* and a master of Bengali, to "write a book on India's economic servitude and her exploitation by England. He responded and the result was the famous *Desher Katha*, based on a vivid presentation of unchallengeable facts and figures." The government honoured it with a prompt ban but it kept being read and had "an enormous influence on the young men of Bengal and helped to turn them into revolutionaries."³³

Thus we see the tremendous range of Sri Aurobindo's political action and in his political thought we perceive one of the clearest formulations of the path that the country could follow to achieve liberty. He presented a unique blend of passive resistance as well as revolution — the 'twin methods' of non-violence [minus the dogmatic credal adherence to it because he saw it only as an expedient method to be put in practice when needed] and violence [again to be initiated when the situation so demanded, he considered this to be the "third course open to an oppressed nation"]. The method for attaining liberation to be adopted by a subject nation he felt was "best determined by the circumstances of its servitude". 34 He did not simply give a theory but chalked out a whole path for the march of freedom to take, it has been rightly asserted that "of all the statesmen Modern India has produced, he [Sri Aurobindo] had the clearest vision of Indian Swaraj in its fullness as well as the practical means to attain it by strenuous and sustained struggle. In the political arena he exhibited two distinct but inwardly allied personalities, those of a passive resister and a revolutionary, and in both the capacities he cast a mighty influence over the future course of India's Freedom Movement which had its culmination in the transfer of power in August 1947."35

This brief survey of Sri Aurobindo's interventions in national politics during the pre-Pondicherry days shows that he was indeed a pioneer in every aspect that he introduced into the freedom movement; it also shows — and this is always a crucial aspect in political action and one which is sadly lacking in the contemporary scenario — that he retained at every step while formulating a certain political strategy the larger picture in mind and its future ramifications on the movement in particular and the country in general. This aspect is also seen in his later interventions made from Pondicherry and even there we see clear formulations, clear analysis and clear statements always with the larger picture in mind. We shall try in subsequent articles to see how those interventions were indeed opportunities given to India to try and preserve her unity, integrity and identity and to emerge on the world scene as a formidable entity conscious of her unique mission.

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- 1. Sumit Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908*, p. 316, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1973.
- 2. Sugata Bose, *The Spirit and Form of An Ethical Polity: A Meditation on Aurobindo's Thought*, p. 13, *MCHV*, IIM Calcutta, Kolkata 2005.
- 3. Sri Aurobindo, Autobiographical Notes and Other Writings of Historical Interest, pp. 255-56, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 2006. The letter was written to Joseph Baptista (1864-1930) well known barrister and nationalist collaborator of Lokmanya Tilak. Baptista stood as Tilak's counsel in the famous Sedition Case brought against the latter and assisted him henceforth in his nationalist activities. In 1915 when Tilak began organising provincial conferences after his release from prison, the first such conference was held at Pune and was presided over by Baptista. He became the first president of the Home Rule League and was instrumental in mobilising political opinion in England in favour of it. Baptista organised the first All-India Postal strike in 1917. A pioneering labour leader, he founded along with Lala Lajpat Rai in 1919 the All India Labour Conference and became its president in 1923. In 1924 he was elected to the Bombay Legislative Council and in 1926 to the Central Legislative Assembly from the Pune General Constituency — reflecting his popularity among all sections of the masses. In 1926 he was elected the Mayor of Bombay. (Source: Dictionary of National Biography, Vol. I, ed. S. P. Sen, Calcutta, 1972). This letter was written in connection with moves initiated by Tilak's nationalist followers to start a new party and bring out a daily newspaper as its organ. Baptista had written to Sri Aurobindo requesting him to assume editorship of the paper. It is interesting to note how a decade after his retirement Sri Aurobindo was called upon again to give a new direction to the national movement, this goes to disprove another argument, that the nationalist movement he initiated did not have a pan-Indian effect and was limited only to the province of Bengal.
 - 4. R. C. Majumdar, History of the Freedom Movement in India, Vol. III, pp. 36, 42, Calcutta 1996.
- 5. Mahatma Gandhi's assertion when asked by reporters covering the event to give his assessment of the Amritsar Congress session. Durga Das, *India from Curzon to Nehru and After*, p. 71, New Delhi, 1969.
 - 6. Sri Aurobindo, Autobiographical Notes, op. cit., p. 256.
- 7. K. M. Munshi (1887-1971) while member of the Constitution Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly was in touch with Sri Aurobindo for guidance as was Surendra Mohan Ghose (1893-1976) disciple, member of the Advisory Committee of the Constituent Assembly, member of the Jugantar Party, President of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, and Member of Parliament, whom Sri Aurobindo called "my man" in politics. It may be also mentioned that Dr. S. P. Mookerjee (1901-1953) who sought Sri Aurobindo's guidance from time to time through S. M. Ghose was also a member of the Minorities Sub-Committee of the Advisory Committee, Union Powers Committee, and Union Constitution Committee of the Constituent Assembly. Dr. Mookerjee was also a member of the Interim Cabinet in charge of Supplies and Industries and was to later become Chairman of the Sri Aurobindo Memorial Convention held at Pondicherry in April 1951.
 - 8. K. D. Sethna, Introduction in *India and The World Scene*, Sri Aurobindo Society, Pondicherry, 1997.
 - 9. Sri Aurobindo, Autobiographical Notes, op. cit., p. 67.
- 10. Sri Aurobindo, On Nationalism Selected Writings and Speeches, p. 21, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1996.
 - 11. Ibid., p. 49.
 - 12. Arun Chandra Guha, *Aurobindo and Jugantar*, p. 16, Calcutta. [date not stated]
- 13. Prithwindranath Mukherjee, *Sadhak Biplabi Jatindranath* [in Bengali] p. 66, West Bengal Govt. Book Board, 1990, Calcutta and Amalendu De, *Sri Aurobindo's Role in Indian Freedom Struggle*, p. 8, The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, 2003.
- 14. Uma Mukherjee, *Two Great Indian Revolutionaries*, pp. 114-15, reprint, Kolkata, 2004 and Prithwindranath Mukherjee, *op. cit.*, pp. 292-93.
- 15. Ed. Amitabha Mukherjee, *Militant Nationalism in India* 1876-1947, pp. 109-11, Institute of Historical Studies, Calcutta, 1995.
- 16. Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo (CWSA) Vol. 6, pp. 337-38, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 2002. Proponents of writing 'history from below' ought to look at this aspect of the early nationalist movement in an unbiased light.

17. Hem Chandra Das Kanungo's (1871-1950) Bengali work Banglay Biplab Prachesta (1928), contains peculiar accusatory observations and portrays a deficiency in understanding Indian conditions and mindsets. Prof. Sumit Sarkar in his seminal Modern India calls Hem Chandra "probably the most remarkable figure among the first generation of revolutionaries" and bases a part of his assessment of the early revolutionaries on Hem's account of them and that period. Sarkar and many others overlook the contributions and spirit of other revolutionaries such as Ullaskar Dutt (1885-1965) who had learnt on his own the manufacture of explosives, was equally dexterous and bold but never rueful in spite of undergoing extreme hardship, they ignore the role of P. M. Bapat (1880-1967) who also went over to Paris and together with Hem Chandra learnt the technique of explosive making. Though Bapat did not meet Sri Aurobindo personally he met Barindra Kumar Ghose (1880-1959) and had links with the Maniktolla group. Bapat too underwent severe deprivations and hardships between 1908 when the Maniktolla group was busted and 1913, years he spent underground. Later Bapat was to reorganise his life, continue being part of the struggle for freedom and was conferred the honorific of 'Senapati'— 'General' because of his exemplary leadership role. A littérateur in his own right Bapat translated The Life Divine in Marathi, visited the Ashram in February 1960, had the Mother's Darshan and presented Her the first volume of his translation of the magnum opus. He maintained in a sense a 'mystic liaison' throughout his life with the Master. He was a unique example of how an early revolutionary continued to be part of the movement without regret or rancour. Therefore too much must not be read and construed in Hem Chandra's assertions or Barindra Kumar Ghose's sometimes contradictory reflections of the early period. What concerns us and must matter to readers in general are this period's lasting contributions in terms of ideas, doctrines, inspiring workers and heroism, it is these aspects of inspirational history that finally outlast all dry pedantic dissections of the past.

18. Jyotindra Nath Mukherjee [Bagha 'Tiger' Jyotin] (1879-1915) one of the foremost revolutionaries of the early phase who succeeded in organising a near pan-Indian revolutionary network. Was in touch with Sri Aurobindo since 1903 and after the arrest of the first batch of revolutionaries in connection with the Muraripukur Garden House raid, it was he who reorganised the whole revolutionary network on more solid foundations. Martyred while resisting an attack by the colonial police in September 1915 at Balasore, Orissa, he had the unique privilege of being called by Sri Aurobindo as his 'right-hand man'.

Amarendra Nath Chatterjee (1880-1957) an important revolutionary from Uttarpara, Hooghly district of West Bengal was also a close associate of Jyotindra Nath Mukherjee, met Sri Aurobindo in 1907 and was inspired into revolutionary action. A master at collecting funds for revolutionary work, Amarendra started a number of commercial ventures to support revolutionary operations. While Motilal Roy of Chandernagore arranged for Sri Aurobindo to be escorted from Chandernagore to Ariadaha-Agarpara then in the outskirts of Calcutta, Amarendra escorted Sri Aurobindo from there to Calcutta where with the help of others he managed to have Sri Aurobindo board the S.S.Dupleix which left for Pondicherry on 1st April 1910. While a member of the Central Legislative Assembly in Delhi between 1937 and 1945 Amarendra had written to Sri Aurobindo requesting him to play a more active role during the Cripps Mission of 1942. Sri Aurobindo had sent him two telegrams in response, one of which read — 'My Blessings on your effort to serve and defend Motherland now in danger.'

Upendra Nath Banerjee (1879-1950) one of the early revolutionaries, close associate of Barin Ghose in the *Yugantar* venture where he was one the chief writers, Upen joined the *Bande Mataram* in 1906 as a sub-editor. Given the position of 'leader and teacher' he was in charge of imparting religious and moral instruction to the boys at the Muraripukur Garden House. Arrested there in 1908 he was sentenced to transportation for life to the Andamans along with Barin, Ullaskar and others and was not released until January 1920. His book on the tales of exiled life is a classic in Bengali literature. He was rearrested in 1923 and after release joined C. R. Das's Swarajya Party, in 1945 became editor of the *Dainik Basumati*, joined the Hindu Mahasabha to resist partition, and was Chairman of the All India Hindu Mahasabha in its Calcutta Session in December 1949. Sri Aurobindo once observed that Upendra along with Debavrata Bose, another revolutionary co-worker, were 'masters of Bengali prose.'

Abinash Chandra Bhattacharya (1882-1962) one of Sri Aurobindo's principle co-workers in the nationalist movement was Barin's first recruit in Bengal. Abinash joined the *Yugantar* as its manager and had close personal contact with Sri Aurobindo and lived with him between 1906-08 looking after his household and office. Author of two books which stirred the imagination of youth — *Mukti Kon Pathe* (Which Way Liberation) and *Bartaman Rananiti* (Modern Warfare). Sri Aurobindo considered the latter to be a "new departure in Bengali literature and one which show[ed] the new trend of the national mind." Abinash was arrested along with Sri Aurobindo from 48, Grey Street in the early hours of 2nd May, 1908. He was imprisoned in the Andamans till 1912 and then was moved

to prisons on the mainland. Released in 1915 he joined C. R. Das's Swarajya Party in 1920 and edited his paper *Narayana*. Abinash met Sri Aurobindo in Pondicherry around 1924 and discussed with him the effects of adopting separate electorates. Sri Aurobindo warned him that separate electorates would pave the way for partitioning the country.

- 19. Prof. Amalendu De makes this rather interesting point in his editorial note in the monograph *Sri Aurobindo and The Mother on Indian Independence and on War and Peace*, Sri Aurobindo Samiti, Calcutta, 1999. He quotes from *The Indo-Russian Relations 1917-1947: Select Documents* from the Archives of the Russian Federation edited by Purabi Roy, Sobhanlal Datta Gupta and Hari Vasudevan, Asiatic Society, Calcutta, to support his view.
- 20. Haridas and Uma Mukherjee, *Sri Aurobindo and The New Thought in Indian Politics*, Introduction, p. xviii, 2nd ed. Calcutta, 1997.
 - 21. Mahatma Gandhi's letter to Sri Aurobindo dated 2 January 1934, Autobiographical Notes, op. cit., p. 442.
- 22. Pandit Nehru's foreword in Karan Singh's *Prophet of Indian Nationalism*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 3rd imp. 1991.
 - 23. Haridas and Uma Mukherjee, op. cit., p. xxxi.
- 24. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Sri Aurobindo A biography and a history*, p. 228, Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, 5th ed. Pondicherry, 2006. Prof. Iyengar quotes Daniel Argov's position formulated in his *Moderates and Extremists in the Indian National Movement* (1883-1930) 1967.
- 25. Prof. Amalendu De calls for a re-look at the anti-partition movement in Bengal based on a close analysis of the writings of Sri Aurobindo during the years that followed the event and of his Passive Resistance series in particular, see his monograph on *The Anti-Partition Movement in Bengal an Analytical Study* [Beng] Kolkata, 2005.
 - 26. Sri Aurobindo, 'The Doctrine of Passive Resistance', On Nationalism, op. cit., p. 143.
- 27. R. C. Majumdar, *The Genesis of Extremism*, pp. 170-71, Studies in the Bengal Renaissance, 3rd revised ed. 2002. Kolkata.
 - 28. S. K. Mitra, The Liberator, p. 54, Jaico, 1954.
- 29. Sri Aurobindo, *Bande Mataram*, October 7, 1907, *Bande Mataram*, pp. 563-64, 5th imp. Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1997.
- 30. Discussing the three sides of his "political ideas and activities" Sri Aurobindo pointed out that at that time in the early years of the last century when he started his political action, "the military organisation of the great empires and their means of military action were not so overwhelming and apparently irresistible as they now are: the rifle was still the decisive weapon, air power had not yet been developed and the force of artillery was not so devastating as it afterwards became. India was disarmed, but Sri Aurobindo thought that with proper organisation and help from outside this difficulty might be overcome and in so vast a country as India and with the smallness of the regular British armies, even a guerilla warfare accompanied by general resistance and revolt might be effective. There was also the possibility of a general revolt in the Indian army. . ." A close study of the "temperament and characteristics of the British people and the turn of their political instincts" had convinced Sri Aurobindo "that although they [the British] would resist any attempt at self-liberation by the Indian people and would at the most only concede very slowly such reforms as would not weaken their imperial control, still they were not of the kind which would be ruthlessly adamantine to the end: if they found resistance and revolt becoming general and persistent they would in the end try to arrive at an accommodation to save what they could of their empire or in an extremity prefer to grant independence rather than have it forcefully wrested from their hands." [Sri Aurobindo, On Himself, pp. 21-22, 5th imp. Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, 1989]
- 31. For a detailed study of this phase see Prithwindranath Mukherjee's *Sadhak Biplabi Jatindranath* [in Bengali] Calcutta, 1990 and Uma Mukherjee's *Two Great Indian Revolutionaries*, reprint Kolkata, 2004. Both these pioneering researchers on the early Indian revolutionaries trace the concept of armed insurrection, mutiny and the revolutionary network to Sri Aurobindo's formulation of the methods to be followed for national liberation.
 - 32. R. C. Majumdar, History of the Freedom Movement in India, Vol. II, pp. 281-82, reprint 1997, Calcutta.
 - 33. S. K. Mitra, op. cit., pp. 61-62.
 - 34. Sri Aurobindo, 'The Doctrine of Passive Resistance', On Nationalism, op. cit., pp. 134-35.
- 35. Haridas Mukherjee, *Sri Aurobindo, Sister Nivedita and the Bengal Revolutionaries*, Dr. S. P. Sen Memorial Lecture, Appendix II in *Sri Aurobindo and The New Thought in Indian Politics*, p. 356, 2nd ed. Calcutta 1997.

SAY YES, ALWAYS SAY YES

Who was I when this soul took birth?
Where was it ere we left for Earth?
Soft white universe belonging not to time or space
Began like water troubled in a lake
Uneasiness to feel, a subtle yearning
As shoreward it was urged its way to make
And suddenly a need, a burning drove us hither
Aroused by fate we knew not whither.
A tryst there was we had to keep
We must awake from gentle sleep.
Then rushed upon a wave before it lapsed,
And crushed, our soul was forward, ever forward, driven
Then swiftly from its moorings riven
And from our gentle night impelled.
To this earth's shore we were propelled.

O child of this Mother you've chosen Much love now awaits you. Her warm breasts' devotion for your limbs that feel frozen, The pride of your father. His word half whispered in the shell of your ear The promise that says, "You have nothing to fear. For you we are here, we are here." But from the caress of warm waters And lulling forever you've been taken From the tree of no-time you've rudely been shaken Your world perforce you've forsaken. In innocent passion they would save you From sorrow and pain But you've come to be shaped. All their vows are in vain You'll taste agony like all of earth's children No loving can help that. Naught will avail. It's in the sweet milk that they gave you to suck. They hear it in your first hunger's wail

It's part of the life that awaits you,

The bliss of the sweetness That turns into lack when it is withdrawn Oh why was I born, was I born?

There's no turning back now. For that it's too late. Till you've done what you came for Go forward, go forward and follow your fate. There's a life that awaits you.

With a start you recall now to what you agreed And you fain would turn back and you fain would be freed. "Oh my soul's in a prison!" Nay child. Say yes. Quickly. Quickly say yes.

See. Your star has arisen.

Maggi

ON THIS VERY EARTH

During the last three years of Her life, my relation with the Mother became a silent conversation without end, without end because even after a period of five years from Her Mahasamadhi, the conversation continues uninterrupted.¹

As it happens with all the personalities imbued with the Divine Consciousness, who are Unity in the Multiplicity, when I was in front of the Mother I had the distinct impression that She existed for me, only for me. I was for Her and She was for me, exclusively for me. Not that all that was around disappeared, it was only a special relation that existed between the two of us. On rare occasions I felt myself melting into Her, becoming Her without losing my separate identity. That She was the Mother of all living beings and all were loved with equal intensity and in like manner came to me later, when I was no longer in contact with Her physically or when I meditated on Her Consciousness.

Love was the foundation of all my relations with Her, Love that is expressed through small gestures that he who truly has loved is aware of and which expresses itself sometimes through the tenderness of a look, a clasp of the hand, a caress received from Her and they were the most solid foundation of my life in the Ashram. On this solid foundation, since nothing exists more solidly and more indestructibly than true and pure Love, with a capital L, that which only gives without asking anything in return, satisfied by loving for the sake of Love, which cannot be explained in words, as can no feeling surging from the heart. Day after day, She filled me with all that my being needed for its progress.

The armchair, in which She usually sat, stood to the left of the entrance. When I entered, She would be seated, resting Her bare feet on the thick wall-to-wall carpet, facing the Samadhi of Sri Aurobindo, either in trance or in meditation. I would quietly kneel down at Her feet and when my aura came in contact with Hers, She would become aware of my presence.

"Bonjour, Mère!"

"Bonjour, Nata!"

Her face would open up in a smile full of light, kindness and Love.

In the period when I was in charge of the work of Auroville construction we would have long discussions on the developments. I used to inform Her of how things were going and filling in some particular aspect to make the information more interesting. The visit would come to an end with a short meditation. That was the part I loved most. Her outstretched hands in mine, or with my head on Her knees, I would immerse myself in a sea of beatitude where everything disappeared leaving place

^{1.} The book from which this passage is taken was published in 1979.

only for Her Light.

When my responsibilities as director of the work were over, my visits became more silent. Rarely would I have something worth informing Her about or asking for Her approval on. Generally the conversation touched on the progress in my yoga; I would receive Her instructions regarding my experiences, but nothing was really as precious as the silence of the meditation, the touch of Her beautiful and delicate hands which always left a trace of Her perfume.

On two distinct occasions I received a kiss on my left cheek. The first time was on 2nd December 1966 and the second in June 1972. The first date I remember perfectly because it was due to a very exceptional event which I am unable to reveal. The second was like this. Hardly had I entered than, after exchanging the flowers, I declared proudly that on that day I had smoked my last cigarette!

"Oh! I am so happy," She said with a rush of joy, "you deserve a kiss." At that moment I was absolutely sincere, but I was not aware of the power of that intoxicating habit. Fifteen days later I began to smoke anew and did not have the heart to inform the Mother. I stopped smoking completely in January 1975.

After "Bonjour" it was the habitual exchange of flowers. I would offer mine to Her and then She would hand me Hers — always two red roses and three transformation flowers (flowers of the Indian Cork-tree) and one hibiscus, symbol of Auroville. Whenever the plant in my garden flowered, there would invariably be three dazzling white hibiscus which change their colour with the passing of the day. The morning's white gradually changes into soft pink and assumes a darker shade and at the close of day their life closes into a fiery red. The significance the Mother has given to this flower is "Divine Grace". [. . .] Every time I offered Her those flowers, in order to please me, She would stretch Her hand out with an "Oh!" of wonder. Other than being the incarnation of Truth, She was refinement non-pareil.

Once, for a month I was unable to meet Her as She was unwell. Barely cured, — to be cured, for Her, meant to feel a little better, — She sent me word that if my work permitted, She would Herself like to give me the flowers that were meant for me. I still have before my eyes, that picture — when I met Her again after Her illness. She was so thin, so small, physically so defenseless that I stopped short of gathering Her in my arms. Through tears I thanked Her for permitting me to visit Her every day. She stopped me, saying She was grateful to me.

Whenever She consented to receive Italian visitors, I would lead them to Her room. They would kneel down near Her chair and offer and receive a flower: for men a red rose, and for women, a pink one. I would remain standing behind them. The Mother would bless each one, placing Her right hand on the head of the persons and the visit would be over. When someone did not understand that, the Mother would cast a quick glance at me and I would touch the person very lightly on the shoulder to make him realise that the visit was over. Fortunately, the Italians were never very

difficult to handle. But there was one instance with a Corsican lady — whose name was Italian. She was sent to me by the office that dealt with foreigners. When the lady went to the Mother, she began a long rigmarole as to why the Ashram did not feed the poor and continued at length in this vein, till abruptly the Mother said harshly that She had understood and that it was time for the woman to leave. She heard and left without making any fuss.

Each time, at the end of such a visit I would accompany the person to the door and then return to receive Her blessings. Generally I found Her meditating, eyes closed. I would approach quietly and place my head on Her knees, and finding that it was mine would amuse Her a great deal.

Another thing She liked doing was to caress my head. At the end of my visit in which we had not spoken, before giving me leave, She always asked, "Have you anything to tell me?"

"Yes, Mother."

"What?"

"I love you."

She would laugh in the beautiful manner of a young girl. It was a most delicious laugh.

In the early days, when I could meet Her but rarely, I would look for all sorts of excuses to be able to go to Her. I wrote to Her asking permission to see her on 27 May, the day of my arrival in the Ashram. She consented and thus my regular visits began. During the one that took place on May 27, 1966, the Mother filled me with so much Love that I came out of Her room in semi-trance. Reaching home, I sat down to continue the meditation that had begun with the Mother. Practically at once, the experience rushed in. I saw a gigantic wave of love sweeping me away. I let myself go in that sea of love from which radiated rays of love upon the entire universe. The rays were emanating from the heart. I do not know how long that experience lasted, but when it was over, I wrote to the Mother describing it and asking whether it was this that She intended to give me. Within an hour the reply came, "Yes, it was really that."

Whenever a sadhak prepared a special dish, it was the custom to serve the Mother a small portion. Once I received some red capsicums, roasted and very sweet, from Spain. I prepared a finely mashed dish, (for the Mother ate only food that was in a fine paste), then mixed it with mayonnaise and olive oil. At 11.30 sharp, I was there with my preparation and handed over the dish of my invention to the person who served lunch to the Mother. It was a success. The same day, Dyuman, who saw that the meals were served on time and everything was in order, came to meet me. He said the Mother liked my preparation very much and requested me to prepare something for Her everyday.

Though on the one hand it was a great joy, at the same time, I became aware of the terrible responsibility that fell on me. Then, after an illness, Mother's meal consisted only of fruit juices and my labour came to an end. My culinary efforts had lasted nearly two years. I can assure you that life in that period was not easy. Once it was the turn of the famous cream, and at the last moment I realised that there were no eggs for the mayonnaise. So to the capsicum I added olive oil and vinegar of the finest grade. Not being very confident of my preparation I added a note to the Mother saying that I was not sure if She would like the capsicums, but I assured Her that in my preparation I had added my love for Her. After a while I received an answer, "They were truly very good and certainly it was your love which made them so."

The birthday is the most important day in the life of a sadhak. As long as She was in Her physical body, the sadhak received a card with Her blessings, and sometimes indicating the progress he had made, and also a big bouquet of flowers. For those who were more intimate, there were also presents. A sadhak with eyes full of light and joy flowing from his being, carrying flowers, could not be mistaken: it was his birthday. The Mother used to say that the Divine is particularly near to us on the birthday and on that day one can advance a thousand years.

On my birthday in the year 1960, after being received by the Mother and having received that which was prepared for me, I had a long meditation with Her. I prayed to Her that in my future lives I should always be by Her side.

"Very well," She answered.

"Is it a promise, Mother?" I asked.

"It is a promise" was the answer.

Hardly had I gone out, than Maggi entered. To her the Mother said, "Nata has asked to be near me in his future lives. But he does not remember that in many of his previous ones he has been with me."

Before coming to the Ashram, I had read many times about the devotion and the love of disciples for their Guru. I had read about it but I was quite far from understanding what it meant before having a personal experience of it. Between the Guru and the disciple is established a bond through which the disciple receives all that his spirit has need of. The Guru is also spoken of as the channel through which the disciple speaks with the Divine. To serve one's Guru is to serve the Divine.

How to speak of what happened to me? With what words to describe the Mother? How many times have I been asked, how many times have I asked myself, but without receiving any answer. . . Is it possible to describe the imponderable?

I have narrated a few incidents of my life with the Mother, but it is not possible to speak of my experiences. They are valid for me and for me alone. And whatever arose regarding the state of progress, the particular spiritual conditions, the movement, the future of the sadhana and the sadhaka is what one would like to understand, the contact with other worlds and a thousand other matters too lengthy and difficult to be properly analysed.

Yes, I certainly had experiences: I have seen, in dream and in waking, the Mother resplendent in light; in a millionth of a second I have had revelations of great importance

to my sadhana; I have learnt to know the secret nature of men; I have learnt to isolate myself in the midst of tumult; to master animals; to feel an event even before it occurred; but, and above all, I have learnt to love. Of what value are all the *siddhis* if love is lacking? It is Love which will save the world, and it is something of that Love that the Mother taught me, by Her example, by Her total self-giving to the Divine, by offering to Him and to His creation, Her own body as a sacrifice for the supramental transformation.

I have heard with my own ears the cry of physical pain during the most acute phase of Her Yoga of the cells of a physical body that could only accept death to which they were accustomed from the moment the first unicellular organism emerged from the ocean's abyss. I have seen Her return from very serious illnesses, barely able to sit up in Her chair, yet receiving people, and giving of Her Love to all who asked for it.

The coming on this earth of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother will leave an indelible impression, not very evident, because the task of understanding is difficult, difficult too to penetrate Sri Aurobindo's thoughts, difficult the indispensable self-giving, the "surrender". It is for the elite that has understood that it is not a better human being, — whatever meaning we give to the word, be it socially, politically, physically, intellectually, even spiritually, — but a completely transformed man who can save the Earth. It is not a question of improving this one which is on its way to disappearance, not a spirituality to the accompaniment of the strains of the violin and the perfume of violets, but a radical transformation of Matter, opening it to the infusion of that superior force that Sri Aurobindo called "Supramental" and which is already at work today on this very earth.

NATA

(Translated from the Italian, *Su Questo Stesso Terreno* [On This Very Earth], published by Edizioni Mediterranee, Milan, 1979, pp. 127-33)

WANDERING IN THE ARCHIVES OF MEMORY

(Continued from the issue of March 2009)

7. Leaves of Grass

How much does one remember the day of one's wedding more than fifty years after? For me it remains somewhat of a blur, just doing what others are asking me to do. In spite of studying all those romances as a student of English literature and gobbling up Georgette Heyer by the bushelfuls, there was little romance in my own approach to this new chapter. Arranged marriages were the accepted norm in my generation. I was very happy for a different reason. My prospective husband and in-laws had not objected to my continuing with doctoral studies. At that point of time I thought a doctoral degree was more important than making a success of one's married life.

The auspicious moment had come, the *sapta-padi* had concluded. Nandakumar and myself had taken the seven steps assuring each other of lifelong friendship and it was time to start the rounds of 'salutations', the very best bending exercise created by the Srivaishnava community among the Tamils. Usually women had to bend down, flexing the knees four times and men had to stretch themselves on the earth in *sashtanga namaskara*, also four times. Some kindly souls would stop us even as we were doing the second salutation, saying, "Enough, enough." The first person we had to salute now was the family matriarch.

Nandakumar's grandmother was a learned lady and very, very orthodox. It was her desire that I should wear a nose-screw. What, pierce my nose? But then rebellion never came easy to me; indeed it never has! So now I had a tiny diamond on my nose, flashing away its jaguar blue to be in tune with my earrings. To one who was used to wearing light cotton sarees, the nine yards of heavy Conjeevaram silk seemed a burden; my two plaits that dangled free were now a single strand, also made heavy with yards and yards of flowers and jewels. Jewels on hands, neck . . . it was all quite eerie to me. My worry, however, was something else. How am I going to manage the 'four salutations'?

Then we were in front of grandmother, a wisp of a figure, clad in pure white, her head covered by the sari, not a single jewel on her person. "Amma, the children have come to take your blessings," says my father-in-law. We start saluting. I can think of nothing except keeping count. Four salutations over. But the usual 'enough' has not come. Fortunately my mother had warned me that when taking the blessings of grandmother I must go on saluting till she said 'enough'. What do I do? I lose count in my confusion. Meanwhile her clear-toned words of blessings in a sing-song tone come through. After half a century, I remember two phrases: "Itta kaiyum, raja peru

vazhvum" and "āl pol thazaithu, aruhu pol verodi". I do not understand any of it but then the welcome words are heard. "Enough, enough. Sammandhiamma, you have trained your daughter well in traditional ways."

My mother, who is standing nearby, beams. Grandmother proceeds with a few words of advice. "Listen to what he says always. And you too, take to domestic life like a good boy." This is more comprehensible. Again, I have no breath to relax. Both of us are marched to other elders of the family and to another ritual and yet another ritual and yet another ritual and yet another

In later years my mother used to marvel at the way the grandmother had given the blessing. She explained to me the phrases which I remembered. 'Itta kai' meant a hand that always gave (food); 'raja peru vazhvu' invoked a royal and wealthy life; 'āl pol thazhaithu' signified 'a growth like the banyan (tree)' and 'aruhu pol verodi' assured spreading roots like the 'aruhu' (grass). I wondered how close our culture was to Nature around and people were taught down the generations to feed people to the best of their ability and cherish Nature.

Here there was no 'big' and 'small'. All of creation is needed for one's cultured life. We treasure the lone banyan tree near the Matrimandir. It is a living god for many of us. Just watching it can be yoga. If it is important to us as the very centre of Auroville that was pointed out by the Mother to Roger Anger in 1965, equally valuable is the grass that grows all over the area! For it is grass that teaches us how to be "near to earth's wideness". The roots of grass that are spread wide beneath the topsoil teach us the value of fraternity.

Fortunately, even today, we have kept up some closeness with grass. Indeed who has not seen grass? Right now I am lying on the turf in the shadow of the fort wall of Thanjavur's Big Temple. It is a picnic-cum-holy spot for our family but these days I prefer to spend most of the time here resting my arthritic knees. A little away is an ideal, nuclear family. The lady is opening a hamper and placing cups and plates on the green spread, while two little children appear to be running around chasing butterflies. The young father is busy taking snapshots of his family, of the elephants, of the sculptures.

My own early recollection of grass takes me back to the village. I am a child of seven or eight watching my brother and our cousins bringing in patches of grass, cut like cake and scooped along with the earth from the banks of Tambraparni river. It is holiday time, and they are trying to fashion a garden in the backyard, under the supervision of Narayana *Chithya* (uncle). We love him but also dread him. He is a young bachelor, always ready to give a helping hand with the house, the temple or any village activity. He is ordering the boys around and teaching them how to lay the grass patches in a line and make borders for the kitchen garden. The black clay beneath, exposed by the young devils screaming triumphantly ("I have managed a much, much bigger slice than elder brother!") shows the exposed roots.

With the same speed they have vanished because the grass patches have been laid into neat rows with spaces in between for plants. Another three months, and this

place will be full of jasmine bushes bordered by grass. "That was so long, long ago!" I sigh. In my old age, I am now resting on a patch of grass in the shadow of the fort wall of the Big Temple at Thanjavur. The youngsters who have come with me are moving around, playing, saying hello to the temple elephants. I pull out a few leaves of grass and stroke my forehead thinking of how Ganesa in Vedic Theology is happiest when worshipped with 'aruhu' grass. Also known as Durva grass (Cynodon Dactylon), it is sacred for us and it is available almost everywhere. I whisper to myself with a sense of pride: "Only Indians know how to see the whole world as God and find all creation a sacred edifice."

My mind speedily walks around in the archives. Ha, who is this lady sitting on a patch of grass beneath the Ashoka tree? Who is this terrible ten-headed figure who is trying to demoralise the lady by exhibiting his power and pomp? And what is the lady doing? She is placing a leaf of grass in front of her, as if it could prevent the evil rakshasa from advancing!

Tṛṇamantaratah kṛtvā pratyuvacha suchismita Nivartaya mano maththa svajane priyatām manah

When Ravana says that he is overwhelmed by Sita and desires to possess her, "the lady with the pleasing smile placed a blade of grass in front of her and replied: turn your mind away from me. May it have love towards your wives." For several centuries, commentators have lavished intense attention on this blade of grass. One of the explanations is that by placing a blade of grass or sprinkling water, one achieves a dividing line which cannot be crossed. Hence, Ravana dare not cross the grass. Also it would signify that Sita considered Ravana as common as grass, to humble his ego. Periavachan Pillai, a 14th-century commentator on the verse, says that by this she indicated that Ravana will have to make a hut of grass for himself once Rama destroys Lanka. Well, Sita might even have meant that Rama was going to pull out Ravana's heads as easily as she had pulled out this blade of grass. I am never tired of hearing the several meanings attached to the seemingly insignificant grass on which we tread with impunity. Even in this century there are traditional orators of Srivaishnavism who recreate the scene for a couple of hours in a realistic way. The sight of the emaciated Sita seated under the Ashoka tree remains in a frieze in our mind's eye.

None of the traditional scholars have referred to one other aspect of the same scene. It never struck me either till I happened to read Dr. V. Raghavan's play, "Pul" (Grass). The play was written long ago. In an introduction he says that the use of a blade of grass by Sita as a guardian had exercised his mind deeply. Suddenly it struck him that Rama had also used a blade of grass as a 'brahmastra' to destroy the crowasura, Jayanta. Raghavan imagines that Sita was amazed how an insignificant leaf could be transformed into a missile by one's tapasya and had treasured this novel missile which she had now used in the Ashoka Vana.

How can I disbelieve all these powers latent in every atom of this creation when I have been bombarded with the LHC (Large Hadron Collider) for the past two months? Newspapers, the Net, the Radio: they have all been giving information about this somewhat frightening experiment. I believe this Collider is going "to advance the magnification of the properties of objects by the largest factor in the history of particle physics — by some reckoning, 500-fold beyond what can be achieved today . . . In the tunnel, powerful superconducting magnets steer protons around a ring where huge voltages accelerate them until they pick up an amazing amount of energy — 7 trillion electron volts at their peak." Whoever heard of an iron machine flying high up in the sky carrying more than five hundred persons in 1908? We simply listened to our grandaunts describing the Pushpaka Vimana of Lanka. And we believed all that she told us. We were not fooled, after all. A Pushpaka-Jet and a grass-missile are all part of Mother Nature's Dance Divine. We must have humility to believe the foundations of our culture. They were no vain imaginations of a disordered brain, but visionary footnotes of the future tomorrows. I shudder as Sri Aurobindo's 'A Dream of Surreal Science' opens within my inward eye with its clinching finale:

Thus wagged on the surreal world, until

A scientist played with atoms and blew out The universe before God had time to shout.

The skies are grey today. Will it rain? Shall I have to get up from this grass cushion beneath the open sky and dart into the nearby *mandap*? I remember suddenly my early days as a journalist when every bit of important news meant dashing to the library and picking up books and taking down notes for future reference. I would also write an article which would get published, being topical. The announcement came in 1967 that Carl Sandburg was dead and I remembered reading a few poems by him. Off I went to the library and did my work. I discovered new angles and points of view. I wrote an article which was published in *The Indian P.E.N.* by Sophia Wadia. One poem of Sandburg which I had quoted in my article found an important place in my scrapbook. For a person not yet thirty and who was a young mother at that time, I must confess the poem came as a shock. The poem 'Grass' written in 1918, is terrifying in its stark statement of an ugly truth:

Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo. Shovel them under and let me work — I am the grass; I cover all.

And pile them high at Gettysburg And pile them high at Ypres and Verdun.

Shovel them under and let me work.
Two years, ten years, and passengers ask the conductor:
What place is this?
Where are we now?
I am the grass.
Let me work.

Somehow, whenever I have had to place my foot on a patch of grass, this poem has returned to me, making me remember the past. Would many people have died on this very spot where now it is all grass? Suddenly the history of three millennia of the Cauvery Delta clangs around me with spears and swords and cannon shots. The Cholas, the Marathas, the Muslims, the Britishers, . . . Is there any single inch of earth that can say, "No one died violently here"? Mother Earth, Vasundhara, we have been forcing you to lament for all these killings, whether it was in Tallikota or Plassey or Mewar or the Taj Hotel at Bombay! My father often used to refer to the wanton carnage that had been going on staining this green earth and sought Sita Devi, the Earth-born's forgiveness in his epic poem, *Sitayana*:

O Mother, mighty, fair, immaculate Your compassionate descent, Your divine ministry of sufferance Amidst us, hadn't been in vain. Not in vain, for although the average And even the elect fail Oftentimes in charity, yet we know Your Grace will redeem us still.¹

Grace that comes in the image of grass, forgives our trespasses, covers up the clots of blood and rotting corpses and makes it all beautiful again. The heart grows somewhat calm as I wonder why I have been drawn to grass so much in my thoughts all these years. Perhaps because I am a student of English literature, the word has been floating in the flow of my memories. When K. Viswanadham taught us Old English literature in Andhra University, he explained the presence of diphthongs in the English text. He began teaching the text and unfortunately we giggled. We thought we had come to study English literature but what were these hieroglyphics?

He looked up, understood our predicament and went on with the lesson. These letters were diphthongs. A diphthong consisted of a vowel and a glide, but written as a single unit, a kind of *ardha-nārīshwara* concept! Thus 'a' and 'e' were written together as 'æ', which should be pronounced as a single vowel. This æ was in the

^{1.} Sitayana, Prologue.

very first word of the text:

Hwæt! We Gardena in geardagum . . .

The only word we understood was 'we'. The line said: "Listen! In olden days, we who belonged to the spear-wielding Danes . . ." A boy got up and asked the Professor: "Is this English, Sir? Except for 'we' it is all Greek and Latin!" We giggled again. That was the nearest to a riotous behaviour one could come across in a mofussil university.

"No, no. They are all English words. This is Old Saxon. The form has changed, that is all. Like 'dagum' becoming 'day' and 'setla' becoming 'seat'." He gave a few more examples. One was the familiar 'grass' which happened to be 'græs', he said and that we usually mispronounced it in India. Of course it was 'g-r-a-a-s' for us, we were not in Oxford or Cambridge, or Beowulf's Old England, were we? It was a pain, studying Old English, but it fetched us plentiful marks in translation. Our classes were enlivened by our wishing each other 'hwæt' and how the 'græs' in front of the Arts College was full of centipedes, and there were very few 'dagum' left for the examination. I am afraid we went about christening our teachers with names drawn out of *Beowulf*, this was Grendel the monster, that was Hrothgar the ageing king and our English Department was Heorot, the Hall of Beowulf. The cruelty of the adolescent young!

I kept coming across grass in the books I read with anxious care, for the aim was to get a first class in the Honours course, otherwise it would be perdition for me, I thought. The Romantics and Shakespeare saved my soul in this grind of Old English, Middle English and linguistics. They were so full of life, of earth, of flowers, of grass. They chimed in with my heartbeat. So much of longing, sadness, of feeling a martyr, for no reason whatsoever! That is the inscrutability of adolescence, I suppose. The *Collected Works of Wordsworth* I used five decades ago is still with me, and so is the poem 'Splendour in the Grass' which unknowingly inculcated in me a strong philosophy of life. Do not mourn!

What though the radiance which was once so bright
Be now for ever taken from my sight,
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower,
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;
In the faith that looks through death,
In years that bring the philosophic mind.

Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats: they all loved nature and loved the green sward. Keats says that it is delightful to be rolling in grass and lie stretched out on it. His 'Ode to a Nightingale' recreates grass and meadow and everything pastoral.

Naturally, when browsing in the university library, I was attracted by the title of Walt Whitman's book, *Leaves of Grass*. I had heard only of a 'blade' of grass, and it was interesting that he looked at them as leaves. The style was challenging too. Whitman was not included in the syllabus and so I wasn't so sure about it, it was after all not written by an Englishman, and I made some silly remark. Father must have been irritated by my pretentious statement which implied that only an Englishman could write good English. He opened a page from Sri Aurobindo's *The Future Poetry* (the 1953 edition which he was reviewing for the *Aryan Path* at that time) and said: "Go on, read it aloud." What is this? Four pages on Whitman!

He [Whitman] has the intimate pulse and power of life vibrating in all he utters, an almost primitive force of vitality, delivered from the enormous mechanical beat of the time by a robust closeness to the very spirit of life, — that closeness he has more than any other poet since Shakespeare, — and ennobled by a lifting up of its earthly vigour into a broad and full intellectual freedom.

(CWSA, Vol. 26, p. 196)

There were two results from this incident. I became a lifelong fan of Whitman. And I have kept that edition of *The Future Poetry* with me all these years for it taught me the importance of humility. Don't you start judging others, for you may end up judging god himself! The Mother has given 'humility' as the significance of the minute flowers that rise from the leaves of grass. There is nothing on earth that teaches us humility so well as grass, readily allowing itself to be trod upon, giving us coolth, covering our battlefields with a renewal of hope. And humility is the way to tranquillity, says the Mother:

... the mind, the vital, and the body must learn and feel, once and for all, that they are wholly incapable of understanding and judging the Divine, not only in his essence but also in his action and manifestation.

This is the only true humility and with it come quiet and peace.

(CWM 2nd Ed., Vol. 14, p. 153)

It is time to come out of my reverie and go into the Big Temple with the tiny bunch of precious 'aruhu' grass in my hand. To go to Ganesha's niche and pray for freedom from strife, for *shanti*.

(To be continued)

Prema Nandakumar