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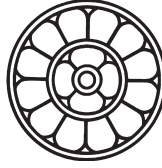
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MONTHLY REVIEW OF CULTURE

SEPTEMBER 2022

SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM
PONDICHERRY
INDIA



Lord, Thou hast willed, and I execute,
A new light breaks upon the earth,
A new world is born.
The things that were promised are fulfilled.



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All correspondence to be addressed to:

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

Phone: (0413) 2233642

e-mail: motherindia@sriarobindoashram.org.in

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MONTHLY REVIEW OF CULTURE

Vol. LXXV

No. 9

“Great is Truth and it shall prevail”

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‘THE MYSTIC TRUTH OUR IGNORANCE HIDES’

Fate followed her foreseen immutable road.
Man’s hopes and longings build the journeying wheels
That bear the body of his destiny
And lead his blind will towards an unknown goal.
His fate within him shapes his acts and rules;
Its face and form already are born in him,
Its parentage is in his secret soul:
Here Matter seems to mould the body’s life
And the soul follows where its nature drives.
Nature and Fate compel his free-will’s choice.
But greater spirits this balance can reverse
And make the soul the artist of its fate.
This is the mystic truth our ignorance hides:
Doom is a passage for our inborn force,
Our ordeal is the hidden spirit’s choice,
Ananke is our being’s own decree.

SRI AUROBINDO

(*Savitri*, CWSA, Vol. 34, p. 465)



STANDARDS OF TRUTH IN THE INTERPRETATION OF THE SCRIPTURE

. . . What then are the standards of truth in the interpretation of the Scripture? The standards are three, the knower, knowledge and the known.

The known is the text itself that we seek to interpret. We must be sure we have the right word, not an emendation to suit the exigency of some individual or sectarian opinion; the right etymology and shade of meaning, not one that is traditional or forced to serve the ends of a commentator; the right spirit in the sense, not an imported or too narrow or too elastic spirit.

The knower is the original *drashta* or seer of the *mantra*, with whom we ought to be in spiritual contact. If knowledge is indeed a perishable thing in a perishable instrument, such contact is impossible; but in that case the Scripture itself must be false and not worth considering. If there is any truth in what the Scripture says, knowledge is eternal and inherent in all of us and what another saw I can see, what another realised I can realise. The *drashta* was a soul in relation with the infinite Spirit, I am also a soul in relation with the infinite Spirit. We have a meeting-place, a possibility of communion.

Knowledge is the eternal truth, part of which the *drashta* expresses to us. Through the part he shows us, we must travel to the whole, otherwise we shall be subject to the errors incidental to an imperfect knowledge. If even the part is to be rightly understood, it must be viewed in the terms of the whole, not the whole in the terms of the part. I am not limited by the Scriptures; on the contrary I must exceed them in order to be master of their knowledge. It is true that we are usually the slaves of our individual and limited outlook, but our capacity is unlimited, and, if we can get rid of *ahankara*, if we can put ourselves at the service of the Infinite without any reservation of predilection or opinion, there is no reason why our realisation should be limited. *Tasmin vijñate sarvam vijñatam*. He being known, all can be known. To understand Scripture, it is not enough to be a scholar, one must be a soul. To know what the *drashta* saw one must oneself have *drishti*, sight, and be a student if not a master of the knowledge. *Atha para yaya tad aksharam adhigamyate*. Grammar, etymology, prosody, astronomy, metaphysics, logic, all that is good; but afterwards there is still needed the higher knowledge by which the Immutable is known.

SRI AUROBINDO

(*Essays Divine and Human*, CWSA, Vol. 12, pp. 36-37)

LETTER TO SAROJINI

[Baroda Camp
25 August 1894]

My dear Saro,

I got your letter the day before yesterday. I have been trying hard to write to you for the last three weeks, but have hitherto failed. Today I am making a huge effort and hope to put the letter in the post before nightfall. As I am now invigorated by three days' leave, I almost think I shall succeed.

It will be, I fear, quite impossible to come to you again so early as the Puja, though if I only could, I should start tomorrow. Neither my affairs, nor my finances will admit of it. Indeed it was a great mistake for me to go at all; for it has made Baroda quite intolerable to me. There is an old story about Judas Iscariot, which suits me down to the ground. Judas, after betraying Christ, hanged himself and went to Hell where he was honoured with the hottest oven in the whole establishment. Here he must burn for ever and ever; but in his life he had done one kind act and for this they permitted him by special mercy of God to cool himself for an hour every Christmas on an iceberg in the North Pole. Now this has always seemed to me not mercy, but a peculiar refinement of cruelty. For how could Hell fail to be ten times more Hell to the poor wretch after the delicious coolness of his iceberg? I do not know for what enormous crime I have been condemned to Baroda but my case is just parallel. Since my pleasant sojourn with you at Baidyanath, Baroda seems a hundred times more Baroda.

I dare say Beno may write to you three or four days before he leaves England. But you must think yourself lucky if he does as much as that. Most likely the first you hear of him, will be a telegram from Calcutta. Certainly he has not written to me. I never expected and should be afraid to get a letter. It would be such a shocking surprise that I should certainly be able to do nothing but roll on the floor and gasp for breath for the next two or three hours. No, the favours of the Gods are too awful to be coveted. I dare say he will have energy enough to hand over your letter to Mano as they must be seeing each other almost daily. You must give Mano a little time before he answers you. He too is Beno's brother. Please let me have Beno's address as I don't know where to send a letter I have ready for him. Will you also let me have the name of Bari's English Composition Book and its compiler? I want such a book badly, as this will be useful for me not only in Bengalee but in Guzerati. There are no convenient books like that here.

You say in your letter "all here are quite well"; yet in the very next sentence I read "Bari has an attack of fever". Do you mean then that Bari is nobody? Poor

Bari! That he should be excluded from the list of human beings, is only right and proper; but it is a little hard that he should be denied existence altogether. I hope it is only a slight attack. I am quite well. I have brought a fund of health with me from Bengal, which, I hope it will take me some time to exhaust; but I have just passed my twenty-second milestone, August 15 last, since my birthday and am beginning to get dreadfully old.

I infer from your letter that you are making great progress in English. I hope you will learn very quickly; I can then write to you quite what I want to say and just in the way I want to say it. I feel some difficulty in doing that now and I don't know whether you will understand it.

With love,

Your affectionate brother,
Auro

P.S. If you want to understand the new orthography of my name, ask uncle.

A.

(Autobiographical Notes, CWSA, Vol. 36, pp. 123-24)



THE ARTIST CREATES AN IDEAL WORLD

All art starts from the sensuous and sensible, or takes it as a continual point of reference or, at the lowest, uses it as a symbol and a fount of images; even when it soars into invisible worlds, it is from the earth that it soars; but equally all art worth the name must go beyond the visible, must reveal, must show us something that is hidden, and in its total effect not reproduce but create. We may say that the artist creates an ideal world of his own, not necessarily in the sense of ideal perfection, but a world that exists in the idea, the imagination and vision of the creator. More truly, he throws into significant form a truth he has seen, which may be truth of hell or truth of heaven or an immediate truth behind things terrestrial or any other, but is never merely the external truth of earth. By that ideative truth and the power, the perfection and the beauty of his presentation and utterance of it his work must be judged.

SRI AUROBINDO

(The Future Poetry, CWSA, Vol. 26, pp. 7-8)



THE RHYTHMIC SPEECH

Taking the impression it creates for a starting point and the trend of English poetry for our main text, but casting our view farther back into the past, we may try to sound what the future has to give us through the medium of the poetic mind and its power for creation and interpretation. The issues of recent activity are still doubtful and it would be rash to make any confident prediction; but there is one possibility which this book strongly suggests and which it is at least interesting and may be fruitful to search and consider. That possibility is the discovery of a closer approximation to what we might call the *mantra* in poetry, that rhythmic speech which, as the Veda puts it, rises at once from the heart of the seer and from the distant home of the Truth, — the discovery of the word, the divine movement, the form of thought proper to the reality which, as Mr. Cousins excellently says, “lies in the apprehension of a something stable behind the instability of word and deed, something that is a reflection of the fundamental passion of humanity for something beyond itself, something that is a dim shadowing of the divine urge which is prompting all creation to unfold itself and to rise out of its limitations towards its Godlike possibilities.” Poetry in the past has done that in moments of supreme elevation; in the future there seems to be some chance of its making it a more conscious aim and steadfast endeavour.

SRI AUROBINDO

(*The Future Poetry*, CWSA, Vol. 26, p. 10)



THE MANTRA

A supreme, an absolute of itself, a reaching to an infinite and utmost, a last point of perfection of its own possibilities is that to which all action of Nature intuitively tends in its unconscious formations and when it has arrived to that point it has justified its existence to the spirit which has created it and fulfilled the secret creative will within it. Speech, the expressive Word, has such a summit or absolute, a perfection which is the touch of the infinite upon its finite possibilities and the seal upon it of its Creator. This absolute of the expressive Word can be given the name which was found for it by the inspired singers of the Veda, the Mantra. Poetry especially claimed for its perfected expression in the hymns of the Veda this name. It is not confined however to this sense, for it is extended to all speech that has a supreme or an absolute power; the Mantra is the word that carries the godhead in it or the power of the godhead, can bring it into the consciousness and fix there it and its workings, awaken there the thrill of the infinite, the force of something absolute, perpetuate the miracle of the supreme utterance. This highest power of speech and especially of poetic speech is what we have to make here the object of our scrutiny, discover, if we can, its secret, regard the stream of poetry as a long course of the endeavour of human speech to find it and the greater generalisation of its presence and its power as the future sign of an ultimate climbing towards an ultimate evolution as a poetic consciousness towards the conquest of its ultimate summits.

SRI AUROBINDO

(The Future Poetry, CWSA, Vol. 26, p. 313)



THE ESSENCE OF POETRY

What then is the nature of poetry, its essential law? what is the highest power we can demand from it, what the supreme music that the human mind, reaching up and in and out to its own widest breadths, deepest depths and topmost summits, can extract from this self-expressive instrument? and how out of that does there arise the possibility of its use as the *mantra* of the Real? Not that we need spend any energy in a vain effort to define anything so profound, elusive and undefinable as the breath of poetic creation; to take the myriad-stringed harp of Saraswati to pieces for the purpose of scientific analysis is a narrow and barren amusement. But we stand in need of some guiding intuitions, some helpful descriptions which will serve to enlighten our search; to fix in that way, not by definition, but by description, the essential things in poetry is neither an impossible, nor an unprofitable endeavour.

We meet here two common enough errors, to one of which the ordinary uninstructed mind is most liable, to the other the too instructed critic or the too intellectually conscientious artist or craftsman. To the ordinary mind, judging poetry without really entering into it, it looks as if it were nothing more than an aesthetic pleasure of the imagination, the intellect and the ear, a sort of elevated pastime. If that were all, we need not have wasted time in seeking for its spirit, its inner aim, its deeper law. Anything pretty, pleasant and melodious with a beautiful idea in it would serve our turn; a song of Anacreon or a plaint of Mimnermus would be as satisfying to the poetic sense as the Oedipus, Agamemnon or Odyssey, for from this point of view they might well strike us as equally and even, one might contend, more perfect in their light but exquisite unity and brevity. Pleasure, certainly, we expect from poetry as from all art; but the external sensible and even the inner imaginative pleasure are only first elements. For these must not only be refined in order to meet the highest requirements of the intelligence, the imagination and the ear; but afterwards they have to be still farther heightened and in their nature raised beyond even their own noblest levels, so that they may become the support for something greater beyond them; otherwise they cannot lead to the height on which lives the Mantra.

For neither the intelligence, the imagination nor the ear are the true or at least the deepest or highest recipients of the poetic delight, even as they are not its true or highest creators; they are only its channels and instruments: the true creator, the true hearer is the soul. The more rapidly and transparently the rest do their work of transmission, the less they make of their separate claim to satisfaction, the more directly the word reaches and sinks deep into the soul, the greater the poetry. Therefore poetry has not really done its work, at least its highest work, until it has raised the pleasure of the instrument and transmuted it into the deeper delight of the soul.

A divine Ananda,¹ a delight interpretative, creative, revealing, formative, — one might almost say, an inverse reflection of the joy which the universal Soul felt in its great release of energy when it rang out into the rhythmic forms of the universe the spiritual truth, the large interpretative idea, the life, the power, the emotion of things packed into an original creative vision, — such spiritual joy is that which the soul of the poet feels and which, when he can conquer the human difficulties of his task, he succeeds in pouring also into all those who are prepared to receive it. This delight is not merely a godlike pastime; it is a great formative and illuminative power.

The critic — of a certain type — or the intellectually conscientious artist will, on the other hand, often talk as if poetry were mainly a matter of a faultlessly correct or at most an exquisite technique. Certainly, in all art good technique is the first step towards perfection; but there are so many other steps, there is a whole world beyond before you can get near to what you seek; so much so that even a deficient correctness of execution will not prevent an intense and gifted soul from creating great poetry which keeps its hold on the centuries. Moreover, technique, however indispensable, occupies a smaller field perhaps in poetry than in any other art, — first, because its instrument, the rhythmic word, is fuller of subtle and immaterial elements; then because, the most complex, flexible, variously suggestive of all the instruments of the artistic creator, it has more — almost infinite — possibilities in many directions than any other. The rhythmic word has a subtly sensible element, its sound value, a quite immaterial element, its significance or thought value, and both of these again, its sound and its sense, have separately and together a soul value, a direct spiritual power, which is infinitely the most important thing about them. And though this comes to birth with a small element subject to the laws of technique, yet almost immediately, almost at the beginning of its flight, its power soars up beyond the province of any laws of mechanical construction: and this form of speech carries in it on its summits an element which draws close to the empire of the ineffable.

Poetry rather determines its own form; the form is not imposed on it by any law mechanical or external to it. The poet least of all artists needs to create with his eye fixed anxiously on the technique of his art. He has to possess it, no doubt; but in the heat of creation the intellectual sense of it becomes a subordinate action or even a mere undertone in his mind, and in his best moments he is permitted, in a way, to forget it altogether. For then the perfection of his sound-movement and style come entirely as the spontaneous form of his soul: that utters itself in an inspired rhythm and an innate, a revealed word, even as the universal Soul created the harmonies of the universe out of the power of the word secret and eternal within him, leaving the mechanical work to be done in a surge of hidden spiritual excitement by the subconscious part of his Nature. It is this highest speech which is the supreme poetic

1. Ananda, in the language of Indian spiritual experience, is the essential delight which the Infinite feels in itself and in its creation. By the infinite Self's Ananda all exists, for the Self's Ananda all was made.

utterance, the immortal element in his poetry, and a little of it is enough to save the rest of his work from oblivion. *Svalpam apyasya dharmasya!*

This power makes the rhythmic word of the poet the highest form of speech available to man for the expression whether of his self-vision or of his world-vision. It is noticeable that even the deepest experience, the pure spiritual which enters into things that can never be wholly expressed, still, when it does try to express them and not merely to explain them intellectually, tends instinctively to use, often the rhythmic forms, almost always the manner of speech characteristic of poetry. But poetry attempts to extend this manner of vision and utterance to all experience, even the most objective, and therefore it has a natural urge towards the expression of something in the object beyond its mere appearances, even when these seem outwardly to be all that it is enjoying.

We may usefully cast a glance, not at the last inexpressible secret, but at the first elements of this heightening and intensity peculiar to poetic utterance. Ordinary speech uses language mostly for a limited practical utility of communication; it uses it for life and for the expression of ideas and feelings necessary or useful to life. In doing so, we treat words as conventional signs for ideas with nothing but a perfunctory attention to their natural force, much as we use any kind of common machine or simple implement; we treat them as if, though useful for life, they were themselves without life. When we wish to put a more vital power into them, we have to lend it to them out of ourselves, by marked intonations of the voice, by the emotional force or vital energy we throw into the sound so as to infuse into the conventional word-sign something which is not inherent in itself. But if we go back earlier in the history of language and still more if we look into its origins, we shall, I think, find that it was not always so with human speech. Words had not only a real and vivid life of their own, but the speaker was more conscious of it than we can possibly be with our mechanised and sophisticated intellects. This arose from the primitive nature of language which, probably, in its first movement was not intended, — or shall we say, did not intend, — so much to stand for distinct ideas of the intelligence as for feelings, sensations, broad indefinite mental impressions with minute shades of quality in them which we do not now care to pursue. The intellectual sense in its precision must have been a secondary element which grew more dominant as language evolved along with the evolving intelligence.

For the reason why sound came to express fixed ideas, lies not in any natural and inherent equivalence between the sound and its intellectual sense, for there is none, — intellectually any sound might express any sense, if men were agreed on a conventional equivalence between them; it started from an indefinable quality or property in the sound to raise certain vibrations in the life-soul of the human creature, in his sensational, his emotional, his crude mental being. An example may indicate more clearly what I mean. The word wolf, the origin of which is no longer present to our minds, denotes to our intelligence a certain living object and that is all, the rest

we have to do for ourselves: the Sanskrit word *vrka*, “tearer”, came in the end to do the same thing, but originally it expressed the sensational relation between the wolf and man which most affected the man’s life, and it did so by a certain quality in the sound which readily associated it with the sensation of tearing. This must have given early language a powerful life, a concrete vigour, in one direction a natural poetic force which it has lost, however greatly it has gained in precision, clarity, utility.

Now, poetry goes back in a way and recovers, though in another fashion, as much as it can of this original element. It does this partly by a stress on the image replacing the old sensational concreteness, partly by a greater attention to the suggestive force of the sound, its life, its power, the mental impression it carries. It associates this with the definitive thought value contributed by the intelligence and increases both by each other. In that way it succeeds at the same time in carrying up the power of speech to the direct expression of a higher reach of experience than the intellectual or vital. For it brings out not only the definitive intellectual value of the word, not only its power of emotion and sensation, its vital suggestion, but through and beyond these aids its soul-suggestion, its spirit. So poetry arrives at the indication of infinite meanings beyond the finite intellectual meaning the word carries. It expresses not only the life-soul of man as did the primitive word, not only the ideas of his intelligence for which speech now usually serves, but the experience, the vision, the ideas, as we may say, of the higher and wider soul in him. Making them real to our life-soul as well as present to our intellect, it opens to us by the word the doors of the Spirit.

Prose style carries speech to a much higher power than its ordinary use, but it differs from poetry in not making this yet greater attempt. For it takes its stand firmly on the intellectual value of the word. It uses rhythms which ordinary speech neglects, and aims at a general fluid harmony of movement. It seeks to associate words agreeably and luminously so as at once to please and to clarify the intelligence. It strives after a more accurate, subtle, flexible and satisfying expression than the rough methods of ordinary speech care to compass. A higher adequacy of speech is its first object. Beyond this adequacy it may aim at a greater forcefulness and effectiveness by various devices of speech, by many rhetorical means for heightening the stress of its intellectual appeal. Passing beyond this first limit, this just or strong, but always restrained measure, it may admit a more emphatic rhythm, more directly and powerfully stimulate the emotion, appeal to a more vivid aesthetic sense. It may even make such a free or rich use of images as to suggest an outward approximation to the manner of poetry; but it employs them decoratively, as ornaments, *alañkāra*, or for their effective value in giving a stronger intellectual vision of the thing or the thought it describes or defines; it does not use the image for that profounder and more living vision for which the poet is always seeking. And always it has its eye on its chief hearer and judge, the intelligence, and calls in other powers only as important aids to capture his suffrage. Reason and taste, two powers of the intelligence, are rightly

the supreme gods of the prose stylist, while to the poet they are only minor deities.

If it goes beyond these limits, approaches in its measures a more striking rhythmic balance, uses images for sheer vision, opens itself to a mightier breath of speech, prose style passes beyond its normal province and approaches or even enters the confines of poetry. It becomes poetical prose or even poetry itself using the apparent forms of prose as a disguise or a loose apparel. A high or a fine adequacy, effectivity, intellectual illuminativeness and a carefully tempered aesthetic satisfaction are the natural and proper powers of its speech. But the privilege of the poet is to go beyond and discover that more intense illumination of speech, that inspired word and supreme inevitable utterance, in which there meets the unity of a divine rhythmic movement with a depth of sense and a power of infinite suggestion welling up directly from the fountain-heads of the spirit within us. He may not always or often find it, but to seek for it is the law or at least the highest trend of his utterance, and when he can not only find it, but cast into it some deeply revealed truth of the spirit itself, he utters the *mantra*.

But always, whether in the search or the finding, the whole style and rhythm of poetry are the expression and movement which come from us out of a certain spiritual excitement caused by a vision in the soul of which it is eager to deliver itself. The vision may be of anything in Nature or God or man or the life of creatures or the life of things; it may be a vision of force and action, or of sensible beauty, or of truth of thought, or of emotion and pleasure and pain, of this life or the life beyond. It is sufficient that it is the soul which sees and the eye, sense, heart and thought-mind become the passive instruments of the soul. Then we get the real, the high poetry. But if what acts is too much an excitement of the intellect, the imagination, the emotions, the vital activities seeking rhythmical and forceful expression, without that greater spiritual excitement embracing them, or if all these are not sufficiently sunk into the soul, steeped in it, fused in it, and the expression does not come out purified and uplifted by a sort of spiritual transmutation, then we fall to lower levels of poetry and get work of a much more doubtful immortality. And when the appeal is altogether to the lower things in us, to the mere mind, we arrive outside the true domain of poetry; we approach the confines of prose or get prose itself masking in the apparent forms of poetry, and the work is distinguished from prose style only or mainly by its mechanical elements, a good verse form and perhaps a more compact, catching or energetic expression than the prose writer will ordinarily permit to the easier and looser balance of his speech. It will not have at all or not sufficiently the true essence of poetry.

For in all things that speech can express there are two elements, the outward or instrumental and the real or spiritual. In thought, for instance, there is the intellectual idea, that which the intelligence makes precise and definite to us, and the soul-idea, that which exceeds the intellectual and brings us into nearness or identity with the whole reality of the thing expressed. Equally in emotion, it is not the mere emotion

itself the poet seeks, but the soul of emotion, that in it for the delight of which the soul in us and the world desires or accepts emotional experience. So too with the poetical sense of objects, the poet's attempt to embody in his speech truth of life or truth of Nature. It is this greater truth and its delight and beauty for which he is seeking, beauty which is truth and truth beauty and therefore a joy for ever, because it brings us the delight of the soul in the discovery of its own deeper realities. This greater element the more timid and temperate speech of prose can sometimes shadow out to us, but the heightened and fearless style of poetry makes it close and living and the higher cadences of poetry carry in on their wings what the style by itself could not bring. This is the source of that intensity which is the stamp of poetical speech and of the poetical movement. It comes from the stress of the soul-vision behind the word; it is the spiritual excitement of a rhythmic voyage of self-discovery among the magic islands of form and name in these inner and outer worlds.

SRI AUROBINDO

(The Future Poetry, CWSA, Vol. 26, pp. 11-18)



ON O. B.¹

Extract from a Letter to His Father

Last night I was invited to coffee with one of the Dons and in his rooms I met the Great O. B. otherwise Oscar Browning, who is the feature par excellence of King's. He was extremely flattering; passing from the subject of cotillions to that of scholarships he said to me "I suppose you know you passed an extraordinarily high examination. I have examined papers at thirteen examinations and I have never during that time [seen] such excellent papers as yours (meaning my classical papers at the scholarship examination). As for your essay it was wonderful." In this essay (a comparison between Shakespeare and Milton) I indulged in my Oriental tastes to the top of their bent; it overflowed with rich and tropical imagery; it abounded in antitheses and epigrams and it expressed my real feelings without restraint or reservation. I thought myself that it was the best thing I had ever done, but at school I would have been condemned as extraordinarily Asiatic & bombastic. The Great O. B. afterwards asked me where my rooms were & when I had answered he said "That wretched hole!" then turning to Mahaffy "How rude we are to our scholars! we get great minds to come down here and then shut them up in that box! I suppose it is to keep their pride down."

1890

(CWSA, Vol. 36, p. 121)

*

At Cambridge

It is said that the Provost of King's College, Mr. Austen Leigh, quickly recognized Aurobindo's unusual talent and rich integrity.

1. Oscar Browning: Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) (17 January 1837 – 6 October 1923) was a British educationalist, historian and bon viveur, a well-known Cambridge personality during the late Victorian and Edwardian eras. An innovator in the early development of professional training for teachers. He was also a prolific author of popular histories and other books.

A vociferous and active opponent of the school's traditional curriculum and teaching methods, he introduced novel and progressive techniques to the classroom, to the general approval of his pupils but to the dismay of the Eton authorities.

Browning returned to King's, where he continued his individualistic approach to teaching, and rapidly established himself as a leading Cambridge personality. Again, his methods were far more popular with his students than with his colleagues. His pioneering work in teacher education, he was later recognised as a formative factor in the development of the university's present-day Department of Education. (From Wikipedia)

[*Altered to:*] Aurobindo's unusual talents early attracted the admiration of Oscar Browning, then a well-known figure at Cambridge.

Austen Leigh was not the name of the Provost; his name was Prothero. It was not he but Oscar Browning, a scholar and writer of some contemporary fame, who expressed admiration for Sri Aurobindo's scholarship,—there was nothing about integrity. He expressed the opinion that his papers, for the Scholarship examination, were the best he had ever seen and quite remarkable.

(CWSA, Vol. 36, pp. 29-30)

*

Provost

I did not take the B.A. degree; I only took double Tripos at Cambridge. It was Oscar Browning as Provost who spoke highly of me as a student. He was well known at Cambridge. He examined the Latin and Greek papers.

(*Evening Talks recorded by A. B. Purani*, pp. 142-43)

*

Lazy

Sri Aurobindo: . . . Up to the age of fifteen I was known as a very promising scholar at St. Paul's. Thereafter I lost that reputation. The teachers used to say that I was lazy and was deteriorating.

Disciple: *How was that?*

Sri Aurobindo: Because I was reading novels and poetry. Only at the time of the examination I used to prepare a little. When, now and then, I used to write Greek and Latin verse my teachers used to lament that I was not utilising my remarkable gifts because of my laziness.

When I went on scholarship to King's College, Cambridge, Oscar Browning remarked that he had not seen such remarkable papers before. So, you see, in spite of all laziness I was not deteriorating.

(*Evening Talks recorded by A. B. Purani*, pp. 247-48)

SRI AUROBINDO

‘LIKE MILESTONES SET ALONG A ROUTE’

July 31, 1914

It seems to me that Thou wouldst make me taste successively all the experiences which are ordinarily put at the summit of a Yoga as its culmination and the proof of its perfect accomplishment. The experience is striking, intense, complete; it carries within it the knowledge of all its effects, all its consequences; it is conscious, willed, the result of methodical effort and not of unexpected chance; and yet it is *always single of its kind*, like milestones set along a route which are separated from each other by a long ribbon of road; and, moreover, these milestones which mark the infinite ascent are never alike; they are always new and seem to have no connection one with the other. . . . Will a time come when Thou wilt make this being capable of synthetising all these countless experiences so as to draw from them a new realisation, more complete and more beautiful than all achieved so far? I do not know. But Thou hast taught me not to regret an exceptional state when it disappears any more than I desire it before it comes. I see in the disappearance no longer the sign of an instability in the progress made, but the evidence of a march which goes deliberately forward without stopping any longer than is indispensable for the various stages of the road.

Each time Thou teachest me yet a little better that the means of manifestation is limited only because we think it so, and that it can effectively partake of Thy infinitude; each time something of Thy immensity makes itself kin to the instrument which is its dwelling-place, flinging wide the doors which open on boundless horizons.

THE MOTHER

(Prayers and Meditations, CWM 2nd Ed., Vol. 1, pp. 212-13)

A CONVERSATION OF 12 APRIL 1951

What is the difference between Japanese art and the art of other countries, like those of Europe, for example?

The art of Japan is a kind of directly mental expression in physical life. The Japanese use the vital world very little. Their art is extremely mentalised; their life is extremely mentalised. It expresses in detail quite precise mental formations. Only, in the physical, they have spontaneously the sense of beauty. For example, a thing one sees very rarely in Europe but constantly, daily in Japan: very simple people, men of the working class or even peasants go for rest or enjoyment to a place where they can see a beautiful landscape. This gives them a much greater joy than going to play cards or indulging in all sorts of distractions as they do in the countries of Europe. They are seen in groups at times, going on the roads or sometimes taking a train or a tram up to a certain point, then walking to a place from where one gets a beautiful view. Then at this place there is a small house which fits very well into the landscape, there is a kind of small platform on which one can sit: one takes a cup of tea and at the same time sees the landscape. For them, this is the supreme enjoyment; they know nothing more pleasant. One can understand this among artists, educated people, quite learned people, but I am speaking of people of the most ordinary class, poor people who like this better than resting or relaxing at home. This is for them the greatest joy.

And in that country, for each season there are known sites. For instance, in autumn leaves become red; they have large numbers of maple-trees (the leaves of the maple turn into all the shades of the most vivid red in autumn, it is absolutely marvellous), so they arrange a place near a temple, for instance, on the top of a hill, and the entire hill is covered with maples. There is a stairway which climbs straight up, almost like a ladder, from the base to the top, and it is so steep that one cannot see what is at the top, one gets the feeling of a ladder rising to the skies — a stone stairway, very well made, rising steeply and seeming to lose itself in the sky — clouds pass, and both the sides of the hill are covered with maples, and these maples have the most magnificent colours you could ever imagine. Well, an artist who goes there will experience an emotion of absolutely exceptional, marvellous beauty. But one sees very small children, families even, with a baby on the shoulder, going there in groups. In autumn they will go there. In springtime they will go elsewhere.

There is a garden quite close to Tokyo where irises are grown, a garden with very tiny rivulets, and along the rivulets, irises — irises of all possible colours — and it is arranged according to colour, organised in such a way that on entering one is dazzled, there is a blaze of colour from all these flowers standing upright; and there are heaps and heaps of them, as far as the eye can reach. At another time, just at the

beginning of spring (it is a slightly early spring there), there are the first cherry-trees. These cherry-trees never give fruit, they are grown only for the flowers. They range from white to pink, to a rather vivid pink. There are long avenues all bordered with cherry-trees, all pink; they are huge trees which have turned all pink. There are entire mountains covered with these cherry-trees, and on the little rivulets bridges have been built which too are all red: you see these bridges of red lacquer among all these pink flowers and, below, a great river flowing and a mountain which seems to scale the sky, and they go to this place in springtime. . . . For each season there are flowers and for each flower there are gardens.

And people travel by train as easily as one goes from house to house; they have a small packet like this which they carry; in it they have a change of clothes, that's quite enough for them; on their feet they wear rope or fibre sandals; when these get worn out they throw them away and take others, for they cost nothing at all. All their life is like that. They have paper handkerchiefs, when they have used them they get rid of them, and so on — they don't burden themselves with anything. When they go by train, at the stations small meals are sold in boxes (it is quite clean, quite neat), small meals in boxes of white wood with little chop-sticks for eating; then, as all this has no value, when one has finished, one puts them aside, doesn't bother about them or encumber oneself. They live like that. When they have a garden or a park, they plant trees, and they plant them just at the place where when the tree has grown it will create a landscape, will fit into a landscape. And as they want the tree to have a particular shape, they trim it, cut it, they manage to give it all the shapes they want. You have trees with fantastic forms; they have cut off the unnecessary branches, fostered others, contrived things as they liked. Then you come to a place and you see a house which seems to be altogether a part of the landscape; it has exactly the right colour, it is made of the right materials; it is not like a blow in your face, as are all those European buildings which spoil the whole landscape. It is just there where it should be, hidden under the trees; then you see a creeper and suddenly a wonderful tree: it is there at the right place, it has the right form. I had everything to learn in Japan. For four years, from an artistic point of view, I lived from wonder to wonder.

And in the cities, a city like Tokyo, for example, which is the biggest city in the world, bigger than London, and which extends far, far (now the houses are modernised, the whole centre of the city is very unpleasant, but when I was there, it was still good), in the outlying parts of the city, those which are not business quarters, every house has at the most two storeys and a garden there is always a garden, there are always one or two trees which are quite lovely. And then, if you go for a walk . . . it is very difficult to find your way in Tokyo; there are no straight streets with houses on either side according to the number, and you lose your way easily. Then you go wandering around — always one wanders at random in that country — you go wandering and all of a sudden you turn the corner of a street and come to a kind of paradise: there are magnificent trees, a temple as truly beautiful,

you see nothing of the city any longer, no more traffic, no tramways; a corner, a corner of trees with magnificent colours, and it is beautiful, truly beautiful. You do not know how you have reached there, you seem to have come by luck. And then you turn, you seek your way, you wander off again and go elsewhere. And some days later you want to come back to this very place, but it is impossible, it is as though it had disappeared. And this is so frequent, this is so true that such stories are often told in Japan. Their literature is full of enchantment. They tell you a story in which the hero comes suddenly to a magic place: he sees fairies, he sees marvellous beings, he spends exquisite hours among flowers, music; all is splendid. The next day he is obliged to leave; it is the law of the place, he goes away. He tries to come back, but never does. He can no longer find the place: it was there, it has disappeared! . . . And everything in this city, in this country, from beginning to end, gives you the impression of impermanence, of the unexpected, the exceptional. You always come to things you did not expect; you want to find them again and they are lost — they have made something else which is equally charming. From the artistic point of view, the point of view of beauty, I don't think there is a country as beautiful as that.

Now, I ought to say, to complete my picture, that the four years I was there I found a dearth of spirituality as entire as could be. These people have a wonderful morality, live according to quite strict moral rules, they have a mental construction even in the least detail of life: one must eat in a certain way and not another, one must bow in a certain way and not another, one must say certain words but not all; when addressing certain people one must express oneself in a certain way; when speaking with others, one must express oneself in another. If you go to buy something in a shop, you must say a particular sentence; if you don't say it, you are not served: they look at you quizzically and do not move! But if you say the word, they wait upon you with full attention and bring, if necessary, a cushion for you to sit upon and a cup of tea to drink. And everything is like that. However, not once do you have the feeling that you are in contact with something other than a marvellously organised mental-physical domain. And what energy they have! Their whole vital being is turned into energy. They have an extraordinary endurance but no direct aspiration: one must obey the rule, one is obliged. If one does not submit oneself to rules there, one may live as Europeans do, who are considered barbarians and looked upon altogether as intruders, but if you want to live a Japanese life among the Japanese you must do as they do, otherwise you make them so unhappy that you can't even have any relation with them. In their house you must live in a particular way, when you meet them you must greet them in a particular way. . . . I think I have already told you the story of that Japanese who was an intimate friend of ours, and whom I helped to come into contact with his soul — and who ran away. He was in the countryside with us and I had put him in touch with his psychic being; he had the experience, a revelation, the contact, the dazzling inner contact. And the next morning, he was no longer there, he had taken flight! Later, when I saw him again in town after the holidays, I asked

him, “But what happened to you, why did you go away?” — “Oh! You understand, I discovered my soul and saw that my soul was more powerful than my faith in the country and the Mikado; I would have had to obey my soul and I would no longer have been a faithful subject of my emperor. I had to go away.” There you are! All this is authentically true.

Why are great artists born at the same time in the same country?

That depends on the person to whom you put the question. The explanation will be different accordingly. From the point of view of evolution, I think Sri Aurobindo has explained this very clearly in *The Human Cycle*. Evolution, that is to say, culture and civilisation, describes a more or less regular spiral movement around the earth, and the results of one civilisation, it may be said, slowly go to form another; then, when the total development is harmonious, this creates simultaneously the field of action and the actors, in the sense that at the time of the great artistic periods all the conditions were favourable to the development of art, and naturally, the fact that all the circumstances were favourable, attracted the men who could use them. There have been concrete movements like that, great ages like that of the Italian Renaissance or the similar period in France, almost at the same time, when artists from all countries were gathered at the same place because the conditions were favourable to the development of their art. This is one of the reasons — a so-to-say external reason — for the formation of civilisations.

There is another, this is that from an occult point of view it is almost always the same forces and same beings which incarnate during all the ages of artistic beauty upon earth and that, according to occultists, there are cycles of rebirth: beings return, group themselves through affinity at the time of birth; so it happens that regularly, almost all come together for a similar action. Some occultists have studied this question and given very precise numbers based upon the actual facts of the development of the earth: they have said that once in a hundred years, once in a thousand years, once in five thousand years, etc., certain cycles were repeated; that certain great civilisations appeared every five thousand years, and that it was (according to their special knowledge) the same people who came back. This is not quite exact, that is why I am not going into details, but in a sense this is true: it is the same forces which are at work. It is the same forces and they are grouped according to their affinities and, for a reason which may be quite material or for a mental or cyclic reason, they reunite at a certain place, and in this place there is a new civilisation or a special progress in a civilisation or a kind of effervescence, blossoming, flowering of beauty, as in the great ages in Greece, Egypt, India, Italy, Spain. . . . Everywhere, in all the countries of the world, there have been more or less beautiful periods.

If you put the question to astrologers, they will explain this to you by the

position of the stars; they will say that certain positions of the stars have a certain effect on the earth. But, as I have told you, all these things are “languages”, a way of expression, of making oneself understood; the truth is deeper, it is more complex, more complete.

Is the average Indian more advanced spiritually than the average man in other countries, like those of Europe, for instance?

There is an essential difference, but generally if he has not been contaminated by European materialism, when someone speaks to him about spiritual things, he has an opening, he understands. In the countries of the West, if you are in touch with the average man and speak to him of spiritual things, he is absolutely closed up and, moreover, if you speak to him of a possibility of relation with higher states of consciousness, he looks at you as though you were mad! If someone renounces the ordinary life to live an ascetic life, they think he is out of his senses!

There is a small minority among those who have kept the religious traditions, which understands, but understands only under the religious form. That is to say, if someone enters a monastery, they understand him more or less. But for the average man (I am not speaking of cultured people), if someone wants to lead a spiritual life independent of all religion, simply setting out in the personal quest of a higher truth, then surely he is ready to be put in a lunatic asylum! It would be better not to speak of it. There are those who have read a little, who are educated, who may think you a little eccentric, but still they understand what it means; but the ordinary man, no. I am speaking of fifty years ago, of course; now, after the Second [World] War, I don't know, I can't say if this has begun to change. But evidently, the educated classes of Europe are now in search of something higher because their life has been so tragic that they need to lean upon something else; and perhaps their effort is contagious, in a sense, and there are more people than one thinks who are seeking — it is possible. But fifty years ago it was not like that. While here, ordinary people, people of the “lower” classes don't perhaps have any discernment, perhaps they cannot distinguish between the imposter and the sincere man, but it is understood that if somebody comes along in the yellow robe and with the beggar's bowl, he will be given something, he won't be kicked out. If a man did that in Europe (naturally there is no question of the yellow robe), but if he came in sordid clothes, he would be immediately taken to the first police station and arrested for indigence. It is understood that in the so-called civilised countries, if you don't have the minimum money in your pocket, you are a vagabond, and the vagabond has no right to be on the streets, he is put into prison for vagabondage. That is the difference.

Do certain arts express more truth than others?

This is more or less a mental gymnastic!

There are people who say that certain arts are physical. If you frequent artists, painters, they will tell you that sculpture, oh! it is laborious, because sculptors work with the very matter, and painting may be considered not much of an intellectual art by a musician. The truth is that in all arts everything depends upon the artist, and what he does depends upon the state of consciousness in which he is. A sculptor may be an extremely spiritual man and his production extremely spiritual also, if he knows how to express his experience. And a poet can be quite a commonplace materialist if he does not receive his inspiration from a higher state. It is the mind which makes little categories (this is more convenient for it), but that does not resemble the truth very much.

You have said that Wagner had an intuition of the occult and that to have spiritual power one must conquer sexuality. In fact, Wagner had the intuition of this victory to be achieved, for in "The Ring of the Niebelungen" there is a treasure hidden at the bottom of a river. Three nymphs guard the treasure and to take it one must renounce all desire for love and woman.

This is an old tradition in Nordic countries. But in his story it ends badly: the one who had to renounce the love of woman is drowned and it ends with the twilight of the gods.

THE MOTHER

(Questions and Answers 1950-1951, CWM 2nd Ed., Vol. 4, pp. 305-13)



THE FALL

Our spirit is a paradise blown down,
 A sun deflowered, a leprosy of light;
 But all its crumbling sacrificial sparks
 Drop from the inviolate ether to arouse
 An earth-apocalypse slumbering unlit,
 A brazier of giant mystery
 Lost like a mouth of dream whose tongue lacks fire!
 The shredded silver and the shrunken gold,
 Caught by this dark divinity of clay,
 Shall laugh and blossom brighter than the unmarred
 Roses of heaven rooted in sapphire hush.

AMAL KIRAN
 (K. D. SETHNA)

... it is necessary in order to break down the veil which is erected by our ordinary mentality between ourselves and the truth; for outer knowledge can be picked up by the way, by ordinary attention and reception, but the inner, hidden and higher truth can only be seized by an absolute concentration of the mind on its object, an absolute concentration of the will to attain it and, once attained, to hold it habitually and securely unite oneself with it. For identification is the condition of complete knowledge and possession; it is the intense result of a habitual purified reflecting of the reality and an entire concentration on it; and it is necessary in order to break down entirely that division and separation of ourselves from the divine being and the eternal reality which is the normal condition of our unregenerated ignorant mentality.

Sri Aurobindo

(The Synthesis of Yoga, CWSA, Vol. 23, p. 515)

IMPRESSIONS OF INDIAN TRAVEL — BARODA

Some years ago, when I was staying at the Maloia, in the Engadine, the Gaekwar of Baroda, who had just arrived, sent to ask if I would receive him in my room. I was somewhat agitated at the idea of entertaining a reigning prince in an hotel bedroom, but I made the best arrangements that I could, and we talked over many things for a long time. Our conversation was principally concerned with the education of Indians at English universities. Before we parted I promised His Highness that, if ever I visited India, I would pay him a visit, and as Baroda lay on the road between Delhi and Bombay, it was easy for me to fulfil my engagement. No one has seen India properly who has not visited a Native State; it is better indeed, if he can, to visit several of them. They retain much of the ancient appearance, and many of the old customs which have perished under the British Raj. If well administered they are interesting, if badly administered they are picturesque. They form a very important part of our system of government. Their existence is an earnest that we hold India as the trustees of the Indian people. They are useful, also, as a comparison with our own methods of administration. So long as the Rajahs are loyal, they are a great support to the throne. Their wealth forms a reservoir; which, like that of the City companies, can be tapped for extraordinary purposes. No Viceroy would now meddle with the independence of the Native States. It is generally admitted that the annexation of Oude, and the fear lest it might be followed by similar acts, were among the principal causes of the Mutiny. To educate native princes, to make them English without ceasing to be Indian, to inspire them with the desire and the capacity for good government without severing them from their subjects, and making them merely the vassals of the court and the companions of English nobility, is a difficult problem. It is one, however, which the present Viceroy has set himself to solve, and in proportion as he succeeds so will the fortunes of the Native States be prosperous.

The Gaekwar of Baroda is a very remarkable man. He is enlightened and hard-working, his whole heart is given to the improvement of his people. It has been objected that he spends too much of his money on palaces, and of his time in Europe. But neither of these charges was supported by what I saw in my visit. It is true that he has constructed, at the cost, perhaps, of half a million, a large palace outside the town. But his ancestors lived in a wooden house in the midst of the city, a place quite out of harmony with modern conditions. The palace at Baroda is not too large for the requirements of a court in which the women live in purda; nor is it better furnished than many English country houses. It did not cost nearly as much as Eaton Hall, which the Duke of Westminster built for the delectation of travelling Americans.

The Gaekwar's tours in Europe have always been conducted for the benefit of his countrymen. In these journeys he has collected a fund of knowledge and

experience which has enabled him to govern his estates in accordance with modern principles, and the Museum of Baroda shows with what judgment the money which he has spent in Europe has been laid out. It is filled with objects collected from the civilised world, of literary, artistic, and scientific interest, best calculated to stimulate the curiosity and to improve the education of his subjects. It was a touching sight to watch the crowds of natives, men, women, and children, as they thronged the galleries, delighted and instructed by the treasures which their sovereign had collected for them.

Baroda offers to the traveller the spectacle of a thoroughly well governed Native State. It has of late years been sorely tried by famine, but the people seem happy and contented. Everywhere there are broad roads, well watered, pleasant groves, picturesque houses, the abode either of ministers or of members of the royal family. The Maharajah does everything for the comfort and amusement of his guests. They are met at the station by royal carriages, and conducted to a spacious guest-house, as it would be impossible for them to be lodged in the palace of the Gaekwar. They may stay as long as they please, and they are shown all the sights of the city.

There is a noble college, with ample, airy class-rooms, and competent English teachers; there is a hospital conducted on the best principles of modern science; there is a gaol in which the prisoners are, if anything, too well off, as the climate of India does not lend itself to solitary confinement. The palace of the Maharajah possesses an extensive library, chiefly of English books, which is open to every one. Europe has not a useful lesson which the Gaekwar has not done his best to learn, and to convey in fitting measure to his countrymen.

I was fortunate enough to have as my guide and companion an old Cambridge pupil, a Brahmin of high rank, the most brilliant Greek scholar whom I ever examined for an entrance scholarship. He obtained a place in the Indian Civil Service, but was rejected for his riding, and the Gaekwar has wisely attached him to his service. He is now engaged in important literary work, and he may some day be Minister of Education. We established a kind of blood-brotherhood between us by riding together on an elephant, an experience which neither of us had undergone before. The beast seemed to tower aloft, higher than any elephant I had ever seen. He knelt down, and we crawled to our seats on either side of him. It was a terrible moment when the animal rose to his legs, and we had to contemplate the possibility of slowly sliding to the ground down that long, stretch of dark grey skin. This difficulty past, we rode slowly through the crowded streets, attracting, to my disappointment, very little attention. Elephants, strange as they were to me, are mere drugs in Baroda, but we were both relieved when we reached the palace where we were to see the jewels. The elephant awaited our return, but we preferred the carriage. Do men ever hunt twice? Lord Chesterfield is reported to have said. Neither my friend nor myself had any desire to mount an elephant a second time.

We saw some strange sights in the native town. A snake-charmer and conjurer

was surrounded by a large crowd at the corner of a street. We stopped the carriage to look at him. For our special delectation he ripped up his boy attendant's stomach, and stowed away the body in a basket, from which the lad soon afterwards emerged, alive and smiling. I had only two opportunities of seeing Indian conjuring, but on neither occasion did it appear to me at all remarkable, except as regarded sleight of hand. The growth of the mango-tree, the murder of the boy, the snake-charming, and some of the other tricks were interesting and picturesque to watch, but could not appear supernatural to the most indifferent observer.

I also had the good fortune to witness a marriage procession. During the latter half of the month of February, the money-lending caste seemed to be marrying in profusion, and we had seen signs of it at Futehpur and at Delhi. The procession was a long one, accompanied by bands of music. The bridegroom, a child of ten, was covered from head to foot with cloth of gold and flowers, and seemed to be much amused as he rode upon his quiet steed. Before him rode on horseback numerous groomsmen, all younger than himself, with richly embroidered robes and caps. Little girls accompanied the procession, carried in litters, with red marks on their foreheads, showing that they were already wives. The bridegroom was on his way to the bride's house, to see her for the first time; he would see her and then depart, and they would not keep house together till some years had passed. Horses are necessary accompaniments of a Hindu marriage, if the real animals cannot be provided, paper models are substituted, which are cunningly made and are very cheap.

We were also shown some parrots, carefully trained to climb ladders and to fire off guns, and some rams who butted at each other with a violence which seemed likely to smash their skulls. We visited the beautiful public gardens, laid out in exquisite taste, where an orchestra discourses, both Indian and European music, under the baton of a conductor who has been trained at Leipzig. This is also highly appreciated by the natives.

At last, all too soon, came the time for departure. My friend accompanied me to the crowded train, where I had with some difficulty secured a lower berth. I was to wake up next morning in Bombay, the last stage of my travel.

OSCAR BROWNING

(Impressions of Indian Travel by Oscar Browning, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1903)

SAHANA'S CORRESPONDENCE WITH SRI AUROBINDO¹ — I

A radical change of man's consciousness and its transformation by the descent of the Supermind was the mission the Mother and Sri Aurobindo had come to fulfil. That is the purpose of the Yoga. They took us forward almost by holding our hands not counting any difficulty, however colossal it might be, or avoiding any struggle and suffering, however painful. When they had to deal with the three dimensions of heaven, earth and the abyss, even a grain of sand was not too small for them. It is for this reason that they have accepted us, insignificant as we are, and spared no pains. Otherwise who will consider our life worth so much?

— Sahana

Once Sri Aurobindo wrote to me:

We mind no trouble so long as we can carry you farther and farther on the path of transformation. Let the greater consciousness, the vastness and the peace grow in you and the psychic liberated from these veils flood you with the divine love and the soul's happiness. We shall certainly concentrate our endeavour to help you towards that.

Since 1931 I had quite often written letters to Sri Aurobindo. The correspondence started from 1930 and became regular from 1932 till 1938, the year of his accident. I expressed in these letters in detail all about my inner condition and movement of Sadhana, since he wanted it so. He wrote,

It is absolutely necessary to write everything freely and write daily.

So everything good and bad had to be written. The mind was not always willing to do so, it looked for many pretexts and means by which it could avoid telling the whole truth and let him know just what was convenient to me: in short, only

1. *At the Feet of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo* is Nirodbaran's English translation of Sahana's memoirs in Bengali. It was serialised in *Mother India* from February 1981 to May 1984.

Sahana's narration of the context of some of the letters has been retained, although abridged or summarised in places and the formatting adapted to *MI* pattern.

The correspondence appearing in Sahana's second book, *Some Letters from Sri Aurobindo and the Mother on day-to-day matters* will also form part of this compilation. — Ed.

a partial truth. I wondered at the way the mind played no end of tricks and ruses with itself in my being.

The letters were addressed to the Mother in both Bengali and English. But it was Sri Aurobindo who replied to them in English. Very rarely he wrote a few lines in Bengali. Most interesting it was to observe that, though the mind was reluctant to write, yet when I finished, whatever I had to write had come through, nothing was kept back. It was as if someone had propelled me from behind.

One day, I was extremely unwilling to write and I knew that I should not encourage this reluctance, still I simply wrote: "Today I feel no inclination to write." Sri Aurobindo sent back not a word in reply except simply three big signs of exclamation (!!!) in the margin of my letter. I did not know what to make of it — to laugh or to weep.

Another amusing incident: I had a strong desire to eat one or two things — it was uncontrollable. The mind was actively working as to how to satisfy the desire. Finally I wrote: "Mother, today I am feeling somewhat greedy. Do you know what it is about? Eggs, lobster and tin-sardine. Terribly greedy, Mother. Either remove this desire or give me permission to eat and protection at the same time."

Next day, the reply came from Sri Aurobindo:

Certainly not! You can eat up your desire — that is the only fish or flesh that can be given to you! It is simply an old samskara rising from the subconscious — these things have never to be indulged, they rise in order to be dismissed.

Satire, enlivened with laughter! But, strangely enough, I noticed that just after writing my letter, my desire had vanished and in its place reigned a pure joy and contentment.

*

While writing to Sri Aurobindo, I felt very often that I could not express myself precisely in English. I would then use Bengali terms at places and ask him their English equivalents. Sri Aurobindo would put their English renderings on the top of the Bengali expressions. I give here some tokens of his exquisite translations — rather to demonstrate his love and grace flowing through these translations.

I wrote: "Let me grow into the true consciousness and the veil of darkness that still keeps you separate from me drop down and with your light let my temple become . . ." Then I continued in Bengali which Sri Aurobindo translated thus: "a-gleam with light and radiant and may the downpour of the rays of the

Light remove all veil of division in me and may I find you within me in your self-revelation."

Another of Sri Aurobindo's English translations: "I feel now the inexpressible sweetness of that which is beyond description forming between you and me. It is such a satisfying experience."

I wrote the following in English: except for the words which Sri Aurobindo translated by "hushed and solitary" and after which he continued with a further expression: "Today also I cherish the same feeling within myself. I am feeling as quiet inwardly as if the main gate of a passage which was always busy with a crowd of all sorts of demands and cravings, etc., is closed, or the passage has become hushed and solitary without the excited crowd, that is to say the footsteps of the crowd are heard no more."

At one time the Mother climbed daily to the terrace and spent some time there. I wrote to her one day's incident:

"Recently I notice that before you go down from the terrace in the evenings you stand for a longer time and I feel just at the time that you give us something especially, so I also concentrate to receive and feel what you give, but this evening suddenly I saw your physical body had disappeared, there was no sign of it! Then again in a few seconds your figure reappeared." The last portion of my letter was in Bengali. It began with "I felt at that moment..." Sri Aurobindo translated the rest:

You mixed with the sky (ether) and became one with all things.

Apropos of a letter of mine on 28.8.1932, Sri Aurobindo wrote:

The Mother makes an invocation or aspiration and stands till the movement is over. Yesterday she passed for some time beyond the sense of body and it is perhaps this that made you see in that way.

When there were mistakes in English in my letters Sri Aurobindo used to correct them on my own insistence. Though he was so short of time, he yet did it without the least murmur of annoyance or unwillingness. In an unstinted measure he poured his grace. Now I cannot but repent for the unnecessary trouble people like me gave him just to get some selfish satisfaction.

*

[I wrote about a dream I had. Sri Aurobindo replied:]

It was a good symbolic dream and your interpretation seems to me correct except for one detail. The sea cannot be the tide of vital desires; it must be the flood of the world forces. (9.1.32)

*

[I wrote about my experiences while I was singing.] When I had sung a part of Kabir's song, I could feel a power coming down and the volume of my voice increasing. The inner self opened entirely, and strange tunes and rhythms began to pour out spontaneously with such speed that I wondered how it was possible. There was a clear feeling that they owed nothing to me, that I was just a channel and they came tumbling down eager to express themselves. Suddenly I heard my voice gaining twice its volume — so much force was there. And I heard distinctly another voice expressing itself through my voice. When I experienced this, I felt it was no longer myself or my own desire that was singing. I could not stop, it did not depend on me. I had never sung a single song at such length, I was simply charmed and overwhelmed by these exceptional manifestations of sound, voice and tune.

Sri Aurobindo answered:

Yes, it was quite right and a very high experience.

*

I observed that the atmosphere, when I sang on the terrace to the Mother alone, was quite different from the one when I sang at other places. I wrote to the Mother: "I have observed that when I sing to you on your terrace, the voice becomes very forceful, which is not so elsewhere. So I wrote to you that a special force works from behind, making me sing differently. It must be your force, isn't it, Mother? I feel it must be your force that makes me sing and makes the singing so intense. The difference is too obvious! But why should it be so? If it is your force acting I should sing equally well everywhere. If I have a psychic connection with you, such difference as regards time and space should not be there. Is it not then my inability to remain in the true consciousness, the true condition, that makes the difference?"

Sri Aurobindo wrote in reply:

You have seen very accurately (as expressed in today's letter) the reason for the difference between your singing on the roof and your singing elsewhere. But that is no reason why you should not sing elsewhere. (19.3.32)

*

I was cherishing a hope to show my dancing to the Mother, but as I did not know dancing very well, there was some hesitation lest I should waste her time. At last I expressed my desire. She consented to see my dance. When I came to the Ashram, I had thought I would have to give up all art for the sake of sadhana, but such sacrifice was not needed. Sri Aurobindo's yoga includes all. He wrote afterwards:

The development of capacities is not only permissible but right when it can be made part of Yoga; one can give not only one's soul, but all one's powers to the Divine. (29.6.31)

*

I practised my dances in a large hall at Dilip's place. When previously I had wanted to practise my dance to the tune of Rabindranath's song in the same room, Sri Aurobindo had replied (referring to a sadhak who lived just under that hall downstairs,): "He is too serious to be danced over." Now, Sri Aurobindo gave permission. I was puzzled and asked him: "You wrote differently before, and now this change?" He replied:

Perhaps before long he will cease to be too serious.

*

. . . when I started the Dawn-dance, no clear form of the mood had emerged beforehand. What appeared was the feeling of the vibration of the mood in the singing before I had understood how the language or the feeling of the song was expressed. Following that vibration the movements and various poses began to be formed. I did not remember the words of the song, only followed its inner movements. Thus, it was felt to be a new experience, having a truth in it. . . . In these respects it was a new creation. So I said that I did not try to get at any definite form at first; nevertheless everything came down very easily and naturally and I understood the inner movements. Am I right in my analysis? Is there any truth here?

Sri Aurobindo replied:

To feel the vibration and develop from it the rhythm of the dance is the right way to create something true; the other way, to understand with the mind and work out with the mind only or mainly is the mental way; it is laborious and difficult and has not got the same spontaneous inspiration. (29.4.32)

*

Sri Aurobindo had told us to surrender ourselves to the Mother, and one could clearly perceive that working in all of us. . . . Sri Aurobindo wrote to me:

When the psychic being is in front, the sadhana becomes natural and easy and it is a question of time and natural development. When the mind or the vital or the physical consciousness is on the top the sadhana is a tapasya and a struggle. (10.7.34)

*

Once a relative wanted to come here. When I asked for some directions about it, Sri Aurobindo wrote:

As for your inner attitude it must remain the same. Not to be excited or drawn outwards by these 'incidents' of the outward life or by the coming in of new elements is the rule; they must come in like waves into an untroubled sea and mix in it and become themselves untroubled and serene.

Your present attitude and condition is all that it should be — only you must remain vigilant always. For when the condition is good, the lower movements have a habit of subsiding and become quiescent, hiding as it were — or they go out of the nature and remain at a distance. But if they see that the sadhak is losing his vigilance, then they slowly begin to rise or draw nearer, most often unseen, and when he is quite off his guard, surge up suddenly or make a sudden irruption. That continues until the whole nature, mental, vital, physical down to the very subconscious is enlightened, conscious, full of the Divine. Till that happens one must always remain watchful in a sleepless vigilance. (26.5.32)

*

I wrote to Sri Aurobindo: "I don't believe that it is our mind that helps us to know the Truth from falsehood and so on, but our true being, our psychic, that helps us to know things; it is when the mind is influenced by the psychic consciously or unconsciously, that the true discrimination can be done, otherwise if the

physical mind is left alone, however great it may be, it always confuses things and prevents them from being seen in the true way.”

Sri Aurobindo's reply:

To see the Truth does not depend on a big intellect or small intellect. It depends on being in contact with the Truth, and the mind silent and quiet to receive it. The biggest intellects can make errors of the worst kind and confuse Truth and falsehood if they have not the contact with the Truth or the direct experience. (1.8.32)

*

Another time I wrote in search of knowledge: “. . . When someone is broken down by mental distress or depression, does it not truly help him if a person visits him and, sitting by his side like a friend, talks or converses with him? . . . My belief is that it all depends on one's attitude. If, of course, the person himself wants no interference, it is different. Otherwise I have seen that a single word at times produces a striking effect so much so that everything changes, and the inner being takes the right bend and all becomes safe . . .”

Sri Aurobindo replied:

It is very often extremely useful to speak in these circumstances if the one who speaks is known or felt by the other to have sympathy with him and if he speaks in the right way. (24.4.35)

*

Once I wanted to know the difference between song and poetry . . . How beautifully he explained the difference! Here is the letter:

No, a song is not a kind of poem — or need not be. There are some very good songs which are not poems at all. In Europe song-writers or the writers of the librettos of the great operas are not classed among poets. In Asia the attempt to combine song-quality with poetic value has been more common, but this is not essential. In ancient Greece also lyric poetry was often composed with a view to being set to music. But still poetry and song-writing, though they can be combined, are two different arts.

The difference is not that poetry has to be understood and music or singing felt (*anubhuti*). If you only understand the intellectual content of a poem, its words and ideas, you have not really appreciated the poem at all. And a poem which contains only that and nothing else, is not true poetry. A true poem contains something else

which has to be felt just as you feel music and that is its more important and essential part. It has, first, a rhythm, just as music has, though of a different kind, and it is the rhythm that helps this something else to come out through the medium of the words. The words by themselves do not carry it or cannot bring it out altogether, and this is shown by the fact that the same words written in a different order and without rhythm or without the proper rhythm would not at all move or impress you in the same way. This something else is an inner content or suggestion, a soul-feeling or soul-experience, a vital feeling or life-experience, a mental emotion, vision, or experience (not merely an idea), and it is only if you can catch this and reproduce the experience in yourself, that you have got what the poem can give you, not otherwise.

The real difference between a poem and a song is that a song is written with a view to be set to musical rhythm and a poem is written with a view to poetic rhythm or word-music. The two rhythms are quite different. That is why a poem cannot be set to music unless it has either been written with an eye to both kinds of rhythm or else happens to have (without especially intending it) a movement which makes it easy or at least possible to set to music. This happens often with lyrical poetry, less often with other kinds. There is also this usual character of a song that it is satisfied to be very simple in its content bringing out a single idea or feeling, and leaving it to the music to develop it; but this is not always done. (4.7.31)

*

. . . some person wrote a letter attacking the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. We were much excited by it and hotly discussed what our attitude should be towards such persons — should we at all keep any contact with them? I was in two minds — perhaps there should not be so strong a feeling of hostility or contempt. One of us asserted very forcefully that far from keeping no contact with such persons, even conciliation was never out of the question. So I wrote to Sri Aurobindo about it, fully supporting that speaker's view.

This is what Sri Aurobindo answered:

No doubt hatred and cursing are not the proper attitude. It is true that to look upon all things and all people with a calm and clear vision, to be uninvolved and impartial in one's own judgement is a quite proper yogic attitude. A condition of perfect *samatā* can be established in which one sees all as equal, friends and enemies included, and is not disturbed by what men do or by what happens. The question is whether this is all that is demanded from us. If so, then the general attitude will be one of a neutral indifference to everything. But the Gita which strongly insists on a perfect and absolute *samatā* goes on to say, "Fight, destroy the adversary, conquer." If there is no kind of general action wanted, no loyalty to Truth as against Falsehood except

for one's personal sadhana, no will for the Truth to conquer, then the *samatā* of indifference will suffice. But here there is a work to be done, a Truth to be established against which immense forces are arrayed, invisible forces which can use visible things and persons and actions for their instruments. If one is among the disciples, the seeker of this Truth, one has to take sides for the Truth, one has to stand against the Forces that attack it and seek to stifle it. Arjuna wanted not to stand for either side, to refuse any action of hostility even to the assailants; Sri Krishna who insisted so much on *samatā*, strongly rebuked his attitude and insisted on his fighting the adversary, "Have *samatā*," he said, "and seeing clearly the Truth, fight." Therefore to take sides with the Truth and to refuse to concede anything to the Falsehood that attacks, to be unflinchingly loyal and against the hostiles and the attackers is not inconsistent with equality. It is personal and egoistic feeling that has to be thrown away; hatred and vital ill-will have to be rejected. But loyalty and refusal to compromise with the assailants and the hostiles or to dally with their ideas and demands and say, "After all we can compromise with what they ask from us," or to accept them as companions and our own people — these things have a great importance. If the attack were a physical menace to the Mother and the work and the Asram, one would see this at once. But because the attack is of a subtler kind, can a passive attitude be right? It is a spiritual battle inward and outward — by neutrality and compromise or even passivity one may allow the enemy Forces to pass and crush down the Truth and its children. If you look at this point you will see that if the inner spiritual equality is right, the active loyalty and firm taking of sides which "K" insists on is as right, and the two cannot be incompatible.

I have of course treated it as a general question apart from all particular cases or personal questions. It is a principle of action that has to be seen in its right light and proportion. (13.9.36)

*

I wanted to know the difference between consciousness and transformation in detail and I got this reply:

Your statement of the different parts of the being as you experience them is perfectly correct and well-observed, and it shows too that your experience of these things is not merely mental but genuine and living. As for your question about consciousness and transformation: the answer is that consciousness is made up of two elements, awareness of self and things and forces and conscious power. Awareness is the first thing necessary, you have to be aware of things in the right consciousness, in the right way, seeing them in their truth, but awareness by itself is not enough. There must be a Will and Force that makes the consciousness effective. Somebody may have the full consciousness of what has to be changed, what has to go and what has

to come in its place but may be helpless to make the change. Another may have the will-force but for want of the right awareness may be unable to apply it in the right way at the right place. The advantage of being in the psychic consciousness is that you have the right awareness and its will being in harmony with the Mother's will, you can call in the Mother's Force to make the change. Those who live in the mind and in the vital are not so well able to do this; they are obliged to use mostly their personal effort and as awareness and will-force of mind and vital are divided and imperfect, the work done is imperfect and not definitive. It is only in the supermind that Awareness, Will, Force are always one movement and automatically effective.

*

Once I . . . wanted to know . . . where was the true difference between intellect, intellectual and intelligence. . . . He wrote:

X asked me the question and I answered it on the basis of the current meaning of "intellect and intellectual". People in ordinary speech do not make any distinction between intellect and intelligence, though of course it is quite true that a man may have a good or even a fine intelligence without being an intellectual. But ordinarily all thinking is attributed to the "intellect", an intellectual therefore is a man whose main business or activity is to think about things — a philosopher, a poet, a scientist, a critic of art and literature or of life are all classed together as intellectuals. A theorist on economy and politics is an intellectual, a politician or financier is not, unless he theorises on his own subject or is a thinker on another.

Y's distinction is based on those I have made here, but these distinctions are not current in ordinary speech, except one or two and those even in a very imperfect way. If I go by these distinctions then the intellectuals will no longer be called intellectuals but thinkers and creators — except a certain class of them. Intellectual or intellectual thinker will then be one who is a thinker by his reason or mainly by his reason — e.g., Bertrand Russell, Bernard Shaw, Wells etc. Tagore thinks by vision, imagination, feeling and intuition, not by the reason — at least that is true of his writings. C. R. Das himself would not be an intellectual — in politics, literature and everything else he was an "intuitive" and "emotive" man. But, as I say, these would be distinctions not ordinarily current. In ordinary parlance Tagore, Das, and everybody of the kind would all be called intellectuals also. The general mind does not make these subtle distinctions, it takes things in the mass roughly — and it is right in doing so, for otherwise it would lose itself altogether.

As for barristers etc. a man to succeed as barrister must have legal knowledge, and the power to apply it. It is not necessary that he should be a thinker even on his own subject or an intellectual. It is the same with all professional men, — doctors, engineers etc. etc.; they may be intellectual as well as successful in their profession,

but they need not be.

P.S. Argument properly speaking needs some power of logical intellect: but it can be specialised in a certain line. The power of argument does not by itself make a man intellectual.

*

I was then suffering from insomnia. For nights and days together I could not get a wink of sleep. . . . One day, I went to see the Mother. Oh, that day is still fresh in mind — she went on looking at me in a manner that baffles description — there was so much tenderness, softness, and deep compassion in that incomparable look! Keeping her eyes fixed on mine, with the sweetest voice, slowly she said, “I want you to sleep.” My eyes kept gazing at her eyes till they were filled with tears. Nor did it end here. Next day Sri Aurobindo wrote:

Mother said you looked rather thin and pulled down. Is it only the absence of sleep or are you eating too little? You said you had hunger — if so you ought to eat well, because underfeeding is not good for the nerves. (15.3.35)

*

Even after such letters replete with solicitude and sweetness, when the insomnia was once again on the increase, Sri Aurobindo wanted me to have some medical treatment. But I misunderstood his well-meant advice and refused it; I thought he was pushing me away from him. His reply given below will speak of the reaction of my mind born of that misunderstanding.

It was precisely out of solicitude for you because the suffering of insomnia and the spasms had been excessive that I proposed to you to take the help of treatment. It is a fact of my experience that when the resistance in the body is too strong and persistent, it can help to take some aid of physical means as an instrumentation for the Force to work more directly on the body itself; for the body then feels itself supported against the resistance from both sides, by means both physical as well as supraphysical. The Mother's Force can work through both together. It is surprising that you should take my suggestion in this way as if it meant an abandonment and refusal to help you! But it is still more surprising that you should have taken Mother's smile at Pranam for sarcasm! The only thing she put in it was an insistence for the cloud that she saw covering the body-consciousness and interfering with its receptivity to lift. You must not allow this clouding attack to come between your mind and the Mother. Reject these distorting suggestions and keep its openness so that it may help to reopen up a

full receptivity in the material body also. If you do not like to take any treatment, I shall try to manage without that if you keep me informed every day without fail, even on those days you feel relieved, till all trace of the attack is over!" (1.9.36)

*

Many moods and forms have I seen of my clouded mind. There is a letter from Sri Aurobindo in reply to one such sample:

I see that you have not sent your book, nor any letter and I am told you did not come to Pranam. Are you then determined to reject us and our help and shut yourself up in your despondency?

But what is the reason for so violent a change? The Mother and myself at least have not changed towards you and the causes you alleged for feeling otherwise are so small and trifling that they could not support any such idea once you looked at them straight. . . .

There remains the difficulty of your sadhana. But you have had much more violent difficulties and downfalls and recovered from them and found your way clearer. Why should now a recrudescence of certain movements which you yourself say was slight or the sense of the difficulty of overcoming egoism (which everybody feels and not only yourself) lead to such persistence in despair and a turning away from help and light?

I hope you will gather yourself together, make an effort and get out of this groove quickly into the joy and love of the Divine which you had before. On our side nothing is changed — the love and help are there as before and I hope you will feel them behind these few lines. (9.11.33)

The day I received this letter, everything in me melted along with the tears that poured from my eyes.

(To be continued)

SAHANA

PURANI-JI AND WRESTLING

(Continued from the issue of July 2022)

Inspiring Association

Dr. Chandulal M. Desai:

I was first introduced to Ambubhai in Surat, when I went there with Lōkamānya Tilak from Bombay. . . . Once Sardar Patel told me, “Ambubhai has an amazing ability to win over the young.” The *bhagirath-tapashcharyā* of my late friend Chotubhai and Ambubhai made flow the Ganga of Shakti in Gujarat; not only that, they taught the true *shrama-yajna* — not to depend on others unless it became indispensable.

N. H. Bhagawati, Justice Supreme Court:

I came in touch with Ambubhai in Baroda College, in 1911. . . . We went together to the Lakshminath *akhādā* in Bajwada and lived in the College hostel . . . and together passed the Inter Arts Examination. Apart from his ability and enthusiasm in physical exercises, he had a unique way of studying. He never studied just to pass examinations: his fathomless and all-comprehensive urge to know inspired him to study every subject in depth. As a result he did not score high marks in the exams, but his discussion on any subject proved that his knowledge of it was deeper than that of students passing its examination with distinction. In the gym too his leadership, character, discipline and patriotism were highly impressive, and his participation in the frequent tours arranged by our *akhādā* always welcome and inspiring. I too went with him on the *Pāvāgadh* tour in which we had trekked 80 miles in three days and saw and learned a great deal. . . . Later both of us went to Bombay for further study. He entered St. Xavier’s College and I went to Elphinstone College. There too we kept up a regular contact and in Bombay’s atmosphere kept up our exercise schedule as much as possible. We separated after graduation but our relationship is as warm as before. . . . Apart from propagating physical culture all over Gujarat, he began to take a deep interest in dharma, his translation of [*Ashwinikumar’s?*] *Bhakti Yoga* was published in those days and he was already attracted to Sri Aurobindo’s philosophy. Consequently after spending a few years teaching in Gujarat he joined the Ashram in Pondicherry. . . . His service to Gujarati literature is not little. By translating Sri Aurobindo’s Integral Yoga and other

books in Gujarati he has informed the Gujarati public of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy. . . . His style is simple and effective and yet it clarifies even the most difficult and profound subject. . . .

Ganesh Vāsudev Māvalankar:

Sri Ambubhai was the creator and inspirer of the physical activities that began in Ahmedabad in 1915-16. I was connected with him from the beginning in that field. In those days, as far as I remember, there were only two *akhādās* of the new type. One was run for a time in Khādiya and then in Sārangpur, in the compound behind the Navajeevan Printing Press. The other in Bhadra. . . . With the view that here along with the body the mind too should be developed, things were so organised that the teaching and programme of the *akhādā* helped the students . . . to also grow into selfless, intelligent scholars ready to serve society sincerely and wholeheartedly. . . . Ambubhai can rightly be taken as the symbol of the aspirations that had awakened in the youth of India in those days, of their dreams of Swaraj and the ideals and principles they included in the field of education. . . . His contact was truly electrifying.

Umāshankar Joshi:

I first breathed the fragrance of Ambubhai's personality through the *akhādā* at Sārangpur, Ahmedabad. When I came to Ahmedabad in 1927 and joined the Matric class, with a few friends, I joined that *akhādā*. I can't say how much my 70 pound body gained by those 100 *baithaks*, but the electric atmosphere created a deep impression. The gymnastic activities were lively but not boisterous or chaotic: calm reigned there inspired by discipline. There was also a small library; it was invaluable for me as books were then beyond my reach. Meetings were held every Thursday evening in the compound of the Navajeevan Press: my captivated mind was filled with wonder seeing the youth sharpen their debating skills there. . . . In the atmosphere of the *akhādā* one name was faintly but often heard with mixed regret and respect. One day a special meeting was held and a portrait of Bandhu Ambubhai Purani wearing only a stringed loin-cloth, with folded arms and the head slightly bent in a challenging pose, evoking manliness and inspiring affection, was respectfully unveiled by Dr. Hariprasād Desai. It was natural that the reminiscences of Ambubhai who, discarding such a beautiful social service in the flush of youth was now infatuated with Yoga, would cover us with a wave of regret, however momentary. Even through that it was love and gratitude that were expressed. The doctor mentioned how he and Ambubhai used to lose themselves in reading the articles in Sri Aurobindo's *Arya*. . . . Later, in our village during the vacations, my friend and I too began

struggling, in the light of our oil lamps, to understand Ambubhai's translation of *Essays on the Gita*.

Anilbaran Roy:

In June 1926, when I came to Pondicherry for the first time, I was surprised to learn that in recognising Sri Aurobindo Gujarat was ahead of Bengal. . . . In those days the Bengalis had almost forgotten Sri Aurobindo and none felt the urge to travel so far away to meet him. They believed that Sri Aurobindo was doing yoga-sadhana for personal salvation and the country had completely lost him. In those very days, Shri Purani had translated Sri Aurobindo's works on Yoga and his *Essays on the Gita* for the people of Gujarat. These works of Sri Aurobindo made one realise that a new light, a new world, had dawned upon earth. . . . For me, it was a crucial time; I had not plunged into yoga as yet; in fact, I stood on the edge. I did not know enough about Sri Aurobindo's Yoga but had arrived here impelled by some inner aspiration. . . . At that point Purani's example inspired me and made my transition easy. The room I was given in the Guest House was just beside that in which Purani lived with his wife. . . . Purani gave me his files of the *Arya* — I had not read them before. Thus he made my entry into that Great Temple and the Sadhana for a New Age outlined therein, easier. On entering the Temple, I realised that it did not demand any external *tapasya*; that Sadhana is to reject the impulses and activities of our lower nature and establish an all-encompassing inner control. When this is achieved, the higher powers of the three consciousnesses become active in us and in their divine way help transform our being.

Pranab Kumar Bhattacharya:

Besides learning boxing in Biren-da's club, I also learnt to do free-hand exercises, weight-training, wrestling, *āsanās*, folk dances, volleyball, drills, parades, etc. Biren-da used to always encourage me a lot and taught me everything with great care. Soon I became his favourite student. Along with physical development, Biren-da taught me how to build an ideal character and love the country. . . . We needed to prepare the youth of the country into an honest, hard-working and self-sacrificing brigade. That was the only way to take the country forward, to make the country great. . . . As I began my studies in college, I also managed to set up a little gymnasium. I called it 'Vivekananda Vyāyām Samiti' and strove to develop my body as well as my character. . . . Although I managed the club and prepared the boys, I did not know clearly what ideal I was to set before them. . . . I could not accept any political, social, religious or economic philosophy of those times. I wanted to build innumerable

gymnasiums throughout Bengal where the work of preparing man would go on. Behind every club there would be an industry that would bring in money for the club and its workers. But beyond that? And so in search of that “beyond” I came to Pondicherry in 1942, and I finally found here what I had been looking for. . . . I stayed here for about four months. I had come to find and understand the vision and path of Sri Aurobindo. . . . Four of us, Sunil, Gora, Ranju and I, stayed at Chettiar House. I do not know how Purani-ji found out that I was interested in physical education and had been involved in organising physical culture associations. One fine morning he turned up there while I was alone. . . . While talking of Purani-ji, the first thing that I’d like to say is that he was a lion among men. Of medium height, almost short, he had a compact, robust body. There was a spring-like buoyancy in his movements; ever jovial and genuinely optimistic. Mother told me that Barin had brought Purani-ji to the Ashram. . . .

Nirmal-da had a garden in the open space in Chettiar House. Some earth had been dug out for planting trees. With Nirmal-da’s permission I and Purani-ji [*then 47 years old*] got into that excavated portion and started our wrestling bout there! He taught me a lot of holds in wrestling: *sakhini tāng*, *harin fansh*, *tabak faad*, *machhi gota* and many others. After the bout he washed himself under our house-tap and said that he was very happy to see my wrestling. If I wished to learn it well he could make arrangements. He knew someone in Gujarat who was an expert. By spending five or six months with him I could learn wrestling really well. He would make all the arrangements for lodging and boarding.

Naturally I never went to Gujarat . . . but when I came away to the Ashram for good and was setting up the physical education department I built with Purani-ji’s help a beautiful wrestling pit [*haudā*] in 1949. The earth for the pit was prepared under Purani-ji’s instructions; a special kind of soil was brought from the Lake. Then oil, turmeric, neem-leaves, khuskhus, sandal powder, lodellium (from lode, meaning an ore or lead-producing gravel deposit in an old river bed), soapstone, etc. were mixed into it. And then Purani-ji himself taught me wrestling with a lot of interest. How can I ever forget his gift of affection?

Note

(In the 1950s, in a wrestling match of A-2 [now B-2] teenagers that the Mother happened to watch, one of the boys was pitted against his strong-bodied and strong-minded captain. The only way he could and did immobilise him was by seizing an opening the captain inadvertently provided. The same boy faced a much older, stronger, bigger opponent than him during a Judo exhibition-match in the Sports Ground, again with the Mother watching. Again, while the

opponent merrily twirled him round like a child, he suddenly tripped him and sitting on his chest put a neck hold with all his strength which ended the fight [like Bālambhatt did to Ali]. “Très bien!” the Mother exclaimed. — “S”)

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Explorations

Why did Pranab-da write: “Mother told me that Barin had brought Purani-ji to the Ashram”? And why has neither of them explained the reason for holding Barin-da responsible for Purani-ji’s coming to Sri Aurobindo in 1921 and settling here in 1923?

Could the following be part of the reasons?

(1) Chotubhai initiated the revolutionary programme suggested by Barindra but his health did not permit him to take up heavy labour so, as Mooljibhai quotes him, “I spent all my energies in training Ambubhai and concentrated them in firmly instilling the ideals Sri Aurobindo and Barindra had implanted in me in his life; for I wished to spread our movement through him.” That is why when the training of the revolutionaries of their core group was over, it was Ambubhai who came to Sri Aurobindo for further orders in December 1919.

(2) “Hypnotised by the education imparted under alien rule, we Indians had forgotten our great heritage,” wrote Anilbaran Roy: “It was Sri Aurobindo who made us aware of the soul of Indian Arts and of India’s spiritual culture. In expounding all this Purani is a product of Sri Aurobindo’s integral yoga.”

(3) Mooljibhai Talāṭī (being Purani-ji’s chief secretary and publisher, his is the most exhaustive biography of A. B. P.) mentions that wherever Ambubhai went, he tried to create an atmosphere for physical exercises and start an akhāḍā on the lines that his organisation had developed. He believed that every evening everyone, young and old, must assemble to exercise and play some games.

(4) In 1943-44, when some of the youngsters whom the Mother had admitted to her Ashram, invited Purani-ji to supervise them when they played in what later became the main ground of the P.E.D., he gladly took up the work. But differences arose because of the unbridgeable gap between his attitude towards games and exercises and that of those children who had no idea of or interest in the ideals that impelled Ambubhai. So the Mother advised him to let the children learn from personal experience and he pulled out. Evidently she knew that like Barin, Ambubhai had (to use Chotubhai’s description of Barin’s talk in 1907) “the magical Shakti to attract others and influence them. An attractive way of conversing which inspired a person and motivated him to do the work he suggested”, and that he could influence her children with his understanding of the place of physical education in national life.

*

But the time for a national revolution on the physical plane — the emancipation of Mother India and breathing new life and forms into her former glory, was over. The Mother and Sri Aurobindo had been working out the details of an unprecedented universal revolution, one that would liberate all earth from the shackles of the hostile forces that prevent it from taking the next step in its evolution. She was waiting for Pranab-da to take over charge of her children's playground, knowing that she could influence his understanding of the place of physical education in Sri Aurobindo's Vision and Path, and guide him in initiating the revolutionary system of physical education she and Sri Aurobindo hoped to create.

Can one then say that that unprecedented method of Physical Education was partially indicated by Sri Aurobindo in the series entitled 'The Supramental Manifestation upon Earth', that the Mother published in the *Bulletin of Physical Education*? And that it is for that unprecedented universal revolution, that great battle of the future, for which she expects her children to become her hero warriors?

(Concluded)

“S”

References:

- (1) The first edition of the Gujarati monograph *Gujarat-mā Vyāyām Prachār* attributed to Chotubhai Purani (elder brother of Ambubhai who settled in Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1923), published by the Gujarat Vyāyām Prachārak Mandal, Bharuch, 1st Edition in 1950. Its Publisher's Note acknowledges that the material on Bālabhatt-dādā and his son Narayanguru was obtained from Shri Dattātreyā Chintamani Majumdar and his Encyclopedia on Physical Culture.
- (2) *Shri Ambubhai Purani – The Story of his Life and Reminiscences*, Mooljibhai Talāṭi, Pathīk Prakāshan Mandir, Umreth, 1st Edition, February 1970, pp. 6, 30-31, 31-32, 156-57.
- (3) *Purani Bandhu o nu Gujarat. . .*, by Praviṅkānta, p. 20; opening with a very brief history of warfare in Gujarat until the blood-soaked birth of Pax Britannica, this exhaustive volume concentrates on the work of the revolutionaries trained by the Purani Mandal.
- (4) 'Meeting the Master', *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, 2007, pp. 14-15. Prof. Gajānan Yashwant Maṅikrao's family name was originally Nhāmaṇe as it originated in Nhāmaṅkerheri, a village in Kāṭhiāwād. An ancestor having earned the title 'Manik', diamond, for an exceptionally heroic deed, the family name changed to Maṅikrao. Maṅik Rao learned wrestling from Jumma-dādā, who had been given shelter by the Gaekwad Sayājirao I, when he was a young child lost in a jungle in Kāṭhiāwād;

he learned wrestling as well as the Hindu scriptures and lived like a sannyasi.

(5) Translations of the Gujarati Reminiscences of Ambubhai's colleagues and Anilbaran Roy in *Shashṭi-poorti*, the commemoration volume published in Gujarat on the occasion of Ambubhai's 60th birth anniversary in May 1955; pp. 5-6, 9-10, 11, 16.

(6) Pages 206-08, 250-52, of 1st edition of Pranab Kumar Bhattacharya's *I Remember* [. . .] published by Sri Aurobindo Bhavan, Calcutta on 24 November 1993.

Of all austerities the most difficult is the austerity of feelings and emotions, the tapasya of love.

Indeed, in the domain of feelings, more perhaps than in any other, man has the sense of the inevitable, the irresistible, of a fatality that dominates him and which he cannot escape. Love (or at least what human beings call love) is particularly regarded as an imperious master whose caprice one cannot elude, who strikes you according to his fancy and forces you to obey him whether you will or not. In the name of love the worst crimes have been perpetrated, the greatest follies committed.

And yet men have invented all kinds of moral and social rules in the hope of controlling this force of love, of making it amenable and docile. But these rules seem to have been made only to be broken; and the restraint they impose on its free activity merely increases its explosive power. For it is not by rules that the movements of love can be disciplined. Only a greater, higher and truer power of love can subdue the uncontrollable impulses of love. Only love can rule over love by enlightening, transforming and exalting it. For here too, more than anywhere else, control does not consist of suppression and abolition but of transmutation — a sublime alchemy. This is because, of all the forces at work in the universe, love is the most powerful, the most irresistible. Without love the world would fall back into the chaos of inconscience.

The Mother

(On Education, CWM 2nd Ed., Vol. 12, pp. 64-65)

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

(Part 28)

(Continued from the issue of July 2022)

Section 3: A QUIET AND HUMBLE DISPOSITION

Humour

The journalist and author Henry Nevinson was fascinated with Sri Aurobindo’s deep personality and his indefatigable commitment to secure India’s freedom and considered him as one of the most silent men he had known. Nevinson had met Sri Aurobindo twice, at Subodh Mullick’s house and at the Surat Congress Conference. Sri Aurobindo noted that “Nevinson had remarked with horror more than twenty years before — ‘the most dangerous man in India’, Aurobindo Ghose ‘the man who never smiles’. He ought to have added, ‘but who always jokes’; but he did not know that, as I was very solemn with him, or perhaps I had not developed sufficiently on that side then.”¹ In a letter to a disciple Sri Aurobindo wrote:

All this talk about grimness and sternness is sheer rot — you will excuse me for the expression, but there is no other that is adequate. The only truth about it is that I am not demonstrative or expansive in public — but I never was. Nevinson seeing me presiding at the Surat Nationalist Conference — which was not a joke and others were as serious as myself — spoke of me as that most politically dangerous of men — “the man who never smiles” which made people who knew me smile very much. You seem to have somewhere in you a Nevinson impression of me. Or perhaps you agree with X who wrote demanding of me why I smiled only with the lips and complained that it was not a satisfactory smile like the Mother’s. All the same, whatever I may have said to Y or Y may have said to you, I have always given a large place to mirth and laughter and my letters in that style are only the natural outflow of my personality. I have never been “grim” in my life — that is the Stalin-Mussolini style, it is not mine; the only trait I share with the “grim” people is obstinacy in following out my aim in life, but I do it quietly and simply and have always done. Don’t set up some gloomy imaginations and take them for the real Aurobindo.²

1. *CWSA*, Vol. 35, pp. 51-52.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

However, a report in the *Indian Patriot*, apparently written by Nevinson, describes Sri Aurobindo: “A man of very fine culture, his is a lovable nature, merry, sparkling with wit and humour, ready in refined repartee. He is one of those men, to be in whose company is a joy; and behind whose exterior, is a steadily glowing fire of unseen devotion to a cause.”³

Regarding the fractious Surat Congress Conference of 1907, Sri Aurobindo was asked, “Was there any chance of personal injury, Sir?”

“Not that I know of,” replied Sri Aurobindo. “Only Satyen Bose was with me and he had a pistol. He said to me, ‘I have a pistol with me. Shall I shoot down Suren Banerji?’ I said, ‘For heaven’s sake, don’t do that.’” (*Laughter*)

“But why did he want to shoot him?” queried the disciple.

“He must have got very excited. At any rate there was a pistol, there was Satyen and there was Banerji.” (*Laughter*)⁴

When Sri Aurobindo’s first biography (unauthorised) in Marathi was published, a disciple showed a section of it to Sri Aurobindo who quipped: “The general impression he creates is that I must have been a very serious prig, all along very pious and serious. I was nothing of the kind.”⁵

And once a disciple told Sri Aurobindo that “your Himalayan austerity and grandeur take my breath away,” to which he replied with a touch of humour:

O rubbish! I am austere and grand, grim and stern! every blasted thing that I never was! I groan in an unAurobindian despair when I hear such things. What has happened to the common sense of all of you people?⁶

Interestingly, Sri Aurobindo’s faithful attendant, Champaklal, observed: “You know, I was very fond of watching his expressions — it gave me an immense joy.”⁷

Sri Aurobindo’s quiet disposition during his hectic political activity can be seen in the light of his guidance to his disciples: “It is always helpful to limit a little unnecessary talking — it has always a tendency to bring the consciousness down and outwards.”⁸ “Everyone who lives much inside tends to feel too much talking a fatiguing thing and quite shallow and unnecessary unless it is talk that comes from within.”⁹ Sri Aurobindo has stated that he was always “silent and reserved” and even as a political leader his contact with the public was a bit limited.¹⁰

3. Sujata Nahar, *Mother’s Chronicles*, Book V, pp. 379-80.

4. Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 1, 2009, p. 470.

5. A. B. Purani, *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, 4th Ed., 2007, p. 113.

6. *CWSA*, Vol. 35, p. 48.

7. *Champaklal Speaks*, 4th Ed. 2011, p. 146.

8. *CWSA*, Vol. 31, p. 84.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 82.

10. *Ibid.*, Vol. 35, p. 49-50.

However, on the importance of humour Sri Aurobindo said: “Sense of humour? It is the salt of existence. Without it the world would have got utterly out of balance — it is unbalanced enough already — and rushed to blazes long ago.”¹¹ But Sri Aurobindo made a distinction between humour and looseness or levity. He writes: “I am not aware that highly evolved personalities have no sense of humour or how the person can be said to be integrated when this sense is lacking; ‘looseness’ applies only to a frivolous levity without any substance behind it.”¹² And on seriousness he writes:

Why on earth should people not be serious if they want? Life may be a joke, — though all do not find it so — but one can’t be laughing at it all the time. The idea seems to be that one can’t be serious unless one is either (1) in a rage, (2) discontented, (3) sad and miserable. But surely one can be serious when one is thinking or when one is looking at serious things or simply and purely when one is not laughing. And one can’t be laughing 24 hours without stopping, — the muscles of the stomach would not stand it and even the American record makers might shy at such a test.¹³

Dinendra Kumar Roy observed that Sri Aurobindo’s “laughter was like a child’s, simple, liquid and soft.”¹⁴ And in Bengal, despite shouldering an immense burden as a nationalist and revolutionary leader, his political attendants Abinash Bhattacharya and Sudhir Kumar Sarkar have both spoken about his sweet, simple and childlike laughter, whilst Suresh Chandra Deb has heard Sri Aurobindo’s joyful laughter when he gathered with his friends at Subodh Chandra Mullick’s house. Nirodbaran mentioned: “He was reticent and grave by nature, but on the other hand replete with wit and humour when He corresponded with us.”¹⁵

Dilip Kumar Roy wrote about his beloved Guru:

For such a great revolutionary, who matured later into an even greater Yogi of invulnerable gravity, to have retained unimpaired the human zest for laughter and humour and repartees! About his humour we gathered titbits only through anecdotes and cautious gossip and I learned, to my immense relief, that though in society he withdrew generally into the shell of his deep, congenital reserve, with his intimates of his inner circle he had always loved to indulge in banter and laughter and quips of every description.¹⁶

11. *Ibid.*, Vol. 31, p. 174.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 174-75.

14. Dinendra Kumar Roy, *With Aurobindo in Baroda*, 1st Ed., 2006, p. 6 (Dinendra Kumar Roy, *Aurobindo Prasanga* – Translated from Bengali by Maurice Shukla).

15. Website: <http://overmanfoundation.org/2018/08/17/sri-aurobindo-as-i-have-seen-him-by-nirodbaran/> dated 18.11.19.

16. Dilip Kumar Roy, *Sri Aurobindo Came to Me*, 2004 (Harikrishna Mandir Trust, Pune), p. 148.

Despite his reserved nature Sri Aurobindo was very pleasant company. After his return to India he used to spend his Puja vacations at Deogarh at his maternal grandfather's house. His cousin sister Basanti Mitra writes: “But his great love of reading did not prevent him from taking part in our talk and laughter. There was a lot of humour in his conversation. His letters too were steeped with it.”¹⁷ After his first visit to Deogarh in 1894, Sri Aurobindo wrote a comforting humorous letter¹⁸ to his sister Sarojini of which K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar writes: “No wonder people found his private talk full of wit and humour and gentleness and infinite understanding.”¹⁹

As a child too Sri Aurobindo made visits to Deogarh to meet his grandfather and other relatives. On one occasion his eldest maternal uncle, the jovial Jogendranath Bose, was shaving before a mirror. The genial uncle placed the mirror in front of Sri Aurobindo, then dressed in western clothes, and teasingly said, “Look — there is a little monkey.” Not to be outwitted, the young Auro took the mirror and held it before his uncle's face and said, “*Boromama, boro Bandar!* (Look, big uncle, big monkey!)”²⁰

At Baroda Sri Aurobindo was constantly engaged in scholarly studies and writing poetry, yet he did mix with his close friends and went on group excursions. An excerpt from a letter to his uncle Jogendra, dated 15th August, 1902, describes a trip to Ahmedabad with other Baroda State officials. He comes across as an engaging raconteur and satirist:

I have been to Ahmedabad with our cricket eleven and watched them get a jolly good beating; which happy result we celebrated by a gorgeous dinner at the refreshment room. I believe the waiters must have thought us a party of famine-stricken labourers, dressed up in stolen clothes, perhaps the spoils of massacred famine officers. There were six of us and they brought us a dozen plentiful courses; we ate them all and asked for more. As for the bread we consumed — well, they brought us at first a huge toast-rack with about 20 large pieces of toast. After three minutes there was nothing left except the rack itself; they repeated the allowance with a similar result. Then they gave up the toast as a bad job, and brought in two great plates each with a mountain of bread on it as large as Nandanpahad. After a short while we were howling for more. This time there was a wild-eyed consultation of waiters and after some minutes they reappeared with large trays of bread carried in both hands. This time they conquered. They do charge high prices at the refreshment rooms but I don't think they got much profit out of us that time.²¹

17. Basanti Chakravarti (née Mitra), ‘Our Aurobindo’, *Srinivantu*, April & August, 1984, p. 82.

18. N.B. Letter is featured on pp. 9-10 of this issue of *Mother India*.

19. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Sri Aurobindo – a biography and a history*, 5th Ed., 2006, p. 49.

20. See Nirodbaran, *Sri Aurobindo for All Ages*, p. 7.

21. *CWSA*, Vol. 36, p. 141.

In the same letter he maintains his storytelling skills when he describes a group picnic to Ajwa Lake. That Sri Aurobindo was one of the most cultured staff members in the Baroda State Service becomes evident for on the disorderly conduct of his colleagues during the picnic he remarks, “I believe I was the only quiet and decent person in the company.”²² Sri Aurobindo’s humorous vein continues when he narrates another incident to his uncle:

Finally last night I helped to kidnap D^r Cooper, the Health Officer of the State, and make him give us a big dinner at the Station with a bottle and a half of sherry to wash it down. The Doctor got so merry over the sherry of which he drank at least two thirds himself, that he ordered a *special-class* dinner for the whole company next Saturday. I don’t know what M^{rs} Cooper said to him when he got home. All this has had a most beneficial effect upon my health, as the writing of so long a letter shows.²³

At Baroda Sri Aurobindo used to enjoy the odd good laugh. His first friend at Baroda, Bapubhai Majumdar, was witty and a good raconteur. Sri Aurobindo used to laugh loudly when he listened to Bapubhai’s stories.²⁴ On Sri Aurobindo’s conversations with his friend Madhavrao Jadhav, Dinendra Kumar Roy writes, “Aurobindo used to laugh a lot while talking.”²⁵ Once after hearing their loud laughter, Roy told Sri Aurobindo, “Both of you are dreadfully serious in nature as such, but the spectacular display of your laughter leaves me astounded.” Sri Aurobindo replied: “This laughter astounds you! Once my grandfather (late Rajnarayan Bose) and his friend Dwijenbabu (late Dwijendranath Tagore, the eldest brother of Rabindranath) took to laughing in the course of their talks, it seemed their thunderous laughter would blow the ceiling off.”²⁶ Even Rabindranath Tagore, who was 21 years younger than Dwijendranath, has noted about Rajnarayan Bose: “To the end of his life the incessant flow of his hearty laughter suffered no check . . .”²⁷

When a note, taken from a report of a meeting with Sri Aurobindo, stating, “He laughed till his body shook; it was rollicking. . . .” was presented to Sri Aurobindo, he responded:

This won’t do. It is a too exhilarating over-description. It calls up to my mind a Falstaff or a Chesterton; it does not fit in my style of hilarity. It is long since

22. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 143

24. Dinendra Kumar Roy, *With Aurobindo in Baroda*, 1st Ed., 2006, pp. 26-27.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

26. See Dinendra Kumar Roy, ‘Reminiscences of the Days of Yore’ (translated from the Bengali article ‘Sekaler Smriti’); papers at Sri Aurobindo Archives.

27. Manoj Das, ‘Sri Aurobindo: Life and Times of the Mahayogi’, *Mother India*, September 2011, p. 780 (Rabindranath Tagore: *Reminiscences*, Macmillan & Co. Ltd., London, 1928).

my laughter has been continuous and uncontrolled like that. For that to be true I shall have to wait till the Year 1, S.D. (Supramental Descent). And “rollicking”? The epithet would have applied to my grandfather but not to his less explosive grandson.²⁸

At Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo narrated several anecdotes, covering his stay in England and Baroda, to his disciples. An amusing reminiscence that he recalled:

When Mr. Eliot, the Maharaja’s tutor, came to Baroda from England, Mr. Parvi, a Parsi officer, could not understand anything he said because of the strangeness of his pronunciation, so Mr. Parvi went on saying Yes to everything. Then Mr. Eliot put him a question to which he should have said No but he said as usual Yes. Eliot got annoyed and said, “Shall I take you for an ass?” Parvi replied “Yes.”²⁹

About deciphering accents there was an anecdote during his Cambridge days which he narrated:

Lies? Well, a Punjabi student at Cambridge once took our breath away by the frankness and comprehensive profundity of his affirmation: “Liars! But we are all liars!” It appeared that he had intended to say “lawyers”, but his pronunciation gave his remark a deep force of philosophic observation and generalisation which he had not intended!³⁰

Another Cambridge anecdote Sri Aurobindo recalled was on Sir Harisingh Gaur:

He was one of the students with me in England; I heard him in Indian Majlis and in the College Union. I wonder if he had something serious in him but he was clever and spoke well. Once during his speech he said, “The Egyptians rose up like a man” referring to their national spirit. This was repeated two or three times. So someone from the audience asked, “But how many times did they sit down?”³¹

Sri Aurobindo’s silent sage-like personality did not prevent him from occasionally bantering and joking with the young revolutionaries. Nolini Kanta Gupta writes that in Alipore jail Sri Aurobindo was immersed in intense sadhana,

28. *CWSA*, Vol. 35, p. 52.

29. A. B. Purani, *The Life of Sri Aurobindo*, 2001, p. 210.

30. *CWSA*, Vol. 35, p. 11.

31. A. B. Purani. *The Life of Sri Aurobindo*, 2001, p. 193.

yet “occasionally he too did not hesitate to join in our childish pranks.”³² And Upendranath Banerji writes: “A nook had been reserved for Arabinda Babu. He remained engrossed in meditation the whole morning. Even the hell of the noise that the musical boys made did never disturb or affect him. In the afternoons he would pace up and down the room and read the Upanishads or some such works. But he could not escape mixing with us in the evening at least for half an hour or an hour.”³³

Biren Chandra Sen, the youngest to be transported to the Andamans in the Alipore Bomb Case and who later joined the Ashram, recounts that even during Sri Aurobindo’s intense sadhana in Alipore jail he had a social and lighthearted side too:

Sri Aurobindo was nothing like the dreadful men we expected leaders to be. Though reserved, his manner was easy and natural. At night he was often found to be in deep meditation or in various postures of ‘asanas’ or ‘mudras’, and, during day-time, and as long as the light permitted, he lay steeped in the ancient lore of Mother India. But that did not prevent him from mixing freely with the rest. He could talk and would talk at times for hours; would not mind playing cards, or rounds of ‘Ghost’ and ‘Word-making’ and ‘Word-raking’; had a fund of humour; and would even prepare propaganda literature like ‘The Cult of the Bomb’ for circulation outside. At times he would relate his experiences of Yoga, at other times he would listen to experiences of his comrades and help them with suggestions; while at yet other times, and not quite unoften, he would be seen engaged in random conversation.

. . . He was extremely human and could even be party to, and enjoy, the devilries of youth. Our friends outside would often send delicacies for us, and my elder brother, Hem Chandra, would sometimes take charge of these and see to their equitable distribution and conservation. One night when all were asleep a few young men conspired to stealthily remove a tin of biscuits and were helping themselves to the contents. Sri Aurobindo also had his share of the loot. Somehow my brother was disturbed out of his sleep and the miscreants took to hiding. Sri Aurobindo, who was busy with his share, noticed my brother and called out — “Hello Hem! Come here and have your share.”³⁴

Abinash Bhattacharya also writes of Sri Aurobindo’s comportment in Alipore jail:

Once, when I was passing out some of Hem’s biscuits, I noticed that Aurobindo-babu was awake. I stuffed three or four biscuits into his hands. He chortled

32. See *Collected Works of Nolini Kanta Gupta*, Vol. 7, p. 378.

33. Manoj Das, ‘Sri Aurobindo: Life and Times of the Mahayogi’, *Mother India*, September 2015, pp. 709-10.

34. Biren Chandra Sen, ‘Sri Aurobindo as I Remember Him’, *Mother India*, April 1964, p. 19.

with delight like a child, stretched out on the floor and started munching them. During our free time we sat in a circle with Aurobindo-babu and played “wordmaking”.³⁵

Sudhir Kumar Sarkar too recalls that Sri Aurobindo did his sadhana in jail and yet he would join in the bonhomie, at times expounding on various important subjects:

The jail became a veritable den of high spirits and amusement. Sri Aurobindo went into meditation in the evening and in the early hours before dawn. On days when there was no court to attend, he would often spend the time with us, sometimes we played word making games for learning the Bengali language; sometimes there would be a mock court in which Ullaskar would be the judge and Sri Aurobindo himself would be the Public Prosecutor imitating the arguments of Norton. He would expound on subjects like philosophy of British law and justice, the morality and immorality of Anarchism, Imperialism, revolution, the morality of political dacoity, bombing, killing, etc., he spoke with such lucidity, arguing on both sides, that it seemed he had a map of all these topics spread out before him.³⁶

About the indicted revolutionaries Sri Aurobindo writes: “On their lips were often expressed high and pure ideas and their speech showed keen intelligence, a love of knowledge and noble selfless aspirations”.³⁷ He also recounts: “I would be content with seeing, now and then, God in all creatures, for the rest I would observe the words and behaviour of my companions in adversity . . . I greatly enjoyed the laughter and the pleasantries of the accused lads; else the time spent at the court appeared wholly annoying.”³⁸ Sri Aurobindo also remarks that the spectators at the Alipore court “might have thought these laughter-loving young lads must be some group of daredevil famous warriors.”³⁹

Sudhir Kumar Sarkar recounts an amusing squabble that broke out late at night between two revolutionary inmates and how Sri Aurobindo became the mediator:

Seeing Sri Aurobindo meditating, we also started to meditate at night. Bijoy Bhattacharya was arrested while making bombs. He used to join us in these activities. Everyone liked him. One day, seeing Probash, the orator, deep in meditation at midnight, Bijoy took a palm-leaf fan in hand, held it like a flute in

35. Abinash Bhattacharya, ‘Sri Aurobindo’, *Mother India*, July 2012, p. 537.

36. Mona Sarkar, *Spirit Indomitable*, 1989, p. 98.

37. Sri Aurobindo, *Tales of Prison Life*, 4th Ed., 2014, p. 30.

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

the pose of Krishna, stood before Probash and whispered, “Here I have come!” What insolence! How dare he make fun of spiritual emotion! Pandemonium broke out! Probash jumped up and chased the fake god through the whole length of the big hall. The noise of the stampede woke all of us up. Finally Bijoy Kanta took shelter under Sri Aurobindo’s wings. The complainant there and then demanded justice from Sri Aurobindo. He threatened if the case was not dealt with either Bijoy Kanta would be annihilated or the sadhak himself would commit suicide! So a court was set up at two in the morning! At the orator’s request Ullaskar was made the judge and Sri Aurobindo agreed to take upon himself the role of counsel for the defendant. The court began.⁴⁰

In an interview soon after his acquittal in the Alipore Bomb Case, Sri Aurobindo expressed his admiration for Ullaskar. Referring to the time the court rose for lunch during the trial Sri Aurobindo said: “Ullaskar, Hem Das and others used to enlighten us with their entertaining witticism.” And when questioned how they could be joking with such serious charges against them, Sri Aurobindo replied: “As far as they were concerned, that was not quite unnatural. None of them would bother himself in the least as to the result of the case,” adding, “everybody was under the impression that guilty or not guilty he was sure to be punished.” When asked what this entertaining witticism was like, Sri Aurobindo said, “Well, some of the witnesses spoke bad English; others pronunciations were very defective while some others made strange gestures. Ullaskar made excellent caricatures of all this — so true and life-like that it was difficult to restrain loud laughter. Hem Das, Upendra and others used to tell various amusing stories. Indeed, we were made to forget of our real position as prisoners by these various entertainments.”⁴¹

Whilst Ullaskar, Hem Das and others largely made fun of the British and others in private, Sri Aurobindo daringly did it publicly. After his acquittal, Sri Aurobindo knew he was a marked man. About the British bureaucracy spying on him he wrote, tongue in cheek, in the *Karmayogin*:

Sj. Aurobindo Ghose has recently received an anonymous letter giving him the momentous information that a certain Gopal Chandra Ray of the C.I.D. with several assistants is busy watching 6 College Square and the Post Office and copying all the letters and postcards that come in his name without exception. Sj. Aurobindo has not the honour of the noble Gopal’s acquaintance, nor is he even aware whether this gentleman has any corporeal existence. The letter may be a hoax; or it may be sent by one of the “assistants”, weary to death of copying letters and postcards and of the inclement and uncomfortable business

40. Mona Sarkar, *Spirit Indomitable*, 1989, p. 99.

41. See Manoj Das, *Sri Aurobindo: ‘Life and Times of the Mahayogi’*, *Mother India*, September 2016, pp. 739-40.

of an open air watch fanned by the breezes of Goldighi in this season. It does not matter to the gentleman honoured by these attentions whether the whole police force occupy Goldighi for inquisitorial purposes or whether numerous editions of his correspondence are turned out for the use of posterity by the disinterested labours of the C.I.D. Still, he has suggested to us certain proposals to be placed before the Government in this connection and we proceed to make them. In the first place, for the sake of humanity, a comfortable stall might be put up in the Square for the vigilant cow-keeper and his herd whence they could watch more happily and quite as effectively. Secondly, if the Government would kindly instruct the Post Office not to lose one-tenth of Aurobindo Babu's letters after copying them and delay the greater part of the others, there would probably be no harm done to the Empire. Thirdly, Sj. Aurobindo Ghose begs us to inform the authorities that he was never greatly in the habit of writing letters before and, after the exposure of his private correspondence with his friends and family by the prosecution in the Alipur case, he has almost dropped the practice, except in urgent matters of business. It is possible, therefore, for this part of the investigation to be carried on very cheaply, and the Government must not be deceived by any representations on part of Gopal or others that a big staff is wanted. Further, we are instructed to inform all intending correspondents of the above-mentioned facts so that they may not be disturbed or anxious about Sj. Aurobindo's health if they get no answer to their letters. Secondly, it would be advisable for them, when writing to him, to forward a copy of the letter to the Secretary to the Bengal Government or to Mr. Denham of the C.I.D. Thirdly, if any one wishes to send by post specimens of bombs, revolvers, or anything explosive or picric, or plans and estimates for a conspiracy or insurrection great or small, he had better send it either by hand or through the editors of the *Statesman* or *Englishman*. No reply need be expected.⁴²

In his Kumartuli speech on 11th July, 1909, a dauntless Sri Aurobindo humo-rously recounted his interactions with the police after he was released from Alipore jail:

Another quarter he had disappointed was the police. (*Laughter*) He had received a message from them saying that he was opening his mouth too much. He gave an interview to a press representative and told him something mainly about the food and accommodation in the Government Hotel at Alipore. (*Laughter*) He was immediately informed that that was a great indiscretion on his part and that it would bring trouble on him. When he went to Jhalakati the attentions of the police pursued him. They told the Barisal people and the local merchants that if he (the speaker) was taken there the District Conference would be stopped.⁴³

42. *CWSA*, Vol. 8, pp. 416-17.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

Sri Aurobindo in his Bengali book *Karakahini (Tales of Prison Life)* had written about his experiences in the Alipore jail. Although the threat of being sent to the gallows was constantly hanging in the air, Sri Aurobindo saw the lighter side of the imprisonment and his narration is written with irony, sarcasm and humour.

Once a biographer was documenting Sri Aurobindo's brilliant scholarship at Cambridge where he passed the Classical Tripos obtaining record marks in Greek and Latin. However, the biographer had added, in brackets, a long passage on his Cambridge classmate, Beachcroft, who subsequently had adjudicated and acquitted Sri Aurobindo in the Alipore Bomb Case. Sri Aurobindo then interjected, “But what is Beachcroft doing here? He butts in in such a vast and spreading parenthesis that he seems to be one of ‘these ancient languages’ and in him too, perhaps, I got record marks!”⁴⁴

Prior to Sri Aurobindo's arrival in Pondicherry, Motilal Roy arranged for his stay at Chandernagore in February-March 1910. Roy joyfully reminisced his contact with him: “We talked for hours together, leaving nothing undiscussed. I can hardly restrain my laugh, when I remember his numerous bantering remarks.”⁴⁵ Subsequently Sri Aurobindo faced severe financial hardship in Pondicherry. In a letter to Motilal Roy where he was trying to secure funds to meet his expenses Sri Aurobindo writes satirically: “That Rs 250 ought to come from Sham Babu and Sharma, but there is little hope of money once swallowed by a patriot being disgorged again. His philanthropic stomach digests sovereignly.”⁴⁶

Years later there was an instance where the Mother asked Sri Aurobindo: “X promised to offer us a big sum, but he has given only Rs 100 with the promise that the rest will follow. Shall we accept or refuse, Lord?” Sri Aurobindo quietly replied, “Accept it and hope for the best.” The Mother along with the attendants instantaneously burst out laughing.⁴⁷

G. Monod-Herzen was acquainted with the Chief of the French Police and requested him to search through files to see if there was anything about the Ashram in the early days. The Chief of Police found a report that stated, “I, secret agent being stationed at the corner of rue de la Marine near a room where Sri Aurobindo and his friends had gathered, heard him laugh loudly: which goes to prove that these people are not very serious.”⁴⁸

In 1920, Barin, after his release from the Andamans Cellular Jail, thanks to a royal amnesty after WWI, visited Pondicherry. Sri Aurobindo received Barin in his smiling quiet detached manner. There were always “bright talks sparkling

44. *Ibid.*, Vol. 36, p. 13.

45. See Motilal Roy, *My Life's Partner*, pp. 189-90 (translated from Bengali by D. S. Mahalanobis).

46. *CWSA*, Vol. 36, p. 208.

47. See Nirodbaran, *Twelve Years with Sri Aurobindo*, 2000, p. 257.

48. Gabriel Monod-Herzen, ‘Reminiscences of Sri Aurobindo’, *Mother India*, August 1972, p. 498 (translated from French by Patrizia Norelli-Bachelet).

with wit and humour”. Only those who have sat with Sri Aurobindo, says Barin, can understand the “sweet uplifting power” and the “intellectual richness” of his personality.⁴⁹

In 1921, Hrishikesh Kanjilal, a fellow revolutionary who served jail terms both at Alipore and the Andamans for his role in the Alipore Bomb Case, came to Pondicherry with his companion Nolini Kanto Sarkar to meet Sri Aurobindo. Nolini Kanto Sarkar relates the meeting:

On entering [*Sri Aurobindo's house*] we found Sri Aurobindo and Barin-da before us standing in the courtyard. We bent down and touched Sri Aurobindo's feet. The way Sri Aurobindo greeted Hrishi-da, dispelled all my nervousness at one stroke. It was the intimate light-hearted banter that friends use to address one another. The reason for this familiarity was not far to seek. Hrishi-da had spent one whole year with Sri Aurobindo in the Alipore Jail, and so they knew each other very well. I knew Hrishi-da had a good sense of humour, but this kind of witticism from Sri Aurobindo was beyond my dreams.⁵⁰

Much of Sri Aurobindo's humour, wit, satire, banter and jest has been documented by his disciples in Pondicherry. Let us briefly delve into this treasure trove. V. Chidanand, who had his first darshan of Sri Aurobindo in March 1920, writes: “His wisdom was profound and he had a fine and subtle sense of humour. . . . he made us feel quite at ease in his august presence. I never saw him solemn or serious. Humour, even light-hearted jokes and jests, used to be there in plenty. On occasions he would chuckle happily.”⁵¹ V. Chidanand also writes: “About the year 1920 a good-humoured joke of Sri Aurobindo — one of many — used to be current in his circle. A certain person wanted to publish a magazine and sought Sri Aurobindo's advice. Sri Aurobindo was reported to say to him, “What is it you want to publish? Your ignorance?”⁵²

V. Ramaswami Iyengar who stayed with Sri Aurobindo in the early years said: “His sense of humour was colossal. He had a gift of aggressive laughter without giving offense to anybody, least of all, to the party affected.”⁵³ Not only was Sri Aurobindo's delectable humour harmless but his boundless compassion, care and patience blended so well with his occasional witty remarks that he made on his disciples. When a disciple remarked, “Some people regard quarrelling with the Divine as the psychic way,” Sri Aurobindo quipped, “In that case, many people are psychic in the Ashram.”⁵⁴

49. See Barindra Kumar Ghose, *The Tale of my Exile – Twelve Years in the Andamans*, 2011, p. xxxv.

50. Nolini Kanto Sarkar, ‘Between the Arrival and the Departure’, *Mother India*, November 2004, p. 1031 (translated from Bengali by Aniruddha Sircar).

51. V. Chidanand, ‘Sri Aurobindo at Evening Talk’, *Mother India*, August 1969, pp. 470, 472.

52. *Breath of Grace*, Editor M. P. Pandit, 2011, p. 1.

53. *Sri Aurobindo: Archives and Research*, December 1988, p. 188.

54. A. B. Purani, *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, 4th Ed., 2007, p. 648.

In another instance he good humouredly said: “I thought that Japanese spirituality is in the Japanese religion which is called Zen Buddhism. There the disciples have to bear blows from the Guru as a test of discipleship. (*Smiling*) I suppose many would find that inconvenient here.”⁵⁵ In a conversation with his attendants Sri Aurobindo affirmed that Zen Buddhism was alive in Japan to which A. B. Purani remarked, “I am told that in Lhasa the meditation is very rigorous and the monks are thrashed for breaking the discipline.” Sri Aurobindo quipped, “We might also begin that here! Purani could be deputed as one of the thrashers.”⁵⁶

However, unlike the Zen and Lhasa Buddhist masters, Sri Aurobindo gave a lot of latitude to his disciples. In fact his patience was legendary. And when Nirodbaran expressed his disgust and difficulty with two patients, T and S, Sri Aurobindo put forth a positive proposition:

Well, T and S used both to get cured without need of medicines once on a time. The later development has evidently come for your advantage, so that you may have elementary exercises in samata. I have had a lot of schooling in that way and graduated M.A. Your turn now.⁵⁷

Sri Aurobindo did not take offence when some disciples tried to cross swords with him. Nirodbaran was an intrepid letter writer. In one instance he boldly wrote to the Lord, “Obviously, evidently, undoubtedly, Sir, your Force is growing! By the number of departees, one can see that!” Sri Aurobindo clarified: “They are not departees — yet. X gone on a spree — says he will one day come back. V sent as a missionary by the Mother — don’t expect his mission will be very fruitful though. R went for her property — property and herself held up by family, as we told her it would be etc. So no sufficient proof of Force here. If they had all gone saying ‘Never shall I come back’ as X threatened once, the proof would be conclusive.”⁵⁸

Nirodbaran himself proposed to be a temporary departee when he wrote to Sri Aurobindo, “In short, I am thinking of going out somewhere for a month. I can only think of A at Bombay who may be willing to keep me.” The Master reacted, “That is D’s proposition all over again! I have to spend a large part of the night writing letters to him so that he may not start for Cape Comorin and the Himalayas — now if you pile Bombay and A on these two ends of India, I for my part shall have to head for the Pacific Ocean.”⁵⁹

Amal Kiran was another disciple who took full advantage of Sri Aurobindo’s liberalness, daringly seeking answers and in the process, occasionally, was at the

55. Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 1, 2009, p. 105.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 207.

57. *Nirodbaran’s Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 2, 2001, p. 717.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 856.

59. *Ibid.*, pp. 622-23.

receiving end of the Guru’s repartee and wit. Once, a disciple said, “Have you seen Amal’s recent article ‘Can Indians Write English Poetry?’” Sri Aurobindo replied, “Yes. He has paid a compliment to the Ashram. He has said that there is a growing band of gifted poets here. Perhaps he is paying a compliment to himself!” (*Laughter*)⁶⁰

Nirodbaran’s and Amal Kiran’s (and also Dilip Kumar Roy) attempt to jestingly lock horns with their beloved Guru evokes two of his aphorisms: “Until thou canst learn to grapple with God as a wrestler with his comrade, thy soul’s strength shall always be hid from thee.”⁶¹ and “To fear God really is to remove oneself to a distance from Him, but to fear Him in play gives an edge to utter delightedness.”⁶²

On Sri Aurobindo’s correspondence with Nirodbaran the Mother remarked: “There are extraordinary things in there. He seems to be joking all the time . . .”⁶³ On the same correspondence the Mother also remarked: “And you know from the point of view of humour, I have never read anything more wonderful, oh! . . . He had a way of looking at things . . . it’s incredible. Incredible. But it seems that for him, the outside world was something . . . absurd, you know.”⁶⁴

Let us briefly mention some of Sri Aurobindo’s memorable witty one-liners or succinct replies. Sri Aurobindo had an irresistible answer to every jibe that was thrown at him. When Nirodbaran demanded: “May I ask you for that promised poem as a New Year present?” Promptly came the reply: “You may ask; but who has time for it? Not yours truly.”⁶⁵ On his poetic perplexity Nirodbaran expressed his dilemma, “At times I wonder why the devil I bother my head with poetry? Have I come here for blessed poetry?” Sri Aurobindo put his doubts to rest, “You haven’t. But the poetry has come for you. So why shout?”⁶⁶ And when Nirodbaran wrote, “Interest in poetry and in reading has dwindled, and now I’m on the way to be a ‘subconscient ass’,” Sri Aurobindo proposed, “Why not become a conscious one?”⁶⁷

On another instance, Nirodbaran gave Sri Aurobindo an earful, “I try to leave myself in your hands entirely. Am I wrong in my attitude or am I to cry constantly into your ears?” Sri Aurobindo’s unperturbed succinct reply read: “Not constantly, but from time to time.”⁶⁸

Once Nirodbaran boldly stated, “People are longing to see the first batch of the supramental species from your great laboratory, Sir,” Sri Aurobindo amusingly proposed, “Go forward, go forward and show yourself.”⁶⁹ In another instance

60. Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 1, 2009, p. 355.

61. *CWSA*, Vol. 12, p. 496.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 481.

63. *Nirodbaran’s Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 2, 2001, p. vi.

64. *Ibid.*, p. vii.

65. *Nirodbaran’s Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 1, 2001, p. 441.

66. Nirodbaran, *Sri Aurobindo’s Humour*, 3rd Ed., p. 113.

67. *Nirodbaran’s Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 1, 2001, p. 390.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 342.

Nirodbaran asked for an intelligent person with some interest in work to guard the dispensary. When Sri Aurobindo replied in the negative, Nirodbaran responded, “Very strange, Sir, that you don’t have a single intelligent chap in the species of your Supramental race-to-be! On what do you build your hopes, please?” Sri Aurobindo retorted: “Excuse me, you said intelligence and interest. You might find one of these separately, but how do you hope to get them combined together?” and then went on to recommend, “Anyhow we can’t hunt for the kind of animal you want, you really should take up the chase.”⁷⁰

To certain disciples, particularly Nirodbaran, Sri Aurobindo often used all kinds of exclamations in his letters like “Good Heavens”, “Good Lord”, “Gracious Heavens!”, “Merciful heavens”, “Great Jehovah”, “Shobhan Allah!”, “What the deuce”, “By Jove”, “But hang it all!”, “Great Scott!”, “Glorious” etc. Nirodbaran explains that Sri Aurobindo very freely “used swear-words for the sake of fun or perhaps to shock the puritan temper.”⁷¹ Once, Nirodbaran started a letter with the phrase, “By the Guru!” Sri Aurobindo interjected, ““By the Guru’! What kind of oath is this?”⁷²

When Nirodbaran asked Sri Aurobindo to expound on his statement “What really works are unseen forces,” he neatly circumvented the question: “Sir, do you think I have time for your interesting questions? I have had three nights work to do in a single night — and in that my table lamp gone.”⁷³

And when Nirodbaran moaned: “My nights are again becoming heavy. I don’t know how to deal with them,” the Lord commiserated, “So are mine with a too damnably heavy burden of letters to write.”⁷⁴ And then Nirodbaran informed the Master, “Self — Pus still coming out. Nose also angry!” Sri Aurobindo tempered the disciple with a jest, “What a bad-tempered “pussy” cat of a nose!”⁷⁵

On another occasion Nirodbaran informed, “X has phimosis,” Sri Aurobindo queried, “What kind of medical animal is this?” “That is a trouble causing difficulty in passing urine due to the narrowing of the orifice,” replied the doctor. Sri Aurobindo continued, “My dear sir, if you clap a word like that on an illness, do you think it is easy for the patient to recover?”⁷⁶ And when Nirodbaran wrote, “No medical cases today,” Sri Aurobindo corrected him, “Hello! Golden Age come or what? No — for R’s pain is kicking cheerfully again. . . .”⁷⁷ And about a disciple who believed that it was the Codein Phos syrup and not the Yoga-Force that miraculously stopped his cough, Sri Aurobindo sweetly and punningly wrote to Nirodbaran, “The fellow!

70. Nirodbaran, *Sri Aurobindo’s Humour*, 3rd Ed., p. 12.

71. *Nirodbaran’s Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 1, 2001, p. x.

72. Nirodbaran, *Sri Aurobindo’s Humour*, 3rd Ed., p. 60.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

74. *Nirodbaran’s Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 1, 2001, p. 473.

75. *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, 2001, p. 993.

76. Nirodbaran, *Sri Aurobindo’s Humour*, 3rd Ed., pp. 69-70.

77. *Nirodbaran’s Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 1, 2001, p. 598.

After my strong intervention, he now says it is not God’s Force, but Codein Phos!”⁷⁸

Once Dr. Nirodbaran narrated an experience, “In meditation, I had again a stillness of the inner and outer being, but the body was gradually bending down, as if I was in a light sleep. I could remember that you were there. Was that a state of sleep due to a full stomach?” Sri Aurobindo confirmed the experience, “You were going into the inner consciousness and away from the outer, that is all,” and then humorously encouraged, “Is that the medical man’s explanation of the experience? If a full stomach can produce experiences, you ought perhaps to treble or quadruple your rations.”⁷⁹

In another instance Nirodbaran lamented, “But I haven’t got that leechlike tenacity. . . . You yourself had to concentrate for 4 or 5 hours a day for so many years, after which everything flowed in a river. But I am not Sri Aurobindo! I am not born with such a will and determination.” Sri Aurobindo amusingly cheers up Nirodbaran: “It does not matter if you have not a leechlike tenacity — leeches are not the only type of Yogins. If you can stick anyhow or get stuck that is sufficient. The fact that you are not Sri Aurobindo (who said you were?) is an inept irrelevance.”⁸⁰

Once an exuberant Nirodbaran could not restrain himself in writing to his beloved Guru: “Let me then say definitely that I love you and you love me a little and let us meet somewhere in this matter. You may remark, ‘This man has gone mad, otherwise why all these asthmatic gaspings?’ Yes, I am mad, Sir, and impatient too.” A bemused Sri Aurobindo replied: “Ummm! don’t you think there are enough people in that condition already here without the Asram doctor adding himself to the collection?”⁸¹

And when Nirodbaran wrote: “You can cut me, Sir, or beat me, but don’t forsake me,” Sri Aurobindo’s reassuring rejoinder read, “Never! But beat — a lot.”⁸²

A few months later Nirodbaran wanted a table and reminded Sri Aurobindo about it. “What about my table? Forgotten? Ellipsis?” And followed it with a doggerel:

Out of the silence
What is the word that be
About my cane-table, Sir?
Either can I take with surrender. . . .

Sri Aurobindo’s reply read: “Forgot both the cane and the table. You can have, if it is lying about. Good Lord? another! If you rhyme sir and surrender, you don’t

78. *Ibid.*, p. 524.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

80. *Ibid.*, pp. 457, 461.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 209.

82. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

deserve a table but only a cane and plenty of it.”⁸³

Then there was an incorrigible fellow called Chand who used to regularly send letters or telegrams to Sri Aurobindo directly or through Nirodbaran. Once Chand pestered Sri Aurobindo by sending four telegrams one after the other, the last one stating, “Great inertia again, letter follows.” Nirodbaran forwarded the telegram to Sri Aurobindo saying: “Guru, another bombardment! What an impulsive fellow! Almost unparalleled. I think he is another fellow who will find life extremely difficult here.” “Well,” replied Sri Aurobindo, “there’s no inertia in his wrong activities at any rate. He is full of energy there.” The correspondence then continues:

Chand says that one day he will commit suicide due to lack of faith! My Gracious, are you specialising at a lot of sentimental screw-loose fellows as disciples?

It looks like it! What a museum! But this kind of collectioning has been my luck and not my intention.

Chand writes there is no letter from me. So, one word, Guru!

Well, well! (That’s one word twice repeated).

Chand writes: “You have said ‘Well, well!’ The meaning is quite clear to me.”

Queer! He seems cleverer than myself.⁸⁴

Once, in one of Sri Aurobindo’s letters Nirodbaran misread the word “marriage” as “message”. He wrote to Sri Aurobindo: “What, Y has gone out to deliver a ‘message’”? Sri Aurobindo replied: “There is nothing about message — marriage, marriage — two marriages, in fact. Not that he is going to marry 2 wives, but he is going to see the misfortune of two others consummated and gloat over it.”⁸⁵ About another disciple Nirodbaran asked: “He has very big ideas about himself, e.g. he once said to me that he was trying to solve the sex-problem of the Asram!” Sri Aurobindo quipped: “So did N — he solved it finally by joining his wife.”⁸⁶

On the theme of marriages there is an assortment of jokes. There is a story about a sadhak who wanted to marry but only on the condition that Sri Aurobindo gave his approval. He wrote to Sri Aurobindo expressing his desire but received no reply. When the sadhak wrote a second time asking whether his silence indicated

83. *Ibid.*, p. 359.

84. *Nirodbaran’s Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 2, 2001, pp. 1063, 1080-81, 1154-55, 1157.

85. *Ibid.*, pp. 860-61.

86. *Nirodbaran’s Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 1, 2001, p. 519.

acceptance, pat came Sri Aurobindo’s answer, “I am not a girl.”⁸⁷ Then there was an incident during the thirties, where a sadhak, who had been residing in the Ashram for some years, asked Sri Aurobindo’s permission to marry. The Lord replied, “Here only cats and dogs marry.”⁸⁸

On the other hand, when Nolini Kanto Sarkar decided to remarry after the death of his wife, with whom he was incompatible, a few people complained to Sri Aurobindo, imploring him to dissuade Nolini Kanto from remarrying. Sri Aurobindo took no heed to their pleas and instead replied, “Inform me early when he goes for it a third time.”⁸⁹

After Sri Aurobindo’s accident on the eve of the November 1938 darshan the disciples had to miss two darshans. The following April the conversation with his attendants went as follows:

SATYENDRA: There is talk of the Darshan taking place in April now. People are asking us about it. If we say, “We don’t know,” they get angry and retort, “Oh, you are having Darshan every day and so you don’t care.” (*Laughter*)

SRI AUROBINDO: I don’t know myself. Maybe. (*Purani was signalling from behind to Nirodbaran that there would be Darshan*).

SATYENDRA: Purani knows.

SRI AUROBINDO: He does?

PURANI: There is a chance. The Mother perhaps doesn’t want to say anything because many people may ask for permission.

SATYENDRA: If the sadhaks know, it’s sure to leak out.

SRI AUROBINDO: Yes. Spreading news has become a yogic siddhi. (*Laughter*) Even before anything is decided it leaks out!⁹⁰

Once when Sri Aurobindo was informed of a quandary that a disciple faced, he offered some practical wisdom laced with a touch of humour:

NIRODBARAN: . . . The man has asked Anilbaran for Rs. 10,000 to help him out of his difficulty and has asked for your blessings.

SRI AUROBINDO: Blessings can be sent, but Rs. 10,000?

NIRODBARAN: It seems this man did some good to Anilbaran a long time ago and Anilbaran in return offered to help him, if he needed help at any time. This was sixteen or seventeen years ago.

CHAMPAKLAL: Anilbaran says the man has always been very honest but has been cheated by everybody.

87. See Anurag Banerjee, *Sri Aurobindo as We Saw Him*, 1st Ed., p. 84.

88. Shyam Kumari, *More Vignettes of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother*, 2005, p. 26.

89. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

90. Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 2, 2013, pp. 543-44.

SRI AUROBINDO: That is the fate of honest people. The rule is: you shouldn't cheat but you should know how it is done. (*Laughter*)⁹¹

About the evening talks that Sri Aurobindo had with his attendants, Nirodbaran writes:

I have often wondered what his state of consciousness was, for instance, when he was talking with us or dictating *Savitri*. Now I have learnt that the three states of consciousness: transcendent, cosmic and individual can operate at the same time. I also used to wonder how he could take interest even in the most trivial, “unspiritual” amusing talk or incidents, and joke with us, say on snoring or baldness! He had found the *rasa*, the delight of Brahman in everything. So his jokes were never trivial; they could be playful but always had an intellectual element in them.⁹²

The attendants often narrated jokes to Sri Aurobindo. In one instance the conversation ran thus:

DISCIPLE: In the days when X used to work here [*with Mother*] a newcomer asked him, “Who are the advanced sadhaks here?” He said, “I don't know.” Then, after he was repeatedly pressed, he said, “I will tell you, but you must not tell anybody else. There are only two advanced sadhaks here — you and I.” (*Laughter*)

SRI AUROBINDO: This instance of “we two” reminds me of a joke of Hugo. Balzac told a friend that there are only two men who know how to write French, “Myself and Hugo.” When it was reported to Hugo, he said, “That is all right, but why Balzac?” (*Laughter*)

There is a story of a Calvinist lady. Calvinists believe in the doctrine that people are predestined to go to either Heaven or Hell. Someone asked her, “Do you know where people of your congregation will go?” She said, “All will go to Hell, except myself and the minister. But I have doubts about the minister.” (*Laughter*)

DISCIPLE: Very similar is the case of Dr. R who is here. When he first came here I asked him about homeopaths. He said, “You see there are four topmost men in the line. One is in Calcutta, two are abroad, and I came here.” (*Laughter*)⁹³

Speaking of *littérateurs*, Champaklall once mentioned: “My eyes always remain watery.” Sri Aurobindo responded, “Virgil had eyes like that, while Horace used to

91. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, 2009, p. 355.

92. Nirodbaran, *Twelve Years with Sri Aurobindo*, 2000, p. 233.

93. A. B. Purani, *Evening Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, 4th Ed., 2007, p. 647.

breathe hard. Once Mycaenas, the great patron of literature in the reign of Augustus Caesar, was sitting between the two poets and said, ‘I am sitting between sighs and tears.’ (*Laughter*)”⁹⁴

Sri Aurobindo’s humour also reflected his modesty and unpretentiousness. A disciple wrote: “There was a report in the *Hindu* that a deputation was coming from London to Pondicherry to ask you to take the helm of politics as a successor to Gandhi. The report says that you know 35 languages and have written 500 books.” “I have read the wonderful screed from London,” replied Sri Aurobindo and hilariously added, “Truly I am more marvellous than I thought, 35 languages and 500 books!” For good measure he also commented about the supposed deputation from London, “As to the seven pilgrims, they must be men of the Gita’s type, *niṣkāmakarmīs*, to be prepared to come all these thousands of miles for nothing.”⁹⁵

(*To be continued*)

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94. Nirodbaran, *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, Vol. 1, 2009, pp. 60-61.

95. *CWSA*, Vol. 35, p. 27.

This ego or “I” is not a lasting truth, much less our essential part; it is only a formation of Nature, a mental form of thought-centralisation in the perceiving and discriminating mind, a vital form of the centralisation of feeling and sensation in our parts of life, a form of physical conscious reception centralising substance and function of substance in our bodies. All that we internally are is not ego, but consciousness, soul or spirit. All that we externally and superficially are and do is not ego but Nature. An executive cosmic force shapes us and dictates through our temperament and environment and mentality so shaped, through our individualised formulation of the cosmic energies, our actions and their results. Truly, we do not think, will or act but thought occurs in us, will occurs in us, impulse and act occur in us; our ego-sense gathers around itself, refers to itself all this flow of natural activities. It is cosmic Force, it is Nature that forms the thought, imposes the will, imparts the impulse. Our body, mind and ego are a wave of that sea of force in action and do not govern it, but by it are governed and directed.

Sri Aurobindo

(*The Synthesis of Yoga*, *CWSA*, Vol. 23, p. 214)

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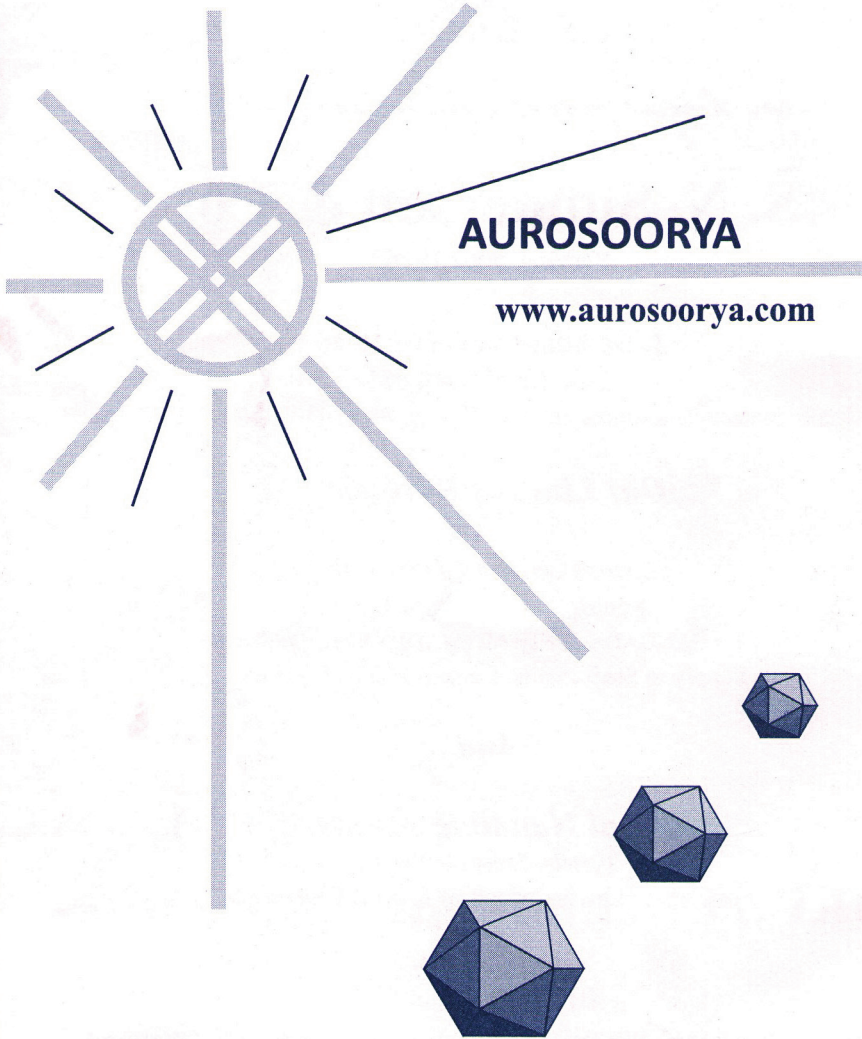
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