

MOTHER'S CHRONICLES

BOOK SIX

Mirra – In South India

by

Sujata Nahar

CONTENTS

Pre-Content

A Word with You, Please

Prologue

1. He for Whom I Was Waiting

2. Mirra Was Born Free

3. The Arrival

4. Shankar Chetty's House

5. The Uttara Yogi

6. The Arrest Warrant

7. The Government's Dilemma

8. Search and Seizure

9. Some English Friends

10. God to the Rescue

11. Vedapuri

12. God's Cracker

13. Statecraft

14. The Deccan
15. Pondicherry
16. West Europeans
17. The Colonizers
18. Christianity
19. Enter the French
20. The Fly in the Ointment
21. Meanders of Destiny
22. Acquitted
23. Sundar Chetty's House
24. The Tamil Bard
25. South Indian Nationalists
26. Nandanam
27. 'Spasa' Means Spy
28. French Government's Headache
29. The French League
30. He Knows Latin, He Knows Greek
31. The Anglo-Indian Press
32. Two Beautiful Hours
33. The Quest
34. This World
35. The Training

36. A Spiritual Adventure
37. All Life is Yoga
38. Science of the Spirit
39. The Programme
40. The Traveller
41. The Kundalini
42. Laying Down the Foundation
43. The Clue
44. The Have-Nots
45. One Day
46. Foetus of Language
47. Social Customs
48. The Guest House
49. Never a Dull Moment
50. Pondicherry Elections
51. In Pondicherry the Election is Done
52. The Himalayas in Rue Dupleix
53. The 'Arya'
54. Mirra's Prayers
55. August Fifteen
- Table of Illustrations



MOTHER'S CHRONICLES
BOOK SIX

MIRRA
IN SOUTH INDIA

SUJATA NAHAR

MOTHER'S CHRONICLES - Book Six -

Mother's Chronicles

book six

MIRRA

IN SOUTH INDIA

SUJATA NAHAR

INSTITUT DE RECHERCHES ÉVOLUTIVES, Paris,
THE MOTHER'S INSTITUTE OF RESEARCH, NEW DELHI,
& MIRA ADITI, MYSORE

Already published:

Book One: MIRRA

Book Two: MIRRA THE ARTIST

Book Three: MIRRA THE OCCULTIST

Book Four: MIRRA-SRI AUROBINDO

Book Five: MIRRA MEETS THE REVOLUTIONARY

To be published:

Book Seven: MIRRA IN JAPAN

Book Eight: MIRRA THE MOTHER

The publication of this book was facilitated by a grant received by the Mother's Institute of Research from the Ministry of Human Resource Development, department of Education, Government of India, which is gratefully acknowledged.

Mother's Chronicles-Book Six: MIRRA IN SOUTH INDIA © 2001 by Sujata Nahar. All rights reserved.

Information addresses:

- *in India and Asia:* MIRA ADITI CENTRE 62 'Sriranga', 2nd Main, 1st Cross T. K. Layout, Saraswatipuram Mysore - 570 009, India *Email:* miraditi@vsnl.com

- *in America:* INSTITUT DE RECHERCHES EVOLUTIVES, CANADA CP41 CHAMBLY QC J3L4BI CANADA

- *in Europe:* INSTITUT DE RECHERCHES ÉVOLUTIVES B. P. 9, 14880 Hermanville FRANCE *Email:* ire-agenda@wanadoo.fr

Cover painting by Maryse Prat (after Indra Dugar's series)

ISBN 2-902776-18-7 & 81-85137-07-2 BECPIJATHO 81-85137-07-2 (8-volume set)

ISBN 2-902776-69-1 & 81-85137-72-2 BECPIJATHO 81-85137-72-2 (Book Six)

FIRST EDITION

Printed at Thomson Press, Faridabad, India, September 2001

A Word with You, Please

Hello! Hello! Friends. Are you still there? My absence has been pretty long, hasn't it? But only a wink in time, no? This probably calls for an explanation. But knowing my readers, I don't think it's necessary. As you enter this story you will understand the reasons for the length of time taken over this book. The time span covered is only four years, but, oh my! What years they turned out to be! It's a secret for the moment and I wouldn't want it to be immediately noised abroad. I let each of you discover for yourself.

I must, however, divulge a few secrets.

Our friend, Patrice Marot, obtained for me a pile of documents regarding the erstwhile French India from the French government's archives. I have made good use of them. And shall continue in the next book also.

Nicole Elfi deserves a hearty thanks for the trouble she took as no trouble while computerizing my manuscripts.

As for Michel Danino I don't know what I would have done without his invaluable help always forthcoming to my hundred and one questions; apart from the task of editing this Book Six of *Mother's Chronicles*.

Help has also come from brothers Abhay, Nirmal and Noren, and sister Suprabha, for the out-of-the-blue questions I have the habit of putting.

Page-9

And why not tell you the material help extended by friends Magda and Werner Itin? The book would not have seen the light of day had not Werner given me a magical eye.

Actually what caused so much delay was a request from Sri Gobindo Gopal Mukhopadhyay, bolstered by Satprem. Imagine! They wanted me to delve into the beginnings of Sri Aurobindo's sadhana. I could not very well refuse them, could I? In spite of my inadequacies. So bowing to their wishes, I dived into the subject, since my ideas were vague, if not downright fuzzy. And, gosh! Did I come up with untold treasure! Here I present to you but a few of those priceless treasures. With the hope that at least some of you would go on to discover the trove.

Happy hunting! Enjoy yourself.

Page-10

Prologue :

Once upon a time, long, long ago, before I or you were born, before our parents or grandparents were born, even before their grandparents were born, some thousands of years ago, the Vindhya mountain was upset one day. And why was he so upset? "Why," he asked the Sun and the Moon, "why do you not go around me? Aren't I a greater Mountain than the Meru?"

The Sun thought to himself, "Oh, these old fellows! Look at his pride! Comparing himself with the golden Mahameru. Really!" Instead of answering politely, the Sun went on his daily business of going round the mountain Meru.

That surely made Vindhya angry "Ah, old! Am I! I shall show you who is old!" He too sent a silent message to the rude Sun. Vindhya was indeed a venerable old mountain. It bifurcates India into north and south, and was much older than the young Himalayas.

Vindhya then began to grow. He grew and grew and grew. He pierced the sky. When the Sun wanted to return to the South he found his way blocked by Vindhya. Vindhya now smiled grimly at the Sun. The Sun had to remain in the North. The constant heat of the Sun burnt the northern plains, while the South remained in constant darkness. An eternal day and an eternal night. The suffering was terrible on both sides of the Vindhya mountain. "How long! oh, how long, is this state of

Page-11

affairs going to last?" A desperate prayer from birds and beasts and trees and rivers rose to the Supreme God. "Come, oh come, and help us, Lord."

The Lord had been looking on the goings-on. He was not one to move a finger without being asked! But now that the whole creation was asking Him to do something, He gave the situation a thought. It was quite like Him to come up with an impish solution.

"Agastya," He spoke to the Rishi seated in front of him. "Will you do me a favour?"

Agastya was ever ready for adventures. He also knew something about the Lord. So he inclined his head.

'You see, Agastya," the Lord said sweetly, "how the creatures are suffering. Will you not help them?"

"How?" enquired Agastya.

"Well, you are the Guru of Vindhya. So when you go to him, he will bow down to you. And then ... then you tell him this ..." The Lord whispered into the Rishi's ear.

The valiant Agastya smiled. Maybe a little sadly? But he was game.

When he saw his guru approaching, Vindhya bowed down his head at his guru's feet, like the good-mannered person he was. Agastya blessed him. And then said, "O great Vindhya, I am pleased with you. But I have some urgent business down south. Will you please keep your head bowed like this till I come back?" Vindhya assented.

But Agastya never came back.

Since those times Vindhya never raised up his head again. And Agastya remained in the South.

Repeating history, the Uttara Yogi, the Yogi from the North, came down to South India in our own times, but a few decades back. And he too never returned to the North.

He too had received a Command from the Lord.

The Uttara Yogi was our Sri Aurobindo.

He for Whom I Was Waiting

"He for whom I was waiting"—"*celui que j'attendais*," wrote Mirra in France, in one of the innumerable visions she had early this century.

In this particular vision she found herself in her 'family' house—not that she knew it physically! She was living there with her father and two brothers. All the three were big and strong. The two brothers were men of 'not much goodwill,' or rather, they had a disbalanced vital. The father, though not highly developed, was a man of 'goodwill.'

All of them were assembled in a vast rectangular hall. A great big window open to the south-west let in the light. The walls were oak-panelled. In the middle of the west panel a colossal mantelpiece was built in sculpted stone. In front of it stood the old father dressed in a dark and coarse cloth. The house must have been built on a hillside, because the glass window overlooked an immense plain, bounded on the horizon by a long chain of mountains entirely covered in a purple fog. At the bottom of the valley, among the huge trees, a winding stream dazzled with a copper glow under the last rays of the setting sun. The deepening dusk made the big hall but dimly lit.

A young girl was sitting by the window with the setting sun behind her. Mirra identified herself with her. She was dressed in a simple white gown, her folded hands rested on her knees, her gaze was lost in the darkest corner of the hall, towards the east. All of them seemed to be waiting ... for someone.

"Suddenly he entered without our hearing the sound of the door opening or closing. He entered from the other end of the hall which I was facing. For the others he was veiled by a sort of invisibility, wrapped in a magnificent deep purple, so as to look like an ordinary man. But, as for me, I saw quite well that although very dense, the laws of gravity and of movement (and perhaps many others besides), to which we are subject, did not exist for him. I recognized him with all my being." She was in the grip of such a strong emotion that she could not move and "remained in my place."

Mirra noted, "Between him and my family several things took place which I do not clearly remember, except one. My father approached the newcomer with a profound reverence to welcome him in respectful terms. The being of light responded with a warm hug. I was so affected that I did not quite grasp what passed between them. Except that when they separated, my father who had gone from his place in his *grey, dark* dress came back all *transformed* and dressed in a superb and large golden dress. Full of admiration, I said, 'See the wonders He can perform.'

"But it was for me that He had come. He came near me slowly unveiling himself. And gradually I saw—*without any amazement*—that he was enveloped in a brilliant white light, and that he himself was luminous." Young Mirra was smitten. "He was

Page-16

so wonderfully beautiful that, filled with wonder and ecstasy, I fell to the ground losing my consciousness for a minute. But very soon I recovered, then approached Him and first of all kissed his feet. But helped by him I at once got up, and put my head on his shoulder and we remained clasped in each other's arms for a long time. For a very long time we remained looking through the great window, far away into the vast plains, at the last fading rays of the setting sun." Silence reigned.

They made a sweet picture. The dark-bearded Being of light and the auburn-haired girl in the first flush of womanhood. He looking to the far beyond; she looking up adoringly at him. He, sad and serious; she, radiating happiness.

During that long contemplation wordlessly they communicated to each other the depths of their souls and thoughts. In silence they conversed about the greatness of the work to be accomplished and the splendour of the imminent victory, of which "the dazzling radiance that surrounded him was like a glorious pledge."

After their long and silent contemplation, he turns his face towards her and puts his lips on her forehead.

"The young woman also gradually becomes luminous. Then the two of them lie down side by side, hand in hand, in a bed of rest at the bottom of the hall, and sleep.

"The white light emanating from them grows more and more intense, and spreads more and more. It radiates very far across the house, above the immense plain.

"And, wherever the balanced radiance passes, it brings with it health, hope, harmony and joy."

Page-17

In the morning Mirra wakes up late, in her own bed, strong and happy. "No words can describe the intense happiness I felt. Everything in him was familiar to me, so much so that I hardly observed him. What emanated from him, his voice, his gesture, his expression, were all so well known to me, so sweet, so beautiful, that even now that I am fully awake, I still feel deeply moved when I think of it. He was tall, thin, his hair and beard seemed dark to me, but of that my memory is not quite precise. His expression was extremely *serious* and sad, but infinitely gentle and tender. I could not describe him well, but I am certain that I shall recognize him among millions."

He always looked to the far beyond. Behind the beyond. To the noons of the future.

Mirra recognized the Being of light when she met him.

It was at the 'Guest House' that she first saw him, when she went to Pondicherry in 1914.

That was "merely the beginning of my vision," Mother said. Six years later, when she returned from Japan and met him again "in the same house and in the same way—did the END of the vision occur."

Page-18

2

Mirra Was Born Free

"Sri Aurobindo saw with more clarity," said Mother to Satprem while explaining a certain situation. "It was even the first thing he told the boys around him when I came in 1914— he had seen me but once—he told them that I, Mirra (he at once called me by my first name) 'was born free.' "

He also told the boys that he had "never seen anywhere a self-surrender so absolute and unreserved."

Mirra had met Sri Aurobindo on 29 March, at 3:30 in the afternoon, at the Guest House to which Sri Aurobindo had moved with the boys a few months earlier.

We have promptings more insistent than that of reason. Mirra was prompted by what—she did not know—to go see Sri Aurobindo all alone? "I climbed up the stairway and he was standing there, waiting for me at the top of the stairs." Mother's eyes widened at the recollection. "Ex-actly my vision! Dressed the same way, in the same position, in profile, his head held high. He turned his head towards me, and I saw in his eyes that it was He. The two things clicked (*Mother gestured*), the inner experience immediately combined with the outer experience and there was a fusion: the decisive shock."

Page-19

They talked that day a little. Mirra told Sri Aurobindo in a few words some of her realizations, and about a particular difficulty which, so far, she had not been able to overcome. It was mental stillness she had striven to obtain. A mental stillness in which anything can pass through your head without causing the least ripple. "It is the stuff of the mental being that is still, so still that nothing disturbs it" as Sri Aurobindo described it. If thoughts or activities come, "they come from outside and cross the mind as a flight of birds crosses the sky in a windless air. It passes, disturbs nothing, leaving no trace."

Mother said candidly that she had tried complete mental silence but had not succeeded. "I had tried, but couldn't do it. I could be silent when I wanted to, but as soon as I stopped thinking solely of that, stopped wanting only that, the invasion resumed, and the work had to be done all over again," Mother sighed. "That's all I told him, not in great detail, but in a few words."

To next day's meeting with Sri Aurobindo she went with Paul Richard. "He saw me the next day for half an hour. I sat down, it was on the verandah of the Guest House; I was sitting there on the verandah." She sat on the floor near Sri Aurobindo. "There was a table in front of him, and Richard was on the other side facing him. They began talking. I myself was seated at his feet, very small, with the table just in front of me, it came up to my forehead, giving me a little protection." Sri Aurobindo was seated in a chair as was Richard across the table. "Then I sat

down near him and he began talking with Richard, about the world, Yoga, the future, all kinds of things: what was going to happen—he already knew the war would break out.

Page-20



All at once I felt a great Force come into me....."

This was 1914, war broke out in August, and he already knew it towards the end of March or early April. So the two of them talked and talked and talked—great speculations." To Mirra, who had had her visions and revelations—she too—this was past history, and she wasn't interested in those speculations. She didn't really listen. "I didn't say anything, I didn't think anything, try anything, want anything, I merely sat near him."

That day was 30 March 1914. "I was just sitting there, not listening, but all at once I felt a great Force come into me—a peace, a silence, something massive! It came, did this (*Mother swept her hand across her forehead*), descended and stopped here," she said pointing to her chest. That is to say, it encompassed the three active mental centres. "When they finished talking, I got up and left. And then I noticed that not a thought remained—I no longer knew anything or understood anything. I was absolutely BLANK. SO I gave thanks to the Lord and thanked Sri Aurobindo in my heart."

So many things in her life had completely gone from Mirra's consciousness, all that was useless perhaps. But all that was preparing the Being for its action was held in a clear vision. "Even before coming here and meeting Sri Aurobindo," disclosed Mother, "I had realized everything needed to begin his Yoga. It was all ready, classified, organized. Magnificent! A superb mental construction ... which he demolished in five minutes!"

The unexpected turn of events left Mirra wonderstruck. "How happy I was! Aah! It was really the reward for all my efforts." A structure of so many years' standing, gone up in a whiff!

"Nothing! I knew nothing anymore, understood nothing at all—not a single idea left in my head! Everything I had carefully built up over so many years—I was past thirty-five, I think—through all my experiences: conscious yoga, non-conscious yoga, life, experiences lived, classified and organized—oh, what a monument!—crash! It all came tumbling down. Magnificent I hadn't even asked him."

Mirra had tried. From 1912 to '14 she had done endless exercises to still her mind. She could easily go out of her body, but the mind inside kept running. "For years I had tried to catch silence in my head, I never could. I could detach myself from it, but it would keep on running. But at

that moment, all the mental constructions, all the mental, speculative structures ... none of it remained—a big hole.

"Such a peaceful, such a luminous hole!"

But how many of us are capable of bearing a silent, a holey mind? Sri Aurobindo had imparted that gift to others before Mirra. "One (not a disciple—I had no disciples in those days)," explained Sri Aurobindo, "asked me how to do Yoga. I said: 'Make your mind quiet first' He did and his mind became quite silent and empty. Then he rushed to me saying, 'My brain is empty of thoughts, I cannot think. I am becoming an idiot' " Sri Aurobindo always had a strong sense of the ludicrous. "He did not pause to look and see where these thoughts he uttered were coming from! Nor did he realize that one who is already an idiot cannot become one." He added frankly, "Anyhow I was not patient in those days and I dropped him and let him lose his miraculously achieved silence."

Mirra, on the contrary, was very appreciative of that miraculous

Page-24

gift. "Afterwards, I kept very still so as not to disturb it. I didn't speak, I took good care -to refrain from thinking, and held it tight, held it tight against me. I said to myself, 'Make it last, make it last, make it last.....'"

For eight to ten days she hugged it close. She was living in her inner joy, while nothing inside her stirred. "I spoke as little as possible and it was like a mechanism, it wasn't me. Then slowly, slowly, as falling drop by drop, something was built up again. But it had no limits, it had no ..." She paused, looking back across the years. "It was vast as the universe and wonderfully still and luminous." Pointing to her head, "Nothing here, but THERE," she said, making a gesture above the head. "And then everything began to be seen from there."

Once it was done, it was done. "It was well rooted."

It never left her. "You know," Mother told Satprem in a wondering voice, "as a proof of Sri Aurobindo's power, it's incomparable! I don't believe there has ever been an example of such a—how can I put it?—such a total success: a miracle. It has NEVER left me. I went to Japan, I did

all sorts of things, had all possible adventures, even the most unpleasant, but it never left me-- stillness, stillness, stillness...." Her voice trailed off.

"And it was he who did it, entirely. I didn't even ask him, there was no aspiration, nothing... I wasn't doing anything— just sitting there. He seemed outwardly to be fully engrossed in his conversation about this and that and what was going to happen in the world....."

Mirra was sitting quietly at Sri Aurobindo's feet while he talked with Richard. She heard the sound of their conversation,

Page-25

without paying much heed. "This lasted about half an hour," said Mother. "And then when I got up, I no longer knew anything, I no longer thought anything, I no longer had any mental construction. Everything was gone, absolutely gone. Blank. As if I had just been born."

Page-26

3

The Arrival

Sri Aurobindo had landed on the Coromandel coast in 1910. What happened at the Guest House—his fifth house— happened from 1914 onwards. During those four preceding years at Pondicherry what type of life did Sri Aurobindo and, incidentally, his young companions lead? Let me try to be logical—chronological should I say?—and begin at the beginning.

S.S. Dupleix had left her berth, N°1 Esplanade Moorings, on the Hooghly river on Friday the first April, at 6:30 a.m. Under the command of Captain Musseau, the French mail steamer made steady progress as she steamed down the Bay of Bengal with her precious 'cargo.' On 4 April 1910, around four in the afternoon, she cast anchor at Pondicherry's harbour. Those who were in the know wanted to give Sri Aurobindo a very special reception. Moni dissuaded them from their project with the argument that as Sri Aurobindo was coming here in secrecy, and would be living here secretly, their planned public reception would be a big leak. What Moni said made sense, so, although disappointed, they dropped their plan.

Moni, who had come by train, had reached Pondicherry in the first hours (at 2:30 a.m.) of 31 March, and passed the

Page-27

rest of the night in the station's waiting room. In the morning as soon as he could, "I got onto a strange man-driven contraption called a push-push." The young Bengali was sorely disappointed with what he saw of the town. He had heard so much of the "beauty-loving French people and their renowned capital Paris." His destination was the office of the weekly *India*, N°10 Rue Valdaour (later changed to Rue Duplex, and now Nehru Street), which proved to be a printing press. The owner did not live there. A local man directed the newcomer to another part of the town: a house on Muthumariamman Koil Street. It was to the master of the house, Srinivasachari, that Moni handed over Sri Aurobindo's letter of introduction.

Srinivasachari was a Tamil Brahmin. Moni saw in front of him a man of thirty odd years, of medium height, fair, large-eyed, with wide forehead, sharp-nosed, clean-shaven, most of the head shaved except the top from where sprung a long lock of hair (*tikki*), in a word "a pure aryan appearance.*His forefathers hailed from Mysore. It was the great-grandfather of Srinivasachari who had first migrated to Madras; he was appointed a District magistrate. His son, Srinivas's grandfather, became an advocate at the Madras High Court. By then the family began to perceive the ills of the British rule. So the father of Srinivas went away to Pondicherry and his children were educated there. Thus, Srinivasachari was no stranger to Pondicherry. The family however had returned to Madras after the father's death, and the boys went to college there. It was Tilak's advent on the national scene that attracted the family to work for the country.

Srinivas had come back to Pondicherry to help Subramania Bharati against whom the Madras government had

Page-28

issued a warrant—but Bharati had slipped away to Pondicherry before he could be arrested. When Srinivas heard that Bharati was being harassed by the French Police at the instigation of the Madras government, he followed his friend there. It was the Tamil weekly paper *India* that had brought the ire of the British rulers on the editor, the printer and the contributors.



Page-29

When the editor of *India* was jailed, the others packed up their gear, slipped through the British dragnet, and went to the French enclave. From there they again began publishing *India*. A reporter from *India* had even interviewed Sri Aurobindo in Calcutta. We do not know who exactly it was, but Sri Aurobindo had met both the younger brother and the brother-in-law of Srinivasachari at Calcutta when he was residing in his Na' Meso's house. The brother, S. Parthasarathi Iyengar, was probably the "Secretary Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company" with whom Sri Aurobindo had an engagement at "3 o'clock" on 20 July 1909, as he noted in his diary. Parthasarathi had gone to North India to canvass for his Navigation Company. Moni, for his part, recognized the brother-in-law Rangachari as somebody who had met Sri Aurobindo at Calcutta.

So it seems likely that it was to Rangachari that Sri Aurobindo had granted an interview which was published in *India* in September 1909. Introducing the article, the reporter did not forget to give his own impression of the revolutionary leader. "He lived a very simple life, and put up an ordinary appearance with his dhoti and shirt; but his eyes were afire with grace and knowledge and a halo of mysterious peace pervaded where he lived." It was to the same reporter during the interview that Sri Aurobindo had given his 'prediction' on India winning her freedom amid worldwide upheavals and revolutionary changes, giving his answer in "gentle, sweet and dynamic accents," as the scribe put it.

Srinivasachari opened the letter brought by Moni, read the contents, and came to know of Sri Aurobindo's plans. He extended his hospitality to the eighteen-year-old youth from

Page-30

Bengal. "I passed the four and a half days before Aurobindo's arrival in Mr. Achari's house doing nothing but eating and sleeping. Every day a little before sunset I went with three or four people to the beach, and after spending an hour or two at the pier came back with them." He was also closely questioned by these gentlemen. Only ... well, the trouble was that although Moni was a matriculate and could read English fluently, he had no fluency in speaking it. His vocabulary consisted of 'yes,' 'no' and 'very good.' That was the general case of Bengali students. South Indians, on the contrary, talked quite fluently in that tongue. I remember being utterly amazed to hear in Madras a rickshaw-puller speak in English! However, though the Pondicherry gentlemen tried to extract information from the Bengali youth by interrogating exhaustively, they could not make much headway, and remained suspicious of him: was he indeed a messenger from Sri Aurobindo or a government spy? On his side Moni was worried. To his disquiet he was not even told where they intended to lodge their Guest. Each time he dared to bring up the subject with Srinivasachari he found his host evasive. Moni would be warded off with a noncommittal answer: "Oh, we'll see," "all in good time," and so forth.

April four dawned. From the *Messagerie Maritime* Office at the sea-front Srinivasachari and friends had obtained information of the time *Dupleix* was expected to dock at Pondicherry harbour. In the afternoon Moni and Srinivasachari went together on the pier. Pondicherry harbour is too shallow for a sea-going ship to dock near the shore, so S.S. *Dupleix* was anchored a quarter to half a mile away from the pier. The two men got down to a landing platform and somehow managed to get into

a rocking rowing boat... by doing some gymnastics: "My! How it's rocking and tossing!" felt Moni. The boat was manned by eight to ten oarsmen. In Bengal Moni was used to see on the Padma or the Ganges covered boats, but the boat he now got into was open. It and they set out towards the ship. When they neared it they made out Sri Aurobindo and Bejoy standing on the deck, their eyes fixed on the approaching boat. Bejoy Nag was the young revolutionary from Calcutta who helped Sri Aurobindo in his clandestine voyage. Moni and Srinivasachari went up a rope ladder. From the deck all the four descended to the second-class cabin which the seafarers had occupied. While the boys were getting the luggage packed and the two elders were talking, they were all served with tea and "a plate of small, crisp, fish-shaped biscuits." Being a Tamil orthodox Brahmin, Srinivasachari did not partake of the ship's food. But the others enjoyed it. After their tea in the cabin, the boys took the three trunks and bedding and then all the four men got down into the boat which took them back to the pier. From there they walked down its length to the sea-front road, *Cours Chabrol* as it was then called.

Srinivasachari took Sri Aurobindo with him in a horse-drawn carriage which he had procured from a friend for the occasion. Subramania Bharati, who was to become the famous Tamil nationalist poet, accompanied them.¹ Moni and Bejoy² followed behind in push-push with the luggage, and a Tamil guide. To Moni's great surprise the house to which the guide

1 Both Purani and Amrita mention Bharati's presence. Not so

2 Moni. Moni does not quite remember about Bejoy.



*The old pier at Pondicherry,
where Sri Aurobindo landed*



A horse-cart like the ones used around 1910

took them was not the clingy one situated in a dirty street which he had been shown the previous day. This house was big and respectable! "Escorted by my guide, I went up to the third floor of this house and found the place clean, neat and uninhabited." At the time Pondicherry boasted of no other three-storeyed house, adds Moni.

The second floor, which was fixed as Sri Aurobindo's lodging, was not at all large. "For that very reason it was an excellent place to stay in hiding." There were two tiny rooms nine or ten feet square, and another smaller one which, were you suddenly to enter it, brought to mind a light railway carriage. The house faced north and it had a small open terrace with a railing round it.

"At the back, on the southern side, was a long covered verandah." On the west, if you went down two or three steps from the verandah, was a kitchen. This second-floor portion was built over the back of the house, and was not visible from the main road. It made a compact unit. The toilet was on the first floor though, "clean, neat and sparkling." But the one drawback was the lack of a bathroom. Arrangements for bath were on the ground floor. So Sri Aurobindo had to go down there once a day. Of course, the main door would remain closed during his bath.

That was the residence of Calve Shankar Chettiar. A prominent citizen of Pondicherry, he was an honorary magistrate, an important businessman, and one of the richest men of the town.

When Moni, escorted by his guide, went up to the second floor of Shankar Chetty's house, "on entering a small room I saw Aurobindo sitting in an easy chair, while Srinivasachari

Page-35

along with four or five others were standing deferentially in front of him." Among them was also Rangachari who had come before the 4th. And Subramania Bharati whom Moni had already met.

Thus it was that from 4 April 1910, as a happy sun plucked flowers from the clouds to shower upon the Earth before retiring for the night, Sri Aurobindo, Moni and Bejoy made N°39 Comoutty Street their shelter in Pondicherry for the next few months.

Was it a coincidence that Sri Aurobindo's first base had earlier sheltered Swami Vivekananda when the latter visited Pondicherry? That was in January 1893, just a few weeks before young Aurobindo reached Indian shores at the end of his voyage from England.

Page-36

4

Shankar Chetty's House

On their way from Cours Chabrol to Shankar Chetty's house, as they rode in the horse carriage, Srinivasachari and Bharati explained to Sri Aurobindo the arrangements made for his lodging. At first the Guest was reluctant to live in another man's house and said he would rather have a separate place. The two men assured him that an alternative existed, in case this one did not suit

him. But this one was safer than the other. Would 'Babu' not give it a try tonight? Sri Aurobindo consented. On arrival he inspected the accommodation provided, "and found that by closing the doors of the stairs the whole upstairs became a separate block," recalled Srinivasachari. The next day when they asked him, Babu said it was secluded, and there was no need to change the place for the present.

The guests had no cot, no bedding. Moni and Bejoy had straw mats, and a thin mattress was provided for Sri Aurobindo.

Sri Aurobindo, Moni and Bejoy lived at N°39 Comoutty Street (now Calvé Soupprayan Chetty Street) for approximately six months. During the first three months none of the three ever stepped outside the house. Even to the courtyard, they went down but once a day for bath, such was their seclusion.

Page-37



Shankar Chetty's house as it was in the 1950s.
Sri Aurobindo probably lived in the small rooms at the top.

After that Sri Aurobindo allowed the two teenagers to go out, though he denied himself the pleasure. The two generally would go out around five in the evening, stroll up and down the pier for an hour or so, meet and talk with some local acquaintances, then return home.

As a rule they did not have foreign visitors. Paul Richard was an exception. He met Sri Aurobindo twice. They talked long together, for two to three hours each time.

But local revolutionaries dropped in of an evening. Subramania Bharati was a daily visitor. Most of the local people were before my time. However, I did meet one gentleman, Mr. Mouttayan. In the '40s he taught French to the top graders of the Ashram School, which included my two younger sisters. He was a stickler for good manners, was Mouttayan. Well, at any rate, he had the privilege of witnessing Sri Aurobindo walk in Shankar Chetty's compound. We have had the occasion already, when speaking of Sri Aurobindo's two long fasts,¹ to state that the longer one took place here, in this house. He fasted for twenty-three days while carrying on all his other activities. But what did he eat when not on fast? Here is Moni with a description of their meals.

"Sri Aurobindo used to take tea twice a day—once in the morning (around 6:30 or 7), and again at four in the afternoon. We two didn't get into the habit of drinking tea for quite some time. During those six months Sri Aurobindo drank his tea from a silver tumbler which had been offered by Shankar Chettiar." It was no high tea, just plain tea. The boys had something in

¹ See *Mother's Chronicles*, Book V, ch. 19.

between meals.

"Let me now introduce you," murmured Moni, "to some of our eating habits during our stay at the Chettiar house. In the kitchen on the second floor, which I mentioned earlier, there were four or five ordinary wood-burning ovens in a row. Firewood was then commonly used in Pondicherry." Bejoy and Moni began preparing lunch there at around eleven. "Bejoy was the 'Chef de cuisine,' I his assistant There was one iron frying pan and two to three earthen vessels."

That's all they had. "We sat on the kitchen floor and ate rice served on banana leaf." They also had brinjal. Unlike the soft brinjals of Bengal, these were hard as brick which they sliced in rings, and learned to soften a little by boiling them in *moong dal*.¹ In addition they made a sort of gruel or pulp of sweet pumpkin. "Bejoy and I ate after Sri Aurobindo had finished his lunch. The banana leaves were brought along with our vegetables. A maid servant was engaged for our works of cleaning, washing and marketing.

"During those six months our menu invariably consisted of five items: rice, *moong dal*, brinjal, sweet pumpkin, and milk. There were no changes, no exceptions, no nothing—like the wheel of fate those items invariably turned up every day in our second-storey kitchen.... At night all the three of us had *payas*.² A real case of plain living and high thinking. Naturally the high thinking was done solely by Sri Aurobindo."

It was lucky for them that in 1910 vitamins and calories were yet to be discovered. As Moni pointed out in the mid-'40s,

¹ *Moong dal*: a type of lentil.

² *Payas*: rice boiled in sweetened milk. Often garnished with almonds, pistachios, raisins, etc.

"That's why we survived, and I am able to chronicle this story."

All the same, after three months when the two boys were allowed to go out of an evening, they tried to bring back, clandestinely, some eggs. Eggs in the house of an orthodox vegetarian! But how to dispose of the shells? Flush them down the drain, of course! and they will vanish in the sewers. To the boys' sorrow the drain pipe ended about one foot from the ground in the courtyard. The eggshells fell in a heap at one corner. Chettiar let off the youths lightly, saying not to do it again. They didn't do it again; the next three or four times they ate eggs in the house the boys were careful to smuggle out the shells in their pockets.

Eggs could somehow be managed, but fish? How long could a fish-eating Bengali do without fish? Swami Aiyar was a young Tamil Brahmin. He was placed as a companion to them, to look after their needs. He hailed from Tinnelvely and had come but recently to Pondicherry. He was

then the editor of the Tamil paper *Dharma (Tarumam)* and lived at Dharmalayam, from where the paper was printed.

Moni and Bejoy fried their fish in Aiyar's house—the latter was less orthodox than the older generation—wrapped up the fried fish in a newspaper, and brought the packet into the house. Not a soul in sight. All went without a hitch ... the first time. Not the next time though. As the boys tried the same trick a second time they found that Shankar Chettiar was very much there. "Making a beeline for the staircase" Moni recalls, "I tried to avoid him. But he was quick and cut off my way. Then pointing to the packet he asked 'What is in it?'"

" 'Some sweets,' I replied as a thumping began at a

Page-41

particular spot in my left breast.

"Chettiar asked again, 'From where?'"

"I replied, 'Bought in the market.' The thumping had now become a pounding. Then I had a brain wave.

" 'For Babu.'

"Instantly Chettiar moved away and freed my passage. I ran up the stairs taking two steps at a time."

Sri Aurobindo was then known as 'Babu' to the Tamil friends at Pondicherry.

*

* *

But apart from eating, sleeping, bathing etc. what else did they do? How did they spend their time?

Sri Aurobindo divulged to his disciples in 1923 that he was "following a certain programme that was laid down for me when I came down to Pondicherry." We will come to it presently.

But he was not one to neglect anyone. The cheerful service done by the two Bengali boys must have touched him. God, as I know so well, never neglects His servitors. He / She always gives the necessary help, even material help. The Divine wants the full flowering of a being.

It was during those three months' virtual incarceration, with practically nothing to do, that the idea came to Moni to woo the Muse of Bengali literature.

Moni and Bejoy, specially the former, did some studies. Moni, I happen to know, was well versed in Bengali and English and French. He may have learnt Tamil also. But Sri Aurobindo was not his teacher of Tamil! Then there was their new-found

Page-42

friend, S. Aiyar, who was nearer their age than the others. The boys often had hilarious time with him. But what they must have looked forward to was the evenings. The evening spent with their adored '*Sejda*' (elder brother). For that was when Bharati and Srinivasachari would come to see 'Babu.' Srinivasachari could see 'Babu' at any time of the day if the need arose.

The conversations between the elders were engrossing. They were not necessarily centred on politics only, though that must have been the main topic as all of them were revolutionaries. Besides, Sri Aurobindo always liked to keep a finger on the pulse of the nation.

Also, as we have already seen, the revolutionaries of that period were greatly drawn to Yoga. Add to that the fact that both Sri Aurobindo and Bharati were men of wider ranges. When they were alone, their talks conceivably were as wide as the universe.

My idea received support when I came across some writings of S. Srinivasachari.¹ His notes say that "though political subjects would often come up in the conversation, it lost its importance as our sole preoccupation." Sri Aurobindo was giving them "some instructions as to how to practise concentration," and watch how ideas rise in the mind. "After such instructions our conversation would turn on general subjects, on one of those occasions I asked him what he meant by Akasic records about which he used to write in his *Karmayogin*. He said that he himself cannot say much about them, he felt some scribbled scrolls were unfurling before his eyes with some

¹ Published in *Sri Aurobindo Archives and Research* (December 1988).

connected ideas rising in his mind, he was neither able to say what language it was nor what the script was."

Another point noted by Srinivasachari: "On another occasion he was telling us that the coming Yuga will be a glorious one, for man will be able to live a far higher life, almost divine, in this world Then Bharati said that if divine life is lived on earth, then we must be immortal also. Yes, he said, we are bound to be so when we work for it."

How hard Sri Aurobindo worked—for decades—to usher in the New Yuga.

5

The Uttara Yogi

What Moni and Bejoy must have enjoyed the most were the seances or sessions of 'automatic writings.' They could be exhilarating.

Yes, for some years at Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo continued the practice of automatic writing until he found out fully what was behind it.

For the first three months, it seems, the seances were regularly held. Apart from Moni and Bejoy, both Bharati and Srinivasachari were regulars too. Well, they were witness to the writing of *Yogic Sadhan* in that way. Every day one chapter was written, notes Purani. The book with its nine chapters was finished quickly. From whom did Sri Aurobindo 'receive' it? "When I was writing it," Sri Aurobindo once said, "every time at-the beginning and at the end the image of Rammohan Roy came before me." A detail from Purani: "On the last day a figure that looked like Rammohan Roy seemed to be disappearing in the subtle by the side of the corner of the ceiling. It was inferred that Rammohan Roy had dictated these chapters." Confirmed several times by Sri Aurobindo. "As for *Yogic Sadhan* it was not I exactly who wrote it ... " Again, "The *Yogic Sadhan* is

not Sri Aurobindo's own writing, but was published with a note by him, that is all ..."

Once more he wrote saying, "But Yogic Sadhan is not my composition, nor its contents the essence of my Yoga, whatever the publishers may persist in saying in their lying blurb, in spite of protests." Honest to the least detail of life, Sri Aurobindo finally withdrew the book from circulation, sometime late 1934. He had taken care not to put his own name as the book's author, but used Uttara Yogi as the author's name. Uttara Yogi means the Yogi from the North. And thereby hangs a tale .

Once upon a time, in the nineteenth century, in Tiruchirapalli district of South India, there was a family with large land holdings, in other words, a zamindar family. They lived in Kodiyalam (or Kodailam or Kodairam as variously spelt by different authors). It was a prosperous village. As was customary in those days, the zamindar had a family preceptor. The preceptor was born to Sri Rangachariar and Janaki Ammal in the hamlet Sam-bodai in Vedaranyam section of Tanjore District in September 1829. Quite young he began a nomadic life. Soon, however, he settled down in Nagai village to do his sadhana. That is how he came to be known as Nagai Swami. He did not practise rites or rituals but repeated continuously a japa evolved by him and which comprised elements from the Gayatri mantra woven into the Ashtakshara mantra (or Om Namō Narayanaya) . This is what he taught his followers who did not tarry to cluster around him. Thus Nagai Swami's disciples came to be known as Nagai Japatas.

When Nagai Swami was ready to enter into samadhi (around 1880, we understand), he called his disciples and declared that

in future they would follow a great Guru from the North. "The Yogi from the North (Uttara Yogi) was my own name," wrote Sri Aurobindo, "given to me because of a prediction made long ago by a famous Tamil Yogi, that thirty years later (agreeing with the time of my arrival) a Yogi from the North would come as a fugitive to the South and practise there an integral Yoga (Poorna Yoga), and this would be one sign of the approaching liberty of India. He gave three utterances as the mark by which this Yogi could be recognised and all these were found in the letters to my wife." The 'three utterances' were the 'three mad nesses' of which Sri Aurobindo had written to Mrinalini Devi in 1905, on 30 August.

The new zamindar of Kodiyalam was but a babe of two or three when Nagai Swami attained samadhi. But he was brought up in that lore. Nor did he forget to pass on the Guru's prediction to his children. He had nine. Two of his sons were K. V. Rangaswami Iyengar and K. V. Srinivasa Iyengar (K for Kodiyalam and V for Vasudeva, their father). Several months after Sri Aurobindo came to Pondicherry, when very few people knew—or were supposed to know—of his presence there, a person in the know blurted out the secret to K. V. Rangaswami. Immediately K. V. R. sent a friend, V. Ramaswamy to find out the truth or otherwise of this piece of news. With the help of Bharati and Srinivasachari, V. Ramaswamy was able to pay his respects to Sri Aurobindo.

The good news confirmed, K. V. R. hurried to Pondicherry and had a meeting with Sri Aurobindo. His hope became a certainty. Yes, here indeed was the Uttara Yogi of whom the family Guru had spoken. Narrating the episode to his disciples,

Page-47

Sri Aurobindo added, "A Zamindar disciple of the Yogi found me out and bore the cost of the book *Yogic Sadhan*. "The book, according to Amrita, was printed at Srirangam Vani Vilas Press in 1911. Reprinted several times over the years its last edition came out in 1933. K. Y. R. not only bore the cost of the printing of *Yogic Sadhan*, but also promised financial help to his newfound guru. The belief was that their own guru had taken a new birth in Sri Aurobindo. He kept his promise. He sent money whenever he could. He had to be so very careful not to let anybody know about his help to a revolutionary. And what a revolutionary! The 'most dangerous man' according to the British government. If K. Y. R. was caught proffering his assistance to such a revolutionary it would spell danger for him. He was a big landholder, was K. Y. R. ; and as an elected member of British State council he represented the landlords in the Legislative Assembly of Delhi during the imperial rule. His meetings with Sri Aurobindo were kept a dead secret, he met him but two more times. KY. Rangaswami Iyengar was a man with nationalist sympathies and was well acquainted with Tilak, Khaparde, Lala Lajpat Rai, and others.

A word here on V. Ramaswamy may not be without interest. In a letter of 1934 (24 October), in which Sri Aurobindo dwelt on the subject of inner vision, and the faculty of seeing unknown people, he said that "not only Yogins have it, but the ordinary clairvoyants, crystal-gazers, etc." Mother, whose inner faculties were highly developed, had 'prevision,' 'telepathic vision,' and

numerous other kinds as well. "The Mother is always seeing people whom she does not know; some afterwards come here or their photographs come here." Sri Aurobindo

Page-48

then spoke of his own experiences. "I myself have these visions, only I don't usually try to remember or verify them. But there were two curious instances which were among the first of this kind and which therefore I remember. Once I was trying to see a recently elected deputy here and saw someone quite different from him, someone who afterwards came here as Governor. I ought never to have met him in the ordinary course, but a curious mistake happened and as a result I went and saw him in his bureau and at once recognised him."

He then described his second vision. "The other was a certain V. Ramaswamy whom I had to meet, but I saw him not as he was when he actually came, but as he became after a year's residence in my house. He became the very image of the vision, a face close-cropped, rough, rude, energetic, the very opposite of the smooth-faced Vaishnav who came. So that was the vision of a man I had never seen but as he was to be in future —a prophetic vision."

V. Ramaswamy Iyengar came to live with Sri Aurobindo sometime in 1911, and left by the middle of 1913. He became a writer of repute in Tamil literary world as an author of short stories. He is the Va. Ra. of Tamil literature. It was with the help of K. V. R. that he had been able to go through his college studies. In 1910 he had gone to Calcutta. He even



Page-49

tried to meet Sri Aurobindo at K.K. Mitra's house at College Square, but without success.

This is how Va. Ra. describes his first meeting with Sri Aurobindo in the room on the top floor of Shankar Chetty's house. "That day was ever memorable to me." wrote Va. Ra. in December 1950. "It was a sumptuous treat to me to see Aurobindo and Bharati talk. The conversation was a sort of variety entertainment. Only the level was very high, both of them being, in the cricket language, 'all-rounders.' "

Va. Ra. also says that Sri Aurobindo was informed every now and then about the activities of the Nationalist movement "from all over India, especially from Bengal and the Punjab." All present would hear the stories. "No oath of secrecy was administered to us and this is a very remarkable trait in Aurobindo's character. He trusted our honour and sense of patriotism, not to divulge such things even to our nearest and dearest."

Page-50

The Arrest Warrant

Sri Aurobindo had left his own 'nearest and dearest' hundreds of kilometres away.

Days had turned into weeks, weeks had rolled into months since he had vanished from public view. "The sudden disappearance of Arabindo," wrote his cousin Sukumar, "and being without any news of him for a very long time, his uncles and aunts and others at Deoghar, particularly Arabindo's maternal grandmother, Rajnarain Bose's wife, were stricken with anxiety." The family's worry found expression in Sukumar Mitra's article in the Bengali monthly *Basumati*. "They wrote us letters in Calcutta for Arabindo's news, but we were unable to tell them anything about him." Sukumar, one of the key players in that crucial period, naturally knew all about Sri Aurobindo's movements, but he was bound by his promise not to divulge anything about his cousin. Indeed, not a word did he whisper to anyone, not even to his father, about the dramatic events of 31st March, when his cousin had come down from Chandernagore and boarded the *Dupleix* for Pondicherry.

"Seven or eight days after Arabindo left Calcutta," Sukumar wrote, "one Sunday evening a man came and asked to

meet my father. The gentleman told him that India's Director General of Criminal Investigation, Sir Charles Cleveland, was living at the Great Eastern Hotel of Calcutta. A coded telegram from Pondicherry had come to him. The work of the gentleman was to decode and put that into plain language. He learned from the telegram that Arabindo had gone to Pondicherry. He said to my father," Sukumar explained, "that they [father and other family members] were certain to be greatly worried, that is why he had come to give them the news. My father was relieved to know that Arabindo was safe. And I, hearing the news from behind the door, was happy: my labour and effort had been successful. Later, I gave the news to my helpers Nagendra and Surendra."

Sukumar's father, Krishna Kumar Mitra was a well-known and respected citizen of Bengal.

The newspapers did not lose the opportunity of Arabindo Babu's sudden disappearance to taunt the government. The Bengal Government was red in the face. Naturally, as is the habit of newspapers, they served the public with a delightful mixture of fact and fiction.

The *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, Friday, March 18, 1910.

MR. ARAVINDA GHOSE-MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

"Mr. Arabinda Ghose, who was since his release from 'hajut' [jail] in connection with Alipur Bomb case, residing in the house of his uncle, Babu Krishna Kumar Mitra, is reported to have mysteriously disappeared during last few days. He was last traced to Dakhineshwar 'Kalibari' where Rama Krishna Paramahansa used to live and from there is reported to have gone nobody knows where."—I.D. News

Page-52

Rumours abounded. To stem that wild flow Sri Aurobindo sent a text from Chandernagore, published unsigned in the *Karmayogin* on 26 March 1910.

"We are greatly astonished to learn from the local Press that S.j. Aurobindo Ghose has disappeared from Calcutta and is now interviewing the Mahatmas¹ in Tibet. We are ourselves unaware of this mysterious disappearance. As a matter of fact S.j. Aurobindo is in our midst, and if he is doing any astral business with Kuthumi or any of the other great Rishis, the fact is unknown to his other Koshas.² Only as he requires perfect solitude and freedom from disturbance for his Sadhana for some time, his address is being kept a strict secret. This is the only foundation for the remarkable rumour which the vigorous

¹ *Mahātmā*: mahat + atma: great soul. Mahatmas: Kuthumi is the chief of the Mahatmas, who are central to Theosophical teachings. They are stationed "beyond the spheres, above the mighty Gods," as Sri Aurobindo wrote in his poem "The Mahatmas," where he developed the central idea of Mahatma hood. These "souls to death denied" preserve the knowledge that preserves the world. For, when Kali comes men are endangered because they lose true knowledge and are covered in ignorance. But Kuthumi gives hope to man.

"... for the golden age

In Kali comes, the iron lined with gold,

The Yoga shall be given back to men,

The sects shall cease, the grim debates die out

And atheism perish from the Earth,

Blasted with knowledge; love and brotherhood

And wisdom repossess Sri Krishna's world."

Because Sri Krishna has utterly returned to the Earth.

² *Kosha*: parts or sheaths of the being.

Page-53

imagination of a local contemporary has set floating. For similar reasons he is unable to engage in journalistic works, and *Dharma* has been entrusted to other hands."

But earlier, on 21 March, the Bengali weekly *Dharma* had published a notice.

"It is rumoured that Sri Aurobindo Ghose has gone away somewhere, nobody knows where. So far as we know, he is engaged in the practice of yoga and will not take up any political or other work. Because he is not willing to see anybody for the moment, the place of his sadhana has been kept a secret."

Sri Aurobindo had trained Nolini Kanto Gupta in the task of editing the news columns of his Bengali paper *Dharma*. He then made "me slowly grow into a journalist underwriter," Nolini reminisced. "Next there came to me naturally an urge to write articles." Sri Aurobindo was pleased with Nolini's first Bengali article.

Well, then, after Sri Aurobindo went to Chandernagore, those who remained back in Calcutta continued to run the two papers, *Dharma* and the *Karmayogin* (left in Sister Nivedita's charge), for some time.

For some time.

"But afterwards," says Nolini, "we too found it impossible to carry on and our pleasant home had to be broken up. For news came that the police were after our blood, it became imperative therefore that we too should disperse and go into hiding." That is what they did. What happened to each of them is the stuff of several stories.

Let us go back to newspaper coverage of the 'mysterious disappearance of Arabindo Babu.'

Page-54

From the time newspapers came into existence there have been all kinds of them. It is therefore not surprising that not all were sympathetic to Arabindo Babu, some were quite hostile, to be frank. The *Englishman* led the field in anti-Arabindo Babu hectoring. That is not to say that other papers of the ilk trailed much behind! The *Pioneer* of Allahabad, for instance, wrote sarcastically:

"The sudden disappearance of Mr. Arabinda Ghose from Calcutta has naturally enough created some excitement as well as embarrassment among his friends. It is not, however, true, we understand that his absence from Calcutta has in any way necessitated a change in plan in connection with Bengal Govt.'s choice of its Executive Councillors."¹

' This calls for an explanation. So long the Imperial Government had carefully excluded any Indian from having a say in the governance of his own country. But in 1909, under growing pressure of Indian public unrest, the British Government awoke to the necessity of giving some representation to Indians and, for the first time, agreed to the appointment of an Indian to the Viceroy's Executive Council; one each to the Executive Councils of Bengal, Bombay and Madras; and two Indians to the Council of the Secretary of State for India. This was part of the Morley-Minto Reforms Act of 1909. John Morley was the Secretary of State for India (1905-1910), and Lord Minto was the Viceroy of India during the same period. Under the same Reform policy, the Anglo-Indian Machiavels reshuffled the constituent elements of Indian politics on the basis of not only creed, but of caste. Of course, the Colonialists had begun long ago to make capital of the religious diversities of Indian society, but under Minto they openly adopted the policy of setting Muslims as a counterpoise to the Hindus. Muslims were no more to be the children of the soil, an integral portion of one Indian people, but as a politically distinct and hostile interest, to nullify the Hindus. Worse was the seed of discord sown by creating caste as a political instrument. Is it not strange that the British rulers who did their best to undermine caste as a social institution were the ones who did their best to perpetuate it?

On 22 March the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* reprinted the above text as Editorial Notes.

Among the papers which retorted to the sarcastic remarks of the *Pioneer*, was *Bharat Mitra* (2 April 1910):

'You may cut jokes at Babu Arabindo Ghose's cost; but all his countrymen know that prestige of the Government will no doubt be raised by admitting him into the Council. Arabindo Babu himself, however, is not expected to lower himself so as to accept such a post; he is much above it." Not only was Arabindo Babu 'above it,' he understood the sham concession for what it was.

When the Viceroy talked of giving Indians a larger share in the government, he did not mean control but a mere voice, "a voice, and nothing more," as Arabindo Babu put it.

In spite of the vigilance mounted by the Calcutta police, Arabindo Babu had disappeared! The *Daily Hitavadi* could not resist poking fun at the government.

"We hear," it wrote on 11 April, "that Calcutta Police have offered a reward of three hundred rupees to anybody who will be able to cause Srijut Arabinda Ghosh to be arrested. We hear also that the disappearance of Srijut Arabinda Ghosh has put some Police officers to trouble. It is rumoured, though we are not prepared to believe in such a cock-and-bull story, that the Government used to spend four hundred rupees every month for the purpose of keeping Arabinda Babu under surveillance. We should think that the Government should publish a contradiction of these rumours, for we have heard them from many persons and at many places____"

Another paper was so annoyed with the bumbling police that it wrote, "It is absolutely useless to maintain that huge

army of asses at an enormous cost of money."

Believe it or not, it was not such a 'cock-and-bull' story after all! Besides, 'four hundred rupees' a month was, well, Rs. 400 a month.

The times were dangerous. Before his disappearance, the threat of arrest had been hanging over his head like the sword of Damocles. But Arabindo Babu's sense of humour was irrepressible. The *Pallivarta* of 25 January 1910 wrote a longish article, quoting extensively from the *Karmayogin*. We give a few points.

"Mr. Aravinda Ghose has recently received an anonymous letter. This letter informs him that an officer of the Detective Department named Gopal Chandra Ray, along with some associates, is watching the premises N°6, College Square, and that they are also securing copies at the Post Office of all letters and post-cards addressed to him." Not quite dismissing it as a joke, but saying that there was nothing in all that for him to be anxious, the paper said, "But, for the

information of Government he has made some suggestions to us." The suggestions were a blend of sarcasm and irony habitual to Arabindo Babu.

"Firstly, for humanity's sake there should be a shelter provided at College Square for this Gopal and his associates, wherefrom they would be able to discharge their duty with more care and efficiency than now." It was pretty cold there in January.

"Secondly, let Government kindly instruct the Post Office to see that many of Aravinda Babu's letters are not lost after they have been copied, and that the rest are not delayed in delivery. Probably the adoption of this suggestion will not do the Empire any harm."

Page-57

A third point. Arabinda Babu was never much of a letter writer, and now he has almost given it up altogether, so there was no need to employ a good many hands to copy out his letters "for the use of future generations." "So this part of the inquiry about him can be managed at a very small cost...."

Some advice to his would-be correspondents was included. "... It would be well to send a copy of any letter addressed to him to a Secretary to the Bengal Government or to Mr. Denham¹ of the Detective Department."

Finally a word of caution. "Then, again, if anybody wishes to send him a revolver or an explosive or any plans or estimates about a conspiracy, revolution, big or small, it would be best to deliver it in person or send it per the editor of the Statesman or of the Englishman. There is no need to await a reply in these cases."

Sukumar specifies that six police spies were always in duty in front of their house, one of them being equipped with a bicycle! The police would follow Arabindo Babu or Sukumar whenever they went out. The police also kept copious notes of the visitors to their residence. One such report on Sri Aurobindo says that "he spends most of his day in study of religious books and in writing. He is said to be accessible to almost anyone known or unknown, who goes to call on him." What a far cry from present-day 'leaders'! Among the most frequent callers were C.R. Das, Sri Aurobindo's advocate during the Alipore Bomb Case, the *Modern Review's* editor Ramananda Chatterji, and the Sanskritist Gispati Kavyatirtha.

¹ G. C. Denham was then Special Assistant to the Deputy Inspector-General of Police, Bengal. Here is his address:
7, Kyd Street, Calcutta.

Page-58

The Bengal Government was now desperate, as was the British-Indian government. They *had* to do something. They had to show that they were capable of taking some action against the 'arch revolutionary,' as they thought of Sri Aurobindo. Unable to lay their hands on him, they did the next best thing: issued a warrant of arrest against him.

Page-59

7

The Government's Dilemma

That the Government was extremely agitated at the situation developing in the country is well brought out by the following news item in the *Modern Review* of March 1909.

"Human Pawns? The report comes from Berlin that Great Britain has entered into an understanding with the Sultan (of Turkey) by which in consideration for British support in the Near East, he shall cast his influence with his coreligionists in India in favour of the British rule." (*Boston Evening Transcripts*)

"This extraordinary announcement, if true, would seem to betoken a curious nervousness on the part of the British in India. The people we wonder at, are those who seem to think that different communities in India are mere pawns on the chess-board of politics to be moved hither and thither at the wish and judgement of the players. *We are human beings*—whether Hindus or Mohammedans. *And India is our motherland*. We experience hunger together in summer, when the harvests fail. We rejoice together when the seasons are good. We think of the same places when in some foreign land we are assailed by the pangs of home-sickness." Such was the sentiment expressed by the magazine's editor, Ramananda Chatterji.

Page-60

The warrant of arrest was the fruit of much debate in the highest administrative circles. Letters and telegrams, proposals and counter-proposals had been triangularly exchanged between the governments of Bengal, of India, and the Secretary of State for India.

The fact of the matter is that the Indo-British government was scared of Babu Arabindo Ghose. True, it was now able to breathe a little more easily, since most of the known 'terrorists' like Barin, Upen, Ullaskar etc., had been banished for life to the Andamans. Other 'troublemakers' had been safely put behind bars. Bal Gangadhar Tilak was rotting in a jail in Mandalay (Burma). Bepin Pal had left India. As 'leaders' only men like G. K. Gokhale and Pherozshah Mehta were acting out like puppets the part assigned to them by the wily British. India was more or less manageable. Even in Bengal, which continued to give the rulers a headache, the government could quite handle a Moderate leader like Surendra Nath Banerji, although he too was rather unreliable. Always seeking popularity, he swam with the fish. He hid the truth and called it 'diplomacy'!

But the root cause of the Indian government's headache was Babu Arabindo Ghose, an analyzer par excellence. He was "the most dangerous of our adversaries now at large" as the Chief Secretary to the government of Bengal put it. Here was a man who had a backbone, who always spoke out. Arabindo Babu was not just a run-of-the-mill politician, he was a statesman. He knew and acted on the principle that "truth has a greater hold on the imagination of the common people than the polished lies of a silver-tongued orator."

What's more, Babu Arabindo Ghose was a gentleman. He

was "the fountain of moral and intellectual energy," to borrow the words of the British administration. Arabindo Babu refused to stoop low. Remember the Hooghly Conference in September 1909? The Extremists were a democratic party. The policy makers presented their decisions to the rank and file, who adopted or amended them. Just before the start of the official conference, the Nationalist policy makers met. Several of them were for bringing down the Moderate party. 'You must bring down the Moderates by any means fair or foul....' Do you know what Sri Aurobindo replied? "No, I shall never agree to that. Do you have any idea what great work Surendranath Banerji and his Moderate Party have done in Bengal politics? We are standing on their shoulders and because of that we appear tall." He added calmly, "Besides this,

whatever be anybody's work, I shall not be a party to bringing down their downfall by foul means....."

The government was fully aware of all that. But what caused consternation among the bureaucrats was to feel that Babu Arabindo Ghose could easily see through their moves and countermoves, and expose to the public the underlying scheme so as to offset their plans. Therefore the urgent question before the British bureaucrats was: how to get rid of this 'dangerous' obstacle?

Judge Beachcroft had dismissed the sedition case against this 'most dangerous man' to use the words of the Viceroy. Dare the government go on an appeal against that verdict? Did they have enough judicially sustainable evidence to clinch the charge against him? What if a court of law were once again to acquit Babu Arabindo Ghose? Won't that make them a

Page-62

laughing-stock? Realizing the weakness of their case the government reluctantly abandoned the idea of an appeal.

A second option was to deport Babu Arabindo without trial. Just as they had done to K.K. Mitra and others in December 1908. But then the Alipore Bomb Case trial was still going on. But now? What excuses could the government find? Rather it risked evoking an outcry by the English public. Fearing the public opinion, the Secretary of State, Lord Morley, put his foot down: "As for deportation, I will not listen to it."

There remained a third option.

Page-63

8

Search and Seizure

The third option was time-consuming.

The government now concentrated on finding some indiscretions on the part of its 'dangerous adversary.' Any statement that Sri Aurobindo made was submitted to the closest scrutiny. The Intelligence Bureau, the police, even high government officers were roped in to analyse his speeches and writings. Oh, if only he would commit a blunder! The British government was ready to pounce on his slightest slip. But neither his actions nor his public utterances seemed to lend themselves to a new charge for sedition.

Months and months passed.

Then on 25 December a second signed letter was published in the *Karmayogin* (the first one being the Open Letter of 31 July 1909). The Indo-British government thought the article to be a clear legal offence. They could now prosecute their antagonist for this new infringement of the law, and send him to prison. It took over six weeks for the fast-moving bureaucrats to get their act together. A warrant of arrest was got ready against Babu Arabindo Chose. By then Sri Aurobindo had disappeared from view, so he could not be immediately arrested. The warrant

Page-64

was held back, and the search of the *Karmayogin*

Simultaneously, the police swooped down on his papers *Dharma and the Karmayogin*. The next day, Tuesday 5 April 1910, *Amrita Bazar Patrika* published the news.

"The *Karmayogin* office was searched by the police last evening from 5 p.m. to about 8 p.m. Superintendent Creagan, Inspectors of Shyampukur and Burtolla and one or two officers were present.

"A warrant was shown to the Printer, Manomohon Ghosh, and he was arrested on a charge under sub-section 124 A, IPS of having published seditious matter in the issue of December 25, 1909.

"Papers, manuscripts as well as several letters found on the person of the Printer were taken possession of. Bail was refused."

This was the third sedition case against Sri Aurobindo instituted by the British-India government.

The Karmayogin, like its predecessor Bande Mataram, folded up in a rather dramatic fashion. Its last issue is dated 2nd April 1910.

The police did not stop with the raid to the Karmayogin office. The next day, 5 April that is, Calcutta Police searched the Sanjivani Office at 6 College Square, which was also the residence of K. K Mitra. It was too much. Even the Bengalee of Surendra Nath Banerji protested.

Page-65

"We hold that there was not the smallest justification for searching the house of Babu Krishna Kumar Mitter. And we ask again when will proceedings of this kind come to an end?" (6 April 1910)

The editorial in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* day,

"Why was the *Sanjivani* office and residential house at all searched? That is the question which is just now agitating the educated community in town very much. The object, it now appears, was this: the police wanted to get hold of a copy of the Karmayogin of the 25th December last and all papers and documents connected with it. Now, the Karmayogin is not printed or published at the Sanjibani office. it having a separate office of its own. It is true that Babu Aurobindo, the alleged writer of the offending article, is a relation of Babu Krishna Kumar and used to live with him. But did that justify the search of Babu Krishna Kumar's house? Would not a mere letter to Babu Krishna Kumar have served the same purpose for which he and his family were subjected to the horrors of a house-search? It seems the authorities have not yet realized the feeling of bitter resentment which house-searches excite in the minds of law-abiding and peaceful Indians."

Worldwide the courteous ways of the police are legendary. The Calcutta police were no exceptions to the average policemen. "An English policeman accompanied by several constables came and showed my father a search warrant," says Sukumar. "I asked the English officer, 'Why do you want to search the house?' He replied, 'We want the Karmayogin magazines.' I then said, 'If we give you those, you won't search the house and

Page-66

ransack everything?' To which he said, 'No.' I then gathered all the Karmayogin issues both Sarojini-didi [Sri Aurobindo's sister] and I had with us; and gave all to the Police officer. He took them all and then quite as usual searched the house leaving everything in a mess ." Sukumar adds bitterly, "My paternal aunt was a devout Hindu widow. Despite our protests, the police entered her room. She had to throwaway all the cooked food and had to go without food."

One month after the above episode, once again the police raided 6 College Square. This time the raiding party was led by the Assistant Inspector-General of Police himself. He asked Sukumar to hand over all the letters he had received from overseas, including those from British Members of Parliament. When Sukumar brought him the packet of letters, he was made to stand against a wall with an admonition not to move. The thoughtful police had brought a woman with them to guard the ladies of the house. "The next day," narrates Sukumar, "a representative from the Englishman came to in quire about thesearches. He came to know that the police had taken my letters from Members of Parliament." Reuters immediately sent. the news to England, where newspapers published it the very next day.

The British MPs read the news with their breakfast. Some of them wrote to the newspapers protesting against such searches. Need we add the amount of pressure that they exerted on the Secretary of State for India? Those were the letters Sukumar had written during his father's incarceration in Agra Jail to men like Ramsay MacDonald, Keir Hardy, Sir Henry Cotton and others, and the replies he had received from them. "For

Page-67

the first time, no doubt under pressure from British Members of Parliament, the police, who never before had returned any object they had taken away, came back after two days to return the letters."

Sukumar Mitra was glad because the letters he had written were drafted by his cousin Auro-dada.

Page-68

9

Some English Friends

This was not the first time that the Government was questioned by the members of the House of Commons on its India policy and, more specifically, on the ongoing events in Bengal. India did have some English friends¹ who took interest in her. A few were in the Parliament. Even at the risk of displeasing their party bosses and of their renomination in Parliament, some members took a bolder stand than the Moderates of the Indian Congress. A few names spring to mind: Sir Henry Cotton, Mr. Keir Hardie, Dr. H. V. Rutherford, Mr. Frederic Mackarness, Mr. Ramsay MacDonald, all members of the House of Commons. They were ably assisted by a number of journalists, among whom was our friend Mr. H. W. Nevinson.

The Calcutta newspapers had, as we just saw, prominently published (6 April 1910) reports of the police raids at the *Karma-yogin* office. *Amrila Bazar Patrika*, for instance, had headlines such as:

¹ The reader is sure to have noticed that my criticism is entirely directed towards the Anglo-Indian government, never to Englishmen as such.

Security under new press act

Notice on publisher of "dharma"

"Karmayogin" sedition case—trial of the printer etc. etc.

Another highlighted news item was the issuing of warrant of arrest against Sri Aurobindo.

The *Indian News Agency* promptly spread the news. Date-lined 5th (April 1910), it wrote from Calcutta:

"The Chief Presidency Magistrate yesterday issued a warrant for the arrest of Arabindo Chose under section 124-A, Indian Penal Code. The warrant remains unexecuted owing to Ghose's whereabouts not being known."

The *Times* lost no time in reproducing these news items, along with a few more details. Londoners, when they opened their newspapers on the morning of 7th April, read—some with shock, some with glee:

"A warrant for the arrest of Mr. Arabindo Chose has been issued because of an article published in his newspaper, the *Karmayogin*, on December 25....."

Armed with the morning's *Times*, the Labour members of Parliament right away queried the Government. They were led by Ramsay MacDonald in the House of Commons. He asked the Under Secretary of State for India, Edwin Montagu, whether he could confirm or deny 'the report in this morning's *Times*' that a warrant of arrest has been issued against Mr. Arabindo Ghose for an article that appeared in the *Karmayogin* of 25th December, and whether a copy of the said article could be placed in the Library for the information of Members?

The Under Secretary could not deny having seen the

Page-70

report in the *Times* but pleaded ignorance as to the veracity or otherwise of the published news. *Amrita Bazar* splashed the news on 9 April.

"TELEGRAM

ARABINDA'S WARRANT

LORD MORLEY'S ENQUIRY

London April 7: Mr. Motagu, replying to Mr. Ramsay Mac-Donald said 'Lord Morley has seen in the *Times* the announcement of warrant for arrest of Arabinda Ghose and telegraphed to India for information.' "

James Ramsay MacDonald (1866-1937), took keen interest in Indian affairs. Son of a labourer, he joined the Labour Party in 1894 and worked his way up. He was first elected to Parliament in 1906 on a Labour ticket. In January 1924 J. R. MacDonald became England's first Labour Prime Minister, but his ministry was of a very short duration. Then from 1929 to 1935 he headed another Labour government which was turned into a National Government in 1931. He was an associate of the British Labour leader, James Keir Hardie (1856-1915), also a member of the House of Commons. Keir Hardie had visited India at the height of the Nationalist Movement.

During his father's incarceration Sukumar had written to several English friends including the above two, describing the plight of his father in the Agra jail. K.K. Mitra, along with eight others, among whom were Subodh Mullick, Shyam Sundar Chakravarty, and Aswini Kumar Dutt, had been deported or held without trial for months and months, from December 1908, because "even the police" were "unable to procure evidence

against them," to quote from the *Review of Reviews* of January 1909.

Attracted to India, J. Ramsay MacDonald decided to visit it and acquaint himself with the prevailing situation there. In November or December 1909 he was in Calcutta along with his wife. At Sukumar's invitation they paid him a visit. "My mother, sisters Kumudini-didi, Basanti and Sarojini-didi welcomed them and offered them *sandesh, rosogolla, kochuri, singara*) and other Bengali food items." When in 1911 his book, *The Awakening of India*¹—highly appreciated by the Nationalist Indians—was published, he offered one copy to Sukumar.

It was then, towards the end of 1909, and there at the College Square house, that Ramsay MacDonald had met Sri Aurobindo. They talked long. During their conversation MacDonald asked him, "What is your conception of the end which is being worked out by our Indian administration?" The reply granted was terse. "A free and independent India."

In his book J. R. MacDonald not only records his impression of his tour in India, but also quotes a number of extracts from the *Karmayogin* where Sri Aurobindo had spelled out his ideas of Indian freedom and Nationalism.

Naturally enough, he gives his impressions of the meeting with the great Nationalist.

¹ *Sandesh* and *rosogolla* are sweets made from curdled milk; *koichuri* is a kind of pancake made of kneaded flour and pulped pulses; *singara* is a kind of stuffed snack shaped like a water chestnut ... all extremely tasty and all mouth-watering.

² His next, *The Government of India*, written after his second visit to India during 1913-14, was published eight years later.

"But Bengal is perhaps doing better than making political parties," he wrote. "It is idealising India. It is translating nationalism into religion, into music and poetry, into painting and literature. I called on one whose name is on every lip as a wild extremist who toys with bombs and across whose path the shadow of the hangman falls. He sat under a printed text¹ 'I will go in the strength of the Lord God,' he talked of the things which troubled the soul of man, he

wandered aimlessly into the dim regions of aspiration, where the mind finds a soothing resting place. He was far more of a mystic than of a politician. He saw India seated on a temple throne. But how it was to arise, what the next step was to be, what the morrow of independence was to bring, to these things he had given little thought. They were not of the nature of his genius."

There are a few disputable points in MacDonald's assessment. For instance, years earlier, Sri Aurobindo had prepared a comprehensive plan for the Gaekwad for the administration and development of the Baroda State. The report dealt with wide-ranging subjects: different aspects of agriculture, fertilizer and crop patterns; fodder and grazing of cattle; crafts including the training of workers and inducement to good ones; commerce and industry; import and export, not forgetting custom duties, taxation, and so on; and naturally, education. It was a basic plan for a good administration which could quite easily have been adapted on a vaster scale for the whole country. He was a competent policy maker with a penetrating vision.

¹ Their meeting had taken place in the office room that served as *Sanjibani* office. As Krishna Kumar Mitra used to work for his paper and receive people there, his wife Lilabati had hung up that motto on the wall.

But Sri Aurobindo always made light of his own accomplishments.

No doubt Ramsay MacDonald was an astute man ... when he had to deal with ordinary men. But he was unable to shake off his European mindset to which a mystic is a mystic is a mystic. How can a 'mystic' ever be a politician? A mystic is not supposed to have much comprehension of matter, and does he not tend to be most impractical? Well, 'no' would say an Indian, if by mystic you mean spiritual. A spiritual master's consciousness is wide as the universe, so it is natural that he sees more widely than we ordinary people do.

In point of fact, Sri Aurobindo, like his predecessor Sri Krishna, was intensely spiritual *and* intensely material. He had a very firm grasp of the material. Remember the way he had organized the great movement for Independence. Later events too were to disprove MacDonald's view that the 'wild extremist' had not given any thought to India's 'morrow of independence.' The future British Prime Minister did not live long enough to see, but Sri Aurobindo, though 'retired' from politics for well over three decades, intervened personally during Cripps' mission in 1942 by making a public pronouncement on the subject. Oh, how he tried to stop the splintering of

India when she was finally to gain her independence. All this is now history. Indian politicians were deaf to his appeals. Sri Aurobindo had sent his emissary, Duraiswamy Iyer, to Rajaji' with a message to the Congress leaders "that they should accept without hesitation or conditions the Cripps offer," recalled B. Shiva

1 C. Rajagopalachari.

Page-74

Rao in 1959. "After that rejection there was no turning back for the British for full support to the Muslim League and all its demands." Do you know that M. K. Gandhi rejected outright Sri Aurobindo's advice, saying irritably, "Why is he meddling?"

Frankly, most Indian politicians were but toys in the hands of the British; Gandhi and Nehru being chief among them. The reason is not far to seek. To quote Dilip Kumar Roy,¹ "[Indians] have been successfully westernized and completely insulated from India's ancient spiritual influences by the modern European outlook on life, as had happened with Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru.... Pandit Jawaharlal finds Hindu culture so foreign, even bizarre, and fails to understand the diverse ways in which its religious spirit has helped humanity."

Dilip was charitable. Because it was worse. Jawaharlal Nehru was a self proclaimed 'secularist' In other words, a Hindu hater. In a letter (17 November 1953) to Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the then President of India, he unmasked himself. "The Hindu," wrote Nehru, "is certainly not tolerant and is certainly more narrow-minded than almost any person in any other country except the Jew."

And to fill our cup, there is Nehru's bitter reproach to the French Indologist, Alain Daniélou. "What you are interested in is just what we want to destroy."

To destroy.

1 Sri Aurobindo Came to Me.

Page-75

God to the Rescue

We have digressed.

Let us see what was going on in the British House of Commons.

Ramsay MacDonald may not have understood Sri Aurobindo properly, but there is no doubt at all of the impact the latter made on him. He again put his question on 14 April to which Montagu gave only a partial reply. To an additional query on the fate of the publishers he replied that the Secretary of State was 'not aware' of any other warrants in this matter. *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, in its editorial on 20 April expressed great surprise.

"Mr. Montagu, the Under Secretary of State for India, said in answer to Mr. Ramsay MacDonald: that he was not aware of any warrants having been issued against the publisher of Babu Arabindo's paper. We are surprised at this reply, for, not only printer and publisher have been arrested about a fortnight ago, but he has been put on trial. His bail was refused by the Chief Presidency Magistrate, but the High Court has granted it. The India Office, we wonder, knows nothing about all this. Mr. Montagu complains that 'considerable delay occurs just now in obtaining information.' This is indeed strange, for, he

Page-76

can surely get information from India by wire in a few hours. 'I must ask patience' said Mr. Montagu, 'while fullest information is being produced.' This is reasonable request; and we dare say, Mr. Ramsay MacDonald will gladly wait, but, in that case, it is also not unreasonable to ask that the proceedings in connection with the trial of Babu Arabindo and his printer might be stayed till fullest information is placed before the House...."

Well, Ramsay MacDonald did show his goodwill and patience. But when days and days passed without a word from the Government, he repeated his question on 26 April. The Under Secretary's reply was bland. "The Secretary of State is not yet in a position to add anything to the answer given."

The Member's patience was wearing thin. Besides he had effectively utilized the time to obtain directly a great deal of information from India. Once again on 28 April Ramsay MacDonald put the same question to the same person. Yet again Montagu denied having received any further information. To his oft-repeated denial he added a few pieces of advice to the Labour M. R. The latter was fed up with the Under Secretary's prevarications. The Member said that this was the fourth time he had put the question and all the information he had been able to get was that the warrant had been issued under Section 124a of the Indian Penal Code.

MacDonald expressed his concern about the type of the official mind that was dealing with the exceedingly delicate situation in India: "I feel perfectly certain that unless the India Office will insist upon its officials administering India with some generosity, some catholicity of sentiment and some serious

Page-77

attempt to associate with themselves men like Mr. Arabindo Ghose, the future is going to be very much darker than it at present is."

The Labour M. P. Keir Hardie, member for Methyr Tydvil, supported MacDonald. "Everything that tells against the Indian people" he observed, "is blazed forth, and matters which might tell in their favour do not receive anything like the same publicity."

J. Ramsay MacDonald disclosed that "I have myself received, in the ordinary course of my Indian post, during at least the last three weeks, newspapers, each one of which stated that Mr. Arabindo was at a certain place and each one of the statements agreed." He stated additionally, "It is perfectly well known, he has left what we call in this country the public life. He has left the cares and concerns of the material affairs of the universe and has gone into retirement to make his peace with the Eternal."

Criticizing the Government of India for putting Mr. Arabindo Ghose on its 'black books' and for branding him a 'sedition-monger' who needed watching, MacDonald reproved it saying, "... he has been put in the suspected list, and there is not a single thing that he does but is twisted and misrepresented. Even as a matter of fact—and this is my own version of the issue of the warrant—when he retires from public life to private life, although that again was known, and although all his friends said it was imminent, and although he himself practically told me when I saw him that he would not be very much longer in the affairs of the world and engaged in

journalistic work— when that step was taken, and he did retire, it was apparently regarded by the Government of Bengal as a move in some

Page-78

deep-seated hidden political plot, and that was the thing which causes the issue of the warrant— at any rate that is my theory."

To the discomfiture of the Under Secretary of State, Ramsay MacDonald said ironically, "What is this article about which so much has been said? My Hon. Friend has not been able to furnish me with a copy, I have it myself." With a flourish he brought out the article from the *Karmayogin* of 25 December 1909.

A good deal of prayer must have gone up to God from the bureaucrats of the Colonial government; He took pity on them.

The Eternal sent an intimation to the ardent Nationalist whose ideal was independence. In this way it came about that Sri Aurobindo "on receiving an inner intimation left politics for spiritual lifework. The intimation was that Swadeshi movement must now end and would be followed later on by a Home Rule movement and a Non-cooperation movement of the Gandhi type, under other leaders."

A first Command sent him to Chandernagore.

A second Command sent him to Pondicherry.

That is how God came to the rescue of the Indo-British government.

Page-79

11

Vedapuri

Sri Aurobindo came to Pondicherry.

Nobody knows when this port town on the Coromandel coast came into existence. Its birth is lost in the mists of time. But if you sit on its sandy beach, quieten your mind, and listen to the lapping waters of the ocean, you will be taken to a time beyond time.

My spirit drifted off with the murmuring voices of the sea.

I was startled out of it by a loud noise. I jumped to my feet and turned. I saw a forest. Elephants trumpeted as they passed through it. Behind them came other animals. The spotted deer was lovely (I remember him so well even now). All were running. Running towards the north. The last to run past was a roaring lion, most majestic. Why were they all headed northwards? Why this tearing hurry?

I climbed a little to reach the forest. Then walked a bit here, a bit there, when I came upon a little clearing. In the middle of it stood a charming little hut, with a thatched roof, spotlessly clean all around. Seated in front was a golden-hued man, deep in meditation. A puissant Rishi. The hut's door opened, and a fair woman stepped out. Her every movement was graceful. Grace incarnate. At her approach the Rishi opened his eyes.

Page-80

Their loving glances met. She sat down by him. Both went into a deep meditation.

I turned.

The forest had vanished. In its place was a desert. I got a glimpse of the disappearing back of a camel. I turned again.

The sea was there. But it had become rough. The waves came crashing. Then a strange thing happened. About ten to twelve metres from me, waves began to take on colours. These waves of colour rose three to four metres in the air, then fell at the same place. I stood there, rapt in the play of those rising and falling coloured waves. Words sounded in my head: "The creation of the world."

Was that but a dream?

It took me some years before things fell into place.

Pasupati, the lord of all creatures great and small, was getting married. The animals were running, for they did not want to miss the great event. The lion was taking them to the Himalayas. Uma, the daughter of Himavat and Menaka, was the Bride.

Hosts from heaven and hosts from hell had come trooping. Bhutas and Pramathas' had escorted their Lord from Kailash, dancing and beating skull drums and rattling bones. From the Bride's side came the Apsaras, the Gandharvas² the

¹ Bhutas and Pramathas are ghosts and fiends attending upon Shiva. Hence Shiva is also known as Bhutanath and Pramathesh.

* Apsaras and Gandharvas are heaven's dancers and musicians and singers. They live in the middle air, between heaven and earth. The dwellings, the cities of the Gandharvas are reputed to be most splendid.

Kinnars.¹ Apsaras, the nymphs of heaven, danced their exquisite dances to the heavenly music of the Gandharvas. The Kinnars, the celestial choristers, enriched the scene.

Everyone who was anyone or who was nobody gathered on the Himalayan peaks- to celebrate the divine Marriage. Obviously, that posed a great threat to the earth's equilibrium.³ How to restore the balance? Imploring eyes turned, not to Vishnu who had tied the knot, but to the Bridegroom. Mahadev looked at the high assembly, then beckoned Agastya.

Agastya, the offspring of Mitra and Varuna, the Sun-god and the Ocean-god, was born in a water jar, tiny as a fish, but of great lustre. He did not grow tall even as a man. But his lustre had grown resplendent. Fabulous were his exploits, such as drinking up the ocean to expose the demons hidden in the dark waters so that the gods could wipe them out; eating up the Rakshasa Vātāpi, who had taken the form of a ram, and digesting him instantly, then destroying Vātāpi's brother Ilvala by the flash of his eyes. So great was his power and light, it is said, that

¹ Kinnars dwell in the heaven of Kuvera the Yaksha, in Kailash. A Kinnar has the form of a man and the head of a horse, as opposed to Sagittarius the Archer, who has a horse's body and the head of a man.

² I have heard that it was at Triyugīnārāyan (1980 m.) that Vishnu, or Narayana, performed the celestial nuptials. The fire lit for the wedding ceremony still burns. The temple with a gopuram is curiously reminiscent of South Indian temple architecture.

³ "... The native Yurok believe" wrote Rick Gore ('Cascadia,' *National Geographic*, May 1998, p. 35), "the Creator taught them about Earth's movements at the beginning of time. Every two years ... elders perform a ceremony to balance the Earth." The Yurok say, "We're not doing this just for our own people. It's for everyone."

Page-82

in his vicinity the demons could only gaze upon the country and not possess it. Besides so many other feats he performed! Agastya was level-headed. His was not a matchstick temper like Durvasa muni's—flare up at the drop of a leaf and curse. Nor was he all-pardoning like his brother Vasishtha. Astute Agastya could see through a mask and had no compunction in destroying an evil. He stood for Truth-Knowledge. Therefore nobody was really surprised when Mahadeva called him. Yes, Rishi Agastya could attract people to him and restore normalcy in the earth's balance.

Well, we know that today's happening is tomorrow's story and the legend of the day after.

Tamils venerate Agastya as the first teacher of science and literature. The legend has it that when Shiva laid on him the task of going down South and restoring earth's balance, at first Agastya was reluctant as he had no wish to leave the pleasant side of the Great God. But Mahadeva persuaded him with the promise that wherever he, Agastya, found himself, there Shiva would show himself. Then Agastya prayed to Shiva to give him a knowledge of the country where he was being sent, and enable him to communicate with people there. The great God started "beating a drum with his two hands. The sounds that came from the left side were the basis for the Tamil language." The sounds from the right were the basis of the Sanskrit language.¹ In due course, after some interesting adventures, Agastya reached the southernmost section of the Western Ghats, the

¹ Majumdar: *The History and Culture of the Indian People*, vol. 2 (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan).

Page-83

Podiyil Hills (Malaya mountains) from which flows the river Tāmraparni. "There, in the cool mountain fastness, Agastya produced a giant Tamil grammar called *Agctstyam* [or Agattiyam]

the supposed fountain-head of Tamil language and literature."¹ In the Deccan, he is even now one of the most famous sages and is considered the oldest teacher of ancient times.

That work achieved, Agastya and Lopamudra set out to explore the south. Deeper and deeper they travelled. Everywhere people were attracted to this luminous couple. That is how the Agastya cult became widespread and popular in the South.

But Agastya and Lopamudra had come on the earth to do something even more stupendous than all those exploits put together. For that they needed a 'seat.' They found it finally. By the seashore on the Coromandel coast. Our Pondicherry.

It is their hut I had seen.

Rishi Agastya and his consort Lopamudra were in deep meditation for the creation of a new world.

A new Veda.

¹ Majumdar, *op. cit.*

12

God's Cracker

Aeons passed.

Aeons had passed before.

But when aeons were not?

When "Time moved not yet nor Space was unrolled wide?"¹ Whamm! Cra-a-a-ck! Boom-boom-boo-oom! What was that whiz-bang? A cracker bursting? My friends, had we been there to hear that ear-splitting noise, we would have had no ears left to hear anything. It was God setting off his cracker with a 'big bang' signalling the start of the World Game. Said Ishwar the God to Ishwari the Goddess:

"When Light first from the unconscious Immense burst to create nebula and sun

'Twas the meeting of our hands through the empty Night that enkindled the fateful blaze;

The huge systems abandoned their inert trance and this green crater of life rose

That we might look on each other form on form from the depths of a living gaze."²

¹ 'The World Game,' a poem by Sri Aurobindo.

⁸ Ibid.

I recently read with interest that "astronomers looked 8000 light-years with the Hubble Space Telescope and it seemed that the eye of God was staring back."¹

When the Earth was young, she was a fanciful little maid. Hers was a playground of miracles. Time was timeless. Over geological aeons she made and remade her lands and seas (not that she has stopped!). Sculpting, painting now this picture then that. Always new. Always different. She is a great artist, our lass Earth. She formed huge landmasses—the continents—that move around the planet. At the surface ride more than a dozen huge, stiff fragments, or plates. They move at a tortoise's pace, but traverse thousands of kilometres over millions of years. As they drift, the plates collide and separate, in the process changing the face of the Earth and rearranging her features.

Once our young Earth formed a vast landmass: Pangea, part of which became Gondwanaland. An ancient super continent, Gondwanaland included in its landmass the present Antarctica, Africa, South America, Australia, and India. One fine day, about 160 million years ago, it began to break up. Each mobile fragment went its way. A small wedge went adventuring. It drifted and drifted. How delicious it was to sail along so lazily! The sun kissed it with its myriad rays. The wind blew over it, warbling, whispering sweet nothings. The sky twinkled at it with its million stars. The great, tropical Tethys Sea, wide as today's Atlantic, cradled it. It was lost in a reverie.

Wha-a-mm! What a jolt! Like a skittish kid it went and butted against the underside of the Eurasian continent. You

¹ *National Geographic*, January 1997. Many scientists believe that the 'Big Bang' took place about 15 billion years ago. Give or take a billion or two.



know how a calf butts its mother's underbelly to get more milk? Well, it was not milk that flowed from this particular impact. Instead, the great Himalayas rose. India became a part of Asia.¹

The young lass never ceases to amaze us. Full of whims, the 'green crater of life' now began to evolve 'life.' Whimsical, yes. But so very painstaking! Just note how she set in motion 'evolution,' whose beginnings our present-day biologists are still unveiling. Note also that the lass has her head well screwed on her shoulders. For, before creating 'life' she did not forget to create ingredients for sustenance of 'life'—atmospheric chemistry was in place.

"I suppose," wrote Sri Aurobindo to my father on 1st December 1935, "I suppose a matter-of-fact observer if there had been one at the time of the unrelieved reign of inanimate Matter in the earth's beginning would have criticised any promise of the emergence of life in a world of dead earth and rock and mineral as an absurdity and a chimera; so too afterwards he would have repeated his mistake and regarded the emergence of thought and reason in an animal world as an absurdity and a chimera...."² Let's then give the lass a standing ovation for her handiwork. From a mass of gases to inanimate Matter, to a

' Pangea began breaking up during the Triassic (220 million years ago); by the Jurassic (150 m. y. a.), the Tethys ocean had formed. "Until 65 million years ago, a great ocean, the Tethys, separated India from Asia. There were no Himalayas and no Tibetan Plateau. These high points of today's globe were created by the slow collision of India and Asia, and are still being forced upwards today as the plate carrying India grinds to a halt. The area around present-day Lhasa was an island, dividing the Tethys into two parts." ('Remains of an ancient ocean,' *The Hindu*, 9 September 1999.)² *Sri Aurobindo and Mother to Prithwi Singh*,, p. 62.

protoplasm, to gigantic dinosaurs, to hominids that led to us: *Homo sapiens*.

Our lass turned out to be a great Creatrix.

Scientists believe that 'life' on Earth began about four billion years ago. "The oldest rocks of Earth," writes V. B. Scheffer,¹ "showing evidence of life preserve the fossils of one-celled, microbial species only." Defying conventional wisdom, the planet of 'inanimate Matter' became a living world. There exist three-billion-year old fossilized microbes that closely resemble living bacteria.

When our lass made the first cell, she put a code in it. The Code of Life. A little hesitating at first, she began to move from single-celled to multi-celled stage. It was a momentous event. As she became adept at handling her imaginative creations she also went on to develop extraordinary strategies of survival.²

Our clever lass, not satisfied with a mere 'survival of life' code, also implanted something else in each species. An urge. A few individuals in each species felt the urge to push against its physical limitations of life and get out of its habitual rut. Weirdoes to the average members. Pioneers to the next generation.

Fantastic indeed is the handiwork of our lass. "The inventiveness of Nature during eons of time," marvels V. B. Schaffer, "has brought diversity to the animal world." Naturally. That was

¹ *Spires of Form, Glimpses of Evolution.*

- Nematodes, for example. Those microscopic worms go into a lifeless state when moisture departs. But they are not dead. It's a trance-like state. When the tiniest bit of moisture comes along, "the nematode emerge from their freeze-dried state and go back to eating bacteria." (*National Geographic*, October 1998, p. 132)

the idea, no? To "look on each other form on form." So, through biological times she increased the diversity of species. And if, perchance, she did not like her handiwork she brought about a cataclysm and wiped out the species. Her latest major diversity being the species of bipeds, the modern *Homo sapiens*.

No, but see how our lass delights in complexity! Beginning with one single cell she has gone on to build creatures with trillions of cells. Then in the human genome she has inscribed roughly three and a half billion letters.¹ Again how very complex she did make a human brain! "Every second, more than ten billion neurones send electrochemical signals round your head at speeds up to 400 kmph."- Enough to keep our heads spinning!

The question uppermost in the minds of scientists is when, where and how *Homo sapiens* appeared on planet Earth. Most scientists now believe , because of evidence found there, that it was in Africa, around 125,000 years ago that modern *Homo sa/liens* appeared." Did that happen following a cataclysm? With ever new discoveries by pale anthropologists the dawn of humans is being rolled back. Scientists still debate the time.

Let the scientists debate. "A whole lot of Earth's history is unknown to us," Mother pointed out pertinently.⁴ Let the

¹ *National Geographic*, October 1999 (p. 55).

² 'How to Have Brilliant Ideas' by Nick Morgan (*Reader's Digest*, August 2000).

³ Had the same amount of assiduous excavations as carried out in Africa, been done in other parts of the world—China or India—I am sure they would have found enough evidence to conclude that humans appeared simultaneously at several places on the Earth.

⁴ *Mother's Agenda*, 17 October 1964.

scientists puzzle out Nature's secrets. There are other means of knowing.

The memories of the dawn of humans remain embedded in Earth's memory. Some people have access to the storehouse. Mother has already taken us with her on a voyage of her memories of an earthly paradise,¹ when man lived in harmony with Nature.

Sri Aurobindo, in his turn, describes vividly that Nature. "Visions of waters blue in an immortal sunlight or grey in the drifting of a magic welter of cloud and rain, rocks swept by the surf and shifting in their hollows with the wind, island meadows and glades many-pictured above the sea, rivers and haze-purple hills, a scene of unimaginable beauty where forms moved that had not lost the pristine beauty of man before the clutch stiffened on him of early decay and death, of grief and old age, where hearts beat that had not lost the pulsations of our ancient immortality and were not yet attuned to the broken rhythms of pain and grief... ."-

There are many things hidden in time that we have yet to learn. I am not a scientist, that is clear. I am not an intellectual, that's evident. Mine is an average brain. Therefore nothing binds it down to one single track. It wanders. It wonders.

I mused. Does not the interdependence of everything in Nature show us that it is all the work of one and the same hand? Did not our lass bestow equal loving care to the minute and the gigantic forms when she fashioned them? Now, the

¹ *Mother's Chronicles*, Book Three, ch. 6.

- 'Srebian, A Tale of Prehistoric Times' (*Archives*, April 1983, p. 49)

question is, why this proliferation of forms? Why more and more complex, 'evolved' life forms? All this prodigious work of the Earth is then aimless? Or does she have an aim and a purpose? If we look carefully, we discover that Earth-nature has followed an amazing plan. Probe deep, and we find that Earth's aim was—is—to develop consciousness. Now, my friends, does it seem logical or reasonable to you to suppose that Earth-nature's billions of years' meticulous work is destined to be destroyed in a jiffy by the degraded bipeds, Homo sapiens sapiens ? Non-sapiens, actually, because our ignorance is simply colossal. The lass who put a code of conduct in the cells of each species, changed her formula when she came to the most complex of

her creations: the humans. She gave humans the liberty of choice. The choice of participating in her creative evolution, or committing enough error to destroy their own species (not to speak of the destruction of other species). But it seems quite illogical to me to think that Earth will rest on her laurels after having created this particular genus of bipeds, at present the 'pinnacle' of evolution. Would it not be more reasonable to suppose that Earth's evolutionary process is leading towards another type of being? Not necessarily different from us in form, but rather in substance. I can well imagine a type of being whose consciousness will not-cannot-lend itself to degradation, but which will scale higher and higher peaks of knowledge, deeper and deeper oceans of reality. Sri Aurobindo called the new type 'supramental. '

"The descent of the supramental is an inevitable necessity in the logic of things and is therefore sure," had begun Sri Aurobindo in the same letter to my father. "It is because people

do not understand what the supermind is or realise the significance of the emergence of consciousness in a world of 'inconscient' Matter that they are unable to realise this inevitability...." He said at the end of the letter, "It is the same now with the appearance of supermind in the stumbling mentality of this world of human consciousness and its reasoning ignorance."¹ The question that pops up is why did the great Creatrix give such a liberty to the human race? Maybe she wished to have some creatures to consciously share the World-Game with her? Share her joy of creation, partake of the rapture of God's bliss? She invites us to embark upon the adventure of life. To make a clear and willed choice. She beckons us to probe

the mystery of existence. That is why, to put it in Mother's words, "It is the substance of physical life which wants to know its profound law."-

As Mother peeled off layer after layer of mystery wrapped round the cell, she could say: "A certitude at the bottom of Matter that the solution lies THERE."

The reason behind Sri Aurobindo and Mother joining forces in South India was to accelerate the process of evolution.

Towards the completion of her work, Mother's memory was freed. A cellular memory.

"We have to descend right to the very bottom, in quest of that marvellous bursting of the Vibration of Love."

¹ *Sri Aurobindo and Mother to Prtihwi Singh*, 1st Dec. 1935.

² *Mother's Agenda*, 30 October 1964. On Satprem's 4T' birth anniversary
Mother revealed the great secret to him.

13

Statecraft

Earth's little Wedge became the great Mother of a mighty civilization.

Worldwide there grew pockets of human development. The nomadic, hunting Palaeolithic people, using rude stone implements, gave way to the Neolithic people with greater skill, who used polished, improved implements.' An astonishingly long stride took place between the former and the latter. Neolithic tribes learned the art of agriculture, to domesticate animals, to make, paint and decorate potteries, to construct boats and go out to sea. In India, Neolithic people could spin cotton and wool, and weave cloth. Like their counterparts in other regions of the world, with whom they had similarities of social customs, they buried their dead, sometimes putting the body in a large urn. Remains of these cave dwellers are found in almost every part of India.

Apart from the basic needs of drinking and bathing, water

¹ This is based on R. C. Majumdar's *Advanced Study of India*. He further says that "an ancient factory for the manufacture of stone implements has been discovered in the Bellary district, Madras, where we can still trace the various stages of their construction."

Page-95

is needed for agriculture too, in fact much more. Indeed, there is an intimate connection of rivers with the well-being of a country. That is why the prehistoric (historic too!) peoples chose to settle near rivers. Once settled they began to develop rapidly. Facility of navigation and transport played an important part in the growth of trade and industry of a riverside town. Civilizations were born. The Nile, Euphrates and Tigris, have all played their role in nurturing various great human civilizations. After the last Ice Age,¹ floods of meltwater rushed down the mountainsides. Great rivers flowed across continents. One of the greatest rivers was the Saraswati. Born on the high Himalayas, she traversed long and wide plains—at places she flowed ten kilometres wide—to fling herself on the breast of Pashchima Payodhi.² On the banks of the great Saraswati grew up one of the most ancient and enduring civilizations. The Vedic Rishis hymned her in exalted terms. For, in this country, people worship rivers as gods and goddesses.

Civilizations are normally linked to empires. Like human life, civilizations grew, declined and passed away with the rise and fall of empires. They left some imprint in humanity's consciousness, to be sure, which often remained as legends: such

¹ The last Ice Age ended roughly 10,000 years ago. That time is generally considered as the end of the Pleistocene Epoch and the beginning of the Recent Epoch of the Quaternary Period of Earth history. At the height of the Pleistocene glacial ages, more than 30% of the land area of the world was covered by glacial ice, whereas at present only 10% is so covered. The flora and fauna of the Pleistocene began to resemble those of today. Among the significant mammals that evolved during the Pleistocene were humans.

² Now called the Arabian Sea.

Page-96

as the lost civilization of Atlantis. But they were no longer living.

The civilization that developed along the banks of the Saraswati had something different in it. The Vedic Rishis heard and saw and explored the mystery of creation. It was the sublime gift of the Saraswati. The Rishis were great travellers. The hymns sung on the banks of the Saraswati spread to the banks of Ganga and Narmada, of Godavari and Krishna, of Kaveri and Tamraparni.... From the Himalayan peaks to Dakshina Jananidhi (Indian Ocean), from Purva Sagar (Bay of Bengal) to Pashchima Payodhi (the Arabian Sea), India's air filled with a strange aroma. Swami Vivekananda of our own times put it so well. "India," he said, "shall rise only through a renewal and restoration of that highest spiritual consciousness which has made of India, at all times, the cradle of the nations and the cradle of the faith."

Although rooted in a spiritual civilization, India did not divorce spirituality and materialism. From very early times she evolved a happy blend of material resources with spiritual values. In the Veda, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, one finds a well-formulated system of governance. From olden times several systems of rule were known: monarchy, oligarchy, plutocracy were all in vogue. Of these, hereditary monarchy was the more prevalent. It was understood, however, that the first and foremost duty of a ruler was to protect his people, destroy their enemies, and defend their territory—therefore his. Ideally, a ruler is the upholder of the law, dispenser of justice, bringer of prosperity to his people. Valmiki, in the epic Ramayana, includes universal education among the signs of a just society. The Rig-Veda emphasizes the need of people's approval if the rule were to be stable. In short, India developed a citizen-oriented

governance. So much so that the arrogant Kuru prince Duryodhana never neglected the welfare of his subjects during his reign.

Naturally, all those systems of governance had taken thousands of years to take shape. At first when people settled down they began to form a social system. The first development was a tribal system or of clan. All freemen were considered equal, and treated as such. As the same clan began to inhabit a certain territory, they laid claim to it. "After the fixed settlement," explains Sri Aurobindo, "within determined boundaries the system of the clan or tribe continued, but found a basic unit or constituent atom in the settled village community."¹ Communities met for communal deliberations, for worship, for sacrifice, or for war. The leader of a clan or community soon became a king. "The religious institution of the sacrifice developed in time a class of priests and inspired singers, men trained in the ritual or in possession of the mystic knowledge which

lay behind the symbols of the sacrifice." Thus was sown the seed of the Brahminic institution. Neither the kingship nor the priesthood was hereditary to begin with. In fact, there was an interclass mobility. But given human tendencies, it was easier for a carpenter's son to learn good carpentry. Therefore the hereditary principle emerged at an early stage of social development. But, mind you, the status of a man was not fixed by his birth, but by his capacities and his inner nature. With the passing of time came hierarchy, or a system of social classes. The classes were

' All quotes in this chapter are from *The Foundations of Indian Culture*, 'Indian Polity.'

Page-98

divided into *caturvarna*, miscalled the system of four castes. "The division of castes in India was conceived as a distribution of duties." Which means that the caste divisions were not at all an obstacle to the united life of the people. Up to a certain point the Indian line followed the ordinary line of evolution as in other world communities.

Nevertheless owing to the unique mentality of the Indian race, certain striking peculiarities fixed themselves, and gave a different stamp to the political, economic and social factors of Indian civilization. Because, as Sri Aurobindo says, "It was a marked feature of the Indian mind that it sought to attach a spiritual meaning and a religious sanction to all, even to the

most external social and political circumstances of its life_____ "

It imposed on all classes and functions an ideal of duties, "a rule of their action and an ideal way and temperament, character, spirit in the action, a dharma with a spiritual significance." It was the work of the Rishi—the man of a higher spiritual experience and knowledge, born in any of the classes—"to put this stamp enduringly on the national mind, to prolong and perpetuate it, to discover and interpret the ideal law and its practical meaning, to cast the life of the people into the well-shaped ideals and significant forms of a civilisation founded on the spiritual and religious sense."

As priests, legists, and spiritual preceptors, the Brahmins exercised considerable influence, but the active political power "remained with the king, the Kshatriya aristocracy and the commons. But, above them all, above the king himself, was the Dharma." It was the Rishi, exercising an authority by his spiritual personality over the rest, revered and consulted by the king,

of whom he was sometimes the religious preceptor, who was "in the then fluid state of social evolution able alone to exercise an important role in evolving new basic ideas and effecting direct and immediate changes of the socio-religious ideas and customs of the people." It was neither the king nor even the Brahmins who had the authority to make at will any changes. The Brahmins were recorders and exponents of Dharma. The king in India "exercised supreme administrative and judicial power, was in possession of all the military forces of the kingdom and with his Council alone responsible for peace and war...." Indian monarchy, previous to the Muslim invasion, was not an autarchy.

"A greater sovereign than the king" Sri Aurobindo tells us, "was the Dharma, the religious, ethical, social, political, juridic and customary law organically governing the life of the people." And, let us note, with the Dharma no secular authority had any right of autocratic interference. "The king was only the guardian, executor and servant of the Dharma...." He was not the religious head of the people. There was no exclusive State religion. The religious liberties of the people were assured "and could not normally be infringed by any secular authority." Normally, there was no place in the Indian political system for religious oppression and intolerance.

The Indian social and political system was based on the conception of duty, not on rights and powers. As a rule the king could not disregard the will of the people. Exceptions there were, of course. "In spite of the sanctity and prestige attaching to the sovereign," to quote Sri Aurobindo, "it was laid down that obedience ceased to be binding if the king ceased to be

faithful executor of Dharma." Incompetence and violation of the obligation to rule to the satisfaction of the people were causes enough for the king's removal. The much maligned Manu goes so far as to advise that "an unjust and oppressive king should be killed by his own subjects like a mad dog." That fate overtook Manu's own descendant Vena, who turned out to be such a wicked king that a cry arose, "Kill this wicked man." Vena was killed. Sri Aurobindo deduces that "this justification by the highest authority of the right or even the duty of insurrection and regicide in extreme cases is sufficient to show that absolutism or the unconditional divine right of kings was no part of the intention of the Indian political system."

It is regrettable that we know so little of the political organization of those times. But there is clear evidence that the summit of the political structure was occupied by three governing bodies. The topmost was the King in his ministerial council. The Council included a fixed number of all the four castes. Vaishyas outnumbered the others, because in those early times, they comprised not only of merchants and small traders, but also the craftsmen and artisans and the agriculturists. Thus the whole community was represented in the King's Council. Metropolitan assembly was the second governing body: it was constituted of representatives of the city guilds and the various caste bodies belonging to all the orders of society. The third one was the general assembly. These three bodies acted as a check on the royal power. The two assemblies sat either separately or together, as needed. Separately, for the exercise each of its separate powers. Together, for matters concerning the whole people. Between them they represented the mind and will of the whole country.

Page-101

The joint session of the Metropolitan and general assemblies was consulted on all questions of vital interest to the country, including on matters of succession. Because, together these assemblies could depose the sovereign, or alter the succession at his death. Dasaratha was a mighty king of the Solar dynasty. Counting from its founder, Vaivasvata Manu (the seventh and the present Manu), Dasaratha was the forty-second descendant in the line. Hereditary monarchy was therefore well established. Dasaratha could have proclaimed his eldest son Rama the Crown Prince. But the king was not an autocrat as we said. So, instead, he called together a joint session of various assemblies of the realm. "Delegates of the different provinces and various orders, religious, military and popular" came to his summons. When Dasaratha expressed his wish to anoint Rama as the Crown Prince, all of them gave their enthusiastic assent.

We see therefore that the "whole Indian system was founded upon a close participation of all the orders in the common life." Not even the Shudra was excluded from "his share in the civic life and an effective place and voice in politics, administration, justice." Consequently, we perceive that from early times the principle of democracy was in vogue. Not that the mass held the reins of government, but people had the certainty that their approval or disapproval of any action of the government would be effective; a sort of socialist democracy. In this way, a well-ordered civic life for the Indian people was assured. People were all for a good administration, as it allowed them to go about their daily lives unhindered, and lead a life of productivity and ease. In

that commerce and industry had a big part to play. Because, as explains Sri Aurobindo, "In human life

economic interests are those which are, ordinarily, violated with the least impunity; for they are bound up with the life itself and the persistent violation of them, if it does not destroy the oppressed organism, provokes necessarily the bitterest revolt and ends in one of Nature's inexorable retaliations."¹ The rulers were fairly well versed in the law of economics—production, wages, exchange, profit, rent, market, and so on. A set of guidelines existed for planning and budgeting, for the imposition and collection of taxes. Taxation was limited to a fixed percentage. But when State power declined, central control became weak, then local oppression became more and more unrestrained, and "instances are known of people from villages in an entire district meeting together and deciding upon common action to resist arbitrary and unusual imposts," declares Nilakanta Sastri.-

Villagers, whose principal occupation was agriculture were not neglected. Irrigation canals were dug to water cultivated fields, manure was used to fertilize the crops. Villagers themselves decided upon matters of common concern to them such as the regulation of land and irrigation rights in the village. Due importance was given to the rearing of cattle and other domestic animals. Roads were laid, and maintained, for travel and transport. Chariots drawn by horses, and wagons by bullocks, were the main means of transport by land. Boats³ plying on the rivers were another means of transport of men and material. Marine navigation served the external trade. Old inscriptions

¹ *The Ideal of Human Unity*, Sri Aurobindo.

² *A History of South India* (1997).

³ Different types of boats were used for shorter or longer voyages.

record the execution of works of public utility including the construction of and repairs to sources of water such as lakes, tanks, channels and wells. Trees were planted along the roads to

give shade to the midday travellers. Rest houses were provided for them. Wells were dug by the roadside for the use of men and animals. The State employed caretakers for this purpose.

That our ancients were well versed in civic administration of towns and villages, becomes clear from a simple perusal of the Mahabharata. Vyasa, its author, through the mouths of Bhishma and Vidura, explained in detail the intricacies of Statecraft.

Our later kings were no less experts in administration. For example, at the time of the Vijayanagar empire "the police system," says Nilakanta Sastri, "was fairly efficient, the rule being that when a theft occurred the property was recovered or made good by the police officers." Police regularly patrolled town streets at night. Justice was administered by a hierarchy of courts.

So we see that even when the Mughal grabbed a large chunk of the country and influenced its politics, a dharmic core of statecraft remained ingrained in a Hindu king who tried to secure the order and welfare of society.

More importantly, the old Indian social ideal did not accept the idea that poverty is noble. On the contrary, people were encouraged to be industrious, gain riches, and live a pleasant life. "Ancient India with its ideal of vast riches and vast spending was the greatest of nations." So wrote Sri Aurobindo. "Modern India with its trend towards national asceticism has fully become poor in life and sunk into weakness and degradation."¹

Thoughts and Aphorisms.

Decline and degradation. Yes. Given human nature and its tendency towards the downward pull, a fall from the high ideal of the Dharma was inevitable. The nobler ethical ideals gave way to a habit of Machiavellian statecraft, leading to a coarsening of the national mind in the ethics of politics. A total lack of political principle gave full force to the unbridled egoism of princes and leaders, worse compounded by the indifference of the common people to a change of rulers that "gave the whole of the vast peninsula into the grasp of a handful of merchants from across the seas." The over two hundred years' rule of those 'merchants from across the seas' hastened the degeneration of Indian society.

In conclusion, we may say that with such lofty ideal did our ancestors give shape to Indian polity. A polity for the welfare of all its citizens. A polity for the common weal. It was a natural order of the life of the people. But the life of a people, Sri Aurobindo reminds us, is like the life of an individual. It has a communal soul, mind and body. And like a human being's life, the life of the society passes through a cycle of birth, growth, youth, ripeness and decline. "If we let it go unchecked, the course towards decadence will make it perish, as a man dies of old age."

"But," said Sri Aurobindo, "the collective being has too the capacity of renewing itself, of a recovery and a new cycle."

What is India going to do? Renew herself and begin a new cycle? Rise from her ashes like the Phoenix?

Page-105

14

The Deccan

From time immemorial geographical India was culturally one. Because "The Vedic Rishis and their successors made it their chief work to found a spiritual basis of Indian life and to effect the spiritual and cultural unity of the many races and peoples of the peninsula." So, to be sure, one met with a multiplicity of regional tongues and a profuse variety of dialects. But one language, Sanskrit, was understood all over the great subcontinent. It is therefore not surprising that several thousand years after the Vedic Age, a saint-poet from the deep South, Tiruvalluvar, would echo all those concepts in his *Kural*. *Full of worldly wisdom, Tirukkural is a comprehensive manual of ethics, polity and love, expressed in pithy couplets. In it he gives a broad outline of statecraft and covers its essential elements. The author was a strong advocate of meritocracy. He had no hesitation in recommending the sacking of a corrupt officer or the compulsory retirement of the inefficient. Because the interest of the public was of paramount importance.*

The Tamil author Tiruvalluvar was regarded as a saint. But very little authentic information about his life and times has come down to us, although it is often affirmed that he was

Page-106

a weaver and belonged to a Sangam,¹ a college of Tamil poets.

Majumdar defines the Sangam Age in Tamil literature as a period of great literary glory. "It saw the production of a colossal volume of Tamil poetry in its pristine purity. Works were produced in every department of knowledge—though, alas, most of them are now lost to the world. The age was, besides, a period of national awakening, when the arts and the sciences flourished alike, when the people obtained all social amenities, and when far-flung trade and commerce secured to the Tamils prosperity and power."

In many countries of the world, we find that cultural efflorescence always took place in a prosperous society. That is how it should be. For how can culture flourish in an impoverished soil with the life half-killed and the intellect discouraged and intimidated? "It is when," says Sri Aurobindo, "the race has lived most richly and thought most profoundly that spirituality finds its heights and its depths and its constant and many-sided fruition."

Geologically speaking, the Deccan plateau is one of the oldest lands in the world. Its rocks are hundreds of millions of years old. "The Deccan," wrote Nilakanta Sastri in *A History of*

¹ There are supposed to have been three or four Sangams. The Sangam at the time of Tiruvalluvar was supposedly the last one. The creation of the Rural is put at AD 450-550 by Nilakanta Sastri. R. C. Majumdar limits the Sangam age between 500 BC to AD 500. P.S. Sundaram, who has translated the Rural into English couplets, says that Tiruvalluvar probably lived and wrote between the second century BC and the eighth century AD. The reader is free to choose his or her own date. A French dictionary, however, says that Tiruvalluvar lived most probably in the second century AD and the Rural was composed in the ... sixth century AD!

South India, "is one of the oldest inhabited regions of the world and its pre-historic archaeology and contacts with neighbouring lands, so far as they are traceable, constitute an important chapter in the history of the world's civilizations."

Cultural India was one, as we just said. Geographic India was well defined. But political India was in a constant flux. In the Deccan, dynasty rose and dynasty fell. Boundaries of a kingdom were drawn time and again. Kings reigned, waged wars, conquered or lost territories. From the south of the Vindhya ranges to the tip of the land where three seas mingle, dynasty after dynasty held sway over this vast territory. But whenever they could, the great kings—South India can

boast of many— built temples, founded schools and colleges. For education was a basic need of life as worship was a basic need of heart. Even in the fourteenth century, when Ibn Batuta, the Moorish traveller-explorer who spent many years in India, records his experiences of South Indian society, he is wonderstruck. "I saw in Hanaur [Cannanore?] thirteen schools for the instruction of girls, and twenty-three for boys, a thing I have not seen anywhere else." The literature and monuments those rulers left us are centuries-old yet do they stand as mute testimonies to the greatness of our ancestors.

The eminent historians R. C. Majumdar and Nilakanta Sastri provide us with a detailed picture of our past. "A succession of able rulers in Northern India," wrote Majumdar, "and of powerful dynasties in the Deccan and South India ensured for the three great geographical zones of India, the blessings of a sound administration." These rulers were upholders of society and protectors of the people. Besides, there was no

Page-108

room for weak or incompetent monarchs on the throne—they were soon "displaced by the ablest among their lieutenants."

The kings were splendid promoters of culture and arts. The Chola king, Rajaraja I (985-1014 AD) constructed the great Brihadeshwara temple of Thanjavur. His son, Rajendra I (1014-44), created its replica in the wilds of Trichinopoly district and founded a new city around it, Gangaikondacholapuram. The Chola sculptors have incarnated beauty that takes our breath away.

Fifty kilometres south of Madras (now Chennai), in the ancient sea port town of Mamallapuram (or Mahabalipuram), at the mouth of the Palar river, are found rock-hewn sculptures by the talented artists of the Pallava times. "There can be little doubt," writes N. Sastri, "that Mamallapuram was one of the chief entrepots of South India and that from it streamed forth strong cultural influences which shaped the art of Hindu colonies in Indonesia and Indo-China." Angkor-Wat is an example of that. Mamallapuram's exquisite rock-carvings are approximately dated to the seventh century AD.

Hiuen-Tsang, the famous Chinese traveller, came to India before Mahomedan invasion, in the first half of the seventh century. He left copious records of his extensive wanderings in the country. R. C. Majumdar¹ quotes quite a lot from those

The History and Culture of the Indian People, vol. III, the Classical Age (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan).

I have often wondered why we always quote Chinese or Arab travellers for the records of Indian history. Then I remembered that the Muslim invaders had laid waste the renowned Nalanda and Taxila universities and others. Their well-stocked libraries were burnt to ashes. Much of whatever escaped was later destroyed by Christian missionaries. Remember that for seven centuries following the demolition no university was ever established.

Page-109

records. It's now our turn to quote a bit. Hiuen-Tsang "mentions various sanitary rules observed by the people for their personal cleanliness as also the general use of unguents and flowers." Here are some eating and drinking habits of the Indians. "Eating onions and garlic was visited with loss of caste." "Different kinds of beverages and wines were drunk by the respective castes—syrup of grapes and of sugar-cane being drunk by Brahmanas and Buddhist monks; wines from vine and sugarcane by Kshatriyas; strong distilled spirit by Vaisyas, and unspecified kinds of drinks by the low mixed castes." And what was his opinion about its people? "They are of hasty and irresolute temperaments, but of pure moral principles. They will not take anything wrongfully and they yield more than fairness requires. They do not practise deceit and keep their sworn obligation." A far cry from Lord Curzon, isn't it?

In the latter part of the seventh century, another Chinese, I-tsing, on a long visit to India, gives quite a detailed account of the sanitary practices and personal comforts of the people. We summarize a few points.

- a) Floor of Indian houses purified with cow dung¹ and strewn with season flowers.
 - b) Indians wash before every meal, throw away or polish utensils after use, chew tooth sticks after meals, smear bodies with scented unguents like sandal and saffron.
 - c) Clean water for drinking to be kept in earthenware or porcelain jar, while water for cleaning purposes to be kept in jar of copper or iron.
-

1 A practice continued even in our days.

Page-110

d) Use of tooth sticks every morning.

e) Daily personal purification.

f) Bathing at proper times.¹

g) Pillowcases made of silk or linen; pillows stuffed with wool, hemp, cotton, etc., and made high or low according to season.

It seems obvious that India was studded with a large number of towns which really had attained a high level of wealth and prosperity.

Later history is fairly well known. The Chola power was at its meridian in the eleventh century under Rajaraja I and his son, Rajendra I. "These two great monarchs," says Nilakanta Sastri, "gave political unity to the whole of Southern India for the first time and established it as a respected sea-power controlling the highways of the Indian Ocean."

The maritime side of the story goes back many centuries. Already, at the beginning of the Christian era or before, the Satavahanas dynasty, which ruled a goodly part of the Deccan for over three hundred centuries, "were described as 'lords of the three oceans' and promoted overseas colonization and trade," to quote Sastri.

But wait! References in Chinese historical sources make it clear that as far back as the seventh century BC maritime trade was briskly practised between India and China. Discoveries in the Philippines, the Malay Peninsula, Borneo, Java, of Iron-Age

¹ Recall the 'great bath' at Mohenjodaro, in all likelihood used for ritual purposes, and houses with bathrooms equipped with sanitary drains. From the earliest days of their civilization Indians seem to have had some regard for personal hygiene!

Page-111

finds similar to South Indian objects of the same period, confirm the long-standing trade contacts with these countries.

Hang on a moment, please. There is a western side to India's maritime history. "A beam of Indian cedar found in the palace of Nebuchadnezzar (King of Babylon 605-562 BC), the teak logs found in the temple of the Moon-god at Ur ... confirm the existence of active maritime intercourse between South India and its western neighbours," says Sastri. Furthermore "the Assyrian and Babylonian empires traded with India by sea from their ports on the Persian Gulf and continued to receive gold, spices and fragrant woods from India." Remember the Queen of Sheba? She had already brought such gifts to King Solomon at Jerusalem in the ninth century BC.

At any rate, what comes out clearly from all this is a picture of a prosperous society that laid stress on duties and obligations rather than rights and demands which we have learned from the West.

15

Pondicherry

We spoke of a wedge when India broke free of the land-mass Gondwanaland and joined the Eurasian mass. A glance at the map of the Deccan does give us an impression of a triangle, which tapers to a point at Kanyakumari (Cape Comorin). The point is the meeting ground of three seas. It is washed by the Bay of Bengal from the east, and by the Arabian Sea from the west; mingling with them is the Indian Ocean. Bordering the Arabian Sea are the Malabar and Konkan coasts. The western coast extends from the Cape almost in a straight line towards the north up to the Gulf of Khambat, where Mahi, Narmada and Tapti rivers end their overland journey. Along the Bay of Bengal is the Coromandel coast. It too stretches northwards, but less steeply, before curving to the north-east towards the delta of the Ganges.

Running parallel to the coasts are two mountain ranges: the Eastern and Western Ghats. The Western Ghats appear like a gigantic sea-wall, often rising in steps from the shoreline. In contrast the Eastern Ghats are broken, scattered, of much lower altitude; and also they recede from the coast, then strike south-westwards to meet the Western Ghats in the Nilgiris. The Deccan has a distinct slope towards the east. Most major rivers that rise

on the crest of the Western Ghats course down to the Bay of Bengal, and not to the Arabian Sea.

From very ancient times, from the mouth of the Narmada to the mouth of the Ganges, there were well-known port towns studding the long coast lines of India. Among the ports on the Coromandel coast was one named 'Poduca' in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* which is none other than Pondicherry. It must have been an important port of call, because Ptolemy the geographer (c.140 AD) also writes about it in his *Geography*, although he called it 'Poduka.' These names appear to have been derived from 'Puducheri.' When the Europeans came, they too called this port by various names. To the Portuguese it was 'Puducheira.' To the Danes, who came afterwards, it was 'Polesere.' Under the French, after several transformations and misspellings, it finally became 'Pondichery,' from which the English derivation, Pondicherry. That name stuck.

In the 1930s came G. Jouveau-Dubreuil as professor of History in the Colonial College at Pondicherry. Impassioned by the town's history, he carried out extensive research. Here are a few pluckings from him.²

¹ Majumdar says that the anonymous author of this historical travelogue (c. 70-80 AD) was "an Egyptian Greek. A merchant in active trade, he personally voyaged to India in the second half of the first century AD. He has given a detailed account of his voyage," naming ports and the articles of "import and export in connection with each of them."

² The pluckings are taken from *Revue Historique de l'État de Pondichery*, 1955, where these articles were reprinted from *Le Semeur* between the years 1931 to 1939.

Let me add that this chapter on Pondicherry consists of pluckings also from R. C. Majumdar, Nilakanta Sastri and Yvonne Gaebélé (or Suvrata as Mother named her).

He pored over old maps of India. One of which was drawn in 1635 by a Frenchman, Pierre Berthelot (born in Hon fleur, France, on 12.12.1600) when the Danes were in Pondicherry. And sure enough 'Polesere' was well marked at the right place. The map by Berthelot carried the names of only the most important ports.

The historian read old manuscripts and writings of travellers of yore. He corresponded with Professor K. A. Nilakanta Sastri of Madras University. He went to the spots to check the ground reality of his findings. He did find, at that, a large body of evidence proving that Pondicherry on the mouth of Gingee river, like Nagapattinam further down south on the estuary of Kaveri, had carried on a brisk trade with the Far-East since antiquity, and certainly during the Middle Ages. As we know, a profound Buddhist influence¹ had spread over the entire eastern coast of India from the Bay of Bengal to the island of Sri Lanka, spilling over to the east from the second century of the Christian era onwards. A substantial number of Chinese, Indochinese, Sumatrans, Siamese, Burmese, and so on, lived

' I must say that the Buddhist faith, an offspring of the Hindu faith, wasn't all that different from the parent body. When the new king of Cambodia was crowned on 22 July 1928 by Brahmin priests, the special correspondent of the *Times* sent the following despatch: "On the entry of the eight officiating Brahmin priests the King rose and seated himself on a low chair immediately in front of the throne-dais. The eight Brahmins approached and knelt around the Sovereign, representing the eight points of the compass. One after another they repeated the traditional prayer for the King's welfare, his Majesty turning his chair so as to face each priest as he spoke. During this ceremony the King, although a Buddhist, held in his hand the images of Vishnu and Siva, the 'Protectors of Cambodia'—a tradition of the old Vedic faith so deeply rooted in the country." (*Modern Review*, Nov. 1928.)

Page-115

in their settlements in the ports on the Coromandel coast. Remember how in the eleventh century, Buddhism had thrived under the Pal and Sen kings of Bengal? That was probably the final great era of Buddhist art and literature in India. Well, the 'foreign' Buddhists had also built their places of worship in the Hindu kingdoms, where there was great tolerance for other religions. Let us recall that there was no place in the Indian political system for religious oppression and intolerance. It was encoded in the Indian statecraft that though "the monarch might personally favour a particular sect or creed ... at the same time he was bound to respect and support in his public office all the recognized religions of the people with a measure of impartiality, a rule that explains the support extended by Buddhist and Brahmin emperors to both the rival religions." This freedom of religion became ingrained in the Indian people. Different religions lived side by side.

Persecuted peoples from other lands, like the Parsi, the Jew, or Syrian Christians, sought refuge on Indian shores. The world knew that Hindus had a taste for cultural diversity. Raja-raja Chola,

encouraged Sri Mara Vijayottungavarman, the ruler of Sri Vijaya (Sumatra) to build a Buddhist *vihara* at Naga-pattinam. The monastery was called Chudamani vihara after the father of the ruler of Sri Vijaya. Wrote N. Sastri, "Sri Vijaya was the powerful maritime state which ruled the Malayan peninsula, Sumatra, Java, and the neighbouring islands, and controlled the sea routes from India to China." There was considerable trade between China and India.¹

¹ "A Chola embassy of 72 merchants reached China in 1077 and received

Times changed. Kings changed. Rajaraja's great-grandson, Kulottunga I (1070-1122), who started the Chalukya-Chola dynasty, became king. He was one of the great kings of eastern Deccan, and ruled from Tanjore. Commerce with Sri Vijaya was very active. During the reign of Rajaraja, the ruler of Sri Vijaya built a Buddhist *vihara* at Nagapattinam. It was popularly known as the 'Chinese temple.' At the request of his contemporary king of Sri Vijaya, Kulottunga I granted some privileges to the *vihara* and regularized its boundaries. On that occasion a charter was engraved on a copper plate marking those boundaries. The plate is in Holland, at the Museum of Leyde University. Jouveau-Dubreuil called the Chinese temple 'Chinese Pagoda.' It was destroyed by the Jesuits in the nineteenth century.

Could Pondicherry be outdone? No, no. It had its own Far-Eastern temple: 'Burmese Pagoda.' When the eighteenth-century astronomer Le Gentil stayed in Pondicherry from 1761 to 1769, he found a 'singular' statue: "The Tamils assured me that it was 'Baouth' [Buddha], and that the Chinese came to the Coromandel coast for trading at the time of 'Baouth.'" By cross-checking, Jouveau-Dubreuil found out that the Buddhist temple was situated on the east bank of the Ariankuppam river, at the cremation ground. The statue, he says, is of Buddha at the moment of his Enlightenment: a Buddhistic robe covers his torso, his right shoulder is bare and, draped over the left arm the cloth hangs over the left side of the breast where it

'81,800 strings of copper cash, that is, about as many dollars in return for the articles of tribute comprising glassware, camphor, brocades, rhinoceros horns, ivory, incense, rose water, putchuck, asafoetida, borax, cloves, etc' " (see *A History of South India*, p. 191).

forms a very visible fold. This 'Birman Kovil' or 'Burmese Pagoda,' asserts Jouveau-Dubreuil, "was assuredly extremely ancient; it was founded and maintained by Buddhists from Burma, Siam, and Sumatra."

In those bygone days Pondicherry covered a vaster area than the present town. Archaeological excavations carried out at Arikamedu, at the mouth of the Ariankuppam river, which lies two to three kilometres to the south of Pondicherry, have brought up not only potsherds bearing epigraphs, terracottas, but also a megalithic tomb and a trove of gold ornaments, including a ring with the seal of the Roman Emperor Augustus Caesar, besides quantities of Roman coins in silver and gold. As Roman commerce was officially authorized at Pondicherry, the Romans owned here a 'loge,' and minted their coins to pay wages to the Indian workers. Majumdar directs our attention to the rich treasure of earthenware and terracotta figures in addition to other finds that were revealed by excavations at Arikamedu. "These finds come from what was once a considerable town that comprised, among many other things, a warehouse, a textile manufactory and at least several bead-making establishments." He assigns these wares to the centuries immediately preceding and succeeding the Christian era. Marco Polo, who voyaged in these parts in 1293, adds his interesting bits of information. Pearl-fishing was common, he says, and diamond was found in Masulipattam, which lay more to the north of Pondicherry. Let me now tell you an anecdote. Just after the Second World War, in 1945 or 46, when the present Harpagon Workshop was being dug to lay foundations for a building, a hoard of garnet was found there. When Sri Aurobindo was

shown some which were red as rubies (some others were bluish-violet), he remarked that 'perhaps if they dug still further, they might get diamond!'¹

Evidence has surfaced that at Bah our commune, twenty kilometres south of Pondicherry, a Sanskrit College was functioning in the seventh century AD during the reign of the Pallavas, who also built a Shiva temple at the same time. These Dravidian kings were great builders. When the Cholas gained power in the eleventh century, apart from building other temples, they also took care to renovate the old Shiva temple. One of the best known of even earlier times was

the Vedapurishwar temple,- where the lingam was *swayambhu* (self-born), and which had been worshipped by Rishi Agastya, according to tradition.

It is worth noting that the new rulers did not destroy temples erected by previous dynastic rulers, but rather renovated these, often enlarged them, and gifted land and village for the upkeep of the temples.³ Private individuals followed the example set by their king, and made endowments for free distribution

¹ When Golconde Guest House was being built, lignite was found along with the dug earth. When told about it, Sri Aurobindo said, "Perhaps it will be better to dig a coal mine instead of building Golconde!" In point of fact, there is a lignite mine in Neyveli, not very far from Pondicherry.

(We have Sri Aurobindo's remarks through the courtesy of my sister Suprabha, who got them from Lilou Patel.)

- The temple was in existence at least as far back as the second century AD, asserts Jouveau-Dubreuil.

⁵ "The Chalukya monarch Vikramaditya II (733-746 AD)," writes R. C. Majumdar, "then entered Kanchi, which he did not destroy, and donated heaps of gold to the Rajasimheswara temple and other shrines which had been built by Narasimhavarman II" (the Pallava monarch of seventh century).

of food and medicine to the needy and the sick. The king was the leader of the armed forces, true; but he was also the head of State, the fountain of honour, and judge. These kings patronized all creeds. Although favouring their own particular religion, they never sought to impose it on all their subjects. No king prevented pilgrims passing through his territory from worshipping at the shrine of their choice; the devotees travelled freely through rival kingdoms. Even after a political revolution, the social stability was maintained "by express proclamations that all pre-existing rights of property and the charitable foundations would be respected," N. Sastri points out.

The government imposed taxes; but as Sastri declares, "the king, the nobles and the temples drew largely in various ways upon the products of the industry of the common people. But much of this wealth was returned to them in ways that advanced their common good." He adds admiringly, "It was a wonderful social harmony based not on equality of classes or individuals but on a readiness to give and take, a mutual goodwill that had its roots deep down at the foundations of communal life."

Each part of the community existed for the good of all. The society could turn its best energies to its higher development.

16***West Europeans***

"But these early dawns cannot endure in their purity, so long as the race is not ready," wrote Sri Aurobindo in *The Human Cycle*. Because, after a time, the force dies down; then comes a static condition of the human mind and human life, entailing stagnation, decay, disintegration. The reason? "The multitude remains infrarational in its habit of mind," Sri Aurobindo explains, adding "though perhaps it may still keep in capacity an enlivened intelligence or a profound or subtle spiritual receptiveness as its gain from the past." Just exactly what happened to the Indian people.

Besides, the time of the Europeans had come. A spirit of adventure had taken hold of them. The vast ocean beckoned them to far-off explorations. The titan self of Europe sent an answering call.

"O grey wild sea,
 Thou hast a message, thunderer, for me.
 Their huge wide backs
 Thy monstrous billows raise, abysmal cracks
 Dug deep between.

Yes, thou great sea,
 I am more mighty and out billow thee.
 I will seize thy mane,
 O lion, I will tame thee and disdain....."
 They came, those West European seafarers. Wave after wave.

When I was a kid, somewhere between eight and nine years, my father gave me a Bengali book to read—he used to give us a lot of books—narrating the adventures of Captain Cook. Later on, when I learned to read English properly, naturally enough I read Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. How I lived those adventures! just like hundreds of kids around the world. Much later I read about the discoveries of many navigators. Among them was Louis Antoine de Bougainville.

Everybody now is familiar with the flower that carries his name, and which Mother called 'Protection.' Both Cook and Bougainville had circumnavigated the world in the latter half of the eighteenth century, within a year or two of each other. The Frenchman missed 'discovering' Australia by a whisker. He turned away from Australia when he heard the sound of the sea breaking against the Great Barrier Reef—2,000 kilometres of submerged coral islets along the Queensland coast of Australia: "This was the voice of God, and we obeyed it." This happened just as James Cook was setting out from Plymouth harbour on 25 August 1768. His ship was the *Endeavour*, and on board were the botanist Joseph Banks (later Fellow of the Royal Society, and knighted), artist Sydney Parkinson, and their team-mates; they collected exotic plants and animals. The three-year voyage around the

Page-122

world also produced a wealth of geographical knowledge. But more importantly for the British, Captain Cook found the east coast of Australia, and on 28 April 1770, the ship anchored in Botany Bay. Once the Revolutionary War closed America as a convenient dumping ground for undesirables, nearly eight hundred convicts were shipped in eleven boats to Australia in 1787.

Needless to say that these discoveries and colonizations by the Westerners did not come in a day. The build-up had taken centuries.

After the fall of the Roman Empire and the advent of Christianity a pall of darkness had fallen on Europe. For example, when Charlemagne (768-814) perhaps one of the most important rulers of the whole medieval period, needed men who could read and write, to minister his far-flung territories, "there were hardly any at first in his entire realm who were literate, so thoroughly had the rudiments of learning been forgotten since the decay of Roman city life."² That was the onset of the Middle Ages, as that dismal period came to be known. It lasted a whole millennium. During most of the times people lived in abject poverty and ignorance. It was almost a slave-like condition for the populace. Naturally, given the condition, the advance of geographical discoveries and sciences considerably slowed down.

¹ America's War of Independence (1775-83) which subsequently formed the United States of America.

² Burns, Lerner, Meacham, *Western Civilizations*, vol. 1. The historical facts have been taken generally from this book, as well as from *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, 'decouvertes (grandes).'

But between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, many technological improvements were made. Watermills and windmills, and other agricultural innovations, ushered in a sort of agricultural revolution, helping Europeans to improve their standard of living. Then calamity struck. Along came Black Death (1347-50). Torrential rains. Great floods came sweeping across western Europe. Between 1300 and 1450, the bubonic plague, combined with war and effects of famine reduced the total population of western Europe by at least one half if not two thirds.

But the Black Death and the devastation that came in its wake seemed to have given the west Europeans a new zest for life. They found a new zeal for exploration and discovery, a new interest in technology. Artillery and firearms were invented, as were optical instruments and mechanical clocks. Finally, but by no means least of all, was the replacement of parchment by paper, followed by the invention of printing with movable type.

Charlemagne had conducted dozens of ruthless military campaigns to impose Christianity and establish his Holy Roman Empire. In 789, he issued an edict to churches and monasteries in his realm to establish primary schools. Many cathedral schools were indeed started, but they were devoted mainly to the training of priests. With the availability of books, literacy increased rapidly. Schools and universities mushroomed. It was an educational boom that helped stimulate the growth of cultural nationalism. The linguistic standards developed by each European country were disseminated uniformly by books. As books became easily accessible, ideas spread quickly. That was when the Italian Renaissance (c. 1350-1600) of which we have heard

so much took place. As the epitome of the Renaissance culture, Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) springs to mind. Sri Aurobindo puts it all neatly. "After the interlude of the Middle Ages, this civilisation [Graeco-Roman] was reborn in a new mould in what is called the Renaissance, not in its life-aspects but in its intellectual aspects. It was therefore a supreme intellectual, Leonardo da Vinci, who took up again the work and summarised in himself the seeds of modern Europe." (29 July 1937)

Books enhanced communication. The invention of mechanical clock gave the Europeans the habit of regulated work, making them more efficient. West Europe was now ready for the next stage. The stage of expansion. The impetus came from numerous improvements in ship-building, map making, and navigational devices such as the marine compass and the astrolabe. The astrolabe, a device used for measuring heavenly bodies, helped calculate the latitude of any place at any time of the year from anywhere on the sea. Navigators could now cross the ocean at large, instead of having to hug the coast.

But the truth of the matter is that most of these 'inventions' were 're'-inventions. China for instance. By c. AD 1000, the Chinese had developed science and technology, including gunpowder, paper money, movable type, and blast furnaces capable of producing cast-iron; they were already using a magnetic needle for navigation. Their ships were big enough to sail around the world, but they did not do so. The Europeans proved their superiority in applied science.

European civilization seems to have developed side by side two tendencies. One was a voyage of discovery in the realm of Thought. Universities played an important role in the

Page-125

development of free thought and analytical faculties. The University of Paris, for instance, which had started out as a cathedral school—one of the earliest and most prominent— became by the twelfth century a recognized centre of northern intellectual life. To the extent the Intellect was able to shrug off the hold of the Church, to that measure it could forge ahead in the discovery of the real reality of things and the law of existence. West Europeans, as they came into more and more contact with Greek thought, developed a refined Intellect, open and wide—a Power of Thought. With their Power of Thought they grappled with Matter. With that instrument for becoming, the West European civilization became a leading force in the history of the world ... for a group of centuries. Not for ever.

Page-126

17

The Colonizers

That was the bright side of the coin. Then there was the flip side. It was Europe's unregenerated vital, full of greed and cruelty. It had grown almost unchecked. As though the Black Death had taken root in Europe's life system itself. That is why today, at the start of the twenty-first century of the Christian era, that European "civilization" seems to be in its last throes.

But in the fifteenth century the western world was just coming into its own. And it had a role to play in the world. The new-found zeal of the Europeans for exploration and discovery, pushed along by strides made by technology, sped them to colonize the world.

The Cape of Good Hope was rounded in 1488, the West Indies were "discovered" in 1492, India reached by the sea route in 1498, and Brazil "discovered" in 1500, by Portugal's Pedro Alvarez Cabral.

The Portuguese were the first off the block. In 1486 P. da Covilha was charged to find out the way to India. He managed to reach the Malabar coast, touched Cannanore, Calicut and Goa. On his way back he got lost in Africa. But before that he was able to send home some pieces of information about the

east coast of Africa and the sailing in the India Ocean. Armed with that scanty knowledge, Vasco da Gama, then a young man of thirty, started out with four ships on 8 July 1497. Helped by Indian fishermen off the east coast of Africa, he reached Calicut on 20 May the next year.

Almost simultaneously, the Spanish rulers also turned to overseas expansion. Queen Isabella supported the Genoese, Christopher Columbus, who had garnered from books he read that the Earth was round and the Eurasian continent did not measure more than 225 degrees; he imagined that Cathay—that is how China was then known—was very close to Europe by the western route, and India was half the distance across the Atlantic as travelling east across land. A mistaken belief, of course. But, oh, how often our mistakes lead us to great discoveries !

The Genoese set out with a fleet of three ships on 3 August 1492. Seventy days later, on the night of 11-12 October, the seafarers spied land: the Bahamas. Europeans had found a new continent. Columbus, however, thought he had reached Asia, and died ignorant of his real find. It was left to later navigators to realize that it was not Asia but a newly found land. It was the voyage of the Portuguese navigator Ferdinand Magellan (1480-1521), the first European to go

round the Tierra del Fuego, and sail the Pacific—a name he gave to the vast ocean west of the new continent—which confirmed the newness of these lands. The Europeans named the New World: America.¹ To be

¹ Derived from the name of the Italian merchant, Amerigo Vespucci, who explored the north coast of South America in 1499.

precise, the 'New World' was a 'discovery' only for the Europeans, because the lands were already inhabited, and many regions had developed a civilization of their own.

Hard on the heels of the Iberians came the French and the British. They sent out their own expeditions. John and Sebastian Cabot discovered Canada for the English. Or, should we rather say 're'-discovered? Because the Norsemen under Leif Eriksson had already landed on the North American continent—Canada—about 1000 AD. The French occupied Canada (1534), but ceded it to Great Britain by the treaty of Paris (1763). Jacques Cartier (1491-1557), the French navigator, explored Canada by sailing up the St. Lawrence river. More than a hundred years later, Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, missed the mouth of the Mississippi by four hundred miles, and his ship, the *Belle?* foundered in a storm in January 1686. He was the "first European to travel the length of the Mississippi, from the great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico, claiming the entire drainage area for France, and naming it Louisiana for his patron, the French king Louis XIV."

The English settlement on Virginia in 1607 was the start of their empire building, "nothing before could be called a British Empire."

The Dutch were a little late in this colonizing game. They ousted the Portuguese from many places. Their most valuable possessions were Malacca, the Spice Islands, and the ports of India and Africa wrested from Portugal in the early seventeenth century. As a matter of fact, it was quite a merry-go-round

Recently salvaged. For details see *National Geographic*, May 1997.

between the British, the French, the Dutch, after getting rid of the Portuguese from the Coromandel coast. The Portuguese ceased to be masters of the major sea routes. So lucrative was the spice trade that these West European powers muscled belligerently into it, and later became imperial powers. The Danes also were a part of that power game, and got a few toeholds in India.

If we look back, we find that after the fall of the Roman Empire and the rise of Islam, Muslim merchants had monopolized in a couple of centuries all trade between the East and the West. But canons placed aboard ships enabled European vessels to dominate foreign waters—an advantage fully exploited in the game of overseas expansion. Arab maritime powers were greatly curbed, and the Europeans had only themselves to contend with.

The Europeans had also embraced a strange religion. Christianity. As happens with 'religions' Christianity too was divided into many sects. One of these was called the Society of Jesus, a Roman Catholic order founded by St. Ignatius of Loyola, a Spanish soldier.

The Spaniards were notorious for the 'Inquisition' cruelties. Flush with the victory over Islamic Moors, they had a surplus of religious zeal. When they landed in the Americas, the Spaniards proclaimed that they came "in the service of God ... to give light to those who were in darkness, and also to acquire riches."

Consumed by greed and a religious zeal, Columbus and his successors, enthusiastically aided by the ruthless Jesuits, destroyed the Aztec and Inca civilizations and what was left of the Maya. "The last vestige of Mesoamerica's cultural splendour,"

wrote James Shreeve, "was abruptly extinguished with the capture of the ruler Moctezuma by Spaniards seeking gold, glory and souls."¹

"A harvest of souls," says the present Pope. The Christians were, and are, bent on converting the natives. Converted— more often by force than otherwise—"by their conquerors, native laborers and artisans erected Roman Catholic shrines and churches." Sixteenth-century Spanish gold seekers, French and British empire builders, brought with them diseases till then unknown in the New World. "From the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, diseases brought to the Americas by

Europeans killed at least half and perhaps as much as ninety-five percent of the native population," wrote J. L. Swerdlow.²

Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474-1566) was a Spanish historian and missionary. He lived among Indians in Spanish American colonies. He recorded in his work, *The Devastation of the Indies'* that according to secular Spaniards who had been in Latin America for many years, "the goodness of the Indians is undeniable Yet into this sheepfold ... there came some Spaniards

who immediately behaved like ravening wild beast.... And Spaniards have behaved in no other way during the past forty years, down to the present time____" He goes on to list savage devastation in detail, giving the number of victims in millions. We skip. But a little description will give the readers a clear enough

¹ 'Uncovering Patagonia's Lost World' (*National Geographic*, December 1997).

² *National Geographic* (February 1998).

³ Quoted in *Dead Sea Scrolls and the Crisis of Christianity* by N. S. Rajaram (Minerva Press, London). My account is based mainly on this book, with additional facts and figures taken from the *National Geographic*.

picture. "And the Christians," wrote Las Casas, "with their horses and swords and pikes began to carry out massacres and strange cruelties against them [natives of Hispaniola]. They attacked the towns and spared neither the children nor the aged nor pregnant women nor women in child-bed, not only stabbing them and dismembering them but cutting them to pieces....." The natives were repaid their initial hospitality by being enslaved, driven from their own lands.

The Portuguese in no way lagged behind their Spanish neighbours. The brutalities perpetrated by the Portuguese in Brazil are another horror story. The British too joined in the game of exterminating the native population. Not so much by massacring them, because the British were more cunning and, maybe, less given to savagery than the Iberians. Some English officers gave the Red Indians blankets from the local smallpox hospital. The commander-in-chief of the British army told his subordinate to try to 'inoculate' the natives "by means of blankets as well as try every other method that can serve to extirpate this execrable race."

"Execrable race"! We can but wonder. The Mesoamericans were already tracking the movements of celestial bodies—sun, moon, stars and planets—by the third century AD. The unbiased or

secular Europeans found the native population 'rational,' and innately good. "The goodness of the Indians is undeniable."

It was really the greed and cruelty of the Westerners that wrought havoc in the lives of the natives wherever the former established colonies. Gold from the New World, all the silver from the mines of Mexico and Bolivia and Peru; coffee and cacao ... oh, so many new consumer goods and raw materials

Page-132

that flowed into West Europe were produced by the labours of the enslaved nations.

As though all those unspeakable atrocities they had committed were not enough, "the priests accused the victims of being instruments of the Devil. At Yucatan in Mexico, after destroying a large quantity of ancient manuscripts containing priceless records, Bishop of Landa wrote: 'As they contained nothing but superstitions and lies or the Devil, we burned them all, which the Indians regretted to a great degree and which caused them great anguish.' "

It was only during a brief voyage to a charming little island in the Pacific that the full import of the destruction of ancient manuscripts by the Christian clergy sank in. Being an Indian I innocently asked a local young woman who their ancient gods were. She shuddered. "Oh, they are not 'gods!' they are 'devils.' " That is how the Church Fathers converted the old 'pagan' gods into demons and devils, from Greece to the remotest island in the Pacific. Thereby erasing their cultural past. Thereby cutting off peoples from their roots. Thereby obliterating from the converts' consciousness any attachment to their own country. A total alienation.

'Superstitions' ? It is the Catholic Church that seems extraordinarily obsessed by demons and devils.

"How loathsome is God-defying bestiality under the cloak of religion, becomes quite visible if we open our eyes a little," said Rabindranath Tagore.

The aim of the Jesuits, the Dominicans, and other Christian sects, was the 'soul count.' They never batted an eyelid in taking the name of the 'Apostle of Peace and Love' to indulge

Page-133

in their brutal depravity. Killing and destroying such a countless number of humans. All in the name of 'true religion.'

In a few deft sentences, Sri Aurobindo draws a telling picture of Christianity.

"The mentality of the West," he wrote in *The Foundations of Indian Culture*, "has long cherished the aggressive and quite illogical idea of a single religion for all mankind, a religion universal by the very force of its narrowness, one set of dogmas, one cult, one system of ceremonies, one array of prohibitions and injunctions, one ecclesiastical ordinance. That narrow absurdity prances about as the true religion which all must accept on peril of persecution by men here and spiritual rejection or fierce eternal punishment by God in other worlds. This grotesque creation of human unreason, the parent of so much intolerance, cruelty, obscurantism and aggressive fanaticism, has never been able to take firm hold of the free and supple mind of India ... Intolerance has been confined for the most part to the minor forms of polemical attack or to social obstruction or ostracism; very seldom have they transgressed across the line to the major forms of barbaric persecution which draw a long, red and hideous stain across the religious history of Europe."

Page-134

18

Christianity

Poor Christ.

A nice enough gentleman from most accounts. Yet those who swear by him keep him hanging on the cross. Poor, poor Christ.

He who could not tolerate sham in the name of religion. Remember his going to a Jewish temple—he was a Jew—with a broom and determinedly sweeping out all the pretentious priests?

He must be hanging his head in shame at the doings of his 'followers.'

Christian clergy and the laity alike felt no shame in doing everything in the name of their Lord. The wars fought in the name of the 'Apostle of Peace,' and the cruelties perpetrated by the Roman Catholic Church in the name of the 'Apostle of Love,' beggar all description.

It was Europe's awakened intellectual spirit that began to revolt against the horribly inhuman acts of the Church in the name of its 'true religion.' The more they scrutinized the Christian dogma, the more the European intellect found out on what falsehood were based the claims of the Christian clergy.

Page-135

Edward Gibbon (1737-94), analysing that religion's claims, said, "Christians ... exacted an implicit submission to their doctrines without being able to produce a single argument that could engage the attention of men of sense and learning."¹

As a religion Christianity is rather irrational. To take but one point. It says that those who do not believe in Christ will perpetually roast in hell. It stands to reason then that all those who were born before Christ, including his grandparents and parents, are even now getting roasted in hell? What a peculiar religion! It makes no sense to me.

The intellectual assault on Christian missionaries was led by Francois-Marie Arouet, better known as Voltaire (1694-1778). He was joined by many more, among whom were Madame de Steal (1766-1817), and Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826).

Voltaire, who dominated the intellectual world of the eighteenth century, was also endowed with a lion's heart. He took on the might of the Roman Catholic Church. Throughout his life he waged a war to cut Christianity to size. His discerning intellect saw through the deliberate falsehoods spread by the missionaries, not to mention the cupidity of the Europeans sustained by Christian doctrine. "The Europeans," he pointed out, "have swarmed over India. They have brought war into that country. Many of them have amassed immense fortunes, but few have bothered to know about the antiquity of this land which, in the days of yore, was more renowned for her religion, her sciences and her laws than for her riches which nowadays have become the only reason of our travels there." He did not

¹ *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.*

Page-136

stop with deploring his countrymen's greed but was scathingly scornful. "Want created the first robbers. They invaded India because she was rich, and surely a rich people is united, civilized and polished long before a society of thieves." That remark applies not only to India but to other countries also, like the Americas.

Voltaire had a profound reason for his lifelong revolt against Christianity. "The Indian books announce only peace and gentleness, they forbid killing of animals. The Hebrew books speak only of massacring men and beasts. Everything is slaughtered in the name of the Lord." How come the compassionate Christian God had no compassion for his other creatures? Is it because animals, birds, fish et al., do not need a scripture to tell them what is good and what is bad? Because Earth-Nature had endowed them with an instinct? On the other hand the 'heathens' always believed that being a part of the creation they should live in harmony with Nature. Have you read the moving, soul-stirring speech of the Red-Indian Chief to the White Chief? That tells it all.

What gives? Exploitation. That is the mainspring impelling the Westerners. "That spring," pointed out a friend to me, "is to be found on the very first page of the Bible." It opened my eyes. Did not the 'Lord' tell his flock to go forth and exploit the earth? It's not for nothing that Mother had such a hearty dislike for the 'Lord' of that religion. If we read but a few sayings of the 'Lord' we realize with shock the characteristic traits of a dictator. 'Ye shall,' enjoined the Lord on them, "utterly destroy all the places wherein the nations which ye possess served their gods." The 'good' Christians did so. Exactly like

Page-137

the 'good' Islamists who followed them.

The Christian clergy began their 'good' work in Europe itself. They set out to erase the past. Culturally and materially. Under the pre-Christian Celtic society women's "position was highly advanced compared to their position in other European societies," comments P. B. Ellis. The honoured women, depolarized by the Roman Church, became 'chattels' in a male-dominated society. Christian clergy engaged in a systematic destruction of Roman places of worship, of old Druidic holy sites, of Greek temples—any 'pagan' holy site became rubble. "Historians of the Roman Empire have documented the large-scale destruction of 'pagan' temples by Christian clergy from the fourth century onwards."¹ By the end of the fifth century, the famous Greek

temple at Eleusis, where Demeter—Mother Earth—was worshipped, was changed into a graveyard. The rapidity of the destruction is rather breathtaking when we learn that it was only in November 392 that the Roman Emperor Theodosius had banned all forms of public worship other than the Christian.

Madame de Staël said succinctly, "Pagans divinize life, Christians divinize death." And what death! During the Spanish Inquisition, in a span of fifteen years, between 1483 and 1498, a single Dominican priest who was the Inquisitor-General, sentenced over 114,000 victims—of which 10,220 were burned.

When Napoleon conquered Spain in 1808, the battle-

¹ *History of Hindu-Christian Encounters*, by Sita Ram Goel (Voice of India). All quotes from this book are with the kind permission of the author. He even gave me carte blanche to quote from any book published by Voice of India. Isn't he nice !

Page-138

hardened soldiers of the French Army, accustomed to war and bloodshed, could not stomach the sight of so many cells, dungeons and instruments of torture in a monastery in Madrid, where hundreds of naked victims huddled in torture chambers. They freed the victims and blew up the monastery with gunpowder.

"Millions of innocent men, women and children," wrote Thomas Jefferson, "since the introduction of Christianity, have been burnt, tortured, fined, imprisoned...." Europeans themselves were among the worst victims of the brutality of Catholic religion. It has been computed from historical records that within three hundred years from 1484, nine million persons were put to death for witchcraft in Europe. The Catholic Church seems to be a hotbed of superstition. We do not know the total count of victims that perished before, in the preceding centuries.

We have seen a little while ago that under the leadership of Vasco da Gama, who landed at Calicut on 20 May 1498, the Portuguese were the first to reach India. For a number of years they had a free field. Samudiri, the ruler of Calicut (modern

¹ "For more than a century Native Canadians were abused mentally, physically and sexually in schools run by Christian churches. The goals of the schools, with government support, was to de-Indianize the children, a process which robbed them of their rich cultural and linguistic heritage ... some natives assert that the residential school system was nothing less than organized genocide, with 50,000 school children dying in the system, most of infectious disease but some of outright murder." (*Hinduism Today*, March-April 2001, p. 32-33) The wheel seems to be turning now. The Native Canadians are fighting back. The Canadian government has given them a written apology. As for the Churches, sinking in a "morass of lawsuits," they are facing bankruptcy in legal settlements.

Page-139

Kozhikode) received da Gama with great courtesy and gave him the right to trade. Soon the Portuguese spread their tentacles. While they had the Bay of Bengal to themselves, the Portuguese sailed up the Ganges, and penetrating the interior fell like a pack of wolves on Bengali villages. Not only did they plunder all they could, but the pirates captured able-bodied men, and as many young women as they could pack into the holds of their ships. Packed like sardines, cabined and fettered, starving and thirsty, untold numbers perished during the voyages. Those who survived were sold away as slaves. I do not even mention forced conversion of Bengalis. The boast of the Portuguese was that they made more Christians in a single year by forcible conversion than all the missionaries put together in ten. Exactly like Hitler telling Bishop Berning of Osnabruch, "I am only doing what the Church has done for fifteen hundred years, only more effectively."¹

It was sometime after 1510 that Goans called the Portuguese commander Alphonso d'Albuquerque to oust the Muslim rulers whose religious persecution of the Hindus, including the forced conversions and the destruction of many Hindu temples, had become intolerable. The Goans did not know that they had dug a canal and invited crocodiles to their home. They found out soon enough. Albuquerque became the founder of Portuguese power in India.

Let me share with you a little story. An acquaintance of ours passed on to us a book of his family history.² They had come

¹ *Dead Sea Scrolls*, by N. S. Rajaram, p. 50.

² *The Sowcar Bappai Family* (2nd ed. 1970), or *The Pais of Mangalore*. Courtesy Major Pai.

down to Goa when the Saraswati river went dry. The family belonged to the clan known as Saraswat Brahmins.

The Portuguese made their base at Goa. As they settled down, they began to show their true colours. Goa, in the antiquities was known as Gomantaka, as mentioned in the Mahabharata. "At least from 1540 onwards," writes T. R. de Souza, a Christian, "and in the island of Goa before that year, all the Hindu idols had been annihilated or had disappeared, all the temples had been destroyed and their sites and building materials were in most cases utilised to erect new Christian churches and chapels."¹

Well, mere destruction of temples, erecting new churches and chapels, all by native slave labour, was not enough for the new masters. No, it was not enough to have brought to a halt all the important welfare works of the village, and sent "the village economy in Goa into bankruptcy," as remarked N. Sastri. "Missionaries," said Charles Dickens, "are perfect nuisances and leave every place worse than they found it." A band of monkeys in a banana grove could not have wrought more havoc.

No, all that wasn't enough. The Portuguese let loose a reign of terror. Francis Xavier arrived in India in 1542. He was one of the founders of the Jesuit order. And began the terror of Inquisition. Francis Xavier had come with the firm resolve to uproot paganism from the native soil and plant Christianity instead.

So it was *sauve-qui-peut* with our Saraswat Brahmins. It was a precipitate flight. Hugging the coast they sailed down south

¹ As quoted by Sita Ram Goel in *History of Hindu-Christian Encounters*.

and found their new home in South Kanara "where life and religion were quite secure under the Nayaka rulers of Keladi." They had managed to save their family Goddess, Mahālasā.

Those who were unable to escape, and who would not embrace Christianity, were tortured, then sold as slaves. That is, those who did not die as a result of thumbscrews, stretching racks, leg crushers, spiked wheels, burning sulphur, quicklime ... and holy water. Then the 'heretics' were dragged through Goa's main square, and amidst a carnival atmosphere were burned alive at the stake.

All that came startlingly alive when one morning Satprem told me the nightmare he had had. You know perhaps that Satprem was born on Giordano Bruno street in Paris. Bruno, a sixteenth-century Italian philosopher who regarded God as the unity reconciling spirit and matter, was burned at the stake by the Inquisitors for his belief. Satprem saw the backs of two black-robed figures enter a white painted small church through a door,¹ about fifty metres or so from where he was. Those figures were sinister. Almost instantly he felt flames licking his fingers. Then he saw that he was bound to a stake with cords, his hands tied behind him, and stark naked; as the flames burned his hands, he cried out, "But I am alive! I am alive!" His own cry jolted him awake.

Can our body's cells keep their memories for so long? Do our bodies contain or are formed by the conscious cells of our past forms?

¹ I heard that the door of the Office of the Inquisition at Goa is still standing, though the building itself is in ruins.

Vasco da Gama's grandnephew, Luiz Vas Camoens, had set sail for Goa in 1553. He saw for himself the havoc wrought by the policy of 'Saint' Francis Xavier. A few lines from Camoens' epic poem, *Os Lusíadas*.

"What new disaster dire
intendest thou
to lead these kingdoms and folk
into
what deaths, what horror
must they swallow now
under pretence to spread
Religion true!"

*

* *

1755. All Saints Day. Lisbon.

All the Christians, devout or not so devout, were in churches.

A devastating earthquake struck. Accompanied by tidal waves and fires.

Church roofs came down on the praying Christians. Sixty thousand souls went straight up to heaven.

Or was it hell? Did the sins of their forebears finally visit the 'successive generation'?

Page-143

19

Enter the French

During the Second World War, specially after the Normandy landing by the Allied forces, Saint-Malo was much in the news. I still remember the horror we felt when in August 1944 we heard from the BBC that before capitulating to the army of General Patton, the Germans had set fire to the city and destroyed almost three fourths of it.

But when our recital opens, it was a flourishing port on the estuary of the river Rance. It had become a part of France in 1491, and a hundred years later it had become fully integrated. The Malouins, as the inhabitants of St-Malo are called, were first-class navigators, and the ships they used were eminently sea-worthy. In fact, so renowned were they that the French kings recruited their best privateers at St.-Malo. That is how it came about that in 1616, two merchant ships, *Saint-Michel* and *Saint-Louis* set sail from St.-Malo harbour for the Far-East with an all-French crew. Reaching Ceylon (Sri Lanka) they separated. *Saint-Michel* continued her eastward journey, while *Saint-Louis* went exploring the Coromandel¹ coast. She visited Pondicherry, and Pentopoli

¹ Le Gentil tells us that 'Coromandel' is derived from 'Chola-mandalam,' (a Chola province), a word corrupted by the Portuguese who pronounced cho as ko.

Page-144

(Nizampatnam), up to Masulipatnam. The French sailors and merchants were charmed by the Indians they met and delighted at the reception they got. On their way back, *Saint-Michel* was scuttled by the Dutch. *Saint-Louis* reached safely the home harbour. Shortly afterwards the Malouin naval officers wrote down their experiences, as well as a set of recommendations for the furtherance of commerce between France and India. It was therefore when the Bourbon, Louis XIII (1601-43) was king of France—he became king at the age of nine—that the French went on an exploratory mission to the east coast of India.

So far we have barely mentioned France, which too was a great colonial power. It held vast territories in the African continent, the New World, the Far-East, and was looking at India: a rich new land of opportunities. All types of adventurers were attracted to this new El Dorado. The earlier ones were more concerned with promoting French commercial interests than conquest. To that end they tried to undermine the British influence, in particular among the Indian rulers. Letters from Lord Wellesley (Duke of Wellington, 1769-1852) plainly speak about the panic in British circles over the close ties of French generals with Indian rulers.

In the pursuit of commerce, the Dutch formed their *Veveenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, the British their "East-India Company" which was incorporated in 1600, and the French formed the *Royale Compagnie de France des Indes Orientates* in 1664. The French Company was founded by Jean-Baptiste Colbert (1619-83), a statesman under Louis XIV (1638-1715). Colbert it was who reformed French financial administration, developed industry, virtually founded the French Navy and,

Page-145

above all, founded the French Academies of Literature, Science, and the Fine Arts. The same year (1664) that Colbert set up the French Company, a group of merchants sent a 'Requete' to Louis XIV. Referring to the earlier voyage of *Saint-Louis* in 1617, the merchants presented to the king a plan of action almost identical to that of the Malouins. Among which was the reflection: "... the liking of the Indians for the French temper and generosity, a liking so powerful and effective that whatever the other foreigners have exploited in that country by the force of arms, is easily done by the French by the force of the heart."

Underlining the facilities for commerce, the 'Requete' went on to say: "The situation, government and habits of every place were observed: monarchy was found in almost every

district, with so widespread a liking for the French temper that this little fleet and its emissaries were received everywhere with an open heart. The Nayaka of Pondicherry, located on the Coromandel coast, allowed [us] by treaty to build and maintain in his territory a fortress to ensure the safety of French trade, contenting himself with a moderate allowance, and this project would have been carried out had the Company continued its remittances."

And what was the commerce to consist of? Proffering an estimate for each future fleet, the merchants pleaded: "Part of these ships will reach the Coromandel coast to sell there yarn, lead, amber from Dunsvic, polished coral and other goods with great profit, and to trade as well with Pondicherry, Pentopoli and Masulipatnam for diamonds and rubies, the diamond mine being nearby and the ruby mine in Pegou, which is not far from it. The same ships will load, on the Coromandel coast,

Page-146

indigo, various kinds of local cloth, that one can easily get cheaply from the manufactures, money being rare and food at such a low price that two hundred and fifty reels [a Spanish monetary unit] a year are enough to feed ten men." Doesn't it sound fantastic? It was so dirt cheap to live in those days!

Like other West European nations—such as the Dutch, the Danes, the British—the French too began by setting up a trading centre at Surat (1666), on India's west coast. They got permit for trading during Aurangzeb's reign, who ruled a part of India from 1658 to 1707; exactly as the East India Company had got theirs when his grandfather Jehangir reigned. But all of them recognized the advantages of a foothold on the Coromandel coast. "The need for expansion of commerce pushed them [the Dutch] to get a footing in the Hindu territory further south," explains N. Shastri. From the eastern seaboard commerce with the Far-East would naturally become less time-consuming, not to speak of the advantages to be had by spying upon the rivals' shipping lines in the Bay of Bengal. The Dutch had established their factories in Nizampatnam and Masuli-patnam in 1605. Then they obtained permit to erect a factory at Pulicat with exclusive privileges of trade. The factory was in place by 1610. The Danes also made their presence felt; they settled at Tranquebar¹ in 1620. The English too were spreading their tentacles. They were allowed to trade in Pulicat in 1621 by a treaty with the Dutch, but ultimately moved their factory to Madras in 1639-40. By the time the French began to compete in earnest, the Dutch had already ousted the Portuguese from

¹ Then known as Tarankampadi, and today as Taragambadi.

the Tamil country. Certainly, there were great commercial and political advantages to be had from a secure base on the Coromandel coast.

Francois Baron' was the Company's first Director General. In Francois Martin he found a devoted and intelligent assistant. When Baron died (14 May 1683) Martin stepped into his shoes. After several skirmishes with rivals—mainly the Dutch and the English—Martin opted to build his base at Pondicherry. Why Pondicherry? Its port, to put it in Martin's words "was the most advantageous post on the coast." A lot of evidence has been found to prove that at least up to 1675, the Gingee river flowed directly to the sea. But through natural causes, the river branched into two. From then on Pondicherry lost its old golden harbour.

Actually, it appears that the then king of Gingee, Muthu Krishnappa Naik (1595-1625), was the one who laid the beginnings of a European 'loge' at Pondicherry in 1618 by installing there a Dutchman, Simon Jeesten. That made it easier for the Danes and later for the French to build their loges, which were 'fifty steps' one from the other.

Commerce flourished. Among the trades, there was also the 'slave trade.' Not only in Pondicherry, but all over the world

' Francois Baron backed Martin to set up a '*loge*' there. 'Log?' in French meant the same as English 'factory' or the Dutch 'feitoria.' The word 'factory' was coined in 1582. It meant: an establishment for traders carrying on business in a foreign country.

Strangely, the last but one French Governor in India was his namesake, Francois Baron (died 26 March 1980). Satprem told me that it is quite likely that both the Barons were descended from an ancient family from Nantes in Western France.

wherever the Europeans (and the Arabs) went. It is interesting to hear Sri Aurobindo. "In India the institution of slavery was practically absent and the woman had at first a freer and more dignified position than in Greece and Rome; but the slave was soon replaced by the proletariat,

called in India the Shudra, and the increasing tendency to deny the highest benefits of the common life and culture to the Shudra and the woman brought down Indian society to the level of its Western congeners."

In the innumerable wars that the French and the British fought in Europe in the worst days of their rivalry to conquer the world for themselves, there were repercussions in their own hemisphere as well as in their overseas empires, including the Indian subcontinent. As soon as some sort of peace obtained in Europe among the warring nations, Martin breathed a sigh of relief. He was astute enough to procure a 'firman' (edict) from the Mahratta governor of the Deccan. Once officially established as the 'Director of the Coromandel coast, of Bengal and places in the South where the company will practise its commerce,' Martin set out to develop this small enclave into something else. He built a fort of brick and mortar some four hundred feet from the sea. In September 1699 the French entered into a treaty with the Dutch, and acquired the Fort, the town of Pondicherry, and the surrounding villages. And paid 16,000 Pagodas¹ for it all. Soon he obtained permission to mint money locally to pay wages to the workers, such as weavers, bead-makers, carpenters, and so forth.¹ Pondicherry was no

¹ The Dutch had bought Pondicherry from the local king Ram-Raja, for 'perpetuity' for the sum of 25,000 Pagodas.

longer dependent on Surat.

Francois Martin gave assurance on behalf of France that it would respect the ways and customs of the people, and would not in any way interfere with their religious practices. That attracted the Hindus—weavers, dyers, artisans, merchants all flocked to the new, growing village, soon to become a town. Pondicherry became an important base for the French. Gradually they levied taxes, and introduced their own legal system to the territories they governed. The French king, Louis XIV constituted in 1702 a Sovereign Council (*Conseil Souverain*) at Pondicherry. The French Company had its Higher Council (*Conseil Superieur*) where all criminal cases were tried.

¹ When the Dutch were in Pondicherry and Nagapattinam, the money they minted was 'cache.'

The French had several types of coins: Royalin, Fanon, Pagode (or Pagoda). My sister Suprabha did a spot of researching, and gave me a few details. She found that a 'Royalin' coin dated 1723. was worth half a Fanon. A Mahe

Fanon, in silver, was worth one-fifth of a rupee. The Pondicherry Fanon was minted both in bronze and silver. The Pagoda, a gold coin, was minted from 1715 onwards. The Pondicherry Pagoda bore a cross or a star on one face. Centuries before the Europeans, the Cholas and Eastern Chalukyas of South India minted gold coins mainly of two denominations: *varaha* or *pagoda* and *fanam*, a tenth of varaha in weight and value.

The Fanon, worth half a rupee, was the most used currency. I think up until the end of French rule in 1954, it was in use. 'Pagode' too I have heard of. Not the Royalin. There were stamps of different denominations in Fanon.

And the Doudou. Twenty Doudous made one Fanon. These copper coins had a fleur-de-lis on one side, and "Puduchery" in Tamil on the other.

Though coins were used in commerce from ancient times, paper money came but recently to South Asia; a mere two or three centuries ago.

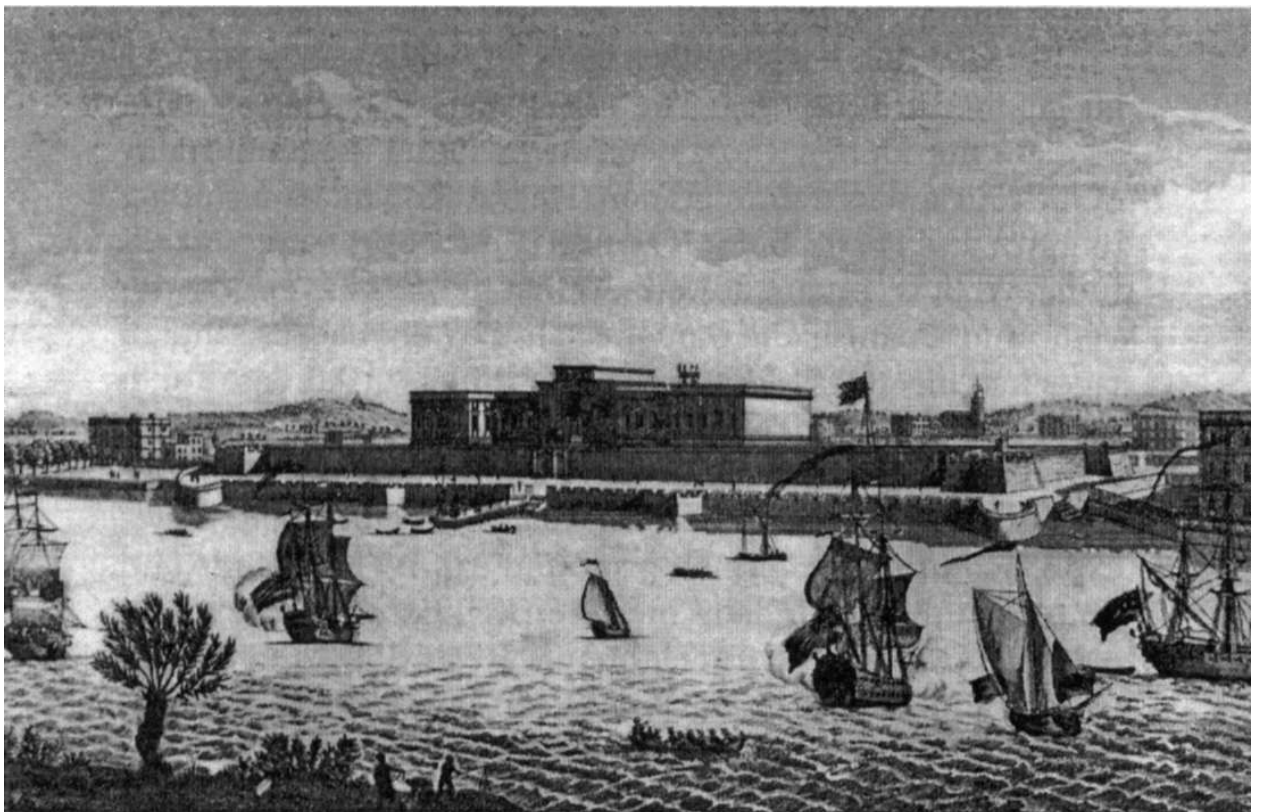
Page-150

Pondicherry became the capital of French establishment in India.

*

**

It was the reaction of those early Frenchmen that aroused my interest. The gentle contact of the Indians found an echo in the hearts of the Celtic race.



In those early days, when Indian history had not been perverted by the Christian clergy and British imperialists, those Frenchmen had no hesitation in airing their views. Some of them believed that the Egyptians, the Chaldeans, etc., had received their knowledge from India. "The ancients regarded Indians as the first inhabitants of the earth," wrote in 1782 P. Sonnerat, an expert in Natural History. "We know ... that all the peoples came to them to draw the elements of their knowledge, and that Pythagoras went from Greece to study under the Brahmins, looked upon as the most enlightened of men."

School children know Pythagoras of Samos (c. 569 B.C.) for his geometrical theorem. The Greek mathematician was also a great philosopher, whose doctrine included the immortality of the soul and its transmigration. He travelled much including to Egypt and Persia, but it is not certain that he came as far as India. What is certain, however, is that he was conversant with Vedic and Upanishadic thoughts. How? Well, because Indian sages had meetings with Greek philosophers at Athens! For, it is known that exponents of literature, science and philosophy travelled regularly between Greece and India.

Sonnerat, looking at the Indian with an unbiased eye, expressed in simple terms a profound truth. "The gentle and simple manners of Indians merit respect, but the more a people is happy the more its neighbours are envious, and cruelty, tyranny and ignorance will always keep away virtue and happiness." And he added, "A rich country, where everything seems to contribute to man's desire, is not long in becoming the bloody theatre of war."

20

The Fly in the Ointment

In a general way, the French turned out to be more humane in their dealings with the native populations. But they too had their moments of aberration.

Things had gone on for several decades, with more ups than downs, after the death of Francois Martin (1706).¹ Left to themselves, things might have developed harmoniously between the French government and the Tamil population, the vast majority of them Hindus. But there is always a fly in the ointment. In the event, the fly was the Christian missionaries. Jesuits to be more precise. It was impossible for a tribe of those proselytizers to tolerate Hindu temples. Mind you, if they could they would not have tolerated Muslim mosques either—but they were too afraid of the violence-prone Muslims. But Hindus were quite another cup of tea. So the Jesuits fixed their sights on Hindu temples. They got their heart's wish when Dupleix became the governor of Pondicherry.

Joseph Francois Dupleix, born in 1696 in France, had first arrived in Pondicherry in 1721 as the Councillor to the

¹ Francois Martin and his widow were buried in Pondicherry.

Higher Council. There he met Jeanne Vincent who spoke several Indian languages. She was born Jeanne Albert, daughter of Dr. Jacques Albert, the Chief Medical Officer at the town's hospital. Her mother, Marie Main-former, was the offspring of a Hindu woman and a Portuguese man. So Jeanne was a 'Creole' to the locals. When Dupleix was posted to Bengal in 1731 as the Company's Director General, he called the Vincent family to Chandernagore. Vincent, Jeanne's first husband, died there in 1737, leaving her a widow with six children. In April 1741 Joseph and Jeanne got married. That same year, after his nomination as governor, Dupleix inherited the title of 'Nawab' from his predecessor Dumas. On 14 January 1742 the Nawab and his Begum landed back at Pondicherry, and Dupleix assumed charge as the governor of French India. Jeanne had bewitched Dupleix, and could turn him round her little finger. She herself was under a strong influence of the Jesuit clergy. That was the opportunity those Christian priests were waiting for.

Now, it so happens that the Dubash,¹ Ananda Ranga Pillai, the commercial agent of Dupleix, was in the habit of writing a

Literally, Dubash means one who knows two languages, or an interpreter. In Pondicherry, the Dubash was the chief agent of the government to strike deals with Indian merchants.



Duplex and his wife

Page-154

diary. He began writing it from September 1736.¹ He was unfailing in the task. So thanks to his voluminous diaries (twelve volumes), we get a pretty good idea of the day-to-day life during the time of Dupleix. And, naturally, the important events were written down in great detail. We give a few excerpts from his diary, describing how the great, ancient Vedapurishwar temple was razed to the ground.

"The first incident at the Veda Puri Temple took place *Ananda Ranga Pillai* on March 17, 1746," begins

Sita Ram Goel, from whose book *History of Hindu-Christian Encounters*¹ we are quoting. " 'On Wednesday night at 11,' writes Pillai, 'two unknown persons entered the Ishwara temple carrying in a vessel of liquid filth, which they poured on the heads of the gods around the altar, and into the temple, through the drain of the shrine of Ishwara; and having broken the pot of dirt on the image of the god Nandi, they went away through a

¹ These diaries were translated into English in 1904 by the Madras Government's efforts.

⁸ (Published by Voice of India.) For the full report please read the book. A few other facts have also been taken from Sita Ram Goel's book, as well as Yvonne Gaebelle's *Histoire de Pondichery*, and from *Revue Historique de l'Etat de Pondichery* (1955).



part of building which had been demolished.' " Next morning the chief priest and the servants of the temple reported the matter to their superiors and "bringing them to the spot, showed them what had been done."

Like wildfire the sacrilegious news covered the town. Hindus, "from the Brahman to the pariah," held a public meeting. Governor Duplex sent his chief peon, who tried to disperse the meeting by striking "a Chetti on the cheek" and ordering the people to go away. The people, however, defied the order and protested, 'You better kill us all.'

The background to this act can be traced to the fact that the Jesuit missionaries had built in 1728 the Ghurch of St. Paul adjoining the Vedapuriswar temple. Those Jesuits were, so to say, all-powerful. During the reign of Louis XIV who had ascended the throne of France in 1643, they had had Governor Hebert recalled, because Hebert wanted to clip their wings by issuing a declaration proclaiming the citizens' freedom to live according to their ancestral customs. The Jesuits were furious. The King's confessor belonged to the Jesuit confraternity. He had the King's

ear, hadn't he? So what was to happen, happened. But Hebert had learned his lesson. When he returned next as governor of Pondicherry he became as brutal as the Christian clergy. Already by 1703 the Jesuits were running there a sort of college. The 'born Christians' ("*ceux qui etaient de la naissance*" are the actual words used by Gaebele) were taught Latin, philosophy and theology. The Jesuits obtained from their king the ban on any repairs of Hindu temples, and the Hindu festivals were prohibited on Christian festival days. Three-fourth of the population fled from the city. It was still not enough for the missionaries.

Page-156

They urged that a temple should be pulled down. Not just any old temple would do, mind you. The temple should be the principal place of worship for the Hindus of Pondicherry. So it had to be the Veda Puri Ishwara temple. Louis XIV, the 'Sun-King' in whose name Francois Martin had given assurance to Tamil people, found nothing wrong in passing such a dark order. But the Pondicherry administration found itself unable to execute the royal order. The Hindus constituted the most important part of the native community and they put up a great resistance. The wily Jesuits bided their time.

When the hue and cry over their sordid deed of 17 March had died down, they repeated the same tactics on 31 December. Emboldened by the support of Governor Dupleix and his wife, they did their vile deed from within the grounds of the Church of St. Paul.

Months went by. The political situation was in a flux. In September 1748 the British laid siege to Pondicherry. Taking advantage of the situation, Dupleix allowed the departure of Hindus, so that not even ten heads of castes remained in town. At the same time, order was given to the soldiers guarding the city's gates not to let the Hindus return. All perfectly planned. The Jesuits, led by their superior, Father Coeurdoux of Karikal, rejoiced. And they struck.

Ananda Ranga Pillai wrote in his diary dated 7 September 1748. "This morning tents were pitched round St. Paul's Church, and two hundred soldiers and a hundred sepoys were quartered there ... and priests were told that the Iswaran temple would be demolished." Demolished it was the next day, on 8 September 1748. The engineer, the clerical staff with diggers,

Page-157

masons and others pulled down the southern wall of the temple and the outhouses. While the Dubash was being told all this, more news came in quick succession. "Just then," wrote Pillai, "news was brought that Father Coeurdoux, the Superior of St. Paul's Church, had kicked the inner shrine with his foot ... and ordered the Christians to break the Vahanams." The few heads of castes who had remained in Pondicherry braved the merciless beating by soldiers to rescue whatever of temple articles they could salvage. "Then Father Coeurdoux of Karikal came with a great hammer, kicked the lingam, broke it with his hammer, and ordered the Coffrees¹ and the Europeans to break the images of Vishnu and the other gods. Madame² went and told the priest that he might break the idols as he pleased. He answered that she had accomplished what had been impossible for fifty years...." The temple demolition order passed by Louis XIV was finally executed under the reign of his great-grandson, Louis XV.

Governor Dupleix had also ordered the demolition of the ancient mosque opposite the *Eglise des Capucins*. But unlike the Tamil Hindus, the Muslim Captain of the French Mahe sepoy went and told Dupleix, "If you pull down the mosque, not a single Muslim sepoy would be left," nor the demolition workers—all would perish. The Governor immediately revoked his order. Pillai lamented, "If the Tamils had only some among them as brave in word if not in deed as these Muslims, none would have thought of touching the temple."

'Coffree' in Pondicherry was a contemptuous term for 'black-skinned natives.' It is a derivative of Caffre (or Kaffir), which originally meant Bantu inhabitant of South Africa, and more generally any Black South

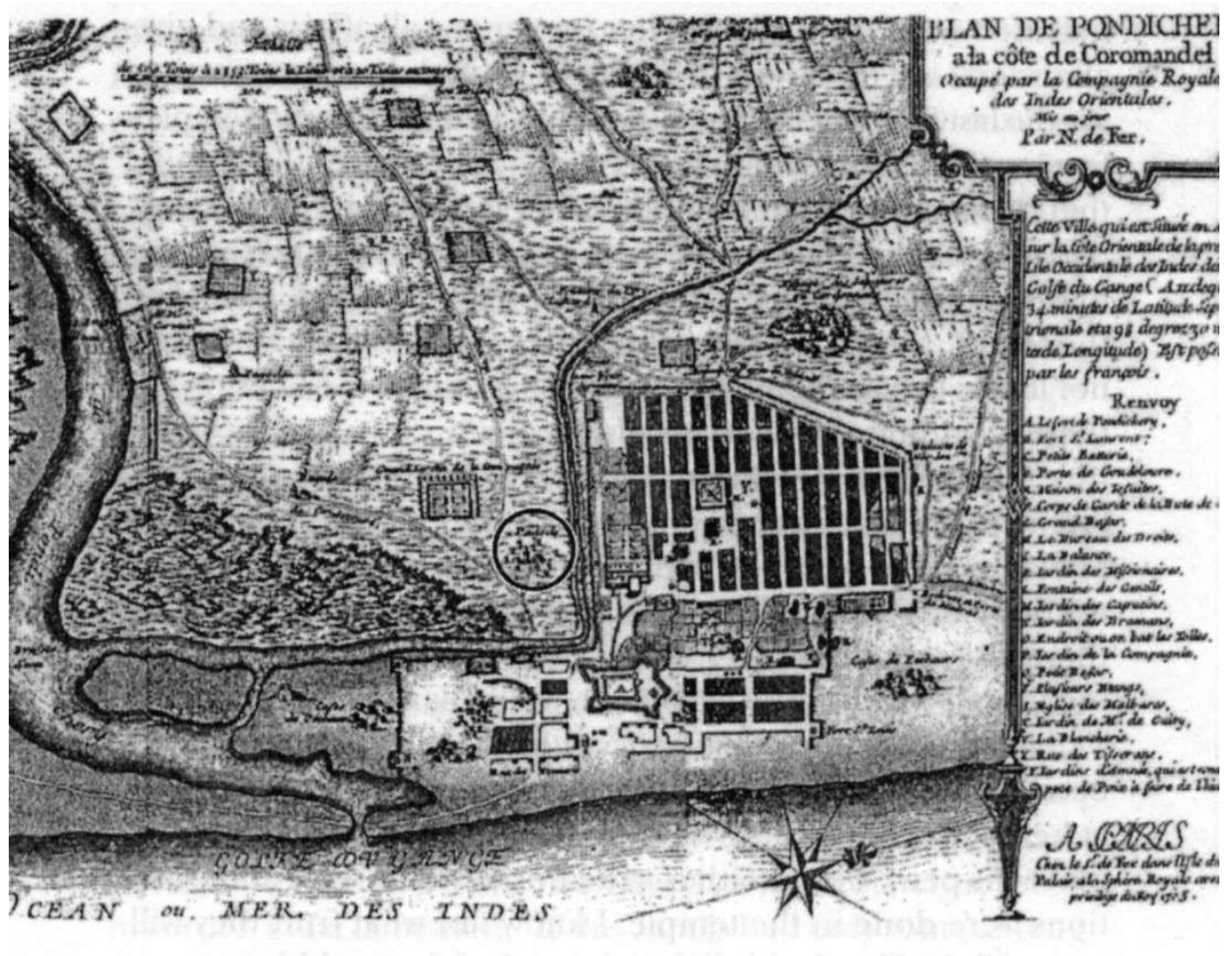
In his private diary, Pillai wrote his private thoughts. "The Governor has dishonoured himself. Firstly, he has listened to his wife's words and allowed her to manage all affairs and give all orders.... The priests of St. Paul's Church have been trying for the last fifty years to pull down the Veda Puri Iswaran temple; former Governors said that this was the country of the Tamils, that they would earn dishonour if they interfered with the temple, that the merchants would cease to come here, and that the town would decay, they even set aside the king's order to demolish the temple, and their glory shone like the sun. But the Governor listens to his wife and has ordered the temple to be destroyed, thereby adding shame to his dishonour."

In the temple, a native convert "also kicked the great lingam nine or ten times with his sandals in the presence of

Madame and priest, and spat on it, out of gladness_____ " It was

not for nothing that Tamil Hindus told Christian clergy that there was something seriously wrong with the doctrine which inculcated such beastly behaviour, particularly in the converts.

Ananda Ranga Pillai learned later that "the temple had been levelled with the ground and the whole people were troubled at heart." He himself was so sick at heart that he could scarcely move his pen. "I can neither write nor describe what abominations were done in the temple. I know not what fruit they will reap. All the Tamils think that the end of the world has come. The priests, the Tamil Christians, the Governor and his wife are more delighted than they have ever been before, but they have not yet considered what will befall them in future."



Ma/l of Pondicherry by de Fer (1705). We have added a circleshowing
the location of the ancient "pagoda" or Vedapurisuiar temple.

Addendum

(Excerpts from a letter of 20 December 1952, from Frère L. Faucheux to Mrs. Yvonne Gaebele, translated from the French. Y. Gaebele had asked Rev. Fr. Faucheux, who had done some research on the sites of old graveyards, the exact location of the Vedapuriswar Temple.)

"Madam,

"The map of Pondicherry made by de Fer and published in 1705, placed the Vedapurisvara Pagoda at the east end of today's Nida-Rajappa-Ayyer Street. I presume that all the land east of the missionaries' cemetery, the land of the Mission's printing press, and the stretch of the *Missions Etrangères* Street contiguous to them, belonged to it. The pond of the Pagoda took up almost all the land between the *Missions Etrangères* Street, the continuation of Nida-Rajappa-Ayyer Street, and the compound of the sisters of Saint-Louis-de-Gonzague. Its southern part encroached on half the breadth of Saint-Ange Street.

"(...) According to the map by de Fer, at the beginning of the eighteenth century there was no edifice at the spot today occupied by the Cathedral.

"In 1728, the Jesuit Fathers began there the construction of the Immaculate Conception church, finished about 1736 _____

"Everybody knows that in 1761 the church was razed to a height of three feet by order of the English."¹

¹ The good Father mentions the destruction of the church by the English but passes over in silence the temple's destruction by his own order!

"Befall them in future." Future ?

Well, as more than a couple of centuries has passed since those times and those deeds, history gives us a few answers. And provides us with a few meanders of destiny reserved for some of the above actors.

Saint-Paul's Church. After leaving in 1748, the English regrouped themselves, and returned to the attack. On 16 January 1761, British troop entered the town. Lord Pigot, then governor of Madras, gave three months' time to the inhabitants to clear out. Then it was a 'Guy Fawkes Day.' Everything was blown up, but everything French. The white town with its fortifications, its fort, Dupleix's palace, convents, public buildings ... and churches. Including St-Paul's Church which in its turn was razed to the ground. Lord Pigot walked among the rubble, to check that his orders were carried out.

When in 1769 the French wanted to rebuild Pondicherry's fortifications, the Chief Engineer, for economic reasons, ordered the workers to carve blocks out of old walls for using these as new foundations. Well, he had reckoned without the Indian

Page-162

method of building which could withstand centuries. It proved to be more costly labour wise ... and the loss of an extraordinary number of broken tools.¹

Ananda Ranga Pillai. Son of a well-to-do merchant, Tiruven-gadam Pillai and Lakshmiammal, he was born around 1708. After the death of his mother when he was about the age of eight, his father went to Pondicherry along with him and his younger brother, the junior Tiruvengadam. It was the insistent call by his wife's brother, Nanyappa, that decided Tiruvengadam to quit his village near Madras, and move to Pondicherry. This is the same Nanyappa, a rich merchant, a man as good as he was rich, you could not find one better, all Pondicherry loved him. All did I say? Well, not quite. The exceptions were the Jesuits. These Jesuit Fathers were determined to have his skin. When Hebert returned as Governor with the promise to do every single bidding by the Jesuits, he brought all sorts of trumped up charges against Nanyappa. As prosecutor and judge the Governor easily imprisoned him and confiscated his considerable properties. If Jesuit priests were there, could torture be far away? Nanyappa, after great torture, was left to die in prison, all help denied. He died in August 1717.² Many years

¹ *Les Indes Florissantes*, an anthology by Guy Deleury, p. 418. All the facts presented here are gleaned from this book, unless otherwise mentioned.

² *Revue Historique 1955*. Yvonne Gaebelle recounts in detail the whole horrible episode.

When recently I reviewed the above text, written two or three years ago, it was Durga Puja. Durga, as you know, comes each year to destroy one Asura. An ardent prayer rose in me, imploring her. "Mother, annihilate all the cruel forces. Never, ever, may any act of cruelty occur in this world."

Page-163

later Ananda Ranga Pillai became the Company's Dubash in his turn. He died in January 1761 during the British siege and before the English entered the town.

Society of Jesus. This order of priests, the Jesuits, was founded in 1534 in Paris by Ignatius Loyola, Francis Xavier, and others, to defend the Roman Catholic Church and propagate its faith. Its members' duties are to preach, to educate, and to hear confession. The pro-Church politics of Louis XV was opposed by the Parliament of Paris, which obtained the Society's dissolution in 1762 in France. Yielding to pressure, Pope Clement XIV issued a decree in 1773 abolishing the order. In 1814 Pope Pius VII restored the Society of Jesus.¹

Gaston Coeurdoux. He lived in Pondicherry and Karikal from 1731 to 1779 when he died. During his lifetime he practised industrial espionage. He was in the habit of converting textile dyers. So much so that the unsuspecting dyers disclosed to him their secret of the art of dyeing textiles. Now, the European manufacturers had been trying for long to copy the beauty of Indian textiles, but had never succeeded. This Jesuit priest, a 'Reverend Father,' treacherously revealed the Indian dyers' secret to the Europeans. Why only dyeing. All sorts of Indian technology were objects of curiosity to the Europeans. How Indians extracted juice from sugar cane. How they built their houses ... The engineering skill of those who built the Agra bridge over the Yamuna river far surpassed a bridge built at

¹ An interesting definition from the *Oxford Illustrated Dictionary* of the adjective "Jesuitical": (2.) Having character ascribed to Jesuits; dissembling, practising equivocation or mental reservation of truth.

Page-164

Tours over the Loire. In fact, the Frenchmen who stayed in India for some time never failed to be amazed by the excellence of Indian craft. "Some even thought it was the best in the world," writes Guy Deleury. Some Frenchmen even went so far as to think that "the extraordinary refinement of technique had become possible due to the Indian system of castes because of the hereditary transmission." Europeans had always coveted Indian textiles. Sangam poems speak of cotton cloth as thin as the slough of the snake or a cloud of steam. Anyway, the weaving of complex patterns on cotton and silk was widely known. But now they were astonished at the deep and detailed knowledge of the producers of silk and wool. The silk producers knew what to feed and when to feed the silkworms; the Kashmiri shepherds knew the whys and wherefores of different grades of their sheep's wool. And did they admire the delicate skill of the muslin weaver! You bet. The French praised the skill and grit of Indian labourers who repaired their damaged ships. And, do you know what! These foreigners to our shores were taken aback to find a hospital for animals! Much to the disgust of Christian clergy scornful of the feeling of fellowship Indians had with all of God's creatures.

As for Coeurdoux, being the confessor to Begum Jeanne, his influence on her is best left to the imagination of the reader.

Jeanne Dupleix. With a great talent for conspiracy, had set up a network of spies, not forgetting to cultivate the Muslim ladies, whose language she spoke. The British feared her. The French knew her to be the power behind Dupleix. For, it was she who planned Dupleix's political moves, generally quite successful. The French king made him a Marquis. Along with

Page-165

her unlimited energy, she had an unlimited lust for power, coupled with an avaricious desire for money and jewellery, for pomp and luxury. Privately the Indians despised her and called her chural (she-devil). As for Ananda Ranga Pillai, there was no

love lost between them-in his diary he always termed Jeanne Dupleix as neeli, meaning a plotting and conspiring woman. But Jeanne stood by her husband Dupleix through thick and thin, her loyalty constant and unwavering.

Joseph Francois Dupleix. He succeeded Governor Dumas who was in Pondicherry from 1735 to 1741. During his tenure, Dumas started to build a governor's palace in 1738. The palace was completed in 1752 under Dupleix. Luxury abounded in it. Four marble statues ordered from

France; a fountain that sprayed water in the vestibule, an immense hall covered with silver sheets. That was the reception hall-cum-ballroom. Numerous crystal chandeliers suspended from the ceiling with lighted candles were reflected in the huge mirror that decorated the hall. Quite fit for a Nawab and his Begum, what! In 1751 Dupleix got several pillars, carved like jewels, from a Gingly temple where they had supported the temple's heavy roof; we see them at the pier's entrance. Money flowed. Expenditure mounted. The constant skirmishes with the English were another cause for a big drain in the kitty. The French Company's finances were in a mess. Paris was alarmed. Dupleix was recalled. On 14 October 1754 the Marquis and his Marchioness left in a boat along with their family and servants. They landed at Lorient on 26 June 1755. Dupleix, who had at one time acquired vast tracts of land for France was abandoned by the Versailles Cabinet. When the Seven Years War left the king's coffers empty, Dupleix too was

Page-166

ruined. Jeanne died first, and Dupleix followed her to the other world in 1763.

King Louis XV (1710-74). He was the great-grandson of Louis XIV, his successor, and king of France from the age of five. Many were the wars fought during his reign. One of these was the Seven Years War (1756-63), between France, Austria and Russia on the one side, and ranged against them were Prussia of Frederick the Great (1712-86), and Great Britain of George II (1683-1760) and later his grandson, George III (1738-1820). An enfeebled France lost to Britain much of her possessions in America and India where she had considerable holdings.

French enclaves in India. After changing hands several times, Pondicherry was returned to France in 1816 under the treaty of Paris. France retained only five enclaves in India. Pondicherry and Karikal on the Coromandel coast, Mahe in Kerala, Yanam in Andhra Pradesh, and Chandernagore in Bengal.

France. The centuries-old monarchical system of government was overthrown during the French Revolution of 1789-93. Its motto: Liberty-Equality-Fraternity, caught the imagination of the world. The first Republic came into being. In 1791 the French Company's privileges were abolished. On 30 October 1792 the slave trade was prohibited. Then the First Consul, the Corsican Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821), soon put an end to the Republic by founding the First Empire in 1804. He conquered large parts of Europe, then after several meanders of destiny, was finally defeated at Waterloo, a village in Belgium, on 18 June 1815. Exiled to the

island of St. Helena, in the South Atlantic, he died there six years later. A victim of stomach cancer officially, though arsenic poisoning has often been alleged.

Page-167

After several pendulum swings from monarchy to republic to monarchy we come to Napoleon III (1808-73). Nephew of Napoleon I, he was elected president of the Second Republic in 1848. Like his uncle, he too proclaimed himself emperor in 1852. This is the same Emperor whose Empress Eugenie joined the festivities at Alexandria, when the Suez Canal was opened in 1869, and its builder Ferdinand de Lesseps invited Mother's grandmother, Mira Ismalun. Remember?

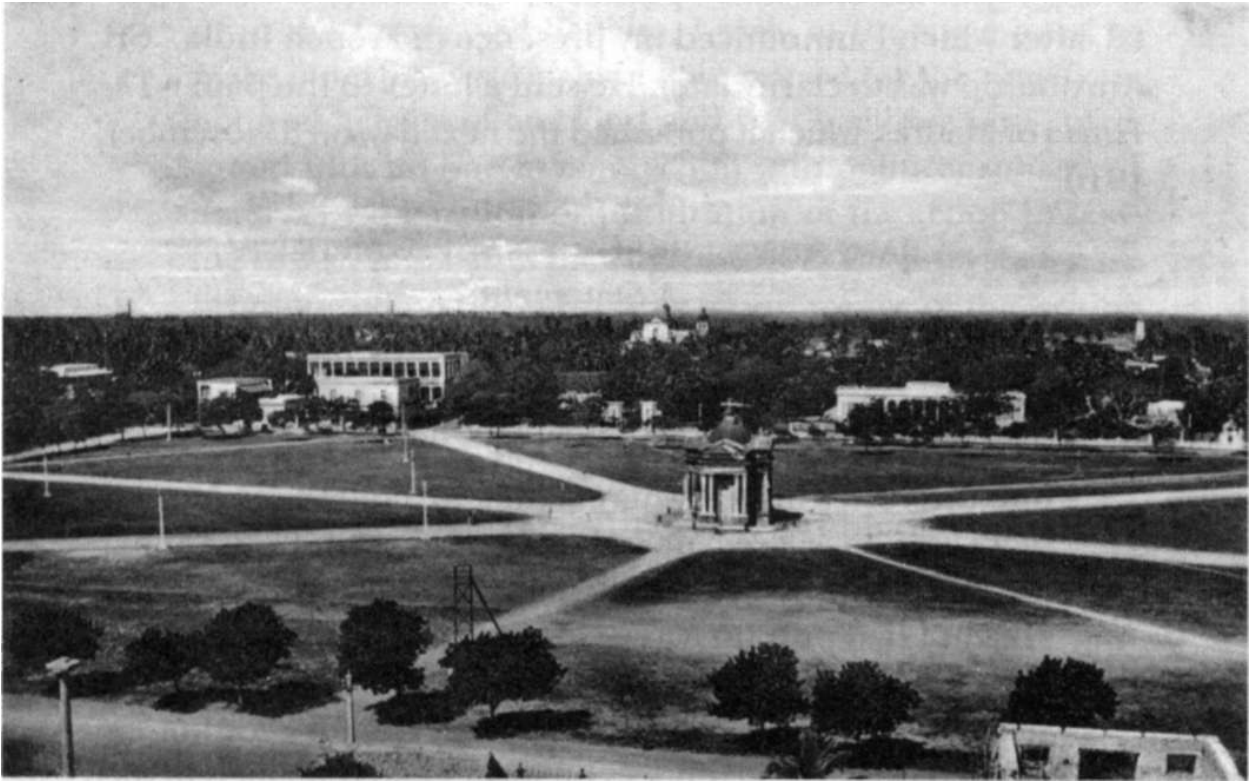
Recently I read a charming story about Napoleon III and how he came to build in Pondicherry a monument to Aayi, a lady of the night.¹ To escape the wrath of Emperor of Vijayanagar, Krishna Deva Raya (reign: 1509-1529), who mistook her house for a temple and prostrated himself in front of it—imagine his rage when he realized his mistake—Aayi demolished her own house and at the site dug a well and built a tank. In gratitude people named it Aayikulam. As the residents of the White Town lived close to the sea, they always suffered from lack of good drinking water. Over the years they had tried all sorts of contrivances to solve the problem but had not succeeded. When Napoleon III reigned he sent an engineer who proved to be competent. After studying the local topography he decided to lay a long canal from Aayikulam to the White Town. The tank was five kilometres west of Pondicherry. Success. The French residents had now enough fresh water to drink. The governor wrote to the Emperor expressing gratitude and saying that the engineer deserved a reward. The Emperor, who was much moved

¹ To enjoy the full story please see *A Concise History of Pondicherry*, by P. Raja (1987)

Page-168

by Aayi's story, replied, "Be grateful to Aayi. She deserves a monument." Thus a monument was built in the middle of the Park, around the new well, by an appreciative Emperor for a public woman. The Park was named Le Jardin du Roi (the king's garden); and after the Second World War, it was renamed by the then Governor Francois Baron, Place Charles de Gaulle. I happened to be passing by and saw Baron with Satprem at his side.

And that, dear reader, brings us right back to the present.



*The monument to Aayi in the centre of Pondicherry's Park,
as it was early this century*

Page-169

22

Acquitted

As at Chandernagore, so also at Pondicherry. "I remained in secrecy in the house of a prominent citizen until the acquittal, after which I announced my presence in French India," Sri Aurobindo was to clarify later. He sent a letter to the paper *The Hindu* of Madras, which it published the next day, on 8 November 1910.

BABU AUROBINDO CHOSE AT PONDICHERRY

A Statement

Babu Aurobindo Ghose writes to us from 42, Rue de Pavilion, Pondicherry, under date November 7, 1910:

"I shall be obliged if you will allow me to inform every one interested in my whereabouts through your journal that I am and will remain in Pondicherry. I left British India over a month before proceedings were taken against me and, as I had purposely retired here in order to pursue my Yogic sadhana undisturbed by political work, I did not feel called upon to surrender on the warrant for sedition, as might have been incumbent on me if I had remained in the political field. I have since lived here as a religious recluse, visited only by a few friends, French and Indian, but my

Page-170

whereabouts have been an open secret, long known to the agents of the Government and widely rumoured in Madras as well as perfectly well-known to every one in Pondicherry. I find myself now compelled, somewhat against my will, to give my presence here a wider publicity. It has suited certain people for an ulterior object to construct a theory that I am not in Pondicherry, but in British India, and I wish to state emphatically that I have not been in British India since March last and shall not set foot on British territory even for a single moment in the future until I can return publicly. Any statement by any person to the contrary made now or in the future, will be false. I wish, at the same time, to make it perfectly clear that I have retired for the time from political activity of any kind and that I will see and correspond with no one in connection with political subjects. I defer all explanation or justification of my action in leaving British India until the High Court in Calcutta shall have pronounced on the culpability or innocence of the writing in the *Karmayogin* on which I am indicted."

'Innocent.' The Calcutta High Court pronounced its verdict on the same 7 November. This was the case of the *Karmayogin*. On 25 December 1909, Sri Aurobindo had written an article, 'To my Countrymen,' under his own signature.

Briefly, this is how the case had evolved. On 18 June 1910, the Chief Presidency Magistrate of Calcutta had pronounced the article 'To My Countrymen' as seditious. He sentenced Manmohan Ghose, the printer of the *Karmayogin*, to six months' rigorous imprisonment. Two weeks later, the Magistrate directed that Babu Arabindo Ghose "should be proclaimed an absconder

Page-171

and that his property should be attached." Thereupon, the government seized the *Dharma's* press and appropriated one fourth of Manicktolla garden, the other three parts belonged to the other three brothers. Following which an application was filed in August for an appeal. The appeal was finally heard by Justices Holm wood and Fletcher on 25-26-27 October. These two British judges allowed the appeal, set aside the conviction and sentence, acquitted the printer, and released him from bail. Their judgments, though separate, concurred. Both the judges opined that the article 'To My Countrymen' could not be considered seditious. Exactly what the Secretary of State Morley had told Viceroy Minto months earlier.

Many secret reports were in the files of the government concerning Sri Aurobindo. A good number of comments were made by top Anglo-Indian bureaucrats. Many letters and telegrams were sent back and forth from England to India, between Viscount John Morley, the then Secretary of State for India, and Fourth Earl of Minto, Gilbert Eliot, the then Viceroy of India. Why?

A secret report of the Government, laying squarely the blame on Sri Aurobindo, says, "His is the master mind at the back of the whole extremist campaign in Bengal."

"A dangerous character," opined the Lt-Governor of East Bengal and Assam, "more especially dangerous in that he is preaching a religious patriotism." This was in reaction to the article in the *Karmayogin* of 31 July 1909, where Sri Aurobindo had written, "Our ideal is that of Swaraj or absolute autonomy free from foreign control. We claim the right of every nation to live its own life by its own energies according to its own

Page-172

nature and ideals. We reject the claim of aliens to force upon us a civilisation inferior to our own or to keep us out of our inheritance on the untenable ground of a superior fitness."

Referring to the article, the Home Secretary of the Government of India said the same thing in a secret report. "It will be seen that the whole policy is anti-British and the goal is 'absolute autonomy, free from foreign control.' "

Minto was much perturbed by the strong reaction shown by Members of Parliament back home. "I have been somewhat exercised," he confessed to Morley on 14 April 1910, "by the questions in the House of Commons about Arabindo Ghose. He is the most dangerous man we have to deal with at present

and he has great influence with the student class_____ In the

meantime Arabindo has disappeared and it will be very unfortunate if there should seem to be any sympathy with him at home."

Morley tried to soothe the Viceroy. "As to the famous Arabindo ... you are mistaken if you think that there is any sympathy with him at home." Then he spoke about what was troubling him. "That is not the point. The point is, in my mind, that the institution of proceedings against him was a foolish blunder, from the side of policy.... Is a conviction reasonably certain in this case? I should think decidedly not, and I hope not. So far as I can make out, the article (so far back as last X' mas) simply paraded passive resistance and abstention from taking part in public life. That may be as odious and objectionable as you please, but it is at least doubtful whether any decent court will find it to be sedition."

'Decent court' ? Maybe the Secretary of State had in mind

Page-173

the judges of British courts at home? Evidently he did not grasp the biased mindset of most of those who were dispensing justice in India. Some of them had decidedly peculiar notions of justice. Here was the Chief Presidency Magistrate who found the article to be 'seditious.'

Just a few lines from the famous article of 25 December 1909 will make the reader grasp the reason behind the Indian bureaucracy's rage.

"We [the Nationalist Party] demand,... not the monstrous and misbegotten scheme which has just been brought into being but a measure of reform based upon democratic principles and effective voice in legislation and finance, some check upon an arbitrary executive. We demand also the

gradual devolution of executive Government out of the hands of the bureaucracy into those of the people."

Minto felt snubbed. "As to the celebrated Arabindo," he wrote back to Morley, "I confess, I cannot in the least understand your hope that we shall not get a conviction against him! I can only repeat what I said to you in my letter of April 14th that he is the most dangerous man we now have to reckon with ... and has an unfortunate influence over the student class, and Indians who know him well have told me he is quite beyond redemption. Surely you cannot hope that such a man should remain at large ? We had to consider two courses of procedure against him—deportation and prosecution in accordance with law.... In the meanwhile Arabindo is in Pondicherry where he seems to have formed some undesirable French connections and will probably sail for France." A reference to Paul Richard, no doubt.

To Minto's letter of 26 May Morley answered on 15 June.

Page-174

"You say you cannot in the least understand my hope that you won't get a conviction against the redoubtable Arabindo. The belated proceedings were a thorough blunder from the first.... I have not met a single person, having read the indicted matter, who thinks there is any indictable sedition in a single line of it. Nothing will induce me to pretend to support the action taken," he told the Viceroy firmly. 'Your information may be good about the mischief that the man may have tried to brew but we have information here that he means to 'retire from the business' of political agitator. Deportation! I should think not."

From the time of Sri Aurobindo's disappearance from Calcutta in February of 1910, there had been plenty of speculation about his whereabouts. Some were wild, some were way off the mark, as we have already seen. It is only towards late April or maybe early May, that the British government became finally certain that he was indeed in Pondicherry. Bengal Government's Chief Secretary confirmed it to the Indian government's Chief Secretary, Home Department, in a communiqué: "He is still at Pondicherry and is being watched by the Madras Police. Should he attempt to escape by way of Colombo he will be arrested under the Fugitive Offenders Act." The bureaucracy had no doubt that Sri Aurobindo was trying to escape from India to avoid arrest. The administration took immediate steps to prevent him escaping once again. It sent warrants of arrest from Calcutta to Colombo, Madras and Bombay. As the French law did not permit the

servicing of a British warrant on a French ship, Ceylon police officials were briefed in detail on how to carry out the arrest of Sri Aurobindo.

Ultimately, following his acquittal, the warrant against Sri

Page-175

Aurobindo was withdrawn on 21 November 1910, as were the orders proclaiming him an absconder and the attachment of his property. The same day, a Home Department official announced that "the warrant out against Arabindo has been cancelled and he can return to British India without fear of molestation from Government whenever his likes."

The government officials were dismayed. "Arabindo Ghose is apparendy at Pondicherry and not anxious to return at present. But, if he were to do so," wrote the Chief Secretary to the Government of Bengal despairingly, "we could not of course touch him."

As we have seen, there was never any lack of sensation mongers. The same Home Dept. official who announced the cancellation of the warrant of arrest against Sri Aurobindo, added, "Meanwhile there is reliable information to the effect that Arabindo has come by steamer from Pondicherry to Chandernagore where he is keeping himself closely shut up parody because he is ill with an abscess in the stomach."

Such was the 'reliable' news fed to the government by its spies, whose flights of fancy ranged pretty wide.

Page-176

23

Sundar Chetty's House

The observant reader has surely noticed the change of address in Sri Aurobindo's letter.

It was actually in October 1910 that the change took place. It was a rented house, let by one Sundar Chetty at Rs. 20 a month. Sri Aurobindo with Bejoy and Moni had already spent some six months—'less three and half days' to quote Moni— at Shankar Chetty's house. Then Sri

Aurobindo's brother-in-law, Saurin Bose, turned up on 30th September, the 'last day' (Moni says) at Shankar Chetty's, and passed the night with the two young men. Next day, on the forenoon of 1st October, the four of them moved to their new residence.

The move brought them from the west of the canal to its east. The canal, running north to south, divides the town into two quarters: European (east) and native (west), or as the French put it, '*ville blanche* 'and. *ville noire*' (white town, black town).

This N°40 Rue du Pavilion (now Rue Suffren) was to be their first rented house. The street is south of the big central park, and runs north-south, parallel to the canal. The door of N°40 opens to the east. There is a lane at the back of the house. Otherwise only houses. As one stepped in through the large



Sundar Chetty's house as it was in the 1950s

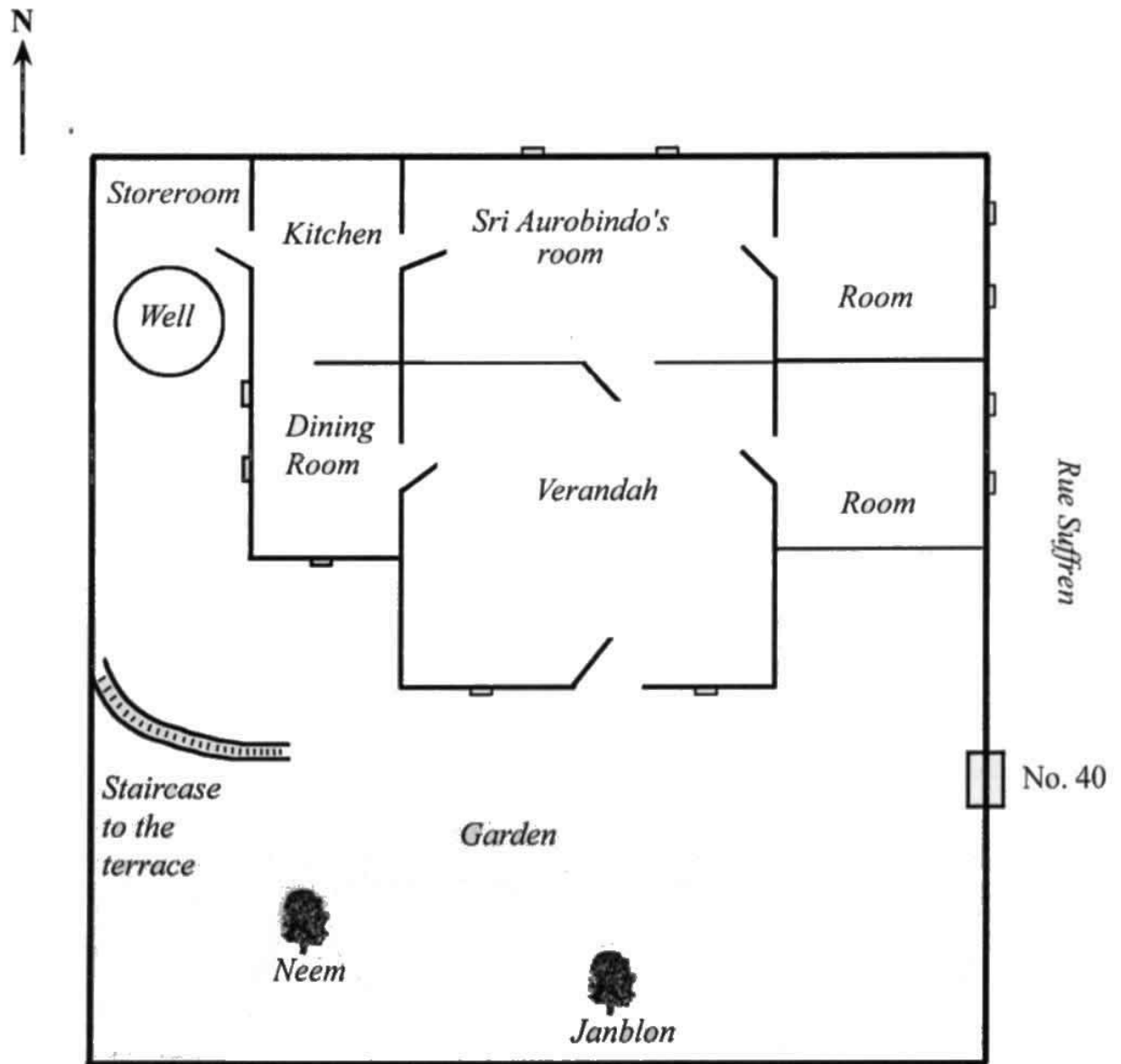
door, one saw a garden to the left. A smallish one, but with trees. Particularly a Neem tree, like many other old houses in Pondicherry. Because of its purifying quality Mother named the Neem flower 'Spiritual Atmosphere.' There was another fruit tree, 'Janblon' in local parlance, we call it Black Jamun; it is, I think, Rose Apple tree (*Eugenia jambos*). To its flower Mother gave the meaning 'Mastery' and explained, "Know what the Divine wants and you will have mastery."

To the right of the gate was the house proper. About ten steps up and you were on a spacious verandah of the raised house. A door to the right opened to a room which Moni and Saurin shared. A similar door to the left led to the dining room. At the deep end of the verandah was yet another door. And this time we are at the threshold of the room where Sri Aurobindo lived all

those six months, from October 1910 to April next year. That was the northernmost room. It had two north windows and two doors. The eastern door opened to a smaller room which was taken by Bejoy, and Nolini when he arrived in November. The western door communicated with the kitchen.¹

Moni and Bejoy kept up their job as cooks, just as they had done at Shankar Chetty's. Now Nolini and Saurin joined them. "We did the cooking ourselves," said Nolini, "and each of us developed a specialty. I did the rice, perhaps because that was the easiest. Moni took charge of *dal* (pulses), and Bejoy being the expert had the vegetables and the curry." Nolini specified

¹ I hope the reader will visualize better the layout with the help of the rough sketch than with my verbal description! To my horror, I just heard (14 October 1998) that the old building has been demolished, and a modern office stands in its place. The number too is changed, I understand.



Sketch showing the layout of Sundar Chetty's house

to me, "And sometimes we would invite Sri Aurobindo into the kitchen, make him sit on a chair, and let him watch us at work."

Now that the Bengalis were at liberty, they did not forget fish! Nolini narrates in his *Reminiscences* with some humour. "Fish three annas" Bejoy would instruct in his particular Tamil (*meen moon anna, illai, naal anna*) their one and only servant, who shopped for them, "if not, then four annas."

They had more substantial food at Rue Suffren. Purani, who did as thorough a research as was then possible on Sri Aurobindo's life, provides us with the following list.¹

At breakfast each one had: tea, milk, sugar and bread (loaf).

Lunch was taken between 11:30 and 12:30. The five of them shared 3 lbs of meat; or they had curry along with other food.

In the afternoon, Sri Aurobindo was given a cup of tea. Generally Saurin prepared it. From time to time Moni made it.

Their dinner time was a little variable. Because, I believe, the four young men soon struck up friendship with local youth and joined them at sports. After they returned towards 7 or 7:15 they would set about cooking the dinner. Generally it was fish, rice and one vegetable. Or curry. It was therefore towards nine at night that they dined.

As they settled in, a dog turned up one day and adopted the household. Sri Aurobindo named it Yogini as the dog was a bitch. Eventually, she gave birth to puppies, "and two of them," Nolini recalled, "became particular favorites with Sri Aurobindo."

¹ *The Life of Sri Aurobindo* (1964), p.152.

Sri Aurobindo never agreed with the then current idea that animals cannot think. In January 1939 he told a story about Yogini's thought processes. "We had, when we were staying in Rue Suffren, a bitch left by someone in the house which had a room upstairs with glass windows and a bathroom at one extremity. One day this bitch found herself locked out. She tried all sorts of devices to enter the room but could not as the main door and the windows were all closed. As all attempts failed, she sat down in front of the window and began to think—how to get in? The way she sat and the attitude of her sitting showed clearly that she was thinking. Then suddenly she got up as if saying: 'Ah, there is the bathroom door! Let me try it.' She went in that direction. The door there was open and she got in."

His conclusion: "It is the Europeans who make a big difference between man and animals. The only difference is the animals can't form a concept, can't read or write or philosophise."

As in most (if not every) houses in those days, Sundar Chetty's also had a well in the backyard. The water from the well was used for cooking, for bath and every other purpose. Nolini added, "for cleaning our teeth, we used tooth powder," and not neem twigs as I thought.

Well, the boys managed to procure a camp cot for Sri Aurobindo. They themselves had no bedding, so they slept on mats. 'Slept,' that is when the buzzing and bites of mosquitoes would allow sleep. They were too poor to afford mosquito nets. "If there were too many mosquitoes, we would carry the mats out onto the terrace for a little air, assuming, that is, that there were any." Pondicherry is notorious for its hot climate. After all it is not quite 12° north of the Equator (to be precise: 11°58'

Page-182

North 79°54' East will find the spot on a map).

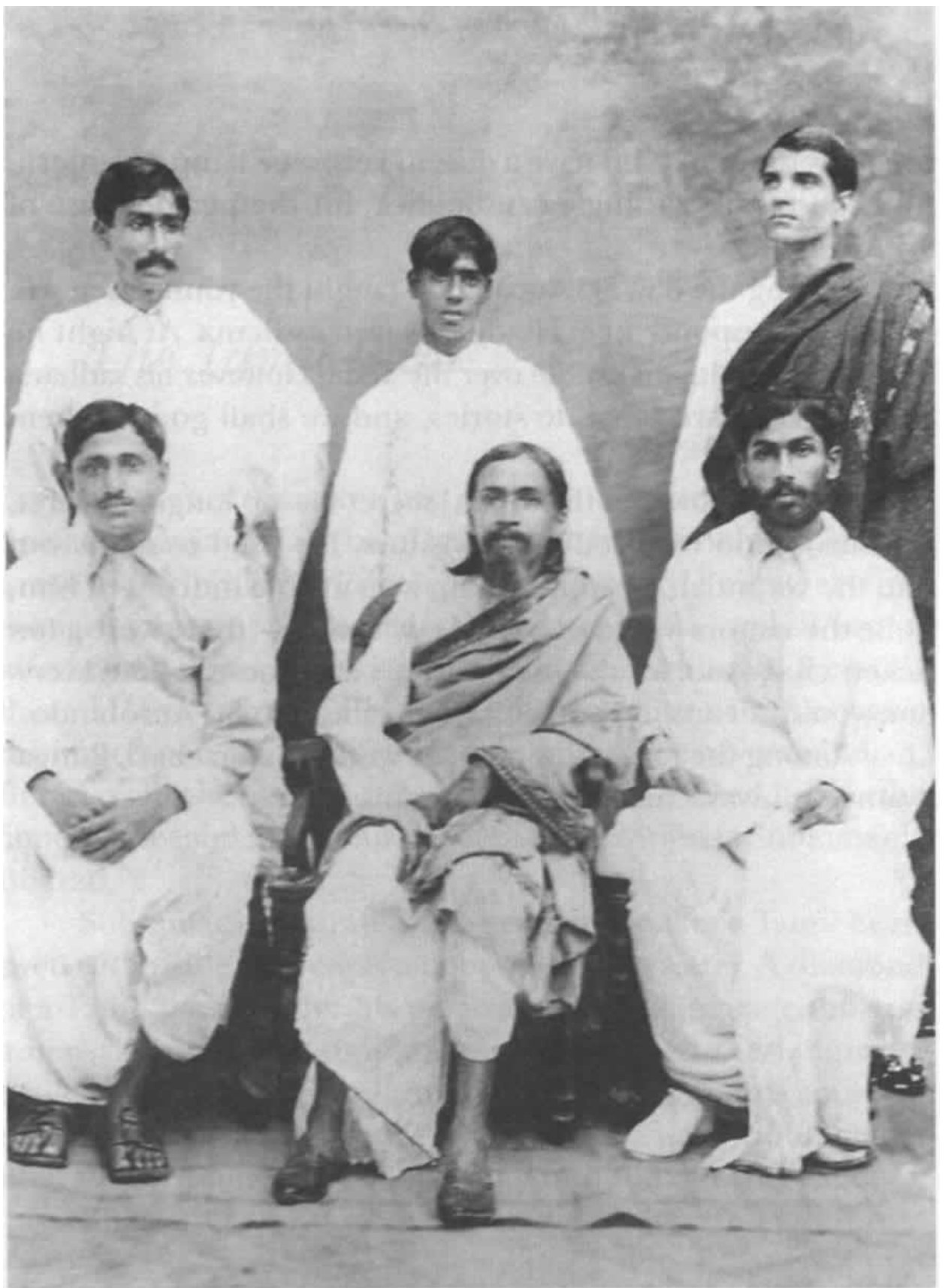
These young men did not have any furniture for themselves. But they had a lot of books. Not at once though. Sri Aurobindo, however, had two or three trunks full of books and papers with him as always. Including, Nolini recalled, "a copy of Max Muller's ten-volume edition of the book (Rig-Veda), only the text. Sometime later he secured a copy of Sayana's 'Commentary' " It was indeed when Sri Aurobindo was living at Sundar Chetty's house that he started studying the Rig-Veda in the original Sanskrit.

At Shankar Chetty's house, with nothing to do, Moni had taken up writing in Bengali during the first three months. But in the new house, Sri Aurobindo began to educate the four young men. Almost the first need they felt was therefore for books. "Sri Aurobindo had fixed Rs. 10 a month for buying books. He himself used to select the books—mostly they were classics of English literature ... especially the series published in the Home University Library and the World Classic editions," Nolini specified to me.

Sri Aurobindo took up the young men's education from where he had left off at Shyam Pukur Lane, at the *Karmayogin* office at Calcutta. Remember how he taught Nolini French beginning with Moliere's *L'Avare*? Nolini had studied only Bengali and English in his school and college days. Here he continued to learn French, and having such a wonderful teacher he did not miss knowing Greek and Latin. "Sri Aurobindo has taught me a number of languages," Nolini said. "Here again his method has often evoked surprise. I should therefore like to say something on this point. He never asked me to begin the

study of a new language with primary readers or children's books. He started at once with one of the classics, that is, a standard work in the language. He used to say that the education of children must begin with books written for children, but for adults, for those, that is, who had already had some education, the reading material must be adapted to their age and mental development. That is why, when I took up Greek, I began straightway with Euripides' *Medea*, and my second book was Sophocles' *Antigone*. I began a translation of *Antigone* into Bengali and Sri Aurobindo offered to write a preface if I completed the translation, a preface where, he said, he would take up the question of the individual *versus* the State." Nolini never completed the translation. "I began my Latin with Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Italian with Dante." I do not know with what books he began his Spanish and German lessons! Nolini knew well those two languages also. And Sri Aurobindo taught him Sanskrit. He learnt it so well that he translated many hymns into Bengali from the original texts of the Rig-Veda.

One would think, what could one buy with rupees ten a month? "We were able to purchase some French books at a very cheap rate, not more than two annas [one eighth of a rupee] for each volume in a series. We had about a hundred of them, all classics of French literature. Afterwards, I also bought from the secondhand bookshops in the Gujli Kadai area several books in Greek, Latin and French. Once I chanced on a big Greek lexicon which I still use," Nolini said in 1962. "Gradually, a few books in Sanskrit and Bengali too were added to our stock, through purchase and gifts." There being no bookshelves, no tables, the books necessarily lay on the floor. Mind



Sri Aurobindo around 1914, with (sitting, left to right) Bijoy and Nolini ; (standing) Nagen, Dumont and Moni.

you, they did "not even have a decent kerosene lamp or lantern. All I can recall is a single candle-stick, for the personal use of Sri Aurobindo."

During the day, Sri Aurobindo taught the young men. He did his correspondence. He did his own sadhana. At night he burned the midnight candle over the Veda. However his sadhana and the Veda are separate stories, and we shall go into them later.

Anyway, now that the 'open' secret was no longer a secret, Sri Aurobindo received many visitors. He used to come out into the verandah, occupy a chair, with a table in front of him, while the visitors would sit in 'rickety' chairs—"there were a few rickety chairs too, for the use of visitors and guests"—and everyone would "sit around and engage in talks with Sri Aurobindo."

Among the locals and regulars were: "Rangachari, Ranga-swamy, Srinivasachari and Subramania Bharati."

24

The Tamil Bard

"That very first day when I was resting after lunch, a gentleman, chewing paan [betel leaf] came to Shri Achari's house" wrote Moni in his *Smritikatha*. "Of an average height, around the age of thirty.... Neither fair-skinned nor black—typical 'brown race.' Beard shaven, but with an impressive moustache. Trimmed hair.... He wore his dhoti in Tamilian style. But he did not give the impression of a Tamil, he rather looked like a North Indian. But in reality he was a Tamil and a Brahmin. Indeed he was the famous poet and litterateur of Tamil Nadu: Srijukta Subramania Bharati."

Subramania Bharati. The very name makes a Tamil heart swell with pride. Here was a poet of the first water. A diamond of a Tamil poet. Under his pen this ancient language took on a new vigour, a new suppleness; he enriched the language, made it adaptable to modern thought. New

thoughts could be expressed with flowing ease. And power. In a word, Subramania Bharati's writings infused a new life into the old language.

Bharati's parents were Chinnaswamy Iyer and Lakshmi.¹

¹ The material facts in the life of Bharati are based on Yvonne Gaebelle's *Bharathi* (in French) and Prema Nandakumar's *Bharati* and *Subramania Bharati*.



A view of the Ettayapuram palace

They were cousins. She was sweet-natured and kind-hearted. He had a keen intellect and a dream in his mind. He was proficient in Tamil and English, in mathematics and logic. From a nearby village Iyer had come to Ettayapuram in Tirunelveli district of the then Madras State. Ettayapuram was a small estate ruled by a zamindar (landholder), who liked to be addressed as Raja. As the Raja was quick to recognize the sterling quality of the man, Chinnaswamy rose rapidly in Ettayapuram court. He then began to translate his dream into reality. Impassioned by western technology, Iyer set up a textile mill at Ettayapuram in 1880. It was one of the first such ventures in South India.

Out of the happy union was born a child. The graceful Lakshmi gave birth to a son on 11 December 1882. The child was named Subramanyam, which is another name for the handsome god Kartik; the month was also *Kartik*. The constellation under which he was born was *Mula* and the year was *Chitrabhanu*.

The handsome child—pet name Subbiah—was encompassed in love and affection. His grandfather Ramaswamy Iyer doted on him. His maternal grandparents, uncles and aunts and cousins made up a large family in Ettayapuram. He was growing into a lively boy.

But life seems incapable of keeping intact its cup of happiness. The cup breaks soon enough. When he was barely five

1 According to North Indian astrology:

a) Kartik is the seventh month of the year, starting from Baisakh.

b) Mula is one of the 27 Nakshatras or lunar constellations. It is ruled by Ketu, and its deity is Nirriti (catastrophe). It forms the first part of Sagittarius. One lunar Nakshatra covers an arc of 13°20'.

c) Chitrabhanu is the name of a year in a cycle of sixty years.

years old, Subbiah's mother died. Father Chinnaswamy was grief-stricken at the sudden loss of his beloved cousin-wife. His grief faded in a few years and he married again. It was Subbiah who never overcame the loss of his mother. He carried the grief in his heart till the end of his own life. Pain inflicted on the heart very early in life seems to be the lot of almost all extraordinary beings. For our Subbiah was no ordinary child. He seems to have come with a special blessing from Saraswati, the goddess of Art and Learning.

Even before his thread ceremony—he came from a high-caste Brahmin stock—he composed verses in Tamil.

At school he was the headache of his teachers. If any word uttered by his teacher caught the attention of the boy, he would stand up and begin reciting a poem he had made up then and there. His classmates were hugely delighted—the interruptions were welcome in the monotony of their classes. They may have enjoyed the poems too, who knows! But luckily for the teachers Subbiah was apt to play truant. Whenever he could, which was quite often, he would go roaming around the village, or hide himself in a corner of some temple or the other, and get completely lost to the world, so engrossed would he become in Tamil literature. Subbiah's grandfather it was who had introduced the boy to Tamil classical poetry. He even arranged for the boy to study Kamban's *Ramayana* under a Tamil pandit.

But Subbiah's father, who had other ideas for his son, was not at all pleased with the situation. He made it quite clear to his son. Very often Subbiah's stepmother had to shield the wayward boy from his father's sternness. Finally Chinnaswamy got his son admitted to the Hindu College at Tirunelveli. The

three-year high school grind was odious to the Tamil lover, for he had to study English and the sciences, which he did not like. But later on the studies were to stand him in good stead. In the event, Subbiah failed to get selected for the Matriculation examinations. Relieved, he returned to Ettayapuram. Seeing that he could not cure his son of his folly, Chinnaswamy put Subbiah in the service of the Raja. The Raja was charmed to have such a clever boy as a companion, who knew Tamil and English classics, and who made brilliant observations in an amusing way.

When Subbiah was just fourteen and a half, in June 1897, he was married to a child bride of seven, Chellammal. She later described the event. "My husband," said Chellammal, "would go on singing love songs unabashedly to the delight of all present. But I felt very embarrassed at not having been blessed with a normal husband for my life mate." Which in no way stopped her giving him her lifelong love and support. Soft spoken Chellammal may never have become an erudite, but coming as she did from a distinguished family—her father was Chellappa Ayer of Tirunelveli—she drew attention by her exquisite education, her extraordinary dedication and the dignified way she bore herself.

Being a favorite at any court awakens jealousy in other breasts. Subbiah's case was no exception. He was taunted often enough. One day his patience—not that he was a patient man! —ran out, and he flared up when a man affronted him publicly. Subbiah challenged the man to an open debate, which duly took place in the Raja's presence. Knowing himself to be no match for Subbiah's tongue, the courtier engaged a learned

Page-191

Pandit to represent him. After the Pandit finished his sophisticated arguments, Subbiah took the floor. He countered with telling arguments. His speech was brilliant, eloquent, and filled with rainbow-hued humour. The audience listened with rapt attention. When Subbiah finished, an elderly Pandit, very respected, very learned, rose and extolled Subbiah for his sagacity, his eloquence and his felicitous delivery. He conferred on Subbiah the title 'Bharati,' which is another name of Saraswati. From then on we got our Bharati.

But dark clouds were gathering over Bharati's life. The textile mill at Ettayapuram had to be closed down owing to heavy losses. Misfortune, as is well known, never visits singly, a host of other disasters are misfortune's companions. Chinnaswamy Iyer was heartbroken and penniless. He died in 1898. His second wife took her young children and went to live with her parents. Bharati was left alone to fend for himself and his family. It was then that his aunt and uncle, Kupammal and Krishna Sivan, who were in Benares, invited him. They lived and looked after a Saiva Math, where Sivan had installed Nataraj. The couple also cared for the visiting pilgrims.

At Benares Bharati joined the Central Hindu College, affiliated to the Allahabad University. Here the young man learned both Sanskrit and Hindi, apart from fine-tuning his English. And this time there was no restraining him. Triumphant he passed the Entrance Examination in first division.

It was during his student days, there in Benares, that Bharati began to dress in the way now familiar to us. He cut his hair to the dismay of his uncle, grew a moustache, dressed in the North Indian fashion, and adopted his classic turban. His

Page-192



Subramania Bharati and his wife at Pondicherry around 1918.

uncle and aunt were worried at all this change of style, but were relieved when they found that the young man's heart was in the right place, and he did not mean any disrespect to his Hindu Dharma. Their own hearts melted when they heard his emotional rendering of some famous hymns. He was a good singer with a melodious voice.

Once again, it was there in Benares that Bharati learned to call everything into question. He questioned the British rule in India. He questioned India's social structure. He wanted to change the social bias against women and bring about an equality of the sexes, and became deeply interested in women's education. Once he even assembled a goodly audience on a Saraswati Puja day, and delivered a lecture in Tamil on women's education.

After completing his studies, Bharati managed to get a teaching job ... at Rs. 20 a month! Remember that he was not living alone, his wife Chellammal was there too. But as chance would have it, just at that time the Raja of Ettayapuram came to Benares for a few days. He was on his way back from the Delhi Coronation Durbar held by Lord Curzon on 1st January 1903, to celebrate the ascension to the throne of Edward VII after the death of his mother, Queen Victoria. The Raja invited his Subbiah back to Ettayapuram.

For the next eighteen months Bharati again became the companion of the Raja and lived comfortably. In his spare time, he soaked himself at the founts of English and Tamil poetry, Shelley, Kamban, and others. But the almost useless life at the court was too stifling for a poet like him. Came a day when he could no longer bear it. He left. His first stop was Madurai. He took a job as a teacher of Tamil in the Setupati High School, a

job he held for about three months. Then his destiny intervened. It was in the person of G. Subramania Iyer, the then editor of *Swadesamitran*, a leading Tamil newspaper. It was November 1904. Bharati, as subeditor, began earning Rs. 30 a month. His main work was to translate into Tamil the news published in English dailies. That is how Bharati came to translate speeches of Swami Vivekananda, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and other Nationalists. Grippled by the messages of these men, Bharati became a sympathizer of the Nationalists. This work gave him good training in the art of writing. His language gained in a power of expression till then unknown in Tamil.

As the subeditor of *Swadesamitran* Bharati went to attend the twenty-first All-India Congress Session at Benares. There he met Sister Nivedita. His two volumes of poetry, *Swadesa Gitangal* (1908) and *Janma Bhoomi* (1909), were to be dedicated to Sister Nivedita, "who without words, in a split second, taught me the nature of true service to the Mother and the greatness of sacrifice."

Swadesamitran was a moderate paper. Bharati was chafing under its harness as his views became more and more radical. Tirumalchariar and Srinivasachariar, the Mandayam brothers, were hardy patriots, and did not see why they should not spend their inherited fortune for the Motherland. Thus was born a new Tamil weekly, *India*, based in Madras. It was begun in 1906, at around the same time as the *Bande Mataram* at Calcutta. Bharati became its editor. He was also the editor of an English magazine *Bala Bharati*, another Tamil magazine *Chakravartini*, and a Tamil daily, *Vijaya*. In *India* Bharati poured out his flaming heart in poems of fire. His prose targeted the Moderates,

விஜயா.

—*—*—*—*—

பிரதிநிதனம் வெளியாகும்



வரலாற்றுக்குரிய புகழ்பெற்ற 'விஜயா' இதழை வெளியிடுகிறது. இதில் உள்ள செய்திகள் மிகவும் சுவாரசியமானவை.

இந்த இதழை வெளியிடுகின்ற நோக்கம் என்னவென்று கேள்விப்பட்டால், அதற்குரிய செய்திகளை வெளியிடுவதே நம் நோக்கம். இதில் உள்ள செய்திகள் மிகவும் சுவாரசியமானவை. இதில் உள்ள செய்திகள் மிகவும் சுவாரசியமானவை.

வருவது: 1908
 வெளியீடு: 357

சுமார் 1910 1912
 விலை: 100

வெளியீடு
 "விஜயா" இதழை,

and poured scorn on the Indians who did not join the freedom struggle. In a cartoon published in *India* in 1908 the Moderates are portrayed as dogs eager for the bones Lord Morley is throwing to them while the British wished to loot the mansion of India; and sadly looking on is the caged Lion, Balgangadhar Tilak. Naturally enough, the British administration got his pen-lashings in full measure. The intrepid Bharati spared no one. The Government was ready to crack its whip.

Page-197

25

South Indian Nationalists

Bharati slipped through the Madras police net to Pondicherry in September 1908. That fateful year 1908.

The colonial rulers were no sleepyheads. Once they swung into action against the Nationalists, they did a thorough job ... to the worst of their abilities.

From May 1908, the Anglo-Indian government began filling up its prisons with the Bengali group of Nationalists—even a whiff of suspicion was enough to land a youth in prison, even a passer-by near a public meeting was not spared a jail sentence.

The principal culprits, 'the prime movers' as the government put it, were the Ghose brothers; especially the "founder of the violence section of the Bengali revolutionary party," Babu Arabindo Ghose. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, after a summary trial, was deported in July to Mandalay in Burma to suffer a prolonged solitary confinement. He was released only in June 1914. Bengal, Maharashtra, Punjab, no corner of the country was spared the panic reaction of the government against *Swaraj*.

It was the great good fortune of Tamil literature that Bharati listened to his friends and escaped to French India. Otherwise,

Page-198

given his predilection to face the music, he would have met with the same fate as his compatriots V. O. Chidambaram Pillai (V. O. C.), Subrahmanya Siva¹ and so many others. To the jolly tune of 'white man's justice' the Indians were made to dance the macabre dance of death.

Anglo-Indian ferocity was let loose against Indians. The deeds of British bureaucrats were heinous beyond words. Let us take but the cases of V. O. C. and Siva.² V. O. C., arrested without rhyme or reason, was given two—two—life sentences of transportation (later reduced to six years) by the specially appointed Sessions judge; Siva was given ten years' imprisonment. But instead of deporting V. O. C. immediately to the Andamans, the worthy officials sent the political prisoner to jail in Coimbatore to undergo hard labour. So for four years, from 1908 to 1912 V. O. C., suffered all the horrors of a criminal sentenced to rigorous imprisonment. As for Siva, a political prisoner he too, he was thrown into the Trichinopolyjail, in the same cell where criminals with leprosy were lodged.³ "The prison system of the European nations" Sri Aurobindo wrote (1909) from his personal experience, "is only a refined and systematised savagery perpetuating the methods of ancient and mediaeval barbarity in forms that do not at once shock the eye."

And pray, what was their crime, of these eminent men?

¹ Born Subrahmanya Iyer, this Brahmin from Batlagundu in Madura district changed his caste name Iyer to Siva.

² Facts in the cases of V. O. C. and Siva are taken from Madras Presidency in Pre-Gandhian Era, by Saroja Sundararajan.

³ Both V. O. C. and Siva were released on 24 December 1912. and kept under close surveillance.

To begin with they were Nationalists. V. O. C. and Bharati had even attended the Surat Congress, forming part of a group of thirty from Madras. As such they tried to put into practice the scheme of the Nationalists 'to prepare the nation' for regeneration. "The schemes by which we seek to prepare the nation," Sri Aurobindo explained in the *Bande Mataram* of 11 April 1908, "the scheme of industrial regeneration, the scheme of educational regeneration, the scheme of political regeneration through self-help are subordinate features of the deeper regeneration which the country must go through before it can be free."

We know, of course, to what extent of impoverishment the colonial rulers had reduced India. Cleverly the government brought out laws upon unjust laws not only to muzzle free expression, but to murder India's artistic and industrial capacity. Well, the public-spirited V. O. C, for his part, established at Tuticorin the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company (registered on 10 October 1906). Srinivasachari's entire family, including his brother and brother-in-law, were his great supporters in this venture. The Company's two ships served as passenger and cargo, and plied between Tuticorin and Colombo. Its aim was to facilitate movements of goods, and to free Indian manufacturers from the British commercial monopoly. The South Indian merchants immediately patronized the new Indian enterprise. To the utter shock of European merchants, the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company became a successful venture. So successful that the foreign merchants turned green with envy, and put great pressure on vexed British bureaucracy to act. The arrest of V. O. C. was nothing if not commercial jealousy.

What filled the bureaucrats' cup of ire was the affair of

Page-200

the Coral Mills. There is no need to repeat how the working class in India was treated by its white masters. Nationalists were much moved by the repression on their countrymen. Foremost among them was Sri Aurobindo. "The condition of the poorer classes in this country," he wrote in the *Bande Mataram*,¹ "is a subject which has till now been too much neglected." He was concerned with the economic condition of the poor, naturally, but more worrisome to him was the moral side "which is even more important." Because the poor peasants were being brutalized by unexampled oppression and bestialized. "We have heard of villages where the liquor shop and the prostitute, institutions unknown twenty-five years ago, have now the mastery of the poorest villagers," wrote Sri Aurobindo in 1908.

Coral Mills was a British venture in Tuticorin. On 27 February 1908 the mill hands struck work protesting against their oppressed condition. Under the leadership of V. O. C. and Siva the people conducted themselves "with a marvelous combination of firmness and dignity, with quiet self-control" and gave "absolutely no hold to the excited bureaucrats," wrote Sri Aurobindo in the *Bande Mataram* (4 March 1908). He continued. "We can only suppose that as the self-assertion of Indian labour has evoked the enthusiastic support of the people, so the menace to the despotic control of the labour market by British capital has been taken by the bureaucrats as a blow aimed at British rule.... The people seem to have found worthy leaders in Sits.

Chidambaram Pillai and Subramaniya Siva and have so far held their own in the struggle. We await further developments with

¹ 'The Next Step,' an article dated 31 March 1908.

interest and with confidence in their courage and discretion." Appreciatively Sri Aurobindo observed, "This is not the first instance in which Madras has shown how deeply it is imbued with the spirit of a strong and enthusiastic Nationalism."

The country did not have to wait long for the outcome of the Tuticorin struggle. On 13 March the *Bande Mataram* announced that "the great battle fought over the Coral Mills has ended in a great and indeed absolutely sweeping victory for the people. Every claim made by the strikers has been conceded and British capital has had to submit to the humiliation of an unconditional surrender. Nationalism may well take pride in the gallant leaders who have by their cool and unflinching courage brought about this splendid vindication of Nationalist teaching." With one stroke a bond was established between the educated class and the masses.

The humiliated government, however, began to impose restrictions upon the *Swadeshi* Line. Ashe, Sub-collector and Joint Magistrate of Tuticorin, opined that as the *Swadeshi* Company admitted Indians only as shareholders and excluded Europeans, it was a clear case of promoting sedition and class hatred, therefore liable to prosecution by the law. A panicked administration lost all sense and indulged in insane acts. V. O. C. and his associates were arbitrarily arrested and denied bail. Trouble began. People's passion flared up. A mob smashed some furniture, broke some windows, and wrecked some government buildings, and forced some Europeans to say 'Bande Mataram.' They did not take a single life. But Ashe, the Sub-collector of Tuticorin, ordered the police to open fire which killed several men. "The campaign of repression proceeds merrily

in Madras," reported the *Bande Mataram* on 26 March 1908. "Srijuts Chidambaram Pillai and Subramaniya Shiva are to be prosecuted for sedition (we notice, by the way, that Srijut Pillai was

not allowed to see his Vakils in jail, a typical piece of bureaucratic 'justice'), the Tuticorin lawyers are being bound down to keep the peace, and it is reported that instructions have been issued to the Sub-Magistrate, Tinnevely, to issue warrants for the arrest of persons shouting 'Bande Mataram' within the limits of Tinnevely and Palancotta. Meanwhile people crowd round the jail gates and line the roads to get a glimpse of the faces of their imprisoned leaders."

The *Modern Review* of December 1908 wrote in an editorial: "It is some consolation that in the Tinnevely Sedition case, Mr. Chidambaram Pillai's sentence has been reduced from transportation for life to one of six years; though we are of opinion that he ought not to have been punished at all. That he is being made to do the hardest work of criminals is illegal and unjustifiable. The police reporters in this case on whose evidence he was convicted were not skilled in the art of reporting. Some of them are said to have taken down speeches in English as they were delivered in Tamil! The mother-tongue of the principal witness was Hindustani, and not Tamil."

This was not the first time nor was it going to be the last when this kind of 'evidence' was to serve the cause of 'justice.' The editorial takes a look at the stand taken by Lord Morley "when he was plain Mr. Morley." "In an address to Englishmen," said the editorial, "Morley cited the case of an Irishman convicted on the evidence of a police constable, a short-hand writer who did not know short hand! At the end he asked his

Page-203

English audience, 'Would you endure to be under exceptional repressive legislation of this kind so administered? I do not believe you would.' " Commented the editor, "But what is sauce for even the Irish goose is not sauce for the Indian gander."

Yes, the good Lord Morley was not in the least bothered by such 'sheer caricature of evidence' as he put it, admitted by many judges in Indian courts, and harsh sentences passed on gentlemen far superior to these underlings.

V. O. C., Siva and other Nationalists did not haggle with Providence. They put all they had for the Motherland. Quite unlike the Moderates. When in December 1908 the All-India Congress Committee session was held in Madras no mention was made about the imprisonment of V. O. C. or Siva. But the delegates, all Moderates, sang lustily Vande Mataram to the tune of God Save the King....

The *Bande Mataram* of Calcutta, on the contrary, lavished praise on V. O. C. "All honour to Chidambaram Pillai for having shown us the first complete example of an Aryan reborn, and all honour to Madras which has produced such a man."

Sri Aurobindo, writing in the *Bande Mataram* (23 March 1908) said, "The *Madras Standard* has undoubtedly hit the right nail on the head when it derives the Tinnevely disturbances from the establishment of the Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company and the attempt to throw difficulties in the way of its success." He summed up the situation. "The struggle generated an acute feeling on both sides and when the commercial war extended itself and the people took sides with Indian labour against British capital in the affair of the Coral Mills, the patience of the English officials gave way and they rushed to the help of

Page-204

their mercantile caste-fellows, misusing the sacred seal of justice and the strong arm of power as instruments to maintain their trade supremacy. This unjust and unwarrantable action has been responsible for the riots and the corpses of dead men lying with their gaping wounds uncared for in Tinnevely streets,— uncared for but not forgotten in the book of divine reckoning." Sri Aurobindo added with his clear vision. "Nations as well as individuals are subject to the law of *karma*, and in the present political and industrial revolt British rule in India is paying for the commercial rapacity which impelled it to prefer trade returns to justice and kingly duty and use its political power to turn India from a land of fabulous wealth into a nation of starving millions." The Rishi spoke. "The payment has only just begun —for these karmic debts are usually repaid with compound interest."

Page-205

26

Nandanam

In the 1970s we, Satprem and I, lived for a few years in Nandanam. Nandan in Indian parlance means a heavenly garden where gods have a perfectly happy time. We not being gods did not have a 'perfectly' happy time. It was rather turbulent.¹ But no matter. The orchard was indeed a pleasure to behold. A very large property with a big furnished bungalow, it had a small pond at

the entrance. Inside were two wells at some distance from each other. There were stands of coconut palms, breeze or wind playing soft or loud music on their fronds. Big, old tamarind trees drew patterns of lace against the evening sky. Cashew bushes full of juicy fruits. Satprem told me that in Brazil they make a very fine spirit distilled from cashew apples. Let us not forget those mango groves.

Mother had taken that property of about ten hectares on lease for eighteen years in November 1968. Decades of neglect had left the garden overgrown with nettles and thorny planer. The bungalow was inhabited by ghosts and bats. It was to my brother Abhay that Mother gave the responsibility of developing the property. He was then in his mid-forties and was the

¹ Interested readers may read Satprem's *Comets d'une Apocalypse*, vol.1. It is in French though.

chief of 'Atelier' (Ashram's Workshop). By nature Abhay was very dynamic. He also had many bright and practical ideas. As chief of Atelier he had the manpower to execute his ideas. Working with him at the time was a retired engineer from the Indian Air Force. Bhadurida, as we called him, came up with the design of a machine which, when fitted to a tractor facilitated and accelerated the uprooting of the thorny plants.

Once cleared, one could see walks around the bungalow —which had to be cleared of bats and rats! The bungalow contained quite a few old etchings and paintings. Behind the building was an alley with a row of sculptured images in granite, such as Vishnu with Sridevi and Bhudevi, six-faced Kartik with his consort, and other gods and goddesses. A little away, all alone under a canopy, there was an exquisitely carved granite image of Buddha, seated in Padmasana posture, deep in meditation.

Within the year, under Abhay's able direction, the orchard begun to show its full potentialities. Several rose beds yielding beautiful roses—which became a daily offering to Mother. Several varieties of jasmine perfumed the air. A vineyard was planted with rows of grapevines. Pineapples too. Papayas and bananas of different types found their places in the garden. Guava from Benares soon turned into fruit-laden trees. And, oh, many, many other trees and shrubs delighted one's senses.

Once the underthicket was cleared, a motorable road was laid. It ran all round, and was built from the debris of demolished buildings; a special mention must be made of the debris from the seventeenth-century Manakula Vinayaka Temple, in the 'white town.' Nandanam is near Muthialpet, a northern suburb of Pondicherry.

Page-207

The three-hundred-year-old temple was, at first, very small, and was on the bank of a tank full of sand, from which it derived the name Manakula. The temple is also known by the name of Vellakara Pillayar.¹ It is said that in bygone days a European tried to remove the deity. Several times he tried but each time Ganesha was back in his old place! Consternation. Then admiration. Finally devotion.

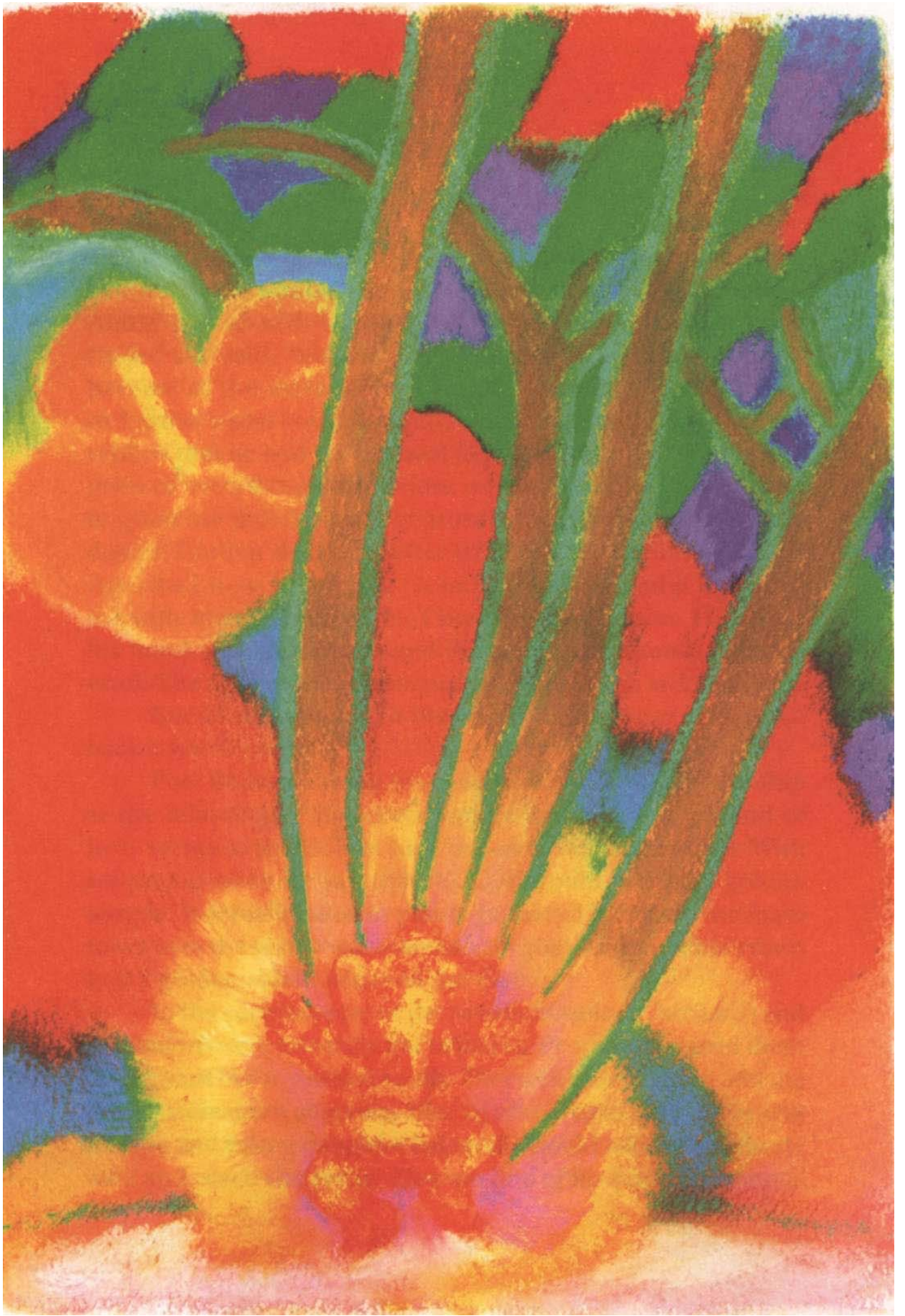
I don't know whether the European devotee had seen or not Ganesha as he really is. Mother who had, told brother Noren that Ganesha is more handsome than he is represented. We of course know how Mother had met Ganesha and how they were "on very good terms, very friendly."² So it is not surprising to hear that she came to his rescue on one occasion. It was late 1960s, the Manakula temple trustees prayed to the Mother to help widen the narrow southern perambulatory path which was but one metre wide, causing difficulty to the devotees. The temple did not have the land to do it. The temple trustees also offered to bear the entire cost. But Mother arranged the matter in her own way. "Thanks to the munificence of 'Mother' "³ the temple got an extra space of 130 square metres. The old boundary wall was demolished, a new wall was constructed—all cost borne by Mother—and everything handed over to the temple trustees on 21 January 1969. Mother had given this job too to Abhay. A few days later he had a visit from Ganesha himself! "A radiating golden Ganeshji with a football in his hand ..."

¹ *Vellakara* in Tamil means a white man. Ganesh, Ganapati, Pillayar, Vinayaka, and so on are names of the same god.

² See *Mothers Chronicles*, Book two.

³ *The New Indian Express*, 20 January 1999.

Page-208



The god looked fondly at Abhay and invited him to play football with him! Abhay was a good football player. A delighted Abhay played with Ganesha till he was tired. The kind god smiled and said, 'You see, I am now able to move about freely because of the extra space. I am pleased with you and I want to bestow upon you a boon.' A surprised and happy Abhay replied that he had no personal need "as you know, the Mother gives us everything even before we ask Her. But I pray to you to grant me that the work of growth and development at Nandanam Garden does not suffer from paucity of funds." Abhay described to us his dream. "A smiling Shri Ganeshji looked at me with love and affection. I bowed down to him. He raised his hand and blessed me and disappeared." Ganesh kept his word. The work at Nandanam never suffered from lack of money.

But all this was still in the womb of the future. Let us go back a few decades.

Poet Bharati, during his exile, often went to offer worship at the dilapidated Manakula temple. He strung a garland of forty verses to the God in his *Vinayakar Naanmani Malai*. With his poetic vision he saw that the God would inhabit a golden temple. It actually came to pass in January 1999 when the main tower over the shrine was covered with gold, and a golden crown and a golden shield adorned the God.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, orchards and plantations were normally not walled in. People often used them as shortcuts or for pleasant strolls. They were more honest and the owners were more generous. Bharati who lived in Muthialpet with his wife and young daughter Sakuntala would take a five-minute walk and reach the estate. This was one of his favourite haunts.

Often he had like-minded friends with him, and a great admirer of his, Nagaswami Aiyer, his brother-in-law. Sitting under the shade of mango trees, his head thrown back, he would look up at the sky trying to draw inspiration. He might have seen now and then the flight of a wedge of cranes from the distant Manasarovar honking some message from Saraswati. A good singer, Bharati could lose himself in Nature's concert: the buzzing of bees, the chirping of birds, the sough of wind in the trees. The melody would make him doze. It was in such a half doze that he got the inspiration for his famous poem *Kuyil Pattu* (the Song of the Koel. This is one of his narrative poems in blank verse of 750 lines. It tells the story of a koel, a bull, a monkey, and the

poet himself—and what had happened in their previous births. In fact, the period between 1910 to 1913 was Bharati's most creative period. He wrote *Panchali Sapatham*, *Kannan Pattu*, composed numerous devotional and patriotic songs during these years. He also made many translations from the Sanskrit into Tamil.

The reason for this creative output is not far to seek. We shall be coming to it.

Well, Subramania Bharati, 'the most dangerous member' of the *India* group had escaped to French India. When Mandayam Srinivasa Iyengar the then editor of *India*, was arrested, convicted and sentenced to five years' transportation, his brother Mandayam Tirumalachari, *India's* proprietor—against whom also a prosecution was launched—removed himself to Pondicherry along with his office equipment, and printing press, lock, stock, and barrel. That was in October 1908. On 10 October the first issue of *India* came out from here. Early in 1909 Tirumalachariar went to the West, ostensibly to study photo-

Page-212

engraving. By the end of the year all trace of him was lost.

Among the several journals Bharati edited, the weekly *India* enjoyed a great popularity. On the one hand its style and content made *India* a treasure in Tamil journalism. On the other, the government and the bureaucrats who were made the objects of its butts were enraged. Neither did the Moderates escape its pen-lashings. The public lapped it all up.

Bharati, we know, was a great admirer of Sri Aurobindo's. In the middle of 1909 he sent one of *India's* correspondents to Calcutta to interview him. The interview was published in *India* in its issue of 18 September 1909. It was this type of reporting that made *India* a treasure in Tamil journalism. Sri Aurobindo had also met at Calcutta S. Parthasarathi, 'Secretary Swadeshi Steam Navigation Company' That is why when Sri Aurobindo received the *adesh* (Command) to go to Pondicherry from Chandernagore, he had sent Moni with a note addressed to S. Parthasarathi Iyenger, c/o 'India' Press. Parthasarathi was away from Pondicherry, so at Moni's request Parthasarathi's elder brother Srinivasachari had opened the envelope and learned that Sri Aurobindo "was coming to Pondicherry and wanted a quiet place of residence to be engaged for him where he could live incognito without being in any way disturbed." That is what Srinivasachari noted. That is how he and Bharati went to receive Sri Aurobindo on 4 April 1910.

Then in November 1910 Varanganeri Venkatesa Subrahmanya Iyer, or WS Iyer in short, managed to land at Pondicherry, straight from a French ship. He had been one year in France. From India he had gone to England to be trained as a lawyer. But called to the bar, he refused to take the oath of

Page-213

allegiance to the British king. He had many adventures in Europe playing hide and seek with the British police. Mind you, he may not have *looked* for adventures, but adventures were attracted to him like a magnet!

With the coming together of these four men, a nucleus of Swedes his was formed in the French enclave. More importantly, it seems to me, three of them did their most precious works there. Sri Aurobindo, Bharati and WS were all men of letters. They were immensely drawn to Indian culture. They sought to express, each in his own way, India's soul.

It was here in Pondicherry that WS Iyer wrote in Tamil the biographies of Chandra Gupta Maurya, Rana Pratap, Mazzini, Garibaldi, and Napoleon. When he was in England Iyer had become an 'extremist'—especially after the Curzon Willie¹ episode—and in France he came close to Madame Bhaicaji Cama, Shyamji Krishna Verma and Veer Damodar Savarkar, revolutionaries all. In France WS Iyer learnt French and read in the original the *War Memoirs of Napoleon*. At Pondicherry, based on Napoleon's method of warfare, he produced a treatise on military strategy which could be used in India to counter the British. To top it all, he translated into English the *Tirukkural*... just in four months, while waiting to be deported at any moment from French India. Even now WS Iyer's translation of *Tirukkuralis* considered as one of the best, if not /A<?best.

It was here in Vedapuri that WS Iyer, Subramania Bharati

¹ On 1st July 1909, Sir Curzon Willie, an ADC for the Secretary of State for India, was shot dead in London by Madan Lai Dhingra (who was subsequently hanged).

Page-214

and Sri Aurobindo produced their best works.

Sri Aurobindo?

We shall be coming to him. But before that we would like to look at his life in the beginning of the Pondicherry days.

Page-215

27

'Spasa' Means Spy

Those who have read the *Ramayana* know how one day Rishi Vishwamitra came to the court of King Dasaratha of Ayodhya. Welcoming him and expressing great happiness at his coming, the king said that he was ready to do any bidding of the Rishi. Pleased, Vishwamitra replied that he had "begun to perform a *yajna* (sacrificial rites), but two Rakshasas, Marich and Subahu, along with their hosts, were giving too much trouble. They were raining down flesh and blood over the sacrificial platform. Would the king send his eldest son Rama with him for the ten nights of the ceremonies, so that Rama might protect the performing priests and destroy the Rakshasas?" Dasaratha was very upset but a word given is a word given. With great reluctance the king accepted to send his beloved Rama, not even sixteen years old, to such a dangerous mission. That is how Rama and Lakshmana went to Siddhashram where Vishwamitra was trying to perform his *yajna*. That is how the two young princes killed Taraka Rakshasi, killed Subahu and other Rakshasas, but a wounded Marich escaped. Vishwamitra also taught them the use of sophisticated weapons which came in very useful when later they fought with Ravana and his army in Lanka.

Page-216

Sri Aurobindo's situation was no different. Except that in each age the disrupting forces put on a different mask. It had become so bothersome that Sri Aurobindo had again to write to *The Hindu*. We give some relevant portion from his letter.

"I am obliged to seek the protection of publicity," he wrote on 23 February 1911, "against attempts that are being made to prejudice my name and reputation even in my retirement at

Pondicherry. A number of individuals have suddenly begun to make their appearance here to whom my presence seems to be the principal attraction. One of these gems heralded his advent by a letter in which he regretted that the Police had refused to pay his expenses to Pondicherry, but informed me that in spite of this scurvy treatment he was pursuing his pilgrimage to me 'jumping from station to station' without a ticket. Since his arrival he has been making scenes in the streets, collecting small crowds, shouting *Bande Mataram*, showing portraits of myself and other Nationalists along with copies of the Geneva *Bande Mataram* and the *Indian Sociologist* as credentials, naming men of advanced views as his 'gurus', professing to possess the Manicktola bomb-formula, offering to kill to order all who may be obnoxious for private or public reasons to any Swadeshist and informing everyone, but especially French gendarmes, that he has come to Pondicherry to massacre Europeans. The man seems to be a remarkable linguist, conversing in all the languages of Southern India and some of the North as well as in English and French. He has made three attempts to force or steal his way into my house, once disguised as a Hindustani and professing to be Mr. Tilak's durwan [doorkeeper]. He employs his spare time, when not employed in these antics for which

Page-217

he claims to have my sanction, in watching trains for certain Police-agents as an amateur detective. I take him for a dismissed police spy trying to storm his way back into the kingdom of heaven. Extravagant and barefaced as are this scoundrel's tactics, I mention them because he is one of a class, some of whom are quieter but more dangerous."

The satirical stamp of Sri Aurobindo!

It is quite striking to note that with the development of his sadhana—we shall come to that, of course, in due time— Sri Aurobindo was rapidly developing certain inner faculties. For instance, between late January and early February 1911 he wrote in his diary (Record of Yoga):

"Two people applied to see me at the door, not seen by me. Cognition that they were detectives. I heard immediately afterwards that they had asked for 'Sociologist' and 'Liberator'."

He also specified:

"I had a cognition formerly that the man calling himself Rama Rao Yogi was a detective— independent of all inference. Learned on Feb 1 of a police report in which he is mentioned as watching the trains and taken for some time by the others as a Bande Mataram man."

Then on 10 February: "A man came calling outside. Immediate cognition by prakamya' on seeing him and revelation acting in confirmation of each other that he was a detective. It turned out to be Ram Rao Yogi, the detective from Maharashtra side."

There were others. In an undated letter he wrote to Motilal Roy, who had sheltered him at Chandernagore, 'Your R.S. Sharma

' *Prakamya*: a Siddhi of knowledge by which the mind and senses surpass the ordinary limits of body.

Page-218

I hold to be a police spy. I have refused to see him because originally when he tried to force his way into my house and win my confidence by his extravagances I received a warning against him from within which has always been repeated. This was confirmed afterwards by two facts,— first that the Madras Police betrayed a very benevolent interest in the success of his mission, secondly, that he came to Pondicherry afterwards as sub-editor of a new Pondicherry paper, the *Independent*, subsequently defunct and replaced by another the *Argus*, belonging to the same proprietor who has been openly acting in concert with the British Police against us in Pondicherry. In this paper he wrote a very sneering and depreciatory paragraph about me, (not by name but by allusion) in which he vented his spite at his failure. Failing even so to get any footing here, for the Swadeshis were warned against him, he returned to Madras. He seems now to have tried his hand with you at Calcutta and succeeded, probably, beyond his expectations! I wonder when you people will stop trusting the first stranger with a glib tongue who professes Nationalist fervour and devotion. Whether you accept my estimate of him or not, you may be sure that his Bhakti for me is humbug,—as shown by the above newspaper incident,— and you must accept at least the facts I have given you and draw any conclusions that common sense may suggest to you."

So we now know what prompted the above letter to *The Hindu*.

In actual fact however, the spies had dogged the footsteps of the Swadeshis from the very beginning. Here is Moni¹ with

Smritikatha.

Page-219

his customary vivacious tale, of which I give just the gist in English translation. After the first three months in Shankar Chetty's house, when Moni and Bejoy were allowed by Sri Aurobindo to go out, they regularly set forth towards five in the evening for a stroll along the sea, walking up and down the pier for about an hour. A few days later they noticed two Bengalis doing the same. One of them was dressed Bengali style, the other in European style, in a silk suit. As Moni and Bejoy showed no inclination to get acquainted with them, the silk-suit sort of gate-crashed, and began to show great interest in the boys. He even lent a copy of Alexandre Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo*, which Moni read. But Moni and Bejoy were quite sure that he, Silk-suit, was a spy. Things would have gone on for how long nobody knows, but for the intervention of Bharati. "One evening, twilight had turned to dusk, just as I reached the entrance to the pier I saw the same Silk-suit with Bharati. Silk-suit with an ashen face was trying to get in a word from time to time. But Bharati, oh, goodness gracious, what an image he then presented! As though his soul had been possessed by the accumulated anger of all the Greek tragedies. Words flowed from him like a flood of lava. It seemed to me that Bharati was determined to pulverize his prey." Poor Silk-suit, he ended up weeping, weeping copiously. "Well, in the event, Silk-suit was totally devastated, and Bharati emerged victorious." Silk-suit and his companion disappeared for ever, no doubt with a grudging admiration for Bharati's address!

Nolini adds his bit. "I have said," referring to an earlier talk to the Ashram students, "that this cemetery that was Pondicherry had been infested by ghosts and goblins. These had a

Page-220

special category known ordinarily as spies. The word 'spy' carries with it, as you know, an association of all that is low and disgusting and unspeakable things of dark import. But did you know," said the Sanskritist, "that the word is pure Sanskrit? It was *spasa* in the old Vedic

language. The Vedic Rishi describes Indra as sending out these *spasa* to trace the movements of his enemies.... So, the Vedic gods had their spies, just as the modern British government had theirs, though of course there was bound to be a certain difference. These government spies tried to collect information as to who came to our houses, who were the people who met us, what places we frequented and how our guests spent their time. The British Indian police set up a regular station here, with a rented house and several permanent men. They were of course plainclothes men, for they had no right to wear uniform within French territory. They kept watch, as I have said, both on our visitors and guests as well as ourselves. Soon they got into a habit of sitting on the pavement round the corner next to our house in groups of three or four. They chatted away the whole day and only now and again took down something in their notebooks. What kind of notes they took we found out later on Strange records, these: the police gave reports all based on pure fancy, they made up all sorts of stories at their sweet will. As they found it difficult to gather correct and precise information, they would just fabricate the news." Should we call them 'spies' or 'rumourmongers' ? The Superintendent of Police, in charge of the British post in Pondicherry, was ... well, judge for yourself. "He was a Muslim," Nolini recalled, "named Abdul Karim if I remember aright, a very efficient and clever man, like our old friend Shamsul Alam

Page-221

of the Calcutta Police. We used to go to a friend's house very often, particularly myself. This gentleman too, we found, was a visitor there and we used to meet him as if by accident. He was very nice and polite in his manners. He even expressed a desire once to have Sri Aurobindo's *darsan* so that he might pay his respects. Sri Aurobindo did not refuse, he was given the permission. The gentleman arrived with a huge bouquet by way of a present and had the *darsan*."

But it was WS Iyer who drew the British CID's anger to himself, as he had proved to be too clever to land in their net. His activities in Pondicherry made the spies gnash their teeth in impotent rage. For, it was alleged that WS had trained Vanchi Iyer to shoot with a revolver. Vanchi was a married Brahmin from Shencottah who shot dead Ashe, the Collector of Tinnelvely on 17 June 1911. Then he committed suicide. The savage treatment meted out to patriots like Chidambaram Pillai had entered the soul of Indian youth like a hot iron.

However, it was poor Bharati who bore the brunt of the colonial rulers' ire. "Endless were the mischiefs played by the policemen," Bharati was to write later, "unbearable to the political

refugees—men like Mr. Aurobindo Chose, whose spiritual realisations were greatly hampered by the extraordinarily hard conditions brought upon them by the police activities. Imagine 200 policemen, constituting a fatly financed department by themselves, spending all their time in writing reports against you, stopping your letters and money orders, setting up rogues to rob your house or to make nocturnal attacks upon your homes in organised bands, concocting cases of conspiracy and murder against you, carefully, elaborately and circumstantially,

Page-222

thus bringing you to trials in French courts: trials which cost you much money and anxiety and which [might] have brought you most serious trouble but for the keen sense of justice on the part of certain French magistrates."

After the assassination of Ashe the British government put a lot of pressure on the French government. This time the French government in Pondicherry yielded. The 'Aliens Act' was resurrected. "But now the law was made stringently applicable to refugees from our own country." Nolini explained, "It was laid down that all foreigners, that is, anyone who was not a French citizen, wanting to come and stay here for some time must be in possession of a certificate from a high government official of the place from where he came, such as a Magistrate in British India, to the effect that he was a well-known person and that there was nothing against him; in other words, he must be in possession of a 'good-conduct' certificate." It does seem rather peculiar to me that Indians from one part of India could not seek refuge in another part of the country without a certificate of good-conduct from a foreigner! Never before had Indians been so shackled in their movements, not even when kings were at war with each other. In fact, it is with the advent of different European nations occupying different parts of India that all sorts of restrictions were imposed on Indians in their own country.

Well, the upshot of it all was that the 'foreigners' chose the alternative option. They had to register themselves with the French Police, and the registration form had to be signed by

¹ From Saroja Sundararajan's *Madras Presidency 1884-1915*.

Page-223

"five gentlemen of standing belonging to Pondicherry." Bharati collected the forms from the 'alien' patriots all duly filled in, and took these to Shankar Chetty. The latter went immediately into action. By the afternoon he procured all the necessary bureaucratic signatures. In this way all the 'aliens' were registered at the French police station. Do you know who "the five noble men who affixed their signatures" were? Nolini recorded their names. "1) Rassendren (the father of our Jules Rassendren), 2) De Zir Naidu, 3) Le Beau, 4) Shankar Chettiar (in whose house Sri Aurobindo had put up on arrival), 5) Murugesh Chettiar."

Those were the Five Good Men.

"The names of these five should be engraved in letters of gold," said a grateful Nolini. "They had shown on that occasion truly remarkable courage and magnanimity. It was on the strength of their signatures that we could continue to stay here without too much trouble."

Page-224

28

French Government's Headache

"Without too much trouble"? Let us see.

Bharati appreciated the "keen sense of justice on the part of certain French magistrates." We shall meet one of them by and by. Nolini went further: "In fact," he said, "the French Government had not been against us, indeed they helped us as far as they could. We were looked upon as their guests and as political refugees, it was a matter of honour for them to give us their protection. And where it is a question of honour, the French as a race are willing to risk anything," he said in the 1950s. "But at the same time, they had their friendship, the *entente cordiale*,

'Dilemma' ? Well... see for yourself. Here are some documents.

In point of fact, as soon as the freedom movement began in British India, the Franco-Indian government followed it with a watchful eye. After all, Chandernagore was but a stone's throw from Calcutta, which was then the hub of Nationalist movement triggered by the partition of

Bengal. It used to be said that when Calcutta catches a cold, the rest of India sneezes! As the Alipore Bomb Case trial brought to light, several accused

Page-225

were precisely from Chandernagore. The Pondicherry administration did not fail in its duty to keep Paris abreast of the political turmoil in India, including sending excerpts from Indian newspaper reports (kindly translated into French, of course) on the Anglo-Indian political front.

But when from 1908, owing to severe repression by the British, there began an influx of political refugees—'swadeshistes' in French parlance—the administration became more alert. Even more so as the British neighbour did not care to hide its annoyance. What was most galling to the English were the newspapers both Tamil and English published from Pondicherry and widely circulated in British territory, with articles thoroughly discrediting them, and news items in which English officials cut a sorry figure, because their conduct was truly disgusting. The papers *Dharmam* and *India* led the field in describing the economic evils arising out of British administration. We are reminded of Bharati's *India* bringing out sarcastic cartoons. There was (23 February 1909) one pictorial representation of a ship loaded with wheat going to England and a fat official speaking to three famine-stricken Indian peasants depicted as mere skeletons:

"English official: Protection, security, peace—we give you people all this.

"People: Sir, you give peace, but you take away food."

So upset was the Madras officialdom that the then French Governor Levecque thought it prudent to write on the subject to Albert Lebrun (1871-1950), the Minister of Colonies. We

Page-226

give here an English translation of one of the letters.¹

Pondicherry, February 24, 1909

"I am pleased to send you the enclosed copy of the correspondence exchanged between His Excellency the Governor of the Madras Presidency and the local administration regarding the publication at Pondicherry, in the Tamil newspaper *India*,

"Consulted by my predecessor about the nature of the legal action that could be taken against this paper, the Public Prosecutor informed me that since none of the incriminated articles oversteps the limits of criticism permitted by French law, he found it impossible to bring any action against the manager of *India*....

"I thought it my duty, Sir, to keep you informed of these facts, which reveal the English Government's preoccupation with the newspapers that criticize its administration or try to draw people to a party opposed to the Government of India.

"I may add that in our Establishment, the newspaper *India*

¹ It was through the great effort of our friend Patrice Marot that we obtained these documents kept in the French Government's archives at Aix-en-Provence. Patrice could procure them through the good offices of the then minister for National Education, Mr. Francois Bayrou. Our profuse thanks to both of them.

Page-227

train, without the English Government thinking it appropriate to stop its entry into British territory."

Signed: Levecque

That was before the arrival of Sri Aurobindo. When he came to Pondicherry the diplomatic relations between the French and the English became somewhat strained. In the meantime A. Martineau¹ had replaced Levecque as the governor of French India. Moni remembered him vividly. "A simple unostentatious man was the Governor Monsieur Martineau. He often went about in a rickshaw. That was then the only rickshaw in Pondicherry. By chance one day I saw the Governor riding in the rickshaw. He was dressed in a white trouser, a white coat buttoned up to the neck, a coat moreover with a patch on the back. A local passer-by commented with a shrug, '*Quel Gouverneur!*'"

"I am pleased to send you the translation of an article published on 20 September in *The Madras Times*

and the anti-English movement In its conclusion, the Madras newspaper explains that the territory of Pondicherry

¹ It was the same A. Martineau who edited the diaries of Francois Martin in two volumes.

now functions as a refuge to no less dangerous agitators and even to the most dangerous of all; but it hopes that, as in the mother country, they will not be allowed to carry on with their 'heinous' occupations.

"If I draw your attention to this article, it is so that you may precisely know, if necessary, how the possession of our French settlements in India can expose us to extremely delicate diplomatic difficulties; as for the assertion that the territory of Pondicherry offers refuge to 'the most dangerous of India's Nationalist leaders,' it is at least exaggerated. The Indian paper refers probably to ARABINDA GHOSE, a Hindu from the North who does at present stay in Pondicherry under the very special surveillance of the English secret police. But till now, it does not appear to me that ARABINDA CHOSE breaks the reserve his situation as a virtual political prisoner imposes on him. The Tamil newspaper *India*, of which I pointed out one or two very tendentious articles last month, seems even more discreet, since it has not been published for the past one month. At the moment, nothing therefore justifies the fears of the Madras newspaper; but I do not hide from myself that this does not imply peace or surrender from the Hindu nationalists, but simply a lull, a pause in the general struggle against all English influence."

Signed: A. Martineau

Unable to bear all the indignities and humiliations, the Colonial government had in mid-1910, finally imposed a ban not only on *India*

the British administration applied a tourniquet using its post office to stop—at least to delay—all or any remittance destined for Bharati. A 'civilized' strangulation.

Bharati himself describes briefly his tribulations during the past few years, in a letter to Ramsay MacDonald, then the leader of the British Labour Party. Bharati's letter¹ was published in *The Hindu*

"Dear Sir" wrote Bharati, "From the middle of the year 1905 to the month of August 1908, I was working as a special contributor to a weekly Tamil journal India by name-which was published in Madras. In the latter year, the Government of Madras thought it fit to prosecute that journal for sedition. "I was not the person responsible for the conduct of the journal and so, of course, they sent another man to gaol."In my lectures, poems and pamphlets I represented the advanced section of the party of constitutional reform. I quitted Madras a few days after the India prosecution commenced, as many of my friends informed me that keen disappointment was felt by some high-placed officials at

their inability to find something which would enable them to send me to prison and that the Police were trying to fabricate false evidence against me. An impartial and thorough student of the history of our times like yourself could not but be aware how mercilessly and deliberately the peaceful nationalist movement was suppressed in that year, thus making room for what neither the Government nor the

¹ Courtesy National Archives, Pondicherry, procured by Abhay Singh Nahar.

Nationalists really wanted, viz., terrorist violence.

"My public utility was thus unexpectedly checked—let me hope, temporarily—and I had no special love for the interesting role of a martyred victim to official blindness and police lies. I, therefore, sought refuge under the French flag in Pondicherry.

"After I came to Pondicherry, I was living as an independent journalist, not attached to any particular paper, but receiving money from various newspapers for signed articles. I challenge the Government of Madras to produce a single article signed by me which any impartial court could pronounce guilty under the law.

"... Subsequently the Pondicherry journals, with some of which I had already severed my connections, were proscribed by the British Government.

"In the month of July 1911. Collector Ashe of the Tinnelvely District was shot dead by a Brahmin, Vanchi Iyer, and, as though to encourage the inventive skill of the Madras Police, Vanchi Iyer committed suicide, leaving no clue whatsoever as to the possible abettors.

"The lower Police, to whom by the way, political motives and political crimes were, and still are, as strange and unfamiliar as Differential Calculus, at once imagined that the newspapermen who had been talking *sxvadeshi*

"During the trial of the Ashe murder case at the Madras High Court, I could get some glimpses into the sort of 'evidence' which made the police suspect me as a possible abettor.

Page-231

"It would appear that some of the so-called 'conspirators' —the charge of any conspiracy to murder Mr. Ashe, be it noted, broke down in the course of the trial and was abandoned by the Government—had with them copies of a harmless love poem and a social reform novelette written by me. It must also be mentioned that the particular men in whose possession these books were found were acquitted by the Court as nothing could be found to connect them with even the general 'conspiracy' on which charge some of their fellow-accused were ultimately sent to goal.

"The only charge which the Police could maintain against these acquitted men was that they were found in possession of books published by me! And, of course, I was guilty because they had my book! Q. E. D.

"With such wonderful 'evidence' in their hands, the Police got warrants issued against all the refugees in Pondicherry, making a noteworthy exception in the case of my friend, Mr. Aurobindo Ghose, evidently because they thought he was too powerful a personality to play such vulgar tricks against.

"Our names were proclaimed in British India and a reward of a thousand rupees was offered for the capture of any of us. I naturally wanted to protest.

"But, in the meanwhile, as a result of some mysterious agreement between the British and French Governments, a company of policemen, about 200

"... Later on, they said they were going to use personal violence against some of us and carry us away by force. A

few adventurous Sub-Inspectors tried to influence some local rowdies to injure us. In one case, at any rate, there was a midnight visit from the rowdies and my own house was looted and robbed in my absence by men who afterwards confessed the guilt and whom everybody knew to be the hirelings of the British spies.

"Later on, in the month of April 1912, two local informers who were proved to be in the pay of the British police stationed here—the same force that induced the Government of Madras to issue warrants against us on the charge of conspiracy—brought an accusation against myself and some other refugees charging us of a criminal conspiracy to murder all Europeans (of course, including the French).

"But the French Magistrates were not nervous fools and they could see, after due investigation, that the whole thing was a clumsy conspiracy engineered by the British Police, and *juge d'instruction* said this in so many words a number of times during the trial. ... For, the charges against us were sought to be established by devices as stupid and absurd as they were cruel and mean.

"So the British Police continued to stay here and I may add that they are still with us, although in a much lesser number than before, and are overwhelming us with the *kindness*

"The local [French] Governors have again and again expressed to me, in the course of personal interviews, their perfect satisfaction as to the legality and innocent nature of my private and public life here. I have been living in Pondicherry for more than five years now.

"And because a crime is enacted about three years after I

left British India, in some obscure corner of a far-off district where a previous Collector had incurred unpopularity [in the Tinnelvely Riots affair], the British Government, on the advice of the lower Police, issues a warrant against me on the charge of conspiracy, while the same charge

of conspiracy brought against me by the hirelings of the same Police people was, after a long and painfully sifting enquiry (including house searches and all that sort of thing) dismissed as frivolous and baseless by the local Magistrate who had a much better opportunity of ascertaining my life and character than the Government of Madras.

"I wish I had sufficient power of language to depict the whole absurdity and injustice of the thing. I have heard and read about many countries and I may record my sincere conviction that nowhere in the world is the sacredness of individual liberty more cynically ignored than in Madras and certain other Provinces of India."

Here Bharati has touched on several aspects of the thoughtless persecution to which he was subjected. This is not the whole of the story. Some missing parts are disclosed in the following chapters.

Page-234

29

The French League

Ashe, the Collector of Tinnelvely, was shot at close range on the platform of Maniyachi Railway Station in the same District on 17 June 1911. He later died. Vanchi Aiyer who shot Ashe, committed suicide. On his body was found a letter in Tamil which stated that every Indian was trying to drive out the English and that "3000 Madrasis had taken a vow to kill George V as soon as he landed in the country." Fourteen persons were implicated and went on trial at the Madras Court. The Special Bench, comprising Sir Charles Arnold White (Chief Justice), Justice Sankaran Nair, and Justice Ayling, pronounced its preliminary verdict on 15 February 1912. The judges were unanimous in rejecting the prosecution charge of abatement of murder against the fourteen, so on that count all of them were acquitted. But the three judges differed in their perception on the accusation against the fourteen for conspiring to wage a war against the King. At any rate, what the judges explained in their judgment was that the accused, mainly the first accused Nilakanta Brahmachari, was sent out from Pondicherry, and the conspiracy was hatched from the French territory; they quoted copiously from *India*,

Page-235

British government through its representative in Madras, mounted pressure on the French: nothing short of the extradition of the Indian political refugees would do. The 'Swadeshis' were naturally alarmed. They alerted their French friends in France. There followed quite an exchange of letters between the *Ligue Francaise pour la Defense (les Droits del 'Homme el du Citoyen*

September 22, 1911

"Minister, Sir,

"Already in the past I drew the attention of your predecessors to the too great condescension the administrative authorities of French India show towards the police and administration of English India. Quite recently, I conveyed to you a complaint from Mr. Srinivassacharya, a British Hindu (waiting for a naturalization), whose letters with the mention 'by French liners only,' are, it appears, arbitrarily opened by the administration of the English Post Office while in transit through English India.

"Some reliable correspondents, themselves notified by telegram, inform me that the English police are at the moment 'more and more interfering.' They may demand, it is feared, the expulsion of Messrs. Ayar [WS Aiyar] and Arabinda Gosh [sic], both members of the nationalist Hindu party, as well as other refugees whose names are not with us.

"Mr. Ayar, who lived in Paris, has always kept in Pondicherry the strictest reserve; he never took part in any plot and there is no reason why he could be troubled, our correspondents assure us. The same is true for Arabinda Gosh, a

Page-236

famous writer who is said to have given up all politic activities to confine himself to philosophical and religious speculation."

The president of the League went on to express the hope that the French authorities were indeed not thinking of expelling those having full trust in the hospitality of the French Republic. But in case some of the political refugees had indeed to be expelled, at least not to hand them over to the Anglo-Indian administration; and immediately to give explicit instructions about it to the officials concerned.

Well, the French Minister of Colonies did not tarry (quite unlike our present-day ministers, eh! Indian ministers don't even care to acknowledge receipt of a letter let alone give a reply ...) but sent a polite reply on 18 October, enclosing a copy of the last paragraph of his own letter dated 13 October to the Governor Duprat.

"... In case you would consider it indispensable to order some expulsions, you should however not take the expelled individuals to the British border, but see that they can reach a neutral territory."

Signed: A. Lebrun

However, Lebrun's complete letter to Governor Duprat brings into focus another angle on the subject of 'Swadeshistes.' This was 1911 and the British King, George V who had been crowned the previous year, was on the point of paying a visit with his queen Mary to the 'brightest jewel' of his empire. The French Foreign Office was all of a dither, and surely had talked to the Colonial Ministry.

Page-237

Paris, 13 October 1911

"While communicating in your letter n°46 C of 21st June, various documents relating to Swadeshism, your predecessor [A. Martineau] informed me of his reasons for taking the liberty not to carry out the wishes of the Viceroy of India, who requested searches and seizure of swadeshist documents in the offices of the newspaper *Dharman*, in *Pondicherry*.

"I am pleased to inform you that, whatever the nature and importance of the reasons Mr. Martineau put forward, it seems to me inadmissible that the local administration should deny the Anglo-Indian government the assistance it asks in order to check activities that result in crimes and murders of a very dubious political nature.

"The British government would be entitled to blame us for an attitude so contrary to good neighbourly relations and far from circumspect, because of the difficulties we might experience on our own territory on account of Swadeshist agitators.

"I therefore deem it my duty to draw your attention to the necessity of lending the widest support to the British authorities of India in suppressing revolutionary activities that jeopardize our own domination in Hindustan."

By return of post, the president of the French League sent off another missive to the Colonial minister, first thanking him for the instructions he had given to Governor Duprat concerning expulsion of the Hindu nationalists. Then again he expressed his worry at the continued activities of the Anglo-Indian police in French territory.

Page-238

19 October 1911

"Minister, Sir,

"Additional information received from credible correspondents, which I take the liberty to communicate to you, will show you that not only is there no need to expel Messrs. Aiyar and Arabinda Gosh and their friends, but that we have to check the intrusion of the Anglo-Indian Police into French territory. Five inspectors and around twenty constables, all belonging to the C.I., surround Mr. Aiyar's house and follow him wherever he goes; I am told there are in Pondicherry town up to two hundred constables. Mr Aiyar, in alarm, met the Governor of Pondicherry, who assured him that no decision would be made without thorough investigation.

"However, the constables, scattered all over the town, spread rumours detrimental to the refugees. They say that those Swadeshis cooperate with the party of Mr. Gaston Pierre, teach its members how to make explosives, and make explosives themselves; they allege that the murder of Ashe was prepared in Pondicherry and that one of the accused in the Tinneveli affair is hidden in Pondicherry at Mr. Aiyar's. I understand that all these allegations *are false*

"Those are, Sir, extremely serious facts: the presence of a large number of British constables in Pondicherry would be dangerous not only for the Swadeshis who sought asylum from the French Republic, but for the security of the town, where they may instigate unrest."

Page-239

It was Lebrun who had underlined the words are false besides putting a question mark against them. But promised to keep in touch with the League.

The minister kept his word. He communicated to the League's president that Governor Duprat had assured him the Swadeshis were never harassed by the British Secret Police— "which is momentarily and exceptionally tolerated on our territory owing to the visit of the English sovereigns to India."

Governor Duprat in fact brushed aside the French League's worry and taking liberty with truth gave a clean chit to the Anglo-Indian police.

"... At no time have the Swadeshis suspected by the British Secret Police, which is momentarily and exceptionally tolerated on our territory, really been harassed by that police. I add that the French police, which keep their own watch on the refugees, have not so far informed me of any specific misdeed that could be held against them."

In the same letter dated 10th January 1912, the governor added that the secret police were to leave the French territory any day now, because "the British monarchs have today sailed to Europe from Bombay."

Well, King George V and Queen Mary left the shores of India after announcing that the Partition of Bengal—the settled and irrevocable fact—was now revoked, and that Bengal was again one, undivided. Everyone in the government heaved a sigh of relief, hoping fervently that now the terrorist menace had no more reason to exist.

At least so thought the French government.

He Knows Latin, He Knows Greek

Though Governor Duprat gave a certificate of good conduct to the British secret police stationed in Pondicherry, in reality its conduct was not all that good. Even if the French government thought that with the Bengal Partition undone the threat from violence would subside, the British

never thought so. That is why when they saw that the French were disinclined to expel the Swadeshi refugees from their territory, they tried to provoke some incidents there. After all, it is an English saying that 'all's fair in love and war,' isn't it? And hadn't they declared war on the Swadeshis?

Let us note that for the Anglo-Indian bureaucrats the hard core or 'the inner ring' (to use their words) of the extremists consisted of 'Arabindo Ghose' and his four or five 'satellites': Bharati, WS Aiyar, Srinivasachari, and Ramaswami. The Pondicherry administration shared the same idea. So the situation of the Swadeshis was quite critical as we can now learn by piecing together data from a variety of sources.

There was a father-and-son pair, Devanayagam and Mayuresan, who were spies in the pay of the British police. They made a good living by giving cooked-up information to their paymasters over the years. But like all employees they too wanted

Page-141

their pay enhanced which the chief of the secret police put off with mere promises of better payment 'next time.' So with hopes of better reward the two informers went to the French police. It was March 1912. They told the tale of a great conspiracy by the Swadeshis, not only against the British but against the French too, and to that end they, the Swadeshis, had formed a secret society and were hatching a plot to overthrow the colonial European governments. As proof they asked the French police to search the houses of the leaders of the Indian political refugees.

But the morning before the police could begin their search when the maid of V. V. S. Aiyar went to fetch water from the well she was shocked. "The back side wall of Aiyar's house," wrote Srinivasachari in his diary, "which had fallen owing to recent heavy rains allowed any outsider to have easy access to a small well in the backyard. Into this well was thrown the hermetically sealed jar with a weight attached to it so that it may remain sunk till the French police come and examine the well on their complaint.... He [Aiyar] was living in that house just as before with his wife and children and the servant was attending to her work as usual. The jar must have been put into the well the previous night when all were asleep. At daybreak when it was yet dim the servant as usual went to the well and threw her bucket into it to draw water holding the other end of the rope. The bucket when filled with water went down and hit the jar which getting loose

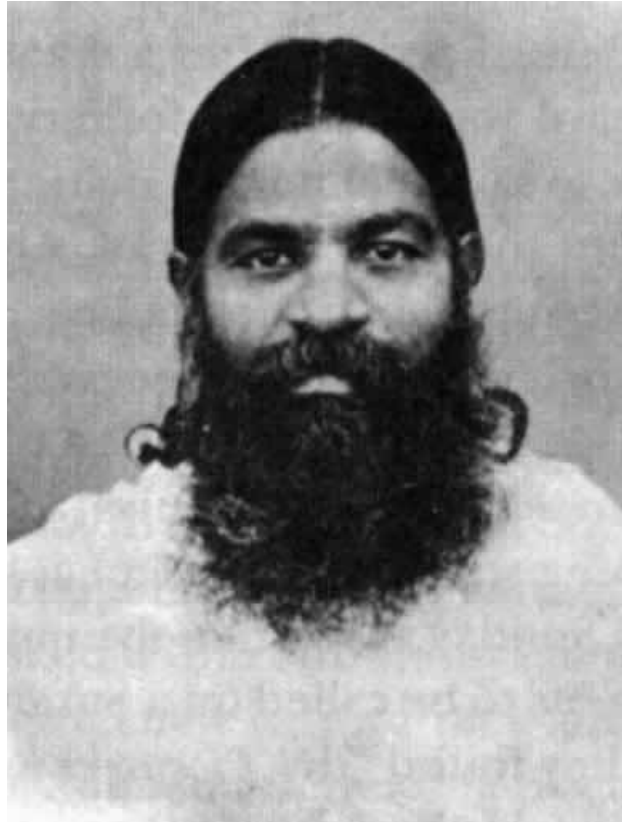
from the weight attached to it rose up to the level of the water and began to float visibly. The servant woman seeing it come up suddenly and float was taken aback and took it to be a child.

¹ Reproduced in *Sri Aurobindo Archives and Research*, December 1985.

"She ran to Aiyar and told him her suspicions. He went to the well and found something floating over the water. He got into the well and took hold of the object and finding it to be a jar, brought it to his room." Naturally enough he opened it. After a good look he closed it carefully, and when Bharati came they conferred and went to the house of Srinivasachari with the jar and the carefully packed contents. After conferring amongst themselves, *V. V. S. Aiyar*

Bharati went to Sri Aurobindo to

get his advice. Sri Aurobindo told him to inform the French police. The three wrote to Governor Duprat asking for an interview. It was granted. The three then went to the governor with the porcelain jar, told him how it was found and where, and placed the contents before the governor. There was a "receipt book with counterfoils, the rubber-stamp facsimile of my signature with a pad and some printed papers," noted Srinivasachari. Among the many seditious papers the jar contained, "was a photo of a temple of Kali with the heads of Europeans separated from their bodies scattered before the image made as offerings to her." There were several copies of such photos. Also included was a card written in Bengali, supposedly issued from the Mymensingh Sadhana Samaj. Sri Aurobindo studied it, and pointed out the many mistakes committed by a non-



Bengali writer. After a detailed analysis he concluded that the card was a 'clumsy forgery' After a good look, the governor also said that it was a matter for the police to enquire and find out the culprit. Bharati, Aiyar and Srinivasachari accordingly went to the French police, delivered the jar with the contents, and preferred the necessary complaint.

"The next Saturday all the three of us, Aiyar, Bharati and myself went on Srinivasachari, "received summons from the Magistrate to be present at his court on the next day which was a Sunday at seven in the morning. It looked somewhat strange to us to be called on a Sunday at such a hour." When they went they found "the *Procureur de la Republique* [public prosecutor], one M. Nadau was there and we were called in." They were then told about the complaint by 'two French citizens.' They were also told the names of the complainants. Then they were told that a few policemen will go with them "immediately and search our houses to find out if there are incriminating documents or other articles there. When we said we had no objection, a batch of French Indian policemen were sent with us to search our houses. In my house the search began at about 10 A.M. and lasted till 2 to 3 P.M. In Bharati's house, it was over by

midday. In Aiyar's house it went on till 4 P.M., and the only objectionable article that the police confiscated in his house was the Nepalese kukree that I had lent him for the Ayudha Puja worship during the Dusserah. Sri Aurobindo's house was also searched towards the evening by two European officers from the Magistrate's court who on entering his house told him 'Nous sommes venus pour en montrer l'inanité' (we have come to show its futility) and the search there was over within an

hour. The police report was that nothing incriminating was found in the houses searched."

This is how Purani, who was not present, pieced together the incident: "The investigating magistrate who came to search Sri Aurobindo's house was one M. Nandot [sic] who arrived with the chief of police and the public prosecutor. He found practically no furniture in the house, only a few trunks, a table and a chair. On opening the drawers of the table he found only books and papers. On some of the papers Greek was written. He was very much surprised and asked if Sri Aurobindo knew Greek. When he came to know that he knew Latin, Greek and other European languages, his suspicion waned, yielding place to a great respect for Sri Aurobindo. He invited Sri Aurobindo to meet him in his chambers later and Sri Aurobindo complied with his request."

Nolini who was a witness to these events has left us a vivid remembrance. The affair of the police search took place in N°10 Rue Saint-Louis, known as 'Raghavan House.' We will go there later for a fuller visit.

"Those who tried most to stop Sri Aurobindo from settling down and were ever on the alert to move him from his seat were the British authorities. The British Government in India could never accept that Sri Aurobindo had come away to French territory for carrying on his yoga. Religion and spirituality, these to them were a mere subterfuge. They thought they knew what Sri Aurobindo was—the one most dangerous man in all India, the source of all the trouble. Pondicherry was the place from where were supplied the necessary instructions and advice and perhaps even the pistols and other weapons. Here was the

brain-centre of the Indian independence movement. That Sri Aurobindo had been the mainspring of Indian independence they had been told by their life-instinct, although the superficial sense in which they understood it was not obviously the whole truth."

Exactly as the British secret police had decided to kidnap V. V. S. Aiyar, so did they decide to kidnap Sri Aurobindo "in a car with the help of one of the chiefs of the local *bandes*. We had to patrol all night the house in which Sri Aurobindo lived, lest there should be a sudden attack_____"

"Nevertheless," went on Nolani, "force having failed they now tried fraud. An attempt was made to frame a trumped-up charge at law. Some of the local 'ghouls' were made to help forge the documents—some photographs and maps and charts along with a few letters—which were to prove that we had been engaged in a conspiracy for dacoity and murder. The papers were left in a well in the compound of one of our men. The French police had even entered Sri Aurobindo's residence for a search. But when their Chief found there were Latin and Greek books lying about on his desk, he was so taken aback that he could only blurt out, '*Il sait du latin, il sait du grec!*'— 'He knows Latin, he knows Greek!'—and then he left with all his men. How could a man who knew Latin and Greek ever commit any mischief?"

When the father-and-son pair failed in their efforts to convince the French police about the sinister designs of the Swadeshis, they panicked. Here is a letter from the examining Magistrate, M. Nadau to the Attorney General.

Page-146

10 July 1912

'Sir,

"During the month of May, there was no preliminary investigation for two reasons:

"1. The house searches at the Swadeshis' (on 4 and 7 April) and their interrogations showed that they did not form a secret society and did not meet clandestinely.

"2. [...] Since then, i.e., since the beginning of June, I ordered the documents seized in their houses to be returned to the accused: letters, newspapers and manuscripts, none of them being connected with the alleged offence.

"On 6 and 7 June, I ordered a confrontation between the informer Deivanayagachetty and the Swadeshis.

"The accusation collapsed completely; following our searches of 4 and 7 April based on Deivanayagachetty's indications, which we had good reason to regard as suspect, all information coming from him *was proved to be false*.

"In their defence, the Swadeshis deposited a certain number of documents coming from Mr. Mayoressim, the informer Deivanayagam's son, proving the said Mayoressim's connection with the British police.

"This person had handed over to the Swadeshis his correspondence with the English police and confessed to the offers this police had made him in case he agreed to fabricate some affair against the refugees _____

"In short, all our suspicions about the unworthiness of Messrs. Deivanayagachetty and Mayoressim stood confirmed. It was established that the Swadeshis were the victims of a slanderous denunciation (I remind you the British police has offered a 1000-rupee reward—or 1670 Fr.—for the

Page-147

arrest of each one of them). Messrs. Deivanayagachetty and Mayoressim took flight on 7 June. It was therefore impossible to determine, at least from their own confession, the exact nature of their relationship with the French police. Nevertheless, seeing that Deivanayagachetty and his son are from Pondicherry and live there, that neither has a respectable occupation and both must be well known to the local police, one may wonder how the local police could thoughtlessly and blindly receive their denunciation and go so far as to buy from them some obviously fake pieces of evidence.

"In conclusion, concerning the Swadeshis I am of the opinion that we must declare the charge as dismissed, nothing being left of it.

"For the Examining Magistrate" *Signed*: Nadau

On 3 July Sri Aurobindo wrote to Motilal Roy on the above episodes.

"The case brought against the Swadeshis (no one in this household was included in it although we had a very charmingly polite visit from the *Parquet* [Public Prosecutor's office] and *Juge d'Instruction* [Examining Magistrate] has collapsed into the nether regions and the complainant and his son have fled from Pondicherry and become, like ourselves 'political refugees' in Cuddalore."

From Cuddalore, the informers wrote to the Public Prosecutor and to the Governor on 8 June a complaint against Magistrate Nadau. In it they told "the Governor that Nadau sided with the Swadeshis and was about to beat them during the enquiry for preferring a false complaint," Srinivasachari

Page-148

said with satisfaction. "To dispose of this new complaint the Governor had to call for an explanation from Nadau who had to defend himself by saying that it was utterly false and had to refer him to us who were the only persons present in his room at that time. So the poor investigating officer, Bharati said later on, had to cite us the accused as witnesses to get himself cleared of a false charge brought by the complainants against him, in a departmental enquiry." Sri Aurobindo had a good laugh when Bharati narrated the comical episode to him.

Srinivasachari summed up the embarrassment of the British secret police. "On the other side the situation had not been so funny as it had become to us. The complainants had become

a burden to the British secret police If they are caught and

prosecuted by the French police they will pitilessly expose all the intrigues, machinations of the British police there [in Pondicherry] and the inducements that they are constantly offering to men of their stamp to bring the Swadeshis to trouble. Their concoction of the supposed conspiracy, in the present case will be laid bare in public. The photos of the dismembered heads of Europeans, the receipt-book, the rubber-stamp facsimile and the way in which the hermetically sealed jar was dumped in the well in Aiyar's house would all be mercilessly exposed. Even their attempt to kidnap Aiyar may come out."

Governor Duprat, in his report of 18 June 1912 "to the Minister for Colonies regarding various complaints against Mr. Nadau, Examining Magistrate at Pondicherry," emphatically stated, "I am

forced to conclude along with the Public Prosecutor that this allegation against Mr. Nadau cannot be maintained."

Page-149

31

The Anglo-Indian Press

Such then was the fixed idea of all British Police, of the entire administration, I dare say, from top to bottom, that 'Aurobindo Ghose' was a dangerous man plotting terrorism against Europeans and their assassination.

The Anglo-Indian press spread that idea with utmost enthusiasm, for, were those papers not the mouthpiece of the government? So, like a circle of foxes howling at the moon, those newspapers howled at the Nationalists.

We shall never really measure the extent of influence the media wielded. On the one side were Nationalist papers like *Kesari* of Maharashtra, *Bande Mataram* and *Yugantar* of Bengal, *India* of Tamil Nadu, and many others, all of which made Indians aware of the myriad injustices practised by a foreign government, and awakened them to their rich inheritance. Arrayed on the other side was the Anglo-Indian press which abhorred anything Indian. These newspapers, I am sure, were, the precursors to the modern Indian 'secularists,' and given to denying everything that was beyond them. Tooth and nail they tried to thwart India's progress which the Nationalists craved to bring about. We have yet to gauge the extent of damage the Anglo-

Page-250

Indian press inflicted upon the Indian consciousness.

A typical Anglo-Indian newspaper was the *Madras Times*. It led the chorus of hysterics over the activities of the Swadeshis which, if one were to go by it, led to the assassination of Ashe. Wildly piling conjecture upon hearsay, the paper targeted Sri Aurobindo. The following excerpts from his two letters published in *The Hindu* in July 1911 will help readers to draw their own conclusions.

"An Anglo-Indian paper of some notoriety," Sri Aurobindo wrote on 20 July 1911, "both for its language and views, has recently thought fit to publish a libelous leatherette and subsequently an article openly arraigning me as a director of Anarchist societies, a criminal and an assassin. Neither the assertions nor the opinions of the *Madras Times* carry much weight in themselves and I might have passed over the attack in silence. But I have had reason in my political career to suspect that there are police officials on the one side and propagandists of violent revolution on the other hand who would only be too glad to use any authority for bringing in my name as a supporter of Terrorism and assassination. Holding it inexpedient under such circumstances to keep silence, I wrote to the paper pointing out the gross inaccuracy of the statements in its leatherette, but the *Times* seems to have thought it more discreet to avoid the exposure of its fictions in its own columns. I am obliged therefore to ask you for the opportunity of reply denied to me in the paper by which I am attacked," wrote Sri Aurobindo with barbed sarcasm.

"The Anglo-Indian Journal asserts, (1) that I have adopted the saffron robes of the ascetic, but 'continue to direct' the

movements of the Anarchist society from Pondicherry; (2) that one Balkrishna Lele, a Lieutenant of Mr. Tilak, is in Pondicherry for the same purpose; (3) that the most dangerous of the Madras Anarchists (it is not clear whether one or many) is or are at Pondicherry; (4) that a number of seditious journals are being openly published from French India; (5) that revolutionary literature is being manufactured and circulated from Pondicherry, parts of which the police have intercepted, but the rest has reached its destination and is the cause of the Ashe murder."

Point by point Sri Aurobindo refuted the charges.

"It is untrue that I am masquerading or have ever masqueraded as an ascetic; I live as a simple householder practising Yoga without Sannyas just as I have been practising it for the last six years. It is untrue that any Balkrishna Lele or any Lieutenant of Mr. Tilak is at Pondicherry; nor do I know, I doubt if anybody in India except the *Madras Times* knows, of any Mara-tha politician of that name and description. The statement about Madras Anarchists is unsupported by facts or names and therefore avoids any possibility of reply. It is untrue that any seditious journal is being published from French India. The paper *India was* discontinued in April, 1910, and has never been issued since. The only periodicals published from Pondicherry are the Tamil

Dharma and *Karmayogin* which, I am informed, do not touch politics; in any case, the harmless nature of their contents, is proved by the free circulation allowed to them in British India even under the rigours of the Press Act. As to the production of revolutionary literature, my enquiries have satisfied me,—and I think the investigations of the police must

Page-252

have led to the same result,—that the inflammatory Tamil pamphlets recently in circulation cannot have been printed with the present material resources of the two small presses owned by Nationalists. In the nature of things nobody can assert the impossibility of secret dissemination from Pondicherry or any other particular locality. As to the actuality, I can only say that the sole publications of the kind that have reached me personally since my presence here became public, have either come direct from France or America or once only from another town in this Presidency. This would seem to show that Pondicherry, if at all guilty in this respect, has not the monopoly of the trade. Moreover, though we hear occasionally of active dissemination in some localities of British India, the residents of Pondicherry are unaware of any noticeable activity of this kind in their midst. Finally, the impression which the *Times* seeks sedulously to create that Pondicherry is swarming with dangerous people from British India, ignores facts grossly. To my knowledge, there are not more than half a dozen British Indians here who can be said to have crossed the border for political reasons. So much for definite assertions; I shall refer to the general slander in a subsequent letter."

Sri Aurobindo at once proceeded to refute the 'general slander' made by the *Madras Times*.

"In continuation of my last letter," he wrote, "I proceed to deal with the allegation that I 'continue to direct Anarchist activities from Pondicherry,' an allegation self-condemned by the gross implied imputation of a charge from which I have been exonerated by British tribunals. Here too a simple statement of facts will be the best answer." Sri Aurobindo declared,

Page-253

"My political conduct has been four times under scrutiny by different tribunals and each time the result has been favourable to me."

After briefly listing the trials he had had to undergo at the hands of the Anglo-Indian government, and how each time the judges acquitted him, he said, "After so many ordeals, I may claim that up to my cessation of political activity my public record stands absolved from blame."

Sri Aurobindo then gave the reasons for his 'cessation of political activity' Always factual and often sarcastic, he wrote:

"I left British India in order to pursue my practice of Yoga undisturbed either by my old political connections or by the harassment of me which seemed to have become a necessity of life to some police officials. Ceasing to be a political combatant, I could not hold myself bound to pass the better part of my life as an undertrial prisoner disproving charge after charge made on tainted evidence too lightly accepted by prejudiced minds. Before discontinuing activity myself I advised my brother Nationalists to abstain under the new conditions from uselessly hampering the Government experiment of coercion and reform and wasting their own strength by the continuance of their old activities, and it is well known, to use the language of the *Madras Times*, that I have myself observed this rule to the letter in Pondicherry. I have practised an absolute political passivity. I have discountenanced any idea of carrying on propaganda from British India, giving all who consulted me the one advice, 'Wait for better times and God's will.' I have strongly and repeatedly expressed myself against the circulation of inflammatory literature and against all wild ideas and reckless methods as a stumbling

Page-254

block in the way of the future resumption of sound, effective and perfect action for the welfare of the country. These facts are a sufficient answer to the vague and reckless libel circulated against me. I propose, however, with your indulgence, to make shortly so clear an exposition of my views and intentions for the future as will leave misrepresentation henceforward no possible character but that of a wanton libel meriting only the silence of contempt."

We don't know whether or not he made that 'exposition' he intended. But what is certain is that the British Government refused to believe him. It resorted to all sorts of underhand tricks to discredit the Swadeshis, as we have already seen, and shall see some more.

Page-255

Two Beautiful Hours

"I spent two very beautiful hours exploring India's ancient philosophical ideas with an interlocutor of exceptional intelligence," wrote Madame Alexandra David-Neel to her husband Philippe Neel in a letter dated 27 November 1911.

We have already met her a few times.¹ The reader perhaps knows that she had set out from Europe in August 1911 promising her understanding husband Philippe Neel that she would be back with him within eighteen months. In actuality it became fourteen years, for it was in May 1925 that the couple saw each other again. During those fourteen years Alexandra had covered thousands of kilometres through the Far East, a good part of Central Asia, not to speak of South Asia, and crisscrossed the Indian subcontinent. On 18 November 1911 she reached Mandapam via Rameswaram from Colombo. From there she took the train to Pondicherry, then to Madras. She took her lodgings with the Theosophical Society at Adyar. At Madras that was the cheapest she could find, because "any hotel worth the name asked 8 Rs. a day" ("equivalent to 13 F 60," she noted)

¹ *Mother's Chronicles*, Book III, chapters 25 and 28; Book IV, chapter 3. What follows is from her book, *Journal de Voyage*.

and she added charitably that Madras was a big city and it was the tourist season. At the Theosophical Society they offered to lodge her for Rs. 25 a week (which was 42 F 50 and came to 6 F a day, she told Philippe). She was also hopeful of getting there vegetarian food "which is sure to suit me better than preserved meat which is the main ingredient in the hotels of this country." Her description of Adyar is quite entertaining. The villa she occupied reminded her of Paris' "Trianons with its Louis XVI colonnades. Inside too it is Versailles: white rooms, in rotunda, white paneling, doors fitted with small squares of glass." She was very pleased, I think, with her room which measured "about 8x6 with a ceiling 6 metres high or almost." There followed a lengthy description of the things around her. She was quite an adept at giving detailed descriptions. It should not surprise us. She had been a student at the Sorbonne, at the College de France, learned English in England, she had taken courses in Oriental languages, so naturally she had a good grasp of languages. And, of course, an observant eye. An eye moreover which never

missed an incongruity, such as the ascetic's cot "like a jewel among the commonplace of English furniture."

It was from her cosy villa at Adyar that Alexandra was writing to Philippe, describing her adventures. "Adventures ... I promised you adventures and I have a lot to tell you."

Which brings us back to the subject close to our hearts.

"First I went to Pondicherry. There too I had a taste of Versailles. A dead town that was 'something' and remembers it, stiff in its dignity, irreproachably clean, hiding under impeccable whitewash the cracks of the old town...." She was rather disgusted with the lack of cleanliness in her hotel room. But

Page-257

luckily the weather was fine and the whole afternoon "I could be out driving in a kind of nameless prehistoric contraption, pushed by four blacks." The 'contraption' was the same poussepousse Moni earlier described to us. She took photos of it to send to Philippe.

"In the evening," Alexandra continued, "I had a conversation with a Hindu, about whom I don't think I ever spoke to you because we never corresponded, but knew him only through friends who spoke highly of him." The friends were Paul and Mirra Richard. "I passed two very beautiful hours exploring the ancient philosophical ideas of India with an interlocutor of rare intelligence, belonging to that uncommon tribe that I like so much (for which I have a fellow-feeling): the rational mystics. I am really grateful to the friends who recommended me to look up this man. He thinks with such clarity, there is such lucidity in his reasoning, such radiance in his look that you are left with the impression of having contemplated the genius of India as you dream of it after reading the most sublime pages of Hindu philosophy."

The 'Hindu of Pondicherry' seems to have left a deep impress on her mind. Writing to her husband on 19 December from Madras, Alexandra again referred to him. "... As for me? I no longer know. One loses the sense of things in the

ambience I am living in One of these days I am going to

write to the Hindu of Pondicherry about whom I spoke to you and who has a keen power of analysis and a critical turn of brain. I shall tell him, reminding him of the experiences he himself

is pursuing with such a care for a meticulous observation." Alexandra lists her whimsical questions. "I think that the question

Page-258

will make him laugh, as he had so charmingly laughed the day I told him about similar things. There you are then, not knowing any longer whether you are becoming so fabulously wise or going mad."

Mad? She had already found out who in reality were mad. "From the sublime to the ludicrous," said Napoleon, "is but one step."

Hardly had she alighted from the train that brought her to Madras from Pondicherry and had taken but a step or two, when she was brought up short. Who was it waiting for her on the platform? Let us hear from her. She thought the perfectly dressed Englishman was from Adyar. Was he?

"I knew this philosopher had a political stand which displeased the British, but naturally, not wanting to be indiscreet, I did not broach the subject. Besides we were soaring too high above politics." Ruefully she added, "However, while we soared, others were content to remain on the ground ... these others being the English police," she said in her letter of 27th November. "When I arrived in Madras the chief of the C.I.D. was waiting for me in person. A very correct and polite man for all that, he asked me why I had gone to see that suspected gentleman in his house. I was not surprised having expected my visit to become known. What's more, I did not at all hide it."

She told the chief of Police, "I had heard of Aurobindo Ghose as a distinguished philosopher, and it is as such that I wished to see him and have a talk with him."

" 'He certainly is a remarkable scholar,' conceded the chief of Police, 'but a dangerous man. We owe him the recent assassination of Mr. Ashe.'"

Page-259

"I never heard of Mr. Ashe.... I merely replied that it seems to me quite improbable that the savant, who discoursed so knowledgeably on philosophical questions, could be an assassin.

" 'He certainly did not kill Mr. Ashe himself,' retorted my interrogator. 'He got him killed.' "

"Ah, good heavens! How all their agitation seems petty and paltry, their scare and their distress! And what a different atmosphere there was in the silent house at Pondicherry where the breath of things eternal blew, where in the peaceful evening, near the window opening onto the rather funereal gardens of that fallen town, we looked beyond life and death. And how he seems to view with superb disdain the cot of the ascetic— which beckons to me even now—and how he promises dreams other than those that haunt the poor feverish brains of these lunatics!"

Poor Alexandra! This was not the last she was to hear about the 'Hindu of Pondicherry' A few days later when she went to lunch with the governor of Madras, "I was seated at the right of His Excellency, who, of course, spoke again about my visit to Pondicherry."

She left Madras soon after and went to Calcutta. From there Alexandra wrote to Philippe on 14 February 1912. "... This morning I have been to the *Government House*.... Naturally, there also they knew that I had been to Pondicherry and met Aurobindo Ghose. I had no idea that he was such an important man. Had I known I would have tried to make him speak on politics to find out what kind of ideas could germinate in

¹ See *L'Inde où j'ai vécu*.

the brain of a Vedantic mystic. But though I knew that he had undergone a political trial, I did not know why exactly. This morning the private secretary to the Viceroy was telling me, 'I think he finds our civilization, our education, and all our modern progress *godless*, that is why he repudiates them.' Could well be. Hindus view things and the world from another angle than we do. Had not our interview been limited to a few twilight hours in that monastic house at Pondicherry, I perhaps would have discovered where, for that brain, lies the 'flaw' in our materialist Europeans ... and could have made an interesting study of a mentality foreign to Europe. Yes, it could have been interesting.... But, bah! maybe I owe a beautiful memory to the fact of not being sufficiently informed about him. False, illusory, no doubt, as most beautiful memories are—that of the vast empty room, near the window open onto the pale purple evening sky, Aurobindo Ghose and I speaking of the supreme Brahman, of eternal existence and, for a

moment crossing the threshold beyond which cease life and death, living the dream of the Upanishads...."

33

The Quest

"Living the dream of the Upanishads ..."

"I left British India in order to pursue my practice of Yoga undisturbed," Sri Aurobindo stated in his 21 July 1911 letter to *The Hindu*. It was indeed a statement of fact, like the fact that the sun rises in the east. The British bureaucrats could be as sceptical as you like! After all the bureaucracy, British or otherwise, is notorious for its stationary ideas and fixed ways. Quite unlike the character who frequently said, "My ideas changed, so I changed my ways!" as portrayed by our Bengali poet D. L. Roy.

In point of fact, all those who had known Sri Aurobindo during the intense political period of his life, and even those who had but met him in passing (Nevinson, for instance), were aware of the Yogi in him.

Sri Aurobindo also mentioned that he was practising yoga for the last six years, which should take us to 1905. He was evidently thinking of 'conscious yoga.' Because let us recollect that with his first step on Indian soil he had begun to get experiences. Earlier still, from his Darjeeling days. Let us recapitulate some of the main experiences.¹

¹ Described in *Mother's Chronicles*, Books Four and Five.

- In Darjeeling: "I saw suddenly a great darkness rushing into me and enveloping me and the whole universe."

- In London. The vision of the Deity of Britain's destiny welcoming him, then the Sannyasin who gave him the mantra of Indian culture. So he skipped the riding test of I.C.S.

- "A vast calm descended upon him at the moment when he stepped first on Indian soil ... in fact with his first step on the Apollo Bunder in Bombay" (6 February 1893).

- The experience of the 'Godhead' when he "sat behind the dance of Danger's hooves" at Baroda.

- The sense of the Infinite, 'Adwaita,' which he experienced at the Shankaracharya Hill at Kashmir, or

- the invasion of the Infinite he felt when he stood atop the Parvati hill near Pune.

- Standing before a temple of goddess Kali at Karnali, looking at the sculpture, unexpectedly, mysteriously he saw "a Face that looks into yours."

- Sri Aurobindo began his practice of pranayama in 1903, if we recall aright. This practice opened up some remarkable faculties in him:

a) he felt a sort of electricity all around him;

b) a rapid flow of poetry;

c) his "mind began to work with great illumination and power" as did his memory.

But pranayama did not "carry me far."

It was in January 1908 that Sri Aurobindo met Lele, the Tantric Yogi. Results:

a) "My mind became full of an eternal silence—it is still there."

Page-263

b) "In seven days I got the Nirvanic experience ..." otherwise called the silent Brahman Consciousness.

It was, said Sri Aurobindo, his "first positive spiritual experience and it made possible all the rest of the sadhana." That his sadhana was progressing at a pace can be deduced from his letters to his wife, Mrinalini Devi.

- The experience of the Cosmic Consciousness, or the Vasudeva experience in the Alipore jail.

Now, any one of these experiences would have been fulfilment enough for any individual. It is common knowledge in India that some of these experiences come at the end of a lifelong sadhana. Attaining the Brahman Consciousness is said to take many lives of intense sadhana. But, "Nirvana in my liberated consciousness turned out to be ... a first step towards the complete thing, not the sole true attainment possible or even a culminating finale." Normally, the ultimate aim of most Yogis is the attainment of the Cosmic Consciousness, where all beings, all objects are perceived as the Divine. This is a cherished realization.

Now, if 'Arabindo Babu' had these personal realizations while in Bengal, what need had he to go to such a far-off place as Pondicherry?

But we have seen enough of 'Arabindo Babu' to know that he was never driven by personal ambition nor did he ever care for personal achievement. When he began his political career it was India he looked at. India the Mother. He saw how the colonial government was sucking the blood of the Mother. His legitimate revolt against the entrenched British Government was to free his country from foreign domination.

So too now. When he achieved those spiritual realizations

Page-264

he looked at the Earth. Why does she have to perpetually remain in such dark ignorance when so many luminous Beings had brought illuminating Lights? Why this constant suffering when she was supposed to have been created for Joy? Some of the predecessors had given hints and a few had pointed out the causes of her illness and had prescribed some palliatives. But no one, so far as we know, had ever tried to cure her once and for all. Where was the panacea that could cure the Universe? Restore to the Earth her lost health? Give her back her youth? Eternal youth full of the joy of life? In a word, what *is*

'Arabindo Babu' became 'Sri Aurobindo.'

Thus began his Quest.

He repeatedly said that the Yoga he was doing was not for himself. No, he had no need for a personal salvation: "My Sadhana was not done for myself but for the earth-consciousness."

It was an unimaginable task that he had undertaken. Eyeing the present Man he had doubts as to whether Man could really be Nature's last word. He went searching for the secret of the birth of a new humanity. He had to find that secret, find his way to the Secret, and prepare the earth-consciousness for the Age that seeks to come.

Did Sri Aurobindo succeed in the stupendous task?

That his search was crowned with success is amply clear from his writings, and from Mother's conversations with Satprem. Sri Aurobindo and Mother together have given us humans the secret key. It is up to us to pick up the key and unlock the door of the great Mystery.

Page-265

They, of course, like other Yogis first explored the upper worlds. But instead of simply climbing the ladder to the ethereal worlds like the Yogis of yore, who neglected the body to finally vanish into the worlds beyond, Mother and Sri Aurobindo "plunged through the body's alleys blind to the nether mysteries." They were shown that the body's substance is sacred. The body is the Earth.

Thus far we know.

But what I did not know was what heroic deeds Sri Aurobindo had to perform before he saw "the source whence" the Earth's "agonies part and the inner reason of hell." How many dragons and goblins he had to vanquish I did not know, nor how many giants and ogres he encountered. The valorous deeds of the Knights of the Round Table pale into insignificance before Sri Aurobindo's heroic deeds. What adventures did he have on the way? How did he go about finding the Secret? What routes did he take to reach his destination ? Frankly, I was intrigued. "How?" was my question.

But Sri Aurobindo once said, "I have not written the history of my sadhana ____" So how do we find out?

Now, I have always loved, still love, reading mystery stories, as my friends will tell you. I have gulped down Sherlock Holmes, Hercules Poi rot, Perry Mason, and admired their cleverness in finding solutions from stray clues; Nancy Drew, The Three Investigators, Tintin (in French) have delighted me; I have hugely enjoyed Byomkesh and Feluda (in Bengali), and oh, so many more!

This being so, you will readily understand that I also wanted to see if the Mystery that was puzzling me could be unravelled.

Page-266

Surely, I thought, there are many hints lying scattered among Sri Aurobindo's writings and his letters? Clues are certain to be found strewn across his poems, which are not mere flights of fancy but expressions of solid experiences?

When the question is genuine, the answer is provided.

*

* *

First of all, however, I would like to proffer an apology.

Decades ago, when my nephews—now grandfathers— were schoolchildren in the Ashram, studying in *Cinquieme* (today's class 7, I think), they had a teacher for arithmetic who was a brilliant mathematician, Nolini Sen. In the Calcutta University Nolini Sen's classmates were Meghnad Saha and Satyen Bose.¹ Well, the problem was precisely his brilliance. He would start on a problem and immediately ask, "you have understood?" ("*tu as compris ?*" or "*vous avez compris ?*") and the next instant he would jump to the solution. He never thought it necessary to go step by step and explain the steps. With the result that the children never learned the process of solving a mathematical problem. They were bored, and the teacher they got the next year made them lose another year. Yet those students were by no means dullards. Because, when they came up to *Troisieme* (class 9?) they showed a quick grasp of the subject. Their new

¹ Nolini Sen (1894-1962).

Meghnad Saha (6.10.1893 - 16.2.1956), a physicist.

Satyendra Nath Bose (1.1.1894 - 4.2.1974) is well known for his Bose-Einstein statistics. He was also vice-chancellor of Tagore's Visvabharati at Santiniketan for two years.

Page-267

teacher was my brother Abhay. He was what you would call a normal bright boy, but by no means anywhere near the brilliance of N. Sen. Yet was he able to impart more effectively an understanding of the process to the students and awaken in them a liking for the subject. My! how he worked hard, and how he made those students work hard! He told them, "Look, with your present knowledge I can't make you pass to the next class. You'll have to stay in the same class." Dismayed, the students promised to work hard and make up for the missed years. So all of them toiled. In fact, the work habit they then acquired stood them in good stead in their adult life. And they still retain a sense of gratitude towards their teacher Abhay.

It often turns out that a lesser mortal is more helpful than a brilliant one. And the anecdote is my apology for my audacity at inviting you to join me in the exploration of some of the alleyways and byways Sri Aurobindo crossed, or did not cross, before he reached the Highway.

Mind you, this is going to be a first tour for me too. I intend to share with you whatever clues I discover.

The explanation behind us, let us set off on our expedition.

Page-268

34

This World

Do you remember Sri Aurobindo saying that he could have remained in the Brahman Consciousness eternally? But "I came out as I got the command from above." Before parting from Lele at Nagpur, he told him of "a mantra that had arisen in my heart." Lele had begun to give instructions but suddenly stopped and "asked me if I could rely absolutely on Him who had given me the Mantra." Sri Aurobindo said he could. So Lele handed him over "to the Divine within me...." He returned to Calcutta. A month or two later Lele came there. But in the meantime Sri Aurobindo had "received the command from within that a human Curu was not necessary for me."

The Divine Charioteer was now firmly seated in the heart and had taken the reins of the Chosen One's destiny in his own hands.

The Command to go to Chandernagore at a moment's notice came from the same source. It was again the same Voice that spoke when he received the Command to go to Pondicherry. "It was impossible to make a mistake or disobey that voice," said Sri Aurobindo categorically.

By the time Sri Aurobindo arrived in Pondicherry he had

Page-269

become quite familiar with that Voice.

But the Voice was not going to immediately reveal to him the purpose behind these moves. The revelations were to come, so to say, in dribs and drabs. Because the moment of the realization's advent "is chosen by the wisdom of the Divine alone and one must have the strength to go on till it arrives, for when all is truly ready it cannot fail to come." So Sri Aurobindo quietly began to prepare the ground. Almost a decade later while declining the offer from Joseph Baptista¹ to take up the editorship of an English daily he stated, "Pondicherry is my place of retreat, my cave of tapasya, not of an ascetic kind, but a brand of my own invention."

'Not of an ascetic kind' describes it perfectly. "There is to me nothing secular," he wrote in the same letter (5 Jan. 1920), "all human activity is for me a thing to be included in a complete spiritual life...." His was a balanced approach. "My own life and my Yoga have always been since my coming to India both this-worldly and other-worldly without any exclusiveness on either side," wrote Sri Aurobindo in 1949 in a letter. He never made any sharp difference between what he called 'the two ends of existence.' Never. It was so from the very beginning.

When he came out of jail in 1909, the change in Sri Aurobindo was perceptible. He himself had not bargained for it, when for a whole year he had to live "beyond the pale of society,

¹ Joseph Baptista was a Nationalist leader. He requested Sri Aurobindo to take up the editorship of an English daily to be brought out from Bombay as the organ of a new political party which Tilak and other like-minded people intended to form at the time. But Tilak passed away a few months later, in August, leaving free the political field to M. K. Gandhi.

Page-270

like an animal in a cage," as he wrote in his *Karakahini (Tales of Prison Life)*. No, it was not "the old familiar Aurobindo Ghose" who came out of the "Ashram at Alipore," it was "a new being, a new character, new intellect, life, mind, embarking upon a new course of action" who reentered the world of action.

Changed was the tenor of his writings from the *Bande Malaram* to the *Karmayogin*. Not that he did not write on politics, he did. Nor did he immediately give up all his political activities, or retire into solitude after his Vasudeva experience at Alipore Jail. No, quite the contrary.

Immediately upon his release on 6 May several advocates had taken Arabindo Babu to the Bar Library. With great respect some of them touched his feet with their hands. From there he and the other released prisoners were taken in a procession of hired horse-carriages to Kalimohan Aloy, the house of Chitta-ranjan Das at Russa Road, in Bhowanipore. A quarter century later Sahana,¹ recounting the episode, vividly lived the scene. She was but eleven years old at the time, but she recalled the wild excitement when the news of Arabindo Babu's release was brought to the house. Had not all of them seen how C.R. Das, her *mamababu*, had worked day after day, night after night, consulting big law books, pacing the floor, for months on end? His labours had finally been crowned with success. And when the released prisoners reached their house, what joy there was! A jubilant welcome was given to the guests. After which the ladies of the house went to the kitchen. The young men out of

¹ Sahana Devi, C.R. Das' niece, was a great singer in those days. I met her first in Pondicherry in 1935. Such an affectionate nature is hard to find.

the jail took an enthusiastic bath of liberation in the large pond south of the house.

After a big lunch everyone went to rest in the big hall. Sri Aurobindo sat in their midst. A buzz of chatter swirled round him. He rarely uttered a word. His eyes were fixed afar. Just a few times he said something in an undertone to Chitta. In his soft voice there was not a trace of excitement. In the evening the released prisoners went to their respective homes. Sri Aurobindo went to N°6 College Square, his *na'meso* K. K. Mitra's house.

The police began their surveillance of Arabindo Babu as soon as he walked out a free man. They kept tab on his activities, and noted the comings and goings of his many visitors. "He is said to be accessible to almost anyone," goes one police report, "known or unknown, who goes to call on him. He went out to deliver speeches. He even went on speech-tours to far-off villages where he met and talked with many."

Students in particular adored him. Nolini and Bejoy used to go to 6, College Square every afternoon to see him. Naturally they did not escape the notice of the police set to watch Arabindo Babu's movements. It was, of course, a nuisance at the time. But thanks to the police reports filed, we can, we do, get some glimpses of Sri Aurobindo's daily activities. For instance, on Sri Aurobindo's birthday on 15 August 1909—his last at Calcutta—"a band of young men attended at N°6 College Square, to offer their felicitations to Arabindo Ghose on his attaining his 39th year." There's accuracy of police report for you! Factually Sri Aurobindo was thirty-seven that day. As was the prevailing custom, the young men offered him sweets, fruits, flowers and

cloth. Making the occasion more lively with high-spirited cries of 'Bande Mataram,' and 'Long live Arabindo Ghose' in between. "He was also presented with an address," the report said, "which set forth the services he had rendered to the country in developing the national ideal. Arabindo Ghose—was visibly moved and made a suitable reply."

A Bengali newspaper of Calcutta, the *Bharat Mitra*, faithfully reproduced the reply in its 21 August 1909 issue. "In My childhood," began Sri Aurobindo, "before the full development of my faculties, I became conscious of a strong impulse in me. I did not realise what it was then, but it grew stronger and stronger as I gained in years till all the weakness of my childhood, fear, selfishness, etc., vanished from my mind. From the day of my return to the mother country, the impulse is surging forth in great force, and my set purpose and devotion are becoming more confirmed with the trials and oppression to which I am subjected. When some Divine power by the grace of God manifests itself in a human being any efforts to develop it give a new force to the national life. You will have to sacrifice yourself at the feet of your mother. You should, therefore, devote yourself with firm faith and whole heart to her service. Service of our motherland is our highest duty at this moment. This must be our duty in this iron age Every one must store up energy. Be prepared with fresh hope and vigour for the worship of the Mother.

Divine power has infused this nation with a new power." This was to be the Supramental Power he was to discover. "This power will exalt the nation one day," he concluded.

The students stored up his words in their hearts, and

Page-273

touching their foreheads with the dust from his feet—an Indian custom—they left.

From the very beginning Sri Aurobindo always included both 'this world' and the 'other world,' the material and the spiritual, in his purview.

When he went on tour, Sri Aurobindo's companions would see him meet with other Nationalists and discuss the affairs of the country with them; they would attend his address to various audiences, and hear him deliver lectures. They would see the crowd of villagers come to have a glimpse of him. It was not just that he was a famous Nationalist, a lover of Mother India and its suffering inhabitants, but because the news had spread fast that he was a Yogi, and the villagers came to seek his blessing. In the camp, if one of the boys awoke in the middle of the night, he would see him seated in lotus posture. Eyes wide open. His unblinking gaze fixed on ... what?

Page-274

35

The Training

His upward gaze fixed on what?

Once in' Chandernagore Motilal Roy put the question to Sri Aurobindo. Sri Aurobindo replied that before his eyes "some writings come floating, I try to decipher their meanings." He called them *lipi*, which in Sanskrit could mean a letter, or written characters, or the alphabet of a language. He also said that "Gods of the invisible world take form. These forms also are as significant as the *lipi*—and they want to convey something, which I strive to discover." Sri Aurobindo called these visions or seeing of forms *rupa-drishti*. Rupa in Sanskrit stands for form as well as beauty; *drishti* is seeing.

That upwardly fixed gaze of Sri Aurobindo's was not a new phenomenon begun at Chandernagore. It had already drawn the attention of no less a person than the Lt. Governor¹ of Bengal at the time of the Alipore Sedition Case. He asked Charu Dutt, "Have you seen Aurobindo Ghose's eyes?... He

¹ The same Lt. Governor Andrew Fraser (attempt on his life was made on 6 Dec. 1907) who had collected details about the Extremist Party and its "able, cunning, fanatical leader," Arabindo.

has the eyes of a madman." "No," Dutt disagreed. "No, he has the eyes of a Karma yogi."¹ After Sri Aurobindo's release from prison the drops began coming in trickles, then in streams, and now they threatened to rain down in heavy showers. Other spiritual perceptions were also crowding into his consciousness.

His training had started in earnest.

As he travelled to Barisal, to Khulna, to Jhalakati (now all in Bangladesh) many visions rose before his eyes. A goodly number were scenes from Nature: "River scenes. Thickly wooded bank. Bright stream with islands. Padma wide flowing covered with boats. A terraced green bank with steps in the middle." And so on. Sometimes human figures were part of the scene.

The training was not limited to sight. Hearing too was included. He heard voices and could distinguish from where they came. Some told "prophecies of future; but with appeal to reason."

That year the Bengal Nationalist Party's Provincial Conference was held in Jhalakati on 19 June. The speech Sri Aurobindo delivered there stirred his audience to the depth of its being. He tersely noted down in his diary, "Speech from chitta."²

His *lipi* reading was improving. "Short sentences deciphered & remembered."

At the same time work was going on in other parts of his being. "All relics of fear, disgust, dislike, hesitation rapidly disappearing. Doubt checked, suspension of judgment."

¹ *Mother's Chronicles*, Book Five, ch. 50.

² *Chitta*: the emotive mind.

All these bizarre experiences were, naturally, having an effect on his body. "All liberty of bodily movement being steadily taken away," he jotted down in the afternoon of the 18th. The same night, "Bhava of Avesh¹ in steamer shaking body." The next day, after his speech at Jhalakati, he wrote, "Movement of limbs felt always to be alien except in ordinary motions of walking when there is knowledge without upalabdhi."²

In a word, it was a rigorous and a thorough training that Sri Aurobindo was undergoing. Not a single part of his being was unattended. All were in the melting pot. And if we consider that in that state he was bringing out two weeklies, the *Karma-yogin* and *Dharma*, apart from all else, which a police report brings into focus, we are left breathless.

The report named "his principal associates, whom he visits and is visited by." Among them were several barristers, including Chitta Ranjan Das, Basanta Kumar Das, Bijoy Chandra Chatterji; there was our R Mitter (Pramatha Nath Mitra); the list also included the names of Ramananda Chatterji, Gispati Kabya-tirtha, Lalit Mohan Das, and some others. The list of names shows us Sri Aurobindo's wide-ranging interests. Those names were, in a way, linked by politics, no doubt, but many of these men were eminent in their own field. All of them were interested in Indian culture, in education, and other aspects of Indian life and society. Gispati Kabyatirtha, for instance, was a founder member of Calcutta's Sanskrit Sahitya Parishad. Ramananda Chatterji was the founder editor of the Bengali magazine

1 Rapture of trance.

2 *Upalabdhi* = realization.

Prabasi (1901, from Allahabad), as well as the founder editor of the *Modern Review* (1907); he too was an educationist. Lalit Mohan Das hailed from Barisal, he had taken active part from 1905 onwards during the Partition and Boycott movements, and was a professor at Calcutta's City College from which post he resigned when the Risley Circular came into effect banning any participation in politics by students and teachers; in 1909 he founded the Barisal Seva Samiti.

Some visitors did not figure in that police report. Rabin-dranath Tagore, a family friend, would drop in now and then. We also know that Ramsay MacDonald and his wife visited 6 College Square. Then there were the students. How they adored *Sejdal* With reason, of course. When, for instance, at the Hooghly Conference of the Bengal Congress Committee the Moderates conspired to eliminate the student community from participating in the deliberations, 'Aurobindo Babu' it was who, single-handedly, manoeuvred to get the students admitted. Remember? In addition there were family members. There was a constant coming and going. His *na-masi* would often ask her favourite nephew Auro to accompany her to the Ganges for a bath. He went to his father-in-law's residence also to meet Mrinalini Devi.

How did he manage ? Even for a normal person it is a tremendous task. But Sri Aurobindo in his condition? It simply takes my breath away.

When things reached a crucial stage, God came to the rescue. The Anglo-Indian government decided to take action against him. Sri Aurobindo heard the Voice: "Go to Chandernagore." He went.

At Chandernagore, he would have remained unperturbed

Page-278

in the thatched hut in Coolie Lines, or even in the dilapidated shed which was kept locked from outside all day long; only in the evening did Sudarshan Chatterji, a revolutionary, bring him some dried fruit and nuts to keep his body and soul together. Sri Aurobindo would not have minded any of those discomforts.

But during those forty-five days or so in Chandernagore he had to change his location half a dozen times. Detectives, discovery, police, were haunting the revolutionaries who took care of him, while Sri Aurobindo himself remained "plunged into solitary meditation. Though inwardly absorbed, he continued to follow the outward events as they unfolded." The Indo-British government would not so easily give up its quarry. Could he then "pass the better part of my life as an undertrial prisoner ..."? No. God had other plans for him.

Sri Aurobindo again received a Command: "Go to Pondicherry."

"I have heard His voice and borne His will On my vast untroubled brow."

36

A Spiritual Adventure

"I regard the spiritual history of India" wrote Sri Aurobindo in a letter (18 August 1935), "as a constant development of a divine purpose, not a book that is closed, the lines of which have to be constantly repeated. Even the Upanishad and the Gita were not final though everything may be there in seed. In this development the recent spiritual history of India is a very important stage." Decades earlier, in an article in the *Karmayogin* (26 March 1910), Sri Aurobindo had given three names—Rama-krishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda, and Bijoy Goswami—as examples. They had then indicated to him "the lines from which the future spiritual development had most directly to proceed, not staying but passing on."

Among them, as we had occasion to see, it was in the life of Ramakrishna Paramahansa¹ that the message of Hinduism was summed up. But was the message understood? "The work that was begun at Dakshineswar is far from finished, it is not even understood," penned Sri Aurobindo in the same article of 1910. By then it had become clear to him that it was he who had to carry on the unfinished work from where it was left off. Gradually it would be revealed to him that he had not only to

¹ See *Mother's Chronicles*, Book Five, ch. 62.

complete the work of spiritual development but pass on to something beyond.

Sri Aurobindo received three messages from Sri Rama-krishna.

From his notes:

"The guidance from above seems now to be free from the necessity of any longer managing & giving rein to the forces of Anritam.¹ Its final emergence from the action of the Mechanician, the Yantri, mending & testing His machine & self-revelation as that of the God of Truth & Love,

began definitely to be worked out from 18th October, when the third & last message from Sri Ramakrishna was received. The first message was in Baroda, the '*Arabindo, mandir karo, mandir karo*,² & the parable of the snake Pravriti devouring herself. The second was given in Shanker Chetti's house soon after the arrival in Pondicherry, & the words are lost, but it was a direction to form the higher being in the lower self coupled with a promise to speak once more when the sadhan was nearing its close. This is the third message (18 Oct 1912).

" 'Make complete sannyasa of Karma.

" 'Make complete sannyasa of thought.

" 'Make complete sannyasa of feeling.

" 'This is my last utterance.' "

Hinduism has layers and layers of truth. In Sri Aurobindo's words, "I can say what to my view is the truth behind Hinduism, a truth contained in the very nature (not superficially seen of course) of human existence, something which is not the

¹ *Anritam*: falsehood.

¹ "Arabindo, build the temple, build the temple."

monopoly of Hinduism but of which Hindu spirituality is the noblest expression." But its Truth of truths was not yet revealed. I dare say, not even fully explored. Sri Aurobindo was going to do it systematically.

The severe scientist of Yoga that he was, Sri Aurobindo was going to put each and every experience of his to repeated tests, till he could reproduce it in minutest detail, before he would accept the truth of anything. He always based himself on his own experiences, never on a blind adherence to traditions which he considered to be the greatest obstacle to truth. The spiritual realities he experienced were too concrete for him to deny whatever paradoxes they may present to the ordinary intelligence.

His systematic exploration led him to a method making it possible for others to follow. He however said (5 October 1935) that "the detail or method of the later stages of the Yoga which go into little known or untrodden regions, I have not

made public_____ " Anyway he called the method 'Integral Yoga,'

"and that means that it takes up the essence and many processes of the old Yogas—its newness is in its aim, standpoint and the totality of its method." His Yoga, he said, "aims at the integrality of the Divine in this world and not only beyond it and at a supramental realisation." Elsewhere, he elucidated the point saying that his Yoga was a Yoga of transformation of the being, not "a Yoga of the attainment of the inner Self or the Divine, though that attainment is its basis without which no transformation is possible." As we know, he put forth the view that "the spiritual past of the race has been a preparation of Nature not merely for attaining the Divine beyond the world, but also for the very step forward which the evolution of the earth-consciousness

Page-282

has still to make." He said that he was "putting forward a thing to be achieved that has not yet been achieved, not yet clearly visualised, even though it is one natural but still secret outcome of all the past spiritual endeavour." He was proposing a spiritual evolutionary process—aeons compressed into decades.

Sri Aurobindo did not expect much from the materialist: "From materialism least of all, however philanthropic or patriotic, can our future salvation be expected." He was also rather wary of the cogent reason of the rationalist. "Cleverness has replaced wisdom and men are more concerned to be original in minutiae than to secure their hold upon large and permanent truths." But he was quick to point out that rationalism was necessary to balance the error of the ascetics "who would make of God's world a mistake and of its Maker an Almighty blunderer or an inscrutable eccentric or an indefinable Something inhabiting a chaos or a mirage." Because most of the mystical ascetics in order "to honour the Maker, slight and denounce His works." But Sri Aurobindo was not satisfied with seeking only the essentiality of Brahman, his seeking included Brahman's manifestation. So he was to put aside these various partial truths and pass onward.

Pass onward to discover the unchanging, undying Truth. He was going to give that Truth "new forms and beauty, grandeur, truth and effectiveness." He was to place the eternal Truth—the Veda—in its native light before humanity. "I believe that Veda to be the foundation of the Sanatan Dharma;¹ I believe it to be the concealed divinity within Hinduism,—but a veil has to be drawn aside, a curtain has to be lifted. I believe it to be

knowable and discoverable. I believe the future of India and the world to depend on its discovery and on its application, not to the renunciation of life, but to life in the world and among men."

Mind you, Sri Aurobindo's Yoga was not going to be solely a supracosmic achievement for the sake of the individual, for an individual achievement of divine realization, "but something to be gained for the earth-consciousness here."

And yes, "the future of India and the world," nay the very existence of the Earth depended upon the work to be done by Sri Aurobindo. A prodigious task. A whole lot was at stake.

Following the Command Sri Aurobindo came to Pondicherry.

There his yogic experiences multiplied, intensified. He had left behind his novitiate days.

As we know, a Yogi has to learn to handle an intense and exceptional use of powers. Now, our universe is full of powers or forces. An apprentice Yogi has, first of all, to learn to distinguish between them, as some are beneficial while others are nasty. It is not so very easy to tell them apart because the nasties are very clever at assuming the mask of a saint or a moralist.¹ But the Highest Truth is neither saintly nor moralistic. It is the Greatest Good. The Yogi's next step is to learn the uses of the powers,

' Sri Aurobindo went so far as to say that there are Asuric forces that can imitate the calm of the Supermind. "Do you think," he asked a disciple bitingly, "that the Asura is a fool? Sometimes, Tapasya is his chief weapon_____

Doing good to humanity is one of the favourite weapons of the Asura. Of course, he seeks to do it in his own way. The Asuric Maya can take up any garb: even the pursuit of an ideal or sacrifice for some principle!" *{Evening Talks, 15 September 1925}* Reminds us of the 'humanitarian bombs' on Kosovo, doesn't it?

and finally their applications. It needs a long practice and deft handling. Sri Aurobindo repeatedly asserted that Yoga is a process quite scientific in its principle, that is, capable of being verified, provided one accepts its conditions—as a scientist accepts the conditions of the laboratory where he is experimenting.

Sri Aurobindo who was always methodical handled his Yogic methods quite scientifically. He did not form his methods out of the blue, but upon a knowledge developed and confirmed by regular experiment, practical analysis ... and constant result. "True knowledge cannot do without experience, as true science can't do without experiment," he said. True science is a continuous quest and exploration.

"One of the most fundamental requisites for the search of the Truth," Sri Aurobindo explained to his disciples in 1926, "is a critical reason, almost a cynical mind which tears off the mask and refuses to accept current ideas, thoughts and opinions. It is a kind of solvent. Man must have the courage to see the Truth as it is without any deception about it."

Even if other men did not have the courage, Sri Aurobindo had it. He had watched all ideals, principles and truths and had seen how far each ideal could be realized. But these did not satisfy him. It was the Highest Truth that he was seeking. "I seek a text and a Shastra" he said clearly, "that is not subject to interpolation, modification and replacement, that moth and white ant cannot destroy, that the earth cannot bury nor Time mutilate."

A fairy tale.

"Our Yoga is not a retreading of old walks, but a spiritual adventure."

37

All Life is Yoga

It was going to turn out to be an incredible 'spiritual adventure.' Because it was the 'Yoga for the Earth.' Not an atom was to be neglected. Sri Aurobindo's motto was 'All Life is Yoga,' and he lived up to it. His was the Upanishadic view, which did not assert the unreality of our present existence but only its incompleteness and inferiority. So what Sri Aurobindo had to do was to get to the bottom of things: where did things go wrong? Why did they go wrong? He began by

observing life. Not only of man, to be sure. No creature great or small was beyond the pale of observation of this Scientist of Yoga. He observed, studied, analyzed. He observed at close quarters butterflies, spiders, ants, cats, dogs, and men. Nothing and nobody escaped his keen study. He had heaps of anecdotes on all sorts of creatures. He never lost a chance to put his disciples in their places when they talked superciliously about animals.¹ He always repudiated man's general misconception that animals cannot think or reason. "They have," he said, "an intelligence which acts

¹ Let us remember that all this took place in the 1920s. Today there is some improvement in our ideas.

within narrow limits of the needs of their life."

Sri Aurobindo taught his disciples to make a distinction between the instinct and intelligence of animals. He explained that "the animal instinct is limited to a particular purpose. It is something ingrained in the being, something that is handed down to a particular species." He held that the ordinary idea about animals is absurd. "They are much nearer to man than is generally supposed."

When he told the tale of a spider—he had scores of spidery tales!—and one of the disciples present still thought that animals have 'no intelligence,' Sri Aurobindo promptly put the man in his place. "What do you mean?" he shot back. "They have as much intelligence as men have." As an illustration he told another tale of a spider. "I told you, perhaps," he said in 1925, "how the other day I saw a spider. He wanted to balance his cobweb against some weight in order to support it. He put a blade first, but found it was not heavy enough. So he went down and brought a small piece of gravel and with it balanced the web. Now, you can't call this instinct. It is intelligence."

Commenting on the resourcefulness of spiders which he had witnessed any number of times, he said, "they know what they have to do and then they learn by experience and experiment." Better than humans ...

Do the animals, despite having no articulate speech, have a language to communicate with each other? The question was put to Sri Aurobindo in 1926.' "It is not true that they have no

¹ In the intervening decades science has brought a wealth of information on the subject. Today it is common knowledge that dolphins, for instance, communicate with each other through sound impulses—or is it song?

Page-287

language," he replied. "They have some sort of intoned sounds, and also they have a power of wonderful telepathic communication of impulse." He cited the case of cats. "The cats have a language of their own; they utter different kinds of mews for different purposes." Then added characteristically, "It is the Europeans who make a big difference between man and animals. The only difference is the animals can't form a concept, can't read or write or philosophies."

A decade later, in a letter to Dilip, he was more explicit. "The power to discuss and debate is, as I say, a common human faculty—and habit," he wrote on 23 June 1935. "Perhaps it is here that man begins to diverge from the animal; for animals have much intelligence—many animals and even insects, even some rudimentary power of practical reasoning, but, so far as we know, they don't meet and put their ideas about things side by side or sling them at each other in a debate as even the most ignorant human can do and very animatedly does ____" In a footnote he corrected himself: "Perhaps the crows do in the Crow Parliament sometimes?"

All this was the result not only of his keen observation of physical movements of creatures, but also of a deep study of their psychology. He deduced that not only have we inherited much from the animal nature, but we have brought it almost intact into our human life.

It was the day before his fifty-fourth birthday, 14 August 1926. During the evening talk with his disciples on the subject of beauty, Sri Aurobindo said, "Well, some flowers have got psychic beauty in them: for instance, the jasmine is a very psychic flower."

Page-288

An astonished disciple remarked, "The flowers have beauty but it is something new to learn that they have psychic beauty."

Sri Aurobindo nodded. "Yes, it is the beauty of the soul of the flower."

"Soul of the flower!"

"I knew it would astound you," came the rejoinder. "You think the flowers have no soul? It is again man's ignorance that makes him think that he is the greatest being in creation. Many dogs have got a much finer psychic being than many men."

The conversation was held in August 1926, as I said. By then Mother had been there already for several years. So it need not surprise us to learn that there were several cats around. Mother used to prepare pudding, and put aside a portion in a small dish, then add a little milk and stir it herself. "She showed me how to do it," said Champaklal, who was Mother's odd job man, "and was particular that no grains should be left unmeshed.... And do you know for whom this part of the pudding was meant?" He answered his own question. "For *cats*. Later on I learnt that they were not really cats but something more. You would be interested to know that at times Sri Aurobindo also kept fish ready for these 'cats,' removing the bones etc." Sri Aurobindo had ample opportunity to study cats at close quarters.

"Would you believe if I were to tell you," Sri Aurobindo asked his sceptical disciple, "that there is a psychic element in the love-making of animals? Take our cat, Big-boy. When he makes love to Bite-bite, he is physical; when he makes love to Baby, he is vital; when he makes love to Mimi, he is emotional and sentimental; and when he makes love to Girly, he is psychic!"

A perplexed disciple asked, "Then how is it that man is

regarded as the highest being in creation?"

"It is the egoistic ignorance of man that makes him think so." Sri Aurobindo replied patiently. "He is high because there is in him the possibility of evolving a divine life. You can say also, that he is high because he has developed a mind and the mind gives him a chance of conscious evolution. But it does not necessarily follow that because man is a mental being he has used his mind for his evolution. Exactly because he has a mind, man has an infinite capacity to be devilish. He brings to the help of his devil a mind, and the devil himself can't be so bad as man with his mind when he puts it at the service of his

vital being It is the egoistic ignorance of man which makes

him think he is the highest in creation," he reiterated.

It was difficult for the disciple to accept that downgrading. He could not conceive that in this world of slow evolution man has emerged out of the beast and is still not out of it. So he came out with another argument. "But, then, there is the great difference between man's body and the animal's."

"That is all," Sri Aurobindo refused to buy the argument, "and even that is not so much as you try to make it out to be." He asked, "After all, what is the difference between the animal body and the human ? If you see carefully, you will see you have discarded the tail, and instead of walking on four legs you have been using two, and the other two you have changed into hands." He conceded, "There have been slight but very important changes in the brain and some details here and there. You have cast off your fur and horns."

"Not all men!" interjected another listener. "Khitish has a lot of fur yet."

Page-290

Amidst the roar of laughter that followed, Sri Aurobindo said with a smile, 'You see, after all it is not so great a change in the physical as would create a gulf between animal and man! No, all that is human nonsense!' Then more seriously, "Man is great because he can open to something higher and can consciously go beyond the mind and live a divine life upon earth."

Page-291

38

Science of the Spirit

Let us not imagine that Sri Aurobindo was passing his time like any old scientist simply studying the movements of birds and beasts and insects, and their psychology. No. I dare say that that was but a by-product of his keen interest in all-life.

What was he doing then? "I am developing the necessary powers for bringing down the spiritual on the material plane," he wrote in a letter of 12 July 1911, from Raghavan house where he had met Alexandra David-Neel.

How did he go about it?

At Sundar Chetty's house he was already honing his skills. One of the first was to obtain the effectiveness of the Will on an object or event that had to be affected. The improved effectiveness was to lead to "the control of the object in its nature so that it is submissive to the spoken word, receptive of the thought conveyed or sensitive and effective of the action suggested."

He began with simple things. For instance, he knew of the new change of soul in their dog Yogini, and in late January it was confirmed by Bejoy. On 9 February to be precise, he willed "for the dog to shake off its heavy *tamas* and manifest the new soul. Rapidly successful, but the *tamas* still struggles

Page-292

to remain & the old *bhava*} [attitude or feeling] in the face and body persists." Two days later, on the 11*, Sri Aurobindo renewed his will-force and noted that it produced "an immediate effect, the dog doing what it had never done before."

There are different ways of applying one's will-force. Sri Aurobindo changed his tack, and instead of applying his force through the mind, he applied it through the heart. Two days later, on the 13th, he noted that this time when he willed for Yogini to eat bread which it had always refused, "Suddenly it began eating with relish after first refusing." Next day he used the same means while willing the dog to refrain "from large piece of bread given, but [to] eat others. Persistently refrained even when it was broken into small pieces, except when induced to think it was not the same."

Imagine! He even exerted his will on an ant! He willed it to give up its object and go back ... and he succeeded "after a short persistence." Constant practice made the Power more effective. By December 1912 he could already note that in isolated cases the Power fulfilled itself frequently in small things: "A bird in its flight, an ant in its turnings, feels the thought strike it and either obeys or is temporarily influenced in its immediate or subsequent action."

The four young men living with him were also his fields of experiment. Just as a physician tries out the proper dosage

¹ When Sri Aurobindo wrote for himself in his Journal of Yoga' his notes were peppered with Sanskrit words whose meanings were perfectly clear to him. I am afraid it will not be so clear to us! Even though he thoughtfully wrote down their meanings. But the Sanskrit words cannot be entirely avoided, I have therefore tried to keep them to the barest minimum.

Page-293

on a patient, so did Sri Aurobindo on these young men. He would put forth some force and see how the boys reacted. "I have also to see," he explained, "how they would react if I put the force in a different way." Being scientific in his methods, he studied the laws that govern a force, under what conditions would it work and give tangible results.

Saurin, Mrinalini Devi's cousin, shared a room with Moni in Sundar Chetty's house. Once he suffered from acute diarrhoea. Sri Aurobindo used both his mind and heart into his will for its 'lessening.' On 9 February he noted in his diary: "fulfilled as soon as made." Next day, Sri Aurobindo willed "for rapid restoration of health and strength, repeated and fulfilled." On the 11* he again applied his will for Saurin's restored health and strength, and noted its success, "even the time coming correct."

It goes without saying that Sri Aurobindo applied these remedial measures on himself also. When he tried to stay nausea while eating, he was "immediately successful." He was equally successful in his attempt to clear the stomach of disturbances and heaviness. Indeed it is even striking how closely he monitored his own body's functions, and with what minuteness. After all, he did say that "it is not sufficient to open the mind and the vital being and leave the physical being to its obscurity." If we simply look, for instance, at a few first entries in his diary of 1912, what do we find?

"18.1.1912—The *roga* [disease or disorder] that came, is being slowly eliminated. Its chief characteristic is a dull form of watery nausea, slight in substance but with some tamasic power of oppression.... Hunger persists."

"20.1.12—A dull nausea has been persistent all the morning,

Page-294

but does not interfere with the appetite or disturb the *prana*. More has been eaten today than ordinarily & with full *rati* [pleasure] of food.

"21.1.12—Relics of watery nausea—much water rising in the mouth.

"24.1.12—Adverse movements [of the body] are chiefly the order of *roga*, a sore throat having taken hold after an interval of several years, and of bodily slackness ..."

During my early visits to the Ashram, when I was eleven or twelve years old, I would listen round-eyed about Sri Aurobindo's 'feats,' one of which was about his tea drinking. The narrator told me that Sri Aurobindo would be plunged in his work. His eyes would fall on the timepiece on his worktable. The hands would point to a particular time, and hey presto, Saurin would come exactly at the time shown with a steaming cup of tea!

Years later this is how Sri Aurobindo himself related it. "I was in the past a great tea addict; I could not do any work without my cup of tea. Now, the management of the tea was in the hands of my brother-in-law. He used to bring it any time he woke up from his sleep. One day I had a lot of work to do but couldn't get into it without the tea. I began to think, 'When will he bring it, why doesn't he come?' So far I had never asked anybody for anything for myself. Suddenly I found that a particular hour was written on the wall before me, and exactly at that hour the tea was brought in."

We know that Sri Aurobindo liked his tea and his cigar. Champaklal told us that Sri Aurobindo smoked Spencer's 'Flores.' These could be bought readymade from the market and he could smoke when he felt like it. But tea? Someone had to

make the steaming cup. Normally it fell to the lot of Saurin to make tea. But when he was sick? Well, then it had to be Moni! But Moni was fond of his afternoon nap. So Sri Aurobindo had to apply his will. On 10th February 1911 he willed for Moni to wake up—"Immediate success." So far so good. But, though awake, Moni showed no inclination to get up, let alone make the tea! So Sri Aurobindo sent forth another will for Moni "to get up and give the tea. Succeeded after a slight resistance, lasting five to ten minutes." That is how Sri Aurobindo got his tea that day. It is quite likely, though, that this happened frequently. Because Saurin was pretty irregular in his habits. Sri Aurobindo had to use his will rather often to improve the situation. On 16 February he

willed for Saurin's "regularity in the afternoon, immediately fulfilled." Not so the next day; it took half an hour on the 17th to be fulfilled. On the 18th however, his will was "fulfilled under adverse circumstances (they sat down to cards at 4) within quarter of an hour."

Simultaneously he was developing many other faculties. For example, on 13 February he felt striking in his own consciousness a feeling coming "from Saurin of the idea of making the tea. Immediately after I heard him talk of it, & a minute after he came and made it."

By the way, it is only after his knee accident in November 1938 that Sri Aurobindo stopped drinking tea. Thank goes again to Champaklal for this scrap of information.

If you ask me why I am talking of such trivialities as tea, I shall reply that it is part and parcel of our life, and for Sri Aurobindo nothing in life was trivial—"All Life is Yoga"—nothing of life and Matter was to be rejected or excised. Everything counted,

Page-296

be it micro or macro. Sri Aurobindo actually used the most trivial domestic happenings as exercise to hone his powers. Did he not repeatedly say that the aim of 'our Yoga' was "to return upon life and transform it"?

As a matter of fact, later when Sri Aurobindo obtained complete mastery over the willed use of subtle force, he applied the effective will worldwide, when necessary; as in the two World Wars "to secure a particular result at some point in the world." Let us not be astonished. Because, as Sri Aurobindo took the trouble to explain to Dilip, "Just as there are waves of unseen physical forces (cosmic waves, etc.) or currents of electricity, so there are mind-waves, thought-currents, waves of emotion—for example, anger, sorrow etc.—which go out and affect others without their knowing whence they come or that they come at all, they only feel the result."

Well, among the many faculties he was developing was the power of cognition. "I saw the time by the watch in the sitting room to be 2-40," he noted down on 28 January 1911, "ideally cognised the time by my watch to be 2-43. Verified, exact to the minute." Then he began chasing away a dog! "A little later after a chase of the opposite house-dog, having lost the intellectual idea of the time, I ideally cognised it to be just 2-50. Verified, exact to the second." The cognition worked for other things than divining time. "All rooms being closed, I ideally

perceived that all were asleep. Verified immediately afterwards by no one moving when the servant repeatedly banged for admission at the door."

As a matter of fact the siddhis he was trying to perfect normally entail a long, hard slog. But in his case, though perhaps

Page-297

not of meteoric speed, it was very rapid indeed! Take the power of healing. What was begun in a small radius in 1911, was already expanded in 1912. "Power is also telling on the bodies of others a little," he jotted down on 19 November, but he still felt that it was "only in its commencement." Seven months later, on 6 July 1913 to be precise, he noted that "therapeutic power is on the increase." He succinctly cited a few cases. One such case was "given up as hopeless by the doctor, rid in less than two days of his worst symptoms (difficulty of breathing at once, difficulty of urination in a day)," and so on. He however observed that "the most desperate cases still offer a stronger resistance. The control of the will over my own bodily states has also increased."

But I must recount to you another episode. Well, we know that children were drawn to poet Bharati. How enchantingly he sang! How absorbing were the stories he told! Bharati himself was very fond of children. Once in 1913, in spite of his own penury, he took under his wing a local boy, mentally unsound. Bharati kept the boy near him as much as he could. He oversaw the boy's intake of food, and even when he slept he kept the boy close. Bharati did not miss praying to his Goddess. To the intense surprise of Bharati's sceptic friends, and the boundless joy of the boy's parents, suddenly, one day, the boy was cured ... Everybody remained mystified. The mystery is finally resolved by Sri Aurobindo. In his notes dated 6 July 1913 we come across the following lines. "Therapeutic power is on the increase, eg. Bharati's hysteric patient not cured by him in spite of strong effort and personal contact & suggestion, cured after a distant & moderate application of Will by myself in two days." Bharati himself never claimed that the boy was healed by him. He sent

Page-298

his heartfelt gratitude to the Mother Goddess.

I could give you more cases, but by now you must have got the gist of it.

Finally, when Sri Aurobindo had a perfect mastery over this power of healing, how did one perceive it? Let us hear from the most reliable source! I mean from Mother who had a long experience of it.

"You know," she said to Satprem on the eve of her ninetieth birthday, 'You know that after living with Sri Aurobindo for a year, when I left [for France in 1915] at the time of the war, because of the war, all the nerves fell ill: they were in a state of irritated tension (I think they call it neuritis, when all, but all the nerves are ill). It's particularly painful, and everything is disorganized all over: the circulation was disorganized, the digestion was disorganized, everything was disorganized (it was in France, in the South of France). The nerves remember that, and I don't know why, once when things here [in Pondicherry] were very difficult, they remembered. Sri Aurobindo was there and I told him.... I absolutely had the feel of a hand coming and taking the whole pain away like that—in one second it was gone." Mother's excruciating pain was lifted with the sweep of a hand. Satprem remembers Mother saying that when Sri Aurobindo cured somebody, one often saw a subtle hand come with a current of blue force and seize, as it were, between its fingertips, the vibration of the illness or disorder.

And why did Mirra get that terrible neuritis in France which lasted for weeks? "I got it in France," Mother explained to Satprem, "because when I went away, I left my psychic being here, and that was the result."

39

The Programme

"What has happened to you?" Purani could not refrain from exclaiming. He was astonished to see Sri Aurobindo so much changed when he saw him again in 1921; for it was but in December 1918 that he had seen him! But what a change! "In 1918 the colour of the body was like that of an ordinary Bengali—rather dark—though there was a lustre on the face and the gaze was penetrating." This time though as he went up the stairs like last time, in the same Guest House, a great surprise awaited Purani. "I found his cheeks wore an apple-pink colour and the whole body

glowed with a soft creamy white light. So great and unexpected was the change that I could not help exclaiming: 'What has happened to you?' "

Sri Aurobindo smiled and countered: "And what has happened to you?" Purani had grown a beard.

It had taken Sri Aurobindo quite a few years, and sometimes concentrated work, to bring about this physical change. It proved that eventually the psychic body had been able to alter the physical sheath into its own image. Among the many elements of Yogic perfection, *siddhi*, he had also undertaken to develop physical beauty—*saundarya*. A willed modification

Page-300

of form. We find in his Yoga diary under the date 10 December 1912: "The first successes in *saundarya* limit themselves to

three ____" After describing the first in some detail, he noted,

"The gain is a detail, but the important point is that the power of the will to change formations in the body has now been physically proved beyond doubt or dispute." The second gain: "The gloss, softness & smoothness of the hair has been restored." The third: "The tendency to unnatural entanglement and profuse loss of hair has been steadily diminishing, though it is not yet nil the hair is now exceedingly thin, shot with grey & threatening baldness above the temples. These signs of old age show no promise of reversal or dissolution."

'Signs of old age,' when he had just turned forty! Well, anyway, six months later, on 16 June 1913, he was pleased to see that "the effusion of beard has been resumed after a very long period." Also his hair was curling, and there was an improvement of the face.

Not only hair, but teeth and skin colour were part of the action on beauty. "Improvement of hue in the leg (below the knee where it was black & clumsily glossy)," he wrote down on 20 June 1913, and continued with, "Whiteness of teeth (especially lower row) with some relics of yellowness." This is of special interest as it was now four years that Sri Aurobindo had not used "any artificial means of preservation or cleansing (brush, powder, etc.)...." After some ups and downs he got rid of the yellow film, and both the upper and lower teeth regained their whiteness.

Even more striking were the changes in shapes. Fingers, for instance. "A rounding off of the sharp angles of those fingers

Page-301

which were formerly square." A similar tendency came to the feet. He was, of course, quite aware of the slowness of the process. "The Will Power cannot alter the lines of the body," he observed on May 21, 1913, "except by a slow & tedious process & the bone still resists the alteration of status; still the figure has definitely changed, & in the colour, hair, feet, etc. there are slight but effective alterations. Some of the signs of old age, eg grey hairs, although no longer visibly increasing, still resist ejection." So it went on over the years. Purani had seen the result.

Impressive though it was, it was but one aspect of his many accomplishments. Sri Aurobindo has taught us that the experiences described in the Indian Yoga system can be had again and again by generation after generation of Yogis. Although Sri Aurobindo fretted at the slowness of the process yet the whole gamut of Yoga—which takes lives and lives—was to be covered in a short space of time. The Master of Yoga was making his Instrument burn up the road.

One commonly known faculty of a Yogi is the triple time-vision : *trikdldrishti*. It means "the direct knowledge of the past, the intuitive knowledge of the present and prophetic knowledge of the future." He took up the work of developing this faculty; and telepathy, and thought-transmission, and cognition, and a series of similar elements.

The development and perfection of the senses were not neglected. This subtle power of the senses, he explained, "is the power of perceiving smells, sounds, contacts, tastes, lights, colours and other objects of sense which are either not at all perceptible to ordinary men or beyond the range of your ordinary senses." He always had a keen sense of smell, but now

Page-302

he could smell baked bread, fish, onion, "perfumes & other scents not within the physical range or usual experience." Taste developed rather suddenly: "intensity & materiality are perfect & the range is not limited as it includes the sweet, the bitter & the pungent as well as nondescript tastes." Touch "is still confined to the habitual touches, rain, wind, insects, heat of the *sukma*

[subtle] sun, fire, etc..." Hearing: "This sense which was the most acute & earliest to develop, is now the latest (*rupa* excepted) to perfect itself & the clear sounds of jail do not repeat themselves." Remember when he used to hear the sounds of crickets they were so noisy that he thought there were many crickets outside! Of *rupa*, or seeing not mere images but actual forms, "of which there were some instances in the jail & afterwards" there was "none here."

Nevertheless, many experiences in the Alipore jail were now reemerging "on a new basis of perfection."

The sweet taste of the nectar in the throat returned. Diluted at first, but later "much stronger, denser and more frequent and continuous, the mixture of phlegm less frequent."

An ant-bite in the jail had produced in his body a feeling not of pain but of ecstasy, ananda. Now it awakened in his body a feeling of intense ecstasy, "pure *raudrananda* without discomfort." (Mosquito bites were less manageable, I dare say!) Yet, when his right knee got fractured (on 24 November 1938) it happened so suddenly, so swiftly, that he could not immediately change the intense pain into ananda. Later, when the intensity subsided, and the pain settled down into a steady sensation, Sri Aurobindo could change it into ananda. Decades of practice had not prepared him for such an experience. Sri Aurobindo

said as much, "Perhaps it was to give me knowledge of intense pain!"

But in the 1910s, Sri Aurobindo was still training his body to feel several types of ananda. One of which was electric or *vaidyuta*. "It comes as a blissful electric shock or current on the brain or other parts of the nervous system & is of two kinds, positive or fiery & negative or cold, *saurya* or *chandra*, conveyed through the sun or conveyed through the moon." His sensations perceived them as a feeling of internal heat or as rheumatism "turned into a form of physical pleasure...." He added reflectively, "It is, probably, these two forms of *sukshma vidyut* that are the basis of the phenomena of heat & cold—such at least is the theory suggested to me in Alipur jail." Practice makes perfect. So later he could say confidently, "I know very well what ecstasy and Ananda are from the *brahmananda* to the *sarîrananda*, and can experience them at any time."

One experience of the jail which Sri Aurobindo practised assiduously was levitation—*utthapana*. Mind you, it was not at all like the levitation with which we are familiar, when the whole body

remains suspended in the air unmindful of the law of gravitation. What a delightful feeling of rest and lightness that gives! even if it occurs in our dreams. But Sri Aurobindo was out to conquer all laws of physical nature. He therefore went about it in his own way. He would keep an arm or a leg suspended in the air for more than two hours sometimes. "Utthapana, in spite of resistance, in left arm, legs neck," he noted on 20 June 1913. Then there was the *utthapana* of other parts of the body—the back, loins, etc. He did all this standing or sitting or supine. In the main though he walked and walked. For

Page-304

hours together. "Yesterday nearly 12 hours were passed in walking or the erect position" he noted down on 2 January 1913. The results were "the old pain in the soles of the feet..." and some stiffness in the thighs, but both passed away at once, convincing him of "material falsity."

He was also aiming at the conquest of exhaustion. In the process he mastered four physical attributes. *Mahimdand garima* which give the body abnormal strength, and "may even develop into the power of increasing the size and weight of the body." *Laghimd* makes you so light that you can walk on air. *Animd* brings subtlety to the body, makes you as fine as an atom so that you can disappear into thin air.

Our severe scientist of the Spirit noted down everything meticulously as does an experimentalist in his laboratory to establish control. How many hours he walked, with what intervals, what were the results; how many hours he slept, the kind of sleep it was, the types of dreams he had. And all sorts of things besides. The main concern of a true scientist is with physical phenomena; he observes them, he studies the conditions, makes experiments, and then deduces the laws. Exactly what our Scientist of the Spirit was doing; putting everything to the test of hard physical experience.

In his Journal of Yoga, under the date of July 1st 1912, Sri Aurobindo wrote: "August, 1912, will complete the seventh year of my practice of Yoga. It has taken so long to complete a long record of wanderings, stumbles, groupings, experiments,— for Nature beginning in the dark to grope her way to the light— now an assured, but not yet a full lustre,—for the Master of the Yoga to quiet the restless individual will and the presumptuous

Page-305

individual intelligence so that the Truth might liberate itself from human possibilities & searching and the Power emerge out of human weaknesses and limitations. The night of the thirtieth marked by a communication from the *sahasradala* [the thousand-petalled lotus above the head], of the old type, *sruti* [hearing], but clear of the old confusions which used to rise around the higher Commands. It was clearly the Purushotome speaking and the Shakti receiving the command." Then there is his observation. "In this yoga at least nothing has been abrupt except the beginnings,—the consummations are always led up to by long preparation & development, continual ebb & flow, ceaseless struggling, falling & rising—a progress from imperfection through imperfections to imperfect and insecure perfections & only at last an absolute finality and security." Certainty was now his.

It was in late November 1912 that Sri Aurobindo wrote: "The regular record of the sadhana begins today, because now the perceptions are clear enough to render it of some real value and not merely a record of mistakes and overstatements." Because "the theory of the Yoga has been proved. The perfectibility of the human being, *trikaldrishti*, Power, the play of the Divine Force in the individual, the existence of the other worlds, & of extra-mental influences, even the possibility of the physical siddhis are established facts—*vijnana* [supramental knowledge], the Vedic psychology, the seven streams, everything is established. What is wanting is the perfect application, free from the confusions of the *anritam* [falsehood] which result from the play of mind."

I remember Sri Aurobindo wishing: "Just as people are

advancing in physical science and trying to explore every possible secret of Nature, so also if they went into the inner being and tapped the powers from the unusual ranges of Nature then there could be no limit to possibilities."

Oh, how astonishing it is that those two worlds, both available to our eye, yet remain hidden each from the other.

He was now poised for the next step. "The siddhi has now reached a stage when the test of its positive worldward side has to be undertaken."

40

The Traveller

To be sure Sri Aurobindo never did anything haphazardly. He had a programme all chalked out which he was following.

When Sarala Devi Chowdhurani, Tagore's niece, and Sri Aurobindo's fellow worker of the revolutionary days, came to meet him towards the end of 1920, Sri Aurobindo hinted as much. "As for myself, I have a personal programme," he told her.

He was more forthcoming in 1923. It was his fifty-first birthday, and the dozen or so assembled disciples wanted to know the actual state of his sadhana. In the middle of the talk Sri Aurobindo let fall that he was "following a certain programme that was laid down for me when I came down to Pondicherry."

Who else but the Divine Guide would do that? That is what Sri Aurobindo said when he expressly stated that there were many things beyond the realization of the Self. "The Divine Guide within urged me to proceed, adding experience after experience, reaching higher and higher, stopping at none as the final, till I arrived at the Supermind. There I found the Truth indivisible and there everything takes its proper place."

When actually did Sri Aurobindo get the idea of the Supermind? Because at first he "did not know about the planes."

It was Vivekananda who "showed me the Intuitive Plane" during his meditation in Alipore Jail. "Then afterwards I began to see the still higher planes." Sri Aurobindo said, "I myself got the idea of the Supramental after ten years of Sadhana. The Supramental does not come in the beginning but at the end of Sadhana."

Nolini, for his part, told us that it was when they were living in Sundar Chetty's house that Sri Aurobindo began to widen their knowledge from the purely educative exercises he had so far

pursued with them. "His first 'instruction' was about the seven Worlds," Nolini said. "Sat, Chit and Ananda above; mind, life and body below; and the Supermind linking them up." The Supermind plane stands between the upper hemisphere—Sat, Chit and Ananda—and the lower hemisphere— life, mind and body.

Nolini specified that "this was later elaborated in *The Divine Plan*."¹ There one finds also the description of Super mind's three layers and its suns. Sri Aurobindo called the highest layer the Imperative Supermind. 'Imperative' because nothing could stand against it: "It is knowledge fulfilling itself by its own inherent power."

In 1923 Sri Aurobindo satisfied the curiosity of the assembled disciples who queried about the work he was then doing. "I am," he replied, "at present engaged in bringing down the Supramental into the physical consciousness, down even to the sub-material."

How did he feel? "One feels as if 'digging the earth,' as the Veda says. It is literally digging from the Supermind above

¹ Cent, ed., vol.17, pp. 28 to 32.

to Supermind below.... It is this birth after birth on every plane that makes the process complex."

Why did Sri Aurobindo want to bring down the Supramental in our earth-nature? Because this world of matter, he explained, has been for ages the bulwark of darkness, falsehood's most redoubtable citadel where, up to now, inertia has reigned supreme. In 1924, he told Dilip, "Suffice it to say that I want to invoke here on earth the light of a higher world, to manifest a new power which will continue to exist as a new influence in the physical world and will be a direct manifestation of the Divine in our entire being and daily life."¹

Even to arrive at those planes of the Supermind, Sri Aurobindo had to, first of all, traverse the maze of continents that lay in between. Like any rational person Sri Aurobindo did not believe that man was confined to the physical body alone. Actually there are many planes and parts that go into the making of a human being. These planes were fairly well known to the travellers of the inner worlds. India at least never lacked adventurers of the Spirit. Like scouts they marched

into uncharted territories, seeking adventure of consciousness, and returned with news of what was there. But with time much was forgotten; weeds grew obliterating the paths; even in India the old knowledge of the Upanishads was almost lost. What to say of the Vedas. Besides, I dare say, nobody before Sri Aurobindo had taken pains to document these worlds so systematically and in such detail. You have but to read his *Savitri* to check the veracity of my statement.

¹ *Among the Great*, 221, 226.

Another important point to note is that "the old Yogins when they went above the spiritual mind passed into Samadhi, which means that they made no attempt to be conscious in these higher planes...." But Sri Aurobindo always kept his eyes wide open. He mapped for us the geography of the planes he traversed. At first, going upwards, he found well-beaten tracks. Then as he crisscrossed the territories the explorer found the crossways and paths made by previous travellers. Some were less travelled, and some were overgrown with weeds, lost among brambly bushes. He even ventured out to the unknown wilderness and met its fearsome denizens.

"The hounds of darkness growled with jaws agape, And trolls and gnomes and goblins scowled and stared"¹

To his surprise he found that "In all the series of the planes or grades of consciousness there is nowhere any real gulf, always there are connecting gradations and one can ascend from step to step." This gradation of planes—worlds in themselves—is a great connected complex movement. This was one of the important discoveries he made as the Divine Guide within urged him on.

"The interpenetration of the planes," Sri Aurobindo wrote on 14 January 1934, "is indeed for me a capital and fundamental part of spiritual experience without which Yoga as I practice it and its aims could not exist. For that aim is to manifest, reach or embody a higher consciousness upon earth and not to get away from earth into a higher world or some supreme Absolute.... But the fundamental proposition in this matter was proclaimed

¹ *Savitri*, VII, 3.

very definitely in the Upanishads which went so far as to say that Earth is the foundation and all the worlds are on the earth and to imagine a clean-cut or irreconcilable difference between them is ignorance; here and not elsewhere, not by going to some other world, the divine realisation must come."¹ Then added, "This statement was used to justify a purely individual realisation, but it can equally be the basis of a wider endeavour."

His was an unbelievably 'wider endeavour.' Why do I say that? Because Sri Aurobindo could very well see that though Bringers of Light, Bringers of Knowledge, Bringers of Compassion, so many Bringers had come one after another, come from age to age, yet it was still ignorance and suffering and cruelty that had the material world in their firm grip. Nothing much had changed in the physical life. The human mass go on preferring darkness to light, ignorance to knowledge, falsehood to truth. Life and matter were constantly preyed upon by the nasty undivine forces, as they had always been. Why? What happened? "It is the vital mixture—" Sri Aurobindo explained, "the mixture of the life-forces—that comes in and corrupts the whole spiritual movement." And leaves our life and body ignorant, imperfect, impotent as before.

That is why Sri Aurobindo resolved to replace the reign of corrupting Falsehood by a Truth-creation. That is where the Supermind came in. That New Power does not admit of any mixture. It makes no compromise with the lower forces, with

¹ From Sri Aurobindo's commentary on the Kena Upanishad (II, 5): "It is here, *ihaiva*, in this mortal life and body that immortality must be won.... 'If here one find it not, great is the perdition.'"

the powers of Falsehood. "By the Truth-Consciousness," he specified, "I mean a dynamic divine Consciousness. This Power must govern even the minutest detail of the life and action of man. The question is to bring it down and establish it on earth and keep it pure. For, there is a gravitational pull downwards. So the spiritual power must be such that it can not only resist but overcome that pull." He was speaking on 18 January 1939. And he threw a challenge. "This is the solution I propose. It is a spiritual solution that aims at changing the whole basis of human

nature. But," he cautioned, "it is not a question of a moment or a few years. There can be no real solution unless you establish spirituality as the whole basis of life."

In point of fact the 'spiritual solution' Sri Aurobindo proposed was a rapid evolutionary process compressed into a few years. Nature, in the process of evolution, takes millions and millions of years to effect a little change in matter. As for humanity, it "is moving itself. The only difficulty is that it has a tendency to come back to its starting point again and again!" Sri Aurobindo once said ironically.

That ours is a plane of evolution was freely accepted by the pro-Evolutionist. "In my explanation of the universe I have put forward this cardinal fact of a spiritual evolution as the meaning of our existence here." Of course, by 'evolution' Sri Aurobindo meant an evolution of Consciousness and an evolution of the Spirit in things and "only outwardly an evolution of species." Sri Aurobindo could not see logically why the Consciousness which emerges out of Matter to fashion life, give form to animal, to man, should stop with the last and not become something more than mere man.

Now, why did Sri Aurobindo say that it felt like 'digging the earth' if indeed the ancient Yogis had prepared the field? The fact of the matter is that their aim in general was to attain the Supermind and escape through the door of the Sun. It is true that many Yogis, after the attainment of Self, had taken pity on the suffering humanity, and had returned to heal the wounds of men and women; only their action was limited. It is also true that no one had really attempted to change the very basis of life. Sri Aurobindo, on the contrary, wanted to bring down all gains to the plane of the ordinary consciousness. "The complete change down to the physical was only sought for by a few and then more as a 'siddhi' than anything else, not as the manifestation of a new Nature in the earth-consciousness." That is the reason why he remarked that "the past efforts had not prepared it. Not that efforts were not made in the past but nothing stable was attained on the physical level; nothing fundamental was established. If it were established, the thing would be there, however partial the achievement." Because all achievements leave some legacy of traces for posterity to follow. Particularly, a spiritual realization once completely achieved could never be entirely obliterated. Said Sri Aurobindo, "I find that the Supramental physical body has not been brought down; otherwise it would have been there."

As he explored the lowest rung of the lower hemisphere, and descended to the sub-material, the subconscious, the inconscient, he found practically no trace of any attempt to change anything whatever. "Up to the present time nobody has cared to bring down and apply this Power [Supermind] to the physical plane," Sri Aurobindo told the assembled group of disciples in

Page-314

July 1926. "Something was done in the mind and also in the vital being but not in the physical."

He explained. "Firstly, the Yogis did not care for these questions of the physical plane. Secondly, they had other, more direct, means of dealing with them."

But Sri Aurobindo wanted life's transformation, "complete transformation. My aim is not to disown life but to transmute it through the alchemy of the light of the Spirit."¹

Easier said than done! It was going to be far from easy to make Matter responsive to the shock of Light.

As he worked from level to level he met with fiercer and fiercer resistance. He had to wage a war of attrition, 'a locked struggle' as he put it: "All the hostile forces in the spiritual world are in a constant state of opposition and besiege our gains," he specified in a letter dated 26 June 1916. "That I suppose, is why the religions and philosophies have had so strong a leaning to the condemnation of Life and Matter and aimed at an escape instead of a victory."

He who was so passionately fond of mother Earth refused to abandon her: "Our mother Earth must not feel herself for ever accursed." The Earth in desperate need called to the Soul that had become one with the universe. Our Hero of the Spirit chose to be in the thickest of the struggle.

Admittedly, the first that hews his way through a trackless jungle—the pathfinder—faces much to clear the way, to make it easier for his followers by leaving a legacy of traces.

Let me borrow a few lines from Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri*

¹ *Among the Great*, 228.

(Book I, IV) which express so beautifully what I have been trying at some length to say about him.

"A seeker of hidden meanings in life's forms,
Of the great Mother's wide uncharted will
And the rude enigma of her terrestrial ways
He is the explorer and the mariner
On a secret inner ocean without bourne ;
He is the adventurer and cosmologist
Of a magic earth's obscure geography."

Page-316

41

The Kundalini

The Cosmologist was also a Cosmographer.

Not only did Sri Aurobindo say that there were no gaps between the planes but he also explained that each plane is "in communication with various worlds that belong to it."

He gave a graphic description of how the being is organized. "There are in fact two systems simultaneously active in the organisation of the being and its parts: one is concentric, a series of rings or sheaths with the psychic¹ at the centre; another is vertical, an ascension and descent, like a flight of steps, a series of superimposed planes with the supermind over mind as the crucial nodus of the transition beyond the human into the Divine."

These heavenly worlds are above the body. Below the body are the subconscious worlds. *Pātāla*, a place without light of consciousness is universal, therefore without bounds or end. It is "the dark unconscious infinite out of which this material universe has arisen—it is walled with darkness on all sides, it

' "The psychic being is the soul evolving in course of birth and rebirth." In other words, "The psychic is the support of the individual evolution; it is connected with the universal both by direct contact and through the mind, vital and body."

Page-317

seems also to have no bottom." In the Veda it is symbolized by the cave of the Panis, Sri Aurobindo clarified.

You do remember, don't you, how Mother could go from sheath¹ to sheath till she arrived at the threshold of the Formless? She had learned to do that from the Théons in Algeria.

The sheath next to the body is called the subtle physical sheath. Is that what the Theosophists call the 'aura' ? It is a sort of consciousness surrounding the body, but individual, through which we are in contact with the cosmic forces and with other beings. In spite of the closeness to the physical and resembling it somewhat, there are marked differences between the two. "For instance," Sri Aurobindo spelled out, "the subtle physical has a freedom, plasticity, intensity, power, colour, wide and manifold play (there are thousands of things there that are not here) of which, as yet, we have no possibility on earth." But earth has other qualities.

Although the knowledge contained in the Vedas and Upanishads faded with time—especially because we almost forgot the language used and the real meaning of the words—later on other Indian Yoga systems continued their inner explorations. The Tantra in particular made a thorough study of the subtle body. It also defined the worlds from which we get our emotions and feelings and sensations: our higher and lower moral qualities (*vritti*)—courage, selflessness, generosity, hope endeavour, and so on, or anger, cruelty, arrogance, jealousy, fear, greed, etc.—come to us from different planes. Tanta's emphasis is on

¹ "Sheaths is a term for bodies, because each is superimposed on the other and acts as a covering and can be cast off. Thus the physical body itself is called the food sheath and its throwing off is what is called death."

Page-318

Shakti. Its Kundalini Yoga deals with the latent power asleep in the *chakras* and the processes of awakening it. Naturally, when we speak of the chakras it is only in reference to Yoga.

Kundalini, or the Serpent Fire, is the Shakti lying coiled three and a half times round the Linga of the Muladhara. She is then at rest or asleep. Muladhara, at the base of the spine, is the physical centre. In our subtle body we have centres of consciousness which are normally quiescent. Through certain yogic processes formulated in the Tantra, the sleeping Kundalini¹ can be awakened. Then she rises up and carries the consciousness upward, opening and purifying all the chakras up to the Brahmarandhra.² There she meets the Brahman. Then she descends. Her upward movement from centre to centre is spiraling or serpentine.

"Do you know," Mother asked Satprem (4 Feb. 1961), "that the serpent is the evolutionary power? It is Shiva's creature. He always puts snakes on his head and around his neck, because it is the power of evolution, of transformation."

The chakras are the centres of inner consciousness located in the middle of the subtle body and are attached to the spinal cord. The chakras are normally knotted, it is the awakened Kundalini that unknots each of them as she rises from centre to centre. Kundalini ascends through the spinal column. A chakra is also called lotus (*padma*). "But as the subtle body penetrates and is interfused with the gross body, there is a certain

¹ *The Serpent Power*, by Sir John Woodroffe (Arthur Avalon), deals exhaustively with the Kundalini Yoga of Tantra. Here is a genuine friend of India, with his profound understanding of Indian culture.

² *Brahmarandhra*, the crown of head. Literally, the hole of Brahma!

correspondence between these chakras and certain centres in the physical proper." Normally quiescent, as we said, when the chakras are active we have the feeling that it is happening in our own body. I remember once during a meditation I felt as though my head were knocking at the ceiling quite some five metres above my head! It was only later that I learned it was the Kundalini. Others feel the action of the Force in different ways.

In the Tantra each lotus or chakra is depicted in a particular colour. The number of petals of each one is fixed. On each petal a letter from the Sanskrit alphabet is inscribed, that too in a certain colour. The description of a lotus includes its *bija* or seed-mantra mounted on an animal; also the presiding deity of the chakra, more often than not seated on his mount. Each lotus has its Shakti. The chakras¹ are sort of doors opening a communication to a certain type of world.

"I think the Tan tries acknowledge seven chakras," Mother said to Satprem (11 Oct. 1960).
"Theon however used to say that he knew more, notably two below the body and three above.
That's my experience too; I know twelve."

The seven Mother referred to are the main chakras. In Sri Aurobindo's Yoga each has a fixed psychological use and

¹ In the Tantra tradition, apart from its other attributes, a chakra is said to represent a certain substance, *dhātu*.

Muladhara: bone (*asthi-dhātu*)

Swādhishthāna: fat (*meda-dhātu*)

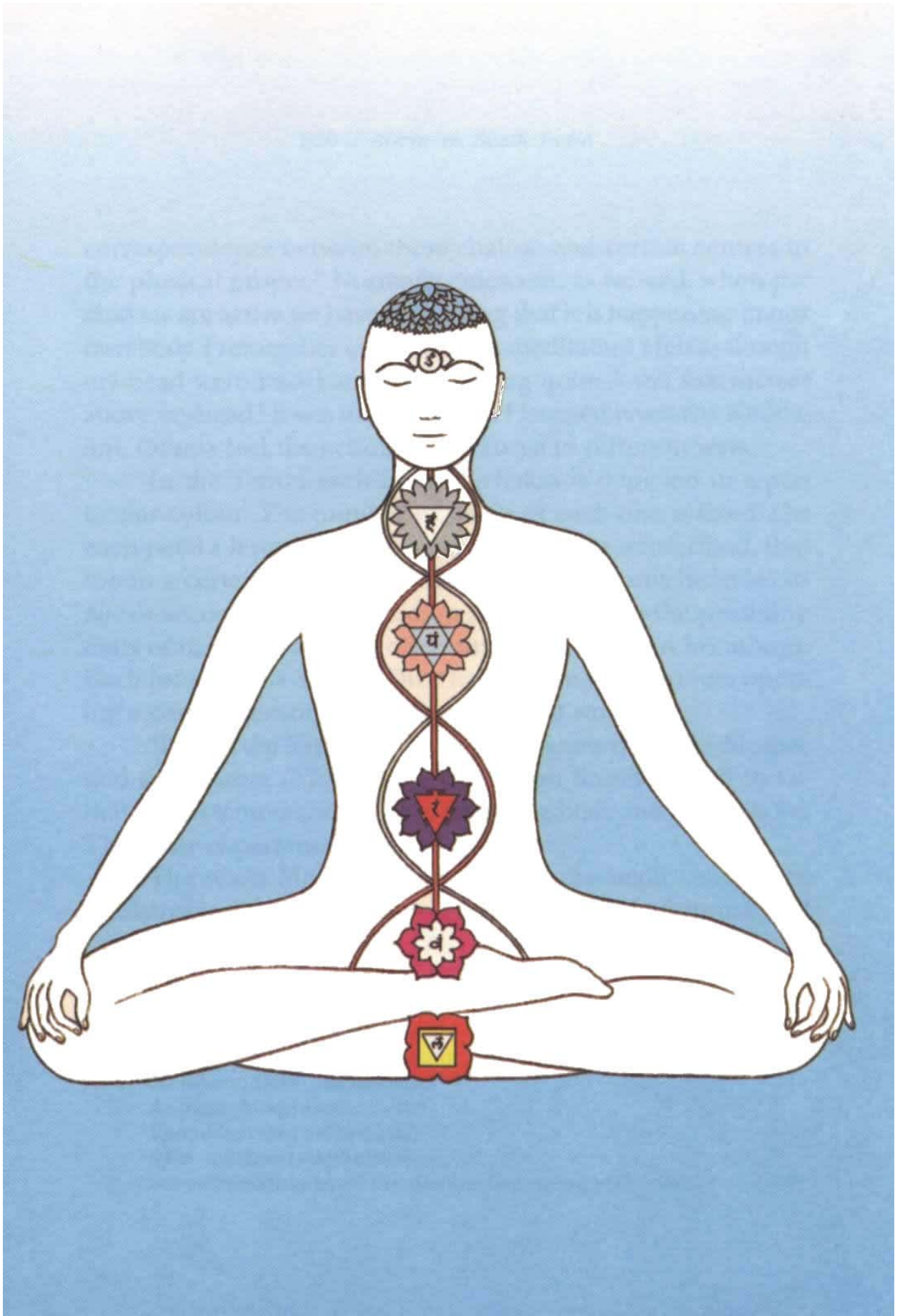
Manipura: flesh (*mamsa-dhātu*)

Anāhata: blood (*rakta-dhātu*)

Vishuddha: skin (*tvak-dhātu*)

Apiā: marrow (*rajā-dhātu*)

Sahasrāra: contains all the dhatus, beginning with semen.



general function, not necessarily reproducing details laid down in the Tantric books. Some slight variations there are in the description of the lotuses, but they are so minor as to make not much of a difference. Here I have based myself on Sri Aurobindo's texts.

Starting from the bottom as we go upward are:

1. MULĀDHĀRA: located at the base of the spine. The lotus is red and has four petals. It is the Earth-centre in the body. "This centre commands the physical consciousness and the subconscious t." It is the main and immobile support of all bodily operations, "of the material parts of nature."

2. SWĀDHISHTHĀNA: located below the navel. The lotus is deep purple-red and has six petals. This lower abdomen centre's element is Water-water-centre in the body. This centre commands "the small vital movements, the little greeds, lusts, desires, the small sense-movements," in other words, the lower vital world.

3. MANIPURA (or NĀBHIPADMA): the navel lotus, violet and with ten petals. Its element is Fire. It governs what Sri Aurobindo terms as the larger vital , in other words, "the larger life forces and the passions and larger desire-movements."

4. ANAHATA (or HRITPADMA): located in the heart. The lotus is golden pink and has twelve petals. The element here is Air. It is the seat of two powers, "commanding the higher emotional being with the psychic deep behind it." Elsewhere he elaborated: "The heart spoken of by the Upanishads corresponds with the physical cardiac centre; it is the *hrtpadma* of the Tantras. As a subtle centre, *cakra*, it is supposed to have its apex on the spine and broaden out in front."

Yogically, stomach, heart and intestine lodge the vital movements: "It is there that anger, fear, love, hate and all other psychological privileges of the animal tumble about and upset physical and moral digestion."

5. VISHUDDHA: the throat centre. The lotus is grey and has sixteen petals. Its element is Ether. This centre of speech commands "expression and all externalisation of the mind movements and mental forces."

6. ĀJNĀCHAKRA :located on the forehead between but a little above the eyebrows. The lotus is white and has two petals. It "governs the dynamic mind, will, vision, mental formation." In a word all mental faculties . When the third eye opens, it is here; then we get the occult vision.

All these six lotuses are upward turned. So Mother was quite surprised one day. It was August 1966. After the interview, having done his pranam, Satprem left the room. The exit door was to the right of Mother seated in her chair, and a little behind. Her eyes followed Satprem till he went out. For a long time she remained pensive. Finally, Mother said to me, "Strange, very strange. I have never seen a lotus bud turned downwards." To my look of incomprehension Mother elucidated, "The heart lotus is always turned upwards; it's the aspiration. But here, in him, it is turned downwards, towards the earth."

The seventh Chakra is above the head, in the apparent void. It is the thousand-petalled lotus; it is the residence of Bhagavati, the Mother of all the three worlds.

7. SAHASRĀRA¹: This full-bloomed lotus is "blue with gold

¹ *The Serpent Power*- says that this lotus "has its head turned downward."

light around." This centre, said Sri Aurobindo, commands "the higher thinking mind and the illumined mind" and opens "upwards to the intuition and over mind." He clarified that some identify it "with the brain, but that is an error—the brain is only a channel of communication situated between the thousand-petalled and the forehead centre."

Those then are the seven main chakras. Tantra however recognizes several other sub-chakras. Such as, LALANĀ at the base of the tongue, just above Vishuddha; or SOMA chakra located above Ajiiā. But more important, and better known are the seven sub-Muladhara chakras. They are, in descending order, ATAIA, VITAIA, SUTAIA, TALATAIA, RASATAIA, MAHATAIA, and PATAIA. They are different regions of the underworld leading to hell.

It will be remiss of me if I don't speak of NĀDIS, nerves. "The physical nerves" to quote Sri Aurobindo, "are part of the material body but they are extended into the subtle body and there is a connection between the two."

We, of course, have thousands of nerves (72,000 says Tantra). But in the Kundalini yoga three play a decisive role. SUSHUMNA, fiery red, is inside the spinal column. On both sides of the spine are the feminine IDA, pale, likened to the moon, and the male PINCAIA, red, likened to the Sun. They alternate from right to left and left to right as they go round the chakras. Reaching the Ajiia chakra they proceed to the nostrils. Inside Sushumna is a subtler nerve Vajrini, and within it is the subtlest one, Chitrini. As she travels from lotus to lotus. the awakened Kundalini takes the channel of Chitrini. It is not without interest to note that both Ida and Pingala denote Time, while Sushumna devours time.

Page-325

Such is the ascent of the Kundalini Shakti. Sri Aurobindo sums it all up in a few lines. "There is a force which accompanies the growth of the new consciousness and at once grows with it and helps it to come about and to perfect itself. This force is the Yoga-Shakti. It is here coiled up and asleep in all the centres of our inner being (*chakras*) and is at the base what is called in the Tantras the Kundalini Shakti. But it is also above us, above our head, as the Divine Force—not there coiled up, involved, asleep, but awake, scient, potent, extended and wide; it is there waiting for manifestation and to this force we have to open ourselves—to the power of the Mother."

In the Tantra the emphasis is on the ascent of the Kundalini. In Sri Aurobindo's Yoga the descent plays a crucial role. He conceived it as the '*Seven Suns of the Supermind*.'" "The sun in the yoga is the symbol of the supermind and the supermind is the first power of the Supreme which one meets across the border where the experience of the spiritualised mind ceases...."

Let us note that there is no separate centre for the Supra-mental as it is not organized in the body.

The Seven Suns of the Supermind :

1. The Sun of Supramental Truth,—Knowledge-Power originating the supramental creation.

Descent into the Sahasradala (the full bloomed thousand petaled lotus above the head).

2. The Sun of Supramental Light and Will-Power, transmitting the Knowledge-Power as dynamic vision and command to create, found and organise the supramental creation. Descent into the Ajna Chakra, the centre between the eyes.

Page-326

3. The Sun of Supramental Word, embodying the Knowledge-Power, empowered to express and arrange the supra-mental creation.

Descent into the Throat Centre.

4. The Sun of Supramental Love, Beauty, and Bliss, releasing the Soul of the Knowledge-Power to vivify and harmonize the supramental creation.

Descent into the Heart-Lotus.

5. The Sun of Supramental Force dynamited as a power and source of life to support the supramental creation. Descent into the Navel Centre.

6. The Sun of Life-Radiances (Power-Rays) distributing the dynamis and pouring it into concrete formations. Descent into the Penultimate Centre (Swadhishtana, below the navel).

7. The Sun of Supramental Substance-Energy and Form-Energy empowered to embody the supramental life and stabilise the creation.

Descent into the Muladhara.

My father was initiated to the traditional yoga before I was born. Apart from hearing subtle sounds—as of bells and conches, etc.—and seeing lights and forms, he became familiar with the Kundalini. He frequently experienced his backbone becoming full of light as she ascended, and a white light rising straight well beyond his head and becoming stationary in the sky.

Personally, I never practised any traditional Yoga system, let alone Tantra. I only followed Sri Aurobindo and Mother. So what happened?

"In our yoga" said Sri Aurobindo, "there is no willed

opening of the chakras, they open of themselves by the descent of the Force. In the Tantric discipline they open from down upwards, the Muladhara first; in our yoga, they open from up downward. But the ascent of the force from the Muladhara does take place."

For the pleasure of the readers let me quote a few lines from Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* describing the ascent and the descent of Kundalini.

Out of the Inconscient's soulless mindless night
A flaming Serpent rose released from sleep.
It rose billowing its coils and stood erect
And climbing mightily, stormily on its way
It touched her centres with its flaming mouth ;
As if a fiery kiss had broken their sleep,
They bloomed and laughed surcharged with light and bliss.
Then at the crown it joined the Eternal's space.
In the flower of the head, in the flower of Matter's base,
In each divine stronghold and Nature-knot
It held together the mystic stream which joins
The viewless summits with the unseen depths,
The string of forts that make the frail defence
Safeguarding us against the enormous world,
Our lines of self-expression in its Vast.
An image sat of the original Power
Wearing the mighty Mother's form and face.
Armed, bearer of the weapon and the sign
Whose occult might no magic can imitate,
Manifold yet one she sat, a guardian force :
A saviour gesture stretched her lifted arm,

Page-327

And symbol of some native cosmic strength,
A sacred beast lay prone below her feet,
A silent flame-eyed mass of living force.

.....

In the country of the lotus of the head

Which thinking mind has made its busy space,
In the castle of the lotus twixt the brows
Whence it shoots the arrows of its sight and will,
In the passage of the lotus of the throat
Where speech must rise and the expressing mind
And the heart's impulse run towards word and fact,
A glad uplift and a new working came.

.....

In the kingdom of the lotus of the heart
Love chanting its pure hymeneal hymn
Made life and body mirrors of sacred joy
And all the emotions gave themselves to God.
In the navel lotus' broad imperial range
Its proud ambitions and its master lusts
Were tamed into instruments of a great calm sway
To do a work of God on earthly soil.
In the narrow nether center's petty parts
Its childish game of daily dwarf desires
Was changed into a sweet and boisterous play,
A romp of little gods with life in Time.
In the deep place where once the Serpent slept,
There came a grip on Matter's giant powers
For large utilities in life's little space ;
A firm ground was made for Heaven's descending might.

Page-328

42

Laying Down the Foundation

It was a singular discovery of Sri Aurobindo's that the Supermind was everywhere, even in the atoms, just as mind and life were there. The only trouble was that the Supermind was not yet a part of manifestation, in the sense that it was not the organizer of life and mind. Being an effective power, the Supramental can work its way if once it can be activated in matter. What a

trouble that proved to be! His plan, you see, was to get the organizing power of the Supermind—the Truth-Consciousness—work everywhere, down to the physical plane. That was the only way to effect a radical change of the present human nature. Now, the seed of our nature is lodged in the subconscious. Therefore to cut the seed out he had to plunge into the unknown depths of the abyss. A heroic, epic battle which could be the theme of another story.

In the first flush of discovery, he was, however, full of enthusiasm.

Let us then look at some of his earliest letters available, which will also help us to get some insight into his activities as they were unfolding.

The first letter was written from Raghavan House.

Page-330

"I need some place of refuge in which I can complete my Yoga unassailed and build up other souls around me. It seems to me that Pondicherry is the place appointed by those who are Beyond, but you know how much effort is needed to establish the thing that is purposed upon the material plane—

"I am developing the necessary powers for bringing down the spiritual on the material plane, and I am now able to put myself into men and change them, removing the darkness and bringing light, giving them a new heart and a new mind. This I can do with great swiftness and completeness with those who are near me, but I have also succeeded with men hundreds of miles away. I have also been given the power to read men's characters and hearts, even their thoughts, but this power is not yet absolutely complete, nor can I use it always and in all cases. The power of guiding action by the mere exercise of will is also developing, but it is not so powerful as yet as the other. My communication with the other world is yet of a troubled character, though I am certainly in communication with some very great powers." He called them his 'guides.'

"What I perceive most clearly, is that the principal object of my Yoga is to remove absolutely and entirely every possible source of error and ineffectiveness, of error in order that the Truth I shall eventually show to men may be perfect, and of ineffectiveness in order that the work of changing the world, so far as I have to assist it, may be entirely victorious and irresistible. It is for this reason that I have been going through so long a discipline and that the more brilliant and

mighty results of Yoga have been so long withheld. I have been kept busy laying down the foundation, a work severe and painful. It is only

Page-331

now that the edifice is beginning to rise upon the sure and perfect foundation that has been laid." The letter is dated 12 July 1911.

The second letter is dated 20 September 1911.

"My Yoga is proceeding with great rapidity, but I defer writing to you of the results until certain experiments in which I am now engaged, have yielded fruit sufficient to establish beyond dispute the theory and system of Yoga which I have formed and which is giving great results not only to me, but to the young men who are with me.... I expect these results within a month, if all goes well."

The third letter with uncertain date, but written from Raghavan House sometime in 1912, is addressed to Ananda Rao. Remember the boy and his mischievous tactics in the train from Deoghar to Baroda? By now, in 1912, he was a young man. Some relevant excerpts.

"Dear Anandarao,

"I cannot understand why on earth people should make up their minds that I have become a Sannyasin! I have even made it clear enough in the public Press that I have not taken Sannyasa but am practising Yoga as a householder, not even a Brahmachari. The Yoga I am practising has not the ghost of a connection with Sannyasa. It is a Yoga meant for life and life only. Its object is perfection of the moral condition and mental and physical being along with the possession of certain powers, —the truth of which I have been establishing by continuous practical experiment,—with the object of carrying out a certain mission in life which God has given me. Therefore there is or ought to be no difficulty on that score.

Page-332

"The question about the Siddhi is a little difficult to answer precisely. There are four parts of the Siddhi, roughly, moral, mental, physical and *practical*. Starting from December 1908, the moral

has taken me three years and a half and may now be considered complete. The mental has taken two years of regular Sadhana and for the present purpose may be considered complete; the physical is backward and *nearing* completion only in the immunity from disease,—which I am now attempting successfully to perfect and test by exposure to abnormal conditions." In spite of a sore throat he would continually expose throat and breast to December's cold. Result? no cold, no cough. His long fast of twenty-three days when he walked eight hours a day, was behind him. Now another arduous condition he imposed on himself was copious eating and drinking without regard to satiety. "The physical also does not matter so much for practical purposes, as the moral, mental and a certain number of practical Siddhis are sufficient. It is these practical Siddhis that alone cause delay. I have had first to prove to myself their existence and utility, secondly to develop them in myself so as to be working forces, thirdly to make them actually effective for life and impart them to others. The development will, I think, be complete in another two months, but the application to life and the formation of my helpers will take some time,—for the reason that I shall then have a greater force of opposition to surmount than in the purely educative exercises I have hitherto practised. The full application to life will, I think, take three years more, but it is only for a year of that time (if so long) that I expect to need outside assistance. I believe that I may have to stay in French India for another year. I presume

Page-333

that is what the question about my future means. But on this point also I cannot speak with certainty. If, however, it refers to my future work, that is a big question and does not yet admit of a full answer. I may say briefly that I have been given a religious and philosophical mission, to re-explain the Veda and Vedanta (Upanishads) in the ancient sense which I have recovered by actual experience in Yoga and to popularise the new system of Yoga (new in arrangement and object) which has been revealed to me and which, as I progress, I am imparting to the young men staying with me and to others in Pondicherry. I have also to spread certain ideas about God and life by literary work, speech and practice, to try and bring about certain social changes and, finally, to do a certain work for my country in particular, as soon as the means are put in my hands. All this to be done by God's help only and not to be begun till things and myself are ready."

The next letter we produce here was written to Motilal Roy of Chandernagore. The date is uncertain, but I am inclined to think that the letter was written just after 15 August 1912. Here we give but a few excerpts.

"15th August is usually a turning point or a notable day for me personally either in Sadhana or life,—indirectly only for others. This time it has been very important for me. My subjective Sadhana may be said to have received its final seal and something like its consummation by a prolonged realisation and dwelling in Parabrahman for many hours. Since then, egoism is dead for all in me except the Annamaya Atma,—the physical self which awaits one farther realisation before it is entirely liberated from occasional visitings or external touches of the

Page-334

old separated existence.

"My future Sadhan is for life, practical knowledge and Shakti, not the essential knowledge or Shakti in itself which I have got already, but knowledge and Shakti established in the same physical self and directed to my work in life.

"... I am now busy with an explanation of the Isha Upanishad in twelve chapters. I am at the eleventh now and will finish in a few days. Afterwards I shall begin the second part of the series and send it to you when finished.

"I have also begun but on a very small scale the second part of my work which will consist in making men for the new age by imparting whatever Siddhi I get to those who are chosen. From this point of view our little colony here is a sort of seed plot, a laboratory. The things I work out in it, are then extended outside. Here the work is progressing at last on definite lines and with a certain steadiness, not very rapid, but still definite results are forming."

So began his work for the earth.

In his explorative travels through the inner worlds, Sri Aurobindo saw enough to convince him that the spiritual development of the race was but a midterm step, not the final one. The evolutionary earth-consciousness must take the definitive stride forward at one time or another. Now. It was poised to do that. All it needed was a trigger. Who? What? Sri Aurobindo also needed to know how far humans could help to speeding up the process. So he cultivated his seed plot.

Page-335

The Clue

It is Bharati who wrote: "All new knowledge is 'revealed,' " Suvrata¹ reported. She repeated what Bharati had said: "A few days back I asked Sri Aurobindo how he got his new and wonderful theory of the interpretation of the Vedas: 'It was shown to me'—he replied and I knew that he was saying that in an absolutely literal sense."

There is no doubt at all that Bharati was but stating a fact. Sri Aurobindo said as much in the undated letter to Motilal Roy from which we quoted some fragments in the last chapter. Here are some more parts from it.

"I am now getting a clearer idea of that work and I may as well impart something of that idea to you; since you look to me as the centre, you should know what is likely to radiate out of that centre.

"1. To re-explain the Sanatana² Dharma [the Eternal Law] to the human intellect in all its parts, from a new standpoint.

¹ Mme Yvonne Gaebele, in *Revue Historique* 1955, p. 152.

² *Sanatana* does not mean 'old'; it means that which is eternal, beyond the three times, indestructible, that which continues uninterrupted through all change.

This work is already beginning, and three parts of it are being clearly worked out. Sri Krishna has shown me the true meaning of the Vedas, not only so, but he has shown me a new Science of Philology showing the process and origins of human speech so that a new Nirukta¹ can be formed and the new interpretation of the Veda based upon it. He has also shown me the meaning of all in the Upanishads that is not understood either by Indians or Europeans. I have therefore to re-explain the whole Vedanta and Veda in such a way that it will be seen how all religion arises out of it and is one everywhere. In this way it will be proved that India is the centre of the religious life of the world and its destined saviour through the Sanatana Dharma.

"2. On the basis of Vedic knowledge, to establish a Yogic Sadhana which will not only liberate the soul, but prepare a perfect humanity and help in the restoration of the Satya Yuga [the Age of Truth]. That work has to begin now but it will not be complete till the end of the Kali [the Iron Age].

"3. India being the centre, to work for her restoration to her proper place in the world; but this restoration must be effected as a part of the above work and by means of Yoga applied to human means and instruments, not otherwise.

"4. A perfect humanity being intended, society will have to be remodeled so as to be fit to contain that perfection."

We have picked out a few relevant notes as Sri Aurobindo jotted them down in July 1912, so that we all may know when it happened and how it happened.

¹ *Nirukta*, Vedic etymology, composed by Yaska. Let us note at once that Sri Aurobindo did not write a 'new Nirukta' but his *Origins of Aryan Speech*" shows to where he was leading.

Page-337

"July 13th. Ananda Mimansa¹ begun last night; the first adhyaya² completed this morning.

"July 14th. Yesterday by a sudden opening of faculty Sanscrit prose, even of the Kadambari³ type, which was until the last reading difficult to understand, troublesome & wearying to the brain, has become perfectly easy & intelligible at the first reading without labour. A similar result is coming in Sanscrit poetry but more slowly....

"The bhasasiddhi⁴ of Sanscrit prose, tested, proved to be well established.

"July 15th. The movement of the intellect in difficult Sanscrit poetry is much easier and stronger & sometimes the vijna-namaya knowledge manifests (smarta sruti') with regard to the meaning of unknown words."

Sri Aurobindo's notations say that the revealed knowledge of old Sanscrit had come by 'a sudden opening.' However, I may be allowed to point out that the solid groundwork laid over the

¹ *Ānanda Mimāṃsā*, a part of the Taittiriya Upanishad (ch. 8, part 2) inquiring into the nature of bliss and giving the following scale to measure it out: starting from the happiness of a healthy and prosperous young man, that of ancestors, gandharvas and devas is a hundredfold; the happiness of India again is a hundred times that of the devas, and so on. The final limit of happiness is that of the Brahman, which is the supreme Bliss.

² *Adhyāya*: chapter.

³ *Kādambari*, a Sanskrit novel by Bānabhatta (c. seventh century AD), the royal poet in the court of emperor Harshavardhana.

⁴ *Bhāsāsiddhi*: *bhāsā* = language; *siddhi* = perfection, accomplishment.

⁵ *Smarta Shruti*; *Smarta*: derived from *smṛiti* = memory. *Smṛiti*: spiritual hearing. Among several main spiritual paths—Saivism, Vaishnavism, etc.—Smartism also is another traditional yogic path followed by many Hindus. A Smarta, a traditionalist, takes the line of Knowledge—*jñāna yoga*—to achieve liberation, *moksha*.

Page-338

years had made possible this 'sudden opening.' Remember how already at Baroda R.C. Dutt had admired Arabindo Babu's English rendering of some segments of the Mahabharata? It was also at Baroda that Arabindo Babu had taken up translations of some Upanishads.

Let us continue with Sri Aurobindo's notations of 1912, and find out how not only Sanskrit but his general literary works were progressing.

"July 18th. Sahitya¹ was resumed today, the Life Divine commenced; also the systematic study of Magha,² an orderly arrangement of material (*chh* dhatus³) for the Structure of Sanscrit Speech and a review of past Prerana⁴ records begun.

"July 19th. The Life Divine continued, Rigveda resumed, nirukta & prerana slightly, kavya"¹ touched, Bhasa proceeded with. The difficulty of understanding Magha now only persists, ordinarily, where the meaning of important words is unknown.

"July 20th. Bhasa & the Life Divine have already been resumed.

"During the day the karma¹ was strengthened—Rodogune⁷ revised, prerana liberated from its shackles, nirukta strongly brought forward (*chh* roots), the RV [Rigveda] proceeded with and, at night, the collection of materials for the RV. Bhasa and

¹ *Sahitya* = literature.

' Māgha (c. eighth century AD) , a Sanskrit poet, born in Gujarat, lived after Harshavardhana. His only surviving work is Shishupalavadha (The killing of Shishupala).

¹ *Dliālu* = verb, metal, substance. *Chh* = a group of Sanskrit roots.

⁴ *Prerana* = inspiration.

⁵ *Kāvya* = poetry. " *Karma* = work.

⁷ A play by Sri Aurobindo.

Sahitya were continued.

"July 21st. The doing of work in larger masses has begun this morning with the Rigveda. More of this collection of material will be done today, without interfering with other work.

"The last suggestion was fulfilled. All the usual work has been done, but the collection of material replaced the usual comment on RV.

"July 24th. Epic poetry resumed.

"July 25th. Bhasa in Rigveda strengthened, *vijnana*¹ working normally."

As regards the literary work the next entries are in November. In the meantime Sri Aurobindo wrote several times to Motilal Roy that he was in need of R. C. Dutt's Bengali translation of the Vedas, "or any translation for that matter which gives the European version." Evidently Sri Aurobindo was collecting materials for the commentary on the Rig-veda.

"November 12. The literary work is now being done, faultlessly in manner, faultlessly in substance, almost without fault in style.

"November 14. The Sahitya [literature] proceeds perfectly, although not always compassing an entirely flawless expression at the first thought. Redound, in its final form, is completed & only needs a slight revision correcting an inconsiderable number of expressions. Today the Isha Upanishad² will be resumed &

¹ *Vijnana* = supra-intellectual knowledge.

² *Isha Upanishad*. First translation was published in the first issue of *Karma-yogin*, in June 1909, although Sri Aurobindo had already translated it in Baroda. The new translation with a new commentary was begun in the first issue of the *Arya* in August 1914 and continued till May 1915.

Page-340

steadily pursued till it is completed in a perfect form. Farther rewriting will be unnecessary.

"November 17. Only the Sahitya proceeds smoothly & seems to develop in security.

"November 19. The Sahitya still improves in sustained quality under the stress of rapidity, but the physical brain cannot yet respond to an unlimited call upon its vital energy.

"November 28. The Secret of Veda is now fixed & exact confirmations occur frequently.

"December 13. Today's experience has thrown a clear light on many expressions in the Veda especially in relation to Indra and the Rudras."

Sri Aurobindo did not note in his Yoga diary *all* the various literary work he was simultaneously doing. Bhagavat Purana, for instance, which he was translating into English.

But those were early days yet. With the passage of time, as his Yogic experiences evolved, so did his literary output.

But to come back to the Vedas.

We know that languages evolve, words change their meanings. For instance, when we were young the word 'gay' stood for lively, cheerful; but look what it has come to mean in a few decades.

The language of the Vedas was so old, so old, a type of Sanskrit from times lost in the mist of oblivion. Sri Krishna told Arjuna, "This is the imperishable Yoga I declared unto Viva-swan, Vivasvan revealed it to Manu and Manu to Ikshvaku told it. Thus was it known to the royal sages by hereditary transmission, till by the great lapse of time this Yoga was lost This is the same ancient Yoga that I have told unto thee today, because

Page-341

thou art my lover and my friend; for this is the highest of all the inner truths."

If Yogas could be lost, why not languages? That is what really happened. Too great was the lapse of time. For not only Yaska but a long line of etymologists and glossarists before him had made attempts at preserving the original sense of the Vedic words. In India the real meaning of the original passages was forgotten: "Even in the earlier days of classical erudition ... the original sense of the words, the lines, the allusions, the clue to the structure of the thought had been long lost or obscured; nor was there in the erudite that intuition or that spiritual experience which might have partly recovered the lost secret," wrote Sri Aurobindo in *the Secret of the Veda*. A tongue unintelligible to us may be correctly understood once a clue has been found, he pointed out. Really, how, without the key to the symbolism of the Riks, could one understand them or translate them?

Something even more dangerous was happening. In the nineteenth century Europe the young science of philology set about interpreting those immemorial texts. It was more a conjectural science than a real science. Its laborious construction was built not on facts but on conjectures. "We feel after all," wrote Sri Aurobindo, "that an accumulation of conjectures does not constitute proof and that a single clear & direct substantial statement in one sense or the other would outweigh all these ingenious inferences, these brilliant imaginings. To begin with a hypothesis is always permissible,—it is the usual mode of scientific discovery; but a hypothesis must be supported by facts. To support it by a mass of other hypotheses is to abuse &

exceed the permissibility of conjecture in scientific research."

European scholarship had turned the light of its comparative philology on the Veda. It was floating some wild theories, among them the obnoxious 'Aryan invasion' theory. The result? We all know. A widely popularized error. Sri Aurobindo, however, predicted that it will "prove to be a modern legend and not ancient history."

Let us recall that most European scholars were either Christian missionaries or funded by churches. Wherever they have gone it has been their policy to uproot the locals from their own native culture. Any foul means was good enough for these messengers of 'good news.' It should not then cause us any surprise to learn of their endeavour to complete their degradation of the Veda—"the babblings of children"—and their denigration of the Vedic Rishis—"half-savage,"

"barbarous Aryan invaders." They were also backed by their government. In this case by Her Majesty's government.

The task set out before Sri Aurobindo was to prove that the Veda, "not only by historical continuity, but in real truth & substance is the parent & bedrock of all later Hinduism ... & the later unorthodox religions. From this quarry all have hewn their materials or from this far-off source drawn unknowingly their waters; from some hidden seed in the Veda they have burgeoned into their wealth of branchings & foliage."

Sri Aurobindo had found the clue to the secret of the Veda. He could now unlock the secret of the past, the messages and meaning of the Riks. "The substance of the Vedic hymns" he wrote way back in 1911, "is the record of certain psychological experiences which are the natural results, still attainable &

Page-343

repeatable in our own experience, of an ancient type of Yoga practised certainly in India, practised probably in ancient Greece, Asia Minor & Egypt in prehistoric times."

For those who cared to follow "the clue I have myself received, the path and its principal turnings," the signposts were clearly indicated.

It was 12 December 1938. Sri Aurobindo was lying in his bed after the knee accident. He was explaining about different types of poetry. He quoted the following lines from the Rig-Veda.

"The seers climb Indra like a ladder, Along with the ascent all that remains to be done becomes clear." (Rig-Veda 1.10.1-2)

"It is an extraordinary passage expressing perfectly a spiritual experience. Indra is the Divine Mind and as one ascends higher and higher in it or on it, all that has to be done becomes clearly visible. One who has that experience can at once see how perfectly true it is and that it must have been written from experience and not from imagination."

Again from the Rig-Veda (V.19.1):

"Condition after condition is born Covering after covering becomes conscious In the lap of the Mother he sees."

44

The Have-Nots

"The seers climb Indra like a ladder," fits the bill. Exactly. To our Seer much that remained to be done was becoming clear.

Let us hear it from the horse's mouth.

"All these matters as well as the pursuance of my work," wrote Sri Aurobindo to Motilal Roy in another undated letter, "depend on the success of the struggle which is the crowning movement of my Sadhana—viz, the attempt to apply knowledge and power to the events and happenings of the world without the necessary instrumentality of physical action. What I am attempting is to establish the normal working of the Siddhis in life i.e. the perception of thoughts, feelings and happenings of other beings and in other places throughout the world without any use of information by speech or any other data; 2nd, the communication of the ideas and feelings I select to others (individuals, groups, nations) by mere transmission of willpower; 3rd the silent compulsion on them to act according to these communicated ideas and feelings; 4th the determining of

'January 1913 is the tentative date suggested by the editors.

events, actions and results of action throughout the world by pure silent will-power. When I wrote to you last, I had begun the general application of these powers which God has been developing in me for the last two or three years, but, as I told you, I was getting badly beaten. This is no longer the case, for in the 1st, 2nd and even in 3^d I am now largely successful, although the action of these powers is not yet perfectly organised. It is only in the 4th that I feel a serious resistance. I can produce single results with perfect accuracy, I can produce general results with difficulty and after a more or less prolonged struggle, but I can neither be sure of producing the final decisive result I am aiming at nor of securing that orderly arrangement of events which

prevents the results from being isolated and only partially effective. In some directions I seem to succeed, in others partly to fail and partly to succeed, while in some fields, e.g., this matter of financial equipment both for my personal life and for my work I have hitherto entirely failed. When I shall succeed even partially in that, then I shall know that my hour of success is at hand and that I have got rid of the past Karma in myself and others, which stands in our way and helps the forces of Kali-yuga to baffle our efforts."

Almost from the beginning of the Pondicherry days, in letter after letter, Sri Aurobindo spoke about the financial difficulties he was facing. When he wrote to Anandarao in mid-1912, he detailed his needs.

"The amounts of money I shall need for the year in question are Rs. 300 to clear up the liabilities I have contracted during the last nine or ten months (in which I have had only fortuitous help) and some Rs. 1200 (or 1500 reckoning up to

Page-346

August 1913) to maintain myself and those I am training. I had hoped to get the money from a certain gentleman¹ who had promised me Rs. 2000 a year for the purpose and given it for the first year from October 1910 to October 1911. But there are great difficulties in the way....

"At present I am at the height of my difficulties, in debt, with no money for the morrow, besieged in Pondicherry and all who could help are in temporary or permanent difficulties or else absent and beyond communication. I take it, from my past experiences as a sign that I am nearing the end of the period of trial. I would ask you if you can do no more, at least to send me some help to tide over the next month or two. After that period for certain reasons, it will be easier to create means, if they are not created for me."

It comes to us as a shock to learn the poor living condition of Sri Aurobindo and his household. On 3 July 1912 Sri Aurobindo states baldly their actual situation.

"Your money (by letter and wire) and clothes reached safely," he wrote to Motilal Roy. "The French Post Office here has got into the habit (not yet explained) of not delivering your letters till Friday... I do not know whether this means anything.... It may be a natural evolution of French Republicanism. Or it may be something else.... The postman may be paid by the police.

Personally, however, I am inclined to believe in the Republican administration theory,—the Republic always likes to have time on its hands.

"I have not written all this time because I was not allowed

K. V. Rangaswamy Iyengar, the zamindar of Kodailam; see ch. 5 for details.

Page-347

to put pen to paper for some time,—that is all. I send enclosed a letter to our Marathi friend. If he can give you anything for me, please send it without the least delay. If not, I must ask you to procure for me by will-power or any other power in heaven or on earth Rs. 50 at least as a loan. The situation just now is that we have Rs. 1 *V-i*

"Srinivasa is also without money. As to Bharati living on nothing means an uncertain quantity... No doubt God will provide, but He has contracted a bad habit of waiting till the last moment. I only hope He does not wish us to learn how to live on a minus quantity like Bharati."

Elsewhere he explained that not only for the daily necessities but also "I need some extra money badly now for materials for the work I have now seriously entered on in connection with the Veda and the Sanskrit language."

Finally, so straitened became their circumstances that they could no longer afford to live in Raghavan House. In April 1913, from European quarters they shifted to the west of the Canal. A fact duly noted by the British government with deep satisfaction.

But Motilal had seen for himself the situation when he came to Pondicherry in mid-1911.

He came from Chandernagore along with two other special Representatives to the French Council in Pondicherry, for about a month and a half. But it was dangerous to meet Sri Aurobindo openly as Alexandra David-Neel had found out to her dismay. Letting a few days go by, Motilal went to Odeon Salai, a big open ground close to the Botanical Garden, where a game of football was in progress. Moni, Nolini, Saurin, Bejoy

Page-348



Raghavan Chetty House as it was in the 1950s

were among the players—quite good, it seems. But that's another story, and we need not go into that now.

Anyway when Saurin saw Motilal he drew near him, as though in the movement of the game. Then without uttering a word he pointed towards a young Pondicherian. Motilal later found out that the youth was Joseph David, a future eminent citizen, who was to become a barrister and eventually the mayor of Pondicherry. But that was still in futurity.

That very day, however, as night began spreading her cloak of darkness, Motilal wrapped himself in a Madrasi shawl and silently got into the *pousse-pousse* Joseph David had brought. The *pousse-pousse* took them to St. Louis street, and stopped by a two-storeyed house. But all was in darkness! Motilal's heart beat faster. David descended and knocked at a door. As soon as the door opened, David got on the carriage and left. Motilal met Moni as he entered. He met others also. Then he was taken up the stairs.

It had been more than one year since Motilal had seen his Guru. But he could hardly see! His eyes overflowed with tears. As he calmed down he was pained to see how thin Sri Aurobindo had become. His eyes, however, were calm and sweetness poured out from them.

After a long talk it was decided that Motilal would visit only twice a week, on Tuesdays and Fridays, so as not to draw the attention of the police stationed at the entrance. They were there to collect information on all those who came calling. "That was why," Nolini reminisced, "Motilal when he first came to Pondicherry had come dressed as an Anglo-Indian, and he never entered our house, except by the backdoor and under

cover of darkness after nightfall." The household garbage was dumped in the narrow lane near the backdoor, remarked Motilal.

And do you know why Motilal saw the house in darkness when he first came? Well, because they had just two lamps to share between the six of them. Sri Aurobindo had a candle lamp in his room upstairs, and a small kerosene lamp was used in the kitchen-cum-dining room. At night, when dinner was ready the candle lamp was taken down to the kitchen.

Sri Aurobindo used to bathe last and go directly to the kitchen where the other members would be waiting for him after taking their baths. The boys cooked by turns. They—at least Moni and Nolini—had lessons in Latin, Greek and French from Sri Aurobindo. V. Ramaswami (Va. Ra.) may have taken part.

Va. Ra. joined Sri Aurobindo's household in 1912. An anecdote of his brings to life the pitiful living condition of those days.

"One fine morning," wrote Va. Ra., "in Aurobindo's house there was hardly any money for marketing. He asked us what things we had got for cooking. There was some rice, chillies, gingerly oil and salt. The chillies were fried; rice was cooked and there was a grand dinner with the salt added thereto. You must have seen Aurobindo, then! What a remarkable man! The man who could roll in wealth and command any convenience! He wanted to finish that day, with that hearty meal."

Page-351

45

One Day

The bad shape of the economy made Sri Aurobindo move to a small house in the centre of the "native" quarters: N°59 rue de la Mission Etrangere, or Mission Street; Mata coil Street to the locals. Sri Aurobindo lived in this fourth house for six months, from April to October 1913. With him were Bejoy, Moni, Nolini, Saurin and V. Ramaswami. Two Bengalis, Nagen Nag and Biren Roy, joined them in July 1913.

With no improvement in their pecuniary state in sight, Sri Aurobindo wrote to Motilal detailing their plight.

"Our position here now is at its worst; since all efforts to get help from here have been temporarily fruitless and we have to depend on your Rs. 50 which is insufficient. We have to pay Rs. 15 for rent, other expenses come to not less, and the remaining Rs. 20 cannot suffice for the food expenses of five people." There Sri Aurobindo forgot to count himself! "Even any delay in your money arriving makes our Manager [Nolini] 'see darkness'. That is why we had to telegraph....

"There is no 'reason' for my not writing to you. I never now-a-days act on reasons, but only as an automaton in the hands of Another; sometimes He lets me know the reasons of

Page-352

my action, sometimes He does not, but I have to act,—or refrain from action,—all the same, according as He wills."

Well, to give our readers a graphic view of the living condition of the household of those Bengali Nationalists, we reproduce a sampling of some daily accounts' kept by Sri Aurobindo in May-June 1913.

Miscellaneous Expenses

Suresh	0.0.6	
Cigarettes	0.1.6	June 1 st
Oil	0.2.0	"
Feast, last month	2.0.0	June 2 nd
Saurin	0.0.3	June 4 th
Brooms	0.1.0	June 9 th
Telegram	0.6.0	" 11 th
Barber	0.2.6	" 15 th
Nolini	0.0.6	June 13 th

Store Account & Standing

Rice	11.0.0	May 31 st
Tea	0.13.0	"
Matches	0.0.9	"
Spices	1.10.6	"
S's cigarettes	0.8.0	June 1 st

¹ From an article by Nirodbaran, "Sri Aurobindo's Bazar Account," published in *Mother India*, November 1977. Sri Aurobindo wrote this account in a notebook he called "Record of Yogic details." The figures are: rupees, annas, paisas.

Cigarettes (Self)	0.1.3	June 1 st
" "	0.1.3	June 4 th
" "	0.0.6	" 10 th
" "	0.1.3	" 12 th
Daily Meal		
Breakfast	0.2.6	June 1 st
Meals	0.8.6	" "
Breakfast	0.2.3	" 2 nd
Meals	0.4.0	"
Extra for feast	0.4.7 (?)	"
Extraordinary Charity	6.0.0	June 2 nd
to be recovered from May & July		
Bejoy's journey	47.14.0	June 11 th

Dear reader, rest assured that all this does not mean that they always went without food. Sri Aurobindo's 'domestic' time-vision—still a bit uncertain, a bit mixed up—showed him what they were going to eat at their various meals. "As it turned out," says his note dated 25 January 1913, "there were both prawns and fish for the night's meal, bread for breakfast & prawns and fish again for the day's meal."

Not much is known about this red-tiled house as no traces of it could be found later on. What we do know has come down to us from K. Amrita, who was to become the manager of Sri Aurobindo Ashram. In 1913, however, all that was in the cave of futurity. Amrita was but a callow youth then. He recalls the past in his book *Old Long Since*.

Let me briefly introduce him. All the same I wish you had met him. Such a delightful man! Pleasant and humorous. He was born on 19 September 1895 in a high caste Brahmin family His name was Arumuda Iyengar. His father, Rajagopalachari Iyengar was the munsiffs of

Kazhipervenbakam where Amrita was born (hence the K. before his name). The village was not far from Pondicherry. Amrita's uncle was living in Pondicherry. At the age of ten, in 1905, Amrita came there for his studies and joined the Calvé School.

Bharati took refuge in the French enclave in 1908, and other revolutionaries followed suit. Politics was in the air. Amrita's uncle himself was a politician. He, like other adults, talked about it a great deal at home. Four names occurred again and again: Tilak, Bipin Pal, Lajpatrai—the famous Lal-Bal-Pal—and Aurobindo. Those were the men who dared to ask publicly independence from the foreign rule. Strange are the ways of destiny. Because, said Amrita, of the four names "only one name caught my heart and soul. Just to hear the name—Aurobindo— was enough." He was thrilled with delight when he heard that Sri Aurobindo had come to "the very town where I had come!" Through his politician uncle he had come to know about Sri Aurobindo's arrival "on the third day itself." A strong desire took hold of him that he must see his Hero. However, his repeated requests to Bharati were met with silence. His repeated requests to his uncle brought evasive replies. He was being taught patience. It was only two years later, in 1912, that Amrita got his first glimpse of Sri Aurobindo. It came about in this way.

' Munsiff = an officer trying suits at the lowest civil court.

Amrita had a neighbour, Krishnaswami Chettiar, a well-to-do man who was a great devotee of Bharati, to whom he rendered all possible help. Because of Bharati, Chettiar had intuitively formed a profound respect for Sri Aurobindo. But he spoke only Tamil. That being so he would, now and then, go and have Sri Aurobindo's darshan from a distance.

Said Amrita, "Finally one day, at about six in the evening, my friend Krishnaswami Chettiar and I started from Muthialpet, a suburb of Pondicherry ... and proceeded towards the beach where Sri Aurobindo's house stood." That was the Raghavan House in rue St. Louis. They walked the whole distance, the teenaged boy and the adult. Krishnaswami wheeled his cycle as he walked alongside. The evening had set in so he proposed to leave his cycle in Sri Aurobindo's house before going to the beach. A cycle would have hampered their walk. But as they came to it, they found the door bolted. Hesitatingly they knocked on the door, and suddenly the door opened and was left ajar. "Sri Aurobindo had come quietly and turned back immediately

as the door opened In that fading twilight only his long hair

hanging gracefully upon his back and his indescribably beautiful small feet caught my eyesight!
My heart throbbed within me as though I had been lifted up into the region of the gods!"

But soon he came down to the earth and his longing for a glimpse of the face of his Hero increased with each passing day. Days passed into months. There did not seem to be any opening anywhere. "In the core of my heart burnt a living faith incessant and unwavering, that somehow some day I would have his Darshan."

Then one evening as Amrita was strolling on the beach

Page-356

he met Ramaswami Iyengar, "who a few years later became well renowned as Va. Ra." Pretty soon an intimacy grew up between the two men of disparate age. After their walk Amrita would leave Ramaswami at Sri Aurobindo's house in Mata coil Street and return home all alone. He always felt sad to break off their conversation. "His remarks were always trenchant and scintillating. Never would he speak of anyone with respect. His face had charm. His eyes beamed." And a hope was kindled in Amrita's heart that through Ramaswami he may yet meet Sri Aurobindo. "It became a habit with me to meet Ramaswami Iyengar on the beach every evening at about 5-30 just after leaving school. It was natural for my school friends also to accompany me." After some time Va. Ra. began to welcome his young friend to his room. On the weekly holidays, Sundays and Thursdays, at about 4 p.m. the schoolboy would go to Va. Ra's room for a tête-à-tête. After 5 o'clock both would set out for the beach to join their other friends. As he began to feel at ease, Amrita could drop in whether Ramaswami was at home or not. "But I never took courage to go farther than his room...."

Although over fifty years had gone by, and the very spot where the house stood had become unrecognizable, Amrita could still picture it vividly. "In the Matacoil Street, called Mission Street, Sri Aurobindo lived for six months in a house with a tiled roof." The house N°59 was close to the Duplex Street, and faced west. It extended from the Matacoil Street backward down to the Rue de la Cantine on the east. And bread was supplied from a bakery—"called *Boulangerie* in French"—that stood on the crossing of Mission Street and Ananda Ranga Pillai Street. The house "consisted of three courtyards. Each courtyard had four

verandas around it; Sri Aurobindo's room was in the third block.¹ The front block was occupied by Nolini, Sourin, Bejoy; Moni was in the second block. I heard it said that Sri Aurobindo would daily walk round and round the courtyard from about five in the afternoon till the other inmates returned from their playground at about eight or eight-thirty in the evening."

The police and the CID who kept a watchful eye on the Swadeshis commented on the games played by the Bengalis. "His Bengalis spend their time in a reading room and are apparently shining lights at the local games clubs, football and hockey especially, as far as I hear, being their favourite," reported the police chief. Nolini: "This man plays football well." Sourin: "Picks up quarrels like a mad man sometimes." Moni: "Plays football well." Joseph David: "Studying in B.A. Class. A close friend of the Bengalis.... It is learnt that letters for the Bengalis come addressed to this man."

Amrita soon became familiar with the names of the 'Bengalis.' "Among the inmates Nagendranath was laid up with tuberculosis." The doctors in Bengal had advised N. N. Nag for a change of climate. The hills brought no improvement. So then he wanted to try the sea, and who knows, Sri Aurobindo's spiritual help might cure him! Bejoy, his cousin, encouraged him to come to Pondicherry. Nagen Nag came in July 1913, accompanied by a helper, Birendra Nath Roy. "Some evenings," Amrita continued, "when engaged in conversation with Iyengar

' In 1967 Nolini paid a visit to the house of a Bengali, Hernial Mitra. To Nolini's surprise he recognized the house as a portion of a larger house where they had lived long ago. The portion was where Sri Aurobindo lived. There was a well and two young coconut trees.

on the verandah outside his room I would see Sri Aurobindo come out from the back portion of the house to the hall in front, take his seat on the same mat with the sick man, put to him some questions and return to his room. I was lucky to have Sri Aurobindo's Darshan in this manner several times without going near him." Amrita then had no inkling that Sri Aurobindo was studying the action of the Yogic Force he was applying to cure that disease, and training himself

in its application. "There is no miraculous force and I do not deal in miracles," said Sri Aurobindo.

Anyway Amrita could follow Sri Aurobindo's movements with his eyes. "On his way to the front part of the house and back from there, Sri Aurobindo's preoccupation seemed to be wholly with what he had come for. He would pay little attention, as it were, to any other thing around him. And yet, I was told, nothing could escape his notice."

Surely, the young Brahmin boy had not escaped Sri Aurobindo's notice. So when Ramaswami asked Sri Aurobindo if the Tamil teenager could pay his respects to him on his birthday, Sri Aurobindo consented. August 15, 1913. A day imprinted in the heart of Amrita, in gold.

He was asked by Ramaswami to come at about 4:30 in the evening. The teenager was there even before. "All the invitees started coming one by one from all sides. By about 5 or 5:15 all of them had arrived. It was probably one hour before sunset. This I surmised by the dimness of the light inside the house." Among the invitees were the local friends of the boys from *Cercle Sportif*, like Joseph David, Sada (we shall meet him later), and others. Amrita takes up from here. "In the hall of the front

portion of the house some twenty or twenty-five banana leaves were laid out on three sides just as it is done during a marriage feast."

When all the guests had arrived, the main gate was bolted from inside. Immediately "Sri Aurobindo came into the hall and stood on one side; some one garlanded him with a rose garland; all present clapped their hands and Sri Aurobindo spoke something in English." Amrita's heart was leaping with overwhelming joy, so he took in all this but vaguely. "All of us sat down before the banana leaves as we do at a collective dinner. I was one of the guests; with eyes full of delight I saw Sri Aurobindo as he stood before each banana leaf, looked at the person seated there, gently passed on to the next and thus to the last person—meanwhile someone walking by his side served various kinds of sweets and other preparations."

After seeing the last person seated before a banana leaf, Sri Aurobindo went to the verandah of the middle portion of the house and "sat there in a chair kept for him before a table covered with

a cloth." Sri Aurobindo had fever that day. Moni read out a Bengali poem he had composed for the occasion. Sri Aurobindo gave Moni a garland to show that he liked the poem.

When the guests finished taking their refreshments they went to the big jar of water kept in the courtyard along with a small tumbler to wash their hands. Then they stood and chatted for a while. "By then it had become dark. In each section of the house one or two lighted hurricane-lamps were put up. The guests took leave one by one or by twos and threes and went home." That is to say, all but one. Our Amrita waited "not

Page-360

knowing what to do." Then Ramaswamy came and told the youth that Bharati, Srinivasachari, V. V. S. Aiyar, were going to pay their respects to Sri Aurobindo. He asked Amrita, "Do you intend to see Sri Aurobindo with Bharati and others? Or with the inmates?" Amrita was in a dither. It was already past seven, and if he delayed longer what would befall him at home? A few moments' hesitation. Then he said firmly, "When the inmates are there."

It was 8 p.m. when the big three left. They peered at the boy as they went out, not expecting to see him there so late. But they did not speak a word. Fifteen minutes later Ramaswami came to the waiting boy and said: 'You may get Sri Aurobindo's Darshan as you pass before his table. Go with folded hands. But no permission to speak with him. While passing by his right just stand in front, stop awhile, join your hands, silently take leave of him and go home.'

A few minutes later Amrita was called. "I got up and approached Sri Aurobindo's table. From the ceiling hung a hurricane-lamp that served to dispel the darkness only partially. Going round Sri Aurobindo by way of *pradaksina* I stood in his presence with joined palms and made my obeisance to him. Sri Aurobindo's eyes, it seemed, burned brighter than the lamplight for me; as he looked at me, in a trice all gloom vanished from within me, and his image was as it were installed in the *sanctum sanctorum* of my being. Nothing was very clear to me. I went behind him, stood again in front, offered my homage to him and not knowing whether to stay or go I staggered perplexed. Sri Aurobindo made a gesture with his heavenly hands to one of those who stood there. A sweet was given me once

Page-361

again. I felt within that he had accepted me though I did not quite know it. I left Sri Aurobindo's house and proceeded towards my own."

A day seen through a teenager's eyes.

*

* *

That is how Sri Aurobindo's forty-first birth anniversary was celebrated. His fourth birthday in Pondicherry. The first one, 15 August 1910, was in Shankar Chetty's house; the second and the third—15 August 1911 and 1912—were both celebrated in the Raghavan House.

It was but one day among the many he spent in that fourth house. And what was he doing during those six months?

Page-362

46

Foetus of Language

Recently I was reading a book, *The Druids*,[^] and I came across the following: "Like most world religions, the Celts started with a 'mother goddess' concept. In the case of the Celts, the mother goddess was Danu ('water from heaven') and it is significant that the great river Danube takes its name from her; significant, that is, because it was at the headwaters of the Danube that Celtic civilization is acknowledged to have evolved."²

Danu? That rang a bell.

In Indian tradition the great mother goddess is Aditi ('the infinite'). She has twelve sisters who are the root-mothers of a particular species, like Vinata mother of birds, or Kadru of serpents. Aditi's progenies are called the Adityas, or gods in common parlance. Her sister Danu's progenies are called the Danavas.

That is not all. The author, Peter Ellis, goes on to say that "As the ancient Celts emerged into recorded history and became known to the Classical writers, it is clear that in their society four main classes had developed ... : the intelligentsia, the warriors,

' *The Druids*, by Peter Beresford Ellis (Constable, London, 1995).

² P. 42.

Page-363

the producers of goods and the menial workers. These classes paralleled the Hindu ones of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra."¹

Moreover, all those who have pored over the history of the Celts—Ellis quotes a number of them—are struck by the commonality between the social systems, law systems of the Celts and those of the Hindus. "The extraordinary parallels and similarities between the Celtic and Hindu cultures, occurring in the areas of language, law, religious attitudes² and mythology, music and caste." How come?

I was reminded of the Battle of Ten Kings. A battle fought by King Sudas of Vedic times against ten kings who were, it seems, his kin, all of them descendants of Nahusa of the Lunar dynasty. The defeated kings scattered, some going east, some going west, some north. The king who was driven west was Druhyu, one of the five sons of Yayati. So, thought I, is it not possible that he and his descendants were the original Druids?³ My flight of fancy, I suppose! At any rate, as Ellis says, "Much

¹ P. 28-29.

⁸ Such as the belief in immortality of the soul (p. 52). ^s But the very meaning of the word 'Druid' is variously interpreted. Ellis says that "some leading Celtic etymologists... saw the word as deriving from the word roots *dru* *wid*—'oak-knowledge'—the *wid*, meaning 'to know' or 'to see' ... others opt for 'those whose knowledge is great,' or 'thorough knowledge.' " Veda, of course, means 'knowledge.' '*Vid*' is currently used in Indian languages, with the meaning of 'specialized knowledge,' i.e. *pakshi-vid*, meaning 'an expert in bird knowledge.' I am inclined to think that Druid means: seekers of true knowledge.

'Dru' also aroused my curiosity. Because we have the word *daru* which means wood.

Page-364

work has now been done in demonstrating similarities of grammar construction between the language of the Vedas of Hindu culture and Old Irish."

The above similarities would have been welcomed by Sri Aurobindo, I am sure, had they been available to him in the 1910s. But many more decades were to elapse before the seeds sown by him were to sprout. In his time it was, as he put it, "After the ingenious toils of Roth and Max Muller, as after the erudite diligence of Yaska and Sayana, the Vedic mantras remain for us what they have been for some thousands of years, a darkness of lost light and a sealed mystery." Yet the Veda has been the bedrock of all Hindu creeds. But the trouble was that it ceased to be intelligible to us couched as it was in a vocabulary which resembled classical Sanskrit although much of it differed too. Misunderstanding came easily. Said Sri Aurobindo, "If Indians hardly understand the Vedas at all, the Europeans have systematised a radical misunderstanding of them," he was alluding to the linguists, or philologists as they were then called. "The astonishingly elaborate modern descriptions of Vedic India will turn out [to be] a philological mirage and phantasmagoria."

The task given to Sri Aurobindo by the Master of the Yoga was to dispel the misinterpretation of the Sacred Books. If you turn back a few pages, you will find it stated in his letters which we have quoted. "Sri Krishna has shown me the true meaning of the Vedas, not only so, but he has shown me a new Science of Philology showing the process and origins of human speech so that a new Nirukta can be formed and the new interpretation of the Veda based upon it." Yaska was the author of the original *Nirukta*, an etymological text, mentioned in the Mahabharata.

Page-365

Sri Aurobindo worked on Nirukta over a period of time. The work progressed, a little hesitatingly at first, then more surely. Even on 28 December 1912, when a certain perfection of method was attained, he was left unsatisfied "since possibility still has its play." Possibilities were not acceptable, only the right word would do. Within the week (up to January 4), however, the "Work (nirukta) has emerged from its hesitations &c is being steadily done; incidentally much that was seen by intuition formerly is being proved by the data." The reader will remember that Sri Aurobindo had also developed the faculty of audition. He heard sentences or even "purely grammatical formula" along with its sense, and it was suggested to him that those were "actual words used in this sense in pre-Vedic Sanskrit."

That is how Sri Aurobindo came to write *77i<? Origins of Aryan Speech*. "He knows Latin, he knows Greek!" had exclaimed the French magistrate, and he could have added, "He knows Sanskrit!" That Sri Aurobindo knew perfectly both English and French was common knowledge.

Once, when someone expressed surprise at Sri Aurobindo's speaking in French, Mother cut in, "But he spoke very good French! And French had *come back* to him as a spontaneous memory." The reader may recall that he had learned other European languages like German, Italian and Spanish. Back in India he had learned Bengali enough to produce original works in it, besides having more than a nodding acquaintance with Gujarati, Marathi and Hindusthan (Urdu). Who then better qualified than he to take up such lexicological work? He now turned his attention to Tamil, which he had begun at the *Karmayogin* Office in Calcutta. All that I knew.

Page-366

Yet, as I was turning the pages of his personal 'Records,' I was in for a surprise. So will you. His note of 22 January 1913 reads, "Study will be resumed, but not more than slightly. It will include Tamil & Hebrew." Hebrew?! Well, well...

Returning to Tamil. At Pondicherry he had the help of Subramania Bharati. As was his wont, no sooner did Sri Aurobindo begin learning Tamil than he started reading Bharati's poems. We find in his notes under the date of 31 December 1912: "*Bhasa* [language]. Bh's Panchali Sapatham¹ taken up; in the first verse yesterday only a few words could be understood without reference to the dictionary & no connected sense has been made out from the sum of the vocables. Today, in the second verse, the difficulties of the Tamil way of writing (sandhi etc.) were overcome by the intuition as well as some of the difficulties of the grammar, but the Bhasashakti [power of language] which used formerly to give correctly the meaning of unknown words has not recovered its habit of action."

But in the rapid development of his sadhana, the supra-intellectual memory became active. Barely ten days later, on 9 January 1913 to be precise, we see: "... Things are now remembered permanently without committing them to heart, which formerly would not have been remembered even for a day if they had been even carefully learned by heart eg the first verse of Bharati's poem, in Tamil, not a line of which was understood without a laborious consultation of the dictionary. Yet although an unknown tongue, although no particular attention was paid

¹ *Panchali's Vow*. Panchali or Draupadi was the wife of the five Pandava brothers in the Mahabharata.

Page-367

to the words or their order everything remains in the mind even after several days. Formerly even a verse of Latin, English, Sanskrit carefully studied & committed to memory, would be lost even in a shorter time."

His command over the Tamil language progressed so quickly that with Bharati's help he translated into English some pieces from Tamil literature. A few lines from the Kural of Tiruvalluvar; two pieces—*Hymn of the Golden Age* and *Love-Mad*—by Nammalwar, a poem by the Chera king and saint Kulasekhara Alwar, and three pieces by Andal.

In all his literary works a double action came into play. Sri Aurobindo notes on 7 January 1913, "The only work done in the day was a grammatical commentary on the fifth hymn of the Rigveda. Here as in all the works of Knowledge, there is a double stream of action, the intuition which sees the truth and the speculative reason with its groping judgements, imaginations, memories, inferences which works towards truth through error."

It was, however, the Tamil language which made the way clear for the intuition so that inspiration could flow freely. "The inspiration developed on the connection of Tamil with O. S. [Old Sanskrit] pointing out lost significations, old roots, otherwise undiscoverable derivations."

It was as he was examining the forms, 'vocables,' of the Tamil language "in appearance so foreign to the Sanskritic form and character," that Sri Aurobindo found himself "continually guided by words or by families of words supposed to be pure Tamil in establishing new relations between Sanskrit and its distant sister, Latin, and occasionally, between the Greek and the Sanskrit." Moreover, "Sometimes the Tamil vocable not

only suggested the connection, but proved the missing link in a family of connected words. And," he avowed, "it was through this Dravidian language that I came first to perceive what seems to me now the true law, origins and, as it were, the embryology of the Aryan tongues." That perception was the key to the discovery of the real connections of the ancient languages. He uncovered "a common mother-root, common word-families, common word-clans, kindred word nations or as we call them, language." Musing on the kinship of Sanskrit and Tamil, he said, "the

possibility suggests itself that they may even have been two divergent families derived from one lost primitive tongue."

Thus it came about that his study of Tamil brought Sri Aurobindo a clue to "the very origins and structure of the ancient Sanskrit tongue." As he followed the clue which led him farther and farther, to other clues, he stumbled upon an Ancient Language, a language older than any known form of Sanskrit. And he "plunged into the far more interesting research of the origins and laws of development of human language itself." The clues came to him from several sources. One was, of course, etheric writing (*dkasha-lipi*). Truth-audition (*Shruti*) was another. Intuition and inspiration played their part. Also from script transmitted directly to the hand. In such a manner did he proceed with old languages. He noted down, or should I say, he took down in dictation (?) what he said was from authors of the Dwapara Yuga. Obscure authors, obscure language, but relating to the epic Ramayana. Not as the epic has come down to us, though. Some mysterious writings in unknown languages have been found in Sri Aurobindo's notebooks, one

Page-369

of which was an 'Ancient Language' notebook of c. 1911!

It was therefore through a direct access to the lost language that Sri Aurobindo discovered the origins of human tongues. Later he would check his discoveries with outwardly available data.

Always methodical, his first step was to form a kind of science of linguistic embryology, lay out the processes by which language took birth and form: "If the origin and unity of human speech can be found and established, if it can be shown that its development was governed by fixed laws and processes, it is only by going back to its earliest forms that the discovery is to be made and its proofs established." Because "modern speech is largely a fixed and almost artificial form, not precisely a fossil, but an organism proceeding towards arrest and fossilization." Modern tongues have lost their pliancy, which is why he took up the reverse study of "tracing back the finished forms to the embryonic and digging down into the hidden original Foetus of language." An archaeologist of language! The most convenient tool was Sanskrit—helped out by Greek, Latin, Tamil, and occasionally Celtic, Irish, French, Spanish and Italian. In Sanskrit the original type of Aryan structure was fairly well preserved. Surprisingly, "The structure we find is one of extraordinary initial simplicity and also of extraordinarily mathematical and scientific regularity of formation."

This high achiever got to see what practically no one yet got to see. Patterns were revealed to him that generated further research.

As his researches led Sri Aurobindo nearer to the hidden 'Foetus' of language, he discovered that language proceeds in a

Page-370

regular natural law, almost paralleling Nature as she "proceeds in the physical world to form a vegetable or an animal genus and its species."

The debate will doubtless continue, but here we are presenting some food for thought: the results of Sri Aurobindo's researches. "My researches," he said, "first convinced me that words, like plants, like animals, are in no sense artificial products, but growths,—living growths of sound with certain seed-sounds as their basis. Out of these seed-sounds develop a small number of primitive root-words with an immense progeny which have their successive generations and arrange themselves in tribes, clans, families, selective groups each having a common stock and a common psychological history."

He lamented that linguists "consistently ignore the patent fact that in prehistoric and preliterate times the vocabularies of primitive languages must have varied from century to century to an extent—of which we with our ideas of language drawn from the classical and modern literary tongues can form little conception.... It is the preservation of common terms and not their disappearance that is the miracle of language."

He called on the linguist to strictly confine himself to the history of words and the association of ideas with the sound forms they represent, and avoid lures which may draw him away "from the great discoveries awaiting mankind on his badly explored tract of knowledge."

Through *Nirukta*, the use of etymology, through *The Origins of Aryan Speech*, and his profuse writings on the Veda and the Upanishads, Sri Aurobindo has provided us with the clue and the methodology of exploring and arriving at the real

Page-371

connections between the ancient languages, and by the same stroke rediscover "the eternal Truth hidden in the Vedas and the Upanishads." And we see "how the soul of India was born and how arose this great birth-song in which it soared from its earth into the supreme empyrean of the spirit."

That it was Sri Aurobindo's intention to pursue this line of exploration is certain. But other things intervened and he could not complete his investigation. Even then, as my friend Michel Danino—who has mulled over this and allied subjects—pointed out to me, "Though incomplete Sri Aurobindo's conclusions are still far in advance of present-day linguistics." We hope the time has come for the Indian mind to shake off its habit of holding opinions at second and third hand. It is time Indian scholars took up the work from where Sri Aurobindo left off.

Archaeology uses many scientific disciplines. Cannot we have an archaeologist of linguistics?

Page-372

47

Social Customs

My brother Noren was telling us tales from his school days at Santiniketan. All my five brothers were students there. I was too young to join it. In those days there were no nursery schools for children. Besides, the then prevailing custom was that at the age of five, not before, ceremonies were performed on a Saraswati Puja day, and the child was initiated in the art of learning.

Well, Noren told us that once a month, in the school kitchen, all the students and teachers too, even the day students like him, would be invited to have lunch there. That was a special day because the sweepers-cum-scavengers would do the cooking. Of course the cooks took a good bath, and wore clean clothes for the occasion. And it was they who served all the guests. Even more than sixty years later, when he was telling us all this, Noren said appreciatively, "They cooked *khichuri* [a mixture of rice and pulses boiled together]. It was very tasty."

Untouchability, which had taken such a rigid form in Hindu society, was unbearable to most enlightened men. So, in his Ashram, Tagore tried to break that rigidity with some novel schemes. But were mere outward reforms going to change anything basic in a society which seemed to have lost its spirit,

but had kept a decaying body?

I was wondering why cannot we be like birds? I see them daily. Spotted doves, laughing thrushes, grey tits, bulbuls, magpies, mynas, sparrows, all flock around the feast of rice and bread spread on a tiny space of grass. They are not disturbed to be together. They are disturbed only when a big, black crow comes to eat. Then, in a flurry of wings, all the small birds fly away.

I am often reminded of Sri Aurobindo's description at the Surat Congress of December 1907. "Rich, poor, Brahmin, businessman, Shudra, Bengali, Mahratta, Punjabi, Gujarati, we all stayed, slept, ate together with a wonderful feeling of brotherhood." There is the secret of all social reforms: to evoke a feeling of brotherhood.

Among the Madrasi Brahmins was the poet-cumjournalist Bharati. We have already seen that from his Benares days Bharati had rebelled against the way women were treated in the Hindu society. In his Pondicherry days, when he had the benefit of Sri Aurobindo's company, he went much farther. Let us once again hear from Amrita.

"At home we had a strict observance of orthodox rites and rituals. But the moment Bharati arrived, these began to crumble away; in his presence all rules and ceremonies, habits and customs slipped off from me and disappeared in no time.... My neighbour was no more a stranger to me, whether a Shudra or a pariah; he was as I was, a man; little by little my heart got soaked in the feeling that he was my brother. This feeling began to translate itself into due practice. Today it might appear as nothing uncommon," said Amrita to the young Ashram students in 1960s. "But even to imagine today what difficulties it might

have created some fifty years ago can make one shudder with fear.... Later on, Bharati did away with these customs and threw them off like chaff, as things without substance."

Amrita continued. "Whether in Bharati's house or by the tanks or beside the big lake, at the time of collective dining the so-called Pariahs, Shudras, Brahmins would all sit together comfortably without any distinction of caste or creed and take their meals. Today," he repeated, "it may

appear quite common.... The feeling that all were men had taken deep root in the heart of each of us.... As I grew more and more familiar with Bharati, the rites and ceremonies, rules and regulations dropped off from me as withered leaves from a tree." And old habits and customs "looked like worm-eaten things to me," said Amrita.

Let us admit it. Between the first beginnings of social formation to the present, many debilitating customs have crept into Hindu society. Like parasites they suck dry its life energy. The biggest parasitic growths are caste untouchability and oppression of woman.

It was not birth but occupation that led to the arrangement of *chaturvarna*—the system of four castes. There was nothing unalterable in the system. It was much later, when the four castes multiplied themselves without any true economic need of the country, that all this rigidified into its present form.

From historical times we have had religious reformers. Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism, etc. do not care for castes. It was only under the impact of Western ideas that India began to have social reformers. From the time of Raja Rammohan Roy the Hindu society has had numerous social reformers. A few were great, many were not so great. The greater ones had to

Page-375

overcome the narrow understanding of the anglicized reformers on the one hand, and the deep-rooted hostility of the immobile orthodoxy. The orthodox, said Sri Aurobindo, "labour to deify everything that exists. Hindu society has certain arrangements and habits which are merely customary. There is no proof that they existed in ancient times nor any reason why they should

last into the future Neither antiquity nor modernity can be

the test of truth or the test of usefulness To all things there

is a date and a limit. All long-continued customs have been sovereignly useful in their time, even totemism and polyandry." He argued, "We must not ignore the usefulness of the past, but we seek in preference a present and a future utility."

Then there were the parrots of free thought. These reformers had swallowed European notions hook, line, and sinker, and now pressed for throwing away the baby with the bath water. All

customs Indian were to them a mass of superstitions, barbarous and benighted. Their descendants are today's 'secularists.'

We were lucky to have some true great reformers; those who could think for themselves. Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda, and others. Free thinkers, they looked at the degraded forest of Indian society. They looked closely at the myriad 'age-old' customs clogging the river of life. Were they really 'age-old' ? Did they really exist from the very beginning? The Reformers waded upstream to find out. They came to the source of social beginnings.

And in our own time India had Sri Aurobindo.

He found out. He saw.

The originator of *chaturvarna*, or the four castes as it has come to be known, was Brahma himself. From his own body

Page-376

he brought them out. From his face were born the Brahmanas, Kshatriyas from his arms, Vaishyas issued from his thigh, and from his feet issued the Shudras. For the good order of the world the Creator assigned to each *varna* its special, particular duty.

The duty of the Brahmin was to learn and instruct the community, preserve the Scriptures, and lead a simple life; the Kshatriya's duty was to govern, give protection to the weak, and when required make war and give up his life on the battlefield; the Vaishya's duty was to trade, gain and return his gains to the community; the Shudra's duty was to labour for the others. In atonement for his service, the Indian society "spared him the tax of self-denial, the tax of blood and the tax of his riches."

Down the stream of Time travelled Sri Aurobindo.

In the Age of Truth, Satya Yuga (or Krita Yuga), the kingdom of God and the Veda were in the hearts of His people, Sri Aurobindo explained. There was no need of law, government, castes, classes and creeds. People's nature was pure and they had complete knowledge.

Just as they moved in vast physical spaces, the thoughts and ideas of our Indian ancestors moved in vast ranges of Time. They conceived of the lifespan of the Creator Brahma—he is dissolved

when he attains the age of 120 of his own time-span. Then another Brahma comes into being. One day of Brahma— a Kalpa—is divided into fourteen parts. Each division is ruled by a Manu—man comes from Manu. So there are fourteen Manus in one day of Brahma. The lifespan of each Manu is called a Manwantara. In each Manwantara there are seventy-one chaturyugas— Krita, Treta, Dwapara and Kali. One human

Page-377

year is one day-night for the gods. Kritayoga lasts for 4,800 god-years, Tretayoga for 3,600 god-years, Dwapara lasts for 2,400 god-years, and Kaliyoga lasts for 1,200 god-years. Which comes to 12,000 god-years for one set of four Ages. Moreover each Age contains in itself the others. In the heart of the Iron Age lies the Age of Gold.

These divisions of time are not geological but are essentially 'soul-times, 'just as when the Upanishads speak of 'worlds' we should take them as soul-conditions, and not geographical divisions of the cosmos. These are the worlds and times of the ancient tradition.

Well, to return to our theme.

I do think that Brahma was right. He had more common-sense than our inane legislators. It stands to reason that for the well-being of a body each of its parts must play its role for which it was created. Can the face do the duty of the feet? Can our arms replace our thighs? Or vice-versa? The same rule applies to the body of a society. But today's Indian politician wants to replace the brain by the feet. It would be more to the point if instead of their strident clamour to make India backward, the Indian legists gave merit its due, and demanded competence from the executive. And, most important of all, teach each part of the body politic to do its duty and have respect for the other parts. Be practical, I say.

A futile hope. Oh, how far have we fallen from those days when a high character and training were expected from all who held authority in the affairs of the people.

In the event, given the almost infinite sweep of time, it should not surprise us that at the end of Satya yuga, man's memory

Page-378

of his origin had dimmed. That is why in the Treta people needed a prop for their memory. Therefore was written down the law, the Veda. It was used simply as a guide, for there remained great elasticity and freedom. The functions were interchangeable. The great Parasurama, a Brahmin by birth, had no hesitation in using his axe in an effort to exterminate the Kshatriyas. Rama, a Kshatriya prince of the Solar dynasty, killed in battle Ravana, the king of Lanka, who was a Brahmin by birth. The boys and young men who were brought up in the old ashramas were trained in many things belonging to life, including the use of arms. Knowledge, the Veda, could be had by everyone. Satyakama Jabala, son of the prostitute Jabala, was accepted by the Rishi Haridrumata Gautama as a disciple worthy of receiving the supreme Knowledge. What mattered was the Truth. Truth of spirit.

By the third Age, Dwapara, Brahma's creatures had gone a long, long time from him. The idea and the spirit no longer ruled the roost. Form and rule became the true governors of ethics and society. It was the age of Vyasa, the great codifier and systematizer of knowledge. In Dwapara everything was codified, ritualized, formalized. It was then that came Sri Krishna, the Iconoclast. He mocked at the strong hold rule had taken in the hearts of men. Dismissing the set ethical systems, defying conventional wisdom, he established in the Gita an inward and spiritual rule of conduct. He "prepared the work of the Kali," said Sri Aurobindo.

Kali, the fourth Yuga, is the shortest time-wise. But, oh, how concentrated is the battle between the forces of purity and impurity, between the forces of light and darkness. It is horrible to see the ugliness of it all. Cruelty and corruption have taken

Page-379

the place of justice and purity in men's hearts. It is horrid to see the degradation of humans. Unimaginable. As though the Panis had taken over the Earth. Everything is twisted out of recognition. Where is the truth? The Divine and the undivine Forces battle it out, destroy everything, everything is called into question. "The end of a stage of evolution is usually marked by a powerful recrudescence of all that has to go out of the evolution," to quote Sri Aurobindo. The battle is fiercest in Kali-yuga because Kali ushers in a new Satya Yuga. A new Age of Truth. "The seed of dawn sleeps in the heart of dusk."

At any rate, although the system of the four castes was well established, it did not count as an obstacle in the pursuit of knowledge and spiritual advancement. Kingjanaka of Mithila, a

Kshatriya king of the Solar dynasty, was a seer, and Brahmins came to him to learn the supreme knowledge. Satyakamajabala became the guru to the purest and highest blood in the land. Vyasa's mother Satyavati was the daughter of a fisherman. King Shantanu of the Kurus, married her. There are hundreds and hundreds of such examples. Nobody was shut out of spiritual truth and culture on the ground of caste. Vidura, the half-brother of Kuru king Dhritarashtra, born of a Shudra servant-woman, was honoured for his knowledge of ethics. So much so that he was made an adviser at the court of the Kuru king. As for Yogis caste never counted for anything. All were free to search for the Divine.

In Europe "social hierarchies had begun to emerge in some Ice Age societies."¹ Like it or not hierarchy is a fact of life.

¹ To quote from the *National Geographic* (July 2000, p.110).

Not everybody is slotted to do the same thing as everybody else. Nor is everybody equally gifted. Had that been the case then all the students in a class would have stood first, and a field of runners would have breasted the tape together in the same split second. But it does not mean that culture should not be brought to every doorstep. Shutting out someone from culture was an invention of later times. But even in later times when the four orders had grown into a fixed social hierarchy, when we had lost almost all our freedom, there remained the individual's freedom to pursue his or her spiritual knowledge. In India we find, said Sri Aurobindo, "up to the end the yogins, saints, spiritual thinkers, innovators and restorers, religious poets and singers, the fountain-heads of a living spirituality and knowledge as distinguished from traditional authority and lore, derived from all the strata of the community down to the lowest Shudras and even the despised and oppressed outcastes." From the outcastes themselves came saints revered by the whole community. It was this freedom to pursue an individual's spiritual experience which saved India from going the way of other ancient civilizations like Greek, Egyptian, Roman.

Time as we know is a great corrupter. With time the downward pull becomes so great that it seems irresistible. The essential becomes immaterial. Human institutions begin to degenerate. They decay. India entered her Dark Age. The vigorous free-growth forest of Indian society was stifled by the parasitic growth of the temporary forms created in the last few hundred years. The Indian intellect was greatly impoverished. A sort of *rigor mortis* had set in in its functioning.

brother Barin, Sri Aurobindo presents a round vision. "Our forefathers swam in a vast sea of thought and gained a vast knowledge; they established a vast civilisation. But as they went forward on their path they were overcome by exhaustion and weariness. The force of their thought decreased, and along with it decreased the force of their creative power. Our civilisation has become a stagnant backwater, our religion a bigotry of externals, our spirituality a faint glimmer of light or a momentary wave of intoxication. So long as this state of things lasts, any permanent resurgence of India is impossible."

It was high time to reinvigorate the degraded Hindu society.

The instrument we needed most was the ability to think for ourselves. Independently. Not like the present-day dumb slogan-shouting politicians, who hold opinions at third or fourth hand—not even second hand. Thought free of prejudgments, unsparing on whatever obstructs the growth of the nation, "shearing sophism and prejudice asunder as with a sharp sword, smiting down obscurantism of all kinds as with the mace of Bhima ..."

But don't you need strength to wield sword or mace? Where do you find strength? A nation's source of strength springs from the strength of its woman. But woman power in India was strangled by social bondages. Again a result of the accretions of the last few centuries. It was not always so in India.'

'Just think of princess Chitrangada of Manipur, the protector of her people, who was not averse to battling with Arjuna! Then they fell in love and got married.

Rudramba (thirteenth century AD), daughter of King Ganapati Kakatiya, succeeded her father at Warangal as ruler. She stoutly defended her kingdom. The Celts, like the Indians, had no objection to being led by women.

In law and theory at least women in ancient India enjoyed civic rights. They may or may not have always exercised those rights. Records have come down to us that women figured not only as queens and administrators, "and even in the battlefield, a common enough incident in Indian history, but as elected representatives on civic bodies." This state of affairs was quite contrary to the sentiments of most other ancient peoples. Except in the Egyptian and Celtic societies. "The position of women ... at a time when women were treated as mere chattels in most European societies, was amazingly advanced. Women could be found in many professions, even as lawyers and judges.... The Romans looked upon women as bearers of children and objects of pleasure, while the Druids included women in their political and religious life."¹ Druidesses played a co-equal role in the activities of the Druids. There was no such practice in the Indian society, although there was no official bar. In the Egyptian society woman had a remarkable status, almost equal to that of man and far more advanced than in Rome or Greece.

It was with the advent of Muslims and their barbaric ways that women in India were shackled. For to the Mussulmans woman is the property of man. A few centuries of habit built up a multi-storied building in Indian society. But thanks to the efforts of reformers and free thinkers the idea is crumbling into dust. The claim of woman is to be regarded and treated as a free individual being.

If you remember, one of the tasks given to Sri Aurobindo by Sri Krishna was "to try and bring about certain social changes."

The Druids, Peter Beresford Ellis.

He was never afraid to call a spade a spade. He used all the arrows in his quiver. Open attack, unsparing criticism, the severest satire, the most wounding irony, all, all were used to the full. Above all, Sri Aurobindo pointedly asked the Indian society some pertinent questions.

"Whether the spirit as well as the body of caste should remain, is the modern question."

He lamented the impoverishment of the average Indian intellect which was stormy over insignificant details, but gave nary a thought to important things. "I do not care" he said "whether widows marry or remain single; but it is of infinite importance to consider how woman shall be legally and socially related to man, as his inferior, equal or superior; for even the relation of

superiority is not more impossible in the future than it was in the far-distant past." This was in 1910.

The Rishi sent his penetrating gaze to the far-distant future. "Unknown to men the social revolution prepares itself, and it is not in the direction they think, for it embraces the world, not India only. Whether we like it or not, He will sweep out the refuse of the Indian past and the European present. But the broom is not always sufficient; sometimes He uses the sword in preference. It seems probable that it will be used, for the world does not mend itself quickly, and therefore it will have violently to be mended."

Page-384

48

The Guest House

"He already knew the war would break out," Mother explained to Satprem in 1962.

Sri Aurobindo was talking with Richard, "about the world, Yoga, the future ... he already knew the war would break out. This was 1914, war broke out in August, and he already knew it towards the end of March or early April." In actual fact, it was on 23 January 1913 that it had been intimated to Sri Aurobindo that "War is preparing" and the message added "& the Turkish chances seem small____" Sri Aurobindo had taken a keen interest in Turkey then; for reasons I have not been able to piece together.

Mirra accompanied Paul Richard to Pondicherry. He came ostensibly for election work. We will be returning to this point shortly.

From 1910 Sri Aurobindo had been in touch with Richard, so he knew that they were coming. As the time drew near for their arrival, he may have felt somewhat uneasy to receive the Richards in the dilapidated house on Matacoil Street in which he was then living. But the problem was finance. Lack of money had obliged him to give up living in Raghavan House. Moreover

Page-385

he still owed some rent for it. "Fortunately," he informed Motilal Roy, "the litigation connected with the house has kept the matter hanging; but it may be demanded from us any day and we shall have to pay at once, or face the prospect of being dragged into court and losing our prestige here entirely." The deep respect Sri Aurobindo inspired was a cause for worry to the British Government: "Aurobindo Ghose is important as he commands general respect" says a confidential report by C.I.D. Madras.

Sri Aurobindo was looking for a better house to move in. Then two events occurred in July. On 6 July 1913 he noted down about "the easy surmounting of the housing problem and the change in the temper of the intermediary." And Nagen Nag arrived. With his arrival the financial problem eased somewhat. Still, for everything to fall in place a few more months were needed. Finally it was in October that Sri Aurobindo moved from Matacoil Street to rue Francois Martin in the French part of the town.

In February 1914 Moni, Nolini and Saurin left for Bengal. So they were not there to meet the Richards on their arrival at Pondicherry.

"The two persons from France have arrived," said V. Ramaswamy Iyengar beckoning Amrita near him as the latter entered the house at N°41 rue Francois Martin. It was towards the end of March, and Amrita had gone there after school to fetch Ramaswamy for their evening walk. That day as he entered the house he found his older friend sitting all alone in the open courtyard. Said Ramaswamy to the young man, "The two persons from France have arrived. They will just now come and see Sri

Aurobindo. The order is that none other than the inmates should remain in the house. You go alone to the sea-side."

When in mid-October of the previous year Sri Aurobindo had left his fourth house, N°59 Matacoil Street, which was rented at Rs. 15/- a month, for the new house in rue Francois Martin rented at Rs. 35/-, people were greatly puzzled at the extravagance: the difference in rent would be sufficient to meet the needs of a whole family! But the 'revolutionaries' who had settled at Pondicherry whispered to one another that two Europeans had accepted Sri Aurobindo as their guru and would stay here.

Then one day in December 1913 Amrita had confirmation from Ramaswamy that two persons from the topmost cultural circle of France were coming to Sri Aurobindo for practising yoga. "They would be coming very soon. It was a secret till now; I have disclosed it to you today." Finally, it was towards the end of March that Ramaswamy announced to the youngster the arrival of the two guests.

"It was a big self-sufficient house in Francois Martin Street, N°41." Amrita gave a detailed description of the fifth house where Sri Aurobindo lived for several years. "It had two entrances— one on the north and the other on the west. This well-built structure stood at the junction of two streets. Rue Francois Martin ran from north to south whereas Rue Law de Laurelton from east to west. The western gate faced Rue Francois Martin. This was evidently the postern gate, the northern indeed was the main entrance; but as it remained always locked, the western became the main gate. Entering by this gate one would come across an open space which could be termed a courtyard."



The "Guest House"

Facing this door, across the courtyard, were the kitchen and the servants' quarters; on the right of the door was a disused garage, and on the left the main house.

Though the house was big it looked desolate. It had been tenantless for so long that grass had grown thick at places along its walls. But the new inhabitants pulled out the weeds, and daily

swept the house. "The northern gate led straight to the staircase; it was later on closed up and the entrance converted into a room. In the interior of the house, at one end of the verandah there was a wide, winding staircase leading to the first floor. Each of the steps had its rim strengthened, almost decorated, by a wooden plank."

At first the house had no electricity, but it did have running water. Unlike most houses of those days with only a well to supply water for the whole household, the new house had a tap! "There was only one tap for the whole house and that too in the open courtyard, against a wall near the back staircase. Under this water tap—it was fitted up almost to a man's height— lay a big round stone resembling the lower part of a grindstone." The back staircase had no overhead protection from sun and rain, as it was meant for the use of "cooks, servants, the menials."

All the inmates took bath under the same tap. Sri Aurobindo bathed last, just a few minutes before lunch. But it was not only a question of one tap for all, but also one towel for all! The one towel served him also after the others had toweled themselves. It would be stretching the truth to say that it was a rich household. It was not. The four or five young men who lived there had one mat each. It was an all-purpose mat: it served as bedstead, mattress, coverlet and pillow. That being

the sole furniture all their books—plenty of books—lay on the floor. For Sri Aurobindo only a table, a chair, and a camp-cot had been arranged. Nolini recalls that they had neither a decent kerosene lamp nor a lantern, except a single candlestick for Sri Aurobindo's personal use. Then, one afternoon when the boys went out for their games, the electricians came and fitted four points for the entire building: one in Sri Aurobindo's room, another in the centre of the verandah, and two downstairs. By the time the players returned from their football game, it was already dark. But ... what a surprise awaited them as they opened the door and entered the compound! Light, light everywhere, it seemed to them, "a real illumination," marvelled Nolini.

Electricity had come to Pondicherry town only in 1909. Amrita clarifies that there was no electric meter in the house. One rupee four annas was charged for each point each month, less than four points were not given as a rule. "Whether the lights were kept burning or not, five rupees had to be paid and the charge would be the same even if they were kept on through all the twenty-four hours."

Amrita had no occasion to go upstairs. Sometimes Sri Aurobindo would come down and "if I happened to be there— well, my good luck." Apart from Ramaswamy, the young Tamilian had struck up quite a friendship with Bejoy Nag. The latter "used to send letters twice or thrice a month by registered post ...to Chandernagore. As intimacy with him grew, he began to send letters through me. There was no fixed hours for this work. He used to send me at any time between 12 and 3 p.m. He ordered me not to disclose this posting of letters to anyone."



Sri Aurobindo with Amrita (right) at the Guest House in 1920

It was at the French post office that the boy posted the letters, and it worked much of the time. "Now and then, however, the British Secret Police would persuade the French postal authorities or their subordinates, and procure letters addressed to Sri Aurobindo or those coming to V. V. S. Aiyar from Europe, open them and after scrutiny seal them back before handing them over to the postal authority." Such at least was the strong rumour doing the rounds.

After Ramaswamy Iyengar left Pondicherry, sometime in May '14, seeing the desolate young boy Bejoy's heart was moved. One day, at noon, as young Amrita entered the Guest House, as the house later came to be called, he found Bejoy waiting for him in the verandah downstairs. On "seeing me, he called me to him, his face smiling. I too approached him with a heart full of delight, not knowing why. He then said, 'I told Sri Aurobindo about you and also told him about your strong desire to see him.' Bejoy Kanta added, 'I was just thinking how and through whom to send for you. Come up, let's go.' "

It was high noon, 12 or 12:15, as Amrita climbed up the stairs behind Bejoy. "It was for the first time I got up to the first floor of Sri Aurobindo's house." Later, when he became more familiar, he noticed that the upper, covered verandah where Sri Aurobindo received visitors, was "somewhat beautified. One old cracked table, two armchairs, four or five folding armless chairs with back-rest—these were borrowed and arranged there, luckily with no binding to return them."

But on that first day—it remained etched in his memory—it was a scene bathed in light. "In the long verandah overlooking the wide courtyard below, there were big windows giving a

wide view southwards ... all the doors of all the rooms were open... Everywhere and on everything there fell an all-revealing

light, nothing but light ... no spot hidden from light My heart too, wide-open, soared up in sheer delight! I was in this state and Sri Aurobindo stood there, his eyes gazing southwards His small feet appeared to my eyes as two red lotuses.

His hair partly hung on his chest, partly on his back. It was still wet from his bath; water dripped from its ends. His bare broad chest shone in great beauty." Amrita stood at the head of the long corridor. "As I just stood there, Sri Aurobindo, who was about twenty feet away, turned his eyes

upon me. Whether I walked to him or took a leap to him, I do not know.... My being unknowingly swam, as it were, in a sea of silence, it fell prostrate at the lotus-feet of the Master ... lay there body, life and mind all together a single block. Sri Aurobindo touched me with his flower-like hands and made me stand up. I drank the drink he

gave me I do not know why I burst into sobs as I clasped him.

Tears streamed down from my eyes."

Then days passed. Ten or fifteen days later Amrita again took recourse to Bejoy, who obtained Sri Aurobindo's permission. That very evening, as soon as the school was over, Amrita flew like an arrow to the Guest House. Bejoy was waiting. "He was in uniform ready to go out for football at Odeon salai. As I reached there he took me up straight to Sri Aurobindo's room. "I saw Sri Aurobindo the second time thus: "He was in his room seated in a wooden chair beside a table, writing something in a book, facing west. He moved his book a little, faced south and welcomed us both with a gleam of kindness in his eyes. I looked at him and when after a minute

Page-393

I turned I found Bejoy Kanta was no longer by my side." Bejoy had left for his football without a moment's delay.

"He and I alone! None else! Solitude! Seated he kept on looking at me and I too drowned myself in his sacred look."

At the time Amrita was barely able to put two words together in English. He somehow managed with Bejoy, in very broken English which was, however, slightly better than Bejoy's Tamil. But even those two words almost failed him as he stood tongue-tied in front of Sri Aurobindo. With an Herculean effort he just managed: "I want come daily see you!"

Sri Aurobindo graciously complied with the request and

"asked me to come after five in the evening From the very

next day, I began going straight from school at 5 p.m. to Sri Aurobindo's house to see him. Before I reached there—a little later than five-fifteen—Sri Aurobindo would come out of his room and sit on the west side of the southern terrace. I used to stand before him and go on

talking. I would forget then that I knew little English. Day after day I would tell him fluently and unwaveringly my home-story, etc., trying to make the details as vivid and elaborate as possible. I knew no halt... I played the role of the speaker.... He would hardly ever put in more than a word or two." Thus for months every evening from 5:30 to 6:30 the young Tamil lad talked with Sri Aurobindo, and then returned home.

The year 1914 began to draw to its close. The next year in March the boy had to sit for his Matriculation examination to be held in Madras. Sri Aurobindo told him simply that "he expected it of me to pass the examination and make arrangements for further studies." In February 1915 Amrita was short

Page-394

of Rs. 9/-for the deposit. When all his efforts failed and he did not know how to make up that deficit, he put his problem before Sri Aurobindo. The next day "when I went to him, he handed over to me the sum of Rs. 9/- and ordered me to deposit the fee. Astounded and forgetful I stood statuelike in his presence."

Page-395

49

Never a Dull Moment

To be with Sri Aurobindo you have to have a feel for adventure.

Adventure? what kind? Well, that depends.

It could be an adventure of consciousness, where you explore inner worlds. Or ...

Now one day before Amrita became familiar with Sri Aurobindo's house at rue Francois Martin, before Mother's arrival at the end of March, before Moni, Nolini, Saurin went away to Bengal in February 1914, something strange happened in that house.

You may recall that in July 1913 Nagen Nag, a relative of Bejoy's, had come to stay with Sri Aurobindo to get cured of his illness. He had brought along with him an attendant, Birendra Nath

Roy. Biren was an acquaintance of Nagen's, maybe a friend, since both hailed from Khulna. He did look well after Nagen, cooked his meals, and while he was at it he did a lot of work for others also. He ended up becoming the general manager, cook, lending a hand wherever and whenever needed, a jack-of-all-trade. Being a Bengali he soon became a regular member

Page-396

of Sri Aurobindo's household. But not before Motilal Roy was consulted. "There were some legitimate doubts in some quarters owing to his unsteady nature and other defects of character, therefore I wrote to you."

It was sometime in December that suddenly one day Biren was seen with his head completely shaved. That took Moni's fancy. Although he liked being well turned out and present a smart appearance, he now was adamant on a clean-shaven head! Biren tried his utmost to dissuade him, but to no avail. After this Biren seemed rather depressed, as though an anxiety hung like a dark cloud at the back of his mind. When they strolled on the pier, he often asked Moni what he should do. He had passed about six months in Pondichery, and now Bengal was pulling him strongly. But Moni had been away for more than three years! So he told Biren dryly to decide for himself, and not to worry about Nagen.

"In those early years," records Purani, "there used to be wine sittings, when some friend was generous or when finances permitted." Biren was always one of the party.

Not much after the head shaving incidents there was a 'wine sitting' one night. Everybody was drinking and everybody was talking, laughing and joking, mellowed by their drink. The witching hour of the night was almost upon them, it was past eleven. All of a sudden Biren declared that he was going to say something startling to them. Everyone was rather light-headed, and certainly light-hearted. They thought Biren too would recount a funny story or a joke. "Out with it, out with it," they encouraged him.

"I am a C.I.D. man," he said. "I am a spy."

Page-397

No one believed him. How could he be a spy? Did he not come from Khulna? Was he not caring tirelessly for a sick man who was, moreover, Bejoy's cousin? Everyone burst out laughing. But Biren persisted in his story. He told them that he had shaved his head so that a new man who was to replace him and was to meet him at Margie's Hotel could identify him. The police had arranged for this substitute. But how was he to identify Biren from among the four or five other Bengalis living with Sri Aurobindo? Biren in his letter to the police had said to look for the man with a shaven head! Moni spoiled Biren's sport by shaving his own head!

"You don't seem to believe me," said a downcast Biren, "but I'll show you the money I got from the Department." He went to his room, opened his trunk, pulled out a note, brought it and showed it. "See, here is the proof. Where could I have got all this money? This is the reward of my evil deed."

He pressed his head on Sri Aurobindo's feet and said he had never reported anything against him or anyone else. His heart almost full to bursting, his tears streaming down his cheeks, he said, "Never, I shall never do this work again. I give my word to you. I ask your forgiveness ____"

The others were dumbstruck. They kept silent and still. But Bejoy was furious. It was quite a job for others to keep him from doing something drastic. Biren, however, got frightened. When he slept he kept his room locked. After a few weeks he went away of his own accord. The others heaved a sigh of relief.

Never a dull moment with Sri Aurobindo!

When the war broke out, Biren joined the Indian army and with it was sent to Mesopotamia. When Moni went to

Khulna in 1922, he met Biren who had a tea shop there. He received Moni very cordially and gave him a feast. He also assured him that he had given up 'Government service.'

The episode was recorded by Purani, and narrated by Va. Ra., by Nolini, by Moni. Details varied in these eyewitness versions as it always happens. But on one point there was unanimity: Sri Aurobindo did not utter a single word during the whole drama.

After returning to Bengal in February 1914, Saurin met Motilal and narrated the incident to him. Full of anxiety Motilal wrote to Sri Aurobindo. It seems that in the meantime Biren had gone back to Sri Aurobindo. A torrent of words poured out from his pen.

'You write about Biren being here, I do not hold the same opinion about Biren, as Saurin etc. do, who are inclined towards a very black interpretation of his character and actions. It seems to me," wrote Aurobindo on 5th May 1914, "that events have corroborated all he said about his relations with certain undesirable persons. Moreover I see that he has taken Yoga earnestly and has made for him a rapid progress. I am also unaware of anything he has said to others which would help any evil-minded person in establishing a wrong interpretation of your philosophic and social activities. I fail to find in him, looking at him spiritually, those ineffable black nesses which were supposed to dwell in him, only flightiness, weakness, indiscretion, childish and erratic impulsiveness and self-will and certain undesirable possibilities present in many young Bengalis, in a certain type indeed, which has done much harm in the past. All these have recently much diminished and I hope even to eradicate them

Page-399

by the Yoga. In fact," Sri Aurobindo made a point, "the view of his presence here forced on me by that which guides us, is that he was sent here as the representative of this type and that I have to change and purify it. If I can do this in the representative, it is possible in the future to do it in the class, and unless I can do it, the task I have set for myself for India will remain almost too difficult for solution. For as long as that element remains strong, Bengal can never become what it is intended to be."

After presenting several other possibilities to Motilal, Sri Aurobindo went on. 'You must realise that my work is a very vast one and that I must in doing it, come in close contact with all sorts of people including Europeans, perhaps even officials, perhaps even spies and officials. For instance, there is Biren. There is a French man, named Shair Siddhar now in Chandernagore, who came to me and whom I had to see and sound. He is a queer sort of fool with something of the knave, but he had possibilities which I had to sound. There is Richard who is to know nothing about Tantricism. There are a host of *possible* young men whom I must meet and handle, but who may not turn out well. It is obviously impossible for me to do this work, if the close connection with Tantrics remains and everyone whom I meet and receive is supposed by people there to be a mighty and venerable person who is to be taken at once into perfect confidence by

reason of having been for a time in my august shadow. It won't do at all. The whole thing must be rearranged on a reasonable basis." Tantrics and Tantricism were code words used by them and referred to revolutionaries and revolution.

Page-400

He also indicated that for resolving some problems he was in a difficulty—"I get no light on the question from above"— what was demanded was "for the present a spotless peace and irreproachable reputation" for the establishment of a "centre of yogic activity here."

Sri Aurobindo told Motilal plainly, "The new Yoga cannot be used as a sort of sauce for old dishes,—it must occupy the whole place, on peril of serious difficulties in the Siddhi and even disasters."

He ended his letter of 5 May 1914 with a news. "At present we have only started a new society here called *L'Inde Nouvelle* (the New Idea) and are trying to get an authorisation."

Page-401

50

Pondicherry Elections

Well, the Richards were in Pondicherry.

In 1910 Paul Richard had come to French India for electioneering. He was a friend of Paul Bluysen's, a candidate. Mother told us that after becoming a lawyer, Richard entered politics. "He was a first-class orator who fired his audiences with enthusiasm." That is why Bluysen sent him to Pondicherry to canvass for him. "And since Richard was interested in occultism and spirituality, he took this opportunity to seek a 'Master,' a yogi." Instead of launching himself in politics, the first thing Richard did upon arrival was to make known that he was seeking a yogi. Mother went on, "Someone told him, 'You are incredibly lucky! The Yogi has just arrived.'" Sri Aurobindo was not particularly pleased when asked to meet the Frenchman, "but the coincidence seemed rather interesting, so he received him."

In 1914 Paul Richard was himself a candidate for the French Chamber of Deputies, standing against Bluysen among others.

And how were the elections conducted in those far-off days? It may not lack interest today.

Page-402

France, like India, has two houses of Parliament. The Upper House—like our Rajya Sabha—is called the *Senat*; the Lower House—Lok Sabha—is called the *Chambre des Deputes* (in plain English, the Chamber of Deputies). It was during the Third Republic, which was established in 1870 and which lasted until the occupation of France by the Germans in 1940, that the French settlements in India were accorded the right of representation in the French Parliament. But five enclaves together could send only one Senator and one Deputy for the whole of India. The elections to the Chamber of Deputies were held every four years, and every nine years for the Senate. However it was always Frenchmen who represented India, not Indians.

Paul Bluysen was the winning candidate in the elections of 1910. He was then the editor of an Algerian paper, *Journal des Debats*. He was also 'Agent of the Republican Press.' So far as I have been able to gather, he was from India, and had stood unsuccessfully for legislative elections in 1898 and once before. In 1910 Bluysen's main rival was the ex-deputy Lemaire, who had been elected in 1906. The polling took place on 24 April and the acting governor Levecque sent a telegraphic despatch to the Colonial Ministry the very next day giving the first results. In his report the acting governor also described the situation. 'Yesterday many incidents common to Pondicherry and Mudaliarpot; scuffles, blows, violent disputes around ballot-boxes, some wounded; exchange of blows, a few mortal wounds.' The blame for all this violence was squarely laid at Gaeble's door. Henri Gaebele was Pondicherry's mayor from 1907 to 1928. Lemaire, however, complained bitterly against Levecque, accusing him of adopting tactics in favour of Bluysen. In fact, the

Page-403

minister for Colonies had to send some urgent telegrams to the governor for obtaining the final results. In the end, it was on 4 May 1910 that Governor Levecque announced the poll results:

Bluysen = 20,580 votes, Lemaire = 17,453. In the announcement he said that the President had declared Paul Bluysen deputy for French India.

Electoral malpractices were very much there.

What happened was that in August 1904 Jean Lemaire had been appointed governor of French India. From the beginning he took interest in the people and the country he was ruling. He met directly with the people, enquired after their needs, and even tried to do something about them. Anyway, he became popular. That was a change for the people, and dismay for the 'fettlers' of social progress. Their status quo was disturbed. Their pockets were unfilled. The fettlers, in desperation, wrote to the Colonial minister and managed to persuade him to recall the governor. Which was done. The minister offered Lemaire the post of governor of New Caledonia. But Lemaire had taken a fancy to India. The Indians too had come to like him. As soon as the elections for the deputy was announced the 'Hindu' party chose Lemaire as their candidate. The polling was to take place on 6 May 1906. It was duly held. This time people really went to vote, unlike the previous occasions when their names were only on paper. Not only that, but on the ballot counting day the people turned out in great force. The committee set up by the governor for counting the votes was packed with members opposed to Lemaire, but it was obliged to concede the high number of votes cast in his favour. But they would not declare him as the winning candidate. Finally, it was

Page-404

the Chamber of Deputies in France which validated Lemaire's electoral win on 15 March 1907 by an overwhelming majority of 451 for and 11 against.

Only Europeans could stand for election in those days, although the Whites were in a woeful minority—some few hundreds, mostly in government jobs, against a local population numbering 270,000 individuals in 1911. It is a wonder how so few foreigners were masters of so many for so long.

Of the preceding deputies, Pierre Alype never once set his foot on the soil of the land he represented for four terms; Henrique did visit the land once during the eight years he was deputy for French India. However, it was senator Godin who took the cake. For the eighteen years he was senator, he never ever touched the soil of the land he represented. It would be truer to say that he was more an obstruction than a help for the colony's progress. Godin and Lemaire were

always at cross-purposes. In the end the people of Pondicherry got rid of Godin on 3 January 1909. Etienne Flandin, till recently the attorney-general, became the new senator. Moreover he seemed to get on well with Jean Lemaire. Between them, and urged by the then mayor H. Gaebele, they managed to get some long-pending reforms for the French Indian settlements through.

This "economically viable self-sustained colony"¹ sorely needed some mod cons. Power, for instance. It was but from 14 July 1909 that the municipality began to supply electricity,

¹ "*Statistiques Coloniales—Population, Culture et Commerce et Navigation*" (*Ministère de la Marine et des Colonies*) says that "During 1870-1900 it was only once in 1877, due to drought, that French India was in deficit. Otherwise the Metropolitan Government had never subsidized the Colony."

an uninterrupted supply of 220 volts, to the town. Not the whole town, mind you. In 1929 the *Service des Travaux Publics* took charge of power distribution. Anyway, when I first went to Pondicherry in 1935 the whole town had electricity.

Pondicherry was a busy port of call. Import and export went on regularly with hundreds of ships calling there every year. At first the goods brought by ships were loaded on country boats, brought to shore, stocked in god owns, then transported by bullock carts to the interior. A time-consuming affair. So the French built an iron pier—inaugurated on 15 August 1866—spanning 192 metres from end to end. Not long enough. It was extended by another sixty-four metres in 1881-82. Not yet adequate. Finally a third portion measuring eighty metres was joined to it. When Sri Aurobindo landed there, in Pondicherry, he walked all the 336 metres down the pier.

For the safety of the ships, and to guide them, a lighthouse, a fixed light, began operating from July 1836, and was visible to a distance of twenty-nine kilometres. But in 1935 we saw that it was a revolving light. The original fixed light had been replaced in 1931 by the revolving light of 1000 watts. It turns a full circle in thirty-six seconds. The lighthouse is a landmark.

Of course, the colony being French, educational institutions were almost the first to come up. The *Lycee Francais* was started by Viscount Desbassyns de Richmont. College Calve, where Amrita had his education, was founded in 1875 for Indian students.¹

¹ These scraps of information were procured by my brother Abhay from Pondicherry Government Archives. Thanks to them all.

Page-406

Now, in spite of their Manet and Monet, the French are colour blind. At least where skin colour is concerned. No distinction do they make between white or red, brown or black or yellow. Quite unlike the British to whom all non-Whites are 'coloured' people ... therefore not to be mixed with white. Just coming from British India as he did, Moni must have been struck at the difference of attitude between the two neighbouring European nations. A Frenchman, as Moni observed, never bothered a whit about the skin colour of anybody, but would put his arms around the neck of another and say, "*Nous les Francois?*"

In 1910 there were only two political parties in Pondicherry. The European Party and the Hindu Party. If you think that only Europeans were the members of the European Party and only Indians of the Hindu Party, well think again. The leader of the Hindu Party was a French barrister, Gaston Pierre. Suvrata's father-in-law, Henri Gaebele, was the leader of the European Party. One big pillar of the European Party was an Indian, Nanda gopal Chettiar. He was a big fish of the area. He was actually the chief of the fishermen, and also controlled the port workers who loaded and unloaded ships. Nanda gopal made very good use of his men. Specially at election time. "*Lebanese Nanda gopal*" (the "Rowdies of Nanda gopal") were used by him for voter intimidation, booth capturing, perpetrating electoral frauds, and what not. That is why although the Hindu Party had a greater number of members, it was the European

Page-407

Party with fewer members which always won the elections. The election of May 1906 was an exception.

Now the 1914 election to the Chamber of Deputies was once again upon the people of French India. That is when Paul Richard came, ostensibly to stand for election. He was to stand as a nominee of the Hindu Party. The polling was due to take place on 26 April 1914.

And Sri Aurobindo was there.

51

In Pondicherry the Election is Done

Sri Aurobindo was there.

This time he took an active part in the elections. Specially on behalf of Paul Richard. He kept Motilal Roy of Chandernagore—the French enclave in Bengal—abreast of the unfolding scenario. Some of those letters have survived. A few selected extracts from them will help the readers to draw their own conclusions.

"Dear M." wrote Sri Aurobindo in April, 1914.

"I send you today the electoral declaration of M. Paul Richard, one of the candidates at the approaching election for the French Chamber. This election is of some importance to us; for there are two of the candidates who represent our views to a great extent, Laporte and Richard. Richard is not only a personal friend of mine and a brother in the Yoga, but he wishes like myself, and in his own way works for a general renovation of the world by which the present European civilisation shall be replaced by a spiritual civilisation. In that change the resurrection of the Asiatic races and especially of India is an essential point. He and Madame Richard are rare examples of European Yogins who have not been led away by Theosophical

and other aberrations. I have been in material and spiritual correspondence with them for the last four years. Of course, they know nothing of Tantric Yoga. It is only in the Vedantic that we meet. If Richard were to become deputy for French India, that would practically mean the same thing as myself being deputy for French India. Laporte is a Swadeshi with personal ambitions; his success would not mean the same but at any rate it would mean a strong and, I believe, a faithful ally in power in this country and holding a voice in France."

A code phrase, 'Tantric Yoga,' implies revolutionary activities. Laporte, an Indian, was then a criminal lawyer of Pondicherry.

"Of course, there is no chance, humanly speaking, of their being elected this time. Laporte is not strong enough to change the situation single-handed. Richard has come too late; otherwise so great is the disgust of the people with Bluysen and Lemaire, Gaebele and Pierre that I think we could have managed an electoral revolution. Still, it is necessary, if it can at all be done, to stir things a little at the present moment and form a nucleus of tendency and, if possible, of active result which would be a foundation for the future and enable us at the next election to present one or other of these candidates with a fair chance of success."

The First World War intervened and the whole political situation changed.

"I want to know whether it is possible without your exposing yourself to have the idea spread in Chandernagore, especially among the younger men, of the desirability of these candidatures and the abandonment of the old parochial and rotten politics of French India, with its following of interested

Page-410

local Europeans and subservience to their petty ambitions in favour of a politics of principle which will support one of our own men or a European like Richard who is practically an Indian in belief, in personal culture, in sympathies and aspirations, one of the Nivedita type. If also a certain number of votes can be recorded for Richard in Chandernagore so much the better; for that will mean a practical beginning, a tendency from the Sukshma [subtle] world materialised initially in the Sthula [*gross*]. *If you think this can be done, please get it done*,— always taking care not to expose yourself. For your main work is not political but spiritual. If there can be a Bengali translation of Richard's manifesto or much better, a statement of the situation and the desirability of the candidature succeeding,— always steering clear of extremism and British Indian politics, —it should be done and distributed.

In his next letter of 17 April, Sri Aurobindo described the fluctuating situation.

"The political situation here is as follows. In appearance Bluysen and Lemaire face each other on the old lines and the real fight is between them. Bluysen has the support of the whole administration, except a certain number of Lemairistes who are quiescent and in favour of it. The Governor Martineau, Gaebele, the Police Lieutenant and the Commissaries form his political committee. By threats and bribes the Maires of all the Communes [including Gaebele who "has taken huge sums from Bluysen"] except two have been forced or induced to declare on his side.

He has bought or got over most of the Hindu traders in Pondicherry. He has brought over 50,000 rupees for his election and is prepared to purchase the whole populace, if

Page-411

necessary. Is it British rupees, I wonder? The British Government is also said to be interfering in his behalf and it is certain that a Mahomedan Collector of Cuddalore has asked his co-religionists to vote for this master of corruption. A violent administrative pressure is being brought to bear upon both at Pondicherry and Karikal and the Maires being on his side the electoral colleges will be in his hands with all their possibilities of fraud and violence."

Sri Aurobindo continued with a detailed picture of the murky manoeuvres, deals and cabals merrily taking place behind the "democratic" scene, and concluded that "At present it seems as if Bluysen by the help of the Administration money, the British Government and the devil were likely to win an easy victory.

"Then there is Richard. He has neither agent, nor committee, nor the backing of a single influential man. What he has is the sympathy and good wishes of all the Hindus and Mahomedans in Pondicherry and Karikal with the exception of the Vaniyas [merchants] who are for Bluysen. The people are sick to death of the old candidates, they hate Bluysen, they abhor Lemaire and if only they could be got to vote according to their feelings, Richard would come in by an overwhelming majority. But they are overawed by the Government and wait for some influential man among the Hindus to declare for him. No such man is forthcoming. All are either bought by Bluysen or wish to be on the winning side. Under these circumstances the danger is that the people will not vote at all and the electoral committee will be forced to manufacture in their names bogus votes for Bluysen. On the other hand an impression has been made at Karikal, where the young men are working zealously

Page-412

for Richard; some of its communes are going to support him; some of the leaders who are themselves pledged to Bluysen have promised to tell their followers that they are free to vote for Richard if they wish; the Mahomedan leaders of Karikal are for Bluysen or rather for his money, but the mass have resolved to vote neither for Bluysen nor Lemaire, and either not to vote at all

or for Richard. At Pondicherry, Ville our [a commune of Pondicherry] has promised to declare for Richard the day before the election so as to avoid prolonged administrative pressure. Certain sections of the community e.g. the young men among the Christians and a number of the Mahomedans, —Richard is to speak at the mosque and a great number may possibly come over and a certain nucleus of the Hindus are certain to vote for him. We count also on the impression that can be given during the next few days. If in addition Chandernagore can give a large vote for Richard, there is a chance not of carrying Richard but of preventing a decisive vote at the first election, so that there may be a second ballot. If that is done, great numbers who hesitate to vote for Richard in the idea that Bluysen must carry all before him, may pick up courage and turn the whole situation,—to say nothing of the chances of Lemaire retiring and his whole vote coming over or a great part of it. Therefore, I say, throw aside all other considerations and let the young men of Chandernagore at least put all their strength on Richard's side and against the two unspeakable representatives of Evil who dispute the election between them. For if they do not, humanly speaking, Chandernagore seems to be doomed.

"The damning facts are that Bluysen saw the Viceroy on

Page-413

his last visit, that it is known on this occasion the whole talk was about this cession of Chandernagore [to the British], that on his return he told Bharati the cession of Chandernagore was a settled fact and while before his trip northward, he was gushing over to the Swadeshis, afterwards he roundly declared that he could not help us openly because the Cabinet was pro-English and he must follow the Cabinet, that he went to Karikal and declared to a number of people (this has only yesterday come to my knowledge) that Chandernagore was going to be ceded to the British with Bluysen's consent; that, on his second and present visit, he was entertained by the Collector of Cuddalore on his way and that that Collector has condescended to act as an electoral agent for him with his co-religionists. It is perfectly clear now that the man has sold himself to England,—selling and buying himself and others seem to be his only profession in the world. Therefore every vote given for Bluysen in Chandernagore is a vote for the cession of Chandernagore to the British.

"On the other hand, if you vote for Lemaire, it means the same thing at a later date. For he was the first to broach the question in the public press in France, he has advised the suppression of the vote in French India, he has English connections and is an Anglophil.... Let these facts be

widely known in Chandernagore both about Bluysen and Lemaire, let it be known that Richard is a Hindu in faith, a Hindu in heart and a man whose whole life is devoted to the ideal of lifting up humanity and specially Asia and India and supporting the oppressed against the strong, the cause of the future which is our cause against all that hampers and resists it. If after that, Chandernagore still votes for Bluysen or Lemaire, it is its own

Page-414

choice and it will have itself to thank for anything that may follow."

To the British government Paul Richard was 'a rabid socialist.' "He associated freely with extremists like Arabinda Ghosh and C. Subramanya Bharati," says a government report.

Normally, even a tortoise can outpace a government. But when that suits it, the government can move as fast as a leopard. The elections were held on 26 April. On 28 April an interim report was published giving the number of votes each candidate got. According to the report Paul Bluysen got 33,154 votes. As for Paul Richard ... well, he got a total of 231 votes out of 39,453 votes polled. All the same in Chandernagore he got 208 votes out of 885 polled. So Motilal must have done his bit. Now read on Sri Aurobindo's letter to Motilal dated 5 May 1914.

"The election is over,—or what they call an election,— with the result that the man who had the fewer real votes has got the majority. As for M. Richard's votes, they got rid of them in Pondicherry and Karikal by the simple process of reading Paul Bluysen wherever Paul Richard was printed. Even where he brought his voters in Karikal to the poll himself, the results were published 'Richard—0.' At Villen our people were simply prevented from voting for him or anyone else. As for the results they had been arranged on the evening before the election by M. Gaebele and were made to fit in with his figures. The extent to which this was done you can imagine from the fact that at Nanda gopalu's village where there is no single Bluysen te, there were only 13 'votes' for Lemaire and all the rest for Bluysen. The same result in Madanapalli which is strong for Pierre, except in one college where Sada (President of the *Cercle Sportif*)

Page-415

interpreter and did not allow any humbug; knowing whom they had to deal with, they did not dare to falsify the results. There Bluysen got only 33 votes against 200 and more for Lemaire. In

most places, this would have been the normal result, if there had been any election at all. As for Richard, he would probably have got a thousand votes besides the Chandernagore total; as in some five colleges of Pondicherry alone he had about 300 which were transmuted into zero and we know of one village in which he had 91 who were prevented forcibly from voting. Bluysen normally would hardly have got 5000 in the whole of French India. Of course protests are being prepared from every side and if Bluysen is not supported by the Cabinet which is likely to come in after the election in France, the election may be invalidated. Otherwise for some time he may reign in spite of the hatred and contempt of the whole population by the terror of the administration and the police. This Madrasi population is so deficient in even the rudiments of moral courage that one cannot hope very much from it."

We are indebted to the West for teaching us how to make democracy work on the ground. We have refined the art of electoral malpractices—rigging, proxy voting, booth capturing, vote buying, not to speak of voter intimidation and violence. Aren't we Indians good pupils of the West?

"The young men of Pondicherry and Karikal are sending a protest with signed declarations of facts observed in the election and two hundred signatures to the Minister, the *Chambre* and the *Temps*

Page-416

of the 'jeunesse' is much valued and joined with the Lemairiste protests, it may possibly have some effect, unless either Bluysen buys the Validation Committee or is supported by the French 'homme d'etat' There is an ugly rumour that Poincare [France's president] supports Bluysen; there are always corrupt financial dealings underlying French politics which the outside world does not see. If so, we must put spiritual force against the banded forces of evil and see the result." Bluysen's election was validated.

In his letter Sri Aurobindo gave some other pieces of news.

"Meanwhile Richard intends to remain in India for 2 years and work for the people. He is trying to start an Association of the young men of Pondicherry and Karikal as a sort of training ground from which men can be chosen for the Vedantic Yoga. Everything is a little nebulous as yet. I shall write to you about it when things are more definite."

52

The Himalayas in Rue Duplex

"Listen," Mother told Satprem on 29 May 1962, because Satprem wanted to go to the Himalayas, away from Pondicherry's heat, to write his book on Sri Aurobindo.¹ "Listen, I also had a longing to go to the Himalayas, I had a great longing for it when I was in France. When I came here the first time it was fine, I was very happy, everything was beautiful, everything was perfect, but ... oh, to go to the Himalayas for a while! (I always loved mountains.) I was living over there in the Duplex house, and I used to meditate while walking back and forth. There was a small courtyard with a dividing wall, and shards of glass were stuck on top of the wall to keep out thieves. And I was meditating—meditating on the spiritual life—when suddenly something caught my eye: a ray of sunlight on a sharp piece of blue glass on top of the wall. And positively, spontaneously, without thinking or reflecting or anything ... I saw summits of the Himalayas: I was on the summits of the Himalayas.

"It lasted more than half an hour. It was a marvellous mountain scene, with mountain air and the lightness of the

Sri Aurobindo or the Adventure of Consciousness.

mountains—it was all there. The splendour of sunlight on the Himalayan peaks.

"After that half-hour I hadn't the slightest wish to go!

"I'd had the FULL spiritual experience of the Himalayas.

"It was a grace given to me—a gift."

This was Mother's first visit to India.

On 7 March 1914 Mirra and Paul Richard had boarded the Japanese liner *Kaga Maru* at Marseille. After a few halts here and there, the ship arrived at Colombo port on 27 March. In Ceylon (Sri Lanka) they spent the whole day. They met a Buddhist monk. The next day they

crossed over to India. They landed at Dhanuskodi. From Marseille to Dhanuskodi... three weeks had elapsed from the time Mirra had left the soil of France and set her foot on the soil of India.

Mirra was in South India.

On 29 March they reached Pondicherry.

Their first habitation was the *Hôtel d'Europe*, popularly known as Magrie Hotel.

Sri Aurobindo's 'trikaladrishti of Time' was now functioning rather accurately, although he still did not have full confidence in its action. On March 30 he noted, among other things, "Richard's arrival on the 29th not as had been arranged on the 28th, his visit on the same day, & less clearly in the afternoon."

Interesting also are his notings of the 29th. "The afternoon & evening taken up by R's visit, Bh's [Bharati's] &c translation of Rigveda 11.23 &c 24. Bh. has fresh Yogic experiences,—this time of the voice of God &c miraculous cure_____

"Bj. [Bejoy] gets the vision of the colour-body with regard to R—behind the physical body—yellow in blue, then red, red

Page-419

in black, again red and once more yellow in blue."

Sri Aurobindo observed that in political and social sphere "the power is not yet ripe for organised action.

"Veda 11.23, 24, 25, 26—completed today. This shows a great advance in sustained energy."

For election work, on April 13 Paul Richard had gone to Karikal with Mirra. Nolini records, "In this connection the Mother had to pay a' visit to Karikal once. This was her first direct experience of actual India, that is, what it is in its crude outward aspect. She gave us an amusing description of the room where she was put up, an old dilapidated room as dark as it was dirty and a paradise for white ants." Mother must have told them about it much later when she was more familiar with them. Besides they were then in Calcutta the three of them, Nolini, Moni and Saurin, and they returned only some five months later.

However, it was also at Karikal that Mother had seen people drinking "yellowish mud in which cows had bathed and done all the rest" and the village had not a single case of cholera although the other villages around had an epidemic of cholera!¹

Well, now that the din and dust of the elections had settled, what were the Richards going to do? Richard's idea was to stay on for two more years, as Sri Aurobindo told Motilal.

"Next as to money matter," Sri Aurobindo wrote in the same letter of 5 May 1914. "My present position is that I have exhausted all my money along with Rs. 60 Richard forced on me and am still in debt for the Rs. 130 due for the old rent. I

¹ *Mother's Chronicles* Book II, ch. 6, 'Illnesses.'

do not like to take more money from Richard, for he has sold one fourth of his wife's fortune (a very small one) in order to be able to come and work for India, and the money he has can only carry him through the 2 years he thinks of staying here. I should therefore be impoverishing them by taking anything from them. Of course, they believe that money will come whenever it is necessary but then God's idea of necessity and ours do not always agree."

Sri Aurobindo was very explicit about his financial position.

"As for Rangaswamy, there is a fatality about his money,— it is intercepted by all sorts of people and very little reaches me even on the rare occasions when he sends anything. I have no hope therefore, of any regular help from that quarter. Even in the fact of your being unable to meet him, fate has been against us. On the other hand, Saurin writes that he has been able to 'fix' Rs. 1000 a year for me in Bengal. Is this merely the re-fixing of Das' promise or something else? As for fixing, anything may be fixed orally or on paper, the difficulty is to realise what has been fixed. He says also there is Rs. 500 awaiting me, my share of the garden money [Sri Aurobindo's share of the sale of the Manicktolla Garden]. He wants it for his 'commerce,' but when I have no money to live on, I can hardly comply. He does not tell me what I am to do to get the money, but only that I can get it whenever I want it. I am writing to him to Meherpur, but if you see him in Calcutta, ask him to get it and send it to me at once. With this money I may be able to go on for a few months till something definite and regular can be settled and worked out. As for the sum I

need monthly, so long as S. and the others do not return, I need Rs. 50 monthly for my own expenses and

Page-421

Rs. 10 not for myself, but still absolutely indispensable. When S. and the others return, that will no longer be sufficient. I am writing to S. to try and make some real *bandanas* [arrangement] about money before coming back. Please also press Shyam Babu and the others for the money due to me. This habit of defalcation of money for noble and philanthropic purposes in which usually the ego is largely the beneficiary is one of the curses of our movement and so long as it is continued Lakshmi will not return to this country. I have sharply discontinued all looseness of this kind myself and it must be discouraged henceforth wherever we meet it. It is much better and more honest to be a thief for our own personal benefit, than under these holy masks. And always, if one must plunder, it is best to do it as a Kshatriya, not with the corruption of the Vaishya spirit of gain which is the chief enemy in our present struggle." He explained to Motilal, "What you have to do, is to try to make some real arrangement, not a theoretical arrangement by which the burden of my expenses may be shifted off your shoulders until I am able to make my own provision."

To Saurin, Sri Aurobindo wrote a letter in June about money matters. "Sukumar has not yet sent the garden-money but I presume he will do so before long. I have received Rs. 400 of the Rs. 600 due to me from another quarter & hope to get the remainder by August. With the garden money, this will mean Rs. 1100, & with another Rs. 100 & 130 for payment of the old rent, we could just go on for a year even without the Rs. 1000 arrangement yearly or other money. But Rs. 150 is the real minimum sum needed, especially if we keep this house after Nagen goes, as Richard wishes.

Page-422

"As for your loans, my point was not about a legal process or any material trouble as the result of non-payment. It was that those who give the loan should not have any feeling of not being rightly dealt with, if we should fail to repay them, any feeling that advantage had been taken of their friendship. I have had too bad an experience of money-matters & their power to cool down friendly relations not to be on my guard in this respect. Therefore, I desire that there should be

no ground left for future misunderstanding in any matter of the kind, & loans are the most fruitful of these things, much more than money asked or taken as a gift."

It is a human problem this dealing with money. "That men are attached to money is a thing known ever since humanity began its course," Sri Aurobindo once wryly remarked. And to the moanings of Dilip he consoled him (20 February 1936) in his own inimitable style. "As for the money-grabbing propensity, I fear all countries are like that now-a-days—it is an 'economic' world we are living in—with a very badly upset economy, a world governed by Mammon but Mammon suffering from overeating and a bad chronic stomachache. Perhaps there is hope of better things in that stomachache."

Page-423

53

The 'Arya

Under the date 1st June 1914 Sri Aurobindo wrote in his diary: "The idea came to ask Mme R. how soon they would go into the new house, but the question was asked only in the mind; in 15 or 20 seconds she answered, 'In one or two days perhaps we shall go into the house.' "

It stands to reason that they would not stay at Magrie Hotel for two years! So the moment the elections were over a search for a house for them got under way On 8 May Sri Aurobindo wrote in his diary:

"The following decisions in the nature of trikaladrishti rising out of telepathis were registered for observation of success or failure.

"1. *Both will come*—i.e. Richard & Madame Richard.

"N.B. Madame Richard was ill; moreover the Governor visited them at the time of their usual visit here; but they both came subsequently at 6 p.m., 2 hours later than the regular time.

"2. *The house will be found with a little more difficulty.*

"3. *The Society will arrange itself after a few difficulties.*

"4. *The money question will be arranged by a developing siddhi.*"

Page-424

There were three more predictions, which do not concern us here.

On the 11th he wrote in his diary: "Several movements towards the fulfilment of the predictions 2. 3. 4 of the 8th May...."

On 29 May he wrote: "The second of the predictions on the 8th May has been fulfilled after a lapse of precisely three weeks due to a small difficulty which was not overcome owing to a want of energy in the search...."

The house found for Madame and Monsieur Richard was 7 rue Duplex (now 3 Nehru Street).

It was in this house that Amrita first saw the Mother.



Amrita sketched by Mother in 1920

It was Bejoy who had introduced Amrita "as one of the students of the Calve College and as one keen on practising Yoga," recalled Amrita. "Students from our school, in small groups, would come at their leisure hours to see the Mother. We did not know then who the Mother was." But in no time at all Amrita's group "came to feel the magic power of the Mother." Other students too were deeply impressed and felt a change come over them as they came more and more in contact with her. On his twice weekly school holidays, on Thursdays and Sundays to be precise, Amrita would go at 10 a.m. to be with Mother, sit on a chair facing her "almost as equals," study with her for about half an hour one or two pages of the *Yogic Sadhan*. Then back home via Sri Aurobindo's house, to have his 'darshan.'

Fulfilling the third prediction of 8 May, the authorisation for the new society had finally been obtained. It was those students and players of the *Cercle Sportif* "who formed the core group of the society, *L'Idee Nouvelle* or 'the New Idea.' Sri Aurobindo explained to Motilal in a letter: "The second part of my work is the practical, consisting in the practice of Yoga, by an ever increasing number of young men all over the country. We have started here a society called the New Idea with that object, and a good many young men are taking up Vedantic Yoga and some progressing much."

Always hard up for money, Sri Aurobindo had written in June that he was trying to lighten Motilal's burden, but "we do not know whether our attempt to provide otherwise will succeed." And he broke the news to Motilal about the launching of a new Review, the *Arya*. Sri Aurobindo's grasp of the material comes through vividly in the details given in his letter. "That

attempt takes the form of a new philosophical Review with Richard and myself as Editors—the *Arya*, which is to be brought out in French and English, two separate editions,—one for France, one for India, England and America. In this Review my new theory of the Veda will appear as also translation and explanation of the Upanishads, a series of essays giving my system of Yoga and a book of Vedantic philosophy (not Shankara's but Vedic Vedanta) giving the Upanishadic foundations of my theory of the ideal life towards which humanity must move. You will see so far as my share is concerned, it will be the intellectual side of my work for the world. The Review will be of 64 pages to start with and the subscription Rs. 6 annually. Of the French edition 600 copies will be issued, and it will cost about Rs. 750 a year minus postage. Richard reckoned 200 subscribers in France at the start, i.e. Rs. 1200 in the year. For the English edition

we are thinking of an issue of 1000 copies, at the cost of about Rs. 1200 annually. We shall need therefore at least 200 subscribers to meet this expense and some more so that the English edition may pay all its own expenses. Let us try 250 subscribers to start with, with the ideal of having 800 to 1000 in the first year. If these subscribers can be got before the Review starts, we shall have a sound financial foundation to start with. The question is, can they be got? We are printing a prospectus with specimens of the writings from my translation and commentary on a Vedic hymn, and an extract from Richard's collections of the central sayings of great sages of all times called the Eternal Wisdom to show the nature of the Review. This is supposed to come out in the middle of this month, and the Review on the 15th August, so there will be nearly two months

Page-427

No 1

आयं

A PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW

(English Edition of the " Revue de Grande Synthèse")

Editors :

SRI AUROBINDO GHOSE — PAUL St MIRRA RICHARD.

15th August 1914

4i. Rue Francois Martin, Pondicherry. INDIA.

MODERN PRESS. PONDICHERRY

for collecting subscribers. How far can you help us in this work?"

He cautioned Motilal not to entangle the Review in Indian politics. And suggested in another letter to appoint some trustworthy agents who would receive a 'nominal' discount on each copy sold.

"I should like to know from you as soon as possible how far you can help us and how many copies of the prospectus we should send to you. If the Review succeeds, if, that is to say, we get in India 850 regular subscribers, and 250 in France etc. we shall be able to meet the expense of the establishment, translation-staff etc. and yet have enough for each of the editors to live on with their various kinds of families, say Rs. 100 a month for each. In that case the money-question will practically be solved. There will of course be other expenses besides mere living and there may be from time to time exceptional expenses, such as publication of books etc., but these may be met otherwise or as the Review increases its subscribers. Therefore use your best endeavour towards this end."

Motilal endeavoured. On 1 July 1914 Calcutta's newspaper *Amrita Bazar Patrika* announced under the heading ARYA:

"It is perhaps known to everybody that a new philosophical monthly, the *Arya*, will be published from Pondicherry from the 15th of August under the editorship of Srijut Arabindo Ghosh and Paul and Mrs. Richard. The writing will be the outcome of five years of study and meditation of Srijut Ghosh in Pondicherry.

"The Secretary of the *Arya* has sent to me some copies of prospectus of the Review. Those interested in the studies of Hindu theism and philosophy may have the specimen copy

from the following address on application.

MOTI LAL ROY

Boraichanditala, Chandernagore"

Does the reader still needs to be convinced as to how minutely exact Sri Aurobindo always was when dealing with material things? Then please read on. This letter was written shortly after the previous one we have quoted.

"Dear M," Sri Aurobindo wrote, "Again a business letter.

"Enclosed you will find two samples of paper, taken from a sample book of the Titaghur Mills which we want made to order, of a certain size, for our Review. Will you please see *at once* the agent in Calcutta, whose address is given, and ask him for all the particulars, the price, whether the paper of that sample, of the size required, is available or can be made to order by them, in what minimum amount, within what time etc. and let the Manager know immediately by the British post."

In a draft letter to Saurin, perhaps never sent, Sri Aurobindo gave certain other details.

"Dear Saurin," he wrote.

"We have changed the name of the review from the New Idea to the Arya. We are bringing out a prospectus with specimens of the content which will have to be distributed so as to attract subscribers. It will probably be out in the middle of the month. Please let us know before then how many copies we should send to you to distribute. The address of the Review will be 7 Rue Dupleix & subscriptions should be sent to the Manager, Arya at that address. This is the house that has been found for M & Madame Richard; they have not occupied it yet but will do

Page-430

so within a week or so. It is Martin's house over on the other side of the street just near to the Governor's. It is also to be the headquarters of the Review & the Society, at least for the present....

"You will of course return before August,—as soon in fact as it is no longer necessary for you to stay in Bengal to get matters arranged there. I await your farther information with regard to the idea of Mrinalini coming here. At present it seems to me that that will depend very much on the success of the Review & a more settled condition in my means of life. We shall see, however, whether anything else develops."

Rue Dupleix was to be the headquarters of the Review. Well, well! Imagine Mirra moving from Magrie Hotel to the new house. All the cleaning, arranging, getting necessary repairs done, getting the furniture needed (I don't know if the furniture came with the house!), settling down in short. Knowing Mirra it would not quite surprise us to learn that she it was who took the entire charge of the *Arya*. She made all the necessary arrangements, as Nolini described. "She wrote out in her own hand the list of subscribers, maintained the accounts herself; perhaps those papers might be still available," he said wistfully. As there was the French edition coming out simultaneously, Mirra helped Paul Richard in the translation of the writings of Sri Aurobindo into French. "The ground floor of Dupleix House was used as the stack room and the office was on the ground floor of the Guest house. The Mother was the chief executive in sole charge." Her experience with Théon's *Revue Cosmique* came in handy.

Replying to a question in September 1935, Sri Aurobindo wrote that "The *Arya* was decided on the 1st June and it was

Page-431

agreed that it would start on the 15th August. The war intervened on the 4th."

On 5 November 1961 Mother told Satprem, "We began the Review *Arya* in the month of June 1914 and it was announced that the first number would come out on 15 August, the birthday of Sri Aurobindo, and I think the war broke out on 3 August."

As for the War, it came about with the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand of Austria, heir to the throne, at Sarajevo on 28 June 1914. Austria declared war on Serbia on 28 July. Germany declared war on Russia on 1st August. France entered the conflict on 3rd August. Great Britain followed suit on 4th August. So both Mother and Sri Aurobindo were right.

"The Review *Arya* was bilingual," Mother added, "it was one and the same review, one part in French and another in English, but published here, at Pondicherry.... Besides it was I who translated everything, rather poorly at that."

Apart from Sri Aurobindo and Richard, Bharati also participated in the monthly by contributing his English translation of some verses from the Vaishnava poetess Andal's *Tiruppavai*.

The *Arya* was printed at the Modern Press, Pondicherry.

"The Arya was, in fact, a financial success. It paid its way with a large surplus," said Sri Aurobindo.

No, in spite of the success of the *Arya*, Mrinalini Devi did not come to join Sri Aurobindo. In 1918, just at the end of the war, a Spectre swept over the Earth. It was the influenza which in less than two years took a toll of at least twenty-one million people. As it swept over the world, the Indian subcontinent paid a frightful price—at least ten million Indians died. Mrinalini Devi was one of its victims.

Page-432

"But I have loved thee for thyself indeed
And with myself have snared ;
Immortal to immortal I made speed.
Change I exceed
And am for Time prepared."

When the first sense of the irreparable abated, Sri Aurobindo wrote to his father-in-law, Bhupal Bose, that the tie of affection between him and Mrinalini subsisted for him. "Where I have once loved, I do not cease from loving."

Then a longing escaped the human heart. "I should be glad if you would send me two or three of her books, especially if there are any in which her name is written. I have only of her her letters and a photograph."

Page-433

54

Mirra's Prayers

Mirra continued to confide her thoughts to her diary, which we know as the *Prayers and Meditations of The Mother*. Shall we have a look at some of those pages between her arrival at Pondicherry and Sri Aurobindo's birthday?

"Pondicherry, March 29, 1914." It was a Sunday.

"O Thou whom we must know, understand, realise, absolute Consciousness, eternal Law, Thou who guides and enlightens us, who determinest and inspirest, grant that these weak souls may be strengthened and those who are fearful may be reassured. To Thee I confide them, in the same way as I confide to Thee the destinies of all of us."

Then Mirra met Sri Aurobindo. On March 30 she wrote:

"How in the presence of those who are integrally Thy servitors, of those who have arrived at the perfect consciousness of Thy presence, I perceive that I am still far, very far, from that which I would realise; and I know that what I conceive to be highest, noblest and purest is still dark and ignorant in comparison with that which I have to conceive. But this perception, far from being depressing, stimulates and strengthens my aspiration, my energy, my will to triumph over all obstacles so

Page-434

as to be at last identified with Thy law and Thy work.

"Little by little the horizon becomes precise, the path becomes clear. And we advance to an ever greater certitude.

"It matters not if there are hundreds of beings plunged in the densest ignorance. He whom we saw yesterday is on earth; His presence is enough to prove that a day will come when darkness shall be transformed into light, when Thy reign shall be indeed established upon earth.

"O Lord, Divine Builder of this marvel, my heart overflows with joy and gratitude when I think of it, and my hope is boundless.

"My adoration surpasses all words and my reverence is silent."

After her second meeting with Sri Aurobindo, when her mental constructions so carefully built up over the years had crumbled and she had hugged the gift of silence, Mirra wrote on April 1:

"It seems to me that we have entered into the heart of Thy sanctuary and become aware of Thy will itself. A great joy, a deep peace reign in me, and yet all my inner constructions have vanished like a vain dream, and I find myself now before Thy immensity, without any frame or

system, like a being not yet individualised. All that past, in its external form, appears to me ridiculous and arbitrary, and yet I know that it was useful in its time.

"But at present all is changed: a new stage has begun."

Mirra continued on April 3. "It seems to me that I am being born into a new life and that all the methods and habits of the past can no longer be of any use. It seems to me that

Page-435

what was once a result is now only a preparation. I feel as if I had done nothing yet, as if I had not lived the spiritual life, as if I was only entering upon the way which leads to it; it seems to me that I know nothing, that I am incapable of formulating anything, that all experience is yet to commence. It is as if I was stripped of all my past, of my errors as well as my conquests, as if all that had disappeared to give place to one new-born whose whole existence has yet to take shape, who has no Karma, no experience it can profit by, but no error either which it must repair. My head is empty of all knowledge and all certitude, but also of all vain thought. I feel that if I can surrender without any resistance to this state, if I do not strive to know or understand, if I consent to be completely like a child, ignorant and candid, some new possibility will open before me. I know that I must now definitely give myself up and be like a page absolutely blank on which Thy thought, Thy will, O Lord, will be able to inscribe themselves freely, secure against all deformation.

"An immense gratitude rises from my heart, I seem to have at last arrived at the threshold which I have sought so long.

"Grant, O Lord, that I may be pure enough, impersonal enough, animated enough with Thy divine love, to be able to cross it definitively.

"O to belong to Thee, without any darkness or restriction."

On April 4 Mirra wrote: "This body is Thy instrument; this will is Thy servant; this intelligence is Thy tool, and the whole is only Thyself."

Remember Sri Aurobindo telling the boys that "he had never seen anywhere a self-surrender so absolute and unreserved" ?



In its deep lotus home her being sat As if on concentration's marble seat

Savitri, *VI.V.166*

That very day Sri Aurobindo noted in his Yoga diary: "... It has also been fixed in the thought for the beginning of a new period in the siddhi, when the Yoga is to be applied fully to life; for it is the fourth anniversary of my arrival in Pondicherry."

Oh, how I wish I could go on quoting from Mirra's diary! But I refrain myself. At any rate her prayer rose more and more ardent. "Suddenly the veil was rent, the horizon was disclosed." When she was in Karikal, on April 13, Mirra wrote: "All conspires to prevent me from remaining a being of habits, and in this new state, in the midst of these complex and unstable circumstances, I have never so completely lived Thy immutable peace, or the T has never so completely disappeared leaving Thy divine peace to live alone. All is beautiful, harmonious and calm, all is full of Thee. Thou shiniest in the dazzling sun, Thou makest Thyself felt in the sweet breeze that blows, Thou makest Thyself manifest in our hearts and livest in all beings. There is no animal, no plant that does not speak to me of Thee and Thy name is written on all I look at_____

"O Love, divine Love, spread in the world, regenerate life, enlighten the intelligence, break down the dams of egoism, dispel the obstacle of ignorance and be the resplendent Master of the earth."

Back in Pondicherry, she wrote on April 17: "O Lord, O my sweet Master, sole Reality, dispel this feeling of the T. I have now understood that so long as there will be a manifested universe, the T will remain necessary for Thy manifestation; to dissolve, or even to diminish or weaken the T, is to deprive Thee of the means of manifestation, in whole or part. But what must be radically and definitively suppressed, is the illusory

Page-438

thought, the illusory feeling, the illusory sensation of the separate T. At no moment, in no circumstances must we forget that our T has no reality outside Thee."

On May 2 Mirra penned: "Free from all trammels, I shall be Thyself; it will be Thou seeing the world through this body; it will be Thou acting in the world through this instrument."

On May 4 she prayed to the Lord to "dissolve all the darkness of this aggregate which Thou hast formed for Thy service, Thy manifestation in the world. Realise in it that supreme consciousness which will generate an identical consciousness everywhere.... O Lord, all my being cries to Thee in an irresistible appeal; wouldst Thou not grant that I may become Thyself in my integral consciousness, since in fact I am Thou and Thou art I?"

On May 8 Sri Aurobindo noted that "Madame Richard was ill."

On May 9 Mirra penned: "Just at the moment when I felt the imperious need for the regular resumption of these notes to come out of this invading mental inertia, my physical organism sustained a defeat such as it had not known for several years, and for a few days all the forces of my body failed me; I saw in it a sign that I had made a mistake, that my spiritual energy had given way, that my vision of the all-powerful oneness had been obscured, that an evil suggestion had succeeded in troubling me in some way, and I bowed down before Thee, O Lord, my sweet Master, with humility, conscious that I was not yet ripe for the perfect identification with Thee...."

"Let me be Thy living Love in the world and nothing but that.... Let me be like an immense mantle of love enveloping

Page-439

the whole earth, penetrating all hearts, murmuring to every ear Thy divine message of hope and peace...."

It was May 12. "This morning passing by a rapid experience from depth to depth, I was able, once again, as always, to identify my consciousness with Thine and to live no longer in aught but Thee;—indeed, it was Thou alone that wast living, but immediately Thy will pulled my consciousness towards the exterior, towards the work to be done, and Thou saidst to me, 'Be the instrument of which I have need.' And is not this the last renunciation, to renounce identification with Thee ..."

How rapid her experiences were! On 17 May Mirra wrote:

"O Thou, Universal Being, Supreme Unity in perceptible form, by an irresistible aspiration I nestled in Thy heart, then I was Thy heart itself, and I knew then that Thy heart—is no other than the Child that plays and creates the worlds. Thou saidst to me, 'One day thou wilt be my head, but for the moment turn thy look towards the earth.' And on the earth now I am the joyful child at play."

A child is first of all a body. On May 20 Mirra wrote: "From the height of that summit which is identification with Thy divine, infinite love, Thou hast turned my look towards this complicated body which has to serve Thee as an instrument. And Thou hast said to me: 'It is myself; seest thou not that my light shines in it?' And in fact I saw Thy divine Love, clad in intelligence, and then in force, constitute this body in its smallest cells and radiate in it to such a point that it

became nothing else than a mass of millions of radiant sparks, which made it manifest that they were Thou."

Oh, how Mirra supplicated the Lord! "May this body,

Page-440

becoming a burning brazier, radiate Thy divine, impersonal, sublime and calm love through all its pores," she wrote on May 23.

Her look turned towards the world, what did Mirra see ? "On the surface is the storm, the sea is in turmoil, waves clash and leap one on another and break with a mighty uproar. But all the time, under this water in fury, are vast smiling expanses, peaceful and motionless. They look upon the surface agitation as an indispensable act; for matter has to be vigorously churned if it is to become capable of manifesting entirely the divine light. Behind the troubled appearance, behind the struggle and anguish of the conflict, the consciousness remains firm at its post; observing all the movements of the outer being, it intervenes only to rectify direction and position, so as not to allow the play to become too dramatic. This intervention is now firm and a little severe, now ironical, a call to order or a mockery, full always of a strong, gentle, peaceful and smiling benevolence." That was on May 26.

On May 28 she wrote. "Thou settest in motion, Thou stirrest, Thou churnest the innumerable elements of this world, so that, from their primal chaos, they may be awakened to consciousness and to the full light of knowledge. And it is Thy supreme love that Thou usest for thus churning all these elements."

With the *Arya*, Mirra's whole being was "plunged more and more into a material activity and physical realisation which carries with it such a multitude of details" she had to think over and to put in order. The more she worked the more the fire of aspiration blazed in her.

June 9. "O Lord, I am before Thee as an offering ablaze

Page-441

with the burning fire of divine union....

"And that which is thus before Thee, is all the stones of this house and all that it contains, all those who cross its threshold and all those who see it, all those who are connected with it in one way or another, and by close degrees, the whole earth."

Her union with the Divine was becoming more intimate. Her aspiration more ardent. And her experiences of inner and outer worlds were taking on wings.

Time was passing on the wings of wind.

It was August 4, 1914.

"Lord, eternal Master!

"Men, pushed by the conflict of forces, are making a sublime sacrifice, they are offering their lives in a sanguinary holocaust.... My being is before Thee in an integral holocaust so that it may make their unconscious holocaust effective.

"Accept this offering, reply to our call: *Come !*"

There is no diary entry dated 15 August 1914.

At least none that I found in my book. *Prayers* are but a small part that Mother preserved of her diary.

Page-442

55

August Fifteen

Well, yes, there was no entry in Mirra's diary under the date of 15 August 1914. Look, even with her limitless capacity to work, was she not liable that particular day not to have a single minute on her hand? A day, after all, has only so many minutes.

That was the day when the first copies of the *Arya* were publicly released. We know Mirra's role, don't we?

And ... it was Sri Aurobindo's birthday. He was to be forty-two years old. This was his fifth birth anniversary at Pondicherry. He had been a recluse at Shankar Chetty's house on his first birthday.

His second and third birthdays in 1911 and 1912 were 'celebrated' quietly in the Raghavan House; he crossed the thirties and stepped into his forties. It was going to be 'roaring forties'! We have already seen how, when he turned forty-one, the event was celebrated more openly in the house at Matacoil Street.

This time, on 15 August 1914, Mirra was there. Quite naturally, she became the Director of Operations. This time Sri Aurobindo's birthday was celebrated even more openly than last time. Many people were invited to lunch at the Guest House. In the spacious hall upstairs, two or three big tables were placed

Page-444

side by side, "on them were spread thick washed sheets, white as jasmines," Amrita, one of the invited guests, said. "And above these sheets was heaped, mountain-like, milk white rice." Over the white rice were strewn rose-petals. There were, of course, side dishes, and some sweets as dessert.

Sri Aurobindo came out at about 11:30, just before noon. He "stood in the long verandah, south of the hall, at the western end." The guests were assembled at the eastern end. Sri Aurobindo looked at them and "spoke something in English for two or three minutes."

Most of the guests left after lunch. Only a few intimate ones stayed on, Amrita among them. But where was Mirra? Did anyone know? Did she partake of the food she had helped prepare and serve?

For the old friends it was a joyous occasion. They had the *Arya* in hand. Did it contain the results of Sri Aurobindo's search? Did Sri Aurobindo elucidate the secrets of the Veda? They would soon find out. Just then they talked and laughed and joked among themselves. Their laughter was carefree. Though the war in Europe had broken out some days ago, at the time they did not know how it was going to affect their lives. Affect the lives of millions in the world. No, just then, at the outbreak of the war, people were not aware—except a rare few—of its gravity, of how it would soon draw the nations all over the world into the boiling cauldron, and come to be known to future generations as the First World War. The churning had begun.

Mirra knew. Sri Aurobindo knew.

Mirra had met Sri Aurobindo.

Like Ganga, the great daughter of the Himalayas who

Page-445

flowed to the Eastern Sea, this great daughter of the West met the vast Ocean of Knowledge of the East.

That 15 August, Mirra had taken the first step to becoming Anna Purna, the great Mother who nourishes the worlds.

The Earth waited with bated breath.

Page-446

Table of Illustrations

Page	
	Frontispiece Sri Aurobindo around 1919, writing for the <i>Arya</i> (from Abhay Singh Nahar's collection)
29	Front page of India, a Tamil weekly
33	The old pier at Pondicherry (Abhay Singh's collection)
34	A horse cart like the ones used around 1910 (Abhay Singh's coll.)
38	Shankar Chetty's house (Abhay Singh's coll.)
49	V. Ramaswamy Iyengar (Va. Ra. of Tamil literature)
151	A view of Pondicherry in 1790
154	Duplex and his wife
155	Ananda Ranga Pillai
160	Map of Pondicherry by de Fer

	(1705)
169	Monument to Aayi in Pondicherry's park (Abhay Singh's coll.)
178	Sundar Chetty's house (Abhay Singh's coll.)
185	Sri Aurobindo with five disciples (Abhay Singh's coll.)
188	Ettayapuram palace
193	Subramania Bharati and his wife
196	Front page of Vijaya, a Tamil daily edited by Bharati
209	Dancing Ganesha, a painting by Frederic Joos
243	V. V. S. Aiyar
<hr/>	
322	The seven chakras of Tantra, drawing by Maryse Prat
349	Raghavan Chetty House (Abhay Singh's coll.)
388	The Guest House (Abhay Singh's coll.)
391	Sri Aurobindo with Amrita at the Guest House (Abhay Singh's coll.)
425	Amrita sketched by Mother in 1920 (Abhay Singh's coll.)
428	Front page of the first issue of the <i>Arya</i>
21,87,437	Drawings by Sujata

Achévé d'imprimer sur les presses
de Thomson Press (Faridabad, Inde)

October 2001

Depot legal 3^e trimestre 2001

Who is Mother?

I can hear you, dear Reader, wondering. You ask, “What is so interesting in the story of Mother?”

Let *me* ask you: Do you like thrillers that take you hunting for the hidden treasure? Do you like historical novels that take you back in time? Do you like space odysseys that take you forward in time? Do you like science fiction stories that break all bounds of space and time? Do you like scientific discoveries in which scientists painstakingly gather proof after proof and note meticulously their findings? Do you like the story of evolution? Evolution that never stops, evolution that has produced you and me—mankind. And finally, who does not like love stories, love so fierce and absolute that it descends into inferno and confronts death in order to retrieve the beloved?

Dear Reader, if you like any or many or all of these things, then come with me. Let us walk together in Mother’s Geography and find out.

Then, perhaps, we shall know: Who is MOTHER.

S. N.

MIRRA IN SOUTH INDIA, *book six* in MOTHER’S CHRONICLES, starts with Mother’s meeting with Sri Aurobindo in 1914 at Pondicherry. It is his story that we are told: how Sri Aurobindo reached Pondicherry clandestinely and lived there as a refugee, moving from house to house in sheer poverty, evading British spies, dark schemes and the constant threat of deportation. But also, how he went deeper and deeper into his tapasya, “not of an ascetic kind but of a brand of my own”—a systematic exploration which sought to build the foundations for a new life on this earth.

ISBN 2-902776-69-1
© 81-85137-72-2