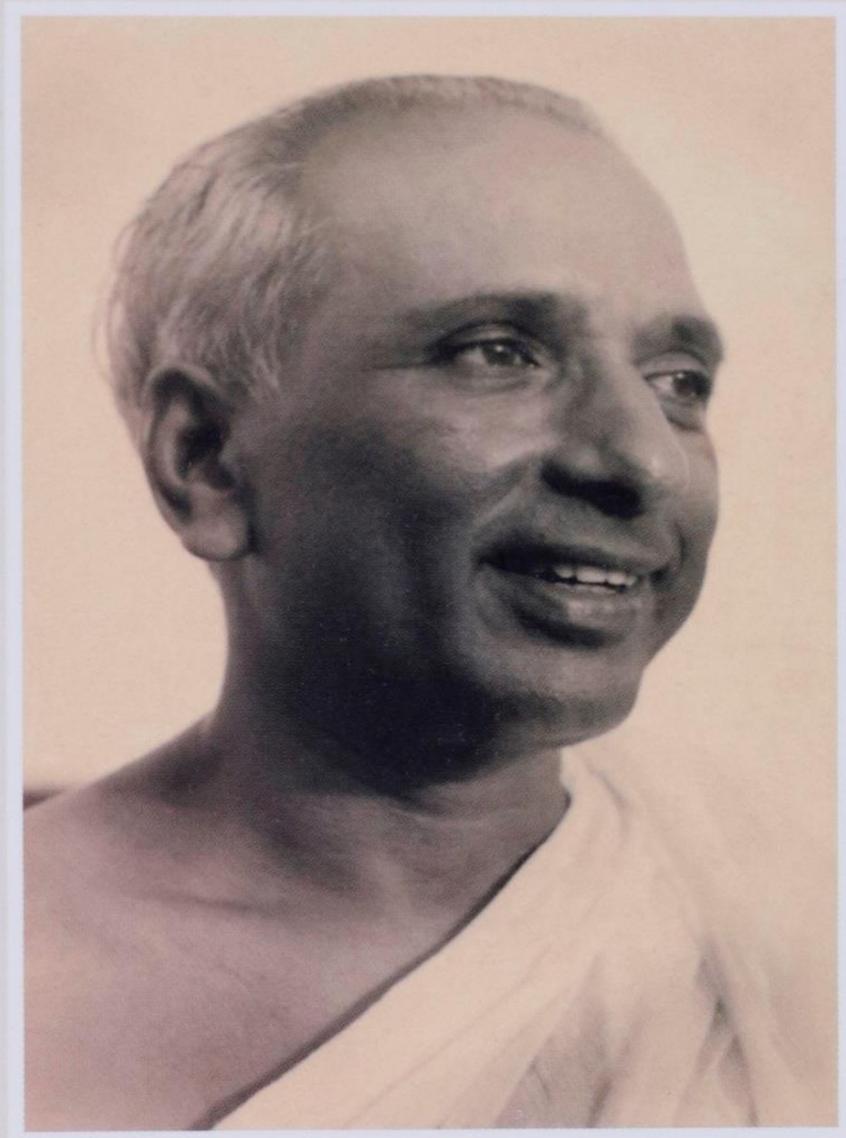


A PILGRIMAGE
to Sri Aurobindo



Amrita

A Pilgrimage to Sri Aurobindo

(Formerly titled *Old Long Since*)

K. Amrita

Sri Aurobindo Ashram
Pondicherry

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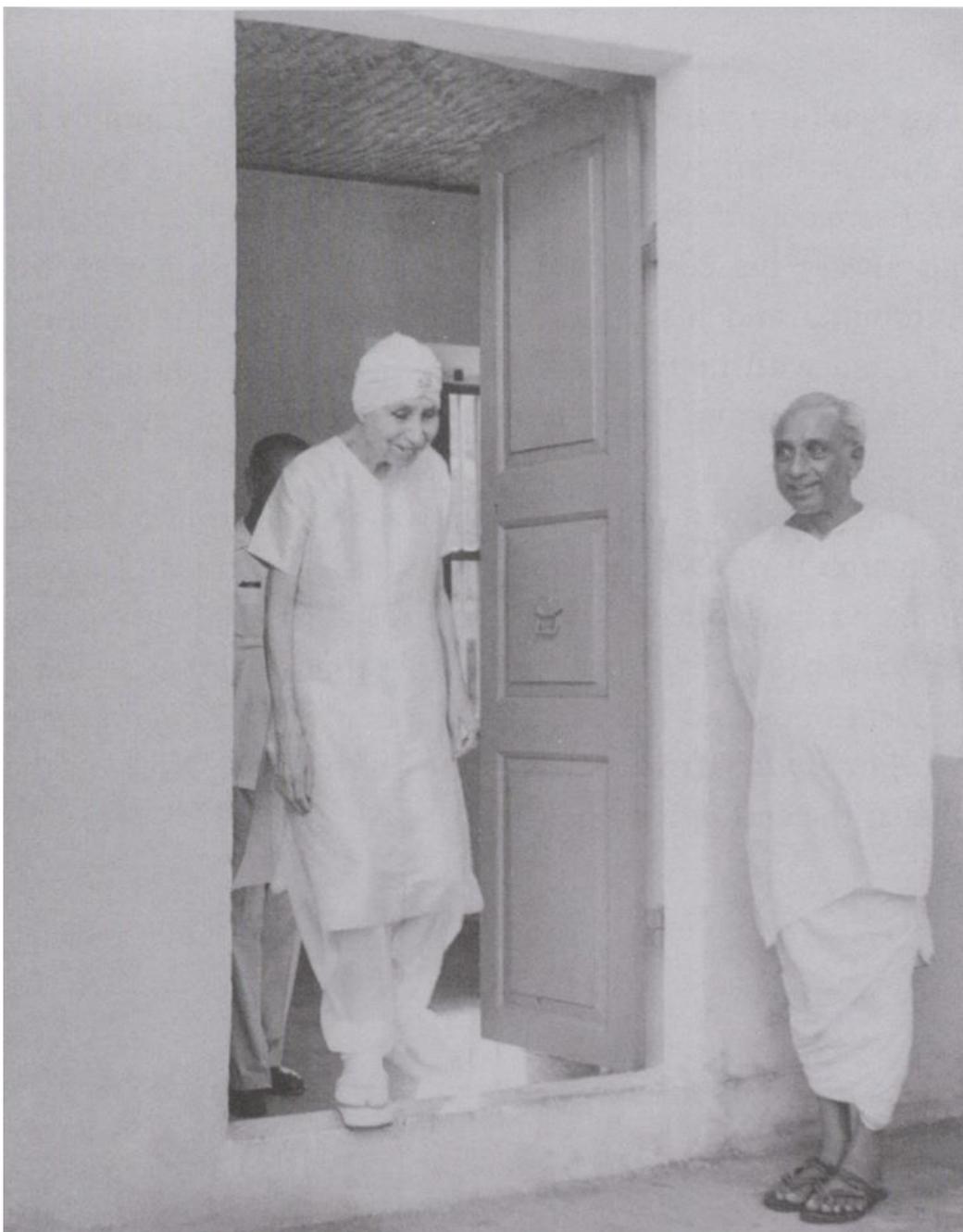


A sketch of Amrita by the Mother made in 1920

Publisher's Note

This book is a translation of a memoir written in Tamil by K. Amrita, an early disciple of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Amrita recounts the story of his childhood and student life, but always his central concern is his relationship with Sri Aurobindo and his efforts to come closer to him. Amrita's tale, told with honesty and ardour, has all the poignancy of a sensitive young Tamil Brahmin discovering a new way of life.

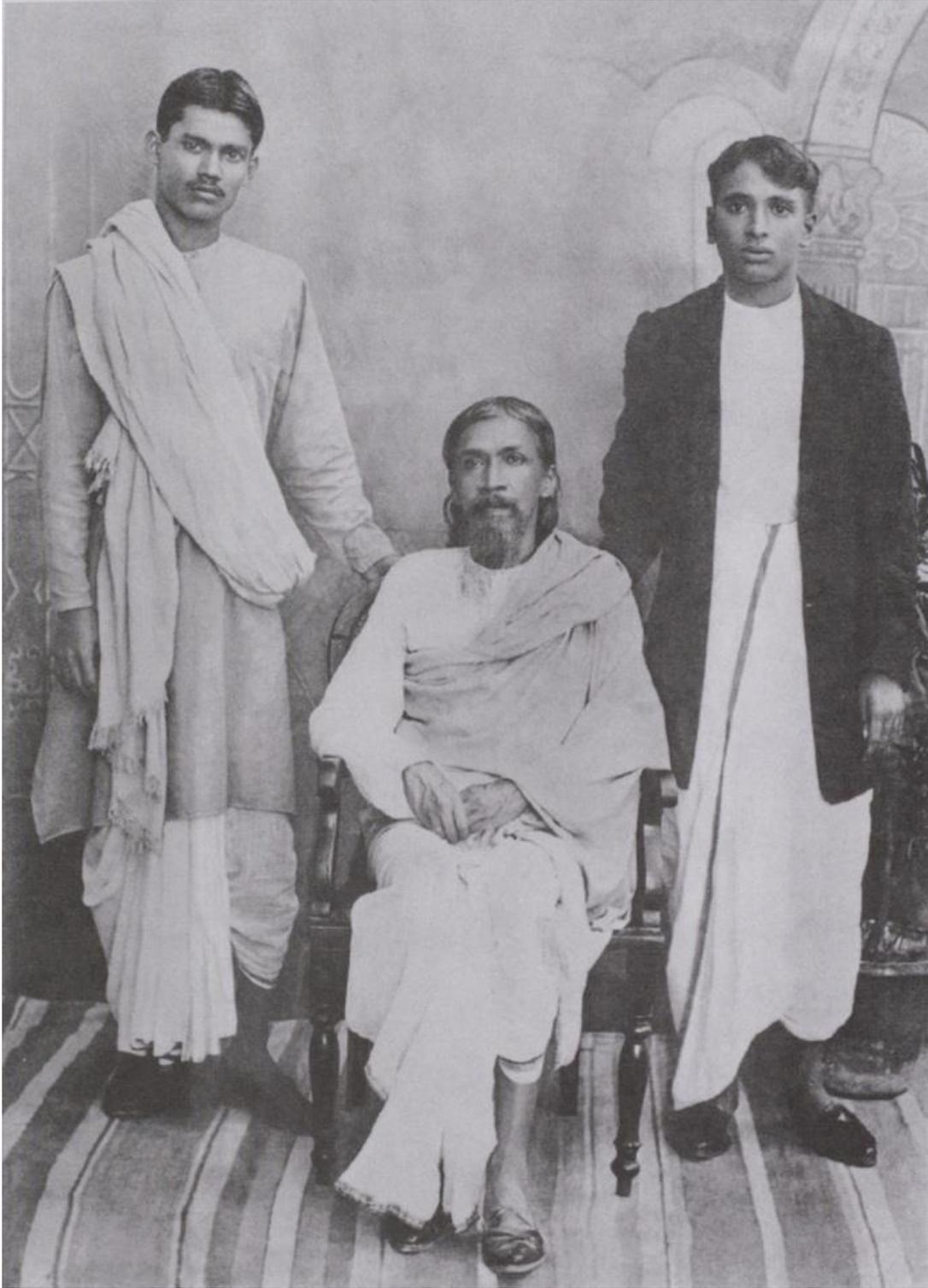
The Tamil text of the memoir was translated into English soon after it was written, and this translation (titled *Old Long Since*) was published in 1969 and 1995 as part of larger works. It is now being published for the first time (2015) as an independent book and has been given a new title, *A Pilgrimage to Sri Aurobindo*. Further details are given in the Note on the Text at the end of the book.



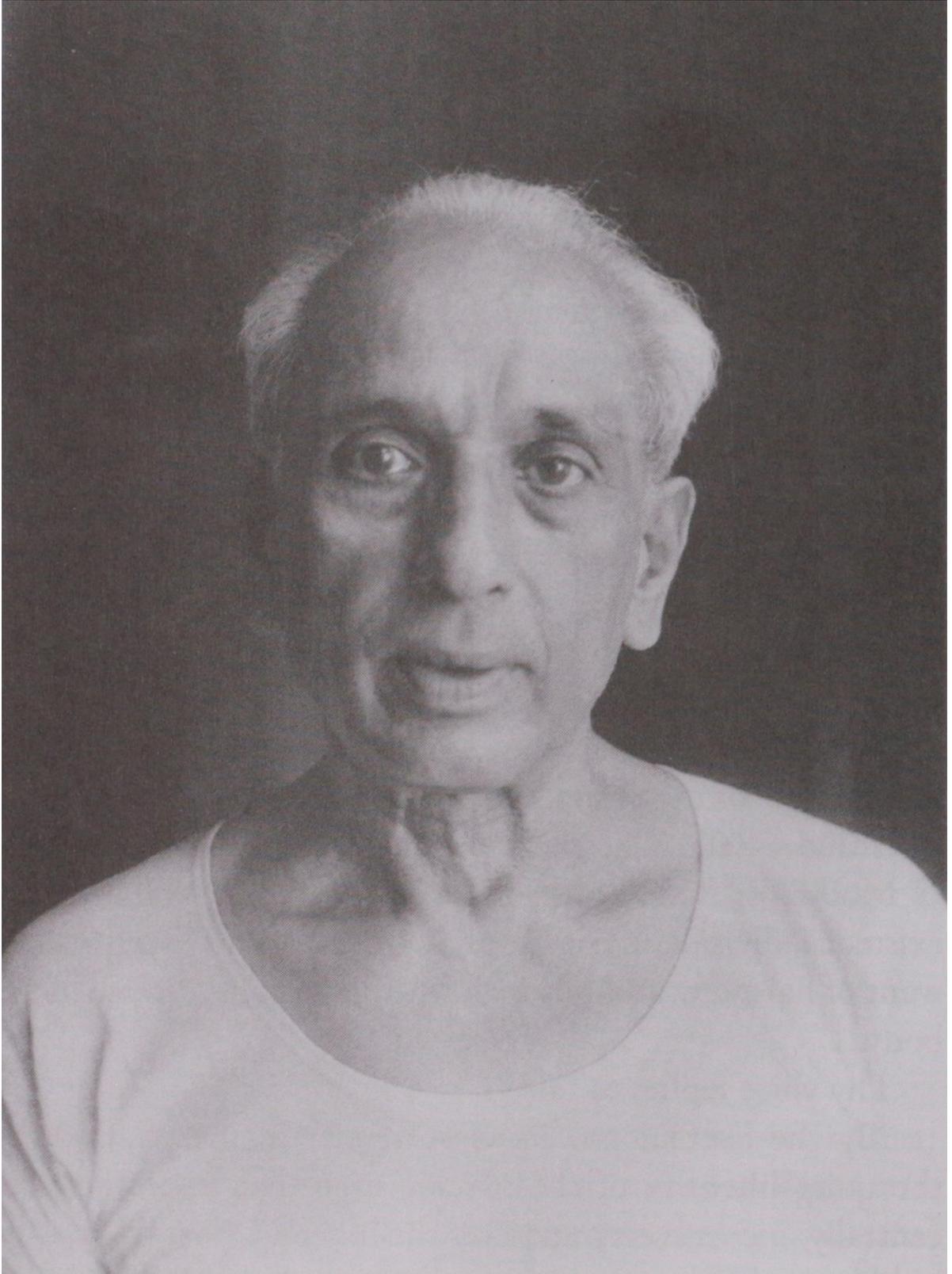
The Mother with Amrita

A Life-Sketch of Amrita

K. Amrita (originally named Aravamudachari Ayengar) was born on September 19, 1895 in the village of Kazhiperampakkam, fifteen kilometers northwest of Pondicherry. At the age of ten he moved to Pondicherry for his education. When Sri Aurobindo came in 1910, Amrita tried to meet him, but he managed to do so only three and a half years later, on August 15, 1913. From then on, he was a regular visitor to the house until 1915, when he went to Madras to complete his higher studies. In 1919 Amrita returned to Pondicherry to live permanently with Sri Aurobindo. When the Ashram began at the end of 1926, he became its general manager and later was made a member of the Ashram Trust. For fifty years, from 1919 until his passing in 1969, he remained in the service of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.



Sri Aurobindo in 1921 with Kumud Bagchi and Amrita



Amrita

A Pilgrimage to Sri Aurobindo

Chapter 1

A Glimpse of Sri Aurobindo

1905-1910

In our village and all around, four names of four great personages were being continually talked of. It was the time when Independence, Foreign Rule, Slavery were the cries that used to fill the sky. And the four great names that reached our ears in this connection were Lajpatrai, Tilak, Bipinchandra Pal, (Lal-Bal-Pal) and Aurobindo.

Of these only one name caught my heart and soul. Just to hear the name — Aurobindo — was enough.

All the four persons were pioneers in the service of the country, great leaders of the front rank. Why then did one name only out of the four touch me exclusively? For many days to come the mystery remained to me a mystery.

In 1905 I came to Pondicherry for study. In 1910 Sri Aurobindo also arrived here. What a coincidence! He came to the very town where I had come! I was full of joy, thrilled with delight.

A strong desire arose in me that I must see Sri Aurobindo. He had been there in our town for six months, very few knew of his arrival, but I knew of it on the third day itself. My uncle was engaged in politics and was in contact with the national workers and leaders. He came to know of the incident on the very day. In fact the number of those who knew could be counted on one's fingers. The idea gained on me that somehow I must see Aurobindo. Hearing must be translated into vision.

Day after day, night after night, this was my sole thought. Two years passed by.

Finally one day, at about six in the evening, my friend Krishnaswami Chettiar and I started from Muthialpet, a suburb of Pondicherry, — near about our present Sports Ground and proceeded towards the beach where Sri Aurobindo's house stood. We walked the whole distance. I was a boy of about fourteen years. Chettiar had his cycle, but he was wheeling it by him as he

walked along. As it had become somewhat dark, Chettiar proposed to leave the cycle in Sri Aurobindo's house before going to the beach. He thought it would be burdensome to carry a cycle with us and we would not be free to walk about as we liked. That was the only reason why we went to Sri Aurobindo's house.

A word about Krishnaswami — who is no longer in the land of the living — would not be out of place. He was a well-to-do man of Muthialpet and a great devotee of Bharati — the great poet and national worker. He used to give all possible help to Bharati and attend to his needs. He knew neither English nor French, his only medium of communication was his mother-tongue, Tamil. He had a kind of instinctive respect for Sri Aurobindo because of Bharati's association. He would now and then go and stand a little afar and have his Darshan, but naturally had no talk with him.

In the Mission Street (Rue des Missions Etrangères) close to the Duplex Street there was a house with its front facing west. It extended from the Mission Street backward down to the Rue de la Cantine on the East. It consisted of three courtyards. Each courtyard had four verandas around it; Sri Aurobindo's room was in the third block. 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.

When Chettiar and I approached Sri Aurobindo's house, we found the door bolted. We both knocked at it with some hesitation. All on a sudden the door opened and was left ajar. Sri Aurobindo had come quietly and turned back immediately as the door opened — it looked as if he did not want us to let us have a glimpse of his face.

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! It took me long to come back to normal composure.

I did not know what were the feelings and thoughts of Chettiar and I did not care to know!

Chapter 2

The Influence of Subramania Bharati

1910-1914

All these five years served the need of my preparation. It should be called a pilgrimage to Sri Aurobindo.

Each act of mine, each event of my life had become, as it were, offerings in the sacrifice done unknowingly by me. Prior to my surrender to Sri Aurobindo, Bharati helped me a great deal to attain wideness in the heart, to loosen the ties of old samskaras and the like, to impart purity and newness to my thoughts, by means of his words, his deeds and his way of living.

Because of Bharati's association with Sri Aurobindo and his immense respect and devotion for him, I felt in me a great inexplicable attraction to Bharati.

Every evening, a little after dark, Bharati would go to Sri Aurobindo's house. He chose that time not with the purpose of avoiding people who would want to make a note of his visit. It was because Sri Aurobindo used to come out of his room and receive his friends only after seven in the evening. An exception, however, was made for close friends like Bharati and Srinivasachari, who, at a very urgent need, could see him at any time of the day. Their visits to Sri Aurobindo's house after seven had become a regular affair. Bharati would visit without fail; it was not so with Srinivasachari, however.

There was hardly any subject which they did not talk about in their meetings at night. They discussed literature, society, politics, the various arts; they exchanged stories, even cracked jokes, and had a lot of fun. In the absence of Srinivasachari their talks would no doubt disregard all limits of sect or cult. In Bharati's absence, Sri Aurobindo's talks with the inmates of the house at dinnertime would reach the height of the humorous. That apart, I heard people say that Bharati and others would return home by eight-thirty or nine at night and carry in their hearts lovingly whatever share of the divine riches they had the capacity to receive. In consequence of their inner and

outer change they would find the exterior world also changed the next morning.

A long time after, I too had a little of this mystic experience. But now as I cast a retrospective look, I perceive that the past was in a way a period of tapasya before reaching the Gurudeva.

As I said, not a single evening would pass without Bharati's calling on Sri Aurobindo. Bharati delighted in pouring out to Sri Aurobindo all that he had read in the dailies, all about local affairs and happenings in the suburbs. And if, however, Sri Aurobindo made comments on one or two of the points raised, his joy would know no bounds.

On his way to Sri Aurobindo's house, Bharati would first call at Srinivasachari's, go with him to the beach, stay there till 7 p.m., and then make for Sri Aurobindo's house. The three together would jocularly discuss a variety of subjects. Bharati, on his way back, would often halt for a while at Srinivasachari's and then go home. As soon as they reached home from Sri Aurobindo's, the people assembled there would put the identical question: "What did Sri Aurobindo say today?" It was as though the Jivatman wanted to know the Will of the Paramatman.

Two years passed in this way. 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. Why so? Because it was Sri Aurobindo's wish that expressed itself through him.

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. But even to imagine today what difficulties it might have created some fifty years ago can make one shudder with fear. The village life was orthodox in its ways; the town life was somewhat different to the same extent as green leaf and green fruit might appear to differ. Later on, Bharati did away with these customs and threw them off like chaff, as things without substance. It would be interesting to follow the whole development and examine it through all its stages. That was

the time when the removal of the mere tuft of hair from the head would mean the loss of the very truth of Brahminhood. But now the white people are not only not looked upon as Mlechhas as before, but, in addition, they as well as the Chinese and the Negroes and other races are all felt as pertaining to humankind. Afterwards I realised that the disappearance of the sense of division from within me had been the effect of a continuous shedding of light upon my heart imperceptibly by Sri Aurobindo.

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 it may appear quite common. But in those days many of us would not dare to disclose such a conduct at home. We would be alarmed if some family member chanced to see us taking part in a collective dinner. Along with Bharati we would make fun of caste distinction. The feeling that all were men had taken deep root in the heart of each of us. Now as we look back upon the past we come to realise how far we have progressed in our endless pilgrimage to Sri Aurobindo. Looked at from another standpoint it would appear clearly as but one step in the path leading to Aurobindo's ideal.

The truth must manifest itself in the heart; the manifested truth must grow up step by step. An unending, ever-growing aspiration hailing from afar in the boundless space of my being fell upon me like a golden light.

In the matter of ritual observance a change within me was going on without my knowledge during two or three years; the truth had dawned upon me that the outer was nothing else than the inner. Old habits and customs had lost all meaning and looked like worm-eaten things to me.

I had to pass through a period when my inner being would say one thing and my outer life would express something else. Gurudeva, whom I had not yet seen with naked eyes, caught hold of my heart and brought about its radical change. Bharati was very helpful in effectuating my inner nearness to Sri Aurobindo. Often it would occur to me: "Why did I not have, like Bharati, courage enough to act according to the inner voice?" 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. During that time my old orthodox friends and relatives took upon themselves the task of explaining to

me what amount of truth lay in religious rules and regulations, in what way they were true. But they failed to strike my mind as true. Was it because of an attraction for the new? Or was it that I could find no relation ever existing between the eternal and the old?

At times Bharati made us hear what Sri Aurobindo had told him on the Shakti cult. But I put no question on its details.

I made repeated requests to Bharati to take me to Sri Aurobindo. He, however, kept silent each time I made this request. Several times I requested my late uncle also. But no definite reply from him either. I used to hear that a very limited number of persons had permission to see Sri Aurobindo; that only Bharati and Srinivasachari could see him daily; that my uncle had his Darshan only once a month.

It had been made evident to me after those numerous attempts that Sri Aurobindo's Darshan was a rarity and to obtain it with the help of Bharati or Srinivasachari or my uncle was well-nigh impossible-Then how was I to have Sri Aurobindo's Darshan? In the core of my heart burnt a living faith incessant and unwavering, that somehow some day I would have his Darshan.

During that period, one day at about five-thirty or six in the evening, I happened to meet on the beach Ramaswami Iyengar, who, a few years later, became well renowned as Va Ra. He had been living there in Sri Aurobindo's house. As intimacy with him grew, I felt a singular attraction for conversation with him. His remarks were always trench' ant and scintillating. Never would he speak of anyone with respect. His face had charm. His eyes beamed. While returning home from the beach I would always feel sad to break off conversation with him. And the hope to meet Sri Aurobindo through him drew me all the more to his company.

Chapter 3

Friendship with Ramaswami Iyengar

(Va Ra)

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.

How did Ramaswami Iyengar come to Pondicherry? How did he meet Sri Aurobindo? I did not know well then. I heard that it was he, Ramaswami Iyengar, who had secretly invited K. V. Rangaswami Iyengar, of whom more presently, and arranged a meeting between him and Sri Aurobindo.

The story is this. A Siddhapurusha — a Yogi — called Nagai Japta was the Kulaguru (family preceptor) of K. Rangaswami Iyengar and a close friend of his. My uncle used to tell me of many a miracle which the Yogi had done. It was rumoured that when paddy fields went dry for want of water, Japta's power would bring down the needed rain and make the withering paddy plants shoot forth again.

This great man had also said to the family members of Rangaswami Iyengar to this effect: "A great saint will come to the South from the North; he is a great Yogi and will show the way not only to our country but to the whole human race; he will be indeed your Kulaguru after me, you should accept him as such." This he said and after a few days disappeared, one did not know where.

On learning of Sri Aurobindo's arrival at Pondicherry, Rangaswami came here secretly with the help of Ramaswami, to see Sri Aurobindo and talk to him. Secrecy was necessary at that time to avoid suspicion of the British Police.

Rangaswami came several times afterwards to meet Sri Aurobindo openly. But it was during the earlier secret visits Sri Aurobindo wrote — apparently — the book *Yogic Sadhan* for him and gave it to him.

In the company of some close friends like Srinivasachari, Ramaswami and Rangaswami, there used to be now and then what is called "automatic writing", that is to say, writing by spirits, as they are named. I am not sure

whether the persons mentioned were the only ones present, there might have been a few others too. I gathered different versions from different people on the matter. It is said that Bharati also used to be in those meetings.

Now, what does automatic writing mean? It is usually done at night only. In the dim light of a lamp sits a man — the right sort of man, it goes without saying — in deep quietude in a chair beside a table, with pencil and paper in front. He invites or awaits the coming of a spirit, most often the spirit of a dead person. The spirit enters into the quietly expectant medium and taking hold of his hand writes down answers to questions put by the people assembled or sets down whatever it pleases the spirit to say for the amusement or enlightenment of the assembly. I myself witnessed such a phenomenon when Sri Aurobindo did the writing and I was full of wonder. Of course it is truly interesting when the medium is a qualified person; everyone is not a Sri Aurobindo.

The book *Yogic Sadhan* had its origin in this way. It is said that it was written through the medium of Sri Aurobindo by some great spirit, probably Rammohan Roy; for it seems Sri Aurobindo said that he saw the figure of Rammohan as he was doing the writing. The spirit entered into him, that is to say, into his hands and wrote down the book. That is why the book, printed at Srirangam Vani Vilas Press, at the instance of Rangaswami Iyengar, was ascribed to an Uttara Yogi as author or editor: that is to say, a Yogi who had come from the North gave form to the book.

As I already mentioned I used to go to the beach after my school hours and stay there till seven or seven-thirty in the evening. Among the persons I met there the most important one was, of course, Ramaswami Iyengar. There I met also Subburattinam, who became famous later on as the writer Bharatidasan. The young Swaminathan, whose traces I have now lost, was also there and a few schoolmates. All of us used to sit on the sands and, as is the way with youngsters, left no subject undiscussed.

At that time naturally I did not realise what was the new and precious thing which Sri Aurobindo's active presence was shaping in me. Not that even now I have the full knowledge of it. It was, however, Sri Aurobindo's dynamic presence that accounted for the indescribable joy experienced by me. And it was through Ramaswami that the great riches of Sri Aurobindo came down to

me as Grace from the Divine, and also spread in a somewhat formless or informal way among all. My thought remained absorbed in whatever Ramaswami would say about Sri Aurobindo, his message, his talk, his jokes, everything.

One day all of a sudden a thought arose in me; I told Ramaswami while on the beach, “I would like very much to dine with you once.” I could make out from his face that this proposal of mine came to him like a thunderbolt. The proposal was not made in the presence of others, I whispered it into his ears, when I found myself alone with him; very clearly there was but one motive behind it. I hoped that if I dined with him, Sri Aurobindo also would be there. Ramaswami, evidently bewildered, thought for a moment and then questioned me, “But it is no vegetarian meal in Sri Aurobindo’s house; how do you propose to dine there?” He said this somewhat hesitatingly and hoped it would put an end to the matter. But I was not to be baulked so easily. A little perplexed, I too retorted, “What if there be no vegetarian meal? I am ready to dine with you all.” He must have been terribly vexed to get such an unexpected reply and in such a categorical manner, without a moment’s hesitation. He however gave no expression to his surprise, but asked me to come next day straight from the school at 12 noon and join him. I was beside myself with joy.

Next day the closing bell at the Calve School went ding-dong at 11.30 sharp. Along with the other students, I too walked out of the school. I went straight home to Muthialpet, took my bath — rather hurriedly — and reached Sri Aurobindo’s house at 12 noon precisely. Plunged in the thought that in a little while I would be seeing Sri Aurobindo, I became forgetful of everything else.

The main door in Sri Aurobindo’s house in Mission Street was left open. As soon as I entered, Ramaswami came and received me. There was none else. The house lay dead silent in the intense heat of broad daylight. My heart too was motionless.

Ramaswami made a move and said, “Let us go to the hotel.” On hearing these words I felt as if I had suddenly been thrown down from a height to which I had been lifted up. I could not understand anything. I was then almost dying with hunger. The citadel built by me was cast down by one breath as it

were. Well, I started trudging, in that excessive heat, with Ramaswami towards a hotel more than a mile away; I walked the distance with bare feet, without sandals. The meal was served for me alone. Silently, without uttering a single word, I swallowed the food and then proceeded towards my school, Ramaswami accompanying me. I entered the Reading Room of the School, the classes were to start at 3 p.m. And I tried my best to attend to my lessons. In the same street, just a little to the south, lay Sri Aurobindo's house and Ramaswami moved towards it.

So far as I remember this happened in the first week of July in the year 1913.

Chapter 4

Darshan of Sri Aurobindo

In Mission Street (originally Matakcoil Street), Sri Aurobindo lived for six months in a house with a tiled roof. That house has at present undergone a radical change; the very spot is unrecognisable. It was in this house that I had Sri Aurobindo's Darshan. There I had the first opportunity of seeing him but from a distance.

During his stay in this house I had the habit of meeting Ramaswami Iyengar every evening on the beach, as I have already said. His heart started melting in my favour little by little even as ants slowly and persistently leave a trail on granite. The result was: he began to welcome me to his room. The school remained closed two days in the week, Sundays and Thursdays. Those days I could meet Iyengar in Sri Aurobindo's house at about 4 p.m. From 4 to 5 p.m. we would be alone conversing with each other. Our relation thus began to ripen. After 5 we would go straight to the beach and join other friends.

Because of my friendship with Iyengar, Sri Aurobindo's house appeared to me as my own. That is why I felt no timidity or shyness to go to Iyengar's room; whether he was at home or not, I would go there. But I never took courage to go farther than his room; to do so seemed improper.

As I got more and more familiar with Iyengar, the names of the inmates of Sri Aurobindo's house came to be known to me. Only one of them is still here. His name is Nolini Kanta Gupta. Of those who are no more, Bejoy Kumar Nag was one — his name became Vijayakantan in Tamil. In order to escape from the clutches of the British Government he had assumed the pseudonym Bankim Chandra Basik. Likewise, Suresh Chandra Chakravarti was known to the people of Pondicherry by one name alone: "Sakra". Sourindranath Bose went by his own name. Nagendranath Nag and Biren Roy came later to stay in Sri Aurobindo's house.

Among the inmates Nagendranath was laid up with tuberculosis. Some evenings when engaged in conversation with Iyengar 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. At that time I could not speak English well. 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.

During this period I requested Iyengar once or twice to introduce me to Sri Aurobindo. But my requests seemed to carry no weight with him.

Sri Aurobindo's birthday was drawing near — August 15, 1913. I requested Iyengar once more. I appealed to him to take me to Sri Aurobindo on his birthday. He replied, wonderful to say, in a consenting tone. I felt an immense joy.

On the 15th August Iyengar asked me to come at about 4.30 p.m. I reached there slightly earlier. 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.

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.

As far as I can remember, no sooner was the main gate bolted from within than 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. All this I can recollect but vaguely. This vagueness of memory is due, I suppose, to an overwhelming joy and palpitation in me on that occasion.

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.

In the courtyard a big jar full of water was kept and by its side a small tumbler. We took some refreshments and after washing our hands we gathered together and kept chatting for a short while. In the meantime Sri Aurobindo had gone 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. Evidently he was waiting for some other item in the programme. 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.

I kept on waiting, not knowing what to do. As soon as the guests left, Iyengar came and told me that three big persons, namely, Bharati, Srinivasachari, V.V.S. Aiyar, would see Sri Aurobindo to pay their respects to him. If I could wait till they left, there would only be the inmates of the house, five or six, alone with Sri Aurobindo. He had a mind to take me then to Sri Aurobindo. But for that Sri Aurobindo's permission was required, he said finally. I nodded assent immediately. It might have already struck seven or gone on to seven-fifteen. A fear lurked in me that I would be questioned at home, "Why this delay?" But still I ventured to give my consent.

Iyengar once again asked me, "Do you intend to see Sri Aurobindo with Bharati and others? Or with the inmates?" I could not make out what answer to give. Whether in the midst of Bharati and others or in the midst of the inmates of the house Sri Aurobindo would be the same Sri Aurobindo. I began to revolve in my mind how there could be any difference. A little while, it might be less than a minute, I wavered in mind and replied, "When the inmates are there." "If so, you must wait for some time," said Iyengar and left.

I had to wait till 8 p.m. Bharati, Srinivasachari and Aiyar, at the time of going out of Sri Aurobindo's house, looked closely at me with a view to recognise me. They did not expect me there so late. They at once doubted and wondered if I had become an inmate of Sri Aurobindo's house. Their faces betrayed this mixed feeling.

At about eight-fifteen Iyengar came to me and said: "You can now 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." Iyengar's words were imprinted upon my mind.

I was soon called in. 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 *pradakṣhinā* I stood in his presence with joined palms and made my obeisance to him. Sri Aurobindo's eyes, it seemed, burned brighter than the lamp-light 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 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.

When I reached home, it was 9.30 p.m. What happened at home? What trouble befell me? All this is of little importance. Students of my age of that time can easily imagine all the hubbub that took place in my house!

For long my heart had been in a state of suspense thinking that I might or might not attain the goal; my life drifting in distress on the shoreless ocean had somehow come to perceive the light-house. In the midst of gathering despair my being had found a new life and I allowed it full freedom.

On one hand trouble at home; on the other trouble in studies. All this did not touch me to the extent of upsetting me. At times it appeared to me as if no relation existed between anything and me. There was a screen within; all desires known to me and others unknown were outside the screen. Behind the screen there existed incalculable possibilities, innumerable things happened not within the range of my vision. Something non-human, something strange and bodiless had been shaping my being and consciousness. That is how I think now.

I had been familiar with Bharati since 1910 or 1911; I had imbibed from him, without understanding, a distaste for the old and a boundless attraction for the new. When I look at it now even this revaluation — this mere rejection of the past and acceptance of the new — seems to have had its origin not deep within but meant simply a surface attraction. For the real reality was quite different. It was not the old or the new, it was not the snare of the old or the

temptation of the new but the opening of something else behind or within or above that gave form to everything and touched me profoundly without my knowing it.

I started now frequenting Sri Aurobindo's house. My family members knew nothing of it. I became acquainted with one or two of the inmates — mainly Bejoy Kumar. He used to send letters twice or thrice per month by registered post — called *Poste Recommandée* in French — to Chandernagore. As intimacy with him grew, he began to send letters through me. There was no fixed hour for this work. He used to send me at any time between midday and three. He ordered me not to disclose this posting of letters to anyone.

In Pondicherry there were two types of post-offices in those days: one was French, the other British. The bundle from the French post-office would be carried in a small hand-cart with a French policeman escorting it. The bundle would be secured under a seal. It would then be entrusted to the British head post-office. Nobody was authorised to handle it until it was delivered to the French post-office at Chandernagore. That was why all correspondence of Sri Aurobindo's house would pass through the French post-office. The duty of posting letters of Sri Aurobindo's house luckily fell upon me. 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 authorities. At least a strong rumour was current then to this effect.

Chapter 5

The House on François Martin Street

Sri Aurobindo's household moved from Mission Street to François Martin Street. There arose a difference of opinion among those called swadeshis as to the necessity of this change of residence. A strong dispute started in their midst on this account. The disputation, I was told, reached Sri Aurobindo's ears.

Why this controversy over Sri Aurobindo's change of residence? The city of Pondicherry was divided into two by a canal running north-south. The eastern side of the city was called by the people European Quarter whereas the western side, comprising more than three-fourths of the population, was known as Indian Quarter. The European Quarter was mostly, we may even say totally, inhabited by the white or mixed white people. As a rule, the houses in this part of the city had in front a footpath for pedestrians and, further away, the road for vehicles. Standing on the footpath one would open the gate of a house and then get in. The houses in the "Indian Quarter" had commonly covered platforms in front to sit upon, but no footpath. In the White Town, pedestrians would find no shelter from rain and storm. The gates remained always closed. The streets were nearly always silent. People were hardly seen walking there. Sometimes with the arrival of French steamers the shores of Pondicherry were a little busy and, in the interior either the next day or the day after, one might come across one or two pedlars carrying, on the head in baskets or big wooden boxes, perfumes, special biscuits, children's playthings, stitching threads of many kinds and colours, and other French products. These pedlars would cry out in French, "*Marchandises, marchandises*" (i.e., "Goods for sale, goods for sale"), with a view to attract the attention of customers. This business was run by one or two of the French families which had settled down at Pondicherry for supplying the needs of the local French people.

Every house had two gates — one for the inmates and the other for the *pousse-pousse* (push-push) carriages. The latter had a wide opening, a big one-leaf door or, in some places, folding doors.

Sri Aurobindo's house in Mission Street was rented at Rs. 15 per month whereas the rent of the house now taken was settled at Rs. 35 per month. Now the great question arose: Why did Sri Aurobindo change his residence when the rent was so high? A perplexing question! Why this extravagance? The difference in rent would be sufficient to meet the needs of a whole family. All this was brought to Bharati's notice. But he did not utter a word about it to Sri Aurobindo, because there was no point in discussing about it when Sri Aurobindo had already taken the decision. It was Bharati's firm belief that Sri Aurobindo would not do anything without a definite purpose behind it.

A description of the new house: it was a big self-sufficient house in François Martin St., No. 37. 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 François Martin ran from north to south whereas Rue Law de Lauriston from east to west. The western gate faced Rue François 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 northern gate led straight to the staircase; it was later on closed up and the entrance converted into a room, as you see at present. The house being tenantless so long, grass had grown thick at certain places along its walls. There was only one tap for the whole house and that too in the open courtyard, against a wall near the back staircase. The tap still exists and is used by our Green Group boys. 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.

In the interior of the house, at one end of the verandah there was a wide staircase leading to the first floor. Each of the steps had its rim strengthened, almost decorated, by a wooden plank. The back staircase had no protection from sun and rain. It was constructed for the passage of cooks, servants, the menials. I have said before that the house was big but it looked desolate.

The upper storey held spacious rooms and a spacious verandah. The east and the west ends had both an open terrace facing south. On the west, at the corner there was a wide room, adjoining which was another room and then the open terrace. Both the terraces had seats under the parapets. I mention

this because we used to sit there, including Sri Aurobindo, and chat for long hours at night. The big room, the front room and the terrace — the three together being considered the best part of the house — were set apart for Sri Aurobindo. Such a big house but without electric lights!

The events that took place since Sri Aurobindo's birth anniversary in August 1913 to his shifting to François Martin Street, that is, from August 1913 to December 1913, left no clear impression upon my mind. My memory is dim now about this period.

To go a little back in our story, Sri Aurobindo reached the shores of Pondicherry on board the Dupleix at 4 p.m. on April 4, 1910, got down with Bejoykanta and made straight for Shankar Chetty's house in Comoutty Street.

The persons who escorted Sri Aurobindo to Shankar Chetty's house were Srinivasachari, C. Subramania Bharati, Suresh Chandra Chakravarti and Shankar Chetty. Of them only Srinivasachari is still alive (1962).

Sri Aurobindo lived incognito for six months in Shankar Chetty's house. Later on, his stay in Pondicherry came to be known more and more by others.

It was during his stay at Shankar Chetty's that he observed a fast for twenty-one days. Though he lost weight, as he said, due to this fast, his energy increased many times.

It was again in Shankar Chetty's house that a distinguished scholar and savant from France met Sri Aurobindo in secret. His name was Paul Richard. While returning to France he said to Sri Aurobindo that Mira and he could come in the year 1914. Accordingly, they sailed from France, disembarked at Dhanushkoti, took the train and reached Pondicherry on March 29, 1914 without a halt on the way.

Now, what accounted for that change of residence to No. 37, in the François Martin Street, many thought, was the impending arrival of these two persons from France. So far as I remember it was the middle of December 1913 that the new house was first occupied.

The revolutionaries who had settled at Pondicherry whispered to one another that two Europeans had accepted Sri Aurobindo as Guru and would stay here. This news spread abroad and reached my ears also. One day in December 1913, as was my habit, I went to see Ramaswami Iyengar in the

evening. He was downstairs on the verandah in front of his room and said that two persons from the top-most 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," he concluded.

I felt very happy: European savants! they have approached a countryman of ours with reverence. My heart rejoiced to hear of it.

The upper storey — its verandah, to be exact — was somewhat beautified. One old cracked table, two arm-chairs, four or five folding armless chairs with back-rest — these were borrowed and arranged there, luckily with no binding to return them.

Moreover, four electric lights were put up, one in Sri Aurobindo's room, another in the centre of the upper verandah, the third in the verandah downstairs, the fourth I do not remember where. There was no electric meter in the house. For each point the charge was one rupee and four annas per month. 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. Less than four points were not given as a rule.

The weeds in the courtyard were pulled out. Daily sweeping of the house was now attended to. The house put on almost a gay appearance because of these much-needed changes.

I do not distinctly recollect what took place after Ramaswami Iyengar had shifted from Mission Street and before he finally left Pondicherry. The succession of events and their chronology have become hazy in my remembrance. Naturally I could not know everything, since I was not an inmate of Sri Aurobindo's house.

After Sri Aurobindo had moved to the new house, not a day passed without my paying a visit to the place. Ramaswami was put up in a room downstairs adjacent to the staircase. I used to call on him every evening without fail and accompany him to the beach. As I said, I was much attached to Ramaswami and identified myself with him without being quite conscious of it. In the Mission Street house I used to have Sri Aurobindo's Darshan once a day. Here it was not so. I had no occasion to go upstairs. Sometimes he would come down and if I happened to be there — well, my good luck!

One event. The year 1914 was born. It was towards the end of March. Time: evening, about six o'clock. Ramaswami was sitting all alone in the open court. There was no other soul. The sense of solitariness was somewhat awesome. Not a fly, not a crow near about. I entered the house. He made a sign and calling me near said: "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."

There was a reaction of sorrow and confusion in my heart. I not an inmate! a stranger! Yes, that must be the cause. I said once that there was a kind of screen in my consciousness. The "I" behind that screen was not a stranger; the "I" outside the screen was one.

Iyengar did not stay long in this new house. So far as I remember, he left for his village in May 1914. Whenever I called at the new house I found Ramaswami with a big copy of the Ramayana printed in Devanagari script. He had started reading Sanskrit. Nolini Kanta Gupta was his tutor. Whenever Ramaswami spoke about his tutor, he spoke with love and respect.

Nolini Kanta Gupta gave him lessons in the Bengali language also. In the new house Ramaswami rendered into Tamil Bankim Chandra Chatterji's short story "Jugal Anguria" and got it published in some periodical — I have forgotten the name, it might be *Swadeshimitran*. Iyengar's handwriting looked like a string of tiny pearls. Bharati used to write each letter separately, juxtapose one letter to another and so his handwriting would look like an arrangement of jewels. Iyengar would send his translations to the press only when they had been shown to Bharati.

Ramaswami cherished an immeasurable affection for his mother. A year had passed since he had left his mother's house. He must see his mother now, he decided. He spoke about this to Sri Aurobindo. Sri Aurobindo was reluctant to permit him. He tried to dissuade him from going back to his place and the old life. But Ramaswami stuck to his decision stubbornly and set out for home. It was some time in May 1914. When I went to the house the day after Ramaswami had left Sri Aurobindo and gone home, I found the downstairs as if all forsaken. Sorrow invaded my heart. My eyes swam in tears. I felt as if I had been deprived of help or support. With what affection and what love Iyengar talked with me even on the day previous to his

departure! Did all that now become an illusion! Seeing me thus, and realising my piteous condition, Bejoykanta, who was on the spot, approached and comforted me with words of kindness.

Iyengar's departure was but an excuse for me to be in that condition. There was created a vacuum in me. The parental affection could not fill it. The one chosen by my inner being only could make this emptiness disappear. Bejoykanta was a help in reaching the Guru's Feet.

Chapter 6

Preparing for the Matriculation Exam

I began now to pass more time in Sri Aurobindo's house and less in mine. I would go home for food and sleep only. And for this I had a good excuse to give to my family. I was then studying in the Matriculation class of the Calve College, Pondicherry. My class-mate was Krishnamachari, the son of M. Srinivasachari's elder brother; he was perhaps two years younger than I. As Krishnamachari and I (I was then known as Aravamudachari) were very intimate and as there were greater facilities for study in his house, such as space, books, etc., I began preparing for the Matriculation in his company. My family was under the impression that my time was all devoted to study. The time left after studies I would spend mostly in Sri Aurobindo's house. Sometimes I would take my bath there and sometimes meals too. But I would not eat with the inmates. Bejoykanta would bring for me a slice or two of bread with butter. As my heart was full, the need for food was not much felt. Even some light refreshment would be a feast to me. My association with Bejoykanta grew into intimacy. Once a month or once in two months, seven or eight of us together would go out picnicking to the suburbs of Pondicherry such as Villenour, Oosteri, Pakkamadayanapathu, etc. We would set out early in the morning to return as it grew dark.

Before my friendship with Bejoykanta, I used to go with Ramaswami Iyengar to Villenour or some other villages around Pondicherry. Several times Bharati joined us. When he was in the party, the expenses would be borne by the late Krishnaswami Chetty of Muthialpet. With Bharati we could not remain out at night. If Bejoykanta accompanied us, we had to come back by all means before ten o'clock because Sri Aurobindo used to take his meal between nine-thirty and ten.

Thus those who led an orthodox life were felt by me as strangers whereas others I felt as my kin. I developed a dislike for the family rites and ceremonies and lost all faith in them.

As I record my reminiscences here, I follow all along in the background the ineffaceable footprints visible anew on the path of my life's pilgrimage. In this interminable flaming journey the chronological order and the

successive arrangement of things are sacrificed. What I consider important is the series of small changes brought about in me by the action of light.

To return to the subject. My heart realised that all attachment to the orthodox way of life had definitely fallen off from me as do the withered leaves from trees. Something else more important had begun to take shape in me imperceptibly. It was not visible to my surface consciousness. Because it was working behind the scenes my wrong conduct, *mithyācāra* — the false way of life — continued yet for a few years. “I should live firmly in the truth, express the truth in each movement of life, be a fit instrument of true realities” — such were the sweet notes that kept vibrating ceaselessly and noiselessly in my dream-state and that I heard now and again as a soft music in my waking state also.

Although all attachment to the Vaishnava way of life had left me radically, my attachment to my parents, specially to my mother — should I call it desire? love? bondage? — still continued its hold on me. My mother had the feeling that she would some day in some way lose her eldest child. But as she could not give expression to this feeling, she kept silent. She knew nothing in her outer consciousness about it. “My child spends his time with his friend in the house of Srinivasachari, preparing for the Matriculation examination. After the examination, before he joins the F.A. in Madras, he will come to stay with me for two or three months” — these thoughts my mother cherished in herself and these she expressed as they were clear to her outer mind.

Chapter 7

From Darkness to Light

During the one year of my preparation for the Matriculation I was reducing the number of my visits to Bharati's house and increasing the time of my stay in Sri Aurobindo's, with the result that an intimate relation was formed with Bejoykanta and Saurindranath Bose who too was living there. Bharati once or twice asked me, "Why, my boy, have you stopped coming to my house?" I could not forget this. In this respect, in my mother's heart and in the heart of Bharati I seem to perceive the same thing, an echo of the play of the World Mother in her fragmented nature of the three gunas.

One day it was noon. I proceeded as usual to Sri Aurobindo's house. No human voice was heard as I walked down the street. The sun was at the meridian; it was all lustre. So extraordinary was its light that nothing could keep hiding in the places lit up wide by it; all must come to light. Not a speck of dust in that broad daylight; it was as though the presence of Lord Krishna behind the sun, pervading the whole sky, was there to enhance a hundredfold with its dark blue the light of the sun shining therein. Nothing could conceal itself in that great light. As I note down my experience of this time, it comes to my memory clothed in that significance. What was then only an impression left on my consciousness seems now to have been an unforgettable experience, an unearthly sunlight.

I do not know what account I gave to my family, specially to my mother, for my absence from the midday meal. The real reason, of course, was that it was the time for me to go to Sri Aurobindo's house, after taking my bath in Srinivasachari's house.

Unaccountably joyful, I entered Sri Aurobindo's house. I found Bejoykanta waiting in the verandah downstairs and, 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." (Nowadays we say "to have his darshan".) Bejoykanta added, "I was just thinking how and through whom to send for you. Come up, let's go."

It was twelve or twelve-fifteen at noon. As I think now of my climbing the stairs, it seems to me as if I was truly going up towards the sun out of the dark state of my consciousness!

The scene I saw:

It was the first time I got up to the first floor of Sri Aurobindo's house. 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; nothing was seen covered or screened, nothing was unrevealed, no spot hidden from light. My heart too, unwittingly, with no doors to close or conceal anything, free of confusion or perplexity, 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. His divine gaze did not yet turn towards me.

Bejoykanta got up first. I followed him, reached the head of the long corridor and, 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. What I remember is that a lamp was lit everywhere in me and I saw in a spontaneous and automatic movement in front of me an intense celestial beauty. My being unknowingly swam, as it were, in a sea of silence; it fell prostrate at the lotus feet of the Master; it did not utter "My Refuge, my Refuge", but 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. That eternal sight still lives in my memory in the same form. I do not know why I burst into sobs as I clasped him. Tears streamed down from my eyes. Were they tears of delight now that I had attained the celestial joy of Indra Loka, or were they the regrets of my ego watching the imminent end of its life? I cannot say. Bhakti is a divine acquisition, a thing of wonder; it cannot have its birth without divine grace. When the heart is aroused from sleep by the all-ruling grace, one sees that greatness; it is so delightful to the sight; then only one's life, possessed of

the knowledge of the Lord's universal state and His transcendent state, will know how to live at once in all the three states.

The sight seen by me at that young age, as I lay at Sri Aurobindo's feet, comes vividly into my memory. Immeasurable wonder drowned me. What I saw was the repetition of a marvel of many years before.

Our village. A huge sand-hill far away from the village. On the sand-hill stood rows of thick-set palm trees almost striking the sky. On the north of the hill in the lowland was a wide and deep reservoir of water. It was the village tank. The tank was full of lotuses and there were lilies too in a little corner of it. On its eastern bank was a banyan tree; at a distance from that a peepal tree.

In the evenings the Brahmins of our village in order to perform the *sandhyā vandanam* (the evening rites) would start from the village, cross the mango grove, amalaki grove, tamarind grove, date-palm forest, etc., wade through the small stream flowing with a soft murmur, climb the sand-hill with its palm forest, get down to the bank of the tank and sit by its edge. After having performed the evening rites, japa and tapa, they would get up and, all of them reciting together the *Viśhnusahasranāma* (the thousand names of Vishnu), come back to the village.

On the eastern bank of the tank was a small temple of Ganesh and the holy image of Aiyanar at the border of the village.

One evening. Darkness had just crept over the place. I was sitting on the sand-hill by the tank. I was then about eight or nine years old. Four or five Brahmins were still on the bank occupied with the performance of rites.

In that dim darkness of the evening, just two or three stars twinkled in the western sky.

And then, in front of me at a short distance and gradually drawing nearer and rising above as it came close to my head, there appeared a shining ball, a big ball of the size of a palm fruit. Its lustre was dark blue. My eyes fixed on it, I kept looking at it. That ball shone soothing my eyes, comforting my body, seizing my heart and, as it slowly swam up, proceeded far to the south; my sight followed its course till it disappeared.

I must have been immersed deep within myself at that time because I was oblivious of the earth and voyaging in the sky.

Someone in the darkness, his face I could not see, called me to go home and so I came back to the waking state. Ten miles away from our village to the south-east was Pondicherry!

Sri Aurobindo had not yet come to Pondicherry. The beings of the upper worlds were as if making ready the blessed town of Pondicherry to receive Him!

While I lay at Sri Aurobindo's lotus feet for the first time I saw once again that glowing ball, familiar to me and quite close, appearing in the dark blue sky within me and leading me towards the south. It seemed as if the star had accomplished its ordained work.

Chapter 8

Learning English with Sri Aurobindo

I do not quite remember after how many days I next saw Sri Aurobindo. I think it was after ten or fifteen days. The second time also it was Bejoykanta whom I asked as to when I could see Sri Aurobindo. He said he could give a reply only after asking Sri Aurobindo. Four or five days later he told me one morning that I could see Sri Aurobindo the next evening. When I requested him to take me to Sri Aurobindo that very evening he thought for a little while and said rather hesitatingly, "All right." The hesitation was natural because he could not readily consent to my request without having asked Sri Aurobindo first. But, as he had a firm belief that Sri Aurobindo would not say "No", he replied, "All right."

That evening as soon as the school was over I hastened to Sri Aurobindo's house like an arrow flying from the bow. It might have been five-fifteen. Bejoykanta was waiting for me. He was in uniform ready to go out for football at Odéonsalé. As I reached there he took me up straight to Sri Aurobindo's room and without a moments delay started for Odéonsalé.

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 I turned I found Bejoykanta was no longer by my side.

He and I alone! None else! Solitude! Seated he kept on looking at me and I too drowned myself in his sacred look.

In those days I could not speak English well. With Bejoykanta I had to talk in English. He struggled to speak Tamil. His knowledge of Tamil was, however, confined to the few words for rice, salt, chili, tamarind, pulse, etc., and some names of vegetables. A few verbs in addition, such as "come", "go", "take" and the like, he had picked up for his purpose. He employed them for all purposes while instructing the cook to make purchases. I saw him manage other needful things by gestures.

I endeavoured to speak in English with Sri Aurobindo as I used to do with Bejoykanta. At that time even one or two English words that I knew well would get stuck in my throat. With a Herculean effort I could just say:

“I want come daily see you!”

This I struggled to finish with bated breath. I was able at that time to read and understand short stories written in easy English. But I had no habit of speaking English. I could follow others when they spoke simple sentences in it. This reminds me of a small experience at school. A teacher named Mariat was appointed to teach us history and geography. He was in charge of giving lessons on these two subjects in the fifth and sixth forms. He made it binding on his students to speak only English and with this end in view he gave one of us a small wooden block, about two inches thick, with the following order:

“The one who holds this block of wood should be alert to pass it on to the student who starts speaking Tamil, and he in his turn should pass it to another student indulging in the same habit.”

In this way the habit of speaking some English grew in us. The habit of using English, even if imperfectly, acquired in this way stood me in good stead when I had to express myself to Sri Aurobindo.

He complied with that request of mine for seeing him daily and asked me to come after five in the evening. His compliance filled my heart with joy and I did not know then if I were on earth or in heaven.

From the very next day, I began going straight from school at five 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. In his presence my heart would flow out like an undammed flood either out of deep love for him or inspired by his supreme grace. It cast aside all human measures of what ought to be said and what ought not to be said. Today I may venture to call it bhakti. At that time I did not know its name. My heart was full to the brim with the *rasa* of sweetness.

Every day I talked with Sri Aurobindo from five-thirty to six-thirty and returned home.

I played the role of the speaker. I poured out to him everything without exception. He would hardly ever put in more than a word or two. In this way days passed into weeks, weeks into months. The feeling that, because of this intimacy, his unfailing grace would hasten the change that had already been taking place in me cheered me up. Does ego possess any sight? It is indeed blind. I realised afterwards that his grace was equal, impartial, pure, as constant as an eternal truth.

In a month or two, without my noticing the fact, it became easy for me to speak English. I acquired also a confidence in myself. I got into the habit of speaking English, right or wrong. As a result, I had only a very few occasions to get the wooden block in the school.

One day almost in playfulness I asked Sri Aurobindo if I could stay with him. It was probably during November or December 1914. I had practically prepared myself for the Matriculation examination. It was to take place in March 1915. The day of submitting my name and depositing the examination fee drew near.

Instead of giving a direct answer to the above question Sri Aurobindo simply said he expected it of me to pass the examination and make arrangements for further studies.

I was at my wits' end. History I had not read attentively. Chemistry seemed to me difficult. Mathematics was quite interesting: I had attained a proficiency in it. In English, though I was fairly strong, I had not reached a high standard. So a doubt that I might not come out successful pinched my heart.

All this apart, I had an opportunity to observe the lives led by the inmates of Sri Aurobindo's house. I saw no trace of care and worry on anyone's face. This was a matter of surprise to me. I had worries due to poverty, due to the coming examination, etc. nibbling at my heart. The inmates led a carefree life.

What it was I cannot say but a small thought had taken birth in my heart. This thought had an infinite power — I realised this fact much later. A tree out of a seed!

One day I told Sri Aurobindo in passing that I wanted to practise Yoga and I asked him to show me the way to its practice.

He asked me a counter-question, “Do you know what is meant by Yoga?”

I replied, “I don’t know”.

That much only. No further talk about it for a long time.

But whenever I approached Bejoykanta he would without fail raise the subject of Yoga. By Yoga, he would say, one could fly in the air, walk over water, remain free from death, be immune to disease, conquer old age, etc., etc. In addition, he said finally, one could drive away all the English *feringees* from India.

Mention of these miracles, however, gave rise in me to other thoughts, other hopes. By Yoga my family’s poverty would disappear; we would no more feel the pinch of hunger; I could score high marks in the examination; I might procure a good job, etc.

Chapter 9

The Year 1914

In the year 1914 I had the darshan of the Mother. I could not perceive then that the Mother was not an ordinary human birth. In 1914 the Mother came for the first time to the land of India, the decreed repository of spiritual riches.

As directed by Sri Aurobindo in 1910, the Mother reached Pondy on March 29, 1914. A few days after her arrival, Bejoykanta introduced me to her. How did he do it? He introduced me as one of the students of the Calvé College and as one keen on practising Yoga.

The Mother lived in the house No. 3 facing the north, in Duplex Street. She had so much work to attend to that she met people only at an appointed time. Steps were taken even then to start the monthly review *Arya* both in English and in French.

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.

At that time the book *Yogic Sadhan* could be seen in the hands of many of those persons who frequented Sri Aurobindo's house. This book Bejoykanta taught me. I did not consider him a teacher. The terms Guru, Acharya, teacher, instructor, preceptor were not current amongst us those days. All that we had been taught was social etiquette and hospitality, no one had given us any idea of modesty or humility or devotion.

Amidst all these superficialities I approached the Mother with the help of Bejoykanta. My dumb heart at once came to feel the magic power of the Mother. Over my poor heart lay loads of dirt. If one load dropped down, another would roll in to occupy the empty space.

In my first approaches to the Mother I thought her to be one like others. My mind's way led me in one direction, my heart's voiceless feeling led in another. I had not learnt at that time either to listen attentively to the still voice of the heart, or forgetting all outer hankerings, to feel the inner urge. The *tapasya* perhaps that I had failed to do in my previous births I began doing now in this short span of life.

Had someone seen the Mother and myself seated on chairs facing each other, almost as equals, with the book *Yogic Sadhan* in hand, he would have been in a fix to know who was teaching whom. In truth, however, I approached the Mother in the spirit of a seeker of knowledge.

The school remained closed two days per week — Sundays and Thursdays. On these two days, at ten o'clock, I would go to the Mother, study with her for half an hour one or two pages of the *Yogic Sadhan*, proceed to Sri Aurobindo's house for his darshan and return home.

An image of immeasurable power — that was how I felt the Mother to be whenever I approached her. She, however, held that power in herself without allowing the least display of it. On some occasions the great power would shine forth irresistibly. Our inner sense would perceive this radiation if it was awake.

Not only myself but some of my friends of those days had felt certain necessary changes taking place, whether we had wanted them or not and without our being conscious of them, changes not only in our basic consciousness but in some of our external parts too. We would approach the Mother with our contradictory ideas and doubts and after a talk with her each one of us would be filled with an unaccountable purity and joy, and self-oblivious we would come back home talking merrily like people living in a happy world.

In this year 1914 Ramaswami Iyengar left Sri Aurobindo's house and started from Pondicherry for his native place. In this year 1914 again, during April and May, efforts were made, as I said, to bring out the monthly review *Arya*. On July 28 of this very year the First World War broke out. On August 15 the first issue of the *Arya* saw the light of day in English and French editions. In this 1914 indeed the foundation was laid of my close contact with Sri Aurobindo. And in this same year 1914 I began feeling like a simple child the Mothers continuous affection.

On August 15, 1914, Sri Aurobindo's birthday was celebrated more openly. In the spacious hall upstairs two or three big tables, taken on hire, were placed side by side; on them were spread thick washed sheets, white as

jasmines; and on these sheets was heaped, mountain-like, milk-white rice. Finally, rose petals were strewn over the rice.

That morning, at about eleven-thirty, Sri Aurobindo came and stood in the long verandah, south of the hall, at the western end and, looking at us eastwards, spoke something in English for two or three minutes.

Ten or fifteen persons only out of those who had assembled that day stayed behind for some time and I was one of these few. I do not remember now where the Mother was, where she sat and took her food.

In October 1914, I suppose, Abdul Karim, a chief inspector of the C.I.D. of Madras Presidency, sought Sri Aurobindo's permission for an interview. I do not remember the date. He was asked to come on a particular morning at ten for the interview. Abdul Karim came on that day in time and met Sri Aurobindo. The talk must have lasted for more than half an hour in private. While going to Sri Aurobindo Abdul Karim had carried a big rose-garland and two or three plates full of fruits, etc. Not being an inmate of Sri Aurobindo's house, I had no means of knowing what transpired between them. Even if I had been an inmate, Sri Aurobindo would have said only what could be disclosed. It was rumoured in Pondicherry that the talk must have been mainly about the World War and Abdul Karim sought to know Sri Aurobindo's views about it.

One or two months passed after the outbreak of the World War. Nolini and Saurin who had gone to Bengal came back hurriedly to Pondicherry. Now Bejoykanta also grew impatient to go to Bengal like them for a short visit. He persisted in it. Sri Aurobindo gave no consent to it. Bejoykanta's friends in Pondicherry and some others, including Abdul Karim, had come to know that he was about to leave for Bengal.

Either the very next day after Abdul Karim's interview with Sri Aurobindo or one or two days later, Bejoykanta started for Bengal. The news circulated in the town that, as Bejoykanta was suspected to be a revolutionary, a warrant of arrest was in Abdul Karim's pocket the very day of his interview with Sri Aurobindo.

Bejoykanta started from Sri Aurobindo's house and caught the train to Madras. Directly he crossed the French border he was arrested and taken into

police custody at Cuddalore; he was then transferred a few days later to his native place in Bengal and interned there till the end of the War, that is to say, five long years. As soon as he got released he came back to Pondicherry.

Before the publication of the *Arya*, it was widely talked about — and most amongst the Tamil poet Bharati and his friends — that a review of the kind was soon going to be published. The idea also spread, along with the talk, that a new age was about to dawn, this new age was for the whole human race and Sri Aurobindo was the Rishi of this new age. Poet Bharati was chiefly instrumental in spreading the idea.

I was fortunate enough to hear many say several times that the *Arya* would elucidate the secrets of the Veda and, as a corollary, unravel many a knot, till now unloosened, in the Upanishads, Itihasas, Puranas, etc. I heard many who also declared that Sri Aurobindo had found a new method of Yoga for the sake of mankind and would divulge in the *Arya* the characteristic process of sadhana for following this method.

Hardly a month had passed since the declaration of the Great War when I heard elderly people, rich in knowledge, affirm that the World War was but the unhealed sore in the human consciousness and the appearance of the *Arya* was destined to heal the sore. At the time, I could not grasp all that clearly.

One day at the beginning of September I took up a copy of the first issue of the *Arya* from the table on the long verandah upstairs in Sri Aurobindo's house and started reading the first article of the series "The Life Divine" written by Sri Aurobindo, just loudly enough for myself to hear. I read it over and over again. Great thoughts clothed in great words — I could not at all comprehend! However, it was sweet to read and re-read it. It was as if someone else in me comprehended all that was read!

As I was reading, Sri Aurobindo came, stood in front of the table and kept listening to my reading. When I put down the copy of the *Arya* and lifted my head I saw Sri Aurobindo standing there. I told him that the reading was delightful but nothing could be grasped. He heard all that I said and replied, "It is not necessary to understand it all at once. Go on reading. If you find a joy in reading, you need not stop it."

Anyone may perceive in Sri Aurobindo's writings a wealth of experiences, a mantric power and an extraordinary superhuman attraction. That first sublime article in the *Arya* begins with one or two Riks from the Rig Veda. Hear:

“She follows to the goal of those that are passing on beyond, she is the first in the eternal succession of the dawns that are coming, — Usha widens bringing out that which lives, awakening someone who was dead.... What is her scope when she harmonises with the dawns that shone out before and those that now must shine? She desires the ancient mornings and fulfils their light; projecting forwards her illumination, she enters into communion with the rest that are to come.”

Kutsa Angirasa — Rig Veda I.113.8,10

Without being conscious of my relation with the Mother before and after my birth on this earth, I felt a child's love for her at the very outset.

The Mother left for France in February 1915. I too went to Madras for the Matriculation examination that very year.

Chapter 10

The Baker Boy

In the days when the French were in considerable number in Pondicherry, there was a bakery called Boulangerie in French at the crossing of Ananda Rangapillai and Mission Streets. Bread used to be supplied daily from here to Sri Aurobindo's house. A young man of about twenty-five would carry from house to house a basket full of bread and biscuits, deliver them as per arrangement, take the signatures of the residents and go back.

The story I am going to narrate took place about fifty years ago. Sri Aurobindo lived then in François Martin Street. I remember only the name of one person out of the several who stayed with him; the other names are lost to my memory.

The lunch in Sri Aurobindo's house would generally finish by twelve noon. The main gate and the room doors of the house were not shut or bolted in those days. Even so, no outsiders or thieves would get in.

After the midday meal the inmates of the house, all except Sri Aurobindo, were in the habit of going to sleep after closing their windows to keep off the heat of the sun. They would sleep from twelve-thirty to two-thirty or three. The man carrying bread used to put it in the proper place between two and two-thirty and go out. He would enter by the main gate, climb the stairs and, approaching the table in the middle of the verandah which would be dark owing to the shutting of windows, put the bread and account book on it and leave the house. After three the bread was removed and the signature put in the book. The man returned before five or five-thirty to collect the book for bringing it again next day with the bread.

The verandah table had but one drawer. It had no locking arrangement. Some ten one-rupee notes and five rupees' worth in small coins would generally be inside the drawer. The inmates were not in the habit of counting the money while putting it in. The amount would sometimes be more, sometimes less.

One day when Bejoykanta opened the drawer to take some money out, he by chance detected an appreciable shortage. He was a bit startled. He kept

observing for two or three consecutive days. All the notes vanished mysteriously. Only the small coins remained. Bejoykanta one day kept a five-rupee note and two or three one-rupee notes together with the small coins to observe the result. The very next day a one-rupee note was missing. The next day after that, another one-rupee note disappeared. He was convinced by this that it was during their sleep that the money was being stolen. He resolved to catch the thief anyhow; he called me, asked for my help to catch the thief red-handed by keeping an eye out for him from a hiding place between twelve-thirty and two-thirty. Being young, I was over-enthusiastic to catch the culprit.

At the appointed time three of us (besides Bejoykanta there was someone else whose name I forget) concealed ourselves behind the doors and kept a watch from three directions. It was about two. My heart was beating fast with impatience. The bakery boy climbed up the stairs and then walked up to the upper verandah without the least sound as if he did not intend to disturb our sleep. He took down the bread basket from his head, put the fixed number of loaves and the account book on the table (a bit of pencil would always be attached to the book), silently opened the drawer of that rickety table, picked a five-rupee note out of it and thrusting it inside his turban retraced his steps. I could no longer contain myself. All three of us leaped lightning-like upon the boy and catching him dealt resounding blows to him. The sound of beating in that silent hour fell as that of thunder upon my ear. At the first two or three blows the boy uttered no word. As the fourth blow came upon him he could not bear it and started to cry out. He confessed that he had been stealing for some time past and promised that he would do it no more. Either on hearing the cry of the man or for some other reason Sri Aurobindo came out of his room straight to the verandah and appeared before us. For a little while he stood without a word. On the face of the boy who had received blows there shone the solace of having seen his Saviour. Our raised fists dropped down of themselves and we stood still as though we had been the culprits. Sri Aurobindo forbade us to take the five-rupee note away from him and when we heard the order we felt as if a sentence had been passed upon us.

Chapter 11

A Few Months in Madras

At the close of the year 1914 the question came up of my going to Madras and of my lodging there. It was decided that I should be put up in M. Srinivasachari's house. His house was a big one and quite near the temple of Parthasarathi at Triplicane.

February 1915.

A crucial stage arrived in my life. Along with this came a quietude of mind, a constant memory of something which was fundamental.

I had not yet developed the capacity to comprehend what I might achieve by tapasya or that for a while I had come to prepare myself here for things. Even the desire to understand them had not been born in me. The Matriculation examination solely occupied my mind. The thought of it, burdened with the heavy feeling of my family's poverty, did not allow me to stand erect, depressed my spirit and created a struggle, made me live a half-alive and half-dead life, a life beset with hardships. The time then was like this.

The whole of our village had experienced failure of rains for two or three years in succession, resulting in a drying up of its fields and then followed ceaseless rains for ten or fifteen days inundating the village, bringing down and tearing to shreds a number of houses, rendering the villagers homeless and throwing them into utter distress. It was a time when our stored paddy and other grains in the granary had been consumed even before the interminable rains broke out. It was a time when even a cash crop like groundnut could not be cultivated. It was a time of dryness and barrenness for us and other villagers without any way out of it. And it was time I should have to go to Madras. I was short of nine rupees for the deposit. I found no way to make up this deficit. A month of the year 1915 had already passed.

On some occasions, when I sought for Sri Aurobindo's advice for deciding whether I should appear in the examination or not, he always exhorted me to do so. His purpose behind this advice and his jokes at such examinations which I heard four or five years later when I finally joined him, I could not

for long comprehend. I may cite the case of an Andhra friend of mine to illustrate my point. It was Chandrasekhara, and he had passed creditably the B.A. examination. Sri Aurobindo made him the butt of such a volley of jests for this success in the examination that he all but wept for it.

I was at a loss to know how to procure the amount needed. Once I broached the subject to Sri Aurobindo. I also informed him of the approaching time-limit. The day after this talk, when I went to him, he handed over to me nine rupees and ordered me to deposit the fee. Astounded and forgetful I stood statuelike in his presence.

In 1915 I went to Madras to sit for the examination. Back to Pondicherry from there, I first met Sri Aurobindo and then Bharati. There being no longer any place here to stay, I went back home.

One part of my being was given to endearing play and prattle with my mother; another and greater part of it felt all bonds with my parents and relatives loosened. It felt them as strangers only. This major part unknowingly and imperceptibly was captured by Sri Aurobindo. The small part enjoying my mother's caresses and fondling stood long in my way.

A letter from my friend Krishnamachari apprised me of having passed the Matriculation examination. That I had passed, even if not very creditably, gave me satisfaction. I immediately started from home for Pondicherry to convey this news to Sri Aurobindo. I put up in Bharati's house. In Pondicherry I stayed only for a day or two. At the time when I informed Sri Aurobindo of the result, he encouraged me in a way for further studies. But I felt perplexed. If I went on studying like this, when should I join Sri Aurobindo? This apprehension, partly perceptible to my heart and partly imperceptible, evoked a struggle in me.

On coming back to my village, I set myself to collect all that was necessary for higher studies — money, books, clothes, etc., etc. I had also to find a lodging in Madras.

Chapter 12

The Fate of a Brahmin's *Shikha*

As a result of my stay in Madras, the tuft of hair on my head got shortened and shrunken. In my Pondicherry days this tuft (*shikha*) had drawn its strength from three-fourths of my head. Such a beautiful *shikha* Bharati would always insist upon being removed whenever he would happen to see it. My mother, however, cherished for my *shikha* the same affection as she did for me. Somehow a fear had crept into my mother's mind that I might one day reduce the *shikha* to nil. She would often tell me, "Keep the *shikha* as it is. Do nothing with it in play." She would mutter to her companions that if some day her child's *shikha* came to an end, it could only be through Bharati.

Destiny, however, did away with this stately tuft! How, I shall narrate.

During my first two years' stay in Madras, my *shikhas* form shrank to a lean twine. That was the price I had to pay for my life in Madras!

In the year 1917 — I do not quite remember the day and the month — probably during May, I put up as usual in the house of Sri Aurobindo when I came to Pondicherry. This time I had decided to stay for two days instead of one.

The inmates of Sri Aurobindo's house would sometimes begin a conversation at about nine-thirty and continue it till after midnight. And when I was in their midst the conversation would prolong itself much later than midnight. This discussion would embrace diverse subjects such as philosophy, social reforms, the changes that ought to take place in the manners and customs of Indian life, various yogic practices, the characteristic difference between Sri Aurobindo's yoga and the traditional ones, etc. Amidst such talks Sri Aurobindo would shine as the light of Truth laying bare the central significance of everything.

As luck would have it, on the second day of my stay, when the talk was about to terminate, it suddenly turned towards my *shikha*. The talk was indeed carried on in a spirit of jest and fun. But I had the apprehension that night that the *shikha* would no more be on my head. The importance of the *shikha* for such ceremonies as the *upanayāna* (investiture with the sacred thread),

marriage, *srāddha* (annual ritual for the deceased), etc., is of course not unknown to anyone.

Next morning having got up, as I felt for the *shikha* I found it non-existent.

I got struck with fear. How could I dare look straight in the faces of my parents and relatives? A Brahmin youth without a *shikha* was no better than a pariah! Thoughts like these troubled my mind.

I put off my decision to start for Madras to the third day. There was none to sympathise with my mental agony, the bewildered state of my heart. All inmates of Sri Aurobindo's house appreciated the extinction of my *shikha* and scoffed at such senseless customs.

I then went to Bharati thinking that he alone would show sympathy with my condition then. He listened to all that I said and exclaimed, "Do you have the courage to leave your family completely and come out of it? If so, from this very moment stay on with me." Emphatically he pronounced the sentence and made no attempt to pacify my perplexed feelings.

As my heart was attached to my parents, especially to my mother, I hesitated a little before replying to the words of Bharati and said, "Now the *shikha* is no longer with me. It is in somebody else's grasp! How am I then to stay with you?" It was in this strain that the reply came. I found at last a consolation in the thought and feeling that on going to Madras I would stay there in hiding, out of my parents' and relatives' ken.

I started for Madras two or three days later.

I heard afterwards that in accordance with Sri Aurobindo's decision and order the *shikha* had been cut off. There is a custom still prevalent in South India to go to a temple and offer prayers there in order to remove the tuft of hair. The temple of Tirupati is held to be the foremost among the places for this purpose. Why does God ask for the *shikha*, what mystery lies behind it? I cannot explain. Nor can I say why Sri Aurobindo demanded my *shikha*.

Not even ten days had passed since my arrival in Madras when my father who had found out my lodging came to my room. Astounded at my appearance he stood fixed like a statue. It took him about ten minutes to come to his own self and then he sat down on the floor. Tears streamed down his cheeks. Some

more time passed for words to come out of his mouth. His words when uttered simply stupefied me.

“You have broken our religious traditions and set at naught all our religious rites and customs.” Why did he speak so? There was no religious mark on my forehead — a blank brow! No tuft of hair on my head! No sacred thread across my chest! What else was needed? This was the ghost my father saw of me!

I spoke not a word.

About an hour elapsed before my father, without turning to me, said, “A girl has been chosen for you at Bangalore. She belongs to a rich family. Her parents have of themselves offered to bear all the expenses for your studies up to B.A. They are likely to give as dowry fifty thousand rupees in cash. I have just seen the girl. Yes, she is quite dark in complexion with pock marks on the face. Her family is extremely orthodox. But of what use now to think about all this? You have pulled down the whole edifice that I had built.” So saying he got up all of a sudden and left.

The sacred thread can be bought and put on; the religious mark can also be painted on the forehead; but where to go for the *shikha*?

The *shikha* was offered as the first fruit to Lord Sri Aurobindo. Was this not a scrupulously orthodox Brahmacharya?

The *shikha* was scissored off clean by Nolini Kanta Gupta in obedience to Sri Aurobindo’s order that night at about two o’clock, on the altar of the temple at sacred Pondicherry in which Sri Aurobindo is the *mūrti* (deity). He performed this service when I was asleep.

Chapter 13

Studies in Madras

I arrived finally in Madras and was, therefore, cut off from my family. When now I look back upon this event, I seem to realise how far away was the action of my own will from that of the divine Will. If I had been acting according to my own inclination, I could never have come near the divine Presence. We are for the most part subject to petty desires and feelings. My life's course was settled, without my knowing it, as soon as the Master's glance embraced me. When I reached the crucial stage of my life, and felt pulled to and fro by the force of attachments on one side and by that of the divine Light on the other, and stood swaying in the thick of the conflict, what was it that made me give up the life of the world and turn towards that of the Spirit? Who brought about this turning? Each time that I think over it, I have the feeling that I was not an agent but a mere tool, an instrument only, *nimitta mātram*.

I stayed at Madras till April 3, 1919. Even though I lived there, it was the Masters presence that guided me; in my heart there was ever the remembrance of Pondicherry. The word "Pondicherry" meant to my soul Sri Aurobindo — there was room for nothing else there. I studied for a year in the Intermediate Class at Madras. I used to come back to Pondicherry once a month. Sometimes, due to unforeseen circumstances, it would be once in two months.

At Madras I was fortunate to have one or two intimate friends. One of them was V.P. Karunakaran Nambiar. He was a student of the Law College. He had a boundless love for Sri Aurobindo. He believed that it was Sri Aurobindo who had given a new life to the Indian political movement. He felt, moreover, immensely attracted to Sri Aurobindo's writings. He made friends with me when he came to know of my association with Sri Aurobindo. He began accompanying me to Pondicherry without fail once a month. He used to put up at some hotel here. We would start from Madras on Friday by the night train, get down at Pondicherry on Saturday morning, and return by the Sunday night train. Nambiar had the good fortune to see Sri Aurobindo and speak with him on Saturday night itself; and sometimes on Sunday night also. He would have a talk with Sri Aurobindo for half an hour, solely or mostly on English literature. It was Nambiar who, for the first time, made

arrangements to borrow books in his own name from the Madras University Library and Connemara Library for Sri Aurobindo! He is no more — he died a few years ago.

In Madras I passed four years in George Town, in the house No. 14 at the corner of Baker Street, opposite to the Law College. Madras was not so crowded between 1915 and 1919 as it is at present. I would go after five to the vast *maidan* of the High Court and be there all alone till seven. I would read at that time over and over again Sri Aurobindo's journal *Arya* or his book of poems *Ahana*, and take immense delight in them. Did I understand them or not? What was it that delighted me? How did I enjoy them? All this my soul alone knows, I know nothing.

Wherever I happened to be — on the sea-beach, in the High Court grounds, in Pachchiappa College, in Baker Street or at Triplicane — no matter where, the memory of Sri Aurobindo burnt bright in my heart. The single thought in me was, "When will the next opportunity come for me to go to Pondicherry?"

Once on my way to Pondicherry, I met an Andhra young man, Chandrasekhar Ayya by name. He enquired of me, "How can I meet Sri Aurobindo?" I told him, "You may come with me and take your chance."

When I broached the matter with Sri Aurobindo, he asked me several questions relating to Chandrasekhar: "Where does he come from?", "Why has he come to Pondicherry?" "Is it on account of some business?" etc., and then, at last he consented to meet him. The interview between Sri Aurobindo and Chandrasekhar lasted not more than five minutes.

Later on, I remember to have met Chandrasekhar Ayya once or twice in Madras. Whenever he came to Pondicherry, I would be with him. He never failed to have Sri Aurobindo's darshan. His first interview with Sri Aurobindo for only five minutes laid the foundation of the priceless things he gleaned in future from Sri Aurobindo. Unlike the late V.P. Karunakaran Nambiar, Chandrasekhar plunged heart and soul into Sri Aurobindo for a few years. A man of intellectual attainments, he was a scholar in Sanskrit and knew English very well. He could intently open his heart without reserve to whatever he would see as the best. Sri Aurobindo kindled the fire in him.

Chandrasekhar Ayya came ten or twelve times after I had left Madras finally and taken refuge in Sri Aurobindo. He used to put up at a hotel. At times he would stay four or five days at a stretch. He gave himself entirely to Sri Aurobindo. There grew up steadily an intimacy between them. As a consequence, he started reserving a room for himself on rent in a hotel here. Can the fire so kindled ever forsake him?

Subramania Bharati learnt the Rig Veda from Sri Aurobindo. Chandrasekhar also studied the Rig Veda with Sri Aurobindo methodically at a particular hour. He studied in this way for two or three years, not by the old traditional commentaries, nor in the old style, but in the light of Sri Aurobindo's own revealing interpretation. I listened to the interpretation with great delight, whenever I could be present.

In Madras I had the opportunity of contacting a number of big persons, some of whom were really great, and had talks with them. I met and talked with Annie Besant several times. I approached Mahatma Gandhi through Va Ra on Bharati's behalf. But none of them could appeal to my heart, which the Master had captured, whole and entire. I felt it had become indissolubly one with him. My Master — how great he was! An Avatar! He mixed with me as if he was one of us, and had taken hold of my soul. How could I then be drawn to others?

My friends urged me to join the Theosophical Society and, later on, some of them pressed me passionately and untiringly to join the Non-cooperation Movement of Mahatma Gandhi. My mind gave no response to such talks. How could it respond, when the Master's command had been otherwise, even if he had expressly told me nothing?

Many great movements were, of course, going on, but they did not seem to me to reflect in any way the truth of man's inner being. They were conceived and carried on in the rush-light of the human mind.

Sri Aurobindo had somehow put away from us all outer attractions, turned our gaze inwards and made it centre in him. Politics, patriotism and social welfare had no attraction for me. What can the outer activities express but only our inner imperfections so long as we do not change our consciousness and nature? What use then being wholly absorbed in them?

Ten or twelve days before I left for Madras, Sri Aurobindo, in response to my repeated requests, consented to say a few words about the practice of Yoga. I would go to him every evening between five and five-thirty. He would speak to me in a simple way about the practice of Yoga. I noted down the major portions of his sayings.

Many years before his passing, Sri Aurobindo took away the notebooks from me. He probably did not intend that those secrets of Yoga should be disclosed to others. His sayings had been written down by me in two small pocket-books. They would be with me constantly as a guide throughout the four or five years of my stay in Madras. At night, during my sleep, they would remain under my pillow. Throughout the day they would be in my pocket. I would read them time and again.

In Madras my association with the members of the Theosophical Society began to grow by degrees. The Home Rule movement was in full swing. On the first floor of the house No. 2 at Broadway, almost facing the Law College, the Home Rule Library was opened by Annie Besant with great éclat. Dailies, weeklies, monthlies in English and a small section of them in Tamil were displayed there. Its reading room remained open from seven or seven-thirty in the morning up to nine at night. Many people would come to read the magazines. The hall was quite spacious and a number of electric lights kept burning from six to nine. There were about half a dozen cupboards which got filled up within a month of the inauguration of the reading room.

By nine the library's gate would close. I was left in charge of the vast library with the reading room. From nine to seven next morning it would be, as it were, my own home.

At night my friends, relatives and school friends used to come and see me whenever they liked. In addition to the hall, there was a small room and, to the east, a bathroom. It was like a palace for me. I arranged for my meals at a Brahmin hotel in Thambu Chetty Street. I had not given up my room in the house No. 14 in Baker Street.

I have written all this in detail, because when I moved from the house in Baker Street, I made the house at Broadway my residence for nearly four years.

It is not necessary to write how I was in Madras and in what way I lived. But how through certain circumstances, through association with some genuine and sincere persons my soul took its course in this life, and how my life developed under their shadow by the grace of the Master — all this becomes a source of disinterested joy as I remember and describe it.

Some four or five months before I left for Madras, Sri Aurobindo would sometimes say in a casual way, “Whatever happens, detach yourself from the happenings and learn to watch them as the Witness. Do not get involved in them.” Although I could not grasp the full implications of this mantra of initiation, it left a deep imprint upon my heart.

This single mantra acted as an unfailing sustenance of my life during my stay at Madras for four or five years. How it became by stages effective in my sadhana is, however, another story into which I do not wish to enter here.

I have already mentioned that many persons used to come and read magazines in the Home Rule Library when I was there. One of them was a student of the Law College. He became intimate with me and kept a close watch over my way of life.

When I was with the members of my family I had to observe the usual religious rites and ceremonies. But in Pondicherry, out of their sight and reach, I could afford to be free. In Madras I was quite free to move about and act as I wished. No rule was binding on me. But in the heart of this freedom something within me would go on uttering in a low tone, during sleep or at odd moments during the day, something like a voice from afar, “You are in bondage. The chains are holding you tight.” I could not clearly catch the sense of it — I was drowned in the surface noise and whirlpool. I lost all discrimination of the true and the false. But in whatever condition I was, and into whatever hell thrown, the Master, the Lord of my soul, would be with me and within me, and never abandon me.

The person who was closely observing my movements in the Home Rule Library had come to Madras from Kumbhakonam to study in the Law College, as I have said above. He lived in a small rented house with his wife in Mannadi. He was a Vaishnava and, having somehow come to know that I too was a Vaishnava Brahmin, he tried to correct my nature and my life in what

he thought was the right way. He would bring to the library books of short stories in English, written in a simple style. Each story contained moral lessons to help one live religiously. Handing over one such book to me, he would say, “Keep it as long as you need it, and return when you have finished it. I shall then give you another book.” He was probably older than I by three or four years.

As he had a doubt that I was not reading the books he gave me, he proposed one day that we should read the books together. This, after a few days, I found rather boring. So far as I remember, his name was Krishnaswami Iyengar.

Once a week he would invite me to his house for meals. He found out in a few months that all his efforts to change my ways of life and make me follow religious observances had been in vain. He had failed to perceive that in my heart was ever burning the light of Sri Aurobindo.

I have referred briefly to my initiation. It did not, however, follow the traditional way. And what I have called the mantra of initiation — the often repeated command of Sri Aurobindo to detach myself from all happenings and practise to be only the Witness Purusha — this mantra was not given as such. The traditional method consists in the Guru’s choosing an auspicious day and moment, and softly uttering the mantra in the shishya’s ear. But Sri Aurobindo’s way was quite different. One may intensely seek for the Guru and, seeking thus, one may, by rare luck, find him. But the Guru, so found, may keep one waiting for years to be accepted as his disciple. This is the traditional way. But Sri Aurobindo’s way, I repeat, was different. As we grew intimate with him, we felt within us that he had already accepted us. In silence the sadhana had begun in us. The Guru’s Grace and the shishya’s receiving it were a spontaneous development, without even the need of a single spoken word. According to their capacity and fitness — *adhikāra* — some disciples would make steady progress in Yoga, while others would have a sudden, and sometimes even a marvellous, out-flowering of literary and artistic talent. Each one would receive the Masters silent inspiration in his own distinctive way, and according to the fitness and aptitude of his nature.

Appendix

HYMN TO THE MOTHER OF RADIANCES

1.

AN inner fullness has come in like the coming in of light in dark caves. It fills, it illumines, it vibrates the multiple strings of life; it has found the contact with the forgotten achievements of the past to enable me to start the new ones of the future on the basis of the changing formations of the present. The currents of life well up to meet the descending rays of light from the upper heavens for transmutation base and the dark into the luminous and the true, for transmutation of the ugly and the wrong into the beautiful and the right.

O Mother of Radiances, you have dawned in the narrow horizons of my mind. Out of its depthless rigidities, in the midst of its walled-up spaces you have created a heart-like something that will live its eternal life. You have revealed to me a chamber alive and warm within the mind's substanceless polar regions and there I can safely retire and find in you my refuge.

The lower network of moving forces remains, but I feel your presence in its midst. The higher network of moving forces remains, and here you have stepped in also shedding a warmth of life that was not there before, you have turned the dull grey luminosity into a brilliance of living waters. Your active and living presence is everywhere; you have heeded my words of aspiration, the fire of my demand for your omnipresence. More than what I ignorantly sought for, you have revealed to me. You are intimate and one with me when in truth and in law and yet away and far off from one me when in error and in falsehood.

When there are no more darkening shadows about me; when you see me bared of all shams and shows in every part of the being; when you see in every cell of my body an eternal home for you and an eternal temple; when you see me one with you in identity and still worshipping you; when you melt the compact gold of knowledge in the living and running waters of devotion;

when you break my earth and release the energies; when you turn my pride into power in your hands and my ignorance into light, my narrowness into wideness, my selfishness into a true gathering together of forces in one centre, my greed into a capacity of untiring search after the truth for the attainment of its substances, my egoism into the true and conscious instrumental centre, my mind into a channel for you to descend, my heart into your heart of pure fire and flame, my life into a pure and translucent substance for your handling, my body into a conscious vessel for holding what of you is meant for me; then, O Mother of Radiances, my aim in life now and hereafter will be fulfilled in the true and right and vast way. Aspiration wakes in me! Achieve in me all that I flame for!

2.

Create in me a state of consciousness in which whatever I hear from you may at once turn into an intimate knowledge, a self-revelation, an expression of identity, an awareness at once of the within and the without. O Mother, whatever I gather from you, let it be of the deep vasts of the within which is omnipresent. May I be one with you in every way to have the supreme Delight, yet separate from you to stream forth devotion to you, one and yet separate like-life and its movements, like heat and light, like power and its expression, like true knowledge and its effecting force. Let what you give me be not a treasure to me but as if a thing of my own self-discovered.

Wipe out the division in my consciousness that I may see and listen to you as part of yourself. The life-energies in me aspire for the knowledge that comes from identity, for the vision that is born of identity, for the listening that takes its orientation in identity, — the identity that is yourself.

May I be the manifestation of a portion of you in your limitless and shining spaces.

3.

Increase my fires and aspiration, make the surrender in me possible at once and in every way; widen my openness and receptivity; remove the coverings

that delay the workings of psyche deep within; take away, O Mother, from me what I have and what I have not....

The cells of my body, the filaments of my nervous coat, the five streams of my mind, — all make their unconditioned surrender to you, O Mother of Radiances, that there may not be falsehood in existence, division in consciousness, death in the living waters, want of harmony and misery in the nerve coils, disease in the body....

Thy voice replies to me:

“By the fivefold powers of surrender in the physical, by the quiet intensity of the psychic urge that is behind you, centrally, increase ever and ever the inherent Ananda and the hidden opulences of your consciousness. First of all, become conscious of what I have willed in you; be, next, that of which you have become conscious. Know at once and for ever, ‘In me is your all.’”