

# With Aurobindo in Baroda



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### ***Publisher's Note***

This is the first English translation of *Aurobindo Prasanga* (literally, “About Aurobindo”), a memoir by Dinendra Kumar Roy (1869-1943). A Bengali writer who was fairly well known during the first half of the last century, Dinendra Kumar lived with Sri Aurobindo in Baroda from 1898 to 1900 or 1901. The chapters making up this work first appeared in the journal *Sahitya* in Bengali year 1318 (1911-1912). More than a decade later, in 1923, they were brought out as a book. Some of Dinendra Kumar’s references to historical and literary figures are explained in editorial notes at the end of the translation.

## I

I could never have imagined before the Bomb Case began that Sriyut Aurobindo Ghose would become so famous, in such a short time; that throughout India the police force would keep him under constant watch; and that to prove the charge of sedition against him, the renowned barrister Mr. Norton would gulp down more easily than champagne thousands and thousands of rupees belonging to the poor of India and as dear to them as blood. I doubt whether anyone could have imagined such celebrity. Why, I doubt whether Aurobindo himself ever thought of the possibility of such a change in his destiny. But in a man's life many things happen that once lay beyond his imagination. And so the bureaucracy's attempt to prove Aurobindo a traitor did not astonish him.

After Aurobindo acquired this celebrity or notoriety, many things were said about him in various English and Bengali journals. Some time back I heard that a certain Mr. Palit had written his biography in order to spread his name in India and abroad. But Aurobindo hasn't yet crossed the threshold of his youth and the time for writing the story of his life has not yet come. Besides, for various reasons, it is not quite proper to bring out the biography of a living person. But self-interest knows no rules. It is therefore difficult for some to resist the temptation of pushing someone prematurely into the public gaze and making him dance there, especially if the sale of that person's life story can bring in a little money. I know that Aurobindo does not support such a public display. But there are many who are eager to know something about him. And I am sure that all those who are born as men in Bengal will be pleased and profoundly delighted to contemplate the story of Aurobindo's life. This is the reason I have sat down after twelve long years to write about my personal contact with Aurobindo.

Aurobindo spent a few years of the earlier part of his active life at Baroda. It is doubtful whether any of his biographers knows anything worthy of mention about the period of his stay in Baroda. For during that time he had almost no contact either with Bengal or with Bengalis. Rather it is his Marathi friends who have some familiarity with the events of this

part of his life. For myself, whatever little I know is the result of my personal contact with Aurobindo.

I left for Baroda in 1898 sometime around the beginning of winter, perhaps a few weeks after the Pujas. I had been given the charge of teaching Bengali to Aurobindo. This was twelve years ago. From his childhood Aurobindo had lived in England; he stayed there from the age of five or six till he was past his teens. For this reason he had not had the chance to learn his mother tongue well; but he was very eager to learn Bengali since from his childhood he felt strongly attracted to it. The master of so many European languages could not write a letter in his own mother tongue! What is more, he could not even speak the language like a Bengali! I believe he considered this an unpardonable defect. And that is why Aurobindo's maternal uncle, the late Jogindranath Bose, eldest son of the late lamented Rishi Rajnarayan Bose, selected me as the right person to groom Aurobindo in the use of Bengali, and Rajnarayan-babu approved the proposal. And so accordingly I left Calcutta for Deoghar with Aurobindo himself. There I met Jogin-babu for the first time. Aurobindo was on leave at that time and spending his holidays in his maternal uncle's house in Deoghar. Sri Krishnakumar Mitra, the respected editor of *Sanjivani*, was Aurobindo's *mesho-moshay* (mother's younger sister's husband).

I will never forget the love and affection I received at the house of the late Rajnarayan Bose. Jogin-babu used to look on me with great affection. It must have been because we were both devoted to literature that I, an unknown youth, earned his genuine sympathy and deep affection at the very first meeting. A confirmed middle-aged bachelor with the heart of a child, he was simple, gentle and sweetly affectionate. As for the revered Rajnarayan-babu, what can I say that hasn't been said before? At that time he was on his sickbed and suffering very much. His body was reduced to skin and bone, his hair, beard and moustache were as white as snow. I was enchanted to see in his almost lustreless eyes a celestial light and purity. I felt my life blessed. Even from his sickbed he talked of English and Bengali literature, of the old days and the new, and of so many other things! Whenever he spoke about Bengali literature the enthusiasm of his youth seemed to return and the agony of his illness was lessened. I recall now

that on the day of my departure, he hugged me lovingly and, placing his hand on my head, blessed me: “May your sadhana in literature be fruitful.” I do not think I have ever received such a heartfelt blessing from anyone else. That was my first meeting with him; the first and the last. After that I always passed through Deoghar with Aurobindo on the way to Baroda, but I never experienced the same joy in Rajnarayan-babu’s house that I had when he was present. The deity had gone from the shrine leaving the temple forlorn. That vacant temple had no more attraction. But his unblemished memory still pervaded the sacred house like the fragrance of flowers. Once, while talking with Jogin-babu, I told him, “Your father could laugh heartily, I have never seen anyone laugh with a fuller heart. Despite the terrible pain he suffered, how he could laugh!” Jogin-babu replied, “What you saw was nothing. When father used to chat with Dwijendra-babu (Rajnarayan-babu’s best friend Dwijendranath Tagore) and both of them laughed it seemed as if the roof would come down with the force of their laughter!” Nowadays we become wise too soon and look down on whole-hearted laughter as a sign of childishness; precocity and seriousness seem to have infected us to the bones. This is why I mention it. Jogindra-babu was the worthy son of a worthy father. He and his younger brother Manindra-babu were as simple and unassuming as they were witty, well-read, generous and diligent. Jogin-babu contributed articles to a number of English journals. Literature was his livelihood.

At first the thought of teaching Bengali to Aurobindo made me very nervous. Aurobindo was himself a great scholar. In the Latin and Greek papers of the Civil Service Examination he had stood first, with marks that no previous candidate, English or foreign, had received before in those two languages. After passing the Cambridge University examinations, Aurobindo received many books as prizes; among them I saw in his library a beautiful edition of the *Arabian Nights* published by the Kama Shastra Society of England; the 18-chapter *Mahabharata* or the *Shabdakalpadruma* were nothing next to it! I had never seen such a voluminous edition of the *Arabian Nights* — like the sixteen volumes of Webster’s dictionary! It contained innumerable illustrations too.

Before I met Aurobindo I had pictured him as a stout young man, like my writer friend Sureshchandra Samajpati, bespectacled and dressed from head to toe in European clothes; rude in speech, arrogant of eye and terribly haughty in temper. I imagined that the slightest slip would enrage him. Forget about going to Europe! If people with their love of imitation can attain “Europeanness” just by going to Bombay — cockroaches changing into beetles — I shuddered to think of the terrible haughtiness Aurobindo must have attained after almost a score of years in England!

It goes without saying that I was very disappointed with my first meeting with Aurobindo. Old-fashioned slippers with ends turned up on his feet; his clothes of coarse, flounced Ahmedabad-mill khadi, the end of his dhoti hanging loose; a tight-fitting waistcoat on his back; on his head, a mane of long, thin hair parted in the middle and hanging down over the neck; tiny pockmarks on his face; his eyes with a gentle, dreamy look — who would have thought that this thin, dark-skinned young man was Sriman Aurobindo Ghose, a living fountain of English, French, Latin, Hebrew, Greek! Had someone pointed out the hills of Deoghar and told me, “These are the Himalayas”, I would have been less surprised and confounded. In any case, after a short acquaintance, I realised that there was nothing of the meanness and dross of earth in his heart. His laughter was like a child’s, simple, liquid and soft. An inflexible will was visible in the set of his lips, but there was not the least force of worldly ambition or ordinary human selfishness in his heart; there was only a longing, rare even among the gods, to give himself in order to relieve others’ suffering.

Aurobindo could not speak Bengali then but how eager he was to talk in his mother-tongue. As I became acquainted with his nature, living together with him day and night, I realised that Aurobindo was not of this world. He was a god fallen from heaven by some curse. What God was thinking when He created Aurobindo a Bengali and then doomed him to exile in India — only He could say. Aurobindo went to England in his childhood, as a babe in his mother’s arms, and returned to India long after the end of his youth: but astonishingly the dissipations and pleasures of British society, its glamour, its diverse habits, its attractions, could not touch the nobility and human kindness of his heart. While we were staying in a single-storied

bungalow at the Baroda Camp, a young Bengali (also named Ghose) came to Baroda after his return to India from England. His aim was to procure a job with the government of Baroda. He put up first at the Dak Bungalow in the Baroda Camp but then came to our house to win the patronage of Aurobindo. Two or three years in England had made him an absolute saheb. Seeing the vast difference between the behaviour of Aurobindo and of this man, I once spoke to Aurobindo about the strange westernization among the class of foreign-returned imitation Europeans. I said, “The wonderful ‘westernization’ of those who set out for Europe but came back after seeing the waves of Bombay — this is irritating enough. Let’s not even talk about those who return after staying in England for a year or two. But how is it that you who spent so much time in England from your very childhood seem like such a thorough Bengali?”

Laughing, Aurobindo replied that when one goes to England one certainly is blinded at first by the country’s outward glamour. But if one stays longer then that blindness goes away. One develops the ability to distinguish the good from the bad. There are many who go to Europe and after just two or three years come back as fully fledged sahebs, calling a banana peel *kela ka phool* (the “flower of a banana”), practically forget their mother-tongue; they go back to their village and, finding no table, turn over a cane basket, put a metal dish on top of it, pick up a fork in one hand and a spoon in the other, and find nothing to their liking but ox-tongue and ham (or in their absence, even cow dung!). How could such people believe without seeing it that even after eighteen or twenty years’ stay in England one could return, not a grotesque *firinghee*, but a son of the Motherland who offered her the devotion and respect due “to the mistress of the heart of the world, the Mother, clad resplendently in sun-beams, Bharat-lakshmi”?

All four Ghose brothers had been to Europe and so had their mother. Aurobindo’s younger brother, Barin, who was the principal accused in the Alipore Bomb Case, was delivered on the ship while it was at sea, near the English coast and for that reason he was named “Barindrakumar”. Their father, the late Krishnadhan Ghose (Dr. K. D. Ghose, I.M.S.), was an absolute saheb in his habits. He had both the virtues and vices of the

English. For many years he held the position of Civil Surgeon in Rangpur and later in Khulna. In both places, he became well-known for his extraordinary reputation and influence. Everyone loved and respected him highly. He earned vast sums of money and spent it freely. When he died he was hardly able to leave anything to his children. After his death, Aurobindo and his elder brother, the poet Manmohan, were in great financial difficulty in England. Aurobindo told me that sometimes it was difficult for them even to leave the house because their creditors were always after them. Aided by nothing but their intelligence and fortitude, the two brothers made it through these trials and were able to return to their country without losing their respect. After coming back to India, Manmohan entered the government's educational service. During his stay in England, he had distinguished himself in English society by his creative genius as a poet. In India too, many know him as a fine poet. But he never abused his genius by writing poems in Bengali! Aurobindo's eldest brother, Binoykumar, settled in Coochbehar State and holds a respectable position in the service of the raja. Had Aurobindo been permitted to enter the Indian Civil Service he would have been the judge or magistrate of a district by now. Even if he had continued to work in the Baroda State service, his monthly salary would have been two or three thousand rupees. But Aurobindo never cared much for money. When I was in Baroda, Aurobindo was earning a decent salary. He lived alone and was not addicted to luxury. Not a paisa was ill spent. In spite of this there was nothing left at the end of the month. I often saw him borrowing money from his friends! The first thing he did on receiving his salary was to send an allowance to his mother and sister. His sister was at that time studying and staying with the "Aghor-family" at Bankipur. I saw him sending them money-orders at other times too.

One day while chatting with Aurobindo I told him, "I notice that you are the only one who sends money to your mother and sister every month. Your two elder brothers earn a lot of money too. Don't they send them any allowance?" Aurobindo replied that his elder brother was capricious and money slipped through his hands; he lived alone and yet could barely meet all his expenses. As for Mejda (Manmohan), he had just got married and

Aurobindo felt that marriage was an expensive luxury — these were the very words he used. His mother was insane and at times had to be confined to the house, but I was moved by Aurobindo's uncommon devotion to her. Sometimes he would say with a laugh, "I'm the mad son of a mad mother!" He had a great deal of affection for his brothers and cousins, writing them letters, sending them money.

This reminds me of an incident. One day Aurobindo was filling out a money-order form to send money to his mother or sister — I can't remember which. For some time I had been thinking about sending some money home but I was hesitant about asking Aurobindo as I was not sure whether he had enough. Seeing him writing the money-order, I thought this might be a good opportunity to ask him. I asked for the money. Aurobindo smiled and took a small bag out of a box. He emptied the bag of the little money that was in it, and giving it to me said, "This is all I have. You send it." I replied, "What do you mean? You were just filling out a money-order form so that you could send money. You send the money. Do it. I'll send some later." Aurobindo shook his head and said, "That isn't right. Your need is greater than mine. It won't matter if I send it later." He left his money-order form half-filled and placed it on one side of the table; then he opened the *Mahabharata*, and started working on a poem based on the episode of Savitri and Satyavan.

We read in history or in novels about great-souled, magnanimous people who place the need of another above their own. But I don't think I've ever seen an actual example of it in this day and age.

One of Aurobindo's paternal uncles was at this time head-clerk in the Bhagalpur Commissioner's office. Once Aurobindo went there to meet him. I remember he was invited to dine at his uncle's house. In fact, it doesn't seem that Aurobindo was very close to his father's family. He rather preferred his maternal uncle and grandfather and was close to his mother's family. Such is the case with most families where the father is no more. The mother's side of the family is more affectionate and loving than the father's. A brother-in-law might prove unwilling to accept the burden of his brother's widow but a father or brother would not abandon a daughter or a sister. From time to time Aurobindo wrote to his maternal uncle, his

brothers, his sister, his cousins and his aunt (the wife of Srijut Krishnakumar Mitra, editor of *Sanjivani*), among others; but he almost never wrote to his paternal relatives. He rarely wrote to his brothers either. He was not in the habit of writing a lot of letters, and rarely finished a letter in a single day. On small sheets of “Grey Granite” stationery he would write ten lines of one letter, twenty of another and then abandon both. He would finish them later when he had the time or the inclination, and send them off. Some letters never ever reached the post office — they were buried alive in the pad! Aurobindo felt that the less one said about oneself the better. Perhaps that is why he spoke so little.

Aurobindo was not very popular in Baroda. There is a saying in English that genius and popularity don't go together. This applies very well to Aurobindo. But the few friendships he had in Baroda had a sincerity that is rarely found in the world. He had become very close to the Jadhav family of Baroda. Srijut Khaserao Jadhav, graduate of an Agricultural College in England, a close friend of the Maharaja and Suba or Magistrate of Baroda, looked on Aurobindo as a brother. Khaserao's younger brother Lieutenant Madhavrao Jadhav was Aurobindo's most intimate friend. Generally they spoke to one another in English; sometimes they also used Marathi. Aurobindo could understand Marathi quite well, though he could not speak it well. But he could speak it better than Bengali. Aurobindo used to laugh a lot while talking.

## II

When we went to Baroda we stayed at first for a short time in Khaserao-saheb's house. This was a large, red, single-storied mansion on the main road. It was quite beautiful. Rao-saheb's family was not staying there at the time. He had been posted as the magistrate of Kadi or Amreli district of the Baroda state. His family lived there too. When he came back to Baroda as magistrate, we left that house and went to another locality where we stayed in a *waada* that belonged to a Muslim. So much time has passed that I can't remember the strange name of this *waada*. The houses around us belonged to Maratha families. In the morning, the women used to get all dressed up and go to the temple or some other place. They came out at dawn with a plate to collect flowers from the nearby gardens. As I watched them I was reminded of Ravi Varma's paintings. The women were not veiled nor did they show any shyness. Their steps did not falter when they walked past strange men. When I saw them walking boldly on the main road, draped in bright saris worn in the Maharashtrian style, with flowers adorning their hair, I felt that in many respects they were better and more independent than Bengali women.

One afternoon I was sitting on the first-floor verandah chatting with some friends. At one point in the conversation, talking about the characteristics of Maratha women as compared with Bengali — about the distinctive qualities that can be observed from outside, that is — I said that due to the absence of purdah, Maharashtrian women were far more self-reliant, courageous and freethan their Bengali counter-parts. Our women could not walk in public so freely; and as for defending themselves against attack, it was out of the question!

After listening to me, one of our Maratha friends, Mr. Phadke, said, "A brute who would attack our girls on the road had better be prepared! A few days back, a Maharashtrian woman was travelling from Bombay to Surat. It was on a local train and there weren't many passengers. At Kalyan junction all the passengers in her compartment got down and she was left all alone. Just before the train pulled away a gigantic Pathan entered the compartment. He was a well-built fellow with a flowing beard and mous-

tache, eyes blackened with *kaajal*, and a huge turban wrapped all around his head. I suspect this young man was slightly capricious. Once the train started, our chap noticed a beautiful young damsel clad in a blue sari with its pleats tucked in front, sitting all alone. Divine Eros took aim at the poor chap's breast and shot his unfailing flowery arrows. For a while the chap opened his large beautifully *kaajal*-lined eyes and gazed at the pretty lady. He gestured to her a few times; then when, despite his signals, she did not respond, he moved over to her seat and sat down next to her. The young woman rebuked him sharply, saying that he must have a mother or sister who travelled by train. What would she think if a hooligan came and sat right next to her? But as the saying goes, a rogue pays no heed to good counsel. The chap bared his teeth and stretched out his left hand to embrace her. Where could she go? There was no way out! The young woman leaped up like a tigress and gave the chap such a kick on his chest that the tall, hefty chap was knocked down on the bench. And that wasn't the end of it. She thrust her two fingers into the chap's eyes and blinded him for good. When the train stopped at the next station the chap's cries attracted several people and he recovered his freedom; but he never recovered his eyesight. After this incident many a hooligan like him had his inner vision suddenly opened!"

Had this taken place in Bengal what would have happened? After violating the Bengali woman the rogue would have escaped or been nabbed by the police. And the woman's righteous, religious husband or brother would have frowned and declared, "We cannot tarnish the purity of our blameless family by accepting this impure, unchaste woman back into our house." And the society would have threatened, "Beware, if you take her in, you'll be ostracized. Let the girl go and live in the marketplace."

No one laughed at what I said; only a few nostrils quivered a bit in disgust. The Marathas present there, I imagine, had a rather high opinion of Bengali society!

Aurobindo never cared about dressing up: he had nothing to do with stylishness. Even when he went to the royal court, he went in his ordinary clothes. He did not own any expensive shoes, shirts, ties, collars, flannels, linen or any of the innumerable sorts of coats, hats and caps that people

wear. I never saw him wear a European hat. He used the sort of hat that is generally known in this area as the *Piraali topi*.

His bed was as simple and ordinary as his clothes. Even a clerk would have thought it below his dignity to lie on the cast-iron bedstead he slept on, which cost him all of thirty rupees! He wasn't accustomed to sleeping on a soft, thick mattress. On account of its proximity to the desert, Baroda has severe summers as well as winters. But I never saw Aurobindo use a quilt even in the cold of January. Instead of a quilt he used an ordinary blanket. During the winter he wore a blue shawl worth half a dozen rupees. As long as I lived with him and observed him he was absorbed in his studies, sensitive to the suffering of others, and always self-sacrificing like a *sannyasin*. It seemed that he had made a vow to devote his life to the acquisition of knowledge. Even in the midst of the hustle-bustle of this world he was immersed in intense *tapasya* in order to fulfil this vow.

I have never seen such an incredible reader. Since he wrote poetry late into the night, he rose rather late. He always kept a cheap, open-faced watch with him. A small clock stood on his reading table. After a morning cup of tea he sat down and opened his poetry notebook. At that time he was translating the *Mahabharata*. He couldn't understand Bengali well, but the Sanskrit *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* he understood quite well indeed. He did not translate the whole text in order but parts of it. He wrote poems based on some episode of the *Mahabharata*. He also wrote English poems in various metres. He had an exceptional mastery of English. His English poems were simple and sweet. The descriptions were clearly expressed and free from exaggeration. His vocabulary was extraordinary — he never misused a word. He wrote poems first on small "Grey Granite" coloured letter pads. He hardly ever made corrections. Before writing, he smoked a cigarette and thought for a while; afterwards the thought-stream flowed through his pen. It is true that he could not write fast, but once he started his pencil did not stop. If anyone asked him something at such times he felt disturbed, but the other person would not guess his irritation. I never saw Aurobindo get angry. In fact none of the human vices had any hold on him. One cannot gain such mastery over oneself and one's senses without first doing a lot of sadhana. I found him especially cheerful on days when he

was satisfied with what he wrote. Occasionally he used to read out the poems to me. He would open the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and read out the original words to verify whether his rendering had been faithful. He preferred the great Valmiki to Vyasa; he believed that Valmiki had no peer in the world. He once wrote an English article to demonstrate Valmiki's prominence as a poet. I don't know if this article was ever published in an English monthly either here or in England. He said that Dante fascinated him and he found Homer's *Illiad* highly satisfying. In European literature these two were incomparable. But as a poet, Valmiki was the most outstanding. No epic on earth could equal Valmiki's *Ramayana*.

He read and wrote until about ten and then went for his bath. After that he sat down again with his notebook and revised what he had written earlier in the morning. After reading over the lines two or three times, he would change a word or two if necessary. Lunch was served before eleven. He used to read the newspaper as he ate. Baroda food did not suit me but he was used to it. The food was sometimes so bad that it was difficult to put it in one's mouth! But he just swallowed it without ever complaining to the cook. He preferred Bengali cuisine and often praised it. We normally had a vegetable dish, a fried dish, *daal*, meat or fish, and bread and rice. He ate more bread than rice. The rice he ate was so little that he did not mind its absence I guess! He found it difficult to eat meat twice a day, so he took meat at one meal and fish at the next. The cook sometimes prepared chutney too. But it was inedible because what he made was either too hot or too salty. The way he cooked meat was neither *curry* nor *kalliya* — neither liquid nor dry. Too much spice often made it inedible. Dry grated coconut is one of the principal ingredients in Maharashtra — no vegetable could escape it! In Baroda we got large quantities of *maurulla* fish and lobsters — the prices were good too! We also got *rui*, *mrigel* and other fish sometimes. But none of this ever tasted as good as our Bengali fish. Occasionally sea-fish was served, but the stink was nauseating.

Since Aurobindo was very partial to Bengali cuisine we recruited a cook from Bengal — a young man from the Bankura district. We thought that he had consented to come as far as Baroda out of an adventurous spirit, but when we tasted his cooking we realised that it would not stand a chance in

Bengal. But Aurobindo ate whatever he cooked. This made the cook even more wayward. Around that time Mr. Shashikumar Hesh, the famous painter, came to Baroda from England. I'll speak about him later. Aurobindo invited him and some other friends for dinner. The cook did not understand English and at that time Aurobindo could hardly speak Bengali. I explained to the cook what Aurobindo wanted — Bengali cuisine, things like *pilao*, meat curry, grilled fish curry, gravy and chutney. When he was asked if he could prepare these things, he replied, "If I get the ingredients, I can cook anything!" Aurobindo's Gujarati servant, Keshtha, went and got the ingredients in large quantities. In order to show his culinary skill the cook fried everything — fish, lobsters and all — in *ghee*. During dinner, you can't imagine the stink of the fish! We had to abandon it half way. Had he been employed by someone else, the cook would have got a couple of slaps. But Aurobindo just burst out laughing at this exhibition of his culinary skill!

This cook could not stay long with us at Baroda. He did not understand the language of the place and so was unable to speak with anyone. Soon he was as desperate as a fish out of water. Sometimes in the afternoon he would sit in the shade of the nearby sandal-grove and cry out aloud:

*Jaa re kokilaa amar praan-bandhu jekhaane!*

(Fly, O cuckoo, to where my soul mate lies!)

Aurobindo was quite amused when he heard the cook — overcome with sorrow, far from his beloved — mournfully bellowing out his song. But Aurobindo's gentle heart was also filled with sympathy for him and he remarked, "Poor fellow, he's awfully sad here." A few months later, when we returned to Bengal, we took the cook along. He did not come back to Baroda. In the absence of a male cook we hired a woman. She was an old Gujarati woman who looked rather like a child's nurse.

From the beginning Aurobindo had a young domestic servant named Keshtha or in proper language Krishna. I think his parents must have given him this name on account of his complexion. One does not generally come across such a dark-skinned fellow. He wore silver bracelets on his forearms and rings in his ears; his teeth were so big that he could not close his lips.

Rabi-babu, in his play *Raja o Rani*, describing the qualities of the old Trivedi Thakur, wrote: “His simple-mindedness was just a mask for his crookedness.” This was more than apt for Keshtha. I doubt if he would have lasted for more than three days with anyone else but Aurobindo. I cannot close this chapter without mentioning some of his antics.

Krishna used to buy the provisions for the house from the market. One day he brought one paisa worth of lemons. (The Baroda mint issued *babasayi* paise, which were accepted in the Baroda markets; three Indian paise were worth four *babasayi* paise.) The lemons were only a little bigger than our wild jujubes. We understood that he had saved half a paisa. A few days later as I was taking an afternoon stroll I noticed some large lemons in a shop and bought a paisa’s worth. Later in my own mixture of Marathi, Gujarati, Hindi and Bengali, I told Keshtha, “Hey, Keshtha! I got three big lemons for a paisa and what did you get the other day?” Without the slightest embarrassment, he said, “But how small my lemons were! How can you ever get more than two of those for a paisa?” Aurobindo laughed heartily at his logic.

On another occasion Keshtha bought some mangoes. The mangoes of Gujarat are usually sweet, but the ones he bought were so sour that he must have really scoured the place to find them. No sooner had I taken a bite that I spat it out! Later I bought some extremely sweet mangoes for much less than what he had paid. Giving him one to eat I said, “See how sweet these mangoes are! You rogue! The other day you bought those horrible mangoes for three times the price!” After tasting the mango I had offered him, he shook his head and said with a straight face: “*Iya amba phaar gor ahe!*” — “This mango is much too sweet!” His point was that such sweet mangoes would obviously be cheap; where would you get sour mangoes at such a low price! I think that Keshtha thought we weren’t residents of India but old-fashioned Highlanders! I cannot resist the temptation of recounting a story here. In the early days of the British Raj, some platoons of Highlanders were posted at the Fort in Calcutta. Back home they had never seen a mosquito or a firefly. In Calcutta they were so harassed by mosquitoes that they covered themselves from head to toe with a blanket and just lay there on their bunks. They were unable to breathe, but they

dared not uncover their faces for fear of mosquitoes. But how long can a man lie with his nose and mouth covered? Finally one of them pulled the blanket down from his face a little and noticed a firefly in a corner of the room. He screamed out, “Good Lord! We’re done for! The beasts have returned with lanterns to search us out!”

These foreigners had heard praises of the coconut abroad, but they had never had the good fortune of tasting one. One day they decided to try a coconut. They went to a grocer’s shop, bought several coconuts and took them to their barracks. Gutting one open they found a lot of husk and a big round stone! They threw the stone aside and started chewing the husk. They found it had no taste at all, but discovered that it caused the tongue to suffer greatly! They concluded that the grocer had fooled them by giving them some inedible fruit instead of coconut; so furious, they marched down to the grocer’s shop. They were at the point of beating him when the grocer found out the reason for their anger. He calmed them down and opened a coconut. Throwing the husk aside he broke the nut open, removed the flesh and gave it to them to eat. Afterwards they returned to their barracks, picked up all the coconuts they had angrily thrown into the drain, cracked them open and ate them. Fortunately Keshtha could not fool us to that extent!

Aurobindo ate very little. Because he ate little and led a well-regulated life, he was able to maintain his health even though he did heavy intellectual work. He was very health-conscious. Every morning he had a glass of *Isabgol* (a natural laxative) mixed in water. He could not do without it. If it was not available in the Baroda bazaar he would get it from elsewhere. Though not fond of physical exercise, every day before nightfall he used to walk briskly up and down the verandah for an hour. He loved music but could not sing or play anything himself.

Aurobindo had a Victoria coach. The horse was very big but it moved like an ass. Even the whip did not affect its speed! No one could say how old the carriage was. Everything about Aurobindo was peculiar — his clothes no less than his carriage and his house. For the money he paid he could have got a nice house in Calcutta. He was so simple in worldly matters that everyone cheated him. But since he had no attachment to

money the cheating did not affect him. People in Baroda — from the higher as well as the lower classes — had heard of Mr. Ghose. Everyone who knew him respected him. The educated people of Baroda had a high regard for his uncommon genius. He kept the glory of the Bengali undimmed in Maratha society. The students of Baroda looked upon Aurobindo as a god. No one except the English principal of the College received more of their respect and trust than this professor from Bengal. They were really impressed by the way he taught. Some of the professors of Baroda College were selected as Examiners for the Bombay University, but I never saw the name of the brilliant Aurobindo on the list of Examiners! Perhaps he never asked for this honour. Besides, Aurobindo did not have time to examine the university students' test-papers. I wonder if anyone other than Derozio, the professor at Calcutta's Hindu College, has ever received as much respect, love, devotion and trust from his students as Aurobindo did.

Often, in the morning or the evening, I used to see an armed Turkish rider come with a letter from Lakshmivilas Palace, sent by the Maharaja's private secretary. Sometimes the private secretary wrote, "If you would be so kind as to join the Maharaja for dinner, he would be very pleased" or "Would you be free to meet the Maharaja at such and such a time?" Sometimes I saw Aurobindo refuse the Maharaja's invitation for want of time! How many noblemen yearned vainly for months, hoping to be called for a single meeting with the Maharaja! And here was Aurobindo, an ordinary school-teacher, who regarded his duty more important than a visit to the Maharaja's palace!

Bapubhai Majmumdar, a Gujarati Brahmin barrister, came to Baroda and stayed for some time in our house as Aurobindo's guest. He lived with us but had his meals elsewhere. Handsome, witty and a good conversationalist, the man recounted to us many amusing stories. Even the serious-natured Aurobindo used to laugh loudly when he listened to Bapubhai's stories! He prayed regularly and meditated. I became quite close to him. He had learnt a few Bengali words and would repeat them at odd times. He would ask me, "*Babuy aapni keeman acchau?*" ("Babu, how are you?") or "*Tu Culcuttay jabe?*" ("Will you go to Calcutta?") He was full of praise for Calcutta. His son was studying law in England. The father

had come to Baroda to look into the possibility of a job in the Baroda State Service for his son when he returned from England. He wanted Aurobindo to pull strings for him. He also tried to get a position for himself. When he found nothing in Baroda he managed to become a judge in another district of Gujarat. Today he is the chief justice of a state. Aurobindo did not wish to influence the Maharaja in order to get someone a job. The Maharaja too was well acquainted with Aurobindo and respected his dignity. He knew that in his very large office there were many pot-bellied officers earning two to three thousand rupees a month, but there was only one Aurobindo. There were very few princes in India capable of appreciating the good qualities of a man like him. Aurobindo's opinion of the Maharaja was very high. He told me that the Maharaja was worthy of governing a far greater empire and that it was hard to find in India a politician like him. I thought that the Maharaja would have refused Aurobindo nothing but Aurobindo never asked him for anything!

I once told Aurobindo during a conversation: "I see that there are many high-placed officials here who command extraordinary respect. You too could have similar respect if only you wanted it. So many people would only be too glad to wait on you! But you pay no heed and their indifference increases, leaving you forgotten in a corner." Aurobindo laughed and replied, "One does not acquire happiness simply by respect, honour, skill and influence. Is there any joy to be derived from the flattery of selfish fools?" Not merely the flattery of fools, even the praise of the wise and the intelligent failed to enthuse him. The late Romesh Chandra Dutt had come to Baroda, invited by the Maharaja sometime towards the end of 1899, I think — I don't quite remember whether it was before or after he had left the post of Chief Commissioner of Orissa. I don't think Mr. Dutt knew Aurobindo from earlier times, but he had heard of his poetic genius, and perhaps he had even read some of his poems. Mr. Dutt had just published in England a poetic translation of parts of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. When he heard that Aurobindo had translated certain parts of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, he expressed an eagerness to see the translations. Needless to say Mr. Dutt was a distinguished writer in English literature. Many of his English writings are better than those of famous English

writers. He was equally fluent in prose and verse, in novels and poetry. So when Mr. Dutt asked quite spontaneously to see Aurobindo's poems, Aurobindo showed them to him, even if a little reluctantly. Mr. Dutt, discerning as he was in literary matters, was so impressed with Aurobindo's poems that he later said: "Seeing your poems, I regret all the trouble I went to trying to translate the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*! Had I seen your poems earlier, I would never have published my own writings. It all seems like child's play now." Yet Mr. Dutt's *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* had received many appreciative reviews in English weeklies and magazines. But I did not see Aurobindo pleased even after such praise from Mr. Dutt. Aurobindo was always equal in happiness or sorrow, comfort or hardship, praise or criticism. Later when the destructive clouds of terrible calamity thundered over his head and exploded like lightning on all sides, everyone must have thought that unending restlessness and agitation had overcome his sleep and dreams. The poor people of India consoled themselves, thinking their lot to be more fortunate than his. But Aurobindo remembered these great inspiring words of the Prapanna Gita: "*Tvayaa hrishiksha hridhithitena, yathaa niyukto'smi tathaa karomi*" ("Thou, O Lord of the senses, dwellest in my heart and I do as thou impellest me to do.") and remained rapt in the contemplation of his adorable divinity facing all vicissitudes with an equal, unflinching heart. The fire that would have reduced any other man to ashes kindled Aurobindo, removed all impurity and made him even more radiant.

### III

When plague broke out, we moved out of our large old single-storied house in the dusty, crowded locality in the centre of Baroda and went to Killedar's Bungalow on the outskirts of town. I don't remember now the killedar's name or whether he was still alive. His widow was the sister of the Gaekwar's first queen. She did not appear before us, but she lived secluded in the zenana upstairs. I noticed that the Maratha women who belonged to the high Brahmin castes did not usually come out of the zenana. The killedar's wife lived with her little son and young daughter in an exceedingly large single-storied mansion. The boundaries of this building plot were very large. There was a lawn on one side of the mansion and a flower garden on the other. Adjacent to this garden was a big tiled bungalow. We were supposed to stay in this bungalow, which was a tiled eight-gabled dwelling. We were quite stunned on seeing this place!

Besides the servants and attendants of the killedar's wife, an old Maratha lived there too. I never found out whether he was related to the woman. But there was no doubt that he was the widow's guardian and a friend, philosopher and guide to the two children. He taught them to read and write and spent his days in prayer and meditation. He was a very sober sort of man. His bathroom was in the tiled house where we stayed. I passed him two or three times in a day, but strangely enough he never spoke to me. I think that either he scorned me or else he never forgave the unrightful entry of two strange Bengali young men into their empty mansion. Whatever the reason, on account of his indifference I never spoke to him either. But occasionally I saw him say a few words to Aurobindo.

This family had good relations with Aurobindo's friend Lieutenant Madhavrao Jadhav. I think it was thanks to him that we had got this tiled house. We did not have to pay rent for it. Lieutenant Madhavrao came to our dwelling at least once a day. As soon as he arrived, the killedar's children came along with him to visit us. The girl was tall, dark-complexioned, beautiful, liquid-eyed, well-built and slightly serious in temperament; she must have been about nine or ten. The boy was six or seven, extremely vivacious, slim, fair, intelligent and fun-loving. They did

not resemble each other at all, either physically or temperamentally. Who knows how they have grown or whether they are still alive? I don't know why, but after all these years I still remember these children sometimes. Living in that forlorn house, far from home, deprived of all social contacts, I remembered my own children when I saw this girl and boy. I was always eager to fondle them and talk to them, but I did not understand their language nor they mine. They kept staring wide-eyed at this unknown foreigner. Occasionally they offered me some flowers plucked from their garden. Perhaps they had heard about us from their old "masterji" or the lieutenant-saheb had told them who we were, where we came from and why. They knew nothing more. Since I did not know the language I was unable to satisfy my curiosity. I wanted to learn Marathi in order to converse with them.

There was a devout, young Maratha named Srijut Phadke. A Deccani Brahmin, he was especially close to Aurobindo. He came from somewhere near Poona and had been settled for a long time with his family in Baroda to earn his livelihood. His younger brother was a painter. I never asked him where he had been initiated into painting, at the Baroda Kala Bhavan or somewhere else. Sometimes Phadke the painter came with his elder brother to visit us. He once took a photo of Aurobindo and myself while we were living in Khaserao-saheb's house.

Sometimes Aurobindo studied Marathi with the elder Phadke, whose full name I can't recollect. Another pundit came to teach him the Modi language. Modi was a colloquial form of Marathi, a little like Prakrit to Sanskrit, and very difficult to understand. Its alphabet was not Devanagari but Aurobindo was eager to learn it anyway! Phadke was a clerk in the Dewan's office but whenever he found time he came to our house. He was a cheerful person and laughed all the time. He talked very fast and was fond of mystery. He was rather good at homoeopathy. One day I told him, "I want to learn your language." It was difficult to believe how thrilled and happy he felt. Lieutenant Madhavrao had nicknamed me "Novelist" and Phadke called me by that nickname. He brought a primer for the Novelist. The letters were Devanagari so it did not take me long to pick them up. Marathi, like Bengali, descends from Sanskrit, and there is a lot of

similarity in the vocabulary of the two languages. Our *gaachh* (tree) is *jhaad* in their language; our *biraal* (cat) is their *maajdru* (*maajar?*); our *chaaturi* (clever) is their *shahaanpan* — it means the same as our *seyaanaa*!

I started studying the first part of the primer in great earnest but by the time I came to the story of the *maajarur shahaanpan* my enthusiasm waned. Aurobindo told me one day that to be able to write good novels it was important to know French. When I heard that, I got a French vocabulary and applied myself to studying it. Aurobindo became my master. But a month or so later, the rigors of French pronunciation began to make me lose my enthusiasm. Seeing me discouraged, Aurobindo's enthusiasm redoubled and he began to teach me German! It was difficult to count all the books he had, all kinds of books in so many different languages!

Phadke was a patron of literature. Before meeting me, he had published a Marathi translation of Bankimchandra's *Durgesh Nandini*. After meeting me, he began translating Ramesh-babu's *Jivan-prabhat*. He said that he had never read a novel like *Jivan-prabhat*. He felt proud of the greatness of the independent Maratha race and thought that the account Ramesh-babu had given of Chhatrapati Shivaji's love for his country and race was incomparable. He wrote this novel filled with the spirit of Shivaji Maharaj. While he was translating *Jivan-prabhat*, Phadke used to ask me to explain portions that he had not understood fully. I explained them to him in English. He could not read Bengali well, but when there were many Sanskrit words, he was able to grasp the sense quite easily. He did not understand at all the way Aduri or Toraap spoke in *Nildarpan*. I don't know if his translation of *Jivan-prabhat* was ever published because after I returned home we stopped corresponding. Phadke was an orthodox Hindu, no doubt, but I have not seen among our bigoted Bengali Brahmins today the sort of tolerance he had.

Our new house was very isolated. When Aurobindo left for college after lunch, I found it difficult to remain alone in that secluded house. But after a few days I got used to it. On all four sides of the house were huge trees, even some sandalwood trees. These trees were all inhabited by monkeys and squirrels. Beyond the confines of the house was a large stretch of wilderness. On the north was the wide Raj path. It was hard to live in this

tilled house in summer as well as winter! During summer, the unbearable heat made the tiles fiery-hot. Unable to bear that heat I used to stay wrapped all the time in a wet towel! Then in winter the cold was so biting that the blood seemed to freeze in my chest. But neither the heat nor the cold troubled Aurobindo. I never saw him suffer from either of them. I was terribly harassed in this bungalow by flies in the morning and mosquitoes at night. At night, while lying in bed, I would feel as though the mosquitoes might drag me out into the field and eat me. The tiles in the house were old; the house had been uninhabited for a long time. During the rains water poured through the tiles over the table. Many a Bengali aristocrat's cowshed was better than that dwelling! But Aurobindo never complained or showed unwillingness to live in such a terrible place. He lived undisturbed in that dilapidated house for a long time. Aurobindo would sit on a chair beside a table under the light of a "jewel lamp" and, untroubled by the awful mosquito-bites, would read on till one o'clock. I would see him with his eyes fixed on a book, sitting in the same spot with the same concentration for hours on end, oblivious of the outer world, like an ascetic rapt in yoga! He wouldn't have noticed if the house caught fire! In this way, staying up at night, he read countless books in many European languages: poetry, novels, history and philosophy. In Aurobindo's library there were piles of books in various European languages, all sorts of books in French, German, Russian, English, Greek, Latin, Hebrew, about which I knew nothing. His collection contained works by all the English poets from Chaucer to Swinburne. Numerous English novels were stacked up in cupboards, piled up in corners of the room, and locked away in steel trunks. Homer's *Illiad*, Dante's great epic, our *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, books by Kalidasa and other such poets were all there in his library. He was extremely fond of Russian. He said that Russia would one day lead Europe in art as well as in literature. This sounded very new to me. Sometimes he read Bengali once or twice a week; at other times he did not open a Bengali book for a fortnight.

I would spend my time in my own work. In the afternoons I went alone to town for a walk. I went down the long road as far as the Baroda Railway Station. I loved wandering in the station. To me it was like my own country

and the meeting-point of all my travels. How many trains went from Bombay to Ahmedabad! I could see people from so many different regions in the passenger trains but I never saw a Bengali among them! At that time Bengalis didn't travel much. Many Bengalis undoubtedly lived in Bombay but they almost never came this side. I saw mostly Marathis, Gujaratis and Parsis. Many Parsis lived in these parts. One could see Parsis of all classes — from the very fair, well-dressed, respectable Parsi businessmen to the mud-coloured, unkempt, ill-dressed poor Parsi labourers. The Parsis did not mix with us. But in the Baroda State Service there was no dearth of pot-bellied, well-paid, Parsi employees. A couple of Parsi friends used to come occasionally to meet Aurobindo. But Aurobindo did not think much of the ethical behaviour of the average Parsi.

Once Aurobindo had learnt Bengali reasonably well, he applied himself to reading books like *Swamalata*, Bharatchandra's *Annadamangal*, Dinabandhu's *Sadhabar Ekdashi*. Since he did not understand the colloquial language well, I had to explain several portions to him in English. I too benefitted from this and whatever skill in translation I may have developed was due to this. But I was not so intelligent that I could fully answer all his questions and satisfy him. Where my own intelligence was insufficient, I tried to explain in all sorts of ways. With his brilliance, Aurobindo would somehow get the hang of it, then he would explain it elaborately in English and ask me if his explanation was correct. From his explanation I could see that he had understood quite well. I remember once, while reading Dinabandhu's *Lilavati*, that I started sweating as I tried to explain a nursery rhyme:

*Mader majaati gaanja kaati kach-kach,*

*Maamir pirite maama hyaankach-pyaankach.*

It would be impossible for me — why, even for many a university scholar — to render this correctly. Despite all my efforts I was unable to explain to Aurobindo the meaning of *hyaankach-pyaankach*! Aurobindo may never be able to understand *pirite hyaankach-pyaankach* in his life. Had he understood he would not have been in such a sorry mess!

Aurobindo read Bankimchandra's novels himself and he followed them quite well. He had extraordinary respect for Bankim. He said that Bankim was a golden bridge between our past and present. He wrote a beautiful sonnet in English in his honour in order to express his regard for him. He derived great joy from Swami Vivekananda's Bengali essays. He would tell me that in Swamiji's language the breath of the Spirit can be felt and that such force, music and flow in the language are very hard to find. Aurobindo also bought and studied Rabindranath's poetical works. He was quite respectful towards our singer-poet, although he did not think that all his poetry was worth publishing. I used to correspond with the venerable poet even before leaving for Baroda. Occasionally I wrote to him from Baroda and he answered regularly. Aurobindo was sometimes mentioned in these letters, though Rabindranath Tagore had not yet found an opportunity to meet him. And he felt bad about it. I remember once on Aurobindo's return to Calcutta I took him to Samajpati's house. Samajpati met Aurobindo here for the first time. At that time Samajpati lived in Harighosh Street. The *Sahitya* office was in the same house. Samajpati was impressed by that very first meeting, by the few words spoken by Aurobindo who was taciturn by nature. He realised what stuff Aurobindo's being was made of. During the first national movement when Aurobindo quit his Baroda job and came away to Calcutta, he became quite close to Samajpati.

Although formally the son of a Brahmo, Aurobindo was not against going to the theatre. Besides, many Brahmos go to the theatre secretly. After coming to Calcutta he went to the Star Theatre a couple of times to see plays. I think he once saw *Chandrashekhar*. He did not like any monkeying around on stage. Nor did he like the staging of pointlessly vulgar and flimsy plays. I think no educated man of taste can really enjoy that. Once in Baroda I went to see a play with Aurobindo at the local theatre, the Sayaji Vijay. The play was *Tarabai*, adapted from Shakespeare. The female roles in this performance were played by clean-shaven men. I could not follow the speeches and songs well, but I was happy with the costumes and the sets. I found that from the point of view of acting and dance, the Bengali stage was more advanced than the Marathi one.

Aurobindo was very impressed by *Swarnalata*. It is not surprising that the son of an itinerant Bengali would be touched or satisfied by a picture of Bengali domesticity. But I found him a little confused while reading the concluding part of the novel. When he came to the point in *Swarnalata* where Shashankshekhar's house catches fire, he shut the book. He said the novelist had spoilt the artistry of the story at that point. It is for readers interested in literature to judge the truth of this statement.

I used to get many books for Aurobindo from Gurudas Babu's Library in Calcutta. He took practically everything from the catalogue of the *Basumati* office. The *Basumati* was still in its infancy then, but he preferred it to all the other weeklies. He liked its language and style. Panchkadi Bannerjee was the editor of *Basumati*; the respected Jaldhar-babu was his collaborator. Aurobindo enjoyed reading Panchkadi-babu's simple criticism. I never imagined that very soon Panchkadi-babu would quit the *Basumati*, that I would be closely associated with it, and that eventually the whole editorial responsibility would fall on my weak shoulders! In the turn of destiny's wheel, I had to assume the editorship of *Basumati* prior to Aurobindo's coming to Calcutta to launch *Bande Mataram*.

## IV

Atmaram Radhabhai Segun and Thakkar & Co., two well-known booksellers of Bombay, used to supply books to Aurobindo. Every month, sometimes even every week, they sent him lists of new books. He selected titles he liked from these lists and sent his order. As soon as he got his salary he would send a money-order of fifty or sixty rupees or more to the booksellers. They supplied Aurobindo with books on a deposit account system. His books did not come by bookpost but in huge packing cases sent by rail parcel; such parcels came as often as two or three times a month.

Aurobindo would finish reading these books in eight or ten days and then place an order for new books. I have never seen such a voracious reader. Those who suspected Aurobindo of being a terrible revolutionary or a pioneer of the revolution and those who continue to hold such opinions even today, would be surprised to know that I never saw any revolutionary literature among the piles of books in his library! I never heard him express a word of contempt for the formidable British government. There are some people, perhaps, who believe that Aurobindo detested the British government because he was deprived of the right to enter the Indian Civil Service. To my mind this idea is utterly without value. Aurobindo accepted a very high post in the Maharaja Gaekwar's state at the Maharaja's request. It is true that he was serving as a professor in the college, but in the beginning the Maharaja assigned him to the Dewan's office. He discharged that work with great competence. Aurobindo did not enjoy official work and so he quite willingly became a professor. The Maharaja fulfilled his desire. Career was of no importance to Aurobindo — he never made petitions for promotion. I find it hard to believe that someone so indifferent about his job could be angered by the government for not allowing him to enter the Civil Service. Even after staying with him in the same room day and night for over two years and listening to his conversation, I could never imagine, even for a moment, that he harboured sinister designs of throwing the English out of India. I thought it unbecoming to tarnish his love of freedom, which was his very soul, with the reproach of disloyalty. It is totally unthinkable that a man like him whose honesty was beyond dispute, whose nature was generous, devout, compassionate, considerate of others'

pain, lacking in violence or hatred, that such a man could plot with bombs and be involved in a plan to kill human beings. It seems there was some factionalism among the high-placed state employees of Baroda, but Aurobindo never took part in this or chose sides. And I certainly would have known about it if he did. I suppose that Aurobindo never had the time, nor much less the inclination, to meddle in all this factionalism. The service of Vagdevi, the Goddess of learning, was his only aspiration. He always remained rapt in the service of Bharati.

Before I went to Baroda, Aurobindo had contributed a number of articles to a Bombay periodical *Induprakash* criticizing some errors of the Congress. Unable to refute his conclusive arguments, the blind followers of the Congress were highly upset with him. When reason is vanquished, anger takes over — this has always been man's primary weakness. I was told that after the publication of these articles, one of the judges of the Bombay High Court, the late Mr. Ranade, met Aurobindo. Aurobindo had a discussion with him about these articles. Even the vastly experienced, learned and magnanimous Ranade could not with all his great intelligence refute Aurobindo's arguments! But he requested Aurobindo not to write such articles in the future. Such articles he feared, could damage the Congress. Aurobindo acceded to his request. After this he never criticized the Congress again in the *Induprakash*. I never asked Aurobindo about the substance of these articles.

Many addressed Aurobindo in their letters as A. A. Ghosh, Esquire. I never asked him why that extra "A" was appended to his name, thinking that such a question might be considered impolite. Thus this needless curiosity remained unanswered. I have heard however that in England he was known as Acroyd Aurobindo. He may have lived with a family of that name during his sojourn in England as a child. I am not at all intrigued by this unusual name. Many a person returning from Europe has appended a prefix to his name — Michael Madhusudan, Victor Nripendranarayan, Shelley Kamalkrishna, Albion Rajkumar. When he returned to India, Aurobindo dropped this unnecessary prefix.

Aurobindo was a firm believer in astrology. He believed that the planets had an influence on human life. He hadn't the slightest doubt that one could

tell good or ill in the life of a new-born by studying the horoscope. Once while talking to him about astrology I mentioned Srijut Kalipada Bhattacharya, who was from my village. Although Kalipada-babu was a graduate of the Calcutta University, he was a convinced tantrik and excelled in the science of astrology. At the time of which I speak, Mr. Bhattacharya was the assistant headmaster of the government school at Barasat. At Aurobindo's request I got a horoscope made by Mr. Bhattacharya. I never asked Aurobindo whether the events in his past life agreed with his chart. We met on the winter holidays when Mr. Bhattacharya came home and I returned from Baroda. He told me that if he were given the right remuneration he could draw a chart that would tell us the events of each day. Aurobindo wanted such a detailed chart to be made but somehow that did not happen. It might have happened if I had stayed a little longer at Baroda. Mr. Bhattacharya prepared the horoscopes of several great men of our country. When I met him he told me, "Your pupil is an uncommon man. Even though he is especially loved by the Maharaja, he is destined to suffer much pain and sorrow; there isn't much domestic happiness in his future." Aurobindo was eager to get married at that time and did so soon afterwards. His job brought him a lot of money and his health was perfect. But there was no domestic happiness in his destiny! I could not quite accept this prediction of Mr. Bhattacharya, but today I realise that Mr. Bhattacharya was not wrong after all. Who else with such uncommon brilliance as Aurobindo has had to suffer so much pain and sorrow, to bear so much mental anguish? *Aparam vaa kim bhavishyati!* (What will happen after this?)

Many readers may not know the story connected with *Aparam vaa kim bhavishyati*. I cannot resist recounting it here.

A Goswami Prabhu (Vaishnava guru) lived in a village. He was also interested in the Tantrik path. He knew a lot of astrology and was also conversant with *kakcharitra*, the knowledge of auspicious and inauspicious things from the cry of the crow. It seems that the knowledge of *kakcharitra* enables one to read the apparently meaningless marks found on top of a human skull!

The Goswami Prabhu had many disciples and devotees. One day he was passing by a cemetery on the bank of a river bordering the village in order to go to a disciple's house on the outskirts of town when he noticed a human skull at the foot of a tree. When he saw the haphazard marks on the skull he stood there and, using his knowledge of black magic, began deciphering what was written on it. He read:

*Bhojanam yatra tatra, shayanam hattamandire.*

*Maranam Gomati tire, aparam vaa kim*

*bhavishyati?*

(I ate wherever I could, I slept in the market-hut. I'll die on the bank of the Gomati. But what will happen after this?)

The Goswami understood that when the man was alive he ate anywhere, slept under the roof of some shop, died on the bank of the Gomati, but he wondered what would happen after death. This greatly aroused his curiosity. He wrapped the skull in a cloth and brought it home. He put it inside a new pot, covered the pot with a cloth and hung it from the ceiling in a corner. Almost everyday he inspected the skull but he could see no changes in it.

Almost a week later he had to go to a different disciple's house. While leaving he said to his wife, "Don't get curious about what is inside this pot. Don't open the pot or even go near it."

Because of this prohibition, the curiosity of the Goswami's wife became uncontrollable. There is no woman on this earth who can control her curiosity. So the Goswami's wife disobeyed her husband's order and uncovered the pot. The horrible sight chilled her. Why was a dead person's skull in the pot? Why did her husband uncover the pot once almost daily and look into it? However much she racked her brains, she could not discover the reason. Finally it dawned on her that this was the skull of her husband's secret mistress! The luckless woman had died but her husband had not been able to forget his love and so he consoled himself by looking at her skull every day. How could she fail to come to such a simple explanation! The woman's heart burned with anger and jealousy. Taking

the skull out of the pot she smashed it to pieces and threw them into a filthy gutter. Then removing the ornaments from both her arms, the offended wife lay herself on the floor and began to weep.

When the Goswami returned home, he found his faithful wife in this dismal state. He enquired what had happened but did not get any answer. “O speechless maiden, why don’t you say something?” Finally he went towards the pot and discovered that both the pot and the skull were missing. He went back to his wife and asked about the skull. The woman’s hurt pride exploded. Springing from the ground, she yelled furiously, “So you rascal! You love someone else!” and things like that. Then at last the Goswami understood the fate of the skull — *aparam vaa kim bhavishyati* — and thus this unresolved problem of Providence was solved.

It seems that Aurobindo’s elder brother Benoy-babu was also quite a believer in astrology. Aurobindo once told me a very amusing story in this regard. An astrologer once prepared Benoy’s chart. When he handed it over, he flattered him with his reading of the chart. Benoy rewarded him by paying him a handsome sum of money. A few days later, Benoy-babu showed this chart to his uncle, Jogin-babu. Well-versed in Sanskrit, he looked through the chart and smiled a little. When Benoy-babu asked why he was smiling, he replied, “Look, everything that is written in your chart is fine, but there is one bad indication with regard to your character.” He then read the relevant Sanskrit *shloka* and explained it to him. When he heard the explanation, Benoy-babu turned red with anger: “That rascal-astrologer hoodwinked me and got ten rupees out of me. Had I known this before, I would have kicked the beggar!” Benoy-babu’s anger greatly amused Jogin-babu.

A Deccani Brahmin youth named Gopal Deshpande lived in another part of the house where we lived at the Baroda Camp. He had studied agriculture or something of the sort in England and then returned to Baroda to take up a government job. He worked in the revenue department and his post corresponded to that of a deputy collector. I think he earned 200 or 250 rupees a month. He was a serious sort of person and did not mix much with others. Sometimes he would sit and chat with Aurobindo. Many people came to the house and almost all of them came to chat with Aurobindo.

Hardly anyone went to see Deshpande. Many business people respected Aurobindo highly. They were cordial with him not because of his genius, I think, but because he was especially loved and trusted by the Maharaja. And so they came to him with all sorts of business motives. Occasionally I saw Gujarati traders and Maratha *sardars* come to Aurobindo asking for advice about sending their sons to Europe for education.

Once another Deccani Brahmin arrived, “Bakkeshwar” Mangesh — I don’t remember his surname. He introduced himself as a salesman of some insurance company and wished to make use of Aurobindo’s influence. He wanted Aurobindo to persuade the Maharaja to have himself insured for life through him for forty or fifty thousand rupees! But just before this the Maharaja had bought a life insurance policy for a huge sum. I was told that Mangesh was the late justice Ranade’s follower and protege. Aurobindo behaved quite cordially with him. After the first two meetings I understood that the fellow was a braggart and a rogue. When I told Aurobindo what I thought, he just laughed and said nothing.

The man’s garrulity in the house exasperated me! He imagined that since I was a Bengali I was familiar with Calcutta, so he asked me all sorts of questions about the city. Finally, he brought up the question of the Tagore family. The respected late Satyendranath Tagore was at that time a judge in the Bombay area. This salesman was therefore on familiar terms with him and his family! While we were talking about the Tagore family he made such impertinent remarks about this respected and dignified family that I decided to teach him a lesson by publishing a character sketch of him in *Pradeep*, a well-known, important Bengali monthly of the time. During our summer vacation when we went to Calcutta, this article appeared in *Pradeep*. The salesman did not know Bengali, but one of Aurobindo’s friends living in Baroda decided to have fun, so he read and explained the whole article to him, adding his own remarks as he went along. The fellow became mad with rage and howled and growled and did not hesitate to threaten me. There was quite an uproar among the Marathas of Baroda. Some Bengali “Novelist” had written an article in a monthly and exposed a distinguished Maratha like him. What impudence! How dare he ridicule a man who was the respected judge Ranade’s beloved protege! Even

Aurobindo was slightly upset and wrote to me from Deoghar, “What have you done! You’ve stirred up a hornet’s nest! If you don’t go and apologize to Mangesh, I don’t know how it will be possible for me to stay with you when I return to Baroda.” I sought the counsel of the respected and affectionate Jaldhar-babu and wrote to Mangesh, “You are unjustly angry with me for my article. The person who explained to you the article explained it incorrectly in order to infuriate you. I wanted to make you known in Bengal. I haven’t exaggerated anything. However if it has hurt you, will you forgive me?” And so Mangesh’s anger subsided. After the winter holidays when I reached Baroda, Aurobindo’s friend and magistrate of the city, Mr. Khaserao Jadhav, told me one day, “Shame on you! What an unjust thing you’ve done! To humiliate a man by publishing his table-talk! That wasn’t decent at all.” I understood that the infuriated Mangesh had gone and complained about me to Khaserao as well. But Aurobindo did not admonish me. Had he said something unpleasant it would have been impossible for me to go to Baroda with him. I asked him if it was really a crime to draw a character-sketch of someone who had behaved with such extreme arrogance in the company of friends, making impertinent remarks about one of the most respectable families of the country, a family I dearly loved. Aurobindo laughed a lot when he read Mangesh’s character-sketch. From this may be gauged his own opinion of Mangesh.

A few days before this incident a tall, sturdy Bengali youth appeared in our house at the Baroda Camp carrying a metal pot and a long staff. His name was Jatindranath Bandyopadhyaya. He did not tell us where he was from, nor whether he had any family nor what was the purpose behind his wandering from place to place. At first he was suspected of being a spy. There had just been a great uproar in south India about the Rand and Ayest murders. A lot of spies were hunting for revolutionaries all over India. In the afternoon when three or four of us went out for a walk to the river near the railway station or to the race-course, one or two strange men always followed us. Or if I got up while we were chatting on the verandah in the evening, to see whether anyone was outside, I’d see someone disappear from behind the screen! This used to happen often, so you couldn’t say I was unjustified in suspecting this newly-arrived Bengali youth to be a spy.

But my suspicion soon vanished. He told me that Bengalis were not allowed to enter the British army, so he set out to try to enlist himself in another army — say an army of a princely state or of a state allied to India. In spite of all his efforts in the various states of Rajputana and Central India he was not successful! No king or head of state in western or northern India dared enlist him because of the British government's clear prohibition against Bengalis entering the army. If Bengalis were to learn the art of war, the British Empire in India would come to an end! Aurobindo was impressed by Jatindranath's courage, ardour and ambition and he earnestly hoped that he would succeed in entering the army. To get around the fact that Bengalis could not enter the army, Jatindranath concealed his Bengaliness, dressed up like an eastern Brahmin, dropped the "Bandyo" from "Bandyopadhyaya," making it "Upadhyaya", and presented himself before Aurobindo's friend, Lieutenant Madhavrao Jadhav. He asked Madhavrao to enlist him as an ordinary foot soldier. Aurobindo commented that in an independent country if Jatindranath had been given the chance to join the army he would have distinguished himself for his heroism in due time. But unfortunately, this son of Bengal, instead of dedicating his life to becoming a writer, wanders about the whole of India in the hope of becoming a fighter! I don't know whether fortune finally smiled on him because I returned home soon after. But it was clear that the spies were watching his movements very closely. A few days prior to my departure from Baroda I suddenly received a return-requested telegram from somewhere. The telegram said: "Intimate 'military' Jatindranath's whereabouts; and what he is up to." I could not understand why the telegram was sent to me of all people? How did they find out my name and address? However I did not answer the telegram. I did not receive any more news of Jatindranath.

While we were still living at the Baroda Camp, the famous painter Sriji Shashikumar Hesh returned to India after studying art in Europe. I had been told that his actual paternal name was "Ash" but since the English pronunciation and meaning of the word were not very dignified he used "He" in place of "A" in his name. But his father did not give up his ancestral surname. It was through the late Maharaja Suryakant Acharya Bahadur's generosity that he had been able to go to Europe to learn

painting. Shashikumar-babu was a teacher in a Bengali school in a village in Mymensingh district. Isn't it astonishing that this ordinary village schoolteacher went to Europe merely on the strength of his courage, perseverance and fortitude and came back after learning the art of painting? Shashikumar-babu was no more than thirty when he returned to India. He had come to meet the Maharaja Gaekwar with letters of recommendation from Sir George Bardwood and Dadabhai Naoroji.

When he came to Baroda from Bombay Shashikumar-babu was not Aurobindo's guest but the Maharaja's. The Maharaja's guest-house in Baroda was built in the European style — a large, elegant mansion in the middle of a lovely garden. The honoured guests of the king were put up in this building. Shashikumar-babu stayed here while he was in Baroda. Cars had not yet come to this part of the country. An excellent horse-carriage was given to Shashikumar-babu for his use. In this carriage he came daily from the guesthouse to visit us in the Baroda Camp. At our first meeting we were enchanted with him. He made us feel close to him right from the start. Although he did not know Aurobindo, he was on close terms with his uncle, Srijut Krishnakumar Mitra, who was the editor of *Sanjivani*. When Shashikumar was in Europe, the *Sanjivani* used to print a letter from him almost every week. Shashikumar-babu also spent some time in Florence and Munich studying painting. He stayed for a long time in Paris. While there he fell in love with a French woman. He married her and returned to Calcutta. Shashikumar-babu was an ordinary, traditional Brahmo, so he was married to this foreigner according to the Brahmo rites. The ordinary people of the Samaj objected to this. They were neither kind nor generous in judging their love. Shashikumar-babu often used to lament about this. Aurobindo told me, however, that one could not blame these ordinary Brahmos for objecting to such a marriage. In any case thanks to the noble Acharya Jagdishchandra's help and graciousness, Miss Flamard, who had come to Calcutta without a friend, was made to feel at home and their marriage was solemnised without any difficulty. Shashikumar-babu wrote to his beloved in French because she did not know Bengali or English. Although he was familiar with French and Italian literatures he did not know English well. While talking to us, he was not able to speak English

fluently. Aurobindo mentioned to me that even if one was not told of Shashikumar-babu's profession it was easy to guess that the young man was a painter just by his appearance! His face was quite uncommon. When I first met Shashikumar-babu in European clothes I did not guess that he was Bengali. Few Bengalis are so fair-complexioned. Aurobindo said that he could have passed for an Italian. His beard and moustache were light.

I used to go almost every afternoon to the guesthouse for a ride with Shashikumar-babu. On some days we talked till very late at night. Occasionally Aurobindo came along. Although he openly praised Shashikumar-babu's patriotism, love of literature and artistic genius, he did not quite support his love of luxury. I was surprised to see one who had spent his early youth as a teacher in a village school take to luxury. But Aurobindo told me that such an inclination towards luxury was a natural quality of great artists. Shashikumar-babu had been impressed by Aurobindo's erudition and was full of praise for him. He had Aurobindo sit for two to three days at the Baroda guest-house in order to make an oil-painting of him. With just two or three strokes of his brush the portrait seemed to come alive. Unfortunately the Bengalis never got to know about his artistic genius. Only once a single-colour drawing by him appeared in the Bengali monthly *Pradeep* — a drawing of Kunti and Kama which did not quite reflect his artistic genius.

At Baroda he did oil portraits of several members of the royal family. But he was unable to paint the Maharani's portrait, as she refused to sit for him. While he was working on these paintings, an English painter came to stay at the guest-house in Baroda. He had an introductory letter from the Governor-General. He had been given his job of varnishing some of the priceless old deteriorating paintings in the Maharaja's palace. Shashikumar remarked that no great self-respecting artist would have agreed to varnish the paintings of another painter.

One night at about nine o'clock Shashikumar turned up all excited at our house. He said he had had a bad argument with the English "varnisher". The fellow was mad, he told us, and had behaved very improperly with him. If he misbehaved again he would thrash him and teach him a lesson or two. Shashikumar could not live in the same house as this Englishman, so he

asked Aurobindo what he should do. Aurobindo calmed him down with sweet words and sent him away. He explained to him that he should not do anything in a fit of temper — that would merely fill him with regret and was unlikely to solve anything. Shashikumar undoubtedly calmed down with Aurobindo's advice but his hurt ego continued to sulk. He was especially pained by the fact that although the Englishman went off with a few thousand rupees merely for brushing over some old paintings, he had not received even half his payment after having done several excellent oil paintings. He left Baroda quite disillusioned.

I met people from different classes during my sojourn in Baroda. I especially remember one I cannot forget: I can still picture this valiant old man's clean-shaven face. In Baroda a procession called the Ekadeshi Savari was taken out on the day after Vijaya Dashami. I described this in *Bharati* quite some time back. Groups of cavalry and infantry-men, along with horse-carriages and gold and silver gun-carriages, paraded through the city on this occasion. So many people came out to witness this procession that there was no place left on the main road and its surrounding houses! In order to witness it I went out with Aurobindo and we positioned ourselves on the verandah of the city's public library. The procession was led by a tall clean-shaven man in military dress but bearing no arms and seated on a big horse. I remember Aurobindo asking me, "Tell me, if you can, if that old man is Hindu or Muslim." I told him, "A beardless Muslim is indeed rare! He must be a Hindu."

I found out that he was a Muslim. The story of how he lost his beard and moustache is as amazing as fiction. I have forgotten this old man's name — he was Malharrao Gaekwar's general. Malharrao Gaekwar was removed from the throne on the charge of having poisoned the then Resident of Baroda. When the Maharaja was about to be dethroned, this general told him that he and the army would make sure that he did not lose his throne. He would repulse any intervention by the British army. As long as he lived, he would not allow his lord and king to be dethroned and humiliated.

But the general's proposal only reflected his madness. Malharrao Gaekwar did not approve of it, for he knew that it would bring about the

fall of the kingdom and the ruin of all his subjects. So then the general surrendered his sword at the feet of the Maharaja and returned home. The general's aged mother was still living at that time. She had already heard of the king's reversal of fortune. On seeing her crestfallen son when he returned home, the mighty woman thundered, "Your king is in such peril and you've sneaked back home like a thief! What sort of intelligence is this? Is that how you show your gratitude? You could not fight and repulse the *firinghee* and protect the King! Why then have you become a general?" The general replied, "What could I do, mother? The King did not agree to fight. He told me, 'These English have conquered India by physical force. They have countless weapons and soldiers who are well-trained. I can't fight them with a handful of soldiers — it would be suicidal. I won't try to protect myself, general.' Mother, when I heard this from Maharaja Bahadur Khaskel Samser, I left his sword at his feet and came away! I could not but obey the King's orders." The general's mother retorted, "Is the king in his right mind now? You are his general, you've eaten his salt and yet you didn't try to protect him with all your strength! You shirked the duty of a general and ran away leaving him in danger! If you couldn't do anything else, you could at least have sacrificed your life on the battlefield. Now that you've surrendered your arms and run away, your beard and moustache no longer look good on you. Shave them off as a reminder that you are not a man."

On that very day, the general shaved off his beard and moustache and never took up arms again. That is why he was clean-shaven and unarmed in the procession.

I am sure that this last example of free India's heroism and pride is no more alive. His mortal body has been laid to rest. But after all this time, whenever I think of Gujarat in the west of India where I worked during my early youth, along with the quiet, dignified image of Aurobindo, this old man's face also appears in my memory's mirror. He who has spent even a few days with Aurobindo can never forget him for the rest of his life. It was my supreme good fortune that I was given the opportunity to live with him for over two years.

## Notes

Page 1: “a certain Mr. Palit”

Ramchandra Palit was the author of *The Life of Aurobindo Ghose*, an English biography published in Howrah in 1911.

Page 4: “The deity was gone from the shrine leaving the temple forlorn.”

Rajnarayan Bose died in September 1899. The place name Deoghar means literally “house of god” or temple.

Page 9: “was delivered on the ship ... and for that reason he was named ‘Barindrakumar’”.

Barindrakumar Ghose was born in Upper Norwood, near London, on 5 January 1880, several months after the Ghose family arrived in England. In his birth certificate his name is given as Emmanuel Ghose. It is not known when or why his name was changed to Barindrakumar (“Barindra” means “Lord of the waters” or “ocean”.)

“Dr. K. D. Ghose, I.M.S.”.

Dr. Ghose was not a member of Indian Medical Service. He served as a Civil Medical Officer in Rangpur, Khulna and other places.

Page 10: “Binoykumar”.

The name of Sri Aurobindo’s eldest brother was Benoybhusan.

Page 11: “a poem based on the episode of Savitri and Satyavan”.

This “poem” or translation by Sri Aurobindo has not survived. It is unlikely that it had any textual relationship to Sri Aurobindo’s epic *Savitri*, which he began working on in 1916.

Page 22: “*Raja o Rani*”

A play (1889) by Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941).

Page 32: “Modi language”

Modi is not a language but a script formerly used for writing Marathi.

Page 33: “Our *gaach* (tree) is *jhaad* in their language...”. In these examples, Dinendrakumar shows how the same or similar words mean different things in different Sanskritic languages. In Marathi, *jhaad* is the ordinary word for “tree”; in Bengali it means “bush”. *Maanjar* is the ordinary Marathi word for “cat”; in Bengali it is a literary word. *Shahaanpan*, which means cleverness in Marathi, is similar to the Bengali *seyaanaa*, which means “clever”.

Page 34: “Bankimchandra’s *Durgesh Nandini*”.

Bankimchandra Chatterji or Chattopadhyaya (1838-1894) was the greatest Bengali novelist and essayist of the nineteenth century. *Durgesh Nandini*, his first novel in Bengali (he wrote one in English before this), was published in 1865.

“Romesh-Babu’s *jivan-prabhat*”.

Romesh Chandra Dutt (1848-1909) was a government official, a scholar and a writer. His *Maharashtra Jivan-Prabhat* (1878) tells the story of Shivaji and other heroes of Maharashtrian history.

“*Nildarpan*”. A celebrated play by Dinabandhu Mitra (1830-1873), published in 1860. In the play, Aduri and Toraap are prostitutes who use rather vulgar language.

Page 36: “in various European languages”.

Sri Aurobindo did not know Hebrew or Russian. He read books in all the other languages listed here.

Page 37: “books like *Swamalata* ...”

*Swarnalata* is the first and best novel by Tarak Nath Gangopadhyaya (1843-1891), published in 1878. *Annadamangal* (1752), by Bharatchandra (1712-1750), is one of the greatest surviving works of pre-colonial Bengali literature. *Sadhabar Ekadashi* (1866) is a farce by Dinabandhu Mitra (see above).

page 39: “Samajpati”.

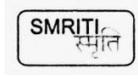
Suresh Chandra Samajpati (1870-1921), a well-known writer and editor. Among the journals he edited at one time or another was *Sahitya*, in which *Aurobindo Prasanga* first appeared.

Pages 44-45: “A.A. Ghose”... “Acroyd Aurobindo”

Aurobindo was known in England as “Aurobindo Acryod Ghose”. “Acroyd” was the surname of a friend of his father’s. Aurobindo dropped the “Acroyd” after he returned to India, but for some time he continued to sign as “A. A. Ghose”.

Page 52: “Jatindranath Bandyopadhyaya”.

Jatindranath Bannerji or Bandyopadhyaya (c. 1877-1930) was a Bengali man interested in physical culture who came to Baroda in 1900 or 1901 in order to enter the army of the state of Baroda. Later he became one of the leaders of Bengal’s first militant revolutionary society.



This is the first of a proposed series of books to be issued under the imprint “SMRITI”. As the name suggests, “SMRITI” will consist of memoirs and other first-hand accounts of the lives of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.