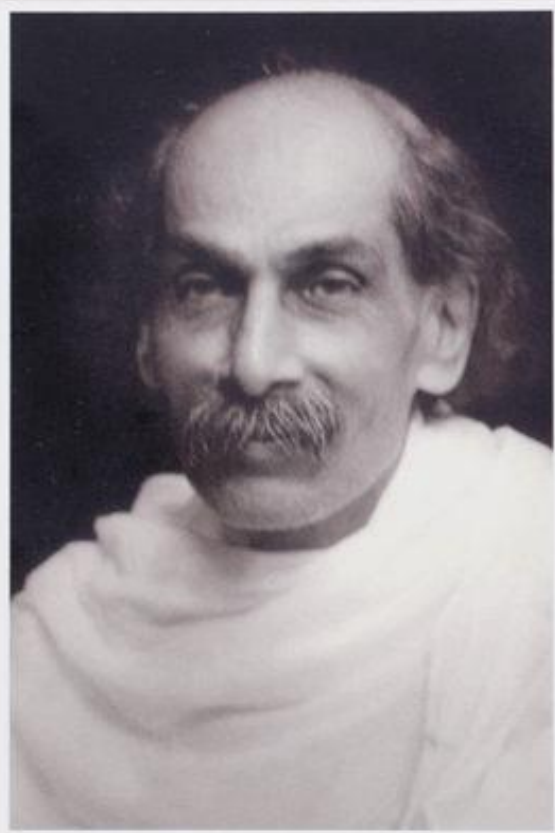


# REMINISCENCES



Nolini Kanta Gupta

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Nolini Kanta Gupta

Sri Aurobindo Ashram Pondicherry

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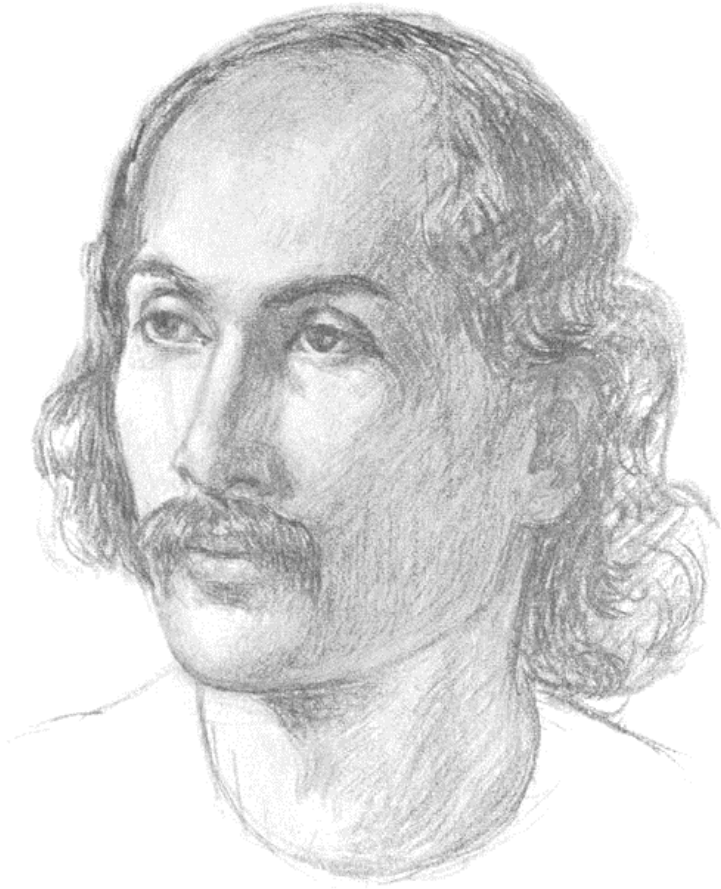
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# Contents

1 The Ullas — Russell Encounter .....	1
2 Muraripukur 1.....	8
3 Muraripukur 2.....	25
4 Deoghar .....	38
5 Shyampukur .....	49
6 Pondicherry 1 .....	61
7 Pondicherry 2 .....	73
8 Pondicherry Cyclone .....	94
9 Two Great Wars .....	101
10 I Bow to the Mother .....	109
11 I Played Football .....	122
12 The Soviet Gymnasts.....	141
13 My Athletics .....	155
14 Eternal Youth .....	165
15 The Second World War (1939-1945).....	170
16 The Situation of Today.....	185
Note on the Text.....	191



A sketch of Nolini by the Mother made in 1931

## **Publisher's Note**

In these reminiscences Nolini Kanta Gupta recounts the highlights of his eventful life — his transition from student to revolutionary to disciple of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. The memoirs first appeared in English translation in 1969 under the title *Reminiscences* and are now being brought out under the same title, forty years later, in a second edition. Further details are given in the Note on the Text at the back.



Sri Aurobindo with Nolini around 1915-18

# 1

## The Ullas — Russell Encounter

The Subhas — Oaten encounter has attained some notoriety, as a number of people have on several occasions given an account of how Subhas Chandra once gave a thrashing with his shoe to one of his British professors, Oaten. But it seems to have almost been forgotten by the general public that this incident was a mere replica or imitation of an earlier and identical performance. Subhas did not institute anything new; he was simply following in the footsteps of eminent and heroic predecessors. Today I propose to give an account of that original performance.

It was in the year 1905. The Swadeshi movement was in full tide, flooding the land with its enthusiasm, particularly the student community. But how about the Calcutta Presidency College? That was an institution meant for the “good” boys and for the sons of the rich, that is, for those who, in the parlance of the time, “had a stake in the country”, those who, in other words, had something to lose. How far were they touched by that flood? Those that were touched might be described as something of a phenomenon.

In 1905, I was in my Second Year class. Among my classmates were Narendra Nath Law, a well-known name in later years, and perhaps also Bhupati Mohan Sen, who



subsequently came to be known as Principal B. M. Sen.<sup>1</sup> Sitapati Banerji too was there; he won the Ishan Scholarship in his B.A. examination and was ultimately given the name Swami Raghavananda or Sitapati Maharaj at the Ramakrishna Mission. These more or less made up the list of the “good” boys. Among the “bad” ones was Indranath Nandi, a son of Colonel Nandi of the Indian Medical Service. Let me recount some of his exploits.

He had been a colleague of Barin Ghose of Maniktolla Gardens fame, and also a member of the Atmonnati Samiti, an “Association for Self-improvement”. This Samiti was really a centre for the recruitment and training of revolutionaries. I too had been one of the junior members of the Samiti. Bepin Behari Ganguli was among its organisers. We had just given up football as being a non-Indian sport and had taken up lathi and dagger play. I had already attained such proficiency in these games that I was once asked to give a demonstration of *lathi* play before Mrs. Sarala Devi Chowdhurani on the occasion of one of her visits. But Indra Nandi was engaged in something much more serious; he was trying to make bombs. And he ended by blowing up his fingers in an explosion during a test. Caught in this maimed

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<sup>1</sup> I cannot now exactly recall if Bhupati Mohan had been at the Presidency College right from the First Year class, or whether he joined the Third Year from the Scottish Churches College, known at the time as the General Assembly’s Institution.

condition, he was sent up for trial in the Alipore Bomb case, although he could not be convicted. Our counsel managed to prove that the state of his hands was due to their being crushed under an iron chest.<sup>2</sup>

Let me in this connection announce one of the feats of my college life. It was in that same year, 1905. Loud protests had arisen on account of the Bengal Partition and there was going to be observed a Day of Fasting or Rakhi Day or something like that. In what manner did I register my protest? I went to college dressed as if there had been a death in my family, that is to say, without shoes or shirt and with only a *dhoti* and *chaddar* on. As I entered the class, everybody seemed a little stunned. The professor cast an occasional furtive glance at me but said not a word. My action must have appeared as rather unconventional, perhaps even incorrect to many, but I felt at the same time there were quite a few who gave me an admiring look.

At that time, in the class just above mine was Charu Biswas. Next above him was Rajendraprasad, and a year senior to Rajendraprasad there were Benoy Sarkar and Atul Gupta. Ramesh Majumdar was perhaps a year junior to me.

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<sup>2</sup> But there was a rumour that Colonel Nandi had compounded with the Government on condition that his son would thenceforward behave like a thoroughly good boy.

Now let me come back to what I was going to say — *revenons à nos moutons*, as they say in French.

At a time like this, when the sky was getting red and the air was hot, with so much agitation in the minds of men and the young hearts, one of the Englishmen in our college, Russell, our professor of logic and philosophy, got it into his head to come out with something tactless against the Bengalis. It was like a spark in a powder dump. There was much excitement and agitation among the students. Could this not be avenged? Should the white man be allowed to escape scot-free, just like that? The day of reckoning came at last, like a bolt from the blue. How did it all happen? One of our classes had just ended and we were going to the next class along the corridor, when all on a sudden there rang out all over the place from a hundred lusty throats shouts of “Bande Mataram” that tore the air with its mighty cry. Everybody ran helter-skelter. “What is the matter? What happened?” “Russell has been thrashed with shoe!” “Who thrashed him? Who?”

The Principal came — it was Dr. P. K. Roy, the first Bengali to have become Principal of the Presidency College, though in a temporary capacity. We all got into our classes. He entered our class first as it was nearest to the scene of the incident. Russell was with him, his face red with shame and indignation. He glanced around at those present in the class

and said that he could spot no one. After the class was over, we went into the Physics Theatre for the physics class. There too the Principal came in and broke out in a deep thundering tone, “I see, ‘Bande Mataram’ has become a war-cry.” But the whole class was utterly quiet, there was not a sign of movement. All that high excitement and agitation of an hour ago was now hushed in dumb motionless silence. We were all a bunch of innocent lambs!

But who was the culprit? It was Ullaskar Dutt, one of our class-fellows. He was a boarder at the Eden Hindu Hostel. He had come to college with a slipper wrapped up in a newspaper sheet and had made good use of it as soon as he got a chance....

The life-story of this Ullaskar is a real drama, although its last stage is rather tragic. Soon after this incident he joined the Maniktolla Gardens with Barin Ghose and gave all his thought and energy to the making of a bomb. He did not know even the a-b-c of bombs. He read up by himself books on chemistry, pieced out information from all kinds of books and finally mastered all alone the principles of explosives — nobody ever taught him. His father, Dwijadas Dutt, was a professor at the Sibpur Engineering College. He had something like a small laboratory at his residence. It was here that Ullaskar took his training in secret. To what extent he had finally succeeded in his efforts was proved one day when to

the first of his bombs one of our own men had to fall a martyr — Prafulla Chakravarty.

I too had been an associate of his in this enterprise.

Ullaskar — “one who abounds in energy” — fully lived up to his name: he was indeed an inexhaustible fount of energy and enthusiasm. When they used to escort us in a prison van from the jail to the court room (during the trial of the Alipore Bomb case), we rent the air all the way with our shouts and songs as we drove along. It was Ullaskar’s idea; he led the chorus and the rest of us followed. Some of the old refrains still ring in my ears, I can still recall the words — of songs like “Deep From the Heart of Bengal Today”, “The Soil, the Rivers of Bengal”, “My Golden Hindusthan”.

I have heard that Ullas is still alive, though almost halfdead, they say. Ten or twelve years of jail in the Andamans deranged him in body and mind. But this, after all, was part of the ritual of sacrifice. As Barin used to say, “Such indeed was the vow in this kind of marriage.”

For, the enthusiasm of that day, that reawakening to new life, took no account whatever of the gains and the losses. It forged ahead by itself, it drew its secret support from its own momentum. That was why people gazed wide-eyed in wonder, that was why they all joined in a mighty chorus:

“A day indeed has dawned

When a million hearts  
Have known not to fear  
And leave no debts unpaid.  
Life and death are  
Bondslaves at our feet;  
Our hearts have forgotten to care.”

## 2

### **Muraripukur**

#### **I**

At last I made up my mind finally to take the plunge, that I must now join the Maniktolla Gardens in Muraripukur. That meant goodbye to College, goodbye to the ordinary life.

A little while ago, Prafulla Chakravarty had come and joined. Both of us belonged to Rangpur, both were of nearly the same age, and intimate friends. This too pushed me to my decision.

I had already taken a vow about a year ago, in front of a picture of Kali at a secret ceremony at dead of night, a vow written out in blood drawn from the chest, that I should dedicate my life to the whole-hearted service of the Motherland. With me there was a companion, and also a local leader who had read out the oath. This leader became a Sannyasin later on and rose to be the head of a Math; he has since given up his body, so I have heard. My companion of that day is still alive; he did not give up the world and in fact became a very successful man; at present he is enjoying his rest in retirement.

I lived in a students' boarding, one that had acquired quite a name. Among the inmates were Atul Gupta, Charu

Bhattacharya (late of the Vishwabharati), and a little before my time there was Naresh Chandra Sengupta. In my first year of College, Atul Gupta was in his fourth year, Charu Bhattacharya in his fifth and Naresh Sengupta had just passed out. I happened once to set foot in the room he used to occupy and there I found scattered about the floor a few pages torn out of a notebook which read very much like love letters. This seemed to me a little strange, but later I realised these were some pages from the manuscript of one of his novels.

This decision to choose my path came while I was in my Fourth Year. That I would definitely join the Gardens was conveyed to Barin by Prafulla. He had already told him about my antecedents, so one day I received a call — Barin would see me, as if at an interview for a post. Escorted by Prafulla, I arrived at his residence in Gopimohan Dutt Lane at Goabagan. This place acquired some renown during the Alipore case as a den of the terrorists. Next to the house there was a gymnasium for the young men of the neighbourhood where wrestling and boxing and all kinds of dangerous martial exercises were practised.

This happened to be my first meeting with Barin. He received me with great kindness and had me seated next to him. I cannot now recall the details of the conversation we had, but perhaps there was nothing much to remember. One thing, however, I distinctly remember. He asked me if I had



read the Gita. I said I had read it in parts. He handed me a copy and asked me to read aloud. I began reciting “*Dharmakṣetre kuruksetre...*” in a pure and undiluted Bengali style. He stopped me and cried out, “That won’t do. One doesn’t read Sanskrit here in the Bengali style. Listen, read like this.” He gave a recital in the Hindi style, that is, with the pronunciation current in the other parts of India.

That was my first lesson in Sanskrit pronounced in the Sanskrit way. Later I have heard the correct Sanskrit accent so often from Sri Aurobindo himself. I have heard him recite from the Veda, from the Upanishads, from the Gita. Today, I too do not read Sanskrit in the Bengali way, even when reading from an article in Bengali.

It was settled that I would join the Gardens and stay there. But I did not give up my rooms at the boarding. My books and papers and furniture — a bedstead and the table-lamp, for there was no electric light in those days — were all left in charge of my roommate, and I paid only an occasional visit. I attended College as well, but at infrequent intervals. College studies could no longer interest me.

It was about this time that I hovered around the newly founded National College in Calcutta for a short while. My aims were a little “dubious”. At the Gardens, there used to be discussions about the bomb, so an idea came to my head: could not the National College offer an opportunity to study

the subject? I thought of reading Chemistry and by joining the Chemistry practicals learn the principles of explosives. At that time the Superintendent (or perhaps Principal) was Satish Chandra Mukerji, Founder-President of the Dawn Society. I had met him several years ago in the rooms of the Society.

Let me then narrate this earlier story in the present connection. I had just come to Calcutta and joined the First Year. Atul Gupta took me to a meeting of the Dawn Society. Benoy Sarkar was there, Radha Kumud Mukerji too was there, I think — not his younger brother Radha Kamal who became one of my class-fellows in the Third Year after he had passed the F.A. examination from Berhampore. Here is a sketch of one of the Society's meetings. Satish Mukerji took the chair. We were about twenty or thirty young men in all. He read out a verse from the Gita: *yad yad vibhūtimat sattvam, śrīmad-ūrjitameva vā*, and gave a short explanation in a few words. Then we formed ourselves into small groups of four or five. We were to discuss what is meant by “*śrīman*” and “*vibhūtimān*”, what is the difference between the two, what do we understand by “*ūrjita*”? Each group was to discuss separately, each member was to say what he had to say, and finally each of us was to write out in the form of an essay our viewpoint. The essays would then be submitted to the chairman for his consideration and judgment. I sat absolutely dumb in that first session, an ignoramus among the learned, like a goose in the midst of swans. (I must have been

about fourteen at that time.) But I did not feel quite at ease in that atmosphere, I had an impression it was all fine talk and dry debate, purely academic, one would say. Satish Chandra had no doubt wanted to use this as a means of forming the character and not merely as an intellectual training, a way of moulding the life, something that had been missing in our college education. I do not know to what extent he succeeded in actual fact.

This was about the middle of 1904. It was three years later, about the middle of 1907, that I met Satish Chandra again. He could not have remembered about me, nor did I remind him. He asked me, “You are a student of literature and philosophy. Why do you want to read Science?” “I have read Physics and Chemistry for my F. A. (that is, Intermediate). I have a special attraction for those subjects, that is why.” However, the matter did not proceed very far, for I was getting more and more engrossed in the life at the Gardens.

Almost about the same period, I had thought of another childish plan, again in connection with the making of a bomb — the thing had so got into my head. I was a student of the Calcutta Presidency College where the great Jagadish Chandra was professor at the time. Here was the idea and it was approved by my leaders — could I not join his laboratory as some kind of an assistant? Then I could carry on research and experiments on bombs. But how to get hold of him? I

thought of Sister Nivedita. She was a great friend of Jagadish Bose and it was easy to catch hold of Nivedita, for she was one among our circle of acquaintances. But the occasion did not arise for this line of advance, for things had been moving fast at the Gardens.

Let me say a few words about our life there. But may I preface it with an amusing incident? I have said that my attendance at College had been getting more and more irregular. This attracted the notice of some of my class-fellows. One day, I found one of their representatives arriving “on deputation” to meet me at the boarding. He began questioning me as an intimate friend and well-wisher with a show of great kindness and affection. “Tell me,” he said, “what has been the matter with you? What makes you keep away from College? Has there been a mishap somewhere? You have been such a good student and so regular in your attendance — what could have come over you all of a sudden?” I could guess what he must have been suspecting: surely it had something to do with my morals — *chercher la femme!* Was that the case here? Complaints and entreaties having failed, he finally sought to console and encourage me with these words, “Don’t you worry. If Calcutta does not suit you, let us leave the place and go somewhere else. The two of us could stay together, and if we worked hard for, say, three or four months, we would get ready for the examination without fail. Our absence from College would make no

difference.” To this I replied in a grave tone, “Very well, I shall think it over.” Lest there should be similar attacks in the future, I practically gave up the boarding.

One would not say that life at the Gardens had settled down to a definite routine yet, for we had just begun. There were about a dozen or fourteen of us in all. There were occasional visitors from outside who would come for a short stay and then go back to their work. Naren Goswami had come like that for a couple of days, so had Bhavabhushan who later became a Sannyasin. We began with readings from the Gita and this became almost a fixed routine where everybody took part. Even the local Inspector of Police expressed a desire to join in these readings with us Brahmacharins. But he had to pay dearly for that. He did not realise that these were no ordinary lessons in the Gita but served as a facade for our preparations for the bomb. For this he was, we heard, later dismissed from the service. The poor fellow had wanted to acquire a bit of spiritual merit which seemed to turn against him.

A beginning however was made to introduce some kind of discipline and organisation. It was decided that the entire group should be formed into two sections, one “civil”, the other “military”. The “military” section was to include the active members and the others were to serve as auxiliaries. The idea originally was to build up an armed force, a regular

army in fact, with its full complement of weapons and equipment and trained by regular drills. The “civil” side was to deal with external work like journalism, propaganda and recruitment. The *Yugantar*, and later the *Navashakti*, became our publicity organs. I was not much attracted by this “civil” side; I wanted to become one of the “military” men. Prafulla, who was one of those dreamy, introvert, intellectual types and a good writer and speaker, took up the “civil” work. They used to say with a touch of humour, no doubt, that he was the Mazzini and I was his Garibaldi. But no provision had yet been made to give this Garibaldi the necessary training in military drill or the use of weapons. So, I had to begin with the science of warfare rather than its art. Barin was at that time writing his series on “The Principles of Modern Warfare” for the *Yugantar*. I too began my study of the subject. I started going to the Imperial Library (now the National Library) in Calcutta for my studies and research. Where could I begin? Well, it was a book called *The Art of War* by the German military expert, Clausewitz, a book where the very first sentence ran like this, “The object of warfare is to destroy the enemy and finish with him.” I am not sure how this helped me add to my knowledge of warfare or my skill in the art of fighting.

During my last days in College, I used to study Mazzini in place of *King John or The Faerie Queene*. One day I suddenly discovered that they had removed my Mazzini from

the shelves of the library, and even the *Life and Death of Socrates* by Plato had disappeared. These books were no doubt supposed to turn the heads of our Indian students!

About this time, I had been several times to my home town Rangpur. There at the local library, I discovered a fine book on the history of secret societies. The book gave the story of how subject nations aspiring for freedom began their work in secret. In it the story of Ireland and Russia had been given a good deal of space. The secret societies in Russia had a system which was rather distinctive. It should have been taken over by us, so I have heard Sri Aurobindo say. They would divide the underground workers into little groups of no more than five. No group could know the others, only those belonging to a particular group would know its own members. Each group had a leader, who alone would know his immediate superior, who was placed in charge of only four or five of these little groups. Similarly, the leader of the higher group would have dealings with the person next higher in rank who would be in charge of the bigger groups, and so on, right up to the topmost man. Such a system was necessary, because if someone got caught, he could not implicate the entire organisation but only a handful of his acquaintances. One of the main instruments in the hands of the police or the government for detecting a conspiracy is the confession extracted from the persons caught, whether by torture, temptation, sheer bravado or whatever other means. Under

that system, no one could know anybody except the few members of his own group with whom he came into immediate contact through his work, nor could he know anything about the general plan of work; he had to carry out only the part assigned to him.

At the Rangpur Library I came across another book, namely, Gibbons famous *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. I ran through the lengthy volumes from end to end with tremendous enthusiasm and added a great deal to my learning and knowledge. I had a hope that the book might throw some light on how to bring about the “decline and fall” of the British rule in India. I regret much help did not come that way.

Now, to come back to the Gardens and our organisational system. Nothing could be arranged by way of an armed force, for our work itself took another turn. A military organisation now gave place to a terrorist organisation. In the earlier stages, we did not have much faith in terrorist methods, for, as we had seen about Russia, this path led only to mutual assassinations; murder and revenge seemed to follow in an endless succession, leading to no final issue. That is why we had decided on the military solution. To that end, our efforts had been directed towards forming a new military force on the one hand and on the other towards sowing the seeds of revolt among the British Indian troops. I remember a military



police force stationed at Rangpur where the commandant had been won over to a large extent, although I could not say how it would have turned out at the end.

In the event, it was none of these methods that brought us independence. Indian independence has come in another way, the inscrutable way of Providence.

As I was saying, we gave up militarism and turned towards the terrorist methods. There had awakened in the country a keen demand and aspiration: Must we bear in silence and give no answer to this tyranny and oppression that seems to go on increasing day by day? So, we started getting ready for a fitting reply. It brought in the first place a greater courage to the general public, though it remained doubtful if it helped relieve the oppression. And secondly, it gave some satisfaction to men. Thus we directed our efforts to shooting at the Lieutenant Governor, derailing his train, and assassinating tyrants in the official ranks. Governor Andrew Fraser, the District Magistrates Allen and Kingsford, Mayor Tardivel of Chandernagore, these became the targets of the terrorists. The members of the Maniktolla Garden group were directly connected with these activities. But there is one thing to be noticed about these attempts that at least in the earlier stages almost all of them failed, with only one or two exceptions.

One of the activities of the Gardens, apart from the attempts to manufacture bombs, had been to procure and distribute guns and rifles and pistols. Purchase, theft and loot were the three methods of procurement. In this manner one might gather materials for terrorist purposes, but it could hardly meet the needs of an armed force. At the Gardens there was some shooting practice too, with pistols. The trunk of a mango tree had been riddled with bullets — the police could very easily find that out later. This reminds me of Prafulla Chaki. He used to say taking a revolver in his hand, “I for one am not going to live on if they get hold of me. I shall neither be tortured by the police nor will I let their baits to confess tempt me. Look, this is the way I am going to finish myself.” He would then open wide his mouth, push in the revolver muzzle and press the trigger with his fingers, adding, “This is the one sure way. In the other methods, one merely wounds oneself, very often with no serious danger to life. But it is much more risky to live on after getting wounded, isn’t it?” Prafulla committed suicide after the Muzzaffarpur bomb affair in exactly the way he had rehearsed — I should not say “suicide”, for it was really an act of martyrdom.

Now let me come out with some of my own exploits. I did not, as I have said, want to be one of the law-abiding “civilians”; my aim was to be a “military” man with his law of the bomb. But first I must prove my mettle in that line. So, they set me a test. I was to carry a pistol and deliver it to a

gentleman in Jalpaiguri. You seem to laugh at this instance of my “military” ability. But perhaps you cannot now imagine what it meant in those days to carry a real pistol. The police had its secret agents all over the place always on the lookout for victims. If you happened to be a young man, if you dressed in a manner even slightly out of the ordinary, if there was anything the least suspicious about your movements that might attract attention, it was enough. If the police came and searched you and found a lethal weapon like a revolver in your possession, you would get at least seven years — of that you might rest assured. Nevertheless, I managed to carry the weapon in a perfectly easy and natural manner all the way to North Bengal and reached it to the address given. This was the way in which they used to distribute weapons for future use to the different centres at various places.

Now that I had passed the first test almost without effort, there came a second hurdle to cross. Will you be shocked to hear that I was to join a gang of dacoits and take part in a real dacoity? “Very well,” I said to myself, for everything is fair in love and war — although I did feel somewhat uncomfortable even without my knowing it, for there was something about the whole affair that was not palatable to me. But this had been decided upon as one of our methods of collecting funds, for the money that came from gifts was not sufficient, and people rather shied of making gifts for the work of such secret societies. So we had to fix on loot. The

mail runner was to be waylaid and his bags looted, somewhat far away in a place in the Khulna district. We left in a body and put up with a friend. There we had to spend a couple of days arranging to stitch up the bags, for the money had to be carried back in bags, you see. But for some reason or other, the plan fell through and I for one heaved a sigh of relief. However there was one thing I had gained out of all this. It was a glimpse I had of the river Kapotakshi, no longer limpid like the “pigeon’s eye” though, for it was all cluttered up with weeds — on whose banks stood the birthplace of Michael Madhusudan and the mango grove where he used to play about as a child. I did feel as if the breath of his poetry still lingered about the atmosphere.

The household arrangements at our Gardens were of the most simple, natural and unpretentious sort, the aim being to avoid all unnecessary complications and save our time and labour. The cooking was done perhaps only once a day and almost every day it was *khichari*. For the second meal, something readymade bought from the market was found enough. We did the cooking ourselves and washed the dishes. The dishes and utensils were not of brass; they were all earthenware vessels, I believe. And the washing was done in the waters of the pond. What kind of pond it was could only be described by a Kalidasa, but perhaps some idea, could be had from Bankimchandra’s description of the Bhima tank: “the dark shades of the palms dancing to the rhythms of the

dark waters” and so on. That is to say, it had more weeds and mud than water, not to speak of the fish and the frogs and other animal species, including a fair complement of serpents and things. But to us it seemed good enough and we used to take our dips there with great glee. In fact I had my first lessons in swimming in that very pool. There were actually two pools and not one, and it would be difficult to decide which was the more “untouchable” of the two. The gardens around were in an equally poor condition. They were no gardens at all, for all was primitive jungle, a tangle of shrubs and trees and creepers, with all sorts of insects and reptiles roaming within it. And the house where we lived was in ruins.<sup>1</sup>

But in spite of all, the place was absolutely quiet and silent, one reason being that it was practically outside the city limits. The life we lived in such surroundings could be compared with that of nomads. The strange thing is that despite such irregular habits, or rather the habitual irregularities of our life there, we never fell ill. The abundance

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<sup>1</sup> I went there once later. It was no longer the old Gardens but a ploughed field. There was no trace of the jungle left, it had all been dug up. The pools too had been drained and filled and the house razed to the ground. The British authorities had dug up every inch of the area to see if any weapons might have been kept hidden anywhere. I found in the case of the *Yugantar* office also, which stood next to the Medical College, that it had been pulled down and there was only a little plot of open ground left in its place.

of vitality and the enthusiasm and joy kept at bay all attacks of disease. It was very similar to the kind of life we lived here in Pondicherry during the first few years. Motilal, when he saw us then, exclaimed in utter surprise, “What! Is this the way you live? And you keep him (Sri Aurobindo) too like this?” Perhaps some day I may give you a picture of that life of ours, that life of utter freedom which looked so rustic in the eyes of “civilised” people.

Let me end this story today with something nice and sweet. It was during my stay at the Gardens that I had my first meeting and interview with Sri Aurobindo. Barin had asked me to go and see him, saying that Sri Aurobindo would be coming to see the Gardens and that I should fetch him. Maniktolla was in those days at the far end of North Calcutta and Sri Aurobindo lived with Raja Subodh Mullick near Wellington Square in the South Calcutta area. I went by tram and it was about four in the afternoon when I reached there. I asked the doorman at the gate to send word to Mr. Ghose — this was how he used to be called in those days at the place — saying that I had come from Barin of the Maniktolla Gardens. As I sat waiting in one of the rooms downstairs, Sri Aurobindo came down, stood near me and gave me an inquiring look. I said, in Bengali, “Barin has sent me. Would it be possible for you to come to the Gardens with me now?” He answered very slowly, pausing on each syllable separately — it seemed he had not yet got used to speaking Bengali —

and said, “Go and tell Barin, I have not yet had my lunch. It will not be possible to go today.” So, that was that. I did not say a word, I did my *namaskar* and came away. This was my first happy meeting with him, my first darsan and interview.

### 3

## Muraripukur

### 2

Now I come to the last phase of our life at Maniktolla Gardens, when we turned towards terroristic activities like the manufacture of bombs, collecting pistols and rifles and making good use of them. The first chapter had already begun with the *Yugantar* newspaper.

As we took up these revolutionary activities, we discovered that it was not easy to carry on this kind of secret work unless there was, common in the country as a whole, a keen desire and hope for freedom. What was needed was a favourable atmosphere in which the revolutionaries could get the desired sympathy and support. One could expect nothing but opposition from a people cowed down by fear, shut up within its narrow selfishness and wholly preoccupied with its dull routine. That is why Sri Aurobindo started his daily newspaper, *Bande Mataram*, which was the first to declare in clear language that what we wanted was the freedom of India, a total freedom, a freedom untrammelled by any kind of domination by the British. Its aim was to carry to the ears and hearts of our people a message of hope and faith and enthusiasm, a message that spoke of independence full and absolute, not the kind that looked to England for protection



and help, and such independence too not as a distant possibility of the remote future, but as an immediate gain of the morrow.

Even so, *Bande Mataram* had to keep within the letter of the law; its advocacy of freedom had to follow as far as possible the lines of peace, its path had to be that of Passive Resistance. But *Yugantar* shed off all the masks. It was the first to declare openly for an armed revolt and spoke in terms of regular warfare. It wrote out its message in words of fire and spread it to the four corners of the land. Balthazar, the king of Babylon, had once seen similar writings on the wall of his hall of feasting, words that spoke of the imminent doom of his empire. To the country and its youth the *Yugantar* gave its initiation of fire for nearly a couple of years. It was only after the *Yugantar* group decided that the time had now come for action and not propaganda alone that there came to be established the centre at Maniktolla Gardens in Muraripukur. The section entrusted with real work and the people concerned with propaganda were to form two distinct groups; one was to work in secret, the other out in the open. Hence the work of *Yugantar* was entrusted to the propaganda group. The gentleman who took charge was Taranath Roy. Those who had hitherto been on the staff of the paper left it and joined the Maniktolla Gardens for intensive training and work. It was however agreed that here too there would be two groups, one for regular work and the other for propaganda.

Only, the propaganda here would be of a different kind, for here it would not be possible to speak openly of armed revolt as that would draw the attention of the authorities to the regular workers. It was therefore decided to have a paper in Bengali with a policy analogous to that of *Bande Mataram*. A paper named *Navashakti* was already there, owned and conducted by Sri Manoranjan Guhathakurta. It had a house rented on Grey Street in North Calcutta. An understanding was reached between the parties so that the spirit and letter of *Yugantar* could continue in and through *Navashakti*. The house was built more or less on the pattern of the one we had later at Shyampur. There were two flats. The one in front was used as the *Navashakti* office; Sri Aurobindo occupied the other with his wife, Mrinalini.

A word about Manoranjan Guhathakurta will not be out of place here. In that epoch Aswinikumar Dutt and Manoranjan Guhathakurta of Barisal were two of the mighty pillars of nationalism. But whatever their achievements as political leaders and selfless patriots, as writers and orators, it was their greatness of character that mattered more. By a great character I mean one in whom there has awakened in a certain measure and manifested to some extent the inner being and the indwelling spirit; this is what Vivekananda used to call the awakening of the Brahman in the individual. I had come to know Sri Manoranjan Guhathakurta personally and I had been to his house in Giridih and stayed with him more than

once. Giridih being not very far from Deoghar, he was aware that we dabbled in the bomb. He was not only aware of it, he also gave us all his help and sympathy. It had even been suggested that a factory for the making of bombs might be tried somewhere around the mica pits he owned in that region. His eldest son Satyendra had been a schoolmate and friend of Barin and the two were practically co-workers. This family had helped Barin a good deal by their offers of money and advice. But what I had in mind was not these external things but an inner life. Manoranjan Guhathakurta had an inner life, a life of sadhana His wife in particular was known for her sadhana. In his eyes the service of the country was an occasion and a means for the service of God. But his saintliness or sadhana did not stand in the way of his strength of character. In him there was a fine blend of strength and sweetness.

Manoranjan's son Chittaranjan became for a time a centre of great excitement and violent agitation in those days. There was a session of the Bengal Provincial Conference at Barisal which was attended by all the leaders like Sri Aurobindo and Bepin Pal. But there came a clash with the Government, the police raided the pavilion and attacked the procession with *lathis*. The boy Chittaranjan went on shouting "*Bande Mataram*" as the police beat him mercilessly. He fell down wounded and covered with blood but he did not cease his "*Bande Mataram*". This raised a furious storm of protest

throughout the country, which gave an opening to the terrorists too.

This shining example of non-violent resistance occurred long before the Gandhian era. To us who were in favour of armed resistance this kind of forbearance seemed intolerable. When, after this incident, the journalists and the poets began to sing in chorus, of “Barisal of glorious virtue”, we could not help adding with a little sting, “thanks to those beatings”.

I have said that Sri Aurobindo came to occupy with Mrinalini a portion of the house on Grey Street. It was here that they arrested him later. The *Navashakti* too did not last long. In the course of their search, the police discovered in one of the rooms occupied by Sri Aurobindo a lump of clay, which Mrinalini had brought from Dakshineswar as a sacred relic. But the suspicions of the police were not to be allayed so easily. They thought it might as well be some kind of raw material for the manufacture of bombs, so they had it sent to their chemical laboratories for chemical analysis!

Now let me come to the story of this final rounding up. For some time past almost all of us had been noticing one thing. Whenever we went out on any business, to shop or to visit people, somebody seemed to be following us, from a little distance, no doubt, but it was clear enough that we were being watched. When we stopped, he too would stop; if we tarried a little, he too kept himself occupied on some pretext

or other. We talked about this among ourselves and made the great discovery that this must be what they called spying, and that we must henceforth take extra precautions. So far, we had never had this kind of trouble. Ours had been a secret society only in name, for the whole thing was out in the open. Anybody could enter the Gardens from anywhere at any time and move about the place, for it was an open compound without any fencing or walls. That is why on the morning of our arrest, a couple of boys from the neighbourhood also found themselves under arrest along with us. In piteous tones they implored the policemen, “We are innocent, sirs; we came here only for a morning stroll.” The poor innocents!

The evening before our arrest, it was already getting dark and we were thinking of retiring for the night, when some voices came to our ears in a rather peculiar way, and lanterns were seen moving about in the dark. “Who are you? What do you do here?” the voices said. We did our best to give evasive replies. “Very well, then, we come again tomorrow morning and will know more about it.” With these words, the strangers seemed to make their exit. Were these warning voices? In spite of our dull wits, we could understand at least this much, that things were now getting rather serious and that we must take our precautions. The first thing we decided was that we should leave the place before daybreak and disperse. Upen told us later that he had wanted us to disperse immediately and make no further delay. But that was obviously not to be,

for it was destined that we should pass through the experience of jail. Nevertheless, we did start doing something at once; that was to remove all traces, by burning or hiding away or whatever other means, of anything that might raise a suspicion against us. The first thing that came to our heads was this: There were two or three rifles in the house where Sri Aurobindo lived. They were in the custody of Abinash (Abinash Bhattacharya) who lived with him and looked after Sri Aurobindo's affairs. Those rifles must be removed at once, they could on no account be left there. Had the police found them on Sri Aurobindo's premises, it might have been more difficult to secure his release. The rifles were brought back, they were packed in two boxes bound with iron hoops, together with the few revolvers we had and all the materials for the making of bombs, and hidden away underground. Next, getting hold of all our papers that might contain names and addresses and plans, we set fire to them. This went on far into the night. We could not, however, burn everything. A number of names were still left intact and with the help of these clues, the police subsequently searched a number of other places and made several arrests. Had I been able to make good my escape then, it would not have been difficult for the police to trace me through my address; there was the Imperial Library card issued in my name and it gave the address of my Calcutta boarding, 44/3 Harrison Road.

We went to bed after doing away with all we could, in the hope that we might run away by daybreak. But the running away did not materialise. In the early hours of the morning — it was not yet light — we were awakened by an eerie sort of noise. We sat up in bed. But what was all this going on? Shadowy forms were moving about the place, there was a clatter and a creaking of boots. Suddenly out of the dark silence, a conversation arose:

“You are under arrest. Your name?”

“Barindra Kumar Ghose.”

“Arabinda Ghose?”

“No, Barindra Kumar Ghose.”

“Well, we’ll see.”

The next thing I knew was a hand clapping on my shoulders. “Come,” said a voice.

Several people have expressed great surprise at this facile surrender on our part, as though we were goody-goody boys, innocent as lambs. Why, it has been asked, did we not give them fight and take a few lives before we surrendered? But our aims were of another kind, our path, our very policy was of another character. Our goal was not to die a martyr’s death. We wanted to be soldiers. The martyr is happy if he can give up his life. But the duty of the soldier is not to give his life but to take the lives of others. The soldier seeks the maximum

protection for himself, he goes under cover, and he seeks to kill as many of the enemy as he can. He does not think it enough that he should only sacrifice himself. No doubt there comes a time when it is no longer possible to find a shelter or go under cover; it may not even be desirable. Then one throws off one's masks, comes out in the open and acts in the way so vividly described in these lines of Rabindranath:

There began a scramble  
As to who should be the first to give up his life;  
That was the only hurry.

Or else, the way the Light Brigade of England acted at Balaclava in the Crimean War:

Into the jaws of Death,  
Into the mouth of Hell,  
Rode the valiant six hundred.

The Japanese soldiers too, in one of their encounters with the Russians in the Russo-Japanese War, did not wait to build a bridge over the ramparts of a ditch; they made a solid bridge with the pile of their dead as they jumped in one after the other and let the army march over their bodies. To save oneself does not mean that one should, like Nandalal of the comic skit, take a vow to “keep oneself alive at any cost, for the good of the country and all”, or live by the bourgeois doctrine that one



should always save oneself somehow, even by the sacrifice of one's wife, *ātmānam satatam rakṣet dārairapi dhanairapi*.

That is why we used to tease Paresh Mallick and called him a descendant of Nandalal. Have I told you the story? He was once deputed to present Kingsford, the Presidency Magistrate, with a live bomb packed in the form of a book; the bomb was to explode as soon as the book was opened. Paresh went in the garb of an Englishman's bearer. We looked out every day for an account in the papers of some serious accident to Kingsford. But nothing happened. He seemed to be attending court regularly and was apparently quite safe and sound. So we had to ask Paresh at last if he had in fact reached the bomb to its destination or whether he had thrown it away somewhere to save his own skin. However, the book-bomb was found later among a pile of books belonging to the Magistrate. It had been lying there safely, unopened, and caused no harm. People were demanding vengeance upon Kingsford because he had sentenced a young student, Sushil, to flogging, simply because the boy was involved in a tussle with the police. That was an occasion for us terrorists. Sushil later on joined the revolutionary group at Maniktolla.

The police, on more than one occasion, suggested to Sri Aurobindo, so that he might feel flattered or perhaps even get excited and be moved to act according to their wishes, that a strong and truthful and straightforward man like him would certainly not adopt a false pose or act in secret; that he had the

courage to do openly whatever he considered to be his duty or the right thing to do; that he would never care to run away and hide himself; and that whatever he did he would frankly acknowledge and say without hesitation, “Yes, it is I who have done it.” But Sri Aurobindo was not to be trapped like that. He held that far more important than any question of personal honour or indignity, or a parading of one’s capacity or virtue, was the work to be done and its success. He would cite the example of Sri Krishna in the Mahabharata story; Sri Krishna had no intention of being caught by Jarasandha and he fled to Dwarka in order to make ready for the adversary. That is why Sri Aurobindo did not consider a retreat to be a bad thing always. “We live to fight another day”: this should be the motto of the soldier. That is why he left standing instructions with Barin and his group that they were not to admit anything immediately if they were caught by the police. They should keep their mouths shut and make whatever statements were necessary only when the time came at a later stage. It is however true that Barin and some of the senior members of the group did make a full confession soon after their arrest. But they did that purposely, with a view to save the party by the sacrifice of some of its members. They had hoped that by taking on themselves all the responsibility, the others might be proved to have been innocent, so that instead of all of us dying together, some might still live on to carry the work forward.

Nevertheless, we were all arrested in a body. The police made us stand in a line under the strict watch of an armed guard. They kept us standing the whole day with hardly anything to eat. Only towards the evening, some of them were kind enough to get us some fried stuff from the market. Our throats were so dry by the time that we would have gladly taken a sip out of that famous pond of ours. In the evening, the order came, "Follow us." But follow where? I somehow had the feeling that here was the end: "Remember, O soul, the day of the Great Departure." I could not conceive at the moment that a case would have to be framed against us, that there must take place a trial and there might be a counsel to defend us. I thought on the contrary that they would take us straight to Fort William and finish us off with a firing squad! I was in fact getting myself ready for that. But things turned out rather differently. The British Government could not be so heartless after all. We were taken to the lock-up at the Lal Bazar police station. There they kept us for nearly two days and nights. This was perhaps the most trying time of all. We had no bath, no food, not even a wink of sleep. The whole lot of us were herded together like beasts and shut up in a cell. The police showed by their manner how rude and bitter they could be. Then, after having been through all this, we were taken to Alipore Jail one evening. There we were received with great kindness and courtesy by the gentleman in charge. He said, "Now there will be no more of that harassment by

the police. You will find it quite comfortable here.” And he had us served immediately with hot cooked rice. This was our first meal in three days, and it tasted so nice and sweet that we felt as if we were in heaven.

## 4

### Deoghar

The scene was Deoghar, though not exactly the town itself. About five miles before you reach the town, there is the Jesidih Junction on the main railway line. Nearly a mile from there, close to the railway line there was a house with only a ground floor and quite neat and clean on the whole. All around were open fields — not the green meadows of Bengal but the barren red moorlands of Bihar. Not entirely unpleasant scenery though, for it breathed an atmosphere of purity and peace and silence. A little farther away there stood a larger two-storeyed mansion, perhaps the comfortable holiday retreat of some rich man.

The time was towards the end of 1907 and the beginning of 1908. I was about seventeen or eighteen and had just finished with my college life.

The *dramatis personae* were (1) Barindra Kumar Ghose, (2) Ullaskar Dutt, (3) Prafulla Kumar Chakravarty, (4) Bibhuti Bhusan Sarkar, and (5) Nolini Kanta Gupta.

The plot was to manufacture bombs. Hitherto, there had been only preliminary investigations and initial experiments and efforts. Now Ullaskar came out with his Eureka. “All is

ready,” he said, “now there is going to be a real test. We have to demonstrate with a live bomb in action.”

But here I must add that although we had made the preparation of bombs our first object when we chose this lonely and out-of-the-way place, we were not entirely heartless men, that is, atheistic and given wholly to a materialistic philosophy. It had been part of our plan to devote some time to the cultivation of an inner life too in that solitude. I remember how we would get up an hour before sunrise and, sitting down in that calm atmosphere in a meditative pose, we would recite aloud with deep fervour and joy the *mantra* of the Upanishad:

*tīleṣu tailaṃ dadhanīva sarpir  
āpaḥ srotaḥsu araṇīṣu cāgniḥ  
evam ātma ātmani gr̥hyate 'sau  
satyena enam tapasā yo 'nupaśyati.*

“As one gets oil out of oilseeds, as one gets butter out of curds, as one gets water out of the stream, as one gets fire out of wood, even so one seizes the self out of the self, one who pursues it in truth and *tapasyā*.”

Who could say at that hour that this was a place of the manufacture of bombs? It would not have been far out to call it an Ashram, “the abode of quiet joy”, in the Kalidasian phrase, *śānta-rasāspadam-āśramam-idam*.

And it was precisely because of this that Barin got Lele Maharaj down here for our initiation and training in sadhana, the discipline of yoga, the same Lele who had been of particular help to Sri Aurobindo at a certain stage of his own sadhana. But it was our bad luck that the whole thing misfired.

When Lele Maharaj came to know that we had accepted the cult of the bomb, he raised an objection. Sadhana and the bomb, he said, did not go well together and the kind of violent rajasic action we had in view was not at all conducive to the purification of the heart. Besides, he added, although the freedom of India was a desirable thing, was indeed desirable and necessary for all, it would come about by another method, it would come inevitably and in a peaceful way, there would be no need for bloodshed. We got disgusted and smiled at him with incredulity and even perhaps in derision. Englishmen would pack up their belongings and leave of their own accord without as much as a grumble, like thorough gentlemen — this looked rather like a fairy tale if not “a tale told by an idiot”. We were no Vaishnava devotees. We were Tantriks, worshippers of Kali. Our chosen deity was the Goddess of Death incarnate, with her garland of skulls. Ours was the heroes’ worship of strength. We had long been singing the proud refrain:

Have the hero-sons, O men,  
Adorned the Mother’s forehead

With the blood-red mark?

There was also a time when we had been proclaiming loudly at meetings and shouting to the four quarters:

Counting your beads and doing austerities,  
All your yoga and prayers and worship,  
Oblations and sacrifice and honouring images  
of the gods, —  
Nothing of this will now avail in the least.  
Make of the arrow's sheath and the sword thy cult,  
For the olden days are no more.  
India will not be saved, it cannot,  
Through the worship of the gods.  
Unsheath now the sword,  
For these demons are not as of yore.

Lele Maharaj threatened us with another warning, “If you do not give up this, you will not only not succeed but are bound to meet with danger, if not catastrophe.” How true his prophecy was we all know from the concrete evidence of what came to pass.

However, we did not confine our studies to religious books alone, we had with us some secular literature as well. It was precisely at this period that a collection of Matthew Arnold's poems came to my hands. The book belonged to Sri Aurobindo and must have been brought along by Barin. That



Sri Aurobindo had studied it minutely was evident from the book itself, for he had marked in red the passages or lines which he had particularly liked. I still remember a couple of lines that had the good luck to get a red mark:

Strew on her roses, roses,  
And never a spray of yew!

The simplicity of feeling, the deep pathos, the fine felicity of rhythm in these lines had stirred my young heart too a great deal. That was my first introduction to Matthew Arnold. The greatness of the poet-laureate Tennyson had already reached the ears of even the ordinary student at college, but Matthew Arnold and Browning were still unknown.

All this, however, is quite beside the point. Let me come back to the story.

The bomb was ready, I said, a real live bomb. It was mainly Ullaskar's handiwork, we others had acted as assistants. It was now decided that the testing would be done on top of a hill known as Dighiriya — it was not much of a hill but only a low range of hillocks — across the railway line, beyond the level crossing. (There was an amusing incident in the Sessions Court in connection with the man at this level crossing about which I may say something another day.) Of an afternoon, the five of us made for the hill. It fell to my lot to carry the bomb. I carried it along with due care no doubt,

but I had no idea of the risks I carried. We were quite ignorant and inexperienced at the time. It was nothing short of a miracle that we had no accident, the way I carried the thing; I realised that only a little later.

We broke through the thickets and chose a spot right on top of the hill. There we came across a huge boulder rising steep and straight on one side about breast-high and on the other sloping gradually to a distance of some ten or twelve yards. The plan was that Prafulla would take his shelter behind the steep and abrupt side as he threw the bomb at the sloping rock and sit down behind the slab as soon as he made the throw, so that no splinters might hit him after the explosion, as the bomb was to explode only on the slope by friction of the impact. Ullas was to stand by Prafulla to see that everything got on well and both were to duck behind the slab right after the throw. I climbed up a tree a little farther away so as to have a clear view of the whole scene. Barin and Bibhuti took their positions around. As we lay in wait, — my eyes were glued to the boulder, — suddenly I saw a spark of fire flash out over there with a puff of smoke and such a terrific noise! The whole sky seemed to be getting broken up into bits, and waves of sound went echoing forth from one end to the other as if in a hundred simultaneous claps of thunder. Never again have I heard a noise like that. I was of course beside myself with excitement and joy. With great glee

I climbed down the tree and ran towards the boulder, shouting at the top of my voice, “Successful, successful!”

But how is this? What is this? What a gruesome spectacle! Prafulla lay limp on Ollas’s chest, Ullas held him in his arms. Slowly the body was laid down. One side of the forehead was broken through and a portion of the brain coming out. It was an unbearable sight. We sat around and no one spoke a word. At last Barin said, “It’s all over, there is not a hope.” The body lay motionless, showed no signs of life. The eyes were closed, the face looked serene.

This is how it happened. We had thought that the explosive would catch fire only after the bomb touched the ground and rubbed against a hard surface. But instead of that, the explosive had been so easily inflammable that it caught fire as soon as it came into contact with air on being thrown up. I said I had been carrying it in my hands; it might have caught fire and exploded even by that slight swing. That it did not was my sheer good luck.

Now the problem was what to do next. What was to be done with the body? Burn it? or give it a burial? To bury it was out of the question, for to dig a hole in that hard stone was impossible. Give it a cremation by lighting a fire in the bush? But that might attract people and the news might spread in the neighbouring villages. Barin said, “We need not do anything, let us go away leaving it as it is. This is a field of

battle. Our first soldier has given up his body in the battlefield, this is our first casualty.”

So far, our eyes had all been riveted on the corpse. And now suddenly someone cried, “Ullas too has been wounded.” His clothing was riddled with holes and covered with marks of blood all over. We removed the clothing and examined him as far as we could. Barin said, “Our first task now is to look after him. Who is gone is gone. Now Ullas must be saved. We must therefore hurry back. There is no time now to discuss what is to be done with the dead body. We have to return to Calcutta this very evening and consult the doctor.” There was a special doctor, the renowned Indu Mallick, so far as I remember, who looked after us terrorists.

We started down the hill with not a word on our lips, our throats all choked with emotion, our minds stunned. The picture of the English poet came to mind: “Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note.” I once blurted out with a suppressed feeling, “We were five when we came, only four are now returning.” Barin gave me a rebuke, “No sentimentality, please.”

As we walked down, I wondered if the frightful noise had not reached the people around. There was of course nothing like a human habitation anywhere in the neighbourhood. But people did come from the surrounding country to gather fuel in the thickets. However, nothing untoward happened and we

returned safely. Barin and Ullas left for Calcutta that very night.

Early next morning I looked towards Dighiriya and seemed to see some kites and vultures flying over the hill. That evening, or perhaps it was the next morning, Upen arrived from Calcutta with Barin. Ullas was all right, they said, there was nothing to fear about his wounds. Upen wanted to have a look at the place. We started again for that holy spot, and arrived on the scene. Even from a distance we could see the body lying exactly as we had left it, dressed exactly in the same way; there was no change whatever. Nor was there any sign of decomposition, on this the third day. We went back just as we had come, leaving the body as it was.

It was decided to end this particular episode here. Lest the police should get scent, it would be wiser to break up camp and get away. Whatever materials we had in our possession for the manufacture of bombs were packed up in a couple of trunks and dispatched to the shop of a friend in Deoghar. The trunks were left hidden among other things in the godown at the back of the shop. What happened to them afterwards I do not know.

Before leaving for good, we felt a desire to have a last look at Dighiriya hill. It was the fourth day after the event. We climbed to the spot. But how strange! Where was the body? There was not a trace of it anywhere. We searched

about here and there but did not find even a shred of clothing. Could it have been carried away by beasts? But without leaving the slightest trace? The whole thing remained a mystery.

Afterwards, many kinds of rumours got afloat. Some, they said, had seen him in the streets of Calcutta — a Sannyasin was supposed to have come across the dead body and revived it — and so on. To set my doubts at rest, I once asked Sri Aurobindo if there could be any truth in these stories, and what exactly had happened to Prafulla. Sri Aurobindo said, “All that is sheer myth. Prafulla is really dead.”

Let me end this Deoghar episode with a little picture that still sticks in my memory. Within about a mile from our camp there was a village called Rohini. There in a garden-house — it was almost covered with jungle when we saw the place — still lived Sri Aurobindo’s mother, Swarnalata Devi. The garden was full of various kinds of trees and shrubs. The house was a large-sized cottage, though the walls and flooring were of masonry work; it had an old dilapidated look for want of repairs. The local people called it the Memsahib’s *kothi*, the Lady’s house. Everybody called Sri Aurobindo’s mother a Memsahib or fashionable lady. At that time, she was out of her mind and always remained shut up in her rooms. We passed several times through the gardens by the house, but she could not be seen.

The holy legend of sacred Deoghar would not be complete if I were not to mention in this context the name of Sri Aurobindo's maternal grandfather, Rishi Rajnarayan, who is called the Grandfather of Indian Nationalism. We saw the house where he once lived, where Sri Aurobindo often used to come. It stood in an open compound, which may have been a bed of flowers once; now it was a white mansion where no one lived, left lonely as a dream.

## 5

### Shyampukur

On coming out of jail, Sri Aurobindo found shelter in the house of his maternal uncle, Krishna Kumar Mitra; the place was known as the *Sanjivant* office. Bejoy Nag and myself had got our release along with him, but we could not yet make up our minds as to what we should do next; we were still wandering about like floating weeds. But both of us used to go and see him every afternoon.

About this time, Sri Aurobindo went out on tour for a short while in the Assam area in connection with political work and he took the two of us along. I shall speak about that on another occasion. On return from the tour he told me one day that he had decided to bring out two weekly papers, one in English and the other in Bengali. The premises were ready, the arrangements were practically complete and we could both of us come and stay there. He asked me if I had any practice in writing. I said that I had never written anything beyond college essays, but I could try. "Then get hold of an English newspaper tomorrow," he said, "pick out some of the important items of news, write them out in Bengali and bring them to me. I shall see." I did that the next day. He seemed to be pleased on seeing my writing and said that it would do. He gave me the task of editing the news columns of his Bengali



paper *Dharma*. Half of it would be articles and the rest would be news. Needless to say, I accepted the offer. He added that for this work he would give me a stipend of ten rupees per month and that I should not take that amiss. For, he explained, this was for him a matter of principle as he did not consider it fair to exact work without giving its due reward. That was why he offered this token payment and I should accept it as part of my pocket-expenses. This was the first time I was going to earn any money.

So we came to stay at Shyampukur, on the *Dharma* and *Karmayogin* premises. There were two flats or sections. In the front part were set up the press and the office, and at the back, in the inner apartments, so to say, we set up our household. There were three or four rooms on the first floor and downstairs there were the kitchen and stores and things.

Sri Aurobindo used to come here every afternoon from his uncle's place. He would first look to the work in the office and then come to our rooms. Till about ten in the evening he would spend his time with us.

It is here that our true education began, and perhaps, nay certainly, our initiation too. Three of us were permanent residents, Bejoy Nag, Suresh Chakravarti and myself. But Ramchandra Majumdar Biren Ghosh and Saurin Bose turned up practically every day. Saurin, brother-in-law of Sri Aurobindo later came with us to Pondicherry and stayed here

many long years. A frequent visitor was Ganen Tagore of the Ramakrishna Mission who acted as the link with Sister Nivedita. There were a few others who came once in a while. Sri Aurobindo had his own novel method of education. It did not proceed by the clock, nor according to a fixed routine or curriculum; that is, there was nothing of the school about it. It went simply and naturally along lines that seemed to do without rules. The student did not realise that he was being educated at all. Is there not something very similar about his sadhana? Of fixed rules and processes determined in advance there is none; it moves by different paths and along different lines, depending on the time and circumstances; its form and movement vary according to the individual seeker. Even the seeker hardly seems to realise that he is doing any sadhana. Does a fish living in water know that it has learnt to swim?

By giving me the work of editing the news Sri Aurobindo made me slowly grow into a journalist underwriter. Next there came naturally an urge to write articles. Sri Aurobindo was pleased with the first Bengali article I wrote. Only, he made a slight change at one place, I remember. I had written, "In the past, India held the illusionist view. But in the present age, she cannot afford to reject life and the physical world; these she must accept." He corrected the first phrase to "At a particular stage in our past". This first article of mine was published in the eleventh issue of *Dharma* dated November 15, 1909. I was twenty then. Some of other articles of mine

came out in *Dharma* afterwards. My writings in English began much later.

Now we started collecting a few books. At the very outset Sri Aurobindo suggested two titles: Carlyles *French Revolution* and Greens *History of the English People*, perhaps in consideration of our taste for history and revolution. Arrangements soon were made, all of a sudden and it seemed as if by accident, for our coaching in Hindi as well. A Marwari gentleman who used to help Sri Aurobindo in his journalistic work had a Pundit as his protégé to whom he had to pay seventy or seventy-five rupees per month as an honorarium. So he asked Sri Aurobindo if instead of the Pundit being paid for nothing he could be made to give some service. It was accordingly agreed that the Pundit would come and teach us Hindi for an hour every day. He was a Brahmin of the rigid orthodox type, but once in the grip of iconoclasts like us, his orthodox habits were soon broken to bits. For instance, he was made to drink water from taps in place of holy Ganges water brought from the river by a carrier; he even accepted to eat sweets obtained from the market instead of living entirely on his own cooking. Hindi has now embarked on its career of empire and perhaps it was in anticipation of this that Sri Aurobindo wanted to get us ready from that early date. But the Muse of Hindi did not prosper much in our hands.

It was here at Shyampukur itself that Suresh Chandra had his first inspiration for poetry.

One day, in the midst of all this, Sri Aurobindo asked me all of a sudden if I had any desire to learn languages — any of the European languages, French for example. I was a little surprised at the question, for I had not observed in me any such ambition or inclination. None the less, I replied that I would like to. That is how I began my French. He said, “At the National College (National Council of Education, now Jadavpur University) they have got the books I loaned to them. You take this note from me. They will give you a volume of Molière’s Works.” I started right away with a play from this volume, *L’Avare*. At several places in the margins he wrote out in his own hand the English equivalents for my convenience. I still possess that volume with the marginal notes in his handwriting.

About this time Sri Aurobindo himself began a study of the Tamil language with a Tamil gentleman who used to come to the *Karmayogin* office. A rather amusing incident has been narrated in this connection by Suresh Chakravarti. You should read Suresh Chakravarti’s account along with mine in order to get a more complete picture of our life at Shyampukur. His *Reminiscences* (in Bengali) have just been published by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. While taking up the study of Tamil, Sri Aurobindo did not have the faintest

suspicion that he might have to go to Tamil Nadu one day and make that his permanent home.

Here in Shyampukur and about the same time, another kind of education began for us, another type of experience, a rather strange experience I should say. Everybody knows about automatic writing, in which the hand of the writer goes on writing automatically without any kind of impulsion, desire or direction on his own part; he remains neutral and lets himself go.

It is said that through this kind of writing spirits or bodiless entities are brought down. The Western savant may say that all this is a play of the subconscious mind since the waking mind abdicates then. But that is a matter for argument. Let me here describe what actually happened. Sri Aurobindo showed us, or rather made us hear, not examples of automatic writing but of automatic speech. About eight in the evening, we would take our seats around him. The lights were put out and all was silent. We kept still for a while. Then slowly there came a voice from Sri Aurobindo. It was clearly not his own voice, there were many voices, each of a different character and tone. The voice itself would say who it was. Some of them I remember very well. Once someone came and said many fine things about education, about literature, about our country. We got eager to know his name. After putting us off for a while he finally gave out that he was Bankimchandra.

The talks were in English. He had used a word, “obfuscated”, and as none of us knew the meaning of this unusual word we asked him the meaning. His reply was, “In our days we knew better English than you do.” Another day, somebody else appeared and immediately announced in a terrible voice, “I am Danton! Terror! Red Terror!” He went on discoursing on the need and utility of all that bloodshed of the French Revolution. Another who came introduced himself thus: “I am Theramenes.” Theramenes was a political leader of ancient Greece. He spoke in a calm and subdued tone and gave us a lesson in political matters. So many others came like this, day after day, and taught us many things on various subjects. Someone even raised the question of Hindu-Muslim unity and offered us a solution as well.

Who are these beings? Or what are they? Do supraphysical beings exist in fact? And do they come and disclose their identity before men in this manner? It is a very obscure and complicated affair indeed. Supraphysical beings do exist. But the supraphysical world is not of a single piece. There are worlds upon worlds in a regular series, from the most gross to the most subtle; above the physical is the subtle-physical, above that is life, and above life mind; the series continues above mind also; and in each of these there are several layers or planes. Any of the beings from any of these worlds or planes can manifest himself. But he has to manifest through the instrumentality of the human medium, through

the substance of the medium's mind, life and body. Therefore he cannot easily manifest his real nature or true being, he has to gather his materials from the mediums own substance. Very often it is the make-up of the medium that predominates and the being that manifests preserves very little of his own. But it may, on the other hand, be quite otherwise. All will depend on the capacity of the medium. With an impure or unfit medium there will be a greater possibility of charlatanism and falsehood.

In many cases it is not the true soul of a dead person that comes; what comes is some portion of him, some fragments of his mind, life or subtle body that may have survived in the corresponding worlds or in some other worlds. By animating these parts and using them as vehicles, some other being or entity or force may come, as if a representative of the whole man. Or else it might even happen that an entirely different being presents himself under a false name. There is really no end to the complexities that may arise in these supraphysical worlds. There may also be a medium who knows how to keep under his control the action and modality of such appearances, that is to say, determine in advance the particular beings or types of beings that will come or will not come, the kind of things they will say or will not be allowed to say. Or he may, if he chooses, open the gates for anyone to appear, simply in order that he may watch and examine what

takes place. It is needless to add that when Sri Aurobindo made himself a medium, something like this used to happen.

As a record of one of his experiments along this line, Sri Aurobindo himself has said or rather left in writing something that we all know. The book entitled *Yogic Sadhan* was written entirely in this manner through his hand by somebody else. And judging by the fact that at the time of the writing Sri Aurobindo had seen the subtle presence of Rammohun Roy around, it may be inferred that the book was written or inspired by Rammohun Roy. Sri Aurobindo has likewise told us that the subtle being of Vivekananda came to him in Alipore Jail to give him certain instructions.

Meanwhile one afternoon, a young man — Satish Sarkar — came to us running, to give Sri Aurobindo the news that Sham-sul-Alam, the Police Inspector who had been the mainstay of the Government in the Alipore bomb case, had just been shot down on the steps of the High Court by Biren (Birendranath Dattagupta). He added that he too had been with Biren, but had managed to escape, although he doubted if Biren could have escaped. Biren actually got arrested and was hanged. Satish himself absconded. Afterwards he came to us in Pondicherry and stayed here for some time, perhaps for a year or so. We christened him “Junior Sinner” — as he was, as it were, a younger brother to us. But he developed into a Mayavadin, an Illusionist, and finally left us as he could not



reconcile himself to our viewpoint. Afterwards he became a sannyasin. He has an ashram and receives an allowance from the Bengal Government as a political sufferer.

Our life in Shyampukur went on in its regular course, when one evening, as we gathered for our usual stance, our friend Ramchandra suddenly appeared with the news that the Government had decided to arrest Sri Aurobindo again; everything was ready, he said, and it might even be that very evening. Sri Aurobindo listened to him in silence. Then he said, "Come, let us move out just now." He had received the Divine Command, as he told us later, to leave immediately for Chandernagore. He came out of the house and made straight for the riverside, accompanied by Ramchandra, Biren and Suresh Chakravarti. Suresh has given an accurate and full account of what happened next, and I shall not repeat that here. You should read it in his reminiscences.

The story of this sudden exit or disappearance of Sri Aurobindo has appeared in several versions, with many distortions and not without a touch of colour. For instance, someone has said that it was on Nivedita's advice and at her insistence or request that Sri Aurobindo took shelter in French territory. Another has given a vivid cinema-like picture of how Sri Aurobindo had to jump a wall, how he lost his way among the narrow lanes and finally landed on somebody's doorsteps and the dramatic dialogue that ensued, and so on.

But all this is sheer myth and romance. Sri Aurobindo himself has left his record on the point, and his companions of that evening have also written out the true facts.

Those of us who were left behind continued to run the two papers for some time; Nivedita was of particular help in regard to the English journal. But afterwards, we too found it impossible to carry on and our pleasant home had to be broken up. For news came that the police were after our blood; it became imperative therefore that we too should disperse and go into hiding. I have said that there were three permanent residents in that house. Of these three, Suresh Chakravarti, at Ganen Tagore's instance, disappeared among the Tagore family, in the house of Gaganendranath Tagore. Bejoy removed to a friend's house in Calcutta itself. And I decided to leave for an obscure little village in distant Barisal; there I put up with a friend of mine, Satish Chandra Sengupta, who afterwards became professor of philosophy at the City College in Calcutta.

That expedition of mine was not less romantic than any Antarctic trip. First I went by train; next came the ferry steamer that carried me across rivers; then I had a country-boat that paddled along the little channels of East Bengal; and finally I had to walk the last lap of my journey before reaching the destination, Kumeru. Perhaps I shall tell you about that romantic episode in more detail later if there is luck. I spent a

couple of months there, enjoying all kinds of delicious dishes and fine hospitality and lorded over the football fields out there. Then I got news that the time had come for starting my travels again — this time a far distant trip, to the verge of Cape Comorin almost.

## 6

### Pondicherry

#### I

Sri Aurobindo came to Pondicherry in 1910 and took shelter here. We might say, of course, from another point of view that it was he who gave shelter to Pondicherry within his own consciousness. But why this city in particular? There is indeed the usual view that he retired into French territory to escape the wrath of the British bureaucracy. But actually, all he wanted was to find a quiet spot where he might give himself to his own work undisturbed.

The place was so quiet that we can hardly imagine now what it was really like. It was not quiet, it was actually dead; they used to call it a dead city. There was hardly any traffic, particularly in the area where we lived, and after dusk there was not a soul stirring. It is no wonder they said, "Sri Aurobindo has fixed upon a cemetery for his sadhana."

It was a cemetery indeed. While the Indian nationalist movement had been flooding the whole country, nothing of that regenerating flood could find an entry here, except for one or two individuals who had felt a touch. It was like a backwater of the sea, a stagnant pool by the shore. There was here no such thing as a public life or a youth movement or

any kind of collective effort or any experiment in educational reform — there was no sign whatever of an awakening to life.

A cemetery it was no doubt, but one with its full complement of ghouls.

In the first rank of these ghouls were the ruffian bands. Such creatures can appear only in a highly tamasic environment. For, the greater the depth of inertia the more is the need for keen rajasic excitement followed immediately by the silence of sleep. Pondicherry of those days had a still more notorious reputation for its cheap wine-shops and rowdy tipsies. Of this type of ghouls there was a regular invasion from outside every weekend.

The ruffian bands — known locally as *bandes* in French — were a peculiar institution now almost broken up. The French regime in Pondicherry was supposed to be in theory a reign of liberty, equality and fraternity. But in actual fact, it was the feudalism of pre-Revolution France that held sway here. Or perhaps it was something worse, namely, the arbitrary rule of three or four high officials and rich men of ill-gotten means. The *bandes* were in their pay and they were there to do their bidding; the police had neither the will nor the power to intervene. On certain occasions, during the campaigns for political elections, complete anarchy seemed to reign in Pondicherry, while rioting and murder continued for days on end and blood flowed freely. People would not

dare stir out of their houses, especially after dark. We were not openly involved in politics, but some of our friends were. And Sri Aurobindo would sometimes send us out to meet them, even after nightfall and on purpose. The local people marvelled at our dauntless courage.

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These ruffian bands — these ghouls I was going to say — had turned against us too on more than one occasion. Let me explain in a little more detail.

Soon after Sri Aurobindo came, he realised that a firm seat must be established here, an unshakable foundation for his *sadhana* and *siddhi*, for the path and the goal. He had to build up on the ever-shifting sands of the shore a firm and strong edifice, a Temple of God. Have we not read in the Puranas and other scriptures that whenever and wherever a sage or a Rishi sat down to his meditation and *sadhana*, there rushed upon him at once a host of evil spirits to break up his work? They seemed to have a special liking for Rishi's flesh.

Those who tried most to stop Sri Aurobindo from settling down and were ever on the alert to move him from his seat were the British authorities. The British Government in India could never accept that Sri Aurobindo had come away to French territory for carrying on his yoga. Religion and spirituality, these to them were a mere subterfuge. They

thought they knew what Sri Aurobindo was — the one most dangerous man in all India, the source of all the trouble. Pondicherry was the place from which the necessary instructions and advice were supplied and perhaps even the pistols and other weapons. Here was the brain-centre of the Indian independence movement. That Sri Aurobindo had been the mainspring of Indian independence they had been told by their life-instinct, although the superficial sense in which they understood it was not obviously the whole truth.

At one time, they made up their minds that Sri Aurobindo should be kidnapped in a car with the help of one of the chiefs of the local *bandes*. We had to patrol all night the house in which Sri Aurobindo lived, lest there should be a sudden attack. I gather the ringleader behind this move showed repentance later and said that to act against a holy man and yogi was a great sin and that a curse might fall on the evildoer himself.

Nevertheless, force having failed they now tried fraud. An attempt was made to frame a trumped-up charge at law. Some of the local “ghouls” were made to help forge the documents — some photographs and maps and charts along with a few letters — which were to prove that we had been engaged in a conspiracy for dacoity and murder. The papers were left in a well in the compound of one of our men, then they were “discovered” after a search by the police. The French police

even entered Sri Aurobindo's residence for a search. But when their Chief found there were Latin and Greek books lying about on his desk, he was so taken aback that he could only blurt out, "*Il sait du latin, il sait du grec!*" — "He knows Latin, he knows Greek!" — and then he left with all his men. How could a man who knew Latin and Greek ever commit any mischief?

In feet, the French Government had not been against us, indeed they helped us as far as they could. We were looked upon as their guests and as political refugees; it was a matter of honour for them to give us their protection. And where it is a question of honour, the French as a race are willing to risk anything: they still fight duels in France on a point of honour. But at the same time, they had their friendship, the *entente cordiale*, with Britain to maintain, and it is this that got them into a dilemma.

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In addition to force and fraud, the British Government did not hesitate to make use of temptation as well. They sent word to Sri Aurobindo, which they followed up by a messenger, to say that if he were to return to British India, they would not mind. They would indeed be happy to provide him with a nice bungalow in the quiet surroundings of a hill station, Darjeeling, where he could live in complete freedom and



devote himself to his spiritual practices without let or hindrance. Needless to add, this was an ointment spread to catch a fly and Sri Aurobindo refused the invitation with a “No, thank you.”

Afterwards came a more serious attack, perhaps the one most fraught with danger. The First World War was on. India had been seething with discontent and things were not going too well abroad on the European front. The British Government now brought pressure on the French: they must do something drastic about their political refugees. Either they should hand them over to the British, or else let them be deported out of India. The French Government accordingly proposed that they would find room for us in Algeria. There we could live in peace; they would see to our passage so that we need have no worry on that score. If on the other hand we were to refuse this offer, there would be danger: the British authorities might be allowed to seize us forcibly.

I can recall that scene very well. Sri Aurobindo was seated in his room in what was later called the Guest House on Rue Francois Martin. We too had come. Two or three of the Tamil nationalist leaders who had sought refuge in Pondicherry came in and told Sri Aurobindo about the Algeria offer and also gave a hint that they were agreeable. Sri Aurobindo paused a little and then he said, in a quiet clear tone, “I do not budge from here.” To them this came as a bolt from the blue; they had never expected anything like this. In Algeria there

would be freedom and peace, whereas here we lived in constant danger and uncertainty. But now they were helpless. Sri Aurobindo had spoken and they could hardly act otherwise. They had no alternative but to accept the decision, though with a heavy heart.

The story of Danton comes to mind — Danton one of the leaders of the French Revolution. For a long time he had been on the crest of the wave of revolution, a leader revered by all. The wheel of his fortune was now on the downward turn and another party, the extremists, had reached the crest. Orders were out for his arrest, which meant the guillotine. His friends rushed to him to give advice. “Flee, Danton, flee,” they said, “there is yet time, flee.” Danton was unmoved and he replied in a calm and quiet manner. “That cannot be,” he said. “*On n’emporte pas le pays à la semelle de ses souliers*” — “You cannot carry the country on the heels of your shoes.”

The Ashram has of course been subjected to fresh attacks later, and to some of these many of you have been witness. But by then the Ashram had its foundations well laid and the edifice had risen high. But in the days of which I have been speaking there was no such thing as a foundation yet. Today the Ashram stands like a banyan tree with head erect and branches spread all over; its body is solid and immovable, the roots go deep and strong and firm. An attack may dislodge or even break a few leaves and branches, but nothing more

serious can happen. But in those days there was a possibility that the whole tree might get uprooted and such attempts too were there. The whole endeavour then was to find a standing-room. Sri Aurobindo wanted, as the Vedic Rishis before him had done, to find a footing where there was none, *apade padadhātave*.

In those days there was in the Collège de France in Pondicherry a French professor named Jouveau Dubreuil — later on he became quite a well-known name — who had been engaged in research in ancient history and archaeology. We knew him quite well. He was at that time working on the early history of Pondicherry. From a study of the ancient documents and inscriptions he discovered that the city of Pondicherry, which I have called a city of the dead, had at one time been known as a city of the Veda, *veda-puri*. That is to say, it had a centre of Vedic learning. And this Vedic college, our professor found from ancient maps and other clues, was located exactly on the spot where the main building of our Ashram now stands.

According to ancient tradition, the Rishi Agastya came to the South to spread the Vedic lore and the Aryan discipline. His seems to have been the first project for the infusion of Aryan culture into the Dravidian civilisation. Many of you may here recall the lines of Hemchandra the Bengali poet:

Arise, O Mountain, arise,

Agastya has returned;  
A new sign has been floated,  
There's a racing flood of Light;  
And lo, the sky holds a new splendour of the Sun!  
Hold this light, O Mountain,  
That it may spread a new Dawn over the land;  
May it hold the new Knowledge,  
May it acquire a new life;  
May a new Dream come to us all.  
Raise, O Mountain, your blue dragon-mass.

The legend goes that as Agastya journeyed South, the Vindhya mountains bent low to give him passage, and that they have remained low ever since and would continue in that posture until the Rishi came back. In connection with this story about the Vedic Rishi Agastya, one is almost automatically reminded of the endeavour of Sri Aurobindo. Like Agastya he journeyed South and set up a permanent seat here to emanate a new Light — he was even known in these parts as the Uttara Yogi, the Yogi of the North. In his lines of work and sadhana too we find a strange affinity with Agastya's effort, at least in one respect. Agastya had been for years driving deep into the earth, in the abyss of the subconscious, for he nourished both the worlds, earth and heaven; he along with his companion Lopamudra had been striving for victory here upon earth itself, in their battle and

the sacrifice with its hundred fiery tongues, *jayāvedatra śatanīthamājim, yat samyañcā mithunāvabhyajāva*; for the effort that had the protection of the gods could never fail, *na mṛṣā śrāntam yadavanti devāh*. To carry the effort of the Vedic Rishis to a greater fulfilment, to make the victory complete in a hundred, nay, in a thousand ways, *śatanītham, sahasranītham*, — this precisely was Sri Aurobindo's aim.

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Sri Aurobindo was in Pondicherry for forty years. The first few years were spent in establishing a seat: he had to select a suitable spot and make a permanent abode where he could work undisturbed. This point about selecting a “seat” occurs in the story of all great spiritual aspirants and in all the disciplines. The Tantriks had need of their “seat of five skulls”, *pañcamuṇḍī*. Ramakrishna had his *pañcavaṭī*, the grove of five banyans. But why this insistence on five? Perhaps the number stood for the five main elements in man and the five worlds that constitute the universe, — what the Upanishads term body, life, mind, supermind and spirit. The Vedas too speak of *pañcakṣiti*, the five abodes, *pañcakṛṣṭi*, the five fields of culture, *pañcajana*, the five births or worlds. Sri Krishna's conch of *pāñcajanya* may well occur to the mind. Lord Buddha too when he took his seat under the Bodhi tree is supposed to have said, “I do not rise from this seat until

my aim is attained, even though the body dry up or fall.”  
(*Ihāsane śuśyatu me śarīram.*)

The site once chosen and the seat established, Sri Aurobindo had now to prepare the ground. There were, as I have said, shifting sands all around, symbolising a changing world where all is in a state of flux, *yat kiñca jagatyām jagat*. All that had to be cleared and firm ground reached. He spent many long years, even as Agastya had done, in this spade-work. For he was to erect a huge edifice, a temple dedicated to God. He had once dreamed of a temple for Bhawani, Bhawani Mandir, where he would install Mother India. Now too he desired the same thing, a temple for Bhawani, a temple-city in fact.

That needed a solid, firm and immovable foundation. For this he had to dig into the farthest abyss, to fix, one might say, the “five supporting pillars”. All this he did single-handed during the first four years, from 1910 to 1914. Then the Mother came. And although that was for a short time, it was then that the plans were clearly laid for the thing that was to be and the shape it was to take, — this new creation of theirs.

The work of building the foundation took him till 1920. From 1920 to 1926 he worked with the Mother in giving it strength, testing it and making it fit and adequate for carrying the future load. In 1926 there began the construction of the superstructure, and along with that proceeded the work of

installing the presiding Deity. This work of installation took twelve years to complete and the next twelve were given to making it permanent. His task done, Sri Aurobindo stepped aside, for a new task, for taking up another line of work. But to this foundation he lent the entire strength of his bare back, that his work and new creation should stand immortal and with its head erect.

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All that Sri Aurobindo had wanted to do with his body was to install permanently in an earthly form the Mother Divine. This temple we call the Ashram has grown through the Power and Influence of her physical Presence, in order that she may manifest anew. The Divine Mother of the worlds has installed herself here. In the golden temple the living Goddess is manifest with all her Powers of realisation. She has herself taken charge of the work now. And the power of her Grace is working towards the goal that the entire earth and the race of men grow into a living manifestation of herself.

# 7

## Pondicherry

### 2

I have said that this cemetery that was Pondicherry had been infested by ghosts and goblins. These had a special category known ordinarily as spies. The word “spy” carries with it, as you know, an association of all that is low and disgusting and unspeakable, things of dark import. But did you know that the word is pure Sanskrit? It was *spaśa* in the old Vedic language. The Vedic Rishi describes Indra as sending out these *spaśa* to trace the movements of his enemies, the forces of evil that clustered round the god. So the Vedic gods had their spies, just as the modern British government had theirs, though of course there was bound to be a certain difference. These government spies tried to collect information as to who came to our houses, who were the people who met us, how our guests spent their time and what places we frequented. That was why Motilal (Motilal Roy of the Prabartak group in Chandernagore) when he first came to Pondicherry had to come dressed as an Anglo-Indian, and he never entered our house, the Raghavan House of today, except by the back door and under cover of darkness after nightfall.

In fact, all of us on our first arrival here had to come under false names, the only exception being Moni (Suresh



Chakravarti). He did not have to, for he had not been one of the marked men like the rest of us and his name had not been associated with any political trouble, as he was too young for that at the time. And in any case it would not have been wise to give him a false name to save him from the clutches of the law, for it was decided to rent our houses in his name and it was he again who was to act on our behalf in all official matters. Sri Aurobindo called himself Jatindranath Mitra, though only for a short while. It was under this pseudonym that he sailed from Calcutta as a passenger on the *Dupleix* and had presented himself before the doctor for the medical examination. The fun of it was that the doctor had no suspicion as to whom he was going to examine, although he did exclaim on hearing Sri Aurobindo's accent, "You seem to speak English very well!" to which Sri Aurobindo replied, "Yes, I was in England for some time." Some time indeed — fourteen years! My name was Manindranath Roy, and eventually I came to be known as Monsieur Roy; some of my local friends of those days still know me as such and call me by that name. Roy and "Sacra" (that is, short for Chakravarti in French) became quite well-known figures both in town and elsewhere on account of their football. Bejoy was Bankim Basak — Basak for short — the noted halfback in our football team.

The British Indian police set up a regular station here, with a rented house and several permanent men. They were

of course plainclothes men, for they had no right to wear uniform within French territory. They kept watch, as I have said, both on our visitors and guests as well as ourselves. Soon they got into a habit of sitting on the pavement round the corner next to our house in groups of three or four. They chatted away the whole day and only now and again took down something in their notebooks. What kind of notes they took we found out later on, when, after India had become independent and the French had left, some of these notes could be secured from the Police files and the confidential records of the Government. Strange records, these: the police gave reports all based on pure fancy; they made up all sorts of stories at their sweet will. As they found it difficult to gather correct and precise information, they would just fabricate the news.

Nevertheless, something rather awesome did happen once. By then we had shifted to the present Guest House. There were two new arrivals. One was a relative of Bejoy's, Nagen Nag, who had managed to get away from his family and had come to stay here on the pretext of a change of air for his illness. The other was a friend and acquaintance of his who had come with him as a companion and help; his name was Birendra Roy.

One day, this Birendra suddenly shaved his head. Moni said that he too would have his head shaved, just because

Birendra had done it. That very day, or it was perhaps the day after, a regular scene occurred. We had as usual taken our seats around Sri Aurobindo in the afternoon. Suddenly, Biren stood up and shouted, “Do you know who I am? You may not believe it, but I am a spy, a spy of the British police. I can’t keep it to myself any longer. I must speak out, I must make the confession before you.” With this he fell at Sri Aurobindo’s feet. We were stunned, almost dumbfounded. As we kept wondering if this could be true, or was all false, perhaps a hallucination or some other illusion — *māyā nu matibhramo nu* — Biren started up again, “Oh, you do not believe me? Then let me show you.” He entered the next room, opened his trunk, drew out a hundred rupee note and showed it to us. “See, here is the proof. Where could I have got all this money? This is the reward of my evil deed. Never, I shall never do this work again. I give my word to you, I ask your forgiveness.” No words came to our lips, all of us kept silent and still.

This is how it came about. Biren had shaved his head in order that the police spies might spot him out as their man from the rest of us by the sign of the shaven head. But they were nonplussed when they found Moni too with a shaven head. And Biren began to suspect that Moni, or perhaps the whole lot of us, had found out his secret and that Moni had shaved on purpose. So partly out of fear and partly from true

repentance, for the most part no doubt by the pressure of some other Force, he was compelled to make his confession.

After this incident, the whole atmosphere of the house got a little disturbed. We were serious and worried. How was it possible for such a thing to happen? An enemy could find his entry into our apartments, an enemy who was one of us. What should be done? Bejoy was furious, and it was a job to keep him from doing something drastic. However, within a few days, Biren left of his own accord and we were left in peace. I hear he afterwards joined the Great War and was sent to Mesopotamia with the Indian army.

During the Great War, Bejoy had his spell of bad luck. This makes another story. I have said the British Indian police had set up a post here. It was placed in charge of a senior official, no less a person than a Superintendent of Police. He was a Muslim, named Abdul Karim if I remember right, a very efficient and clever man, like our old friend Shamsul Alam of the Calcutta Police. We used to go to a friend's house very often, particularly myself. This gentleman too, we found, was a visitor there and we used to meet him as if by accident. He was very nice and polite in his manners. He even expressed a desire once to have Sri Aurobindo's darshan so that he might pay his respects. Sri Aurobindo did not refuse, he was given the permission. The gentleman arrived with a huge bouquet by way of a present and had the darshan.

The three of us, namely Moni, Saurin and myself, who had returned to Bengal after an interval of four years, had to hasten back here almost immediately owing to the outbreak of War, for there was a chance that old criminals like us would again be shut up in jail. When we had come back, Bejoy said he wished to go to Bengal, for he too wanted to have a change. He would return after paying a short visit to his people. He said he had been away for so long. But the question was: would it be all right for him to go? What did the French Government think? What would they advise? It was informally ascertained from the Governor that he did not consider it advisable to leave here, for the intentions of the British authorities were not above suspicion. Abdul Karim too was sounded as to their intentions. He said the British Government meant us no harm, for he was well aware that we were saintly people engaged in sadhana alone, and so on. But Sri Aurobindo had serious doubts. Bejoy, however, was a headstrong man. He got eager to go and set foot on British territory, that is, offer his neck to the scaffold. And that is what happened. The moment he crossed the border and entered British Indian territory, he found the police waiting. They put him in handcuffs, and for the next five years, till after the War was over, he was held in detention. Once he had managed to get away with only a year's custody in jail; this time it was not so easy.

But why dwell on this dark tale of the lawless wilds and the demons and beasts? Their ranks are still powerful and I do not wish to add to their strength by talking about them. Now let me say a few nice things about some good people, for such people too had their abode here. At the very outset I should speak of the Five Good Men. It is quite possible that there was a law in French India that applied to foreigners, but now the law was made stringently applicable to refugees from our own country. It was laid down that all foreigners, that is, anyone who was not a French citizen, wanting to come and stay here for some time must be in possession of a certificate from a high Government official of the place from which he came, such as a magistrate in British India, to the effect that he was a well-known person and that there was nothing against him; in other words, he must be in possession of a “good-conduct” certificate. Or else he must produce a letter to the same effect signed by five gentlemen of standing belonging to Pondicherry. I need hardly say that the first alternative was for us quite impossible and wholly out of the question. We chose the second line, and the five noble men who affixed their signatures were these: (1) Rassendren (the father of our Jules Rassendren), (2) De Zir Naidu, (3) Le Beau, (4) Shankara Chettiar (in whose house Sri Aurobindo had put up on arrival), (5) Murugesh Chettiar. The names of these five should be engraved in letters of gold. They showed on that occasion truly remarkable courage and magnanimity. It was

on the strength of their signatures that we could continue to stay here without too much trouble.

The story of these local leaders reminds me of another incident. When I came here first, I had to adopt a subterfuge in order to ward off suspicion. I posed as if I had come from Chandernagore, that is, from one part of French India to another, as a messenger carrying a letter from one political leader to another. I had a letter from the leader of a political party in Chandernagore to be delivered by hand to his counterpart in Pondicherry. The gentleman for whom I brought the message was called Shanmugabhelu; I forget the name of the Chandernagore gentleman. The letter suggested that he might help me find suitable accommodation for my stay here. I came and saw Mr. Shanmugabhelu at his residence with that letter. My pronunciation of the name as Shanmu-gabhelu must have shocked those of you who know Tamil! I found the huge Mr. Gabhelu leaning on an easy-chair, surrounded by his henchmen and discoursing in tones of thunder — although the thunder must have been of the dry autumnal sort, for his party was Radical Socialist, something like our Moderate Nationalists who shouted but produced nothing. He spoke in clear French. “*Sommes-nous des citoyens français, ou non?*” — “Are we French citizens, or are we not?” — he shouted. This was a plaint addressed to the French authorities, a petition and protest: “Where exactly do we stand here in the matter of rights?”

Among our first acquaintances in Pondicherry were some of the young men here. The very first among them was Sada — you have known him, for he kept up with us till the end. Next came Benjamin, Rassendren and a few others. Rassendren joined us again at the end of his career; in his early days he had been our playmate. Gradually, they formed a group of Sri Aurobindo's devotees. The strange thing about it was that they were all Christians. We did not have much of a response from the local Hindus; perhaps they were far too orthodox and old-fashioned. The Cercle Sportif was our rendezvous. There we had games, we arranged picnics, as you do today, we staged plays and held study circles. Only students took part.

Afterwards, when the Mother came in 1914, it was with a few men chosen from out of this group that she laid the first foundation of her work here; they formed the Society called "*L'Idée Nouvelle*". Already, in her Paris days, a similar group had been formed around her, a group that came to be known as the *Cosmique*, a record of whose proceedings has appeared in part in the Mother's *Words of Long Ago (Paroles d'Autrefois)*. Here in Pondicherry, she started building up an intimate circle of initiates simultaneously with the publication of the *Arya*.

Let me speak now of a strange incident lest you should miss the element of variety in our life of those days. We



stayed at the Guest House then. The Mother had finally arrived. The Great War was over, I mean the first one. And with the declaration of Peace, nearly all the political prisoners in India had had been released. Barin, Upen, Hrishikesh had all come back from the Andamans, although they were still hesitating as to whether they should join us here in the life of yoga or continue for some time longer their work in the outside world.

One day, something rather extraordinary happened. Into our compound there came a Sannyasin. He had a striking appearance, tall and fair, a huge turban wrapped round his head, a few locks of hair hanging down upon his shoulders. There were three or four disciples too. He begged for Sri Aurobindo's darshan. But the darshan turned out to be somewhat spectacular. There he disclosed his identity. Concealed behind the thick cloak of Sannyasa was our old comrade Amarendra, Amarendranath Chatterji, the noted terrorist leader for whose capture the British Government had been moving heaven and earth, that is, the worlds of the dead and the living, and also raising hell in the underground world. Perhaps they had set a price on his head too. And here he was in person! There was a wave of joy and excitement, mingled with some apprehension as well, for no one knew what the British or the French would do in case the news got abroad.

Amarendra had suddenly disappeared one day. He lived the life of a primitive savage in the jungles of Assam; he sold poultry and eggs at the steamship stations along the rivers of East Bengal, in the garb of a Muslim complete with lungi and fez. And so many other things he did just to avoid the Government's vigilant eye. It was a long romantic tale. Finally, he made himself a Sannyasin and became a Guruji. Near Tanjore he set up his Ashram. Disciples gathered, his mantras and teachings brought him fame; he styled himself, if I remember aright, Swami Kaivalyananda. The British Government were completely fooled.

The Swamiji, our Amarendra, came here to obtain Sri Aurobindo's instructions as to what to do next. This, as I have said, was after the end of the War, when practically all the political prisoners had been set free and even those deported to the Andamans had been allowed to come back. He wished to know if he could now disclose himself and also what he was to do afterwards. He was advised to go back to Calcutta and await the turn of events for a while. The Swamiji now ordered his disciples back to the Ashram and said that he would like to live in solitude for some time.

That was the end of Swami Kaivalyananda. He had had his nirvana and his place was taken by Amarendra Chatterji. The disciples had in the meantime gone back to their Ashram. There they kept waiting, but the months passed without any

news of Guruji. They came here at last to find out where their Guruji was. Where indeed?

I met Amarendra for the last time just before I came away to Pondicherry for good. I had been to his shop. It was a drapery stores known as the Workers' Cooperative, which served as a veil and a meeting ground for terrorist activities. He knew all about me and also that I was on my way to Pondicherry. As a parting gift, he handed me a shawl from his stores, adding, "Payable when able." I distinctly remember the phrase. I came in touch with him again long after this. He became a devotee and disciple of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and remained a faithful follower till his death.

It will not be out of place here to say something about the sort of education and training we received in those early days of our life in Pondicherry. One of the first needs we felt on coming here was for books, for at that time we had hardly anything we could call our own. We found that at the moment Sri Aurobindo was concentrating on the Rigveda alone and we managed to get for him two volumes of the original text. He had of course his own books and papers packed in two or three trunks. It was felt we might afford to spend ten rupees every month for the purchase of books. We began our purchases with the main classics of English literature, especially the series published in the Home University Library and the World Classics editions. Today you see what

a fine Library we have, not indeed one but many, for there is a Library of Physical Education, there is a Medical Library, there is a Library for the School, and there are so many private collections. All this had its origin in the small collections we began every month. At first, the books had to lie on the floor, for we had nothing like chairs or tables or shelves for our library. I may add that we had no such thing as a bedding either for our use. Each of us possessed a mat, and this mat had to serve as our bedstead, mattress, coverlet and pillow; this was all our furniture. And mosquito curtains? That was a luxury we could not even dream of. If there were too many mosquitoes, we would carry the mats out on to the terrace for a little air, assuming, that is, that there was any. Only for Sri Aurobindo we had somehow managed a chair and a table and a camp cot. We lived a real camp life. I should add that there were a few rickety chairs too, for the use of visitors and guests.

And lights? Today you see such a profusion of electric lighting in every room and courtyard; we have mercury lights and flashlights and spotlights and torch lights; we are even getting well into the limelight! There is light everywhere, “all here is shining with light”, *sarvamidam vibhāti*. In those days, on the other hand, we did not even have a decent kerosene lamp or lantern. All I can recall is a single candle-stick, for the personal use of Sri Aurobindo. Whatever conversations or discussions we had after nightfall had to be in the dark; for

the most part we practised silence. The first time there was an electric connection, what a joy it gave us! It came like a revelation almost. We were in the Guest House at the time; we had shifted there only a little while ago. We were out one afternoon for our games (that is, football), and it was already dark by the time we returned. As we opened the door and entered the compound, what a surprise it was! The place was full of light, there were lights everywhere, a real illumination. The electricians had come and fitted the connections while we had been away. They had fitted as many as four points for the entire building, the Guest House that you see, two for the first floor and two downstairs!

We were able to purchase some French books at a very cheap rate, no more than two annas for each volume in a series. We had about a hundred of them, all classics of French literature. I find a few of them are still there in our Library. Afterwards, I also bought from the secondhand bookshops in the Gujli Kadai area several books in Greek, Latin and French. Once I chanced on a big Greek lexicon which I still use.

Gradually, a few books in Sanskrit and Bengali were also added to our stock, through purchase and gifts. As the number of books reached a few hundred, the problem was how to keep them. We used some bamboo strips to make a rack or bookstand along the walls of our rooms; the almirahs came

later. I do not think there were any almirahs at all so long as we were in the Guest House. They came after the Mother's arrival, when we shifted with our books to the Library House. That is why it came to be called the Library House.

This account would be incomplete without a few details about our housekeeping. As for the furniture, I have already said that the mat alone did duty for everything. Of servants we had only one; he did the shopping. But as we did not know his language, we had simply memorised a few words connected with shopping and we somehow managed to make him understand with the help of these words and a good deal of gestures. Bejoy had his standing instructions: *meen moon anna* (fish three annas) — it was lucky *meen* in Tamil is the same as in Bengali — *ille*, then *nal anna* (if not, then four annas), the Tamil equivalent of “if” or “then” being beyond the range of our knowledge. Today we have practically one servant per head, thanks to the boundless grace of the Mother. Sri Aurobindo used to smile and make the comment, “We have as many servants as there are sadhaks here.”

We did the cooking ourselves and each of us developed a speciality. I did the rice, perhaps because that was the easiest. Moni took charge of the *dal* (pulses), and Bejoy, being the expert, had the vegetables and the curry. What fell to the lot of Saurin I do not now remember — Saurin was a brother-in-law of Sri Aurobindo, a cousin of Mrinalini's. Perhaps he was

not in our Home Affairs at all; he had the Foreign Ministry, that is, he had to deal with outsiders. We had our first real cook only after the Mother's arrival, by which time our numbers had grown to ten or twelve. There was a cook who had something rather special about him: he had been to Paris and made quite a name there on account of certain powers of foreseeing the future and other forms of occult vision which he possessed. The Mother had these powers tested in the presence of some of us. He was asked to take a bath and put on clean clothes and then made to sit with us. The Mother took her seat in a chair. We did a little concentration in silence and then the Mother asked him, "What do you see? Do you see anything about anybody present here?" and so on. He gave truly remarkable answers on several occasions. And yet he had had no sort of formal education, he was absolutely illiterate, had only picked up some French by ear. Another cook who came later has become, as you know, quite a celebrity thanks to his spiritist performance. The story has become well-known, it is now almost a classic. Sri Aurobindo has referred to it, the Mother has spoken and written about it, the well-known French poet and mystic Maurice Magre who had been here and lived in the Ashram for some time has recorded it in one of his books. You must have heard or read what Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have said on the subject. I do not wish to add anything of my own, for I was not an eye-witness; I had been away in Bengal for a while.

Now that we are on this topic of cooks and cooking, let me add a few words about myself in this connection. I had, as I said, some practice in the work of the kitchen and I took it up again later on. For some time — we were about fifty in all by then — I did some serving in addition to cooking once a week. What kind of cooking was that? In those days, we used to have pudding for dinner three times a week, ordinary rice pudding, fried rice pudding, and tapioca pudding. I did the tapioca. It was rather in the fitness of things that the hands that had once been used to make bombs should now make some sweets.

At one time, one of our main subjects of study was the Veda. This went on for several months, for about an hour every evening at the Guest House. Sri Aurobindo came and took his seat at the table and we sat around him. Subramania Bharati, the Tamil poet, and myself were the two who showed the keenest interest. Sri Aurobindo would take up a hymn from the Rig Veda, read it aloud once, explain the meaning of every line and phrase and finally give a full translation. I used to take notes. There are many words in the Rig Veda whose derivation is doubtful and open to differences of opinion. In such cases, Sri Aurobindo used to say that the particular meaning he gave was only provisional and that the matter could be finally decided only after considering it in all the contexts in which the word occurred. His own method of interpreting the Rig Veda was this: on reading the text he



found its true meaning by direct intuitive vision through an inner concentration at first, and then he would give it an external verification in the light of reason, making the necessary changes accordingly.

Sri Aurobindo has taught me a number of languages. Here again his method has often evoked surprise. I should therefore like to say something on this point. He never asked me to begin the study of a new language with primary readers or children's books. He started at once with one of the classics, that is, a standard work in the language. He used to say that the education of children must begin with books written for children, but for adults, for those, that is, who had already had some education, the reading material must be adapted to their age and mental development. That is why, when I took up Greek, I began straightway with Euripides' *Medea*, and my second book was Sophocles' *Antigone*. I began a translation of *Antigone* into Bengali and Sri Aurobindo offered to write a preface if I completed the translation, a preface in which, he said, he would take up the question of the individual versus the State. Whether I completed the translation I cannot now recollect. I began my Latin with Virgil's *Aeneid*, and my Italian with Dante. Have I have already told you about my French? There I started with Molière.

I should tell you what one gains by this method, at least what has been my personal experience. One feels as if one

took a plunge into the inmost core of the language, into that secret heart where it is vibrant with life, with the quintessence of beauty, the fullness of strength. Perhaps it was this that has prompted me to write prose poems and verse in French, for one feels as if identified with the very genius of the language. This is the method which Western critics describe as being *in medias res*, getting right into the heart of things. One may begin a story in two ways. One way is to begin at the beginning, from the *adikanda*, from *Genesis*, and then develop the theme gradually, as is done in the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Bible. The other method is to start suddenly, from the middle of the story, a method largely preferred by Western artists, like Homer and Shakespeare for instance.

But it was not found possible for Sri Aurobindo to continue with his own studies or even to help us in ours. For as I have already hinted, our mode of living, our life itself took a different turn with the arrival of the Mother. How and in what direction? It was like this. The Mother came and installed Sri Aurobindo on his high pedestal as Master and Lord of Yoga. We had hitherto known him as a dear friend and close companion, and although in our mind and heart he had the position of a Guru, in our outward relations we seemed to behave as if he were just like one of ourselves. He too had been averse to the use of the words “Guru” and “Ashram” in relation to himself, for there was hardly a place in his work of new creation for the old traditional associations

these words conveyed. Nevertheless, the Mother taught by her manner and speech, and showed us in actual practice, what was the meaning of disciple and master; she has always practised what she preached. She showed us, by not taking her seat in front of or on the same level as Sri Aurobindo, but by sitting on the ground, what it meant to be respectful to one's Master, what real courtesy was. Sri Aurobindo once said to us, perhaps with a tinge of regret, "I have tried to stoop as low as I can, and yet you do not reach me."

It was the Mother who opened our eyes and gave us that vision which made us say, even as Arjuna had been made to say:

*sakheti matvā prasabhaṁ yaduktam  
he Kṛṣṇa he yādava he sakheti  
ajānatā mahimānaṁ tavedam  
mayā pramadat pranayena vapi.*

*yaccāvahāsarthamasatkṛtosi  
vihāra-śayyāsana-bhojaneṣu  
eko 'thavāpyacyuta tvat-samakṣam  
tat kṣāmaye tvām-aham-aprameyam*

"By whatever name I have called you, O Krishna, O Yadava, O Friend, thinking in my rashness that you were only a friend, and out of ignorance and from affection, not knowing this thy

greatness; whatever disrespect I have shown you out of frivolity, whether sitting or lying down or eating, when I was alone or when you were present before me, — may I be pardoned for all that, O thou Infinite One.”

## 8

### Pondicherry Cyclone

I have once spoken to you of an earthquake and a small fire. Today I shall say something about two or three other inclement natural phenomena of which I have had direct personal experience.

The first was when I was a child; it has left a clear imprint on my mind. Many of you, no doubt, are familiar with storms and hurricanes. But have you ever seen a whirlwind, what they call a tornado? This word has been rendered by a Pundit as *tūrṇa-da*, a thing that is swift in its flight. I have had a chance to see the thing with my own eyes. Just listen, you will see how terrible a thing it is and how well in keeping with its formidable name.

“We were at school then, the District School at Rungpur, and were attending class. The day was almost over. The sky had been overcast and it looked as if it was going to rain. All of a sudden we heard people shouting, “Fire, fire!” Was there a fire, a real fire? We rushed out in a body into the open field in front. As we looked up we saw what they had taken at first to be smoke, or rather a whirling mass that looked like smoke, but was actually a cloud. There was a mass of clouds that kept whirling almost over our heads, and from a distance there came a low rumbling and whistling sound. What could that

be? What did it mean? They let us off from school and all of us ran in the direction of the sound. It did not rain much, very little indeed, if at all. We ran on, but the sound was nowhere near. Then we heard people saying, “Something terrible has happened, over there, in that direction.” We kept running, for a distance of two or three miles from the school and beyond the limits of the town. Suddenly we were brought up short. Right in front of us there was a wooded tract where the trees had been all smashed up. We moved on straight into the heart of the ruin. It was a strange spectacle, as if an open zig-zag path some fifty cubits wide had been cut across the wood with dozens of bulldozers driving through and levelling everything down. Bushes and shrubs and trees and houses — it was lucky there were not many houses — had all been swept clean away, for a distance of four or five miles, we were informed. The place had been sparsely populated, so the casualties were not heavy — some half a dozen men, a few head of cattle and some houses. The demon of destruction seemed to have spent all his wrath on Nature. It was perhaps really the work of some evil spirit.

They said the whirlwind had arisen from a pool of water four or five miles away and it did look like a demon when it came rushing forward with a whirling motion after having churned the waters of the pool. However that may be, we heard this story about a pedestrian who had been walking along the road just when the tornado crossed his path. He was

caught by the wind, given a few twirls up in the air and thrown down on the ground by the side of the road. As he shook himself up on his feet, he went on muttering, “What fun, I got a free lift to the sky!” — *kaisā majā, āsmān dekh liyā mufat se*. The man was a labourer type from Behar.

As I moved for some distance along the clearing left by the wind, I could see how swift and powerful its impact had been. The trees that had not been uprooted were twisted in a fantastic manner you could hardly imagine. All that was needed now to make a paved road or highway out of the clearing was to remove the bush and throw in some gravel and mud.

What I saw, or rather experienced, on the next occasion was not a tornado, but a prank of the wind-god all the same. It was a wild enough prank and rather dangerous for those of us who were among its victims.

It was here in Pondicherry. At that time we were in the old Guest House; it is old indeed, for after that storm the very look of the house was changed. In those days, Pondicherry used to have regularly every year, in October or November, cyclones of a rather severe type. We do not get anything like them now. The Mother’s presence seems to have pacified the wild forces of Nature a great deal. In those days it would not do to bar our doors and windows with ordinary bolts and latches, they needed to be held by regular bamboo poles.

It all happened after nightfall. The sky had been overcast the whole day, it was dark all around and heavy showers fell at intervals — really nasty weather, you would say. We were upstairs. In those days we all lived in the rooms upstairs, the ground-floor was used only for meals. We had just had our dinner and had moved upstairs. In the meanwhile the wind had been gathering strength all the time and the downpour grew heavy. Suddenly, there was a terrific noise of things creaking and crashing down, which meant that the doors and windows were giving way before the ferocious gale. With it came a whistling sound and splashes of rain. The doors and windows of the two rooms occupied by Sri Aurobindo were blown away, leaving them bare to the wind and the rain like an open field. He moved to the room next door, but there too it was much the same. The upstairs was getting impossible, so we started moving down. We had barely reached the ground-floor when the shutters and windows along the walls of the staircase fell with a crash on the stairs. We escaped by a hair's breadth. Things did not seem to be very much better in the rooms downstairs. There too the doors and windows had given way and allowed free entry to the wind and rain. All of us gathered in the central hall, and somehow huddled together in a corner.

In the early hours of the morning the storm abated and by daybreak all was clear. Indeed, to us it seemed much too clear. That is to say, the rows of Porcher trees — we call them health



trees — that lined the streets and were considered among the attractions of the city now lay prostrate in heaps on the surface of the roads, making them impassable. Gangs of workmen arrived from the Municipality with their axes and tools, but it took them some time to cut through a passage. Even then one could see, especially on the way to the Lake, huge trees lying about uprooted on the ground with their limbs broken and twisted out of shape.

And now we had to think of our daily needs, about breakfast and lunch. But where to find the milk and foodstuffs, the rice and pulses? Where were the shops? Everything was a shambles. I wonder whether during a war the opposing forces battling through a town or village would leave it in a condition somewhat like this. The number of wounded and dead was fairly large, somewhere in the region of a thousand.

I cannot recall now the exact year of this upheaval. Most probably it was 1912 or 1913, that is, shortly before the outbreak of the Great War. We may suppose that this minor upheaval may have come here as the harbinger of that world-shaking calamity.

But it was no less strange that not long after the end of the Great War, there came another storm, not of the same intensity but on a somewhat similar scale. This time it brought

a different sort of message and turned out to be a blessing for us in the end.

The Mother had already arrived for the second time, this time for good. She was at the Bayoud House where the Dowsetts now live. We were at the Guest House and I remember well how Sri Aurobindo used to call on her every Sunday and dine with her. We too would go along and have a share of the dinner. I need not add that the menu was arranged by the Mother herself and she supervised the cooking in person; she also prepared some of the dishes with her own hands. That is the reason why I say we were really lucky to have a share in those meals. At that time we could only appreciate the physical taste of the food we were served; today I realise what lay behind it.

After dinner, we used to go up on the terrace overlooking the sea front. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother stood aside for a talk and we stood by ourselves. Sometimes we would request Sri Aurobindo to do some automatic writing after dinner. The writings that came through his hand in those days were frightfully interesting. I remember somebody came and began to give an analysis of the character of each one of us; he had many things to say about Motilal Roy as well. One day someone suggested that something might be given about the Mother. But she immediately protested, “No, nothing about me, please.” At once the hand stopped automatically.

Well, during the Mother's stay in this house, there came a heavy storm and rain one day. The house was old and looked as if it was going to melt away. Sri Aurobindo said, "The Mother cannot be allowed to stay there any longer. She must move into our place." That is how the Mother came in our midst and stayed on for good, as our Mother. But she did not yet assume the name. You can see now how that last spell of stormy weather came as a benediction. Nature did in fact become a collaborator of the Divine Purpose.

## 9

### Two Great Wars

We have been through two great World Wars in the course of our life in Pondicherry. This was quite an experience.

The two Wars were identical in their inner nature and import. From our point of view, they were both of them a battle between the Gods and the Titans. On one side were the instruments of the Gods, on the other of the Titans. It is a curious thing, if not altogether strange, that Germany and, to some extent, Russia should have sided with the Titans and England and France and America fought on the side of the Gods.

This is something that happens always in the history of man, this battle of the Gods and the Titans. Whenever there is a New Creation in the offing, and man is to be carried a step forward in his evolution, there comes up ranged against him the forces of Evil which do not want him to rise to a higher level of consciousness, towards the Godhead. They want to hold man bound down in their grip.

Such a moment of crisis came to man in the time of Sri Krishna. The Kurukshetra War is known as a war of righteousness, *dharma-yuddha*; it was a war of the Gods and the Titans. On the battlefield of Kurukshetra Sri Krishna gave

his message which was to initiate the New Age that was coming. In exactly the same way, Sri Aurobindo began to proclaim his message with the opening of the guns in the first World War. The War began in August 1914; on August 15th of the same year came out the first number of his review, the *Arya*. Another point of note: the *Arya* continued almost as long as the War lasted. The official end of the War came towards the close of May, 1921; the *Arya* ceased in January of the same year. The Mother had arrived in the meantime to make Pondicherry her home.

The War left India practically untouched and without any major upheaval. It came and blew over like a stray wind, even as the raids of the *Emden* did on the Indian seas. Our memories of the War are still associated with that strange episode. The German cruiser passed by the shores of Pondicherry without doing any damage here, though Madras city received a few shell-shots. But I distinctly remember how many of the local residents, that is, those who lived on the Pondicherry sea-face, fled pell-mell towards the west, in the direction of the present Lake Estate. They packed themselves into rows of “push-push” carts — we had no rickshaws in those days — and looked for safety among the ravines of the Red Hills, or perhaps was it to hide themselves in the waters of the Lake, like Mainaka of the Indian legend?

India had been under the protection of England, so it was Europe that had to bear the brunt of the attack. We escaped with just a mild touch, though it did produce a few ripples here and there. First and foremost of these was the birth of the Bengali army — not a professional army of paid soldiers serving under the Government, but a corps of national volunteers. With the sole exception of the Punjabis and the Gurkhas, Indian troops were not in those days considered on a par with European soldiers in the matter of fighting capacity. And Bengalis of course were treated with special contempt. They had of late shown some courage or skill in the art of secret assassination, but in the opinion of many that was a dastardly crime. A trained and disciplined army was quite another matter. Now a band of young men from Chandernagore, taking the opportunity provided by the War, formed themselves into a corps of Volunteers, some fifteen of them. They were French citizens and were therefore to join the War on the side of the French and the British. They arrived in Pondicherry on their way to France, a band of young men beaming with courage and intelligence. Our Haradhan was among their number. The picture of young Haradhan, a tall erect figure of a man, calm and audacious, still lingers in my mind. He used to narrate to us on his return from the War many stories of his experiences. Once he had even been shipwrecked by a torpedo and had to swim for his life to a life-boat off the coast of Tunisia. Haradhan has recorded his

experience of the War in a booklet entitled “The New Ways of Warfare”, modelled on Barin’s “Principles of Modern Warfare” which we used to read in our early days.

Some of the War scenes of Pondicherry come to mind. Here there was no question of volunteers. France has compulsory military training and Frenchmen on attaining the age of eighteen have to join the armed forces and undergo military training for a full period of one or two years. The *Renonçants* of Pondicherry, that is, those Indians who had secured their full citizenship rights by renouncing their personal status under the Indian law, were also subject to this obligation of compulsory military service. There was, as a consequence, great agitation among our local friends and associates. They had to leave in large numbers to join the French forces. Among them was our most intimate friend, David, the noted goalie of our celebrated football team. He had only just been married. I remember how regularly his wife used to offer worship to Mariamma (Virgin Mary) praying for his safety and well-being, during the period of nearly three years that he had to be away: they were of course Christians. The plaintive tones of her hymns still ring in my ears. David returned after the War was over, perhaps with the rank of Brigadier. I still remember the welcome he was accorded on his return. He later became the Mayor of Pondicherry. I also recall the story of our Benjamin. His mother burst into sobs when she learned he was to leave our

shores. There were so many mothers and sisters who shed bitter tears as they saw off at the pier the boatloads of men. Benjamin however did not have to go. He became a “*reformé*”, that is, disqualified in the medical test.

Within the country itself, Indian patriots with terrorist leanings tried to use in their own way this opportunity to bring England down to her knees. One such group, the Gadar party was caught red-handed, as it tried to land arms and ammunition obtained by ship from America. Another was led by “Tiger” Jyotin, our Tejen’s father as you all know, who waged open war with the police at Buribalam in Orissa and died fighting with all his followers. We have a cinema film of the dramatic episode here. A third consisting of our “refugee” patriots assassinated the tyrannical Magistrate Ashe, through a conspiracy hatched in Pondicherry itself.

Whether or not such sporadic acts and activities had any real utility is open to question. But a great and noble movement does not keep within the bounds of “expediency”; it proceeds along the lines of its inner urge and law. These patriots and revolutionaries have shown how much could be achieved in a nation of slaves, even in that epoch and under those circumstances, by a band of slaves and prisoners bound hand and foot in their chains; they worked to the utmost of what was possible then and according to their capacity. The World War had brought them an opportunity; they thought



they might be able to shake England off the seat of her power. They took it as self-evident that England's difficulty was going to be our opportunity.

From a larger point of view, the first Great War can be taken as ushering in an end to the French Revolution. The Revolution had rolled to the dust the heads of a single monarch and his queen. But the end of this War saw the disappearance of practically all the crowned heads of Europe. Those that remained, like the monarchy in England, were left as puppets without power. This was an external symbol whose real significance lay in the awakening of the masses and their coming to power. This meant that not only wealth and affluence but also education and culture were no longer the privileges of the few; they must be made available to all. Money and position must be within everybody's reach, all must get a chance to show their merit. To use our own terminology, the higher Light and Consciousness that are descending on earth and helping man forward in his march to the heights were now finding their fulfilment: they would be firmly established and become a living force in the general level of mankind.

That is why, in the second place, the message brought by the War was that of freedom and autonomy for all, for the individual as well as for the collectivity or nation. Colonialism was to cease to exist; even the smallest nations

were to win their freedom. This new era of progress was begun by the First World War.

A third boon was to lay the foundations of an international society. This no doubt implied that the different countries and peoples of the world were to attain their freedom and autonomy. But in order that the smaller units might be left in security and there might be a check on unjust dealings among the nations, there had to come into being a society of nations where the representatives of all the nations could meet. This is what came to be known as the League of Nations. The unity of the human race was to be founded on a complex harmony of the diverse groups of men.

The ideal now was to create a race of men endowed with the highest gifts of education and training — what in the view of the sages and mystics would be a race of god-men — the transformation of man from the animal-state to that of the Gods. But that was precisely what stirred the opposing Forces to action. They were to keep man distracted, lure him from the good path into evil ways, change him, not into a God but a demon, a titan, a ghoul. (Goethe once had presented this picture.) That is how man got his notion of the super-race, and the notion took concrete shape among a particular people and some particular individuals. That is what lay behind the rise of Hitler and his Nazis in Germany. Stalin and his Bolsheviks appeared as their counterparts in Russia. Mussolini was their

henchman, a “satellite” in modern parlance. Our Puranic scriptures tell of the ancient Shumbha and Nishumbha, Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashipu, Shishupala and Raktadanta, dual power of Evil defying the Divine Power. Something similar seemed to be happening again.

Here was precisely what lay behind the origins of the second Great War: the descent of Evil incarnate to bar the descent of the Divine Power.

## 10

### I Bow to the Mother

Those of you who came to the Ashram as children recognised the Mother and called her by that name practically from your birth, that is, from the moment you began to recognise things. We the grown-ups did not have that privilege. It has taken us a long long time to open our eyes and know. We have lost valuable time, almost wasted it. But, as you know, it is never too late to mend and it is possible to recover and even to make amends for lost time; there lies an interesting secret.

But as I was saying, you did not have to be told about the Mother, for you have almost been born and brought up in her lap. In our case somebody had to introduce us to the Mother, for we had been born and brought up in a stepmotherly lap, although that too was one of her own forms, her form of Maya.

The first time I heard about the Mother was shortly after our arrival here. It was Sri Aurobindo himself who told us about a French lady from Paris who was a great initiate. She was desirous of establishing personal contact with Sri Aurobindo. That the Great Soul whom she meant was no other than Sri Aurobindo would be evidenced by a sign: she would be sending him something that he might recognise. That something was Sri Aurobindo's own symbol — in the

form of a diagram, known as Solomon's Seal. Needless to add, after this proof of identity, steps were taken to facilitate her coming. Monsieur Paul Richard was at that time much interested in spiritual thought and practice and he found an opportunity for coming here: he wanted to find out if he could get elected as one of the Representatives of French India in the French Parliament and he stood as a candidate for election. In those days, there used to be two elected representatives of French India, one in the Upper Chamber, the *Sénat*, the other in the Lower House, the *Chambre des Députés*. I have already spoken to you about this business of elections; this was a real bloody affair with murders and mob-attacks, which caused terror among the populace.

The first time he came here for canvassing, he was alone. The Mother accompanied him the next time. To all outward appearances they arrived here to canvass support for the elections, although M. Richard did not in the end get very many votes. But this provided the occasion for the Mother to meet Sri Aurobindo and gather a few trusted friends and devotees. In this connection the Mother had to pay a visit to Karikal once. This was her first direct experience of the actual India, that is, what it is in its crude outward aspect. She gave us an amusing description of the room where she was put up, an old dilapidated room as dark as it was dirty and a paradise for white ants. Thus it was that the Divine Mother, One who is fairer than the fairest and lovelier than infinite beauty, had

to come down and enter the darkness and evil of this human life; for how else could these poor mortals have a chance?

When it first came to be bruited that a Great Lady like this was to come and live close to us, we were faced with a problem: how should we behave? Should there be a change in our manners? For we had been accustomed to a bohemian sort of life, we dressed and talked, slept and ate and moved about in a free unfettered way, in a manner that would not quite pass in civilised society. Nevertheless, it was finally agreed that we should stick as far as possible to our old ways even under the new circumstances — for why should we permit our freedom and ease to be compromised or lost? This indeed is the way in which man's arrogance and ignorance assert the glory of his individuality!

The Mother arrived. She would meet Sri Aurobindo in company with the rest of us at our afternoon sessions. She spoke very little. We were out most of the time, but also dropped in occasionally. When it was proposed to bring out the *Arya*, she took charge of the necessary arrangements. She wrote out in her own hand the list of subscribers, maintained the accounts herself: perhaps those papers might be still available. And afterwards, it was she herself who helped M. Richard in his translation of the writings of Sri Aurobindo into French for the French edition of the *Arya*. The ground floor of Duplex House was used as the stack room and the

office was on the ground floor of the Guest House. The Mother was the chief executive in sole charge. Once every week all of us used to call at her residence accompanied by Sri Aurobindo and had our dinner together. On those occasions the Mother used to cook one or two dishes with her own hands. Afterwards too, when she came back for good, the same arrangement continued at the Bayoud House; I have told you of that before. About this time, she had also formed a small group with a few young men; this too I have mentioned earlier. A third line of her work, connected with business and trade, also began at nearly the same time. Just as today we have among us men of business who are devotees of the Mother and who act under her protection and guidance, similarly in that period also there appeared as if in seed-state this particular line of activity. Our Sauren founded the Aryan Stores, the object being to bring in some money: we were very hard up in those days — not that we are particularly affluent now, but still... The Mother kept up correspondence with Sauren in connection with these business matters even after she left here for Japan.

At one stage, the Mother showed a special interest in cats. Not only has she been concerned with human beings, but the animal creation and the life of plants too have shared in her direct touch. The Veda speaks of the animal sacrifice, but the Mother has performed her consecration of animals in a very novel sense; she has helped them forward in their upward

march with a touch of her consciousness. She took a few cats as representatives of the animal world. She said that the king of the cats who ruled in the occult world — you might call him perhaps their Super-cat — had set up a sort of friendship with her. How this feline brood appeared first in our midst is somewhat interesting. One day all of a sudden a wild-looking cat made its appearance at the Guest House where we lived then; it just happened to come along and stayed on. It was wild enough when it came, but it soon turned it into a tame cat, very mild and polite. When it had its kittens, Sri Aurobindo gave to the first-born the name of Sundari, for she was very fair with a pure white fur.

One of Sundari's kittens was styled Bushy, for it had a bushy tail, and its ancestress had now to be given the name of Grandmother. It was about this Bushy that the story runs: she used to pick all her kittens up in her teeth, one by one, and drop them at the Mothers feet as soon as they were old enough to use their eyes — as if she offered them to the Mother and craved her blessings. You can see now how much progress this cat had made in the path of Yoga. Two of these kittens of Bushy are well-known names and became great favourites with the Mother; one was Big Boy and the younger one was Kiki. It is said about one of them — I forget which, perhaps it was Kiki — that he used to join in the collective meditation and meditate like one of us; he perhaps had visions during meditation, for his body would shake and tremble while his



eyes remained closed. But in spite of this sadhana, he remained in his outward conduct like many of us, rather crude in many respects. The two brothers, Big Boy and Kiki, could never see eye to eye and the two had always to be kept apart. Big Boy was a stalwart fellow and poor Kiki got the thrashings. Finally, both of them died of some disease and were buried in the courtyard. Their Grandmother disappeared one day as suddenly as she had come and nobody knew anything about her again.

The style in which these cats were treated was something extraordinary. The arrangements made for their food were quite a festive affair; it was for them alone that special cooking was done, with milk and fish and the appropriate dressings, as if they were children of some royal family, — all was according to schedule. They received an equally good training: they would never commit nuisance within doors, for they had been taught to use the conveniences provided for them. They were nothing like the gypsy-bedouin cats of our Ardhendu.

In the days before the Mother came, we used to have a pet dog. Its story was much the same. All of a sudden one day there appeared from nowhere in our earliest residence a common street dog — it was a bitch; she too came and just stayed on. Sri Aurobindo gave her the name Yogini. He used to tell a story about her intelligence. It was already nightfall

and we did not know that she had not yet come in. She came to the front door, pushed against it and did some barking, but we heard nothing as we were in the kitchen next to the back yard. Suddenly she recalled that there was a door at the back through which she might perhaps gain entrance or at least draw our attention. She now ran around the three corners of the house and appeared at the back door. From there she could make herself heard and was admitted. She too bore some puppies and two of them became particular favourites with Sri Aurobindo. I cannot now recall how they were called.

You all know about the deep oneness and sympathy the Mother has with plants, so I leave out the subject today. As with the world of animals and men, so with the beings of the supraphysical worlds — from the little elves and fairies to the high and mighty Gods, all have had their contacts with the Mother, all have shared in her Grace as you may have heard, but the Grace could at times mean thrashings too!

Today I leave aside the Mother's role as our guide on the path of sadhana or yogic discipline. Let me speak in a very general way of an aspect of her teaching that concerns the first principles of the art of living.

The core of this lies in elevating our life to a cleaner level, and the first and most important need is to put each thing in its place. The training that the Mother has throughout been giving us — I am not here referring to the side of spiritual

practice but to the daily routine of our ordinary life — is precisely this business of putting our things in order. We do not always notice how very disorderly we are: our belongings and household effects are in a mess, our actions are haphazard, and in our inner life we are as disorderly as in our outer life, or even more. Indeed it is because we are so disordered within that there is such disorder in our outer life. Our thoughts come to us pell-mell and our brains are crowded with straying bits of random thought. We cannot sit down quietly for a few minutes and pursue a particular line of thought with any kind of steadiness or order. Our heads are full of noise like a marketplace without any peace or restraint or harmony. If the mind is in such a state, the vital being is still worse. One cannot keep count of the strange desires and impulses that play about there. If the brain is a marketplace, the heart is no better than a madhouse.

Well, I shall not now enlarge further on the state of our inner being. One of the things the Mother has been trying to teach us both by her word and example is this, that to keep our outer life and its materials in proper order and neat and tidy is a very necessary element in our life upon earth. I do not know to what extent we have been able to assimilate this teaching in our individual or collective living. How many of us have realised that beauty is at least half the sense of life and serves to double its value? And even if we do sometimes realise it, how many of us are impelled to shape our lives

accordingly? The Mother taught us to use our things with care, but there was more to it than this. She uses things not merely with care but with love and affection. For to her, material things are not simply inanimate objects, not mere lifeless implements. They are endowed with a life of their own, even a consciousness of their own, and each thing has its own individuality and character. The Mother says about material things what the ancients have said about the life of plants, that they have in them a consciousness that responds to pleasure and pain, *ataḥ-samjñāḥ bhavanti ete sukha-duḥkha-saman-vitāḥ*. We are all aware how carefully the Mother treasures old things and does not like them to be thrown away simply because they are old. The reason for this is not niggardliness or a conservative spirit; the reason is that old things are to her like old friends, living companions all.

Let me illustrate the point with something Sri Aurobindo once said. One of the inmates wrote to him that as the gate of his house seemed to have jammed and could not be opened, he had to open it by giving it a strong kick. The door did open but it hurt his foot rather badly. So what he wanted now was some ointment along with Sri Aurobindo's blessings. Do you know the answer he had from Sri Aurobindo? "If you kick the door, the door will naturally kick back at you!"

As I told you, in the beginning the Mother did not appear to us, the older people, as the Mother; she came to us first in

the garb of Beauty. We received her as a friend and companion, as one very close to ourselves, first because Sri Aurobindo himself received her like that, and secondly because of her qualities. Now that we are on this subject of her qualities, although it is not necessary for a child to proclaim the virtues of his mother, I cannot refrain here from telling you another point in her teaching. This concerns something deeper. The first time Sri Aurobindo happened to describe her qualities, he said he had never seen anywhere a self-surrender so absolute and unreserved. He added a comment that perhaps it was only women who are capable of giving themselves so entirely and with such sovereign ease. This implies a complete obliteration of the past, erasing it with its virtues and faults. The Mother has referred to this in one of her *Prayers and Meditations*. When she came here, she gave herself up to the Lord, Sri Aurobindo, with the candid simplicity of a child, after erasing from herself all her past, all her spiritual attainments, all the riches of her consciousness. Like a new-born babe, she felt she possessed nothing; she had to learn everything right from the start, as if she had known or heard about nothing.

Now to come back to a personal experience. The first thing I heard and came to know about the Mother was that she was a great spiritual person. I did not know then that she might have other gifts; these were revealed to me gradually. First I came to know that she was a very fine painter, and

afterwards that she was an equally gifted musician. But there were other surprises in store. For instance, she had an intellectual side no less richly endowed; she had read and studied enormously, had been engaged in intellectual pursuits even as the learned do. I was still more surprised to find that while in France she had already studied and translated a good number of Indian texts, like the Gita, the Upanishads, the Yoga Sutras and the Bhakti Sutras of Narada. I mention all this merely to tell you that the Mother's capacity of making her mind a complete blank was as extraordinary as her enormous mental acquisitions. This was something unique. In the early days, when she had just taken charge of our spiritual life, she told me one day in private, perhaps seeing that I might have a pride in being an intellectual, "At one time I used to take an interest in philosophy and other intellectual pursuits. All that has now gone below the surface, but I can bring it up again at will." So, I need not have any fears on that score! It was as if the Mother were trying to apologise for her deficiencies in scholarship. This was how she taught me the meaning of humility, what we call Divine Humility.

As I was saying, this capacity for an entire rejection of the past has been one of the powers of her spiritual consciousness and realisation. It is not an easy thing for a human being to wash himself clean of all his past acquisitions, be it intellectual knowledge or the habits of the vital, not to speak of the body's needs, and then step forth in his nude purity.

And yet this is the first and most important step in the spiritual discipline. The Mother has given us a living example of this. That is why she decided to shed all her past, forget all about it and begin anew the a-b-c of her training and initiation with Sri Aurobindo. And it was in fact at the hands of Sri Aurobindo that she received as a token and outward symbol her first lessons in Bengali and Sanskrit, beginning with the alphabet.

But all this is simply an attempt on the part of the small to comprehend something of the Vast; it is as if a particle of sand was trying to reflect a little of the sun's rays, a dwarf trying to catch at the high tree-tops with his uplifted arms, a child prattling about his mother's beauty.

In the beginning, Sri Aurobindo would refer to the Mother quite distinctly as Mira. For some time afterwards (this may have extended over a period of years) we could notice that he stopped at the sound of M and uttered the full name Mira as if after a slight hesitation. To us it looked rather queer at the time, but later we came to know the reason. Sri Aurobindo's lips were on the verge of saying "Mother"; but we had still to get ready, so he ended with Mira instead of saying Mother. No one knows for certain on which particular date, at what auspicious moment, the word "Mother" was uttered by the lips of Sri Aurobindo. But that was a divine moment in unrecorded time, a moment of destiny in the history of man

and earth; for it was at this supreme moment that the Mother was established on this material earth, in the external consciousness of man.

Let me now end this story for today with a last word about myself.

I have said that so far the Mother had been to us a friend and companion, a comrade almost, at the most an object of reverence and respect. I was now about to start on my annual trip to Bengal — in those days I used to go there once every year, and that was perhaps my last trip. Before leaving, I felt a desire to see the Mother. The Mother had not yet come out of her seclusion and Sri Aurobindo had not yet retired behind the scenes. I said to him, “I would like to see Her before I go” — Her with a capital H, in place of the Mother, for we had not yet started using that name. Sri Aurobindo informed the Mother. The room now used by Champaklal was the Mother’s room in those days. I entered and waited in the Prosperity room, for Sri Aurobindo used to meet people in the verandah in front. The Mother came in from her room and stood near the door. I approached her and said, “I am going,” and then lay prostrate at her feet. That was my first Pranam to the Mother. She said, “Come back soon.” This “come back soon” meant in the end, “come back for good.”



# 11

## I Played Football

### 1

Some of you have asked to hear about my performance in football. I have already told you something on an earlier occasion. Let us have a little more today.

I have dabbled in football almost since my birth or, to be more exact, from the time I barely completed five. My hand was introduced to the pen or chalk and my feet touched the ball practically at the same time. Would you believe it, I had my formal initiation into studies, not once but twice, and on both occasions it was performed with due ceremony on a Saraswati Puja day, as has been the custom with us. The first time it took place, I was only four years old and I cannot now tell you why it had to be at that early age. It may be that I had gone into tantrums on seeing somebody else's initiation and a mock ceremony had to be gone through just in order to keep me quiet. But I had to go through the ceremony once again at the age of five, for according to the scriptures one cannot be properly initiated at the age of four, so the earlier one had to be treated as cancelled and a fresh initiation given to make it truly valid. Perhaps this double process has had something to do with the solid base and the maturity of my learning!

But if I was to play football, I must at least get hold of a ball. Here you have your footballs by the dozen, as if they were tennis balls. But we had to move heaven and earth in those days in order to procure a single ball. Even the older boys could seldom boast of more than one, or at the most one and a half — one already half-worn and the other a mere half, an old tattered ball with a thousand patches like the shoes of Abu Salim in the story. But young people never lack devices. We discovered a substitute, the Indian grapefruit or shaddock, which looks like a ball. No doubt the touch was hard, but it could be reduced to a convenient softness with our kicks and blows and poundings with the fist. The only trouble was that the thing gave way soon afterwards on receiving such treatment. But this particular fruit was no rarity in our part of the country. There were any number of trees and it grew in profusion; there were several trees in our compound itself.

Now to announce my first victorious feat. I was then about seven, or eight at the most. The older boys were playing and I stood as a spectator, perhaps an envious one. They suddenly found themselves short of a player: one of their goalkeepers was missing. Someone called to me, “Hey, you there, would you go and take your stand at that goal? You will have nothing much to do, simply keep on standing.” A nominal goalkeeping in fact, since they had to have a goalkeeper in order to play a game. And till the very last moment, the ball did not come to our side of the field at all. It

was growing fairly dark when one of the opponents suddenly came in running and aimed the ball at my goal from a little distance. No one had any doubts as to what would happen and they all began to shout, “Goal, goal!” for how could a little kid like me manage to stop the ball? But the miracle happened: I did stop the ball and took hold of it before it could pass into the goal. Our people now cried out, “No, no, no goal!” and what a pandemonium followed! They started dancing about with me caught up in their arms. “Bravo, bravo, my dear fellow,” rang the cry all around. For me it was like the tiger’s first taste of blood, to use a hunter’s phrase.

Years went by and I grew into an expert player while still in school. I played right-out in the forward line and began to get used to that position alone. But this gave me the habit of using only one foot, the right, and I became an adept of the single foot. I could not make much use of the left, except as an occasional stand-by at need, just as Rajen still does with his right. Do you know where I got real good training in the use of my left foot? It was after I came in Pondicherry, and it took me several years to make it perfect. But I developed a different style for each of the two feet. The right was used for high long shots, such as corner kicks and overhead passes; the left was reserved for the low powerful drives. It is these left-foot drives that got me most of my goals. In the Pondicherry team there was no place for me as right-out, for the boy who played in that position could not play in any other position,

but he played very well as right-out. His name should be recorded here, it was Sinnas, Everéste Sinnas; he was an Indian Christian and the name was like that. So I was given the right-in position. I played on the right wing, and Moni (Suresh Chakravarti) played left-out. The two of us, Moni Chakravarti, or Chakra for short, and me soon acquired quite a name here thanks to our football. Our styles were very different, though. Moni's tactics were simple. Once he got possession of the ball — the ball had to be passed to him, for he seldom bothered to snatch it for himself — but once he got the ball he was irresistible. What a run he could give! He seemed to fly past the touch line and no one could catch up with him or stop him till he reached near the corner post. From there he would send a high kick which would land the ball right in front of the goal, as though it were a corner shot. I would be there to receive it and do the needful.

I played a different style. I did not lag far behind Moni in the matter of speed, but I was an extremely calm and steady player. Moni raced like a storm without caring for anything or anybody, as if it was a matter of life and death. This cost him a broken collar-bone more than once and he had serious injuries on his face and nose. I too ran fast enough, and carried the ball past my opponents whenever I could, but my aim was always to pass on the ball and to receive it back. I tried to keep my position, anticipate where the ball was likely to land and the positions our men would be found. A well-known player

from Coochbehar once remarked, on noticing the easy manner and artistic style of my game, “There is a fine individuality about your play; it is calm and steady, neat and clean and robust.” Indeed my aim was to play a clean game: no one was to touch me in the legs nor was I to touch my opponent’s body; whatever contacts came must come through the ball alone. I had nothing to do with what they call a robust game, that was miles apart from my idea of football. And that explains why after so many years of football, I have never had a fracture or injury, except for a slight twist to one of my toes. I must however confess that I too have done a bit of roughing in my days, but I was forced to it; for in those days, “push him down” was the accepted slogan and it was not treated as a foul. But even the pushing had its do’s and don’ts; you could not just push your way through as you liked.

Moni and I, and with us our club, the Cercle Sportif of Pondicherry, suddenly came into the limelight after a particular match. We had a visiting team from Vellore. This team was thought to be invincible. They had won all the matches they played on their way to Pondicherry. The first time they met with a reverse was at our hands; we won by a margin of two goals. They felt humiliated and demanded a return match the next day. It was a tense game ending in a draw, so we could keep up our prestige. They never expected to meet such a formidable team as ours in an obscure spot like Pondicherry — Pondicherry was certainly an obscure enough place from

the point of view of football. In our team, four of us were what they called “Swadeshi” players — this was the name given to those who took asylum here after doing patriotic work. All the four were from Bengal. Moni was there and Bejoy — he played centre-half — and Purnachandra Pakre, a student from Chandernagore who pursued his studies here, and myself. This Purnachandra went one better than the rest of us at least in one respect. He had mastered the Tamil language to such a degree that I could find him devouring Tamil novels of the “yellow-back” type with complete ease. How many of us here have learned even the Tamil alphabet?

Now to come back to Bengal. When we returned to Bengal after a lapse of four years and they saw us play at Rungpore, we were given the name, “Madrasi players”, and it was given out that two absolutely formidable “Madrasi 7 players” had arrived in town. So the Town Club of Rungpore decided that they must now annex the Dinajpur Shield, the most coveted trophy in North Bengal. A couple of players were “hired” from elsewhere to make the team perfectly invincible. And off we went to Dinajpur. The performance of our team had already received adequate publicity, for we had beaten Bogra Town Club by two goals. One of these goals was scored by me and it brought profuse applause. Let me stop and tell you first about that particular feat. I was playing right-out. A ball came to me about mid-field, near the touch line. The field lay practically open. The half-back, a non-

Indian, was a little farther away and I could easily pass him by. The full-back rushed at me, but he too was by-passed. As there was no point in waiting longer, I aimed a shot at the goal. But instead of shooting with the right foot — I was playing right-out you remember — I used the left. The goalkeeper was naturally expecting the shot to land on his right; instead it went to his left and got us a fine goal, and what hurrahs! Needless to add, these things do not happen by previous plan or calculations, they come in the moment and automatically. One can of course try to reason out later how it all happened. This in the parlance of Yoga is what Sri Aurobindo calls an “involved process”.

To come back to the point. It was the last match of the tournament, the final: Dinajpur Town Club versus Rungpore Town Club. Everyone felt certain that we would be the winners, ours was such a strong team; the only question was: by how many goals? We too felt the same way. However, soon after the play began, I think it was before half-time in any case, something entirely unexpected came to pass. One of the Dinajpur forwards, I cannot now recall his name but he was a very good player, finding our side of the field almost empty — we were pressing them hard on their side of the field — aimed a shot from beyond the half-boundary line, almost near mid-field. Our goalkeeper was caught napping and it was a fine score. Everybody was flabbergasted. During the next half-hour or so, we held them pressed to their goal mouth and

went on bombarding them with shots at the goal. But each time we shot, the ball struck the post or the crossbar or it hit the goalkeeper; it could never be placed inside the goal. It was a regular bombing every minute that we kept up, but nothing happened; it looked as if somebody had raised a wall against us. I tried six or seven corner kicks, all of them first-class, but to no avail. A Kumartuli player in our team was so impressed by my corner kicks that he extended to me an invitation. "Why don't you come and play in Calcutta? What is the point in wasting yourself here in a provincial town? You should come and play with us in our team." I could not accept the invitation however; I am going to tell you why. Anyhow, we did not manage to equalise that goal and had to accept defeat. I never felt so disappointed. We returned to Rungpore with heads down and not a word spoken.

But do you know what had happened? It was explained to us soon after the match by one of their outstanding players, perhaps he was their captain. He actually half belonged to our team, for his relatives lived in Rungpore and he himself sometimes came and played for the Rungpore team. "This serves you right," he said. "Mother Kali is a living goddess, you see." With this, he took out a half-pice bit from his pocket and went on, "We had been to the Kali temple, we made this offering to the goddess and said to her, 'Mother, here we have come, begging for thy protection; take this half-pice as our modest offering and give us the victory this afternoon.' Now,



see how she has got us the victory. How else could we have stood up against a team such as yours?" So that was how they won. We had been swelling with pride at our prowess and ability, somewhat in the spirit of Duryodhana haughty in the pride of his troops of the divine gift, whereas they had been modest like the Pandavas reliant on Sri Krishna. This at least was the lesson that came to me.

Let me tell you a story here in this connection. It is not a story, but a thing that actually happened. It was the time, at the beginning of the century or even earlier, when the youth of Calcutta took to football seriously and enthusiastically. And among the pioneers was the same team I spoke about just now — Kumartuli. This club had at its head as manager and inspirer a gentleman who gave his all — money, time and energy — for his organisation. He had the ambition to see his boys play and play successfully with the European and military teams. It was an ambition, for there was no comparison in those days between a team of British soldiers and a team of weakling Indians. The Indians at football were like new recruits in comparison with the seasoned Britons. First of all, the Indians all played barefooted against eleven pairs of high boots. Secondly, the Britons had strong robust beef-eating bodies while the Indians were almost airy nothings. Thirdly, the British had a long strenuous training behind them: the Indians were newcomers in the field. However, this particular Indian team worked and practised with zeal in view of a

match with the Britishers. The result, of course, was a foregone conclusion. They were lucky to get defeated by only a couple of goals.

Now the British team had a generous captain who became interested in the matter and undertook to coach and train the Indians. A big tournament came on at about that time and this Indian team was pitted against a famous military team, Blackwatch or something. The manager, the guiding spirit of the Indian team, was, as I said, a high-spirited, enthusiastic, ebullient personage; he had only one defect, if defect you call it: he was addicted to drinking. That was a fillip to increase his enthusiasm and buoyancy and dare-devilry. He used to invite his players to feastings and revelry — to inspire and encourage them. Now the day of days approached. And the gentleman was in jitters, terribly nervous: how were his boys to face these giants? And a change came upon him. On the previous day he refrained from drinking, fasted, adopted *mauna*, went to Kalighat and worshipped Mother Kali.

On the next day the hour struck and the players were about to take the field. The team of British soldiers came in carriages (there were horse-carriages in those days), with music, bugle and drum, singing and shouting, sure of their victory. They were giants indeed, each a Hercules, and the Indians were pigmies before them. The play started. Just then our manager noticed that at a distance, away from the field,

under a tree was sitting a Sannyasi. As soon as he saw the Sannyasi, he ran, ran towards him and sat before him. The Sannyasi asked what was the matter. He answered that there was to be a fight with British soldiers, our Bengali boys had to be protected, they must win. The Sannyasi enquired whether they had guns and cannons and what was the strength of the enemy. He was told that it was not that kind of battle — it was a football game. The Sannyasi shook his head and sent him away.

The gentleman returned and saw that with great effort his boys had pulled through and managed a draw game till half time. Now the danger was ahead — half an hour more. He could not restrain himself and again he rushed to the Sannyasi who was still sitting in the same position, and prayed and entreated him, saying they were threatened with defeat at the hands of Mlechchas, their honour and prestige were at stake. The Sannyasi asked, “How many killed and wounded?” The gentleman explained again it was not like that. It was a football game. The Sannyasi asked, “How many on their side?” They were eleven. The Sannyasi then asked the gentleman to get eleven bits of stone. These were collected and placed before him. The Sannyasi arranged them in a row, then drew some circles around and sprinkled water and uttered something. Then he told the gentleman to go away. He returned to the field; the game had already started after a recess. But he began to notice a strange thing. He saw one of

the soldiers — a giant of a fellow — rushing with the ball, nearing the goal and about to shoot into it, when suddenly he tumbled down and rolled over and the ball went off somewhere. In fact all the mighty heroes were behaving in a curious manner. They were running but with difficulty, as if with legs tied up. They fumbled, tottered, fell down, moved with great difficulty. Something was restraining and impeding them, pulling them back. So the result was a victory for the Indians by two goals. You can imagine what happened after this miraculous victory. The gentleman manager rushed towards the tree to thank the Sannyasi. But where was he? Nothing was there, barring the row of stones.

## 2

I did not go to play in Calcutta. One of the reasons of course was that I belonged permanently to Pondicherry and my trips to Bengal were more in the nature of holiday excursions and I did not want to enter into binding commitments. For another thing, the atmosphere of Calcutta football was one that I was not likely to cherish; we belonged to different worlds as it were.

Let me now tell you about another match, this time in Jalpaiguri. As far as I remember, it was a Jalpaiguri Shield Final, Nilphamari versus Purnea. Young Samad, the great

Mohan Bagan hero, was then playing for the Purnea team and his game was something worth seeing. Nilphamari enjoyed a peculiar kind of reputation — whether it was good or bad is for you to judge — they always played a good game but they seldom managed to win. The same thing happened this time. You will be surprised, four of us brothers were playing on the same side on this occasion. I believe one was at the goal, another at the back, the other two in the front line. Out of these, my third brother played centre-forward. He read for his Degree in Calcutta and was a member of the junior Mohan Bagan team. I alternated between the out and the in positions at the wing, but he always played centre. One of the tricks I performed on this occasion brought tremendous applause and much excitement among our spectators. I held the ball and was planning to make a run, when one of my opponents came and stood less than a couple of paces in front of me. Both of us stood perfectly still for a moment, both manoeuvring for position. Can you guess what I did next? I drove the ball past his side, got around him and picked it up again. The poor fellow was left behind, completely non-plussed. What a shout of joy rose from the crowds and what applause! I was right-out and as I passed along the touch line, stray comments reached my ears: “Blackbeard plays very well indeed, doesn’t he?” “Carry the ball yourself, Blackbeard, do not pass it on” — this because my team seldom made good use of my passes. I wore a beard in those days, you know; it was something like

a French cut. Already some of my friends had launched a campaign against my beard. “That is now wholly out of date in Bengal,” they would say. “Shave it off, throw it away.” One of them even went so far as to make me a present of a shaving set. Finally, there was no other go for me but to follow the maxim, “Eat to please yourself, but please others in what you wear.” But Sri Aurobindo did not much appreciate my beardless face; he seemed to prefer us to wear a moustache and beard, at least in those days.

I shall end this story of football with an account of my last performance in this line. By then I had practically given up and was on the “retired list”. I began as an ordinary player, then I was captain for a year, an Inspector of Games (in our club) for another year, and finally a retired man. I never played in matches any longer. The juniors now took our places. I would pay an occasional visit, however, and play just a little. They once held a six-a-side competition. The final was between our team, Cercle Sportif of Pondicherry, and the Missionaries’ team, Société le Nid. For a long time, the two teams had been keen rivals. The Missionaries never liked us, as you know, and their supporters naturally took their side. The boys of the Cercle Sportif were the enlightened, national ist element in the local population. Now, the play began. One of the conditions of the match, laid down in advance, was that if any of the players on either side were to get disabled in the course of the game, he could be replaced by another. The

Sportif boys had arranged among themselves that in case the game did not go well and they found themselves giving way, they would get someone “disabled” and take me in as a substitute. That is what happened in fact. Our team lost a goal and immediately afterwards one of our boys — he was later the Hon’ble Justice Mr. Antoine Tamby, now in retirement — sat down with a thump. He said he had got hurt and could not play any more. So they shouted for me. “Roy, where is Roy?” I was “Roy” and ready at hand. I entered the field, with my red and white uniform, the Mohan Bagan colours. I immediately changed the whole tactics of the game. What our boys had been doing was to cluster close around the ball for the purpose of short passing — three or four out of the six were doing that. There was to be a centre kick following the goal. I stood with the ball at the centre and told the two boys on my right and on my left to keep as far away as possible from the centre and to go on making long passes. I sent the ball from the centre straight to the right wing. Our outside man was ready. He took the ball and passed it back to me at the centre. I was already far ahead, almost beyond the half-back. As soon as the goalkeeper saw me rushing with the ball towards the goal, he lost his nerve: “Oh, Roy is coming!” It was an easy score. What an excitement among our boys, what uproarious hurrahs! We won by two goals in the end and the cup was ours. After the game was over, how they danced with me on their shoulders! Moni led the boys. He too, like me,

had given up playing and was on the retired list, acting only as a spectator, Moni was so pleased with this performance of mine that he took me straightway to a nearby hotel or bar. There was no Ganpatram in those days, alas!

Let me conclude this narrative with a few incidental remarks, some reflections concerning “style” in games. In my native town in Bengal I had a friend who played tennis. Once, after seeing him play, I made this comment: “There is no grammar about his play.” My dictum became a classic among our sporting circles. He used to play in what may be described as a “hit-and-miss” style. Not that he broke any rules of the game, but there was in his manner something loose and slovenly; he had no style or system. But often enough he hacked his way to victory by sheer force of vital energy. Bejoy and our Benjamin with his leech-like grip — they were the two half-backs in our team — followed exactly the same method.

In fact, there are two essentials to a good game: grammar and style, or grammar and rhythm, to use the terms of ancient rhetoric. In our time, grammar was no doubt important in school, but we were never bothered by any such bugbear in the field of sports, at least as far as our country was concerned. In those days, men became champions through sheer genius, that is, by virtue of their innate skill. Without any systematic training or practice on scientific lines, they developed a skill



in the game through some inner urge or influence. Perhaps all men of genius are creatures of this type. They say this about Napoleon too. He went on winning his victories without end and no one could stop his onward march. The old experienced generals of the enemy Powers, the Austrians for example, practically gave up trying. On being criticised for their failure, they said, "But what on earth can we do? The fellow does not observe any of the principles of warfare. How can one fight under such conditions? He breaks every rule of battle." But today we are in an age where not untrained skill but close mastery of detail and unfailing practice are the things that count.

Here in the Ashram, through your games and physical exercises, you are being trained to make the postures and movements of all the parts of your body orderly, precise and disciplined. You practise day after day, month after month, for years on end. We in our days had no knowledge of any such thing, we were utterly ignorant and illiterate in this regard. The time has now come when man has to make his advance by conscious method, not drag his feet along somehow in a blind ignorant way, not rest satisfied with what comes automatically. In our country, in ancient times at least, grammar was considered important in two fields: in the study of language and in the art of Yoga. The rules were extremely strict and there was no end of manuals and glosses. But in our ordinary life, in the art of day-to-day living, there grew up an

enormous amount of slackness and indiscipline, at least in recent times.

I have just now spoken of two things, grammar and rhythm; style is mainly a matter of rhythm but it presumes grammar, for you cannot have a good style without taking note of grammar. Grammar is like the skeleton and bony structure in a man's body; without that support and foundation, the body becomes limp like a mass of flesh. By grammar I mean the right arrangement of the different limbs. Whether it be tennis or cricket or any other game, or even ordinary jumping and running, one must know in minute detail and apply in practice the knowledge as to how the arms and chest and back and abdomen are to be held, in what position the legs should be, down to the smallest fingers and toes. And it is not enough that you control the separate movements of the different parts of the body, you have to combine all these movements into a single harmonious whole and give them a fine well-formed and one-pointed rhythm. This last quality is what characterises rhythm or style. It is said that the style is the man. It is really something that belongs to the inner man; in a game, it is a quality of the inner body-consciousness. It needs a harmony between the consciousness of the body and the inner vital being, it implies a natural sense of measure and rhythm. In our days, we did not know anything of all this. We had the gift of imagination and feeling, but now is the day of science. You have the great

good fortune that you can now acquire both these gifts, effect between the two a supreme synthesis and harmony and arrive at a higher fulfilment.

## 12

### The Soviet Gymnasts

#### 1

As you know, sometime back — quite a few years now — we had a group of Soviet Gymnasts in our midst. And what a pleasant, perfect performance they gave! Their hammer-and-sickle floating against the wind, the first time they stepped in unison on our sports-ground, marching to the tune of the Russian national anthem, surely you must still remember that beautiful spectacle. Some of their tricks and techniques we have bodily taken over. A good many of you received training at the hands of these experts. They have been heavily filmed and photographed in action and these pictures you must have seen more than once.

I draw your attention to the date on which the group went to the Mother and received Her blessings. Numerically, it is significant — 3-4-5-6, that is April 3, 1956 (a day before Sri Aurobindo came to Pondicherry in 1910). We have heard a lot about these numbers — 1-2-3-4 (February 1, 1934), 2-3-4-5 (March 2, 1945) and now this 3-4-5-6, while ahead of us lies 4-5-6-7 (May 4, 1967). Last in this series we have 5-6-7-8, the Mother's centenary, to go no further. These dates in their sequence are significant in that they indicate or represent

some occult phenomena, some happenings in the inner world, each marking a step forward in the manifestation of the new world of the Supramental.

To come back. Among the characteristics of the Soviet Gymnasts, also the major lessons one can learn from them, are these. First, difficult and complicated body movements. Such control of the body is indeed hard to acquire. It calls for physical strength and stamina, also a considerable capacity and plasticity of the limbs — the nerves and muscles. Secondly, difficult exercises are done in an extremely easy and simple manner. In fact, they are performed so effortlessly that it might seem there is nothing much in them and that anyone could do them — till one tries. Then one knows what stiff and rigorous discipline lies behind this apparent effortlessnes. Thirdly, these difficult exercises are done not only effortlessly but gracefully — the movements are rhythmic and harmonious, pleasing to the eye. Teamwork, group-efficiency, is yet another of their characteristics. Not only solo performances, but the combined movements of many persons in perfect balance, a unified cadence and orchestral pattern. Fifthly, and this point deserves particular mention, in the sphere of physical culture (as in other spheres too) the Russians make no difference between men and women. They believe that men and women can and ought to do the same exercises together, that it is pure superstition, nothing but outmoded convention to think that women are

unfit for and unworthy of such activity. Well, we have seen how expert and capable these Soviet girls can be. Today the whole world has heard with wonder and admiration about not only astronaut Gagarin but about Valentina too.

A commonplace argument often put up against women doing physical exercises is that as a result they are likely to lose their grace and femininity. Is that really so? To me it has always seemed that, thanks to these exercises, our body — women's body included — acquires a new poise and proportion. Or do tenderness and charm disappear, as some fear? Of course, those who admire the beauty of a willowy, weeping kind, the faery frailty of the sickly maid, well, they are a class apart. You have seen Valentina's photograph. To me she did not seem to lack charm and grace. Far from it. The fact is, we very often try, in vain, to hide our bodily defects and debilities under an elaborate toilet and stylish wear. But it is only a strict physical regimen or regular exercise that can cure these defects and bring out the true grace and light of the body beautiful. In reality, charm, grace or delightfulness, name them as you will, do not depend so much on physical factors and bodily formation as on something else. The source is elsewhere: it is really a reflection or shadow that is derived from the ease and clarity of the vital Force in us, and if somehow we can add to that the soul's ease and clarity, then only do we have genuine beauty, beauty from within.

It is as if the Russians have discovered a new dimension of the body. Psychologists today speak of depth psychology. According to them, at the back of our mind, there lies another hidden and profounder mental world — the unconscious or subconscious. Spiritualists and yogis speak of still another unknown and invisible world, above and beyond the mind. Somewhat in the same way the Soviet gymnasts are telling us, and more than that showing us, that there is no limit, or almost none, to the capacities of our body. At any rate, we can go a good deal further than the limits usually set for it. We think that just as plant life is conditioned by the earth, by its surface and atmosphere, it is the same with the life of men and animals too. We live and move within the temperature and the pressure of the air around us; when we go beyond them (either above or below), our ability to bear the altered conditions are extremely limited — or so we think.

But in one sense, even in the ordinary way of living, men can and do put up with a lot of inconvenience and suffering. Of course, it might be said that this is entirely due to compulsion, that there is nothing else one could do, except endure. Even in the midst of intense pain and torment people have been known to live. On the battlefield men have survived the worst calamities, even the loss of limbs. According to popular wisdom life is uncertain and quickly over, *nalinī-dalagata jalavat taralam, jīvanam atiśayacapalam*, but this is not a literal truth. Just as life can

end all of a sudden, so too it can stay on and withstand apparently impossible conditions. But, it may be said, this is due to compulsion, it is not a healthy or natural condition of our being. It is indeed painful, and what men really want is to come out of it — into a world of natural freedom. The new physical culture that the Russians are now following is meant to open up the hidden resources of the body. This they are doing with the help of knowledge, practice and endless, eager experiment. Rooted in the earth, one with the physical universe, the capacities of our body are daily and rapidly increasing. Even leaving the earth surface for the wide open spaces, one day men may (in a light, weightless condition) find a new normalcy. Where shall we draw the line on the limit of achievement?

## 2

The round of sports and athletics over, the Soviet gymnasts expressed a desire to know more about us — that is, about the aims and ideals of the Ashram, the spiritual disciplines we follow and their rationale. You know, officially and in the world's eye the Soviet Union is atheistic and follows a materialist philosophy of life. Their entire stress or faith is on this world, this life, on the physical-vital-mental being whom they call Man.



It was arranged that I should talk to the gymnasts. Following civilised traditions, this was to be a post-prandial session; that is, the conversation was to follow a rather sumptuous dinner. Food before philosophy, as they say. But, no. The Soviet gymnasts were strict dietitians, extremely cautious and restrained in their food habits. When finally we met, there were ten or twelve of them, three or four girls and the rest young men. Only the leader seemed slightly elderly. Their knowledge of English was almost nil. Russian was all they knew. When they used to train the Ashram children, funny situations would arise, for they had to express themselves mainly, sometimes vainly, through wordless hints and gestures. Anyway, one of the girls knew English fairly well and she acted as interpreter. Of her more later.

We met at a conference, as it were, in the Golconde. I started by reading out a brief passage from the *Words of the Mother*. It contained a statement of our ideal or objective — the goal of transformation, the coming race, a new consciousness and realisation. But the Soviet leader was a bit of a blunt atheist, or at least that was the role he chose to play. And in due course he raised the usual objection. “In times like ours,” he said, “what we need is health and wealth. All our activities and education must be conducive to these normal aims. After all, men have to live. First, therefore, the care of the body, time enough for the soul afterwards. First this world, then the rest.”

“Why not a little division of labour?” I told the group. “You keep to your social reform or revolution, if you please, your physical culture and your secular pursuits. Spare us from them. Why not let us to go ahead with another kind of aim and work? After all, we do not mind your doing what you like to do. It is only fair that you should allow us to go our own way. Isn’t this the ideal of co-existence?”

But then, the ideal of co-existence finds little favour with the radical communists. Their one aim is to destroy or convert — that is, brainwash — the opposition. Somewhat in that spirit the Soviet leader continued his criticism. “But if you tempt people away from their normal social duties,” he said, “and if by degrees people are drawn towards the soul and the beyond and all that, will that not prove to be ruinous for the race and did not something like this actually take place in the history of the Indian people?” “*Mā bhaiḥ*, fear not,” I assured him. “Only a few turn to this path. After all, out of millions and millions how many — or how few — come this way?”

But they countered my remark by saying that though we might be few in number, our influence might spread, quite out of proportion to our number — which, by the way, is true. Then they raised another doubt or objection: that the kind of education given to the children in the Ashram, forcing a doctrine on their young, unsuspecting minds, what was it but a kind of indoctrination?

“No, sir,” I replied. “For one thing, we never ask, much less force anyone to come here, we offer no rewards or temptations. On the contrary, we make it quite clear that the path chosen here, the training and the education are indeed hard. Sharp as the razor’s edge, our sages have called it. So one should choose carefully. And out of those who still insist on joining us, only a few are permitted. Of course the children know little or nothing, but the parents who bring them here do. At least they have been told. It is, however, true that there are some children who are conscious and know fairly well what they are doing and why they are here. After staying here and seeing things for themselves, many of them make up their minds to stay on; they refuse to go elsewhere. Also, ours is not a medieval monastery, a lifelong entombment, so that once you get in you can never get out. Here anyone can leave at any time. One has full freedom in the matter. In other words, the very first principle, the foundation of our life and teaching in the Ashram, is freedom and individuality. No one is cajoled or persuaded to follow the spiritual aim or spiritual path. If one wants to know something, one knows it freely, of oneself; if one wants to understand something, one does it in freedom. At every moment you are free, you can step in any direction you like, provided you are ready for the consequence. In fact, we have few compulsory codes or taboos here, only those that are absolutely necessary to keep group-life together for any length of time. “Discover your

own rule or law of being for yourself,” that is our primary instruction. Where is compulsion in all this? As for the atmosphere, the climate of opinion’, wherever men live, in whatever age, society or country (even in your Soviet State) one has to ‘belong’. The common man, the citizen, cannot help breathing in the atmosphere of his age or milieu. But here, and only here, we warn everyone, we tell them, well ahead, to be conscious of all that is happening around and within; we tell them to watch, understand and scrutinise what it is that they are taking in. This is not indoctrination but its exact opposite.

“In all this, where does spiritual discipline come in? What is its necessity? First and foremost comes the care of the body, then only other considerations. That is what one may naturally think. But it is wrong to think that for spirituality, outward comfort and affluence are a necessity. Those who want bodily comfort are apt to remain content with that, all their efforts are confined to finding the means of such enjoyment or euphoria. But the spiritual seeker, even in the midst of suffering and discomfort, will move towards the spirit. In fact, he uses his very adversity for spiritual ends. The true seeker longs for the spirit in the midst of comfort and discomfort alike, while those who do not want the higher life, do not want that, quite apart from being comfortable. In spite of what many think, material factors do not determine these things. The Mother once said something to this effect. In

order to relieve the disciples from all thoughts of earning their livelihood, she had planned an external order of untroubled living, so that aspirants might find the time and opportunity to dedicate themselves completely to spiritual living and realisation. In practice, however, she found that this does not always work.” “All right,” said the Soviet guests. “But suppose that while you are engaged in your own spiritual growth and culture, for want of the good life, the rest of the human race goes to the dogs — what then?”

To this my answer was and is: “The majority of men are obviously busy with the pursuit of worldly ends and creature comforts. This has been so always and the indifference or withdrawal of a few aspirants will not matter much. As to the human race ending up in smoke, we would say that the race is not going to be snuffed out so easily. It has never been like that. What wars and devastations we have had down the ages, what upheavals and revolutions! Millions dead and dying and yet the race is still going strong. Not only that, it is evolving, progressing. In spite of everything the standards of civilization are going up. Even you admit progress — of some kind. Perhaps you will say, but all this is a gift of the reason or the intellect. We will say it is a gift of the soul, or of the soul and its bearer, the intellect, together. If this soul were not there, man could not, would not survive. It is because of this active, immortal spark within him that he lives and shall continue to live and progress towards perfection. Don’t

worry. No amount of outward loss or danger can wipe him out. Man will disappear only when the soul in him withdraws or is extinguished.”

Of course, to present-day Russians ideas like these are illusions or delusions, which they treat with a sceptic smile.

In the end they raised a rather funny question. “Here we find a very pleasing sight,” they began. “We mean the groups of little children and your love and affection and solicitude for them. It’s very rare and very touching. You like children so much and yet we are told you do not like to be parents of children. We don’t understand this.”

“Do you understand self-restraint?” I asked them. “We are told not to drink, not even smoke. Why?”

“Because the effect of drinking and smoking on the body, especially the body of an athlete, is harmful. That’s why,” they replied.

“Exactly so,” said I. “When you’ve progressed a little further, you too will arrive at our conclusion.”

At this they all laughed, perhaps somewhat incredulously.

But it is indeed so: all those who wish to acquire a special power, benefit or perfection, who set out to acquire a new capacity — in our case nothing short of a transformation of the body, life and mind — for them such self-imposed restraint is a “must”. And so I say again: *mā bhaiḥ*, fear not.

The world will not come this way all at once or immediately, and the world will not collapse because of our unwillingness to add to its population. As for the future who can tell? Who can say that the time-worn biological process shall remain, for all time, the only means of birth and manifestation? Today, ignoring the weight and other limitations of the body, ignoring the laws of Newtonian physics, we travel, with what ease, across the distance and the silence of infinite spaces. As in the physical field so in the field of life, who can say that new rules will not emerge? Sri Aurobindo has openly hinted at such a possibility.

Our society is based on blood or parental relations. But the Russians themselves have tried to set up another set of relationship — social instead of parental. Taking the children away from their parents, they are rearing them in socialised crèches, schools or kindergartens. To them the parents are but secondary instruments. The child belongs to the State, to the service of the almighty State. The average parents have neither the ability nor the resources that the State possesses. Now, if instead of the secular State we think of a spiritual group, or use the word ‘God’, a new and altogether different possibility opens up. Not the link of biology but the closeness of the spirit within is all, the same in all, a relationship in terms of Reality or the Divine. How deep and intimately satisfying such a relationship, based on Truth, can be. I think

our Soviet gymnasts had a glimpse of that truth here in the Ashram. And naturally they wondered.

3

Earlier I spoke of the lady interpreter in the Soviet group. Impersonal and neutral, she would translate, as clearly as possible, their words or the official view. In all this she never expressed any personal opinion. Yet I had a feeling that she did not fully share the official views or conclusions. Now and then she seemed to hesitate. Somewhere, she seemed to feel, life held other values, another dimension. In her conduct and conversation we found her extremely amiable. As she was leaving she told us that this time she had come as part of an official delegation, but one day she hoped to come on her own and alone. I have a feeling that she did come again, with another member of the group.

I believe that those who come to the Ashram and receive the direct touch of the Mother do not come suddenly or by accident. It is not just a has-been, a fact that might as well not have been. Some deep inner necessity brings them here, to the Mother. It is, you might say, the push of the deity within, though they might not know anything about it and it does not matter if outwardly they are sceptical or atheistic. Unknown



to themselves, they surely have some opening somewhere — it is that which brings them here.

Either individually or as representatives of the Russian people it was such a call, some future fulfilment that had prompted the group to come here — such an idea may be more than idle imagination. Or is it the coming truth, the coming event that has cast its shadow before?

## 13

### My Athletics

There is in the Upanishad a description of the stage in man's life when he becomes so old and decrepit that he cannot walk except on a stick, *tvam jīrṇo daṇḍena vañcasi*. At precisely that stage in our life, we in the Ashram received a call to plunge into the activities of our Playground. I was then perhaps the oldest among the inmates, and had long passed the fifty-year limit once set by the ancients for retiring to the forest, *pañcāśordhe vanam vrajet*; I was in fact in my early sixties.

For at least twenty years previous to that, we had been taking it rather easy and were doing very little physical work or exercise. That had been what might be described as a period of inner preparation, a time devoted almost entirely to meditation and study. Lest however I should lose all elasticity of body, I had been making use of two opportunities for some kind of exercise. One was to ride on a bicycle once a week to the local French Post Office and back. The Mother used to receive her foreign mail in those days through that Post Office, and on me had devolved the task of bringing in the mail. That incidentally was how I got my famous headgear: it came in connection with this particular item of work. During summer, the hot summer months of Pondicherry, I had to go

to the Post Office in the blazing sun. It was quite a distance in those days and I felt I needed some kind of protection for my skull. I struck upon a device. The mail had to be carried in bags, one or two white canvas bags. I folded them up in two and put them on my head, the two corners of the bags sticking out on either side like a pair of horns. This gave the children of the local school an occasion for a hearty laugh one day: “*Quel bonnet! quel bonnet!*” — “What a cap! what a cap!” they cried. When I mentioned this to the Mother, she said, “All right, we shall see.” We had a French lady, called in the Ashram by the name Sarala, staying with us here at Belle Vue, with her husband who was known as Shuchi. Shuchi died later and was buried in the public cemetery in Pondicherry. This Sarala was asked to devise something for my head. It was she who designed my skull-cap which has since been the inspiration for many a subsequent imitation.

In this connection let me tell you another amusing story. One day a packet addressed to the Mother came to the Post Office from Japan. It was war time and the rules were very strict, lest any kind of undesirable matter should find entry. One of the Post Office employees, a Frenchman, opened the packet in my presence. He found in it nothing else except a single sheet of paper with something on it that looked like a sketch — just the branch of a tree. The official handed me the paper with obvious disappointment, adding his comment, “*Une branche quelconque*” — “some sort of a branch!” The

“*branche*” happened to be a fine piece of Japanese painting. But who would appreciate that? Not in any case a detective of the Post Office. I mentioned the incident to Sri Aurobindo. He could never forget the story; at the slightest opportunity he would come out with that “*une branche quelconque*”.

Now to come back to the point. I was speaking of the kind of exercise I had in those days, that medieval period of our existence you might call it. The second item in my physical education programme was still more impressive. It consisted in giving a very careful washing to my clothes when I took my bath. This allowed some exercise to the limbs and body and I considered this as the minimum needed for keeping up the physical tone; it did duty for push-ups and dumbbells and everything else. I should add another item: that was walking, a kind of morning walk. Early in the morning every day I used to go out and deliver to the sadhaks the letters written to them by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. In those days, of course, the Ashram houses were not so many and not so far apart, so it was not exactly a 1500 or 5000 metre walking race.

As I told you, we received the call to join the Playground activities. I was enlisted in the Blue group. In those days it was the Mother who decided who would go to which group; in any case it was done with her knowledge and approval. Udar was our captain. We started learning the steps, “*Un, deux, tin, deux*”. Ages ago, I had done some military marching with

the Volunteer Corps, but that was only for a few days. I remember how in that enthusiasm for everything Swadeshi, they had started giving the marching orders in Bengali: “Turn to the left”, “Turn to the right”, “Drop out” (instead of “Dismissed” or “*Rompez vos rangs*”)!

I had to start this new athletic career without any preliminary practice or training. Many of you may recall how we joined in our first competitive tournament, on the site along the sea-face where the Tennis Ground stands — they had not yet been built. I had no knowledge of the special technique, there was no warming up or anything. We just walked in and took our positions along the starting line, and off we went as soon as the whistle blew. We simply ran for our lives, with the result that I sprained a thigh muscle in my first run. Luckily, this happened near the goal, so I could finish the race. The results were not bad: I shared the second place with Pavitra and Yogananda — the first position went to someone, a sannyasin who is no longer with us. I took part in the long jump in the same manner, without any previous practice or warming up. Some people advised me to do a little preliminary training, but I was obliged to reply, “My sole events in the course of a whole year are a single race and three jumps. They do not deserve more.” This is the opening chapter in my new career of athletics.

At that time I had not the faintest notion that one day I would develop into a regular athlete, that is to say, undergo all kinds of training and exercise. I told you once about the difference between the physical training activities here and the way we used to set about them in our time. This is the age of science and those were the days of untrained skill. Let me illustrate from an experience I had in football. We never observed the rule that a proper warm-up is needed before one joins the game. We entered the field straightway, and it happened several times that after the first long run at the beginning of the game I felt absolutely worn out and wondered how on earth I was going to last through the game. Of course, everything was all right after a while and the body received a new influx of energy as it got warmed up — we used to call it “heating up the blood”. Today, the first and most important principle of any kind of game or other exercise is training, a detailed and minute training. Formerly, one could pass off as a master by simply mastering the rules of the game. This applied not only to games like cricket or football; even in our own native wrestling and lathi-play, “training” meant nothing more than getting acquainted with all the tricks and applying them correctly in practice. But that is not what is now meant by training. Training implies a special preparation of the body, making it fit for a special kind of activity. First of all, one has to acquire a general all-round physical fitness. Next, one has to find out which parts of the

body and which muscles are specially called into action in any particular movement and they have to be specially trained to give them the necessary strength, endurance and skill, exactly like a material instrument, as if they were bits of dead matter. In whatever activity you wish to specialise, for specialisation seems to be the aim of physical culture today, you have to prepare yourself for it; the preparation itself becomes the main objective, the end in view is relegated to the second position. You take part in a 100 metre race for only a few seconds. But in order to prepare for the race, you have to train for several hours every day, for days on end over a period of months and perhaps years.

Formerly, the entire emphasis was on the game itself, not so much on the person who played the game; it used to be said that it was the game that made the player. But now the scales have turned the other way: the player has become the main interest. The concentration is on the player himself and his training is the main thing. He has first of all to build up the body, next his vital forces, and finally even his mind and will power have to be geared to the end in view; the inner psychological factors are taken particularly into account today. In science too the same thing is noticeable, even in the study of physical science. Formerly, the whole effort of science lay in discovering and establishing the existence of the separate, self-existing and independent elements in Nature and in finding out the mechanism of their action through the

methods of observation and experiment. Now, it is being said, observation and experiment are all right so far as they go, but at the same time one cannot ignore the person who makes the observation and experiment; he too has an importance, perhaps a prime importance.

To a certain extent, I too have gone through this phase of modern training, as you all know. I have given up the old methods of learning by rule-of-thumb and have tried to acquire some kind of proficiency through a process of regular training, following in the footsteps of many among you, although I may not have been able to tread the lines of our Madanlal. His theory seems to be that the more effort you put in, the greater becomes your skill or ability and that there is no game on earth you cannot master by sheer dint of hard work. Madanlal himself is a living proof of his doctrine, for he is without a rival in this method of hard, painstaking practice. There are, as you know, two main types among those who do well in studies or, shall we say, there are two ways of becoming a good student. There are those who, gifted with natural intelligence and ability, waste the whole year in all sorts of extracurricular activities and pleasures and pastimes and then read up for days and nights for a month or two just before the examination and get through the test and even secure high places. There is the second type who read and work hard throughout the whole year, devote some time every day to their studies, and never run the risk of falling ill or



having a nervous breakdown about the time of the examination on account of excessive work. Our Madanlal belongs to this second category. He is really out to prove by his own example that definition of genius which makes it nothing but the capacity for taking infinite pains.

I have to mention another name in this connection. For much of what I have now achieved in the field of athletics I owe a deep debt to our Chinmoy. He has been my coach. What have I learnt from him? It is enthusiasm. What do I mean by enthusiasm? I shall explain. One of the secrets of physical training is that you must always try to perform a little more than your capacity, or what you may think is the limit of your powers. Perhaps it was with this end in view that in our time, when one had to exercise a particular part of the body, the instructions were to go on repeating the movement until one began to sweat and felt exhausted. For how long am I to manipulate the dumbbells or the Indian clubs? Until you are tired, the chart said, that is, until you felt you could do no more. Now of course, nothing is done by such haphazard guesswork. You have to repeat the movements for a certain definite number of times, by actual count, say, five or six repetitions for the first day, to be increased by one or two every day or every week, a final limit being set in respect of each individual according to his capacity. This is the method of scientific training today.

Whatever the method you adopt, your strength and capacity have to be increased in this manner. If you go beyond your limits, there is always a chance of accidents, but you accept the risk. The carefree enthusiast asks you to hitch your wagon to a star whereas the more cautious would point to the tragedy of Icarus. The legendary hero of Greek mythology had invented wings for man to fly, but he built them of wax. His aim was to reach the sun, but when he came near that burning orb the wax got melted by the heat and his wings melted and he hurled back headlong down to earth.

Well, it was from Chinmoy that I got the courage or the foolhardiness for an attempt of this kind. This has been a great help to me. But there was a considerable resistance born of old age, even though we are here precisely to get rid of that. The resistance comes from two sources. It is there, first of all, in your own individual consciousness; you have heard the adage about getting old before twenty. It is true that here in the Ashram we are often apt to forget, or we try to forget, to take account of our age. For example, even at the age of sixty, I did not quite realise or rather my body did not feel — it is quite natural for the mind not to feel, but the body itself must realise — that it carried any load of more than twenty-five or thirty years. This kind of feeling must have come at one time or another to many among the older people here. This is indeed the root idea behind our desire to conceal our true age and reckon our age at less than the true figure. This recourse

to a slight falsehood comes from an attempt to express and maintain the fact of our youth that is still effective in our life and inner consciousness in spite of our years. But the inexorable law of the external physical nature is still in operation. It invades our mind and pains it at times. Moreover, in addition to this resistance in our own individual consciousness or frame of mind, there is pressing upon us from all around the collective resistance, a resistance that comes from the consciousness and mental attitude of everybody else, the neighbours with whom we live. Even if we manage to forget, they will remind us of the pressure of advancing age. It is difficult ordinarily to escape from the influence of this double pressure. But to get rid of this influence and pressure is, after all, the very aim of our endeavour here.

## Eternal Youth

This is about the time when you, the young, the children had not arrived here. The few of us who were here had grown up, many had become aged, even old; that is to say, they had passed middle age. I often wondered: Well, we here, we grew up, we are becoming old. What will be the nature of this institution long after, twenty or thirty years after? Will it not be the home of a band of old men, of monastic sannyasis, an immobile structure without growth or evolution? However wise or accomplished we may be inwardly, however young or green in consciousness, however far our vision may stretch towards the unseen future, yet externally, in the midst of surrounding society, will we not become like an isolated island?

One day the proof came through an interesting event. After the mid-day meal I was taking a little rest lying on the bed, suddenly a baby burst out weeping by the roadside window just near my head, and that went on for a pretty long time. I could not maintain my patience any longer, I got up and saw through the window a man standing by the side of the baby, perhaps its guardian. I said to him, "Can't you silence the baby?" That gave him the chance and the man burst out, "What do you care? You do not keep children,

neither will you have any, you are comfortably living in solitude — what does it matter to you?” At that time I did not conceive that not only a few children, but hordes of them would invade, there was no fear of the blank that I was apprehending before me.

In an unexpected manner, yet most smoothly the blank was filled up. In our institution or around it, there remained no room for a full stop, not even for a comma or a semicolon; a continuous unbroken line developed, beginning from the very old to the very young, an unbroken flow of age, way of life, consciousness — all that has been your contribution.

How the young ones, the children, and the parents of the children arrived here, an account has been given by the Mother. This has been, above all, a gift of the war; when the ill omen of the comet appeared in the sky of India, that is to say, when there was the panic of bombing by the Germans and the Japanese, even when their arrival in this country seemed imminent, then many thought that the only safe place was at the feet of the Mother in Pondicherry. Therefore their solicitations reached the Mother. The Mother said that it was not possible for her to refuse them. So the doors of the *achalā-yatan* were opened and you came in!

But all this is external. It was like this from the outside — but there was also an internal necessity, an indispensable necessity.

The young brought in their youth, that is to say, a new vital force, and that turned out to be an asset in the atmosphere here. For them the Mother had to open the school, the gymnasium; the playground had to be prepared. Under the influence of that green new life, dry branches flowered, as it were, in the external life also of us, who were the old. After almost twenty or twenty-five years, at the age of sixty, I had to join the playground and do the gymnastic drill, and I am continuing doing that for the last twelve years. This is the fact of life not only for myself; this is the history of many old men and it is a unique feature of this Ashram. Not only in respect to the body, even in our mental make up, there came youth and newness; for in order to teach the children we had to learn the elementary lessons again, and that brought new fertility to the brain, there can be no doubt about it. Even from the standpoint of education, by teaching young people, the elders get no less benefit than the young.

Besides you have made other contributions too. About this I have told you already. The Mother's creation is not an isolated construction, that is, it is not a self-satisfied, self-sufficient community, separated from the common universal life. The Mother's work encompasses the whole world, it aims at a transcendence taking up the young and old, the men and women of the Ashram as well as the whole human race. We work for the emergence of a great human race out of this human race and as a consequence a new development of the

whole creation. Therefore we require a community which will be representative of the whole human race; that is to say, what is not here is nowhere else in the world; we represent a complete sample of the whole earth, the whole human race. However various are the elements which constitute this earthly life, our institution will be a picture of that — a laboratory, as it were, for new creation. Which element has to be purified, which transformed and in which way, which has to be rejected altogether — all this is being experimented upon here. What has been accomplished here has created a possibility, a beginning for the whole earth, the whole human race.

In this way the coming of the young is going on daily, the fixture is coming to us with its possibility — and still there is something more.

I have spoken about the indispensable necessity of youth — fresh life and living aspiration, are the contribution of the young. But what is lacking in the young and has to be acquired is a peaceful mind and a wider consciousness. With strong vitality there must be pure luminosity, with motion there must be vision. It is this that is the contribution of old age. With long experience comes wisdom, with wisdom knowledge — consciousness progressing gradually becomes settled understanding. It goes without saying, that mere age

does not mean wisdom, likewise mere youth does not mean progress — at least, not always or everywhere.

Bankim has said, “Are years alone the measure of time?” So youth or old age cannot be judged merely by years. It is seen that old age has sometimes come in youth, that youth is retained in old age — such instances are not rare. Certainly you will remember the picture drawn by the Mother — the picture of the supramental boat. There the Mother could not find the well-known old people — all there were tender or young, the old could come there only by becoming young. But one should remember that supramental youth is the youth of rich and ripe consciousness. May be that is something higher than both youth and old age.



# 15

## **The Second World War (1939-1945)**

### ITS INNER BEARINGS

This is a war to which even spiritual seekers can hardly remain indifferent with impunity. There are spiritual paths, however, that ask us to render unto God what is God's and unto Satan what belongs to Satan; in other words, spirituality is kept apart from what is called worldliness, clean and untouched by the dust and murk of Ignorance — Maya. The injunction accordingly is that they who are worldly must remain worldly, they have no business, no right to meddle with spirituality; and they who are spiritual, on the other hand, should remain strictly spiritual, should have nothing to do with worldliness. Because of this complete divorce between the spiritual and the worldly, the world remains worldly even today, and continues to be the empire of unspirituality and obscurity, of suffering and grief; it is unable to become a dynamic and living expression and embodiment of the Spirit.

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An abridgement of this essay was broadcast from the All India Radio Delhi Station on December 4, 1942.

Not that spiritual men have not served and worked for the welfare of the world; but their work could not be wholly effective, it was mixed, maimed, temporary in effect. This could not be otherwise, for their activity proceeded from inferior and feebler sources of inspiration and consciousness other than those that are purely spiritual. Firstly, little more was possible for them than to exercise an indirect influence; their spiritual realisation could bring into the life of the world only a reminiscence, an echo, just a touch or a ray from another world. Or, secondly, when they did take part in worldly affairs, their activity could not rise much beyond the worldly standard; it remained enclosed within the sphere of the moral and the conventional, it took such forms as charity and service and philanthropy. Nothing higher than ideas and ideals confined to the moral, that is to say, the mental plane, could be brought into play in the world and its practical life — even, the moral and mental idea itself has often been mistaken for true spirituality. Thus the very ideal of governing or moulding our worldly preoccupations according to a truly spiritual, a supramental or transcendental consciousness, was a rare phenomenon and even where the ideal was found, it is doubtful whether the right means and methods were discovered. Yet the sole secret of changing man's destiny and transmuting the world lies in the discovery and application of a supreme spiritual Conscious-Power.

Humanists once affirmed that nothing that concerned man was alien to them, all came within their domain. The spiritual man too can make the affirmation with the same or even a greater emphasis. Indeed the spiritual consciousness in the highest degree and greatest compass must needs govern and fashion man in his entire being, in all his members and functions. The ideal, as we have said, has seldom been accepted; generally it has been considered as a chimera and an impossibility. That is why, we repeat, even to this day the world has its cup of misery full to the brim — *anityam asukham*.

All this has to be said by way of explanation and apology. For if we are spiritual seekers, even then or rather because of that, we too, we declare, have our say in a matter which looks so mundane as this war. We refuse to own the nature and character so often ascribed to us by the West, which finds a graphic description in the well-known lines of Matthew Arnold:

The East bow'd low before the blast,  
In patient deep disdain.  
She let the legions thunder past,  
And plunged in thought again.

In fact, however, there is no insurmountable disparity between spirituality and “worldliness”, between meditation

and the most “terrible work” — *ghore karmaṇi*: the Gita has definitively proved the truth of the fact millenniums ago. War has not been the monopoly of warriors alone: it will not be much of an exaggeration to say that the Avatars, the incarnations of the Divine, have done little else besides that. And what of the Divine Mother herself? The main work of an Avatar is often to subdue the evil-doers, those that follow and pull others to follow the Wrong Path. And the Divine Mother, she who harbours in her bosom the supreme Truth and Consciousness and Bliss, is in one of her essential aspects, the slayer of the Demon, of the Asura.

Now, it is precisely with the Asura that we have to deal in the present war. This is not like other wars — it is not a war of one country with another, of one group of Imperialists with another, nor is it merely the fierce endeavour of a particular race or nation for world-domination: it is something more than all that. This war has a deeper, a more solemn, almost a grim significance. Some thinkers in Europe, not the mere political leaders, but those who lead in thought and ideas and ideals, to whom something of the inner world is revealed, have realised the true nature of the present struggle and have expressed it in no uncertain terms. Here is what Jules Romains, one of the foremost thinkers and litterateurs of contemporary France, says:

“Since the end of the Middle Ages, conquerors did harm perhaps to civilization, but they never claimed to bring it into

question. They ascribed their excesses and crimes to motives of necessity, but never dreamed for a moment to hold them up as exemplary actions on which subject nations were called upon to fashion their morality, their code, their gospel.... Since the dawn of modern times the accidents of military history in Europe have never meant for her the end of her most precious spiritual and moral values and a sudden annulment of all the work done by the past generations in the direction of mutual respect, equity, goodwill — or, to put all into a single word, in the direction of humanity.”

Modern thinkers do not speak of the Asura — the Demon or the Titan — although the religiously minded sometimes refer to the Anti-Christ; but the real, the inner significance of the terms is lost to a mind nurtured in science and empiricism: they are considered as more or less imaginative symbols for certain undesirable qualities of nature and character. Yet some have perceived and expressed the external manifestation and activities of the Asura in a way sufficient to open men's eyes to the realities involved. Thus they have declared that the present war is a conflict between two ideals, to be sure, but also that the two ideals, are so different that they do not belong to the same plane or order; they belong to different planes and different orders. On one side the whole endeavour is to bring man down from the level to which he has arisen in the course of evolution to something like his previous level and to keep him imprisoned there. That this is

really their aim, the protagonists and partisans themselves have declared frankly and freely and loudly enough, without any hesitation or reservation. Hitler's *Mein Kampf* has become the Scripture of the New Order; it has come with a more categorical imperative, a more supernal authority than the Veda, the Bible or the Koran.

When man was a dweller of the forest, a jungle man akin to his forbear the ape, his character was wild and savage, his motives and impulses crude, violent, egoistic, almost wholly imbedded in what we call the lower vital level; the light of the higher intellect and intelligence had not entered into them. Today there is an uprush of similar forces to possess and throw man back to a similar condition. This new order asks only one thing of man, namely, to be strong and powerful, that is to say, fierce, ruthless, cruel and regimented. Regimentation can be said to be the very characteristic of the order, the regimentation of a pack of wild dogs or wolves. A particular country, nation or race — Germany in Europe and, in her wake, Japan in Asia — is to be the sovereign nation or master race (*herrenvolk*); the rest of mankind — other countries and peoples — are to be pushed back to the status of servants and slaves, mere hewers of wood and drawers of water. What the helots were in ancient times, what the serfs were in the mediaeval ages, and what the subject peoples were under the worst forms of modern imperialism, even so will be the entire mankind under the new over-lordship, or something

still worse. For whatever might have been the external conditions in those ages and systems, the upward aspirations of man were never doubted or questioned — they were fully respected and honoured. The New Order has pulled all that down and cast them to the winds.

Furthermore, in the new regime, it is not merely the slaves that suffer in a degraded condition, the masters also, as individuals, fare no better. The individual here has no respect, no freedom or personal value. This society or community of the masters will be like a bee-hive or an ant-hill; the individuals are merely functional units, they are but screws and bolts and nuts and wheels in a huge relentless machinery. The higher and inner realities, the spontaneous inspirations and self-creations of a free soul — art, poetry, literature, sweetness and light, the good and the beautiful — are to be banished for ever; they are to be regarded as things of luxury which enervate the heart, diminish the life-force, distort Nature's own virility. Man perhaps will be the worshipper of Science, but of that Science which brings a tyrannical mastery over material Nature, which serves to pile up tools and instruments, arms and armaments, in order to ensure a dire efficiency and a grim order in practical life.

Those that have stood against this Dark Force and its overshadowing menace — even though perhaps not wholly by choice or free-will, but mostly compelled by

circumstances — because of the stand they have taken, now bear the fate of the world on their shoulders, carry the whole future of humanity in their march. It is of course agreed that to have stood against the Asura does not mean that one has become *sura*, divine or godlike; but to be able to remain human, human instruments of the Divine, however frail, is sufficient for the purpose; it ensures safety from the great calamity. The rule of life of the Asura implies the end of progress, the arrest of all evolution; it means even a reversal for man. The Asura is a fixed type of being. He does not change, his is a hardened mould, a settled immutable form of a particular consciousness, a definite pattern of qualities and activities — *gunakarma*. Asura-nature means a fundamental ego-centricism, a violent and concentrated self-will. Change is possible for the human being; he can go downward, but he can move upward too, if he chooses. In the Puranas a distinction has been made between the domain of enjoyment and the domain of action. Man is the domain of action *par excellence*; by him and through him evolve new and fresh lines of activity and impulsion. The domain of enjoyment, on the other hand, is where we reap the fruits of our past Karma; it is the result of an accumulated drive of all that we have done, of all the movements we have initiated and carried out. It is a status of being where there is only enjoyment, not of becoming, where there can be development and new creation. It is a condition of gestation, as it were; there is no new



Karma, no initiative or change in the stuff of the consciousness. The Asuras are *bhogamaya puruṣa*, beings of enjoyment; their domain is a cumulus of enjoyings. They cannot strike out on a fresh line of activity, put forth a new mode of energy that can work out a growth or transformation of nature. Their consciousness is an immutable entity. The Asuras do not mend, they can only end. Man can certainly acquire or imbibe Asuric force or Asura-like qualities and impulses; externally he can often act very much like the Asura; and yet there is a difference. Along with the dross that soils and obscures human nature, there is something more, a clarity that opens to a higher light, an inner core of noble metal which does not submit to any inferior influence. There is this something More in man which always inspires and enables him to break away from the Asuric nature. Moreover, though there may be an outer resemblance between the Asuric qualities of man and the Asuric qualities of the Asura, there is an intrinsic difference, a difference in tone and temper, in rhythm and vibration, proceeding as they do from different sources. However cruel, hard, selfish, egocentric man may be, he knows, he admits — at times if not always, at heart if not openly, subconsciously if not wholly consciously — that this is not the ideal way, that these qualities are not qualifications, they are unworthy elements and have to be discarded. But the Asura is ruthless, because he regards ruthlessness as the right thing, the perfect thing; it is an integral part of his swabhava

and swadharma, his law of being and his highest good. Violence is the ornament of his character.

The outrages committed by Spain in America, the oppression of the Christians by Imperial Rome, the brutal treatment of Christians by Christians themselves (the Inquisition, that is to say) or the misdeeds of Imperialists generally were wrong and, in many cases, even inhuman and unpardonable. But when we compare them with what Nazi Germany has done in Poland or wants to do throughout the world, we find that there is a difference between the two not only in degree, but in kind. One is an instance of the weakness of man, of his flesh being frail; the other illustrates the might of the Asura: his very spirit is unwilling. One is un-divine; the other anti-divine, positively hostile. They who cannot discern this difference are colour-blind: there are eyes to which all deeper shades of colour are black and all lighter shades white.

The Asura triumphs everywhere for a while because his power is well-built, perfectly organised. Human power is constituted differently and acts differently; it is full of faults and flaws to start with and for a long time. There is no gap anywhere in the power of the Asura, no tear or stitch — it is streamlined, solid, of one piece; it is perfection itself in its own kind once for all. Man's being is made up of conflicts and contradictions; he moves step by step, slowly and laboriously, through gradual purification; he grows through

endeavour and struggle. Man triumphs over the Asura only in so far as he moulds himself in the ways of the divine power. But in the world, the Divine and his powers remain behind, because the field of actuality in front is still the domain of the Asura. The outer field, the gross vehicle of man — body and life and mind — all this is constituted by Ignorance and Falsehood; so the Asura can always establish there his influence and hold sway and has actually done so. Man becomes easily an instrument of the Asura, though often unwittingly; the earth is naturally in the firm grasp of the Asura. For the gods to conquer the earth, to establish their rule in the earth consciousness requires labour and endeavour and time.

No doubt, the violences indulged by men in older times, especially when they acted in groups and packs, were often inflamed and inspired by an Asuric influence. But today it must be clearly seen and recognised that it is the Asura himself with the whole band of his army that has descended upon the earth; they have possessed a powerfully organised human collectivity, shaped it in their mould, using it to complete their conquest of mankind and consolidate their definitive reign upon earth.

As we see it we believe that the whole future of mankind, the entire value of earthly life depends upon the issue of the present deadly combat. The path that man has followed so

long tended steadily towards progress and evolution, however slow his steps, however burdened with doubt and faintness his mind and heart in the ascent. But now the crucial parting of the ways looms before him. The question is, will the path of progress be closed to him for ever, will he be compelled to revert to a former unregenerate state or even something worse than that? Or will he remain free to follow that path and rise gradually and infallibly towards perfection, towards a purer, fuller, higher and vaster luminous life? Will man come down to live the life of a blind helpless slave under the clutches of the Asura or even altogether lose his soul and become the legendary demon who carries no head but only a decapitated trunk?

We believe that the war of today is a war between the Asura and men, human instruments of the gods. Man certainly is a weaker vessel in comparison with the Asura on this material plane of ours; but in man dwells the Divine — and against the divine force and might, no asuric power can ultimately prevail. The human being who has stood against the Asura has by that very act sided with the gods and received the support and benediction of the Divine. The more we become conscious about the nature of this war and consciously take the side of the progressive force, of the divine force supporting it, the more will the Asura be driven to retire, his power diminished, his hold relaxed. But if through ignorance and blind passion, through narrow vision

and obscurantist prejudice we fail to distinguish the right from the wrong side, the dexter from the sinister, surely we shall invite upon mankind utter misery and desolation. It will be nothing less than a betrayal of the Divine Cause.

The fate of India too is being decided in this world-crisis — on the plains of Flanders, on the steppes of Ukraine, on the farthest expanses of the Pacific. The freedom of India will become inevitable and even imminent in proportion as she becomes cognizant of the underlying character and significance of the present struggle, deliberately takes the side of the evolutionary force, works for the gods, in proportion as she grows to be an instrument of the Divine Power. The instrument that the Divine chooses is often, to all appearances, faulty and defective, but since it has this higher and mightier support, it will surely outgrow all its drawbacks and lapses, it will surmount all dangers and obstacles and become unconquerable. This is what the spiritual seeker means by saying that the Divine Grace can make the lame leap across the mountain. India's destiny today hangs in the balance; it lies in the choice of her path.

A great opportunity is offered to India's soul, a mighty auspicious moment has come, if she can choose. If she chooses rightly, then can she arrive at the perfect fulfilment of her agelong endeavour, her life mission. India has preserved and fostered through the immemorial spiritual

living of her saints and seers and sages the invaluable treasure, the vitalising, immortalising power of spirituality, so that it can be placed at the service of terrestrial life for the deliverance of mankind, for the transfiguration of the human type. It is this for which India lives; by losing this, India loses all her reason of existence, her *raison d'être*; the earth and humanity too lose all significance. Today we are in the midst of an incomparable ordeal. If we know how to take the final and crucial step, we come out of it triumphant, with a new soul and a new body, and we will make the path straight for the Lord. We have to recognise clearly and unequivocally that victory on one side will mean that the path of the Divine — of progress and evolution and fulfilment — will remain open, become wider and smoother and safer; but if the victory is on the other side, the path will be closed perhaps for ever, at least for many ages, and even then the travail will have to be undergone again under the most difficult conditions and circumstances. Not with political shortsightedness, not out of considerations of convenience or diplomacy or narrow parochial interest, but with the steady vision of the soul that encompasses the supreme welfare of humanity, we have to make our choice: we have to go over to the right side and oppose the wrong one with all the integrity of our life and being. The Allies, as they have been justly called, are really our allies, our friends and comrades, in spite of their thousand faults and defects; they have stood on the side of the Truth

whose manifestation and triumph is our goal. Even though they did not know perhaps in the beginning what they stood for, even though perhaps as yet they do not comprehend the full sense and solemnity of the issues, still they have chosen a side which is ours, and we have to stand by them wholeheartedly in an all-round comradeship if we want to be saved from a great perdition.

This war is a great menace; it is also a great opportunity. It can land humanity in a catastrophe; it can also raise it to levels which would not have been within its reach but for the occasion. The Forces of Darkness have precipitated themselves with all their might upon the world, but by their very downrush they have called upon the higher Forces of Light to descend. The true use of the opportunity offered to man is to bring about a change, better still, a reversal, in his consciousness; it will be of highest utility if it forces upon him by the pressure of inexorable circumstances — since normally he is unwilling and incapable of doing it through a spontaneous inner awakening — the inescapable decision that he must change and shall change; and the change is to be for the birth of a spiritual consciousness in earthly life. Indeed the war might be viewed as the birth-pangs of such a spiritual consciousness. Whether the labour will be sublimely fruitful here and now or end in barrenness is the question the Fates and the gods are asking of man, the mortal being, today.

*September 1942*

## 16

### The Situation of Today

11 February 1965

It is not of today, nor of yesterday, but also of the day before yesterday and the day before and the day before. The story is as old as human consciousness itself. Whether it will be the same tomorrow remains to be seen.

It is the fate of all spiritual endeavour to raise in its wake a contrary movement that declares and demands its negation. The Buddha says: surrounded as we are by enemies, let us not be inimical to them. The Christ, as we all know, with a crown of thorns on his head and nailed to the cross, heaved a sigh and prayed to the Lord to pardon all those who did not know what they were doing. In the early centuries of the Christian era when Rome sought to spread her gospel of Christendom and extend its frontiers, the vandals rose up against it and from their barbarian soil of Germania swept through the countries like a hurricane, laying waste everything before them till they reached the Holy City itself, pillaging and ravaging it, desecrating the basilica — leaving their name as an immortal legacy to mankind for their deeds. And centuries later, the little maid of Orleans, Jeanne d'Arc, was burnt alive, because she said that she saw angels and heard their voices



and conversed with God. And Mohammad, whose glory today rings reverberant in all the four corners of the globe, in his day was tracked from place to place like a hunted animal. Since then the situation seems to have worsened, not improved; for even as late as the enlightened nineteenth century, towards its end, we find a poignant picture, drawn by the great dramatist Ibsen, of the social crisis of today, in which the people, the masses, are not capable of recognising their own secular good — not to speak of any higher spiritual welfare — and one who does or tries to do a really good turn to them is dubbed an “enemy of the people”.

Today the opposition is infinitely greater. The call now to humanity is for an infinitely greater change — an inner change in the consciousness and an outer change in life and material existence. Also the change is to be a radical change, that is to say, from the very root, not merely a superficial reform. The aim is not to leave the world as it is or just a little better in some ways, if possible, but to remould it in the very substance and the constitution of the Spirit. And the ultimate goal of earthly life is not the Divine’s crucified body, but the perfected glorious body.

Naturally, the old habits, the millennial forces, the ignorant and obscure movements of instinct and tradition cannot suffer such an upsetting. Earthly creatures, wherever they are, cannot bear the Light that descends to illumine the

earth. Its impact is too strong: the beings that abide in cool shades or cosy darkness struggle and wriggle, they fear to be dissolved; they desire no change. But the decree had gone forth. And earth moves... towards the Light.

Sri Aurobindo founded the Ashram to give a form to the descending Light, to make of man an angel, not leaving him to remain an animal or half animal as he now is.

The Mother's dream from her childhood was to find a place upon earth where men would be free, happy, wise, pure, one in love, above want, dwelling in the plenitude of prosperity, both inner and outer. She was building up, she is building up a structure in that direction, naturally under the restrictions and conditions of prevailing circumstances, seeking to open them out for the play of a higher order of consciousness, a superior status of being, a luminous mode of life.

Opposition from the stagnant order, opposition from domains that do not want man to be free from his past and present and become a being of the future, is inevitable in the nature of the things. Opposition is also meant to be a test and a training for perfection. Through troubles, tribulations, through whatever accidents and incidents that happen, we move unflinching to the Divine Fulfilment.

Trials and tribulations are not new to the Ashram. From the first day Sri Aurobindo planted the seed here more than

half a century ago, it has been buffeted by bad weather. He was advised to quit, offered a cosy retreat in the Himalayas by the Imperial British. The French regime offered him an equally agreeable resort, a peaceful haven on the Mediterranean coast of Africa. And even among well-wishers here, some were eager to take him out for a joy ride to... an unknown destination. But Sri Aurobindo had made his choice. This is the holy spot, this is the seat for his sadhana and siddhi — Pithasthan. The Mother has not abjured his choice, she continues.

Even so the Buddha had taken his seat under the Bo-tree and declared: I am here and I do not move. Let my body dry up, I sit firm and go through, to the end.

The passage to heaven, Sri Aurobindo says, lies through hell. Here is his warning and beckoning:

Here must the traveller of the upward way —  
For daring Hell's kingdoms winds the heavenly route—  
Pause or pass slowly through the perilous space,  
A prayer upon his lips and the great Name.

\*

Where the red Wolf waits by the fordless stream  
And Death's black eagles scream to the precipice...

The nether forces can never divert or deflect the Divine Decree. That alone is carried out and fulfilled. And in His Will is our peace.

When a mountain surges up, lifts its peak high in the heavens, an opposite movement is generated that seeks to drag it down and bring it to the original level ground — the result being formidable glaciers and cataracts and landslides hurtling down. But through these accidents and incidents — they are no more than that — the mountain remains firm, the living structure that is to be there abides in its integrality and greatness, although the accidents look like a tearing and a mauling of its body.

Through all contraries and adversities, through all things that are broken and torn, through all events that pass and disappear grows slowly and emerges irrevocably that which the Supreme wills towards the final consummation. And one day we all shall see

Built is the golden tower, the flame-child born.



The Mother with Nolini

## **Note on the Text**

Most of the chapters comprising this book were first spoken in Bengali to the students of one of Nolini Kanta Guptas classes; these chapters, along with a couple of later, written ones, were made into a book entitled *Smritikatha* in 1963; brought out by the Sri Aurobindo Pathmandir, Kolkata, it was reprinted in 1967. An English translation first appeared in 1969, published by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, under the title *Reminiscences*. This book contained not only Nolini's reminiscences but those of two other early disciples, K. Amrita and Suresh Chakravarti. In the present (second) edition, these two reminiscences have been omitted. The text of Nolini's reminiscences in the present edition contains the same material as the first, but there are a few corrections of factual errors and some minor revisions of the original translation. The text of the first edition, it may be noted, was incorporated in the complete works of the author in Volume 7, *Sweet Mother (New Talks)*.