

Recent Publications

Sabta



The main characters in the 1949 production of *Towards the Future*: the Poet, the Clairvoyant, and She

In 1949 the Mother wrote and directed *Vers l'Avenir*, or *Towards the Future*, a one-act play, which was performed for the annual 1st December programme of the Ashram school. Our feature article in this issue offers a thoughtful interpretation of the play which highlights its idealism, examines the inner conflicts of its protagonists, and also reveals how the social and moral attitudes of those days shaped the audience's reaction to its theme.

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Towards the Future: a play written by the Mother

I discovered this play in 1995 while looking for a short play which would have only four or five characters. I started doing a bit of research before beginning rehearsals because besides directing it I was myself playing a role, so I had to be fully prepared before starting work. To my surprise, I found out that the play had not been performed again after it was first staged in 1949. In the forty-six years that separated that first production from ours most of the members of the original cast had passed away. Fortunately, the two main actresses were still there—Arati Das Gupta and Millie-di (Bratati Bhattacharya). Much of the information that I eventually gathered came from the conversations I had with them.

Before saying anything, it should be understood that this play was written for a performance which was going to be held within the next six months. It was not a literary piece written just for the pleasure of expressing oneself. In the early years of the Ashram school, the annual programme was a variety show in which a play was generally the main item. For some years the Mother chose French plays which were light-hearted comedies. Although the younger members enjoyed watching and acting in these plays, the older *sadhaks* found them a bit too light-hearted for their taste. Perhaps the Mother felt that it was better to write an original play, the theme of which was more in harmony with the atmosphere of the Ashram, and this is how she wrote the three plays which we find in her collected works. We must keep in mind that all three were written originally in French, and what we get to see in the Collected Works of the Mother is the English translation.

Towards the Future, or *Vers l'Avenir* as it is called in the original French, is the only proper play the Mother wrote, as the other two cannot strictly be called plays. *The Great Secret* is a series of monologues which were not even all written by the Mother, and *The Ascent to Truth* is a collection of short scenes with very simple dialogue and very little action, the structure of which does not correspond to the classical forms of drama. In contrast, *Towards the Future* has the structure of a one-act play—once the curtain goes up it only comes down at the end. There are no scene changes and no changes of costume or props. There is drama in the

form of the inner conflicts of the protagonists and a complexity of emotions. The narrative is compact, and the action takes place in real time, within an hour. The Mother not only wrote this play for a performance but she also directed that first performance.

The basic story of *Towards the Future* concerns a woman who has a great urge to turn her life towards spiritual seeking and finds her opportunity when she sees that her husband has found another companion. The new woman is a singer and a clairvoyant, with the gift of being able to see some occult realities. She comes to their house when the wife is out, to ask the husband for help in her career. The husband, who is a poet, at once feels that he already knows this woman, perhaps from another birth. When the wife comes back she understands that her husband is torn between his loyalty to her and his realisation that the clairvoyant is the person he is destined to live with. She steps forward from the shadows where she had been standing and announces that she will leave so that her husband and the clairvoyant can make a new life together. She makes it clear that she has had a deep aspiration to lead a spiritual life and now she is free to follow that path.

The plot revolves around the three main characters—the wife, the poet and the clairvoyant. The two other characters, the painter and the schoolfriend, are there to serve a purpose. It is the presence of the schoolfriend which allows the audience to know what the wife is thinking: we come to know that she is dissatisfied with her life as she speaks with her friend. Their conversation also gives us a glimpse of the wife's strength of character. The painter, on his part, takes the story forward by introducing the clairvoyant to the poet. The presence of these two characters also creates a variety of moods within the play and allows us to see certain facets of the main characters.

Right at the outset the Mother says that this play can be set in any culture because the theme is universal. Keeping this in mind, she has made the text free from all culture-specific words and she has not even given any names to the characters. They are

all identified by what they do or by a capacity they have. This is why the husband is simply called “the poet” and his friend is “the painter”, the woman who is the neighbour is the “clairvoyant musician” and there is a “schoolfriend”. The main protagonist, the wife of the poet, is simply called “She”.

I started by preparing for my own role, the role of the clairvoyant, before I could direct the others. In the English translation of the play she is called “the clairvoyant musician” but it would be more accurate



The Poet and She

to call her “the clairvoyant singer”. As this role had been played by Arati-di I spoke to her to find out what the Mother had told her about the role. It was during that conversation that I understood not only the nuances of the character of the clairvoyant but also through that I understood the tone of the whole play. Suddenly everything fell into place. The Mother had given very clear instructions about how that role had to be played and getting the performance of that character right was crucial to getting across the right message.

According to the Mother there are no villains in this play. All the three characters are sincere in what they are doing. It would be easy to assume that the poet is attracted to another woman, the clairvoyant, because he is looking for some novelty in his life and that the wife “catches” him red-handed, which

prompts her to leave him out of anger and as a punishment. But this is not at all what the Mother had in mind. According to her, the poet and the clairvoyant recognise from the moment they meet that they have known each other for a long time, that they are soul-mates. It is the recognition of a deep inner relationship they already have. The entire play hinges on this very important fact. The relationship of the poet and the clairvoyant singer is not based on physical or emotional attractions. They are two souls who are destined to meet and continue

their inner journey together, a journey which they had started in another life perhaps. Once they meet, “She” can follow her own destiny of leading a spiritual life.

As we began rehearsals I had assumed that the role of “She” was the most difficult to play but actually the other two main roles are also difficult because even unconsciously one must not give out the message that there is a play of passions. The

Mother had insisted that the clairvoyant singer should not do anything that looks as if she is trying to attract the poet. The reason why the singer is called “the clairvoyant” is because she can see beyond the physical reality, and this already suggests that she is above the ordinary level on which most people live—she is not a frivolous woman.

Having understood that the clairvoyant singer is innocent, the next mistake that the reader or viewer of this play could make is to look on the poet as the flawed character. But in fact, he is not to be seen as a weak person either. He is someone who has a difficult choice before him when he meets the singer and realises that he is connected to her in some way already. The Mother, as the playwright, has made us aware of his unease in the relationship with his wife. Although he knows that he has not found the ideal

relationship with his wife, he is not really thinking of leaving her. In fact, he is deeply worried about her future when he sees that he cannot even contemplate a new life with the singer without thinking of what would happen to his wife.

This leaves us with the final difficulty—that of interpreting the complex denouement at the end of the play, which in the view of the playwright is actually a happy ending, the problem presented at the beginning being resolved. Those who could not see that there was a problem at all could not see that the end brought a solution. The theme of the whole play was a bit too avant-garde for its time. After the performance, the French government officials, who were customarily invited to the annual programmes of the 1st and 2nd December, left without coming to thank the Mother as they usually did. It was clear that even they had been quite shocked by the story. The fact that the wife was leaving the husband was something that the people in the audience, Indian as well as French, found hard to accept. Many of those who had watched the play thought it was about infidelity and a wife abandoning her marital duties.

During the preparation of our performance in 1995 I got the impression that when the play had first been performed in 1949 it had left the viewers a bit uneasy. From what I gathered as I spoke to a number of people, it was a piece of writing which, being a work of fiction, was not given much importance by most. I also came to understand that it was the whole question of a man-woman relationship, its difficulties and its undertones of unhappiness, that had left everyone quite baffled and unsure of how to relate to it, and so the work was not taken up again for a performance on stage for all those years.

For many people who watched that performance it was difficult to grasp what exactly made the couple part ways so easily. They felt that the play was somehow justifying the way the poet is attracted to another woman even though he was married and the way he desires to be united to this woman about whom he knows so little and that too within minutes after having met her. The point that most people did not catch was that the husband and the wife were already dissatisfied with their lives but had not admitted this to each other.

Perhaps the reason why this play was nearly forgotten was because there were many points that were not very obvious to the viewers. For example, it was unclear for many in the audience why the wife was leaving her husband. They wondered why she was not happy with him. After all, she wasn't in a violent or abusive relationship. The poet has great respect for her, and in one scene in the play where the couple is together and alone, they seem to have a perfectly normal conversation. At no point during that scene do they seem unhappy together. It was difficult for people to understand that they both wanted something else, something more. It was also very intriguing for people to see the stand the wife takes in front of her husband's sudden attraction for another woman. Why was she not hurt or angry? For 1949 the play offered too many unanswered questions.

There was clearly a gap between the playwright and her audience. The Mother surely took it for granted that everyone would understand that the couple in question was looking for a deep fulfilling companionship where the two could be united at all levels of their being. The wife says at the very beginning of the play that her life is empty. She points out to her schoolfriend that she and her husband are good friends and adds, "Esteem and mutual concessions create a harmony that makes life quite bearable; but is that happiness?" On his side the husband says, when he is alone, "I admire her, I feel a deep respect for her... But all that is not love... Love! What a dream! Will it ever become a reality?"

The Mother had obviously set her story in the Parisian artists' milieu of the late 19th century in which she had lived and in which the concept of romantic love, or something more than that, was accepted and understood and where social conventions did not have the last word. But it was hard for the audience in Pondicherry to understand why anybody would want anything more than living without disagreements under one roof. In the Indian context of the times a loving companionship, even romantic love, was not essential to a harmonious married life. Marriage was more about duties than personal fulfilment.

The Mother intended to draw the attention of the audience to the great aspiration which was burning in the wife's heart. She had been inwardly preparing herself for a life in which she could serve a higher purpose when this incident takes place. The Mother



The Poet and the Clairvoyant

would not have created a character who would set out on a spiritual path because she is bitter about her personal life. Sri Aurobindo has said that one must not turn to the spiritual life out of disgust or in an attitude of defeat towards ordinary life. He says that it should be out of a desire to make this life better and more meaningful than it is. This is why the last part of the play is so powerful and moving, because the wife wishes the poet and the singer a happy life and announces with joy that she is now going to start on a new path in her life. In the moment just before the curtain falls the poet takes the wife's hand and in a gesture of respect bends down to touch his forehead to it.

The Mother must have really worked hard to get this play ready for the stage. Firstly she wrote it well in advance, some time in the summer of 1949. Then she got the cast together, assembled them in a room in Golconde, and had the whole play read out to them. She organised the rehearsals and directed the actors and actresses. Training the actors was no easy job because the play was going to be performed in French, and some of the members in the cast were

not familiar with the spoken form of the language. I am told that the rehearsals were held at Nanteuil, in one of the rooms where Sri Smriti is now located, so that no one would see the actors while they were working. After that she chose the costumes, taking saris from her own wardrobe for the actresses. In those days a makeshift stage was built at the western end of the Playground for the 1st December programme. That too was part of the preparations. The Mother had the backdrop painted and decided on the props. Sahana-di was asked to sing offstage the song which the poet hears and which is supposed to be the voice of the clairvoyant.

The first thing the Mother did after writing the play was to read it out to Sri Aurobindo to get his opinion and approval. Champaklal writes about this and recreates from memory their conversation:

When Mother came for Sri Aurobindo's food tonight she brought yesterday's file and started reading the sheets to him when he was taking food.

...

When Mother finished reading Sri Aurobindo nodded his head and said: Ah, ah.

Mother asked: How did you find it?

Sri Aurobindo : Very good.

Mother: Can it be played?

Sri Aurobindo: Yes, I suppose it can be played (and again he nodded his head).

Mother: Sahana will sing from the back stage. B's voice is beautiful, has volume, it is sweet; she understands.... A, who read the Rose of God, has fine expression, eyes are rounded as required. V knows French well, but her part is brief. Men will be dressed in pants and ladies will be in saris because the modern dress is very ugly. [Champaklal Speaks, 1975, pp 76-7]

Many have assumed that the story is modelled on a chapter from the Mother's own life, and that this was probably how she and Henri Morisset separated. But in my opinion this assumption is incorrect, firstly, because the Mother never mentioned anything about it and secondly, because this is a story that could have happened to anyone in an urban context, especially in a European context. A married couple separating was not something so impossible, from a European perspective at least, that the reader or viewer would have to find a parallel in the Mother's own life to see where the story came from. Some think that because the heroine has no name, is simply called "She", that it must be a way of keeping the identity of the woman secret. As I have mentioned earlier none of the characters have a name, it is not the wife alone who is unnamed.

Moreover, to me it is clear that the story is set in the time in which it was written. There is a clear reference at the beginning of the play to "the marvellous teachings that guide our life". In her last long monologue the wife says, "I shall go and join those through whom we have found the path, they who hold the eternal wisdom and who have, from a distance, guided our steps till now. Surely they will give me shelter." This could be a reference to the Mother and Sri Aurobindo and the Ashram. The woman wants to go to a spiritual community because she says "surely they will give me shelter". Either the Mother meant by that a spiritual community somewhere in the world or she could have referred to the Ashram itself. If we take the second possibility to be true then the wife cannot be the Mother herself.

However, as I have mentioned earlier, there are indications that she might have drawn inspiration from incidents that she must have seen around her during her life in Paris. She not only knew several artists but was connected through them to many others who were a part of the cultural scene of that epoch. In this play most of the characters are engaged in some creative activity and earn a living from it. We have, thus, the artist, the poet and the singer.

K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, in his biography of the Mother, points out that it is very strange that the poet and the clairvoyant are supposed to be neighbours, and that too for six months, but they

have never seen each other. This may seem unusual for Indian towns but it is a perfectly normal situation in metropolitan cities like Paris where people live in apartment buildings and may never get to see or know the people who live in the next building.

The reaction of the audience to our 1995 performance was positive and there was a general appreciation of our work. The subject of the play did not bring up any specific comments because it seemed so normal—in fact, some even said that they had found the answers to questions and doubts which they had in their minds. In my desire to be faithful to the original production I had kept the ladies' costumes the same as in the first one, but the men were in *kurta-pyjama*. Some in the cast had even felt, as we neared the performance day, that I should have gone all out to present it as a contemporary play and given the actors everyday contemporary clothes as costumes.

Indeed, today, fifteen years after our performance and sixty years after it was written, the Mother's play *Towards the Future* has a contemporary feel and no one would feel uncomfortable watching it. In fact, the title says it all. The *Future* towards which the Mother was pointing has come, and now the audience would be able to understand the need for personal fulfilment in life, a fulfilment which goes beyond the satisfaction of finding a partner with whom one can live the dream of true love. As I write about this play and think over the issues it deals with, I feel that, with all the social and cultural changes that have taken place in India, even over the last decade, it will surely find an audience which will appreciate it. Today, even if it means going against social conventions, there is a greater acceptance of the individual's need for spiritual fulfilment.

— Sunayana Panda
Sunayana Panda, who holds an MA in English Literature, was a student at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education. She is on the editorial team of The Golden Chain, the alumni journal of the SAICE, and has been actively involved in the staging of many of Sri Aurobindo's literary works.

RECENT PUBLICATIONS

ENGLISH

Compilations from the Works of Sri Aurobindo

The Gita in the Vision and the Words of Sri Aurobindo

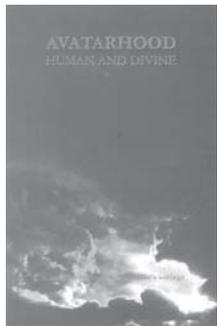
Publisher: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, Pondicherry

339 pp, ISBN 978-81-7058-935-8, Rs 240

Size: 16x24 cm

Binding: Soft Cover

This book provides a seamless fusion of translation, interpretation, and commentary on the Gita in the words of Sri Aurobindo. Nearly all of the 700 *shlokas* or verses of the Gita have been translated or freely rendered by Sri Aurobindo, mostly in *Essays on the Gita* but also in *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, and in essays and articles published in *Essays Divine and Human* and *Essays in Philosophy and Yoga*. The editor, following the order of the Gita's Sanskrit *shlokas*, has woven together these various translations and added explanatory passages, an introduction, and a conclusion, all compiled from *Essays on the Gita*. A distinctive feature of this scholarly work is the use of boldface type to indicate those portions of the text that are renderings of the Sanskrit verses, thus incorporating translation and commentary in an unbroken continuity. *See review on page 10*



Avatarhood: Human and Divine

Publisher: Auroville Foundation, Auroville

74 pp, Rs 70

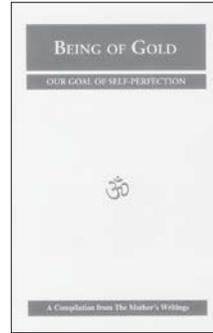
Size: 14x22 cm

Binding: Soft Cover

Divided into four sections, this compilation presents selections from Sri Aurobindo on the nature and purpose of Avatarhood. Section One is compiled from

Chapter XV of *Essays on the Gita*, "The Possibility and Purpose of Avatarhood". Section Two contains extracts from Nirodbaran's *Correspondence with Sri Aurobindo*. Section Three, selections from *Letters on Yoga*, explains the purpose of Avatars and Vibhutis in the evolution and addresses typical misconceptions about their incarnations. The final section contains excerpts on the Avatar's life in the world as one who comes to open the way for humanity to a higher consciousness.

Compilations from the Works of the Mother



Being of Gold

Our Goal of Self-Perfection

Publisher: The Centre for Indian Studies, Auroville

364 pp, Rs 200

Size: 14x21 cm

Binding: Soft Cover

This compilation presents the Mother's vision of the ideal society. Part One, titled "There is Nothing But That", contains

excerpts from the Mother's conversations and writings on the nature of the universe and the possibility of a new species in the evolution. Part Two, titled "The Seed of the Gnostic Society", looks at how the ideal society could be achieved, working out the problems of the individual through the emergence of the psychic being, and the conditions required for the creation of a Gnostic collectivity. An appendix includes additional works related to the theme: two stories, the play *The Great Secret*, and some of the Mother's comments on Sri Aurobindo's *Thoughts and Aphorisms*.

Compilations from the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother

Reprints from All India Magazine booklets

Publisher: Sri Aurobindo Society, Pondicherry

Footprints of God

56 pp, ISBN 978-81-7060-291-0, Rs 60

Size: 18x25 cm

Binding: Soft Cover

The Four Aids to Yoga-siddhi

32 pp, ISBN 978-81-7060-296-5, Rs 30

Size: 14x20 cm

Binding: Soft Cover

Our Road from Matter to Eternal Self

32 pp, ISBN 978-81-7060-297-2, Rs 30

Size: 14x20 cm

Binding: Soft Cover

Sri Aurobindo's Message

40 pp, ISBN 978-81-7060-298-9, Rs 30

Size: 14x20 cm

Binding: Soft Cover

Other Authors

Mother You said so...

— Compiled and designed by Huta

Publisher: The Havyavahana Trust, Pondicherry

113 pp, ISBN 978-81-87372-24-0, Rs 200

Size: 18x24 cm; Binding: Soft Cover

This book records conversations which the Mother had with Huta from 1955 to 1973. Huta recorded the talks from memory and sent them the next day to the Mother for corrections. In these revealing talks, the Mother teaches Huta how to live the true inner life and constantly encourages her to overcome her problems and difficulties, to reject the influence of the adverse forces, and to open herself completely to the Divine. In addition, the Mother talks to her about the Future Painting. Also included are a few letters written by the Mother.

See review on page 15

Following in Their Footsteps

Discovering Sri Aurobindo's Life in England and The Mother's Life in Japan

— Sunayana Panda

Publisher: First Feature Ltd., London, UK

126 pp, ISBN 978-0-9562923-1-5, Rs 160

Size: 14x22 cm; Binding: Soft Cover

This series of travel essays combines historical research, city walking tours, and textual references from the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother to explore the various places in England and Japan where Sri Aurobindo and the Mother lived. The author muses on how these different physical environments and cultural influences may have contributed to the human aspects of their lives. Also included are essays on Sri Aurobindo the poet and the Mother as an artist, two areas of their lives in which their contact with England and Japan has played an important role. All essays but one have been previously published in journals.

See review on page 17

Golconde: The Introduction of Modernism in India

— Pankaj Vir Gupta, Christine Mueller, Cyrus Samii

Publisher: Urban Crayon Press, Washington, D.C., USA/
New Delhi; 98 pp, ISBN 978-0-9795534-4-8, Rs 1600

Size: 25x25 cm; Binding: Soft Cover

Using a combination of historical narrative, early and recent photographs, architectural plans, and extracts from letters and diaries of those involved in the work, this book gives a history of the design and construction of Golconde, a dormitory for residents of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, and the first structure in India to use reinforced

concrete throughout. The authors, a team of three contemporary architects, lay emphasis on its technologically innovative design, the precise craftsmanship in every detail, and the spirit of modernism with which the original architects conceived and carried out their design while addressing the harshness of the local climate, the scarcity of building materials, and a labour force untrained in modern construction methods.

See review on page 12

Uttara Yogi

— Arup Mitra

Publisher: Niyogi Books, New Delhi

576 pp, ISBN 978-81-89738-55-6, Rs 495

Size: 14x22 cm; Binding: Hard Cover

This historical novel takes place in pre-independent India, at a time when efforts were being organised to throw off British rule. Through the narrative of the fictional character Harimohan Datta, who meets and befriends Sri Aurobindo, the author recounts the story of Sri Aurobindo's life and his rise to prominence as a leader of the nationalist movement. Interwoven with the well-known events and historical personalities of the day are varied characters who become involved in the adventures, betrayals, and tales of patriotism that move the story to its conclusion, the arrival of Sri Aurobindo in Pondicherry on 4 April 1910.

See review on page 19

Passage: An Educational Journey

— Edited by Deepti Tewari

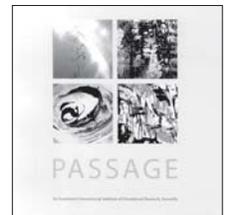
Publisher: Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research, Auroville
132 pp

ISBN 978-81-903346-3-1, Rs 795

Size: 22x22 cm

Binding: Soft Cover

This book presents in very broad strokes an experiment in free progress education from Last School in Auroville. The first part of the book, using many quotes from the Mother, summarises the aspiration at the base of Auroville's educational experiments. The second part, which is a photo essay and the main component of the book, presents *Passage*, the art installation created by four teenaged students of Last School. Part Three outlines some of the guidelines and methodologies used by their teachers. The book concludes with a few selections from Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, offered as lights on the way towards an education for the future.



OTHER LANGUAGES

FRENCH

Une Nouvelle Éducation pour une Nouvelle Conscience
— Choix de textes de Sri Aurobindo et de la Mère
ISBN 978-81-7058-936-5 Rs 250
L'éducation intégrale telle que l'envisagent la Mère et Sri
Aurobindo et comment elle peut contribuer à l'émergence
d'une « nouvelle conscience » au-delà du mentale.

ITALIAN

Destino e Libero Arbitrio — Parole dagli scritti di Mère e
Sri Aurobindo Rs 75
ISBN 978-81-7058-965-5
Yoga integrale e psicoanalisi - III : Sull'Amore
—Miranda Vannucci Rs 500

SPANISH

La Vida Divina - Libro II : El conocimiento y la ignorancia
— Sri Aurobindo Rs 1500
ISBN 978-84-935352-7-8
Enseñanzas de Sri Aurobindo y la Madre — Guía de textos
recopilados por Nacho Albalat, Nityananda Rs 200
ISBN 978-1-895383-62-1

BENGALI

Sri Aurobinder Rajnaitik Jeeban O Tatporjo
— Dr Soumitra Basu Rs 15
Sri Aurobinder Chandannagare Shubha Padarpaner
Shatabarshiki Smarak Sankalan : Sri Aurobindo's Holy
Arrival at Chandernagore (A Centenary Commemorative
Volume 1910–2010) — Articles by various authors Rs 150
Sri Suresh Chandra Rachana Sangraha – Part 2
— Suresh Chakravarty hc Rs 150
Samagra Jibanee Yoga : Sri Aurobinder "The Synthesis
of Yoga" pustaker duti adhyaya avalambane — Debabrata
Majumdar Rs 10
ISBN 978-81-7060-292-7
Jodi Sri Aurobindo Anugami Hote Chai : Sri Ma-Sri
Aurobinder Lekha Avalambane — Debabrata Majumdar
ISBN 978-81-7060-295-8 Rs 35

GUJARATI

Antarmukhee Jeevan — Compiled from the works of Sri
Aurobindo and the Mother Rs 120

HINDI

Antarik Roop se Jeena — Compiled from the works of Sri
Aurobindo and the Mother Rs 85
ISBN 978-81-7058-932-7

Bhakti Sudha : Mantra aur Bhajan
— Compiled from various sources Rs 75
Nari: Naye Yug Main : Srīma-Srī Aravinda ke Alok main
— Compiled from the works of Sri Aurobindo and other
sources Rs 35

KANNADA

Sri Aravindara Mahakavya Savitri — Sri Aurobindo
hc Rs 250

ORIYA

Savitri (Padyanuvad) — Sri Aurobindo Rs 220
ISBN 978-81-7058-947-1
Maanka saha Prasnottara — The Mother hc Rs 220
ISBN 978-81-7058-948-8

TAMIL

Sri Aravindarin "Deiveega Vazhkai" yin Saram
– Vol 2 (Part 2) — M. P. Pandit Rs 300
ISBN 978-81-7509-120-7

TELUGU

Sri Aravindula Chintanamrutamu
— Dr T. Prasanna Krishna Rs 100

ORDERING INFORMATION FOR BOOKS

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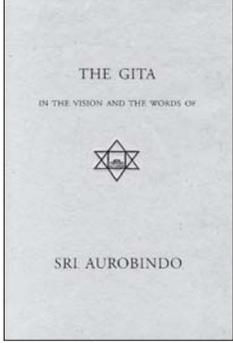
Fax +91 413 222 3328

Email mail@sabda.in

Web <http://www.sabda.in>

The Gita in the Vision and the Words of Sri Aurobindo

Publisher: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, Pondicherry
339 pp, ISBN 978-81-7058-935-8, Rs 240



Size: 16x24 cm

Binding: Soft Cover

Very often devotees of Sri Aurobindo ask, “Has Sri Aurobindo not translated the Bhagavad Gita?” The answer is yes and no. He has not translated every *shloka*, one by one in chronological order—no! But if one went through all

of his works then one would find ninety percent of the Gita’s *shlokas* translated or freely rendered into English. A translation from one language to another is always a difficult task and especially when the two languages have totally different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, normally a word for word translation of the Gita from Sanskrit to English would be a clumsy effort. On the other hand, an elaborate explanation of every *shloka* would lose the charm of reading the Gita in English. And yet look at Sri Aurobindo’s renderings of the verses from the Gita. They are precise, concise, and at the same time one does not feel one has entered into a foreign language. He has been able to preserve the intense atmosphere and the sanctity of the Sanskrit language. He expresses and expounds the ideas most aptly as only he can. The supreme advantage that Sri Aurobindo’s translation has over others is four-fold: he is a master in English; he is also a master in Sanskrit, with an in-depth knowledge of the language; he has studied the Indian scriptures (Gita, Upanishads, Vedas, etc.) deeply and widely; and last and most important, he has a vast spiritual knowledge and experience as a base. When one considers this then one is not satisfied with any other translation, however close it might be to the original.

For those who love Sri Aurobindo single-mindedly and would like to have the meaning, both the external and the inner significance, of every *shloka*, in his words, then there is nothing like *The Gita in the Vision and the Words of Sri Aurobindo*. Every word here is from the original writings of the Master. *Essays on the Gita* does not give us translations or renderings of the Gita *shloka* by *shloka*. But here one has that and more. The

commentaries, blended so skilfully with the translations, offer the reader an elaborate yet very much to-the-point description and meaning of nearly every *shloka*. As the editor Galeran d’Esterno mentions in his postscript:

The length of the translated *shlokas* varies considerably, because Sri Aurobindo elaborated some of his renderings in order to better bring out their significance. The deeper truth of the *shlokas* is here revealed, and with all their implications, suggestions and allusions brought to light, they become more penetrating, more vibrant and alive in us.

Perhaps the best way to understand the wonder of Sri Aurobindo’s renderings is to make a few comparisons. Several books have been published offering translations of the Gita’s *shlokas* based on Sri Aurobindo’s words and in some cases using the translations of others. Look first at Chapter 1, *shlokas* 21-23 from one such book, *The Bhagavad Gita* (ed. Khetan, 1992):

Arjuna said: O Achyuta (the faultless, the immovable), station my chariot between the two armies so that I may view all these standing here, desirous of battle, with whom I have to fight in this holiday of fight.

I should have a look upon those who have come here and who would engage in fighting, to champion the cause of the evil-minded son of Dhritarashtra.

And now compare the words of Sri Aurobindo as we find them in *The Gita in the Vision and the Words of Sri Aurobindo*:

Arjuna — Right in the midst between either host set thou my car, O Unfallen. — Let me scan these who stand arrayed and greedy for battle; let me know who must wage war with me in this great holiday of fight. — Fain would I see who are these that are here for combat to do in battle the will of Dhritarashtra’s witless son.

A bit further on in the same chapter of that 1992 translation we have the *shlokas* describing Arjuna’s reaction before the battle:

28-29. Arjuna said: Seeing these my own people, O Krishna, thus eager for battle, my limbs fail and my mouth is parched, my body is quivering and my hair stands on end.

30. Gandiva (Arjuna's bow) slips from my hand and my skin seems to be burning. I am not even able to stand and my mind seems to be whirling.

31. I see, O Keshava (Sri Krishna), adverse omens and do not see any good in slaying my own people in the battle.

Turning to the same verses in *The Gita in the Vision and the Words of Sri Aurobindo* we are met with language of an unsurpassed beauty and power of expression:

Arjuna — O Krishna, I behold these kinsmen and friends arrayed in hostile armies — and my limbs sink beneath me and my face grows dry, and there are shudderings in my body and my hair stand on end, — Gandiva falls from my hand and my very skin is on fire. Yea, I cannot stand and my brain whirls, — and evil omens, O Keshava, meet mine eyes. I can see no blessing for me, having slain my kin in fight.

And finally, in *The Message of the Gita*, first published in 1938, Chapter 3, *shloka* 6 is translated as:

Who controls the organs of action, but continues in his mind to remember and dwell upon the objects of sense, such a man has bewildered himself with false notions of self-discipline.

But in Galeran's book we find the translation of the same verse, embedded (in bold text) in the commentary for this *shloka*:

The objects of sense are only an occasion for our bondage, the mind's insistence on them is the means, the instrumental cause. **A man may control, *samīyama*, his organs of action and refuse to give them their natural play, but he has gained nothing if his mind continues to remember and dwell upon the objects of sense. Such a man has bewildered himself with false notions of self-discipline, a false and self-deceiving line of action, *mithyācāra*;** he has not understood its object or its truth, nor the first principles of his subjective existence; therefore all his methods of self-discipline are false and null.

Aside from the power of the language and the nearness to the spirit of Sanskrit, I found two additional outstanding features while comparing this book with previous translations and commentaries. For nearly every *shloka* there is some rendering from Sri Aurobindo, which is not the case with the other books. And there is a beautiful blending of translation and

commentary which is missing in previous books. Here are some examples of how this blending of translation and commentary adds to the experience, enhancing our understanding (words corresponding most closely to the Sanskrit text are in bold typeface):

Chapter 2, verse 5:

Better the life of the mendicant living upon alms than this *dharma* of the Kshatriya, this battle and action culminating in indiscriminating massacre, this principle of mastery and glory and power which can only be won by destruction and bloodshed, **this conquest of blood-stained enjoyments,** this vindication of justice and right by a means which contradicts all righteousness and this affirmation of the social law by a war which destroys in its process and result all that constitutes society.

Chapter 9, verse 30:

The equal Divine Presence in all of us makes no other preliminary condition, if once this integral self-giving has been made in faith and in sincerity and with a fundamental completeness. All have access to this gate, all can enter into this temple: our mundane distinctions disappear in the mansion of the All-lover. There the virtuous man is not preferred, nor the sinner shut out from the Presence; **together by this road the Brahmin pure of life and exact in the observance of the law and the outcaste born from a womb of sin and sorrow and rejected of men can travel** and find an equal and open access to the supreme liberation and the highest dwelling in the Eternal. **Man and woman find their equal right before God;** for the divine Spirit is no respecter of persons or of social distinctions and restrictions: all can go straight to him without intermediary or shackling condition. **If, says the divine Teacher, even a man of very evil conduct turns to me with a sole and entire love, he must be regarded as a saint, for the settled will of endeavour in him is a right and complete will.**

The other books follow the traditional format of presenting first the Sanskrit verse with the English translation below it, and set below that is the commentary. That format, both visually and intellectually, lacks the sense of spontaneity and completeness that one feels with the presentation followed here.

The object of this book is to make the reader understand deeply and truly the essence and the fundamental truth

of the Gita, *shloka by shloka*, in Sri Aurobindo's words. Reading it is compulsive, educating, and highly satisfying. The translation touches the marrow of the seeker's sensibility. An understanding of the Gita becomes so clear that the inward journey begins at once, very naturally and effortlessly. This book is a must for all who love the Gita, all who love Sri Aurobindo and India, and all who love spirituality: the *Sanātana Dharma*.

The value of this book cannot be described or explained in a mere 1600-word book review. One must study it

to be able to experience the grandeur and the beauty of the Gita's teaching in English. It is poetry in prose; it is philosophy at its highest; it is spiritual thought materialised. It will remain your companion for the rest of your life, and perhaps even thereafter.

— Bharat Mahapatra
Bharat has been a teacher at SAICE since December 1981. He teaches mathematics and Sanskrit at the school and the Gita and the Upanishads in the Higher Course.

Golconde: The Introduction of Modernism in India

— Pankaj Vir Gupta, Christine Mueller, Cyrus Samii
Publisher: Urban Crayon Press, USA
98 pp, ISBN 978-0-9795534-4-8, Rs 1600



Size: 25x25 cm
Binding: Soft Cover

In Golconde matter has truly revealed the face of the spirit. This “all shades of grey” building has a pure, luminous soul, and its radiant simplicity has often been a barrier, as have its high walls and fortress-like door, for imperfect beings like us to fathom it, to live it or even just to enjoy it; for when we behold Golconde we see at the same time our own imperfections.

Golconde is perfect, not so much as a piece of modern architecture, which indeed it is, but for its processes of conception, commissioning, design, construction and post-construction use and maintenance. To me as an architect, the greatest achievement of this book is that it brings out the revealing aspects of this remarkable building to a devotee, a student of design or any other interested person, equally well.

Architecture is often overlooked when it is seen only as glossy photographs or talked about in technical or artistic jargon. This book has none of that. A full book on Golconde was long due, and that it should come now in this form and texture is, of course, a blessing,

but as an architect-reviewer I have had a difficult time thinking about how to introduce this book and its subject to a mixed audience. After much deliberation, I have decided to leave the readers with a sense of progression – beginning with the conception and commissioning of the project and following the thread through the design, construction, and maintenance of the building – allowing us all to learn to appreciate the values of good architecture.

The Conception

Aptly summoned up right in the beginning is this quote from Sri Aurobindo:

Architecture, sculpture and painting, because they are the three great arts which appeal to the spirit through the eye, are those too in which the sensible and the visible meet with the strongest emphasis on themselves and yet the greatest necessity of each other. The form with its insistent masses, proportions, lines, colours can here only justify them by their service for the something intangible it has to express; the spirit needs all the possible help of the material body to interpret itself to itself through the eye, yet asks of it that it shall be as transparent a veil as possible of its own greater significance.

Like all other ideals on which the Sri Aurobindo Ashram is based, the conception of Golconde had to be the highest, the truest and the most desirable ideal. In the beginning of the book, a context is built up through an introduction to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, their lives and works, and the practical and political situations in the Ashram and Pondicherry that led to the idea of building Golconde.

The value of work in Sri Aurobindo's yoga and the fact that his Integral Yoga was not developed in order to escape from life but to perfect its powers and capacities establishes the wider and underlying context for the manner in which this project was undertaken. The Mother's special attention to artists and the presence of various working departments show that the making of Golconde was the ideal next step in perfecting the workers and the works, an ideal of their yoga. The construction of Golconde was not given out to a construction company, but was done by Ashramites and the local people of Pondicherry. And it was pressure from the French government that the Mother "stop buying and renting properties" and "build her own houses" that helped to define the practical and political context.

The Commissioning

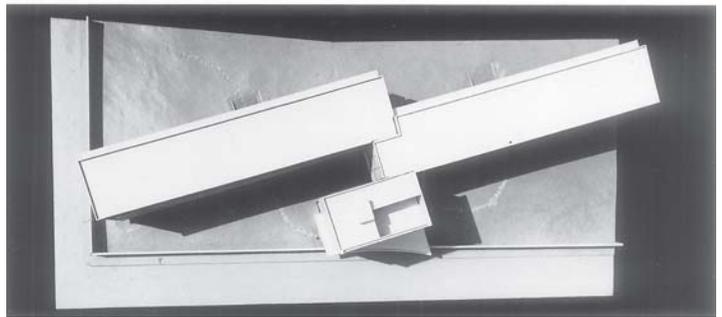
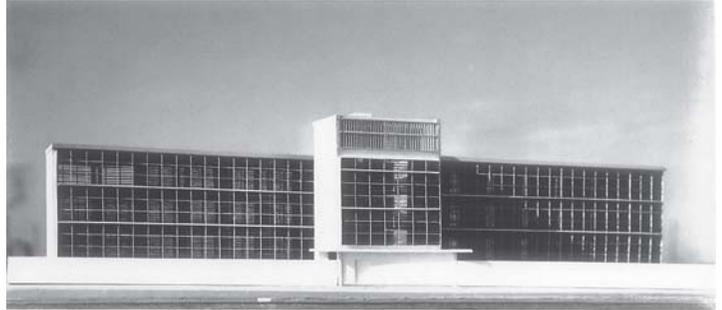
The Mother's preference for a Japanese influence was perhaps instrumental in the selection of Antonin Raymond as the architect of the project. Although he was a Czech-American architect, he was practising in Japan and was incorporating traditional Japanese aesthetics and methods of construction in his work, albeit in a modern material—reinforced concrete, a material which was still quite new in the world and more so in India. This choice of architect was ideal as Golconde had to be "of the future" but still have the distilled nuances of the past.

How Raymond got into the spirit of his commission is expressed by him in these words:

Our eight months at the Ashram were extremely fruitful and instructive. Not only was the life in this Indian monastery the revelation of another way of life, but the conditions under which the work of the building was done were so remarkable when compared to those we had known in this materially bewildered world, that we lived as in a dream. No time, no money, were stipulated in the contract. There was no contract. Here indeed was an ideal state of existence in which the purpose of all activity was clearly a spiritual one. The purpose, as a matter of fact, of the dormitory was not primarily the housing of the disciples—it was creating an activity, the materialization of an idea, by which the disciples might learn, might experience, might develop, through contact with the erection of a fine building.

The Design

Chapters Two and Three sum up a good part of this exhaustive step in the realization of Golconde. Pavitra (Philippe Barbier Saint Hilaire), on behalf of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, corresponded with the architect on the project and also sent him photographs of Pondicherry architecture. The brief building process, an indispensable step towards good design, had started with the questions like why to build, what to build, how to build and where to build.



Golconde model elevation and model plan

Raymond sent them some sketches as preliminary studies. It is interesting to note how a good architect is not just drawing walls and doors and windows but is finding the very spirit which shall realize them. A building is in its material form a distillation of the highest principles of commodity (function), firmness (strength) and delight (beauty). An excerpt from the letter which accompanied the sketches from Antonin Raymond to Pavitra on pages 37–8 reveals the architect's vision:

I hope that you will not be shocked by appearances, for I have no doubt that this building does not differ greatly from what already exists at Pondicherry. But in the architecture of today we are trying to rediscover the original values, in direct response to the physical and spiritual needs of men, without being subject to prejudices which have restrained us for centuries, and of which the style of buildings

in Pondicherry is the outcome. We lay the foundation of a new architecture based on principles and not on habits of mind. As you have it in your philosophy: first of all a mind which is free, open, and clear as far as possible from preconceived ideas.

The letter goes on to talk about layout, construction, furnishing, materials, etc. and the broad ideas on which the final design shall be developed. Raymond also requests them at this stage to “kindly study the plans with care”.



Model room exterior

A quote from Udar Pinto on page 42 elaborates on the climatic design principles applied in the design by Raymond. As we see later, the final design of Golconde evolved from the sketches, ideas and principles laid out in this letter.

To test out the ideas and also to school the work force comprised solely of members of the Ashram, the architect chose to make a full-scale model of a dormitory room, in the correct orientation and with similar details and finishes. It is my own observation that even the rain water pipe and its fixing details were resolved in the model room. On page 26, in an excerpt from his autobiography, Raymond comments on his decision to first build a working model:

The building I had in mind was to be in reinforced concrete throughout—something without precedent in India. Since I had to depend entirely on the local labour, who had neither any modern tools nor any know-how in their use, I decided to build a working model first. I started at once to establish a

laboratory for testing the materials and the strength of our concrete mixtures. The enthusiasm and seriousness of everybody concerned, as well as of the disciples quite unconnected with the work, was remarkable. The final result was more than satisfactory.

The Construction

Sri Aurobindo’s insistence that the work be done by the inmates of the Ashram with no stipulated time frame, and not by a commercial construction company in six months (as assumed by the architect), is a startling fact of the building of Golconde. The construction of the model room introduced the ideas and the process of its construction to the future work force. A letter from George Nakashima (the site architect) to Raymond’s office in Tokyo tells how the foundation designs were adjusted (re-worked) to the soil conditions discovered during excavation. Good architecture has to accommodate Nature in its design, not just as landscape but as the strength of the soil underneath and the direction of the wind, rain and sunshine.

On the other hand, good architecture also does not move away from its governing principles when confronted with human nature. In reply to Udar Pinto’s suggestion that he could use standard taps and dies to make bolts and nuts which would only be slightly different from the “pretty drawings which conformed to no standard at all” made by the architects, the Mother was adamant and said, “Not even a fraction of a millimeter must be changed. If the taps and dies are not available for these drawing sizes, then make your own!”

This attention to detail in the construction of Golconde is one of the key elements that make it a masterpiece. It has been instrumental not only in adding to its beauty but also to its longevity. Golconde has required very minimal repairs in all its components over almost seventy years of its existence. There are many illustrated examples in this book which bring out the construction and details of Golconde.

Post-Construction Use and Maintenance

That this book is dedicated to the memory of Mona Pinto, “the guardian of Golconde”, is indeed apt. A building, although built of inanimate components, is indeed a living entity. It needs regular care and considered use for best performance. Sri Aurobindo’s words quoted on page 78 establish an often neglected aspect of our material culture:

In Golconde Mother has worked out her own idea through Raymond, Sammer and others. First Mother believes in beauty as a part of spirituality and divine living; secondly, she believes that physical things have the Divine Consciousness underlying them as much as living things; and thirdly that they have an individuality of their own and ought to be properly treated, used in the right way, not misused or improperly handled or hurt or neglected so that they perish soon or lose their full beauty or value; she feels the consciousness in them and is so much in sympathy with them that what in other hands may be spoilt or wasted in a short time lasts with her for years or decades. It is on this basis that she planned the Golconde.

Mona Pinto and her group of dedicated workers have established routines that reflect, as the authors put it, “an understanding of the life cycle practices integral to architectural preservation”.

It is quite a comprehensive book but for a few glaring mistakes, e.g., the picture on page 35 is not of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram main building and the photograph of Golconde on page 7 is from the south-west and not from the south-east as mentioned.

This book goes a long way in placing Golconde in the echelons of the best of world architecture and, more importantly, as a perfect example of how to conceive, commission, construct, use and maintain good architecture.

— Neelratn

Neelratn is an architect based in Pondicherry.

Mother You said so...

— Compiled and designed by Huta

Publisher: The Havyavahana Trust, Pondicherry

113 pp, ISBN 978-81-87372-24-0, Rs 200

Size: 18x24 cm

Binding: Soft Cover



When I opened this book, the first thing that appealed to me was the whiteness of the pages and the font size. “No strain on the eyes!” I said to myself and I plunged into it.

I was immediately transported to my own fairyland, those years of my childhood, vibrant with light and happiness! The Mother’s smile, her luminous eyes, and the stories she recounted wove a magic spell over us.

By sharing her precious diary, Huta-ben has brought back to me many memorable words and incidents with greater lucidity and fuller import. I was too young then to understand all that the Mother said in the evening classes in the Playground. I attended those classes because I had no other option as my elder sisters were there and I couldn’t go home without them. But I

remember certain words... These words have remained encrusted on the screen of my mind like bright stars.

As I read the book these words and ideas started coming to the foreground. The Mother always wanted us to be happy children. When I read the following paragraph, I remember clearly how we were at that time:

I want everyone to be happy. If you unite consciously with the Divine, you will be happy, because without the Divine life is useless. There is no existence without Him. The Lord is everything.

2.3.56

These words seemed so easy then. Just to breathe was to be happy. Such was the magic of her Presence.

One could speak about many little things...

There is another incident which made a strong impact on me when I first heard it as a child. Huta records these words of the Mother:

In 1960, on the night previous to the First Anniversary of the Supramental Manifestation, Krishna came to me and told me, “It is I who will distribute tomorrow’s message.” He sat on my lap and started giving blessings to people. It was really so amusing.

25.2.66

When we heard about this as children, we were overawed. Now, after reading about it in this book, I can feel the sweetness of the experience.

Huta-ben, through her personal queries, has revealed the Mother's answers which are precious and will be helpful to all seekers.

There are many new things in the book. The ideas about painting, especially the "Future Painting", have always intrigued me. Now that I have seen Huta-ben's paintings inspired by *Savitri*, I can understand it better.

The Mother told Huta-ben:

I want to do something new. You must try to do the *Future Painting in the New Light*.

There is a reason why I always ask you to paint mostly on a white background. It is an attempt to express the Divine Light without shadow in the *Future Painting*. But everything will come in its own way.

In the *Future Painting*, you must not copy blindly the outer appearance without the inner vision. Never let people's ideas obsess your mind and their advice too regarding the *Future Painting*. Do not try to adopt the technique either of modern art or of old classical art. But always try to express the true inner vision of your soul and its deep impression behind everything to bring out the Eternal Truth and to express the glory of the Higher Worlds.

6.2.57

Doing something so new also invites a lot of criticism, especially from those who are trained in one school or the other, even in what is understood to be modern art. I can understand the disappointment Huta-ben felt when she heard other people's remarks about her paintings. The Mother scolded her:

Why do you listen to people? Everyone has his or her own ideas and different points of view and opinions. No one can see the real thing by a true and total sight. The Divine alone can see, know and can do everything. Child, better rely on the Divine alone, who is the best judge and knows better than people do....

Here you must remember that the growth of consciousness is indispensable for your painting, because what you learn from books or from professors is of no use until you get into the higher true artistic consciousness.

9.3.57

The Mother repeatedly asks us to put everything into the hands of the Divine Grace, and to worry less:

People cannot stop the earth from turning round the sun. So they must not worry and bother about what is going on in the Universe.

There are millions of people who have no idea about the higher life, because their souls are not awakened; so they go on enjoying their ordinary lives. Naturally they have many difficulties and miseries also.

...over here, in the Ashram, people are lucky that they can get constant and direct help from the Divine.

...

You must laugh away all difficulties.

30.3.57

Yes, we have seen how She pulls us out of our difficulties the moment we place them before Her.

On another occasion, when Huta-ben talked to the Mother about her headache, the Mother, who was then talking about yoga, suddenly remarked: "For your headache, you must either eat fish or do meditation." A flash of amusement crossed the Mother's face and laughter rang out sweetly. Suddenly Huta-ben felt better. Can we deny that laughter is the best medicine?

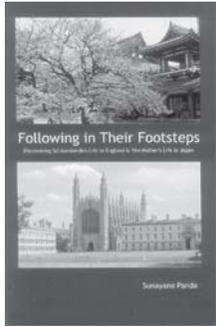
The last message of the book is very encouraging. The years 1972-3 had been very crucial. On one side we were full of the joyous celebrations as it was the year of Sri Aurobindo's centenary and on the other side we could feel a sort of apprehension as the Mother withdrew more and more from the physical field. I had my last Darshan of Her on the 27th of February 1973. Little did I then think it would be the last! When I read the last message from the Mother in the book - "If I am certain of anything in this world, I am certain of only one thing: The Victory of the TRUTH." - I was filled with courage. With this assurance from the Mother let us continue unflinchingly on Her path.

Huta-ben's book is full of new things which are enlightening but the familiar ones are often more cherished. As I read through the book I was really happy to be able to relive those precious moments of my childhood.

The book has a simplicity which is refreshing.

— Krishna Dundur
Krishna Dundur, née Roy, completed her studies at SAICE in 1965 and was made a teacher here by the Mother. She continues to teach here with great pleasure. It was her privilege to have had Sri Aurobindo's Darshan and to have participated in the work of building the Samadhi.

Following in Their Footsteps



Discovering Sri Aurobindo's Life in England and The Mother's Life in Japan

— Sunayana Panda

Publisher: First Feature Ltd.,
London, UK

126 pp, Rs 160

ISBN 978-0-9562923-1-5

Size: 14x22 cm

Binding: Soft Cover

Sunayana Panda, who grew up in the Ashram, has given us a delightful little book, which traces the journeys she has made with her husband Giles Herdman in search of places in Britain and Japan connected with the lives of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother before they came to Pondicherry. She writes vividly and evocatively, and takes us along with her on her explorations.

The first essay deals with Manchester, and took me on an excursion down memory lane. I think that the Manchester I was familiar with in the 1940s and 50s must have been much more like the city that Sri Aurobindo knew in the 1870s than the modern one that Sunayana and Giles visited. Long before the Clean Air Act rendered Manchester and the surrounding towns unrecognisable to those of us who knew them in their industrial grime, how many times I have passed that Octagonal Church on Stockport Road, where William Drewett had been a minister, on the way to visit my paternal grandmother! My father, also a Congregational minister like Mr. Drewett, had preached there several times when he was a student pastor. And how familiar appeared the house in Shakespeare Street, Moss Side, where young Aurobindo and his brothers lived with the Drewett family, when I saw its photograph in Purani's biography of Sri Aurobindo. My friend Satyajit Ghosh, who used to work in the Physics Department of Manchester University, told me – quite a few years ago now – that he could see that house from his window. But

now, Sunayana tells us, the whole area has been demolished and rebuilt; not only the grime has disappeared, but the house and even the street. Is it not interesting that Sri Aurobindo, who was born in Shakespeare Sarani, Calcutta, should live in Shakespeare Street in Manchester? The only building that Sunayana and Giles could find which had been part of Shakespeare Street in the 1870s was the Pub—which the young Aurobindo must have passed, but surely never entered.

The next essay introduces us to the four houses where Sri Aurobindo and his brothers stayed after they moved to London, and he became a student at St Paul's School. The school was founded in 1509, and originally stood in the City of London. But in the 1870s a new site was purchased in Hammersmith and a new school built. It was



49, St. Stephen's Ave, where Sri Aurobindo first lived in London

opened in 1884, the year that Aurobindo Ackroyd Ghose and his elder brother Manmohan joined it. Once more I felt on familiar territory, for in 1968–69 I lived in Barons Court, very close to St. Paul's School. Sunayana found that the school had been moved to another site in 1968, and its building no longer exists. Eventually she found the High Master's house—the only part of the old school compound that still remains as it was in those days. When I lived nearby, the school was still there, standing clearly visible from the road amidst its grounds. It looked very similar to my own secondary school, which was built around the same time, like many others around the country. Perhaps I would not have paid it much attention except for the fact that it was just at that time –

and in a house not far away – that I first learned about Sri Aurobindo. When, a little while later, I came across his biography by Purani, of course St. Paul's School took on a new significance and interest for me. I remember too, after reading Purani-ji's book, walking down the Cromwell Road and trying to find out which was the house where Sri Aurobindo and his brothers had stayed after they left Shepherds Bush, their first place of stay in London.

After tracing the four different houses where Sri Aurobindo lived during the next five years, all of them still standing and in use, Sunayana devotes a chapter to his time at St. Paul's School, and outlines the story of the school itself. Then she moves on to Cambridge, and a visit to King's College where he studied from 1890–92.



The Mother photographed with Rabindranath Tagore in Japan

The fifth chapter is devoted to telling how a commemorative blue plaque came to be placed on the first house where Sri Aurobindo and his brothers stayed – 49, St. Stephen's Avenue, in Shepherds Bush – stating "Sri Aurobindo, 1872–1950, Indian Spiritual Leader, lived here, 1884–1887". These blue plaques are a British institution, started, she tells us, in 1867. Buildings all over the country are marked if someone eminent enough has lived there. The body responsible for installing the plaques is called 'English Heritage', and the privilege is not given easily. Giles made an application in 2001. Sunayana recounts the interesting tale of how finally the

plaque for Sri Aurobindo was approved, and how it was installed on 12 December 2007.

The following two chapters recount the explorations and experiences of Sunayana and Giles on two visits to Japan, tracing some significant aspects of that unique culture, as well as places connected with the Mother's life there. While the first visit was spent absorbing the atmosphere in Tokyo and Kyoto, their second trip, for which they had prepared themselves for over two years, had two specific goals: to find the house where the Mother had lived in Kyoto, and to identify where the familiar photo was taken of the Mother standing alongside Rabindranath Tagore in a garden, in front of a large statue of the Buddha. This time they had an address for the house, and a hand-drawn map to guide them. After taking a wrong turn and experiencing a particularly beautiful corner of the city in cherry blossom time, they did find the house, now somewhat modernised. Identifying and locating the Buddha statue proved more complicated, and the essay closes without the mystery being fully solved. Yet they left Japan with a sense of achievement and satisfaction, feeling a new understanding and appreciation of the Mother, and the importance of her time there.

The collection closes with two more essays, one on Sri Aurobindo as a poet, the other on the Mother as an artist, both of which contain fresh insights and suggestions.

Sunayana is an accomplished writer and storyteller, and makes us accompany her on her explorations, carrying us from one fascinating detail to another in a delightful way. The book is illustrated by photos taken by Giles in the course of their journeys. There are some especially beautiful ones of the area around the house where the Mother stayed in Kyoto. I can warmly recommend this attractively produced book as an informative and enjoyable supplement to the various biographies available on Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

— Shradhdhavan
Shradhdhavan, a long-time resident of Auroville, coordinates the activities at Savitri Bhavan and edits its journal Invocation.

Uttara Yogi

— Arup Mitra

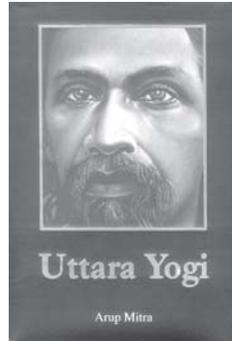
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In *Uttara Yogi*, Arup Mitra, longtime resident of Pondicherry and disciple of Sri Aurobindo, offers a new work based on a mix of history, legend and fiction. While the historical personality of the Master finds a place in many contemporary novels, notably in *Journey to Ithaca* by Anita Desai, it is perhaps for the first time that a radically new attempt has been made to present the career of Sri Aurobindo's pre-Pondicherry life through a modern day *Sutradhar*, Harimohan Datta, who is both a participant and an observer in the dramatic action.

The blurring of the boundary line between history and fiction is, of course, central to Mitra's *oeuvre*. He has suggested elsewhere that his aim is to present a popular account of Sri Aurobindo's life and narrate the events that preceded his historic arrival in Pondicherry on 4 April 1910. The idea clearly is to bring Sri Aurobindo before a wider audience. A laudable goal!

Uttara Yogi throws up a number of interesting issues related to the art of historiography, traditionally regarded as an attempt to understand and interpret events of the past based on empirically verifiable facts. The novel also foregrounds the art of narrativization that willfully ignores the claims of historical 'certitudes' and welcomes fictional devices through irony, ambiguity, paradox and points of view characteristic of the Novel form.

Significantly, in recent times newer approaches to history have questioned the so-called objectivity of traditional historiography. Both the Post-Structuralism and Subaltern History schools have drawn our attention to the 'location' of the historian and the actual narration (discourse, if you will) underlying the events themselves. The questioning itself is welcome, though it has to be conceded that most humans have a longing to know the *real* events as they *really happened*. Mitra has made his own choice. He reveres his Guru and builds the story of *Uttara Yogi* basically around the Master's own account of his life.

Mitra's goal is not to address the philosophical issues revolving around traditional historiography and

narrativization, but to tell an engrossing and important story. In *Uttara Yogi*, we see the intersection of two primary narratives: one is the story of Harimohan Datta, adopted child of the aristocratic couple Horace and Julia Cockerell. This story, we may say, is a complete work of imagination. The second narrative, based on historical fact, is a story that marks the transformation of Aurobindo Ghose into Sri Aurobindo.

Mitra carefully works out the double narratives through a structure of four parts: "The Beginning", "Search Within", "A Special Destiny" and "The Man and the Mission", each part deftly built so as to bolster the overall understanding of the nationalist who evolves into the exponent of Integral Yoga and the future evolution of man.

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A "Short History", offered at the beginning of *Uttara Yogi*, acts as a foreword to the novel. It acquaints the reader with the necessary background: the role played by the British East India Company in a colonial rule based on loot and plunder. The Raj, it need hardly be said, created a psychology of diffidence and self-loathing among the subject population.

In a fast-paced, action-packed narrative, Mitra gives a chronological account of the events and incidents associated with the life of Sri Aurobindo. The novel opens in 1870 in a remote hamlet of the South Indian Peninsula, in an area hit by severe drought. The people of Nagai have gathered because of the crisis to implore a saint named Vasudeva to bring rain to the parched land. As the first clouds bring the miracle of rain, the sage of the Nagai foretells the arrival of a Yogi from the North: 'Read God's writing in the sky', he tells the devout. 'Soon a great Uttara Yogi will come and settle down in these parts of the country for his own and the world's spiritual salvation. It is he who will lead you in the future.' (p. 20)

The two tales of *Uttara Yogi* are based on the changing fortunes of its two leading families. Horace Cockerell, ICS, and his wife Julia, granddaughter of the Viscount Strathallan, adopt Harimohan and give him an English

education. Similarly, the English-educated Dr Krishna Dhona Ghose of Rangpur and his wife Swarnalata, daughter of Rishi Rajnarayan Basu of Deogarh, the legendary reformer of 19th century Bengal, have their own plans for their four sons: Benoybhushan, Manomohan, Aurobindo and Barin.

Through a series of short chapters that revolve around spectacular events, Mitra presents the dramatic action of the late 19th and early 20th century India. The focus is invariably on the Renaissance and nationalistic movements that seek to dethrone the British from the Motherland.

Thus we see the early life of Aurobindo and his brothers in England. We hear of Reverend Drewett, James and Henry Cotton, historian G.W. Prothero, Lord Kimberley and George Russell.

We witness the arrival of young Aurobindo in Baroda as an administrator in the service of Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad. As Aurobindo teaches in Baroda College and writes articles for K.G. Deshpande's journal *Induprakash* under the title "New Lamps for Old", Harimohan, the fictional character, receives an offer from the Maharaja to become the Dewan of Baroda.

We meet Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Romesh Chandra Dutt, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Jatindranath Banerjee. The latter joins the Baroda army to train for future insurrections. We see the meeting of Aurobindo with Tagore and Sister Nivedita, C.C. Dutt and his wife Lilavati, Sarala Devi, Brahma Bandhab Upadhyay, P. Mitra and Raja Subodh Mullick. We hear of the tumultuous events leading to the partition of Bengal brought into effect by Lord Curzon. We learn of the Anushilan and Jugantar Samitis, underground organizations that spearhead revolutionary action. Here we see a band of fearless nationalists: Barin Ghose, Nolinikanta Gupta, Sudhir Sarkar and others who were ready to lay down their lives for the sake of the nation. We meet other historical figures of the day including Lord Curzon, Sir Andrew Fraser, Sir Edward Norman Baker, Charles Tegart, Judge Beachcroft and Rabindranath Tagore.

As the novel progresses, Barin, Aurobindo's brother, meets Indraneel, the son of Harimohan. We are told of experiments in bomb-making in the Dighiria Hills that result in casualties.

We next see the sacrifice of Khudiram Bose and Prafulla Chaki, Aurobindo's imprisonment in the Alipore jail, his defense by the fiery barrister Chittaranjan Das and his final acquittal. His departure to Chandernagore, and later to Pondicherry, is narrated with equal passion.

Finally, as Moni (Suresh Chakravarty) journeys on the Madras Mail along the Coromandel Coast, he finds himself conversing with the fictional character Ayanar Gounder, who is destined to witness the realization of the prophecy about the arrival of the Uttara Yogi.

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Based on years of painstaking research, Arup Mitra narrates the story of Sri Aurobindo with passion and fervor not unmindful of his loyalty to history. It's a tightrope walk clearly. Mitra's

preferences for visionary goals and idealistic actions are evident. Some may question his reluctance to offer counter-narratives based on skepticism and disbelief.

Uttara Yogi is no *Saint Joan* of Bernard Shaw where miracle-making must be constantly juxtaposed against comic disbelief. I am glad Arup Mitra has not fallen into this trap. Some may question the degree of monotony created by the regular pattern of short chapters around an event or two. It is possible that an alternate narrativization could have been effected. However, Mitra has opted for his own approach, and it is a legitimate choice!

What concerns us ultimately is the overall vision of the novel. This is where Arup Mitra scores. Published on the occasion of the centenary of the Master's arrival in Pondicherry, the book reminds us of the immense significance of that event as the beginning of a new epoch in human history.

— Sachidananda Mohanty
Dr Mohanty is Professor and Head of the English Department at the University of Hyderabad. His latest work is Sri Aurobindo: A Contemporary Reader. He has received a number of national and international awards and is widely published. He had his early education at the SAICE, Pondicherry.