

ONE of the new books introduced in this issue is the two-volume set titled *The Mother: Her Miraculous Touch* (see the review on page 15). Through the nearly 500 photographs and the

schoolchildren, visiting Ashram departments, coaching the actors in the annual drama, playing tennis, and attending the various sports activities. In these photos, where she is the magnetic centre of everyone's attention, one sees and feels quite vividly, on the faces of those gathered around her, the effect of her spiritual influence on their lives.



The Mother at the opening of Harpagon Workshop, 26.4.54.
Chandrakant is seen here, third from right.

accompanying quotations from the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, the book depicts in images and words the various aspects of the Mother's life and evokes the far-reaching scope of her work. For those who lived through those days in the 1940s and 1950s, these volumes stir wonderful memories and for those who've read or heard accounts of life with the Mother as she moved so freely among her children, they exert a strong emotional pull as well. Many of the photos show her with the disciples, with the

Maintenance Service, is in charge of a cycle repair department and a farm called Highland, and has responsibilities for the Ashram's theatre. Chandrakantbhai was kind enough to share his reminiscences, in writing and in conversation. Some of these memories date back seven decades; they are recorded here as he recalls them now. His narration is typical of his practical nature, straightforward and to the point. The headings and the comments in square brackets have been provided by the editor.

The Miraculous Touch of the Mother

When I was asked to go through these books and relate some stories connected to the photographs, I wasn't sure how to begin. All those years we just worked for the Mother, played sports, went to meditation, without thinking of this or that. I certainly never thought then that one day I would be asked to write some reminiscences! But the pictures did bring back some strong memories. Let me start with tennis, as there are many photos of the Mother at the Tennis Ground.

At the Tennis Ground

In 1948 it was decided to start playing tennis, and two courts were to be built as approved by the Mother. The work started on the eastern side of the allotted portion of the seafront property taken on lease. The first court was ready in three to four months' time, and it was always known as the "first court". While these tennis courts were being made ready, we used makeshift arrangements to practice tennis in the Playground. We took coconut string for a net, tying one end to a window and running the string across to the other side, to be tied around a brick resting on a tripod of sticks. Everyday we would mark the court lines with our feet. And so we started learning how to play tennis.

When the court in the Tennis Ground was ready, we started our play there. Those who wanted to play had to bring a racquet and two balls. All were required to remain at the ground after play to do work: fill up any small pits and holes with red earth, water them, and finally go over the repaired spots with a big heavy roller that had to be handled by six or seven people. Only then could everyone go home.

Now the second court was ready, made of red earth like the first one. When the Mother was informed, she said, "I will also play!" So the



Chandrakantbhai, December 2011

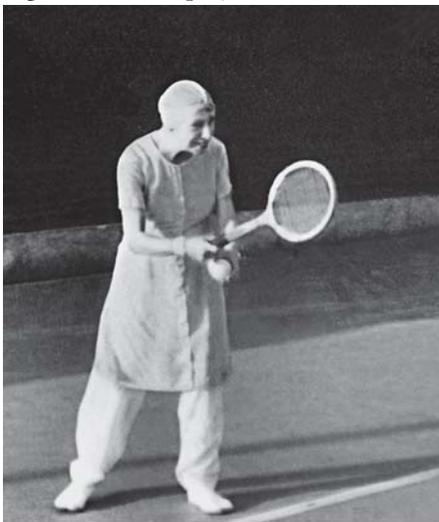
first red earth court was converted to a cement court, with a slope of four inches from the net to the service lines to allow the rainwater to drain off quickly. If it rained we would sweep the court and wipe it with cloths to prepare it for the Mother to play. She always played on the first court, with Pranab as her doubles partner.

She would come to the Tennis Ground around 4:30 p.m., but during the athletics competition season she would come at 3:45 so she could reach the Sportsground by five o'clock. Birthday persons would be called to play first. The set was five games, the Mother starting and finishing with her service games.

Once two or three of us asked the Mother, "How should we play with you?" The Mother said, "Each time I give a stroke, I pass on the energy to the opponent. How much they receive and return—it all depends upon them."

I was having long rallies regularly, but in April 1956, Udar one day counted the number of strokes in each rally during my game with the Mother. As she was preparing to leave the Tennis Ground, Udar told her, "You just had a rally of 114 strokes with Chandrakant!" This exchange of crosscourt forehands may have been a record.

When the cement courts were completed, tournaments were arranged. I was a hard server and striker of the ball. One day, after about three months of playing tennis, my wooden racquet head became loose and shaky. It was difficult to control the ball, and I felt it would be dangerous to play with the Mother using such a racquet.



Now if I went to the Tennis Ground without a racquet, she would still call me to play—and I would have to borrow one from somebody. If that racquet head gave way like mine did, I had no means to replace it. So I decided to just keep to my Harpagon work and stop going to the Tennis Ground. After two or three days, the Mother asked the others, “Why is Chandrakant not coming?” No one knew what to answer as I had not told anyone of my predicament. After another two days, when I went upstairs to see the Mother at my daily time of eight o’clock in the morning, she asked me, “Why are you not coming to play with me?” “Mother, the top of my racquet has become loose and shaky and I cannot control my shots.” “No!” she replied, “You come and I will give you a racquet.” So I went to the Tennis Ground that evening, and when the Mother arrived, she turned to Pranab and asked for her racquet. She then gave me her own racquet and after that, every year on my birthday, she gave me her old racquet and took a new one for herself.

After some time, the Mother noticed that the sea had begun to wash away the land at the Tennis Ground and this might affect the courts. So she asked for a wall to be made. Concrete piles with a tapered end were cast and driven into the sand about sixty feet away from the tennis courts. The space between this foundation and the courts was filled with earth and topped with river sand. The Mother used to take exercise by walking along this corridor. Later, a wall was erected over the foundation.

In 1949 the athletics competition started at the Tennis Ground. Basketball courts, a boxing ring, and a wrestling pit were also made ready there. In 1951 the convention to inaugurate the Sri Aurobindo International University Centre was held there under a huge tent. When the Sportsground was ready in 1951, all the athletics items were shifted there.

Energy to work

After Sri Aurobindo left his body, the Mother gave Darshan blessings from her chair just opposite to the small Darshan room in the Meditation Hall upstairs. From sometime in 1951 or 1952 up to

1959, on the four Darshan days each year, I stood near that chair and fanned the Mother with a round fan made of peacock feathers. This continued all through the Darshan, for hours without stopping, fanning only with my right hand.

Many had experiences where they could work for hours and hours without feeling tired. Mother gave us the energy to work! One instance stands out for me. You know that Sri Aurobindo’s room was renovated in the late 1940s. The room was in disrepair and the walls had to be replastered, so it was decided to renovate the whole room and make new furniture at the same time. The Mother told us that the new furniture, made mostly of rosewood, must be ready by a certain date. Udara gave the designs for the furniture and instructed the carpenters. A small group of us did the sandpapering and polishing at night. I remember Birenda was there helping us. We did our regular work each day



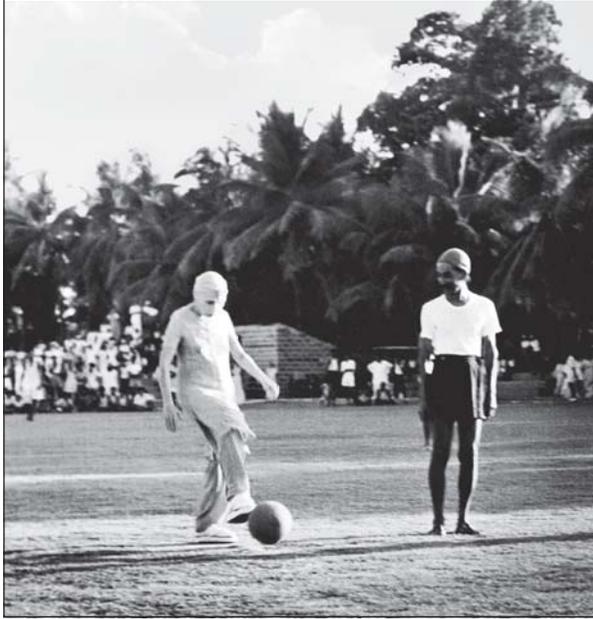
and then worked at night, for six full days, without rest or sleep. When the Mother heard that we were working through the night, she sent us plates of dried fruits and sweets, and we felt full of energy to do the work! When all was ready, we carried the furniture upstairs and installed it in Sri Aurobindo’s room. Sri Aurobindo had temporarily shifted to the southernmost room, the upstairs Meditation Hall, and so was not disturbed by our work in his room.

I remember walking to Cazanove Garden in the late 1940s, when machinery there needed to be repaired.

We would walk there, a distance of a few kilometres, carrying our tools, work until noon, walk back to the Dining Room for our meal, then walk back to Casanove and work until four o'clock. We thought nothing of all this walking. It wasn't "exercise" for us; it was just doing our work! We didn't start using cycles to move around until 1951 or 1952.

Football

I always seem to come back to sports! In this photo Mother is kicking a football at the Sportsground, sometime in the 1950s. Back in 1948–9 we young men played football in the military ground in Uppalam, where the Indira Gandhi Stadium is now. In the evenings a group of us –



– Amiyo, Ranju, Kanak, and others too – would literally run, barefoot, to the ground. We made two teams and played our game, then ran back for our meal at the Dining Room. I quickly washed my legs and feet and sat down to eat. As I was late, I would take my milk and vegetables and eight slices of bread, break up the four slices in each bowl and then add water to both the milk and the vegetables to cool them down so I could eat as fast as I could. Then I rushed off to the Ashram for evening meditation with the Mother.

Once in conversation Mother came to know I didn't have any football shoes. She told me she wanted to buy me the shoes. My friend Manubhai was standing just behind me at the time and later he said, "Why should Mother have to spend? Let's go to the bazaar and purchase them ourselves." So we went and got the shoes. After some time, Mother remembered that she had promised to buy the shoes for me. I told her we had already got them. "But I want to give you", she told me. So she handed me Rs 50, five new ten-Rupee notes. I purchased the shoes and went to the

Mother with the bill. She saw the change in my hand and said to me very sweetly, "No, no. Keep it with you—eat chocolate."

During the 1950s the Ashram football team played games against outside teams. We were known as the

best team, and sometimes our opponents used dirty tricks against us. There was an incident with one team. Two or three of their players would charge and deliberately kick the ball against our bodies—things like that. When Mother came to hear, she stopped all outside matches.

Early visits to the Ashram

I first came here in 1940 when I was fifteen. We had come from Bombay for the November Darshan. We stayed in a rented house next to the bakery. It was called Acharya House and was owned by an old blind man.

Before the Darshan I thought I would ask for blessings for success in my studies, but when I went up and stood in front of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, my mind went completely blank! After that I came on my own every year during my school and college vacations, for about five weeks.

My routine in April and May 1941 was like this. I got up early and went to the Ashram for Window Darshan. At about 5:45 a.m. the Mother would open the shutters of one of the Salon's windows (on the first floor) and look out at us for three or four minutes. *[Over the years, the timing for the Window Darshan kept getting later in the morning; it was eventually discontinued.]* Then at 6:30 or 6:45 I went for Balcony Darshan; we all stood on the road on the north side of the Ashram building and waited for Mother to come out of Pavitra's room onto the balcony. She would stand there and slowly look all around at each one of us, shifting her gaze from one to the other. That lasted about five minutes. After that, I hurried to the Dining Room for my food and my work, which was to wipe the vessels. I remember

one Bhismadev also did this work with me. He was a very good singer but unfortunately lost his voice later on.

At about ten o'clock in the morning I went back to the Ashram for Terrace Darshan. We all stood in the Ashram courtyard and waited for Mother, who came and stood on the terrace above Dyuman's room. After a few minutes she would climb the stairs and take a walk on the upper terrace. Chinmayi went with her and held the Mother's parasol.

During the rest of the day, I prepared for the coming year's studies. At about four o'clock I went to the seaside, where I took a walk or sat alone until it was time for the evening meal. Then I went to the meditation in the Ashram, after which I went home and read until 9:30 or 10:00, and finally to sleep. This was how I passed my days.

There were hardly any organised activities back then as neither the school nor group activities had started yet. But I do remember that in early 1943, before the school actually started, Manubhai (Albert's brother) would sit on the verandah of an old house in the Playground compound and tell stories to some four or five young children. [*Manubhai also told stories to a few young children in a room inside the Ashram compound around this time.*] So maybe you could say that this was, in a way, a sign that we would soon have a school!

Like this, I came alone every year during my vacations. I worked in the Dining Room for two or three years, then in the electric service for one year, and after that Mother sent me to work at Harpagon.

Saris and dhotis

In between my vacation visits, we made a journey to Pondy for a special reason. During World War II there were many restrictions on goods. It was 1943 or 1944, and there were no saris or dhotis to be distributed to the *sadhaks*. The Mother told Dyuman to ask my father Manibhai to arrange. Through his contacts in Bombay, Manibhai managed to get the required goods at the Kalbadevi Market. He then bought four metal trunks, which we made look all battered and old so as not to draw the attention of the officials. If we'd been caught, we would have got

into serious trouble as things like cloth were strictly rationed. We boarded the train at VT station in Bombay with these four trunks and by Mother's grace all went smoothly. We passed through everywhere – even the customs at the Pondicherry/Tamil Nadu border – without any questions put to us. As we had telegraphed our arrival time, we were met at the station and taken to the Ashram. We delivered the trunks to Dyuman. The Mother was very happy and when we went to her, she gave us blessings. That same night we went straight back to Bombay.

No difference

Here's an amusing anecdote from the old days, I think it was in 1946. During the evening meditation, the ladies would sit on one side in the Ashram courtyard and the men would sit on the other side. Our Shanti Doshi used to go and sit right in the middle of the group of ladies. They got upset and complained to Nolini-da, who told the Mother. Mother answered firmly that she made no difference between *sadhaks* and *sadhikas* here! There were no more complaints.

15 August 1947

In late June 1947, Mother decided to hold a special celebration for the Lord's birthday that 15 August, as that was to be the date of India's independence from Britain. Dyuman, who was involved in organising the celebrations, told the Mother that he needed someone to help with the arrangements for the Ashram main building. So it happened that on 1 July my father received a letter from Dyuman, in which he wrote that Mother had said, "Ask Chandrakant to come." The very next day I left Bombay for Pondicherry by train. When I arrived I met the Mother, who told me to work with Dyuman. I was asked to hang coloured electric lights on the trees inside the Ashram and to string coloured paper flags on the outer walls of the compound. I remember that Tulsibhai was in charge of setting up a big tent in the Playground to accommodate the visitors. Some bamboo and string cots were provided for sleeping, and mats as well.

This day also saw one of the saddest events in the Ashram's history. Many people had come to the Ashram for the celebrations, but in the streets riots

were started by those who were against the Ashram. It was the evening, it was dark, and most of us were inside the Ashram compound. Suddenly stones were being thrown over the wall at us and some people were getting injured. Purani was standing at the main gate. I insisted on going out to pick up some stones to use in our defence. Outside, I looked to my left and saw Mulshankar, who had been caught in the melee and stabbed. When I saw him, he was standing in the street near the Rosary Gate, beckoning for help. He had been attacked while returning to the Ashram after seeing a friend in the Playground where the tent was set up. I ran to help him. I tried to stop the bleeding by applying pressure with my left hand over the wound on the right side of his neck. As I could not lift him that way and still plug the wound, I switched hands and wrapped my right arm around him, got a better grip, and then carried him towards the Ashram main gate. As we approached, those near the gate thought I had caught one of the local rioters, and they began shouting, "maaro, maaro! (hit him!)" I cried out to them, "Mulshankar! Mulshankar!" When they realised who it was, they immediately took him inside, to Dyuman's room. The Mother was informed. Pavitra-da telephoned the French doctor. Then Mulshankar was carried to the garage and taken in the Mother's Ford car to the General Hospital, where he soon died. You'll remember, Mulshankar was one of Sri Aurobindo's attendants. This tragedy came as a great shock to all of us.

Theatre work

There are a few pictures of the stage at the Playground that was used for the annual 1st December drama. This was before we had our theatre. Mother asked me to take charge of constructing this stage from Dayakar, who had an injury and could not do that work any longer. The stage was built with big iron girders. I don't remember how we even lifted those heavy girders into place. It took eight to ten days to erect the stage with the help of nineteen workers. We used corrugated iron sheets for the roof. We built wings at the side, hung curtains, and

erected galleries at the opposite end of the Playground. After the event we would take it all apart and store the components until they were needed again.

This went on for six or seven years, until the Ashram theatre was ready. That property, which had been a godown for storing groundnuts, was purchased and renovated as a theatre, with a projection room, green rooms, etc. We used to go there in the evenings and with hammers break down the old walls before the renovation could begin. Ashram engineers made the designs for the theatre. I worked on the renovation and then remained in charge of all the arrangements for the stage. You know, the Mother never allowed an open fire to be used in any production. Instead, we used a light bulb with cellophane streamers when a fire was required for the play!

Ever vigilant

As you know, the Mother came regularly to watch the events at the Sportsground. This book has many photos which show her there. When I saw the pictures of the shot put event, I remembered an incident. Once I was at the Sportsground, standing near the Mother and watching the shot put event. As the thrower was about to release the shot, the heavy metal ball slipped from his hand and headed in the Mother's direction. I moved forward in front of her and stopped the shot, pushing it down to the ground.



The stage at the Playground during the drama on 1 December 1954.
The Mother is seated in the centre.

You also see lots of photographs of the Mother visiting Ashram departments—the Press, Handmade Paper Factory, the School, etc. I remember once the Mother went to Honesty Engineers and Contractors. I also went there. As the Mother got out from her car, she asked me stay and guard her purse, which she had left inside the car. So I did not go inside with the others, but remained there by the car to guard her purse. I did not let anybody come near the car!

During the anti-Hindi agitation in 1965, there was a lot of trouble in the town and bad feeling towards the Ashram. The Ashram Post Office was even set on fire. We arranged for Ashramites to stand guard on the rooftops of several Ashram houses, holding torches. One blink of the torch meant “all clear”, two blinks meant there was some movement on the streets below, and three blinks meant danger. On this signal, I would jump into our jeep with my crew and rush to the scene. That jeep is still being used today.

Sweet memories

These are a few memories, very short, that came to mind while looking at the photographs. You may like to hear them.

I stayed for a while in Golconde. I used to climb up to the roof terrace to put my clothes to dry. From there I could see the Mother walking in her room on the second floor. She walked very fast, sometimes fifty or sixty rounds of the northern part of her room. Pranab would walk by her side.

One early morning on my way to the Sportsground, I saw some pretty pink flowers. I liked them very much and thought I would cut a bunch and offer them to the Mother. I cleaned them carefully, removed all the thorns, and then gave them to her. She asked me if I knew the meaning of that flower. I said I didn't, that I just liked it. She then told me the significance of the flower was “Not to Tell a Lie”! *[In the books on flowers the significance is recorded as*

“Never Tell a Lie”, but it is known that the Mother would sometimes change the wording slightly depending on the person she was speaking to.]

One day, the Mother's watch stopped while she was playing tennis. She took it off her wrist and handed it to me to fix. I tried a few movements, but unfortunately it still did not start.

Sometime in 1954–5, while observing me walking at the Tennis Ground, the Mother remarked to Priti (Das Gupta) that I had a “perfect walking style”. Of course, I was very happy to hear this when it was conveyed to me.

During a visit to the Ashram Poultry, the Mother saw the huge compressor on the ground nearby. She asked me why it was lying there, and I said there were no workers to help me remove it. She then gave me very detailed instructions: first I must make a good road, then build a shed, and only then bring the machinery to the site for whatever work was required. I was amazed at her knowledge of these things and into how much detail she went to explain everything to me.

A final note

To end I will share two very personal stories. They are connected. The first happened in 1973. I remember the date exactly. It was 12 February at about two o'clock in the afternoon. Mother called one of her attendants and told her, “I saw Chandrakant in the supramental world—young, bright, throbbing with energy.” The Mother then asked her attendant, “Does he believe all this?” and when she said, “Yes”, then Mother said, “Go and tell him.”

The second happened in 2009. On 15 February I had an experience: I was waiting for the Mother to come. When she did, she told me to follow her. We moved along quite far until we came to a huge gate. The gates slowly opened and everything behind was golden and bright—a sheer expanse of golden light.

— Chandrakant M. Patel