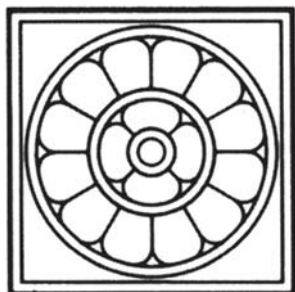


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The new book *Sri Aurobindo Ashram: The Story of the Main Building* tells the captivating story of the block of four houses where Sri Aurobindo and the Mother lived for more than fifty years. Our lead article features some photographs from the book and reminiscences from some sadhaks who settled in the Ashram in the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s.



The Ashram Main Building, 1947-48

## The Story of the Ashram Main Building

One of the publications featured in this issue is a new book about the Ashram main building, the block of four houses where Sri Aurobindo and the Mother lived for more than fifty years. Concerned almost exclusively with the physical structures, *Sri Aurobindo Ashram: The Story of the Main Building* traces its history from the time Sri Aurobindo and the Mother moved to the Library House on 25 October 1922, paying as rent the then handsome sum of one hundred rupees per month.



The Library House, Rosary House, and Meditation House

1922-29

Soon the Rosary House and the Secretariat were acquired and finally the Meditation House, into which they moved on 7 February 1927. Thus a small world was created within the compound walls of these now connected properties—a world that was the very centre of the lives of all the sadhaks.

While the book focuses on the renovations, reconstructions, alterations and additions to the structure of the Ashram main building through a combination of text, quotations from letters and other documents written during those early years, detailed graphic explanations, drawings and diagrams, and many old photographs, an ancillary effect is the subtle

recreation of an atmosphere from the years when the Mother's daily contact with the disciples took place within the Ashram compound. In this context we asked a few sadhaks to share some memories from those days—memories that contribute to the story of the Ashram Main Building.

### First Impressions

Robi Ganguly came to the Ashram in 1941 when he was just ten years old and recalls that “my first

impression was of beautiful flowers, the fragrance of flowers. There was something wonderful as I entered the Ashram. Everything became cool; there was a very cool feeling. I loved it. As a child I didn't analyse it in my mind, but that feeling was there right from the first day.”

Tara-ben Patel, who settled in the Ashram in 1930, remembers that the Mother was very strict about only

having one gate open, and that everyone entered and left by the gate to the Library House. As soon as she passed through that gate she would “fall into meditation”—no effort was needed; the atmosphere was so peaceful, so intense.

Chitra Sen, who came to settle here in the early 1940s, when she was a young girl, remembers that when she entered the Ashram, “I used to feel something passing through me. It was something you may describe as being more dense than the atmosphere.” She went on feeling it as she passed by all the rooms where the sadhaks were working in such a concentrated state.

As Chitra-di was too young at first to attend the evening meditation, she sat with her sister under the Transformation tree that used to grow under the window of Sri Aurobindo's room in the Library House, where the rockery is now. "There I used to sit while the meditation was going on. And now I understand that I had some experience. I was sitting there, but as if I didn't have a mind at all; no thoughts came. For some time I sat like that. As I was a child, these things came spontaneously." In this photo one can clearly see the Transformation tree which Chitra-di describes.



The Library House

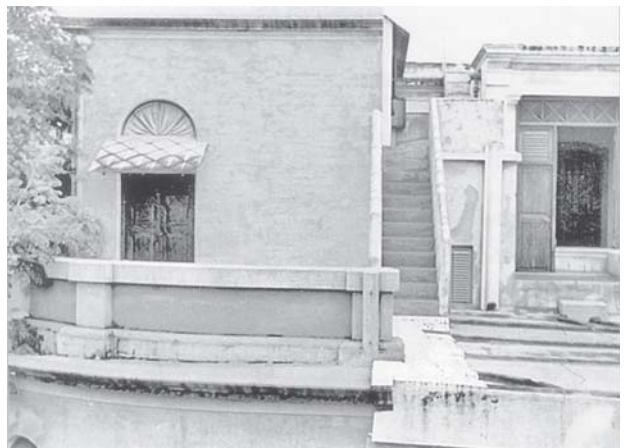
1922-29

### Darshans

Many people are familiar with the Balcony Darshan that the Mother used to give in the early morning from the balcony of Pavitra's room, but there were other opportunities later in the morning for the disciples (and for the children who roamed freely about the compound) to have darshan of the Mother. At about nine or nine-thirty the Mother would open the far right and far left windows of her room, known as the Salon, where she was spending most of the day. Robi-da remembers that when she opened the first window "someone would call out '*Victoire à la Douce Mère*'. It was usually Anilbaran, or perhaps Madangopal. Anyway, there was keen competition on who could say it first. And the moment she opened the next window they would say '*Au Divin*

*Victoire*', which two or three persons would then repeat. That was the Window Darshan." He also recalls seeing Shuddhananda Bharati, who stayed in the room that is now the *Bulletin* office, going each day to the Mother during Vegetable Darshan at about noon. She would come down from her room on the first floor by the staircase near Nirodbaran's room to see the vegetables that had been brought for the dining room. "The Mother would throw tomatoes to everyone. And you had to catch them!"

Beginning on page 148 of the book there is a description of the Mother's terrace walk, which took place shortly after the Window Darshan. She would come out onto the terrace south of the Salon and stand there briefly before going up the staircase to the top terrace for her walk. A diagram on page 149 clearly marks the route she sometimes took. Several photos also show disciples in the Ashram courtyard having the Mother's darshan as she took her walk. Chitra-di remembers that during this Terrace Darshan "Dilip-da [Dilip Kumar Roy] would stand there by the palm tree in front of Purani's room. As the Mother was going up the staircase she would stop at this small landing, turn, and smile down at Dilip-da. Her grace and love—everything was flowing through that smile. It was something to see. I still remember that."



The terrace south of the Salon where the Mother used to come and stand before going to the second floor for her walk. The small landing Chitra-di mentions can be seen midway up the staircase



Disciples in the Ashram courtyard during the Mother's terrace walk

## Studies

Naturally the sadhaks interviewed for this article were children when they came to the Ashram in the 1930s and early 1940s, and they shared some reminiscences of the type of schooling that took place inside the Ashram main building. Suprabha Nahar settled in the Ashram in 1941, when she was eleven. There was no school as yet, so the Mother arranged for some of the Nahar children to be taught at home. Her elder sister Sujata had been assigned the work of teaching the younger siblings French. But, as Suprabha-di recalls, "at home you play and talk and hardly study at all. So one day, Didi [her elder sister Sujata] gave me an idea. I was standing in the Ashram courtyard, and Chandulal was going to his room when he asked me, 'How is your French going on?' I said, 'Not much progress, why don't you teach me?' He agreed and started taking our French class in his room on the ground floor. He used to send our notebooks to the Mother." Pavitra also taught some subjects, in the rooms that now house the Reception

Service and the Photo Section. Robi-da has described one of these study rooms: "It was a very small room, but there was a large table there, and then one, two, three, four, five, six, seven ... eight chairs were there—I still remember. On each side there were two chairs. And it was difficult to get in if you were late because near the door the chair had already been placed and the table almost filled the room." Eventually this room could no longer be used for classes as there were just too many children.

Anu Purani was educated primarily by her father A. B. Purani, who gave her classes in Gujarati, English, and maths in one of his two rooms inside the Ashram main building. "My father saw that I was extremely restless while doing my lessons, so he said, 'Why don't you learn to play the veena?' He went off into town and found one lady who was teaching the veena. It was so hard, you know, you sit cross-legged and keep the veena there and then turn your hand around—it is quite difficult. He saw that I was avoiding it, and he told me it was very easy, 'Why do you escape? See, I can do it.' For my sake he learned it and he made me do it." The symbolic name given by the Mother to Purani's room was Agni and his study, the room in which Anu-ben did her lessons and practised the veena, was called Peace in the Physical. Both these rooms are located off the courtyard which leads to the staircase going up to Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's rooms, and perhaps they sometimes overheard Anu-ben diligently practising her music.

Studies, of course, meant that homework must be done, and we learn that these young students bent their heads over their notebooks in the most unlikely places. Robi-da said that many of the children did their homework in Dyuman's room while waiting for the Mother to come down for evening meditation in the late forties. Chitra-di remembers doing her homework while she sat in the flower room, which was then located in what later became Pujalal's room. The Mother had given her the work of keeping all the trays and dishes on which flowers had been offered and returning them to their owners. She kept them all neatly in a cupboard and, while she sat there, did

her homework and sometimes watched the younger children, like Aster and Kittu, playing in the open courtyard. By this time, in 1943, the old flower room in the centre of the courtyard had been taken down and in its place there was a long rectangular structure with fern pots on top (where the Samadhi was later built). In this photo one can see some children standing by this structure, under the branches of the Service Tree.

Robi-da remembers how they used to play hopscotch, marbles, and other games during the Terrace Darshan and that they made a lot of noise, because the number of children had grown. One day the Mother called Chandulal and told him it was becoming too noisy during the Terrace Darshan so there must be a school to keep the children occupied during the morning hours.

“That is how the school started. I don’t know how many people know about it, but that is what Chandulal told me.” And Chandulal said that the Mother had asked him to design benches for the school. One afternoon, Robi-da recalls, three different specimens of benches were kept in the courtyard just below the terrace of Dyuman’s room. He and a few others were there when the Mother came out on the terrace and asked them to sit and try the benches. “And I still remember I told the Mother, ‘This bench is very comfortable for sleeping!’ So one of the benches was chosen and Chandulal got them made for the opening of the school on 2 December 1943.”

### **Meditation and Pranam**

At this time, during the early forties, the Mother held meditation for the sadhaks in the Meditation Hall every evening at about seven o’clock. She would come down the staircase, stop halfway, place her hand on the banister, and the meditation would begin. It would last ten to twenty minutes, sometimes longer.

People had their customary places and used to gather ahead of time; some would meditate and others would just wait quietly for the Mother’s arrival. After the meditation people were allowed to go up to the top of the staircase, to the small passage just behind the door, for pranam. People were assigned different days on which they could go up. Chitra-di describes how the Mother used to stand there: “One of the shutters

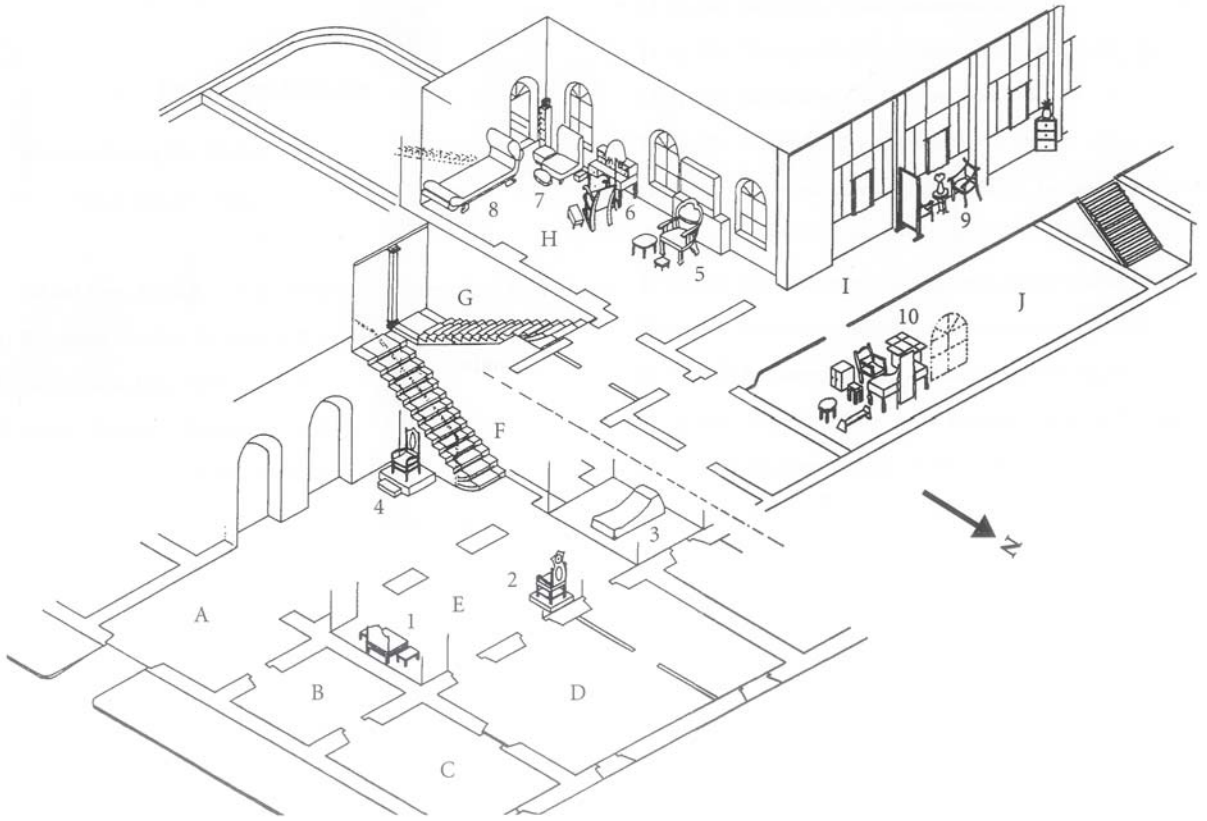


would be closed. And she stood behind it, so when we went to her it was absolutely private. Between where the Mother stood and the Salon door there was a low table with flowers on it. Champaklal would stand by the side there and help by taking or carrying the flowers.”

From 1931 to 1938, the sadhaks offered pranam to the Mother in the Meditation Hall downstairs. The Mother sat on a low chair near the door to Amrita’s room, where now the large painting of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother is kept. The sadhaks would sit where the Mother’s bed is now kept. Suprabha-di says that her sister Sumitra remembers attending this pranam quite clearly. “Everyone had to go in order to the Mother. Once, after waiting and seeing so many people going for pranam, Sumitra-di could not contain herself and just went forward out of turn and made pranam to the Mother. She got a scolding from my uncle Udaysingh, but the Mother later told my father Prithwisingh that she liked her spontaneity.”

Toward the end of the book there is a diagram showing the placement of furniture and location of rooms on the ground floor of the Meditation House and the first floor of the New Secretariat. Here you

were sitting just opposite, where they have now the washing area for flowers. I was sitting there and straight in front of me stood the Mother. What a voice—it was so overpowering! When she gave a



can clearly see the passage at the top of the staircase (marked G) where people went to the Mother for pranam as well as the seat (marked 1) used by the Mother for pranam in the Meditation Hall downstairs.

Later, when more and more people came, the evening meditation was shifted outside. The Mother would come out of the south door of the Salon, move to the front edge of the terrace above Dyuman's room, and stand there to hold meditation for those who had gathered in the courtyard. Chitra-di also remembers the day when the Mother, from this location, read out a message marking the end of the Second World War. It was 16 August 1945, and "we knew that the Mother would be reading something, so that day we

message it was always in a different voice." This was the prayer that the Mother read out on that day:

The victory has come, Thy victory, O Lord, for which we render to Thee infinite thanksgiving.

But now our ardent prayer rises to Thee. It is with Thy force and by Thy force that the victors have conquered. Grant that they do not forget it in their success and that they keep the promises which they have made to Thee in the hour of danger and anguish. They have taken Thy name to make war; may they not forget Thy Grace when they have to make the peace.

## Work

Tara-ben Patel was eighteen years old when she settled in the Ashram. In those days everyone took up a work assigned by the Mother. Tara-ben and her elder sister Lila-ben were asked by the Mother if they would like to do some cooking. Lila-ben replied that they were just village girls from Gujarat and didn't know any dishes outside of their village cooking. When the Mother offered to teach them, they happily agreed, and soon took up the work in the tiled-roof kitchen that stood in the centre of the courtyard.

You can see this building in the photo here, with the branches of the Service Tree resting on its roof.

The sisters would prepare a variety of dishes after looking at the available vegetables. When once asked by the Mother to repeat a particular preparation that she had liked, Lila-ben replied that she could not at all remember how she made it. She had cooked it while in a trance-like state of inspiration, thinking only of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

Norensingh Nahar first visited the Ashram in 1936 when he was a boy of sixteen. After settling here, he joined the construction work at Golconde in 1939, helping to bend steel rods for the reinforced concrete. Later, in 1940, the Mother gave him a place to grow vegetables in the small Prosperity courtyard behind the Library House. He even tried to grow paddy there, without much success. Although Norensingh-da is best known for his work on the Ashram stamp collection, he relates how the Mother had also put

him in charge of the fruits, when they were being washed in Pavitra's laboratory upstairs, before the Fruit Room was built in 1948. The laboratory is a small room just to the right of the staircase on the first floor of the new Secretariat, and it was in this room that lotions, soaps, pastilles, and other items were prepared for Sri Aurobindo and the Mother under Pavitra's direction. Norensingh-da recounts:

We got papayas from Ambabhikshu's garden and from Bangalore came tomatoes and oranges.

So we used to wash them with permanganate and keep them separately.

Sri Aurobindo especially liked the papayas from a particular tree. Ambabhikshu used to write numbers on the papayas, indicating from which tree they came. So when we saw that particular number, say 36, on any papaya, we'd wash it carefully and specially keep it apart for Sri Aurobindo. In those days, in the corner near where the Samadhi now is, there was a tree with custard apples

(ramphal) that both Sri Aurobindo and the Mother liked very much. At Santal House there was a mango tree, very big. Sri Aurobindo used to like the mangoes from that tree.

In the early morning the Mother would arrange the fruits in baskets and from there the baskets were distributed to the sadhaks. When the quantity of fruit became too much to handle in the laboratory, the Mother thought of having a fruit room, which was then built on the terrace of the Cold Storage block. Eventually Norensingh-da gave up this fruit room work and Ravindra, who was already looking



after the Cold Room, where almonds, dried fruit, and other items were stored, took over. These photos show the completion of the ground floor of the Cold Storage block in 1935 and the Fruit Room in 1948.

In the photo below you can see the very long terrace of the Cold Storage block that extended to the new Fruit Room. Anu-ben recalls how the Mother had the idea to



Cold Storage block



Fruit Room

All the sections of the book, filled with old photographs, letters, diagrams, and excerpts from interviews with sadhaks, are woven into a compelling narrative that captures not just how the Ashram main building developed structurally, but also something of the special atmosphere of the Ashram in its early years. As Robi Ganguly so aptly describes his impression, “When I hold the book, I almost get back the olden days. That’s what I like about it. Apart from the research that has gone into it, it has an atmosphere of the Ashram. And one feels the spirit behind the work, the attitude with which the whole work has been carried out. It is the attitude that really counts.”

make here two rooms for Ravindra, and that she particularly wanted the construction of these rooms to be done only by Ashramites. The first floor of the Cold Storage block was completed in 1958, and the Mother attended the opening of the new rooms.

Other sections of the book recount the story of the Samadhi, the construction of the Mother’s rooms on the second floor, and the symbolic names of rooms in the Ashram main building given by the Mother during the years 1928–32. The Publication Department/SABDA’s Service branch takes its name from the one given by the Mother to its main room.

To end these recollections about the story of the Ashram main building, we have a comment from Amal Kiran [K. D. Sethna], who celebrated his 104<sup>th</sup> birthday in November 2008. He first came to the Ashram more than eighty years ago, in 1927, earlier than any other current Ashramite. When *Sri Aurobindo Ashram: The Story of the Main Building* came out in July, he was given a copy to look at. He pronounced it a “handsomely produced volume” and added, with a sense for language and history that is notable in much of his writing, that when he first came to the Ashram in 1927 [the Meditation House had only been acquired earlier that year], it was the



western wing, or the Library House, which was known as the Ashram “main building”. This observation reminds us that it was in 1922, when Sri Aurobindo and the Mother moved into the Library House, that the history of the Ashram main building began. This book tells the story.

*Note: Anu Purani was interviewed for this article on 9 August 2008, less than two months before she passed away. Anu-ben was a dancer, choreographer, editor, Hindi teacher, and dedicated administrator and teacher at the Udavi village school.*

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## Excerpt from the book

*The Meditation House, where Sri Aurobindo and the Mother moved on 7 February 1927, was the last of the four houses to be taken on rent and the first one to be purchased. A letter by Barin Ghose, Sri Aurobindo’s youngest brother, describes the Mother’s inspection of the Meditation House:*

Soon after coming back from Calcutta I heard that the house adjoining ours was vacant. I don’t know what impelled me to go and see it. I casually mentioned it to Mother Mirra. She wanted to see it too. We did not know at the time that this house would be Sri Aurobindo’s abode and the very centre of the Ashram buildings. Mother might have felt something of the kind but she did not give us any inkling until I actually took her there.

A Bengali young man from Hyderabad (the Nizam’s capital) was in correspondence with me at this time on Yoga and kindred matters. He mentioned one Ibrahim in his letters, a young Mahomedan idealist, who wanted to come to Pondicherry and take up Yoga. Ibrahim subsequently wrote to me and actually came for a short visit. He was stout, fair, very quiet and unobtrusive, with large lustrous eyes and a great hankering for things spiritual. He went away promising to come later, renouncing the world for good and sit down at the feet of the great Master to learn Yoga.



The Meditation House

1922-29

As soon as the key of the new house was procured, the Mother went to inspect it. So far as I remember, it was a sweet and clear morning with white fleecy clouds suspended in the blue sky. Ibrahim had returned by this time. He also accompanied us. As Mother Mirra went up the grand staircase of the new house, she fell into a trance. Gently she entered the hall, looked about in her peculiar dreamy and absorbed way. Turning to me with her luminous mystic smile, she said, “I see untold wealth here, Dara has brought it with him.” She moved about the house in a tense, indrawn state.

Ibrahim was ... renamed Dara (after the eldest bother of Emperor Aurangzeb) by the Master. She [the Mother] at once began negotiating for the purchase of the house. The owner wanted as much as Rupees 14,000, an exorbitant sum for it. Mother said money wasn’t of any consequence as this house meant so much for the future of the colony. So it was purchased and repaired for Sri Aurobindo to live in.