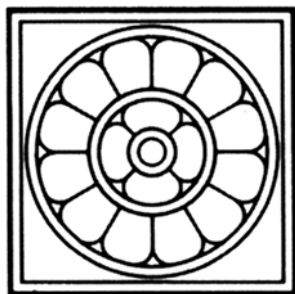
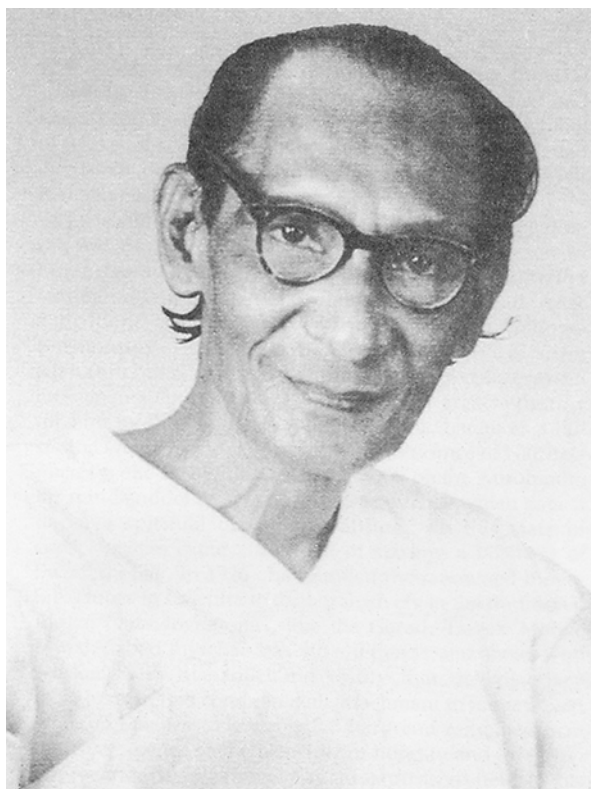


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S a b d a

Over a span of ten years, from 1960 to 1970, Rishabhchand wrote chapter by chapter the story of Sri Aurobindo's life. He was a dedicated *sadhak* and an erudite author, whose own life was anything but ordinary. We bring you here a glimpse into that life and how the biography came to be written.



RISHABHCHAND
The Many-Faceted Life of a Biographer

Not many people have heard of Rishabhchand, and since he passed away thirty-six years ago, even those who knew him are now few in number. His name remains unknown to the younger generations because he was totally self-effacing. He never sought any attention, any social group or even any appreciation of the work he did. Even though he is the author of several books there is almost no published

material about him. The only source of information is the booklet brought out by his family members on the occasion of his birth centenary in the year 2000.

There are many interesting aspects to his life, but the one fact that stands out in clear prominence is that he is the author of a biography of Sri Aurobindo.

Before we speak of this biography let us first throw a glance on the events in his life that led him up to the moment when he undertook this work. Rishabhchand Samsukha was born on 3rd December 1900 at Jiaganj in West Bengal. He came from a Jain family, and his father was known for his writings on the Jain religion. As he grew up he developed a love for reading, especially English poetry. He studied at the Presidency College at Kolkata, but as it was a British institution, he left to finish his studies at Krishnanath College in Berhampur, before joining the non-cooperation movement.

It was in this spirit of non-cooperation that in 1926 he started a business dealing with hand-woven Indian silk from the various textile centers in his area. Even in the field of business he maintained his innate sense of honesty and clarity. Thanks to his hard work and integrity his business grew and eventually became the reputed establishment, Indian Silk House, continuing even today to be very well known.

Although he was from a family in which Jainism was not only practised but also the philosophy behind this path was known thoroughly, somehow Rishabhchand felt dissatisfied by what it had to offer and was inwardly seeking a more comprehensive philosophy of life. At some point in his search he came across the book *The Mother* by Sri Aurobindo. That was the turning point, and he was drawn more and more towards his ultimate Guru.

For seven years he worked untiringly to develop the business and to look after his wife and children, leading the life of a householder. Then he decided to leave everything and settle down at the Ashram in 1931. Once he joined the Ashram he never went back. His sense of organisation and his skill in dealing with workers were put to good use when the Mother gave him the responsibility of looking after the House Maintenance Service and later of the Furniture Department also.

It is not generally known that he was the first person from the Jain community to join the Ashram. Many others, who were close to him and turned to him for guidance, eventually followed his example and came to live in the Ashram. In a way he opened the door for the others who came after him. He

continued till the end of his life to be a guide and an elder brother to all those who needed help to better understand Sri Aurobindo's thoughts. Through letters he was also in touch with people living in the outside world who had an inner aspiration to follow Sri Aurobindo's path.

Rishabhchand began writing on the works of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, and *The Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo* was published in 1953. Perhaps he got the idea of writing an entire book on this subject since he was often explaining the fine points of Sri Aurobindo's writings to so many. This book turned out to be an answer to the real need of people

all over the world and served not only as an introduction to the major works of Sri Aurobindo but also as a guide to those who wanted to put this new philosophy into practice. It is not at all surprising that this book was reprinted several times and continues to be available today.

In 1960 he started writing the biography of Sri Aurobindo. People often wonder why he took the trouble of writing it when such a good book as A. B. Purani's *Life of Sri Aurobindo* already existed. There was also *Sri Aurobindo On Himself* for those who wanted to know more about the subject, in the Master's own words. The truth is that this was not a personal project initiated by him. The Mother herself had asked him to write about the life of Sri Aurobindo, making it clear that she wanted him to focus on the external aspect of his life only. She wanted it to be serialised in the *Bulletin of the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education*.

Knowing his background it is easy to see why she chose him for this work. Firstly, having studied English literature he had a mastery over the language and a fine style in his expression. Secondly, having been a part of the non-cooperation movement in Bengal he knew thoroughly the context in which Sri Aurobindo had worked to awaken his countrymen to the very idea of wanting to be free. When Sri Aurobindo left Bengal in 1910 Rishabhchand was a ten-year-old boy. In the decade that followed the air was still vibrant with the energy unleashed by that revolutionary movement. All this Rishabhchand knew

Rishabhchand had that rare quality of mental sincerity, and his inner being was fully surrendered to the Mother.

first hand. But there was probably another reason, too, for which he was the right person for this work. Rishabhchand had that rare quality of mental sincerity, and his inner being was fully surrendered to the Mother. He was the kind of man who would know where to draw the line between Sri Aurobindo's political work and his personal life. A lesser person may have felt tempted to digress and include details about his family or his home life, which are of no importance to one who wants to know about the Master's work, be it political or spiritual. Rishabhchand's sensibility allowed him to see this fine line and keep the irrelevant out of the picture.

The interesting point to note is that this work was not conceived as a book at the time it was written. The first chapter came out in the August 1960 issue of the *Bulletin* under the title "Sri Aurobindo – His Life and His Work". As we know, the *Bulletin* is a bilingual journal and every page written in English has its French translation on the facing page. In order to get the French version to accompany Rishabhchand's text, the Mother sent a copy of his manuscript for translation to her son André Morisset, who was in France. The Mother not only asked the author to write this text but she also followed its progress closely. She went through the first chapter before it was printed and asked Nolini Kanta Gupta, her secretary, to read the subsequent chapters before publication. She was ready to answer any question or clarify any doubt that Rishabhchand had. Not only that, she also provided him with an assistant - Tarun Banerjee - who had just finished his studies at the Centre of Education.

Sri Aurobindo has himself written that his life had not been on the surface for people to see. For some people that has translated itself into a general impression that we should not even try to know what he did before coming to Pondicherry. However, the Mother wanted this biography to be written, and in retrospect we can try to understand why. The most important events of Sri Aurobindo's outer life were those connected with the Freedom Movement. Today, a hundred years after the Alipore Bomb Case trial, what is so astonishing is that the common man in India has little or no idea of Sri Aurobindo's contribution to the revolution that not only brought liberation to India but also united the millions who had remained for centuries isolated and unconnected.

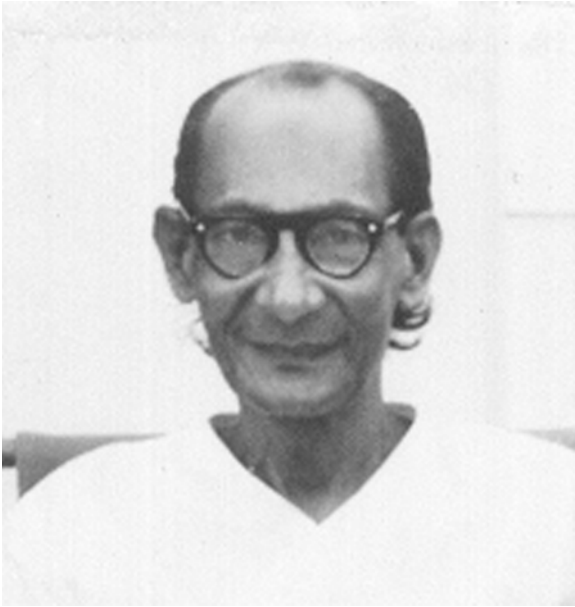


With his daughter-in-law and granddaughters

The Mother may have foreseen that the leaders of the country would leave him out of this glorious achievement and that he would find scant mention in the history books which are used to teach the subject to the children of our country. Perhaps she had also foreseen that he would be misunderstood by many of his own countrymen. Some of his contemporaries believed that he "fled" the scene of action to "hide" in Pondicherry, and that the fate of the country did not interest him after that. This could be one of the reasons for their ignoring his advice to accept the Cripps proposal. The misconception in the minds of those leaders has percolated down to our times. The Mother may have felt, a decade after the Master left his body, that a record of his great work in the political field had to be written and preserved for posterity.

It was because the Mother asked him to do this work that Rishabhchand did his own research, gathering material from newspapers and journals. People also wrote to him from West Bengal, giving him the information he needed. The Mother had instructed him to tell the story of Sri Aurobindo's life as much as possible in his own words. Not only the facts had to be checked and recorded faithfully but the tone had to be high and inspiring.

Readers who go through this thought-provoking volume may imagine that Rishabhchand left everything and sat down to write the chapters which were being serialised. In reality, as a sincere practitioner of the Integral Yoga he continued to look after the Furniture Department during the day and



in the evening took up his pen to set into words the unique life of his Guru. He spent his morning hours thinking of nails and screws, of inches and feet, of paint and sandpaper, of tackling the problems of the lazy worker and the dissatisfied sadhak whose furniture was being repaired or replaced. When the sun had set and the sky deepened into night he sat in his room above the Furniture Department and now his mind sifted through newspaper articles and reports, weighed one word against another, examined punctuation and syntax, and looked into the past to pick out the images that had created history.

When the first chapter came out in the *Bulletin* in August 1960 there was an introductory note:

We begin to publish serially, from this number, the story of Sri Aurobindo's life – the external history of it; for that also is of considerable interest and will be appreciated by many who do not know much of it. The writer is a disciple, he has consulted all available sources and his narration is expected to be as accurate and authentic as possible.

– Editor's note

The last installment was printed in the February 1971 issue of the *Bulletin*. Even though a simultaneous French translation had come out in the *Bulletin* a new French adaptation was done by Archaka in 1978. For French readers who are not too familiar with the Indian Freedom Movement this book came as a great help to understand Sri Aurobindo in the historical and social context in which he had lived and worked. It was only in 1981, eleven years after the author had passed away, that *Sri Aurobindo – His Life Unique* was published in book form. In a single volume it covers the Master's life from his birth to the early beginnings of the Ashram.

Rishabhchand's life was rich in experience: he had lived in the disciplined world of Jainism, deeply loved English poetry, joined the revolution for Independence, delighted in the beauty of fine silks, marched through the maze of business and commerce, been encircled by the living warmth of home and family, and then cast it all away to follow the path of yoga, leading an austere outer life but an abundant inner one. Out of the wealth of all those experiences was formed the mind and the heart and the inner voice which would one day be chosen by the Divine Mother to tell this unique story, of Sri Aurobindo's life and the birth of modern India.

— Sunayana Panda