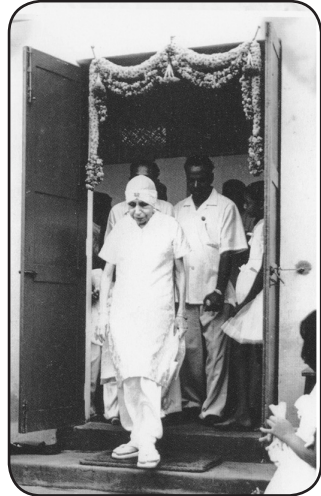
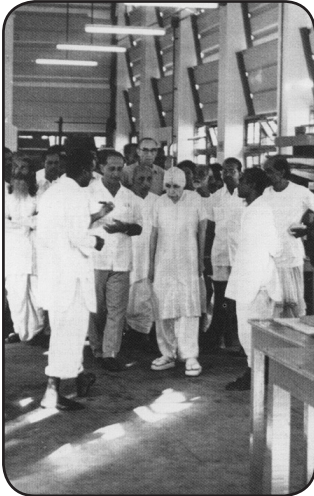
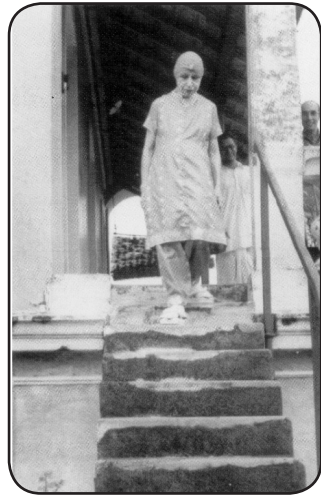
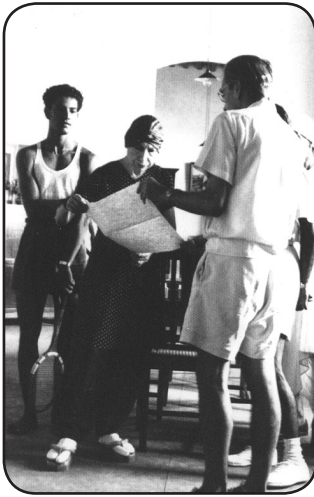


FOUNDING THE ASHRAM



The Mother's Letter to a Student

Sweet Mother, Can you hear me whenever I call you?

My dear child,

Be sure that I hear you each time you call and my help and force go straight to you.

With my blessings.

1-6-60

Nirodbaran, *Memorable Contacts with the Mother*, p.179

I

It is difficult if not impossible, even for those who were the privileged participants in the divine drama, to explain what precisely happened on the evening of 24 November 1926, henceforth to be known as the Siddhi Day, the Day of Realisation. Some sweet tension, like a spring being wound up, was building up for days, even for weeks — in fact, from the time of Sri Aurobindo's birthday, 15 August, three months earlier. During the evening discussion on that day, Sri Aurobindo had made a reference to the possibility of opening up "a direct connection with the world of the Gods". On 6 November, he had said that he was "trying to bring it [the world of the Gods] down into the physical." As the days passed, Jaya Devi and other sadhaks had felt that all Pondicherry was "fragrant with incense", that a great delight seemed to be at play. And on Mahashtami day, when she was granted a special permission, Jaya Devi performed a private worship in Sri Aurobindo's room. That day, she saw Sri Aurobindo looking like a radiant and golden Shiva and Mirra like Durga, verily the Divine.

With all this background, it would have been merely banal if something of seminal significance had not happened sooner or later. But what exactly did happen? The reports of the sadhaks — Purani, Rajangam, Champaklal, Jaya Devi and others — are unanimous that, when Sri Aurobindo and the Mother had withdrawn after meditation, pranam and blessings, Datta spoke some words as if visioning something in a trance or a sudden apocalyptic flash. They had all seen that there was a new lustre, a luminous glory, on Sri Aurobindo — but what had brought about that change? Like a prophetess in a temple of old speaking in an inspired moment of sudden seeing and ecstasy, Datta found the appropriate words and spoke them. But the hearers too were in a dazed condition, and although they had heard the words — perhaps repeated as in an incantation — they could not recapture them later, and each remembered somewhat differently. In 1921, Sri Aurobindo had told Purani that although the Divine Consciousness had descended, it had not yet penetrated the physical being;¹ it was precisely this that took place on 24 November 1926. In Sri Aurobindo's words:

"It was the descent of Krishna into the physical. Krishna is not the supramental Light. The descent of Krishna would mean the descent of the Overmind Godhead preparing, though not itself actually bringing, the descent of Supermind and Ananda. Krishna is the Anandamaya; he supports the evolution through the Overmind leading it towards his Ananda."²

Equally significant was the fact that now the way stood open for the evocation and establishment of the Supramental Consciousness itself on the earth. To realise this possibility, it became necessary for Sri Aurobindo to withdraw into seclusion.

II

But Sri Aurobindo's retirement was not to mean a diminution of activity; it meant the very reverse in fact. The community of sadhaks now placed under the Mother's care was to grow into a "spiritual collectivity" which Sri Aurobindo decided to put under a protective spiritual Name. It is said that he considered for three days³ — perhaps consulting the Mother before taking the final decision of naming the collective establishment "Sri Aurobindo Ashram", notwithstanding the ideas of austerity, asceticism and rejection popularly associated with an 'ashram'. But Sri Aurobindo thought of an ashram in the old Vedic sense: "The House of the Teacher where the students and disciples gather to draw inspiration from him, to learn how to find God."⁴ It was to be at once the House of the Spirit and the House of manifold but enlightened human activity. As he wrote to the Maharani of Baroda in 1930, "My aim is to create a centre of spiritual life which shall serve as a means of bringing down the higher consciousness and making it a power not merely for 'salvation' but for a divine life upon earth. It is with this object that I have withdrawn from public life and founded this Ashram..."⁵

The founding of the Ashram was also a fulfilling moment in Mirra's life of high aspiration and sustained yogic effort. As she acknowledged in the course of a conversation in May 1956:

"At the beginning of my present earthly existence I came into contact with many people who said that they had a great inner aspiration, an urge towards something deeper and truer, but that they were tied down, subjected, slaves to that brutal necessity of earning their living ... they felt imprisoned in a material necessity narrow and deadening.

I was very young at that time, and I always used to tell myself that if ever I could do it, I would try to create a little world - oh! quite a small one, but still...a small world where people would be able to live without having to be preoccupied with food and lodging and clothing and the impetrative necessities of life, so as to see whether all the energies freed by this certainty of a secure material living would turn spontaneously towards the divine life and the inner realisation.

Well, towards the middle of my life ... the means was given to me and I could realise this, that is, create such conditions of life."⁶

If the birth of the Ashram meant the realisation of one of Mirra's persistent early dreams, it also signified the materialisation of Sri Aurobindo's own hopes as expressed in his letters of 1920. In his letter to Barin, Sri Aurobindo had spoken of a Deva Sangha, and even one hundred dedicated members would, he thought, be able to form the necessary nucleus for future large-scale practical work in the field of social transformation. Writing to Motilal Roy on 2 September, Sri Aurobindo had wanted to establish "our communal system on a firm spiritual,

secondly on a firm economical foundation." The Ashram that took shape under the Mother's fostering care, benefiting at once from her genius for organisation and her infinite reserves of the Spirit, was perhaps Sri Aurobindo's old Bhavani Mandir doubled with his later concept of Deva Sangha, as also her own "typic society", a self-poised self-sufficient community turning spontaneously to the divine life and inner realisation." When the time came, the atmosphere was propitious, the instruments ready, and the twin-horses — spirit-power and economic-power - were properly yoked to the great endeavour.

This needs a little explanation and recapitulation. In his Baroda days over twenty years earlier, Sri Aurobindo had thought of establishing a Bhavani Mandir for training a band of yogins to engage in national service. That didn't come about, but something remotely resembling it was organised by his brother, Barindra, in the Manicktolla Gardens at Calcutta in 1907-08. Being mixed up with revolutionary activity, the enterprise was vitiated from the beginning, and after the Muzzaferpore bomb incident, the Manicktolla group was rounded up and rendered innocuous. Barin and some of his co-workers were sent to the Andamans after the Alipur trial (1908-09), and Sri Aurobindo himself, about a year after his acquittal, retired to Pondicherry in April 1910. After 1926, under much better auspices and under the spiritual and general direction of the Mother, the earlier Bhavani Mandir - Deva Sangha idea began to take a viable shape as Sri Aurobindo Ashram. In Sanat K. Banerji's words:

"The Ashram in Pondicherry is that temple of the living Bhawani, where her devotees, the men and Women who aspire to a new life on earth, offer Her worship, serve Her through their works, prepare themselves for receiving the new Light according to the best of their ability, so that the Light may spread and usher in a new world to take the place of the old."⁷

There was also a definite 'policy' decision. Two courses had been open to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother: first, to wait till their own Yoga of supramental transformation was complete, and then take the people forward too; and second, with whatever gains of Yoga had already accrued to them (and they were momentous enough), to get a group together, and carry whole collectivity forward. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother opted for the latter course.

Many years later, when the question was directly put to him "Why did you retire?", Sri Aurobindo answered that, if he had to do what the Mother was doing, he could hardly have found time for his own work of hastening the manifestation of the supramental consciousness. It was practically a division of labour, and the Mother herself explained that in 1926,

"Sri Aurobindo had announced to the few people who were there that he was entrusting to me the work of helping and guiding them, that I would remain in contact with him, naturally, and that through me he would do the work."⁸

That the Mother's part in the collaborative adventure of running the Ashram was all-important may be seen from Sri Aurobindo's own ready admission on 10 December 1938:

"All my realisations — Nirvana and others — would have remained theoretical, as it were, so far as the outer world was concerned. It is the Mother who showed the way to a practical form. Without her, no organised manifestation would have been possible."⁹

III

While the disciples could see that Sri Aurobindo's Siddhi on 24 November 1926 had a key importance to the Sadhana — individual and collective — and meant a decisive victory on the path generating a new fervour and ananda in the atmosphere, few of the inmates were quite prepared for what immediately followed. On the 27th morning, Jaya Devi went as usual with the tulasi garlands and returned disappointed, for she had been told that Sri Aurobindo would not come out for darshan. Having shown the previous evening for one immaculate interim the very *rupa* and charged splendour of the Delight of Existence, Sri Aurobindo had effected a sudden and determined withdrawal. No more daily darshan and pranam, no more luminous discourses and scintillating Evening Talks! The Mother was accessible of course, and she was all-radiant purity and sovereign compassion. And yet—was it the same thing as receiving benedictions from the Master himself? When somebody ventured to complain, Sri Aurobindo wrote to say that the sadhaks would henceforth receive his light and force from the Mother, and they should be guided by her in their sadhana. Even on the 24th evening, some recollected, Sri Aurobindo had blessed the disciples as it were through the Mother — the Mother being the intermediary, the interceder, the paraclete.

There were intermittent grumblings all the same. One line of argument was that, granted that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother were divine collaborators, still they were two persons, weren't they? How, then, could the Mother entirely obliterate the Master, and put herself alone in the forefront? Sri Aurobindo was to make a pointed reference to this heresy in a letter to a disciple written in 1934:

"The opposition between the Mother's consciousness and my consciousness was an invention of the old days... and emerged in a time when the Mother was not fully recognised or accepted by some of those who were here at the beginning. Even after they had recognised her they persisted in this meaningless opposition and did great harm to themselves and others. The Mother's consciousness and mine are the same, the one Divine Consciousness in two, because that is necessary for the play. Nothing can be done without her knowledge and force, without her consciousness — if

anybody really feels her consciousness, he should know that I am there behind it and if he feels me it is the same with hers."¹⁰

It was true they first met only in 1914, and her second coming was in 1920, barely six years before the Siddhi. While they had been doing Yoga before they met or knew about each other, their respective lines of sadhana had followed the same course. And when they met, there resulted the fusion of their lines of sadhana, a mutual strengthening and consolidation which presently came to be known as Sri Aurobindo's Yoga. But it was the Mother's Yoga as much as Sri Aurobindo's, and he was always forthright in acknowledging his debt to the Mother's contribution. As he once said:

"Before the Mother came all [the sadhaks] were living in the mind with only some mental realisations and experiences. The vital and everything else were unregenerated and the psychic behind the veil. I am not aware that anyone of them at that time entered the Cosmic Consciousness. At that time I was still seeking my way for the transformation and the passage to the Supramental... and acted very much on a principle of laissez faire with few Sadhaks who were there."¹¹

It was the Mother's coming and her eventual assumption of full responsibility that effected such a sea-change in the atmosphere.

IV



As regards the selection of the sadhaks, the work assigned to them and the system of arrangements for the smooth running of the Ashram, the principle governing these had little in common with the normal criteria of the outside world. "The moment one enters the life of the Ashram and takes up the yoga," the Mother wrote to a sadhak in January 1929, "he ceases to belong to any creed or caste or race; he is one of Sri Aurobindo's disciples and nothing else."¹² Many years later, Sri Aurobindo told Surendra Mohan Ghose that the Mother's choice of sadhaks was not exclusively governed by their spiritual advancement or intellectual brilliance: "She selects different types She wants to observe how the Divine works in different types."¹³ The Ashram was, after all, a laboratory for a spiritual and supramental Yoga, and in it humanity had to be represented in all its diversity. From the very beginning, the Ashram community had a cosmopolitan cast, and this only came to be emphasised more and more with the passage of time, for thus alone could the Ashram microcosm serve as the matrix of the future humanity.

"Since 1926 when Sri Aurobindo retired and gave me full charge of it (at that time there were only two rented houses and a handful of disciples) all has grown up and developed like the growth of a forest, and each service was created not by any artificial planning but by a living and dynamic need. This is the secret of constant growth and endless progress."¹⁴

And Sri Aurobindo too had written much the same thing in the course of a letter to a disciple in 1939:

"There has never been, at any time, a mental plan, a fixed programme or an organisation decided beforehand. The whole thing has taken birth, grown and developed as a living being by a movement of consciousness (Chit-Tapas) constantly maintained, increased and fortified. As the conscious Force descends in matter and radiates, it seeks for fit instruments to express and manifest it. It goes without saying that the more the instrument is open, receptive and plastic, the better are the results."¹⁵

The Ashram, organised not for the renunciation of the world nor for a life of meditative retirement, but for advancing the work of future-building on yogic consciousness and yoga-shakti, had to place the accent on Karma yoga which would both help the Ashram to thrive as a self-poised, self-sustained human aggregate and also advance the sadhaks' spiritual training. A few excerpts from Sri Aurobindo's letters to his disciples will make this clear:

"The work here is not intended for showing one's capacity or having position or as a means of physical nearness to the Mother, but as a field and an opportunity for the Karmayoga part of the integral yoga, for learning to work in the true yogic way, dedication through service, practical selflessness, obedience, scrupulousness, discipline, setting the Divine and

the Divine's work first and oneself last, harmony, patience, forbearance, etc."¹⁶

"The work in the Ashram ...was meant as a service to the Divine and as a field for the inner opening to the Divine, surrender to the Divine alone, rejection of ego and all the ordinary vital movements and the training in a psychic elevation, selflessness, obedience, renunciation of all mental, vital or other self-assertion of the limited personality."¹⁷

"Work is not only for work's sake, but as a field of Sadhana, for getting rid of the lower personality and its reactions and acquiring a full surrender to the Divine."¹⁸

V

Again, even as the selection of the sadhaks was governed by considerations other than the sheerly logical, not easily analysable by the mere intellect, the allocation of work to the inmates could also sometimes baffle the surface understanding. Why should a poet be asked to look after furniture? Why should an affluent businessman be asked to wash plates in the dining hall? Why should a trained physician be put in charge of nuts and screws? Why should a serious student of philosophy be asked to dust books in the library? Why should one trained for the legal profession be made to move food-carriers in a push-cart and distribute them to the different houses? On the other hand, the work — of whatever kind — attracted no wages as such. And although, as the Ashram grew and the work proliferated, there arose the necessity to have heads of the various departments that was only for convenience and despatch, and not to create masters and subordinates; all the work was still an offering to the Mother, to the Divine, and not to the departmental head. But even the grumblers had in the end to acknowledge that the work assigned, although apparently unsuitable and even uncongenial at first, had somehow grown into the sadhaks' life. Of course, things did not always work with complete precision and coordination, and this was because all the sadhaks were not equally, or at all times, ready and efficient channels of the Force and the Consciousness at work in the Ashram. In such cases, Sri Aurobindo or the Mother had to intervene, generally from behind, and set right the distortion. And sometimes the Mother made a trial of divers arrangements before deciding upon the best course.

This, then, was the difficult psychological hurdle that the sadhak had to cross silencing the insidious promptings of his 'reason' and 'common sense': that, firstly, the work assigned to him was really the Divine's work, and must be done in the right attitude of consecration; and, secondly, that the work being the Mother's, the Divine's, if the application or dedication was truly sincere and free from all egoistic distortion, the Mother herself would give the strength

and the expertise to the sadhak to see the work through. The first part was affirmed and clarified in several of Sri Aurobindo's letters:

"Remind yourself always it is Mother's work you are doing and if you do it as well as you can remembering her, the Mother's Grace will be with you."¹⁹

"Work should be done for the Mother and not for oneself, — that is how one encourages the growth of the psychic being and overcomes the ego. The test is to do the work given by the Mother without *abhimāna* or insistence or personal choice or prestige, — not getting hurt by anything that touches the pride, amour-propre or personal preference.

It is a high and great ideal that is put before the Sadhak through work it is not possible to realise it suddenly, but to grow steadily into it is possible...."²⁰

As regards the second part, it was axiomatic that when one did the Divine's work, the Divine must lend a helping hand. This too was reiterated in Sri Aurobindo's letters:

"If the mind and the vital get the habit of opening to the Mother's Force, they are then supported by the Force, and may even be fully filled with it — the Force does the work and the body feels no strain or fatigue before or after."²¹

The intellectual and poet, K.D. Sethna, was first asked to take charge of Ashram's stock of furniture. This brought him daily in contact with the Mother to take her signature on the requisition slips. "There was no other job, I suppose," he reminisced, "open at that time which could bring me in touch with her so much," and he added the revealing comment:

"But I realised that the Mother, when she gives any work, gives two things also with it: first, the Ananda of the thing because without that joy you couldn't carry on at all, and, secondly, the capacity — to some extent at least!"²²

More pointedly, the Mother once told Champaklal, and this was more than a month before the founding of the Ashram:

"Do you think that you are working? No, your Mother is working."

Then, two days later:

"You know, only one Purusha is working in the whole world."²³

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17. *ibid.*, p. 850
18. *ibid.*, Vol. 25, p. 211
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Inauguration of the Ashram Swimming Pool

The construction of our lovely swimming pool in the Sportsground had been complete and was thrown open to all the Groups of Physical Education. At last, I thought, some pleasant innocent exercise when I had given up all other games. But alas, soon I began to feel uneasy after the dip, even a bit out of sorts. One night I had the vision of Sri Aurobindo's right arm stretched out across the entrance to the Sportsground. The indication was quite clear that I should stop my innocent pastime. I asked the Mother if swimming was harmful for me. She answered, "No, you can go for swimming." But when I told her about my dream, she said, "Then you should not go." This is how the Guru guides us in every little detail!

Nirodbaran, *Memorable Contacts with the Mother*, p.78