...An Arrival and a Beginning...

Commemorating the Centenary of Sri Aurobindo's Arrival in Pondicherry (1910-2010)

One hundred years ago, around four in the afternoon of 4 April 1910, the S.S. Dupleix, a ship of the French shipping company Messageries Maritimes, arrived in Pondicherry. On it, as a passenger, was a revolutionary-mystic who was wanted by the British Government; he was travelling under an assumed name. The passenger was Sri Aurobindo and this was a day that would change Pondicherry and the world for ever.

Sri Aurobindo's arrival in Pondicherry represented a momentous transition in his life. From the Karmabhoomi of Calcutta with its focus on the political struggle, Sri Aurobindo moved to the Tapobhoomi of Pondicherry, where he turned exclusively to the inner life, and the practice of sadhana. The shift was from a work centered primarily on the outer planes — physical, vital and mental — to one whose action was focussed almost entirely on the occult and spiritual planes. A life dedicated to the liberation of India now became a life that promised to free all humanity from slavery to ordinary nature by bringing down a dynamic new spiritual consciousness, which he called the Supramental consciousness.

By 1910 Sri Aurobindo had had most of the traditional spiritual realisations — the realisation of the silent mind when he meditated with Lele, the experience of Nirvana when he visited Bombay, and the realisation of the Divine (Vasudeva) immanent in all beings, in all things, while confined in the Alipore Jail…. Now would begin his own yoga.

For Pondicherry too this was a historic day. Like Ahalya of yore who awaited the touch of Lord Rama's foot, to come to life, a sleeping Pondicherry was blessed by the coming of the "Uttara Yogi". She would awaken and, in years to come, be a magnet for seekers from all over the world.

In the following pages we retrace the sequence of events that brought Sri Aurobindo to Pondicherry and briefly cover the first years of his stay here, a period that laid the foundation of his future pioneering work. This is a condensed version of the exhibition "Laying Down the Foundation" prepared by the Ashram Archives. It is on display at the Exhibition House from 29 March to 10 April 2010.

AFTER ALIPORE

Sri Aurobindo was acquitted in the Alipore Bomb Trial on 6 May 1909. From then until February 1910 he lived at 6 College Square, which was the office and plant of the Bengali Nationalist paper *Sanjivani*, and also the residence of Sri Aurobindo's *meshomoshay* (maternal aunt's husband), Krishna Kumar Mitra.

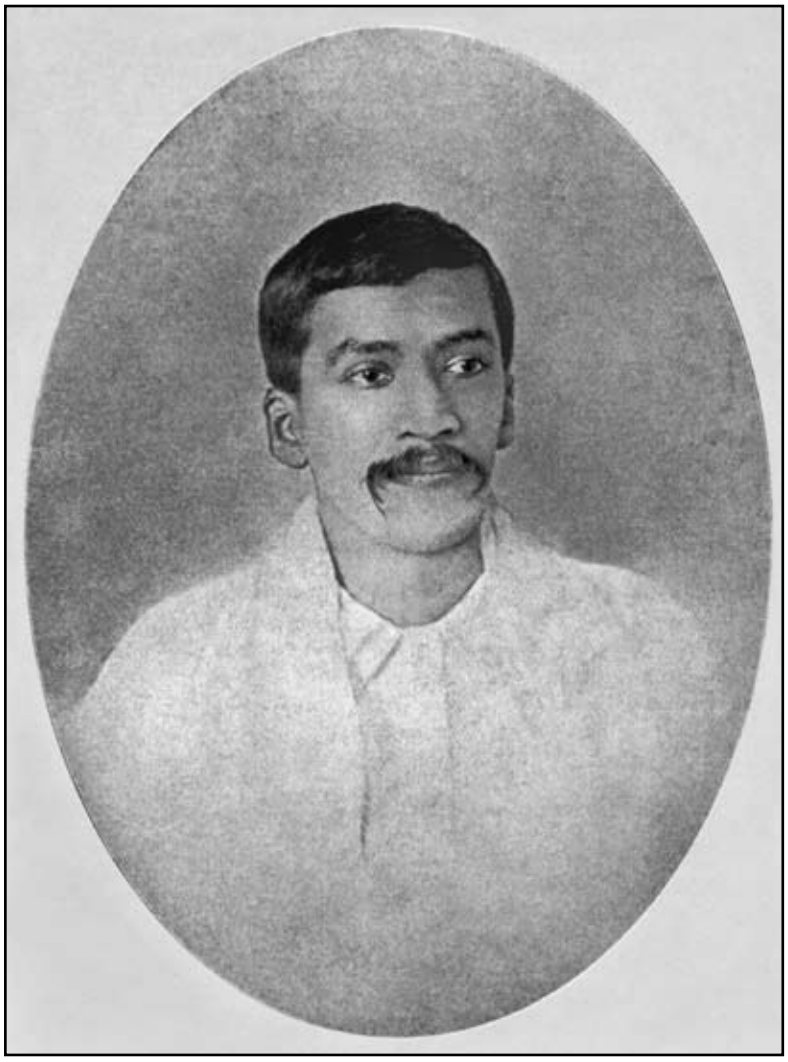
TO REBUILD THE PARTY

In the summer of 1909 Sri Aurobindo found "the [*Nationalist*] party organisation broken, its leaders scattered by imprisonment, deportation or self-imposed exile and the party itself still existent but dumb and dispirited and incapable of any strenuous action. For almost a year he strove single-handed as the sole remaining leader of the Nationalists in India to revive the movement."[1]

While Sri Aurobindo was in Alipore jail, Bal Gangadhar Tilak had been sentenced to a six-year jail term in Burma and Lala Lajpat Rai and Bipin Chandra Pal were in self-exile in England. Nine prominent leaders from Bengal were deported by the British.

Sri Aurobindo said that after his release from prison he "went to places in the districts to speak and at one of these delivered his speech at Uttarpara in which for the first time he spoke publicly of his Yoga and his spiritual experiences."[2]

He also spoke of two messages that came to him "in the communion of Yoga". The first message was, "I have called you to work, and that is the *adesh* for which you have asked. I give you the *adesh* to go forth and do my work." The second message was, "Something has been shown to you in this year of seclusion . . . it is the truth of the Hindu religion. This is the Sanatana Dharma, this is the eternal religion…. When therefore it is said that India shall rise, it is the Sanatana Dharma that shall rise.... It is for the *dharma* and by the *dharma* that India exists."[3]



Sri Aurobindo after his release from Alipore Jail

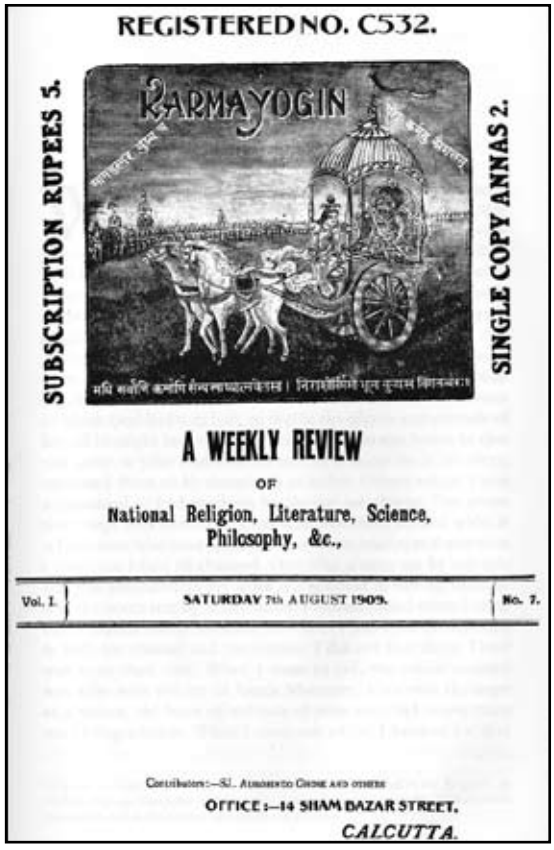
KARMAYOGIN

Sri Aurobindo was determined to continue the struggle for independence. After his arrest in May 1908, *Bande Mataram*, the newspaper he edited from 1906, had been suppressed by the British authorities. To continue the work of the Nationalist Party, and to "aid his effort"[4] he started two weekly newspapers, one in English called *Karmayogin*, and the other in Bengali, *Dharma.*

On 19 June 1909, six weeks after his release from jail, Sri Aurobindo launched the *Karmayogin*.

On the same day a copy of the first issue of the *Karmayogin* was sent to the central office of the CID and before the end of the month it had reached the Viceroy, Lord Minto's office.[5] A few days later Minto wrote to Lord Morley, the Secretary of State (for India) in London, "I only hope he [*Sri Aurobindo*] will sufficiently commit himself for us to prosecute."[6]

Sri Aurobindo wrote articles in the *Karmayogin* on philosophy, yoga, education, art and literature. There were contributions from other writers too. But after the first few issues, almost all the original matter appearing in the *Karmayogin* was written by Sri Aurobindo. The *Isha Upanishad* and *Kena and Other Upanishads* were published in this journal. Seven poems which now form part of his *Collected Poems* were published in the *Karmayogin,* as well as some of his shorter works such as *The Brain of India*, *The National Value of Art* and *Conversations of the Dead*.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KARMAYOGIN

A WEEKLY REVIEW

OF

National Religion, Literature, Science, Philosophy, &c.,

Vol. I. | SATURDAY 7th AUGUST 1909. | No. 7.

OFFICE:—14 SHAM BAZAR STREET, CALCUTTA.

Frontispiece of the *Karmayogin*



Sri Aurobindo lived at No. 6 College Square, the *Sanjivani* office.

Through this journal he wished to put the Nationalist ideal before the country but not only in political terms; increasingly the cultural and spiritual dimensions became prominent in his thoughts. Sri Aurobindo wrote: "The *Karmayogin* will be more of a national review than a weekly newspaper. We shall notice current events only as they evidence, help, affect or resist the growth of national life and the development of the soul of the nation. Political and social problems we shall deal with from this standpoint, seeking first their spiritual roots and inner causes and then proceeding to measures and remedies."[7]

SPEECHES IN 1909

On 13 June 1909, Sri Aurobindo addressed a large gathering at a Swadeshi meeting held at Beadon Square, Calcutta. On 19 June he spoke at Jhalakati and 4 days later at Bakarganj. On the 25th he addressed a gathering in Khulna. Two days later he was in Howrah where again he gave a speech. He gave speeches in Kumartuli Park and College Square in Calcutta at this time. On his birthday, 15 August 1909, he spoke to a group of friends and supporters at his residence. In September he spoke at Hooghly and Jalsukhia. The following month there were speeches in College Square, Harish Park, Bhawanipore and Beadon Square.

In the ten months after his release from prison — from May 1909 till February 1910 — Sri Aurobindo addressed more than a dozen meetings in Bengal, East Bengal and Assam.

During this period he was the most prominent leader of the Nationalist Party in the country.

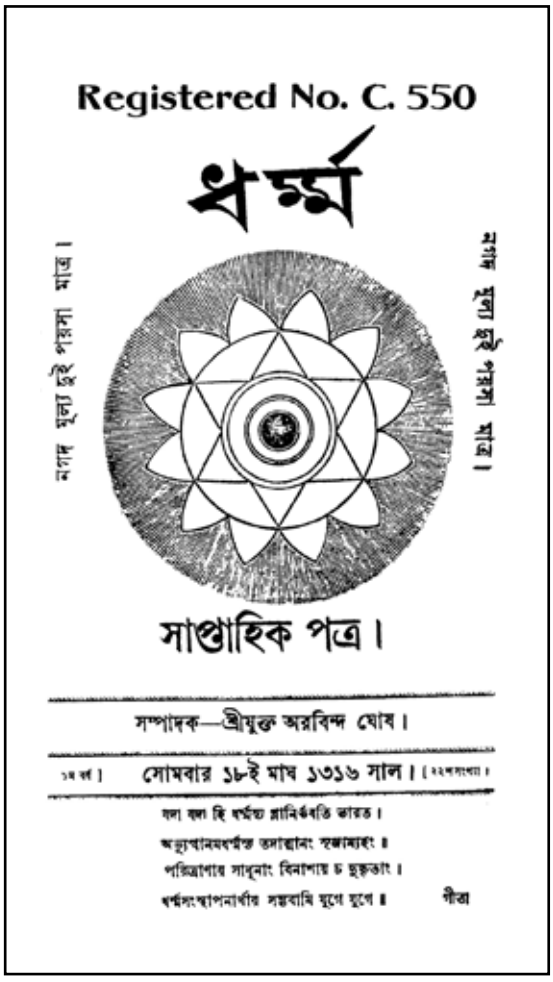
POLICE CONSIDERS LEGAL ACTION

The British Government was not at all happy with the result of the Alipore trial, especially with regard to Sri Aurobindo. From the Viceroy to the chief of CID, every officer of the Government hoped to be able to put him behind bars once again. Three options were available to them: to appeal Beachcroft's verdict, to prosecute Sri Aurobindo for some infringement of law on his part or to deport him without trial. The deportation option began to be seriously considered.

On 31 July 1909 Sri Aurobindo wrote an open letter in the *Karmayogin* which preempted and prevented this action by the Government. In the Open Letter which he called his "political will



Sri Aurobindo addressing a public meeting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ধর্ম্ম

সাপ্তাহিক পত্র।

সম্পাদক—শ্রীযুক্ত অরবিন্দ ঘোষ।

সোমবার ১৮ই মাঘ ১৩১৬ সাল।

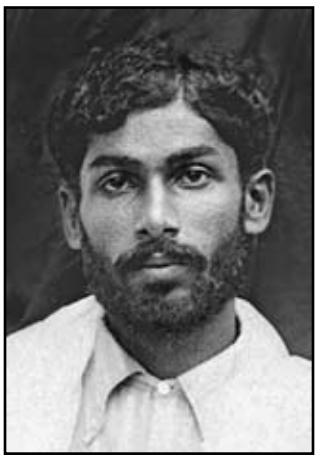
যদা যদা হি ধর্ম্মস্য গ্লানির্ভবতি ভারত।
অভ্যুত্থানমধর্ম্মস্য তদাত্মানং সৃজাম্যহং॥
পরিত্রাণায় সাধূনাং বিনাশায় চ দুষ্কৃতাং।
ধর্ম্মসংস্থাপনার্থায় সম্ভবামি যুগে যুগে॥ গীতা

Frontispiece of *Dharma*

and testament" he wrote: "Our ideal is that of Swaraj or absolute autonomy free from foreign control. We claim the right of every nation to live its own life by its own energies according to its own nature and ideals.... We have brains, we have courage, we have an infinite and various national capacity. All we need is a field and an opportunity."[8] Sri Aurobindo also discussed at length the aims of his party — Swaraj, Boycott, Swadeshi, and National Education.

This letter had the desired effect on the Government. The idea of deportation was dropped. But the British still kept a close watch on Sri Aurobindo whom they considered "the most dangerous of our adversaries now at large".[9]

DHARMA


Nolini Kanta Gupta (1889-1984)

Towards the end of August 1909 Sri Aurobindo launched the Bengali paper, *Dharma.* He wrote most of the articles himself and gave Nolini Kanta Gupta the task of editing the news columns. The articles were on the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Gita, as well as on Nationalism. Sri Aurobindo's famous "Durga Stotra" was first published in *Dharma* in October 1909.

THE YOGA CONTINUES

By mid 1909, Sri Aurobindo once noted, he "had already realised in full two of the four great realisations on which his Yoga and philosophy are founded. The first . . . was the realisation of the silent spaceless and timeless Brahman"[10] while meditating with the Maharashtrian yogi, Vishnu Bhaskar Lele, in Baroda in 1908. The second realisation, "that of the cosmic consciousness and of the Divine as all beings and all that is", the dynamic Brahman, "happened in the Alipore jail and of which he has spoken in his speech at Uttarpara."[11]

After his release from jail in May 1909, Sri Aurobindo continued his Yogic sadhana. In the midst of his political activity — speeches, conferences, deliberations on party policy — he still found time to note down some of the spiritual experiences he was having.

He kept a record of his own practice of the yoga in a series of diaries. The first entries in this *Record of Yoga* are dated June 1909.

EVENINGS AT THE *KARMAYOGIN* OFFICE

Sri Aurobindo, who lived with K. K. Mitra's family, visited the *Karmayogin* and the *Dharma* office at Shyampukur every evening. Nolini-da recalls, "Three of us were permanent residents, Bejoy Nag, Suresh Chakravarti and myself… He



Karmayogin and *Dharma* Office in Shyampukur, Calcutta.

would first look to the work in the office and then come to our rooms *[which were at the back of the building]*. Till about ten in the evening he used to spend his time with us. It is here that began our true education, and perhaps, nay certainly, our initiation too."[12]

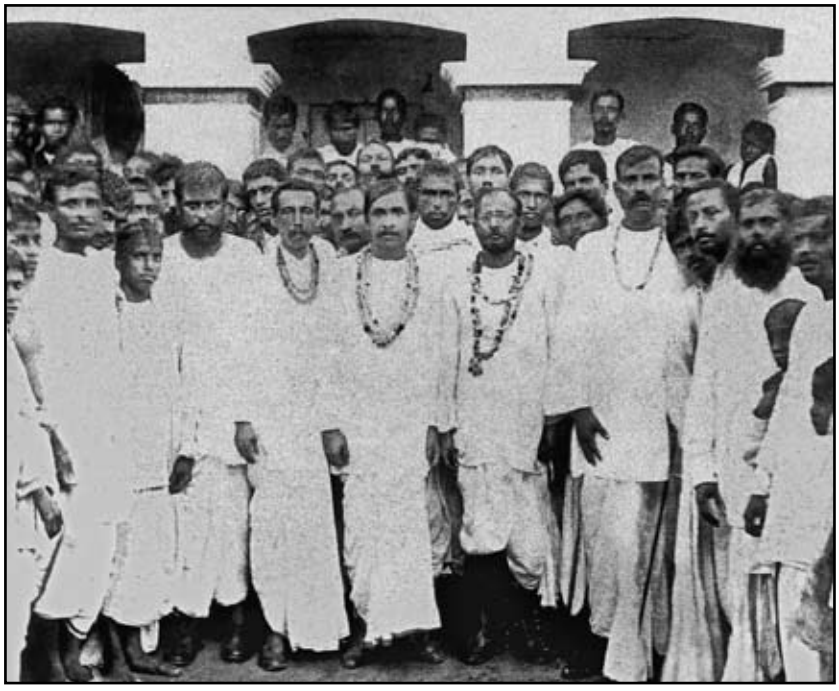
Sri Aurobindo suggested to the young men the English titles they should read and helped them learn French. About this time, in the same office, Sri Aurobindo himself began to study Tamil from a Malabari *pandit*. On some evenings they also had automatic speech and automatic writing séances.

POLITICAL MEETINGS

In the first week of September 1909, the Bengal Provincial Conference was held in Hooghly. Sri Aurobindo attended it with a large number of young Nationalist delegates. At the conference he openly appealed for the unity of the Congress.

After the Hooghly Conference, Sri Aurobindo took a short political tour in Assam, accompanied by Nolini Kanta Gupta and Bijoy Nag. Much of the journey had to be by boat. Sri Aurobindo addressed many meetings in the province and most of those who came to his meetings were common village folk.

During this tour, Sri Aurobindo did not confine "himself to political matters alone. There were many who knew that he was a Yogi and spiritual guide and they sought his help in these matters too."[13] After a hectic day, Sri Aurobindo would find time only at night to do his concentrated meditations. At Jalsukhia he would "sit up practically the whole night" meditating "and go to bed only for a short while in the early hours of the morning."[14]



Sri Aurobindo in Hooghly

ANOTHER OPEN LETTER

Sri Aurobindo continued to write in the *Karmayogin* about the political situation in Bengal and in the rest of the country. The Moderates and Nationalists were divided over how to deal with the Minto-Morley Reforms.

Then, five months after his first "open letter", Sri Aurobindo published another one. "To My Countrymen" was published on 25 December 1909 in the *Karmayogin*. In this letter Sri Aurobindo affirmed: "The period of waiting is over.... Whatever we do, we must do ourselves, in our own strength and courage. Let us then take up the work God has given us, like courageous, steadfast and patriotic men willing to sacrifice greatly and venture greatly because the mission also is great."[15]



TO MY COUNTRYMEN.

Two decisive incidents have happened which make it compulsory on the Nationalist party to abandon their attitude of reserve and expectancy and once more assume their legitimate place in the struggle for Indian liberties. The Reforms, so long trumpeted as the beginning of a new era of constitutional progress in India, have been thoroughly revealed to the public intelligence by the publication of the Councils Regulations and the results of the elections showing the inevitable nature and composition of the new Councils. The negotiations for the union of Moderates and Nationalists in an United Congress have failed owing to the insistence of the former on the Nationalists subscribing to a Moderate profession of faith.

The survival of Moderate politics in India depended on two factors, the genuineness and success of the promised Reforms and the use made by the Conventionists of the oppor-

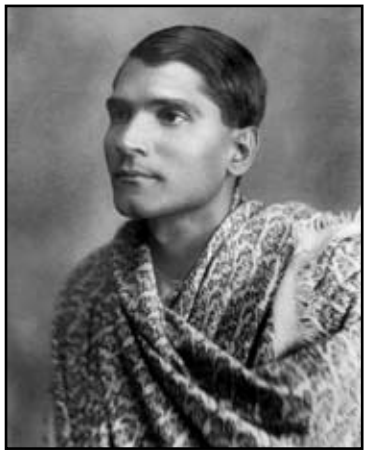
Sri Aurobindo's "Open Letter" published in the *Karmayogin*

"To My Countrymen" was signed — the second such political writing to appear explicitly in Sri Aurobindo's name in the *Karmayogin*.

GOVERNMENT CLAMPS DOWN

1909 and early 1910 was a period when revolutionaries belonging to various groups in the country carried out several spectacular assassinations. The Government decided to clamp down harshly on any Nationalist activity. It brought in harsh laws such as the Indian Press Act that effectively interdicted the free expression of opinion in the press or on the platform.

On 12 February 1910 the Advocate-General of Bengal gave his opinion that the Government had a good chance of success if it chose to prosecute Sri Aurobindo on the charge of sedition for his open letter of 25 December in the *Karmayogin*. The Lt. Governor's office began to prepare the Government's case.[16]



Sureshchandra Chakravarty (Moni) (1885–1954) was on the staff of the *Dharma* and *Karmayogin*

About this period Nolini Kanta Gupta recalls: "Our life in Shyampukur went on in its regular course, when, one evening as we gathered for our usual séance [*the automatic writing session*], our friend Ramchandra suddenly appeared with the news that the Government had decided to arrest Sri Aurobindo again; everything was ready, he said, and it might even be that very evening."[17] Ramchandra Majumdar was a member of the *Dharma* and *Karmayogin* staff and had a relative who worked in the police department. While it was true that the Government was considering legal options for Sri Aurobindo's arrest, it had not yet issued the warrant. In fact it would not be issued until much later.

DEPARTURE FROM CALCUTTA

Suresh Chakravarty, or 'Moni' to his friends, who shared the living quarters at Shyampukur with Nolini and Bijoy, recalls that particular evening in February 1910:

"...For some time past there had been a rumour that the Government would not rest until they had Sri Aurobindo in their grasp again. Nevertheless, the whole atmosphere of the room immediately changed as the news came. In place of the bubbling mirth there prevailed a deep silence, like sudden darkness after a strong illumination. All of us waited with anxious hearts. Sri Aurobindo seemed to think for a few seconds. Then he said, 'I shall go to Chandernagore.' Rambabu said, 'Just now?' Sri Aurobindo replied, 'Just now, this very moment.' "[18]



Rani *ghat* in Chandernagore, thirty kilometers up the Ganges from Calcutta

Sri Aurobindo stood up and left the house. The others joined him. As Moni recalls: "We… formed a small procession, not a festive but a silent procession, with Sri Aurobindo and Rambabu at the head, Biren [*Ghose, a colleague*] following them from a little behind and keeping them within view, and last of all myself a little farther behind Biren keeping him in my view." [19]



Birendra Nath Ghose

The "silent procession" moved along the northern part of Calcutta. Moni relates: "As long as Sri Aurobindo remained in that house [*in Shyampukur*] it used to be watched by the men of the CID.... But we found that on that particular evening, when Sri Aurobindo and Rambabu came out of the house and the two of us followed in succession, there was not a trace of any policeman anywhere about the house."[20]

Ramchandra knew every nook and corner of the area through which he was taking Sri Aurobindo. They walked through many lanes and by-lanes in order to avoid a possible pursuit by the CID detectives. The entire area was hushed in silence. "On that solitary path in a locality criss-crossed by so many lanes and turns, in that dense silence, it was impossible for the police to give chase and keep the fugitive within sight till the end."[21]

Moni recalls, "On arriving at the *ghat*, Rambabu hailed one of the boatmen and said, 'Hey, would you take a fare?' These words of Rambabu and his voice still ring in my ears."[22] After a brief conversation between the boatman and Ramchandra, Sri Aurobindo got into the boat, followed by Biren and Suresh. Ramchandra took his leave. The "common Ganges boat rowed by two boatmen" [23] sailed off.

THE *ADESH*

Sri Aurobindo later wrote in a letter that it was "the result of a sudden decision taken on the strength of an *adesh* from above and was carried out rapidly and secretly without consultation with anybody or advice from any quarter".[24] In another letter he wrote: "I suddenly received a command from above in a Voice well known to me, in the three words: 'Go to Chandernagore.' In ten minutes or so I was in the boat for Chandernagore."[25]

In 1925, in a conversation with a fellow-sadhak regarding Sri Aurobindo's departure from Calcutta, Suresh Chakravarty said: "He did not think even for a moment about *Karmayogin*, papers, articles, politics, party, wife, house — nothing. Simply went away."[26]

IN CHANDERNAGORE

Throughout the boat ride from Calcutta to Chandernagore Sri Aurobindo and the others "sat so quietly on the bare wooden planks in

the darkness of the thatched cabin that it would have been difficult to know whether they were there or not.... After sailing for the whole night, the boat reached Chandernagore before dawn while it was still quite dark."[27] It landed at Rani *ghat*.

Sri Aurobindo did not step out of the boat. He knew only one resident in this town, a revolutionary called Charu Chandra Roy, and sent Biren to him. When Charu Chandra was told that Sri Aurobindo was in Chandernagore and seeking shelter with him, he refused to provide it. He was not willing to put himself in danger any more.

Though he had been refused refuge, Sri Aurobindo simply remained in the boat, unperturbed. Meanwhile Charu Chandra spoke about his arrival to another local revolutionary, Srish Ghosh, who in turn mentioned it to some revolutionary friends, among them a young man named Motilal Roy.



Motilal Roy (1882–1959)

MOTILAL'S GUEST

Motilal Roy at once agreed to take Sri Aurobindo in. He was to remark later: "This event changed the whole face of my future."[28] Biren and Suresh Chakravarti returned to Calcutta.

Motilal could not receive the Nationalist leader openly in his house. He therefore decided to hide him in the lumber room. He was not happy about this dusty hideout for Sri Aurobindo, but it was too risky to keep his guest anywhere else in the house. As an alternative, Sri Aurobindo was taken to Santosh Dey's *[a local revolutionary]* house where he spent his first night and second day. But since



Way to Motilal Roy's house from the Ganges.



Sri Aurobindo spent his first day in this room in Motilal Roy's house.

there Sri Aurobindo had to share the room with another person he came back to Motilal's house. This time he stayed for a few days in a room that was used for stocking chairs.

CHANGING HOUSES

However Motilal and the other Chandernagore revolutionaries were worried that if Sri Aurobindo continued to stay in one place for long, it "might cause the secret to leak out."[29] So over the next few weeks Sri Aurobindo moved to different locations. From Motilal's house he moved to Gondalpara. The next few days were spent there, sometimes in a rented thatched hut in a colony of coolies and sometimes in Narendranath's *[another revolutionary]* house. But this arrangement did not prove to be suitable.

Nakur Kar, a local *zamindar*, owned a garden house in the Bagbazar area of the town. It was decided to shift Sri Aurobindo there late one night. He and Narendranath were to reach the garden house on foot.

"Srishchandra had forbidden us to enter Kar's Garden by the gate on the main road. On the western side of the garden, off a narrow alley, a part of the wall was broken down."[30] While entering the garden in the darkness through the wall opening, Narendranath and Sri Aurobindo fell over one another. "Aurobindo smiled sweetly and said, 'On account of these English we are doomed to die an unnatural accidental death.'"[31]

Sri Aurobindo spent only a few days in



Motilal Roy's house, Chandernagore



Karer Bagan, Chandernagore

that house. Located in the middle of the town, it was too exposed for his stay to remain secret. Once again he had to be moved to another place.

This time the young men found a dilapidated house, more like a shed, in Nichupatti near Lakshmigunj Bazar. It was close to a Shiva temple, known as Jagannath *bari*. In this dilapidated house Sri Aurobindo stayed till he left for Pondicherry.



In this dilapidated house Sri Aurobindo stayed till he left for Pondicherry.



Sister Nivedita

NIVEDITA TAKES CHARGE

Sri Aurobindo's departure to Chandernagore effectively ended his connection with the two journals, *Karmayogin* and *Dharma*. He asked Sister Nivedita to take up editing of the *Karmayogin* in his absence. She consented. Sri Aurobindo had left behind several pieces intended for publication. In his absence Sister Nivedita serialised them in the journal. These writings were: *A System of National Education*, *Baji Prabhou* and *Chitrangada*.

SRI AUROBINDO'S SADHANA AT CHANDERNAGORE

In a Note on his political life published in 1948, where Sri Aurobindo refers to himself in the third person, he says: "At Chandernagore he plunged entirely into solitary meditation."[32]

About Sri Aurobindo's first day in the godown of his house, Motilal recalls, "a thick layer of dust settled on the floor. Bats, cockroaches and spiders reigned undisturbed about the beams; I did not dare stir them up in fear of interfering with his rest. I swept the dust away from a part of the floor and laid a carpet, which was covered over by a sheet. He sat down noiselessly like a marionette. 'I will be back in a moment,' I conveyed by a sign."[33]

Motilal returned to the room later without making any noise: "Opening my eyes wide, I observed that Sri Aurobindo was sitting silently with his eyes fixed in an upward stare. What a complacent and divine look!... He had utterly resigned himself to God. When he talked, words came out of his mouth as if someone else made him speak. If his hand moved, it was controlled as it were, by a third agency."[34]

THE CASE AGAINST SRI AUROBINDO

After Sri Aurobindo left Calcutta, the police department was in a fix. He was untraceable for weeks. There was wide speculation about where he might be. "Reliable information" had it that he had become a *sannyasin.* Another rumour placed him in Tibet. As a result of his disappearance, his prosecution was "postponed till he should again reappear."[35]

While he was in hiding, Sri Aurobindo remained in touch with one person — his cousin Sukumar, the son of Krishna Kumar Mitra. No one else in the house knew where Sri Aurobindo was.

THE SECOND *ADESH*

Then one day "Aurobindo wrote saying he would go to Pondicherry."[36]

In the Note on his political life, Sri Aurobindo says: "Then there came to him a call to proceed to Pondicherry."[37]

In a talk with disciples in 1938, he said: "I was wondering what to do next. Then I heard the *adesh*, 'Go to Pondicherry.'" To a query: "Why to Pondicherry?", he replied: "I could not question. It was Sri Krishna's *adesh*. I had to obey."[38]

Once when asked: "Why did you choose Pondicherry as the place for your sadhana?", he replied: "Because of an *adesh,* a Command. I was ordered by a Voice to come here." He said Lele had told him to meditate at a fixed hour and hear the voice in the heart. "I didn't hear any voice from the heart but a quite different one, from above.... The same Voice from above brought me to Pondicherry."[39]

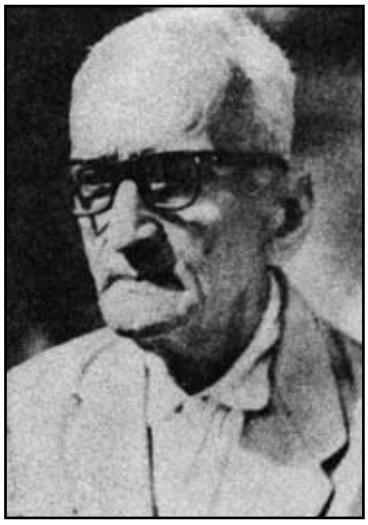
THE PREPARATIONS BEGIN

Sukumar Mitra recalls: "The responsibility for making all the arrangements for sending him fell on me. Since the secret police openly picked me up and followed me from the moment I left the house, I got the work done by giving instructions to two men I trusted. What I told one, I did not inform the other, and I did not allow the two to meet."[40]

The two young men that Sukumar chose were Nagendrakumar Guha Roy and Surendrakumar Chakrabarti. In the last week of March 1910, Sukumar summoned Nagendrakumar. The task assigned to him was to keep in his custody two steel trunks containing clothes and other articles. Sukumar asked Nagendra to meet him the next day.

Nagendra recounts: "The next day when I met Sukumar-da at the appointed time, he wrote down the names and addresses of two men and, giving me the necessary money, asked me to buy two second class tickets on the Colombo steamer."[41]

Sukumar had decided to send Sri Aurobindo to Pondicherry by a French ship rather than by train. If he took the train he might be recognised during the long ride or noticed by police spies. Going by ship would also mean that as soon as the ship crossed the three-mile zone of Bengal, that is the British Indian coast, the passengers would be in international waters and come under French jurisdiction.



Sukumar Mitra, Sri Aurobindo's cousin

The ship, SS *Dupleix*, in which Sri Aurobindo sailed from Calcutta to Pondicherry belonged to a shipping company called Messageries Maritimes. Ships of other companies, sailing from Calcutta to Colombo, did not halt at Pondicherry.

Sukumar had instructed Nagendrakumar to reserve a cabin meant for two passengers. Names and addresses of passengers had to be given at the time of reservation. Sukumar supplied Nagendra with two names and addresses chosen from the *Sanjivani*'s [*Sukumar's father's Nationalist paper*] subscriber list. The two names were: Jotindra Nath Mitra of Uluberia (a town near Calcutta), and Bankim Chandra[42] of Nilphamari in Rangpur District. Sukumar reasoned that in case of a police investigation real names and addresses would prove safer than entirely fictitious ones. By the time the police reached and interrogated the two subscribers, Sri Aurobindo and his companion would be out of danger.



Bijoy Kumar Nag (1892-1935)

Sri Aurobindo had chosen Bijoy Nag to accompany him to Pondicherry.

As per Sukumar's instructions, Nagendra informed the shipping company that one of the passengers *[Sri Aurobindo]* suffered from malaria. Both the passengers would, therefore, take their meals in the cabin. "Two tickets were bought. I asked Nagendra to keep them with him."[43] The tickets were for Colombo and not Pondicherry, to further mislead the authorities.

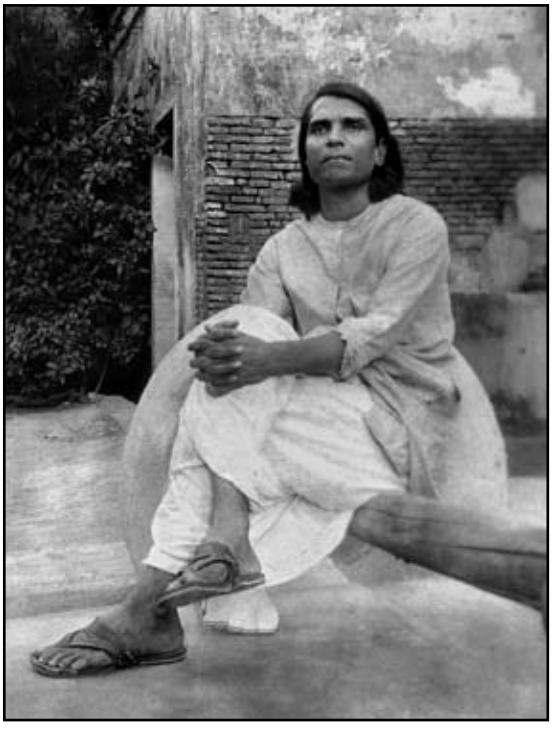
On 31 March 1910, Sukumar Mitra asked Nagen to put the two trunks on board the *Dupleix*, in the cabin reserved by him. Nagen was also to carry the two tickets with him, show them to the captain and lock the cabin.

MONI'S MISSION

Meanwhile, earlier that month, Moni (Suresh Chakravarty) had received a small note from Sri Aurobindo asking him to go to Pondicherry to arrange a house for him. Unlike most of Sri Aurobindo's associates of the time, Moni, who was 19, did not have a police record and was free to move about in any part of the country. He left by train for Pondicherry.

He reached his destination on 31 March 1910 at about two-thirty in the morning. Sri Aurobindo had given a note of introduction to Moni for Parthasarathi Iyengar but since he was not there, his brother Srinivasacharya, received the young visitor and promised to make the necessary arrangements for Sri Aurobindo's accommodation.

"I passed the four and a half days before Aurobindo's arrival in Mr. Achari's house doing nothing but eating and sleeping.... The one thing I was especially engaged in at this time was reminding Srinivas Achari to fix up a house for Aurobindo."[44] But his host did not seem to take Moni's request seriously. Each time Moni asked him about it, Srinivasacharya would say, "All right" or "We're looking into it."[45]



Suresh Chakravarty (Moni)



Messageries Maritimes

FRENCH MAIL STEAMERS.

DEPARTURES FROM CALCUTTA.

THE S. S. "DUPLEIX," Capt. Mussean, 2,600 Tons, will sail on the following dates, taking passengers and cargo for Pondicherry, Colombo, Egypt and Marseilles, and also China and Japan, in connection at Colombo with the following steamers homewards :—

Sailings from Calcutta.	Sailings from Colombo	Steamers.	Tons.
1 April	9 April	Tonkin	6092
29 April	7 May	Oceanien	4141
27 May	4 June	Australien	6365
24 June	2 July	Yarra	4142
22 July	30 July	Tonkin	6093
19 August	27 August	Ville de la Ciotat	6373
16 September	24 Sept.	Oceanien	4145

DEPARTURES FROM BOMBAY TO ADEN EGYPT AND MARSEILLES.

(PASSENGER SEASON 1910).

		Tons
14 April	Sydney	4118
12 May	Villa-sur-La Ciotat	6378
9 June	Ner.	5538
7 July	Caledonien	4130
4 August	Dumbea	5685
1 September	Sydney	4118

REDUCED FARES.

"B" ACCOMMODATION.

To London (Overland)	Single.	Return
First Class	Rs. 660	990
Second Class	Rs. 528	792
To Marseilles		
First Class	Rs. 594	891
Second Class	Rs. 495	743

The present higher fares are retained for some cabins according to situation.

For further particulars apply to

L. GREZOUX, Agent,

No. 6, Hare Street, Post Box 228, Calcutta.

(or Agent, MESSAGERIES MARITIMES Albert Buildings, Horaby Road, Bombay.

Notice to Passengers per S. S. "Dupleix."

The French Mail Steamer "Dupleix" will leave her berth, No. 1, Esplanade Moorings, on Friday, the 1st proximo, at 6-30 a.m.

Passengers are requested to be at Pani Ghat at 6 p.m. [illegible]

Advertisement of the French shipping company, Messageries Maritimes, in the daily *Englishman* of 31 March 1910

Moni returned with his escort and could not say anything to his host either.

"Finally, on 3 April, I insisted on finding out about the house; and a man took me along with him to point out the house to me. The house they had selected for Aurobindo to live in was situated in an especially dirty locality in a blind alley. My escort took me upstairs. There was a room at the head of the staircase — it would be closer to the truth to call it a garret.... The bedroom was like a speaker's platform.... I was so stunned I could not say anything."[46]

A COMPLEX PLAN

Meanwhile, Sukumar Mitra and Motilal Roy had worked out the details of Sri Aurobindo's journey from Chandernagore to Calcutta. They did not want him to be taken to the city directly. Instead, Motilal arranged for Sri Aurobindo to go from Chandernagore by boat downstream to Dumurtala *ghat* in Agarpara — that is, halfway between Chandernagore and Calcutta on the

eastern bank of the Ganges. From there Sri Aurobindo would be escorted by Sudarshan Chattopadhyay and Srish Ghosh, the two Chandernagore revolutionaries.

Amarendranath Chattopadhyay, a revolutionary from Uttarpara known to Sri Aurobindo since 1906, was told to hire a boat at Uttarpara and take it to Agarpara. There he would pick up Sri Aurobindo and take him to another *ghat* a few miles downstream. "It had been decided that Aurobindo would change boats mid-stream"[47] from the Uttarpara boat to a third boat sent from Calcutta by Sukumar with Nagen and Surendra in it. Sukumar's instructions to Nagen were very clear: when he saw a boat with a particular pennant he should take its passengers on to his boat and carry them to the steamship *Dupleix*.[48]

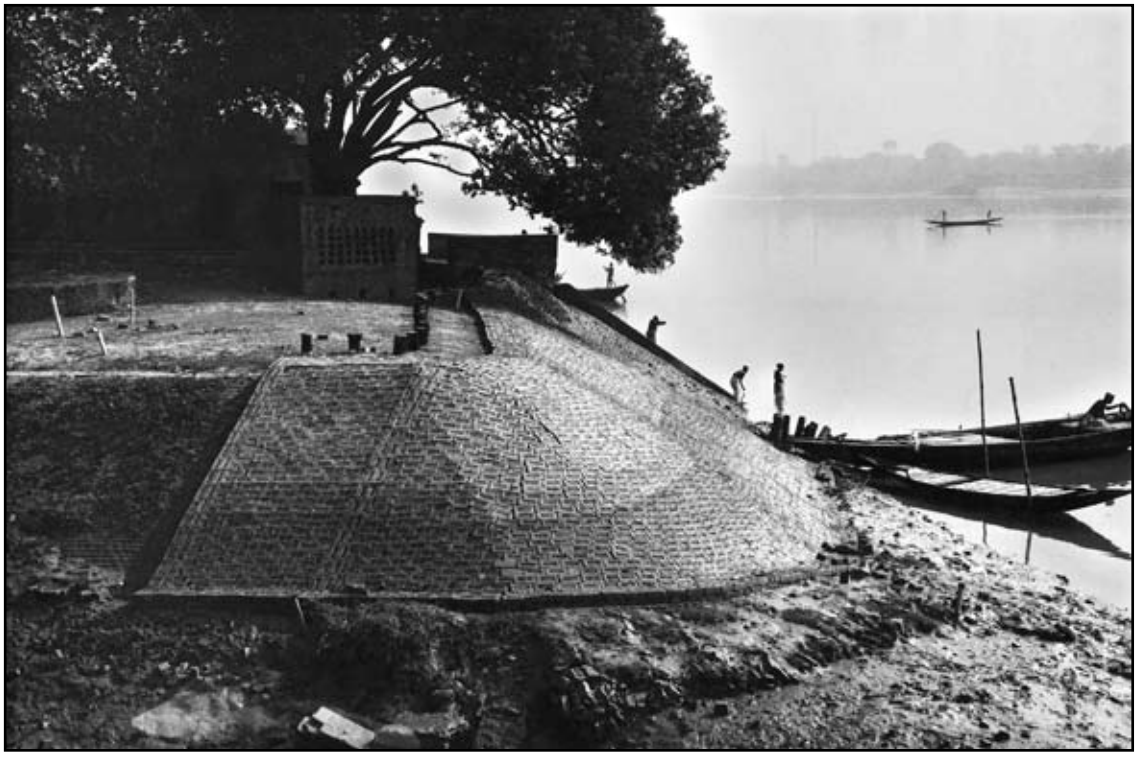


Amarendranath Chattopadhyay (1880-1957)

MOTILAL BIDS FAREWELL

All was ready now for Sri Aurobindo to leave Chandernagore. In the early hours of 31 March 1910, he sent for Motilal. Motilal met him at Boraichanditola *ghat*. "I beheld Sri Aurobindo, who stood on the bank awaiting my arrival. I eagerly bowed at his feet. He laid his hand on my head and said, 'You will be fulfilled. Stick to your sadhana; do not worry.' Then he said, 'I must get going. We shall meet again.'"[49]

Motilal Roy stood on the bank as Sri Aurobindo stepped into the boat. Within minutes he was gone.



Boraichanditola *ghat*, from where Sri Aurobindo began his journey for Pondicherry, via Calcutta.



Map showing Calcutta and Chandernagore

FROM CHANDERNAGORE TO CALCUTTA

As arranged by Motilal, Sri Aurobindo began his journey from Chandernagore heading towards Calcutta in a boat with Sudarshan Chattopadhyay and Srish Ghosh. They reached Agarpara and met Amarendranath who had brought with him Manmathnath Biswas, a trusted lieutenant. Sri Aurobindo got into Amarendra's boat. Up to this point things went according to plan. But unfortunately Amarendra's boat, with Manmathnath and Sri Aurobindo in it, failed to make contact with Nagendra and Surendra's boat which was coming towards them from Calcutta.

Amarendra was a little upset but decided to take Sri Aurobindo straight to the mooring-place of the *Dupleix* in Calcutta. The worst part of the mix-up was that Sri Aurobindo's and Bijoy's tickets were with Nagendra.

Amarendranath and Manmathnath hired a carriage for Sri Aurobindo and went to the wharf where the *Dupleix* was moored. They did not find anyone they knew so they rushed to Sukumar's house in College Square. It was a tense ride for Amar; he was obliged to bring a famous fugitive right through the centre of the capital of the Indian Empire. The carriage passed within a few hundred metres of Government House, the residence of the Viceroy, Lord Minto.[50] Amarendra recalled thirty-eight years later: "It had given us quite a few jitters to take him in this way . . . in downtown Calcutta. But the one for whom we were anxious was altogether calm, like someone absorbed in the trance of *samadhi*."[51]

Amarendra stopped short of College Square and sent Manmathnath to enquire at Sukumar's place. Sukumar was not at home. They returned to the wharf and waited.

ONE MORE HURDLE

Nagendra and Surendra, not finding Amarendranath's boat, crossed the river and returned to Calcutta. "We went straight to Sukumar-da's house and told him what had happened."[52] Sukumar told Nagen to go at once to the *Dupleix* and bring back the two trunks.

All passengers were required to take a medical examination by a doctor appointed by the shipping company. Passengers were not allowed to board the ship without a health certificate from him. By the time Nagendra reached the ship to retrieve the trunks, it was six o'clock in the evening and the doctor had gone home. Nagendra met the captain and got the doctor's residential address.

Nagendra hired a coolie to help him remove the two trunks from the *Dupleix*'s cabin. The coolie said he not only knew the doctor's residence but also his servant. He could arrange everything for a suitable consideration. Nagendra agreed to pay him a certain amount and asked him to wait at the pier. He then returned to his mess with the trunks and then headed back to Sukumar's house. The two tickets were, of course, still with him. "There was no end to my scurrying about that day…. Before I could give him any other news he ordered me to take the two trunks and tickets to the pier immediately." Sukumar had learned, on returning home, that Amarendranath had taken Sri Aurobindo and Bijoy Nag to the pier by carriage and they were waiting there for Nagendra.[53]

At the pier Nagendra saw a carriage and the coolie he had spoken to earlier. It was the carriage hired by Amarendra. The coolie had informed Amarendra that Nagendra would soon return. "When he saw me he at once ran up and said, 'Your

babus have come.... It's late. If you waste any more time, the *sahib* won't be able to do it [*the medical examination*], he'll go to sleep.'" They rushed to the doctor's house which was on Theatre Road. On his last day in Calcutta, Sri Aurobindo visited the neighbourhood where he was born….

The doctor had finished eating his dinner and was in no hurry to conduct business. After a half-hour's wait he finally sent for the two passengers. "They remained with the doctor for about fifteen minutes. When the doctor enquired, he was given the story that Aurobindo was going on this sea-voyage to recuperate his health…. After a few minutes' conversation, the doctor, hearing Aurobindo's English, asked: 'Were you educated in England?' Aurobindo admitted that he was. Then the doctor gave them both their certificates."[55]

"The examination went off without a hitch. Had Sri Aurobindo been examined at the pier at the usual time, it is unlikely he would have crossed this hurdle so easily. A Calcutta policeman was detailed routinely to observe the examination — and Sri Aurobindo's was a known face. The police report for that evening stated only that the two ticket-holders with Bengali names did not turn up at Pani *ghat* to be examined."[56]

"It was 10 O'clock; they had to get back to the ship immediately. There was no end to our worries! Those accompanying Aurobindo were anxious and troubled, but Aurobindo was calm and poised. He was by nature above anxiety and worry."[57]

It was almost eleven when Sri Aurobindo, Bijoy Nag, Amarendranath Chattopadhyay and Nagendrakumar Guha Roy reached the pier and boarded the ship.

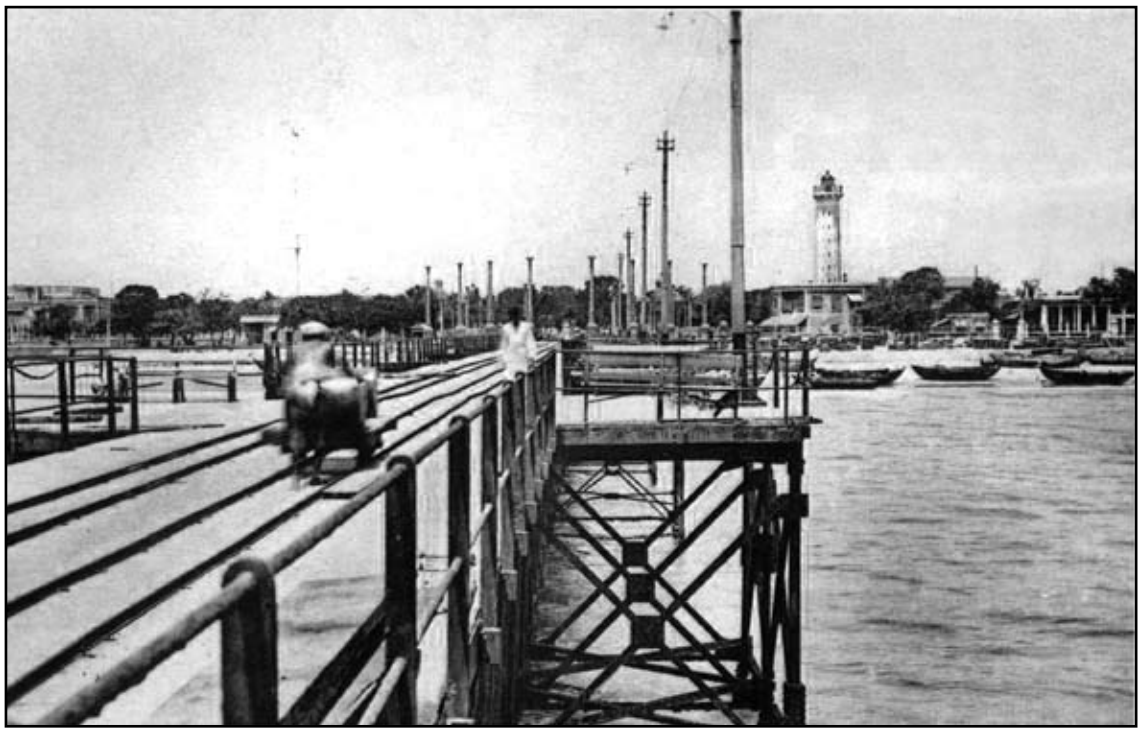
FAREWELL

The coolie arranged the luggage and went out. Amarendra and Nagendra bowed to Sri Aurobindo and bid farewell, "inwardly confident but with hearts overcome by emotion."[58]

The ship sailed the next morning, on 1 April 1910. Amarendranath later said: "What a huge 'April Fool' we made of the Bengal government!"[59] Sri Aurobindo had slipped beyond the reach of the British police. He was on his way to Pondicherry.



S. S. *Dupleix*



Pondicherry in the early 1900s: view from the old pier.

PONDICHERRY

Pondicherry, like Chandernagore, was under French rule. Because of the traditional rivalry between the French and the British, the officials of the French government were far from enthusiastic to cooperate with their British counterparts in matters such as extradition. This made Pondicherry an excellent place of refuge for many political activists in British India, especially revolutionaries who were being harassed or persecuted.

The centre of the anti-British movement in Pondicherry was the office the Tamil Nationalist newspaper, *India*. Initially based in Madras, the three people connected with the paper moved their office and even the printing press to neighbouring Pondicherry after its editor, M. Srinivas Aiyengar, was jailed for sedition in 1908. These three were: the owner Thirumalachari, his cousin Srinivasacharya and the paper's editor, the rising young poet C. Subramania Bharati. After Thirumalachari left for France, Srinivasacharya was registered as the paper's owner.

Srinivasacharya and his friends doubted young Moni's story about Sri Aurobindo's coming to Pondicherry. Would such an illustrious political leader really travel so far south to live among them? The *India* office group suspected Moni to be a spy sent by the British government. This is why they showed him a rundown building earlier as Sri Aurobindo's future residence. But in case Moni was telling the truth, the Tamil Nationalists had to be ready to receive Sri Aurobindo. They asked a friend, Calve Sankara Chettiar, if he would host Sri Aurobindo. Chettiar offered a portion of his house. But Srinivasacharya did not inform Moni about this — nor did he inform the young man about the grand welcome Sri Aurobindo would receive on his arrival in Pondicherry.

Although he was kept in the dark about the house, Moni got wind of the rousing reception. He was horrified. "I told them that Aurobindo was arriving here incognito and would be living here incognito and therefore we should not do anything that would let people find out."[60] The group was disappointed but finally Moni managed to convince them.



Camoutty Chetty Street (Vysial Street), Pondicherry, in 1910.

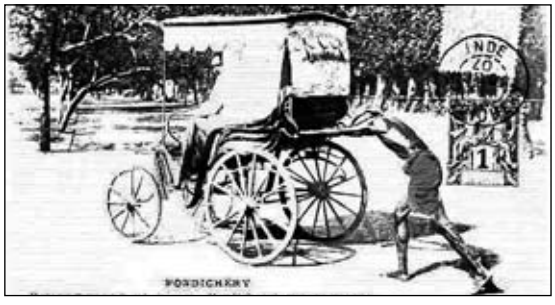
On 4 April 1910 Srinivasacharya and Moni went to the pier to receive Sri Aurobindo.

THE ARRIVAL

"At about 4 o' clock in the evening, the *Dupleix* anchored in Pondicherry harbour.... ships could not come up to the pier, they had to anchor half a mile out."[61] Moni and Srinivasacharya got into a boat rowed by eight or ten oarsmen and set off towards the *Dupleix*.

"As we neared the ship, I saw Aurobindo and Bijoy standing on the deck, their eyes fixed on our launch.... our launch soon came up to the side of the ship. With great difficulty we climbed from the boat tossing in the waves up the ship's ladder to the place where Aurobindo and Bijoy were standing."[62] Then all four went down to Sri Aurobindo and Bijoy's cabin. On board the ship it was time for evening tea. So while the two passengers were sorting out their luggage and exchanging pleasantries with their friends, they were all served tea and biscuits.

After tea, the party of four got into the launch with the passengers' baggage. Between them Sri Aurobindo and Bijoy had three trunks and bedding. From the pier they walked to the main road, then known as Cours Chabrol.



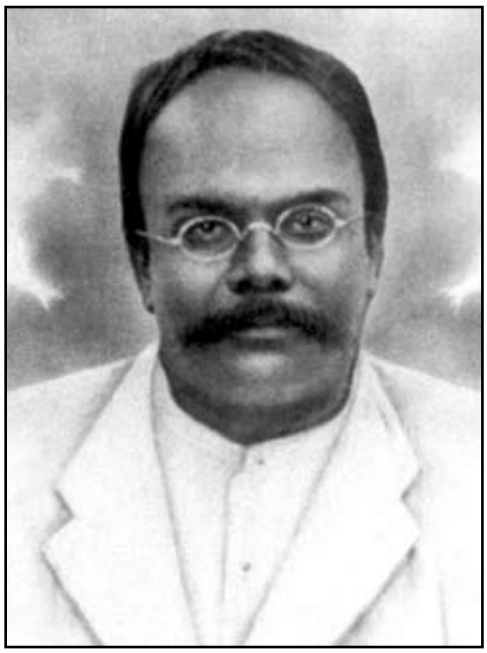
A pousse-pousse

Srinivasacharya had arranged for a horse carriage from a local gentleman. He and Sri Aurobindo left in the carriage. Moni and Bijoy followed in a *pousse-pousse* with the baggage, accompanied by a young Tamil man to guide them. Moni was in for a surprise.

Moni later recalled: "But the house I was taken to by my Tamil guide was not the garret on that filthy, blind alley I had been shown the previous day. This was quite a big and respectable place on another street."[63]

SANKARA CHETTIAR

The owner of the house, Sankara Chettiar, was a businessman and one of Pondicherry's well-to-do citizens. His house was the only two-storeyed structure in town at the time. He lived on the ground floor with his family and arranged for Sri Aurobindo, Moni and Bijoy to live on the first and second floor. He provided them with supplies for cooking and a servant to run errands. Chettiar's house had not been taken on rent for Sri Aurobindo by his Tamil Nationalist friends. Chettiar looked after Sri Aurobindo, Bijoy and Moni for six months as his guests and never charged them any rent.



Sankara Chettiar



First and second floors of Sankara Chettiar's house on 39 Camoutty Chetty Street (now 63 Vysial Street). Sri Aurobindo lived here from 4 April 1910 to Sept.1910.

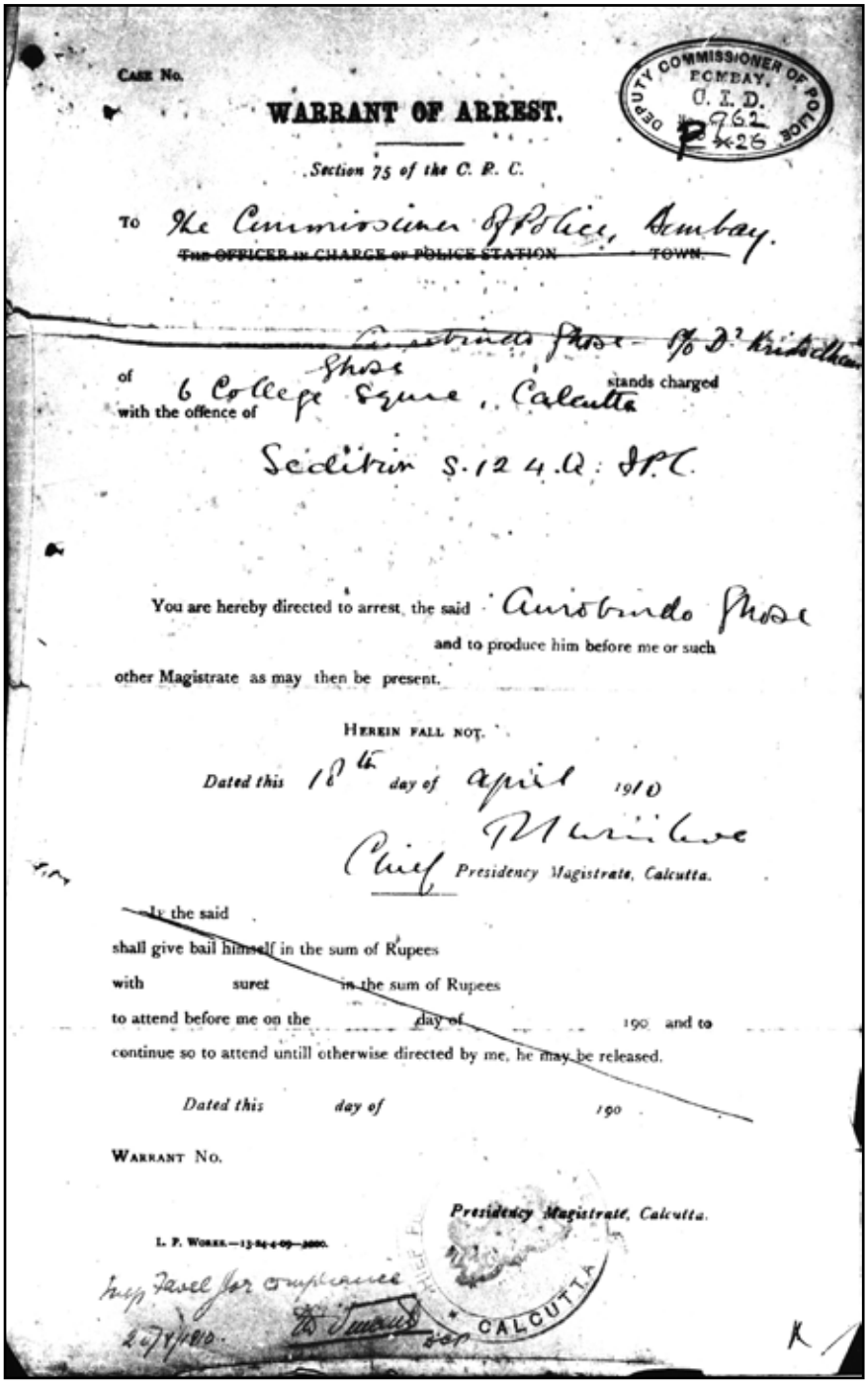
ARREST WARRANT ISSUED

On 4 April 1910, the day Sri Aurobindo arrived in Pondicherry, the warrant for his arrest in the *Karmayogin* case, was issued in Calcutta. He was charged with sedition for writing and publishing, in *Karmayogin*, the open letter "To My Countrymen". Since the writer could not be traced, Sri Aurobindo was declared an absconder.

HOME IN A FOREIGN LAND

By this time Sri Aurobindo and his two young companions had settled in their dwelling in Pondicherry, which offered them a lot of privacy.

The first and second floors of the house were built at the back portion of the building and were therefore not visible from the main road. The second floor where Sri Aurobindo and his companions stayed was not very large. "There were two tiny rooms of about 8 or 9 feet square and another room the size of a railway coupe. On the northern side (the house faced north) there was a small open terrace with a railing. In the back, on the southern side, was a somewhat longish covered verandah. Two or three steps down was a kitchen."[64]



CASE No.

WARRANT OF ARREST.

Section 75 of the C. P. C.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER OF POLICE BOMBAY. C. I. D. 962 P 26

TO The Commissioner of Police, Bombay.

~~THE OFFICER IN CHARGE OF POLICE STATION TOWN.~~

Aurobindo Ghose - c/o Dr Krishdhan Ghose

of 6 College Square, Calcutta stands charged with the offence of

Sedition S. 124 A. I.P.C.

You are hereby directed to arrest, the said Aurobindo Ghose and to produce him before me or such other Magistrate as may then be present.

HEREIN FALL NOT.

Dated this 18th day of April 1910

Chief Presidency Magistrate, Calcutta.

If the said shall give bail himself in the sum of Rupees with suret in the sum of Rupees to attend before me on the day of 190 and to continue so to attend untill otherwise directed by me, he may be released.

Dated this day of 190

WARRANT No.

Presidency Magistrate, Calcutta.

L. P. WORKS.—13-24-4-09—2000.

Insp Favel for compliance

20/4/1910.

CALCUTTA

Copy of the Arrest Warrant sent by the Calcutta Police to the Bombay Police

DAILY SCHEDULE

Sri Aurobindo's day began at six o'clock. After half an hour a cup of tea was sent to him from his host's kitchen. There was no breakfast.

Vegetables for lunch were bought from the



Entrance door of Sri Aurobindo's room

market by Sankara Chettiar's maid servant and given to Bijoy and Moni. Around eleven the two young men would start cooking. The meals had to be vegetarian. Chettiar's stipulation that there must be no fish or meat in the house had to be strictly adhered to.

The maid always bought rice, *moong dal*, pumpkin, brinjal and milk. There was no variation in the supplies. Cooking was done on a clay stove with wood fire. Bijoy did the cooking with Moni as his assistant. Every day for six months Sri Aurobindo, Moni and Bijoy ate rice and *moong dal*, with pieces of brinjal thrown in, and a curry of mashed pumpkin. The menu never changed.

Lunch was served in the kitchen on the first floor. Sri Aurobindo stayed in one of the two small rooms on the second floor. Every day he went down to the kitchen and was served first. Sri Aurobindo ate quietly — he never spoke during mealtime — and left quickly. Bijoy and Moni would eat after he returned to his room. There was no cutlery or crockery. They ate on banana leaves, spread on the floor. (Each morning Chettiar's servant bought fresh banana leaves from the market.) After the meal the maid cleaned the utensils and the kitchen.

After lunch Sri Aurobindo returned to his room and remained there for most part of the day. "Even the members of the household abstained from going upstairs so as not to intrude upon his quiet life."[65]

At four another cup of tea was sent to him. As with lunch, the dinner menu was fixed. The young men boiled rice in a litre of milk and added some sugar. This simple



Part of Sri Aurobindo's room in Sankara Chettiar's house



S. Srinivasacharya

payas was divided equally among the three of them. That was dinner.

Nobody cared for comfort, least of all Sri Aurobindo. He slept on the floor on a thin mattress.

One remarkable feature of their stay at this time was that no one stepped out of the house for the first three months. Sri Aurobindo absolutely forbade it. He himself did not leave the house for six months. Both Bijoy and Moni were under twenty years of age then. Sri Aurobindo was thirty-seven.

The two young men did not have much to do. Moni recalls, "The rest of the day, when not cooking or taking our meals, we would spend either sleeping or talking."[66]

Moni was struck by Sri Aurobindo's austerity and complete detachment towards material things. He said with characteristic Bengali wit: "Our lifestyle was undoubtedly one of 'plain living and high thinking'. The 'high thinking' of course fell to Aurobindo's lot."[67]

Sri Aurobindo did a lot of writing in Chettiar's house during the six months he spent there. It is here that he began writing *Ilion*, a narrative poem about the fall of Troy, as well as the play *Eric.*

EFFECT OF FASTING

While in Chettiar's house, Sri Aurobindo fasted for twenty-three days. He wanted to see how long the body could do without food and how it was affected by the fasting. During his fast he "kept up full mental and vital and yogic activity."[68] He said, "I was walking eight hours a day and yet not feeling tired in the least."[69] However, Sri Aurobindo found "that a certain diminution of material substance was taking place. He concluded that physical life would be impossible without food."[70]

POLICE FIND OUT

The Bengal police soon found out that Sri Aurobindo had arrived in Pondicherry; they informed the British authorities. A report prepared by the Home Department stated:

"An officer of the Special Department who went to Pondicherry saw Arabindo Ghosh there, and that there is no question of his identity…. His movements are being watched, and should he attempt to leave Pondicherry, he will be followed and arrested, if possible."[71]

VISITORS IN CHETTIAR'S HOUSE

Sri Aurobindo had two regular visitors while living in Chettiar's house, S. Srinivasacharya and Subramania Bharati.

S. Srinivasacharya was about thirty when he first met Sri Aurobindo in Pondicherry. A graduate of Madras University, he was actively involved in the Nationalist movement in the Madras Presidency and became the publisher of the Nationalist Tamil newspaper *India*.

The success of *India* was mainly due to its brilliant young editor, C. Subramania Bharati. Bharati belonged to the Tinnevelly district in Tamil Nadu. The partition of Bengal in 1905 affected him deeply. From then on he wrote for the cause of the Nationalist movement. In 1906



C. Subramania Bharati (?–1921)

Bharati joined the staff of *India* in Madras. In 1908, along with S. Srinivasacharya, he moved to Pondicherry. An excellent political writer, Bharati also started writing patriotic poetry. Most of his now-famous poems were first published in *India*. Today Bharati is one of the most highly regarded modern *litterateurs* in Tamil.

Another visitor who met Sri Aurobindo in this period was the Frenchman Paul Richard who was very keen on meeting a Yogi. Their meeting was a long one and at the end of it, he and Sri Aurobindo agreed to stay in touch.

The famous Tamil writer and patriot Va Ra (V. Ramaswami Iyengar) was another early visitor of Sri Aurobindo. Later Va Ra came to stay with him.

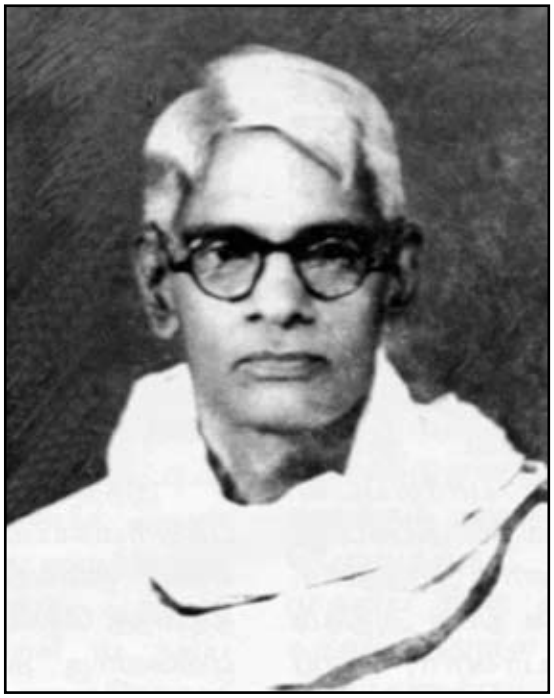
THE *KARMAYOGIN* CASE

When he arrived in Pondicherry, Sri Aurobindo had planned to return to Bengal possibly after the *Karmayogin* case was settled. He never intended to settle down in Pondicherry permanently. When they first came, in April 1910, Bijoy Nag told Moni that they would all return to Bengal in three months' time.[72]

On 7 November 1910 two High Court judges declared that "To My Countrymen" could not be considered seditious. Two weeks later, on 21 November 1910, the warrant against Sri Aurobindo and the orders proclaiming him an absconder and attaching his property were withdrawn.

During his stay in Chettiar's house, Sri Aurobindo went through a brief period of inner struggle. He wished to return to the political field, but a part of him wanted to break away from political activity and concentrate on the inner life. He mentioned to Bharati and Srinivasacharya that he gained peace of mind only when he decided, "after a few days' struggle", to give up the idea of returning to political life.[73]

In October 1910 Saurin Bose, Mrinalini Devi's cousin, joined Sri Aurobindo's household.



V. Ramaswamy Iyengar (Va Ra) (1889–1951)

THE UTTARA YOGI

One day a friend of Bharati's, K. V. Rangaswami Iyengar, came to visit Sri Aurobindo.

Iyengar came from a *zamindar* family from Kodiyalam in the Kaveri delta region. Thirty years before Sri Aurobindo's arrival, the Iyengar family's guru had said that a Yogi from the North would come to the South as a fugitive and practise Purna (Integral) Yoga. This Yogi would be known by three sayings. "Those three sayings" Sri Aurobindo once noted, "were those I had written to my wife."[74] The guru had said that after he was gone, the family should turn to this Yogi from the North. After his interview with Sri Aurobindo, Iyengar was convinced that Sri Aurobindo was indeed the promised Yogi. He expressed his desire to help Sri Aurobindo financially.

A NEW HOUSE

In September 1910 Sri Aurobindo asked Bharati and Srinivasacharya to look for another house for him. He had decided to move out of Chettiar's house.

In October 1910 K. V. Rangaswami Iyengar sent Rs. 2000 to Sri Aurobindo. This amount would cover his expenses for a year.[75] It was a generous and courageous donation. "Those were days of great danger to anyone who dared to render any kind of help to a revolutionary political leader."[76]

A relative of Sankara Chettiar, Sundara Chettiar, owned a house on rue de Pavillon (now renamed rue Suffren) in the European quarter. It was a fine, large old house. The owner charged a modest sum — Rs. 20 a month — to



Sri Aurobindo lived in this house, on 42 rue de Pavillon, (now rue Suffren), from October 1910 to March 1911.

Sri Aurobindo, who moved in in the first week of October along with Moni, Bijoy and Saurin. When Sri Aurobindo left Sankara Chettiar's house to move to Sundara Chettiar's house, it was the first time he stepped out into the open after a self-imposed seclusion of six months.

In the new house they could afford a servant who cleaned the house and went to the market.

In November 1910 Nolini Kanta Gupta joined them. Like Sri Aurobindo he came from Calcutta to Pondicherry under a false name, Manindranath Roy.

"All of a sudden one day there appeared from nowhere" a dog.[77] Sri Aurobindo called her Yogini. When she had puppies, "two of them became particular favourites with Sri Aurobindo."[78]

Soon after Sri Aurobindo moved into the new house, "the British police also engaged a house in the same quarters."[79] A man who lived there, Abdul Karim, was the chief spy.

Sri Aurobindo remained a recluse even in the new house, but since his whereabouts became known, people from all walks of life from all over the country came to see him. Though Sri Aurobindo was not inclined to meet them, they kept coming. Finally he wrote a letter to the editor of the *Hindu*, published on 24 February 1911, in which he said: "They have crossed all India to see me.... They clamber on to my windows to see me.... I wish to inform all future pilgrims of the kind that their journey will be in vain."[80]



A view of the garden in Sundara Chettiar's house



North-west corner of Sri Aurobindo's room in Sundara Chettiar's house

LITERATURE AND YOGA

While Moni, Bijoy, Saurin and Nolini went out for walks to the pier, played football or read and talked, Sri Aurobindo plunged deeper into his work, literary and spiritual. He continued to work on *Eric* and *Ilion* and rewrote *Rodogune*. There was also his study of the ancient Indian languages, Tamil and Sanskrit.

The extensive research into the Sanskrit language brought him in contact with the Vedas. As he later wrote: "My philosophy was formed first by the study of the Upanishads and the Gita; the Veda came later."[81] Srinivasacharya lent him two volumes of Max Mueller's translation of the Rig Veda and a copy of Sayana's commentaries. Srinivasacharya wrote: "He used to translate for us portions from the texts with their commentaries and also give us his own version of them."[82]

"Subramania Bharati learnt the Rig Veda from Sri Aurobindo."[83] The research in the Vedas led Sri Aurobindo not only to a discovery of the hidden meaning of the scriptures, but to a deeper understanding of his own spiritual experiences. He began translating the Vedas and writing commentaries on them.



Sri Aurobindo in 1911



In this house now known as Raghavan House on 13 rue St. Louis, Sri Aurobindo lived from April 1911 to April 1913

At this time Sri Aurobindo was also deeply engrossed in his sadhana. He still kept to himself. He wrote, meditated and he also walked in his room, sometimes for eight hours a day!

While staying in Sundara Chettiar's house Sri Aurobindo kept a record of his spiritual experiences and experiments. They are now published as part of the *Record of Yoga*.

RAGHAVAN HOUSE

In April 1911 Sri Aurobindo moved to a house at 10 (now 13) rue St. Louis. Yet another Chettiar helped him this time. The house belonged to Raghava Chettiar and he gave it on a two-year lease to Sri Aurobindo. In this house, now known as Raghavan House, Sri Aurobindo lived from April 1911 to April 1913.

NATIONALISTS UNDER WATCH

The revolutionaries from Bengal, along with their leader, were leading a quiet life in Pondicherry. Then came a bolt from the blue. On 17 June 1911 William Ashe, collector of Tirunelvelli, was shot dead at point blank range at Maniyachi railway station. The assassin Vanchinathan Aiyar, popularly known as Vanchi, killed himself. Vanchi Aiyar had been trained by V. V. S. Aiyar, a Tamil revolutionary living in Pondicherry.

Sri Aurobindo was not connected with the Ashe assassination, but his friends Subramania Bharati and Srinivasacharya were charged with complicity in the murder, along with V. V. S. Aiyar, S. Nagaswamy Aiyar and S. Madaswamy Pillai. Suddenly Pondicherry was crowded with British soldiers, spies and CID personnel. Sri Aurobindo



Zir Naidu



Murugesh Pillai

and his companions continued to be under surveillance.

In July 1911, Sri Aurobindo wrote to Paul Richard about his sadhana at the time: "I need some place of refuge in which I can complete my Yoga unassailed and build up other souls around me. It seems to me that Pondicherry is the place appointed by those who are Beyond, but you know how much effort is needed to establish the thing that is purposed upon the material plane...."[84]

LIFE IN RAGHAVAN HOUSE

At Raghavan House Sri Aurobindo was plunged in his sadhana and literary work. Nevertheless, he found time to teach French, Italian, Greek and Latin to Nolini and Moni. His collection of books in these languages and his papers, all brought from Calcutta, had filled three trunks. Now books worth Rs.10 were ordered every month.

Their financial situation was not very sound at this time, but they did not seem to care.

Unable to afford a servant, the young men did the cooking by turns. They had only one towel which was shared by all, including Sri Aurobindo. There was one kerosene lamp and one candle lamp. The young men slept on straw mats. For Sri Aurobindo there was a camp cot. There were also a chair and a table for his use. "We lived a real camp life."[85]

A NEW CHALLENGE

Sometime in 1911 the British government tried to get the "Swadeshis" out of Pondicherry. They convinced the local French government to pass a law which would deny the right of domicile to any "foreigners" residing in Pondicherry. However the French Government added a clause to the Bill — those "foreigners" who were residents of Pondicherry a full year before the passage of the Bill, could continue to live in the French enclave provided they were able to get the signatures of five Honorary Magistrates and register themselves as citizens of Pondicherry. The Bill was passed and became law. The Nationalists were given hardly any time to get the signatures.

After discussing the matter with Sri Aurobindo and other Swadeshi leaders, Subramania Bharati and Va Ra met Sankara Chettiar at his house and explained the situation to him. Chettiar smiled and said, "This is no big thing. I am myself an Honorary Magistrate. I shall get you the signatures of the other four also." "By 3 p.m. that day," Va Ra said, "we had presented the forms and registered ourselves as residents."[86]

Nearly five decades later, Nolini Kanta Gupta narrated this incident in a talk and expressed his gratitude to the "five noble men who affixed their signatures".[87] The five were: Shankar Chettiar, Rassendren, De Zir Naidu, Le Beau and Murugesh Pillai.

"The names of these five should be engraved in letters of gold. They had shown on that occasion truly remarkable courage and magnanimity. It was on the strength of their signatures that we could continue to stay here without too much trouble."[88]

VISITORS TO RAGHAVAN HOUSE

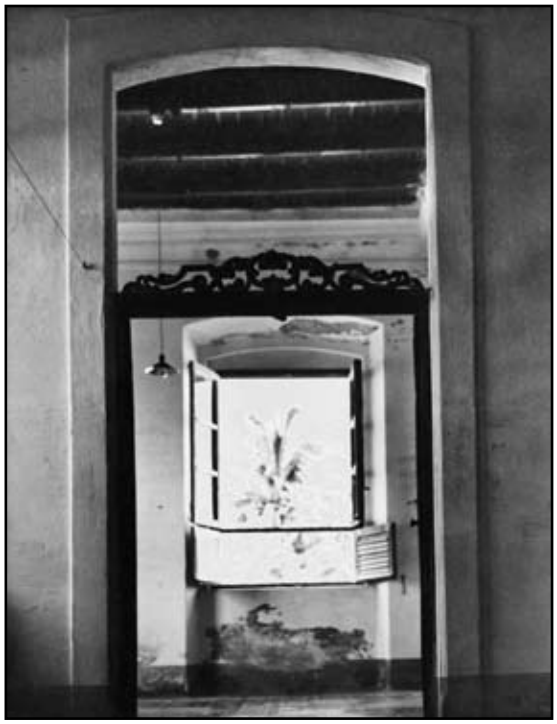
People from all walks of life wished to see Sri Aurobindo. He did not encourage this at all though he agreed to meet a few.

Va Ra recalls a visit to Raghavan House during the period when there was an acute shortage of funds. On this day "there was no money to buy provisions. There was some rice, chillies, oil and salt, nothing else. But Sri Aurobindo said it was enough. The chillies were fried in oil, and mixed with cooked rice and salt — and that was a full meal! The same day financial help came from a friend."[89]

Years later Sri Aurobindo wrote to a disciple: "To bear quietly psychological as well as physical inconveniences is, after all, part of the training of the sadhak of Yoga."[90]

While Sri Aurobindo was living in Raghavan House, the daughter of his friend Srinivasacharya got married. Sri Aurobindo, who hardly ever went out, attended the wedding.

Motilal Roy visited Sri Aurobindo some time in 1911. He spent six weeks in Pondicherry and used to visit him twice a week. Motilal cherished every moment he spent with Sri Aurobindo. But he was saddened by the economic hardship borne by his guru and the young men around him. After returning to Chandernagore, he helped Sri Aurobindo financially and in any other way he could.



Sri Aurobindo's room in Raghavan House

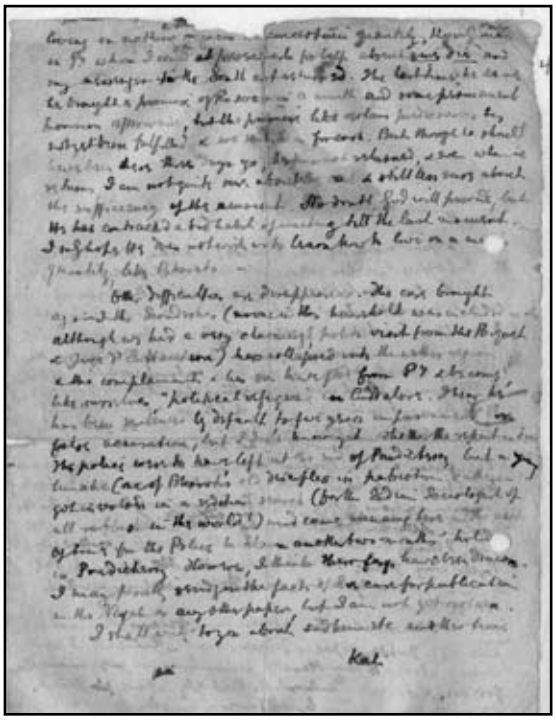


Alexandra David-Neel in Tibetan costume

Alexandra David-Neel became famous as the first Western woman to travel to Tibet. Before going there she spent some time in India in 1911. She had heard about Sri Aurobindo from her friends, Mirra and Paul Richard, and was eager to meet him. In a letter written to her husband on 27 November 1911 from Adyar, Madras, she gave her impressions of her interview with Sri Aurobindo: "...I spent two wonderful hours reviewing the ancient philosophical ideas of India with a man of rare intelligence. He belongs to that uncommon category that I so much admire, the reasonable mystics. I am truly grateful to the friends who advised me to visit this man. He thinks with such clarity, there is such lucidness in his reasoning, such lustre in his eyes...."[91]

PLAN TO KIDNAP SRI AUROBINDO

At one point during the early years of Sri Aurobindo's stay in Pondicherry, the British made up their minds that Sri Aurobindo should be kidnapped in a car with the help of one of the chiefs of the local ruffian bands known as the "*bandes*". The plan was that once Sri Aurobindo was out of



Part of a letter to Motilal Roy signed "Kali"

the limits of French India, with the help of goondas, the agents of the British Government would arrest him and he "would be held up on some fabricated charge. The information of this intended plan reached Sri Aurobindo through Moni, Bijoy and others. To foil the plan the young men armed themselves with acid bottles to prevent any forcible entry into the house. Fortunately no one turned up."[92]

The anticlimax of this event was that an arrest warrant was issued in the name of the chief of the gang on the same day that he planned to abduct Sri Aurobindo.[93] The man had to flee Pondicherry in order to avoid arrest.

CORRESPONDENCE WITH MOTILAL

By the middle of 1912 Sri Aurobindo's monetary situation was very difficult. In a letter to Motilal Roy, dated 3 July 1912, he wrote: "I must ask you to procure for me by will power or any other power in heaven or on earth Rs. 50 at least as a loan.... The situation just now is that we have Rs. 1½ or so in hand. Srinivasa is also without money.... No doubt, God will provide, but He has contracted a bad habit of waiting till the last moment."[94]

Sri Aurobindo's correspondence with Motilal Roy continued through all the ups and downs of life in Pondicherry. After his fortieth birthday Sri Aurobindo wrote to Motilal: "15th August is usually a turning point or a notable day for me personally either in sadhana or life — indirect only for others. This time it has been very important for me. My subjective sadhana may be said to have received its final seal and something like its consummation by a prolonged realisation & dwelling in Parabrahman for many hours. Since then, egoism is dead for all in me except the Annamaya Atma, — the physical self which awaits one farther realisation before it is entirely liberated from occasional visitings or external touches of the old separated existence."[95]

LINK WITH THE REVOLUTIONARIES

Just as the British government had not lost interest in Sri Aurobindo, he had not given up his interest in the struggle for independence and kept himself informed of the revolutionary movement from all over India, especially Bengal and Punjab. He also maintained contact with the revolutionaries through Motilal.

Between 1910 and 1912, Sri Aurobindo is believed to have written a number of letters to Motilal Roy "in a numeral code".[96] "All this correspondence of this period in code had to be burnt in 1916 on the eve of a search in Sri Roy's house."[97] However twenty-six letters written by Sri Aurobindo to Motilal Roy between 1912 and 1920 have survived. Written in English, they contain veiled references to revolutionary activities. In these letters Sri Aurobindo addressed Motilal as "M" and signed for himself as "Kali".

"A CERTAIN MISSION IN LIFE"

Sri Aurobindo once was asked about the influence he had on his companions in the early days in Pondicherry. He said: "Bijoy and the others were greatly influenced by company with me in the old days but it was more in the direction of mental and vital development than spiritually,

for at that time I was doing my own sadhana and not putting out any spiritual influence on others — only if anybody asked me, I told him what to do, the result of his effort was his own affair."[98]

On 1 July 1912 Sri Aurobindo wrote in his diary: "August, 1912, will complete the seventh year of my practice of Yoga."[99] In the same year he wrote in a letter that the object of his Yoga "is perfection of the moral condition & mental & physical being along with the possession of certain powers . . . with the object of carrying out a certain mission in life which God has given me."[100]

During a talk with disciples in 1926, Sri Aurobindo said that when he came to Pondicherry "a programme of what I would do was given to me. It came to me independently and I took it down."[101] He called this programme of sadhana the *Sapta Chatusthaya* because it had seven (*sapta*) sections, each of which had four elements (*chatusthaya*). They are: Samata, Shakti, Vijnana, Shariра, Karma, Brahma and Siddhi Chatusthayas. Sri Aurobindo referred to the four elements of each section as *siddhis*. In the *Record of Yoga,* he noted down not only his progress in attaining the various *siddhis* but also the ongoing experiences, the setbacks, and the indications of the future movement. Sri Aurobindo's sadhana did not follow the order of the seven *chatusthayas* systematically; rather it attempted to perfect various elements of the different *chatusthayas* simultaneously.

A NEW HOUSE

While Sri Aurobindo's Yoga progressed rapidly in 1912, his financial situation did not improve. Then in April 1913, along with Nolini, Moni, Saurin and Bijoy, he moved to a house at 59 rue des Missions Etrangères because its owner charged a lower rent, Rs. 15 a month. Va Ra also joined the household at this time.

Sri Aurobindo's diaries of the early years in



Sri Aurobindo lived in this house at 59 rue des Missions Etrangères (now popularly known as Mission Street) from April 1913 to September 1913.



Aravamudachari Iyengar (1895–1969)
whom Sri Aurobindo later renamed Amrita

Pondicherry give a glimpse not only of his spiritual experiences, but also of daily life at the time. In one notebook which served as a diary, he wrote a detailed account of household expenses in the first five pages; from the sixth page onwards begins the record of his sadhana. The motto of Sri Aurobindo's spiritual practice was "All life is Yoga". "In one single book, we find heterogenous items neighbouring one another without causing any jar or jolt."[102]

The young men went out in the evenings to play football. Sri Aurobindo stepped out of the house only on rare occasions. His regular visitors continued to be the poet Bharati and Srinivasacharya. He received them every evening after 7 p.m. On the way back, Bharati often stopped at Srinivasacharya's house, where people would be eagerly waiting to know, "What did Sri Aurobindo say today?"[103]

IN THE "REGION OF THE GODS"

In the house on Mission Street a young Tamil boy saw Sri Aurobindo for the first time. For two years Aravamudachari had cherished only one wish in his heart — to see Sri Aurobindo. One evening he was out for a walk with a friend, Krishnaswami Chettiar, who was a great admirer of Subramania Bharati and, along with Bharati, sometimes visited Sri Aurobindo's house. On this evening Chettiar had his bicycle with him and proposed to leave it in Sri Aurobindo's house before going to the beach. When Chettiar and his young friend reached the house on Mission Street, they found the door bolted from inside. After knocking with some hesitation they waited nervously. All of a sudden the door opened and was left ajar. When they entered they understood who had opened the door: "Sri Aurobindo had come quietly and turned back immediately as the door opened — it looked as if he did not want to let us have a glimpse of his face.

"In that fading twilight only his long hair hanging gracefully upon his back and his indescribably beautiful small feet caught my eyesight! My heart throbbed within me as though I had been lifted up into the region of the gods! It took me long to come back to normal composure."[104]

By now the number of residents in Sri Aurobindo's house had gone up to eight. Bijoy's relative, Nagendra Nag, had joined them. He was suffering from tuberculosis and had, therefore, brought a servant, Biren, to look after him. Nagendra had some money, so with his coming the financial situation of the household was somewhat eased.

THE "GUEST HOUSE"

In October 1913 a large, one-storey house on rue Francois Martin was available on rent for Rs. 35 a month. Sri Aurobindo decided to move into this house.

It was a big self-sufficient house. The upper storey held spacious rooms and a spacious verandah.[105] In this veranda Sri Aurobindo's "Evening Talks" with disciples were held. All the residents

lived on the first floor; the ground floor was used as kitchen and dining room. K. Amrita recalls: "In the Mission Street house I used to have Sri Aurobindo's Darshan once a day. Here it was not so. I had no occasion to go upstairs. Sometimes he would come down and if I happened to be there — well, my good luck!"[106]

"The big room, the front room and the terrace — the three together being considered the best part of the house — were set apart for Sri Aurobindo. Such a big house but without electric lights!"[107] But the house had plenty of natural light streaming through its large windows and doors. The house was still sparsely furnished.

THE SECRET AGENT

When Bijoy's relative, Nagendra, came to stay in Pondicherry in 1913 he had brought along a servant called Biren Roy. "Biren was in fact a secret agent of the Bengal government"[108], who provided information about what happened in Sri Aurobindo's household. After spending six to eight months in Sri Aurobindo's house, Biren wished to return to Bengal. Another agent came down from Calcutta to Pondicherry to replace Biren. Biren decided to shave his head so that the new man would be able to identify him among the other Bengalis he was living with. Suresh Chakravarti also took a fancy to shave his head.

"When Moni got his head shaved, Biren felt sure that all the inmates staying with Sri Aurobindo knew him to be a secret agent."[109] One evening when the members of the household were sitting together upstairs and talking, Biren suddenly got up and said he wanted to say something. "I am a CID man!" he exclaimed. Everyone thought he was joking and burst into laughter. Biren said, "You do not seem to believe, but I am just going to bring the money I have received." He went to his room and returned with a large sum of money the CID had been paying him to get information about Sri Aurobindo, his visitors, the activities of the inmates, etc. Biren sat down at Sri Aurobindo's feet and offered him the money. He began to weep. "The whole atmosphere changed. Everyone became serious. Sri Aurobindo did not say anything."[110] Biren was allowed to continue to stay in the house; but after a month he returned to Calcutta. "He finally left the police department in 1921 or 1922."[111]



Sri Aurobindo lived in this house, later called the Guest House, on 10 (now 41) rue Francois Martin for the next nine years from October 1913 to October 1922.



The upper storey held spacious rooms and a spacious verandah. In this veranda Sri Aurobindo's "Evening Talks" with disciples were held.

END OF AN ERA

"My whole life has been a struggle with hard realities, from hardship and semi-starvation in England through the fierce difficulties and perils of revolutionary leadership and organisation and activity in India to the far greater difficulties continually cropping up here in Pondicherry, internal and external. My life has been a battle from its early years and is still a battle...."[112]

In February 1914 Nolini, Moni and Saurin left for Bengal. They would return eight months later, in September. During their absence, sometime in May 1914, Va Ra moved out of Sri Aurobindo's house and left Pondicherry. Biren Roy had already gone to Bengal. The number of inmates in that large house was suddenly reduced to two, or possibly three.

On 29 March 1914 in this very house Sri Aurobindo was to meet Mirra Alfassa, who later became known as the Mother. Their first meeting was to mark the beginning of a new era in human spiritual endeavour. With her help, Sri Aurobindo was to found the Ashram and also lay the foundation of his Supramental Yoga. ⌘



The two rooms occupied by Sri Aurobindo in the Guest House



END-NOTES:

1. *Autobiographical Notes*, Sri Aurobindo, p. 8
2. *Autobiographical Notes,* Sri Aurobindo, p. 61
3. *Karmayogin*, Sri Aurobindo, pp. 3-12 *passim*
4. *Autobiographical Notes*, Sri Aurobindo, p. 8
5. *The Bomb in Bengal*, Peter Heehs, p. 221
6. *Morley papers, Minto to Morley 7 July 1909*
7. *Karmayogin*, p. 22
8. *Karmayogin*, pp. 150-160 *passim*
9. *Archives&Research, April 1983*
10, 11. *Autobiographical Notes*, Sri Aurobindo, p. 94
12. *Reminiscences,* Nolini Kanta Gupta, p. 35
13, 14. *Reminiscences*, Mother India, August 1962, p. 21
15. *Karmayogin*, pp. 373-76 passim
16. *The Bomb in Bengal*, Peter Heehs, p. 233
17. *Reminiscences*, p. 40
18, 19, 20, 21, 22. *Reminiscences*, S. Chakravarty, pp. 136-138
23. *Autobiographical Notes*, Sri Aurobindo, p. 101
24. *Autobiographical Notes,* pp. 90-1
25. *Autobiographical Notes,* pp. 89
26. A. B. Purani notebook, pp. 79-80, talk of 27 September 1925 as quoted in *A&R* journal
27. *A Page of Unpublished History*, S. Chakravarty, pp. 22-8 *passim.*
28. *Jiban-Sangini*, Motilal Roy, pp.171-92 *passim*
29. *My Life's Partner*, pp. 171-215 *passim*
30, 31. *Rakta Biplaber Ek Adhyay*, pp. 52-9 *passim*
32. *Autobiographical Notes*, Sri Aurobindo, p. 64
33, 34. *My Life's Partner*, Motilal Roy, pp. 171-215 *passim*
35. *Autobiographical Notes*, Sri Aurobindo, p. 87
36. *Sri Aurobindo Acroyd Ghose,* Sukumar Mitra, *Masik Basumati*, pp. 171-341 *passim*
37. *Autobiographical Notes*, Sri Aurobindo, p. 64
38. *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, Nirodbaran, vol. 1, p. 42
39. *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, Nirodbaran, vol. 1, p. 3
40. *Sri Aurobindo Acroyd Ghose,* S. Mitra, pp. 171-341, *passim*
41. *Debata Biday*, Nagen. Guharay, pp. 48-68 *passim*
42. According to Nolini Kanta Gupta, it was Basak. Ref. *Reminiscences*, p. 52
43. *Pondicherir Pathe Sri Aurobindo*, pp. 330-32
44, 45. *Smritikatha*, S. Chakravarti, *A&R*, April 1985, p. 103
46. *Smritikatha*, S. Chakravarti, *A&*R, April 1985, p. 105
47. *Sri Aurobindo Acroyd Ghose*, Sukumar Mitra, *Masik Basumati*
48. *Sri Aurobindo Acroyd Ghose*, Sukumar Mitra, *Masik Basumati*, pp. 171-341 *passim*
49. *My Life's Partner*, Motilal Roy, pp. 171-215 *passim*
50. *A&R,* April 1985, p. 117
51. Letter Amarendranath to Nagendrakumar, dated 25 April 1948, *A&R* April 1985, p. 89
52, 53. *Debata Biday*, Nagendrakumar Guha Roy, *Galpa Bharati*, pp. 48-68 *passim*
54. *Debata Biday*, Nagendrakumar Guha Roy
55. *Sri Aurobindo Acroyd Ghose*, Sukumar Mitra, *Masik Basumati*
56. *Archives &Research,* April 1985, p. 119
57. *Sri Aurobindo Acroyd Ghose*, Sukumar Mitra, *Masik Basumati*
58. *Sri Aurobindo Mahaprayane*
59. *Sri Aurobindo Mahaprayane*
60, 61, 62, 63, 64. *Smritikatha*, Suresh Chakrabarti
65. Reminiscences of S. Srinivasacharya, p. 39
66. *Smritikatha*, Suresh Chakrabarti
67. *Smritikatha*, Suresh Chakrabarti
68. *Talks With Sri Aurobindo*, Nirodbaran, vol. 1, p. 86
69. *Talks With Sri Aurobindo*, Nirodbaran, vol. 1, p. 86
70. *The Life of Sri Aurobindo*, A. B. Purani, p. 142
71. GOI, Home Political-A Proceedings, National Archives of India
72. *Smritikatha*, Suresh Chakrabarti
73. Reminiscences of Srinivasacharya
74. *Talks with Sri Aurobindo*, pp. 3-4
75. *Autobiographical Notes*, Sri Aurobindo, p. 174
76. A.B. Purani, *The Life of Sri Aurobindo*, p. 144
77. *Reminiscences*, Nolini Kanta Gupta, pp. 78-9
78. *Reminiscences*, Nolini Kanta Gupta, p. 79
79. Reminiscences of Srinivasacharya, p. 45
80. *Autobiographical Notes*, Sri Aurobindo, pp. 265-66
81. *Autobiographical Notes*, p. 113
82. Reminiscences of Srinivasacharya, Part II, p. 1
83. *Old Long Since*, K. Amrita, p. 186
84. *Autobiographical Notes*, Sri Aurobindo, pp. 283-84
85. *Reminiscences*, Nolini Kanta Gupta, p. 59
86. Va Ra in *Mahakavi Bharatiyar* as quoted in *V.V.S. Aiyar*, p. 124
87, 88. *Reminiscences*, Nolini Kanta Gupta, p. 55
89. Quoted in *Sri Aurobindo: A biography and a history*, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, p. 381 from *Mahakavi Bharatiyar* by Va Ra, p. 68
90. Sri Aurobindo to Dilip Kumar Roy, undated, from Archives collection
91. Translated from *Journal de voyage: lettres a son mari*, Alexandra David-Neel
92, 93. *The Life of Sri Aurobindo*, A. B. Purani, p. 148
94. *Autobiographical Notes and Other Writings of Historical Interest*, Sri Aurobindo, p. 176
95. *Autobiographical Notes*, p. 177
96. *Light to Superlight,* p. vi
97. *Light to Superlight.,* pp. 29-30
98. From a forthcoming volume of letters from the Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo
99. *The Record of Yoga*, Sri Aurobindo, p. 74
100. *Autobiographical Notes*, Sri Aurobindo, p. 173
101. *From* MS of *Evening Talks,* Purani's notebook
102. Nirodbaran in *Mother India*, November 1977, p. 783
103. *Old Long Since*, K. Amrita, p. 144
104. *Old Long Since*, K. Amrita,, pp. 142-43
105, 106, 107. *Old Long Since*, K. Amrita, p. 163-166
108, 109, 110, 111. A. B. Purani, *The Life of Sri Aurobindo*, p. 154-155
112. Sri Aurobindo. From a forthcoming volume of letters in CWSA.