Savitri Bhavan (2016-17)

Introduction

Savitri Bhavan was founded in November 1995 as a place where all kinds of materials and activities could be gathered that would enhance understanding and appreciation of Sri Aurobindo’s epic poem Savitri – A Legend and a Symbol, which the Mother has called ‘the supreme revelation of Sri Aurobindo’s vision’. Since Sri Aurobindo’s vision underlies the aims and ideals of Auroville it was felt to be important to create a place where his vision could be shared and spread not only amongst Aurovilians and Newcomers but also the general public. All the activities of Savitri Bhavan aim to serve this purpose.

Activities of the year

The regular research activities of Savitri Bhavan continued throughout the year, grouped under the headings of Outreach, Learning Materials and Research Projects. During this year a significant increase in Outreach activities occurred with the addition of several new regular classes and courses, now totalling 18 in all (see following report on Savitri Bhavan Research Activities). Some highlights of the year were:

• A mime performance was given in April of Sri Aurobindo’s poem “Silence is All” by Drupad with eight of his young students from Deepanam School.
• August was marked by an outstanding exhibition, Images of the Invisible, paintings by Paolo Tommasi, a distinguished Italian artist and devotee of the Mother now living in the Ashram.
• In November a group of devotees from Ahmedabad and Baroda centres visited Savitri Bhavan to celebrate the release of the publication Savitri Sabdamrut no.6, the sixth volume of the Gujarati series of translations by Shri Kirit Thakkar from Shraddhavan’s books The English of Savitri. This volume covers Cantos 1, 2 and 3 of Book Seven of Savitri: “The Book of Yoga”.
• On December 27th 2016 Shri Manoj Das Gupta, Managing Trustee of the Ashram presented to Shraddhavan the 2016 Sri Aurobindo Puraskar (Award) for work in English at a ceremony in the Hall of Harmony at the Ashram school, “in recognition of her outstanding contribution to the study of Sri Aurobindo”. These awards are bestowed annually by the Sri Aurobindo Samiti of Sri Aurobindo Bhavan Kolkata for work in English and an Indian language.
• In January 2017 the Savitri Study Circle met for the first time in the newly completed Sangam Hall, under construction since December 2015. The Hall was officially inaugurated on February 19th by Dr. Ananda Reddy when he gave the 7th annual Dr. M.V. Nadkarni Memorial Lecture on the topic of “The Vision and the Boon: Savitri and Katha Upanishad”. About 300 people were in attendance.
• A few days later, on the Mother’s birthday, a ‘First Brick’ ceremony was held to initiate construction of the long-planned extension of the Picture Gallery. This project is funded by GOI grant and aims for completion in February 2018. When fully equipped, the new enlarged Gallery will house a permanent display of the entire series of Meditations on Savitri paintings made by Huta with the Mother’s inspiration and guidance from 1961-66. This will make it possible to ‘walk through’ these illustrations of selected passages of the poem from the first lines of Canto One of Book One to the last lines of the poem at the close of Book Twelve. Completion of this construction in Auroville’s 50th anniversary year will also mark the completion of the Savitri Bhavan complex according to its Master Plan, first presented in November 1996.
Outcomes

In addition to the major landmarks in the physical manifestation of the Bhavan, two more outstanding events were the completion of reading cycles of Sri Aurobindo’s epic. In the English of Savitri class the systematic reading and study begun in August 2009 came to an end when the group reached the end of the poem on December 29th, 2016. A new cycle of classes started from January 19th, 2017. Video recordings of these sessions are published on the website www.savitribhavan.org and transcripts made of them have formed the basis of the English of Savitri volumes published by the Bhavan in recent years. Meanwhile, in the Sunday-morning Savitri Study Circle, the reading of Sri Aurobindo’s epic which was begun in May 2012 was completed on February 26th, 2017, and a new cycle of reading and study was launched the following Sunday. Regular participation in this Study Circle has steadily increased over the years and reached one hundred participants in January 2017.

An increase in attendance has also been experienced in the group reading Sri Aurobindo’s major philosophical work The Life Divine, launched in December 2008. In February 2017 thirty-five regular members embarked on the final chapter of the book, and expect to complete the reading in December 2017. An article on this study-pilgrimage was published in the Sri Aurobindo Pathmandir Annual of 2016.

During the last year, Savitri Bhavan experienced a record number of visits by student groups as well as increasing numbers of visitors who appreciate its ambience and the three semi-permanent exhibitions (Sri Aurobindo – A Life Sketch in Photographs, Glimpses of the Mother, and the Meditations on Savitri paintings), as well as the information materials provided in the entry area. In response to these growing numbers of visitors, the team has been enlarged by the inclusion of three young Newcomers who offer attendance at the Digital Library, the Picture Gallery and the Information Desk.

Another newcomer to the team, from the USA, is a highly-experienced teacher of English as a second language. She is providing regular classes in spoken and written English to employed staff and some team-members. We are very grateful to her for this opportunity to enhance the language skills of people working at the Bhavan.

Reflections

The large number of visitors received throughout the year, many of whom express their appreciation of the atmosphere, activities and architecture of the Bhavan, is felt to be an indication that Savitri Bhavan is fulfilling its purpose of spreading awareness of the vision and work of Sri Aurobindo which underlie the aims and ideals of Auroville. This is both encouraging and challenging to the team-members.

Since Savitri Bhavan is visited by so many student-groups as well as members of the general public, it is planned to create more audio-visual presentations for their information and understanding of the purpose of the Centre, including films created specifically for architecture students.

One challenge which remains unsolved is the shortage of suitable part-time staff or volunteers to guide and answer the questions of the many groups and individual members of the public who visit the Bhavan.

Conclusion

In February, Savitri Bhavan was asked to participate in a major initiative launched by members of Auroville International as part of the celebrations of Auroville’s 50th anniversary in 2018. This project, called “Savitri around the World”, aims at a continuous complete reading of Savitri by readers in as many countries as possible, broadcast on the internet. The organisers have requested Savitri Bhavan to host the final event to be held over two days during the birthday week and to assist in all the necessary arrangements to make the project successful. This will be one of the Bhavan’s major projects over the coming year.