Inside the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives
Chronicles
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Editor Larry Seidlitz interviews Peter Heehs, Bob Zwicker, Richard Hartz, Matthijs Cornelissen, Ranganath Raghavan, and Raman Reddy of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives and Research Library, Pondicherry. The interview took place on a hot afternoon in June 2005 around the table shown at right in the central room at the Archives office.

The start of the Archives

Collaboration: When did the Archives start?

Peter: We don’t have a founding date, but it probably started in 1973. From 1971, I and later Shipra and others were working under Jayantilal, and that seamlessly evolved into the Archives. But there was no Archives when we joined.


Peter: Right, and then Ashwin came the next year, I think. Jayantilal was looking for people. He had the idea, and he needed people. He had a good organizing mind.

Collaboration: I am interested in how it developed out of the previous work for the Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library (SABCL).

Peter: We were here and doing that, working on the SABCL, and that work had not yet finished. There was an office in existence.

Collaboration: But that work must have taken a long time?

Peter: The printing of the SABCL took three years, from 1970 to 1972, an extraordinary thing, if you think about it. The whole Ashram press was doing nothing but that at the time, and everyone was proofreading and all. There wasn’t much editorial work for the SABCL because they were just reprinting things that had already appeared. In a few cases they had to put volumes together. For example, The Harmony of Virtue had to be put together. But the texts were taken straight out of wherever they had appeared before.

Ranganath: There was no reference to the manuscripts at that stage.

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Ranganath: There was no reference to the manuscripts at that stage.

Peter: There were no manuscripts available, most of them were kept by Nolini-da. Actually, the idea of just an archives was what Jayantilal started off with; it was to preserve the manuscripts physically and also photographically. What happened was that Kiran and Kamal were supposed to do microfilming of Sri Aurobindo’s documents, and there was nothing to do microfilm at first. Kiran and Kamal went up to Delhi to learn about microfilming. Then we went to Nolini for the manuscripts, but he wasn’t so willing to give them. It was Ashwin Barai who said, “We need the stuff, we need the stuff.” Then finally Nolini just started sending boxes full of manuscripts. The idea was that we would prepare them for microfilming. This was probably in 1973.

Then they would come to me, because we had to find out what was there and what was not, and some sort of numbering and labeling had to be done. Then we found things that hadn’t been published. So things began to evolve.

In a sense, the Archives editorial work began with volume 27 of the SABCL, the Supplement. A few manuscripts had begun to come, and people were tearing their hair out. The Motilal letters had already been published in an SABCL volume, and then we got the original letters, which were about 100 pages. That had to go in the Supplement because some of the material had not been published. The other work of receiving manuscripts for preservation purposes was going on around the same time, and we realized that there were more things that needed to be published.

Finally, Jayantilal said we would have a continued supplement, and that was the birth of the journal, Sri Aurobindo: Archives and Research. That is why Archives and Research has the same physical format as the SABCL. Because printing technology was not very ad-
vanced then, the idea was that we would just photographically reproduce the pages in *Archives and Research* and use them when the time came for later editions of books. So that project for the Supplement evolved into the *Archives and Research*, which subsequently evolved into the *Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo* which currently is being published. So there is a continuity there.

**Bob:** Regarding the founding of the Archives, there is a document we have, dated 25 October 1971, in which Jayantilal wrote to the Mother:

“I have long thought of writing to you that it has become necessary to make a serious and organized effort to collect all the manuscripts of Sri Aurobindo, make photographic copies of them, prepare a catalogue of all the writings, and finalize copies which all can refer to in the future. If this is not done, many mistakes will begin to creep in. This process of deterioration has already started, and if it is not checked, one does not know where it will end.”

**Bob:** We don’t have any record of whether Mother replied to this letter, but it shows what was in Jayantilal’s mind. Then he wrote her again on 15 January 1973:

“Mother, I have often suggested that we build up a kind of archives where microfilms of all of Sri Aurobindo’s and Mother’s manuscripts, photocopies of the various editions of their works, and important letters and documents are preserved. To this must be attached a library of the books of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. I wonder what the Mother thinks about such a project.”

**Bob:** To this request the Mother said, “All right, yes.” We have it in the hand of the secretary who took Jayantilal’s letter to the Mother. It might be taken as the date of the founding of the Archives.

But the big thing is this: in the early 1970s a large portion of Sri Aurobindo’s manuscripts came to us. Peter took two years to organize them. Then in August 1975, he became editor of the *Bulletin of the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education*, and from that time on—he was editor for five years—the Bulletin was packed with new material, especially new writings from Sri Aurobindo.

**Peter:** In between, we started the journal *Archives and Research*, because we were being called upon by all the Ashram journals to give this and that new writing, and it was becoming very chaotic. So in 1976 we decided to start the new journal, and we started publishing in April 1977. It was decided that we would no longer give

**Collaboration:** Would you describe the general process of editing that you went through for publishing the *Complete Works*?

**Peter:** First something was identified as needing publication—a new letter, or a new essay, or a version of something that is obviously a later revision of something that had been published. And this was based on a very large work of inventory that had already taken many years. The first thing we did was to go through and identify the material, and see what its relationship was to things already published and see whether it was new and ought to be published. So that was the first thing: to find something that needed to be published.

Historically speaking, what generally would happen is that we would first prepare it for publication in the *Archives and Research* journal. So it meant typing a copy of it, in those days on a typewriter, and checking it, and checking it, and checking it. That is actually what we do, we check. There are a few people who transcribe directly from the manuscript, some people who are very good at this. Sue Crothers, an Australian, is perhaps the
best. Then the thing would be on paper. And then it is just a matter of reading it over and over again.

Richard: We have this system of one person reading to another, that is, reading the manuscript to the person who is holding the transcript in order to check the transcript.

Collaboration: So this is for the publications that came out in Archives and Research?

Peter: Historically, most of it came out in Archives and Research before it went into the Complete Works. But it is a typical case of how things that had not yet been published ended up in printed form.

Collaboration: But what about for something like The Synthesis of Yoga or The Life Divine?

Peter: Then it is kind of similar in that you still have to identify what is the most reliable version or combination of versions to use for this particular text, with Sri Aurobindo’s latest revision. So, again, there is an identification of the correct manuscript or printed edition to follow.

Richard: Work on the major books was actually started with scanned texts.

Peter: In other words, we didn’t have to type them. By this time we had computers. Instead of reading from the base text to a typed copy, we’ll read to a computer print-out that had been produced through scanning.

That is just verification of the accuracy of our new copy. Simultaneously, we are looking and seeing whether everything is the way it should be. For that you have to use your judgment. That is where you get into the very difficult part of editing.

Richard: Actually we don’t do what most people think of as “editing.” We are only concerned with establishing the authentic text and we don’t try to improve on what Sri Aurobindo wrote. We get into difficult situations, though. Sometimes we don’t have anything to read against except the Arya, for example. So if there seems to be a misprint in the Arya, there is no manuscript to check for the correct reading. The Secret of the Veda, for example, was just printed in the Arya and that’s that. For The Synthesis of Yoga, part of it is like that, Parts Three and Four are straight from the Arya, but other parts Sri Aurobindo revised very extensively and rewrote. Part of that was published during his own lifetime. So each text has its own history. But if there is a manuscript written by Sri Aurobindo in his own hand, then we generally read from that, taking into account the later stages in which he revised the typescript of it.

Collaboration: So it is not the case that for everything there is a written manuscript?

Richard: There is not always a manuscript, no. There are many books for which the beginning of the text is the Arya, but then many of the works published in the Arya were revised by Sri Aurobindo on pages torn out of the Arya. And so we read against the revised Arya.

Peter: It often means that there is not one single set of papers that is the manuscript for a given book. For part of it we have to rely on one source and for another part we have to rely on something else. When Sri Aurobindo revised something and didn’t see it all the way through to print, sometimes problems arise. In a simple case he might not have put a period at the end of a sentence. Editorially, you have to put the period at the end of a sentence, but that’s already an editorial decision.

Richard: Even if he did see it all the way through to print there is the problem of what to do if we discover that the very first typescript that he revised already contained a mistyping of what he had written in his original manuscript. Then we have to decide whether to go back to the manuscript or accept whatever was incorporated in the revised version even though it began as a transmission error.

Peter: This has been explained in something like a hundred pages in Archives and Research where we talk about various editorial difficulties. But essentially it is a matter of confirming the text by having the material on one side, having a transcript on the other, and confirming the text of the transcript. Nowadays we check a laser print that has been produced through scanning the best available version of the text. So it is kind of a straightforward thing, we just check text A against text B; but there are a multitude of difficulties and complexities that can enter in.

Collaboration: Can you give a timeline for completion of the Complete Works?

Peter: Everyone is smiling because it is difficult to do.

Matthijs: There is a sliding timeline.

Peter: We would have liked there to be no timeline at all, and those of us who were involved in editing knew that it would stretch out. On the other hand, Jayantilla wanted the whole Complete Works done in three years! And so that three years has gradually stretched out. There is a kind of tension between the need that we all recognize of getting the thing done—the needs of the press, the needs of the distributors, the demands of the readers to have their final product—and then our recognition that a great deal of work is needed for any text.

Richard: In fact, the whole difference between this edition and the SABCL is due to the fact that we are taking a lot more time.

Bob: Our general situation is this. We started the Complete Works in 1997. It is now eight years later. We have put 25 books into the press. We have a dozen more to go, and we have done a lot of work on almost all of them. Whereas in the SABCL there was one volume On Himself; there will now be two volumes: Letters on Himself and the Ashram and Autobiographical Notes and Writings of Historical Interest. One volume of that is among the next things coming. Collected Poems will also come soon because we have read most of the poems twice and they need just a finalization. Then the book The Mother with Letters on the Mother will come. Then the four Letters on Yoga volumes will come; there won’t just be three volumes, there will be four, and they are so packed that each volume will run to 700 or 800 pages. Then will come Hymns to the Mystic Fire and Vedic Studies with Writings on Philology.

Collaboration: Will the latter works
be substantially enlarged?

Peter: Whereas before there were two volumes, Secret of the Veda and Hymns to the Mystic Fire, now we have three. Secret of the Veda is made up entirely of things that were published by Sri Aurobindo in the Aranya, and the new edition is pretty much like the old one. That has been out for some time. Hymns to the Mystic Fire was partly published by Sri Aurobindo and partly not. What identifies it is that the hymns in that book are addressed to Agni. We also have a lot of other Vedic material that needs to be published. That would have properly gone into one volume that we are going to call Vedic Studies, but it just became too big. It would have been over 1000 pages. So we are reducing the size of it by putting anything from Sri Aurobindo’s notebooks that has to do with Agni in with the other material in Hymns to the Mystic Fire.

Bob: So we have a dozen volumes to go. It is 2005. Sri Aurobindo enters the public domain in 2010. After that point, anyone can use his works the way they want to. By 2010 we would like to have everything wrapped up, so that when Sri Aurobindo does go into the public domain, it is all accurate, orderly, and as complete as possible.

Peter: He doesn’t go completely into the public domain. For anything that was published after his passing, it would be 60 years from that point, and not from 1950. That is how I understand it. But anyhow, yes, we want to get it finished.

Bob: So we hope to wrap it up in five years. We should be able to do that.

Richard: We certainly will have 35 volumes out, which is what we promised people. There may be a couple of volumes still to go.

Peter: We had to add two volumes to what we originally thought—a volume of letters on yoga and a volume of material on himself and the Ashram.

Behind the scenes

Collaboration: Do you have enough people and resources in the Archives?

Peter: In a way we have a kind of balance now, because things are going forward on different books at different speeds and in different ways. So maybe we could use more people for proofreading, but then someone here would have to produce something to feed them text to proofread, and that person is busy with something else. It is not like having huge numbers of people doing one thing.

Richard: And most aspects of the work take a lot of experience. You can’t just bring in anybody new.

Bob: The truth is that the general organization and final editing of all the volumes is done by our two main editors, Peter Heehs and Richard Hartz. They are both superb organizers, readers, and editors. The work of the rest of us is largely to support them, give them time to work, and assist them in every way we can. And they, in turn, put on us every responsibility they can, realizing that they only have a certain amount of time.

Peter: That makes it too “editor-centric.” The one factor you haven’t brought in is the technical side. I said that we started with typed sheets and ink, and now we have scanners and computers. When Matthijs came in 1992, we really didn’t have a computer program or an idea about how we were going to handle all the electronic text that we were producing. With his experience in this sort of thing, he was able not only to set up the particular program that we were going to use, but also to fit it in into the whole publishing program that the press had.

Bob: When a book goes to the Ashram Press for publication, it has been not just edited here and proofread, but also completely laid out down to where the hypens appear on the page.

Matthijs: I’ve mainly been contributing to the typesetting of the book, and trying to keep all the editorial information as part of the texts. So we have a program that allows us to keep all the editorial history in the text without it affecting the final typeset pages that go to the press. So it will all be there, even though it doesn’t print.

Richard: That is one of the big differences between this edition and any previous edition. For previous editions, all we have is what was printed; we can only guess how it came about. Whereas in this edition, we have a record of how everything happened and it is all there in computer files.

Peter: As well as on all the paper that we have produced; we are saving a huge collection with the various stages of our editorial work.

Matthijs: For most books that go to the press, we have about five versions here, with all our notations in the margins. And the file format is plain text, so it will also be readable after 20 years when all these programs are not available any more. If you do everything in Microsoft Word, after 10 years you are lost. But these are very simple text files.

Peter: To get away again from the editorial-star approach, I may mention that to identify the proper text takes an enormous amount of inventory work and study that is done beforehand. The best example of that is the Letters. Raman has done a lot of work over the years to organize the Letters, and it is a very vital thing, but the kind of thing that doesn’t attract anybody’s attention.

Now when we go to a letter, say a letter written on 3 July 1936, we have a record containing every version of the letter, every handwritten copy, typed written copy, and printed version of that letter. And maybe there was a letter that was written by Sri Aurobindo and revised for one purpose and then revised by him for another purpose. All those things have been brought together from various sources—from so and so’s manuscripts, from typed copies over here, and the proofs of a book over there. All of this material has been brought together through years of work. There are at least 6000 letters.

Raman: There are 5966. (Laughter)

Bob: When Peter takes a decision today, persons like Raman have been working for 25 years to prepare the background.

Raman: It is not only me, there have been so many people like me working as storekeepers, organizers, arrangers. I have
personally worked on this database of letters since the very first day I came here in 1976. I was looking for work and Peter said, “Give him the letters.” So he gave me the letters, and I didn’t even know what it meant.  

*Laughter*

So you had to try find the original letters that went into the many volumes of Sri Aurobindo’s printed letters. The Centenary Edition had been published. There were five or six volumes, and you had to find the original letter. It was really difficult to find. You either had to read the entire thing and keep it in memory or you had to have a practical arrangement.

So the first thing that came to mind was to make a card index. I wrote on plain chit pads the first line of every letter. I had 6000 cards and I put them in alphabetical order. It became a kind of finding game. Then gradually the cards got typed, so we had a typed index. Then we put it on the computer. I learned the elements of database and created a plain database program. It worked, and then in time this database became more and more sophisticated, and we eventually got control over all the data.

Now, in this database we have the first line of every letter, its date, and the source of that date—how we know it was that date. It will refer to a certain manuscript (if we have it), to the person to whom the letter was written, whether there are early typed copies of it, where it is published, and any of us can consult it. It would be available. So now this is on our computers and it will be in the SABCL and where it will be in the *Complete Works*.

Raman: There are often several manuscripts of a single letter. So all these had to be collated together.

Matthijs: For each of the 6000 letters, there is a folder which contains a copy of all the manuscripts related to that one letter.

Peter: Now it takes only a tenth of a second to bring up the record on that letter. But to produce that took 20 years or so to go through all the hundreds of boxes, and say, “Ah, this is a version of A1,” and then put it in the computer and have it available. So now this is on our computers and any of us can consult it. It would be absolutely impossible to do work on these letters without this information. Actually, this is a database of all our holdings, not just things related to manuscripts.

Raman: It is an inventory of the Archives. There are about 10,000 items in the Archives. When Matthijs came, he went through all the items, listed them, and dumped them into one big database. Now we have access to every item. We know at once whether Moni Chakravarty has six boxes or five boxes, where they are, and what sort of material, whether it is primary material kept in the cold storage, or secondary material stored elsewhere.

Matthijs: There were others who contributed to that database before me.

**Sri Aurobindo’s correspondence**

Collaboration: How do the letters in this edition of the *Complete Works* differ from those in previous editions—in terms of publishing more letters, or publishing more of the questions?

Raman: Each letter has been checked against the manuscripts.

Bob: There will be about 25 to 30 percent new letters, and with the old ones, we are checking each letter to make sure it is accurate. And sometimes we are including portions that had been left out previously. As for questions, they will go in some volumes and not in others. In the four *Letters on Yoga* volumes we won’t have questions, but in the volume *The Mother with Letters on the Mother*, for example, there will be questions. Also in the two volumes containing letters of Sri Aurobindo on himself there will be questions. In the *Letters on Poetry and Art*, which is about 750 pages long, certain sections have questions.

Collaboration: Have there been systematic attempts to solicit letters?

Peter: Routinely, people have given their letters to the Ashram authorities and then they have come to us. I don’t know that any advertisement had to be done.

Bob: We have put notices on the bulletin board in the Ashram, but it hasn’t brought us much. It is more often the case that when people pass away the trustees send their manuscripts to us, or when people know that our work is good, they voluntarily come and say, “Here are my letters.” Madhav Pandit did that, for example, he brought his whole collection of letters.

Peter: This is a major portion of what we have. Many things either came from Nolini or from Madhav Pandit. Nolini-da gave all his papers, all his letters, all his...
manuscripts. Madhav Pandit entrusted his collection to Jayantilal and the team he built up.

Collaboration: Do you think there are a lot of letters out there that still that have not been collected?

Bob: I don’t think there are a lot, no.

Peter: For the major correspondents, who were just a dozen or so, their material is with us. A lot of letters never left the Ashram, because if it went outside, what Sri Aurobindo wrote by hand would remain with Nolini, and only a typed copy went out. So all those things were with Nolini. And there were no great losses, I think, because they were treated as something sacred.

Raman: For some correspondences, we do not have the correspondent’s questions—the questions were destroyed by the person after receiving Sri Aurobindo’s replies.

Peter: There are a number of correspondences where all we have is signatures, or “yes,” “no,” because people would cut that out from the letter, which they then destroyed.

Collaboration: Is there more correspondence on literature and poetry and things like that that you have collected?

Bob: Yes. In the SABCL, the letters on poetry came out in four different volumes: some in On Himself, some in the back of The Future Poetry, the Savitri letters in the back of Savitri, and some letters in the Supplement. We brought them all together and added many new letters in the volume called Letters on Poetry and Art.

Some of the great collections of letters had been fragmented, like the letters to Amal Kiran. So although this book is organized by subject, there also has been an effort to keep the sadhaks’ letters together within the subject. This book came out about two years ago and was organized by Peter.

The Record of Yoga

Collaboration: Can you tell us about the Record of Yoga? I would be interested in hearing about the history of that.

Peter: I’ll do the early history, then Richard can take it up. The notebooks in which the Record is contained include about 30 that are primarily or only Record material, and portions of other notebooks. These came along with all the other notebooks from Nolini in the mid-1970s. This was the main discovery when we were going through those notebooks. There had been rumors about this material, but no one really knew if it existed. They didn’t know there were almost 1500 pages of material. Finally, when the inventory of the notebooks was done, a certain number were set aside as being only or primarily Record notebooks. They were numbered and put aside as being a different category of things. Then a typed transcript was made, just because we wondered what was there. There was some question about whether it ought to be published at all. Sri Aurobindo certainly didn’t write it for publication. On the other hand, there were plenty of things he didn’t write for publication that had been published. That includes drafts of essays that never got worked up.

Collaboration: Who made the decision?

Peter: We wanted to publish it ourselves. We thought this was great stuff. But we had to ask Jayantilal what he thought about the idea. A characteristic of Jayantilal that was remarkable is that he would never push anything. He would sort of suggest. He knew everyone in the Ashram, he was well-respected. He would just kind of say, “Well, this seems like this might be a good thing to do.” I sometimes contrast it to Satprem’s approach with the Agenda, which is that you take it and ram-bash and push it through, and damn what anybody thinks. Jayantilal just very slowly brought the idea forward. I think he might have published one or two pieces of it and nobody seemed to object. He talked about the project to Nolini who would make the decision, and also to other people who might conceivably have opposed it. He prepared the groundwork. It wasn’t until 1986 that we began to bring out little pieces of the Record in Archives and Research. At first we would select from a given period things that seemed interesting. And this was a time at which anyone who had objections could object, but no one did. And Jayantilal said, “Well, it seems all right. We can’t really say that Sri Aurobindo didn’t want it to be published along with all his other unpublished material.” So we went ahead, and finally, without too much outcry, we got to the end of it, in a good nine years.

Collaboration: Was it a fairly straightforward project in terms of gathering the material and putting it in chronological order?

Peter: Fortunately, there were two aspects that made it easier than some things. First, it was all dated, or largely dated. And the undated pieces, with only a little work, could be fitted in with the dated ones. Second, there is only one version. He hardly rewrote anything. So it was just a matter of reading it. Of course, there are difficult portions—we are talking now just about reading the words on the page. Actually, he wrote rather slowly, so that the words are pretty well-formed. So producing a transcript wasn’t all that difficult on the whole.

It was prepared for publication in the way we did everything: making a typed copy, checking that, rechecking, getting it printed in Archives and Research. We now had 1500 pages in print. Most of this was being done by Richard; for a while that was his primary job in the Archives besides Savitri, to produce the two installments of the Record of Yoga that would come out every year. By the end of 1994 it had all pretty much come out. More material was added mainly near the beginning and the end when it was published as two volumes of the Complete Works in 2001.

Collaboration: I would like to ask about the substantive contents of the Record. Are there important elements of the Integral Yoga that are described only there and not in The Synthesis of Yoga or the Letters on Yoga? Are there some important elements of the yoga for which one has to go to the Record?

Richard: It depends upon how much you want to know. There are certain as-
pects which Sri Aurobindo discussed in a general way in the Synthesis, about which there is much more detail in the Record. Also, there is the fact that he did not complete Part Four of The Synthesis of Yoga, “The Yoga of Self-Perfection,” which is the part that corresponds most closely to the Record. He explains a lot of the terminology of the Record in the portion of Part Four of the Synthesis that he did complete. For the topics that were to be covered in the unfinished remainder of the Synthesis, in some cases all we have is the unfinished remainder of the Synthesis.

Richard: In the last part of the Synthesis, “The Yoga of Self-Perfection,” Sri Aurobindo started to go very systematically through what he called the sapta chatusthaya, although he didn’t call it that in the Synthesis. For his own purposes he was calling it the sapta chatusthaya, the seven tetrads. These formed the structure—he called it the program—of his sadhana, which he received soon after he came to Pondicherry. “The Yoga of Self-Perfection” starts off with the last of the seven chatusthayas, the siddhi chatusthaya. There are chapters on shuddhi and mukti, that is, purification and liberation, and a general explanation of what he meant by siddhi, integral perfection. He more or less skipped over bhukti, liberated enjoyment, which in the Record is the third member of the siddhi chatusthaya, but in the Synthesis is listed last and he may have intended to come back to it at the very end. Then there is a chapter called “The Elements of Perfection,” in which he summarizes the first six chatusthayas. He doesn’t use the word chatusthaya, but it is very clear, because he talks in several places about the four elements of each chatusthaya. Then he takes them up systematically, and he gets to the second member of the third chatusthaya, the vijnana chatusthaya. The second member of that is trikaladrishti, the triple-time-vision—meaning the knowledge of the past, present, and future. And that is where the Arya stopped. That means that he was less than half way through, or about half way since he had already talked about the last chatusthaya.

Reference material

Collaboration: One of the tasks of the Archives, as I understood from the background reading you gave me, was gathering biographical information on Sri Aurobindo, some of which was done for the SABCL.

Peter: As far as the SABCL went, it was Jayantilal who suggested that we have at least a chronology of Sri Aurobindo’s life to be published with the index and glossary in volume 30 just as basic information. For that, someone got some material from Delhi at the National Archives, and Jayantilal encouraged me to get material from other Archives. I did a lot of that sort of work in the 1970s and 1980s. It is not, strictly speaking, one of the main projects of the Archives.

Collaboration: Is there more of that kind of material in this edition?

Peter: Actually, we are letting Sri Aurobindo speak for himself, because one of the volumes is going to be called Autobiographical Notes with Writings of Historical Interest. That corresponds to a certain type of material that was published in On Himself, part of which was a collection of biographical documents. So more biographical material is coming out, gathered from different places. Also, letters of the 1930s in which Sri Aurobindo referred in passing to himself, some of which had also appeared in On Himself, are coming out in another volume called Letters on Himself and the Ashram. So that is part of the work with the letters—to isolate those letters on...
Sri Aurobindo and the Ashram and bring them together.

I don’t know that we have any plans to do much in the way of biography in the reference volumes of the Complete Works. Inherently, writing a biography is interpretative, and I have personally taken on that work, which I do apart from the Archives work. Collecting materials is another thing. Something that I would like to publish is a series called “Documents in the Life of Sri Aurobindo.” Much of it has already appeared in Archives and Research, which has about 150 pages of straight historical documents. A project to be taken up is to complete that, to print the raw data without any historical interpretation, just as they came, and leave it for the reader to make use of. That is something we will do in the somewhat distant future.

**Collaboration:** Regarding reference material, I understand that there is going to be some reference work pertaining to the Record of Yoga?

**Richard:** Yes, there will be a fairly extensive glossary. No other volume of the Complete Works will have its own glossary, but the Record poses unusual problems for readers. Peter had already done a lot of work on the technical terminology of the Record before I joined the Archives. Then when we began to publish it serially in Archives and Research, I took over the job of preparing for each issue a glossary defining the Sanskrit terms that occurred in that installment. The definitions in those glossaries were just the minimum that was necessary to have some idea of what the words meant. When the Record finally came out in two volumes, ideally there should have been a glossary along with it, but we didn’t want to delay publication until the glossary was ready. So as soon as those two volumes were published, I started working on the glossary (besides my other work). At first the idea was essentially to combine the glossaries that had appeared in Archives and Research and add some definitions of terms occurring in new material that had been included. But gradually the scope of it has expanded and I have started going into more depth. Now some of the definitions of the most complex terms come to almost half a page. And there are between two and three thousand terms, including compound expressions which sometimes need to be defined apart from the separate words they are composed of.

**Peter:** We should also explain that there are two parts to the glossary.

**Richard:** Besides the glossary proper, there will be an outline of the terminology of the Record of Yoga. Peter had already prepared something he called a Structural Outline, and I took that up and elaborated on it. It is an outline of a few hundred of the important terms based on the structure of the saptapada sutras. One can go through it and familiarize oneself with the terminology, before trying to grapple with the Record itself. Or it can be used in conjunction with the alphabetical glossary, which refers to the outline by the numbers of the items. The problem with a glossary is that you can’t read through it, because there is no meaningful sequence; you can only look up individual words. With the outline, you can glance through it and see the relations of the different terms for any aspect of the yoga you are particularly interested in. Then if you want to go into it more deeply you can find the terms in the glossary.

**Peter:** The outline follows Sri Aurobindo’s own structure.

**Richard:** Yes. We have simply filled in that structure with related terms so that it has become more detailed. But he himself laid out the seven chatushtayas and their members—the elements of the Yoga of Self-Perfection as he called it in the Synthesis—in a kind of outline form.

**Collaboration:** The glossary will be a volume of the Complete Works?

**Richard:** It will be part of the set, yes, but it won’t be numbered as a volume.

**Peter:** It will be an appendix as it were, so it can sit on the shelf next to the Record of Yoga. It will be sold separately also, so that people who have bought the Record of Yoga separately can obtain it.

**Richard:** The fact that it will be part of the Complete Works is one reason I don’t want to rush it. Once it is done it will be there for all time. I feel that it should be done as well as possible.

**Collaboration:** What is the timeline for getting it out?

**Richard:** Recently a problem has come up with regard to the publication of the glossary, in addition to the fact that it is taking longer than expected and is delaying other work. Many quotations from Sri Aurobindo’s writings occur in the definitions—I try to use his own words as much as possible because it is the only way to bridge the gap between his consciousness and ours. Some of the writings quoted have not yet been published in the Complete Works. In order to give proper references, those volumes should be published before the glossary which contains quotations from them. So at a meeting with the Publication Department it has been decided to give priority to completing the regular volumes of the Complete Works. The glossary to the Record will be brought out along with other reference material at the end. Meanwhile it has been proposed that a simpler glossary could be put on the Ashram’s website for those who cannot read the Record without a glossary. The Ashram doesn’t want to print and publish something that is only a stopgap, but putting it on the Internet would be a temporary solution until the definitive glossary is available. This possibility has just been suggested and is being considered.

**Perceptions of the Archives**

**Peter:** There is something that is interesting to me that I would like to discuss. Ranganath has been in the Ashram a long time, he has been here since he was a child. He saw the Archives taking shape, but joined it only recently. At first the Archives wasn’t much in view and now it seems sometimes too much in view. Ranganath, as someone who has seen developments in the Ashram over a long period of time, how does the Archives appear to people outside the department?

**Ranganath:** I think the Archives is doing a very important job. For one thing,
Generally, there is a recognition here that the Archives is doing good work. There are pockets of resistance here and there, which are largely, I think, ignorant, ill-informed, but that also slowly is changing. There have even been court cases and all that. But I think the Archives has taken that very well in its stride.

**Collaboration:** Are the court cases an ongoing problem?

**Peter:** We don’t really feel it that much. Richard, if he is called upon, has to explain one thing or another, for some reason or another.

**Richard:** At one point it was taking up quite a bit of my time and slowing down our work. Actually the legal harassment has been by fundamentalists outside the Ashram, though it stirred up controversy in the Ashram too. Most of it has been directed against the 1993 edition of *Savitri*, whose text was finally decided not by the Archives but by Nirodbaran and Amal Kiron, just like previous editions.

**Peter:** Basically we do our work just like we have done from the 1970s. We were first shielded by Jayantilal, and even now after his passing the trustees are 100 percent behind us. They have wanted to know what is going on, but they have never taken a hostile or prosecutorial attitude towards us.

**Ranganath:** That is because it is generally recognized that whatever is being done is very legitimate, and there is no tampering with the texts. There was this misunderstanding: some people thought that now it is not Sri Aurobindo, but what somebody else has substituted. But that idea was very ignorant and ill-informed.

**Bob:** Yes. Our main work at the Archives is to remove any mistakes accidentally made by people while transcribing and publishing Sri Aurobindo’s works in the past. We simply restore what Sri Aurobindo actually wrote.

When Jayantilal passed away, Manoj-da came forward and took his place. Manoj-da is a respected member of the community who trusted and appreciated our work. He wanted to be informed of all that we were doing, and we invited him and the other trustees, regularly, for briefings on what we were doing. Especially Manoj-da and Dr. Dutta showed real interest. We would sit here at this same table and spend a whole afternoon together. Peter and Richard would make presentations, show the manuscripts, explain what we do. They appreciated that we were open with them. We have always had their support. It hasn’t been easy for them to support us when there was misunderstanding and opposition, but they have always given us full support—moral support, legal support, and financial support. It is a very beautiful thing to have the support of your respected elders.

**Peter:** I think that generally people think that the Archives is doing a good job. Most people in the Ashram aren’t busy-body types. As long as there is a general feeling that we are members of the Ashram, are doing our work, and we are supported by the authorities, they let us go about our business, for the most part.
There is a vocal minority, of course, and vocal minorities tend to get heard.

**Raman:** I think it is the general atmosphere of the Ashram that is responsible for everything that goes well here. We don’t realize that we have a special environment of the Ashram. In the Ashram you have the Archives, which is not different, basically, from the other departments. It gets a protection. And it is the Mother who is running it. Maybe I am being a little sentimental and emotional, but basically it is that. Everybody is working for the Mother. That is something concrete. If you take that element out, we will just fall apart. I have seen other centers where this feeling is not strong, and they just fall apart. And this is very concrete. It is fine to say I am working for the Mother and all that, just to say it, but to feel it and do it is different.

**Peter:** No one here feels that he or she is working under somebody else. We really don’t have a head of the department in that way. Legally, Manoj, the Managing Trustee, is the head.

**Richard:** I don’t think there is another department that is so decentralized.

**Peter:** We have Bob and Mr. Pattegar as administrative heads. Some people give work to other people, but nobody has the sense that they are working for another.

**Bob:** That is one of Jayantilal’s great contributions. He gave us freedom and support and encouragement.

**Peter:** And then he just let things develop, so that before he passed away in 1999, we had 25 years of just doing what we were doing, with his encouragement and behind-the-scenes direction. So the thing had developed as a kind of self-starting proposition, and continued that way.

**Bob:** Jayantilal decided to start publishing the *Complete Works* in 1997. We thought, give us a little more time, let us develop a larger body of books so that when we begin we will have more material ready. I thought, and a few others thought, that 2000 would be a good starting date for publication, with the new millennium and all that. He wanted to start right away. We started in 1997, Sri Aurobindo’s 125th birthday. Jayantilal passed away in 1999. By then, things were well under way. Up until then, it was he who protected us and defended us. And soon after he passed away, there was criticism of our editorial methods and even court cases against our work. Yet, by then, things were so well underway that there was no going back. If we had waited until 2000 and there had been many objections against our editorial methods or what we planned to do, the project might not even have gotten off the ground. Jayantilal got the thing going in 1997; now we will continue our work and complete it.

**Matthijs:** It needs to be mentioned that all those court cases fall flat because our methods are so meticulous. The whole editing process is one of sticking strictly to what Sri Aurobindo wrote himself. We are not doing fancy work. And finally it goes smoothly because our work is solid and transparent and we keep detailed records of all the things we do.

**Peter:** We can’t be criticized for trying to pull something over on anybody because we are perfectly clear about what we are doing. We have written hundreds of pages in *Archives and Research* and elsewhere explaining everything about our editorial method, and now we write these notes in the back of every book telling what is going on. So it is not as if there is a mysterious little cabal producing things and not being accountable to anybody. We feel we are accountable to everybody, in fact. On the other hand, we have to do our work too.

**Matthijs:** It doesn’t go in any way against what has been said about the Mother’s protection, and that everybody is basically working for the Mother. But the work is also solid in its own way.

**Preservation of manuscripts**

**Collaboration:** Would you describe the present state of Sri Aurobindo’s manuscripts with regard to their preservation?

**Matthijs:** I think we do what is technically state-of-the-art at the moment. This climate is the worst you can have, and so the manuscripts are now stored in a place where they are kept as well as anybody could keep them. They are kept at a totally regulated temperature and humidity.

**Peter:** They are kept in a place that Matthijs helped to design with a custom-made air conditioning and dehumidifying system, and it is very impressive.

**Matthijs:** It is interesting in that the trustees gave us their meeting room for storing the manuscripts, which by itself is very sweet; they are kept in the old room where the trustees used to meet.

**Collaboration:** How do the manuscripts look now? What condition is the paper and the ink in?

**Matthijs:** They deteriorated quite a bit in the early years. Many of the pages from the *Arya*, for example, are completely brittle. With the loose editions of the *Arya* which are kept outside, you cannot turn the pages without breaking them. But the ones that have been kept in cold storage are in better condition. That is impressive. For every five degrees that you bring the temperature down, the life of the paper doubles, more or less. If you bring the temperature down from 35 to say 20 Celsius, then the life becomes eight times as long. So that is a considerable improvement.

**Collaboration:** Are all the handwritten manuscripts in the cold storage?
Matthijs: All the handwritten manuscripts of Sri Aurobindo are in the cold storage and kept in acid-free handmade-paper folders. The main enemy of paper is the acidity in the paper itself, so if you keep them protected from each other, interleaved with acid-free paper, they last longer.

Peter: Incidentally, we don’t touch the manuscripts anymore ourselves. All the work that we are doing is done with xeroxes or scanned copies, so now those manuscripts in principle will remain there forever without being touched again.

Collaboration: Is there anything more being done with the manuscripts?

Matthijs: There are methods to preserve them, more aggressive methods, to deacidify the paper. But not all of the methods are 100 percent reversible, so we are not using them, because we try to be as cautious as possible. Anything you do to the paper involves a risk, so we don’t do anything aggressive or irreversible.

Collaboration: So now they are stored and nobody is doing much with them?

Matthijs: Yes, we are still in the process of storing them a little more carefully with still more acid-free and acid-absorbent paper in between. But that will be basically it.

Bob: Barbie does manual repair of the pages, but there is not a wholesale attempt to deacidify them.

Peter: If the technology improves, we might at some point take that up.

Matthijs: But we have learned to be extremely cautious with active preservation, because what has happened very often in history is that people found a fantastic method to keep things, and then ten years later discovered that it was a disaster that you cannot reverse.

Collaboration: What is this new machine you showed me for destroying insects?

Peter: It is a glass chamber that receives the sun’s rays, and then holds the heat in, and you keep it at a level of 60 degrees centigrade. It produces extreme heat that kills the bugs through the heat itself and through desiccation.

Matthijs: The traditional method involves pesticides, but we try to do it entirely without pesticides. And this works. This is absolutely the minimum you can do to the manuscripts and still remove the bugs.

Collaboration: But this is only for new manuscripts that are coming in?

Matthijs: Yes, whatever we already have is free of bugs.

Peter: It is more for books that we are going to use this solar chamber. Anything that sits on a bookshelf in India tends to get infected with insects. So now, say, we get a nice early edition of one of Sri Aurobindo’s books; it will probably be infested with bugs, so we can’t put it in our library without first killing the bugs.

Matthijs: And even if we don’t see that a book or piece of paper is infected, it is safer to treat it, because you don’t want to introduce bugs into the general storage.

Collected works of the Mother

Collaboration: My understanding is that when The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo are finished the Archives will begin work on the Mother’s Collected Works?

Bob: Yes, we will try to do the same thing with the Mother’s works that we did with Sri Aurobindo’s works.

Peter: But that has been going on concurrently for a long time. It is not like one will finish and the other will start.

Bob: Yes, that’s right, but I would say that the Mother’s works are on the back burner at the moment. We publish some things of the Mother which come out in the Bulletin, but we really haven’t taken up the Mother’s works with the idea of checking everything for accuracy, checking the translations, and incorporating new material. We are too busy finishing up The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo.

Collaboration: It sounds like that could be a work of similar scope to that of The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo?

Bob: The scope will not be as large, but it would involve a similar treatment. We will have to look at each text. There is some material that has not yet been published, but not a huge amount.

Peter: Many of the texts are oral, so it is a different thing, and many of the texts are written in French, so we have to have a different set of people doing the editing.

Collaboration: Regarding the oral texts, what is the condition of the tapes, of the recordings? Is that part of the Archives?

Bob: No, it is done by the Projector Room, the Ashram department in charge of audio recordings. I believe Steve Webman has been working with Arunkumar to put the old tapes onto CDs.

Matthijs: It has all been digitized, so it is all there digitally. And it has also been put onto analog tapes. But the original analog tapes are in an amazingly good state, much better than anybody could expect.

Collaboration: You say they have been digitized, but have they also been cleaned up in terms of removing static and extraneous noise? I imagine the original recordings were of pretty poor quality.

Peter: They are studying that problem.

Matthijs: First you copy it exactly as it is. Then you make secondary copies on which you do the cleaning.

Collaboration: Are they doing that?

Matthijs: You have to talk to Steve Webman or Arunkumar about that. They also have state-of-the-art equipment.

Collaboration: If you were checking against originals, presumably you would be checking against these recordings?

Matthijs: Yes, but for a lot of the texts there is no recording anymore.

Peter: Transcripts were made and that is all we have.

Matthijs: Because they used the same tapes again and again. They would make the transcript of a talk and then use that same tape again.

Bob: We have got boxes of early transcripts, including many that were edited by Satprem. They haven’t been looked at carefully, but they will become very valuable primary material. But we have Mrityunjoy’s collection of typescripts of the Mother’s Entretiens. They are very valuable. We also have Sanat Banerjee’s col-
lection, which is fairly extensive, and others. We have a copy of the Entretiens in which Satprem has made his revisions, so by studying it you can see his method of editing the Mother’s talks for publication in the Bulletin and for publication as they have come out in the Entretiens series.

Peter: And his work would be quite legitimate, because oral things do need to be edited. You don’t speak in full sentences. So there is nothing wrong with that work having being done, but it can be checked now.

Collaboration: So you will go over those things again?

Bob: Yes, we will. That is the work. Whether we change it is something we will have to decide when we see.

Peter: But it would be French speakers who would be doing the decision-making.

Richard: The translations also need to be looked at.

Bob: The translations are often awkward; they are not fluid.

Collaboration: So new translations would be made of all these things for the new edition?

Bob: We will look at everything and see if it needs revision and retranslation. But this is still years down the line. First we will finish up the Complete Works.

Other work of the Archives

Collaboration: Is there other work being done by the Archives that we have not touched on?

Matthijs: There is the digitization of the manuscripts. We are making images of each and every one. That has started, but it is still in its early stages.

Raman: There is also Kiran’s photography.

Bob: We are doing the same with the photographs—digitization and storage.

Matthijs: All the photos of Sri Aurobindo have been done, but the photos of the Mother are still in the process of being done. That is a huge job.

Peter: Also historical photographs, photographs of the Ashram, photographs of disciples will be done.

Collaboration: All of that is stored here?

Peter: Yes. More and more we are trying to put things in the cold storage.

Matthijs: We have a lot of collections, but some collections are spread out. They are not all in one place.

Collaboration: Do you have access to them?

Matthijs: The Archives has good relations with all the people in charge of them.

Bob: Here is another thing. In the Complete Works we will have altogether seven volumes of letters. Some, like the Letters on Yoga, won’t have the questions of the disciples with them. In the future, we want to bring out these letters in their chronological order with the disciple’s questions and comments. Nirodharan has done a good job of that with his own correspondence in two volumes. In the same way there are many other valuable correspondences: Dilip Kumar Roy, for example, and Dr. Naik, whom nobody even knows about—these are major correspondences. We would like to bring out all of them in a question-answer format in the natural day-to-day order, because then you get a feeling for the person, for the difficulties they have, and Sri Aurobindo’s answers take on more texture and appropriateness than when they are divorced from the question or the comment. It is a large work. It will take a long time to do this rightly because we will follow the same process that we have for the Complete Works. Each letter will be read two times carefully.

Matthijs: And it involves a lot of editorial decisions, because for most of the correspondences you cannot simply publish them exactly verbatim as they are.

Bob: You have to take only the relevant part of the question.

Peter: The questions are often terribly long, rambling, and written in bad English, which isn’t surprising because English was not the correspondent’s native tongue.

Matthijs: There are often five or ten pages of question and just one or two words by Sri Aurobindo.

Peter: If you took a good selection of the questions, it might come to 15 or 20 volumes.

Collaboration: So that is what you envision doing?

Bob: Absolutely.

Matthijs: That should be done. But we have first to finish what we are doing.

Bob: In the Bulletin, we now have a policy of editing the correspondences in this way. We are doing Dr. Naik at the moment, his questions with Sri Aurobindo’s answers. But we cannot put much in an issue of the Bulletin. So we will start bringing out the correspondences in separate books, disciple by disciple; but again, it will take years because it is a large work.

Collaboration: What does the Archives do for researchers who come and want to do research on Sri Aurobindo? Do you make things available? Do you have people coming to do research?

Peter: If they come and they want printed material, we will tell them where they can get it. If what they want is material that is archival, we will make it available to them if they are bonafide researchers—usually in the form of xeroxes. Say it is someone researching a particular disciple, we will give them access to that disciple’s papers and correspondences. But often we don’t allow people to work here itself because we don’t have room and it is a bit of a distraction. But we help people if they have a legitimate need. So long as it is material that only we can supply, we’ll help them out.

Bob: You see at the moment, our main work is publishing Sri Aurobindo’s Complete Works. It takes all our time and attention. We try to help people who do come. In editing the works, we are organizing all this information that later will be available on a larger scale to more people. But that organization work takes time and is being done slowly. We’re not in a position where we can advertise ourselves as a service for anything people want to know. Each question takes the time of an important person. Jayantilal used to say that ours is a quiet work, and it is to our benefit that it is quiet so that we can do the foundational work. Then later on we will be able to help more people.