8. TALKS

Those who have read *Talks with Sri Aurobindo* or *Evening Talks* must have realised that Sri Aurobindo was not a world-averse Yogi lost in rapturous silence of the Brahman like the Maharshi, nor talked, when he did, mostly of spiritual matters as did Ramakrishna. In fact our talks covered a vast range of subjects, they had almost a global dimension. We wondered at his enormous knowledge in so many fields. Considering the shortness of the period during which he lived in strenuous contact with the external world, one would be tempted to ask how much of this knowledge was the outcome of his practical worldly experience and how much a result of Yoga? In a letter to me he had said, “Don’t try to throw allopathic dust in my eyes, sir! I have lived a fairly long time and seen something of the world before my retirement and much more after it.” So Yoga must have opened to his vision “thoughts that wander through eternity” and made him the possessor of infinite knowledge, secular as well as spiritual: “World after world bursts on the awakened sight”, he says in one of his sonnets. He has attributed all that he had become to the effect of Yoga. In one of our talks we were staggered to hear him profess that even if he had written ten times more than he had done, his knowledge would have remained unexhausted. And when we murmured in a sad protest that such a vast amount of knowledge would be lost to us, he replied, “Practise first what I have written.” On another occasion when he was asked by a sadhak how he could manage to write on seven subjects at a time in the *Arya*, he replied that he could write seven issues of the *Arya* every month for 70 years and still the knowledge that came from above would hardly be exhausted. The Mother also said that he wrote the *Arya* from a completely silent mind; everything came right down on the typewriter. Otherwise it would not have been possible to write 64 pages every month. Strictly speaking, it was only in the last week of the month that he would get down to writing. Amrita had been asked to remind him about the *Arya*, a week before its time for the Press. When he gave the signal, Sri Aurobindo would start the ‘Herculean labour’ and finish it with utmost ease. Those words from a sonnet of his – “I have drunk the Infinite like a giant's wine”, are a testimony to this bewildering fact.

Now at this fountainhead of wisdom and yogic illumination we had the rare opportunity to drink day and night for a number of years. If we could not get more it was not because he had closed the channel, but rather that our small vessels could not contain more. One can then understand that next to his silent human-divine Presence, his talks were the most coveted feature of our close association with him.

Yet they came so unexpectedly, for Sri Aurobindo, as we had come to know and see him during the Darshan, had succeeded in building in our minds a picture of him high-poised as his *Life Divine*, far-moving as his *Synthesis of Yoga*, unapproachable, except perhaps by the gods, not at all close and intimate like his *Essays on the Gita* or accessible to our mortal longings. Of course, few of us had the extraordinary good fortune of knowing his human side through his inestimable correspondence, on the strength of which I wrote to him, “You thrashed me for calling you grave and austere at the Darshan time. But see, when we go to the Mother, how seraphically she smiles, while your noble Self being near, appears still far away at some Olympian height. It is difficult to discern the gravity or the jollity of a face at such a height. I suppose our conception of the gods was formed from the vision of such a figure.” He replied, “Neither gravity nor jollity, but a large, easy, quiet, amiable condition. The gods can’t be amiable?” And it was this amiable aspect that came to the forefront in our talks. We came to know much later that Sri Aurobindo used to hold ‘table-talks’ in the pre-Ashram
days, with his few young followers. But I believe ours were an advance on those talks by the ease, the informality, the natural diversity and intimacy of communication due to the exceptional circumstances in which they were held. Sri Aurobindo had no need of vocal self-expression, either in our time or before. It is my conviction that the interchange with us was an act of compassion to entertain us in return for the medical attendance we had been called upon to render him. I may add here that any personal service offered to the Divine, however small, brings an ample reward.

When after the first few days of discomfort and submission to medical rigours, he had adjusted himself to the new mode of life, the talks started. At first they were in the form of medical enquiries. Dr. Manilal would come up in the morning (for he was living outside the Ashram compound) and stand with folded hands before Sri Aurobindo who lay in bed. After pranam he would ask, smiling, “How are you, Sir? Did you sleep well?” to which Sri Aurobindo’s answers were genially brief.

These short preambles were soon followed by the cascade. It was evening, about 7 p.m. Our duty being over, Sri Aurobindo was lying down in bed. A dim electric light was on. I had gone out. When I came up after a while, I saw our group sitting on the left side of Sri Aurobindo’s bed, near his feet and some talk was going on, almost in whispers. Sri Aurobindo was the talker. I joined the group at once but could not get very near. All were listening intently; if they did notice my coming, they had no room to spare for me. This was the first time he talked at length. As we were not accustomed to his subdued voice and intonation, we had to strain our ears in order to catch all the words, and yet many of them were lost to me. Several people have asked us about the quality of his voice. Lacking in expressive power for such delicate matters, I am afraid I can't define it or give its exact sound-shade. The nearest characterisation I can hazard is that it was masculine, but soft – some have called it musical – low-pitched, quiet and measured, with a clear English accent. This was my impression formed from a gradual closeness. In her Prayers and Meditations, the Mother describes the voice of the Lord which can apply very well to Sri Aurobindo's. On June 27, 1913, she writes:

“Thy voice is so modest, so impartial, so sublime in its patience and mercy that it does not make itself heard with any authority, any force of will but comes like a cool breeze, sweet and pure, like a crystalline murmur that brings a note of harmony to a discordant concert. Yet, for him who knows how to listen to the note, to breathe that breeze, it holds such treasures of beauty, such a fragrance of pure serenity and noble grandeur, that all foolish illusions vanish or are transformed into a joyful acceptance of the marvellous truth that has been glimpsed.”

It is a great pity that we do not have a tape-recording of his voice. People have charged us with a callous indifference. But then there was no radio, no ceiling-fan and even to take a photograph of the Mother was strictly banned. I am told that when the Mother went out to see our Ashram team playing a volleyball match with an outside team, someone took a photograph of hers and gave it to the local photographer who was known to us, to have it printed. The Mother managed to stop the printing. Besides, who could ever dream that Sri Aurobindo would pass away so suddenly? It was by an unseen dispensation that a few photographs were taken in his last year. We often compared his previous photographs with his present appearance and wished for new ones to be taken and distributed to the sadhaks, instead of the old ones. Once somebody had made paintings of Sri Aurobindo from his old photographs and sent them to him. Looking at them he said, “I look like a criminal! Am I so bad to look at?” But our requests for the new photographs were gently turned down with a humorous (or was it solemn?) reply that only after the descent of the Supermind they could be taken. Henri
Cartier-Bresson's photographs, impressive though they are, are still a poor apology for Sri Aurobindo's real physical appearance. Can they do justice to all that God-like majesty, beauty and serenity? Those who had seen him with his bare shining torso different times in different postures, look at these light replicas and murmur sadly, “Was this the figure that we loved and worshipped?” The Mother showing a painting of Sri Aurobindo to Champaklal asked him his opinion, he kept quiet. She then repeated, “You don't like it?” Then he burst out, “How can I like it, Mother? This is sheer mockery. I won't look at it!” The Mother smiled. But people would perhaps say that something is better than nothing. It is true that but for these last photographs there would have been a great void left in our recollection of Sri Aurobindo.

After the first day, regular talks continued at the same time in the evening. All of us sat huddled together near his bed, Purani sometimes stood at a distance, and the talks rolled on under the dim light. The listening hush was quite often broken by our outbursts of hilarious laughter. We had ample leisure, since all medical duties were over and what remained before us was only his light supper. In the middle of the talks the Mother would sometimes glide in and ask Sri Aurobindo with a smile, “They are making you talk?” The Mother feared that too much talk would put him under an undue strain. At times we got so absorbed in the talks that Sri Aurobindo had to remind us of the Mother's coming and we then quickly regrouped ourselves ready to receive her. She would then insist saying, “Don't move, don't move.” Dr. Manilal's reply was, “No, Mother, we shall now meditate!”

“But if I want to talk?”

“Then we shall talk, Mother.” The ready answer was followed by a burst of laughter. Rarely did she participate in our talks. Once she asked, “What are you laughing about?” Sri Aurobindo replied with a smile, “I am telling them the story of my poet-brother Manmohan.” It was one of the most interesting talks we had!

In the beginning, as I said, Dr. Manilal was the spearhead of the attack. What we did not dare to ask because of our youth, our shyness or even our sophistication, he, our elderly doctor, babble away like a simple child, bluntly and sweetly, and we were greatly rewarded. We were so much charmed by the novelty of the talks that none of us thought of keeping any record. I would make some mental notes and when I visited Dilip's place for tea, pour them out and make everybody roar with laughter. He would regale me with a sumptuous breakfast, in return for the divine ambrosia. After about a fortnight of squandering the precious talks which, had they been noted and published, would have made another volume, I realised my mistake and thought, “Why not keep a record?” But I would debate, “What's the use since they will never be published?” Thus in two minds, I started noting them down in the middle of the night after the work was over or at other odd hours. Quite often my colleagues would help me in rescuing some of the points I had lost, or correcting and adding others. Still almost one third of the talks were not recorded for want of time or sheer laziness. Meanwhile the news had gone abroad that Sri Aurobindo was having talks with us. So people began to waylay or hunt us out for some nectar and our stock went up. Groups were formed, according to the law of sympathy and attraction for hearing the ‘Divine news’. Some approached Dr. Manilal, some Purani some Satyendra and others came to me. Many advised us to keep a diary and others must have suspected that we were doing so already. Sri Aurobindo did not know, at least physically, about it and there was even a fear that if he did, he might stop talking altogether. Now I feel that some Hand must have pushed me over my reluctance and turned out a fairly good record, after all.

With Sri Aurobindo's gradual recovery the time of the talks also changed. They were held mostly during his sponging and later during his bath. As the years passed, the original stream of abundance began to get thinner and thinner till in the last years there was practically a silent attendance on a silent Presence. Either we had exhausted all topics and a satiation had followed and dried up all our inspiration or Sri Aurobindo had withdrawn his inner gesture of
approval. Only when Dr. Manilal arrived from Baroda, the still atmosphere quickened with life for a while but he too would soon lapse into a quiescent mood.

About the range and variety of the talks the readers have now got a fair idea from our books. They show Sri Aurobindo's encyclopaedic knowledge and bear out the truth of his remark that if he wrote all that he knew, it would be ten times more than what he had already written. He had serious or sublime subjects in mind, but I am referring even to ordinary matters of life. Dr. Ramachandra once told me that he had had a racy discussion with the Guru on horse-racing! Much more striking was the ease and freedom in which the talks were held and on either side there was no feeling of constraint or sanctimonious awe putting a check on our impulses. We forgot the sublime Guru-shishya relationship and became long-standing friends. It was quite a different Sri Aurobindo from what he was at other hours of the day. The high, serene and silent snow on the Himalayan peaks had melted down into a quiet and cool gurgling stream. Hold the pure sanctified waters in your hands, sprinkle them over the body, drink them or play with them like a child. How perennially fresh and diversely rich, sparkling always with his ready wit and humour! But the stream flowed, as I said, only at some particular time and not for a long period. Again the grand, serene and silent Presence on the peaks! One could say that the austere “cloak of a reclining God”, the robe of silence had slipped down and brought to our view the body of a human godhead. But he would put on the robe of silence again; yet both the visions had their unfailing charm and grandeur.

The talks of Sri Ramakrishna come naturally to our mind in comparison. Their spirit is perhaps the same, the lightness and vivacity too are there, but his talks were restricted in scope, while all life being yoga for us, no subject was too trivial for our discussions. And in Sri Aurobindo's case always samam brahman, impersonality marked all his utterances, no matter what the subject of the discourse. Nevertheless, the warm touch of personality could always be felt from behind the usual front of impersonality. For instance, though he would, while talking, hardly look at us or address us by our names, for his eyes were cast downwards or looking away in front, still the soft tone of his voice, sparks of personal humour reflected the “sweet rays of a temperate sun”.

I have said so much about his voice, I might as well add a few words about his eyes. Opinions about them vary according to the inner quality of the person who saw them. Sir Edward Baker, Governor of Bengal, archenemy of Sri Aurobindo's fiery nationalism, described them as “the eyes of a madman” when he visited him in Alipore Jail. The English Principal of the Baroda College said, “...There is a mystic fire and light in them. They penetrate into the beyond. If Joan of Arc heard heavenly voices, Aurobindo probably sees heavsly visions.” Upen Banerjee, a close associate of Sri Aurobindo during his revolutionary period, describes his first meeting with him, “That sickly, dark, malaria-afflicted man is Aurobindo? He is our Chief?... My spirit was awfully damped at the sight, but just then he turned to look at me. I don't know how to describe that look. There was a liquid sparkle of amusement in it, but the pupils gave me a sense of fathomless wonder that baffled all analysis. Even today the mystery has not left me.”

Arjava (J. A. Chadwick) remarked, “How beautifully he writes, how crystal clear! Not a trace of haziness anywhere. No abracadabra, wanting to show off and yet how luminous – shedding light without heat – like his eyes!”

I have said that Sri Aurobindo rarely looked into our eyes except at Darshans when, he said, he gave a ‘piercing look’ to everybody. Most often, he was gazing in front or looking down, and seldom were the eyes fully open. During our pranams in his room on our birthdays or on Darshan days, he looked deep and steadily into our eyes. At that time I could mark their colour: it was a dark brown. To see anything beyond the softness and compassion in the expression was not given to me. But once, and once only, I saw a different pair of eyes, and that experience is unforgettable. He had finished lunch and I was attending on him. Just for a
memorable moment, he half-opened his eyes and I saw two deep pools, intensely black, serene, inscrutable and unfathomable. It was as if on a hushed afternoon you entered a dense wood and suddenly came upon a deep pond and saw its still dark waters.

People who read our Correspondence were under the impression that our days bubbled with “jest and jollity, quips and cranks” all the while. In fact, a friend did not believe me when I said that the bubbling lasted only for a short time. Sri Aurobindo was, after all, a Yogi. All who knew him knew that. In one of his letters to Dilip, when Dilip complained that Sri Aurobindo would not laugh or even smile, he replied that since his childhood, he had been estranged from his family and accustomed to live a solitary life. His nature had therefore become reserved, somewhat remote and he felt shy of too much personal emotion. The English racial climate may have, I suppose, added its own large share to it. Moreover, the Yoga he had practised, beginning with the transcendental nirvanic experience, must have crowned the natural disposition. Buddha, I believe, for all his compassion, could not but have been impersonal in his daily communication. This vast impersonality even in personal relations, is it not the basis of his Yoga? I have often wondered what his state of consciousness was, for instance, when he was talking with us or dictating Savitri. Now I have learnt that the three states of consciousness: transcendent, cosmic and individual can operate at the same time. I also used to wonder how he could take interest even in the most trivial, ‘unspiritual’ amusing talk or incidents, and joke with us, say on snoring or baldness! He had found the rasa, the delight of Brahman in everything. So his jokes were never trivial; they could be playful but always had an intellectual element in them.

I have already given some examples of his humour in the previous chapters; let me now quote something to show his light mood. One day suddenly breaking his silence, he addressed Purani and said, “There is something nice for you, Purani.” (For once he used his name!)

Purani: For me?
Sri Aurobindo: Yes. A letter has come from America addressed to Sri Aurobindo Ashram. The writer says, “I have heard that you are a great yoga. I am also a yoga. I have started to predict sporting events. I can go into trance and know everything. If you agree to work in collaboration with me, we will share the profits. Let me know your terms. If you don’t want to take the money yourself, you can give it to the poor. Our collaboration will be a service to yourself, to me and to the poor.” What do you say, Purani? You too can go into trance or send Nirod into trance!

He was by no means a conversationalist as we understand and use the term. Tagore, for example, was one. Those who have heard or talked to Tagore, recall their experience as “great”. When we read his talks, we can well imagine how brilliant he must have been with his rich similes and metaphors, his sparkling wit and banter, the twinkling of his eyes, the rise and fall of his voice and all the other concomitant dramatic gestures so that his personality came in front more than his talks. Sri Aurobindo is quite a different study in perfect contrast. Life here is steady; there are no eddies or whirls, the stream flowing unobtrusively in a quiet rhythm, the jokes uttered rather casually, in an even tone in a typically English fashion, which makes you laugh all the more. Here the personality remained behind and the subject-matter became more prominent.

His talks with Dr. Manilal deserve special notice. The doctor had medical and worldly experience. The Mother considered him a master in his own field. But he still had a child-soul in him and it talked freely with Sri Aurobindo. The Guru with an equal paternal or friendly smile would listen to his prattle. His long rigmarole on Jainism that would bore us, would amuse him and after the doctor had departed, Sri Aurobindo would naively ask Purani how far Manilal’s knowledge of Jainism was sound and dependable. It was most entertaining to
see how Sri Aurobindo used to dodge, tease, play with him, yet obey his medical injunctions! “Oh! Dr. Manilal is coming! I must hang my leg!” he would exclaim and we in turn utter, “You seem to be afraid of Dr. Manilal!” The tone, one would feel, was that of a comrade chatting with another; the doctor's age, position and nature evoked from the Guru a response in tune with them. Sri Aurobindo once remarked that he was very simple and frank like a child.

Throughout our talks extending over many years and to many subjects, I don't remember a single occasion when Sri Aurobindo lost his patience with us. He never refused to answer any question but on the contrary would explain at great length and repeatedly if some points did not enter my head. “Do you understand?” he would ask softly. The tone was always affable. Even when one of us complained that he could not accept his Yoga, he looked into his difficulties and met his objections in a kind, dispassionate manner. Much of this must have been due to the Guru's innate nature and the rest due to Yoga. We have had hot debates among ourselves before him; he listened quietly to our childish vanity and showed our mistakes only when we approached him for his views. If we have not profited as much as we should have by his talks, at least his patient tolerance and indulgence, wideness of outlook and leaven of humour have cast a radiant influence on our souls. As we look back on those days, we hear a sigh in the breeze murmuring, “Those delightful days that are no more!” The nostalgic memory revives at moments when we meet and start talking of those bygone years. Satyendra recalled an incident I had completely forgotten. Once the Mother came to inform Sri Aurobindo that Bhishmadev, a former disciple and an eminent singer of Bengal, was going to sing on the radio, and he very much wanted Sri Aurobindo to hear him. So the radio was brought near and the sponge-bath and the music went on simultaneously. When at the end of Bhishmadev's programme we asked him how he had liked the music, he answered, “Oh, I completely forgot!” We had a good laugh. A similar instance happened in Dilip's case. He had sent the timing of his radio programme from Calcutta and beseeched Sri Aurobindo to hear him. Sri Aurobindo asked Champaklal to remind him of it. Champaklal, probably, did not. When the music was over, he asked Champaklal, “Where is Dilip’s music?” He laughed and said that it was already finished!

Lastly, those who have read Talks with Sri Aurobindo and his Correspondence with me cannot but notice a striking difference between the two in their tone and manner. Though both of them have an air of intimacy and informality, still the correspondence is certainly more free. There he has let himself go, to quote his phrase, whereas in the talks there is a sense of restraint. Is it because of a different set of circumstances and a different milieu? I believe there is something more. Even if I had met him all alone, I don't think he would have been as free in his speech as with his pen. For, his shy and reserved nature would have put some curb on total abandon. Of course, the correspondence was restricted to one person with his own particular interests; the talks covered a larger and more diverse sphere, and there they have an advantage of their own.

Laughter of the Gods

The old idée fixe that Sri Aurobindo was an anchorite who did not know how to smile or laugh is by now dead. A new fixed notion may swing to the other extreme that he smiled or laughed too much for a yogi. But a sensible estimate, after a reading of his letters, talks and creative works, will confirm the view that his Yoga instead of drying up the fountain of laughter made it flow like the Ganges. For his consciousness grew as vast as the universe; it sounded the uttermost depths and heights of existence. He read the “wonder-book of Common things” as well as the supernal mysteries of God and found the very rasa which is
at the root of things. His love and compassion flowed towards all men and creatures like a life-giving ocean. He said in one of his letters:

“It is only divine Love which can bear the burden I have to bear, that all have to bear who have sacrificed everything else to the one aim of uplifting earth out of its darkness towards the Divine. The Gallio-like ‘Je m'en fiche’-ism (I do not care) would not carry me one step; it would certainly not be divine. It is quite another thing that enables me to walk unweeping and unlamenting towards the goal.”

In his own Ashram which is composed, on the one hand, of unlettered villagers and, on the other, of the intellectual élite, with what patience and forbearance, love and sympathy he, like a grand patriarch, guided and led us all towards the goal! Humour that springs from a heart of sympathy made him smile at our follies and foibles and the numerous eccentricities of our human nature. The readers of *Talks with Sri Aurobindo* must have observed how Sri Aurobindo threw aside his mantle of gravity and enjoyed with us pure fun and frolic, as if we had been his close playmates. In the preceding chapter we have already touched upon one instance. In the period after the accident to his right leg, when he failed to carry out Dr. Manilal's instructions about hanging the leg, he would exclaim as if out of fear, “Oh, Manilal is coming, I must hang my leg.” And one of us, piqued by his fear, would remark, “Sir, you seem to be afraid of Dr. Manilal.” When Manilal arrived and enquired about the leg, he replied, “The leg is still hanging.”

Yogis and great men there were, who used to joke with their disciples and friends; but it seems to me that there was always a barrier of awe and reverence between them. And though Sri Aurobindo allowed us to forget that and we cut jokes with him on equal terms, the sense of his being our Guru was there.

At certain places in this book, I have given some indication of his sense of humour. Here I shall reveal it further by citing instances from several sources and add my little bit to the gaiety of nations. The readers will also notice how any circumstance or situation could trigger off his comic Muse either in the form of sustained volleys or quick sparkling shots.

An example of pure fun:

Sri Aurobindo was lying on the bed. We were talking in whispers among ourselves. Champaklal who had been trying to suppress his laughter let go suddenly and had to run away from the room. Sri Aurobindo, looking at us, said, “What divine descent was it?” I replied, checking my mirth, “Champaklal burst into laughter.”

Sri Aurobindo: “Oh, so it was Vishnu's Ananda that descended!”
Later on, Champaklal said, “My eyes always remain watery.”
Sri Aurobindo: “Virgil had eyes like that, while Horace used to breathe hard. Once Mycaenas, the great patron of literature in the reign of Augustus Caesar, was sitting between the two poets and remarked, ‘I am sitting between sighs and tears.’”

Addressing Dr. Manilal with whom he was very free during the talks, Sri Aurobindo said, “Your mention of bribe and small amount makes me think of X. He said that people simply thrust the money on him and he couldn't but accept it. ‘After all, it is a small bribe,’ he argued. I was then reminded of the maidservant's story. She got an illegitimate child. The mistress of the house was very angry and rebuked her severely for the fault. She replied, ‘But, oh madam, it is such a small one!’”

A sadhak, while meditating, saw a beautiful woman looking at him with plaintive eyes. He asked Sri Aurobindo about the meaning of the vision. Sri Aurobindo wrote back, “This is

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1 *Letters on Himself and the Ashram*, p.46
I wrote about a patient, “Most of the trouble is in the abduction of the hip joint... I will take him soon to Philaire [a French Surgeon].”

Sri Aurobindo: Abduction of a joint, sir? What's this flagrant immorality? What happens to the joint when it is abducted? And what about the two colliding bones? Part of the abduction? Right. Abduct him to Philaire.

I wrote again: X had irregularity in her periods caused by physical and mental strain due to poetry.

Sri Aurobindo: Good Lord! If poetry is to be the parent of irregular menses!

I protested: It is not poetry, but physical and mental strain, Sir! Coming here, going there with the poem to send it to you, etc., etc. Not enough to cause strain?

Sri Aurobindo: You relieve me! I was thinking if poetry could be the parent of i.m., what it would do to you and Dilip and Nishikanto.

Moral purists, I am afraid, will burn with a righteous indignation at such uninhibited levity.

Once I asked him: Please give me some precise practical suggestions on the art of healing. How to bring down the Force?

He answered: My God, man! I am not a doctor. How? is there a how? You call, you open, it comes (after a time). Or, You don't call, you open, it comes. Or, You call, you don't open, it doesn't come. Three possibilities. But how – ? Well, God he knows or perhaps he doesn't.

In my medical report I wrote: No medical cases to report today.

Sri Aurobindo: Hello! Golden Age come or what? No – for R.B.'s pain is kicking cheerfully again. It is telling her, “Your Nirod's potion and things indeed! I just went because I took the fancy. I go when I like, I come when I like. Doctors – pooh!"

Myself: Yesterday J's finger was incised prematurely but there was hardly any pus. Today the swelling persists.

Sri Aurobindo: Mother suggests hot water 1 part peroxide, 3 parts water and dipping the finger for 15 minutes. Some of these things are cured by that — it ought really to be done immediately, but even now it may be effective.

Myself: Why, that is almost exactly what we have advised him to do from the very start, only peroxide was not given.

Sri Aurobindo: You are taking daily almost exactly the same thing as Anglo-Indians take in their clubs i.e. a peg. Only brandy and soda are not there – but the water is.

Myself: Couldn't touch the patient without making her shed tears. The ladies are thinking, “What heartless brutes these doctors are!”

Sri Aurobindo: Much safer than if they think, “What dears these doctors are, darlings, angels!”

Myself: I am plunged in a sea of dryness and I am terribly thirsty for something. Along with it waves of old desire. Any handy remedy?

Sri Aurobindo: Eucharistic injection from above, purgative rejection below; liquid diet, psychic fruit juice, milk of the spirit.

Myself: For this yoga one must have the heart of a lion, the mind of a Sri Aurobindo, the vital of a Napoleon.
Sri Aurobindo: Good Lord! Then I am off the list of the candidates – for I have neither the heart of a lion nor the vital of Napoleon.

Myself: What will be the nature of the physical transformation? Change of pigment? Mongolian features into Aryo-Greek? Bald head into luxuriant growth? Old men into Gods of eternal youth?

Sri Aurobindo: Why not seven tails with an eighth on the head – everybody different colours, blue, magenta, indigo, green, scarlet, etc.; hair luxuriant but vermilion and flying erect skywards; other details to match? Amen!

Now you can't surely say that all your points have not been cleared?

Myself: Again a blessed boil inside the left nostril – painful, feverish. A dose of Force, please.

Sri Aurobindo: As the modernist poet says

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{O blessed blessed boil within the nostril,} \\
& \text{How with pure pleasure dost thou make thy boss thrill!} \\
& \text{He sings of thee with sobbing trill and cross trill,} \\
& \text{O blessed, blessed boil within the nostril.} \\
\end{align*}
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I hope this stotra will propitiate the boil and make it disappear, satisfied.

I complained: Inspiration is very wanton in its nature. I know nothing of its reason of arrival and departure. It has no railway time-table.

Sri Aurobindo: No reason. Only unreason or super-reason. Keep your end up and it will arrive again, and some day perhaps after jack-in-the-boxing like that sufficiently, one day it will sit down and say, “Here I am for good. Send for the priest and let us be married.” With these things that is the law and the rule and the reason and rhyme of it and everything.

Myself: The result of the last Darshan was disturbing in some quarters. Difficulties of individual nature rushing up?

Sri Aurobindo: Individual and general. The subconscient, sir, the subconscient. Brilliant irruptions of the subconscient Brahman into the dullness of the ordinary life.

Talking about astrology, Dr; Manilal said, “I met an astrologer who was after money. But he didn't know I was a hard master to deal with.” Pat came Sri Aurobindo's answer, “He would have to propitiate Saturn before coming to you.” A gentle hit at Manilal's parsimony!

“But there was another astrologer,” Manilal added, “a good man who is dead.”

Sri Aurobindo: And this is a bad man who is alive?

Satyendra: The psychic of the Divine is like a dictator.

Sri Aurobindo: It is more like a constitutional monarch who allows you to do whatever you like.

Satyendra: But it doesn't come out.

Sri Aurobindo: Because it waits for the consent of all the members of the cabinet.

Last example which can be taken as a piece of humour or as a serious statement.

Kalyan, a sadhak, offered to Sri Aurobindo the skin of the first tiger he shot, remarking to me, “Please tell the Lord that it is without the tiger's skull. So, there is no chance of his stumbling over it at all.” The Master replied with a smile, “Very well, it will be placed under my feet at Darshan.” Ever since it was always placed under his feet.
I think I can now close this chapter with the sense of ‘something done’. Here is what Sri Aurobindo has to say about the sense of humour: “Sense of humour? It is the salt of existence. Without it the world would have got utterly out of balance – it is unbalanced enough already – and rushed to blazes long ago.”

Correspondence and Interviews

Correspondence of Sri Aurobindo with the disciples stopped to all intents and purposes as a consequence of his accident and it appeared that there was no chance of its resumption. Just as he would have no revival of the eight or nine hours’ Darshan of the old days, so no more of the nine hours of correspondence. Besides, it had outlived its need. But as he began to recover and resumed work, correspondence with him took another form. People began to send verbal enquiries or questions or even letters through anyone of us who was in sympathy with them. We also would gladly carry the queries and messages, as much for our own interest as for the sake of the communicants, since they would serve to create an opening for some talk with him on intellectual questions, life-problems, dream-experiences, etc. Sri Aurobindo would very often satisfy them with a generous response or lend spiritual help to their sadhana or worldly difficulties. People who had no connection with us also approached him for guidance. A few instances of this kind have been recorded in Talks with Sri Aurobindo. And quite a number of our own people, inmates or visitors, who never hoped to reach Sri Aurobindo through external means, had thus the ‘divine grace’, as they called it, to be heard by the Lord.

The self-imposed seclusion was partially broken by the hand of Fate. There was the case of a visitor-friend who was unjustly involved in a criminal case and detained in jail. It was a serious case, indeed. Sri Aurobindo gave specific instructions on many legal points, backed undoubtedly by his spiritual Force, till it ended with the release of the accused. A Maharani, also involved in some legal suits, prayed to him for help. Then during the Hindu-Moslem riot in Calcutta constant frantic appeals were coming to him seeking advice, guidance, succour. When the Hindus were getting beaten in the first few days, Sri Aurobindo remarked, “Why don't the Hindus strike?” The very next day the scene changed; there was a tremendous counter-move. Lest people should be shocked to hear Sri Aurobindo advising violence, I refer them to Essays on the Gita where he discusses this question. Here I shall quote something from my correspondence. He says, “There is a truth in Ahimsa, there is a truth in Destruction also.... Non-violence is better than violence as a rule, and still sometimes violence may be the right thing....”

All the communications were, however, mostly made orally and did not interfere with Sri Aurobindo's personal work. But gradually correspondence of another sort began to demand his attention. I mean writings on various aspects of his work, either by sadhaks, visitors or outsiders, were sent to him for approval, comment or suggestion, such as Prof. Sisir Maitra's series of articles, Prof. Haridas Chowdhury's thesis on his philosophy, Prof. Sisir Mitra's book on history, books by Prof. Langley, Morwenna Donnelly, Prof. Monod-Herzen, Dr. Srinivas Iyengar, and Lizelle Raymond on Sister Nivedita, to mention a few. In the last three books Sri Aurobindo made extensive additions and changes. Even casual articles from young students were read and received encouragement from him. Arabinda Basu was one of these writers. Poems written by sadhaks, for instance, Dilip, Amal Kiran (K. D. Sethna), Nishikanto, Pujalal and Tehmi, or a Goan poet, Prof. Menezies, were also read out. Then came the journals, The Advent and Mother India, the latter particularly, being a semi-political fortnightly, needed his sanction before the matter could be published. Most of the editorial articles of Mother

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2 Letters on Yoga – IV, p.174
India written by Amal Kiran were found impeccable. But on a few occasions small but significant changes were telegraphically made. Sri Aurobindo’s famous message on Korea with its prediction of Stalinist communism’s designs on South East Asia and India through Tibet, was originally sent in private to Amal Kiran for his guidance. One of the editorials was based on it. Sri Aurobindo declared privately that Mother India was his paper. When the Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education was launched, the Mother wanted to initiate it with an article from Sri Aurobindo. Some days passed. She asked him if he had started writing it. He answered with a smile, “No.” After a few days, she reminded him of the urgency. Then he began dictating on the value of sports and physical gymnastics. Quite a series commenced and the most memorable of the lot was the article “The Divine Body”. It was a long piece and took more than a week, since we daily had just about an hour to spare. As he was dictating, I marvelled at so much knowledge of Ancient Greece and Ancient India stored up somewhere in his superconscious memory and now pouring down at his command in a smooth flow. No notes were consulted, no books were needed, yet after a lapse of so many decades everything was fresh, spontaneous and recalled in vivid detail! This article, like his others, was then read out to the Mother in front of Sri Aurobindo. She exclaimed, “Magnificent!” Sri Aurobindo simply smiled. All of them have appeared in book-form called The Supramental Manifestation upon Earth.

About some of the articles by others which were being read out to him, he asked, “Have you not read them before?” “No!” I replied. He repeated, “Are you sure?” “How could I? I received them only yesterday,” I answered. “Very strange!” He added, “They seem so familiar, as if I had heard them already.” He appeared much intrigued by this phenomenon and I wonder if he found an explanation of the mystery. Some articles by a former sadhak were filled with so many quotations from Sri Aurobindo’s writings that I muttered my protest, “There is hardly anything here except quotations.” He smiled and answered, “It doesn’t matter.” Once he asked me about a long abstruse article, “Probability in Micro-Physics”, written by Amal. It was read out to Sri Aurobindo shortly before he passed away. He asked me, “Do you understand anything of it?” I said, “No!” He smiled and said, “Neither do I.”

Readings and dictated correspondence, as I have stated before, began to swell in volume and absorbed much of his limited time. Consequently the revision of Savitri suffered and had to be, shelved again and again till one day he declared, “My main work is being neglected.”

Dilip’s was a special case. Sri Aurobindo’s accident had cut off all connection with him and Dilip suffered a lot. After some time, Sri Aurobindo made an exception and maintained correspondence with him almost until his withdrawal from his body. He even granted him an interview. Amal who was living in Bombay at the time was also an exception. Particularly important were the long answers (sometimes 24 typed sheets) Sri Aurobindo dictated to his questions on topics like “Greatness and Beauty in Poetry” as well as the correspondence centering on Savitri. All these constituted the last writings dictated by him. They are a work apart and form a permanent contribution to our appreciation of mystic poetry in general and Savitri in particular. It seemed to me that he did this lengthy work with much zest and was glad to have an opportunity to shed some light on his unique poem for its proper understanding in the future. Again, I would gape in wonder at his surprisingly vast knowledge.

And this lengthy communication required very little change. The exchanges between the Master and the disciple went off and on for two years through me and one cannot be too thankful to the disciple for drawing out the Master on his own creation. Another important Work that was carried on for some time with Purani was on the Vedas about which I have written in the chapter Attendants.

Work of a different sort that did not interfere with his regular schedule was to correct various factual errors perpetrated by his biographers. Quite a number of people from outside
started writing in English and Bengali about his life. One biography that gained some popularity in Bengal and drew public attention was by a Bengali littérateur Shri Girija Shankar Roy Chowdhury. He was reputed to be a scholar and his articles were coming out in the well-known Bengali journal *Udbodhan*. But many of the facts he had collected and collated from heterogenous sources were entirely baseless and therefore the conclusions he had drawn from them wrong and fanciful. He took them for granted, without caring in the least to refer to Sri Aurobindo for verification. Since he was a man of some consequence, many of his articles were read before Sri Aurobindo who was amazed to find his erudition so muddled, and imagination so fantastic that he asked Purani to compile a sort of factual biography where only the facts of his life would be stated with precise dates and exact descriptions. Both, the Master and the disciple in collaboration, established on a sure and authentic foundation all the main incidents of his life and corrected those that passed into currency on the authority of the biographers. These are given at the end of Purani’s book, *The Life of Sri Aurobindo*. Sri Aurobindo was very much amused at the fanciful hypothesis drawn from his early love poems that he must have fallen in love more than once while in England! We could hardly control our laughter. Because of such inaccuracies, twisting of facts, colourful and hasty conclusions indulged in quite often by biographers, Sri Aurobindo discouraged the sadhaks from writing about his life since he did not “want to be murdered by his own disciples in cold print”. The greatest drawback of Girija Shankar's book is that he does not seem to be an impersonal seeker of the truth about Sri Aurobindo's life. He was already a partisan even when he began his so-called biography.

Among the interviews granted to public figures by Sri Aurobindo the first one was in September 1947, followed by a few others at a later date. It was a great concession on his part to break his self-imposed seclusion. A prominent French politician Maurice Schumann was deputed by the French Government as the leader of a cultural mission to see Sri Aurobindo and pay him homage from the French Government and to propose to set up at Pondicherry an institute for research and study of Indian and European cultures with Sri Aurobindo as its head. I was happily surprised to hear this great news, great in the sense that Sri Aurobindo had at all consented to the proposal, for I hailed it as an indication of his future public appearance. The fact that it came on the heels of India's Independence pointed to her role as a dominant power in the comity of nations, as envisaged by Sri Aurobindo. It seems Sri Aurobindo asked the Mother in what language he should speak to the delegates. The Mother replied, “Why, in French! You know French.” Sri Aurobindo protested, “No, no! I can’t speak in French.” The Mother, Sri Aurobindo and the French delegates were closeted in Sri Aurobindo's room and we don't know what passed among them.

The second interview was with Sir C. R. Reddy, on December 11, 1948, one year after India's liberation, when he came to offer Sri Aurobindo, on behalf of the Andhra University, the National Prize for the humanities. On this occasion Sri Aurobindo gave a message to the Andhra University “re-emphasizing the unique and true role of resurgent India!” I may quote here the last few lines to show how India was always in the forefront of his consciousness:

“.... It would be a tragic irony of fate if India were to throw away her spiritual heritage at the very moment when in the rest of the world there is more and more a turning towards her for spiritual help and a saving Light. This must not and will not surely happen; but it cannot be said that the danger is not there.... No doubt we will win through, but we must not disguise from ourselves the fact that after these long years of subjection and its cramping and impairing effects, a great inner as well as outer liberation and change, a vast inner and outer progress is needed if we are to fulfil India’s true destiny.”

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3 *Autobiographical Notes and Other Writings of Historical Interest*, p.504
The next interview was with K. M. Munshi in April 1950. In previous years Sri Aurobindo had often mentioned Munshi in our talks. After the interview Munshi said, “A deep light of knowledge and wisdom shone in his eyes. The wide calm of the spirit appeared to have converted the whole personality into the radiant Presence of one who shone with the light of Consciousness. He was the absolute integration of personality, the Central Idea in Aryan Culture materialised in human shape, one of the greatest architects of creative life.”

At another place, Munshi writes:

“When I visited Sri Aurobindo in 1950, after a lapse of more than forty years, I saw before me a being completely transformed, radiant, blissful, enveloped in an atmosphere of godlike calm. He spoke in a low, clear voice, which stirred the depths of my being. I talked to him of my spiritual needs. The sage replied: ‘...I wrote to you that I would help you and in my own way I am helping you.... I will watch over your progress.’

Then we discussed Indian culture. I said: ‘The younger generation is being fed on theories and beliefs which are undermining the higher life of India.’ The Master replied: ‘You must overcome this lack of faith. Rest assured that our culture cannot be undermined. This is only a passing phase.’ Then the Mahayogi sprang a surprise on me. ‘When do you expect India to be united?’ he asked. I was taken aback. I explained to him how our leaders had agreed to partition. I then said: ‘So far as the present generation of politicians is concerned I cannot think of any time when the two countries – India and Pakistan – can be united.’ Sri Aurobindo smiled and averred: ‘India will be reunited. I see it clearly.’

Was it an opinion? Was it a clear perception? I shook my head in doubt and asked how India could be reunited. In two short sentences the god-man described what Pakistan stood for and indicated how the two countries could come together.”

Munshi was one of the prominent leaders of India at that time. He was to observe later: “He (Sri Aurobindo) saw into the heart of things. His perception of the political situation in India was always unerring. When he world war came in 1939 it was he of the unerring eye who said that the triumph of England and France was the triumph of the divine forces over the demoniac forces. He spoke again when Sir Stafford Cripps came with his first proposal. He said, ‘India should accept it.’ We rejected the advice... but today we realise that if the first proposal had been accepted, there would have been no partition, no refugees, and no Kashmir problem.”

There was another interview in 1950 with the Maharaja of Bhavanagar who was then Governor of Madras. Sri Aurobindo was not well at that time. Still, he did not cancel the interview. I had the impression that he would have been willing to see other people too if they had so desired and would have conferred his blessings on them.

Then there were the long series of regular interviews with Surendra Mohan Ghose extending over some years up to even a few months before Sri Aurobindo's withdrawal. I should not call them interviews, for he was Sri Aurobindo's political follower in the early days, and later his disciple, and a prominent political leader of Bengal. Whenever he visited the Ashram, he had meetings with the Master to get guidance in his political work which he had accepted as his work. Sri Aurobindo used him as his instrument and said to us, “He is my man.” In the talks he gave to the students of our Centre of Education, Surendra Mohan partially disclosed the various issues he had discussed with him. They were mostly international, national and provincial situations as well as spiritual matters. They constitute a

4  Bhavan's Journal, December 26, 1971
very illuminating document testifying to Sri Aurobindo's external intervention in politics, besides his occult action. I often used to see Surendra Mohan in advance to get current news and Sri Aurobindo would ask, “What does Surendra Mohan say?”

Let me quote an instance to illustrate how Yogis have more insight into politics than politicians themselves. Surendra Mohan writes, “When I came here in October or November 1949, he asked me, ‘Why have you not asked me anything about the communal situation in Bengal?’ ‘I said, ‘There is nothing to report, it is all very quiet.’ ‘No, no, be careful. Something may happen.’ And something terrible did happen – the communal killings.” Yet, not even great leaders paid any heed to it; they thought it impossible even when Surendra Mohan apprised them of Sri Aurobindo's warning. Sri Aurobindo predicted also “the Russo-Chinese rift and the disintegration of China one day”.

We ridicule the idea of Yogis having any knowledge of affairs outside their own ‘limited’ spiritual field. Sri Aurobindo's intervention during the Cripps' Proposals was stigmatised as such an ignorant and illegitimate interference. More than once he demonstrated how false this notion is. Not only are Yogis aware of world affairs, but those who ordinarily claim cognizance of them are actually ignorant and incompetent. For, according to Sri Aurobindo, unless one knows the domain of the Spirit, one's knowledge of the world remains incomplete.

The Mother too gives directions to those who seek for them; whether they listen to them or not is their affair. Quite often they come to grief if they do not. Yet, are not Yogis supposed to have trikāla drsti?

Apropos of the integration of French India and the other French possessions with India, Surendra Mohan writes: “...All of us had to suffer for not having listened to Sri Aurobindo's direction or advice. He sent me back saying, ‘Go and tell Gandhi, Nehru, Maulana, Sardar and Rajendra Prasad that it is for the good of India and ultimately for the good of the world that they should act on these lines and here is an opportunity I am giving them, let them accept and work on it.’ I went to Delhi — there was a meeting of the Working Committee of the Congress, everybody said, ‘A very good thing, very good,’ but it was never implemented.... The draft which Sri Aurobindo had made about the integration was on this basis that all the French possessions should immediately merge with India, with a right for Pondicherry to maintain its cultural contact with France. Because we did not implement it, a serious problem arose afterwards. To solve it I was again asked to go to Pondicherry after Sri Aurobindo had passed away in 1950.” And with the Mother's help and intervention the whole plan of integration with India was finalised here. Yet the Mother was not at all willing at first to meddle in politics; she said she was not interested in it. Political problems were Sri Aurobindo's field. When Surendra Mohan asked for an interview with her, she enquired, “Is he interested in seeing me?” The interview granted, he pressed upon the Mother to take up Sri Aurobindo's cause and won his case.

I have purposely given long quotations in order to dispel our ignorant notions that Yogis live in a rarefied atmosphere of the Spirit and are indifferent to what passes on this plane of Matter; we forget that Spirit and Matter are two ends of existence. I shall give another minor, even humorous, instance of Matter's reality to Sri Aurobindo the Yogi, the poet and the philosopher. Sri Aurobindo was taking his meal, the Mother was serving him and we were standing nearby. She said, “X promised to offer us a big sum, but he has given only Rs.100 with a promise that the rest will follow. Shall we accept or refuse, Lord?” Sri Aurobindo quietly replied “Accept it and hope for the best.” All of us, including the Mother, burst out laughing.

Another interview with Sri Aurobindo, which Surendra Mohan almost succeeded in bringing about, but which did not materialise, was with Mahatma Gandhi, in spite of both the parties' willingness to meet. Sri Aurobindo said, “He can come now. You may tell him this.” Fate stepped in and foiled what could have been a momentous meeting!
Apart from these discussions on politics in which Sri Aurobindo gave a prophetic warning about China's intention and about the Hindu-Moslem situation in Bengal, Surendra Mohan speaks of some astrological reading regarding Sri Aurobindo, which vitally concerned us. According to Bhrigu astrology, he says, Sri Aurobindo after his 78th year, would develop a loathing towards his body and then would leave it; otherwise death was in his control, he was such a great Yogi.... It was also mentioned there that the Mother or he himself could perform a particular yajña, a sacrificial ceremony following elaborate instructions and repeating certain mantras. On hearing this Surendra Mohan immediately came here and informed the Mother about it. When Sri Aurobindo heard of it, he consoled him saying, “Don't worry.” The Mother asked him to send a copy of those instructions but due to some misunderstanding they arrived too late to be of any possible use. Now, this reading took place probably in October 1950. I remember very well the Mother having a talk with Sri Aurobindo on this point. That the reading was unhappily true has been borne out by later developments. Sri Aurobindo's answer to Surendra Mohan was equivocal; we now know that he had already decided to leave a year before. Had the instructions arrived earlier and the yajña been performed, it is still improbable that Sri Aurobindo would have changed his decision. The whole thing still remains a baffling mystery. We can only quote the Mother's words on the subject, uttered on 28.12.50: “Our Lord has sacrificed himself totally for us.... He was not compelled to leave his body, he chose to do so for reasons so sublime that they are beyond the reach of human mentality.... And when one cannot understand, the only thing is to keep a respectful silence.” Another utterance on 18.1.51: “We stand in the Presence of Him who has sacrificed his physical life in order to help more fully his work of transformation. He is always with us, aware of what we are doing, of all our thoughts, of all our feelings and all our actions.”

Surendra Mohan avers that this is very true in his case. He sees his Presence, and gets his guidance whenever he calls it.