Sometimes an unexpected difficulty brings about a new positive growth. The creation of our School is one such story. During the Second World War when the Imperial Japanese Army Air Force began bombing Calcutta, some devotees who were living in Bengal, fearing for the safety of their children, wrote to the Mother asking her if they could send them to the Ashram. This request was something unusual and unprecedented as there had been only a few children in the Ashram before this. Naturally, the Mother accepted them.

Till then the Ashram had been a place of very intense spiritual practice within a dedicated group of sadhaks and sadhikas. So the arrival of children and families completely changed the way the community lived and it changed the nature of the Ashram forever. Once the Mother found herself with this group of children under her care she felt that the inevitable next step was to give them a good education. So she took permission of the French Government and opened the Ashram School. It happened to be December 2nd, 1943.

It seems it took the Mother about a year to put together the resources to open the School. The property which was bought to house the School was what has now become the bodybuilding gym in the Playground. The name of the School when it was opened in 1943 was “l’École de Sri Aurobindo Ashram” and Pavitra-da was the “Directeur”. There were about 38 children. Four batches were created out of the group of children of different age-groups who were under the Mother’s care. These became the first classes. As they grew older, new levels were added to the School; but for some years the children were grouped according to their capacity for each subject rather than being grouped according to age.
In 1945, the Physical Education section started, headed by Pranab-da. The physical education programme included the adults of the Ashram too and in this way it grew and developed as something that was independent of the School and has remained so. The interesting thing was that in the beginning children and adults competed together and later gradually the competitions were organised according to age-groups. The physical education programme became more and more complex and comprehensive with time.

In 1945 another old house which was connected to the then School building, and which is the northern part of today’s Playground, was offered to the Mother to be made into the first boarding. It was called “Dortoir” and all the children whose parents were not living in Pondicherry lived in that boarding. The boys were downstairs and the girls were upstairs. Two Parsi ladies, Gulben and Shireenben, were given the responsibility of looking after them.

In this way the School, the Playground and the only Boarding were all in the same place. Some years later the performance of the School’s anniversary was also held on a temporary stage that was erected on the western side of the Playground, which was dismantled when the programme was over.

**1950s – YEARS OF GROWTH**

Seven years after the School had started, Sri Aurobindo left his body in 1950. At that point the Mother thought that the best memorial to him would be a university. The project of starting a university had already been discussed with Sri Aurobindo when the then French governor François Baron and Mr. Maurice Schumann had met him. This happened soon after the independence of India from the British and the French knew that sooner or later they would have to move out of Pondicherry and were interested in making the city “a meeting place between France and India”. It is reported that Sri Aurobindo also suggested establishing a university where pupils from all over the world could come to study Indian culture.

The first students of the School in what is now the Playground. The day began with a prayer.
A few months after Sri Aurobindo left his body, on 24th and 25th April 1951, the Sri Aurobindo Memorial Convention was held to announce the intention of starting a university. The Mother invited eminent citizens and scholars to attend. Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee presided over the convention. The Mother opened the convention with the following words:

“Sri Aurobindo is present in our midst, and with all the power of his creative genius he presides over the formation of the University Centre which for years he considered as one of the best means of preparing the future humanity to receive the supramental light that will transform the élite of today into a new race manifesting upon earth the new light and force and life.

In his name I open today this convention meeting here with the purpose of realising one of his most cherished ideals.”

Plans started being drawn up for the Sri Aurobindo International University Centre. A new property was bought for the centre. On 6th January 1952 the School section of the University centre was inaugurated by the Mother by cutting a ribbon (captured in the well-known photo). Classes moved from the Playground to where the School is now. However, at that time, the area that the School occupied was only the southern half of the whole block, what we now know as the teachers’ room block and the part which extends from the south-eastern gate. A new plaque was put up and the name of the School at that point was changed to “Sri Aurobindo International University Centre”. The University Centre also got its own symbol.

The School building has undergone a lot of changes and it is difficult to describe how it was at that time and how it evolved. Just as the Ashram Main Building is made up of several smaller properties which were bought one after the other and joined together, so too the School which is now the entire block was made up of four separate houses and their gardens.

The part which is now on the north-western side, where the younger children have their classes and where there is the soup varendah, was a separate house and it was already being used as a residence for Ashramites. The ground floor of that house was where the flower service used to be and the first floor was the residence of sadhikas. When the School moved into its new and present location, there was a wall where the stage is located now and it divided the School from what was there to the northern side. There are many photos of the Mother where we can see her distributing prizes or watching cultural programmes in front of that wall.

The East Wing and the West Wing were open
terraces and these were converted into rooms with windows on all sides. There was no Hall of Harmony at that time and a large terrace separated the “Teachers’ Room block” from the “Sisir-da’s Room” block. Very soon the rooms of the first floor of the south-eastern block became the music and dance sections and the other half became the Library, looked after by Medhananda.

The 1950s was a period of expansion for the School. A steady stream of students continued to come to join the School. One by one, new hostels were opened for them. The 1950s saw the acquisition of the land for the Sportsground and its transformation into a proper ground for athletics and field games. In 1956 the swimming pool was ready for use. The same year the Theatre Hall was also constructed and the Science Laboratory was set up. The year of the Supramental descent brought a new level of accomplishment in the Mother’s efforts at making the School a unique institution.

The growth continued steadily and the Library moved to where it is now. The Kindergarten and Primary sections moved to Delafon House. Tanmaya-da and Padma arrived and started new

THE PRIMARY SECTION

After the School moved to its present premises, the classes for very small children were first held there and in 1953 moved to Delafon. A sadhak named Pran-bhai was given charge of the Kindergarten and the primary section. A few years later, Padma, a lady from Switzerland, joined the teaching staff. She, like Pran-bhai, was trained in the Montessori system. She worked by taking instructions from the Mother on every detail. The other teachers who worked with her learnt from her. Padma herself invented many games so that children could learn as they played. As the number of children grew, the need for a separate place for the Kindergarten was felt, so in 1963 the youngest children moved to where they are now.
experiments and new methods of teaching under the guidance of the Mother.

Something else also happened in the mid-1950s that gave another turning point to the School. The French decided to leave Pondicherry and the process of the integration with India started. But it wasn’t until 1962 that Pondicherry actually became a part of the Indian Union. This fact, that Pondicherry was Indian territory and not a town ruled by the French, changed something in the way the people saw themselves and their institutions.

In 1959, the word “University” was dropped due to technical reasons, as we did not fulfil the Government criteria of a university. The centre then became “Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education”. Meanwhile Kireet-bhai and Joshi-bhai of the Lab were asked by the Mother to reorganise the classes and the method of teaching etc. Kireet-bhai was good at organisation and his skills were very useful at this juncture when the number of students continued to grow.

The children with whom the School had started
had grown up and to answer to their needs the Higher Course had been started. Once again teachers were found among the sadhaks and sadhikas of the Ashram. Whatever was their capacity they offered to the Mother. When these older students finished their studies they were absorbed into the Ashram. Some of them became teachers in their turn.

It was around the early-1980s that the western instrumental music classes became organised and regular. Probably before that the only regular instrument classes were Tarun-da’s tabla class and the sitar classes by Romen-da which followed the Indian classical style. Since then many more instruments and teachers have been added.

**ARTISTIC ACTIVITIES**

In the early years of the School, the children learnt drawing and painting from accomplished artists such as Sanjiban-da, Jayantilal-da and Krishnalal-ji.

In 1970 or 71 the Art Room in the School was built and Amita-di was in charge of it. She created a very beautiful space with art books and art material and handmade papers. Art teachers had a place where they could teach and the unfinished works of the students could be kept there for them to continue working on when they came back the following week. The small room on the left was used for exhibiting paintings and photos. Some older students went to learn to draw and paint at the Art Gallery which was looked after by Krishnalal-ji.

In the 1970s a large number of children were taught to paint on fabric. Embroidery was also a hugely popular activity. Classes were held in the afternoons in one of the ground floor rooms of Delafon. There were students of all age groups and there were many boys also who learnt embroidery. In the early years the students offered what they had painted or embroidered to the Mother on their birthdays. All the work produced in these classes was sent to the Embroidery Department and sold there. During the exhibitions held before the February and August Darshans, there was and still is a special section where the students’ works are displayed.
**HOLIDAYS**

To begin with, the School remained closed only for a week. This grew to two weeks to prepare for the 1st and 2nd December programmes. Finally the holidays were extended to a month and a half.

Until 1973, as long as the Mother was in her physical body, the children of the boardings mostly stayed in Pondicherry because the Mother disapproved of children going out. Special permission had to be taken from her to go out. A few did go but it was not the norm. But after the Mother’s passing, the children began to go out regularly during the holidays.

Since there were so many children and the 2nd December or 1st December practice was only in the late afternoon, the Physical Education Department organized a series of competitions. They included board games such as chess, carrom and Chinese checkers but also creative writing, embroidery, clay modelling and painting.

Finding teachers for the School and the Higher Course had one difficulty: the teacher had to be in harmony with the thought of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. So they were found from among those who were already there in the Ashram or among the new ones who joined the Ashram or among the devotees who were living in Pondicherry and wanted to offer their services. This aspect was more important than their qualification.

By the end of the 1950s the entire institution had reached a certain level of excellence. There was a school, a science laboratory, several grounds for sports, a swimming pool, a theatre, a special space for dance and music, an art gallery, an exhibition hall, regular film shows, a good health service. This growth has to be seen in the background of the conditions that existed at that time in India and the world. In comparison to what was available to the average student in India and elsewhere, this school, even from a material point of view, was something exceptional.

What was important though, was that through this period of outward expansion, the core values and spirit of the School remained strong. This happened very naturally because the physical presence of the Mother was everywhere. The Mother was physically present among the students in the Playground, in the Tennis Ground and the Sportsground. She would come to the School and the Theatre.

**1960s – INCREASE IN NUMBERS**

The 1960s was the time when many things changed radically. The Mother stopped coming out and would guide people from her room and through those to whom certain responsibilities were given. Pondicherry officially became a part of India and from then on a link had to be established with the Indian government. The number of students continued to increase and touched 800 in number by the end of the 1960s.

Many more boardings were opened and people appointed to look after them. The Corner House was opened to centralise all organisation around food. And finally, the Auroville project was started and this had an impact on the School as it was
1ST DECEMBER

The first few celebrations of the anniversary of the School were put together in a short time. The cultural programme used to be in fact a variety programme. There were songs, recitations, dances etc. The main participants were students. The physical education demonstration was similar to what it is now: drills and a show of skills.

With time the performance of the 1st December programme became more focused on one main play. At first French plays were chosen for the 1st December programme, even French comedies. There was once even a performance of a simplified version of the ballet “Swan Lake”.

Then the Mother started writing her own plays which could be performed on the anniversary of the School. Right from the beginning some short extract from Sri Aurobindo’s writings had been performed on stage. This later developed and entire plays were performed.

fully involved at the time of the foundation.

It was also during the 1960s that some students who had finished their studies in the Ashram expressed the wish to go and follow higher studies abroad and the Mother at times helped them get admission in universities outside India. She probably wanted some of these men and women to then come back and put their new knowledge to good use within the centre of education and take it forward. That did not happen very often though.

This was happening while the Ashram itself continued to grow and many new members joined as sadhaks and sadhikas. The resources were limited but the Mother saw to it that things ran smoothly. The Physical Education department however had always been a very well-organised department and the general level of interest and high level of performances was probably at its peak in the 1960s and 70s. The student community had a strong link with the Ashram members as many of the students were from Ashramite families. It was a time when although new children were being admitted, the old guard made up of the first Ashramites such as Nolini-da, Amrita-da and veterans like Nirod-da and Amal Kiran were still very actively involved in the day-to-day life of the Ashram and the School.

1968 saw some major structural changes in the School organisation. There was more scope given for the implementation of the principles of Free Progress. The structure defined then of 3 years of Jardin d’enfants, 3 years of l’avenir, 3 years of Progrès, 6 years of En avant vers la Perfection and 3 years of Cours Supérieurs is still largely being followed today. The unique system of Free Progress followed in Knowledge [see box on page 22] was also initiated then.

Variety programme, 1970. Staircase going up to the old Hall of Harmony.
At the end of the 1960s a very large number of children came to join the School. Their parents wrote to the Mother and she accepted them. The School could expand, creating new spaces for the new students, even new boardings were opened to accommodate them but the Physical Education structure was such that only a limited number of children could be taken.

This problem was solved by creating the New Group. Children of the New Group were supervised by some teachers and Ashramites who were not regular captains. The children had a uniform which was different from the regular group uniforms: light blue shorts and white shirt. At first the New Group children played in the School courtyard (which at that time had a cemented surface) instead of in PED grounds. Then a ground was found for the older children which was the empty plot where later the “Knowledge” building was constructed.

When the construction of “Knowledge” was started the children went to play in Nandanam. This was a larger property a few kilometers away from the Sports Ground and which the Ashram

---

**LEARNING METHOD**

At first the Ashram School followed the pattern of French Schools in many ways. In 1943 Pondicherry was a part of French India and it was normal to follow that pattern. Text books were in French and all subjects including History and Geography were taught in French. The classes were structured as they were in French Schools.

A few years after the School began, the practice of having quarterly tests was started by some teachers. The Mother saw that this system of having quarterly tests was causing a lot of harm as some students fell ill because of the anxiety and some others felt tempted to cheat. So she stopped the tests. In the new organisation more importance was given to the daily activities and its monitoring and the quarterly progress report became a way of recording at regular intervals the progress each student was making.

It was perhaps after the re-organisation of 1959 that some other changes took place. The language used for teaching Science and Maths continued to be French but History and Geography were taught in English. The decision to keep French as the language of instruction of some subjects was taken by the Mother. But from then on English gained importance and the School became effectively a bilingual school.

Indian languages were added in a more organized way. The teaching of Sanskrit also started with a lot of emphasis in the mid-1960s, with every child attending Sanskrit classes in addition to an Indian language. These classes were generally held in the afternoon.

In the mid-1950s with the arrival of Tanmay-da and Padma, the Free Progress method of learning was started. This was a method where the student was given great freedom to follow the lines of study and the pace of study that he wished, where he was encouraged to take responsibility for his progress based on his own inner need and truth. The Mother followed very closely its activities as Tanmay-da used to regularly see the Mother regarding these classes.

The principle of Free Progress was again an important aspect of the reorganization that happened in 1968. Part of the restructuring involved the implementation of a new, more student-driven system for the Higher Course. In the system that Jugal-da put in place and that still functions, students had the freedom to choose their teachers who usually present or give in writing the subjects which they will teach and how they will work. Students also choose the number of hours that they will devote to each subject. They are free to take any combination of subjects, some of which are studied at a lower level than the level of the Higher Course. Though everyone chooses to study one or more of the major works of Sri Aurobindo it is not a compulsory subject. The number of students in a group is 15 at the most and students can also choose individual classes with a teacher.
PHYSICAL EDUCATION

The one aspect of the education at the Ashram that we have always taken great pride in, is the physical education and its wide range of activities. But all this didn’t happen overnight. The development happened in stages. At first there was only the Playground but soon afterwards the Tennis Ground was added to the area available. Tennis courts were made on one side so that the Mother could play tennis and the wrestling pit and boxing ring on the other end of the ground. The basketball courts came up in the centre. From the Tennis-ground there was access to the sea so regular sea-bathing was started. Around the same time a special place was acquired for volleyball.

In 1952 when the Sportsground was ready for use, the next step was taken in the growth of the physical education. Now the whole range of athletic events could be practised, which included the track items, the throws and the jumps. Field games such as football and hockey could be played and once the swimming pool was constructed, swimming and diving were added to the programme. The rooms in the Playground which had once been classrooms were re-arranged so that gymnastics could be practised on the various apparatus such as the beam, the parallel bars, the asymmetric bars, the horizontal bar etc. The gymnasium as we see it now was built in the late-1970s.

The aim of the physical training was not only to build a body that would be supple, agile and strong but also to develop psychological qualities such as perseverance, courage, equanimity, team spirit and discipline. The variety of activities ensured that each one developed in an all-rounded manner. This system of aiming for all-rounders rather than excellence in only one item or one line of activity, also gave the opportunity to the students to find the sport for which they had a natural aptitude and talent. This gave each one a sense of self-worth. In the 1950s the Mother was present during the competitions at the Sportsground and her presence inspired everyone.

As the programme got more organised, captains and coaches were chosen among the sadhaks and sadhikas so that the groups could be managed independently and could be given the specific activities that were required for them. In the early years, those who were still students were made captains of smaller children. When the Mother came to the Playground she would sit and watch as Pranab-da taught exercises to the captains.

1970s – THE END OF A PHASE

One of the important developments at the beginning of the decade was the construction of the ground and first floors of the Knowledge building. The Higher Course then moved there. This was also when the Computer Section started.

In 1972 it was clear that the School could not expand indefinitely. At that time the number of students in the School had reached 800. So the
intake of students was limited to the Kindergarten level only. It took a while before all the students of the New Group could be absorbed into regular groups and the additional arrangements made for them could be completely stopped. From that time onwards the number of students in the School began to diminish until it stabilised at about 400 children. This meant that there was no need for such a large number of boardings and one by one most of them were closed down.

An important event of 1972 was the announcement the Mother made that at the age of fourteen a child was old enough to decide if he or she wanted to continue to be in this School. She said that this should be told to the children who were not yet fourteen so that they would be aware. Knowing that the system was so unusual that there was not going to be any official paper that could be recognised by any institution outside, the Mother wanted the children to understand that they were free to leave if they wanted a career in any professional line for which they would need grades and universally recognised degrees.

The 1970s was a landmark decade for many reasons because in 1973 the Mother left her body but also this decade saw the beginning of the outflow of students who finished their studies and left the Ashram. On the one hand the selection of the students had to be done by the senior teachers, something that used to be done by the Mother herself earlier, and on the other hand they had to deal with the outgoing students who were increasingly interested in making a life for themselves outside the Ashram. This would mark the end of a phase in the history of the School and the beginning of another.

**BOARDINGS**

Although the School was started for the children of the Ashram, with time, devotees living outside also wanted their children to receive this education given by the Mother. The boardings provided a home which was in every way linked to the Ashram and gave the children a sense of belonging to the larger community. At first for more than twenty years the boardings had children of all age groups, and boys and girls were together. This was done so that children could grow up in an environment that was as close to a family as possible. But in 1972 the boardings were re-organised and boys and girls were separated and there were only boys or only girls in each boarding and also the boardings were divided according to age groups. The girls were brought closer to the Ashram and the School and the boys were sent to the boardings which were further away.

**CORNER HOUSE**

The Corner House was set up in 1967 and turned out to be the place where students spent time together and got a sense of the wider group, irrespective of age. Being there for breakfast, lunch and dinner, the students could share each other’s lives. The Corner House then became the fourth pillar of the students’ lives, the other three being the School, the Playground or the various grounds and the boardings.

---

*I am perfectly sure, I am quite confident, there is not the slightest doubt in my mind, that this University, which is being established here, will be the greatest seat of knowledge upon earth.

It may take fifty years, it may take a hundred years, and you may doubt about my being there; I may be there or not, but these children of mine will be there to carry out my work.

And those who collaborate in this divine work today will have the joy and pride of having participated in such an exceptional achievement.*

The Mother

(CWM, 12,112)