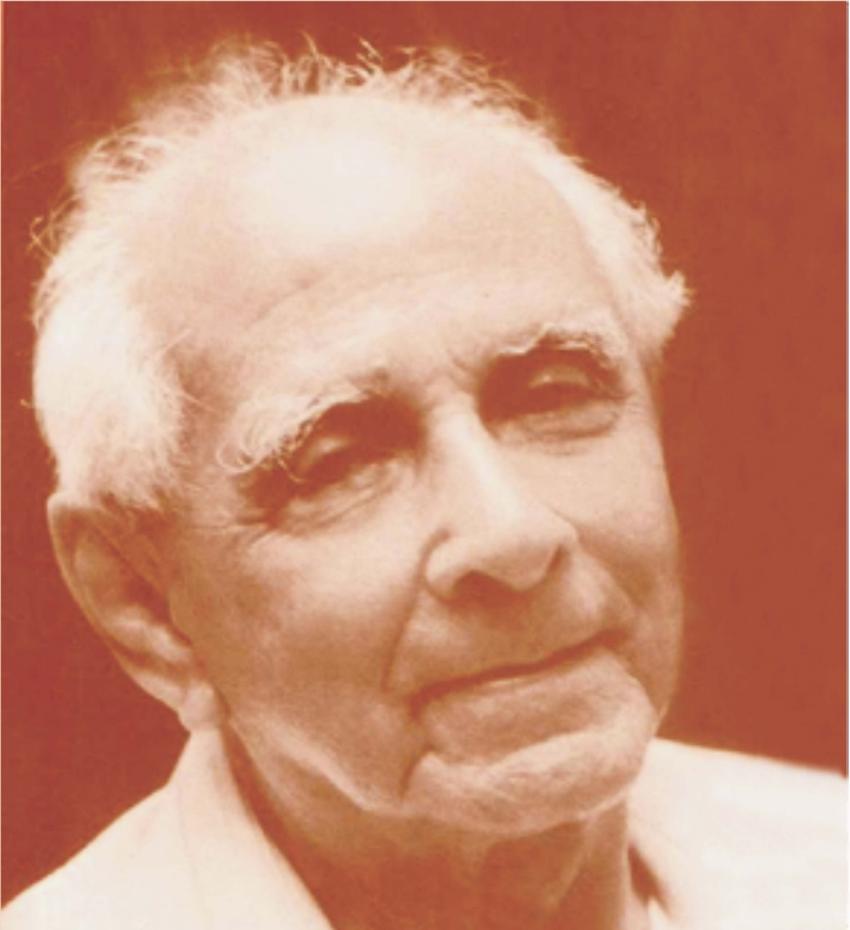




Makers of Indian Literature

K.D. Sethna

P. Raja



K.D. Sethna (1904–2011): Named Amal Kiran by Sri Aurobindo, like many Sadhak intellectuals found his true self in the Ashram at Pondicherry. He pioneered research in several areas and out of this endless list emerged Aryan invasion theory and Ancient Indian history, Blake and Shakespeare studies, Christology, Comparative Mythology, Indian systems of yoga, international affairs, Overhead Poetry, Hellenic literature and culture, philosophy, mysticism, spiritual and scientific thought, modern physics and biology. He touched almost all the fields available on Planet Earth and they all gleamed with his light. A scholar-extraordinary he edited *Mother India*. Author of several books, both creative and critical, he inspired many to take up to creative writing.

P. Raja has 32 books for adults and 8 books for children in English and 14 books in Tamil to his credit. Apart from contributing special articles to Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literature in English (London), Encyclopedia of Tamil Literature in English, and to several other edited volumes, he has also written scripts for Television. He was General Council Member of Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi representing Pondicherry University. He is the Editor of *Transfire*, a literary quarterly devoted to translations.



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K.D. Sethna
(AMAL KIRAN)

The sculpture reproduced on the endpaper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodhana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From: Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D.

Courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi

Makers of Indian Literature

K.D. SETHNA

(AMAL KIRAN)

P. Raja



SAHITYA AKADEMI

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1

Between Us

All poets love the ocean. The ever rolling waves trying to gain a piece of land for themselves and the land refusing with a scowl and forcing them to retrace their steps... Ah, what a lovely sight the ocean makes? Who would not find time to stand and stare at the ocean? Sometime in April 2009 by sundown a guru and his shishya sat, the former in his wheel chair and the latter by his side on the stain free floor of the hall in Ashram Nursing Home, Pondicherry, staring at the Bay of Bengal through the glass walls without disturbing each other.

The guru was so engrossed with the pranks of the waves that he was not even aware of the shishya's arrival. Seconds gave birth to minute and, minute to minutes. And both were listening to the message of the Bay with such rapt attention that the nurses who were crossing and re-crossing the hall took them for two yogis conversing with the Bay in silence or for two useless guys wasting their time by simply staring at the ocean.

It was by accident the shishya cleared his throat. The noise that emerged from his side made the guru turn his head. A smile flashed across his face. He broke his silence.

K.D. Sethna

“Oh, it is you? When did you come here?” the guru asked smiling a divine smile.

“I don’t know, Sir!” the Shishya told a lie. After a pause, he asked, “How long are you here, Sir?”

“Who? Me?... I do not know. I do not know why I am still here. I do not know what I am going to do here,” replied the guru.

The shishya was not unaware of the double-meaning the guru gave to the word ‘here’. It almost broke his heart. Tears threatened to trickle out of his eyes. A few seconds later the tears that managed to find their way out and sliding on his cheeks seemed to ask the guru on behalf of his shishya: “How can a writer like me, a child of yours, who had the privilege of studying the art of writing under you, ever afford to lose you?”

Perhaps the guru guessed the thoughts of the tears. He then said, “Perhaps my name is playing hide and seek with the Lord of Death and he is still in search of it in his mammoth register”, and made his shishya roar with laughter. He said thus without in the least aware that the Lord of Death would take two more years to search and trace out his name in the register.

The guru is the hero of this book, and the Shishya, the author of this work. And that’s me.

I still remember the day when I entered Sethna’s house (no.7, Rue Suffren) where he last stayed before he shifted to the Nursing Home, once and for all. I saw a few foreigners sitting around him and having a chat with him. When I felt a bit hesitant to intrude, he smiled and welcomed me, “Come in, Raja, and join the lit-chit-chat.” He then introduced to me all the four foreigners who were all women and told them, “Here is Prof. P.Raja, our star-reviewer for *Mother India* and a well known writer in English.” I felt elated for he has honoured me with such a nice certificate.

When I searched for a chair to sit in, his eyes roved all over his well-equipped study-cum-office and finding all the chairs

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occupied he said without any hesitation, “No chairs! Then choose a lap,” and sent every one of us to rib-tickling laughter.

Once when Sethna was busy in his study proof-reading the pages of a forthcoming issue of *Mother India*, a monthly review of culture from Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, whose editor he has been for more than fifty years, his telephone screamed. Lifting the handset from the cradle, he said “Hello” and waited for a response. “Is it Aurofood?” came a voice from the other end. Sethna did not howl “wrong number” and bang the handset against its cradle. Keeping cool he replied in his characteristic tone: “No! This is Amal Drink,” and set the man at the other end roaring with laughter, for Sethna is ‘Amal’ to the Ashramites.

Sethna was always bubbling with humour and his jokes were not meant to hurt anyone. Every friend of Sethna always looked for opportunities to retell the jokes he or she had heard Amal crack and found delight in acknowledging them. I was one among those blessed few who had the honour of laughing with Amal. And whenever he made me laugh, I thought to myself, “What a sincere disciple of Sri Aurobindo Sethna is!”

Was it not Sri Aurobindo, the yogi’s yogi, who said, “Humour is the salt of existence”?

I still distinctly remember the day I first met Sethna. It was on February 21, 1979...Mother’s birthday...Darshan day in the Ashram. It was around eleven in the morning. Mr. George Moses, a retired Superintendent of Police, a voracious reader and editor of a literary journal *Youth Age*, introduced me to Sethna in his house at Rue Suffren, where he lived with his second wife, Sehra. It must be mentioned in passing that Sehra became a great fan of mine when I began to write my creative short stories and also translated Tamil fiction for *Mother India*.

But the day I met him I was only a budding writer, a struggling writer with a very strong itch to write. I placed a cardboard file before him and spread it open.

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“What is this?” he asked.

“A file of clippings...all my writings,” I answered, my hands shaking in fear.

“Oh, I see! What do you want me to do with them?”

“Please, Sir, go through them when you find time. If my writings could get me a chance to write in *Mother India*, then I would consider myself a blessed being,” I said in all humility.

“I see,” Sethna said as he flipped through the clippings in the folder. He then banged it shut. I was disappointed because he did not even bother to read a single line from any of my clippings.

“Can you review a book for *Mother India*?” he asked, looking at me through his thick glasses.

“Review? I have not written a book review so far.”

“Say you were not given a chance so far! Then try with this,” he said, giving me a copy of *Collected Works of Nolini Kanta Gupta – Vol.7*. It weighed heavily both in my hand and on my mind.

“Life is full of challenges. Take this too as a challenge,” he said and added, “Your review will speak for your literary acumen and will help me judge your writing abilities.” He then advised me on the art of reviewing books. I had taken heart from his short lecture, took about a month to go through the book, wrote the review and submitted it to him. He went through the four pages under my very eyes, making editorial changes. He beamed with joy and said, “I found the writer in you. You can write for *Mother India*”.

I jumped for joy.

By the end of April Sethna gave me a copy of the May 1979 issue of *Mother India*, patted me on the back and invited me to write regularly for *Mother India*, founded by no less a personality than Sri Aurobindo.

Thus began our Guru Shishya relationship.

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Out of the four hundred and odd editors of magazines and newspapers both in India and elsewhere who published my writings, I think Sethna is the only one magnanimous enough to devote several hundred pages for my literary effusions. Is not the writer in me a blessed being who gained valuable experience and training under his tutelage?

A quarter century ago when my daughter was not even two years old, I brought her along to Sethna's house. That was the first time she came to his home. As we entered his study, the child saw my guru, stood spell-bound for a minute and then whispered into my ears, "Appa! He is god."

"What did she say?" Sethna asked me, affectionately touching her chubby cheeks.

I repeated what she had whispered. And Sethna alias Amal said, "If her soul could see the god in me, then I have not lived in vain."

It took a very long time for me to understand his statement. Yes. I got his message.

Thou wast not Born for Death, Immortal Bird

The Lord of Death at last tracked the name of Sethna that was playing hide and seek with him in his mammoth register. He sent his angels to the Ashram Nursing Home on Wednesday, June 29, 2011 at 12:15 p.m.

When Shri Kaikhushru Dhunjibhoy Sethna alias Amal Kiran left his physical body, he was 106 years of age.

Oh, who would not shriek at the thought of death? But Sethna was of a different mould, for he was ready for it for a number of years. To put it in his own words: "I am doing my best to live long both because I am happy and can give happiness and because I want as much time as possible to go nearer to Sri Aurobindo's luminous Truth and the Mother's radiant Beauty. All the same I am ready to say 'Hurrah' whenever they tell me, 'your time is up.'"

He did not live his long life in vain. It was a prayer offered to the Divine. His was no death at all. That was because he captivated the hearts of the visitors with his "shining complexion, his delicate sensitive face, two eyes radiating a keen and kind glint of intelligence and a sweet smile as innocent as that of a child,"

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as his friend the late Jugal Kishore Mukherjee had rightly put it.

Sethna was of the opinion that if there is no progress in life, life is wasted. Was not Sir Walter Scott right when he said, "Is death the last sleep? No, it is the last and final awakening."

On November 25, 1904 a Parsi Bombayite by birth was christened Kaikhushru Dhunjibhoy Sethna. He was also called "Cooverji" for all official documents and, to suit the needs of day-to-day life "Kekoo".

Sethnas are a family from Surat. From Surat they moved to Bombay and settled down there. Most Sethnas are lawyers, solicitors or doctors. 'Seth' means master and 'na' means belonging to the master. Adam and Eve, our first parents, had a third son named Seth. Maybe they come from that ancestor.

Kaikhushru is the Persian equivalent to the Latin Cyrus. Dhunjibhoy is literally the Gujarati word for Brother Opulence.

The boy baby's mother, Bhikaiji Dhunjibhoy Sethna, was a real beauty. She was an extremely emotional person, with a spontaneous response to any suffering she might come across. The slightest sign of suffering in anybody would draw an immediate answer from her heart. She was extremely kind to all at home, perhaps overkind. She was an excellent raconteur too.

His father, Dhunjibhoy Pestonji Sethna, had a zest for work. His motto was *Labor itse voluptas*, which is Latin for 'Labour itself is pleasure'. He would find any occasion to work and do things. A voracious reader, he could not begin a book at night without finishing it. He read all kinds of books and when he would be on a holiday at home, he would clean the books and rearrange his vast collection, giving his children every chance to handle the books. A postgraduate in medicine, he practised general medicine only for a few years, before he became one among the three or four specialist eye-surgeons in Bombay at that time. Apart from his medical career, he was a bit of a writer too.

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Sethna, affectionately called 'Kekoo' by his family members, imbibed all the good qualities of his mother and faithfully followed his father's motto, only to bloom as a writer. The *cacoethes scribandi*, the itch to write, he caught from his father made the latter very proud.

In his *Autobiographical Note* written in 1951 Kekoo records his moment of birth in a typical humorous vein, the hallmark of Sethna's writings: "The moment I was born the big lamp in our drawing room flared up. My father had to answer the frightened servant's cry and run from my mother's side to prevent a fire. The English lady doctor in attendance on my mother took the flaring lamp as an omen and said: 'This boy will be a great man'. It seems to me that she went beyond her data and should have confined herself to saying: 'This boy will be a fiery fellow!' I displayed from the beginning a very hot temper and the fury with which I, as a baby, yelled and grew red in the face was worthy of a Riza Shah Pahlevi. And it is quite on the cards that I might have become a soldier or at least a man of action if misfortune had not dogged my steps in my third year. In the literal sense, my steps were dogged by misfortune, for a severe form of infantile paralysis attacked my legs."

Kekoo spent his childhood days along with his two sisters and a brother in the Hill Station of Matheran near Bombay. His younger sister was born just twenty days before the eldest sister died and she was just twelve. The elder sister was older than Kekoo by two years and the other was younger than him by nine years.

A very healthy, vigorous and active child Kekoo became crippled by polio at the age of two and a half. It was quite a blow to his family. Some repair work was going on in the house and he romped as usual among lime and things that lay pell-mell there...an immediate exposure he could think of for the fatal blow that gave

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him a crutch for life. He went to bed at night as a healthy child and in the morning when his father came to look at him, he saw Kekoo's leg. The heel of his left foot had been drawn up, and could not touch the floor. Being a physician his father at once guessed that it was polio. Kekoo had to put his hand on his left knee and press the whole leg down so that the heel might touch the floor. He walked that way for a little more than three years, when his father realized that if he went about in that posture he would suffer in the course of time permanent spinal curvature.

And so he began to try all sorts of things in Bombay to cure Kekoo of his deformity before he resolved to take him to London and get corrective operation done. On his way to England with his parents on a French boat his eyes got glued to two good-looking girls on that boat. Both were French. One had a sharp kind of face and the other a general pleasing kind of countenance. One was called Marie Sainte and the other Mercedes. Little Kekoo was in a dilemma. He did not know whom to choose. He looked at his father standing nearby. His eyes too were set on those two girls. They were real beauties. So he asked his father: "If you had to marry, whom would you choose?" He replied that it would be a difficult job. Then the son asked his father, "Can't you marry both of them?" "Huh! That would be still more difficult," came the reply. And that was his first romance. His taste was more or less universal and not restricted at all, for one of the two girls was a brunette and the other a blond.

The fact that Kekoo fell in love when he was only six and that too with two girls older than him by two or three years shows how romantic he was. His first attempts in the field of writing were all inspired by those two lovely girls whose memory he carried into his grave. No wonder he was prolific, for is not the adage 'Love teaches even asses to dance' true to every syllable?

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The polio operation had put him in bed in London for three months. The doctors there made him walk straight, though with a slight limp.

Sethna had the privilege of having his early education at St. Xavier's School and College, a Roman Catholic Institution in Bombay managed by very competent foreign Jesuit priests. It was only during this period he began to lisp in numbers. Originally, the impulse was competition. A cousin of his, who was many years older than him, used to come from college to dine in Kekoo's house, because he had his residence in a suburb. He used to boast before Kekoo the many number of lines of poetry he had composed, rather light-hearted romantic verse about a girl called Katie. And when once he said that he had composed 200 lines, Kekoo thought he could compose more than that and compete with him and beat at his own game. That was how he started.

He found an outlet to his thoughts only in English, for English was practically his mother tongue. He could not be very articulate in Parsi Gujarati, a language spoken in his house. And the general practice was that after every three or four words in Parsi Gujarati an English word would rush in. And so English was the only language open to him, a language favoured by his father all the time.

In his school days, he had tried his hand at fiction writing. He wrote nearly twenty little novels and gleefully bound them himself. All kinds of stories were there and each had an alliterative title like "The Sign of the Serpent", "The Mayor of Madrid". He had attempted detective stories too. Sethna was such a talented tale-teller that his Hindu private teacher in Mathematics, who used to come to his home, on the fourth floor of his family house in Bombay took a keen interest in his fiction that instead of teaching him mathematics, read the stories with him. And when anybody

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came into the room, they used to cover up that stuff with the arithmetic book.

Once a detective story was so intriguing and the criminal was so hidden away that the tuition master could not guess who it could be. Sethna, the author, told him to keep the problem revolving in his mind. So when he was going down the stairs and revolving the problem in his mind he missed a step and tumbled from the fourth floor to the third. After that fall he never came again to teach Sethna.

In school he developed admiration for the Jesuit priests for their unstinted hard work. He liked also two Indian teachers, one for his literary taste and the other for his capacity to tell stories. He found a true friend in a Parsi classmate, who admired Sethna and threw open his heart by saying, "If you had been a girl, I would have fallen in love with you and married you." Perhaps he admired Sethna's brains.

It is no wonder that as a collegian, Sethna won in his intermediate Arts Examination of Bombay University the Hughlings Prize in English and the Selby Scholarship in logic. He passed his B.A. (Hons) in Philosophy and won the Ellis Prize in English, which a student not of philosophy but Literature should have taken.

While still in college, he began his literary career as a book-reviewer to the Bombay based newspapers and magazines. At this time something untoward has happened in his life. His father suddenly died. As a faithful son to his father and to cherish his memory forever, Sethna dedicated his first book *Parnassians* to him that made its appearance sometime in 1924, when its author was still in his teens. Sethna's grandfather, Pestonji Cooverji Sethna, who played a major role in the upliftment of his career, was rich enough to finance the book.

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Parnassians is a collection of four essays that Sethna wrote on the works of H.G.Wells, G.B.Shaw, G.K.Chesterton and Thomas Hardy. As a voracious reader of world literature, he considered these authors the four outstanding denizens of Mount Parnassus, home of the Muses. He regretted to have given that title to his book, for he understood at a later stage that the term 'Parnassians' referred to a school of poets in France. A.S.Wadia, the Parsi author, knew Wells personally well that he posted the book to him. Wells, perhaps after reading the section devoted to him, wrote back: "Your young man will go far".

3

The Great Search and the Unexpected Fruit

When Sethna was a boy his father put two ideals before him, rather he took for granted that he was all the time living up to these ideals. He told his son: “You will never tell a lie. And you will not have any fear.” As for the first one, he confessed in his reminiscences that he did not live up to his expectation. But he tried his best to put a bold face as regards everything.

Once his father asked each of his three children to go to the end of a long passage, which was quite dark. Sethna’s sister and brother failed to do it, perhaps afraid of the nocturnal creatures lurking there to catch children and gobble them up. Sethna was full of fear but still, trembling though he was, he walked up to the end of the dark tunnel with dark worries and gloomy speculations and came back with a white yet triumphant face.

In the matter of courage, Sethna could compliment himself on having done several things, which a person with his polio leg would not have dared to do... Riding horses, for instance. He could make the horse go at a gallop or canter. Trotting he could not

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do for it involved getting up and down in the saddle. Galloping, of course, is the most dangerous thing. Still he did it.

Sethna has got a record regarding his horse riding that is good enough to get into the Guinness Book of World Records. Once he went on horseback from Dehradun to Mussoorie, a height of 8000 feet by a winding path skirting the precipice. This was the biggest feat of horsemanship by a disabled person so far.

While still a student of the M.A. class, Sethna came across a friend who had done *Pranayama*. He told Sethna that *Pranayama* gave him an abundance of energy, an energy, which could be used in any way he liked...And there was no question of strict *brahmacharya* or spiritual objective. What he said struck the young man as very fascinating and helpful. Therefore, he started reading books on Hatha Yoga and Raja Yoga in particular. While he was doing this, he got interested naturally in the works of Swami Vivekananda. And Vivekananda gave him a greater perspective. Yoga, he understood, is a means not just to amass energy, which one can throw about as one likes but to gather energy to concentrate on a certain aim which would lead one to the true self within one.

Sethna had a girl friend and she talked to him of a Bengali saint called *Pagal Harnath* (meaning 'Mad Harnath', mad with love for Lord Krishna) whom she had known and who was still alive. Previous to his interest in yoga, Sethna had been a scoffer and denier of all traditional values. And his aim in yoga too was originally not spiritual. To meet this mad old man seemed to him just a curious thing to do. Still in order to please his girl friend he consented.

Together they went to see the saint, who used to come to Bombay and be the guest of some rich Gujarati. There was a big hall in a posh house and the old man was sitting lost in meditation. There was a semi-circle of his disciples, all the time watching him.

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And when he was in a certain posture and a finger of his seemed to point to somebody, they all looked at that person to find some meaning in his involuntary gesture.

Cheekily Sethna went and sat almost next to the saint. And when the latter at last opened his eyes and looked around, he saw a new face there. Everybody prompted Sethna to ask a question. Therefore, he asked him: "Since the universe is governed by fixed laws, what is the need of a Creator or a God to govern it?" The saint at once answered: "If there are laws, there has to be a law-giver."

The answer was rather simplistic. Ordinarily Sethna would have mustered up an array of arguments to counter it. Somehow he fell silent, impressed by the way the old man spoke. To Sethna, he seemed to speak not from his head by way of an argument but from some depth of actual touch on things beyond our ken, from some sort of realization. So Sethna did not argue further. That was the first time in his student days that somebody could silence him.

Argumentative that he was, he was surprised at himself. He became faintly aware of something within him, which was beyond the mere argumentative intellect. It must have been this something which had fallen silent, most unusually and to his own surprise. After that, he began to take more and more interest in things beyond human understanding.

In the course of a few more months, Sethna read in a newspaper that a Maharashtrian Yogi had come to town. With his girl friend, he went to meet the Yogi. Seeing Sethna dressed wholly in the English style, an old man who was the Yogi's host asked him to show the right palm before going into the inner room where the Yogi was to be met. After glancing at the palm, the old man shook his head and said, "You are destined to have three children. Why are you bothering about Yoga?" Sethna pleaded,

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“Not one has come out. Let me go in.” Rather disgustedly the old man grunted, “All right”, as if he meant, “go and be damned!”

In the inner room, Sethna and his friend sat down with the rest of the people. After a while the Yogi went round touching each one’s head. When he touched Sethna’s head, Sethna felt a sort of electric current run down his spine. Towards the end of a brief meditation session, Sethna requested the Yogi, “I want to do something which would take me beyond my ordinary consciousness. Give me some practical hint for it.” The Yogi advised, “When you are alone, lie in your bed and try as it were to pull your consciousness, right up from your feet...up...up...up to your head and try to feel that you are on the top of your head. When you succeed in doing so, you will see a ring of light above it. Then try with your consciousness to leap into that ring and you will be in what is called *Samadhi*.”

It looked interesting and so night after night Sethna practised this exercise of lifting his consciousness up and up. He never got to the top of his head but one night something startling happened.

Sethna found that he was not in his body. He was high up in the air and he was floating in the room pushing against one wall, going to the other wall, pushing against that and coming back to where he had started from. He could see his own body lying in bed. And so he was really surprised that he could be out of his body like that, free from physicality and still perfectly conscious...not dreaming. He could voluntarily do things. And he had a subtle body with all the needed parts. All of a sudden, a doubt rose in him. He asked himself how he could ever be like that. It looked impossible.

As soon as Sethna turned a Doubting Thomas and attempted to analyse his condition, Sethna lost it and came back rushing into his reclining body, with a sort of warmth near the heart region. And when he came back his usual body was utterly immobile.

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Only his eyes could see things. Then gradually life seemed to flow back into him. He was normal again, and said to himself: "No materialist can now convince me that I am only my body. I have gone out of it and still lived consciously. So materialism is wiped out." Sethna had been inclined to both materialism and atheism.

After that experience, he started looking out for passing sannyasis or yogis in Bombay. He found one and requested the yogi to impart something spiritual. The yogi said, "Dig a hole in your floor and light a fire there." For Sethna, that was impossible to do. His grandfather would shout and get angry if he did anything of that kind. "You light a fire and then I will give you a mantra to repeat. Then ultimately a Goddess will appear to you. You may ask her a favour...whatever you want." However, Sethna had to rule out this whole practice of invoking supernatural powers. So he just kept quiet.

It was during that period of his life as a spiritual seeker that he met a theosophist plus art-critic who had paid a visit to Sri Aurobindo in Pondicherry. Seeing the bundle of various qualities, even contradictory ones, in Sethna, he said: "A complex person like you will be satisfied only with Sri Aurobindo. I could see that Sri Aurobindo had the cosmic consciousness. He could feel even the grass grow! He could know everything within the universe as if it were his own consciousness." That interested Sethna. But things rested there.

Then one day he went to Bombay's Crawford Market to buy a pair of shoes. The shoes had been put in a box and the box was wrapped in a newspaper sheet, and a string ran around the sheet. He brought his purchase home and as soon as he took off the string, the newspaper sheet fell open in front of him.

A headline in very bold type attracted his attention. It read: "The Ashram of Sri Aurobindo Ghose." To Sethna, it looked like a divine call.

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At once he read the article and felt that Sri Aurobindo's Ashram in Pondicherry was the place for him because life was not denied there. Everything possible in man was sought to be brought out, enhanced and geared to a divine purpose... by seeking something beyond our senses, the Infinite, the Eternal, life would be transformed. Sethna found that it suited him. He decided to go to Pondicherry.

He and his girl friend, Daulat, wrote to the Ashram. An answer came from a person named Purani, who was in charge of the Gujarat side of the correspondence. He wrote that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother had said they could come and see for themselves the Ashram life.

But how to go there? For one thing, they did not have enough money. Moreover, in those days an unmarried couple travelling together for several days was not the thing done in polite Parsi society or in any other society or community in India. Since they were in love with each other and seeking the same goal, they decided to marry. By getting married, they would be able to collect a fairly good sum of money. It would make them independent and therefore not helpless in case their parents were not in favour of what they wanted to do.

Now, before going further, a little bit of background in relation to Sethna's grandfather would help. After his B.A., Sethna suggested that he should be allowed to go to Oxford for higher studies. Had his father been alive he would have certainly encouraged him and helped him in all possible ways. But the orthodox old man said, "Oh, if you go to Oxford, you will bring an English wife with you. And that will never do. We don't want an English woman in our Parsi family."

When Sethna promised his grandfather that he would not bring back an English wife, the old man remarked, "I can see your

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plan. You won't bring her here. You will keep her there. And ultimately you will join her and be lost to us."

A little later when the old man found that his grandson was doing some very peculiar things like meditation in a particular pose and was interested in spiritual philosophy he feared that he might lose his grandson completely that way.

So, one day he suggested to Sethna: "Why don't you go to Oxford?" Evidently, according to the grandfather, an English wife was preferable to the Divine beloved! Perhaps the old man felt that he could tackle an English wife in some way but the Divine Beloved would be beyond his reach. Sethna simply replied, "I am not interested."

The dutiful grandfather after doing a bit of spying around found what his grandson was interested in. Sethna's first collection of poems *Artist Love* that he financed for its publication in 1925 came to his rescue. He delved deep into those poems which he forgot to do earlier and read the mind of his grandson. He found out that "Daulat" was the inspirer of all the poems. A known devil is better than an unknown angel, they say. The old man perhaps thought a marriage in Bombay would save his grandson from both the English wife and the Divine Beloved. So, he arranged for the marriage.

The beloved by one's side and enough money in the coffers, Sethna and his wife Daulat decided to go to Pondicherry after honeymooning for about two months. But the couple saw to it that it was not openly mentioned. The plan was to go to Calcutta on a sort of belated honeymoon. After a short stay at the Grand Hotel and a meeting with Tagore, the couple visited the village of Sunamukhi where *Pagal Harnath* had been born and had died a few months earlier. They were back to Calcutta and from there started for Puri.

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In Puri there was an Ashram of *Pagal* Harnath. Two of his devotees were running the Ashram. Sethna and Daulat stayed there and talked of visiting the famous Jagannath temple. Daulat was wearing a sari, so there no question of any objection to her entering the temple. However, the man in charge of the little Ashram told Sethna: "You can't go because you are not a Hindu".

So, Sethna smiled sarcastically and asked him: "What to do? How to become a Hindu?" to which he replied: "It's very easy. Pull your shirt out of your pants and you become a Hindu." Sethna did as he was told and went into the temple and saw the great image of Jagannath.

From Puri they got the midnight train to Madras. It was in the middle of December and very cold. They both had their overcoats on and when they got into the train there was no seat at all. And so Daulat was pushed into the Ladies' compartment and Sethna went into the Gents' compartment, and sat almost at somebody's feet. He moved his feet a little and Sethna comfortably sat on his haunches. After half the night, there was room for Daulat to be brought in. Then they were both together. All of a sudden she developed severe diarrhea and vomiting. It was like cholera.

Sethna was not sure of his next step, except that he had to take her to the toilet every five or ten minutes. She had become very weak. At one station he met the guard and requested him to send a telegram to a doctor at the next stop. He did as asked.

The next stop was in the small hours of the night...three o'clock or so...a doctor came along with a hurricane lantern and mounted to the compartment. After examining Daulat, he said gleefully: "Well! Well! Her pulse is still going on."

Luckily at that time, the loose motions had stopped. The doctor offered the prepared medicine but Daulat did not need that medicine. In the morning when they reached Madras, she was

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perfectly all right. They had *iddlies* and *dosais* there, in spite of her supposed cholera at night.

From Madras Sethna sent a telegram to his grandfather: “Visiting Picturesque Pondicherry”, and another intimating their arrival to Sri Aurobindo Ashram before they boarded the night train to Pondicherry.

How true were the words of H.G.Wells when he said after reading Sethna’s *Parnassians*: “Your young man will go far”! Perhaps Wells did not know that Sethna would go as far as Pondicherry. And the shoes Sethna had gone to buy were meant to be those of a pilgrim.

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All in Bombay were puzzled. They did not know why the young couple was moving to the little French town in the remote South instead of coming home.

It was December 16, 1927. K.D.Sethna was just twenty three.

Pujalal, one of the old sadhaks of Sri Aurobindo Ashram, received the couple. Then they mounted the famous *pousse-pousse* which was in vogue at that time. It was a two-seater rickshaw with two big wheels in front with a connected rod to guide the vehicle. A man had to be behind it pushing it on. Later Sethna learnt that a Frenchman, who did not want his wife to know where he was going, invented it. So, he employed a blind man to push it. The Frenchman could guide the carriage wherever he wanted.

On their way to the Ashram, Pujalal was talking to the newcomers about his guru who was so wonderful and Sethna was nudging his wife as if to tell her, "Every disciple praises his guru to the skies. Let us see for ourselves how he is."

They reached their destination. It was Purani's room. Through the north window of his room, Sethna first caught sight of the

Mother. She was walking on the roof-terrace of her house with her hair down. She had shampooed her hair and was drying it in the morning sun. She made such an entrancing vision of beauty that his heart was immediately captured.

“If this is the guru we have to accept I shall be most happy,” Sethna is said to have remarked.

Then came Amrita, another sadhak, to see the couple in Purani’s room. When he said that the Mother was particularly enquiring about the young lady’s health, Sethna said to himself: “Why is the Mother enquiring after her health and completely ignoring me?”

The mother had sensed a hostile attack on Sethna’s wife, trying its maximum best to prevent her coming to the Ashram, because she was extremely open and receptive. So the couple was in the Ashram and a few days later, sometime in January 1928 Sethna having turned his back upon his old life and smartly dressed in European style was given an opportunity to meet the Mother in the old library room in the Ashram.

“Mother! I have seen the whole of life. Now I want only God and nothing else,” said Sethna.

“Huh! You have seen the whole of life and now you want only God. Great! How old are you?” asked the Mother.

“Twenty three”.

“Just twenty-three and you have seen the whole of life?”

Sethna felt that the Mother was pouring cold water on his enthusiasm. He also felt that the Mother was not greedy to have disciples. And so he asked the Mother if he would be permitted to stay in the Ashram for good.

The Mother replied: “Stay here for some time, look around. See if the life suits you. Then only make your decision that you want only God”.

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It was only on Feb.21, 1928, Sethna had his first darshan of Sri Aurobindo. When his eyes met Sri Auorbindo's, his physical mind came to the fore. He began examining how he looked. What sort of a beard he had? What sort of a nose he had? What sort of hair he had?

Sometime later, Sethna asked the Mother if Sri Aurobindo had said anything about him? The Mother replied: "Oh, yes. He said you have a good face". Her words brought to his memory how he himself scanned Sri Aurobindo's own face at the Darshan moments and found it "good"!

So it was time for Sethna to make up his mind. The Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry was the place for him. Once Sethna found his gurus then everything for him began to move smoothly and he realized that all his dreams were coming true one after the other.

A few months passed. Sethna's people in Bombay realized that picturesque Pondicherry could not remain picturesque so long and so they sensed some ulterior motive behind the whole thing. Sethna had to explain to them they were in Pondicherry to study spiritual philosophy. Yoga was still anathema because the Parsi mind had all sorts of curious associations with Yoga. Sethna's grandfather would have even imagined that his grandson would sit stark naked the whole day and his wife doing some strange or weird things. After some time the grandfather accepted the fact that the couple was studying spiritual philosophy. But Sethna's grandmother was upset after nine months, because no baby was on the way. What fun there could be in the idea of marriage, if it could not manufacture babies? That was really disappointing for the grandmother. She had no way but to swallow it all, and keep quiet.

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Sethna had his second Darshan on 15th August 1928 and offered to Sri Aurobindo a poem of his:

August 15 – Sri Aurobindo’s Birthday

*I thought of a thousand marvels to implore –
Yet when I touched Thy mystery’s heart, no more
The lust came crowding: not one plea I bear
Unto Thy altar as my penury’s sign,
But bring my whole poor self to make it Thine!*

*Now goldenest boon hangs like a mote of air:
Deep-sunk in worship, void of puny prayer,
So large a hush of indigence is mine,
Nought save that ageless measureless charity –
Thy utter Self – can slake the abyss of me!*

That newspaper article which gave Sethna an idea of what Sri Aurobindo wanted to do with their being and of the yoga he proposed for them led him to take interest enough to go to him first and take the chance to see whether he could cope with his yoga. Sethna felt that he could, though his wife was a little doubtful because she thought that Sri Aurobindo was an intellectual and would express a development of the thinking mind. Her worry was set at rest when they saw the Mother. And so the couple said in unison: “This is the place for us”.

The work done by the Ashram –Yogic work and other work too – greatly interested the couple. It was not a passive kind of yoga...in a way it was Karma Yoga...and much more than that.

Pondicherry, being the abode of peace, gave the spiritual seekers what they wanted. Far from the common turmoil, they became sadhaks ready to go into their selves. While Pondicherry gave the mental peace Sethna wanted, the practice of the Integral yoga of Sri Aurobindo provided him with an abundance of energy.

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On December 16, 1927 K.D. Sethna became an Ashramite by joining the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry at a very young age of twenty three. He died an Ashramite at a ripe old age of 106, spending a very major part of his life, that is to say 83 years, in the Ashram, all the time sincerely following the voice of his master, Sri Aurobindo:

*“We are sons of God and must be even as he
His human portion, we must grow divine.”*

(Savitri, Book I, canto 4)

At the start of his life as an Ashramite, Sethna was known by his pet name Kekoo, but on his request he was given the name of ‘Amal Kiran’ meaning ‘The Clear Ray’ by Sri Aurobindo on 3 September 1930. And his wife Daulat (meaning wealth) was rechristened Lalita, which means beauty and refinement. And traditionally it was the name of one of the companions of Radha, a consort of Lord Krishna.

Sri Aurobindo is said to have remarked that his Ashram is a “Human Laboratory” in the sense that he welcomed all types of human beings and was not choosy about those who seemed to have lived in a certain controlled kind of way. All kinds of people were welcomed here, if they had a centre of sincerity in them. The Mother’s work was for all human kind, and not for the elite only...the Mother accepted even difficult people because through their difficulty she could work on the recalcitrant spots in all humanity. People of various kinds and various occupations come here with a central harmonious aim. That would be the nucleus for a larger consciousness, and it is here that all kinds of people can participate and achieve unity.

Since Sri Aurobindo was of opinion that “all life is yoga”, his disciples invariably believed that “work is God” and practised ‘karma yoga’ to the core. In the beginning of his life in the

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Ashram, Sethna was deputed for the care of the Ashram stores. His letters to the Mother, who managed the entire Ashram, serve ample testimony to the fact that he delighted in being the storekeeper under Her divine service.

In one of the chits he had sent to the Mother, (Letter no.1637 dated 8.5.1932) he wrote:

Mother,

I had given Anilkumar a shelf some time ago. A few days back he told me he couldn't find room for all his books on it and so would like to have a kind of bookcase. I have two bookcases in the stores – one which was meant for you but rejected, – another Rambhai's. I have also another shelf like the one I gave to Anilkumar. – Amal.

Here is the Mother's reply, written on the empty space of the same chit: "If he has too many books, why doesn't he give them to the library?"

When Subhadra asked through Amal for a shelf of 3 feet x 3feet x 1½ feet, the Mother commented (Letters no: 1642 & 1643, dated 14.5.1932): "This is quite ridiculously big. It would hold a full library. Even if you had anything of the kind, I would tell you not to give it. But one of the biggest among Purani shelves could be offered. I shall probably require the shelf you allowed me some time ago – you can give it after 'Pranam'."

A sadhak wanted an easy chair. A voracious reader wanted to keep the book he had borrowed from the Mother for a day or two more. One loved to have a pre-historic desk. A sadhika wanted her commode to be changed. Another liked her rusty trunk to be painted. Yet another wished to have a mug in addition to a mat. Huh...innumerable were the demands of the sadhaks and the

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sadhikas. Poor Amal looked after everyone's need, of course after receiving commands from the Mother, for as Sri Aurobindo has said:

*“She was the single self of all these selves,
She was in them and they were all in her”*

(Savitri: Book VII, Canto VII, Lines 219 & 220)

In several of the letters that Amal had written to the Mother on various occasions he discussed his own problems, both physical and mental. He had a bit of bother with his weak knee and that continued throughout his life. In his letter (No.2039 dated 17.7.1933) he wrote:

“Should I now make it a point to practise walking daily – I mean, without support? Today I did so, but as the knee is still not strong nor very flexible, I feel some strain and pain. If, however, you think it is good to be on the move, I'll do it all the same. The inflexibility of the knee is due, I believe, to the little swelling which is still there – and also of course, to the lack of practise in moving the joint.”

To which the Mother replied: “No. On the contrary, so long as there is swelling, walking should be avoided”.

In another letter (No.2041 dated 19.7.1933) he expressed his pessimistic view to the Mother about his knee:

“Do you think it will be less than six months before I am able again to walk as I used? As it is the weak knee the one which had been operated upon, I don't feel very optimistic. Of course, I shall be walking in less than six months but like a snail or the older monsieur Cornette. I want to be well soon, Mother, at least by August 15.”

And the Mother replied “Do not put strain and it will come all right”.

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His bad legs were certainly a greater defect than stammering, but it was stammering that hurt him the most. And so when Amal came across a miracle man who promised to cure his stammering, he addressed a letter to the Mother seeking her permission: "...it would be such a relief to me to get rid of this cruel impediment in speech, which, though sometimes not very much in the way, is at times extremely annoying and disappointing" (letter No.2068 dated 3.10.1933).

To be cured of stammering meant so much to Amal. And when the Mother wrote back to use his commonsense in such matters, Amal penned his decision to the Mother: "...it seems to me commonsense to do so if there is the remotest chance of a cure" (letter No.1079 dated 9.10.1933).

But no miracle ever worked with Amal and he continued to stammer till the day of his death. In a pathetic voice he recorded his grievance in a lovely and admirable poem titled "A Poet's Stammer":

*My dream is spoken,
As if by sound
Were tremulously broken
Some vow profound.*

*A timeless hush
Draws ever back
The winging music-rush
Upon thought's track.*

*Though syllables sweep
Like golden birds,
Far loneliness of sleep
Dwindle my words.*

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*Beyond Life's clamour,
A mystery mars
Speech-light to a myriad summer
Of flickering stars. –*

Amal's grandfather, "the financial backbone of the family", like a hound was at the heels of his grandson always nudging him to return to Bombay. Amal put an end to the old man's dig at Sri Aurobindo's Yoga by posting a letter: "...kindly refrain from arguing about the reasonableness of my yoga; I have made my choice of life and all that is of any worth in me acclaims it as the very best. So I hope you will respect your convictions and what is greater than my convictions – the sacred presence I feel in my heart. Please do not tax me with questions like why my marriage should be no marriage and why I am not generous enough to provide you with grandchildren. Also I have formed certain habits of life here which I do not desire to be unnecessarily broken" (Letter No.843 dated 24.1.1934).

Amal decided to make Pondicherry his permanent abode and his decision was final. He found a real mother in the Mother of Sri Aurobindo Ashram and believed that she would take care of him in every possible and also in every impossible way. No wonder that his letter (No.1505 dated 11.3.1934) addressed to the Mother reads: "I have got a rather annoying cold in the nose since the afternoon. Kindly dry it up".

Several of Amal's letters addressed to the Mother speak volumes of how intimately acquainted they were. He addressed the Mother as 'Mother Darling' or 'Dearest Mother' or 'Mother, my dearest' or 'Beloved Mother'. Here is a letter that gives a taste of their intimacy – the intimacy between mother and child:

"Of late, especially, I think, after my seeing you on the 25th – I feel not quite a disappearance of passion but an automatic

indrawing of consciousness in the sex-organ. I have been often surprised by it, and agreeably, but there is a lurking fear lest I should become impotent, and something obscure wants to cling on to the capacity of sexual excitement as if that were a precious joy.

“This afternoon during a short sleep I was about to have a seminal emission. But there was a powerful pulling back of the fluid so that it flowed inwards again and I could feel and even hear it boiling and swirling at the root of the penis. Only a little of it happened to escape out.

“I shall be glad to have a few more words from you about the subject – and further power of self-control” (Letter No.1257 dated 9.12.1933).

Amal, in fact, was trying his best to fit himself suitably with the Ashram life. He was trying to bid goodbye to human vices one after the other. In an undated letter (No.1259) he sought the advice of the Mother on a matter of serious concern: “I am troubled again by that still urge of masturbation. I haven’t yielded. But please do something to eradicate it completely. In what way could I best cooperate?”

The power of self control that he gained gradually made Amal abstain from drinking wine, his favourite pastime. Letter No.524 dated 11.10.1935 reads thus:

“...I suddenly resolved not to touch drink again; but saw some inconveniences in the way, so withdrew the resolution in its extreme form; yet a power for the good remained.

“Facing myself later, I perceived that I did not have any special complex for alcohol but that I should still take care and if it was at all necessary to drink something nice I must confine myself to innocent cold drinks.

“Yesterday I had written that I liked wine and a cold drink equally. Now there was a distinct desire to avoid the former.

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“Then I fell asleep and had a most frightfully realistic dream in which my teeth broke off in my mouth and fell out in my hand and on the floor. Thinking – in the dream itself – that this must be a dream, I dreamed that I got up. But in that condition also I discovered that my teeth came loose and I spat out quite a lot of them. I was terribly pained to see such a thing.

“I really woke up after this and, understanding what the falling of teeth meant, felt a great release – a fine sense all over me of openness to you and a freedom from the old consciousness. Of course, the thinking mind brought back certain retarding considerations – but surely, Mother dear, something has been done.

“I would like to have some words from you.”

To which the affectionate Mother replied with delight: “I am happy at your resolution and I hope you will keep to it. I was going to write to you that you must choose between seeing me and drink – for I would not see you if you mention drinking – but I am glad to hear that you have made the resolution already”.

Once Amal’s grandfather understood that his grandson was moving into ascetic life, he almost gave away the very idea of supporting him in matters of finance. As no postman knocked Amal’s door with any money-order, he devised a simple way of extracting money from the old man. Under the pretext of buying a gold necklace for his wife Lalita he requested his grandfather Petronji to send him Rs. 3000. But poor Amal had to stomach the old man’s dig at him. The reply came: “What use will it be to you? Daulat does not stir out of the Ashram; she cannot wear it. You have no children and are not likely to get any. Then what do you want it for? Only to look at it and admire it and run the risk of having it stolen. I am sorry to disappoint you but if you calmly consider you will admit the soundness of my views. I have talked

the matter over with maeji and she agrees with me” (Letter No.1075 dated 7.1.1938).

How cleverly Amal worked at winning the old man over! How cleverly did the old man gave him back in his own coin! Perhaps it was a sort of tit-for-tat for not listening to his words of requests and his great plea to return to Bombay.

How could Amal go back to Bombay once he found a foothold in the Ashram? He realized that he was meant for that sort of life lead in the Ashram. Where could he find a mother like the Mother who treated Amal as her son? Where could he find a guru like Sri Aurobindo who helped him in his literary endeavours and advancements? The needs of an Ashramite are very limited and Amal felt that his quest got fulfilled. A short poem he wrote during that period serves proof enough to that fact.

Quest

*Long have I sought Him
Yet never could find,
In the heart's hollow
Or hill of mind;*

*Neither through lifted
Azure surmise
Nor the red darkness
Of calm shut eyes!*

*Will no ardour
Of solitude linn
My roving bareness
With image of Him?*

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*Dreams His hair wayward
Gossamer-light
Or a cool heavy
Hanging night?*

*O once I knew joy
In unborn years
Ere the mist floated
Of earthly tears!...*

*But sweeter than tangible
Loveliness yet,
This haloed absence
I never forget.*

So under the divine care of the Mother and the masterly touch of Sri Aurobindo Amal began his life in Pondicherry, rarely moving out of its precincts except for a short spell to be with his relatives in Bombay.

It was only here Amal Kiran alias K. D. Sethna began to wield his pen. Though he bloomed as a poet, he very soon branched out and established himself as an outstanding literary and cultural critic, an authority on the works of Sri Aurobindo, a noted literary detective and Historian, and above all the indefatigable editor of *Mother India* with a considerable body of writing in the field of creative journalism.

A Long Road of Shimmering Discoveries

Under the tutelage of the great master Sri Aurobindo and the loving care of the Mother, Sethna gained valuable experience and training, and began to feel “conscious of the high things not yet won”. His intellectual companions in the Ashram were such great stalwarts as Nirodbaran, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, Dilip Kumar Roy, Arjava, among others, who all delighted in being called ‘Aurobindonian School of Poets’. And Sethna came to be known as its ‘Captain’.

Before Amal started writing serious poetry, he began to read the master’s verse. In letter No.1518 dated 16.9.1934 he confessed to Sri Aurobindo: “I feel a greater understanding of the poetic ‘organology’ as Carlyle would have put it, distinguishing it from the mere ‘mechanology’ of the poetic technician”.

Reading the poetry of Sri Aurobindo showed Amal a new pathway in writing poetry and he very much wished that every line of what he wrote should be supervised by the master. Poems from Amal’s inspired pen started pouring out and he sent them to Sri Aurobindo’s room almost every day.

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On the top margin of each leaf Amal requested Sri Aurobindo to give a critical, an all scrutinising estimate of each line of his poem. In one such note (No.739 dt.10.11.1935) Amal wrote:

“Sri Aurobindo,

Worth anything as poetry? Please give your impression – in some detail, judging all the elements: mood, language, rhythm structure.”

In another (No.669 dt.12.11.1935) Amal wrote:

“Sri Aurobindo,

How do you find this poem? What plane does it come from? I suppose the first and the last stanzas are rather obscure?”

Amal perhaps was more interested in finding out from his master the quality of each of his poems he penned.

On each leaf of Amal’s poem Sri Aurobindo wrote ‘good’ or ‘very good’ or ‘very fine’ or ‘very beautiful’ or ‘very powerful’ or even ‘magnificent’. The master, of course, encouraged all those who sought his help in the field of writing but never hesitated to call a spade a spade. Amal wanted to know why only such comments and so he emboldened himself to ask in a letter (No.1518 dated 16.9.1934). Here is Sri Aurobindo’s reply: “...rather kinds than levels...the differences of mood and manner...the various planes from which the poems come but with the same degree of aesthetic perfection”.

Amal took the help of Sri Aurobindo for perfecting his poetry. At the same time he was not ready to gulp down all the suggestions that the master wrote on the margin of the leaf. He had disagreed with Sri Aurobindo on the use of an indefinite article before ‘waterfall’ (Letter No.1225 dt.27.1.1934). He had also fought with his master over the word ‘roar’ which he had used in a poem and which Sri Aurobindo did not approve of (Letter No.1128):

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“Sri Aurobindo,

Why, what’s wrong with that ‘roar’? And why shouldn’t it mumble like an earthquake? How is that all of a sudden it has startled you? At first the only thing that ‘struck’ you objectionable was ‘striking’ as applied to ‘mew’, but that now is struck off. If the ‘mew’ remains, the ‘roar’ must come in, too – otherwise the former would be from the viewpoint of style, a catastrophe, it must rely on a contrast for its justification...”

Amal

18.1.1935

In spite of his difference of opinion over the choice of words, Amal very much relied on Sri Aurobindo’s verdict: “I am awaiting your thumbs up or thumbs down”. At times he was also apologetic: “I am very sorry if my letter showed want of gratitude for the trouble taken by you to correct my mistakes. I don’t know if I’ll find anything better than the suggestions you have made – and please continue to make suggestions wherever necessary” (Letter No.780 dt.30.1.1935).

Under the expert guidance of Sri Aurobindo, Amal was able to write a poem a day. The master, in spite of his tight schedule, corrected and commented on the very same leaf the poem was written and redirected it to its author. Gradually Amal had developed confidence and before he dashed off a poem to his master, he gave several readings to it and strengthened two or three weak expressions. When the last reading told him that the concluding two lines were somehow unworthy and ineffective, he pigeonholed it till the right sort of inspiration came and so occasionally he delayed the poem a day.

“A real poet”, according to Sethna, “is one who has the capacity to express himself with intensity of vision, intensity of

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word and intensity of rhythm. These three intensities in whatever degree are required to make a poem a poem: otherwise it is at best some kind of very efficient verse". Further defining a true poem he said: "It can be about anything but in all poetry there is a spiritual force at work; it can work directly and it can work indirectly. Mere belief in God will not do, your every line must move like a god. Then whether you believe in God or do not, it does not matter so far as poetry is concerned. You have to write from some inner source—that is all."

Immortality through poetry was perhaps Amal's goal. He worked for it each day. No wonder he is classed best among the poets in the history of Indian Poetry in English. His poems were gathered between covers in half a dozen volumes – *Artist Love* (1925), *The Secret Splendour* (1941), *The Adventure of the Apocalypse* (1949), *Overhead Poetry* (1972), *Altar and Flame* (1975), *Poems by Amal Kiran and Nirodbaran* (1987). Later they all joined hands along with his uncollected poems to see the light of day in a pillow-like volume running to nearly 800 pages titled *The Secret Splendour: Collected Poems* (1993), published by Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry.

Sri Aurobindo taught Amal how to concentrate on poetic effect, exclude all sorts of expressions which were not in tune with the central theme or the kind of spiritual poetry Amal aimed at. The prose writings as well as the poetry were meant to bring out the best in him on the new line he had struck and so he became more self-critical than before. In that way, the amount of his writing diminished at first. But it gained in quality. Sri Aurobindo was a hard taskmaster. And his opinion Amal considered 'super-Coleridgean'.

Amal beautifully brought out in the following poem his credo as a poet:

If I Became a Great Poet

*A monument of music
Out-pyramidding all!
Seeing it none shall grieve
To see me fall –
None save the heart of you
That make no feast on fame:
What can you care for splendours
Signed with my name
If, to your sweet calling
By word or waiting lip
That monument is an answer
While the warm hungers slip
Out of my flesh for ever,
Leaving no joy to your lust
But the final hour of forgetting
My dust in your dust?*

Amal's areas of interest ranged from literature, philosophy, mystical and spiritual as well as scientific thought to topics of ancient Indian history and, national and international questions that haunted the period of his stay on Planet Earth.

As in everybody's life there were rough spots in Amal's marital relationships. And whenever such rough spots came, Amal used to thank God. Otherwise he would have been seduced into the ordinary life as the *summum bonum*.

In the letter No.796 dt.30.1.1937 Amal complained of his wife to Sri Aurobindo:

“...Lalita has always expressed the regret of having fallen in love with me. She says I brought her nothing but sorrow, uncertainty,

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insecurity, unfaithfulness. It is true that my past – described and confessed to her myself – put her under a shadow of perpetual fear–fear that I would be unfaithful to her. But there was a point in our friendship, after which I resolved to give myself to her, to love her only, and to the utmost of my capacity I did so. She refuses to admit that I ever did anything worth speaking about; and I marvel how she could forget all the solicitude, all the service, all the sacrifice I gave, how that haunting fear induced by my past could make her overlook the way I did devote myself to her – the very first time in my life that I resolved and succeeded in being faithful; the intense sacrifices I gave just for her are still vivid to me and I cannot understand why she should not acknowledge them, why she should make me feel that after all I have wasted the utmost self-giving and love, I was capable of in the human way. Am I really so mistaken in thinking that I had loved her? I feel hurt to believe that she was so blind and is the same even now when whatever blinding circumstances might have been then are over and she is free from all that feverish past. I was not entirely happy with her, though she loved me – because of the tensions due to my past, but I cannot in justice overlook that love of hers. Why should she deny all that I felt and did? Do you truly think I am pretending or that I am deceiving myself? Not that the past matters very much now; the old bondage to each other is broken; but I want to face facts and I want to know myself...”

Amal continued his complaint in his next letter too:

“...I admit the mixture of the vital and the ego. But in what human love is it absent? Was it absent in Lalita’s love for me? Does pure love feel vindictive? Does it torture the beloved? Does it insist so much on selfish possession? And yet, how can I ever deny that in spite of everything she loved me very much. Why can’t she be just to me also? Consider my complex and errant nature. To have allowed it to be brought into a straight line for her,

to have submerged all my interests just to please her, to have felt a self-giving which to my great regret, I have not always been able always to repeat with the same passion even here to the Mother, to have almost worshipped her as something more than human – does all this mean nothing? How can the rising higher of one's ideal or a defensive attitude render on totally unjust? She never denies that she loved; why then should she say: 'After all what Amal felt was so little. If you want to know the truth, ask Mother'. And this was not spoken in reference to any higher ideal of love realized here.

"I do not deny that I am a-moral and desirous of a serious *volupté* in a certain part of my nature, and that she had to make a tremendous effort to win me. But when one has definitely surpassed oneself, risen far above all the common play and flux of feeling and experienced a love that flung itself madly at the feet of the beloved – don't you think that it would hurt one to find that the person for whom so much was felt refuses to acknowledge it, considers it worth nothing and refers to Mother as a justifying authority of her attitude? Did I really feel 'so little'? I would not bother much about things anybody said, but in this case I feel some sort of desecration. It may well be that in me the lower vital, the sex element, was more in prominence than in her – but at the core, the burning centre of my emotion, and even in the outward self-abandon of its expression, was my experience so paltry as compared to her own that she should after ten years of mental clarity, refuse to see anything?" (Letter No.797 dt.1.2.1937).

Sri Aurobindo was such a lovely guru that his good counsels made Amal write a worldly wise letter on the next day itself. The letter No.799 dt. 2.2.1937 had put an end to the misunderstanding of the couple:

"...I do not compare the glamour of the past with the true beauty of the spiritual present. If I were not convinced of the

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superiority of the latter, where would be the sense of my staying here or originally of my coming here? What any human being ever can give is 'so little' and even on the level of the dissensions I understand why Lalita could say so. The effort she had to make so exhausted her that when the true thing was got it hardly had any value. What I wanted her to see was that though she could not appreciate it, the true thing was there. I am not excusing myself from the responsibility of having made it hard for her to appreciate. I only wanted you to tell me whether I was mistaken about the genuineness of my emotion. You have said that it was genuine, especially since the psychic element was involved. Well, that's enough. Lalita and I have had a chat just to clear up matters. There is no misunderstanding left now and we have agreed not to rake up the past any more. This little bit of a confusion has helped to relieve certain tensions and led to better consideration of the demands of the true life here. Neither Lalita nor I will look back to the old vital love in a spirit of enthusiastic appreciation but there is no need to spit upon it either. We must regard it with a detached calm now and try not to stand in the way of each other's progress by discussing it. Is that all right?"

To the last question that Amal asked in his letter, Sri Aurobindo gave his answer by writing "Yes, that's all right". And that was the end of it. It was not Amal who divorced Lalita but it was she who did it. Convenience was the only reason. Both of them wanted to be free from each other. So they got separated. But they continued to be very good friends.

When Amal went to Bombay on a long visit, he came to know that the girl who had been in love with him before he married Daulat (Lalita) was still single. But he was not attached to her, though he admired her and liked her. At that time he came to know her, he had no idea of marrying anybody. He married Daulat because both of them were seekers of spiritual life and they had

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come to the Ashram together. Otherwise marriage was far from his mind.

Psychologists are of the opinion that it is better to marry someone who loves you rather than marrying someone you love. Amal loved Daulat, married her and lost her. So this time he opted for Sehra who really loved Amal and remained a spinster all the time thinking of him. And when Amal found that she became extremely miserable at her own place, he took her away and married her on condition that she should be an understanding wife since his life was set on following a spiritual goal. She agreed.

Back in the Ashram Lalita as Amal's ex-wife and Sehra as his current wife became very great friends. Both were very dear to Amal while he was with them. But all through his life Amal wanted to be as free as possible for the spiritual future. Sehra was a frail but agile woman. It was her spiritual urge and prophetic vision that was responsible for making Sethna what he is today. Truly, behind every successful man there is a woman.

6

“My Paper”

Amal’s correspondence with Sri Aurobindo began quite early. As a young man he had his problems. And the Master advised him to face the Jaws of Life without flinching and that if his central being had chosen the spiritual path there was nothing to fear. And Amal began to bask in the sunshine of his Master’s affection and love right from 1927.

It was only in that year he came to hear of Sri Aurobindo’s *Savitri* in progress. October 25, 1936 proved to be the most memorable day in Amal’s life. It was only from that day Sri Aurobindo sent passages from his magnum opus to Amal to type out. Installment after installment, day after day, reached Amal and that went on for months till there came a lull in the composition of the work, destined to be the first epic in Indian writing in English.

Amal had occasionally the temerity to make suggestions if any about Sri Aurobindo’s poetry. Why did Sri Aurobindo choose Amal to read his *Savitri*? Amal was trying to write what his master Sri Aurobindo had called Overhead Poetry. That is poetry coming from planes or levels of consciousness beyond the thinking mind;

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not only behind the thinking mind as most poetry is, but beyond it. When Amal wanted Sri Aurobindo to give him samples of that kind of poetry the master sent his disciple the opening 12 or 15 lines of *Savitri*. For Amal it was absolutely overwhelming.

Fifteen or so months later Amal wrote to Sri Aurobindo: “I am happy that you are taking up ‘Savitri’ again. Here is the whole unfinished section after line 670. I hope you will complete it a little before the 25th (the date of my departure from Pondy) so that I may have the good luck to type a fair copy for you” (Letter no.192 dt.11.2.1938).

Amal had discussed Sri Aurobindo’s poetry in several of his volumes: *Sri Aurobindo – The Poet (1970)*, *Overhead Poetry (1972)*, *The Poetic Genius of Sri Aurobindo (1974)*, *Talks on Poetry (1989)*, *The Vision and Work of Sri Aurobindo (1992)*, *Indian Poets and English Poetry (1994)*, *Life – Poetry – Yoga – Vol. I (1994)*, *Life – Poetry – Yoga –Vol. II (1995)*, *Life – Poetry – Yoga –Personal Letters - Vol. III (1997)*, *Aspects of Sri Aurobindo (1995)* and *Inspiration and Effort (1995)*.

It was this great dedication to work and greater devotion to his Master that made him take up interest in literature and its sister subjects. The sort of work that Amal had done after becoming an Ashramite was really amazing. Talented and courageous, he had the gift for research and his areas were as diverse as Ancient Indian History, Aryan Invasion theory, Blake and Shakespeare studies, Christology, comparative mythology, Hellenic literature and culture, Indian systems of yoga, international affairs, literary criticism, mystical, spiritual and scientific thought, Overhead poetry, philosophy, the English language and the Indian spirit, the structure of thought in modern physics and biology... wow! The list is endless!

All those who were intimate with K.D.Sethna knew that he was always preoccupied with one project or another. People from

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many parts of the globe whenever they came to Pondicherry loved to visit him after having darshan in the Ashram. He too loved to meet people and respond to their queries. It was always 'time well spent' with him. While he provided them with lot of information in the subjects he was familiar with, he was never shy of asking questions all with the noble intention of gathering information for the betterment of his research.

No wonder that when the Ashram wanted to start a cultural journal of its own, named *Mother India*, it chose K.D. Sethna as its editor.

Mother India was originally an idea of Keshav Dev Poddar, known afterwards as Nava, short for Navajata, meaning the 'New Born'. In 1949 he wanted to bring out a journal commenting on current topics, both National and International, but with the Aurobindonian view at the back of it. The journal was not intended to be openly a mouthpiece of Sri Aurobindo. Sethna was diffident about his own role as editor because he was not quite conversant with political themes. Perhaps he was in a fix. As usual he sought the help of the Mother who too knew very little about politics. But she encouraged him saying, "There is Sri Aurobindo. He will do everything for you."

Sri Aurobindo jolly well did. Originally Sethna had wanted somebody like Anilbaran, another illustrious Ashramite and a one time political activist, to touch on political themes. But the Mother and Sri Aurobindo insisted that he should do it himself. So Sethna, who had little touch with the political world, came to be regarded as almost a pundit by his friends. And people who recognized his talents gathered around him when they saw him anywhere near the Ashram and asked his opinion on this or that current political topic.

Discussing Sri Aurobindo's views Sethna found that they did not quite chime with the current political attitudes. So when he

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wrote about Kashmir the Government of India wanted to give a bit of its mind to Sethna. He was asked to face a Press Council. He was severely warned. He was also advised to be careful for not being careful enough in expressing his views on the Kashmir situation. Sethna was frank enough to tell the Council that the duty of an editor very much rests in seeing things very clearly in their essential truth and writing about certain things without any reservation. The Press Council stuck to its guns and told him to be more careful because it is the duty of every editor to think how Pakistan would treat her Hindu minorities.

All his political articles were sent first to be read out to Sri Aurobindo by Nirodbaran or Nolini. Only when he sent the note 'Fully approved' they appeared in print. So, for the first year and a half or even a year and three quarters all that Sethna wrote could be taken as Sri Aurobindo's own direct views on national and international problems.

In the early days, when political opinions used to be expressed in *Mother India*, somebody began to criticize some of the ideas and when this idea was reported to Sri Aurobindo, he said: "Doesn't he know that *Mother India* is my paper?"

After Sri Aurobindo had left his body, the Mother advised Sethna not to touch directly on politics. Later in a reply to Amal's letter she sent a note that tolled a death-knell: "No politics in any of our publications" (Letter No.2302 dated 15.11.1965).

The name of *Mother India* was suggested by Sehra, Sethna's second wife. But there was a protest against it, because a book by such name had come out which was anti-Indian, written by Katherine Mayo, though Mahatma Gandhi dismissed the work as 'the drain Inspector's report'. But the couple persisted in keeping the name so as to clear its associations, and get the right kind of

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thought connected with that name. When *Mother India* was started, the Mother sent her blessings to Sethna: “Stick to the date, live on faith”. Sethna, the editor of *Mother India*, adhered to her words till he breathed his last.

Mother India's policy was broad-based. Essentially it has to be Aurobindonian. But this is not to say that every article should be on Sri Aurobindo or on his yoga. The only demand was that it should not run counter to Sri Aurobindo's vision. So all kinds of articles – literary, cultural, artistic – were invited and accommodated in *Mother India*. Occasionally the situation was such that the editor himself had to write three or four articles per issue under different names. One was ‘Satyavan’. Sethna also ran a column of literary tidbits called ‘The Owl's Banquet’. The owl is the bird of Minerva, the Goddess of Learning. Naturally the author of the column was ‘Minerva’.

The early contributors were mostly friends and most of them Aurobindonians. But occasionally the editor got contributions from outside the Aurobindonian circle. He gladly published them provided they were not against the trend of Sri Aurobindo's thought. The contributors were paid. The payment was Rs. 15 per 1000 words. But the journal had to stop paying its contributors because it could not financially manage it. When *Mother India* was a political voice it had a print order of 2000 copies. But when it stopped being political the number had to be cut down. Then there arose the question of raising the price. From Rs.12 a year to Rs.15...just an extra three rupees... oh, that was enough for 300 Indian subscribers. They fell away. It was so saddening. But none of the foreign subscribers had defaulted.

Sri Aurobindo and the Mother contributed to the growth of the journal. Their support was quite constant. And their confidence in the editor was a great source of encouragement. When it was suggested that for certain sections somebody could be the working

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editor, the Mother did not approve of it. She said he could contribute articles but the main editorship should remain with Sethna.

At the beginning Sethna had a co-editor, Soli Albless, a friend of his who was by profession an architect but in whom he read signs of a future writer of some weight. He was of great help to Sethna, but owing to some circumstances he left the Ashram and naturally ceased to be his helper. So after two and a half years or so, Sethna had to carry on *Mother India* single-handed. It has been a regular production though the original idea of its being a fortnightly was given up and it became a monthly.

Mother India was distinct from the other Ashram periodicals in that it was not directly financed by the Ashram. It had to earn its living independently, by means of help in getting advertisements and by occasional liberal donations.

What did Sethna achieve by editing this financially less viable journal in all these years? When *Mother India* was started he had to consciously try to put himself in complete tune with Sri Aurobindo's mind. So his editorship served as an additional yoga on his part. And afterwards too he always appealed to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother to help him in the course of doing *Mother India* work. So it was a special line of contact with them which helped also his usual literary inner communication with Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

Further *Mother India* is the magazine that groomed several writers and reviewers, including the author of the present book, and found its pride of place in the select list of relevant periodicals numbering only to 31 both from India and abroad that have contributed to the growth of Indian writing in English (Amritjit Singh: *Indian Literature in English, 1827-1979: A Guide to Information Sources*, USA: Gale Research Company, 1981, pp.496)

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And when Sri Aurobindo passed away, Sethna expressed certain despair about his literary work, because he always used to turn to him for help. In fact, there were moments when he wrote to his master: “I was thinking to stop writing poetry for sometime in order to let the inspiration come richer through a medium of hushed intensity” (Letter No.848 dt. 6.2.1934). Again in the Letter No.1407 dated 24.9.1936 he wrote: “I cannot tell you how very helpful your remarks were – I feel so much nearer the source of mystic inspiration – I don’t mean that I shall henceforth draw flawlessly from it but there is a certain illumination come from what you have written about the desiderata of mystic poetry. Of course, poets work principally by an instinct but some need conscious perception and knowledge to foster and fulfill that instinct – the more I know what poetry should be the closer I feel to a capacity for it...” Here is yet another letter (No.1296 dt.21.8.1937) that he wrote when he felt himself sliding into obsession: “I am feeling uneasy and unsettled. Aspiration seems almost extinguished. To put it more precisely although I want to aspire I don’t have the necessary impetus to satisfy that wish. Tamas weighs my consciousness down – so that I don’t have the inward energy left even to try writing poetry with sufficient effort. Please send me inspiration and tell me if this recurring cloud of incapacity comes as a sign that after all I am doomed to taste nothing more than a mere drop of the yogic life. I find yoga ever so difficult – but I am appalled by a prospect of labyrinthine useless when I think of the ordinary life...”

At all such moments of despair, Sri Aurobindo’s words came to Sethna like the chill cool breeze solacing his bereaved heart. But when the Mother came to know about the note of despair when Sri Aurobindo left his body, she held Sethna’s hand and said: ‘Nothing has changed. Ask for Sri Aurobindo’s help and you will

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always get it.” That put heart into him. He knew that the help was always there, not only in regard to *Mother India*, but also in regard to his literary ventures. For his approach to intellectual and artistic achievements he very much relied on his Master.

Honours, awards and rewards – none of these were anywhere on his mind when he burnt the mid-night oil in his study. He was steadily marching in his chosen path all the time driving sense of humour in his otherwise serious work. Yet Public honours came to him unasked. We are given to understand that the Government of India once approached the Sri Aurobindo Ashram authorities to recommend someone who would be fit enough to discharge the duties of the Consul General of Pondicherry. Both Sri Aurobindo and the Mother chose K.D. Sethna, but he declined the offer for he felt such a power would drag him away slowly from the direct contact of the objects of his highest adoration.

Dr. Spiegelberg, the Founder-President of the Asiatic Society, at California, had high regards for Sethna. He considered him an authority on Indian philosophies and also on the Philosophy and Yoga of Sri Aurobindo. Hence he offered him the post of a lecturer in the Stanford University. Sethna again declined the offer and suggested the name of Sri Haridas Chaudhuri to Sri Aurobindo and on his approval wrote to Dr. Spiegelberg about it. Dr. Spiegelberg accepting Sethna’s recommendation said in all humility, “My Guru’s word is a law to me.” Such incidents are proof enough to show how Sethna spurned earthly name and fame, preferring the close proximity of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. He was really proud of himself when he remarked: “Who cares for what the world says when those great wide eyes, deeper than oceans, fell on these poems and accepted them as fit offerings to His divinity? The Lord’s look, the Lord’s smile—that is what I have lived for.”

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The Israel University wanted to rope in Sethna for a series of lectures on Sri Aurobindo's Philosophy and the Indian philosophies. When Sethna conveyed the news to the Mother, she remarked: "So you are going?" Sethna with no second thoughts responded: "Am I such a fool, Mother?" The sweet Mother smiled sweetly and thereby put an end to the matter.

Several such proposals came to Sethna by and by from various parts of the globe. But he simply brushed all such offers aside and all such actions of his echoed only Sri Aurobindo's words: "All is too little that the world can give."

7

Battles Fought and Won

When Sri Aurobindo left his body on December 5, 1950 Sethna felt he had lost everything. In point of fact, his own life seemed to get drained out of him. He always felt that Sri Aurobindo was very unique for his vision which went beyond all thought structure of other writers. He was very unique for his power of expression to make that vision living to others in the form of words. The new disciple let out his cry to his master in the following lines:

December 5, 1950

*Till the fall of your body a void was my day,
You sank like a sun and made me your west:
O Deathless who died since in no other way
Could you be buried for ever in my breast!*

Sethna believed that the range of Sri Aurobindo's knowledge and interest went beyond the range of any other Indian figure, somewhat of comparable stature. Further he found that in Sri Aurobindo the man and the superman were so intermixed that it was difficult to entangle the mere man. The human side of him

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was quite evident. The way he dealt with all his questions, yogic as well as literary, showed a great compassion. And the way he always encouraged Sethna in spite of his doubts as to his capacity to do yoga was remarkable. There were times when Sethna easily got depressed and Sri Aurobindo picked him out of the slough of despond again and again.

Words, it is said, are poor comforters when the heart knows its own sorrows. Yet the Mother's assurance that nothing had really changed and that Sethna could draw help from Sri Aurobindo just as before, kept him going.

The knowledge that Sri Aurobindo inculcated in him and the courage his father had instilled into him turned Sethna into a scholar critic, ready to take up machine guns against hurdles and troubles. He was not a pugnacious man, of course, but he was not ready to stomach insults – insults hurled at his favourite subjects. He always decided to conduct his own defence. He gave evidence for the defence in every literary case he took up. It may be a point of view which will be awfully hard to defend. Yet he was boldly going where no man had gone before. All these became feasible for him because of his serious study of books, men and matters.

It is good to recollect here that he was called up once before the Press Council to defend his treatment of Kashmir and Pakistan issue. Again when General MacArthur was dismissed by Truman, *Mother India* was the only publication in the whole world which stood by MacArthur. Sethna wrote and published an article titled "A Defence of General MacArthur". And even when the American Consul, Henderson, was trying to be apologetic about certain utterances of MacArthur at a meeting of the Press Bureau, Sethna had to get up and defend MacArthur against the American Consul. Sethna told Henderson that MacArthur belonged to the true Kshatriya temperament which takes pleasure in fighting, especially when it knows that its cause is just. And, by the way, the Mother

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herself supported Sethna in backing MacArthur. She had a very high opinion of his military genius. She was prepared to rank him even with military captains like the Duke of Wellington.

What Sethna had said of MacArthur in his defence holds true in his case too. Though a Parsi by birth he was a Kshatriya by instinct. He couldn't keep quiet when someone needed help in the proper understanding of Sri Aurobindo's writings. He had broken many a lance with several critics. Among them he found P. Lal of Kolkata quite a congenial person to quarrel with.

Sometime in 1951, a year after Sri Aurobindo's demise, Prof. Purushottam Lal, a poet in his own right and the founder of Writers Workshop at Calcutta, mustered courage to criticize the poetry of Sri Aurobindo, the only modern poet, in any Indian language, to have attempted the large philosophical poem *Savitri*. He wrote an essay "A Testament for Our Poets" and published it in *Sunday Standard*. Therein he condemned the epic and warned Indian poets to keep away from the Aurobindonian brand of verse if they wish to do anything worthwhile. Again in the same essay he wrote: "When I read any passage from Sri Aurobindo's epic a sick-as-stale-lemonade shiver gallops up and down my spine at a rate impossible to compute". He described Savitri-like verse as "greasy, weak-spined and purple adjective poetry", "a loose expression of a loose emotion". Further he cautioned that poets like him should necessarily band together and produce a Manifesto pledging "there is every likelihood that the blurred, rubbery and airy sentiments of a Sri Aurobindo will slowly clog our own poetry". On reading such a vitriolic essay Sethna felt that Lal betrayed his most serious lack of response to spiritual poetry. And he was not a man to leave things at that and make Lal continue to wallow in ignorance. He was prepared to lecture.

So Sethna responded with a strongly worded letter defending the poet in Sri Aurobindo. He began with a remark that Mr. Lal's

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essay betrayed his ignorance and had no clear idea of spiritual poetry. It was because of this lacking of idea Mr. Lal couldn't show true sensitiveness to the kind of inspiration that is *Savitri*. Since the epic is "spiritual philosophy as well as spiritual vision Mr. Lal is equally at sea with poetry that fuses the philosophical concept with mystic symbolism and revelation". Quoting relevant passages from *Savitri* Sethna proved that the epic "transposed to the plane of spiritual vision and spiritual philosophy, illumined and enlarged in the consciousness of a seer-sage, all that Mr.Lal demands of a true poem is here in abundance".

Sethna published his response to Lal's remarks in *Mother India* (October 1968) and sent a copy of it to the unjust critic. P.Lal jumped into the fray. He wrote back: "...I am flattered that you should think my remarks worth two lengthy pages of reply...In spite of your many cogent arguments and very level-headed attempt to puncture my thesis, I am still a member of the group which cannot find pleasure in Sri Aurobindo..." But he thanked Sethna profusely for his "stimulating criticism".

It was this response that evidently called for a second rejoinder. Sethna wrote: "...you represent a rather small class which has allowed some obscure prejudice to colour its judgment. There seems almost to be perversity at work, eager to run down somebody who, some instinct tells one, is truly great..." Quoting the case of C.R.M. and Tambimuthu, who "seldom let an opportunity go by of having a fling at Sri Aurobindo's poetry, whether earlier or later, without ever having taken the trouble to read him sufficiently." He hit the nail on its head by saying that Sri Aurobindo's usage of words is beyond him.

P.Lal unable to withstand the arguments wrote a short letter (December 1951) to Sethna and told him: "...it is Christmas now and hatchets are best buried...I shall in 1952 read *Savitri* with

greater care, in order to cultivate a more perfect sympathy for it”, and thereby put an end helplessly to the arguments.

Who is this C.R.M. that Sethna talked about to P.Lal? He was an Irishman who edited the *Illustrated Weekly of India*. In his regular column “Books and Comments” he reviewed (July 31, 1949) K.D. Sethna’s work *The Poetic Genius of Sri Aurobindo*.

A note about this book would help. In his book *Light and Laughter*, a series of talks Sethna delivered in Pondicherry, he recorded the importance of his book. He concluded his ‘Talk Two’ in the following manner: “...the matter of keeping *Savitri* a secret was a difficult job. In those days Nolini was Sri Aurobindo’s postman. He used to bring the letters for everyone; we used to wait for him in the morning. And he knew that some special correspondence was going on between Sri Aurobindo and me, because the Mother might have been giving him the folded letters to put into the envelopes. Each time he handed me my letter he lifted his eyebrows. I looked very innocent and took it and waited for him to go away before opening it. He would hesitate for a minute or two and then go away. It happened like that 3 or 4 days and then it got on my nerves. So I wrote to Sri Aurobindo: “What should I do? I think Nolini is going to ask me. Then Sri Aurobindo very blandly replied, “Let us hope he won’t.” But still the silent inquisition of the lifted eyebrows did not cease! Then I wrote in desperation to Sri Aurobindo: “I am sure it is going to happen now. Please tell me what to do. Can I take him into the secret or not?” Then Sri Aurobindo said: “All right but only him.” So this secret remained a secret between Nolini and me for 10 years. Only in 1946, when I began to write a book on Sri Aurobindo’s poetry, I divulged *Savitri* to the world – with Sri Aurobindo’s approval. *Savitri* came out in excerpts for the first time in that book of mine, *The Poetic Genius of Sri Aurobindo*. Afterwards the Ashram published it in fascicles and then as a volume...”

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Now to the review of C.R.M. After calling Sethna's book interesting, he made a very sweeping statement: "...for Mr. Sethna, Sri Aurobindo's Muse is a case of 'this side idolatry', and then I am not so sure that genius is so rampant as he claims. The merits seem to me to consist of a high level of spiritual utterance, abundant metrical skill, and a sound poetic sensitivity based on the classics and much akin to that of many of the more conservative masters. Sometimes it is as if Sri Aurobindo had taken the cream of Milton, Wordsworth and Tennyson and stirred it to boiling point in the cauldron of his Muse."

It was this remark that drew Sethna's fire. And C.R.M. had no way but to burn in Sethna's fury for "his rather cursory acquaintance with Sri Aurobindo's poetry and a certain haste in making up his mind". He wrote a long rejoinder, winding up the letter with the following lines: "May I hope that C.R.M. whose writings are often acute as well as charming, will give my book a closer reading and, instead of being in a hurry to pass judgment, open himself more sensitively, more discerningly, to the Aurobindonian inspiration?"

C.R.M. who had the shock of his life refused to publish the letter on the pretext that there was no correspondence column in the *Weekly*. But since Sethna felt that the editor was a gifted writer of considerable popularity and his readers might accept his estimate of Sri Aurobindo, it was necessary that he should voice in *Mother India* (September 3, 1949) what was originally meant for the *Weekly*.

Dr. Nirodbaran, Sri Aurobindo's physician and amanuensis, had raved about the critical acumen of his 'cherished friend' Sethna thus: "...and the master has left us. But before leaving, he commanded: 'Stick on'...Also, before leaving, Sri Aurobindo saw to it that, among those he had initiated into poetry with so much special care, one of us at least would be able to follow the path he

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has opened and I must say that my friend Amal has admirably fitted himself to that task, and is capable too of taking us along...I can say without fear of contradiction that he is the best exegete of Sri Aurobindo's poetry...I can go further and claim that in the vast field of English and European poetry Amal can stand on a par, not only in India but everywhere with the best of critics".

Well! That was Sethna. What Nirodbaran had said of Sethna, "the best exegete of Sri Aurobindo's poetry" and "on a par with the best of critics" holds water when we read Sethna's best known works in Literary Criticism, viz., *Sri Aurobindo on Shakespeare*, *Sri Aurobindo— (The Poet, The Poetic Genius of Sri Aurobindo, "Two Loves" and "A Worthier Pen", The Obscure and the Mysterious: A Research in Mallarme's Symbolist Poetry, Blake's Tyger – A Christological Interpretation, Talks in Poetry, The Inspiration of Paradise Lost, "A Slumber did My Spirit Seal": An Interpretation from India, Adventures in Criticism, The Thinking Corner, Classical and Romantic: An Approach Through Sri Aurobindo, Sri Aurobindo and Greece.)*

Among the battles he fought and won, another memorable one that should by all means go down the history of Indian writing in English was the one with Ms. Kathleen Raine.

It all began with William Blake's poem "Tyger". Sethna published a long essay on this poem. Sir Geoffrey Keynes was kind enough to read and then pass it on to the eminent English poet and critic Ms. Kathleen Raine for scrutiny. The discussion began. The correspondents exchanged not only their collection of poems – Miss Raine her *Collected Poems* and Mr. Sethna *The Secret Splendour*— but also the insights into each other's poems.

In her letter dated 5.8.1961, Miss Raine after giving general remarks on the poems of Sethna, concluded thus: "Only one thing troubles me: Why do you write in English? You write of the land

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of India, subtilised, in an almost physical sense, by the quality of life that has been lived there; is not the same thing true of language? Have you not, in using English, exiled your poetic genius from India, to which it must belong, without making it native of England, for English learned as a foreign language can never nourish the invisible roots of poetry. I feel this even about Tagore, and so did Yeats. I do not believe that we can – or if we could, that we have the right to – write poetry in a language other than our own.”

Miss Raine’s comment sparked off the discussion on whether Indians can write genuine poetry in English. The correspondence on these lines between the poet-critics continued and led to the publication of two scholarly volumes – (*The English Language and the Indian Spirit* and *Indian Poets and English Poetry*.)

Sethna argued: “What evidently is necessary for poetic success in English is an intimacy somehow won with the language...If a notable command of the English language and a thorough knowledge of English poetical technique could be at the disposal of Indian inspiration, I see no reason why memorable English poetry should fail to be produced.” When Raine commented: “I have read no poetry by an Indian that does not seem to an English reader to be written by a foreigner. This I find even with Tagore, certainly with Sri Aurobindo, and also with most of your poems;”, Sethna refuted that criticism and finally counter argued thus: “If you didn’t see an Indian name under a poem, would you infallibly know that its English was not by an Englishman?”

After many arguments and counter arguments, Kathleen Raine withdrew from the discussion by saying: “Of course if India is determined to adopt the English language nobody can stop you. The blame lies with the English, who as a ‘ruling race’ for two hundred years impressed India with the power and prestige of our brief moment of material supremacy.”

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K.D. Sethna gave Kathleen Raine the impression that he liked her *Collected Poems* and that he had made elaborate marginal notes. Hence she urged him again and again to write something on her poems. And here is K.D.Sethna in the last and final letter: “But repeatedly I wonder why you want my views. Am I not as an Indian whose mother-tongue is different from yours, unfitted in your eyes to appreciate a creation like English poetry, which is your language at its subtlest?”

From the arguments and counter-arguments found in his books it is quite clear that it is dangerous to argue with K.D.Sethna. Boswell’s remark about Dr. Johnson may be true of him if modified a little to show a multiple resource. He can use his pistol not only to fire but also knock you down with the butt-end of it.

Do Not Be Too Upset If I Pass Away

K.D.Sethna was a yogi to the core. He had been single-minded about his quest all his life. To achieve his goal the Mother gave him very generously all the support he needed. Behind this successful man there were two women. Besides the Mother, Sehra his wife gave all the help he needed. It was she who made his house a home.

In 1981, Institute of Human Study, Hyderabad brought out a collection of K.D.Sethna's essays, letters, poems, short stories in a single volume under the title *The Sun and the Rainbow*. The dedication he wrote for his book speaks volumes about Sehra's love and affection he enjoyed. The dedication reads as follows:

To

beloved SEHRA

(9.9.1909 – 24.4.1980)

ever-attentive wife for 36 years,

devoted disciple of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother
at their Ashram from 1954.

The ever- affectionate Mother left her body in 1973. The ever-attentive Sehra left her husband for the heavenly abode in 1980.

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Sethna told his heart, "...grieve not that the face most dear/ has robbed you of its sight!" Death did not disturb him, for he was a yogi and yogis know what death is. To them it is only a deep sleep gone out of control. How can one expect Sethna to sit and brood over the death of the two who were intimate to him? And that too when he himself had a brush with death, on two occasions!

Once he took a monstrous overdose of a stimulant drug forty-eight times the normal quantity. He nearly passed away. He had to call for the help of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother to keep him going. He felt that there was a hand under his heart sustaining it, keeping it up and making it go on. And that folly of his brought him occasional spells of a collapsing feeling for several years. So drastic was the attack brought on himself by his rashness.

The second one came in a small natural way, when he was researching in the thought structure behind modern physics. He was climbing up tall ladders in libraries, looking at old books. And when he reached home he could hardly breathe properly. He slumped into his chair. Absolutely bathed in cold sweat, he felt a sinking feeling all the time in the centre of his chest. He called his wife and his mother and in his characteristic calm tone told them, "Don't be too upset if I pass away". Then instead of his dying, the sinking seemed to burst open some obstruction between the outer and the inner being and he began to see things in a different light altogether. The pieces of furniture in his room looked like Gods and Goddesses. He got up from his chair and bowed down to them. The whole universe seemed to become a divine being. And on that same night, he could see things with his eyes shut. He could also see lines of poetry running in front of him. He tried to jot them down in the darkness on the blank front and back pages of the book he was reading. In the morning he tried to reconstruct those things and they ultimately formed the beginning of the book which was later called *The Adventure of the Apocalypse*.

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Since he felt death twice and saw death at close quarters twice in his life, he never felt that he was lonely in his house, though his wife was physically missing. Blessed is he who is always surrounded with books that are more than friends in human form. Moreover, he who is gifted with an auriferous pen makes himself extremely busy round the clock.

Fiction writing did not appeal to Sethna, though he wrote two short stories after joining the Ashram. Sri Aurobindo, whose short stories can be counted on one's fingers, liked them very much. About "The Hero" he wrote: "It seems to me that what you have written has very distinct qualities as a story (idea, building, writing out) and also narrative power". And about the second story "A Mere Manuscript", he commented: "It is very good both in language and form and its substance and idea".

Apart from numerous studies on the problems of Indian history, Sethna had very persuasively put the Rig-Veda anterior to the Indus-Valley civilization of c.2500 -1500 B.C. in his two major books on History – (*The Problems of Aryan Origins* and *Karpasa in Pre-historic India*.) It was Sri Aurobindo who was the first to dismiss in the course of his writings the theory of an Aryan invasion but did not pause to substantiate the dismissal thoroughly. Sethna's massive work on the subject – *Ancient India in a New Light* - fortifies the new revolutionary outlook. The International Institute of Indian Studies based in Ottawa, Canada gave him the Devavrata Bhisma Award for 1994 for this work.

Well! Sethna did not restrict himself with Indian history. He spread his tentacles of quest far and wide. He took up the much read and more translated book *The Bible* and probed into both the Old Testament and the New Testament. And the result was the publication of two books – *Problems of Early Christianity* and *The Virgin Birth and the Earliest Christian Tradition*. In these books Sethna dealt with the hypersensitive issues of Immaculate

Conception, the question of Jesus' historicity and whether it was a resurrection or a resuscitation that Jesus underwent. In writing these two books he drew much from the writings of Sri Aurobindo.

The remarkable aspect of Sethna was that he never took any statement at face value. He tested every claim against all possible evidence till he found the light of truth at the end of the tunnel. It would not be an exaggeration to say that he sailed to uncharted territories in quest of knowledge none dared to explore before.

The researcher who made use of the available archaeological evidence to tell the truth about the origin of the Aryans, the wrestler who tried hard with historiography, used his Holmesian talent to identify the great mysterious figures – the dark lady, the youth and the rival poet – in Shakespeare's *Sonnets*. In spite of all the investigations done by researchers and scholars solving the enigmas continued to remain horse's horns. But in his book "*Two Loves*" and "*A Worthier Pen*" Sethna succeeded in identifying them through a new method which he called "internal chronology". In mustering evidence all in support of his own case for the enigmas, he also tried to answer all possible objections set up in favour of alternative solutions.

Author of more than fifty books K.D.Sethna is really a multi-faceted genius and his works are a rare treat for all those lovers of literature, poetry, yoga, science and history. His profound erudition as well as his wonderful sense of humour serve as a real feast for all those who love to read a book most of the time smiling or laughing. Here is a sip from his ever gurgling cup of *Light and Laughter*:

"When I was young I was considered a writer of poetry. I believe I am still a poet though very few know it and my face can hardly show it.

"At times I am a bit of musician too: as you have just seen, I can blow my own trumpet.

K.D. Sethna

“Poets, musicians, painters – all artists – are credited with a very lively imagination. But by no stretch of imagination can I figure myself as still young and therefore, as having the right to talk to you with a sympathetic spirit.

“In this age of dynamic disrespect for old fogeys, I could not help wondering why I had picked on to address you. I asked myself: ‘Am I fit to do so?’ Then I remembered Oscar Wilde. He does not exactly appear to be a writer coming naturally to the mind of an aspirant to spirituality. But, in the first place, we are in old French India, and in the French language the word ‘spiritual’ – which is ‘spirituel’ on French lips – most often means ‘intellectually sparkling’. Oscar Wilde was surely that. And, in the second place, the memory of Wilde came to me in the form of his epigram: The only way to remain young is to go on repeating the follies of our youth.” Well, I committed one great folly in my youth – or so it was considered. And I have been repeating it for years and in that way I can certainly claim to be still a young man.

“...(My grandfather) said Yoga was a great folly. It was a folly I wholeheartedly committed and, on the strength of its persistence even now, I can qualify by Oscar Wilde’s standard to address you...”

One of the foremost sadhaks of the Aurobindonian community, a painter and cartoonist in the early days of the Ashram, Amal Kiran who had pledged his “whole life to the great Beyond and the deep Within and longed to live in the wide Without with the ego-swamping light from on high and the ego-refining warmth from the secret psyche”, captivated the hearts of all his visitors. In fact everyone wished him a long life and the divine had blessed him with not only a long but also fruitful life.

Amal Kiran spent his last years in the Ashram Nursing Home cared by the ever-attentive doctors and nurses. His room was the most crowded one during the visitors’ hours. His smile lighted up

Do Not Be Too Upset If I Pass Away

his room and the laughter of men and women who stood round his cot flowed out and filled the Home brightening up the faces of the inmates. Even when the age was in, his wit was never out.

What Amal Kiran alias K.D.Sethna wrote of his wife after her death in his lovely poem "Voice from Within" can be said of him too:

Your work is ended, your time over.
Look now for all your bliss beyond.

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