

The Departure from Calcutta, 1910

To Charu Chandra Dutt

Charu

This is my answer to the questions arising from your letter.¹ Except on one point which calls for some explanation, I confine myself to the plain facts.

(1) I was the writer of the series of articles on the “Passive Resistance” published in April 1907 to which reference has been made; Bipin Pal had nothing to do with it. He ceased his connection with the paper towards the end of 1906 and from that time onward was not writing any editorials or articles for it. I planned several series of this kind for the *Bande Mataram* and at least three were published of which “Passive Resistance” was one.

(2) The articles published in *Dharma* during February and March 1910 were not written by me. The actual writer was a young man on the subeditorial staff of the paper. This is well known to all who were then in the office or connected with it, e.g. Nalini Kanta Gupta who was with me then as he is now still with me here.

(3) I did not go to the Bagbazar Math on my way to Chandernagore or make pranam to Sri Saradamani Devi. In fact I never met or even saw her in my life. It was not from Bagbazar but from another ghat (Ganga ghat) that I went straight by boat to Chandernagore.

(4) Neither Ganen Maharaj nor Nivedita saw me off at the ghat. Neither of them knew anything about my going; Nivedita learned of it only afterwards when I sent a message to her asking her to conduct the *Karmayogin* in my absence. She consented

¹ *Charu Chandra Dutt wrote to Sri Aurobindo in regard to certain points contained in a letter from Swami Sundarananda to Girijashankar Raychaudhuri dated 11 February 1944 and published in the Bengali journal Udbodhan. — Ed.*

and from that time to its cessation of publication was in control of the paper; the editorials during that period were hers.

(5) I did not take my wife for initiation to Sri Saradamani Devi; I was given to understand that she was taken there by Sudhira Bose, Debabrata's sister. I heard of it a considerable time afterwards in Pondicherry. I was glad to know that she had found so great a spiritual refuge but I had no hand in bringing it about.

(6) I did not go to Chandernagore on Sister Nivedita's advice. On a former occasion when she informed me that the Government had decided to deport me, she did urge me to leave British India and do my work from outside; but I told her I did not think it necessary, I would write something that would put a stop to this project. It was in these circumstances that I wrote the signed article "My Last Will and Testament". Nivedita afterwards told me that it had served its purpose; the Government had abandoned the idea of deportation. No occasion arose for her to repeat the advice, nor was it at all likely that I would have followed it: she knew nothing beforehand of the circumstances that led to my departure to Chandernagore.

(7) These are the facts of that departure. I was in the Karma-yogin office when I received word, on information given by a high-placed police official, that the office would be searched the next day and myself arrested. (The office was in fact searched but no warrant was produced against me; I heard nothing more of it till the case was started against the paper later on, but by then I had already left Chandernagore for Pondicherry.) While I was listening to animated comments from those around on the approaching event, I suddenly received a command from above in a Voice well known to me, in the three words; "Go to Chandernagore." In ten minutes or so I was in the boat for Chandernagore. Ramchandra Majumdar guided me to the Ghat and hailed a boat and I entered into it at once along with my relative Biren Ghosh and Mani (Suresh Chandra Chakrabarti) who accompanied me to Chandernagore, not turning aside to Bagbazar or anywhere else. We reached our destination while it was still dark and they returned in the morning to Calcutta.

I remained in secret entirely engaged in Sadhana and my active connection with the two newspapers ceased from that time. Afterwards, under the same "sailing orders", I left Chandernagore and reached Pondicherry on April 4th 1910.

I may add in explanation that from the time I left Lele at Bombay after the Surat Congress and my stay with him in Baroda, Poona and Bombay, I had accepted the rule of following the inner guidance implicitly and moving only as I was moved by the Divine. The spiritual development during the year in jail had turned this into an absolute law of the being. This accounts for my immediate action in obedience to the adesh received by me.

You can on the strength of this letter cite my authority for your statements on these points to the editor of the Udbodhan.

December 15, 1944

Sri Aurobindo

To the Editor, *Sunday Times*

I am authorised by Sri Aurobindo to contradict the statement quoted in your issue of the 17th instant from the *Hindusthan Standard* that he visited Sri Saradamani Devi on the day of his departure to Pondicherry (?) and received from her some kind of diksha.² There was a story published in a Calcutta monthly some time ago that on the night of his departure for Chandernagore in February 1910 Sri Aurobindo visited her at Bagbazar Math to receive her blessings, that he was seen off by Sister Nivedita and a Brahmachari of the Math and that he took this step of leaving British India at the advice of Sister Nivedita. All these statements are opposed to the facts and they were contradicted on Sri Aurobindo's behalf by Sri Charu Chandra Dutt in the same monthly.

Sri Aurobindo's departure to Chandernagore was the result of a sudden decision taken on the strength of an *adesh* from

² On 17 June 1945 the *Sunday Times of Madras* reproduced a letter written by K. Ghose to the editor of the *Hindusthan Standard* that had been published in that newspaper on 6 June. This reply by Sri Aurobindo was published in the *Sunday Times* on 24 June with an introductory note stating that the information was provided by his secretary, Nolini Kanta Gupta. — Ed.

above and was carried out rapidly and secretly without consultation with anybody or advice from any quarter. He went straight from the Dharma office to the Ghat — he did not visit the Math, nobody saw him off; a boat was hailed, he entered into it with two young men and proceeded straight to his destination. His residence at Chandernagore was kept quite secret; it was known only to Srijut Motilal Roy who arranged for his stay and to a few others. Sister Nivedita was confidentially informed the day after his departure and asked to conduct the Karmayogin in place of Sri Aurobindo to which she consented. In his passage from Chandernagore to Pondicherry Sri Aurobindo stopped only for two minutes outside College Square to take his trunk from his cousin and paid no visit except to the British Medical Officer to obtain a medical certificate for the voyage. He went straight to the steamship *Dupleix* and next morning was on his way to Pondicherry.

It may be added that neither at this time nor any other did Sri Aurobindo receive any kind of initiation from Sarada Devi; neither did he ever take any formal diksha from anyone. He started his sadhana at Baroda in 1904 on his own account after learning from a friend the ordinary formula of Pranayama. Afterwards the only help he received was from the Maharashtrian Yogi, Vishnu Bhaskar Lele, who instructed him how to reach complete silence of the mind and immobility of the whole consciousness. This Sri Aurobindo was able to achieve in three days with the result of lasting and massive spiritual realisations opening to him the larger ways of Yoga. Lele finally told him to put himself entirely into the hands of the Divine within and move only as he was moved and then he would need no instructions either from Lele himself or anyone else. This henceforward became the whole foundation and principle of Sri Aurobindo's sadhana. From that time onward (the beginning of 1909) and through many years of intensive experience at Pondicherry he underwent no spiritual influence from outside.

published 24 June 1945

On an Article by Ramchandra Majumdar

In his reply to Suresh Chakravarty's article my old friend Ramchandra Majumdar congratulates himself on the strength of his memory in old age.³ His memory is indeed so strong that he not only recollects, very inaccurately, what actually happened, but recalls also and gives body to what never happened at all. His account is so heavily crammed with blunders and accretions that it may provide rich material for an imaginative and romantic biography of Sri Aurobindo in the modern manner but has no other value. It is a pity to have to trample on this fine garden of flowers but historical and biographical truth has its claim. I shall correct some of the most flagrant errors in this narrative.

First of all, Suresh Chakravarty's article about the journey to Chandernagore confined itself to inaccurate statements of the facts and denied the story of a visit to Sri Sarada Devi in the course of that journey. This point has now been practically conceded for we see that the alleged visit has been transferred to another date a few days earlier. I may say that Suresh's narrative of the facts was brought to the notice of Sri Aurobindo who certified that it was true both as a whole and in detail.

But now another story has been brought up which is full of confusions and unrealities and is a good example of how a myth can be established in place of the truth. Sri Aurobindo never spoke with Sister Nivedita about any case intended to be brought against him by the Government in connection with the murder of Shamsul Alam, for the good reason that no such intention was ever reported to him by anybody. Sister Nivedita never directed or advised him to go into hiding. What actually happened had nothing to do with the departure to Chandernagore. What happened was this: Sister Nivedita on a much earlier occasion informed Sri Aurobindo that the Government intended to deport him and advised him "not to hide" but to leave British India and work from outside; Sri Aurobindo did not accept the advice. He

³ *This statement, dictated by Sri Aurobindo in response to an article written in Bengali by Ramchandra Majumdar and published in Prabasi in 1945, was used by Nolini Kanta Gupta as the basis of a rejoinder published in the same journal. — Ed.*

said that he would write an “Open Letter” which he thought would make the Government give up its idea; this appeared in the Karmayogin under the title “My Last Will and Testament”. Afterwards Sister Nivedita told him that it had had the desired effect and there was no more question of deportation.

Sri Aurobindo did not see Sister Nivedita on his way to Chandernagore; this is only a relic of the now abandoned story of his visit to the Math at Baranagar on that occasion in which it was related that she had seen him off at the Ghat. She knew nothing whatever of his departure for Chandernagore until afterwards when he sent her a message asking her to take up the editing of the Karmayogin in his absence. Everything happened very suddenly. Sri Aurobindo, as he has himself related, while at the Karmayogin Office, heard of an approaching search and his intended arrest: he suddenly received an *adesh* to go to Chandernagore and carried it out immediately without informing or consulting anybody — even his colleagues and co-workers. Everything was done in fifteen minutes or so and in the utmost secrecy and silence. He followed Ram Majumdar to the Ghat, Suresh Chakravarty and Biren Ghose following at a little distance; a boat was hailed and the three got in and went off immediately. His stay in Chandernagore also was secret and known only to a few like his later departure to Pondicherry. Sri Aurobindo never asked Ram Majumdar to arrange for a hiding place; there was no time for any such arrangement. He went unannounced, relying on some friends in Chandernagore to arrange for his stay. Motilal Roy received him first in his own house, then arranged in other places, allowing only a few to know. This is the true account of what happened according to Sri Aurobindo’s own statement.

The new story now told that Devabrata Bose and Sri Aurobindo both asked to be admitted into the Ramakrishna Mission and Devabrata was accepted but Swami Brahmananda refused to accept Sri Aurobindo is another myth. Sri Aurobindo never even dreamed of taking Sannyas or of entering into any established order of Sannyasis. It ought to be well known to everybody that Sannyas was never accepted by him as part of his

yoga; he has founded an Asram in Pondicherry but its members are not Sannyasis, do not wear the ochre garb or practise complete asceticism but are sadhaks of a yoga of life based on spiritual realisation. This has always been Sri Aurobindo's idea and it was never otherwise. He saw Swami Brahmananda only once when he went on a boat trip to visit the Belur math; he had then about fifteen minutes' conversation with Swami Brahmananda but there was no talk about spiritual things. The Swami was preoccupied with a communication from the Government and consulted Sri Aurobindo as to whether there was any need of an answer. Sri Aurobindo said no and the Swami agreed. After seeing the math Sri Aurobindo came away and nothing else happened. He never by letter or otherwise communicated with Swami Brahmananda before or afterwards and never directly or indirectly asked for admission or for Sannyas.

There have been hints or statements about Sri Aurobindo taking or asking for initiation from certain quarters about this time. Those who spread these legends seem to be ignorant that at this time he was not a spiritual novice or in need of any initiation or spiritual direction by anybody. Sri Aurobindo had already realised in full two of the four great realisations on which his yoga and his spiritual philosophy are founded. The first he had gained while meditating with the Maharashtrian Yogi Vishnu Bhaskar Lele, at Baroda in January 1908; it was the realisation of the silent spaceless and timeless Brahman gained after a complete and abiding stillness of the whole consciousness and attended at first by an overwhelming feeling and perception of the total unreality of the world, though this feeling disappeared after his second realisation which was that of the cosmic consciousness and of the Divine as all beings and all that is, which happened in the Alipore jail and of which he has spoken in his speech at Uttarpara. To the other two realisations, that of the supreme Reality with the static and dynamic Brahman as its two aspects and that of the higher planes of consciousness leading to the Supermind, he was already on his way in his meditations in Alipore jail. Moreover, he had accepted from Lele as the principle of his sadhana to rely wholly on the Divine and his guidance

alone both for his sadhana and for his outward actions. After that it was impossible for him to put himself under any other guidance and unnecessary to seek help from anyone. In fact Sri Aurobindo never took any formal initiation from anyone; he started his Sadhana on his own account by the practice of pranayama and never asked for help except from Lele.

One or two less important points have to be mentioned to show how little reliance can be placed on the details of Ramchandra's narrative. His statement about the automatic writing is only an imaginative inference and in fact quite groundless. Sri Aurobindo totally denies that he used the automatic writing for any kind of moral or other edification of those around him; that would have meant that it was spurious and a sort of trick, for no writing can be automatic if it is dictated or guided by the writer's conscious mind. The writing was done as an experiment as well as an amusement and nothing else. I may mention here the circumstances under which it was first taken up. Barin had done some very extraordinary automatic writing at Baroda in a very brilliant and beautiful English style and remarkable for certain predictions which came true and statements of fact which also proved to be true although unknown to the persons concerned or anyone else present: there was notably a symbolic anticipation of Lord Curzon's subsequent unexpected departure from India and, again, of the first suppression of the national movement and the greatness of Tilak's attitude amidst the storm; this prediction was given in Tilak's own presence when he visited Sri Aurobindo at Baroda and happened to enter just when the writing was in progress. Sri Aurobindo was very much struck and interested and he decided to find out by practising this kind of writing himself what there was behind it. This is what he was doing in Calcutta. But the results did not satisfy him and after a few further attempts at Pondicherry he dropped these experiments altogether. He did not give the same high value to his efforts as Ramchandra seems to have done, for they had none of the remarkable features of Barin's writings. His final conclusion was that though there are sometimes phenomena which point to the intervention of beings of another plane not always or often of a

high order the mass of such writings comes from a dramatising element in the subconscious mind; sometimes a brilliant vein in the subliminal is struck and then predictions of the future and statements of things [unknown]⁴ in the present and past come up, but otherwise these writings have not a great value. I may add that Ramchandra's details are incorrect and there was no guide named Theresa, in fact no guide at all, though someone calling himself Theramenes broke in from time to time. The writings came haphazard without any spirit mentor such as some mediums claim to have.

A smaller but more amazing myth presents Sri Aurobindo as a poet in Tamil — and this apparently after only a few days of study. Far from writing Tamil poetry Sri Aurobindo never wrote a single sentence even of Tamil prose and never spoke a single phrase in the Tamil language. He listened for a few days to a Nair from Malabar who read and explained to him articles in a Tamil newspaper; this was a short time before he left Bengal. At Pondicherry he took up the study of Tamil, but he did not go very far and his studies were finally interrupted by his complete retirement.

R's whole account is crammed with reckless inaccuracies and unreal details. Srish Goswami has pointed out in a letter that the astrological writings of Sri Aurobindo of which R speaks were only some elementary notes and had no importance. Sri Aurobindo drew them up at Baroda to refresh his memory when he was studying the subject with the idea of finding out for himself what truth there might be in astrology. He had never any intention of figuring as an astrologer or a writer on astrology. These notes did not form a book and no book of Sri Aurobindo's on this subject appeared from the A. P. [*Arya Publishing*] House.

It is not a fact that Sri Aurobindo's wife Mrinalini Devi was residing at S. J. K. Mitra's house in College Square; Sri Aurobindo himself lived there constantly between the Alipore trial and his departure to French India. But she lived always with the family of Girish Bose, principal of Bangabasi College.

⁴ MS (*dictated*) are known

One is unable to understand the meaning of the saying attributed to Sri Aurobindo that he was a man rising to humanity unless we suppose that he was only the animal man rising towards the status of a thinking being; certainly Sri Aurobindo never composed such a resonant and meaningless epigram. If it had been to a Divine Humanity it might have had some meaning but the whole thing sounds unlike what Sri Aurobindo could have said. In fact all that Ramchandra puts into Sri Aurobindo's mouth is of a character foreign to his habits of speech e.g. his alleged Shakespearean and Polonius-like recommendation to Ramchandra himself while departing to Chandernagore. He may have enjoined silence on Ramchandra but not in that flowery language.

This should be enough; it is unnecessary to deal with all the inaccuracies and imaginations. But I think I have said enough to show that anyone wanting the truth about Sri Aurobindo would do well to avoid any reliance on Ramchandra's narrative. It can be described in the phrase of Goethe "Poetic fictions and truths" for the element of truth is small and that of poetic fiction stupendous. It is like the mass of ale to the modicum of bread in Falstaff's tavern bill. In fact it is almost the whole. 1945

To Pavitra (Philippe Barbier Saint Hilaire)

Pavitra,

The account which seems to have been given to Lizelle Reymond and recorded by her on pages 318–319 of her book⁵ is, I am compelled to say, fiction and romance with no foundation in actual facts. I spent the first part of my imprisonment in Alipore jail in a solitary cell and again after the assassination of Noren Gosain to the last days of the trial when all the Alipore case prisoners were similarly lodged each in his own cell. In between for a short period we were all put together. There is no truth behind the statement that while I was meditating they gathered around me, that I recited the Gita to them and they sang the verses, or that they put questions to me on spiritual

⁵ Nivedita: Fille de l'Inde (*Paris and Neuchâtel: Editions Victor Attinger, 1945*).

matters and received instructions from me; the whole description is quite fanciful. Only a few of the prisoners had been known to me before I met them in prison; only a few who had been with Barin had practised sadhana and these were connected with Barin and would have turned to him for any help, not to me. I was carrying on my yoga during these days learning to do so in the midst of much noise and clamour but apart and in silence and without any participation of the others in it. My yoga begun in 1904 had always been personal and apart; those around me knew I was a sadhak but they knew little more as I kept all that went on in me to myself. It was only after my release that for the first time I spoke at Uttara para publicly about my spiritual experiences. Until I went to Pondicherry I took no disciples; with those who accompanied me or joined me in Pondicherry I had at first the relation of friends and companions rather than of a guru and disciples; it was on the ground of politics that I had come to know them and not on the spiritual ground. Afterwards only there was a gradual development of spiritual relations until the Mother came back from Japan and the Ashram was founded or rather founded itself in 1926. I began my yoga in 1904 without a guru; in 1908 I received important help from a Mahratta yogi and discovered the foundations of my sadhana; but from that time till the Mother came to India I received no spiritual help from anyone else. My sadhana before and afterwards was not founded upon books but upon personal experiences that crowded on me from within. But in the jail I had the Gita and the Upanishads with me, practised the yoga of the Gita and meditated with the help of the Upanishads; these were the only books from which I found guidance; the Veda which I first began to read long afterwards in Pondicherry rather confirmed what experiences I already had than was any guide to my sadhana. I sometimes turned to the Gita for light when there was a question or a difficulty and usually received help or an answer from it, but there were no such happenings in connection with the Gita as are narrated in the book. It is a fact that I was hearing constantly the voice of Vivekananda speaking to me for a fortnight in the jail in my solitary meditation and felt his presence, but this had

nothing to do with the alleged circumstances narrated in the book, circumstances that never took place, nor had it anything to do with the Gita. The voice spoke only on a special and limited but very important field of spiritual experience and it ceased as soon as it had finished saying all that it had to say on that subject.

Then about my relations with Sister Nivedita — they were purely in the field of politics. Spirituality or spiritual matters did not enter into them and I do not remember anything passing between us on these subjects when I was with her. Once or twice she showed the spiritual side of her but she was then speaking to someone else who had come to see her while I was there. The whole account about my staying with her for 24 hours and all that is said to have passed between us then is sheer romance and does not contain a particle of fact. I met Sister Nivedita first at Baroda when she came to give some lectures there. I went to receive her at the station and to take her to the house assigned to her; I also accompanied her to an interview she had sought with the Maharaja of Baroda. She had heard of me as one who “believed in strength and was a worshipper of Kali” by which she meant that she had heard of me as a revolutionary. I knew of her already because I had read and admired her book “Kali the Mother”. It is in these days that we formed our friendship. After I had started my revolutionary work in Bengal through certain emissaries, I went there personally to see and arrange things myself. I found a number of small groups of revolutionaries that had recently sprung into existence but all scattered and acting without reference to each other. I tried to unite them under a single organisation with the barrister P. Mitra as the leader of the revolution in Bengal and a central council of five persons, one of them being Nivedita. The work under P. Mitra spread enormously and finally contained tens of thousands of young men and the spirit of revolution spread by Barin’s paper “Yugantar” became general in the young generation; but during my absence at Baroda the council ceased to exist as it was impossible to keep up agreement among the many groups. I had no occasion to meet Nivedita after that until I settled in Bengal as principal of the National College and the chief editorial writer of the *Bande*

Mataram. By that time I had become one of the leaders of the public movement known first as extremism, then as nationalism, but this gave me no occasion to meet her except once or twice at the Congress, as my collaboration with her was solely in the secret revolutionary field. I was busy with my work and she with hers, and no occasion arose for consultations or decisions about the conduct of the revolutionary movement. Later on I began to make time to go and see her occasionally at Bagbazar.

In one of these visits she informed me that the Government had decided to deport me and she wanted me to go into secrecy or to leave British India and act from outside so as to avoid interruption of my work. There was no question at that time of danger to her; in spite of her political views she had friendly relations with high Government officials and there was no question of her arrest. I told her that I did not think it necessary to accept her suggestion; I would write an open letter in the *Karmayogin* which, I thought, would prevent this action by the Government. This was done and on my next visit to her she told me that my move had been entirely successful and the idea of deportation had been dropped. The departure to Chandernagore happened later and there was no connection between the two incidents which have been hopelessly confused together in the account in the book. The incidents related there have no foundation in fact. It was not Gonen Maharaj who informed me of the impending search and arrest, but a young man on the staff of the *Karmayogin*, Ramchandra Mazumdar, whose father had been warned that in a day or two the *Karmayogin* office would be searched and myself arrested. There [have]⁶ been many legends spread about on this matter and it was even said that I was to be prosecuted for participation in the murder in the High Court of Shamsul Alam, a prominent member of the C.I.D. and that Sister Nivedita sent for me and informed me and we discussed what was to be done and my disappearance was the result. I never heard of any such proposed prosecution and there was no discussion of the kind; the prosecution intended and afterwards

⁶ *MS (typed copy)* has

started was for sedition only. Sister Nivedita knew nothing of these new happenings till after I reached Chandernagore. I did not go to her house or see her; it is wholly untrue that she and Gonen Maharaj came to see me off at the Ghat. There was no time to inform her; for almost immediately I received a command from above to go to Chandernagore and within ten minutes I was at the Ghat, a boat was hailed and I was on my way with two young men to Chandernagore. It was a common Ganges boat rowed by two boatmen, and all the picturesque details about the French boat and the disappearing lights are pure romance. I sent someone from the office to Nivedita to inform her and to ask her to take up editing of the *Karmayogin* in my absence. She consented and in fact from this time onward until the suspension of the paper she had the whole conduct of it; I was absorbed in my sadhana and sent no contributions nor were there any articles over my signature. There was never my signature to any articles in the *Karmayogin* except twice only, the last being the occasion for the prosecution which failed. There was no arrangement for my staying in Chandernagore at a place selected by Nivedita. I went without previous notice to anybody and was received by Motilal Roy who made secret arrangements for my stay; nobody except himself and a few friends knew where I was. The warrant of arrest was suspended, but after a month or so I used a manoeuvre to push the police into open action; the warrant was launched and a prosecution commenced against the printer in my absence which ended in acquittal in the High Court. I was already on my way to Pondicherry where I arrived on April 4. There also I remained in secrecy in the house of a prominent citizen until the acquittal, after which I announced my presence in French India. These are all the essential facts and they leave no room for the alleged happenings related in the book. It is best that you should communicate my statement of facts to Lizelle Reymond so that she may be able to make the necessary corrections or omissions in a future edition and remove this wrong information which would otherwise seriously detract from the value of her life of Nivedita.

13 September 1946