

Letter from the Archives and Museum Committee of the Avatar Meher Baba Trust

This letter is to inform Beloved Avatar Meher Baba's lovers around the world of the plans that His mandali are now preparing for the conservation of Meher Baba's personal articles, as well as the correspondence, diaries, photographs, films, tapes, and other records associated with His Advent.

When Beloved Baba walked this earth as the beautiful God-Man, He left His imprint in everything and everyone that He touched. The dishes that He ate from and the cups that He drank from, the clothes that He wore, the games that He played with, the sticks and stones and other assorted tokens of love that He received as gifts from the "masts" (or God-intoxicated souls), His own precious nails and hair preserved and treasured by His beloved Mehera — these tangible links to Him come to us today suffused with His fragrance.

So too, the letters that He wrote and that were written to Him, the diaries and reminiscences, the accounts and chits and records of His daily activities, the photographs and films that capture His image, and more recently, the audio and video recordings of the recollections of His close ones — all of these register otherwise perishable memories of details and fragments in that matchless Story that is the Divine Life that He led.

Baba's mandali have long been aware of the need to take in hand the task of safeguarding for posterity these precious articles and records connected with His life, a task which they regard as almost comparable in importance with the preservation of Baba's Tomb. It was with this responsibility in view that two years ago Mani, Baba's sister and the Chairman of the Avatar Meher Baba Trust, created the Archives and Museum Committee and appointed Meheru Irani, Bhau Kalchuri, Meherwan Jessawala, and Framroze Mistry as members. With the help of Janet and Ted Judson, Meredith Klein, Dot Lesnik, Beth Ganz, Sheila Krynski, Keith Gunn, and other volunteers, much of the planning and preliminary cataloguing has now been completed. At this juncture we feel it is timely to set forth some of the vision and prospects of this vast and ongoing project before Meher Baba's worldwide family.

Intimations from Baba's Time

What gives this conservation work such singular importance is the fact that Baba Himself, when He was in the physical form, had intimated that the things closely associated with Him should be preserved for posterity. Even when the ashram was being disbanded and its various effects given away or sold off in preparation for the New Life, from which, Baba warned, He and His companions would never return, still He ordered that His used personal articles should be saved and stored in the East Room of Meher Retreat in Upper Meherabad. And after the New Life when Baba was residing again in Meherazad, annually Naja and Rano were sent to Meherabad to check through all the trunks and make sure that their contents were in good order and pest-free.

The women mandali still remember an occasion from the Meherazad years when Baba's beloved Mehera brought Him an old sadra, torn and threadbare with wear, and asked Him what she should do with it. "Send it to the East Room at Meherabad," Baba gestured. "You have no idea what just one scrap of My sadra will mean to the world in the

future." Although Mehera had been entrusted with the charge of Baba's personal belongings, she never felt she should give them away to those who asked without first asking Baba. Sometimes with a particular item Baba would say, "No, not that one — that one should be kept." Thus was Baba Himself making provision for His lovers in the days to come.

Some of these old treasures were deeply connected and interwoven with certain phases of Baba's life. During the 1920s, for example, Baba continuously wore the "kamli coat" and sandals which, whenever in need of repair, were given to be patched or mended and immediately returned for His use. Eventually the kamli coat had become a virtual quilt in which patches covered most of the original material, and His sandals had been stitched and strung together so many times that His feet were supporting and carrying them more than they were Him: yet He continued to wear them nonetheless. Several decades later, during the sahasras of September, 1954 Baba had them shown to the visiting Westerners and commented, "What the coat has in it will be revealed after I drop the body. Then thousands and thousands of men and women will come to worship."

Baba's sadras, His alphabet boards, His precious hair — each is a unique and irreplaceable link to His human form. Yet the written records serve as a different kind of reminder of Him, for they register the facts and details of His life. Over the nearly five decades of His ministry, Baba sustained an enormous correspondence, and these letters open many windows to intimacies of exchange between the Beloved and His dear ones. Chanji, Adi, Mani, Eruch, Bhau, Bal, and others took part in this daily activity of Baba's, and He expected them to give it their scrupulous attention. The Trust archives contain many other treasures, including even small "chits" or hand-scrawled messages conveying Baba's instructions to the mandali. Of special importance are the diaries of close disciples such as Chanji and Ramjoo, which preserve stories and accounts that would otherwise have been forgotten. The Trust archives have already served disciples writing Baba's biography under His direction, as they will undoubtedly serve generations of biographers, historians, and assorted scholars in the future.

And of course a unique gift to humanity in this particular Advent are the photographs and films which are preserving His image for the eyes and hearts of millions. Baba once told Mani that His photos should be spread throughout the world. Modern technology has also made possible many hundreds and thousands of hours of audio and video recording of the reminiscences of Baba's mandali; and these too contain gems of story and insight that must not be lost.

These things that bear His touch and imprint have the power to touch the heart. They need to be preserved so that future humanity can savor the fragrance of Him that they carry.

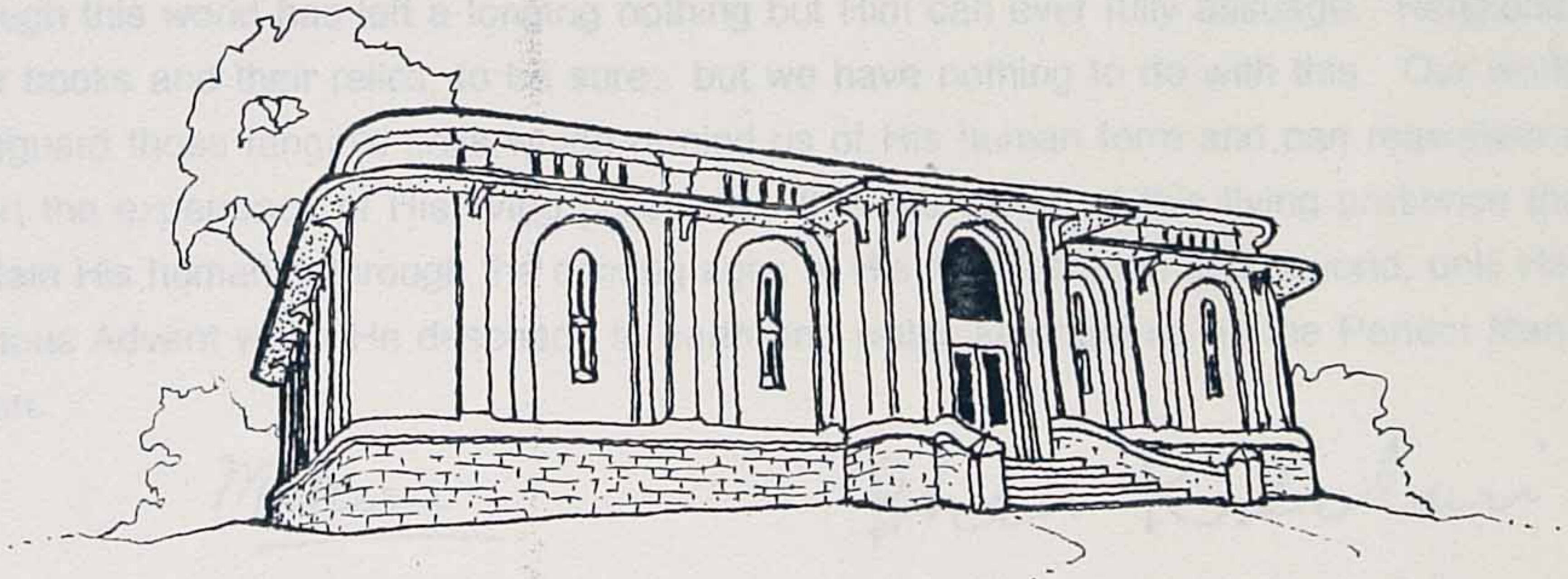
Work Completed So Far

With this goal in view, for the past two years the Archives and Museum Committee has vigorously been researching archival and museum conservation methods. In His own unique way Baba has expedited this process by making available expert guidance and consultation from some of the world's topmost authorities. The Director of the Museum Support Center for the Smithsonian Institution and the Registrar of the United States

National Park Service paid personal visits to Meherabad and Meherazad, and the Conservator in Charge of Textiles at the Metropolitan Museum in New York has given us valuable advice.

In accordance with the recommendations of these and other leading experts, the cataloguing and temporary packing of Baba's precious belongings is under way. Special efforts have been made in this process to record whenever possible the mandali's recollections of these treasures. Meanwhile, we have been planning for the preservation of fragile documents and for the scanning of their contents which will ensure that a digital "image" of each page survives even if the paper itself decays. Eventually, we hope, much of this historical and biographical material will be published in some form or made available through the "information highway" that is currently revolutionizing communications in this technological age.

All of these plans depend upon the creation of an adequate building facility; and to meet this need, over the last year architectural designs for the Conservation Building have been drafted and finalized. The chosen site lies at the foot of the northeast edge of the Hill in Upper Meherabad, as near as possible to the East Room of Meher Retreat where many of the precious artifacts themselves have been housed for half a century. A large structure encompassing 15,000 square feet of floor space, the Conservation Building will not be a museum or library — those will come later — but a facility for storage of precious items and documents in museum-quality cupboards, for scanning, and for specialized treatment if needed. Since power supply in India is erratic and the future prospects are always uncertain, reliance on high technology has been avoided. Temperature and humidity, therefore, will be regulated not by air conditioners but by the building design itself, which will work on the same principle as a thermos bottle: that is, a sealed air space will serve as a buffer between an outer and an inner wall. The ground for the building will be broken this year. By present plans the finished structure will be ready for use in 1999.



Present Needs and Future Prospects

As this construction work gets under way, the Committee will be turning its attention in the coming months to new issues. The furnishings and supplies required for the new building will be expensive and, in some cases, hard to get. A single museum-quality cupboard with shelving, for example, if purchased in the United States, may cost between \$3000 and \$7000 (i.e. between Rs.1,00,000 and Rs.2,50,000). Some of the equipment,

such as the computers and scanners, can possibly be bought in India; but the acid-free folders and boxes — which must be procured in large numbers — are available only in the West. This makes unavoidable the confrontation with problems and expense of shipping, duties, import licenses, and other complications.

Baba's worldwide family has the opportunity to participate in this effort in a significant way, through donations. Donations are in a real sense the bricks and mortar that will shelter this precious legacy for the future. The building alone will cost an estimated \$240,000 — i.e. about Rs.85,00,000 — and there will be other comparable expenses. Knowing that many Baba lovers would want the privilege of sharing in these costs, for your interest and information the Committee will send further updates as the work unfolds. Meanwhile, those who wish to contribute now may send donations to the Trust for "Corpus," earmarked "for archival and museum building and facilities." These gifts will be lovingly received and set aside for this project.

All this current focus on matters of conservation and preservation is only preparatory to the greater objective of this project, which is the sharing of these precious treasures with the family of lovers of Avatar Meher Baba and, indeed, the world at large in the future. Meherabad itself will one day embrace museum, library and research centres that will draw upon and make broadly available the fruits of this present conservation effort. Meher Baba's own personal articles and other irreplaceable objects, of course, will always require special care and supervision. Duplicable records such as letters and diaries, however, once the preservation of originals has been seen to, can be shared and disseminated more freely. Baba is for all; and these things used by Him or registering His touch are gifts of His for all humanity.

Of course, the members of the Archives and Museum Committee know only too well that no garment, document, or facility can ever replace that beautiful, divine Person whose passage through this world has left a longing nothing but Him can ever fully assuage. Religions have their books and their relics, to be sure: but we have nothing to do with this. Our work is to safeguard those tangible links which remind us of His human form and can reawaken in the heart the experience of His living presence. It is the sense of this living presence that will sustain His humanity through the coming ages of His manifestation and beyond, until His next glorious Advent when He descends to earth and walks amongst us as the Perfect Man once again.

Meheru

Bhau Kalchuri

**Meheru Irani, Bhau Kalchuri, and the members
of the Avatar Meher Baba Trust Archives and Museum Committee**

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