

# AUROVILLE TODAY

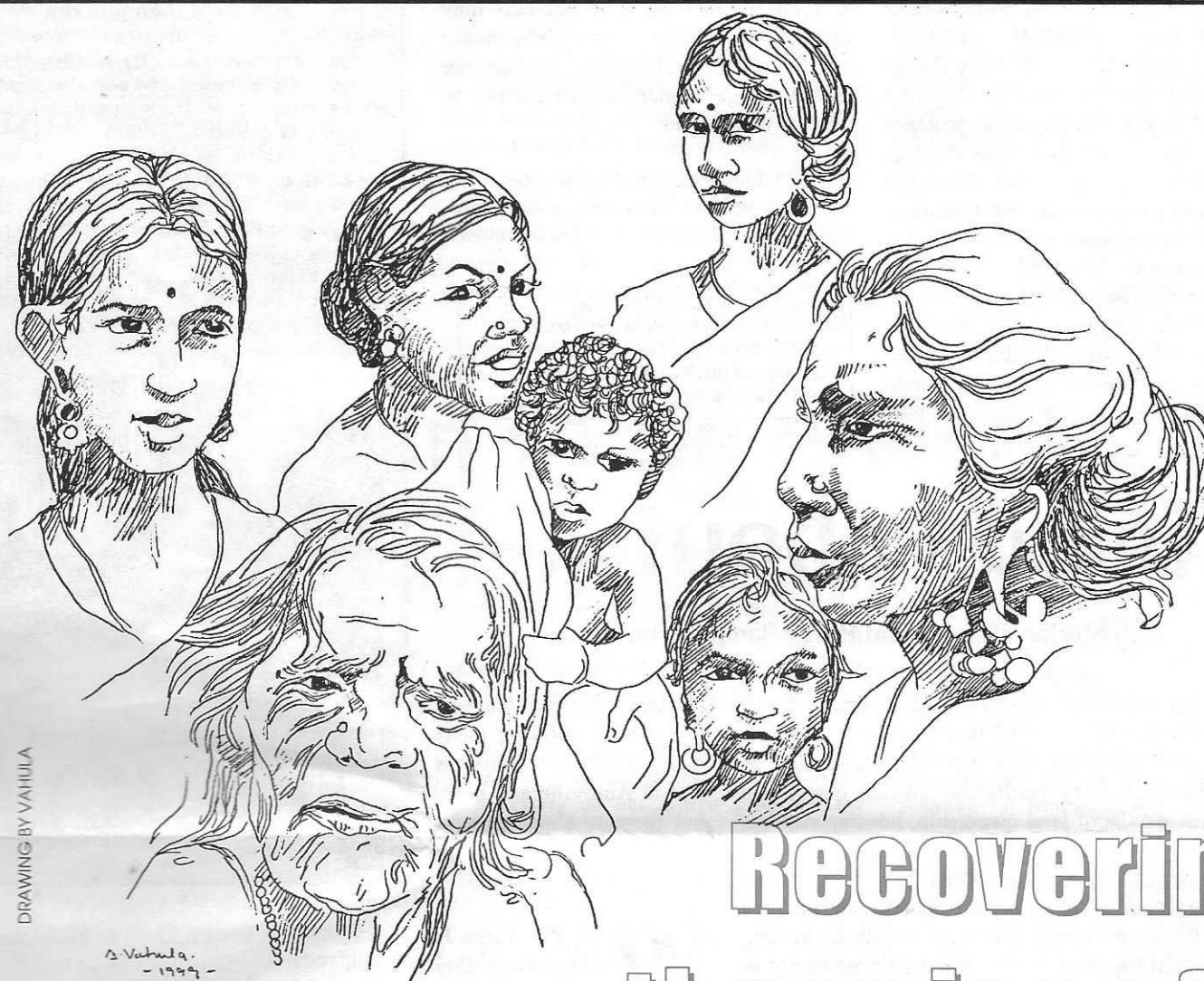
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## Introduction

Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG) have released a series of fifteen booklets, in English and Tamil, entitled *Recovering the Voice of Women*. Martha and Harini, two social workers who have been involved with AVAG for many years, were the driving force behind this UNESCO-funded project. The booklets are the result of months of intensive work, discussing and documenting the social, cultural and religious issues prevalent in the villages with over one hundred women whose lives, in one way or another, have been touched by Auroville. Many of these women come to work in Auroville every day, neatly dressed and cheerful, but what do we know of their circumstances and the often oppressive conditions they face at home? These booklets provide a valuable insight into their lives and social norms. However, they are primarily designed to be used as educational tools for the women themselves.

In this issue we present the idea behind the project and introduce, through excerpts from the booklets, what it means to be a woman from a local village.



DRAWING BY VAHULA

## Recovering the voice of women

by Robin Askew

Ever since the inception of Auroville in 1968 and its continuous growth since then, there has been an uneven, even uncertain relationship between the long-standing, traditional Tamil villages and the totally new, far from traditional Auroville settlements that have sprung up in their midst. If, on the one hand, immediate environmental improvements and employment benefits have been noted and appreciated, the relatively sudden impact of entirely foreign social values and customs on the other hand has been met with an uneasy response.

The basic idea of Auroville is one of dramatic and fundamental change, an idea which is alien to the millenarian rural communities of Southern India. Though the twentieth century has brought immense changes to Indian society in general, certain segments offer great resistance to change, such as those reflected in the status of rural Tamil women within their families, villages and the society at large. Such women, living and working with or in close proximity to the women of Auroville, who represent many different—and to their eyes, ‘strange’ societies—must be affected by the commingling of these cultures. Yet, even though they become more conscious of the restrictions that their society has for so long imposed upon them and notice how the foreign women do not suffer the same restrictions, they may remain as resistant to change as the rest of their community—or even more so, in many

instances.

For the foreign women of Auroville, the question arises whether it is incumbent upon them to promote change in their village sisters. Indeed it would seem hard to justify any attempt to persuade the Tamil village women to give up their traditional way of life. Yet at the same time, who can stand by and ignore the plight of one's sisters, obviously suffering under the burdens of excessive and discriminatory restrictions, all their so-called cultural *raison d'être* or rationale notwithstanding? There is no easy answer to this dilemma.

But if we were to resist the temptation to interfere and even try and keep the influence of Auroville to a minimum so as to preserve the cultural integrity of the village way of life, all we would accomplish by such a ‘hands-off’ policy would be to abandon the role of Auroville as a model to that of the nearest urban centre, Pondicherry, and the inexorable influences of modern mass media emanating from it and beyond. This is not to say that Auroville has all the answers and that its way of life is better for everyone. But those who come to live in Auroville believe in the possibility of achieving a better and

higher way of life. And so we do interact with our neighbours, to learn from them what we can and offering to share with them what we have and know, in the hope that, as we live beside each other, Aurovilian women and women from the neighbouring Tamil villages, we may work things out together.

It is with this in mind that the Auroville Village Action Group has, with financial support from UNESCO, published a series of fifteen booklets, simultaneously in both Tamil and English, on ‘Recovering The Voice of Women.’ Each of these booklets focuses on an aspect of the social life of Tamil women. They have been chosen from among topics of particular significance to the women, ranging from informative descriptions of the traditional drawing of *kolams* (sacred geometric patterns) that are made regularly on the ground or pavement in front of the thresholds of their houses, to discussions of such problems faced by women and their families as those that arise from the dowry system. Other

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topics include the role of the mother-in-law, concerns about maintaining ritual religious practices, questions of a woman's so-called 'invisible work' and problems associated with domestic violence.

The form of the booklets varies from little dramas that can be acted out, through narrative stories and letters for reading, to a cartoon-like fable of a conversation between two saris hanging out to dry on the washing line. Readers and those who will use them in educational workshops or classes are invited to embark on a kind of journey, a journey that will have fifteen stages—each of which may be taken as a day in the lives of the two main protagonists, one the grandmother of the other, as they explore, investigate and reveal the condition of women in the rural villages. They will reveal how Paati, the grandmother, becomes increasingly distressed as she discovers so many of these women are suffering undue and unreasonable hardships. Her granddaughter, Iruchammal, who possesses a kind of innate wisdom way beyond her years, at times

consoles her grandmother and at other times pushes her to delve deeper into the questions raised in their journey together.

It is hoped that the story-telling nature of each booklet will entertain as well as provoke a more serious response. The additional feature of a series of questions related to each story is designed to draw out at least tentative answers on those topics that are more difficult for the women to deal with, or at least give rise to further questions in those areas that they may never have questioned before. We hope that our work with these booklets may prove to be a catalyst for many other future collaborations and efforts among the Tamil village women in their journey to recover their voices.

Robin Askew is a friend of Auroville, who works as a free-lance journalist and video-maker, with a particular emphasis on women's issues.

#### Recovering the Voice of Women:

A series of 15 booklets and one puzzle  
Available from VAG-DTP Unit, Kottakarai  
Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India  
e-mail: Harini@auroville.org.in

## Tell us about...

by Martha Méndez and Harini Sampathkumar

Some years ago we published a survey of the eleven villages around Auroville (see AVToday # 104, September 1997) covering topics such as gender, literacy, family composition, occupation and income, details of land ownership, housing patterns and drinking water facilities. The survey showed us that half of the combined population of nearly twelve thousand villagers are women, of whom more than one third are illiterate. While the survey provided us with interesting statistics about the women, it did not help us to get to know them in a qualitative form.

It is because of the experience we gained through our work in the Life Education Centre [a project of the Auroville Village Action group which offers education and vocational training for school drop-out girls between the ages of 15 and 25—eds.] that we gained enough confidence to engage in exploring other social contexts. We felt that we could start to expand and build on this experience

of working and learning together by meeting many other women in the villages and in Auroville and inviting them to share with us through group discussions or simple chats.

When Ms. Anees Jung, an advisor to UNESCO, visited Auroville in autumn 1998, we discussed the possibility of exploring women's issues more deeply, taking into account their personal lives and the cultural aspects, and we agreed to start a project named "Recovering the voices of women: A study to provide a space for re-awakening the values in their own culture, traditions, beliefs, working practices, humanistic attitudes and gender experiences." The aim was to reach these women and to find ways to improve their situation; to get

to know them; to document their experiences in such a way that they could be easily mirrored back to them, so as to help them understand some of the beliefs, limitations and traditions which are given factors in their lives and which have been unclear and unquestioned by them; and to know any kind of influence that Auroville has on them. The female population we have chosen to work with are either women from the surrounding villages who work in Auroville, or women living in the villages who are involved in one way or another in developing their village with the help of Auroville, or women from a village background who have grown up and are living in Auroville but still maintain a very close contact with their village family. The collected information involved 129 Tamil women, whose voices were recorded in 16 gatherings. The methodology was to bring them together in such a way that the ambience would generate the confidence to share, what we call "Tell us about..."

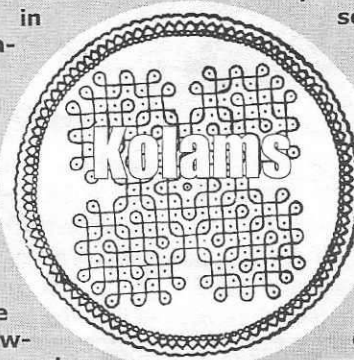
But our assumption that from our first meeting we would be able to prepare the ambience, release any collective tension and be open to sharing all the experiences proved far too ambitious. In some meetings, there was a rejection of the subject matter we proposed for discussion, and in some cases the women themselves received the orders of the elders not to speak about a particular issue or circumstance. We discovered that, because of so many endogenous marriages in the villages, the family ties tend to get very extended and would convert the entire village into one big family. Due to family disagreements, some women were not able to share. We learned that the cultural restriction on sharing their personal lives is very strong. To disclose details involving other members of the family is absolutely unacceptable, it is almost like being naked in front of the others. Behaviour regulations such as 'women should not talk to anyone outside the home about their private lives,' and the desire to please

In the morning just before sunrise, women in Tamil Nadu sprinkle water mixed with cow-dung on the ground in front of their houses, then fetch a small plate of rice flour and start making a grid of precisely and equally spaced dots with it. Using more white rice and ragi powder—to feed the ants and birds—the women then join the dots with lines or draw flowing curves around them, by letting the powder flow from between the first three fingers of their hands. This pattern is called a "kolam." On certain occasions, such as the harvest festival of Pongal, special kolams are drawn, each with its own name: Hridayakamalam (lotus of the heart), anklets of Krishna, lotus flower, cradle of Krishna, Krishna's foot prints, chariot, tortoise, swastikam and

poornakalasam being just some of them...

Kolams are made every day of the year, except when there has been a death in the house and during the period of mourning, on death anniversaries or on the New Moon of every month in those houses where they offer prayers to the dead relatives. Some people used to believe that the kolam was to be drawn before anyone left the house. So when the man would leave his house, crossing over the kolam, there would be a guarantee that he would return safely. And for the other members of the family too—the women and the children—really nobody should leave the house before the kolam is drawn.

(Based on the booklet "Kolampet")





## TELL US ABOUT...

- THE UNFOLDING OF A FULL DAY'S WORK
- THE CULTURE BEHIND OUR SARIS—THE LAYERS OF BELIEFS, TABOOS AND COLOURED PATTERNS
- YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT
- THE NEVER-ENDING DOWRY STORY
- SLOW PACE OF WOMEN AS OFFICE BEARERS IN THEIR SANGAMS
- THE UNHEARD VOICES OF CHILDREN THROUGH THEIR TEACHERS
- KOLAMS AND THE PUZZLE OF MY LIFE
- THE COMMUNITY AS MY MIRROR—WHO DEVELOPED WHOM?
- WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT FROM US AND WHAT YOU ARE DOING NOW
- HAND AND SHOULDER TO WORK TOGETHER
- TELL ME WHAT DOES YOUR MOTHER DO?
- THE RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR GODS AND TEMPLES
- THE DECORATION OF YOUR HOMES
- YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW.

(HEADINGS CHOSEN FOR THE SHARING OF INFORMATION)

sometimes made it very difficult to receive correct or truthful replies. Also, the lack of trust among the women could make sharing a difficult exercise.

The material they did share with us was rich and vast. We gained an insight into many of Tamil Nadu's religious and cultural patterns, but we also experienced the enormous amount of pain and desperation suffered by these women. The group gatherings often became a space for a cathartic experience, women wanting to express what their problem was. And then the question came: what now? For after all was said and done, they still had to go home; and that realisation gave rise to attitudes of resignation and indifference that the women would express over our exercise. We repeatedly experienced the message: "Of what use will this exercise be when we do not have any hope?"

The result of these gatherings is that the women started recognising that they are their own sources of knowledge. The permanent echo of their wounds is speaking

for themselves, and we understood how their existence is braided with their cultural values in such a way that they have very little space for themselves. Our role has been that of witnesses and helpers, so that, through sharing with them, they would gain more confidence and understand better their plight. Our job in these cases has been to show them the urgency of getting to know themselves, so that they might escape the limitations imposed upon them, understand why they play the roles of victims in their own context, understand the meaning of social control and encourage the creation of a space where they may find a way to express themselves.

We are grateful to all these women who have gathered to share with us and spoken with such frankness, humour and sincerity, giving whatever information they could in the knowledge that it would be shared not only amongst themselves or even within their village, district or state, but on the distant scale of crossing lands and seas, where other women may read and relate to their experiences.

This is our first attempt at establishing such co-operative two-way learning links with the women. It is hoped that we may have the opportunity, through the ongoing contacts and work together that the booklets will engender, to continue and strengthen these links and that they may prove helpful and productive in the development of each woman individually and of all of us together.

*Martha Méndez, a sociologist in education and women's studies from Bogotá, Colombia has been working with Auroville Village Action (AVAG) ever since she joined Auroville in 1990. She co-founded the Life Education Centre, becoming an executive of AVAG in 1991. At present she is one of the founders and co-ordinators of the Desk-top Publishing (DTP) Unit of Village Action, as well as working as a healer and teacher in Quiet Healing Centre.*

*Harini Sampathkumar from Chennai trained in rural management and worked for five years with various NGOs before joining Auroville in 1993 as a teacher with Life Education Centre. At present she is one of the founders and co-ordinators of AVAG-DTP.*

# What does it mean to be a woman?

What does it mean to be a woman? It is a question to which every society has many and often different answers. Here, in the villages around Auroville, the answers too are many—but they are not so different in that they have one common denominator, which, sadly, is one of oppression. The booklets published by Auroville's Village Action Group underline this negativity. While providing a unique insight into the traditions and customs prevalent in our bio-regional area, they also paint a bleak and often distressing picture of what life means for our Tamil sisters. As one of them observed:

I have always wondered why this culture is so particularly harsh with women. Indian culture always tells us that a woman must be under so many social restrictions. Now I have started to realise that if we go on living under such restrictions, our freedom will be totally lost. Unless we stand up against the men, they will continue hitting us. A culture is meant for both men and women. So why should it be so much against the women? Women are made prisoners of a culture and their own families, while yearning to be able to come out with full freedom. I am unable to leave my family and live on my own. In our culture we can neither cry to our parents nor complain to our in-laws. The only thing our culture has taught us to do is to be submissive to the whole world as if we were slaves. Following my parents' advice, I tolerated all this pain for years, but instead of peace I gained only more agony.

The restrictions start at an early age. The birth of a daughter is not greeted with as much enthusiasm as that of a son, and abortion of female foetuses is common. Once a daughter is born, her place as a being inferior to the son will be made clear to her on many occasions. For example, many girls will receive little or no education.

My parents stopped me from going to school after 8th standard, as soon as my sister got married, and my parents had to look after the cashew fields. My brothers were working, and whenever I complained to my

mother that I wanted to study, my parents would tell me that they didn't have the money to educate me. I had to do all the housework and look after another physically handicapped brother. I felt so lonely and envious of all my classmates going to school. The sight of them in uniforms, carrying their bags and walking to school together, filled me with despair and frustration. I had always dreamed of studying and becoming a college graduate; and here I was not even finishing school...

The reasons for this are often purely economic. A daughter is supposed to marry and join the family of her husband, while a son is supposed to take care of his ageing parents. One of the booklets deals with the system of arranged marriages, where the parents, usually with the help of horoscopes, look for a suitable bride or groom, as well as with the love marriages, a more recent phenomenon.

Women do not just marry their husbands—they marry into his entire family. And invariably they actually live with his parents and unmarried sisters. Indeed it is expected that all the sons will continue to live with their parents and so be able to look after them in their old age, along with their wives. This is the normal situation.

In the case where the parents have no son but do have a married daughter, she may look after her parents—though always with her husband's consent. But this is not very common, as normally it would not be accepted by her in-laws. In such cases it is common for the in-laws to accuse her of helping her parents too much, either financially or by taking them things, while her own relatives will likely accuse her of not helping them enough or at all.

It sometimes happens that an unmarried daughter takes care of her parents, but that implies, more often than not, that her chances to marry are minimized.

And then there is the never-ending story of dowry. In Tamil Nadu the system is that the family of the bride gives a dowry to the groom. When the girl Iruchammal asks her grandmother Paati what dowry means, she gets a distressing answer:

Previously dowry was a gift from the parents to their daughters. In Tamil Nadu daughters do not inherit property; the property will only go to the sons. So at the time of marriage, it was an opportunity for

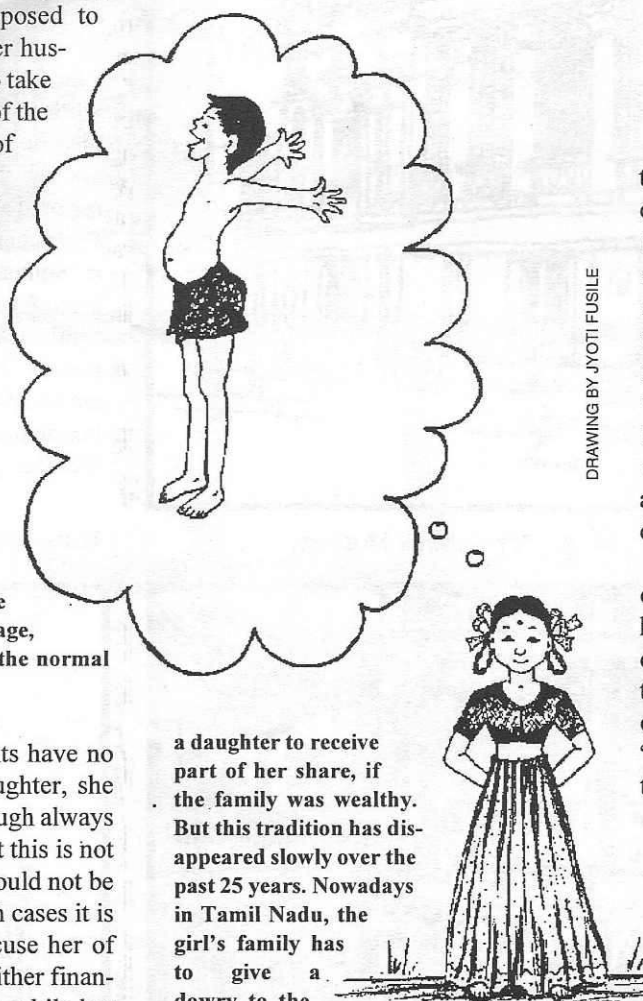
they have to borrow money. For the lower classes and the poor that is a tremendous burden. The girl's parents may curse her and think that to have given birth to a daughter is a burden or even a sin! If there is a son in the family it becomes his duty to get his sisters married. The burden shifts to him, and when he gets married, his wife may hate her sisters-in-law because of this burden. All this enmity is caused by the dowry system. Further south, near Kanyakumari, the tradition of giving dowry to the girl disappeared much earlier than here. Demands there are ten times higher than in this area, and on account of this, many girls there do not marry at all, or marry quite late, say at age 30 or 33, since they first have to earn money. Poor creatures!

Marriage, however, does not guarantee that the dowry demands are over. Too often the women's in-laws demand additional dowry, creating further hardship and sometimes even the break-up of a marriage. One booklet exposes this demand through a drama, enacted between the mother-in-law and the newly-wedded wife. The booklet highlights the mother-in-law's dominant position, which is still very strong in India. She is the main authority in the house, as far as her son and daughter-in-law are concerned.

Other booklets deal with a problem common to many marriages, that of alcohol abuse, wife and child beating, the vandalising of furniture, and the attempts of too many women to end their lives by suicide. The story of Mallika in the booklet "Temples" is well-known to the women in this area:

One day a young married woman called Mallika was alone in the Mariamman temple that was on the far end of her village. She was over in a corner, sobbing her heart out. "My husband is an alcoholic and always uses that as an excuse to beat me up. I never say a word and tolerate it as I feel ashamed to tell this to others. But yesterday evening at six o'clock, he demanded money from me for going to the toddy-shop. I didn't have a single paise but he refused to believe me. He started to shout

(continued on page 6)



a daughter to receive part of her share, if the family was wealthy. But this tradition has disappeared slowly over the past 25 years. Nowadays in Tamil Nadu, the girl's family has to give a dowry to the boy's family in order for her to marry the boy. But dowry has become a problem, especially when the boy's family demands a dowry that the girl's parents cannot afford. Often they do not own property—they do not have anything! So to get their daughters married



# Can INTACH keep Pondicherry intact?

AN INTERVIEW WITH AJIT

In early January an exhibition on the architectural heritage of Pondicherry was mounted in the Chamber of Commerce building in the centre of the town. It was organised by the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) and Ecole Francaise de l'Extrême-Orient (EFEU). Ajit, an Aurovilian architect, is a member of INTACH and one of the moving forces behind the exhibition. Here he talks about the qualities of traditional architecture and the challenges involved in preserving it.

**T**he idea behind the exhibition was to educate the public about the need to preserve Pondicherry's unique architectural heritage. INTACH and EFEU have been collaborating on a heritage project since 1987. We have identified 1800 buildings worthy of preservation within the area of the four main boulevards, and whenever an old building was about to be demolished we've tried to persuade the owner not to do so—with mixed success. At the moment we are discussing with the owners how to preserve the Capuchin Monastery, which is one of the oldest buildings in Pondicherry. We also give advice on how new buildings can be harmoniously integrated with existing structures. In 1994 we renovated the facades of

20 houses in Iswaran Koil Street with funds from the French Government to show people how beautiful it could be.

"In spite of this, our efforts to preserve Pondicherry's heritage buildings have been hampered by the fact that we lacked a permanent base and that all the work was done on a voluntary basis. Recently, however, an enthusiastic Secretary in the Pondicherry administration encouraged us to send in our proposals, and we've received funds to set up an INTACH Conservation Cell with a permanent staff of professional architects. One of the tasks of this Cell will be to screen, in conjunction with the Pondicherry Planning Authority, applications to demolish, rebuild or modify old buildings, and to provide professional architectural solutions which will take into account both the need to protect Pondicherry's historic fabric and the needs of the owners.

"The latter is important because there are a lot of difficulties in looking after old houses. There are problems of rising damp (the older houses have no damp-proof course), leaking roofs and of dry rot or termites in the wooden roof joists. In spite of this, in many cases it is worthwhile to restore old buildings. For example, the impressive mansion which now houses the Pondicherry Museum was restored after we managed to persuade the Pondicherry Government not to demolish it. Sometimes old buildings are demolished for inadequate reasons, like leaking roofs, and unscrupulous builders scare owners into thinking that old buildings are unsafe. This is why we are asking the Pondicherry Government to provide funding for roof repairs and facade

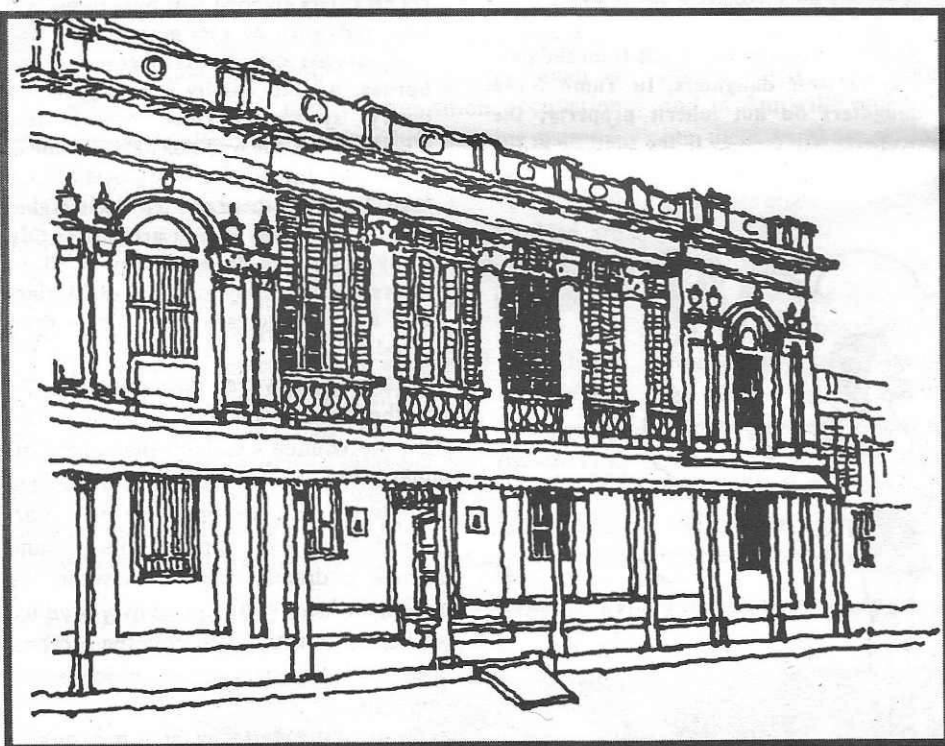


Subramaniya Bharati Museum

**"What makes Pondicherry unique is that within a small area traditional Tamil and French colonial architecture exist side by side, each influencing and learning from the other."**

restoration of the more important listed buildings, and to consider tax-holidays and other incentives for their owners. We would also like to see legislation to prevent the demolition of listed buildings.

"All this begs the question of why we should seek to preserve old buildings. One of the qualities of traditional architecture—whether it be in Pondicherry, Rajasthan, Italy or Spain—is that it has a certain continuity and harmony: in street after street there is a common language. Moreover, the buildings knit together to create public spaces like plazas and squares. This is because traditional architecture was inspired by social and practical considerations, to suit a certain lifestyle, and not by the need of the architect to make a personal statement. In this sense, traditional architecture can be said to be non-egoistic while modern architec-



Above: Blend of Tamil and French styles. Below: Pondicherry Museum



Tamil streetscape: Cazy St.





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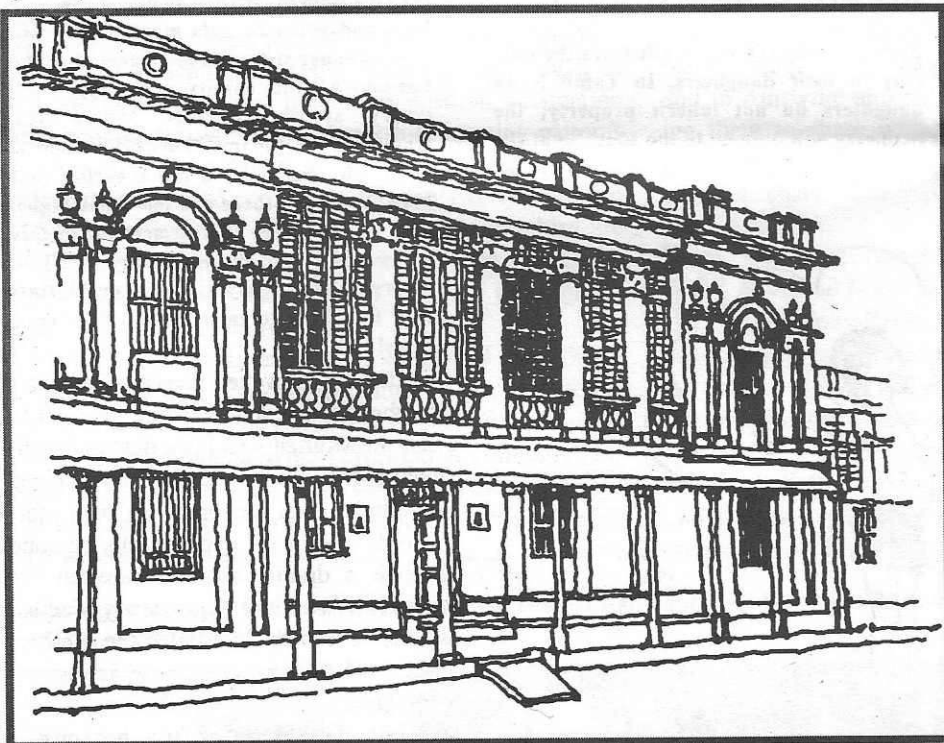
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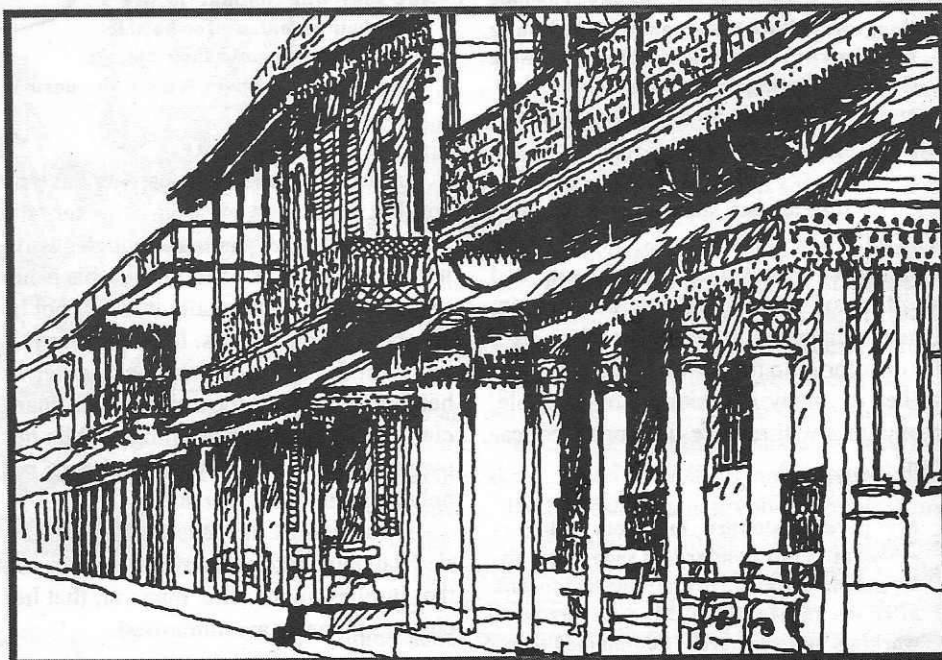
Subramaniya Bharati Museum



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Tamil streetscape: Cazy St.





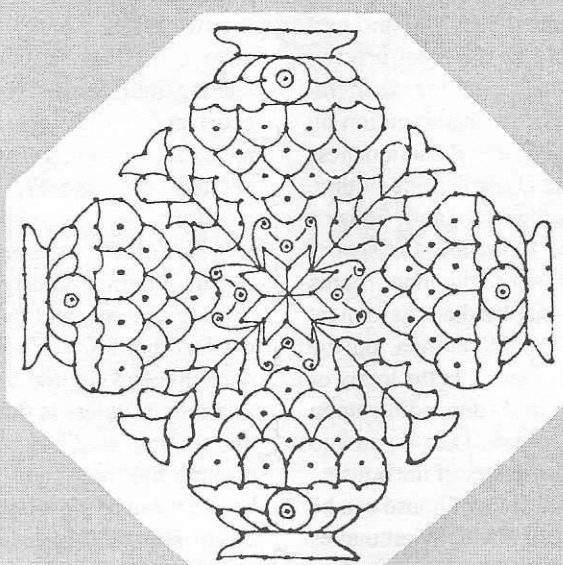
**P**reviously in most homes, girls weren't allowed to study much. Only what was required for daily life was expected to be learnt. There were a lot of restrictions for a girl: she wasn't allowed to wear two braids; she was not allowed to visit a neighbour's house; she was not allowed to go out of the house after 6 p.m.; she was expected to ask the elders for everything. The younger generation couldn't express their feelings. But I don't wish that to continue with my children or the children of the school. I want them to study when they want to study and play when they want to play. I want them to live freely according to their wishes. At the same time, I would always have a check on them. Education is most important for a person. I will extend help to anyone who wishes to study."

(A teacher speaks out in "Correcting the grammar of my life.")

**T**he native God is that particular deity that every family has traditionally worshipped over the generations. The boys will always keep the same native Gods and their children will continue this tradition. But girls after marriage will take up the worship of their husband's native God.

It is obligatory for the entire family to visit their native God. Families usually have a particular place, where they go to perform a special Pooja at least once a year. This is an occasion when the entire family (even the whole extended family) gets together to offer pongal (a special sweet dish of rice and jaggery) and sometimes sacrifice chickens and pigs. However, this Native God is also represented by a stone or an icon placed near each house, where the normal daily prayer is done.

The temple for Ayyanarappan, the guardian God for the territory (*elai kadavul*) is at the out-



skirts of the village, as he guards the land. He is a warrior-like figure mounted on a horse. Families worshipping Him may sacrifice chickens in the performance of certain rituals.

(Religious customs in the booklet "Cheziur.")

**K**astury: When I was young, we were able to do what we wished at any time. My husband used to get me everything, but after his departure everything is different.

During my childhood things like ragi, jowar, millets, and onions were grown. We were very prosperous and our meals were very nutritious. But now, everywhere there is poverty and crops are grown with pesticides, which is a major cause of sickness. In my youth only organic waste was used to fertilise the crops. Yams, tomatoes, potatoes, garlic, all were grown without pesticides. Since only organic wastes

were used, people lived without sickness in those days. They managed well even with ten children, but now having just one child has become a problem. We drank porridge made from ragi, millet, and corn. But now, people drink beverages such as tea and coffee. Because of this, every day, people suffer from headaches or body aches. Even the way of cooking and the vessels used have changed from earthen pots to aluminium vessels, from firewood to kerosene stoves.

Paati: Who decided which crop was to be cultivated, the men or the women?

Kastury: In the past, it was only the woman who decided everything. The man of the house would just come, eat and go. In other cases, both men and women used to jointly decide and work together in the field. Only the women would decide the kind of crop to be cultivated. But now, women have no say in any matter. This is because the style of work has changed for a man who has left the field to go to the office or factory or construction site. Men have also changed a lot because of alcohol.

Paati: In regard to cultivation, who decides things now?

Kastury: Men do everything now, right from planting to harvesting. Then with the money earned, they drink and then return home. If they are questioned, they simply tell the wife to get out of the house. A neighbour works in the fields earning Rs.100/- and gives 50/- per day to his wife to look after the children's education, their basic needs, house-hold expenses, food, expenses including meat and fish for the husband with that amount. Sometimes they have to eat porridge with green fried chillies. With such food how can we expect to remain healthy?

(Memories from the past in the booklet "...And we reap what we sow.")

(continued from page 3)

at me and accused me of giving my daily wages as a domestic servant to a secret lover of mine. I was so angry and hurt that I couldn't stand his accusations any longer and I just ran away to my sister Jaya's house on the next street. When I returned after an hour or so, he was already back from the toddy-shop. I don't know where or from whom he got the money. He started by throwing down and breaking all the vessels and then he turned on me and began to beat me mercilessly. I couldn't stand the pain anymore and ran away again to Jaya's house. But I left behind the two children!

They were crouched in a corner trembling with fear. They had never seen their father in this state. They said they were having nightmares after seeing their father beating me like such a madman. Now I am just calling out to Mariamma, asking her, why am I alive—telling her that I feel like dying. I have some poison, but the only reason why I am alive now is for my children..."

Stories of this type of difficulties are often mentioned in the booklets—in particular when women are encouraged to come together and speak about their life experiences. This coming together is a new phenomenon and not particularly encouraged by the men. Says one of the women:

The men placed many restrictions on us, for example, preventing us from going out and talking to people. Age-old customs restrict our movements to such a great extent. If the men-folk and elders were made to loosen their restrictions on the women, we could be sure of interacting with others outside our own sphere, and so learn from others and thus be able to help improve our society. Generally we women have no opportunity to meet and mingle except at the water collection places and there it is—more often than not—to get into arguments. Of course there are also marriage functions; but these are where only the relatives get to meet—or in the temples and then only for about five minutes or so.

But now the women are creating groups to get together

with each other—to help each other, to develop saving schemes, to improve the infrastructure of the villages, to build new installations for the communities, to knit, and so forth. As they put it, "It is only at the women's gatherings that we are really exposed to each other and able to discuss our problems and learn from each other's experiences."

And the smart girl Iruchammal sums it up:

Paati, I have learnt by now that to be born as a girl is not the same as to be born as a boy. Boys do anything they please because they believe they have the right to do it. And you see Paati, if they believe that, it is because someone taught them that. For example: if a woman goes and fights with her neighbours because they were talking badly about her or of any other member of her family, she will be considered very outspoken and impudent—far too bold and aggressive or even bossy—by the whole community. But if a man goes and fights for the same reason, he will be called a courageous and brave person, one who is full of self-confidence and acts with authority—a good defender of the family. You see, Paati, the same action is seen in different ways because we have different beliefs about how men and women should behave.

It is probably from such women's groups that the impetus for change will be most strongly forthcoming. The last booklet of the series, appropriately named "Giving a Helping Hand and a Shoulder to Cry on ..." catches a discussion between the community workers which says it all:

Kastury: What are the common values of the women you come across?

Radika: A woman is one who is very adjusting, loving, and one who controls her anger. She is also one who sacrifices, and suppresses her feelings. She does the job of bringing up her children, and is responsible for the overall welfare of her family and the country. In spite of that, whatever work she does, those around her take it only as her duty, and she is given neither credit nor rights. Sakuntala: It is women who preserve the family and the whole society as well.

Karpagam: Culture as well is kept only by women. She is the one that is expected to follow the demands of culture and preserve traditional values, starting with the daily wear, the saree, and including symbols such as the *thali* (a marriage symbol, a yellow thread which a married woman wears around her neck) which is worn only by women. It is obligatory. On the other hand, there is no counterpart for the men. They have no such obligation.

Sarala: We have been examining many of the traditional restrictions, and most of the examples bring us to the sad conclusion that when the same actions are made by men or women, women are heavily spotlighted negatively. One thing has to be learnt for sure; men have to respect and not abuse women. Poorani: Unless we stand up against these restrictions and the people who enforce them, the whole weight of culture will continue to oppress us. Of course, we mustn't forget that culture has many good points. Yet, in any case, culture is meant to equally affect both men and women, so why should it fence in woman alone?

Sakuntala: The restrictions on women should be analysed and then we have to decide if any make sense. We also have to examine who has created these restrictions and who is implementing them, because I have my suspicion that the bad guys are not just the men, but also we women. We have a little man within us...

Edited by Carel



DRAWING BY JYOTI FUSILE



# Amarna and Auroville: Towards the Sun

The exhibition "Amarna and Auroville: Towards the Sun" was held in the Centre for Human Unity and Laboratory of Evolution during the months of February and March. Wonderful photos, sculptures and various texts told us about the startling similarities between Amarna, (the present Arabic name of the site of the ancient Egyptian "City of the Horizon") and Auroville.

Claire, a newcomer from France, has been working on this project at the Centre for several months.

"It was important for me to connect with the role of Auroville in evolution," says Claire. "Akhenaton, the great Pharaoh and builder of this city, had a dream, like the Mother. Many people were touched by this dream. The idea of Universalism, the aim of Unity with the Divine, the idea of one God unifying all, all these new beliefs were part of the dream. It was a great change, and he took people who were open to change, to a change of consciousness. It was also the first time a Pharaoh made the Sun the most important god. The ori-

gins of this belief lie in the ancient worship of Ra in Heliopolis, and Akhenaton was inspired by this." In a well-attended talk by Paul Vincent, this subject was discussed. For Paul, Akhenaton was "a man who dreams," and Amarna was his experiment, the "material expression of an eternal idea—the Love of God. It was a city for everyone, and he created it to teach the people, to give them this vision. It was a liberating epoch," said Paul.

The parallels with Auroville are numerous. Tanmaya from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram wrote, "Answering a question I had asked The Mother about Akhenaton, She had clearly let us understand that She had been Akhenaton's mother, the Queen Tiya. (Mother also mentions this in the *Agenda* of 10.5.67). She added that Akhenaton's revolution had aimed at revealing to the humanity of that time the unity of the Divine with its manifestation. As the Mother pointed out, that attempt was premature—men were not ready for it—but it had to be expressed to keep on living on the mental plane."

Another parallel is that Auroville is the City of Dawn at the service of Truth. "Auroville belongs to nobody in particular. Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole," says Auroville's Charter. Similarly, Amarna was "the place that belongs to no prince, to no God. Nobody owns it. The earth will find its joy in it. Hearts will be happy in it."

In Amarna, which was built in five years, new art and culture flourished. Akhenaton asked the artists to make representations of him and his family as warm, loving human beings, instead of the conventional royal portraits. It was a new form of art, which represented a new consciousness. "When I read the Sun Hymn, I have the feeling," says Claire, "that Akhenaton had access to the same source of inspiration as the Vedic Rishis in their hymns to Surya, who also used the Sun as their symbol." (See "A Hymn to Surya Savitri", in *The Secret of the Veda*, Sri Aurobindo.)

Amarna's premature attempt was a seed in the earth's evolution to prepare the way for the future Auroville.

Jill

## Visions for a new millennium

On 27th February about 75 Aurovilians, friends and guests met together in Atithi Griha Guest House to reconnect with and rededicate themselves to the vision of Auroville, and then to direct that inspirational energy towards dealing with some of the community's biggest challenges.

Questions asked included "What inspires you in the vision of Auroville?" "How are we doing, both as individuals and as a community?" and "How can we move faster towards our goal?"

The theme of the afternoon session was "Auroville, India and the world". Dr. Karan Singh, who attended the afternoon session, was asked what contribution Auroville could make to India and to the world. He replied that it was a matter of seeing everything as a series of concentric circles: the self, Auroville, India and the world. "The four circles of action are interlinked. As Aurovilians your responsibility is to begin with yourselves and then, through your actions to spread the perfume of Sri Aurobindo everywhere, to light a candle for the world."

What did the day achieve? On the one hand, little new was said regarding the challenges that confront us. But perhaps the most important effect of such workshops is that they create a space which is not politicised or adversarial, so allowing us to express different perspectives in safety and without losing our sense of being one family.

Alan

### LETTER on The Auroville Adventure

Congratulations on your "Selections from ten years of Auroville Today"! It is very well done and most pleasant to read. The different aspects of the building of the town are covered very well and also the spiritual dimension behind it, although in the very limited space of 12 pages. I especially enjoyed the self-critical perspective in the selected articles and the sense of humour. It would have been unimaginable if there had been no cartoonists in Auroville!

Elke Bracht, Germany

### The Auroville Adventure is still available!

As its name suggests, this compilation provides a unique and in-depth look at the "adventure" of Auroville that continues to unfold. The book, 22 x 28 cms., is richly illustrated with black and white photographs, drawings and cartoons, and has approximately 175 pages. It consists of eleven chapters, each highlighting a particular activity or aspect of Auroville life. Price: Rs.250 (India) or \$15 (all other countries). Postage (airmail) and packing are included.

To order, please contact Auroville Today, CSR Office, Auroville 605101.

Fax: +91.(0)413 622057. Email: avtoday@auroville.org.in

## Brief News

Miramukhi, Auroville's only French-medium school, has decided to take children only up to the age of 7 years in the future.

The long-awaited coffee shop above the Solar Kitchen opened last February. Specialities include their cappuccino coffee.

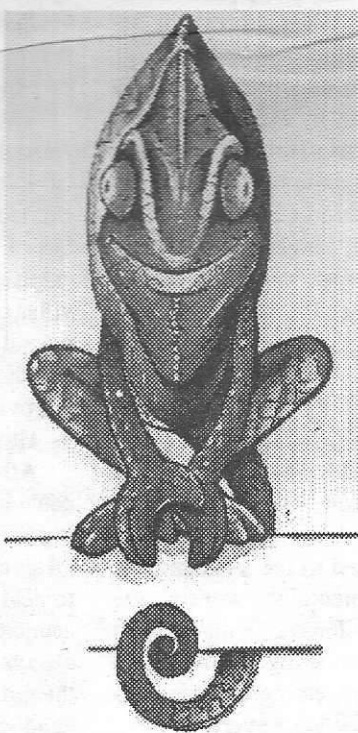
Two further issues of *Shikra*, the environmental education booklet, have been released.

So has the second number of *Matrimandir Journal*. The focus in this one is on the meaning of the Universal Mother.

World Water Day was marked by a series of events organized by the Auroville Water Service. They included performances of a play about water in eight local villages and an open house in all the Water Service units.

Sunday, 14th March, was the 27th anniversary of the opening of the account called For All Pour Tous. On this day this year there was a small ceremony around a foundation stone to mark the beginning of work on the new For All Pour Tous building near the Solar Kitchen.

Two seminars were held focussing on different aspects of the land. The first one looked at ways of secur-



Chameleon (illustration from *Shikra*, by Emanuele)

ing the land Auroville needs; the second one was an attempt to reach agreement on how we wish to use the land that has already been acquired.

On Sunday, 21st March, the well-known Tamil music director and poet, Thiru Ganga Amaran, gave a talk on *The Mother in Tamil* in the Bharat Nivas auditorium to a large and appreciative audience.

New School students have left on their Himalaya trek after successful fund-raising activities including a sponsored walk and a raffle.

A Health Care Scheme for Aurovilians has been initiated by a donation from Maroma, in the context of several Aurovilians needing to undergo major surgical operations recently.

### Another Kind of Blue

From Charlie Parker to Miles Davis, a wonderful evening of classic, straight-ahead jazz was offered at Sri Aurobindo Auditorium. On stage were a mixture of Auroville's best, including Stefano Mauro on saxophone, Holger Jetter on electric violin and Rolf Lieser on congas. Stefano's friends from Bangalore came to play—Roberto Narain on drums and Amit Heri on lead guitar, joined by Keith Peters from Chennai on bass guitar. The sound was very clean, the drummer spinning through some hot licks, and Holger shining through on his solos. Especially delightful was Amit Heri, whose guitar solos were reminiscent of the brilliant magic of "slow handed" Eric Clapton. Stunning. Another Kind of Blue.

Jill

### Subscription Information

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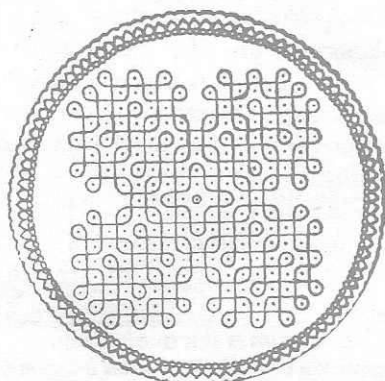
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AUROVILLE ARCHIVES  
C/O KRISHNA T.  
BHARAT NIVAS  
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Akhenaton with his daughter: a new informal style in Egyptian art (see "Amarna", page 7)

## A visitor's perspective *There's no place like home*

by Rhoderick

**T**wo days. That's all I thought I'd need to spend here. Now, of my five weeks in India, three and half have been in elusive Auroville. At first it was easier learning about Auroville from my computer in Montreal, but eventually a relationship started to form.

I first heard of Auroville through a good friend of mine also travelling to India. She'd told me of a very special experiment in human unity on once barren land in Tamil Nadu.

Wanting to learn more, I did a search on the World Wide Web. Filtering through my query I read of extensive afforestation, alternative energy, sustainable agriculture, environmentally sound architecture, water conservation...

You could say my curiosity was piqued. Definitely worth a look, at least for a few days. The word Utopia came to mind and I considered what it meant to me and more importantly to Auroville.

I also remembered Utopia literally means "no place."

At that point in my life I confronted a duality, of which I am reminded even more acutely in Auroville. I realized I was caught between all I wish for and all I see. I saw that my stability was an illusion and that I needed to fill myself from the inside out, not from the outside inward. Though I was surrounded by friends I felt lonely.

I decided to give up my worldly possessions and professional commitments—effectively the life I'd cultivated over five years in Montreal—to find my place. Since I already felt homeless and alone, why not bridge the gap to reality?

I also wanted to be worldly, and you don't become worldly by staying put. So in October of 1998 I set off to explore other cultures. To be a cosmic tourist. Thus far my world has consisted of Paris, London, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, and now, India.

The Subcontinent has proven to be a world unto itself, and Auroville seemed an oasis in the jarring Indian cacophony of sights and smells. Getting off the bus, I found Tamil villagers balancing impossible loads on their foreheads sharing the red dirt road with Oakley sunglass-wearing westerners zipping by on spaceage mountain bikes. I expected to see a community of radical environmentalists working the land alongside the villagers, living towards their ideal of human unity. I envisioned people living in huts eating organic vegetables and practicing yoga everyday.

Sadly, what I found seemed to be a microcosm of western materialism and excess set in the pretext of spirituality and human unity. I saw fine examples of neo-colonialism, capitalism, intolerance and good old-fashioned grumpiness. The first settlement I saw here was Auromodele—not exactly a paradigm of simple life in huts.

I was again caught between all I wish for and all I see.

I wondered if Aurovilians were facing the same duality I am, and that curiosity kept me from leaving. I remembered that some of my closest friends at first put me off, and that our affinity took time.

After thirty years of skeptical tourists, converging hippies, and misplaced pilgrims, Auroville had developed a thick skin. I wanted to get through that outer layer.

So, I talked to people, explored, inquired. It eventually washed away the strange taste my first impression left, and Auroville slowly insinuated a place in my heart. I found that people here are very open to genuine interest. In getting to know its denizens, I began to understand Auroville.

**R**egardless of origin, there are certain qualities I find prevalent in most Aurovilians I've met. The people here maintain eye contact, even when not actively engaged in conversation. That warm gaze is so rare in the west, here it's like a friendly embrace. People speak in even tones, very respectfully and with patience, even when confronted by an idealistic young man questioning everything they've achieved.

In fact the Aurovilians with whom I have had contact have been quite candid when answering my questions. I found their responses to be very articulate, well-informed, unapologetic and more than a bit cynical. Not the least bit proselytizing.

At the very least Aurovilians are good people, real, with faults and limitations. What's special is that they came here intentionally to form something a little bit better than what they had before. With eyes wide open, not wide-eyed.

Perhaps after being caught between all they wish for and all they see, they came here to bridge the gap.

There are enough contradictions in Auroville to keep even the most amateurish cynic busy, but I cannot help but be excited by the efforts of people here. Social work (such as education and empowerment of the women in the Tamil villages), research in biodiversity, implementation of alternative energy and just the sheer tenacity and chutzpah of most Aurovilians is exciting to see.

Utopia?

After almost a month here I begin to consider my reasons for staying, possibly even living here, to be an Aurovillian. On all levels it's demanding. There is so much to deal with, the climate, the wildlife, the economy, and after everything else there's always the monolith called India. Beneath the outer layer, Auroville does not offer a simpler life.

Nevertheless something about this place feels right. Despite the huge contradictions arising from what is basically a western device existing in an immovable force such as India, something is working. After thirty years people are still here. Children are born and people are still giving up everything to start a new life here.

I still haven't found my reasons to stay. I could be looking too hard. During my time here I decided to try to give something back to this place. That brought me to these pages. You might see me here again in one form or another.

Who knows, in the end no place might be as good as any.