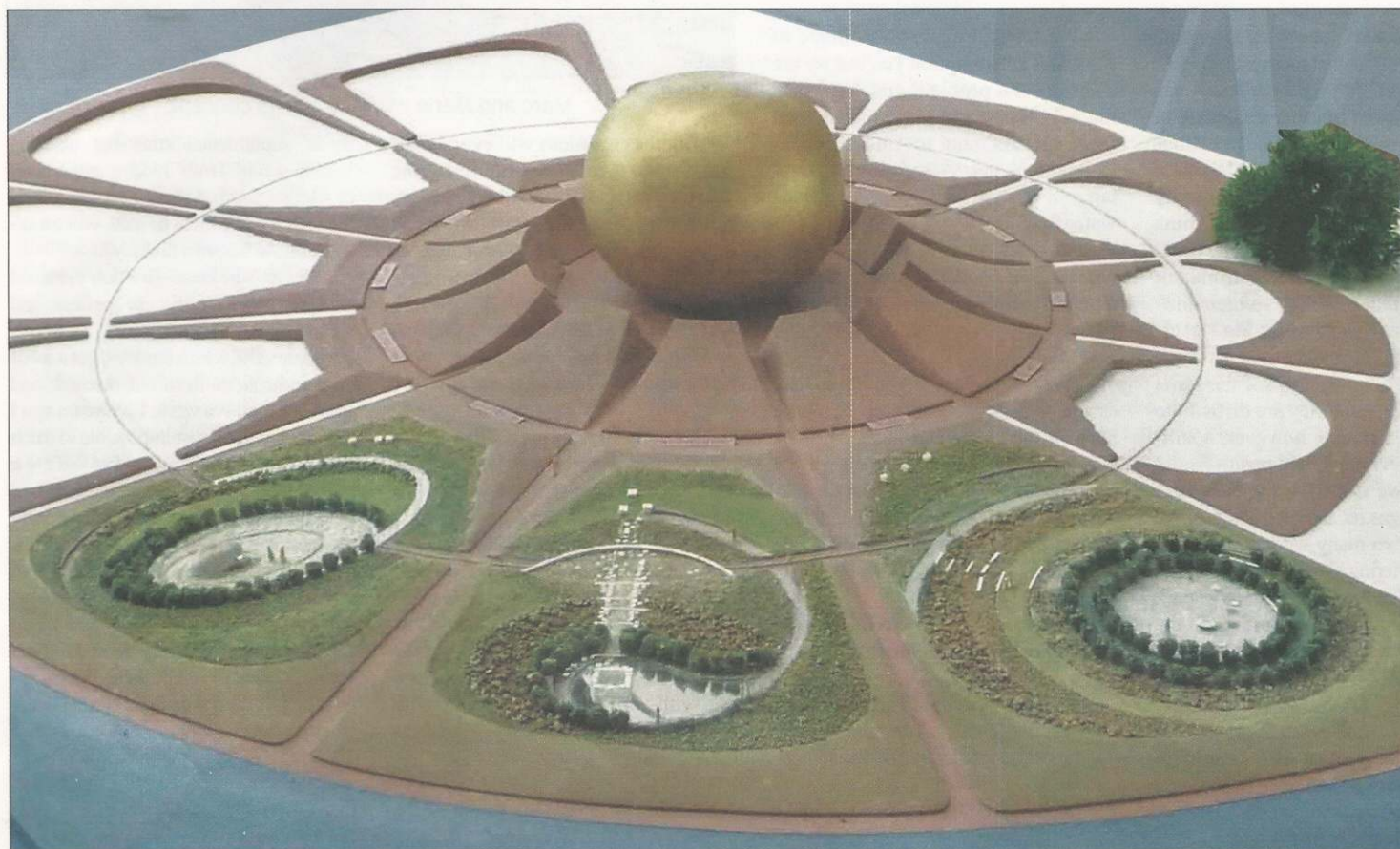


Auroville Today

APRIL 2009, No.242

Auroville's monthly news magazine since 1988

Designing the Matrimandir gardens: "not a mental process"



Model of the garden area with designs for the gardens of Existence (left), Consciousness and Bliss

New energy has flowed again into the design and materialisation of the Matrimandir gardens and recently there was a well-received exhibition of new designs for the first three gardens. Marc who, together with Marie and Maurizio, designed these gardens, talks about the process.

What is the recent history of the Matrimandir garden design?

Some years ago, Roger Anger asked Paolo Tommasi to draw up a design for the twelve Matrimandir gardens. Roger also came up with his own design. Their very different proposals were exhibited in 2002. Roger was not happy with Paolo's design but Roger also said later that he didn't want his own designs to be implemented. This was the end of the first phase.

The second phase started five years ago when Roger publicly invited anyone to come forward to design one or more of the gardens. There were certain guidelines to be respected but otherwise there was great freedom. Ultimately fourteen proposals were put forward by nine Aurovilians.

A Garden Reflection Group was formed, with Roger at its head, to scrutinise the designs and decide if any full-scale prototypes should be made. Eventually four prototypes – for the *Unity*, *Bliss*, *Light* and *Power* gardens – were installed on site. Roger was quite positive about some of these designs. However, for several reasons, the Matrimandir executives were reluctant to take the next step – the main one was that they felt their mandate did not include starting the actual gardens – so the process was effectively blocked.

The most recent phase began one and a half years ago. I had been out of Auroville and when I returned, I met Marie who is a landscape architect. A few weeks later Maurizio, another landscape architect, arrived from Italy and we all decided to work together on a new concept for the gardens.

This time we agreed we wanted a unified design for the twelve gardens. Meanwhile, Roger had left his body but he had left enough clues – for example, regarding the basic parameters and the 'necklace' and 'jewels' etc. – about how to unify the gardens.

What are the 'necklace' and the 'jewels', and where did they come from?

The jewels are something that represent the essence, the meaning, of each garden. They will not be immediately visible: you have to walk into the heart of the garden to discover them. I think Roger must have taken the concept from Mother – She mentions them – and he was very attached to it. So in our conception the pathway through the middle of the gardens is a kind of connecting 'necklace', and there is a 'hook' in each garden which leads you towards that garden's jewel. The 'jewel' of the *sat* garden is a stone beneath which is a hidden spring; in *chit* it is a square fountain in a pool in the shape of a water-drop; in *ananda* it is a thousand-drop fountain and seven bowls in a white surrounding.

Maurizio spent five years in Japan. He has a deep knowledge of rock arrangements but he is also a calligrapher, so he proposed that our initial approach should be to take ink and brushes and try, without thought, to sketch the twelve jewels. Later, Marie and I also used this intuitive, non-mental approach to come up with ideograms to represent the essential form or direction of each garden. We took the name of each garden and sketched a simple

shape. Interestingly, we got very similar designs. For example, *ananda* was represented for both of us by a circle and *Progress* is steps or a spiral or something soaring upwards.

We also tried to grasp how the gardens relate to other elements of the Oval – the Matrimandir, the Amphitheatre and the Banyan – energetically and symbolically. We think there is some hidden meaning in the layout of the Oval. The Oval itself has the shape of a tantric egg and I think Roger consciously – and even unconsciously – put strong symbols here.

Last summer I also sat down to read the compilation of Gilles Guigan about what Sri Aurobindo and Mother had said or written about the 'qualities' which each of the twelve gardens should express. It was a beautiful work, which also gave us very interesting clues to the design of the gardens. For example, Sri Aurobindo says *sat* (or existence), "has formed itself here, fundamentally, as Matter". So what is fundamental matter? For us, in a garden, it is rock. But Sri Aurobindo says *sat* is not only being, but also becoming, it's the source, the beginning of manifestation. So we have a spring in the *Existence* (*sat*) garden, and there is also a large egg-shaped area with a large stone partly in and partly out of the

Features of the proposed gardens

SAT: Garden of Existence

Quality: Psychic Power in Existence, "Manifold, imperious, and irresistible in its comprehensive sweetness."

Features: Emergence of a primary and rough stone; beginning of the spiral of evolution in an egg shape (birth); spring of water which appears hidden by the stone and disappears into matter, to gush back in *chit*; generous use of minerals; pink flowers to express the psychic.

CHIT: Garden of Consciousness

Quality: Supramental Consciousness, "Gloriously awake and powerful, it is luminous, sure of itself, infallible in its movements".

Features: Water gushes from a square fountain; flows down 7 stepping-stones representing the seven steps to reaching matter; and impregnates a marshy area; yellow flowers express the Supramental sun.

ANANDA: Garden of Bliss

Quality: *ananda*, "Calm, tranquil, equal, smiling and very gentle in its truly simple austerity."

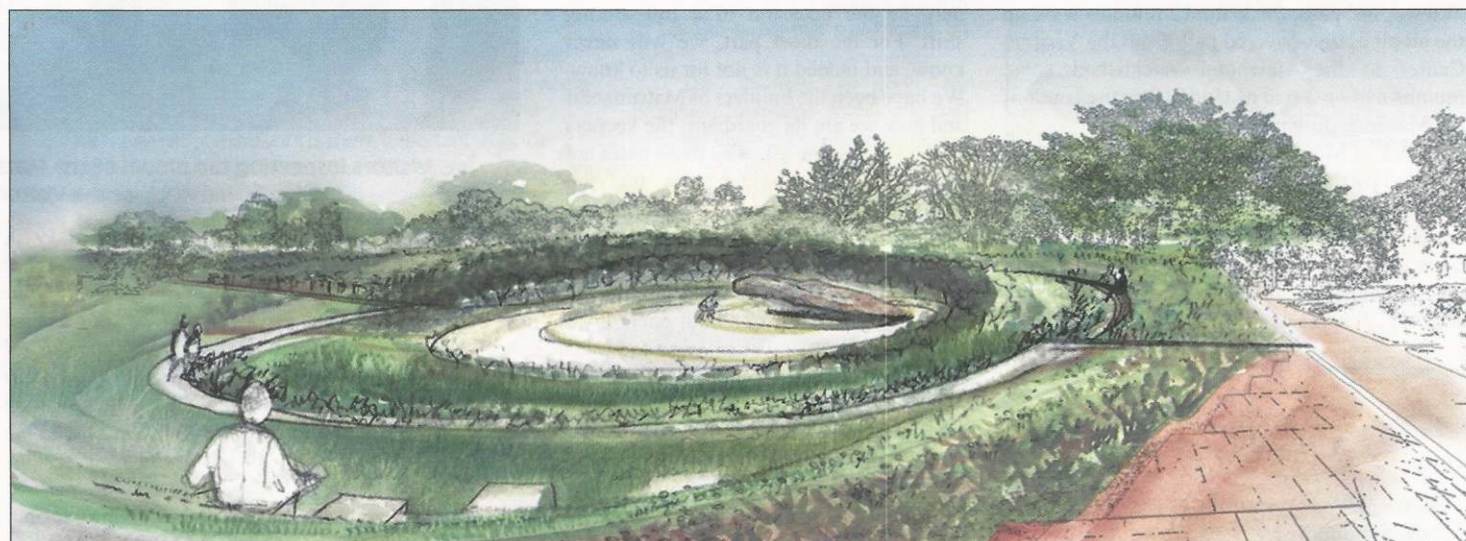
Features: Calm austerity of the vast white esplanade; crystalline harmony of the sounds created by the thousand drop fountain; seven bowls representing the seven major anandas catching the light of the sky; white and pale blue flowers.

ground, symbolising fundamental matter emerging from the soil. Symbolically, the subsoil of the garden is *sat* as being, and the surface is *sat* as becoming. From the source, a thin golden spiral spreads itself out in the twelve gardens, as a golden necklace symbolising both the manifestation and the unity of these gardens.

How important is it that when one enters the gardens one understands the symbols?

Mother said that when you enter a garden you should experience what it tries to express. In the *Bliss* (*ananda*) garden you will feel *ananda* and so on. I don't think we are there yet. I've seen that in many symbolic gardens in the world – Japanese gardens, for example – the symbols are not obvious, but you can read explanations about what is represented. I think this adds to the experience, so it might be better to understand the symbols before entering the Matrimandir gardens.

continued on page 2



Perspective drawing of the garden of Existence

- Visiting the Matrimandir
- Introducing the International Zone
- The Slovenian Pavilion

pages 2 – 3

- Heritage conservation in Pondicherry and other cities
- Regional planning seminar
- The work of PandyCan!

pages 4 – 5

- Working outside Auroville
- New Dawn Carpentry
- Sound Wizard
- Centre for Scientific Research

pages 6 – 7

- Auroville's farmers' market
- Making science accessible at New Creation school
- Sarasija on the art of silence

pages 7 – 8

Scout

Designing the Matrimandir gardens: "not a mental process"

continued from page 1

In terms of approaches to garden design, Paolo represents the more 'natural' approach and Roger the more 'architectural'. Your designs are clearly closer to Roger's conception.

Yes, I have chosen to follow Roger and to respect the basic parameters he laid down because Mother chose him for this work and She told him everything about the gardens. Actually, my own preference is for Japanese gardens – I love Japanese gardens – but it makes no sense to have a real Japanese garden here. These gardens are integrally part of a specific culture, and there are also different gardens at different periods of Japan's history. Besides, Roger was very clear that the Matrimandir Gardens would not be recreational. They would be unlike any other gardens in the world because, for him, they would be the first step in an initiatory journey that would end in the Chamber. So it's obvious there will never be many people in the gardens at any one time: probably people will have to get permission to enter them.

The Matrimandir Gardens as a whole cannot be compared or identified with any past or existing garden since they have to respond to the indications given by the Mother to manifest a specific beauty and various states of consciousness. They are the first step on the initiatory path of the Matrimandir, and have to create a favourable atmosphere for the visitors' inward receptivity. This research has still to be done. It will be more of a quest to allow a vision to be manifested than a mental work to get a synthesis of the various existing traditional forms of gardens, Japanese or Western.

Roger Anger, January 2004

The Gardens are as important as the Matrimandir itself. The Mother

As to how the gardens will be used, we don't know exactly whether or not people should enter them in any particular order. My personal opinion is that there is an order but perhaps, like the petal concentration chambers, people will simply go to the garden corresponding to the quality they wish to explore and experience at that moment.

However, these gardens can reflect the spirit of other gardens. For example, we've had some meetings about how to translate the Japanese spirit – that of reflectiveness, beauty etc. – into these gardens and I think we've made some progress. The problem with designing the Matrimandir gardens is that there are so many different tendencies in Auroville – some want big trees, others just flowers, some want to be able to see the stars at night, etc. – and they are difficult to harmonise. I notice, however, a softening of previously held positions.

When we displayed our first three garden designs recently we had positive feedback from many whom before had strongly-differing viewpoints. Also, let's not forget that there will be a large park with beautiful big trees just aside the twelve gardens, on the other part of the Oval Island.

Roger did not want any trees in the gardens and your designs reflect this wish. Won't this lack of shade make the gardens unapproachable for long periods during the hotter months?

Roger didn't want big trees in the gardens because he didn't want the view of Matrimandir to be obscured but also because his vision was that the Matrimandir site should be perceived as a whole. But this problem of shade could

be considered. We could study how to put small trees at the back of the gardens far from the Matrimandir – as far as I know Roger was not against this. Roger also had the idea that people could be provided with Japanese-style paper umbrellas so they could walk in the gardens during the day.

Water is also a very important element in the designs of all your gardens. Is this wise in a region of water scarcity?

We haven't made an estimate of the water consumption yet, but we are aware of the problem and are working with Narad and Tina, and Richard from the Ashram to find drought-resistant plants. Also, all the fountains in our gardens will recycle the water they use.

Once in place, will the gardens be very tightly controlled or allowed to develop naturally?

Both. Now there is consensus that, except perhaps for some specific plants, most of the plants and bushes will be planted in the ground so there will be some natural development. But the gardens will also be carefully maintained and controlled in a way that won't feel artificial.

What is the next step in deciding upon these three garden designs?

We had a positive response from most people (about 180 people, including 150 Aurovilians) who came to see our recent exhibit. The next step is to call for an official two weeks' feedback from the larger community. If the response is good we can start the *Existence* garden soon as everybody at Matrimandir wants to begin and the money (for the gardens only) is available. If all goes well, the first garden could be realised this year and the next two by the end of 2010.



Marc and Marie working on the concept

But these gardens will evolve. We can change them easily if, after some years, we have another vision. Meanwhile we can start work on designing the second sequence – *Light, Life and Power*.

Were you not tempted to start with easier concepts to materialise than Existence, Consciousness and Bliss?

Yes, my first feeling, when Roger asked me to work on the design of the Matrimandir Gardens five years ago, was to start with the *Progress* garden because the concept seemed more concrete, easier to materialise. However two years ago, along with the Garden Group, we came to the conclusion that we had to respect the sequence of the gardens as given by The Mother, starting with *Existence* and ending with *Perfection* and materialise the gardens in that order.

Isn't it unusual that the order of the gardens runs anti-clockwise?

Yes, but anti-clockwise, in my opinion, represents the descent from the divine into matter, while evolution is the opposite movement. So the Matrimandir would be emerging clockwise from matter. It's interesting that in his *Record of Yoga Sri Aurobindo* mentions not only

seven supramental suns but also an 'eighth sun of Truth' hidden in the heart of Mother Earth. I think Matrimandir is the eighth sun which, he said, will awaken Earth "to her own divinity".

But let's be clear – we don't pretend we have the truth of these gardens, and we are open to people joining us in this adventure. But we do think we got a lot of clear indications from our research and from our intuitive work. Five years ago I thought it was almost impossible to catch anything of these gardens but once we started working, we discovered a certain magic in the process, especially during the last phase. We could be empty for days, weeks, and then one day we would start drawing, with nothing in mind, and within a few minutes we would catch something and in a very short time the whole concept would be there. For example, the last design of *Bliss* garden came like that, in ten minutes.

It's what Roger told me. You don't need time; once you catch the thing it can be done very quickly. You just have make yourself open, not to pull but just to be available for whatever wants to come through. So now I'm very confident about the other gardens because I know when we start working with a certain attitude, the thing comes. Even if the mental knowledge is a great help, it's absolutely not a mental process.

Alan

Visiting the Matrimandir

It is 10 a.m. at the Matrimandir office. A group of 70 visitors waits seated on granite benches overlooking the oval of the Matrimandir gardens. They have checked their bags, cameras and cell phones at the booking office, receiving numbered tokens so they may collect their belongings when they return in just over an hour. It will be the very first visit inside the Inner Chamber for all of them. They have already been to the Auroville Visitors Center, have become somewhat acquainted with the aims and ideals of Auroville and have made a reservation to visit the building itself.

The flow of those wishing to view Matrimandir is increasing steadily. Recently, over the Christmas weekend, some 7,000 visitors came to the Auroville Visitors Center in a single day, and most of them, after getting their 'Viewpoint' pass, made the 12 minutes walk up the sloping, tree-covered path from the Visitors Center to the viewpoint established some months ago on a rise of land just to the south of the Matrimandir gardens.

Back at Matrimandir, the first-timers group is called by the guide of the day, and the whole group moves off a few hundred metres to gather under the shade of two large neem trees. From there they can see the Banyan Tree, the Urn in the Amphitheatre and the Matrimandir structure with the 20 acres of garden area surrounding it.

The introduction goes on for 15 or 20 minutes and touches on a wide variety of aspects of the Matrimandir project – its origins, history, the decades of construction, the work still ahead, the meaning of it all. People fire questions, wanting to know everything from why Matrimandir looks like it does (a "golden golf ball") to how best to concentrate inside, where the funding comes from and how to become an Aurovillian. We answer as well as we can, but the most important part of their visit is just ahead.

At 10.30 the group enters the building, puts on fresh white socks and is led up to the Chamber where everyone will sit in silence for 15 minutes. Those few minutes may be just another episode in a busy schedule of touring South India, or they may be the occasion of a life-altering shift. For the most part, we will never know, and indeed it is not for us to know. We have been the builders of Matrimandir and now we are its guardians, the keepers of the gate. Some ask why those gates are not thrown open wider, now that the building is completed. Why not let humanity stream in, and see this wonder from the inside?

To some extent, we had tried this approach for a few years: for one hour each day anyone who wished to see was allowed to go inside. A long silent line of people, up to 2,000 on some days, walked up the spiral ramps of Matrimandir to glimpse, for just a few seconds, through the Chamber's doors the white interior with the sun-ray playing softly on the transparent globe at its centre.

The experiment was discontinued after some time, and then, as the work inside the building accelerated towards completion, visits were suspended altogether for several months. Upon reopening the Matrimandir, long lines of people coming in to "see" seemed no longer a realistic option.

But how are we to decide on this matter of the visitors? The Mother's few conversations on the topic have long served as the basis for our



Visitors inspecting the model of the Matrimandir in the main information hall at the Visitors Center

visitors' reception policy. In January of 1970, while describing her vision of the Inner Chamber, She said: "...it will be a place for concentration. Not everyone will be allowed in; there will be a time of the week or the day (I don't know) when visitors will be allowed to come, but anyway without mixture. There will be a fixed hour or day to show the visitors, and the rest of the time only for those who are... serious – serious, sincere, who truly want to learn to concentrate." This has been the main criterion: the need for separate timings for those who just wish to see, and those who seriously and sincerely want an inner concentration in the Chamber.

Immediately the question arises: "Who is qualified to decide which visitors are sincere and which aren't?" And so we have evolved and experimented with several different systems over the years, to find ways to allow people to sort themselves out naturally, the serious from the casual.

The Mother also said, "...there will be certain conditions to meet before one is allowed to [enter] the temple.... It will have to be a bit initiatory: not just anyhow." (10 Jan 1970) "The first condition," she said, was "to ask" – and based on this comment, the current booking system has evolved. This in itself is a difficult job to organize and handle, for our phone lines almost melt with the frequency of incoming calls during the booking hours!

Like everything else at Matrimandir, the process has been and is evolving according to the need of the day. We always try to strike an appropriate balance between openness to the incoming flow and ensuring that Matrimandir is properly maintained and is used for silent concentration as the Mother intended. For the moment, a way has been found to open Matrimandir to the world, and at the same time to respect the peace at the centre of Auroville.

From the Matrimandir Newsletter Feb. 2009

PHOTO COURTESY MATRIMANDIR

Timings for Chamber visits

Bookings: 2:00 pm to 4:00 pm
Concentration: 9:30 am to 10:30 am
First-time visits: 10:00 am to 11:00 am

Bookings can be made by phone (0413) 2622268 or by email mmconcentration@auroville.org.in. We recommend to make the booking several days in advance in order to avoid disappointment.

Introducing the International Zone

The Mother said that the city is to be planned in four zones: Residential, Cultural, Industrial and International. The nations of the world should participate in its creation by building and supporting the cultural pavilions of their countries in the International Zone. If one tries to find out what actually was said by the Mother one discovers that her recorded statements on the International Zone of Auroville are very few indeed. In brief, each country is to build and maintain "a pavilion of their culture and ideal" (1966) so that "the whole will represent all cultures on Earth" (1972). "Cultural pavilions" are to have their own gardens (1965), as each country "has a particular way to relate to nature and its own way to express beauty" (1972). It also could include "a sort of small museum or permanent exhibition of the achievements of the country" (1965), "and in the pavilion, there will be a kitchen from that country" (1967), "and the pavilion should be built according to the architecture of the country represented", so "it should be like a document of information" (1965).

All this is rather clear and simple. But we have to keep in mind that the Mother had never given any particular directions for the building of the International Zone and the pavilions. These statements sound more like hints, initial directions. According to Roger Anger, Mother refused to give any detailed descriptions of the Zone, so that the Aurovilians would have to discover it for themselves.

But one may recall it's not the first time Mother spoke of national pavilions. In 1952 Mother mentioned pavilions of cultures when she spoke about the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram which would have the idea of human unity as one of its main guiding forces. The pavilions were conceived as parts of this Centre, the main

aim of which was to prepare those who "will be able to work for the progressive unification of mankind and be ready at the same time to embody the new force which is descending to transform the Earth". The first aim of the pavilions was "to help individuals to become aware of the fundamental genius of the nation to which they belong and at the same time to bring them into contact with the ways of life of other nations". She also wrote at that time about the souls of nations as spiritual realities guiding their destinies, and also about the need for an idea which could serve as a basis for the unification of the human race. This idea "has to be as high and as wide as possible".

The Educational Centre in Pondicherry didn't really become international. The pavilions were never built. But the idea of a university later expressed itself in Auroville. Talking to Roger Anger, the architect of Auroville, Mother mentions "The University of Human Unity". She says that "the permanent university will be the key to Auroville's *raison d'être*. It must be a leap forward so that it can hasten the advent of the future, of a world of harmony, beauty and union."

Another aspect is added by Roger Anger, the architect of Auroville. According to what he understood from the Mother, pavilions besides expressing the 'souls' of the countries should also express the contribution the countries made to the evolution of humanity.

In Auroville, a city dedicated to human unity, a quarter of the area is given to pavilions of countries of the world to express their culture but also their genius or souls, the psychological realities supporting each nation from behind. These pavilions are to be connected with a university-like international educational centre.

In conclusion we would like to quote the late Aurovillian

All countries are equal and essentially one; every one of them represents an aspect of the One Supreme. In the terrestrial manifestation they have all the same right to a free expression of themselves. From the spiritual point of view, the importance of a country does not depend on its size or its power or its authority among other countries, but on its response to Truth and the degree of Truth it is capable of manifesting.

The Mother

Prem Malik who had always been confused by the need for an International Zone in a community which was already international in its inhabitants. He received his answer from the Mother.

"The way it came to me, which was of course confirmed by Mother, was that the main purpose of the International Zone was to demonstrate, at the physical level – as one might say – the essential unity that existed behind the diversity which manifested itself in the world in the form of different cultures. One question, which was of the utmost importance in my mind, related to the essential manner in which this unity would manifest itself in each of the national pavilions. When I put this to The Mother she smiled and said that the essential unity manifests itself only at the spiritual level. In the material manifestation, diversity is the norm. Therefore She laid a lot of stress on revealing the spiritual heritage of the country which was being represented in the pavilion. This was why, She said, She wanted the Indian Pavilion to be the first to physically establish itself in the International Zone, as India was the one country which had an unbroken spiritual heritage and so this pavilion could be an example for the other pavilions to follow."

Sergei Tretiakov and Ruslan Yeskendirop on behalf of the International Zone Group

The Slovenian Pavilion

The Slovenian Pavilion may be part of the International Zone by 2012.



Monika Maku



Matej Ukmar



Miranda Rumina



Dalaj Eegol

PHOTOS COURTESY MIRANDA

"Per capita, Slovenia has probably the most artists in the world. So it's obvious that the Slovenian Pavilion will firstly concentrate on that aspect: to be a place where artists and other open-minded people who are interested to contribute to society on a 'different' level can work and share," says multimedia artist and writer Miranda Rumina. She is just back from a 'retrospective' in Vézère, where she, together with her partner Dalaj Eegol and their friends Matej Ukmar and Monika Maku, presented 'Art made in Slovenia'. Some objects made from ice, glass, plexiglass and bronze were exhibited. The pictures of other art objects – including paintings, computer graphics, collages and fusion glass – were projected on to the wall, accompanied by art videos and music composed by Dalaj. "This event is a taste of things to come," says Matej.

The four Slovenes have known each other for more than a decade, working together in the Kerubin Art Society and the *Kerubin Art Gallery*. "We all are Buddhists and were living a non-conformist lifestyle in Slovenia. Our work was not commercial. We didn't work for money, we instead gave to society. But we didn't receive much in return. At some point we decided to move out of Slovenia and try something else," explains Matej. Miranda made an exploratory visit to Auroville in 1992, to see if this was a place to settle. Monika soon followed twice for long visits. The choice,

eventually, narrowed down to Thailand, Costa Rica, the Vanuatu islands and Auroville. "Auroville won," says Dalaj. "For none of the other places has that unique art flavour. And though it was quite difficult in the beginning, the four joined Auroville. Matej has been accepted as Aurovillian, Monika and Dalaj are still Newcomers, while Miranda's application is still pending as she travels a lot – though, she says, "I have been living in Auroville more on than off for the last three years and have experienced both the monsoon and the summer!"

While most Newcomers are content to only build their homes and get involved with Auroville life, this was not the path for the Kerubin artists. "For sure, we share the problems of all Newcomers in finding a place to live. But for us, something else is more important. We have been dreaming for many years about creating a centre for the arts in the widest sense of the word. It never came to anything. Here in Auroville the idea was suddenly awakened. We were visiting the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture when Kalsang, the manager, mentioned that the International Zone needed to move on and suggested that we try to build the Slovenian Pavilion," says Matej. The suggestion was taken up, discussions followed with members of the International Zone Group and with L'Avenir d'Auroville, Auroville's town

planning department, and soon the ball was rolling. "We started off with a presentation to the President of Slovenia, Mr. Danilo Türk. At our request, the Working Committee wrote him a letter proposing that Slovenia build a pavilion in Auroville's International Zone. The President was very positive, and gave us a letter of support. We are now in contact with the Culture Section of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Culture," says Miranda. The group is confident that it will work out. "The estimated costs of the Pavilion are a mere 250,000 Euro," says Dalaj. "That's about the cost of a 3-room apartment in Ljubljana. So that's not really an issue."

"The Pavilion is good for Slovenia," explains Matej. "It will offer a focal point for many Slovenes to come and work and study. Sri Aurobindo is relatively well-known in Slovenia. His works are taught at the philosophy department of the University of Ljubljana and there is even a rather thick book of his, translated into Slovene. Similarly, Auroville is also well-known, even though there doesn't exist an Auroville International Slovenia."

Asked to what extent the Pavilion intends to be an expression of the nation soul of Slovenia, Miranda replies that the building, according to Roger Anger's ideas, will probably be in the form of a square and not express anything specific Slovene. "We have fantastic architects in Slovenia and we would love it if one of them could become involved. But we do not mind to build a simple but beautiful building in accordance with Roger's ideas," says Miranda. The Pavilion will have a big hall for events, exhibitions and performances, study rooms and places for work. The group already brought the necessary equipment. Around the building, a sculpture garden is being planned.

"The nation-soul will be defined by those who come," says Dalaj. "We are just preparing the

grounds for experts from all ranges of society: artists, philosophers, historians, architects – they will be the ones who will show what Slovenia is all about. At the same time, the Pavilion will be a focus for student exchanges and offer presentations on Slovenia for those who wish to know about our country."

Miranda estimates that within four years the Pavilion should be a reality. "Rather three," corrects Dalaj. "We are in contact with a large group of influential Slovenes, many of whom have already told us that they want to come. We would like to manifest the Pavilion as soon as possible."

Carel



Symbol of the Slovenian Pavilion

Architectural parameters for the pavilions

Chief architect Roger Anger laid down the maximum and minimum sizes of the nation pavilions in the International Zone (not larger than 700 and not smaller than 200 sq. metres) as well as the basic architectural parameters for the various continents. In order to achieve architectural harmony among the buildings of each continent, a basic geometrical form has been chosen for each continent. For Europe it is a square, for Africa a circle, for Asia a triangle, for the Americas a hexagon and for Oceania a mixture of a hexagon and a triangle. A common landscaping for the entire zone is envisaged, with variations specific to each continent around each pavilion.

Slovenia

Slovenia is a country in southern Central Europe. To the north is Austria; to the east, Hungary; to the south, Croatia; and to the west, Italy and the Adriatic Sea. The capital of Slovenia is Ljubljana. It has about 2 million inhabitants.

After centuries of domination by other countries, Slovenia became an independent country in 1991. In 1994, it joined NATO and the European Union. In 2007, it accepted the Euro.

Situated at a cultural crossroads, Slovenia has always been a place of high artistic achievements. Arts and culture have had a special position in the history of the Slovenian nation and have compensated for the lack of its own state and political institutions in the past. A rich cultural life and far-reaching institutions, organisations, and cultural societies are comparable to the most developed European countries. Nowadays, Slovenia has a myriad of theatres, cinemas, libraries and educational facilities and is well known abroad for its cultural exports.

Cooperative planning to create sustainable regions

An important international workshop on regional planning was held in Auroville in the last week of February.

February 25th – March 2nd marked a big step in a new pioneering adventure for Auroville. Organised by the German Pavilion group, Dreamcatchers and L'Avenir d'Auroville, three experts, attracted by the ecological and innovative experiments already going on in Auroville, came and led a three day demonstration of a participatory planning process. It proved an inspiring experience of how skilled facilitation can help people tap into the collective intelligence and will.

Planners and officials came from Pondicherry, Goa, Chennai, Bangalore and Delhi, as well as from Auroville. The workshop began with the Lieutenant-Governor of Pondicherry, Shri Govind Singh Gurjar, giving a stirring key-note address. He promised that the Government of Pondicherry "will consider the suggestions made at this workshop and incorporate them in a document to be presented to the Government of India to seek in-principle approval".

Presentations by the visiting experts followed. They showed how eco-cities are actually being built in Europe, Middle-East and China. More importantly, from the point of view of the workshop, they showed that when all the stakeholders of a city or area are engaged in sharing their knowledge and dreams, and when these are carefully processed by a team of planners and communicators, something truly harmonious and sustainable in terms of



Participants discussing regional planning issues

urban or regional development can emerge. Then we experienced the process for ourselves. The facilitation team (from Germany and UK) had already met with Aurovilians and officials to get acquainted with the ground realities. Now they got the assembled participants to list out all the problems they saw in making a regional development plan. Participants identified a host of problems: no trust, poverty, pollution and corruption, water scarcity and environmental degradation, emigration from the rural areas and crowding in the cities. These were read out and pasted up. Then there was a call for "Dreams". This exercise also filled a big board. The dreams included a vision of a bal-

anced rural-urban life, of sharing of resources, of clean and healthy cities with no slums, of a prosperous rural area growing organic food and retaining its youngsters. Then there was a call for solutions – how to solve the problems and move toward the dream. Again, a wealth of ideas emerged.

These ideas were elaborated the next day when the participants chose one of five "Hands-On Planning Tables" with maps and markers.

The next session was about the way forward and groups of increasingly excited people shared their ideas, recognising how much they already know together and at the same time how much they needed to discover. The experience

of citizens turning around a terribly unsound regional plan in Goa was both heartening and offered many practical ideas. Similarly, The Pondicherry Citizens Action Network (PondyCAN!) shared many of their ideas about improving the region. Then people began to commit to various parts of the process: reaching out to the local villagers to help them map their villages, taking up small projects which can already begin to improve the quality of life.

On the last day the facilitators made a Powerpoint presentation of the entire process and the first draft of a plan based on the points of agreement and general direction (see box).

For Jana, who organised the conference with the Auroville Dreamcatchers group with funding from the Breuninger Stiftung and AVI Germany, one of the key moments was when the Aurovilians finally let go of their Auroville-centric ideas and concerns. "People saw that one of the best ways of protecting Auroville was to enlarge the focus and put in place a sustainable development plan for the whole region. At the same time it was realized how little we knew about this larger region and how important it is to create a model sustainable planning process by working with all the stakeholders and interest groups in the region."

After the workshop she was one of those who met the Lieutenant-Governor. "He said he was 100% behind the plan and would do everything he could to push it forward. The

Secretary of the Auroville Foundation is also very supportive and has promised to bring the plan to the attention of both the Puducherry and Tamil Nadu Governments." *Bhavana*

The regional plan proposes:

- ◆ a model city, a suburb or city satellite neighbourhood, a model town and a model village to provide duplicable models to improve the quality of life in urban and rural areas
- ◆ an infrastructural development plan for public transport
- ◆ integrated water management, especially waste water treatment and improving the quality of potable water
- ◆ building decentralised solid waste plants
- ◆ upgrading the present inland railway running from cities in the south to Chennai rather than building a new railway along the coast
- ◆ moving industrial development inland from the coast to industrial centres near rail and road links
- ◆ relocating Pondicherry airport to the west to better serve all towns in the region
- ◆ turning the fishing harbour in Pondicherry which is causing coastal erosion into a sensitive tourist development
- ◆ protecting sensitive coastal areas and redevelopment of the groynes to allow coastal regeneration

Building consensus on regional planning

PondyCAN! (Pondicherry Citizens' Action Network) is a group which has come together to preserve and enhance the natural and cultural fabric of Pondicherry and to promote sustainable development in the larger region. It works closely with Auroville on issues like coastal erosion and participated in the recent collaborative planning workshop.

Auroville Today: How did PondyCAN! come about?

Aurofilio: On 4th February, 2007, a group of concerned Pondicherry citizens came together to discuss various issues like footpath encroachments, garbage, traffic congestion, noise pollution etc. During that meeting I presented the huge threat posed by the proposed port project to the erosion of the coastline and mentioned that in ten days a public hearing on the project was scheduled. Alarm bells started ringing and, basically, in those ten days the group that later became known as PondyCAN! formed.

PondyCAN! was partly a coalition of existing groups. There was Ajit from Shuddham – which focuses on solid waste management – there was INTACH and Prashant from Auroville Coastal Development Centre was also there.

The port started us thinking, but when we looked at other urgent issues we realized there was a vacuum in Pondicherry planning. For example, Pondicherry wants to expand its existing airport, but this is in the wrong place, squeezed between Pondicherry and Auroville, forcing most people to drive through Pondicherry town to reach it. Congestion will also be increased by the plan to site a family entertainment centre at the end of the beach road.

In fact, when we looked at all the pressing problems – coastal erosion, congestion, salt water intrusion etc. – we realized that none of these were exclusively Pondicherry problems: they were Pondicherry-Tamil Nadu problems which could only be addressed properly by a regional development plan.

Yoo Mi Lee: We want development to happen in a sustainable regional fashion. That's why, for example, we've said that instead of a constructing a centrally-located solid waste management facility for the State, as is planned, it would make more sense to decentralise it. And if separation of organic and recyclable waste was

made mandatory at source, it could be income-generating rather than simply being a nuisance.

Prashant: We had a lot of help from Dr. Harjit Singh Anand, former Secretary in the Union Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation. I first met him when he visited Auroville and we got into a discussion about the proposed lake around Matrimandir. He told us we should look at the wider water scenario. Later some of us met him in Delhi and he suggested we should start drawing up a regional plan which would work towards maintaining a healthy urban-rural continuum. He was interacting with the Town Planning department in Pondicherry whom he felt would be very interested.

So, together with L'Avenir d'Auroville and the Pondicherry town planning people, we organized a consultation meet on water management through integrated planning and regional collaboration. This took place at Auroville's Town Hall in May, 2008. Dr. Anand presided over this and Pondicherry and Tamil Nadu officials attended. In late July, we organized a regional planning meeting at the Pondicherry Chief Secretariat which was attended by key people from Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry Governments. It laid down steps to move forward. In October 2008, together with Dr. Anand we made a presentation to the Pondicherry Lieutenant-Governor. He liked the idea and set up a meeting with the Pondicherry Chief Minister, the Town and Country Planning Minister, the Chief Secretary and others. They were all very eager to go ahead with a regional plan and welcomed the idea of a group like ours pushing it forward and working alongside them.

After the recent workshop in Auroville on collaborative planning for the bioregion, the Lieutenant-Governor invited us to come and tell him about the outcome. He had invited all the Secretaries, Heads of Departments, the Development Commissioner and the Chief Town Planner. His first reaction to our presentation was that it was 'utopian', but then he said it was worth pursuing. He encouraged us to take up the matter with the Tamil Nadu Government and, meanwhile, to work on the Pondicherry Master Plan within the larger framework of the Regional Plan.

Aurofilio: Without support from the politicians, nothing will happen.

Probir: We feel that our main function in PondyCAN! is to get people on board, to build



PondyCAN! members. Back row from left: Ajit, Probir, Yoo Mi Lee and Nini front: Prashant and Aurofilio

consensus, to drive this process: without us, nothing would have happened. We have a lot of support at the top levels of the administration, but we haven't yet worked at the lower levels. This has to be done as, unlike Secretaries, the Directors are here for a long time.

Ajit: Nobody's taking ownership of the idea as yet. One thing we need to establish is that it's a win/win situation for all stakeholders. Pondicherry, for example, is afraid of being swallowed up by Tamil Nadu, while a regional plan is not a priority for Tamil Nadu. Then again, middle management is not excited about it because it would mean changes and they already have their systems in place.

Nini: But, ultimately, everyone recognizes that this plan would be for the benefit of all.

Yoo Mi Lee: Meanwhile we at PondyCAN! continue with our daily task of fire-fighting. And we've had some successes. A recent plan to build a dysfunctional market building nearby was dropped in favour of a more sensitive INTACH design, and Ousteri Lake, which was to be developed as a boating centre, has now been declared a bird sanctuary, thus protecting one of the key sources of Pondicherry's drinking water.

Auroville Today: What part can Auroville play in developing a regional plan?

Ajit: In November we met with the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation and presented the regional plan idea to him. He was very positive – in fact, he said he would lead the charge to get it adopted. Once the elections are over, he promised to set up a meeting with the Chief Secretary of Tamil Nadu to discuss it further.

Yoo Mi Lee: The Chief Secretary of Pondicherry wants Auroville to help with their planning as she sees that Auroville has so much expertise.

Probir: PondyCAN! is driving the process in Pondicherry but we need someone to take up the work in Tamil Nadu; Auroville can help here. There should be a separate cell in Auroville to take up regional planning as its prime focus. In fact, it was agreed during the recent collaborative planning workshop that such a group will be formed. It would also be good to get international recognition for this new regional planning model – if international bodies are watching, it forces you to behave in a certain fashion. Auroville could play a big role in making such contacts.

*From an interview by Alan
For more information visit pondycan.org*

Auroville outreach through heritage conservation

The preservation of India's heritage is passionately pursued by a few Aurovilians through INTACH.

"I love cities," says architect Ajit. "I love to stroll in those well-preserved city centres in Europe and enjoy their heritage architecture. It is something I miss in Auroville. I joined in 1971, and was passionate about the Galaxy. But after eight years, when not much had materialised, I left for work in Germany where I came to appreciate the values of heritage buildings. When I returned to Auroville in 1987, I was full of ideas of heritage conservation. I came to see Pondicherry with new eyes and realized how beautiful it was with its distinct French and Tamil parts. As work at the time was still slow in Auroville, I joined the Pondicherry chapter of INTACH, the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage Conservation. Ultimately, this became the main occupation of my wife Ratna and myself."

At that time, public interest in heritage conservation was at an abysmal low. Many historic buildings were being pulled down and replaced by modern and often ugly buildings. "Our chance came when the Indian Neerama Hotels Group, which is famous for restoring and managing heritage hotels, purchased a dilapidated building in the French part of Pondicherry. It had served for more than 20 years as Pondicherry's department of education and had been totally run down. Ratna and I got the assignment to restore it and turn it into a heritage hotel." Hotel de l'Orient, as the building was renamed, was opened in 2000. "It was an eye-opener for the Pondicherry government. Almost all officials had visited the place before. Now they saw a small architectural jewel. It was a turning point in the history of heritage conservation in Pondicherry, and was awarded the UNESCO Asia Pacific Heritage Award in the year 2000," says Ajit.

Asia-Urbs

In March 2002, the Asia-Urbs conference happened in Auroville, organised by Aurovilians Sauro, Luigi and Lalit. Asia-Urbs was a programme of the European Commission to foster partnerships between cities in Asia and cities in Europe. Shortly after the conference, Auroville helped partnering Pondicherry with the Italian city of Urbino, while Brahmanand Mohanty, a former Ashram student, made the contacts with the French city of Villeneuve-sur-Lot. Together with the Government of Pondicherry, and in partnership with these two European cities, Sauro, Lalit and Ajit prepared an Asia Urbs project proposal called "Achieving Economic and Environmental Goals through Heritage Preservation Initiatives." The project aimed at restoring some heritage buildings and improving the urban environment through solid waste management and the introduction of battery-powered tempos ('Bijlees') in Pondicherry. The total costs estimate was € 750,000 of which about € 100,000 was to be contributed by Pondicherry. The European Commission approved the project.

"The reason why this project was approved," says Ajit, "is because we had brought in the idea of promoting tourism through heritage protection. We were able to demonstrate that heritage conservation is a tool for city development, and that it pays off to protect one's heritage! Hotel de l'Orient was a case in point. This brought about a change in perception. The politicians and the bureaucrats suddenly started to take this idea seriously. They have come to accept and support the importance of heritage as a major part of Pondicherry's identity and economic development."

The highlight occurred on February 14, 2009, when the UNESCO Asia Pacific Heritage Award of Merit 2008 was given to the Lt. Governor of Puducherry for the successful restoration of Vysial Street under the Asia-Urbs Programme. "UNESCO stated that the revision of this historic Franco-Tamil street has reinvigorated a sense of pride among the community,"

World expo in Shanghai

Because of INTACH's work with the Pondicherry Municipality on the Asia Urbs Project, Pondicherry has now been selected to participate in the World Expo 2010 "Better City, Better Life" in Shanghai in the "Urban Best Practices Area" pavilion, along with 50 other cities from across the world. Ahmedabad is the only other city from India that has been invited to participate.



Le Café on the beach road and a house in Vysial street before and after the renovation

says Ajit. "They applauded the restoration of Vysial Street as a notable example for urban streetscape conservation and praised the cooperation of the municipal government, conservation experts and local residents."

A pro-active role.

"In all these years we learned that INTACH has to carry the flag, that we cannot expect the government alone to take the initiative," says Ajit. "We learned to be proactive and prepare proposals ourselves and then we mostly managed to get government approval." When the Asia-Urbs project was at its end, INTACH shifted its attention to other projects in Pondicherry. Revitalizing the Bharati Park in the middle of the French town was the first one to get completed in January 2007. The renovated park became a pedestrian oasis. The pathways were paved with granite and modern lighting saved energy while raising the illumination level; the sprinkler irrigation saved on water consumption. Several Auroville units like Swaram, Auryaj and Aurore participated in providing wind chimes, granite articles and litterbins and childrens' play equipment. The trees were pruned by Joan and his team from Auroville TreeCare. The product was an all round success as can be seen from the crowds that visit the park every day.

The other important restoration project INTACH completed last year was the former port office building on the Beach Road near the Gandhi statue. The heritage building had been changed beyond recognition by unsympathetic additions. Today 'Le Cafe' is one of the nicest places to have a coffee with sea view – here too Aurovilian Marc Tomo from *Coffee Ideas* was brought in as a consultant.

Improving the pedestrian connection between Bharati Park and the beach road is now next. "The Government has tendered the work for upgrading and beautification of the *Gandhi Thidal*, the plaza which connects the park to the Gandhi memorial on the beach. It will be paved with granite, and have a food and crafts bazaar, something like the *Dilli Haat* in New Delhi," says Ajit.

Other projects in the pipeline are the landscaping of the beach road with pedestrian walkways, benches, lampposts and trees. Hopefully future projects would be the renovation of Pondicherry's two museums, with content, displays and lighting up to international standards. This will be done in cooperation with the French partner cities La Rochelle and Villeneuve-sur-Lot. Also the restoration of the old lighthouse, built in 1836 and the oldest on the East coast, is planned. It will house a small museum on maritime and customs activities. "The list of projects is long," says Ajit. "But it seems that we have made a major step in sensitizing the government and population of Pondicherry to the historic sig-

nificance of their city and to create more conscious awareness about the need for heritage conservation."

The Heritage Conservation Advisory Committee

It seems so indeed. In March this year the Lieutenant Governor of Pondicherry, Shri Govind Singh Gurjar, constituted a Pondicherry Heritage Conservation Advisory Committee. Its members are experts from planning, conservation and other related academic disciplines, government officials from the Pondicherry Town Planning, Tourism and Public Works Departments, and representatives from INTACH, the Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville. "The committee will be responsible to advise the government on all heritage issues. One of the mandates of this committee is to pass a heritage law, such as they have in Mumbai, Hyderabad and Ahmedabad, which would make it illegal to pull down listed buildings, and provide incentives for heritage preservation" says Ajit.

Cuddalore and Chidambaram

Pondicherry's INTACH is now slowly spreading its wings to neighbouring cities in Tamil Nadu. "We have been asked by the Cuddalore District Collector to make a plan for the restoration of the Government House in Cuddalore. This was originally the residence of Robert Clive, who was one of the key figures in the creation of British India," says Ajit. Another



Houses in Goldsmith street, Tranquebar, before and after the restoration

project in Cuddalore is the restoration of the Town Hall. "After we had showed him the advantages that heritage conservation has brought to Pondicherry, the Collector asked us to list all heritage buildings in Cuddalore and in the nearby pilgrimage city of Chidambaram with its Nataraja Temple. Neither city has good tourist facilities," says Ajit.

INTACH has also made proposals for the landscaping and improvement of tourist facilities of the Pichavaram mangrove forest near Chidambaram. "These are all prime tourist locations, but there are no decent facilities," says Ajit. "Pichavaram is the second largest mangrove forest in the world. It is home to a large variety of birds – local resident, migratory resident and the pure migratory birds – and there is a lovely beach which separates it from the Bay of Bengal. It is one of those rare mangrove forests which has actually increased by 90% between 1986 and 2002. Auroville's expertise could help to turn this into a beautiful place for tourists, while at the same time protecting it," he says.

Tranquebar

Another heritage town INTACH is involved with is the former Danish colony of Tranquebar. "The Neerama people bought a former collector's bungalow, a dilapidated building, and Ratna and myself did the restoration," says Ajit. "Then, after the tsunami, the Danish Bestseller Foundation visited it in 2005. They proposed to buy some of the fisherman's houses which had been abandoned, and that INTACH would restore them. This was the first time in the history of INTACH that a corporate expressed interest in promoting heritage restoration not only by investing in restoration but taking care of all INTACH expenses – a commitment for many years to come. We did as requested, and the houses are now beautifully restored. Tranquebar today is one of the cleanest communities in the area thanks to the solid waste management supported by Bestseller. Incidentally Bestseller got introduced to Auroville through their involvement with us and today they have many projects with Upasana." [see AVToday # 239 January 2009]

Together with the Tamil Nadu Tourism Department, INTACH presented a proposal to the Ministry of Tourism in New Delhi to make Tranquebar a heritage destination. The first phase, to the value of Rs 5 crores, has now been approved. "We will restore buildings, pave the streets, install street lighting and restore the temple on the beach. There are also plans to improve sanitation, power and water infrastructure. All this might also involve other people from Auroville," says Ajit. "Upasana is already developing crafts in the area." And he predicts, "Heritage preservation is going to involve Auroville in a big way."

Carel

"Outside work is challenging"

More and more Auroville units are working not only inside Auroville but also outside in the larger India. In this way they export something of the quality and ethics of the community while making an important contribution to Auroville's prosperity.

But what does it mean to work in India? What are the particular challenges and satisfactions? And how do they see their role? In these two pages we present the views of some of those working on this larger canvas.

New Dawn Carpentry was begun by Ricardo twelve years ago. Its main work is manufacturing furniture, windows and doors. The team takes up projects both inside and outside Auroville.

Why do you take work outside Auroville? Is the reason purely financial?

Ricardo: No, although it's true that we earn more working outside Auroville, and this gives a boost to the company's finances. From time to time I have to make big investments to buy new machinery etc. and it's not possible to finance this from work within the community. I'm also happy that my workers earn much better on outside jobs.

But the main reason I enjoy tak-

ing work outside Auroville is that these jobs tend to be more interesting and everybody in our team likes being challenged. For example, the two sound studio projects we did in collaboration with *Sound Wizard* were very challenging because the work was so sophisticated: we were using many different materials, we often had to find original solutions and everything had to be completed to a very high standard.

In Auroville our projects tend to be more routine stuff.

Actually, I don't enjoy being out of Auroville because I don't like living in cities: it's my workers who enjoy it. They have good accommodation, good food, they get to see new places. And they are challenged.

But you've also had some very bad experiences working outside.

Only once, in Bombay. I'd taken my whole team and equipment there for a job. I had stipulated certain conditions beforehand regarding accommodation for my workers, but the client put ten of them in a tiny room without water or bathroom facilities – and these guys were working ten hour days and coming home covered in dust and chemicals. Also, he only gave them only Rs 45 each a day for their food, teas etc – and Rs 45 hardly buys a *dosai* in Bombay. I was furious. Within a few days my manager came to me and said the team wanted to pull back. So we loaded all our equipment in a lorry and left.

How can you prevent that happening again?

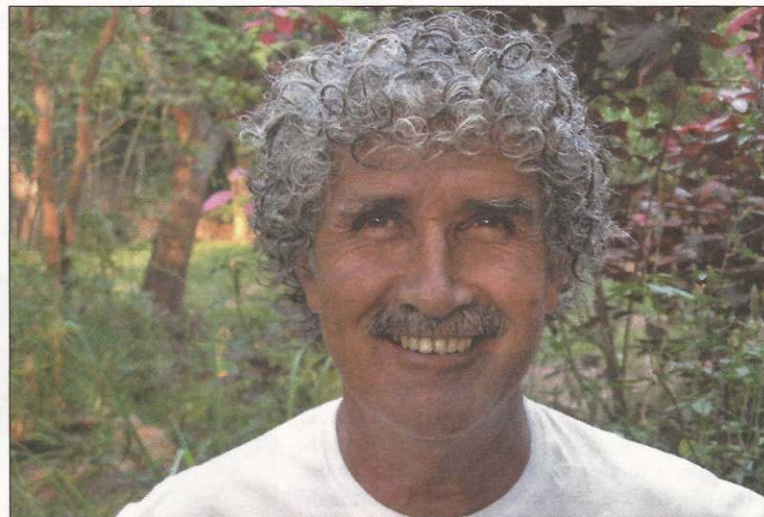
You can't, you have to trust your client. But this was the only time it happened like this.

We had another problem when we began working on A.R. Rahman's studio in Chennai. The studio was designed by an architect in Los Angeles and Rahman gave it to a company in Bombay to construct, but they didn't manage. Over several years he tried other companies – none of them constructed it and he was being deceived by everyone. So when we started working for him his people were very distrustful: they watched every movement my workers made. It was awful, like being in jail, and I had to clarify that I couldn't work any longer in this way. After that, everything went fine. My workers are very proud that we managed to build Rahman's studio, not just because he won the Oscars but because we were apparently the only company in India that could manage to complete this project.

You must sometimes be working for people who have a lot of money but little taste. How do you deal with that?

It's tough because we always want to do beautiful work. But if I'm asked to make something which is really ugly I do it – my goal is to satisfy my client, not to change their mind – although ugly things can be beautifully made.

I also experience deep contradictions because all my outside clients only want to use teak wood. So I go to



Ricardo

the sawmill and see these beautiful trees which have been cut down in their prime. I often think, what am I doing? We all know what is happening to the planet. Sometimes, however, I can convince my clients to use second-hand teak.

Then there is the challenge of *vaastu*. Everybody in India uses this ancient design system that not only defines the shape and orientation of buildings but also the smallest details in carpentry work. For example, *vaastu* requires that all logs must be cut in such a way that the lower part of the tree goes at the bottom of the door and the upper part at the top. So when I go to the sawmill I have to mark all pieces, 'down' or 'up'. It's a real headache.

Are you planning to expand?

No. I could easily do so – we have enough demand – but I don't want to get bigger mainly because, at my age, I'm not looking for more work and responsibility. Actually, I'm very happy at what we have already achieved together in *New Dawn Carpentry*. We are very efficient, we do good work – my clients are always happy – but most of all I have built up with my workers a very good relationship based on mutual trust. There's no big boss here, we work together like a family, facing the difficulties and enjoying the achievement together. In fact, I see this as the most important thing I have achieved since coming to Auroville.

From an interview by Alan

"Working outside Auroville can be fun"

Sound Wizard was founded by Didier, a professional sound engineer, in 1999. The unit specializes in architectural acoustics and system design for professional studios, auditoriums, discos and conference halls. It also designs high-end home theatres, more appropriately called private cinemas, under the brand name *Espace*. *Sound Wizard*'s work is almost entirely outside Auroville, although it offers free advice to Aurovilians and assistance in purchasing audio and visual equipment.

Auroville Today met the Sound Wizards, Didier, Kumbha and Fabien, in their office in Shakti to find out more about their work.

What are the main satisfactions of your work?

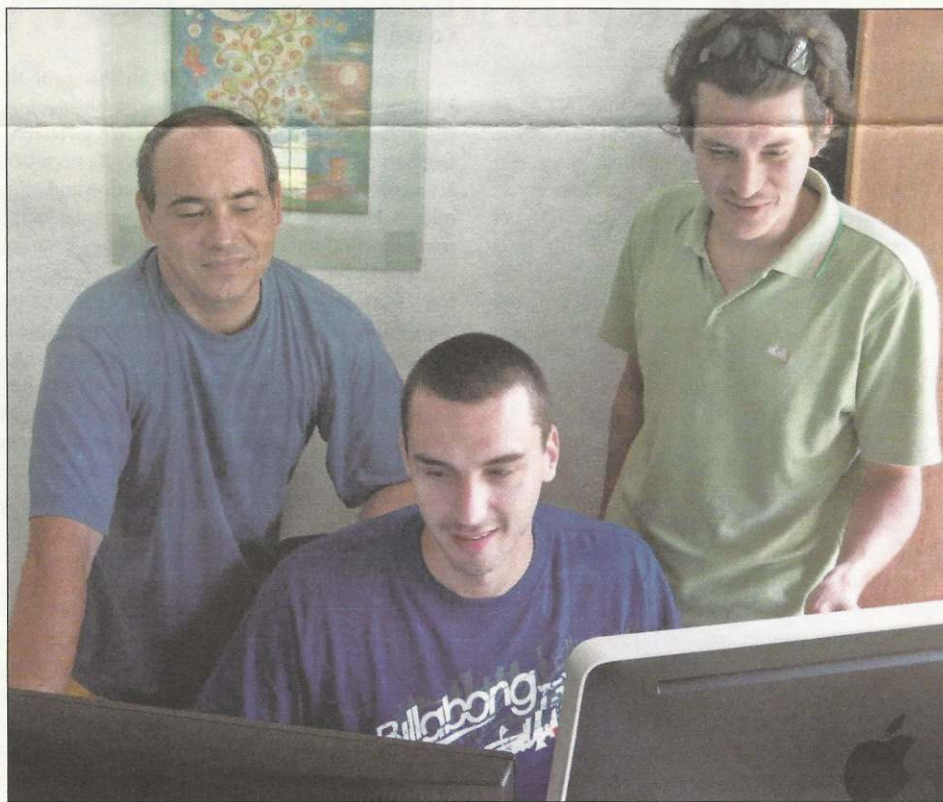
Kumbha: It's fun when things move smoothly and all of us in the team can work on what we do best and be creative. We answer all the client's questions, we work out every detail of equipment and design, we put the client in contact with the right suppliers. Finally we go to test the equipment and acoustics, we enjoy it all for an hour, and then we're out.

How many times does that happen?

Kumbha: Almost never. The process usually stops in the middle for one reason or another – the client is indecisive or has run out of money or lost interest. Then, sometimes a year later, he will suddenly phone you and want to continue, and we have to pick up the thread again.

Didier: Most of our projects drag on, and that kills the fun a bit. Often, however, you build up a relationship with your client which can be very satisfying. A lot of our work has to do with education because, at the beginning, most of our clients don't really know what they want and they know little about high-end equipment. So you explain to them that if they buy this, this is what they will get. Then they get interested, they start buying audio magazines and calling us up with more detailed questions. It's good for business – we had one client who began by wanting to buy a few speakers and we ended up doing a one crore (ten million rupees) project for him. And then at the end of the project they are almost disappointed it's over because they enjoyed the learning process and often want to keep in close contact with us.

Kumbha: The personal touch is very important. In theory we wouldn't have to visit our clients much to do the work but, especially in India, people like meeting, people like the personal contact.



Didier, Fabien and Kumbha

Didier: I've made a lot of friends all over India this way. And going out allows you to take some distance from Auroville, to recharge your batteries. It's refreshing to be with people who are not always talking about Auroville! But the frequent travelling can be tiring and your family life suffers. So now we divide the travelling between us.

Kumbha: I like going out. It's really fun to open up to people a whole new world of sound and visual experience: we can't do this in Auroville right now because people can't afford it. But the thing I most appreciate about going out is seeing how fast things are moving in modern India. Everything is on a bigger scale, everything is manifesting faster than in Auroville, where things move very slowly.

Your clients are very well-off and some must have entirely different value systems and lifestyles to yours. Is this a problem?

Didier: People tend to assume that someone with a lot of money conforms to a certain stereotype in terms of behaviour and lifestyle, but this is not so.

Kumbha: One of the charms of India is

that privileged people are often very simple and genuine. They live luxuriously, but you feel they could scale down to much simpler standards if they needed to.

What are the challenges of business in India?

Kumbha: One challenge is people not meeting deadlines and commitments. Then people in the big cities don't start work before ten in the morning – in the studio business they don't start before 2 in the afternoon – and then they work on late. So we can't tell them we're only here between 9-5 because we offer a high-end service and have to be on-call always. It doesn't bother me to be phoned up at odd hours by a client, but some people might feel it's an invasion of their privacy.

Fabien: Doing business in India is way more unpredictable than doing it in the West; there's so much here that's floating, ungrounded. This can make it tiring and frustrating. A client will say 'yes' one day and 'no' the next – it's how things are done here – and if you want to survive in business you have to be very flexible and willing to accept everything and not take things personally. The time you spend

on issues outside the purely technical is huge compared to the West.

Kumbha: You soon learn there are many different 'yesses', and that some 'yesses' are very close to 'no's'. So when a supplier tells you something will be delivered by 2 o'clock tomorrow afternoon you have to be able to gauge if this will happen or not.

Didier: But we have to be careful not to get overpowered by the unpredictable part of it. At some point we have to draw a line.

Do you have a blacklist?

Fabien: Not of clients but of suppliers. Our past experience of many suppliers has ranged from bad to very bad. The final option is to blacklist their business, although the people often keep in contact and remain friends.

Kumbha: But even the blacklist slowly gets grey and then white again because we've run out of alternatives!

Didier: It's all to do with finding a work philosophy in others which matches ours. This is getting better. A new young breed of tech-savvy people who move like us. Old-style business in India had a lot of *tamas* around it.

Do you ever have problems getting paid?

Didier: At the end of my first big project in India I got a big shock. A lot of money was owed at the time of the final payment, but when I asked my client to pay he said, 'What do you mean? It's the discount, no? In India the final payment is always waived.' I got into a conflict. So I learned quickly. Now we make sure that everything is paid in advance for our services and we don't have to rely on getting the final payment to run the company. Anyway, most of time we don't get the final payment, not because client doesn't want to pay but because the project is never finished!

Kumbha: Payment is not normally a problem because we give a very good service and our clients are happy. Although coming from Auroville brings no advantage in our line of business, people say, 'Look these guys are genuine, they work hard, let's find out more about this place they come from'. And this can lead on to other Auroville contacts. In this way, our work outside can benefit Auroville. So I see us as kind of ambassadors. We try to represent Auroville in terms of quality and ethics.

From an interview by Alan

For more information go to
www.soundwizard.net or
www.espaceav.com

"Behind our products is a whole value-system"

Tency was one of the founders of the *Centre for Scientific Research (CSR)*. Among other things, CSR specialises in manufacturing and installing wastewater treatment plants and its services and products are more and more in demand in India today.

Auroville Today: Can you remember the first time you worked outside Auroville?

Tency: In the 1990s the government of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands asked CSR to provide them with biogas plants. We got the contract because they wanted a finished product – it was too expensive for them to construct their own plants as they had to import all the materials from the mainland. So we shipped them our prefabricated plants and it seems they are very satisfied – nearly every year for the past 15 years they have ordered more. I sometimes wonder where they put them all!

You already had a professional product.

Yes. All our skills and expertise had already been built up in Auroville. It's an unbelievable blessing to be able to fine-tune products within our wider family before they go outside. Aurovilians are the perfect guinea-pigs because they are crazy enough to take up every new thing that's produced here.

That first time must have been a big learning experience.

It's a whole experience which had to be built up. First of all we had to price everything correctly – that's a whole story in itself, estimates, quotations, at that time none of us had a clue about such things. Then we had to make the paperwork in the form the government needed – the administrative side is almost as important as the technology because if you goof up on the paperwork you lose money. That first time the officials helped us a lot, they were tolerant of our mistakes and after a couple of times the process went very smoothly. Then we had to learn how to pack the plants so they would survive a road trip, a three day sea voyage and then, often, another voyage on smaller ships. We got it right – none of them ever broke. The first time, Ramu and myself went there and installed two of them and did a one week compressed course. Since that time they have been able to handle all the installations themselves.

And the payment?

Whoever we have dealt with over the years, final payment is always a

problem. It's often delayed, sometimes for years! We didn't realise that at the beginning – we were so naïve, we learned everything the hard way.

Since then you've worked not only with the government but with a whole range of clients – NGOs, corporates, individuals.

One of most satisfying experiences we had was working with an NGO. In the early 1990s we started working with Sushma Iyengar who co-founded the *Kutch Nav Nirman Abhiyan* to help the organization develop new and appropriate technologies in Kutch, Gujarat. Since then CSR and AuroRE have been doing projects with Abhiyan and they have been sending people here for trainings. We tried working with a lot of

ty years we have built up the experience and skill to design and implement natural wastewater treatment systems from the small to the big-scale. ITC were interested because they are very conscious about sustainability and want to reduce their energy consumption – all conventional treatment systems are dependent on huge electricity inputs and most of the time also on chemicals.

Our first installation was in their big tobacco factory in Nepal. It was a very tough test of our technology, but it worked well and since then we have done further work for them, including installing a large system in their five star hotels (ITC owns a hotel group).

Working with ITC was a completely different experience for us. ITC

What about working with individual clients. Is it easier?

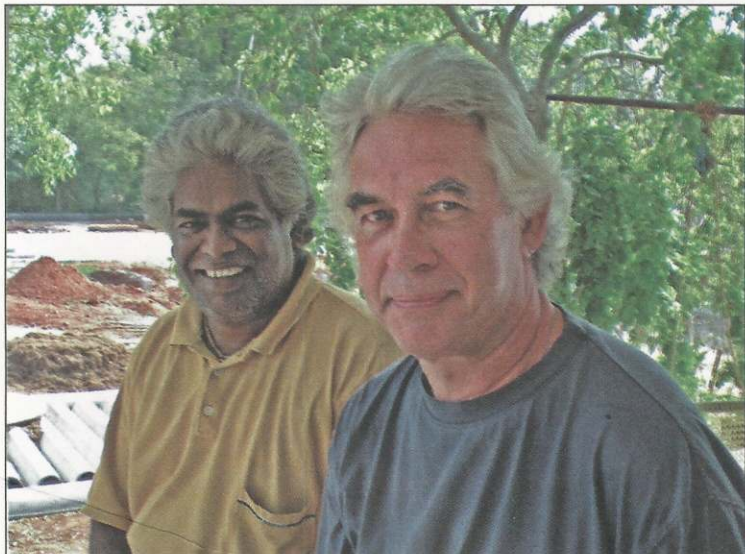
No. Often you have to dilute your product or services to fit their budget. Then there is a whole dance, a whole ritual, involved before you sign the contract. You don't dance twice round the table, you dance 500 times! So if we work for individuals there has to be an interesting angle, there has to be something innovative about the project so we can learn something new. For us it's a process of growing, not of making extra money. If we simply wanted to make money we would be into mass-production, but we've never done well with this. We try it for a while, and then it fizzles out. I guess it's not interesting enough for us.

Do people develop a relationship with Auroville through purchasing your product?

This is another area which is so unpredictable and so satisfying at the same time because we're not a company which sells only products. We're also part and parcel of the Auroville experience. In our product is embedded a whole value system and life-style; we try to make sure that our values are part of the product so that it carries those values to the place it is installed. Because people won't have seen that effort at perfection in a normal concrete box, they see that the details are taken care of and, if something goes wrong, they see that we put it right. This makes people curious. It's as if there is a special magic around the product that attracts people and causes them to ask, what's behind this, where is this coming from? Then, very often, they visit and become more and more interested in Auroville itself.

And it's not just the product. If you work outside you need to travel, and when people hear where you come from, there is always an interest, they look at you as someone special – most people in India know something about Auroville. So, inevitably, you become a kind of representative for Auroville and it's up to you to carry something of our values outside. This is not something you can fake. It's important that you are true to yourself and what you believe in.

It's interesting. When you start working outside you don't think about any of these aspects – most of the time you're freaking out because of all the things that are going wrong – but at the end of the cycle you start to realize that you're not just doing business: many things are happening on a lot of different levels. It's interesting that after a 25-year roller-coaster journey the will to progress and continue is still very much alive in me. It's a flame that is still burning strong. *Alan*



Ramu and Tency

other NGOs over the years but none have worked so well – probably because we have similar values to the people in *Abhiyan*: it definitely helps to have shared values.

What about the corporate world?

We have more and more contact with this world. When CSR was founded in 1984 Prem Malik put us in touch with the *Imperial Tobacco Company (ITC)*. Apart from a donation for the land on which CSR was built, not much came out of that at the time, but much later another friend put us back in contact and that relationship has since blossomed. They were interested in the two fields in which we have built up experience, renewable energy and wastewater treatment. Our renewable energy devices never took off with ITC, basically because it's a very competitive area and we are involved in small to medium-scale applications whereas they need huge systems to power their factories.

Where we did find a niche was in the area of water treatment. Over twenty

is pure business, very cost-conscious like all large corporations, and you have to be 100% sure of your product because you have to offer guarantees, you have to sign on the dotted line. Also, all your paperwork and your presentations have to be on a level which we are absolutely not used to in Auroville. It was a tremendous learning experience. Fortunately we had a team which could divide up the tasks and the two people in ITC head office whom we dealt with believed in our technology and helped us a lot.

Often we were late in getting in the necessary documentation because the Auroville scene is so unpredictable. Then I would have the painful task of apologising for the delay. I know and admire how professionals work; if your paper has to be somewhere at 5 o'clock in the afternoon you get it there, whatever the circumstances. Forget about the excuses. There are very few people in Auroville who have that capacity. This is why it is important that the client has faith in your product and that you develop a close connection based on trust.

FARMS

Farmers' market winds down for summer

The Saturday Farmers' Market, which has been held opposite the Solar Kitchen since December last year, closed down in April. The plan was to start in early December, but it had to be postponed because in November the cyclone *Nisha* had destroyed about 70% of the plantations. But on December 20th, despite having little to offer, the farms decided to go ahead and started the first Auroville Farmers' Market.

"We wanted to reach out and explain how the Auroville farms had been affected by *Nisha*," says Isabelle. "The Botanical Garden brought seeds and seedlings, Kofpu food-processing unit came with their organic and healthy processed food, and Pierre from Buddha Garden prepared wheat grass juice."

From the beginning the response was good. People enjoyed the outdoor market and came to see and buy the colourful range of products from the Auroville farms. As the season picked-up – winter is the best time in our area to grow a wide range of vegetables – gradually more products were made available. There were fresh-picked herbs and salad greens, vegetables and fruits, rice and grains, cheese, eggs (free-range, of course), plus jams, spreads and biscuits. Towards the end of the season, the farms even

brought flowers – Windarra's sunflowers became very popular.

The Farmers' Market became a platform to promote Auroville-grown products, present the farms, and bring awareness about locally-grown organic food. It also was the place where one could meet the farmers as well as the Foodlink team – the unit that connects the farms and consumers with the Pour Tous outlets, the Solar Kitchen, the food-processing units and the Auroville restaurants. Says Isabelle, "Since the farms do not sell directly to the Aurovilians, we missed this contact which is very important for a better understanding between the grower and their clients."

Now with summer approaching, the production is going down again and the market has closed – for a while. But the Auroville farms will continue to supply their summer bounty – ladies finger, snake and bottle gourds, beans, sweet corn, aubergine, cucumber, and pumpkin, plus many fruits such as papaya, banana, sweet lime, and others. Most special of all there will be an ample supply of the delicious



The Auroville Farmers' Market

organic mangoes.

"With each market, I could feel togetherness, a being with my family. An event like the Farmers' Market shows how much we in Auroville are interconnected and that the spirit of community is very much alive," says Isabelle.

Priya Sundaravalli

In brief

GB and IAC meetings cancelled

The Election Commission has informed the Auroville Foundation that in accordance with the Code of Conduct which is in operation during the time of India's General Elections, no meetings of the Governing Board and International Advisory Council can be held. The meetings of the Governing Board and the International Advisory Council, which had been scheduled in Auroville on 4th and 5th April 2009, have therefore been cancelled.

Late Arrival

41 sheets of 12 mm clear glass measuring 3.2 by 2 metres, which had been sent to a glass factory in Calcutta to be bent for the ramps, arrived at the Matrimandir after 10 years as the factory had been closed due to labour problems. As the glass parapets have since been installed with glass bent in a recently opened factory near Chennai, Matrimandir is now looking for other ways to use or sell the glass.

Solid Waste Management Survey

Soma Waste Management carried out a survey in January-February 2009 to know more about the waste we generate. The survey covered a total of 60 households, 94 communities (which included guesthouses), 40 units and offices and 10 restaurants. Findings showed that 88% of households separate organic and non-organic waste; 50% separate recyclables; 30% separate hazardous waste; and 23% separate medical waste. Only 12% of households do not separate their waste at all. 55% of the households are not aware of what happens to Auroville's solid waste after it leaves their house or their community. The survey showed that there is a lot of room for improvement in the way Aurovilians deal with and think about their waste.

White Peacock opens

Pottery lovers attended the opening of the Ceramic Studio 'White Peacock' on March 8th near the Kindergarten. The studio offers a space for children and adults to create objects in clay.

AVI Meeting in Holland

The Auroville International Meeting will be held in the city of Venwoude in The Netherlands during the first week of May. For registration visit <http://www.auroville-int-ned.nl/AVI2009.html>

Thamarai CD

A CD with songs from around the world sung by children and volunteers of the Thamarai Learning and Community Centre in Edayanchavady village is now available. The CD comes with a booklet that describes the work and captures the spirit of Thamarai through pictures and drawings from the children. The music invokes the themes of healing, celebration and unity. Further info: email thamarai@auroville.org.in.

Earth Week 2009

'People's Participation' is the theme of this year's Earth Day celebrations in Auroville. For an entire week beginning April 16th and ending on Earth Day, residents will be encouraged to lock up their fossil fuel guzzling vehicles and take to the roads on bicycles, horses, electric bikes, or on foot to experience less dust, less noise, and less pollution.

For three days a huge banner at New Creation School announced 'Science Fair - 2009'. Busloads of excited children from schools in the surrounding villages as well as Pondicherry came to visit. And the brains behind it was Aurovillian science educator Anbu Aravind.

"I strongly believe science enriches our lives, expands our imagination, and liberates us from ignorance and superstition," says Anbu.

Anbu is passionate about taking science to children and making it accessible to them. "You can say it's in my blood," he says with a smile. "My mother was a teacher, my sister is a lecturer in a college, my uncle a district education officer, and my grandfather was a headmaster, so I grew up around teaching and learning. And here in Auroville, I am lucky to have found the perfect fit at New Creation School."

Anbu grew up in Kanyakumari, the Southern most district of Tamil Nadu. He moved to Pondicherry in the early nineties. "I used to come and visit Auroville when I was working there," he says. "I would sit for hours at the Visitor's Centre watching people from all over the world as they passed through. It fascinated me, seeing such an international mix of people." He also recollects cycling around the different Auroville communities. "I was curious to see how they worked."

Anbu was very impressed by what The Mother and Sri Aurobindo had to say about education and became an avid reader. "And after six months of observing, reading, and searching within, I decided that Auroville was the place for me. It became clear that while the outside world offered a well paid job, there was no room for creativity or experimentation. And I wanted to be part of this place where experiments could happen." In 1996, Anbu moved to Auroville; his wife Meena joined four years later.

Being a chemistry graduate with training in textile technology, Anbu first joined Auromode. "But my primary interest was teaching, so I left to join the Auroville School system as a science teacher."

Anbu became part of the Auroville Outreach schools as he wanted to share his knowledge with the children of the villages. "There is an urgent need for good teachers everywhere, especially in the

Making science accessible

The philosophy of the Auroville Schools Science Educational Training (ASSET) centre is to make science accessible to all children



Children at the New Creation Science Fair 2009 (Anbu stands at the far right)

Outreach schools," he says. "For me, all children are gifted, whether they come from poor or rich families or are from the village or the city." Anbu's fluency in Tamil, his first language, besides English, made him very suitable for the task.

"I visited all the schools in the area and everywhere I saw the traditional Indian system of rote learning from the text book. It is as if education is still run by the military! But children need practical experience to understand the world, especially this complex modern world that is encroaching upon their lives."

He is appreciative of what New Creation School has done over the last few years. "It has developed a completely different approach. The teaching is student-centred and visitors comment on how open and interested the children are in their

work. We want this school to be a role model for India where teachers can come and see how things can really be different."

It was for this reason that in 2006 Anbu set up an independent 'one stop-shop' for science in Auroville. "That was how ASSET or the 'Auroville Schools Science Educational Teaching' centre was established and it is part of SAIER," he explains. "I wanted to create a place where there could be a new energy and framework for science teaching."

Anbu draws personal inspiration from India's former president and scientist, Abdul Kalam. "I have read all his books, so when he visited Auroville in 2005, I was thrilled to meet him. For me, he symbolizes a man of action. He came from a lower middle class family and overcame all obsta-

cles through personal effort and dedication to become who he is."

Anbu is also moved by Kalam's rapport with children. "He is marvellous with youngsters. One can see that he respects children and always answers their questions. Once a young boy asked Kalam who the best scientist was, and his answer was 'Children, as they are always asking questions.'"

"This is what I believe too. And it is the teacher's responsibility to find the right tool at the right time to stimulate and encourage a child."

In the last three years, ASSET has been offering workshops, trainings and field trips for teachers and students, inviting local experts in science, mathematics and even agriculture. Since 2007, ASSET has organized annual science fairs in Auroville, inviting the surrounding schools.

"The first year, our topic was 'Water'. The second year, we focussed on 'Energy' and this time the theme was 'How does it Work?'."

Judging by the turnout, the 2009 Auroville Science Fair was a great success. "Over 3000 children and adults visited," says Anbu. The exhibits consisted of about sixty working models displayed under three categories - self-explanatory booths; material that the children could touch and handle themselves; and stalls where students of New Creation School demonstrated scientific principles to their audience.

Visitors were impressed. Professor Heidi Watts of Antioch University, USA, an annual visitor to Auroville, commented: "It was hard to believe that these confident and eloquent children come from poor families, the first in their families to have the chance of education."

Anbu wants to take ASSET further. "I would love to set up a Science and Technology Park at the Visitor's Centre," he says. "Thousands of young people come here and, apart from the Matrimandir, there is nothing for them to see. We have all the material from our science fairs, plus the examples of the real practical work that Aurovillians are doing in the field of alternative energy and technologies. What an inspiring place this could be! That is my dream."

Dianna

ARTS

Seeking emptiness

A feeling of emptiness, space and silence prevails in the *mandala* exhibition at the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture. The *mandalas* of Auroville artist, Sarasija appear deceptively simple at first sight. It is only when viewed from an inner level that one realizes that this is spiritual art which attempts to express the inexpressible. "For me, *mandalas* represent the essence of the Universe," says Sarasija.

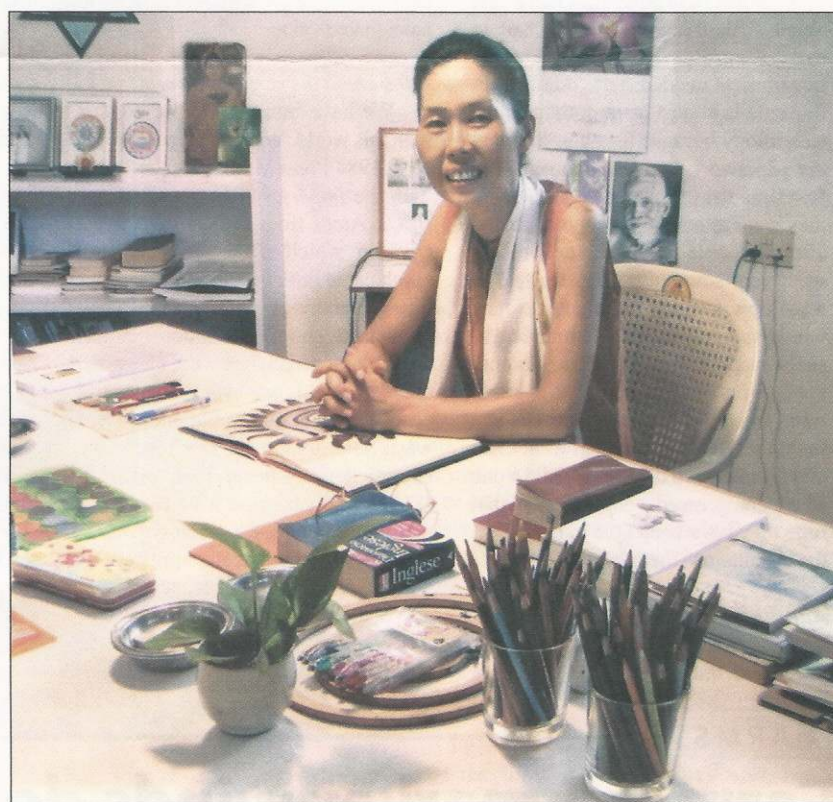
Sarasija first encountered *mandalas* in the mountains of Ladakh.

"I was staying in a monastery for three months when the lamas were creating a *Kalachakra mandala* from coloured sand. It was huge and impressive. Every day they worked on it. Finally it was finished, and there was a big puja and celebration. And then, suddenly, in front of everyone's eyes, they destroyed it. I was shocked. The sand was gathered up into little containers, taken to the river, and mixed with the water. All done, all gone... Later I asked a monk about what had happened. I will never forget his reply, 'This is Buddha's house - all the universe,

all, you, me, is Buddha,' he said". A Buddhist herself, the statement made a deep impact. "Ever since, *mandalas* have become part of my life".

Kim Sung Ae, better known by her Auroville name Sarasija, meaning 'Lotus Flower' in Sanskrit, got her bachelor in Fine Arts at the E-Wha Women's University, Korea. "I knew that if I wanted to be a successful artist, I should have stayed in Korea and worked in Seoul. But that was not my path. I wanted to go to India, to live a dream". For many Koreans, in particular those who have a Buddhist background, India is the Mother country as it is the birthplace of the Lord Buddha. Sarasija had another reason as well. "One of my ancestors was an Indian princess from Ayodhya who married a Korean king". But above all, Sarasija wanted to go to India "to find my soul, to develop myself spiritually."

She landed at Rabindranath Tagore's Visva-Bharati University in Shantiniketan, where she got her Post Diploma Fine Arts. "Those three years in Shantiniketan were a heaven for me. I studied philosophy and sculpture while being surrounded by many forms of culture. I par-



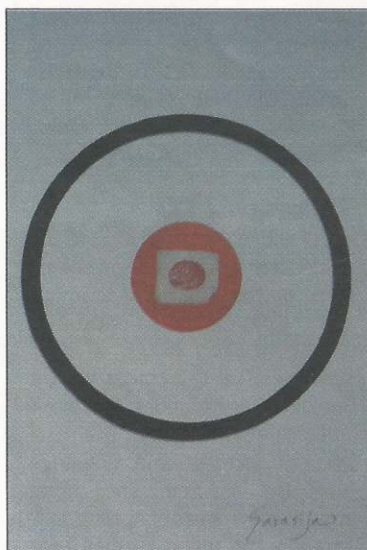
Sarasija in her studio

ticular enjoyed the music of the Bauls, those wandering singers from Bengal who believe in a simple life."

Ten years ago she made the decision to settle in Auroville. "I worked for the first four years in the Matrimandir nursery, learning to surrender and work in silence. Only afterwards did I feel ready to start drawing *mandalas* and giving classes." She explains, "I am a spiritual

seeker. As part of my seeking, it's natural for me to express my inner self through art. Creating *mandalas* means for me going into meditation, going to the centre. I want now to serve the Divine through offering *mandala*-drawing classes and share the peace and silence I experience."

In conversation with Priya Sundaravalli



Sarasija's mandalas are characterised by the use of the bindu (dot) at the centre which represents the soul.

Subscription information:

- ◆ One year subscription rates: India Rs. 450; other countries Rs 2,000 equivalent
 - ◆ Two year subscription rate: India Rs. 800; other countries Rs 3,700 equivalent.
- Those for whom the subscription rate is an obstacle are invited to contact *Auroville Today* for information on reduced rates. *Auroville Today* does not receive any funds from Auroville. Your subscription (or your supporting contribution of double the amount) helps us to continue this work.

There are three ways to subscribe:

- ◆ Through our website. Subscriptions can be ordered and paid on line through www.auroville.com/auroville-today
- ◆ By sending your contribution directly to *Auroville Today*, Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India. Cheques sent directly to *Auroville Today* should be made payable to Auroville Fund, specifying: 'Contribution for *Auroville Today*'. Personal cheques are preferred to bank cheques. Please do not send postal money orders or cash.

◆ By sending your contribution to:

- ◆ Germany: Auroville International Deutschland e.V., Solmsstrasse 6, 10961 Berlin, tel. (49)(0)30-42803150, Fax (49)(0)30-92091376, email: info@auroville.de, GLS Gemeinschaftsbank, BIC: GENODEM1GLS, IBAN:DE16430609678019389200,
- ◆ The Netherlands: Auroville International Nederland, email: info@auroville-int-ned.nl, Postbank account: 805707, account name: Auroville Int. Ned. Account address: George Washingtonlaan 16, 2285 CG Rijswijk (IBAN: NL11 PSTB 0000 805707, BIC: PSTBNL21)

- ◆ U.K.: Auroville International U.K., c/o Martin Littlewood, 30 The Green, Surlingham, Norwich NR14 7AG, tel. 01508-538300, fax 01508-537122, email: info@aviuk.org
- ◆ USA: Make checks payable to Auroville International USA, and send to either: U.S.A (1): AVI USA, P.O. Box 1534, Lodi, CA 95241-1534, Tel: (831) 425-5620; email: info@aviusa.org; or to U.S.A (2): Auroville Information Office, PO Box 676, Woodstock NY 12498, tel: (1) 845-679-5358, email: AVINY@aviusa.org

Editorial team: Alan, Carel, Dianna, Hero, Priya Sundaravalli, Robert. Proof-reading: Alan. DTP: Carel. Photo editing: Jean-Denis

Published by Carel Thieme on behalf of the Auroville Foundation. Printed by Brihat Consultants, Pondicherry, and published at Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India.

Auroville Today does not necessarily reflect the views of the community as a whole.