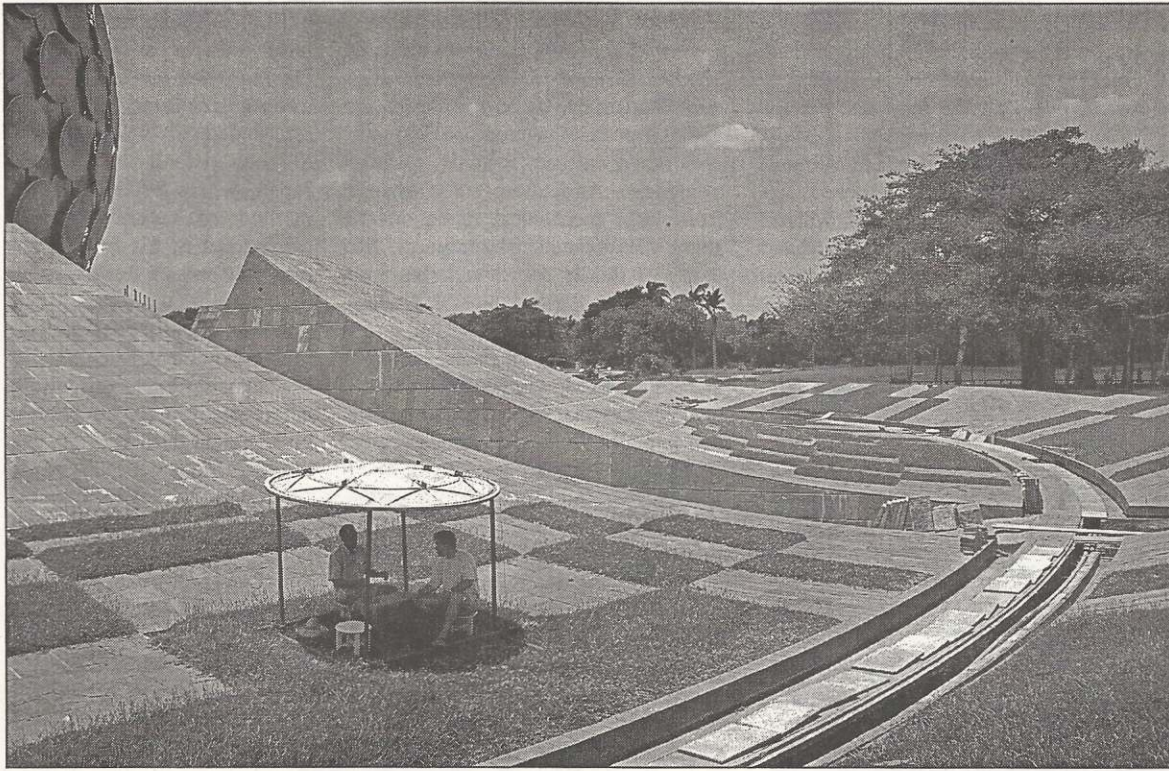


# Auroville Today

MAY 2004, No.184



## Preparing the cradle of bliss

Since October 2003, work on Matrimandir and its gardens has progressed beyond expectation

“We are in the process of clearing the area for the ring-road around the Matrimandir oval. More than four-fifths of it has been done. The remaining part goes straight through the former Matrimandir workshops, which are now being pulled down.” Alain Grandcolas, my tour guide for the morning, points at a group of people who are busy dismantling buildings and clearing rubble. These workshops, which have stood for almost 30 years, are no more. Also the trees that provided shade to the many people who worked there will be cleared. “But perhaps we can save that one,” says Alain, pointing at a magnificent Banyan. Out of its massive trunk, four Palmyra trees have risen, creating the symbiotic entanglement which is typical of these species. It is a beautiful specimen and will be even more so if it stands free from the workshops. “It may

find a place in the garden of Existence,” explains Alain. “As the ground level of the former workshop area is higher than in the rest of the gardens, some digging will have to be done. And then the route for the oval ring road around the inner gardens will at last be cleared.”

Sounds of incessant hammering greet us when we walk along the future road. Two teams of stone workers are dressing large granite slabs, making them smooth and level, in such a way that “there is some life left in the stones.” These granite slabs, more than 7,000 of them, have been stacked behind the workshop for more than 10 years. “In total,” says Alain, “we’ll need about 40,000 slabs of granite and 7,000 slabs of Agra stones in various sizes for the inner gardens alone. These two teams dress about 30 stones a day, which are then being cut to the required sizes in the cut-

ting workshop. And from there they are transported to their final destination: the pathways of the inner gardens of the Matrimandir.”

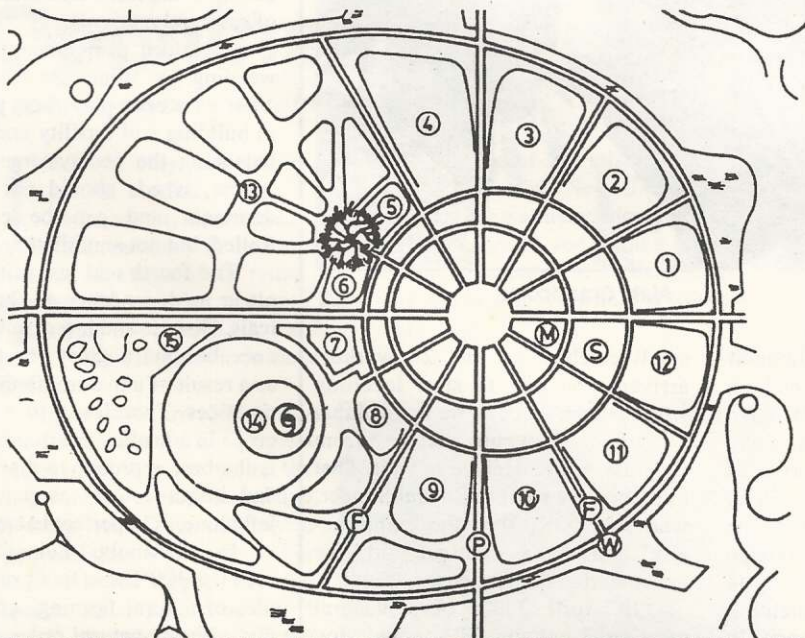
Together with Somu, Alain is in charge of the pathway department. Their first task is to have all the pathways originating from the Matrimandir and leading through and around its inner gardens ready within two years. “So we deal with the four entrances to the Matrimandir, the eight pathways that lead down to the pond underneath the Matrimandir, the area around that pond and also with the two circular pathways around the Matrimandir: the one in between the large and the small petals and the one outside the small petals,” he clarifies. “The work involves building the utility channels along the pathways, and laying granite and red Agra stone slabs on the 3.3 kilometers long pathways in the patterns indicated by the architect.”

The work is scheduled to take not more than 2 years, and expected to be ready by February 2006. “We are on schedule,” says Alain cheerfully.

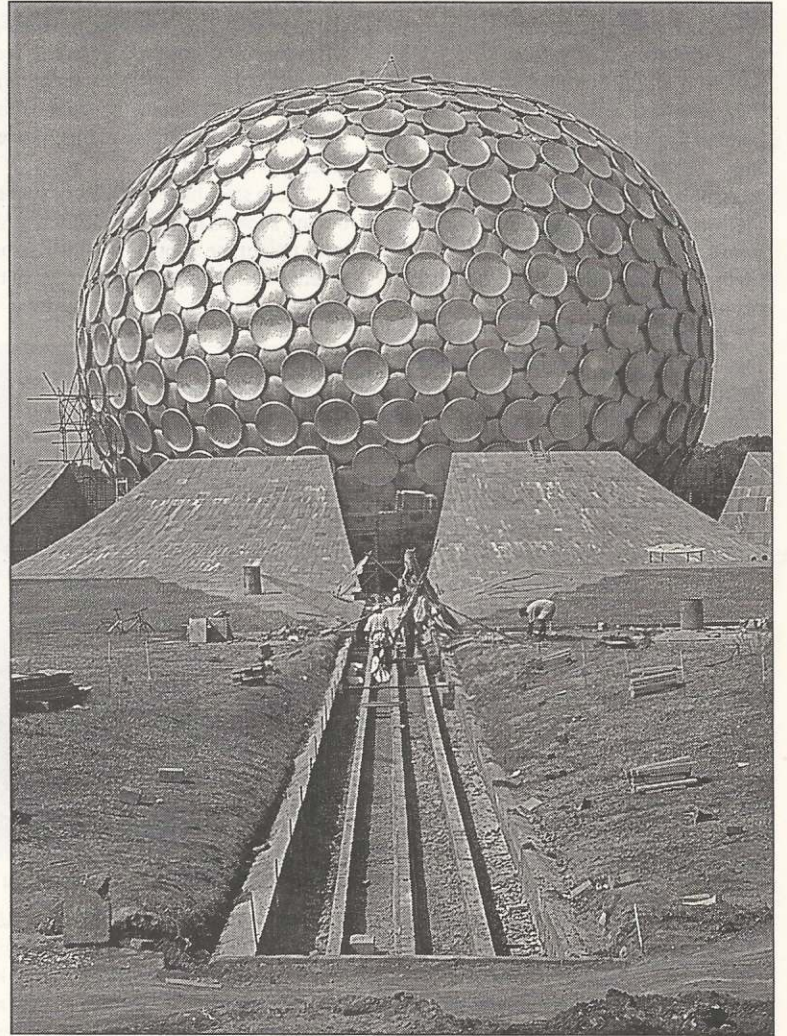
The achievement of this objective

### The Matrimandir gardens

1. Existence
2. Consciousness
3. Bliss
4. Light
5. Life
6. Power
7. Wealth
8. Usefulness
9. Progress
10. Youth
11. Harmony
12. Perfection
13. Unity garden
14. Amphitheatre – Urn
15. Rosegarden



Matrimandir is at the centre, the Banyan is between the gardens of Life and Power  
Eight pathways lead to the pond underneath Matrimandir (F)  
Four main pathways give entrance to the Matrimandir (P)  
W: oval ring road, M: Main petals, S: small petals



Path-making work in progress. Left: The pathway between the large and small petals, with the open-air office of Alain Grandcolas parked on the lawn of the large petal. Above: The pathway leading to the pond underneath Matrimandir

would not exactly leave the pathway department jobless. “The present work covers only half of the oval area,” he explains. “After this, we’ll have to do all the pathways in the area around the Amphitheatre and the Banyan, the rose garden and the unity garden. For this area, the designs are still awaited.”

Creating the pathways around the inner gardens defines at the same time the area of the gardens themselves. “Each inner garden,” explains Alain, “consists of two parts, separated from each other by the circular pathway. Each garden starts at the crest of the small petal, and from there undulates down, continues over the pathway, and waves up again into the next petal. The wave pattern, which results from the Matrimandir as it emerges from the earth, continues in the inner gardens. The largest garden (Light) is about four times the size of the two smallest gardens (Power and Life).”

The present work is to prepare the cradle of the garden of Bliss, the garden opposite the Town Hall, by finishing all the pathways and the water channels around it.

“Bliss will be the first experimental garden,” explains Alain. “The pathway department has set itself the target of November 24th, 2004. We hope that then we can show a first idea of the garden, with all the flowering plants that Mother has named ‘Ananda’. Primarily, these are two varieties of hibiscus (*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*), the one with cream petals and a pure white centre and the other with cream petals and a red centre (called by Mother ‘Ananda’ and ‘Ananda in the physical’ respectively); two varieties of *Canna Xgeneralis*

(cream white flower with pink specks named by Mother ‘Ananda in the centres’ and a cream white flower with a red centre called ‘Ananda in the physical body.’) Then there is a *Zinna* variety, a cream flower with a red centre (*Zinnia elegans* – named by Mother ‘Ananda of endurance’); *Plumbago auriculata*, the cluster of small soft pale lavender blue flowers Mother called ‘Krishna’s Ananda’, and the fruits of *Vitis vinifera* – common grapes – named by Mother ‘Divine Ananda’. The gardeners may add other plants as well, but these plants will be the heart of the garden of bliss.

Has the design for each garden been finalized? “Not at all!” says Alain. “Roger Anger, the architect, has invited anybody interested to present their design, preferably with a model. Right now three Aurovilians have given a design, and then there is the design of Roger himself and of the Italian architect Paulo. We have asked Paulo to allow us to make a model of his design, so that in August there can be a presentation of five or six models. Ideally, we would like to have one concept for the Bliss garden approved in August so that we can start. As long as the concept has not been finalized, we may simply plant grass everywhere, which will be replaced when a garden is built, so that in the meantime the area doesn’t look dead.”

We descend below the Matrimandir. The seating arrangements inside each of the four pillars that support the Matrimandir, now high above us, will offer a view on the future marble pond underneath.

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# Practising natural farming in Solitude

"It is extremely important to us to live with the food we are growing," says Krishna

Krishna, who arrived in Auroville from England at the age of nineteen, started the Solitude farm on a barren piece of land in 1996, with a few other young Aurovilians who have since moved out. In September 2002, he met Masanobu Fukuoka in Delhi, and then attended a five day workshop on Natural Farming, which he was conducting in Dehradun. "Sitting with Masanobu Fukuoka and listening to him talk was wonderful," recalls Krishna, who was deeply inspired, not only by his methods of natural farming, but also by his life philosophy.

After he returned from that meeting, Krishna started practicing natural farming on some of his fields. Solitude Farm, which covers a six acre piece of land, has fruit trees, vegetable gardens, and peanut, rice and millet fields. "I would like to develop non-tillage techniques, especially for growing our local millets: ragi, kambu, tennai, varagu and samai," explains Krishna. "My aim is to practice natural farming following Masanobu Fukuoka's four principles, which I would like to add are universal principles which are not only applicable to Japan: they're applicable everywhere. Of course we have different conditions here, a different climate, different crops etc. and we have to adapt to that."

This year, Krishna invited Masanobu Fukuoka (who had already visited Auroville in the early 1990s) to come and offer a workshop in Auroville, but as his health did not permit this, two of his students, Yukohoma and Naoko Kaowaki, came to conduct the workshop instead. Both of them have travelled widely and have been invited to various countries, including Greece, Pakistan and Afghanistan to participate in large-scale reforestation projects.

The workshop, which began at the end of February and lasted three weeks, was attended by a few Aurovilians, new comers and guests, some local Tamil farmers from Aurobrindavan and others who came from Krishnagiri, Bangalore and Mumbai. The method taught was the clay-ball sowing technique, which, as Krishna explains, was developed by Fukuoka to implement the first principle

of natural farming, non-tillage of the land. Seeds are coated with clay, rolled into balls and then scattered on the land. In this way, nature can select what she wants to grow and when the time is ripe, when the conditions are right, the seeds will germinate. Though the preparation required varies, this method can be used for fruit trees, vegetable plants, flowers, green manure and grains.

"I can say I have had a lot of success, but my success lies in my failures, which have taught me a lot," explains Krishna, when asked about his experiences in trying to practice natural farming in

this year: "We were quite happy to eat pumpkin every day, why should it be a problem? We prepared it in different ways; we boiled it, steamed it, prepared it with peanuts from our harvest, we made cakes, we grated it raw in salads... Because that's extremely important to us, to live with the food that we are growing. And it was amazing that everyone always looked forward to eating it, because the taste was absolutely amazing. It was grown in the wild, without watering. When you cultivate, weed and water, the vegetables lose their taste. You've brought them away from nature.

Revolution and the spread of capitalism. Many farmers' only aim today is mass production to generate money. In Auroville, I really feel we have a great chance of stepping out of that tendency."

As Masanobu Fukuoka explains in *The One Straw Revolution*: "Humanity must stop indulging in the desire for material possessions and personal gain and move instead towards spiritual awareness. Agriculture must change from large mechanical operations to small farms attached only to life itself... If this is done, work becomes pleasant and spiritual breathing space becomes plentiful."

"Solitude is a place dedicated to try and realize the aims of natural farming," explains Krishna, "And it's also a place that is really, truly open to everybody. Apart from me, there are many other people from India and the rest of the world, who come to live here for shorter or longer periods of time. Amongst them are long-time friends of mine, social workers from Germany, students of agriculture... a lot of young people with great energy and aspirations, who have come here searching for something. And many of them end up reading Masanobu Fukuoka's *The One Straw Revolution*, and get inspired by it. They discover natural farming working on the land. So all these people are putting their energy into the Solitude Farm, and it's all this energy which is going to make it happen."

One of Krishna's other passions is working with the children of the surrounding villages. He gives classes at the Irumbai and Kottakarai evening schools, and regularly invites the children to Solitude, where they can become familiar with Natural Farming practices and methods as well as take part in creative and artistic activities. "I really enjoy working with these children," says Krishna "and I feel in them there's a great hope for the villages and Auroville. I would like to involve them more in the farm, and extend the educational activities we are offering them at present."

There is no better way to conclude than to quote Masanobu Fukuoka once again: "The ultimate goal of farming is not the growing of crops, but the cultivation and perfection of human beings."

Emmanuelle

## The four principles of natural farming

Masanobu Fukuoka has been hailed as the most outstanding farmer and agricultural thinker of our time. Having opted out of his career as an agricultural scientist, he returned to his village on the Shikoku island in southern Japan, where he developed a method of natural farming, arising out of his insight that man's efforts are futile and that by disturbing nature as little as possible, one can generate crop yields as good as when practicing conventional agriculture, where one is heavily dependent on chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

Having developed methods for the greening of devastated desert areas, he applied them in Greece, Thailand, the Philippines, India and Africa, and received the Magsasay award in 1988 for his worldwide contribution to the well-being of mankind.

Author of *The One Straw Revolution* and *The Natural Way of Farming*, books which have inspired thousands of readers across the world, Masanobu Fukuoka invites us to help reverse the degenerative momentum of modern agriculture by a return to nature.

The essence of his method of natural farming is to reproduce natural conditions as closely as possible, by allowing a balanced eco-system to develop, where insect and plant communities maintain a stable relationship.

Natural Farming has four principles. The first and most fundamental is: no plowing or turning of the soil or non-tillage of the land, as that disrupts its living eco-system, and the earth cultivates itself naturally by means of the penetration of plant roots and the activity of micro-organisms, earthworms, etc.

The second is: no use of prepared compost as the soil, if left to itself, maintains its fertility naturally, and it is only because of man's destructive farming practices that the soil becomes depleted and drained of essential nutrients.

The third principle is: no weeding by tillage or herbicides as weeds play their part in building soil fertility and in balancing the eco-system. Of course, weeds should not be dominant and can be controlled, but not annihilated.

The fourth and last principle is: no dependence on chemicals. Disease and insect imbalance became a great problem as a result of unnatural farming practices. Therefore, to grow crops in a healthy environment is the best approach to disease and insect control as nature, left alone, is in perfect balance.

In Masanobu Fukuoka's own words: "These four principles of natural farming... comply with the natural order and lead to the replenishment of Nature's richness."

(*The One Straw Revolution*, by Masanobu Fukuoka, 1978 - English edition: Published by The Other India Press in 1992)



Masanobu Fukuoka (inset), and Solitude Farm

Solitude. Over the years, he has had to face many challenges, one of the greatest being weed control. As Krishna had been plowing his fields previously, and as that practice brings up a lot of seeds which lie dormant in the sub-soil, there were a lot of weeds in his fields. "Weeds have their place in nature," he explains, "and are essential, but if they become dominant in a field, then the crops can not grow, so they have to be controlled. It's very important to observe our weeds and cut them when they are about to flower, so they don't have a chance to seed. Then we leave them on the fields as mulch."

However, there have been rewards as well. Krishna is very enthusiastic about the one hundred and fifty kilograms of pumpkin grown with natural farming methods which were harvested

When they're in the wild and are growing with weeds in a harsh environment, they get that taste of nature. Man has forgotten what that taste of nature is. We've lost that sense of what is natural food."

Krishna goes on to explain that the processed or imported foods which we consume have not only lost this taste of nature, but in order to produce them and make them available to us, enormous amounts of energy have been used. "We forget the global ecological costs of those foods we consume, and forget the fact that in consuming them we are all involved in the pollution of the land and the atmosphere which their production causes. It is very important to consume what is grown and available locally."

"Farmers the world over have been completely alienated from nature," he continues, "especially after the Green

## MATRIMANDIR

# Preparing the cradle of bliss

continued from page 1

"In the original plans this was to be a lotus pond," says Alain, "but this idea has been dropped as there won't be sufficient light for lotuses to bloom. Instead, it will be an ornamental marble pond. There will be a continuous water flow on both sides of the circular pathway between the large and small petals and alongside

the large petals, cascading down into the ornamental pond. When we experimented with it, we noticed the reflection of the golden discs in the water. It was fantastic."

The tour finally comes to a halt at Alain's improvised outdoor office - four scaffold poles carrying a rejected disc, below which three low stools serve for comfort.

"You know, something funny happened," says Alain reflectively. "In March 2002, when I was wondering how I could contribute to the construction of Matrimandir, I unexpectedly received a strong intuition, what they call in India an *adesh*, to go work in the Matrimandir gardens. I wondered about it, as I am no gardener. But I decided to listen to it since I have nothing to lose, and I did not want to take the risk of rejecting a true intuition! Some weeks later, I was reading the Matrimandir diary of Ruud Lohman [an Aurovillian who passed away in 1986, eds.]. He described something which had skipped my memory. In November 1972 Mother had given instructions that the work of the gardens should start. Shyam Sunder [appointed Auroville liaison by The Mother eds.] called Ruud and me and told us to start the gardens at the date and time given by Mother: 24<sup>th</sup> November, at 6.30 am. There was a

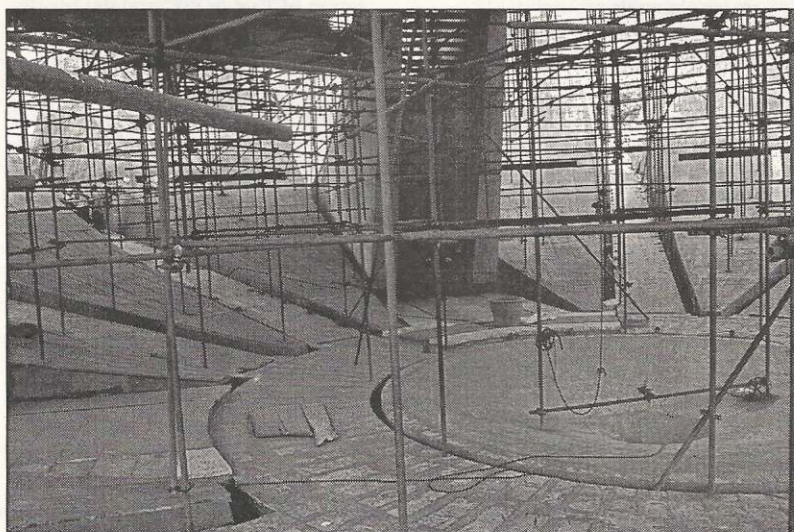


Alain Grandcolas

small celebration, and 20 workers arrived next day to start levelling work. But on that day we learned that a bulldozer would arrive from Calcutta, so we decided to wait. That afternoon we went to Shyam Sunder, who said 'OK, start the amphitheatre' and that's what we did. We never started the gardens.

"In April 2002, in a general meeting, I announced I would stop my work for the Information Centre and start with the gardens designed by Roger on November 24<sup>th</sup> - which I did. After a delay of 30 years I have finally started the work Mother had given to us."

In conversation with Carel



The trellis of scaffolding underneath the Matrimandir.



# An environmental gadfly

## A profile of Jos

In recent weeks, regular visitors to AVNet cannot fail to have noticed a deluge of postings – on topics ranging from global warming and GM foods to obesity and the city – from Jos at AuroRe. Auroville Today went along to find out more about this rare bird in Auroville: a compulsive communicator.

“I wanted to be a pilot, but my eyes were hopeless. So I took up aeronautical engineering.” Not the obvious background for an environmentalist, perhaps, but after Jos completed his engineering degree in The Netherlands, he left for Australia where he soon found it impossible to get a job in aviation. “I was getting pretty desperate. Then

After five years in Africa, he moved to Oxford where he did a one year postgraduate degree in Renewable Energy. During the course he visited Kenya. “There I became interested in small-scale solar applications in remote areas, for I saw how one small solar panel providing power for an electric light could transform the lives of poor people. That really inspired me.”

When he graduated, he took a job in India with IT Power, a consultancy company in renewable energy. After completing projects in Bihar and Arunachal Pradesh he was posted to their head office in India, which happened to be in Pondicherry. During his time there

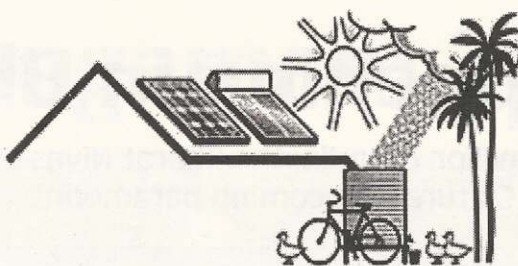
for a long time, trying to work out what it was and how it worked. Clearly, we were on a very steep learning curve.”

Working seven days a week, 12-14 hours a day, they and a team of technicians managed to install 175 solar pumps in a record three months. “We cut it fine. We installed the last on the day on which the project had to be completed.”

These days Jos spends most of his time in Auroville. Does he miss working in remote regions of the world? “Sometimes. At the same time, there’s so much work to be done in Auroville.” AuroRe’s work in the community includes obtaining subsidies for and installing solar pump sets, servicing existing solar pumping systems, designing and installing solar home systems, as well as solar water heaters. They have also begun advising commercial units and services on how they can save money by switching to high-efficiency lighting systems.

Saving money? One of the most frequent points made by skeptics is that renewable energy is for the rich, not affordable by the masses. True? “Partly true. The main obstacle to more widespread use of solar is short-term thinking. The up-front investment for solar is high, but the overall life-cycle cost over 20 years is much less than conventional electricity. To make solar accessible to the masses, the Indian government has very generous subsidies for various solar applications, in particular for solar pumping systems. AuroRe has installed over 200 such solar pumping in Auroville alone.” And Jos adds, “Electricity prices will continue to go up in future due to the depleting fossil fuel reserves and concerns over global warming. It’s only a matter of time before people will be scrambling for solar panels”.

So how is Auroville doing from a sustainability perspective? Do his frequent postings and his growing status as a kind of environmental gadfly suggest that he is pessimistic about the level of Auroville’s ecological awareness? Jos chooses his words carefully. “There may be many good projects which I don’t



‘Trying to live more sustainably...’

know about but, yes, I think we still have a long way to go. Take water. A recent posting on AVNet claimed that in Auromodèle the average use is 1,000 litres per person per day – more than they consume in Florida. If that is true, that is pretty outrageous! We should be reducing our water-consumption drastically and be an example to the outside world. How can we otherwise claim with a straight face to be “the city the earth needs”? As a friend of mine put it, if you want a green garden in Auroville, use Astroturf (artificial grass eds.).

“While I’m getting known as Mr. Gloom and Doom for my postings, that doesn’t mean I’m pessimistic or that I’m about to run away from the problems. I see them as a challenge. For example, I believe that global warming is the most serious threat to the planet today. Emissions from internal combustion engines are a major cause of this, so I always cycle rather than use a motorbike. It’s like cleaning up my backyard and showing by example, which is the only way I think we can start making a difference.”

Jos’s work at AuroRe is very much focused upon technical solutions to environmental problems. What about the need for a change in consciousness? How does he relate to Auroville’s spiritual dimension? “I came to Auroville through, let’s say, the ecological door. However, I think the spiritual and ecological dimensions of Auroville are intrinsically linked, as we can see from the first settlers here who spent most of their time transforming the land from a severely eroded wasteland into the lush green environment we live in now. Earth, so far as we know, is life’s only residence. We are Earth’s stewards and should take care of it, not just for ourselves but for all future inhabitants. It is dangerous to concentrate solely on spiritual matters and ignore what is happening to our environment”.

Alan



Jos against a backdrop of solar panels

one day I saw a tiny advertisement in a newspaper: Greenpeace wanted canvassers. I had no idea what a canvasser was, but I signed up and spent the next year knocking on doors, giving people information about environmental issues and Greenpeace. When I started I knew nothing about such things – my whole life until then had been aviation – but Greenpeace opened my eyes to a completely different side of the world.”

Three years later Jos returned to The Netherlands. However, his home country no longer attracted him, so he took a job with Médecins Sans Frontières providing logistical support for their medical staff in remote parts of Africa. Later he was to do the same work for Oxfam.

he met Hemant who had set up AuroRe, one of Auroville’s renewable energy units. When Jos resigned from IT Power, Hemant offered him a job. “AuroRe were feeling a bit overwhelmed. They had just won a contract to install a large number of solar pumps in the Punjab and they had a staff of precisely two!” Jos and another new AuroRe recruit, Rishi, had to establish an office in South Punjab from scratch, survey the potential solar pump sites, train technicians and then install the pumps. “I remember asking one of the first Punjab farmers we met to show us his borewell. He took us to a corner of a field and pointed to a rusty pipe sticking out of the ground. We, the so-called solar experts, stared at it

## MATRIMANDIR, APRIL 4

# Opening the disc

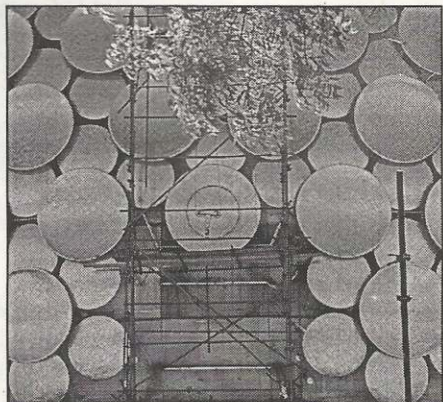
## A once-in-a-year moment in Matrimandir

There is only one removable golden disc on the Matrimandir. Once a year this disc is taken out early in the morning to let the first rays of the rising sun shine into the chamber and onto the crystal. This day is April 4th, the day, in 1910, that Sri Aurobindo came to Pondicherry.

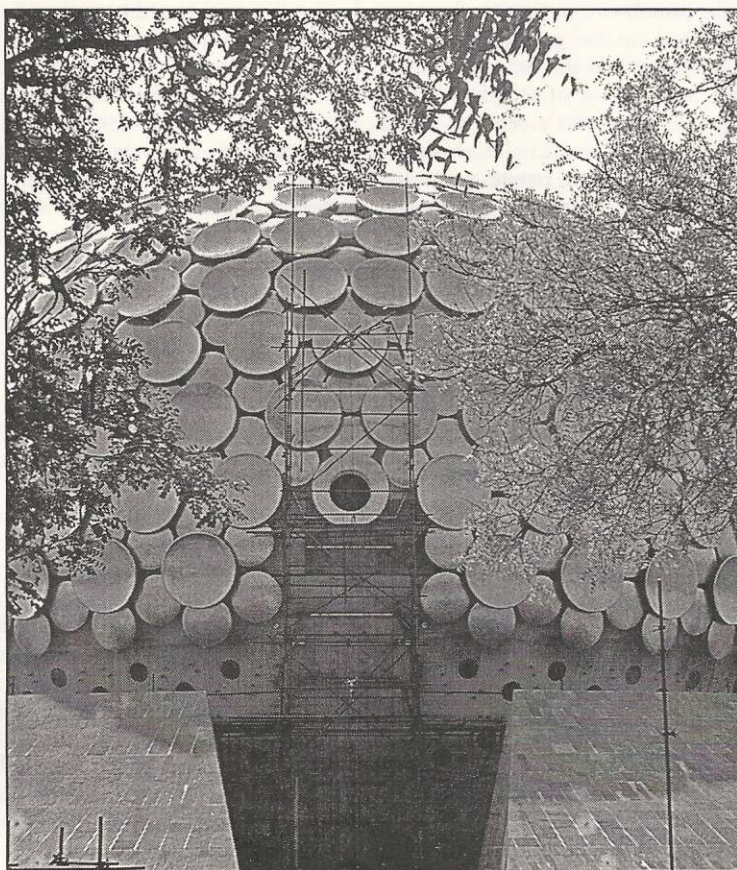
And so we arrived shortly after 6 o’clock at a misty-magical Matrimandir. The disc facing the rising sun had been removed and all doors were flung wide open. The spotlights were off, and a faint daybreak dipped into the chamber. After half an hour a first sun-ray crept slowly through the opening onto the carpet inside the chamber, creating a broad golden sunlit path. It did not touch the crystal directly, it only peeped into the room, illuminated it, and then slowly retreated. The single beam, for which we were expectantly waiting, did not appear, proba-

bly because of the mist which diffused the ray. Nevertheless, the atmosphere was tremendously powerful and peaceful, and it was a grace to sit in the chamber in the early morning and be charged with that wonderful energy.

Time



Matrimandir on April 4th with closed and open disc.



## In brief

### All Auroville budget

The Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC) is investigating the possibility of creating an all Auroville budget as a means to creating an economic development plan for Auroville. This is necessary to obtain a vision of what the Auroville economy needs to do to expand. All Auroville activities will be asked for their realistic projections for 2004-2005; whether they are exploring all possibilities available to them to cover their budget; and what they would like to do if the means were available. Also an infrastructure development budget, listing the most urgent infrastructure needs of Auroville for the next 1-2 years, will be part of the Auroville budget. The Auroville Board of Commerce, which is in the process of being reconstituted, will be asked to create a development proposal for commercial unit activity in Auroville.

The FAMC expressed concern about prioritizing development. Up to now Auroville has been growing through the successful implementation of the dreams of individual Aurovilians. But at the present state of development a shift toward a collective strategy is needed to determine what development is most needed in Auroville and how the necessary funds can be generated.

### Leave India notices

Leave India notices have been issued to two long-term Aurovilians. The matter has been taken up by the Working Committee, which has made a strong plea with the Government officials that we may henceforth be given a chance to make representations before such notices are issued. In response, the officials concerned have asked Auroville to take responsibility for all that goes on inside Auroville and that there should be corrective measures taken by Auroville for any wrongdoings.

### Long-term housing loans

A proposal that Auroville would create a Housing Loan Fund that would give low-interest, long-term housing loans to those without adequate financial means, was rejected by the FAMC, as the loan would be returned too slowly for an effective revolving of the fund. Other reasons given were that people joining Auroville should come prepared to create their own accommodation and not rely on community loans; and that in the current scenario Aurovilians who take out loans often have to request more maintenance in order to keep up their monthly repayments of the loan.

### Teachers’ maintenance

In view of the present uncertainties regarding continued Government funding for teachers’ maintenance, the FAMC has asked executives of Auroville’s commercial to guarantee an advance up to an amount of Rs 45 lakhs for the financial year 2004-2005.

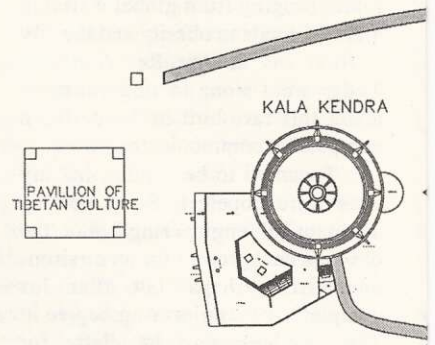
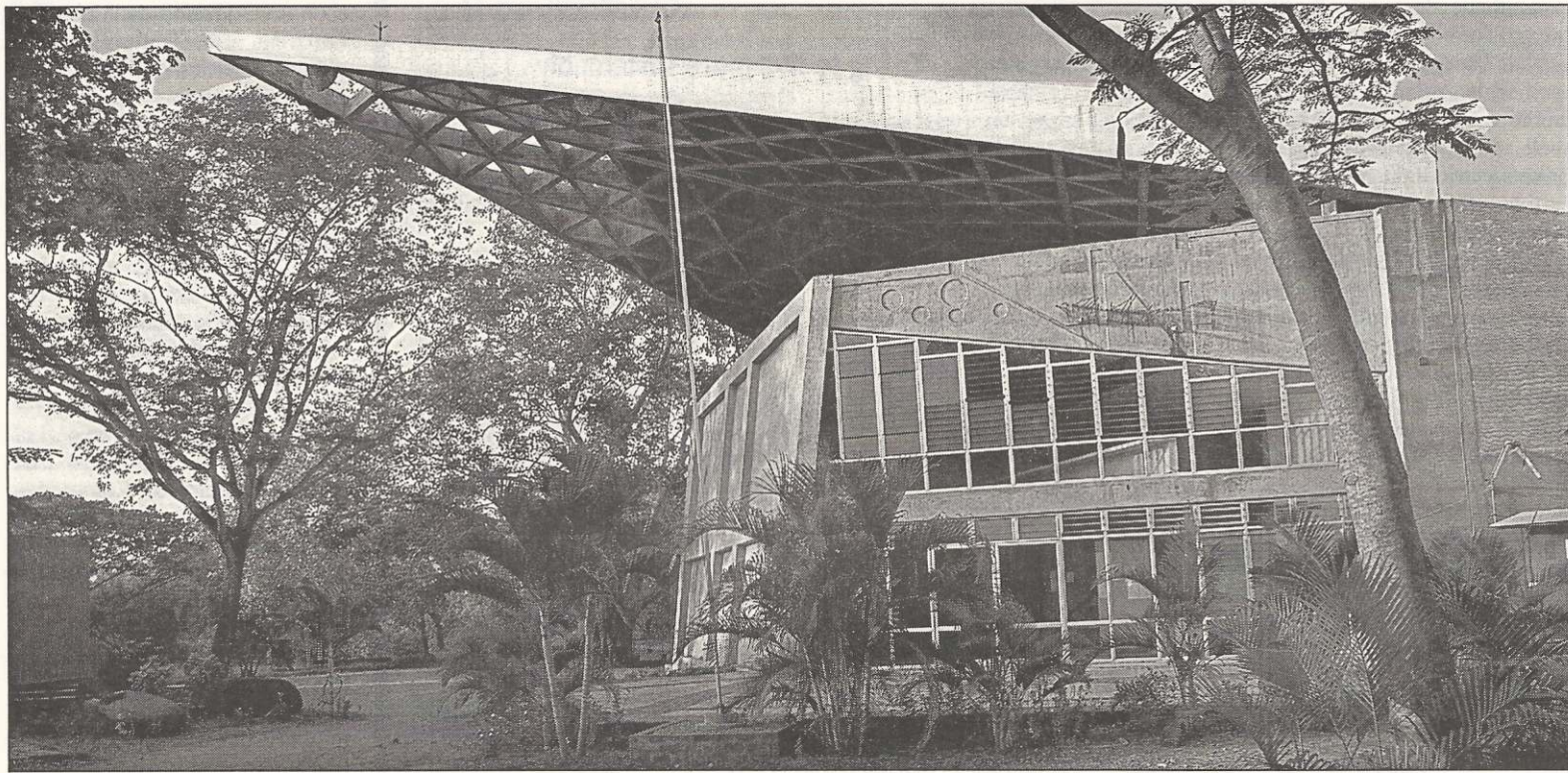
### Village Action

The Auroville Village Action Group had to dismiss its staff of 22 Development Workers, due to loss of core funding. Some of these workers had been with AVAG for almost 10 years.



# What is happening in Bharat Nivas?

While the buildings of the Pavilion of India, the Bharat Nivas complex, are being rejuvenated, their use as the Centre for Indian Culture is becoming paramount



Left: Entrance to the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium

Top: Overall Lay-out plan of Bharat Nivas

Right: Entrance to the Centre for Indian Culture and the New Space

The focal point of the artistic and cultural life of the Auroville community is undoubtedly the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium in Bharat Nivas. But the Auditorium is only a part of the vast Bharat Nivas complex, whose very buildings have been designed to house, in a living and concrete manner, representations of the culture of India in Auroville. Though there has been no dearth of cultural events, the full usage of the complex as the House of India has not yet been possible, for it is only recently that Bharat Nivas has been relieved of some of the guests which it has hosted for many years. Auroville's Future, which occupied a number of large spaces, has moved to the Town Hall and so have the Housing Group, the Working Committee and the Auroville Council. The Residents' Service, the Entry Group and

heaves a sigh of relief. "It's high time that the Pavilion of India starts assuming its rightful function in the International Zone of Auroville. All these years it has been a semi-political area which hosted all the important working groups - at some time more than 30! We are happy that all of them are now slowly moving out, and that we finally can start using the space for its intended purpose."

This, however, is easier said than done. For Bharat Nivas has many spaces and, given the wide variety of Indian culture, the potential usages are many. Says Dharmesh: "When we started the rejuvenation of Bharat Nivas, we asked Shri Dashrath Patel, one of the paramount designers of India who shaped the first professional design course at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, to help us. He sat with us for five days, looking at the buildings, evaluating spaces, trying to put them in a future perspective. His help was a great gift to Auroville."

Dharmesh digresses and dwells for a moment on the fact that Auroville has attracted the best cultural programs and other professionals that India can offer. "In the past twenty years, India's most prominent musicians, dancers and theatre groups have performed in the Sri Aurobindo auditorium of Bharat Nivas. For last year's seminar 'The Sense of the Infinite,' historians of high repute came to Auroville - people you would have a problem getting an appointment with. Similarly, Auroville has hosted India's foremost town planners, architects and designers. These people agree to come on the basis of a simple invitation. There must be something interesting for them in Auroville, they

give their input voluntarily, we hardly take care of their travel expenses. That is not only fantastic, but it holds great promise for the future."

While finishing Bharat Nivas and promoting Indian culture takes much of his time, Dharmesh's aim is to also create an Auroville design school in the complex in the next 5 to 10 years. "The issue is not the space in Bharat Nivas - there is plenty. The issue is to organise high-quality courses which we can offer to students. Many Aurovilians are willing to participate, and we know that

many professionals from outside are ready to give their time and energy."

## The main building

Dharmesh takes me on a tour of the complex which starts at the main building. Where once the activities of Auroville's Future and the Housing Service held sway, now peace and quiet prevail. The Centre for Indian Studies and the Centre for Indian Culture have moved in, bookshelves line the walls and comfortable seating arrangements invite the visitor to leisurely introspection. The 'New Space', as it is called, is a place for lectures and Indian music, and in future perhaps for the screening of Indian films. The Tamil Heritage Centre has also got a generous space of its own, where earlier the graphic section of Auroville's Future produced maps of the town. Space being no longer a constraint,

the full deployment of the three centres now depends only on the drive of individuals and adequate financing.

The foyer of the Sri Aurobindo auditorium is now being used for exhibitions, while Kalamitra and Kala Khoj have found an office in the basement below the entrance. The Sri Aurobindo Auditorium itself has also seen changes. Its acoustics have vastly improved, courtesy of the acoustic panels on ceiling and walls. Recently a 66-tonnes air-conditioning system has been installed, in the process of which the windows got closed leaving a rather stuffy atmosphere but this is only temporary as the air-handling units are not yet operating to full capacity. Sadly, no one has yet come forward with a donation to upgrade the plastic bucket seats which are uncomfortable after a few hours.

## A brief construction history

Bharat Nivas was the first pavilion to come up in Auroville's International Zone. Designed in 1970 by the Indian architect R. Chakrapani, the complex would consist of two groups of elements: the pavilions of the then 19 states of India with as common facility the auditorium-cum-conference hall; and a group of support buildings: a restaurant, a library, a school for linguistics and lodgings for staff.

The Chennai based company E.C.C. started construction in 1971, but stopped in 1974, after the passing of The Mother, when problems between the Sri Aurobindo Society and Aurovilians began to surface. Three pavilions, the auditorium and the restaurant were left unfinished. In the period 1978 - 1982, the Sri Aurobindo Society attached some new structures to the restaurant and to the three pavilions, disregarding the original design. Then, for many years, nothing happened though incidental government grants allowed for much needed repair work. In 1995-96, a government grant was given for the building of the Bharat Nivas guesthouse, Atiti Griha. In 1998, the complex was re-designed to a considerable smaller lay-out than originally planned. In the new layout, the three State pavilions are interconnected at first floor level and linked to a new building, the central reception. The restaurant was redesigned as a place where visiting artists and artisans can have a temporary studio. The auditorium was to be finished. The Government of India approved the redesigned complex and allocated Rs 1.5 crore (at that time US \$ 350,000) to be issued in five yearly instalments, towards its completion.

The year 2000 saw the completion of the first phase of the Sri Aurobindo World Centre for Human Unity (SAWCHU), a multi-purpose hall for meetings and small cultural events. The central reception will be located on top of this building, and then connected to the three pavilions through a system of elevated walkways. Shortly afterwards it was decided to enlarge Atiti Griha with four new buildings, air-conditioned guesthouses for members of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation and other VIPs. Two of these have meanwhile been constructed, one of which is used by the Chairman during his visits to Auroville. On the occasion of the Asia Urbs conference in 2002, chief architect Roger Anger designed the new façade of the main building. Further work now depends on when the promised funds from the Government of India arrive.



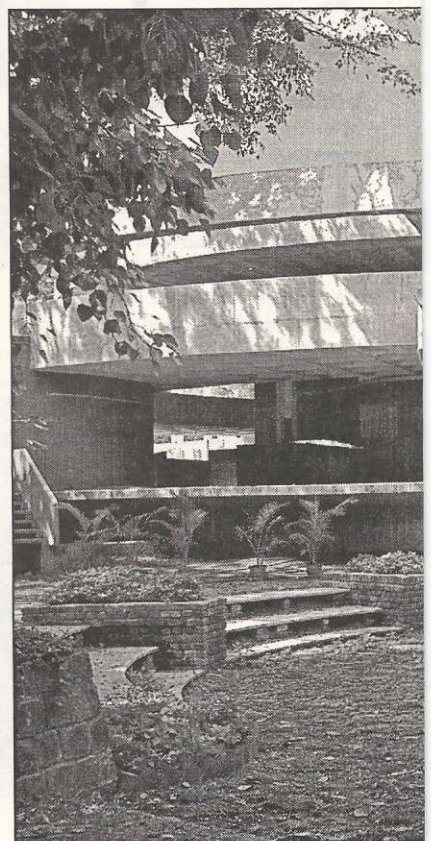
Dharmesh

Auroville International are expected to move within half a year. Amongst the tenants who will remain for some time are the offices of the Auroville Foundation and the Sri Aurobindo International Institute for Educational Research, the library, the Auroville Archives, the business unit Naturellement and the Free Store. All the other spaces of Bharat Nivas are now being re-dedicated to its original function: that of the Pavilion of India and the Centre for Indian Culture. Dharmesh, one of the members of the Bharat Nivas team,

## Kala Kendra

To envision a new role for the 12-13,000 sq. ft. open restaurant building was not easy. Except for its outbuildings which now provisionally house Naturellement and the Free Store, the building has been left exposed to the elements ever since ECC departed in 1974. However, the quality of the concrete is excellent and the building has not noticeably suffered.

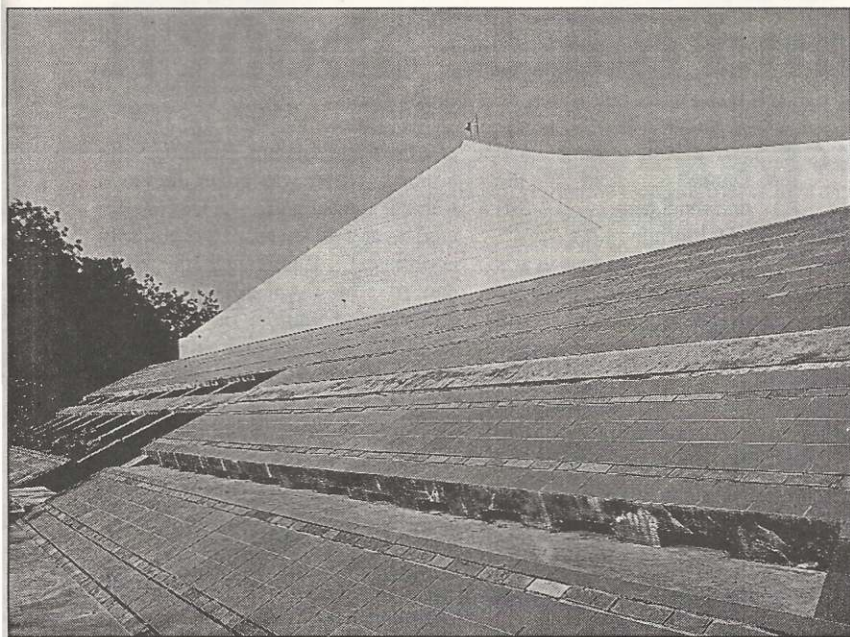
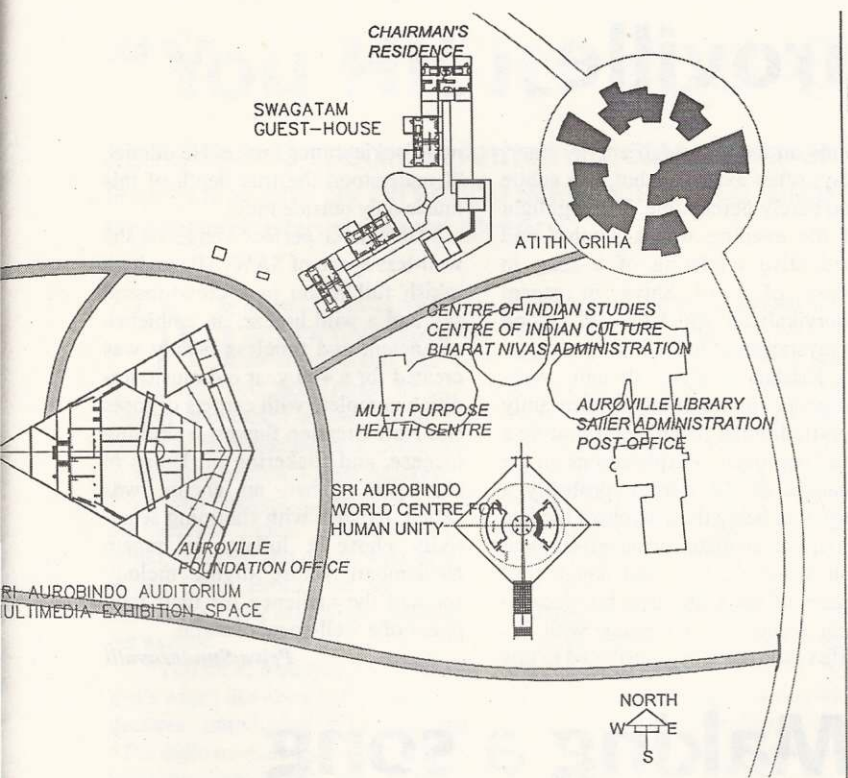
It has been decided to change the purpose of this building into Kala Kendra, a modern Centre for Arts with art studios for Indian guest artists and artisans. "Our immediate purpose is to protect the area and to make this building functional," says Dharmesh, while showing the ongoing work. "We aim at a kind of 'artist-in-residence' programme. We'll invite artists to come and work here for a certain period of time. There will be studios for painting and print making, dance and music classes, and sculpture. Once Naturellement and the Free Store move out, those spaces too will be transformed into artists' studios." Pointing at a recent addition, a small open-air circular seating arrangement made with discarded steps from the building, he adds "The area around



View on Kala Kendra



# Sangamam 2004



Kala Kendra could become a sculpture park with a cafeteria. And if there is sufficient money we will also put the upper circle of the building to use as exhibition gallery."

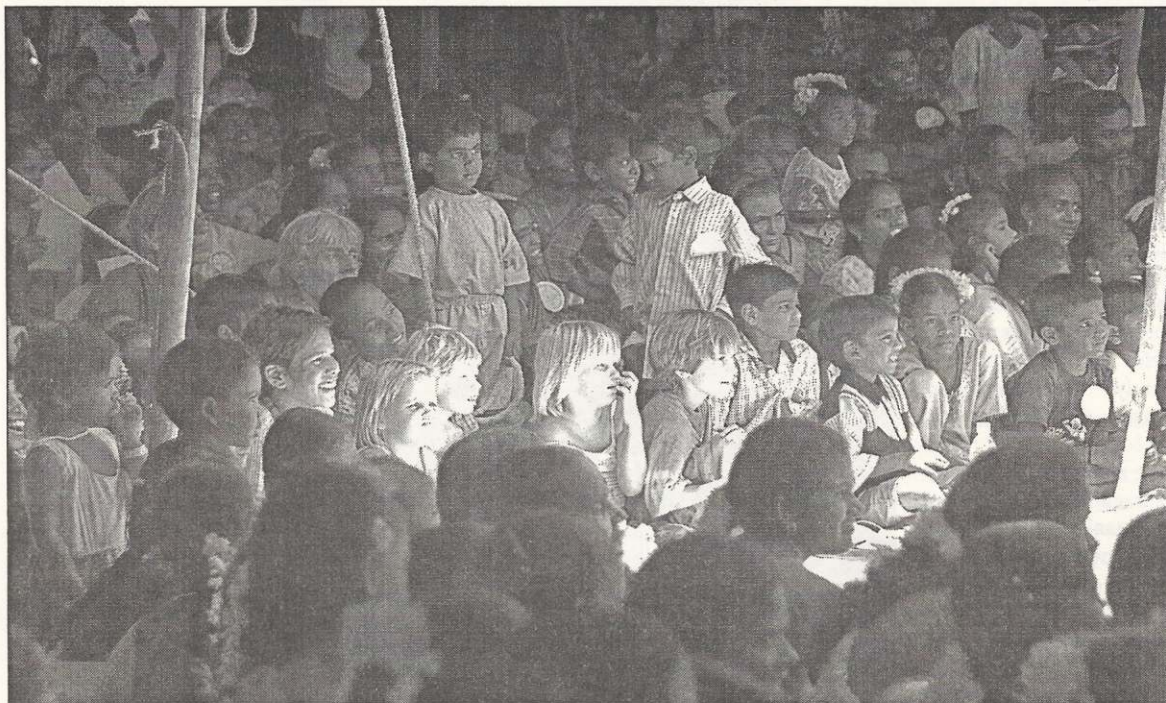
Visiting artists will not be the only beneficiaries of the rejuvenated building. The Auroville Museum of Archaeology, which is now crammed into its small entrance, has been allocated the basement in the centre of the building, where it will host a permanent exhibition of some of the archaeological artefacts that have been found in the Auroville area. The centre space one level up, at one time used for a restaurant and ballroom dancing, will have a library and chairs for leisure and chat.

## The pavilions

Views on the future usage of the three circular pavilions are not yet fully developed. The former pavilion that housed the Centre for Indian Culture has been converted into a presentation space and will serve for small exhibitions. The library will continue to occupy one of the other pavilions as long as funds do not materialize for it to get its own building. The third pavilion was never occupied. "The revised plans foresee that these buildings are interconnected at first floor level and linked to the first floor level of SAWCHU with elevated walkways," says Dharmesh. "But most probably these are the last buildings we will finish." *Carel*



endra with the welcoming outdoor seating arrangement



Spell-bound audience

It's close to ten in the morning on a Sunday, the heat is already building up and the elder singers from Kottakarai sing traditional devotional songs to gods such as Ganesh, Durga and Mariamman, to the accompaniment of the Kottakarai temple drummers. They also perform their recent compositions extolling the magic and beauty of Auroville and Matrimandir. The Sangamam had opened with the same troupe performing a Mangala Isai – a traditional Tamil musical prayer offering and invocation. Shankar, the Tamil teacher from Aspiration, who will ably emcee the morning's three hour programme, explains: "They, the temple drummers and musicians, came to the Sangamam, so as to provide a taste of the local tradition. It's a tradition where stories are told at night on lamp-lit village squares through street plays." He further adds that most of the day's performers work in Auroville. A steady flow of people, mostly local villagers, many of them groups of women in their dazzling saris with clusters of well-dressed children in tow, are streaming onto the dusty palm-ringed football field. Blue-banded volunteers check passes at the entrance as three large traditional tents near the far goalposts shade the hundreds already seated.

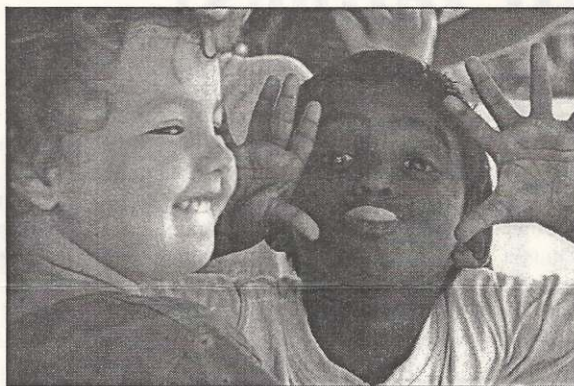
The 2004 Sangamam – which means 'confluence' or 'coming together of rivers' in Tamil – was the first to be held in Auroville in over ten years, and was the result of the brainstorming, dedicated planning and concerted effort of a grassroots group of Auroville volunteers who called themselves the Unity Walk Group. The idea for a Sangamam event came from the local Aurovilians who run the Abri workshop and Electrical Service. It was a result of the success and the positive energy generated by the first Unity Walk through three villages in February, as a response to the tragic and brutal murder of Sydo. The Unity walk group has met several times since and organized two full-moon walks in Auroville. Two meetings have also recently been held, bringing together Tamil and Indian Aurovilians concerned about what they can do for Auroville. According to Arumagam of Abri, at the two 'What can we do for Auroville?' meetings, attended by over a hundred and twenty five and eighty people respectively, it was widely stressed: "It's time to stop blaming each-other and time to start building Auroville."

According to Renu of the Working Committee: "Both these events are grassroots efforts coming out of a frustrated populace. A lot of Tamil Aurovilians have finally found a dynamic role which they can participate and feel comfortable in. Previously they were lacking a focus because of the way the Auroville organization is set up. But we are all dying to live in an Auroville where we can all take an active role in its development. There was a real sense of belonging that was felt by

local Aurovilians during the first Unity Walk. Ever since Sydo's death many people feel it's no longer time to just wish and hope, but that it's time to act. The message is we can't keep complaining about Auroville as we are Auroville and if we're not happy with the way it is then we have to take on an active role in its development."

Arumugam adds: "There were lots of problems between Auroville and the villages and we wanted to try and bring them together to create a good relationship. This Sangamam

is a starting point." Wazo and Segar, both actively involved in organizing the Sangamam event, stressed the importance of creating and building up a positive atmosphere together and recognized the need for more interactive happenings and performances in such events in the future such as joint Auroville-Village theatre, Kabbadi and musical performances.

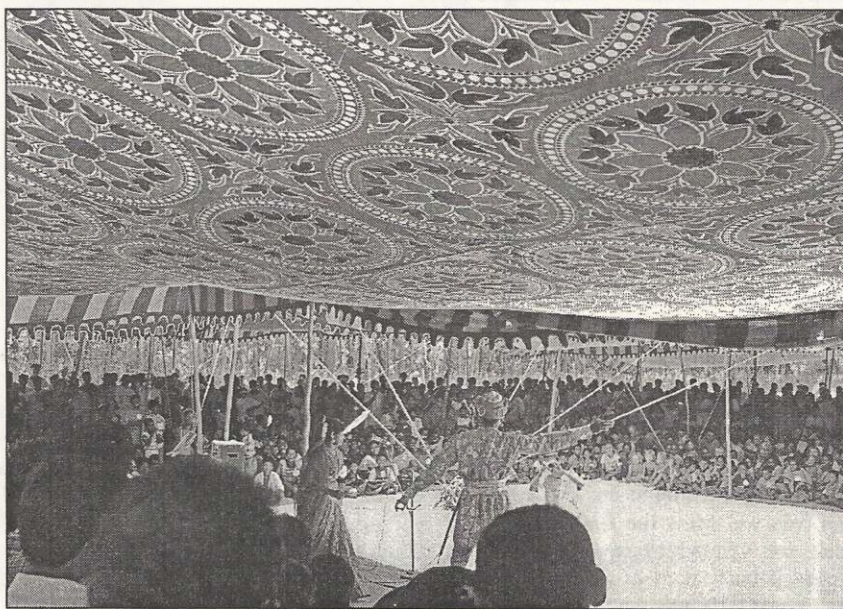


Fun at Sangamam

The show unfolded with folk songs and classical dance performances by young girls and boys from Sanjeevnagar and Alankuppam, and an impressive stick dancing troupe from Bommaiarpalayam. It ended with a one hour performance of an original play written and performed by the Kulilapalayam Yatra School of Arts. Its social and environmental message emphasized the need to plant more trees and avoid using plastic. Srinivasan, who directed the play, as well as played the lead role of a Tamil King's minister, had the children in the two thousand strong audience thrilled and captivated throughout with his engaging comic talents.

It was no mean feat providing lunch for two thousand people, despite some complaints as regards a lack of shade for the queue. And as people who had not signed up for the organized visit to Matrimandir lingered under the colorful tents, one felt that there is much more that unites than divides those that reside on and around the Auroville plateau. Events such as these do much to help foster and strengthen that bond: born of memory, shared endeavour and a very particular spirit of place.

*Roger*

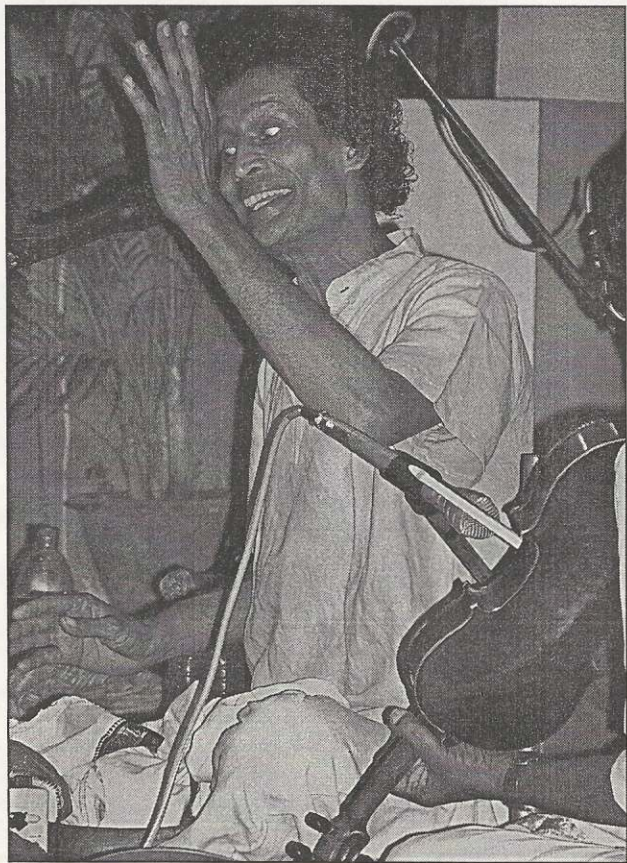


A historical drama being enacted under a colourful canopy at Sangamam



# Divine melodies waft into Auroville

PHOTO: REGINA



Krishnakumar in concert

Aurovilians recently had the pleasure of listening to a vibrant Carnatic vocal concert by Krishnakumar. It is a rare treat to be entertained by an artist who is not only skilled in his art but is also a performer who can make that special contact with the audience. For novices to this musical style, he succinctly and simply introduced the essence of the Carnatic style of music as "pure song and rhythm based on 72 ragams (fixed notes), and 5 taalams (beats), with the general theme being Bhakti (devotion)."

With his raspy but powerful and pliant voice, Krishna set the mood for the concert with a chant invoking the auspicious trinity of Lord Ganesha, his Guru, and Goddess Saraswathi. This was followed by a varnam in ragam Mohanam done in three speeds performed

with joyous abandon. What is unique about Krishna is that, being a professional dancer, the quality of movement infiltrates into his handling of the music – sound becomes more palpable and physical, finding flamboyant expression through his body. It was a visual treat to watch him with his shock of curly locks, eyes full of rapture, his facial abhinaya (expression) revealing the moods of the songs, his body moving to the rhythms of the drums and his own punctuations on a tambourine. The aural dialogue between him and the supporting artistes, Balasundaram on violin and percussionists Krishnamurthy on Thavil (south Indian double-sided leather drum) and Madhu on Ghatam (mud pot)

made an exciting high energy inter-play, often explosive but also subtle and barely perceptible. The highlight of the evening was a sombre and meditative rendering of a song in praise of Lord Shiva in ragam Poorvikalyani, which evoked a mood of mysticism of the twilight hours.

Krishna's style though well-grounded in tradition, is pleasantly non-traditional (even incorporating a 'rap' approach to explanations on the nuances of the music), probably a legacy of being the disciple of the late M.D. Ramanathan, an unconventional and academic musician and a trail blazer of sorts. Perhaps his decade-long sojourn in Germany with his wife Geeta has also contributed to this

non-cookie-cutter image. He admits, "I understood the true depth of this music only outside India."

Held in a perfect venue of the wall-less space of SAWCHU under a rakish full moon in a cloud-tossed sky and a wild breeze, an ambience of ancient and timeless beauty was created for a 400 year old music tradition complete with carpets of roses and New Creation flowers, spiralling incense, and flickering oil lamps in clay pots. When an encore was called, Krishna with charming sensitivity chose a lullaby in ragam Neelambari whose divine melody soothed the audience for their next phase of a well-spent evening.

Priya Sundaravalli

## Making a song and dance about it

"Festival of Song and Dance" read the announcement, "Sri Aurobindo Auditorium, 17th April". My mind wafted back to last year's event. Then, it seemed, most of Auroville as well as Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry had managed to wedge themselves into every crack and crevice in the Auditorium in order to cheer on their favourite performers. One year later my limbs were at last unfurling and my circulation was returning. Was this to be more of the same?

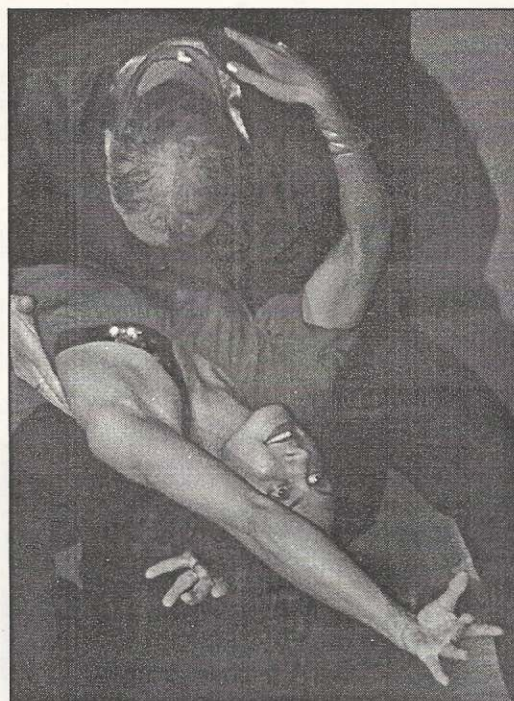
It wasn't. To begin with, someone with intuitive consciousness decided that this time the adult and children's programmes would take place on different nights. So the Auditorium for the adult programme this year was simply full. Secondly, this year's adult evening of song and dance seemed much more varied than its predecessors. In addition to the old favourites – Bharatanatyam and the incomparable 'Black Cats', Bobby's troupe of aerobic fanatics – there was Hawaiian chant, Balkan dance, Salsa,

courtship and rhythms. Running Salsa a close second was either Jeremy's original songs on life and love, delivered at rat-a-tat speed, or a beautifully coordinated Bharatanatyam piece danced by Anushiya, Ramya, Sasikala and Vanitha, or 'The Black Cats' arm-and-foot-pumping version of 'Rocket Man'. Honourable mentions should go to Aurelio's interestingly experimental 'Song Lines', followed by a haunting performance by his group of young dancers. There was also the sweet, but slightly unsynchronised Balkan dance performed by Loretta, Grace and Tatiana (Coco deserves an Oscar for the costumes).

Among the plums in the cake there were, however, one or two less edible items. Dutch Nellie sang one of her own compositions. While the message – 'I care, I care' – was no doubt admirable, the lyrics were a tad sentimental for such a red-blooded audience. And then there was Tamar's 'poem song', accompanied by two musicians who increasingly looked as if they'd rather be some-

where else. Now, I've got nothing against angel poems: Spencer and Blake, among others, wrote fine lines on these ethereal beings. And perhaps the content of Tamar's poem was fine. The problem was her delivery. Beginning in a slightly disturbing singsong voice, she was soon striding round the stage shouting "We are angels". I believe the technical term for the effect of this is cognitive dissonance or, as Lord Byron put it, "The angels all were singing out of tune".

Overall, however, this year's Festival of Dance and Song was definitely worth attending, not only for the quality of some of



Passionate Salsa: Ulli and Prema

contemporary jazz dance, a drum dance and songs and celebrations by various performers. There was even a kind of poem: more about this later.

A varied programme, then, of – it has to be said – varying quality. Judging by the audience's response, the undoubted highlight was the Salsa dance performed, or, rather, insinuated, by fluid-jointed Ulli and Prema, a technically-polished and elegantly sexy evocation of South American

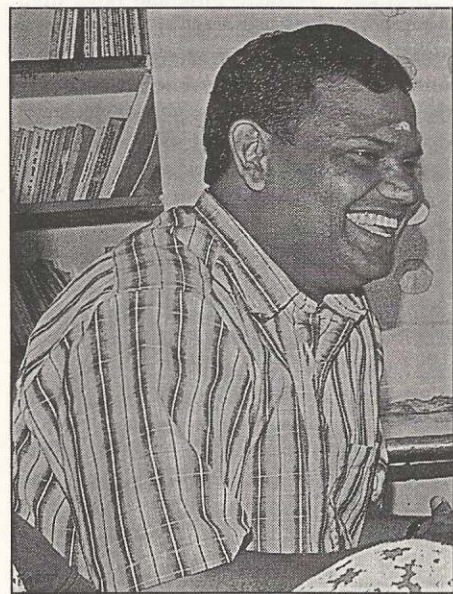
the items but also for Afsaneh's quirky compering. For the final item – Capoeira! – Gemma, Jeremy and friends entertained us with Hawaiian chants (at least I think they were Hawaiian), synchronised martial arts and gymnastics. I didn't really understand what it was all about, and I'm not sure they did either, but soon I was clapping the beat along with just about everybody else in Tamil Nadu. It was that kind of evening. Alan

## LANGUAGE LEARNING

### Fun with Tamil(s)

Dianna Bowler and her husband, Norman, have just returned to the U.K. after staying for some months in New Creation. They come back in October to begin their newcomer period. During this visit Dianna started learning Tamil. Here is her progress report.

I've been doing the 10 week 'Fun with Tamil' class at the Auroville Language Laboratory. My vague memories of learning



Shankar

Latin and French at school were of ploughing through tenses of verbs I never knew existed and constructing constipated sentences I'd never think of using. And, to tell the truth, I wondered what the point was of me, a Brit, taking all that time to learn Italian for a two week Italian holiday when most Italians already understand some English...and next year I'd probably be going to Greece, anyway.

But here at the Language Lab. it was quite different. The teacher was Tamil, young and bouncy, and sort of threw everything at us. The system was we threw the first ball of what we wanted to say, then he hurled it back at us or wrote it on the board if we shouted loud enough. And when you are in a

class with seven other people speaking six different languages, with none of the reticence of a weary London evening class, you had to be the loudest to be heard. Great fun – like being a kid all over again!

It was sociologically interesting as well. The German lady obviously had amma problems because she wanted to say, "Don't be late tomorrow". The Frenchman was not getting on so well with his gardener: "Do not eat my mangoes", "Why is this plant dying?". A young American introduced a lighter note with, "Where is the beach?" and "My bicycle is not going well".

At the next class we were given print-outs of our questions in French, English and in the familiar and polite versions of Tamil. The only way I could relate to these two types of address in Tamil, which have no equivalent in English, was to think of the familiar version as a sort of thick Glaswegian, understood only by those born there and looked down upon by anyone born more than 30 miles away. But to whom should I use the respectful form? Anyone with grey hair, good shoes and a better accent than mine? Would it 'upgrade' my amma if I used the respectful form with her? All very confusing...and a potential landmine.

Someone in the ashram suggested I start with speaking the 'higher' Tamil – a worthy idea, but a friend of mine did and could only converse with the local doctor and teacher. So I started at the bottom and practiced with the builder and his wife. Their faces were a picture of bewilderment, but they suddenly burst into laughter when they understood two words of my mangled Tamil. Now I've worked out a basic system of responses I can trot out on particular occasions – e.g. to admire babies, show appreciation or disapproval – and although this accomplishes little on the practical level it

does create a lot of laughter which, at my tender stage of learning the language, is perhaps the main object. When I can suddenly recognize and identify a particular word or phrase I feel quite thrilled, and this keeps me going.

These few weeks of lessons – now I'm on lesson eight – have changed my relationship with the local people. At first I thought of the Tamils and their language as a sort of blur: this was how I protected myself against a vast and alien culture. But it has been a great surprise that with so little effort a door has opened. Learning just a few words and phrases made me really look at the person in front of me and now I listen to Tamil people with great concentration. I've lost any sense of superiority and am reminded of whom I am – I am living in their country and I am their guest.

Ange, the potter, told me that one of the conditions for getting a work visa in Taiwan was to do ten hours of Chinese classes a week for the duration of her stay. She said it was difficult and frustrating, but she could see it was necessary not to be a burden on that society by being 'special'. In British India the officers had to learn an Indian language. In Israel it is compulsory for new immigrant to learn Hebrew. I can't believe there is no similar programme in Auroville. Surely nothing else would create harmony and understanding more quickly, especially if it also involved appreciating local Tamil customs like the way they deal with marriage. Newcomers really want to know about such things.

Finally, a word of praise for the *Auro-lang, initiation aux quatre langues* book. At first I must confess I panicked a little at four languages confronting me en masse, but when I relaxed I appreciated the skill and imagination with which this language course has been constructed, and the brilliant use of poetry to break up the serious stuff. I discovered I have a companion for life.

Dianna



# "You Hit it! You Quit It!"

Radio drama specialist Anthony J. Sloan creates ripples in Auroville's theatre scene by directing Stephen Briggs' play adaptation of Terry Pratchett's book *Wyrd Sisters*.

"Mike test 1...2... I am kidding! I am Anthony and we are at Johnny's lovely Fertile. You hear some birds - Heckyl and Jeckyl as we say in the US." The unmistakable radio personality spills out of New Yorker Anthony J. Sloan who grabbed our recorder just as our interview begins. "Conceived, born, raised, educated and damn near drafted in the South Bronx, the real South Bronx," he rattles off his brief bio without a pause.

"You hit it. You quit it - basically that's what I like about radio drama," he declares introducing his speciality. "The radio medium frees you and I am basically into justice and freedom. These are my tenets in life and what I look for... which is probably what brought me into Auroville." Anthony is an African-American who holds degrees in English literature, urban communication and in playwriting. With his own theatre company doing off-Broadway shows, he has clocked up over 30 years in the field of theatre. Later he started a successful career in radio drama. "I like radio theatre because appearances don't matter, it's all in the voice. It goes into your ear only and your imagination fills in the gaps."

Preferring to live very low to the ground and working mainly with people who have little resources, Anthony is a nomad who makes his home wherever he finds himself. His last sojourn was in Cape Town, South Africa, where he worked with BUSH Radio, a community radio station offering workshops to 'township' boys on radio drama production. India came into his travel plans as a place to recover from a serious injury which had left him near paralyzed. "At Chennai where I landed, someone mentioned that there is this place called Auroville which would be a perfect place to heal, and foolhardily I arrived in the middle of the night, in high season just before Mother's birthday." Luckily for him, André of New Creation had a space, and Anthony was able to put down new roots. "You know what they say in Auroville - you just end up here!"

While Auroville became his nursing pad, what Anthony had not bargained for was another relationship - an intimate involvement with the community through his first love of theatre. Within a few days of his arrival, he met Norman Bowler at New Creation. "This

English guy, Norman, wanted me to 'comment' on a play that was being rehearsed. I went there, saw the scene, and the situation looked pretty bleak, especially since they had less than a month before performance." Anthony immediately stopped the rehearsal, offered his help to direct the play with the condition of "the right to rehearsal." After a hasty conference amongst the cast, his offer was accepted. Thus Anthony got himself inextricably entangled as director of Stephen Briggs' adaptation of Terry Pratchett's *Wyrd Sisters*, an ambitious production with a huge cast of twenty five. Says Anthony of this experience, "I still maintain it was duplicitous on Norman's part to somehow get me involved, which he continues to deny."

Then began the saga of learning for both sides... Anthony had to tread carefully but also swiftly as time was at a premium. He had to constantly remind himself that he was working with a community theatre group and not a professional company. "I quickly realized that I had to approach this as a workshop." It was not easy being an 'outsider' directing a group of 'insiders'.

Anthony shares how it required a great amount of firmness to deal with some of the cast who would come to him with stories and excuses. "Basically I am trained not to go for excuses - 'Oh, This is Auroville. We only do things this way' I don't take that. No! I'd say to them, 'Yeah sure, but lemme explain somethin' to you', and I'd launch into my diatribe. Auroville is YOU! You change, Auroville changes." For Anthony, one of the biggest challenges was to resist this 'Aurovilian way' of doing things. "They wanted a lot of props but I insisted it be a costume drama and chucked out much of the stage directions." Minimal scenery with creative props became a necessity due to the lack of budget. "It was a give-and-take process, many times with their will against my will."

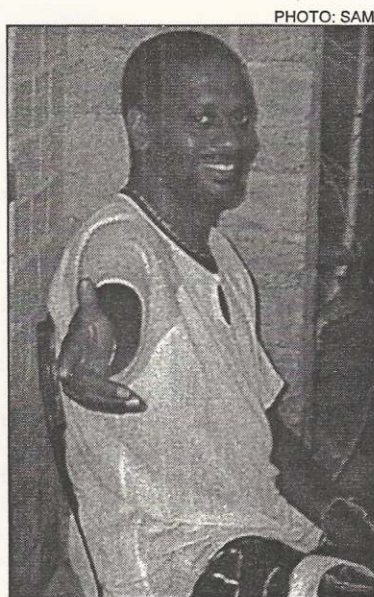
But an even more important challenge was the human element. "I had people come to me and say, 'I don't want this person in the cast because we had a problem with him or her before.' And I'd say that it is the director's problem and they should not worry about it." For him, the stage is a 'sacred' space, where one can leave everything behind. "It is a different reality in theatre. It's a space for people who nor-

mally don't talk to each other to talk to each other, those who have never had alliances to have alliances or misalliances." It appears that Anthony in his short stay here has hit upon the essence of what ails Auroville. "The point is that you have the opportunity for a limited amount of time to get over your miscommunication, therapy yourself and move on to the next level. 'Cause if you hold a thought or a grudge against somebody in a small community like this, sometimes for 15 years, it doesn't make sense!"

Anthony is also quick to admit that there were times during the rehearsals when communication became a challenge even for him. "As I was seen as the bad guy, the dictator, or the evil-whatever, any exchange would become difficult. Then I'd say, 'Go talk to Johnny, he knows how to talk to you, or go talk to Jesse, he knows how to talk to you' and that worked." Anthony was lucky in that several of the cast were trained in theatre including Catya, the visiting stage manager from Ireland.

Was it an exasperating experience? He shrugs off the query. "I am a seasoned director with 37 years behind me, and believe me, I have seen it all. I know all the resistances. Basically people don't wanna go on stage and make a fool of themselves." For Anthony, it is not about "getting the adaptation of Stephen Briggs right, or Terry Pratchett's view correct," but to "take the instincts of the players, perceive where they are trying to go with it, and just help to bring it out of them." Close to production, Anthony stepped back further, assigning increasing responsibility to the others. He views theatre as an exercise for the community including the audience community. "So they can see someone in a different light. 'Wow, that person is really talented,' or 'My goodness, why didn't I see that before' - y'know? For the next two weeks, everybody should be looking at Sam in a different way, Loretta in a different way, Jeff in a different way, the kids in a different way... That's what I want. It's not about being an auteur and wanting to impose my vision of things."

The lack of time with only six rehearsals made certain things impossible for Anthony. "A kind of bonding you try to get with the cast didn't happen. Perhaps it was also because of the large size of the group." But perhaps it did happen, for on the night of the farewell dinner when the entire crew



Anthony J. Sloan

got together to celebrate, the children who had minor supporting roles came dressed in costumes of the lead players and re-enacted scenes without an ounce of shyness. He regrets that there was not enough time "for sharing, enthusiasm, vision, and blah blah!" But there was magic. "People got into the mood. And it is amazing what people got doing when the adrenalin was flowing. Especially in Auroville because you only have opening night and closing night, with no shows in between for a downer."

Another regret that Anthony has is that the theatre scene in Auroville is not organized, and this he believes should be the next logical step. "It is a shame because this is the kind of play that you do here and then travel around with, performing at other theatres in the area." He feels that it should not be difficult to "put a group of actors and their costumes on a bus, be someplace for a weekend to do a Friday night performance, a Saturday matinee and an evening show, and travel back on Sunday. Everything is possible - just takes somebody to think about it."

While his time at Auroville is coming to an end, he definitely plans to be here next year. "This is a great place to write and meditate," he shares. Perhaps offer a play-writing workshop? "Well, it will be possible... but it will be easier if you had a radio station; then you'd have something to work towards." He immediately takes off on that thought. "We could hook up the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium, which is a terrible audio space I must say, and use it as a recording facility for a little Auroville radio station. Then the possibilities are endless." Anthony will be really glad to hear that the Indian Government has finally decided to grant community broadcasting licenses to established educational institutions. Auroville should definitely qualify...

Priya Sundaravalli

## In brief

### Peace Table

On March 29th, the day the Mother and Sri Aurobindo met in the physical for the first time 90 years ago, the Peace Table was moved into the Unity Pavilion in the International Zone. The Auroville Peace Table was installed in the Centre of Indian Culture of Bharat Nivas on February 29, 1996. In future, the table will be housed in a special hall of the Unity Pavilion, which is not yet built. The table was inaugurated on April 4th with a meditation for Peace.

### Water day

Dirk and Manfred hosted an Auroville Water Day in Auromodèle on April 18th to create awareness of the water situation in Auroville, the necessity of rainwater harvesting and demonstrate ways to recycle waste water for irrigation.

### Odissi dance workshop

Sangeeta Dash gave a 10-day intensive for beginning dancers at Pitanga, Auroville

### Bengali dance

On March 27th, Smt. Soumi Saha from Kolkatta gave a Goudiya Nritya dance performance at the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium.

### The Features of Trees

Birgitta Volz exhibited The Features of Trees in the Foyer Art Gallery, Bharat Nivas, using bark prints to artistically express and visualize the very nature of the trees. She has been working on the Auroville trees for 2 1/2 months, taking their images and portraying them on banners with her bark prints.

### Choir concerts

The Auroville Choir, conducted by Eugene, gave two evenings of romantic sacred choir music in Pitanga with works of Rachmaninoff, Arensky, Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky, Poulenc and Verdi.

### Twin exhibitions

Newcomer Sarah Bowyer exhibited 'Portraits of Aurovilians' at the Aurelec Cafeteria and "The Twelve Angels", a serigraph series, at Pitanga.

### Tamil-French relationships

Chevalier Prof. S. Madhanakalayani from Pondicherry delivered two lectures on Tamil folk songs of Pondicherry translated into French and the impact of Tamil-French relationships on all aspects of life.

### International youth conference 2005

UNESCO has granted US \$ 20,000 for an International Youth Conference to be held in Auroville in February 21-28, 2005, around the theme "Explorations of new values in inter-religious and intercultural dialogue." Up to 100 youth will be invited and sponsored from India and other south-Asian countries. For further info contact unity@aurville.org.in

### Ritam

SALIER has published the second issue of its bi-annual journal Ritam dated February 2004, on material and spiritual researches. For obtaining a free copy contact unity@aurville.org.in

### Correction

The price of the monograph, "Integral Yoga: The spiritual ideals of Auroville" is Rs. 60 within India and US \$5 outside India.



Impi, as the maiden witch and Jeremy, as the fool, about to share their first kiss (left); Loretta, as the haughty dutchess (middle); Johnny, as the ghost of the murdered king (right). Costumes by Coco.



# Building a mosque in Saudi Arabia

"You need a will, a stainless steel will."

Aurosatprem (known as Satprem), who coordinates the activities of the Earth Unit of the Auroville Building Centre, is building up a national and international reputation for the quality of his work.

He is also a man in a hurry. After the devastating earthquake in Gujarat he and his team went there and constructed a 23 square metre earthquake-resistant house from foundation to roof, including electrical connections and painting, in just 62 hours. A few months back they went to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia and, with the help of local labour, constructed a 25.80m x 15m mosque, complete with 18.05m tall minaret, in only 7 weeks. "It's my natural work rhythm," explains Satprem. "I seem to have chosen this kind of intensity as my dharma this lifetime." In the case of the mosque, however, there were additional reasons for speed. "I really felt that The Mother wanted this project to be done, so even though I only had seven weeks I was determined to complete it for Auroville and for Her."

The Al Medy Mosque contract came to the Auroville Building Centre (AVBC) Earth Unit by way of the Internet, after the contractor in Riyadh read about the unit's capabilities in stabilized earth construction and learned that Satprem had done similar work in Saudi

low Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, though there were also a few Tamils (at any one time about 75 masons were working on the construction, together with a supporting work force of 150 workers). "Not surprisingly I spent the whole time correcting mistakes."

Then there were the exhausting 11 hour working days which started at 6.30 in the morning, with compulsory breaks for prayers. All this meant that Satprem had almost no time to explore the traditional earth construction techniques of Saudi Arabia. He did manage one visit to Al Diriya, the first capital of Saudi Arabia which was constructed in the 18th century, but found that the earth buildings were in a bad state of repair. "Although there is a project for the restoration of Al Diriya, the preservation of such buildings has not been a high priority."

This may be about to change. As a result of the success of the mosque construction, the City of Riyadh now wants Satprem to help set up an Earth Construction Centre with a view to researching, developing and promoting earth building technology in Saudi Arabia. He has also been asked to spend 2 weeks in Iran, helping the local authorities assess the damage to vaulted earth buildings in the city of Bam after the recent earthquake there. This latter project, instigated by the Iran Cultural Heritage Organization, will be overseen by UNESCO, with funding provided by the French Ministry of Communication and Culture.

It looks as if there is renewed interest in earth architecture in Saudi Arabia and Iran. But what about India? "Here the revival of interest in earth architecture is very, very slow," says Satprem. "There's just not enough awareness of its potential: it's still seen by most people as a building material for the poor. Modern cities are built in brick and concrete and the villagers – who represent the mass of India's population – want the same for themselves. Even in Gujarat, where traditional earth structures stood up well during the earthquake while cement and brick buildings collapsed, people are once again using brick, cement and steel. There's simply no will from any political party or any other organization to give earth architecture a push. Even most Schools of Architecture don't offer courses in appropriate building methods, although this is slowly changing." In fact, an increasing number of architecture students, from both India and abroad, are attending the courses in earth technology which Satprem offers regularly in Auroville.

Is Auroville, then, a beacon for earth architecture in India? Satprem points out that though many of the largest Auroville construction projects of recent years – like the Solar Kitchen and the Visitors Centre – were constructed using Compressed Stabilised Earth Blocks (CSEBs) there is hardly any earth construction taking place in Auroville at present. Why not? "Aurovilians, like the rest of India, are just not aware of the advantages of using this material." But what about



The Al Medy Mosque in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, built with earth technology

some of the objections voiced by architects and contractors? For example, that CSEB construction requires very good supervision, and that it is not appropriate for a climate where there are not big differences between day and night temperatures? "The supervision issue is a valid point: I'm still looking for a site supervisor who is able to ensure both quality control and speed. One possible solution would be to train a pool of masons who would not be attached to one construction company in Auroville but who would move from site to site, specializing in earth construction. As for the climatic objection – properly-designed earth construction buildings are definitely cooler than either concrete or brick structures in the tropics."

Satprem accepts he is partially responsible for Aurovilians' lack of awareness of the benefits of constructing with earth. "I should give more information. At present I feel somewhat

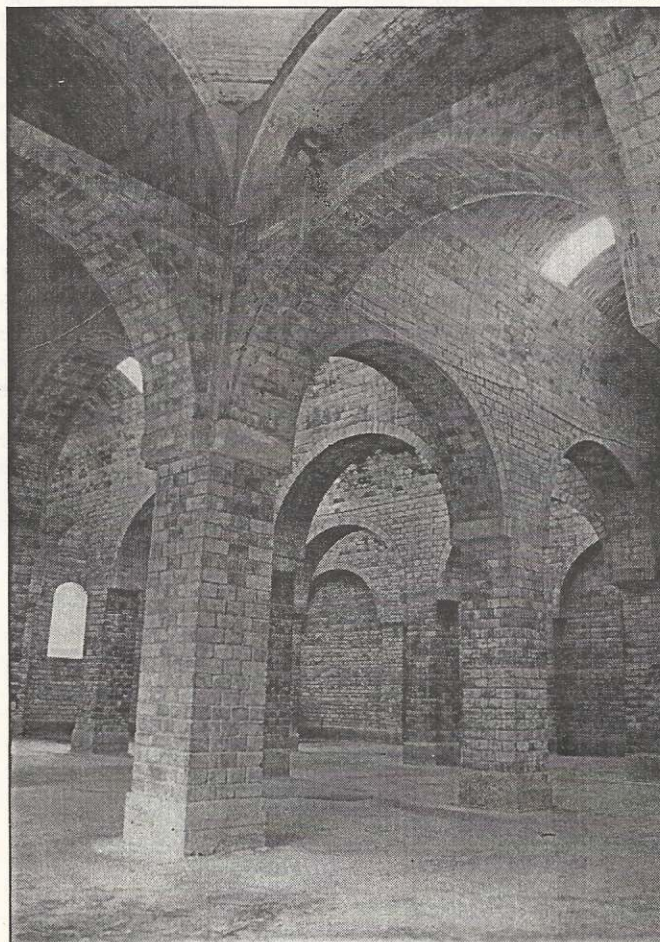
useless in Auroville because people don't appreciate what I can give." He is also quick to admit that he can be his own worst enemy. "I'm short-tempered and easily explode when I feel negative vibrations coming from people. It's been worse since my accident in 1995 (when Satprem fell 10 metres from a windmill) because now I'm more sensitized to such things. Also, while I have a good reputation in my field, I'm always unhappy because I never fully attain the very high standards I set myself: I get very nervous when something is not being done correctly."

"At the same time, I'm able to observe myself and, while I can't completely stop myself exploding, I have more and more control. I have two sides to my nature: an impetuous side and a very harmonious one. I'm trying hard to bring the latter forward. I'm also much more aware of karma yoga now, of the need to be totally detached from the fruit of

one's action and not to do the work for oneself. What I learned in Saudi Arabia is that it's a mixture of will and surrender. You need the will, a stainless steel will, to do the work and achieve the goal, but if it's not working out you have to be able to say to Mother 'O.K. I can't do any more. You do it.' And within a very short time things change completely. This is what happened when we couldn't find the right soil anywhere to make the blocks for the mosque. I was about to give up. Then I left it in Mother's hands and, within 30 minutes, we were driving behind a truck full of promising-looking soil. We stopped the truck, they directed us to a quarry...and the problem was solved!"

Satprem is trying to bring the same spirit of surrender to his everyday work and to the future. He plans to transform the Earth Unit of the Auroville Building Centre into the Auroville Earth Institute which would run one year courses in earth construction for engineers, architects, 'barefoot' illiterate architects and master masons. "I'll need a lot of help, both in terms of human resources and funding to get this off the ground. Still, I don't worry. If it is the will of The Mother, I know it will happen."

Alan and Tim



Earth pillars inside the mosque

## Aurosatprem

Arabia 15 years earlier, when he constructed an exhibition centre 25 kilometres from Riyadh.

Inspiration for the mosque, which had been conceived by a Saudi architect, came from the Riyadh Development Authority, which is interested in promoting indigenous-style architecture in Saudi Arabia using modern building techniques. The main contractors in Riyadh had found themselves unable to handle all the specialized work required, and so they called in Satprem in July-August last year to design the mosque, start the earth blocks production and generally organize everything.

"It was a continual struggle," says Satprem. "First of all it was very difficult to get visas. Then, when we arrived we discovered that the foundations and floor slabs, which should have been completed, were unfinished. And always there were communication problems." Speaking almost no Arabic himself he was obliged to use English to convey his needs to the on-site Syrian engineer, who in turn used Arabic to explain what was required to the Pakistani foreman, who finally used Urdu to give detailed instructions to his team of labourers, which included mostly fel-

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