

Why Auroville needs India

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COVER STORY India: Defying Definitions

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Looking at India with fresh eyes

The first anniversary of India's independence in the new millennium is a good occasion to reflect upon how this country's culture and people have been viewed and to consider necessary modifications to be made to our conceptualizations. A rapidly changing India demands equally rapid changes in our thinking about her.

India has long been the object of the most confining clichés. Observers have prioritized some salient features of her culture over others, erasing from their view any diversity that might stand at odds with their perceptions. For example, many intellectuals, artists, and citizens have insisted on seeing India as eternal and unchanging, or at its core concerned with a kind of spiritual escapism. Some have condemned India in their thinking to a quagmire of inescapable poverty and injustice. Others have smothered her in a veil of exotic mystery. All such stereotypes serve only to deny the capability of Indian people to change over time. Moreover, in truth, India is many things, not merely a handful of essential, cultural traits. As Sri Aurobindo pointed out, there is little in the range of human possibility that cannot be found on this soil.

For example, the young filmmakers participating in this year's New Indian Cinema Festival in London allege that the history of Indian film is largely one of Indians seeking to reproduce the very images about India that the West has always wanted to see, even when making films for exclusively Indian audiences. These contemporary directors have joined the ranks of a movement of intellectuals and artists who are resisting stale representations of their culture. By portraying an urban, middle-class lifestyle and modern social problems, they seek to combat stereotypes and to convert the silver screen into a mirror for reflecting upon new social identities. Even these efforts are problematic, however, as such films usually seem to depict experiences relevant only to certain sectors of northern cities in India, leaving regional cultural differences unexplored.

friend, it is now possible to order from anywhere in the world the idol of your choice and any puja paraphernalia that you or your pujari could possibly need. My friend says that Indians living abroad are emailing everyday like mad. But he also told me that some of the customers are not Indians!

Such instances shatter any efforts to insist that Indian traditions are somehow struggling at odds with modern society. In fact, quite the opposite appears to be true. Just as India is extending towards her future, she is also reaching for her past. Unfortunately, this sometimes takes the form of narrow-minded cultural policing and violence. But ultimately contemporary developments attest to the fact that more often than not, tradition and modernity are not diametrically opposed, but exist rather as overlapping points along a continuum.

The complexity of Indian modernity

Whereas simplistic versions of India were never really tenable, today they are impossible to sustain. In the face of an increasingly global economy, a burgeoning middle class of consumers, and the flood of new ideas via the internet and mass media, any model which reduces India to a corpus of ancient texts or to a cesspool of squalour is highly suspect. India has actually become a kind of vortex in which local histories and practices mix and mingle with technologies, symbols and concepts from numerous other parts of the globe. Stop only to ponder how this land can be host to as many gurus as internet business tycoons and one soon appreciates the complexity of Indian modernity.

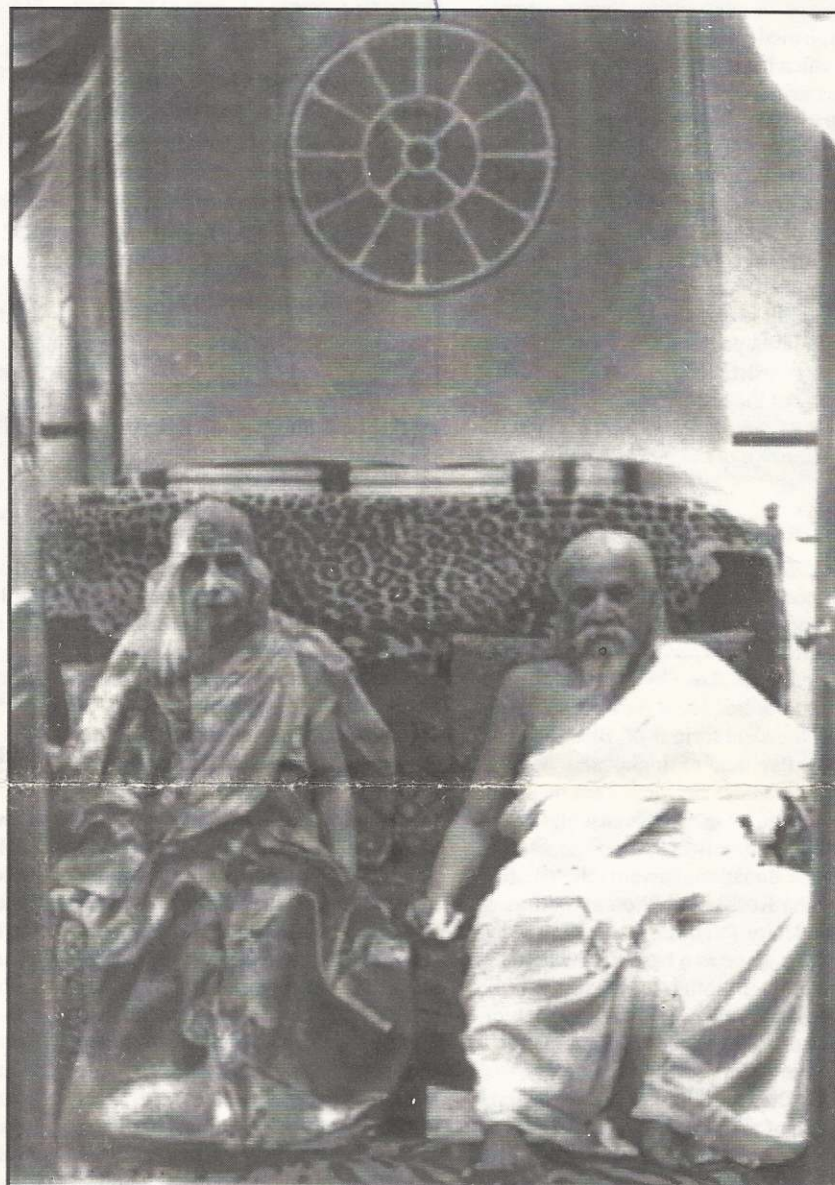
The significance that these developments have as to how Indians define themselves and how they and others define their culture is an interesting and pressing question. It was certainly a question that crossed my mind recently when I ran into a friend in Chennai who recently launched yet another "dot.com." As the cyber extension of a long-standing family business, the new venture has attained an overnight success. Thanks to my

The remaking of tradition

Equally important to consider is that often what gets passed off as a remnant of "ancient" culture may not be so very ancient at all. Take for example the classical dance of bharatanatyam, a gem on the crown of Tamil culture. While literary evidence suggests that the dance has existed for millennia in some form or other, the present proscenium-staged form, with its "traditional" sequence of genres of musical compositions, dates back only some 150-200 years. Moreover what some prominent schools of this art perform is the result of the compilation and systematization of steps completed only in the twentieth century. And even this is changing as growing numbers of young dancers, for better or worse, decide to experiment with new contemporary social themes or movements from other dance styles.

What many Western observers do not understand is the highly creative dimension of Indian art and thought.

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Darshan, 24 April 1950

PHOTO COURTESY OF SRI AUROBINDO ARCHIVES

August 15th marks Sri Aurobindo's birth anniversary as well as the anniversary of India's independence. In our cover story this month, we explore the cultural identity of Indians as contemporarily expressed and share our reflections on Hinduism, India's main religion.

Hinduism is as old as Indian civilization itself. But what does the term "Hinduism" exactly connote? How did Sri Aurobindo perceive this ancient religion?

What perceptions do people outside of India have of it?

Although many myths about India were born during the colonial period, when they served to legitimize British power, it is important to recognize that they are still very much alive today. Moreover, fantasies about India are not the exclusive purview of Western observers. Indians themselves have participated in perpetuating a limited view of their own cul-

"As a Westerner, the idea of merely passing by these two [Sri Aurobindo and the Mother] with nothing being said, had struck me as a bit ridiculous.

I was still unfamiliar with the Hindu idea that such a silent meeting could afford an intensely spiritual impetus. I watched as I came up in line, and I noted that the procedure was to stand quietly before the two of them for a few silent moments, then to move on at a gesture from Sri Aurobindo. What happened next was completely unexpected.

As I stepped into a radius of about four feet, there was the sensation of moving into some kind of a force field. Intuitively, I knew it was the force of Love, but not what ordinary humans usually mean by the term...

Then, all thought ceased, I was perfectly aware of where I was; it was not "hypnotism" as one Stanford friend later suggested. It was simply

that during those few minutes, my mind became utterly still. It seemed that I stood there a very long, an uncounted time, for there was no time. Only many years later did I describe this experience as my having experienced the Timeless in Time. When there at the darshan, there was not the least doubt in my mind that I had met two people who had experienced what they claimed. They were Gnostic Beings. They had realized this new consciousness which Sri Aurobindo called the Supramental." Rhoda P. Le Cocq, describing her experience of the last Darshan of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother on 24 November 1950 in *The Radical Thinkers* - Heidegger and Sri Aurobindo p. 199.

Building the city

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A concrete jungle!

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New energies in the International Zone

Manifesting Auroville's International Zone has long been at the bottom of Auroville's list of priorities. But while construction work on the Pavilion of India and on the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture slowly proceed, new energies are flowing in

"One of the main motivations of the International Zone is to give the possibility to all the countries assembled on the land of Auroville to manifest their contributions to the global evolution of humanity. Such contributions have expressed themselves over the centuries through many diverse aspects: spiritual, cultural, political, etc., which have produced the special characteristics of the 'soul' of each country. According to such a central principle, the International Zone of Auroville must not be developed as an architectural manifestation offering the nationalistic and competitive spirit of the usual international exhibitions. On the contrary, it must allow each country to express as soberly as possible in its pavilion what it believes to be its participation in the universal play of the history of the world."

(From Development Group paper "Concept of the International Zone")

All countries are equal and essentially one; everyone 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

as the first building of the African pavilion.

Progress is also being made on the level of planning. The International Zone working group has accepted the layout of the International Zone as proposed by Roger Anger and Helmut [see map]. The idea is to create an urban web around four focal points in a semi-circle around the Pavilion of India for the cultural entities of Europe, Asia (including Oceania), the Americas and Africa (including the Middle East). Each focal point would encompass an area of approximately 5000 sq.m. From these focal points development could take place in the same way that a village or small town develops around a central point such as a village square or market place. The focal point for Europe, for example, could be the colonnaded urban space that is found in so many European townships (e.g. the Mediterranean); it is the "agora" of the Greeks, the "forum" of the Romans or the cloisters of the monastery. Other cultural entities must discover their own center; ideas

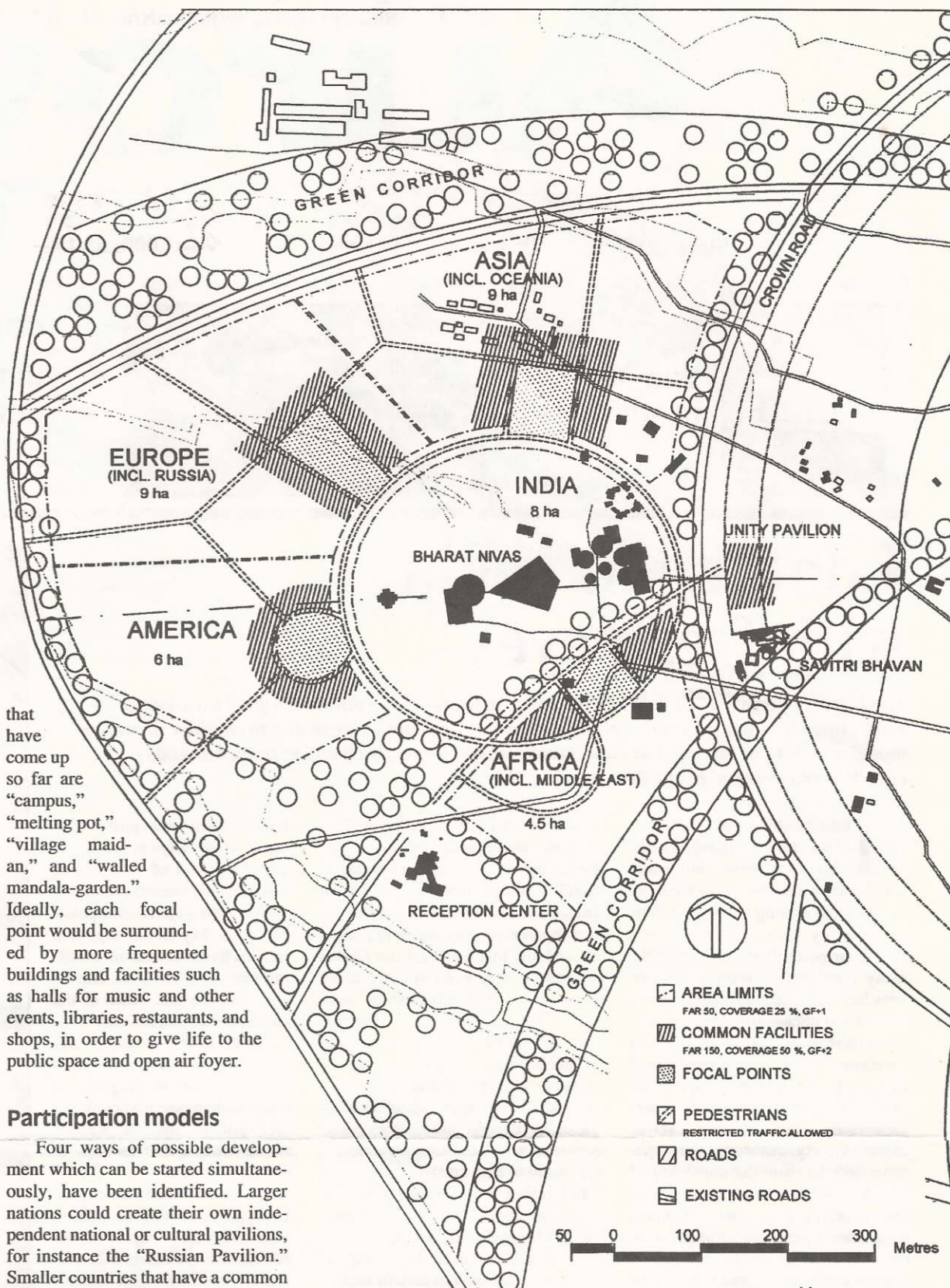
that have come up so far are "campus," "melting pot," "village maidan," and "walled mandala-garden." Ideally, each focal point would be surrounded by more frequented buildings and facilities such as halls for music and other events, libraries, restaurants, and shops, in order to give life to the public space and open air foyer.

Participation models

Four ways of possible development which can be started simultaneously, have been identified. Larger nations could create their own independent national or cultural pavilions, for instance the "Russian Pavilion." Smaller countries that have a common cultural background could go in for a collective approach. One example is the recently finished project of the "Scandinavian embassies" in Berlin, consisting of a cluster of five buildings for the countries Finland, Sweden, Norway, Iceland and Denmark with an additional collective building for common use. Each building was designed by a different architect. The European area could in the same way host such sub-groupings, not only the Scandinavian culture but also the East European culture, the Mediterranean culture, and so on.

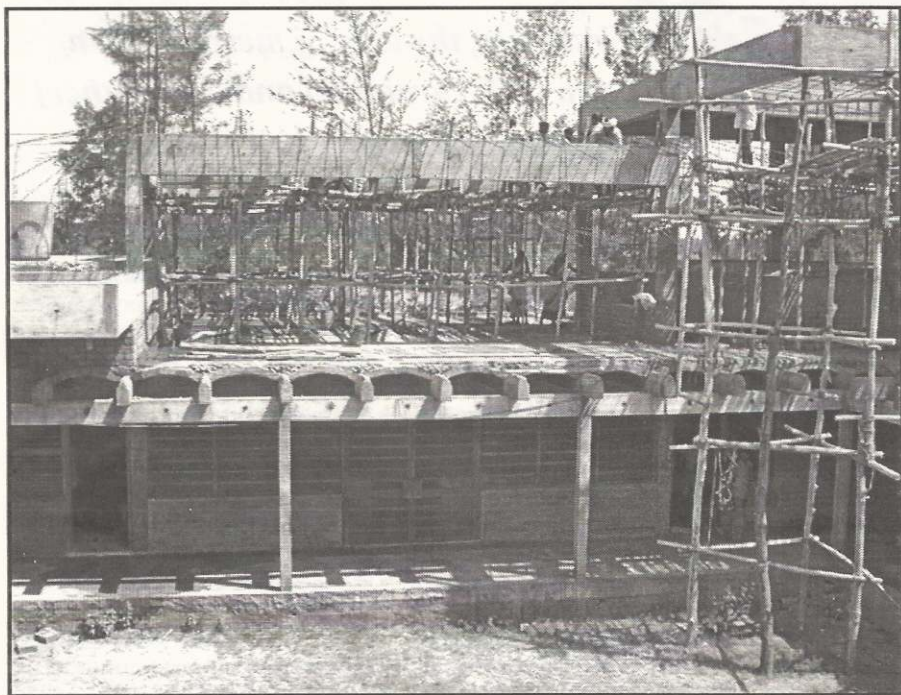
A third alternative could be participation in the so-called "Unity Pavilion", a project which might contain exhibition spaces, offices, and guest accommodation of approximately 500 sq.m. as a service and forum for cultural groups who want to start "activities". Lastly, there would be the possibility to allow for small and independent beginnings of a national pavilion or

group of pavilions in the form of a shop, flat or guesthouse. Examples are the hostels for people from Orissa, Gujarat and Bengal in nearby Pondicherry; or the "auberges" of different groups in Jerusalem. This last alternative is a difficult form of development because of the smallness of the first groping steps and the uncer-



What's new?

There is quite some progress to report from the field. The ground floor of the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture is expected to be ready in September. The Government of India has allocated funds for the finalization of the Auditorium of Bharat Nivas, the Pavilion of India, and work is expected to start in autumn this year. Dimitri von Mohrenschildt, an Ashramite of Russian descent, has made donations towards the creation of the Russian pavilion as well as of the Unity Pavilion, a pavilion which would serve as a base from where the creation of other pavilions will be stimulated and which will host exhibitions, performances and international conferences. Auroville International USA has promised funds for the creation of the U.S. Pavilion. Tekeste, an Ethiopian long associated with Auroville and now a newcomer, has promised a donation for a youth hostel



GOI grant for Pavillon of Tibetan Culture

The Pavilion of Tibetan Culture has received a grant from the Department of Culture, Government of India that will enable it to complete the ground floor of the pavilion and to build the large conference hall on the first floor. This hall will be named after the great Indian Pandit Atisha who in the 9th century brought Buddhism in all its purity back to Tibet after two centuries of decline. The grant shows the Government of India's deep interest in preserving a culture which is on the brink of disappearing on the other side of the Himalayas.

Architect Helmut dreams of the future in the International Zone

"... it's around 6 o'clock in the evening, and people are drifting into the 'Place de l'Europe'. Students on their way to or from their classes or hostels in the back lanes, researchers emerging from the libraries, a group who've been playing cricket on the field behind the British Pavilion, others who plan to move on to the Swedish film or a concert being given by a German string quartet and have come early to enjoy this convivial hour... people are sitting on benches under trees, or on the steps of the colonnades, chatting, listening to some musicians from Prague who've brought their instruments out onto the square, or playing 'tavli' at the tables of the Greek cafeion. Delicious smells are wafting from one of the restaurants - it's Hungarian night tonight. Under the colonnade the lights are coming on shops and stalls offering books in many languages, art, handicrafts, CDs... at the art gallery a Tiepolo exhibition is announced for next week. And mingling with the crowd are tourists who have strolled over from the Visitors Information Centre to enjoy a taste of the best of European culture at first hand."

tainty of future progress and financing. However, those initial steps are also important and deserve encouragement, since small seeds can grow into the big trees.

A first necessary step is now to approve of a Land Use Plan for the International Zone. The next step will be to raise sufficient finances to start the construction of the "Unity Pavilion" from where the development of the International Zone can be promoted. All possible developments should be encouraged, as the process of creating the zone will be as important as the aesthetic conception of

each of the buildings. No good effort or good intention towards creating the International Zone should be discouraged. For the concept of the International Zone not only touches upon countries expressing their contributions to the global evolution of humanity; but they also would serve as centres of learning and culture, living demonstrations of the interrelation of cultures and man's aspiration to achieve human unity, one of the aims of Auroville.

Based on reports from Helmut and Jill

"Let Africa be under Mother's influence"

Former Ethiopian diplomat Tekeste recounts how he came into contact with The Mother and Auroville and explains his plans to start the African pavilion in the International Zone

Tekeste came to India at the beginning of 1966 as a diplomat attached to the Ethiopian embassy in New Delhi. He befriended some people who were brought up in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. "They told me about The Mother and Sri Aurobindo and about the new project, Auroville. I told them about my Ethiopian guru Father Woldestensai, a Coptic Christian who, with his exceptional powers, healed thousands of people, the blind, the dumb, the deaf and the mentally ill, in the name of God with prayers and sprinklings of holy water," says Tekeste. Through his friends he received a blessings packet from the Mother.

"I heard again about Auroville sometime in 1967, when the Ethiopian Embassy received an invitation to participate in the foundation ceremony of Auroville. The Ethiopian authorities told us to participate, but it did not happen for some reason. But we did manage to send some Ethiopian soil and our flag, ensuring a symbolic participation. Knowing already about Sri Aurobindo and The Mother I was eager to see Auroville for myself. I asked the blessings of my guru to visit this spiritual place and asked him to be with me in spirit. I came to Auroville on the 27th of February, 1969, one day before Auroville's first birthday celebrations. I participated in the celebrations and somehow I got the holy spirit of the place. I was extraordinarily happy and so inspired that for about four days I wrote down many important ideas about the future of Ethiopia which the spirit revealed to me. Then the holy spirit inside me asked me, 'How do you feel,' and I said, 'I surrender, I have no other word to express it.'

Contact with The Mother

"I had an appointment to see the Divine Mother. But the evening before the appointment something strange happened. I saw a young girl passing by, my thoughts wandered off, and suddenly I realized that the inner light had been switched off. All the happiness was gone. I questioned myself what had happened, trying to recall the sweet memory of the earlier days. But a force covered my mind, obliterating the memory. It told me to tear up everything I had written, which I did, and then asked me if I was going to



betray my guru, or Mother Mary, or my country's religion? Then, leaving me to my choices, the force kept quiet.

"I tried to understand what had happened. I told myself that the spirit that had been with me for four days was an Indian God, and that the one who was talking to me now was the Ethiopian God who wished to save me from this situation. Then I decided not to meet Mother. I told the person who would bring me to Her that I, being an Ethiopian, respected spiritual and old people and that I came here to get a blessing from an old spiritual person, but I had not come here to find God. This was reported to Mother who said that it was a good reaction and sent Her blessings through some rose flowers.

"I returned to New Delhi and there, once again, asked myself what had happened to me when I was in the

Ashram. Then I realized that the first spirit was the holy spirit, the true light, but that the second spirit was the vital power which we call the devil. Then I wrote to the Divine Mother that I had now understood, that I was extremely happy, and that I wished my country to be the second country to support this wonderful idea of Auroville. The moment I posted that letter I felt the true light of the holy spirit coming down once again. I also wrote to the Ethiopian Emperor Hailie Selassie and to my guru. The Emperor replied praising The Mother to carry out such a wonderful project at her age. My guru answered that all that was revealed to me was from the True Light from the Holy Spirit and he asked me to ask the Divine Mother to pray for him. Soon afterwards Mother sent me her blessings and expressed that She wanted to

see me soon. And indeed I was fortunate to meet Her three or four times a year for the next five years.

"On the occasion of my birthday in 1969, I presented the Mother with a gift, a wooden artefact with Mother's photo on one side, Sri Aurobindo's on the other and in between a silver cross. It was only much later that I came to know that Mother had spoken to Satprem about this gift [see Agenda IX, p. 407, eds.]. She said that as soon as She saw this, like an answer in the form of a massive descent, the will came to transform Christianity. She added that the vibration was so powerful that She felt that the transformation was being done. In that same talk with Satprem She explains that the cross is the symbol of transformation, Matter (transversal) penetrated by the Spirit; and the junction is the transformation. Of course I knew nothing of this at the time.

Coming to Auroville

"After The Mother's passing I continued to come yearly to the Ashram and Auroville. I donated my diplomatic car to Auroville – though it took me a long time to convince the Indian authorities that foreigners should be allowed to give this type of donations to Auroville – and I wrote a book in Amharic, one of the main languages of Ethiopia, on Sri Aurobindo, the Mother and Auroville entitled "Auroville, the fruit of good deeds", subtitled "The new light that has descended in our time". As I was a diplomat, I travelled wide and far, but from the moment the Divine Mother was revealed to me I have aspired to dedicate my whole life to Her work. I wished to be the ambassador of the Divine Mother wherever I was and Auroville was in my soul. My house in Addis Ababa was named 'Auroville Hostel' and served as an information centre for Auroville for about 15 years.

"In 1992, after my retirement, I came to Auroville to start the newcomer process. But I did not get a clear inner indication, and I was puzzled. Then, miraculously, I met with Dr. Karan Singh, who advised me to wait for about five years and see my guru's ending. I accepted his advice and as he had said, within five years everything was settled. I have received my guru's full blessing and seen his ending, and then I came to Auroville with a calm mind to work for the Divine Mother."

Tekeste's main interests are now to translate and publish some works from Sri Aurobindo and The Mother in Amharic. "Ethiopians are a very spiritual people, I dare say even that they are Mother's children. But of course none of Her or Sri Aurobindo's works are available in Ethiopia," says Tekeste. His other aim is to create the first building of the African pavilion in Auroville's International Zone. "I believe in the unity of Africa," he says, "and have asked Mother that Africa be united with Her blessings." And he wrote to the Development Group: "I am convinced that all the nations of Africa must come under the influence of The Mother, through the involvement of their governments in the International Zone of Auroville.... I would like to provide a base from which this could start to happen, by providing a hostel where African students and other guests from Africa could be accommodated and come into direct contact with the atmosphere of Auroville."

AVI 2000

The three-day Auroville International 2000 meeting in Steyerberg, Germany, focused on International Understanding, with special emphasis on the India-Pakistan relations. Throughout the meeting everybody was asked to keep the question in their hearts and minds in which way Auroville can be of help to heal the wounds caused by the division of India, now that elsewhere in the world remarkable steps forward towards unification are being made. All AVI-members, Auroville friends in their respective countries and Aurovilians and Ashramites are asked to silently concentrate on Mother's map of united India on Sri Aurobindo's birthday.

Discussions took place on various Auroville topics such as the Land Use Plan and land fundraising, the development of the International Zone, the policy of the Entry Group and the desirability to give a date when Auroville will be open again for newcomers to join, the housing situation, the possibility to create a new economic model for Auroville and the Matrimandir progress. The Centres too reported on their activities. Dmitry Melgounov from St Petersburg will be the new Russian AVI liaison (email: dimitry@lens.spb.ru.). The meeting called for AVI-liaisons to start elsewhere in the world, especially in Asia and Africa.

AIM 2000

The five-days All-India Meet 2000 took place in Nainital, Uttar Pradesh, India. It was an occasion for all those institutions, organizations, groups and individuals in India committed to the vision and work of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother to come together. The emphasis of the meeting was a pragmatic and in-depth discussion of three areas: education, social issues and youth. Twelve Aurovilians joined the event, which was described as incredibly warm and harmonious. Participants expressed the need for interconnectedness and the importance of working together. It is hoped that through these events an empathetic and meaningful relationship amongst these groups and individuals will develop.

AUM 2000

The All-USA Meeting 2000 held in Connecticut brought together people from all over the USA dedicated to the vision of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother and to Auroville. The program included talks by Mangesh Nadkarni, Dr. Karan Singh, Georges van Vrekhem and others and hatha yoga classes by Wendy Lines and Tom O'Brien and movement and meditation by Don Salmon and Jan Maslow. Jill gave an update on the American Pavilion and the Land and following a spontaneous appeal by Paula Murphy, \$15,551 was raised during the conference, a third of which came as a "match" from the Rama family. On the last night of the conference, Girish Mantry gave a video and slide talk on Matrimandir followed by a detailed update by Alan. The evening ended with a reading by Jocelyn from the "John Kelly" chapter of the "Antithesis of Yoga".

Matrimandir

Cleaning the Chamber

It is a dramatic transformation. One moment, the Chamber is as usual: quiet, reverent, peaceful, dim. As always, the eye is drawn immediately to the glowing crystal. Suddenly, strong overhead lights are turned on; voices are heard issuing instructions; another set of doors is opened; a vacuum cleaner is wheeled in, followed by crates containing clean sheets and cushion covers. It is all light, sound, activity. Astonishingly, the crystal is almost reduced to being furniture.

It is 8.00 pm. Cleaning time.

Gather up the loose sheets. One person vacuums the mats underneath. Then teams of two go around the Chamber straightening the mats and rejoining them to their neighbours. This is hard work: pull from this end, straighten that side, find the velcro strips, smooth out the creases, on to the next.

Meanwhile, as it's Tuesday, all the cushion covers need to be removed for laundering. Fresh ones must be put on. Three or four people sit amongst a pile of white cloth, performing the same action over and over again. There are a lot of cushions.

There is another set of mats between the columns and the crystal, including twelve cunningly designed ones that fit exactly around each column. A day's procession of tramping feet - however reverent - leaves all these very ruffled. Straightening them requires an almost zen-like appreciation of the relationship between each sheet and the whole.

Over at the cushions, they're now putting on the new covers. There are four different sizes of cushion, but the covers look much the same until you get to know what you're doing.

Finally, the top sheets are replaced. The old sheets and covers are gone, the vacuum cleaner just a memory. The door is closed. The lights are switched off. The crystal is restored to supremacy. We sit for five minutes in the settling calm of the fresh, clean Chamber. Yes.

David

Carel

Looking at India with fresh eyes

(continued from page 1)

These realms are not merely the products of autocratic handing down on the part of elders and the passive, obedient imbibing on the part of successive generations. If Indian traditions have continued to flourish throughout the ages it is because brilliant innovators have placed their stamp upon them from time to time. Even mundane traditional practices survive because they are continually remade, continually adapted to make them relevant to the situations at hand.

This too can be problematic, however, as some aspects of culture are rooted in discrimination and violence. All traditional practices need not be unthinkingly glorified or blindly defended. Preserving what is valuable from the past, while aiming to make society more equitable, is no easy task. As the recent controversy over the making of Deepa Mehta's film *Water* proves, cultural pride can conceal the ugliest cultural chauvinism and oppression. During this incident, thousands took to the streets of Benares to protest the filming of a story that denounced the well-documented, inhumane treatment of widows.

The changing dimensions of India's culture

To return to the case of my Chennai dot.com friend, the other thing we must relinquish in our thinking about India is viewing her culture as necessarily something geographically sited. It is high time we think of Indian culture as something beyond the specific area we associate with India on a map. Of course on one level this means remembering the growing numbers of Indians living outside India and their perceptions of their cultural heritage. The Indian diaspora, often thought to be conservative, builds Hindu temples, celebrates Divali, and sells Hindi movie videos. Yet children of Indian parents are increasingly involved in shaping global, popular culture in the form of new, hybrid musical forms such as bhangra and techno-trance. At the same time Indians living abroad, often economically powerful, make interventions in cultural developments in India. The case of bharatanatyam is again illustrative. Wealthy, semi-trained daughters of Indian parents settled in the USA can easily displace local, more talented dancers at major dance venues in India simply because they can easily pay the rising costs of stage rentals, costumes and musicians.

Thinking about Indian culture as it exists outside of India also means thinking about Indian traditions as they come to be practiced or purchased by people of various nationalities. For example, one might explore the significance of yoga centers opening all over the world, and the populations of non-Indians participating in Indian practices within India. It is certainly easy to dismiss the growing presence of Hindu iconography on clothing and store windows in, say, New York City as merely the latest commodity fetish. Yet the fact that at least some New Yorkers attribute some kind of spiritual significance to their Ganesh T-shirts could suggest something a bit more complicated.

No matter how we look at Indian culture, something will always escape our view. Consequently, we must be careful not to search for easy definitions or draw simplistic conclusions. In truth there are many versions of India and as the world we all live in continues to change in the decades to come, many more versions will be born.

Shanti

Indian thought is not understood in America

Rajiv Malhotra has been described as "a man with a mission". He was born and raised in North India, but then settled in the USA where he has now lived for thirty years. In 1994, realizing he had been given an opportunity to "get out of the rat-race and spend time in more valuable pursuits", he founded the Infinity Foundation which sponsors humanitarian and academic projects that further knowledge in philosophy, science, and above all, spirituality. It was in the latter context that he discovered that there is hardly any appreciation of Indian philosophy and culture in the USA. Determined to do something about this, Rajeev has recently started another non-profit foundation called the Educational Council on Indic Traditions (ECIT). Rajiv visited Auroville recently and had wide-ranging discussions with the community about his work. Here we publish extracts from an interview

"It was quite a shock when I discovered that Indian philosophy is not being properly addressed in American universities. In fact, only two American universities offer a doctorate in Indian philosophy. In general Indian thought is not considered as philosophy but is taught, and badly at that, by the departments of religion or of anthropology. This results in a complete mis-appreciation if not misunderstanding of Indian philosophical thought and consequently, of the values of India. One of the reasons is that Western scholars have been shaped by Greco-Semitic concepts, and often cannot grasp the complexity of Indian philosophical thought. Hinduism, for instance, is usually perceived as being polytheistic; in reality it is both monotheistic and polytheistic believing in One God taking different forms of manifestation. It was another shock when I discovered that quite a number of Western scholars appropriate Indian philosophical concepts without crediting the sources, as if they were the results of their own original thinking. And I learned that the situation in American high schools where my kids study is no better: there is inadequate understanding of India and Indian thought and Hinduism is portrayed through negative stereotypes.

"There is one exception to this, namely Buddhism. The Buddhists have good scholars, themselves practising Buddhists, who teach the Buddhist religion. Also the Dalai Lama instructed his followers to go out and teach the tradition to keep it alive. So some Tibetans went out and got degrees in Western universities, and now they are teaching all over the world. But Hinduism, Sikhism or Jainism are being taught by Americans who themselves do believe in thought systems! This is even considered desirable in the name of 'objectivity,' while the same rule does not apply to Christianity which is taught by Christians and even preachers.

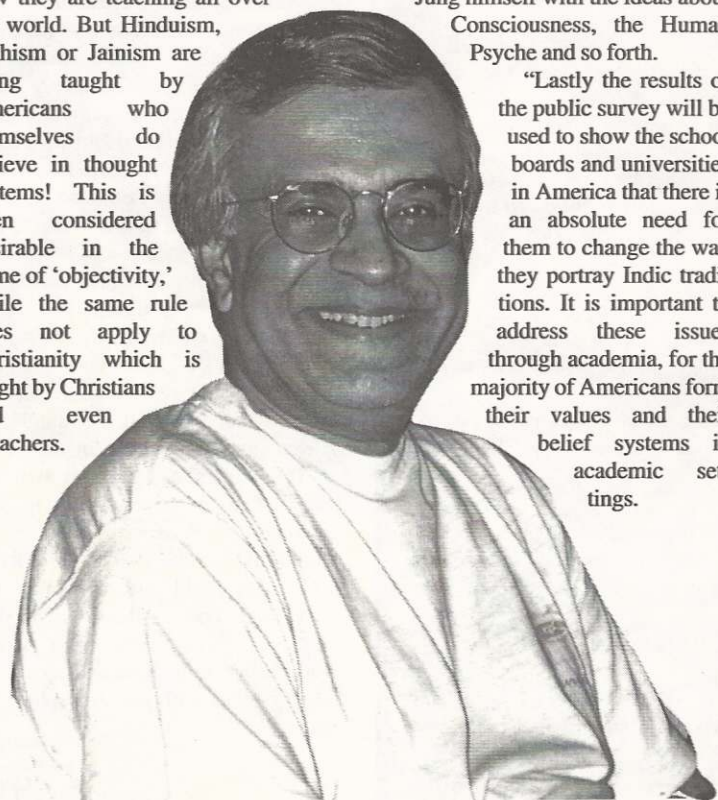
Educational Council on Indic Traditions

"To address these problems, the Educational Council on Indic Traditions was created. One of its first aims is to fund a survey by some nationally recognized polling firm such as Gallup to determine prevalent American attitudes, opinions and beliefs about Indic traditions. They will for example poll schoolteachers, college students, and very committed churchgoers. What do these different demographic segments of America think about Indian traditions? Such a survey has never been done before and its importance is immense. Based on the information gathered in this survey, the Council will identify the most common stereotypes about Indic traditions and, having identified them, challenge them.

"There are various ways to do that. One is to fund the creation of a library of materials on India and Indic thought. The slide-show "The Genius of India", produced by Auroville Press, is an excellent example of the kind of materials needed. Other such slide-shows or films are needed in order to challenge certain in-built assumptions, such as the belief that poverty in India is a result of the Hindu religion.

"I would also like to see a whole series of works on 'The History of Ideas'. This would show that many of the discoveries that have come out of India (such as language, mathematics and logic) have not been correctly attributed. This process of non-attribution continues today, often quite accidentally. For instance Carl Jung scrupulously documented his Indic sources, but his students tend to credit Jung himself with the ideas about Consciousness, the Human Psyche and so forth.

"Lastly the results of the public survey will be used to show the school boards and universities in America that there is an absolute need for them to change the way they portray Indic traditions. It is important to address these issues through academia, for the majority of Americans form their values and their belief systems in academic settings.



Durga, riding on her lion against the buffalo demon. Mahishasura cave temple

Lack of scholars in India

"There is a severe lack of good scholars, with proper academic credentials, to teach Indic thought. I found that even Indian universities do not specialize in Indian philosophy but concentrate instead on Western philosophy! So even when I succeed in convincing American universities to endow a chair in a particular branch of Indian thought, there are no suitable candidates available to fill that post. That is a distressing state of affairs, and it needs to be addressed. The Council will also have to put energy into the Indian academic institutions. It is necessary for India to produce scholars of international standing who can teach Indic thought in all its aspects. For example, Sri Aurobindo represents Indian philosophical thought as it has developed over thousands of years in its most modern form and concept. Yet I cannot find a single university in India that can provide me with the names of scholars holding doctorate degrees in Sri Aurobindo studies. If we could create a Chair of Sri Aurobindo studies in the Philosophy or Psychology Departments of the main Indian universities, those who get a degree there would be able to fill academic positions elsewhere, e.g. in the USA, and Indic thought will gain

recognition. The Council intends to fund such chairs, as well as the research and dissemination of Indic thought, so that a body of scholars in different Indic traditions with strong academic credentials will be created.

"Another way to fight stereotypes is to bring academic people from America to India and let them see for themselves. I have two high school teachers with me on this trip. And this is an area in which Auroville could play a most important role. Auroville is unique: you have people here who are steeped in Indian thought and of great sincerity and commitment and who can bridge the cultural gap. We need to make maximum use of the resources you have built. We could also collaborate on the production of educational materials. More generally, I think Auroville needs to have a global outreach programme. I don't know if you are ready yet: maybe it's too early. You are unknown to most of the world. But Auroville should be part of the whole academic movement in USA variously called 'consciousness studies', 'human potential', 'future of humanity'. You should attend important conferences and have a presence there - as Auroville. You should present your story."

Interview by Carel, David and Bindu



Mamallapuram PHOTO OLIVIER BAROT

Seeking new forms: dancing Durga

Durga is worshipped in India, especially in Bengal in the east, as the Goddess embodying Shakti or Power. As with many other Indian gods, Sri Aurobindo recognizes Durga as a living godhead of the Overmind. In a soul-stirring hymn, written originally in Bengali, Sri Aurobindo invokes the Goddess to manifest Herself and lift India from her "selfishness and fearfulness and littleness", to "extend wide the power of Yoga" and "to help mankind". Taking this hymn as inspiration, Joy and Aurelio enacted a composite movement of dance, music and recitation

Mother Durga! May the noble heroic mighty Indian race, supreme in love and unity, truth and strength, arts and letters, force and knowledge, ever dwell in its holy woodlands, its fertile fields, under its sky-scraping hills, along the banks of its pure-streaming rivers.

It was a throwback to the Auroville of yesteryears. An open field caressed by the subdued gold of the evening sun. A stage of freshly turned earth, demarcated by the sprinkling of white kolam powder and decorated with red flowers symbolic of the Shakti. The sway of the trees, the squawking of the birds, and in the distance the clear notes of a cuckoo reverberating in the still air. The participants sat on the ground on simple grass mats. For once, Aurovilians had left their noisy motorcycles far away and had walked or cycled their way to the performance. Stray cows and villagers on their way home, occasionally stopped to watch...

Mother Durga! Thou are Kali, naked, garlanded with human heads, sword in hand, thou slayest the Asura. Goddess, do thou slay with thy pitiless cry the enemies who dwell within us, may none remain alive there, not one. May we become pure and spotless, this is our prayer, O Mother, make thyself manifest.

Joy entered the stage dressed in a simple white tunic, red pants, and a red sash tied at the waist, knelt to pay her homage to the stage, the Mother earth, and then began the warrior dance of the Goddess. The movements started slowly in prayer and invocation, as is customary in Indian dance. Then they picked up speed, more evocative of the thundering force of the Divine warrior, her feet beating a crescendo on the rude earth. Always Joy maintained an inner composure. Her movements

were never exaggerated, but simple and controlled, gracefully illustrating the words of the hymn. Aurelio beat out the accompaniment on native percussion instruments. Now and then, the music would mark a change, and Joy's movements would still into a pose reminiscent of the Goddess. And she would declaim a stanza of Sri Aurobindo's Hymn to Durga.

The recitation in English did not always work. Even though Sri Aurobindo himself translated the hymn into English, keeping as close to the inspiration of the original as is evidenced by the italicised excerpts here, the feel of the English language, the bend or snap of its unwieldy consonants does not lend itself easily to the flow of Indian dance movements. They occasionally jarred in the otherwise mellifluous mix of music and dance.

Still, Joy's performance was a commendable effort in the search of new forms to express old truths. Sri Aurobindo recommends such efforts as the base of an Indian renaissance when he says, "The shaping for itself of a new body, of new philosophical, artistic, literary, cultural, political, social forms by the same soul rejuvenescent will, I should think, be the type of the Indian renaissance...." In these terms, Joy's self-choreographed dance was a quiet success.

Mother Durga! When we possess thee, we shall no longer cast thee away; we shall bind thee to us with the tie of love and devotion. Come, Mother, manifest thyself in our mind and life and body...May our entire life become a ceaseless worship of the Mother, all our acts a continuous service to the Mother, full of love, full of energy. This is our prayer, O Mother, descend upon earth, make thyself manifest in this land of India.

Bindu

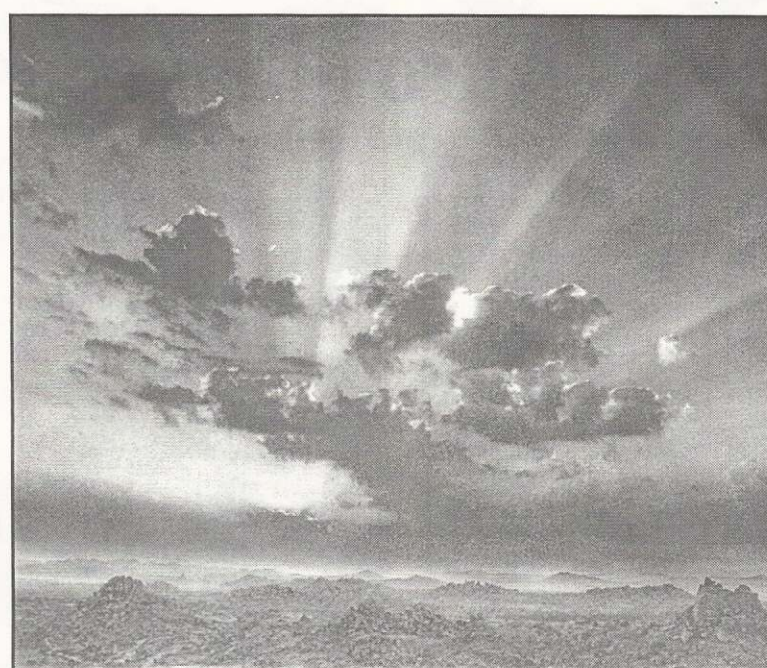


PHOTO OLIVIER BAROT

It is when a greater light prevails and becomes general then we shall be able to speak...of the renaissance of India.

Sri Aurobindo

Hinduism and the mission of India

An excerpt from an essay by Sri Aurobindo believed to have been written in 1912

"That which is permanent in the Hindu religion, must form the basis on which the world will increasingly take its stand in dealing with spiritual experience and religious truth. Hinduism, in my sense of the word, is not modern Brahminism. Modern Brahminism developed into existence at a definite period in history. It is now developing out of existence; its mission is done, its capacities exhausted, the Truth which, like other religions, it defended, honoured, preserved, cherished, misused and disfigured, is about to take new forms and dispense with all other screens or defender than its own immortal beauty, grandeur, truth and effectiveness. It is this unchanging undying Truth which has to be discovered and placed in its native light before Humanity.

"There are many defenders and discoverers of truth now active among us. They are all busy defending, modifying, attacking, sapping or bolstering current Hinduism. I am not eager to disparage but neither do I find myself satisfied with any of them....

"If these things do not satisfy me, then what do I seek? I seek a light that shall be new, yet old, the oldest indeed of all lights. I seek an authority that accepting, illuminating and reconciling all human truth, shall yet reject and get rid of by explaining it all mere human error. I seek a text and a Shastra that is not subject to interpolation, modification and replacement, that moth and white ant cannot destroy, that the earth cannot bury nor Time mutilate. I seek an asceticism that shall give me purity and deliverance from self and from ignorance without stultifying God and His universe. I seek a scepticism that shall question everything but shall have the patience to deny nothing that may possibly be true. I seek a rationalism not proceeding on the untenable supposition that all the centuries of man's history except the nineteenth were centuries of folly and superstition, but bent on discovering truth instead of limiting inquiry by a new dogmatism, obscurantism and furious intolerance which it chooses to call common sense and enlightenment; I seek a materialism that shall recognise matter and use it without being its slave. I seek an occultism that shall bring out all its processes and proofs into the light of day, without mystery, without jugglery, without the old stupid call to humanity: 'Be blind, O man, and see!' In short, I seek not science, not religion, not Theosophy, but Veda – the truth about Brahman, not only about His essentiality, but about His manifestation, not a lamp on the way to the forest, but a light and a guide to joy and action in the world, the truth which is beyond opinion, the knowledge which all thought strives after – yashmin vijñate sarvam vijñatam. I believe that Veda to be the foundation of the Sanatan Dharma; I believe it to be the concealed divinity within Hinduism, – but a veil has to be drawn aside, a curtain has to be lifted. I believe it to be knowable and discoverable. I believe the future of India and the world to depend on its discovery and on its application, not to the renunciation of life, but to life in the world and among men.

(Excerpted from *Essays Divine and Human: Writings from Manuscripts 1910-1950. Vol 12, The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo. Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, pp. 59-63.*)

Bindu

Reflections on Hinduism

To write about Hinduism is not easy. As the Encyclopaedia Britannica says, "Hinduism is both a civilization and a congregation of religions; it has neither a beginning or founder, nor a central authority, hierarchy or organization. Every attempt at a specific definition of Hinduism has proved unsatisfactory in one way or another..."

Strictly speaking, Hinduism is not an "ism," not just a religion or fixed doctrine at all. At its broadest interpretation, the term Hinduism denotes both the extant Indic civilization which started in banks of river Indus 3,000 years ago and the Vedic beliefs that have been passed down to the Indian people through the centuries. In its connotation of a civilization, Hinduism shows certain distinct social and cultural traits. In its connotation of spiritual beliefs or traditions, Hinduism encompasses a bewildering array of opposing doctrines, cults, rites and rituals.

In principle Hinduism rejects dogmatism, seeking instead to incorporate and synthesize all forms of belief and worship. This principle arises from the fact that Hinduism believes that while the Godhead can be experienced in many different ways, it cannot be rigidly defined in verbal terms. Consequently Hindus distinguish

themselves from other religions (or even from other cults within Hinduism) on the basis of ritualistic practices rather than on the basis of doctrinal beliefs.

On account of this disinclination to be shackled to narrow strictures, Hinduism has allowed for a constant evolution of the Truth, for God's plan to be progressively worked out on earth. The eternal truth which Sri Aurobindo denotes as the "Sanatan Dharma" of Hinduism has been expressed in different ways by different prophets according to the need of the moment.

Unfortunately, starting with the colonial policy of the British to "divide and rule", in modern days, for economic and political gains, Hinduism has come to be regarded as a distinct religion with specific characteristics. This has significantly narrowed the broad and tolerant outlook of the Hinduism that is espoused in the Vedas. Adding fuel to the fire of

Hindu fundamentalism is the sad fact that Indians tend to view themselves as victims of a wounded civilization. They tend to glorify their Vedic heritage and believe that the purity of their ancient values has been sullied by successive invasions of their civilization, first by the Muslims and later by the Europeans. This view of the past is so prevalent in the mindset of Hindus today that even a great writer like V. S. Naipaul believes that "Hindu militancy is a corrective to the history".

At the opposite end, to counter the view of a glorified Hindu past, are socialist thinkers like Abraham Eraly who denounce the classical values of Hinduism and caution, "however glorious our heritage, we cannot live on it today".

The truth perhaps is to be sought in the middle way. The past, the cultural artifacts – paintings, sculptures, drawings – that have been left by our ancestors are living proof that the

eternal spirit could once be freely expressed in this country. Hindus should indeed draw their inspiration from the past. But having done so, instead of dogmatically insisting on the observance of Hindu traditions, they need to find new ways of expressing the truth of the values they believe in. Sri Aurobindo asserts "our ideal is not the spirituality that withdraws from life but the conquest of life by the power of spirit. It is to accept the world as an effort of manifestation of the Divine, but also to transform humanity by a greater effort of manifestation than has yet been accomplished." The present chaos of modern-day India with its admixture of values shows little, if anything at all, of such accomplishment. Hinduism can take the lead in helping India to rise to new heights but to do so, it must dedicate itself to the manifestation of spiritual ideals in society.

Why Auroville needs India

What Indian values need to be given expression in Auroville?

Time and again I ponder over the words the Mother spoke to Satprem on February 3rd, 1968: "India is the representation of all human difficulties on earth, and it is in India that the ... cure will be found. And then, that is why - THAT IS WHY I was made to start Auroville." [Mother's Agenda, 1968] Cryptic words. Words that inextricably link India and Auroville together. As though the one would not be able to fulfill its true spiritual role without the other. As though Auroville were created to help India rise to her destiny. And Auroville in turn, by virtue of being in India, draws its sustenance from the living body of India's wisdom.

Spirituality

Spirituality is the cornerstone on which both India and Auroville are founded. Spirituality is the alpha and omega of the hopes that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have for both India and Auroville.

"India," the Mother declared, "is the guru of the world....She incarnates the spiritual knowledge in the world." India is the only country where the Truth has not been extinguished; where there has been an unbroken tradition of the ever-evolving Divinity that seeks to save the world. And yet, both Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have repeatedly warned that without proper development, India's soul-force could be severely diminished. For instance, in 1965, in a letter to a disciple, the Mother wrote, "India ought to be the spiritual guide who explains what is happening and helps to hasten the movement. But unfortunately, in her blind ambition to imitate the West, she has become materialistic and neglectful of her soul."

In 1968, the Mother founded Auroville, "the City the Earth needs." The phrase "the City the Earth needs" has become a catchy by-word or slogan for Auroville. And unfortunately in our brochures, videos and presenta-



tions on Auroville we have come to narrow the meaning of this phrase. "Earth" is seen only as material earth or nature. And a philosophy of environmental sustainability has emerged in Auroville and is justified as being that which the Earth needs. In reality, in the broadest meaning of the Mother's words, what the Earth needs is a city that, in all its aspects, activities, and ways of being is turned com-

pletely towards the Divine. A city that by the sincerity of its aspiration will help in the manifestation of the Truth. Undoubtedly such a city could only be founded and could only survive in India, where, as has been said before, there has always been a recognition of the emerging Divinity. It could also be argued that the Mother hoped that Auroville, "the city at the service of Truth," would prove to be a beacon or

guiding light that would allow for a resurgence of spiritual values in India.

The Challenge of India

Indeed, in the early years, Aurovilians boldly took up the challenges that faced rural India - poverty and environmental degradation - and showed, by example, how through hard work and determination a land could be regenerated and its people rehabilitated. As it develops the facilities of a city however, Auroville has not successfully addressed the challenges of urban India. Auroville's low-density urban development has few solutions, if any, to offer modern India. And sometimes I wonder if the problems in land acquisition and the threats we face from real-estate speculators arise from the fact that, by and large, Aurovilians hesitate to take up the challenge of urban development.

An even more dangerous drawback is that Auroville has not yet inculcated in its development any Indian values. For I believe that the new life the Mother foresaw for India and for Auroville roots itself in the eternal values of India. Although Indians are the single largest race in Auroville, comprising almost one-third of its population, the socio-cultural values - individuality, independence, initiative, work-ethic, vital creativity etc. - that have shaped life in Auroville are largely western. Visitors and Indian Aurovilians have often remarked that Auroville is too westernized. It has been argued by some that the reason for this unbalanced development is because, in Auroville, economic and decision-making power lies largely in the hands of Westerners and not Indians. But I feel the imbalance is more due to the fact that Indians have not yet been able to articulate and manifest the values that they believe in, the values they have imbibed through the greatness of an enduring civilization. The Mother herself observed: "The West expresses more than it really knows. India knows more than it can really express."

ed by the mind. But as the Mother says, "Truth cannot be expressed in the mind's terms... Truth cannot be formulated, it cannot be defined, but it can be LIVED. Truth is a living, changing thing which expresses itself every second." Auroville would do well to cultivate faith in India's national motto, "Satyameva Jayate" (Truth always triumphs).

Another western tendency is to be suspicious of authority and dismissive of authoritative figures. In contrast, India with its social stratification into castes, with its hierarchical order of a joint family system, with its belief in the power of "gurus" and its respect for elders and teachers, shows an obedience to authority that borders on servility. A healthy balance would be to seek the middle way between these two extremes. Auroville, I feel, is hindered in its progress because Aurovilians do not easily accept leaders to chart out the community's development. There is lack of trust among us, and consequently we fall into the error of trying to deal with our problems democratically. The Mother's vision of a natural hierarchical order is yet to be manifested in the community.

Plurality is a characteristic that marks both India and Auroville. Like Auroville, India embraces quite a mix of ethnic groups and cultures, a profusion of languages, lifestyles and ranges of economic levels. Examining this plurality, Shashi Tharoor writes, "Any truism about India is immediately contradicted by another truism about India." In the same way, it has often been observed that there are as many views of Auroville as there are Aurovilians. The value that Auroville needs to learn here is tolerance and a respect for this diversity. Too often, we sink to unacceptable levels of intolerance by denouncing someone's way of life, someone's spiritual practices etc. As in Indian classical music, where the musician feels free to improvise within set rules, so also Aurovilians must be left free to develop according to the Truth as they perceive it in their evolution towards manifesting Auroville's ideals.

Lastly, like India to the outside world, Auroville despite its rich diversity is perceived as a single entity. And as we respect the diversity amongst us, we should equally celebrate our oneness and the common goal that unites us. Auroville, like its mother country India, is greater than the sum of its comprising parts.

To conclude, Sri Aurobindo says, "the method of the West is to exaggerate life and to call down as much - or as little - as may be of the higher powers to stimulate and embellish life. But the method of India is, on the contrary, to discover the spirit within and the higher hidden intensities of the superior powers and to dominate life in one way or another so as to make it responsible to and expressive of the spirit and in that way to increase the power of life." Auroville has so far developed by "the method of the West"; but now in the dawn of a new millennium, it is of utmost necessity, for the

Finding India within Auroville

The role of Indian culture in formulating Auroville's identity

One of the most challenging aspects of the Auroville experiment is the ongoing creation of a unique social identity for the collectivity. In as much as the community struggles to become the city of the future, it also struggles to formulate some new, more universal concept of culture, no longer based on the limitations of race, nationality, creed, etc. The difficulties of this task go far beyond the mere selection and artful combination of what is best from the palette of human experience. It is a journey that requires each individual to become more aware of the social space she or he has occupied until now and to confront her or his deepest fears, prejudices, and biases. And such unexamined emotions do exist in all of us, no matter how loudly we may proclaim our spirituality.

Given that Auroville's great cultural challenge is taking place on Indian soil, it seems reasonable to ask just what it is of India that we allow to infuse into our lives here. Auroville is a place where India and Indian culture are both so central and yet somehow so marginalized, so present and yet sometimes made so invisible. In Auroville one can eat some version of sambar in the community kitchen and hang swami padams on the walls of one's home, and yet never speak an Indian language or interact with Indians in the

course of anything other than the most limited transactions.

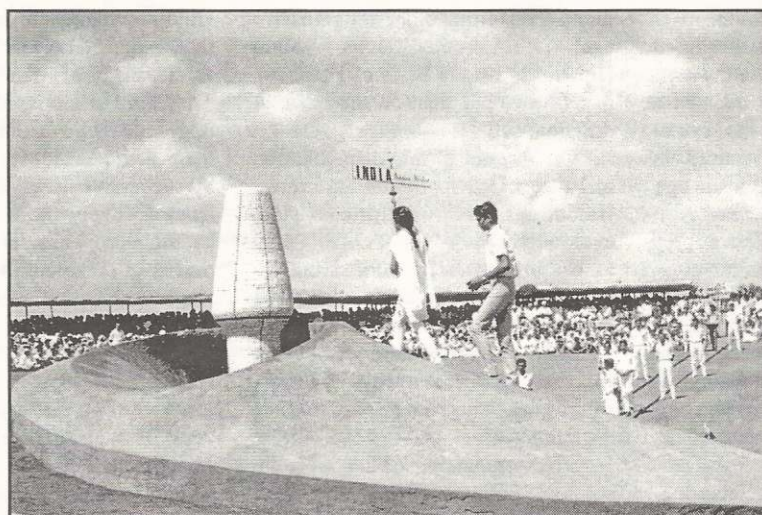
An academic might make the argument for Auroville as the product of the international circulation of Indian philosophies and their subsequent return to India in new forms. A spiritual aspirant can think of Auroville as an endeavour to access the Indian spirit as Sri Aurobindo saw it, as something with its roots in native soil and yet ultimately universal and all-encompassing. Consequently, Auroville challenges easy, narrow definitions of what is "Indianness". Either way, it seems curious when many Aurovilians regard daily life and official communal processes as "Western".

Sri Aurobindo was entirely clear that the universality at the base of Indian culture is embodied in the Indian languages, its art forms and philosophies. It seems inevitable that over time these traditions will play an increasing role in the daily life of Auroville as more Aurovilians are born on Indian soil and more Aurovilians coming from other countries are willing to critically examine their own perceptions and knowledge about Indian culture. And these traditions will manifest themselves with greater and more productive diversity as more and more Indian people come to participate fully in the life of Auroville.

On the day when all this has come to pass, perhaps one will be able to ask what Auroville is contributing to India's cultural identity. One need not restrict oneself to thinking about Auroville as merely a model for development or environmentally friendly living. Equally important to consider is how the community's values, symbolic expressions and the meanings it attributes to daily activities will speak to the rest of India. At the beginning of this millennium I wonder about the role of Indian culture, in all its variety and complexity, in the ongoing formulation of an Aurovillian identity. Who knows, but perhaps later on one will be able to ponder what Auroville means to India. After all, Auroville belongs to no one in particular, and yet it is not for nothing that its roots are in India.

Auroville inauguration Ceremony, 28th February 1968.

Earth from Kerala (top photo) and Madhya Pradesh is put in the urn



and the perseverance to wait for the truth to emerge and instead seeks to impose solutions from the mind. The ideals of Auroville, which are eternal spiritual ideals, are too often interpreted

world, that Auroville grows by "the method of India", by the identification with the spirit within and the imposition of its rule on matter.

Bindu

Promoting the arts

When it comes to art Auroville, more than any other Indian city, has a truly international flavour to offer. Last year, for instance, an Austrian dance troupe visiting India chose to give performances at only three places – New Delhi, Chennai and Auroville! Shanti talks to Tapas Bhatt, an Indian woman, who coordinates “Kalamitra”, (meaning “Friends of Arts”), a unit which organizes performances of artistes visiting Auroville

What's the vision behind “Kalamitra”?

My long-term goal is to promote the development of art in all of its richness in Auroville. Under Kalamitra, top-notch artistes perform in Auroville about twice a year. Usually these artistes offer their work without desiring any form of compensation as they feel inspired by the concept of Auroville. Some top performers who have appeared on our stage include Pandit Birju Maharaj, Sonal Mansingh, Amjad Ali Khan, Pandit Jasraj, Astad Deboo and Chandralekha. Through such artistes, Auroville has come to be known in the cultural world of India.

In recent years, the international context of the community has also attracted younger Indian artistes. Contemporary musicians, experts of martial arts and dancers have interacted with Auroville artistes and produced collaborative works. As a result, Auroville artistes have mounted exhibitions and performances in Indian cities.

In Auroville, many Westerners perhaps have little knowledge about classical Indian arts. How does this affect your work?

Actually, artistes are aware that Aurovilians, most of whom come from a certain intellectual or cultural milieu, seriously appreciate their performance, more so than in other parts of India. Auroville is also known for its warmth and hospitality towards artistes and this also makes the experience of performing here special.

Traditional Indian performing arts, especially those where language is not used, are quite well received in Auroville. When artistes perform elsewhere in India, it is always in a traditional context and the art is appreciated at a certain level in its own cultural history. Here, you have another level. You have a largely Western population so the audience has a different mood. It is just a different way of appreciating the Indian arts. But it is also true that

some things must be organized differently here for that very reason. In this context, my experience in Paris where I worked for a decade at the Indian embassy handling their Indo-French Cultural Exchange programme has been extremely useful. I am used to presenting Indian arts to audiences that are not familiar with Indian culture!

Do you see hosting these performances as a way of educating the Auroville community about the Indian arts?

Yes and no. They are informative and educative to a certain extent only. Performances are ephemeral experiences and I don't know how much the audience takes away with them after a show. Exceptions are always there! I think that only when Bharat Nivas assumes its true role as the Indian Pavilion in the International Zone that this process of education could really begin.

What do you see as the importance of cultural programmes and education in Auroville?

My main interest with every visiting or local artiste is to promote research and innovation into arts. I try and persuade visiting artistes to give a workshop along with a performance so that Aurovilians can have a deeper understanding and learn something. Ultimately, I am interested in research into and the synthesis of yoga and art – to add to the arts that spiritual dimension Sri Aurobindo speaks about in the “The National Value of Art.” The sacred has a direct relation with beauty. Art is the synthesis of the spirit and matter. Step by step, I hope we can produce a new generation of Auroville artistes with new forms of expressions and techniques.

What are some of the major challenges to the further development of arts in Auroville?

There are so many! Presently, the community does not even have resi-



Tapas working in the green room of Bharat Nivas: an office is urgently required!

dent artistes in certain basic disciplines. If Auroville musicians want to stage a western concert over the weekend, they have to hunt for a drummer!

Some of the bigger challenges however are lack of adequate funds, equipment, and a proper cultural center with studios, offices, galleries, a library etc. to promote serious study into the arts. Of course, some of the facilities exist but in a scattered and unorganized form. Perhaps, we should not organize the artistic scene at all, as one of the Auroville artistes rightly said, that if we organize too much, we may stifle creativity.

Then, unless the question of financial and moral support to serious upcoming artistes of Auroville is solved, arts will also have to follow the road to commercialization, and the artistes will not be able to survive without selling their works. The priority of Auroville, at present, is not culture, it is not art, it is somewhere else. It is the same situation as in the outside world where art is the last priority and considered as a luxury or leisure-time activity.

What solutions do you envision?

One solution that I am working on is to receive professional quality artistes and experts through international artistes' exchanges. Through my experience abroad, I learnt about a network called “Res Artis” in which some 120 countries participate. The network's objectives include helping

young artistes of one country to interact with artistes from other countries, through short-term and long-term residency programmes, both learning from them and sharing their own expertise. Auroville became a participating member of “Res Artis” in 1996 under the programme, “Kala Khoj” (meaning “in search of arts”). This programme is still in its infancy here. Out of almost fifty artistes from various parts of the world who have shown interest in the “Kala Khoj” programme, about five artistes and five arts managers have visited Auroville. Such people help our artistes to connect with the art world outside. Otherwise we tend to work in isolation and believe we are the best. Also, through “Res Artis”, it is possible to send our artistes abroad for short-term research projects or training.

What keeps you going despite all the obstacles?

For a community of its size, I think that Auroville is extremely privileged and shows tremendous potential. At times during the year, there is so much going on – seminars, exhibitions, performances! The number of visiting artistes keeps increasing. I have no doubt that one day when the community is bigger we will have a very unique arts scene. There will be more research and exploration into new expressions perhaps to create a new identity yet to be discovered!

Super School starts

Last School teachers have taken the initiative to start the Super School program. It is based on the free progress system envisaged by Mother for Auroville education. It follows the natural evolution envisaged by Mother in her list: Last School, After School 1,2 and 3; Super School; No School.

“Super School is a school where the subjects are of the higher levels of human thought and action and are treated in a holistic manner. The program is pursued at a ‘super’ level and at a ‘super’ or accelerated speed. The aim is to ‘summarize’ the human past so quickly that one can have all the energies to pursue the development of the future. This requires a great deal of ‘schooling’, which can be seen as a process where a lot of care and attention is given to students. Super School prepares the being to enter into ‘No School’ which is the condition when the instrumental nature is fit to pursue, on its own, integral growth. The program will have a component that addresses all the four domains of the Integral personality.” Dr. Kireet Joshi, the Chairman of the Governing Board, has agreed to give introductory lectures in the history of Western and Indian Philosophy, Sankhya and Shankara's Philosophy and Materialism, as a preparation to the study of *The Life Divine*. Under the header General Knowledge two comprehensive introductory lectures will be given on a wide variety of topics such as economics, political science, law, ethics, sociology, etc.

Land Fund auction in Los Angeles

On the initiative of Anie Nunnally and Peter Lepore, an auction of Auroville products was held in Los Angeles on June 15th. Unit holders and artists of Auroville gave freely what they could, and many individuals carried the heavy parcels in their luggage to America. Apart from all the valuable goodwill, connections and friendships created, approximately \$5,000 was collected for land for Auroville. Anie and Peter have started to organize a similar event for 2001, and plan to reach out towards the Hollywood moghuls to attract their attention to our work here in Auroville.

Name ‘Auroville’ and its emblem protected

Since March 28, 2000, the name of Auroville is now also protected under the Emblems and Names (Prevention of Improper Use) Act 1950. Auroville's emblem has already enjoyed this protection since July 22, 1999.

Bad cashew season

The entire region is experiencing a very bad cashew harvest. The reasons are unclear. Some village farmers attribute the poor harvest to the untimely and heavy rains in February, others complain about particularly heavy pest infestation by the T-mosquito bug. Auro-Annam farm is giving advice on precautions and remedial measures, such as spraying a mixture of cow manure and cow urine fermented for 48 hours, mixed with reliable organic neem kernel preparation.

The beginning of unending education

When one becomes conscious of one's inner need for the Divine...

All those who have pursued Sri Aurobindo's writings seriously will understand that there is never a word wasted, nor a word superfluous. And Sri Aurobindo says, “All life is yoga”, not “even life can be yoga”. Any aspirant venturing on the sunlit path of integral yoga must ponder over this seriously. As also those who seek a life of constant progress towards tangible milestones.

Yoga is union with the Divine as well as the path that leads to such a union. But where then is this glorious path in the humdrum activities of daily life where at every corner someone rubs you the wrong way, at every other step circumstances seem to thwart one's plans, mundane and grandiose?

The moment you become an adventurer of consciousness things fall nicely into place. Every time there is a sense of being hurt, look for that chip

on your shoulder. Relate each failure and success to the premise that the Divine always tries to accelerate your progress towards the ultimate union. See how each strong desire nursed in your bosom robs you of ‘lifetime’ – because until it is fulfilled it occupies your mind and distracts your life energies, preventing you from making tangible gains. And desires are habit forming!

The universal ignorance wearing the garb of rationality poses the question: isn't a crow in the hand better than the bird of paradise in the bush? Does striding on this path of yoga sans the baggage of desires and pleasures lead to tangible gains, here and now?

Answering this question is like making a couch potato understand what a regimen of physical exercises can give over a period of time. Just like the first million, the first mile on the

path of yoga is the hardest to cover. The going gets easy when one experiences that the ‘inner delight’ is not an abstract mental state but something that courses through the very body as waves of Ananda. As the divine presence becomes your constant companion, emotional security exceeds 100% – with a lifetime guarantee. And when one has this all-consuming need to know the Divine, there are responses which shatter all doubts to smithereens.

Paramahansa Yogananda's ‘kites’ episode related in his Autobiography of a Yogi is something which I understood from within after one such experience.

In 1996, while on a yatra from Calcutta to Gangotri, our pilgrim bus was caught in a mile-long traffic jam in Bihar. We were told that it would take at least two days to clear up, owing to a

major accident. I prayed for Mother's intervention. In ten minutes a ten-hour long jam started clearing up.

One year later, the tourist bus I was on was caught in a similar fix en route to Almorah. I just could not pass up the chance of confirmation (having been informed that villagers had created a human road block to press their demands and would leave only after sunset). This time the prayer worked within three minutes. As though the Mother already knew the working of my mind and wanted to leave me in no doubt about Her presence!

Unending education begins the moment one becomes conscious of one's inner need for the Divine – and shifts one's attention away from the clamour of the ego to listen to the Voice within.

Sankaran



Concrete jungle

The large nursery and other environmental projects (see AVT #134) at Aurobrindavan are familiar to many. Less well known is the tropical garden that lies hidden behind the main building. David talked to Bernard and Deepika, the architects of the garden, and discovered how fruit trees can grow on beds of stone and concrete

At first sight, it appears to be a perfectly ordinary garden. There are tall papaya trees, flourishing plant-beds edged with bricks, a few tubs, and a concrete path. Only upon closer inspection is its true nature revealed. The "path" turns out to be merely the visible part of a much larger expanse of concrete that underlies everything. There are no plant-beds. There is virtually no soil or earth: in this garden all the plants and trees grow directly on the concrete. A twenty-foot papaya tree, solid as a rock when I push against it, is growing on a shallow mound of stones, its roots covered with small vines, leaves and composting fruit skins. A whole section of plant life can be lifted up like a mat off the cement, its underside showing a bare minimum of earth clinging to the tangle of roots. How can concrete sustain a lush garden?

The secret lies in the nature of topsoil under tropical conditions. Bernard and Deepika, the creators of the garden, explain: "In temperate zones,

plants and trees derive a great deal of their nutrition from the soil: they have large root systems, penetrating deep into the earth. In the tropics, however, fertility is always in circulation and not in the soil. The Amazon rainforest grows in the poorest soil in the world. The advantage is that you can grow a great variety of trees, vegetables and some flowers with very little soil."

Since exposing the topsoil leads immediately to its dissipation, the first rule is for the plant roots and soil to remain covered. Bernard and Deepika use leaves as mulch. "If the cover is sufficient, the soil will gradually accumulate by itself." They point to a small pile of stones from which a cashew plant is growing. "There is some earth now among the stones, but we have not put any there." The second rule is to have plants of different heights next to one another, so on the ground are creepers and vines which provide useful root cover for the next layer of large ferns. Above them loom shrubs. And finally the trees. Among the tan-

gle can be seen spinach, Radha's Consciousness, guava...

Just how little goodness comes from the soil is demonstrated by the papaya tree, which has several nearly ripe fruit hanging from it. "The edible part of the fruit is carbohydrate - carbon, oxygen and hydrogen. These are created by air, sunlight and water. All that comes from the soil is various metals such as zinc, which are stored in the seeds and the skin. The skin should be put back onto the roots of the papaya tree so that these elements are once again available to it."

Learning from experimentation:

The garden is now thriving so well that seeds can simply be thrown into the undergrowth. However, it has taken a great deal of hard work and experimentation to reach this stage. To create the initial topsoil, they painstakingly built-up layers of composted leaves. We have now found out that it is best to soak the leaves overnight in water. Then we put them out on a compost sheet. You need twelve layers in all. It must be kept moist. Also some wood-ash should be added." They also use earthworms as part of the composting process.

The ground-cover plants were started off in pots until they were strong enough to be transplanted. It took three years before a balance of



A twenty-foot papaya tree is growing on a shallow mound of stones

different species was flourishing. "It is also necessary to water the garden every day. Not much is needed, since there is no earth to absorb all the moisture." Another feature of the garden is the lack of seasonal change. "In the tropics, it is all movement. You don't have seasons in the normal sense. At any time during the year a plant always has young leaves, mature leaves and old leaves."

Despite their impossibly frail grasp on the earth, these plants demon-

strate impressive strength. A section of a four-foot diameter water-tank ring, now used as a very big flowerpot, was lifted clear off the ground by the spreading roots of a papaya tree planted inside it. The vines at one point last year ate their way through the walls and into the office building.

When one visits or sees pictures of a teeming

tropical rainforest, it is hard to conceive the underlying fragility of the whole system. But as Bernard points out, "It is for this reason that clearing rainforests for agriculture doesn't work. Once the topmost soil is gone, say after three years, there is no fertility left in the soil to sustain agriculture." More hopefully, their concrete jungle demonstrates how much can be done with very little.

David



Riding high

David, one of our guest editors, braves a journey atop a bus and tells a tale of dodging...

To visit the ruined city at Hampi, you must first travel to the nearby town of Hospet. From there, you take a bus ride of some half-hour along pretty roads lined with flame trees. Interesting ruins dot the landscape as you get closer to Hampi. The road passes under a ceremonial archway. The land is green and lush. It is a pleasant journey.

After ten days in Hampi, Schmidt and Carol and I were preparing to make the return bus ride to Hospet. It happened that we arrived at Hampi's bus station just before the next scheduled departure. The vehicle was very full. Squeezing in our three selves and two small backpacks seemed really out of the question.

Schmidt said, "Let's go on top."

I looked at the roof. Already a dozen other brave souls had chosen speed over comfort. Why not us? Actually, I could think of many reasons, but they all seemed unadventurous. Schmidt has travelled in Asia for years and he's still here. If he says it's do-able, then it is. And I have wanted to ride on top of a train ever since seeing "Gandhi"; surely this is the next best thing? And it's only half an hour.

"Fine with me," I said. So up the rear ladder we went, picked a space

amongst our fellow travellers, and settled ourselves against the luggage-rail which ran around the roof at a height of about six inches. I looked over the side. The ground was much further away than I had expected. What happens when we go over



a bump, I wondered. Or around a corner? Or...

"Actually, we're safer this way," Schmidt observed encouragingly. "If the guy rolls the bus over, we'll just fall off. It's the people inside who have the problem." I smiled bravely, and tried to wedge myself even more firmly against the rail.

The engine started, and was revved furiously for several seconds. The air-horn sounded. It sounded again. A heady aroma of speed and impatience - an intimation that the driver considered the whole journey an inconvenience to be cut as short as possible - wafted with the exhaust fumes up to the roof.

We set off. It became clear at once that the driver was indeed not going to

make any absurd concessions to passengers who had chosen to ride on top. Speed was king. Okay, so holding on tightly seems like a Good Thing. This is all right. I can handle this. This is Fun! Wow! I'm



riding on top of the bus! My friends should see me now! But hang on. What about this tree coming up? Are we going to...

"Down!" shouted Schmidt. All us Economy-Class passengers ducked down, and the branches of the tree swept over our backs. A scratchy massage from Mother Nature.

"You need to watch out for trees," Schmidt shouted over the roar of the engine. "You can easily lose an eye. Keep looking ahead and be ready to duck."

"What about telephone lines and power-cables?" asked Carol.

"Those too," he replied. "But they just take your head off."

If meditation is the art of noticing when we are distracted, that bus trip was good practice. Sitting on the corru-

gated iron roof whilst the luggage-rail dug into the small of my back helped me stay in the body: and looking out for the next tree is a good way to remain in the present moment. The only abstract thought that I noticed during the whole journey was a resolution never to complain about aeroplane seats again.

After a long twenty minutes, we passed under the arch that I had so admired coming the other way ten days before. But my new relationship to the roof of the bus granted a different perspective. Why, I wondered in a sort of despair as I squeezed my face into the metal, do people build these confounded things? Don't they realise what a nuisance they are to honest travellers?

This thought occurred again as we started along the pretty road lined with flame trees. Planted at ten-yard intervals on either side, their branches met in an unbroken canopy over the road. A very lovely sight - when you have a windscreen and a good, stout roof between you and the reality. Remove those, and I experienced a passionate desire to round up all members of the responsible authority and make them sit up here dodging every damned branch.

As Flame Tree Avenue came to an end, the road ahead straightened out for a mile or so. Impossibly, our speed picked up.

A small commotion amongst our fellow travellers was followed by the appearance up the left-hand ladder of the conductor, a phlegmatic individual who sat himself in the absolute centre of the roof and began issuing tickets. His composure was admirable: he displayed no acknowledgement or even awareness of the hazards that were so

demanding of my attention. It soon became apparent that by sitting in that exact spot he avoided the trees, whose branches whipped by an inch either side of his face. And he obviously knew the road so well that he could lean minimally into each corner at the precise necessary instant without thinking about it. But still it was an impressive sight.

I was slightly surprised that we should be asked to pay the full fare. It seemed to me that when it came to comfort and convenience, the customers inside the bus had a less demanding ride. All they had to do was sit there, and at some point they would arrive: while we on the top had to exercise all our energy and flexibility simply to stay on. What did Schmidt think?

"You're on the bus, so you pay the fare," he said reasonably.

Finally, we arrived in Hospet. What had previously seemed like a pleasant but unexciting small town was transformed into a video game of overhead cables, trees and lampposts (who put them here?). I had the sensation of being subject to the whims of a bored Creator, diverting himself by seeing how many hazards can be added to a situation before it ceases to work. On the roof of the bus? Yes. A sharp corner? Fine. Plus a big bump in the road? Yup. At seventy kmph? B-o-r-i-n-g. Add in some phone lines? No sweat. While trying to get five rupees out of an inside pocket to pay the conductor? Sure. And a tree? Easy.

At the bus station, I uncoiled myself slowly from my corrugated seat. My arms and legs were stiff. I climbed gingerly down the ladder, and stood on the firm earth. I smiled with real delight at Carol and Schmidt.

"That was fun," I said.

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