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From the early days of Auroville, individual Aurovilians and groups have involved themselves in the hard and often frustrating work of village development. The approach, especially that of the Village Action Group, has gradually changed from being essentially charity-based to being based upon participation and co-development. Auroville's involvement has shown results: the villages have made gigantic strides in the spheres of economic development, infrastructure, health, education, welfare of women and organization of youth. Though the results are encouraging, Auroville's work has only been "a drop in the bucket". For a more co-ordinated approach, quantified data is required. And such data for the first time, for the eleven villages in the immediate proximity of Auroville, has recently become available in the "Village Data Survey: A Report". This report was prepared, with support and funding by Stichting de Zaaier, by the Village Action Group—Desk Top Publication (VAG-DTP). The actual survey was conducted by the development workers of the VAG, but it took a whole year to collate that veritable mountain of raw data to create this first database. Auroville Today spoke to Stella Thomas, Martha Mendez and Harini of VAG-DTP about this ground-breaking and highly laudable work.

"You want to know how many people cook on firewood in Ambedkarnagar? You are interested in how many people in Irumbai live under tiled roofs? The illiteracy rate of children in Bommaiarpalayam? Do villagers in Rayapettai get their water from the street tap or directly from the well? The occupation of women in Alankuppam? Details of a family's assets? Specifics of the livestock found in the villages?...they are all here," says Stella, pointing to stacks of extremely large sheets on which the names, occupations, income, assets, etc. of each family in each of the 11 villages have been



Village women collecting water in the morning

PHOTO: SVEN ULSA

painstakingly recorded. That wealth of information, nicely compiled in a statistical database, is now available to Auroville, to the local authorities and the villagers themselves, so that they can see for themselves their status and possibilities. The present report supplies data on Alankuppam, Annainagar, Sanjeevinagar, Ambedkarnagar, Edaiyanchavadi, Irumbai, Irumbai Colony, Kottakarai, Rayapettai, Bommaiarpalayam and Kulapalayam.

"Higher caste status," the report explains, "is associated with land ownership or superior rights on the soil, a higher living standard and a ban on manual labour. For example, the agriculture caste fits in the middle rank and field labourers occupy a lower status. These traditional roles based on caste are gradually breaking down over the years in a quest towards a more egalitarian society and specifically to abolish the ills brought about by the caste

tions imposed on them. In Auroville you'll see too that the dynamics of caste still influence the social patterns. And whenever people from Pondicherry come to work in Auroville, there is an immediate groupism against the outsiders."

Occupation

It is interesting that the influence of Auroville has come to undermine the status of the upper castes. Nowadays

Surveying the villages

The report notes that since the social organization of the villages is based largely on a caste hierarchy, caste has therefore been given the highest priority within which all the other parameters are analysed.

The Caste System

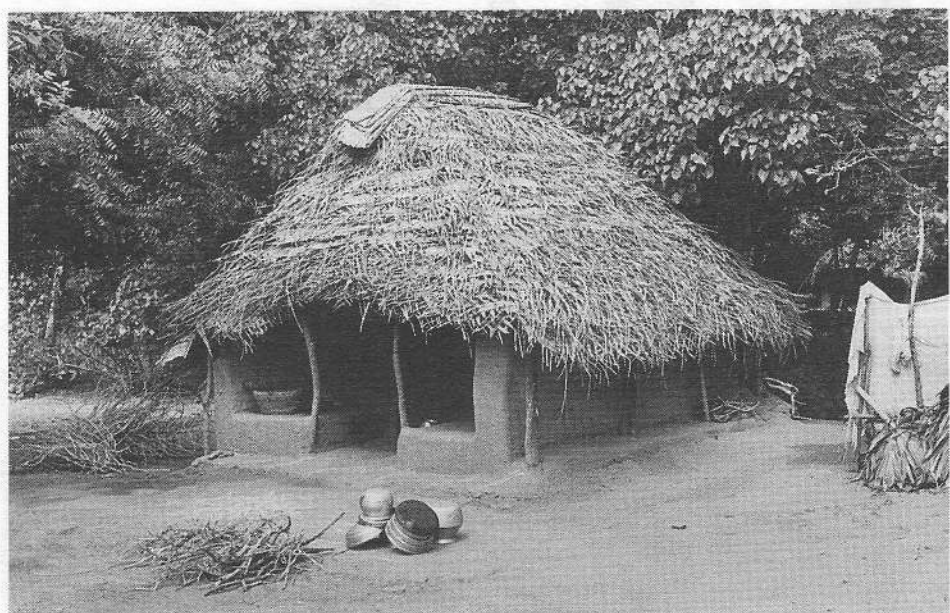
The report defines caste in general "as a collection of families or group of families bearing a common name which usually denotes and is associated with a specific occupation, descent, or as forming a single homogeneous community." The caste classification not only differs in different parts of India; it has even been found that the set of castes differ in each of the 11 villages surveyed.

system, for example untouchability." But the prevalence of caste is still very strong. The major group in the villages are farmers. In the report, 12 distinct castes are specified. They are Barbers, Brahmins, Carpenters, Chettiyars, Dhobis, Nadars, Naickers, Naidus, Pandits, Reddiyars, Vanniyars and Yadavars. Two other groups, based on religion, Christians and Muslims, fall outside of this caste distinction. Does caste play a role amongst village workers in Auroville? Martha answers, "We were amazed to see how strong casteism still is. It differs from village to village. But it appears that people have come to accept it—the lower castes do not complain about many of the restric-

people in the villages respect wealth, a person's command of English and their connection to Auroville. Harini points out that to the villages, "Auroville is like a city. It provides employment to 3000-5000 people every day," so Auroville is playing an important part in the growth of their economy. Auroville provides up to 90 % of the employment in these villages." Stella adds, "since farming in this area is a seasonal business, work in the service sector, (especially in Auroville as ammas, gardeners, watchmen) has increased. Also the small scale industries increasingly provide employment." The survey identifies 80 occupations. The majority of the male and the female working population fall under the land-

(continued on page 2)

Surveying the Villages (continued from page 1)



About 62% of the families in the 11 villages have thatched houses with two rooms.

based work. In the sector of semi-skilled work such as knitting, handicraft, leatherwork and tailoring, women (4% of the population) predominate over men (2.1% of the population). The unemployment rate of the adult population at the time of the survey was as high as 41.3%. The working age in the villages starts from 15 years, and the report classifies anyone below that age as children.

Income

Stella remarks, "what struck me most about the survey was to discover that 80% of the earning population amongst women falls below the poverty line—that is quite alarming. This income group is part of a casual labour pool which is mainly working as farm labour, not related to Auroville." The average monthly income of the villagers falls between Rs. 301-500, and incomes of men are considerably higher than that of women. The highest income bracket of Rs. 2001-9000 represents only 2% of the total earning population. Not more than 25% of the families of each village draw an income from the land.

PHOTO: SVEN ULSA



94.2 % of the households use firewood for fuel with 70% of the families spending up to 1 hour per week collecting firewood.

Assets

Despite such a depressed economy however, "it is interesting to note," says Harini, "that family members pool their resources to purchase or hire a television." [Joint family systems are still prevalent in the villages]. Assets of a household reflect on the earning capacity of its members. The two main categories of assets owned by the villagers are vehicles—largely cycles and mopeds—and domestic equipment—radios and television sets are most common followed by grinders, mixers and other kitchen equipment. Cattle is another asset of the villagers. Cows, goats and bullocks are the main livestock. The income generated from the livestock was difficult to determine accurately. On an average, it can be said that the monthly income from livestock falls within the income-bracket of Rs. 301-500.

Literacy

In spite of having worked in the villages for many years, Martha was shocked by the illiteracy rate. Says she: "I would never have guessed that the illiteracy rate is so high! About 50% of the villagers [about 40% among women and 21% among men] are illiterate, especially the women. Our report defines 'illiterates' as those who do not have any scholar year of education; but those with 1 to 5 years of education at school should actually also be included under 'illiterate' as such education does not necessarily mean that they have acquired the ability to read and write. Something in this field has to be done, but it is very hard to bring about changes in adult women. Learning takes place best between the ages of one to seven and up to fifteen years. Thereafter learning becomes far more difficult. We need to concentrate our education drive on children who form about 35% of the population. Of this, on an average, 19% are illiterate. Many children don't get

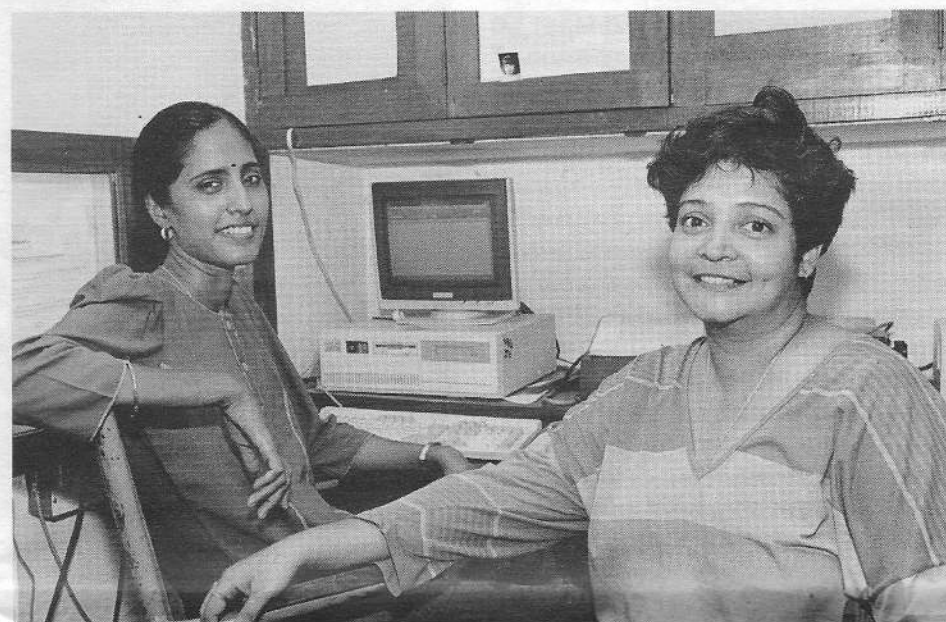
proper nutrition, and they often lack love and attention in their homes. In such conditions, the development of the mind can be quite slow.

Future steps

Harini admits that this report is only a preliminary step. "The villages surveyed are the ones which are closest to Auroville. But Auroville plans to work in what is called 'the larger bio-region,' comprising about 60 villages. It will be necessary to set up a statistical database for the entire bio-region. We have started to work in about half of these 60 villages, but we estimate that it will require at least five years before such a database would be ready." "This first report has been useful as an experimental model," adds Stella. It has brought to light the limitations and

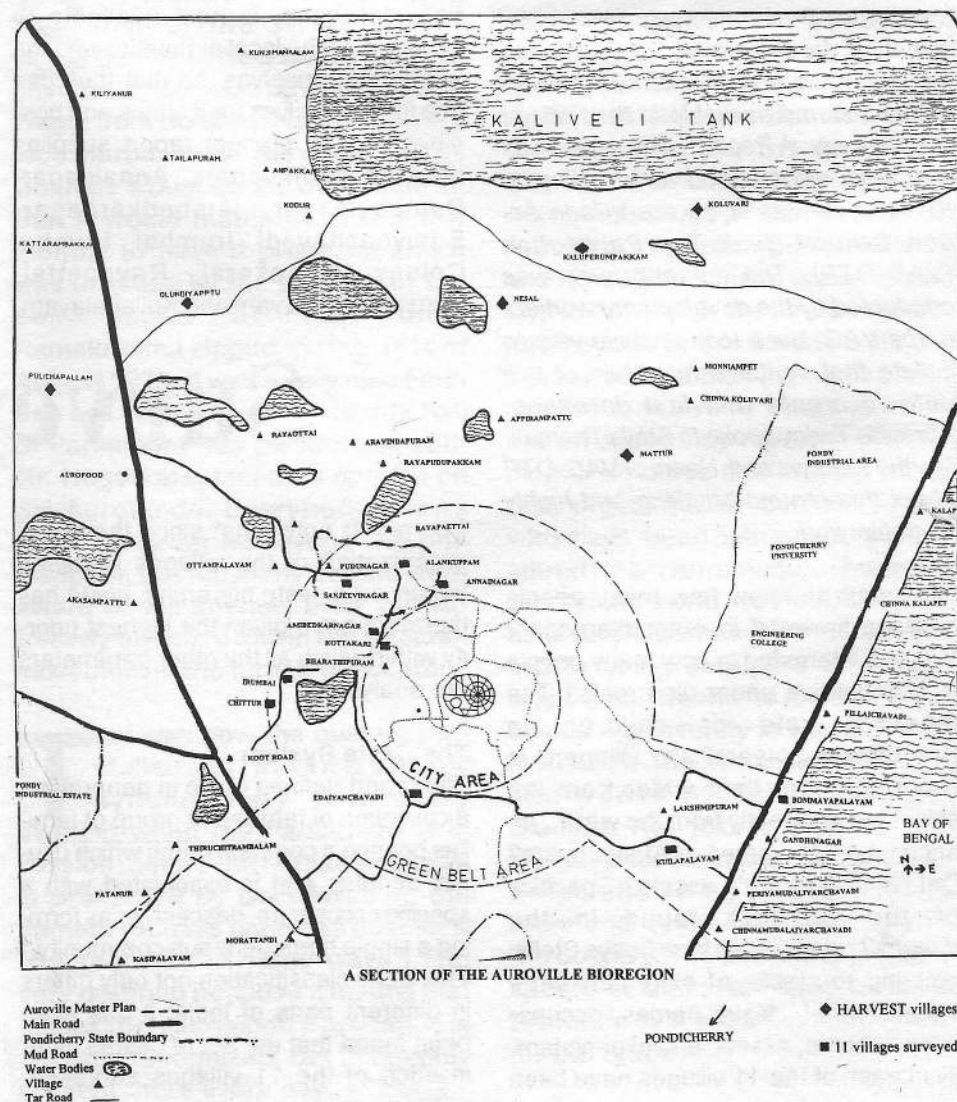
drawbacks of our methodology. We are working out a modified format which will allow us to analyse the data more precisely, and we are now taking the responsibility of training the Development Workers who conduct the survey. Encouraged by Stichting de Zaaier, we are now starting to use this source material for further research by taking one village, Thuravi as a sample. We also plan to interact with other research institutes in South India to develop comparable parameters for analysis." "As we modify our approach to the villagers, as we give them, more precisely, the means for self-development, the current perception of Auroville as a kind of welfare institution that has to take care of the villages will change.

Carel and Bindu



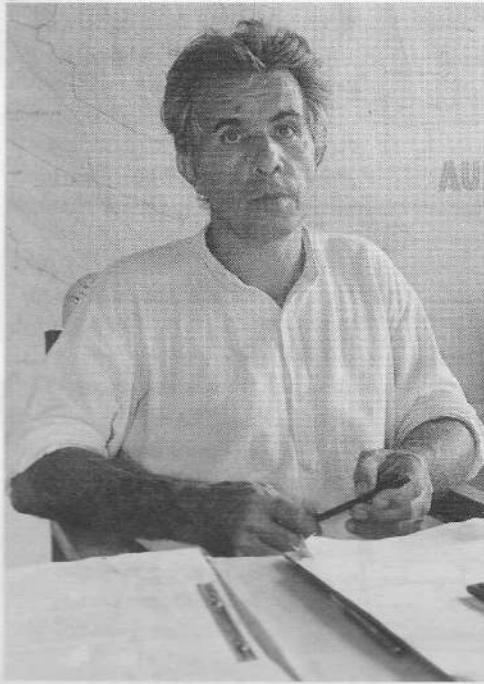
Stella (left) and Harini at the VAG-DTP

Auroville's work in the Bioregion



WATER HARVEST: Collecting the drops

At a Consumers Forum held recently in Pondicherry it was observed that a considerable decrease in groundwater levels over the last few years, coupled with ongoing urban and industrial expansion and the neglect of traditional water catchment systems, was leading to a situation where serious water scarcity could threaten Pondicherry within a few years. Across the state border Auroville and its surrounding bio-region could be facing a similar situation.



Tom at Water Harvest

Tom who, in 1986, started the Auroville water service—a unit that today fields a team of fifty, maintains wells, keeps a track of our water consumption patterns in the township area, and measures the quality of drinking water in the surrounding villages—has become increasingly concerned about falling water levels in our area. He is the driving force behind Water Harvest, an ambitious new project that hopes to raise awareness and create a grass-roots network of concerned water-users, particularly farmers in the larger bio-region of the Kaluveli Tank watershed. The goal of this initiative is a concerted and sustainable long-term programme of watershed management for the region, for, Tom feels, it's only on the bio-regional level that lasting sustainable solutions can be found.

Our bio-region consists of two types of geological formations: a granite plain beyond Killianur that spreads north-west past Tindivanam; and stretching south-east of that, secondary, tertiary and quaternary sedimentary formations with a high porosity. These comprise the three aquifers of the region where the highest quantity of ground-water is stored. Rainfall which recharges the aquifers is the only source of water in this area as there are no perennial rivers. The surface flow is towards Kaluveli swamp which is its final outlet. Ground-water however moves slowly in a south-east direction towards Pondicherry. In big pockets of over-extraction where water is pumped out at a higher rate than it is recharged, salt water is flowing in from the sea. This phenomenon is particularly noticeable on the coast near Pondicherry

University due to massive amounts of water being extracted by Chemfab—a chemical factory producing chlorine related products—as well as extensive agricultural irrigation in the area and to the south of the Kaluveli swamps.

Tom explains, "Farmers are supplied with free electricity and they pump from all three aquifers. We have observed that the depletion in all three aquifers is very advanced. We were recently in the Olundiyaipattu area where they have a major pumping station that pumps water up to Tindivanam. Salt-water intrusion has reached Kaluperumbakam and is now slowly advancing in this direction. It has started entering the Vanur sandstone formation, 6 km inland from the sea. If this salt-water intrusion were to continue its advance towards Olundiyaipattu, Tindivanam could be without drinking water."

As Auroville is situated on a plateau and is higher than the surrounding coastal areas Tom believes that if we manage our water well it won't become saline in the upper aquifer. But we will have very limited capacities for development as a city. "How can we build a city of the future in the midst of an area devastated by salt-water intrusion?" he asks. There is an urgent need to stabilize the situation of the deep aquifers which are the main storage source of ground-water. But this work has to be undertaken in the entire area of 750 sq. kilometers which comprises the watershed.

A primary concern of Water Harvest is the restoration of the ancient system of "eyeries"—interconnected rainwater storage tanks—that made Tamil Nadu self-sufficient in water in the olden days. Another problem that needs to be addressed in the larger bio-region is an almost total lack of concerted management not only of water but of other natural resources as well. The present administration is over-stretched and overloaded. For example, one engineer has to cover an entire Block and the Public Works Department (PWD) is in charge of 40,000 tanks in Tamil Nadu. If one wants to manage a watershed one needs to have a very clear interaction that incorporates both surface and ground-water management, agriculture and social development. Right now these different areas do not work together in an integrated manner but according to their own independent schemes and budgets.

"What we intend to do is create an organisation that can work with the existing administration but whose impetus and driving force would be the water-users themselves. Farmers, villagers, industrialists etc. would be organised on the micro-level in local associations, and on a higher level federations would group together 10 to 20 of these associations. It is hoped that this middle level would have enough economic power to employ a number of engineers to oversee work in the areas of agriculture, irrigation, tank rehabilitation and social forestry. It is extremely important to have first-hand scientific and administrative knowledge of the problems of tank rehabilitation, irrigation, social development and forestry. For this we will have to create a network of support teams of engineers attached

to each federation and we will send these teams into the field to establish the ground-work. Then part of the team will stay behind. We will survey the entire watershed area to collect all the information needed for a sound management. This work will be done in collaboration with the villagers and the support team of each federation which will receive the first part of its training during this phase. We hope to cover forty villages a year. Development teams will then follow and activate the water-users associations.

"We started this summer and the response has been quite positive in the northern area near Mattur where we have been working since June. The villagers are not only supporting us but asking us to come and work with them. We have set up water-user associations and have been strengthening the bunds and dikes of six of their centuries-old tanks. In another village, Kaluperumbakam, we have been working on desilting the main access channel, as well as the tank, repairing the breaches and strengthening the bund by raising it. We use excavators and tipper trucks for some of the work, and would like to sell silt at subsidized rates back to farmers. In one tank we were able to excavate

"Our aim in the long run is to create an awareness of water as a common collective resource that should be treated as a public and not a private resource."

of water as a common collective resource that should be treated as a public and not a private resource. Our first project was for twenty-two tanks in the Killianur area but we soon realised that in order to address the

coastal problem, the whole Kalivelli Swamp had to be included and incorporated in our project. Presently Dr. Rauf Ali is designing a base line study of the link between

water quality of the lake, wildlife, and human impact and adjacent land use. Another study will be conducted by The Action Research Unit (TARU) to help understand the relationship between surface and ground-water and the parameters to be set in order to stabilize the situation.

The problem of tank silting existed in the past but to a much lesser extent than today. Little information exists on these tanks some of which cover up to hundred hectares. "We are working on creating and updating an exact database as regards the tanks and catchment areas in the bio-region as well as soil quality. In the past there was less land under cultivation, more water and more forest. But today's population growth and a resultant population shift from rural areas into towns



Water Harvest: Repairing the bund of a village catchment tank

PHOTO: NATHALIE

350,000 cubic metres of silt! Money for this work has come from the Employment Insurance Scheme and the Rural Development Ministry via the Collector. We are now hoping to get started in the Olundiyaipattu-Pullichapalam area with PWD funds.

"This field work has shown us how much we have to learn, particularly in the area of social development. The water-user associations have to be composed of people with a genuine interest at stake, such as the farmers who depend on the water from the tank. So far four associations with some forty members have been started in the last few months and our target is to have a network of associations linking the 192 surface water tanks in the region. We would also like to set up ground-water-user associations. Our aim in the long run is to create an awareness

in search of jobs has coincided with a change in cropping patterns. Food is grown less and less, surfaces under paddy and pulses are diminishing rapidly, replaced by water-intensive cash crops such as casurina and sugarcane. There is also the danger not only of depletion but of chemical pollution of the water which is already occurring near Pondicherry's industrial zone. It is not too late to create a widespread awareness of the problem and its implications, and a grass-roots network of water-user associations empowering rural communities and giving them a say in their own future is a step in the right direction. The very future of this region depends on water and sustainable voluntary solutions being found for the preservation of this most precious and essential of natural resources.

Roger

Star-sequinced dolphins, smiling, flapping ducks, grinning fishes, undulating serpents, snapping alligators, gaudy parrots, jigsaw elephants balanced on a stool—all these and much more come alive in the wooden world of Bommaiur, the toy-making unit nestled in the green scrub spaces of Kottakarai. Bommaiur, which literally means Toy-Village in Tamil, was started with the help of CARITAS by Dr. Lucas in 1995 to generate funds for the Auroville Health Centre.

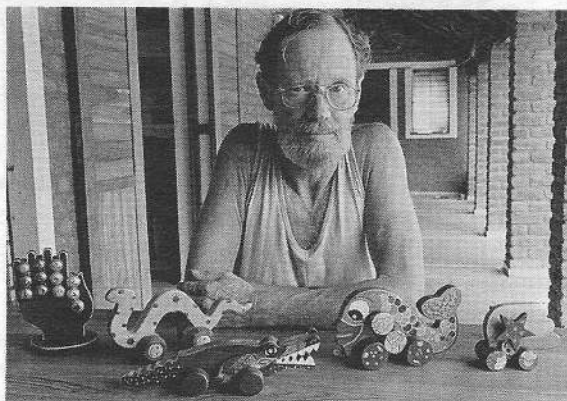
Creativity, with a capital C, and quality is what distinguishes the toys of Bommaiur. The toys are all crafted from the wood of surplus or dying work trees (acacia auriculiformis) of Auroville. Designed by Manfred

Wagner, a German sculptor

who is trained in traditional Bavarian wood-carving, each of the twenty or so models are beautifully proportioned and have no sharp edges or small removable parts that can harm a child. The production line, managed by Shamugam and Stephan, consists of about 15 workers who hand-operate the lathes, circular-saws and jigsaw machines, sandpaper and polish each piece, and painstakingly paint each one in intricate designs and bright colours. Again, keeping the safety of children in mind,

linseed oil rather than varnish, which often contains lead, is used for finishing, and acrylic instead of enamel is used for painting. The original range of Bommaiur toys retained the natural texture of wood. But now, Ute, a German artist who has joined the team and oversees the painting, has come up with a popular and eye-catching range called, "The Art Collection." The result of all this endeavour is that while the toys possess a machine-derived perfection, each one of them has a warm, unique human touch to it.

The Toy Makers of



Manfred with his creations

What is also special about these toy-makers, is that they work as a team—each one is aware of and trained in the various aspects of the production—and if need be, they willingly put in extra hours to meet a deadline. Also heartening is the fact that Bommaiur achieves gender-equity by training young girls as carpenters. Little wonder perhaps that with such principles, Bommaiur has met with phenomenal success: it found a market for its products in the boutiques of India and broke even within two years of its inception, and now with forthcoming export orders from Germany and USA, it is poised for further growth with an expansion of its machinery and labour force.

Bindu

What a Waste!

"Auroville has to manage its waste water." This is the urgent message from my interview with Gilles Boulicot, an engineer, who has recently started working with CSR (Centre for Scientific Research) on implementing a project to build sewage treatment plants in Auroville.

A few years ago, small waste water treatment plants had been built in Centre Field, Vikas and Samasti. Through trial and error, many things were learned from these pilot projects. Then two years back a German organization, BORDA, contacted Tency from CSR regarding a project already in existence called LOMWATS—Low Maintenance Waste Water Treatment Systems—which was funded by the European Community and coordinated by BORDA of Germany and GERES of France, to develop ecological sewage treatment under tropical conditions. Pilot projects are now being implemented in India (Delhi, Kerala and Auroville), China and Taiwan. In Auroville, four waste water treatment plants are in process of being installed in the areas of Samasti/Prarthana and Invocation/Surrender; the Visitors Centre and the Aspiration/Health Centre area. They should be functional by October. Full technical support is also given for treating sewage water from the new Solar Kitchen.

"It will be a big improvement, especially in the Aspiration area," says Gilles. "Before, all the waste water used to go directly into the canyon behind Aspiration community. And now the Health Centre is building a sewage treatment plant that will treat the sewage produced in the Health Centre complex, Aspiration community and the public toilets in Kulapalayam. This particular venture is impor-

tant because it is suspected that at present the sewage water of Kulapalayam seeps into the ground water resulting in a high incidence of disease-causing bacteria."

In total, the project concerns 900 people as users today. But in the future, says Gilles, "If there are 10,000 people in Auroville and we use 200 litres per person per day, that produces 2,000 cubic metres of waste water per day. It would be a terrible mistake not to use it to water gardens and parks, for example. But this means developing a recycled water distribution system free of pollutant and health hazards. This is one of our main goals.

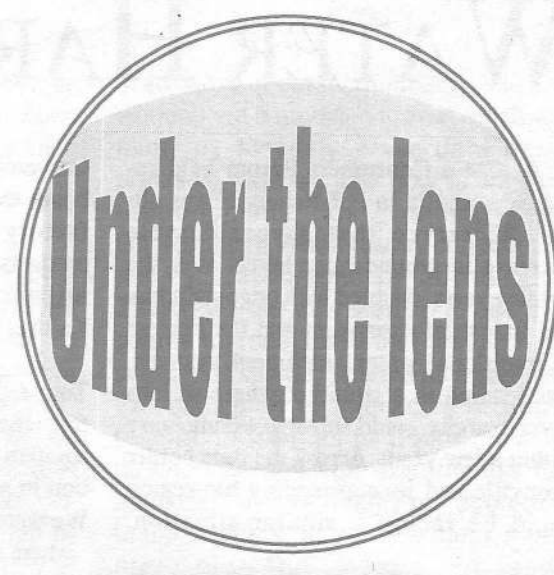
"We have started to analyze the treated water, with the help of Igor from Aurobrindavan, to see what the level of pollution is after treating. Like this, a standard can be defined. The water-testing laboratories of Auroville can identify any pathogens—worms, bacteria, viruses etc.—in the water. A tree can filter pathogens successfully, but if you want to grow salad, carrots, tomatoes, right now it is not yet safe.

"The EC representatives came recently and feel more than enthusiastic—they say it is the most suitable site for a pilot, demonstration and diffusion project using appropriate technology, especially in terms of socio-economic impact on the local population, i.e., Auroville and the villages."

The next step is to improve our laboratory capacity, and to create a frame work to make Auroville a demonstration centre for waste water treatment. Eventually we will take up one of the neighbouring villages and make it a pilot village for an integrated waste water management."

Jill

updates & new ventures



More than a drop to drink

The team of Aqua Research Centre (ARC) and Utsah hosted an "open house" in early August to provide information about their innovative research and experimentation with water purification and to inaugurate their new laboratory, Aqualab.

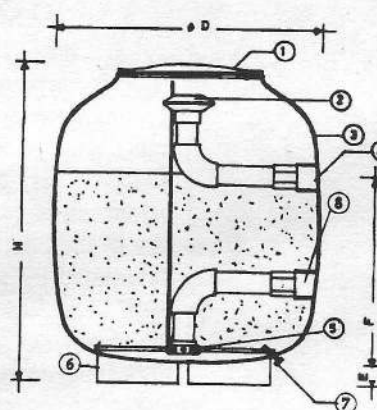
Behind the simple ceremony stand several years of hard work. Utsah, a unit for technological and biological researches and their application, was started in April 1993. After years of work, a few prototypes have been achieved mainly in the field of electromagnetics and related to medical purpose and health such as a Kirlian camera

(new application of electro-bioluminescence and electro-static phenomena): an ioniser for air purification; an ozoniser for water purification, etc.

Two years ago, the ARC (started under New Engineering Trust) developed, with Italian technology, a whole system of water filtration and purification. Today, it produces FRP pressure quartz filters with a capacity of 10 cubic metres to 66 cubic metres per hour and can purify water particles as small as 0.2 microns. The filtration process, which uses layers of pure quartz, is natural and eco-friendly. This filtered water is further treated with ozone or chlorine which are very strong oxidizing or disinfecting agents that neutralize chemical particles present in the water and kill viruses and bacteria.

The recently opened Aqualab takes this research into purification of water onestep further. Aqualab was started by Jean-Claude with a huge investment of laboratory equipment brought from France. The most interesting aspect of Aqualab is its research into bio-dynamised water. Treated or purified water that is commonly used for drinking these days, is considered "dead" or sterilized. Bio-dynamised water is produced by charging water with high-frequency cosmic waves of 10¹⁰ Hz. The team of ARC, Utsah and Aqualab are at present conducting experiments to test the power of bio-dynamised water. They have a small vegetable garden where plants treated with sterilized water and bio-dynamised water are compared. It has already been noted that plants watered with bio-dynamised water grow faster with a better and more healthy root structure. Individual Aurovilians are also volunteering to drink bio-dynamised water to note its effect on human-beings.

ARC and Aqualab also function as service units, joining hands with the Health Centre and



1. Top Cover (with bleed cork)
2. Sprinkling Head
3. FRP Shell
4. Inlet (Raw Water)
5. Atomising Head
6. Filtering Medium
7. Drainage Holes
8. Outlet (sparkling clear water)

Auroville Water Harvest to follow the quality of the water in Auroville. Their dream is to produce high-quality, bio-dynamised water for drinking and agricultural purposes in Auroville.

Bindu

New Yoga Hall

The Verité Yoga Hall (photo below) which is now almost complete, opened in June by hosting a Vipassana meditation course. This is Verité's vision:

"We see the Hall as a place which will allow various techniques and teachings which are helpful to the Integral Yoga to be presented to Aurovilians and guests, in the context of Auroville. There are many techniques, methods, arts, teachings which can help people in their individual and collective yoga. We see Verité bringing together in the Hall and in the community many different teachers, researchers, seekers and resource people, to share their talents and skills and receptivity, so that learning can take place on many levels, thus hastening us towards our goal."



Upgrading the Visitors' Centre

The Visitors' Centre which presently comprises an Information Centre, a Boutique and a Cafeteria is getting a number of much-needed facilities. The Visitors' Centre receives two hundred and in the peak season five hundred people a day. This causes problems as the Cafeteria, which runs entirely on solar energy, is not equipped to handle large crowds and the Boutique gets overcrowded with people who are not interested in buying anything but just want to look at Auroville products. Many of these visitors then go on to see the Matrimandir. Plans are being drawn up to cater to the needs of the ever increasing numbers of casual visitors which include a pleasant foot-path to Matrimandir passing through gardens, a refreshment stand, an exhibit of a model of Matrimandir and a small nursery where plants can be bought.

In the initial phase of this development a permanent gallery has been set up on the first floor of the Visitors' Centre to display the crafts and products of Auroville's artisans. It is hoped that this gallery will take some of the pressure off the Boutique. The gallery opened on the 14th of August with an exhibition titled, "Interior Design from Auroville Artisans." On display are a spectacular assortment of quilts,

cushion covers and wall-hangings, sculpted brass containers and comfortable, elegantly carved wooden furniture.

Bindu

Filaure takes a bow

In July, our clothing unit Filaure, along with Auromics, participated in the Indian International Garments Fair in New Delhi. For Filaure, whose production is geared to fulfill the demands of German garment manufacturers, it was their first presentation of a collection of children's clothing, fully designed by their own staff. The response was so positive that they were invited to attend a garment fair in Germany. They declined the offer however due to the pressure of meeting existing orders.

Biodynamic farming reaches AV

Forty-two cow-horns, filled with dung from lactating cows, were buried on the first day of a two-day training programme on biodynamic farming. The training was given by organic farmers from Kodaikanal who are promoting this method all over India. The trainers were invited to Auroville by Dr. Lucas of the Health Centre who hopes to create a greater awareness of the importance of farming organ-

ically by organizing study-cum-training sessions for local farmers on the dangers of using pesticides on cashew trees and by starting a waste-disposal and composting unit. (see adjoining article).

All the participants from Auroville are enthusiastic about biodynamic farming and want to try it out on their farms and orchards. Hopefully it will have positive repercussions with the local farmers, thereby discouraging them from using chemicals and inorganic waste.

From Garbage to Good Compost

For quite a few years now, farmers in the villages have been importing the untreated urban waste of Pondicherry into the Auroville area to use as compost and creating thereby major health hazards. Despite utmost efforts, Auroville could not persuade the farmers to do otherwise. Then last year, at the initiative of Dr. Lucas, a project was started in Kuilapalayam to sort out hazardous, inorganic waste

and to turn the remaining organic waste into good compost.

Recently, a piece of Auroville land near Kuilapalayam was made available for carrying out the composting under well-protected conditions. The project envisages the collection of waste from different dump-sites around Auroville and the experimenting with a variety of composting methods including vermiculture. The project, being carried out in collaboration with the local farmers, is funded by Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ)



Garment factory Aurosarjan will be moving into its new office-complex in the Industrial Zone in a few months.

THE CHANGING FACE OF THE RESIDENTIAL ZONE

Vikas: The Experiment Continues

Vikas continues to evolve. This community, located next to Sailam, was begun in 1989 by AuroSatprem as a collective experiment, with funding from AVI France. The ten Aurovilians who worked on the first phase accomplished a lot: basic infrastructure, relying solely on solar power, was installed, a windmill was erected, mud-brick apartments were built, a community kitchen and guest capsules were added, trees were planted.

April, 1996: the second phase, the second building. Eight people were involved in this phase, and they wanted to have a chance to design for their own needs. The concept is modular, with vaults and domes as the repeated shapes of the roofs giving a continuity to the architectural design. The third building is still under construction, and will probably be finished in one year.

There is no hired contractor, and this cuts down overhead costs. The architect in this phase is Gundalf. Gilles Boulicot, coordinator of the project, says, "We try to do as much as possible with the people. Materials are purchased as a service to the community. We try to identify and hire workers who can learn, take part and bring some good quality to the process. They are also enjoying it. I think," Gilles ruminates, "when people feel comfortable in their place, the relationships are good."

In the second phase, they first experimented with "Leg-Aums". These simple structures, designed by AuroSatprem, were supposed to be movable and cost-effective. In reality, it was found that they were not movable. But they function well as single-room houses. By common agreement, they have no attached toilets,

showers or kitchen, but everyone shares these facilities. "They are quite spacious; the small ones measure 26 sq. metres and the large ones 35 sq. meters. They cost around 1,200-1,500 per sq. meter. That is really quite cheap, according to Gilles.

Vikas is situated in a green corridor of the residential zone, and the community members are trying to keep it from becoming too densely populated. Together with Sailam the Vikas residents are designing this green buffer zone as an orchard, planting fruit trees and other ornamental trees. *

"The experiment of Vikas is working out now because it is an open space. People who are interested in a collective life come to this place, as it is not easy to find a place with community-living anymore. We are happy because we have a clear picture of what we want and what we don't want. Basically, it is for people who are open to experiment, and who want to share. There are no fences, because fences give a different vibration. Of course, we have to deal with the cows then... It's not perfect, but a feel life here now is very dynamic and harmonious."

There is quite a mixture of residents at Vikas—French, German, Italian, Tamil, Canadian. "Every week there are new ideas.



Surrender. Architect: Andre Hababu. Second phase under construction. The first phase is ready and the first people have moved in.



Invocation. Architect: Rolf

The first inhabitants created an archery space, a kalari (studio) for martial arts, and a vegetable garden. We would like to continue to develop common facilities. Perhaps add a laundry."

"People—Aurovilians, newcomers, guests—all come to work and share something. I think they like it here because we don't force anyone to do what they don't want to. At present it looks really good and the future will be even better."

Interview by Jill



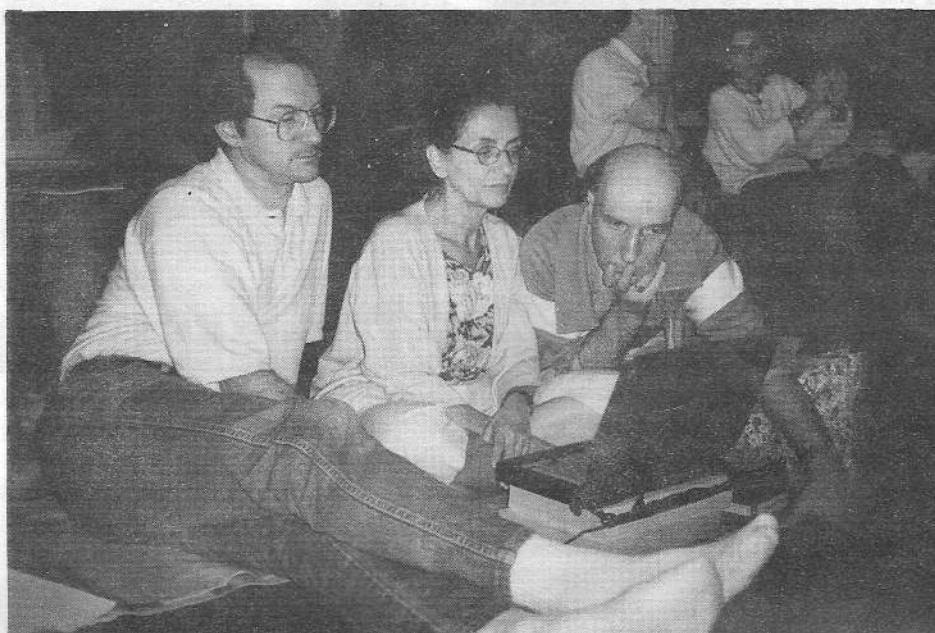
Towering water tanks under construction between Surrender and Arati. Architect: Helmut. These tanks are innovative in the sense that they will link wells of the various communities in the first sector of the RZ and provide water to all.

UNDER THE SIGN OF HARMONY

THE YEARLY AUROVILLE INTERNATIONAL MEETING

The Auroville International (AVI) Meeting this year was held June 24th through 29th at Le Kleebach, a music-oriented retreat center in the Alsace region of France. The getting together was organised Auroville International France, who had taken great care that music and yoga were gracefully interwoven with the business meetings. Some sixty participants came from all corners of the globe, as individuals or as representatives of AVI centers (formal and informal) including the UK, Sweden, Germany, Italy, Spain, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, USA, and The Netherlands. Auroville was represented by several individuals and Mauna served as secretary of AVI. This annual meeting serves many purposes for the AVI centers. Throughout the year, each center pursues its own goals and projects which are specific to its own nation. The annual meeting provides an opportunity to receive current information from Auroville, hear about the activities of other centers, learn from each other's efforts, and perhaps most importantly, get reconnected on the physical plane. Large photographic prints by Dominique Darr, which chronicle the history of Auroville since its inception, were artistically arranged throughout the meeting facility. At every turn we were reminded of our purpose and common goal, to bring about the material realization of Mother's dream for the earth—Auroville. The first day brought us to one of the most important issues and urgent needs of Auroville, securing the physical base for the city by purchasing the land within the central city area, the green belt and key hole areas. The magnitude of the endeavour was outlined by Guy of Auroville who showed a video followed by details on the need to purchase 300 acres in the central city area as well as 2500 acres in the city at large. The subject of fundraising followed quite naturally from the morning session. Lest I overlook something quite important, our physical base was secured in the morning by the t'ai chi of early risers and further nourished with friendly and delicious repasts served in the family style with six to ten people per table. It was over meals and at informal moments that connections were made that will advance the day in and day out work of running an AVI center. Subjects identified during the general meetings that required more detailed attention were discussed over meals or outside on the grounds overlooking the Munster Valley. We were blessed throughout the entire meeting with almost constant summer rain which kept our attention focused on the long hours of work. The first day ended with a beautiful classical piano recital by Heinrich of Auroville. The grand piano in the main hall reverberated with the inspired music of such composers as Ravel, Messiaen and Beethoven. The next day Daniel Baum, a noted lawyer and humanist, presented a talk entitled, "Intolerance in Our Societies" including the question what answers can Auroville bring to our old societies overwhelmed by this blight. A lively dis-

cussion ensued. The afternoon session started with the presentation "Auroville the Scientific Aspect" by Andreas Mascha from Germany. Andreas challenged us to expand our vision and discard preconceived notions of how Auroville will interact on the rapidly changing global stage. Advances in the scientific realm are swiftly converging with Sri Aurobindo's vision of the future of humanity. Andreas emphasized the advantage of using a scientific approach when describing and communicating the Auroville experience as it does not lend itself to a fundamentalist religious interpretation. The relevance and timeli-



Checking collective email@the meeting of the Auroville International Centres

ness of this point recurred in later discussions of the criticism levelled at Auroville of being a cult and again when the issue of the tax exempt status of AVI centers in various countries was discussed. We walked the fine line between spirituality and religion and recognized that the confusion in the mass mind on this subject can be to the detriment of Auroville. Though this was not intended as a policy setting meeting, a consensus emerged that while Auroville can use the scientific method for research and expression, it must remain true to the words of its Charter and not radically change to conform to expectations of governments or funding sources. This very full day culminated with the dynamic and lyrical singing of Sabine from Germany followed by a slide show by Dominique Darr whose exquisite photographs have chronicled the growth of Auroville from its earliest days to the present. During the next day, ideas for fund-raising for land purchase filled our meetings large and small. Ideas for calendars, fundraising events, direct mail appeals, etc. were all discussed as well as the possibilities to protect Auroville's name and symbol from misuse. The sun thankfully illuminated the afternoon as we walked to the summit of Le Petite Balloon, picnicked on the mountainside and later visited the historic and beautiful city of Colmar. The evening was crowned with a concert of classical Indian music on sarod and tabla. By Saturday the meeting was running at full speed and the realization

that our time together was running short dawned on us as we repeatedly restructured the agenda to meet our needs. Reports from each center were given, followed by work on AVI statutes and viewing of current Auroville videos. Old members of the board were wholeheartedly thanked for their work and the new board given a rousing cheer of support. As Sunday morning unfolded we looked within and without, gazing around at the circle of faces that had become familiar and dear. The multifaceted jewels of our national characteristics sparked. Closure was drawn in a beautiful way with each person having two

minutes to share the quintessential meaning of the meeting for him or herself. We entered a very unusual time warp that allowed even the most profusely verbal of the group to convey their unique perspective in a very limited time. We left the hospitable environment provided by AVI France and returned to the four corners of the earth inspired and energized by our time together.

Paula Murphy

Statement of the General Assembly of Auroville International regarding the use of the name and symbol of Auroville.

The General Assembly of Auroville International, meeting in Kleebach, France, from June 24th through June 29th, 1997, decided to issue the following statement. The name and symbol of "Auroville" refer only to the international township of Auroville in South India, created by The Mother in 1968, and presently functioning through the Auroville Foundation set up by an Act of the Indian Parliament in 1988. This statement has become necessary as the public around the world can become easily confused by the use of the name and symbol of Auroville by persons or organisations not directly connected to Auroville. Matters of fundraising, information and public relations require a clarity and accountability that can only be maintained if the name and symbol of "Auroville" are used by agreement and authorisation of Auroville itself. This is presently done by the Working Committee of the Auroville Foundation which protects the use of the name and symbol of Auroville. Presently it occurs that there is the unauthorised use of the name of "Auroville" as a domain name on the Internet which includes the unauthorised use of its symbol, and also proposals exist to create other communities and organisations using the name and symbol of "Auroville." There can be only one Auroville. Other communities or endeavours, based on the same or similar ideals, are by all means encouraged but obviously with another name and symbol for the purpose of clarity and truth.

TO SUBSCRIBE

The contribution for the next 12 issues of AUROVILLE TODAY in India is Rs. 250, for other countries Rs. 1250, Can. \$ 51, French F. 195, DM 56, It. Lira 61000, D.Gl. 63, US \$ 38, U.K. £ 25. This includes the postage by airmail. Please send your contribution (or your supporting contribution of double the amount) either to the Auroville International centre in your country (add 10% for admin. and bank charges) or directly to Auroville Today, CSR Office, Auroville 605101. **Cheques should be made payable to Auroville Fund**, specifying: 'Contribution for Auroville Today'. You will receive the issues directly from Auroville. Personal cheques are preferred to bank cheques. Please do not send postal money orders. Subscribers will receive a reminder when their subscription is about to expire.

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AVI España, c/o Kibx and Yolanda, Apartado de Correos 36, 31610 Villava, Navarra, Spain. Tel: (34)-48-227514. Email: kty@bcn.servicom.es

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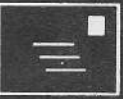
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Auroville Today provides information about Auroville, an international township in South India, on a monthly basis and is distributed to Aurovilians and friends of Auroville in India and abroad. It does not necessarily reflect the views of the community as a whole.

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LETTERS PAGE

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The soul of Britannia

I was really impressed by your edition of June '97 on Human Unity and the quality of the articles on the nation souls of five great nations. It would be interesting to see this series continued.

As a Briton, the reflections of my fellow countrymen were deeply thought provoking. My first reaction was to be rather shocked that they saw themselves as English rather than British and England as the nation. I do not think that would strike our Welsh and Scottish brethren as modest charm but as typical Sassenach gall.

As I read in the concluding paragraph of Alan's article, "The Bulldog and the Gentleman: What makes the English English?" (AVT #101), "I don't think England is one of the great nation souls. Just as Britain itself is a land of modest scale, modest charm, so our strength is more in the middle region of pragmatism and ethics than idealism and spiritual discovery," I had an overwhelming feeling that we were not seeing the wood for the trees and our soul searching had not quite grasped a profound significance.

When I look at the modern world so totally transformed in the last 300 to 400 years from anything that preceded it within known history, I cannot think of any major secular idea-force which did not first arise, if only in seed-form, within those island

shores, or any people whose culture and society has not been turned upside down by them, even if many have rooted and flourished more fully elsewhere.

Britain first united as a nation centuries before the rest of Europe woke up to the ideal of nationalism and it was there that the germ of the ideal of democracy first emerged, her revolution preceding the French one by more than 150 years. Nor should we forget that it was the direct ideological descendants of the Roundheads who a hundred years later dumped the tea in Boston harbour and authored that extraordinary Declaration of Independence, to teach another uppity English king the limits of his power.

Britain was the first nation to throw off the yoke of feudalism and replace it with scientific agriculture and industrialisation. As a consequence she pioneered urbanisation,



banking, capitalism, socialism and can even lay half a claim to birthing communism. It was Britain that evolved bureaucratic organisation and first developed a civil service, a police force, a post office. It was Britain that championed the abolition of slavery, who

first banned child labour and introduced compulsory elementary education for both boys and girls. The genius of Isaac Newton, Adam Smith and Charles Darwin revolutionised the basic paradigm of western culture and society.

Using world-wide trade as her arm of conquest, Britain spread her ideas, her language, her inventions and her religion, for she always was firmly convinced she had God on her side, to the four corners of the globe. And as her influence spread like lava from a gigantic volcano, she touched the souls of the nations and forced them to awake. She aroused Great Mother India from her profound slumbers and brow-beat her into taking up again the burden of her transforming spiritual destiny. It could not be haphazard chance that Sri Aurobindo spent his youth in Britain and there took his first tentative steps on his path to the Supermind.

While searching within for an image of the British nation soul, I was incredulous to find myself face to face with Britannia, seated on her throne, armed with her shield of faith, her spear of aspiration and her helmet of indomitable courage, looking out with clear brow and far-seeing eye, across the seas that surround her. A female soul, a warrior soul, more akin to Durga than to Lakshmi. Not a comfortable soul to live with. Materialistic, pragmatic, ethical, definitely; small and of modest charm, most definitely not. And perhaps that is why she is so hard for us to look at. For now that the great outpourings of her puissance are exhausted, it is we that have to confront to the earth shaking consequences of our nation having, so arrogantly but so wholeheartedly, followed her dharma.

As modern Britain, still leader of her world-wide Commonwealth, carries her newly multi-racial people into a united Europe, struggling to find her rightful place in the global society to which she gave birth, the British in Auroville can offer to the quest for an actual living human unity the very important discovery that pragmatism is mankind's most powerful and effective tool for transformation. But someone else will have to bring the gentler gift of modest charm.

Judith, Auroville

Questioning Germany's decision

For several years Auroville International (AVI) Germany has been channeling donations from Germany to the Auroville Health Centre. In May, AVI Germany reported that their status to certify tax exemption for donations to Auroville projects has been withdrawn. The reasoning behind this act supposedly was the doubt of German authorities whether contributing to Auroville truly serves international understanding and human unity.

The facts are that, in the last half year, the staff of the Auroville Health Centre is comprised of people from ten different nations, i.e. from Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, India, Lithuania, Netherlands, Spain and USA. The Health Centre offers students from all over the world opportunities to complete their studies by undergoing practical courses; during the last five years, these students came from France, Germany, India, Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, UK and USA. The international team at the Health Centre comprise of volunteers from so many countries and of employees from India, caters to the medical needs of the local population. This

includes the growing population of Auroville—presently about 1,300 people from 30 countries as well as approximately 30,000 people of 25 neighbouring villages.

Obviously—as any research team consisting of members from different parts of the world could testify—working together in a team of members with widely differing national, cultural, social and religious backgrounds enhances international understanding. Especially so when this team serves an international community. And even more so as the Health Centre is a unit for medical services within the frame of a collective experiment that aims to realize the human unity which expressly includes people from all socio-economic backgrounds. The Auroville community factually does consist of people including the poorest, the socio-religious outcast, the illiterate.

The actual reasons for the decision of the German authorities are not known to us. Nevertheless, if Auroville, whatsoever be its real achievements or failures, does not serve international understanding and human unity, what place on earth does?

Dr. Lucas, Auroville

...and through cyberspace...

More than a few years ago, I clipped an article from an issue of "Omni" magazine, which spoke of the "City of Tomorrow". I was so fascinated by what I read, I brought the article to my friends and teachers at school. To my surprise, while preparing to discard much of my not so treasured items from the past, I happened upon this article. Searching for and finding the Auroville web sites, and being able to read of your progress, is a pleasure.

I am interested in subscribing to Auroville Today, and was hoping you would be able to provide me with the sample issue described on your site.

Peter Beilard
(pbeilard@direct.can)

The address for the Auroville Today site on the internet is:
<http://www.auroville-india.org/what-new/journals/avtintro.htm>

—Eds.

A Last Word

by Nirodbaran

You have made a small misrepresentation of my views in your article "Viewpoint" (AVT #102). For I have not spoken to Aurovilians on the dangers of choosing different spiritual paths or gurus other than Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. That is their own affair. What I have said is that once you have chosen Sri Aurobindo and The Mother as your guru, you should stick to them. One should avoid any mixing with other paths.

It is obvious that, as Auroville will develop, many people with all kinds of different motivations will come to live in Auroville: some of them because of Sri Aurobindo or The Mother, some for other spiritual reasons, and some for ideological or material reasons. This, inevitably, will affect the general atmosphere, just as any society's atmosphere will be affected by those of its members who misbehave, smoke drugs or drink heavily. In Auroville, though, Mother's Force is active, constantly. It gives pressure to change on all, irrespective of their motivations to come to Auroville. She also said that they must do "the yoga of work" which combines the effects of all other yogas.

No cause for celebration

In your May issue, on the subject of "Land", in one article, there appeared a boastful statement on money earned by leasing out some Auroville land for cashew cultivation. [In the article, "How should we use the land?", Angad points out that 145 acres of land leased out for cashew cultivation by Land and Estate Management generated Rs. 3,75 lakhs last season—Eds.] However, there is no real cause for celebration over this income as it is a gain without due regard of the environment.

Monoculture of cashews has invaded our surroundings almost totally and has brought with it the highly offensive chemical pesticide-spraying culture, which is rapidly spoiling the environment. At this juncture, Auroville is not correct to encourage cashew business in any form, including leasing. What cashew trees Auroville possesses must be worked directly, even though this means much labour and less revenue. And more Aurovilians should come forward to take care of the Auroville land that is lying fallow. A healthy environment, which we all want, requires some sacrifice from us.

Rita
Auroville

Correction:

The speaker of the Lok Sabha in 1978 who unveiled the bust of Sri Aurobindo was Shri K. S. Hegde and not Ramakrishna Hegde as was reported in the article, "Sri Aurobindo's Influence in India Today" (AVT #103). This inadvertent error is regretted.—Eds.

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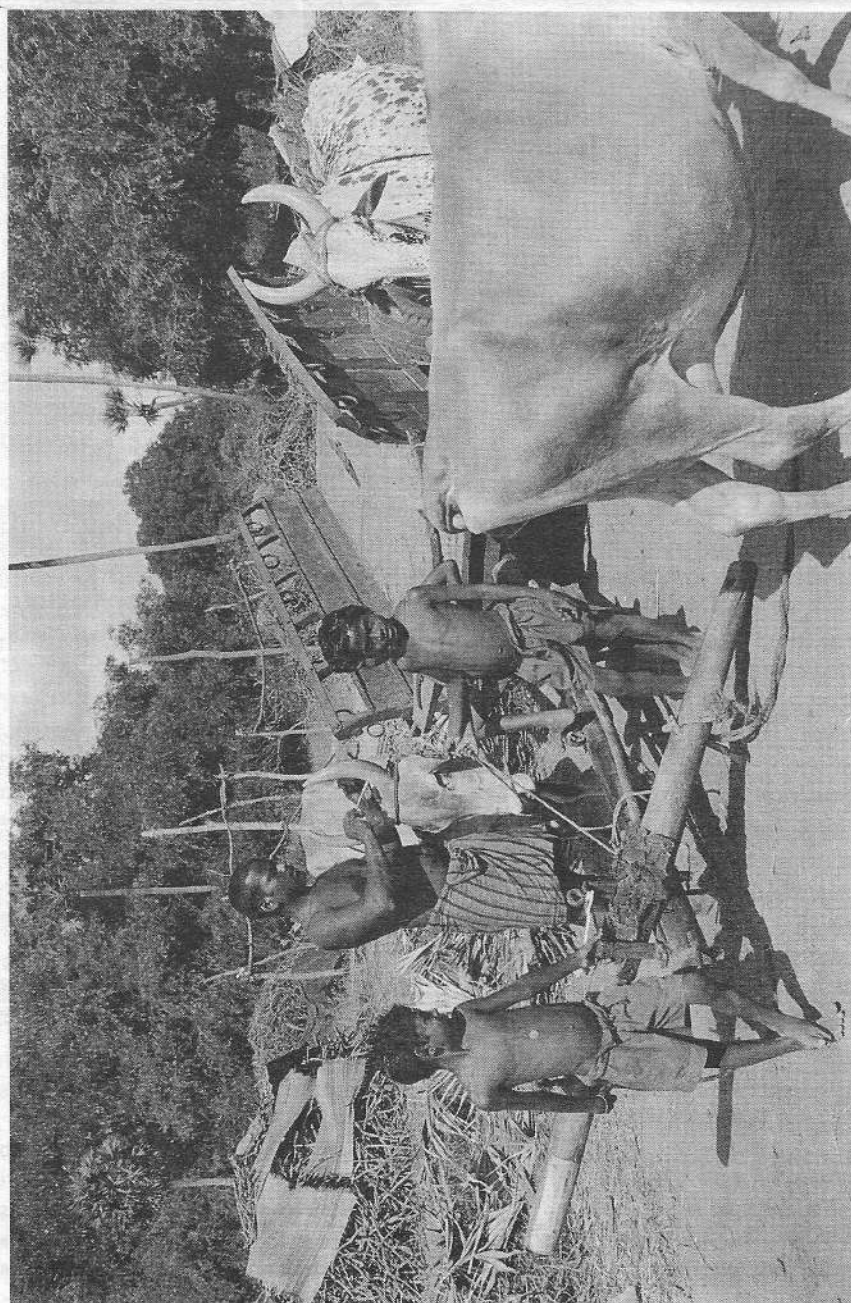
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September 1997
Number 104



Village scene at Kuilapalayam

Dyeing Naturally

If you pass Vérité and turn right, you come to an open field with a simple but beautiful building. This is the office of "Colours of Nature", the natural dyeing unit set up and run by Jesus, an Aurovillian of Spanish origin. "Colours of Nature" was set up in 1992 with the aim of creating an ecological alternative to the polluting chemical dyeing industry. Three years of experimentation were necessary before traditional, natural dyeing techniques, which were in the danger of being lost to posterity, were rejuvenated and developed. When I walk in with a white bedsheet which I want dyed blue, Jesus shows me the room where earthen pots containing thousands of litres of indigo in the process of fermentation are buried under the ground of the mud floor. The floor is covered with kolams [kolams are traditional patterns, usually drawn at the entrance of a Tamil house]. It doesn't smell good, but Jesus, who likes it, tells me that this is the "normal" smell of indigo being processed.

When asked why he decided to take up this ancient and painstaking process of making natural dyes, Jesus says, "I have a deep connection to nature. I love the colours of the earth. I love to roam outdoors looking at plants, learning about nature. After living in an ashram in Spain for a long time, I went with my friend Emma to Kashmir five years ago where we made silk carpets. There I came in touch with natural dyeing because I wanted to make carpets in the traditional way, which means naturally dyed silk yarn. I discovered that naturally dyed silk did not exist anymore on a semi-industrial scale, but was only made for handicrafts. So when we came to Auroville the idea to produce natural dyes was born. We knew that we wanted to do something useful but also beautiful, something which makes us happy. Karma yoga is my way of life. Various people in Auroville stimulated us to do this work. We travelled all over India and met more people who encouraged us in this direction but it was not easy to find information on natural dyeing. Hardly anybody in India practises this technology today. The knowledge of natural dyeing, which was used in India for thousands of years has been lost, first because of the introduction of cheaper chemical dyes and secondly because it is so labour intensive and expensive to produce. Since the discovery of synthetic indigo in 1907 all the indigo plantations have gone. It is much cheaper. Nowadays people don't remember how to work with natural indigo anymore. Recipes are hardly available. Also, there is a long-standing tradition of keeping recipes for dyeing secret. Friends sent me whatever information they could gather from all over the world. And then finally, we found some people with knowledge about natural dyeing, who were willing to train us for four months. After that we were on our own. A lot of my knowledge is from books and experimentation. We have specialised in the technique of dyeing indigo. In the beginning, I used

to send samples to a laboratory, checking them for colour fastness and whether our process was polluting. We were working (and still are) seven days a week, because once you have started the fermentation process, especially in producing indigo, you need to take care of it every day. Daily I spend 6 hours checking the fermentation. It is a very critical process and only dedicated people can do this work. But it is the only way of dyeing indigo without pollution and wasting water. I think it is the only dye which does not pollute the environment. We use only indigo leaves, water, seeds and lime. The water is not thrown away. I have at the moment 10,000 litres of indigo in fermentation in big underground pots. The water is being reused, and if taken care of, can be used for 100 years."

Although the catalogue of "Colours of Nature" carries about 30 beautiful colours, it is still not easy for Jesus to provide all those shades. "While trying to make different colours, I've wasted lots of cotton. When someone wants a special colour, our research starts. We first make a small amount, send it to the laboratory for testing and if the results are good, our problems start! For it is very difficult to repeat the same colour in a bigger amount. A few hundred years ago so many beautiful colours were made, especially around Bombay and Pondicherry. I found many references to the most beautiful and the fastest red colour in India, which was produced in Pondicherry and along the Coromandel coast. I have been trying to find seeds of this plant to make this colour for three years. But it is a protected plant and the seeds are very difficult to find. Some of my colours were developed by chance: we have a beautiful green colour which is made from a mistletoe-like parasite which grows abundantly in the trees in and around Auroville. Another colour was discovered by Auroville, who used to work here with the colours and one day by chance mixed some ingredients and came up with a soft shade of brown." Incidentally, one of Jesus' dreams is already fulfilled: he dyes silk for the Weaving Service Centre of Kancheepuram (a town in Tamil Nadu renowned for its beautiful silk saris) who are more than pleased with his work. And about the future he says, "First I would like the workshop to be self sustaining, and then I would be happy if 'Colours of Nature' becomes a training centre for local people to learn about the production of traditional, natural dyes for clothing and other materials. That way a dyeing craft will be revived."

A few weeks later I pass by the workshop again to check on my bedsheet. Long strands of coloured cotton hang behind the office. Jesus takes me to the shed where he is washing freshly dyed fabric. Big brass pots full of water and biodegradable soap are heating up on wood fires. My bedsheet is outside, drying on the grass. What a beautiful sight this dark blue indigo is against the fresh green of the grass!

Interview by Tineke