

Auroville Today

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Wishing our readers a joyful 2010!

Auroville's monthly news magazine since 1988

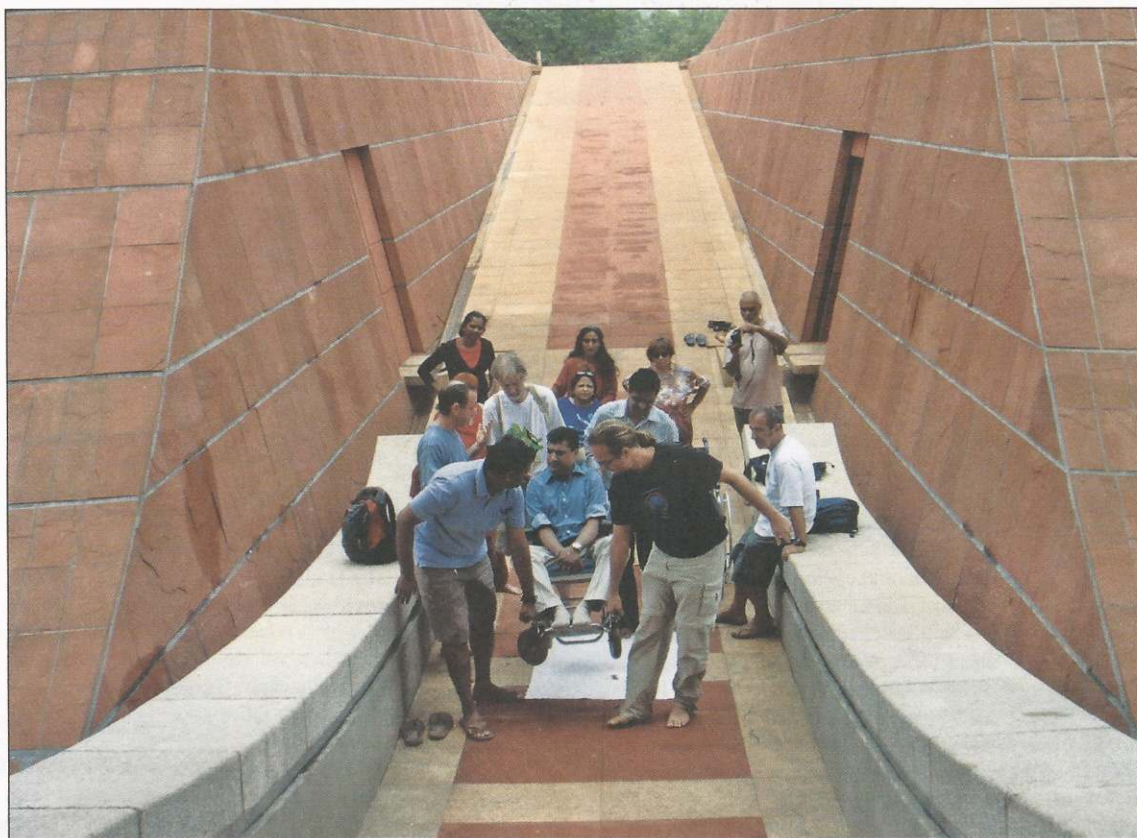
More and more countries are passing legislation to ensure that people with disabilities are allowed to participate fully and equitably in society. In 1995 India passed the 'Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act' which promotes equality and participation of people with disabilities and the elimination of all kinds of discrimination. However, many of the provisions of this Act have not been implemented as individual states need only implement them if it is within their 'economic capacity'.

How is Auroville doing on this front? After all, one would expect that a community which has human unity as its goal and invites participation from all people of goodwill would be in the forefront of this movement. However, this is not the case. Take accessibility. Many of our buildings and public spaces, not to speak of our roads, are difficult to negotiate not only for people with disabilities but for anybody whose mobility is even temporarily compromised.

In the early years, of course, the nature of the pioneering work meant that most Aurovilians were young and able-bodied and little or no thought was given to people with disabilities and reduced mobility. Today, however, a significant proportion of Auroville's population, which includes some of those pioneers, is over sixty and increasingly likely to be physically incapacitated, either temporarily or permanently.

To be fair, awareness of the need to do something has been growing over the years. In 2001, under the auspices of the Asia-Urbs project, there was a possibility to bring an expert to Auroville to work on making it 'barrier-free'. Unfortunately, this did not materialize. So it was not until October last year that the first

An accessible Auroville for all



Accessing the Inner Chamber of the Matrimandir is cumbersome and uncomfortable for people with disabilities.

workshop devoted to making Auroville more accessible for everyone was held here.

The three day workshop was led by a team from *Samarthyam*, a pioneering national organization which works to make buildings, public spaces and transportation systems accessible for all. The workshop was divided into three parts. On the first morning the basic concepts were clarified by Executive Director Anjee Agarwal and her colleagues, access auditors Ashwani Kumar and Debabrata

Chakravarti. They spoke of the need for a "barrier-free environment" which they defined as "creating and maintaining environments in which people can participate in ways which are equitable, dignified, maximize independence, conserve energy, and are safe and affordable". And who benefits? Not only the disabled, but anybody with reduced mobility, which includes people with short-term ailments, senior citizens, pregnant women, families with young children – even people with heavy luggage.

What's it like to have reduced mobility? A blindfold walk in the Town Hall brought this home to participants in a very immediate way, as well as pointing up the failure of one of our major public buildings to consider the needs of the blind and others who are 'differently-abled'.

The second part of the workshop focused on technical aspects of accessibility and how architects and engineers can tackle them. It clarified that barrier-free access involves much more than constructing a ramp or a

handicapped toilet. It requires taking into account the whole environment, including the need for signage, special flooring, lighting, colour contrasts and emergency evacuation routes (see box on page 2).

Most people assume that doing all this would be very expensive, but the *Samarthyam* team emphasised that barrier-free construction costs only 1% – 2% of the total project cost if it is incorporated in the planning stage. To retrofit existing buildings, of course, is more expensive.

The final and most interesting part of the workshop involved Anjee and her colleague Ashwani, both of whom are in wheelchairs, making an accessibility audit of the Matrimandir, the Town Hall, Sadhana Forest and Bharat Nivas (see box on page 2).

In their final report, *Samarthyam* appreciated that Auroville was making efforts towards creating barrier-free environments but noted they were insufficient. It recommended that all public buildings and guest houses in Auroville be made barrier-free; that in each community at least two ground floor living spaces should be made fully accessible for anybody with reduced mobility; and that codes specifying what should be done to ensure full accessibility in all public buildings in Auroville should be framed and implemented by l'Avenir d'Auroville.

Susmita, the Aurovillian who was instrumental in bringing *Samarthyam* to Auroville, is herself partially disabled. For her, the conference marks the beginning of a more conscious urban development which considers the needs of all, something she has dreamed of for many years. "I firmly believe it is a new step forward in Auroville."

Alan

Towards a barrier-free city

Susmita, initiator of the recent conference, and Frederick, Pino and Sauro, three of the coordinators of l'Avenir d'Auroville, discuss how Auroville can become a more inclusive community.

How well is Auroville doing regarding making it accessible for everyone?

Sauro: Not very well at all. Historically there were reasons for this. Auroville was physically very challenging in the early days and the settlements were very spread out, so it mostly attracted only those who were young and fit. Today the environment is more urban, concentrated, we have more public buildings, so we should pay more attention to accessibility. But we are not doing much in this line.

Pino: I live in Creativity, a community which is not accessible for anybody who does not have full mobility. It's shameful that, after forty years, Auroville is doing so little to provide full accessibility. We are definitely lagging behind here.

Why has it taken Auroville so long to work on this aspect? Are there other reasons beyond the ones Sauro mentions?

Frederick: Yes. In the early days the Aurovilians

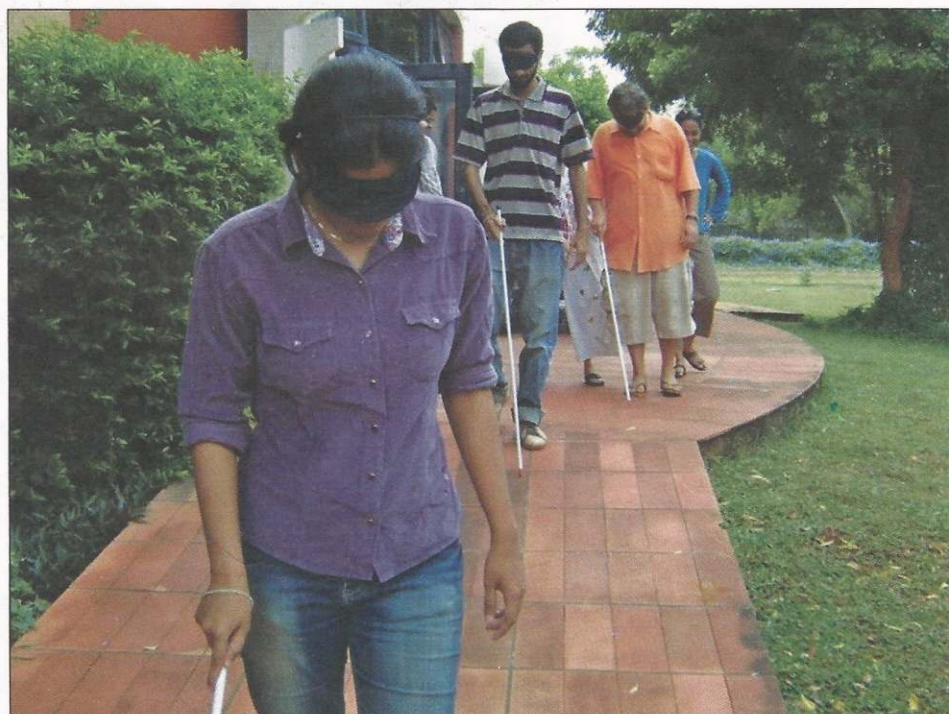
working on Matrimandir were scoffing at those who took any kind of security measures: 'You don't have enough faith in The Mother, nothing can happen'. When Mother came to know about this she was very upset by this simplistic interpretation of her protection. She was always telling people to have a full faith in her protection but at the same time to do everything necessary to protect themselves.

So there was this feeling that we were on a new wave, that nothing could happen to us and that we didn't have to make any special provision for anybody who had disabilities – although we never excluded anybody who wanted to work with us.

Wasn't there also some kind of feeling that the pioneering aspect was a test, some form of initiation? Isn't this also why so little was done to change things?

Frederick: True. And then there was that pattern which said that if somebody got injured there must be some reason for it.

Then there was the Matrimandir. Roger was often asked why he didn't make it accessible for people who were disabled. He would brush it aside. 'We are a fraternity', he said, by which he meant that we are a brotherhood of Mother's children and if somebody wants to go up to the



Participants in the 'barrier-free' workshop experience a blindfold walk outside the Town Hall.

Mother's room we would bring them there.

I saw it rather differently. I agree with J.K. Galbraith who said that a society is judged on the way that it cares for its young, old, poor and sick. I think Auroville is now at a stage where it's

an absolute necessity that we make conscious arrangements for these people.

At the same time, it's tricky to create a special category. For example, J.R.D. Tata was rather (continued on page 2)

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shaky on his last visit to Auroville. But when someone offered him his arm to help him go up to the chamber, he brushed it away. "I can do this on my own," he said. So people with a handicap or limited mobility do not necessarily want to be treated in a special way.

Susmita: This is true. I am partially disabled and many times people have offered to help me but I have always refused because I want to do things on my own. At the same time, while people like me can improve our bodies, there is a limit beyond which we cannot go and this needs to be considered. The Ashram, for example, doesn't consider the needs of the old and physically-challenged, even though 50% of the inmates are old and can't walk. So they sit at home and don't participate in the larger life of the community. I hope this will not happen in Auroville where, we shouldn't forget, something like 25% of the present population is over 60 years old (see box).

Essentials for full accessibility

- * Accessible routes
- * Ramps at all entrances and exits
- * Handrails on steps and ramps
- * Way-finding and information signage supplemented with Braille and pictograms
- * All doors should have a minimum width of 900 mm
- * Antiskid flooring
- * Accessible drinking water units
- * Accessible unisex toilets on all floors
- * Acoustically-insulated rooms to keep away ambient noise

So how do we begin to make Auroville more accessible?

Susmita: The *Samarthyam* team stressed that the first thing that has to happen is to pull down the mental barriers. Once this has been done, the physical barriers will come down more easily.

A mental barrier can mean ignorance of the needs of the disabled, but it can also mean discrimination.

Susmita: Exactly. One Aurovilian I know has a disability which cannot be seen. I asked her to come and work with us but she refused because she didn't want to be identified with this work. She explained that once she had talked to another Aurovilian about her problem and this person had said some not very nice things, so now she wanted to remain quiet. Then there is the example of Christel. She was talking with somebody about joining Auroville and this person told her, "Don't worry, you're in a wheelchair so they will never let you become an Aurovilian."

Frederick: In other words, we only want the beautiful, rich, young, and healthy!

Susmita: Discrimination is also built into the language we use. For example, the



Before and after: The unsafe 'ditch' around the reception desk in the Town Hall has finally been filled-up.

term 'disabled' implies 'unable to function properly'. But my brother always uses the term 'differently-abled' because if, for example, you are blind, you may develop other capacities which far exceed those of sighted people.

Differently-abled people are often better workers because every day they have to prove themselves, so they push themselves to give of their best. That's why our commercial units should be willing to employ them.

Sauro: We must change the way we think. We used to talk about making Auroville a pedestrian and cycle-friendly city, but now we must plan for an inclusive pedestrian city which is accessible for all. We also have to change this conception that the present condition of Auroville is only a problem for people who are physically-challenged. It affects

everybody with reduced mobility, either temporary or permanent. For example, if you have a back problem you can't cycle on the kind of roads we have now.

Practically what does it mean to make Auroville accessible for all?

Sauro: L'Avenir should take the lead in drawing up a code of practice ensuring full accessibility of public buildings.

Pino: We are already working on it. Within a few weeks we will publish guidelines regarding the need to provide ramps and fully-accessible toilets and bathrooms in all our public buildings.

But the Samarthyam team pointed out that full accessibility means much more than providing ramps and special bathrooms. We are talking about the total environment.

Pino: True, but I don't think we can cover everything right away. All public buildings will have toilets so ensuring they are accessible for all is simple. Providing ramps and handrails on all stairs is also not a big deal. But if we talk about providing lifts, for example, it becomes more difficult.

Isn't one of the concerns that ensuring full accessibility will be very costly?

Susmita: *Samarthyam* estimates that if full accessibility is planned in from the beginning, it will increase construction costs by only 1-2%. Of course, retrofitting existing buildings is more expensive.

Pino: In the new guidelines for constructions we should specify that an extra percentage be included to cover the cost of full accessibility. We're talking here about public buildings which cost three or four crore rupees, so a few lakhs extra is nothing.

Frederick: A special fund should be set up, fed through a percentage from these large public buildings, to rectify existing buildings. If there is a will, the economics are not really an obstacle. We should also make a study of the local villages to see what the situation is there and what can be done.

We've talked about the mental and financial blocks to ensuring full accessibility. But what about the aesthetic one? Aren't architects worried that ensuring full accessibility will spoil the appearance of their buildings? Take the Matrimandir. Samarthyam recommended

a number of modifications, like chair-lifts and handrails, to make it more accessible. Are we willing to make these changes?

Pino: Today we cannot make the Matrimandir fully accessible; if we had planned this from the beginning it would have been completely different. But we can make it partially accessible. We can provide handrails on at least one of the very steep ramps which go down to the Lotus pool and we can provide a chairlift for the steps which lead up to the Matrimandir as long as it doesn't compromise the aesthetics.

The Samarthyam access audit team mentioned that the spiral marble stairs leading up to the second level are a particular challenge.

Pino: We can do something there as well. We should do some research to find out what technologies are available. Of course, we don't have to provide accessibility from all sides: only one of the spiral stairways need be accessible.

I suppose one of the points, if you are old or differently-abled, is that you don't want to have to phone ahead and have a whole organization put in place just because you wish to visit the Matrimandir.

Pino: Exactly. But now there are chairlifts which are very small and light and which can easily be operated by whoever is on duty. Basically, we need expert advice about this.

Susmita: *Samarthyam* has offered to keep working with us. I also want to be trained to do accessibility audits of our buildings and environment so that we don't have to keep calling in outside experts.

Pino: Within the next two to three years we have to see real movement on the accessibility issue. This means drawing up guidelines for public buildings and large blocks of apartments and putting them into practice. We start today.

From an interview by Alan

Age break up of Aurovilians

Age	Number
18 to 30	311
31 to 40	389
41 to 50	357
51 to 60	334
61 to 70	231
71 to 80	61
81 to 90	18
91 to 100	1
Total:	1702



A chairlift: an option for the Matrimandir?

Extracts from Samarthyam audit recommendations

Matrimandir

1. Access

The access path has loose sand and it is difficult to manoeuvre mobility aids, especially when wet.

* A paved path from the parking to the main gate is preferred, as it allows independent movement of persons using mobility aids.

* The receptionist and security people to orient people with disabilities about the accessible path to Matrimandir and Amphitheatre.

* The vehicle already provided for children, senior citizens and others requires adaptation to carry persons with disabilities, including wheelchair users.

* The connecting paths leading to the Matrimandir are narrow (only one and a half meters) and should be widened to allow two wheelchairs to pass each other.

2. Access to Lotus Pond

Steep slopes lead to the Lotus Pond

beneath the Matrimandir. Assistance of more than two people is required to move a wheelchair up or down. Old people and people with medical conditions will also require assistance.

* All slopes to have handrails on both sides of the wall.

* At least one slope to have platform or stair lift provision to carry wheelchair users or older people.

3. Access to petal meditation rooms
Access to meditation rooms in the petals can be provided by means of portable ramps stored in each room and made available for wheelchair users. Inside the meditation rooms there are two steps. Portable ramps can be provided to access the rooms.

4. Access to Inner Chamber
A steep slope and a flight of steps mark the entrance to the Matrimandir. Lifting chairs are available for wheelchair users to be lifted manually up the steps. However, the process of lifting people up the steps and further transfers on the way to the inner chamber is

cumbersome and could be painful not only to persons with disabilities but also for the carers in attendance. Persons with severe disabilities find it difficult to balance and adjust in the narrow lifting chair. It is unsafe and difficult to lift the chair with a person with disability on the marble spiral staircase.

* A stair lift both for outer stairs and inside spiral steps is the best possible solution

5. Access to the Amphitheatre

* Ramps to be provided on the side slopes.

* Level differences at the beginning and end of the slopes to be merged to provide unhindered access for wheelchair users.

* Accessible toilet should be provided.

Town Hall

1. Entrance

* Directional signage for the ramp location to be provided near the steps.

* Handrails to be provided on both sides of the ramp.

2. Reception area

The unfriendly sunken-area design around the reception makes it extremely difficult to converse with the receptionist by visitors using wheelchairs and other mobility aids. [The area has now been covered with black stone, eds.]

3. Ramp to first floor

* Needs to have handrails fitted on both sides.

4. Steps to cafeteria

* Contrasting colour handrails should be provided on both sides of the stairs at two levels - 700 mm and 850 mm.

* The edges of the steps to have colour-contrasted bands of 50 mm to help people with low vision to make out the depth and height of each step.

5. Cafeteria counter

* A part of the counter to be lowered to 800 mm so that wheelchair-users and children and short stature persons can access it easily.

6. Accessibility ladies and gents toilets

A steep ramp without landing marks the present entrance to these toilets.

* The signage for accessible toilet should be provided on the wall.

* A ramp with landing to be provided as the door opens upwards and it is difficult for wheelchair user to open the door and move the wheelchairs simultaneously.

* Internally, cubicles to have grab-bars which assist in transfer from wheelchair to WC.

Bharat Nivas

1. Auditorium

The gravel path that leads to the stage and handicapped entrance at the side of the Auditorium is difficult to negotiate.

* The existing ramp to the stage needs modification. Handrails are required on both sides.

* There is a need for unisex accessible toilet

2. Kala Kendra:

* There is no easy access

Serving the spirit of service

The bimonthly communications from the Auroville Board of Services / ServiceLink in the *News and Notes*, the weekly internal Auroville newsletter, are commendable for their regularity and in-depth information. But what is ServiceLink? And what, exactly, is the Auroville Board of Services?

“The Auroville Board of Services (ABS) aims at bringing together all the service activities of Auroville, so that they can share their aspirations and difficulties, their projects and their experiences,” says Anandi. “We agreed on this name as we wanted to ‘organize’ them similarly to the way the commercial units have been ‘organized’ in the Auroville Board of Commerce (ABC). But there is no ‘Board’ with any kind of authority, as such. All services are automatically members and a meeting of the Board of Services means a meeting to which the managers of all service activities are invited. It’s, in fact, a name we are not attached to.”

Anandi manages the Pour Tous Distribution Centre (PTDC) and is an active member of the Human Resource Team and the Budget Coordination Committee. Together with Isha, she is fully involved with the ABS and with ServiceLink.

“The work of supporting and assisting the services, providing them with information and helping them become more coordinated and effective in their work, is done through ServiceLink, the coordinating channel which represents the ABS,” explains Isha. “This ‘service for services’ can be in the form of identifying problems and offering management tools and solutions, advice on appropriate operational frameworks, or simple help with text editing or promotion work.”

She explains, “For example, when the Budget Coordination Committee (BCC), the group that is responsible for drafting Auroville’s annual budget and recommending allocations, requested the services to present yearly budgets, many service managers had doubts on how to go about this. Here ServiceLink offers help. ServiceLink also provides the secretarial function for the ABS, for general meetings, area meetings and drafting proposals. ServiceLink in turn is helped in its task by the Services Support Team, a rotational group of 5 service managers with long years of dedicated work in Auroville’s service sector.

Should the ABS then be seen as the pressure group of the services? “No,” says Anandi, “The ABS is not that; it isn’t a special interest group. It tries to represent the particular aspirations and difficulties experienced by those working in our services, including those who work for funded projects or some special income-generating activities. This need has meanwhile been acknowledged by the FAMC (the finance and economic policy setting group) and in the BCC where one representative of the ABS has a permanent seat.”

The specific difficulties of the Services

Is there a sympathetic hearing in the BCC for the requirements of the services? “There is,” says Isha, “but often we hear the critique that there are too many services to be supported by Auroville’s limited income. Many services have started as projects, on the initiative of an individual who, after some time, requests financial support when it seems the service has become ‘essential’ for the community. The community, through the BCC, needs to prioritize which services should be developed and supported.”

She also elaborates on the concept of self-supporting services. “To minimize the financial impact of service budgets on Auroville’s self-generated income, previous Economy groups have encouraged a diverse system of partially or fully self-supporting services, where the services collect income from individual users in order to cover their expenditure. The Electrical Service and Auroville Bakery operate in this way. But this



Anandi (left) and Isha

reflects a market-driven approach. It is not in conformity with Mother’s ideals, when applied to an internal economy serving the needs of those who work entirely for Auroville and its development. In our context, it becomes economically-backward.”

“I believe that the Auroville administration is less aware of the specific difficulties of the services,” adds Anandi. “The BCC, like their predecessor, the Economy Group, is very concerned about expenditure, so it demands budget requests and projections, and scrutinizes figures and accounts. But this attitude doesn’t really encourage the services or helps them to improve their functioning – in fact, in some ways it actually discourages them. The BCC could help more by providing a transparent economic overview showing all avenues of income and expenditure, and by actively increasing the income.”

She explains, “Those who work for Auroville’s service activities are people who have the spirit of service. That doesn’t imply that they are all expert managers or fully-qualified financial administrators. Now these people are scrutinized disproportionately compared to those who run a commercial unit or who are self-supporting. They have to present budgets and account for every paisa, and moreover are the only ones in Auroville whose material well-being (their personal ‘maintenance’) is decided by other people.”

Isha clarifies, “Auroville is a place where everybody is meant to find ways to express themselves and nurture their inner development through their work. The present maintenance system, as reflected by the support provided in goods and services, needs a lot of attention. This is also reflected in the way in which services themselves are being supported, financially and otherwise.”

The universal maintenance concept

One of the ways that is being investigated is the concept of a ‘universal maintenance’. “We are all Aurovilians, all working for Auroville, part of the same family, part of the same system,” says Anandi. “We

should all be maintained in a similar and balanced way, following the same channels. The concept of an Auroville universal maintenance would imply that everybody in Auroville would receive more or less the same type of maintenance packets from the same source, so that there would be no major differences. Instead of directly paying their executives and staff, commercial units could transfer that money through Auroville’s internal channels. Self-supporting people could then also contribute the equivalent of their living expenses through these same channels. We believe that such a system would make everybody feel part of the same Auroville, under one economic umbrella.

“We are also concerned that Aurovilians really work for Auroville. Those who work for themselves, while living in Auroville – well, what can we say? Those energies are for the most part lost to Auroville. At present those people are asked to pay an extra contribution to Auroville. It would be far better to design a system where the energies of these people can contribute more directly to the development of Auroville.”

Do they consider themselves purists in adhering to the principles of the economy as indicated by The Mother? Anandi nods. “We believe that the Dream of the Mother, her economic model, is the only way forward if Auroville is not to become an ordinary city. You can call us dreamers if you like, as opposed to the pragmatists who look primarily at so-called realities and feasibility. But both have their intrinsic value and we very much need to reach a balanced approach.”

“The Mother’s Dream includes cultivating the spirit of work as an offering – of service,” says Isha. “The spirit of service means the joy of service. If that is not a cornerstone of our collective consciousness, in our daily work, then there is something essential missing. It is this important aspect that gives meaning to our life in Auroville, and it should be actively encouraged.”

In conversation with Carel

In brief

Documentary film on Sri Aurobindo

April 4th, 2010 will be the 100th anniversary of Sri Aurobindo’s arrival in Pondicherry. The Union Minister of State for Planning, Parliamentary Affairs and Culture, Mr. V. Narayanasamy, has given the green light for making a documentary film on Sri Aurobindo. The film, directed by ‘Gunavanti Mainthan’ Ravi, will be released on April 4th, 2010, marking the centenary of Sri Aurobindo’s arrival in Pondicherry. The event will also be commemorated by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, by the Pondicherry government as well as in Auroville.

Matrimandir Test Pond

L’Avenir d’Auroville informed the community that permission for building the Matrimandir test pond is still pending. A Task Force Matrimandir Test Pond/Lake has been set-up to advise if the test pond can serve to verify the feasibility of the parameters set for the lake by late Roger Anger as well as environmental parameters. The Matrimandir Lake should be environmentally sustainable. Another point of discussion is the size of the test pond.

At the end of November 2009, discussions were held with a renowned water specialist and geo hydrologist from Ahmedabad on the test pond, the proposed future lake, and the entire water situation in the Auroville area. The report of the expert is awaited.

Banyan tree

The soil level under the Banyan tree, the geographical centre of Auroville, has been raised by some 25 centimetres with a mixture of light soils. No soil was put around the main trunk because that might accelerate its decay. The Banyan is thought to be about 100 years old, and its main trunk is already hollow. The tree has 29 secondary trunks, some of them with a diameter of up to one meter. These will support the canopy of the tree as the central trunk slowly decays. Two narrow paths were laid under the branches of the tree to form the border for the gardens of *Life and Power*. The work under the Banyan tree will be completed with the installation of a new set of granite benches.

Auroville Marathon 2010



PHOTO RAMESH

The third Auroville Marathon will happen on February 14, 2010. Running enthusiasts are invited to register at: www.marathon.auroville.com

Auroville market starts again

The Auroville Market has restarted and now happens every Saturday morning opposite the Solar Kitchen. Auroville farm products and arts and handicrafts are sold and while information is shared about social, economic and environmental sustainability for Auroville and the surrounding neighbourhood.

ENVIRONMENT

Hunting the poachers

The rare sight of a deer, the frequently observed encounter with a jackal, the swift flight of a rabbit, the powerful archaic feel of a monitor lizard and the noisy passing of a couple of porcupines fills one’s heart with joy that our reforestation efforts have made it possible for wildlife to return.

The first to come back were the birds. Some of them are on the list of threatened species. The horn bill owl for instance. There was a time when several of these magnificent birds lived in the Forecomers canyon. Then they disappeared. Now again there are rare sightings. But the other night I heard the call of a

bird which I have never heard before and to my own dismay a sad thought crept out of my mind, “How long will it survive before it is shot?”

For since several years now our wildlife, regardless of whether it freely roams the sky above or is bound to the few acres of afforested land, have been under constant threat of being killed. The blast of rifles in the early morning hours in the Forecomers canyon heralds the demise of one or more creatures.

For long we didn’t know how to solve the situation. Help came in the form of a group of determined young men who are part of a Pondicherry NGO called *Animal Security*.

They assisted the Pondicherry Forest Department to arrest the poachers by joining a hunt with the offer of Rs.1,000 for the quills of a porcupine. Four poachers were caught red-handed, their country rifles seized and a fine of Rs. 10,000 was levied. After their interrogation, three more poachers were arrested.

Those poachers ran a racket that sold body parts of endangered species on request as well as on the public market. A lucrative criminal business has received a severe blow and one can only hope that the sanctions and penalties handed out by the Forest Department will stop the illegal hunting for a long time.

Bindu



Indian Crested porcupine (*Hystrix indica*)

IMAGE COURTESY PITCHANDIKULAM BIO-RESOURCE CENTRE

Research in homeopathy: *Harmony* and *Samata*

A posting by Maggi Lidchi-Grassi in the News and Notes on the beneficial effects of homeopathic remedies prepared from substances originating from the hair of The Mother and the nail-clippings of Sri Aurobindo led to debate on the Auroville's internal Intranet and to a public statement of the Working Committee which termed the posting 'unfortunate'.

"I do not believe the Working Committee knows anything about the topic," says Sigrid. She is one of Auroville's homeopaths who is researching the remedies and is documenting the seven year old database of Maggi to provide clear information on the effects of the homeopathic remedies *Harmony* and *Samata*.

Maggi, who developed the remedies, was for many years one of The Mother's private secretaries. She is a practising homeopath, and founded Quiet, Auroville's healing centre. She is also a prolific writer of novels and essays.

Maggi had explained in the *News and Notes* the origins of these remedies. "Much of the work of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother consisted in attempting to bring the supramental down and establish in the material plane. That work, in so far as we have any understanding of it, required that these energies first be brought into and fixed in their own bodies. ... Might those energies that had been fixed in the cells of their bodies not be releasable by the process of homeopathic potentization? And what would the effect be on someone taking a potentized remedy derived from such material? Being in the possession of some hairs from The Mother's head which Mother had once given to her with the words, 'All of me is potentially in this', the remedy called *Harmony* was prepared ... Subsequently, some nail parings of Sri Aurobindo were obtained and the remedy *Samata* (Sanskrit for 'equanimity') was prepared from it.

Nearly a hundred people, primarily in Pondicherry and Auroville, have taken one or both of these remedies one or more times. Some individuals who took the remedies were suffering from various ailments including hypertension, migraine headaches and depression. With these people the focus of interest was on the effect the remedies might have upon their existing pathology. Most of them, according to Maggi, reported improvement in their health.

But mostly the individuals taking the remedies were in good health. Their feedback focused on

changes they experienced in their state of consciousness, energy, creativity, dream life, etc. "Only positive effects were experienced, primarily in the form of people having deep experiences," says Sigrid. "There were no negative responses at all! This is amazing." For Maggi, these experiences are doorways to increased energy, creativity, and even for the psychic being to come to the front.

Maggi admitted in her posting that proper experimental methodology had not been followed. "There was, for example, no control group; and while none of those taking them knew the actual source of the remedies, most (though not all) were aware that the remedies were 'special' and that they were in some way related to Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. Still, the effects reported were so consistently (and often profoundly) positive – not least in some of the cases involving real health issues – that the conclusion that something of Sri Aurobindo's and The Mother's energies are working through these remedies seems not merely justified, but inescapable. Those of us who have been most closely involved in this work, who have experienced the effects of *Harmony* and *Samata* ourselves and read report after report of others experiences are convinced that we are truly witnessing an action of the Grace."

Maggi gave more information on the remedies in a further letter to the Working Committee. "We have seen that by administering a single drop of 'Harmony', people are touched by The Mother in the same way as when she was alive: depressions cured, pains alleviated, comprehension widened, the sudden descent of peace and calm, and torment dispelled. Compassion, forgiveness and love take the place of resentment. Many illnesses have been cured."

She continues, "With *Samata* a great stillness is established, instructions come in dreams, seeming miracles occur. Ariel Browne, a clairvoyant who didn't know what the remedy was, saw that *Harmony* had a 'transformational power' and could 'reposition the cells'. Katia, a French clairvoyant, also saw their evolutionary possibilities." In a later

email, Maggi stated that "*Harmony* and *Samata* are made available in the belief that peace and compassion of Mother and Sri Aurobindo may infiltrate the consciousness of the human race."

If these were "glad tidings" to some, others found using relics of the gurus to prepare homeopathic remedies highly objectionable. The Working Committee, concerned about the

Understanding homeopathy

Homeopathic medicines, or 'remedies' as they are called, are prepared by means of a process known as 'potentization'. This involves trituration followed by repeatedly diluting the original substance while subjecting it to 'succussion', a repetitive pounding, which releases the pure essence of the subtle energies associated with the material substance. Chemically, the original substance cannot be traced after the process. For each substance the effects are documented meticulously in so-called 'provings': Healthy persons take a remedy and document the effects on the physical, emotional and mental level in great detail for several weeks. In this way, to date four thousand 'remedy pictures' have been documented in homeopathic *Materia Medica* over 250 years. This concise material is then used to prescribe a medicine for a sick person according to 'like cures like'. The homeopathic healing process may be understood in the framework of quantum physics.

image of Auroville, feared that offering the remedies publicly might lead to Auroville being seen as a sect. Others argued that the transformation of one's consciousness does not depend on relics of the guru but only on one's relation with the Divine. For some, the use of these remedies belongs to the old paths of ador-

ing the masters – an outdated tradition that is inappropriate in Auroville.

But for Sigrid, this discussion showed a misunderstanding of the very basics involved. "This is research on the frontiers of consciousness: these arguments demonstrate a lack of awareness of today's research in homeopathy and healing sciences."

"Homeopathic remedies free subtle energies of a material substance or of living tissue, such as from human body parts, for example *Lac humanum* (Mothers milk), or from DNA, and these have been used therapeutically for many years – just to put things into perspective. By following this line of thought it is clear that – according to homeopathic understanding and philosophy – *Harmony* and *Samata* reveal by means of potentization the energies stored in the bodies of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, who were working on establishing a new species." She invites the critics "to join the research and find out for themselves – either by ingesting the remedies or by doing a focused meditation with them" – rather than uttering preconceived opinions. "Let them experiment with this 'energetic reminder' of the work we came to do here – research in consciousness."

As Maggi states, "This is a serious project with possible worldwide repercussions. Homeopaths in England, America, Italy and Czechoslovakia as well as India have used *Harmony* and *Samata* and prescribed it. ... An article on 'Harmony and *Samata*' is about to appear in 'Links', the international Homeopathic journal that is read in 50 countries. ... If Auroville is ever in any way recognized as one of the sites where *Harmony* was first 'proved', it will be to her credit." And she concludes, "Ultimately, if enough people experience something of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother through these essences, it should make a difference for human consciousness as such."

Carel

For more info on homeopathy in Auroville visit http://www.auroville.org/health/inner_health.htm

SERVICES

In search of the missing donor

Auroville Today's report of the meeting of the Auroville International Centres in Holland in the June-July issue mentioned that an American dentist had promised \$16,000 to the Auroville Dental Clinic for village dental work. Repeated enquiries, however, have failed to discover the donor.

"Maddening!" says Jacques. "We were extremely happy to read this report and asked Auroville International for the contact details of the donor. But nobody knew anything about it, even though they had approved the report that appeared in Auroville Today! Was it just a chimera? We hoped it wasn't, but hope is failing."

Jacques is one of the early Aurovilians. He has earned respect by not only setting up and running a first-class dental clinic in Auroville, but also creating a dental health care system in the villages that surround Auroville. Both are based on revolutionary concepts.

The Auroville Health Centre works with the so-called 'Zero Concept' developed by Dr. Beech. The patient lies flat instead of sitting in a tilting dental chair. "The dentist no longer has to break his back treating a patient," says Jacques. "Work can be done in a natural position sitting behind the patient's

head. The dentist has minimum body tension and maximum finger control. Back pain is the number one bane of all dentists. I had it for 18 years, but with this system, it completely disappeared."

"The second advantage is that can be used by our village dental helpers," says Suriyagandhi. She manages Auroville's Dental Clinic and ADCERRA, the rather unwieldy acronym for Auroville Dental Centre Education Research Rural Action, a programme for the villages. She explains, "Our dental helpers are ordinary village women with no medical or dental background. They have been trained by us to do teeth cleaning for adults and children and provide basic anti-carries treatment in milk teeth. As the patients lie on a flat surface, any table will do, there is no need for an expensive dental chair. This makes the treatment affordable."

"The women remove early caries and fill the cavities with special cement which releases some fluoride. This halts the decay process," explains Jacques. "If the dental helper sees something she cannot treat, the patient is referred to the special dental clinic for villagers at Auroville's Health Centre. Treating caries at an early age avoids costly dental care when the person is older. The technique is promoted by the World Health Organisation. It can be used in the most difficult conditions, even when there is no electricity or running water."

So how many people benefit from ADCERRA?

"In addition to the dental clinic we run ten sub-centres," says Suriyagandhi. "We employ 14 dental



PHOTO COURTESY AUROVILLE DENTAL SERVICE

A time for self-examination

helpers who cover a population of about 25,000 people living in 19 villages within a 15 kilometre radius from Auroville. The programme is very beneficial to them. Most of the 700 million inhabitants of rural India have no access whatsoever to dental facilities!"

Asked for the success rate, Suriyagandhi confirms it is high. "The programme includes regular meetings with village leaders, headmen and women's clubs to increase the awareness of the need for dental hygiene and treatment. The children are regularly checked. As a result, they have far less caries and rarely suffer any acute pain. We started work in the villages about 15 years ago. We now notice that there is substantial less need for root canal treatments, tooth extractions or bridges and implants."

"We were shocked when we did a survey in the schools of a remote village," adds Jacques. "There was a very high incidence of caries and lack of hygiene. It showed how much the children in Auroville's surrounding villages benefit from our dental programme. The difference was so huge that it really encouraged us to continue. Our programme could be a role model for underprivileged rural areas and should be implemented all over India!"

But many dental clinics and colleges have come up in Pondicherry. Is there a need for continuing the programme? "Definitely," says Suriyagandhi. "The costs of dental treatment in Pondicherry are far higher. We only charge for materials and labour, not overheads or profits. For example, a root canal treatment which costs Rs 3,000 in Pondicherry is done by us for a mere Rs 800. This is affordable for the people from the villages. If they had to pay Rs 3,000, the tooth would go untreated."

"It's here that the funding requirement comes in," says Jacques. "ADCERRA aims at self-sufficiency, but with the increase in salaries and material costs, this ideal cannot yet be reached. We estimate that will need to be supported for the next three years. We are experimenting with a kind of 'dental insurance' system, where a village family pays Rs 120 a month for basic treatment, but this has not really caught on. We are also exploring an idea to start a scheme of collective micro-credits which aims at every sub-centre becoming financially self-supporting. But this too is a distant dream. That's why we were so happy reading about the American donor! Could anyone with information please contact us at aurodentcentre@auroville.org.in?"

Carel

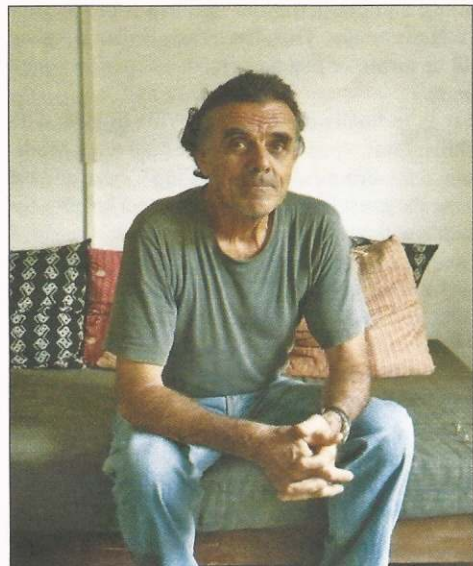


PHOTO COURTESY AUROVILLE DENTAL SERVICE

A dental helper at work while children await their turn

Researching the effects of food on the body

Opposite Sve Dam is the Food Laboratory set up by Lorenzo. "Mother wrote many fascinating things relating to food which for years have captured my imagination" says Lorenzo. In the *Agenda* she wrote, "I would like an experimental kitchen to be there (in Auroville), a sort of 'culinary laboratory'. Two years ago we created this 'Laboratoire Culinaire' where a group of us meet two or three times a week.



Lorenzo of the Food Laboratory

The Food Laboratory's main interest is the body's immune system which decides the choice of foods that it will use in maintaining equilibrium in the body. "A defective immune system," says Lorenzo, "may trigger auto-immune diseases. Some examples are rheumatoid arthritis, diabetes, multiple sclerosis, lupus and many others. Here at the Food Laboratory we aim at eliminating the trigger, and we do this by trial and experiment. This is a new approach in Auroville to food and its effect on the body; a living, working experiment.

"There are basic allergy tests to determine ones sensitivity to certain foods. We diagnose by kinesiology which is a simple tool for measuring the body's reaction to certain substances it may be sensitive to.

"There are three main categories of food that a small but increasing number of the population are allergic to. The most common is a milk or dairy food allergy, the second a wheat

allergy and the third are foods that come from the nightshade family. These include potatoes, peppers, aubergines, chillies and tomatoes. Certain foods for certain individuals trigger off the body's defence system with resulting symptoms which include bloated stomach, headache, lack of energy, and general flu-like symptoms. Once the irritant is identified and the person takes responsibility for avoiding certain foods, there is often a dramatic improvement in health. Because the person has the support and encouragement of the Food Laboratory it gives them the motivation to simply avoid the irritant."

Tony from Felicity is an Aurovilian who has benefited from the Food Laboratory's service. "I discovered I had an allergy to most of the nightshade family of plants, especially potatoes which, being British, I love. The result of avoiding these foods has been remarkable," he says. "I had a heart by-pass operation a few years ago which necessitated the surgeon taking vein out of my leg and I have suffered from post-operative swelling ever since. My wife insisted I go to the Food Laboratory, where my intolerance to potatoes and tomatoes was discovered. Since I stopped eating them my leg has almost healed and I feel much better. I also lost 15 kilos and no more have an energy slump after a meal."

Tony says it has also meant re-thinking habitual eating patterns. "I have learned to cook meals avoiding these foods; with suggestions from the Food Laboratory it was not difficult. That is also why we are in Auroville – to be willing to change our harmful habits and take responsibility for ourselves, not just react in the same old way. It has been a great learning experience for me on many levels."

Peas versus Pills.

Peas versus Pills is the name of regular seminars run by Dr. Nandita Shah to help people become their own best doctors through food rather than medicines. "By understanding our anatomy and physiology and understanding what would be the natural food for a human being we can greatly improve our health. We can also enjoy and be creative with food" says Nandita.

Nandita emphasises the benefits of a vegan diet for our health and the health of the planet and of course, animals. She also explains how chronic diseases like high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, obesity, asthma, and acute diseases like urinary tract infections and diarrhoea can often be reversed completely, just by making simple changes in the diet. "Many people think that

healthy food cannot be tasty which is why we serve three meals during the courses and provide recipes. The goal is to let people understand that it is really simple to make tasty healthy meals. There are always people who say that our meals are some of the best they have had in a long time."

"It always surprises me how many people do not know how to cook, and others do not know how to cook healthy food," continues Nandita. "Also many people do not know how to use alternatives to commonly used unhealthy items in their diet. In these classes we address all these issues. We have different themes; one class could be Italian cooking, then local Tamilian cooking, or dairy alternatives. Each time we cook 6-7 items to make a whole meal which the participants will eat before leaving. They are always amazed at the good, satisfying tastes they have created."

The Raw Food Centre

Over to the Kottakarai area of Auroville where Tamil born Aurovilian Anandi promotes 'living on raw foods'. "Last year I was able to go to the *Tree of Life Rejuvenation Centre* in Arizona, USA with a generous free scholarship from Dr. Gabriel Cousens," Anandi said. "It was a quantum leap in my life." The 10 weeks programme exposed her to the values of eating raw vegan vegetarian diet and its gourmet preparations. "The impact is so deep that I've decided to build Auroville's first *Raw Food*



Anandi who champions a raw food diet

Centre. It will have a restaurant, take-home service as well as offer educational programmes." More donor aid is still necessary. "It will be a big asset for Auroville in bringing vibrant phys-



PHOTO COURTESY NANDITA

Nandita advocates veganism

ical health to all and supporting our spiritual aspiration," she says.

She explains that according to raw food philosophy, "Cooking destroys 50% to 80% of the food nutrients. Cooking creates acidity which disrupts many bodily functions. It takes away the calcium from our bones and oxygen from our body which may result in breeding parasites. Cooked foods also are devoid of enzymes which are crucial for our digestion. This constant depletion causes degeneration and aging is accelerated."

Meanwhile Anandi, keen to introduce this new concept to India where traditionally raw foods are considered unhygienic, is creating her own raw food recipes using local ingredients. "Modern city-dwelling Indian people are becoming aware of the necessity to change their food habits as the rapid increase in heart disease and diabetes is starting to worry them. I incorporate Indian cuisine, but my recipes are all raw-food."

Anandi prepared me a Technicolor, fragrant dish that was a work of art. "Dr. Cousens taught me that dishes should be presented colourfully and artfully. This is the key to attracting people towards food as the eyes prepare us for food by causing salivation. That is the outward aspect. There is also an inner one. When I was a child, my mother taught me to approach food with devotion. Before eating, we would always silently offer our plate to the little shrine in the corner of the room and give thanks to the Divine."

Anandi is now also giving weekly workshops and prepares lunches and take home food.

Dianna

EDUCATION

Teens serving the community

Since the inception of Future School's internship programme, four batches of teenagers have experienced serving the Auroville community.

In 2006, Future School introduced a special activity into its curriculum: a semester-long internship programme called 'Auroville community service'. The intention: to have more interaction between the schools and Auroville services and units, and for the teenagers of the freshman class to experience Auroville through working in services and units.

Angela, who initiated the programme and is currently running it, explains: "For the first year students to do community service is a good transition between the middle and high school. I also believe that through this the students get to practice qualities that are essential – like being punctual, respecting the people one

works with, and adapting to different environments."

The programme starts at the beginning of the school year in July. Angela takes the students to visit the different services and units that have offered to be part of the programme. "There they get a small introduction and the people speak to them about what is expected. After this, the students make their choices which I take into consideration as I prepare the schedule that has to be as diverse as possible!"

This semester, the teenagers had seventeen workplaces to choose from covering a range of activities – from puncture service at Abri, to education with young children, to cooking and or hospitality at restaurants and New Pour Tous. The workplaces rotate every month so that each student will experience five jobs during the semester.

"Every Friday, the students report to work for an entire morning," says Angela. "For these fourteen-year olds, contributing to Auroville in this way has proved to be quite exciting. But they have to be committed: they cannot come up with excuses that they're bored or don't like the job – they have to stick with it!"

The programme, according to Angela, has been a success. "For the youth, it is a way of feeling part of the larger community," she says, "and also a time of self-discovery. Most of the students ask if the internship programme could not continue into the second semester also. Unfortunately, academic commitments come in and we can't afford this time; so we tell them that they should follow it up outside school hours."

However, Future School does have a work-study programme that caters to students not wanting a fully-academic curriculum. "For these students, we tailor-make programmes to suit the needs."

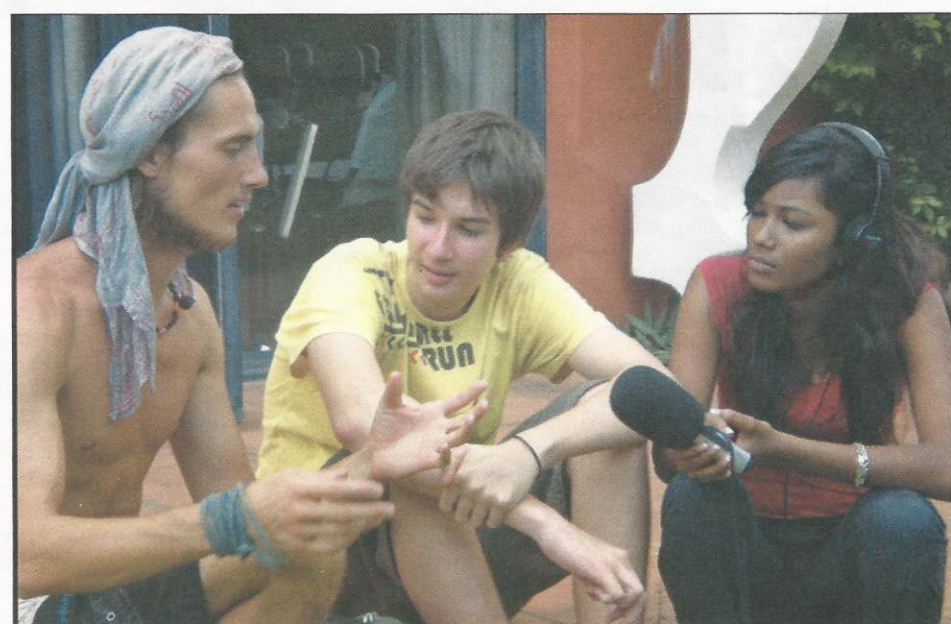


PHOTO ANGELA

Interns Aurodeva (centre) and Chandra (right) interviewing a volunteer for Auroville Radio.

An English workshop by students

For the past year, students of Last School have been volunteering at Deepanam School teaching English, art, theatre, and juggling.

Recently, Aurevan, one of Last School's students and a Deepanam graduate herself, organized a week-long workshop of 'intensive English' for the oldest class at Deepanam along with her three classmates. The team worked one-on-one with each student examining various aspects of the English language. Aspects that were covered included grammar, flow of writing, use of the Thesaurus, analysis of poetry and prose, communication of abstract thought and articulation and expression. Aurevan explains: "The common theme of the workshop was 'intensity' and our aim was to get these students to work both independently and together as a group."

"What was remarkable," says Aurevan, "was the response of the students in terms of commitment to their work and enthusiasm they showed. The experience of this little workshop carried a lot of joy; and insignificant as that may seem, I think it was a great stepping stone for all of us involved."

Beginning January, three Last School students will start working as part-time teachers at Deepanam.

For Angela, the community service programme has brought some special moments of sweetness. "I am always amazed how practical the teenagers are," she says. "Some time ago, we had a Russian student who enjoyed working at Savitri Bhavan. He wanted to work at the library at Savitri Bhavan instead of working with young children because he preferred the quietness of the library to noisy children!"

This past semester, Angela has noticed that cooking has become a popular choice. "Both boys and girls, they seem to enjoy anything to do with food," she says. "The most requested workplaces have been Martina's *Naturellement*, *La Terrace* and the *New Pour Tous*."

Angela hopes that more services and units will come forward to support the initiative. "Many units are not yet ready to engage teenagers, and the success of the programme depends on the willingness of the adults to guide them. For example, almost all the teenagers want to work at Matrimandir. But we can't place them there as there is no one ready to coordinate the students' work. We need workplaces where people are open to welcoming teenagers and willing to guide them – that, I believe, is the secret to a successful internship."

Priya Sundaravalli

“Afsaneh in Persian means ‘fairy tale,’” says Afsaneh. She sits in her beautiful Japanese style home a stone’s throw from her guest house and talks about her life, her work, and her childhood dreams.

“My life began in Persia, or Iran, as it is now called. When I was 6 years old my father emigrated to Germany. I was put in a Jesuit Girl’s School and as a Muslim was treated badly, so when I was 13, my father agreed that I could convert to Catholicism.” At 15, Afsaneh met the long-haired revolutionary, Jacob. “He had been to Auroville in 1968 and back in Germany he had become the local guru. This was the sixties and young German people were searching for something else in their lives. I was never a real hippie, but my contact with Jacob and his way of thinking gave me a push to explore other ways of being.” She married Jacob at 18. “I had to become a Jew as Jacob was from a very traditional Jewish family. So I went through three religious traditions in 12 years!” Afsaneh pauses for breath, and then explains how she came into contact with The Mother.

“When I was a young teenager someone gave me a copy of Huta’s *White Roses* and every sentence of it touched my heart. Having lived with all these religions, suddenly this peace came upon me that was not connected with religion. I had been overloaded with religion all my life. I said ‘Yes, yes’, that is all I want, just this direct connection with the heart.’ That was my first direct link to The Mother, and later, to Auroville.”

When Afsaneh and Jacob divorced in 1978 she saw her chance to finally go to Auroville. “Jacob had talked about this place in South India which was trying to create a new world and where you could create a new world for yourself. I had always felt very lonely in Germany; everything seemed cold after the warmth of Iranian society and I longed to put down roots somewhere meaningful.” For several months she travelled around India before arriving in Auroville in 1979. She remembers her first moment in Auroville: “I stood under the banyan tree and then I felt a lightning shock go through my body. My friend said I screamed out ‘Home, home!’ I felt that I was, finally, at home.”

“Looking back I realize I had always lived in communities. In Iran I had grown up in a family with five uncles and my mother and then I spent ten years in a boarding school, so it seemed a very natural way for me to live. It took several years of coming and going between India and Germany to wind my life down there, but on the 4th of January 1981, I became an Aurovilian.”

Afsaneh lived for a while in a keet hut where the Town Hall now stands, then moved to Kottakarai. “In the early days, I slept under the big neem tree that still gives me shelter, then someone said to me, ‘This is your place’ and I knew exactly what they meant.” Afsaneh had lost what little money she had, but a friend who owed her some cash gave her a sack of shiny beads and she started Bijou workshop, making beaded items to sell. “Bijou is still going strong after 12 years and Gillian is running it. Then I started to do massage and I believe I was the first therapist in Auroville, though at the time I think many people wondered what was going on up here.”

In 1985 Afsaneh went back to Germany to see her father with whom she had a strong and loving connection. “He came from a long line of healers in Iran and his Farsi name is on the Guest House sign,

A dream come true



Afsaneh

‘Afsaneh Mohebbi Guest House’. He is still remembered in Auroville as a visiting chiropractor who treated the bad backs of many Aurovilians.” Inspired by her family tradition, Afsaneh trained in Germany for three years to become a Heilpraktiker practitioner, then afterwards as a bio-resonance therapist and chiropractor.

“I asked my father if he would help me to build a new workshop for Bijou. He generously consented, and in 1985 Poppo the architect, came to start the building. An observant Sufi friend passing through said; ‘You are a born host; why don’t you create a guest house instead of a workshop?’ and that is exactly what I did.”

“The original guesthouse had five rooms and a dining room, and in 1989 my dear father came and inaugurated the *Afsaneh’s Guest House*.”

“One of my dreams was to create a beautiful place where Aurovilians’ parents could stay when they came to visit their children and where I could make them feel welcome. Also, so they could see we were not all hippies living in a forest and they could feel more reassured about their children’s life choice.”

She is proud that she never had to take any money from Auroville for her projects. “My father always helped me as he could see how happy I was in Auroville. This also brought us close together as he felt involved. Now I feel good that I can contribute

the money we make on the guest house to the Central Fund.

“Through my daughter Mirani, who was born here in 1983, I became aware of the problems facing the Auroville kids who were growing up in such an isolated place. In those days the food in Auroville was limited and I used to feed the kids with food from the Guest House kitchen, so I got to know many of them rather well. Like my daughter, they too were born here and many of them needed to go abroad for education as the schools were still developing at that time. They needed to learn skills as the training here was limited. So every time I had the chance of going to Germany, I took some of them with me to work and study. This brought me much satisfaction.

“It was so important for them to come back with skills to offer the community. However, I see that often when they come back ‘home’ they do not have anywhere to live. They cannot build their own house and don’t want to live in a room as they don’t feel they are Newcomers. They have their dream, like we did, and we should be aware of that and create a situation which is attractive for them.

“I was very happy to finally return to Auroville in 1999 with my professional skills. I now spend three days of the week working down by the sea in the beautiful Quiet Healing Centre and the other days organizing the guest house. This is a perfect balance for me. I could not do this without the help of my manager, Baskar, a wonderful Tamil man from the village who is now an Aurovilian whom I have trained and on whom I depend completely.

“I feel very satisfied with the new dining room and guest house that Poppo built in the Japanese style. This is the 3rd one built on this spot. It has taken me 25 years to have a house that I have helped to design and I love living in it. I also get great satisfaction from seeing the guests’ pleasure in the beautiful gardens and rooms here. Europeans feel very comfortable as it is so clean and Indian guests are amazed by the Zen garden and efficiency of everything. Many people come for peace and rest and it is good to be able to provide that for them.”

“One of the main perks of running a Guest House,” says Afsaneh, “is that it makes you feel connected with the big world outside Auroville. I find that living with the same 2,000 people year after year can get limiting so this is a wonderful chance for me to meet all sorts of interesting people. It brings gusts of fresh air into my life.”

In the dining room are a group of head-scarved Iranian women, laughing and talking together. “Their tour organizer was driving around Auroville last year and was lost in our forest. Suddenly he saw the sign of my guest house written in Farsi. He couldn’t believe his eyes! Now he has brought these women who are on an Indian pilgrimage and they are very touched by this Iranian connection in the middle of South India. I took them to Matrimandir and some of them wept with emotion and told me they will never forget this place.

“Now I realize why my sweet auntie gave me my Iranian name ‘Afsaneh’. She knew I would fulfil the ‘fairy tale’ – I am so happy I have been able to bring it to fruition in Auroville, the home of my soul.”

Dianna

AUROVILLE WRITING

Jogging Through the Auroville Countryside, One December Afternoon

Against the cereal-like profile, screened by an embankment, On a path radiant with light, stood the witness, with bared breast and barefoot.

He had not met a soul, and everything was yielding to the soul’s pressure.

Then he turned: at the other end of the field, not far from the place where he had once raised the hackles of a couple of baying killers, a cautious dog, of no particular breed, was watching him unmoving. He felt bound to it by a kind of kinship. But above all, above all, perfuming the prudent valour of the ultra-modest cereals – even humbler than buckwheat or rye – ran the silvery relay of crickets, a singing perfusion into the blood of the world.

Their modulated shrillings create a kind of hypnosis, a little like a cat’s purr. Crickets populate spaces where nature is still alive. They commune throughout the immense course of a day, with the micro-seasons that punctuate it. Again and again they pass to each other the flute-like sound of a celebration. They possess the fibre of bright hours, even in the depths of the night. The fail but astonishing lively grace of their song lies poles away from the massed discordant choirs of the amphibian – something like Krishna’s omnipresent fluting: violinists of eternity, in the verdant court of the cosmic mansion. Songster-sorcerers of the fields, moving around on the spot, heralds who make a hut vibrate with ecstasy; “burrowers, omnivorous, lovers of warm dark places” says the dictionary – but I find that they love warm bright places. Nothing like locusts, whether sedentary or nomadic: these are pilgrims on the spot, like you, o stationary vagabond, rooted, rooted! Cornered on every side and free in a single point (a glowing point in the darkness). Let us listen to the spokesman of these numberless allies:

“We transmit the good wishes of eternity; our musical massage, whose wavelets you feel entering your body in procession, enchants the serpent of the air and makes it drowsy. Around us we create, for those who know how to hear us, a lake-chain of indrawn peace, of many-marvelled mini-amphitheatres. Charmed time continues to flow according to its appointed mission, but smoothly and with nonchalance, now and then curling back upon itself. The heavy tread of human brutes silences us. Out pet hate is agitation; we see to it that the air makes its journeying gentle, so that sometimes even the breeze is suspended for a moment, musing in the

crook of a cashew-tree or leaning against some globular jackfruit to listen to us. When the hot wind is unleashed you may notice that between two blasts one of us is always there, ringing its song of freshness. Our small size, our omnipresence, protect us from violation. Our Gregorian trillings form a gently rolling landscape, crowned with fervent hills. At the apogee of our inspiration, our perpetual Mass makes the hut-cathedral of the earth, whose piles plunges into infinity, slowly oscillate. This rocking, this sonorous open-hearted shimmer, is our personal note. Through us you might rediscover, without too much literature, a childlike echo of the rapture of spheres, or of the joy that dreamed the worlds.

“Certainly other creatures bear the same message, and hold a place of honour in the pigeonholed memory of poets, or in the suddenly poetic heart of lovers. That is because, you see, all dreams are one. You can bind us in one sheaf with all the other sonorous enchanters, whether they form the soul of a grove of silvery olive trees, of a wild wellspring where the oleander grows, or, like a nightingale, transfigure on a night in May a little garden with a single tree, closed in by joyless houses, in a lost provincial town. But try never to forget that throughout your life, all your lives, we were here. In your truest hours, when you are face to face with your Origin, your soul dances on our silver thread. You are searching for gold, we know it well; you want to feel yourself again riddled with thousands of tiny windows, all lit up, all inhabited – a transposition onto your own body of casements, miniscule admittedly but innumerable, that we are ceaselessly opening up onto non-time. Gold is nothing astonishing to us – we are its heralds. We were heralding it to you already amongst the mountain meadows, on the first level where the morning sun halts for a moment on its mounting way to draw breath; we have spoken to you of it from every vegetation-zone where we could dwell; and even in the midst of a wasteground crenellated with rubbish and haunted by human refuse, we have put you in possession of your true memory. Sometimes we have spoken to you (always in the language of simplicity) as a thirst-quenching fire that stretches on and on into infinity amidst limitless fallow and ploughed fields, and at others as the repeated ratings of a small illuminated signboard whose persistence has helped you to get through the night.”

Thus spoke to me the King of Crickets, sonorous mate of the Queen of Fireflies, who are-kin to falling stars. I

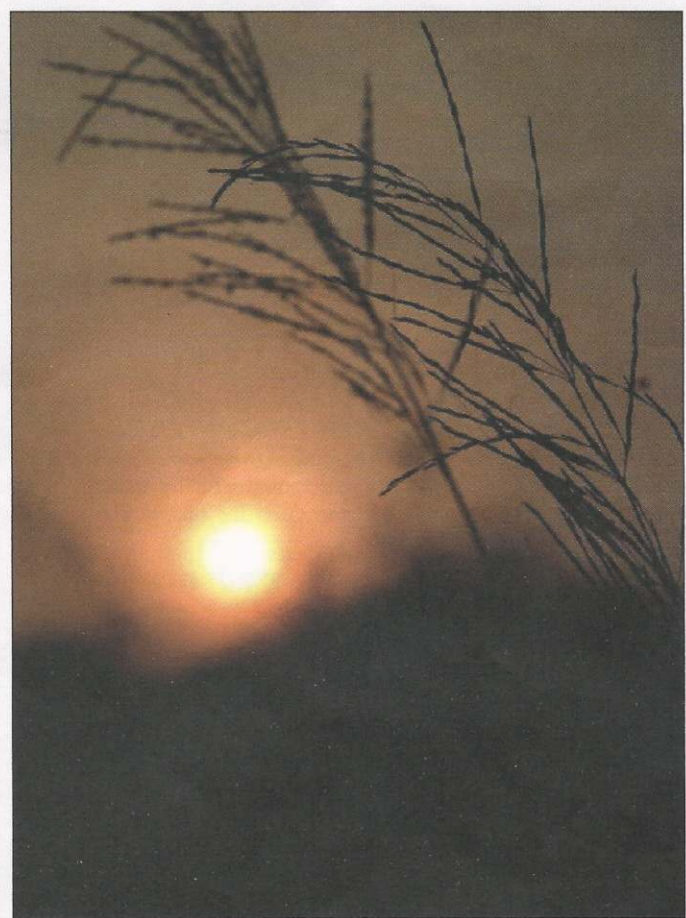


PHOTO COREN LINDFIELD

was in an open field where gleamed the discreet delight of silvery plumes lightly tinged with mauve emotion. On my body glazed with solar gold, the old tattoo marks had vanished.

I was tiptoeing away backwards, when to the comet of the passing moment was added the tail of a title: SILVER AND GOLD.

*written in the late 1980s by Raymond Thépot
Excerpted from ‘Real Utopias: Essays, Paradoxes, Short stories’
Translated into English by Shraddhavan*

The Caretaker

In December a group of Aurovilians presented *The Caretaker* by Harold Pinter. *The Caretaker*, written in 1960, was the first of Harold Pinter's plays to be a commercial success. The plot is straightforward. Aston, a psychologically-fragile man, invites an old tramp called Davies back to his room and invites him to stay. However, Aston's brother Mick, who owns the room, resents the intruder and schemes to have him thrown out. Eventually the two brothers unite against the tramp and the old man is rejected.

However, the situation is immensely complicated by the fact that each character is trying to create a bond with one of the others, often at the expense of the third. Aston appears to have invited the tramp home because he is unsure of his brother's affection and is seeking it in someone else. Davies's motivation is simply to secure a roof over his head, so at first he tries to ingratiate himself with Aston. However, when he learns that Mick is the landlord, he abandons Aston and tries to win over Mick. Meanwhile Mick cannot simply throw the tramp out as this may alienate his brother, whom he really cares for.

The constant psychological manoeuvring is reflected in the problem of communication. Davies is evasive about his past and vague about his future. Aston, whom we later learn has had electric shock treatment, has difficulty in communicating anything beyond his preoccupation with buying a new woodworking tool or putting up a shed in the garden. Mick spends much of his time manipulating Davies, at one moment terrorising him, at another pretending to be his friend.

For most of the play the brothers' feelings for one another are unexpressed. Only near the end, when the brothers have agreed to throw the

tramp out, do they smile faintly at one another. In the diminished circumstances of this play, it is like a profession of love. (Pinter himself said the play is 'about love'.)

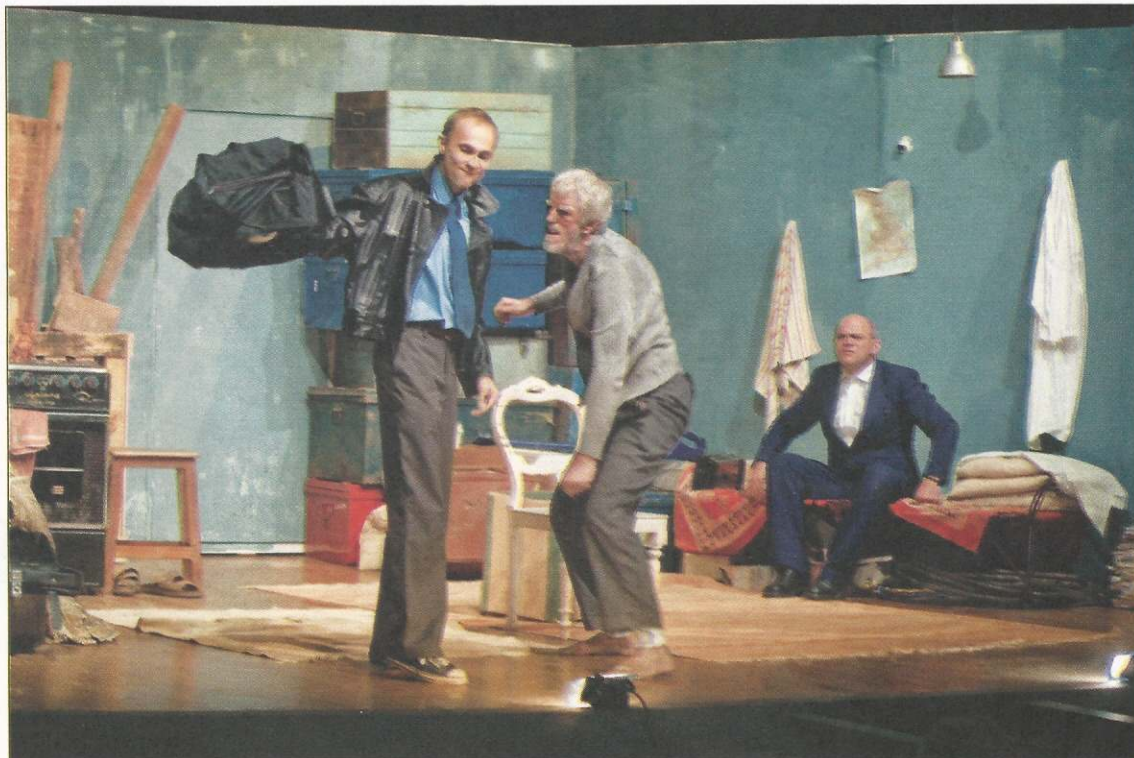
The Caretaker, then, is not a play of action. It involves the manoeuvrings of people who protect themselves while they attempt to gain security or love or domination over another. As a theme, this is not exceptional. What makes the play extraordinary is how the tone shifts continually between banality, threat, comedy and pathos.

For example, in Act Two Mick terrorises Davies in the dark with the nozzle of a vacuum sweeper. Davies, terrified, pulls out a knife: "If anyone starts with me, they know what they got coming." At which point Mick blithely offers him a sandwich. "We just got off on the wrong foot," he says. Davies begins to relax. Mick confides he would like Davies' advice as he's a bit worried about his brother whom, he suspects, doesn't like work. "I know that sort," says Davies, who has probably never done a day's work in his life. Then, overreaching himself, "He's a bit of a funny bloke, your brother." "Funny? Why?" asks Mick sharply, as the psychological temperature abruptly shifts again.

In other words, it's not an easy play to perform, to 'get right'. Pinter himself put it like this:

"An element of the absurd is, I think, one of the features of the play, but at the same time I did not intend it to be merely a laughable farce. If there hadn't been other issues at stake the play would not have been written. As far as I'm concerned, *The Caretaker* is funny, up to a point. Beyond that point it ceases to be funny, and it was because of that point that I wrote it."

So how well did the Auroville production, directed by Norman Bowler, deal with these challenges? Krishna was superb as the damaged brother



Mick (Nikolai) snatches Davies' (Otto) bag as Ashton (Krishna) looks on.

Aston, all slow, heavy movements and concentrated doggedness as he fiddles endlessly with an electrical plug. The long, fractured monologue in which he reveals what happened to him in the mental hospital is one of the most moving scenes in the play. Nikolai had Mick's fluent unpredictability, although he lacked the dark dangerousness of Alan Bates in the film version of the play. The claustrophobic chaos of the room – all boxes, buckets and assorted junk – which mirrors the characters' internal states was also faithfully recreated.

The play, however, tends to stand or fall on how Davies the tramp is depicted. Otto, who played him, is without doubt one of our best actors. He has a superb stage presence, good delivery and no gesture is wasted. All of this was evident in this performance. He succeeded well in showing

how Davies winds his way into the heart of the brothers' household, and he is very funny in his outraged professions – "I wasn't dreaming. I never had a dream in my life." What his Davies lacks, however, is the element of pathos because Otto plays him essentially as a caricature rather than a man who, for all his scheming, is also desperate for security and affection.

Caricature is, of course, Otto's strong suit – who can forget his Fagin in *Oliver* or his Monsieur Argan in *Le Malade Imaginaire*? – and playing the old man like this clearly makes it easier to connect with a multicultural audience. But there is a price. For if we have never felt for Davies, then the final rejection and his despairing "What am I going to do? What shall I do?" won't evoke any more complex emotion in us than relief that the old codger is finally getting his desserts.

Having said this, *The Caretaker* was a very ambitious project to take on. It requires an exquisite sensitivity to different registers of the English language and the ability to express the continually shifting sands, the changing psychological tonalities, being played out in this edgy, claustrophobic environment. The cast and the director, who clearly had worked intensively together, made a very brave attempt at this. Ultimately, *The Caretaker* is an actors' play: apart from anything else, it's a superb instrument for actors and director to extend and refine their theatrical vocabulary. Hopefully, what they learned here will bear fruit in future productions.

Whether or not the audience fully appreciated what was going on, or left with any new insight into the human condition or its potentialities remain, however, open questions.

Alan

BOOK REVIEW

Travels of the Psychic Being

A Little Book, *Travels of the Psychic Being* by Namah, the writer, and Claire, the illustrator, has just come out as though in answer to a prayer of a collective Psychic Being.

It explains indirectly through words and directly through luminous illustrations of an ever smiling being in the heart centre, the eternal Divine spark that is our true self which, life after life, under one name and then another, comes to earth to learn before going to its rest. After many lives, 'Sacha' and 'Salila' no longer have to return in the bodies of babies. Their bodies of light have become so strong that they can just land on earth to spread light everywhere. This is now their work. Now there is no shadow, no night, no need for rest, no forgetting what one has been, no suffering, only joy. But before this being of joyful light can achieve this there are many lives to go through. As the book describes it,

*When the little Psychic Being finishes resting
He has to come back to Earth
But on Earth
He needs a physical body to walk and run
He needs a life body to have energy to laugh, to play to work
He needs a mind body to see, to learn and to understand
These three bodies are just instruments of the Psychic being
For Him to grow and to create the Life Divine
But always, these three bodies only want to do what they want:
The physical body wants to rest
Then the life body wants to laugh with his friends
And the mind body wants to read
Oh là là! There is such confusion! C'est la panique!
But one day, the physical body, the life body and the mind body come to agree!
The Psychic Being has become very strong
The three bodies listen to it and follow its movement
And there, always, there is a Delight*

*It is harmony
The Divine grows in humankind
The Divine prepares His World*

Thus, simply, a child's conflicts and their purpose are made clear to him.

The candid words and illustrations for children are accompanied discreetly in cursive print by quotations from Sri Aurobindo and The Mother for the children up to the age of 103.

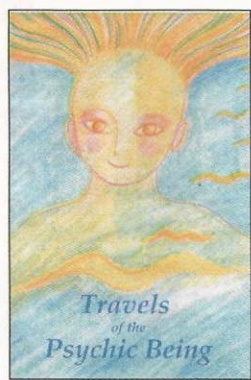
No school can afford to be without this book nor can any parent. It answers the questions that children often ask but even more the questions the children don't know how to ask. It is for all ages but it is very specially for children stepping out of their magical light world into a world of logic and calculation, at about seven years. It helps them keep in touch with their light centre which almost inevitably goes into the background at this stage.

For others it reconnects them to their own light and joy, and for yet others it introduces them to a world of which they have been almost unaware but which was waiting within them. The fact is that we all, as we move into adulthood, largely leave behind a world of psychic sensitivity.

So thank you Namah and Claire for the much needed contribution of your book. May there be many more books in this genre.

Maggi

'Travels of the Psychic Being' written by Namah and illustrated by Claire Le Touzé 40 pages; Published by Auroville Press, 2009. Price: Around Rs.250 Available in Auroville from Wild Seagull Bookshop, Freeland, and Auroville.com



PICTURE OF THE MONTH

Auroville's first electric rickshaw



A prototype electric rickshaw is circulating on the Auroville roads. Commissioned by Chandresh from Auroville Community Transport, it was built by Sukrit and Akash of EVFuture. The rickshaw operates from Sharnga Guest House.

PASSING

Shriram Jaiswal

Nepali Aurovillian Shriram Jaiswal, father of Himal and Giri, left his body in the Auroville Health Centre on December 17th. He was 75 years old and had been suffering from cancer. His family was with him at the time of passing.

Old-timers may remember Shriram from the years that he lived here with his wife, sons and daughter during the late seventies, early eighties, working at Matrimandir and staying at Samridhi.

Five years ago he and his wife Parvati returned to Auroville, where they stayed with their sons in Ami. At the time Shriram taught at the Auroville Language Laboratory and wrote musings and short stories on the daily life and philosophy of India, which he posted in the *News and Notes*. Two years ago, his deep interest in languages took him to Sarnath, Varanasi, where he taught Sanskrit, Hindi and English till his physical situation gave out.

On Saturday 19th, Shriram's remains were cremated at Adventure's mandapam site.



Nele: Inspirations from the play of energy



PHOTOS COURTESY NELE

Nele Martens' recent displays of mobiles and paintings at Pitanga are a world of light play, transparency and weightlessness. Like Miro's shapes and orbs come-alive, the mobiles, precisely balanced on wire, float whisper-like and spin in the early winter breeze. As Nele puts it, "Their interrelatedness through balance and movement organizes the image in continuing new orders and creates a feeling of peace." The paintings too, executed on panels of white semi-transparent and clear Plexiglas creates illusions with their layered depths.

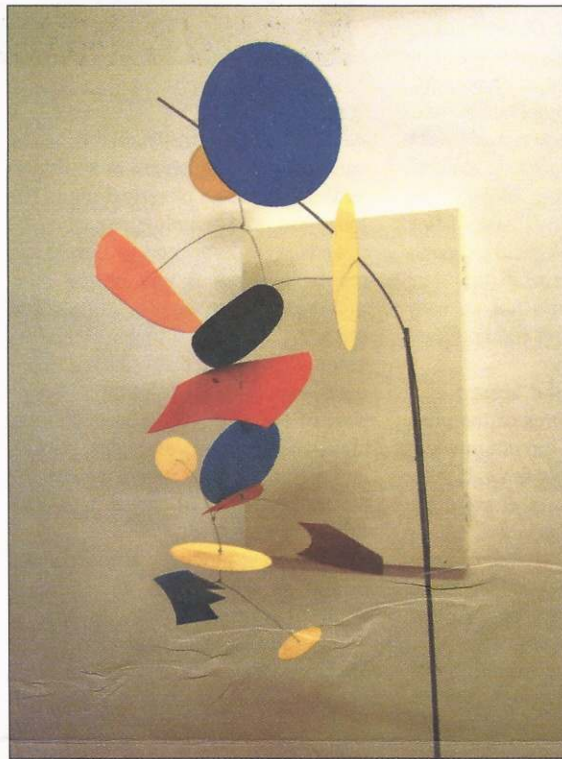
Nele's evolution as an artist can be traced through the body of works she has created—from *Roses* and *Tropics* over a decade ago to the increasing abstraction, refinement and implosion of energy in the recent years. Art historian, Debashish Banerji writes: "Nele Martens draws her inspiration from the play of conscious energy in or as form, universally active in nature. Structural modelling through variations of colour density combine with controlled or swift rhythmic and textured brush dynamism to convey an impression of archetypal energy events at the subtle interface between substance and force. [...] She brings to her paintings a colour sensitivity and intensity which introduces an element of quality of consciousness..."

Nele seems to have reached a point where she delights not just in pure pigments and light, but also in the joys of sculptural physics and gravity-defying geometries.

She explains: "I try to express light through the possibilities of colour and composition. These paintings and mobiles, which I call kinetic sculptures, are very much experimental, a constant research to explore light, matter and form in relation to one another. They become a changing composition, one that delights tremendously. Ideally, they should come alive!"

And so they do. Caught in a gust of wind, the tall Plexiglas mobiles heave gently like frozen sheets on an icy ocean.

Priya Sundaravalli



ENVIRONMENT

A campaign for a litter-free Auroville

A group of enthusiastic young Aurovillians are organizing a litter-free day on 29th January to make the community more aware of the challenges associated with solid waste.

The event is initiated by Soma Waste Management. In 2009 Soma had organized a smaller litter clean-up in Auroville but now they want to do something much bigger.

"We want to involve at least a thousand people, 50% of our population," says one of the organizers. "We want to make it the biggest community event since 1968!"

The central objectives of this campaign are to promote positive waste disposal practices, raise awareness of the impacts of waste on the environment, address littering in Auroville and create a platform for real change in our community. The coordinators want to collaborate with the community to create short and long-term solutions to the waste problem. As one of them put it, "If we can't prove to the rest of the world that we can consciously handle our own solid waste, how can we expect others to do it?"

The idea is generating a huge amount of enthusiastic support. The Dutch Foundation, *Stichting de Zaaier*, has agreed to provide some funding and many people have come forward with their ideas and their energy. Everyone from units, artists, schools and individuals have been extremely helpful. Units are testing and donating 100% recycled paper. One has even dedicated its flower-press and staff to make leaflets made out of leaves! The inten-

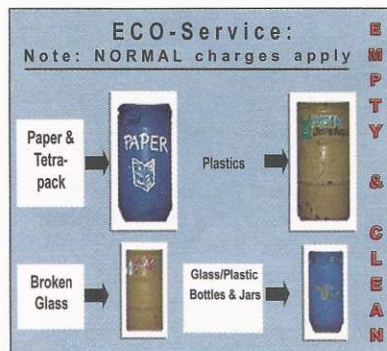
tion, of course, is that the waste generated from the litter-free campaign should be limited as much as possible.

"It's amazing to belong to a community which spontaneously gives so much support and which has such a vast diversity of idea and energy," says one of the organizers.

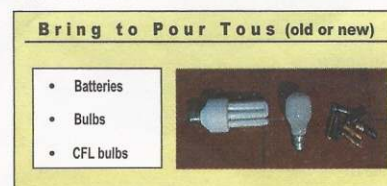
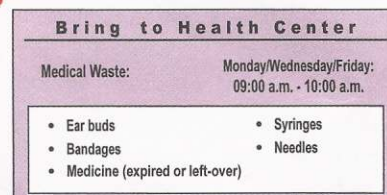
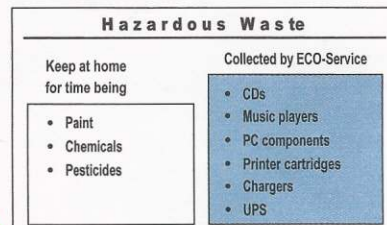
The plan is that all the litter collected on the morning of the 29th January will be brought to the Certitude sports ground where it will form a waste mountain. This will be the location for an interactive exhibition which will promote awareness through fun games, sharing information and collecting ideas and suggestions on ways to reduce our waste. This will be followed by an evening of events, including a play, concert and even a 'trashion' show.

Through this campaign the coordinators hope to get more attention paid to solid waste management in city planning and development and, more importantly, to integrate it into the school curriculum in Auroville. The litter-free day campaign is focused mainly on children and youth because they will inherit what we have created. As one of the volunteers put it, "I think the message we want to bring across is that everyone can make a difference."

Alan



WASTE!!!
DON'T BURN!!!
Email SOMA: somawaste@auroville.org.in



POSTER HELGARD

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TONGUE-IN-CHEEK

The Greatest Workshop Ever

Between December and February, a great many workshops are offered in Auroville on a vast variety of topics. Alan felt inspired to offer his own.

Are you feeling...

sad, lonely, bored, claustrophobic, guestophobic, depressed, repressed, compressed, apathetic, pathetic, or simply dull as ditchwater?

Are you suffering from...

diphtheria, tennis elbow, 'repetitive' strain injury, asthma, piles, black death, Legionnaire's Disease or Postman's Knock?

Do you want to...

rule the world, rule Auroville, be popular, crush your opponents, contact your psychic being, achieve cosmic consciousness, eat more chocolate, levitate, populate, flagellate?

Then here's wonderful news. All ills will be cured and astonishing new powers will be yours if you sign up for my never-to-be-repeated workshop.

Come, gather at my perfumed pool. As you float in and out of consciousness (courtesy cardiac resuscitation unit, PIMS) you will experience, in addition to the inevitable nausea and occasional heart failure (you will be asked to sign a release form) rebirthing, rebathing, expanded consciousness, expanded lungs, athlete's foot and silent mind. As you recover by the poolside, I will peel back the layers of your nasty little being and triturate, percuss and concuss the contents until you emerge new-born, ready to astonish the world.

Aurovillian skinflints can take my workshop for free. Those privileged to make a contribution will find it outstanding value at a mere 1,800 euros. For those who favour an alternative economy (and I want to say I'm shoulder-to-shoulder with you on this), I will also accept gold in any form—rings, lockets, watches, fillings etc.

So, don't delay. Rush today to avail this never-to-be-repeated offer and be the cynosure of all eyes. Send your personal details, including bank statements, credit card numbers and next-of-kin, to Box 666, Aurovonder Workshops Inc.

Just read what world leaders say about my workshops:

I'd been feeling a bit down. Then Dick C. told me, "They're water-boarding in Auroville. Go for it." Best thing I ever did. Went out this morning and cut down 18 trees before breakfast. George B.

My friend Luigi he teller me to come on your course. Fantastic. I never have so much energy. Now the candle I burner at all ends. Silvio B.

Before I 'ad no con fiance. Now I vill conquer ze verld. Nicolas S.

Adequate. Gordon B.