

AUROVILLE TODAY

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PHOTO IRENO



This issue of AUROVILLE TODAY concentrates upon those 'first citizens of Auroville'—the local villagers—who are in the process of joining, or who have already joined Auroville. Do they face particular challenges in entering the community? What does it mean to be living just 'across the road' from their families, and how far does the traditional life style of the village still influence them? And what do long-term Aurovilians who have been involved for many years in the integration process feel about the present integration programme? Can it be improved, and, if so, how?

But it's not only local people who sometimes experience difficulties in joining the community. We also glance briefly at the increasing web of red tape which can tie up in knots even the most enthusiastic aspirants for a new life.

Finally, we look at how a recent educational venture in the community helped bring Aurovilians and villagers closer together, we are brought up to date on what is happening with the East Coast Road project, and we hear about how a 'Frenchie' liberated a brick from Tibet!

Crossing the Road

Each individual is unique; and for each individual, joining Auroville is a unique process. However, it is also true that certain people encounter challenges in the process of entering Auroville which are specific to their nationality and culture. For example, those people who wish to join Auroville from the neighbouring villages are in something of a special situation. They are born into a culture where certain traditions are still strong and, as their families are just 'across the road', the demand made upon them to fulfil certain family responsibilities and traditional religious practices can be overwhelming. In addition, in comparison to many of the prospective Aurovilians who come from the West or even other parts of India, their grasp of the English language—the lingua franca of the community—is often not strong, and materially they are less well off.

Of course, as soon as we begin talking about 'special categories', we are in a minefield littered with explosive charges labelled discrimination or elitism. For Mother, clearly, everybody was a soul, an opportunity for progress, regardless of colour, nationality or caste. But Mother also took a particular interest in the neighbouring villagers, not only appointing an Aurovillian to have special responsibility for village relations, but also stressing repeatedly to the early Aurovilians that these villagers "are your brothers in spirit—this should never be forgotten", and "Those who are in contact with the villagers should never forget that these people are worth as much as they are, that they know as much, that they think and feel as well as they do." She further stressed that "we would like to take them as people of Auroville if they collaborate and are willing". Later, She was to give a date marking the beginning of the integration process for these villagers, a process which continues until today.

Today, in fact, those Aurovilians who have joined Auroville from the neighbouring villages represent approximately 25% of the total population. Some have been

part of the community for over 20 years, and many are performing key tasks. The channels through which they joined are various. In the early days, Mother gave the approval herself after meeting them. Later, others were 'adopted' by an Auroville community or individual; or were educated at New Creation or Last School; worked in Auroville or married an Aurovillian. Some years ago, a Co-Entry Group—consisting of a number of long-term Aurovilians who had joined from the villages—was set up to process a back-log of 75 applications from local villagers wanting to join the community. This group examined all the applications on a case-by-case basis, evolved some basic guidelines for the integration process—which included, in addition to finding work and accommodation in the community, learning about Sri Aurobindo and Mother and the ideal of Auroville, and learning to read and write in Tamil—and assisted in the integration process when it was appropriate. Last year, 10 applicants joined the community through this process. Today, about 11 are in process, and another 20 have made an initial application. But many more would like to join...

The situation today is complicated by the fact that there are mixed feelings in the community regarding what is happening. Some people (including long-time Aurovilians who were born in the villages) feel that the motivation for those who want to join from the villages today is primarily materialistic rather than idealistic, and that the needs of their dependents—some come from large families—put a heavy strain upon Auroville's already overburdened resources. Others fear that the new wave of applicants may 'import' village customs and practices into Auroville, or that a preponderance of the Tamil population—or of any one nationality—may make it much harder for Auroville to become a truly international city. On the other hand, some suggest that those wanting to join Auroville from the surrounding villages are unfairly discriminated against, for people from other places are not subject to such a rigorous integration

process. It is also suggested that there is a certain lack of respect for the local Tamil culture, as witnessed by the fact that so few non-Tamil Aurovilians can speak the local language, and by the dearth of information about Auroville that has been translated into Tamil and disseminated in the surrounding villages. And it has been pointed out that if Auroville developed its bio-regional consciousness, and included the villages more in its development plans, then the motivation for those wishing to join Auroville from the villages would change.

Such remarks, however well intentioned, tend to be divisive, for they ignore the fact that every Aurovillian and newcomer, whatever his/her background or nationality, represents not only problems but also opportunities for the community as a whole. In fact, the solution of the difficulty seems to lie at another level altogether. Mother indicated this in answer to a question about how the Aurovilians should relate to the villagers. "The best way, you see, is education. To educate them not by words and speeches but by example." Or, as She put it another time, "There is only one way to be convincing—it is to BE that. Then we'll stand strong, we'll have the divine force on our side." In other words, through becoming what Mother termed 'true' Aurovilians, the present members of the community would create—or collaborate with—a force that would automatically attract to Auroville all those of whatever nationality who want to work for its true realization. For, "the power of the realization—of the sincerity of the realization—is such that it's UNBEARABLE to those who are insincere."

Meanwhile, of course, we're not there, and the problems confronting the Co-Entry group, and all of us, are potent and real. And, once again, we are faced with that typical Auroville challenge—to call the future while continuing to face honestly the consequences of our present inadequacies.

Alan

Little by little...

VARADARAJAN, who is from Tamil Nadu, worked in the Government's Central Secretariat Service before coming to Auroville. He first had Mother's *darshan* in 1964. When the concept of Auroville was taking shape, he became one of the Auroville contacts with the local villagers, particularly those from Kulapalayam. In 1969, he moved to Aspiration, and later to Promesse. At present, along with others he runs 'Arul Varzhi', a kindergarten and play school for the children of Morattandi village.

AUROVILLE TODAY spoke to him recently about his involvement with integrating villagers into Auroville in the early days, and about the guidance he received from Mother.

AvT: In the early days of Auroville, you were a liaison between Mother and the villagers. How did the first villagers join Auroville?

Varadarajan: In 1969, Auroville was like a big explosion. Everybody was very enthusiastic and energetic, we were building and planning for things like the Olympic Games etc. It was in this atmosphere that we planned to integrate the whole of Kulapalayam village into Auroville in a very short time. But then I heard that Pavitra (one of Mother's secretaries) had remarked on hearing this, 'But are they ready?' It was a very pertinent question,

and it made me stop and think carefully about the whole matter. We began the integration process with a few families. At that time, five families had come forward who wanted to join Auroville—only five, because some villagers thought that joining Auroville would involve a conversion to something like Christianity or Islam! I sent the photographs of these families to Mother. On Her approval for them joining Auroville, I asked Her to set a date when this process could begin. She specified 7th August, 1970. Later I took the four families—one family dropped out—to meet Her.

Did Mother give any specific guidance on the integration process?

On the 22nd October, 1971, Mother said, 'We should explain to the villagers that we are there to make life better and easier for them and not more difficult. We would like to take them as people of Auroville if they collaborate and are willing'. Mother also confirmed that when She accepted them, they became Aurovilians in all respects; they would receive Prosperity, and could go to the Samadhi and Ashram playground like any other Aurovillian at that time. She also said that we were to provide them with facilities 'according to the possibilities of the development of the Township'. But She stressed that work for the community was compulsory for them, both the men and the women.

Of course, as for anybody else, it was expected that those who wanted to join

Auroville from the local villages had goodwill and an aspiration to work for human unity. But apart from this, Mother made no guidelines. Why? You see, perhaps guidelines are for the mind, not the heart. Consequently, each one tends to interpret them in his own way. Whereas, what Mother stressed was the need for the psychic* to come forward and to inform all the activities of the individual. This is the only solution. For if we can approach the local people through the psychic, the results will be immediate and beneficial, and all the present problems will be solved.

But until this psychic opening occurs, what are we to do, particularly if it is felt that many of the villagers who want to join Auroville today want to do so for material reasons?

In 1970 I specifically asked Mother about this as, even in those days, I was concerned about this. She told me, "The best way, you see, it is education. To educate them not by words and speeches but by example. If you can make them mix with your life and your work, and they get the influence of your way of being, your way of understanding, then, little by little, they will change." I was sitting at Her feet when She told me this. And when She said, very slowly, 'little by little', She bent down almost to my ear—as if to emphasise that the process of becoming a true Aurovillian would be a long and gradual one. But it was clear that, for those She accepted, She saw this process

happening after they had joined the community. As for many of us, joining Auroville was just the beginning.

Of course, it is also true that if more is done to improve life in the villages, fewer villagers will want to join Auroville for material reasons. But it cannot be said that the villagers want to join Auroville only for material reasons.

Finally, can you clarify the meaning of that famous phrase that the local villagers are 'the first citizens of Auroville'?

In 1970, there was a group of people—including Roger Anger—who were working on integrating the local people into Auroville. From what Mother told Roger, I wrote to the Mother that, 'The first citizens of Auroville are those Tamil people who live on the soil of Auroville', for which Mother conveyed Her blessings. As I see it, there are geographical Aurovilians and there are true Aurovilians. It is up to each one of us to decide what we want to be. For each of us to become a true Aurovillian, there must be a psychic opening.

Ultimately, all problems will be solved only if the Aurovilians are sincere in their aspiration towards the Divine.

Interview by Alan on 4.5.93

***"The psychic is the spark of the Divine involved here in the individual existence. It grows and evolves in the form of the psychic being." (Sri Aurobindo)**

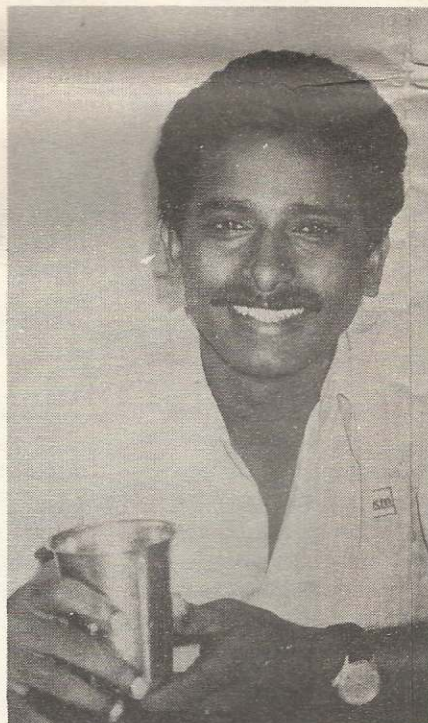
"The whole issue is very tricky"

PONNUSWAMY was born in nearby Pettai village. He joined Auroville in 1973 and, after being involved in different activities, at present he manages the Auroville Electrical Service. Ponnuswamy was one of the original members of the Co-Entry Group, which was set up to deal with applications from the local villagers to join Auroville, and he is now one of the initiators of a new project which may help make the initial integration process more satisfactory.

AvT: What was the situation five years ago when the Co-Entry group was set up?

Ponnuswamy: At that time, the existing Entry Group had received about 75 applications from villagers wanting to join Auroville—and they didn't know how to deal with them. So, when the Co-Entry group was formed, we went through the applications, one by one, to try to discover why these people wanted to join. In fact, we discovered that most of the applicants wanted to join for material reasons—for example, to enjoy the sports and other facilities here—or because they wanted to escape from problems in the village. But a few applicants, mainly the ones who had worked in the community for some time, really understood what Auroville was for, and most of these subsequently joined the community.

It was difficult because we didn't want to reject anybody just like that. But some



PONNUSWAMY

were coming directly from the distant villages—through marriage to an Aurovillian, for example—and knew nothing about this place. So if we had doubts about their knowledge or motivation, we told those applicants to learn more about Auroville and become more involved with community activities, and meanwhile we would monitor their progress. In my experience, those who really wanted to join the community always managed to find work and a place to stay. However, if there was some uncertainty in their mind, things wouldn't work out.

What conditions did the Co-Entry group attach to the integration process?

Joining Auroville from the village; the present procedure

A local person who wishes to join Auroville first gives his name to the secretary of the Co-Entry group at the Secretariat, and a preliminary discussion about the applicant takes place at the weekly meeting of the Co-Entry group. If it is felt that an applicant's involvement with Auroville is already substantial, then they are given an application form to fill in. One member of the Co-Entry group will volunteer to be a contact person with the applicant, and interview the applicant in detail. If the outcome of this interview (which is reported back to the larger group) is positive, the applicant will be called to a meeting with the full Co-Entry group. If everything is satisfactory, the Co-Entry group will forward the application to the Entry Group for a decision whether the applicant can become a Newcomer.

At present, the Co-Entry group is reconsidering the basic guidelines applicable to those who want to integrate into Auroville. These include at present, having a place to stay and work in Auroville, involvement in community activities, a basic understanding of Sri Aurobindo and Mother, and the support of Aurovillian 'sponsors' who are willing to take some material responsibility for the applicant.

The present Co-Entry group presently consists of eleven Aurovilians; five of them are from the neighbouring villages.

In addition to finding work and a place to stay, we said they should attend Meenakshi's after-work school so that they could learn to read and write in Tamil, as well as learn something about Sri Aurobindo and Mother and the background of Auroville. We also asked them to join in community sports activities and participate in activities like the Good Work Fair so that they could get to know more Aurovilians. We also requested them to make a monthly financial contribution to the community, and to take it personally to the Auroville Fund so that they would begin to understand how our organisation works.

During this initial period, we assigned them a contact person who would keep us informed of how the applicant was doing. When we felt that the applicant was ready, we would hand him/her over to the Entry Group and the normal entry process would begin.

If they owned land in the Auroville area, were they asked to make it relatable to Auroville?

It's a good idea, but in practice it proved almost impossible. Either the land would be owned by the whole family, and couldn't be split up for the one who was entering Auroville, or they didn't want to make it relatable because either they needed the status or it was a kind of security for them in case of financial emergency. However, the practice of Tamil Aurovilians or newcomers buying and selling land within the Auroville area for private profit has to stop as it goes against the whole idea of Auroville.

The whole issue of integration is very tricky. For example, those villagers who want to join Auroville are often still close to the village, and we didn't feel we could ask them to give up all the village customs—regarding marriage and so on—right away.

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"They come by themselves"

"They herd the family's cows and goats all day long, and are normally covered with dust and clothed in hardly more than rags. But once you get the contact, your efforts are well rewarded..."

Ananda is making some general remarks about the village boys and girls one sees everywhere around in Auroville. He got involved with them some ten years ago, when he was teaching Aikido, a Japanese martial art, to Auroville children. "Couldn't you teach the village children from New Creation too?" was the innocent question from André Tardeil. Ananda started a class, first keeping them separate from the Auroville children, but later mixing them freely. He allowed two girls to join the otherwise all-male class, which gave him a first insight into the special problems of boys and girls relations in Tamil Nadu. The Aikido experiment lasted for about one year but, ever since, Ananda has been involved with educating village girls—in addition to being the executive of Lotus, one of Auroville's commercial units, together with his Japanese life partner.

Why girls? "Well, it seems that I have a bit more success with educating girls" says Ananda. "And there is also the practical reason that they have definitely less possibilities for development than boys, because of the social structure of the villages. They come by themselves; we are not going after them. They themselves have the motivation and the willingness to progress. The children have just taken the freedom, and got the permission of the parents. It works remarkably well."

One of Ananda's 'classes' is about using computers. It started three years ago when one of the girls working in Lotus saw a computer for the first time and wanted to learn. Soon, this developed into regular afternoon computer classes to a group of 12 to 15-year old girls. "I must have had about 30 students over the last two years", says Ananda, "some of whom were quite good, and easily found work in Auroville, like Raji who is now working at the Bharat Nivas secretariat, and Mira who joined Joster in the Visitors Reception Center."

One class led to another. Ananda soon got involved with younger girls, mostly children of employees, teaching many different activities. One group started coming to his house every evening from 6 to 7.30 to read the booklet 'A Child and a Tree'. "I call it 'the School of Controlled Chaos', as I never really try to give it a particular form, we just improvise every day. We do tailoring, play hide and seek in the garden, at other times I teach them riding a moped or we read in English, or glue and cut paper and cardboard and all kinds of things. Most of them came from New Creation School, with one or two exceptions. One was a complete street girl, unable to



ANANDA AND FRIENDS

read or write, even in Tamil, and yet somehow very smart and very energetic, and with a strong will to change her life and to improve her circumstances, even wanting to join Auroville straight away if she had the opportunity."

Asked to evaluate his experience, Ananda says that it depends on the angle you look at it. "The glass is half full or half empty. If I look forward and think what still has to be achieved, I get the feeling that the goal will never be reached. But when I look back, and remember at which point we started, I wonder how we managed to reach so far. But the main gain is the understanding of what can be achieved, and how to do it. We have noticed that it is far more difficult to get the grown-ups in the villages to change. And we have also noticed that whenever we take care of the children, the parents are ready to step back."

"What we are trying to do now, in coordination with New Creation, is to create more boarding facilities. Unless we can provide housing, half of what we do with children gets lost. This links up with the traditional Indian concept of education, where it was never really expected that the parents educate their children. There used to be a custom that the parents would find the teacher for their children, and send their children to that teacher to live with him. In the West the boarding school has become an institution. You do not join a person, but something very impersonal. What we have to re-create is a system of education which is centered around people, teachers. We have no choice. We are living together with the people from the village, we have to grow in harmony with them, so we need to have some kind of influence.

The best way to get that influence is by concentrating on the children.

"Integration is a definite must. And there are a certain number of things which still influence life here in such a way that it makes integration quite difficult. One example is arranged marriage and the whole attitude towards girls. Another factor is the language difficulty.

"Mother has given us a hint of how to cross that gap. We have to be in contact with our inner centre, our psychic being, and realize that there are common values. As long as our values are mostly cultural, integration is very difficult. Auroville is definitely developing a set of common values, but it takes time.

"There is another thing we should concentrate on in order to realize a better integration. And that is offering education to all our workers. I have heard that one Auroville community is planning to give the *ammass* working there classes for half a day per week, without cutting their salaries. This fully fits into the ideals of Auroville set by Mother. I believe Auroville units should aim at this as well. Everyone in Auroville, and not only the Aurovilians, should be allowed to stop work at 3 pm, so that they can go to sports, take classes and all those things. It is not a question of generosity only, it goes far beyond that. It is the very reason of Auroville's existence. A little more education, a little more play will cause more work to be done in less time, and will contribute tremendously to the mutual integration."

Interview by Carel

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But doesn't this mean that some villagers who have joined Auroville are living here in the same way as they used to live in the village?

Yes, and the first Co-Entry group didn't know how to deal with this. On the other hand, we had Tamil Aurovilians who had completely cut all their connections with the village—and this is not good, either. Actually, in the seminar on the villages which was held two years ago, I suggested that all the Aurovilians who come from the local villages could become bridges between their village and Auroville, taking other Aurovilians to their village and explaining Auroville to their village friends.

How do you think the integration process for the villagers could be improved?

We need to have Auroville centres in all the villages. These centres would give information about Auroville, about Sri Aurobindo and Mother, and Aurovilians could come and give talks to the villagers. This would be a great help in preparing those who want to join Auroville.

Another step is a project which I and a group of others are involved in now. The

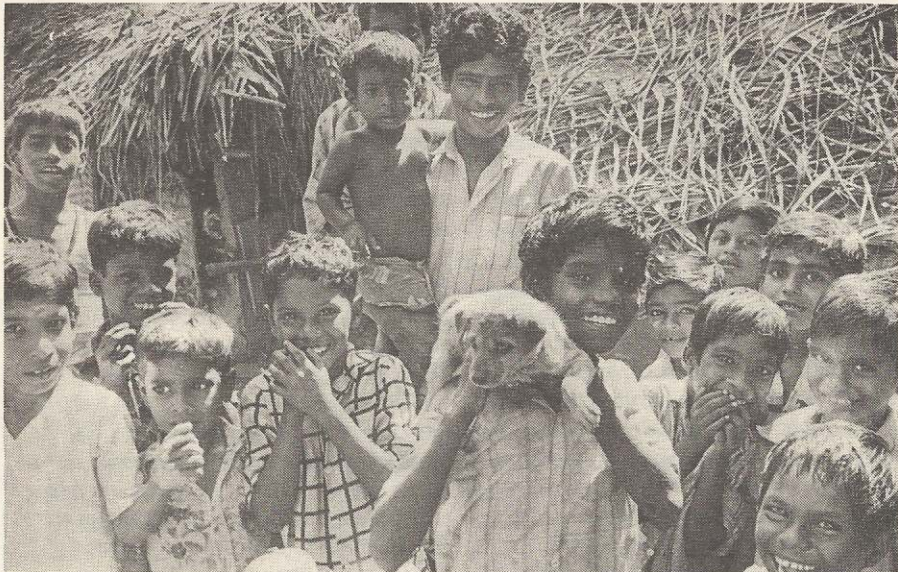
idea behind 'Utility 2' (situated next to the present Utility community) is to create a place where long-time Auroville workers can live for some time to experience Auroville life; a kind of half-way place between Auroville and the village. After some time, they would have to choose if they wanted to enter the main community or go back to the village. However, if they really wanted to stay on in 'Utility 2', we'd have to look at that as a possibility too. A group of Aurovilians would act as contact persons to help introduce them to Auroville life and to the background of what we are doing here.

At present, the project is still on the drawing-board. We have a small plot of land, but we need about 2.5 lakh rupees initially to create the basic infrastructure. The individual houses would be paid for by Auroville units, Aurovilians or friends.

Do you want to rejoin the Co-Entry group?

I'm not waiting to get back! It's a very difficult work because you get attacked from all sides.

Interview by Alan on 7.7.93



"From the spiritual point of view, India is the foremost country in the world. Her mission is to set the example of spirituality. Sri Aurobindo came on earth to teach this to the world.

This fact is so obvious, that a simple and ignorant peasant here is, in his heart, closer to the Divine than the intellectuals of Europe. All those who want to become Aurovilians must know this and behave accordingly; otherwise they are unworthy of being Aurovilians." (The Mother in a message to some Aurovilians, 8.2.1972)

RAJI and SHANKAR were born in local villages and have applied to become Aurovilians. We talked to them recently to find out why they want to join, and what difficulties they have encountered in the process so far.

The Turning Point

SHANKAR was born 26 years ago in Kuilapalayam village, into a family of fairly prosperous farmers. He was educated in the village school, but then went on to High School and Pondicherry University, where he received a B.A., M.A. and M.Phil. in Economics. Today he teaches Tamil in various Auroville schools as well as to adults and he lives at Last School. Recently, he applied to become a member of the community.

“The turning point for me was when I met Meenakshi in 1985. Until then, although I’d known something about Auroville—with the other children, I’d even thrown stones at the first settlers—I was just looking forward to getting a good government job and having a nice life. But when Meenakshi told me more about Auroville, and of the ideal of service to something greater, suddenly my whole life changed. I went to live in Ilaigarkal (Meenakshi’s school in Matrimandir Nursery) for two years, and, while teaching the students, gradually learned more about Sri Aurobindo and Mother. Later I lived in other communities. Now I want to join Auroville fully.

But the process of joining Auroville is not easy for me. For example, the villagers who join Auroville are not much respected in the village. There’s a feeling that they join because they don’t want to work, just to have a good life. And often they seem to act superior to the villagers, or to cut themselves off from village ways. In fact, the villagers say ‘If you go to Auroville, you don’t know the price of rice!’. So I have to fight against this bad image, even in my own family.

An even bigger problem is that my family is very strict and traditional. I’m the eldest son, so it’s expected that I will take up my responsibilities to look after the family. If they knew that I wasn’t going to accept their ideas—like getting a ‘good’ job or getting married to someone they had chosen—they would feel betrayed and would reject me. This would hurt me very much, because I love my parents very much. My father is illiterate, but he is like my guru; he always behaves very correctly, and everybody in the village looks up to him. However, since I’ve been living and working in Auroville for five years now, I see they are changing a little towards me. For example, they don’t expect me to be helping them all the time. But I still haven’t been able to tell them that I want to join Auroville. Joining Auroville may not be such a problem for children from poorer families, however, because then the parents may feel that their children can get a better life there.

A much smaller problem for me in coming to Auroville is giving up religious rituals, because I feel I can overlook them, be detached. But for many villagers who join Auroville, it is very hard to give up their traditional religious practices, both because they believe in them, and also because they are afraid what the other villagers would say if they stop. In fact, almost all the Aurovilians who have



SHANKAR

Since our life is an experiment, we have to try to correlate to Auroville whatever habits or customs we have inherited from our culture. So, first we have to correct ourselves, and then we can become models for others.

come from the villages are still paying or expecting dowry, having big marriages, having ear-piercing ceremonies etc. In this, they have not changed at all.

Something which is much more difficult for me is practising the yoga of Sri Aurobindo and Mother. I can work for hours in the sun, but after ten minutes of sitting in a room and trying to still my mind, I just burst into tears. My stupid mind goes everywhere. It’s so hard! I’m sure I have a long way to go before I’m ready for the ideal, but I’m preparing myself. Sometimes, I translate passages from Sri Aurobindo, Mother and Satprem into Tamil, both for myself and my Tamil students. But even to translate something before you realize it fully is difficult.

Undoubtedly, the material aspect is the most important one for the majority of those who join Auroville from the villages. But Auroville is not a paradise, it is a battlefield. Auroville is not meant for an easy life or to accumulate possessions. Unfortunately, some of the Aurovilians from the villages—some Westerners too—are not good examples here. Since our life is an experiment, we have to try to correlate to Auroville whatever habits or customs we have inherited from our culture. So, first we have to correct ourselves, and then we can become models for others. As a teacher, I know this is the only way to change people.”

From an interview with Alan on 28.4.93

“I want to live my own life”

RAJI was born in Edayanchavadi in 1972 into a large family, some of whom have worked in Auroville. She attended the Udavi School set up by the Auroshika incense factory. Later she learned how to use the computer with Ananda while she was living in the Pichandikulam community. Her present job is in the Secretariat where she does computer work for the Auroville Fund, the Visa Service, the Entry Group and the Centre for Indian Culture.

“If I was on the Entry Group, I wouldn’t ask people ‘Why do you want to join Auroville?’ It would be better to look at what people are actually doing and how they are living. As you know, if a boy wants to marry a girl he will speak very nicely to her and only after does he drink and beat her.

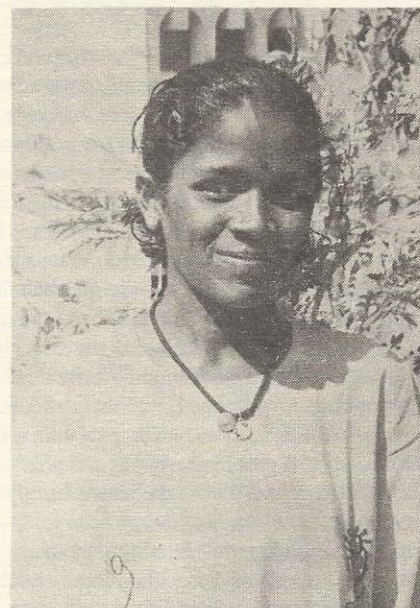
I like Auroville and I want to live in Auroville. I feel free here, unlike in the village where I couldn’t talk to a boy without the neighbours talking about it. I wanted to live my own life. Also, I feel much more cared for in Auroville than I was in the village—both by other Aurovilians and by Mother.

I certainly didn’t come here just for material benefits. In fact, in some ways, it was more luxurious for me in the village, because I was always wearing what I wanted to—like shorts and so on—in my house, whereas here I wear ‘proper’ clothes so people will not think badly of me. I also knew a lot about Sri Aurobindo and Mother through having been educated at ‘Udavi’ school.

I haven’t encountered many problems in leaving the village to come here.

My parents supported my decision—even though I’m the first girl in my village to come on her own to live here—partly because I have so many other brothers and sisters that I wasn’t a big loss. And I’m not like some of these people who neglect the village when they come to Auroville. There’s a Tamil proverb, ‘My father, mother and teacher are my gods’, and I always try to behave like this.

Sometimes I had problems with other Tamil people in Auroville speaking badly to me, and then I would think, ‘I’ve come from the village to get away from this, but it’s just the same here’. But then I would remind myself, ‘Mother will help me’, and I would always come through the problems.



RAJI

I don’t really care if I’m made an ‘Aurovilian’. Everywhere you go people ask you ‘Are you an Aurovilian?’ They make a distinction and are differentiating all the time—treating workers one way and Aurovilians another. This is not right—we are all human. Then when a villager gets the Aurovilian name, sometimes they act like a king or queen or as if they got an award. You can hardly talk to them anymore! Like some other Aurovilians, they feel they can come and go when they like from work. They maybe work only half day but then don’t use the other time to study or learn. Of course, some of them are motivated to join Auroville for the material advantage, for some profit, for the maintenance. Also some try to get their family members and friends into Auroville too. On the other side there are Western people who don’t want any Tamil people to join Auroville. Each one should see the necessary discipline and adjustment from both sides Western and Tamil.

There are many things I would like to do in Auroville. One thing is to help children and teenagers who have problems because of alcoholic parents. This is a big problem in the village. I also want to learn more about computer work. I even think of becoming a midwife but also I need to become physically and psychologically stronger. I’m easily upset by criticism and insults, and it affects me a lot.”

Interview by Bill and Alan



UMA IN ASPIRATION

“Here we can manage differently”

Many Tamil women come to Auroville through marriage. UMA is one of them. She is 19, a sweet, thoughtful woman from Ariankuppam (about 15 kilometres from Auroville). She has lived in Aspiration for over a year now. Married to a Tamil Aurovilian, Karna, Uma now assists as a Tamil teacher at Transition School. AUROVILLE TODAY asked her how she came to Auroville.

“I saw Auroville for the first time about two years ago. I met Karna when I visited Aspiration on a tour. Karna was in the kitchen when I arrived and he agreed to show me around. He asked me if I liked the place, and what I was doing. Then it was, ‘Thank you. Bye.’”

When he asked me what I was doing, we had a conversation about school. We also talked about marriage in general, and he said it was different here from elsewhere in India. Then he said if I want to join Auroville, I must first go to school here. So I started learning to use a computer. I also began to learn a bit of English.

Karna told me about Auroville, about the life here. It sounded like a very nice place. He told me about people from all over the world coming together, and what Mother and Sri Aurobindo asked of them.

Later, when Karna explained to my family that he would like to marry me, they thought it was a good idea; they had no other arrangements for me. Also, the signs were compatible. So we were married.

I continued to study computer at Last School. Then Karna went to Transition School and asked Suzie if I could work there. Karpagavalli was teaching Tamil and she needed another teacher. I studied with her and learned teaching methods. Now I have one group of five children. I teach Tamil as a first language in Transition.

When I came to live in Aspiration, I talked only to Tamil people. I was shy. It was difficult for me at the beginning. I wondered how I was going to talk to the white people. Now I'm happy to talk to them. Here are many accents, like French. I think slowly, ‘What is it they told?’ After three months, I began to take English lessons, especially to learn to speak. Now I am speaking it. I want to learn French also.

In the village, there is always fighting, like in Kuilapalayam. They always want money for something. Also, there is a monotonous routine. In Auroville, we can manage differently. We can do something new after work—classes, Pondy, movies, reading and writing. In the village they are always working—cooking, cleaning, washing, taking care of the children. Here, a stranger comes and takes care—not family.

There is no other community besides Aspiration where I would like to live.

If a new Tamil wife came to live here, I would say, ‘You're a lucky girl.’

Jill

Finding the little bits of glue

JOSS came to Auroville in late 1969, and since then has been intensively involved in land work and afforestation activities. In 1973, he started Pitchandikulam community with half a dozen Harijan boys. Since then, his community has become, among other things, an experiment in coexistence and in integrating villagers into Auroville. At present, Joss is also a member of the Co-Entry group.

The villages: past and present

In the early days, life was far less complicated. The villages at that time were much simpler—very basic, rough and tough. It was essentially a farming community, with goats and cows wandering everywhere. In those days, Aurovilians and villagers worked a lot together as we newcomers learned basic survival skills, how to build a house, plough a field etc. We even dressed alike, until the Aurovilians got a directive from the office in Pondicherry, asking us to wear a few more clothes as our loincloths were considered too... elementary.

At that time, idealism was rampant. Mother was there, and it was not difficult to believe that we would create this beautiful place together. That thought and aspiration is still there among us, but the realities of today are different...

The ancient Dravidians created one of the seed cultures of the planet. But nowadays, the richness that was there in Tamil Nadu has gone, and the villages are polluted and corrupted by politics, casteism and the influence of consumerism. The villager who long ago sold me compost at Rs 2.50 a load now lives in one of the largest houses in the village, and has become the main dealer in pesticides. If you went to a village house then, you saw big pots full of local grains. Now the storerooms are full of mopeds. The villagers are no longer farmers; they grow cash crops and lease out their land.

The reality is that through the proximity to Auroville, the local people have had the opportunity to earn quite a lot of money. The question is, can that wealth be channelled in the right direction? The signs are not good, for first-generation wage earners are generally not renowned for their social consciousness. There is money enough in the villages to transform them, but the villagers as a whole are not interested in this as yet. Whenever there is a request for support, Auroville must help. But the changes and development will only be sustainable if it comes from them.

It's a matter of choice. Some Aurovilians with sophisticated and wealthy backgrounds live simply and walk barefoot; others live in material comfort as high as anywhere. But choices have been made. When Aurovilians coming from the villages spray pesticides on their land—which is sometimes adjacent to Auroville land—just because everybody else in the village is doing it, or when they arrange marriages for their daughters and hold extravagant functions for the sake of prestige, then this becomes part of the role model for the young villagers who want to join Auroville.

How to share real concerns between different cultures? There is no longer a tradition of honest searching for solutions through a forum in the villages as politicians' gangs and factions rule the village communities now. Yet it is time for all of us to redefine our shared concerns, values and ethics. And it would seem useful to start with something as basic as the land. We could perhaps agree that the land in the area of Auroville could come under the care and protection of a commonly agreed ethic that regenerates rather than exploits the land.

The Co-Entry group

The Co-Entry group was specifically created to facilitate the entry of people from the surrounding villages into Auroville. It is not just a policy im-

plementing body, but a group of people who are searching for a truer way of dealing with this very important part of the overall community process. Integration is nothing else than finding the little bits of glue that bind the community together. The Tamil contribution is doubtless that special form of gentleness and generosity that we from the West could all gain from.

However, we often wonder why the work of the Co-Entry group is not easier. Applicants should come to us with the backing of other Aurovilians and working groups, and with the material aspects solved. But often this is not the case. A lot of our work is field work, investigation, interviewing, advising and, sometimes, even conflict resolution. Some cases are complicated. For example, we had the case of the husband of a daughter of a Tamil Aurovilian. She had grown up in Auroville, and had gone to an Auroville school, but her father arranged a marriage for her with someone who lives and works outside Auroville. We sent the father a letter asking him why he thinks that arranged marriages have a place in Auroville, and pointing out that the husband of his daughter will not automatically become an Aurovilian through marrying an Aurovilian girl. As to the husband—whose understanding of Auroville was minimal—we gave him some advice about how he could widen his Auroville experience. Now we wait to see what will happen.

Auroville is regarded by some villagers as a Government undertaking, which will provide security, a good job and a motorbike. We have to break this image and, for example, to attract young Tamil farmers to work on the land and help with afforestation by bringing dignity back to labour.

Above all, in the Co-Entry group we are looking for a spark, we are trying to learn together to recognise that spark that is some deep connection with, or openness to, Auroville.

Joss, based partly upon an interview with Carel

Auroville's influence on the nearby villages

In 1992, A. Thillai Ganapathi completed a sociological study (sponsored by the SAIIR) on ‘The Impact of Auroville on its Neighbouring Villages’ over the last ten years. The study is based upon interviews with a representative sample of villagers in a) the villages immediately adjacent to Auroville and b) villages further away. To determine how Auroville has affected the nearby villages, the results from a) and b) were then compared. The main findings were as follows:

Economic growth—as reflected in income, type of housing, possession of consumer goods etc.—is greater in the Auroville villages than in those further away. This is due to the fact that villagers have sold land to Auroville for high prices; that many of these village families have two or more members working in Auroville, and so have a secure income in comparison to the insecurity of traditional dry-crop farming; and that many villagers have received training in Auroville and can now get well-paid jobs in Pondicherry. The per-

centage of middle- and high-income groups is also higher in the Auroville villages.

Social changes There are some modifications in the institution of marriage. Boys and girls get married earlier in the Auroville villages—due to greater economic stability—and more boys and girls from these villages choose their marriage partner themselves. Slightly more marriages in the Auroville villages are inter-caste.

The elders of the Auroville villages were more influential and respected ten years ago than today.

Caste feelings and conflict are less acute in the Auroville villages, as different castes are used to working together in Auroville.

Education The general level of education, of both sexes, is higher in the Auroville villages, due to schooling provided or supported by Auroville.

Other changes The traditional religion is a potent force in the Auroville

villages, but less potent than in the more distant villages.

The number of people dependent on agriculture is far lower in the Auroville villages, partly because some of the land has been sold to Auroville, and partly because many of the villagers have taken up other jobs in the community. For similar reasons, far fewer families are looking after cattle in the Auroville villages than in the further villages.

Political conflicts are fewer in the Auroville villages because, with more people engaged in full-time work, there is less energy and opportunity for such conflicts to break out.

In the Auroville villages, more rice, bread, fruit and vegetables are eaten now than 10 years ago, when the staples were millets. This may reflect changes in India as a whole, but the Aurovilian diet is clearly an influence.

Note: These changes occurred more among the youth than the elders; more among the uneducated and the lower castes; and more among those employed in Auroville.

HUMOUR

"What kept you?"

"Are invited to Auroville all those who thirst for progress and aspire to a higher and truer life" (The Mother)

Aspirant: I thirst for progress and aspire to a higher and truer life. Can I join Auroville?

Resident: Do you have an Entry Visa?

A: No, a Tourist Visa.

R: Sorry, you'll have to go back to your home country and get an Entry Visa.

A: To stand once again where I'm standing right now?...

R: Sorry, these are government regulations.

(After two or three months, around 35,000 kilometres, a 42,000 rupees airfare, enormous effort and inconvenience, BUT... with the word 'Tourist' now replaced by the word 'Entry')

A: I want to join Auroville.

R: Please complete this Arrival Report Form.

A: I want to join Auroville.

R: You need to have an AIDS test.

A: I want to join Auroville.

R: You can stay in Auroville as a Guest. If you're still interested after three months you can see the Entry Group.

(Three months later)

A: I want to join Auroville.

R: We'll accept you as a Newcomer. You are requested to contribute 1,500 rupees

per month, and give 1,000 rupees to the Repatriation Fund.

A: I'd like to build a house.

R: First you'll have to find somewhere to build, which means finding Aurovilians who'll accept to have you live near them in 'their' place.

(Around three months later, after much foot-slogging, ego-bruising and negotiating)

A: That's now arranged. So can I go ahead?

R: No, that's not allowed. As a Newcomer, you first have to get permission from the Entry Group.

A: Can I then build?

R: No, you have to get an Application Form from the Receptionist at Aurofuture, complete it, and submit it to the Development Group via Aurofuture, together with a plan of the community

where you plan to build, showing the position and orientation of the house relative to other buildings and permanent features like power lines, roads, and so on.

A: Can I then build?

R: No, you also have to provide a plan of the house, floor by floor, with drawn elevations and—if possible—perspectives.

A: Can I then build?

R: No, you must also give details of how the building will be integrated within the existing infrastructure in terms of water supply, power supply and waste water treatment. Also, how access will be obtained for building materials, and how the building will be financed. All this will be considered by the Development Group, who if they are satisfied will give their approval.

A: Can I then build?

R: No. The rest of Auroville will be informed in the Auroville News and given a chance to object.

A: Can I then build?

R: No. Only when the Secretary has also given his approval.

(Some exhausting months later)

A: My house is under construction, I'm working in an Auroville unit, I've been living in Auroville for one year, and I would now like to be approved as an Aurovillian.

R: OK with us; but first let's see if any of the 900-or-so other Aurovilians object.

(Finally...)

A: Oh Mother, here I am, at your divine feet at last, and able to give myself fully to your work.

She: My child, my child, I've been waiting for you. What kept you?

Tim



REFLECTIONS ON A NEW EDUCATIONAL EXPERIMENT

"It's powerful stuff"

Take a large thatched hut. Add refreshments, some villagers, Aurovilians and visitors, a course of lectures presented in English and translated into Tamil, a lot of information and fun—and you have a stimulating mixture called the 'Auroville Centre of Development Studies' (or 'The College', as it is better known.)

The College was the brainchild of Janet and Philip. "For me", says Janet, "it grew out of a need to tackle some of the issues blatant in Auroville, like the growing disparity between us and the villagers. For example, the only relationship most of us have with them is that of employer to

employee. But there are many villagers in the area with High School education—we estimate between 2,000 and 3,000—who most of us do not come into contact with, and who are looking for college level education. These are one of our target groups."

"The villagers around here are being 'modernized', whether they like it or not," adds Philip. "So why shouldn't they become better informed and, progressively, partners in this process? The College could be both a means to achieving this, and a practical example of how some of the values of Auroville—human unity and unending education—can be implemented."

The villagers, however, are only one component of the planned College. Janet and Philip hope that the student body will also include Aurovilians, and students of development on field placements from colleges and universities abroad. "There are not enough young Aurovilians at present to form a college on their own," says Philip, "but they could become involved with what happens here, and if the international element participated, there would be a big increase in their peer group here in Auroville." The lectures and presentations would be given by the Aurovilians themselves.

Earlier this year, the College opened for an experimental trial run in the compound of Janet's house and former workshop. For four weeks, a coffee shop opened daily for Aurovilians, guests and villagers, and for the final three weeks, lectures and presentations happened almost every afternoon. The 'menu' included a musical recital, a tea party with the Vice-Chancellors of many Indian Universities, and presentations by Aurovilians on subjects as diverse as tree planting, biogas, the ozone layer, AIDS, Tamil culture, Why Auroville?... and, even, 'Reflections on a Shakespearian echo in 'Savitri'!' A feature of every presentation was that everything was immediately translated into Tamil for the benefit of those villagers whose English was not adequate.

In all, a total of about 1,000 people attended the 18 presentations; 125 Tamils, 60 visitors and about 50 Aurovilians attended one or more sessions.

What did Janet and Philip learn from this trial run? "There was not a great interest from the Aurovilians," points out Janet, "but a lot of interest from the Tamils. And they were less interested in Auroville pep talks than in getting information, particularly scientific informa-

tion." "I was very pleased with the presentations," said Philip, "and I was very impressed by the bi-lingual element. It's powerful stuff because it's not just translation; it also creates a new kind of relationship between the Tamils and non-Tamils through the use of language. And nearly all the Tamils who came would like the College to continue."

What's the next step? "Our original idea, and it's still an active possibility," says Janet, "was to run, later in the year, a course for a mixed group of Tamils, Aurovilians and others in Development Studies. This would involve different types of work experience and an introduction to the basic ingredients of development Studies—international development, ecology, economics, housing, hygiene etc.

"In terms of funding," says Philip, "we are prepared to fund certain expenses, such as student stipends and some incidentals, and for the rest the pilot project will be supported by existing facilities. But my sense is that Auroville should now appoint a Board of Trustees for the project who would represent Auroville's interests. For, clearly, this has to be a collective project, an Auroville project, in line with Auroville's ideals."

An idea whose time has finally come? Who knows? But as I walked away after one of the presentations, I carried with me memories of happy faces, of an intense thirst for knowledge, and a sense of intimacy with all those who had listened and laughed together under the neem tree on that particular Saturday afternoon. "I can't think of a better mechanism for changing our relationship with the villages than this project," says Philip. He might be right.

Alan



PHILIP AND JANET

The East Coast Road

Since the last article on the ECR project appeared in AUROVILLE TODAY one year ago, a small core group of Aurovilians has been actively engaged upon attempting to modify the project in collaboration with other concerned groups. Ardhendu and Ajit are part of this group, and here they give an update on the present state of affairs.

A major highway, called the East Coast Road (ECR), is planned to link Calcutta in the north east with Kanyakumari at the southern tip of India. The first phase, between Madras and Cuddalore has already been sanctioned. It involves the widening of an existing road, and something like 3,000 old trees have been cut down. Auroville would be directly affected by this road. It would run along the bottom of the Auroville plateau, separating the beach communities from the rest of Auroville, and would bring with it noise, pollution and environmental degradation. Many beautiful old Tamarind trees between here and Pondicherry have already been cut down in the past year.

Since last year, a small core group of Aurovilians has been actively engaged upon attempting to modify the project in collaboration with other concerned groups. It has produced papers pointing out that the proposed ECR is ecologically damaging, financially wasteful and that the process so far has not conformed to Government regulations. The group, in collaboration with the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) and the Consumer Action group (CAG), has proposed an alternative to the ECR proposal which would be cheaper, serve a much larger section of the population, and be much less destructive of the environment (see map).

Three major things have happened over the past year.

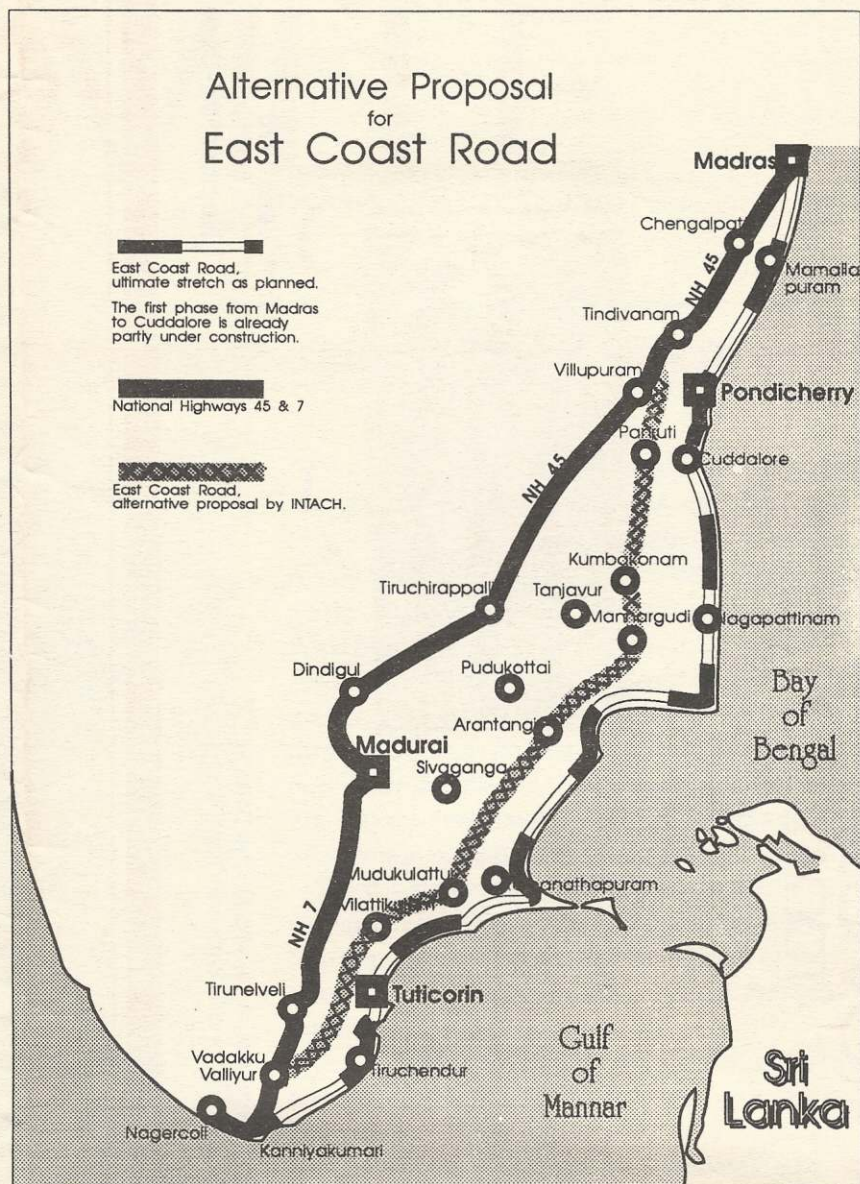
1. The Madras High Court issued an injunction in December, 1992, prohibiting the further felling of trees along the proposed route of the road. This was in response to a petition by two Aurovilians, by INTACH and CAG. This order is still effective, protecting more than 3,000 trees that were destined to be cut.

2. The construction of bridges and culverts, and work on widening a few stretches of the proposed road continues, but we have been assured by the Environment Minister of India that the local authorities have been advised to suspend work until an Environmental Impact Assessment has been made, and until clearance has been given by the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MEF) for the work to continue.

3. In response to the INTACH publication—'The East Coast Road; why it is neither cost-effective nor environmentally sound'—the Highways and Rural Works Department presented an Environmental Impact Study, justifying the need for a National Highway standard road along the East Coast of Tamil Nadu. The Study is in many ways unsatisfactory. In our view, it is full of unsupported assumptions, and is not a serious attempt to re-evaluate the need for the project. A number of critiques of the Study have subsequently been presented to the Ministry of Environment and Forests, and recently an Environmental Appraisal Committee of the MEF visited the road construction site, and had a brief discussion with some Aurovilians. The recommendation of the MEF is expected by the end of May.

In addition, the East Coast Road issue has drawn the attention of the Indian Press—the first article was published by Francois Gautier, an Aurovilian—and the project has been discussed in both the Tamil Nadu Assembly and the Indian Parliament.

In early May, twelve local non-governmental organizations invited a group of concerned Aurovilians to Madras to present the various aspects of the ECR project, and its potential impact on the coastal ecosystem. As a result, they formed an Action Committee to visit all



the villages on both sides of the proposed ECR route to collect data and to raise awareness on the issue. The ECR will also be one of the main issues in a 5 day national workshop on 'Human Rights—Environment and the Law', to be held in Bangalore in the beginning of June.

It seems that the whole process of changing the original plan will be a long, drawn-out one. It has also taken us far beyond the environs of Auroville in our focus and thinking. After all, the southern stretch of the road alone, from Madras to Kanyakumari, is 700 kilometres long. So,

while we started with focussing upon the tree-cutting problem, we are now drawing up an ecologically sustainable development strategy for the coastal area, and we are trying to establish a network of collaboration between people all along the coast to tackle the problem.

We invite anybody who wishes to contribute ideas or resources to contact us at the Auroville Greenwork Resource Centre.

Ardhendu and Ajit

BRIEF NEWS ♦ BRIEF NEWS ♦ BRIEF NEWS

The Annual Exodus

By the end of May, approximately 200 Aurovilians (out of a total of 850) will be temporarily out of station—130 of them abroad, and the rest in cooler parts of India. So far, everything in Auroville seems to be functioning as usual. What's the message, we wonder...

Summer Activities

A number of activities have been organized for the Auroville children and older students who will be around this summer. The activities include the annual camp at Berijam Lake; a 2000 kms cycle tour around the south of India; snorkelling along the coral reef at Rameswaram; coaching camps in basketball, kabbadi and volleyball; and various craft activities at 'Transition' and 'Arul Varzhi' schools.

Flamenco Dance

On the full moon evening of 6th May, Maria Solis, a professional dancer from Spain who had spent the last year in Pondicherry, gave a performance of Flamenco dance at Last School. By the end of the evening, Maria had persuaded many of the audience to join her on stage, and new versions of Flamenco were being born every second.

Relocating the residents of Matrimandir Camp

A grant of 6 lakhs has just been sanctioned by the Ministry of Urban Development to the Auroville Building Centre to build a trainee hostel in CSR's compound, and a cluster of 10 experimental houses elsewhere in Auroville. The Development Group has been able to add 4 lakhs to this amount.

With this money, Raman and Gilles intend to start a new settlement called 'Savitri' in the Residential Zone employing cost-effective building methods. The families and individuals at present living in Matrimandir Camp will be the initial beneficiaries of this project, allowing the Camp to be finally demolished to make place for the development of the Matrimandir garden complex.

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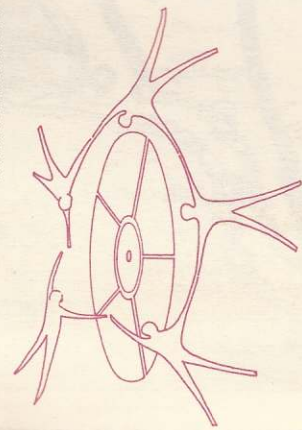
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In this issue:
Joining Auroville from the villages; the College;
the East Coast Road; a brick from Tibet; etc.

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Exp. # 63

ANNE AND MICHAEL
GRACE
AUROVILLE

PHOTO ALAN

Making music together at the Good Work Fair

TRAVEL

A Frenchie and a Brick

Recently, Claude Arpi—a French Aurovilian with a great love for Tibet—was invited to accompany a group of Earthstewards to Tibet. Here he describes one of his many experiences in the Land of Snow.

The afternoon before leaving Auroville for Tibet, I received a phone call from Dharamsala from the Secretary to His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He gave me the fantastic news that the Dalai Lama had accepted to come to Auroville at the end of December 1993. What a beautiful Christmas present!

Anyway, the next day we left for Calcutta, Kathmandu and Lhasa, and after a lot of adventures in Kathmandu—where we found out that our trip had been cancelled—we arranged to journey overland to Lhasa.

All this time I had been thinking about the extraordinary coincidence of receiving the news of His Holiness' visit just before leaving for the Roof of the World. So, the first days in Tibet, the idea lodged in my mind that I should do something for the Dalai Lama's visit to Auroville, and especially for the laying of the Foundation Stone of the Tibetan Pavilion in Auroville. However, it was only in Gyantse that I got the *adesh*: "Bring back a brick from Tibet".

We had reached Gyantse early in the afternoon, and it was while wandering in the streets of the old city (it was the first city which did not look like a Chinese city), that it came clear to me. After that, I had only to carry out my plan. However, I thought it would not be a good idea to just steal a brick from a construction site in broad daylight, even though the Chinese presence is less in Gyantse than in other cities. So I decided to wait until the early hours of the morning to collect a brick from a nearby site.

The next morning, I executed my plan and I kept the brick near our bus, which was still locked. When the driver started loading our baggage, I discreetly slid the heavy brick below my seat. The brick, which was made of rammed earth, weighed around 8 kg, but when I thought that His Holiness himself was going to have it in his hands, it felt like a feather.

Anyway, the next few days, I and my brick were the recipient of quite a few jokes. Already my French accent had become one of the most popular topics in the bus, so now my companions had a Frenchie and a Brick to joke about. I did not mind as I thought it could help them to forget their AMS (Acute Mountain Sickness) and make them breathe better.

The next few days I often saw smiles on the faces of my colleagues: they were thinking of the brick, and they were waiting for the last day to see if I would be sent to Drapchi, the most dreaded prison in Lhasa, for smuggling assets of the *People's Republic* out of the country.

On the final departure day, I decided to keep the brick with me in my ruck bag. I could hear some of my American friends whisper at the back of the bus: "O God, the Frenchie and the Brick again", but I pretended not to hear anything.

That morning, we left early for the airport situated 90 km from Lhasa. In the bus, I frankly told the gods that this brick

was not for me personally, and that they should really help to smuggle it out without any hindrance as it was destined to be held by His Holiness himself. But one is never too sure with the gods if they are listening or not!

In the airport the atmosphere was quite different from Lhasa and other places that we had visited. Never in the previous days, had I had such a feeling of oppression. The Airport was green with Army officers, and there were also a very large number of security guards around. My brick suddenly began to feel much heavier.

One particular lady officer (looking like a Chinese Brigitte Bardot and immediately nicknamed "Miss China"), was so ice-cold that everyone had the same allergic reaction to her. She looked like one of the secret agents that one can see in American movies—our guide looked like an angel in comparison.

After Miss China had examined our passports and visas, we moved towards the security check and the customs. I passed without problem through the various metal detectors and sent my brick through the X-Ray machine with the other accompanied luggage of the group. It passed through without problems. I retrieved my bag and was proceeding towards the waiting room, when a customs officer called me and ask me to open my bag. I remained very quiet and opened it. The brick was wrapped in a plastic bag inside a cloth bag. The customs officer took out the cloth bag, took my brick and went around the counter. Nothing on his face showed how heavy the confiscated object was, but the Chinese are famous for not showing their feelings.

I had a brief vision of Drapchi, but I still did not move.

I thought the officer was going to his superior, but to my surprise, without saying a word he passed the brick through the X-Ray machine again, and then came back and handed it over. I slowly and quietly put it back in my bag, closed it and left for the waiting room. The whole scene took place in complete silence, though I saw afterwards that some members of our group were giggling in the other corner of the room.

During the trip, my American friends had kept on repeating two phrases that I could not understand with my limited understanding of American humour: whatever was happening, they would say: "Here it goes!". And whatever they saw, they would say, "It's neat". So, I suddenly found myself saying: "Here it goes, it was neat!"

Immediately, I went to drink two cups of tea as my throat had gone a bit dry over the past few minutes.

I was very much relieved when we finally boarded the airplane to Kathmandu to enjoy two hours of Nirvana in a totally blue sky over the Himalayan range and the high Tibetan plateau. For the grand finale, we circled the great mountains Kanchenjunga and Chomolungma (Mt. Everest) (clockwise!).

There were no further problems for the Frenchie and his Brick, and the Nepalese and Indian customs were passed through very smoothly.

Sometimes the gods have to be with us!

Claude