

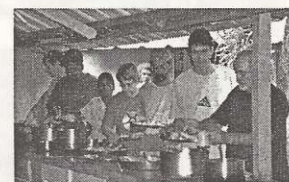
Auroville Today

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MAIN THEME: Experiences of community life

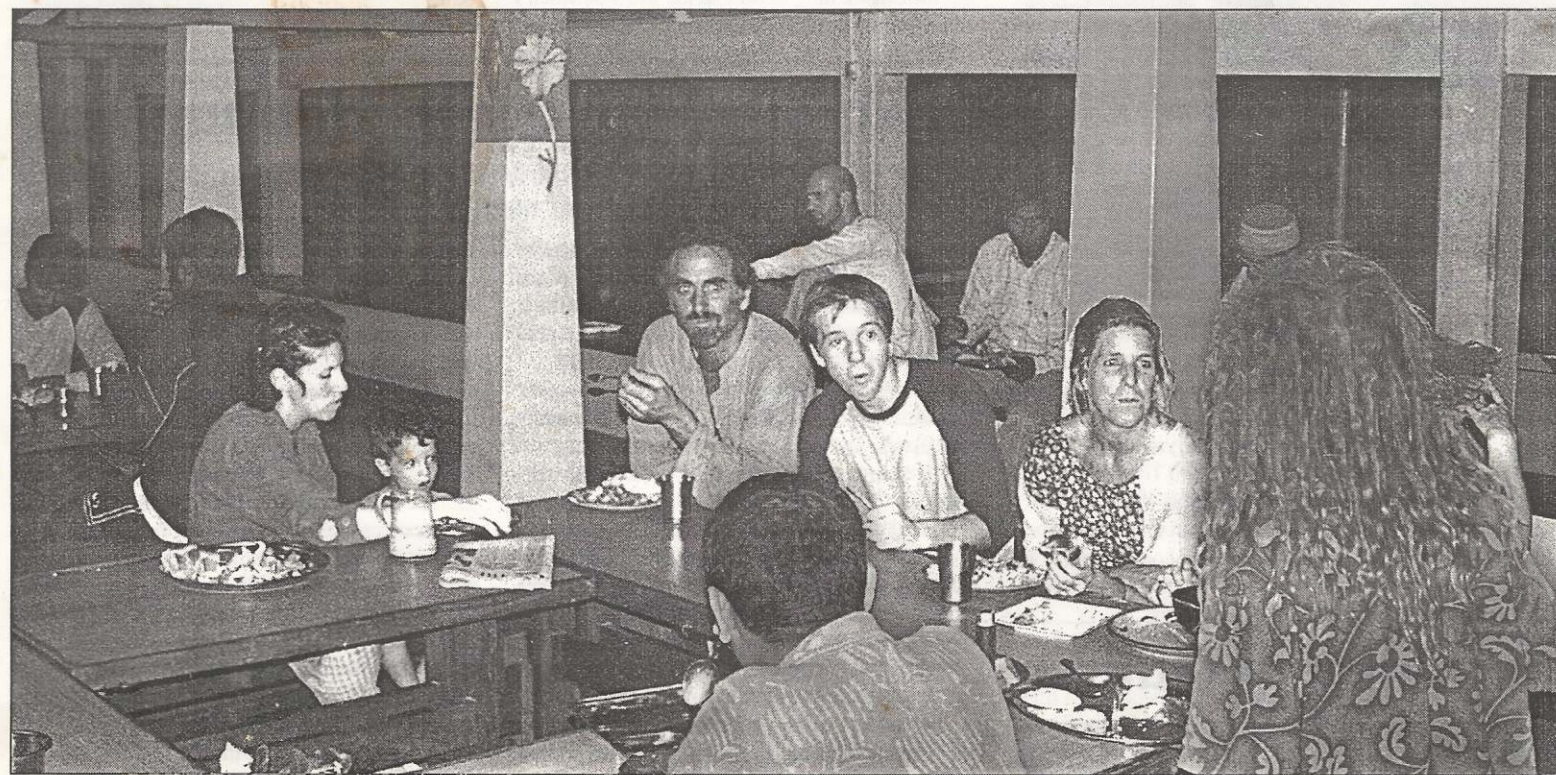
- Jothi and Aran on Aspiration
- Ute and Chris on the Quiet Healing Centre
- Dianna on New Creation
- Ambre on communities in the world
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Self-service in Aspi kitchen

Collective Living in Aspiration: Jothi's experience



Collective living in Aspiration, the oldest community of Auroville

Although there are many examples of collective living in the world, Auroville is unique. The ultimate goal of Auroville's efforts towards collective living is to hasten the process of evolution on the whole earth. It has now been over 37 years since Auroville began and it is a project that is yet far from complete. This is so, because Auroville is not simply about constructing a city, but also about working towards human unity; a unity with diversity. It is through experiments in collective living situations that people in Auroville are trying to work towards human unity because, there are no models on earth of the kind of unity we are seeking to bring about: it is only through experiments that we can try to progress.

In Auroville we talk a lot about collective living. But we usually talk about it as an aspiration. We do not spend much time examining or evaluating what we have done so far. I want to share what has happened in a particular instance of collective living in Auroville – the Aspiration community – which represents the longest standing collective situation in Auroville and one that I have been participating in through different phases over the past 32 years. It is a fascinating experiment, and there are many lessons to be learned from collective living in Aspiration. They may be relevant to other endeavours in collective living.

My experience in collective living actually began before I joined Aspiration. Around 1974, I participated in a project called Udayam. Udayam was a collective housing project for the Tamil children attending schools in Aspiration. Gordon and Jean, who joined Auroville after completing their Peace Corps Work in Cuddalore, initiated the project. There were about 18 of us girls and boys, all

coming from the neighbouring villages. A few of us got involved in helping with completion of the construction of Udayam. We carried bricks to the masons, created the gardens and laid the pathway to Udayam.

Training in communal living

It was here that I, for the first time, participated in a collective. The experience of working for a common project was fun, because our attitude towards work was to create something beautiful for ourselves. So working together for Udayam was joyful. The other responsibilities we had to share on a regular basis were the more mundane activities of sweeping, watering the plants, washing our clothes, and, on Sundays, preparing our own meals when there were no meals served at the kitchen.

Two years later in 1976 when I moved to the Aspiration Community, I realized that the practice of washing, keeping things clean, and all the many tasks I did in Udayam came in rather handy. Each resident in Aspiration was expected to take up many responsibilities to ensure the functioning of the community. In addition, all the adult members of Aspiration also took turns to cook meals for the community and clean the dishes at least once a week. Had I not had the earlier preparation at Udayam, the whole concept of common space and working for the community might have taken me by surprise. This experience made me realize that one cannot expect people to immediately understand what is required or expected of them in collective living situations. Like everything else in life, education and practical experience are necessary to know what it means to live with others.

Minority voices

During the meal times at Aspiration, the dining hall would be full. Aspiration was (and still is) the biggest collective community in Auroville. As the majority of people living in Aspiration then (1976) were French, the common language spoken was French. Even the few Tamil boys coming from Udayam to take their meals in the kitchen had to be able to express things in French. Naturally Aspiration came to be thought of by many Aurovilians as a French community although there were a few Americans, Germans, Australians and Indians residing there too. At some level I think this shows that collective living situations can fall into a kind of 'majority rules' scenario, as happens in most human societies. The interest of the dominant group gains priority. To me this is an important lesson. Just calling something "collective living" does not mean that it supports all

members in equal ways, especially when it comes to things like language and culture.

Minimal level of resources

During the years of conflict between the Sri Aurobindo Society (SAS) and Auroville residents, I felt a very deep sense of brother-hood among the residents. It was the most difficult period in Auroville's history. It felt like one had embarked on an uncertain adventure that might come crumbling down any day. Thugs beat up Aurovilians and some residents were taken to Tindivanam prison on false charges. The SAS also withheld funds, claiming proprietorship on Auroville. This brought many projects to a standstill. More specifically, it affected life in Aspiration. There was not much food to eat even for the young people. Soya milk instead of cow milk was served. On some days, there simply was

not enough food. I remember days when I had to drink water to fill my stomach. As this condition was prolonged for some time, those of us from Kuilapalayam would visit our families in the village for meals. Others who had money would visit the neighbouring tea shop or go to Pondy. To me this situation clearly demonstrates that only when there is a certain minimal level of resources available, can a collective function properly. Ultimately when push comes to shove, individuals tend to fall back on their social ties and resources that exist outside the collective. This is still an issue in Auroville today, as many people rely on family savings or ties in some way or another.

Everyone's best interests

From 1974, when the schools were shut down, to the time when SAIER was created in 1982, there were no formal schools set up for the young people in Auroville. As a result, many young people were left alone to do as they pleased, with the exception of a few children, whose parents took the trouble to help with their education at their homes. As a result, many of us took to a wide range of extracurricular activities like hunting bats, exploring the canyons, playing marbles, gilli-danda, wolf games, ping-pong, basketball and swimming at the beach. While this might sound like a young person's dream, in retrospect I can say that the situation seriously limited our mental development. Gradually, the young people themselves began to seek out willing adults who could teach them some maths and English. Our efforts gradually led to the re-establishment of the schools in Aspiration. When few resources are available even for basic survival, how can the collective be concerned with aspects like education for its young? So collective living situations do not necessarily lend themselves to the fulfilment of everyone's best interest. Those especially vulnerable are the ones who might not be able to articulate in public forums what their needs and best interests are.

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"Community life is challenging"

"From the ego standpoint, this is a very challenging place," says Israeli Aurovillian Aran. "You want things to go your way. Or you do things and other people are not satisfied, money-wise or decision-wise. And there are a lot of clashes. But I think it is part of community living."

Aran has lived in other communities. In Israel, he lived in a kibbutz. How does it compare? "In many aspects it's the same. The main difference is that in a Kibbutz, the goal is to manifest community life and to share. If you achieve that goal, then you are there. In Auroville, community life is a means to evolve. The goal is not community life, community life is only a tool."

"Aspiration is one of the most affordable communities for many individuals, especially those on maintenance. Community life is, moreover, considered as being very convenient. Each community member has only to cook once a

week – not every evening – and you can sit home doing something else while the food is being prepared. The same goes for gardening or whatever. But people forget that it is also very challenging, and I believe more challenging than convenient. Once you live in a community, the dynamics are somehow accelerated: the dynamics of internal work and the quality of your contacts with the others, for good or for bad. The same goes for your partner and children. You share more with other people."

"Living community is perhaps a very Israeli way of being. When I see new Israelis joining Auroville, I hope they will bring this element in. Being together, feeling oneness, togetherness. This oneness can translate into issues of nationality – for me, that is the negative side. The positive side is a universal togetherness, irrespective of nationality and other differences."

Priya Sundaravalli

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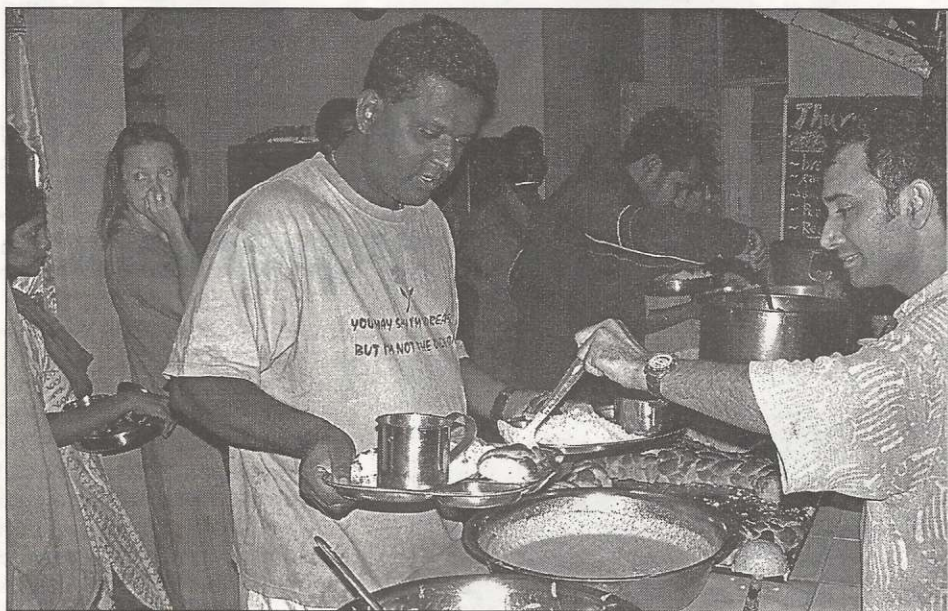
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The heart of the affair

The community kitchen is the soul of Aspiration – people come in and out, it is busy, alive, noisy around meal times, and quiet and peaceful in between. Late afternoon on Thursday, the 'Thursday team' is preparing dinner, producing a cacophony of warm kitchen sounds: chopping, cutting, bubbling and sizzling, and smells are curling up into the misty evening. It is an example of community alright – around the

and something spicy." Today's menu is a root vegetable soup, fresh salad, the potato dish, and the staple white rice and a daal swimming with extra-hot green chillies.

The dining room next to the kitchen feels like a long log house, its high slanted ceiling criss-crossed with white rafters supporting red terracotta tiles. The place of honour is taken by a large photo of The Mother with the word 'Aspiration'



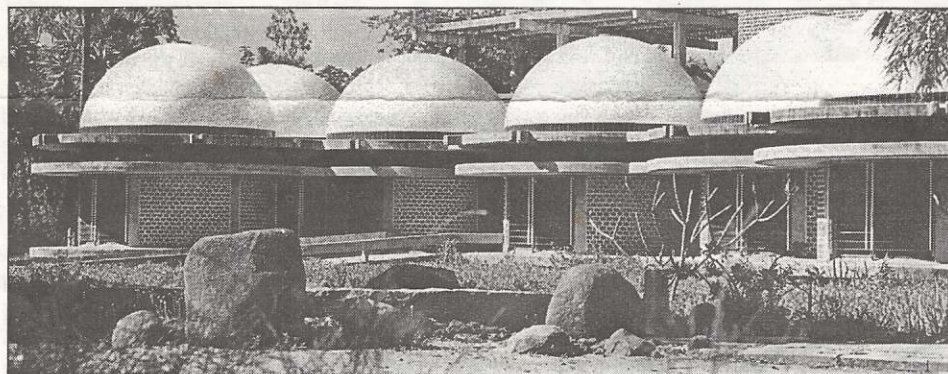
Dinner is served – the Aspiration dining hall comes alive at mealtimes

butcher-block of a square table, a gaggle of adults and children chop onions, dice tomatoes, peel carrots, and grate cheese. Tamil, Israeli, Russian, Dutch, and British. The wood-fire oven outdoors is blazing. Someone loads in trays of potatoes with cheese. The Thursday team shares how impossible it is to meet all the eating demands of 60 people. "Someone wants light soup, this one will only eat organic; the Tamils have to have white rice

in her handwriting. Over the photo hangs an orange satin canopy; underneath is a display of miniature teapots made by Aspiration children. In the corner is the notice board carrying a complaint by a resident; a helpful note from The Mother on psychic self-control; and letters from guests. Orchids grow on the tree in the courtyard. The place breathes sweetness.

Priya Sundaravalli

The healing community at Quiet



The Quiet Healing Centre is a fascinating place where many healers offer a wide range of services to the larger community. I have been there many times, for individual therapies, or to attend workshops. Quiet is a dream of the Mother – a Dream coming true. This time I visited Quiet as reporter, and talked with the team about this specific community.

"We think of ourselves as a healing community," says Ute. Chris defines the team as a group of healers working together with a unified focus. "Therapists usually are prima donnas," he says. "They're quite eccentric and have strong egos. But in Quiet, we all have gone through a lot of process, and have learnt to work together. We are not easy people, mind you. But slowly we have understood how to deal with and support each other rather than compete with or suppress one another." "The result," adds Ute, "is that a certain kind of energy permeates this place – quietness, peace, caring and love."

Uniquely, perhaps, the therapists do not really consider themselves as healers. "We are only the vehicles," says Chris. "If someone comes to me with a problem, I make sure that they are ultimately the ones who are going to make the change happen. If the person accepts that, then the healing becomes a lot easier."

"The secret to Quiet's success," says Ute, "is the feedback from the guests. They are treated as a whole; there is a real contact between the therapist and the patient, and for many of them this is mind-blowing. They are used to being treated as 'just another body who brings in the money'. They usually come in tired, stressed, heart-broken or sick, sometimes they are really seriously ill when they arrive, and then we see them blossom. Perhaps we should make before and after photos. To notice this dramatic differ-

ence is a beautiful experience."

Quiet's location by the beach, pre-determined by The Mother, has a distinct advantage. The team feels that it may be easier for people to go to a place that is far from the centre of Auroville and a different environment, especially when one wants to clean one's mind from every day issues, and whatever else that may be happening in their lives. Ute adds, "There is a different energy here. If you are sensitive, you feel it. There are many people who come and say, 'Wow, for so many years Quiet has existed and I have never found the way here.' They are often very pleasantly surprised that this place exists, and they come back."

For 10 years, the Quiet Healing Centre had a director. He recently stepped down and works as the second homeopath on the team. Now decisions are now made by a core group. "We are all multi-tasked," says Chris, "and we are all capable of doing many things." The therapists individually decide their schedules, how many patients they can receive in a day or week, but everything else is done in dialogue with the group. About conflicts, the Quiet team takes a philosophical approach. "We don't make them bigger than they are," says Ute, "and I think as we come with goodwill, we are doing fairly well. The small conflicts we deal with easily. Those which are more difficult and for which we don't have an answer, we just juggle along."

Quiet is the Auroville unit with the largest number of Aurovilians employed on a full maintenance without any financial support from Auroville. "We treat Aurovilians free of charge, which is possible because of our income from guests," says Ute. "Quiet has developed its own strength."

Ancolie

Collective living in Aspiration

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By the early 80s, the situation had become more stable in Aspiration and there were many communal events taking place. There were the famous French theatrical performances and dance parties staged in the Last School building, Charlie Chaplin's movies were screened on the lawns of Aspiration and sports and games played at the playground – basketball, volleyball, and even including kabaddi. Almost everyone participated in these events. People from other communities would also turn up. These group activities, artistic and recreational, were essential for a healthy collective living arrangement, and gave a feeling of well-being, and helped us enjoy one another's company. What I feel is important to remember today is that collective living is not only about decision-making, conflict resolution and the like, but also about having fun together, and playing.

Like a family

Fast-forwarding in time to the late 90s, when I was still a resident of Aspiration, I had the unique

opportunity to discover and treasure some of the greatest dimensions of collective living. In 1998 I was hospitalized with kidney disease. The immediate outpouring of support, care and help from the entire community of Auroville for me was something I had never experienced before. It was amazing how things were organized for my care. There were shifts of two people sent to Chennai to care for me every few days for over a month. Efforts to raise funds needed for the operation, and post-operative care along with the medical expenses were also organized. Residents of Aspiration particularly went out of their way to accommodate me in so many different ways, and to this day they still do. Without this spontaneous and overwhelming show of love and support from the collective of Aspiration and all of Auroville, I can honestly say that I would not be here to share this with you today. The great advantage of a collective system is that not only do people operate like a family, they actually work together even much more than a typical family.

Jothi

Learning from other communities

Ambre, an Aurovillian from the early days, speaks out on the decline of community spirit and the urgent need for community building

There are few moments when we come together as a community – some celebrations or the times of tragedy when we lose someone. But is this all? Is Auroville truly a community? Is it a conscious community?

"We never talk about it," says Ambre, one of the early Aurovilians, but she feels that the community spirit in today's Auroville is at its lowest.

"I remember when very close friends of mine left Auroville. They were people who had been here a long, long time, and they left with a lot of sadness. It was a terrible thing for them. But Auroville as a community has never tackled such issues. When people are here 10, 20 or even 30 years and they are leaving, the community should really ask what does that mean, and what could have been done to support them, or enter into some kind of communication with them."

For several years, Ambre has been researching how communities function. She has visited several communities in Europe, including Damanhur in Italy, Tamera in Portugal, Findhorn in England, and several in Germany – Oekodorf, Zegg, 7Linden, etc. "I like to communicate with other groups and get inspiration and be challenged from them," she says. She confess-

with our inner difficulties and get listened to. Because I believe most people here are working within, and doing inner work. And even in such situations, the collective can be a useful mirror to reflect how we are received and get supported.

"Some of us do that in our little communities. We have that in the greenbelt, for example. Perhaps as we grow bigger and bigger, these small communities will create ripple effects and extend over all Auroville."

She also observes that each of these European communities has a special focus. One of her favourites, Tamera in Portugal, which she visits frequently, works consciously on gender issues. "Men-women issues, relationship issues, the love theme, which is one of the biggest issues in our life, not to confuse it with romantic love – but we never talk about these things here." Several of Tamera's residents also came to experience Auroville. "They, too, are searching for spiritual insight and new ways in their lives. Spirituality is becoming stronger and stronger everywhere in the West. People look upon Auroville as a possibility, and some even decide to come back as newcomers."

The newcomer process is another area that



Ambre (far left) with visitors from Tamera (Portugal) and Zegg (Germany)

es that she does not get enough of that here in Auroville.

What interests Ambre is community spirit, and how it gets created. "None of these communities are as old as we are, nor as big. Auroville is the biggest intentional community in the world, though I hear that the Vissarion community in Siberia has crossed the 2000 mark. Auroville is also the most diverse and spread apart, a quality that may be challenging to community-building. But almost all these others express community spirit more strongly than we do."

The secret Ambre feels, is that they all have structures for sharing. "Times for sharing are given much importance. Perhaps this is what we need to learn here." But would that be possible in Auroville? Ambre believes it is. While acknowledging that our preoccupation with work or the great physical distances may be reasons that separate us in Auroville, she feels that we still need to come together. "Not as working groups, but as sharing circles, from a human point of view – where we can talk about where we are

Ambre sees has great potential to build community. "A lot of our newcomers are leaving. Why? What I hear is that newcomers feel very much isolated, unsupported, not really getting much direction or feeling Auroville is unwelcoming. If they cannot feel community spirit, or if they don't enter into it, then it is no surprise that many choose to leave."

Ambre sees a simple remedy to the issue. "We should learn from what the communities outside do – learning to share from the beginning by working together with people in groups. I am sure we could eliminate the entry process – getting together, sharing and studying, providing feedback and mirroring, and giving people the learning experience of community and building community. If we could work together towards creating a situation of trust, transparency and support, newcomers would eventually stay longer because they have found some kind of support here. This is what people are longing for."

Priya Sundaravalli

Building community: the Vérité experience

Vérité was founded in 1985. It is an experiment, among other things, in transformation through community. Today, it has ten residents and has developed into an integral learning campus which hosts Auroville workshops as well as students and researchers from abroad. Auroville Today asked three of its core members to talk about the challenges faced and lessons learned over the past 20 years.

Auroville Today: What do you understand by the term 'community'?

Bhavana: I see community happening on different levels. There is the material level, where it is ecological to live in community because it's a better use of resources. On the emotional level, it's a social unit of a manageable size which provides the possibility for healthy social interaction. On the mental level it's a tool of sadhana, for learning how to live in close community can be very helpful in moving you out of the prison of your mind and ego into another consciousness.

Aurelio: I think the function of community is to bring us from the individual level to the next level in consciousness. Ultimately, the urge to live in community is a preparation for the global consciousness. Community can be an amazing tool of spiritual progress because it brings up all the different realities and unknown parts of yourself and you have to deal with them. I believe that in this yoga we have not yet fully utilised the collective, community aspect for this yoga is not for personal salvation but for transformation on a larger, global scale.

Dhanya: As I went through my own development, my sense of community changed drastically. In my early days, what I identified with was the Auroville community in distinction from the old world. When Vérité started, there was an impulse to create a small-scale intentional community. To understand what this means we have to look at the transformations that take place through being part of such a small community within the larger community of Auroville.

How has Vérité changed over the years?

Dhanya: I need to emphasise that our views are necessarily partial – you would get other perspectives if you spoke to other members of Vérité. I think a community, like an individual, goes through different stages of growth. Initially, in Vérité there was the unity that came from a group of people having a shared intention to create a new impulse in Auroville in terms of living in community. That first phase was like falling in love, it was the pre-individualized stage of community where everybody emphasises the good, the positive, and the shadow side is avoided.

Then, just as in a relationship, you have to ground the ideal, you have to find out how to live together on a daily basis. But as soon as we began to work on practical issues, the underlying contrasts between us began to rise to the surface, and we discovered that we had very different assumptions and expectations about community.

In other words, we were coming not only for the community ideal but for the fulfilment of all kinds of personal unconscious needs, like being loved unconditionally. The result was all kinds of stuff got projected on one another and at times it was very painful and messy.

This is a stage you can't by-pass. However, we didn't know how to hold the group together to move through it and the result was after 4-5 years most of the community left. Slowly new people came in. It was a nice group, but if there is not a critical mass of people who have experienced and learned from a previous phase, then that phase may have to be repeated. This is what happened with us. I tried at the beginning to point out to the new group that we were recycling old issues, but then I decided it would be better for me to stay on the periphery and let the new group find its own identity.

Aurelio: I joined during that transitional period. The first thing that struck me was that I felt no particular resonance with the people I met in Vérité, but I felt a strong attraction to the field. So from the beginning it was as if I was looking for something beyond personal alignment, beyond living with people with the same vibes.

At the beginning of my Vérité experience, there was definitely this feeling of falling in love with community. There was a lot of sharing, reading and celebrating activities together. Guests would come with a particular skill and we'd immediately say, 'Let's do a workshop'.

Bhavana: I joined around that time and it was wonderful. I got everything I needed here – just the right amount of relationship, of food, of discipline. For me it answered all that I'd wanted from Auroville, which was that sense of giving all and getting just what I needed. The mistake I made, however, was to assume that Vérité was primarily the field – that whoever moved here would automatically manifest that particular field – so I wasn't concerned with entry policy. However, at a certain time there were so many people here who were unhappy that it created a lot of difficulties.

Aurelio: A few years ago we embarked on much stronger material development and that churned up a lot of things. Suddenly we had new responsibilities because we were building facilities which we had to take care of. It was grounding the community, but strong differences were also coming up between us. We needed to sustain ourselves with the income from more guest facilities and programmes, but some of the members disagreed with this direction: they felt Vérité was becoming too 'busy' and asking too much time from them. So, while on a material level all the buildings were coming up, on a psychological level the community almost fell apart: it was like Vérité's second breakdown.

Dhanya: I think that a lot of the shadow side of Vérité was put on those who left, but that all of us involved haven't consciously processed those issues yet; there has been little reconciliation, which has to happen if we are to move on. What I think was happening at that time was a lot of personal karma was being played out. We would meet to decide something about organization, but all the time there were interpersonal

issues behind, and this takes a lot of energy out of what can be accomplished on a professional working level. So now we are choosing to concentrate upon ensuring, in a very practical way, that Vérité goes in a direction we all feel good about. If we are successful in this, we'll see how many of the interpersonal issues are still there or relevant.

Aurelio: For many years we struggled with this image of Vérité as an elitist place with lots of rules. Somehow, this locked us up. I think we've become less dogmatic, more realistic, and now we're defining ourselves more as a working group which is running a project. During the difficulties I think the sense of community almost got lost for me and now something needs to be newly defined. I think, actually, we're in transition, we're reaching for a higher octave of community which recognizes and embraces all the different individual approaches and realities.

One of my concerns is that over the past five years we haven't had new people joining us who are genuinely interested in the experience of community life. It's a bit of a crisis from my point of view.

Bhavana: Having looked after the Vérité guest programme, I have a different perspective. I know of some people who have definitely resonated with this place, and it wasn't Vérité but their life circumstances which didn't allow them to stay.

Dhanya: I think the reason why Vérité has somehow stagnated in terms of bringing new members on board is that we haven't learned to do something better. Over the past 5-6 years, a lot of people have come and tried to stay but I think there was an incapacity on our side to be adaptable, to say this person would like to work with us so how can we make it possible? I think people should be able to tap into Vérité in different ways, we could have multiple levels of community participation. We need to change our parameters.

You mean changing some of your basic community guidelines?

Dhanya: I think it's more a matter of changing what we identify with. In Vérité, we have sometimes been perceived as somehow separate from the rest of Auroville, and at times I think we did project a somewhat independent identity. But I want to make it very clear that Vérité would have fallen apart long ago if it wasn't for the larger field of Auroville. So I think we need to identify primarily with that now and not get stuck in the smaller thing of being a Véritéan. This is also part of development – identifying with larger and larger circles of complexity. My identifying with Vérité and with Auroville were milestones in my life, but in order to grow I had to widen my circles to include a larger world process. This has shifted my orientation towards



From left: Dhanya, Bhavana and Aurelio

sadhana and living in community. In the same way, I think Auroville is identifying much more now with the transformational processes that are taking place in the larger world.

Aurelio: In the early days we were talking about making Vérité into a campus. Now we are returning to this, to offering a service for student groups and researchers who want to learn about and contribute to Auroville. This is very rewarding because it is not a one-sided serving of guests; rather, it feels like we are co-creating something with the larger community. It's also symbolic that all the residents of Vérité are now very active in the larger Auroville community. It's as if we are finding the true spirit of community centered in the larger Auroville now.

But for me the question remains – now that we are 'cooling' our interactions a little, now that we are going to a more managerial level, what happens to community as a tool in the sadhana? Because living in intense community, going through thick and thin together, is definitely an accelerated field of yoga.

Bhavana: I think we're in the midst of a transition. We're hoping to take a big step towards realizing our original intention – it's something we feel is coming. Come back in six months for an update!

Dhanya: I think that original intention included many things. We wanted to create an intentional community with an ecologically-sustainable infrastructure, a healing/counselling facility, and educational activities and programmes. And we wanted to maintain a spiritual awareness in our interactions. Over the years, different aspects have been emphasized while others have been ignored, or put on the backburner. Now we're at the point where we're trying to bring all the different aspects together more consciously, more integrally, than before.

Bhavana: We've been so blessed with donations that now we have all the facilities, as well as all the years of individual and collective experience, to make it work.

Dhanya: Also, as Auroville progresses in its experiment, it allows us to grow in our smaller experiment.

Aurelio: Ultimately, I think the deep aspiration we all share, but which is almost too sensitive to talk about, is to live together in such a way that we create an environment for the psychic to come forward.

From an interview by Alan

A New Creation experience - Dianna shares

When I think of New Creation I think of the entrance with the beautiful old tamarind trees and the taxi drivers in their white shirts playing cards or polishing their taxis or just sleeping in the shade. And Kumar's bike shop where he is always willing to fix a chain or put bits back on my moped and the taxi office, a constant buzz of phones and important activity.

My husband and I were guests in New Creation on and off for five years ago. Finally we just stayed on and didn't go home any more. New Creation is a unique community, sort of a Western one horse town with a metal workshop, a school and a crèche, a handicraft unit, a pottery and guest houses spread out on each side of the red earth road that runs through the centre.

All this sounds very hectic and noisy but somehow it isn't as there is always just a calm buzz and a sense of purposeful activity. You'd think guests wandering around would be intrusive,

but they seem to absorb the green calmness and actually it's nice to have some new blood around the community and some help in the school. We have made friends with many of them and they come over for Sunday breakfast. There are six family houses here scattered around at the far end, half of them Tamil and the others the usual mixed bag of nationalities. We like it here, in fact we are very happy. Everyone says 'hello' or 'vanakkam' and it feels like a large, if rather bizarre, family with Tamil and French and English newcomers and Aurovilians and workers and guests and children all bumping along very nicely together.

The New Creation team of workers renovated our house when we moved in, so we know them well and it feels very comfortable seeing them around the place. If we need a plumber we just wander out and look for Raju, and Murugan the carpenter will drop by to fix a broken shelf. The sports ground is

two minutes walk away and we often stroll over in the evenings and watch the basketball games or the men sweating it out at tennis.

Not many people in the world have a gym or swimming pool in the backyard, not to mention a diverse selection of yoga, dance, pilates and aerobic classes. When I heard two years ago that they were going to construct a swimming pool my instant reaction was shock, horror. In England an outdoor pool means shrieking children and screams as people jump in to splash their friends and ladies in bitsy bikinis working on their tans. Of course, being Auroville it wasn't like that and everyone swam up and down the rows very seriously and silently, so yet another preconception bit the dust.

Recently the community decided to share cooking and eating evening meals together. My husband and I joined for a while but found the Tamil food a bit too spicy. And to tell the

truth, 7.30 p.m. is the only time of day we can sit down quietly together, having been with people all day, so that time is precious.

It's always a joy to see the village children come down the dusty road in the mornings to New Creation school, spotless and shining. I feel they are a big part of my life, though I am on the periphery of theirs, but it is always nice when a little voice calls my name in Kulapayalam. Sometimes I sit in on the school meetings and am amazed by the complexity of it all, the different cultures, languages, ideas and ideals and the complicated and precarious financial situation, yet there it is, a school of 150 happy children.

Our nearest and dearest neighbour is Suresh Joshi who lived in the Ashram and was Mother's messenger for 25 years. I am sure his vast experience and devotion to Mother brings a very special vibration to our community. He says Verite is special because



Dianna

there are no rules here, everyone can go in his own direction, though this can be difficult and one has to learn to be flexible. He says André's love for the truth creates Love and Truth. I am sure he is right.

Dianna

Beach erosion at Quiet

The beach in front of Quiet, the Auroville Healing Centre, is under imminent threat of being eroded. Auroville Today reported on the problem in November 2002. The situation has worsened since.

The problem of coastal erosion originated in 1986, when the Government of Pondicherry gave the green light to develop a new harbour at the mouth of the Ariyankuppam Estuary, south of Pondicherry. As part of the New Harbour, two long breakwaters – rocky wall-like structures that protrude from the shore into the sea – were built. These breakwaters interfere with the coastal currents and processes. As a result, a very significant process of coastal erosion was triggered off. It started south of Pondicherry, from the mouth of the New Harbour, and gradually advanced north. Every year another large chunk of beach is lost to the sea. In little more than a decade, all six kilometres of the beach of Pondicherry town disappeared. Now a rocky seawall extends all the way from Ariyankuppam from the south of Pondicherry to Kottakuppam in the North. In 2002, the coastal village of Kottakuppam between Auroville and Pondicherry saw the erosion of a huge part of its beach and hundreds of fishermen lost their homes. Today, the problem has moved further north and is now threatening the Quiet beach and other beaches further north.

In fact, the beach erosion in front of Auroville’s communities has already started. In the last decade, the beaches have changed consid-

erably. There used to be a sandbar, a so-called “underwater island,” about 15-30 meters away from the shore. It no longer exists. The beach itself has become more and more steep. The beach sand is now coarse as the finer grains have been gradually washed away while the heavier and larger particles have been left behind. These are the first symptoms of beach erosion. Now the beaches have started to recede. And this will go from bad to worse as long as the problem caused by the New Harbour breakwaters is not corrected.

Dutch expert Jeen Kootstra judges that the erosion process will not stop unless proper measures are taken. The best course would be if the Pondicherry Government could be convinced to rectify its breakwaters. But it does not appear to be interested in taking this initiative. Instead, anti-erosion measures have been taken that, Kootstra believes, will soon be useless. One make-shift solution is poles that are tied together, with bags filled with sand behind it (see photo). Kootstra believes that this structure will hold initially, but that the waves will soon undercut the poles and then the whole structure will be washed away. He believes that another solution, to create barriers of trunks of Palmyra trees parallel to the beach, will not be very efficient either. Instead, Kootstra proposes the Dutch and

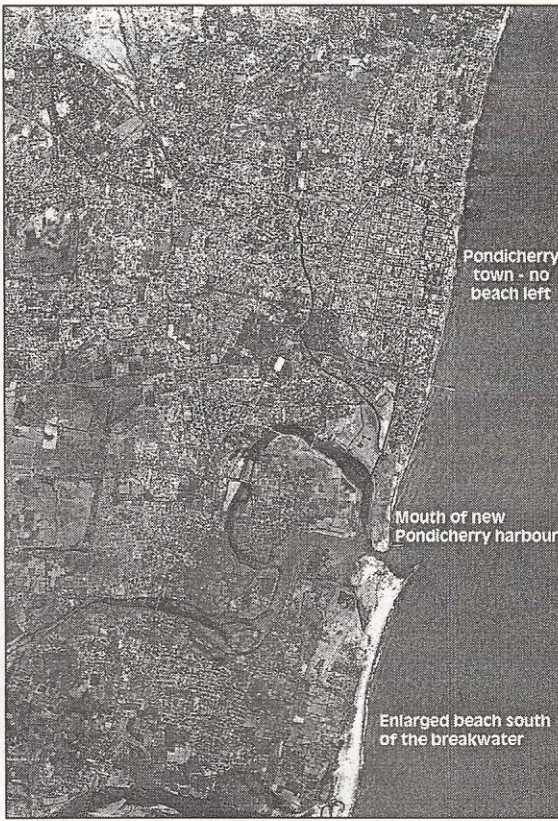
time-tested solution of installing rows of 6 m long poles, 4 m into the sand and 2 m above the beach, perpendicular to the coast to prevent longshore drift and sand transport. (see photo) At the upstream end, sand will be deposited and at the downstream end, sand will be eroded. Of course, this solution implies that the erosion will start further downstream, and this will necessitate the placement of subsequent lines of poles.

A better but more costly solution would be the construction of groynes, small rock-filled dams, also perpendicular to the coast. A last, but even costlier option, is to construct groynes in the sea parallel to the beach at about 150 m distance. On the lee side of the groynes, sand will be deposited. In between the groynes, the water will get deeper. It would result in a pleasant coastal morphology, but due to the large amount of material required to be deposited in the sea, the expense would be considerable. These measures proposed are based on general engineering judgement and one afternoon visit. Precise dimensions and cost will have to be worked out in a beach erosion study

based on data on wind, waves and current.

The beaches in India belong to the Government, so any solution for the Auroville beaches will need the involvement of the Governments of Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry. The Auroville Working Committee has informed the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation of the seriousness of the matter and has requested it to contact the concerned authorities for a solution.

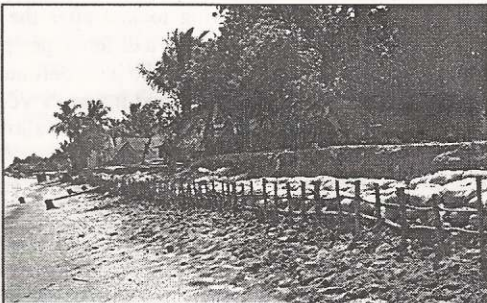
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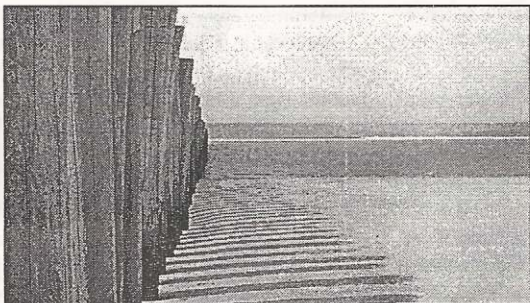
Satellite photo of the Pondicherry coastline showing the breakwater and the enlarged beach south of it



The dramatic encroachment of the sea into fishermen settlements



A make-shift solution: poles tied together, with bags filled with sand behind it



The Dutch solution: rows of long poles staked perpendicular to the coast

Auroville population statistics

A decrease of Auroville's population

Predicting the development of Auroville’s population is close to impossible. A year ago the Auroville Planning and Development Council, asked to draft a 5-year development plan, studied the population statistics and concluded that it was unable to make any comfortable prognosis. According to figures obtained from Auroville’s Residents’ Service, the average growth of 7% in the years 1996-1998 had slowed down to 3% - 4% in the years 2002 – 2004. The APDC thought that the main factors responsible for the slow growth were the non-availability of sufficient housing, infrastructure, educational facilities, and work spaces. Optimistically assuming a yearly growth rate of 8 to 11 % for the next 15 years which afterwards would stabilise at 11%, the APDC calculated that Auroville’s ultimate population of 50,000 people would only be achieved after 35 years. A population of 5,000 people (10% of the targeted population) might only manifest in 2016. Because of these uncertainties, the APDC decided to concentrate on a development plan for a city of 3,000 people, instead of a five-year plan.

But though the APDC knew that its assumptions might be optimistic, no one, in fact, had expected that the population would fall. And so it came as a shock when, in November 2005, the Residents’ Service informed the community that, compared to 2004, the population had decreased by 20 people.

Many Aurovilians thought that the decrease was due a too strict and rigid stance of the Entry

Group. But the Entry Group members were quick to dispel that idea. They pointed out that, according to their own statistics, in 2005, 54 persons had been admitted as Aurovilian (after the customary 2 year Newcomer period), 8 as ‘returned Aurovilian’, and 64 as Newcomer. In 2005, 26 Newcomers left (some of them had been accepted in previous years), and only one person’s newcomer period had been terminated.

The Entry Group, whose mandate is limited to the admission of people into Auroville, explained that Newcomers often leave for purely personal reasons: Auroville being different than imagined, disappointment with Auroville, available housing not meeting requirements, one or more family members not adjusting to Auroville, financial difficulties, or unresolved issues back home.

Ilse looks after the Master List. Asked for a clarification, she explains that the Master List provided by the Residents’ Service includes all residents of Auroville: children, Aurovilians and newcomers – as well as aspiring newcomers from abroad, people who have come to join Auroville but before becoming newcomers are going through the compulsory 3-months’ guest period. “These people have immediately to be registered as per the regulations of the Indian Government,” says Ilse. The list maintained by the Entry Group, moreover, only mentions people from 18 years and above (no children). The Master List does not contain the names of Aurovilians who are out of station for a period of

more than a year. “Those names have been removed; if the person returns permanently within a period of five years from the date of leaving, the name is automatically added again,” she explains. She informs that, according to her records, in 2005 so far, 41 people have left Auroville, and 7 passed away.

The figures are confusing. Ilse explains that the total number left in November 2005 compared to August 2004 is 20. “This figure may change soon again, this is only a moment in time. But Auroville’s population is definitely not growing. That is worrying. It may have to do with individuals’ private reasons, it also may be due to the way Auroville functions. We should try to find out. Hopefully there will be a larger influx once the Matrimandir is finished.”

Carel

Table 2: Adults and minors population by gender August 2004 – November 2005

	Aug-04	Nov-05
ADULTS	1390	1370
males	741	728
females	649	642
MINORS (< 18 years)	413	413
males	221	220
females	192	193
GRAND TOTAL	1803	1783

Table 3: Newcomers and Aurovilians who left Auroville 2002 – 2005

Status	2002	2003	2004	Nov-05
People left	44	41	74	41
People died	8	6	3	7
TOTAL	52	47	77	48

Table 4: Comparative overview by nationality

Nationality	Aug-04	Nov-05	Change
Indian	686	736	50
French	300	261	-39
German	245	226	-19
Italian	82	85	3
Dutch	84	77	-7
American	62	61	-1
British	53	50	-3
Swiss	42	42	0
Russian	36	40	4
Spanish	32	30	-2
Canadian	25	23	-2
Korean	25	20	-5
Belgian	24	17	-7
Israeli	13	16	3
Ukrainian	17	15	-2
Australian	13	12	-1
Swedish	14	12	-2
Austrian	7	10	3
Argentinian	9	8	-1
Tibetan	3	7	4
Japanese	3	4	1
Sri Lankan	4	4	0
Danish	2	3	1
Hungarian	4	3	-1
Brazilian	2	2	0
Bulgarian	1	2	1
Ethiopian	2	2	0
Latvian	2	2	0
Lithuanian	0	2	2
Slovene	2	2	0
New Zealander	2	1	-1
Algerian	1	1	0
Belorussian	1	1	0
Colombian	1	1	0
Finnish	0	1	1
Irish	0	1	1
Kazakh	1	1	0
Nepali	1	1	0
South African	2	1	-1
TOTAL	1803	1783	-20

Table 1: Newcomers and Aurovilians accepted/refused by the Entry Group 2002-2005

Status	2002	2003	2004	Nov-05
Accepted as Newcomer	80	67	69	64
Refused as Newcomer	11	0	1	0
Newcomer period terminated	3	2	9	1
Newcomers who left on their own initiative	11	10	25	26
Newcomer accepted as Aurovilian	10	37	60	54
Returned Aurovilians accepted as Aurovilian	7	4	4	8

"It's a tool for collective organization"

The managers of AVnet, Auroville's intranet or electronic internal communication network, talk about its possibilities and the challenges they face

In the early 1990s, a few of our far-sighted 'techies', like Ulli and Theo, felt the time was ripe for a major step forward in communication. By 1990 there were already 200 phone connections and more and more Aurovilians had access to computers, so the idea was to link these computers through the phone lines in order to create an electronic Bulletin Board System (BBS). A BBS, among other things, enables users to communicate on-line, to send emails, to hold referenda and polls, and to form groups to exchange information and discuss issues. In other words, it has the potential to dramatically enhance the community's communication possibilities.

Unfortunately, the first Auroville BBS that was launched in 1994 was not a success due to the poor quality of the internal phone lines. Following the installation of a new electronic telephone exchange, an improved version was made available in October, 1995. While the user interface left much to be desired, this version proved more popular, particularly for emailing: by 1998, 6000 emails a week were being sent from Auroville to the outside world and many more were zinging between Aurovilians. This fulfilled one of the original intentions – to dramatically improve communication within Auroville and with the larger world – but certain potentialities of the system remained untapped. For example, hardly anybody was using the polling facilities to assess the 'mood of the house'. This was the more surprising as by 1998 450 people were using the system (which was now called AVnet) and there was a groundswell of deep dissatisfaction in the community with our conventional meetings.

Interactive possibilities

In May, 2000, Manoj decided to kick-start the discussion and interactive possibilities of AVnet by launching Pulse. This was a monthly question to which people were invited to respond electronically. (For the record, the first two questions were "Should Auroville organize exhibitions outside Auroville?" and "Should an entry fee be levied to visit Matrimandir to cover the costs of adequate visitors' facilities?" 65 people responded to the first question, 123 to the second.) Subsequently, Manoj was invited to design the first fully interactive version of AVnet, allowing participants to respond to postings, and this premiered on 1st January, 2002. A second version followed in September, 2003. "Since then," he explains, "it has undergone constant modification."

Today, more than 1,000 people are registered on AVnet, of which about 90% are Aurovilians. The possibilities and offerings provided by AVnet have also expanded. They include announcements, meeting reports, newsletters, an event calendar, access to the Financial Service and the library catalogue, diary (for personal sharing), bazaar (the electronic market-place), archives of important reference material (like the Auroville Foundation Act and the mandates of various Work Groups), private spaces for Work Group communication and discussion, common interest forums and City Express (an open space for comment and discussion). You can even access the weather report and world news headlines. It has to be said, however, that some of the possibilities – like the opportunity for Work Groups to hold discussions and share material on-line – remain vastly underutilised.

The proponents of the original BBS were clear about their intentions. They wanted to improve communication but, beyond that, they saw it as a means to strengthen community and increase collective participation in decision-making. How far have these aims been fulfilled? "I know," says Manoj, "that people like Ulli, who was instrumental in the development of this electronic network, are disappointed that AVnet has not done more for community-building and collective decision-making. However, when the first interactive site was launched in 2002, I made a personal projection that 2007 would be the turning-point for this medium to become the vehicle for community decision-making. Now we are at a crucial moment because we have reached a critical mass – on average, 190 people visit the site every day – and awareness is growing of its possibilities while, at the same time, the physical Residents Assemblies are becoming obsolete due to lack of participation. What is missing at the moment is the knowledge of how to go about defining the next step. But I think it is only a matter of time before we have an on-line Residents Assembly. After all, at present AVnet is the only daily forum for public exchange and discussion in the community."

Not a safe space

However, one of the problems is that the main site on AVnet for community discussion – City Express – is not perceived by many as a safe or interesting space to air one's views as some of the postings and comments are overly aggressive or puerile. "The problem with City Express at present," explains Manoj, "is that it has a dual function and these functions clash with each other. There is information-sharing, which could be the basis for discussion and decision-making, but it also operates as a kind of psychological safety-valve for those people who, for one reason or another, feel frustrated and angry." "And this mixture is what often happens in our General Meetings," adds Annemarie who, along with Manoj, manages AVnet, "so in this AVnet is mirroring the mental and vital atmosphere of the community."

"Clearly," says Manoj, "there is a need for a space where focussed discussion and decision-making can take place and a space for releasing pent-up tensions, but we will have to find a way to segregate them." This raises a tricky issue. Does AVnet need some kind of central, top-down control to ensure that sites like City Express operate well? Annemarie and Manoj shake their heads. "AVnet is fundamentally different from other websites where the information is put out by a selected group of people who choose what others should know," explains Manoj. "AVnet is a vessel which merely holds what comes into it, and structures and processes it so that it's easy to understand what has been communicated. As managers of AVnet we create new possibilities – like the possibility for Work Groups to have their own on-line space – and then we see if they correspond to an actual need. If they don't, we take them out and try something else. But there's no coercion. I see AVnet primarily as a tool for the collective to organize itself in a situation where there is no overall command and con-



Annemarie and Manoj

trol structure. The network is like the nervous system and the software is the brain which organizes whatever data comes in. The community can then reflect upon this and evolve its own organization."

"Regarding City Express," adds Annemarie, "we do have some 'Rules of the Game'. They include an agreement not to publish false, unsupported or deliberately partial information, slander and gossip, anything commenting on national or international politics, and any derogatory statement about someone's nationality or religion. If somebody contravenes them, we quietly point this out and this is generally enough. We also introduced a rating system which allows people to rate contributions and feedback to City Express on a 1-5 scale. The rating for one article may not be significant, but now we have summarised the ratings people received over a two year period and this gives some very interesting information!" "What we've noticed," adds Manoj, "is that people tend to rate contributions either 1 or 5. In other words, it's clear that the responses are from the vital with its strong likes and dislikes. Still, the two year results are a good indication of what people feel about the postings of regular contributors."

On-line community?

Actually, just as happens in Residents Assembly meetings, City Express tends to be dominated by a few voices, and the PULSE questions receive, on average, no more than 60 responses. And even if 190 people are accessing AVnet daily, many of these may be using it for financial transactions rather than on-line discussion. So can one really talk about an on-line community? "Certainly," says Manoj, "for those who visit regularly, the sense of on-line community is very strong. And even if most people are passive witnesses, they represent a power. What is happening now is that a few individuals choose to post on City Express because they know they have this big audience. This can be addictive and serve purely personal ends. But if the posting is a challenge to a Work Group to be more transparent in sharing information, the presence of this silent majority puts pressure on that Work Group to respond."

At the same time, Manoj agrees that the biggest challenge at present lies in empowering this silent on-line majority and getting them to express themselves. "There's a default setting

in this community, an unconscious habit, which assumes that if there is a problem somebody else will clean it up. It also has to be acknowledged that AVnet is different from other media where you can publish and be relatively insulated from people's responses. Here you are exposed to the feedback straight away, and if it is negative this can be very uncomfortable. I think a new generation is coming up that can separate out the junk and negativity and not allow it to affect them, but I've had to make an effort to face it and learn from it, to make dealing with my ego-reaction a part of my growth. Of course, on a collective level it would be wonderful if everybody expressed themselves in a harmonious and civilized manner, but this is still a dream. So if individuals are willing to take the step to publicly say they agree or disagree with something or somebody they should have some kind of protection. For example, if a contributor doesn't want to see feedback from a particular person, or doesn't want to receive any feedback at all to a posting, this should be possible. This is essentially a software development challenge."

The question remains: does the fact that more people are not actively using AVnet represent merely a software challenge, or does it reflect a deeper problem within the community regarding how we relate to each other? In 1993, Ulli expressed his hopes like this. "Community needs to happen on two levels: on the practical, physical level and on the larger, inner level which is very difficult to grasp. But I think that once we have created the material basis for community through tools like the Bulletin Board, the other level will be able to evolve and express itself." Today this sounds over-simplistic. For while AVnet is potentially a superb vehicle for exchanging information and just keeping in touch, it has also exposed and even amplified the many cracks and dysfunctions in our community. No doubt, a safer electronic environment can nudge us on our way. But if AVnet is truly to foster community rather than fragment it further, it seems the change will first have to happen within each of us. Only then, perhaps, can we look forward to a radically different kind of communication: one based on authenticity rather than the play of the ego, on the recognition of our inner oneness rather than a fixation on outer differences.

Alan

In brief

Environmental Leadership award

On 14th November 2005, Auroville's Future, on behalf of Auroville, received the 'Environmental Leadership Award' presented in recognition of 'Outstanding contributions made through working in partnership to improve the environment and quality of life for the people of Asia' from the United States – Asia Environmental Partnership (US-AEP), a regional programme of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) which, for ten years, has been promoting environmentally-sustainable development in Asia.

Tsunamika gets Award of Excellence

India's National Institute for Fashion Technology (NIFT) awarded Upasana's Tsunamika venture its Award of Excellence. The award was presented by the Minister of Textiles, Government of India, Shri Shankersinh Vaghela to Uma, executive of Upasana, at a ceremony at the Rashtrapati Bhavan in the presence of the President of India.

Sydo murder case

The Working Committee informed that the trial against the accused of the murder of Dutch Sydo van Loo in January 2004, has begun in August at the Fast Track Court in Tindivanam. At the first session, witnesses from Auroville and four of the accused (one remained in jail) were presented to the judge. First witness Steve Senesac, an Aurovillian who now lives in the USA, informed that he cannot return to India to give testimony, and attempts are being made so that he can testify by video conference, a procedure which has recently been allowed in India but has not yet been used in Tamil Nadu. The Dutch Consulate has dispatched a representative to several of the initial hearings.

Village relations

The Working Committee has been promoting communication and collaboration with the Headmen, Panchayats and various organizations of the nearby villages. A very positive fruit is a coordinated effort to plan and implement development projects in the villages. The first example of this collaborative effort is the repair of a pond in Edaiyanchavadi, implemented with funds from Auroville and the village.

Auroville Vision 2012

Following the seminar on New Business and Economy, a group of Aurovilians is exploring ways to accelerate the manifestation of the City of the Future that Auroville is meant to be. The Auroville Vision 2012 coordinating team wishes to facilitate the emergence, through a communication process with as many Aurovilians as possible, of a living synthesis of how we can move forward to build the city as well as to manifest our ideals in a practical way. A series of interactive dialogues with Aurovilians will be held.

Domestic electricity consumption up

Following the introduction of a scheme whereby the community partially subsidized electricity bills, a review was organised to appraise the consumption. It was found that the consumption had increased by 11% in one year.

Christine Devin talks about her work

Some thirteen years ago, when I was a teenager studying in Last School, Christine Devin was my French teacher. She was one of those teachers with the precious gift of being able to instill the thirst for learning in her students. All these years later, I now have interviewed her. This is not a conventional profile. Christine is someone who much rather talk about her work, in which she is always immersed, than about herself.

In 1974, the second caravan of people who had traveled overland from France arrived in Auroville. On board was Christine Devin. Over the years, quite a number of the young people who had arrived in these early years have left. But some have stayed, and Christine is one of them.

When Christine arrived, she started working in Pour Tous, together with Claire and Surabhi. After a couple of months, though, both of them left, and Christine was left in charge of running the distribution centre. Then, at the time of the conflict with the Sri Aurobindo Society, the Pour Tous Fund was created, and she joined the team which had been formed. "That was the beginning of financial independence for Auroville. The Pour Tous Fund was the seed of whatever came later, and is today known as the Central Fund. At that time, we worked in the small building in Kuilapalayam which later became the post office. That was Pour Tous," she remembers, "that is also where the Pour Tous meetings started, in that small, small space. It was crowded, but there was such an amazing energy!"

Christine worked in Pour Tous for ten years. She stopped because, amongst other things, she wasn't happy with the direction the Auroville economy was heading. And she also wanted to do something different. During her final years in Pour Tous, she had started studying Hindi. And it so happened that at that time the Auroville Press, which was then headed by Claude Arpi and located in Fraternity, was working on bringing out the *Mother's Agenda* in Hindi. "The translation from the French original had been done by a pandit from Benares," explains Christine. "As I was still a beginner in Hindi, I was just supposed to type it out. But then we realized that there were a lot of mistakes in the translation, and we actually had a lot of editing and proof-reading work to do. So, Abha, Uma and myself started working on it together, taking it sentence by sentence, and comparing it to the French original. Now computers, at that time, just weren't what they are today. The machine at the Press, which was, I believe, one of the first computers in Auroville, kept crashing. We also had a complicated system to type, involving a lot of codes in the Hindi script.

Also, we didn't have the possibility to print out our work, so we had to do the proof-reading on the screen itself. Then we would send whatever we had typed for photo-composing in Madras, and they would send us the print out. If there were any typing mistakes, we had to start all over again. So this work took us a few years, but finally we managed to bring out the *Agenda* in Hindi."

Later, Christine was also involved in education, teaching French and History in Last School for a few years, while at the same time continuing to work at the Auroville Press. She also started studying Sanskrit.

In 1997, for the 50th anniversary of India's independence, Auroville was invited to present an exhibition in Delhi. The idea came up of presenting a slide show along with music, which would illustrate and accompany some of Sri Aurobindo's texts. "We didn't want to speak about Sri Aurobindo,

amongst them many well-known Indian personalities."

Since the slide show had been so well received and there was such a great response, Christine soon returned to Delhi and, together with Jyothi Madhok, who was a member of the Governing Board at that time, as well as others, she presented the slide show in many schools and universities there. She then went on to tour other states where she presented it in the educational institutions of various cities.

Some time later, they were invited to participate in another exhibition. And for the occasion, the team, which again included Christine, Serge and Olivier, started working on a new slide show *The Genius of India*. "We presented extracts from Sri Aurobindo's *The Renaissance in India*, where He speaks of the genius of India, as well as some of His texts on the main qualities of the Indian mind. Then we illustrated those texts with Olivier's photographs." This second slide show had a great impact on the audiences as well. For the next couple of years, Christine toured the country, a few months at a time, presenting *The Genius of India* in various schools and universities. Apart from Delhi, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, she brought the slide show to schools and universities

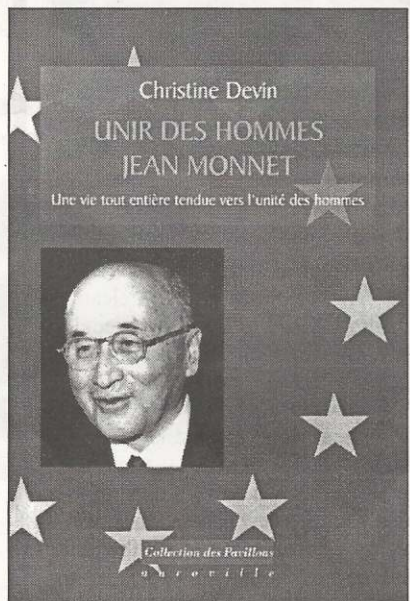
released a book on *The Genius of India*, in its Vande Mataram series. "In this series, which we have published in both French and English, we have different textson India, essentially from Sri Aurobindo, which we illustrate with photographs. One thing we realized, while touring the country with the slide shows, is that there are a lot of people, even in India, who do not know about Sri Aurobindo, who do not even know that he was involved in the freedom struggle and worked towards the independence of India. So we felt that the wider Indian public could be introduced to what Sri Aurobindo has written about India. I think these books can be of great interest even for people from other countries, who come to India and want to understand why they are so fascinated, or why this country is such a mystery. I must say that since I have worked on these texts, I have a feeling that there are things I had never understood about India, that I understand much better now. It was very enlightening."

Another series which Auroville Press Publishers has brought out is *Tales and Legends of India*. There are tales from the *Ramayana*, and texts by Kalidasa, and all have been adapted from the Sanskrit into French by Christine. Roger Harris then translated the French adaptations into English. "I call them adaptations," explains Christine, "because although the texts are quite close to the originals, I have taken certain liberties while translating them. For example Kalidasa's *Shakuntala* was written as a theatre script, yet I didn't render it as one, I adapted it into a tale. I also skipped certain passages.

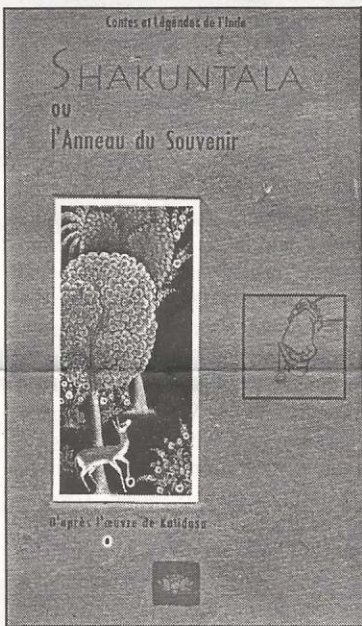
"I can not say that I have learned Sanskrit, I can only say that I am learning Sanskrit. I am definitely not a Sanskrit scholar, for that I would need a whole lifetime, and I am involved in too many other things," she continues, "But even without being a pandit, when you read a text in its Sanskrit original sometimes, it is so extraordinary, so beautiful, that you tell yourself, you've never read anything in any other language that even comes close to it, so you want to try and render it in your own language. That's what happened to me with each one of these texts. And I think that if one loves Sanskrit, even if one isn't a scholar, one can attempt this work. For me, the universe of Sanskrit, and the universe of Sanskrit literature is really like an ocean, an ocean of beauty. And you dip your little toe in it, and touch it with the little knowledge that you have, which is really like a very little window, but nevertheless, you touch something which is real. In Sanskrit there is such richness, in sound, sense, meaning, there is such depth, such power. It is incomparable, but on the other hand, I still feel that my adaptations can bring something to those who can not have access to the Sanskrit originals."

There is also the Pavilion Series. "We have released a few books in this series, some are in French, others in English. The idea is to publish texts which have human unity and international understanding as a focus, and from there on to present different personalities, stories or historical events, that can show either the genius of a certain country, or the meeting point between several countries," explains Christine. Two new books in this series were recently released, one written by Claude Arpi, on the last days of Pondicherry as a French colony, as seen by the then British general council. The other book, written by Christine is *Unir des Hommes - Jean Monnet*. "When I discovered Jean Monnet, which was quite recently, though he is a rather well-known French personality, I felt what an extraordinary man, what an extraordinary life! So immediately I started to do some research on him and his life. Jean Monnet was one of the important precursors of the unification of Europe. All his life he worked at uniting people, during the two World Wars as well as during times of peace. He felt that 'collaboration' between countries wasn't enough. In times of peace things would go well, but he had seen that in times of war, or crisis, each country thought about their own interests first. So one of his great ideas was the fusion of sovereignties; that each country would delegate a portion of its power to an institution which would be above all these countries, and would be independent, and could act independently. So this was one of his great dreams, on the basis of which, slowly by slowly, the European Union was built, in spite of all drawbacks. What I immediately felt, when I started reading about Jean Monnet and his life, was that he was an instrument of human unity, that he was an instrument of Sri Aurobindo. During my research, I came into contact with the Foundation Jean Monnet in Switzerland. And they allowed me to access a lot of interesting archives and documents, which Monnet himself had presented to them. And when I read his personal diaries, where he looks at himself, analyses his nature, questions himself on how he can progress, I really felt those were the diaries of a yogi. And that is how I presented Jean Monnet in my book, as a yogi, as an instrument of human unity. When it came out, I presented a copy of my book to the president of the Jean Monnet Foundation, who was actually a very close friend of Monnet. And he was very interested, not by my book, but by the fact that I had presented Jean Monnet in a different light, which is actually the light of Sri Aurobindo. That was new to him. At the same time, he told me I had really perceived and captured the essence of Jean Monnet's personality."

Emmanuelle



we wanted Sri Aurobindo to speak for Himself," explains Christine. "So a team of us, including Olivier, Serge and myself from the Auroville Press, started working on this idea. I made a script, based on Sri Aurobindo's Independence Day message. We illustrated each of the five dreams He had for the future of India and the future of the world, with other texts He had written. For instance for the last dream, which is a step in evolution, we added a passage from Savitri, which Roger Harris read very beautifully. Except for a brief introduction where we spoke of His life, all the texts were by Sri Aurobindo, and were illustrated with different slides and accompanied by a soundtrack which Didier had worked on. Though we had very little time to work on this slide-show, the result was very powerful. And I think the main reason is that audio-visuals are really the media of our time. The show had a great impact on a lot of people in Delhi; it was really Sri Aurobindo coming alive for these audiences. A lot of people came,



in Bombay, Pune, as well as, though less extensively, Bangalore and Chennai, in the South of the country.

Later, a film was made on *The Genius of India*. "I still feel that the slide show is an excellent medium to present Sri Aurobindo's texts," stresses Christine, "First of all, as far as image quality is concerned, there is nothing like a slide. When projected, the power of the text, which is the main thing, the power of Sri Aurobindo's words, is really present, it vibrates. Film is powerful too, but it is a different medium, it doesn't have the same impact."

Auroville Press Publishers also

Auroville diary

A week's retreat at Quiet

I just had one of the nicest weeks of my life down by the sea at the Quiet Retreat. I did asanas, meditated and danced and was massaged daily with Thai or ayurvedic or shiatsu or reflexology by their team of very caring and professional therapists. The sea was a stone's throw away. As as I lay in bed at night I could hear the waves gently crashing on the beach. It was such bliss to be able to just walk out of my room, cross the sand and go for a swim. After a massage I would often go and just lie on the beach and feel I was quite in heaven.

There were 22 of us and 13 therapists and a discreet army of ammas, gardeners and excellent cooks, so we were always beautifully cared for; by day three our grumpy old greenbelters were sleeping like babies and dancing like silly

teenagers. In the evenings we struggled to revive super-relaxed brain cells and listen to the excellent speakers they provided for us, like Ananda Reddy and Georges Van Vrekhem.

The jewel in the crown was the water pool where you could enjoy a Watsu, floating in the warm water, lying in the arms of your therapist who gently supported your head. As she slowly moved me through the water I sank into a deep, far off space of ease and trust that touched something within me from long ago. As the week progressed the loving care and the peace and space of the place gradually sank into the spirit.

Many Aurovilians work hard in what can become a pressured environment for here there is little, if any, separation between work and home. So this opportunity to get away from the

dense greenery and often denser emotions and walk on that vast beach and be lovingly cared for was a god-send. When the retreat was advertised several Aurovilians said No! No!; the very idea of spending so much intimate time with other Aurovilians was, to put it mildly, not their idea of a holiday. Yet everyone in our final meeting agreed wholeheartedly it had been so good to spend time with people they had seen around for years, and many deep bonds were formed. We have had a reunion party since, and it was lovely to see everyone again and renew and maintain contact.

Dianna

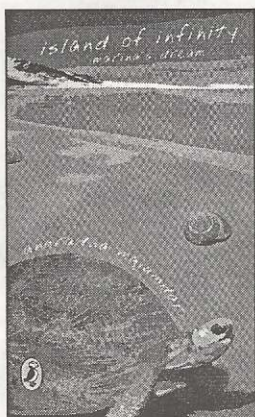


Dariya guides the 'retreaters' a blindfolded play in the warm Watsu pool

Island of Infinity

"Island of Infinity - Marina's Dream" is the first children's adventure book of Anuradha Majumdar, who is known in Auroville as a talented dancer, choreographer and author of the books 'Refugees from Paradise' and 'Parallel Journeys'. "She had no intention of ever writing a children's book, which just goes to show how wrong one can be," says the introduction to the book, but we are left to speculate about the reasons for her change of mind. Whatever they are, the result is a worthy addition to the genre of children's adventure writing - with an eye to the older generation as well.

In "Island of Infinity," the main protagonists, the girl Marina, her brother Gautam, their Tibetan refugee friend Tenzing, and her parrot Spark, are puzzled by a rock that, years ago, was found by Marina's grandfather on Mount Fuji in Japan. The rock has the uncanny ability to become invisible in full light. Rumours have it that the rock is a part of the long-lost "Island of Infinity" where people lived by exerting their High Will - a Will without desire that can act upon physical matter. The book includes map to the island, found on the shell of a turtle, was deciphered by a Tibetan lama - the grandfather of Tenzing. The shell, moreover, carried the message that the Island's most valuable source of power and instrument of knowledge and peace - a large crystal - had been stolen. Is it possible to recover the crystal and to return it to the island? Or is all this a fable? That the island really exists could be deduced from some curious pictures taken



by an astronaut, which show a remarkable light over a part of the Indian Ocean - a light that seemed to be alive and conscious. Moreover, Marina has dreams - dreams of the island, dreams of a great light, and dreams of a dark passage. She is sure something is going to happen...

And happen it does. This vivid eco-fable takes us from the mountains of Kodaikanal in the Western Ghats to the Andaman Islands in the Indian Ocean. There, the children meet the agents of Dargate, a sinister organization that catches turtles for their shells to produce false maps. Dargate deforms Truth, attempts to find the crystal for its own dark purposes, and tries to prevent the children from making the discovery of the crystal - forcing them, through that, to find the High Will, be guided by that and in so doing construct their own inner bridge to the Light.

Anuradha's new novel, the first of a trilogy, is a pointer to a paradise - perhaps inspired by ideas of what a Supramental manifestation might be. The book is enjoyable - with the exception, for me, of the ubiquitous parrot Spark whose vocabulary and intelligent insights transcend the believable - but then he too was guided by the High Will.

Carel

*Island of Infinity - Marina's Dream by Anuradha Majumdar
Published by Puffin books India
Rs 250 (in India)*

Tartan and Turban

On 20th November, the British Pavilion Group invited Aurovilians to the opening of a touring exhibition sponsored by The Scottish Arts Council. 'Tartan and Turban' was the title, and it featured photographs, by Herman Rodriguez, of Sikh communities who have integrated into or adopted features of Scottish life. Many Indian weddings and funerals in Scotland feature pipers alongside bhangra musicians. One Sikh community has even adopted a tartan of their own - it includes blue for the Scottish flag, green for the Indian flag and the saffron of the Sikh community. The other Indian/Scottish tartan is that of the Laird of Lesmahagow, a south Glasgow Sikh landowner who has had the works of Robert Burns, Scotland's national poet, translated into Punjabi (perhaps one day they will be translated into

English).

It sounded interesting, but the exhibition was disappointing. For the majority of the photographs showed Indians in either Indian or Western dress in Scottish settings, and there were few visual clues as to how far they had integrated into or influenced their adopted country. We had to rely upon the captions for this information.

At the opening of the exhibition, Shradhavan briefly introduced the concept of the British Pavilion and listed its proposed activities - hosting studies and research in the English language, literature and culture, welcoming visitors from Britain who wish to experience Auroville and share with us their expertise, and providing a lively experience of 'Britishness' to tourists, visitors and Aurovilians. The facilities to be provided will include a reading

room and library, bookshop, games collection, small theatre and, of course, a rose garden.

On 20th November, the Britishness was provided by the English tea with its McVitie's digestive oatmeal biscuits, coffee cake and Earl Grey tea; for many half-starved Aurovilians this was clearly the most interesting part of the proceedings. There was also the bonus of Norman and friends reciting Scottish (Robbie Burns), English and Irish (W.B. Yeats) poems. The Welsh reader failed to turn up, so, depending upon your point of view, we either missed or were spared a poem by Dylan Thomas.

Alan



Kimay

Auroville mourns the passing of Dutch Auroville-born Kimay, who on November 18th lost her life during a traffic accident involving a speeding bus, when returning home from Pondicherry with one of her parents.

Kimay was only twelve years old.

When her body was laid in the Auroville Health Centre to give a last possibility for people to visit her, her countenance shone up, serene and peaceful, from among the flowers. All around her were draw-

ings and other tokens of love made by her friends.

At the burial in Adventure on November 20th, the community poured out its love and grief, and Kimay's riding friends, with their horses, came to pay a last tribute as well.

*Dear Dear Kimay,
We will always love you and cherish all of our memories of you. Your beautiful smile will be with us always. Love from everyone in Transition School*

I Knew Her When She Was Small

I knew her when she was small,
I knew not that her empire of fun,
love and kindness would fall.
It fell and my heart deeply saddened.
The hearts of spirits who brought her:
Her mother, her sister, her father
Their hearts are deeply saddened.
But she will not leave
For within our sadness we conceive
The power to keep her here.
We must let her go
And the only way is to believe,
So that she may know that she has
The freedom to depart.
We will always keep her in our hearts.

Kimay

Only a tear drop will stay
But a tear drop of light,
To help you on your way
To lighten up your path.
Oh, peaceful may you be
In this journey on which you embark,

Let it be filled with happiness and
glee
To drive away the dark

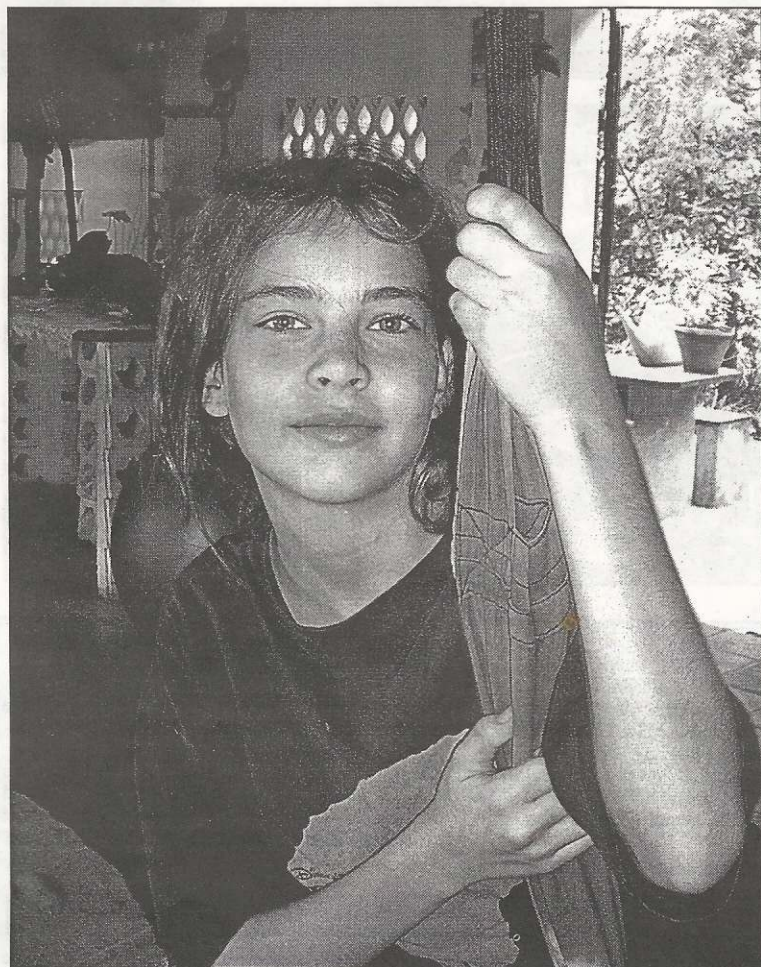
And perhaps, maybe sometime
Sometime once in a lifetime,
I will see you again, pass by
As you ride your horse and smile.

For I still: hear your laughter
Echoing, resounding, filling my
heart.
Still see your smile,
Your eyes glistening never to part

I still perceive your presence
As you enjoy the passing hours
Still love you, love you like a sister
As your jolliness opens flowers.

Together like a family, everyone
in my heart stays.
Your memory is one that is real in
many ways.
You'll always be with me and
with everyone you knew.
And we will all send you love and
light and happiness, too.

Written by Kimay's friends



In brief

Abundant monsoon

Monsoon rains have been abundant this year. Tamil Nadu recorded excess rainfall, leading to the filling up of water reservoirs for the first time since many years and to flooding situations all over the state. Pondicherry recorded 73% excess rainfall compared to the average so far.

Pata and patua

An exhibition of the pata and patua tradition of West Bengal (paintings used by the story tellers of Bengal) was held at Gallery Square Circle, Kala Kendra, Bharat Nivas with two performances by the story-tellers.

Indian puppet show

Contemporary puppeteer Anurupa Roy and traditional puppeteer Puran Bhat from New Delhi, who came to Auroville to prepare puppets based on Tsunamika, gave an introduction and demonstration of their art form in SAWCHU, Bharat Nivas. Anurupa introduced 22 traditional puppet forms of India. Puran Bhat works with modern techniques, construction and manipulation of puppets.

'Magic of Ice'

A photo exhibition by Michael Buchs, "Magic of Ice", installed by Aron Nicolet was held at the Tibetan Pavilion. The photos were partly taken in the Swiss Alps and partly at Gomuk, one of the sources of the river Ganga.

City Centre Café opens

The City Centre Café, next to the Town Hall, has opened serving breakfast, lunch and snacks throughout the day.

Library concerns

The executive of the Auroville Library has raised concern about the limited community funding extended to the library, which is a basic municipal service whose services are provided for free.

Khmer and Thai Buddhas

An exhibition featuring drawings by Franz of Khmer and Thai Buddhas was held at the Aurelec cafeteria.

Ph.D. on Sri Aurobindo in Russia

On October 13th, the Russian Alexander Velichenko obtained a Ph.D. from the Philosophy Faculty of St. Petersburg State University with his doctoral thesis "The Reconstruction of Sri Aurobindo's Teaching of the World Evolution." This demonstrates that Sri Aurobindo's writings can now be studied and taught in Russia, where before they were forbidden. Velichenko earlier wrote "The Secret of Sri Aurobindo's Yoga" and is credited with creating the Russian glossary of terms in Sri Aurobindo's writings.

Update on Roger

On October 31st Roger Harris, long time Aurovillian from USA, and one of Auroville Today's editors, was hit by a speeding truck near Auroville. Roger's right arm was entirely severed from the body, but the spine and brain and organs appeared undamaged. The arm has been re-connected in the Pondicherry Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS) and is taking well and Roger's overall condition continues to improve. He is now 85% out of coma, but due to a tracheostomy he cannot speak for the time being. Further surgery on his arm and shoulder will follow

The numinous – between sacred and magic

Sacred spots, deities and religious festivals in the villages surrounding Auroville

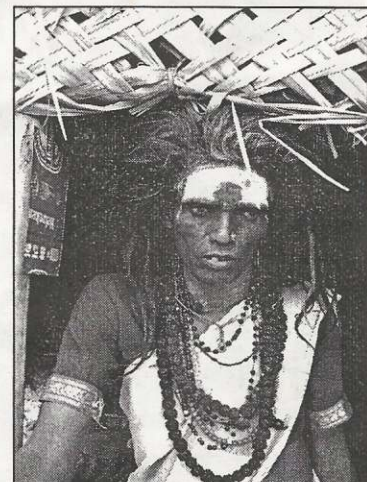
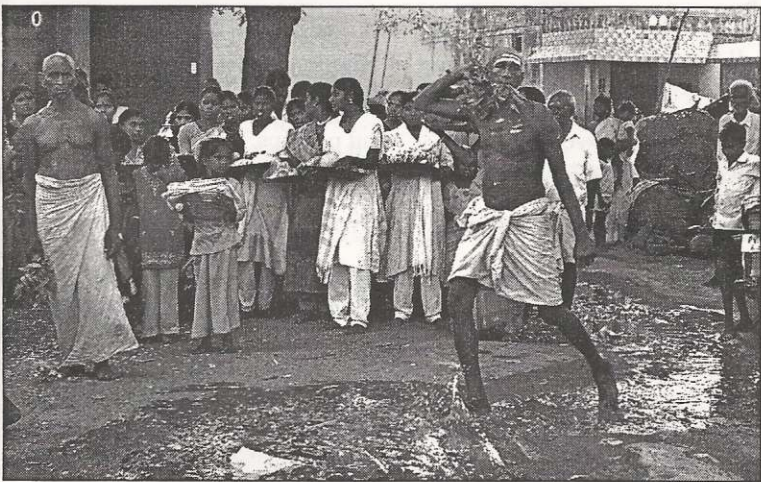
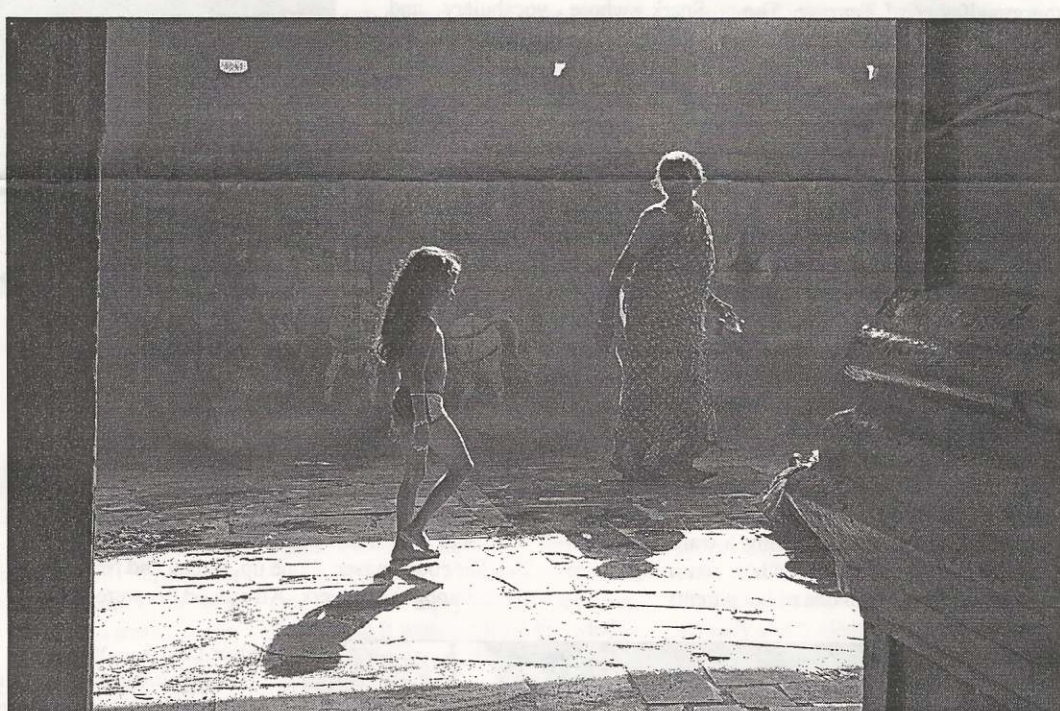
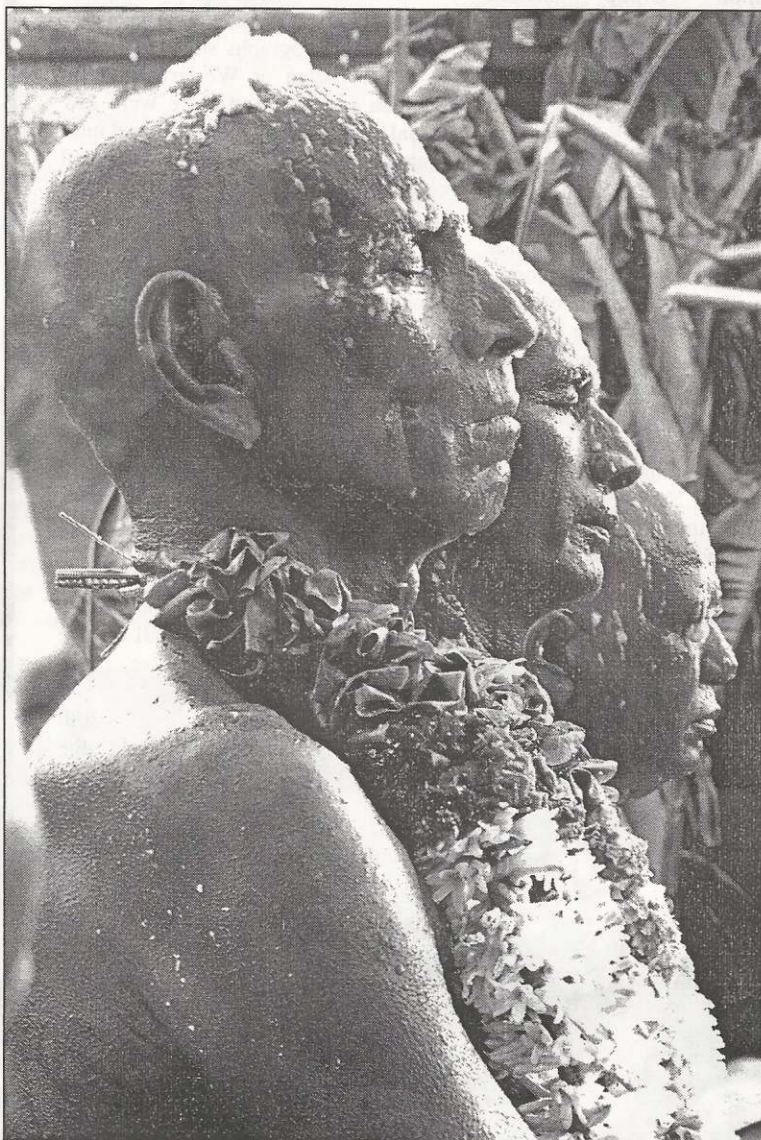
On the occasion of the Deepavali festivities, an exhibition with the above title was held in Kala Kendra Art Gallery, Bharat Nivas. The exhibition featured photos by Aurovilian photographers Paulette, Giorgio, Sebastian, Pino and Marco of festivals, deities and sacred spots in the surrounding villages. It concluded with the showing of videos; there were films by Manohar, Raman and Basile of fire-walking in Edaiyanchavadi and Sanjeevinagar, of a kolam contest and of local villagers' views of Auroville.

Paulette, who organized the exhibition, described how "One day I showed up at the Edaiyanchavadi (fire-walking) festival and it was so powerful I fell on my knees. I realized I had been living side-by-side with this reality for over three decades – and I had understood nothing. We in Auroville have been missing something special which goes back to what Mother said: that the simplest villager is closer to the Divine than all the intellectuals of Europe." In the exhibition announcement, she described the initiative as an attempt to "get a little closer to the Dravidian and pre-Dravidian world and its deep mysteries, reminiscent of the symbolic age that Sri Aurobindo saw as the beginning of the human cycle. We wish to find a meeting-place where all can enrich each other, in full respect of the creeds, festivities and traditions of this most ancient culture."

For me the most powerful images were of the three Edaiyanchavadi men – described by Paulette as representing the 'moral health of the village' – undergoing austerities before the fire-walking. In their faces was a sense of timelessness, as if they had been carved out of stone, while all around them bubbled excitement and expectation. And even some of the simpler images, like that of a placid Kuilapalayam lake or the young girl passing in front of the temple wall while an older lady looks on, had something of the transfigured, of the numinous about them. The images which I had more difficulty with, perhaps because they seem so alien to my Western upbringing, were the video shots of devotees with hooks in their backs either suspended from wheels or pulling lorries. Here the question arises, do all the images in this exhibition lead us closer to this culture or do a few of them actually serve to turn some of us away?

Paulette's intention is to take the exhibition to the villages; Giorgio has already presented VCDs of the photos to Panchayat leaders who were very happy to receive them. This exhibition is a very worthwhile initiative coming, as it does, at a critical moment in our relationship with our neighbours. May it enrich us all.

Alan



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