

# Auroville Today

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## SPECIAL ISSUE

## MAIN THEME: Food

- Home-made foods for sale
- Food processing units Naturellement, KOFPU and Aurosoya
- Alan's Golden Fork Guide to Auroville eateries

- Navigations in the world of Tamil cuisine
- Moments of Magic: Celebrating the simple delights of existence

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## An avalanche of home-made food

A large quantity of home-made and organic food products is on sale in Auroville. Their number is daily increasing.

Of late organic and home-made foods are widely promoted. The Solar Kitchen posts up each day what elements of its menu have been grown or produced in Auroville. The Pour Tous stall has a special section devoted to organic Auroville-grown and home-made products. The Auroville farms have started a massive jam and marmalade-making movement offering stiff competition to the existing Auroville food processing units. And the number of individual Aurovilians whose home-made pickles, cookies and other consumables are fighting for shelf space in Pour Tous is increasing to such an extent that the Pour Tous team, in an announcement in the Auroville News, felt forced to state: "We have already plenty of jams and biscuits. How about some new ideas?" All this not only suggests that the organic idea has taken firm root in Auroville, but also that there is a market for home-made products, the average low monthly maintenance notwithstanding.

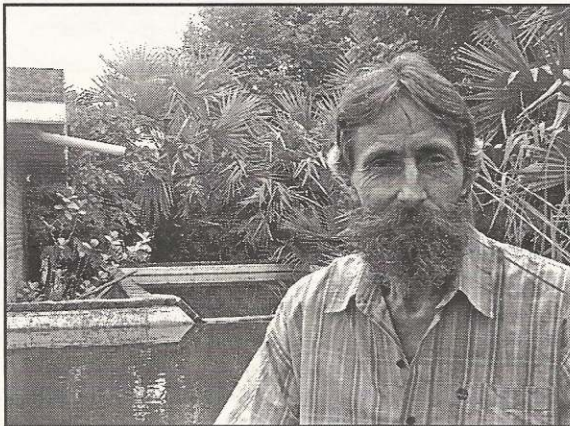
### Maintenance needs

In fact, it is rather the low monthly maintenance which has given the impetus to selling home-made products. Herbert, the manager of Siddhartha farm, recounts that when he came to Auroville in 1983, there was not enough food for everybody. "I was in charge of a huge piece of land in the forest area, I had a watchman but the money to pay that watchman often wasn't there. The basket, which all of us received from Pour Tous, was often almost empty. I had no money of my own. Then I decided to start making biscuits, using the oven of the Center Kitchen from 8-12 in the night. I used local grains such as kambu and mixed them with wheat flour, jaggery and some fruits. That resulted in rather sturdy biscuits, each of which was said to be a meal in itself. And I started to make peanut butter. The income helped me to sustain myself and my family and pay the watchman. And I never stopped. I moved to a new farm but I still make the biscuits and peanut butter, though today's biscuits are better. Nowadays I use varagu, ragi and kambu, and mix it with the jaggery from the sugarcane which we now grow here on the farm. I also sell cashew butter and roasted cashews. Most of the peanuts I also grow here, though sometimes they come from Pondy. My focus on using Auroville organically grown produce

hasn't changed. And as I have created a large rainwater catchment tank, I'll soon also provide Tilapia fish to Pour Tous."

Money problems were also the reason for Jaya and Nico to start baking their by now famous 'brownies'. Says Jaya: "About six years ago we decided to send our children to the Kodaikanal International School but we did not have money and we felt that it would not be a good idea to go back to our home country to earn. At first a number of Aurovilians generously helped out. Then the idea of selling brownies came up and that was a bigger success than we had anticipated. Obviously, quite a few Aurovilians have a sweet tooth. We did have some moral compunctions, though. But just when we were wondering if we shouldn't stop promoting the vital gratifications of the Aurovilians, a lady from Pondicherry approached me on the road and with simple sincerity expressed her gratitude for the product. Somehow it was a sign that it was ok to continue, and since then we have diversified and are offering more products."

Henri came to Auroville in 1992. Being a professional cook with a two-star restaurant background, the decision to be involved in the food sector came naturally. "I worked in many Auroville restaurants, but then I realized that I could never afford to construct a decent accommodation if I continued in this way. So I went twice back to France and spent a miserable time working very hard to get money to build myself a house in Auroville. When I came back I decided that I would not repeat that experiment ever again and that I would start selling food products in Auroville to maintain myself. It was the beginning of 'Royal'. Its first product was a chicken-liver pâté, which still sells well today. More products followed soon afterwards: biscuits, cakes, mayonnaise, mushroom à la grecque, quiches, to name but a few. The reception of the products is good, but after a



while some items go down and I have to come with something else. So I make some new products every few weeks. I have to find a means though to balance my inner work with the outer activity."

### Going commercial?

With the exception of a few products that are available in Pondicherry, home-made food is only sold in Auroville. There is not yet a drive to turn the home industry into a

**From top to bottom:**  
Herbert next to his rainwater catchment tank; Valli and Jaya showing the products for Pour Tous; Nico preparing the Brownies for the oven; Henri taking the freshly baked pastries 'frillantines' (with a filling of home-made grape jam) and 'basques' (with crème pâtissière filling) from his wood oven.

From the days of communal cooking under the open skies, when money for daily meals was scarce and varagu and kambu porridge the primary diet, Aurovillian cuisine has come a long way. One can taste French, German, Russian and Italian dishes alongside regular Indian fare in most Aurovillian restaurants. Some popular common dining facilities like the Solar Kitchen offer a menu that satisfies both the local and the global tastebuds of those who eat there. In addition, Pour Tous not only offers a range of imported foods to those who crave the original flavours from their home countries but also there is a special section devoted to organic Auroville-grown or home-made products that include a wide selection of cheeses, jams and syrups. In this issue Auroville Today invites you to visit the various food processing units and the eateries that offer an amazing mix of ethnic foods.

real food-manufacturing business. Says Jaya: "Many of our Auroville products are top notch quality and I think that a bakery cum gourmet shop selling Auroville food products in Pondicherry or elsewhere would be doing very well. But many of the people involved in the production do not really want to go commercial." Says Henri: "There would not really be a problem to expand production. But it would make no sense to do that as an individual. At present, all those who sell their home-made products in Auroville do so in order to earn money

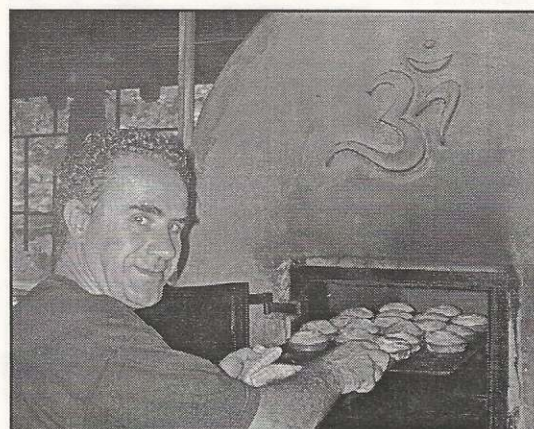
to make ends meet. If all would agree to join forces and not only concentrate on making money for themselves but also on making money to support Auroville, it would make all the difference. We would need a large collective workshop and an Auroville sales organisation to market the products and we would need to adjust the products for a longer shelf-life. But this is a realistic possibility and I would like to be part of it."

### New food products

There is a lot of experimentation going on to create new food products. Henri plans to start a product line of instant-food. Packed in aluminum foil, these vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes only need to be kept for 5 minutes in boiling hot water, and then are ready for consumption. Refrigerated, the bags will keep for 3 days. Jaya too likes to experiment. "I have always been interested in health food. Though I myself like good cakes I didn't really feel happy baking all kinds of things with sugar. When Don from America came to live in Auroville he suggested we make breakfast cereals. We worked on that idea together and it resulted in 'Granola'. It contains oats, wheat flour, dried fruits, nuts and organic jaggery instead of sugar. But this product still relies on grains that are not locally grown. Then, together with Anandi, Martina and Don, we visited the Central Food

Technology Research Institute in Mysore, and that eventually gave the boost to introduce a new product, called 'Dr. Nibbles'. It is a breakfast cereal consisting of crispy flakes of organically grown local grains, mixed with jaggery, and snippets of dates, ginger and raisins.

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# Naturellement shifts gear

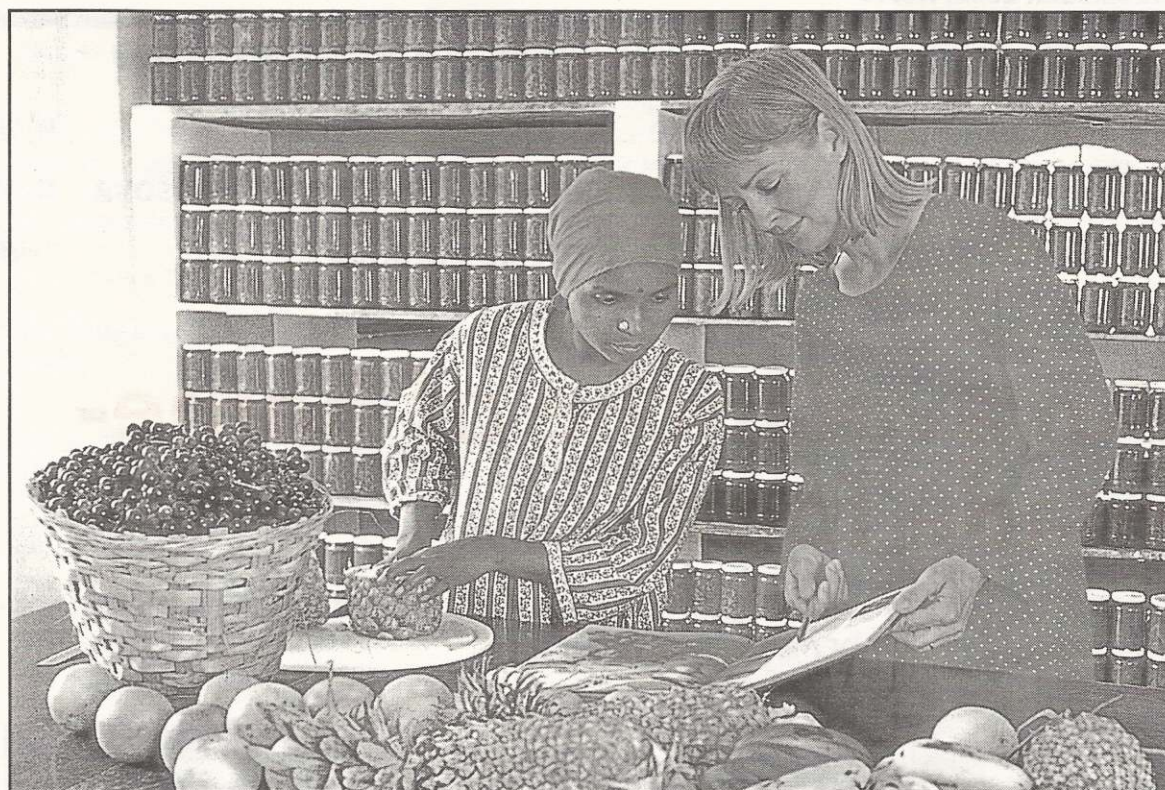
The food processing unit Naturellement shifts focus from servicing Auroville to selling in India

The past two years have not been easy for Naturellement. Facing the prospect that it has to vacate the premises in the Bharat Nivas complex in the near future, the unit has undergone a complete overhaul in terms of strategy and pricing. Where it used to be service-oriented, aiming at providing top-quality food products at low prices to Aurovilians, the aim today has expanded to selling gourmet-quality organic foods in India and abroad and helping the future development of Auroville through profit contributions.

"OK, call me idealistic. I certainly was," says Martina. "We got many compliments from Aurovilians who enjoyed our good quality products at low prices. We also have made a lot of donations in kind, in particular to Auroville's schools. However, when we were told that we had to move out of Bharat Nivas as soon as a government grant arrived to finish the construction of this building, we realised that we had not built up any financial reserve. Finding a new location was a big problem in itself, but finding the money for a building was even worse. Ultimately the Dutch foundation Stichting de Zaaier came forward through Prof.

We envisaged that we could expand our outside market quicker than what was possible. This was partly due to the fact that our former pricing policy had been faulty. It was not easy to explain to our new customers that our prices at the Pour Tous stall had been subsidized. The other difficulty was that establishing a market in India implied a shop by shop approach, for which we lacked sufficient manpower, and the orders are on average small – a shop normally doesn't purchase more than 20-50 bottles of jam at a time.

The decision to go commercial also increased the prices at Pour Tous. "That gave me a lot of negative feedback," admits Martina, "but I had no choice. The loan from Stichting de Zaaier came with the condition that a group of advisors would help us: Divya, Manuel Thomas, a chartered accountant from Chennai and co-author of the 'White Paper on the Auroville Economy' and Rahul Gambhir, a marketing expert and sales manager for Johnson & Johnson (India). This team found that almost 80% of our profits went into the SAIER donation and recommended that we stop our donations completely. We will gradually downsize, hoping that



Martina showing how to make the marmalade

PHOTO: IRENO

while the turnover at Pour Tous goes down. As we cannot possibly build up more stock, we had to ask the employees to work part-time. And that hurts. We have a team of ladies here who have shown great dedication to the unit and have joy in their work. They work with dedication, love and care, which is very important because it influences the food quality. To send these people home and not be able to pay them their full salary is a really painful decision," says Martina.

"So we are in a bottleneck situation, we are trying to squeeze through, but we are slightly exhausted. The donation from Stichting de Zaaier has gone into the extensive infrastructure, the loan is being used to get the building up, but our first repayment instalment is due in March 2003 and we have had to slow down construction. I had hoped that our sales by now would have increased so much that there would have been no problems paying back the loan. But in fact, we would need a large inflow of money now to really get back on the rails.

"The price increase of our products at Pour Tous had, by the way, a foreseen consequence in that it brought competition. I had always made it a point to support Auroville's farmers by buying their produce. Now I realised I could support them even more by helping and encouraging them to make their own jams and marmalades as value-added products for sale in Pour Tous. They don't need to bother about an outside market and turnover; they can sell even a few pots of jam if that's all they can make from their available fruit. And they hardly have any extra overheads. This development is good as the farms get more cash income and the Aurovilians can still buy cheap and good quality products, or, if they insist, our products at higher prices."

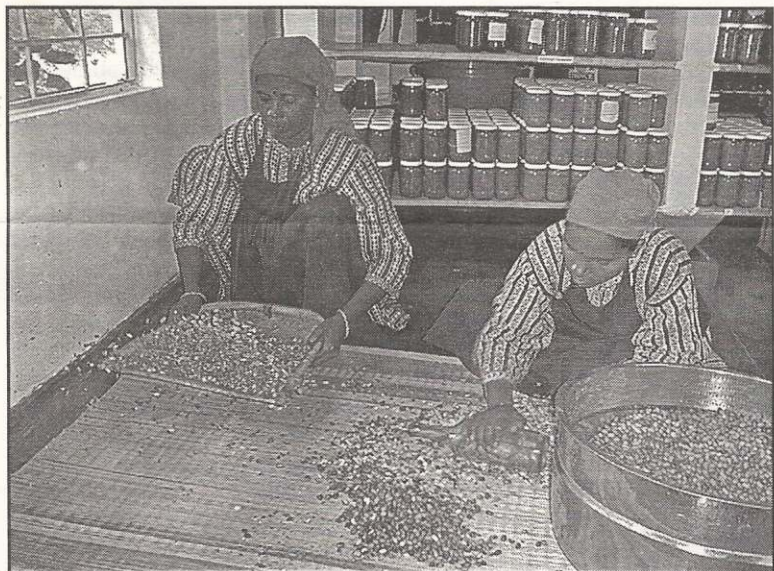
If there is one aspect of food processing which troubles Martina more than anything else, it is quality control. Over the years Naturellement has developed its own strict quality control standards. Says Martina: "We have an FPO license, which allows us to sell food products made from fruit and vegetables all over India. I have no doubt that our products also conform to the quality requirements of other countries. But it is an open question if all Auroville food products conform to such quality requirements. So far, no internal quality control mechanisms have been developed to test foods for the presence of pesticides or toxins. This is worrying. Take Aflatoxins, for example. These toxins result from mould growth; they are invisible and survive cooking and processing. Aflatoxin B1 is fre-

we found bags of peanuts for sale in Pondicherry that contained 90-100 times the permissible amount of aflatoxins, enough to kill a horse! I know the tests are expensive – a bag of peanuts costs Rs 1600, the test Rs 200 – but that is no excuse to put people's health at risk."

Mukund, who started working for Naturellement recently, joins in. "There is another reason why an Auroville quality standard and quality control has to be introduced soon. Increasingly, Auroville products are sold to non-Aurovilians. People come to Auroville and think everything is super. Indians have a craze for anything imported, and if they know that Westerners have made these food products, they assume it is top quality. The name of Auroville itself stands for good quality products. But one bad food product can irreversibly damage the image of Auroville as a whole. And that is a risk you simply cannot take."

What are the prospects for the future? "The present situation notwithstanding – I trust that this is just an intermediary period – Naturellement has great potential. As we have never made any compromise, neither on product quality nor on labour conditions, our products rank among the best," says Martina. "Nilesh, a newcomer has taken it upon himself to market Auroville's products all over India through his company Auro Siddhi Global Marketing. We have hopes that our product sales will also increase because of this. Already our products can be bought in Hyderabad, Pune, Bangalore and Goa, and we can trust with Nilesh that many more outlets will follow. India can become a lead player in organic foods, and Naturellement is qualified to take advantage of this. We are just beginning..."

Carel



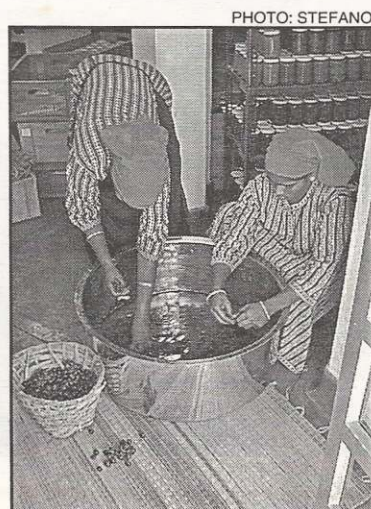
Carefully cleaning peanuts after they have been checked for the presence of aflatoxins

Dr. Henk Thomas, the Chairman of the Foundation. He stated in May 2002, when he publicly presented the White Paper on the Auroville Economy, that the community should give special attention to the relatively small number of specialised Auroville units that had the potential to help Auroville's future development. [see AVToday June-July 2002]. Organic food processing is one of these areas. He studied our problems and this led to a complete turn around in our policy. We had to stop servicing Auroville in the way we had done, and concentrate instead on the outside market. When this decision was made, it changed something: suddenly the energy started flowing again. And the Foundation put its money where its mouth was: they gave us a donation and a loan for the new building. The loan is to be paid back to Auroville and will become part of a revolving loan fund to help other units."

Martina, the former kindergarten teacher turned manager of a food processing unit, gives me a wan smile. For the changeover has proven to be more difficult than anticipated. "When we made our projections we were too optimistic.

other jam-makers will step-in and that SAIER will receive more money in future. The team also insisted that we put a minimal profit margin on our prices in Pour Tous. When we did that the result was that our sales went down dramatically. As we did not make any profit at Pour Tous, this did not matter much in terms of income.

"But it has placed us in a rather unenviable position: the turnover of our outside sales is still small,



Preparing the grape jam



Making pineapple jam

PHOTO: STEFANO



# KOFPU's innovative organic health products

A unit under the Auroville Village Action Trust Group, KOFPU is continuing its onward journey to promote the production and consumption of organically grown crops

The Kottakarai Organic Food Processing Unit (KOFPU) consists of three modest-sized workrooms and four employees that, surprisingly, produce a total of 30 products. Anandi, the soft-spoken manager of the unit describes how the project "took seed in 1992" and later with the help of grants from Himalaya Trust, Foundation for World Education and Stichting de Zaaier "gave new leaves until it reached its desired manifestation in 1995".

Anandi's use of metaphor aptly captures KOFPU's organic growth from a home-based food processing activity to a small-scale unit with a more diversified and exotic range of natural foods and body care products. These products are

peanuts and cashews, spaghetti made from various combinations of whole wheat, kambu and spirulina, a health food organically farmed in Auroville itself. Anandi also invented a dosai mix from urad dal and ragi, a grain native to southern India and rich in calcium and other minerals. Intent on promoting ragi instead of the more popular wheat and rice-based foods, Anandi enumerates the many merits of ragi in the tropical Indian climate. "Ragi is cooling to the body. Our ancestors used this as the staple crop, before rice became the dominant food. They were able to work six to seven hours in the hot sun solely on the basis of the ragi diet that they were accustomed to."

KOFPU also offers hair oil, body massage oil, extracted primarily from sesame and coconut. These oils are reasonably priced and are infused with various traditional herbs grown locally in and around Auroville.

There is also a special neem-based oil with anti-lice properties.

Anandi explains that the ancient way to produce oil was the cold-pressed method. The process was slow, with bullocks slowly turning the pestle that ground the

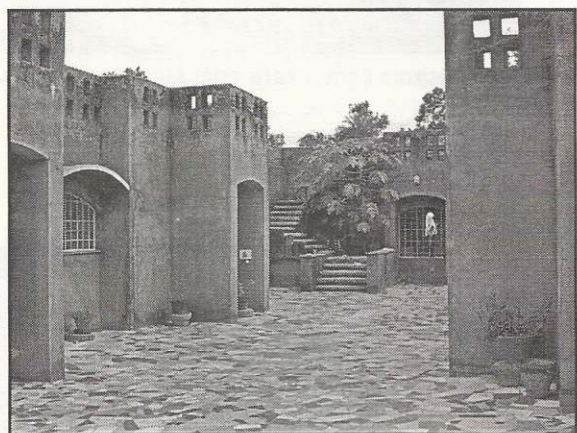
seeds in a vessel made from a tree trunk. "The only reason we discarded this method was due to the flies that were settling in large numbers. So now we take our seeds to the electric mill, but we set it at the slowest speed possible so as to retain the oil's nourishing properties".

Operating under Village Action Trust, a body that is concerned with rural development and promoting organic farming in the villages neighbouring Auroville, KOFPU deals mainly with organic foods grown by certified producers. The Auroville unit, Auroannam, which supplies KOFPU, takes full responsibility for the organic quality of the produce KOFPU products, like those of most other Auroville units, are made under hygienic conditions. Use of gloves for mixing ingredients, and use of eco-friendly cleaning agents for vessels and floors is mandatory. The KOFPU peanut butter is made from organic peanuts that are certified as being free from aflatoxin.

Presently, only 10% of KOFPU's sales are outside



From left to right: Vanitha, Anandi, Valli and Ramani selecting basil leaves for pesto



The KOFPU building in Kottakarai community

popular enough to begin finding acceptance in the Indian market. These include kombucha, a fermented health drink using Korean mushroom, butter made from

Auroville. Efforts are on, however, to enter bigger markets in cities like Chennai and Bangalore. In response to people desiring to replicate some products that KOFPU is manufacturing, KOFPU has no plans to export its products. "First I give priority to Auroville, and then I want to go outside, but remain within India since modern India has a big need for reintroducing healthy food and body care products."

From a financial point of view, KOFPU is surviving quite well. A few of its products, especially spaghetti, are recording good sales. The unit is self-sufficient, without

debts of any kind.

Anandi's vision of KOFPU's future is straightforward – to promote organic farming and provide good, organic food and health care products for as many people as possible within India. Her greatest challenge so far has been trying to encourage people to consume organic food products. "This is a delicate process as it involves a real shift in consciousness within individuals towards focusing on food products that help us to remain healthy, and that help the earth to sustain itself."

Abha Prakash

## An ideal protein provider

An important food crop in China, Japan and Korea, soybean products are only slowly gaining ground in India. The same goes for Auroville.

Soybean or soyabean is one of the most versatile pulses known to mankind. Its high protein content makes it a substitute for expensive meat products. It is estimated that one hectare of land used for grazing purposes will produce enough meat to satisfy one man's protein needs for 190 days; planted in wheat it will provide enough protein for 2,167 days. But that hectare, planted with soybeans, will yield enough protein for 5,496 days. Soybean finds hundreds of uses in home and industry. Well-known processed soybean products are tofu, soya sauce, tempeh (originally Indonesian), miso (Japanese), natto (Japanese), and hamanatto (Korean). Soybean is also used to produce textured vegetable protein to replace meat, a source of oil, and is added to paste toppings, baby foods, candy bars, cake mixes and bread.

In countries such as China, Japan and Korea advanced technologies for the processing and manufacture of palatable soybean products have been developed. In India the introduction as a food item has proved difficult. In Auroville too, soybean products are only slowly being appreciated. About four years ago the unit Aurosoya was



Wrestling to separate the soya milk from the okara. From left to right: Kuppu, Muthulakshmi and Frederic

launched, but it is still struggling to keep afloat.

"Actually, the unit would not have survived but for the help of the Dutch Foundation Stichting de Zaaier," says Frederic who manages the unit. "They have helped a few times in the past, and the result of their most recent cash injection will come to Auroville soon: a soya cow, a machine to process the soybeans. The machine's filter will remove the

particular smell and taste of the bean which some people don't like, and it will be possible to introduce another product range."

In addition to tofu, the white delicate soyabean curd that is sold in water-containing plastic bags, Aurosoya sells soyabean milk (good for people with high blood pressure and those who are allergic to lactic acid) and tempeh. New products are cookies made from soya and wheat flour,

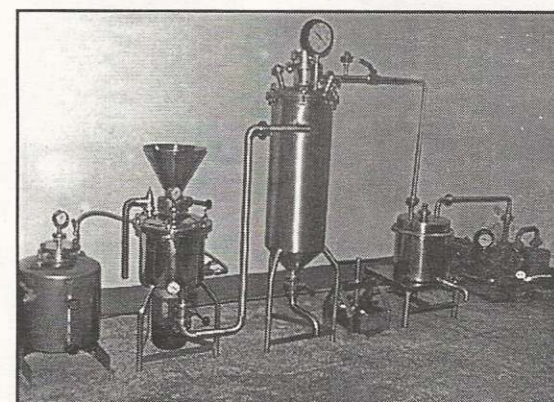
and muesli made from the bean pulp (called Okara in Japanese) that remains after making tofu, mixed with raisins, dates and jaggery. "When the soya cow is operational, we will soon produce soya yoghurt and soya bean paste," says Frederic, "and I have many other plans."

One of the uncertainties of Aurosoya is the quality of the soybean that the market offers. Are they genetically-modified? "There is no way for me to know," says Frederic. "Best would be if the Auroville farms would produce the soybeans – assuming they can buy seeds that are not engineered. But so far they supply less than 10% of my requirement. The only thing I know is that my soybeans come from Madhya Pradesh, but there is no certificate that the beans are organic."

Aurosoya's main sales outlet is Auroville and there are a few shops in Pondicherry and Thiruvananthapuram that sell Aurosoya's products. Is there a prospect of a quick development now that the soya cow is coming soon? Not really, it appears. "Tofu is not well-known and it will take some time to have the product accepted."

Then there is the marketing and packing problem. I cannot sell tofu outside of Auroville in the water-containing plastic bags I use here. To sell outside, I would need a Rs 1 lakhs (US\$ 2000) vacuum-sealing packing machine which I cannot afford for the unit is under severe financial constraints. As it has to move out of the Bharat Nivas complex as soon as the government grant arrives to finish this building, I had to take a loan to build a new unit. The pay-back time is 12 years! The best result I can expect is that we will break even in the coming years and that the marginal maintenance the unit now provides me with will rise to an acceptable level."

Carel



The SoyaCow with deodoriser and tofu box will soon be installed at Aurosoya and make the daily struggle a thing of the past



# Food, glorious food

A fallible guide to eating out in Auroville



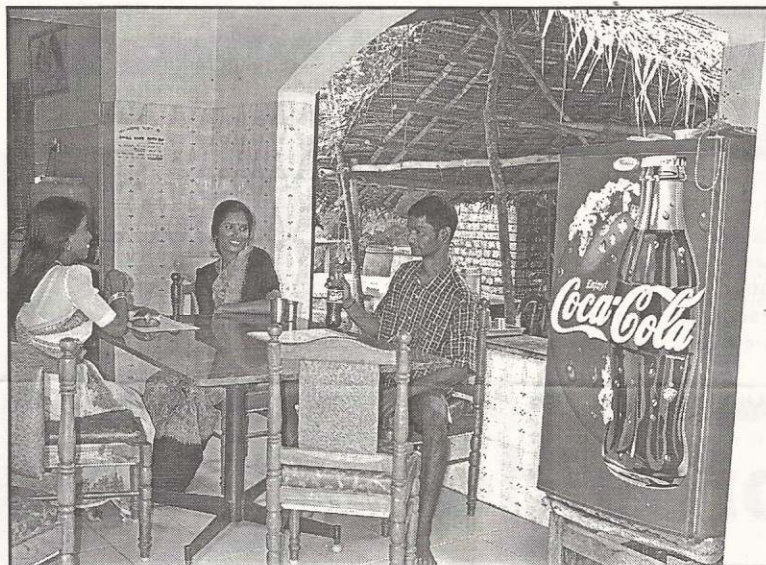
The Pour Tous snack bar where everybody hangs out after shopping

Many, many years ago, when Auroville Today was but a fledgling publication and innocent of the ways of the world, we decided to run a food review. A new restaurant called La Ventura had just opened in the Bharat Nivas burger and I recklessly offered my stomach as a testing-ground. I still remember arriving in the midst of the monsoon to be confronted by a vision from another world: above the mud and murk, impeccable waiters, napkins folded across their arms, glided between tables with dishes prised from my dreams. I almost cried. After a wasteland of ragi porridge and Herbert's jaw-cracker biscuits here was food, real food, at last.

The next morning, still high on haemoglobin, I sat down and wrote an effusive review. The following month our postbox was full. No less than three (it was a small postbox) indignant letters from readers complaining that Auroville was going to the dogs (or chickens) because we had opened a restaurant serving NON-VEGETARIAN food. One reader, in an attempt to stop the rot, even sent us a vegetarian cookbook!

Today these same readers would be suffering apoplectic fits. While good vegetarian food abounds, it seems that wherever one goes in the community cooked chicken, fish, steak, mutton and other less identi-

fiable life forms are flung at one promiscuously. For Auroville today is foodville, where almost every taste and pocket is catered for.



Fizzing-up at Ganesh bakery

## Lite bites

Fancy a mid-morning snack? Why not try the 'Tea Stop', almost hidden beside the Auroville Bakery? Here a charming lady will serve you croissants, baguettes, buns or cakes fresh from the bakery next door. The tables in the small open courtyard have napkins, and the merely passable coffee is made up for by the very nice cup and saucer. There was even a copy of the 'The Hindu' lying around the day I passed by. Thankfully the battery of dogs, which have become adept beggars at the door of the bakery, don't manage to penetrate this far.

For those marooned in the wastes of Kottakarai a similar 'lite bite bar' can now be found attached to Ganesh Bakery. Here, after you've shopped till you dropped at Vinod's superstore next door, you can sit at a marble-topped table enjoying Ganesh Bakery products (biscuits, cakes, croissants, vegetable and egg puffs etc.) accom-

panied by tea, coffee or fizzy drinks. A vegetable puff with a cup of tea will set you back all of Rs 8, possibly the cheapest blood sugar shoot in Auroville today. Sundaram, the manager of Ganesh Bakery, seems to have negotiated a unique deal with fellow multinationals Coca-Cola and Pepsi: they both have fridge concessions in his small eating area.

Surfies and beach-bugs are catered for at the Sun Bliss snack bar at Repos Beach, but whenever anybody refers to "the snack bar" they're really referring to the one opposite the Pour Tous store where everybody hangs out after shopping. Here the surroundings are, well, basic – cuddapah stone tables and benches, a tiny sink in which to wash your hands and you order through a hole in the wall – but the food is surprisingly good. On my most recent visit I had a fresh coconut juice (a bit insipid but it's great that they provide it at all), a tasty puri masala and a slightly gassy banana lassi. Other possibilities that day included various sal-

juices, including not only fruit but also vegetable, grass and herbal juices. "Grass", did I hear you say? Well, freshly-squeezed juices like kombu or wheat grass are, and here I quote the menu, "one of nature's most potent detoxifiers...by the direct absorption of poly-peptides into the bloodstream, its promotion of cellular metabolism turns polyvinyl chloride, cadmium, strontium and mercury into soluble salts." If this doesn't put you off your food you can enjoy a range of healthy snacks including potato pancakes, hummus on Auroville bread, coriander oothapam and even Goan coconut fish. On a wet monsoon lunchtime I enjoyed a delicious mixed vegetable juice (carrot, tomato, beet, onion, radish and cucumber with a shot of ginger and a few drops of omega 3 flax oil) and a generous portion of over-garlicked hummus on warm pumpernickel bread.

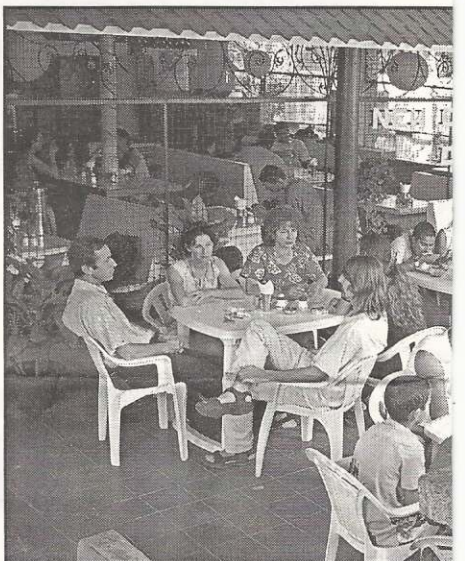
## Café culture

With Oasis, the snack bar category begins to blur into café territory, and this is the moment to introduce Alan's Golden Fork Guide to Auroville eateries. Taking into account not only taste, presentation, ambience and cost but also more arcane matters like mosquitoes per square metre and the look of the cook, this fallible guide peaks at three forks and bottoms out with a doughnut.



Onwards and upwards, then, to the Solar Café, perched on top of the Solar Kitchen between the AuroNET and Guest Service offices. The Solar Café has always had a young and lively feel to it. Before skateboarding went out of fashion, you could watch young skaters skinning their knees on the large terrace opposite while listening to African Rock on WorldSpace radio. Since Mark and André inaugurated the Café a few years ago a number of managers have come and

shapes and sizes. While it's not the best place to be in a monsoon down-pour, it's a great place for deep-



New Creation Corner, almost every

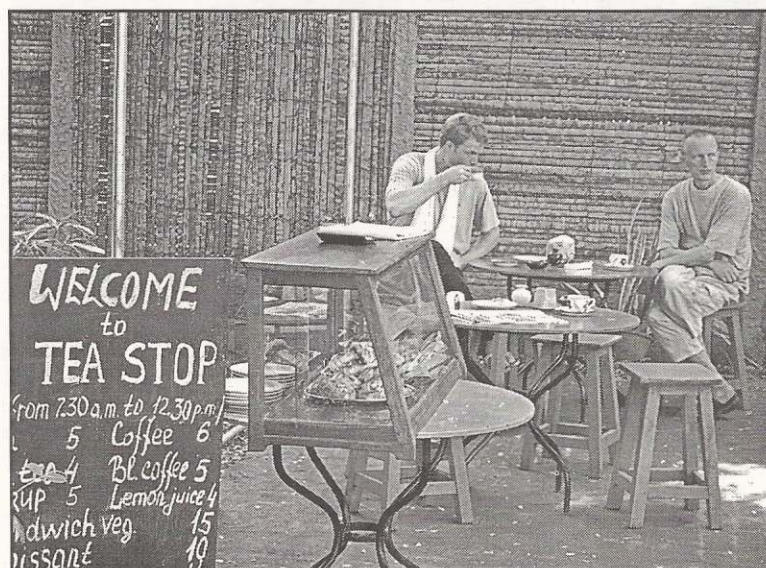
breathing and star-gazing. The service is good, the menu quite extensive and the food tasty. On a windy Sunday lunchtime I had a delicious pumkin(sic) soup and a slightly salty fish with mashed potatoes, followed by the Solar Café's supreme contribution to gastronomic evolution: ice cream cappuccino. Meanwhile my partner was tucking into her Tibetan vegetable momos with tomato sauce ("good, but not enough") and her somewhat bland White Bear Cake (at least they took out the fur), all washed down by kombucha – the wonder fungal drink that cures all known, and many unknown, diseases. Two forks.



My café category also includes Auriginal Pizzeria, which regrettably closed down soon after my visit. It is superbly placed on the beach road entrance to Auroville. Enterprisingly, they've painted an Auroville map with main guest house locations on their wall. They've also emulated other pizza concerns by offering home delivery (although "home" doesn't yet extend to my house in the green-belt). Upstairs it's keet roof, pot plants and good music – very Mahabalipuram, somehow – and there's a wide range of pizzas as well as soups, salads and pasta dishes. The menu also boasts an amazing variety of ice creams, but on the day I visited they were all "off". I



Oasis: The healthy place to eat



The 'Tea Stop': fresh baking fare

Bar on the road to the beach. "The different juice bar", as it terms itself, is the HEALTHY place to eat. Here you can choose from among a bewildering variety of

gone. Their lingering influence is reflected in the eclectic menu – Russian, Indian, Tibetan and Spanish fare – and the eclectic seats: cane, wood, plastic, in all

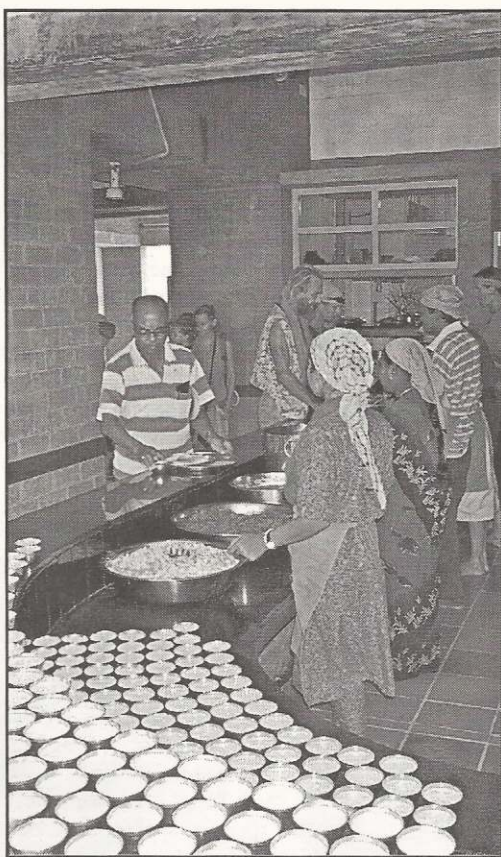


went for the marinara pizza, the only one without cheese. This was a mistake as the tomato sauce, garlic and tuna fish topping was too dry. My partner, on the other hand, flung herself into the auriginal pizza, which boasts not only tomato, ham, mushroom and black olives but no less than five different kinds of cheese (you guessed it, Auroville Today was paying). When she finally surfaced she concluded it was, "a success. A tasty topping on a light base." We followed it up with charlotte cake (Auroville Today was still paying) and a lemon grass tea, which somehow turned out to be rosemary. All in all a satisfying meal, if somewhat pricey. Two forks.



**New Creation** Corner is, I suspect, almost every Aurovilian's favourite eating place. The food

is consistently tasty, the service fast and friendly, the prices reasonable. There's always a chicken and fish dish on the menu as well as an Indian meal. But be warned. At N.C.C. what you see is what you get. If the menu says mushroom pie, that's all that will arrive on the plate. On my plate last week was fish and mashed potato (excellent) chased up by a delicious crème caramel. My partner opted for the



Predictable food in the Solar Kitchen

taken off. Perhaps it's a tad remote. Perhaps...well, the day we went the menu was inviting. I chose mouton a la tomate/riz, my partner more prosaically went for quiche and salad. The quiche was fine, the salad O.K., although rather coarsely cut. Meanwhile I was sawing away, sawing away, at my mutton meat which remained obstinately attached to a number of large knuckle bones. Now, I'm all for exercise. It opens the blood vessels, stimulates the appetite. But somehow I hadn't anticipated heavy exercise at the lunch table. If I had, I'd have come dressed differently. And brought along a chain-saw. One fork.

#### Canteen cooking



The Solar Kitchen falls into the institutional or canteen category. Solar Kitchen habitués like myself know what to expect, day by day, and adjust our expectations accordingly. Basically the weekly menu start well, dips in the middle, then rises to a peak on Saturday when the kitchen throws everything at you, presumably on the principle that they have to get you through Sundays when the Kitchen is shut. As an act of pure kindness, I chose a Saturday for my fork rating. Actually, Saturdays are not always great – sometimes the choice of dishes seems to be based more on colour-matching than nutritional balance – but this particular Saturday was a success. A tasty vegetable soup, followed by a choice of rice, varagu or pasta, accompanied by potato in white sauce, dumplings and cucumber with mustard dressing, followed up

with kulfi and curd. Yum. Although a touch on the heavy side, the hot mint tea cut the starch and milk and sent one home feeling that one's ribs were no longer in contact with one's backbone. Two forks.



Aurelec began as a canteen for those who labour at the I.T. coalface, but Franz is trying to widen its appeal. He's introduced very reasonably priced breakfasts and a late afternoon tiffin service. He's also invested in a tandoori oven which, once a week, disgorges tandoori products. The day I went there was rice, dal, fried cauliflower, soup, pappad, salad, curd and coffee. Basically very eatable, although the dal was over-salty and the soup

rather thin. The coffee has definitely improved over the years but it still has some way to go before it can enter polite society. The big plus for Aurelec is the lively social

small guest house kitchen. Molto italiano. Two and a half forks.

#### At the top table

At present there's only one establishment in Auroville which can lay claim to the hallowed status of restaurant, although another future claimant has just been born.



Roma's Kitchen: noted for its north-Indian dishes



Roma's Kitchen arose from the ashes of a previous gastronomic experiment in Auromodèle and is noted for

The new Afsaneh's Guest House, although still unfinished, is already the best looker of them all. Architect Poppo's Japanese-influenced design is evident in

both the spacious, tasteful dining room – all marble floor and exposed beams with Persian inscriptions incised into the cement – and in the simplicity and sweeping curves of the pond and sand garden outside. At present there is a set dish every day – no à la carte – and one has to book in advance. On the day we visited we struck gold: chicken with pineapple in ginger sauce, potatoes and cauliflower, followed by fresh fruit salad. Delicious. When the fresh fruit juice bar is finally completed it's likely to get even better, although by then there will probably be considerable more diners than the three who sat down with us. Too early, too embryonic, as yet to qualify for forks, but this one may eventually outfork them all.

All good things, as my granny told me, finally come to an end. My only hope, as I contemplate the wasteland of dry bread and water which stretches ahead of me, is that Auroville Today will not completely abandon this stomach for hire. Hey, come to think of it, how about an article on eating out in Pondy? No? What about Kuilapalayam then?

Alan



The Solar Café: a young and lively feel

scene under the giant jackfruit tree. The drawback is that in the summer months patrons must choose between either eating inside and getting broiled in the heat, or eating outside and getting eaten alive by flies. Franz is now actively seeking out remedies in places like Israel (where unsubstantiated reports suggest that the flies are machine-gunned). Plans for the future include replacing the asbestos roof and installing air-conditioning. One and a half forks.



Center Guest House is an anomaly. It's not a snack bar, not a canteen, and on six days a week the meals are basically for the guests. However, one night a week Aurovilians flock there to savour Silvano's famed pizzas. "It took me 3-4 years to get them right", he says, and right they are. The base is light, crisp, the topping pungent, aromatic. Accompanied by salad, aubergine, beetroot and an omelette (omelette with pizza?), this is a meal to wipe away the years and tears, a meal redolent of lazy afternoons, olive groves and good Italian wine. On the night we went the rains crashed down, so we all went into a sociable huddle in the

its north Indian dishes. On the evening we went that reputation remained intact – my saag chicken with rice was very tasty. However, Roma has also diversified her menu by including Western and Italian dishes, so my partner and I also decided to sample something from the other side of the tracks. It was not a good move. The minestrone soup was far too peppery, and my partner's epinard a la crème (spinach, baby corn and mushroom served with mashed potato and brown bread) was very bland (the cook had forgotten to put salt in the potatoes) and severely overpriced.



The new dining room of Afsaneh's guesthouse in its Japanese setting.



Aurovilian's favourite eating place

Indian meal – rice, curd rice, brinjal curry, beans, cauliflower, potato and pappad – which was somewhat spoiled by the curd rice having gone over. As this is unusual here, N.C.C. is awarded two and a half forks.



The Visitors Center cafeteria has been through peaks and troughs over the years, depending upon the management and the cooks. Actually, it's got a lot going for it – proximity to the boutiques, the video room and an open air entertainment arena, a lovely sitting area beneath Royal Palms – so it's a bit of a mystery that it's never really



Under the giant jackfruit tree at Aurelec



# Foods and food traditions of the village

A beginner's navigations in the elaborate world of Tamil cuisine

What is the first thing that comes to your mind when someone asks you about local foods of the village? Is it fluffy white idlies with a bowl of steaming sambar, or crispy paper-thin dosais with a generous dollop of chutney? Or perhaps your thoughts have flown to the delicious parottas and kurma with which you indulged your late night craving at that homey eatery in Kulapalayam...

But there is more to Tamil cuisine than what is served as popular restaurant food. Its world extends far beyond the confines of pongal and pooris, or the mixed rice varieties (tomato, lemon, curd, or tamarind) served for lunch.

The collective geniuses of Tamilian grandmothers and mothers, wielding their creativity in little kitchens, has resulted in a culinary sophistication that can match any fine cuisine of the world. The best evidence to support this claim is the virundhu sappadu, a multi-course meal presented with élan on banana leaves that is characterized by its bold and unusual food combinations that present a playful blend of both subtle and direct flavours. This special spread is marked by three or more rice dishes served in a well-defined sequence of sambhar, rasam and thayir (yoghurt), accompanied by kootu (vegetables in gravy), poriyal (sautéed dry vegetables), thovayal (chutneys), pachadi (yoghurt based vegetables), and oorugai (pickles). Of course, a virundhu sappadu is incomplete unless accompanied by appalam (sun-dried wafers fried in oil), vadai (fried savoury doughnut) and payasam (dessert).

For the people of Tamil Nadu,



Lakshmi preparing juicy ocean crabs in a delicate sauce of tomatoes, onion and garlic on an outdoor wood-fire stove

food is a vital part of both celebration and ritual. Every festival has its proscribed foods, including the upcoming festival of Pongal in the month of Thai (beginning in mid-January) that heralds a successful winter harvest. During Pongal, rice and pulse dishes are cooked on open wood-fires in shiny brass pots richly decorated with sugarcane, turmeric saplings and vermilion powder. Pongal, as this rice is also called, is made in two styles — one savoury and the other sweet. As the rice-pulse mixture bubbles over, the women collectively chant "pongalo pongal", calling in blessings for abundant harvests over the coming year.

There is also plenty of ageless wisdom that has gone into Tamil cuisine. Many examples exist both for maintaining good health and preventing illness. A fine example is the

hearty breakfast food of koozh, a thick nutritious porridge made of local grains like varagu or kambu. One can now get koozh powder marketed as a high-energy flour on the shelves of any reputable supermarket, including our very own Pour Tous. Another example is the spiced buttermilk flavoured with asafoetida, curry leaves, mustard seeds and salt, which is reputed to keep the body cool as the mercury rises. A superior alternative is to drink the water used to preserve cooked rice by soaking it overnight. This mildly fermented decoction is mixed with some rock salt and drunk straight for healing.

Food is the most vital part of Tamilian hospitality. Depending on the season, a guest is never allowed to leave one's home without partaking of at least a cup of hot tea or coffee, if not joining in the family meal itself.

Suffice it to say, the kitchen is the heart of a Tamil home. Anytime one visits a traditional Tamil kitchen, it seems as if something is always in the making. If it is not the tender mangoes that are pickling in early summer, it is lemons during the rest of the year. If it's not green chillies soaked in salted buttermilk sun-drying in the courtyard, it is cluster beans or brinjals being prepared. Every edible ingredient gets utilized in the most efficient of ways, both for immediate consumption as well as for preservation.

Tamil cuisine also specifies appropriate cooking implements, something that adds a quaint charm and an old world beauty to the kitchen. A recent visit to the home of Lakshmi, a baker working at the Auroville Bakery and who lives in the village of Kulapalayam, reveals that she has an outdoor kitchen. She has

hand built a wood-fire stove that she uses when the weather is dry. The day I pay her a visit, the area around the stove has been beautifully decorated with white kolam designs. She tells me that she does this almost every day so that the chore of cooking becomes more pleasurable. Today, juicy ocean crabs are simmering in a delicate sauce of tomatoes, onion and garlic; the rice has already been cooked. Her Aurovilian sister Selvi eagerly waits by her side for the first taste. Lakshmi tells me that seafood is very popular in the village, especially Meen Kuzhambu (fish in a spicy gravy), and that one can get the best fish near Bommaiarpalayam village.

The sun has set and the crabs are finally done. I am offered a plate with the fattest one. I gently decline since I am vegetarian. Lakshmi insists that I join in the dinner and serves me puli keerai (tamarind spinach) with rice along with lemon pickle. We all eat together in a comfortable silence, sitting on straw mats under the stars. I feel I am in Tamil food heaven.

Priya Sundaravalli

## Moments of Magic

An experience in wholesome food cooking

Moments of Magic is the first book of a series called "Nirama Upanishad" to be published for an extensive understanding not only of how to cook a healthy meal but "making food an occasion of celebration of the simple delights of existence". The author, Dr. Bina Ramesh Naik is an allopathic medical practitioner with training in pediatrics and educated in health management.

Beena (as she is known to the Auroville community) was inspired to create this set of books in 1994. "I was working at the Ganesh Bakery and with Sharanam. We were trying out recipes for using millets and local grains which are available in Pour Tous but many people I talked to then, did not know how to use them." Knowing how to prepare local grains still eludes many in Auroville. Moments of Magic is a way to educating individuals about how to eat healthily using the diverse foods available in Auroville, and increasing the knowledge of organic and environmentally conscious food growth, preparation and consumption.

Moments of Magic touches all aspects of the food world represented in Auroville today. Although the book includes over 250 recipes, "What was guiding the background research was more along the lines of vital education according to the ancient Vedas and the Upanishads as well as concepts from the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. The spirit is very important to understand, otherwise the book does not serve its purpose.

"Another thread is the Mother's idea about the cultural pavilions in the international Zone and the kitchens. This book is really an attempt to have a glimpse into this future of the Auroville Dream: that the basic need for self-sufficiency in foods grown the Auroville way will lead to a poison-free, organic way of living." For her book, Beena researched recipes that could be modified to use indigenous grains as well as soya products as a substitute for dairy products. The book also educates about foods rich in protein, vitamins, minerals and anti-oxidants.

Moments of Magic is being published by Editions Auroville Press International in collaboration with SAIIR and will be on the shelf in the coming months. Proceeds from the sales go toward supporting organic farming in Auroville.

"Maybe together we can break the vicious cycle and above all, offer a sincere prayer for what sustains this universe, the Mother's Love, that permeates everything and Ma Annapoorna, the One who nourishes all."

Sunaura

Here is a recipe:

Bengali Dahi Begum ~ Ange an artist who makes a different kind of pottery, shared this recipe. It is an adaptation of a popular Bengali dish — eggplant in curd sauce. 250 g eggplant ~ one L water ~ salt ~ 2 c oil for frying ~ coriander leaves. For the curd sauce: one fine cubed onion ~ one tsp black mustard seeds ~ 1-2 green chillies ~ one tsp panch purna ~ pinch of turmeric ~ 500 ml bland curd ~ one tbsp sugar ~ salt ~ one tsp sesame or mustard oil. First, make the curd sauce. Heat oil. Fry the onion, chilli with turmeric and salt. Let it cool slightly. Beat the curd into a smooth cream. Pour it over the veg mix when it is cool. Add the sugar. Stir and mix. Now cover and keep aside. Take the cleaned eggplant. Cut them first in one half up to the stalk. Keep the stalk. Then split the half into two, again the same way. Put some salt in the water to make a very salty solution. Soak the eggplants for 10 minutes in this salty solution. Drain. Pat them dry with a towel. Heat the oil in a frying pan or wok. Fry the whole eggplant so that it is golden brown on both sides. Drain all the oil away. Arrange the eggplants in a platter and pour the curd sauce over it.

It's great with fried rice or pooris.

## An avalanche of home-made foods

continued from page 1

"This product is being extensively tested by a few Aurovilians. Some are friends who eat these type of products regularly. One of my testers has a very well developed sense of taste, and recently I asked an Aurovilian who is involved with a physical fitness program to give me feedback on how her body responds to these foods. If 'Dr. Nibbles' and other products in this line are a success, it would encourage both the AV farms and local farmers in the village to grow these grains organically and the farm-group could be supported in buying its own flaking machine. Another planned activity is to meet with experts in the Ayurvedic health tradition to understand more deeply how best to combine different foods."

### Quality control

A rising concern is the need for food quality control. So far, the Auroville sale outlets accept the products as they are brought in. "The need for quality control was voiced years ago by Dr. Lucas, Martina and others, but it has not had a sufficient follow-up. Few people will disagree that quality control is necessary, and that a 'food quality control team' will be required soon. It probably is a full-time job. They should not only check the end-product for the presence of pesticides and toxins, but also the hygienic circumstances under which it

is manufactured. Ultimately, this should result in some Auroville standards, and products that do not conform should simply not be sold," opines Jaya.

### The maintenance paradox

Isn't it a paradox that in order to increase one's low monthly maintenance home-made foods are offered to those who have to survive on that same low maintenance?

Jaya admits that the question has relevance: "Some Aurovilians who are on a low budget have an arrangement to get my products straight from me, which is cheaper for them. Ideally, all of us should be able to live without having to make a profit. But this is not an ideal world. I have no problem that cakes and luxury items carry a profit; but basic food items, such as the breakfast cereals, should be within everyone's financial means."

For Herbert, this question arises to a lesser extent. Herbert's farm Siddhartha is unique in Auroville as its location bordering the Irumbai lake allows it to grow crops such as rice and sugarcane that require large amounts of water. Along with Annapurna farm, he participates in the Free Food program which was started a few years ago by Auroville's commercial unit Maroma. Maroma donates the costs of production to grow organic red rice and sugarcane, and Herbert donates the rice and the jaggery directly to the Solar Kitchen.

But as the community does not pay for farm maintenance, the income from the sale of foods made from the farms produce remains necessary to run the farm. "The farm's productive area is still low, as it consists of a lot of pieces that are not linked to each other. But the piece of land right in the middle is now for sale. If we can manage to buy that piece and raise the money for a well and a pump, Auroville would have a productive area of 30 acres instead of the 5 acres I manage today," he says. "And that would vastly increase the amount of free produce I can offer to Auroville under Maroma's scheme."

### Meeting basic needs

Maroma's Free Food scheme is certainly a step towards the realization of the Auroville economy Mother wanted. For the township is supposed to meet everyone's material needs on the basis of the most elementary necessities. Says Jaya: "We have still a long way to go to provide basic housing but we could look at places like Atithi Griha to get an idea how to go about it. For clothing, Auroville has developed the Nandini system: you donate a certain amount each month, and in return you can take, within certain limits, whatever your requirement is. It should be possible to create a place where Aurovilians would get their basic food requirements in the same way."

Carel



# Top-class dental lab becomes independent

The Auroville dental laboratory has moved into new premises and takes up work all over India

October 31st 2002 was a special day for a small team of Aurovilians – Nicola, Pierre, Grazi, Marc and Namgyal. It was the day that the Auroville Dental Laboratory officially opened its doors as an independent unit in its new home at the Aurelec premises. Besides the rain gods who enthusiastically showered their blessings that

Nicola is a dental technician who was trained in Italy, and moved to Auroville 12 years ago. He was responsible for the creation of the Auroville Dental Laboratory in 1990. "I was visiting Auroville on a holiday from Italy. By chance I got to meet a dentist here. He expressed a need in the community for a dental technician. It was an exciting proposition; I

dental lab unit that is separate from the Auroville Dental Centre."

What was the reason for this shift? "We have been feeling the need to focus more intently on our profession which is very different from that of the dentist's," Nicola explains. "A place was available at Aurelec very close to the Auroville Dental Centre. The conditions were just right.

Jacques supported our decision to move, and gave us all the equipment that was part of the Auroville Dental Centre. Now we have the opportunity to change the set-up as well as the space as optimally as we envision. This will bring a new energy to the unit."

Did this move prove expensive? "To install a dental lab, a lot of investment is needed," agrees Nicola. "This is because it is technology intensive. We have been helped by a loan from the Central Fund that we have to pay back monthly. Our ultimate aim is to be self-sustainable.

"A lot of equipment is needed, and we have to keep up with the latest technology to provide the best possible services that we can. While our primary customers will be Aurovilians and the villagers who are patients of the AV Dental Centre, we will also be opening our services to the outside market."

Nicola shows me some of the equipment that has been bought recently for the laboratory. "Here is a micromotor from Austria. It is cutting-edge technology used for sculpting and grinding ceramic surfaces." Nicola hands me a device that is about 15 cms long. The handle is ergonomically designed, and the grip feels very comfortable. He turns on the machine and the tip whirs silently. I can hardly feel any vibrations. He turns it off and puts it back gently. "It costs approximately two motorbikes." I gasp. "We have four such devices," he adds.

I gingerly ask about the costs of dental work at their unit, and how affordable it is. Nicola nods as if he expected that question, "When Aurovilians go to the dental centre, they get charged. If they are not able to pay by themselves, they are supported by the Central Fund, which has a budget for this."

Since 1998, Nicola has been a

consultant to certain Italian and German companies in India. They have been sponsoring him to attend dental conferences within India, and also provided opportunities for offering workshops to the dental community. This has provided him with valuable people contacts, and given him a unique perspective and an edge over his peers.

Nicola has a vision of providing the products and services of the Auroville dental lab to middle and higher range dentists in big cities like Chennai and Mumbai. "These days, there are more and more patients who are willing to pay for quality work. Since we can confidently say that we are amongst the top dental laboratories in Southern India, I am certain that we will find dentists with whom we can work."

"In India, the market is generally not concerned with quality but is focused on being cheap and quick. Our approach is different. We propose a certain quality on par with the standards set in the west. We import almost all of our material, including new generation composites with which we make ceramic crowns and bridges." Nicola pauses to show me what he is talking about. He opens a cupboard that is full of small plastic vials arranged neatly in rows. Each vial contains different shades of bio-compatible ceramic material in powder form that approximate the variations in teeth colour. They form the raw material for building crowns.

Nicola is called over by Namgyal who is sculpting a ceramic tooth filling. I watch them exchanging ideas intensely; then Nicola takes the hand tool and demonstrates how the filling has to be surfaced. I am curious about how long it will last. "Teeth which have received dental care can last for many years, even up to 15-20 years. Much depends on how it is taken care of by the customer. Tooth work can never be guaranteed. But at our unit, we are ready to correct any problem that may develop within 1 year.

What future visions do Nicola and his team have for the unit? Our first concern is to establish a high repute for our laboratory. We also see this

lab as a state-of-the-art training centre in dental technology, both for technicians and dentists. One of my personal dreams is to train an Aurovillian in this work. Is anyone listening?

One has to remember that this work is both an art form as well as a science. Many of us at the lab visit Paris annually to get exposed to the latest developments in the field. We do feel that we should share this knowledge with the dental community in India so that everyone can benefit, especially the customers. We plan to move in this direction in the future, and this of course will mean additional work.

We are trying to do our work with a lot of care and with professional integrity. This is often not often recognised by Aurovilians. Even now it is hard to make people understand what is implied by our work and the effort behind it. He pauses as if he needs to clearly express what he feels inside. Going only for cheap things is not a good idea, especially when something really has a lot of importance to your health and figures prominently in your body.

If there is one message I absolutely want to share, it would be this:

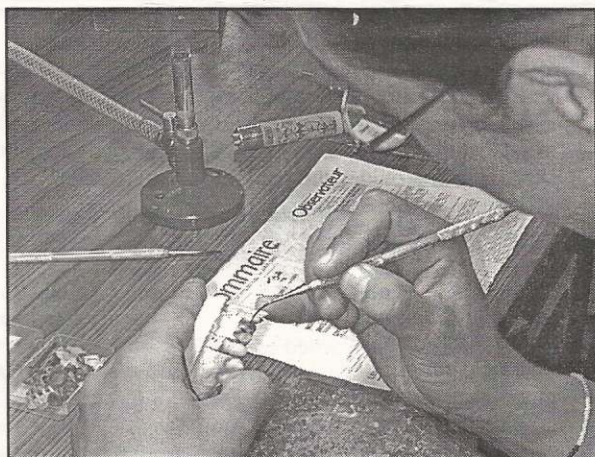


From left to right: Namgyal, Nicola and Pierre

day, a smattering of Aurovilians braved the torrential downpours to participate in celebrating its renewed beginnings. I met Nicola a few days later for the complete story...

Nicola beams at me as I arrive punctually that afternoon. We enter a large room painted white. It is airy and full of light. The quietness of the space strikes me when I notice two people intently at work. They are Pierre and Namgyal.

The place looks like an unusual mix of an art studio and a chemistry lab. Posters of crowns and bridges, perfect specimens from the prosthetic world are prominently displayed. Workbenches with all kinds of gadgets and tools, a pigeon-hole cupboard holding dental casts with name tags identifying the mouths they belong to, a baking oven, a furnace, mortars and pestles, glass tubes, and so much more – my eyes can hardly take it all in...



Namgyal works painstakingly on a set of dentures

explains. "Later it became part of the Auroville Dental Centre. There we were working with Jacques and Suryagandhi. Now we have created a



Nicola displaying a palette of different teeth colours

Look, there are people here who can do this kind of work in a certain way. So let us support them, and not go to Pondy anymore. Our doors are open for any Aurovillian to visit us at any time. We would love to have Aurovilians stop by, understand the environment we work in, examine our products, and see what we are doing, invites Nicola heartily.

Of course our best advertisement is our patients who are happy, who can bite easily and have the most perfect of smiles!

Priya Sundaravalli

## MATRIMANDIR

# Ray of light

A new heliostat will soon be in place on top of Matrimandir.

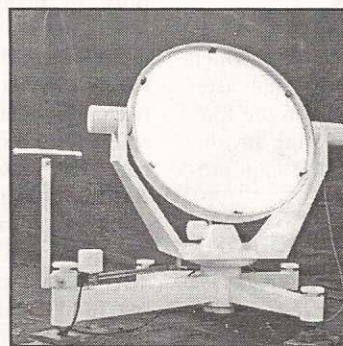
When you enter the chamber of the Matrimandir, the first thing one notices is the large crystal sphere, supported by a four golden symbols of Sri Aurobindo in upright position. The next thing one notices during the day is the beam of sunlight striking this crystal globe. In describing Her vision of the chamber, Mother in 1970 indicated: The important thing is the play of the sun on the center. Because it becomes a symbol – the symbol of future realization. This sunlight is focused on the crystal via a heliostat on top of the building.

In order to reach the heliostat, you have to first enter the building the usual way. Once you reach the spot where you enter the chamber, you take a tiny spiral staircase that leads up above the chamber vestibule and then a few flights of concrete steps, some wooden steps and a sloped wooden ramp lead up to a small round opening in the concrete rib. Finally you have to hop through this hole between the two halves of the massive concrete ribs, go up one more flight of stairs and then you are on the roof, next to the heliostat.

From this point you get the best view of the whole of

Auroville and its surroundings. A sea of green wherever you eyes wander, with the blue green hue of the Bay of Bengal on your east. Some of the larger buildings like the Solar Kitchen, the Bharat Nivas auditorium, some apartment buildings stick out of the trees, you can see windmills, and further away the hills near the holy town of Thiruvanamalai.

The heliostat consists of four mirrors. One of them rotates, driven by a computer program, to follow the sun. The other three are stationary and direct the reflected sunray down through a plexiglass-covered opening exactly in the center of the top of Matrimandir. Just below the plexiglass is a large lens that concentrates the ray onto the globe, 15 meter below, in the chamber. At the level of the lens, the ray is 45 cm wide. As it descends to the globe it converges due to the effect of the lens. When it touches the crystal globe, the ray is just 20cm wide,



The rotating mirror of the new heliostat

Looking down from the roof, one can check whether the ray is exactly in the center of the globe, or out of focus. The adjustment needed in the direction of the ray is tiny but important. One of the three stationary mirrors is free-standing and a heavy gust of wind can throw it off its alignment, or it could conceivably be moved by one of the peacocks that sometimes come up at dusk to sleep on top of the Matrimandir.

The present heliostat prototype, which has been doing its job for over ten years now, is getting old. A new and sturdier heliostat is ready to be mounted, which will result in a different look. At present there are eight openings in the ceiling of the chamber: four for the artificial lights that shine on the globe when there is no sunlight, and four to let the cool air from the air-conditioning system.

The new system will do away with all those openings. It is planned to project the spotlight on cloudy days and at night through the central opening itself to simulate the ray more accurately. Also the air-conditioning ducts will be modified so that the cool air will come through the central hole as well. All this will need a few months of work, meaning that the chamber will have to be closed to visitors for some time.

John Harper and Tineke



# On dark streets with solar

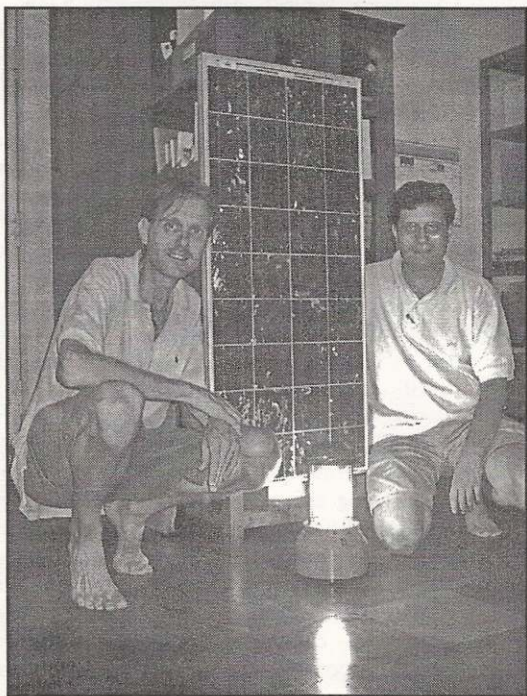
Hemant and Jos, the managers of AuroRE, a unit responsible for promoting renewable energy applications within and outside Auroville, talk about their new projects

"It's dynamics. We learn what works in Auroville, we take it out to other parts of India where we learn new lessons which, in turn, help us improve what we are doing here." Hemant enjoys talking systems. He's also pretty nifty at setting them up: he's about the only person I know who understands the complex financial juggling involved in allowing Aurovilians and others to get their hands on solar pump sets at wildly discounted prices.

By 1995 about 150 of these sets had been installed in the community, about 150 kW worth of installed capacity. The next year, however, was a quiet one: both the demand and the subsidies dried up. Suddenly, Hemant had time on his hands. "Every day I came to the office just to metaphorically raise the flag in the morning and lower it again in the afternoon." The next major project was the Matrimandir Solar Plant, which was commissioned in 1997, but this was followed by another two year hiatus. "I really began to wonder," recalls Hemant, "if I shouldn't have been doing something else. However, I took the opportunity to search out creative solutions for financing solar developments, and this finally bore fruit."

The 'fruit' was a contract to set up the financial package for provid-

it would be a huge challenge. Apart from setting up an office and mastering the logistics of getting all the equipment sent to the right places,



Jos (left) and Hemant with a solar lighting set

we had to train five teams who, at the peak, had to install 7 systems a day. It also meant that Rishi, Arnab and myself, the project managers, had to work 12-13 hour days for three months without a break!" "We made plenty of mistakes," adds Hemant cheerfully, "because we had to design things on the hoof, at top speed. For example, our first design for the tracking mechanism had to be modified after some of the systems developed cracks during an exceptionally windy summer. We ended up replacing every single tracking

over five years, at a cost of 433 crore rupees (approximately \$86 million), thousands of home-lighting systems and solar lanterns will be distributed, and solar power plants, similar in size to that at Matrimandir, will be set up to provide electricity to remote villages.

"Fortunately," says Jos, "this time we were only responsible for the project coordination of part of the first phase, but this still involved supervising the installation of 8,700 home lighting kits – comprising a 37 Watt solar panel, battery, charge controller and two 11 Watt lights – and 6,000 solar lanterns. The latter went mainly to nomadic herdsmen while the home lighting sets were for houses in remote villages. What was unique about this scheme was that, unlike previous schemes, the government was not giving away the systems free. Instead, the end-user had to make an initial down payment and thereafter

pay a small fee every month. The funds collected pay for regular servicing by technicians as well as battery replacement after five years, something which previous government schemes had disastrously overlooked. A further innovation is that the money stays in the community: the local panchayats are responsible for collecting the fees."

"The best reward," says Jos, "was seeing the enormous impact these systems had on people. I went to inspect the installation in one house which had missed out on all the previous electrification schemes. A woman showed me the old wick lamp she had been using for years. Then she switched on her new light. She had tears in her eyes. She just couldn't believe how much light she had now! In fact, the local name for it is 'rangwang ot', or 'the anytime light'."

## The beach business

The Ladakh project was an energy service scheme. In other words, the end user hires an energy service rather than purchasing the equipment outright. "Similar schemes have been tried successfully in many other countries," points out Hemant, "and I'd been interested in the concept for years. Finally, after long talks with friends in the solar fraternity, it emerged that one local application could be to rent out solar lanterns." A friend suggested they begin in Chennai and offered his house for the incubation phase of the project. What made this even more interesting for Hemant and Jos was that this friend had helped some local slum children get an education and was looking around for something for them to do next. "It seemed perfect," says Hemant. "The project could fulfill two objectives at once, helping us break into the energy provider market while providing these boys with the next step in their careers." The operative word here is 'could'. "We were really on dark streets with this one," admits

Hemant, "we had no idea how it would turn out."

In the event, a niece of the Chennai sponsor took up the supervision of the project, and while the first two boys didn't stick it out, the next two came up trumps. "They're much better businessmen than us," says Jos admiringly. "They went to the vendors on the beach – who, as slum-dwellers, were part of the same 'family' – and offered to rent them solar lanterns for the same price as the vendors previously paid to hire out Petromax lanterns.



Transporting solar home lighting systems to the far reaches of Ladakh

Then they increased the price for weekends and holidays, the really busy times. They began with one lantern, now they're up to 65!"

The vendors pay a deposit, then rent the lanterns by the night. Originally the boys brought the lanterns to the vendors in the evening, then picked them up late at night, but now the vendors collect the lanterns from the house where they are charged up by solar panels during the day. AuroRE chooses and provides the technology – the lanterns, chargers and solar panels – and also provides a loan for part of the cost of the equipment (well-wishers have donated the rest).

"Everybody's learned a lot," says Hemant. "The beach environment is very hostile – all that sand and wind – but after some initial training the boys now do all the necessary servicing themselves. They're incredible! Meanwhile market forces are telling us which

thus giving them more independence."

AuroRE plans to expand the scheme in Chennai. They are also considering introducing it to Pondicherry street vendors. While Hemant can hardly contain his enthusiasm it takes a lot to make an economist completely lose his head. "The key component in all this is the battery," he points out. "The batteries in the lights are supposed to last five years but we just don't know how they will perform. If they give out in one and a half

years, we're definitely making a loss. If they last three years, we're ahead. And if they hold out for four years we're going to start issuing shares in this enterprise to all Aurovilians!"

As for the future...Hemant takes a deep breath and launches out while Jos leans forward, trying to look as if this isn't new to

him too. I see three areas which we'll be involved in. Firstly, product integration using advanced solar technologies: in other words, we'll identify the best components then put them together in an optimized system. We're already working on an improved solar rice cooker, solar lantern and solar home lighting kit. Secondly we want to focus much more upon providing renewable energy services, similar to the experiment in Chennai and particularly in the area of solar thermal applications. In the long run we may explore community solar cooking applications on the scale of our Solar Kitchen. Finally we need to consolidate our experience of project management, which is the activity which runs everything else that we're doing at present.

"Basically, we'd like to see our role as a catalytic agent, like the hub of a network. In this way we could remain small but we'd have



The boys who run the Chennai lighting scheme

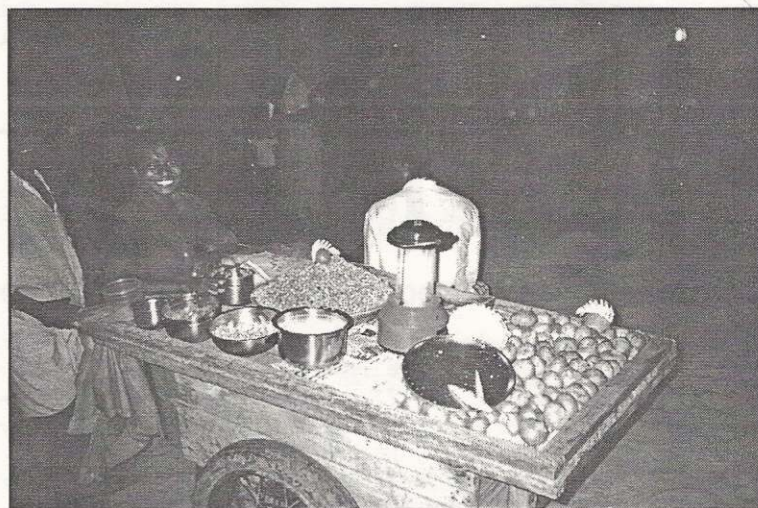
ing solar pump sets to farmers in the Punjab and other states: AuroRE was also responsible for the installation and servicing. "There were times when I thought we'd bitten off more than we could chew. We had to install 219 pump sets in 3 months over a huge area – from a border village in Punjab to a place in West Bengal, from Kanyakumari on the southern tip of India to the northernmost village in Gujarat – and we were beginning from scratch: we had no office up there, no technicians, no nothing! Fortunately at that moment Jos came along."

Jos has a degree in Renewable Energy technologies and project management experience in both Africa and India. "I knew we could do it," says Jos, "but I also realized

mechanism, even the ones which had not developed problems: after all, our reputation was on the line. But we learned something invaluable – how to do far-flung projects."

## Anytime light in Ladakh

This was just as well because the next one was even further flung: in remote and beautiful Ladakh. This region is no stranger to solar projects as the high altitudes offer ideal conditions – low ambient temperatures and more sunny days per year than any other part of India – and the huge distances and widely dispersed population makes the generation of electricity by conventional means unviable. Yet even by Ladakh's standards this is to be a huge project:



Solar smiles on Chennai beach

is the best lantern – our initial design was rejected by the vendors because it didn't give enough light, so we had to come up with a bigger one. It also emerged that the solar lanterns are 'gender-positive': unlike the Petromax lanterns, our lanterns can easily be lit by ladies,

the freedom to develop techniques and applications which would then spread through a network of suppliers, entrepreneurs, NGOs etc. into India as a whole."

Why stop at India? I'm about to ask. But my tape has run out...

Alan



# Real estate developers in the greenbelt area again

A matching program has been developed to raise money to purchase a 50-acre piece of land in the greenbelt which was recently bought by real-estate developers

In March 2000 an article in Auroville Today reported on the activities of real estate developers in the greenbelt area. A real estate agent from Pondicherry had plans to develop a 50 acre plot in the Green Belt into a huge private housing colony. Fortunately, thanks to the timely support from friends and well-wishers, Auroville was able to purchase that plot. Today, the Auroville Botanical Garden – a project to set up a research, training, outreach and demonstration centre for botanical and ecological studies – is transforming the plot into a lush, green area.

Meanwhile, another emergency situation has developed close to the edge of Auroville's city limit. Another 50-acre plot – one of the last few big pieces of land in the planned Auroville Green Belt – has fallen into the hands of a real estate agent. The plot is situated next to the recently started Botanical Garden close to the edge of the Auroville city limit. In fact, this plot was planned for extending the Botanical Garden and hosting an environmental outreach centre and various ecological research facilities.

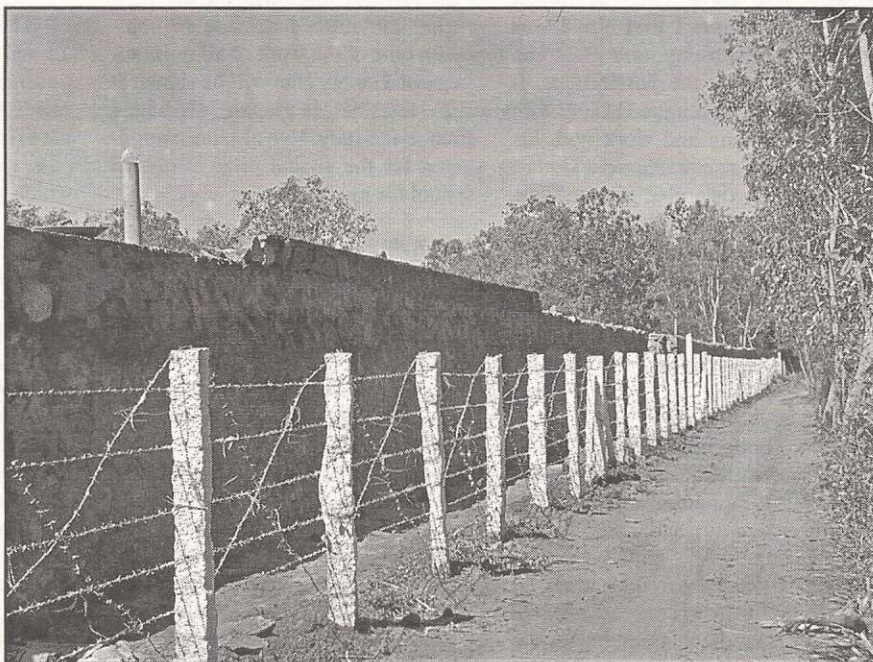
This time, the 50-acre plot has not only been fenced with barbed wire. Almost all trees, many of which were planted by Auroville pioneers in the early days, were felled, and all vegetation burned. A 3-metre high, grey compound wall has been erected just behind the barbed wire, sealing off the whole area from the green surroundings. The plot was offered to Auroville for purchase, but Auroville lacked the funds: Rs.1.75 crore or US\$ 375,000. Most other plots in the Green Belt are smaller, so huge

chunks of land are environmentally and strategically very critical. If Auroville can buy this land, it will not only consolidate its environmental work, but also put a major brake on potential real estate development in this sensitive area.

Prompted by Auroville's dire land situation, Auroville Land Fund, Auroville International USA and two donors have joined hands in a matching programme designed to raise over US \$34,000 for the 'Land for Auroville' cause. It works as follows:

◆Two donors have pledged up to a total of \$17,000 (Rs.7,50,00) to the Land Fund, provided we can raise another \$7,000 by December 31, 2002.

◆In order to allow as many people as possible to participate, the donors are matching only the first \$100 of your donation.



The 50-acre plot in the in the greenbelt that has been being slashed, burned, fenced and walled off by a real estate developer

◆If you donate \$100 (or more) to the Auroville Land Fund via AVI USA before December 31, \$100 will be added to your donation.

Although donations below \$100 are not eligible for a match, all donations are welcome. And neither have

they to be limited to only \$100. At this point, every dollar counts to save the land for Auroville!

Please note that all donations under this matching fund have to be channeled through Auroville International USA, P.O. Box 877, Santa Cruz, CA 95061, U.S.A. Phone: (1).831.425.5620, email: info@aviusa.org

For more information, please visit our website at [www.auroville.org/index/land.htm](http://www.auroville.org/index/land.htm) or AVI USA's website at [www.aviusa.org](http://www.aviusa.org)

AV Land Fund

## Were you there?

"I remember, but no, it can't have been..." In our February issue we are publishing first-hand accounts of Auroville's inauguration ceremony on 28th February, 1968. If you were there, we invite you to send us your memories – however fallible – by 1st January, 2003.

## ORGANISATION

# Choosing a new Auroville Council

The previous Working Committee had their mandate extended twice during the last two months as the community wrestled with the problem of how to select a new one. Finally the new Resource Group formulated a proposal which received general support. Around fifty nominees from the Residents Assembly would meet and choose from among themselves a fifteen member Auroville Council, which would include the seven-member Working Committee. The idea is that the Council would take up the tasks both of the old Executive Council (which was responsible for internal matters) as well as those external responsibilities specified in the Auroville Foundation Act.

The nominees were to be selected by community-wide ballot. Each Aurovilian was invited to select up to six names, write them on a ballot form and hand them in at a designated voting place. The process was overseen by a Selection Team which ensured that each ballot submitted was signed for (as the selection was secret, the forms themselves were not signed).

In all, 376 ballots were cast (about 30% of the adult population) and the top 48 nominees met to decide upon the membership of the new Council. As happened on the previous occasion, each nominee was asked to specify if he or she was making themselves available for the new Council and in what capacity, and then all the nominees held a secret ballot to ascertain which of those who had offered themselves

had the most support. The names were then published in the Auroville News.

The process, as always, was not without hitches. The balloting procedure turned out not to be as secure as planned for there was at least one accusation of vote-rigging. There was also a sense that a selection held under the shadow of the Matrimandir dispute

was quite highly politicized. Disagreements also surfaced during the final selection by the nominees when certain Aurovilians, convinced they had received a mandate from the community to be on the new Council, failed to receive sufficient support from the rest of the selection group.

Is this the best way to choose those

who will take up very important community tasks? Many doubt that it is. At any rate, we have two years to come up with something better (assuming that the new WC/AVC doesn't collapse prematurely). Hopefully, next time we'll get it right. Or righter.

Alan

## What is consensus?

The attempts to manifest a new internal organisation for Auroville have all one aspect in common: the willingness to solve disputes and reach policy decisions by consensus.

But what is consensus? A search on websites resulted in the following interesting definition from the website of the Co-Intelligence Institute CII home // CIPolitics home. While the aim is far-fetched, it seems to be worthy of Auroville.

From a co-intelligence perspective, consensus means more than merely broad agreement. In fact, when we're aiming for true consensus we're less concerned about generating agreement than generating wise solutions that take into account all the relevant needs and perspectives. Once we have taken into account the full picture, agreement usually follows naturally – and it's not a reluctant, conditional agreement. When we all shape the outcome, we

become invested in its success. Implementation is much smoother than when a majority has ruled and left an upset minority to impede progress.

Those intent on agreement-by-any-means use force, compromise, tangential deal-making and other strategies to get agreement. This may bring more parties onto their bandwagon, but it seldom results in a truly wise agreement. From the co-intelligence perspective, this sort of agreement-brokering is almost like cheating on a test to get a high score, rather than learning the material well enough that you understand it, so that passing the test is a natural – and secondary – outcome. Agreement-brokering may be necessary in some very difficult circumstances, but it isn't true consensus and shouldn't be accepted as standard practice.

When people compete for individual gain instead of cooperating for mutual or collective gain, they use their

brilliance to undermine each other, thus reducing their collective intelligence. True consensus process taps into the creativity, insights, experience, and perspectives of all the parties involved. Significantly, consensus process treats the differences between people not as problems, but as stimulants to deeper inquiry and greater wisdom.

While consensus process is most directly applicable to groups of up to several dozen people, it has been expanded to groups of thousands by dividing people into smaller groups who send spokespeople to a spokes-council. Both the smaller groups and the spokes-council are run by consensus, and issues go back and forth between the two levels until full agreement is reached. An innovation called the Wisdom Council allows a large population (a community or country) to also get the benefits of consensus process.

## In brief

### Deepavali

India's national Festival of Light (November 3rd) was this year celebrated at Atithi Griha guesthouse of Bharat Nivas. Fireworks and food delighted the hundreds present, including innumerable wide-eyed kiddies.

### Electricity supply

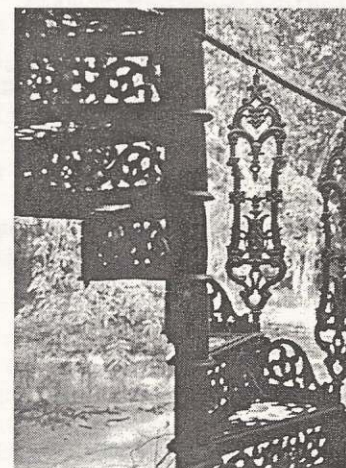
In order to secure a continuous 3-phase electricity connection in future, Auroville will have to purchase its own feeder for an amount of Rs 35 lakhs (US\$ 73,000). It is as yet unclear how this amount is going to be financed.

### New Phone numbers

All Auroville telephone numbers have changed. A 2 has been added before the existing number.

### Exhibitions

Aurovici held a stunning photography exhibition in Pitanga, displaying photos from Auroville, South India, Switzerland and England.



### Education by Design

Groups of teachers from 5 different Auroville schools (Transition, Deepanam, Centre for Further Learning, Udavi and New Creation) have participated in an intensive graduate course on an educational model called Education By Design given by Brenda from the Antioch University Graduate School in New Hampshire, USA. The focus in the EBD model is a shift from teacher-centred to student-centred education where the students, in a collaborative community environment, learn by doing and experiencing rather than being 'taught'.

### Central Fund deficits continue

The Economy Group announced that, generous contributions from individuals notwithstanding, the deficits of the Central Fund have continued so that there was insufficient income to cover the regular budgets for November 2002.

### Detailing the Master Plan

The Auroville Master Plan is a so-called Perspective Plan which is to be followed and strengthened by a 'Detailed Development Plan' which in turn will be the basis for Annual Plans. The Interim Development Council has initiated community interaction to come to the Detailed Development Plan consisting of two community sessions a month on aspects of town planning such as roads, water and energy, mobility and solid waste and urban environment.

### Website AVI The Netherlands

With effect from November 21st, the Dutch translation of the Auroville website and information about Auroville International The Netherlands is accessible on <http://www.auroville-international.org/avinl>.



# From New to Dude: Mirao in Holland

Mirao was born to German parents and brought up in Auroville. For the past four years he's been studying at an art school in Groningen, Holland. Recently he returned to Auroville for a visit.

**Auroville Today: The last I heard you were living in a houseboat...**

**Mirao:** That was at the beginning of my course. It was winter, the temperature went down to minus 10 degrees, and I was living in a small cabin on this old boat. I had a little wood-burning stove which I lit as soon as I came in every evening. Around two o'clock in the morning it would go out and by the time I got up the blankets would be, well, not very supple! I'd dress quickly, leap on my bike and pedal like mad for half an hour to get to college. I'd arrive smelling of sweat and smoke and then everybody would look at me like, 'Who is this guy from India?'

**You felt different from the others?**

The first few months were tough, everything was new, including the language, so, yes, I felt a bit apart at the beginning. I didn't feel German or Indian – when you grow up in Auroville you don't think of yourself in terms of nationality – but coming from Auroville I had these Aurovilian tendencies.

**Such as?**

Little things. Like a certain sense of humour, and the kinds of things you talk about. In Auroville we talk about who got bitten by the snake last night. In Holland it was all about TV programmes and films, the whole city culture thing.

**What led you to Groningen?**

I remember when I was 12, Suzie asked my class to write about what we'd like to do in the future, and I wrote that I wanted to paint like a real artist. I started working with Johnny, doing wood sculpture. Later, when Rajan (a traditional craftsman) came, I learned bronze-casting from him.

One day Detlef, a German glass master who was helping the

Matrimandir team with the disks, gave a talk about glass at Bharat Nivas. Afterwards I told him I was interested in working with glass and asked him about the possibilities. It ended by him inviting me to stay with him in Germany and work with his company. He also organized a kind of tour for me to visit other glass masters in Europe – they all know each other, it's like a family – and Groningen was my first stop. I was going to learn about stained glass there.

**But you ended up applying for art college.**

It was quite spontaneous. I didn't have the right educational qualifications, but I submitted a portfolio of my Auroville work and they accepted me, which I think is quite unusual. I decided I wanted to concentrate on illustration, which is part of a course in which you also learn about media and graphic design. In fact, when I made my cartoons I was using all three techniques.

**Why cartoons?**

In my third year I was learning an art computer programme called Flash. I decided to explore its possibilities, so I thought I'd try making this little cartoon film. I painted scenes, then collaged and overlaid them. Then, using Flash, I moved the overlays about to create the sense of movement. I also made up a rap song to go with it. I called it D-J Cool and people really liked it, they found it funny.

In my final year I decided to make another humorous film using a similar technique. It was called Dude the Hero. It's only six minutes long, but there was so much work involved it took me almost six months to complete.

**And it won a prize.**

Not exactly. It was nominated, along with twelve others from all over

Holland, for the Dutch Academic Film Prize. It didn't win, but the organizing committee has made a compilation tape of the work of all the nominees and so my film will be shown at film festivals in Japan, Germany, France and Italy. I've also been nominated for the annual prize at my art school for my illustration work.

**Has living in India influenced your style?**

I think I'm much more influenced by the West than by India in my recent work, although people tell me they still see the Indian tropical influence, particularly in my use of bright colours. Actually it's interesting that the Indian appreciation of art is quite different from that in the West. If you look at posters in India you find a lot of vivid colours, and an aesthetic order which would probably seem chaotic to a western graphic designer. At the same time, there is such a large diversity of art, formal and informal, in India that it is difficult to define what is really Indian.

**Do you notice other differences?**

In India I notice a certain tolerance, people accept things the way they are, whereas in the West everything has to work well. If it doesn't people find it real scary.

**Did you begin to think about things differently over there, do you feel that you discovered aspects of yourself that wouldn't necessarily have been developed in Auroville?**

Definitely. Being able to compare the two societies made me more aware of their differences. Also, as part of the communication design course, we also did classes in philosophy and psychology, so I was encouraged to think about who I am, and the relationship of art to society and to myself.

**What is that relationship?**

The way I see it, culture changes art and art changes culture: the relationship is always interactive. In other words, the artist may take things from the existing culture, but then he or she puts them together in a new way which gives that culture a new perspective to work with. Of course, the culture may not notice what the artist has done. The artist may have created something autonomous, something which exists for the artist alone, a means of self-exploration rather than communication. But in this process he's extended his boundaries, and because of this he can then make something new and worthwhile which, in turn, may influence society....

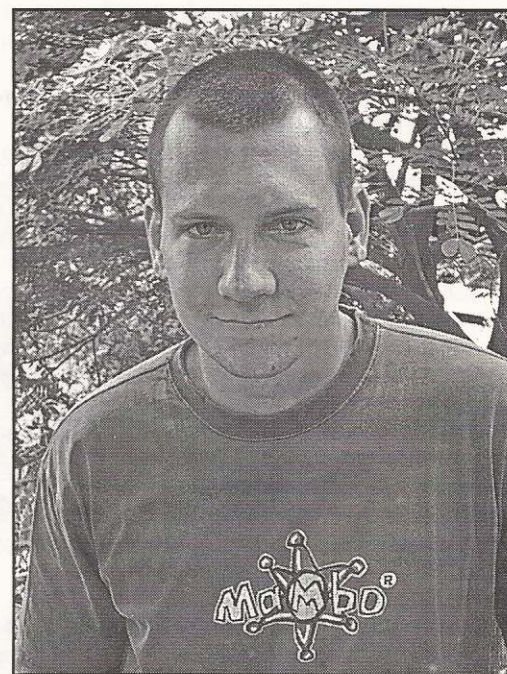
**What's it like to be back in Auroville?**

Auroville is still a very important part of me and it's good fun seeing many people again although, when I'd been over there for some time, I totally got into that way of life. So now it's like I'm recollecting another part of myself and reflecting upon how long I want to continue to live in Europe.

I've been looking around a bit since I returned, seeing what people are busy with, what would be the opportunities for me. There's plenty here, but I think for now if I don't go back at least for some time I'll miss a chance to learn something, something which I can later apply here. So I'll try to find a job which is creative – not just boring lay-out – and see what I can learn. Also I'd like to travel more....

**Do you find the art scene in Auroville pretty tame in comparison with Holland?**

Not really. Actually I think it's quite advanced...whatever that means! It's also a society where art can attack taboos and get away with it more easily.



Mirao

ly. The problem is the scene is small, whereas at an art school you have 800 students busy doing it, and there are international exchange programmes and lots of different influences which you can reflect upon and absorb into your own creativity. In a place like Auroville where there are fewer artists, fewer influences, it's more difficult for the artists to define what is better and what not.

But India! In India the traditional art scene with modern influences is incredible. I'd really like to learn more....

Alan

## ENVIRONMENT



## Monsoon rains still insufficient

Apart from two days of hefty rains in late October, so far the rain gods have been parsimonious. The two days of rain were sufficient, nevertheless, to fill all canyons. "This is the happiest day of my life," exclaimed dam builder Kireet, inspecting all his dams to see that for the first time ever they all were functioning to expectations, preventing run-off and securing the inflow of huge amounts of water into the underground.

In the picture right: happy boys from Bommopalayam village enjoy themselves in the swimming pool of Utility canyon. Left: canyon filled to the brim.

### Subscription information

- ◆ One year subscription rate: India Rs. 250; other countries Can \$51, € 37, US \$38, UK £25.
- ◆ Two year subscription rate: India Rs. 450; other countries Can \$92, € 67, US \$68, UK £45.

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### There are two ways to subscribe

- ◆ Send your contribution directly to Auroville Today, Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India. Cheques sent directly to Auroville Today should be made payable to Auroville Fund, specifying: 'Contribution for Auroville Today'. Personal cheques are preferred to bank cheques. Please do not send postal money orders or cash.
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- ◆ U.S.A (2): Auroville Information Office, PO Box 676, Woodstock NY 12498, email: avinfo@aol.com, tel: (1) 845.679.5358, fax: 5853

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