

# Auroville Today

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Auroville's monthly news magazine since 1988

As we approach the 40th anniversary of Auroville's inauguration, Aurovilians differ over how to mark it. Some welcome the planned influx of VVIPs, others feel it would be more appropriate to use the day to quietly celebrate Mother's great gift to the world and to acknowledge those who have devoted so much of their lives to this project.

Whatever the response, it's clear that this is an opportunity for us to take stock: to look at where we have come from, to see what we have achieved and where we have stumbled, and to identify the main opportunities and challenges confronting us.

We set the ball rolling by asking long-term Aurovilians to range over the history of the past forty years and to talk about what inspires them – and concerns them – today. We also provide a brief 'shopping list' of some of Auroville's major achievements on the material and social level, not forgetting, of course, that the crucial changes we are asked to make are inner rather than outer.

These articles are illustrated with photos from the early days of Auroville.

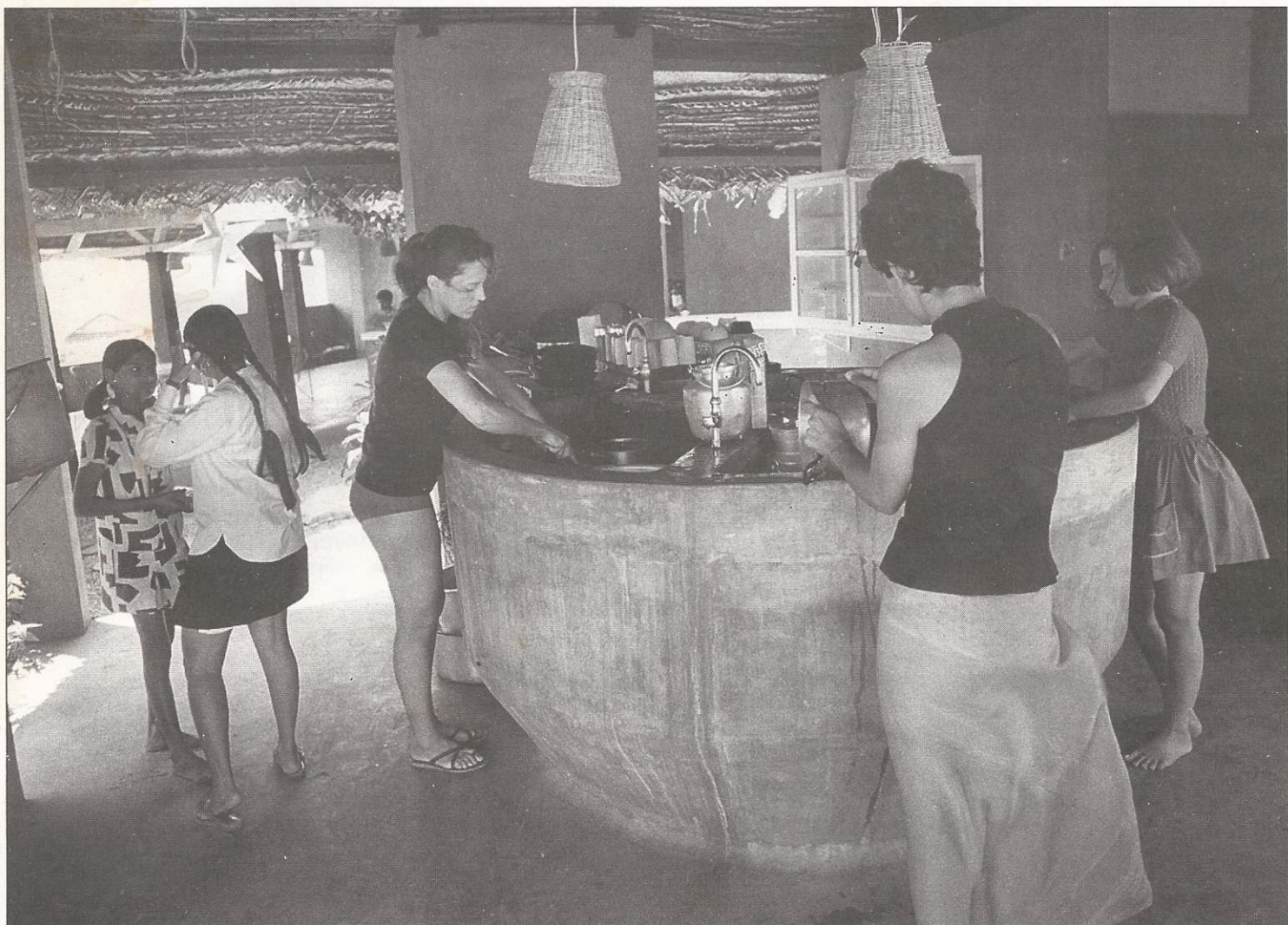


PHOTO DOMINIQUE DARR

Aspiration community kitchen (circa: 1970-1971)

## "There's an aspiration for something different"

Chali was born in the U.S., came to Auroville in 1969 and grew up here. She is one of the current coordinators of Future School. Shraddhavan came in the very early days and presently helps focalize activities at Savitri Bhavan. Shankar was born in a neighbouring village, was connected with Auroville for many years and became an Aurovillian in 1994. He is the headmaster of New Creation School. They talk about what it is about the Auroville of today that inspires them.

**Shankar:** Compared to the outside world there is more depth here, a different perspective. Here people try to do things in a different way. It's the whole energy of the place around here, the Auroville vibe. Here we can have a meeting in which people disagree but at the end someone will say, 'But we still

love each other'. That's what I call the inspirational fibre of this place.

**Alan:** The glue?

**Shankar:** Yes, that's right.

**Shraddhavan:** What inspires me is the fact that Auroville still exists. I can look back over 37 years and the predominant feeling I have is gratitude. Gratitude that I could be here, that I'm still here. And then to see people really working hard, doing their best. There's definitely always been this striving dynamism. Even during the worst times, when you would think nobody would have the faith to invest anything, still people were coming and giving all their money and building houses and buying land and trying to develop things. It's some kind of miracle, really.

**Bindu:** Is Auroville different now from the Auroville of 30 or 40 years ago?

**Shraddhavan:** I think it's definitely the same but we are different. We have grown, we have changed.

**Chali:** Many things inspire me in Auroville – where to start! Even though I was only a child then, I remember the energy of those early days and I think that energy is still here. And the ideals – the Dream, the Charter – they are very present for me. Not in the sense that I have big posters on my walls at home or anything like that, but they're there. I've also seen my parents giving up everything to come here. They had this faith, this belief, which was quite incredible. So that's another source of inspiration for me.

People ask me, 'Why do you stay here? You had your life in the United

States.' Yes, I did for a while and I was glad to have had that experience. And yes, life was good, but it was just...going along. And here, it's all the time highs and lows. There are moments where I feel like superwoman and I can do everything, and then there are moments I feel like crawling into a cave and hiding from everything because it's just too, too intense. But this intensity is actually part of what I love about being here.

Sometimes these experiences can push me down pretty far. Twice in the past twelve years I got to a point where I had to say, "What am I doing here? I'm leaving. I can't do this any more." But I think there's also the knowledge in me that I won't stay down there at that low point. That's the thing: something so far has always just kept me hanging on just long enough to come back out of that. And even the worst moments didn't ever shake my faith in Auroville.

Another source of inspiration is that there are lots of opportunities here. People come with certain work experiences that can be applied in the community, but there is also the space to explore other aptitudes and interests that may contribute to the growth of both the individual and Auroville.

**Shraddhavan:** That's the freedom aspect. There's an open space here. Something new can always happen; you can try things.

**Chali:** And you have this freedom to follow the signs, to be open to a different kind of direction or guidance. You know, when I started the Center for Further Learning with Luc it just kind of fell in my lap. So I said, 'OK, why not? I'll do it for a while

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## The President visits Auroville



The President of India Smt. Pratibha Patil (centre) flanked by Dr. (Tmt.) Poongothai, Minister for Social Welfare, Government of Tamil Nadu (left) and Thiru. N. Rangasamy, Chief Minister of Pondicherry (right).

The President of India, Smt. Pratibha Devisingh Patil, visited Auroville on December 22nd. Accompanied by the Lt. Governor and Chief Minister of Pondicherry and the Minister for Social Welfare of the Government of Tamil Nadu, Mrs. Patil visited the 'Progress' petal meditation chamber and then went up to the Inner Chamber, where she meditated for some time. On leaving, the President issued the following message:

*"Auroville is the atom which has the inherent power of filling the world with humanity, peace, progress, tolerance and harmony. It gives a chance to explore by the coming together of the right thinking people of different cultures all around the world."*

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*See KR*



# Celebrating 40 years

The universal township project of Auroville was started on 28th February 1968, some 40 years ago. What has Auroville achieved since then? What has it got to show for its 40 years of existence? The following is an ultra-brief summary of some noteworthy features and achievements on the external level.

## LAND AND INFRASTRUCTURE

- \* A widely reforested landscape where previously there was hardly a tree to be seen.
- \* Over 2,000 acres of land held in trust for "humanity as a whole".
- \* Around 100 sub-settlements, with some 900 houses and apartments for Auroville's residents.
- \* The Matrimandir, with its Inner Chamber and 12 Petals, plus Amphitheatre and emerging gardens.
- \* A massive erosion control system of earth bunds and check-dams, plus water-conserving infrastructure.
- \* A Town Hall building and adjacent Multimedia Centre.
- \* Over 40 guest houses, plus student/youth hostels.
- \* A collective 'Solar Kitchen' able to provide up to 1,000 meals a day.
- \* Some 240 wells for water supply, with over 30 windmills for pumping water (the Auroville-designed and constructed AV55 is considered the most efficient in India).
- \* A Visitors Centre, with exhibition, video facilities, cafeteria, three boutiques displaying and selling Auroville products, and an Information Service providing leaflets, brochures and books on Auroville.
- \* The Bharat Nivas complex, with its Indian Cultural Centres, 850-seat Sri Aurobindo Auditorium, art gallery, guest house, restaurant, SAWCHU building and offices.
- \* The Savitri Bhavan complex.
- \* A Unity Pavilion, a Pavilion of Tibetan Culture, and various National Pavilions either nearing completion or under study, all in the International Zone.
- \* Three weather stations, plus 15 micro-stations maintained by Auroville in the surrounding villages.
- \* A Museum of Archaeology holding 2,000-year-old artifacts found in Auroville, plus a Seed Museum and collection of historical implements at Pitchandikulam.
- \* More than 25 natural wastewater treatment plants.
- \* Over 300 kW of electricity-generating photovoltaic panels, plus 250 solar water-heating collectors (some 150 houses are fully solar-powered). Also one of the biggest stand-alone solar photovoltaic power plants in south India, with 484 PV modules (total capacity 36.3 kW) producing approx 140 kWh of energy a day.
- \* Over 15 restaurants, cafeterias and snack bars.

## AGRICULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT

- \* 14 farms growing largely organic food.
- \* A 50-acre botanical garden with Environmental Education Centre.
- \* A herbarium with some 15,000 botanical specimens.
- \* A unit specializing in EM technology and its practical application around India.
- \* An Environmental Monitoring Laboratory doing tests on soil and water.
- \* Campaigns against local spraying of chemical poisons on cashew trees.

## OUTREACH

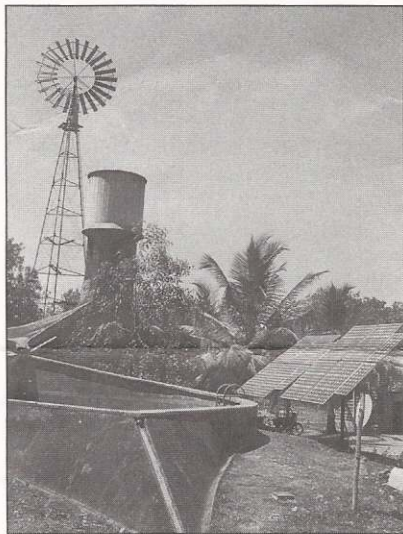
- \* Creation of employment opportunities for some 4,000-5,000 local people, some with associated training opportunities.
- \* An active Village Action Group working to improve the life of people in 60 local villages, specially the women and youth, and 2 village-based cultural centres – Mohanam and Thamarai – established by Auroville.
- \* Annual 'Sangamam' festivals for Auroville employees and their families.
- \* A monthly journal 'Auroville Today' (since 1988), and various other regular periodicals in English, Tamil or French.
- \* A web radio, [www.aurovillerradio.org](http://www.aurovillerradio.org), and an OutreachMedia team facilitating visits of filmmakers and journalists.
- \* A Coastal Development Centre working with

local authorities and various NGOs to improve the lives of the local population.

- \* Pitchandikulam Bio-Resource Centre, supporting traditional village healers and doing transformative educational and environmental work in the surrounding areas.
- \* Tsunami, Small Steps and Wellpaper projects, each providing employment opportunities for local people using 'waste' materials.
- \* Installation of affordable and reliable renewable energy products & services (in the form of solar panel systems) in 12 Indian States, benefiting 80,000 people.
- \* Programmes for the restoration of tropical dry evergreen forest in parts of south India, plus associated research work, seed collection and tree nurseries.
- \* Water Harvest's collaboration with local water authorities on coastal salination monitoring, groundwater recharge and restoration of water holding infrastructure.
- \* Contributions to external projects such as INTACH's work preserving Pondicherry's heritage buildings; the upgrading of Pondicherry's Bharathi Park; the installation of educational panels at toll gates on the East Coast Road; and planning and coordination work for creation of the 358-acre Adyar Creek Eco-Park in Chennai.
- \* Construction of a 570-tonne domed roof for the Dhyanalingam Temple near Coimbatore, and of a mosque in Saudi Arabia in just 7 weeks from scratch, both using earth-brick technology.
- \* Palmyra's programmes for improving the standard of education in local schools, supporting local sports & healthcare activities, reforestation and wasteland development.
- \* Major contributions to disaster relief following the 2001 earthquake in Gujarat, and the 2004 tsunami.

## RECOGNITION AND AWARDS

- \* The Government of India passed the Auroville Foundation Act in 1988, establishing a Governing Board, International Advisory Council and Residents Assembly for Auroville, and has subsequently approved a Master Plan for the township. It also contributes financially to the project.
- \* Statements of support from people such as Mrs. Indira Gandhi, HH the Dalai Lama, three Secretary Generals of UNESCO, the Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations, various Ministers of the Government of India, and other VVIPs.
- \* Recognition by and interaction with UNESCO (4 unanimous resolutions of support by its General Assembly), the European Commission, and various internationally important NGOs.
- \* Honoured by Presidential, Vice Presidential, Ministerial and other high-ranking visits from India's Central and State Governments, plus visits from Presidents, ambassadors and Consuls of other countries, UNESCO officials, and hundreds of VVIPs annually.
- \* Recipient of more than 20 awards to individuals or units for outstanding work, including the highly prestigious Ashden Award for work in the field of sustainable energy.
- \* Host to a number of international and national conferences and seminars, including the Asia Urbs City Networking conference in 2002.
- \* Seat of the worldwide UNESCO Chair in Earthen Architecture.
- \* Asian site of the Peace Table, one of 5 tables placed in different continents around the world.



Alternative Energy sources and rainwater harvesting tank in Vilkas

PHOTO AUROVILLE TODAY ARCHIVES



2007 Christmas celebrations at the Visitors Centre.

- \* Worldwide support from an association of Auroville International Centres and Liaison Offices in 23 countries.

## COMMERCE / BUSINESS ACTIVITIES

- \* Over 140 business / commercial units under 25 trusts, a number of them exporting to Europe, USA and other parts of the world.
- \* Units specializing in renewable energy systems, wind-electric generators, hybrid systems and data loggers.
- \* Two metal workshops, one doing major construction work for outside clients.
- \* A sound engineering unit doing high quality work for studios in Mumbai, Chennai and elsewhere, and a sound recording studio.
- \* A number of shops & boutiques in Auroville itself, plus others in nearby Pondicherry.
- \* Two bakeries; 2 units producing a range of high quality health food products; 2 bookbinding units; and 2 travel agents.

## EDUCATION AND CULTURE

- \* 5 schools, 2 kindergartens and 2 crèches for Auroville children, plus another 16 outreach schools overseen by Auroville.
- \* A main library with over 25,000 books in 8 languages, plus several smaller libraries, mostly specialized, including a children's library. Also Video/DVD and music lending libraries.
- \* A Language Laboratory for learning Indian and other languages.
- \* An Industrial School providing training for local village youth.
- \* Centres for Indian Culture and Tamil Heritage.
- \* Presence of various successful authors, musicians, singers, artists, poets, architects, sculptors and potters, some doing work for outside organizations and individuals.
- \* Pitanga Hall, offering facilities for dance, yoga, therapy, exhibitions and evening performances.
- \* Classes in a wide range of subjects, including health therapies, dance, yoga, martial arts and music, many accessible to non-Aurovilians.
- \* At least 9 sites where exhibitions are held on a regular or occasional basis.
- \* Three cinema screens showing films regularly, plus 3 stages for theatre.
- \* Five highly successful annual Festivals of Dance, typically featuring over 100 Aurovilian performers.
- \* Three choirs, two adult and one children's.
- \* Regular performances by several Auroville theatre groups.

## HEALTH AND SPORTS

- \* A main Health Centre, with laboratory, x-ray unit, ambulance and pharmacy, offering allopathic and homeopathic treatment, plus 7 village sub-centres.
- \* A wide range of alternative health therapies via Quiet Healing Centre, Pitanga and individual practitioners.
- \* Two Dental Clinics, plus 11 village-based sub-clinics overseen by Auroville.
- \* A project (Deepam) caring for disabled children from nearby villages.
- \* Coordinated programmes for sterilization, treatment and anti-rabies inoculation of stray dogs.
- \* A comprehensive school sports complex, plus wide range of facilities spread around the rest of Auroville, from football and cricket fields to badminton courts, running tracks and a 25m swimming pool.
- \* A Tai Chi Hall, and a fully equipped gymnasium with upstairs martial arts, dance and exercise floor.
- \* A horse riding school, plus 'Pony Farm' for younger riders (Auroville has also hosted Horse Tournaments under the auspices of the South India Equestrian Association).
- \* Successful basketball and kabaddi teams playing in outside tournaments.

## RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

- \* SAIIR's umbrella role as a government-supported institute for educational research.
- \* The 15m dia solar collector on the roof of the Solar Kitchen creating steam to cook food.
- \* Widespread use of Auroville-designed ferro-cement structures, specially roofing channels, biogas units, moveable latrines & panels, mostly by the Centre for Scientific Research (CSR).
- \* A widely acclaimed Building Centre specializing in alternative construction methods.
- \* Research activities in the fields of water purification, solar desalination, bio-fuels, body awareness education, establishment of a cashless economy, etc.
- \* Units developing electric cycles and other eco-friendly devices.

Extracted from a leaflet prepared by PRISMA



A Body Awareness class at Transition School (above); Yoga at Pitanga (top right).

PHOTO GIORGIO

PHOTOS AUROVILLE TODAY ARCHIVES



# Deepanam – Towards Free Progress

Tucked away behind the Matrimandir is Deepanam, a school moving towards Free Progress education.

“There are many things in Auroville that are born from necessity and this school is one of them,” says Rajeev, one of the team members at Deepanam School. He is here with two of his colleagues, Anand and Aikya, to talk about the school.

Started in the year 2001, Deepanam is a primary and middle school in Auroville for students from the age of 7 to 14 years. It seeks to follow the ideals of Integral Education as described by The Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

Last September, two months into the school year, Deepanam went through a major change that resulted in the formation of a new team.

## Crisis and new birth

Rajeev points out that over the past few years many experiments had been made in Deepanam introducing various educational methods – Montessori, Rebecca Wilde, Pestalozzi and so on – methods that most of parents were not familiar with, and which caused “quite a lot of confusion!” Many parents had pulled their children out of Deepanam in the middle of the year. So the team, disturbed by the lack of confidence shown by the (Aurovilian) parents in the school’s direction, called the parents for a meeting after the first term break to discuss the future of the school.

“They expressed doubts about the relevance of Deepanam’s existence,” says Rajeev. “And that took us all by surprise. Our immediate response was, why should we not continue? Even if we are a small group, we shouldn’t be discouraged.”

In a dramatic move, the parents offered to run the school themselves together with a few from the previous team who were willing to continue. And so began Deepanam’s rebirth last October with an optimistic team of adults and a dozen children.

Since the change, the biggest accomplishment, the three say, is the sense of being “one big family”. “We are very much together this time,” says Aikya. She is one of those who stayed on from the previous team. “And it’s a feeling shared by everyone – both the children and the adults.”

## The approach

To love to learn is the most precious gift that one can give to a child, to learn always and everywhere. “This statement by The Mother is our inspiration,” says Rajeev. “Our sole aim is to spark the enthusiasm for knowledge and progress in our children.”

Since October 2006, Deepanam School has been working with the aim of encouraging the children to be responsible for themselves. The programme emphasises free growth and natural development. “For example,” says Rajeev, “the class schedule of each group is made by teachers and children together! And progressively the children are encouraged to take up more initiative in making their own schedules.”

“In our schedule we try to be very flexible in order to accommodate as much as possible, the needs of the moment of children and teachers – while at the same time striving to keep a safe and structured atmosphere! We feel that children are happiest and most open to learning in such conditions.”

## The School now

Within a year, the school has doubled its strength: presently there are 24 students. Half of them are the children of Aurovilians or newcomers, and the rest are children of long-term guests or those



An outdoor class: learning about check-dams in the Auroville canyon in Utility.

in the process of becoming newcomers. The only request made of the latter is that they stay in Auroville for at least three months – “preferably over a school year for an effective experience and development of their child”.

The school ensures that its policy of being open to children of guests does not have an effect on the programme [see box] followed by its regular students. Structured activities are planned separately in the mornings, but in the afternoons, everyone comes together during the time of the ‘free choice’ creative or physical activities.

## Deepanam School Programme

Each school day (5-day week) at Deepanam begins with a ten-minute concentration when every one gathers together in a circle to listen to (fine) uplifting music. The children are divided into three groups depending on their age and fluency in English. The mornings are devoted to structured activities which include mathematics, local history and geography, and languages. The four languages mentioned by The Mother – English, French, Sanskrit, Tamil – are taught at all levels. The afternoons are set aside for ‘free choices’ where the children can pick from a variety of creative and physical activities. Some choices this year have included clay modelling, carpentry, painting, origami, singing, flute, Bharatanatyam dance, mime, capoeira, and computers. Sports, which is organized by the Dehashakti Sports programme, is mandatory for all children and takes place in the late afternoons.

All children are also involved in the daily life at school which includes arranging the classroom, cleaning up, working in the garden, cooking etc. A few teachers in the school have started to use the greater Auroville as a teaching and learning resource. Field trips are organized on a regular basis to various communities, farms and units. “It’s another way of developing the love and connection to Auroville and encouraging students to participate in The Mother’s dream project,” says Anand.

Going by the percentage of guests the school accommodates, Deepanam is indeed offering a valuable service to Auroville. “When families arrive in Auroville,” says Rajeev, “they find that their children first need to feel like part of this large ‘Auroville family’ – children need to connect to other children. And what better way than being in a school?”

“So at Deepanam we give priority for those guests who are seeking to explore the possibilities of settling in Auroville and so try to make their introduction to Auroville more welcoming.”

“Not all Auroville schools welcome short-term students,” adds Anand. But this, he says, is understandable because many of these visiting children have little or no knowledge of English. “This is something that can disrupt the regular programme of a larger school,” he continues. “It’s precisely because we’re small that we’re able to take these children in.” For non-English speakers, Deepanam offers intensive language sessions, often on a one-on-one basis for the first few months.

## Challenges

And the challenges so far? The main challenge, according to Rajeev, has been to try to convince the various groups in Auroville about Deepanam’s need to exist. “Also fund raising has been a big challenge as being a small school few want to support our activities,” he says. “But these are moments of real challenge. To keep going on with a positive attitude in spite of it all, is what gives us – teachers and parents the greatest joy.”

For Aikya, the concern is not so much about the challenge of convincing people, but “to grow steadily and in truth. And if people get interested, we can give them the information they want.”

## The Future

So will the new Deepanam survive? Aikya responds: “I remember a quote of Sri Aurobindo where he talks about faith – to have faith in your possibilities, and with aspiration and trust you will be led forward... But what we can definitely say is that we have a lot of joy in working and doing what we believe in.”

The new team is giving itself at least 5 years to discover “the lines of its own true nature”. “If one looks back at the history of this school,” adds Anand, “what’s clear is that every time a system became rigid, and things got stuck, it ultimately broke down. However, all those experiences have left behind their truths and have contributed to where we are now. So I’d say that no struggle has been a waste!”

Says Rajeev, “At Deepanam we feel that if children are happy and healthy they will learn everything they need to learn. This calls for a big shift in the mindset for many parents and teachers – and this we are gradually exploring, debating, and applying.”

Priya Sundaravalli

## AUROVILLE’S 40TH BIRTHDAY

### Unity Kolam Ceremony

Dear friends of Auroville around the world,

This coming February 2008, Auroville will celebrate its 40th birthday. This is a remarkable achievement and a testimony to the perseverance of its residents, their tenacious adherence to the Vision, and the strength of the evolutionary force urging forth this unique experiment.

Many celebratory events are planned to express our connection to what it means to live in and serve the vision of Auroville at this auspicious moment.

During last summer’s Auroville International meeting in Montreal, the AVI association looked for an appropriate way to convey a message of unity and gratitude from Auroville to the world, to create an event of global outreach that would express something essential about the vision of Auroville and that would potentially include the participation of all. What emerged was the idea to create an event called the Unity Kolam Ceremony.

For this event we invite YOUR collaboration. We invite you all to contribute by bringing a cupful of soil/sand (about 200gm) from a meaningful place anywhere in the world. It could be a sacred site, an international community, a nature reserve, a place of national or historical significance, or simply a place that is in some way special. If the handful of soil/sand could be a specific colour, like black volcanic sand, white beach sand, red or yellow ochre clay, diverse samples will make the end result more interesting!. These samples may be deposited or sent to the Auroville Town Hall Reception – Unity Kolam Ceremony – 605101 Auroville – T.N. – India. They should reach Auroville by 15th February. It is important to label each sample with an email ID of the person who collected the sample, and a clear description of the place it was collected from. Additionally, we would also like you to send a brief description/write up about the place including any special features or qualities and, if possible a digital photo via email to AV40th@gmail.com.

This information will be displayed graphically on our web page [www.humanunity.info](http://www.humanunity.info) (due to be on line after the 10th January).

In the early morning of the 28th of February these earth samples will be laid out by children from many different nations in a Kolam pattern that integrates the Auroville symbol.

The highlight of the event will be a dismantling ceremony the next morning (which will be the 29th, the “Golden Day” of the Supramental Manifestation). The soils of the world will be swept together as a symbol of unity, and redistributed in beautiful gift packets, made in Auroville, symbolizing Auroville’s gratitude and outreach to the world.

Thank you for your participation in what we hope will be a joyful and meaningful celebration for all.

If you have further questions, please contact Biggie (Auroville project co-ordinator) on behalf of AVI and the organising team.

Email: [biggie@auroville.org.in](mailto:biggie@auroville.org.in)

## In brief

### Income tax exemption granted

The long awaited IT Exemption U/S 10(23C)(iv) from 2003-2004 onwards has been granted to the Auroville Foundation. The exemption has no specified time-limit, but is subject to specific conditions.

### Tibetan Women’s Leadership Conference

The Tibetan Women’s Association held its annual Leadership Programme in December in Auroville. Twenty seven Tibetan participants came from all over India to attend workshops on the theme of “The Invisible Visible”: removing the cloak of invisibility that shades the achievements of women.

### One-world concept in Tamil Language

The Auroville Tamil Heritage Centre organized a one day conference on the theme ‘One-world concept in Tamil language’ on Sri Aurobindo’s Mahasamadhi day (December 9th). This coincided with the finale of the 125th Birth Anniversary celebrations of the Tamil poet Subramania Bharati.

### WISP 2008 begins

The 4th Auroville Winter Integral Studies Programme (WISP) has started. The programme offers a range of courses, classes, lectures, and study programmes around the theme of transformation and integral learning throughout the months of December, January, February and March. Over 38 Aurovilians and Auroville are contributing to this programme. For more info contact <http://www.auroville.info/WISP>.

### Welcome Realization

A new community called Realization is projected in the Residential Zone, near Vikas and Creativity. Future community members started to come together to do collective work such as adobe brick making. Cost-effective structures will be made with locally-available materials like earth, wood, coconut and bamboo, and the houses will have eco-friendly technologies such as composting toilets, solar energy and ecological wastewater treatment. Realization aims to provide homes for 150-250 inhabitants. In the first phase, 40 homes will be built.

### Mediation training starts

With financial support of the Dutch Stichting de Zaaier, a 4-day training in mediation techniques will be given to a group of about 10 Aurovilians by mediators of the Indian Centre for Mediation and Dispute Resolution connected to the High Court in Chennai. Training material will be tailored to Auroville requirements. Once the training has been successfully completed, a proposal will be made to the Residents’ Assembly to set-up an Auroville Community Mediation Office.

### Auroville best

‘BEST of India’ is the title of the cover story of the November 26th issue of India’s magazine *India Today*, listing the best aspects of India. Auroville is included. The magazine states that “Auroville has proven to the world that an idealistic community not built around a cult or religion, can not only exist successfully, but also engage with local communities, evolve architecture that has been acclaimed the world over and work towards environmental restoration – the only experiment of its kind in the world!”



# "Let's arrest this downward slide"

**N**ineteen years ago, Auroville Today brought together some long-term Aurovilians to recall the past and to share their thoughts about Auroville's future. At the beginning of Auroville's fortieth year we once again invited Aurovilians who met Mother and who have lived for many years in the community to look back, look forward.

## The early years

**Auroville Today: What was it like in the early years of Auroville when Mother was still in her body?**

**Francis:** We knew at that moment we were having a fantastic, phenomenal experience. There was this great energy everybody was living off and you just wanted to give, to create this something that was much larger than you as an individual.

**That energy came through your contact with the Mother? Or was it something in the air?**

**Francis:** For me personally it came through my contact with Mother, but collectively it was just in the air. Everybody was drinking up the nectar and everybody was doing what they could do to enrich Auroville. It was an extremely beautiful experience.

I remember one time climbing down from the Matrimandir to speak to a reporter from the Washington Post. 'Why are you here?' he asked. I said, 'Because it's the most exciting place on the planet'. He looked around, and there was absolutely nothing. Then he looked at me as if, well...!

**Rathinam:** That magic was definitely present. Just the physical Auroville, going on horseback to Matrimandir through the fields, eating at Center Kitchen, it was something wonderful. We kids felt so safe, we never wondered for a moment where we were going to have our next meal or where we were going to sleep that night.

## How easy was it to contact Mother?

**Frederick:** In those days there were many lines of communication to Mother. There was Roger, Maggi, Shyamsunder. While we weren't always aware of her presence on a deeper level, all of our actions were referred to her. She told us it's good that you sit down and try to find out what my will is, but before you implement something better check up with me that you got it correct!

**Gerard:** When I met Mother it was the first time I met someone *real*. She was so present, she had so much strength. It was a different sense of reality, another 'geography'. Meeting her was a beautiful shock. Everything seemed possible when she was there.

**Those possibilities included the transformation of the body?**

**Francis:** Yes. We just dedicated ourselves to doing the work and she was doing our yoga. I had absolutely no doubt that both the building of Auroville and the transformation of the body was going to happen in 20 years.

## Mother's passing

**So what did it mean when Mother passed away?**

**Francis:** Shock. It was hard to catch up to the reality of the situation. I couldn't believe she would do that to me (laughing)! After all, I was being trained for transformation, I was already thinking about how I could profit from the transformation!

**You never had any doubt that Mother would transform her body?**

**Francis:** Her secretaries told us she was in the process of transforming the cells. I just automatically accepted it. So in the spring of 1973, when her health started to deteriorate, I didn't want to hear about it.

**Gerard:** Her passing was a big shock, we never understood.

**Frederick:** We never entertained the thought that she would die. You have to realize that I first met her in 1960 when she was so much more accessible, and subsequently I saw her often. She was more than just a physical Mother, I was in love with that person. I remember seeing her on the morning she passed away, laid out in the meditation room, and a big vacuum opened up in me. What Satprem experienced on that same day, the pulsations of love, the



Ananda Reddy declaring time-out from a game of basketball. Aspiration school behind.

feeling that nothing could stop her work — I never had that. And the statements from the Ashram glossing over what happened, I could never quite believe in them.

I felt she had left. And I haven't yet accepted it on a very emotional, physical level. But I'm very reluctant to call this all back because a few years ago I felt I had to drop this whole memory as it was just dragging me down.

**So what did you all think when Mother passed away? That it's all over, that Auroville is finished?**

**Gerard:** No. At this time we were so much involved in the Matrimandir and it felt like we were going somewhere, it wasn't fixed in one place. We felt we were on a huge ship and we were going somewhere.

**Francis:** Just after she left her body, I went to the Matrimandir and I felt the energy there. I was so happy that I had found it. Matrimandir was something I could grasp and proceed with after Mother's passing. We were putting in eight or ten hour days, six or seven days a week, joyously, we had a fantastic time.

**Frederick:** I agree that originally there seemed to be a different time-scheme for Auroville. Everything was going to be completed in 15-20 years. But somehow we took a longer route. I think Mother herself didn't know when this adventure began how long it would take, or whether she would remain in her body.

When she left, Auroville took a different road. The fighting started with the Sri Aurobindo Society, and that whole thing took so much time.

## The struggle

**Looking back, was it a kind of ultimate struggle for Auroville's continued existence, or were the motivations more personalised?**

**Gerard:** With Mother there were no rules but with the Society the rules started. They wanted to throw people out, control our visas, they were crushing something. We felt they wanted to destroy the dream, the experiment, to cover it over. It was unreal and Mother was so real. We wanted that something else. That's what we were fighting for.

**Frederick:** I don't think one should overglorify the struggle. If we could have had a larger vision and stepped over our sense of what was right and wrong... For me, it started when Amrit was asked to submit to the dictates of the Society and we started a signature campaign against this. And I recall my feeling that, 'I will get you Nava for that, [Navajata was the Chairman of the Sri Aurobindo Society] I'll fight this one through.' It was very personal, there was a lot of ego involved.

**Francis:** There was lots of stupidity. Just as we were totally enriched by Mother's Force, I feel that at that time another Force got its head in the door — a Force of greed, of doubt, of fear, whatever — and we were just banged along. I also was Joan of Arc

running down the street waving a flag, I also was one of Mother's warriors. I loved it! But today I see that all of us were just being swept along, reacting to whatever was in the air at the time. And I don't think there was anyone conscious enough to put the brakes on. So it just ran on.

**How was it for the kids to be in Auroville at that time?**

**Rathinam:** Really confusing. We didn't know what to do except follow the crowd. Always there was something happening, we went to all the meetings, we were there in the midst but nobody really explained it all to us. One thing was sure, though, we looked on the Society as our enemies.

Definitely, we were affected by the tension. Our parents were very worried about us and wanted us to come back to the village. But most of the time we stayed in Auroville. You see, there was also some kind of joy to be in that movement and we wanted to be part of that.

**Gerard:** It was very intense. Aurovilians were being put in jail, they were being beaten up at their workplace. So when somebody was in danger you didn't think about it: you just went there and did what had to be done.

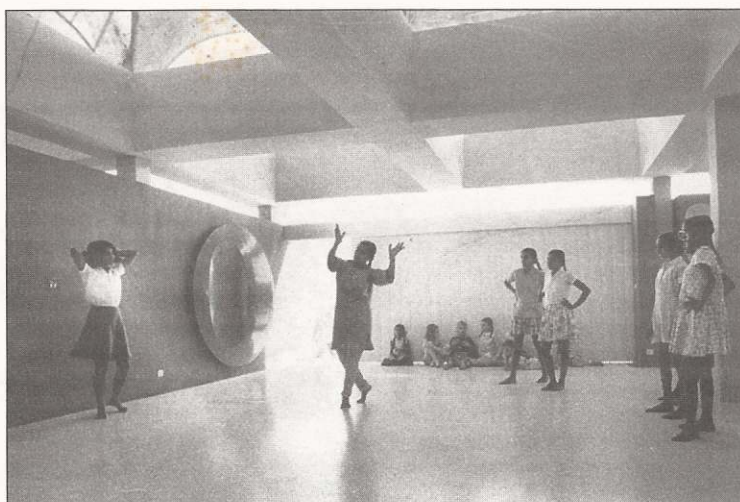
## The Government comes in

**In 1980 the Government passed an Act which put Auroville into government administration for five years. This seemed to usher in a more settled period.**

**Frederick:** Our first administrator, Mr Nigam, had a calming and healing effect, particularly with the Indians because the conflict with the Society was a very Western European thing. There was a period of growth, of development, of lots of new things.

**But the struggle continued between the Aurovilians themselves.**

**Frederick:** In the conflict there were three groups basically — the 'Satpremians' or whatever you wanted to call us, the 'neutrals' who were Aurovilians who disagreed



Dance class in progress at Last School

with our stand, and the Society. I think it's true to say that a certain momentum was created when we won the court case. The winning group bullied the others. It wasn't a very glorious time.

**Gerard:** But some Aurovilians were saying Auroville is a religion. We had to fight this.

**Frederick:** You have to remember that the Society problem was not solved until 1988. In the meantime, some Aurovilians sympathetic to them were going to Delhi and were quoted as saying that we were just a few dissidents and that we were anti-Indian. Then these Aurovilians would come back and we would meet them on the road. You met your opponents on the road, so of course you asked them, 'How can you say that?'

## No dialogue was possible?

**Frederick:** There were some attempts; later there was some integration. But I think even now some of that group are carrying ill-feelings. We had a meeting in Verite a few years ago where it came out very strongly. It's not been settled.

## Auroville becomes a Foundation

**In 1988 the Foundation Act was passed. I remember Alain, Frederick and Krishna coming back from Delhi and saying that they'd had an extraordinarily high experience. But soon the doubts began to be voiced.**

**Frederick:** The underlying accusation was that we had called in the government rather than keeping it in the family, and that would mean the end of Mother's Dream. Actually, at the time we felt that the Foundation Act was a temporary measure. Also, I don't think I was ever given the full implication of the Act. I was told we were creating an autonomous organization; I understood the actual decision-making would remain with the Aurovilians. Maybe that was so at the time, but over the last 20 years we have seen a growing encroachment of the Foundation authorities into our activities. When I look at the Foundation now and how the Act is being practised, I don't recognise what we created then.

**Francis:** I was always amazed that the Foundation didn't interfere for so long. It's only been in the past five years that the Foundation interference has been very strong. Before that we had lots of opportunities to do something and we failed miserably. We quibbled, we bickered among ourselves, and we continue to do so. There is nobody to blame but ourselves for today's situation.

**Frederick:** True, when it was convenient to call in the Foundation authorities — when we wanted to change the management at Matrimandir, for example — we did so. For short-term convenience we may have opened the door to much greater Foundation involvement.

**Francis:** That was definitely the turning-point.

**Rathinam:** But even before that, when our first Secretary brought in an Order giving him the power to remove unit executives, we had the possibility to resist and we didn't. We've had our chances — our next secretary, Mr. Bala Baskar, was open to anything, Kireet was supportive, even the present chairman says Auroville is not a government institution.

## The same consequences

**Abha:** But that is not always how the Secretary acts, and he's the one who's sitting here. We are facing the same consequences now as when we were fighting the Society. Maybe those Society people were impossible people, but still they were Mother's disciples. Now we are facing a machinery which will squash us if it continues in the way it is going. Is that original separation between Auroville and the Society at the root of everything?

**Gerard:** I read that passage recently where Mother says the realisation of Auroville does not depend on human beings. She said nothing, nothing, depends on human beings, that Auroville will be built by forces we cannot see. I feel the only way today is not to look back to the past or to worry about the Foundation — I'm not afraid of the Foundation or the government because Auroville is Her's.

I think each one of us has to find a way through to something else. We have to give up all our ideas about how we should organize Auroville. We have to surrender completely, to become nothing, and then, as Satprem describes it in *On the Way to Superhumanhood*, we go through, we enter this other

*continued on following page*



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space where each person discovers his or her own place and work. When we are there, the true way of being together will manifest.

This is why some long-term Aurovilians have stepped back from the collective life. They are trying to learn how to do this. It is not easy, it takes great courage, but it is the only solution. Auroville is not a failure. It's just we are at a point where we are being asked to give up more and more.

**Abha:** But we are talking two different levels now. You are talking about the inner level, and there I agree with you, but there is also the external level. At that level, things are getting more and more entrenched, the stone is beginning to run downhill.

**Frederick:** Unless we make a concerted effort to foster those things which bring us together and not dwell too long on those which divide us, it will be very grave. That's why I think many people want to put their energies into things which bring us together.

#### Collective weakness

*But when it comes to doing things collectively, we often fall apart. Why?*

**Francis:** Individually we can all tap into a higher nature or our creative nature, but it seems when we have to work together the negative aspect of our beings comes to the forefront.

Take me. In 2000 I dropped out of everything and for five years did my own thing, and I actually believed that I had made a step. But the only way to test this was to go back into the arena. So I went back and volunteered to join the land group. Wow, did I fail miserably! I didn't see any step at all!

**Rathinam:** We need to get the next generation to come into the centre, to take up work for the community.

**Francis:** But where is this next generation? This is where they were born, where they grew up, where they have families now. We're getting old and tired, we don't have the stamina to go on any more. So where is the next generation when they're so badly needed?

**Abha:** It's to do with how we educate our kids. We are training them to study for exams and qualifications and to go out, so that's where they are going.

**Francis:** But some do come back. And then they try to find a quiet little niche where they're not disturbed.

But there's another element now. The Tamil Aurovilians want an even playing field. According to them Auroville is not an even playing field now, particularly in material terms, and their dissatisfaction is causing a lot of disruption. Until they proceed to the next level of growth or satisfaction, I don't see a possibility of us coming together as a larger collective.

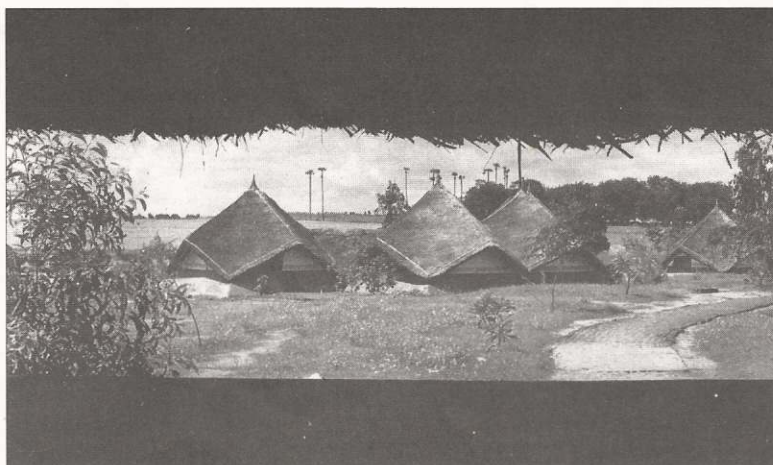
**Gerard:** Everywhere you look in Auroville today, it's crazy. But if I look too much at the surface of things, I may lose my way: the only thing I can do is to offer it to Her. That allows me to stay, to continue to do what I have to do.

#### The fire has to return

**Abha:** Two years ago when Claude [her husband] had his heart attack it was very moving because suddenly everyone was there. But it takes an extreme situation of almost losing someone before people wake up and say, 'You're important for us'. We don't take the time to be with each other, to appreciate each other.

When we came to Auroville in 1978 we were taken around, we met all the old Aurovilians and we heard their experiences of what happened with Mother. This inspired us. If only newcomers today could be touched in that fashion. The fire has to come back to our everyday lives....

**Frederick:** I think *Auroville Today* could play a much more important role here. It's the only published voice of Auroville but it's not doing its job at all. It is descriptive, entertaining, flat. If it were really the voice of a community on fire it would



A view of the neighbourhood from inside an Aspiration hut

show much more courage and guts and daring. It could actually be a fiery voice calling for something which could take us into the future.

**Francis:** Recently someone told me, 'Faith begins where trust ends'. Well, right now I am having difficulty maintaining the faith. Individually I will always be thankful for being allowed to stay here and have my experiences and my friends, but collectively I no longer see it. I don't see the next generation coming through, I see the government walking in, and meanwhile we're all becoming middle-class and mediocre.

Look at The Theosophical Society in Chennai. That was a vibrant, happening place at the turn of the 20th century. Now it's dead. That's my fear for Auroville — that we become institutionalised, that we die off, and the next generation walks in and decides it's just a nice place to live. And the whole concept is lost.

As Abha said, it's going to take a heart attack to bring us together, or a tsunami directly on our heads. Otherwise we are going to slumber away for eternity. Or until the monster machine comes through the door and takes over completely.

#### A way forward?

**Frederick:** Let's look at arresting this sliding stone. I believe we can work on a vision where we

don't ask the government to get lost, that would not be the way. But I think if we were to approach the right people in the right way the government could agree to step back. If a receptacle is created which is accountable, transparent and which, perhaps, could comprise all those who have been excluded over the years, including the Society and the Ashram, as well as well-known people in public life, I think the government could be made to see it is in their own interests to hand it over. This is something that India could do in its grace for the world.

*Over the years Auroville has had a number of charismatic authority figures. Yet all of them, to a greater or lesser extent, have polarised the community. Have we reached the point where we should stop looking for an external saviour of Auroville, whether it be an individual or the government?*

**Frederick:** I am by nature a follower, a disciple-type. I gravitate towards people like Kireet, Tata, Satprem and Roger but I know it is something which retards me.

If I generalise from my personal experience, I feel Auroville is moving towards finding its own identity and not outsourcing it to x, y or z. Perhaps we are shifting from a person to another point of cohesion, the Matrimandir. I think the presence of the Matrimandir is becoming more and more powerfully felt and it may be crucial in helping us find our collective identity.

**Francis:** All I want to do is be on the Matrimandir when it takes off!

**Frederick:** But it's not going to take off, it's just made a secret touchdown!

*From an interview by Alan*

## "There's an aspiration for something different"

continued from page 1

and see what happens.' Later I thought, 'It's not working any more', and we almost quit, but then something else happened to make me realize this is what I am supposed to do. There have been, and continue to be, many other examples of this 'guidance' and inspiration over the years.

**Shankar:** For me it's like an evolving inspiration, it's like you keep on peeling skins off yourself, things fall away. When I first came, for example, I was very much into religious rituals and I felt that other beliefs were not really beliefs at all. But then somebody says something interesting, my beliefs shake a bit, they settle down again, then they shake a bit more, until...

But it takes a long time to change. And there's so much work to do. Once, one of the Aurovilians in my Tamil class said, "We need a multi-lifetime visa to do all these things." I just laughed at him. But now I understand.

**Chali:** I like that. When I look at pictures of me when I was living in the U.S. I think, "Who's that?" That was only twelve years ago, but it feels like it was a different person. It was like one of my previous lifetimes, and now I am in my next lifetime and there will probably be a few more before I really go on to the next life.

**Shraddhavan:** When you feel these periods are whole lifetimes that means there are great and radical degrees of development.

**Chali:** I feel that very distinctly from my time here.

**Shraddhavan:** I think that what Auroville has given me is the opportunity to offer my life to something that feels really meaningful. I think that's an important thing for humans: you want to know that your efforts have some meaning.

Of course, when we speak of Auroville we mean different things. There's that immutable Auroville that we are so grateful for and then there's the present reality. One is the soul and one is the physical body and we want the two to be united. So if we see that the physical body, the present day life in Auroville, is not sufficiently connected with "The" Auroville it's often very painful.

But I have learned not to be attached to any particular form. Auroville is a marvellous home but it's just what we're engaged in at the moment. You can follow your path even if you're not living here any more. I'm very grateful for this insight. It means I don't have to get caught up in doomsday scenarios.

**Chali:** I think the present doomsday-sayers in Auroville have a strong attachment to a very particular image of Auroville which they have developed. They don't acknowledge the fact that we don't know what is going on. Actually, it's O.K. if we don't know how we're going to actually materialize the ideals, the important thing is that these ideals are there. And even if we each choose different ways, we're all moving basically in the same direction.

**Shraddhavan:** I've come to the conclusion that this ideal city that we're aiming at is meant to be a product of a higher level of consciousness. So if we collectively haven't managed to achieve that higher level of consciousness, then Auroville won't be what it's supposed to be. It will be some kind of a show, not the real thing. The solution is not going to be purely organizational. It depends on there being a kind of critical mass of people who fulfill the conditions, who are true Aurovilians.

At the same time, I'm very concerned about our youth. When we came we were all in our twenties, we were very young and we had to take up responsibilities. I feel that many of the young people who were born here or came here as children might actually feel quite excluded now. They start their own businesses, they get some self-fulfillment in that way. But I feel this is a great loss to the community.



The Aspiration school jeep transporting the children

There are a lot of people, adults as well as young people, who are pretty disillusioned with the process in Auroville and don't offer themselves for community work for that reason. And I can understand that. There's a feeling that now it's all politics, that it's not about serving the community any more. But I believe most of the young people still believe in Auroville and feel it is their home.

**Shankar:** I would say the youngsters are O.K. These young people are coming back and maybe because of the politics the youth step back but their involvement remains strong. They're ready to step into the community and get into different responsibilities.

**Shraddhavan:** But where do all the politics come from? That's really bad for Auroville.

**Shankar:** Yes, it is a bad idea. A few years ago some of the Tamil Aurovilians formed a group. They wanted to do more for Auroville. That was good. But then it became a political play and they wanted representation on all the main committees.

**Shraddhavan:** Somehow we have the feeling in Auroville that to get something done we have to form groups. Then groups form against other groups.

**Chali:** But many people don't want to join groups, particularly Working Committee-type groups, for the same reason they don't want to go to General Meetings. They just see it as the same people saying the same things and nothing actually changing.

Then look at the way we communicate with each other. Sometimes I'm amazed at how little consciousness, how little thought, seems to go into what we say to each other and, more importantly, how we say it. I do think that's changing, though, that there is a much greater awareness of the importance of improving our community interactions, and that there is real effort and progress being made in this direction.

**Shraddhavan:** But I think there is some evolution in our social habits. For so many years the focus in Auroville had to be on the physical. Then the cultural scene began, there were some vital developments. I think that over the past seven or eight years there's gradually been this switch to a more mental level where we study and try to understand and go into things together. There are all kinds of study groups that are not just on the physical level and not just cultural workshops. I think if we can foster this movement it might cause a breakthrough to something that we could call a collective yoga. At the moment, if there's any collective yoga going on, I think it's unconscious.

**Chali:** It depends on what you mean by collective yoga. I think most people outside of Auroville associate the term 'collective yoga' to be like a mass meditation or something, and we don't have those kinds of 'rituals'. But people wouldn't be here if there wasn't an aspiration for something different, some aspiration for change. And this aspiration for change and the willingness to make it happen is a kind of collective yoga for me.

**Shankar:** Auroville is also collective karma yoga, there's no doubt about it. Everyone is doing their work.

**Shraddhavan:** That's really interesting because people really aren't doing it for money. Wherever you go, everybody is working hard and they're doing it because they want to do it.

**Chali:** And, yes, it's for self-fulfillment, self-development, but at the same time they're giving something to the larger cause; it's for the good of the community in some small or big way.

*From an interview by Alan and Bindu*



# Blue Light: sparking a revolution?

There's a new unit on the block: Blue Light or, to give it its full name, Blue Light Open Source Service and Research Centre. What's it all about? We spoke to two members of the new team.

“There's a real need in Auroville for quality computer software and support,” explains Jason, “and Blue Light aims to provide this.

We believe one of the best software solutions is Open Source software because it is of high quality, it's less vulnerable to viruses and other forms of attack and it's free or much cheaper than proprietary software.

“But for Auroville there's another, even more powerful, reason to migrate. Open Source is community-driven software, it is diverse individuals pooling their knowledge to create something better for the entire community. The other basic idea is that this software should help people develop and learn without being hampered by legal or financial restrictions. The core tenet is ‘Open Source Software is controlled by no one in particular, but by humanity as a whole’. So the philosophy behind Open Source is very compatible with the ideals of Auroville.

“Therefore, whenever possible, Blue Light will offer Open Source software to Aurovilians. When this is not feasible, we'll provide the non-Open Source software that we think does the job best.”

“To successfully implement Open Source software solutions in Auroville,” says Jürgen, “Blue Light will adopt a four-pronged approach. Firstly, we want to create a research centre in which network-based solutions can be tested and fine-tuned before they are used in the community. These groupware solutions help working groups and teams to use their computing environment efficiently in the form of shared files, group-email set-ups, common calendars, task-lists etc.



The Blue Light team: from left, Jason, Manu, Amy, Jürgen and Sanjay.

“Then we want Blue Light be a learning and training environment. We welcome everybody who wants to work with Open Source, whether they be Aurovilians, long-term volunteers or I.T. students from India or abroad. We will run high-quality classes in the use of Open Source software to improve computer literacy in Auroville. Among other things, the classes will lead to a better understanding of the amazing range of Internet-related applications as well as the dangers posed by easy broadband access to the Internet.”

the service to the commercial units and individuals.

“So our final objective is to create a support system for individuals through building up a community of knowledgeable Aurovilians.”

The team is upbeat about the future. “We've already got some seed-funding, a workspace and a nice team,” says Jürgen. “Let's hope that Blue Light can spark a revolution!”

Alan

## Why India and Auroville need Open Source

Open Source Software (OSS) began appearing in the 1980s when an American graduate student, Richard Stallman, started the Free Software Foundation. OSS remained unnoticed by most people until the explosion of the Internet in the mid 1990s – a technology advance made possible by the wide spread of OSS.

When we talk about open source software (OSS) we mean computer software developed in a very different way from the most common form of software we are used to – proprietary software. Proprietary software companies closely protect their programming source code, but the OSS method is to make the source code available to everybody who wishes to work upon it. OSS creates a community (which includes developers, testers, users and translators) round a particular software tool like OpenOffice.

This phenomenon of ‘many eyes’ looking at the software is an important reason why OSS tools can improve more quickly than proprietary alternatives. In fact, the OSS community

focuses on creating the highest quality computer software for the people who use it at the lowest cost, while the proprietary method focuses instead on creating the highest revenue for the company that markets the software. Simply put, OSS is community-driven software development, while proprietary software is commercially-driven development.

Some of the most important success stories of OSS include the Internet – enabling computer networks to communicate with one another across the planet – and the World Wide Web, which enables shared information and email. It's not possible to say whether these technologies would exist today without OSS – the thing that matters is that they do exist and the core pieces still run off OSS.

Recent developments in the field of proprietary software show that companies are more concerned about their profits than about the usability, security and availability of their products. More and more users find themselves powerless and frustrated, accepting almost everything that is imposed on them in terms of standards and

license conditions. Once data is locked into proprietary file formats the companies have a strong self-interest in keeping the users dependent.

An unending circle of licenses, forced upgrades and more licenses is how the story goes. Compatibility with other software is not welcomed and therefore only minimally supported. And then there is the cost. A piece of software like the Microsoft Office Suite is sold in India for the same price as in Europe or the US, while average incomes in the subcontinent are often 10 or 20 times lower. This means that the same software in India is 10 to 20 times more expensive. No wonder that recent studies suggest that 75% of all proprietary software used in India is pirated.

Today NGOs, governments, educational institutions, individual users and commercial enterprises have begun to realise that their freedom is at stake. Recently France and Italy moved the administration of their parliaments to OSS and China developed their own operating system based on OSS. Schools, libraries and other educational institutions are migrating because of horrendous license fees which exceed their budgets.

Companies like Audi in Germany migrated its administration and its whole research department to Linux (an OS operating system). The municipality of Munich (Germany) is migrating 20 000 desktop computers to OSS. The Dutch and Belgian governments have decided to migrate all government administration to OpenOffice, an open source office suite. In India, Kerala is shifting all schools to Linux and the Central Government in New Delhi has started to promote OpenOffice in all its offices, using open standards to store data and documents.

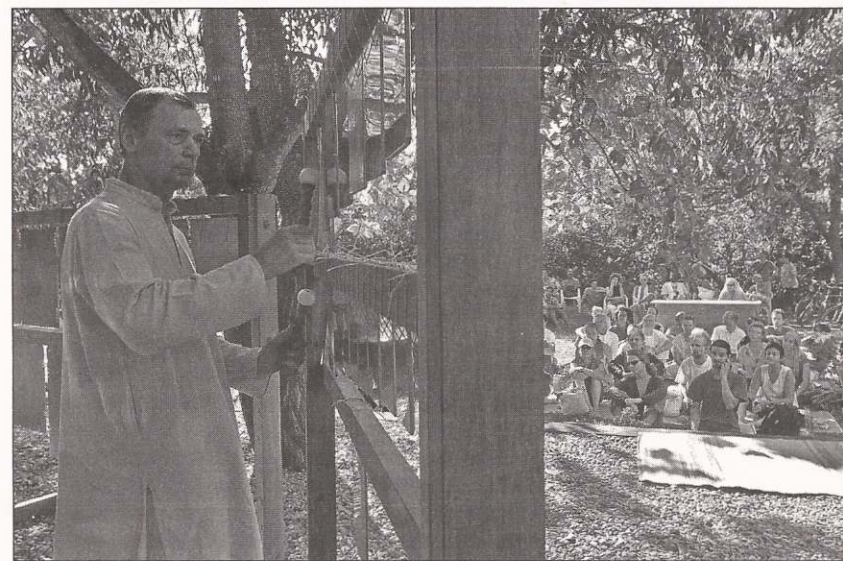
Wouldn't it be natural in ‘The City of the Future’ to promote free and open standards?

The aim of OSS is to make good software available for people to use freely, to enrich it and share it. That will not only improve the software but help communities to grow. The core values are transparency, freedom, innovation and creativity. If Auroville wants to move forward promoting those values, Open Source Software provides an alternative truly fitting Auroville's aims and ideals.

The Blue Light team

## AUROVILLE AND THE WORLD

### The Russian singing bells



Alexander performing on the flat bells at the Unity Pavilion

Alexander Zhikharev from Moscow is an amateur musician who always had a feeling there must be a more celestial sound somewhere than that achieved by humanity. One day, as he was walking by the river Karma in Russia, he experienced a sound that he knew he must manifest. It was connected with the great Russian tradition of bells.

they respond to a simple touch. They are also beneficial and enjoyable for children as they are easy to play and can be played collectively or individually and bring a sense of peace and harmony.

Newcomer Vera from Moscow, who organized three concerts of Alexander's bells in Auroville over the holiday season, feels they are a wonderful inspiration to the Russian Pavilion group.

Dianna

## LETTER

Dear Auroville Today,

I have a comment to make on the question of whether to celebrate Auroville's birthday, which was raised in some recent issues.

In speaking to one or two people, I have discovered that *The Spirit of Auroville* – the title given by The Mother to a painting by Huta – refers to a The Divine Mother or a portion of The Divine Mother. So, Auroville has a soul, which is independent of the souls that inhabit it. Therefore Auroville is not equal to the sum of its parts (ie all its residents). It is, in this way, a unique individual like each one of us. Therefore, just as we do not question the rightness of celebrating the birthday of a friend or loved one, the celebration of Auroville's birthday also should not be questioned. It seems rather egoistic to say “We have not done well this year, therefore we will not celebrate Auroville's birthday”. What would we feel if our nearest and dearest were to say that to us and refuse to come and share food and gifts with us on our birthdays?! What a miserable world it would be! More pertinently, on Auroville's birthday, we should show our gratitude for the existence of Auroville, and gratitude to The Divine Mother for the opportunity She has given to the world. That itself is an important act – a once a year ritual of remembrance and gratitude that would help everyone for the rest of the year.

With best wishes,  
Girija Shettar (London, UK)



## Film Culture in Auroville

Aurofilm recently held a captivating exhibition, *Roll up the Reel*, about the history of film culture in Auroville. Displayed in Kala Kendra's circular space, the exhibition consisted of movie paraphernalia such as colourful posters, old projectors and film reels, along with text panels detailing Aurofilm's history.

Created as a film society in 1981 to promote art cinema in Auroville, Aurofilm has grown over the years to become a tool for education and creative research in film, as well as a film-making unit. In 1983, Aurofilm acquired a 35mm projector, and film screenings have been taking place since then on a weekly basis, along with regular film festivals, classes and workshops to study films and film-making. French Aurovilians Gerard and Surya have been operating the unit from the beginning. They have an office and studio in Kalabhum, but hopes are high for a new building with facilities like a film theatre, a film library and an archive to keep and store films.

### Making films is an art

Curated by French volunteer Valentine, the exhibition's aim was to educate people about Aurofilm's work and film basics. "Many people think



The recent film exhibition in Kala Kendra

35mm film doesn't exist anymore, that everything is just DVD," says Valentine. Gerard adds: "Only five percent of the feature films are made with a digital video camera, the rest is still 35 mm."

Gerard strongly believes that film will not disappear. "Film-making is an art. It is fascinating how you can play

with light, sound and image. To give up 35 mm would be like asking a painter to throw away his brushes and work only with a computer." It strikes him that art cinema is not considered something serious. "There are twenty good film makers in India, but movie halls refuse to show their work, even though they often receive accolades at the national and international level." The non-commercial filmmakers have to travel from one small-scale film festival to another to make ends meet.

The exhibition contains evocative posters for the popular weekly screenings in the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium, including recent offerings such as veteran Chinese director Zhang Yimou's new film *The Curse of the Golden Flower*, Tarkovsky's Russian art house classic *Andrei Rublov*, the Iranian film *Where is my Friend's Home*, and legendary French director Jean-Luc Godard's *Soigne Ta Droite!*

Due to the recent renovation of the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium, Aurofilm has been forced to stop screening films, but the programme will restart in

February. A 4-day film festival on the 'Cinema of Kerala' will open the restored Auditorium, which will have new seats, air conditioning, a better sound system and a new rolling screen.

Surya and Gerard continue looking for four quality art-house films per month: ideally one should be Indian, one French, one classic and one other. The films need to fit Aurofilm's criteria of being meaningful, with few songs and a social feel. "It's not easy," says Surya about finding 35mm prints of suitable movies from India. "Although India is a big producer of films, most of them are very commercial, and most distributors are American. It's difficult to get prints of new movies, and sub-titled ones are in demand and are usually showing in festivals."

### Less censorship

While Aurofilm usually gets complete prints, occasionally they face censorship. Strangely enough it is not always done by the Indian authorities. "They do censor, but not like in the

past," says Surya. "The movie halls themselves may do it to cater to audience tastes as well as to fit the theatre's schedule. For example, *The Lord of the Rings* had most of the peaceful elves scenes cut out in favour of the battle scenes."

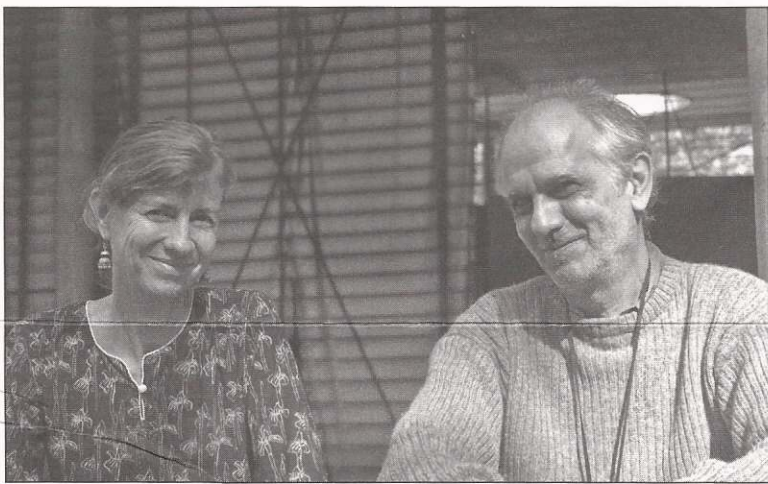
Aurofilm also functions as a film-making unit, and has made a number of short films on Auroville projects and units, performances and ceremonies in Auroville and the villages. The unit also made a short documentary on luminary film director Satyajit Ray, using existing material. The exhibition offered regular screenings of some of these short films.

Aurofilm's recent twenty minute documentary on the National Film Archive of India in Pune was the first film the unit had made outside of Auroville. Surya and Gerard approached the archives with the idea, and gained SAIER funding for the project. Although Gerard and Surya loved doing this, the main focus stays on Auroville. They have just finished a film on education in Auroville. It is yet to be screened for the Auroville teachers. Afterwards, it may be shown to the public at large. So far, a one hour version and a 45 minute version have been made, both on DVD.

Aurofilm also occasionally functions as a training institute, teaching the basics to students at Auroville and outreach schools. It has also offered film-making intensives, such as a three-week film course for Aurovilians in 1999 with Venezuelan cinematographer Daniel Petkoff. "We want to build up our infrastructure to do regular training," says Surya. There are also plans to create an Aurovilian film crew, and an exclusive venue for the study and archiving of films. "It would be great if we could find a script writer who wants to help make a film on the 'vibration' of Auroville," adds Gerard.

Valentine concludes, "People seem really surprised to know about all of Aurofilm's work, as they weren't aware of it before. So I'm happy the feedback at the exhibition is all good."

Leslie and Robert



Surya and Gerard

## LIFE IN AUROVILLE

### The monsoon again... that mouldy time of year

Before I came to live in South India I thought Monsoon was a chain of trendy clothes shops in England. Now I know differently. It is a smelly, mouldy time of year, pervasive and secretive – it gets in everywhere. In fact the more secret and hidden, the more it loves to nest. I haven't yet got the art of using those 5 watt 24-hours burning lights in cupboards to fight it head on, but next year I will prepare myself well in advance.

I grew up on the gloomy and damp Yorkshire moors in the north of England, in "Bronte country", in the years before electric blankets and central heating. My childhood was laced with the dire threats of damp. "It'll get in yer bones; once there, it's there forever", leading to that painful English disease of arthritis.

Here in Auroville it is at least a warm damp and I haven't so far heard of any health warnings, though when I look at what it does to my wall I can easily get concerned about what it may be doing to my insides.

### Rainfall 2007

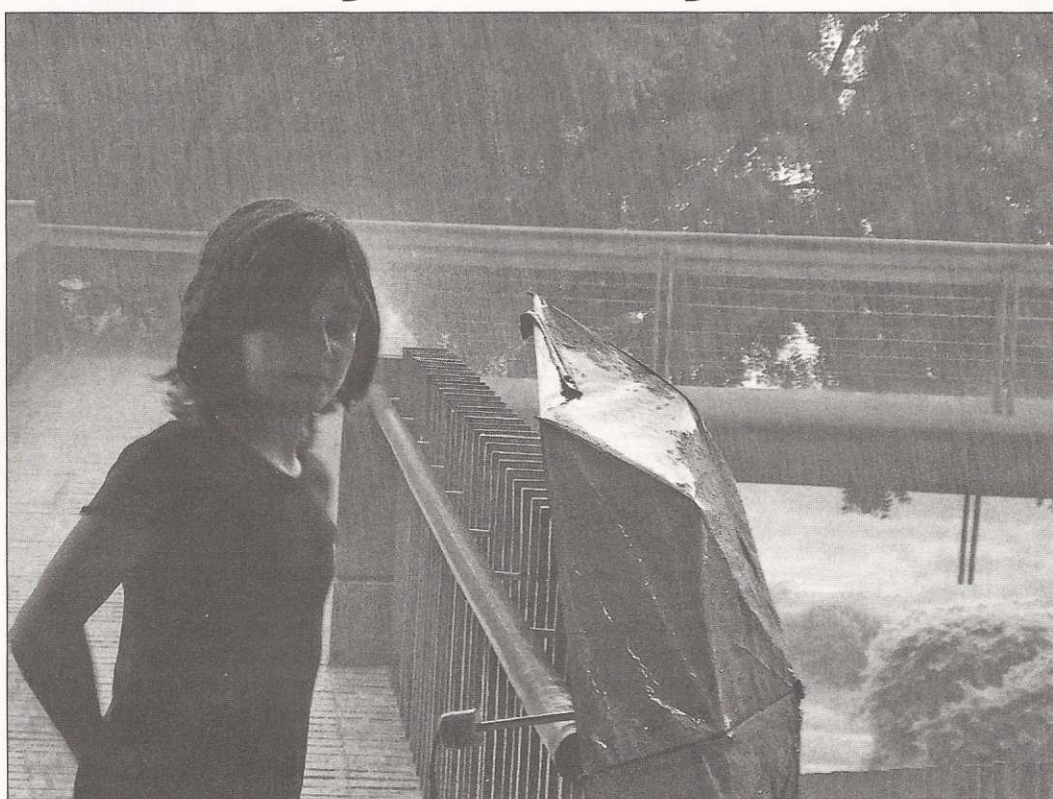
Auroville Water Harvest, which has weather stations in Kottakarai and in Vanur and in the Matrimandir gardens, plus a network of rain gauges and thermometers in the surrounding villages, reports that as of December 29, the total rainfall in 2007 was 117.2 centimetres. In 2006 it was 111.7 cms. The yearly average (1968-2005) for the area is 128.3 cms.

English houses tend to be cozy and cluttered so I was surprised when I first visited Aurovilians' houses to see them so stark and simple. I presumed this was due to the owner's spirituality or poverty, but now I know better. After two years of accumulations from Nehru Street and the Free Store, I am sadder and wiser. So many of my clothes have been nibbled, my books chewed, and my curtains have patches of a sad black and grey.

Recently, I opened a cupboard door and lifted out a lacey black blouse. "I didn't know I had a lacey black blouse", I innocently said as I held it up to the light. It had been munched into a delicate design of thousands of tiny holes. A white shirt had lost half a sleeve and my favourite T shirt had that tell tale trail of brown dust on it, omen of yet more destruction. My clothes were being composted under my very eyes. My good leather sandals had grown a coat of fur and my plastic sandals broke in half when I put them on.

And somehow the mould doesn't wash out, however much you scrub and bleach it; it is in there for life and you've got yet another multi-purpose cloth. One might think the heat of an iron might dry it out, but it just seems to embed it even deeper.

The mould is a living thing, a step on the evolutionary scale below the lowest poochie. It moves unpredictably and silently, though sometimes in the night I can bet it's creeping around in the kitchen, its favourite haunt. It loves bread and biscuits and damp tea towels. My two-year old red fridge has black blisters on its top. And



Monsoon rains photographed from Café Morgan at the Town Hall

it's better not to look at the cloth when you wipe that strip of rubber that seals its door – I am sure you can get food poisoning just by looking at it.

You drag everything outside into the sun to hopefully steam the damp out, but in the monsoon time the sun is lukewarm and unpredictable. A week ago, I hauled all my bedding out into the garden to give it a good sunning and went off for the day telling my husband, "Keep

an eye on it." A cloudburst soaked it and we had to drag it all indoors again, now completely sodden and more evil-smelling. The next few days, I had to sleep on a rug on the floor.

Never mind, in a few weeks I'll be complaining about the sun and prickly heat and my curtains fading from 'sun-bleach'. One thing about life in Auroville, it is never boring.

Dianna



# Volunteering in Auroville

A great way to plug into the community.

“Volunteering in Auroville is incredibly easy,” says Scott, a young American who is working in Discipline Farm. “And very informal too,” he adds, “as in many places you can just show up and you’ll be given something to do.” Before Scott left the States, he had enquired about volunteering. “But it had seemed so complicated then as I didn’t know where I would be, so I didn’t want to commit myself to anything.”

It was a friend who brought Scott to Discipline. They found work for him planting trees and now says Scott, he is having a great time. “Next week I may go and make bricks, or help in the villages,” he adds enthusiastically.

## Organizing Volunteers

There is no central body in Auroville which organizes the volunteers, and so no one knows how many there are at any given moment. In mid December, the estimates vary between 130 and 200. Shivaya at the Unity Pavilion says that there are plans next year to have a set-up to coordinate volunteers, but it will take a lot of work to put together.

Helmut, an Aurovilian architect gives his perspective. “Because of the pressures of work here, many of us here have found we cannot give enough time to volunteers who are seriously interested in some facet of Auroville.

“Auroville is supposed to be a place of unending education yet it is very sad that we do not offer more training skills for people from the outside. I get at least 2 enquiries a week from Indian architecture students who want to come and volunteer in Auroville, but I have to refuse them. I am so overworked myself that I just don’t have the time for them. When I did have them here, I found them a burden as they took up so much of my energy. It is a great pity we cannot offer inspiration and a glimpse into Auroville’s aims and ideals to young people.”

## The choices

At the Guest Service one can see an impressive list of volunteering opportunities stuck up on the wall – 62 in all! Quite a number are related to farming (about 20); education follows next with 12. But there are many more to choose from – disc cleaning at the Matrimandir, or helping with Auroville Radio (experience only), or even horse-brushing.

Many of the volunteers are out on the farms, planting and digging, especially out at Sadhana Forest which is a very different environment from the usual lush green of Auroville. The place can host up to 70 volunteers at a time. They are stashed in various open keet-roof dormitories, almost nose to nose, but nobody seems to mind. At Sadhana Forest, the volunteers have to contribute 80 rupees a day towards food and everyone works in the mornings. The young people love the experience of working outdoors and living so “informally.” They enjoy meeting Tamil people and the feeling of doing something worthwhile.

The experience at Buddha Garden, an organic farm run by Priya Vincent, is quite different as it is much smaller. Ideally Priya prefers to take research students who will stay up to 6 months

and are seriously involved. “If they are only here for a few weeks I can’t expect them to get involved with the farm.” Buddha Garden has at least two volunteers throughout the year, while during the season the numbers can get up to ten or twelve.

“At first,” says Priya, “they used to drain a lot of energy from me. For example they’d turn up in the middle of the night.” But now she has got the system streamlined. Priya has put out all the information on Buddha Garden’s website with photos and explanations. “This makes the organizational side much easier,” she says.

She, however, makes it clear that Buddha Garden is not a guest house, and that she is “not on 24-hour call” for the volunteers. “I work with them from 6 a.m. till 9 a.m.,” she explains. “Then we have breakfast together which is nice. If they want to work longer, that is also welcome.” Volunteers are requested to contribute 100 rupees a night to stay at Buddha Garden, which says Priya she is desperate for as “this place eats up money”.

## Internship opportunities

Volunteering can also be an excellent way of getting experience in one’s particular field. Tanjay from Germany is volunteering at New Creation School for 6 months. She has trained as an occupational therapist and this is her first professional experience. She found the school through its website and is now busy engaged in setting up the space to offer her therapies.

“I want to support the slow learners here but I am finding it rather difficult as there are absolutely no materials,” she confides. “The way I’ve been trained depends on high quality equipment so I am having to do a lot of quick thinking. Everything here seems to be so disorganized compared to the German way of doing things, but actually I love it. I realize this is a unique opportunity for me as I have full control over what I will set up and the experience will be invaluable.”

Today New Creation School has four volunteers who come in part-time and some of them are lucky to live in a New Creation house that is kept especially for them.

## Age not a barrier

Not all volunteers are young people in search of fun and adventures. Mike and Sue, an English couple in their late forties, are highly-trained teachers looking for a way to use their years of experience when they retire from stressful jobs in England. They stayed and worked in New Creation School for two years.

Professor Heidi Watts, who must be in her early seventies, comes from Antioch University in New Hampshire, USA. She has been visiting to Auroville since the early 1990s and her help in education has been inestimable. Heidi spends about three months over the winter season in Auroville, often bringing some of her teacher-training students with her.

On Sunday mornings, up to 25 volunteers from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram can be found weeding in the Matrimandir gardens after their session in the Chamber. The acres of grass always need large numbers of volunteers who enjoy the quiet meditative work in the morning.

## Others

Twenty-five volunteers stay at the Mitra Youth Hostel, tucked away behind the Town Hall. Amongst those are six girls from the University of Minnesota, all biology students on a 4-month research project in India. They are now spending their last month volunteering in Auroville. “We had a choice of where to go in the world and most of our friends chose Europe, but we felt that’s a place we can go any time. India seemed a wonderful opportunity for us to experience a very different society and do something of value.”

The group does not have a professor with them which is quite unusual. “So we have to be self-motivated and organize everything ourselves, which has often been a great challenge, as you can imagine.”

They talk of the amazing time they are having in Auroville. “We still cannot get over the fact that the temperature here is 30 degrees above while back home it is 30 below!” The previous day they had been following the EM (Effective Micro-organisms) men in blue-uniforms on their bicycles evaluating the effectiveness of the EM spraying against the mosquitoes.

Like most other volunteers they complain about having to contribute to the Auroville Fund. “We’re already offering our work, so why should we have to contribute financially too?” they ask. Money can become an issue for those who stay longer, and they feel they should be helped more if they are in difficulties.

There are always a few young German volunteers here who had the choice of joining the German army or else of doing ‘social service’ either at home or abroad. A member of Auroville International Germany organized this Auroville connection several years ago and the programme seems to be very successful.

Not all volunteers are foreigners. Neelam and Vijay for example, are from Varanasi in North India. They are on a 22-week volunteer programme at Upasana, the garment unit run by Uma. They found Upasana through the internet and wanted to find out more about its design philosophy, the beautiful clothes it creates, and the attitude towards its workers.

The two have been especially looking for ways to learn about simpler types of weaving so that they can re-train weavers at Varanasi. They explain that over 50,000 traditional silk weavers have now lost their jobs due to cheaper imports from China. “So far we’ve already trained 40 weavers on different types of looms, and our aim is to retrain 1,300.” And about their time in Auroville: “It has been incredibly valuable. We’re very impressed with the social concerns and the creativity of Upasana.”

Dianna



Farming is a popular choice: volunteers harvesting salad greens at Solitude farm.

PHOTO COURTESY KRISHNA

# Population continues to rise

Auroville’s population has grown over the period December 2006 – November 2007 by 75 (or about 4%, roughly the same as last year). There are now 43 nationalities represented, with the addition of two new countries, Moldova and Norway.

The largest increase was in the Indian population: 39. However, the largest percentage rise is in the number of South Africans: an increase of 600% (a jump from 1 to 6). The Israelis increased their representation by 33% (from 21 to 28).

Most other nationalities recorded relatively unchanged figures, although the French representation increased by 11 and the Dutch by 8 (arresting three years of declining numbers). The British, Korean and Austrian communities registered a slight decline in their population.

In terms of the breakdown of nationalities, Indians now represent just over 40% of the total population, the French 15% and the Germans just under 12%, figures which are almost unchanged since last year. More than 2 out of 3 Aurovilians are now either Indian, French or German.

The adult gender ratio is now 89 females to 100 males. Last year it was 87:100. The ratio for minors (under 18) is 93 females to 100 males, a significant increase in female representation over the previous three years. The ratio of minors to adults has also changed. Whereas it was 27:100 last year, it has now increased to 30:100.

With bated breath we await the deep explication of these figures.

Alan

## Comparative overview by nationality (Nov. 2005 - Nov. 2007)

Nationality	Nov. 05	Nov. 06	Nov. 07
Indian	736	760	799
French	261	279	290
German	245	226	226
Italian	85	89	93
Dutch	77	75	83
American	61	65	67
Swiss	42	50	53
British	50	51	48
Russian	40	41	45
Spanish	30	32	33
Korean	20	25	19
Canadian	23	23	24
Israeli	16	21	28
Belgian	17	19	19
Ukrainian	15	16	16
Swedish	12	13	14
Australian	12	12	12
Austrian	10	10	7
Argentinian	8	7	7
Tibetan	7	6	7
Japanese	4	4	4
Sri Lankan	4	4	4
Brazilian	2	3	5
Danish	3	3	3
Hungarian	3	3	4
Bulgarian	2	2	2
Colombian	1	2	1
Ethiopian	2	2	2
Latvian	2	2	2
Lithuanian	2	2	1
Sloven	2	2	2
Algerian	1	1	1
Bielorussian	1	1	1
Finnish	1	1	1
Icelandic	0	1	1
Irish	1	1	1
Kazakh	1	1	1
Nepali	1	1	3
New Zealander	1	1	1
South African	1	1	6
Thai	0	1	2
Moldovan	0	0	1
Norwegian	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>1783</b>	<b>1865</b>	<b>1940</b>

## Adults and minors by gender (Nov. 2005 - Nov. 2007)

	Nov. 05	Nov. 06	Nov. 07
<b>Adults</b>	<b>1370</b>	<b>1464</b>	<b>1489</b>
males	728	786	788
females	642	678	701
<b>Minors (&lt; 18 years)</b>	<b>413</b>	<b>401</b>	<b>451</b>
males	220	215	233
females	193	186	218
<b>Total</b>	<b>1783</b>	<b>1865</b>	<b>1940</b>

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