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The last decades of the 20th century have witnessed a revolution in international telecommunication. Fuelled by cheaper, faster computers, better software, fibre optic cables, a vastly improved satellite system and the break-up of the old telephone monopolies which resulted in lower phone rates, global telecommunication traffic quadrupled between 1985-95. Internet, the globally-linked computer network, is growing at a phenomenal rate. By the end of 1997, 26 million host computers were connected to it and the volume of information on it is doubling every year (The World Wide Web, which it hosts, has over 200 million pages and adds about 300,000 pages a week). The amount of time spent online by U.S. adults is estimated to be almost ten hours per week.

In other words, whether we like it or not, we are part of, and increasingly influenced by, the cyber revolution. But what are the implications of this? Of being able to access vast amounts of information at a key stroke? Of being able to send and receive images, printed data, sound, to and from almost anywhere instantaneously? As usual, the doers get on with it while the philosophers struggle to make sense of what has happened, but, broadly, there seem to be three kinds of response to this revolution. Firstly, and this includes the vast majority of users, it's taken as a matter of fact, a new tool that, in spite of a few glitches, makes a lot of things easier or possible for the first time. Secondly, there are those enthusi-



Auroville Cyberville

Auroville is taking part in the cyber revolution. The Auroville homepage on the World Wide Web is visited by a thousand people a day, and more than 400 people are linked to the world via Auroville's own electronic Bulletin Board System. What has been the effect of this development so far?

AUROVILLE TODAY makes an assessment.

asts who see it in grander terms. They believe we are witnessing the creation of a "global brain" which will hasten the next stage in human evolution; that if time and space are the illusions which keep us apart then cyberspace is a crucial step towards human unity: that it is an intimation of another freer, finer world ("The surrogate life in cyberspace makes flesh feel like a prison, a fall from grace, a sinking descent into a dark, confusing reality"—Michael Helm); that it is a powerful means for raising consciousness ("The computer is not only a business tool, it is a 'metaphysical machine' which can trigger meditative awareness, the flow experience, and deep speculation on ultimate questions."—Let Davidson).

Finally, there are a minority of cyber-skeptics who are not convinced that it's such a good thing. They point to the dan-

gers of uncontrolled access—of children being exposed to cyberpornography and racism, for example—and of the virtual life becoming a substitute for the real one. They also fear it will become yet another tool of Western economic and communication colonialism. Some postulate that this new form of communication actually changes for the worse the way people perceive the world and relate to each other. The new medium, they argue, substitutes the accumulation of data for wisdom; it encourages simplistic, brief communication rather than well thought-out argument and analysis; it elevates entertainment above depth; it encourages fantasy rather than responsibility.

The Auroville experience

Auroville's AuroNET! started as a bulletin board system which initially only

provided internal email and forums. In 1996 Auroville tiptoed into cyberspace when AuroNET! began providing international email facilities, enabling global communication at a very cheap price. Today this external traffic accounts for about 6,000 messages (of 20 MB) a week. For the past two years, Auroville has also had very limited access to the full Internet—one public station and one private subscriber—although it does have a website (<http://www.auroville-india.org/>) on the World Wide Web which contains vast amounts of information about Auroville. A parallel development is an interactive CD-ROM about the community which is in process of production.

What has been the effect of these developments upon Auroville, upon its relationship with the larger world and that

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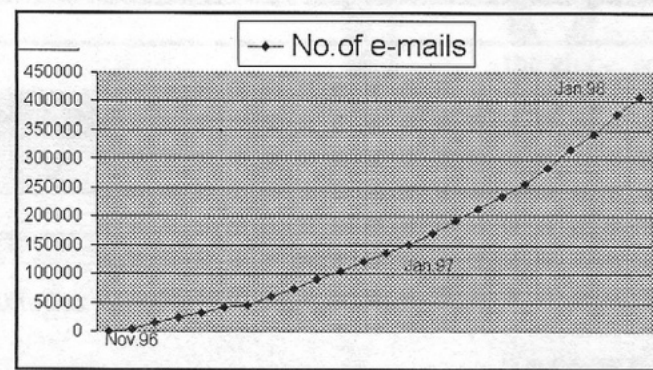
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world's relationship with the community? It's too early to be anything but tentative, but clearly the linking of computers with telephone lines has enormously facilitated communication within the community. While the existing telephone system already provided instant voice communication, the new system enables files and images to be transmitted equally fast, bypassing the unpredictable messenger service. Moreover, as the new medium involves individuals sitting at a computer terminal, it is potentially "cooler" than the telephone, allowing a more considered statement or response. Paradoxically, the ephemerality, the transience, of the computer screen also seems to encourage users to communicate informally—at times, even to take more personal risks—and this brings an energy, a "juiciness", to online discussions often missing in more formal meetings.

Having said this, it's worth remembering that, while about 400 Aurovilians subscribe to AuroNET! at present, far fewer than half have personal systems: the rest have to use public terminals which are few and far between. Moreover, the system is very much underutilized in terms of its potential. The present set-up allows us to poll subscribers, to conduct on-line conferencing, to run on-line and off-line forums etc. yet almost all the present usage is de-

voted to personal email. In this sense, it has not yet fulfilled the promise of the cyber-optimists who believed that the new technology would enable us to revolutionise the way we discuss issues and take decisions in the Auroville, and generally strengthen the sense of community.

As to Auroville's relationship with the larger world, the Auroville website is be-



DATA PROVIDED BY AURONET.

coming an important interface, receiving more than 1,000 "hits" a day at present. Already many people's first contact with Auroville is a "virtual" one. At the same time, the website allows others to give us feedback on how we're doing, and to collaborate in our development. This sense of Auroville being opened up to the world by the new technology has been most evident—and most controversial—in the example of the AVI Compat forum. This international forum began as a means of linking together members of

AVI USA but later expanded to include members of other AVI Centres, Aurovilians and friends. It has enabled ex-members of the community scattered around the world to contact each other again and to renew their link with Auroville. In fact, such is the speed of electronic communication that AVI Compts living thousands of miles away often hear about the latest events in

Auroville long before most Aurovilians! The forum has not only been used for information exchange, however. There is also much discussion about community issues—Matrimandir and Auroville's organisation, for example. Some of this has been of a high standard—higher, probably, than we would have achieved in our community meetings—and the forum has provided an invaluable means of keeping Auroville alert to the perspectives and expectations of a wider world which deeply cares about what happens here. The efficacy of the forum has been hampered, however, by a number of factors. There are few active participants, most of whom live outside Auroville, and the information they receive about what is happening here is often very partial. Consequently, many of their proposals seem to fall upon deaf ears in the com-

munity. This gives them a sense of frustration, which makes them shout a little louder and be more critical, which turns off more people...

What the experience of the AVI Compat Forum has done, however, is to raise crucial questions with which we have yet to grapple. These include what role outsiders or non-residents might play in Auroville's decision-making processes and this, in turn, raises the whole issue of what Auroville primarily is. A place? A state of consciousness? A global laboratory in which all are potentially co-workers?

As to the new technology—clearly, it is here to stay. But we can still make conscious choices about how we use it, and this involves exploring much more actively what its limitations are, what it is good for, and how it can be used to further our ideals. One future intriguing thought occurs. Is it possible that this new communication revolution, in the speed with which it is expanding the existing pool of knowledge, and in its tendency—through hyperlinks etc.—to break down linear patterns of thinking, is encouraging a shift in consciousness from the cerebral to something much more intuitive, something more able to grasp multiple connectedness and instantaneous shifts in the pattern of things, and then move on, without attachment, in readiness for the new "becoming"? Now THAT begins to be interesting!

In October, 1995, we interviewed Theo, Ulli and Rabiya about the new Bulletin Board System (BBS) they were setting up in Auroville, and their hopes for how it might stimulate increased community participation in discussions and decision-making. Recently we spoke to Theo and Ulli again about how far their hopes have been fulfilled and about the next big step in our cyber evolution.

How has the BBS developed in the past two years?

Ulli: Two years ago we had hardly begun to communicate internationally. Now 6,000 electronic messages a week are passing between Auroville and the outside world, and email has largely supplanted other forms of communication like FAX and international STD. In fact, as email is charged at local telephone rates, the income of the Auroville telephone exchange has actually dropped by about 30% in the past year!

Theo: There are approximately 450 people on AuroNET!, our internal communication network, of whom about 400 are Aurovilians and 50 are friends. Although technically we could accommodate more, we seem to have reached a certain plateau of numbers with the existing set-up.

These figures don't tell you how people use this facility. For example, it's interesting to note that AuroNET! is used almost exclusively for email: hardly anybody is setting up forums, polling Aurovilians or using it for on-line conferencing.

This is partly because of technical limitations: we have only six telephone lines at present making people uneasy about staying on-line very long, and the present software does not allow the forums to be used to their maximum advantage.

Ulli: Looking back, we can see that

AuroNET! and the Internet

An interview with Auroville's Cyber Captains

the moment we opened up the possibility of communicating outside Auroville with this new medium and improved the user interface, the internal traffic picked up a lot. In fact, we probably have—given the size of our community—one of the most used and efficient email services in the world at present.

What about Internet access?

Ulli: What we have not yet been able to provide for Aurovilians is comparable ease of access to the Internet: this is our next big challenge. But once this is possible and we have a critical mass of Aurovilians who are "Internet literate", I'm sure a lot more people will plug in and start communicating in more interesting ways. The electronic version of the Auroville News could start using hypertext, for example.

Actually, soon Internet access will not be a technical problem. There is Internet access in Pondicherry now, and once the Auroville Exchange is upgraded—which they have to do by the end of March—and the new Pondicherry link is activated, we will have a permanent leaseline connection for the Internet, along with ten additional internal connections. Within three or four months we could already have forty people connected. If this creates a critical mass, within a year a hundred people could be plugged in.

Theo: The challenge is financial rather than technical. Now, for the first time, users of AuroNET! have to pay a nominal sum. This is to make them value the service more, but also to deter individuals from sending or receiving huge amounts of data (the more you send and

receive, the more you pay). However, this income by no means covers the additional costs of the new set-up. Even with help from Shuttle, we still need additional funds to create public access stations to the Internet in places like the Solar Kitchen and larger communities. We hope some of the units will participate. We may also set up a Cyber Cafe which would charge by the hour for Internet access... but this would only be a nominal fee.

Ulli: We should stress that this is not meant to be a profit-making operation. It is, above all, an experiment in communication. At present, Auroville has a choice. Either we stagnate at the present communication level, or we take the next step to widespread Internet connectivity. If we choose the latter, the community will have to participate financially.

Theo: The Internet can offer enormous possibilities to Auroville in the fields of education, business, architecture etc. It has already stimulated us to create our own Web Site. The result is far more information about Auroville is being put out now than was the case a few years ago. If Auroville wants to be a laboratory of evolution it must not only be in touch with everything significant happening elsewhere; it must also be willing to describe what it has been doing so that others can test it out and evaluate it. In this respect, I think the Website is a tremendous tool.

What about educational possibilities?

Ulli: In terms of educational possibilities, we are just about to set up an interesting experiment at Transition School.

We are going to augment their existing computer set-up and have it linked to the Internet so that eight students can simultaneously access the Internet under the supervision of a teacher. It will be very interesting to see what effect this has upon teaching methods and the students' progress.

But I think the significance of Auroville being in cyberspace is much larger than this. For example, the danger of becoming a tiny island, of Auroville building walls around itself, is diminished by its access to a wider electronic world. It helps us keep things in perspective, and it's good that others can provide input into our process because it prevents us becoming an incestuous society in terms of ideas and creativity.

Theo: Knowledge is power, and I think this electronic network minimises the possibility of somebody using their private knowledge to exercise power over others. It won't prevent it happening completely, but it is definitely a counterweight.

What about the possibility of electronic discussion forums? Have they fulfilled your expectations?

Theo: Active Aurovillian participation in electronic forums both within Auroville and outside it, like the AVI Compatible forum, is very low. I think this is because many Aurovilians have become somewhat fatalistic about what happens here, and the struggle for survival has taken precedence over discussion of community issues. In the process, it's as if Aurovilians have unlearned how to communicate and instead come to rely upon a few vocal people to speak for them.

But the potential for change is here, and the new electronic possibilities

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AURONET! THE FUTURE...?

The AuroNET! team dream:

In keeping with the ideal of the Charter, Auroville should take advantage of new technologies in communication that are available in the world. At present, Aurovilians use only the e-mail service of AuroNET! for communication, but in reality, much more can be accomplished with this electronic tool.

AuroNET! can form the backbone of **reliable and instantaneous exchange of information and ideas** in the community. Aurovilians can access any sort of information through AuroNET!—from checking the local weather report to reviewing ideas prior to taking a decision at a meeting. Discussions on community issues can be structured on AuroNET! such that there is a meaningful interchange of ideas from all participants—working groups and individual Aurovilians. The various possibilities for structuring information that AuroNET! offers will get the community to take a closer look on how it handles information and consequently how it organizes itself. Given the fact that Auroville is spread out over a large area and most Aurovilians lead individualized lives, AuroNET! can bind us together and create a new sense of community by developing new and hitherto unexplored communication structures.

AuroNET! can also greatly facilitate **community services**, such as conducting financial transactions. Databases and information retrieval systems of AuroNET! can provide easy access to information, currently stored with various working groups and units or in the Auroville Archives.

In the field of **education**, the Internet is an ideal supportive classroom medium that, as a tool for research, will greatly facilitate project-based teaching in Auroville. With global connectivity through AuroNET!, the bottleneck of the scarcity of good teaching materials can easily be eliminated. Small peer groups which are the bane of Auroville-schools can be avoided by extending the classroom globally via Internet.

With AuroNET!'s access to the Internet, there will be a tremendous potential for research, for exchange and cross-fertilisation of ideas, in all fields from town-planning to appropriate technology, with researchers from all over the world. Funding for research projects can also be sought through the Internet. The Auroville Homepage currently lists Auroville's achievements in alternative technologies and environmental regeneration on the worldwide forum of the Internet.

Business units of Auroville, especially those that are geared towards export, will greatly benefit from the exposure to a large, worldwide audience via the Internet. E-mail has already proved itself to be a cheap and effective tool for business communication. The Internet opens the door to new ideas for business, for generating personal and community income.

All Aurovilians can avail the communication facilities of AuroNET! through the **public access stations**. The AuroNET! office at the Solar Kitchen complex offers technical assistance in installation and maintenance of software and training to new users. As the use of this electronic tool grows, assistance to individuals in information retrieval, up/downloading, forming mailing lists etc. will also be made available. However, in order to establish a dynamic communication network within and outside of the community, it is vital that Aurovilians are willing to participate and share their thoughts and ideas through this electronic medium. The community as a whole needs to get involved with this cyber tool that has revolutionized communication all over the world.

Lords of the dance

An interview with the CD-ROM team

For some months now, a small team has been preparing a CD-ROM on Auroville. Auroville Today spoke to them about the project, and about the influence of the new technology which has revolutionised communication.

AVT: What is a CD-ROM?

Manoj: A CD-ROM is a Compact Disk Read-Only Memory which contains a large amount of information (650 MB): this can be conveyed through different media—text, graphics, video, sound, animation etc., and hence it is also called multimedia. What makes this communication medium unique is that it is interactive. In other words, the user determines the way he or she accesses the information, and the challenge is to make this interaction as interesting as possible.

Why a CD-ROM on Auroville?

Holger: Through the use of hyperlinks (words or images that, on being highlighted, offer more in-depth information about that topic—Eds.) a CD-ROM makes it far easier to indicate complex links and interrelationships between different areas and concepts than would be possible in a linear written document. This is why it is particularly suitable for providing a wide overview of a place like Auroville where so many different things are happening, and so much is interrelated.

What are the challenges of writing a CD-ROM?

Manoj: Writing a CD-ROM about Auroville is a big challenge. You begin by structuring information into major categories—culture, economy, yoga etc.—but as soon as you start working on any one category you find you are led into many other connected topics. So a presentation on Yoga can lead to the topic of the proper role of money, which can lead to self-sufficiency, farming etc. Many things you cannot plan beforehand: it's a very organic process which requires a lot of intuition and creativity as you dance

between topics.

Holger: In this project, there are challenges on all levels. These include getting a computer, working out how to use the programmes, learning how to master the various media—and that's just in the office! Then there is the problem of understanding Auroville well enough to know where to go to get the right information. I've been here seven years, and I haven't even understood a small fraction of this place yet. This is where the need comes in to expand our team.

Then there is the problem of sensitive information. We've hardly touched this yet—we keep to safe topics—but ultimately, because Auroville is a laboratory it's important to document the failures and problems as well as the successes.

In this context, it is vital that the CD-ROM provides some context to help people understand why there are failures and conflicts here: such things should be seen in the light of what we are trying to

"It's a very organic process which requires a lot of intuition and creativity as you dance between topics."

do. At present, we know that our first attempt—which we hope to have out by 15th August—may fail to avoid causing some confusion. But we see the first CD-ROM as a seed. Hopefully it will interest enough Aurovilians to make them want to join our team, so that by the time we bring out our third version in two or three years' time, it will be much more complete. The larger project, however, is the creation of huge electronic archive. If we can structure this well, we can keep on adding new information while drawing upon it for many different projects.

What we have to accept, however, is that we can't directly document the most important part of the experiment of Auroville, which is the change of consciousness. We can only provide, on a mainly mental level, material for further

research and understanding.

For whom is the CD-ROM meant?

Stefano: When I first joined this team, I thought we were making this CD-ROM for people outside Auroville, but actually one of our goals is to produce something which enables Aurovilians to understand what other Aurovilians are doing, since we never seem to have time to sit down with each other any more.

Holger: One idea is to take a photo of a group of Aurovilians at a meeting. Then, on the screen, you can click on each one and find out their name and what they are doing in Auroville!

Have you been changed by working with computers?

Stefano: What I've also noticed since I got into this computer world is I understand much better how my mind works.

Holger: This is not surprising because our memory works like hyperlinks in a CD-ROM. Working with computers has not so much changed my way of thinking as made me more conscious of that process.

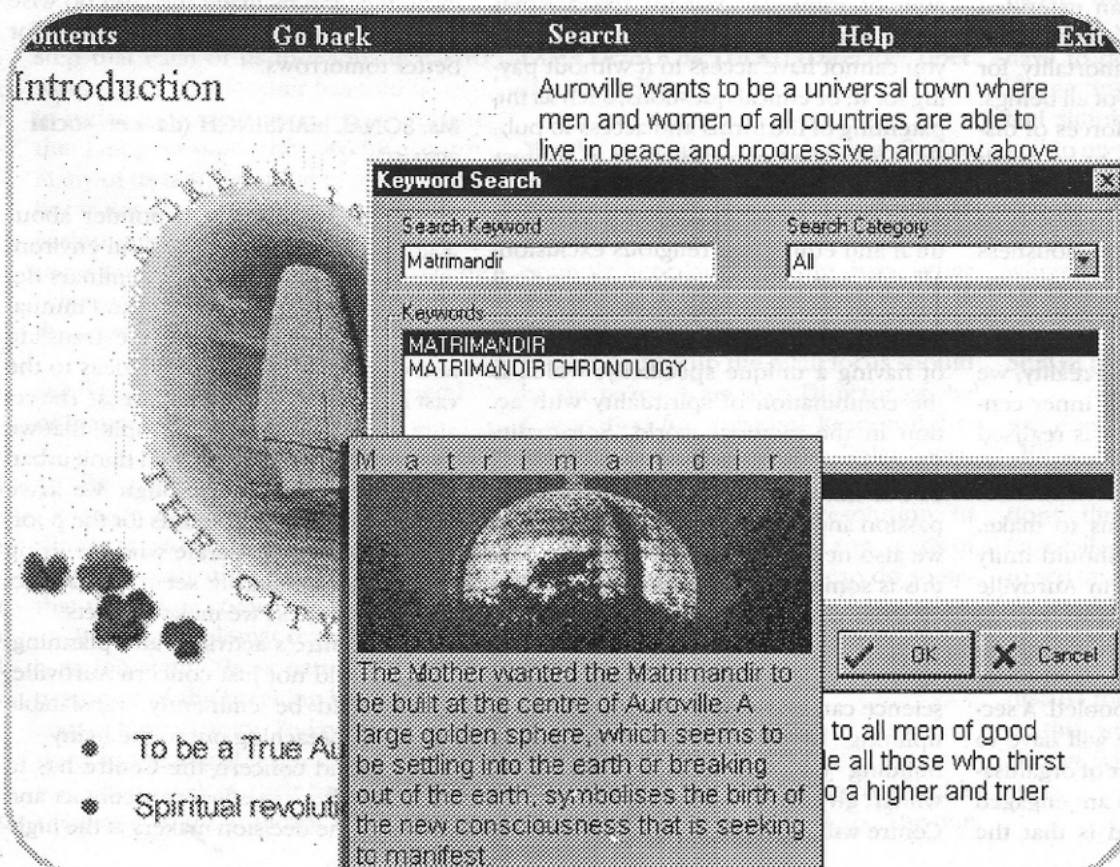
Manoj: Working with computers and on this CD-ROM has also helped me see how other people's minds work. To write a good CD-ROM you have to know the user's mind. Now, when I get information from somebody, I immediately see how clear or confused that person's mind is. It has also helped me train and structure my mind. If a computer has a problem with doing something, there is always a rational cause. Our natural tendency when confronted with a problem is to react emotionally. But the only way to solve a computer's problem is to sit quietly and go back, step by step, analysing what you have done, until you find what is wrong. This is a very valuable approach to use in everyday life, too.

Holger: The new technology, which has resulted in the total pool of knowledge available to mankind doubling every few years, is forcing us to use our minds in different ways. It is no longer possible to know anything but a tiny corner of a particular field. So the minds of the future won't be trained to retain as much information as possible—as was the case in the past—but to access relevant information as efficiently as possible, and then move on. We

no longer need to clog our minds with vast amounts of data because that data will be available anywhere at a keystroke.

Manoj: We are forced to look at things in a different way now. Previously you learned something and then you knew it. But new knowledge is appearing so fast now that you cannot function by using memory any more: you have to develop the capacity to grasp its underlying logical structure instantly. This demands that you are always very alert, very conscious. If you're not, you become obsolete the next day!

From an interview by Alan



CD-ROM screen captured in print

TOWARDS A WORLD CENTRE FOR HUMAN UNITY

On February 2, 1998, an article appeared in the Indian daily newspaper *The Hindu*. It began:

The quest for human unity is as old as human civilisation. Following the end of the Cold War, the demolition of the Berlin Wall and the end of apartheid in South Africa, several eminent thinkers and writers had hoped that the world will witness a new era of harmony and friendship. However, detailed studies undertaken by the International Commission on Peace and Food, reveal that numerous mini-conflicts are taking the place of potential mega wars. Also there has been an enormous proliferation of small arms. Everywhere violence seems to be growing in the human heart, starting with violence to oneself through drug addiction and AIDS and extending to ethnic conflicts.

Consequently, the redeployment of funds from defense to development is also

not taking place on any significant scale. Even the spread of the environmental movement has not helped to promote tolerance and peace, although as stressed by Gandhiji over 60 years ago: 'How can we be non-violent to nature, unless non-violence becomes central to the ethos of human culture?'

It is against this background that we should rejoice at a significant redevelopment taking place at Auroville in Tamil Nadu.

On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of Auroville, the Auroville Foundation and the members of the Auroville community have decided to establish the Sri Aurobindo World Centre for Human Unity. This Centre will function as a platform to explore both the human community and the global environment.

The article was written by Dr. M.S. SWAMINATHAN, Chairman of the

Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation, who is one of the prime movers behind the initiative to create the Sri Aurobindo World Centre for Human Unity in Auroville. The previous day, Auroville had hosted a special seminar in the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium to elicit ideas and inspiration for the proposed Centre. Among the invitees were Dr Ismail Serageldin, Vice-President in charge with Environmentally Sustainable Development at the World Bank; the dancer and activist Sonal Mansingh; Dr Ariyaratne, President of the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement in Sri Lanka; Norman Myers, environmental writer; Doboom Tulkku, Director of Tibet House in Delhi; Dr Xuan Zengpei, Senior Advisor on International Relations for the Chinese State Commission on Science and Technology, as well as a number of Ashramites, members of the

Governing Board, and other friends of Auroville like Begum Bilkees Latif and Sriram Panchu.

A seminar which brings together a senior Chinese official and an eminent Tibetan monk, a Vice-President of the World Bank and a prominent environmentalist, is already making some kind of statement about human unity. But the tone was set by Shri Nirodbaran, who, referring to Auroville's Charter that "Auroville will be a site for material and spiritual researches for a living embodiment of an actual Human Unity," stated that Human Unity cannot be realised if it is not founded on spirituality.

Here are extracts from a stimulating day which Dr. Karan Singh, in his summing up, called a "successful brainstorming":

Begum BILKEES LATIF (writer, active in children's welfare):

I wish to share with you that while driving down from Madras, I could sense a change in the atmosphere when I entered Auroville. I used to feel that special atmosphere when I came to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram when Mother was still in her body. I never before felt it in Auroville, except when entering the Matrimandir.

This particular experience made me feel that there is hope that this Centre may work, provided it does not become too much of an intellectual exercise.

Dr. KARAN SINGH (ex-minister in the Govt. of India; present member of Raja Sabha; Governing Board member):

The concept and the ideal of human unity is deeply imbedded in India's long and unbroken spiritual tradition. The Vedas and the Upanishads speak of the entire human race as an extended human family, they speak of the children of God, of the children of immortality, for the Lord resides in the heart of all beings.

In the world today, the forces of disunity and disharmony seem to be much more active and effective than the forces of human unity. Anything that is able to concentrate and focus our consciousness on human unity is therefore to be recommended. But a purely intellectual approach will be self-defeating. If the concept of human unity is to find reality, we have to find in ourselves our inner centre, the psychic being. If that is realised Auroville itself will be a centre for an effective human unity.

I have a few observations to make. The first is that the Centre should unify all the various institutions in Auroville such as SAIIR, CIRHU and Savitri Bhavan. A co-ordinator or academic director will be necessary, and resources (books, people) have to be pooled. A second one is that this Centre will have to network with a large number of organisations around the globe who are engaged in similar activities. A third is that the

Centre has to be prepared, notwithstanding Auroville's dislike of religions in general, to interact with religious institutions in order to understand and contribute to finding solutions for the major conflicts of today that are based on religious or ethnic conflicts. A last observation is that human unity starts at home, and Auroville should be willing to solve the divisive issues that have been dogging it for many years.

Dr. ISMAEL SERAGELDIN (Vice President, Environmentally Sustainable Development, the World Bank):

We move towards the 21st century, to a knowledge-based society and knowledge-driven economies. The Centre will have to address various forms of apartheid, such as between the "haves and have nots," the fact that 20 % of the world population controls more than 83 % of the world's income and is today 60 times as rich; or the pernicious development of proprietary science, the idea that knowledge can be appropriated, and that you cannot have access to it without paying for it; or ethical questions, such as the patenting of life forms and access to public goods. The Centre will have to address multiple dimensions of exclusiveness such as political, economic, social, cultural and ethnic and religious exclusion. All this needs to be addressed, and all available research models should be used. Here, Auroville has the advantage of having a unique specificity, which is the combination of spirituality with action in the material world. Spirituality does indeed call forth the better aspects of our nature and it enables us to fuse passion and compassion in our work. But we also need to ground it in reality, and this is something which is unique in this experience here. It is not disengagement from life, but engagement with it. It results in a holistic view where reductionist science can go side by side with spiritual uplifting. It seems to me that you are building on real achievements here, which gives me the feeling that this Centre will be true.

It was a remarkable experience for me to be some time in the Inner Chamber of the Matrimandir, for it allows each one to reach into his or her tradition and to be reinvigorated and strengthened with the inner sense of the spiritual. Bringing the material and spiritual together is the essence of starting the quest for human unity. It is not in the subjugation or the loss of the identity of self into the many that human unity would be achieved, but it is respect for the individuality of each member of humanity, and recognising the interconnectedness of all human beings as well as all human beings in relations to other aspects of nature.

In that interconnectedness you have made a remarkable start here. In your effort to live the faith is the beginning of the articulation of true human unity for all of us wherever we are. Recharged by this experience we must go forth and live the faith, remember the forgotten, think of the unborn, give hope to the forlorn, reach out to the unreached, include the excluded, and by living the faith do wise actions that will lay the foundations for better tomorrows.

Ms. SONAL MANSINGH (dancer, social activist):

It is very glamorous to ponder about grave problems in a beautiful environment, and I often find that seminars descend to a level of socialising and mutual back-patting. But how do we translate and carry and communicate ideas to the vast numbers living in rural areas? The reality is that we are urban people, that we speak an urban language and think urban thoughts and that, although we have great concerns in our minds for the poor, uneducated and illiterate who are living in villages, we hardly seem to connect with them unless we make projects.

The Centre's activities and planning, then, should not just concern Auroville; they should be eminently translatable into action reaching out to the many.

A second concern the Centre has to address is how to effectively contact and convince the decision makers at the high-

est levels. A third concern is how to change the attitude towards women, most of whom today are still treated with unacceptable arrogance.

Dr. NORMAN MYERS (environmentalist):

Auroville is a place where we leave our labels behind in the car park, where each of us can be what we are and accepted for what we are. I spend a good part of my life running around in universities and research centres, and I am often reminded of that person who once said: when all is said and done, there is a lot more said than done. But at Auroville, you are getting on with it; you do not even think about human unity, but you do it, you live it.

We can have too much thought. That's why I was so relieved to go into Matrimandir and sit there, and not think but just be, and let whatever come to the surface. I felt more trust in myself than I had felt for a long time. There was peace, and I felt heartened and strengthened to step out in the world again. How fine that this should be the place chosen for the World Centre.

And there is a tremendous urgency today that it succeeds. For within the lifetime of most people in this room, humankind is going to do things together, whether they want to or not, because there are so many global problems of environment coming up. The winds carry no passport. Economically too, we are all living in each other's pockets, so close together that we jostle up against each other, close enough to hit or to hug each other more than people have ever done in the past.

It seems that hugging is the way out, for there is no other way to solve our problems then by doing it together. We see that if humankind is forced to do things together, that we have to expand our horizons to take in everybody else on earth.

Aurovilians are fortunate to be right on the front-line of this magnificent experiment, the best that people ever at-

tempted since they came out of the caves. I wish much joy to you in your work, in your lives together, in your aspirations, in your dreams.

Shri MAHENDRA M. SHAH (Executive Secretary, System Review Secretariat, World Bank):

There is a park in East Africa called Masai steppe. On the other side is the Serengeti. At the end of each year, a million wildebeest gather on the plains of Masai steppe. There is total silence. Suddenly there is the sound of thunder from over Serengeti. The strong ones start to move and suddenly there are a million wildebeest on the run. They reach the Masai river which separates them from the new food in Serengeti. There are crocodiles in the river. But the strong ones in front do not stop. They jump in the river and the crocodiles move in for the kill. But on the top of their bodies the rest of the millions cross to feed in Serengeti on the other side.

The wildebeest find their sustainability in moving from one side to the other. For us it is equally important to move from the spiritual to the material, so that the ecological spiritual world is created here soon. For time is against us.

Mr. N. KRISHNAN (former Indian Ambassador to the U.N., Governing Board member):

Human unity, to me, means essentially the realisation of four concepts. The first concept is unity in diversity. It has become very popular to talk about preserving the diversity of the ecosystem. It is equally vital to preserve the diversity of the human beings, as we don't want a human society in which everybody looks alike. The second concept is unity in creativity. It follows from unity in diversity that every person is not going to engage in similar tasks, but that every individual should have space to develop his or her own talents. The third concept is unity in equity. We cannot have human unity if there are too great disparities in standards of life and life styles. The fourth concept is unity in co-operation. We do not want unity in which there is just tolerance of the other persons, or even respect. Even "to live and let live" is not adequate. What we need is for all humans to get together, despite those differences, and to work together for a common goal and higher purpose. Auroville is still very far from the realisation of any of these concepts, but it endeavours to implement them.

Shri JAYANTILAL PAREKH (Sri Aurobindo Ashram):

The concept of a Sri Aurobindo Centre is the result of a concerted effort of all those in India who are interested in the manifestation of Sri Aurobindo's vision: the Sri Aurobindo Ashrams in Pondicherry and New Delhi, the Sri Aurobindo Society and a few other organisations. Together they presented a paper to the Government of India suggesting that there should be a research centre where various disciplines which lead to the goal before us can be studied in a free and unhampered way, and it was found that Auroville would be the best place to locate such a centre.

The Centre has a most essential function to fulfil: to research ways to manifest

Sri Aurobindo's vision, to find ways and means how to fulfil his ideals.

Ms. ASTER PATEL (Aurovilian):

From the first publication of Sri Aurobindo's works in the early 1940's till the late 1960's or early 1970's, very many brilliant minds went into a great deal of theoretical exposition of Sri Aurobindo's works. In the context of Auroville we have to concentrate on the practical aspects: How do you work out life, individual and collective, in the spirit of Sri Aurobindo? If we restrict ourselves only to academic research, we limit the activities and that is also not the basis of Auroville's experience.

Auroville's processes in the past up to the present have been more divisive, even though our goal and aspiration is for unity. Can we think of some group that tries to look at all the issues of Auroville from a unifying perspective? For we cannot just take Sri Aurobindo's name as it suits us, we invoke an Action in doing so.

DR. RAMADASAN (Malaysia):

The type of education which most human beings receive at present is aimed at holding a paper qualification. What is lacking is the emphasis on the inner man, for the inner man holds the key to the outer man. A good educational system which addresses the issue of human unity has to incorporate inner development. Education also has to focus on a paradigm shift: man should stop thinking of himself as a master species who is master of nature. If he is properly educated he sees himself as part of nature. If that can be accomplished, we would be able to accomplish human unity, based on the recognition of the oneness of all creation, oneness of the cosmos and of the universe.

MS. JHUMUR BHATTACHARYA (Sri Aurobindo Ashram):

For an effective human unity, we have to become complete human beings first. We have to unify ourselves around our inner centre, instead of allowing ourselves to be pulled in different directions. As it is always the ego that comes between oneself and oneself and the world, the abolition of the ego is the very first step that each of us individually has to work upon. The Mother has told us that in order to do that we must coordinate the being around the psychic centre. Many of us talk about the psychic centre, but is not easy to experience. For me the easiest way is to offer the being as completely as possible to the Divine. Having achieved oneness within oneself, one can then attempt oneness with others.

MR. PHILIPPE BABRY (Consul General of France):

The concept of human unity is necessarily appealing to me and to every diplomat, as our job aims at working towards human unity. It is when we fail that the armies come in.

But each diplomat represents a state, a nation state. These nations are prime examples of the breaking up of the concept of human unity. Today there 195 nations in the world, each with their territory, their borders, their flag, national anthem and so on. It means no free move-

ment of people, no free right of travel from one state to the other, no automatic right of residence for "foreign nationals". So working towards human unity also means overcoming the rigidity of the sovereignty of the nation state.

MR. SHARMA, Chief Secretary, Pondicherry:

We all are like beads of a rosary, and the thread which passes through all these beads, the thread of the spiritual consciousness, is the real essence of the unity. It is this which we have to strive for. But it cannot suddenly start from the collective; it has to start from the level of an individual. If I am not at peace with myself, I cannot think of bringing about peace amongst others. If there is no peace, no unity in my small unit, which is known as my family, I cannot think of peace in my neighbourhood. And it expands like this. To be in search of our "in-search" should be our starting point.

DR. A.T. ARIYARATNE (President of the Sarvodaya movement, Sri Lanka, and International Advisory Council member):

I must confess that I am in a learning process, as a new member of the International Advisory Council. In my formative years I read every book I could of Sri Aurobindo and also by The Mother. I was naturally attracted to Auroville. But being 66 now, I have been resigning from most of the world bodies I was a member of. What attracts me to Auroville is that it is one of those places where people very strongly believe that the spiritual energy a group can collectively create can make a difference in people who have no spiritual inclination at all. Therefore, it is very important that you should network, and that the core of that networking should not be with religiously motivated people (there are plenty of fanatics around the world) but with something beyond religion. In India they call it dharma, reality, things as they are.

Auroville is based on the principle that self-transformation is necessary to transform the outside. Our movement in Sri Lanka is the same. As we are not very far away, I want to send groups to learn from you and you are welcome to come and learn from us. I am sure this Centre will succeed.

LAMA DOBOOM TULKU (Director, Tibet House, Delhi):

In the programme for the new Centre you have mentioned consciousness evolution and dealing with environmental problems. You have set a very good example here, but there are many other organisations in the world working on that. My submission is that in this Centre you are setting up the main focus should be on peace. I am also Director of the Foundation for Universal Responsibility set up by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. One of the ideas of His Holiness is to do something about conflict resolution, to work towards harmony and sow seeds of harmony and peace. If you can do something on that level, maybe a project called "seeds of harmony", we would be happy to be part of that.

SRIRAM PANCHU (lawyer):

Human Unity is a big basket and holds a lot of ideas and concepts. The one

I would like to talk about is peace. Peace is fundamental, and in order to get peace, the ability to resolve conflicts is essential. There are great public divisions in society: divisions regarding the environment, in the distribution of social resources etc. If you can draw those in conflict to a place as peaceful as this, I think you would enable them to communicate with each other. And if you can open up communication, that often is the first and most effective step to resolving conflict. Also, if you could initiate studies into conflict situations (e.g. the Cauvery dispute), and if you could say how it is possible for a conflict like this to be solved by mediation, that by itself would be a work of great public utility.

Dialogue is also important in another sense. It is in the sense of education, of understanding and through that of growth. Another idea I would like to promote is that of the Auroville seminar. What I have in mind is that you would be the host for this yearly seminar and that you would draw here for it people of proven quality and expertise and professionals of demonstrated performance. There are many possible areas of exploration—health, education, housing, environment, politics, laws, environment, business, justice. I believe for all these big issues there is a need for alternatives, the need for a new vision and focus and structure, and this should be the aim of the seminar.

The basis of all this, in my mind, is that there are many truths, and once we come to understand this we understand the need for a dialogue, and from that grows everything else like compassion, understanding, and finding a way to move forward. The world is a shrinking circle of hope. There is so much corruption and disillusion. If we are to change this we must express our ideals in a concrete, action-based way which produces demonstrable results.

FREDERICK (Aurovilian):

There are seasons of growth, individual and collective. Collectively we have gone as far into the ordinary material level as Auroville possibly can go. If we let down the masks we see that Auroville externally and collectively is not well. Because it has been given Sri Aurobindo's name, this Centre calls us to gather around his name again. I do not think we have to do very much more at present, like getting into big action programmes; I feel simply a need to clear out a space within myself, and within the community, for Sri Aurobindo's action. It seems to me that we are so busy sometimes that there is no such space left. Let's create a focus where this presence can be evoked, and for some time leave it like that.

SERGE (Aurovilian):

When we speak of offering a solution to the world situation I feel depressed. For, somehow, all our institutions, the Ashram as well as Auroville, have failed and we must have the courage to see the truth. We cannot offer much to the world if we do not come back to the central truth of our coming here. So let's try to give this new endeavour that we discuss today this direction. If we do not do this, we will have just another Centre, and we will fail again.

Compats comment

AVI@compatible.com is the email address of an international forum on which Auroville residents and Auroville International members and friends abroad discuss topics relating to Auroville. Recently, AUROVILLE TODAY asked the "compats" to comment on the Forum and its significance to Auroville's development. Here is a selection from their responses:

"As to the consequences of Auroville being [discussed] in cyberspace, I fear that (so far) it is "survival of the verbiest", and that the strong end up flapping their keys to the exclusion of a real inclusive interchange. There are many, many out there that are either timid or bored or frustrated in the way this phenomenon plays out. This makes me think it may take some time before we have an equitable representation of types and styles: it will take more pregnant pauses to bring out those who have ideas and responses but not the drive to be on top." (Jack Alexander)

"I joined this link in order to shorten the distance between myself and those in Auroville, and those who are part of Auroville though not residing there at present, and to be abreast of what is up at the moment in Auroville. All is fulfilled except that I feel sure I am being informed on only the issues that people feel strongly enough to write on. My relationship to Auroville with the input of the Auroville forum entering my space here in Seattle has been greatly enhanced. I tune in every three or four days, read what is happening (or, at least, what some feel strongly enough to write on) and each time feel nostalgia for the place, to be on my cycle in the early morning on the Certitude road towards Matrimandir, hearing birdcalls, encountering fragrant jasmine trailing down the hair of ladies sitting on the backs of passing cycles..." (Marlenka)

"Aside from the joy of always having mail in my mailbox, there is the joy of once again feeling the pulse of Auroville. The dedication, the conviction, the open-mindedness and the sometimes over-zealousness of Auroville is all there.

My first surprise after my name was presented was the responses I received. There were people out there, all over the world, it suddenly became clear, with whom I shared a common bond, an understanding of a place often too hard to describe to others who have never been. I felt the need to post something, anything, to acknowledge the welcome, to say hello. Not long after I learnt something about how this forum can tend to function. Among the seven or eight posted messages to the forum that day, a few responded to my message. While all of them were essentially positive and well-meaning, I found myself suddenly feeling slightly exposed to an unseen audience. I scanned each response for sub-text and found myself resisting the urge to reply to each comment in an almost self-defense reflex." (Luke)

"It's the first time I can express myself exactly as I want to while probably being heard by more people than when speaking in a meeting in Auroville.

As to how I see this forum contributing to the development of Auroville, the key word is integration. I perceive the idea growing of an integration of all the aspects of Auroville, which comprise 1) all Aurovilians and function groups within Auroville 2) all long-time Aurovilians abroad and all the Auroville centres. If we consider Aurovilians and those abroad as equal children-partners, Auroville needs to develop the computer facilities that those who want to participate can do so relatively easily. Then the AuroNet connection within Auroville and the Auroville-forum can become part of Auroville's internal functioning. In this way, important issues can be posted to the forum for responses, ideas, suggestions, guidance, discussion. These comments are then studied and a synthesis, when needed and possible, made. Still the responsible groups (in Auroville) will have the power of final decision-making, provided they can show they have applied or seriously considered the forum-output—from abroad and from the Auroville community—in their decision-making.

As long as the AVI-forum is not part of Auroville's internal functioning, I do not see that contributions on relevant topics can be of much importance, although there is always an influence and effect." (August)

"In general, I think it's a good thing. I believe that the level of discussion in general tends to be a little more reasoned and less heated than what one might get in person." (Larry)

"My experience with the Auroville International compatible forum has so far been mainly negative. Having been part of an "official" Auroville working group, the Working Committee, I was repeatedly upset to read how easily some of the compats could be ignited against the Working Committee (or any other working group) by often partial truths or simply misleading statements thrown on the forum by angry or frustrated individuals. If those statements concerned the Working Committee, I felt it was sometimes necessary to correct them, or give the Working Committee's point of view, which occasionally resulted in apologies (which, strangely, were not sent to the forum but to me individually). Some compats believe that they have a "right to information" and that the Working Committee or any other committee for

that matter has to provide information upon their request. This attitude and this experience has taken the "joy of sharing" largely away. Another frustration was that the forum has been used to try to impress a personal view on the other compats. While there is nothing wrong with expressing a personal view, its unending repetition and the disregard for contradictory views, often denounced in a derogatory way, also contributed to the fact that the forum is no longer considered "a safe space" where you can express your ideas without fear of being maligned: a blow via the net is as hard as one in the face. The forum has degenerated to another version of the letters page of the Auroville News (which is universally repudiated in Auroville) with the one difference that the news only appears once a week, the forum the minute you start your e-mail work." (Carel)

"The Auroville International compat forum to which many people living in and outside of Auroville belong, is controversial for some people because of some of the things that have been said by people using it. This is like getting mad at the telephone because somebody insults you over it. The discussions on this forum have naturally reflected the people using it. On the Forum I have been accused of all sorts of things including "passive aggression" and could even have deserved some of it for being so flippant in some of the things that I wrote. On the other hand, I have been weeping at the keyboard with joy and love because of some of the exchanges. At the same time, I experience a privacy and yet an intimacy with the words that appear on the screen. The words are manifesting out of psychic spaces whatever virtual jargon we like to use. I am seeing these words become flesh right in front of me on my super laptop and they will go electronically to the Auroville Today team and if they pass, you'll now have got this! Got what? Got the inspiring message that Spirit goes through the Net." (Bill)

AuroNET! and Internet (continued from p.2)

which are becoming part of the fabric of Auroville can help bring about that change... if we are ready to use them in that way.

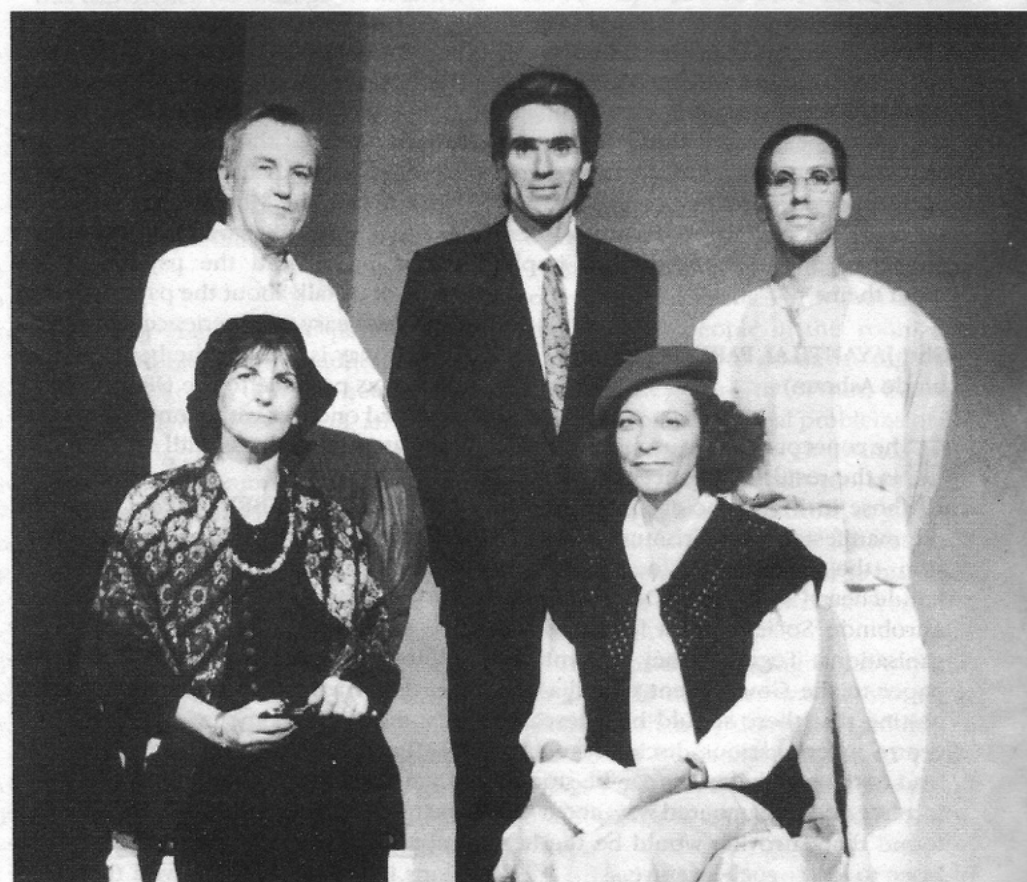
Ulli: What is not predictable is the extent to which Auroville will use the new electronic possibilities to strengthen our sense of community, to increase participation in our decision-making process. I'm far less optimistic about this now than I was two years ago. I feel it's more likely that the individual consuming aspect and individual information-gathering will predominate.

There's another reason why I'm less hopeful: I find it remarkable that there is such enormous resistance in Auroville to using this electronic medium to "assess the mood of the house," to find out what Aurovilians think about any issue. It could be done very easily and quickly through an electronic questionnaire or poll. Yet people seem to fear it because they think it might lead to manipulation or to decisions taken by head counts... and we know what Mother thought about democracy. Yet the present situation, where individuals can manipulate meetings or appeal to authority figures above the heads of the Aurovilians, is obviously no better. Unsurprisingly, it is precisely these people who resist the new medium and its egalitarian information-sharing most strongly.

Do you feel Auroville and the internet are compatible?

Ulli: Mother never told us to live in caves, to disconnect ourselves from the world. We have to work in the world, and the world today is - CNN - and Internet: that's not up for discussion. The challenge is to integrate and make use of these new possibilities to lead us towards our goal. So let's use the Internet to realize Mother's vision rather than arguing about its dangers and distractions.

Interview by Alan



Cast for the "Bay at Nice" (see next page): front l. to r. Jill as Sophia, Shuba as Valentina; back l. to r. Mauro as Henri Matisse, Svar as the Assistant Curator, Joss as Peter.

Invited by the community, Prof. Dr. Gerard Endenburg spent one week in early January in Auroville to study its decision making processes, and see for himself if the sociocratic method developed by him [see AVToday # 106, November 1997] would also work in Auroville. The visit was a success, and not only because of Gerard's captivating charm, but also because he got many chances to observe Auroville's attempts to reach decisions. He met and talked with business unit holders and services, gave talks about sociocracy and answered questions, and attended a Residents Assembly (RA) meeting. "You need to acknowledge your leaders, and not be afraid to really take the lead if you are put in that position," was one of his observations. "In your RA meeting, very valid observations were made but will get lost if a

SOCIOCRATIC OBSERVATIONS

facilitator only allows the next person to speak, without steering the process." Commenting on the way the Residents' Assembly tried to elect people proposed for the next Working and Executive Committees, he commented, "If you ask for objections against a person, you only get negativity being expressed. You should also ask what the positive reasons are for selection. Also, the chairperson should correct people in a meeting, and not allow disdainful remarks to be made or supercilious attitudes towards someone else to surface, as these too will result in negativity and ultimately destroy the meeting

process." Most important, however, were his observations that "You have to formulate your aim and group yourselves around it. The aim of an organization should determine and encompass subsidiary aims of all the groups and units which function as part of that organization. The attempt to give the RA the final say is bound to fail, as taking decisions for the community in a large meeting like the RA where anybody can come is impossible due to sheer numbers, and because you have many groups with different aims in the same meeting." Can sociocracy work in Auroville? Gerard is convinced it can, and that it would result in a society where each individual has a guaranteed say in the running of its affairs. A first draft of a sociocratic organisation model was discussed with him.

Carel

AUROVILLE INTERNATIONAL ANNUAL MEETING

This year's Auroville International meeting will be held in Italy on the hills of Siena, Tuscany, 500 metres above sea level. The place is located in a surroundings which are very beautiful and rich in art, Etruscan archeology and history. The proximity to a medieval "ideal city", Pienza, may set the tone for explorations into an ideal city for the century to come...

The meeting will be held from Tuesday evening, June 23rd till Saturday afternoon, June 27th. People involved in organising the meeting will convene during the weekend before. Further details can be obtained from the AVI Italy Liaison team, Marco and Patty, at the following address: Patrizia Ghezzi, via Morali 13, 24100 Bergamo, Italy. Tel. (39) 35250781. email: <sauro@auroville.org.it> or <avi@auroville.org.in>

THEATRE REVIEW "The Bay at Nice"

The axis of David Hare's "The Bay at Nice" is Henri Matisse's painting by the same name. Valentina (played by Shuba) is a former student of the artist who studied art in Paris, but returned to Russia and suffered during the Stalin period. She has been asked at the beginning of the play to authenticate the work. The two central characters of "The Bay at Nice", Valentina and her daughter Sophia (played by Jill who also directed the play), are locked in a mortal battle of control—Valentina punishingly disdainful of her daughter Sophia's choices in life and appearance, and Sophia struggling to wrest her life falteringly from her mother's vice-like grasp. Sophia's decision to leave her highly-ranked but loveless husband becomes the catalyst of the piece. And as her mother scowls openly and vehemently at her decision, and Sophia struggles to withstand the emotional shockwave, an albeit subtle battle of emotions and wills plays itself out on stage.

For the committed audience, it made for compelling theatre. Hampered somewhat by the vast auditorium at Bharat Nivas, the actors' words occasionally faded to inaudibility. Nevertheless, the performers in this "play of ideas" compensated for this remarkably with distinct and physical characterisation that accentuated and at times carried the narrative. Shuba as Valentina moved with a world-weariness that at times left the actor behind and let the character live. Ross was well-cast as the gentle, self-effac-

ing, model aircraft-collecting Peter and carried the character in voice and body. Jill's Sophia was a roller-coaster of emotion travelling from moments of silent tears to the evident joy on her face when she finally puts her arms around her mother. Svar as the quiet Assistant Curator belied a lifetime of thoughtful repression aching to be expressed without even realising it. Mauro in his brief appearance gave the audience a lively, youthful Henri Matisse.

Using a single set and lighting-state for almost the entire play, the production-design of "The Bay at Nice" could be called spartan if it were not for the presence of Valentina's more ornate chair and the large frame that hung above the stage suggesting a window with shafts of sunlight.

During the full one and a half hours, the audience did not get to see the much-discussed painting—except for an occasional tantalising glimpse of colour. An almost audible sigh of relief can be heard from the audience when at last it is shown the painting. This is used to good effect in the final scene where the lights move to silhouette the Assistant Curator with his Matisse.

"The Bay at Nice" makes few judgements but rather lays out ideas for the audience to judge. Is freedom happiness? Is love pain? Can one justifiably be selfish? If so, when? At what point should we ignore our parents? When should we let our children go? These ideas leave the audience with a sense of self-examination that compels difficult-to-answer questions to be re-asked. As a play it demanded the audience's attention and rewarded those who gave it.

Jesse

CELLULAR EVOLUTION CONFERENCE

The second International Cellular Evolution Conference was held at the theatre of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry during the first week of February, 1998. Two days of post-conference sessions were held in Auroville. The conference was organized by Dr. Ariel Browne and Dr. Wayne Bloomquist from USA as a continuation of the first conference held in San Francisco in 1995.

The presentations focussed on the work in the body by the Mother and Sri Aurobindo to transform the living cells of the body into conscious instruments of progress. Bhaga, from Auroville, spoke on "The Continuity of Cellular Transformation between Sri Aurobindo and the Mother" and at another session on "Mother's comments on similar cellular experiences in others." Mikael, also from Auroville, gave a session on "Transformational dance in the body's shift to integral consciousness". Shyam Kumari, an author from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, presented "Cellular Transformation according to the Mother". Dr. Felicity Edwards from the Rhodes University, S. Africa, Dr. Charlotte Smith (USA), David

Fiedler from Gnosis (USA), and Elizabeth Hin from the White Rose Foundation (USA) also gave presentations, as did Maggi, Richard, and Kailas of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

In Auroville, the sessions were discussions about the work in progress here: the participants visited a number of projects.

Bhaga adds, "During the five days of the conference, very interesting and often moving talks were mostly presented by people who had not only theoretical knowledge about cellular evolution as described by Sri Aurobindo and Mother but some experience of it as well, based generally, but not always, on years of intense sadhana and spiritual experience (of the psychic being, in particular) in the vast context of the Integral Yoga. Some of the sessions were more like workshops in which almost everyone joined for some cell-oriented physical exercise or guided exploration, either silent or dance-like to music.

Quiet provided the venue for the last afternoon of the conference. During this session, Maggi from the Ashram (Mother's secretary for years and the founder of Quiet) shared with us what Mother had told her about the "golden contagion" at work now in everyone's cells. Maggi also brought two cassettes—Mother reading the Charter of Auroville and Sunil's New Year music for 1972—which drew everyone into a deep final meditation together."

Letter to the Editors

The most widely known formula of physics ($E=mc^2$) is also the most widely misunderstood. In his article "Unity is a fact", AVToday, February 1998) Peter Thurrell echoes the common misconception. For those who care about that little bit of truth that is accessible to science, I would like to set the record straight. Since the "m" stands for "mass" and not for "matter", the formula does not proclaim the equivalence of matter and energy. What it says is that "mass" and "energy" are two names for the same quantity, a quantity that can be measured either in units of mass (kilograms) or in units of energy (joules). In other words, $E=mc^2$ is a conversion formula as trivial as the statement that there are three feet in a yard. Less trivial is the nature of that quantity. Although time "flows" or "passes" equally fast on properly synchronized clocks, it flows at different rates for different objects. Except for another conversion factor (Planck's constant), the energy/mass of an object is the rate at which time flows for that object.

Ulrich Mohrhoff, Pondicherry,
ujm@auroville.org.in

Indian Dance

Bharat Natyam: Chitra Visweswaran

"Chitra Visweswaran is one of the leading Bharat Natyam dancers in India today; her name has become synonymous with this Southern style of Indian classical dance. Trained from a very young age in the pristine purity of this traditional dance style, she has harnessed to it an intellectual quest and aesthetic sensibility which make her performance scale great creative and classical heights. Her husband is a Carnatic vocalist-composer. Together they have made the pursuit and dissemination of Indian dance and music a religion in itself," said the notice which announced the performance on January 24th.

Normally, such statements have to be taken with a grain of salt. This time, however, the expectations raised by the notice were too modest. The grace of Chitra's dance was exquisite indeed, often approaching the sublime. The voice of her husband, who sang as Chitra's accompanist, at times even went beyond. At least I found myself listening in rapture and closing my eyes in the process, so missing out on some of Chitra's elegant and refined movements. But I was lucky enough to capture at least one thrilling episode. It was when Chitra depicted Yashoda, the foster mother of Krishna, cradling the baby Krishna. At this point an Auroville child that had been happily playing around in the audience without showing much interest in the performance, came forward fascinated by the loving care which was being portrayed in front of him. Spellbound, he advanced to the stage, and it could have become very interesting but for his father, who rapidly snatched him away.

It was an evening of Fine Arts indeed.

Odissi Dance: Sonal Mansingh

What can be said about Sonal Mansingh which has not already been said? Which superlatives can do justice to a phenomenon who has won a number of major awards? Sonal is said to be "a class apart", a "paragon of excellence" or "a peerless example" of Indian classical dance, in particular Odissi. But these words just set her apart without even touching upon the existential quality or the creative expression which Sonal displayed in her solo performance on March 2.

Did we see Devi, the Goddess, in her various moods? For sure, it was Sonal dancing, but wasn't it Devi who appeared as a shadow on the wall, and was it imagination when one sometimes felt that more than the shadowy presence had been invoked to manifest? Why was Sonal's personification of Maria Magdalena in her surrender to Jesus Christ so intensely moving as to invoke the corresponding movement within oneself? "Art", says Sri Aurobindo, "is nothing less in its fundamental truth than the aspect of beauty of the divine manifestation." And he goes on to say that, from that standpoint, some artists can be considered as Yogis, those who create according to their greater inner vision.

Sonal ended her performance by singing the Indian national anthem, Bande Mataram, for and partly together with the audience, and with an emotional request to Auroville: "It took you three years to invite me to come back to Auroville. Please don't make me wait three years again." Don't worry, Sonal, we won't.

Carel

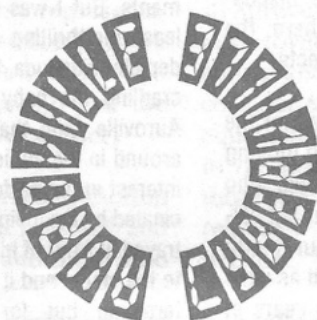
A TALK

"Science and the ultimate nature of man" was the title of a talk by the eminent nuclear scientist and former Defence Minister of India, Dr. Raja Ramanna on February 11th, 1997. The next evening Dr. Ramanna entertained an Auroville audience playing piano pieces from Beethoven, Liszt and Saint Saëns.

BY AIRMAIL
BOOK POST

AUROVILLE TODAY

CSR Office
Auroville 605101
Tamil Nadu, India

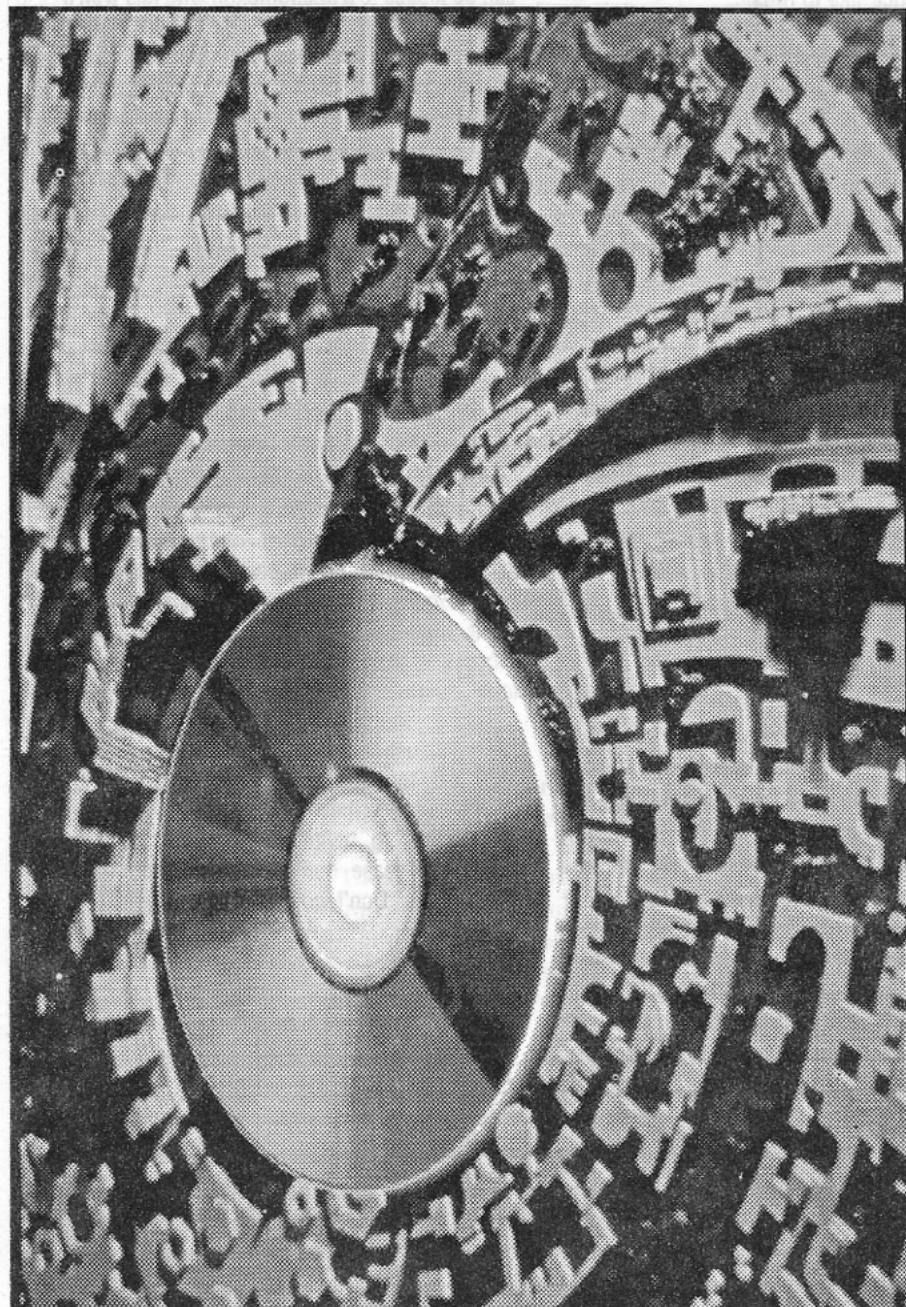


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Cyberville... computer composition by Manoj

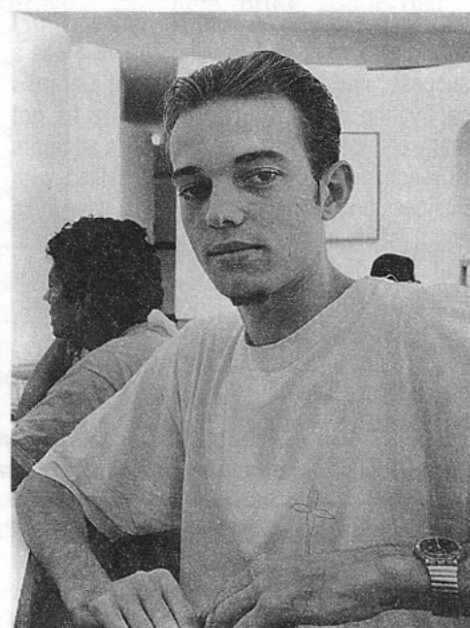
Virtually Akash

A portrait of a self-taught technology whizz

Akash, intelligent, well-spoken and charming, has the air of someone waiting for vocation to strike. And indeed a vocation lurks. Born in Auroville, he's a self-taught technology whizz. He has his own homepage and has already written and installed a reservation management system for a major Auroville guesthouse and an automated billing system for a busy Auroville food processor. He's also worked on the development of no less than three compact disc (CD) multimedia publications using a multi-media authoring package written and developed by him called Navarasa—Hindi for "nine flavours" suggesting the many flavours of multimedia. No mean feat, writing a program that allows the development of an interactive CD "book" containing a multitude of media including sound, video and slides in a single package. The result of two years' work and still under development, current versions of Navarasa are available on the Net at www.simtel.net and have been published as part of a Shareware demo CD distributed with the magazine, *PC Quest*.

When I ask Akash for a comment about email in Auroville, he points out that a staggering 40 per cent of Auroville's population now have email accounts. Compared with a global average of around fifteen to twenty per cent, Auroville seems ahead of its time. Akash remains in regular contact with a group of fifteen to twenty "cyber friends" from around the world, all of whom have contacted him in response to his homepage accessible through the Auroville homepage. (It seems Akash writes more letters now than he did before email). In response to my question about a downside to the increasing use of electronic mail, he says: "I don't think being connected to the world is at all bad." The greatest value of email, he says, is the access it gives Auroville to the outside world, but he hastens to add, the world would benefit more from access to Auroville than Auroville would from access to the world except in terms of tertiary education and research.

As to whether he has been changed by his immersion in the world of computers, he admits that now he tends to analyse much of the time: "This has its advantages, but it can make you emotionally cold, an observer rather than somebody who experiences things."



A new, faster link is planned for the Auroville network that will allow Auroville to do many things electronically not previously possible. "Chatting" for example will be possible. With a faster link, rather than sending single letters back and forth between Auroville and overseas, Aurovilians will be able to have live (typed) conversations with friends overseas. One currently available variation on this, says Akash, is on-line education. Students regardless of location can "sit in" and participate in school or university courses and eventually graduate this way. Akash is interested.

In Auroville's electronic future, Akash prophesies a computerised finance service that will provide all Auroville shops, restaurants, cafes with instant access to a customer's financial position at Pour Tous. If your account's in minus, no cheese pie at New Creation Corner, or cash only. It is not unforeseeable, he says that when we check our email, we'll also be able to check our account. In the distant future, Pour Tous numbers may be replaced with cards with bar codes or magnetic strips processed by electronic readers at each shop. Already plans are afoot to store Auroville archives on computer, eventually available for access by anyone with a computer and a password. Auroville's electronic future will undoubtedly far exceed these modest predictions regardless of how outrageous they seem today. Whether or not this will be an improvement remains to be seen, but, whatever happens, electronic Auroville is here to stay.

Jesse

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