

# Auroville Today

MAY 2006, No.208

## Celebrating Earth Day!

PHOTOS: PRIYA SUNDARAVALLI



**A**pril 22nd witnessed an unprecedented celebration of Earth Day in Auroville with a spontaneous outpouring of programmes and activities. There was an Eco-Film Festival, a two-day workshop 'Understanding Soil and Plant Physiology', and a Green Toddler programme. At Savitri Bhavan one could listen to a recording from The Mother "For Earth and Men", Savitri's prayer to the Divine and the response of the Supreme, and get a booklet specially prepared for Earth Day of relevant passages from Savitri.

Pollution-free or less polluting modes of transport were on show, such as the Auroville Bio-Bullet motorbike, running on a mixture of diesel and Straight Vegetable Oil (SVO); a Bio-Trike running on Auroville 'biodiesel'; the latest version of the Mahindra Bijlee electric three-wheeler; the REVA compact electric car; and a range of bicycles from the Honesty Cycle House, Pondicherry, which offered an attractive Earth Day discount of Rs 999.00 on the purchase of Firefox mountain-bikes.

During the day, almost all Auroville restaurants and a few non-Auroville restaurants in the vicinity agreed to serve only vegetarian food as the production of vegetarian food puts much less pressure on the environment than meat production. Another person who was doing something in a small way for the environment was Mr G.Yuvaraj of New Pizzeria, who used ecological plates made of plant materials instead of cardboard for packing and for home delivery of his pizzas.

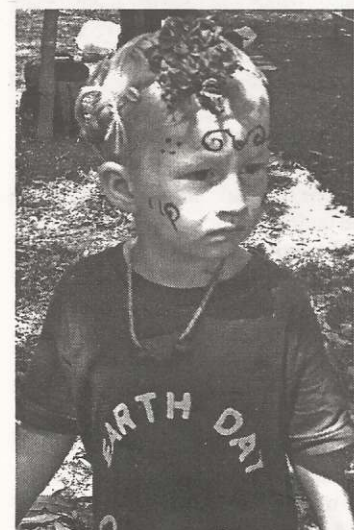
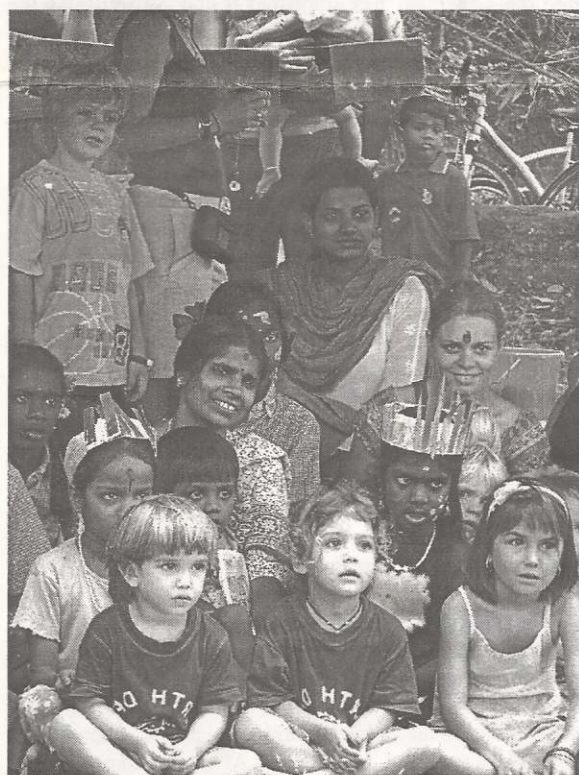
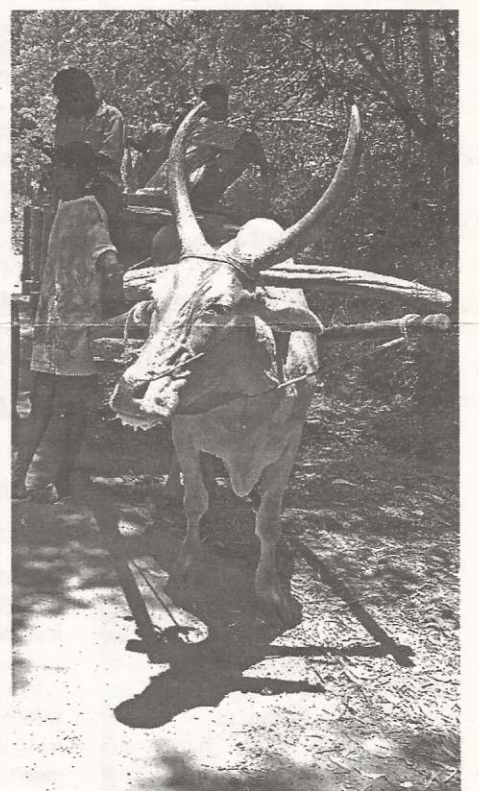
Those who wanted their old T-shirts dyed blue were invited to give them a free dip at The Colours of Nature natural indigo-dyeing unit. The Auroville Earth Institute conducted an awareness programme on earth architecture. The farmers and food producers pitched in with an organic farmers and food products market. In the Town Hall a series of speakers presented 10 minute lectures on carbon-neutralising Auroville; sustainable grasses at Matrimandir; The WELL Project for village women learning handicrafts with recyclable materials; the 'No More Pesticides!' campaign; the end of the plastic plague, introducing 100% degradable plastics; and how to save water in Auroville. Representatives from Greenpeace India talked about their work in places like Bhopal, Alang, and Cuddalore.

The grand finale was held at Kalabhummi where a range of activities and games for children was organised. The 'Unicorns' from Transition School performed their play 'Toad of Toad Hall', and in the evening some 'Songs for the Earth' were sung by children from Udavi School, followed by hip-hop dancing by our Auroville teenagers. An organic selection of musicians played till midnight.

Compared to last year, this year's Earth Day celebration involved many more Aurovilians and Auroville units. And this time there were no aggressively-green Auroville pre-teens and teens banging pots or ringing

bells at motorcyclists – though we noticed that many Aurovilians had not followed the suggestion 'See you on your cycle and leave your motorbike at home.'

*Carel*



- GB meets
- Touched by 'ubuntu' - AVI South Africa meeting
- Doing yoga in Auroville

pages 2-3

- Regina and the forest
- From AuroRE: two new projects
- Njal's saga

pages 4-5

- Romi's plastic blooms
- Aureka's new challenge
- Roger's progress
- A glimpse of Franz

page 6-7

- Art in Auroville: three exhibitions
- Tartuffe/Texas
- Chinese folk music concert

page 8



# Governing Board meets

Members of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation visited Auroville on March 29th and 30th for their postponed meeting.

In the evening of March 29th the Governing Board met with the members of the Working Committee and representatives of various units and working groups to inform itself of developments. The next morning chairman Dr. Karan Singh opened two buildings and laid the foundation stone for a third one. That afternoon the Board met, and in the early evening interacted with the community in the SAWCHU building.

"With all the excitement about 'offices of profit,' it is a miracle that I am here at all," began Dr. Karan Singh in his talk to the community. He was referring to the controversy which was front-page news in the Indian newspapers some weeks ago, when, in the wake of Mrs. Sonia Gandhi's resignation as a Lok Sabha [Lower House of Parliament, eds.] member, he resigned as Rajya Sabha, [Upper House of Parliament, eds.] member to uphold the highest principles of polity and propriety. "The Indian Government is studying the issue. Meanwhile, I am happy that my psychic commitment to and contact with Auroville is continuing," he said.

Dr. Karan Singh then briefly talked about a few major topics which the Board had dealt with. In order to help obtain the exemption from income tax which the Auroville Foundation had enjoyed before, the Board approved the creation of an Auroville Unity Fund, though it is aware that its modus operandi and guidelines still need to be worked out. [see AVToday October 2005, issue 201] "The last thing we want is our commercial units having to pay vast sums of money to the Income Tax Authority when that money is needed for the development of Auroville," said Dr. Karan Singh. "The setting up of the Auroville Unity Fund is an important milestone in the evolution of Auroville as a unified community."

Another major problem is the question of land acquisition, which has come to a total

standstill in the last two and a half years. To deal with this issue the Board had set up the Land Consolidation Committee in its meeting in September 2005. It now instructed the Acting Secretary Mr. Srinivasamurthy to convene its first meeting and restart the process of land acquisition. "For," said Dr. Karan Singh, "unless we acquire that land, any talk of building the city is unrealistic."

On this topic he mentioned that the Board is still studying the proposal submitted by Roger Anger about how to proceed building the city. [see AVToday March 2006, issue 208]. "Now that the Matrimandir, apart from



The Mitra Trainees Hostel

the gardens, is nearing completion and should be ready by Auroville's next birthday on 28th February 2007, the next phase has started, which is to build the city. We have to apply our minds as to how we are going to get the money, and how to create a structure and appropriate organization to build the city. That is the next serious question we have to deal with."

Referring to the earlier interaction with community members and his morning activities, Dr. Karan Singh reflected that he remains "profoundly impressed by the creativity of the



Dr. Karan Singh laying the foundation stone for the Auroville Foundation office building

Aurovilians; how a small community of 1800 people, which is hardly a village – a small village in India would have 18,000 people! – is able to produce such a lot of creative work in

the light, to the inner light, I am sure that Auroville will continue to progress in the future very rapidly. That is my personal belief."

Asked about Auroville's image in New Delhi, Dr. Karan Singh mentioned that it has definitely improved, but he warned that "it is really up to the community to see that it functions in such a way that the image continues to improve." He concluded that he looks upon Auroville as part of the broader Sri Aurobindo movement, which includes the Ashram, the Sri Aurobindo Society, Auroville International, and all people who are interested in Sri Aurobindo. "I think that there is a growing interest around the world now in the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo. More and more people are beginning to wonder about consciousness. Despite the outer tsunami of materialism there is also an inner spiritual growth in the world. Sri

Aurobindo's philosophy and the way the Mother has amplified it and Auroville as the symbol of it are going to become increasingly important in the years to come." *Carel*



The new exhibit hall and audio-visual room at the Visitors' Centre

different fields. I think it shows that there is some force working in Auroville, despite the apparent discords and the conflicts that surface from time to time. If we keep ourselves open to

different fields. I think it shows that there is some force working in Auroville, despite the apparent discords and the conflicts that surface from time to time. If we keep ourselves open to

## Touched by 'ubuntu'

Glimpses of the 23rd Annual Meeting of Auroville International in Cape Town, South Africa

In March 2006 we had our first Auroville International (AVI) meeting on African soil. No better place could have been chosen as a venue than Cape Town which is known as the Mother City of South Africa. Africa and Auroville are both places of a new beginning, Africa being the cradle of humanity and Auroville striving to become the cradle of a new society. We were reminded of the Mother's own physical connection with the African continent through her mother coming from Egypt. So there may be a deeper significance to our holding the meeting in South Africa at a time when Matrimandir, the House of the Mother and golden symbol of the highest consciousness, is approaching completion.

This feeling of deep underlying importance was most tangible when we visited Table Mountain. With its incredibly strong physical presence it is regarded by many as the basic, Muladhara chakra of the world. Standing on top of Table Mountain at sunset, holding hands in a big circle, chanting OM together, our African friends singing "Nkosi sikelel' iAfrica" (Lord, bless Africa), the South African anthem, and our Indian friends answering with "Vande Mataram" – this aroused more than sentimental feelings!

For the first time at an AVI meeting the three bodies founded by the Mother – the Ashram, Auroville and Auroville International – were well represented in Cape Town. From the Ashram came Dr. Chamanlal Gupta,

Dr. Alok Pandey and Sraddhalu Ranade, Auroville sent fourteen members, five of whom were of Indian and two of African origin, and AVI representatives came from nine different countries. Altogether people of 19 different nationalities joined the meeting, a beautiful assortment of colours and languages, out of which the local Xhosa language with its amazing click consonants attracted the greatest attention.

During the first three meeting days we stayed at Lynedoch Sustainability Institute and EcoVillage, just outside Cape Town. These days gave us an experience of the townships around Cape Town, with their activists and community projects. Some of us lodged in one of the townships, with warm-hearted black African families opening their homes to us. Our guided tours through the township revealed a lot of the social problems South Africa is still facing: the different populations still don't really mix, townships are still predominantly either "black" or "coloured", with the white population close to zero. The family structures are often shattered, with an overwhelming percentage of single mothers – the legacy of AIDS but also at least partly a result of black labour policies of the Apartheid regime which systematically separated men from their families. There was also a high rate of alcoholism and related violence and a general lack of self-confidence which results in inertia and fatalism. It was uplifting to meet wonderful, dedicated people working



Final gathering on top of Table Mountain

in the townships to encourage women's and youth groups and support other educational initiatives. Some seed money was collected at the meeting for a crèche in a township which will be called "Auroville".

A visit to Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela has spent most of his 27 years of imprisonment and many other freedom fighters were incarcerated, left another strong impression. Our tour guide brought us to the lime quarries where Nelson Mandela and his comrades were subject to hard labour, damaging their eyes in the burning sun reflected by the brilliant white lime. But instead of being physically and psychologically broken, the political prisoners started in the quarries lessons in all kinds of subjects, thus laying the knowledge foundation for the society they were aspiring to build. What an incredibly strong example of the power and ultimate victory of human dream and vision over the most adverse conditions!

The second part of our meeting was dedicated to presentations and exchange. Ms. Ruchira Kamboj, High Commissioner of India, gave the opening speech. She spoke of the

PHOTO FRIEDERIKE

bond that eternally connects South Africa's with India's freedom struggle, for Mahatma Gandhi organized his first Satyagraha campaign in South Africa.

Alok and Sraddhalu started the presentations with talks on "The Ideal of Human Unity in the Light of Sri Aurobindo", reminding us that no outer system can ever win lasting peace and happiness unless people are ready for a change of consciousness. The next presentation impressively showed how far South Africans are already prepared for this change. Ginn Fourie, a white mother whose daughter had been killed 1993 in a bomb attack, spoke together with Letlapa Mphahlele, a black member of the former militant wing of the Pan African Congress who had given the order for the attack. They met in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings and now work together to help heal the wounds of the past. As Ginn put it, "It is only at the moment when you can identify with the other person that you can be liberated yourself."

I don't have enough space in this article to mention all the extremely interesting presentations from African and Auroville. But I have to mention the wide variety of cultural performances we enjoyed, with classical Indian and modern African and Brazilian dance, singing, reciting poems – we had two young black African poet-rappers showing their great skills and Meenakshi answering with a poem dedicated to the youth of

Africa – a one-woman play, written in prison, a wide variety of films and videos and more.

A third part of the meeting was dedicated to the AVI Board meeting and General Assembly. The venue was the Temenos Retreat Center, which is dedicated to bringing world religions together. A Lakshmi statue was waiting to be consecrated there and the Temenos community was delighted to have Meenakshi, Sraddhalu and Venkat perform the consecration ceremony. There are major changes in AVI since our former chairman Sonia Dyne (AVI UK) resigned due to personal reasons. The new chairman is Julian Lines (AVI USA) and the vice-chairpeople are Sonia Dyne and Toby Neuman (AVI Netherlands). We also said farewell to our previous Auroville representative, Tine, thanking her for her many years of dedicated service and for helping our new representative, Kathy, familiarize herself with the work.

Finally we expressed our deep gratitude to Jasmin and Aravinda Maheshwari, our AVI South Africa liaisons, for their immense dedication and untiring efforts to make this meeting happen.

"Ubuntu", the underlying spiritual principle of the South African Rainbow Nation, describes in one word the idea of equality and dignity of all people, the sisterhood and brotherhood of all mankind and the sacredness of life. It felt as if the ubuntu spirit touched us throughout the meeting, evoking the impression of Auroville's soul meeting the soul of Africa.

*Friederike*  
AVI Secretary

(For more details of the meeting visit [www.auroville.africa.org](http://www.auroville.africa.org))



# Doing yoga in Auroville

"I do not want to pry into your spiritual life, but you are here to study yoga. What sort of spiritual development are you all doing?" asked Dr. Karan Singh. He suggested, with a grin, that this might be an interesting topic for Auroville Today. It certainly is.

Responses to Dr. Karan Singh's observation have been pronounced. Some people challenge his right to ask the question, particularly in view of the hidden sting in his conclusion that 'if the Aurovilians are not doing yoga, then they are not following the Charter of Auroville.' "Is he implying that those people shouldn't be in Auroville?" asked one person indignantly. Other Aurovilians consider that the Chairman has a perfect right to ask this question. They point to the first line of Auroville's Charter which asks those living in Auroville 'To be willing servitors of the Divine Consciousness' and to The Mother's numerous writings on what it means to be an Aurovilian.

Reactions apart, answers to the question have been hardly forthcoming. Only Alain Grandcolas spoke up during the interaction. He replied that he believed that more than 50% of the Aurovilians are giving priority to inner life. Asked by Auroville Today to corroborate this statement, Alain admits that his is an educated guess – and most probably on the low side. He has been doing some research on yoga in Auroville, and is conducting interviews with selected Aurovilians. "I discovered that most of the people who apparently are leading a normal life are in fact giving priority to their inner life," he says. He explains, "Giving priority to inner life means that there is a connection to one's inner being, that to some extent one's life is guided by the psychic. Whenever they take a decision, they listen to how they inwardly feel about that decision, and they act according to the indication they receive."

Alain's figure of 50% (at least!) is backed up by a survey on spirituality in Auroville conducted by two Dutch students. In 2005, Sandra ter Huurne and Erik Jan Tillema, students of Religious Studies and Philosophy at the Free University of Amsterdam, asked 101 Aurovilians and Newcomers how the philosophical ideas of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother are realized in Auroville. To the question if they practice Integral Yoga, 77% of the respondents answered they (tried to) practise it; 11% replied that they practice another yoga; and 7% said that they

## The Mother about 'doing yoga'

There's nothing to say – if you sincerely want to get out of it, it's really not so difficult: there's nothing to do but leave everything to the Lord. And He does it all. He does it all, He is ... it's so wonderful! So wonderful! He takes anything, even what we call a quite ordinary intelligence, and then He simply shows you how to put that intelligence aside, lay it to rest: "There now, keep still, don't stir, don't bother me; I don't need you." And then a door opens – you don't even feel you have to open it; it's wide open, and you're led through to the other side. It's Someone else who does all this, not you. And then ... the other way becomes impossible. Oh, all this frightful toil, this effort of the mind to understand! Struggling, giving itself headaches – phew! ... Absolutely useless, absolutely useless. It leads nowhere, except to more confusion. You find yourself facing a so-called problem: "What am I to say? What am I to do? How should I act?..." There is nothing to do! Nothing but to say to the Lord, "You see, here's the situation." That's all. And then keep very still. And spontaneously, without thinking about it, without reflecting, without calculating, without doing anything, anything whatsoever, without the slightest effort ... you do what must be done. But it's the Lord who does it, it's no longer you. He does it, He arranges the circumstances, He arranges the people, He puts the words in your mouth or under your pen – He does it all, all, all, and you have nothing more to do, nothing but let yourself live in bliss."

Mother's Agenda 3, p. 376-7



PHOTO PRIVA SUNDARAVALLI

"Spiritual atmosphere' is the name given by the Mother to the Neem flower.

tual life is there, most of us still live like ordinary human beings most of the time, while some of us seem to be doing nothing else. "Our own 'Aurobindonian' brand of spirituality is not strongly enough expressed here. It is still not a sufficiently dominant strand in our collective life," she says.

"One reason is historical," says Shraddhavan. "Some people miss having a living guru who gives daily guidance. And we had a difficult past when Auroville broke away from the Ashram." She refers to the early days of Auroville when there was a strong feeling in some that all that was available from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram was just mumbo-jumbo; that all that was needed was The

Adventure of Consciousness or Mother's Agenda. At the same time, there was a tendency to a zealous and excessive use of quotations, which resulted in a kind of 'Mother-said' syndrome. Moreover, quotations were often used by people who themselves were not living up to what they quoted. Says Shraddhavan, "As a kind of inheritance from those years, some Aurovilians, and Auroville's youth in particular, developed a disgust and do not want to hear any more speeches about The Mother and Sri

Aurobindo. Many Aurovilians also have developed a healthy reluctance to speak about something they feel they cannot live up to. We do not want to be marked as a sect, we do not want to preach, and in consequence, we leave people free to their own inner development – but perhaps fail to pass on information about our own inspiring experiences that would be helpful to others."

Another reason is that Auroville's path of Karma Yoga is probably not sufficiently understood. The Mother, in Her last message to Auroville, stressed that the particular yoga Aurovilians are supposed to be doing is Karma Yoga, which has as focal point the surrender of all one's activities to the Divine. But many people need help to understand and practice this path, and there is no one in Auroville who offers it. Individuals are left to themselves. Perhaps for this reason quite a few Aurovilians and Newcomers feel the need to visit other gurus or attend other disciplines. In recent years, Savitri Bhavan has been inviting lecturers from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and elsewhere, and their courses are increasingly well attended. "Those who have grown up in the Ashram carry something special," says Shraddhavan, which is perhaps one of the reasons for the growing attendance. Another one may be an increasing inner need.

Finally there is the aspect of collective yoga. Says Shraddhavan: "I believe that The Mother has created a special concentration of energy in Auroville to accelerate the yoga of evolution. When she talked about collective yoga, she conveyed not only that everybody who connects gets affected, but also that the force field acts like a churn, making all that needs to change rise up. This may be one of the reasons why Auroville seems such an impossible society at times, with so many problems surfacing."

Yet, Shraddhavan is convinced that the path almost all Aurovilians – "surely 70% or even more," she says – are following is the path of dedicated work. "This is the hallmark of Auroville. For most of us this is not yet real Karma Yoga, which for me implies a conscious constant consecration of all activities to the Lord of the Yoga. But it is an offering of lives and capacities, energies and resources to the ideal of a better world and a higher consciousness and as much perfection as possible. In addition, many people are trying to gain more knowledge, both by studying and concentration, and there is a strong though fairly silent current of devotion too. The fact that all this offering to a

## What is the fundamental difference between the ideal of the Ashram and the ideal of Auroville?

There is no fundamental difference in the attitude towards the future and the service of the Divine. But the people in the Ashram are considered to have consecrated their lives to Yoga (except, of course, the students who are here only for their studies and who are not expected to have made their choice in life). Whereas in Auroville simply the good will to make a collective experiment for the progress of humanity is sufficient to gain admittance.

10 November 1969  
MCW 13

higher ideal is made within the force-field of the Mother's formation means that it should have much more effect than mere idealism ever normally does."

So is Auroville a spiritualising society? The problems and historic setbacks notwithstanding, both Shraddhavan and Alain reply with a forceful 'yes' but add that Auroville's spiritual society is still in its infancy. "But," says Shraddhavan, "while I'm not at all satisfied with the state of Auroville as it is today, I'm also not ready to accept any criticism of Auroville from anyone who is not participating in the effort – for only those people who participate are in a position to understand the difficulties Aurovilians face." Carel

## The last message given by the Mother for Auroville:

Auroville is created to realise the ideal of Sri Aurobindo who taught us the Karma Yoga. Auroville is for those who want to do the Yoga of work.

To live in Auroville means to do the Yoga of work. So all Aurovilians must take up a work and do it as Yoga.

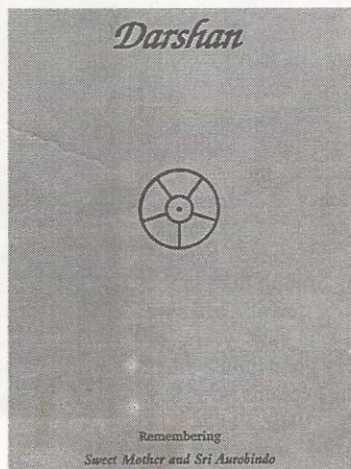
27 March 1973  
MCW 13

do not practise any yoga whatsoever. Asked whether they read any literature about or by Sri Aurobindo or The Mother, 93% replied 'yes' and only 6% said 'no'.

Is this conclusive evidence of a spiritualising society? "I wish it was," sighed Shraddhavan, "but I can't believe it. I would assume that if 70% of the Aurovilians were really practicing Integral Yoga, we should be witnessing a completely different society than the one we've got." Shraddhavan believes that, even if the aspiration to live a spiri-

## NEW BOOK

To mark the 50th Anniversary of the Supramental manifestation in February this year, a book called 'Darshan' has been compiled. The book contains personal reminiscences of Aurovilians and Ashramites. Their recollections are not only touching but also very informative. For those who did not have the opportunity to meet The Mother physically, this collection of stories about how The Mother entered the devotees' life is a treasure. For more information email [varadharajan@auroville.org.in](mailto:varadharajan@auroville.org.in)



## In brief

### Land Consolidation Committee

By order dated 14th March 2006, the Chairman of the Auroville Foundation nominated 5 of the 11 members of the Land Consolidation Committee. Earlier, the Residents' Assembly had nominated the other 6 members. The tenure of the members will be two years. In view of the long delay in setting up the Committee, the Governing Board urged the Committee to expedite and re-start the process of land acquisition and consolidation.

### Study Group on Organization

On March 16th, a General Meeting created a Study Group on Organization to make proposals for a proper internal organisation of Auroville. The Group is meanwhile taking the pulse of the residents through compiling and circulating a questionnaire dealing with information, discussion, organization and decision making in Auroville. The information gathered will help identify the direction for a new organization for Auroville, which should minimize the growing communication-gap between the residents and the working groups and promote transparent communication within the community.

### Passings

On March, 27, 2006, Manou died. Jakareya Manou joined Auroville Electrical Service as an office staff member and became an Aurovilian in 1984. Afterwards he pioneered an air-ticketing unit for Aurovilians. He later gifted the unit to The Travel Shop – Inside India, as he saw more benefit for Auroville in joining the two units than allowing them to continue as two separate entities. He was one of the founders and executives of SEWA, the Small Employees Welfare Association, he coordinated the Auroville Board of Commerce, and functioned in the Working Committee for several years. He also took care of SAIER's accounting and was involved in Ilaigarkal School. He was buried at Auroville's burial ground in Adventure and a special concentration was held at Ilaigarkal school.

### Auroville Choir concerts

The Auroville Choir, conducted by Nuria, gave two end-of-season performances in Pitanga, and one in the Cathedral des Anges in Pondicherry. The 29 member choir sang 15th Century Spanish songs of anonymous or unknown Spanish composers, late renaissance composers Orlando di Lassus, Claudio Monteverdi and Michael Praetorius, and Bach, Brahms, Rheinberger and Kodaly. Auroville's Children's Choir, also conducted by Nuria, gave a concert at Pitanga Hall with music from anonymous 18th century composers and Fugain, Duteil, Coulais and Andrew Lloyd Webber. There was also a song from Walt Disney's Aladdin.



# Regina and the forest

An enthusiast speaks about the Auroville Green Belt: what has been achieved over the years, and what are the greatest threats to it today.

“**T**he Green Belt is Auroville’s only protection,” says Regina. “But a lot of people don’t realize its importance. There should be more consciousness of the land, of our natural environment.”

Regina’s great passion is nature, there is absolutely no doubt about that. She lives in the midst of her element, the forest, in Newlands, a community in the Green Belt, together with her partner Robi and their twelve year old daughter Keya. They live in a beautiful, tiled roof house built on stilts over a pond, depending on solar power for electricity and on a windmill for their water supply.

wasteland onwards,” she continues. “We could find out how the soil changes, at which stage the bacteria and fungi come in, when the undergrowth begins, when the insects start to appear. It would be fascinating!”

Over the years, Regina has worked on documenting the growth of Auroville’s forest through the medium of photography. “When you see slides from the early days, and then you see the forest today, you really get a sense of what has been achieved.”

## An Auroville nature guide

She has also been working with Auroville and Jana on putting together an Auroville nature guide. They have been doing research and

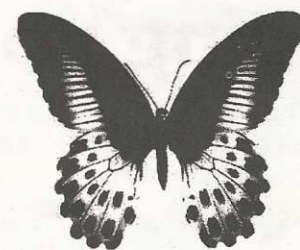
caterpillars feed on their leaves.

## The increase of wildlife

Over the years, a multitude of new insects, dozens of different species of birds, as well as a number of reptiles and mammals have been reappearing in the forests. Witnessing this has been one of Regina’s greatest joys. “It’s really exciting! Where does all this wildlife come from?” she wonders.

She mentions that in the early days of Auroville, some thirty different species of birds were recorded.

hidden. It is extremely rare to sight one. It was really a special darshan. The fact that all this wildlife is coming back on its own is a clear indicator that the work we have been doing on the land is paying off. It’s really rewarding!”



not the only one. The canyon is not protected. “On the other side of the canyon, towards Pondicherry, there is an open sewage farm, tons of garbage are being burned and there is illegal mining of the land.

“We have to protect the land! I think that’s the real urgency,” says Regina, with a lot of emotion. “There has to be a legal protection for our Green Belt, our canyons. Otherwise all our work could be reduced to nothing. And it is not just Auroville and the Green Belt which need to be protected, it’s the whole bio-region, the whole area. We still live in paradise, but it’s paradise in the midst of Kali Yuga.”

## Environmental education

“The children are the future,” she says, “And that is why, some years ago, I started environmental education.” She has worked with students from various schools: Transition, Udavi and New Creation. Recently she also got involved in Joss’s project, the Nadukuppam School. “We have to educate everybody, not just the Auroville children. It’s also the children of the surrounding villages that we have to reach.”

When she starts speaking of her work with the children, Regina’s eyes light up and she’s very enthusiastic. “I take them for walks through the forest, explain to them how natural regeneration works, introduce them to the wildlife. We play games and try to have fun. My goal now is to get them interested, to make them aware of their environment. Then we can go deeper into the subject. When they are very young, you can really get through to them. And there are such amazing children around!”

“It’s not just about going into the forest, playing games and being loud,” she continues, “It’s about focusing, listening, observing. I’ve also been compiling passages from the Mother, for my work with the children. She writes a lot about the importance of creating a connection with nature, of communicating with nature.”

Though the threats to the land are many and the challenges may sometimes seem insurmountable, Regina is not one to give up.

“One can only protect what one loves,” she concludes, “There is so much the land has to offer. There is so much overwhelming beauty around. Walking the land for all these years, seeing the forest grow, has given me so much joy. I’ve got so much more out of it than I can ever give back. I feel it is my duty to share that joy, to make others see the beauty of the leaf patterns, to help them discover the land.”

Emmanuelle



Photograph by Regina of an old cashew tree growing wild in the Forecomers/Newlands forest; Right: The nocturnal Slender Loris

The house, with its distinct Japanese inspiration, was designed and built by Regina, who studied and specialized in tropical architecture in her native country, Germany. It was built keeping environmental sustainability in mind. The mud walls, plastered with cow dung, are covered with white potter’s clay and the floor is slabs of green cadappa stone. The sliding doors and windows help the spaces inside the house blend harmoniously into the natural surroundings. “The living space is not restricted to the inside,” explains Regina, “you can open it up and extend it to the garden, where you can sit down under the trees.”

Behind the house, a beautiful grand old Rain Tree and a Service Tree are in bloom, an explosion of golden yellow flowers. All around there is a multitude of bird songs, and an amazing variety of insects humming, buzzing and chirping.

## A nature sanctuary

Regina’s dream is to work, together with other nature enthusiasts in Auroville, on creating a nature sanctuary in the region, of which the Green Belt would be a part. “We have lots of ideas,” she says “like reintroducing wildlife, and having animal corridors which would connect to the outer forests. If we had the land, we could even create corridors all the way down to the Kallivelli watershed, and to the Ousteri Lake. We would also very much like to have a scientific laboratory to study reforestation from

accumulating as much information as possible on the different mammals, reptiles, birds and insects of the area. “We are in the process of creating a unique Auroville nature guide. It would explain how everything came to be, the whole regeneration process, and which plants came in which succession. It would be beautifully illustrated, with information about the habits of the animals, birds and insects, what they eat, where they hide...”

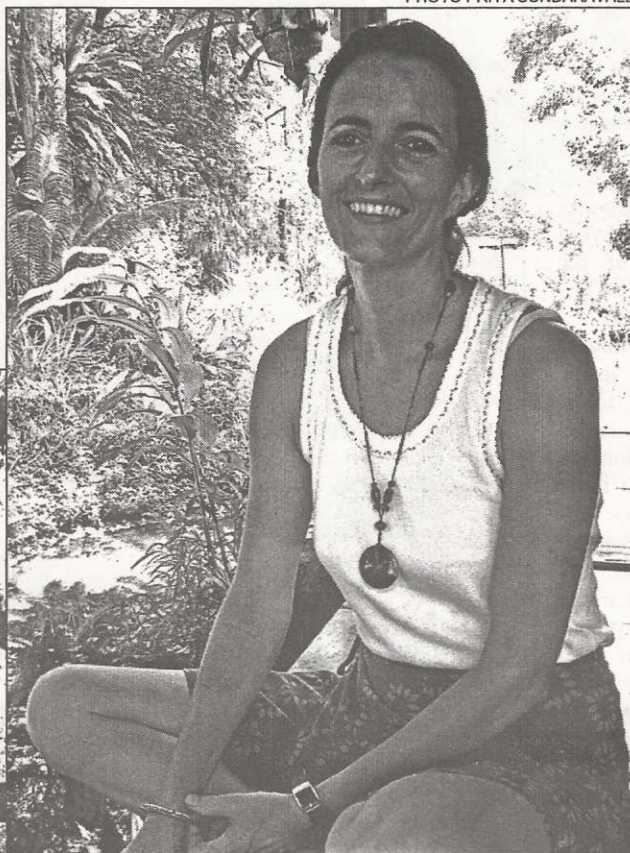
“When you start getting interested in nature and wildlife, it’s endless, you keep making new discoveries. It’s fascinating! Look at the termites for example. Where do they get their water from? During the summer, when there hasn’t been any rain for months, all of a sudden these fresh, moist termite mounds appear. And they actually get the water from the aquifers, they sometimes dig up to forty metres to get to it. Just imagine!”

As we speak, a beautiful butterfly flutters by. “It’s a Blue Mormon,” Regina exclaims. “They started appearing around here in the early nineties, after we had a few years of very good monsoons.” She explains how they lay their eggs in lemon trees and the

Today, there are more than one hundred and thirty. A lot of them are migratory birds, but some stay over in the summer, like the Golden Oriole, which started appearing in the eighties.

There are also a variety of mammals dwelling in the forests. The more common and well known are squirrels, jackals and civet cats. There is also the occasional monkey. Wild cats have also appeared, and there have even been sightings of barking deer. Then there are porcupines, different species of turtles and the star tortoise.

Some years ago Regina even spotted a Slender Loris, a tiny nocturnal primate with large round eyes. “It is very secretive and remains



Regina

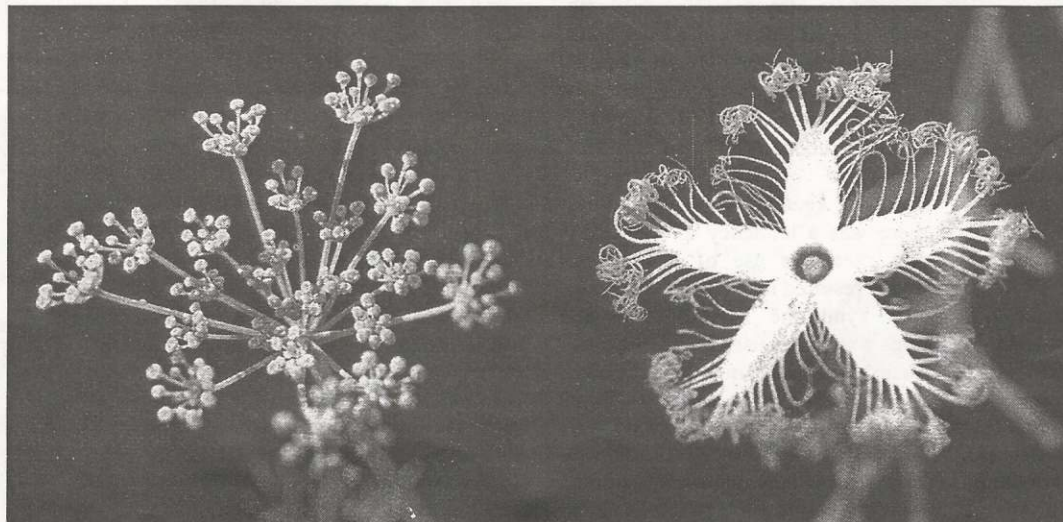
“But on the other hand,” she says “we have to be aware that the environment we have helped create, the forest, is very fragile. And there is a lot of pressure from the outside.”

## The threats

A couple of weeks ago, a plot of land situated right at the entrance of the Newlands-Forecomers forest was bought and walled off: “More and more people from Pondicherry are buying land close to the Green Belt area for real estate development. They wall off the compound and put up ‘Farm houses’. Pondicherry is growing, everybody wants to invest their money in real estate. And they are ready to pay a very high price per acre, sums that Auroville cannot match. It’s a very serious threat and if we don’t get it under control now, it will be too late,” Regina warns.

“I am normally a cheerful and absolutely happy person,” she says, “but this is really draining me. And it’s difficult to keep going and have faith that things will get better.”

While real estate development is without doubt the greatest threat, it is



Dill and snake-gourd flowers photographed by Regina



# New from AuroRE

Since 1984 AuroRE, Auroville's renewable energy service provider, has been conducting research on alternative energy applications within and outside Auroville. Its contribution to promoting small-scale solar businesses across India was recognized when in 2004 AuroRE won one of the Ashden Awards for Sustainable Energy – known as the 'Green Oscars'. The latest from AuroRE are two innovative projects that are funded from the award money: the experimental application of a small biomass gasifier in Auroville and an ambitious scheme to introduce solar lanterns in the Indian hinterland.

## Biomass gasifier in La Ferme

The technology is not new. During the Second World War Swedish trucks ran on gas produced by combusting biomass. Nowadays the technology is used in a number of production plants around India, where biomass combustion is used to generate electrical power. The process takes place in a furnace called a biomass gasifier that is fueled by small pieces of wood.

The researchers from AuroRE wanted to find out if this technology could benefit small industries. To carry out the experiment they needed a small-size production unit which required 24 hours current. La Ferme, Auroville's cheese farm, met all the criteria for a case study.

A biomass gasifier was installed with a 3 phase alternator coupled to a modified diesel engine that can generate 12KW of energy.

PHOTO JOANNA



Woodchips being fed into the biomass gasifier

Calculations suggest that La Ferme will need 3 tons of wood per month to fulfill the desired output. "When you reduce the size of the gasifier, you are not sure if it's economical," says Olivier, one of the three managers of the farm. "You need to pay for wood, for three workers on shifts and maintenance costs. We will unplug from the grid and instead of paying TNEB (Tamil Nadu Electricity Board) we will pay the monthly electricity fee to AuroRE, minus the running costs."

If the biomass technology proves to provide cheaper electricity than conventional sources, La Ferme will be happy to keep the machine and pay monthly installments to AuroRE as a return on investment. When the plant is fully repaid they will have electricity for free. The small surplus of energy when the factory is not in use can be used for the benefit of La Ferme's residents – for fans, fridges and other electrical home appliances. Olivier also wants to harvest the waste heat produced as a side-product during the combustion to warm up water for cooking and processing the cheese.

The advantage of biomass technology lies in its independence from the unreliable central power supply. If it proves to be cheaper than the conventional electricity, it will offer a realistic alternative. Solar and wind energy are not alternatives for small industries as big arrays of solar panels or fields of windmills would be required to generate sufficient power for production.

### Promoting local economy

"The idea for small gasifiers has been cooking for 10 years," says Hemant, the manager of AuroRE. It had to wait for the right moment when several things clicked together. Two years ago an important improvement was made to the technology that allowed 100% of

the gas to be used in the engine with no addition of diesel. Then AuroRE won the Ashden Award and got money that enabled them to start the pilot project in La Ferme. There are plenty of thorn bushes in Auroville and surroundings that could be used as a source of wood. One could also grow specific shrubs that would provide the material for biomass since all a gasifier requires are small cubes of compressed sawdust, shavings or waste paper. "Ideally we should be growing our energy," says Hemant. "There is a large green belt planned around the city area. This could act as a source of energy if we manage it well. A whole industry for collecting and compressing waste-wood could develop around the biomass technology, creating employment for many."

Going back to wood is beneficial not only for the local economy but also for the global environment. In a tropical and agrarian country such as India, biomass is easily available. The most common source of biomass is wood waste and agricultural waste. Burning biomass is the easiest and oldest method of generating energy but also the least efficient. Gasification of biomass taps it more intelligently. "Biomass decaying in the open produces methane that adds to the greenhouse effect," explains Olivier. "The methane burned in a diesel engine and its exhaust gases are much less harmful to the environment."

The success of the experiment would mean that Auroville could become more sustainable and independent. "If it works, we will have a good mix of technologies: solar for residential areas, wind and solar for pumping water, and biomass for small industries," says Hemant. And once the technology has been perfected in Auroville, he would like to take it to other industries in the Industrial Zone and outside. "La Ferme is a trial for how the requirements of small agro-industries match the biomass technology. If it works, it will keep small industries in the rural areas."

Now local entrepreneurs are moving from the countryside because they can't afford power cuts. Neither do they have the confidence to invest money in alternative technologies. AuroRE can act as a catalyst, providing the initial capital. It can buy the gasifiers and install them for small businesses that are willing to try out the biomass technology. If they like it, they will be able to pay back from savings made on the new solution.

But let's wait for the conclusions from La Ferme experiment.

Joanna

## APPRECIATION

### Njal's Saga

Not far from the Solar Kitchen, at the side of a busy road, there is a small cashew plantation with a difference. Yield is increasing year on year and cashews are only one of its harvests. Another harvest is the growers who are inspired to take up organic methods.

The project started in 2001 in response to the dangers of Endosulfan pesticide use. Its aim is to demonstrate organic farming, particularly to cashew farmers. For the last five years Njal and others have set up an exhibition by the road with information about the dangers of pesticides, natural alternatives and organic growing in general.

This year's exhibition includes panels on the lives and thoughts of Diogenes, Thoreau, Gandhi and Schumacher. They all espoused values of simplicity and the deep satisfaction that can be found in it. Diogenes who believed in the incompatibility of truth and goodness with the artificial growths of society; Thoreau who wrote "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to [confront] only the essential facts of life, and see if I could learn what it had to teach, and not, when

## Solar power for 87 million huts

PHOTO AUORE

Every evening 87 million huts in India are lit up by small kerosene lanterns. A wick lamp might seem romantic but for the people who use it this is their only source of light.

It doesn't give much light, produces unhealthy fumes, contributes to the air pollution and can easily set thatch huts aflame. A system of government subsidies has been created to make kerosene easily available for the poor, but the subsidies tend to be captured by the better-off before they reach their intended targets. But there are alternatives.

Three years ago AuroRE launched a small experimental project in the streets of Chennai, replacing petromax (kerosene) lamps with solar lanterns. They rented out to street vendors one hundred lanterns with batteries recharged by solar panels and organized a team of young people to collect the batteries for charging. Solar lanterns proved not only to offer better quality light for less money but also generated jobs for those who hired out and maintained the lanterns. No wonder that the idea spread like wildfire. Some thirty entrepreneurs in Karnataka, Chennai and Gujarat have now replicated the model.

But the real challenge for renewable energy applications lies in the remote rural areas, where 70% of Indians live. 56% of the villagers still have no access to electricity. Recently the government realized that something more must be done and the Prime Minister's office announced a governmental electricity initiative. Most of this is planned to be conventional electricity.

Around this time Hemant, AuroRE's executive, happened to visit a remote village without electrical light. He knew that solar lights could be a solution, except that the villagers couldn't afford the rental. Being gifted at creative thinking, AuroRE's researchers are now tailoring an affordable solution for the villagers. "The batteries will be produced by outside companies and have to be bought at the



Working models of solar panels in two rural homes.

market price," says Hemant, "but the assembling of the kit may be done in Auroville."

A pilot village, Mutukadu, has been selected and discussions have been held with the local women's Self-Help Group (SHG). The village women will be trained to set up a recharging

service. It has been proved in many places that training women is a long-term solution as they are less likely to leave their families to work in urban areas. Hemant hopes that within two to three months, the battery pack will be ready to be introduced in several other villages.

AuroRE will outsource production and act as a network hub, creating and keeping up links with the vendors, recharging providers and end-users. Solar panels will be installed at a central location. Each family will be provided with a battery pack and a set of lights. Once the battery is discharged it will be brought to the charging station. The SHG will maintain the charging station and collect a fee to provide the charging service.

If the rural project works on a small scale, Hemant plans on linking-up with governmental action nationwide and with similar initiatives around India. This project will hopefully give the initial spark for small entrepreneurs to pick up the idea.

Joanna

PHOTO COURTESY NJAL



Njal

meet the people I need to meet, learn the things I need to know. At those times my mistakes are few," he says softly.

With rising enjoyment of the jest to come, Njal tells me of another harvest from the cashew plantation – the pleasure and peace he reaps. Days later, as I recall conversations at the exhibition, I realise there's a lot more being passed on than just organic growing techniques.

Charles



# Beautiful blooms of the plastic kind

Long-term guest Romi Netis-Pardesi infuses creativity and consciousness into the recycling challenge

It's a run-down building at the entrance of New Creation where I find myself searching for Romi. She is my interviewee for the afternoon, a long-term guest at Auroville who has been creating fashion accessories and jewellery out of discarded plastic bags. I spot my target – room 25. I knock, unsure if I will be answered, but the door opens. Standing before me and beaming widely is a waif-like woman. Behind her is what appears to be a tropical Eden. "Priya?" she asks softly with a papery whisper. I nod, momentarily speechless. It is a riotous burst of colour everywhere the eyes turn. Plastic flowers of all sizes and shapes – lotuses, lilies, roses, dahlias, and sunflowers – spilling out of bottles, hanging from shelves, festooning the window grills, even fluttering from a slow-turning fan.

Welcome to Romi's flower world.

Romi arrived in Auroville a year ago just in time for Earth Day 2005. "I heard about Auroville from an article I read 10 years ago on The Mother and Auroville," she says. "At that time, I knew I would one day come here." Romi is not your ordinary 'run-of-the-mill' vacationer hanging out in India for an easy life. She has been an activist of sorts, living and moving amongst the common folk, teaching English to disadvantaged children and crafts to women, while quietly advocating a cleaner plastic-free environment. Once in Auroville, Romi immediately got down to work.

Originally from Ukraine, 37 year old Romi grew up in Israel. Trained as a designer, her passion was recycling plastic waste to create one-of-a-kind sculptural pieces. "I would collect discarded balls and broken toys, sculpt them with 'play-dough' into animal forms – cows, sheep, frogs, birds, whatever... and these I sold out of a small shop that I ran."

Her connection with India began in the year 2000. "I wanted to visit India for a short vacation. But when I got here, I fell in love with the country." She found herself in the holy island town of Omkareshwar in Madhya Pradesh. "I volunteered to help at the local Government school teaching

English to children." It was here that recycling plastic bags entered Romi's life. "The town itself is so lovely, located at a junction of two rivers, the Narmada and the Kaveri. But plastic pollution was so bad and people were burning it to get rid of it." She says that plastic bags were strewn everywhere – "Bags flying around, caught in the trees and bushes, or floating in the waters. It was really ugly. I felt I needed to do something." She gathered the children together and asked them to help her collect the plastic bags littered all over town.

"And so it started," says Romi. "But soon we had filled up all the available space and we didn't know what to do with all the plastic we had picked up." Her mind became preoccupied with how to solve the problem. "It became like a meditation – I was constantly thinking about it, asking for divine guidance. One day I was sitting in my room when suddenly the answer flashed up. I saw five ways to make flower blossoms out of plastic!" The following day Romi was early at school, ready to teach the technique to the teachers and children.

She taught the group not only how to make flowers, but also kites, brooms and cushions (stuffed with plastic) from their vast pile of recycled plastic. "The teachers enjoyed it, but it was more the idea of art that engaged them rather than concern for the environment." Romi did not let that bother her. "For me that was okay. I decided to keep doing what I believed in. They took home their creations as souvenirs or decorative pieces."

Soon it was time to move, and Romi left Omkareshwar to visit other big and small towns in India. It was during her stay in Goa that she discovered an economically-viable aspect to the plastic bag recycling saga. "Goa is a plastic nightmare because of the tourist industry," explains Romi. "After the beach comes the restaurant and hotel zone, and behind that is the dumping ground littered with all kinds of waste, including mountains of plastic. And the way it is dealt with is through open burning," she adds with a shudder.

Romi began in earnest to collect



Romi and Rajeni with blossoms of plastic

plastic by the day, creating her signature flowers – she was also inspired by the Western tourists to make floral accessories and costume jewellery – and in the evenings visiting the local 'open-mike' café with her bouquets. "It was a popular hangout for the tourists. There I'd go on-stage, speak to the crowd about plastic pollution caused by us tourists, and explain the absolute need for recycling. Then I'd go from table to table selling my flowers." Her creations became an instant hit. "And I'd always run out of flowers before the evening was over." It was a big success. "People even gave money for the project when I had run out of flowers for them to buy!" The experience in Goa gave Romi the confidence that there was a market for recycled products. "It was the first time I began to think that perhaps this could be an employment option for poor unskilled women."

This is exactly what Romi pursued

after her arrival in Auroville. The Tsunami relief work had started, and the W.E.L.L. programme for women's employment was just taking off. Romi taught at several places, including the Life Education Centre run by Village Action, a women's Self-help Group at Pillaichavadi village, and the workshop of Orly and Danny, a newcomer couple running a papier maché unit for young village women. "There I taught them how to make the flowers."

For Romi, the experience was special. "The women themselves brought old plastic bags from their homes and surroundings, and we'd pay them a small amount of money, 50 paise or a rupee, depending on the colour and condition of the bag. Once in Pune I spotted an old woman carrying a bag that was a rare shade of purple. I had never seen it before and I had to have it. So I ran up to her, offered her five rupees for parting with it. But she was street-smart; she said she'd give it only

if I paid her seven rupees!" Of course she paid up.

Romi shares her knowledge generously with just about anyone who expresses an interest. Besides the women in the W.E.L.L. programme, Romi has given workshops at Deepanam school, and even privately to those who ask. With some of her creations selling at 120 rupees a piece, is she not concerned about creating competition? "The real motivation behind my work is not how to make money but to raise awareness about plastic litter and how to do something constructive about it." For Romi, the more women making flowers the less litter. "Also this is easy income for unskilled or uneducated women." She explains how the investment is only one's own time, as the raw material comes practically free. "I have even given a name to my project," she adds. "I call it the 'I love my planet project'. And I would like to see 'I love my planet' shops open all over our planet – a place where people can take old plastic bags for recycling, and have some beautiful objects made."

Romi recycles everything. "If I cannot recycle something, I just don't use it!" She recently became a mother for the first time. Rajeni, her baby girl is two months old. "Rajeni is the Hindi name of a beautiful fragrant white flower with a yellow centre. And she is the new flower in my life," says Romi gazing at her sleeping daughter. She adds, "And here I find out that the Mother has given a special name for it – 'Psychological perfection'! With Rajeni too, Romi takes great care to use only things that are recyclable, like cotton diapers. "I will never use disposables," she says categorically. "And no, it is not much work!" she adds as if reading my mind.

But isn't life more difficult if you make such a choice I persist? "No, in fact it is easier," she replies, "because in my head, the price we pay for plastic is very high."

"It's time we humans wake up," she continues softly. "If we love our planet, we have to be creative and recycle everything; we have to reuse everything – and I mean everything."

Priya Sundaravalli

## BUSINESS

# "It's a whole different ballgame"

Aureka, Auroville's engineering workshop, takes on a big new challenge.

When people talk about the environmental achievements of Auroville, they often forget about the back-room work that made it all possible. Take water. For many years the Toujours Mieux workshop serviced the hand-pumps which made irrigation possible. It also worked on improving the efficiency of windmills donated to the community. Ultimately the Aurovilians working at Toujours Mieux came up with their own design, the highly-efficient AV55, described by a Dutch wind-energy consultant as the best windmill manufactured in India.

Some years ago Toujours Mieux was renamed Aureka. And the changes didn't stop there. "It's a whole different ballgame now," says Robi as he surveys the busy compound below his office. "And it all began when we hooked up with Suzlon."

Suzlon is not only India's leading manufacturer of wind turbine generators, it's one of the biggest in the world. Globally, there's a huge growth in the market for wind turbines. This is

not just because of concerns about global warming. "It's also because it's a mature technology now and a really profitable investment," says Robi. "These machines cost two crores or more, but after five years of generating and selling electricity you've repaid your investment."

A friend of Robi's mentioned that Suzlon needed custom-made mobile tool cabinets for the huge tools they use on their production line. "They gave us the specifications, we made a prototype and they were very pleased. Actually," says Robi, "they were in awe. They told us 'We can see Swiss engineering here'."

Suzlon wanted more cabinets, but clearly the demand for mobile tool cabinets is limited. So Robi asked if Aureka could also manufacture components used in Suzlon's production process. "The production manager gave us some drawings but he implied that we may not be able to compete with other Indian suppliers because the pricing was so competitive."

Yet so successful has Aureka been in producing high-quality components at the specified prices that today they

are manufacturing over 100 different components for Suzlon. "The other day," says Robi, "their production manager was here and he said that next year he'll give us as much work as we like. One crore, two crores, five crores, no problem."

Robi does not want to expand the workforce, however. Aureka has already increased production by 50% since last year, and simply to meet present orders the workers are doing a lot of overtime. Robi also notes that they've had previous experience of increasing their workforce, only for orders to suddenly drop away when they were confronted with cut-throat competition from other Indian suppliers.

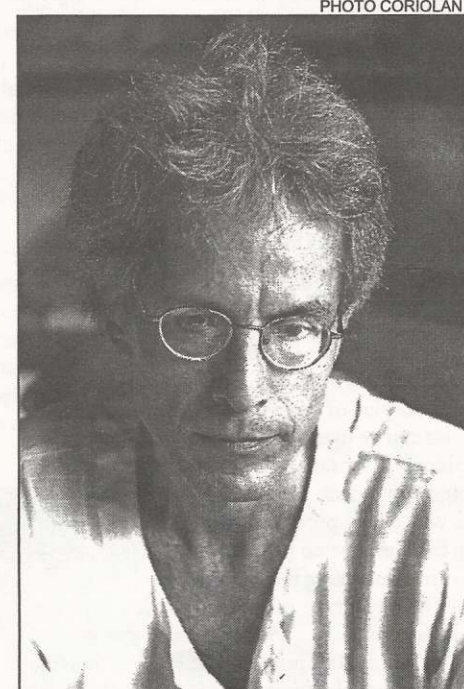
"Actually, we're happier designing and making prototypes – that's where our skills lie – than getting into huge production runs," says Robi. "And as Suzlon, given the rate of innovation in the industry, will always need new parts I'm not too worried."

Clearly, the Suzlon orders are running the workshop at present. Does this mean that Aureka no longer has time to manufacture the AV55

windmills or do one-off jobs for Aurovilians? In fact, the windmills are still being made. However, while there have been big improvements in the design of the AV55 over the last five years, fewer than ten a year are being manufactured now. "The government has shown very little interest in promoting it," says Robi, "and while a subsidy exists it is difficult to get it. This makes the AV55 a rather expensive proposition for many people."

"We also manufacture equipment for Auram Earth Construction (actually this constitutes up to 30% of our work) and specialist equipment for the Arvind Eye Hospital, a long-term customer, and, yes, we still do those one-off jobs – the wheelbarrows, frames, grills etc. – because we don't want to send people away."

In the compound below Robi's office people are hammering out sheet metal, cutting, welding. In one corner the new computerised lathe awaits its first orders. Everywhere there is



Robi

activity. "We have sixty people working here, that's a wage bill of two lakhs a month," says Robi. "Sometimes it all gets a bit too much. But then I remember how it was when we didn't have orders, when the guys were bunding the compound because there was no other work, and I know I'd rather have it this way."

From an interview by Alan



# Better than ever

In October 2005, Roger Harris, one of Auroville Today's founding editors, met with a severe accident. Hero, a good friend, has been following his progress.

In the garden outside the bakery a small and popular café begins serving breakfast at seven in the morning. Both the main English-language newspapers, 'The Hindu' and 'The Express' lie on the tables and it's often hard to find a place to sit as Auroville's blue-collars fortify themselves for the day.

On the morning of October 31st last year, I was sipping my third chai and contemplating the international section of the paper, when Roger Harris, an Aurovilian who's been here since 1982 and an old friend, joined me at my table. He spoke hardly a word and looked agitated. But then, this was hardly unusual when what he called 'the black dog' was upon him, and I didn't think further about it.

As we left together, his agitation seemed more pronounced. Both of us live in the same central part of Auroville so seeing him driving close behind me, I assumed he was going home and this relieved me: I knew the surroundings of his apartment would calm him. I had no presentiment of trouble.

I had got back and was reading, when some five minutes later a neighbour arrived to tell me Roger had had a serious traffic accident and been taken to hospital. Stopping only to tell some of his friends I met on the way what little I knew, I drove as fast as I dared and reached the hospital barely half an hour since I'd last seen him.

Inside, doctors and orderlies

were running through the halls with a gurney on which Roger lay, unconscious and his body covered by a sheet. I asked an orderly if it was true that his arm had been severed. Yes, he said, between the shoulder and elbow. He'd washed it with saline and put it on ice.

Sitting outside with several other Aurovilians, we waited for the doctors' prognosis, which was shortly forthcoming. Things looked grim. They were trying their best to save his life – as to his arm, well... At the moment they needed blood, lots of it. Volunteers leapt up and mobile phone calls went out; "What's your blood type?" I wandered off to smoke a badly-needed cigarette and think things over.

Roger and I had spent countless evenings discussing just about everything with the exception of "Auroville's appalling politics", a subject that polite society drops after 18:00 hours. We shared a mutual love of English literature, European history, an interest in translation, (Roger is a skilled translator and has done several books) and in things arcane and curious – though some of his preoccupations, as with crop-circles, I viewed with utter bemusement.

Though we would often call on each other at home, Roger's true element was holding forth at a table in the local dive down the road where he drove us all to distraction with his endless replaying of his favourite music. For a few months it would be Country and Western, then

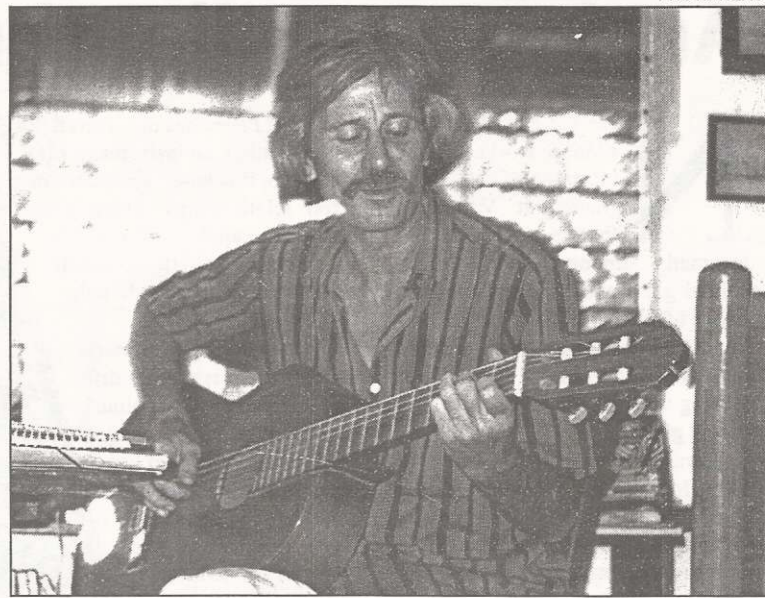
a particular recording of Dylan or the Stones. But generally when he got up to play, say an Emmylou Harris track for the third time in an hour, he'd be shouted down and forced, grumbling about "Philistines", to accede to popular demand.

I remembered one evening, showing him with some enthusiasm a book I'd recently come across. He flipped through a few pages and asked me if I really couldn't see that it was just a silly rehash of Beowulf? "Oh," I said, seeing, and sat back down suitably abashed.

Another time I mentioned in the conversation that I'd just read of the death of the writer Anthony Burgess. Roger took this like the loss of a personal friend and refused to be consoled for the rest of the evening, retreating into glum silence.

Again not very long ago, I had been working on a translation, one of Baudelaire's poems, and showed him where I simply could find no way to scan, or even find the equivalent of a French word in English. We discussed it for some time and then went on to other topics. Some months later a postcard reached me from Paris in which he outlined Aurobindo's comments on a disciple's problems with the same word in the same poem!

And then one evening, about nine years ago, I was on casual leave from my job overseas and looked in at the local to see if Roger was there. He was, and I sat down and began to



Roger playing an Irish ballad

talk. He was looking at me but I slowly realized he was no longer seeing, or even hearing me. We lapsed into silence for two hours and then I got up to leave. His total verbal contribution to the evening had been three monosyllables. This from a man who had so delighted in words and repartee. I left dismayed. Over the years he began to oscillate between the two states – flashing wit and brilliant monologues or morose and silent, somewhere distant, inaccessible, 'the black dog'.

So when the doctors finally told us, that October afternoon, that he was going to live and not leave, I wondered what this meant. 'God does not play dice' Einstein assured us. Nevertheless I wondered, and wondering, wandered home. When the news came through that the surgical team had successfully reattached his severed arm, I was amazed, and although Roger continued to be in a coma, his terrible

accident began to look less random. Over the coming days and months, when many took it in turn to tend to him as he ever so slowly made his way back to us, would this I wondered, be what it took to shake off his 'black dog'? If so, why such violence?

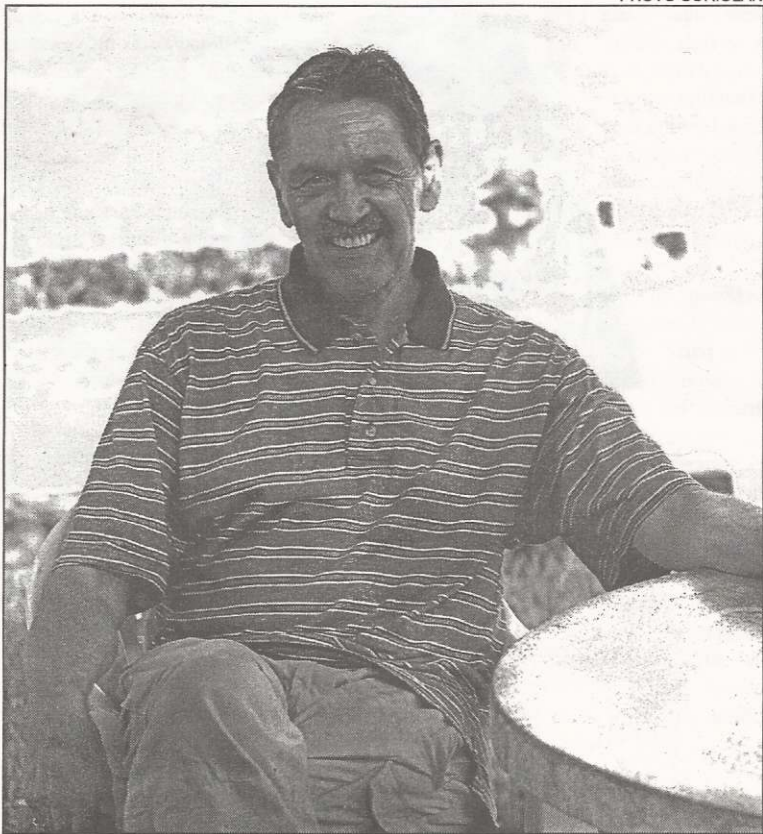
A few days ago I walked down to Henri's house where he was staying, out of the hospital for the first time, and sat down to talk to my old friend. Haltingly, but in a clear voice Roger talked, smiled and looked around at the garden, remarking on it with great pleasure. He seemed never to stop smiling and had about him a gentleness and sweetness that I'd not seen in years. Indeed never had seen. He was my old friend, but he was not the same man I'd spent innumerable evenings with. He was certainly not the man I'd had breakfast with last October. He was, if anything, better than ever.

Hero

## "I always want to create something"

A glimpse of Franz

PHOTO CORIOLAN



Franz

Franz was born in a small town in Germany. "I come from a traditional Catholic family so the 'Mother thing' was always there, although in a different form. However, when the Vietnam War broke out many young people, including myself, opposed it. When we got no support from the Church, this loosened the ties."

Around the same time, Zen Buddhism came to Germany. "There was a lot of talk about 'instant satori' (enlightenment) and I wanted it!

I was reading books on meditation and yoga, but I soon realized that if I wanted to know more I had to go to India."

Franz travelled to the traditional pilgrimage places in the north of the country. Twice he wanted to travel to the south but each time something intervened. "Then I met another German on a flight to Egypt. He was going to stay in the Ashram in Pondicherry after receiving permission from The Mother. The Mother? I'd read Sri Aurobindo but I'd never heard of this Mother."

Franz wrote to The Mother and

finally was allowed to come for one year. "It was the most exciting year of my life. I was meeting all these remarkable people – Medhananda, Nolani – and Mother was still there in her body. It was so different then. We never went out, we were absolutely concentrated on Mother."

The night Franz flew back to Germany, Mother left her body. "I left with the expectation, which many of us had, that she would not die."

In spite of this, Franz made up his mind to return and within nine months he was back. But this time in Auroville. "The Ashram was no longer encouraging people to join. The future, we were told, was Auroville."

Franz had trained as a graphic designer and had been art director of a big advertising agency in Germany, so it was logical he would find work at Auroville's press, Auropress. However, when the troubles with the Sri Aurobindo Society began he left to supervise a workshop in Fraternity. Some time later he joined Aurelec.

"It was a very difficult period. First of all a French group took over the Fraternity workshop, then they threw us out of our community kitchen because we didn't want to put all the money in a common pot. It was a clash which you still see happening today in Auroville between idealism and a more pragmatic position. Then the whole 'Neutral' thing happened (the 'Neutrals' took a different view from most Aurovilians regarding how to deal with the Sri Aurobindo Society)

and suddenly all my friends were outcasts, and all the outcasts were working at Aurelec!"

Franz became stock manager, but when sales of Aurelec computers took off there was a need for advertising and brochures, and he was back in the job he had left behind in Germany.

"But then the Foundation took over and Aurelec stopped. So three of us started a unit, PRISMA, to offer a design, editing and DTP service to Auroville." For some years PRISMA just about kept afloat. "But now a whole shift is happening. The West is very expensive, so more and more Western authors and publishers of niche books are coming to us to get them printed here. It's very exciting

PHOTO PRIYA SUNDARAVALLI



The outdoor seating at Aurelec's cafeteria

because we're in the right place at the right time to help make this happen."

Franz also took over responsibility for the old Aurelec canteen. Not only did he succeed in improving the dire fare he also, somewhat improbably, turned the room into an art gallery. "I had so much art stored in my house and I wanted others to enjoy it. But I also wanted to expose people to good art, to another way of seeing."

Over the years Franz had acquired an interesting collection, mainly of Far Eastern art. But he has also continued working as an artist in his own right. During his first year in the Ashram he crafted two beautifully hand-made books which he presented to The Mother. Later, in Auroville, he would go at night to his small workroom in Auropress – his own room had no electricity – to create visual interpretations of passages from 'Savitri'.

"For me art is one of the most important tools of transformation. Without culture we are nothing, life is misery. That's why I've always been involved with it, that's why I always support it." So how have his artistic efforts in the Aurelec canteen been received by the I.T. professionals who eat there? Franz takes a deep breath. "I think," he says, choosing his words extra-carefully, "that I.T. engineers have brains that are differently formatted from those of artists. They eat here every day but they never comment upon what's on the walls. Maybe they don't even notice there's something hanging there!"

Paradoxically, it's precisely this friction with the environment, with the different cultures here, to which Franz ascribes his continued creativity. "If I'd stayed in Germany life would have been so different..."

"I'm not interested in repeating myself. I always want to create something new, something better and more beautiful. It's the process of making something new which for me is the adventure. And when I'm involved in this, even if I'm just redesigning a small brochure, I feel like I'm contributing something to Auroville."

From an interview with Alan



# Art in Auroville: three exhibitions

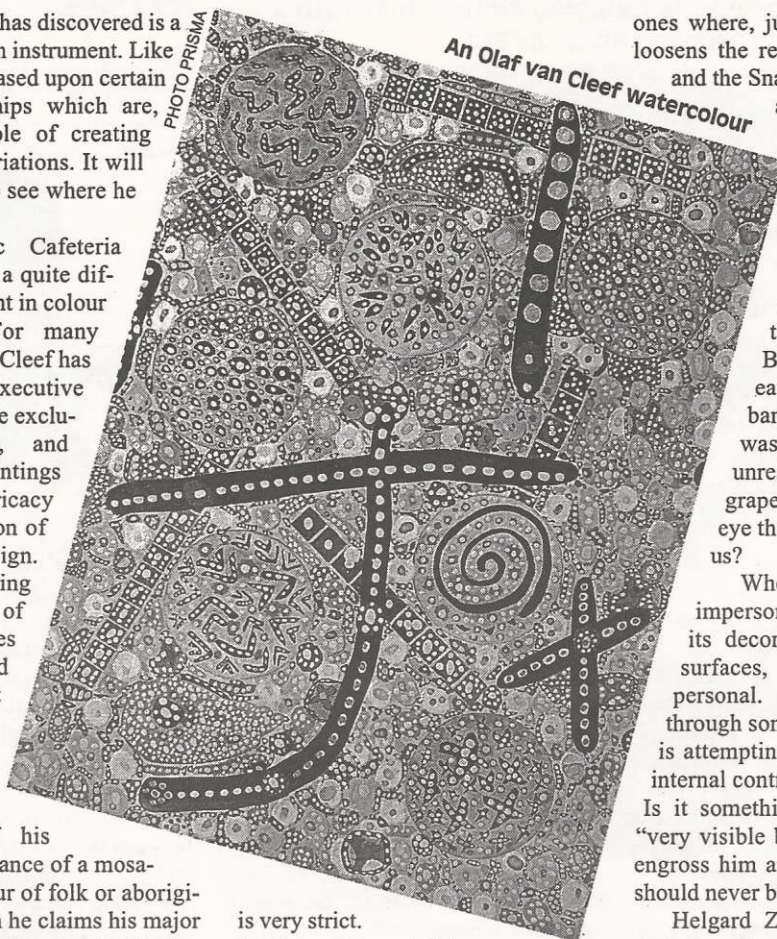
Near the end of his life, Matisse worked on the interior of a small chapel at Vence in France. For it he designed, among other things, stained-glass windows and a bronze image of St. Dominic. But the predominant sense is of white, a white that is only accentuated by the light pouring through the green, blue and yellow glass.

I was reminded of this when, in late March, I visited Pierre Legrand's exhibition in the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture. For here, as in Vence, colours intensify the surrounding white and detail accentuates space.

The main feature of the exhibition, which Pierre called 'The Colour Piano and Some Side-Effects', is a frieze of small, coloured squares and dots which runs round two sides of the room. The dots of yellow, blue, green and white seem either to float above or puncture the ordered blocks of squares: sometimes the dots 'escape' completely onto adjacent areas of white. It's like a dance between structure and non-structure, between organization and anarchy (although one is aware that, this being Pierre, it is all based upon a rigorously worked-out schema). The white of the paper and the surrounding walls, however, is the 'invisible', ground upon which this dance of life takes place.

What Pierre has discovered is a tool or, rather, an instrument. Like the piano, it is based upon certain fixed relationships which are, however, capable of creating innumerable variations. It will be interesting to see where he takes it next.

At Aurelec Cafeteria Gallery there is a quite different experiment in colour composition. For many years, Olaf Van Cleef has been a senior executive with Cartiers, the exclusive jewellers, and many of his paintings reflect the intricacy and concentration of jewellery design. He uses recurring images — of snakes, crosses and circles — and strong, vibrant colours, often in small contrasting blocks, which give some of his work the appearance of a mosaic and the flavour of folk or aboriginal art (although he claims his major influences are Miro and Dali). The colours are usually clearly demarcated by strong outlines, boundaries. "I take extreme care," he says, "to demarcate my boundary before I begin to work...Life, according to me



is very strict. It has very visible boundaries that you should not cross so that you can preserve the beauty in it."

Paradoxically, I found the most interesting of his works were the

ones where, just for a moment, he loosens the reins. His "Fruit Bowl and the Snake", for example, has a strong framing mosaic, but in the centre are three luscious pink bananas within which the darker pink has been allowed to run into the lighter. In "The Blue Pear" the delineation of the pears and banana is strong, but the wash of colour is large, unrestrained. And is that a grape on a plate or is it an eye that is quietly observing us?

Whereas Pierre's is an impersonal art, Olaf's, for all its decorative or geometrical surfaces, somehow feels more personal. One senses that, through some of them at least, he is attempting to work out certain internal contradictions or tensions. Is it something to do with those "very visible boundaries" which so engross him and which he believes should never be transcended?

Helgard Zurmuehl's exhibition at Gallery Square Circle can be seen as a more communal, environmental art. As you approach, white outlines of hands dangle from or embrace trees. In the foyer, brown muddy footprints lead up to her refined

'Lotus-Window', a stylized painting of the lotus which serves as a kind of invocation. Mud and aspiration: an evocative image of Auroville.

Helgard's exhibition is called 'Movements and Impressions in Auroville'. She explains that she woke in the middle of the night with an idea: "to collect traces of Auroville and to transform these impressions and movements of Nature, body, mind and spirit into visible imprints of a momentum of Auroville."

The 'traces' include tyre tracks as well as handprints and footprints of Aurovilians. Helgard has a very developed sense of balance, arrangement and colour but, as in the case of Olaf, perhaps her most interesting work is that where she exercises the least obvious control. Her lightning sketches of dancers, for example, where a few lines define both body and movement, are superb, as is 'Deepness', a painting where tyre marks in yellow and blue are complemented by a strong, green slash that runs up the side of the canvas.

In the raised space at the centre of the exhibition, white hands spiral up towards the orange light flooding down from the central cone in the roof. It's effective but, at the same time, somewhat contrived, as if something had to be underlined rather than trusted to emerge naturally.

Alan

## Tartuffe/Texas

Moliere was something of an original, so it's fitting that the Auroville Theatre Group in its recent production decided not only to set an English adaptation of his most famous play, Tartuffe, in modern-day Texas but also to stage it at La Piscine, the New Creation swimming pool.

Tartuffe is an imposter who has ingratiated himself into a prosperous household through convincing the father of Tartuffe's moral superiority and sanctity. Almost everybody else in the family sees through the deception. However, the father not only refuses to listen to them but decides to wed his daughter to him. Finally he even makes Tartuffe his sole heir.

The father is only convinced of the truth when he observes Tartuffe attempting to seduce his wife. But then it all seems too late for Tartuffe refuses to be thrown out of the house, claiming that it now belongs to him. In fact, he tells the family to leave. Justice is only done when, in a deus ex machina intervention, the law finally catches up with the godman-conman.

Moliere in ten-gallon hats and twangy Texan accents? Actually, it works rather well. Charu is superb as the deceived father trying to lay down the law to his dissenting family — the ipod daughter, the hot-headed son, the sexy wife and the French maid. Jean Legrand is convincing as

Terry Tuff, the white-suited man of God who flings a handkerchief at the wife, telling her to cover her décolletage, only to spend as much effort later on in getting her to uncover it. (The modern allusion, presumably, is to those T.V. evangelists who led a not altogether consonant

CARTOON: CHARUDUTTA



private life.) Srimoyi as ze vrench maid viz ze tonge and Sonja as the Cosmo wife flaunting the latest poolside gear are equally entertaining.

And the pool? Well, it's believable that this is where rich Texans plan their business, amorous and, probably, political campaigns. But Terry Tuff territory? Doubtful. But, there again, I don't know Texas.

The pool does, however, does act as a kind of strange attractor. Everybody, at some stage, seems to teeter on the edge, and

the daughter finally falls in when running frantically round the edge with the rest of the family (I forget now precisely what they were running from or towards).

Entertaining? Yes. Overlong? Yes. This is a version which could certainly have been edited down, notably a toe-twisting speech by the brother-in-law early in the play. It's also unclear why the characters lapse (or should that be 'ascend'?) into French for some scenes. But bravo, Jill, for an adventurous production.

Alan

## On the wings of song

The first live performance of Chinese music in Auroville

The music bursts out of the confines of Pitanga, piercing the still night. We are bathed in startling foreign notes that seem to carry us from the slow-meandering Yangtze into the wind-swept plains of Mongolia.

"It felt very good, very free, singing in Auroville," says Chinese singer 'Fong' Ling Ping who presented a rich concert of Chinese folk music at Pitanga in late March. She confesses that this is the first time that she sings for a live audience without the usual accompanying musical instruments or recorded feedback. "I found myself having to rely totally on my feeling for the music. It was special."

Fong has been living in Pondicherry for the past year and a half with her British partner, who had a work assignment in India. "It's strange that just two weeks before we leave India this concert gets arranged!"

Fong has been connected to Auroville during her stay in Pondicherry. Besides teaching Mandarin to Angad of Mantra pottery, she has also been working with Holger of Sunshine Studio in putting together an album of folk music from China. The Flowing Stream is a collection of twelve traditional songs from the various provinces of China. It is these she presented at her Pitanga concert.

Her collaboration with Holger she says has "widened my eyes to

music". The duo have embarked on a second musical collaboration, this time to present Chinese popular music infused with a 'fresh' Chinese feeling. "Holger is composing the music while I will sing," she says. "We have completed one song, and have nine more to go."

"In China, folk music is not in demand," says Fong, "even though all Chinese are familiar with it as it has come down in families from generation to generation." In China, her performances feature either the more Classical style of the Peking Opera or the pop-genre, the music of the masses. "So it's only when I am abroad that I am able to give concerts in folk music which is my personal favourite."

Singing for audiences who may have little or no knowledge of China or its culture has not daunted Fong. "In fact," she says, "it energizes me. On stage I forget everyone. It is just the music." She also feels that being in an inter-cultural relationship has placed her with a unique responsibility to share her culture with those unfamiliar with it. "To be able to share this music that is rich in Chinese culture is a privilege."

Fong is now off to England with her partner Ben for his next work assignment. "In Europe, I plan to give more a capella concerts and raise money for our project," she says. "We need to finish that album!" This she hopes, will bring her back to Auroville in the near future.

Priya Sundaravalli



### Subscription information

◆ One year subscription rate: India Rs. 250; other countries Can \$51, EU € 37, US \$38, UK £25.

◆ Two year subscription rate: India Rs. 450; other countries Can \$92, EU € 67, US \$68, UK £45.

Those for whom the subscription rate is an obstacle are invited to contact Auroville Today for information on reduced rates.

Auroville Today does not receive any funds from Auroville. Your subscription (or your supporting contribution of double the amount) helps us to continue this work.

### There are three ways to subscribe:

◆ Send your contribution directly to Auroville Today, Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India. Cheques sent directly to Auroville Today should be made payable to Auroville Fund, specifying: 'Contribution for Auroville Today'. Personal cheques are preferred to bank cheques. Please do not send postal money orders or cash.

◆ Through our website [www.auroville.org/journals&media/avtoday](http://www.auroville.org/journals&media/avtoday)

◆ Send your contribution to one of the following Auroville International Centres:

◆ **Germany:** Auroville International Deutschland e.V., Solmsstrasse 6, 10961 Berlin, tel. (49)(0)30-42803150, Fax (49)(0)30-92091376, email: [info@auroville.de](mailto:info@auroville.de). GLS Gemeinschaftsbank, BIC: GENODEM1GLS, IBAN: DE16430609678019389200.

◆ **The Netherlands:** Auroville International Nederland, email: [info@auroville-int-ned.nl](mailto:info@auroville-int-ned.nl), Postbank account: 805707, account name: Auroville Int. Ned. Account address: Generaal Knooppaan 85, 5623 MV Eindhoven, (IBAN: NL11 PSTB 0000 805707, BIC: PSTBNL21)

◆ **U.K.:** Auroville International U.K., c/o Martin Littlewood, 30 The Green, Surlingham,

Norwich NR14 7AG, tel. 01508-538300, fax 01508-537122, email: [info@aviuk.org](mailto:info@aviuk.org)

USA: Make checks payable to Auroville International USA, and send to either:

◆ **U.S.A (1):** AVI USA, P.O. Box 1534, Lodi, CA 95241-1534, Tel: (831) 425-5620; email: [info@aviusa.org](mailto:info@aviusa.org); or to

◆ **U.S.A (2):** Auroville Information Office, PO Box 676, Woodstock NY 12498, tel: (1) 845-679-5358, fax: 5853, email: [AVINY@aviusa.org](mailto:AVINY@aviusa.org)

Editorial team: Alan, Carel, Emmanuelle, Hero, Priya Sundaravalli, Roger.

Guest editor: Joanna, Charles

Proof-reading: Hero, Alan.

DTP: Matthia. Photo editing: Matthia

Printed and published by Carel Thieme on behalf of the Auroville Foundation, and printed at All India Press, Pondicherry, and published at Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India.

Auroville Today does not necessarily reflect the views of the community as a whole.