

# AUROVILLE TODAY

Number Eighty September 1995

## Women. Women at work. Women at home. Women in love. Women in relationships. Women out of relationships. Women carnalised by the me- dia. Women revered as Goddesses. Young Women. old Women. Mothers. Lesbi- ans. Wives. Single Women. Abused Women. Womyn.

Women have seized the imagination of the world this month with the commencement of the Fourth World Conference on Women. While the United Nations conference examines the status of women in the context of Development, Equality and Peace, and while our hearts go out to the millions of women all over the world who still face social and economic discrimination, we, the women on the staff of Auroville Today, felt that Auroville should try and offer new perspectives, add new insights, to this international discussion on women. To that end we called a meeting of some Auroville women to discuss the problems that they faced and the aspirations they cherished.

Though Auroville aspires to be the birthplace of a new consciousness, at present it is governed by many of the world's old formations and habits. At the meeting, it was unanimously agreed that while there was no open discrimination in Auroville on the basis of gender, men often tended to exert a certain subtle dominance over women at meetings and decision-making processes. Secondly, living in India has its own problems, for traditional Indian society does not accord much respect to single

or liberated women. Auroville women, especially white ones, can be subject to harassment when they move alone at night or outside of Auroville. Village women, hundreds of whom earn their livelihood in Auroville, suffer daily from physical and psychological oppression at home. In contrast, many Tamil women from the villages who joined Auroville either as young girls or as wives of Aurovilians feel a sense of liberation in Auroville. Some women complained about the lack of support-groups in Auroville that would help them deal with psychological problems or even with the physical changes that a wom-

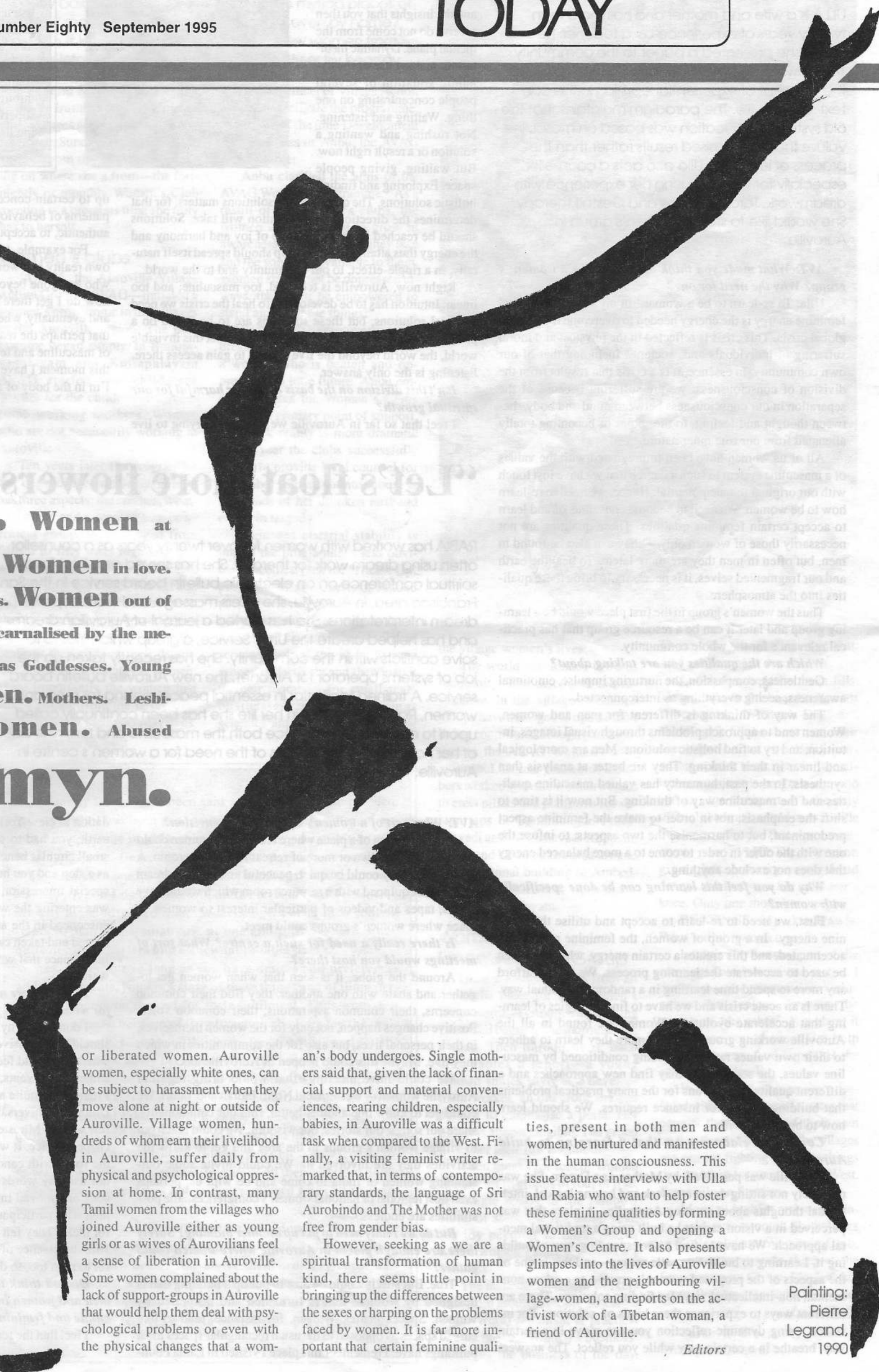
an's body undergoes. Single mothers said that, given the lack of financial support and material conveniences, rearing children, especially babies, in Auroville was a difficult task when compared to the West. Finally, a visiting feminist writer remarked that, in terms of contemporary standards, the language of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother was not free from gender bias.

However, seeking as we are a spiritual transformation of human kind, there seems little point in bringing up the differences between the sexes or harping on the problems faced by women. It is far more important that certain feminine quali-

ties, present in both men and women, be nurtured and manifested in the human consciousness. This issue features interviews with Ulla and Rabia who want to help foster these feminine qualities by forming a Women's Group and opening a Women's Centre. It also presents glimpses into the lives of Auroville women and the neighbouring village-women, and reports on the activist work of a Tibetan woman, a friend of Auroville.

Editors

Painting:  
Pierre  
Legrand,  
1990





# "We have to re-learn to be women!"

ULLA is a wife and mother and has more than twenty years of experience as a teacher. Recently she presented a paper to the community, *The New Paradigm In Education*, which explores the concept of experiential learning in the context of Auroville. The paradigm maintains that the old system of education was based on masculine values that emphasised results rather than the process of learning. Ulla also acts a counsellor, especially for women, using her experience with dreamwork, Tarot readings and Gestalt therapy. She would like to start a women's group in Auroville.

**AVT: What made you think about starting a women's group? Why the need for one?**

Ulla: To re-learn to be a woman! In my view the original feminine energy is the energy needed to overcome the present global crisis. This crisis is reflected in the physical and moral suffering of individuals and societies including that of our own community. In essence, it is a crisis that results from the division of consciousness: we are suffering because of the separation in our consciousness between mind and body, between thought and feeling, to the point of becoming totally alienated from our true inner nature.

All of us women have been impregnated with the values of a masculine system to such a degree that we have lost touch with our original female potential. Hence, we need to re-learn how to be women. We need to become conscious of and learn to accept certain feminine qualities. These qualities are not necessarily those of women only—they can also be found in men, but often in men they are more latent. To heal the earth and our fragmented selves, it is necessary to bring these qualities into the atmosphere.

Thus the women's group in the first place would be a learning group and later it can be a resource group that has practical relevance for the whole community.

**Which are the qualities you are talking about?**

Gentleness, compassion, the nurturing impulse, emotional awareness, seeing everything as interconnected.

The way of thinking is different for men and women. Women tend to approach problems through visual images, intuition, and try to find holistic solutions. Men are more logical and linear in their thinking. They are better at analysis than synthesis. In the past, humanity has valued masculine qualities and the masculine way of thinking. But now it is time to shift the emphasis, not in order to make the feminine aspect predominant, but to harmonise the two aspects; to infuse the one with the other in order to come to a more balanced energy that does not exclude anything.

**Why do you feel this learning can be done specifically with women?**

First, we need to re-learn to accept and utilise the feminine energy. In a group of women, the feminine aspect gets accentuated, and this creates a certain energy, which can then be used to accelerate the learning process. We cannot afford any more to spend time learning in a random, individual way. There is an acute crisis and we have to find strategies of learning that accelerate evolution. Women are found in all the Auroville working groups and the more they learn to adhere to their own values rather than being conditioned by masculine values, the sooner they may find new approaches and a different quality of solutions for the many practical problems that building a town for instance requires. We should learn how to build Auroville.

**Could you elaborate on that "learning to build Auroville"?**

Auroville was perceived, by Mother, as a Dream. She was definitely not sitting down at a desk and having logical, intellectual thoughts about creating Auroville. A place that was perceived in a vision cannot be built using a traditional mental approach. We have to find a corresponding way of building it. Learning to build Auroville means—and this is one of the aspects of the proposed women's group—to explore non-mental, non-intellectual ways for finding solutions. There are different ways to experience these kinds of solutions. For instance, using dynamic reflection you can move in a certain way, breathe in a certain way while you reflect. The answers

and the insights that you then receive do not come from the mental plane. Dynamic meditation: making use of the dynamic situation of several people concentrating on one thing. Waiting and listening. Not rushing and wanting a solution or a result right now. But waiting, giving people space. Exploring and finding holistic solutions. The quality of the solutions matters, for that determines the directions that evolution will take. Solutions should be reached in an atmosphere of joy and harmony and the energy thus attained by the group should spread itself naturally, in a ripple-effect, to our community and to the world.

Right now, Auroville is too hard, too masculine, and too linear. Intuition has to be developed. To heal the crisis we need material solutions, but these solutions are to be found on a plane other than the material one. And to contact this invisible world, the world beyond the five senses, to gain access there, listening is the only answer.

**Isn't this division on the basis of gender harmful for our spiritual growth?**

I feel that so far in Auroville we have been trying to live



When the mind is perfectly silent, pure like a well-polished mirror, immobile as a pond on a breezeless day, then from above, the light of the supermind, of the truth within, shines in the quieted mind, and gives birth to intuition. Those who are accustomed to listen to this voice out of the silence, take it more and more as the instigating motive of their action, and where others, the average men, wander along the intricate paths of reasoning, they go straight their way, guided through the windings of life by intuition, this superior instinct, as by a strong and unfailing hand.

Sri Aurobindo

up to certain concepts of spirituality, trying to imitate role patterns of behaviour. It is important that we learn to become authentic, to accept the reality in which we live now.

For example, to become authentic I have to deal with my own reality as a woman. My ideal is to become a human being who has gone beyond, who has combined the polarities. But how do I get there? I have to travel through my own reality, and eventually, when I reach my own true Self, I will discover that perhaps the reality of that true Self means the dissolution of masculine and feminine principles into a vast Ocean. But at this moment I have to deal with my own reality, which is that I'm in the body of a woman.

Interview by Annemarie and Bindu

## "Let's float more flowers and see..."

RABIA has worked with women for over twenty years as a counsellor often using dream work for therapy. She has served as a host for a spiritual conference on an electronic bulletin board service in the San Francisco area. In Auroville, she offers massage and workshops in dream interpretations. She has started a journal of Aurovillian dreams and has helped create the Unity Service, a group which tries to resolve conflicts within the community. She has recently taken up the job of systems operator for AuroNet, the new Auroville bulletin board service. A trained facilitator in essential peace-making for men and women, Rabiya feels that in her life she has been continually called upon to develop and balance both the masculine and feminine sides of her nature. Here she speaks of the need for a women's centre in Auroville.



**AVT: What sort of a women's centre do you envision?**

Rabiya: I dream of a place where Aurovillian women could come for a day or two or more of retreat in a simple room. A place where they could be quiet, peaceful and alone. I dream of a centre equipped with a resource room which would have books, tapes and videos of particular interest to women. A place where women's groups could meet.

**Is there really a need for such a centre? What sort of meetings would you host there?**

Around the globe, it is seen that when women get together and share with one another, they find their common concerns, their common aspirations, their common voice. Positive changes happen, not only for the women themselves, in their personal lives, but also for the communities in which they live. Maybe this could happen in Auroville too.

We could have meetings that would bring together Auroville women—Western and North Indian and Tamil. We could get to know one another better, find our commonality, share our songs, our stories, our wisdom. We could reach out to village women's groups in the area and get to know the activities they are involved in. We could invite some outstanding women of India to come and be with us, perhaps even host regional or national women's conferences...the possibilities are endless.

**But do we really need to put up another building? Surely there are enough places in Auroville where women could gather?**

True. But still it would be nice to put up a building that is designed by women, that is furnished and decorated by women. Spaces matter. Women, for instance, tend to like curved spaces as opposed to the usual rectangular spaces most buildings have. I remember this place I visited in Lama Foun-

dation in New York where the room was hollowed out in the earth; you had to step down to enter the room. There was a small circular bench running all around the room that served as a step and you had to cross it to enter the room. It created a special impression when one entered the room—it felt one was entering the womb of Mother Earth. Or one was safely ensconced in the arms of Mother Earth. If the Centre is designed and taken care of by women, I think it will open up an inner space that would allow feminine qualities to come forward.

**But would we not be alienating men by building a centre for women?**

I don't see why it has to be that way. The centre we build should be "inclusive", not "exclusive". It should create a space where all would feel comfortable. Men too can participate in some of our events, get in touch with their own feminine side. I remember, quite a few decades back, I was studying to be a Unitarian Universalist Minister. At that time, there were very few women Ministers and we women were asked to conduct a chapel service. It was very different from the usual. We lit up the room with candles and decorated it with drapes. We did not use any words for the service at all, but we hummed a song and moved in rhythm, in a free-form dance... Later, the men who participated said that it was a beautiful experience for them. They felt as though they had been brought in touch with the essence of femininity. Thus this centre could be useful to men too, to develop and integrate their personality.

**Do you think that there is that great a chasm between men and women in Auroville, or let's say between the masculine and feminine sides of Aurovillians?**

I feel that the feminine aspect needs to be developed more,

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## Empowering the women of the village

# "Women should not be oppressed always..."

How much do we really know about the hundreds of women from the surrounding villages who walk, cycle or arrive as precariously balanced pillion riders daily at the myriad places of employment provided by Auroville? How many do we know personally, or even by name? Names can be tricky, and Tamil is a difficult language. Most of us know a few women from the villages. And most of us know the skeleton details of their lives, personally or by hearsay.

For example, twenty-four-year-old Radha is a widow, mother of three young children and the sole source of income in her family of five. Lakshmi is an unmarried mother. Valli has an alcoholic father who reduces her prospects of marriage enormously by drinking her dowry\*. But then Valli doesn't want to get married anyway: "For me I can see that marriage in my village promises trouble". Many women who come to work have been beaten up. But you wouldn't know it.

Ambiga arrives at Centre Field on Monday morning at 8 a.m. sharp, flowers pinned in her long black hair, sometimes with the golden sheen of turmeric on her cheeks. She parks her bicycle, smiles softly. Crosses the red dusty track to the kitchen.

Six days a week it's the same for her. And six days weekly, the same smile, the same serene exterior. But who is she? What about her other life, her home life, her inner life? What about the night times, her days off for example?

Every second Sunday of the month without fail Ambiga rises earlier than usual. As the village rouses itself she has already laid breakfast for her three children. She drapes her sari, yellow like the flowers in her hair, glances at the mirror, thanks the God silently for this day.

Like for two hundred other

\*"Dowry" is property or money brought by the bride to her husband

women from Kuilapalayam, Pillai-chavadi, Irumbai or many of the other villages around Auroville, this particular Sunday is special. For a woman from the village—depending on where she's from—the fortnightly or monthly Women's Club meeting is a precious time she truly has to herself.

### Women's clubs

In 1985, the Auroville Village Action Group—AVAG—initiated a women's programme in the villages in the Auroville region. The programme began simply. In Bommi-yapalayam and Kuilapalayam AVAG started two child-care creches for the children of low-income working mothers. Women who are not necessarily working in Auroville.

Ten years later the programme has expanded enormously. It now has three aspects; the creches, women's clubs and a women's empowerment group. Women aged from fifteen to fifty meet regularly at a women's club in their home village.

Meetings are fluid. The agenda includes discussion, communication about the problems women face—alcohol abuse within the family, the beatings they endure, their daughters' futures. Their status as women. More importantly the women just talk, a respite from the never-ending demands of their everyday lives.

Usually a member of Village Action is there to facilitate the programme, either one of the nine Development Work trainees or Anbu, the AVAG social worker.

Anbu clarified the aims of the AVAG Women's Programme: "As a result of the women's clubs, the women are beginning to grow in awareness of the problems they face and the solutions available to them. Women should not be oppressed always, they must be empowered to stand against these things!"

Part of this empowerment is breaking down the isolation. Alone, a woman who is beaten and oppressed has little future. Anbu emphasised that the Women's Clubs provide a primary point of support. The stark reality is more dramatic—this year the clubs successfully united to provide legal counsel for a member whose continual abuse at the hands of her drunken husband ended in tragedy.

Increased material stability is one of the programme's less obvious outcomes. First the 'Trickle Up' programme, an American-funded project which gave small capital grants to micro-businesses, instigated small savings schemes. These schemes helped the clubs to save money collectively and then loan it to their members for small-scale businesses. Now the savings schemes are an integral feature of



the village women's lives.

The world accelerates towards modernity. The discourse is provocative. In the villages women's groups have managed to update their living conditions through participation in the AVAG Women's Programme. Last year youth club members worked with the women's clubs to erect pillars and platforms for village taps in Gandhinagar, Pillai-chavadi and Pillaichavadi Kuppam, repair and clean up the area around the communal building in Ambedkar Nagar, tackle waste water drainage in Kuilapalayam.

### Women's Empowerment Group

Once a month women from all the clubs meet for the Women's Empowerment Group. The meeting I attended began in the morning with a song. Then introductions. Each club tables a report—a young woman smiles shyly at a development worker, an old crone thumps her fist to emphasise a point. Her power is almost tangible. The group gives her their full attention.

Then breaks for lunch. Women splinter off in groups of four or five, or mingle singly in the rainbow cloud of saris, the hot damp heat, the joy peculiar to those places where women gather for women's business.

The male development workers drift from group to group. So-called Third World feminism is practical and inclusive. 'Women's business' is simply the business of the day.

These men play their part in that. And are accorded due respect.

Lunch finishes, the room fills. The agenda on the board still reads "International Women's Day" and "beatings". Clubs report on their contribution to the IWD programme, how their item for the afternoon concert is progressing, who can arrange transport. It's the only official celebration held in Auroville this year on the day that women celebrate worldwide. The afternoon grows hot, a weary young head droops, finds rest on her neighbor's knee. Only one more item to go.

BEATINGS. My skin crawls. What will the women say?

I didn't stay for that part of the meeting. Pain is a private matter. I don't subscribe to sensational journalism that exploits the pain, the sorrow of 'the other'. You share it with those you choose. Get help where you can. And hope that the gossip is minimal.

In Auroville women are privileged with a freedom and a status that permits them control of their own bodies, their own lives. In the villages women are fighting for these things that are taken for granted in the West. Especially on Sundays.

Monday Ambiga arrives at Centre Field, ever tranquil. She belongs to Kuilapalayam Women's Club. She often represents them at the Empowerment Group. I look at her anew. We share the same heartbeat.

Laine Duffy

Laine is a visiting feminist writer from Australia.

### Rabia Continued from page 2

in both men and women. Auroville is just emerging from its pioneering stage; and in this stage, masculine qualities of independence, of toughness, of getting work done—these were required. But now, now that we have a certain basic infrastructure, we should focus more on nurturing relationships, building community, and women, by nature and by social conditioning, are more suited to such things.

*Are Aurovilian men ready to make use of such a centre, to open out and admit the feminine side of their personality?*

Some are and some are not. But we definitely need to find ways to improve the quality of our meetings, ways to create solidarity and community. So let's see if we can achieve these things by having a women's centre. Auroville is a place of experimentation. So let's try out this experiment. Let's just float some more flowers in the water and see where they go!

Interview by Bindu

So many things have been said and written on the problem [of woman]; it has been approached from so many different angles that a volume would not be sufficient for an exposition of it in all its aspects. Generally speaking, the theories are excellent; in any case, each one has its own virtue, but the practice has proved less happy, and I do not know if, on the level of achievement we are any more advanced than the stone age. For in their mutual relation, man and woman are, at one and towards each other, quite despotic masters and somewhat pitiable slaves.

Yes, slaves; for so long as you have desires and preferences and attachments, you are a slave of these things and of those persons on whom you depend for their fulfilment. Thus woman is the slave of man because of the attraction she feels for the male and his strength, because of the desire for a "home" and for the security it brings, lastly because of the attachment to maternity; man too on his side is a slave of woman because of his spirit of possession, his thirst for power and domination, because of his desire for sexual relation and because of his attachment to the little comforts and conveniences of a married life.

That is why no law can liberate women unless they free themselves; men too likewise, cannot, in spite of all their habits of domination, cease to be slaves unless they are freed from all their inner slavery.

This state of secret conflict, often not admitted, but always present in the subconscious, even in the best cases, seems inevitable, unless human beings rise above their ordinary consciousness, to be unified with the supreme Reality. For when you attain this higher consciousness you perceive that the difference between man and woman reduces itself to a difference purely physical.

The Mother



## Looking after land Paradise at a Price

"If I were not so strongly present here, this land would be lost." I am talking to RITA, a sweet, slim lady from Karnataka, whose self-effacing manner hides a strong, quiet determination. Her words are tough, her voice gentle. She has asked me to come to her place in Centre Field—10 acres of fruit and nut trees and forest, which lies just one field away from Edayanchavadi village. She wants to tell her story.



Rita came to Auroville when she was 26. "I grew up in Karnataka. I was born in a kind of jungle place, but at 17 I migrated to the city, to Madras. Up to the age of 26 I was in Madras and I hated it. Then I came to Auroville, and I felt I had come back home." She moved to Centre Field in 1983, together with her partner Gilbert. She and Gilbert started planting trees and shared the work together until Gilbert left in 1990.

At the beginning, she felt deeply fulfilled with the tree planting. And it made her realize the implications of looking after Auroville land. "To take care of the land means more than just putting up barbed wire and putting a Gurka at the front gate. We have to harmonise our lives with those around us. Being an

Indian myself, I feel the distress of the villagers. There is a lot of frustration in the relation between the cultures and I find myself in between."

After the trees were planted, there were years of watching, protecting, nurturing. It has been, by and large, a struggle. "The relationship with the villagers has been the toughest part of the sadhana. For many years, villagers from Edayanchavadi would come to graze their cattle and ask for water. They want to pick fruit, they are thirsty and want a drink and they don't go away with a simple 'No'. There is no escape from this.

One of the biggest problems for Rita has been to get the infrastructure needed to main-

tain herself and the land. "I believe the collective response to land development has been uncoordinated. We need a group that can provide basic solutions to the problems of infrastructure—water, electricity, telephone connections, communication. From my own experience, I know that when each Aurovilian has to provide basic conditions for living all by him or herself, things take forever and sometimes never get done".

Rita's face reflects the solitary effort that has often gone into protecting and caring for the land. "When I was alone", she recalls. "I really had to solve these problems by myself. I accepted this reality because I felt there was no point wasting what little energy I had running around and looking for help. And it felt good to renovate the land and put my energy here. Then, after a while, I felt I also needed to serve people—I took up other work, in the bakery, at Transition School. I was also interested in developing the artistic side of me—singing, dance, hatha yoga, or simply meeting other Aurovilians. But always the land pulled me back. I wanted to stay faithful to this little place called 'my home'."

The poor quality of the water is another big problem. Rita takes me to her well: the water running out smells rusty and I do not have to taste it to know it's undrinkable—the smell and colour are unsavoury. She has now

managed to improve the filtering system, but it is still not good for drinking. Rita has two workers who help look after the trees, the house and transport the water. Her house is a modest one: two rooms (living and bedroom combined, a separate kitchen) and a small guest house, which is now her friend Njal's study. "It is much better now that Njal is here", she admits, smiling.

Rita and I take a walk through the orchard in the afternoon sun. She plucks some ripe lemons from a tree to make us lemon juice. Here she is at ease and gentle. She has planted these trees and they can sustain, nourish, renew. She pauses to reflect. "You can become isolated: too much concentration on work can make people lonely. After all, my work didn't end once the trees were planted." What is the relevance of the struggle? "I feel deeply that I belong here, although not always on the surface level. Of course now that I have someone to share the work with, I can enjoy the paradise aspect—delicious fruits, colourful birds, deep silence. I think I have grown a lot over the years. But I think as I grow, something else has to grow. We have to learn how to interconnect." She smiles. "I'm still learning."

Jill

## A role model par excellence

Annette, Grace Kelly, Jackie Kennedy, Joan Baez. What do they all have in common? They were, each in their turn, my role models up to the age of 24. I can see what is for me a natural progression in their order, corresponding to my own dreams and aspirations.

Annette will only be known to those who grew up watching the Mickey Mouse Club on TV every night after school. She was tall, attractive and very bright, every girl's idol, especially when she was pursued by the boys!

Grace Kelly was the embodiment of elegance and beauty with her chiselled features and regal stature; it was only fitting that she should marry a prince, being herself a princess.

Jackie Kennedy brought a new sense of chic and refinement to the White House, ever tastefully dressed, the gracious hostess and faithful wife. We lived her tragedy deeply and mourned the opportunity for change which seemed lost forever when her husband was assassinated in Dallas. This moment also marked the end of the age of innocence for my generation.

Joan Baez sang out her heart and our dreams and our pain as our men went off to the hell that was Vietnam, everybody's nightmare. The turbulent years of street protests, marches and sit-ins led to 1968 when a turning point came in the lives of many. Auroville began (so did many other things!), the call went out. Many of us heard it, some of us answered.

And then I found myself in front of the Mother, a phenomenon almost as much as a person, and the jump from Joan Baez to that petite French lady who was Sri Aurobindo's collaborator for 30 years is one with which I am still coming to terms. For She is a role model par excellence, a woman without peer whose attainments in every sphere from the physical to the spiritual defy one's best efforts to achieve a lasting sense of satisfaction and accomplishment.

My life began all over again, under new circumstances, with a new family and a goal remembered from some distant past. What had been up till then a linear progression along a chronological dateline assumed new layers and depths. The focal point of this new adventure was the Mother, plain and simple. The background and context were provided by Sri Aurobindo in the 30 volumes of his collected works. The overall and long-range trajectory was all laid out in these thousands of pages which contained as much 'stuff' between the

lines as on them. After exploring the major Western philosophers and a few Eastern ones as well, Sri Aurobindo came as a relief. At last here was someone whose story held together through and through — no loopholes, no compromises, airtight and watertight and yet open to every possibility in the universe. A quarter of a century later, my skeptical mind has still to discover that loophole.

The Mother embodied woman elevated to her full potential: compassionate, tender, loving beyond belief, repository of our deepest aspirations and most intense longings, able to drown our thousand tears in the vast ocean of her smile; unflinching in her will, disciplined in each and every detail of life and matter; unflagging in her aspiration despite setbacks which would have left most of us high and dry on the shores of nowhere; dreaming a future which made us perceive the present as a grey blur by comparison, a present, however, that was not to be neglected or glossed over, but used as a stepping stone to that brighter dawn.

Barbara

"... the problem of feminism, as all the problems of the world, comes back to a spiritual problem. For the spiritual reality is at the basis of all others; the divine world, the Dhammata of Buddhism, is the eternal foundation on which are built all the other worlds. In regard to this Supreme Reality all are equal, men and women, in rights and duties; based on the sincerity and ardour of aspiration, on the constancy of the will. And it is in the recognition of this fundamental spiritual equality that can be found the only serious and lasting solution for this problem of the relation of the sexes. It is in this light that it must be placed, it is at this height that must be sought the focus of action and new life, around which will be constructed the future temple of Humanity.

The Mother

## Strong women

Before coming to Auroville I was involved in women's groups, the women's empowerment movement. I witnessed the birth of men's talk groups. I felt liberated as a woman and a human being.

Travelling overland to India through Muslim countries felt very restrictive: where were the faces of the women in those countries? Only once I reached India did I feel a sense of freedom again. Smiling faces in colourful garb. Here Goddesses were revered, by women and men.

Once in Auroville, living in the greenbelt, the "typical" role model disappeared. I was the white woman, telling my male workers what to do. I was white, therefore alien. Here I discovered for the first time my strength as a woman. I worked physically on the land, together with the boys. I had to be tough, and could do it. I had to make decisions, be strong.

Around that time, in the early eighties, an Auroville women's weight lifting group started in Ami under a cashew tree.

Every Sunday morning a group of six to eight women met, did bench presses and whatever all those exercises were called. It was fun. We didn't have to outdo each other by lifting more than the others. We laughed a lot. And the skinniest of us all could lift the heaviest weights! Our oldest member was in her 70's at that time.

We also had women's meetings. We were together, we met, we talked, we felt good together, we discussed. But our fellow men thought we must be gossiping about them because they were not invited to our gatherings.

Things have changed. The first men's meetings (not to be attended by any women!) have happened here in Auroville. Well attended workshops about improving relationships were held. Visitors talk about the more gentle atmosphere they notice. We often still act from the male side of our personality, but there is more openness towards a different approach.

Tineke



# ner Views

## FREEDOM!

Amudha—from Alankuppam, a nearby village—came into contact with Auroville when she was a teenager. She joined Auroville 16 years ago after her marriage to Sundaram from Kottakarai village, and has two teen-aged children. Eleven years ago she started the Kindergarten together with Miriam, and she still works there today. She hopes that one day the freedom she enjoys in Auroville will be possible for all the women in the world.

When Amudha was growing up in her village, she was the only girl to ride a bicycle, and she wore a skirt that just about covered her knees. She climbed trees and swam in the village well. All this made many of her relatives and others gossip behind her back, or talk in stern tones to her parents, questioning why they allowed her to do these things.

She stopped going to school after finishing the 8th standard—the highest level of education offered in her village. Her parents arranged for a place in a boarding school in a nearby town, but she refused to go for fear that she would fail her exams, especially in English and Maths.

After she stopped going to school she started going more often to the family field near Transformation. She didn't know a lot about Auroville, but she could feel there was a lot of freedom there. And this was what attracted her—especially the freedom for women.

One day she met Ivar, a Dutch Aurovilian. She asked him—in English—for water.

"He was very surprised that I spoke English. We had some more conversation—half in Tamil, half in English—and I told him I did not want to go to school. Even though he suggested I change my mind, I was very much decided that I didn't want to. Then he proposed to me that I take up a job as a baby-sitter with a Dutch couple living in Kottakarai. I doubted that my parents would allow me to do this, and indeed they were not at all happy with the idea, but eventually they agreed. I joined the Dutch family. They treated me as a family member and I was very happy to be with them. When they left, I got a job at the Bakery. There I met Sundaram who is now my husband. Actually my family had arranged that I should marry an uncle, who was well-to-do and whom I liked. But while I was working in Auroville I could feel the freedom. I saw the way we could live in Auroville. I didn't know much about yoga or Mother, but I sensed a different future although I did not even know what exactly I was going to do. And this made me want to postpone the arranged marriage. My parents did not wish to delay, however, and went ahead with the marriage prepara-

tions. I was at a loss what to do, so I talked to Sundaram, and we decided to get married. Luckily Sundaram's father was very kind. We married in Cuddalore with the help of two Aurovilians, Larry and Thera, and we stayed for some time in a hotel in Pondicherry. Sundaram is from Kottakarai village and I am from Alankuppam. The people from my village began to accuse the Kottakarai people of having stolen me, and both villages got into a big fight! Fortunately it did not end badly, and gradually peace returned. But it took a year before my parents would speak to me again. Meanwhile I got pregnant, and by the time the baby was born, my parents wanted to have contact again, in spite of pressure from relatives. But still, even now, 16 years later, some of my uncles are not talking to me. They still think I made a big mistake, and that I did things I was not allowed to do. Well, I was sad about that, and I was wondering if I did make a mistake. But so many times I told myself, 'I did not make any mistakes! I got what I wanted and I don't care about what other people are thinking about me!' If I had married my uncle—who is rich, a landlord, a businessman who has everything—I don't think I would have had as many opportunities as I have had now. This is why I am really happy to be here. I was invited to go to the USA, with two other women, in 1989, and now I have just come back from two months in France, where I could visit many places, and see some schools. But apart from that, what is most precious to me is that in Auroville I am not expected to ask permission first, either from my husband or my parents, if I want to do something. I can decide for myself whether I want to go to a meeting, to a friend's house, or join a sight-seeing tour.

For some time there was a women's forum in which I was active. Being with a group of women made us learn a lot from each other; we became aware of our bodies through gymnastics; we lost our shyness and reluctance to speak up; we went to see places...

"I have two children, both boys, aged 12 and 15. I have always felt that whether I had girls or boys, I would want them to learn everything, including household work! I was the eldest daughter and I was brought up having to do all the household chores even for my brother, while he could go out and play. And already at that time I felt indignant about that. But what could I do? I had no support from anyone if I protested! I was just not strong enough to fight all that on my own. Now my boys are getting bigger and they start protesting if I ask them to help in the household. But I give them the choice: 'Either you sweep the house, or you wash your clothes. The choice is yours.' And (laughing) they never choose to wash their clothes! So their job is to clean the floors with water, every day. They don't always do it properly, but at least they've learned how to do it!

"Of course I talk to them about it. I tell them that to know these things and to be independent and able to manage for themselves is only good. And that they cannot expect me to do everything for them, because I too have my work at the Kindergarten.

I never had a major problem adapting to Auroville life. I have managed because I feel we are here to learn. And I like to learn!

Interview by Annemarie

## Schoolgirls

Selvi, Sarasu and Renuka are three young Tamil Aurovilian girls. Jill was their English teacher.

The girls arrive. Hips swaying. Lips laughing. Bicycle bells jangling. Flowers in their hair fill the air with the sweet smell of jasmine. How playful! Who cares!

Nothing's serious. Everything's funny. The day is so sunny. "Give us a cold drink!"

"Can we get serious? Just for a minute?" I ask.

"You've got to be kidding! We're schoolgirls!"

"But Renuka, you just got married!" I reply.

"It's great, Jilly," she tells me.

"What about living in Auroville?"

"We're out of the village. We've



always been here. Hey, what's your new apartment like? Where is the bathroom? Can we have more water? Yes, of course, our lives are different. As women. As girls."

"How?"

"Well... we don't know how to wrap a sari!" Giggling, they all agree.

Renuka: "When I go to a wedding, I have to go home and my mother helps me wrap it. Honest. It's

not easy. And I do sports now and some kids started talking about me. Like I'm not supposed to play sports because I'm married. That's the way it is in the village. So much gossip! But I can still go any time to the movies. And I only cook once a week, with some help. An amma cooks for us in Arc-en-Ciel where I live."

Selvi: "I tried to go to school in Pondy but I didn't like it. They pun-

ished me! They made me stand on my knees in the schoolyard for one hour. Not just me. Many girls. And they rap you on the knuckles when you don't do your homework. So I'm at 'After School' now. I'll get married, too, next year."

Sarasu: "I took my exam for 10th Standard (in Pondy school?) and I will get the results in August. Then I will decide what to do. I would like to be a nurse, maybe. I'm living in Aspiration now, in my brother's hut. I won't get married for some years, maybe two. I would like to continue studying. It's true!"

They are getting bored now. Looking at their watches. Orange flowers from their hair are falling everywhere.

"We have to get home before it gets too hot. Thanks for the cool drinks. See you! 'Bye!'"

Jill

Both man and woman can... in their best moments forget the difference of sex, but it reappears at the least provocation, the woman feels she is woman and man knows he is man, and the quarrel starts again indefinitely, in one form or another, open or veiled and all the more bitter the less it is avowed. One may ask if it will not be so till the day when there will be no longer men and women, but living souls expressing their identical origin in sexless bodies.

The Mother



**A** new generation of Asian women has come to the fore in the last few decades. A generation of women who have discarded their traditional roles to publicly protest against oppression and discrimination. Tsering Tsomo, a young Tibetan woman living in exile in India, belongs to this generation of women. Born of parents who fled Tibet in the exodus of 1959, Tsering was raised in India and educated in the USA. She worked for the Central Tibetan Administration as the head of both the Environmental Desk and the Women's Desk, and now acts as Vice-President and regional coordinator of South Asia for the Tibetan Women's Association (TWA). As a senior executive of TWA, Tsering has attended the Human Rights conference in Copenhagen and the first NGO meeting that was held in New York to prepare for the forthcoming world conference on women in Beijing. Tsering has also been associated with Auroville since 1992 when she first attended an environmental workshop. Recently, she was in Madras to attend a discussion on the Beijing meet and stopped at Auroville for a day to find out more about Shradhanjali, an Auroville unit which produces stationery using dried flowers. AUROVILLE TODAY took the opportunity to interview Tsering on the eve of the U. N. conference. At the time of the interview, Tsering was not sure whether TWA would be allowed by the Chinese government to participate in the conference.

**AVT: What sort of an organisation is the Tibetan Women's Association? What work does it do?**

Tsering: TWA is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation based in Dharamsala with 37 branches in India and abroad. The Association perceives itself as the natural successor of the thousands of women who came forward to protest against the Chinese takeover of Tibet in 1949. As a number of women have fled Tibet since then, the Association was officially revived in 1984 in India to give a voice to the Tibetan women in exile. The Association has about 9,000 members worldwide.

TWA tries to provide for the needs of not only women, but also of other indigent members of the Tibetan community. It seeks to preserve and promote Tibetan language, religion and culture. This work is especially targeted at mothers for they are the ones who are the torch-bearers of our culture, passing their values of life to their children. At present, we are seeking ways to empower women by generating new jobs. The income-generating base of Tibetan women in exile has traditionally centred around knitting and carpet-making, but it would be nice to diversify this base. Hence I would like to start a stationery unit like Shradhanjali which can provide employment to women who are old or whose health has been impaired.

One of the most important projects of the Association has been the Tibetan Nuns' Project which it started together with the Department of Religion and Culture in 1987. This project seeks to provide assistance and education to the nuns for their development.

**What was the need for initiating a special project for nuns?**

Nuns have suffered the greatest injustices under the Chinese. Prior to the Chinese invasion, Tibetan nuns numbered over 27,000, comprising the largest group of nuns in the world. Almost all of Tibet's nunneries were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution and nuns have done almost all the reconstruction work themselves at the expense of their religious pursuits. Also, as nuns are free from family obligations, they have bravely taken up the cause of Tibet's independence. Especially since 1987, nuns have been active in staging pro-independence demonstrations. Though these demonstrations are peacefully conducted, nuns have been routinely arrested and often imprisoned without trial. In prison, they are subjected to inhuman torture resulting in severe trauma. Thus it is necessary to provide special care and education to nuns who escape Chinese oppression and come to India as refugees.

**What are the major issues that the TWA wishes to raise at the U. N. Conference on Women at Beijing?**

Let's start with the issue of development. The Chinese Government contends that it has brought social, economic and cultural benefits to the Tibetan people, but evidence suggests otherwise. Tibetans are treated as second-class citizens in their homeland and the Tibetan language and culture are considered as major handicaps to securing a good job. Women suffer even more because many of the jobs are reserved for men. Administrative jobs have traditionally been handled by women but now such jobs are barred to Tibetan women as they require knowledge of the Chinese language. It is reported that

## Passing through: Tsering Tsomo on Tibetan Women's Rights

many Tibetan women have been forced into prostitution because of the lack of economic opportunities.

Secondly, take the issue of human rights. It is a shame that China should be allowed to host this U. N. conference given its deplorable human rights record. Perhaps what affects Tibetans most is the denial of the right to religious expression; Buddhism is not just a religion but a way of life for us. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights gives one "the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion ... the right to freedom of opinion, expression and peaceful assembly" (Articles 18-20). But this declaration is rendered invalid by the continued violence perpetrated by the Chinese Government in reaction to the religious activity of Tibetans. Sexual assaults including rape and mutilation are commonly used as methods of torturing women. Such assaults are not only dehumanising but, for nuns, they are a further violation of their religious beliefs as nuns take a vow of celibacy and often revoke their robes after their vows have been involuntarily broken.

Other Chinese laws too impinge on the health and reproductive rights of women. China's birth control policies dictate that a woman can have only one child. But this adversely affects Tibetans for already our population is small numbering around 6 million. Contraceptives are not made readily available to Tibetan women and compulsory abortions and sterilisations are used as primary methods of birth control.

Abortions, upto nine months of pregnancy, are frequently conducted in unhygienic conditions resulting in a high mortality rate. Cases have also been documented of babies being killed immediately after birth by a lethal injection and the mothers being told that their children were still-born. Such practices make mockery of the United Nations conventions of human rights and of the status of women. Furthermore, they greatly transgress our religious rights as it is considered wrong in Buddhism to take life.

**What role do you think Auroville, or even more specifically, the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture in Auroville, can play in helping the Tibetans?**

I feel that Auroville and the Buddhist culture of Tibet have certain similarities in the plasticity of their thought—in the belief in freedom of thought. We have a lot to learn from Auroville from its alternative technology to its successful small-scale business units. I am keen on building stronger ties with Auroville, on having more Tibetans come out here on training programmes.

And while I think it is a shame that our Pavilion is not a "Pavilion of Tibet" but a "Pavilion of Tibetan Culture", I still hope that the Pavilion will prove to be a dynamic centre of our culture. All in all, I must say that I am extremely grateful for all that Auroville has done for Tibetans.

*Interview by Bindu*

## Namrita: woman in business

Shy, soft-spoken, sweet and smiling. That's how an onlooker would describe Namrita. But behind the sweet smile of this young Punjabi woman, there is a capable and determined businesswoman. When I visited her in her workshop in Auroshilpam, Namrita and her team of workers were busy working on a large order by the D. W. Shop and the Taj Group of hotels for 1,500 cushion covers, pillow cases and bedsheets. Namrita designs the pieces, determines the colours, and then hands it over to her workers to do the necessary painting, patchwork and embroidery. Everything is done slowly and painstakingly by hand. Her designs range from gay, colourful scenes for children to ethnic Indian motifs.

Somehow, Namrita has always been involved with textiles. She studied to be a textile designer in the Polytechnic College of Delhi; did a short course on weaving in England; and was handling the purchase of textiles in India for Mexx, a Dutch multinational, just before coming to Auroville. At first, she missed the demanding schedule and hectic pace of life as a textile merchant but soon discovered that her heart really lay in the more creative work of designing patchwork pieces and painting. In Auroville, she started out designing and painting garments for Auromode, but after a year or so, she felt like making something specifically for children. She moved to a small unfurnished room in the Kottakarai guest-house and, using left-over waste cloth from Auromode, did a series of patch-work designs on bed linen for children's rooms. That was in 1992. Today her unit, Aditi, is planning to extend its working area and earns a creditable profit of 3 to 3.5 lakh rupees every year. "I am happy that it is proving to be successful," says Namrita, "that all the energy I put into it in the beginning, is now coming back." And this joy of creating something beautiful, of working at something till it succeeds, serves as her inspiration. For she does not take a maintenance from the unit, preferring instead to donate the profits to Auroville or to plough it back into the unit. Recently, Namrita has also started collaborating with other Aurovilians in making new products: she paints on the hand-made paper and bamboo lampshades that Guy makes and works with Abha from Shradhanjali to produce a range of patch-work cards. "I really enjoy this spirit of collaboration," says Namrita. "Now, when I go to Delhi to sell my products, I also handle the marketing for Abha and Guy. It feels nicer to repre-



sent Auroville and other Aurovilians and not just my unit."

Now and then, however, Namrita regrets not being able to spare more time from her unit. For she would like to do more community-oriented work. Ever since its inception, Namrita has been involved with Sahanubhuti, a group that looks into the needs of Auroville, material or otherwise. And as part of the group, she has helped to decide on the distribution of funds within the community and is presently involved in the re-organization of the services. "Sahanubhuti gives me the opportunity to make personal contacts with Aurovilians from diverse backgrounds and to empathise with their needs. I feel more a part of the community by doing such work," acknowledges Namrita. One day, she hopes, she would be able to employ more Aurovilians to help her run the unit allowing her time for other collective pursuits. *Bindu*



# First time in the USA: Auroville International Meeting 1995

*Savitri* readings, mountain climbing, Hiawatha: Hero Youth, contra dancing and frisbee games could all be done at this year's Auroville International (AVI) meeting. Oh yes, the usual business sessions were also extensive.

AVI started annual meetings in 1983, but this was the first time this widespread, diverse group gathered in the USA. More than forty people came down the country lanes to the nineteenth-century New England farm house in southern New Hampshire renovated as the Merriam Hill Educational Centre and certified as an organic farm. From Saskatoon and Buenos Aires they came, from Quebec and Tamil Nadu, from Bremen, Paris, The Hague, not to mention West Cornwall, Colchester and Woodstock, and all the places in between like Seattle, Saddle River, and Keene and... So what did all these special people do in this picturesque conference facility for a week? They attempted to make Auroville International into a more dynamic and transparent organization.

Stirred by comments in the report of last year's meeting in AUROVILLE TODAY, the centres seemed determined to integrate the spiritual, social and business aspects of these annual affairs in a more efficient and productive way. A certain success in this endeavour was applauded by everyone during the concluding evaluation. New suggestions also came forward to make it even better in 1996 when the meeting will be held in Sweden.

Generally, several centres reported low energy and lack of resources to reach their goals, although each one could report some valiant efforts to keep it together in spite of the problems. Of the seven reports, Germany was the exception, expressing the results of dynamic group interactions, meetings and activities. They have a core group of twenty people who will begin monthly meetings, as well as a large annual gathering of more than seventy. There are two groups in Germany who also have plans for starting communities related to the AVI work.

Canada had a small centre in Quebec since 1972, but recently has reorganized to include all of Canada and now has about twenty-five members.

U.K. is in transition, but has a strong core group of nine with a larger mailing list of 130. They publish a biannual newsletter.

France just leased a large new office in Paris in which to create the "feeling" of Auroville and has the

volunteers to staff it on a regular basis. In their larger group of 130 about 30 are active.

Holland has always had a small but active centre that could never grow because its members keep moving to Auroville.

Argentina has a liaison person, Anandi, who since 1986 has done a lot of information work through her contacts with the government, travels throughout South America as an educational consultant and with her own books.

USA has been able to send about \$175,000 to Auroville last year of which nearly three-quarters was for Matrimandir. Their board meets by teleconferencing because of the large distances which separate its members. The core group is about 200. On the East Coast, in Julian's shop "Pondicherry", is an additional information office.

New centres would like to form in some of the countries of the former Soviet Union and in Austria, Switzerland, Spain and Italy. The meeting wanted to support these new centres in whatever way possible. An amount of \$150 was sanctioned from the common fund for Argentina, Austria and Italy.

A most significant development of the meeting was setting up and defining the missions of a full-time coordinator of the AVI work in Auroville. Mauna has taken up this work prior to the meeting and received an enthusiastic mandate during the sessions plus plenty of work for the future.

The international pavilions topic received a great deal of attention and a suggested design proposal will be sent to Auroville based on the symbol of the Mother and which groups the "nation soul" according to psychic qualities. The land to be purchased for Auroville was a priority and several strategies for funding it were proposed. On the channeling of funds through the AVI to Auroville, an agreement was proposed and included in the minutes on the overhead percentages that the centres may deduct to cover their expenses. Wider links for Auroville were proposed including an NGO status for AVI. Mia (AVI Holland) was recommended to become a member of the Auroville International Advisory Council. The officers of AVI were selected: Robert Aarsse, President; Thakur Mistry, Vice President; Alain Grancolas, Secretary; Ilse Breymen, Treasurer. Their term of office is one year.

A recurring theme throughout the sessions was how to make the AVI centres blossom. Many of the problems were discussed and some



Photo Richard Lockert

directions were indicated to help. Most felt a greater emphasis on the yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother is necessary to create the context in which Auroville can be understood and appreciated. Certain things already exist which are being under-utilized like AUROVILLE TODAY. How is it that such a compelling vehicle for communicating Auroville has only a circulation of 500 worldwide when it should have 5,000? [This is close to a direct quote from the meeting and not an addition by the editors of AUROVILLE TODAY!]. The meeting decided to promote this publication as much as possible. It was also proposed that larger centres adopt a smaller one to give more support. Communication between centres themselves and between Auroville and the centres

needs much more work. Mauna's new role will help that and money was allocated from the common budget to assist the development of the E-mail infrastructure in Auroville and get all the centres online in cyberspace. Work on publications and videos also received funding and attention as necessities for the work.

On the second day of the meeting, an adventurous group took on the second most climbed mountain in the world, Mount Monadnock (you will now want to know that Mt. Fuji is number one). The view of six of the United States from the top was well worth the climb.

One evening, two local fiddlers introduced the group to contra dances. It was clear why people are still doing these traditional dances.

They are really fun.

On the last evening there was a performance of an original production created for the occasion. Seyril wrote *Hiawatha: Hero Youth* in a *Savitri* style ("This is the day our souls are free") in quest of the nation soul. The production included Gordon on a native American flute, Seyril's intoned recitation, a chorus of four readers and an interpretation by three dancers: Michael (la Ferme), Wendy (Woodstock) and Anandi (Argentina).

From the perspective of the sauna in the basement or the meditation cupola on the roof, and all that happened in between at Merriam Hill, the AVI 1995 could be called a great event.

Bill

## LETTERS

### Opera

The opera [Beyond Awake and Asleep] was breath-taking—almost charismatic. It transported us into the future (not so distant) of Auroville's aspiration leading to fulfilment.

Chamanlal Gupta,  
Sri Aurobindo Ashram

### Gender inclusive language

It is ESSENTIAL that material addressed to an audience in this country (and probably others) include women. It's NOT acceptable to use "he" and "man" if the author wishes the reader to understand that females are also to be considered. Obviously Sri Aurobindo and Mother used the language of their time, but [texts from Auroville] MUST follow current conventions if they are to be effectively addressed to the current English speaking audience (and published in this country).

I'm sorry if I sound too insistent here, but the message does not seem to be getting through (I remember an article some time back in *Auroville Today*). Obviously everyone there will do whatever she or he chooses to do (and make whatever choice seems correct in light of his or her higher consciousness), but for those of you who are communicating with the outside world, clarity alone necessitates the use of gender inclusive language.

Initially it really does take thought and concentration to make the conversion, but after a bit it becomes the norm. Anything else sounds incorrect.

Margo Macleod, USA (in a letter to Guy)

### Land purchase

There seems to be a marked improvement in the magazine as a whole in these last few issues. Congratulations.

P.S. In the January '95 issue there appeared the following note from the Land Service: "... the need to purchase the remaining land—380 acres in the city area, and at least 1,000 in the Green Belt—has never been so urgent."

How on earth then can the acquisition of 15 acres in the city area and 8 "grand" acres in the Green Belt in six long months be described as "meanwhile land purchase... is continuing apace"? Sir, it is not continuing apace but continuing apathetically.

Aryadeep, Ahmedabad,

## SHORT NEWS

### Bharat Natyam goes green

On the occasion of the celebrations for Sri Aurobindo's birthday and India's independence, our cultural organization Kalamitra organized a Bharat Natyam dance performance with an unusual theme: the destruction of nature. In colourful costumes the dancers depicted scenes in a lush forest, full of birds, flowers, animals and fruits. But then the wood cutters came, cutting down trees and destroying this green heaven, causing drought. It was a moving appeal to save nature, well performed and worth seeing.

### CIRHU Papers

On 15th August, *CIRHU Papers No. One* was published containing, among other things, a poem by Sri Aurobindo, quotes of the Mother on the topic of human unity, a brief history and overview of the activities of CIRHU (Centre for Research in Human Unity), and some articles from Aurovilians who are part of the CIRHU group.

The intention is that the CIRHU papers will appear twice-yearly, in February and August, and each issue will focus on a particular theme. Contributions in the form of articles relating to human unity are welcomed from people all over the world, and should be sent to Shradhavan at Grace, Auroville.



By Airmail  
Bookpost

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IN THIS ISSUE:  
WOMEN; AUROVILLE INTERNATIONAL MEETING.



Andre and Masha

## Big Andre and Little Masha

Andre is my friend, so it is fun putting down on paper what I already know and admire about this big, kind man. At first he is a bit sceptical about being interviewed, but he warms up as we sit on cushions in my living room and talk about the Dynamic Duo—Big Andre and Little Masha.

Very often Big Andre, as he is called, and little Masha can be seen on the roads on Andre's big, black Bullet motorcycle. Andre was working as an engineer in Russia. Now he lives in Quiet. Recently, he left his job at Pitanga and is doing every kind of engineering, electrical repair, maintenance, and small construction work here and there. "I'm especially making Big Jocelyn very happy right now", he says, laughing. And Masha? Masha will be four years old very soon. "She was born at midnight," Andre remembers. "I held her in my arms just after she was born. My mother was there to cut the umbilical cord." Masha and Andre are from Russia... via the Ukraine. They arrived with Masha's mother Nadjia in January, 1993 from Odessa. "In Odessa there was a group of us who were interested in Sri Aurobindo and were translating some of his books. The first book was *The Mother*, a small volume. Nadjia and I met through this connection". Nadjia, however, is not in Auroville. She left in August 1994, because of health problems.

They are quite an odd couple now, Masha and Andre. A little girl with short brown hair and eyes that crinkle when she smiles and Andre, almost six feet, blond hair, smoking one beedi after another as he talks and drinks endless cups of tea.

"When I was in school we drank a lot of tea", Andre confesses. He also cooks, cleans, washes clothes and Masha's hair, when she's willing. "Yeah, well, sometimes it's a bit difficult", he says ruefully. "But it's a game also. She has to fight with me about something, or else she's always ordering me around. I'm like her servant". He laughs. It is the life of a single parent, anywhere in the world, but a little unusual for Auroville, where many children can spend time with both parents even when the adults separate.

"Nadjia had a very difficult time here. So finally she decided to return to Moscow and work, and we decided that Masha would stay here with me. I didn't want to lose her and I thought it was the best place for her. It was logical", recalls Andre matter-of-factly. He is very matter-of-fact about a decision that has surely changed his life. "I remember we were living in New Creation at the time when Nadjia left and the first night {alone with Masha} I came back to our house and I thought, 'What have we done?!'". He adds, "You know, the mother is maybe more close biologically, but there is no reason why the father can't be there. You see, I had made a

commitment. And then I felt responsible in front of the Divine for this child. For me, it happened naturally. Just like that." Andre lights another beedi and continues. "I don't feel my freedom is limited," he says, anticipating the question. "Of course, I can't just jump on my bike in the middle of the night. I think she needs to eat properly and so I cook... but sometimes she only wants bread and jam in the evening." He laughs. "She could be more appreciative!"

There is a sweetness which transforms Andre's face when he speaks about Masha. I ask him whether or not he has any real trouble with this very independent little lady. "Not really. I don't really have much trouble with her. She's very often on her own. She is having her own experience. Yes, I cook. I bring her to the school bus, I put her to sleep. And Auroville is a supportive place."

"How has Auroville helped?" I ask.

"Well, there was a creche and now the kindergarten. I'm also grateful to everyone who helps to take care of her. In fact, she knows more people in Auroville than I do! And people recognize us because she is always sitting on the front of my Enfield, and even sleeps there quite comfortably. She is either singing or sleeping. Except when she's angry at me," he adds, "then she'll be very silent."

"Is it particularly difficult for you, being a single father with a small child?" I ask.

"There are other single fathers in Auroville," Andre responds. "But I don't separate men or women in this way. It is maybe more socially acceptable for a woman to be left with the child, but either way there's nobody to blame. It just happened, and so..." His voice trails off. He smiles. "I do feel very... maternal when I look at her when she's sleeping. She can be very beautiful. But when she's awake... she can be horrible!"

Andre has recently been seen on stage as the Viking warrior in Auroville's opera *Beyond Awake and Asleep*. In his scene he attempts to lead the children to safety. I ask him if he feels a special rapport with children. "Well, since I was young, it was interesting, this experience with kids. Maybe I enjoy this feeling of being a father because I was affected by my own lack of a father from the age of seven." He is quiet for a moment, reflecting. "I feel you can't put kids in a corner and forget them when you are tired of them. It's not a toy, this child. And that is something I knew. I knew it perfectly." Jill

### TO SUBSCRIBE

The contribution for the next 12 issues of AUROVILLE TODAY in India is Rs. 150, for other countries Rs. 750, Can.\$ 30, French F. 150, DM 47, It.Lira 35,500, D.Gl. 52, US \$ 25, U.K.£ 14. This includes the postage by airmail. Please send your contribution (or your supporting contribution of double the amount) either to the Auroville International centre in your country (add 10% for admin. and bank charges) or directly to Auroville Today, CSR Office, Auroville 605101. **Cheques should be made payable to Auroville Fund**, specifying: 'Contribution for Auroville Today'. You will receive the issues directly from Auroville. Personal cheques are preferred to bank cheques. Please do not send postal money orders. Subscribers will receive a reminder when their subscription is about to expire.

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