

Auroville Today

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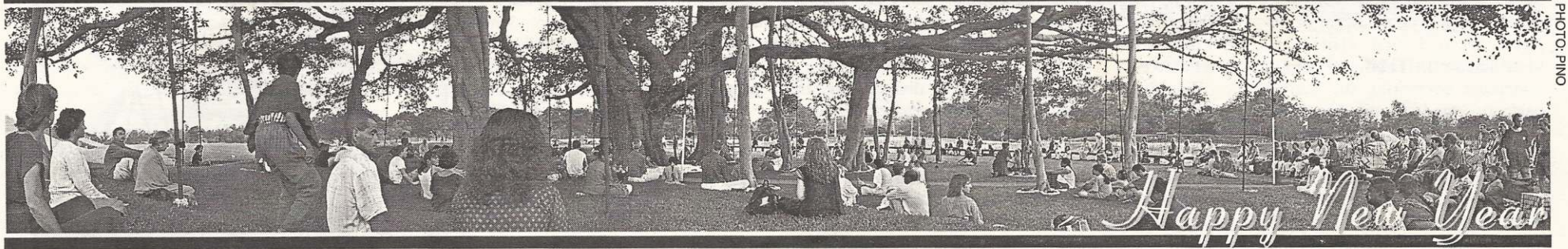


PHOTO: PINO

Over the last few years the month of January has witnessed a number of events marking the development of secondary education in Auroville. The first occurred when the Center for Further Learning (CFL) was inaugurated on January 3rd 1996 at the Last School Campus near Aspiration. Largely inspired by Luc, CFL opened with the aim of providing an alternative educational option to Auroville students, who wished to obtain an internationally recognized qualification. Many students in the age group of 13-19 were at that time studying elsewhere: approximately 15 at Kodaikanal's International School and around 12 at the French Lycée in Pondicherry, as well as at various other schools in India and abroad.

CFL currently follows a program based on the British GCE O and A level syllabi. However, exams are not compulsory and the students take them when they and their teachers feel they are ready to do so. Obtaining a certificate to be able to attend an external college is not the only reason for registering for an exam. It may be to evaluate one's own progress or be as an incentive to study more seriously. Yet, while exams continue to be important value-added features, the main aim at CFL remains the integral development of the student. The Center offers a wide choice of extra-curricular subjects such as music, art, ecology and computer studies. (However, it is surprising to find architecture and urban planning absent.) Says Chali, a full-time teacher and coordinator at CFL, "The teacher-student relationship is primarily to be a relation of trust. Students choose their own mentor, with whom they feel comfortable and we closely interact on the matter of subjects and curriculum." Currently there are thirty-two

A new school takes wing

Aurovilian students at CFL, while there are only four at Kodaikanal and around five at the Lycée. This is ample proof that the aspiration and efforts of Luc and others are bearing fruit, and the program is appreciated and has taken root.

Yet the team at CFL hasn't been resting on its laurels. It has been actively exploring new ways of creating a more conducive and better-equipped environment for a larger number of students. The opportunity arose with the allocation by Gateway of one crore rupees (US\$ 200,000) for a secondary education building. On January 1st 2000 a small groundbreaking ceremony, centered around the planting of a Service tree sapling, marked the start of a new school complex in the Transformation area at a stone throw from Transition Primary School. Following three years of design, planning and construction, another January 1st will see the inauguration of the new campus. The core team of the new school had aptly called it Future School. But that name was unanimously rejected by the students. They prefer a much more conventional name. Explains Jivatma: "Now it is our future school, but once we have moved there the name does not apply anymore." Philip is even more outspoken: "When someone from England comes to Auroville, all those names like Aspiration, Fraternity make no sense to him. I think, that a name like 'Auroville High School' serves the purpose better." In the end it may just continue to be called CFL.

At the new campus I met three members of the school's core group:

Chali, Mary and Sergei; the others being Anton, Bunty, Lyle and Sanjeev. They were enthused about the rapid progress in

the recent days regarding painting, carpentering and especially the contouring of the landscape. Designed by Piero and Gloria and built by Sumark (Rolf and Brigitte), the two-winged, two-storied building in an

The Center for Further Learning will move into a new campus, allowing new possibilities and growth for Auroville's secondary education

erous window spaces with grills in maroon.

While finishing work is still going on, we settled down to conduct our interview in the auditorium on the first floor. It turned out to



One of the three new science labs

inviting peach colour imparts to the visitor a sense of solidity (study is after all serious business) married with a play of color and light (studies are fun too), accentuated by the broad entrance with a colonnaded passage to the tiffin area and by gen-

consist of a concrete mass of semi-circular steeply-rising steps facing a huge blackboard. Light falls from different angles into the space and being equipped for multi-media presentations, the auditorium can host a variety of events and guest lecturers. Opinions about the design appear to be divided, both among teachers and students. But positive consensus reigns about the rest of the rooms at the campus. Downstairs there are five classrooms, of which one has been converted into a library. There is a kitchenette with covered tiffin area and a room for teachers and administration. But the first floor houses the pride of the campus: three fully equipped science labs, the first of their kind in Auroville – one each for biology, chemistry and physics. Both Chali and Sergei, teachers of biology and science respectively, showed the labs with glowing eyes, gently touching the new equipment and carefully sliding up and down the window of the hood.

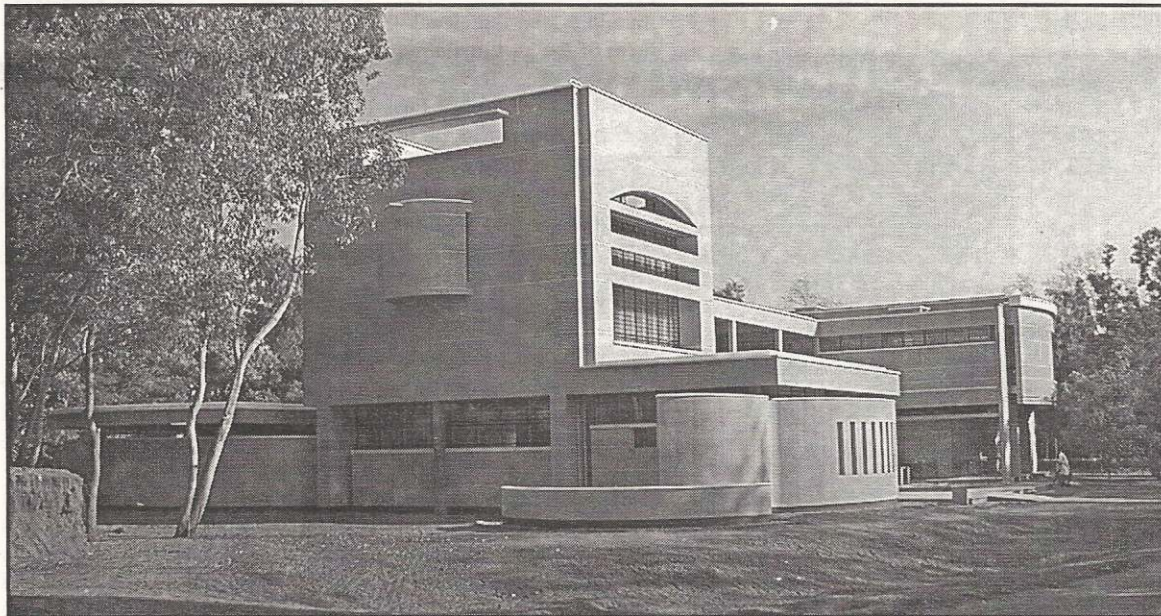
"But this is only the first phase of the campus," explains Chali. "The second phase will have a true library, art rooms and workshops and per-

haps a few more classrooms." Adds Mary, "Last School, including the Pyramid group, may eventually also move here as part of the future CIRHU university complex." The school will be able to accommodate two hundred students. For the time being it will provide an exploration ground for the thirty-two CFL students when they move here by the end of February after their ongoing exams. From then onwards it will be a new journey with new possibilities. But also some apprehensions as expressed by art student Suryamai, for she doesn't know how the considerable distance from Last School and the Pyramid will influence her art classes. Explains Mary, "New possibilities may evolve through interaction with close-by art community Kalabhumi. And the proximity of Transition School may induce an interesting exchange of teachers and new subjects." Also activities centered around physical education and sports may take different shapes in collaboration with the nearby Dehashakti sports complex.

Whatever may develop, the main thing is that the students as well as the teachers are eagerly looking forward to future possibilities. Philip hopes, that "the new building will allow a better organisation of classroom spaces." Says Sergei, "The students spend several years absorbing different subjects of their own choice, exploring to discover their own interest. Only in the end we help them to prepare for the exams. With the new school there will be many more possibilities to explore and we can add new subjects." Adds Chali, "Also the fact that students need not seek education elsewhere allows them to absorb Auroville's special atmosphere for many more years."

But the team's real goal is that their efforts will result in the establishment of an Auroville educational program of international standing, which will be universally accepted and would be more in keeping with the Aurovilian educational philosophy. I left with the confidence that we will continue to witness substantial growth of Auroville's educational organizations.

Dirk Kievith



The new high school

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Matrimandir's four entrances

Much work continues to be done on the Matrimandir, some at a relatively calm pace. Like the entrances, for example. When I first visited the Matrimandir in February 1993, I remember comparing the marble perfection and cosmic beauty of the Inner Chamber with the rough concrete flooring of the steps and the ramps leading up to it. The outer entrances, it seemed to me then, were inert, showing little signs of struggle to achieve a union with the inner form, in matter and in spirit.

Perhaps, my judgement was blinkered by the more conventional lenses I was wearing at that time. Today, as a newcomer more in tune with the Aurovilian ethos, my perceptions are different. My visits to the Matrimandir now are explorations of my self, my own rough-hewn edges that need to be somehow recognized and smoothed into a balanced whole. I realize that process too will take time.

Sometimes work continues behind the scenes. The four entrances to the Matrimandir, particularly the paths leading up to the outer doors, are still unfinished, perhaps because they are the lowest priority at present. Why have the driveway and the front door ready when the house itself is still in process, with workers going in and out all day? Victor, the cheerful Russian engineer in charge of the disc installation and the entrances, informs me of the labour underway, unseen to outside eyes. He takes me on a quick, guided tour of the entrances that face north, south, east and west. Together, they symbolize the four emanations of the Mother's consciousness, her Mahashakti. These four are Mahasaraswati, Maheshwari, Mahalakshmi and Mahakali. A conscious devotee of the Mother could choose to enter or be drawn

through a particular entrance depending on his/her level or condition of progress towards a four-fold personality comprising qualities of Wisdom, Harmony, Beauty, and Force.

Would there be visible differentiation, in form and design, for each of the entrances, I wonder aloud. "No," replies Victor. "It is all on a very subtle plane. The entrances would have the power to pull individuals of varying strengths and weaknesses. The experience of the Matrimandir is entirely subjective. One cannot open it to a logical analysis."

Which is what I am doing now, I think to myself. "But what would the entrances finally look like once they are ready?" I prod Victor. He points up to the space above the stairs leading up to the door. "There will be a metal shield covering that space. It will be made of aluminium, a metal that does not rust in this humid climate and which is light and strong. This shield will be covered by thin, golden tiles, in the form of straight, flat lines. Each tile has a very thin sheet of beaten gold, sandwiched between glass of 2mm thickness. It took us a year to discover the right way to fuse the glass and the gold without cracking. Three quarters of the total number of tiles required are ready. Once the shield is in place it will give the semblance of rays of light issuing from the door. The entrance door itself will be sliding and gilded as well".

I can quite picture the completed structure. The golden discs or "petals" covering the Matrimandir in its entirety, and the four golden entrance doors with their overhead shields heightening the dome's blaze of light and energy. "But there is something else," Victor informs me as we walk back to the gilding workshop. "Each shield will have this disc on its centre." I

watch as Victor attempts to heave over a giant disc lying face down, so I can take a peep. It is in the form of the Auroville symbol – a cut-out flower with five petals. It measures three and a half metres in diameter, and the weight is approximately a half ton. "You mean to say that these massive half ton discs will be positioned directly above the stairs leading up to the entrance doors of the dome? But what if they..."

Victor grins and waves me off. "You ask too many questions," he says.

Abha Prakash

ECONOMY

Surviving, not growing

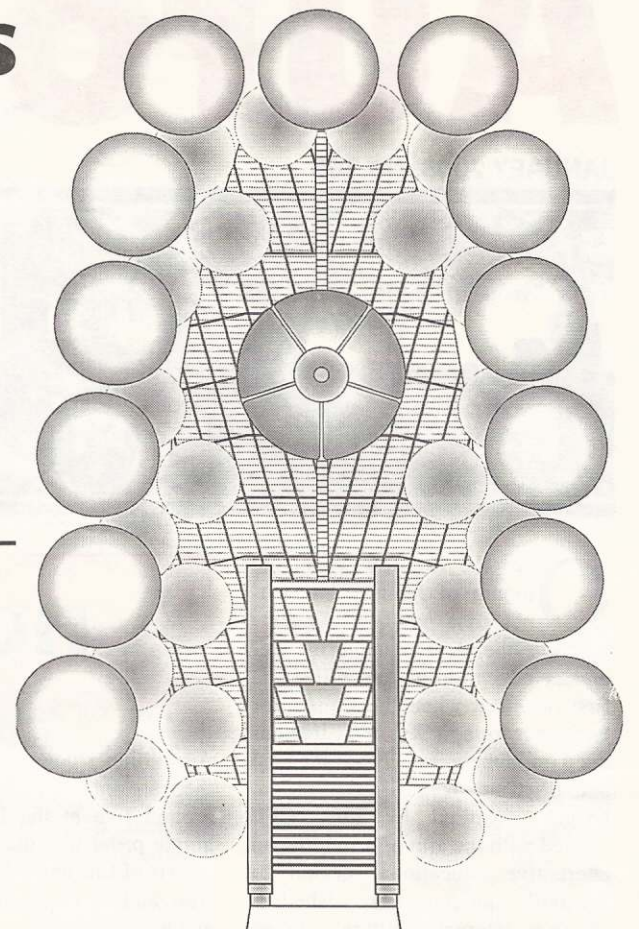
Extracts from a summary presented to the Governing Board by the Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC)

Sources of Funds and Utilisation: Auroville's main source of funds is from donations received by well-wishers in India and all over the world. Of the total receipts of approximately Rs. 33 crores (US\$ 6,875,000) last year, Rs. 4.8 crores (US\$ 1,000,000) came from internal generation and Rs. 7.4 crores (US\$ 1,540,000) from individual donations to Auroville projects and development. The percentage break down of inflows is: internal generation 18%, foreign sources 56% Indian sources 26%. These grants are directed towards all major activities of Auroville: building Matrimandir (10.38 %), purchasing land (4.25 %), education (9.06 %), maintaining Aurovilians (22.25%) and balance towards other activities combined.

Deficits: In the estimates for the year 2002-03, the biggest deficits are in the projects of:

- (i) purchase of land for Auroville
- (ii) Matrimandir,
- (iii) public buildings and housing
- (iv) education.

For these areas Auroville is mainly dependent on donations from outside, which makes forecasting a difficult exercise in today's uncertain world. Due to the unfortunate events of



Artist's impression of the entrance to the Matrimandir: the staircase leads up to the (closed) door. The Auroville symbol is in the centre, surrounded by the golden discs. The metal shield covered by rectangular golden tiles is behind.

September 11th 2001 and its after-effects, the donations from outside India have declined considerably. As of September 2002 we have received 25% less donations. This is leading to a slowdown of many activities, especially the purchase of land which is a priority for Auroville.

Our deficits for the year 2002-03 will be even higher, with the actual receipts being less than anticipated. To keep up activities in the area of educational research, Auroville has applied for funding in the area of Education and Development to the Government of India. It is also doing active fund-raising for Land and Matrimandir, within and outside India.

In summary, the projects of Auroville are maintaining a minimum level of activity to survive. As and when funds become available the projects will go-ahead at full speed, fulfilling the purpose for which they were started and helping build the city of Auroville.

FAMC, November 2002

ARCHITECTURE

Designing with nature

Jorgen Becker talks about his experiments in ecological architecture

In the early years many Aurovilians practiced ecological architecture, or construction which uses natural materials and is in harmony with the environment. More recently, however, many constructions in the community have used energy-intensive materials like brick and concrete. This is a result of guidelines from the Development Group outlawing 'temporary' constructions in the city area, but it also reflects growing reservations concerning the wisdom of using ecologically-friendly technologies which require close and expert supervision like compressed earth block construction.

However, a few experiments with ecological architecture have continued in the greenbelt, and quite a number of Auroville architects continue to be fascinated by the concept. So it was with great interest that many of them crowded into the Meriam Hill Center in December to hear an ex-Aurovilian talk about his continuing research in this area.

Jorgen Becker describes himself as a technician who studies the processes and materials involved with bio-architecture, which is closely related to ecological architecture. In 1982 he began researching in north India into traditional building techniques and geomancy. In 1984 he

came to Auroville and built an 'organic' house which incorporated much of what he had learned. The first challenge in this climate, he points out, is to find ways of releasing

absorb moisture and in hot climates this can lead to the growth of fungi. Eventually he discovered that coconut fibre and dust are very resistant to fungal growth and even ter-

under the auspices of The Institute of Bioarchitecture and Ecology. Temperature, he notes, is only one parameter of comfortable living in the tropics. Others include air movement,

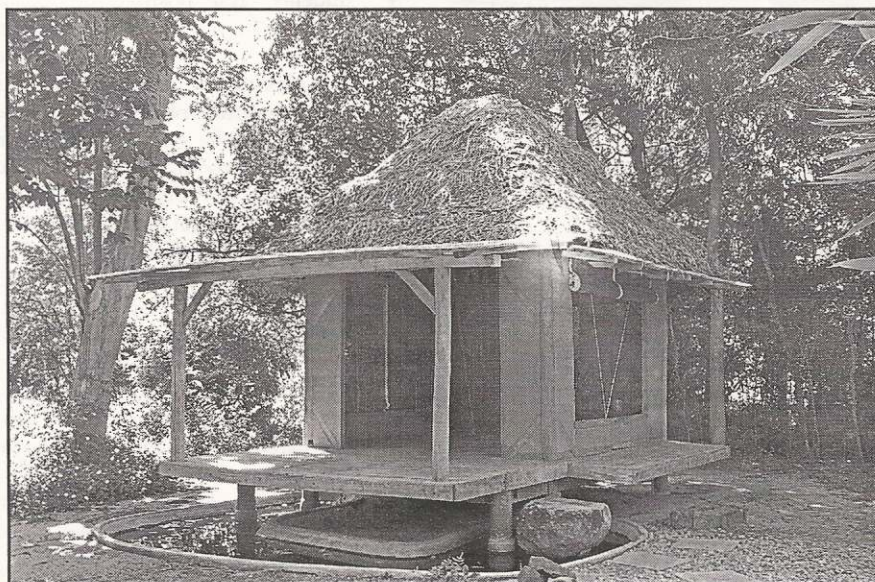
humidity and the cleanliness of the air circulating in a house. There are many ways of achieving these parameters. These include adequate shade, green walls and roofs (walls and roofs covered with vegetation), the provision of a solar chimney, and piping cool air from below the ground into the house (the temperature at 3-4 metres below the surface is constant all year round). Ideally these different techniques should be used in combination, and four years ago a German Foundation funded him to come up with an optimum design for an ecological house. His design included the provision of low openings covered with vetiver grass mats soaked in cold water to clean and cool the air (cooler air is less humid), which is then drawn up through the house by a central solar chimney (such a system

requires the windows and doors to remain shut).

After the Gujarat earthquake he began a closer study of the shapes of dwellings. The Gujarat experience was that right-angled constructions were not as earthquake-resistant as circular constructions. Also, light-frame constructions stood up much better than solid constructions of cement and concrete. This is because a light, flexible construction can absorb more energy before it breaks. Consequently Jorgen designed some houses with circular, lightweight roofs, creating a basket-like frame out of split bamboo which was then thinly plastered.

He discovered, however, that even the round shape can distort and break under extreme pressure because it is closed, static: the energy can circulate but cannot 'escape'. A much better possibility, he discovered, is a dynamic shape like that of a snail's shell which acts like a spring to absorb and release energy. His latest house designs are all of this shape. While he admits it takes a little practice to use the novel inner space provided in an optimum manner, he feels this is one of the most stable of all structures. Best of all, it is based on the wisdom of nature herself.

Alan



An eco-house in the greenbelt

heat energy as quickly as possible. He solved this by making thin walls and roofs out of organic materials and by maximizing the air flow through the building. However, organic materials

mites, so he plastered the thin walls with a mixture of coconut dust and mud.

Since 1985 Jorgen has continued his experiments outside Auroville

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Waste not, want not

Taking steps towards better wastewater management

Wastewater and sewage management has been relatively neglected in the community. Most people have a two or three chamber septic tank, although in recent years some larger communities have experimented with larger-scale treatment plants. Most of these use a reed bed process for the

secondary treatment of wastewater. However this has its drawbacks, notably that large amounts of recyclable water get lost through evapotranspiration and infiltration.

To plan for future development data on existing facilities is necessary. Hence, in 1999 the Development Group initiated a survey on wastewater management in Auroville. As a result there is now information regarding the number and different types of wastewater and sewage installations in the community. The fact that the survey was conducted house to house has also helped create a new awareness of the need for effective wastewater management.

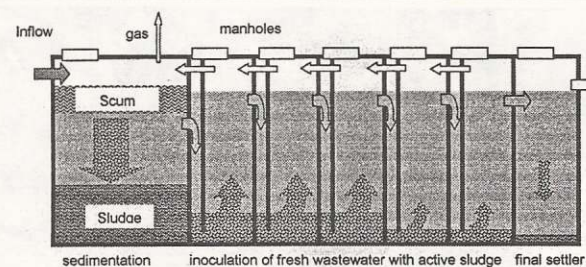
agement.

One finding of the survey was that there are too many people with too little knowledge: what is required is a little bit more expertise in this field to plan effective systems. Therefore a Wastewater Management Group (WMG) has been constituted which exchanges ideas and experiences. The group consists of Joseba, Tency, Dr. Lucas and Cristo, with Govind as coordinator. They are advised by a number of external consultants: Dr. Agrawal, of the Central Former Member Secretary Pollution Control Board New Delhi, Prof. Church Henri of the Washington University and Mr. Martin Strauss of EDWAG/SANDER Switzerland.

The WMG has identified a number of treatment plant prototypes which can be implemented in new projects, depending on the size of the project and the funds available. The latter is often a problem because waste water treatment is often neglected or paid scant attention to at

the planning stage of projects. The survey also identified a number of highly dysfunctional plants, most notably at the Solar Kitchen and Vikas. The WMG was able to advise on improvements to both systems, which have been partially implemented. Another problem is sludge disposal. If properly processed sludge can be turned into compost, but this requires space and the present area available at Harvest is already full.

A topographical survey of Auroville has been made, which will facilitate wastewater management at the level of city planning. However, Joseba explains that it is difficult to develop a collective infrastructure at present as there is a mismatch

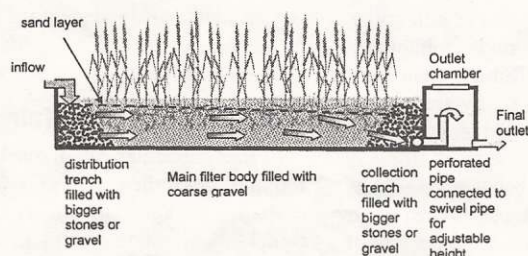


Principle of anaerobic baffled reactor

- 1 Sedimentation – flotation of solids
- 2 Anaerobic digestion of suspended and dissolved solids through contact with sludge
- 3 Anaerobic digestion (fermentation) of bottom sludge
- 4 Sedimentation of mineralized (stabilized) suspended particles

between the concerns of individual project holders and the need for central planning.

In spite of this there are some new developments. The Central Pollution Control Board in New Delhi is taking a very active interest in wastewater treatment experiments in Auroville, as it would like to identify workable solutions for implementation all over India. As a beginning, the Board has granted Rs. 6 lakhs for monitoring and analyzing the wastewater and sewage treatment plants at Sangamam. *Dirk Kievith*



Principle of the horizontal planted filters

- 1 Continuous oxygen supply to the upper layers only
- 2 Anaerobic conditions in the lower parts of the filter
- 3 Roots of plant provide favorable environment for bacteria diversity.

BUILDING THE CITY

The project of Sadaca

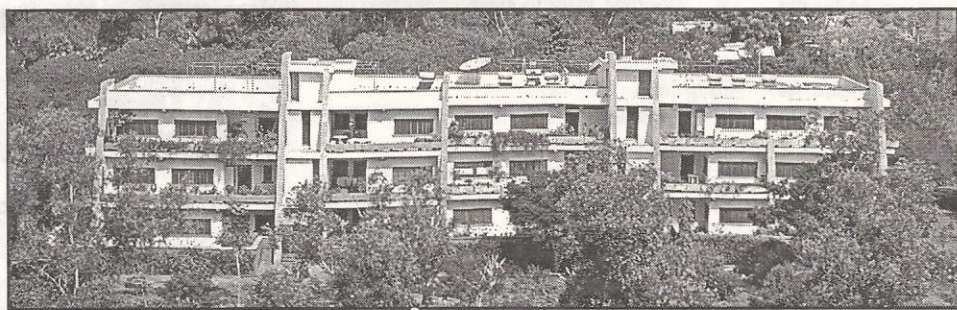
Financing apartment blocks through loans to be repaid from monthly rents is an option which is being studied by Auroville's Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC)

Higher-density buildings are not necessarily an architectural preference brought upon Auroville by a "capricious" Master Plan. It might well be a conscious alternative. For sharing has proven to be beneficial for ecological, economic and social reasons.

Ecologically, sharing results in a more efficient use of natural resources like land, water and energy. The water consumption in high-density areas, for example, has proven to be considerable less than in low-density areas. Collective wastewater treatment plants can supply all the recycled water which a common garden would need. Electricity consumption is less as many facilities such as storerooms and washing machines can be shared.

Economically too, sharing means saving costs. Large solar hot-water systems are cheaper than small ones; maintenance expenses of collective infrastructure are considerable lower; the costs of employees such as gar-

deners and watchmen can be shared. Given the present economic situation of the Central Fund, and the fact that funds available for personal maintenance are not increasing while there is a constant inflation in the cost of living, higher density living might become more and more a necessity. Last there is the social aspect of living more closely together. For harmonious living, one is compelled to take other people's needs into account and maybe change one's behavior along the way, which may turn out to be a training in non-egoistic living.



The Invocation building

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a time, for it is easier to pre-finance two than four or more units.

The difficulty of lack of available housing poses considerable constraints, not only for Auroville but also for those who want to join. The Newcomers policy in effect limits the possibilities of joining Auroville to those who have sufficient funds to make a donation to Auroville in order to get a place to live; the policy makes it nearly impossible for people without capital to join Auroville. There is also no solution offered to newcomers who have not sufficient capital to

build a house, but have only some sort of monthly income. But this cannot be the last word concerning housing and entry.

It is being argued that affordable housing is increasingly a matter of fundraising. The Kailash apartment building is taken as an example, or the Creativity community which to a large extent depends on outside donations [see also *Auroville Today* October 2002]. While fundraising is doubtless an option to be pursued, the "free" housing it gives might create psychological or practical "side effects". Joining Auroville should, we believe, never be an 'easy' commitment and people who feel the call should be able to stand on their own feet and therefore to take the responsibility of finding the means to fully or partially fund their accommodation in Auroville.

Auroville, then, needs to widen its possibilities and the way it handles housing, without reducing the individual responsibilities of those who are in need to find accommodation.

One possibility of doing so is by taking loans from private parties or Auroville units, as well as from friends of Auroville and supporters of the project. With these loans apartment

buildings can be built, which then can be rented out against a monthly contribution which is used as loan (and if applicable, interest) repayment. Alternatively, a unit could be made available to a new occupant against a donation to Auroville. The loans should have a one or two year moratorium on loan repayment and preferably be interest-free, or otherwise given at low-interest and with deferred interest payment for the first years, as high interest rates would increase the building costs. The Auroville unit Sumark has proposed

that the Sadaca project near Invocation be used as an experiment for this approach. Inspired by the Golconde building of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Sadaca will be an apartment building comprising 9 studios and common facilities in the basement. The studios would have a carpet area of 37 sq.m. with terraces surrounding it on two sides. The studios are meant for individuals who would like to live in Auroville as sad-



Four apartments in Arati

haks as well as for long term guests who would like to try and work in Auroville with an assured domestic base. This proposal is at present being studied by the Funds and Assets Management Committee, not only on its financial feasibility but also in view of the ideals of Auroville.

Rolf

ORGANISATION

Long-term guest status revised

The Entry Group recently revised the conditions under which someone can become a long-term guest of Auroville. A long-term guest is someone who wishes to reside in Auroville for more than six months and up to one year to work in and for Auroville without necessarily intending to join Auroville. The long-term guest has the possibility to work in a service, a unit, or a working group in the context of a study, a research project or an exchange programme.

The long-term guest' status is granted by Auroville's Entry Group. Those who would like to avail themselves of this possibility should themselves arrange for a place to work and for accommodation in Auroville. Foreigners who would like to become a long-term guest should also apply to the Entry Group for a recommendation letter to obtain an Entry Visa from their home country. The Entry Visa issued on the recommendation of the Entry Group is for the purpose of residing and working in Auroville only, and cannot be used

for extensive travel in India.

The registration fee for long-term guests is Rs. 4000 for adults, Rs. 1000 for students, trainees or civil volunteers. Long-term guests are also required to pay the general monthly contribution of Rs.1200 to the Central Fund. In case of foreign nationals, a return ticket or the amount equivalent to a return ticket is to be deposited. The ticket or the money will be returned upon departure.

Children of long-term guests below the age of 18 years can study in Auroville schools, subject to the availability of place. Before coming to Auroville, enquiries with the Auroville School Board should be made. A contribution towards the educational expenses will be asked.

A long-term guest must take up residence in Auroville, but cannot build a house in Auroville.

In case of negative feedback or difficulties with integration into Auroville, the Entry Group may cancel the long-term guest status and ask the person to leave Auroville.

Discovering Rajasthan

Rajasthan, in the north west of India, is a magical land of magnificent old forts and palaces. A travelogue

the young man, who sat on a cart, his lifeless legs folded under him, who smiled, with his bright, laughing eyes, and greeted us, but never asked for alms. There was also the deaf and dumb orange turbanned man, whom I sat and had a tea with one morning, who could communicate as well as anybody, with his gestures, and eyes, and smile.

That was, above all, what made it so difficult for me to leave Pushkar...Although the place itself, its charming character, the lake and its peaceful atmosphere had seduced me, it was the people, their smiles, the human contact, which I would miss the most.

In order to reach Ajmer, we jumped onto a crowded bus, which wound its way over the rugged Nag Pahar, or snake mountain. Ajmer is a very important Muslim pilgrimage centre, as the tomb or Dargah of the great Sufi saint Gharib Nawaz Khwaja moin-ud-din Chisti, who lived in the 12th century, is situated there. The saint is revered not only by Muslims, but by Hindu and Christians as well, and throngs of pilgrims of all faiths come to the Dargah to offer prayer and ask for their wishes to be fulfilled. The Dargah's atmosphere is peaceful. Pilgrims, after having offered prayers at the tomb sit in the cool, marble paved gardens, go to the mosque to pray. Qawalis are sung, accompanied by musicians on the harmonium and dholak. Food is cooked at the Dargah and distributed on a daily basis to the poor and destitute of the

with old buildings with delicately carved arched doorways, and balconies.

Jaisalmer was founded and ruled for centuries by the Bhati Rajputs, who are believed to have been the descendants of Lord Krishna Himself. The golden period of Jaisalmer was between the 16th and 18th century, when the desert town became an important trading centre on the silk route. This brought many of its inhabitants great wealth, and beautiful mansions, or havelies were built by tradesmen, some of which still stand today. During the British rule, the ports of Bombay and Calcutta having become the centres of commerce, land routes lost their importance, resulting in the decline of Jaisalmer.

After Independence and the wars between India and Pakistan, the town, being very close to the border between the two countries, became an important military base.

No visit to Jaisalmer is complete without the inevitable camel safari. So one morning we set off in a jeep which led us into the desert to the home of Tiger Khan, who would be our camel man and guide. We set off on camel back, with blankets and provisions bundled and tied onto the animal's saddles. Slowly, carried by the gently swaying gait of the camels, we headed deeper into the arid immensity of the Thar desert.

The fact that the state was suffering from drought, due to the failure of the monsoon for the past three years, became painfully apparent. Land, which had previously been under cultivation had turned arid due to lack of water for irrigation. The carcasses of dead cows, goats and donkeys, which had died of thirst or hunger lay scattered over the sand dunes. We saw the women, dressed in bright pinks, greens and oranges, walking long distances, with vessels on their heads, in search of a well.

We came across some desert villages, made of a few straw roofed huts, their walls plastered with cow dung. We dismounted and walked through them, as the villagers greeted us.

All day we sat on camel back, discovering the great desert, an immense expanse of golden sand over which, scattered, grew a few dry shrubs, some thorny cactuses...In the evening, we stopped and set up camp. We watched the sun set over the dunes. We were joined by an old man wearing an orange turban and a young shepherd boy. As night fell, we sat around a fire, while Tiger Khan and the old man sang. We then went to sleep under the stars, huddled under a large pile of blankets which protected us from the biting cold.

We opened our eyes the next morning as the sun was rising. We saddled and harnessed our camels, rolled up our belongings and set off once more, this time back towards Jaisalmer town,



Folk musician playing the Rawanhatha

As I set foot in Pushkar, a small village built around a holy lake, the Pushkar Sarovar, and surrounded by hills of the Aravalli range, I was immediately under a spell...

Pushkar is an important pilgrimage centre for Hindus, and thousands of pilgrims from all over the country come to bathe in the holy waters of the lake.

According to the Padam Puran, a Hindu religious text, Lord Brahma, the Creator, of the Hindu Trinity, was in search of a place to perform a vedic yagna. A lotus, which He was holding in his hand, fell to earth, and water sprouted from that spot. That is how the holy Pushkar lake originated, and Brahma decided to perform the yagna on its banks.

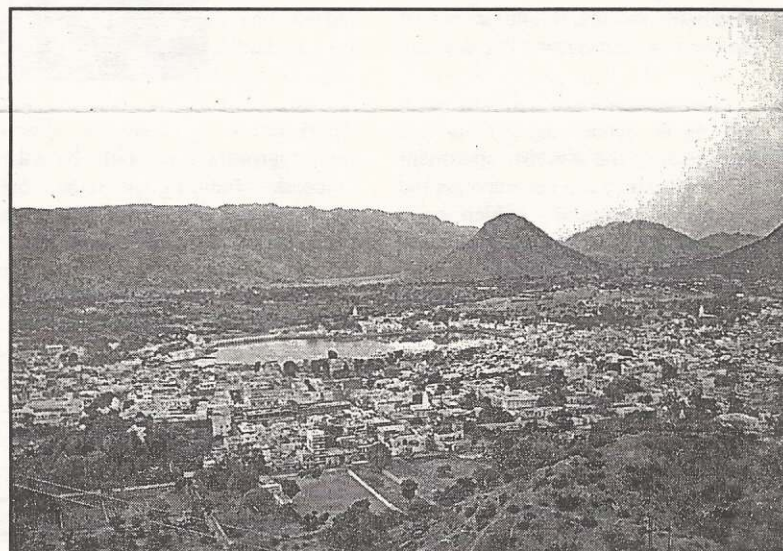
Of the great number of temples built on its banks, the most important is the Jagat Pita Shri Brahma Mandir, the only temple in the world where Lord Brahma, the Creator, is worshipped.

We offered a puja, officiated by a Brahmin priest, to the holy lake on our first evening, as the sun was setting, the temple bells were ringing and devotional bhajans were being sung.

Pushkar village, although it has become a major destination for tourists and travellers from the west, has retained an authentic charm and atmosphere, and the negative and aggressive aspects of 'modernisation' haven't yet invaded and altered its character. Its narrow alleys, lined with old houses and temples, are bustling and alive, with the vegetable and fruit vendors selling their produce, children playing and laughing and the proud, old, turbanned men sitting at the roadside stalls, sipping their spiced tea in terracotta cups.

Our stay in Pushkar was full of interesting encounters. There was the aged Brahmin priest, Shyam, who, one early morning as I sat on the Ghat, told me of the history of Pushkar, recounting the many mythological tales surrounding it. There was also the old couple, from the Langa tribe of nomadic musicians, whose Dharma, or divine duty, it is to play music and sing, of births, marriages, and deaths, in short of life and its different stages. He played plaintive melodies on the sarangi, while she, dressed in the traditional skirt and blouse of bright coloured fab-

ric, heavily bejeweled, with the odhni or shawl covering her head, sang in a powerful, moving voice. There was the young man Krishna, with his bright



View of Pushkar village around the holy lake

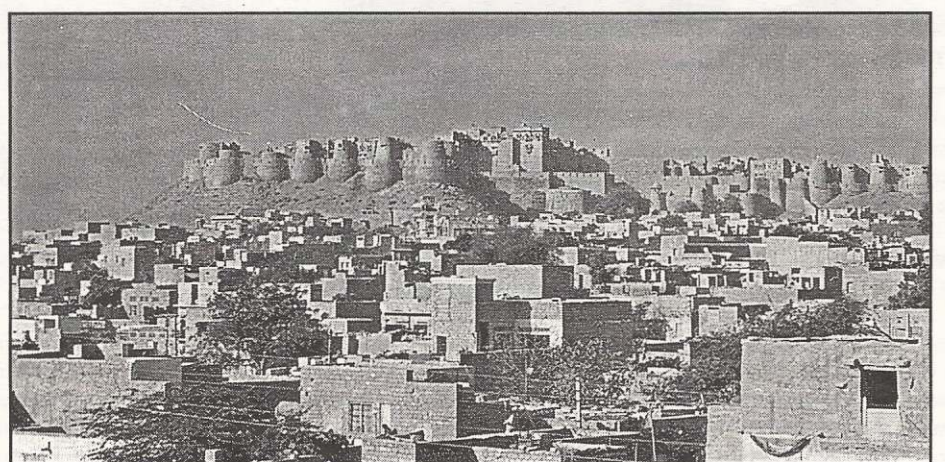
smile, who had started off as a young boy washing glasses at a roadside tea stall. He now runs what you can hardly call a store, a small, narrow enclosure in a wall, where he sells a few bright coloured embroidered shawls, mirror-work pillow covers and wall hangings. The tensions between India and Pakistan, although they now have abated to a certain extent, are responsible for having greatly reduced the foreign tourist influx into Rajasthan, and a lot of the locals depending on the tourism industry are struggling to make ends meet. Yet Krishna, although directly affected, was far from despondent. He was happy to make enough money to feed his family and send his two sons to school.

There were so many others I met, talked to, interacted with, people of different tribes, castes, social and economic classes. There were the gypsy girls on the streets, with their vibrant dresses, chunky jewelry and bright smiles. There was

town. The hidden face of Islam...

Jaisalmer

We then moved west, to Jaisalmer, this beautiful town surrounded by the arid Thar desert, in the midst of which stands an impressive golden sandstone fort. And it is in the fort, within its walls, that the heart of the city really lies. We stayed near the city palace, which has been converted into a museum. I took great pleasure exploring the maze of narrow, winding alleys lined



The Jaisalmer fort

asthan

Magical land with ogue by Emmanuelle

which we would reach in the evening. My camel, Hamoodi, was a young female and extremely friendly. I had heard camels could be aggressive and bite but she let me pat her on the head, and I had learned to lead her, get her to walk, trot, stop and sit down. Once again, we spent the day on camel back under the bright sun, threading the golden sand, surrounded by the peaceful vastness of the desert.

The Pushkar camel fair

From Jaisalmer, we moved on to Jodhpur, and then we were off to Pushkar once again, to attend the great camel fair, where tens of thousands of people from the rural villages came, each year, to trade or sell their camels, cows and horses. We soon learned that some extremist outfit had threatened to throw a bomb in the midst of the

crowds. The Embassies of the US and the UK had advised their nationals to stay away from the event. The news didn't make us change our mind. We arrived in Pushkar, in the midst of the festive crowds of brightly dressed rural men, women and children. The security deployed in view of the threats was impressive. Hundreds of policemen and commandoes stood guard, rifles slung across their shoulder, on every street

and at the entrance to every temple.

Yet that didn't seem to alter the festive atmosphere. Beyond the village, on a vast expanse of sand dunes, thousands had pitched their tents. Hundreds of brightly decorated camels sat around. People had set up their makeshift stalls, selling camel ornaments, leather articles, woolen blankets, brightly coloured embroidered bed covers and shawls and mirrorwork

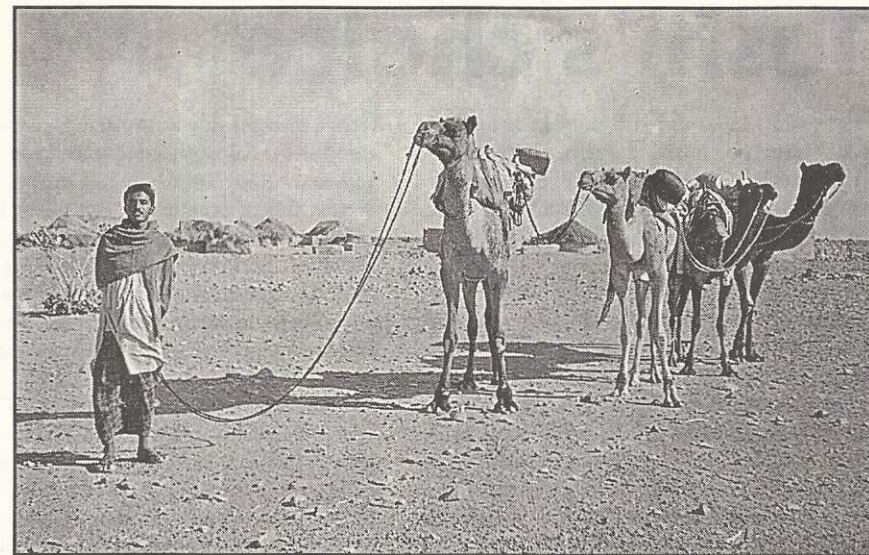


Folk musicians accompanying a young dancer

wall hangings. Spiced tea, sugar cane juice, ladoos and roasted peanuts were sold at road side stalls. Cultural shows were organized, a variety of folk dances were performed, traditional music concerts were given and camel and horse races were held. As we walked through the crowded Mela grounds, we were drawn into the spirit of celebration.

The Pushkar camel fair is also of great religious importance, as it is believed that a dip in the Holy Pushkar Sarovar during the full moon of the month of Kartika will wash away all one's sins. On the auspicious evening throngs of Sadhus and pilgrims arrived to bathe in the holy waters.

At the closing ceremony, after the cultural parade, where heavily decorated camels were followed by groups of traditional musicians and dancers from the various parts of the state, a minister present gave a speech. He talked of music and of dance, of how it had always been so much part of life for the Rajasthani people. He talked of the



Camel man Tiger Khan in the Thar desert

drought, how it had affected the lives of the people, how they were suffering, yet they continued to sing, and dance, and celebrate in spite of the hardships they faced in their daily life.

And finally, we had to leave again, we had to return home, back south. I was sad to leave. Rajasthan had given me much, had enriched me on so many

levels. I felt there was still so much to see in this magical land, so much to discover, so much to learn. The beauty of its landscapes, its magnificent old forts, palaces and temples, its rich history and culture, and its people.

I was fascinated, under the spell, one day, I will return...

Emmanuelle

Invoking the presence of myth

Extracts from a talk given by Roger Harris to the Theosophical Society of Ireland on similarities in the traditions of Ireland and India

I believe that Ireland and India have shared and perhaps still share a predominantly mythic and epic – as opposed to a linear and temporal – sense of history, a predominance based on the survival and continuing resonance of their respective oral traditions, traditions that are the cultural repositories in a language of epic and symbol of the ancient memories of a people. As if the outer temporal dimension we live in were overshadowed by another plane which when invoked and believed in – can, if not always immediately, but at crucial moments of convergence trigger a renaissance that comes to define an age. Leading figures in both the Irish and Indian nationalist struggle against British colonialism invoked the gods, goddesses or legendary figures of their land and past to help awaken the will, and dormant memories of a people. Yeats in one of his later poems, *The Statues*, reflects on the Easter 1916 Uprising wondering



Celtic line drawing of Cuchulain

“When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side
What stalked through the post office?
What calculation, what intellect,
Number, measurement, replied?”

Today the statue of the dying Cuchulain – a warrior figure from the ancient Irish tales – stands in the Dublin General Post Office as a moving testimony to the nationalists poets and revolutionaries who died in that stupendously courageous if doomed uprising that was to capture the imagination of a people and, like an

unstoppable temple juggernaut, set off a chain of events that was to lead to the rebirth of a nation. The Irish literary renaissance had helped create or instil a renewed sense of identity based in part on Ireland's Celtic past that was rich in myth and oral lore. Yeats sang of the ‘ancient ways’ and wrote *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. A decade or so later, Pearse and his fellow nationalists invoked the spirit of Cuchulain and a ‘Terrible beauty was born’.

Contemporary with the Irish literary and nationalist renaissance half-way across the world Aurobindo Ghose was editing a radical nationalist newspaper, *Bande Mataram*, in Calcutta and invoking the gods and goddesses of the ancient land of Bharat in his attempt to awaken the slumbering common mind and masses of India to shake off the British yoke. He wrote “India of the ages is not dead nor has she spoken her last creative word; She lives and has still something to do for herself and the human peoples.”

“The sense of the infinite is native to the Indian mind”, wrote Sri Aurobindo, and the invisible can still feel tangible in India, much as might still be the case in Ireland, with its fairy folk its ancient Gods – the *Tuatha De Danaan* and other stories of elemental and other-worldly beings that Yeats collected in prose work *The Celtic Twilight* at the end of the 19th century. Both India and Ireland share, or shared until recently an oral story telling tradition with ancient roots where the very recital or telling of the story has the power to invoke ancient presences, protection and good luck. Episodes from the *Ramayana* are still recited in rural villages by wandering troupes during local festivals much as the Homeric bards might have done in ancient Greece. The Indian imagination still remains connected to the spirit and defining moments of its ancient epics.

The Leap of Hanuman

The *Ramayana* recounts the epic tale of Rama the prince, and later king of Avodhya. Exiled from his kingdom for fourteen years he lives in the forest accompanied by his brother and his wife Sita. One day Sita is abducted by Ravana, the demon king of Lanka. With his brother he desperately searches for her in the forest where he meets Sugreev a monkey King who has been banished from his capital by his brother. At the urging of Hanuman, the wise counsellor to Sugreev, a treaty of alliance is con-

cluded between Rama and the deposed monkey king Rama helps Sugreev the monkey reclaim his kingdom and Sugreev, in return, sends out expeditions to locate Sita's whereabouts. Hanuman is part of a part of the expedition sent to investigate the Southern regions of India.

A sense of dejection of hopelessness and despair frequently confronts the heroes of these epics before their spirit wakes and rises to the task it is their destiny to fulfil. There is a wonderful description in the *Ramayana* of the dejection experienced by the army of monkeys when facing the ocean for the first time and how as suddenly the dejection turns to joy when Hanuman the monkey leader son of Vayu, God of the Wind, recalls his prowess and decides to make the leap from South India to Lanka. The build-up to the leap across the straits and Hanuman's prowess is splendidly described:

“He stretched himself repeatedly and it seemed as if his whole body was rippling with force. Then, twirling his tail above him, Hanuman threw back his head to the heavens and let out a never ending roar. The monkeys screamed with joy. One could have thought him a lion stretching out his limbs to fill the enormous vacuum of a cave. The Son of the Wind then leapt up to the top of Mount Mahendra. Under the impact Hanuman's feet landing on its peak the mountain let out a cry like an elephant in heat attacked by a tiger. Seized by fear the deer of the mountain scattered and thousands of birds rose up in one motion out of the foliage of the trembling trees and darted off. The mountain was bannered with serpents that raised themselves hissing half out of their holes. The forest deities having flown away from the mountain hovered upright some distance off in the air. Garlanded with red flowers they looked on, their wives besides them adorned with necklaces of pearl. There were Rishis there as well, who marvelling at the scene chanted hymns of praise to Hanuman, Son of the Wind, who for King Rama's sake was willing to attempt and realise the impossible.”

Many wonderful and extraordinary episodes follow and finally Rama, crossing the straits with his army of monkeys who have built a bridge for the purpose, kills Ravana the ten-headed demon king. He returns with Sita to Avodhya to be crowned King. When the time has come for Hanuman and his army to depart, Hanuman approaches Rama and makes one humble request. “May my love for you be constant, my devotion to you continual, and may I never cease to listen to the story of your life.” Sita took off a necklace of pearls and gave it to Hanuman and Rama then takes him to his breast promising him that:

“As long as my story is told,
O Prince of the monkeys,
Life will not leave your body,
And glory will be yours.”

And till this day in India, whenever the *Ramayana* is recited a place is always kept free for Hanuman, who an invisible part of the assembly listens, as he has now for thousands of years, with tears of ecstasy, hands clasped together in devotion, to the tale of Rama and Sita.

Ancient civilisations: legend, lore and fact

As I have said, it is my feeling that Ireland and India share a mythic or epic non-temporal sense of history that might well have to do with their respective oral traditions reaching back to ages that could well predate the more accepted academic timelines of the history of civilisation. And pushing back the accepted timelines of civilisation recent underwater archaeological discoveries off the coast of Gujarat in Western India and elsewhere point to the fact the legendary cities described in the epic tales, local lore and myth, much like Troy, might actually have existed.

Myth can be seen to borrow the expression of Robert Graves in the *White Goddess* as a poetic grammar of history more natural to the people of another age who had a more visionary and innately symbolic sense of life the cosmos and its mysteries. There are similarities between the legendary accounts of the pre-Gaelic races of Ireland and those of India. The magical weapons wielded by the devic forces in the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* also bring to mind those of the *Tuatha te Dannan* – the people of the goddess Dana the ancient supernatural or god-like race of Ireland. Danaan is the mother of this god-like race, and in Vedic Sanskrit ‘Danu’ signifies ‘streams’ or the ‘waters of heaven’. There is a debate as regards whether the *Tuatha de Dannan* came in ships, or on clouds through the air, from the ‘other shore’ of the ‘Four cities of the Northern islands of the world. Interestingly there are also many references to the ocean and ‘the crossing of waters’ in the *Vedas*, as well as descriptions of the aurore borealis or the northern lights. The Five Kindred's referred to in the *Vedas* were supposed to have come from across the waters either in a ship or heavenly chariot – but ‘a crossing of water’ can like many other images in the *Vedas*, be read both literally as well as symbolically. The figure of the bard and the bardic college with its druidic connotations also parallels that of the inspired Kavi or Rishi poet/seer of ancient India. Could it be that both Ireland and India have a common connection and share



links in way or the other – based on hints and allusions in their respective traditions and mythologies – with a legendary hyperborean civilisation of the past?

The poetic language of myth mirrors the great precession of the equinoxes, and chronicles both cosmic and human time reflected in the cycles of society and the psyche of man. According to traditional Indian calculations we are living in the transitional twilight of the Kali Yuga, the sombre or dark age that has lasted for the last six and half thousand years or so, an age of progressive degeneration where ‘Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold’ and man loses his deeper sense of spiritual identity and kinship with rest of creation. But this period of transition dated by the French author and esotericist Rene Guenon as having begun in 1939 leads us back into the Satya Yuga or golden Age and the great cycle – or perhaps spiral – of the ages enters another phase. The twilight of the Kali-Yuga despite the outer violence chaos and general atmosphere of moral decay and decline is nonetheless also seen in counterpart as a period when that which has long been hidden becomes visible again and where accelerated spiritual progress on an individual level – a progress of lifetimes – can be made. Many Amerindian and indigenous prophecies speak of the age we are living in as one of transition from the Fourth to the Fifth world and of a raising of the vibratory level of the planet and human consciousness. And the end of the Mayan calendar on Dec 21st 2012 reflects this in another way.

We live in an age of conflict and confrontation characterised by a fermentation of ideas born of the clash of economic interests and the forces of tradition and modernity within different cultures in an increasingly interdependent world. And the question posed today by nature's evolutionary force is: can man surpass himself and lend himself to a process of transformation leading from our present state of fragmented individuation into one attuned to a growing consciousness of oneness and unity with creation and the rest of humanity, or will he like other species before either disappear or be left by the wayside as an agent of conscious evolution upon earth?

And yet despite the titanic clash of forces, of almost epic or mythic proportions above our earth today – hence the relevance of the ancient myths and the symbolic message they hold – the resultant fermentation of ideas in diverse traditional cultures that are confronting the spirit of modernity and change within their midst bodes well for a renaissance of the spirit of humankind.

Toshi's choice

Toshi Malik was still only in her thirties when her husband Prem, a top-ranking executive in Hindustan Lever, announced one evening in their elegant Calcutta residence his desire to settle down in the Pondicherry Ashram. She wondered if he was serious. Their frequent short visits to the ashram in the sleepy seaside town had been fine, but living there for good would be an entirely different story. And what was the wife of a corporate executive expected to do in an ashram? It would mean giving up going to clubs and eating at fancy restaurants, doing without cars with chauffeurs, expensive saris, and jewellery. It would mean giving up not only the luxuries that Toshi, an upper-class Punjabi Hindu originally from Pakistan but brought up in Delhi, had become used to, but also mean a stripping away of a certain inherited approach to life that she wore like a second skin. An attractive and vivacious woman, Toshi couldn't imagine herself clad in a white cotton sari like the other ashramite women, riding on a bicycle to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram where the mingled scent of tuberose, rosewater, and incense hung like a diaphanous, magnetic curtain all day. Or eating the same austere food at the ashram dining room everyday.

Toshi had seen the Mother for the first time

from a distance. It was Darshan Day, the Mother stood on the balcony gazing at the many devotees gathered below. Toshi's doubts had not lessened. "I was full of scepticism. But when I met the Mother in her room I prayed for her to show me her vision, her power, so I could understand. That meeting changed my life. No words were spoken but something was communicated. I remember nothing except being touched in the core of my being."

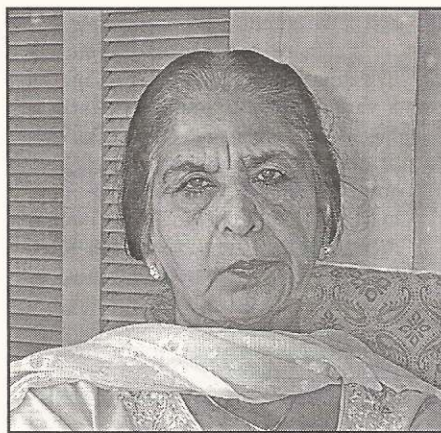
And thus began the story of Toshi's change of consciousness and altered lifestyle when she arrived in Pondicherry in 1968. She was 42, her enthusiastic husband 48. The same year they attended the memorable inauguration ceremony of Auroville. The couple lived first in the ashram under the Mother's physical presence, both teaching at the ashram school. Ten years later they joined Auroville. If living the structured life of the ashram meant surmounting several barriers, some real and others imagined, moving to Auroville was a bigger challenge. "It took us ten years to prepare ourselves to come to the ashram, and then another ten prepared our spiritual foundations to be able to live in Auroville." At its inception the "city" was an endless expanse of eroded red earth, dotted by stringy palms swaying in the wind. When Toshi and Prem moved

there in 1978, it was still a struggling township, going through economic and political hardships.

Within a short time Prem threw himself into the formulation of organisational guidelines according to the Mother's wishes, clearing the way for Auroville's economic self-sufficiency. Toshi took on the role of nurturer, cooking, along with a few other women, meals for up to 100 people everyday. "Those days were not easy. Auroville's resources were scarce yet miracles took place. One day I was told that there was no money for the noon meal at the Aspiration community kitchen. Not even for a simple meal of varagu porridge. I was disturbed and so were many others. Adults could make do, but what about the children? And then suddenly, out of the blue, some money came. The food we ate that day tasted like a feast."

Eager to experience Auroville in its varied, evolving hues, Toshi experimented with different kinds of work. She worked at the Pour Tous grocery stall, taught Sanskrit to adults from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and in the absence of guesthouse facilities provided hospitality to the many VIPs that visited Auroville in the early days.

Today, at the age of 75, Toshi continues teaching Hindi to five of her adult Western Aurovilian friends who have shown remarkable



Toshi Malik

progress over the years. Her main work, however, is at the Information Office at the Visitors Centre, where every morning she satisfies the curiosity of the many tourists who wish to know more about Auroville and its spiritual centre, the Matrimandir. "I enjoy this work very much as it gives me the opportunity to meet a diverse range of people sincerely interested to

know about the spiritual aspects of Auroville and the Matrimandir."

Despite severe back problems and chronic high blood pressure, Toshi is an active member of the community. Since the passing of Prem Malik two years ago, she has been managing the Auromodele orchard which is located not far from the little house that she and her husband lived in for close to twenty-two years. A prominent member of the Bharat Nivas Group, Toshi helps to arrange various events relating to Indian culture and philosophy. Recently she, along with her colleagues, gathered resources and organised a very successful Deepavali celebration. It was attended by over 500 people and greatly enjoyed by both adults and children. Toshi also helps the community by having young, single people in need of accommodation live with her until they find more permanent housing.

Toshi still visits her relatives in Delhi every summer, and also spends time at her little mountain cottage in Ramgarh, near Nainital. Every year her concerned nieces and nephews pressure Toshi to give up her life in Auroville and join them in Delhi now that Prem has passed away. But despite the feelings of loneliness that threaten her at times, Toshi's choice is clear. Every morning at 8:45 she walks down the tree-shaded path to the main road of Auromodele, and waits for the van to take her to the Visitor's Centre. The van arrives full of good humour, with other senior Aurovilians like Toshi setting out for work that they continue to enjoy and cherish.

Abha Prakash

ART

An Auroville bell in the making

Dutch sculptor Cornelis's first steps in bronze casting

The artist's studio is a fascinating place. The moment I enter Cornelis Rijken's work/home space, my perception shifts. The presence of people in the open air workshop chiselling noisily away on a sleeping Ganesha blends imperceptibly with the silence of the garden adorned with steel and granite sculptures. Their organic forms beckon my caress. They all appear dynamic yet very different in nature. The steel creations seem to hold a tremendous tension as if about to unfurl or break free into flight. In contrast, the works in stone radiate a soothing grounded energy. A duality that seems strangely natural coexists...

Immediately outside Cornelis's pyramid-shaped, terracotta-tiled home, is the weighty presence of seven Aattukal (huge Tamil-style mortar and pestle for grinding wet flour). Like sentinels, they stand in guard. I walk inside completely at ease and eager to hear about the 'Bell'. "Aah, yes, the bell!" exclaims Cornelis as he waves me in, "but it is not finished yet."

Cornelis narrates the story of his deliberate move away from his familiar media of steel and stone into the world of bronze. As an artist, he has always been interested in testing and pushing his own artistic limits. His fascination with the medium of bronze began ever since his first visit to India when he saw the Chola bronzes dating from the 12th century. "They are exquisite works of art," he enthuses, "and the craftsmen from Tamil Nadu are famous all over the world for their mastery".

But it is only over the past six months that he has taken steps into the area of bronze casting. A visit to a friend in France led to a serendipitous trip to a bell factory in Brittany, and became the catalyst for his new focus. "I discovered that creating a bell would be most true to my natural inclination as a person of European upbringing," he declares. "Though Indian bronzes continue to be a defi-

nite inspiration, I do not think that I have sufficient knowledge to improve or make it better. Also the bell seems to be the perfect choice for Auroville."

"It will be an Auroville bell; there will be the sign of Auroville on one side. It will produce the purest quality sound and its shape and shine will be perfect. The bell will be an expression of my truth, and will be my gift to the community. To make this bell of this quality, I may have to cast many bells; perhaps 10 or even more, but I am ready. I can never compromise on quality."

This choice of the bell has in no way stifled or narrowed his explorations in bronze-casting. On the contrary, it has only driven him to reach out and explore the area with greater openness through collaborations with

The specifications for bell-making are even more stringent, since the tone of the sound produced is also a parameter to assess the quality of the bell. Did you know that there is a Bell museum in Holland?" Cornelis asks. "It is the 'Klokkemuseum' in Astens; and it has all the information that one would need to make a bell. There is no need to invent anything."

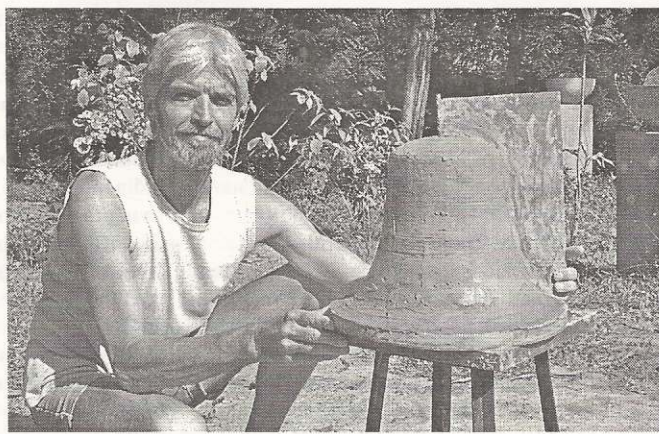
He goes on to share his experience about emailing the director of Klokkemuseum about specifications for a small bell. Two days later, and much to his surprise, he received the complete description of a 25 kg bell, including the coordinates to describe its physical profile that is accurate to one thousandth of a millimetre. Feeding these coordinates into a computer-aided design software has enabled him to visualize the appearance of the bell. And now Cornelis is all excitement, and cannot wait to get started.

He has already begun bronze-casting test objects with a view to train his crew of three assistants. Team work and coordination are vital in this physically demanding process, especially when one has to deal with large volumes of molten metal.

The next step involves working on the mould, a crucial stage in the bell's creation. This will be followed by firing the mould (done for 24 hours on a wood-fire). This first bell will be modestly sized, weighing only 25 kg, but for Cornelis this is just the beginning of a greater vision.

He softly tells his dream "A carillon spanning 1½ octaves with perhaps 10 bells on which Aurelio can play and make music for Auroville..." I leave listening to those bells of the future, ringing auspiciously for Auroville and the entire world...

Priya Sundaravalli



Cornelis with the mould for the Auroville bell

South Indian bronze-casters. One such figure is Rajan, a master craftsman from Swamimalai whom he works closely with. "These kinds of interactions help in exchanging ideas that benefit both of us," confides Cornelis.

Much information has already been exchanged, such as knowledge about the process of mould-making and alloy composition. "In Europe, moulds are of high quality and made of plaster and brick powder while the Indian process favours clay, a substance which is much more prone to surface defects. Also the bronze in Europe is of a purer alloy of copper and tin, while Indian bronze has other impurities such as zinc or lead."

CULTURE

Hymns and Songs in Sanskrit

Official occasions in Auroville are not universally popular with Aurovilians. However, one of the compensations for attending the openings of such occasions is hearing Joy's rendition of the Gayatri Mantra:

Om tat savitur varam rupam jyotih parasya dhimahi yannah satyena dipayet

For me it's always magical. The dying fall of *jyotih*, couched in Joy's limpid tones, is so piercingly beautiful that the most prosaic function is immediately lifted an inch or two above the earth.

It's good news, then, that Joy's rendering of the Gayatri Mantra, along with a number of other Sanskrit hymns and songs, has now been reissued on CD by Rain Tree Records, who have done a fine job in remastering the original and redesigning the CD sleeve. Devotional music is sometimes thought of as lacking in variety, but this is disproved by the choice of hymns and songs on this CD, sensitively arranged by Holger. There is, for example, the achingly beautiful invocation, Om Anandamayi, the joyful and brilliant Surya Stuthi (Salutations to the Sun) and Bhavananyashtakam, Adi

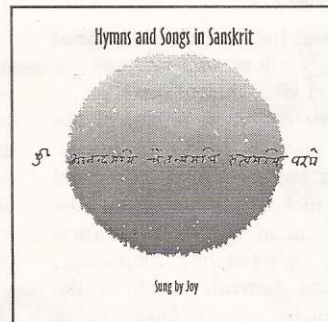
Shankaracharya's affirmation that "No father have I, no mother, no comrade..." What makes the latter piece so powerful is that it begins with Bryce Grinlington's flute solo, suggestive of desolation and loss, only to be followed by the assured tones in which Shankaracharya affirms his choice, "You alone are my path, you are my goal O Bhavani!"

Whatever she sings, Joy sings from 'within': the sacred words are an outwelling of an inner poise and experience, permeating all with a sense of otherness, taking us beyond meaning into regions of primal sound and essence.

In this sense this CD is a wonderful evocation of Mantra as explained by Sri Aurobindo. "Its characteristics are a language that conveys infinitely more than the mere surface sense words seem to indicate, a rhythm that means even more than the language and is born out of the Infinite and disappears into it..."

Alan

Hymns and Songs in Sanskrit. Sung by Joy. Rs.425. Rain Tree Records (enquiries to raintree@auroville.org.in)



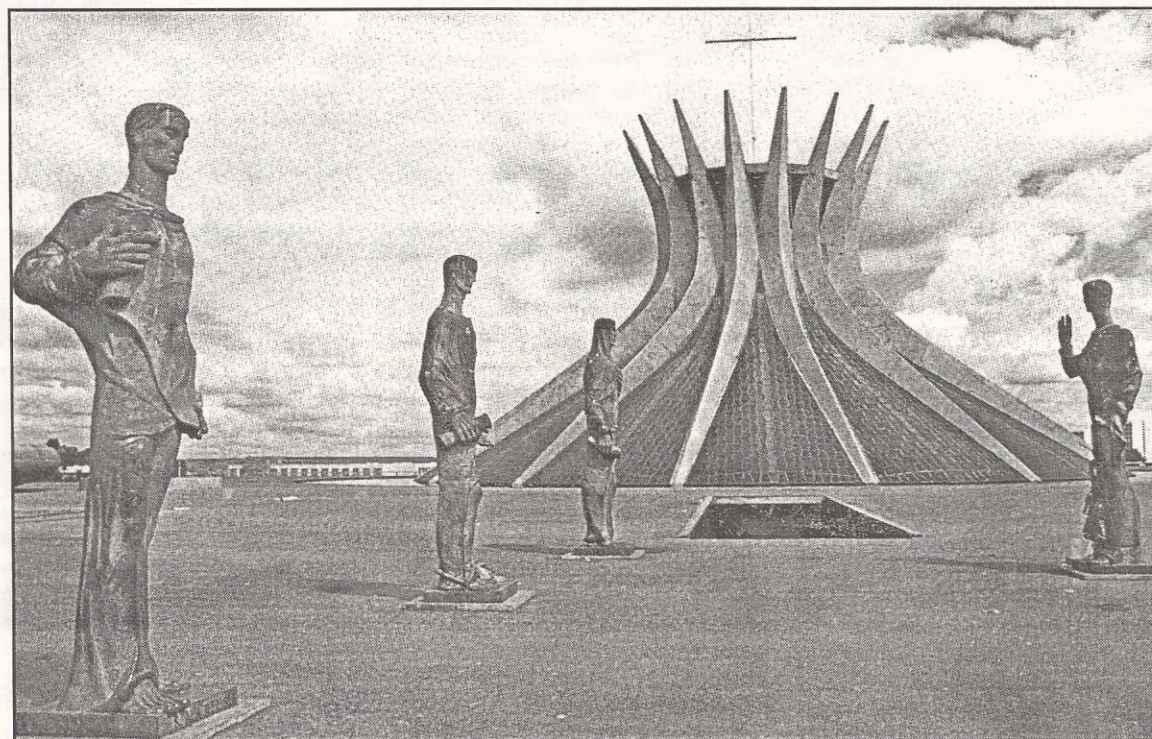
The Brazilian connection

In 2004 the AVI meeting will be held in Brazil. What is Brazil's relevance to Auroville?

At the same time that the decision was made to hold The Auroville International meeting in Auroville in 2003, Brazil was chosen as the next destination in 2004. Brazil will be the first country in Latin America to host such a meeting, but as Brazil is little known except for its football team, it can be asked in what way Brazil is relevant to Auroville, and vice-versa.

The first answer could be the human diversity found over there, a result of the mix of various races and cultures, which creates the need for developing understanding and unity among different peoples. In fact, it can be said Brazil is a nation in the making. This is not a euphemism for "developing country", but points to the fact that Brazilians are still in search of their deep identity, their soul. This creates a kind of receptivity and openness that seems to be very much part of the Brazilian character. On a recent trip over there I noted two aspects of this openness: on the one hand, Brazilians let themselves be invaded by values and attitudes coming from abroad (mainly from "Big Brother" to the North), on the other, I found a lot of receptivity vis-à-vis an experiment like Auroville, because it helps Brazilians foster their own search for the deeper dimensions of life.

I was there at the invitation of friends, and had the opportunity to give work-shops on self-development through art and concentration, and also to present Auroville to different groups. My stay was limited to one city – Salvador (Bahia) – the original capital and oldest town in Brazil, which has a rich culture coloured by its African and Portuguese heritage. It is the town where I used to live before coming to Auroville 18 years ago. I visited at least ten different groups of people, from therapists and educators to people just interested in knowing about something new, and encountered everywhere a similar opening and understanding in relation to Auroville. In some circles Sri Aurobindo and The Mother are



Cathedral in Brasília, designed by Niemeyer

known, mainly thanks to the work of the late Rolf Gelewski, a German dancer and teacher who came to Brazil in the early sixties and who had a strong connection with the Ashram in Pondicherry, where he used to teach and dance. In the seventies he founded the Casa Sri Aurobindo in Bahia, an organization that still helps spread the message of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother to different parts of the country.

Innovative urban management and sustainable development is another converging point between Brazil and Auroville. The city of Curitiba in South Brazil is nowadays recognised world-wide as one of the most successful examples of intelligent and environmentally-friendly urban management. I was there in the late seventies and saw how the city had evolved new solutions to solve traffic problems and to promote public health and education, respect for nature and the recycling of all kinds of waste. For example, with the intro-

duction of a very efficient system of shuttle buses inside the city the use of individual cars became largely unnecessary, and thus many vehicle-free areas could be created. Urban cleanliness is encouraged at the grassroots level, with the administration paying for each bag of waste collected by the people. Education is promoted in many ways, including the creation of libraries and cultural centres all around the town, significantly called (if my memory doesn't fail me) "light-houses of knowledge". As a consequence the local economy and the people are thriving and this success is encouraging other cities to follow Curitiba's example.

Art in general, and music in particular because its capacity for inward penetration, is a powerful means of opening the self to subtle realities. I've seen this happening in Brazil in the field of so-called "popular" music, though such music often displays elaborate harmonies and profundity of meaning. One day I was

out walking when I heard from the sound system of a coconut seller a song which went something like:

*If I want to talk with God
I have to find peace inside
I have to loosen the knots
of my shoes, of my tie,
of my desires, of my fears.
I have to accept the pain
I have to see my sadness
I have to face my ugliness
and in spite of all that
I have to fill my heart with joy.
If I want to talk with God
I have to take risks
to climb up to the heavens
without ropes to hold me
I have to say goodbye
and walk, resolute, on the road
that leads nowhere that I had ever
known before.*

This is a song by Gilberto Gill, one of the many good composers who convey messages like that to the public and find wide acceptance. And he is not an isolated case: other musicians and artists are attracted to a deeper search for meaning in their lives and work. Among them a special mention should be made of Walter Smetak, a complex personality who has combined music with science and spiritual research, and created as many as 150 different instruments to perform his experimental compositions. His music defies any classification and represents a deep search for the essence and origin of sound, drawing its principles from the West as well from the East. Smetak knew of Sri Aurobindo and in his recently published book, "O Simbolismo do Som", there is one chapter which is a translation of a text by the Master about the Supramental manifestation.

The meeting in 2004 will be an excellent occasion for Brazilians connected with Sri Aurobindo and The Mother to come into closer contact with the present reality of Auroville, and for Aurovilians and friends of Auroville to have a chance to experience the atmosphere of a country which is entering a new phase of its history. For it now has a government, elected by a large majority of the people, which is promising to tackle the chronic problems which have blocked the manifestation of the potential of the nation, problems which have created adverse conditions for the emergence of its best qualities, its soul.

Jivatman

In brief

Relationship with Surrounding Villages

The Auroville Council reports that objections among some Kottakarai villagers about Auroville fencing perembake (collective village) lands have served as a strong reminder that establishing better relations with the villagers must be given top priority if Auroville wants to realize its goals. The Council has been having meetings with all of the Working Groups concerned and with various groups in the village. The establishment of Joint Development Offices in each of the villages within the township, Edayanchavadi, Kottakarai – Bharatipuram, Irumbai, Sanjeevnagar, Alankuppam, and Raya Pettai and also Kuilapalayam, which lies just outside the township but whose development has been inextricably involved with that of Auroville since the beginning is seen as a priority.

ID Cards

As it is becoming more and more difficult to know who is an Aurovillian at various points such as Matrimandir, Pour Tous and the beach, the Auroville Council proposes to introduce, on an experimental basis for a one year period, identity cards to make identification of residents, newcomers, employees and long-term friends easier. Guests already have an identity card.

The Gita and Integral Yoga

Dr. M.V. Nadkarni spoke about the Bhagavat Gita and Integral Yoga at Savitri Bhavan.

Voices of Light

Gopika Kaarthikeyan of Chennai exhibited a collection of paintings at Pitanga titled 'Voices of Light', a symbolic representation of the silent inner self. Done in three media – water-colour, pastel and digital print – the works reflect this artist's search within. This first exhibition of Gopika's at Auroville received enthusiastic reviews from the community.



Nada-Brahma

A full day workshop on Nada, an ancient science of sound which included techniques for self-purification, self-healing and self-empowerment was given at Savitri Bhavan by Shruti.

Chaali

Dance groups Bhoorang from Bangalore and Samudra from Thiruvananthapuram gave a dance workshop and performed at Bharat Nivas. Unfortunately heavy rains prevented many Aurovilians from enjoying this performance.

Passings

Sivaraman of Rayapudupakkam, who was involved in Auroville during the last four years, working in the field of quality control for export garments and at the Coffee Shop at Solar Kitchen, passed away on December 3rd.

François Durand, a French newcomer living and teaching in New Creation, unexpectedly passed away on December 8th at the age of 46.

VILLAGE RELATIONSHIPS

Panchayat Presidents collaborate

Village Panchayats, comprising 1-3 villages, are the smallest political and administrative unit of the Government. The Panchayat Raj Act was implemented in 1996 and since then there have been only 2 elections. Of the 64 Panchayats in the Vanur Block, Auroville's Village Action Group (AVAG) currently works in 23 of them. In the last Panchayat election, most Panchayat members seeking re-election lost their seats, while new, young and motivated men were elected. AVAG has always maintained cordial relations with elected Panchayat leaders, but in the last few years, with the growth of AVAG's work, its importance as a development agency has significantly increased. Consequently, it has come to work even more closely with the elected leaders. In this period, AVAG invited all the Panchayat Presidents to attend a woman's seminar on gynecological problems and sexually transmitted diseases. About 70% of the invitees attended the seminar and praised AVAG's initiative in raising

awareness about an issue that is traditionally considered to be taboo.

AVAG further observed that Panchayat Presidents were keen to work with AVAG's villages groups and often sought the help of the AVAG coordinator in solving their problems. Some of the developmental problems faced by the Panchayat were irregular supply of electricity, lack of drinking water facilities, ensuring maintenance of community projects such as common toilets, and delay in getting funds from the State Government. As these problems were common to most Panchayats, at the request of some of the Panchayat Presidents, AVAG hosted a joint meeting of all the 23 Panchayat Presidents that it works with. The meeting saw a 100% representation from all the Panchayats. Problems were aired and solutions were discussed. As AVAG maintains good relations with senior State and Central Government Officials, the Panchayat President asked for AVAG's assistance in following up certain government projects. The Panchayat

Presidents also expressed their gratitude to the network of AVAG village groups as these groups greatly facilitate the interaction between the elected leaders and their constituencies. AVAG groups attend "grama sabhas" called by the Panchayat to discuss projects, and when need be, raise funds on the Panchayat's behalf, from the villagers for developmental projects. The Panchayat Presidents resolved to hold a joint meeting every 2 months.

Another problem that the Panchayat Presidents voiced was the opposition faced by rival political groups in the villages. Many developmental initiatives are thwarted by powerful village leaders who belong to an opposing political group. To overcome this problem, the Panchayat Presidents asked AVAG to set up Village Councils where all political groups, and not just the ones that were elected, would have equal rights. It is hoped that these Village Councils would be a common forum to take up development projects for the villages.

Bindu

Streamlining the Auroville website

Changes are taking place at Auroville's information interface with the world

Last year, Mauna wrote an article [The Web and the Wooing, AVT149-50] describing how the third generation of the Auroville website came into being. Mauna, who together with Manoj was mainly responsible for the content of the site, is now focusing her energy in other directions and is transferring the website job to newcomer Doris. We asked Doris and Manoj about other new developments.

Manoj: One change is that the AV

tion about the Aurovilians themselves: who are they and what brought them here? This information already existed, but the profiles were scattered in various sections and hidden in deeper layers of the AVWeb. So now we have brought them all together in one section and present them more prominently.

Doris: As a Newcomer to Auroville I look at the Website with different eyes from the rest of the team. I remember what it was like to sit in Germany and

of communities and work groups, for example.

Doris: There's also a need to rebalance some of the information presented. Village Action features very prominently on the AVWeb. It's doing good work, but there's nothing at present about the ordinary lives of the villagers or about the challenges faced by Tamil Aurovilians caught between two very different cultures.

How do you present the material? Do you feel you have a public relations function?

Manoj: We don't write the material. It's written by the people actually doing the work and then it's edited and stylistically 'smoothed' by Mauna. We're not interested in propaganda: we want to provide a neutral medium through which Auroville presents itself to the world.

Warts and all?

Manoj: We want to give a clear, honest picture of what is happening here. However, while the main AVNews is available on the AVWeb, the messages pages of the News are not of a quality which can be presented to the outside.

Doris: Nor would they be understood by outsiders.

How do you present the spiritual dimension?

Doris: When the website was redesigned last year there was an agreement that the spiritual dimension should be presented in a 'cool' but not uninspiring way. I wouldn't change anything here. The presentation is very clean, clear, with no atmosphere of a sect or religiosity.

Manoj: In Auroville you don't hear discussion of spiritual issues. It's not that it's not important to us, but it's in our daily life that we work out our problems. So while there are many profiles

on the AVWeb through which Aurovilians can freely present themselves and their concerns, the emphasis tends to be on down-to-earth living rather than spiritual experiences.

How interactive is the AVWeb?

Manoj: At one point we created an interactive forum where outside users could post comments and start discussions on Auroville. We had to remove it after one month because the people who participated got locked very quickly into a spiral of negativity and the whole thing became unhealthy.

However, as webmaster I receive many requests for further information about Auroville. There is a lot of interest in technological areas like renewable energy and architecture, as well as in organic agriculture. Many of the enquiries come from people considering taking up long- or short-term internships in Auroville which is another growing trend.

Other areas of our work don't elicit such interest. For example, we get few enquiries about education in Auroville.

Why?

Manoj: It could just be a reflection of the fact that the information is not well presented. But my view is that there is only life where there is mutuality: in other words, both a demand and a response. In the field of education there are few requests from the outside for more information, and little response from Auroville. So the situation is static. In other fields, however, there is much

greater dynamism. Our task, as AVWeb managers, is to facilitate that flow, not try to direct it.

Are there any major new initiatives on the horizon?

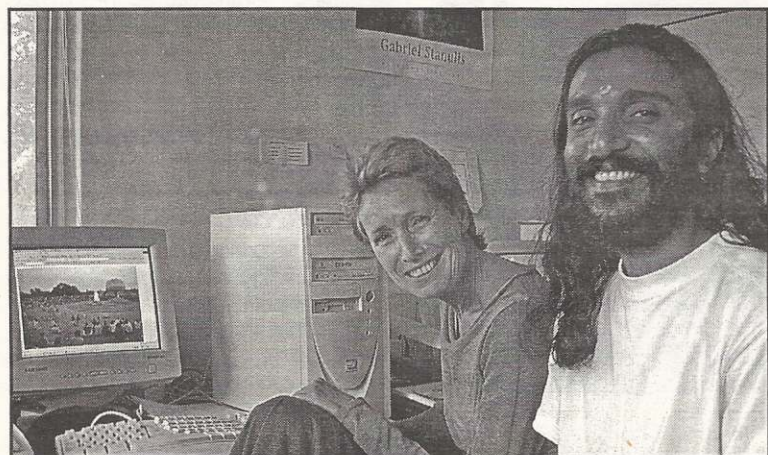
Doris: Within one month we want to launch auroville.com. The auroville.org address is not for business activities, so auroville.com will provide a site where all the commercial activities of Auroville, including not only our businesses but also guest houses etc., can present themselves to the world.

Don't many Auroville businesses already have their own independent sites?

Manoj: Yes, but soon we can refer the many people who visit auroville.org to one Auroville commerce site rather than them having to search through the whole web for Auroville businesses. Also, although we won't design the pages for commercial units, we will look after all the on-site technical aspects for them, so freeing them from a lot of the hassles involved with having to maintain your own website.

A continuing problem with AVWeb has been finding the resources to run it. On principle we feel that basic information about Auroville should be provided free of cost. Since the commercial units will pay us for renting space in the auroville.com domain, we can use some of these funds to finance AVWeb and move us one step closer to financial independence.

From an interview by Alan



Doris and Manoj

Web and the AVNet teams have now merged. However, while we share ideas and I have a foot in each activity, Doris focuses upon AVWeb while Sukhamuni and Kovalan continue to manage AVNet. In fact, AVWeb and AVNet are two distinct organisms which have totally independent lives. AVNet is very much the place where Aurovilians try to solve the issues of their daily lives, whereas AVWeb presents Auroville to the outside (see box).

Auroville Today: The Auroville Website is also undergoing changes. What does this involve?

Manoj: We're not redesigning the site but streamlining it, making it easier for users to find information which is most often requested. For example, we receive repeated requests for informa-

tion about the information I needed from the site. This was sometimes frustrating. For example, as someone planning to stay in Auroville I wanted to know about guest houses and the location of different places. However, the Auroville map took ages to download and it was impossible to toggle backwards and forwards between the map and guest house information. So now we have snipped the map into small pieces which means the map begins downloading much faster: the user no longer has to sit for hours in front of a blank screen.

Manoj: Last year, when we floated this new version of AVWeb we had over 400 pages. Today there are more than 950! In other words, while we are trying to improve the site technically we have to manage the new information which is pouring in. Even so a lot of information is still missing, like profiles

Questionnaire

Dear reader,

We'd like to get your views on Auroville Today and how we can improve it. Please take the time to fill in the enclosed questionnaire and then return it to the Auroville Today office at Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India. You can also email us at avtoday@auroville.org.in Many thanks!

- Which topics do you most enjoy reading about in Auroville Today?

- Which topics interest you least?

- Which topics would you like to see covered in Auroville Today which are not covered at present?

- Do you feel Auroville Today should include more articles or references to issues of Indian/global interest?

- Would you welcome more (please tick)
a) humour
b) readers' letters
c) Aurovilians' personal stories?
 - Are you happy with the present format? If not, would you like (please tick)
a) more photos/cartoons
b) colour photographs
c) smaller page size
d) fewer pages
e) more pages
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