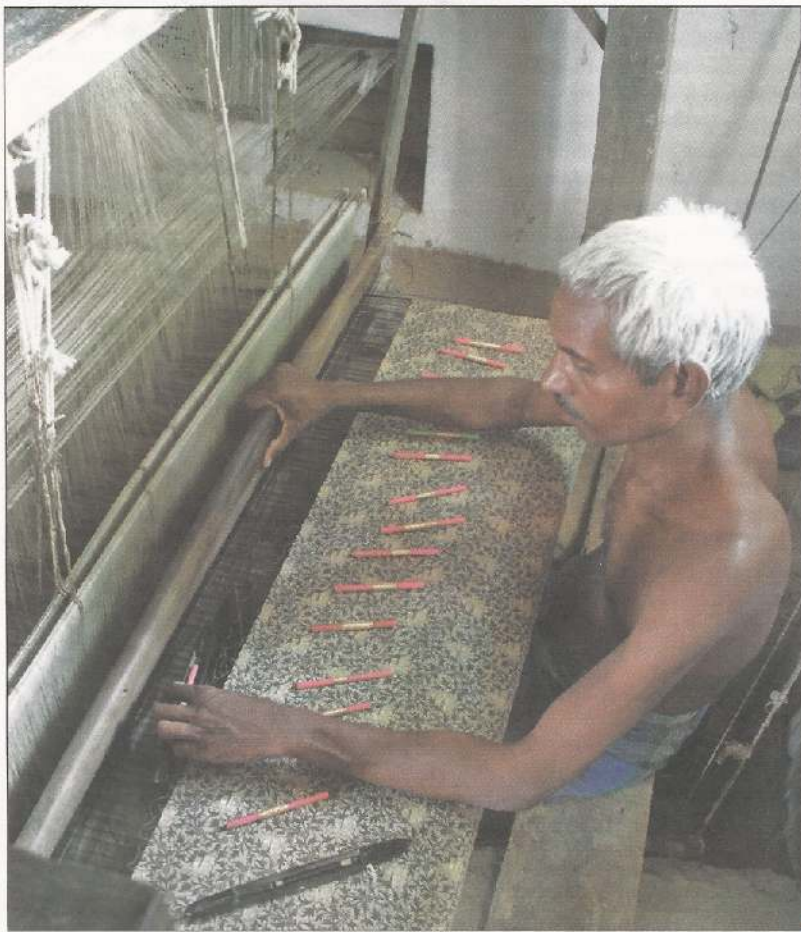


# Auroville Today

JANUARY 2009, No.239

We wish our readers a joyful 2009! Auroville's monthly news magazine since 1988



People helped through Upasana's social and environmental business programmes: clockwise from left: a silk weaver at his loom in a village near Varanasi; winding silk yarn on the traditional charkha; a woman from a local village stitches a 'Small Steps' bag; girls from Varanasi making handmade buttons; a young doll-maker from a fishing village shows off her creations.

## The changing face of Upasana

On October 1st, 2008, Upasana turned eleven. What started as a garment design studio evolved into a company that promotes socially and environmentally conscious business.

By all accounts Uma, the 39-year old executive is passionate: about her being in Auroville, about her dedication to the Divine, and about her work, done in the spirit of karma yoga. Her drive in 1997 started the fashion studio Upasana which provided Aurovilians and others with tailor-made garments using traditional textiles. Years later her fire launched *Tsunamika*; created a gift economy; started an all-India project against plastic pollution; brought Varanasi weavers back to their handlooms; and helped cotton farmers in Tamil Nadu go organic.

Uma is not shy, but takes time to reflect on my questions. "Going within has become a habit," she explains, and adds, a bit mischievously, that many people in Auroville work-out – but that she would rather prefer it if more would 'work-in'. The changes in Upasana, it appears, have all happened after such 'work-ins' – inner explorations done after extensive group consultations. "At Upasana we never try to take decisions impulsively," she says.

### The fashion years

Like all Auroville's units, Upasana started with plenty of good ideas and little money to support them. Back in 1997, the purpose was to set up a unit to present India to Auroville through its textiles. This fitted with Uma's background as a graduate of the National Institute of Fashion Technology. This objective was quickly achieved. Aurovilians and outsiders came to appreciate the personal design touch offered by Upasana and the budding company flourished. After over ten years of existence, employing around 40 people and having an annual turnover of slightly more than a crore rupees, Upasana could afford to pull down the rustic keet-roofed offices that had it had used for so long and move into beautiful new buildings.

But by the beginning of 2004, Uma had lost interest. "I had a strong feeling that I was done with fashion," she recalls. "But when I told my friends, they freaked out. They protested that I would no longer be making their clothes; they could not accept that I was changing. All-in-all, the respons-

es were rather nasty. I lost a couple of friends because of this."

The other option wasn't exactly waiting around the corner. The change came gradually, brought about by many events. "It was a strenuous year," says Uma. "Somebody had burnt down our keet house and my partner Manoj and I lost most of our possessions. I was a member of the Working Committee, which is a very challenging job, particularly if you don't have a roof over your head. Going through all that massive amount of extra work almost broke me."

The turning-point came shortly after December 26, 2004, when the tsunami hit. Like many Aurovilians, Uma and other members of Upasana visited the tsunami victims. "We wanted to do something for those who had lost so much. We wanted to help them regain their self-confidence," she says. The Upasana team came up with the idea of letting the fisherwomen make small dolls out of waste fabric from Upasana's garment production – a doll that had been created in 2002 by one of Upasana interns, Prema Viswanathan. This heralded the birth of *Tsunamika* – a symbol of hope and rejuvenation.

### Tsunamika dolls



The fisherwomen, about 200 initially, took to the idea enthusiastically. Then they asked 'amma, can we make some money out of this?' "We couldn't immediately answer," recalls Uma. "We asked them how much money they were thinking of. 'Rs 1,000 a month' was the humble answer. We thought that if 200 ladies can nurture a modest dream of Rs 1,000 a month, we should find the means to manifest that! For *Tsunamika* had been created as a symbol of hope.

"But we had no idea where the money would come from. We wrote a project for Auroville's Tsunami Relief organisation. We also decided to help the fisherwomen from our own resources if we would not find an external donor. At worst, we would have lost Rs 24 lakhs that year." Was it reckless? "Yes, from a conservative angle, it certainly was. But we were inspired," says Uma.

The donor was found. *Concern Worldwide* responded positively and funded the project. However, within a year, *Tsunamika* had become self-sustaining.

### The gift economy

"Money," says Uma, "had been an issue in Upasana for a long time. During the first four years of Upasana's existence, we often agonised over where the *sambalam* (salaries) would come from. One day, I complained to The Mother that it was not worthwhile to run a business for the sole purpose of making money to survive or to help Auroville grow. Not that we weren't happy making donations to Auroville – we always gave what we could based on an internal feeling and we always gave more than the regulation 33% of the profits' – but we felt it couldn't be the prime motivation of Upasana. We were looking for something else."

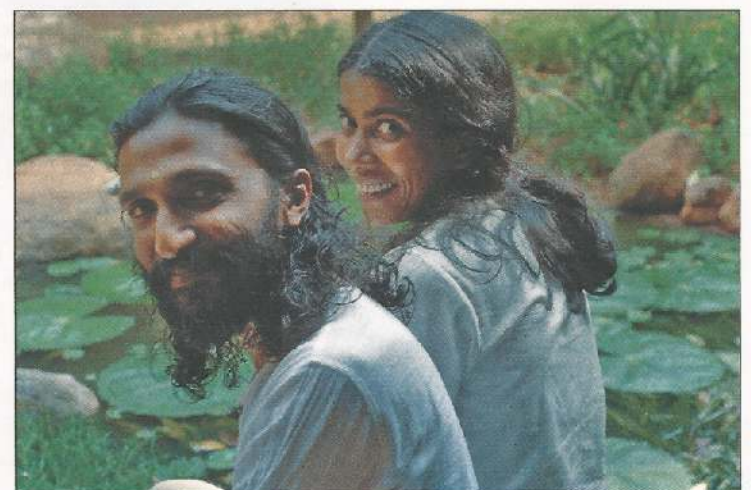
The answer came when the Upasana team started to contemplate what to do with all the *Tsunamikas*. Did they have a commercial

value? Should they have a commercial value? "The decision to distribute *Tsunamika* free came in an inspired moment," says Uma. "I had given the doll to a customer, telling her that her name was *Tsunamika*, and that it was made by the survivors of the tsunami. The lady held it to her heart, and I saw that she was crying, saying that it was so beautiful. I shared it with Manoj, my partner. Next day we had a strategy meeting. We had been calculating like crazy what we could sell the doll for – and in the middle of all that mental arithmetic, Manoj suggested that it should be given for free, but that we would suggest to the recipients that they could make a donation if they felt like. It was a very intense moment – the project coordinator said that she refused to be further involved with the project if we would take such potentially self-destructive action. But it was such a powerful moment that it overtook all objective reasoning. The gift economy was born."

continued on page 2



Uma with the Tsunamika family.



Manoj and Uma

• Child protection in the Auroville area  
• Youth Centre: peaceful city  
page 3

• The canyons of Auroville  
• Encouraging paddy production at Annapurna Farm  
pages 4 – 5

• Fertile memories  
• The King's Stag: a review  
• A hyperlink to Human Unity  
pages 6 – 7

• A living being: Alan reflects  
• Tewa, Jivan and children on a wonderful adventure  
page 8



# The changing face of Upasana

continued from page 1

Today, four years after the tsunami, *Tsunamiika* continues to thrive with a production of about 30,000 dolls a month. The gift economy has proven to be successful, and the income of the fisherwomen has increased. Was there ever a tendency to commercialise? Uma grins. "At the request of a client in Delhi, we thought about commercialising *Tsunamiika*. But my team and especially Manoj reacted in horror at the idea of actually selling any of them! And that was the end of it."

## The Small Steps project



The Small Steps foldable cloth bag.

If *Tsunamiika* was a socially-responsible venture into the unknown, the 'Small Steps Project' was environmentally-motivated. "We became increasingly concerned about the pollution from plastic bags," says Uma. "Every shop offers you a plastic carrier bag which is thrown away after one use and then litters the roadsides. It is a problem all over India. On Earth Day 2006 we launched the foldable cloth bag, a 'small step' to address the problem. At the same time we began a campaign to handle plastic consciously." The project also creates 200 jobs for the women from the villages, and the number is growing every month.

The 'gift economy' concept also served as the basis of the *Small Steps* project. Says Uma, "Money is not the issue. The issue is about creating awareness about the environment and it is about seeing our connection with the greater whole". *Upasana* gives the bags for free to school children and to those who ask for it.

Not everybody in *Upasana* was happy with these changes. Their chartered accountant, for example, asked one day if *Upasana* was doing business or was becoming an NGO. For the approach had shifted completely. "That year," says Uma, "we went through a massive crisis, not knowing if we would break even or break down. But the socially- and environmentally-responsibility chapters that had opened before us were so engrossing that we simply couldn't stop."

*Small Steps* is now gradually reaching out – the Environment Minister of the Government of New Delhi recently invited *Upasana* to discuss the modalities of producing the bags in New Delhi.

## The coming of Bestseller

*Tsunamiika* got an unexpected boost when it became part of the 2006 New Year's gift for the 13,000 employees of the Danish company *Bestseller*. This multinational fashion retailer has a chain of 2,000 outlets in about 40 countries around the world. They had decided that their New Year gift should consist of items or materials which, in the course of their fabrication, would provide employment opportunities for impoverished people in the tsunami-hit areas.

## Bestseller and its policies

*Bestseller* believes in taking responsibility for the people who manufacture its products in more than 900 companies all over the world. With a strict Code of Conduct, *Bestseller* demands that its suppliers ensure that all their employees work in healthy and safe environments, and that they are treated with fairness and respect. Child labour is banned, and instead suppliers are encouraged to help the children of their employees get a decent education. *Bestseller* is also environmentally-consciousness. It demands that all the products it sells are produced in accordance with stringent environmental and ethical standards. Its 'List of Chemical Restrictions' specifies the substances that cannot be used in the manufacturing process of its products due to their harmful effect on humans or the environment. Adherence to *Bestseller's* strict policies is ensured through random audits by its inspectors, and through regular chemical analysis of the products.

Could *Upasana* take up the responsibility? "We did," says Uma. "We identified some other products made by affected people, which included products made by a leper's community near Pondicherry, and made a DVD on the background of the various products." Packed in banana-fibre boxes, 54,000 *tsunamiikas* and other products were shipped to *Bestseller*. The response was enthusiastic.

The New Year's gift was followed by an invitation to visit *Bestseller* in Denmark. "By the time we reached Denmark, the crisis situation of the weavers in Varanasi (Benares) had hit the media," says Uma. "Varanasi is known for its exquisite silk *sarees*. But changing taste, work-culture and the very high costs had made the traditional Varanasi *saree* an elite possession. Cheap imitations from China had hit the markets and thousands of weavers were out of jobs."

*Bestseller* asked if *Upasana* could take responsibility for their New Year's gift for 2007, which would consist of 13,000 silk shawls woven in the traditional Benares style, together with a DVD and a brochure about the project. "We accepted, not realizing what we were going into," says Uma. "And we certainly had not anticipated the work once this order was over."

## Varanasi

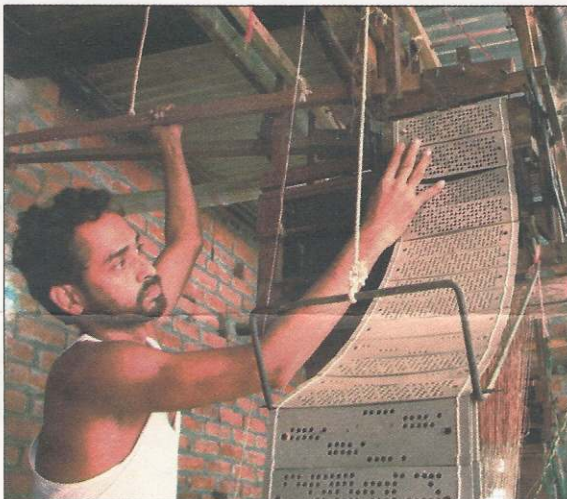
The problems started when *Upasana* demanded that the shawls be supplied within 90 days. "They said 'forget it, we need five years!'" Me being a woman did not make it easy. I was the project leader but couldn't raise my voice; that would immediately have stopped all communication. I sent them a cheque of Rs 5 lakhs to

person who had done the survey in that village broke down and asked never to be sent back to witness that misery.

"I asked Mother to tell me what to do, or I would not return home. I needed clarity. Why were we in Auroville asked to do something about a village more than 2,500 kilometres away? There must be people in India who are better qualified. There must be other villages in India that are in similar hopeless positions."

"I was pondering the question sitting at one of the ghats of Varanasi, when I remembered that some time earlier in Pondicherry an Ashramite had shown me a photo of the chair of the Mother, decorated in Benares silk. Was this an indication that She wanted me to do something about these weavers? Then I got a call from another Ashramite who said 'Be like a warrior! If She wants you to be there, be there!'"

She decided to act. With financial assistance from *Bestseller*, the weavers of that village and two others were given orders for a thousand metres of machine-washable, colour-fast Benares silk. A few designers from New Delhi were told to urgently provide some modern designs. And to the horror of some good-natured advisers, *Upasana* paid the weavers advances to get their looms up and running. "They warned us, saying that the weavers could not be trusted and would use the money for food instead of producing silk. We were stunned. Should they then go hungry? But our amazement at this response was nothing compared to the weavers' amazement at our interest in them. There was a lot of mistrust, which only disappeared after about 3 months of working together."



From left: A Varanasi weaver installing the jacquard punch cards on his loom; the women are involved in creating the fine and intricately-embroidered buttons and accessories out of silk brocade.



show that we were serious. It worked." With the help of a few production coordination teams, the project was successfully completed with a delay of two weeks.

What *Upasana* had not been aware of was the way in which the Varanasi weavers operate. "They work in a very hierarchical system. We could deal only with the person at the top, who in turn dealt with a group of others, and each of them again dealt with others – in all, there were five layers of people involved. We never got access to the lowest level, the weavers themselves! And there was an incredible amount of exploitation going on at every level," says Uma.

When *Bestseller* asked afterwards about their experience, *Upasana* explained that they were disturbed about the processes which they had not been able to control. "We didn't know what exactly had happened with the money and how much had finally reached the weavers. We didn't even know how many weaver families had benefited from the project. The full 700 or less?"

*Upasana* persuaded *Bestseller* to fund a project. "We proposed that students from a design institute in New Delhi would interview about 1,000 weavers in Varanasi." *Bestseller* agreed. The analysis brought a lot of knowledge – not only about the situation in Varanasi itself, but more importantly, about the plight of the weavers who are living in the 300 villages around Varanasi. The weavers in Varanasi city don't have it easy, but they could survive. Those in the surrounding villages were starving.

## Misery in the villages

"I received a call to come and visit a particular village," says Uma, "Their weavers were unemployed and were hiring themselves out as day-labourers in Varanasi. Their children often went hungry. One woman asked me for a job where she could make Rs 10 a day. That completely hit me. After 60 years of independence, a woman has a dream of earning Rs 10 a day and that too is just a dream?! That was very hard. The

## A journey into the world of cotton



*Cotton – a journey into the world of cotton, the fabric of life*, published by *Upasana Design Studio*, is exquisitely laid-out with captivating images. The book talks about the history of cotton, how it inspired human creativity all over the world, how it was used by Mahatma Gandhi in India's freedom struggle movement, and how today chemically-intensive cotton cultivation, grown with pesticides, insecticides, and fertilizers, is harming the environment to an unimaginable extent and driving cotton farmers to suicide. The message of the book is clear – "go organic".

ultimately take over. We estimate that it will take another two to three years before *Upasana* can quit and they are self-sustainable." As for the lady with the Rs 10 dream, she and 90 others have found employment making Benares buttons and accessories.

## The plight of the cotton farmers

For the 2009 New Year's gift, *Bestseller* and *Upasana* decided to work on the theme of cotton. This was because for the past two years, the Indian media have been reporting a spate of suicides by Indian cotton farmers, whose cotton can no longer compete in world markets. In the wake of these suicides, penniless widows and school drop-outs try to survive, while loan sharks exploit the vulnerable groups.

The New Year's gift consisted of a scarf, made of naturally-dyed organic cotton, together with a book that explains the history of this fibre and its importance in the world. The organically-grown cotton was hand-dyed with natural dyes at Auroville's *The Colours of Nature* [see *Auroville Today* issue # 235], and finished into scarves at cottage-looms in Erode.

The project coincides with a new development at *Upasana*, which is to take an active interest in Indian *khadi* products. *Khadi* is Indian hand-spun and hand-woven cloth. The raw materials may be cotton, silk, or wool, which are spun into threads on a spinning wheel called a *charkha*. Mahatma Gandhi elevated *khadi* to a symbol of strength and self-sufficiency in the Indian freedom struggle. To this day, many politicians in India are seen wearing *khadi*, and the flag of India is only allowed to be made from this material.

"We are interested in organic cotton *khadi*, not only because it is widely accepted in fashion circles but also because we want to improve the fate of the cotton farmers," says Uma. "In the coming years we'll concentrate on helping a group of cotton farmers to go organic. But this project is still in an early phase."

## Evaluating the past

Looking back, Uma says that the biggest breakthrough has been the realisation that a small company like *Upasana* can launch all by itself socially- and environmentally-responsible projects without guaranteed funding. Sheer passion and conviction are sufficient. "We have to drop the fear of not having enough money," says Uma. Is that the secret to her work? She smiles. "That and the Grace of the Divine and being in Auroville."

Carel



Scarves made for *Bestseller* from organically-grown and naturally-dyed cotton.



# Child protection in the Auroville area

November 19th is 'The Prevention of Child Abuse' day. On that day in Auroville, a newly-formed group informed the community about an issue that is often ignored in India, that of child abuse.

**"I**t's shocking. I wasn't aware that child abuse is such a widespread problem in India and that such a large number of children are affected." This was one of the comments from a group of 12 Tamil Aurovilians who attended a two-day workshop on child abuse in August this year. The workshop was given by the Chennai-based organisation *Tulir - Centre for Prevention and Healing of Child Sexual Abuse*.

## Child sexual abuse in India

Extensive data on the prevalence of child sexual abuse (CSA) in India is not available. However, some major research studies done in this field present the following results:

- ◆ In a survey of 350 schoolgirls in New Delhi by Sakshi (an NGO) in 1997, 63% had experienced sexual abuse by family members; and 25% of the girls had been severely abused.
- ◆ Another 1997 study on middle and upper class women from Chennai, Mumbai, Kolkata, Delhi and Goa by RAHI revealed that 76% of respondents had been sexually abused as children, with 71% having been abused either by relatives or by someone they knew and trusted.
- ◆ Samvada's 1996 study on students in Bangalore stated that 47% of the respondents had been sexually abused with 62% having been raped once and 38% having been repeatedly violated.
- ◆ *Tulir's* study in 2006, conducted among 2211 school going children in Chennai, indicates a CSA prevalence rate of 42%. Children of all socio-economic groups were found to be equally vulnerable. While 48% of boys reported having been abused, the prevalence rate among girls was 39%; 15% of boys and girls had been severely abused.

From the Tulir website: <http://www.tulircphcsa.org/faq.htm>

"We didn't know that abuse occurs in all social and economic classes of society. It was awful to hear that children – both girls and boys – are most often abused by people they trust, such as family relatives, neighbours and teachers!" said another of the group members. "For here in India nobody ever talks about sex, let alone sexual abuse."

The group was taught about the inappropriate behaviour patterns that can be indicative of abusers. They learned how to recognise the physical and psychological signs of abused children. Through case studies they were shown some common long-term effects of child abuse. Most importantly, they were taught how to keep children safe from offenders. And finally, the group was stimulated to take an active role in preventing child sexual abuse in the Auroville area as a whole.

Back in Auroville, a series of meetings followed with a large group of interested people. The group decided to widen their focus to child protection in general. The first and most challenging task would be education and awareness-raising on issues relating to children's rights and to the many forms of child abuse. A second task is establishing mechanisms for reporting and responding to cases of

## It takes a Community to Protect a Child



A poster distributed by Tulir

abuse. Lastly, in cooperation with local authorities and other interested parties, a child protection policy will be developed. It will outline common principles, Auroville's values and beliefs, and will describe the steps to be taken to protect children. Also a medical and legal counselling network will need to be set up, and educational materials designed and distributed.

Members of the newly-formed Child Protection Services team have outlined an initial programme. They will organize workshops for teachers, parents and children conducted by professionals. Education and awareness-building will also be pursued through distributing materials that are age- and culturally-appropriate.

"It is an enormous challenge," said one of the team members, "particularly in a society where child abuse is still a taboo topic and chil-

dren's rights are hardly recognized. Moreover, support mechanisms are not in place and there is not much help from the Indian laws as they do not provide enough protection for children who are victims of abuse."

Carel

For more info contact [cps@auroville.org.in](mailto:cps@auroville.org.in)

## What is child abuse?

Child abuse or maltreatment constitutes all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power.

## YOUTH

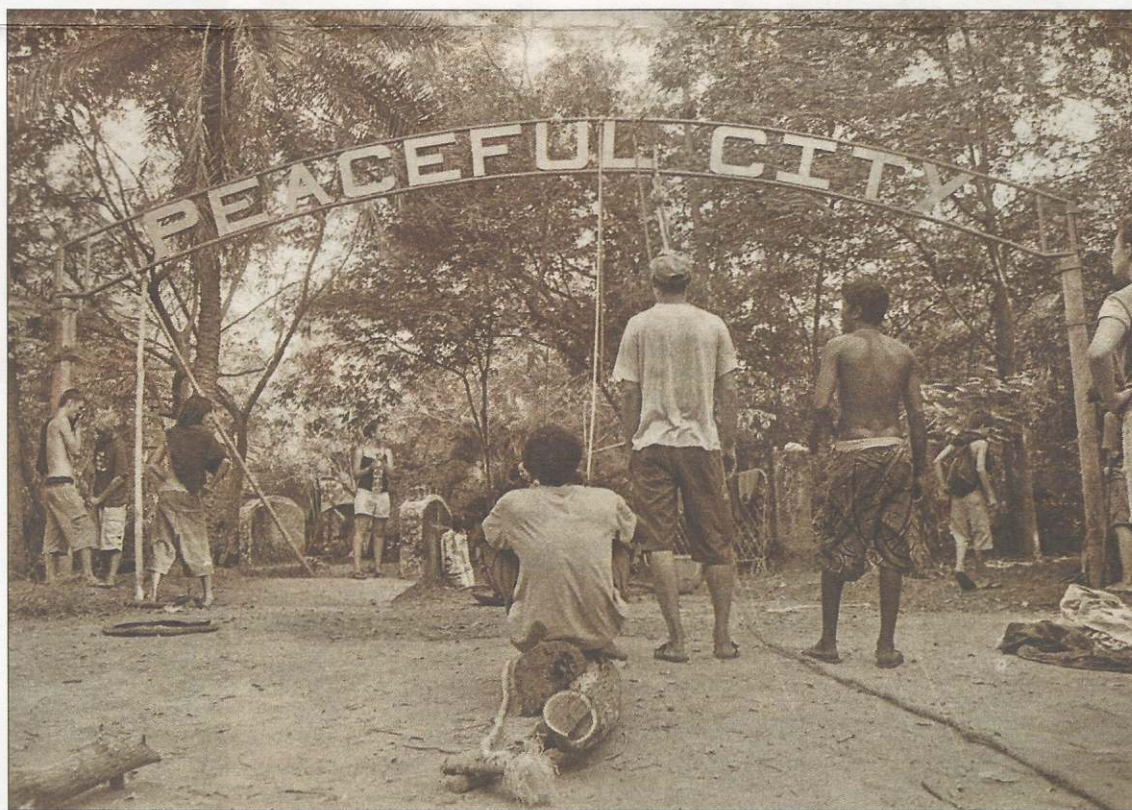
**Y**ou find the Auroville Youth Centre near Transition School. It is grandly announced by a magnificent curvy sign over the entrance gate saying 'Peaceful City'. "Putting this sign up was a landmark for the Youth Centre," says Nikolai, who with his Auroville-born partner, Ancolie, now spends most of his time here. "The sign had been hanging around for ages and then one day we decided to renovate and paint it and about 20 of us heaved it up – it is metal and extremely heavy. I feel it has given us a special identity."

It has also given Nikolai a sense of identity and purpose. "If I had not become involved with this amazing place, I might not have remained in Auroville. I was becoming very disillusioned with all the groups and bureaucracy here but I feel this place, the Youth Centre, is closer to Mother's dream than anywhere else. This is a place where the young people – and that means anyone young in spirit – I can still live and work and experiment in the way they want. I feel it is a sacred space for future generations to discover their own ways of working and not to be dependent on the previous generation's ideas of how everything should be. It is the one space where young people can come together and make their own decisions and take their own actions. In the last 12 years of its existence its progress has been slow, but that is irrelevant. What matters is that we work with no hired labour except for a cleaner who cleans the communal spaces. All work is done by young people on the basis of self determination.

"We have accommodation for four people here with our two tree houses and two keet huts. People come and go and this is fine with us as we want to create an atmosphere of freedom and welcoming for young people."

Ancolie admits that she is happy there is someone to help with the cleaning as often a huge mess accumulates. "It can be difficult trying to live with the hopes and expectations we have of this place," she explained, "But most of the time it does work, and if it doesn't, we try to discuss things with

## Youth Centre: Peaceful City



Auroville youth erecting the Peaceful City arch.

the people involved. There is an awful lot of work to be done. Right now there is wood everywhere as lots of our trees came down in the recent cyclone". Uprooted trees and heaps of logs are scattered in piles, sticks and leaves are in every corner and the job of clearing looks enormous.

A big yellow bus parked under the trees catches my eye. "That is our recent arrival," says Ancolie. "It has been hidden away for years in various places and now we have given it a good home. We think it is one of the Magic Buses that brought the early pioneer Aurovilians here in the 70's. Eventually we hope to make it into a cafe, but that is in the far future"

They have a lot of projects and dreams. "We would like to make a good size vegetable garden, but again that will take a lot of time and energy. Taranti from Transition School has

brought her class here and they have made a vegetable garden so that has got us started. We would like to involve more of the school kids. Like everywhere in Auroville, we need more people. Maybe parents warn their kids about us, or maybe the youth are too busy studying for their exams or going to Kodaikanal School, but we don't have enough people, especially committed young people. This is a very hands-on, vocational place, and not for everyone. We need committed regulars. We have a large area of indigenous forest of which we are the stewards and it eats up our energy. We planted about 400 trees over the last six weeks and it was a successful project for us. About 20 volunteers came and we had a great time. Another ongoing project is the cycle/walking path that goes from the Youth Centre towards Kalabbumi, about 250 metres away. It was a huge

job as we had to literally hack through the forest. The path meanders through the forest and already has a big wooden bench for walkers and joggers to rest on. Eventually we would like to invite Aurovillian artists to make it into a sculpture path.

Nikolai points to a tree house precariously balancing high up in a fragile-looking tree. "The storm damaged it, which is a pity. It would be nice to see more experimental tree houses here which would provide exciting low-cost accommodation. The Youth Centre is the perfect place to experiment with things like this.

"Our Saturday pizza nights are popular and many outside people turn up. Our regular team of twelve take turns to run it and others come and go. Tuesday nights are *dosai* nights and are more like a family dinner but are also open for all. Jesse's Theatre

*Improvisation Nights* bring together a group of youth. We usually have a Christmas fair but this year we are focusing on clearing up all the wood from the storm.

Ilango, the 'tree-care person' joins us and we sit at, and he sits on, a giant mosaic round table, part of the Youth Centre's eclectic furniture. He has been involved for two years now and says he really enjoys being part of the team and taking care of the trees.

"When the Auroville Foundation's sign post went up on the road outside, we had 40 visitors in an afternoon," continues Nikolai. "We have now put a notice on the gate asking people to e-mail and make an appointment if they want to see us. We also get a lot of visiting architects. This raises another typical Aurovillian problem of how much we open to the outside world and how much we maintain a community.

"Ah, the noise problem," says Nikolai. "I was wondering when we were going to talk about that. This is a universal generational problem. Young people love loud music, many older people don't. We try to only 'make a noise' once a month but sometimes things happen spontaneously and the 'noise' just happens. We were donated a big sound system that pounded out the bass but we have now got a smaller one, so things should improve. We are hoping to construct a soundproof semi-underground dome for music and dancing but that would be a big project. If we have uninvited guests, we turn off the music and they drift away. If there are any problems the Auroville security men are just up the road and we can call them.

"We desperately need people with vocational skills – carpentry, electrical, building – to lend a hand here; and also to teach us how to do these things. Any volunteers? We also need positive support from the larger community – but without interference – a delicate balancing act. This place is very important to Auroville. It is a place where the kids, and all the future youth, can be free, independent and have fun in their own place. Don't you wish you'd had a place like this when you were young?"

Dianna



# The canyons of Auroville

Many large canyon systems cross Auroville. To prevent erosion and conserve water, check-dams have been built in all of them. But more action is needed to secure the future water supply of the city.

“The sea was like blood,” says Kireet, recalling his first encounter with erosion in Auroville during the monsoon. “It was my second visit and I was staying with Mali in *Utility*. The canyons were like rivers, sweeping tons of red topsoil into the sea. It flashed through me that there should be a dam in the canyon.” The year was 1975. It would take Kireet another two decades before he came to live in Auroville.

“Like everybody else, I used the first years for finding a place. Soon afterwards, I built my house, which also became a guesthouse and created a garden (*Gaia's Garden*). At the same time, I was working in the Matrimandir nursery and gardens, pruning trees and clearing the outer garden area, as well as at *Shakti* nursery collecting seeds.

“Then it was time to do something else. I remembered my second visit, and started helping Michael from *Samriddhi* to repair the old check-dams that the Government had constructed. They were all in a very bad shape. Michael taught me the ropes and I also learned a few essentials from Jaap. That was a very valuable educational experience – learning by repairing badly designed check-dams.”

into the lakes and *yeris* (small lakes) north of Auroville,” says Kireet. “A major first one begins by the community of *Sukhavati* and finally reaches the big canyon in *Utility*. The second system starts by the *Samasti* community watershed and finally empties into the Kuyilapalayam tank. But the water does not stop there; it spills over the back towards *Aspiration*, travels past *La Ferme*, and goes towards *Quiet Healing Centre* and empties into the sea. A third canyon, a small one, is in the *Auromodèle* area. There is not much overflow here, and the water usually percolates.”

Does he know how the canyons originated? “Human activity, particularly the felling of trees, has caused erosion. The Auroville plateau is situated 52 metres above sea level, so we have here a classic watershed. When the rains came, the water ran down in all directions, etching gullies into the naked landscape. Gradually the gullies became a series of canyons clawing through the Auroville area.”

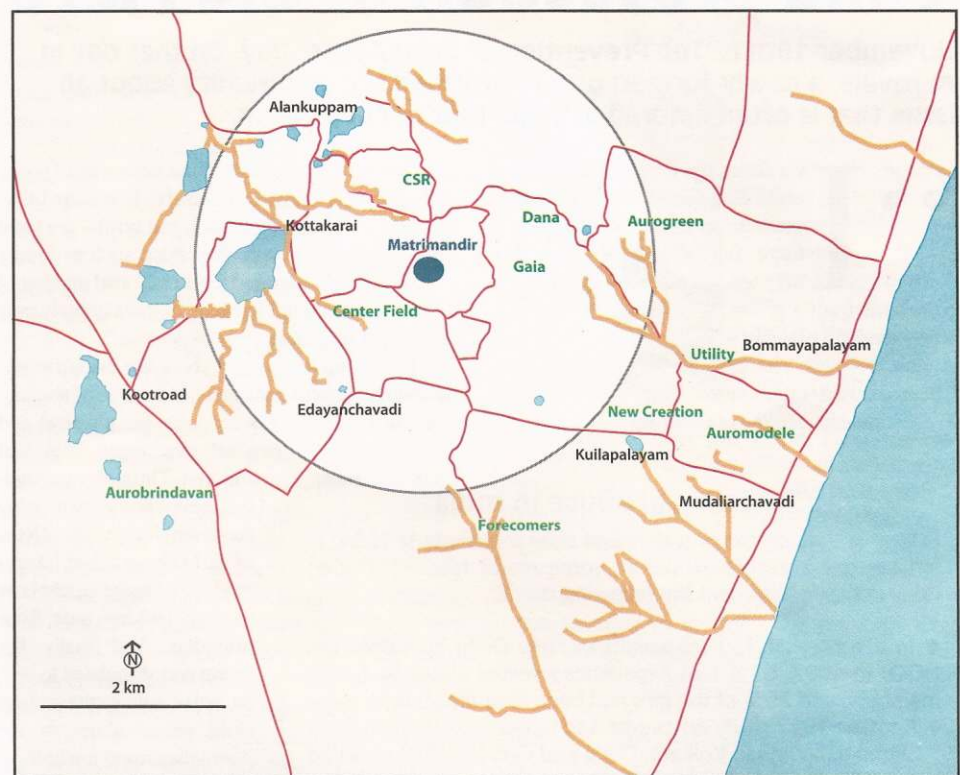
## The importance of the check-dams

Kireet has worked on over 60 check-dams. Their importance cannot be overestimated. “It is not only a question of preventing soil erosion,” he says. “A main issue nowadays is preventing sea

water intrusion into the aquifer, as the water extraction in the Auroville area far exceeds the recharge.” Over recent years, Auroville’s water monitoring agency, *Harvest*, has recorded a steady drop in the water table over almost all of Auroville. “This is largely due to over-extraction for agricultural use,” says Kireet. “Specialists have warned that salt water intrusion into the groundwater will happen in the entire Auroville area, starting with the coastal communities. This will be a disaster. The check-dams will hopefully postpone that moment.”

In the *Utility* canyon alone, there are about 40 basins and 30 check-dams. Are they all safe? On more than one occasion Kireet was out in the pouring rains at 2 a.m., checking the canyon with a torch to see if the dams were holding. “When you have rains like we just had with cyclone Nisha, I was tense. During the last night of the storm, it was raining torrentially, and every check-dam started overflowing. I had never experienced that before. But when the rain stopped in the early morning, the water percolated very fast. One basin of 15,000 cubic metres was empty in three days!” Kireet rejoiced. “Each year after the rains, I look to see where the water is overflowing, and raise the check-dams there by half a metre or more. In this way we have stopped water from overflowing in normal circumstances.” Kireet

believes that the improved percolation is caused by the trees and bushes planted inside the canyons.



Map of the canyons systems of Auroville.

believes that the improved percolation is caused by the trees and bushes planted inside the canyons.

A few years ago, the Working Committee sent an official letter to the village *Panchayats* and the Collector of the district warning of the danger of villagers constructing houses in the canyon, and stating that Auroville cannot be held responsible if an unusually heavy rain breaches a dam. Notwithstanding the warning, new plots are being marked up.

“Nothing is as good as the roots of plants, even grasses, in opening up the soil and making the earth into one big sponge,” he says. “This year the water level in the basins went down on an average by about 30 centimetres a day.”

Kireet thinks that cyclones such as the last one might become more frequent in the years to come. “The weather everywhere is changing, and Auroville too will be affected. We will certainly see more of these heavy and unseasonable rains. Having these check-dams makes a lot of sense.” Are any more required? “No, on the east side of Auroville, the work is over. What we now need to do is to raise the water-table on the west side of Auroville. For that would directly benefit the water supply of Auroville.”

## The west side story

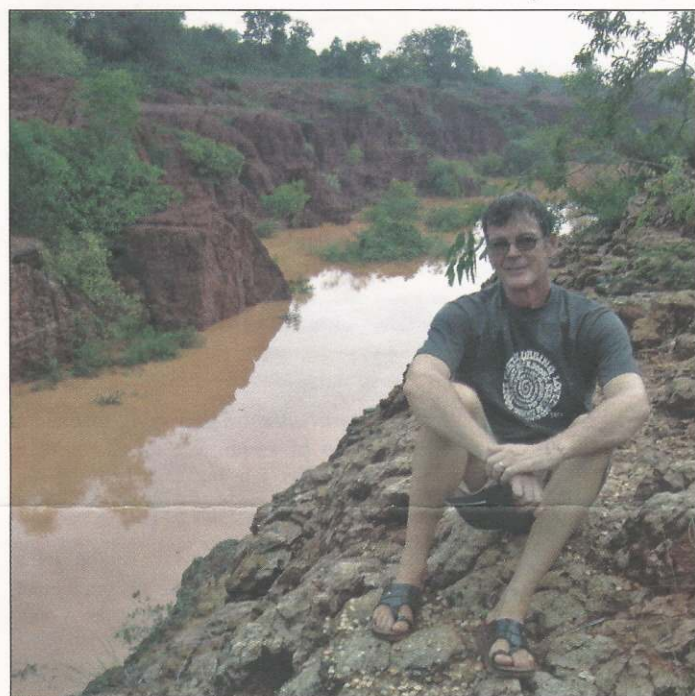
About 10 kilometres north-west of Auroville one finds the forest communities of *Aranya* and *Sadhana Forest*. “Here we have an exception to the dropping water tables,” says Kireet. “In this area there has been a steady rise. And that’s of prime importance for Auroville’s future water supply.”

The soil in this area is white clay, which is not porous. Percolation happens very slowly. This area has quite a few natural ponds, *yeris*, and small lakes. For the past four years, Kireet has been helping Aviram, the caretaker of *Sadhana Forest*, to build bunds, dikes and spillways to harvest rainwater. This year, a wide lake with a capacity of about 25,000 cubic metres has been created using earth-moving machinery. “We had a strict deadline,” says Kireet. “The work had to be completed before the coming of the winter monsoon.” Cyclone Nisha hit, and the lake was full. “It’s a huge success,” says Kireet.

In order to ensure the water for the future city,

Kireet believes that the entire area from *Aranya* to *Aurobrindavan*, including *Sadhana Forest*, needs to be declared a sanctuary with the main purpose of harvesting rainwater. “In my country The Netherlands, certain areas have been protected for water harvesting,” he says. “The quality of water is closely monitored and controlled, and the areas have become nature parks. We should do likewise in this area. If the sanctuary could consist of 200 or 300 acres, joining up Auroville land with that of some other owners, such as the Sri Aurobindo Ashram which own large tracts of land in that area, the effort can be successful. This is the only solution I see to the looming water crisis that will affect all of us in future.”

Priya Sundaravalli



Kireet next to *Utility* canyon.

That first year, Kireet repaired nine old dams and built one new one. Since then, he has built so many that he became known as ‘Check-dam Kireet’. “A major challenge was finding the money – we got some grants from abroad,” he says. “Another problem was purely technical – how to make big check-dams – and here I was lucky to get advice from Dutch engineers who were staying at my guest house. They had come to advise the Government of Pondicherry on doing tank rehabilitation work.”

## The Auroville canyons

“There are three canyon systems leading to the Bay of Bengal, while a few canyons empty



An over-flowing check-dam in the *Utility* canyon in the aftermath of Cyclone Nisha.



Scenes from *Sadhana Forest*. From top down: landscaping to create a man-made lake; a full lake following cyclone Nisha; mud-bathing in the clayey waters of a pond in summer time.



# Encouraging paddy production

**Annapurna Farm is slowly increasing its production of organic rice and cereals. Investments are needed to safeguard future rice production.**



Freshly-planted rice fields at Annapurna.

“Cyclone? What cyclone?” Tomas and André flash identical grins. Cyclone Nisha, which in November wrought havoc in Tamil Nadu, caused no problems in *Annapurna Farm*. “We didn’t notice a thing,” says André cheerfully. Tomas gets serious and explains that the farm only escaped damage because the paddy is not yet flowering. “The stalks bent with the wind. If the storm had come when the paddy was in bloom, it would have caused a lot of damage,” he says.

It is open day at *Annapurna*. A small group of Aurovilians and newcomers is being shown around by André, who runs the farm together with Tomas and Selvam. The farm’s huge rainwater catchment ponds enjoy pride of place. “Contrary to our neighbours, we irrigate our farm using harvested rainwater,” explains André. “In a year with good monsoons the tanks hold sufficient water for our needs.”

*Annapurna* got itself an electricity connection last year, with a Rs 10 lakhs donation from the Economy Group. “This is good planning,” comments Tomas. “*Annapurna* is Auroville’s largest farm and the community’s main rice producer. But we’ll need more water than we have now for the farm to expand and increase its production. We must also hedge against monsoon failures. The only way to do that is by using groundwater. But the groundwater here is at a depth of 100 metres and electricity is essential for running such a deep bore well.” But aren’t the Auroville farms paying the highest electricity tariff? “No longer,” says André. “With the help of the Auroville Foundation office, Auroville farms are now entitled to free electricity, just like all other farms in Tamil Nadu.”

## The soil

*Annapurna Farm* is located about 10 kilometres outside Auroville on the road to Mailam. It was bought by The Mother before the foundation of Auroville in 1968. For many years the

land was arid and saline. When Tomas came in 1986, his first task was regenerating the lands. The going has been slow due to lack of money and manpower. But today, salinity is less of an issue. “We still have a few bad patches which we’ll regenerate in the coming years,” says Tomas. “But most of our 135 acres are now arable.” Apart from paddy, *Annapurna* also grows cereals such as millets, varagu, sesame, kuduravalli and mustard, and rosella, pigeon beans, cow fodder and green manure.

*Annapurna*’s heavy black soil is very delicate. Tomas explains that it

automatically bring populations back into balance. “In fact, we are doing very little active pest control since we hardly have a problem with pests. Moreover, the costs of doing something about it are usually higher than the yield losses. We believe in the concept that a good soil and a good variety of crops – we usually grow four different rice varieties in one season – will yield good results.”

## Certified organic

Because of its soil treatment and the use of natural fertilizers, *Annapurna*’s agricultural produce are certified ‘organic’. The certification is done by the Indian branch of the Swiss Institute for Marketecology (IMO), one of the most renowned international agencies for inspection, certification and quality assurance of eco-friendly products.

“The IMO control is stringent. We have to maintain records, and we regularly receive inspection visits,” says Tomas. Is it worth the trouble? He nods. “There are a number of advantages. Firstly, it sets a high standard which we want to maintain. Secondly, it shows to the Aurovilians that what we are doing is first class. Thirdly, I can sell my products outside for a better price; and that, in turn, convinces Auroville that our prices are reasonable.”

Unlike its cereals, *Annapurna*’s dairy products are not certified organic. “We can’t grow all our cow feed,” says Tomas. “We do grow a good amount of cow grass, but if you want to get a certain milk production, you have to feed concentrates such as grains which do not grow in our climate, and we haven’t been able to find certified organic feed grains.”

Tomas warns about the milk quality. “People don’t realize what they are drinking. The fact that the IMO hasn’t certified any dairy in South India is a warning all by itself. In addition, there are the dangers of milk pollution due to unhygienic storage, and there is a lot of milk adulteration.” Tomas refers to frequent media reports on crackdowns on those who have adulterated milk – even packaged milk of well-known brands – with water or with products such as sodium bicarbonate, soap powder, starch, buffalo milk or colourants, to increase its density and whiteness. “If Aurovilians want to remain healthy, they should only use Auroville’s dairy products. But many Aurovilians risk their health consuming packaged milk and milk products, or buy milk from the village.”

## Value added products

“Lack of community support has forced us to change our farm economics,” says Tomas. “Earlier we sold what we produced. Nowadays, we sell value-added products. Take milk for example. Selling milk is bad business; it does not fetch the cost price since we treat our animals much better than elsewhere.

## Organic soil improvement

‘Green manuring’ means improving the soil by ploughing-in green field crops. *Annapurna* cultivates a few acres of *Gliricidia* for the purpose. The plant grows into bushes. The branches are cut and brought to the fields. Also ‘pressmud’ (sugar cane waste) is purchased for the same purpose.

*Annapurna Farm* also practices ‘live mulching’. In this system, cover crops are inter-planted with cash crops. The seeds are sown in between the rice with the last irrigation flooding. The cover crop germinates after the rice has been harvested, and provides ground cover throughout the summer. Then it is ploughed-in.

But a value-added product such as cheese gives us a good margin. So we make cheese. The same goes for gomasio. It takes very little work to make gomasio from sesame, but it sells well and gives us the profit we need to run this farm. And people are prepared to pay the extra price.”

Market demand has also forced *Annapurna* to purchase a number of machines. André, who is the farm’s mechanic, points at the de-stoner, which separates stones from paddy. Elsewhere is a machine to thresh the paddy, and another one to mill the rice.

“The Solar Kitchen demands clean rice free of husk. They do not want paddy. We do not want to go to the local rice mill, as experiences haven’t been positive. One Auroville farmer almost lost his crop as the rice he got back from the mill was yellow and stank. Also our certification requires that we control our own milling process. So it’s now being done on our farm.”

much bigger fund to help farmers buy seeds and manure and purchase machinery; that fund should also provide a buffer against crop failures.”

In this respect Tomas mentions that the Government of Tamil Nadu has a policy to compensate individual farmers for crop failures due to bad weather. “But it seems Auroville farms don’t qualify as they are part of an institution, the Auroville Foundation. But this should be pursued. For registration would also entitle the farms to purchase machinery and irrigation systems at subsidized prices.”

## The economics of Auroville’s farms

Tomas acknowledges that Auroville’s farms need to improve if they expect the community to respond to their demands. “Many of the farmers are simply not professional.” Should the farm group be given authority to oversee the farms’ production and efficiency? “This should be discussed,” says Tomas.



A field of ripening varagu.

Other Auroville farms have followed *Annapurna*’s example and are also selling value-added products to break-even. “They need to do that as the risks of farming are almost entirely borne by the farmers,” says Tomas. “But that is not as it should be. There is a very small farmers’ fund which is supported by the Economy Group with a Rs 12,000 a month. But there should be a

“Such a management system is used by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. If the farmer does not respond to the needs, they look for another manager. We need to do a brainstorming session between the farm group and various people with interest and expertise to see about the immediate and long term future. Farm land is valuable, and needs to be well-tended.”

*In conversation with Carel*



Tomas (left) and André

has to be treated carefully. “We must ensure sufficient plant cover, not irrigate too much, and certainly not use chemicals. It responds very favourably to organic treatment. We use green manure, live mulching, crop residues and animal compost. That is the key to our farming here.”

The benefits of this system of soil treatment are numerous: improvement of the soil structure, additional nitrogen and increased soil microbial activity, to name but a few. Tomas adds an additional advantage: serious pest outbreaks are rare, because natural controls exist to



Cheese being aged



A catchment pond at Annapurna after the 2008 monsoon.

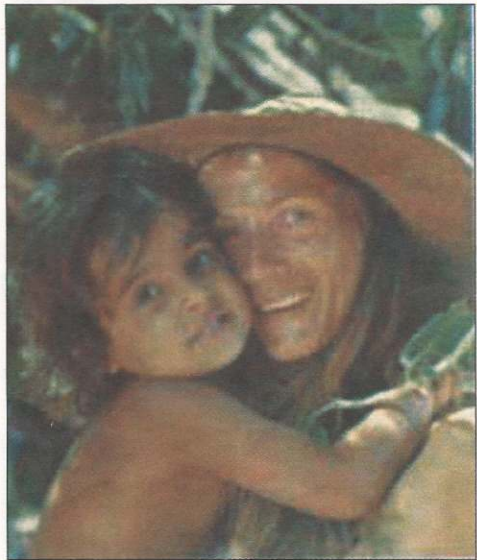


# Fertile memories

Jan Allen, one of Auroville's 'old-timer' residents, looks back at those very first years, and smiles. She remembers life in 'Fertile', a large settlement in the north-eastern part of Auroville's Greenbelt.

I remember so well: it was 1st April 1973 when my little daughter Aurojina and I finally arrived in 'Fertile' – to stay. Having sent our belongings ahead by bullock cart, we made the journey from Pondicherry by cycle. It was a cool morning for April, and as I was fuelled by a sense of new beginnings, the journey was memorable. Jina travelled in a wicker seat on the front of the cycle, and we brought with us a little black kitten that rode calmly in its basket at the rear.

We were to be part of a community of eight which would include Johnny, our son Jonas now six years old, Christianne and Denis, and Rose and Boris. We were representing America, France and Australia, and I felt a loving appreciation of all these individuals who had mysteriously come together in this odd outpost on this desert plateau.



Jan Allen with Aurojina

In those days there was the wide peripheral sweep of the horizon: the sun rose, shone down relentlessly and set, and the moon was obvious in all its phases. Boris had come from Gerard's Orchard where he had been under the influence of Mercier, a fervent exponent of organic gardening from New Caledonia, and he had already acquired the knowledge and skills to create what would become an impressive vegetable garden. Denis was the interface and fundraiser; he knew how to negotiate with the world at large, writing proposals and fine articles about Auroville. Johnny looked after the practical details, eventually installing the pump, involving himself in agriculture, and interacting well with the local villagers. The women's work was all encompassing, as it tends to be. It was my maternal year of surrender – so my energy mainly went into my daughter, Aurojina.

## Halcyon days

In those first months our water was delivered each day by bullock cart from a tank in Aspiration. It was poured into two great barrels and had to be judiciously used. We developed a series of rituals and unspoken rules about this scanty water supply. Our meals were regular and unvarying – ragi and curd for breakfast, rice and dhal for lunch, bread and leftovers for dinner. All meals were interspersed with man-size mugs of steaming tea, or chicory in the evenings. Later there were the seasonal fruits from the young orchard.

We took it in turns to cycle the 15 kilometres into Pondicherry and buy the basics. In those days we were still entitled to 'Prosperity', which would be distributed at the Banyan tree at the Centre each

month by some dignified Ashramites. Through this arrangement we received bed linen, towels, soap, umbrellas always black, and an almirah (small steel cupboard) on a sort of a ration basis. We managed so frugally and yet the days were full and our spirits high. There were the occasional care parcels from home – Johnny referred to them as 'the cargo cult'. How we would delight in their luxurious contents.

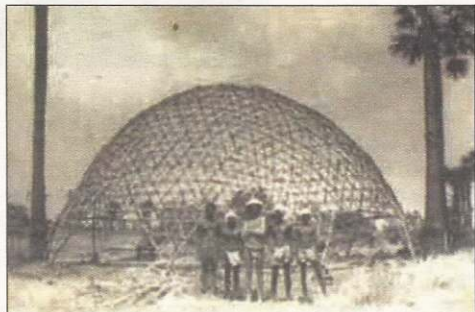
It was the Mother's last year. We were living out her dream cradled in her care, and we trusted in the moment; halcyon days.

Then there were the key moments. One of them was the day the diesel engine began to pump water from the bore well; it flowed through an elaborate system of PVC pipes and into the waiting tanks and on to the thirsty earth. This was something to celebrate. Then there was the first lactation of the cow after the thrilling arrival of the baby calf. And the successful harvesting of a peanut crop and the first bounty from Boris's vegetable garden.

There also were the hardships: the thieves from the village, the endless ever-so-hot days, the bad spacing of the monsoon and the consequent failure of the dry crops, and the occasional inevitable disputes with our neighbouring Aurovilians. There were the interminable run-ins with the villagers over marauding goats and orchard raiders. 'Our' water also had to be shared with an ever-increasing parade of people, especially during the cashew seasons and in the height of summer. It was sometimes difficult to find some peace.

## The first bamboo dome

By now, Johnny began his work with roof-maker Ramu and his men. Together they built the first bamboo dome, and we moved into it as a family. However, despite having paid tribute to all Buckminster Fuller's ideas and utterances for many years, we found it very difficult to live in. There were no cozy corners, no private nooks. Jina, taking her first steps, would hover precariously on the edge of a sunken storage area in the centre. Trying to get settled, we moved our bedding week by week and finally out of the door again and into what we called the Big House near the kitchen.



The bamboo dome

This became our true home for the next ten years. It was a great rambling castle of bamboo, casuarina, *pakamaram* and *keet*, which was constantly added to and subtracted from according to our needs. Meanwhile the dome became a meeting spot and a place where music was performed and where the Auroville children gathered for their games.

In the meantime the project I had drawn up for our besieged forest bore fruit, and money filtered in from the Tamil Fund which enabled us to acquire a fine bullock cart, a water tank, money for growing seedlings and fencing. The forest was now able to expand. We made mistakes. A huge exotic forest was projected, but it wasn't practical or possible. The 'Avenue of Passion', *Spathoda campanulata*, (named 'Passion' by The Mother) was the first to



The Fertile crowd. From left: Rose, Boris, Vijay, Johnny, Jan, and Denis

suffer. They required too many journeys of the vandi with the water tank to keep them erect – one by one they withered. The interspersing of work trees *Acacia auriculiformis*, (named 'Work' by The Mother) saved the day: the indigenous trees could gain foothold in their shade.

A year or so later, with advice from helpful Indian Forestry Department Officers, we began to make forays into local scrub jungles to gather seeds. In a year the seedlings were ready to plant out in the next monsoon. Joss from Pitchandikulam was the overriding inspiration for these adventures.

## Lively education

Auroville was growing apace. There were now older children hungry for information, who often ended up around the circular table at the Fertile kitchen listening to Johnny's marvellous stories. Johnny's patience with children and his inventiveness beguiled so many disciples that a regular school evolved. It began, of course, with our immediate family, which now often included Jesse and Luke, Johnny's sons, who visited regularly from Australia. They brought with them the sophistication of city life and their burgeoning dramatic skills. It was to stimulate these abilities that the first plays were written and performed in Fertile.

The school soon graduated from the old round table to a regular classroom. Our old chicken house was converted, a colourful skylight installed, and the children set about making their own desks from available timber. Over the months there were visiting notables, including Eleanor who was able to make the Second World War come alive from her experience of working on Life Magazine. Prem Malik would occasionally appear with some of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy for junior consumption, and there was even a torrid account of the Vietnam War by a sensitive veteran. Kalya came regularly to teach mathematics and introductory information about computers, and then, for light relief, Judith the Puppeteer would wend her way weekly from the Far Beach. There were soon several amateur magicians...

## Friends and family

Some parents left India and their children stayed with us for a time. Nell had such an avid appetite for mathematics that Johnny would have to hone up his skills to stay a jump ahead of her, and we had to find more books for her insatiable reading lust. Isaac and Jonas inspired the younger ones with their acquired knowledge of constructing traps and their familiarity with the ravines; they also kept diaries that they illustrated, and they filled up many drawing books.

Stefanie, a nine year old German girl, came one day for afternoon tea, nestled into our hearts, and stayed on for six years. Occasionally Llewellyn (Nell and Isaac's father) would arrive with marvellous tales to recount of his adventures on the seas. He was also an authority on the Arthurian legends, and so there were spellbound nights in the big house with the children falling asleep to the stories of knights and their ladies, of their trysts and their battles.

The children at this time were stimulated by simple things and satisfied with their interaction with nature. Perhaps it helped that there were only one or two motorcycles in the whole of Auroville, and there was no television or videos, only the occasional film at Aspiration. It was innocent fun – make believe, wolf games, treasure hunts, making bows and arrows, lots of drawing and painting, dressing-up, riding and maintaining the ponies, which were generally ridden without bridles or saddles. We would spend an hour or so watching the major tragedies of a mynah bird couple, or invading snake, the inquisitive monkey, the mongoose's journey up the palmyra for an attempt on their eggs.

## The unsung heroine

It would have been impossible to cope without dear Aliamma from Pillaichavadi village. She was an inspiration and a delight, a woman of limitless energy and the unsung heroine of those early days. She would arrive punctually at 8 o'clock each morning, a little high on betel nut, and throw herself wholeheartedly into sweeping and cleaning. Her face would light up when there were more for lunch so it was in those days that the open house policy evolved. In low times, with Aliamma's help, we found all sorts of edible wild spinach in the garden and with a magical concoction of spices she prepared delicious meals which became renowned all over Auroville.

It was Aliamma who perfected the dosai with varagu, a sort of hybrid vadai (savoury lentil donut), and her famous version of appalam; she was always ready to experiment. Then there were our Tamilian mainstays, Kadirval from Bommaiarpalalam, Govindraj and Manjini from Pettai, and a series of bullock cart drivers. And dear Moonaswami from Kalapet, with his smooth brown legs and his staff, who for so many years, despite his age, kept a constant vigil in the forest.

So it was a time of innocence and sweetness. Motor traffic was a distant curse. Fertile was a home away from home, a paradise of endless delights and a haven of peace. I am delighted to have been a part of it all.

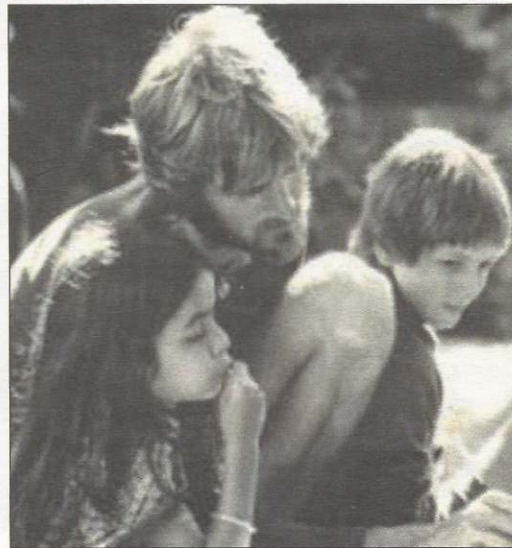
Jan Allen



The kids' table at Fertile



Feasting on palm nungus in summer



Johnny with Jina and Jonas



## The King Stag

An old man enters with a bird-cage calling "Polly, Polly". So far, it's a play that could strike out in any direction. But as soon as multicoloured Polly arrives, careening round the stage on roller-skates, we know we can settle back for an evening of fantasy. For this is Serendip, where the parrot is actually a magician, a plaster head laughs at those who tell lies, and a malevolent minister transports the king into the body of a stag...

Carlo Gozzi's play, *The King Stag*, was written in the 18th century but in many ways it appears modern. The pantomimic characters and exaggerated emotions are familiar to us through slapstick, melodrama and, at one remove, Monty Python, while magical transformations, wicked ministers and love-struck princesses are the stuff of fairy tales the world over. Above all, it's a morality play where evil finally gets its just desserts and true love triumphs.

But morality plays are rarely as much fun as this. Otto is superb as the scheming Prime Minister with the uncontrollable stutter, Charu's Lord Pantaloon is a wonderfully-realized buffoon while Afsaneh's empty-headed flapper, the ambitious butler's daughter, is hilarious in her attempts to curtsy and to seduce the king. In true *Comedia dell'arte* tradition there are colourful costumes and acrobatics, and the play is studded with topical references and artful digs – Sadhana Forest, *Auroville Today* and land exchange all make an appearance, while Lord Pantaloon's son is heavily into hip-hop.

But alongside the rich comic vein runs the straight story of the good king and the true princess. In some ways, these are the hardest parts to pull off, but Ancolie strikes the right note of devotion and, later, shock and repulsion when she senses that the king she loves has become someone else. Jeremy is outstanding as the king. This is the most difficult



The colourful cast

part, for at one point he has to convince us that the king's body has been taken over by the wicked minister. This he does superbly, catching not only the stutter but every physical nuance – the fluttering hands, the jerky movements – of Otto's evil minister. In a similar way, Nikolai very expressively plays an old man within whom, at one point, the king is imprisoned. Perhaps the most moving moment of the play is at the end. The wicked minister has been cursed by the magician and is now imprisoned in the body of the old man As he thrashes around in his death throes, his daughter comes to him. Why? he asks. Because you are my father and I love you, she replies.

Aubert's direction strikes exactly the right balance between lightness and seriousness and he hardly ever lets the pace flag – at two hours that's an achievement in itself. As for that perennial question, what's the relevance of this to Auroville? Well, I guess we can mine the play and come up with answers like, "It's the triumph of truth over falsehood", or "It is the mind and consciousness, not the outer being which makes the man" (this is actually a quote from the play), but it all seems heavy-handed and, somehow, unnecessary to attempt to justify it like this.

Let's just say a good time was had by all. Which, surely, is achievement enough.

Alan

## COMMUNICATION

## A Hyperlink to Human Unity

An editor of *Auroville Today* used the web to reach around the earth with a virtual promise of chocolate in exchange for "an introduction to the web". It was an offer I could not refuse. Since you are really reading these words many times digitalized, many times launched into cyberspace, and finally "translated" as the print before you: welcome to the web. Your life and mine are more entangled in this Internet than anyone could ever have imagined, suspected, or believed.

### Goodwill makes it work

The irony in how our web came to be does hint at the transcendent smile that seems to lurk in evolution. We have come a long way from Darwin. Today everybody uses the web including police, terrorists, gurus, and my god-child. As most everybody knows, the information superhighway blankets the planet and pops up at the push of a button anytime, anywhere, by anybody with a connection. Such a prodigious amount of data is available that it can't even be estimated. The limits for communication, business, science, education, the arts and everything else known, are also beyond the beyond. No one is in charge. Yes, the Internet runs on goodwill. And, a child could destroy it.

### Divinet

Yesterday I was reminded by my first Auroville connection, June Maher, that I had stood up in one of those classic Auroville meetings held in a big tent at the Center. She said I had called for the future. The agenda, as usual, was to chart the course for the future. This was almost two decades ago and I don't remember what I said, but June did. She says I responded to the negativity being expressed about the value of the Internet and I called it the "divinet" and said we needed it. What I do remember was writing an introduction about Auroville for the home page of our first website. That's all I did, then the Auroville website blossomed through countless rebirths until it became what it is today. Auroville itself constantly sprouts new websites even a virtual University of

Human Unity "for a living embodiment of an actual human unity".

### One Self in all

Relativity and quantum mechanics demonstrate that what we call the physical is not as it appears. Buddha and others just call it an "illusion". They all say "vibrating energy" is all that there really is. Then they add how time is not fixed or definite in any meaningful way. Current science keeps verifying the ancient stuff; so let's hope it finally gets through to all of us. We are all connected. For those who have read the work of Sri Aurobindo, you may remember how he nicely (writing in the third person) explains "the one aim of his yoga is an inner self-development... [to] discover the One Self in all... which will transform and divinize human nature."

### From Fear to Gratitude

In the early 1960s, a number of groups wanted to find a way that a message that couldn't get through on one line wanted to keep searching and switching to every possible route in a network until it got through. So these "words" got to Auroville over an unpredictable route around the planet, at near the speed of light, finding the "openings" through a maze of computers. They were not words, of course, but strings of binary pulses: vibrating energy. I paid nothing to send them as I use a "guest of the city" wifi net. My laptop is wireless. I can also phone as well as receive live video to and from anywhere on the planet. Everyday I am amazed, and grateful.

### What happened in 1968?

The first computer network actually began in early 1968 in the "let's do this and find out what happens" spirit of science. The task to make it all work was given to a group of graduate students at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). While they waited for experts/authorities who never showed up, they developed RFCs (requests for comments). This was a way for people to make proposals that could be commented on by others so ideas could evolve as a community effort. It was a forum where everyone

could contribute and feel welcome. So the Internet was born. More and more universities and research centers were connected together. A common language was needed and through the RFCs again, a "protocol" evolved that had originally been literally written on the back of an envelope. The computer user community adopted this protocol because it was free and it worked. If you use it, you are part of it, but you are free to dissent and then you are simply left out, not connected. Meantime, the Internet exploded all over the globe with advances in technology at an alarming rate. An undergraduate student at the University of Illinois came up with the first web browser that went out free over the net. A browser assembles all the bits of texts, graphics and pictures for a web page with links (hyperlinks) that you can click on to take you elsewhere on the web. In 1976 there were 63 host computers holding data for the Internet. By 1995 it was approaching four million. Today nobody knows how many. And who is paying for the web? Everyone: the universities, the governments, the institutes and the international corporate computers who are linked together and maintained by their hosts have become the "backbone" of the web. They are largely self regulated by their own self interest, and by the realization that all are needed to make it work.

### Quantum Meditation

This morning I got up early, fired up the laptop, slid over the touchpad to Skype, the free Internet phone service. The host was connecting our conference call. Voices from around the world were greeting each other. We began our silent meditation, but I like that I can still hear a few of the people breathing. Only two of those people have I ever met. At the bottom of the screen, Skype records how many users are online. At that moment, there were 13,735,827. Of course, they were not all meditating with us (or were they?), but how to describe the feeling of connection with them and the rest of humanity? We entered the non-local silence and aspired using the mantric



Two former editors of *Auroville Today*: Bindu (left) and B.

verses of Sri Aurobindo's Savitri. This is not the world I was born into. I remember holding my father's hand while we stood on the sidewalk looking through a store window at what they called "television".

### The Medium is the Message

Some focus on the rant and the rot on the web, some on the viruses, the worms, the porn, the filth, the spam or other shadows. Yes, the web needs to be nurtured toward the light, toward meaning and purpose; a higher life. But beyond the content of the web is the process which is changing us as beings, beings who have access to vast creative powers in the way we perceive and behave. Another generation is growing up kinesthetically trained on video games and a vast array of electronics plugged into their ears and eyes. The computer is not an advanced typewriter. The Internet is much more than an advanced telecommunication system. The Internet is part of our evolution as a species. It is an extension of the brain – an electronic global brain connecting to everything so that we actually transform and become one, the aim of yoga, the aim of Auroville. Sri Aurobindo also phrased it another way in Savitri: "To feel love and oneness is to live." Now if I just knew how to use my new Flip camera to make a YouTube version of this. Oh, in MySpace someone will chat back on my request for comments.

B (B, aka Bill Sullivan, lived for many years in Auroville and was one of the original editors of *Auroville Today*. He now lives in California.)

## In brief

### Entry Service problems

The majority of the members of the Entry Service have offered their resignation. They feel that it is getting more and more difficult to assess new entrants without a proper structure and without a proper infrastructure to support Newcomers without housing. It is also increasingly difficult for Auroville units and services to employ more individuals on maintenance. A new team is in the process of being established.

### Auroville community transport

Concerned by the growing dangers of using the East Coast Road, Auroville Community Transport has launched a twice daily Auroville-Pondy shuttle service for the use of Aurovilians and guest. At Rs 250, a travelling pass may be obtained that allows for 10 one-way trips on any of the buses.

### Ghadames

The Auroville Earth Institute has helped the World Heritage Site, Ghadames, in Libya in the mass construction of adobes. Ghadames is a centuries old desert town close to the borders of Algeria and Tunisia. More than 100,000 adobe buildings are now being restored there.

### Wood Coop

Attempts have started to create a wood cooperative. The objectives are to store the many trees uprooted in the recent cyclone, create an Auroville saw-mill and use the wood in future Auroville constructions.

### Home gardening

Auroville Botanical Garden offers seeds and vegetable seedlings to Aurovilians for home gardening. This year 11 varieties of tomatoes, 5 varieties of aubergine, 4 varieties of sweet capsicum, and 2 varieties of multicoloured corn are made available along with cucumber, pumpkin, ladies finger, bottle-gourd, snake-gourd, beans, amaranths and water melon.

### Name changes

The Auroville Industrial School has changed its name to Auroville Institute of Applied Technology. New Creation Bilingual School has changed its name to Aikiyam School.

### Auroville TV contest

The Auroville TV website [www.aurovillevideo.org](http://www.aurovillevideo.org) is accepting submissions of short videos of maximum 1 minute length that capture the spirit of Auroville. Submissions are due by February 28th 2009. The highest rated entry will win a surprise gift.

### Auroville web-store

<http://www.auroville.com> is the new on-line portal to buy Auroville products. A wide range of Auroville products can be ordered and paid for by credit or debit cards. For each order placed, a tree will be planted by the forest group's 'tropical dry evergreen forest project' team.

### On-line courses

Beginning in April, the Gnostic Centre near Delhi is offering two online courses: 'A Journey through Psychology – Moving Beyond the Barriers', facilitated by Suneet Varma and 'The Integral Way of Sri Aurobindo' facilitated by Debashish Banerji. For details, please contact [gnostic@gnostic-centre.com](mailto:gnostic@gnostic-centre.com)



# A living being

Last week I was working in the forest, clearing up after the recent cyclonic storm. I have a low threshold for disorder so initially my energy went into furiously sawing up fallen trees and clearing away broken branches. As I worked on, however, I slowed down and gradually entered another mode. I rediscovered the skills of the *kati* (small hand-axe) and of the most energy-efficient way of sawing and chopping wood. I relearned the dynamics of working with unknown helpers from the local village. Above all, I discovered another kind of order that had much less to do with my ideas about neatness and decorum and more to do with something that seemed to emerge from the forest itself.

I began to feel, for example, that this particular area wants to remain wilderness, untidied, while over there that tree is calling for space; that this seeming chaos of trees, vines and bushes are at ease with

each other while that innocent-looking creeper wants to strangle everything in its path. And, on a larger scale, that there is a kind of wisdom in a storm which uprooted so many trees that were non-indigenous, not fully adapted to the specificity of local conditions which require slow, unflamboyant growth and deep rooting.

In a word, I was beginning to experience the presence of the forest, something much more than the sum of its flora and fauna. I was discovering that the forest is a being with its own rhythms, its own wisdom.

It reminded me of what Mother wrote about India. *India is not the earth, rivers and mountains of this land, neither is it a collective name for the inhabitants of this country. It is a living being...*

And what is true of India is surely true of Auroville. I don't know how many of us relate to Auroville like this, as a living being which is something quite other than its inhabi-

tants, forests and buildings. I can't say I do, yet my experience in the forest gave me a hint of what it might be like to live with that constant sense of presence. It's a fuller, more complete contact than is possible through the mind alone. There's a sense of deep stability, yet also of infinite flexibility and infinite wisdom in the unfolding of its manifestation. If my forest experience is anything to go by, such a contact steadies the mind and heart by tuning them to larger rhythms, larger realities.

Finally, what I understood while working in my little patch of forest was the primacy of experience over dogma and our well-meaning plans.

But how does one contact the being of Auroville? There is no road-map. If, at moments, I've had intimations they have tended to happen while I was wandering the canyons and forests. But there's no reason why it can't happen anywhere, at any time. It's a matter of listening deeply, of looking through, behind, beyond, the words



PHOTO JOANNA

and actions with which we fill our days, for something infinitely gentle, infinitely wise.

If we contact that 'other' Auroville, who knows what will follow? But one thing is clear: once the

contact is made, you no longer need guidelines or mandates or any of the paraphernalia of community regulation or control. For now you are drawing from a deeper, clearer well.

Alan

## PROFILE

“We had each been searching for an ‘intentional’ spiritual community with a focus on sustainable living and we met each other at the Kripalu Ashram in Massachusetts. We then went to live in a community in Costa Rica where Oren (now 14), was born in the jungle, and eventually settled on Kaua’i, a Hawaiian island. Kaua’i is my heart’s home,” says Jivan. “When I got off the plane, I just felt this is my ancient home. We lived in Hawaii for 11 years and our daughter, Oceana (now 9), was born there.”

“One day Jivatma and Jeremy from Auroville were visiting Kaua’i and gave a slideshow of Auroville. We and our children were very inspired by what we saw. Together we decided to come for a 3-month visit to Auroville, and yes, we decided we wanted to return as Newcomers. We were back a year later, and have now been here for a year and a half.”

They have been living in *Vérité*. This means participating in community life – helping with the food, interacting with guests and offering educational programs. They also attended weekly community meetings for the first year. Tewa now teaches arts and crafts full-time in Transition School and facilitates Compassionate Communication Courses. Jivan facilitates Freeing Your Healing Voice Playshops, Chanting the Rainbow (songs from around the world), and *Kirtan* (devotional singing). He also teaches weightlifting and wrestling for Transition School sports programme and works part-time at Matrimandir Gardens. Together they facilitate playshops on *Intimate Relationship*, based on their 15 years of being very happily married.

When asked how they experienced their Newcomer time, they smiled. “It has been a big adventure living here in Auroville and India. *Vérité* was a great place to land. It has been a wild and wonderful time – a time of intense sadhana and growth, full of ‘grist for the mill’.”

Tewa finds much joy in teaching at Transition School. “I am delighted with the way everyone works together. There is no headmaster and the team of 35 co-operates and makes decisions together. I love going to the teachers’ meetings! It is a joy to be able to work in this way. Here I find an openness and willingness for everyone’s voice to be heard. The kids come from many backgrounds and their various and individual needs are taken into consideration as much as possible. It is a wonderful challenge. Auroville kids have a beautiful, strong spirit – 99% of them look you straight in the eye – they

## A wonderful adventure

Tewa, Jivan and their two children find joy and “much grist for the mill” in their first year-and-a-half in Auroville. Tewa is South African and Jivan is from the U.S. and they are newly Aurovilian.

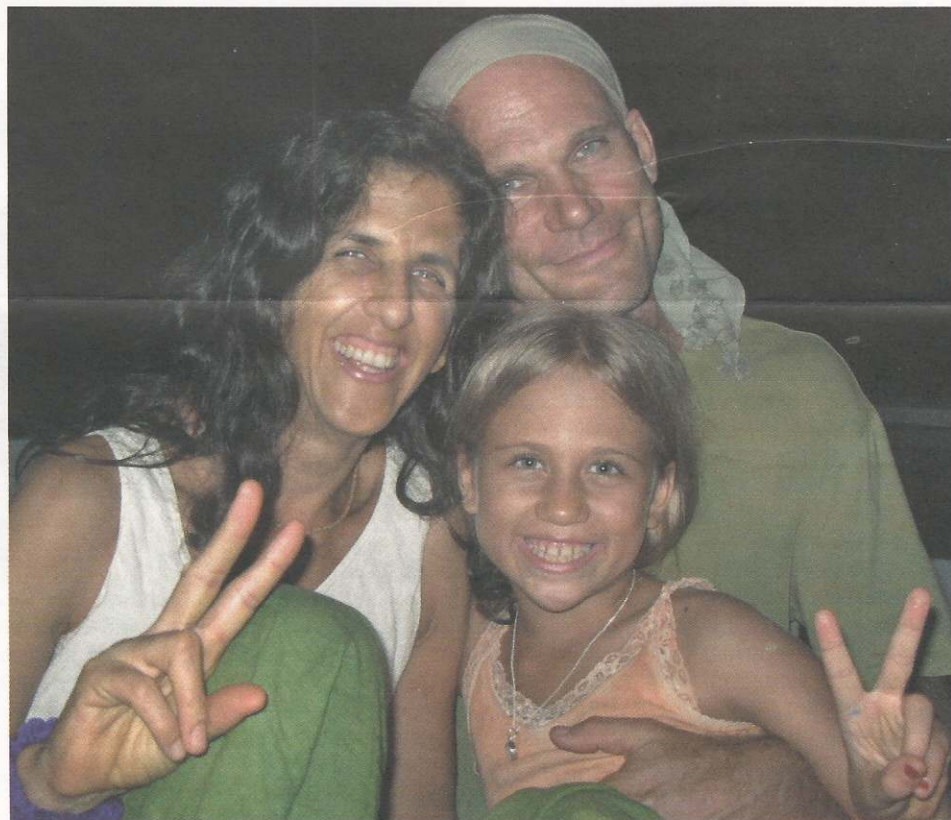


PHOTO COURTESY TEWA

From left: Tewa, Jivan and their daughter Oceana.

have no fear of adults and have a lot of freedom. Many of them are related to each other and have been friends for years and there is a deep sense of caring amongst them.

“Although I have not had any school teaching experience before, I taught kids in home-schooling groups in Hawaii. My years of experience with teaching in Compassionate Communication groups has been a great background for communicating with the children, which is so important for me when teaching. I was an observer in classrooms for a few months, then had a mentor who worked closely with me. I love my new work, contributing to the present and future of Auroville in this way.”

Jivan finds his joy in being in nature and in creating beauty through healing music. In his classes, he teaches practices for accessing one’s natural voice through sonic meditations and

improvisation, opening the heart, connecting with the soul, and being a conduit for healing and transformation in our world. “We are manifesting human unity when we create a circle and sing with the intention of healing. Our songs are the flowers we lovingly offer to the Divine Consciousness. Chanting is a form of concentration which bypasses the noise of the mind and allows us to bask in the ocean of Bliss within.”

“I was working every morning at the Matrimandir Gardens, but now I work there part-time as I am in the midst of recording a CD series of chants from around the world. When the CD’s are complete, I will probably return to gardening, but with a focus on permaculture and creating an ‘edible landscaping’ initiative in Auroville and its surrounding villages. I would also like to see a more receptive, collaborative approach to working with our brothers and sisters in the plant and

animal kingdoms, from a sometimes anthropocentric world view to a more integral and harmonious way of living as an interdependent part of nature. I was taught to ask the plants’ permission before cutting or harvesting. To me the plants and animals are our spirit allies and each one has many things to teach us if we can slow down, quiet the mind, and receive the wisdom and healing they offer.”

And the children? “After a year we went back to Hawaii as this was our agreement with Oren and Oceana. We wanted them to make their own decision about moving to Auroville and to say goodbye to Hawaii – at least for the time being. It will always be in their blood and be their home, but they are clear about wanting to come back here.”

Adjusting from a relaxed island lifestyle to the often intense Auroville scene has been both stimulating and challenging at times for Oren and Oceana. However, they have adapted well and integrated successfully with older and younger kids, as well as adults. They are thriving and growing here.

Difficulties? Tewa takes a moment to answer. “*Vérité* can be a complex place to live and we have a lively guest scene. We interact with the guests daily and share a dining room with them. While we feel grateful to connect with so many fascinating people we sometimes need solitude or family time, and then we take our meals down to our house. Sometimes I hear about communication challenges people are having in various settings in Auroville and I wish there was more self-responsibility and less judgment of others. I have an aspiration that one of the ways we in Auroville can be models for manifesting human unity is by increasing our communication skills as individuals and as a community, learning more and more to speak from the heart and to listen deeply to others. Another challenge is the economy and the difficulty of putting into practice Mother’s dream, which we share, of having no money in Auroville. In the end, however, we have absolute trust in the Divine – which includes trusting that we are evolving exactly as we need to be.

“We are so glad to be here and that our children are growing up in a community of people who share a spiritual as well as an ecological focus. We can feel the invisible thread of shared aspiration here that binds us all together. It really does feel like a family. Auroville is a constant miracle. The fact that 43 different nationalities can live together, and have done so for 40 years, is amazing.

“We feel truly blessed.”

Dianna

### Subscription information:

- One year subscription rates: India Rs. 450; other countries Rs 2,000 equivalent
- Two year subscription rate: India Rs. 800; other countries Rs 3,700 equivalent.

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

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

### There are three ways to subscribe:

- Send your contribution directly to *Auroville Today*, Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India. Cheques sent directly to *Auroville Today* should be made payable to Auroville Fund, specifying: ‘Contribution for *Auroville Today*’. Personal cheques are preferred to bank cheques. Please do not send postal money orders or cash.
- Through our website [www.auroville.org/journals&media/avtoday](http://www.auroville.org/journals&media/avtoday)
- Send your contribution to one of the following Auroville International Centres:

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

◆ **The Netherlands:** Auroville International Nederland, email: [info@auroville-int-ned.nl](mailto:info@auroville-int-ned.nl), Postbank account: 805707, account name: Auroville Int. Ned. Account address: George Washingtonlaan 16, 2285 CG Rijswijk (IBAN: NL11 PSTB 0000 805707, BIC: PSTBNL21)

◆ **U.K.:** Auroville International U.K., c/o Martin Littlewood, 30 The Green, Surlingham, Norwich NR14 7AG, tel. 01508-538300, fax 01508-537122, email: [info@aviuk.org](mailto:info@aviuk.org)

◆ **USA:** Make checks payable to *Auroville International USA*, and send to either: U.S.A (1): AVI USA, P.O. Box 1534, Lodi, CA 95241-1534, Tel: (831) 425-5620; email: [info@aviusa.org](mailto:info@aviusa.org); or to U.S.A (2): Auroville Information Office, PO Box 676, Woodstock NY 12498, tel: (1) 845-679-5358, email: [AVINY@aviusa.org](mailto:AVINY@aviusa.org)

**Editorial team:** Alan, Carel, Dianna, Hero, Priya Sundaravalli, Robert. Proof-reading: Alan, Hero. DTP: Priya, Carel. Photo editing: Jean-Denis

Published by Carel Thieme on behalf of the Auroville Foundation. Printed by Brihat Consultants, Pondicherry, and published at Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India.

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