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Auroville
farming: a
bleak future?

If Auroville is to make progress towards becoming a self-supporting township as Mother wished, it is clear that we need to grow far more food for ourselves than we have done in the past. But what is the situation with our farms today? Have they the capacity to feed our present population? If not, what can be done to remedy this? And how can the rest of the community support them in achieving this goal? Looking farther afield, what are the problems associated with commercial farming worldwide? What are the possible solutions? And how can Auroville participate in this movement?

These are just some of the questions we consider here in our attempt to raise awareness of an issue which is critical not only for Auroville but also, in the light of worldwide declining land fertility and exploding populations, for the future of humanity as a whole.

“A failure on its way to becoming a catastrophe”

BROOKS ANDERSON ON MODERN AGRICULTURE IN THE U.S.

In overdeveloped countries, the past century has been partly characterized by a dramatic increase in the distance between people and the sources of their sustenance. There has also been an increase in the distance between people and the consequences of many of their essential daily decisions. I'm referring particularly to the fact that people in countries like the United States are increasingly removed from the sources of their food and from the wastes people generate. This distancing has created societies which are, by certain measures, probably the most ignorant in history.

People who live with such a high degree of ignorance about their relationship to things like farmland and landfills are incapable of making informed decisions about very consequential matters. For example, they are incapable of discriminating between food that has been grown in a way that protects the environment and food that has been grown in a way that destroys the environment.

In the absence of information, decision-making authority about what people do and what gets produced has largely been handed over to market forces. So that society can be organized around the law of supply and demand, nearly everything has been 'commodified'. In other words, almost everything—whether it be bicycles, human genes or nature—has acquired a market value based on the notion that it can be traded as a commodity in the global market-place. Perhaps the greatest failure of commodification and its underlying economic rationality is that this mind-set constrains peoples' options: often, vision and imagination are entirely obstructed by peoples' single-minded pursuit of profit. Once people adopt a free market mentality, objectives such as peace,

justice and sustainability are seldom served because they cannot be evaluated in terms of this system.

These two trends, ignorance and free-market mentality, have been disastrous in a number of ways. One area that has suffered particularly is agriculture.

According to the American farmer Wendell Berry, America's conventional approach to agriculture, in which farmers rely heavily upon expensive machinery, fossil fuel and agri-chemicals to remain competitive, is “a failure on its way to becoming a catastrophe”. If we look beyond the mere momentary affordability of food in the American system, if we consider the overall and long-term social and ecological costs of such a system, we see that it is grossly inefficient, inequitable and unsustainable. Economic competition, which requires farmers to generate a profit while simultaneously undercutting the prices of their American and foreign competitors, has turned America's farmers into an endangered species. In addition to hastening the attrition of skilled and knowledgeable farmers, the present system is depleting the world's reserves of fossil fuel and damaging the environment. The figures indicting America's agriculture are shocking: the U.S. food system uses approximately one gallon of oil a day per consumer, the production of one calorie of food requires the expenditure of between ten and twelve calories of fossil fuel, the average item of food in America travels well over 1,000 miles before it is consumed, the production of each bushel of corn causes the loss of over one bushel of

topsoil, and America's farmland is being degraded 10 to 20 times faster than it can regenerate.

However, there is good news; a growing number of people in America are informing themselves about the larger costs of this food system, and they are using what they learn to design innovative relationships between farmers and consumers, relationships that—unlike the dominant food system—are good for consumers, farmers, the environment and future generations. For example, some groups of people are mapping their foodsheds, the geographic area over which their food travels en route to their town, school or home. This information is used to calculate the cost of their diet in terms of the energy expended in transportation, and to graphically illustrate the area that consumers are connected to by the food that they eat. Others are doing ecological accounting, measuring the amount of topsoil, fossil fuel and genetic diversity lost or consumed by their consumption patterns. Such imaginative ways of looking at agriculture are empowering because they provide the information that people need to make informed choices, information that makes it nearly impossible to regard food as merely a commodity. Having calculated the true costs of the conventional food system, and having heard about the frightening things that agribusiness corporations are doing to food to increase its profitability, many people are choosing to create alternative food systems. One example is called Community Supported Agriculture (C.S.A.).

In C.S.A., several groups, individuals

and households collectively support a farm by purchasing shares, or portions of that farm's annual produce. The shares are purchased before the growing season, thereby enabling farmers to purchase things like seeds, fuel and machinery prior to planting. Shareholders also share the risk of crop failure, which customarily is borne entirely by the farmer. In some cases, shareholders also participate in planning the farm's crops. In addition to receiving some of the farm's fresh produce every week during the growing season, shareholders get the satisfaction of knowing where their food comes from, how it has been grown and the people who have grown it. C.S.A. helps keep farmers on the land, gives consumers a greater say about what they eat and strengthens social connections.

Such trends are encouraging signs of a much-needed paradigm shift; a shift from looking at food as a commodity to seeing it as part of a process which should serve a much wider range of objectives like keeping people on the land, retaining the land in good condition, conserving groundwater and preserving biodiversity. In other words, shifting from a simplistic reductionist perspective to an ecological one which reflects an understanding of the complexity, order and interconnectedness of all creation.

Brooks Anderson has been living and working at Annapurna Farm in Auroville for eight months. Before coming here, he studied Gandhian Economics in India and the U.S., was an intern at The Land Institute in Salina, Kansas, and earned a Masters degree in Rural Sociology from the University of Wisconsin.

"We are falling behind the learning curve"

An interview with Brooks

AV Today: How conscious do you think Aurovilians are regarding the origin of and processes associated with the food they eat?

Brooks: I've found what appears to be a surprisingly high level of apathy, or at least complacency, about food here. This is partly a consequence of Aurovilians' limited knowledge about the food that they find at Pour Tous or in Pondicherry. Not knowing where food is from or how it is grown, they can evaluate it only on the basis of its appearance and price. So if we look at aubergines grown outside Auroville, which cost only two rupees a kilogram at present, they look rather appealing. But if we learn more about the system which produced these vegetables, such as the poor living conditions of the farmers, the amount of soil lost and the chemicals applied in the production process, and the pollution associated with the transportation of the produce to the market, we learn that this is a system of exploitation and destruction which does not respect human unity.

How supportive is Auroville of its farmers?

Auroville's relationship to its farmers is essentially a market-mediated relationship. That is, Auroville's farmers have to sell their food to Auroville, and the value of the food is largely determined by the current market rates for food outside of Auroville. Auroville makes no assurance that it will purchase food from its farms, leaves all the risk of crop failure, as well as the responsibility for farm development to the overworked farmers and, aside from the provision of one monthly maintenance of Rs 1,200 per farm (the lowest in Auroville), it makes no investment in its farms. When

compared to the innovative relationship being forged between farmers and consumers in other places, Auroville appears to be falling behind the learning curve.

One thing which is particularly disturbing is to hear people seriously suggest that Auroville should simply continue to purchase an increasing amount of its food from the neighbouring villages and other outside sources. At a time when agricultural options in India are rapidly dwindling due to land degradation, industrial development, water depletion, fossil fuel exhaustion and the demands of India's growing and increasingly affluent population, it's unrealistic to expect that food in the market-place will remain abundant or affordable much longer. If Auroville aspires to grow and continue to



be "the city the Earth needs", a model for a non-exploitative, sustainable society, it must grow much more of its own food.

How can Auroville move towards greater self-sufficiency in food production?

Auroville's farmers should receive much more support from the community in the form of direct financial assistance and through innovative schemes like Community Supported Agriculture (see page one). At present, many of our farmers are getting burnt out by the unreasonable demands made upon them. We should do an environmental audit to ascertain what the area we live in at present can sustainably provide in terms of food, water, energy etc. and for how many people. This might throw up some surprises. For example, if we're planning to be anywhere near self-sufficient in food for 50,000 people in Auroville, that will require an awful lot of land and labour, much more than we have at present. So I'll be heretical and suggest that we need to reconsider the present projected size and design of the city if we really aim to be self-sufficient. We also need to consider siting farms in the city area where there is fertile land because this makes good use of the land and reduces the cost of transportation.

Wouldn't some of the changes that you imply, like purchasing much more land for growing food, paying a realistic price for organic food and providing full financial

Parched rice crop at Annapurna Farm: all the risk of crop failure falls on the Auroville farmers

support for our Auroville farmers be enormously expensive?

It's a matter of vision. Either we invest and experiment now, while we still have the relatively large amount of flexibility that factors like cheap fossil fuel create, or we put the hard choices off until some point in the future when fossil fuel is less abundant and the Earth is more warm, crowded and polluted.

The initial cost of bringing our farms up to their potential would be large. However, farming would be much less expensive if Aurovilians themselves did much more of the work on the farms. Farm work is hot and hard. One way to make it more enjoyable is to arrange things so that nobody works more than 4 - 6 hours per day on the land. Another factor is that by growing more of our own food we can reduce our need for money in Auroville. Presently, a lot of our money flows out of Auroville to buy food.

These changes won't be easy. They will require a lot of goodwill and imagination. Auroville is embedded in India which is very rapidly adopting the free market thinking that accelerates environmental destruction worldwide. But in another sense, Auroville is already on another path because its land, housing and health system are not commodified, they are not 'owned' or traded. This is not the situation in the U.S. or most other places. And it is why Auroville has such a potential for modelling another economic system, another way of organizing relationships between people, and people and the land, relationships that avoid the evident failures of a system that treats everything as commodities.

Interview by Alan

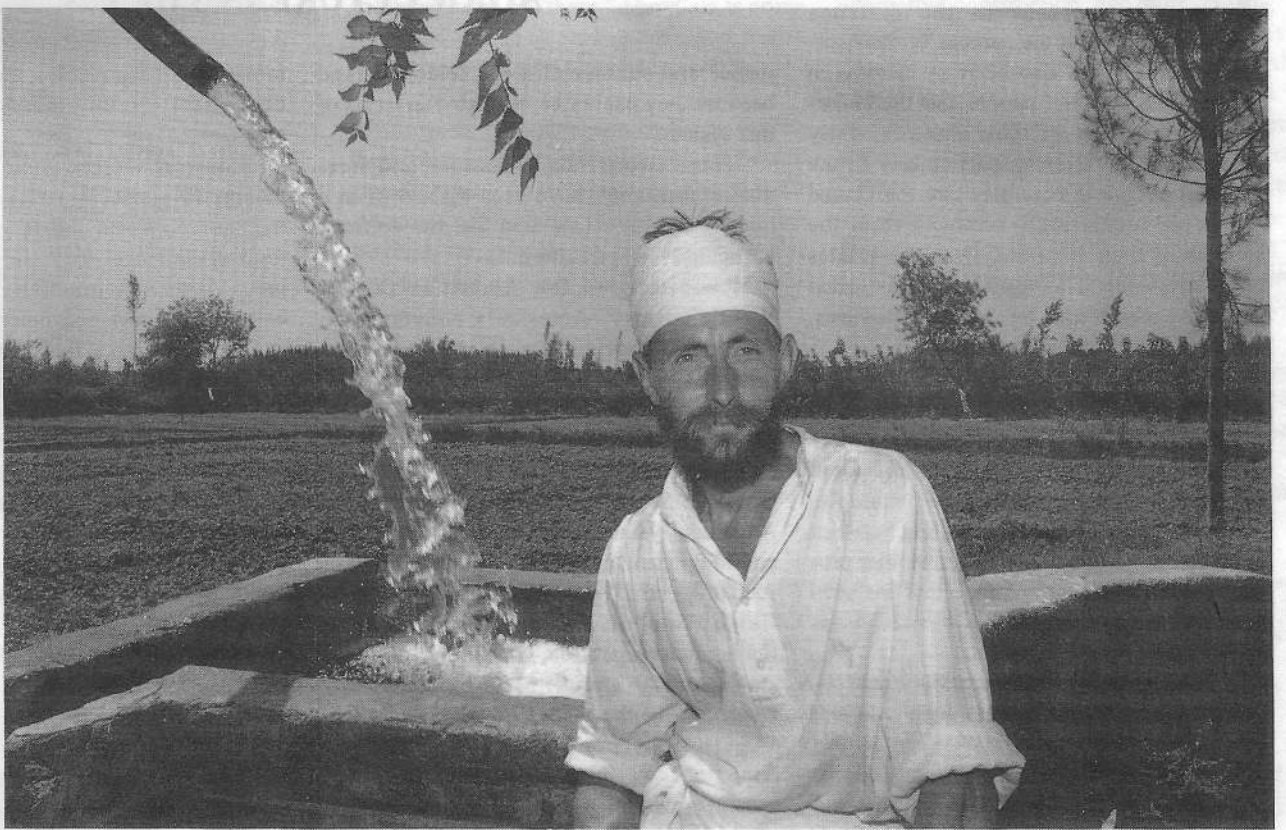
Working on the outer body

Herbert has been dry-land farming in Auroville since 1984. He lives with his wife Selvi and two children in the greenbelt community of Anasuya. At present, much of his energy goes into developing Siddharta farm on a small piece of land which recently became available in the prime rice-growing area of Irbumbai.

"Dry-land farming in Auroville is very difficult. It's always a gamble: you are dependent on the rains, which are irregular, it's difficult to protect the crop from goats and cows, and it's been almost impossible to get any financial support from Auroville for investing in infrastructure (at the moment I'm sleeping between sacks of rice because I don't have a proper store-room and I can't afford a pump for my new well) or for compensating for bad harvests. As a farmer, it's all on your shoulders and out of your pockets; it's not surprising that we can't get new people to take up this work. Once or twice I've been about to drop everything because I felt so bad that I couldn't afford, for example, to feed my animals well enough, but each time I suddenly got help to keep going.

In the first years of Auroville, farming didn't have much priority—there were too many other things to do—but as the population grew, and as more and more people wanted organic food, pressure grew on the farmers to produce more. In fact, we were growing only a very small percentage of Auroville's food needs: a survey a few years ago showed that our farms were only producing 2% of the grains and rice the community needed, 5% of the eggs and about 30% of the vegetables.

Today those percentages are even lower. Why? Because,



Herbert at Siddharta Farm: "Once or twice I've been about to drop everything, but each time I suddenly got help to keep going."

with the exception of well-established farms like Auro-Orchard, our farms are not yet at the level where they can make the best use of the land and water available while our population keeps growing. Annapurna is our largest farm, but the soil is in such bad condition that it will take five to ten years for it to recover. Many other farms lack an adequate water supply or storage facilities. Very large investments would be needed to purchase more good quality farm

land and to bring our existing farms up to the level where they could produce much more organic food for Auroville—to enable our farmers, in other words, to actually start farming! If this is really what Auroville wants, the community has to support this.

At the same time the farmers have to do much more

Continued on page 3

Planting for the future

Lisa comes from California, the state that supplies almost 50% of the vegetables and fruits to the American dinner table. In California farmers are faced, on a large scale, with many of the same problems as we have in Auroville.

"They are problems of water, labour, and land use," Lisa says. "If we solve these problems, we will have connected again with the original work of Auroville, which was work involving people who put their energy into land reclamation. This was a strong beginning for the story of Auroville, and to this day it is one of the most successful projects because as a result of the positive results of planting trees, people naturally became interested in growing food. The two are very related: they both involve caring for the land and becoming aware of sustainable agriculture. And the collective spirit of Auroville was behind this.

"For those who don't know, here's a bit of history: there was a big farm project in the early days in Kottakarai, and at that time there was a perfect spirit and perfect land for farming. Due to a number of circumstances, all that land was later sub-divided and made into a residential area. This was a mistake. We should learn to avoid mistakes like this in the future. After Kottakarai, other farms were started, mostly on less than ideal plots of land. And because of a lack of understanding, there was a tendency to fall back on exploitative management practices regarding the use of water, labour and land.

So what's happening now? "Well, one positive step is that the Farm Group was formed to make a sincere effort to get a clear point of view on the future of our agricultural efforts," says Lisa. "We found that one of the biggest obstacles is our eating habits. The foods which can be grown with the least amount of transportation and protection are not familiar to many Westerners. So we have to educate people. One of the interesting things is that certain kinds of food which grow in sub-tropical climates in the

Americas will grow here, like corn and beans. Another simple fact: papaya grows well here, so why not develop papaya as a vegetable? But people don't know it can be cooked. It's a pity, because it's one of the easiest plants to care for. This kind of information has to be shared."

How will the Solar Kitchen help us? "The Solar Kitchen project is an opportunity to do away with the problems of excessive transportation and individual pricing. If we can cook indigenous food with local spices on a collective scale, it will be a big motivation for our farmers. They will be encouraged to grow indigenous food because the Kitchen will be buying from them. And if the food is prepared in the right way, it can be very practical and tasty. The Solar Kitchen has a lot of potential. It will help to spark the change, because it will provide an incentive for bulk buying."

What about the food-processing units? "Some of the food-processing units are stretching themselves to use dried mango and guava to make fruit strips. Again, it is working with what is indigenous. We could even focus some energy on making an Auroville recipe book because our food habits are part of our sense of identity here. It is a link between the past and the future."

What sorts of problems do the farmers face? "For two years, we've been putting together what we know about how to improve our water usage. This is the major problem right now. We must recognize the danger of overuse and put in drip and sprinkler systems to reduce the amount of water we consume. It means a lot of money invested in equipment and maintenance.

Continued from page 2

research and experimentation if we are to produce more, and if we are to be a convincing model for the local village farmers to follow, for we can't expect them to change on their own. By now we know quite well what can be grown in which type of soil, but what are the effects of intercropping? How can we ensure that the plant takes up all the energy from the compost? What is the influence of different phases of the moon on growth and flowering? All these are very difficult to understand.

Of course, our farmers have been experimenting over the years, but we don't share our experiences very much together, and we don't have ongoing connections to people and institutions outside Auroville which are doing similar work. This definitely has to change.

Good things are also happening. Two years ago, after the Auroville farmers had been struggling along in isolation for some time, the Auroville Farm Group formed. The Farm Group now is in good shape. We try to coordinate production on the basis of annual requirements supplied by Pour Tous, we discuss our problems and we plan how we would like to develop in the future. There are good possibilities

around now: two years ago, with support from Auroville International Germany, I took up the development of a two-acre piece of irrigated land which is ideal for rice growing, and now another 18 acres have come on the market nearby. And I've just heard that a large piece of land—between 20 to 50 acres in size—with very good possibilities for rice production is being offered between Irumbai and Kottakarai. It's crucial to buy such land because time is running out: our population is growing and so is the pollution around us. But who will buy it?

Of course, money is important—and, maybe, Auroville would have to look



Lisa of the Auroville Farm Group

Ultimately, you have to decide what to do with water—should we use it first for agriculture or gardens? With the lack of a monsoon last year, it will put this question under our noses again.

What about the future of agriculture in Auroville? "If we're going to make serious inroads into our present unsustainable patterns of consumption, we have to have more field crops: rice, peanuts, millets, pulses, sesame, grown without chemicals. As usual, the returns are unpredictable. So, per capita, we need a lot more land and individuals to participate actively and with quality. We need a lot of hands-on managers. Now the situation is not very encouraging. People know that it is something which concerns us all, but it is largely ignored. So, we must encourage the pioneer spirit again by embracing it. Land purchase is a big issue. There is land which is ideal and this land is now being considered for purchasing. We should all support this. I feel, personally, it's time to set the wheel in motion. Like a good farmer, you plant something with all your energy and all your goodwill, and then you wait for the rain to come and nourish it."

From an interview by Jill

beyond itself, even to other countries to help finance such development—but awareness is also necessary: awareness of why we need to grow our own organic food. You see, our body has an outer body—the sun, water, earth, air—which passes through us and with which we are one and which interconnects all of us. So then you understand how important it is to keep the outer body healthy because when it is poisoned—through pollution, chemicals etc.—then we also get poisoned.

Farming is working on the outer body. And we Auroville farmers are trying to recreate the balance, to mend the damage to that outer body so that we can also be in balance. Auroville should be in the forefront of such a movement. But while the awareness of these things is growing in the community, it's still mainly on the mental level and doesn't get translated sufficiently into active support for our farmers."

From an interview by Alan



Hands-on farming...

GRIM SCENARIO ON THE FOOD FRONT

A grim scenario prevails on the food front in most parts of Tamil Nadu this summer. Low procurement of Samba paddy in the delta and a steady uptrend in the open market prices of rice is causing anxiety to the authorities... Symptoms of acute drinking water shortage have surfaced in chronically drought-hit areas as most reservoirs have touched the dead storage levels... An official study of the ground-water situation reveals that compared to last year, the water table this year has gone down very markedly in wells everywhere, except in Madras, Chengleput, Salem and Periyar. Most districts in the central and southern parts of Tamil Nadu are badly hit, and already the state government has declared more than 15 districts drought-hit.

(From The Hindu of 9th March 1996)

WHAT SHOULD WE EAT?

"Eat local food according to the seasons. We can eat some rice, but maybe rice should not be our staple as it requires twice as much water as other grains. Our local millets could serve all our needs. They are nutritious, easy to grow and can be irrigated or rain-fed."

Charlie, manager of Aurogreen, Auroville's largest dairy and fruit farm.

WHAT ARE WE EATING?

AVT: Which fruits and vegetables are in demand in Pour Tous?

Otto: People buy what they know—apples, bananas, oranges, tangerines, papayas, potatoes, tomatoes, cucumbers etc.

Q: What proportion of the vegetables are grown outside Auroville?

A: About 95% of our vegetables come from outside, mostly from Bangalore.

Q: Which fruits and vegetables are grown in Auroville?

A: Tomatoes, parsley, salad, pumpkins, squash, ladies fingers (okra) and sweetcorn are grown in small quantities in the season. Capsicum, brinjal and cucumber are grown throughout the year. Much of our fruit is grown in Auroville.

Q: Any comment about Aurovilians' buying habits?

A: Half the population wants the food to be as cheap as possible, which generally means food from Pondicherry market: this is particularly true of the big kitchens which buy in quantity. Then there are those who want the rather more expensive organically-grown food, and the rest will buy either.

Aurovilians are still not buying indigenous vegetables, mainly because they don't know how to cook them. You have to enjoy something first and then you'll ask, "This is very nice. What is it? How do you prepare it?" Then something will change.

Q: How can we promote the buying of Auroville products?

There is no need of promotion because demand is bigger than supply: we sell as much as we can stock. What we can't sell of Auroville produce is given to the food processing units, and they take care of the rest.

(Otto manages 'Pour Tous', the community food store and distribution centre.)

Do foreigners have rights?

WORKING IT OUT IN COURT: Gilles vs. the Union of India and the Auroville Foundation.

Aurovilians of non-Indian origin are regarded as foreigners by the Government of India. Their stay in India is regulated by the Foreigners Act, and each foreigner needs a so-called Residential Permit, which is issued by the Home Ministry. In June 1995, the Government of India refused to extend Aurovilian Gilles Pfeiffer's Residential Permit and requested him to leave India. No reasons were given.

The refusal not only shocked Gilles, who has been living in India for over 20 years. It also shook the roots of the community: for how can the International Township of Auroville succeed if the Government can expel foreign Aurovilians from India without stating any reason? The community addressed a petition to the Home Minister, accompanied by over 500 signatures, stating that it knew of no just cause why Gilles' Residential Permit should not be extended. And it requested the Home Minister for a hearing, a request which was repeatedly supported by Dr. Karan Singh, Chairman of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation.

But the Home Ministry did not reply. Lacking any other alternative, it was decided to start a court case so that Gilles could continue to stay in India legally. In order that all authorities of the Auroville Foundation—the Governing Board, the International Advisory Council, the Residents Assembly and its Working Committee—could express their views on the case and on the general fact that an Aurovilian was requested to leave India without giving any reasons, Gilles' lawyer, Sriram Panchu, filed a case both against the Indian Government as well as against the authorities of the Auroville Foundation.

The reasons why the Home Ministry had refused the extension of Gilles' residential permit became clear during the proceed-

ings. It was based on a number of allegations made by the ex-Secretary of the Auroville Foundation, which had been added to his recommendation for the extension of Gilles' residential permit. Moreover, the Home Ministry argued that a foreigner has no rights in India. In support of Gilles, the Residents' Assembly and the Working Committee stated that the allegations made by the ex-Secretary were groundless and based on his personal problems with Gilles and his partner Judith. On the larger issue the community argued that it is unethical to expect people to bring their material resources into Auroville without any claim of personal ownership and then expel them from the country without just cause.

While the community's affidavit supported Gilles, the affidavit of the Governing Board and the International Advisory Council, filed by the Secretary on their behalf, did not. It stated that the allegations made by the ex-Secretary against Gilles were correct, and added even more allegations against Gilles. The community was stunned. It realised that it was not only fighting with Gilles against the Government of India, but also against elements of its own Foundation. Dr. Karan Singh was immediately requested to withdraw the Secretary's affidavit, not only because it made a mockery of his earlier attempts to reach an out of court settlement with the Home Ministry, but also because it seriously endangered the future harmonious growth and development of Auroville as an International Township. While Dr. Karan Singh did not respond to the request for withdrawal, the two Aurovilian members of the Governing Board—Roger Anger and Ashok Chatterjee—did and filed an affidavit stating their disagreement with the contents of the Secretary's affidavit. Moreover, the Chairman of the Auroville International Advisory Council, Prof. Ervin Laszlo, filed

an affidavit that the Secretary had not been authorised to represent the International Advisory Council. Notwithstanding these three counter affidavits, however, the Court allowed the Secretary's lawyer to present his case.

In the meeting between the Auroville Council and the Governing Board on February 25th, 1996, the matter was extensively discussed. How, asked the Council, could the Secretary file such an affidavit? Why had he not adopted a neutral attitude, simply quoting to the High Court the contents of Gilles' (secret) file, not only mentioning the statements of the ex-Secretary, but also the replies provided by previous Working Committees on these statements? "Nearly every paragraph in the Secretary's counter affidavit contains either innuendo or misrepresentation of facts, acts against the interest of the Auroville Foundation and is harmful to the future development of Auroville as an International township" concluded the Council. The Governing Board was requested to withdraw the counter affidavit, and, in view of the damage done, destroy all secret files on Aurovilians. Lastly, the Council urged the Governing Board to take up its responsibility and protect the interests of Auroville and of individual Aurovilians, by defending to the Home Ministry the rights of Aurovilians of foreign origin to remain in Auroville and be granted residential permits to that effect; and, if and when necessary, to defend those rights before any court of law in India, in line with the affidavit of Dr. Laszlo which states: "Auroville is an important International Township. People come from all over the world to dedicate their lives and contribute their resources to the realisation of the material and spiritual ideals of Auroville. These people should have the guarantee that they can stay and not have to live under threat of expulsion from India without just cause."

THE FOREIGNERS ACT 1946

Article 3A of the Foreigners Act states that the Central Government may, by order, declare that all or any of the provisions of the Foreigners Act or of any order made thereunder shall not apply or shall apply only in such circumstances or with such exceptions or modifications or subject to such conditions as may be specified in the order, to or in relation to any class of foreigners.

On December 15, 1995, Auroville requested the Home Minister to issue an order under this Article, exempting foreign Aurovilians from the provisions of the Foreigners Act.

On the 27th of February, Dr. Karan Singh announced that the Governing Board had decided to agree to two requests of the Auroville Council: To withdraw the Secretary's affidavit if this was legally possible, and, in the case of an appeal, to file a modified affidavit. Destruction of the secret files was considered impossible, but a note could be included that the information contained in the file was incorrect.

However, before the Secretary's affidavit was withdrawn, the Madras High Court on March 8, 1996 rejected Gilles' petition, holding that the Central Government is vested with an absolute and unfettered discretion under the Foreigners Act and can expel a foreigner without any formality beyond the making of the expulsion order. The judgement affirmed the right of the Central Government, after expiry of the period for which permission to stay in India is granted, to take straight away the necessary action to deport a person from the country. Having thus affirmed the rights of the Government, the High Court did not further go into the merits of the affidavits of the other respondents.

As the dismissal of Gilles' writ petition is not only detrimental to the case of Gilles but also to the development of Auroville as an International township, the case has gone to appeal.

THE LAWYER'S VIEW: An interview with Sriram Panchu

Throughout the years, many people from all over the world have been of invaluable help to Auroville. But few have been so continuously involved as Sriram Panchu, a Madras-based lawyer whose support of Auroville in all legal matters is inestimable. At present, Sriram Panchu is acting on behalf of Gilles Pfeiffer in the case of Pfeiffer vs. the Union of India and the Auroville Foundation [see elsewhere on this page]. AUROVILLE TODAY spoke to him about the position of foreigners in India.

AVToday: It seems that there is a lack of clarity regarding the rights of foreigners in India. Does a foreigner have any rights?

Sriram Panchu: The Foreigners Act basically gives the Government powers to deal with foreigners, to allow them to enter, to lay down conditions regarding where they may stay and what they may do. Under this Act there is an Order, which provides for the way the Government exercises these powers. Neither the Act nor the Order spells out any rights for foreigners. I believe that this is akin to most jurisdictions elsewhere in the world.

In my view, this does not mean that a foreigner has no rights. But to find them, we have to look at the Indian Constitution, in particular at articles 14 and 21 that have received a very liberal and wide interpretation by the Indian Supreme Court.

Article 14 gives to every person the right of equality and of equal protection before law. This doesn't mean that everybody in the country will be treated equally for everything. It means that it is permissible to make

classifications, but that within a given classification, everybody has to be treated equally. For example, under this article it is permissible to have different electricity tariffs for agriculture and industry. But all farmers have to be treated equally within their tariff, just as all industrialists within theirs.

In the 1980's the Supreme Court injected a very dynamic philosophy in this article. It decided that article 14 is not just a rule against bad classification, or denial of equality within a classification, but also the rule against arbitrariness. And because of that, it also contains the elements of natural justice, for if you do not follow the rules of natural justice, it leads to arbitrary decision making. In this way the requirements of natural justice became incorporated into the Indian constitution. Natural justice basically means that you have to treat people fairly: if you hear a case, not to be biased against the person, not to have an interest yourself in the outcome of the action, and to follow certain procedural requirements. You must give that person notice of what you have against him,



the opportunity to explain, and then pass a reasoned order, so that everyone knows the reason for the action taken. These principles of natural justice have since been given a very important place by all courts in India.

Article 21 of the Constitution contains the fundamental right to life and liberty. This article has also seen some very dynamic interpretations. Earlier it meant that one's life could not be taken away, one could not be deprived of one's liberty; it was seen as a right against unlawful detention, torture or cruel death. But it has since been expanded. The right to life is not just the right to exist-

tence, but everything which into making it a meaningful existence, which includes the bare necessities of life such as shelter and food. In the case of Gilles I have argued that it should also include the right to follow a spiritual calling, because what is the point of just a material life?

How does this all relate to foreigners?

These two articles apply to all persons, not only to Indian citizens. But I would say that we deal here with an aspect of law that has not been fully developed yet. There is no hard and fast rule. Take the case of a person who has been given a residential permit, and who is acting against the security of the country, a spy for example. Here you might argue that the Government needs the power to react very quickly. But the Government cannot utilise that kind of power to deal with someone under entirely different circumstances. For example someone who is here legitimately, but against whom some suspicion has arisen which does not warrant the taking of any immediate action against him.

The courts still need to lay down the guidelines: under which kind of exigencies the Government has more latitude, and when the Government has to proceed more carefully and has to follow the principles of natural justice.

Could it be said that a special responsibility rests on the Government in view of

Continued from page 4

the stipulations of the Auroville Foundation Act?

Yes, I would think so. After all, by passing the Auroville Foundation Act the Indian Parliament has affirmed the country's willingness to play host to the Auroville experiment. Therefore, the Government has a responsibility to do all legitimate acts to further the experiment. The Foreigners Act regulates the question of who is entitled to enter India; one of the matters of the Auroville Foundation Act is the responsibility of the Residents' Assembly to decide who is resident in Auroville. The fact that someone is entitled to enter India does not automatically entitle him to be an Aurovillian. Likewise, the fact that someone is an Aurovillian does not automatically entitle him to enter the country. But there is an overlap here, as being Aurovillian implies living in India. Some kind of harmonious procedure needs to be worked out between the Government and Auroville in these matters. On Auroville's part this should also include the bodies under the Auroville Foundation, including the Residents' Assembly, and not be restricted to only the Secretary. The procedure should provide for adequate consultation. If such a procedure is evolved, then I think there will be more co-operation and confidence for taking the right decision. The principle ought to be that Aurovillians are entitled to be in India and should not be made to leave except for just cause. And such a decision should be reached by following a fair process.

Now that Auroville has requested the Indian Government to exempt foreign Aurovillians from the application of the Foreigners Act [see box], such a procedure could be worked out.

What struck you most in the case of Gilles?

Actually, there are two things which really strike me. One is the lack of public outcry in this case. There is an Auroville Foundation Act, something totally unusual, an act which happened for the first time in this country and perhaps for the first time in the world, giving credence to and accepting an experiment of unparalleled originality, whose purpose is of extreme importance! Now something happens which threatens one of the pillars of this experiment: a foreigner is not certain he can live here. But there is no public outcry, none, to tell the Government: "What are you doing! Be careful. This is not just one individual!" There is no public response whatsoever!

The other one is that the High Court Judge, who is a senior Indian citizen, well read and informed, a man of the world, has to be informed about Auroville. He is obviously very interested, but he does not know about it. How is this possible!

These two things show to my mind that the connection between Auroville and India and Indians has not been sufficiently developed. If it was, I do not think the Government would have acted in the way it did in this matter, because there would have been an outcry if they were wrong. In other words, Auroville has to start paying very strong attention to its connections with India and Indians. It is not only a question of public relations, but also that Auroville should show the advances it has made in its material and spiritual research, that it collaborates with others in India, that India can be proud that it is host to Auroville. That is the heart of the matter. And that is a force which will sort out many problems by itself.

Interview by Carel

The February 'pressure cooker'

February is probably the busiest month of the year. Apart from being the peak of the high season for visitors and tourists, this year it also featured three celebrations: Mother's and Auroville's birthdays on February 21 and 28, and the Golden Day on February 29th. And lastly, in February the meetings of the Governing Board and of the International Advisory Council took place in Auroville, on which Annemarie and Carel report here.

MEETING WITH THE GOVERNING BOARD

Once again some members of the Governing Board paid a visit to Auroville. Dr. Karan Singh, Prof. Madhusudhan Reddy and ex-officio member Ms. Rupa Joshi (who has replaced Mr. Tayal) met with the Aurovillian members of the Governing Board Roger Anger and Ashok Chatterjee. But before their own meeting, they met with the new Auroville Council for a full day, interrupted only by one of those delicious lunches offered by Tineke and Sylvano at the Centre Guesthouse.

"Why do we meet with the Auroville Council and not with the Working Committee?", was the first question asked by Dr. Karan Singh, who as usual was the most active Board member in asking questions and giving comments. A brief exposition on how the new internal organisation had come into being [see AVToday # 85, February 1996] and the ideal functioning of the four constituting committees was given. While expressing his delight and heartfelt support for this development, Dr. Karan Singh nonetheless stressed the statutory function of the Working Committee and its specific responsibilities as outlined in the Auroville Foundation Act.

The main topics the Auroville Council wished to discuss with the Governing Board were the "White Paper": "Auroville: towards a self-determining township"; the court case of Gilles Pfeiffer and the proposal for a new Secretary to the Auroville

MEETING WITH THE INTERNATIONAL ADVISORY COUNCIL

The day after the long session with the Governing Board, a smaller number of Auroville Council members met with the three members of the International Advisory Council. Though Prof. Ervin Laszlo and Mr. Bertrand Schneider had just arrived that morning, it did not prevent them giving, together with Mrs. Hanne Strong who had arrived a few days earlier, penetrating comments on the topics brought to their attention by the Council. "What do you expect from us?" was their question to the community. "Do we only serve to extinguish the fires when they are lit?" "Why is there no communication between us except for emergencies?" "How do you expect us to function if you do not keep us informed?" It became clear that the members of the International Advisory Council had not been kept informed by either the Governing Board or the community on the pending

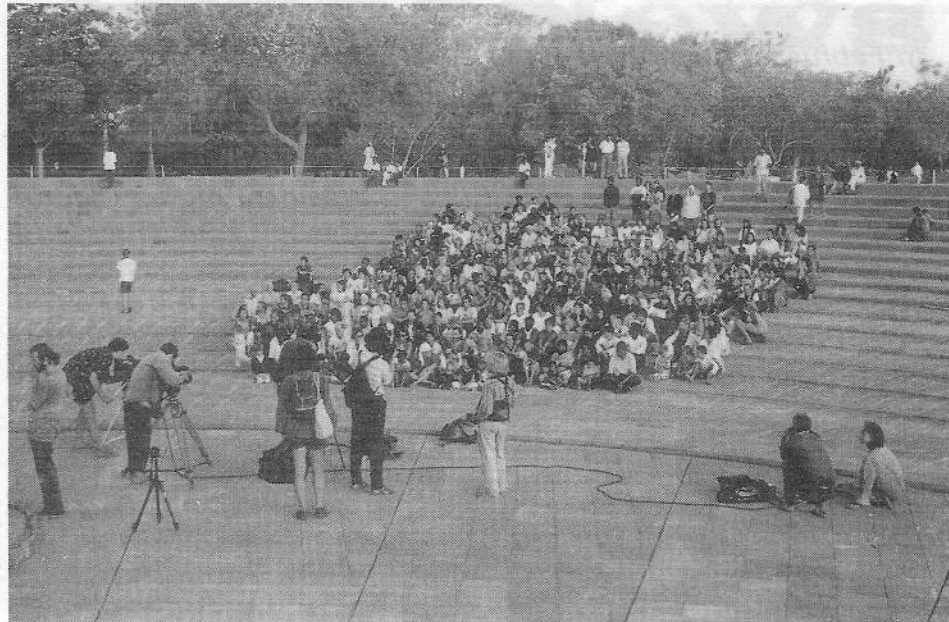


Photo call for Aurovillians after the bonfire (see page 7)

Foundation.

The discussion on the White Paper, prepared by the community, took the full morning of the day. In essence this paper attempts to "formulate some necessary adjustments in the interpretation of the Foundation Act". It contains, according to its introduction, "a formulation of the principles on which the organisation of Auroville should be established, i.e. the guiding principles given by the Mother, with the intention to put them into practice as sincerely as possible at all levels of our collective life." Dr. Karan Singh gave a number of detailed comments, but basically agreed that most of the ideals expressed could find a place within the framework of the Act. Responding to expressions of uneasiness with the Foundation itself, he asked to what extent the Foundation had interfered with each Aurovillian's private sadhana, and asked if the Foundation had not been of help to Auroville? It was replied that, though the Foundation had proven it could be a positive instrument, the attitude of the previous Secretary on issues of visas, secret files and self-management had created a lot of uneasiness, and the counter affidavit filed by the present Secretary in the court case of Gilles Pfeiffer on behalf of the Governing Board and the International Advisory Council had only served to strengthen that uneasiness [see opposite page]. In the afternoon the dis-

cussion on this topic as well as the Council's proposal for a new Secretary continued. Reflecting on the community's experience with the two Secretaries, both serving government officers, it was observed that perhaps the task that has to be performed calls for a person of different abilities and someone who is familiar with the way Auroville works. With these requirements in view, the person of Mr. Kireet Joshi, former Secretary, Department of Education, Ministry of Human Resources Development, and long-standing friend and aide of Auroville was proposed by the Council as Member-Secretary to the Governing Board, with the suggestion that he could delegate part of his responsibilities to a deputy Secretary, preferably an Aurovillian. This proposal was favourably received both by the Governing Board and the International Advisory Council.

Both Dr. Karan Singh and members of the Council expressed their feelings of contentment with the proceedings of the day, and the overall impression was of more openness and understanding from both sides.

[Note: Dr. Kireet Joshi has meanwhile informed Dr. Karan Singh that he regrets that he cannot accept the function of either Member-Secretary or Member of the Governing Board.—Eds.]

"There needs to be a strong will and push from the community to help the outside world to understand and appreciate Auroville's aims."

issues. It was concluded that quarterly reports from both sides are essential for a proper functioning of the International Advisory Council.

Another major topic brought up by the International Advisory Council members was the image of Auroville. "At the moment, Auroville gives an impression of being closed in upon itself. Either Auroville doesn't have an image or its image is bad. We are willing to help, but there needs to be a strong will and push from the community to help the outside world to understand and

appreciate Auroville's aims. You will have to present a unified image to the outside world and respect the traditions of your host country. You have to take up this society and embrace it. India needs to be proud of Auroville. Only then will it be easy for the Indian Government to support and protect you. You have achieved much, but you have to create a bridge with the outside world and make a strategy of communication."

The next day the members of the International Advisory Council had their own meeting. Afterwards they informed members of the Auroville Council that the International Advisory Council will actively pursue two of the most burning issues of the community: raising funds for land purchase, and supporting the communities' request to the Government of India for a special status under the Foreigners Act. They also stressed that Auroville should strengthen all attempts to become self-sufficient in its food growing and processing.

"We are at the end of certainties"

In February, three members of the INTERNATIONAL ADVISORY COUNCIL of the Auroville Foundation visited the community to hold their annual meeting. Each member is eminent in their own field—Dr. Ervin Laszlo is a scientist, futurist and, among other things, adviser to the Director-General of UNESCO and President of The Club of Budapest; Hanne Strong is President of Manitou Foundation and Manitou Institute, and founder of The Earth Restoration Corps; and Bertrand Schneider is Secretary-General of the prestigious Club of Rome. AUROVILLE TODAY took the opportunity one evening to ask them to discuss the major trends they saw emerging in the world today.

Hanne: On the positive side, awareness about the environment and sustainability is far greater today than it was in 1992 when the Rio Conference happened. Then, many of the governments didn't know what they were signing; today everybody is talking about 'Agenda 21', the blueprint for a sustainable future. And this awareness shift has happened particularly at the grassroots level. It's the people who are pushing the politicians on this one: when the Republicans in the U.S. Congress wanted to scrap environmental controls, the public soon made them back down.



From l. to r.: Bertrand Schneider, Hanne Strong and Ervin Laszlo.

Bertrand: There is far greater awareness about human rights today. Even those regimes which are not particularly interested in respecting them are realizing that, if they want to join the international community, they have to make an effort on this front.

Hanne: Another really amazing trend is that governments and major institutions are beginning to openly discuss ethics and spirituality. Recently, I went to a meeting at the World Bank—of all places!—on the theme of morals, spiritual values and development, and the United Nations has hosted a conference on 'Prophecy' to which they invited the elders of nine Amerindian tribes. Why are these big institutions legitimizing spirituality? Because they realize that if this perspective is not taken into account, if people go on getting more corrupt, more greedy, then nature and humanity are finished.

So the Western development agencies are at last beginning to listen to the wisdom of the native peoples rather than imposing their own models of development—which were dead wrong—upon the developing world. They are commissioning numerous studies of indigenous culture and spirituality because they begin to see that the indigenous peoples may have some of the answers to the big questions. That they knew, for example, how to live in the forests for over 10,000 years without destroying them.

Of course, the Western-educated leaders of developing nations are still pushing for Western-style development. But if the big development agencies start listening to the native people, these leaders will have to start

listening also.

Bertrand: When we look at present trends, we need to consider two aspects. On the one hand, awareness about many crucial issues has increased enormously. On the other hand, we have to ask what this awareness has led to. Has anything really been done to change things for the better? This is much harder to ascertain.

When I look around, I see certain things getting worse. Corruption extends everywhere, bureaucracies are stronger than ever and environmental destruction continues apace. Can you imagine the effect upon the

biosphere of millions of Chinese and Indians switching from cycles to motorcycles and cars in the coming years? And then there is the incredible international financial disorder resulting from an unregulated global economy. Did you know that only two countries in the world—Japan and Taiwan—are living within their means at present? The rest are in debt.

Hanne: And Japan and Taiwan are only 'living within their means' because they take resources from everybody else!

In fact, if you talk to the indigenous people, who are the people closest to nature, most of them are saying that we've crossed the point of no-return, that we've damaged the air, the soil and the water so much that now nature will effect dramatic changes. And when you talk to the scientists who have the full picture, they tell you the same thing, that it's already happening—witness the extreme climate changes, the eruption of new diseases for which there are no cure, the destruction of the ozone layer. There is now a huge world food deficit which means, as the World Health Organization pointed out recently, that if there is a major drought anywhere on the planet nobody will be able to help—because the food just isn't there.

And I was in Washington recently when Lester Brown of the Worldwatch Institute told the decision-makers—government people, industrialists, etc.—that none of their predictions about how the world would keep developing, how the GNP would keep increasing etc. were going to happen. Why not? Because the clean water is no longer

there, the soil is not there, the flora and fauna are no longer there...

Ervin: It is evident that there will be mutations in nature as a result of all the chemical changes we are introducing, for the biosphere will seek to achieve a new state of equilibrium. And since the simpler life-forms, like mankind's predators the viruses, mutate fastest we may soon be subjected to very unfavourable conditions. So I think we'd better look for another planet to colonise!

But I'm not without hope. I think there has been a quantum leap in awareness about the challenges facing us, and I also think we are one year closer to the threshold point at which major changes will occur. You see, there are two ways in which a major transformation can take place. One is linear, step-by-step, and the other is sudden, discontinuous, unpredictable, the result of a critical threshold being reached. I don't think the changes, the transformation will be linear, but I'm sure it will happen. The questions are, how soon? And at what cost?

Bertrand: We are at the end of certainties. I don't see anything in the world which is predictable any more. We can imagine a number of possible scenarios for the future, but we also know that none of them will correspond to the reality.

"You can't restore the Earth without restoring the Spirit."

We are experiencing a very important transition. We are shifting from a society for which we understood the rules—they were often very unjust rules, but we knew them (a former President of Germany told me how simple things were at the time of Brezhnev!)—to a society about which we know nothing at all. And our task now is to discover, to establish, new ways of being for a new society, not by imposition but by discussion among all the peoples of the world. This will take time. So we are caught in a contradiction. We have to hurry up with the changes because of the urgency of the Earth's condition, but we need time because human attitudes cannot be changed so quickly.

Ervin: We not only have to inform people about what's going wrong, but REform their whole world view, their perception of themselves and the world. I'm reminded of what Einstein said—that you can't solve a problem with the same kind of thinking that created it. The values and world views which have dominated this century so far, which see the world as some kind of machine which can be engineered and repaired, are leading us into a cul-de-sac, and the system is beginning to crack.

There's a belief on the part of the ruling elite in reversibility: that the present problems are temporary and that we can return to the status quo if we just make a few adjustments. This is a complete fallacy. And those who believe in this are bound to go under...

Bertrand: And, somehow, the ordinary people know this. That there is no long-term vision among the world's leaders: in fact, there's no leadership at all. This is why there is such a widespread mistrust of institutions, of political parties, of governments. People know there will have to be major changes but they're scared because they don't know what to expect. And the ruling elite are fighting a rearguard action to hold on to

their power.

Hanne: I agree that changing values, perspectives, is the key to changing society, but I don't agree that there is no vision for the future. For the one action I'm concentrating upon is precisely this: changing the predominant world view. Not of our generation—they're so stuck in the old view that it's mission impossible—but of the younger generation. Did you know that in the next few years 2 billion teenagers will come into the global job market looking for jobs that don't exist? What are you going to do with them?

So what I'd like to do in this project called The Earth Restoration Corps is to help channel the energy of these young people towards restoring the Earth. But you can't restore the Earth without restoring the spirit. So while we will teach them specific techniques, skills, to begin with they will receive a spiritual training about their connection to nature based on the full picture of the cosmic and natural laws. They'll learn that there is a meaning to life, and that they have a place in the Universe, and then they'll go out and teach and farm and build in a sustainable way.

Ervin: But how do you communicate this vision? Because while certain parameters of the future may be obvious, the overall vision of it is not. We don't know what the world of the future will look like.

Hanne: One thing's for sure. If we don't do something about changing things now, there won't be any future world!

Ervin: And this is why we need to mobilize whatever resources we have to face the biggest challenge in human history. At present there is a tremendous reserve of creativity which generally goes untapped because it's locked up in rigid structures like organized religion and education. Most educational systems do violence to people's common sense, and are ignorant of the fact that some of the 'Earth thinking' that we're talking about is already there in the child: if it's allowed to emerge, the potential for change is enormous.

Bertrand: We should also realize that we are subject to the very powerful impact of the mass media which focusses upon negative trends. This makes many people think that the situation is desperate. But while many of us may not be able to envisage global solutions at present, there are thousands of smaller solutions being effected daily in relationship to the environment and development. There are not enough of them, they don't work fast enough, but they are signs that something is possible. In this sense, we all have a choice—to be the victims or to be active in effecting change.

Ervin: How will the massive changes that are necessary take place? It's very unlikely that it will happen from the top down. If it happens in time, it's much more likely to come from a major ground swell which will sweep away the traditional leaders. But how will the ground swell be created? How will the new vision, values be disseminated? The effects of the new multimedia revolution are as yet unknown: nobody knows its real impact upon society, education, governments, and few people are trying to find out. But you don't need Internet to create a basic change in people's perceptions—it spreads faster than that. I can't give you the details, but I intuitively know that if a group of people—in Baca, Auroville or anywhere else—are really developing at a high intensity, that will have its effect upon everyone and everything.

From an interview by Alan

How Gene helped me become an Aurovilian

by Janet

Gene Maslow, one of the first Aurovilians, returned to Pondicherry in February critically ill. He died in the Ashram Nursing Home on February 28th.

I hadn't seen Gene Maslow for years, and my memories of him were very mixed, to say the least. However, since he was my first contact with Auroville, I was looking forward to seeing him again, especially because it was clear that this was to be his last visit. I waited for news of his arrival. None came. The 28th of February passed. Then I heard what had happened. Gene had come to India on a one-way ticket, made it to Pondicherry, and left his body on Auroville's 28th birthday. Well done, Gene.

Gene always had a superb sense of the dramatic, and his impressive departure was true to character. I hope he managed to have one last coffee in the Indian Coffee House before he left. When I wandered into Pondicherry in 1968 Gene was a middle-aged sadhak from New York, who had been living in the Ashram for several years, and a famous man-about-town. One day in September he invited me to his studio at Parc a Charbon (now Park Guest House) to show me the hollow cement blocks, planks and poles that were to be used to make a portable house in Auroville. The floor was to be of sand, and the walls could be put up in a day. (Today those pieces are part of Michael Tait's house in Centre Field.) Gene asked me if I would like to go out to Auroville and help him build his house. (He was something of an organizer, and this was 1968. Why not?) I said sure, not knowing then what I was getting into. We went by Landrover to the Centre (later called Peace), after first delivering a barrel of water to the residents of Forecomers, then the only other community in Auroville besides Promesse and AuroOrchard. The Centre consisted of the Banyan Tree, the Urn, and three large huts on the site of the present Matrimandir Camp. Six people were living at the Centre. Syed Hussein, usually called Subedar (his Indian Army rank), was the general manager and overseer. Subedar's assistant was a villager called RamDas, who had a little girl, Chinnapouna. They had been recently

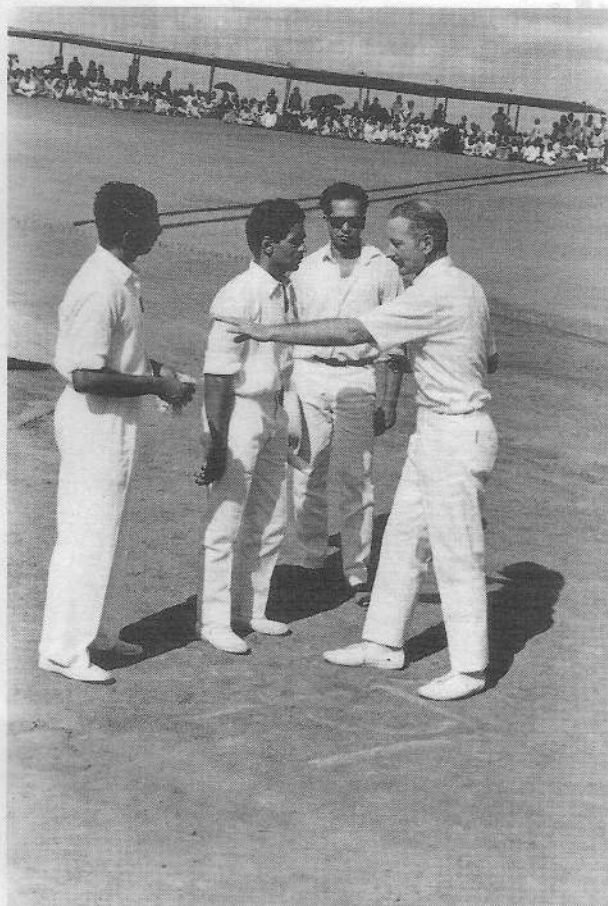


PHOTO: I.A. PODDAR (COURTESY: AUROVILLE ARCHIVES)
Gene Maslow in 1968: helping organize Auroville's inauguration ceremony.

joined by AuroArindam, another American sadhak. Ala Marum Amma (mother of the Banyan Tree), an ancient crone lived in a tiny hut under the Banyan Tree with her transvestite son, RajaGopal. They had, for years, been making daily pujas there. There was nothing else but red earth and a few jackfruit and palmyra trees. Gene had already chosen a plot with three trees as the site for his house. (Mother later called that house Sincerity.) There we worked away all day, but the results hardly invited human habitation. We went back to Arindam's hut to wait for our ride to Pondicherry, but it didn't come. I never went back to Pondicherry, except to pick up my belongings from the Ashram Guest House. Gene and I remained in Arindam's hut for several months, till we all built our own houses. After that our ways parted, and I lost track of him.

Now, looking back, I realize how important it was that Gene and Arindam, Americans with Ashram experience, set up a place in Auroville to receive various Western travellers, many of whom became the early Aurovilians. Some of those travellers are still here, or active in AVI centres abroad. Gene's role was crucial to Auroville's early development. For this I, for one, will remain forever grateful. Dominus vobiscum. Gene Maslow, R.I.P.

GOOD-BYE GENE

On a outbound flight from L.A., with a one-way ticket in his hand, Gene Maslow slid back into Mother's world with a few days to spare. After battling a long-term illness, Gene decided that from inside Mother's Ashram he would leave his body.

A wonderful con-artist, huckster, with more chutzpah than any ten new-age gurus, he could be lovable, sweet, with that something that The Mother saw in him as she sees in all of us.

In the Sixties he resided a number of years in the Ashram before Mother directed him to Auroville. One of the very first to live on the land in Auroville, Gene received the name Sincerity for the area from The Mother and built the first semi-permanent structure in the fall of 1968. He was the person who introduced me and many others to Auroville.

Gene Maslow left his body at 5:45pm on February 28, 1996. he chose a great day.

Francis

Brief News

A seminar on the bio-region will be organised in Auroville in late April, in which also the District Collector (the highest Government official of the district in which Auroville is located) and other officials will participate.

Three days of Art happened recently at Kalabhumi, the Land of the Arts, in the Cultural zone. Many individuals experimented with paint, clay, metal and stone. The jazz concerts on the first and second nights were enjoyed by all.

An "all-Auroville group-photo" at the Amphitheatre, taken after the birthday bonfire, became less collective than was intended. Many had left before there was sufficient light for the photographers to shoot their memorial photograph.

The Table for Peace for Auroville was inaugurated on the Golden Day, February 29th. The Gayatri Mantra, sung by Joy and Angad, opened the simple ceremony. It was followed by a recorded message from the Mother, a speech by Dr. Karan Singh, recorded for the occasion, and speeches by Piero, Mira Nakashima and Carel. Two tabla players from the Ashram concluded the ceremony, drumming on the Table, proving that there is music in a Peace Table.

In a beautiful conclusion to the Golden Day, the Auroville Children's Choir and the Adults' Choir, conducted by Nuria, collectively performed at the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium.

The Auroville ground-water table is falling dramatically, after the failure of the monsoon. Pondicherry has been declared 'drought hit', and the Auroville Water Service has asked the Auroville communities to reduce their water consumption.

The solar kitchen and dining room has so far received a total of Rs 68 lakhs (US \$ 212,000) for the construction of the buildings and the solar bowl; it will hopefully start operating on a minimum level in July this year. To start using the solar bowl and for full-scale operation, another 10 to 20 lakhs will be needed.

On Auroville's birthday, children of Arulvazhi school performed in a dance drama on Sri Aurobindo's epic poem *Savitri*. The children were from the local villages and so, in collaboration with Auroville's outreach programme, "a garland of mingled blossoms [was woven], taking the native wild flowers of this soil and adding to it the fragrance of the music of Sunilda".

A hygiene board has been formed to assess and assist the preparation, processing and serving of food in Auroville. The group will devise guidelines for food procurement, storage, cleaning, cooking, packing, serving and retailing after a careful study of the Auroville situation. It is intended that this group will monitor cleanliness, hygiene, toxicity, acceptability, disposal and other related parameters through periodic visits to all places in Auroville where food is made available to large numbers of people.

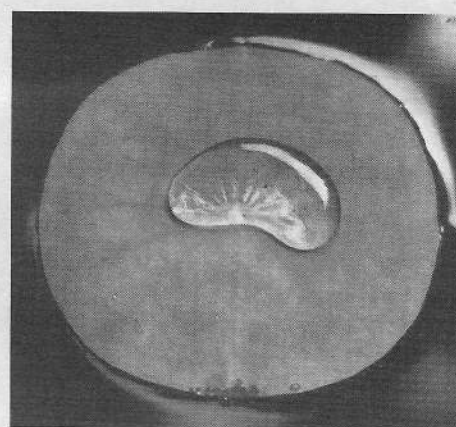
Electricity to farmers in Tamil Nadu is provided free of charge. The Tamil Nadu Government, however, recently changed this policy so as to exclude from this subsidy farms belonging to institutions. This decision financially severely hits the Auroville farms, which are part of the Auroville Foundation. Requests have been made to the Tamil Nadu Government to review its decision.

Auroville Fund has moved from Bharat Nivas to the Financial Service office next to Pour Tous. The empty spaces at Bharat Nivas will be used for secretarial services.

On Mother's birthday, Heinrich gave a piano recital of well-known pieces by Bach, Beethoven and Schubert interspersed by a beautiful interpretation of Webern's "Variation I", an interesting new composition by the young Auroville composer Pushkar, and a piece by the young Norwegian composer Ida Heidel. Only after several encores with Brahms' Berceuse as the very last did Heinrich manage to get the audience to leave this inspired concert.

The outgoing Ambassador of the European Community in India, Mrs. Henrich, visited Auroville for a few days.

Auroville Archives has issued another appeal to all those who have archival material on Auroville in their possession. Anyone out there who does not mind surrendering early mementoes, please contact Krishna Tewari at Auroville Archives, Auroville.



Ireno's "photopeinture" was exhibited at in the Alliance Française in Pondicherry. The works are a synthesis of photography and painting techniques.

A three-day Kabbadi—a Tamil game—tournament was held in Auroville at New Creation sports ground, at which 46 men's teams and 9 women's teams participated. The tournament formed part of a series of Pondicherry state-level tournaments.

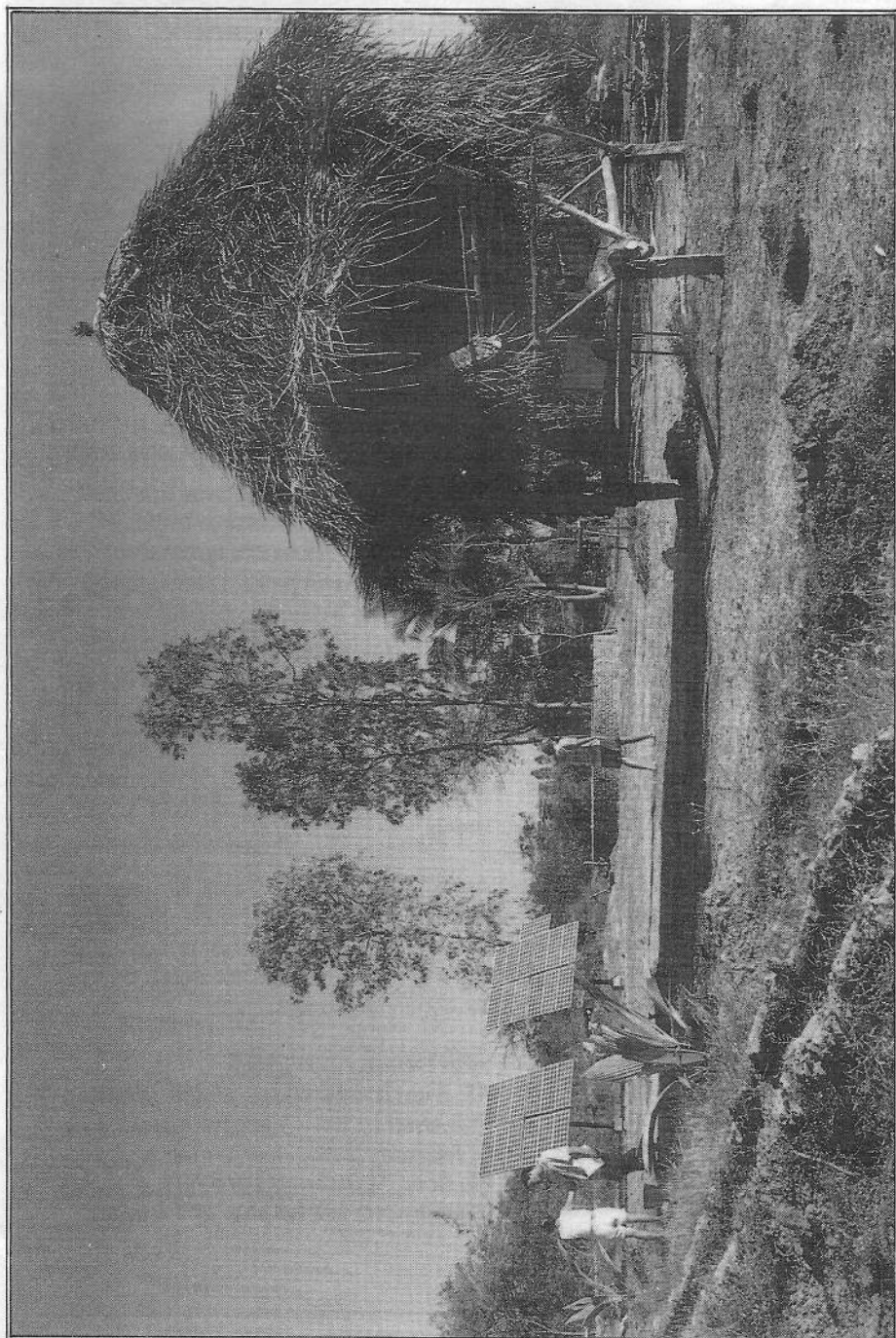
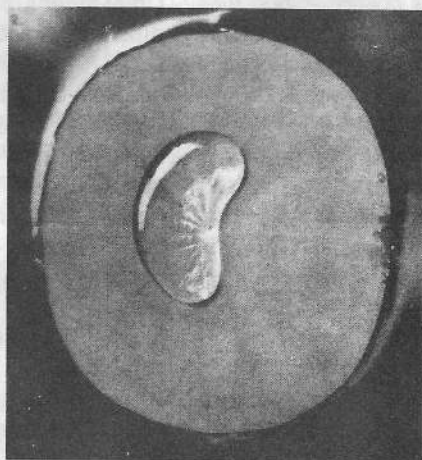
Amla, a well-known Tamil film actress, who expected to spend a few quiet days at the Centre Guest-house, ended up by signing her autograph for hours on end for admiring villagers.

NEW E-MAIL ADDRESSES

All e-mail addresses which mention frhit.ernet.in have become obsolete as of February 29th. New e-mail addresses are: ["\(name\)@auroville.org.in"](mailto:(name)@auroville.org.in) (Please note: NO full stop at the end!)

AUROVILLE
TODAYCSR Office
Auroville 605101
Tamil Nadu, India

Exp. # 99

AUROVILLE ARCHIVES
C/D KRISHNA T.
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Number Eighty-SevenIN THIS ISSUE: FARMING; VISA MATTERS; VISIT OF GOVERNING BOARD AND
INTERNATIONAL ADVISORY COUNCIL; PORTRAIT OF A COMMUNITY.

Bridging the past and the future: a pioneer capsule and photovoltaic panels at Solitude

Solitude

Just past the Bharat Nivas, there is a big bump in the road. That's the signal to turn off onto a little dusty path that was rumoured to lead to Solitude. The path wanders across the International Zone and you could end up at the Tibetan Pavilion on the right, or the Visitors' Centre on the left, if you are not careful. I was careful, and saw some pioneer symbols rising above the fence—"capsules". The "capsule" for those who may not know, is a biodegradable pyramidal hut of local materials [see photo] evolved in early Auroville by Johnny working with the village builders. It resembles a low-tech, back to nature, lunar landing module. The group of young Aurovilians who have founded Solitude have started from scratch because they want to work with the land and build up a self-sustaining agricultural base.

Ah, I was back in history, a time warp, when most of Auroville looked and felt like this. Space, dust, and the sun were the overwhelming features. However, Solitude already has some beautiful assets. In the middle, an open well (from the past) with clear water glistening in the sun, and nine hundred watts of solar power (from the future) arrayed next to it to pump it up to the thirsty people and plants: there are advantages to starting a new community in 1996 which is when Solitude jelled. A year before, Kartik, Muniandi, and Martanda had staked the place out, but only in the past months when Krishna, Eiko, Gemma and John made it their permanent home have things begun to really take shape. They still count Muniandi as a community member, more or less. He says (when I met him having lunch at Bharat Nivas): "I'm out doing all the work gathering materials for them, that's why I'm not there." Martanda is doing a serious course of studies now, and Kartik may or may not turn up once in a while.

Sitting in the only shade on the ten acres, a small grove of young coconuts, four of the community members speak of their dreams: "Over there, the orchard; and just beyond, the rice fields. Right now, we're building the kitchen, the bathroom and the storeroom."

Next to us, sitting out in the open is a food cupboard, the kitchen-to-be is a cleared area with some holes for granite posts. A mattress lies in the sun, the wash, hanging from a rope, flaps dry in the wind, some tiny



Some of the young Solitude pioneers, in front of a "capsule". From l. to r.: Krishna, Eiko, John, Gemma.

beans are starting to climb their stakes.

Tools and materials are scattered around ready for more to happen.

"You know, we have a cow. David's looking after it until we get the cow grass growing. There's a thousand things to do. Look at that amla tree over there. Isn't it beautiful? It was completely dried up when we came and now look at the new growth. See the neem tree out there in the middle? It's a special space where there's a water catchment area. Maybe we will dig it out a little more. We want to do the whole thing: alternative construction, eco stuff, biogas... Money we don't have, but energy is money. The more energy we put in the more will come. We're doing the work ourselves." Muniandi told me that they planned to operate their economy in another way: "We give 50% to Auroville in kind and 50% in kind to the village for the work and things we need from them. It's an exchange, no cash flow." Is it youthful idealism, Auroville's ideal, or the economy of the future?

Why do you call it Solitude? "That name came with the place. Kartik gave it, but people say we should change it. Let's see. Maybe we'll call it Victory."

Bill

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