

AUROVILLE TODAY

Number 126, July 1999

avtoday@auroville.org.in

IN THIS ISSUE

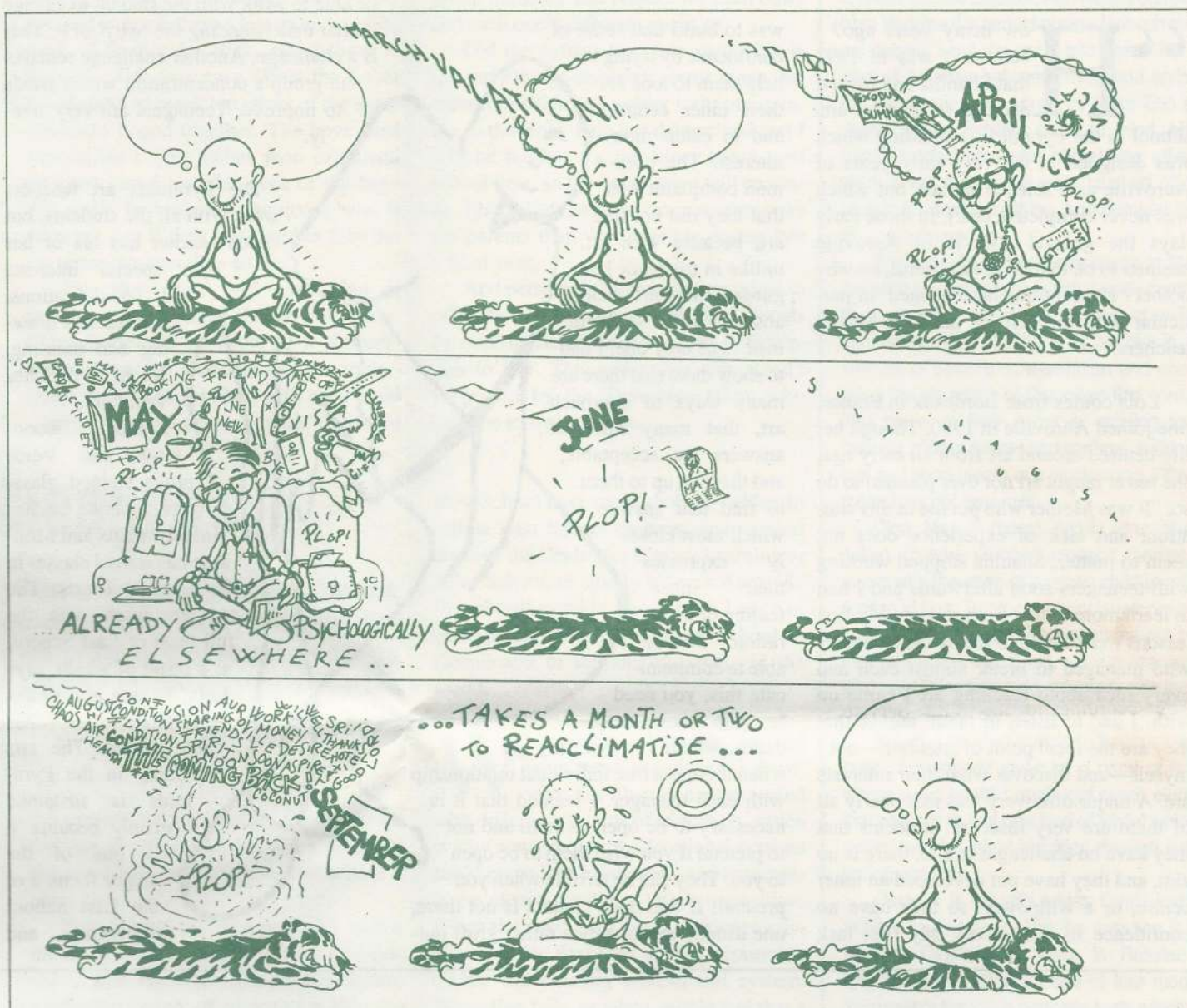
- Is there anybody there?1
Many Aurovillians are out for the summer.
What are the consequences?
- The Pyramids Arts Centre2
- The Eagles3
- School Closures3
A critical look at the closure, or partial closure, of two schools
- Forest Days4
Diary of a greenworker
- The fisher people of Bommopalayam5
A photo feature
- Check-dam Kireet6
Kireet on his erosion control work
- Managing Auroville's waste6
- Myrtle and Joy: two tributes7
- Summer Exodus Blues or Astral Shopping8

According to the Visa Service, about 400 people will be out of Auroville between April and the end of June. If one considers that the total of "in station" Aurovillians and newcomers in February was about 1300, and that the Visa Service figures don't include Indian Aurovillians, this summer we've lost about one third of Auroville!

What effect does this have? On the positive side, it's shorter queues at the Solar Kitchen, easier shopping in Pour Tous, and the chance to house-sit well-appointed villas. Above all, after the hectic winter tourist season Auroville is quiet again and—as the heat sets in—the people who are left seem to become more inward, more in touch with something at the core. There's a quiet vibrancy so different from the hectic outer activities of the winter months. As Roger put it, "in the summer, Auroville regains its virginity!"

This may be so. But on the community level there is a price to be paid. The first signs are the shutting down or abbreviation of various services. The bus to Pondy runs only twice a week instead of four times, the library shuts in the afternoons, the Visa Service opens only three mornings a week and, for the whole of May, Quiet Healing Centre closes down completely because all the therapists are out or need a break. Even the Matrimandir Chamber is occasionally closed due to lack of attendants.

Nothing disastrous, perhaps, but often there's a disguised knock-on effect. For example, when the Transport Service went off on a one-week holiday trip, the Solar Kitchen people had to scramble around to find alternative means of transporting raw ingredients and meals. "All these holidays, it's like a disease," says Andrea, one of the Solar Kitchen organizers, "it disturbs the



Drawing by Emanuele

Calendar of a part-time yogi...

Is there anybody there?

There's nothing new about the annual summer exodus of Aurovillians, but this year the numbers are greater than ever...

flow of things."

A sentiment which is echoed by Otto from the Financial Service. He points out that important new initiatives often emerge in spring or early summer, but by the time they are ready to be implemented, nothing happens because key people are out and there's no longer any community to refer to. "And it's not simply a matter of waiting until people return because by then the moment has passed, the momentum has been lost."

This summer key groups like the Finance and Assets Management Committee have remained intact, but the Representatives Group is losing people, some of whom will not be replaced by the Work Group they were representing.

Meanwhile the group which has committed itself to presenting the Governing Board with a preliminary land use plan in August has also been decimated by the summer outflow.

"Of course everything slows down during these months," says Paul Vincent of the Working Committee. "I wish that everybody wasn't out at the same time, but that's how it is and we just have to cope." However, Mr. Srinivasmurthy, Finance Officer of the Auroville Foundation, believes that something can be done. He notes that Auroville is heavily dependent upon key people whose temporary absence causes disproportionate problems. "This is why the Secretary is encouraging various groups to clarify their policies and set up

systems which will allow them to become less personality-based."

The people who are hardest hit by the summer exodus are probably the food growers and providers. "In winter we have an overload of tourists, in summer everybody drains out of the community," says Olivier of the La Ferme cheese unit, "and these wild annual swings in demand are the biggest problem we have to face. In summer the cows continue to give milk, but the demand for our cheese drops dramatically. We've built cold storage but it's insufficient to store all the cheese that we make until our customers are back." Charlie, who runs the biggest dairy in Auroville, has a similar problem. "Since we don't control when our cows get preg-

(continued on page 2)

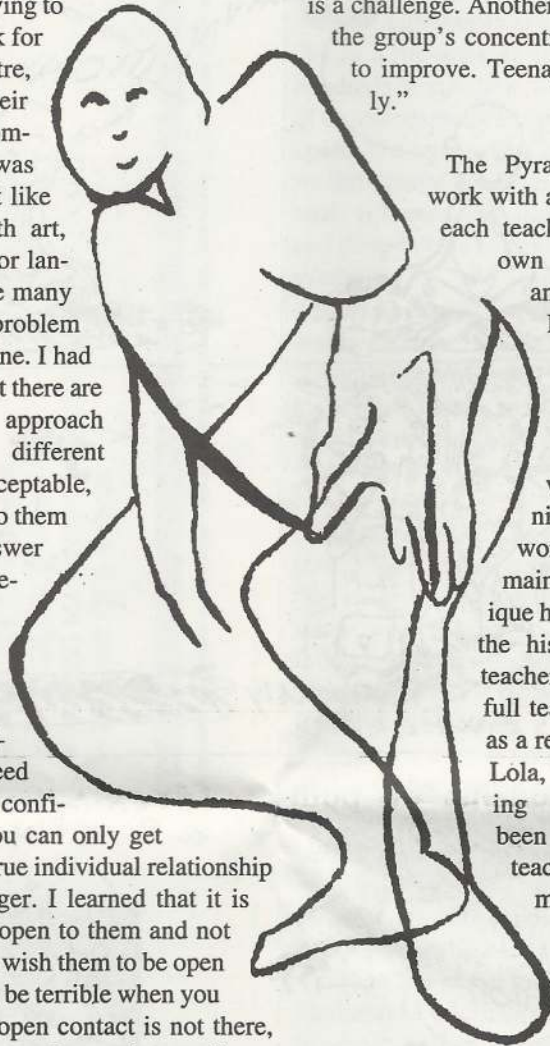
The PYRAMIDS Arts Centre

Students of Last School (12-18 years) hosted a remarkable exhibition of their work as well as work by children of Transition School (8-14 years), After School (15 to 18 years) and by free students (7-22 years) in the Pyramids Arts Centre in April. What was striking was not only the quality of the exhibits, some of which were impressive, but also the way in which the students themselves had staged the exhibition in the unfinished structure, for this showed a true development of artistic sense. Auroville Today spoke with Lola, who, together with Shantha, started the Arts Centre some years ago.

“How many years ago? I believe it was in 1993 that Shantha and myself decided to start an arts school in the Pyramids [a building which was designed in the very early years of Auroville as a science school, but which was never completed, eds.]. In those early days the general attitude in Auroville seemed to be that art is not useful, so why bother? Happily this has changed, in particular with the help of the Last School teachers.”

Lola comes from Bordeaux in France. She joined Auroville in 1990. Though her life centred around art from an early age, she never taught art nor ever planned to do so. “It was Mother who put me in this situation, and lack of experience does not seem to matter. Shantha stopped working with teenagers soon afterwards and I had to learn more or less from scratch. My first lessons were taught to me by the teenagers who managed to break almost each and every idea about teaching art I came up with. I had to listen to them, realise that they are the focal point of attention—not I myself—and discover what their interests are. A major discovery was that nearly all of them are very insecure. It seems that they have no challenges in life, there is no aim, and they have not developed an inner centre, or a willpower, so they have no confidence in themselves. My first task

was to build that sense of confidence by trying to help them to look for their inner centre, and to catch their interest. The common complaint was that they did not like art, because with art, unlike in maths or languages, there are many answers to a problem instead of only one. I had to show them that there are many ways to approach art, that many different answers are acceptable, and that it is up to them to find that answer which most closely expresses their inner feeling or aspiration. To be able to communicate this, you need to gain their confidence, which you can only get when there is a true individual relationship with each teenager. I learned that it is necessary to be open to them and not to pretend if you wish them to be open to you. They can be terrible when you pretend! If that open contact is not there, one usually meets only a rather gruff out-



side, which may be the reason why many adults feel uncomfortable with teenagers. But once the relationship is there, everything is possible, and it becomes a joy to work with them: once they open up, they are full of possibilities and incredibly sweet.

The first years were difficult, and I learned as much as I taught. What to do, for example, when a teenager presents something I consider ugly or even vulgar? I cannot just ‘reject’ it out of hand—even if my being feels like doing so—but I have to be able to accept that ‘shadow-side’, to be able to work with the student to change it after understanding the ‘why’ of it. That is a challenge. Another challenge remains the group’s concentration which needs to improve. Teenagers are very lively.”

The Pyramids art teachers work with all the students, but each teacher has his or her own special interests and qualifications. Lola teaches drawing and painting, Michèl teaches sculpture, Jivatman woodwork and Véronique stained glasswork. Shantha teaches mainly adults and Monique has started classes in the history of arts. The teachers work with the full team of Last School, as a result of which, says Lola, “a safe and evolving environment has been created. The arts teaching in the Pyramids is sustained mainly because it is one of the major focuses of the Last School programmes, and

because of this the Pyramids has become a living centre for the teaching of the arts.”

What is the purpose of teaching arts? “We do not try to build artists here,” says Lola, “though a few students have this possibility. Primarily, art is a means to develop the concentration, refine the vital and develop the aesthetic sense, to discover oneself and work towards a harmonious being, and to train one’s endurance to manifest an idea. The latter in particular is a challenge for most teenagers: to learn to spend weeks if not months on the creation of an object of art. This implies that the children need a lot of time for the arts. The Last School schedule allows its students to spend two to twelve hours a week on it, as per their own choice, which enables us to give them much individual support. The other Auroville schools have allotted much less time in their curricula, normally only two hours a week. This does not allow us to give much individual coaching; instead we work rather with group oriented programmes. But this too is very rewarding. I am teaching the method of the Greek Nikolaides, which is to ask the students to draw by only looking at the model, and not at the paper. This develops the consciousness of the hand and the eye. There are, of course, no results in the beginning and the children are often discouraged. But if they manage to sustain the exercise, they not only develop a wonderful concentration, but also a special quality in the drawing. This technique has helped a few children to achieve a sense of identification with the object, and many have felt that the lines and shapes come alive! That is a wonderful achievement, and it has strengthened my conviction that everything is possible, and depends only how deep you can go with them. I can show them that it does not matter what you do in arts, but only how you do it, with what attitude you do it. And that art does not stop at the door of the Pyramids, but that it can become their way of being, in all the details of their life.”

Carel

Is there anybody there? (contd.)

nant, we often have a big surplus of milk in the summer. I make much of the excess milk into cheese, but in the end I have to tell some of the communities that send us their milk to distribute not to send any more. Then it becomes their problem!”

Agnes helps manage an Auroville food-processing unit. “In the summer our sales are down by 50%. We hope that an Auroville shop that will open in Madras next month will tide us over this period in the future, but for the moment we have to send two or three of our workforce home and the rest work shorter hours which means, of course, that they get less money. It’s by far the toughest time of year for us.”

The Pour Tous store is in a particularly difficult situation. It relies upon a 10% surcharge on sales to cover its running expenses, but with fewer customers in the summer its daily turnover is down from Rs 80,000 to about Rs 55,000. “To make matter worse,” says Mani, “our generator bills are much higher at this time of the year due to frequent power outages.” So how do they cope? “We don’t lay off any workers, but we do reduce our stock. Sometimes we

The Pour Tous store is in a particularly difficult situation. It relies upon a 10% surcharge on sales to cover its running expenses, but with fewer customers in the summer its daily turnover is down from Rs 80,000 to about Rs 55,000.

have to refuse products from Auroville farms... which causes a lot of resentment. But what can we do?”

As to the effect upon the productive units, the situation is less clear. Many are not directly dependent upon Aurovilians purchasing their products, but those which rely upon the tourist trade in Auroville and Pondicherry also experience a dearth of customers in the hot months. Some shorten their work hours; others take the opportunity to build up stock. Those unit managers who take a break, leaving the running of their unit to somebody else, often have to pay a price. “Last year I went out in the summer,” says Olivier. “I hadn’t prepared everything well and so the management

during the period I was away was a bit loose. As a result, there was a lot of wastage. I’m not going out again for at least another ten years!” Andrea notes that when a manager or executive goes out, there’s often a loss of rhythm and focus in the rest of the team which takes time to restore. “It took me weeks to gather up the threads again after I took a short break from my work at the Solar Kitchen.”

However, perhaps the real effects of the annual exodus operate at a different level. For the reality is that many Aurovilians, while they may leave Auroville for three months in the summer, are actually “out” much longer. There is, for example, the preparatory period when

they are already psychologically elsewhere, and often it takes a month or two for them to re-acclimatise—on all levels—after they return. In other words, many Aurovilians are “out” from the beginning of April until the beginning of September. If one considers that from mid-October until mid-December we are in the throes of the monsoon, and from mid-December until early March our main tourist period is in full swing, it’s difficult to see when we have the opportunity to experience ourselves as a community, or to build a community consciousness.

Of course, many of those who leave in the summer do so for perfectly understandable reasons—ageing parents, for example. But the question remains: can we really build the city of the future on the basis of an annual cycle like this? Isn’t there something odd about a community whose ideal is human unity, a community which aspires to practise collective yoga, spending or planning to spend a significant part of the year elsewhere? Some years ago Ram Dass called us “part-time yogis”. We laughed at the time. And now?

Alan

The Eagles

by Devaki

Though I knew the children by face, each of them was a discovery when I became, in July last year, teacher of "the Eagles", as this group of children was called. "A misnomer" was my first thought, as there was little in their unruly natures to compare to those noble birds. "The parrots" would have been a better name, but perhaps Transition School had some occult reason to select this name for the group?

The first need then was to bring harmony, within me, and among them. During the first weeks many children expressed how much they missed their previous teacher, Marval, and their wish that she come back. Realising how delicate the issue was, I intuitively shared their feelings and said how much I personally miss her too. We talked about her, what we liked in her or liked doing with her. Gradually the children started talking less and less about the past and became more focused on the present.

This was the time I was patiently waiting for. As the children grew more open to me, they started to cooperate and I could

express my likes and dislikes. The things which I appreciated were put into the group very slowly and carefully, a lot of them in an impersonal way by telling stories. The problem of the group's lack of harmony, for example, and the children's unfriendliness towards each other and their incessant complaints about each other, was addressed by telling an Indian story about a family with ten brothers who were always fighting each other. Their father decided to teach them a lesson and, giving each of them a fat stick, asked them to break it. This was easy. Then the father asked them to break ten sticks of the same thickness bound together. The boys tried but couldn't. The father then explained that just like the sticks, each of the boys can easily be broken by someone who is stronger; but if they are together they are ten times stronger than alone.

This story 'hit,' and some kind of improvement became slowly noticeable. Other stories did their job. As it is necessary for a proper group harmony to understand each child, I talked with each child separately, so that they wouldn't feel put

down in front of the class. To bring out the positive quality of each child, I showed public appreciation by giving a green card on which was written the reason why the child was the owner of that card. This not only boosted the child's self-esteem, but also helped the group to focus on qualities that could be academic, but could also concern other aspects of the child's personality. All in all, the children developed a group harmony and respect for each other and each one's different qualities.

Did the parrots turn into eagles? It is too early to say, though it seems to me that certain positive and nobler traits are coming to the front. Fate has determined that I will be teacher for the same group next school year, so the experiment will continue. I hope then to have more contact with the parents than was possible during this school year.

And personally? I have endeavoured to offer the whole year into Mother's hands by starting each class with an inner dedication to Her. This endeavour was greatly supported by the Transition team, who help me to feel at home.

New School have more choices—either to follow Last School courses, or to attend those of the Centre for Further Learning or After School, or simply to leave Auroville for schools outside: the French Lycée in Pondicherry, the International School in Kodaikanal or schools elsewhere in the world.

What lesson is Auroville learning from these experiences? Auroville has always experimented with different systems of education, which is why new schools or educational systems could come into existence—and apparently be closed—without much opposition. When the need for a new experience arises, it usually first tries to find expression within the existing educational system. When that fails, or when people feel that a radical change of atmosphere is necessary, a new teaching environment becomes inevitable. This was how both Mirramukhi and New School started. But in order to sustain such a project over the years, the concept has to remain flexible and expand. The fact that Mirramukhi closed as a primary school is an indication that its 'insular' system of education was ultimately resting on too narrow a base. The fact that New School closed is an indication that individual attempts to create a new educational system are bound to fail if they are not widely supported in the community—by supporting the teachers, and by providing proper management, sufficient teachers, teaching materials and finances. But these are only indications; so far, the Auroville School Board has not yet published an analysis of the reasons why the schools closed, or identified the needs for which the schools were started and seen to what extent those needs are or can be covered by the existing educational structure.

The heyday of 'free' educational experimentation, however, may soon be over. The costs of the Auroville schools are high, and are only partly met by outside sources such as the Government of

Øsmose: revolt in style

By LLoyd

When lead singer Olga of the new AV band Øsmose announced the "sweet little song called Eloise", no doubt half of the mixed audience was ready for something sweet. But instead the band broke out in a gallop at almost twice the break-neck speed of any of the preceding songs.

Bill Nelson, a leading composer in the 70s and 80s (Bebop DeLuxe, Red Noise) borrowed from Verlaine the perfect phrase for such musical cheek: "I put my revolt into style". For an idea of balance between revolt and style in modern music early songs by Brian Eno and Japan (David Sylvian) come to mind. Many bands flooded the market at that time, offering more revolt than style; were plucked off the streets for next to nothing, and dumped back there when used up.

The concept of much new music in these decades sounds simple, since it partly consists of accelerating rhythm at the cost of melody and lyrics. But nothing was simple in the amount of intense concentration and energy filling the six songs of Øsmose's first concert. The name of their game is: moving freely through various genres and rhythms, within the fast and short breath of a single song. What is more, they get away with it.

Olga, Mayuel (bass), Nicola (drums) and Julian (guitar) unrolled modern themes in music with the ease of a grown child unrolling licorice ribbon. Turning memory lanes into a six lane speedway, the six songs came out both well rehearsed and fluent, were presented in an unassuming way (and enlarged upon recent developments in music).

In fact, I still find it hard to believe I have been to a concert given by a band of four—whose ages totalled might not reach eighty—that possesses that rare kind of "style" which is a synonym for talent breaking through with a daring concept.

Øsmose is full with talent, tightly knitted, without flowing over. And the question is not whether Olga's lyrics were in Russian or English; but whether as one of four modern instruments her voice performs feats which are so often reserved for classical music.

In other words, various senior Aurovilians declared after the concert that "without wanting to judge quality" it was obvious that the "kids had great fun". The point then may be, whether those who orchestrate Auroville have the fluidity of solar plexus needed for the appreciation of promising young artists.

For a bold step into the future Auroville might do better than Pepsi Cola did by dragging Tina Turner back on stage. Øsmose definitely deserves what it may need to become export quality.

India. The community has to bear a major part of the burden—which rests in fact mainly on the shoulders of a few commercial units—and is not able to meet it adequately. In particular teachers' maintenance allowances are below what is considered acceptable and some of the teachers have had to stop teaching and find other sources of income in order to make ends meet. It may well be that economic pressure will finally force Auroville to manifest its educational 'diversity in unity' within existing structures, or structures that are built with wide community support.

Carel

School Closures

Two events occurred in Spring that were barely noticed in the Auroville News. Yet they were amongst the most fervently discussed in the community. They were the unexpected closures of the Mirramukhi primary school and of the recently started secondary school "New School." The students of both schools were left out in the cold.

The closures are distressing. Mirramukhi started more than ten years ago as a French language primary school in a keet hut in Dana with a lot of zeal and good intention. Parents of students who enrolled were requested to sign a commitment to keep their children at Mirramukhi till they were 18 years old, an indication of the seriousness of the endeavour. The school had some remarkable successes, in particular with its teaching of the arts. Also, the commitment of the teachers was widely praised, and, with funds from the Government of India and others, the school's team materialised a beautiful new school building. Criticism, however, also abounded. The school's selective admission policy was considered elitist. Its curriculum had large gaps, caused in particular by the absence of English and Tamil language teaching. Another criticism was that the team in charge of Mirramukhi preferred to work without publicity—despite requests, Auroville Today was never given any information about it—which strengthened the school's image as 'closed' and 'elitist.'

But whatever views one may have on Mirramukhi, the team's decision to close the primary school is a blow for the children involved, leaving their parents and the teachers of Transition, Auroville's other primary school, to solve the ensuing problems. The question "why?" has not been publicly answered; neither the parents nor the community have been given

the reasons for the closure. One assumes that the decision was based on personal reasons of the members of the school's team.

New School started a year ago, with a lot of community support as well as opposition, after repeated attempts to integrate a different system of education within the Last School system had failed (See Avtoday # 113, June 1998). The school opened in a simple keet hut in the cultural zone. However, the main teacher and those who supported him turned out to be unable to manifest the high ideals with which the school started—"a four year programme, possibly to be supplemented by a fifth year, to gear students towards college or university education." The school's management proved to be inadequate, and in the course of the year both teachers and students dropped out. At the end of the school year, the remaining students were informed that there were no plans for next year. The Last School teachers, understandably, are upset that New School, which started with a lot of acrimony by which, as they believe, Last School was harmed, has now ended in this way.

The main losers, of course, are the children. Those from Mirramukhi can go to Transition (where English is the medium of instruction), but some parents, enamoured of the Mirramukhi system, are now contemplating starting their own school, "Nachiketas," and have asked permission to build a couple of keet houses to do so. Is history repeating itself? The students from

Forest Days

By Joss

Joss, who has been stewarding Pitchandikulam Forest for almost three decades now and has more recently added a medicinal plant conservation park and seed museum to it, jots down moments from his busy life.

MONDAY

Big bat wing flap flapping squabbling sounds coming from the kurukoppalli tree as I walk through the misty forest to the seed room.

Today a group of village women have come for a training in medicinal plant identification and will learn some new simple herbal preparations from one of the traditional healers who comes to help us at the Bio-Resource Centre. Later the sounds of grinding and mixing, granite rubbing on granite and a lot of ladies voices can be heard coming from the hut next to the lily pond.

A Canadian architect working in Eastern Tibet comes for lunch and tells us about his work of trying to persuade the Chinese to plant the special trees needed so that eventually the temples can be rebuilt in the traditional way. He asks our help to advise on starting a medicinal plant research centre. Many groups of Tibetan refugees come for training in Auroville and always Pitchandikulam is a part of the program. Hopefully in the not too distant future we can go and help with Eco restoration works in Tibet itself.

The tooh tooh tooh of the coppersmith sounds from the top of the tree in the hot midday forest.

In the afternoon marking out new seedbeds in the nursery with Elumalai, we disturb a chameleon wandering so silently amongst the herbal plants ready for distribution to women in the villages.

TUESDAY

Planning the new storerooms, early in the morning, with Kanniyappan as he does the milking—light streaming through the canopy 50 feet above, the dog playing with the baby milk goats. Drumbeats in the village. Someone has died...

Bush rat tracks in the sand, bamboo leaves have already partly covered them, dancing down the sun rays in the early morning breeze.

Sitting quietly at 8 a.m. in a circle at the forest meeting place, planning the work with the twelve people who come each day to look after our 60 acres of orchards and forest sanctuary. Gardeners, nursery-persons, cooks, seed collectors, woodcutters, bullock cart and jeep drivers. A monitor lizard waddles past noisily searching for breakfast insects. Around 9 a.m. our botanists, community workers and computer people will come to the BioResource Centre. Two herbal practitioners arrive on bicycles to collect plants from the nursery. They bring seeds of some rare species found in a sacred grove near to their village.

A group of Forest officers are coming this morning for a training on our threatened indigenous species. I hope they like lemon grass tea as the cow kicked over the milk bucket this morning. Looking around the corner of the day, it is going to be a hot one, the sound of baubinia seeds pop popping in the forest can already be heard. Lunch in the Solar Kitchen with friends from the European Commission office in Delhi who are helping us to develop a comprehensive joint forest management plan for the bioregion.

The day yawns in the midday heat, fish hide under lotus leaves in the pond near the seed room.

Shenbagam and Arumugam, two of our botanists, set out to teach about medicinal plants in a village further up the coast. On the way back they will meet with a traditional bonesetter and collect information about the plants he uses in his treatments. Much of our work is facilitating the sharing of traditional knowledge. More and more the

local healers trust us and are willing to share their wisdom with others.

A group of night school children visit to see our collection of seed, raw drugs and traditional technologies. Spathodia flower petals glow crimson in the late daylight. The Mother called them Passion.

WEDNESDAY

Clearing paths in the forest. There is so much biomass now that without any twinge of conscience we can leave dead trees to fall and rot in the sanctuary, nurturing the base of the forest ecosystem trying to re-establish itself.

Loganathan who coordinates our training program goes off in the afternoon to record a radio talk on medicinal plants. It is a time of developing communication strategies; last week we participated for three days in a spectacular Flower Show in the Pondicherry Botanical Garden. We exhibited more than 100 different rare medicinal plants, sold many seedlings and teaching manuals, and won 1st prize for the Best Medicinal Plants Display.

Sitting under the Banyan tree near the lake, the seeds of the huge vine Hiptage bengalensis spin down winging amongst the aerial roots... Two mongooses on a stroll don't notice us sitting on the granite bench that I had placed there 25 years ago: feeling matters to be in their right place. A white Hibiscus floats in an old clay bowl, peacocks call from the tops of trees as they settle for the night.

THURSDAY/FRIDAY

Seed collecting in the sacred groves of Pudukottai: the last Maharaja of this area ran off with a beautiful Australian woman in the 1930s. Huge beehives hang off the cliff face above us as we sit on a granite outcrop high above the plains; Jain monks carved sleeping places in this cave in 810. Blinding reflections dance in my mind from the rice fields five kilometres away below, eagles soar on the hot granite air. The new jeep has become a most useful friend over this last year, enabling us to be so much more efficient in seed and plant collection and to access areas we could not get to before. Returning through the river deltas bursting with ripening rice and then nearer to home the landscape changes to dry lands where industrial plantations of casuarina, eucalyptus and cashew impoverish the souls of the people. There is much erosion, gullies washing the future into the sea.

SATURDAY

Standing at the lake early morning, three jackals came to drink. A joy that lasts through the day from that deep respectful glance of a wild animal.

I am sure they know I live here too. Land ethic enlarges the boundaries of community to include the laterite, pebbles, jackals, the timby dragonfly, the monitor lizard and the frog.

Into Pondicherry on the motorbike to get materials for a new shade house in the nursery. Past the huge bill board picture of Lenin and the dramatic Aids awareness posters, past the piles of watermelons, potters, blacksmiths, tinkers and sellers of satellites dishes. Hurry back as Hafeel, an Ayurvedic doctor, is coming from Bangalore to see our documentation of local traditional healers.

SUNDAY/MONDAY/TUESDAY

Driving through the village in the dark. Already a few figures are huddled round the teashop. Mist blankets the sugarcane fields, spectacular spiderwebs glisten. By 9 a.m., fortified by rice cakes and bananas, we walk across the millet fields and join the valley path that winds through the thorny scrub and tamarind trees to the old fort hill. After a lunch stop on a high shoulder of huge sculpted granite, the others take the temple route to return, while Anita and I continue down into the valley following the streambed to the spider tree pool. Heavy going, thorns, sticking grass and scratches,

nobody had been on these tracks for months. We collect bear and monkey scats from the flat granite rock vantage points, arriving in the magic evening light at the cave and a welcome wash in the lily pond. We have not seen anyone all day, the rare feeling of being alone in India. An eagle soars above, welcoming us' and the swifts dance joyously on the updrafts at the cliff edge.

A windy cold night with a fire burning to discourage any visit by *Melursus ursinus*, then a gentle day of collecting seeds and exploring the maze of caverns and piled boulders of the hilltop.

Often in dark protected places there is the strong smell of pigeons, bats and bear. Jamoon plums, ebony and grewia fruits are

plentiful in the area and many rock-bee (*Apis dorsata*) nests were hanging from the cliff on the way up yesterday. It is a good time for the Folk of the Forest.

Next day. Returning to the valley floor, the village, the road, the inevitable sadness as one leaves something that is still wild, wise and wonderful.

WEDNESDAY

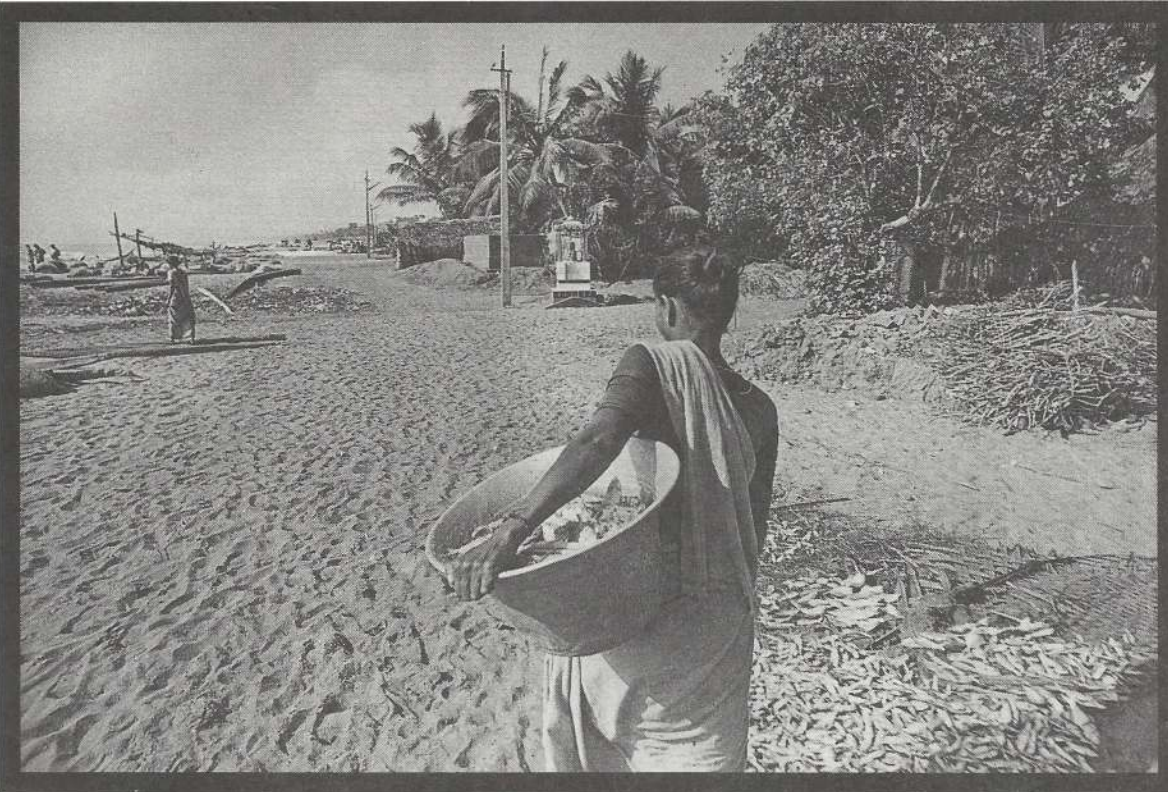
Friends from Right Sharing of World Resources arrive to stay a few days. Julie, a doctor, goes off with Kamatchi to conduct pregnancy check-ups in the villages. Later we visit a nearby sacred grove and sit with two doctors who specialize in treating snake bites. Members of the women's group that our team has helped to form show the herbal gardens that they have made with plants mostly from Pitchandikulam. In the village square under a Bodhi tree basket makers work and men sit playing cards in the dust. Out of the corner of one's eye Mother India is always sweeping aside pretentiousness with her efficient grass broom. Cows and goats are returning from the fields. Patience and age old rhythms are writ large on the hour of the day.



Great Indian horned owl
(drawing by Eric)

The fisher people of Bommopalayam

Photos and text by Gina Guzy



This is my third visit to Auroville, but this time I came with a fixed idea in my bag. I had decided to do my thesis work on photography with a study of a fisherman's life. My friends here thought it was a great idea, but were apprehensive, "Don't go alone, you need contact people. Warned, but not discouraged, I looked for possible contacts. Finally, the Village Action group turned out to be the most promising, and Jürgen established the first contact. Two days later, accompanied by a social worker, I went to Bommopalayam and met "my" future family. The next days I decided to venture into the village on my own. I was a bit scared as I started out to "my" village, but soon was to realize that these people were as peaceful as my intentions. I spent a whole week just sitting with them and communicating with hands and feet. At first, they treated me like a toy, combing my hair, clothing me in wedding sarees, put dots on my forehead, playing with me, laughing... Gradually I lost my fear completely and even managed to say "no", when things went too far. And the "no" was accepted quite naturally. As of then my courage grew and I started with my work. Every morning before sunrise, I went down to the ocean to observe and photograph. The first of these mornings is indelibly engraved in my mind with the following picture. The sun had just risen, an orange red ball of fire suspended just over the ocean. The beach was covered in soft, mist-like fishing nets and close to the waves three old men sat, wrapped in cloths pulled over their heads, looking out to the ocean loaded with catamarans. My first picture. I went to join them and recognized the head of "my" family. He told me the two others were his friends. Every morning found me on the beach, and soon the entire village knew me. At first I did

have a few problems, but every time I got yelled at, one of "my" family members came running to explain what I was doing and that I was a friend of the family... I was rewarded with smiling faces... So when I was on the beach people greeted me "Sina! Sina!" I was beckoned to approach and was shown how nets are mended, fish are sorted, washed and cut for drying, and much more. In retrospect these people showed endless patience, were amazingly hospitable at all times, and offered me a really very deep and private insight into their lives. Now I return home richer from a beautiful experience and the knowledge of having touched a completely different world. I want to thank all those who helped me.



Check-dam Kireet

The canyons which incise the Auroville plateau have their own beauty. But, left unattended, these canyons are also environmental disaster areas, cutting ever deeper into the landscape and funnelling tons of precious topsoil every monsoon into the nearby Bay of Bengal.

"I became interested in erosion control when I first visited Auroville in 1972 and saw how degraded the land was." I'm following Kireet, a genial, large-boned Dutchman, along a canyon which plunges deeper and deeper as it passes Utilite community on its way to the sea. Kireet finally came to live in Auroville three years ago (where, among other things, he changed his unpronounceably guttural Dutch name to its closest Indian equivalent). "By then, much of the landscape had been transformed by the tree-planting, but still every monsoon topsoil was being washed down this canyon to bleed into the sea."

He decided to build a dam lower down to catch the water. But then, as he traced the canyon back to its beginnings, he discovered a series of check-dams which had been constructed about 15 years ago, but which were in a terrible state of repair. Clearly there was no point in building his large dam until the check-dams upstream had been repaired. So four months ago, with a small team of masons and helpers, Kireet got to work.

"At the beginning, none of us knew anything about building dams. So we had to get advice from people like Mike—who

is repairing check-dams further up this canyon—and Jaap from the Forest Group, and I had help from a neighbour who is an engineer." They have repaired or rebuilt ten check-dams so far, each one representing a different challenge in terms of construction and accessibility.

The principle is simple. Each dam checks water flowing down the canyon. If there is a big rain, the excess water flows over a spillway—a lower area in the middle of the dam—to be held by the next check-dam further down. The size and spacing of the dams depends on the "drop" of the canyon and how much water has to be held. As the flow of water is stemmed, the topsoil carried by the water builds up behind each check-dam and becomes a fertile seedbed for nature to regenerate.

Theoretically the dams can be raised every few years until the canyon is filled in with topsoil, "but I don't want to eliminate the canyons completely because they are such a unique biotope. There's such a special atmosphere down here." He points to wobbly white lines traced on the canyon



Kireet at the "waterfall" in the Utility canyon

walls. "A geologist told me these are prehistoric worm-holes!"

We negotiate a bend and suddenly the canyon floor, which is pocked with deep holes like an overripe cheese, drops fifteen metres to a much broader canyon below. We've reached the "waterfall". Kireet points down this mini Grand Canyon towards the sea. "About 400 metres down there I want to build my big dam. It will be five metres high and will catch about 25,000 cubic metres of water. This water will percolate into the underground water-table and help force out the salt which has already intruded into wells near the sea.

Building this dam won't be cheap—it will cost about 12 lakhs (\$30,000)—but I've managed to raise 3 lakhs in Holland, and Tom from Water Harvest, with whom I am working now, can get the balance from a government scheme. If further money becomes available, I'd like to start afterwards on building dams in the Aspiration canyon. And then there's the Certitude-Gratitude canyon..."

So how long does he expect to be working in the Auroville canyons? He laughs. "Probably for the rest of my life!"

From a conversation with Alan

Managing Auroville's Waste

"For too many odd jobs, we tend to count on house ammas or villagers, and by doing so fare no better than anywhere else in the world. We probably do worse, as a matter of fact, because we do not serve as models from the educational point of view. Most children—not all, fortunately—do not see their parents consciously taking care of the garbage and therefore do not participate themselves.

"In kindergarten last year, after a collage session that had been quite successful but messy, I proposed to my group of 4-year-olds that we would all clean up as usual. As we started, I heard some giggling and the comment, 'We're not kitchen ammas!' This story from a kindergarten teacher illustrates how apathetic Aurovilians are about managing their own waste.

"When I came to Auroville", says Mukul, a newcomer, "I was appalled by the Pondicherry waste that is strewn all over the fields here. But then after taking a closer look, I realized that Auroville was not much better than Pondicherry in managing its waste." To prove his point, Mukul takes me on a short walk to show how Aurovilians in his vicinity have just dumped unprocessed waste into a hole in the backyard and, worse still, across their fence into the neighbouring cashew fields of the villagers. It was this concern about the pollution of a land that has been so successfully regenerated that led Mukul to take

over the Eco-Service, the waste-management system of Auroville, from Stefano.

It was Stefano who started the Eco-Service, back in 1989. The service was organized such that there were two Eco-service men who paid a small sum monthly for the right to collect inorganic waste from Auroville. A lot of inorganic waste, such as scrap metal and glass, commands a value and the Eco-service men made their living by the resale of such waste. There were two sheds, one near La Ferme and the other in the village of Kottakarai, where waste was sorted and potentially toxic waste such as batteries that could not be disposed of properly was stored. "Aurovilians were only asked to separate the organic from the inorganic waste and to compost the former at the site. This in itself was a big step. You see, even today 90% of the Aurovilians let their household workers handle the waste and they do not care how they deal with it," says Stefano.

This was one of the major drawbacks of the system. Domestic workers who disposed the garbage took home all the waste that had a resale value. As a consequence there was no incentive for the Eco-service man to pick up the waste, and he did not visit these households and communities. Also, there was no proper system for the disposal of non-valuable waste, about 40% by volume, in an organised manner: It was found that inorganic waste, sometimes even toxic waste, was dumped into holes in the ground and sometimes even into water

bodies. Last but not least, the system was not economically viable and the Eco-Service accrued debts of about Rs. 11,000 at the Financial Service.

To tackle these problems, Mukul, along with the Environmental Monitoring Group, came up with a new system. The underlying philosophy of this system is that waste collection and disposal is an essential service like water and electricity for which people have to pay. So instead of the Eco-service man making a monthly payment for the right to collect waste,

facilitate the work of the Ecoservice men who would come in their tricycles with drums in the same colour code, and instead of sorting the waste with their hands, just empty the bins into the appropriate drum. Most of the inorganic waste will be hygienically and centrally combusted at high temperatures in a two-stage burning process. For inorganic waste that cannot be safely combusted, such as batteries, rubber, glass, certain kinds of plastic etc., a new shed has been built near Vérité where these items will be stored until a solution

"Most children—not all, fortunately—do not see their parents consciously taking care of the garbage."

Aurovilians have to pay the Ecoservice man for each visit that he makes to their household or community. With recyclable waste that commands a value, the Aurovilians can choose to let their workers take it for free or sell it to the Ecoservice man. Though some baulk at this complicated system of payment for a service that was apparently free, the new system does successfully tackle the problem of collecting non-valuable waste. And the Ecoservicemen, Narayan and Arumugam, clearly prefer the new system, under which their incomes are guaranteed.

Another change that Mukul wants to introduce is the sorting of the waste at the site. He has worked out a system where colour-coded plastic bins for different kinds of waste are placed in every unit, household or community. This would

can be worked out. The Environmental Monitoring Team is exploring the possibilities of recycling such waste outside of Auroville.

Mukul is well aware that what he proposes is not a perfect system and that there are plenty of wrinkles to be ironed out. He envisages that it will take him two years before the system runs smoothly. As he puts it, "It is not a question of money, but a question of consciousness. I want the Aurovilians to be aware of the kinds of waste that they produce, and to participate in the process of properly disposing of such waste so that the impact on the environment is reduced to the minimum. After all, the earth does not need yet another city that does not manage its waste responsibly!"

Bindu

Joy Calvert

Reminiscences of an extraordinary lady

One of the more surreal juxtapositions of my life was to find myself, one afternoon, eating strawberries and cream on the sunny veranda of an English country house barely 24 hours after leaving the parched and eroded landscape of Auroville. And to increase the surreality, the white-haired lady with the cut-glass accent who was serving me tea ("one lump or two?"), was not discussing—as one would expect—Wimbledon or the Chelsea Flower Show, but Sri Aurobindo, Mother and "the Force".

To understand Joy, you have to understand something of her life. Born in Bombay in 1905 to English parents (her father was Chief Engineer of the Bombay Port Trust), she spent her first years in India. Later there was the more conventional boarding school in England, the year in Paris to acquire French, there were the tennis parties, golf and marriage. When her father-in-law died, Joy and her husband moved to the Georgian family home, Ockley Court, in Surrey.

It seemed idyllic. But then her husband began showing symptoms of an incurable degenerative illness. Lasting for many years, it put an enormous strain upon Joy. She had always been brought up, as she put it, "strictly religious"—Church of England—but now in her desperation she turned to something else: she began attending meditation sessions with a lady who lived nearby.

One day this lady gave Joy a chapter from a book—"Founding the Life Divine" by Morwenna Donnelly—the first book in English on Sri Aurobindo and the Integral Yoga. Joy contacted the author, met her, and joined a small group which was meeting to discuss the yoga. One of the members was Edith Schnapper, who was to become Joy's great friend and companion on the Path.

It was a time when many members of the group were experiencing "The Force" pouring down from above. But not Joy. She wrote to The Mother asking why she was not feeling it. Some days later, lying in bed in the early morning, she felt a flood of force descending... Another morning at Ockley she heard flute music. She opened her window to find out who was playing below, only to realise that the music was coming from within. She was to retain a special contact with Krishna to the end of her life.

Morwenna's interest was in Sri Aurobindo, not The Mother, but Joy and Edith were becoming more and more interested in Her. Finally Joy in her direct manner precipitated action: "Let's go and see this woman they call The Mother". Joy and Edith met Her for the first time in 1969. Joy's experience was of incredible love. "She put her hand on my head and suddenly it was all over".

In 1972 Joy's husband died. The small group continued to meet regularly in a flat on a Cambridge farm but for Joy it was no longer enough. In 1976, she and Edith bought a beautiful pre-Tudor house—called Boytons—in the rolling Essex countryside and moved there together "to intensify our yoga". For those unacquainted with English society, it's difficult to convey how radical such a decision was. Joy was head of the ancestral home, her family were pillars of the Church, her son a Justice of the Peace. The family never really understood...

'Boytons' was to become the Auroville centre in the U.K., a kind of oasis for worn-out Aurovilians who would come down to breakfast, having finally washed the laterite out from between their toes, to be confronted with a cornucopia of cereals, toast and marmalades while the sun streamed in through the



Joy (1905-1999)

door. Later in the day there would be tea on the lawn or in Krishna's garden—a garden planted by Joy with flowers of Krishna's colour surrounding a beautiful stone statue of Krishna which had been commissioned and brought from India—and walks with Matthew Parker, Joy's Jack Russell terrier, which had an inexhaustible appetite for chasing rubber balls (and much larger dogs).

At a time when Auroville was under immense pressure, Joy and Edith gave tremendous support because they never doubted that this was a unique experiment in collective evolution. They hosted a meeting of Aurovilians and international supporters in 1982 which was later to lead to the setting up of Auroville International, they attended all the subsequent meetings, and they began visiting Auroville regularly. Among their most visible contributions were their support for afforestation activities (Joy loved gardening and trees), their funding of the Avalon Guest House, and the stained glass window of Sri Aurobindo's and Mother's symbols in the Solar Kitchen, which was made for their meeting place in Cambridge and which they subsequently donated to Auroville. They were also enormously generous, in many ways, to individual Aurovilians.

Joy and Edith were a marvellous team: Edith with her quiet wisdom, her learning so lightly worn, and Joy with her spontaneity, laughter and no-nonsense approach which veiled, however, shyness and uncertainty. As an only child, Joy was very sensitive to anybody who felt isolated or left out and she would always take care to include them.

When Edith passed away in 1991, it was a tremendous blow to Joy. 'Boytons' was sold and Joy returned to a flat in the compound of the family home at Ockley Court. She continued visiting Auroville and actively explored settling here, but it was not to be. She died quietly on 19th May, 1999.

Joy's is an example of a particularly English courage—understated, self-deprecatory, yet enormously powerful as is shown in the many barriers that she crossed. She once said, "It's very important that you have something that you have to do every day whether you like it or not. If you have only something you like doing all the time, it gets boring."

It's only now, as I write this, that I realize how much she taught me about courtesy, courage and self-discipline, and about celebrating the smaller moments of life ("Have another piece of cake"). And how dear she was to me...

Alan

Myrtle

A tribute by Barbara

At first I thought I should write so that others might remember you, But then I knew that it was best to write what was in my heart.

I remember when we met, over thirty years ago in San Francisco... You were working almost twelve hours a day waitressing at Zim's. And on your one day off you kept up that frantic pace at home, cleaning and scrubbing and even washing all your clothes by hand in the bathtub, so as not to lose the habit; for already you had been to India and met the Mother and read Sri Aurobindo, and Zim's was just a springboard for your return to Them.

Overland we came, the three of us, us against the world when it wasn't us against each other...

On the way, the first of your two daughters found an entry, in a subtle sort of way.

Your gifts were so many — how wonderful the coverlets you quilted for them (one became two), the clothes you made, the birthday parties for everybody who lived in Auroville, young and old alike—the cakes! creations out of Hansel and Gretel (you baked for days ahead) — How generous to open your home so that Aurovilians could have a meeting place—not once, but for years; many of them difficult, those meetings, which left traces in the atmosphere, but you never complained. Never complained of the endless hours of paperwork you put in, the innumerable cups of tea you brewed, the countless hours of cleaning and gardening you put in to ensure that your house was always ready to receive... Her.

Never complained, for you took whatever obstacles and difficulties that came your way as stepping-stones to your self-perfection, the honing of the instrument, with full confidence in Her Love and Grace.

And then, when Auroville was finally on the threshold of its freedom, you gave up your own by offering your home, your refuge, to one who would usher in that freedom, and lived like a displaced person, out of your element, homeless, for five long years.

How essential to your well-being was that house! (none of us realized it until long afterwards); reconstituted, you took up residence again, but somehow, it was never the same.

When you finally decided to leave—saying you didn't know for how long, but it might be "for a long time" (how true, those words!)—I let you go because I had to, all of us did, though we longed for your return, wrote letters, phoned you every year on your birthday; were confident that, when you fell ill, you would make a full recovery and return to Auroville (oh, how we called you!)

But, with both girls at your side, after long months of suffering during which you, too, kept all your options open and remained faithful, never doubting that it was She who decides whether one goes or stays, you walked into the arms of the Divine Mother, with full confidence in Her Grace and Love.

Dear friend, beloved sister in the kingdoms of the inner Light, I shall miss the radiance of your smile, the generosity of your heart, the perseverance of your courage, the certitude of your fidelity.

You never asked for anything for yourself. You were a hero, in your own quiet way, with the adhesion of your "YES!"

Myrtle first came to the Ashram with her husband in 1966 and returned to stay in 1969. Their house, which was later known as "Tapaloka", was one of the first to be built in Certitude. She devoted herself fully to numerous activities related to the collective consciousness of Auroville, not least by offering her house to the Government-appointed Administrator of Auroville to shelter his deputy. She returned to the U.S.A. in the early 90s.

Subscription Information

Subscription rates for 12 issues of AUROVILLE TODAY are the following: for India Rs 250; for other countries Rs 1250, Can \$ 51, FF 195, DM 60, It. Lira 61,000, D.Gl. 65, US \$ 38, UK £25. This includes the postage by airmail. Please send your contribution (or your supporting contribution of double the amount*) either to your Auroville International centre (add 10% for admin. and bank charges) or directly to Auroville Today, CSR Office, Auroville 605101. Cheques should be made payable to Auroville Fund, specifying: 'Contribution for Auroville Today'. You will receive the issues directly from Auroville. Personal cheques are preferred to bank cheques. Please do not send postal money orders or cash. Subscribers will receive a reminder when their subscription is about to expire.

BY AIRMAIL
BOOK POST

AUROVILLE TODAY

A.T. Tower, Surrender, Auroville 605101, India



IN THIS ISSUE:

- THE SUMMER EXODUS
- ASPECTS OF EDUCATION
- THE BOMMAPALAYAM FISHER PEOPLE
- JOSS'S DIARY

AUROVILLE ARCHIVES
C/O KRISHNA T.
BHARAT NIVAS
AUROVILLE

July 1999
Number 126

Summer Exodus Blues or Astral Shopping

It's been two years since I left Auroville for colder Europe. Every summer, when the exodus starts and almost one third of the Auroville population leaves, I'm happy that I can stay here. Life all of a sudden seems almost serene, the hectic pace of the winter months has subsided, most of the tourists and guests are gone, and Aurovilians have more time for each other. There are usually 'hot' political topics—this year it's the Land Use Proposal—but underneath there is the laissez-faire attitude so typical of the summer-time.

This summer it is my turn to go out again. The family calls! I'm planning to go out for just over six weeks. But, as Alan puts it in his article, it is not just leaving Auroville for a few weeks or so—no, it takes months. First of all you go through the motions of deciding whether or not to go this year. And once you've made up your mind that you will go, then come the big decisions: when, how long, and with which airline? In January the travel office offered special rates, but as I was recovering from an operation at that time, my head was elsewhere. Then, a phone call from a friend telling me that that special offer is on for another three days! Oh, gee, uh, oops, wow! Decisions! I phone the travel service and tell them that I would like to book a flight. "Yes Ma'am, when do you want to go?" I don't know what to tell them. "I will phone you back, sir!" Giving myself some more time, I finally pick a date which works out with the other staff members at the Guest House.

That was step one. I now have four months ahead of me before I leave.

Four long months! My life continues as usual, with work at the Guest-house, and the bi-weekly Auroville Today meetings. Then all of a sudden I hear people talking about their Europe trips, and slowly it dawns on me that this time I'm part of the yearly exodus too. The next phase starts: what shall I wear? After all it will be much colder in Europe than the 40+ degrees of South India. Jeans, woollen sweaters, long sleeved shirts (I thought I had some, but they seem to have disappeared when the temperatures started rising), shoes. Shoes, yes, where do I find shoes? Do I know anyone with my size? Does the Freestore have suitable shoes? Will my feet like to be locked up inside a tight harness for almost two months? I look at my toes, happily spread on their rubber chappals, and wonder. Luckily one guest leaves a beautiful pair of shoes behind which fit me.

Two months to go. Daily life in Auroville goes on. I find myself part of a small guest-house working group: weekly meetings, paper work, answering questions. I've joined yoga classes again after a three-month's break. It feels great to stretch again under Nolly's strong supervision. I've started to play violin in a ten-member orchestra, rehearsing a newly composed piece of music for choir and orchestra by Johannes Jansson. Every week we get a new sheet of music, as the score keeps coming in through the mail. It is exciting to work with this group of musicians. Just before the holiday recess

we have one rehearsal together with the Auroville choir. How exciting to have such a large group of musicians together for the first time in Auroville! Surprisingly it sounded quite nice and promising.

Slowly, slowly, during those hot nights when I can't sleep, my trip to Holland goes through my mind. What shall I bring for family and friends? And how much can I afford from my meagre monthly maintenance to buy presents? Over the next weeks, I do all my shopping in my head and then reject all my ideas. The list becomes smaller and smaller. At the same time I also start making a list of things I need to do over there or things I would like to bring back with me. One day at lunch I joke that I've already done all my shopping in Holland! I've seen myself go to the various shops in my parents' town and buy everything I need. I wish it could be done that way. Astral shopping! What a great way to go about it.

One more month. As often as I can in this hot weather I try to go to the pool in Quiet to practice "Watsu" (water-shiatsu), this wonderful relaxing water therapy which I've just learned. Looking at the sunset I float a friend in my arms, dreaming and becoming one with the soft and smooth energy of the water. In the early mornings I sit on my terrace, overlooking the greenery around my house, listening to the birds' conversations and wondering whether I really want to go. Sometimes after my dinner at home, I take my dog for a short walk through the forest and go to the new Coffee Shop on the terrace of the Solar Kitchen for a delicious ice-cream.

Two more weeks to go and I still feel completely here and now. Auroville Today moves into its new office. Although my participation in its finalization was almost nil so far, I feel that now the time has come to be of help. I purchase some important things like cups and saucers, coffee, tea and sugar containers, water bottles, cake plates and forks. I walk through Pondy, trying to think of everything we would need for our first meeting, resisting the urge to look for a pair of jeans.

Although my suitcase is still locked up, I've started the process of getting myself ready for the journey. My visa extension has not come through yet, so I'll have to go to the visa service and find out what's happening. And shall I take travel insurance? What shall I bring my Mom? I start to buy the first gifts. Then I find myself dreaming about all the food I would like to take with me. The Dutch are famous for bringing food with them on their holidays for frugal reasons, the Italians always travel with kilos of pasta and litres of olive oil, Indians carry jars of pickles, papads and other spicy things. I never understood the need for all that until I found myself making a list of all the favorite eatables which I would like to take with me: nice juicy limes from my garden ("They are very expensive over there," someone tells me), dried sapotas and mangoes, Auroville-made organic jam, cookies from the Ganesh bakery.

Who says you can't take your home with you?

Tineke



Bommapalayam fishermen set out in their catamaran (see also photo feature on page 5).
Photo: Gina Guzy