

Auroville Today

AUGUST 2001, No.151

SPECIAL THEME "Brothers in spirit" Perceptions of Tamil Aurovilians pages 1, 2 & 3

Auroville owes much to the generous participation and support of the Tamil people. From the early days, Tamils have been involved in building the city and in numerous of its activities. In the course of the years, many have joined the community. Today the Tamils compose, with over 300 residents, the largest group of Auroville's multi-cultural population. However, there is little knowledge about their perceptions and particular concerns. In this issue we provide a window on some of their perspectives. While the views shared were sometimes widely diverse, as can only be expected from such a large group, there is a common sense of unease. Many of those interviewed asked to remain anonymous, a sign of the compromising position in which they often feel themselves. This itself is an indicator of the need for more open discussion and a better understanding about the issues that concern the Tamil population of Auroville.

A true fraternity?

Is Auroville living up to the Mother's vision? Perceptions of Tamil Aurovilians

From Auroville's inception, Mother encouraged the participation of local Tamil people on equal footing. Illustrative is her reply to the question of whether at that time the houses of the Westerners were to be different from those planned for Tamil people.

"No, those who cannot accept to have the same houses are not ready to live in Auroville. The stinginess must stop. It is not only the houses but the condition of the soul which must be built in Auroville." (1)

And she wrote a message to the inhabitants of Aspiration about the need to develop a true fraternity with the villagers:

"A relationship that is not only cordial but friendly with the inhabitants of the neighbouring village is absolutely indispensable. For the realisation of Auroville the first step is to establish a true human fraternity - any shortcoming in this regard is a grave mistake which can compromise the whole work."

My blessings are with all sincere effort towards harmony." (2)

Syamala, who was one of those asked by Mother to speak about Auroville in the village of Kuilapalayam, remembers that the response to the idea of Auroville was at times negative, due to the fear that outsiders would appropriate scarce resources. Mother was well aware of this inherent mistrust. In July 1972, she wrote to someone who had offered to help clean Last School:

"It is all right. But while putting things in order, be very careful not to offend the people from the Tamil village. It has been very difficult for us to win their confidence and nothing should be done which could make them lose this new-born confidence which is of capital importance."

Take with you someone who knows and speaks Tamil fluently so that you can talk with them and explain things to them."

They are your brothers in spirit - this should never be forgotten." (3)

The villagers, however, were receptive to Auroville's spiritual ideals. Syamala observes, "Collectively, their psyche was 100% ready for the manifestation that was to take place." With Mother's approval some local families and individuals integrated into Auroville. Six families began to participate in agriculture and to work in the kitchen or health centre. Their integration took place under the conditions of a moneyless economy. Like everyone else, they received no cash, but had basic needs met, including a school for their children. They

were Aurovilians, there was no discrimination. Indeed, many Tamil people who lived through this experience feel that at that period there was a greater sense of fraternity than today. Youth especially did not feel separate from others growing up. During Auroville's conflict with the Sri Aurobindo Society (1973-1980), however, most of the original integrated families, uncertain as to where to pledge their allegiances,

er, there are in some cases other motivations. The opportunities that Auroville provides for a better material life cannot be overlooked and it is only natural that villagers, like people anywhere,

seek out Auroville as a means for improving their standard of living.

This situation is not only upsetting to some Westerners. It also upsets some Tamil Aurovilians, who feel that more should be done to ensure that Auroville is not used as a conduit for economic advancement. Surya-gandhi, for example, who plays an important role in the dental clinic, stresses, "Auroville is not a place of assistance. However, economic aspects are often what attract local people. This mentality must change and they must learn to follow what Mother established for becoming Aurovilians. They must realize that life here is not as easy as it seems. Coming here means dedicating oneself to the aspiration of Auroville, and this demands many sacrifices."

Dealing with people who join Auroville for motivations other than those set forth by Mother is not a problem restricted to Tamil people, but can be said of individuals coming

pen in time. At present there is a move to involve more long-time Tamil Aurovilians in the entry process. Such people would play an important role in communicating Auroville's goals and helping Tamil Newcomers to participate fully in communal life.

Economic concerns

Not so long ago the Entry Group closed Auroville for a while, as there was a substantial lack of housing for Newcomers causing many of them to live in unacceptable conditions such as in sheds and storerooms. The Auroville Economy Group warned that the community was unable to build free houses for those without their own financial means. While Auroville has again opened its doors, the housing situation has not substantially changed. Although many Westerners with limited resources are caught in the same dilemma, the situation is particularly acute for those who come to the community from the local region. This remains a serious handicap for many aspiring Tamil Newcomers.

Unfortunately, there is also no easy solution, as the maintenances earned in Auroville are, in the best case, sufficient to make a living, but insufficient to save to build a house.

It may not be surprising that some Tamil Aurovilians supplement their incomes by running side businesses, often profiting from skills and contacts made in Auroville. Money earned in these ways may go towards building a house, and fulfilling the many economic obligations that several Tamil Aurovilians have with their families both within and outside Auroville. Living frugally and using benefits provided by the community, such as free education, subsidized

returned to the village. Several re-joined Auroville later.

What brings Tamil people to Auroville now?

Whereas few Tamil people became Aurovilians at first, as the community grew their numbers increased, and today they constitute a large percentage of applicants to become 'Newcomers' in Auroville. While some come from elsewhere in Tamil Nadu and are well-educated and knowledgeable about the community's philosophical base, the majority of these applicants hail from the surrounding villages, where they had little opportunity to receive a proper education. Many come into contact with Auroville first as workers. Others are family members, including newly wedded husbands and wives, of those who are already Aurovilians. A new category are the young adults who have been educated at New Creation or at After School.

The reasons for joining Auroville are varied. According to an Entry Group member, some come because of their contact to Mother and Sri Aurobindo, expressed less as knowledge of their teachings than through bhakti [devotion]. Quite a few emphasize that they like the quiet of this place, as compared with the strife of village life. Many are attracted by the idea that Auroville is a place for people to live as equals.

Along with these statements delivered to the Entry Group, howev-



Watching a performance of tamil dance at the Christmas fair

PHOTO: IRENO

here from anyplace. As an Entry Group member states, however, members of the Entry Group, most of whom are not Tamil, have difficulty evaluating a Tamil applicant because of cultural differences. "It's easier for me to read Europeans," tells the Group member. "Shared culture makes it easier to communicate and discern someone's intentions." Resolving these ambiguities may hap-

pen in time. At present there is a move to involve more long-time Tamil Aurovilians in the entry process. Such people would play an important role in communicating Auroville's goals and helping Tamil Newcomers to participate fully in communal life.

Some even invest in "chit funds" (group organized loan pools) that allow them to amass considerable wealth, that is then used towards educating children outside Auroville, or, as it is rumoured, investments in immovable property elsewhere.

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Auroville and Russia: the spiritual connection
First inhabitants of 'Courage' move into their apartments
Earthquake relief: Auroville helps the people of Kutch in Gujarat

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A true fraternity?

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The growing materialism of some Tamil families has garnered the disapproval of some other Tamil Aurovilians interviewed. Manifesting as gold ornaments, or elaborate children's birthday parties, these new forms of wealth often remain hidden to other Aurovilians, sometimes leading to situations in which people who have sufficient resources of their own still seek support from communal resources. However, this is not a problem restricted to any one population. Any increased emphasis on financial gain must be read within the context of the growing materialism in Auroville as a whole.

Education

Although Mother has said that Auroville is to be a place for "unending education," at the level of adult education little has been done. Many Tamil people underline the importance of education to help in orienting themselves towards Auroville's ideals and concur that the process of explaining the significance of Auroville must begin the moment an application is given to the Entry Group. Some believe that the creation of special programs for Tamil women would be efficacious in the development of the community as well. As one woman explains, "It is not easy for a Tamil woman to integrate. While they may find work in an Auroville unit, at home they are dedicated to family life as if they would be living anywhere else in Tamil Nadu. Some form of education is necessary to broaden their experience, to integrate them in the society of Auroville on their own merits instead of as an appendix of their husbands, allowing them to take more initiative than they are used to."

It is not easy for a Tamil woman to integrate on her own merits instead of as an appendix to their husbands.

But education is two-sided. While understanding the aims and ideals of Auroville should be mandatory for any Newcomer, so also should be a basic understanding of local culture on the part of those who come to Auroville from other places. Many Tamil Aurovilians interviewed feel that Westerners should receive instruction in Tamil culture and language, and also in Indian history. Many concur that several misunderstandings might be avoided were Westerners more sensitive to the "do's and don'ts" of local custom, let alone if more had a minimal knowledge of Tamil. Some are hopeful that the situation will eventually change. In a promising development, a new Entry policy attempts to provide education on the ideals of Auroville to Newcomers, while other groups are promoting more than ever language classes in English, Tamil and Sanskrit.

Cultural identity

Auroville is a place in which the best elements from all the world's cultures should contribute towards the future. In light of this,

the position of Tamil culture is ambiguous. Some Tamil Aurovilians remain tied to their cultural identity in ways that do not permit them to gain a broader perspective. Because family is such a central part of anyone's life in India, many Tamil Aurovilians regularly visit extended family living outside the community. These interactions reaffirm ties to the customs and religious beliefs that give meaning to daily life in Tamil Nadu, in addition to involving some Tamil Aurovilians in local grievances and politics. Jothi, who grew up in Auroville, sees this situation as partially problematic. "Quite a few Tamil Aurovilians live no differently than in the village. This prevents them from focusing time and energy on Auroville's progress and from orienting their thinking towards human unity and a moneyless economy."

At the same time, some Tamil Aurovilians express feeling a sense of loss of cultural identity. Interacting with an environment that is ostensibly Western, some Tamil people have a tendency to forget the value of traditional practices. Raman points out how neglecting the beauty of the past may not be in Auroville's interest. "Auroville made me lose and then rediscover the value of my roots. When all Aurovilians realize the true wisdom of their own cultures, then the collectivity will form better. And when you appreciate the value of the past, you aren't so into modern consumerism."

So far, there is little interest in Tamil culture in Auroville. Sporadically, Tamil cultural events are organized, such as Tamil New Year and Deepavali, with dinner and fireworks. While such activities are well attended by Tamils and Westerners, a majority of Tamil Aurovilians may not participate. As for classical or folk arts, apart from some bharatanatyam dance performances, surprisingly few events are organised that express the incredible richness of Tamil culture. Most Tamil Aurovilians interviewed acknowledge that they have only little knowledge about their own literature and art and therefore do not or only marginally contribute to the organization of cultural events. Many Westerners, on the other hand, do not seem overtly interested to learn about Tamil tradition or language. In this context it is not surprising that plans for a Tamil Heritage Centre remain unfulfilled.

Discrimination?

In asking Tamil Aurovilians to describe the difficulties they experience in Auroville, the terms 'racism' and 'discrimination' are often used as an emotionally charged way of describing the treatment they sometimes encounter. Few people reported of incidents of physical violence, but many gave examples of subtle forms of perceived discrimination.

One of the hallmarks of racism is that people are not seen as individuals, but rather as part of an undifferentiated mass. Some of the people interviewed here cited the fact that many of the Western residents never learn the names of the Tamil Aurovilians, even those

with whom they interact regularly, which is experienced as arrogant discrimination. Alternatively, Tamil Aurovilians are even misidentified as either someone else or as 'workers.'

Other forms of discrimination

of the interviewees expressed their frustration over being yelled at by Western Aurovilians, or generally reprimanded in the workplace as if they were children, in the presence of co-workers. "I wonder if any of these Westerners would behave

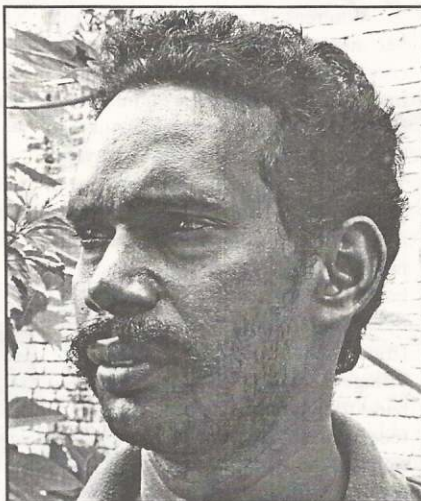
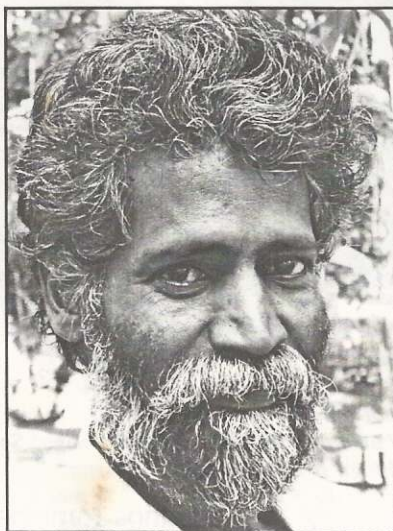
"For the realisation of Auroville the first step is to establish a true human fraternity – any shortcoming in this regard is a grave mistake which can compromise the whole work."

The Mother

are experienced at the workplace. Though quite a few Tamil Aurovilians have become unit executives or hold other positions of responsibility, many Tamil Aurovilians work at the lower ends of work-place hierarchies, often with western Aurovilians as

like this in their own country," observed one of the interviewed. "These instances affirm the fact that some Westerners do not understand Tamil culture, and have not yet cared to learn to communicate better with Tamil people. It also demonstrates their tacit assumption that Tamils should always accommodate them." Such arrogance contributes to Tamil people's common perception that foreign Aurovilians believe themselves to be superior. As one Tamil woman forcefully puts it, "Foreigners come here and think they can do as they please. Half the time they don't think that a Tamil Aurovillian is capable of doing anything." Such a comment reveals much about the experience of Tamil Aurovilians. At the same time it demonstrates how stereotypes exist on both sides.

Being treated with



Raman, Suryagandhi, Syamala and Hari (clockwise from top)

unfounded suspicion is another form of discrimination. Raman explains, "In the past, when there was less theft, everyone moved freely and received a warm welcome. These days Auroville is not a free city. Whites enter places easily, while we must answer many questions. Our own

employers. As Raman points out, "This worker-boss relationship makes it easy for those with more capabilities and power to feel superior to those with less. Just because a person did not have the circumstances that allowed him or her to come up in this world, does not mean that they do not have the same spiritual aspirations." The ways in which this false sense of superiority gets expressed is often unacceptable. For example, many

people, who work as watchmen, respect foreigners more!" Other examples display some Westerners' fears that only selfish interests motivate Tamils. Hari, who grew up in Auroville and runs the Transport Service, cites a time a couple of years ago when some Tamil Aurovilians called a series of meetings with the aim of discussing how to encourage Tamil Aurovilians to take more active roles in Auroville's decision mak-

ing processes. "The response to these meetings was mistrust," relates Hari, who explains that few Westerners tried to find out what was truly going on and to support the effort to involve people in Auroville whose participation is often marginal."

Towards integration

But integration is in progress. For example, the number of young people living in mixed race relationships, Tamil and Western, has increased. How to promote youth integration, however, is still a difficult question. At Transition primary school, for example, where more than 50 percent of the children in the lower classes have Tamil or mixed Tamil-Western parentage, it is observed that Tamil and Western children tend to form their own respective groups, even though they may learn and play side by side. Similarly, the list of names of those who attended this year's annual Berijam summer holiday camp would lead one to conclude that western youngsters are associating with western kids, while Tamil children are hanging out with other Tamil children and that not much is being done to integrate them. But this may be a misleading conclusion. Says one teacher: "I find that the Tamil chil-

Problems might be avoided if Westerners were more sensitive to the "do's and don'ts" of local custom, and had a minimal knowledge of Tamil.

dren are more independent and even assertive in this current generation. The children are clearly much more tolerant of cultural diversity than adults are and the learning and playing side by side is serving to widen the tolerance. The grouping is natural and not disturbing and helps them connect to their own culture."

Coming to terms with social and cultural differences needs to become part of a conscious process along the road to achieving Auroville's goals. Understanding the challenges Tamil people face is one step towards solving some of the many institutional and everyday obstacles. As Mother explained to some Aurovilians in Aspiration, "For the realisation of Auroville the first step is to establish a true human fraternity – any shortcoming in this regard is a grave mistake which can compromise the whole work." (2)

Thirty years later, this human fraternity is beginning to be realised.

Shanti Pillai
based on interviews
by Ann Riquier, Pooja Triveni,
and Shanti Pillai

- (1) March 4, 1968 (Auroville in Mother's Words p. 134)
(2) November 23, 1969 (Auroville in Mother's Words p. 230, Collected Works Mother Vol. XIII, p. 249)
(3) July 1972 (Auroville in Mother's Words p. 438, Collected Works Mother Vol. XIII, p. 251)

Integrating After School graduates

What is the future of the Tamil students who graduated from After School? Selvaraj, who started the school, explains his vision to fully integrate them as Aurovilians.

Selvaraj: After School was born of necessity about 9 years ago, as there was at the time no high school in Auroville that provided formal education. Many of the western children who finished Auroville's primary school have the possibility to go the international boarding school at Kodaikanal or to the Lycée Français in Pondicherry, or, if they did not care for a certificate, to Last School in Auroville. But the Tamil children do not have parents who have the funds to send them to schools outside Auroville. So I started After School to give the option to Tamil children from Auroville and from elsewhere to complete their studies and get a formal 10th or 12th standard certificate, fulfilling the requirements of the secondary and higher secondary examinations of the Government.

Auroville's Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research (SAIIER) has been unwilling to support After School, as SAIIER receives funding from the Government of India for doing educational research. To educate children to get a diploma, apparently, goes against the funding conditions. This is strange as a high school certificate is an absolute must in India if you want to pursue higher studies or training. So I have been doing fund-raising through personal contacts. Most of the funds for the school come from within Auroville itself. However, now that After School has been included in the CIRHU proposal of SAIIER [see *Auroville Today* June/July 2001], I have hopes that we will receive some government funding.

Over the years, After School, which started in a small shed, has grown tremendously. As with most schools or units of Auroville, After School has grown organically out of a perceived need. We did not bother laying down rules and policies. About five years ago the Centre for Further Learning (CFL) was started, another Auroville school which offers high-school education with the purpose to obtain a certificate. Recently CFL and After School came together to discuss the admission policies and rules for functioning. It is a good move. Both CFL and After

School accept children from outside of Auroville, and it would be good to have the same criteria for admission. Both schools plan to move to the new high school complex which is being built nearby Transition, and share common infrastructure such as the science laboratories and the computers. Hopefully, in the future, we'll merge together. It would be good if we could offer higher educational possibilities to both Tamil and Western children, another step to truly manifest human unity.

Regarding admission, After School admits students on the basis of an interview. If the student has not been to any of the other Auroville schools, then we interview the parents as well. Somehow, the parents of all of these students have some connection to Auroville – either they work for Auroville or are somehow touched by Auroville's ideals. For instance, recently a woman approached me for admitting her daughter to After School. The woman, a Tamil Aurovillian, had gotten married and moved to Pondicherry, and she said, "Look, the way my life has gone, I will no longer have any connection to Auroville but I want my daughter to be educated here." For me, this is enough reason to admit a child to After School.

What exactly is happening with those who have grown up in Auroville and finished their higher education? Nearly all of the Tamil students have integrated in Auroville, but most of the western Auroville children who have left Auroville, have not yet come back. One reason is that the western Auroville children can get a good education in the West, while if they apply to Indian universities, they would have to pay an exorbitant rate as foreign student. And then, of course, they stay on to earn money, to repay study loans, or to save to build themselves a house in Auroville if they wish to come back and live here at some later time.

The Tamil children who want to study at an Indian college or a Government University have to face a fierce competition, admission being dependent on their high school marks. So far, After School has not

been able to turn out students who qualify sufficiently to get admitted. On average, their marks are about 60 to 70%, while what would be required in view of the stiff competition by the college or university is 100%. Admission to private colleges or universities is prohibitively costly. Those who leave After School mostly get involved in activities within Auroville.

One way for them to improve their knowledge is through international exchange programmes which Auroville, due to its unique status, has been able to create. For example, over the last few years, 13 After School students have been accepted by the Pestalozzi community in UK to do an International Baccalaureate there. These students, because of their exposure to a Western culture, are now in an even better position to integrate into the community.

But as you know, many Aurovilians worry about too many villagers joining Auroville, and they would like to restrict this influx somehow. But I always remember the Mother reminding western Aurovilians that the villagers are at home, and it is the Westerners who are the visitors. All the children growing up around Auroville are aware of this place. They see Westerners passing through their homes and land. They encounter tourists who ask them the way to Auroville and Matrimandir. This place is as much theirs as anyone else's, and so I find it criminal to refuse any people from the local area from joining Auroville.

This is even more so for those who have attended an Auroville school. But the Entry Group policy towards those young people is unclear and even contradictory. Graduates from After School are extremely well placed to integrate into Auroville. For, apart from giving them a formal education, we give them detailed presentations on Auroville: we



Selvaraj

take them to visit different units, ask them to take part in activities in Auroville and have long-term Aurovilians give talks to them on the ideals and history of Auroville. After they graduate, it is the students' choice if they want to work for Auroville, join Auroville or find a job elsewhere. I am proud to note that, so far, all of the After School graduates, about 50 in all, are working in Auroville, many of them as Aurovilians in key positions or shouldering responsibility.

Admitting these students as Aurovilians has, by the way, another advantage. Auroville cannot exist without the support of the surrounding villages, and having Aurovilians in our midst who come from and understand the local customs and culture is invaluable to make the villagers more aware of Auroville's ideals and support it. To give you an example, a few years ago the villagers of Bommappalayam, instigated by a religious leader came and attacked an Auroville community. The same religious leader has got considerable influence in Kulappalayam, and yet, when he tried on another occasion to rouse the people against Auroville, they looked the other way. They chose to remain passive. It was their way of saying that they support Auroville.

If Auroville is to truly grow, then we need large numbers of people to manage all the various activities. Right now, our operations are still small, and only a handful of people, mostly the same few people who have been there for years, run the central operations of the community. There is scope for greater growth to widen it all out. And this is where I see After School students playing a key role. My vision is to have educated, committed local young people helping Auroville by assuming responsible positions.

(Based on an interview by Bindu)

North-South Indian perspectives

Sonali and Partha are one of the few North-South Indian couples in Auroville. Partha comes from one of the Auroville surrounding villages, Sonali recently joined Auroville after she graduated as an architect in Puna.

AVT: What do you think of the cultural and social differences between the different groups in Auroville – Tamils, North Indians, Westerners?

Partha: As a young child, growing up in Auroville, I wasn't aware of the differences. I studied, played and grew up with Western children, and we were all like a big, happy family. Everybody was working together and putting their money together. There wasn't so much jealousy and competition, as there seems to be now, with people fighting for projects. Nor, did you have to introduce economic experiments like the "circle experiment" for people to share their money. It all just naturally happened. And the early Aurovilians learned to speak Tamil. You don't see many people now making an effort to learn Tamil. You know, if Aurovilians would learn just a few basic words of Tamil, it would improve our relations with the villagers so much. The workers appreciate it so much when their employers can talk to them in Tamil. Otherwise, we have only the relationship of money between Aurovilians and the local villagers.

In those early days, there was not much material incentive for the local villagers to join Auroville for Auroville was poor. Now, in the villages, to be an Aurovillian, or have a job in Auroville seems to have become a status symbol with

economic benefits. I see many Tamil Aurovilians acting as though they were superior to their relatives and others in the villages. Indians look up to the West and like to imitate the Western lifestyle. They don't value their own culture. The Tamil guys who went out to England to study all came back, sporting funky hairstyles and speaking slang with an English accent, saying things like, "I am going home to meet my folks" instead of using the Tamil words, 'appa' and 'amma' for their parents. It is funny but essentially sad that we look down on our own culture.

I don't know how much interaction there is now between Indians and Westerners. When I was teaching in Transition School, I noticed that the students, especially the Tamil girls, tended to form separate groups. Actually now that I think about it, Tamil women rarely integrate themselves fully into the community. They tend to stick only to their Tamil circle of friends and family. Even Tamil women who joined Auroville as children rarely date Western men.

With North Indians and Tamils, it is not a racial issue but a social issue. North Indians who join Auroville always come from urbanized, educated backgrounds,

and so I think they feel superior to or more cultured than Tamil Aurovilians who come from the local villages and have only an informal education. You know, even I felt somewhat insecure in the beginning for Sonali has a B. A degree in architecture, proving her



Partha and Sonali

capabilities while I have no such certificate.

Sonali: It is not just a question of education but also economics. Indians pay a lot of respect to people who do white-collar jobs and earn a lot of money. My friends asked me, "What does your husband do? How much does he earn?" I think they would have respected us more if Partha was a computer engineer earning big bucks.

AVT: Partha, you recently staged a play with a completely Tamil cast that made fun of the Auroville groups and processes. Were you

trying, through this medium, to make a public statement as to the differences between the Tamils and the Westerners?

Partha: Not really. Our theatre group, which consists mostly of Tamil men, was brainstorming for ideas and somehow we got to chatting about things that had recently happened in Auroville, in the processes of the working groups. And so we just strung the whole thing together. All that we depicted in our play was essentially true. We made fun of Tamils – about the way they behave and their lack of sense of hygiene – and of the fear of Westerners that more and more poor local villagers are joining Auroville and that we won't be able to support them all. And our group processes reflect that fear. For instance, that scene where a western Aurovillian shouts at a Tamil newcomer and tells him to stay in the village, is a true incident. I don't know how to manage this influx of people from the local villages, but I feel that people in important working groups should do their jobs with a certain tact or sensitivity.

Sonali: This aspect of Westerners losing their temper and shouting at others is really against the Indian culture where you are expected to be polite all the time.

I was really shocked when an American woman once came to Kolam and shouted at our team. She charged that we Indians never meet our deadlines. She could have just explained her point to us quietly instead of creating this scene. Indians are very uncomfortable with such public demonstration of emotions, and tend to back off rather than reacting. But this is the only time I have been personally subject to a remark I experienced as racist.

AVT: Partha, you have also played an active role in starting a weekly arts programme for village children. Was it a conscious decision to employ Tamil Aurovilians as teachers in this programme?

Partha: Yes. We needed teachers for the various disciplines we were offering – painting, music, dance, and sports. We wanted local Tamil teachers so that there would be no language barriers. I knew all of the Tamil Aurovilians involved in the arts very well – Saroja, Murugesan, Prabha, Selvam and the rest. So I just asked them to help, and it worked out very well. I get the feeling that these Tamil Aurovilians are happy to be able to reach out and help the village children in a meaningful way, in their particular field. Many Tamil Aurovilians turn their backs on the villages, on the culture that they came from and I don't think it is a healthy sign.

Bindu

Annual AVI gathering

The Auroville International meeting 2001 took place in St. Petersburg, Russia. It was particularly intended to establish a living link between Auroville and the many groups and individuals that are connected to Sri Aurobindo and The Mother in Russia, the Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Belorussia and Bulgaria.

In many ways this year's meeting of the Auroville International Centres was different: it was the first time that it was held in an East-European country; it was attended by people from Russia, Belorussia, the Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Bulgaria most of whom had no notion of Auroville; a large number of Aurovilians were present; and there was a special emphasis given to getting to know the Russian culture and the surroundings of the

I have great hope for the Russians... they've had an experience and have realized the emptiness of it all. ... The Russians, in their nature, are mystic, and that has been oppressed, suppressed, naturally it has gained a lot of force. And now it tends to want to burst.

The Mother on Auroville's inauguration day. Mother's Agenda 28/02/1968

venue. We all stayed outside St. Petersburg in a hotel which is the former Znamenka Palace. It was built in the early 19th century and is set near the Gulf of Finland in a beautiful forest full of wild flowers. Although the Russian revolution and afterwards the

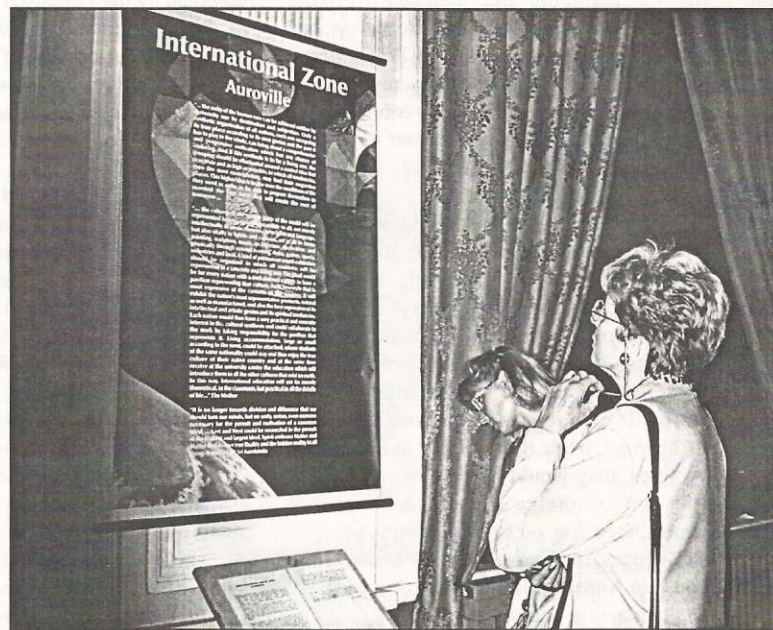
second World War with the Nazi assault on St. Petersburg put an end to its elegant days, the renovation gives one a glimpse of its former glory. Our days started with meditation, followed by gentle asanas with Wendy, and a sumptuous Russian breakfast with, among other delicacies, stir-fried vegetables. Quite often the days ended in the hotel bar, where we could practice some of our newly learned Russian words for ordering Balkai beer or vodka.

After a one-day guided tour of St. Petersburg, there followed two days of official speeches and presentations on Auroville and on activities in Russia related to Sri Aurobindo, the yoga and the Russian soul. As everything was translated either into Russian or English, it demanded a persistent listening capacity from the public. The presentations were held in The House of Officers, a richly decorated and impressive 19th century building. Some of the highlights of the first day were the speech by Rajiv K. Chander, the general consul of India in St. Petersburg, who was well-informed about Sri Aurobindo and the yoga and very positive about Auroville, and Bhaga's introduction to the inner meaning of the Matrimandir.

If, in the beginning of the week, some of the Auroville International meeting old-timers could be overheard complaining that all those speeches had nothing to do with an Auroville International meeting, the typical Auroville quality started to enter the atmosphere once the meeting venue shifted to our hotel. The participants from the former Soviet Union met together in the ballroom of the palace, while the others presented or listened to the reports from the Auroville International centres. In these meetings

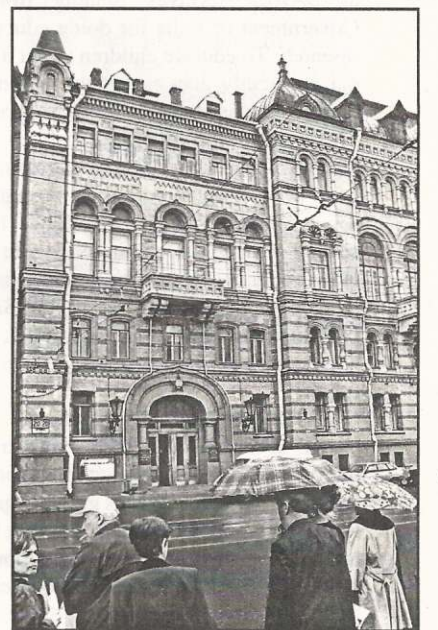
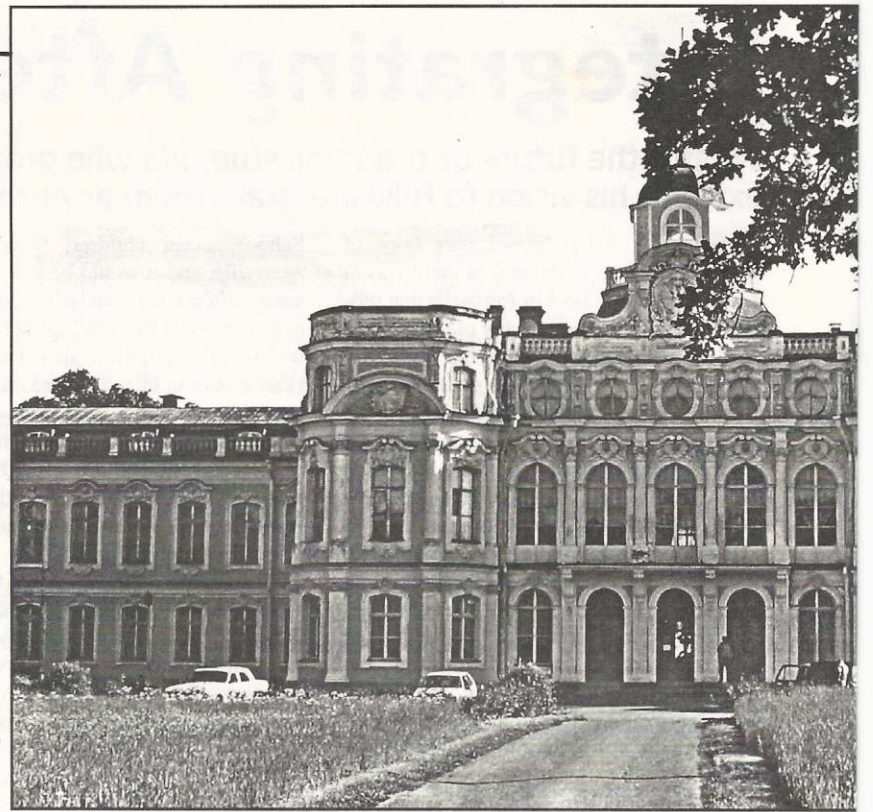
it was decided to give permission to open two new Auroville International centres, one in Kazakhstan, the other in Bulgaria.

Then came June 21st, the summer solstice called "The Day of the White Nights," which is celebrated all over St. Petersburg. After a guided tour to the Hermitage museum, the participants enjoyed a midnight boat trip on the river Neva. It was bright as daylight. While waiting for the drawbridges to open at 2 a.m., a disco started on one of the boats moored at the riverbank,



pulling most of us on board to dance the night away to Western and Russian rock beats.

The last days, which centred around Auroville International issues, were interspersed with well received presentations: Purna Prema, Mother's granddaughter, Manju, Alain



Grandcolas and Roger Toll shared memories of their meetings with Mother; Bindu gave us her view on India's spirituality, and Harini talked about her experience of being a Tamil woman living in Auroville.

Then came the time for goodbyes. After the official closing night, cele-

brated with a grand buffet and live Russian folk music, many Russians expressed how touched they were by this first meeting between sympathetic souls and some of the Western participants mentioned their feeling of 'déjà vu' about visiting Russia: did we all meet here before?

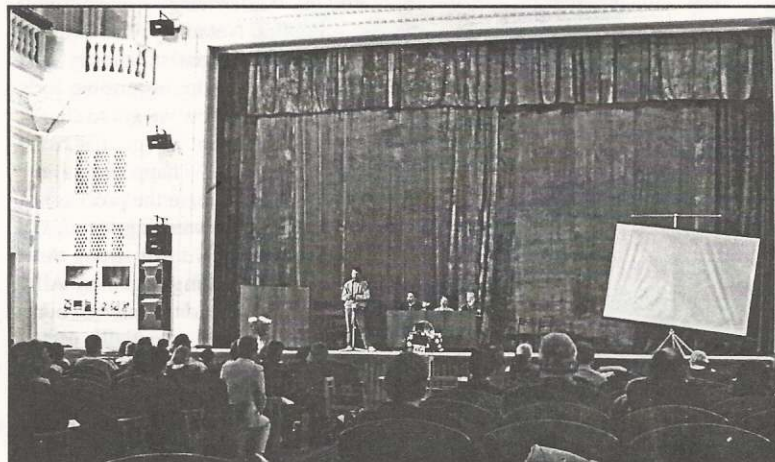
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The Ideal of Sri Aurobindo in Russia

Excerpts from a speech by Dimitry Melgunov, AVI Liaison in Russia, and chief editor of the journal Sadhana

Sri Aurobindo is comparatively well known in Russia. The Mother less so. This is not due to any organized activity on the part of some people, but purely because of the grace of the Mother. In Soviet times, Sri Aurobindo was prohibited. His books were buried in some special libraries to which only a select few had access. Still, translations were made and spread, but doing so was not without risk. Some people were put in prison for it. When, in the late eighties, Perestroika started and some freedom of speech came about, books on spirituality were in great demand. The first book published on Sri Aurobindo was *The Adventure of Consciousness* by Satprem in a very fine translation. The book was a great success, and more than one million copies were sold. It created a great interest in Sri Aurobindo. But works of Sri Aurobindo in equally good translations were not available. A number of translations were published, even two of *The Synthesis of Yoga*, but they were of bad quality. I believe that many people lost interest because of those bad translations. Another reason was of course the whole degradation of society. When in the nineties the living conditions became extremely difficult, people lost their hopes and enthusiasm and turned away from spirituality under the pressure of the harsh realities of every day life.

Nevertheless, Sri Aurobindo's philosophy became a base for spiritual development in Russia. Certain main ideas became ingrained in the intellectual consciousness. Many of his ideas, even many of his terms are used in recently developed philosophies and spiritual paths. Many authors quote Sri Aurobindo and pay homage to him.



Presentations were held in the Public Hall of The House of Officers, St. Petersburg

PHOTO: MARTIN LITTLEWOOD

At the same time, what one could call "the movement of Sri Aurobindo," a group of people inspired by that one ideal and making a joint effort to manifest their aspiration and to change their life and the life around them according to their growing comprehension of the higher ideal, has not yet come into existence. Such an action, which is at the basis of Auroville and the activities of the Auroville International centres all over the world, does not yet exist in Russia. Instead, there are only some scattered groups and individuals.

Some of these groups do not wish for any interaction. Many of these have common features: they consider themselves to be "the chosen ones," who have reached the highest levels of spiritual attainment and who possess the Truth, their leaders claiming to be incarnations of Sri

cerely wish to know more about Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, those who are open to all kinds of collaboration. Our main task will be to develop contacts with all such people, to build-up an information network so that people all over the country may have proper information on request and can start to communicate with each other. Then gradually we may develop some living unity amongst ourselves and can go on helping and supporting each other, just by the very fact that we all exist and are on the same path.

What is necessary is first to have proper translations of the books of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. This work has been taken up by the Aditi Publishing House in St. Petersburg, which aims at translating and publishing the Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. It has published

Aurobindo and the Mother, busy with the supramental transformation of their bodies. This has happened even though most people in these groups do not know English and have not read any of the major works of Sri Aurobindo!

But there are others groups too. They are the people who sin-

some volumes of the Collected Works, a number of compilations from works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, and also some works on Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, among them the famous *Beyond Man* by Georges van Vrekhem. The translation work is extremely difficult and complex and takes time.

The next step is to develop a network which can not only to spread the full and correct information on Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, but do the same for Auroville, Auroville International and related subjects. It will be necessary to present Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, Auroville and Auroville International to the mass media, possibly by broadcasting films on Auroville, and regularly publishing articles in various journals. Last, but not least, we intend to make contacts with Russian authorities to inform them on Auroville and AVI Russia and to apply for their support.

In Auroville, too, we will work to establish a living bond. Ultimately, the Russian pavilion will need to become our focal point. But it may take some time for a building to be created. Meanwhile we can start a monthly Auroville-Russian magazine made in active collaboration with Russian Aurovilians.

In the beginning of the year 1972 The Mother said that in fifty years the whole world, all the receptive section of humanity, would be absorbed in the power of Sri Aurobindo's thought. And She added that those who already are, have the good fortune of being the first ones. We all are blessed to have an opportunity to be among the first to participate in this work and be the instruments of Her world wide action towards a united aspiration and work for the Divine Victory.

Playing in St. Petersburg

Dimitri, one of the organisers, shares his perception of the main achievement of the Auroville International meeting.

The mind always thinks in terms of black and white (more often of black), in terms of division. Our mind-consciousness is based on the sense of a separate "I", contradicted and challenged by many other "I's," by a whole world of "I's" negating its own existence. The mind, therefore, always tries consciously or subconsciously to expand its own existence by possessing as many other separated "I's" as possible. It propagates its own ideas and ideologies, attempts to convert others, even by means of war, in order to reach some commonness with other "I's," to include as many "I's" as possible in its own system of world-understanding, or otherwise to destroy them. By that it tries to realise a kind of oneness which it feels to be the deep truth of all existence and which it lacks so much.

But there is another reality behind mind or beyond mind, the reality of joy and love and oneness. This reality is now growing very fast in all of us, all over the earth, and, probably, in the vanguard, it is growing and manifesting in Auroville, which is destined to become the first and foremost centre of that reality in the world. And what is so wonderful is that this reality exists and grows quite independently from the mind, in spite of all the men-

tal misunderstanding and even in spite of all the mental understanding, as Mother put it. Or as Sri Aurobindo said in Savitri, "God shall grow up while the wise men talk and sleep", and "A stealth of God compel the heart to bliss". Mind tries to possess the higher ideal with which it is inspired; it labours a lot, it meditates, it repeats mantras, it propagates or fights. But behind that and quite independently of all these titanic efforts, there grows quietly a bud of the soul of light in us. Then, one day, suddenly and totally unexpectedly for the mind, the soul blossoms! And the mind is so completely overwhelmed by that sweetness and joy and light and love that it loses itself in the divine fragrance of this marvellous flower. Before that, mind thinks of itself as an independent "I", so it thinks it is something or is not, can give something or cannot, can propagate something or can't, can receive something or can't. After that, it is merged in the being of light existing in the delight of its own existence, bathing in the love of the Divine and radiating that love in thoughts, words and actions, in each movement of existence. After that, one does not see anymore a world of innumerable separated "I's," a world of division. Instead, one sees a growing being of

light and love in each person and feels a deep communion with all these beings of light, with all this growing totality of the one. No more struggle with other existences, only love and oneness, a world of unity.

Mind always thinks it is far away from that light, and it definitely is! But all the time, along with the mind, there exists in us also this being of light and love. Then, why we should identify with these little separated minds? Let us better recognize we ARE beings of light, just remember that we are all simple children, children of the Divine Mother, playing all together in her love and light. That was what all who participated in the recent Auroville International meeting in St. Petersburg could deeply experience, quite unexpectedly for their minds. Suddenly, we all felt ourselves to be these simple children, playing in joy and oneness, experiencing this wonderful sweetness of being one family of aspiring souls. Those who first initiated and radiated this experience, this oneness and joy, were, of course, the Aurovilians, the 22 children of the new world who had come to St. Petersburg! And as far as I could judge, that was quite unexpected even for their own minds! For being involved in the day-to-day work and action in Auroville, they may not



Dimitri Melgunov, AVI, Russia

recognize this divine light and oneness growing quietly, but irresistibly within and around themselves and others. But here in St. Petersburg, in another atmosphere, it suddenly became quite visible and sensible. That was an unforgettable experience for all which brought about some deep inner change.

It was very important and helpful for Aurovilians also. They could realize this oneness and love and joy between them. They realized that all is not in vain, that something is ALREADY there, is manifested already, that it is not at all so very far, but, on the contrary, so near, so natural and native.

This is surely the main achievement of the meeting in St.-Petersburg, the invaluable gift of the Divine Mother to her naughty, rebel, resisting, but sincere, loving and beloved children.

(first received on e-mail)

PHOTO: MARTIN LITTLEWOOD



Top: The former Znamenska Palace where those attending the Auroville International meeting stayed.

Far left: Part of the Auroville exhibition in the Public Hall of The House of Officers in St. Petersburg

Left: Entrance of The House of Officers, St. Petersburg

PHOTOS: MARTIN LITTLEWOOD

Russian Peace Table inaugurated

After seventeen years the Russian Peace Table, cousin of those installed in New York City and Auroville, has finally found a home in Moscow. The inauguration was well attended.

About two kilometers from the Kremlin along Prechistenka, a street of old, stately Moscow residences, sits the Russian Academy of Arts. Inside, in a second-floor room at the end of a series of galleries full of modern Russian paintings, is the newly inaugurated Peace Table, a cousin of the ones already in place in Auroville and New York. Master woodworker George Nakashima had intended it for Russia since 1984, but finding a home for it has been nearly as epic a journey as the transformation of Russia itself.

Finally on Tuesday June 26th, about 150 people – Aurovilians, friends of Auroville, Russian artists and intellectuals, the US and Indian ambassadors, and representatives of four religious traditions – came together to join hands around the table and celebrate its consecration and the further breaking down of both literal and figurative walls.

Nakashima, who was born in the United States but worked in a Tokyo architectural firm prior to World War II, came to Pondicherry in 1937 to help design and build Golconde, Mother's beloved guest house in the ashram. He was so touched by Sri Aurobindo and Mother that he gave up all pay and lived as an ashramite for the two years he was in Pondy. Sri Aurobindo gave him the name Sundarananda, meaning "One who delights in Beauty," and he continued as a devotee for the rest of his life. He died 11 years ago.

In 1984, Nakashima related an experience he had a few years earlier when he received the huge trunk of a walnut tree in his Pennsylvania studio. As he later wrote, "In a small but firm voice, [it] asked to be realised" as an Altar for Peace. "It will be a symbol, a token of man's aspirations for a creative and beautiful peace, free of political overtones; an expression of love for his fellow man. We have become so basically disoriented with

our blind faith in science and technology without spirituality, it has brought us to the pit of madness."

Nakashima saw the altar as part of a transcontinental peace march or, possibly, a "Day of Existence" dedicated to a higher and deeper consciousness. "Enthusiastic contagion would be useful," he wrote, "as peace the world over is uppermost in our consciousness. It must be a joyous peace, not a fear or absence of war. It is a question of surrender. A surrender to the Divine Consciousness to end in a most beautiful aura of love." The first Peace Altar was installed on New Year's Eve 1986 at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City during a gala concert for peace conducted by Leonard Bernstein. The second Peace Table was installed in Auroville on the Golden Day of the Supramental Manifestation, February 29th, 1996.

Like its cousins, the third Peace Table is huge, about four meters by four meters, and fills the center of a corner room with no competing distractions. On long, narrow scrolls that hang from the walls are words of peace from the scriptures or holy men of various traditions – Lao Tzu, the Seraphim of Sarov, Swami Akhilananda, the Dhammapada, a Navaho chant, Guru Arjan, St. Matthew, Martin Luther King, a Celtic prayer, among others. A few photographs on the wall document the creation of the table at the Nakashima studios. The room, along a well-travelled route through the exhibition rooms of this respected academy and art gallery, will remain the way we saw it, a permanent monument to peace and human unity, tied through lines of force with Auroville and New York.

The ceremony was simple, with a few words from several of the guests. The Academy's director, instrumental in finding a home for the Peace Table, expressed his gratitude and pleasure at hosting the table – which he said it looked like a Bird of Peace, remarkably reminiscent of Mother's comment that her signature represented a Bird of Peace. George Nakashima's daughter, Mira, who runs the studio today, offered an intimate look at her father's dream. Irene Goldman, an American dedicated to building relations with Russia in the fields of the arts and humanities and who was key in getting the table into Russia, offered a sigh of relief that her 10-year efforts were realized. The US ambassador, a veteran diplomat, offered his hope "that our leaders and our people will take inspiration from these tables and that we will live in a

more peaceful world in the future." Nakashima's good friend and Dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, James Parks Morton, a man of famously eclectic spiritual inclinations who wears a bear's tooth given to him by a Native American medicine man over his pastoral collar and today serves as president of the dynamic Interfaith Center of New York, told us "Here we are in the hall of peace, surrounding us are the words of peace, and in the center is the table of peace," before reading from those words hanging on the walls. His favorite: "Acquire the spirit of peace, and thousands around you will be healed."

Finally, two speakers from our Auroville family: Julian Lines, representing both the Nakashima Foundation for Peace Board and the Auroville International Board, spoke about linking the three host countries in future programs. Then Bindu, ably translated into Russian by Sergei, spoke on behalf of Auroville. She was great: a solid presence and an excellent representative of Auroville's Flame. She spoke of our dream of creating in Auroville a real human unity, related some of Auroville's international experience through Peace Trees, and invited all present to help build the international zone of Auroville.

Somehow, this inauguration was a perfect ending of the Aurovillian presence in Russia, a tangible act that touched people beyond those in our intimate Auroville family who had already spent a week building and bonding together in St. Petersburg. Most of all, the table seemed to represent a concrete presence of conscious matter in a land that had turned away from its real soul purpose but now seems abundantly fertile, hungry for the transformational seeds of a new world.

Roger Toll



Inauguration of the Peace Table in the Russian Academy of Arts on June 26th, 2001

PHOTO: TINE

EC approves Asia-Urbs II

The European Community has approved a second Auroville project called Asia Urbs II. This project aims at organizing a 5-day conference in Auroville to which representatives of approximately 60 cities from India and abroad will be invited to discuss sustainable urban development and cultural and human integration. The project's total cost is 731,000 Euro of which Auroville and its partner cities Venice, Paris and the Italian province of Treviso will provide 256,000 Euro.

HRD committee appointed

The Union Minister of Human Resource Development has constituted a high level committee headed by Prof. J. C. Pande to explore the Auroville request for a Government of India grant of 129 crores. (US \$ 28 million)

Topographical survey

A detailed topographical survey of Auroville's main land features including canyons, water bodies, major trees and special vegetation cover, as well as buildings, roads and overhead telephone and electricity cabling, is being executed by a firm from Chennai.

Housing Service report

The Housing Service reported that in the first quarter of 2001 it has spent Rs.3.6 lakhs (US\$ 7,600) on house repairs (mainly repairing keel roofs) of 27 units; entered into newcomer housing loan agreements to the amount of Rs.27 lakhs (US \$57,000); has given loans to Aurovilians for house renovation and improvements to the amount of Rs.7 lakhs (US\$ 14,800); and managed to raise Rs. 12.5 lakhs (US\$ 26,500) donations to build new houses.

Health Centre upgrades service

The Auroville Health Centre at Aspiration has upgraded its services to include a doctor available round the clock and a brand new ambulance. The AV Health Centre now qualifies as a small hospital with 10 beds.

Work of Entry Group restructured

The new Entry Group will consist of a core group which will have the deciding power of admitting newcomers; an office staff to receive people and do administrative work; and a group of contact people to help newcomers to integrate. Also a newcomer education programme will be started, offering classes in English and Tamil and courses on the aims and ideals of Auroville and the life and work of Sri Aurobindo and Mother as well as aspects of Auroville's historic development.

Introducing Bildaur

Bildaur is the name of the new Auroville Building Service which intends to do wholesale purchasing of building materials. The service will also provide advice on building requirements and the rates given by contractors.

Aurovillian under probation

For the first time in the history of Auroville an Aurovillian has been put "under probation" on the recommendation of the Executive Committee. This status means that, after one year, a meeting of the Residents' Assembly will decide if the person concerned can remain Aurovillian.

From Dream to Courage

In June this year, the first inhabitants of "Courage", formerly called "Rève" (meaning: dream) moved into their new apartments. Swadha reports.

It all started a long time back. In October 1997, alarmed because of the housing deficit and price explosion, the first thoughts on a new low-cost housing community started to take shape. But it was not until two years later that the ideas had taken concrete form, the then Development Group had approved and taken official charge of the project and a name for it had been agreed upon: Rève, meaning Dream, would build 36 'affordable' apartments including a common infrastructure in the first phase and many more in a second phase. 'Affordable' implied that costs were to be kept low, estimated at a maximum of Rs.3,920 per square metre. The apartments were to be designed to allow, within limits, for individual preferences and requirements. Per individual, the apartment would have 84 m2 floor space including covered terrace space that could also be used for extension.

However, the money for the first phase was slow to materialise, and finally it was decided to start phase I with 16 apartments. Five apartments were paid in full with the usual 10% overhead for the Housing Fund plus 10% for infrastructure participation; another four were paid at costs plus 10% Housing Fund contribution which went back into the project; and the remaining seven apartments were subsidised by donations from individuals and the community. The foundation ceremony took place in September 1999, the building started two months later.

The beginning was slow but encouraging because all the future residents were involved in the project. There were many meetings, talking for hours with the architects, going on site, exchanging ideas, trying to pass all the information from one end to the other and listening (often without hearing) to everyone's opinion on the subject. All the parties agreed: we want to build a community, not just a settlement! For us, this meant a lot.

We could choose where to put our walls, windows and cupboards in our 84 square metres. The only imperative was to organize our space around six

pillars. It sounded great! So we all paid our part: the full amount, so that it wouldn't be on our mind later. From a donation received, the Housing Service paid for four youth apartments plus one newcomer unit and the Development Group for the community infrastructure.

But after a few meetings, we started to realise that we wouldn't really get what we wanted. There were too many walls, windows, shelves for the budget! So we had either to cut down on our requirements or pay more. Most of us were forced into accepting the first solution. Till then things were still going ok, but soon a conflict developed between the architects and the Development Group into which the future residents,

covering each day a new detail to be fixed, or something which had been badly done or "forgotten." And we still await the moment that the overhead water tank will be ready. The costs have been kept reasonably well within the original estimates: Rs.3,600 per square meter without infrastructure, Rs.6,000 with infrastructure included. That, by itself, is an achievement. However, design imperfections, some made in collaboration with the clients (such as kitchens that are open to visiting animals, thieves and the weather and free standing pillars that have not been concealed within the walls) will create additional costs in future.

Is this a new story? No, I suspect that it will bring a smile of understanding to the lips of nearly everyone who has built in Auroville and gone through a similar process. But don't we learn from our mistakes? Apparently not...

We have awakened from our 'Dream.' And we agreed to call our community Courage, as this attribute of the Mother was the only one of Her twelve attributes that hasn't yet been used to name a community in Auroville. An appropriate name, as the second phase of the former Rève

project, which is intended to house 60 or 70 people, will start in August 2001. It will consist of three apartment blocks, each consisting of a ground floor and two more floors, each consisting of 6 apartments, and will be built at a greater density than phase I. It will also have a building like Golconde in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, consisting of individual rooms and shared bathroom and kitchen facilities.

Courage. We'll surely need it to create that great new community we all aspire for.

Project: Rève phase I **Project holder:** Development Group
Size: 16 apartments **Apartment size:** from 30 to 84 m2.
Architect: Brand New Day **Contractor:** Amarati



Two apartment blocks in Courage

inadvertently, were drawn. This compounded the misunderstandings and a great loss of time was the consequence. Of course, no one would take responsibility for the delay, it was always the other's fault. It put a great damper on our initial enthusiasm. The speed of the construction on site was chaotic. The building would go very fast for a couple of weeks and then, for some time, there would be only four or five workers on site. That was the way it went. When the residents threw a tantrum, the Development Group would respond, there would be a small upheaval in the activities but then things would again drag on as normal.

And then, we moved in, carrying our furniture through the raw red earth, stepping over the trenches for the telephone cables, negotiating the mud and dis-

PROFILE

"Greenwork is in my blood now"

Some people think greenwork pioneers are a dying breed in Auroville, but Dirk disproves this: recently he embarked on his third pioneering experience in four years. Here he tells his story.

"I was born in Holland, but at sixteen I went away to sea. I worked on ships, and later on Rhine barges for some years, then later I travelled overland to India. I did this trip three times. Once, in 1974, I almost came to Auroville. I was in Mahabalipuram and planning to come, but then I met some people who had just been here and they told me, 'Everybody's depressed down there because somebody called the Mother has just died.' They also described Auroville as 'a bunch of fanatics digging a big hole'! This didn't sound like much fun to me, so I went to Goa instead.

"In the early 1980s I went to live in Greece. I started a leather workshop which made a comfortable living for many years, but eventually it didn't work any more. I sold the workshop and suddenly I felt completely free. Coincidentally my brother had just come back from visiting Auroville, and he told me the people there were trying to build a better world. This sounded interesting.

"In 1995 I came to check the place out. I'm not a guru-follower, and I wanted to be sure that the Aurovilians were not a bunch of religious fanatics. For three days I walked around totally confused, trying to find out where Auroville was happening. I was just about to leave when I visited the Auroville Boutique and saw the leatherwork for sale. I asked who was making it, and was directed to André at Kottakarai. We hit it off immediately because we were the same age and had the same background.

I went back to Greece and returned with my leather-working tools, planning to work with him.

"But then I heard about a project to develop a new piece of land in the greenbelt, and it really appealed to me. I gave up leatherwork and joined the Adventure community. None of us had a clue about what to do, so we made lots of mistakes. But we also learned a lot. However, after a year it was clear that while I really enjoyed the greenwork, the Adventure experiment was not working out for me.

"Fortunately another plot of land needed caretaking, and I moved there with a friend. This was real pioneering, for whereas Adventure already had many cashew trees, this other plot had virtually nothing. The soil was terrible, villagers had already encroached upon part of the land, there was a large pit from which gravel had been extracted over the years...Still, we decided to try to make it into forest.

"We moved onto the land at the beginning of the monsoon and within three months, with the help of a large team of workers, we fenced it, banded it and planted out many trees...and built a kitchen, storeroom and house! The next year we planted out the old gravel pit-

which everybody in the Forest Group thought was a hopeless task - and the results were amazing.

"Then I heard that the Forest Group was looking for a steward for the Success-Forecomers forest. Success is one of the oldest Auroville communities: along with Forecomers, Newlands and Ravena, it forms the

largest area of forest in Auroville. Finally I decided I might be able to do it. The big attraction for me was getting away from the noise of the nearby village as well as the size of Success: whereas my old place, Siddhartha Forest, was relatively small, Success is over 60 acres. It is also a 'sanctuary', implying that, as far as possible, the forest is left alone and there is no commercial plantation. In some of the remaining open patches and on newly acquired land, however, I'd like to introduce indigenous trees that are missing from the existing forest in order to enrich the biodiversity.

"The main problem at present is lack of water. The old Success well collapsed some years ago, and now I bring water from a neighbouring community three times a week in a small tank on my bullock cart. It's enough for my household needs, but it's insufficient to raise a tree nursery or even to grow cow grass for the bullock. But a new well and windmill will cost Rs.2 lakhs, which is beyond my means.

"As for the rest, it's fantastic living here. It's remote - I walk out in the evening and I know there's nobody around for miles - but I have no problem being on my own. This is my third pioneer-type experience in three years - which must be some kind of record for Auroville! - but I really see myself taking care of Success sanctuary for the long-term. I take long walks and feel the trees growing. Greenwork is in my blood now, it's become a way of life."

From an interview by Alan



Dirk

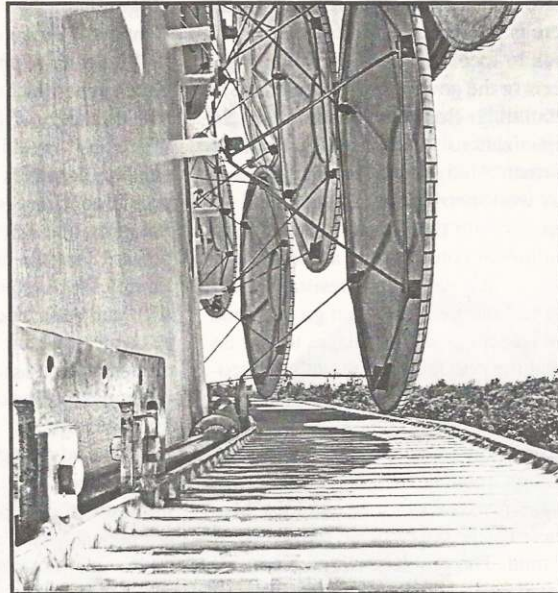
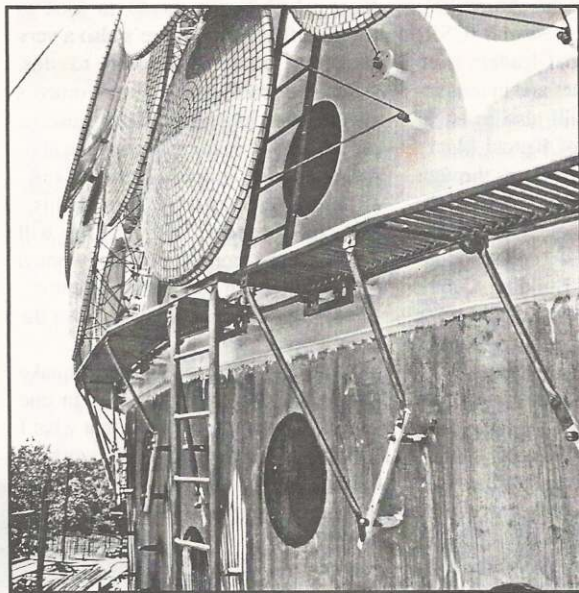
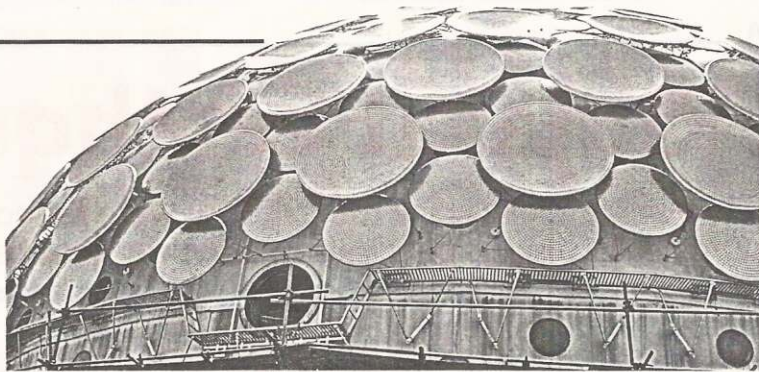
Skin progress

The work of fixing the golden discs on the outside of the Matrimandir, which had ceased about eight months ago after they covered Matrimandir's upper hemisphere, will soon be resumed. While the production of the discs continued in the workshop, a stainless steel walkway was attached midway, circumambulating the Matrimandir. At every quarter section, a stainless steel ladder makes it possible to go up and down. Next to the walkway a water conduit has been installed for cleaning purposes.

The crane on top of the Matrimandir can no longer be used as its arm is too short to fix the discs on the lower hemisphere. The crane will soon be removed, and may, in due time, be replaced by a permanent invisible telescopic one.

According to the latest predictions, the production of the discs will be completed by the end of October 2001. By June 2002 Matrimandir's golden skin may be completed.

Right and bottom right: walkway seen from below and from the side. Bottom left: the ladders enabling access to the lower and higher hemispheres.



CULTURE

"Veervasam" or "Root smell"

Harvest Eco - Farms uses theatre to promote organic farming in the region.

For more than five years Auroville's unit Water Harvest, based in nearby Kottakarai, has been working in the villages surrounding Auroville to help them to take care of their water resources. But what's the point in saving water if it continues to be polluted and overused? This was one of the reasons why Water Harvest decided two years ago to start an organic farming program called Harvest Eco - Farms. The first stage was setting up a demonstration farm of 18 acres to show how paddy (rice), groundnuts (peanuts)

and other local crops can be cultivated without polluting the environment. Through seminars and visits, local farmers got interested and about 10 farmers are now cultivating a small plot on their farm following organic farming practices, while the team of Harvest Eco - Farms gives technical support and takes care of marketing the organic products in Auroville.

The second phase of the project is to develop a larger outreach. How to touch the farmers, the youth, the women and their little ones? Theatre could

be an ideal way to spread the message. It has the potential to raise awareness among a large public in a delightful way. And so Veervasam was born. Pudhuvasandam, a local troupe from Edayanchavadi, was asked to play-act the message we wanted to pass on. We gave the background material, they made it alive, tackling the main issues and ignoring the useless details. A message about the intimate relationship between health and organic farming was expressed in a "cultural frame." Familiar gestures, humour and other distinctly Tamil touches created a story to which the audiences could obviously connect. The scenes showed the threatened health, the little bit of magic with the Swami, the stroll in the kingdom of death, the traditional Tamil dances, the dramatic suicide and the happy ending. There were smiles and from time to time the audience would burst into laughter. For us, who worried if the play would 'work', it was a pleasure to see it well received and that there was an opening for the underlying message.

The play has been performed in 10 villages. About 60 farmers participated in the meetings that followed the performances, and of these about 20 have expressed an interest in going 'organic' with assistance from Eco-Farms. A video of the play has been produced, available for those who want to show it elsewhere in Tamil Nadu. Yvelise



Pudhuvasandam actors on stage in "Veervasam"

PHOTO: WATER HARVEST

Aspiring paintings

Hans Isler's 21 paintings exhibited at the Savitri Bhavan from July 1st - 31st bear testament to aspirations rising high. In most paintings Krishna is present, either in his all-encompassing form or as a silent observer of the material world. Floral forms along with geometrical designs that take the shape of mountains, streams and celestial objects, are abundant. Using color, transparent foreground objects reveal their underlying forms, while achieving a unique harmony of depth and light. Blue in most of the paintings depicts mysticism; pastels soothe the harshness of geometrical lines and curves.

The last painting portrays a swan ('Hans' in Hindi, and symbol of the liberated soul) spreading its wings to fly... symbolic of Hans Isler's spiritual aspiration as expressed in these paintings.

Pooja

RESEARCH

Micro-organising the environment

At the end of May Auroville hosted for Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry farmers the first workshop on the use of Effective Micro-organisms (EM) in agriculture. Tineke talked to Margarita Correa, one of the two Aurovilians involved in EM research.

Effective Micro-organisms (EM) were discovered in Japan in the late sixties. It is a liquid product which combines lactic acid bacilli, photosynthetic (or phototropic) bacteria, yeast, ray fungi, and actinomycetes. It can be used to treat waste water and solid waste, to increase milk production and to improve cattle health. Dr. Lucas and Margarita, who introduced Effective Micro-organisms (EM) in Auroville in October 1999, have been monitoring its use.

The success has been remarkable. Take, for example, Discipline farm,

where allopathic medicines had failed to cure cows of a necrotic fungus. After using EM, the cows not only returned to full health, but also remained healthier and showed fewer flies and ticks. Other dairies that fed EM to their animals noticed that the milk production increased, and that the milk products improved their taste. A few Auroville farms spray EM on their vegetable gardens, paddy fields and fruit trees. One of the successes observed is the eradication of the rhinoceros beetle in coconut trees.

EM is also successfully used to improve compost and enhance an

organic fertiliser called 'Bokashi', a dry mixture consisting of oil cakes, rice, millets, salt and jaggery. Its effective use as a bio-pesticide is being tested.

Also in the treatment of kitchen waste the use of EM has proven effective. A foul odour produced by Auroville's Solar Kitchen waste water treatment plant had become intolerable for diners and nearby residents. It caused a nuisance of flies and mosquitoes. A daily cup of EM in the drain points and toilets proved sufficient to solve the problem.

Concludes Margarita: "After a

trial period of nearly two years, the results in agriculture, animal husbandry and waste water treatment are very positive and highly encouraging. Our activities have now spread out into India. We attend seminars and give consultancy across the country. To keep informed about world-wide developments, I recently attended an EM International Workshop in Thailand, and will represent India in the 7th International Conference in Kiusei Nature Farming and Effective Micro-organisms in New Zealand later this year.

Tineke

In brief

Student Service starts

Increasingly young students come to Auroville for project work or as trainees as part of their studies. In the year 2000-2001 approximately 130-135 students stayed in Auroville. To facilitate their experience, a Student Service has been started.

Contact: study@auroville.org.in

Central Fund contribution up

The Economy group has increased the Central Fund contribution from Rs.1,000 to Rs.1,100 per month. This contribution is paid by each unit for all the Aurovilians working there and by each self-supporting Aurovillian.

Fee for Pitanga classes

Pitanga, the cultural and physical training and healing centre in Samasti, has reopened its doors after a repainting costing Rs.2,25 lakhs (US\$ 5,000) which was funded from private sources. As the community is presently unable to maintain this building, henceforth a monthly fee will be charged from those who regularly attend classes, a decision which flies in the face of the ideals of Auroville that this type of service should be provided for free.

AYA performance

In the month of July the Auroville Youth Atelier gave a performance of music and contemporary dance at the Visitors' Centre.

Mohanam

Tamil youth from different villages working in Auroville opened the cultural centre Mohanam in the village of Sanjeev Nagar. The centre plans to provide free classes in dance, music, and theater to village youth and in cooperation with several Aurovilians to give classes in traditional medicine, health care, environment, yoga and meditation to adults.

Archival materials please!

Auroville Archives has issued an appeal for any old materials on Auroville.

Contact archives@auroville.org.in or write to Krishna Tewari, Auroville Archives, Bharat Nivas, Auroville, 605101.

AVI France closes office

Due to financial constraints, Auroville International France has closed its office in 6, Rue Cail. The new mailing address is Auroville International France, P.O. Box 58, 75462 Paris Cedex 10. Attempts continue to find a new location.

AVI The Netherlands

Auroville International The Netherlands has published a report on its work in the period autumn 200 - summer 2001 on its website: www.nl.auroville-international.org. Main projects supported are Matrimandir, land purchase, Bommopalayam village school and the elderly-support project "Sappadu".

Passings

Jyoti Chitale, a newcomer from India aged 27, who was working at the Kindergarten and the Solar Kitchen passed away on July 3rd during a family visit at Poona.

Kim Hie Cheul (Auroville name: Bori) a newcomer from Korea aged 37, who was working at Pitanga as a healer, passed away on July 14th.

After the Gujarat earthquake

To help the people of Kutch in Gujarat, Rs.12 lakhs (US\$ 25,500) were raised in Auroville. Sandeep Virmani came to Auroville to discuss how the donation can best be used.

Sandeep and his partner Sushma Iyengar have been involved for the past ten years in environmental and social work in Kutch. Both of them played key roles in coordinating disaster relief after the recent devastating earthquake in Gujarat which killed 20,000 and left hundreds of thousands more without homes. This wasn't the first disaster, though. Over the past ten years, Kutch has suffered no less than six droughts and two cyclones. "This means," explains Sandeep, "that a lot of the energy of groups like ours which, through various programmes, are trying to strengthen community in the villages, has had to go into coping with the effects of natural disasters. Calamities can, however, provide very good opportunities for change. The ninety seconds of the earthquake was more effective in changing people's relations to each other and attitudes to the way they live than all our work over the past ten years!"

Sandeep explains how the devastation caused Muslims and Hindus and different castes to work together, and how many of the survivors have begun to reassess their lifestyles. "After a disaster like this, people always begin by going back to tradition. They look at the simpler ways their parents lived and try to learn lessons from this. At the same time, they become very open to new ideas." One example of this concerns construction. Many of the buildings that collapsed were heavy concrete structures. However, the traditional bhungas – circular huts made of wattle and daub or mud – all survived intact, as did buildings made of ferro-cement. "Ferro-cement is comparatively new in this area. After we visited Auroville some years ago and saw it used widely, we sent some masons from Gujarat for training in this technique at CSR. It turns out that ferro-cement structures are very earthquake-resistant. In some villages where everything else had been razed to the ground, all the ferro-cement toilet cabins were still standing!"

Obstacles to change

However, it's one thing to reassess the way one has been living, it's another to make radical changes in one's lifestyle. "There are many obstacles to change," explains Sandeep. "One is the attitude of the government. At times of calamity, there is a tendency for the government to centralize everything, to want to do everything themselves, even though often they don't have the capability. After the earthquake, for example, they wanted to build temporary housing for all the survivors, but this way you just make the people more dependent, less able to look after themselves. So while the government created temporary shelters out of tin sheets which everybody rejected, non-governmental organizations like ours helped the people build their own temporary houses by providing them with local materials."

"Another obstacle to change is lack of knowledge. It's clear that the biggest economic venture in Kutch for the next 2-3 years will be construction, and already commercial interests smell big profits. Corporations come in and try to sell prefabricated building units of

exactly the same type that fared so badly in the earthquake! It's clear, then, that the people have to understand that there are alternatives." The key group here is the masons. "Today the people look to local masons rather than engineers or the government for guidance in rebuilding. So a confederation of 26 organizations called Kutch Nav Nirman Abhiyan has organized three-day workshops for masons at which we discuss with them their knowledge of traditional construction, and introduce them to new earthquake-resistant building techniques. They then go back and hold meetings in 5-6 villages to discuss what the possibilities are with the people. Finally, we support the masons in building a few houses in each village for the poorest of the poor as demonstration models of what good earthquake-resistant housing can look like. These can be out of stone, ferro-cement or mud. The problem with the latter is that now it needs to be 'repackaged' because it has become known as a poor man's building material. Perhaps the compressed earth technology promoted by CSR can assist in this change of image."

Another problem is money. The local NGOs managed to persuade the State Government to allow the survivors to build their own permanent homes, and Rs.50,000-90,000 has been allocated to each family for this, the first phase of which is now being disbursed. "That's a lot of money in these parts, and it's tempting for certain interests and individuals to try to corner it for themselves. The other danger is that the money will cause people to return to concrete as a more prestigious form of construction. This is exactly what happened after the last big Kutch earthquake in 1956. (Kutch sits on top of the confluence of two major tectonic plates, making it a high-risk earthquake zone.) Although there was clear evidence of what happens when you build heavy concrete structures in an earthquake zone, peoples' memories were very short and commercial pressures proved very powerful."

As an antidote to this, in addition to the mason trainings, the Abhiyan federation is setting up 'bridges' in the villages. Each 'bridge' is a small group of professionals – social workers, doctors, engineers, information managers etc. – who act as a support group for a group of 10-15 villages. Their role is to provide information about construction alternatives, to help the people set up village committees, to provide psychological support services, and to assist individuals in filling in forms for compensation. As Sandeep puts it, "Abhiyan hopes to provide the people with a basket of options which concur with tradition, nature and simplicity."

The role Auroville can play

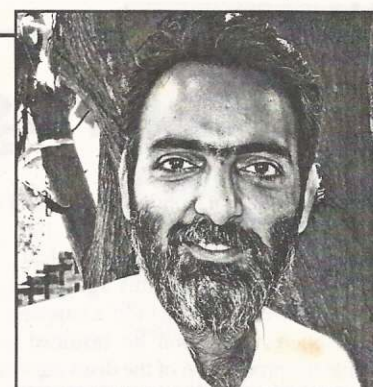
Sandeep also sees the importance of good leadership for the rebuilding – both physical and psychological – of Kutch. "It's crucial that we have a group of committed people who are willing to use both traditional and innovative methods to help the people themselves solve their problems in an appropriate manner: in other words, in ways which promote self-help and a sustainable and simple lifestyle."

Auroville has developed certain technologies which incorporate these goals, and I've come here now to work out a programme by which Auroville's Centre for Scientific Research (CSR) will help train potential leaders from Kutch in new techniques and in innovative thinking. CSR will also assist in upgrading the skills of Kutchi blacksmiths, carpenters and masons through providing trainings in Auroville in technologies like ferro-cement and compressed earth block construction. Finally the Auroville Building Centre will send earth block presses and a team to Kutch where they will erect a demonstration model of the AUM earthquake-resistant house developed by AuroSatprem."

"The advantage of Kutch," continues Sandeep, "is that communities still think together here. In other words if, after open discussion, key people in the community are convinced by a certain

course of action, then everybody else in the community will adopt it. So we're hoping to create a critical mass of villages which are prepared to look at things differently." There's also a very important social dimension to this. After the earthquake, the women's organization coordinated by Sushma played a key role in organizing the allocation of relief supplies in the villages. "They gained a lot of respect for this," observes Sandeep. "Hopefully this will accelerate the empowerment of women which has been gaining momentum, through organizations like this, over the past ten years."

What impact did the earthquake have upon Sandeep himself? "In one sense, it was a confirmation that what I and my friends have been working towards for the past ten years – allowing the ordinary people to have more control over their own lives and resources – is the correct path, for I saw



that those communities and individuals who were used to taking more responsibility for themselves coped better with the aftermath of the disaster. The world responded wonderfully to the disaster: no less than 280 international organizations assisted in relief efforts. Some of them came with their own agendas, with their own centralized, top-down way of working based upon the assumption that 'they know best'. However, when we in the coordination committee pointed out that in such a situation it is vital to decentralize, to allow the people on the ground to make quick decisions without reference to a higher authority, they understood and were willing to accept it.

From an interview by Alan

AUROVILLE AND THE WORLD

A city under siege

Auroville Today's correspondent Roger Harris reports from Genoa.

Genoa, seen from down the coast, flows like lava to the sea. In the Middle Ages, this once proud republic was granted trading concessions in the Mediterranean by Byzantium; it kept its arch-rivals Pisa and Venice at bay, and enjoyed a virtual monopoly of troop transports to the holy land during the crusades. The bank of St. George – named after the city's patron saint – was the western world's first bank – a word that comes from the small Genoese square: Piazza Dei Banchi, where money lenders and shipbrokers conducted their business from benches. Genoese banks financed the Spanish conquest of the Americas, as well as the journey of her most famous son Christopher Columbus. A third of Spain's plunder found its way into Genoese coffers. A proverb of the time went, "Silver is born in the Americas, passes through Spain and dies in Genoa." The choice of Genoa for the G8 meeting held in the city's ducal palace in July, was not therefore totally inappropriate.

Genoa is an organic, unplanned city par excellence, and the storeys of many of its buildings, added over the centuries, are like a catalogue of architectural styles in stone. A sense of verticality dominates the old city with the crumbling laundry-draped facades of its medieval high-rises, its winding alleys, marble portals, and shrines to the Virgin and St. George. The old section of the port is something of a North/South microcosm. Here, Ecuadorians phone home from makeshift booths, contraband of every sort is hawked by roadside vendors, sunlight is as rare as a letter slipped beneath the door, middle class Genoese ladies do their shopping in upscale boutiques, and open air vegetable markets are held in pocket squares where men play cards in griffon-draped cafés. On the corner of a shadowed street, three women – one stiletto-heeled in black – kneel and coddle their shared and common child, as a beam of sunlight briefly falls through a church's open door on a statue of the Virgin, the Madonna of the poor.

Genoa is not riot-squad friendly. It lacks the boulevards. And this normally teeming port became for four days in July, both a symbol and a city under siege. The port – Italy's busiest – was closed for a week, and one of the two main train stations for several days. Twenty thousand residents suddenly found themselves prisoners in their own city, three days before the conference began, when dozens of 5 metre high steel net gates embedded in concrete were erected overnight, sealing off the so-called red zone of the city. And video cameras connected to satellites provided the authorities with continual coverage of the comings and goings in the streets of the city. Sewers had previously been sealed, all this and more, for what amounted to a private meeting – of dubious legitimacy – in a ducal palace, of a group of potentates – the G8 – devoted to unchecked globalisation. A month before the meeting even a group of young entrepreneurs and industrialists at a

two day conference in Santa Margherita, publicly expressed concern at the lack of governance of global capital.

But globalisation is not a one-way street and Jefferson's dream of 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' remains the birthright of relatively few residents of our earth today.

Over a billion residents of our planet do not have access to potable water. A recent UN study estimated that it would cost ten billion dollars a year to provide drinking water to all residents of our planet. More than a billion people are illiterate but six billion dollars a year could provide elementary education for every child. Meanwhile Americans spend six billion dollars a year on cosmetics alone, and Europeans and Americans together spend seven billion dollars a year on dog and cat food. Americans also manage to consume a quarter of the world's petrol products, while even the Kyoto Treaty – watered down as it was – now like the Amazon, threatens to go up in smoke. According to Worldwatch's Jeremy Rifkin 40% of today's monetary wealth is concentrated in the hands of 366 individuals.

The 'People of Seattle' – so dubbed by the Italian press before the conference began – individuals and groups, many inspired by a tradition of libertarian thought ranging from Wycliffe to Bakunin, converged on Genoa to make their voices heard. Rag-tag band, rainbow tribe, or motley mix of both, it had been hoped that their campaign coordinated by an umbrella group, the Genoa Social Forum, would be one of creative civil disobedience. And if the vast majority of the over two hundred thousand protesters who converged on Genoa were intent on peaceful civil disobedience, the indiscriminating heavy-handedness of the police, and a hard-core anarchist fringe, soon turned Genoa into a battleground. With one young demonstrator dead and over five hundred wounded, the smoke rising from the streets rapidly eclipsed the discussions in the ducal palace.

Some would say that the G8 meeting is after all about relieving debt (whose debt anyway, and to whom?) and seeking solutions to the pressing North-South issues that the demonstrators wanted addressed now and for the future. One feels however that some of the participants in the ducal palace meeting had little choice and hardly could afford, given the events that occurred, not to pledge substantial sums for health and the relief of poverty in the world. But one is reminded of Sri Aurobindo's aphorism: "The existence of poverty is the proof of an unjust and ill-organised society and our public charities but the first tardy awakenings in the conscience of a robber."

The Mother predicted the end of communism, but also foresaw the end of capitalism as we know it. But where today are the practical alternatives? Where is the true third way? "There should be somewhere on earth a place..."

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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 one of the Auroville International centres below (add 10% for admin. and bank charges) or directly to Auroville Today, Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India. Email: avtoday@auroville.org.in

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Editorial team: Alan, Bindu, Caryl, Roger, Tineke. Guest editors: Shanti Pillai, Emmanuele. Proofreading: Suzie. All photos, unless otherwise

attributed, have been taken by the editors. DTP: Natacha. Photo editing: Matthia. Printed and published by Caryl Thieme on behalf of the Auroville Foundation, and printed at All India Press, Pondicherry, and published at Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India.

<http://www.auroville.org/journals&media/avtoday/avtoday.htm>

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