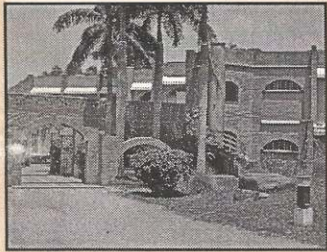
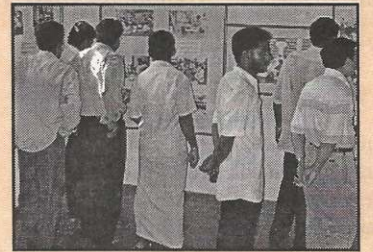


## Cover Story: Receiving visitors



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## Turning tourists into students

### A new perspective on visitors

How should Auroville be presented to the outside world? Are we ill-prepared for receiving visitors to Auroville? And do exhibitions about Auroville held in other parts of India only increase the flow of tourists, thereby accentuating the problem? These were some of the questions raised recently by a proposal to mount an Auroville exhibition in Delhi.

In late February, a short note in the Auroville News announced that there would be an Auroville exhibition in Delhi next year. The exhibition would be held at the prestigious India Habitat Centre, and the aim would be "to create more awareness of Auroville in India that could lead to greater collaboration between the two". The Auroville organizers noted that they planned subsequently to take the exhibition around to all the major cities of India.

Nothing very remarkable about this proposal, you might think—Auroville has presented itself to India through a number of exhibitions over the years. But this time Franz, a long-term Aurovilian who helped stage such exhibitions in the past, raised a strong objection. "I have serious doubts," he wrote to the organizers via the AuroNet, "about the wisdom of mounting an exhibition in Delhi, and even more so about sending it around all the major cities of India at this point in time! Just look at what is happening—or NOT happening—in

ing infrastructure for receiving visitors..."

Franz's note evoked many responses, both from within and outside Auroville, the vast majority of which supported his proposal. Obviously a sensitive nerve had been touched. But why the sensitivity? What are the real issues here?

### Information versus publicity

One of Franz's concerns was that the exhibition would present only an idealistic picture of Auroville, thus creating false expectations among those who might later visit the community.

Sri Aurobindo's views on publicity and advertisements—"I don't believe in advertisements except for books etc, and in propaganda except for politics and patent medicines"—are well-known. Yet the early Aurovilians, intoxicated perhaps by the sheer scale of the Auroville concept, obviously didn't always take them to heart. When Satprem read to



The Matrimandir queue, Sunday, 4 p.m.

information about Auroville should be made available. But what is the difference between information and publicity? She explained:

"Publicity does not discriminate between the persons to whom one speaks. Publicity means addressing a public which cannot understand. What we try to do is to carry the Light where it can be understood and

How well have we followed this? Auroville has suffered adverse publicity over the years, the effects of which—particularly at central, state and local government levels—we continue to experience. One of the present tendencies in our outreach literature is to correct it by emphasising those achievements which make "good copy"; in other words, material achievements which can be easily understood and universally acclaimed (afforestation, village development etc.). The ideals are not neglected, but often they serve more as mastheads than as an integral part of the story that we tell.

This is understandable—the ideals are difficult to translate into everyday language, and we have far, far to go before we can talk about real achievements in this sphere—but it's difficult to avoid the impression that we are sometimes watering down Mother's vision to make it more palatable... with all the practical and occult consequences that may ensue.

The other tendency in some of our publications and exhibitions over the years has been to dwell ONLY upon the ideals, without any reference to the difficult, and frequently messy, process of trying to realize them. Clearly, we do not have to be needlessly self-lacerating. At the same time there seems no good reason why we

should paper over our difficulties and failures. Indeed, they are the evidence that something interesting is happening here, that Auroville is far from being comatose or "dead perfect".

### Mixed messages?

The other major issue Franz raises is the way we deal with visitors to Auroville. He believes we are doing a bad job. In a separate paper put out by Franz and Tim—part of a team attempting to improve facilities at the Visitors Centre—they identify some of the major problems. These include visitors arriving without a basic understanding of Auroville, confusion, overcrowding and delays at the Visitors Centre, lack of essential information, the complexity of obtaining a pass to Matrimandir, and the regimentation involved in visiting the structure.

The evidence of our failure is overwhelming. The question is, do we do a bad job because we lack the means to do a better one? Or because we lack the will? Auroville exhibits something of a schizophrenic attitude regarding visitors. On the one hand many Aurovilians, encountering the steady stream of tourist buses and taxis, rue the day that Auroville found itself on the obligatory tourist trail.

(continued on page 4)

## Visitors to Auroville

Every year more and more visitors come to Auroville. Many come just to see the Matrimandir, and there is also an increase in other categories, like students coming on short- or long-term internships. There's a perception that we are not handling some of these visitors well, leading to frustration and disappointment on all sides. But what is the problem? And what can we do about it? Here are some views drawn from those in the front line.

regard to the existing inflow of visitors, which on busy weekends can already be a thousand or more a day... The fact is, we can scarcely deal with the present inflow—certainly not in a comprehensive and satisfying fashion—yet the exhibition(s) you are proposing is bound to enormously increase their numbers."

"Surely," he concluded, "it would be better at this point to use whatever money is being considered for such an exhibition to first improve our exist-

Mother the famous passage regarding advertisements from one of Sri Aurobindo's letters (see box, p.5), Satprem commented:

"That passage should be typed and put up in Auroville. It is indispensable. They all have a false idea about propaganda and publicity. It should be typed in big letters; at the top, 'Sri Aurobindo said', then put the quotation and send it to Auroville. Say I'm the one who's sending it."

Mother stressed, however, that

received. It is a question of discernment and choice. It is a question of selection: not to spread the thing without discernment. It is to choose which milieu, which people, which conditions can understand and to act there only.

In publicity, to make the ideas comprehensible, one lowers them, while we keep our teachings at the height... We keep it at its height so that those who understand may do so." (from the Gazette Aurovilienne)

### Learning

Hilde, the resident midwife, speaks of her experience in delivering babies in Auroville

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### Environment

Auroville Energy Products experiments with electrically-powered bicycles

### Living together

Alan checks out the Coffee Shop: the heartbeat of Auroville's social life

Page 6

### Open Forum

Christine Bernard responds to Auroville Today's criticism of the new entry process

Page 6

### People

Ulli, who donated US \$1 million towards Auroville's development, shares his views

Page 8





# A profile of the Air Travel Service

Julietta, a newcomer from Germany, joined the Air Travel Service for some time. She spoke with Manou, the man who started the unit, and Joster who now runs it.

Manou, who hails originally from Thanjavur District in Tamil Nadu, came to live in Auroville in 1984 after finishing his university studies in Commerce. He turned down a well-paid job offer in a government national bank and started working with Toine at the Auroville Electrical Service in Abri. By 1992 he was ready for a change and took off for the States where, together with Rama from the Solar Service, he conducted a six-month solar energy training programme.

At that time Auroville was far from being on the map in terms of travel agencies and his friend Toine was checking out the possibilities for a ticketing service in Auroville. Since he always flew with KLM to the Netherlands, Toine did a survey through the Auroville News to see how many Aurovilians would be interested to fly KLM too. He got a positive response from 80 or 90 Aurovilians, and so it seemed a sound enough basis on which to start a rudimentary travel service. "Take the file," he welcomed Manou when he came back home in 1994.

"That was the beginning," says Manou. "I started the Air Travel Service on a trial basis, for there were not so many formalities and bureaucracy as today. I just distributed letters to all Aurovilians through the messenger service and put a note in the Auroville News that the Auroville Travel Service was born. I knew most of Auroville's population personally. The response and support were overwhelming, and the first 100 tickets were sold with zero profit!" After a few months the Air Travel Service became an official unit of Auroville.

After the initial enthusiasm, Manou came to understand the drawbacks: no money, no real office (he started this unit from his own house, and the office is still there today), no telephone lines (he shared his line with the Electrical Service), no computer or fax, no trained personnel. "I did not even ask Aurovilians to work

arrange two free tickets every year for the Caring Service—for students or Aurovilians in need. It has always been my highest priority to be able to give to the community."

After two years, with the financial help of two Aurovilians, Manou took a loan of 5 lakhs (ca. US\$ 12,000 at today's rates) to get the bank guaran-



The staff at Air Travel Service: Murugadass, Dass, Satya, Petra and Sridhar

here because of their five-hour-per-day job policy and the high turnover. I needed commitment." Two of the employees from the early days are still with ATS even now: the accountant Murugadass and the international ticketing manager Sridhar.

There was stiff competition from the Pondicherry travel agencies. They even asked Manou to work together with them, but he preferred to remain independent. At first it was not easy but, "then the growth started," he says. "I reinvested the profits in the building up of ATS and managed to

tee for the domestic ticket stock. Now ATS is able to issue domestic tickets within half an hour; while international tickets take two days.

The ATS, besides providing two free tickets to Aurovilians, was soon able to contribute to the Financial Service, Matrimandir and SAIER. And, having started from scratch in 1994, the Travel Service last year had reached a net worth of Rs. 15 lakhs. They sell at least 200 international tickets a year, plus another 100 for domestic travel. Manou estimates that about 80% of all Aurovilians use the

Air Travel Service. In addition, domestic tickets are also booked for travellers coming from abroad.

In 1999, when the unit was running successfully, Manou again felt the need for a change. He was asked to manage a company of 250 people in Pondicherry and took up the challenge of turning a sick company that was about to be closed down into a flowering business again. Now, after one year, the problems of labour and finance have been solved at Aditi Diamonds and Manou can move on to his next assignment.

## Joster leads ATS into the new millennium.

Joster came to Auroville from Germany in 1976. He started out by planting trees on the then barren earth of Discipline and established a farm there. In 1990 he started the Auroville guest programme, with the aim of providing a more organized welcome to the growing number of visitors. He co-ordinated a central service for booking accommodation and offered the first Auroville Introduction Weeks for guests. As a logical extension he was involved in the final stages of the building and organization of the Visitors Center, and this led to the opening of Inside India Tours in 1997. For two years Inside India was buying its air tickets for group and individual travellers from the Air Travel Service. Recently he took over the running of ATS.

There are plans to expand. Inside India is on the verge of opening a new trust which will merge both units—Inside India Tours and Air Travel Service. Petra, who joined ATS as a newcomer last year, will specialize in working out round trips throughout South India for Aurovilians, their relatives and guests. At present ATS is preparing to move to a larger and more convenient space in Aspiration so that Manou, who lives like a monk in a little keet structure on the roof, can at last have his house back.

Based on interviews by Julietta



## AVAG activities for village children

Auroville Village Action Group organised summer camps for village children in May. There were eight two-day camps, each one on a different theme: singing, dancing, drawing, medicinal plants, sports and games, storytelling etc.

Another new project is the AVAA. This acronym, which stands for Auroville Village Action Arts, means in Tamil 'enthusiasm to learn'. Based upon Aurelio's enthusiasm for culture and Tamil children, village children will be encouraged to come every Saturday morning to Auroville for lessons in Bharat Natyam, folk dance, singing, theatre and drawing.

## American Pavilion on the slipway?

The board of AVI-USA has decided to give a new impetus to the construction of the International Zone by materializing the American Pavilion. As they describe it, "our desire is to start with a low-key presence and structure to encourage educational and cultural exchanges for the benefit of international visitors and residents of Auroville." Initial funds are already available. More details from: [aviboard@aurobindo.org](mailto:aviboard@aurobindo.org)

## Driving people up the wall?

One of the more interesting proposals in a recent issue of the Auroville News was for the erection of climbing walls in Auroville to enable people to learn the skills of rock-climbing. The walls could be up to ten metres high and made of cement or rocks. A new opportunity for our architects to express themselves?

## More trees, less rain?

The Auroville Water Service reveals that Pondicherry, which has few trees, receives on average one centimetre more rain annually than Auroville. So where does this leave the theory that afforestation increases rainfall?!

## Voting with their feet?

A recent General Meeting to discuss a proposal for a Town Council for Auroville was attended by only 25 people—most of whom were from the group involved in formulating the proposal.

## Origami workshop

Beautiful paper creations started appearing all over Auroville recently as a result of an Origami workshop in May. Origami is the traditional Japanese art of paper-folding. Originally it was used to exchange secret love messages, but it has evolved into an art which provides a different approach to geometry, and to creativity.

## Matrimandir

### Glass for the inner skin

Triangular glass panels will cover the inner space beneath the Chamber in the Matrimandir. Finding and applying the precise shade of orange colour that the Mother had indicated for this space was a subject of research for the past few months. The end of the research phase is now near.

As part of the research, small pieces of float glass were fused with different shades of salmon orange, and different textures were also tried out. It turned out that the only possible way to get an even colour was to mix glass powder with silk-screen printing oil and apply it through silk screen. But as the silk screens here are rather small, the results were not satisfactory: the edges of the screen were visible

on the glass. A larger silk screen was needed to accommodate the triangular glass panels measuring approx. 3 m. at the base and 2.4 m in height. This size was not available here, so a special screen had to be manufactured in Germany. It seems that this was the largest screen (4 x 3.20 m) ever made for printing on glass, and a special police escort was needed to transport this large cargo through Germany to the harbour!

Before applying the colour, the glass has to be washed with specially demineralized water (a de-mineralization machine has been imported for this purpose). A glass washing machine, designed by an engineer in Germany, will be built at the Matrimandir workshop. Once the

colour has been applied using the specially built silk-screen printing table, the glass will be fused in the kiln. Afterwards a second layer of float glass of the same size is laminated onto the first panel of glass for safety reasons.

In order to start full production, more machinery will have to be built: another kiln and a movable crane on rails to transport the glass. There will have to be cutting and milling arrangements for the aluminium frames which will be used to fit the glass inside the Matrimandir.

Once the present prototypes have been mounted, we will be able to get a glimpse of how the inside of the Matrimandir will look.

Tineke



# A midwife by chance

## Hilde's thoughts on 23 years of delivering Auroville babies

During the early years of Auroville there were an average of 12 to 15 home births annually: today there are about 30. Hilde's first task, when she arrived in Auroville 23 years ago, was to deliver the baby of Auroville's resident midwife. Since then, more often than not single-handedly, she has delivered numerous Auroville babies. Here she writes about the experience.

Today I work pretty much with the same tools as I did when I started: a few pairs of scissors, clamps, a stethoscope, cotton, metergine injections, needles and thread, all sterilized by the Auroville Health Centre. My tools go into a small leather bag, which I carry on my motorcycle. There is also a small wooden box packed with homeopathic medicines—for mothers who choose a natural home delivery, the small homeopathic pills do wonders. I prefer not to use the allopathic arsenal. Every pregnant mother is assisted in her prenatal and postnatal period for follow-up care. If there are complications with the delivery that cannot be handled at home, I take the mother to the maternity hospital in Pondicherry.

### Delivery by candlelight

By profession I was a psychiatric nurse, though during my studies I had done the necessary training in obstetrics. Soon after I came to Auroville in



Hilde: AV's midwife

1977, it became known that a qualified nurse was available. Me! The one person who was extremely grateful for my arrival was the pregnant midwife who was desperately looking for help and a replacement. My initiation into midwifery was delivering her baby! Before I knew it, delivering children was a full-time job. I would often find myself

doing a delivery in the middle of the night by candlelight, sending the father out to fetch water. Many more deliveries followed. In those years I cycled out to expectant mothers and would often come back from a delivery filled with inner warmth from witnessing one more amazing gift of life.

### Further training

After two years of working alone I increasingly felt the need for more knowledge. A maternity hospital in the nearby town of Pondicherry accepted me as an observing nurse. Further skill was acquired when I attended a short course at a university hospital in Belgium, where I learned to stitch with confidence. In 1990 I had the opportunity to attend a workshop in Australia with Igor Tjarkovsky on under-water births, a technique which had fascinated me for a long time. The workshop and resulting contacts gave me the necessary confidence to deliver my first water baby in a tub placed in the mid-

dle of a hut. Since that time the small water tub is part of my standard equipment and mothers can make use of it either to relax or even for delivering. There is always a person at hand who heats water on a wood-fire and fills the tub to the exact temperature needed for welcoming the new-born baby.

I have worked with other Aurovilian midwives, all of whom have become dear friends. Sadly, none of them was able to stay in Auroville. Nowadays I find myself delivering babies to parents whom I delivered many years earlier, a truly amazing experience! Besides my work as a midwife, I often give advice to women from very different cultural backgrounds on a variety of health issues.

Happy events are intertwined with difficult, sad and painful moments. When things boil over, like nine new babies in less than two months, I must admit that it all becomes too much to handle. But then I also observe that the Grace helps out in many miraculous ways. And at the end it is always Mother who reminds me that She wants Her new children to be born in the safest possible way. It was for that purpose She brought me here.

*As one ascends from peak to peak,  
it is made clear the much  
that has still to be done.*

(Vedic text ca. 5000 BC,  
translated from Sanskrit)

# How to get Aurovilians re-cycling?

## Three new prototypes of electro-bikes

Auroville Energy Products (AEP) is well-known in Auroville for its solar-powered lanterns. For some years it has also been experimenting with alternative transport and, in particular, with electrically-powered bicycles. Our new guest editor, David Clouston went to find out how far they have progressed.

AEP is conducting research and development in many areas of renewable energy. But there are few areas which offer a more potent challenge to Carsten, one of its partners, than that of providing an improved means of transport for Aurovilians. A visit to the premises at Aurosarjan reveals three machines which he hopes may be the prototypes for a new way of getting around: electric-powered bicycles.

The most flamboyant of these is the extraordinary armchair-bike, with batteries under the seat, on which Carsten is often to be seen cruising around Auroville. "It is more of an advertisement, to attract people's attention to the concept," he says with a smile.

The two other electric-powered models have more potential for mass transport. The cycle in each case is locally built, and at first glance resembles a conventional machine. A sealed battery pack is located on the luggage rack: twisting the handgrip sends electric current through a controller to the motor.

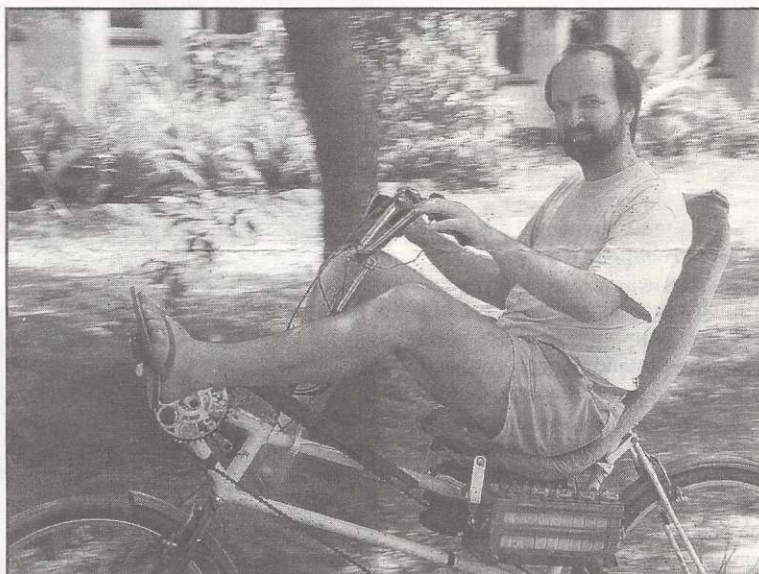
One version powers the front wheel by means of a very compact German-made motor. The range of the machine, without pedalling, is about 10 kilometres. "This is the more

exciting of the two," Carsten explains. "It goes faster, and accelerates more like a moped." He envisages a possible production price of around Rs. 20,000.

The second model uses only Indian-made components. Using a different sort of battery pack, the range of this bicycle is around 20 km. It was sold year ago to a lady in Auroville, and has performed perfectly. "We could probably produce this one for around Rs. 17,000—18,000," says Carsten.

The battery packs are rechargeable with an in-built solar charge regulator. Charging time is about two hours. Their useful life is two or three years. Then they can be disassembled, and the lead and the plastic casing recycled (so to speak). What about the acid? "In Europe there are facilities for dealing with the acid. Here, we have to see how it is done."

For the green-minded customer, these machines look very attractive. If the batteries are re-charged using solar power, there is very little use of non-renewable energy compared to a petrol-powered motorbike or moped. The total energy "footprint" of a combustion engine is heavy: crude oil is extracted from the earth, refined into gasoline, transported to the user and finally burned in an inefficient and



Carsten getting up to speed



The indigenous electro-bike

noisy combustion process whose waste product contains poisonous elements.

That said, there are several serious limitations of both machines for everyday use, even in Auroville. The first is the relatively short range; 20 km. would hardly suffice for a round-trip to Pondy. Another is the lack of carrying capacity; a load of shopping would be difficult, and a gas-bottle quite impossible. Finally, there is the actual cost of the bicycle; a new moped—with fewer limitations of range or load-capacity—costs less than even the cheaper electric bicycle.

While acknowledging these drawbacks, Carsten hopes to reduce their impact by sensible planning. "The first use I see for these machines is for tourists and visitors. They don't want to go so far, and they don't generally need much carrying capacity. If such machines were available for hire, I believe they would be a very attractive.

"Ideally, there would be a number of 'filling-stations' around Auroville where cyclists could pull in to exchange their battery pack for a fully-charged one." He demonstrates that

the pack can be unclipped from the bike and replaced in a matter of seconds. "That way, the users don't have the problem of charging their own batteries."

Even now a visitor could take a spare battery pack in the front basket of the cycle. This would increase the range to 20 kilometres. "And you can always pedal, if all else fails," Carsten points out.

What's in store for Aurovilians? "My hope for the future is to produce an electric-powered version of the TVS moped. That would have larger, heavier batteries under the seat: the range and load-capacity would be correspondingly increased."

### A prisoner in Tibet

In a recent lecture under the auspices of the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture, Maj.Gen. Krishna Tewari recounted his experiences of being taken prisoner by the Chinese in 1962, and his seven months of captivity in a Tibetan monastery.

### Watering the summer cultural desert

May is often a dry season for cultural events in Auroville. However this year we have had performances of Kathak dance and Indian classical guitar, there was an excellent Indo-Dutch exhibition of paintings and sculpture at Pithanga Hall, and—courtesy of the Alliance Francaise in Pondicherry—we have enjoyed a French traditional jazz band and the juggling skills of Francois Chat, a "manipulator of objects and theatrical gestures".

### New opportunity to massage figures

Faced with a chronic shortage of qualified massage therapists from outside, the team at Quiet Healing Centre has decided to train Newcomers and Aurovilians in this hands-on skill.

### Keeping up our guard

When much else seems to be slowing down or shutting down for the summer, the AV Guard is expanding its activities. In addition to their night patrols, they will now be active during daylight hours...as active, that is, as one can be in temperatures of 38 degrees Centigrade.

### Developing Auroville?

The Development Group, which is responsible for granting permission for people to build in Auroville, revealed that they granted 33 building permissions in 1995-1996, 52 in 1996-1997, 50 in 1997-1998, 78 in 1998-1999, and 64 so far from 1999 till today. The 64 permissions granted in the current year were for projects estimated to cost a total of Rs 3,48,04,049.

Meanwhile the Housing Group continues to appeal for help in housing the 70-80 Aurovilians who are unhappy with their housing situation, and in particular for seven families who are living in unacceptable conditions.

### AVI website

Auroville International now has a website which gives information, in different languages, about Auroville and the sixteen AVI Centres and liaisons. The website can be accessed at <http://www.auroville-international.org>

### Ashram website

The Sri Aurobindo Ashram has also put up a new website at <http://www.sriaurobindoashram.org>



## Turning tourists....

(continued from front page)

On the other hand, visitors are welcomed as good business insofar as they purchase Auroville products or stay in Auroville guest-houses. (At present there are almost 400 beds for guests in Auroville, which is indicative of their importance to our collective and individual economies.)

### Making it an educational experience

Visitors and guests come in all shapes and sizes, with very different intentions and knowledge of Auroville. Some come for an hour, some stay for months. Some come with a genuine wish to discover Auroville in its integrality, others don't even seem sure at which place they've arrived.

In the early days, Mother made it clear that Auroville was not for casual tourists. Today, some Aurovilians would prefer a moratorium on tourism, seeing it as a needless distraction from the real work of materializing Mother's dream. This is oversimplistic, not least because some of those who come offer us valuable insights and advice, and many of the present Aurovilians first came here as tourists! In any case now that Auroville seems to be firmly on the tourist trail, it is clear that, rather than trying to turn back the waves, we should be doing a better job of receiving and educating everybody who arrives here.

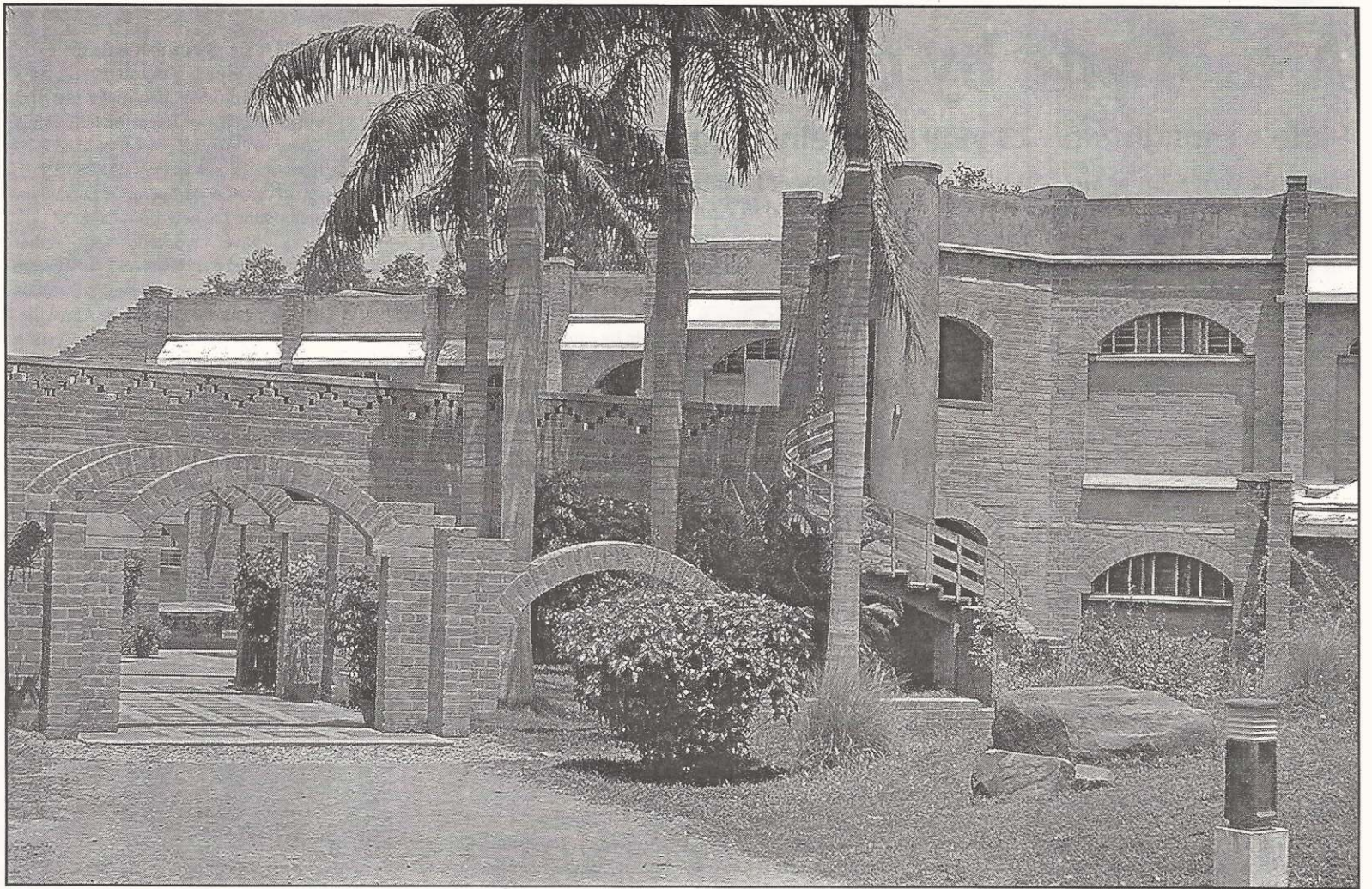
Dr. Kireet Joshi, Chairman of the Auroville Foundation, stressed this point during a recent visit. "One's life should be changed by a visit to Auroville," he said. "It should be an educational visit: we have to find a way of turning tourists into students." For this to happen, he added, certain things have to change. For example, everybody who comes as a visitor to Auroville should have some advance knowledge of the project, and, ideally, visitors should spend a full day here in order to gain deeper knowledge. This, in turn, implies that the Visitors Centre must offer far more than it does at present in terms of presentations and facilities. It may also imply that other areas of Auroville open up to tourists—part of the Bharat Nivas complex, for example.

### Different channels

However, all this doesn't mean that we should treat everybody the same, and that we can't do more to actively encourage those who are touched by Mother's invitation.

"Are invited to Auroville all those who thirst for progress and aspire to a higher and truer life."

One possibility is to make our guest houses less attractive to the casual tourist: Kireet suggests that the majority of Auroville guest houses could be run on the lines of "Golconde" in the Ashram, which imposes clear conditions upon those who wish to stay there. Another possibility is to provide different channels or introductions to Auroville for different types of day visitors. The vast majority of those who come off the tour buses would be well served by a first-class video and exhibition at the Visitors Centre, coupled with the possibility to view the Matrimandir and Amphitheatre from the Gardens. Another category would be those who have more time and show a genuine interest in the Auroville experiment. These people should be allowed to visit the chamber, but only after they



Entrance to the Visitor's Centre

Enjoying the exhibition at Visitor's Centre



have been well prepared for the experience.

Such a programme requires a big input from Auroville in the way of resources—far more people, much more money. But perhaps the fundamental precondition for improving the present visitor and guest situation is a change in our collective mindset—we have to move from viewing such people as a nuisance or, at best, financial opportunities, to seeing them as an integral part of Auroville's educational outreach programme.

Alan

## The young visitors

### Can they afford "the city the earth needs"?

Auroville attracted a lot of young people in the 1970s. Today, a new wave of 20- to 25-year olds are coming to Auroville as students or as "overseas volunteers". How welcoming is Auroville to these youth?

Minh, who first came here as an agricultural intern to work at Harvest, gives his views.

Once upon a time, young wandering seekers stopped by this red barren plateau, got touched, and stayed. Nowadays, values have changed. It is an illusion to believe that young people will come to Auroville the way they came decades ago. Today's young seekers are looking for an internship: they want to have a meaningful professional experience as well as continuing their quest for truth.

A survey is being conducted to determine how many students are here in Auroville at present. A first estimate places their number at between 70 and 100. Their chosen path is often a professional and specialized one—health care, environment, engineering, social studies, architecture.

### Young people are vitamins

Architects' offices, farms, water management units and appropriate

technology units take in large numbers of students whose presence gives a professional, social, and human boost to wherever they work. For example, Auroville architects' offices rely on a regular influx of students to oversee numerous tasks. Another case is Harvest where, over the years, research students have opened up new dimensions in water development work. To date Harvest has provided internships for about thirty students from France, India, The Netherlands, Spain, the USA and Germany.

At the human level the qualities can include youthful energy, spontaneity, openness, focus, concentration, curiosity, clarity of well-trained minds, regularity, consistency and practical results... mixed with a self-awareness of inexperience and keenness to learn. Most interestingly, these qualities rub off on the host as well!

The students are exploring a whole new reality and consider every-

body they interact with as equal: they relate to Aurovilians, guests and villagers without discrimination, and with a much-needed freshness.

They stay on average four months in a focused work environment. Hence their exposure is broader and deeper than ordinary visitors or casual long-term guests—even more than that of many Aurovilians! Ultimately they connect us with professionalism, the movements of the world, and with our neighbours. When they scatter all around the globe again, the experience of Auroville reaches out to new places, networks, and organizations..

### Second-class guests or voluntary workers?

Due to lack of funds here, most of the time students have to cover their own travel to Auroville, and they have to pay for accommodation, food, local transport, plus make a 1,000-rupee monthly contribution to the Central

Fund. So expenses start at Rs. 5,000 per month and can shoot up to a mind-blowing Rs. 10,000 during the tourist season. Low-budget accommodation for students is scarce. They also have to pay guest rates for certain services, cultural and physical activities, even though they may be the ones who make some of those activities possible!

As a first step, Auroville could at least create a "student" status, and extend "Aurovilian" benefits to these young people. Proper facilities and services—student service, student hostels, resource centre, nutrition scheme, sponsorship programmes—would enable more dedicated people to join the experiment who cannot afford to do so at present.

More information on the fledgling Auroville student programme from [minh@auroville.org.in](mailto:minh@auroville.org.in)



# Re-energizing the Visitors Centre

An interview with Gillian and Nicole

The Auroville Visitors and Reception Centre was constructed in 1988 with grants from HUDCO and the Foundation for World Education. The Centre has become well-known for its architecture and its energy-saving construction materials, but it has not yet succeeded in its original aim of providing a comprehensive introduction to Auroville for visitors. Recently, Gillian and Nicole joined the Visitors Centre organizing team. Auroville Today spoke to them about past problems, and about their efforts to re-energize the Centre.

**Auroville Today:** *There's a sense that the Visitors Centre has never really fulfilled its potential. Why is this?*

**Gillian:** There are many reasons. It's never received sufficient funding to allow it to function as it should, and while I support the principle of renewable energy, it requires a lot of solar panels to provide enough energy for a complex of this size: we have so few panels that we have to run the generator 18 hours a day, which means we can only show videos in the afternoon. So, with assistance from CSR, we are getting a hybrid system in which the TNEB hook up will be used as a back-up system only. We hope that this will be operational by August.

Then there is that other energy crisis in Auroville—we just don't have enough good people to do all the work required.

**Nicole:** The Visitors Centre was completed before Matrimandir became such a tourist attraction, and it was not designed to deal with the crowds who come now every afternoon to collect their Matrimandir passes. The information and video rooms are far too small, and the spiral staircase up to the video room is narrow and potentially dangerous.

The challenge of the Visitors Centre is that it has to cater to so many different types of visitors. Most of the visitors come only for Matrimandir, but there are those who want to know more about Auroville, and they are a bit frustrated at present. In terms of alternative energy, there is actually a lot to see on site, but many things are in a state of disrepair. We

are now fixing them up so visitors interested in alternative and appropriate technologies can study them. Also, John Mandeem, Franz and Tim have almost finished putting together a beautiful and informative new exhibition in the information section of the Visitors Centre.

**Gillian:** One of the challenges is dealing with this enormous crush of people every afternoon, and separating those who come just for the Matrimandir pass from those who want to learn more about Auroville. One idea is to have an open-air Matrimandir exhibition at the gate of the Visitors Centre and issue all the Matrimandir passes there. Then only those with more interest will come into the Centre. Kireet Joshi's recent suggestion that all those who wish to visit Matrimandir should spend an hour in silence beforehand is excellent—people will be more prepared and it will also cut down on the numbers of those who want to visit. However, this implies the construction of a large hall where these people can sit in preparation. This would not be here, but it could be part of the new Matrimandir Reception Centre which is planned for the Matrimandir park.



Nicole (left) and Gillian

**Nicole:** For the longer term, we've submitted a project to the Centre for International Research in Human Unity (CIRHU) for a new exhibition space at the Visitors Centre. It will be much larger—400 sq.m.—than the present space, with exhibitions on Matrimandir and Auroville, and a new video room on the ground floor. We also plan to have a fleet of electrically-powered vehicles which will shuttle people between the Visitors Centre and Matrimandir.

**Gillian:** We hope that once we get everything working better, once Aurovilians feel that working here is not a struggle against an ocean of chaos, then more people will want to become involved.

**AVT:** *A new boutique is being constructed here. Some people are concerned that the Visitors Centre will neglect its original purpose and just turn into one big shopping mall. Is there a danger of this happening?*

**Nicole:** What happened is that some unit holders got together to

build this new boutique because the existing Boutique d'Auroville is too small to display all the Auroville products.

**Gillian:** However, we had requested that additional space for exhibitions be incorporated in this new building—we were even prepared to raise the funding for this. Unfortunately our request was not taken up. Now we're clear that we won't have any more expansion of commercial activities at the Visitors Centre unless the exhibition facilities are also expanded: we need to keep a balance.

**AVT:** *What motivates each of you to take up this work, to keep on going in spite of all the obstacles?*

**Gillian:** We both have moon in Scorpio: we figure that's the bottom line! Moon in Scorpio is the shakti energy which doesn't take 'no' for an answer. It's a tremendous will to persevere through difficult situations...

**Nicole:** What's most important to me is to give as complete, as truthful and as inspiring a picture of Auroville as possible to visitors, so that they can catch something of the vibration that is here. This is what we have to nurture.

From an interview by Alan

## Problematic details, myriad delights

Two visitors' experiences of Auroville

Richard Piellisch from the U.S. wrote an account of his first visit in Auroville Today some years ago. After his most recent visit we asked him again for his impressions.

Since my first visit a decade ago, Auroville has beckoned as a place of refuge, a place to leave the world behind, to come and live and do good works among the Tamils, for the planet. One might settle there forever with one's modest Western savings... but can a stranger touch the soul of Auroville?

Changes? Sure. Breakfast under the Banyan tree at Center Guest House was as ever, and the day's tropical heat was shockingly familiar, but the clean white structure of the Savitri Bhavan was entirely new along the road to the Visitors Centre. In its cool spaces it was easy to add to an embarrassingly sparse knowledge of Sri Aurobindo and his works.

At the Matrimandir, we joined a long line of pilgrims—more than I'd seen there before—all of them wishing to view Mother's extraordinary white space. A long, occasionally impatient line of people was admonished to silence and told with gestures where to leave their shoes, their half-hour's trudge rewarded with perhaps a five-second glimpse of the austere pillars and pristine marble walls, immaculate carpet, and the amazing,

amazing light on the Chamber's mammoth crystal ball.

There persist ambitious, to some minds too ambitious, even ludicrous plans for an architected town. I saw displayed an artist's conception of a Crown Road, which was far more than a road: it was essentially a single huge circular building, kilometres in circumference. It seemed like inflexible nonsense. I told an Aurovilian friend about the display. He could only shake his head. His own place is in the Greenbelt, where they don't want any new buildings either. His old place has a keel roof, and while his bedroom is graced with an iMac now and is wired to the world via the Internet, the bats flit in and out as they've always done. The infrared security system is calibrated to ignore them.

When I arrived there were unseasonal rains. I liked the rain. It's a harbinger perhaps of more dire climatic changes, wrought by a meddlesome humanity. Something about Auroville inspires cosmic thought, yet the immediate experience of the place confronts one with a million problematic details—and myriad immediate

delights. Sunday morning we made it on bicycle, before the rain began in earnest, to brunch at Fertile, Johnny's weekly dosai feast. Later, deciding that the rain might never end, we cycled hatless back to Tineke's, peddling merrily in the deluge. The soaking was exhilarating. Cyclists coming the other way were smiling too. Not so the people on motorbikes, they were miserable. I see more motorbikes every time I visit. Unfortunately.

**Irina Pawassar from Ireland was another recent visitor to the community:**

It is never any good to have high expectations and mine always have been too high anyway, so when I arrived—in Repos it was—I kind of hit rock bottom. Nobody smiled, the motorbikes drove me bananas with their noise and smell, no evening walks on the beach (there had been a stabbing the night before my arrival) and also I got warnings not to cycle all alone in the night. Wannabe-Gurus tried to teach me their very own beliefs.

Nevertheless I stayed, mind and heart all open, and kept smiling bravely at everyone, as is the habit in the country where I live, and... things started to happen for me. Those gurus were actually only visitors like me; what a relief. I read about Mother and liked absolutely everything she said. Especially her words about smiling: "Learn to smile, always and in all circumstances." I'm sure this includes tourists as well. At the wonderful Jazz Cafe I saw Aurovilians laughing about themselves, at last. The silent gatherings and meditations were new to me and something happens there underneath that beautiful Banyan tree! In Auroville I learned that there is hope for our world; the energy here will inspire me for the rest of my life.

I guess I have always been longing to sit in a cafe where conversations about the Divine, energies and past lives are the most normal thing. Out here in the "normal" world this is still so hard to experience. Since my trip to Auroville though, I encounter the Divine everywhere and know now how to keep the magic alive!

I hope to be back to Auroville soon, perhaps to stay one fine day...

"...I don't believe in advertisement except for books etc., and in propaganda except for politics and patent medicines. But for serious work it is a poison. It means either a stunt or a boom—and stunts and booms exhaust the thing they carry on their crest and leave it lifeless and broken high and dry on the shores of nowhere—or it means a movement. A movement in the case of a work like mine means the founding of a school or a sect or some damned nonsense. It means that hundreds of thousands of useless people join in and corrupt the work or reduce it to a pompous farce from which the truth that was coming down recedes into secrecy and silence. It is what happened to the 'religions' and it is the reason of their failure."

Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself*, XXVI.375





# "This is family"

## A portrait of the Coffee Shop

With the opening of the Coffee Shop on top of the Solar Kitchen last year a new era dawned in the social life of the city. Now that André, the initiator of the project, has stepped out to do other things ("like meeting my wife again!"), we thought it a good opportunity to find out what has made it such a success.

Eighteen months ago André, who runs a leather workshop in Kottakarai, returned to Auroville after a short trip to the UK. "This was the time of the Sahaj Marg witchhunt, and after reading a few pages of the Auroville News I just wanted to get straight out of here! But then a line from Theo caught my eye—'Anybody interested in starting an internet cafe?' I immediately grabbed the phone and told him 'I'm your guy'."

André had absolutely no experience of running a coffee shop, but he got lucky. He got "the dream team". First came Marie-Ange, who had been running a bakery for five years in Japan, and later came Matilde and Marc, who had managed two speciality coffee shops in Barcelona.

"We began with the four of us and two ammas," remembers Marc, "and we were working more than ten hours a day. It was tough, but it was the best time of all."

"For two years this big space over the Solar Kitchen had been almost deserted," remembers André, "and then, suddenly, it was full of life." "Life" meant fifty hungry Aurovilians clamouring for iced cappuccino, spanish omelette or the delicious galettes—savory pancakes—which Matilde introduced from Barcelona. The kitchen is small, the hours long. How do they cope? "This place gives energy," says André. "I'd shut up my leather workshop at five o'clock, and I'd already feel finished. But within fifteen minutes of coming here I'd be full of energy again."

### The dream team

"It works because it's a great team," says Marc. Marie-Ange, who is 65 years old, often works eight-hour shifts. "We can't get her to go home," says Matilde, "if we suggest it, she just tells us not to bother her! She's our policeman, she keeps us all in order." Recently Arul, who has worked in hotels and restaurants in Delhi, also joined the team. "He's amazing," says Marc. "At midday he



Coffee Shop culture

The Coffee Shop team: (left to right) Marc, Marie-Ange, Matilde and André

is patiently explaining to somebody what an Italian galette is. Eight hours later he's doing it for the twentieth time, with exactly the same patience and exactly the same smile." "Without Arul and our ammas—there are fourteen of us now—this place would not be the same," says André.

What kind of window on the community does working here open up? "I get a very good image of Auroville through working here," says André. "Ninety per cent of the people who come here come to relax. Of course, there are times when the coffee machine breaks down and everybody wants their coffee immediately—Aurovilians are not super-patient—and we just have to keep cool and smiling. After all, it's not like an ordinary coffee shop where you may never see your customers again. This is family."

But the coffee shop is not only for Aurovilians. It's also for visitors and friends from Pondicherry, the Ashram or further afield. This has created some problems. "We don't want to

have cash transactions here", says André, "but many visitors do not have a Pour Tous account. So what are we to do if they want to pay cash? Turn them away?" "Traditionally coffee shops have been places where all kinds of people meet," points out Marc, "and we want to keep this one like that."

"We've been accused of just wanting to make money", says André, "but the money we make enables us to pay good wages to our staff—which is very important to us—and the rest goes back into buying equipment and into the building: we're just completing a new roof. We also provide an opportunity for the

kids to work here, to gain some experience and earn some pocket-money. In fact this was another reason for opening the Coffee Shop—to open doors for the youth."

### Future perfect?

Then there is the matter of the chairs. They look good, but after five minutes there's a certain sense of spinal degradation. "OK, OK," laughs André, "that's one of the things we've got to improve—I've already seen a new model." They have plenty of other plans for the future. "This is already one of the best sites in Auroville," says André, "and when the Plaza comes up around us it will be like the centre of the town." Plans for the Plaza include a library, an exhibition space and offices for the Working Committee and the Executive Council. The Auronet! and guest reception offices, now located on each side of the Coffee Shop, will move into new premises. "If the

Coffee Shop can have these spaces," says Marc, "we could have a separate ice cream parlour, a pool room, chess corner. We could have live music..."

"But the main thing," he continues, "is to keep this atmosphere of a speciality Coffee Shop. We want to provide really healthy food. That's why we use as much organic food as possible, and why we stopped selling Coca Cola—even though it's much more work to make fresh fruit juices." And the Tamils? Do they like the non-indigenous food? "The other evening, half the people here were Tamil Aurovilians and their friends," says André. "At first they ask for ketchup and chilis," says Marc. "I tell them we don't use them, but why not just try a galette? The young ones in particular seem to go for it."

"I'm going to miss this place," says André, "But of course I'll always come back if it's really necessary." Marc and Matilde sit up. "We've got it on tape now!"

From an interview by Alan



# To sleep or not to sleep

## A letter from Christine Bernard about the Entry 2000 experiment

Dear Auroville Today,

I read with dismay Alan's article entitled 'Old Wine in New Bottles', in the Auroville Today no 134.

First of all, let us speak ethics: Is it right for the writer to use Auroville Today for expressing his opinion about an on-going Auroville process, thereby using this forum to try and publicly demolish an experiment before it has even started? Is it right for him to criticize something which is only a draft paper, and criticize it at that stage?

Now for the substance. Instead of appreciating the fact that after so many attempts some people are still ready to

sit together for trying "to translate the aims and ideals of Auroville into practical conditions", the writer looks at it with a shrug of the shoulders: one more! One more useless exercise! Have we become so tired that actually we don't believe anymore that some good can come out of those numerous "attempts"? And obviously, according to him, that responsible for this tiresome and unnecessary churning is "the perception of some Aurovilians that Auroville has drifted off course". It is quite obvious that he doesn't share this "perception", and that everything is hunky-dory here. "While acknowledging (very condescendingly) the need to re-evaluate the entry procedure and the

enormous amount of work that has gone into preparing this draft document", it is clear that Alan thinks that people have wasted their time in producing this, because "a huge gap" exists between Mother's vision and this document. This is stating the obvious. But, at the same time, if we don't try to understand what Mother said and practically see how it can be implemented, then this is precisely how Mother's statements will remain a dogma for us. The attempts at exploring how they can be put into practice is, yes, difficult and suffer from the inadequacy of all of us, but they are an effort at putting them into the reality of Auroville.

I fail to see where is "the flavour of diktats" here. On the contrary, the sentence in the draft which states that property "will be looked upon by me as a Trust" I find very good, as it is really an emphasis on the spirit that is needed and not on what one should do or not do.

As for the sentence "First and foremost, it is essential that people who join Auroville be convinced ... that the principles given by the Mother... constitute the best formula...", I don't see what is objectionable in it. Asking somebody who wants to stay here whether he believes in the principles given by Mother can hardly be termed outrageous. Isn't it the duty of people here to make sure that at least the people who come accept what Mother has said on Auroville? Otherwise how will Auroville be realized?

Why on earth should newcomers become "victims" of this exercise? Why should they become victims when what is proposed to them is to realize Auroville? We just tell them: this is the spirit of Auroville, this is

how Mother saw Auroville, and this is the direction in which we would like to go. Would you like to participate? They are free not to join. Where is the imposition here?

What is really strange is that words like diktats, dogma, forcing the community, fascism (excuse me, but to speak of fascism in this context is utterly ridiculous and an insult to the people in the world really submitted to it) — such words are used when people are trying to see how to realize Mother's vision, precisely at the time when some concrete steps are about to be taken. It is never ever said, for instance, that the present economy, the present way of life, the present materialistic tendencies, are an "imposition" on some people. Yet it could very well be said. Suppose there are many people who still dream of concretely realizing Auroville, should they be forced to forget about their dream?

Yes, Alan is right to pose the essential question at the end of the article. But I would rewrite it in my own words. The real question is: to sleep or not to sleep.



# Stories at one remove

An exhibition at Pitanga of the works of Aurogeeta Das, reviewed by Peter Heehs

Artists tell themselves stories while they work, viewers put together stories while they look at works of art, the works themselves are composed of different kinds of stories—stories of emotion, stories of form, stories of how the formal elements have been put together to produce intentional or unintentional effects. The story of a print differs from the story of a painting or drawing in one important respect. The painter or draughtswoman works directly on the paper, the print-maker primarily on the block or plate. The print is once removed from the touch of the artist's hand. It does not follow that prints are always less expressive than freehand works. An exhibition at Pitanga of the works of Aurogeeta Das showed that it is sometimes the other way around. Born in Auroville at Promesse, raised in Pondicherry, Aurogeeta left the Ashram's Higher Course to study at the Kanoria Centre of Arts in Ahmedabad, which is noted especially for its printmaking department. At Pitanga she exhibited fourteen prints, five watercolours and a drawing. In the watercolours she expresses her feelings directly, but deep feelings are not that easily expressed. A medium that makes the artist work hard paradoxically makes it easier for her to express significant thought and feeling. This is why serious sculptors prefer granite to soapstone and serious writers prefer genres that have formal difficulties to overcome. (Robert Frost, asked why he did not write free-verse, answered that it was like playing tennis without a net.) Most of Aurogeeta's watercolours are apprentice works that express little but the mood of the moment. It is in the technically more difficult media of the printmaker that

she has found her artistic voice. The methods used range from the simple to the sophisticated. A set of linocuts representing the five senses shows how the black-and-white contrast characteristic of this medium brings out the boldness of a tight composition. In "Toil", the use of four-

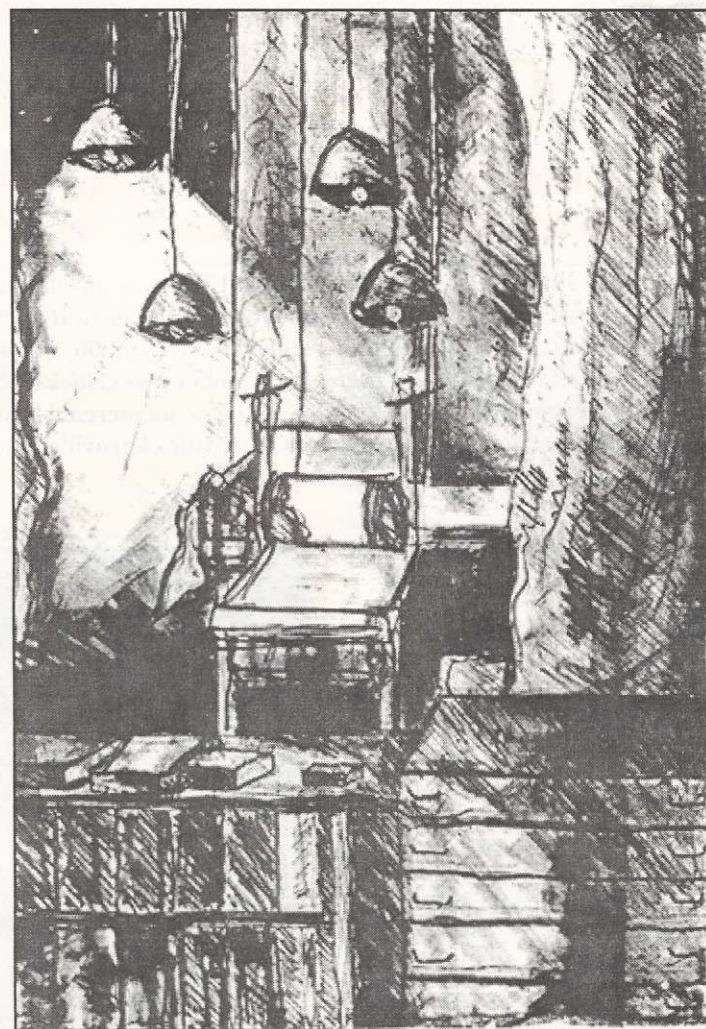
green and blue is held together by vertical lines that in one corner seem to coalesce into a face. The figuration in "For the Next Generation" is deliberate and indeed almost conventional, but the print is saved from new-age obviousness by the skilful handling of the colours. Nothing is worse than



Afternoon reading

colour printing adds a striking or sombre depth to the lines; but neither of the pulls on display are fully successful in coloration. A more effective chromatic balance is achieved in the monoprints. In "Broken Heart" the distribution of brown, red, yellow,

works of art that try too hard to be significant or (God help us) "spiritual". Spirituality cannot be bought that cheaply. The artist is at her best not with colour or black-and-white contrast but monochromatic tonalities. Two prints



The Studio

employing techniques allowing a full range of greys are the most mature of those exhibited. In "The Courtyard" the tones range from almost pure white in one corner to almost pure black in another. "Afternoon Reading" succeeds in the opposite way, by muted understatement. The high-key tonality gives force to the lines that delineate the tree and figure as well as to the spots suggesting the leaves. Here the viewer is compelled to participate in the creation not only of the mood but the very form of the print.

In her catalogue, Aurogeeta speaks of the directions her art might take in the future—performance-art, installations, something even more cutting-edge, perhaps. It is to be hoped that the allure of the movement of the moment will not keep her from developing her considerable talent as storyteller at one remove.

*Peter Heehs is a member of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, and contributes criticism to Art India magazine*

## Book Review

# The Religious, the Spiritual and the Secular

Book review by Roger

In India, with its age-old culture of universality, inclusivism and spiritual tolerance, the connotation of the word "religion" is much more open-ended and encompassing than in the West, where it is shadowed by the history of the Church. The term "secular state" was added to the constitutional definition of India by the 42nd Constitution Amendment Act passed by both Houses of Parliament in November 1976. The ideal of a democratic socialist secular republic was—and still remains—an important component of India's modern political identity. A clear definition of the word "religious" is easier to qualify than to specify. Hence a definition of the term "secular" remains equally elusive.

Robert N. Minor, in this exhaustively researched study, starts by examining the various definitions of the term "secular" and the philosophy underlying the concept of the Indian secular state. He cites in particular the influential views of the philosopher/statesman Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, President of India from 1962 to 1967, who laid stress on the universality of spiritual values. For Radhakrishnan the secular state is

not anti-religion per se, but non-sectarian and dedicated to upholding an inclusive "religion of the spirit."

The book then describes the early development of Auroville and the events in the mid to late seventies that led to the President of India promulgating the Auroville (Emergency Provisions) Ordinance in 1980. When passed by both Houses of Parliament later the same year, this became the Auroville Emergency Provisions Act. This Act put Auroville under government control for a limited period of time. The Act was however immediately challenged by the Sri Aurobindo Society in the Calcutta High Court on the grounds that government interference with a "religious" institution was illegal.

Although Sri Aurobindo made it categorically clear he had never had any intention of starting a new religion, he was seen by many as a religious nationalist, particularly in the early revolutionary phase of his work in Bengal. He frequently used the word religion in his early speeches and writings aimed at the uplift of India, as well as in reference to his own experiences, as in his famous Uttapara speech in 1909. But his use

of the word religion is infused with a universal spirit, born of his vision of the truth of the *sanatana dharma*, the "eternal religion" behind all religions. In *The Human Cycle* he distinguished between true religion, spiritual religion and "religionism" and he spoke of a "religion of humanity" as a next step in our social evolution.

The Mother was much more categorical as regards religion, which she considered outmoded in the evolutionary scheme of things and a hindrance to the forces of spiritual evolution. She considered religions to be exemplars of partial, dogmatic and exclusivistic thinking, which was incompatible with Sri Aurobindo's vision and contrary to Auroville's spirit and deepest *raison d'être*. In a number of her messages for Auroville, she repeatedly and forcefully insisted on this. "Auroville is for those who want to live a life essentially divine but who renounce all religions whether they be ancient, modern, new or future."

In the Supreme Court verdict that upheld the Act as constitutional, the majority opinion—referring to Sri Aurobindo and Mother's own words—ruled that Sri Aurobindo's

beliefs and teachings constituted a "philosophy of cosmic salvation through spiritual evolution" and not a religion. Auroville was a secular and not a religious institution. "It is a township dedicated not to the practice and propagation of any religious doctrine but to promote international understanding and world peace, surely a secular and not a religious activity." The author, in examining legal rulings since Independence, points out that the judicial definition of the term "secular" is both ambiguous and expansive. For instance, it can be seen as inclusive of the spiritual dimension. In the Majority Opinion in the Auroville case, the use of the term "spiritual" in Auroville's Charter, was, for instance, not in anyway considered as an indication of "religion."

This is a useful and first-rate reference work that provides a thought-provoking perspective on Auroville's early history and growth, which is situated in the larger context of India's own evolving political identity. The two chapters of the book dedicated to the debates in Parliament surrounding the original Act, and the Auroville Foundation Bill of 1988, are revealing. The feeling that the Bill was—as

recently described to me by a sitting member of the Raj Sabha—an act of legislative homage to Sri Aurobindo's vision comes through quite clearly. There is also an interesting chapter on the Government of India's relationship with UNESCO, where the author points to the similarities between what he calls the "civil religion" of the Indian secular state and the stated cultural and international ideals of UNESCO.

The academic style and distance the author adopts towards his subject could, however, put off some readers, and his academic analysis tends to anaesthetize and divest the quotes of their original power. His closing arguments for a "stipulative" definition of the word "religion" (as concerning that which is of "ultimate concern" to individuals and communities) are, for this layman at least, unconvincing. It will take more than an academic redefinition of the word religion to rid it of its historical associations.

**The Religious, the Spiritual and the Secular—Auroville and Secular India.**

by Robert N. Minor. Suny Press, New York, 1999, 208 pp.



# The Gateway grant

**Rs 46 million have been allocated to various projects in Auroville through the Gateway group.**

In December 1998, Aurovilian Ulrich Blass (Ulli) announced that he wished to donate 11,000 shares in the American software company SCM to Auroville. This followed the take-over of the software development company Shuttle, of which he was part-owner and CEO, by SCM. The donation, at that time valued at US \$500,000, was well received, though Ulli's decision to form a group of five people called Gateway to decide on the allocation of this money was criticised by a section of the community. Now, nearly one and a half years later, the work of Gateway has been completed. Due to an increase in share prices, a total amount of Rs 46 million (slightly over US \$1,000,000) has been allocated to various projects in Auroville. Auroville Today spoke to Ulli about his donation, its allocation and his views on Auroville's development.

**Auroville Today: Why did you make the donation and why did you appoint Gateway?**

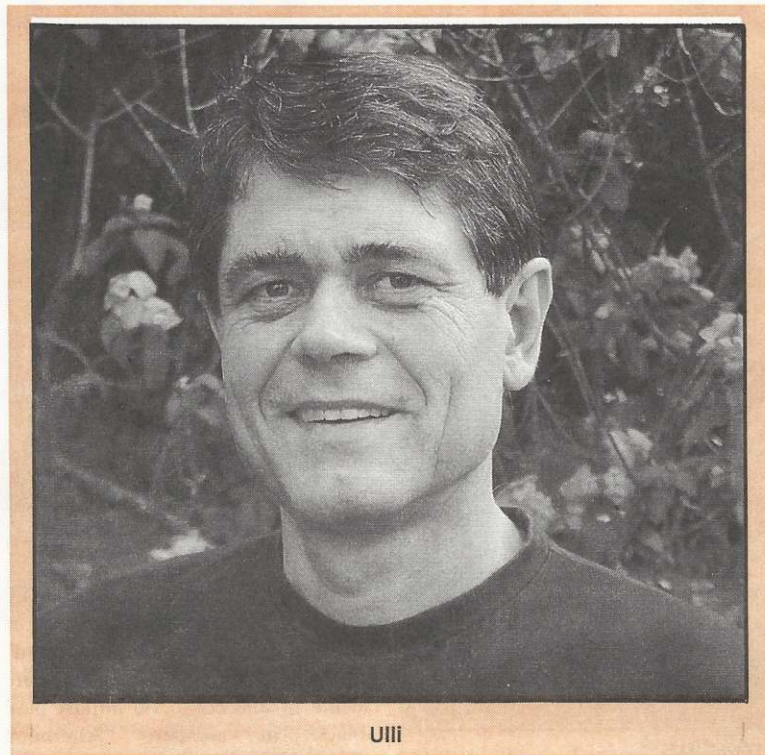
Ulli: I don't think I have a simple straightforward answer. I can tell you how it happened. In November 1998 I went to Germany to discuss the details of the take-over. On the flight back home, when it had become clear that it was really going to happen, the money became a reality in my mind. The question came up: "What are you going to do with it?" And immediately came the answer that part of it should be used to do something in Auroville, as a kind of catalyst, not just a donation, so that something in the atmosphere could change. Finally I decided that three main areas—education, community building and communication—should benefit.

A lot of thought also went into the question how the money should be managed. I did not want to do it myself. I also did not have much confidence in existing working groups and thought instead about creating a legal trust, or just appointing a group of people. At one time I even thought about donating the money to the Residents' Assembly as an incentive to get its act together. I finally settled for a group of trusted Aurovilians, which called itself Gateway, to manage the money and decide on the allocations, while I kept a veto power.

**Are you happy about the way the money has been allocated?**

Looking back, I cannot say that I am fully satisfied. I am very happy that Gateway allocated the bulk of the money, over 2.5 crores, to educational projects. In a way this was obvious: education has always been one of the corner-stones of Auroville, and the schools had their acts together. Under the header "community building" also many good projects have been initiated totalling over 1.5 crore rupees, of which the Plaza [a planned group of buildings around a city square near the Solar Kitchen, eds.] is the most promising. We have the Matrimandir as a symbol for Auroville's soul and spiritual aspiration, but we do not have a place where we can conveniently meet in a relaxed environment. I hope the Plaza will be a step towards this. But in the area of communication, I am dissatisfied. The total amount allocated here is only 35 lakhs. A number of little activities were started, but it did not kick off in the way I had hoped. That really pains me, for this area is the closest to my heart. I have put an enormous amount of energy into the development of email and Internet access, and I regret that the donation did not help it to progress faster.

The Gateway experience was very interesting for all involved. I was rarely approached for money directly, and referred all projects to Gateway. The



Ulli

cooperation was successful; the group did a good job, and I have not pushed any project or vetoed any project against the wishes of the others.

**The two areas you explicitly excluded from funding were the Matrimandir and land purchase. Why?**

Ulli: The Matrimandir is receiving a lot of support from other donors. As I am not in perfect harmony with the way this project is being managed I did not feel drawn to participate. The land was another story. I have always felt that the land for Auroville should be acquired as fast as possible, and I contributed a substantial share from my private resources to land purchase a few years ago. But I also feel that the way land issues are being managed leaves a lot to be desired. The way we use land as a resource is not very inspiring and we still lack a common policy how to develop it. Suddenly providing from a single source a large amount of money would have removed the pressure to get our act together collectively and get it sorted out.

**You also objected to giving money to the Central Fund for the maintenance of people and of Auroville.**

There is nothing new here. I have always objected to centralization. I believe in decentralization and healthy autonomous entities, which can develop at their own speed and because of their own abilities and capacities. But Auroville has chosen the centralist approach, where it tries to regulate, control and equalize everything. This gets it down to the lowest common denominator, which prevents exciting things to happen.

I have made one exception to this

"no money for maintenance policy" and that was in relation to the teachers. Providing a good education to our children is one of the best investments we can make. This implies that we have to employ first-quality people. If those people have no financial means to subsidize their life, they should be helped. For that reason I agreed that a substantial amount of money would be set aside to guarantee the teachers a decent income. I have a son and there were problems with his education because of lack of qualified teachers.

**You suddenly came into the possession of a lot of money. Do you feel that it has affected you?**

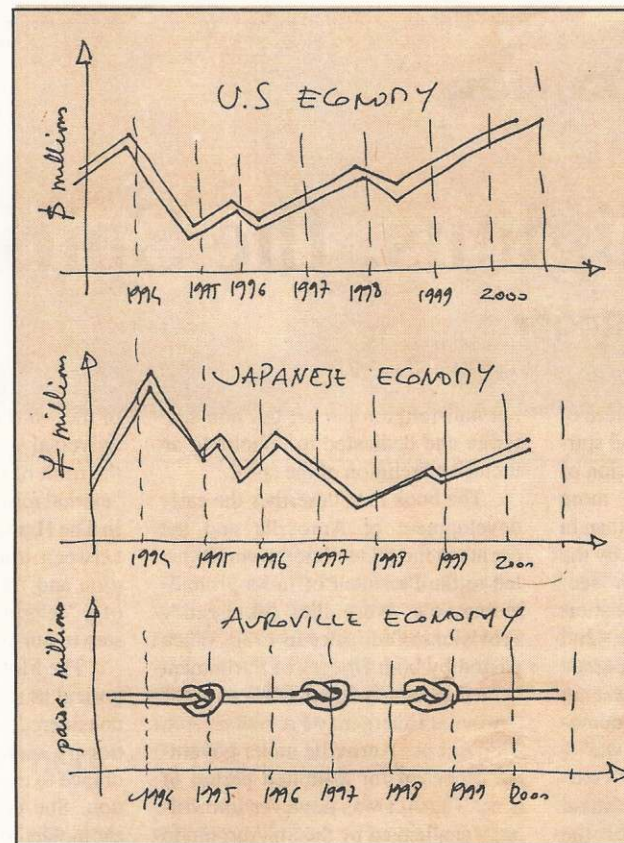
Not very much. I did not need much money before, and I still don't need it now. It is of course quite a change to suddenly have a large amount of money at your disposal, but then I do not see the money that came to me as "my money". I consider that I have been given the responsibility to see that it is used appropriately and properly. I feel myself being a trustee for that money. This attitude comes from what I learned from Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. They gave the basic principles, and I think it is because I picked that up that the money did not really

affect me. Money in the bank is pretty uninspiring. What I have given is certainly not the end of the venture, but it has been one attempt to use money creatively. In future I would like to try out different systems to discover how best to stimulate the Auroville economy.

**You are not happy with the development of Auroville's internal economy...**

I am not happy at all, neither with Auroville's internal economic systems nor with the external one! The Economy 2000 formula carries on a lot of experiments that were done in the past, from which data are available. Rather than analyzing those data and understanding why things went wrong and what needs to be done in order to make them right, Economy 2000 simply repeats the same thing with a different coat of paint.

It is equally frustrating that the name of Mother is used to justify the experiment. Many people forget that Mother herself was the most flexible of people, who warned very explicitly not to take her words as a dogma. But we do precisely that. The no-money economy, for example, which She herself even declared could take a long long time to materialize, we try to implement with one jump, instead of developing steadily and slowly, small steps



at a time with a long-term perspective.

Concerning our external economic system: there is virtually no progress. As a result, our economic self-supporting objectives do not materialize. Today we have the same number of big

units as a few years ago. This situation should ring the alarm bells like crazy! But it doesn't. Those who are in business grow at a modest rate compared to the global and Indian economy, or do not grow at all. Are we not hungry anymore? And then I hear that it is increasingly difficult for newcomers to start an undertaking, and that those in business have created a protective environment to limit competition. Rather than introspecting on our situation, we seem to improve our fundraising efforts, which is no solution at all. We want to be self-supporting, a community that can carry itself.

I think that the lack of new ventures is not caused by the lack of money, but because of the unclarity about where Auroville wants to go. There is too much bureaucratic regularization and we have created an environment that is not encouraging business to develop. When I came to Auroville with a master's degree in electronics and a little bit of experience, I was driven by the challenge to do something different in a difficult environment, against all odds. And one could just start without getting all kinds of permissions as is necessary now. The other problem at present is that the rules of the game are too un-transparent and do not offer any security to entrepreneurs who wish to bring their money to start a venture. People have lost their confidence. Last but not least, I do not see any push to help our younger generation to create business. Instead of promoting, we handcuff their adventures.

**Critics will argue that it is easy for you to talk because you yourself have not actively participated in Auroville for many years. Your company is even moving to Madras, and you are going with it...**

This is partly true. I have been like a visitor at the periphery for a long time, but this does not mean that I am not strongly connected to Auroville. I have been in Auroville for 22 years. I have participated in building Aurelec and later Shuttle and now SCM.

It should be realized that very often you make a step in your life and what follows obliges you to continue, as you have accepted responsibilities for the running of a company, for people, for many things, and you cannot just quit. So sometimes there is not much of a choice. In my case, however, that may soon change.

SCM requires for its future growth a specific type of engineer and top manager, which are not available in Pondicherry. We decided to transfer our operations to the most advanced IT centre in this part of South India, which is Madras. This decision paves the way for me to gradually withdraw, as other managers are found.

The point is now coming where I can choose. I don't know yet what specifically I will decide to do, but I would like to become more involved in Auroville again.

*Interview by Carel*