

Auroville Today

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Pondicherry garbage dump threatens the area

Visiting Pondicherry's garbage dump on the southern side of Auroville is an experience. A waste land of smouldering trash and dead trees reaches into the distance. Flies buzz in swarms as tractors with trailers brimming with garbage continuously thread their way through the foetid mounds. 350 tonnes of garbage are dumped here every day. The drivers get paid by the load, so if the gates are closed, they just tip it outside, expanding the dumpsite. A large dead kite with blood on its wings, head down, beak in the sand surrounded by plastic bags becomes food for dozens of black scavenging pigs that aggressively snuffle through the waste heaps. Acrid black smoke hangs like haze over the dump. The smell is suffocating. A black, slimy path, cut by earth-moving machinery through the mountains of rubbish leads to the nearby sewage plant. Highly polluted water percolates into the aquifers below, while shallow puddles on the surface breeds flies and mosquitoes, encouraging encephalitis, malaria and filaria in the area.

Bordering the dump is a row of thirty tiny concrete houses where gypsies live. The garbage dump provides their livelihood. Gypsy women walk through the smoking debris carrying a bag and a stick for foraging, while a baby is hanging in a rag hammock from a dead tree. Elsewhere children play in the filth, hunting for 'treasures' in the trash. They have their own school, a tumbled down shack with a blue plastic roof. The women and children appear oblivious to the surrounding filth.

Pondicherry's garbage dump is less than three kilometres from Auroville's Botanical Gardens and Forecomers' canyon. On bad days, as experienced in the last hot, dry summer, thick clouds of grey smoke waft over Auroville, affecting those with sensitive bodies with headaches and sore throats. Small wonder then that many individuals living in Auroville as well as in the affected villages of Edaiyanchavady and Morattandi have complained about the state of



ALL PHOTOS NATHALIE

Acrid smoke from Pondicherry's expanding garbage dumpsite blows across Auroville and its neighbouring villages

affairs. One Newcomer filed a Public Interest Litigation in the Chennai High Court in 2006, but so far not much has happened. Also the Auroville Foundation has repeatedly written to the Pondicherry Government expressing its concern.

What can be done? Garbage disposal is a universal problem in India. Recently, the government of Chennai started using Effective Micro-Organisms (EM) in its treatment of solid waste. The Pondicherry government too is aware of the problems, and has even invited specialists from Belgium to advise on the matter. A major issue is that the waste burns continuously, either because it is set on fire deliberately or because of spontaneous combustion caused by the production of methane gas from anaerobic decomposition.

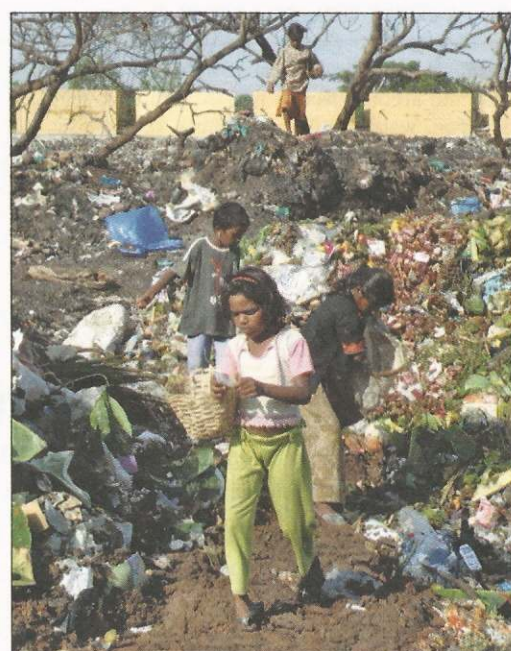
Another problem is that there is no sorting of the garbage. Everything is thrown in together, from hospital waste to toxic batteries. A visitor from an NGO working in Bangladesh suggested paying people by the sack load for sorted rubbish. This advice conforms to the Indian tradition of not wasting anything, and has proven successful in Bangladesh.

The garbage dump also borders on Pondicherry airport, which recently obtained permission for the extension of the runway. The Pondi-

cherry Government may be forced to move the dumpsite, as it is illegal to have a burning dump next to an airport. But then, the problem will just shift.

Meanwhile, at the invitation of a group of concerned Aurovilians, the Development Commissioner of Pondicherry has visited the site and has asked the local administration to work together with *Shuddham*, a Pondicherry-based NGO, and Auroville to find solutions to the problem. Two joint meetings have taken place and funds have since been earmarked for bio-remediation of the site. In this process the garbage is loosely piled-up into windrows, and turned weekly to make compost from, which the non-biodegradable materials are sifted out. This is hoped to put an end to the smoke pollution as well as reduce the volume occupied. In a second phase, it is hoped that the remaining non-biodegradables will be cleaned and sorted before being recycled. The campaigns for cleanliness and segregation will continue to sensitize the public on the issue.

Dianna and Renu



Young ragpickers



A gypsy boy on the rooftop of his home overlooking the dump

Health problems from burning garbage

The unchecked low combustion incineration of garbage, as happens in the Pondicherry dump, may cause many long lasting health problems. Burning plastic releases dioxins, furans and polychlorinated biphenyl (co-planer PCBs) According to the World Health Organisation, these substances do not break down in the environment. Pollutants are carried by air and attach to soil particles and sediment in water, where they enter the food chain and bio-accumulate. This means that particles settling on plants eaten by animals that are eaten by humans will contain increasingly higher levels of dioxin as it travels up the food chain.

Health consequences for those living nearby may include impairment of the immune system, the nervous system, the endocrine system and the reproductive functions as well as other illnesses such as skin lesions, altered liver functions and several types of cancer.

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"What we started in Ahmedabad was great"

Dr. Doshi is one of India's foremost architects and educators and a member of the Governing Board. A few weeks ago, a group of Aurovillian planners and architects, some of whom work in Auroville's town planning department, visited him in his design studio in Ahmedabad. Why did they go? What happened?

How was it to be in Ahmedabad?

David: It was great to be together with a group of Aurovillian architects and planners and to be inspired by Doshi and Rajeev (his son-in-law).

Why did you go there?

Prashant: Some of us had been visiting him regularly over the last year or so and this was a follow-up to our last visit: he wanted to see what we had been doing. This time he began by admonishing us! At our last meeting we had all agreed upon a base map as the foundation for our work, but since then some studies have been done which did not respect this base map. He told us this was no way to work.

David: Then, when he looked at present and planned developments in Sector II of the city, one of his questions was, "Where is the Galaxy?"

Prashant: He pointed out that buildings coming up in sector two of the Residential Zone are being built upon what look like green spaces in the original Galaxy plan. He said that in future we should work in a coordinated way with the Galaxy rather than giving ad hoc building approvals.

So then he set us to work. Ten hours a day!

What did you work on?

David: He suggested we take a slice through the base map of sector II of the Residential Zone. Then he asked us to trace the outline of the Galaxy over it and start detailing out a hierarchy of spaces from the Crown to the Green Belt

Prashant: Doshi said that when you look at Roger's Galaxy plan it is very obvious that a lot of thinking had gone into it. However, detailing still has to be done. For example, many areas of Roger's Galaxy plan are undetailed blocks several hundred metres long. So he asked us to look at where there could be openings in structures, where there could be courtyards, communication spaces etc. He said that eventually what would be detailed out might be different because we would have to take into account factors like the climate, wind direction, water flows, green areas, topography etc., but that this was a start. His main point was that whatever new buildings come up should emerge out of the Galaxy; that we should always try to see what the Galaxy is trying to tell us when we plan a particular space.



B.V. Doshi discusses the base map of Auroville with Prashant. (From left) Tejaswini, Marie, Meera and Pino look on.

Before we left he asked us to agree upon what we were going to do in the next few months and to draw up a document detailing this. One aspect was long-term planning, which is the detailing work. In the medium-term he suggested we should concentrate upon the neighbouring villages. He says that when you pass through nearby villages before arriving in Auroville the vibration you get is that of neglect; that until they are as prosperous as us, there will always be conflicts over land, water, labour etc. So he suggested designing an interface community between Auroville and a neighbouring village. This community would be a model of sustainable technology – it could have an Aquadyn drinking water facility, a wastewater treatment plant etc. – so that villagers could come and see how these things work. The community could also have a doctor or nurse who would help the villagers in an emergency. In the village itself, the villagers could be helped to plant trees and design sitting-areas around their pond or temple. This should be done in equal partnership with them: Auroville should not do it for them. In this way, said Doshi, you will start building confidence between yourself and the villages.

His main point is that the neighbouring villages have to be integrated in our planning. They are our neighbours!

In the short term he asked us to identify spaces in Auroville where people naturally meet and to make some small-scale interventions there – like providing benches or a platform under a nice clump

of trees. We've already held a public meeting about this and have a list of ideas and possible locations.

David: We all had a good experience in Ahmedabad. My question is, how do we recreate that energy here in Auroville? How do we carry forward what we began there?

Prashant: This has always been a problem since we started going and meeting him. We would make a lot of progress while we were there, then we would come back and nothing much would happen; business would continue as usual. So the next time we went to see him we would have to start from the same point again.

So why can't you continue the process here?

David: I believe what we started in Ahmedabad was great. All the Auroville architects and planners got on very well: we had a chance to realize that we all share a common direction and understanding. However, when we got back here we found that some of the larger group involved with planning Auroville are not on the same page, since the request for the budget for the completion of the Crown Road has since been made. When the architects and planners discuss things amongst themselves we seem to be more-or-less on the same page, but when non-architects and planners actually end up making the final planning decisions this blocks the development of a more holistic planning process. I'm sure those individuals believe they are doing what is best for Auroville, but I think they are doing the opposite. It was put very well in your last

issue: "How much disunity can we put up with in trying to create unity?" That sums up the whole thing for me. They want the Galaxy, but the way they are going about it they will not get it.

Prashant: Most non-planners can only relate to roads and infrastructure but not spaces, built forms etc. and roads and infrastructure don't create the Galaxy.

Did the Ahmedabad process call the proposed roads into question?

Prashant: It may do.

David: Doshi is totally flexible. In Ahmedabad we were getting away from the whole concept of roads. We were looking at the Galaxy simply as an area within which one can move around. Doshi himself said that we shouldn't focus upon the Crown just yet. But this is exactly what some of the people in the larger planning group want to do. So how do we address this polarity?

Prashant: Perhaps if the architects and planners within the planning body became stronger, more united, it would make a difference. Doshi suggested that a neutral space be created where architects and planners and interested members of the community could work together and interact on projects in a coordinated way. He thinks that currently the L'Avenir office doesn't offer such a space.

Isn't there a danger that Doshi will get frustrated by the present planning process in Auroville?

David: It's a real question. Just before we left, Rajeev and Doshi quite rightly said that they will not call us again or come to Auroville if we don't do the work and if we have nothing new to show them. They are willing to get totally involved if there is something to be involved in – but they are not willing to sit around chatting.

Prashant: The challenge of building a city like no other city on earth fascinates him, just as it fascinates us. But if we don't do the work, I think he will step back. This would be a great loss as not only is he one of India's foremost architects but he really inspires people who come into contact with him.

How? What is the 'Doshi effect'?

Prashant: He's very humble about the fact he's still learning, learning from nature. At the age of 82 he is still trying to learn new things. That's what keeps him going and that inspires people. He puts this 'bug' to understand, to discover landscapes, into you. And when you start on that line, there is no end to it. The ideas just keep bubbling up.

From an interview by Alan

VOCATIONAL TRAINING

The Auroville Institute of Applied Technology expands

On September 22nd, Mr. H.B. Sauerteig, the German Consul-General from Chennai, inaugurated the extension building of Auroville's Institute of Applied Technology. It had been constructed with an Rs 90 lakhs (Euro 145,000) donation from Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. Another Rs 18 lakhs (Euro 29,000) came from the former Auroville Coastal Development Centre and 12 lakhs (Euro 19,300) had been raised in Germany, mostly from friends and relatives of the Institute's executives.

The Auroville Institute of Applied Technology was formerly known as 'The Auroville Industrial School'. "A name change became necessary when we started training students according to the curricula of the Tamil Nadu State Council of Vocational Training (SCVT), as well as the all-India National Council of Vocational Training (NCVT)," explains Lavkamad Chandra, one of the executives.

The school is located outside Auroville near Irumbai. The six classrooms of the old buildings have now been extended with three labs, two classrooms, a staff room, a multipurpose hall, a kitchen, store and office

rooms and a library. The computer room now has 32 computers.

"Our main NCVT Certificate courses are in Civil Draughtsmanship and Electronics & Communication. We take 19 students for each course, which lasts two years. Other courses offered are in computer hardware maintenance, software applications, and modern office management (secretary ship). The target is the ITI (Industrial Training Institute) certificate issued by either the SCVT or NCVT," says Lavkamad. With these certificates, the students can either start working, or continue their studies for a bachelor degree at other institutions if they have passed the higher secondary examination. Judging by the results, the graduates have no problem finding jobs. "All our students have found placement with good companies such as Wipro, Reliance and Levono. This is recognition of good education," says Lavkamad.

The Civil Draughtsmanship course, accessible for students with 10th standard qualification, prepares one with all the skills needed to know to go into building construction. Part of the course are visits to Auroville to show the student new technologies such as environment-friendly building materials. Says Lavkamad, "As our unique Auroville touch we added 'personality building' to

the curriculum. This includes training in communication, English language, yoga, health care and family planning."

With a school fee of Rs 11,000 a year as compared to a minimum of Rs 50,000 a year elsewhere in degree colleges, studying at the Auroville Institute of Applied Technology comes cheap. "It's a conscious choice," says Lavkamad. "Our aim is to impart skills to the rural youth so that they can be self-employed or gain employment in the local market. But many of these youth come from families who do not have the money to pay for school fees. We even offer 50% scholarships for the needy." Students come from the surrounding villages, as far away as Kalapet and Vanur.

"But the projected income won't meet the school's running expenses," says Lavkamad. "The German Government grant doesn't cover school maintenance, and Auroville doesn't offer any subsidy. We plan to meet the deficit in two ways. The first is to offer more short-term courses.



The newly constructed wing of the Institute of Applied Technology designed by Auroville architect Tejaswini

Plans are afoot to offer 6-month courses for students from families that live below the poverty line. These courses will be financed by the Tamil Nadu Government. For this we will offer our own certificates."

The second way is to raise donations. "So far, we have been successful." He gives the example of the Indian Cognizant foundation set up by Chennai IT companies, which donated 9 lakhs rupees to help finance the com-

puters. "We also have good contacts in Germany. Students of the Kaufmannische Lehranstalten in Bremerhaven, for example, have made the gesture of donating their one-day earnings for scholarships for our students. Other German organisations support us as well. We hope that this will continue."

In conversation with Carel (For more information, visit www.aiat.org.in)

Sri Aurobindo's statue unveiled at UNESCO

On 16 September 2009, Mr. Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO joined Mr. Rameshwar Pal Agrawal, the Secretary for Education of the Government of India, and Dr. Karan Singh, Chairman of the Auroville Foundation, to unveil a bronze statue of Sri Aurobindo at UNESCO's headquarters premises in Paris. Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, India's representative to UNESCO's Executive Board and Ms. Bhaswati Mukherjee, India's Ambassador to UNESCO, also participated in the ceremony.

Observing that the crises that the world is facing not only economic and financial, but moral, ethical, and spiritual, Mr Matsuura said "The teachings of Sri Aurobindo, who will forever be associated with the founding of Auroville, the unique international township founded as a place where people from different cultural, educational and political backgrounds could work together towards their common goal of human unity and sustainable living, resonate particularly strongly as we search for long-term solutions. Last year, we celebrated Auroville's 40th anniversary with a Round Table and cultural performance in this very room. Dr Vatsyayan and other Members of the Executive Board have observed in recent days that the crises we are traversing at present are not only economic and financial, but moral, ethical, and spiritual. The teachings of Sri Aurobindo, and the model provided by Auroville, resonate particularly strongly as we search for long-term solutions to these crises."

Following the unveiling ceremony, Mr Matsuura inaugurated a cultural performance. A small quartet of Aurovilians and Ashramites joined in chanting a music suite, composed for the occasion by Shoba Mitra of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, followed by a 45-minutes Bharata Natyam dance recital by a group from Chennai.

The statue is situated in the yard of the UNESCO Annexe at some 800 metres from the main building, facing Rue François Bonvin. Members of the public won't be able to see the statue at close quarters as the entry is strictly reserved to UNESCO's employees and special guests.

How it came to be

"Nobody knows how this came to be," says Lalit Verma, the maker of the statue of Sri Aurobindo. "We have always been told that as a matter of policy, UNESCO doesn't allow statues of people of national importance to be put up in its premises; for if they give permission to one country, they'll have to do the same for others. But Sri Aurobindo somehow passed. Is it because Sri Aurobindo exceeds national boundaries?"



Mr. Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO (centre), flanked by Mr. M'Bow, former Director General of UNESCO (left) and Dr. Karan Singh, Chairman of the Auroville Foundation (right) with the statue of Sri Aurobindo at UNESCO's headquarters in Paris.

For Lalit, the idea of having Sri Aurobindo's statue at UNESCO came to him when he did the first cast of the statue for the Parliament House in New Delhi (see *Auroville Today* #212, October 2006) "At that time I wondered if we shouldn't also cast a statue for some place outside India. Then the idea of UNESCO came to me, for UNESCO's ideals on human unity come close to Sri Aurobindo's. But everybody told us it was impossible. Yet we decided to make the cast. For over 2 years, that particular statue was kept in storerooms of the India International Centre for the Arts in New Delhi.

This statue of Sri Aurobindo is one of six. "The first statue was installed in the House of Parliament of India; the second in the Sri Aurobindo Bhavan in Calcutta; the third in a diamond factory of a devotee in Surat; and the fourth in Savitri Bhavan in Auroville. The sixth is still in my garden in Pondicherry," says Lalit.

All of a sudden, in April this year, the news arrived that the Director General of UNESCO had shown willingness to have Sri Aurobindo's statue at UNESCO. "I was dumbstruck," says Lalit. "I contacted Ms. Bhaswati

Mukherjee, who obviously was the person behind this development. I thanked her and observed that it was a great honour for my guru to be there. Pat came the reply that it was a great honour for UNESCO to have Sri Aurobindo's presence!" The statue was installed on August 16th, and the inauguration scheduled for one month later. "Quite remarkable, actually," says Lalit. "August 16th marks the independence day of Pondicherry – independence from the French!

"Evidently, many people at some point in time helped to get this realised. There is a beautiful Bengali song that says, 'The Lord does all himself, but all of us feel we do it.' I believe that it happened because Sri Aurobindo chose to be there now." Does he feel that the inauguration of this statue carries a special meaning? "I certainly do," replies Lalit. For me, this is an assurance that *Satya yuga*, the legendary Golden Age or Age of Truth, has arrived and that *Kali yuga*, the era of moral decent and spiritual bleakness in which we have been living so far, has finally come to an end."

Carel

OPEN FORUM

A new approach to sustainability

Up to now, Auroville's development has been, by and large, a spontaneous development; each person was able to enjoy the freedom that the lack of central organization implied, and find his/her unique way of being part of this unconventional experiment. This phase in Auroville's development seems to have reached its full capacity. Economically, it becomes more and more difficult to cater for the basic needs of 2000 inhabitants, while socially it is no longer a small group of pioneers willing to share the same plate.

Auroville's social and physical complexity is about to increase and Auroville should get ready to enter this new, perhaps less spontaneous and more "conscious," phase of its development. "Conscious" here doesn't have to mean more rules and regulations, only a collective consensus on a way to utilise the new possibilities which face Auroville. It is perhaps at the unique point that complexity scientists so beautifully describe as "the edge of chaos" – a critical point in any complex system's development – that can lead either to complete chaos or to a new, more advanced, stage in a system's development pattern.

The spontaneous process of any society's development can be described as "subconscious" in that it is carried out before a conscious understanding has been fully acquired. Some Aurovilians think there is no need to plan Auroville's development and that the whole idea

is to let unorganised activities spontaneously create the society and the city's structure. But when Mother was approached with the idea that "many in Auroville say that an organized working is not desirable in Auroville; they are for spontaneous working," She responded: "*spontaneous work can be done only by a man of genius. Is there anyone claiming to be a genius?*"

In fact, the central characteristic that most clearly distinguishes development from other forms of social change is organization. The essential nature of the process is the progressive development of social organizations and institutions that harness and direct the social energies for higher levels of accomplishment.

So how can Auroville move from a spontaneous, "subconscious" process of gradual development into a more organized, "conscious" and possibly more rapid development process? How can it develop an organizational structure which is flexible enough without leading to complete chaos?

The way in which Auroville is currently organized can be the tool or obstacle for its further development. A new energy or will for change, in itself, is not enough to drive this change forward. It should be accompanied by an appropriate organizational structure that can accommodate it. It is therefore important for Auroville to invest some time and energy in defining a new organizational structure for itself that can enable it to rise to its next level of development.

From our point of view, ecological planning is firstly about recognizing the organizational vitality of a place. This requires at the same time a possibility to experience the place as "an insider," as well as an ability to systematically analyse it as an observer. We began by dividing the collective into three fields of reference: the physical, the social and the natural. In the physical infrastructure we identified: architecture, waste, water, energy, mobility, communication, food and housing. In the social infrastructure we identified: health, education, economy, culture, communication, spiritual development, governance and villages. And in the natural environment we identified: farms, forests, Land and horticulture.

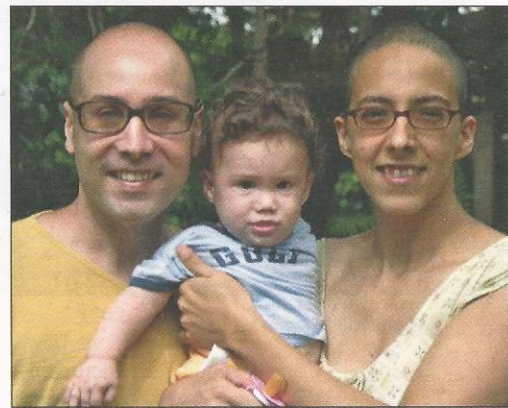
We believe that merely recognizing one's position within and in relation to the whole system that is Auroville can make a difference. Simply by becoming aware of one's 'role' within the whole one's perspective can change. A second step in ecological mapping is to become aware not only of one's position within the whole but also of one's relationships with the other parts that compose the same whole.

The main assumption is that increased connectivity implies increased sustainability. Systems thinking, ecological philosophy and complexity sciences all teach us that the connections between the parts of

a system are the "essence" of that system, its vital force. The more connections that exist between the different parts and different levels, the more resilient the system is considered to be – i.e. more sustainable. Now, how does all of this relate to town planning and to Auroville's future planning in particular? The main idea is to shift the focus of attention from investment in isolated projects, which together compose Auroville's physical, social and natural landscape, into an investment in interlinking projects. What does this mean in reality?

Firstly, and most importantly, it entails reaching a consensus about the future line of development for Auroville. Secondly, we suggest that as a substitute for planning rules and regulations in Auroville there be guidelines for anyone who wishes to develop a new or already existing project. These guidelines will promote increased connectivity with other Auroville projects. Planning permission will then be based on the contribution of the project to the larger whole.

Alon Yakolchik and Batel Dinur



Alon Yakolchik and Batel Dinur with their baby

PHOTO COURTESY BATEL DINUR

In brief

Land consolidation

The Working Committee has appealed to all Aurovilians, Newcomers and Friends of Auroville who own land within the Master Plan area to make these lands relatable to Auroville. The Working Committee also issued a public statement asking Aurovilians not to be associated in any way with land brokerage in Auroville.

Regional Council

The Working Committee reported on its efforts to create a regional development council that will include the Collector as Chairman, the Deputy Superintendent of Police, the Secretary, Auroville Foundation, the *Tahsildar*, the Panchayat Presidents of the surrounding villages, Working Committee representatives and others. This council will address issues of security, land-related topics, and concerns regarding non-Auroville guesthouses and businesses.

Security issues

In a meeting with the Collector and Superintendent of Police (SP), it was agreed to create a police outpost in Kuyilapalayam on a plot of land allocated by the Auroville Foundation. Auroville will assist in building the outpost. The SP agreed to look into the issue of unregistered/private guest houses and other commercial enterprises on the Auroville periphery.

FAMC work-plan

The Funds and Assets Management Committee has outlined its work plan for the period September 2009 – April 2010. It aims to achieve an equitable economy by encouraging a simple life style for all in Auroville and asking those with large personal means to align their life-styles accordingly. Other objectives are: to reduce the amount of cash circulating in Auroville; to promote housing with collective funds for those who do not have personal means and work full time for Auroville; to improve the environment for commerce so that new enterprises can grow; to work towards a self-sustaining economy; to raise the level of collective discipline; and to set-up new services that would ease the life of Aurovilians and make possible the pursuit of activities that promote personal growth.

Medhananda archives

On September 15th, the Medhananda Archive in the Savitri Bhavan Reading Room was inaugurated. A note on Auroville by Medhananda was shared: "What is important in the experiment 'Auroville' is not the possibility of discovering a clever new way of organizing human communal life. It is the possibility of a first step beyond man. Even if this step is faltering, it does not matter. What matters is that for the first time man tries out if evolution itself can evolve, whether man and thinking and common sense are forever his final limitations. A clever organization, an illusive success of organization, would be the end of the experiment. As long as mental endeavours fail, there is hope. There were many pious communities in the past trying to build the city of God, who succeeded to live peacefully together for some time. A success of such a kind would be a catastrophe for Auroville. The oneness which Sri Aurobindo explored was not to be imposed by rules and regulations or saintly behaviour. Only a sudden mutation can take us beyond man. Auroville is such a force-field for mutation. So don't expect to find here bigger potatoes."

Auroville's Environmental Monitoring Service

Auroville's 'municipal' laboratory for water, soil and food analysis is located in Aurobrindavan.

"That's the gas chromatograph. We use it to detect trace amounts of chemical compounds in samples. That machine over there is the atomic absorption spectrophotometer which we use mainly to detect metals, including arsenic and mercury, in different substances. This is the UV-visible scanning spectrophotometer. These three machines are our star performers. Then, of course, we have the usual equipment in our microbiological and chemical testing rooms," says Igor, who runs Auroville's Environmental Monitoring Service (EMS).

"I like chemistry," he explains. "In my childhood I was experimenting with stuff from chemical instruction kits. Later I majored in chemical biology at the University of Odessa, and then worked in a Ukrainian research institute. But I had also been touched by The Mother and Sri Aurobindo. After *perestroika*, I got involved with publishing in Ukrainian the short biography of Sri Aurobindo by Peter Heehs and books of Mother and Sri Aurobindo. This brought me to Pondicherry. I visited three or four times, came to know about Auroville and finally decided to join."

That was in 1993. He met former Aurovilian Ardhendu who had the idea to start a 'municipal' laboratory. "Ardhendu was concerned about the quality of food and water. This was the work I had been involved with in the Ukraine, so I knew what to do. At the time some units like the Health Centre, Village Action, the Water Service and Palmyra were ready to support such an idea. With help of all these units we managed to start a laboratory." After brief stints in the Auroville Health Centre and the Centre for Scientific Research, the laboratory was finally welcomed in the Aurobrindavan complex. "We are located in a former residential area, which is really unsuitable," says Igor. "But the advantage is that we are on the main road from Pondicherry to Tindivanam, so our clients can easily find us."

The laboratory's development

The laboratory slowly developed. In 2002 it received a boost. The Asia Urbs programme [see *Auroville Today* # 159, April 2002] mentioned the necessity of a Municipal Laboratory for Auroville and funding was allocated. "We were able to buy some very good state-of-the-art instruments, including the three machines I just showed," says Igor. "And with these instruments, our work could finally start on a serious footing. At present six people, including two M.Sc. microbiologists, one M.Sc. chemist, field workers and a lab assistant work at EMS."

For a small laboratory, EMS offers a staggeringly wide range of tests [see box]. "It is a survival strategy," explains Igor. "We are a 'self-supporting Auroville service' which means that we don't receive any funding from Auroville. We have to manage on our own. The best way to do this is to offer a wide range of tests for outside clients, and gradually increase our clientele. The income from the outside clients also enables us to provide free tests for public bodies in Auroville, such as the Matrimandir, the Solar Kitchen, Pour Tous, Pitanga, the kindergartens and some schools, while commercial restaurants, guest houses and commercial units are charged only a minimal fee for our work."

Water and ground water testing

A major element of that work involves water. "In the past we did many chemical and microbiological examinations of wastewater systems in Auroville in order to assess which treatment system functioned best and also to find if a system had developed a fault. Today, we mainly test potable water," says Igor. "Most important here are the micro-biological tests to determine the presence of bacteria which are indicator of water quality, such as total coliforms and *E. coli*. The microbiological parameters of water can change quite quickly, often due to things like not properly cleaning the storage tank, wrong placement of the tank lid or not closing the overflow pipe with mesh. Also spontaneous breaks occur in the distribution network due to earth movements or root intrusion. That's why regular testing is necessary." Tests are done in accordance with Indian Standard IS 10 500-1991.

EMS also tests the chemical components of groundwater. "We just finished a test of the groundwater pumped up by a new bore well at the Matrimandir," he says. Asked about the quality of



Igor at Auroville's Environmental Monitoring Service

Auroville's groundwater, Igor replies that it is good. "Our groundwater is clean. In many parts of India the groundwater is affected by high levels of fluoride or arsenic caused by the soil chemistry of that area, but Auroville is free of this." Groundwater, he says, is also unlikely to be contaminated by pesticides. "This type of contamination you only find in open water, such as in ponds or an

the pollution was so heavy that it was almost raw sewage floating past. But if the current went south, there was hardly any pollution. This explains why people sometimes suffered from skin irritations after swimming in the sea."

Testing food items

An Auroville authority, says Igor, should not only monitor sea water and issue warnings and notices but also ensure the quality of Auroville foods. "They should provide us with samples of food items taken randomly from the shelves at Pour Tous or from restaurants for testing." He gives the example of aflatoxins. "Aflatoxins are the number one food poison, with carcinogenic propensities that will attack the liver. They are often found in raw peanuts. It is now standard practice for Naturellement [an Auroville food producer, eds.] to supply us with a sample of a batch of peanuts before purchasing it. We test it - this takes 2 hours - and give the results and then they decide. So we can guarantee that Naturellement's peanut butter is aflatoxin free. But we can't give this statement for other nut butters produced in Auroville. Similarly, we do not know about the quality of the jams and other foodstuffs made in Auroville."

The absence of funding by a central Auroville Health authority makes it difficult for EMS to test specific food products, such as milk, for adulteration and the presence of pesticide residues. "There are many different forms of pesticide residues such as organophosphate pesticides, organochlorine pesticides, carbamate and pyrethroid pesticides, each of which requires a different system of tests. We have the machines and ability to do all tests

required, but we lack the finances," says Igor. He explains, "to do those tests we need a certain amount of chemicals, which only come in rather large quantities. So if we need 50 mg of a certain chemical, and they sell it in packets of 500 gram at Rs 3,000 and it has a shelf life of 1 year, and you do one test a year for which you charge Rs 100, it obviously does not make sense. A normal municipal laboratory would work with a substantial budget provided by the municipality. But we are self-supporting, and as we lack the money, we have decided not to do these tests."

Views on the future

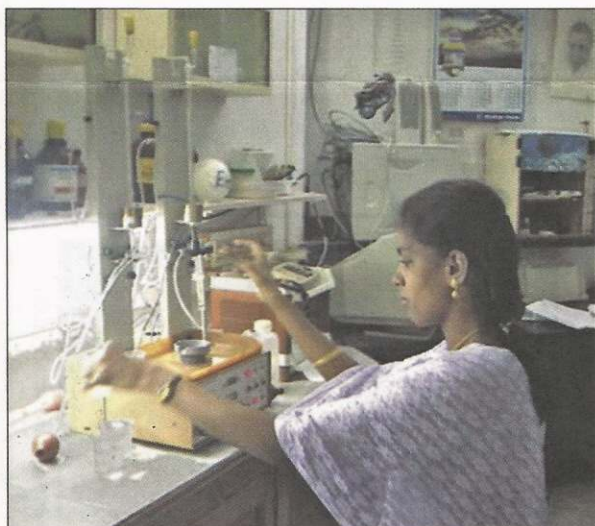
How good is the EMS? Igor laughs. "What we do can only be done in Chennai - nowhere around here do similar facilities exist. Judging by the increasing number of outside clients, I would say that our reputation is pretty good." Amongst those clients are producers of spirulina from all over India and from France, to whom EMS offers a standard package of microbiological and chemical tests to assess compliance with Indian and International standards. Other products that are tested are soaps, essential oils and cosmetics. EMS also does soil and compost tests, and - surprisingly - tests the quality of tea. Igor explains. "There is a company in Calcutta which has six tea gardens. One day they discovered that the test results of their own laboratories had been tampered with. They employed us. Now we test about 150 samples of soil, compost and tea a year. They send it by courier service."

Research and certification

It is normal for laboratories also to do research. EMS is no exception. "We are doing research into specific coatings on drinking water filter candles to remove viruses. Normal candles remove solid particles and harmful bacteria such as *E. coli*, *Salmonella* and *Streptococcus*; but they don't remove viruses. This is a real challenge, and very complicated. The work is in mid-stage, and we are not sure of any results. Whatever we come up with is being tested by a laboratory in The Netherlands," says Igor.

Though well-known, EMS has so far avoided being 'officially certified.' "Very few clients ask us for it and there seems to be no immediate necessity," says Igor. "To be officially recognized, we would need a proper building, not one where the paint is peeling from the wall like here. We also decided against going for it, as it is quite cumbersome and expensive. But it may happen in future, if EMS grows into a larger organisation." Is he interested in expanding the laboratory? "Actually no," he laughs. "I joined Auroville for spiritual reasons, not to run a large laboratory with many employees and international connections! But let's see!"

In conversation with Carel



A chemical analysis in progress

open well." Contamination due to domestic pollution is practically non-existent. "We have encountered only one case, and that was in the past. A shallow well, which was operated by a hand pump, had been situated too close to a septic tank and there was faecal contamination. But this was a rare case."

The situation, however, is different on the beaches. "There we have found evidence of saltwater intrusion in the aquifer, probably due to over-pumping. The problem seems to continue and is getting worse. This will create problems in future," he says.

The absence of a central Auroville Health Authority

Does he make his findings public? "We have a problem here," admits Igor. "We call ourselves a 'Municipal Laboratory' but we lack a client body to report to. We would like to be able to do tests on the instruction of an 'authority' in Auroville whose task it would be to ensure the quality of water and foods, a kind of Auroville Health Authority, to whom we would supply our data for further action. But it doesn't exist."

He gives the quality of the seawater as an example. "Just to satisfy our own curiosity we tested seawater along the coast from Pondicherry to Quiet, to Repos and further up north to Sri Ma. Depending on the direction of the current, we found high levels of contamination. If the flow was north, the sea carried a lot of faecal pollution. Sometimes

Testing facilities at EMS

- Potable water quality analysis (chemical constituency, presence of toxic substances, microbiological analysis)
- Efficiency of drinking water purification systems
- Waste water quality analysis
- Efficiency of waste water purification systems
- Ground water quality analysis
- Sea water quality analysis
- Irrigation water quality analysis
- Bathing water quality analysis
- Concentration of impurities in mixing water of concrete
- Sanitary parasitology
- Assessment of metals in water, sludge, food etc.
- Soil analysis (fertility, micronutrients)
- Compost analysis
- Manure and biosolids analysis
- Biofertilizer quality assessment
- Oils and fats analysis
- Soap analysis
- Cosmetics analysis (creams, lotions, shampoos, powders)
- Food analysis (energy contents, microbiological analysis, presence of vitamin B 12, presence of heavy metals such as lead and cadmium, mercury, iron, zinc and arsenic)
- Spirulina analysis (chemical and microbiological tests)

For more information, contact: ems@auroville.org.in

Farming the blue-greens

Since 1997, *Aurospirul* is producing high quality sun-dried spirulina using sustainable and eco-friendly technologies.

It's Wednesday at Solar Kitchen. At lunch a dark green dollop is served in little steel cups. Its distinct smell of the ocean evokes either love at first taste or total recoil. Welcome to the world of spirulina grown in Auroville's Spirulina Farm at *Simplicity*. To learn more, I visit Dutch Aurovillian Hendrik who runs *Aurospirul*, the unit that produces spirulina.

It's a quarter to ten, close to tea time. Seated under the coconut thatch of *Aurospirul*'s long veranda, we see the women rinsing the white muslin cloth that was used for the morning's harvest. Pressed green pâtés of spirulina lay glistening on stone slabs. Soon they will be extruded into long spaghetti-like threads using hand-cranked machines, and then sun-dried on straw mats up on the roof.

"There has always been a relation between spirulina and Auroville," says Hendrik, whose involvement with the blue-green algae happened by chance. "It is the food of the future and we are in the city of the future."

Hendrik came to Auroville in 1996 and found a place in the beach community of *Simplicity*, where Bonaventura Chanson, a Swiss Aurovillian, had been living. "When I arrived, he had just passed away, and that left me all alone in *Simplicity*."

"Bonaventura had started *Simplicity* in 1990 with the idea of setting up a spirulina farm. For six years he tried to realize the vision but it did not materialize. He had an extensive collection of books on spirulina cultivation which I began reading." Slowly Hendrik's interest grew. "Some months later, when I was a Newcomer, I was asked to justify my presence at *Simplicity*. So together with Tejas Joseph, another Aurovillian, I submitted

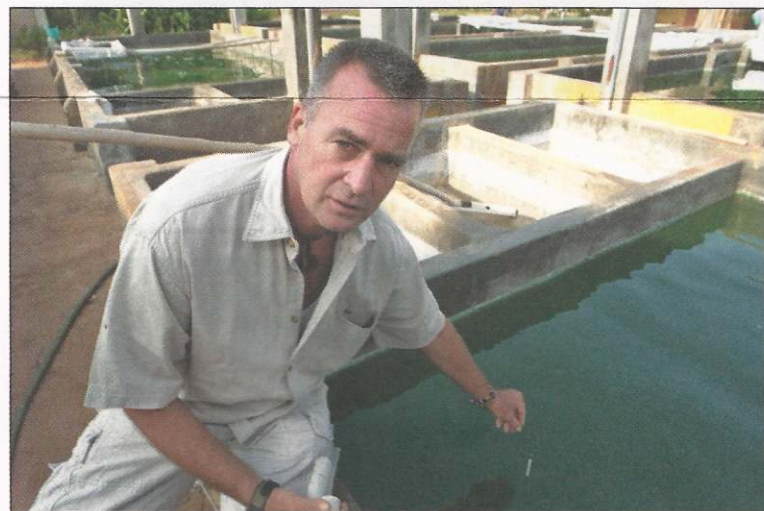


The second spirulina farm at Windarra

Aurospirul had started production.

"Bonaventura's idea got realized and our first production went for a nutrition programme at the Auroville Health Centre."

However neither Bonaventura nor Hendrik were the first to dream of spirulina for Auroville. Hendrik pulls out



Hendrik

a proposal to study the possibilities of setting up a Spirulina farm in *Simplicity*." The Development Group, then in charge of the allocation of land stewardships, consented. "From that moment, the wheels began to turn magically."

"I got a phone call from Antenna Technology in Madurai – I still don't know how they came to know about me – asking if I wanted to be part of a training programme on spirulina farming. Soon the Auroville Health Centre offered an interest-free loan to build our first three tanks, and by 1997,

an old book from the library. It is about spirulina cultivation from around the world. He turns to the chapter on India, where he points to a black and white photo. It is of a water-filled cement pond, with a windmill and palm trees on the horizon. "This is Auroville in the early 1970s," he explains. "Auroville's first experimental spirulina plant was started by Bob Lawlor in the Success community. Later there were other experiments in *Djaima* and *La Ferme*, but these projects never really took off."

But *Aurospirul* did, and continues to grow. Today, at *Simplicity*, the spir-

ulina is cultivated in 15 shallow tanks with a total surface area of 450 square metres with each square metre producing 10 grams of spirulina a day. Last year, *Aurospirul* was allotted land in *Windarra* for a second spirulina plant. "There we have built 24 tanks with a total surface area of 800 square metres. And with that, our production capacity has increased to about 4 tons of dry spirulina a year."

Almost all the workers at *Aurospirul* are illiterate women who come from the surrounding villages. "It is a job well suited to these ladies because every step is done by hand – the harvesting, pressing, washing, drying, packing. We use no machinery and there is a slow pace in the work." The women, says Hendrik, have developed an intuitive sense for spirulina cultivation. "Some of them have been working with us from the beginning and know when to harvest, how much to harvest, when to refresh the culture and so on."

The typical work day at *Aurospirul* begins with the harvesting. "During the early hours of morning, spirulina has the highest protein content," explains Hendrik. Using a gradation of filter cloths and many rinsings with fresh water, the women isolate the spirulina from larger particles. "As spirulina is microscopic, it needs a very fine filter to capture it, and we use a special screen printing cloth with a pore size of 500 microns."

Contamination by other micro-organisms is prevented by the high alkalinity of the water that develops in the tanks. Hendrik gives a scientific explanation. "We add minerals and salts to the water as a nutrient for the spirulina. As the organism photosynthesises, that is captures sunlight and

makes its own food, one of the by-products is an alkali. So the pH level automatically rises and this prevents other bacteria and algae from growing." Also, as part of the processing, the sun-dried spirulina is exposed to a stream of hot air at 65 degrees Celsius. "This ensures we have a 100% food safe product." The spirulina is then packed hygienically, and sent to outlets.

The quality of Auroville's spirulina is certified by Auroville's Environmental Monitoring Service (EMS). "We have our samples regularly tested by EMS for moisture, total ash, protein, iron, fat, beta carotene and micro-nutrient content. EMS also checks for the presence of harmful bacteria such as coliforms, staphylococci, shigella and salmonella, and the presence of heavy

metals such as lead, arsenic, cadmium and mercury. EMS, in fact, is an important key to our success as we can offer a certified product."

Aurospirul sells its products all over India, and to select markets abroad. Since a few months, it has offered the product online through *Auroville.com*. "And of course here in Auroville, as many Aurovillians have adopted spirulina in their daily diet."

A few Auroville units are also experimenting, adding spirulina to their products and coming up with 'spirulinized' fruit juices, honey, soap and even pasta. "The latter is not ideal, as spirulina should not be cooked. Cooking takes away a lot of the nutritional value, especially the heat-sensitive vitamins," comments Hendrik, who himself admits to consuming at least 20 grams a day. "I am my best client," he says with a toothy grin. "I really like the taste; it's simply delicious. Everything I eat, I sprinkle spirulina on it!"

If Hendrik's taste buds have adapted to the spirulina's taste, some Aurovillians still have a long way to go. "But we do have our fans who really like the taste," says Hendrik, "especially the crunchy variety. I can show you the fan mail." To improve the acceptance of spirulina, Hendrik is working on an updated spirulina recipe book.

What keeps Hendrik's enthusiasm burning is the fact that it is one of the foods of the future. "Growing spirulina in Auroville makes perfect sense because of what Mother has said about the food of the future," he explains. "She said: *The whole process of assimilation which weighs you down – this occupies so much of a person's time and energy – that should be done beforehand, and then one should be given something which is immediately assimilable, like what they are doing now with vitamin pills and proteins which can be assimilated directly, nutritious basics which are found in one thing or another and which are not bulky.*"

"Spirulina fits the bill perfectly not only because it is rich in nutrients, but also because it has no cellulose in its cell walls so it is very easily digested and absorbed by the body. It is indeed a food of the future."

In conversation with
Priya Sundaravalli

What is spirulina?

Spirulina is a tiny blue green algae in the form of a spiral that is found in mineral-rich alkaline lakes in tropical climates. It was the first link between bacteria and plants, and appeared on earth 3.6 billion years ago. In fact, spirulina belongs both to the bacterial and plant kingdoms, and may be considered one of the oldest forms of plant life on earth. The species cultivated in Auroville is *Arthrospira plantensis* of the Lonar variety. This variety originally comes from Lake Lonar, a crater lake in the state of Maharashtra in India. *Aurospirul* obtained its culture not from Lake Lonar – which has dried out – but from *Antenna Technology* in Madurai, which in turn got it from a gene bank in Switzerland.

Spirulina cultivation has no hidden environmental costs and produces more nutrition per acre than any other food. It uses water more efficiently per kg of protein than any other food source. Spirulina can be produced on non-fertile land with brackish water.

Spirulina is not a medicine but a food supplement that promotes health and vitality. It contains a lot of nutrients, such as all the essential amino acids, iron, and beta carotene. Spirulina is a low-fat, low-calorie, cholesterol-free source of protein.

(For more info about spirulina visit: www.auroville.org/index/spirulina)

AUROVILLE AND INDIA

Progress in Chennai's Adyar Poonga

In the June-July 2008 issue of *Auroville Today* we reported about the ecological restoration of the Adyar Creek in the middle of Chennai by Auroville's Pitchandikulam Forest Consultants and the plans for creating the Adyar Poonga, an eco park at the Creek.

"Things are moving per schedule," says Joss, the executive of Pitchandikulam Forest Consultants. "The Adyar Poonga will be ready in by the end of next year. He says that the work "to transform desecrated Mother Nature into a garden" has been very challenging. "A year ago, Adyar Poonga was a garbage dump site. Even as we started our work, tonnes of rubble were dumped in the place overnight," he recalled. His team oversaw the

removal of 70,000 tonnes of garbage, before the planting of the saplings could start. Now already 19 species of fish and about 92 species of birds have been sighted

The park will be a showcase of the ecosystem of the Coromandel Coast with fresh water ponds, brackish areas, mangroves, mud flats, and islands. An information centre is being built where the public will be informed about the Poonga and shown technologies that can help clean up Chennai and so increase eco-awareness.

Auroville's Pitchandikulam Forest Consultants have also signed an agreement with the Tamil Nadu government to maintain the Adyar Poonga for two years.



The Ecological restoration work in progress at the Adyar estuary in Chennai.

A Korean family in Auroville

“There are now twenty eight Koreans in Auroville and our numbers are slowly increasing,” says Haandl as she pours me a cup of green tea in her home in Grace community. Haandl and her husband, Padha, are both Aurovilian. They work at Matrimandir – she helps with cleaning and repairing the white socks, while he prepares compost for the Matrimandir gardens. They have a 13-year old son Yon Sung, who attends Transition School.

“Padha and I have always been interested in sustainable living and organic farming,” says Haandl. “For many years we tried to find a community in Korea where we could live and work. There are a few such places but they have strict rules and we were not attracted to them. Then a friend of ours who has been to Auroville told us about the place, and to us it sounded like ‘heaven on earth’. We became very excited and wanted to come as soon as possible.

“We first came to Auroville in June 1999, and were very impressed with the beauty, the spirit of fraternity, the spirituality, and especially the Matrimandir. However, nobody warned us about how hot it would be in July, and the heat took us by surprise. We also realized that we weren’t ready financially. So we went back to Korea to earn more money so that we could return.

“Organic farming didn’t pay much, so I went back to my job as pharmacist, and we both studied English and prepared ourselves for our exciting new life. During those years of working and saving back in Korea, we used to refer to Auroville as our ‘home town’ – that is what it always felt like to us.

“When we arrived, both Padha and I felt immediately connected to the Integral Yoga. The concept that the whole of life can be one’s yoga is a unique approach and by doing something with discipline everyday it becomes part of you. Every day I sat down to translate a page of Mother’s



Padha, Haandl and Yon Sung

Rays of Light into Korean – it became part of my *sadhana*. It took three years to complete, but it was a deep experience for me. If I did not know the correct meaning I would just stay quiet and hope Mother would give it to me – and usually She did. That book had a great impact on me; maybe in the future I will get it published so that other Koreans can read it.

“We both wanted to learn more about Mother and Sri Aurobindo. There is a book called *Living Within* which has been translated into Korean and that was a revelation for both of us. I also remember how thrilled we were in seeing the *The Auroville Experience* translated into Korean.

“Many Koreans feel a connection with India as Buddhism is one of the major religions in Korea, and many come to India on pilgrimages seeking the birthplace of their religion. The poet Rabindranath Tagore too had a special connection with Korea which he visited during his trip to Japan. He wrote: ‘Korea will be the lamp of Asia.’

“A group of Koreans in Auroville meet at each other’s houses once a month for a meditation followed by a dinner,” says Padha. “At these gatherings, every person donates 100 rupees to be put into an account for our future pavilion; that is a nice feeling.

“Food is an important part of our culture,” he explains. “Our way of life is still very traditional with grandparents often living with the family of their eldest son. Food is a daily way of coming together and sharing, so we give it a lot of importance.” Says Haandl, “When a friend comes from Korea they always bring bags of special Korean spices and delicacies for us. We find Indian food very spicy and European food rather heavy, so in the evenings we always cook our own food which is fresh and light. For example, we use chilli powder but it is both hot and sweet, quite different from the Indian. We also prepare many small individual dishes with particular tastes, and these are created with attention and love. We are also regularly offering some typical

Korean food at Pour Tous for Aurovilians – like *Kimchi*, which is a fermented and pickled side dish of vegetables. People seem to like it a lot.

“There are now at least 2,500 Koreans working in Chennai with companies like Hyundai, Samsung and LG. So there is now a large Korean food shop in Chennai where we can get what we need, but it is expensive. The Koreans from Chennai sometimes drive down to Auroville on weekends. In the beginning, they thought Auroville was a cult when they saw the pictures of Mother everywhere. Even my parents thought we were crazy when we first came to Auroville, but when my sister visited us, she loved it,” says Haandl.

“Aurovilians sometimes say that we do not mix enough with the other nationalities and in a way they are correct; but it is because of the language,” say Haandl and Padha. “It requires so much effort from us that we shy away.” They explain that spoken English is not easy for many Koreans. “When we went to school, we did not learn English

until we were 10 years old. Our teachers had no experience of the way English should be spoken so while our grammar and vocabulary was good, our pronunciation was terrible and we never had a chance to improve. Now it is different for the young generation as well-trained Americans are given work permits to teach English, and the situation has improved.”

“Regarding our own spoken English, we owe a lot to Jyotiprem, a Dutch Aurovilian who gives classes for us once a week in his house. At first we went to the Auroville Language Laboratory but the teachers were constantly changing, and that was not easy. But it was a great help for us as beginners and they encouraged us in our progress.

“Our son also faced this difficulty in the beginning. At first, he found school difficult to adjust to, but the teachers were very supportive and he quickly got over that phase. Last year, he wrote a book of poems called *The Marching Flowers* written in Korean and English and illustrated with his own drawings. He is also learning to play Western Classical music on the transverse flute with Dorothee, and he is proving to be quite artistic. For our son growing up in Auroville has been very special,” says Haandl.

“Living in Auroville, we are all able to find the hidden beauty within ourselves,” says Padha who also makes pen and ink paintings of flowers on rice paper. “Auroville stimulates us to improve ourselves and we consider ourselves very lucky to be here.”

I linger on as Haandl pours yet another cup of traditional Korean tea from a tiny glass teapot into ceramic bowls. The ritual is delicate and soothing and the tea fragrant and refreshing. We are sitting on cushions around a beautiful low wooden table. Outside I can hear the Tamil workers on their tea break drinking hot, strong, and sweet tea and I think to myself – ‘This is Auroville, where everyone exists in harmony together.’

Dianna

MATRIMANDIR

Night-watch at the Matrimandir

The Matrimandir team had the inspiration for two people – no couples please – to be a ‘living Presence on watch’ throughout the night in the Matrimandir grounds. As I had never been a ‘Presence on watch’ before, I felt somewhat honoured when Srimey rang up and asked me report at the Matrimandir gate by 9 pm. It is the hour I am usually brushing my teeth and heading in the direction of bed, but I arrived there with a rucksack packed with a bed roll, sheet cover, a flask of tea, bananas and biscuits, and of course, mosquito cream.

Srimey instructed my companion and me: “You are not guards, but it would be nice if you walked around now and then so any potential mischief-maker would be aware of your presence.” She said some ‘Presences’ sleep in the amphitheatre but we decided to bed down in one of the niches under one of the ramps by the marble lotus pond. Not a sensible choice, it later proved, as there was little ventilation and plenty of mosquitoes. There was even a very large black toad living close by.

Promptly at 9.15 p.m. all the lights went out before we had even unpacked our torches or applied the mosquito cream. Neither of us had remembered to bring a cell phone, but Srimey explained that in case of an emergency we could always use the phone in the office and we could call her any time of the night. The only emergency I could foresee was breaking an ankle on those treacherous amphitheatre steps as it was pitch dark, and both of us had ‘elderly’ eyes.

We began our patrol immediately at the amphitheatre, walking slowly around the edge several times and then sat listening to the sounds of the distant party music wafting over from the direction of Kalabhum. When that ended, the equally vital temple music from Kottakarai became audible. After a while, the humans tired of making noises, and everything became still. A deep black silence descended over the earth.

Moving around now felt like swimming through a dark sea, one with hidden currents and depths. The hollow of the amphitheatre seemed like a nest carved into the earth, and the urn like a guiding beacon for passing souls. We lay down on the red stones still pulsing with the day’s warmth and gazed up at the unfurled tropical night sky. How rarely we look at that brilliance which is above us every night of our lives, I thought. Some of the constellations looked vaguely familiar, yet their immensity was threatening. Just for a second as I allowed my mind to contemplate their magnificence, I had a huge metaphysical panic attack. “Maybe if we can name them we can tame them”, I thought, just as my companion broke the silence; “Must bring my star book next time.”

The Matrimandir glowed as molten gold, and then turned a golden

liquid, sparkling and flowing. It morphed into a living, twinkling being with a million shadows and reflections. Gigantic and unearthly, it looked as if it had alighted from the heavens it was as if the thousands of souls who had worked on it over the forty years were contained within it, beating with its golden pulse.

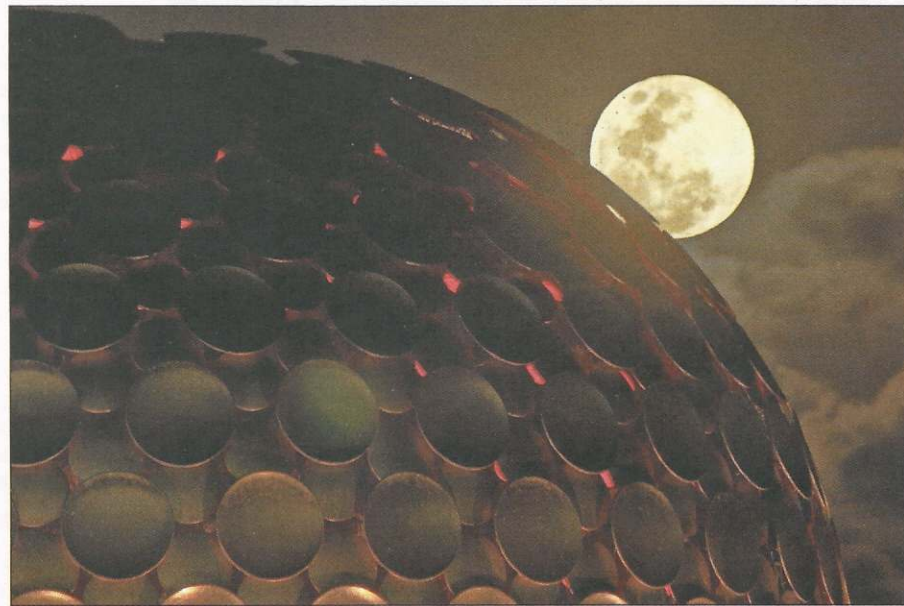
As I walked down the giant sweeps of the red sandstone petals they seemed to lead me down to ancient Egypt, down, down to the worlds of myth and fantasy, the world behind the daylight veil. It was a world of immense beauty, of perfect, bold proportions.

When I awoke from a half sleep during the night the enormous shimmering disks just above my head transported me to Mars, a future place of shining giant proportions. When I awoke another time I was in the purity of a Muslim painting with the luminous white glow of the lotus pool. The sense of space around the Matrimandir was limitless, alternating between being liberating and terrifying. That night I was taken through universes and across aeons of time.

But the body was weak and demanded sleep. I could hear Jesus admonishing his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Could you not wait one hour with me?” I thought wistfully of the siesta I had missed during the day, and of how I should have and could have prepared myself, body and soul, for this unique occasion.

My companion and I had wedged ourselves into a small space under the Mahasaraswati ramp so we lay side by side throughout the night. She was someone I liked a lot but did not know well, yet we chatted easily like an old couple. Sometimes she slept while I walked around, then I slept and she would crawl quietly away. She had worn a flowing all-white dress, having read that mosquitoes are not attracted to white, and so when I opened an eye and saw her floating down the steps, I thought I was seeing a ghost.

It was a joy to spend time with someone without the daytime constraints of personalities. We were in a different medium of time and it ebbed and flowed and all we did was ride it. Oh, to live in that timeless zone always! “It was the hour before the Gods awoke”... “A fathomless zero occupied the world”...



Matrimandir at night

I realized that I had never before had the feeling of having ‘all the time in the world’; the ‘time for myself’, all the clichés we live by. Here in the space and eternal darkness there was no sense of time, just a ‘deep Presence’, for want of a better word. There were no distractions of people, or books, or worn second-hand opinions. Everything was just as it was.

The nothingness threw one easily into a meditative state. Usually we associate the deepest darkest hours of the night with insomnia and foreboding terror. It was not like that at all. For a blessed moment here and there, I knew exactly where I was heading, exactly where I had come from, and that everything was in fact very, very well. There were glimpses, tiny flashes of awareness, that Matrimandir is the centre of the world; that everything happens from here. There is really no need to go anywhere else. I had read these things of course, and agreed with them, but to have access to that through experience, if only for a second, was life changing for me.

We both woke up at 6 a.m. stiff and bleary-eyed to a deep and jolly “good morning”, and saw Otto with his shock of white hair leaning over the wall. The day shift had arrived, and our ‘presence’ was no longer needed. We gathered up our strewn-about things, tidied up meticulously, and stumbled out through the red ramp into the glory of another Aurovilian dawn. My back ached and my bites itched, but I felt gloriously happy.

Dianna

The Auroville Film Festival '09

In the week of September 23-27, one hundred and seventeen films – long, short, and featuring all kinds of topics – were shown in *Cinema Paradiso* and in the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium. Marco and Krishna, the festival's organizers, reflect on a successful experience.

“I had been thinking about this for a couple of years,” says Marco, who manages the Town Hall's *Cinema Paradiso*. “We in Auroville are very rich in ideas, there are many different approaches and points of view, but each of us somehow is living in a bubble. We all know what is around us but we do not know what else is happening in Auroville. So I was wondering if we could not create more awareness. A film festival is ideal for that. Also, apart from visually showing what others are doing, it is a great way to open up creativity.”

“The more I thought about it, the more the idea began to take shape. There are a lot of people in Auroville who are making videos and many put something up on *YouTube*. In that way the focal idea started taking shape: What is the image Aurovilians have of Auroville which they want to present? That's what I wanted to catch, so that others can discover aspects of Auroville they don't know exist, find out about other points of view, reflect on them and discuss them. This helps all of us to widen our views. That was

to have workshops in the schools and teach the students how to create a small video. Most schools responded enthusiastically. And exactly at that moment ‘the cheese on the pasta’ as they say in Italy, arrived in the person of Saguenail, a French professional movie director. He has over 35 films to his credit, with seven of them winning awards. Saguenail lives in Portugal. He has also written numerous articles and books on film making, and is a teacher who founded ‘Filhos de Lumière’ an organisation for imparting the knowledge and skills of filmmaking. He was a godsend.

“The other godsend was *Stichting de Zaaier*, which agreed to make an extra donation for film education. Their help, and the help of more than 50 others who freely contributed their energy and materials, has been essential for the success of the festival.

The workshops

“We ran 8 workshops of 10-days each for students aged 8 and above from schools in Auroville and in the bioregion, 65 children in all. The workshops gave an opportunity to each student to make

is stressing a different aspect of being an Auroville child. We received comments on some children's films from people who are not from Auroville. They said that it was very obvious that children in Auroville are getting a kind of education that children outside Auroville are not getting. Not only in terms of creativity, but also in terms of being able to create a structure. All children showed an amazing freshness, simplicity, joy and a structured approach to their work.

The festival

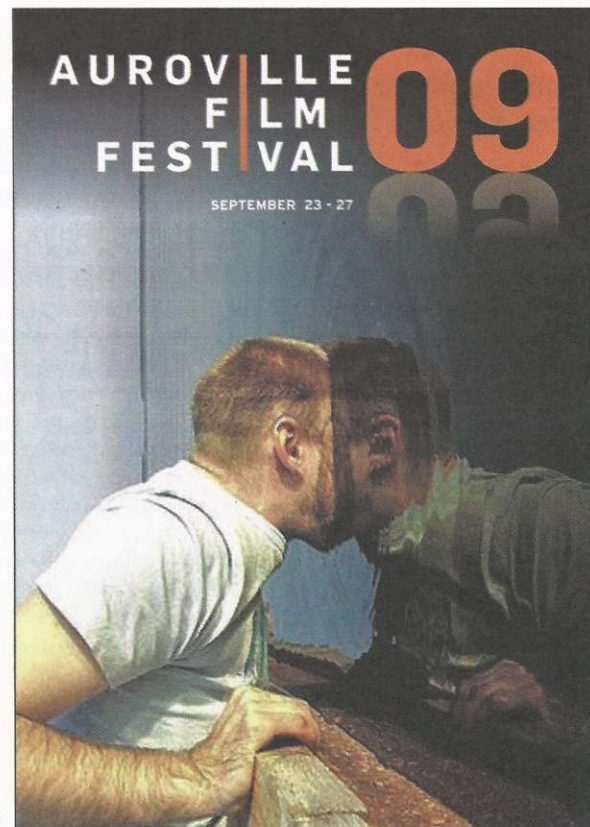
“While the children were being taught, the ideas of the festival itself matured further. We decided that the festival would screen films under three categories: (1) films made by Aurovilians and residents of the bioregion and films shot in Auroville by guests of Auroville; (2) films made about Auroville and or its bioregion; and (3) films made by students of Aurovillian schools or students of schools in the bioregion. In each category, films made in the last two years would be eligible for a jury prize and/or a prize voted on by the public.

“It wasn't easy to find the jury. Most people we approached were too busy. But three people generously accepted. Award winning actress, film director and social activist Revathy (Asha Menon), who has played in more than 100 films in five Indian languages, was the first to agree. She knows Auroville pretty well as she stays here often. Reporter and documentary filmmaker Gerard Perrier, who has been working with *France Televisions* in Réunion Island for the last 20 years, was the second. The third person who agreed to give her time and energy was Gowri Ramnarayan, author, play director and film critic who writes for *The Hindu* on literature, cinema and Indian classical music. She is also a member of the FIPRESCI Jury, an international association of film critics.

“The response to the festival announcement exceeded all expectations. We got 117 videos! There are experimental video clips made by the students of the various Auroville schools, often less than a minute long; short films about specific Auroville activities, such as on *Aquadyn's* research in water, the impressions of the Auroville marathon, the potters at Dana, the paragliding pilots of Auroville, the building of *Agni Jata* and the building of the Matrimandir; films about the children of Auroville, about their views on global warming or on their upbringing and education; professional documentaries on Auroville; and films on a wide variety of other topics such as on the beauty of Tamil Nadu, a trip to see the solar eclipse, solid waste pollution in Tamil Nadu, etc. Out of these 117 films, 94 were judged by the jury and audience.

The future

“We have many ideas for the future. First, we plan to show the award-winning films in different venues in Chennai, Delhi, Calcutta, Mumbai and England. Another plan is to upload as many of the films as possible so they can be seen and downloaded by anybody.



The festival poster, designed by Jonas Allen



Marco and Krishna, the festival's organizers

the first idea, and it was accepted by the Dutch Foundation *Stichting de Zaaier* which made a donation towards realizing it.

“Then a larger group of people came together to actualize the programme. During that first meeting we realized that this festival was a wonderful opportunity to create a short educational programme in Auroville that would teach children the techniques of film and video-making and inspire them to express themselves.

“We contacted all the schools with a proposal

a one-shot film and the group made a collective film. Everybody experienced all facets of film-making, including camera work, sound and editing. Most importantly, Saguenail also gave three adult workshops for 23 Aurovilians of whom 13 were trained to continue the programme in future. For the excitement created by the festival is so high that we think we have to introduce film-making as a subject in the schools.

“It was amazing to see that each Auroville school has a different ‘signature’, as if each school

The winners

The jury said it had been hard to make the final selection. To make life easier, they changed the rules and awarded not 3 but 6 prizes, plus a few ‘special mentions’. The audience prizes were similarly multiplied.

In category I, films made by Aurovilians and residents of the bioregion and films shot in Auroville by guests of Auroville, three prizes were awarded, two for short films and one for a longer film. The awards for short movies went to *The Catch*, a 4-minute experimental movie which, said the jury, ‘makes a remarkable impact with stark images’; and to *Maya at work*, a 7-minute experimental movie that ‘instigates the viewer to think about the power of illusion in art and in life’. The prize for the longer film went to *The Eclipse Trip*, an experimental, 55-minute film about five friends from Auroville who went to see the solar eclipse on July 22nd, 2009. A special mention was reserved for the 36-minute Tamil fiction movie *Maatram*, which aims at creating awareness about solid waste management.

In category II, films made about Auroville and or its bioregion, the prize went to the 41 minutes documentary *The Children of Auroville, part one: Early Education*. In the words of the jury, ‘the film gives an honest and engaging account of educating the children of Auroville in the early years and an insight into the many challenges thrown up in this endeavour.’ Doris, on receiving the prize, mentioned that the second and third parts of the film are in preparation.



PHOTO GIORGIO

A still from Johnini's great cows

In category III, films made by students of Aurovillian schools or students of schools in the bioregion, two prizes were given. The prize for teenagers went to the film *Unexpected*, a one and half minute video clip made by students of Future school. Children from Deepanam School received the prize for younger children, with the clip *Belly Ball* (also one and half minute).

A special mention went to the film *Soul*, a 2-minute documentary on the need for afforestation, which, in the words of the jury, ‘says something universal in a simple way.’

The audience prize in category I went to *Maatram*. ‘Special mentions’ were awarded to *Yatra (Journey to Five Lands)*, a 45-minute Tamil fiction movie about the beauty and environment of Tamil Nadu; and to *The Eclipse Trip*.

In category II, the audience prize went to *Building Matrimandir*, a 52-minute English documentary on the construction of the Matrimandir.

In category III the prize went to *Johnini's great cows* (4 minutes) showing the great magician Johnini at work, made by students of The Learning Community.

“Regarding education, there are two plans. Revathy is preparing a programme to make a movie based on a script made by Auroville children. And, most importantly, we plan to continue the film education in Auroville and the bioregion. Now we have a camera and sound recorder and people have come forward who want to continue teaching film-making in the schools. Christoph and Sasi are focussing on a post-production component and Revathy is eager to give students an insight into acting.

“Lastly, we want to organize the film festival every 2 years. This year the focus was on Auroville, to give more visibility to what we are doing. The Auroville Film Festival '11 could be on one of the themes of Auroville such as ‘surrender’ or ‘human unity’, and we could open up and give an award to the best movie in the world on that particular theme. That would promote Auroville on a different scale altogether.”

In conversation with Krishna and Marco
For more information, visit www.aurovillevideo.org

Auroville is a dream, a unique culture, a community with mutual ideals and a unique way of working together. Our ideals and aspiration are expressed by the artists of Auroville in interesting ways. Increasingly, one such way has been through films. Documentaries, fiction, short films, videos, home movies and films made on cell phones are drawing the attention and imagination of all. Today, film is a medium accessible to everybody. People love to express themselves through it: their thoughts, their imagination, their explorations and their concept of the world around them. Films reveal the location, the culture, the stories, the dreams and the spirit of both the film maker and of the community the filmmaker belongs to.

The Auroville Film Festival '09 is an opportunity for Aurovilians to share the films they make with the community that inspires them.

From the festival programme

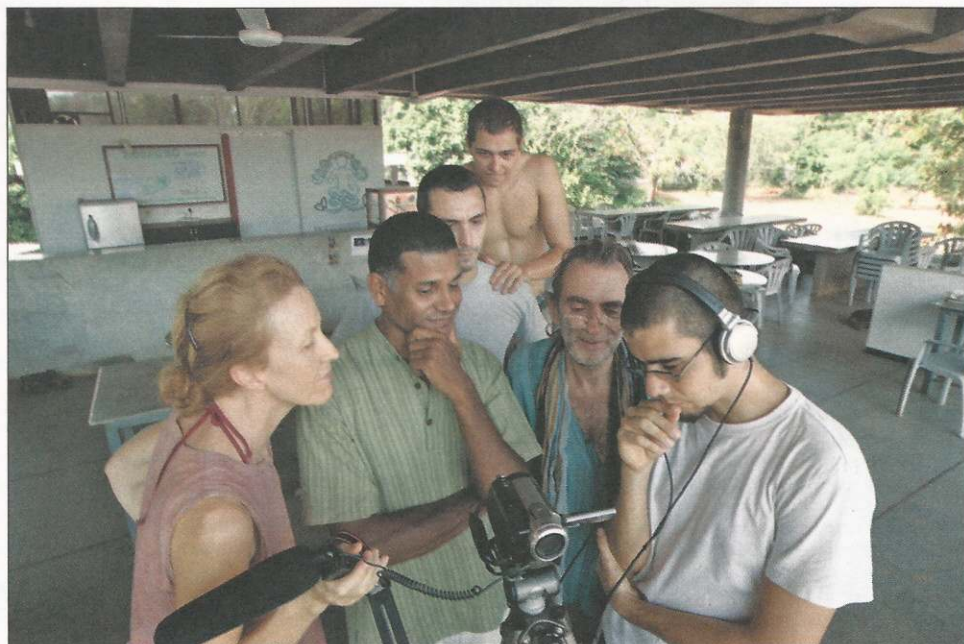


PHOTO GIORGIO

Learning the ropes: Saguenail is second from right

Chasing rhythms, Catching Hold

Painter, print-maker, and public installation artist Perri Lynch, was on a 3-month art residency in Auroville.

“I think of India as the emotional heart of the world,” says Perri Lynch on the opening night of her exhibition *Catching Hold* at Gallery Square Circle in Kalakendra. “Coming from a country like the U.S., where we have vast territories and things go fast, one becomes the rugged individualist. And that can be your undoing when you’re in a country like India with a dense population, and with such a completely different sensibility. That I think is the reason why so many Westerners come to India; to connect to something spiritual which is not just about the individual, but about the entire planet.” For Perri herself, this was surely one reason to come back to Auroville and for an entire summer work at Kala Kendra in Bharat Nivas as an artist-in-residence.

This is Perri’s fourth visit to Auroville. This time she was on a grant to study the *kolam* tradition of Tamil Nadu. In her proposal to the funding agency, she wrote, “The goal is not to pictorialise, exoticise, or aestheticise, but to convey the importance of place-making at thresholds throughout South India and examine similarities and differences with American culture.” As she explained in her online journal:

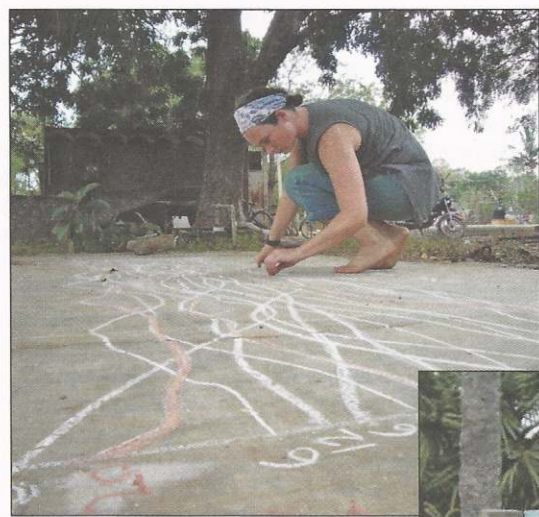
In the hours before dawn, millions of women and girls in Tamil Nadu sweep the threshold of their homes, purify the ground outside, and, with a fistful of white rice powder, proceed to draw a kolam. Kolams are intricate designs combining form, motion, and symmetry in an ancient Dravidian drawing tradition. Over the course of the day, this prayer for prosperity is rained on, walked over, blown by the wind and otherwise obliterated. Each morning a new one is drawn. Through this process of creation and decay, kolams announce the coming of festivals, births, deaths, aspirations, and changes within the home. Designs are based on a system of dots and lines forming one, highly aesthetic, interwoven whole. The dots signify challenges we may encounter. Serpentine lines represent the journey, the Yatra, one takes through life. Each pattern carries a very specific message. Kolams are map, a prayer, a journey, and a ritual. They combine a fixed-grid matrix with labyrinth-like motion, yielding questions of permanence, impermanence, mobility and place.

“The intention was that over the course of my stay here, I would use *kolam* design and the history of *kolam*-making as visual inspiration to create a series of artworks,” she says. But that was not to be. Shortly into her stay, Perri hit a wall. “I was completely blocked. I just could not draw a *kolam*. It was something I was in awe of and inspired by, but as a creative practice, I discovered it was not my visual language. And the harder I tried, the worse it became... and that was the big lesson I learned – that I was trying too hard. So I asked myself, if it is not really the *kolam* itself, what is it

about the *kolam* that I am connecting to?” And with that, the project dedicated to ‘exploring the traditions of place-making as daily ritual and devotional practice in South India’ morphed into a search for Perri’s inner truth. In her journal, she recounts this search.

Yesterday, I braved the heat and went rambling around in Pondicherry...not really in search of kolams but seeking inspiration in some form to get me through this blockage in the studio work. I visited the ashram and felt the sweet pull of the Samadhi. I wandered through the sounds, textures, and flavours of the market. I ate a dosai and found a new juice stall. And all the time, I wondered. All creative work, on some level, is born in the heart. But kolams are based on math and counting and all of this is left-brain activity that feels very mental. So...where do kolams come from? Form the head or the heart?

The answer came in the form of a book, ‘Chasing the monsoon’ by Alex

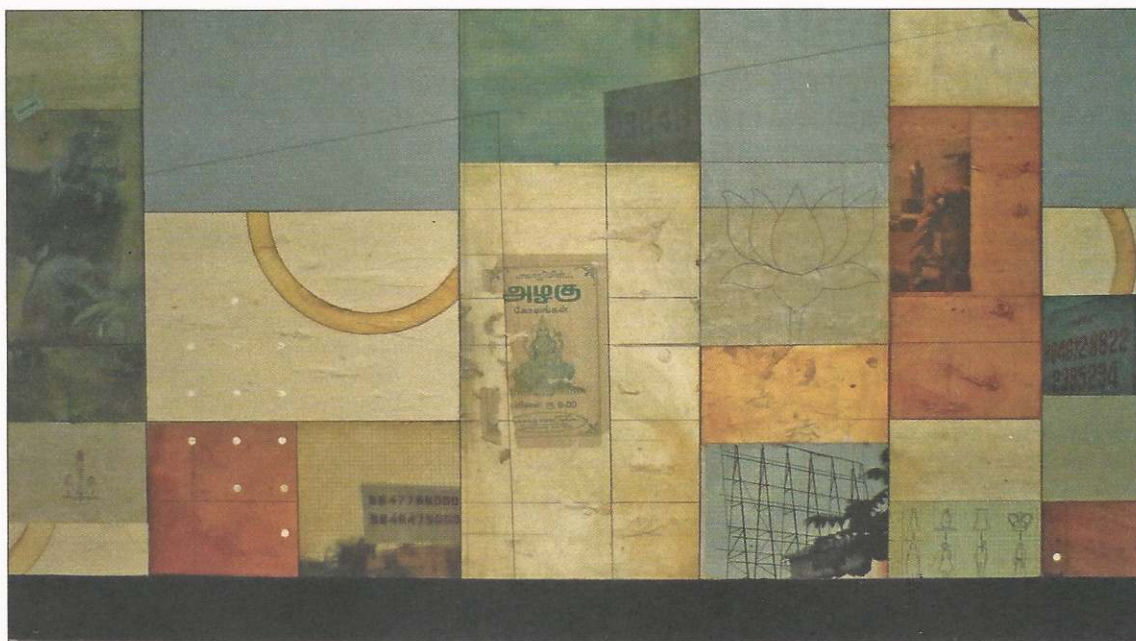


Perri sketching the gate design

Frater. “The idea of journeying in this manner came like an inspiration. It could my own way to get in touch with the larger forces, rhythms and symmetries that unfold in South India in that period – forces that have such a deep effect on the nature and the culture here.” With that, Perri decided to hit the road to the tip of India and chase the monsoon herself.

The experience was profound. “At one point I wasn’t sure if I was chasing something or it was chasing me. All the images and experiences on the Indian roads and coastlines were washing over me; and I had to tell myself I am not going to capture any of this right then.”

Standing in the pouring rain, watching the sugar fields burn; playing tennis in three different languages; the monsoon coming ashore in Kerala; mobbed by children in Kanyakumari; the trees whispering secrets in Goa; the frog in my coffee; taking a right at the orange wastebasket; thunder, lightning, and temple music; Cochín’s synagogue full of chandeliers; the world’s smallest Bhagavad Gita as a 24k gold necklace; rain coming, boat not working; cremation on the outskirts of Edaiyanchavadi; reading Shantaram on the train to Madurai; dehydrated and



‘Aspiring towards honey stations’, one of the eight paintings Perri created in Auroville

eating Palmyra fruits; weddings upon weddings at Madurai’s Sri Meenakshi temple; cows walking, goats running, dogs barking; trying to draw kolams.

When Perri returned from that monsoon trip, she was ready to have her “own storm”. “I was filled with images, and experiences. When I stepped into the studio, I remembered the rhythms – the rhythm of the rain, the rhythm of the train travel, the rhythms of the landscapes on the coast, the rhythms of the

could really study Auroville by living in Auroville. As my background was in art, I facilitating their creative response to what they were experiencing here.” In that visit, Perri “fell in love” with Auroville. “I knew that I would come back to make art.”

She returned a year later to design *Waves*, the gate for the American Pavilion. “It was a way of integrating art with the structure,” explains Perri. She worked with an artisan blacksmith from the nearby village. “He didn’t speak English, and I couldn’t speak Tamil. But I learnt that things actually go much smoother when you don’t communicate verbally. I showed him a little picture of the gate. He took one look at it and then



‘Waves’ – the gate of the American Pavilion.

backwaters... and that started to drive creation.” Her art started to speak the language of her experience and eight paintings emerged.

Kalakendra offered Perri both a studio and exhibition space. “It has been a wonderful atmosphere to make work in,” says Perri. “One of the lovely things I find in Auroville is that everybody doesn’t need to understand everything in order to respect it. There were many people I met here who came up to me and said, ‘I don’t really understand what you’re doing or why you do it, but I think it is really great and I think you should keep doing it.’ And this they say in such a heartfelt way. That is one of the sweet aspects of living in a collective vision – it breeds tolerance and respect beyond any kind of mental understanding. For me, as an artist, this was very freeing. As artists, by nature, often feel like they are not doing something useful or doing something that is going to save humankind.”

Perri connection with Auroville began in 2005. She came as a faculty with the students from the University of Washington to work at the American Pavilion. “It was a programme called ‘Perception and place’ where students

he just looked up at the sky and said – ‘No rain’. And he turned out to be a remarkable craftsman.”

Now, after her fourth and “definitely not last” visit, Perri feels it is the perfect moment for Auroville to consider integrating public art as planning and development projects move forward. “To have art in public spaces is very important to the health and wellbeing of cities and residents,” says Perri, who herself has been involved in several public art installation projects in the city of Seattle, USA. Her latest contribution is *SeaSk8*, a state of the art skate park where she was art consultant. “In my experience projects that are the most successful and satisfying for all involved are the ones where the artist is included early in the design process

“Auroville should consider integrating creative expression with its new building projects. I would love to see more art in the landscape reflecting outwardly the inner beauty that makes Auroville so special. The people of Auroville are incredibly innovative and pragmatic when it comes to solving the many problems that need to be solved in order to live here comfortably. And if art could be part the landscape, with its own form of functional beauty, it would have a tremendous impact.”

The result for the Aurovilians? “With heightened sensitivity towards our surroundings, we can all derive a deeper sense of place,” says Perri reflectively.

Priya Sundaravalli

MILESTONE

First caravan arrives 40 years ago

PHOTO COURTESY ASHRAM ARCHIVES



On the 2nd of October 1969, the first caravan arrived in Auroville, bringing 15 people in five cars. They had started from Paris on August 15th; it took a little more than six weeks to reach Pondicherry and the community of Aspiration where they all settled. Of the 15, some have left, and a few others have passed on. Three of them are still in Auroville: Gerard Maréchal, Bernard Delambre (Janaka) and François Gauthier. Top: group photo taken by Barun Tagore on the day of arrival published in the ‘Bulletin of Sri Aurobindo’s Centre of Education’ of November 1969.

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