

AUROVILLE TODAY

Number 113, June 1998

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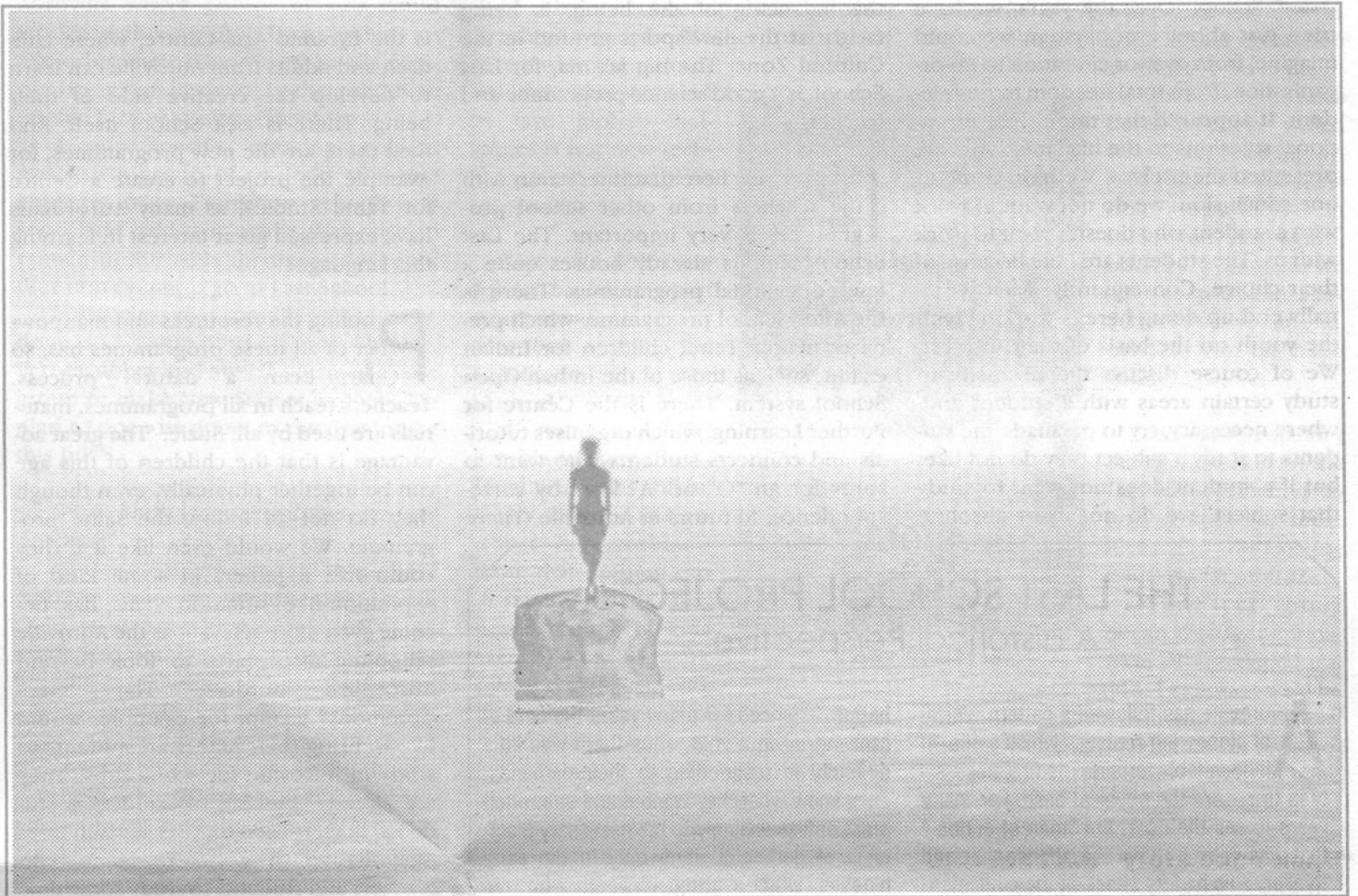
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THIS MONTH...

...we touch upon three areas which are sources of some controversy within the community: high school education, Matrimandir, and the architectural "lines of force" referred to in the original Galaxy plan for the city. Regarding high school education in Auroville, we present ideas for a new school and we talk to teachers who are conducting the continuing experiment of Last School.

We provide an update on what is happening at Matrimandir, and we introduce the first attempt in thirty years to practically realise one of the famous lines of force—long, curving residential blocks for high density living in the Residential Zone. It is perhaps fitting, then, that we should also have chosen to profile Santo who, until recently, has been editor of the frequently controversial AVNews.



LAST SCHOOL

For many years now, the teachers in Last School have had to deal with all kinds of criticism and a controversial image. The teachers at Transition primary school decided two years ago to keep their children for two more years, instead of sending them to Last School. Many Auroville parents send their children to the French Lycée in Pondicherry, or to the International School in far away Kodaikanal. And those children who do attend Last School are often painfully aware of the aura of negativity that is still attributed to it. But is that image justified? Auroville Today spoke with Last School teachers Deepti, Suzie, Shankar, Antarijyoti and Jean-Yves to have their views.

One of the main problems facing Last School teachers is that the parents of their students come from all over the world with widely diverging backgrounds, and have equally widely diverging ideas of what type of education their children should have. Some parents want something radically unstructured and free, other parents want on the contrary an extremely structured and disciplined school. By and large,

their own background determines their views.

The thinking about a child's future often starts shortly before a child finishes the primary school. Up to that age, Auroville is a wonderful place to grow up, but then the parents start wondering: What if my child does not want to stay in Auroville? Can the child make it in the outside world? And so they start seriously thinking about the next level of education, and look with critical eyes on all Auroville has to offer. Those who prefer security decide to send their children out, to conventional schools that offer standard diplomas.

Is it true then that Auroville's education does not prepare the children for "the real world?" 'I think,' says Deepti, 'that Auroville has a relatively good track record. Those who leave Auroville schools to pursue further education elsewhere, have nearly always managed to obtain access to the institution of their choice.' Shankar, the Tamil teacher, agrees. 'Many of the Tamil kids who left Last School and went for some test in another school, ended up in the first rank. And if we compare education in Auroville and elsewhere we should point out that even the Auroville children who have gone to attend other schools observe that the level of education they receive there is not necessarily better than what is offered in Auroville.'

'But I object to the terminology that describes the outside world as "real," says Jean-Yves. 'None of us here has the feeling that Auroville is not the real

world. On the contrary, we tackle the problems of life and earth more really than anywhere else, without cheating.' Antarijyoti: 'Life in Auroville prepares our children more than anything else for the world, within Auroville as well as outside it. Auroville gives the children something so deep that we cannot evaluate it, and consequently, do not value. Our kids are perhaps not prepared for the manipulations or the rat race of the outside world, but they are managing in the world.'

Why then can Auroville not offer the type of certificates that allow the children to pursue higher education elsewhere? 'There are many reasons,' says Suzie. 'One is that there are no universal standards. Standards all over the world differ, in France they need to know this, in India that, in the USA something else. It is impossible to prepare the children for all that. Kodaikanal has an American school syllabus, and there is a possibility to study a year longer to qualify for the European school syllabus. The Lycée is based on the French syllabus. But the main reason is that life has taught us that we cannot keep to an exclusive or limited syllabus here in Auroville. We have made many attempts, and time and again life has taught us that this does not fit in Auroville. Obviously, something else is expected from us.'

We are in a very strange situation right now. For the last two years we have not received any children from Transition (primary) school. Instead, students joined from Mirramukhi (primary)

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school and new students come whose parents joined Auroville more recently. Most of them come with an unhappy educational experience, and they need healing. We are dealing with that, and try to re-awaken the joy of learning, to help them feel good and happy to be in school.'

Deepthi: 'I think this, more than anything else, characterises Last School. Over the years, we have tried just about every system we could imagine, from over-organisation to no-organisation, from total freedom to no-freedom. It appeared that there were no rational solutions to the life situations that presented themselves. We have come to one conclusion: we do not want to work with a student who doesn't want to work with us. The students are here because of their choice. Consequently, what we finally end up doing here is working with the youth on the basis of their interest. We of course discuss the necessity to study certain areas with a student and, where necessary, try to persuade the students to study a subject they do not like; but if a student does not want to study that subject, we do not exert absolute

pressure. The doors are always open if the student decides to take it up a few years later. There is for us no such thing as "education stops at 18." We have here young adults aged 23 who left at 16 and now participate in courses. If there is a student who wants to do an academic type of programme, we will give it.' But can Last School offer everything? 'No, clearly its strengths are in the "right-brain" subjects such as art, languages, history and philosophy, and in mathematics. Physical education, important for the balancing of the being, is being taught at the new sports ground in the Cultural Zone. The big lacuna, for Last School, is a good science programme and teacher.'

It is precisely here that interaction with the teachers from other school programmes is very important. The Last School campus already houses quite a few educational programmes. There is the After School programme, which prepares mainly Tamil children for Indian exams, such as those of the Indian Open School system. There is the Centre for Further Learning, which organises tutorials and connects students who want to study for an "O" or "A" level by correspondence, to tutors in Auroville. There

THE LAST SCHOOL PROJECT A Historical Perspective

Auroville has followed a pattern typical of pioneering societies which settle on inhospitable terrain. The first necessity is to secure the physical base. For many years it was the doer, the "man of action," that was valued above the philosopher and thinker. This had its effect on the educational patterns that Auroville evolved. Schools had to emerge in a somewhat hostile environment where book-learning was dismissed as merely "mental." It is important to note

had experienced for many years the cost of growing up in a void. Thus there was little difficulty in responding to their demands. They knew what they wanted and submitted more or less willingly to the necessary discipline of getting it. It is only in the early nineties, when a group of youth who had gone through organised schooling outside Auroville from a young age arrived in Last School that trouble began. The teacher was perceived as the "adversary" to be revolted against. There was greater chafing at discipline and school was seen as an avoidable "drag." After repeated difficulties and attempts at a whole spectrum of rational solutions it appeared that there was no possibility to equivocate or escape from a fundamental truth of existence: that life is a Power which reason can never really control. We have been forced to embrace this truth and seek other solutions. It is no exaggeration to claim that most methods and systems have been experimented with until we have finally arrived at a point where we cannot be bound to any particular practice, approach, method or timetable. What is viable and right in one situation is out of place in another. There is a basic framework of class hours, and there is a general structure of classes and groups. But there is a great individual plasticity and constant adaptability of approach depending on the psychological nature of each child. It is not highly informed, brilliant students that are the aim, although this can come as a valued result. The object remains to develop the innate psychological faculties in all their uniquely particular combinations in each human being. All means and processes by which the physical, vital and mental being can be expanded and enlarged around its inner centre become means and methods that can be adopted. The youth has to show the teachers what needs to be done. The teachers must be ready to observe, to listen, to adapt and to evolve.

Deepti, for the Last School teach-

The future belongs to those who want to progress.
Blessings to those whose motto is: "Always better."

In the physical, the Divine manifests as Beauty.

(Mother's messages to Last School Campus)

also that many of Auroville's first settlers came out of the sixties, a decade which saw a deep-seated revolt against established norms. This fact coupled with the idea that youth in Auroville had to grow up without losing contact with their souls led to the rather inchoate popular view that it was education focused upon the mind that was the cause of all troubles. Thus Auroville went through periods when organised schools/learning environments hardly existed. Among other factors there was also the difficulty of arriving at a common approach given the diversity of cultural, ethical and social backgrounds of the pioneers. Contrary to normal societies, where the social and ethical mores and the customs of usual practice act as forces of stability, there was little stabilising influence in Auroville's experimental society, where the most contradictory attitudes coexisted.

Last School in its present form was born in 1985 as a direct result of a demand from the youth themselves who were frustrated with not having their own school. These youth

Each human being is a self-developing soul and the business of both parent and teacher is to enable and to help the child to educate himself, to develop his own intellectual, moral, aesthetic and practical capacities and to grow freely as an organic being, not to be kneaded and pressured into form like an inert plastic material. It is not yet realised what this soul is or that the true secret, whether with child or man, is to help him to find his deeper self, the real psychic entity within. That, if we ever give it a chance to come forward, and still more if we call it into the foreground as "the leader of the march set in our front," will itself take up most of the business of education out of our hands and develop the capacity of the psychological being towards the realisation of its potentialities of which our present mechanical view of life and man and external routine methods of dealing with them prevent us from having any experience of forming any conception. (Sri Aurobindo, The Human Cycle, p. 27-28)

is the Pyramid Arts Centre, where children and adults from Auroville can learn to develop the creative side of their being. There is Last School itself. And then there are the new programmes, for example the project to create a Centre for Tamil Studies, as many Aurovilians have expressed great interest in learning this language.

Pooling the resources and manpower of all these programmes has, so far, been a natural process. Teachers teach in all programmes, materials are used by all. Suzie: 'The great advantage is that the children of this age can be together physically, even though they do not all follow the same programme. We would even like it if they could live together, in some kind of Aspiration-like situation. This has become even more relevant as the Auroville schooling also starts to look beyond Auroville's borders. The "Geo-Commons" group, for example, would like to bring their American students to study in Auroville for six-months. They are already thinking of building a students' hostel. Then there is a group from Australia which wants to come with teachers and students to study some time in Auroville. All these can become building blocks for an Auroville international

school of the future. But for that we need unity, unity in diversity and no longer disunity.'

Notes Deepti: 'Do you remember that list Mother made of the schools in Auroville? There was Last School, After School, No School and Super School. What did she mean? High time for all of us, and preferably together, to try to find out.'

Interview by Alan and Carel.

Last School
After School 2:1
Super School
No School

PHYSICAL EDUCATION:

A New Sports Ground

"We have been given a body not to reject it but to make it into something better. And that is precisely one of the goals of Auroville. The human body must be improved, perfected, and it must become a superhuman body capable of expressing a being higher than man. And this certainly cannot happen if we neglect it. It is by an enlightened physical culture and by using physical activities—the activities of the body—not for little personal needs and satisfactions, but to make the body more capable of expressing a higher beauty and consciousness. And for that, physical education has an important place, which should be given to it."

The Mother, June 1970

Sports and physical education have always been an integral and essential part of the curriculum offered to the children in all the Auroville schools. A new impetus, however, came in 1992 when a former professional tennis coach from



Yves teaching gymnastics at the new sports ground

Canada, Yves, settled in Auroville and started coordinating Auroville's school sports programme under the name of Dehashakti which in Sanskrit means "power and perfection of the body".

The sports ground at Certitude, where Dehashakti started out, was built in the early '80s, a period which belonged to the community's pioneering phase when land, human resources and financial means were very restricted. From that time until recently, Certitude provided sports facilities to the children. However, this location had many shortcomings and so the need for a properly planned sports area became obvious. The schools needed an appropriate

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New School

In late March, an interesting communication appeared on the international "compat" e-mail network. It announced a proposal for a new secondary school in Auroville, a complement to Last School, which would "provide Auroville's adolescents with the tools they will need to meet the challenges of the third millennium...The school is rooted in the educational philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother and also other great modern thinkers about education. Its aim is to endow the students with confidence that they have acquired the skills, knowledge and values they will need to meet whatever challenges they encounter in adult life. The school will offer a four year programme which may be supplemented by a fifth year of specific preparation tailored to the entrance requirements of particular colleges or universities in India or abroad."

Peter Thurrell was the informant. Auroville Today interviewed him recently to find out more about the New School proposal.

AVT: How did the New School project originate?

Peter: Two years ago, I was invited by SAIER to teach science for a year in Last School. During that time, I kept hearing people say that the needs of adolescents are not being well met in Auroville at present, and that the kids are not confident that they can get the kind of education here that will prepare them for life.

When I returned to Auroville last year,

I was invited to attend a series of meetings focussing upon long-term plans for adolescent education in Auroville. The meetings were attended by teachers from Transition and Last School as well as parents and other interested Aurovilians. It soon became clear that there was quite a consensus on the need for a place in Auroville where groups of kids could work together, in their own rhythm, on exploring their educational needs without being handicapped in their ability to pursue further studies elsewhere.

A more specific, pressing problem was that a group of students who will graduate from Transition school very soon have said that, while they wish to remain in Auroville for their education, they don't want to go to Last School.

It was clear that something had to be done, so a group of us—Eliane, Shyama, Franca, Abbey and myself—formed a core group to make New School happen. We plan to open its doors to the first intake this July!

What have you contributed to this process?

My wife, Abbey, and I have three teenage children already—our fourth child is at Transition—and they've attended something like twelve different schools, including Montessori and Steiner schools. I'm a High School science teacher myself, and have taught in the U.S. So all this has made me think a lot about educational philosophy, particularly in regard to the question "What is learning?"

Another 'piece' that I brought with me to this project grew out of my awareness that we are facing a world-wide environmental collapse, that this is rooted in our sense of ourselves as separate from nature, and that the traditional system of education actually reinforces this world view. I had come to feel that much of the content of traditional education is irrele-

vant, while the stuff that really needs to be learned in the light of this impending catastrophe—for example, how ecosystems work and how we, as humanity, fit in—is not being taught. So I've come to feel strongly that education should prepare children for the kind of life they are going to have to live: that they should be provided with the tools to tackle new challenges.

These concerns and ideas I brought with me. But I found much of what I'd arrived at before echoed in the work of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, particularly in regard to the perception that what we need to face global challenges is not new technology but a change in consciousness.

How far will New School be based upon educational principles described by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother?

A number of Sri Aurobindo's key educational principles will be clearly reflected in New School. Sri Aurobindo wrote that nothing can be taught. To us, this means groups of kids learning how to work together to learn, with the teacher as facilitator rather than fount of knowledge. Again, Sri Aurobindo said that education should begin with that which is near, and progress to that which is further away. We reflect this by making the central point of the curriculum each individual student. They will be encouraged to ask themselves, Who are you? What is your body? How does it relate to others and your particular surroundings? We will then spiral out to the far to consider sub-atomic particles and the universe, in the process discovering the connection between the self and the far as pure energy.

Another principle that we find important is that learning does not happen in unrelated snippets. So one of our main efforts is to create a curriculum which combines all the pieces—the study of the self, the biosystem, the universe etc.—into one integrated story.

To graduate, students will have to demonstrate that they have acquired essential skills, knowledge and attitudes. These include working and living cooperatively with others, communicating well in at least three different languages (including English and Tamil), using appropriate methods of critical thinking and problem-solving, developing a useful skill, acquiring "ecological literacy", and understanding the tools of scientific enquiry and experimentation.

Will any kind of diploma be issued?

During the four years of the course, the students will keep an academic log of what they've done and in which areas they have developed competence. They will include from their work representative examples which demonstrate such competence. All this—which will constitute their academic portfolio—will be supplemented by a description, from their teachers, of their educational activities over the four years as a further validation of the student's achievements.

The student can then go to a unit in

Auroville or a college outside and show them this documentation as evidence of their competency in different areas. Many colleges in the U.S., including Harvard and Yale, now accept such documentation for their entrance requirements. If, after four years, students elect to prepare for a specific exam we will assist them to do so in the fifth year, perhaps in conjunction with the Centre for Further Learning.

In the long term, I think it would be wonderful if Auroville had an international college offering higher education to those who wish to complete their studies here, a college which would welcome highly-motivated students from elsewhere in India and the world, but for the moment we have to prove in New School that we can successfully run the basic course.

Did you consider trying to work with the Last School teachers, to import some of these ideas into the existing educational set-up?

When our group began discussing long-term adolescent education, I assumed we'd be working together with the Last School people. But then the situation arose of the group of Transition children who didn't want to attend Last School.

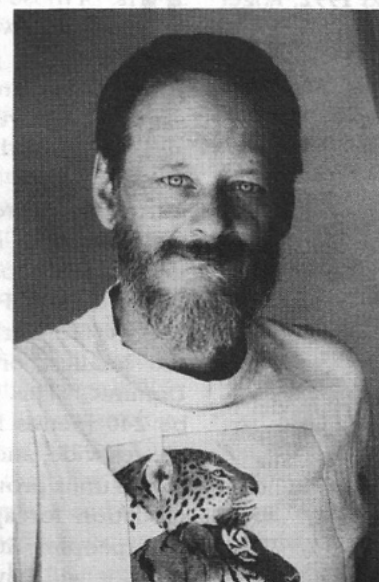
There is also another principle elucidated by Sri Aurobindo where our perception appears to differ from that of the Last School teachers. Sri Aurobindo said that children should be consulted in the process of their education. For me this means more than asking them "What would you like to learn?" It means also, "How do you want to learn it?" Practically, this means involving the students as much as possible in decision-making concerning issues which affect them, decisions which we'll try to make through a process of consent. For example, we would like the students, in collaboration with the teachers, to make a set of rules regarding behaviour at school.

As I understand it, the Last School teachers don't believe that such a process will work—that making rules will only encourage students to break them. Who knows? Perhaps in a few years I'll discover they're correct. But right now it's an experiment in human relations that I'd like to try.

There are other ways in which New School will differ from Last School. For example, in New School skills like problem-solving, critical thinking and leadership will be explicitly developed and evaluated and, as I've already mentioned, the curriculum will be covered as an interdisciplinary integrated whole rather than a series of separate subjects.

Some people may feel that preparing students to succeed in the real world is somehow in contradiction to what Mother wanted of education in Auroville. But I don't believe there needs to be any contradiction, because the skills you need to succeed in the larger world—like skills of interaction and self-directed learning—are exactly the same skills you need to contact your psychic being.

From an interview by Alan



Peter Thurrell

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sports complex in a safe environment with sufficient room for further expansion as the needs of the growing township increase.

In July 1996, work began on the construction of a new sports complex in the Cultural Zone of Auroville. Trees were cleared to prepare the ground for a football field, a gymnastics floor, a storeroom with toilet facilities and minimum infrastructure in terms of water pipelines, connections and pathways. The new sports ground has trees lining the playing fields and shading them from the afternoon sun. It is fenced all around and entry is restricted with a view to keeping a check on straying animals. Two volleyball courts, a basketball court and a wild grass handball field are now ready.

Future plans for the sports complex include a 400 m running track with athletic facilities enclosing an international size football and hockey field, extra basketball courts, tennis and volleyball courts, a dance studio, a swimming pool with diving facilities, and a sports research centre.

School sports is offered to 100 children every week day from 4 p.m. to 5.30 p.m. The children aged between 6 and 17 are divided into groups with names they choose themselves, such as peaches and cherries, mangoes and tangerines, blackcurrants etc.

They are offered instruction in athletics, team and inter-individual games and gymnastics. Twice a year all the children participate in Aurolympics—a week-long sports event in athletics and team games.

The teams comprise children of all ages grouped together according to their capabilities. Working as a team and helping one another as team-mates is the consequence of such a structure. There is little scope for individual rivalry or detrimental competitiveness. Everyone has their own performance scale for reference, which they improve with practice thereby minimizing peer conflicts.

Yves, Firooza, Rajeev, Falguni, Anton, and a few other adults are part of the team that coordinates the program with consistent dedication. Successfully handling a hundred Auroville kids is an achievement in itself. In spite of all the odds, tantrums and misbehaviour by the kids and unwarranted criticism from their parents from time to time, it has not deterred them from their task of continuing and further improving their aims and programmes. They believe that unity, will power, sheer hard work and team spirit are virtues inherent in sports which the children will imbibe to make them better individuals for tomorrow.

Sheril

LINES OF FORCE

One of the most remarkable concepts of Auroville is its master plan, laid out in the form of a spiral galaxy—a galaxy in which several “arms” seem to unwind from a central region. In interviews with Auroville Today in 1988 and 1992, Roger Anger explained how this plan came into existence.

“Mother had given a couple of parameters: the division of the city into four areas, or zones, and the number of people for whom the city is envisaged (50,000). The division into those four zones (industrial, residential, international and cultural) is unique, and has no precedent in town planning. On the basis of this scheme, we, the architects and town planners, started to make suggestions to her. This was done in several stages, and finally the Galaxy came out and was presented as a model to Mother, and accepted by her as a plan that answered to her parameters. She inspired and guided the work. When I talked to Mother one day about Auroville, she said that the city already exists on a subtle level, that it is already constructed, that it is only necessary to pull it down, to make it descend on earth.

The galaxy plan shows the four zones, which are interconnected through the “Crown”, the second circular road around the Matrimandir. From the Crown, twelve roads radiate outwards as part of the infrastructure. Some of them are accompanied by a succession of high-rise buildings which constitute the so-called “Lines of Force”, essential for the framework of the city and for the integration of all access to the city centre... But the plan is not finished. On the contrary, the city is still to be invented, everything has still to be done through the daily experience and rhythm of the Aurovilians. Apart from these Lines of Force, everything is flexible, nothing is fixed.”

The Lines of Force, then, are imperative, for without them there would be no spiral galaxy. But ever since their conception, the Lines of Force have been subject to much criticism and have received remarkably little support. Those opposed point to the fact that high-rise buildings are very unpleasant to live in; that they are out of fashion in many parts of the world and are being pulled down; and that they are not environment-friendly. Should Auroville in 1998 contemplate building large structures which date from a town plan conceived in the sixties? Shouldn't we rather learn from the experiences elsewhere in the world? Supporters emphasise that if one accepts that Mother was the direct inspiration and guide behind the master-plan, and that Mother's vision was from a higher

level of consciousness than that which is normally accessible to us, it follows that there is a Truth behind the concept and that we should endeavour to find that Truth.

One of those who accepts the Lines of Force as a workable manifestation of the spiral galaxy concept, is the young Canadian architect Dominic. He came to Auroville last year, and, dissatisfied with the present building activities in Auroville, threw himself wholeheartedly into the manifestation of those much maligned Lines of Force.

“We are working now on the smallest one”, explains Dominic. “This building will be 240 metres long, and 12 metres wide, and will have 90 to 120 units providing accommodation for approximately 350 people. At its highest point it will have seven stories, at its lowest two, and as you can see from the model, the building is slightly curved and increases gradually in height. It is the intention that the lowest level of this Line of Force will be directed towards the city centre. Once we have learned from this Line of Force, we can start with the others, until we reach the largest one, which will be 900 metres long. This building would also have the highest level directed towards the city centre. So the Lines of Force grow horizontally and slowly increase in height towards their end. This avoids the typical ‘block’ aspect of the apartment buildings. At the same time, they create artificial hills and different heights in the city instead of having big skyscrapers or a flat city.”

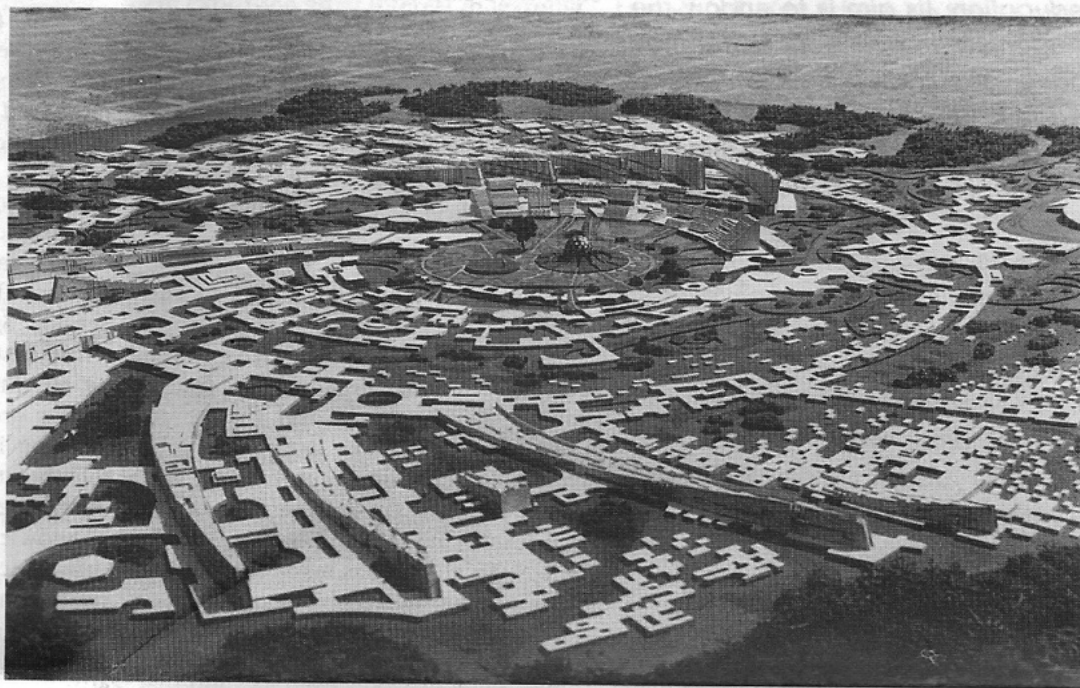
Are we talking futuristic nonsense here? “Most certainly not!” And Dominic explains that all technical aspects are being fully considered. Take for example the problems of sound pollution. Says Dominic: “The design techniques to prevent sound pollution, even in the tropics, are developed and well known. The building will have a few hanging gardens, to enhance its beauty and increase the liveability. There will be a green wall, all along one side of the building, to absorb the heat and give to the occupants the atmosphere of living in a green surrounding. Each apartment will have its own terrace, probably with a garden, so that full privacy is guaranteed. Underneath the

building there will be a big water tank, and the water will be pumped upwards by solar pumps with solar panels positioned on top of the building.”

“Ultimately,” says Dominic, “it is beauty that counts. The concept of beauty and the question how to put consciousness into matter attracts me to build a Line of Force. My great example of a perfect building in the tropics is Golconde which

one's requirement can be from 25sq.m up to 125sq.m. The small apartments of 25 sq.m would need to have common facilities. They could be compared to the rooms in Golconde, which are 24 sq.m each. So the building would accommodate all kinds of housing patterns, individual as well as semi-collective.”

So far the theory. What are the prospects for realisation? Dominic: “There



Spiral galaxy model townplan

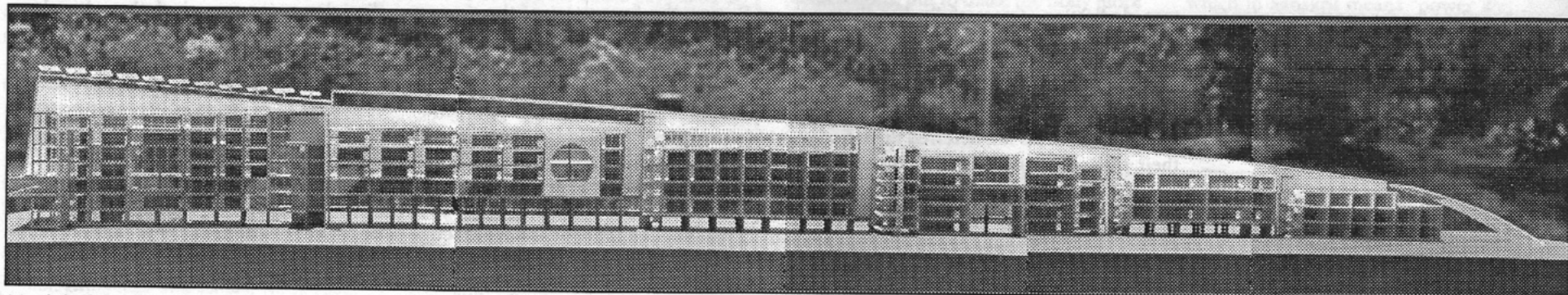
was built 65 years ago in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram under the direct inspiration and guidance of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. But we do not want to copy Golconde with this Line of Force. After all, we live at the beginning of the 21st century, and we have to use the achievements of today. Also, Aurovilians do not live the same lifestyle as ashramites, and the building should also house families with children.”

“Lines of Force will become necessary. Most Aurovilians do not realise that the city of Auroville is planned on a very small territory—a circle of two and a half km. diameter—and only part of that is intended for residential purposes. We cannot continue with the present building trends, for then we will never be able to house the 50,000 people Mother spoke about. It is not reasonable to expect that individual Aurovilians need 200 sq.m for their living area and a big garden to surround their houses. This Line of Force has an apartment pattern of 25 sq.m each, so that

will be the usual resistance, which will try to block implementation. We have so far not attended any meetings, but have worked on the technical problems and on some models. We intend to have an exhibition in May, to show what is feasible and to answer the objections which people may raise. If those can be met satisfactorily, we would like to start with the middle section of this small Line of Force, 15 apartments for 30-35 people.

Of course, this section will be completely experimental, we have no choice. There is an idea to experiment with hollow earth blocks, comparable to the hollow cement blocks one finds elsewhere in the world but then made from mud with 5% cement, which could give some type of ventilated walls. We estimate that the costs will be in the range of Rs 8,000 to Rs 10,000 per sq.m.” A number of Aurovilians have committed themselves to manifest this truly collective experiment.”

From an interview by Carel



Model of the first Line of Force

PHOTOS ON THIS PAGE COURTESY DOMINIC

"PROGRESS"

There are seven of them: Dominic, Anandi and Joseba, Ane and Eric, Michèle and Véronique. They have a few things in common: they all joined Auroville in the recent past, none more than three years ago; they all came for the Galaxy and want to live in the city; they all want to build the first Line of Force; and they have joined forces to construct the first section of that Line, which they have baptised "Progress."

It is a very daring name' admits Eric. 'We thought first about "Endurance" and "Gratitude," but the latter was already taken (*a community nearby Certitude*, eds.) and Endurance sounded, well, a little bit too hard. So it became "Progress," a name which expresses to a certain extent what we hope to achieve for Auroville on many levels with this section of the first Line of Force: on the level of manifesting the city; on the level of advanced building techniques; on the level of ecology; and for Auroville's social life.'

Eric sets the tone for the evening discussion. Why do people choose to invest their money and energies in such a challenging project? Joseba explains it for all of them: 'We did not come here to live comfortably in a big or luxurious mansions. We came here to experiment with a new way of city life which can serve as a model for other cities elsewhere on the planet. If Auroville is to be "The city the earth needs," we have to do research in low, medium and high density living. What we plan to realise with this first Line of Force is research in medium density life styles.' Anandi: 'We are not talking about copying western lifestyles. We are talking about effectuating a change, about discovering that something else is

possible and can lead to a better style of life.' Ane: 'When we took the decision to come to Auroville, it was because it is Mother's city and because the concept of the Galaxy is for us the concept of the future, something we feel very deeply. The way the city of Auroville is developing at present is rather conservative and does not show much audacity to jump towards the future realizations Auroville's Charter speaks of. The Galaxy concept, on the contrary, is futuristic. There is still much conflict around this concept and the Lines of Force, but we think they are full of potentialities and that they can be the basis for a very harmonious collective life.'

Is Auroville then by itself not collective enough? 'It all depends how you define "collective"', says Anandi. 'For example, eating together in the Solar Kitchen and sharing a washing machine is definitely an aspect of "collective life", but that is not what we are talking about. What we in this section of the Line of Force—the other sections may develop differently—would like to do is to discover and develop a collective way to grow, to share experiences, to experiment with a different style of life.' Michèle: 'Essentially, we talk about each helping the other to develop the inner being, and to find that inner connection between the people who are going to live there. We are concerned that the lifestyles in Auroville are increasingly becoming conservative, people living on their own or in family circles, sharing very little, and there are quite a number of people who lead even lonely lives.' Eric: 'There is of course the criticism that many attempts have been made in Auroville to realise some variety of "collective life," and that they all have failed, mostly for reasons of personalities. And we realise that our attempt may become another failure. We will probably meet the same problems as

anyone else, but that is no reason not to give it a fresh try.' Joseba: 'I think it is preferable to meet with defeat in trying to manifest this building, than to cower down in a false type of security and not to try at all.' Anandi: 'There must exist a true Auroville collectivity on a subtle level that has been trying to materialise itself for many years. The attempts have become failures, but in calling them failures, we are perhaps too critical: they were learning processes and our experiment will be another one. We go to school, and we learn how to create a collective life where there is space for the development of each person's being on all the levels of the personality, physical, emotional, mental and spiritual.'

The aspect of collectivity will not only manifest in living together in this section of the building, but already in the earlier phases of planning and construction. Joseba: 'The building is big and complex, and we will have to mix different approaches and specialities, architects, artists and builders, water specialists, ecologists, and more.' Anandi: 'Those who oppose multi-storey buildings always state that they are not ecological. We would like to stress that this Line of Force will not be like that. The building will have hanging gardens and there will be a green wall situated a few metres in front of it. There will be many green spaces around it. Solar energy for pumps and lighting will be used. There will be a waste water treatment plant and a large rain water catchment area and storage tanks underneath the building. We plan to use innovative building techniques such as hollow earth blocks which are compacted under high pressure without any addition of cement—we are in the final phase of testing the machines that we have specially designed for it. These hollow bricks will be used for walls and floors. We will reduce the use of synthet-

ic paints. In short, we are as much concerned about ecology and sustainability as anybody else.' Ane: 'Last but not least there is the labour aspect. The Aurovilians should be fully involved in the construction, with a maximum use of construction machinery.'

These are the dreams that they wish to manifest. But dreaming is not necessarily negative. Eric: 'When Auroville started, it was barren, and the greening of the wasteland was something about which one could only dream. But the Force was there and it happened. We feel that the time is ripe now for another step, to experiment with a Line of Force.' Joseba: 'We feel that in this moment higher density buildings are needed. If there are problems, let's try to find solutions for them instead of blocking all progress. If there are difficulties, let's try to overcome them, instead of giving up. With a bit of imagination and daring, and with Mother's help, we can go far, very far indeed.' Anandi: 'Sure, we are dreamers, and of course, we will make mistakes. But let's try our best, no?'

How far are the plans from realisation? Ane: 'We are mounting an exhibition on the Line of Force in May in the Visitors Reception Centre, where we will show others what we plan to do. We hope we can interest more people to join the first section, which will house 15 apartments for 30-35 individuals. We plan to build in a modular way so that first our section, later the entire building can take shape gradually.' Anandi: 'We also hope that the community will agree to this experiment. The involvement of the community in this project is very important to us. We are not interested in just building something for ourselves. We will need the support from the community, and a lot of co-operation in order to manifest "Progress".'

From a talk with Carel.

We walk along the Oval, the small road which divides the park from the inner gardens/amphitheatre area, and which will have a water channel running just outside it. Parts of this water body have already been excavated, and we stop to look at a small experiment: a small pond has been lined with two layers of lime mortar to see if it is sufficient to seal it. It works. Passing through the site of the former Camp, the Peepal tree standing now in magnificent isolation, we see in the distance the control building of the new Solar Power Plant. "It has not been working so well so far," says Divakar. "There appear to have been some problems with the batteries or the inverter, so as yet we cannot say how much power it will contribute." (*The problems have since been solved—eds.*)

We reach the Amphitheatre. The laying of the red Agra pavings has long been completed, but silicon varnish has been applied to them recently to prevent the growth of a fungus during the rainy season: this treatment will have to be repeated every two or three years. We see some samples of the polished granite which will be laid in a circle on the top rim of the Amphitheatre. Bill speculates that it may become a roller-skaters' paradise...

We walk towards the main structure,

Matrimandir Walkabout

It's 9.30 on a sticky April morning and some of the Auroville Today team are assembling at the Matrimandir office. The Matrimandir Coordination Group has agreed to update us on progress and the latest ideas, and Divakar and Walter are to be our guides.

passing between what will become the gardens of Wealth and Utility. There is little to be seen now except for some basic contouring. "Before we begin planting the gardens," explains Divakar, "we have to finish all the contouring and lay the infrastructure. And we have to move all the workshops." The contouring is being done according to Roger's design, but it's still not clear how the gardens will finally be planted. Roger doesn't favour further planting. Mother, however, was clear that each garden should be planted in such a way as to evoke a distinct consciousness, and she told Narad, who began the Matrimandir Nursery, "The gardens are as important as the Matrimandir itself". Divakar notes that this is not widely understood among donors; "it's very difficult to get money for this work."

Actually, getting funding for anything not involving the outer and inner skin and the disks remains a major problem. "We've had a small pick-up in funding this

year," says Divakar, "because we've contacted some new people. But all work on the petals and general infrastructure, for example, has to be done out of unspecified funds, and these are far too little."

We reach the inner petals. We descend the passage between the looming walls of two petals, clad with Agra stone, and turn into one of the partially completed meditation rooms. Each room will have the same dimensions, but the colour of each (corresponding to the qualities enumerated by the Mother) will differ, as will the patterning of stone on the corridor outside. "They will be open to those who may not always want to go to the Chamber, or may want to come here first as a preparation. But, just as in the Chamber, these small rooms are for individual concentration, not organized meditations."

This raises the whole issue of the supervision of these meditation spaces and the control of visitors to the Matrimandir

area. "At present it's a struggle," says Divakar, "because everything is so open. It will be much easier in the future when there will only be one point of entry to the whole area." This will be by the west entrance, and Roger has a design for a new Reception Centre at that point which will provide much better facilities for visitors, including, perhaps, a video viewing room.

We come out of the petal and descend still further to the base of the sphere. Here there will be a pond, clad in granite or marble, in which the ray which has passed through the sphere will be reflected. Looking up, we see openings in the base of the sphere. These, along with the main doors and a few meshed port-holes, are the places where fresh air enters the sphere (the Chamber has a separate air-conditioning system). "We don't know yet whether this will be sufficient to ventilate the sphere or whether we will have to use mechanical ventilation," says Divakar. Coincidentally some air-conditioning people from ECC are expected any moment to discuss this issue.

As we climb out from the base of the sphere and look upwards, it's obvious that the sand-blasting work in preparation for the application of the Kemperol waterproofing is finished. Apparently the whole area was covered in a layer of dust during the work: even as we speak, scaf-

(continued on page 5)

(continued from page 5)

folding is going up around the grey-looking Banyan tree preparatory to cleaning the dust off its leaves! Normally, the application of Kemperol (for which the German company has now been persuaded to give a 15-year guarantee) would have started immediately after the sand-blasting, but when people from the Kemper company arrived to inspect Matrimandir, they advised that the portals needed additional stainless steel frames around them. These—all 700 of them—are now being manufactured in Pune and should be delivered in a few weeks. Such unforeseen challenges clearly play havoc with any attempt to come up with a rigorous timeframe for completing work on and around Matrimandir.

Meanwhile production of the disks continues. New ovens for fusing the glass tiles have been constructed, and 26 small disks have been completed at the present production rate of two a week.

Up on the second level inside the sphere, the intricate marble mosaic work on the stairwell is complete. We ask about the status of the waterfalls and the eternal flame sculpture planned for this level by Roger but opposed by many in the community as being unnecessary distractions. "As far as I know he still wants the waterfalls, but I'm not sure if the flame is still being considered," says Walter.

One of the ramps curves above us. The ramp parapets will be in glass which has to be bent to a precise curvature in Calcutta. "We've just sent the drawings," says Divakar. "It's a difficult operation because the curvature of the two ramps is different, as is each section of the ramp." On top of the ramps will come a white carpet, similar to the one in the Chamber but not as thick.

How to keep this clean? In future, socks will be issued before people ascend to the second level. But this alone will not guarantee cleanliness as people bring in dust and dirt on their clothes and skin. "We considered installing air curtains or blowers at the entrance to clean the dust off visitors," says Walter, "but then we realised that if you are sweating, the dust will stick to your skin and not be blown off." One possible solution might be to ask people to take showers in the planned Reception Centre before they enter the structure. The Matrimandir team is also consider-

ing issuing at the entrance loose suits which can be worn over one's existing clothing. One only hopes that the air-conditioning will be working well in the Chamber.

Meanwhile, the German glass expert Detlef and his team are about to make some experiments with the coloured glass for the inner skin: he will erect some small triangles of glass in the sphere to see how they look. (See accompanying article.)

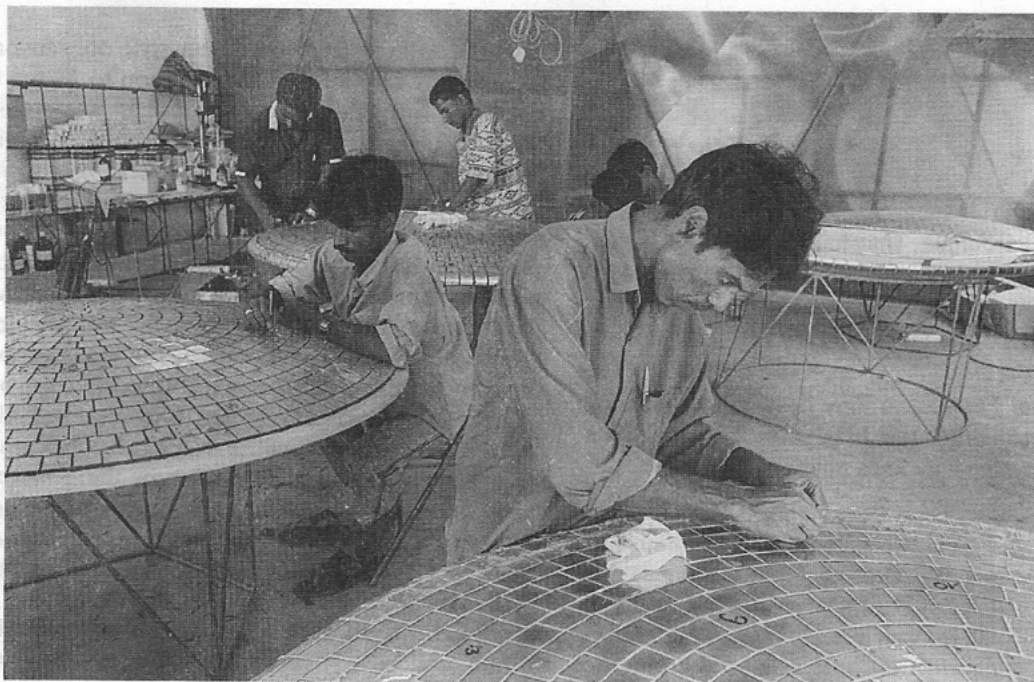
We climb up narrow stairways to the top of the structure and look out across Auroville. From this vantage point one can see the pattern of red stone and grass on the outer petals, and that the petals get larger to the south. As a wind swirls up a dust cloud, one also begins to appreciate how much water will be needed to irrigate the projected gardens. "We will have to build two overhead tanks, a minimum of ten metres high, somewhere in the garden or park area to provide water for the drip-irrigation and sprinkler systems," says Divakar. Roger has already designed them. Five wells are already providing water for the Matrimandir area which probably will be sufficient for future needs.

At our feet are the stainless steel bolts for fixing the disks. Above us is the crane: its final task will be to lift the disks into position. And then? "It will be dismantled and taken down. Probably we'll build a scaffolding ramp to facilitate this. Another idea is to use an Army helicopter. Krishna Tewari jokes that he is ready to call them in at any time..."

Once the crane is removed, the permanent heliostat array, which is much simpler than the present arrangement and is already complete, will be put in position in the centre of the roof. With some adjustments, this may result in a more visible ray falling upon the globe in the chamber.

We make our way down and out into the midday sun. At the office, we are given a folder containing the Matrimandir brochure and four beautiful colour cards which have just been printed. The cards show the urn, the Matrimandir and a simulation of how Matrimandir will look when the golden disk cladding is complete.

Report by Alan



At the Matrimandir workshop: fixing the gold-glass tiles on the disks for the outer skin continues...

Getting it right

Colouring the inner skin

Detlef is a German engineer who, for nearly a year now, has been coming to Auroville regularly to work on all aspects of the Matrimandir skin that have to do with glass: the production of the glass-gold-glass sandwich tiles that will be fixed on the disks to decorate the outer skin, and the production of the rose coloured glass triangles that will be used for the inner skin.

How to glaze the inner glass skin to achieve the required effect has finally been resolved. "There was quite a problem in creating the exact colour," says Detlef. "Mother once gave to Roger Anger, the architect, a piece of her saree to indicate the colour of the light in the interior. That colour was a kind of salmon-orange (the colour of Auroville), and is extremely difficult to make. It was only at the end of January this year that we were able to determine all the components that make up this colour: orange, white, yellow, red, blue, green and pink. These component colours will be imported from Germany in the form of glass powders. What we have to do here is to mix these colours in the correct proportions, apply them to the triangular

pieces of glass that are manufactured in India, and melt the powder and the glass together in a special kiln. But this is not yet enough. We will have to apply extra layers of some colours later on. This is because of the way the rays of light strike the glass. The effect of light striking the glass from an angle is completely different from that of light coming in straight. We have a few samples here which show the difference be-

tween glass where the white and orange colours are mixed together, and glass where the orange and white colours are applied in layers. The only way to test this is to install sample pieces in the Matrimandir, and study the effect of indirect light (light that is reflected by the skin and the backs of the disks) as it shines from the outside through the glass.

"The problems of fusing, of course, are well known in the field of glass manufacture, and we have to take great care to see that the German glass powders and the glass which is manufactured in India have the same coefficient of expansion—this is a number 0.000085 that we have to achieve to the last digit, as otherwise it would result in the glass cracking. The whole process is not going to be easy. Baking the glass, for example, at a temperature that is ten degrees too high, would change its colour. We plan to build our own kiln where we can fire two—and later maybe even three—triangular glass pieces in one go. One firing will take 24 hours to complete, and later we will have to laminate the glass for safety reasons. The kiln will measure 2.80 x 4.80 m, 30 cm height and 60 cm at the top of the arch. The kilns are fairly unique—only a few of these huge kilns exist in the world today. But taking into account all the technical difficulties that we run into, I still think we might be able to finish the requisite 800 triangles in about two years."

All this indicates the birth of a glass industry in Auroville. Concludes Detlef: "When all this work is finished, this unit can move to the industrial zone. We have a team here of very skilled and talented people, and there is a big request for architectural glass. There is potential for a glass-unit which can earn a lot for Auroville and I am ready to help with that."

Based on a talk with Carel



At the Matrimandir workshop: Placing the gold-glass sandwich tiles in the electric vacuum oven

Cultural Events in April

By mid-April the "season" is usually over. Most of the guests and visitors flee the summer heat. Many Aurovilians are on their way to visit family and friends in cool climates, and no more cultural performances are in sight for some months.

But this year there seemed to be a continuing flow of entertaining events. Besides the weekly jazz sessions on Sunday evenings at the Visitors Center, several delightful and varied cultural programmes took place in the span of a few days.

There was the excellent solo dance performance by Astad Deboo (see adjoining article). A fascinating talk on the history of Tamil cinema was held by a retired Head Postmaster of Chennai followed, next evening, with a screening and discussion of an untypical Tamil movie which did not have any song-and-dance routines.

We were especially fortunate to hear Dr. Prabha Atre, a renowned vocalist, deliver a concert of Hindustani classical music, as she rarely performs in public any more. Dr. Prabha Atre, besides having a doctorate in musicology and being a composer of over 200 compositions and a performer, also holds degrees in science and law. Her warm and subtle voice, singing her own compositions, and her gentle personality enchanted the audience.

On the 22nd of the month, the Nrityagram Dance Ensemble from Bangalore gave a traditional Odissi dance performance. Nrityagram is a small but esteemed dance village outside Bangalore, purely dedicated to the three traditional Indian classical dance forms: Kathak, Manipuri, and Odissi. The student dancers (among them Kanchana from Auroville) and one of the teachers, all dressed in colourful native Orissa costumes, mesmerized the audience with their delicate and sensuous movements, emphasising through their gestures certain elegant aspects of Indian culture.

The last Sunday of the month at the Visitors Center witnessed a musical potpourri in the evening, consisting of various types of music presented by many different Auroville musicians. Eight-year-old Jonas on the drums and eleven-year-old Simon on the keyboard, accompanying their respective fathers, Holger on the electric violin and Pascal on the saxophone, were the youngest to perform. Kerstin, Jill, Tine, Ange and Liane sang songs, Johan played on the bamboo flute and many guitarists and percussionists in different combinations treated the audience to a varied and interesting three and a half hours before the Grasshoppers, a rock band from Madras, took over the stage very professionally with their James Brown songs, blasting me away.

Tineke

LEAVE INDIA NOTICES CANCELLED

The Leave India notices served two years ago to Alain Bernard, Juanita, Jean Jacques and Jean Marc have been lifted. The Home Ministry initially decided to cancel the Leave India Notices served to Jean Jacques and Jean Marc, but to enforce those served against Alain Bernard and Juanita. However, after hearing their personal pleas, the Home Ministry gracefully agreed to cancel these Leave India notices as well. Says Alain: "We definitely did feel Mother's Grace acting, and we are grateful for all the support and concern expressed by so many people!" The de-

Daring Deboo

ASTAD DEBOO exploded on the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium stage Monday night and brought the crowd to their feet in appreciation and genuine affection for this big, bald man in a white embroidered dress (his first costume).

For those not familiar with Indian dance, Astad Deboo has been classically trained in Kathakali and Kathak style dance. Added to his Indian dance training have been his travels to Canada, London and Tokyo, enriching his dance vocabulary and experimenting with a fusion of Indian and Western dance/theatre movements. He has performed in more than forty countries and, by the looks of the reviews, he has made friends and delighted audiences wherever he went.

In Auroville, he performed three pieces, with an encore (unusual for him). Beginning with an unnerving, ethereal circular movement evocative of the circles of the whirling dervishes, Astad at the center in white was hypnotising, his costume pinwheeling around him faster and faster. The second piece was a biting satiric commentary on modern life. This was my favourite piece, quite shocking for an Auroville audience used to stylised dance. Using an long aluminum ladder as a prop, Astad ascended and



"He has spent most of his life being a rebel."

PHOTO NEELESH KALE

descended as if through the stages of life—playing with the emotions of fear, regret, confusion, disappointment, anger and joy. Groping for a firm hold, recoiling in terror, expanding with joy, Astad explored the emotional "rungs" of a life overwhelmed by isolation, seeking a refuge which he never finds. The

stage space itself was used as part of the exploration: the pits downstage which usually hold the footlights also became a hiding place and a trap from which the dancer emerged in the end with a triumphant "I did it".

The next day, Astad spoke to me about his special projects, especially the work he is doing with deaf children, both in India and the U.S. In Calcutta, he has worked for ten years with the same group of deaf actors, exploring with them the experience of their bodies, using space, working with a beat, with synchronicity and continuity. The group, called The Action Players, is led by Zarin Chaudhuri. In the U.S., the group of young, deaf adults comes from Gallaudet College in Washington, D.C., and they are dancers. Here the work is also based on finding a body vocabulary, stillness, emotional expression and mime. These projects are very dear to Astad, but difficult to support financially. "I wish the funding would come a bit more easily," he says sadly. He has spent most of his life being a rebel, and the

themes of compassion and suffering play a big role in his work. Astad Deboo gave Auroville an evening of modern dance: we were captivated, amused, and astounded. His in-your-face commentary also was a wake-up call, startling us out of our calm acceptance of everyday life.

Jill

Letters

Wine

With reference to the back cover picture of your April issue no. 111, is the bottle of red wine already naturally Auroville? Such indiscriminate publicity is immensely harmful to Auroville.

Rita, Auroville

Dispatch from Vedapuri

The first paragraph of Alan's article on "The Town" (of Pondicherry, AVT no. 112) contains four statements. The first is an exaggeration, the second and third errors, and the fourth a canard.

(1) "A seat of Vedic learning". All that is known for sure is that around the ninth century AD, a Pallava king made an endowment for a "seat of learning" to be established in a village near the present town of Bahoor (17 km south of Pondicherry). It is not known whether the school was actually opened or, if so, what was taught there.

(2) "Former name was Vedapuri". Until its de-

struction by the French in 1748, the principal temple of Pondicherry was the Vedapurisvaran Koil, located on what is now Mission Street. Vedapurisvaran is a name of Shiva. The town was never called Vedapuri. (3) "Initiated by the ancient sage Agastya". An inscribed stone said to come from the Vedapurisvaran temple contains the word "Agastyesvara"—a relatively common name of Shiva in South India. As of 1961, there were seventeen temples to Agastyesvaran in the Auroville region (that is, in the former district of South Arcot). (4) "As legend has it". This famous legend dates back precisely to 1969, and is the result of a series of errors and a dollop of wishful thinking more generous than any served up in a Pondicherry ice-cream place. A town with a history as notable, and amenities as delightful, as those described in your otherwise admirable article, does not need to take refuge in fictional origins to bolster its self-respect.

Peter Høegs

Sri Aurobindo Ashram

The historical data were taken from the official Pondicherry guidebook! Alan

Subscription Information

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

Auroville Today provides information about Auroville, an international township in South-India, on a monthly basis and is distributed to Aurovilians and friends of Auroville in India and abroad. It does not necessarily reflect the views of the community as a whole.

IN MEMORIAM

SUNIL BHATTACHARYA from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, best known for his New Year music compositions which were played in Auroville every New Year's eve over many years, passed away on 20th April. Sunil came to the Ashram in 1942 and originally taught science in the Ashram School. In the early 1950's, inspired by the Mother improvising upon the organ, he began to compose. As he described it, "She revealed to me the secret of a magic world of music where harmonies meet and blend to make melodies richer, wider, profounder and infinitely more powerful. I have tried to take my music from Her."

Selections of his work were played in the Amphitheatre on May 21st.

TAMARA, one of Auroville's lively, free and open minded teenagers, died following a mountain climbing accident in Himachal Pradesh and was cremated there on May 15th. She was almost 18 years old.

Tamara was born in Auroville. Her clarity of thought and upbeat open outlook on life combined with a soft and gentle nature, made her emerge remarkably sane, healthy and direct from the more than regular share of difficulties in her childhood. She thought her own thoughts and knew how to express them, refreshingly frankly and clear.

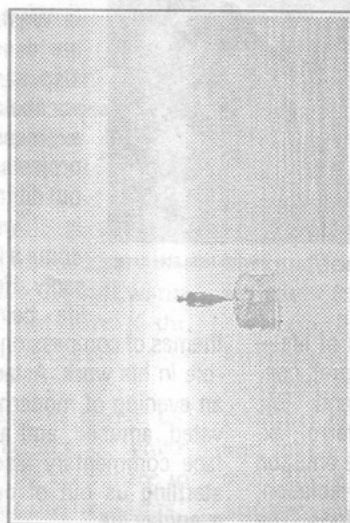
The Auroville youth organised a "quiet gathering for Tamara" and posters were distributed in the community saying: "All are welcome tonight. Please bring candles, flowers and a lot of love."

About one hundred Aurovilians came with candles and flowers to the youth centre and gathered near Tamara's tree house and sat in a spontaneous quality of deep silence that lasted several hours.

BY AIRMAIL
BOOK POST

AUROVILLE TODAY

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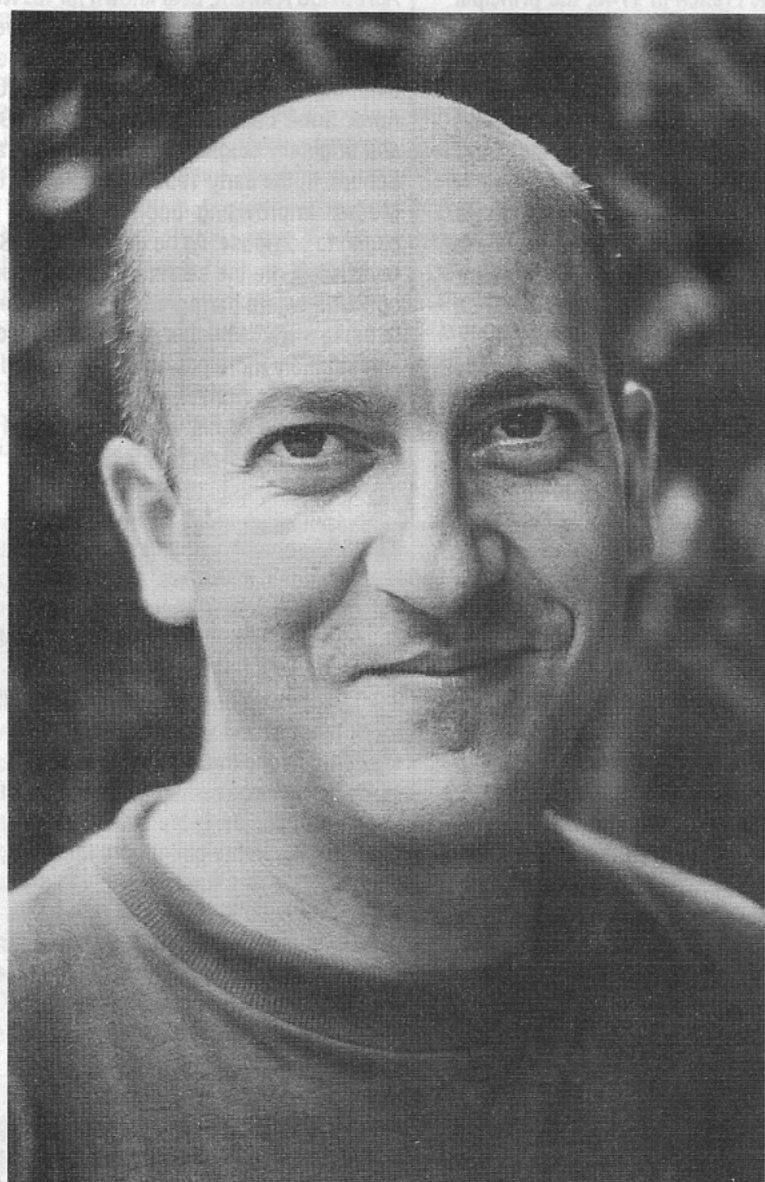


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AUROVILLE ARCHIVES
C/O KRISHNA T.
BHARAT NIVAS
AUROVILLE

June 1998
Received on 11 June 98 Number 113



Santo

Looking in the mirror

A Portrait of Santo

A few weeks ago Santo announced that, after six years in the job, he was resigning as editor of the AVNews. Love it or loathe it, the News remains the main regular source of information in the community, and Santo, along with Hero, has given it a unique flavour over the past years.

Auroville Today went along to find out more about the man who has sat so long in one of the hotter seats of Auroville.

“I used to live in a small village beside Lake Garda in Italy: it was very beautiful, a tourist spot. Through some friends, I came into contact with some people who were reading Satprem. I tried reading him myself, but couldn't really get into it. Later, I read Sri Aurobindo and although I didn't understand much of it, it had a very powerful effect upon me—it made me feel very calm and peaceful.

“When I landed in Auroville, I went to the community—Slancio—where Stefano, an old friend from Italy, was staying. It was the most horrible experience, because when I arrived in the kitchen the feeling from all the young kids who lived there was, ‘Oh, no, not another one’. It was the time when there was hardly any food, and they just couldn't afford to have somebody else living there. But they told me a capsule was free in Aurodam, and next day I moved there.

“In Aurodam things were better. I spent a lot of time on my own, cycling to Pondy and buying books of Sri Aurobindo and Mother which I would read in my room. I also began working on Matrimandir. I got to know the people in Aurodam but I still felt separate, as if there were two different worlds: their world and mine. And the children there were horrible... I'd never met such ill-mannered children in my life!

“When, after a few months, I left Auroville I had no plans to return. But on my last day in Pondy I had a very strong experience. It's difficult to mentalise, but it was as if I was experiencing something of the power of love, peace, ananda, which Sri Aurobindo and Mother talk about. It was so beautiful. From that moment, it was clear that I was going to return to Pondy and Auroville; not because of the ideals or the people there but because of this experience which, I felt then, only this place could give me.

“In September 1990, I returned for the final time. I started building a ‘temporary’ house in Aurodam (which is still very temporary and incomplete) and began taking up various work. Then Li Mei asked me if I would take over her work at the AVNews desk.

“At that time, the News was not particularly controversial: there were a few meeting reports, messages, and the beginning of the Letters Page. But then the first Working Committee became involved in trying to resolve the Aurelec issue and people started writing letters on the topic to the News. As soon as we at the News would publish one—whatever its point of view—I would be accused of being biased, just because I'd published it! And these accusations continued for the whole time I worked at the News. God knows, it's not true. I have strong opinions, but I never, never, never used the News to push my own views: it would not be correct.

“Another accusation was that the AVNews editors—Hero and myself—would censor or refuse to print certain

material. In the first years, I can count on the fingers of two hands the times we refused to publish something, and this was always because the issue was very sensitive and the material we were sent could make matters far worse. (One reason we print letters in a separate supplement now and no longer in the AVNews is that people outside believe that everything that appears in the News represents the ‘official’ view of the community.)

“Later, we made conditions—for example, no personal attacks would be printed—and many times we refused to print because some people simply can't keep to this. And you won't believe how often Rauf's Roughspeak didn't get printed! I always left the final decision up to Hero—with whom, by the way, I had a very good working relationship—but I'd always find a way of letting him know if I didn't like Rauf's latest piece.

“Generally, though, I'm against any form of censorship of information: I always fight for full disclosure. Why? Because I see something like the AVNews as a mirror of Auroville society... and if you look in a mirror and see that your face is dirty, you wash it. But if you never look in a mirror and keep telling yourself that everything is sunny and beautiful, you'll never bother to change. Of course, I know some kinds of information can't appear in print. But then there should be a forum, like a General Meeting, where anybody can go and find out what's happening.

“Not everybody agrees with this. Some people in Auroville are definitely not willing to communicate, and the fear that one of them would take over my job at the AVNews to control what goes in and what doesn't is a concern of many: it also stopped me from resigning earlier. But now I feel the time has come, this phase of my life is finished: after six years at the News I feel I am not progressing any more, either inwardly or outwardly. Auroville is both a collective and it is individuals. In my life, sometimes I go through a phase when the collective is important, at other times I have to work more upon myself as an individual. It upsets me when people try to put this trip upon me that ‘You're only cultivating your own ego if you're following an individual path’.

“I really don't know what I will do now. Sometimes this is comfortable, sometimes it is scary. But while I go through my own ups and downs, I've never, ever lost faith in Auroville. I see many things happening which are painful to me, and I think we have to go through a healing process regarding the old stories—The Sri Aurobindo Society, the Neutrals, Shyamsunder etc.—which are still strong, but I still have faith in what Sri Aurobindo and Mother represent and what they gave us. And what they gave me personally is still there, still strong and deep. If it was not for them, I would not be here.”

From an interview with Alan