

AUROVILLE TODAY

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- Number Eight

Today, it's difficult to pick up any publication without reading about the state of the environment. But the first Aurovilians, struggling to gain a foothold on a scorched and almost barren plateau in South India, did not agonize over ph-levels, the destruction of the ozone layer or the greenhouse effect. They had no choice. They dug, they planted, they watered. And this basic, uncomplicated approach, taken up by many others and refined over the years, has made Auroville what it is today—a comparatively green and pleasant land which is the indispensable physical base for our ideal, our dreams and our experiments.

This issue of Auroville Today opens a window on Auroville landwork. What has been achieved? Where have we failed? What have we learned? What are the new directions? The answers to these questions may be crucial for Auroville's future development.

AUROVILLE AFFORESTATION

— A Brief Overview —

200 Years Ago

Ancient India was a land of forests. Forests where heroes and bandits hid and lived in exile, forests that they journeyed through perilously, forests where sages lived and gathered their disciples around them. Today these forests, once the wealth of a mighty land, are all but gone. From the foothills of the Himalayas to Cape Comorin less than 12% of India's land mass bears any form of tree cover. And despite a growing awareness of an ecological catastrophe in the making (20% of India's forest cover has disappeared since 1960), the destruction continues.

Around two hundred years ago, the Auroville plateau and its surrounding area was covered in scrub jungle. A stone was discovered in Kilianur dating from 1750 that described the local king hunting for elephants and tigers in the nearby forest. In 1825, trees were felled in the Jipmer area between Auroville and Pondy, to drive away the tigers. In Mailam there is a 200 year old temple inscription that refers to elephants roaming in the area.

Slowly the forests were cut down to build cities like Pondicherry and towns like Kalapet. Timber was used for export, and the British accelerated the process by allocating plots of land to anyone who would clear it and cultivate it for a year. Much of it was then left fallow and under the violent onslaught of the monsoon, erosion inevitably began.

The last remaining plots of forest in the Auroville area—2,000 mature neem trees—were cut down in the mid-fifties for timber to make boats. In less than 200 years, what once had been scrub jungle had turned into an expanse of baked red earth scarred with gullies and ravines which had been carved out by the monsoon floods. Each year tons of the remaining topsoil were swept into the nearby Bay of Bengal.

Trial and Error

The first needs that confronted Auroville's earliest settlers were for

shade and water. However, it soon became clear that if the young seedlings were to survive, other measures had to be taken. They needed to be protected, for example, against marauding goats and cows, and some way had to be found to catch and control the monsoon rains so that they would not sweep away precious topsoil but would percolate into the water table. So 'bunds'—raised earthbanks to stop water flowing off the land—were born.

In these early years it was a process of trial and error, and many mistakes were made. For example, a massive dam erected near Forecomers broke in a heavy rain, because the water flow into the canyon was not controlled. Ten years later, in 1978, a freak rain of 30 cms in 12 hours broke bunds and washed away numerous young trees. The lesson learned that time was that bunding had to be systematic and comprehensive, beginning on the top of the watershed and following the topography of the land.

Auroville's afforestation campaign began in the early 1970's. The first tree nurseries were started in Success and Kottakarai and with the help of grants from the Point Foundation, the Tamil Fund and friends abroad, large-scale tree planting began. In the next 10 years, as part of a massive soil and water conservation programme, over a million trees—timbers, ornamentals, fencing, fruit and fodder trees, nut trees etc.—were planted in Auroville. Some were exotic—like the Australian 'Work Tree' (*Acacia auriculiformis*) which has adapted so well that it's now crowding out other species. As the trees grew and micro-climates formed, many species of bird-life and animals returned, further accelerating the dissemination of seeds and enriching the environment.

Outreach

In 1982, impressed by the success of the afforestation project, the Department of Environment, Government of India, offered Auroville 11 lakhs of rupees (then



Peepal Tree - Drawing by Lynndy

around US \$100,000) over 5 years to plant trees and scientifically monitor the results so that the most appropriate techniques and species for our situation—which is the situation of many other parts of India—could be identified. It was the beginning of a new orientation for greenworkers in Auroville, for now it became evident that Auroville had something precious to offer outside its own boundaries.

In the past few years, this 'outreach' has intensified. Further grants from the Government and from organisations abroad have enabled Auroville to run courses in afforestation for villagers, social workers, tribals, academics and administrators. The results are not always encouraging—the follow-up work of the trainees is sometimes poor or non-existent—but the successes are dramatic. In 1987, for example, a SwissAid sponsored project brought a group of tribals from the central Indian states to Auroville. Coming from areas which were almost totally deforested, they were inspired by what they saw here and returned determined to change their environment. That year, in Rajasthan, they planted 328,000 trees; the next year they planted 1,600,000—and with an 85% survival rate! Other educational initiatives taking place in Auroville include courses run by a Dutch organization called *Agriculture, Man and Ecology* (AME), drawing participants from all over South-East Asia, and a project to design and

produce environmental education materials for schools.

At the same time, Aurovilian green workers have been increasingly going out into India to share their experience and help initiate new afforestation schemes. These have included projects with Tibetan refugees in Karnataka, with Irula tribesmen near Chinglepet in Tamil Nadu and a massive project, funded by the National Wetlands Commission, in the Palani Hills to reafforest large areas near Dindigul and Kodaikanal.

We're not yet finished!

Although the perspective has shifted, afforestation work in Auroville is by no means finished. There are still large areas to plant out when the land becomes available, and the process of refining techniques continues. For example, much more use can be made of the selective, interplanting of species that have different life-spans and growth rates, in order to allow the trees to be harvested at a rotational basis, while preserving the fertility of the soil. Also, much more needs to be done with the local farmers to help them find sustainable, profitable and appropriate solutions for their needs. Nevertheless, the return of forest cover to this badly eroded land in the space of 20 years stands as a potent example of how, with determination and application and joy, the great forests could return to this ancient land.

"We're mutually dependent"

An exchange between village farmers
and Auroville land-workers.

In the past few years, a number of Aurovilian greenworkers have become involved in large afforestation projects in other parts of India. However, perhaps the greatest challenge for Auroville farmers and foresters is to learn to work cooperatively and creatively with the village farmers whose fields surround Auroville. How do they view Auroville? What have they learned from us? What can we learn from them?

Auroville Today brought together two village farmers and two Aurovilians with long experience of working on the land. Lingiswami, a 4th generation farmer, farms 10 acres of irrigated land, growing rice, peanuts, sugarcane and vegetables. Kartikkeyan farms 7 acres of dry land (unirrigated). He grows monsoon crops like peanuts, millets and black gram. Both of them are dependent on the land for their livelihood. Jaap managed an Auroville farm of about 60 acres for 12 years. It was a mixed farm, comprising dry land, orchards, irrigated fields and vegetable gardens. Ed manages 'Forecomers', 110 acres of one of the oldest and largest belts of forest in Auroville. Sundaram, from Village Action, was the interpreter.

Auroville Today: What are the major changes you've seen happen on Auroville land in the last 20 years?

Kartikkeyan: The major change is the number of trees that you've planted. At the same time, the fertility of the village lands has gone down.

Do you think there is a connection?

Lingiswami: Your trees affect our crop. The shade means they don't get enough sun and the roots take moisture and fertility from the soil. Trees are good, but not by our crop fields. The Aurovilians are rich, but we depend completely on our crops. We can't afford failures.

Ed: He's right. We have made mistakes. Certain trees do take a lot of moisture and block the sun, and we haven't always planted wisely. But other trees can benefit their fields. A tree like *pongamia* can provide them with organic matter, and its roots break up and aerate the soil. Palmyras give little shade but stabilize the earth.

Jaap: Trees and shrubs can provide wind breaks and create an equitable micro-climate in the fields. Don't you remember those dust-storms years ago? We don't get them now because of the afforestation. Trees like *gliricidia* and *lucaena* can be planted around fields, and in the ploughing season their branches can be cut and the leaves—which are a good green manure—can be ploughed in.

Kartikkeyan: This was how we used to cultivate paddy. We'd scatter neem leaves on the wet land and tread them into the soil. Nowadays we use fertilizers.

Why did you change?

Kartikkeyan: It's much easier. We don't have to collect all the leaves and plough them in.

And you get a better crop?

Lingiswami: Twenty years ago our soil was much more fertile. You could make a good living off the land then. Today we spend more and more money and get less crops.

Kartikkeyan: Each year we have to apply more and more fertilizers and pesticides, but the yield is less. We have far more insects now eating the crop. In the old days, with the traditional varieties of rice, we had hardly any insects. If we scattered some ash, it was sufficient to keep them away. But the new fast-growing types of rice need fertilizer and pesticides.

Lingiswami: If we don't apply the pesticides regularly, our crop is totally eaten up. These new varieties are not strong like the old ones we used to grow.

So why don't you grow the old varieties now?

Kartikkeyan: There's much less water now. There's not sufficient water to grow the old 6 month varieties. These new varieties are ready in 90 days.

Ed: Why do you think the insects have increased?

Kartikkeyan: It's the trees. When I spray my field, all the insects go into the trees, and

**"If we can't work
together, there's no future.
For any of us. We're
mutually dependent."**

then they come back when it's safe. I've seen it happen.

Jaap: But not all insects are bad. Some insects are good because they eat the bad insects. But when you spray, the good ones are killed and some of the bad ones develop resistance. So they increase and you have to keep spraying more and more. When you began using these quick-growing varieties, and fertilizers and pesticides, the first crops were probably good. But after a few years, the soil fertility is depleted and you're caught in this vicious circle of having to put in more and more for less and less. Everything is connected. This means that if you want to change, you can't just change one component—like growing the old varieties while keeping the fertilizers and pesticides. You have to change everything. You have to create an environment in which the pests can be kept under control, naturally. Birds, for example, eat thousands of pests daily. But if you clear the trees, you won't get birds.

How do the villagers feel about using pesticides?

Kartikkeyan: We know it's poison. But what can we do? Without it, no crops. The government is supplying it. Why don't they help us? Everything was more healthy in the olden days. Now there is air pollution, pesticides. Now we can't expect to live for more than fifty years.

Have the villagers adopted any of the farming methods we are using in Auroville?

Kartikkeyan: Not really. But I've learned about the need to preserve the soil, to build fences and bunds.

Lingiswami: The villagers plant a few more trees now. But that's about it. You Aurovilians can do things because you are not dependent on them economically. We have to make a living.

How can Auroville help the villagers when their situation is so different? They haven't the luxury to experiment.

Jaap: Regarding dry farming, we haven't come up with any spectacular solution. In fact, few Aurovilians do dry farming these days because it just doesn't pay. We've got more to offer regarding irrigated farming. But the initial investment is so high that few villagers can afford to do it—or else, it takes a long time before the work bears fruit. That's why so little of what we do here has been taken up by the villagers.

Ed: But there are certain simple things that can be adopted right now by the villagers that we've proven on our own land. Like planting leguminous hedges around fields. Also different fruit and cash crops—like cloves and cinnamon—could be grown here. The conditions are changing—we get

"The real usefulness of Auroville is as a demonstration centre."

less rain now—so we need to be planting species adapted to these conditions. The real usefulness of Auroville is as a demonstration centre. We can try out these species and see if they work. That way, the villagers don't have to take the risk.

Jaap: One thing we've learned is the value of diversification. To have a bit of everything. So if a heavy rain wipes out one crop, there will be another that benefits. I think the villagers could learn from this, and this way they could provide regular work for those who want to work on the land. There would always be something to do.

If the villagers were given the opportunity to change their methods, would they do so?

Kartikkeyan: I would change if I got help to improve my water situation.

Lingiswami: We're willing to try different things, if we can get assistance.

Ed: Let me make you a proposal. Auroville is working on a scheme, which is not yet finalized, whereby a village farmer would sign into a cooperative for 5 years. During those five years, if there was a crop failure in two of the years, Auroville would guarantee to make some payment so that the family wouldn't starve. Auroville would also guarantee to buy your produce at a fair market price, would provide money for good compost and manure, and would help bund your fields. In return, you would have to agree not to use pesticides or artificial fertilizers. The idea behind it is that this way we would all benefit. The fertility of your fields would increase; you would have a guaranteed market; and we would get good, healthy food. We'd begin the scheme with cashews, but afterwards we could include other crops and vegetables.

Lingiswami: I'd be happy to try. I already grew sorghum for the Auroville Bakery on this basis—no pesticides, no fer-

tilizers. It was fine. As long as you guarantee I won't suffer, I'll try it.

Kartikkeyan: I'd try it. But I would also need help to improve my water supply.

Ed: Of course, we also have to create a market for this good food. Many Aurovilians want to pay a bit less and get their food from Pondy—full of preservatives and pesticide residues. And the village farmers have to realize that for the first few years, their yields will be less. The land has to recover from pesticides and fertilizers.

What would you like to see happening in the future?

Kartikkeyan: I'd like to grow a mixture of agricultural crops—paddy, cotton, sweet potatoes—and trees.

Lingiswami: I'd do mixed farming. Rice, vegetables, some fruit trees.

Ed: We need to remember that the situation today is not what it was 20 years ago and it can change again in the future. If we don't have enough water, we'll have to grow trees and drought-resistant fruit trees like mango. There will be no choice.

Jaap: I believe in the principle that, as far as possible, the food consumed in an area should be grown in the area. Since much of the Auroville land will not be available for growing food, I think that the villagers will play a big role in the future in providing us with clean, wholesome food. We can help each other in this.

Ed: I agree. It's beautiful to be able to have an exchange with the villagers. And the main thing is that the land we live on will be getting healthier if we do it in the right way. And as it gets healthier, it can sustain more life. Now Auroville and the villagers can really see if we can work together. If we can't—there's no future, for any of us. We're mutually dependent.

Interviewer: Alan
June '89

Note to our readers

The 5 year scheme for village farmers, mentioned by Ed above, will need considerable financial support. If you can help, or if you would like further information, write to: Karlheinz, 'Forecomers', Auroville, Kottakuppam 605104, Tamil Nadu, India.



Tamil farmer

Photo: Jan (Fertile)

"No one is your friend, no one is your enemy, but every human being is your teacher"

An encounter with Valentin Sidorov, a Russian poet

Valentin Sidorov radiates simplicity. He has come from the vastnesses of Russia: a mysterious and mystic land, the recent symbol of hope for a new consciousness, of the need for clarity and transparency, of perestroika and glasnost; wonder-words which are the mantras of a new generation.

Last year, young people from this great country came to Auroville to participate in the 'Peace Tree' exchange programme (see *Auroville Today* no 3).

They talked to us with love of their country and of their hopes and when we asked them what they thought of Auroville and whether they would like to stay here, they answered us — musing and with a far-away look: "It's definitely very special here, but in Russia there are so many things to do for others, before we can think of ourselves."

I was touched by their courage, their purity, their simplicity, how they marvelled at everything and particularly at the freedom of expression here. I loved those young people and, thanks to them, Auroville breathes a bit in Russia. Recently we met the poet Valentin Sidorov, a member of the Academy of Literature, while he was visiting Auroville for a few hours.

We started a *dialogue à trois*, for we needed his charming interpreter to be able to communicate. He spoke about his childhood, which coincided with the second world war. "That war shaped my character and, to a large extent, the character of my generation. We lived not far from the frontline, so we experienced everything — bombing, starvation, fear — and though I was still a child, many times I found myself between life and death. I think it helped me a lot in my future life, when I faced some difficult situations."

At the end of the war he studied philosophy at the University of Moscow, but he told us in confidence that the teaching, under Stalin's regime, was done in such a way that he felt more disgust and rejection than interest. Yet he admits that it has given him a wider understanding of human nature and of the phenomenon of thought. "But it is true that I was far more interested in poetry than in philosophy."

It seems that the beginnings of his literary career were very difficult. "I didn't even know that my first book of poetry was banished and was labelled 'anti-soviet'. It was under Khrushchev, in 1959. At that time

Khrushchev made this remarkable statement that we had to catch up and outstrip the USA within 2 or 3 years. In my poems, well, I didn't say anything about Khrushchev, but I expressed my doubts about this point and the whole print run was destroyed. So you see, my career started with some trouble."

Valentin Sidorov remains reticent about this period, which he calls "not easy"; but he continued writing. He had to stick it out while waiting to see the day on which his books would be published. And this took some time... Then one day he visited an exhibition of the first paintings of Nicolas Roerich. This was in 1958.

Nicolas Roerich lived in India and became the symbol of unity between Russia and India. He died in the Himalayas. Nicolas Roerich is much loved and respected in Russia and, strange as it may seem, the first introduction for many Soviet people to India has been through Roerich. Valentin Sidorov himself studies the philosophy and teaching of Roerich, which is known under the name 'Living Agni' or 'Agni Yoga'.

"Agni Yoga is very close to the Integral Yoga, and I know that Roerich communicated with Sri Aurobindo. It is very interesting that such a relationship did exist. My first poems on India were written before I actually came here. I wrote on Vivekananda, and I have a whole series of poems which are called *The Blue Hills of Hindustan*. Funnily enough, when they were first published, one of the critics wrote, 'It's remarkable how the first hand experience of the poet is reflected in his poetry', but I had never been there before! I came to India only many years later. Such things happen!"

This made me ask him if there wasn't a huge gap for him between a communist country like Russia with a deeply Christian soul where Islam too is strongly represented and Indian spirituality. "I don't see any contradiction, if you don't concentrate on the rituals, because the truth is one. I remember when I read the Bhagavad Gita for the first time, I was very much surprised that so many aspects coincided with the New Testament. Well, I know this is a very apt question. But, you see, when encounters occur, many people insist that you should believe in their God, not in yours. This becomes an insurmountable obstacle. I am very fond of an Indian saying, 'No one is your friend, no one is your enemy, but

every human being is your teacher'. When you proceed from this concept, you immediately get in contact, in touch. Well, I am fond of learning, and I have been learning all my life. The main idea by which I live is that by learning from everyone the teacher progresses. This is my approach.

I don't know Sri Aurobindo well enough, but the few things I know about Sri Aurobindo and The Mother convince me that this is the future. The future living in the present. And this of course determines my attitude towards Sri Aurobindo."

He suddenly changes the topic, and confides to us the extraordinary importance of a discovery he made in 1977 in the Nicolas Roerich Museum in New York. "I read a letter written by Mrs. Ilana Roerich, who was a remarkable lady of very high spirituality. Many people consider her and Nicolas Roerich as their spiritual teachers. She passed away in India, in 1955. In this particular letter she predicted the end of the world. She predicted a holocaust which would put an end to the human race and gave the exact date, 1949. She said 'then there was a great battle between the Prince of Darkness and the Great Master as a result of which the Prince of Darkness was defeated and thrown beyond this universe'. And thus the Earth was either saved, or had a respite — death was postponed. That was what she had predicted. Now if we come back to the Earth, quite recently we came to know that when the Soviet Union tested their first nuclear bomb, which took place around the end of September 1949, the United States at that time developed a plan for a preventive nuclear strike. At that time all their nuclear potential was some 300 nuclear bombs which they wanted to drop on the Soviet Union. But people were not aware of the after-effects of such a nuclear strike then, not only on your enemy, but on the world at large. Of course you understand what it means — the end of the human race. Till today we don't know what stopped the process. Now I would like to come back to Sri Aurobindo. He also predicted a holocaust that would put an end to life on earth, and the dates he gave were 1949-1951. They didn't know each other. Well, I think that such particular details, such small things, we might say, are a better justification, a better proof of the truth of the prediction than any abstract theorising."

How can the works of Sri Aurobindo be made known in such an immense country where spiritual publications were clandestine, and where the very name of Mme. Blavatsky was banished?

"I have read some of his writings. There are publications which are prepared and translated unofficially by some enthusiasts, volunteers, who don't get any money for it. They were distributed underground. When I met Mr. Joshi we discussed all this; he was very surprised to learn that I had already read *The Adventure of Consciousness*, the famous book [on Sri Aurobindo] of Satprem, in Russian".

Valentin Sidorov is preparing a conference on "Peace through Culture and Spirituality". We asked him how Auroville would fit in his programme.

"Auroville is involved, because we invited Mr. Joshi particularly as a representative of Auroville and Auroville's approach. And we have also invited Satprem who is planning to make a presentation there. But we regard this conference as a pretext to establish relations."

Sidorov spent some hours in Auroville, and was quite touched by it.

"I had a preconceived idea about Auroville, but the real Auroville that I saw is more appealing to me than the image I had in my head, because Auroville is not buildings, it is people. And I saw the Matrimandir, the huge construction that is going on here. We heard the whole story and we saw the human enthusiasm behind it. This enthusiasm reminds me of the first five year plans in my country; that was immediately after the civil war, and also the first era of Christianity — the same heroic efforts. I'm fascinated by people. I meet my readers and such meetings gather huge audiences and people always ask me about Auroville. They think that because I have been in India and have a special interest in India, I must have been here many times and know everything. I was unprepared to answer this question. Now I know what to say."

How to describe the minutes, seconds or eternity that followed? There are no words to describe this kind of recognition... I would say of soul with soul.

Then Valentin Sidorov recited his poem in his own language, and there was no longer any need for translation.

In conversation with Yanne

SON OF ETERNITY

"You are not you".

*This is the beginning
Of most intimate meditations.
Then the true "I"
May sound from the primordial depth.*

*Your spirit should not fuse with your body
Not become sluggish and immovable.
Its fate is freedom and love
and the glittering abyss of outer space.
Son of eternity, think of yourself
As of a particle of the eternal origin.*

Valentin Sidorov



FORECOMERS : From Moonscape to Forest

An avenue of trees—the yellow flowering *cassia fistula* (Indian laburnum), neem, wattle, and Indian cork trees line the cool, one and a half kilometre stretch of dirt road that leads from Abri to Forecomers. Two granite pillars mark the entrance to the community's central compound where a large peepal tree (*Ficus Religiosa*) towers over the tiled roof kitchen and neighbouring common house, as tufted hoopoes and red and blue breasted kingfishers flit through a lush surrounding landscape of bougainvillea and hibiscus bushes, banyan, palm and copperpod trees. Nearby a grey squirrel hawk sits perched, in motionless camouflage, on a grey bare branch. It's just after eight o'clock and Karlheinz is listing the day's priorities, as Kumar, a young Tamil Aurovillian who moved here seven years ago, hands out keys to different storerooms and conveys instructions to different workers. The diesel pump can be heard starting up, shattering nature's silence as the day's rhythms glide into their slow-moving, tropical routine. A group of 'ammās' in their bright, coloured saris can be seen heading towards the nursery, their day's work of planting seedlings into plastic bags about to begin. Elsewhere, a line of cows are led ambling out to pasture and two bullocks of homeric proportions are being hitched to a vandi for the weekly trip to Pondy for supplies. Staring out at the lushness of the landscape, it is difficult to imagine that twenty-one years ago "Forecomers" was a barren stretch of scarred red earth, at best a scrub desert, not hemmed in by trees but open to distant horizons.

"Forecomers" was the name given by The Mother, to the first settlers—Bob and Deborah Lawlor, who moved out to Auroville in 1968—and it remained the name of the community they started. Shade was the first priority for those early settlers. Water was scarce and had to be brought from 3 kms away mounted in large drums on the backs of bicycles. The first plantation was a small palm and mango grove. In 1971, Auroville's first tree nursery was started with Mother's blessing in nearby "Success", and in the years that followed, hundreds of people passed through Forecomers and freely gave their energy. The result is the transformation of what was once a scrub desert into a living, vibrant forest consisting of more than 125,000 trees of over a hundred different species, spread out over a 150 acres.

In the early years, many different trees were planted in a process of trial and error. Ed, who came to Forecomers in 1979, estimated that at least 400 types of trees have been experimented with there, of which about 100 species continue to be used regularly. At one time, exotics were popular because certain species proved to be excellent pioneers. Recently, however, the focus has shifted to rediscovering the indigenous trees that were common to the area until about 200 years ago. This has involved some literary detective work—researching into temple scriptures and old Tamil poetry—and then attempts, through an international seed exchange, to obtain the species that have become extinct here. However, not all the old varieties can be re-introduced as the environment has changed so much—for example, through depletion of top-soil—that it would no longer support them.

Ed explains that the general approach, both in Forecomers and elsewhere in Auroville, is "to encourage the life energies to come back and rebuild the scene. Once you have tree-cover, the birds return. They eat the seeds and propagate more trees. At the same time, second-stage vegetation—shrubs and so forth—begin to proliferate,

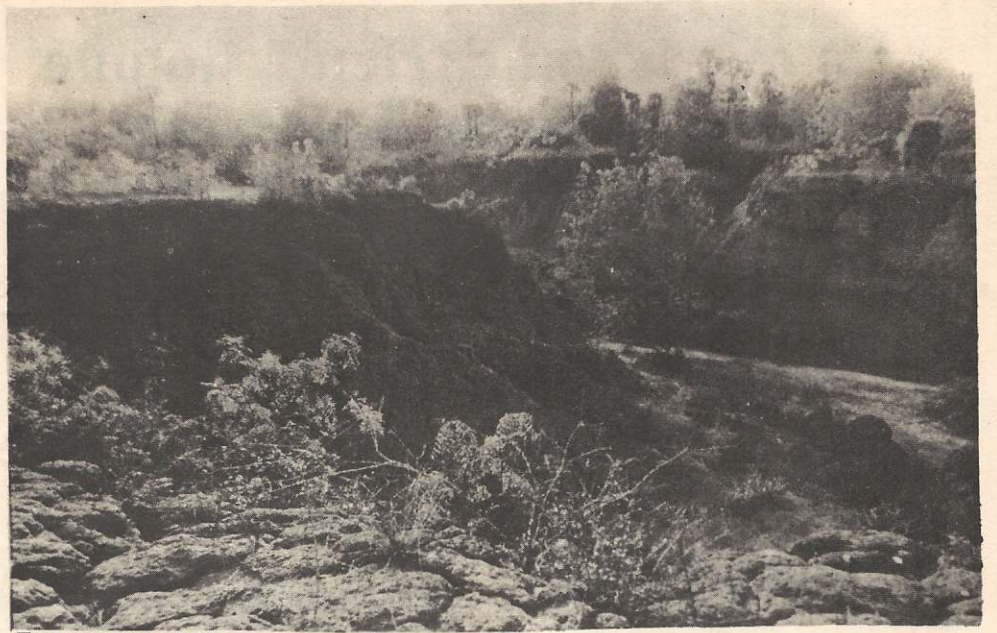
and suddenly it's an explosion!" He also believes that silviculture and agro-forestry are more appropriate practices in this area than monsoon cropping. Silviculture involves the interplanting of different species—timbers like teak and rosewood, with firewood trees (casuarina) and various fruit trees (guava, chikhu, mango, jackfruit etc.)—and then selective harvesting on a rotational basis, so that a steady income is ensured without degrading the land. In a recent experiment in Forecomers, Ed discovered that certain species of trees will tolerate interplanting with a species like casuarina, which depletes the soil.

The villagers are beginning to understand this approach, and the large Forecomers nursery is often visited by neighbouring villagers looking for seedlings to plant. Trees such as *Acacia auriculiformis* ('Work' tree) are popular for firewood and furniture making, and the original indigenous timber trees—teak, rosewood, *Pterocarpus marsupium* (known locally as vengai) and *Pterocarpus santalinus* (red sanders) are also much in demand. Successful tree planting, of course, depends on a good deal of follow-up work—protecting the seedlings from goats and cows, and mulching them to retain moisture—which is why Ed believes that propagation depends more upon willpower than knowledge of technique. In this sense, Forecomers has become a showcase, a demonstration site for what can be achieved with hard work and trust in the forces of natural transformation. Tribals, educationalists, academics, villagers and social workers from all over India have visited here and carried away a new sense of hope and inspiration.

About a dozen Aurovillians and their families—German, Dutch, Tamil, American and English—live in the three communities of the Forecomers area. Their dwellings range from keel-roofed capsules and mud-walled huts to tile-roofed brick dwellings and concrete houses. From choice, Forecomers is not served by the Tamil Nadu electricity board. Instead, two biogas units manufactured in Auroville and fuelled by cow and bullock manure provide gas for cooking and overhead lighting in the kitchen. Kerosene lamps are used in individual dwellings while two houses have electricity produced by roof-top photovoltaic cells. At times the sound of Talking Heads, Tamil film music or Mozart can be heard competing with the cries of children and the rising notes of brain-fever birds auditioning for La Scala.

A crew of ten workers from nearby villages helps with the work of fencing, roof repairs, mulching and tending trees, the watering of plots, farm work and the protection of lands from the grazing of village herds of goats and cows. Two diesel pumps and three windmills supply water to the area. Nursery seedlings are watered twice a day.

However, the emerging ecological balance of this area might, if sufficient care is not taken, be threatened by the close proximity of Pondicherry airport which is less than two kilometres away. Although it is to be initially used for local "shuttle" flights, there are plans to extend the runway for jets in the near future. If care is not taken and buffer zones are not established, in the future Forecomers might not only border a canyon but an encroaching urban wasteland as well. More than anything else, Pondicherry's rapid expansion accentuates the urgent need for Auroville to establish and acquire the lands for an unbroken forest belt surrounding the projected city area. Otherwise the planned galaxy might well melt into an uncontrolled urban sprawl. — Roger



Forecomers area.

BIRDS OF AUROVILLE

It has been noticed by many people that the birdlife of Auroville has increased. The increase was noticeable in those places where afforestation and land regeneration had taken place, and in and around the gardens of the settlements and on the farms. It was soon obvious that the birds present fell into two categories: one, the birds of the barren open spaces, among them larks, pipits and lapwings. Two, the birds of the lightly forested and garden areas, among them diurnal and nocturnal birds of prey, bee-eaters and flycatchers. The year 1972 has been identified as the year in which the change started. The reason is that in this year the reafforestation and land regeneration work was begun on a more organized basis. This coincides with the start of the first community set up specifically for this purpose: "Fertile". Since then many more communities have been started to work on what is known as *greenwork*. This work encompasses every aspect of taking care of the land in a natural and organic way. This work resulted in an increase of the wildlife. This increase was at first barely noticeable, except perhaps the increase of the mosquito population. But after about 5 years the effects on the wildlife were obvious to those who were in daily contact with the land.

The first birdlist made in Auroville consisted of about 40 species. Since then an attempt has been made to separate the 'old' species and those species new to the area.

That is to say species already present when Auroville started and species which came because of the newly forested areas.

At present, the birdlist consists of 26 'old' species and 74 'new' species. For the new species, the year of their first observed appearance in Auroville is noted down. Species from before 1981 have been entered in the list from memory and/or talking to people who worked with the land.

In December 1983, the new species list contained 45 birds. Now the list has 74 species, an increase of about 60%. The arrival of new species is levelling out at present. One presumes this is because of the relative youth of our forests. Many species are migratory and have started to use Auroville as a wintering place. Relatively few new species have settled down and started breeding in Auroville. For this to happen more, our forests have to be a lot older. Or, to put it differently, Auroville's intensive land regeneration work has upset the balance of nature as it was, the balance of semi-desert ecosystem. Now it is changing into a forest ecosystem. It will take nature some time to find a new balance. Yet, this year a pair of Golden Orioles (Orioles orioles) was observed attempting to build a nest, and although their efforts came to nothing it may be indicative of things to come. The Golden Oriole is at present only known to breed in North India.

Pieter



Buzzard

Photo: Jan (Fertile)

A Poisoned Environment

From the month of February till the end of June, it is the cashew season around Auroville. Watch towers go up, fields are patrolled; and the ripe apples with their costly nuts are harvested daily. For the last five years, villagers have been spraying their trees with what they like to call *puchi marunde* (Tamil for 'insect medicine'), a cure-all in their eyes, which is actually a combination of highly poisonous pesticides that presents a health hazard not only to the villagers but to all of us. Cashew topes are spread extensively throughout the Auroville area, and sometimes completely surround Auroville communities.

Cashew trees are sprayed or powdered by hand every 15 to 20 days throughout the 3 month season by farmers and youngsters in order to prevent what they consider harmful insect damage. However, the pesticides they use are so strong that they indiscriminately kill a large variety of insects, including those necessary for pollination. The danger warning printed in 13 different languages and instructions concerning proper use and the need for protective clothing are not at all followed. Among the types of pesticides used are the following: BHC powder is applied by hand—usually without protective clothing of any sort. Much of it is scattered by the wind. This ineffective use demands higher quantities and contaminates the soil. Methyl Parathion and Endosulphan are the liquid pesticides that are sprayed. We quote from the book *Breaking the Pesticides Habit* by Terry Gibbs concerning the effects of Lindane/BHC.

"The body's response to poisoning is basically...the stimulation of the central nervous system...Moderate poisoning symptoms can include dizziness, nausea, weakness, excitability and/or unusual amount of fearfulness and irritability. In cases of more severe poisoning, these symptoms can be compounded with muscle twitching, seizures and difficulties in breathing. Lindane accumulates in human fatty tissues and is biomagnified through the food chain. Extremely high concentrations of 8-BHC in breast milk have been judged as a serious health risk for breast-fed children in West Germany."

Methyl Parathion is closely related to Ethyl Parathion, a nerve gas derivative banned in a number of countries. Lethal oral doses for humans of Methyl Parathion are 5 mg/kg.

We are all exposed to these poisons. Our roads pass through village fields, and the pesticides contaminate air, soil and water. According to the Auroville *Village Action* group, many farmers are aware of the immediate poisoning effects of these pesticides, but believe that the spraying is necessary for a good harvest.

Cashews were introduced into this area on an extensive scale fairly recently—about 20 years ago. They are produced exclusively for export. There are numerous reasons that have pushed farmers away from traditional agriculture—millets, peanuts and pulses—and towards cash cropping. (Cash crops are crops like casuarina—a fast growing firewood—and cashews.) There are the changing weather patterns (diminished rainfall); there is the ongoing erosion on village lands; and sociological patterns in the villages are changing: the younger generation do not work the land

but prefer to pick up skills such as masonry and carpentry for which there is demand in Auroville. Cashews, even though they are relatively short-lived—they have an average life span of 15 to 30 years—nonetheless provide at least some income, whereas labour intensive cultivation (ploughing by bullocks, weeding by dozens of village women) of fields is completely dependent on the monsoons which have frequently failed in recent years. For example, following recent monsoon failures, the water table in February (usually at a maximum level at that time) was this year at the level of last year's minimum. The farmers' situation is particularly bad. According to *Village Action* many farmers in the Auroville area did not break even with their monsoon-fed crops and depend on the income from their cashew topes for survival.

Although some farmers in every village still practise traditional agriculture, their knowledge of the land and the feeling for it, their understanding of cultivation, of the storage of grains, and a climatically appropriate diet based on what they themselves produce will be lost.

Auroville is not an island—and the creation of a healthy, balanced environment demands our cooperation with the neighbouring villages. Auroville-grown food is grown in some cases less than 200 metres away from fields sprayed with pesticides. Birds, insects and other forms of animal life are also exposed to the pesticides; something which undermines our effort to recreate an ecological balance.

Many Aurovilians have tried directly to convince local farmers to stop spraying. They have succeeded only in a few cases. A natural pesticide has been developed in Auroville and has to be made more widely available to village farmers. New movements in the field of environmental education have taken place. But for the village farmers there's no proof that unsprayed fields can produce as much as those that are sprayed, which is understandably their deciding factor.

At present, *Village Action* is working on a comparative study of the yields of village and Auroville fields which will take a number of years. Many Auroville green-belters feel the need to start a food cooperative that would purchase local produce such as rice, millets, peanuts, cashews, sesame and cattle feed from village farmers, instead of acquiring it from Pondy. Their idea is that farmers would be given a premium price for organically grown (i.e. pesticide-free) produce. Erosion control, for instance bunding of fields, would be provided by Auroville. In case of crop failure, the farmer would be helped to make his living. These are some broad outlines of what could be done.

Already this year, there is an attempt through *Village Action* to establish a working relationship with a number of farmers from 3 different villages. This involves observing their techniques, buying their produce and bringing the farmers together to discuss their problems, needs and ideas for a sustainable agriculture.

The challenge we face in Auroville farming is to produce sustainable organic alternatives to a pesticide dependent agriculture.

Sigrid, Newlands

Dear Green revolutionists,

We would like to present our appreciation for the work done in Auroville for the past fifteen years by those who have dedicated themselves to changing this piece of dead land into an evergreen forest. We appreciate their courage, ambition and hard work and consider them as martyrs for the development of Auroville. Wish them all success and hope they will be honoured and remembered as long as Auroville is.

With best wishes,
Senthil and Sergei, USSR

(Participants in the Peace Trees programme last December.)

The Irumbai Legend

Irumbai is a small village on the edge of Auroville. The village temple is extremely old and is particularly associated with the legend of Kaduveli Siddha, a famous yogi who lived in the area some four to five hundred years ago.

According to the legend, Kaduveli Siddha was performing a harsh penance. Sitting under a peepal tree in yogic poise for days, the heat of his body was so intense that the rain gods suffered, no rains came and the people were exposed to hardship and drought. The situation was so bad that it finally came to the ears of the King, who ruled from Edayanchavadi village. No one dared disturb Kaduveli in his penance as he chanted the mantra of Eswara, and soon an anthill started to rise up around him. Finally a temple dancer, named Valli, devoted to the Lord Shiva, decided to do her best to get the attention of the yogi, and to rescue the King and his people from the adverse effects of his tapasya. She observed that occasionally the Siddha would, with his eyes shut, put out his hands to catch and consume the falling, withered peepal leaves. So she prepared some thinly fired apalam (a flat salty wafer made out of green gram dhal), and started placing them in the yogi's outstretched hands, as he tried to catch the falling leaves. Soon he started eating the apalams and getting his taste back. Slowly he grew fatter until finally the anthill broke and he was once more exposed to the rays of the sun. Finally he opened his eyes. Valli was extremely happy and was able to take him back to her house where she kept him happy, dancing for him and learning songs from him. Meanwhile the God of Rain was relieved from the torture induced on him by the heat of the yogi's tapasya, the rain fell in plenty, and the people were happy once again.

In order to celebrate this event the King ordered a big Puja to be held at Irumbai temple, which was to be followed by a clas-

sical performance by Valli in which she would act out the cosmic dance of Lord Shiva, in the form of Nataraja. During the performance, however, one of her anklets fell off, and she started to lose her balance and rhythm. Kaduveli, who saw the Lord Shiva in Valli, picked up the anklet and put it back upon her feet. This exposed him to the ridicule of the King and court for having touched the feet of a dancing girl, and he was heckled and jeered. Furious, he invoked the Lord Shiva to come out of his temple and prove his innocence in a rain of stone. Immediately the lingam in the sanctum sanctorum of the temple exploded, and wherever its fragments fell suddenly became desert. No greenery will grow around these sports, including a crater at a distance of three kilometres from the village, and they are still to this day known as 'Kaduveli'.

The King was suddenly frightened and begged the pardon of the Siddha, bowing down to him with all his entourage and pleading with him to quench the effects of his anger and curse. This appeased Kaduveli, who, repenting of his anger, said that what was done was done, but that in the future, people from far-off lands would come and make the desert land green and fertile again. Today, there are villagers who feel that the Aurovilians are the people from far-off lands mentioned by the Siddha and that the curse is now beginning to leave them.

This story was put together by several Aurovilians, based on a tape-recorded conversation with the temple brahmin at Irumbai.

Food for Thought

A RECENT ISSUE of the magazine *India Today* featured an article on 'Poison in your Food'. Among the findings:

1. Daily, Indians ingest with their food half a milligram of two of the most widely used pesticides in the county: DDT and BHC. That's 40 times more than the average American ingests and it equals the World Health Organization danger level of daily intake of these pesticides.
2. In a recent survey, milk taken from lactating women in India had DDT and BHC residues at least 4 times higher than in the other participating countries, with the exception of China where the residues were even higher.
3. Pesticide use is increasing rapidly in India. India is now both the largest consumer as well as the largest manufacturer of pesticides in South Asia. DDT and BHC, which are either banned or strictly controlled in the West, are the most widely-used pesticides in India.
4. Other common food contamination includes the widespread use of prohibited dyes, the adulteration of cooking oil with highly toxic substances and the presence of heavy metals like lead, cadmium, manganese and nickel in foodstuffs.

The food we grow in Auroville is organic and therefore, as far as possible, uncontaminated. This is a very powerful argument for Auroville to attempt to become self-sufficient in certain foods. But what is happening? Dry crop farming in this area is extremely unpredictable—often, there are expensive failures. Consequently, there is a tendency to afforest such land since this requires less labour and is cheaper. Also, our best arable land is sometimes used for construction.

In addition to this, those Aurovilians engaged in organic farming receive little help from the community. An organic farm does not 'happen' overnight. It takes years to improve the quality of depleted soil. But we release our Auroville farmers to the market forces, expecting their products to compete in our shops with the prices of products which are mass-produced, subsidized and often highly chemicalized.

And now the crowning irony. As a result of so many people being out of Auroville this summer, the farmers are left with a surplus that they cannot sell. Without food processing facilities, much of this surplus goes to waste. Good food. Organic food. The farmers sell less, consequently they have less to maintain their farms. But since the community offers no assistance to the farmers in these difficult months, and since the cost of feeding cows, for example, remains the same, the farmers are expected, in effect, to subsidize the community for this period out of their own pockets.

Not surprisingly, certain farmers are having difficulty in seeing the justice of this. They are contemplating selling some of their cows and reducing their arable land and vegetable gardens. The result? There will be less organic food available for us in Auroville, and we'll be forced to buy even more pesticide-loaded, adulterated, flavoured and coloured food from Pondicherry.

Do we really want this? If not, isn't it time that we, as a community, started helping our own farmers to reverse a trend which is making Indian food the most contaminated in the world?

We've done it for trees. Let's do it now for food.

Alan

The Ones that Got Away

It's a familiar story among fishermen everywhere. The fish that got away, that slipped the hook, was always bigger than the rest. And the dénouement is similarly predictable. The fisherman's arms fly wide apart to indicate the enormity of his loss, his friends nod sympathetically, then buy him a pint of beer, saki or arrack, depending on the latitude and his psychological state. Soon, he forgets...

That renowned dredger of news, *Auroville Today*, has also lost a few fish as its trawled its nets through the colourful seascape of angel fish, piranhas, leviathans and minnows that is Auroville. How did they slip through the meshes? Well, here are a few examples.

The first thing to understand is that our equipment is not exactly state-of-the-art. My tape recorder, for example, is big. It's been mistaken for the flight recorder of a jumbo jet. Which means that it doesn't blend into the landscape. Picture the scene then. Five Aurovilians are in full rhetorical flood—a brilliant, witty, provocative, insightful conversation is in progress. Suddenly I can resist it no longer. I pick up my monster and nonchalantly place it on the table among the butter biscuits. Delicately I depress the 'record' button. Silence. Five larynxes have simultaneously tied themselves in knots, five brilliant minds have seized up.

Of course, sometimes the opposite happens. And it's generally someone who is about to leave Auroville for some time and who has been looking for a chance to share his treasure-house of perceptions, accumulated over the years. He *loves* my black box. He caresses it. He practices modulating his voice, shifting effortlessly from intimate revelations to roof-top declamations about HOW IT SHOULD BE! I sit, enthralled. All my questions answered, all my doubts dispelled. Arriving home, I cannot wait.

With one hand I sweep the table clean, with the other I depress the 'play' button. Silence. I press the rewind button. Nothing. A sudden, horrible suspicion. I tear open the battery compartment. Empty!

But even when both people and machinery are working perfectly, there can be problems. Like non-communication. Reuters News Agency, it is rumoured, has a correspondent in virtually every country of the world. If a Thai princess sneezes, if an Eskimo strikes gold, if it rains rice pudding in Auckland, New Zealand, they know within minutes. Here in Auroville, I'm not always sure what's happening over my fence. So *Auroville Today* correspondents, believing themselves the hub of the news universe, are often stopped dead in their tracks by casual comments like, "Did you see Gorbachev yesterday? He was pulling out peanuts in Revelation", or "Now that Wimbledon's been transferred to Certitude, can't you get a decent sports page together?" Nobody tells us anything—until weeks later. They assume we *know*, that our tiny office is like a giant ear, crammed full of sophisticated listening devices able to pick up the faintest tinkle of tea-cups in the salons of Dana. In fact, if the telephone works, it's already a special day.

On a subtler level, of course, fish are lost all the time. The net is too coarse, too clumsy. Replaying interviews, I frequently wince. I've chosen the wrong words, the timing is off, I interrupt when I should be quiet, the questions are either too crude or too superficial. But how to catch the subtle, shifting grain that is Auroville? How to lock up in language a look, a gesture, the pressure of a moment's truth? Perhaps we should be happy merely to catch the flash of a fin... as another fish slips through the net.

Alan

Editorial team: Alan, Annemarie, Ed (guest editor), Roger, Tineke, Yanne. (Carel and Bill are out of station) Photographer: Susan. Desktop Publishing: Annemarie. Printed at Auroville Press.

AND NEXT THE CITY

And next the city
like a bride
married to the sun.
The INNER ROOM
spinning off viaducts to infinity,
four curved ramps,
four towers,
North, South, East, and West,
beginning the end
of oil slicks and nuclear accidents,
the first solar community on the planet,
the sun and methane gas,
gentle sidewalks,
sometimes moving,
sometimes completely still,
up, down, and around,
and then the stillness,
as the bride and groom
remember their embrace,
while the energy from their love
cools the atmosphere

and pulls clear water
from below.
One mile in diameter
and surrounded by green,
the greened earth and the blue-green
sea,
"it is the city the world needs",
a beacon to outer space,
where visible and invisible
can blend as one,
and love can find the core
inside love,
and a "new way" can find itself
in quiet and simplicity.
A pocket of life on earth
trying to become the life divine,
the INNER ROOM, the City of Dawn,
the INNER ROOM, the INNER
ROOM,
in alignment with the stars.

...

William Billy Netter,
in New York City, Spring 1982, dreaming of Auroville.

Correction

Nadaka came to Auroville in 1974, not
1978 as stated in the last issue of
Auroville Today.

Annapurna Granary of Auroville?

Factories and fenced-in plots—a sign of Pondicherry's industrial expansion—line the two km stretch of road that leads to Annapurna (Sanskrit for 'abundance of food'), a settlement that could one day become the granary of Auroville. Cracked, black cotton soil slopes westward in this low lying, uninterrupted holding of 135 acres that Mother in the early years had expected would one day provide all of Auroville's basic food needs. One is immediately struck by a sense of space and horizons absent elsewhere in Auroville after 20 years of tree planting. Six open wells, four of them borewells, were dug in the early years. The land was abandoned and fallow, and had degenerated considerably. Saline alkalinity has risen to the surface in many places and monsoon run-off from village lands higher up has taken its toll in the form of gullies and erosion.

Two and a half years ago, two Aurovilians, Bernard and Tomas, moved

availability of water. The main aquifer is 30-40 metres down. However, in spite of all the construction going on in Auroville, Annapurna does not have the funds for even one deep borewell pump. Bernard is also worried about the nearby plastic, paper, shoe and ceramic factories polluting the groundwater tables.

But lack of funding has not discouraged either Bernard or Tomas from starting the work. In the last two years they have put 20 acres of land under cultivation—including five acres of casuarina as an investment, and small plots of mixed forest trees for a Department of Environment project. They have erected two huts, a Bangalore Windmill, a small cow shed and a threshing floor. They are also experimenting with rice cultivation on a couple of plots of levelled land. "We are looking for varieties of rice that grow with less water", says Bernard. "Last year we experimented with 30 varieties, of which a few looked promising, but it was a bad year... too little water and

"If all the arable land here was under cultivation it could provide at least Auroville's basic rice needs"

out to this lonely site (it's 10 kilometres from Auroville) in order to heal and regenerate this precious piece of Auroville soil. Both had years of experience in experimental biological farming: Bernard had run the Aspiration farm for many years and Tomas had worked in rice cultivation in Bengal before moving to Auroville. When Tomas moved out to Annapurna two and a half years ago, the first thing that had to be done was clearing out the four open borewells that had been dug in the early years. "We found granite pillars, bricks, pumps, and nine metres of pipes at the bottom of them—we don't know who threw them in."

Otherwise all that existed in Annapurna was a five acre plot with a few tamarind and coconut trees and a small lemon grove that the Sri Aurobindo Society had planted a month before the Government take-over.

Conditions are different here from elsewhere in Auroville. Unlike with the red soil of the Auroville plateau—which in Bernard's opinion is more naturally suited to horticulture—normal bunding doesn't work on the black soil of Annapurna, which has a tendency to swell in the wet months and shrink in the summer. Percolation is restricted. The soil becomes a soggy mass in the monsoon. Paths have to be strewn with granite dust for bullock carts to pass. "We have to get used to this soil", says Bernard. "We have to wait a couple of months before plowing. However, moisture is maintained longer and crops such as pulses and sorghum can grow through February. With a minimal use of water you can have a crop here after the monsoon crop if the soil is well mulched."

A variety of crops can be grown on this land: rice, sugarcane, leeks, garlic, oil-seeds, pulses, sunflowers, sesame, mustard and onions, and says Tomas: "Our goal is to grow food for Auroville, but first we have to reclaim the land, to prepare it, so that it can support food-crops again. At present we are working on levelling select plots of land and erecting strategically located granite walls and check dams."

The development and restoration of the lands of Annapurna depends on the

the yields were poor." Bernard avoids the use of compost and interplants his fields of rice with nitrogen fixing green manure plants. These cover and keep the field fertile once the rice is cultivated, creating biomass and loosening and aerating the soil through root penetration. He also interplants with other crops such as sorghum and corn, and once the sugarcane crop is harvested the land is covered with sugarcane leaves... Small amounts of varagu, sunflowers, mustard, sesame and dhals are also being grown. Like other areas of life in Auroville, a sense of experimentation and research is an impelling motivation for both Bernard and Tomas. "We're still finding out, experimenting with the interplanting of different crops," says Tomas, to which Bernard adds, "A balance should be found, however, between experimentation and production."

Regarding their power needs, they both would like to develop a self-sustaining farm that wouldn't have to rely on the electricity grid, which is very unreliable. They envisage a generator that could provide electricity for the deep pumps, along with wood-gasifiers, solar pumps and sterling engines for other needs.

Looking towards the future, Bernard and Tomas feel it is possible to restore the land in about five years. Sixty to seventy acres could eventually be put under cultivation. The rest of the land, which is of a lesser quality, could be for timberwood trees—necessary amongst other things for the construction of the city. "If all the arable land here was under cultivation it could provide at least Auroville's basic rice needs". (24,000 kgs. of rice per year is bought for Auroville through Pour Tous)

Self sufficiency in our basic food needs should be a priority in Auroville. Both Bernard and Tomas are confident that with the right people and with the funds necessary for them to continue the work, Annapurna will one day be able to fulfil the role The Mother originally intended for it: that of being the granary of Auroville.

Roger

For more information, please contact Bernard, Annapurna, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India

India has been the store-house of a rich diversity of plant genetic material. In rice alone there are as many as 43,000 varieties, which have been identified and documented in the country.

Each of these indigenous varieties has its own specific character, size, colour and form, level of disease resistance and proneness to infections. Some types of rice were grown for lactating mothers, as they were known to stimulate the flow of milk and to give milk a high fat and sugar content. Others, rich in carbohydrates, were taken by men when going out to work in the paddy fields, for it gave them good energy. Some species were kept for their medicinal value, or for special occasions such as cultural festivities and religious ceremonies.

This diversity of genetic material is now gravely threatened under the impact of one-sided development strategies. Today, only about 30 new High Yielding Varieties (H.Y.V.'s) are grown throughout India. Each of these varieties covers huge areas, but they are not always high-yielding, for they require also a high input of water, chemi-

cal fertilizers and pesticides throughout the growing period. If any of these factors are neglected, severe or even total loss of crop results.

The indigenous types of rice have survived over the ages through a natural process of selection and adaptation in a specific environment. They can, for instance, cope much more easily with scarcity or excess of water. They are also more resistant to diseases and pests. In

fact, the genetic material of indigenous rices is used to breed resistance in H.Y.V.'s. But as

H.Y.V.'s are highly promoted and widely grown, indigenous varieties are neglected and die out from the land, so less and less of these varieties become available for breeding. This is called genetic erosion and thus lots of valuable varieties of rice have been lost. Desired characteristics in rice that are getting lost are: storage quality, high protein content, digestibility, specific scents, medicinal qualities and, often forgotten, cooking quality. Many indigenous rices need much less time to cook, thus saving considerable amounts of energy.

Bernard, Annapurna

=R=I=C=E=



Bernard

Auroville International Meeting

This year's Auroville International Meeting took place in Hoogersmilde, The Netherlands, between June 23rd and 25th. People from around 10 different countries and from Auroville attended. The 'official' report hasn't reached us in time for this issue, but the first reports from Aurovilians returning were very positive and mention that a number of new centres have been organized. A full report of the meeting will be published in the next issue of *Auroville Today*, along with the updated list of Auroville International Centres.

• • • To Receive Auroville Today • • •

The recommended yearly contribution (India only) for 12 issues of *Auroville Today*, including special issues, is Rs 66. (Special contr.: Rs. 132) Please send the recommended contribution to *Auroville Trust, Bharat Nivas, Auroville 605101*, specifying: Contribution for *Auroville Today*, with your name and address. The recommended yearly contribution (abroad) for 12 issues of *Auroville Today*, including special issues, is Can \$ 18, French F. 96, DM 30, It. Lira 21000, D.Gl. 33, USA \$ 15, UK £ 9. (Special contr.: Can \$ 36, French F. 200, DM 60, It. Lira 42000, D.Gl. 66, USA \$ 30, UK £ 18. This includes the postage by Airmail. Please send the recommended contribution either to the Auroville International Center in your country, via which you will receive all issues, or to *Auroville Trust, Bharat Nivas, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India*, specifying: Contribution for *Auroville Today*, with your name and address. In this case you will receive the issues directly from Auroville.

Letter from an Aurovillian

Dear Auroville,

Greetings from across the waters. It's a curious thing, looking out over the cliffs to the cold and wild pounding surf of the northern California coast, knowing that this same turbulent Pacific Ocean merges invisibly somewhere into the Bay of Bengal rising in warm and gently rolling waves upon your South Indian shore.

Different perspectives, different shores, one earth.

Over the years, I have stood on these cliffs many times and looked back upon Auroville. Sometimes in sadness, deeply missing Her, sometimes with insight clearer because of the distance.

Eighteen years ago on my first trip back to the States from Auroville, I looked back across the waters to a barren, heavily eroded plateau. Little more than abstract models hovered in the heat waves above the red earth. I had been asked to do a work--to help Auroville develop. But how? What was I supposed to do? Before I left Auroville, the challenge seemed so much easier, inspiring even. The world was obviously just waiting to be asked. Surely America would be swept off its feet by the power of Auroville. That's how it appeared from Aspiration in 1971, two years into my Auroville experience.

But soon after I unpacked my bags to conquer the Wild West, a different America met me and showed me a different Auroville. Armed as I was only with ideals and models, I was totally unprepared for the hard questions America hit me with: "So you want our money and you want our help, well what are you doing? Don't feed me your ideals and your transformation stuff--words are cheap. Show me what you're doing! I'm Mr. Materialist and I only believe what I can see. And it better be relevant!" (Sound of door slamming.)

That night looking over the cliff of dreams, all I saw was a barren red plateau. And no inner vision could deny that or cover it over.

This was certainly going to be harder than any of us imagined. It always is. In that void, out here alone, I found a key: make your weakness your strength. Be honest. Instead of continuing to look at Auroville and the world defiantly and arrogantly through Auroville eyes, trying to convince the world that it was wrong, trying to convert America, to make it see what a great gift Auroville was to the earth *a priori*--"just give us the money, fool, you don't understand"--I made an experiment. I decided to look at Auroville and the world through the world's eyes. Imagine if I'm willing to let go of my Aurovillian identity and just become "nobody in particular", what will I see? Will I be blind? Will I be corrupted forever?

And what I saw wasn't so foolish. It was a barren plateau. That it was *Her* plateau didn't change the fact that it was empty. The place the earth needs *was* a piece of dying wasteland.

So instead of throwing my hands in the air and cursing these dense Americans who will never understand the Truth, I decided to try listening. And in my blindness, I stumbled into the office of an honest man who also happened to be one of the first breed of environmentalists. And who also happened to be on the board of a small foundation. And he said, What do you want? And I said, I don't know. And he said, Good, let's see what we can find.

He saw in his own "crusty" way that Auroville, crazy as it seemed, had a unique potential. He saw that some people were willing to try something new on a barren plateau in South India. Did you ever think of trees? he said. How wonderfully unprofound. Instead of pasting glorious fabrications over our emptiness, he just said trees. He didn't want to hear about the supermind descending, he wanted to know how we expected to get our roots in the ground. How humbling.

In the days to come, I learned that emptiness calls fullness. I learned that by saying I don't know, the world responds in a helpful way. And my new friend and mentor was willing to help me learn to write a proposal for afforestation in Auroville. And he was even willing to fund it. Because it was a good proposal! And proved that Auroville was willing to listen to the world and be relevant. And in 1972, Auroville got its first grant from America. And I learned a great deal. And I said thank you to my friend and to America for teaching me so much and for being a partner. And I still say thank you and I'm still learning a great deal.

Now when I look back over those cliffs, I see 2 million real trees *that we planted*. That makes it possible for us to live there. Or, seen from another perspective, that makes the whole earth more livable.

But I see something else now. Something that's obvious here but maybe not so obvious in the day-to-day there. It comes as another one of those hard questions. Not just from America but from factories, homes, automobiles and everything else on this planet we build and consume. It's the question of energy.

The world is simply running out of conventional energy. This is a fact. We are so desperately, frantically, squeezing out every last drop of oil to feed the great Machine at no matter what cost. Hundreds of miles of Alaskan beaches, an entire eco-system, bear witness to that frenzy of greed. And so we race toward that other mad alternative, nuclear.

If we were to look at Auroville from the eyes of the world, setting aside for a moment our daily Auroville, how are we going to power the township the earth needs? This is not a secondary issue to be shelved for some future planning group. How is it possible to be so concerned and mesmerized with the issue of *designing* the town without focusing attention on a much more fundamental stage of planning. Just as trees *precede* a habitable environment, so too energy systems and infrastructure *precede* the design of structures.

Is it conceivable that Auroville will unconsciously build itself into such a cul-de-sac, that it will continue to construct houses and eventually collective facilities still dependent upon plugging into the old world and its dying power supply? Surely, this is ridiculous. But we are still doing it.

I would invite us all to look at Auroville from other perspectives on the earth. It is important. The world has something to show us through larger eyes. Energy is just one example of a pressing earth need. And if we do not find appropriate energy transitions and alternatives, we will fail to provide an urgent model for our species. The economics and ecology of the planet hang in a dangerous balance due, in large part, to the addictive consumption and pollution of fossil fuels.

While we are exploring a development plan and budget for Auroville as a township, I would urge us to be bold and set forth on a whole new course for the energy systems of the future. It is sheer inertia to keep falling back on the already overloaded power grid of Tamil Nadu. Let us be courageous now while we still can choose; and if we don't have the expertise to chart these new courses, let us be honest and say we don't know. Then, I am sure the world will come forward to help Auroville find the solutions and the funding. We keep telling ourselves that Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole. Well, what does this mean? Is Auroville big enough for the world, taking advantage of all discoveries *from without and from within*... to boldly spring towards future realizations?

From where I see things, yes! So how can we begin to help each other now?...

Love, Savitra

AUROVILLE TODAY

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BOOKPOST

Address Correction Requested

July 1989 - Number Eight

In this issue: Auroville landwork; a visit from a Russian poet;
A Poisoned Environment.

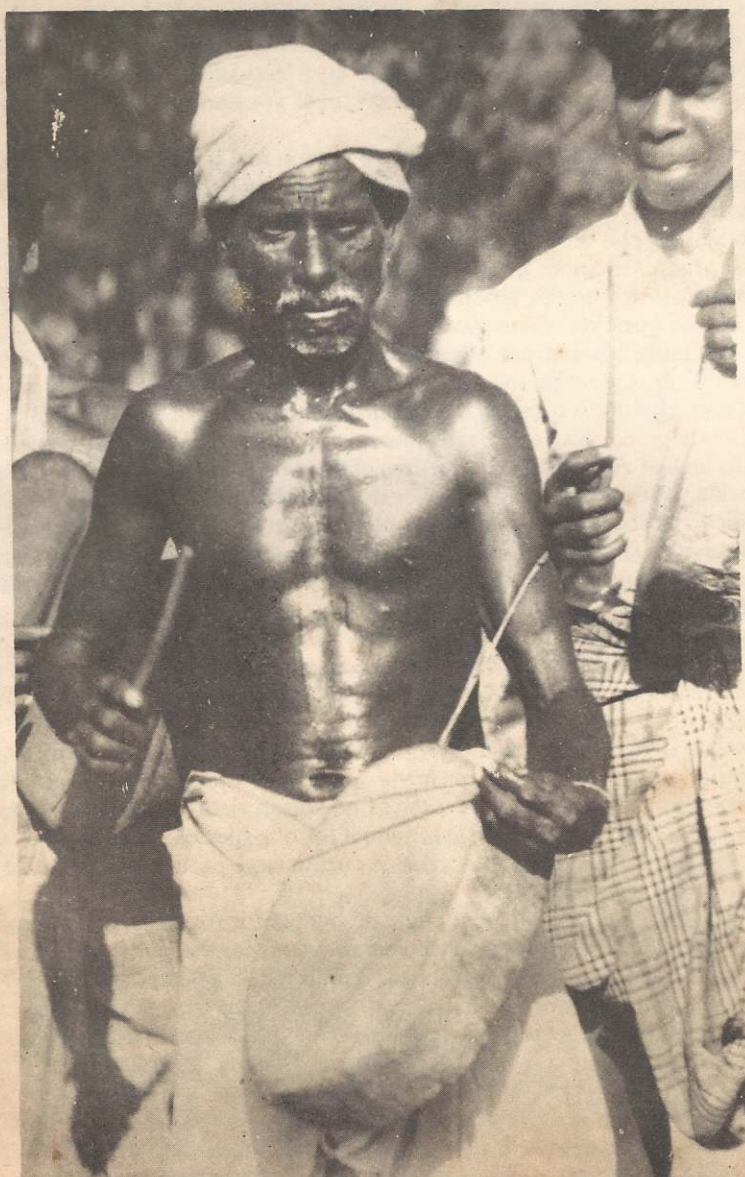
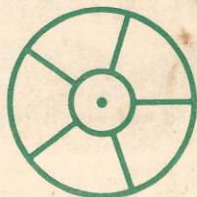


Photo taken during firewalking ceremony at Edayanchavadi village.
See next issue.

A personal impression

Summertime

It's almost mid-summer. A Sunday of hazy sun, quick eddies of wind and that head-popping denseness that later may collapse into sharp scurries of rain. And Auroville is empty, emptier than it's been for years. The signs are everywhere. The secretariat is like a deserted film set, the *Auroville News* teeters on the edge of invisibility, an odoriferous cheese mountain rises in Aurogreen, the Certitude Sports ground echoes to the cry of desultory gulls...

But the strange thing is it doesn't feel empty. At least not to me. Rather, Auroville feels full, compact, as if a dense energy has been released by the winding-down of so many activities. But it's an energy of content rather than form, of potential rather than manifestation, of silence rather than words. It's as if a massive charge is building before flashing across the terminals of materialisation.

Winter, the Auroville winter, feels like the opposite polarity. Those temperate

months are the months of meetings, of seminars, of bright ideas and new faces, of fresh initiatives and unbounded enthusiasm. Each January, the Golden Age, the Millennium, approaches. Just one more meeting and we're there! But what we're playing with, at least some of the time, is forms, packages. New tunes for old songs. And when we get to May, often nobody's singing!

In this sense the Auroville summer, that long, deep tropical in-breath, is the testing ground for those winter brilliancies. If an activity, an idea, can survive those copper days when the rough soil burns the feet and everything is stripped back to elementals, then it stands a chance of plunging its roots into this uncompromising soil.

Summer is not 'time out'. Rather, it completes our circuit, linking winter words with summer substance, outbreath with in-breath. Isn't it time we started appreciating it more?

Alan

It's Not Finished Yet!

One million? Two million? Nobody knows for sure. But a lot of trees have been planted in Auroville over the past 21 years. In those early days everybody, it seemed, was 'green'. Future captains of industry, budding politicians, apprentice musical maestros all got their hands dirty planting seedlings. And the result of this devotion, this blood, sweat and tears, is that Auroville now has an international reputation for its work on land reclamation and afforestation.

But what is the actual situation on the ground today? Let's begin with that seductive term the 'Green Belt'. A 1974 brochure blithely prophesies, "Surrounding the City with its nebula-like shape and its four sectors will be the Green Belt, a band two kilometres in width..." Well, the present 'Belt' wouldn't hold up anybody's trousers. In fact, it's a sizeable green crescent plus some scattered oases of forest plantation. In between are village cashew topes — green, but monocultured and drowned in pesticides — and crop fields which, for half the year, are copper dust-bowls under a slow-wheeling sun. Until we acquire the intervening land, we'd better change our terminology.

But that's not the end of the story. Because even if we acquire the land, who is going to do the work? Proportionately, there are less Aurovilians working on the land now than ever before. Why? One reason is that there is little money available at present to support greenwork in Auroville. Also, most of the available land has been planted out and erstwhile foresters are now turning to other activities. Partly as a consequence of this, there's been a paradigm shift in the community over the last few years. Afforestation, while it continues to be a big 'selling point' to the world, is no longer 'in'. It's been supplanted by education and electronics as the magnet of our energies. 'Greenies' or 'red feet', have been relegated to the status of a fringe caste with quaint — and occasionally controversial — habits who may be safely viewed from the pillion of a speeding Hero Honda.

Such shifts of focus may be inevitable: we are in a different phase now. The problem is — contrary to a common assumption — these green areas are not magically invulnerable. They require maintenance, care, stewardship in the highest sense of the term, if they are to continue to provide the indispensable physical base for all our other weird and wonderful activities. And we're not always doing this. More and more bunds are unrepaired, fences are down, there is over-grazing in parts

of the forest. And the few Aurovilians who are prepared to do this specialised work of stewardship are often forced into other activities that either divert their energy, or, at worst, are actually destructive of their fragile charge. For greenworkers get no maintenance. On top of all this, as the trees grow, as shade invades the parched earth, so do these areas attract more and more Aurovilians who want to live in a sylvan setting while commuting to work. O.K. But we need to be aware what we're doing when roads proliferate at random, where prime timber trees are cut because they "spoil the view" and where extensive water hungry lawns become the favoured setting for miniature palaces (and this in a drought year!).

This sounds apocalyptic, and maybe I have drunk one coffee too many this morning. But the fact is *our green base is fragile*. We neglect it at our cost. Let's be clear. Nobody (I think!) is advocating turning Auroville into a virgin forest. We don't have the land, eventually we'd all have to leave, and it would take about 1500 years to 'climax'. On the other hand, nobody wants Auroville reduced to a few symbolic trees artistically framing modernist mausoleums. Most Aurovilians respect the need for a healthy, viable and fairly extensive zone of trees and parkland surrounding the proposed city. Such a zone would perform manifold functions — stabilizing soil, water catchment, natural air-conditioning and pollution control, buffering noise, providing income, creating seed, fauna and flora 'banks', providing an environment for recreation, for walking, jogging, healing and B R E A T H I N G.

How can we achieve this? There are concrete steps. We need to acquire more land in the designated Green Belt area to close up the missing links; we need to give adequate material support to those Aurovilians who want to do the work; we need to have some control over the density of population and the routing of roads in green areas. We need to designate a few areas that will function as sanctuaries or seed and flora 'banks'.

For this to succeed, however, it will require the psychological support of the whole community. And this will only happen when we 'de-politicize' the forest, when we cease to think in terms of city OR forest, developer OR environmentalist. Nor do we want a pallid compromise. We want (didn't Mother say it somewhere?) *this and this and this*, each strong in their integrity and richness, each finding their rightful place in the Auroville mosaic.

Alan