

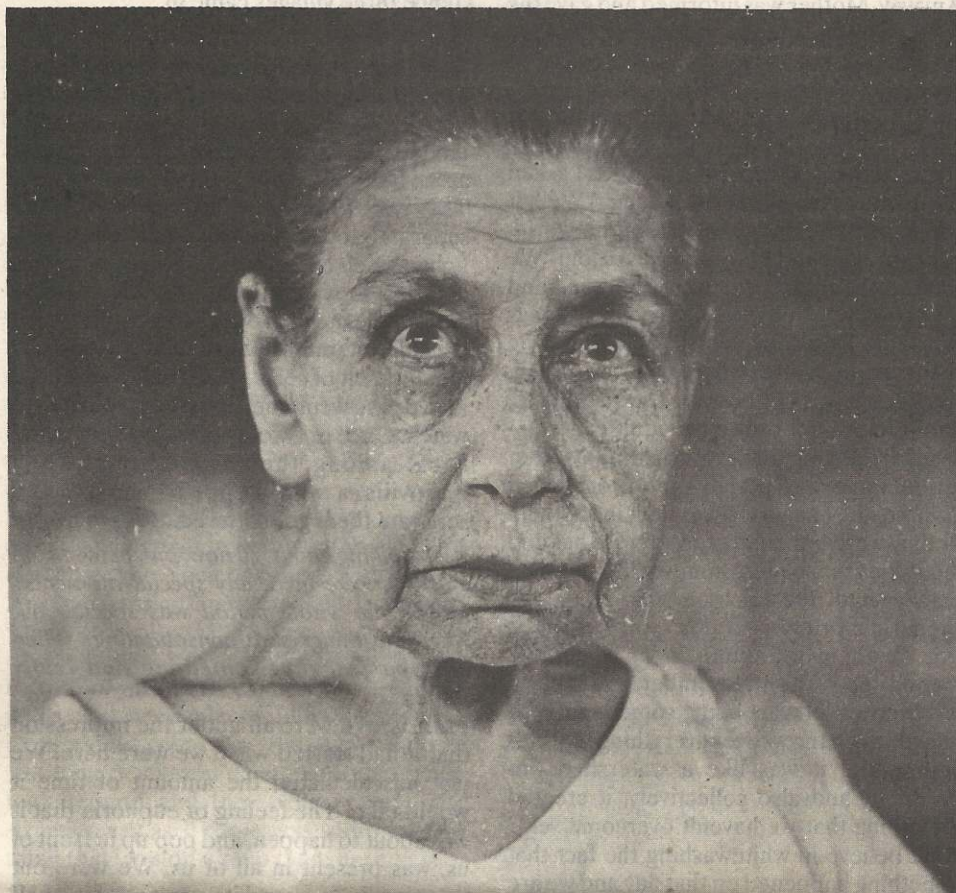
AUROVILLE TODAY

Birthday Issue

February 28, 1989

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Mother

1968

From Foundation to Foundation

This month, Auroville is 21 years old. In this issue of Auroville Today we look, like the Roman god Janus, both backwards and forwards. The chronology below contains the bare bones of the story. Elsewhere, we try to add flesh by asking some long-time Aurovilians to share their experiences of the past and their understanding of some of the crucial turning points in this fascinating, frustrating, compulsive, indefinable experiment — words that are glimpses, fragments of a mosaic. We also provide a hint of how the villagers — “the first Aurovilians” as Mother called them — view us. And then we try, in this City of Dawn, to catch the first light of new beginnings, of new challenges that will confront us in the years to come.

As the bonfire, lit in the early morning of February 28th, burns into the dawn, let it be a moment for recollection, for introspection, for lighting a fire and rededicating ourselves to the flame that burns undiminished in our hearts.

The Auroville Charter

1. Auroville belongs to nobody in particular.
Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole.
But to live in Auroville one must be a willing servitor
of the Divine Consciousness.

2. Auroville will be the place of an unending education,
of constant progress and a youth that never ages.

3. Auroville wants to be the bridge between the past and the future.
Taking advantage of all discoveries from without and from within,
Auroville will boldly spring towards future realisations.

4. Auroville will be a site of material and spiritual researches for a
living embodiment of an actual Human Unity.

February 28th, 1968.

It is the foundation ceremony of Auroville. In the middle of a barren, eroded plateau in South India, Mother's reading of the Charter is broadcast live, and throughout India, by All India Radio. Then youth, representing 124 nations and 23 Indian states, place soil from their homelands in a raised marble urn, symbolizing the fundamental unity of mankind. An age-old dream is reborn on Indian soil. Immediately, the first essential work is begun by a few pioneers — drilling for water, land reclamation, afforestation. The first settlements arise. The challenge is vast, the resources limited.

“I invite you...”

to the great adventure; and in this adventure you are not to repeat spiritually what the others have done before us, because our adventure begins from beyond that stage. We are for a new creation, entirely new, carrying in it all the unforeseen, all risks, all hazards, - a true adventure of which the goal is sure victory, but of which the way is unknown and has to be traced out step by step in the unexplored. It is something that has never been in the present universe and will never be in the same manner. If that interests you, well, embark. What will happen tomorrow, I do not know. You must leave behind whatever has been designed, whatever has been built up, and then march on into the unknown. Come what may.”

Mother

October, 1968.

UNESCO passes the second of four resolutions supporting Auroville, inviting “Member States and international non-governmental organizations to participate in the development of Auroville as an international cultural township designed to bring together the values of different cultures and civilizations in a harmonious environment with integrated living standards which correspond to man's physical and spiritual needs”

February, 1972

The foundation stone of Matrimandir is laid.

“The Matrimandir wants to be the symbol of the Divine's answer to man's aspiration for perfection.” (The Mother, February, 1972)

Work on the structure begins soon afterwards.

November 17th, 1973.

Mother leaves her body.

1974 - 1980

Intensive work on the land continues. Over one million trees are planted, and a massive land reclamation and water conservation programme is carried out.

Meanwhile, there is increasing tension between the Aurovilians and the Sri Aurobindo Society (SAS), an organization based in Pondicherry. Mother had put them in charge of raising money and purchasing land for Auroville, but after her passing they claimed proprietary rights over the project. The residents resisted this as being a betrayal of the spirit of the Charter and began to evolve their own organization. The situation degenerates, violence erupts, work on Matrimandir is seriously curtailed. Finally, the community requests the Government of India's protection in order to continue working uninterruptedly towards the fulfillment of Mother's dream.

November, 1980

The Auroville (Emergency Provisions) Act is passed. The Government takes over the management of Auroville for a limited period, and sets up an International Advisory Council of eminent persons (composed of Mr. A.M. M'Bow, Director General of UNESCO; Sri Narasimha Rao, Minister for Human Resources; Madame Zhivkova, Minister of Culture for Bulgaria; Mr. J.R.D. Tata, the respected Indian industrialist) to advise it on Auroville. An Administrator and a Deputy Administrator are appointed to oversee the management of Auroville's assets.

The SAS challenges the Act. Its major claim is that Auroville is a religious denomination and that, under the Indian Constitution, the Government is not empowered to interfere in the management of such an organization.

1981

The beginnings of the Auroville International network (AVI), linking Auroville with the Centres abroad. The first international gathering is held in Auroc, in France.

November, 1982.

In an historic judgement, the Supreme Court upholds the validity of the Act, declaring, “There is no room for doubt, that neither the Society nor Auroville constitute a religious denomination”

1980 - 1988

A period of sustained and comprehensive growth and consolidation. The community seeks to define and refine its internal organization. Many new productive and research units — ranging from high-tech electronics to craft workshops to appropriate technology — are set up. In 1984, with the assistance of the Government of India, the Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research (SAIIER) is established to promote the educational ideals of Mother and Sri Aurobindo. Education in Auroville is reorganized and revived. The Auroville Press starts printing volumes of *Mother's Agenda*. The population of Auroville gradually increases over this period.

September 1988.

The Auroville Foundation Bill is passed. The Bill provides for an International Advisory Council, a Governing Board of eminent persons, and the Residents Assembly. The latter is granted management of its internal affairs. The community looks forward to a new era of growth.

LOOKING FORWARD, LOOKING BACK

Snapshots of Auroville's First Years

(Roger talks with Frederick, Savitra, Francis, Johnny and Jan.)

A Common Cry

Auroville Today: *Why not start from the beginning? Maybe we can try to remember what Auroville was like then, back in 1968, and how things unfolded and in what direction.*

Frederick: I would say the first phase of Auroville was from 1968 to 1973, when the Mother left. I think each one has his own individual, very personal, very intimate recollections, that is, his individual aspiration. But then there was also a collective aspiration which was not in antagonism to the individual but simply different. I'm sure the foundation of Auroville was something where everyone was caught suddenly in a common cry for the future.

A common dream... *What were the feelings back then when the whole project started? How did the project start?*

Frederick: I think it was very young, and very fresh, very utopian and very hopeful. But speak to people who were in France, in Europe, in Berkeley, in Berlin of '68, '69, '70. It was the same vibration. It was not unique to Auroville. There's an overall terrestrial evolution. I'm amazed sometimes how naive, how young I sounded in my letters to the Mother, my conversations or in my diaries, how hopeful and believing I was.

You once mentioned that the foundation ceremony was almost like a meteorite hitting the earth.

Frederick: It felt like that. It felt like something from a different plane. Like that one triangle of Sri Aurobindo's symbol which stands on its head really hitting the ground. And that impact was too much in fact. The next day there was nobody there. It was empty, it was wind-blown, there wasn't a tree, there was nothing. There was the grandstand there, there was a lot of litter, and it took days before people started crawling out of their niches to look at what actually had happened.

Who were the first people to come out here? There was the foundation ceremony and then an empty desert. The first six months, how did Auroville actually physically start manifesting?

Francis: I came in October 1968; that was the first time I came out here. I actually came to stay here on the land. Other people staying on the land were Arindam, Gene Maslow, Janet Fearn, Bob and Deborah Lawlor and Gary Miller. And they were the only ones here at that time. Except for Bob and Deborah, who had come in July and

started Forecomers, everybody was staying around the Centre area.

Mother

I heard this story that Mother actually physically went to the Auroville area, near where Hope is now, the Ganesh temple, in the 50's. Is that true?

Frederick: What I was told was that she used to go for walks in the afternoon. She owned... a Bentley I think it was. Pavitra would drive behind her and she would walk quite briskly in front. She said, "I know the place".

So, Mother did physically walk this land!

Frederick: She said that she knew there was a banyan tree, she pinpointed it on the map. In one of the plans, I think, Roger Anger had a lake in the centre, and they were rushing back and forth to her with theodolites and dumpy levels, saying they had finally located where that pinpoint actually was on the land. They told her, "But there's a big banyan tree there", and she said, "Yes, I know!". The location of Auroville was still floating, in the initial period, because at one point it was thought to be much more inland, towards the Lake Estate.

When was it that Mother pinpointed this location on the map?

Frederick: It was prior to the Foundation Ceremony. Roger A., Gilbert G. etc. were doing the preparations and they asked, "Mother, where exactly is the Centre?" She said, "Let me see a map". She looked at a map, she closed her eyes and she took some sharp instrument and she put it down. Everybody stared and waited and then they measured it, and that was where the Banyan tree was. And she said she knew there was. And they said, "We have to cut." And she said "No".

Savitra: There was at the time of the foundation ceremony a brick barrier built around it, which the Mother instructed the Aurovilians to take down, because it was constricting the tree. She said she had received the feeling from the tree that this was to be taken away.

Jan: The presence of the Mother in the physical was... I don't know how to describe it... She was looking after everything. It made things easier, no worries.

Frederick: I think her presence helped us not to have to question and not to have to employ your mind and ask for the rights and wrongs. She said it, and you did it. I'm thinking of some of the more absurd situations. One of the things was that Bob decided that the urn at the Amphitheatre... There was

no fortification around it, you see, it was just a dirt mound with the urn on top, and once I met the Mother and I had a photo of that. There was water almost up to the base of the urn and she said, "Now what kind of foundations does the urn have?" After that bricks were put around it, and at that time Bob decided that these bricks really looked horrible. He felt that they should be painted. Everybody was very enthusiastic. He supplied us all with brushes, various kinds of blue oil paints and each one sat in front of his portion of bricks and started painting those bricks by hand. It became a real kind of mosaic. I don't know who of the planners decided that this wasn't IT. Anyway, Mother was informed and gave the reply that was almost standard at the time in case of controversy in Auroville in general, "Wait till Roger comes"...

Savitra: I remember we were asking our kids — the ones who could remember — this question [about Mother — eds.]. I asked Renu and I remember her saying, "Well, it was like everything was right in the world, because the Mother was in that room. We went to the bazaar, we went shopping and we knew everything was OK — She was sitting there, you rode your bicycle down the road, and no matter where you were going, you knew it was OK because she was there". And I know, not only from adult experiences, for the kids that grew up with Mother felt in some way perhaps more orphaned than we did, because it was built in for them — they were born and grew up with her and those kids maybe had a more difficult time than we had. She was their Mother.

Frederick: I think — I don't know if this is true for the world, but it is for us here — that on the 17th of November, 1973, when the Mother left her body, something happened which threw over everything that was before and it was like a watershed. Individually and also collectively, it created something that we haven't overcome yet. I don't believe in whitewashing the fact that something happened on that day and we are all victims of Her leaving in a certain way. Even now, when Savitra was talking — I'm almost fifty years old — I'm close to tears. I miss her, no? I think she has created an expectancy in me and she suddenly left, and that vacuum has never been filled.

Matrimandir: Our centre was off!

Savitra, when did you come to Auroville?

Savitra: '69 When we started digging the foundations (late 1970) for Matrimandir, I was living at Aspiration. We were brought out in a car every morning. We were digging and it was a kind of absurd exercise watching maybe 14 people maximum coming out in the mornings. I don't remember if there were people working full time then. Maybe some of the people at the Centre. We used to come from Aspiration before breakfast, so we would get in about 2 hours of digging.

It went on like this for a couple of weeks. Then somebody came out from Pondy and said, "You guys are digging in the wrong place." Do you remember?

Francis: Yes.

Savitra: Our centre was off! We had to have the centre readjusted.

Francis: It took a few days for everyone to really absorb the shock! (laughter) We were under the impression at the time that all the labour was lost, but in reality it wasn't. It was just shifting the centre and starting from that point. But it made us see very early in the game that we were not going to complete the digging! And that if we would, we would all be grandfathers by that time! Hence three villages came in.

From where?

Francis: I really don't know where they came from, but they hired themselves out as a full village to dig. They weren't local labour. They were from three different areas in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. They were brought in and they had to work separately, otherwise they would all get into fights which actually did take place. It was amazing to watch because it was just like ants on the move. You couldn't believe that these little ammas [village ladies] carrying that little bit of soil... But it was continuous and down went the hole. It was great to watch. Once or twice there were heavy conflicts among the three teams. Then Aurovilians who stepped in to try and separate them got battered. (laughter)

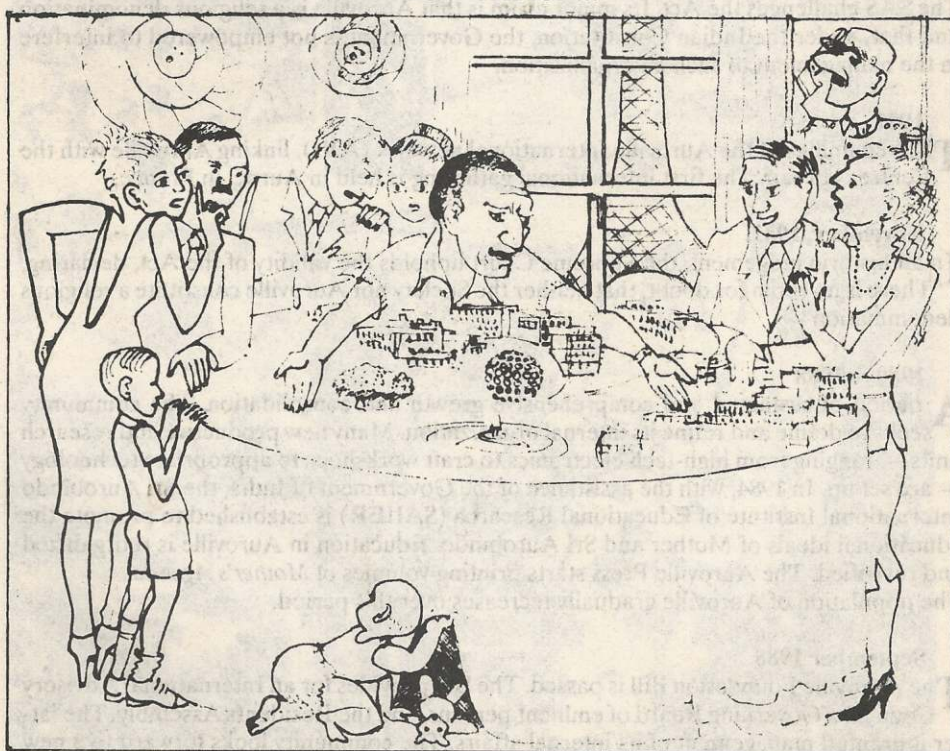
We're talking about '70 now, but, between '68 and '70, were there any special moments? Maybe the whole period was special, but when did things start consolidating? When did you feel that something had really started?

Francis: We were all under the impression that it had started when we were here. We just miscalculated the amount of time it would take! The feeling of euphoria that it was about to happen, and pop up in front of us, was present in all of us. We were out there working — and it wasn't working half a day; it was working all the time from the moment you woke up till when you went to sleep. Just getting your drinking water, cooking your food, buying your groceries, fixing pumps, planting anything, to see if anything would grow. Because there was nothing here. There was a great bond among everybody who was out here and Mother was present, so any disagreements went straightaway to her, and most of the time she laughed! (laughter)

Planning

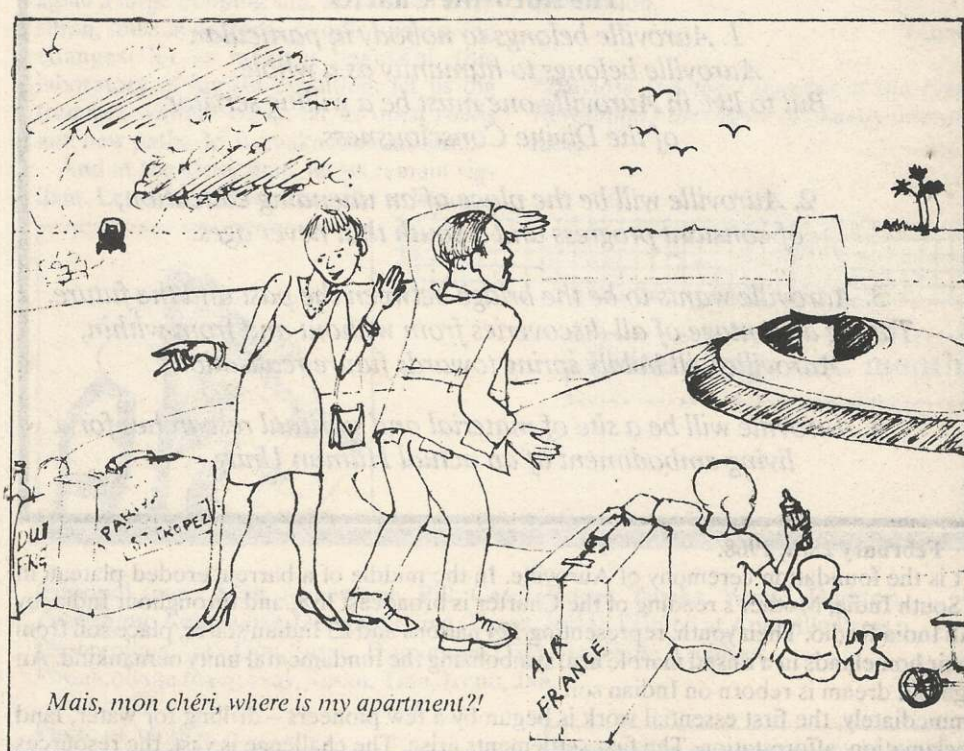
Frederick: I think it must have been her birthday, the 21st of February. She gave a message to Bob saying, "There is nothing living at the Centre, there is nothing to receive my Force, and I want you to plant some trees". So we went to plant 21 Transformation trees. And in one of those mad

PRESENTATION...



Paris, early 70's: Madame Y. comes to know about Auroville.

- REVELATION...



Some time later: Madame Y. arrives at Auroville.

planning sessions — there was already the dichotomy between planners from Pondy and the residents — it was decided that those 21 Transformation trees were standing in the wrong site which didn't correspond to Roger A.'s plan.

This was '69?

Frederick: It must have been '69, yes. It was her birthday, and they were all cut down again because they didn't correspond to the original plan.

Jan: Isn't there even one left?

Frederick: Not at that site. They must have planted some other trees. It was right by the Camp.

They cut down the Transformation trees! It must have put us back about 15 years, at least! Or 21 maybe! How many did they cut down? 21?

Frederick: There were meant to be 21. They all took, actually. Then later on many more trees were planted. And now it's full of trees. So it's all right.

It was like the conceptual mind saying, "We want to have an empty space, where the City descends, on top of it; don't disturb it, don't mess it up, don't start living on it if you can avoid it, and leave it *tabula rasa*..." and the others saying, "Auroville is living something else; work it out there on the land" — this dichotomy has never been solved. Most of the organizers and planners never came out, they stayed in Pondy. In fact I had often attended meetings in Pondy in the planning office, in the Society office, with Roger Anger, Navajata and Ananjani Dayanand where they all said "No, no, no, we can't decide it here, let's go out to the site". And then a cavalcade of cars — two wagoner jeeps and a couple of Indian Mahindra jeeps would come out. But they wouldn't stay long. They would get out of their cars, look around and they would head back straightaway as if there was some kind of thing that wouldn't keep them here.

No More Tour Buses!

Let's talk about the first years in Forecomers, one of the most colourful and interesting communities of the time. Could you describe how it was then?

Francis: It was a moonscape. Nothing was growing.

Horizon on all sides?

Francis: Well, you had some palmyra trees growing and right at the entrance of Forecomers you had maybe half a dozen old mango trees growing. Other than that, nothing. Flat and barren. Actually it was very beautiful at night, especially at full moon nights, or sunrises and sunsets, it was exquisite. The colours of the earth, and all the birds that were there in the canyon and the animals. They were much more visible. They had much less cover to hide. We started a dam. It was picked by everybody:

Auroville's engineers, Tamil Nadu engineers, Central Government engineers and they designed this dam, and we had workers on the dam that would carry earth all day long and pound it. We did a clay centre, and then we walled it up with earth, then we put a layer of bricks and concrete, and another layer of brick, footings on both ends. We granited the whole thing upstream so there wouldn't be any erosion. We were quite proud of this dam. And Pondy was quite proud of this dam too, because they brought their tour bus out every day to show all the tourists this dam that was being built in Auroville. We were getting pretty uptight with all these tourists coming in.

And then we had a freak rain. I think it was in May — it was a strange rain, out of season and everything. We had built two dams by the time this rain came. I was living close to the lesser one and I got up and looked out of the door outside over the edge of the canyon: there was water in it! I was so happy and joyful and I quickly ran over to where the big dam was. I looked into the canyon and... it was dry!! I looked up to where the dam was and there was this gigantic hole as if a 250 pound bomb had landed smack dab into the centre of it! And we're sitting there on the edge of the canyon lamenting this situation, all the time and energy that was lost... and the only thing I could think of was, "Ah! No more tour buses!!" (laughter) And about an hour later this whole group of villagers came storming into the canyon and they WERE angry! And we had no idea what they were excited or upset about and finally somebody showed up to help us and translated everything for us, and it turned out that the water behind the dam had piled up right to the height of the dam and when the dam broke all this water went gushing down the canyon in one surge, it went right into this village and as everybody was sleeping on the floor, they got very wet and very upset!

A beautiful door

Savitra: I remember the Forecomers toilet. It used to be one of the more bizarre visions of Auroville because it had a swinging door and there was nothing behind it!

Francis: That was my creation!

Savitra: You would open this door, which you thought was a door to a bathroom... and there was nothing behind it! (laughter)

Francis: It was painted all these colours — yellow, white, black... it was a beautiful door.

Savitra: It was actually the perfect image of Auroville of those days! There was this facade, and you opened it up and there was nothing behind! (laughter)

The drum

Francis: A play was performed in the canyon, in '69 I think. We worked on it for weeks. The workers must have thought we

were crazy! We put steps down into the canyon, smoothed out whole areas and dug mounds and everything else. People would come out in buses and they would be led into the canyon and be told a story as they went along. And then they would stop at a certain place and some of us would jump out and do a skit, a dance or recite a poem or sing a song... There was one that was beautiful, with Austin and Constance; it was in the middle of the summer, and we had this puddle that was supposed to be a pond. Austin was standing above it and reading out something and suddenly Constance would pop up from the water and answer him! (laughter) It was actually a 55 gallon drum we had buried into the ground and we had put water around the top. We would fit Constance in there and when he saw the crowd coming he had to duck down and hold his breath until the right moment and then he would pop up!

Sacred planting

Johnny and Jan moved to Fertile in 1972.

Johnny: Fertile was actually a forestation camp when it was begun. But it slowly became permanent, simply because we didn't go out to acquire more land. The initial idea was that it would be a camp and you would plant the surrounding area and then leave a maintenance-cum-watchman staff there, and then slowly move around and plant the whole greenbelt [a forest area surrounding the planned city — eds.]. There was a map about how the original plantings should go on. And plantings were an extremely sacred happening. In fact we would do them only on specific days in the beginning. And I remember how Norman Dowsett would come in with all the ashramites and every tree was planted to fit in with a vortex, whose purpose was to channel the winds into the Centre. Every tree supposedly had a specific position and a specific shape, and a specific destiny, and they were all planted with a mantra — at least the first few were. But then we got to the point where we were worried that we were planting when there wasn't any rain. The specific days didn't coincide any more with the tree planting cycle. We used to go through this sort of thing every sacred Sunday — and plant about ten. But then afterwards, whenever it rained we would just move out with the bullock carts and plant the rest. This was the beginning of Fertile — it was called Fertile Seven Banyans.

Auroville and the world

How did things change after 1973?

Savitra: Since Mother's passing, it's almost as if Auroville had to mesh gears with the rest of the world.

No longer an island.

Savitra: Right. You could say that, at the moment of Her passing, we went into our own shadow. But now, if you look all around the world, you see that people are able to acknowledge the relevance, the reality of Auroville, and can actually translate that into their own lives. I feel that the promise that was planted in the beginning of Auroville is coming back now on a much larger scale than any of us imagined at that time. It doesn't belong to us any more.

The conflict

Coming to terms with one's shadow. How did that difficult experience unfold in Auroville? And have we come to terms with our shadow now, 20 years later?

Savitra: I think we're just beginning to have the honesty to confront our shadow as a shadow. You could say the struggle with the Society [Sri Aurobindo Society — Eds.] was an 'outer' conflict, which became an external symbol — and there was a legitimacy in Auroville's struggle at that time. There really was an actual threat. There were persons who — I felt — carried the force of the world that wanted to swallow this place up in one way or another. But then suddenly it wasn't any more a struggle with something 'out there'. It became a dogmatic struggle and they were the enemy, and every problem

was because of *them*. For maybe 5 or 10 years we were operating on this principle: eliminating the negative rather than building the positive. And we lost our balance. When Mother's physical presence was there, she reminded us what we were going toward. "Don't worry about the other person's problems, worry about your own, create an atmosphere of collaboration — that is what I ask of you." This was the overwhelming vibration which she kept pumping into the atmosphere, and in her absence we began to indulge in looking at what was wrong with... I think now, at least I can say for myself, that we are leaving that dungeon.

Was it a necessary experience, could it have been avoided? Was it a detour?

Francis: I believe it could have been avoided. I think Auroville would be better off now, if we had been more advanced at that time. We rebelled against the rigid imposition they (in Pondicherry) were putting upon us, and like all revolutions, once they get going they go out of control and this one did also. And it's now over. Whether we are emerging or we're being forced to emerge I don't know. But I definitely feel that a whole new era is about to descend. And a whole bunch of new people are about to descend which will give a great expansion to the project.

Does it mean that our outlook is changing, a new outlook is emerging?

Francis: We don't hold the Truth; we are aspiring for it and Auroville has never been meant as a small private club. And just now it's going to open its doors and everyone, individuals, countries, everyone is about to participate, in one way or another.

The future

Do you believe Auroville will grow by quantum leaps?

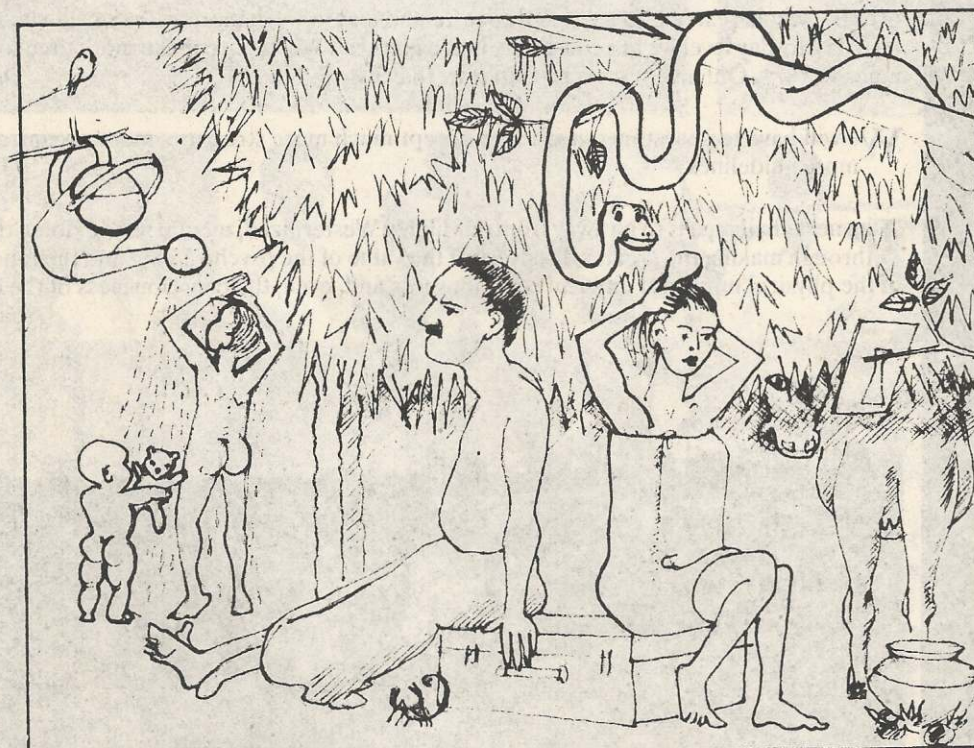
Savitra: I think that's true for the earth as a whole and it is maybe helpful or needed for us to acknowledge this. The quantum leap that happens for us on our micro scale, which is so intense and dense almost to the point of touching — that's going on all over the planet now. Wherever you pass, you get the sense that time is accelerating and that events are moving far beyond people's ability to keep up with them.

Frederick: When Auroson was born for example, somebody — I think it was Yvonne A. — asked the Mother (because, you know, the first Auroson died), "Isn't it a bit early, aren't we pulling down these new beings prematurely, would it not be better if we got more ready and more receptive and more akin to this New Creation..." And she said, "No, if they would have to wait for us, it would be centuries (laughter) — they have to take the plunge and they have to make IT ready." Being caught off guard is going to be the story of Auroville forever.

Johnny: It's an exciting story. It just means that you're going to constantly be confronted with half-finished, half-hearted things.

Frederick: And it also gives you a blessing because luckily all the plans will not happen as planned! There's a grace that relieves you!

Now, after 20 years, after a phase of rooting, of introspection, of consolidating, of making sure that the soil isn't washed into the Bay of Bengal, after all that comes, perhaps, the phase of Auroville which I saw in '66 when I first came to the Ashram and met the Mother. It was an Auroville I saw in a vision: I was far out in the ocean and I remember seeing the waves and the sea, and then the land rising... and then on the horizon, lit up from behind by a setting sun, the silhouette of that Town — of Hers. I felt and saw that the true global participation of the world in the building of Auroville would come from the sea. It would be part of India, but it would transcend India. It was a magnificent promise.



Madame Y. adapts...



The Next Challenge

Auroville Today wanted to discover what Aurovilians felt about the future and, in particular, what they thought would be the next big challenge that we, as a community, might have to face. Here is a selection from their spontaneous responses.

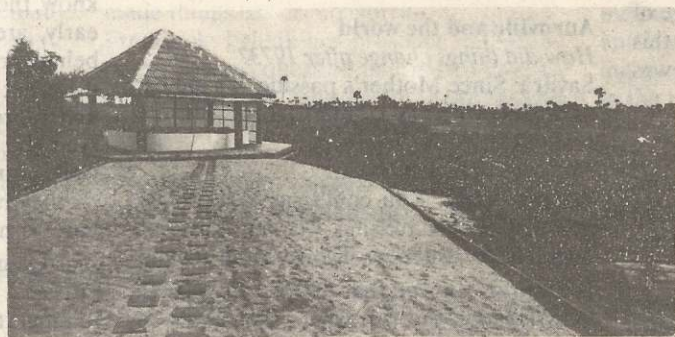
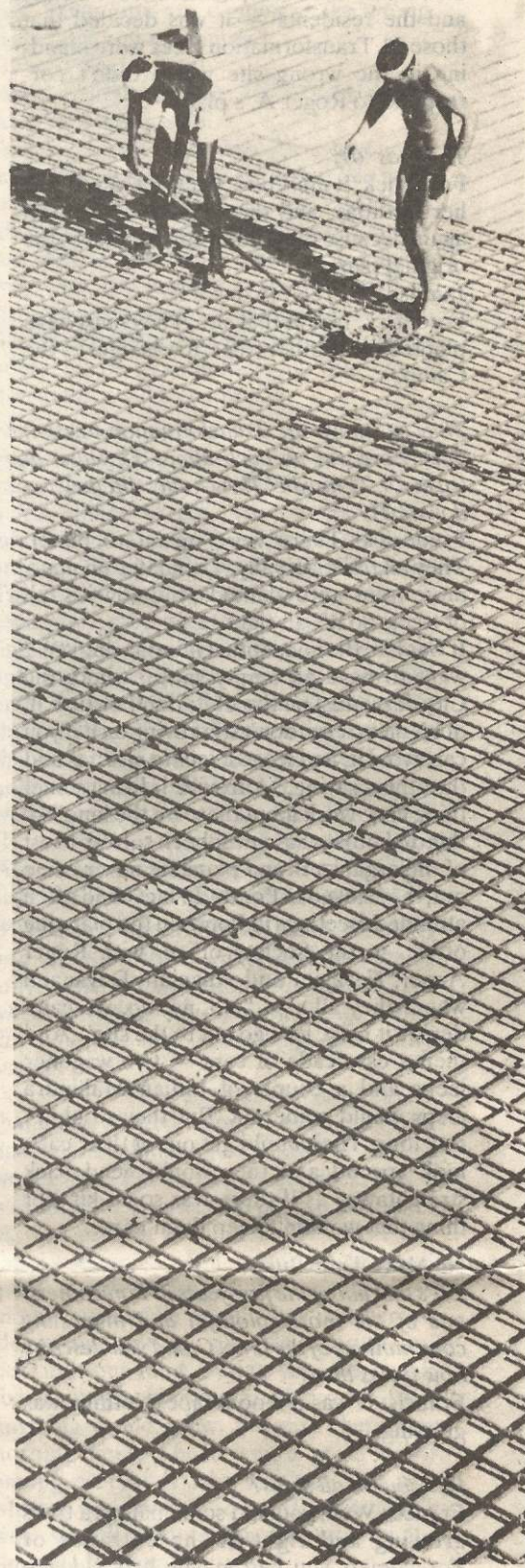
Our biggest challenge is to become self-confident as a community, to know what we want and to go for it without feeling that we have to compromise, to please others. We're not politicians, we're not diplomats. We're Mother's children. If we believe in that, we're going to make it. (Menaig)

The next challenge? A collective economy. O.K.!? (Achilles)

We have to become *relevant*. We can't just live in a bubble. What we do here should have some relevance to the problems people face in the world. We have to become a model for something different. (Suhasini)

We need more humour, more fun! You know the expression 'le bouffon de roi'? We need court jesters! (Croquette)

The challenge is to keep rebuilding ourselves as a community, to keep stretching ourselves beyond our capacities. When there were 70 of us we couldn't cope. With 600 we can't cope. We won't cope with a thousand. But each time, perhaps, we cope a bit better. (Pieter)



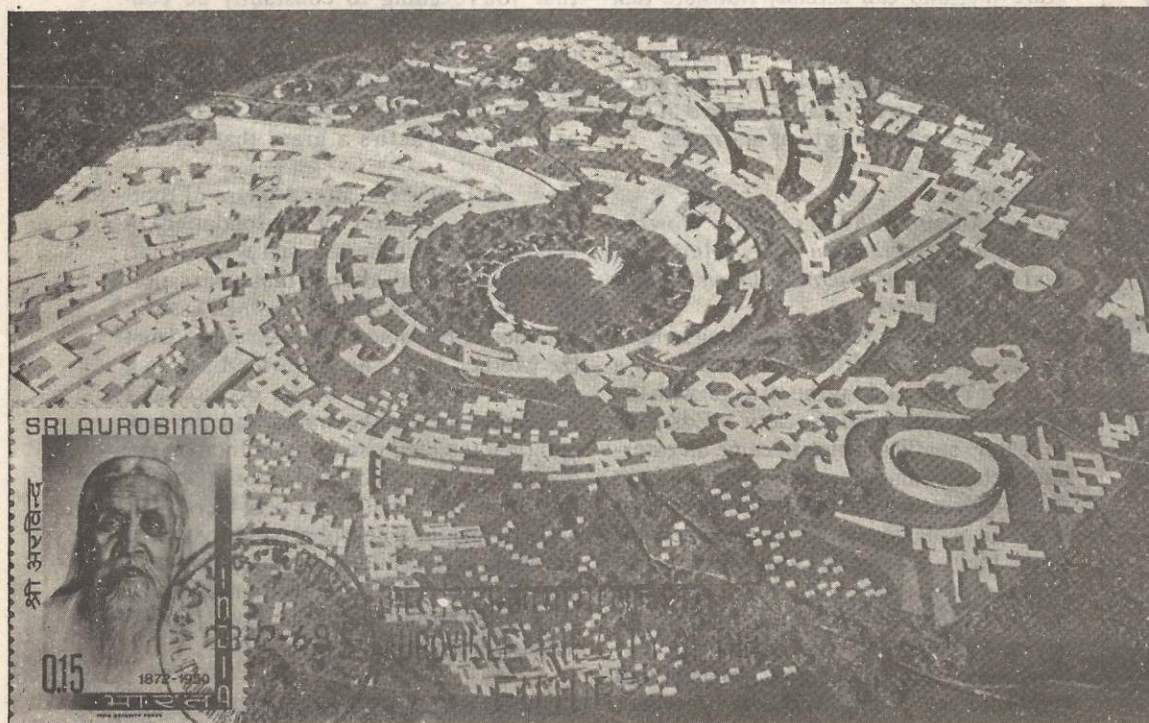
Auroville only has a chance if the spiritual quality is felt, if it is lived. Then the adventure can be unending, even when the city is built. But it is an individual, not a dogmatic question. (Marush)

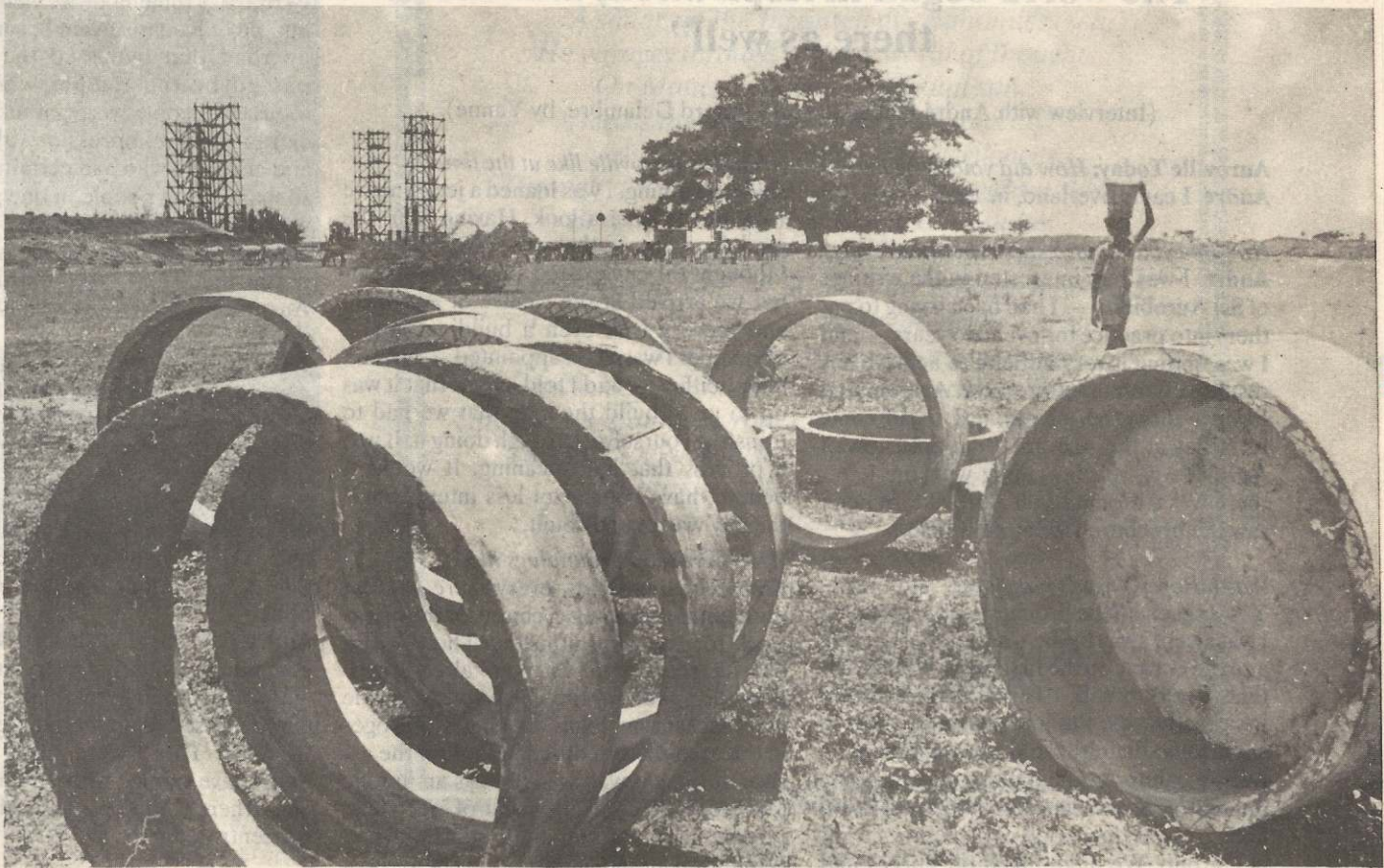
The challenge is to match the external development with the internal development. In the months and years ahead, probably a lot of money will come. Out of that has to grow a truer Auroville. (Alain B.)

We have to get it together to take care of the whole Auroville water-shed, to complete the reforestation and water management work. We have to expand our consciousness over the whole plateau, to include the wasteland and to work more with the village. Also on a day-to-day level we are constantly in the physical. We have to make more time for the inner work. — Oh! and yes, we have to start the city! (Diego)

We will have to accustom ourselves to accept much more structure, more organization more guidelines. (Jothi)

The next challenge is to go away from our highly Westernized, mental way of doing things through making the greater discovery of the value of the psychic being and the function of the physical mind and physical consciousness and, even, the consciousness of the cells (Ananda)





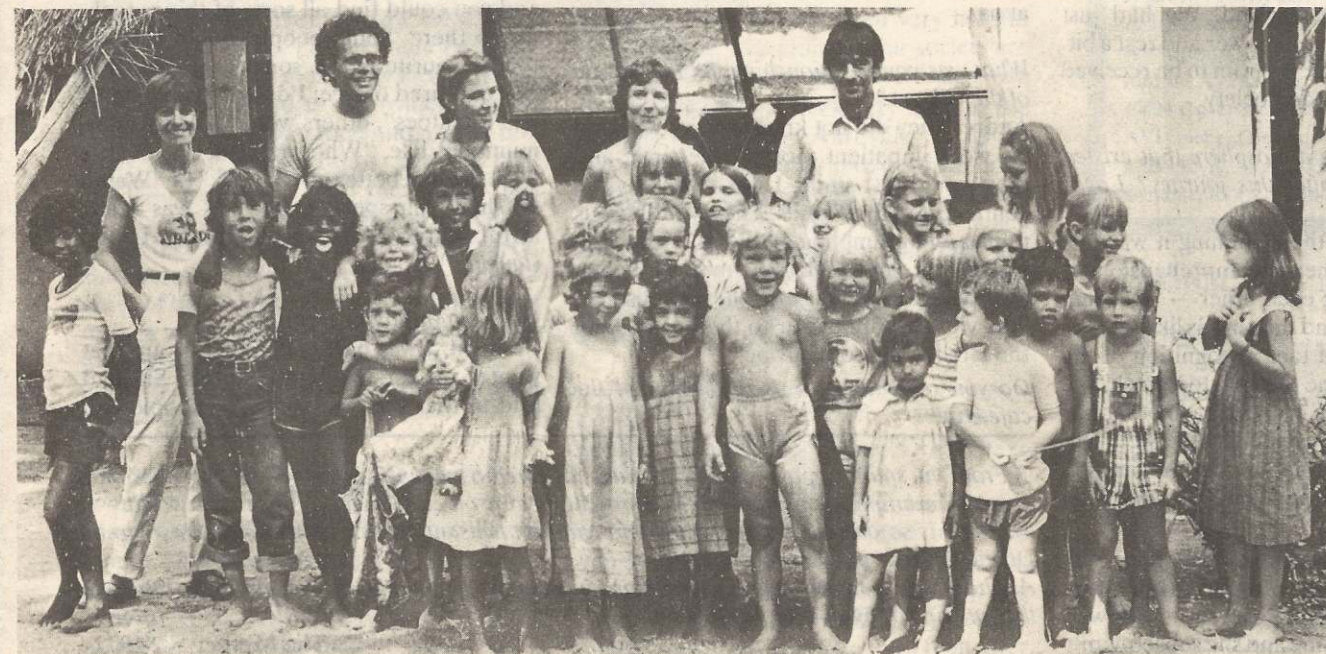
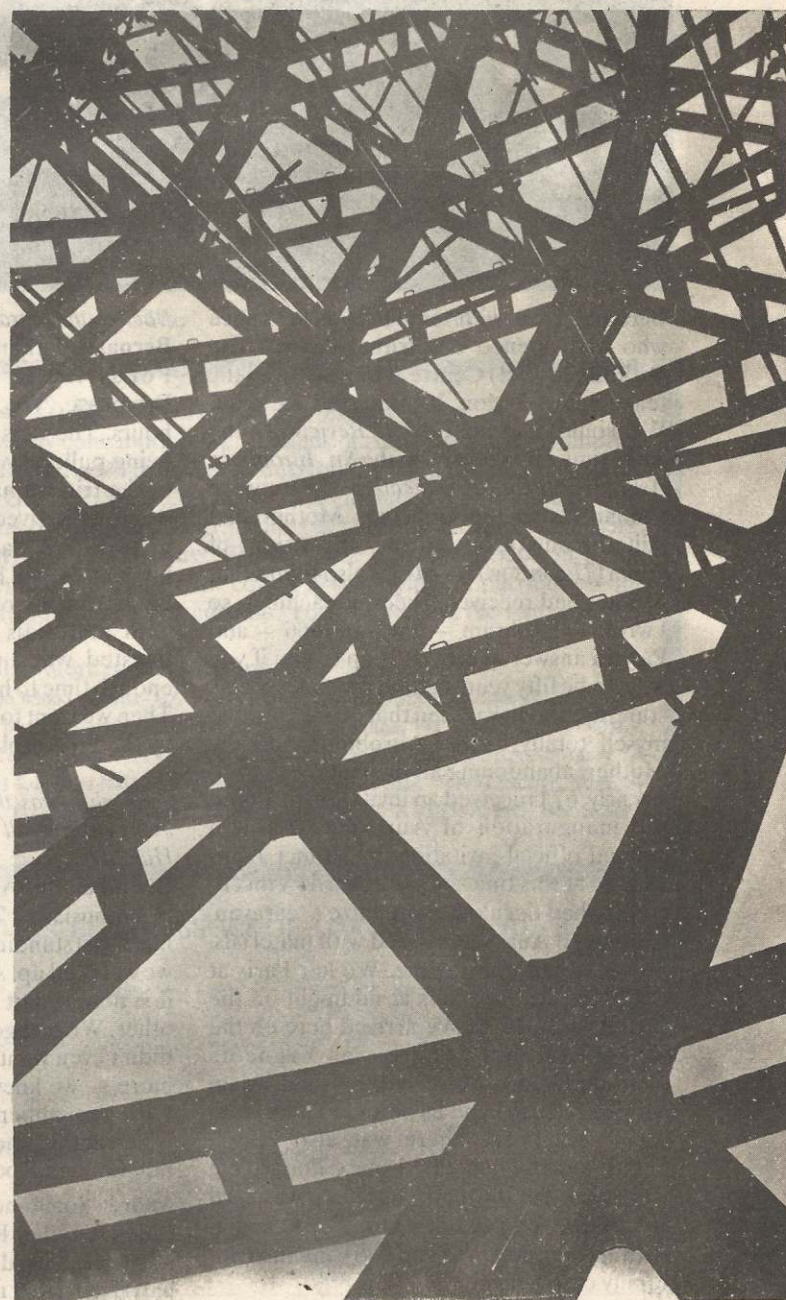
We need to create facilities for all the people who are coming to join Auroville, to create an infrastructure that can support this influx. We have to rise above our capabilities. That's what makes Auroville. (Francis)

We must focus ourselves as a collective body on the central reason for this experiment: an inner growth which expresses itself in an outer manifestation. (Aster)
The challenge is the regeneration of a certain spirit of confidence and sharing. For example, to face the economic challenge. Also a resurgence of aspiration. And why not have a solar panel factory? Then we might become a Solar City! (Eleanor)

More laughter, that's what I see. The past had some grim moments because we seemed to need them to grow up a bit. Now that Auroville's no joke, can we laugh? (Bill)

The first challenge is to create some kind of a collective approach so that we can find the direction that Mother wants Auroville to go in. (Gilles)

Interviews by Alan



"The world began in Aspiration, and ended there as well"

(Interview with André Hababou and Bernard Delambre, by Yanne)

Auroville Today: How did you come here?
André: I came overland, in 1968.

How had you come to know about Auroville?
André: I was very interested in the writings of Sri Aurobindo — I had been trying to put them into practice for over two years — and I was finding it very difficult to achieve any results. I wrote a letter to the Ashram and Pavitra answered me saying I could come for a stay at the Ashram. I did not know of Auroville as yet, but along with the letter there was a brochure on Auroville. When I saw the brochure I was totally taken.

Was it Roger Anger's brochure?
 Yes, I received the brochure in May '68 and I was swept away by the Charter of Auroville and the Galaxy on the first page. When I saw that, I told myself, "This is extraordinary. It's exactly what I'm looking for." I tried to come immediately. I sold some paintings — I was a painter at the time — and got some money together. I came out over land, hitch-hiking. It was the period of the hippies. I left in a group. We hitch-hiked till Turkey and from there, we took buses and trains. It took us a number of months, we thought it would never end.

Bernard, how did you come to Auroville?

What was Auroville like at the time?

André: Nothing. I was loaned a jeep and we went out to take a look. Having seen the model in Paris — that was so well done — I thought the city existed already. I remember we arrived at the Centre of Auroville and there wasn't even a building. And I remember I wasn't disappointed — I wasn't happy either — and I told myself that it was up to us to build the city; that we had to transform ourselves through doing it. It was a process that had meaning. It would, I believe, have been a lot less interesting if the city was already built.

What were the surroundings like?

André: Peanut fields, everywhere. And at the Centre Piero was in charge of the brickwork for the Amphitheatre. There was a banyan tree. For us who were already here (I would spend my time between Auroville and the Ashram; I was working with Roger in the architecture office in Pondy) the arrival of the caravan was seen as an important step in the development of Auroville. I remember we had built some huts in Aspiration, designed by Piero. There was a team of us who were painting them, awaiting the arrival of the caravan. There was Jean-Pierre, now called Bhagawandas, a girl called Brigitte and her friend Christophe and Gilbert G.

gave the place the name of 'Aspiration'.

Bernard: I remember we went through the middle of Kuilapalayam because there was no road that bypassed the village. We passed by the temple where about a thousand people were gathered. It was an extraordinary impression, all these men and children, who had certainly never seen so many white people in one go. And then we arrived in Aspiration and, like André, I was not disappointed because I knew already that there was nothing there in Auroville yet. Arriving was like a sense of relief.

Then slowly life began to organize itself and it was difficult. There was nothing... There was the plateau of Aspiration with one tree under which we had our meetings almost daily in order to define the community's functioning. There was R.A. and G.G. with big words, "Come on, let's make the step, let's throw ourselves into the future, let's put all our money together in a common pot".

André: We decided that we would have a common pot and that everyone would take from it according to their needs. But it emptied itself at an incredible speed.

Bernard: There were some people who didn't have enough to buy themselves bread and others who kept themselves going on concentrated milk...

So some things never change; 20 years later we still dream of putting everything in a common pot...

André: Yes, but I believe nonetheless there is more maturity today.

Bernard: Mrs. Herzog, the wife of the then French Minister of Culture, came on that day. She came up to Aspiration and we had a big celebration. But we were already having problems with R.A. at that period. He wanted us to dress up to receive her; we had long hair, crazy T-shirts etc. He wanted us to disguise ourselves. The cafeteria was very beautiful with cushions of all colours. And we were expecting a lot of people to come. And so we told R.A., "If Mrs. Herzog wants to meet the Aurovilians she must meet us as we are and not as one would like us to seem." He'd answer, "Yes, but one has to be diplomatic", and we, "We know damn well that diplomacy is false". Anyway, things were off to a great start! Finally we all got disguised in turbans to hide our long hair, a floral arrangement had been made and Mrs. Herzog was happy!

You were young. What was your average age at the time?

Bernard: About 22. We were the oldest ones, we were 26; the others were all 18 or 19 years old.

I remember there was once a fire in the village. The water tank was next to where the Health Centre is now. We were resting and then we heard a shout, "There's a fire, there's a fire!" We rushed out with buckets into the village. We had formed a chain and were throwing buckets of water on the roof. Sometimes the chain broke and we wondered why. We realized that one villager had taken a bucket and put water on his own roof — the guy wasn't stupid. It was difficult to maintain a sense of discipline but we finally managed to extinguish the fire. The firemen showed up eight hours later, with their rubber boots; it was rather funny!

André: Mother then gave us all blessing packets — she no doubt thought that it was good that we helped the villagers.

Bernard: When people started to put up photos of Mother in the place where we ate, V. suddenly brought a crucifix and said, "If you put up photos of Mother, I'll put up a cross." ... It created a scandal at the time, so Mother said, "It is probably not necessary to put my photo up all over Aspiration or in public places".

André: That makes me remember that there were two groups in Aspiration. One was the group of the 'vital beings' and the other was the group of the 'supramental beings'. Both had their leader. There were people who were outraged by the fact that some people had an attitude that was very concentrated and meditative and that smacked of spiritual pretension. They, the 'vitals' would go down to Pondy and drink beer and eat steaks which the 'supramentals' would consider scandalous. Finally the conflict came to the attention of Mother and she came out in defense of the 'vitals'! I think it was because as concerns the 'supramentals' there was a slight element of spiritual pretension which Mother never liked.

And the 'supramentals', what would they do?

Bernard: They were stoics. And as no one spoke to each other any more we had a notice board which we called 'the mirror' and you could find all sorts of things tacked up there. Some people would tack up their favourite menu, something like, "I'm sick and tired of rice; I'd love some carrots and tomatoes", others would tack up communiqués like, "Whoever took this or that from me had better give it back" or "Watch out how you speak to me". It was really awful. Quite the City of Human Unity! (laughter)

You met Mother as a group?

Bernard: I was part of the first group that went to see her, the 'supramentals'. She had told us that she wanted to see people and



Bernard: I was with some friends in France who had opened a spiritual centre. The Pathotique (sic!) Centre. They followed the teachings of Théon. It interested me a lot. We would read the *Cosmic Review*. At the same time I was receiving the *Sri Aurobindo Ashram Bulletin of Education*. There were similarities in the language. Mother had edited many of the dreams and visions of Alma [Théon's wife — eds.]. I also found that Mother had received Théon's teachings, so I wrote the Ashram — it was in 1966 — and Pavitra answered me, "It is up to you if you want to be fifty years behind the times". This stung me and it was then that I concentrated myself totally on Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, abandoning all the rest.

In early '67 I received an invitation to attend the inauguration of Auroville. It was a printed official invitation. I had met Jean-Claude at this time and afterwards Vincenzo who had decided to organize a 'caravan' to come to Auroville loaded with materials. So we signed up to come. We left Paris at the Place des Invalides at midnight on the 15th August, 1969. We arrived here on the 6th of October. There was Francois Gautier, Gérard Maréchal, Krishna, Alain Monnier, Eliane and Rose and Filaure, who wasn't yet born. There was also Pitoëf, Sebastian, Stephan, and Louise Fongé. We were twelve or thirteen. At times it was hard to take as we would drive for twelve hours without stopping. We had two vans and two family cars.

Back to the 'caravan'

Bernard: I think we did the final Delhi-Pondy leg in one go. We arrived in Promesse. We had been driving for 15 hours. The vans had fallen apart and were being pulled by the cars. At the beginning of the trip we had had 20 metres of rope; when we arrived here it was down to two metres. We had been driving at eighty kilometres per hour on Indian roads with the horn not working and the vans packed with materials and men. We were exhausted when we arrived. We had just enough time to have a shower and rest a bit. Then we went to the Ashram to be received by the Sri Aurobindo Society.

And what was the atmosphere that existed between you all after this journey? Love? Hatred?

Bernard: No. At the beginning it was one of enthusiasm. Then incomprehension — misunderstanding each other — and then we were fed up. And then it was like the way it is now: a sort of tacit recognition of the other. We had gone through too much. We didn't even want to criticize each other any more — we knew each other too well. But I do remember going up to Aspiration, which at the time was not called Aspiration but 'Golden Rod'.

André: Someone said that the place was called 'Golden Rod' and that Mother was not at all pleased because it was not she who had given it that name and she subsequently

There were very few of you in the beginning...

Bernard: At the beginning, if one includes the caravan, there were probably sixteen or seventeen of us. There were other communities: Promesse, Gérard of Auro-Orchard... but we had no contact with each other.

On the other hand we had many visitors. Tamil people would file by all day long to see how we ate and washed ourselves, what we did... They would come and lift up our window flaps in order to take a better look at us.

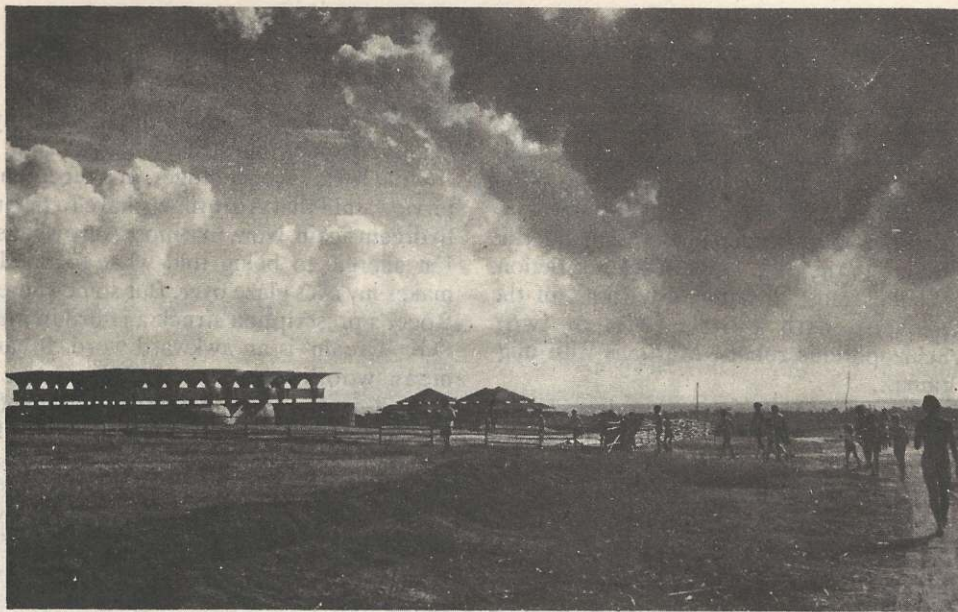
What was your relationship with the people of the villages?

André: They did not know us very well and we were impatient most of the time, and they would just smile. I was struck by the gentleness of the Tamils. They would see us railing and grumbling all the time and they would just smile all the time. And then there was that message Mother sent us that, "the villagers are closer to the Divine than the intellectuals of Europe"

Do you remember the inauguration of the cafeteria?

**) From the spiritual point of view, India is the foremost country in the world. Her mission is to set the example of spirituality. Sri Aurobindo came on earth to teach this to the world. This fact is so obvious that a simple and ignorant peasant here is, in his heart, closer to the Divine than the intellectuals of Europe. All those who want to become Aurovilians must know this and behave accordingly; otherwise they are unworthy of being Aurovilians.*

The Mother, 8.2.1972



we had made up a list. She wanted to receive us as a group. We sat around her in a circle. We said nothing. She would look at us one after the other and slightly above our heads, and then she would become in-drawn. And we were there with all our stupidity and also our faith. There was an incredible sincerity and all of that was offered to Mother. Once when we hadn't said a word, she remarked, "There is a lot of noise here". She would seize us, one couldn't escape. **André:** She could be inside all of us, even physically — it was like she would enter inside my body.

Did the Aurovilians know what they wanted to do with Auroville?

André: We felt that it was an extraordinary privilege and a fantastic grace to be able to be here. It was like a formidable gift. And yet at the same time the ego would take hold of it. At the same time that we had this feeling of Grace we also felt that we were the elected ones, an elite, that we had been chosen.

Bernard: It's true, but the result for example of those visits with Mother — which went on for two months and where Aurovilians met Mother — helped pacify

us. There was a real change in the atmosphere and we began to speak seriously of the construction of Auroville.

Were you already in conflict with the SAS?
André: No. At that time things weren't so bad. It was when Mother left her body that things became very bad.

What I feel listening to you now, is that there wasn't much contact between different communities or even nationalities.

André: That's true. The distances that separated us seemed enormous. And added to that, Aspiration was a very closed place. I think Mother wanted that we remain concentrated. But then also, it should be said, it didn't preoccupy us much — we rarely went to Pondy. The world began and ended in Aspiration.

And the new Aurovilians?

Bernard: They are already completely different. It takes them two weeks and they are already in a light vibration. They catch it much sooner than we did in the beginning. One can see in their eyes that the work is already done.

Twenty-one years of Auroville: A Village View.

An interview with **Lingiswami:** (4th generation farmer from Kottakarai); **Venkadesh:** (President of Village Youth Society, Pettai); **Sarojini:** (Supervisor of Knitting Section at Isaiambalam, from Pudupakkam village.)

Interpreter: **Sundaram** (Village Action, Auroville)

Can you remember what it was like, 21 years ago?

Lingiswami: Everybody was farming then. The first Aurovilians came to the village in jeeps. They gave sweets. We thought they were trying to take our land, to chase us away. So we chased them!

Why did you think they would do that?

Sarojini: They remembered the British and how Indians had to suffer to get independence. They thought all the trouble would start again.

Lingiswami: But then we saw these were different *vellakaras* [Tamil name for white people — eds.]. So everybody in the village wanted to sell land to Auroville, because they could have good food and a good life. They stopped doing crops, and the land spoiled. When they sold their land, they didn't buy more. They lived well, but afterwards they had to go to Auroville for work. But sometimes there was no work. I sold 15 acres of land to Auroville and I understood my son would get a job with Auroville. But he never got one. If people sell land to Auroville, Auroville should try to help them by giving them a job.

Did you understand why these people were coming here?

Lingiswami: We heard they were like a family. They were coming to build an international city.

Venkadesh: And they wanted no caste, no rich or poor. All would be equal.

Were there problems between Auroville and the village?

Lingiswami: People who have jobs with Auroville are happy. But the farmers are not happy because in the greenbelt, Aurovilians grow many trees. And the shade and the roots mean that our crops fail. This bothers us very much, still.

Do you feel Auroville has helped the villagers enough?

Lingiswami: Definitely not. The villagers expected more.

Sarojini: Auroville has been very helpful for my village. The ladies in our society are happy to be able to work here. Otherwise they would have to work very hard in the fields to get money. Auroville has given them better work. And there is a difference between the village ladies and those who work in Auroville. The Auroville ladies dress better, they comb their hair. They are more civilized. They learn how to improve their lives, how to stop their husbands drinking. They get more confident.

Can they keep the money they earn for themselves?

Sarojini: In some families, yes. Others have to give it to their husbands.

Venkadesh: Village Action has done a lot for our village. Last year we had little water. We had to dig a well. Village Action gave us *bombs* [dynamite!-eds.] to help dig. When there is regular work, it is good. But some Aurovilians give a job and then after

*A sailor on the Inconscient's fathomless sea,
He voyages through a starry world of thought
On Matter's deck to a spiritual sun.
Across the noise and multitudinous cry,
Across the rapt unknowable silences,
Through a strange mid-world under supernal skies,
Beyond earth's longitudes and latitudes,
His goal is fixed outside all present maps.
But none learns whither through the unknown he sails
Or what secret mission the great Mother gave.
In the hidden strength of her omnipotent Will,
Driven by her breath across life's tossing deep,
Through the thunder's roar and through the windless hush,
Through fog and mist where nothing more is seen,
He carries her sealed orders in his breast.
Late will he know, opening the mystic script,
Whether to a blank port in the Unseen
He goes or, armed with her fiat, to discover
A new mind and body in the city of God
And enshrine the Immortal in his glory's house
And make the finite one with Infinity.*

Sri Aurobindo,
SAVITRI II, 4



a few months they suddenly say, "No work". This makes the villagers very angry. And we don't want to feel that the *vellakaras* are high up and the Tamil people are below them. Some Aurovilians are very proud. I feel very strongly that we are all the same. When that happens, when some Aurovilians see us as equals, it's very good.

Would any of you like to join Auroville, to leave the village and come and live here?

Venkadesh: I'd like to be an Aurovilian. I'd like to work on the Matrimandir and help Auroville. It's so green and quiet here.

Sarojini: For me it's very difficult. I'd like

to stay here very much, but my parents will decide. And most parents in the village want their daughter to stay in the house when they marry. The husband also wants to keep her there. And if the parents or husband are not there, the brother will be in charge and say the same.

Would you like to give a message to Auroville on its 21st birthday?

Venkadesh: Yes. Do more nice things, keep growing up nicely.

Sarojini: Happy birthday.

Lingiswami: Happy New Year!

Interview by: Alan, Tineke.

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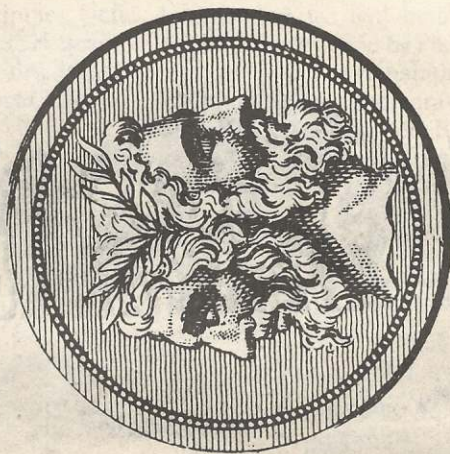
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Looking Forward, Looking Back, Collage '21' and more...

February 28, 1989 - Number Four

Dreaming the future

I have a fantasy that the ultimate novel about the future will consist of blank pages — or else be totally indecipherable. Why? Because if it's really about the future, we won't be able to understand it, embedded as we are in the past. Look at science fiction. What is most of it but extensions of the present, with a little twist or two? Schizophrenic robots, Martians with migraine...

Of course, some futures are less elusive. If termites are climbing my wall tonight, tomorrow's future is pretty predictable — unless I do something fast. The problem is that this prognostic approach doesn't always apply — because our futures, our *real* futures are not always projections of the present. If they were, we'd still be crouching in caves, dreading the sunset.

But Mother knew how difficult it is to break into that new territory. "Auroville will boldly spring towards future realisations", She wrote. "Leap before you look", She told an ashramite, knowing that if we *looked*, we might not *leap*, and if we didn't "boldly spring", we wouldn't escape the inertia, the gravity of the past.

Because, if I'm honest with myself, the future is scary. One part of me, perhaps, suffocating among my stupidities, is desperate for it. But another part takes one peck and decides, "Not today, thank you!" Much easier to find a sunlit niche in the wall and snooze away the afternoon. And it's so easy to fool oneself here, in the City of the Future. Because surely, whatever I do here must be somehow path-breaking, mustn't it? It's the Auroville magic. Maybe. But if I dig a little into myself, I find all the well-oiled patterns of the past alive and kicking — albeit disguised under a new, and convenient, vocabulary. Refusal to commit myself now becomes 'wideness', lack of con-

cern is 'equality', anything opposed to my beliefs becomes the 'adverse forces'.

What to do? Roger Anger, in a recent interview, said that Aurovilians have to begin to dream again. Now, like most Aurovilians, I'm allergic to being told what to do. It makes my eyes glaze over. But somewhere, Roger's prescription struck a chord in me. O.K. 'Dream' is an awkward word. It can mean woolliness, ten-feet-above-the-ground-ness — resulting in missed appointments, or a crowbar through the foot. Such dreams, 'day-dreams', won't build Auroville — or mend the puncture on your cycle.

But... Mother dreamed. Another kind of dream. The kind of dream, She once remarked, which is much truer than our so-called 'realities'. She dreamed Auroville. Extensively. Practically. And, surely, these are the dreams that can drag us — screaming, complaining — into the future, if we will only catch hold. It's a delicious paradox: what will make Auroville most real, it seems, is its capacity to realize a certain kind of dream, to let go of a certain present 'truth', which may only be the fossilized common-sense of the past.

How to begin? Well, it's happening all the time, individually, disconnectedly. But perhaps we need to legitimize this process. Dream workshops! Dream seminars! And if we start here, with the dream rather than the price of drainage pipes, the dynamic changes. We're no longer shaping the future to fit the present. Rather, we are challenging the present to s-t-r-e-t-c-h towards the future, we are forcing ourselves to continually test the limits of today's verities.

And what a menu we have here in Auroville, what opportunities for creative dreaming — town planning, housing, the economy, education. It's enough to make science fiction obsolete!

Alan

Auroville Tomorrow!

A Singapore with a spiritual halo or a Revolutionary experience?

"Oh! Enough of you French people with your eternal revolution!" How many times have I not heard my Aurovilian friends say this. I try to smile and think that there is nothing more revolutionary than the 'Dream' of Mother, and that everyone should at best keep a little 'revolutionary' deep inside of him to fight against the big 'conservative' who, crouching in the shadow, lies in wait. And since we are speaking of the future — of the material, social and spiritual future of Auroville — let us speak of the town, let us construct this jewel box to protect the transforming human being. I imagine a large building site, an earth in transition, souls in progress, people undergoing changes; let us make it beautiful, this laboratory of human evolution; let us dig trenches without delay, let us open roads and new paths, let us make foundations...

And at the same time, let us remain vigilant. Let us not allow Auroville to become

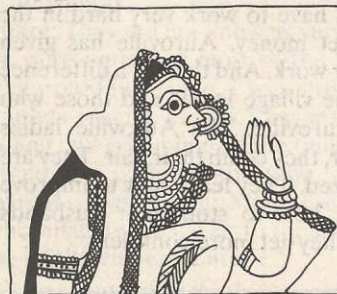
a Singapore with a halo of holy spirituality over it.

I invoke therefore my favourite goddesses: Joy, Spontaneity, Freedom. I call upon Imagination, Creation, Aspiration. I give them all the powers... and maybe one day, to our great surprise, something daring, unusual, unknown will be born that will not allow itself to be classified, to be put in a box, that will not change into a dogma, but will be as similar to inspiration as two laughing drops of water.

Pluviôse*, the year 199 of the French Revolution,

Yanne.

*Pluviôse (on the Calendar of the French Revolution): the month of January (month of rain).



Letters page next month

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Registration as a newspaper in process



Collage '21'