

Mini test ponds for the Matrimandir Lake

The lake around the Matrimandir was foreseen by The Mother. Already in 1965, years before Auroville was founded, She had given Nata the task of studying the lake and how the water could be sourced. Nata's research assumes a 100,000 square metres lake area and mentions desalinated water, not only for filling the lake, but also for drinking water purposes. As he wrote to Mother on 31st October 1965, "There exists also the possibility, envisaged by you, Mother, to have drinking water through the process of desalination of sea water." Desalination, in those days, was just in its beginning phase.

Since then, the Lake has been a topic of study and dispute. [See AVToday # 259, January 2011.] Last year, a self-appointed Lake Team took matters in hand. It executed a number of drillings in the area of the future lake, to ascertain the underground structure. [See AVToday # 290, September 2013]. Now, the team have started digging mini test ponds. Auroville Today talked to Michael Bonke, who is one of the moving forces behind this latest initiative.

Auroville Today. What are the objectives of the test ponds and when will they be ready?

Michael: We are constructing six mini test ponds, approximately 15 x 15 metres each and 1.5 metres deep, which will hopefully be ready before the beginning of the monsoon. The purpose of the exercise is to compare four different sealants and two different methods of how to construct the bank. The comparison is not only aiming at finding out which sealant is technically the best, but also to learn what costs are involved, how difficult the sourcing of the sealing materials is, and how easy it is to work with them.

The sealants we will be testing are natural clay from the Auroville surrounding area; compacted clay provided by a specialised company in Germany; 2 mm thick high density polyethylene (HDPE) foil manufactured by the German firm of Naue; and bentonite mats. These mats consist of two layers of geofabric with bentonite – the swelling component of natural clay – in between.

We have already run into difficulties with some of the proposed sealants. Sourcing the huge quantity of natural clay required from the Auroville surrounding areas has proven to be difficult, if not impossible. The clay we found so far does not have a uniform consistency and that makes it unsuitable for our purpose. Compacted clay seems better, but the costs of sending and importing it are prohibitive. We have even studied if we could set up a plant in Auroville to make the compacted clay ourselves, but that doesn't seem



With the building of six test ponds, the manifestation of the Matrimandir Lake has taken a further step

feasible. It is not only a costly affair, but also the raw materials would have to come from the surrounding area and this clay is not good enough, not even for compacting. Regarding bentonite, we again face high costs importing the huge quantity of mats required. So these options are increasingly unlikely.

We have also to keep in mind that the earth in the Auroville area is not stable. It moves, as can be deduced from the cracks in many Auroville houses. When we inspected lakes in the surrounding area, we noticed that some lake beds also have large cracks, even up to 5 centimetres wide. A sealant like clay would not close such gaps. So this seems to leave HDPE foil as the best solution, and we are thinking of foil that is 2 mm thick.

But all this is still not decided. The proof will be when we test the materials in the ponds. For each material we will get technical support from

the manufacturer, who will teach us how to work with the materials.

Four of the six test ponds have gentle slopes. But in two ponds we will use foil and bentonite mats to test the possibility of making vertical banks or step-banks. This would be done with stone gabions with the sealant being more or less vertical behind the gabions. Vertical banks may be required for architectural reasons and also around the pillars of a bridge, or at an overflow or inflow area.

How will you test for leakages?

There are several ways. One is to install humidity sensors underneath the sealant. Another one is to make collecting channels below the sealant with a sump on the shore. If you see that the sump gets filled, you know there is a leak. This could work when we use HDPE foil or Bentonite mats.

So a few months after the monsoon, you will know what materials to use?

Yes. We will then know which solution is the best. But this will not be the end of the matter: the test ponds will only be 1.5 metres deep, while the Lake is envisaged to have different depths, up to 10 metres. Specialists from the Anna University in Chennai have advised to create a test lake of 10% of the final lake area. We plan to make this test lake 10 metres deep. This will show how the sealant behaves at this depth, if it expands or contracts and what happens when there is an earth movement. This test will be over a period of one to two years.

What about the final depth of the lake?

This is still being studied. Some say that making the lake deeper than 4 metres does not have any practical advantage. Others say, the deeper the lake, the better the water quality. My personal preference would be a lake with many varying depths. This would lead to richer biodiversity.

The lake will naturally attract a lot of

wildlife. Fish, turtles, frogs, they all will be there, as well as water birds. But we need to ensure that the water quality is as clean as possible. In this climate, algae proliferate, and a green soup around the Matrimandir is not so nice. We'll also need to study which water plants will be most suitable. Some plants may help clean the water, some may reduce the lake's water evaporation, others may increase it.

What do you propose to do with the earth which is dug out to create the Lake?

We want to make a hill with it in the northern Greenbelt. This will create an additional and very valuable recreation possibility for Auroville – you can go up the hill and watch the sunset. The earth would be transported there by conveyor belts,

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One of the six mini test ponds with gentle slope

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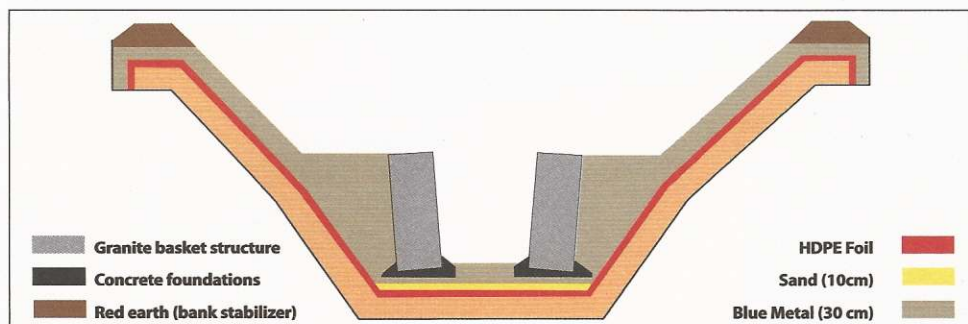
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Mini test ponds for the Matrimandir Lake

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laid in trenches inside the earth. So there would be minimal pollution from trucks. Trucks would only be used to transport the earth from where it is dug to the conveyor belt, and again, from the end of the conveyor belt uphill.

We are also planning two more lakes: one next to the hill, and another one on top of the hill. Both could be used for recreational purposes. But the lake on top is primarily intended to be used as an uphill power storage, where it would interact with a lake at a lower level and so provide electricity to Auroville in times of power cuts. [see AVToday # 271, February 2012]



Cross section of a mini test pond

The purpose of the lake next to the hill is to be a buffer lake for the Matrimandir Lake. Roger Anger was very adamant that the water level of the Matrimandir Lake should remain the same in all seasons. This is not possible without a secondary storage lake which can feed the main lake. The fluctuation will then happen in the storage lake, not in the Matrimandir Lake. The earth dug to create this second lake will also be used to increase the size of the hill. And the trenches for the conveyor belts will, after the hill has been created, become open water ways to connect this second lake with the Matrimandir Lake.

This brings us to the question of how the Matrimandir Lake is going to be filled.

For the first filling of the lake, we plan to use desalinated water. We cannot use groundwater. We hope to be able to build a desalination plant on the beach within three or four years from now,

which initially will be used to fill up the Lake. With a production capacity of 1 million litres of desalinated water a day, a varying lake depth and a lake surface of 162,000 square meters, filling the lake might take up to 2 years, without calculating the inflow of monsoon rains and the water losses due to evaporation.

Once the Lake has been filled, we will need to keep it at the same level. Calculating an average yearly rainfall of 1.30 metres and an evaporation of 1.70 metres, this would mean 40 cm loss over a year. This comes to 64,000 cubic metres a year, or 175 cubic metres a day. If we assume 250 cubic metres loss a day, we have a figure that is equal to the present-day water requirement for the

the amphitheatre runs off into the Kottakarai canyon and is lost. Once the Lake is there, this will no longer be the case.

You mention the Lake's surface area as being 162,000 square meters. This is the size decided by Roger Anger. But over the years, there have been many serious disputes about the size, even involving a mediation attempt by the Governing Board. Has this dispute been settled in favour of the large lake?

The reason for the dispute was that the then Matrimandir Coordination Group was concerned that by creating a large lake, the existing outer gardens and the whole concept of the Mother of the outer gardens would disappear. This is why they were in favour of a smaller lake. The issue has never been resolved, but I think that it is possible to combine a fairly big lake with preserving some of the outer gardens – especially those on the south and east side of the lake where, in the present Master Plan, a very large park is indicated. I believe we can manifest and combine both visions, with a bit of flexibility on both sides. That would mean that the administrative zone with the Town Hall, the Auroville Foundation Bhavan and the SAIIR office would border the Lake and that there would be outer gardens on the other side.

Rumour has it that the water level of the lake will be higher than the Town Hall, and that an embankment will be required if the ground floor is not to be inundated.

The level of the Oval road, the road which will encircle the oval island with the inner gardens and the Matrimandir, is now 1.30 metres above the ground floor level of the Town Hall. The lake level will be about 80 centimetres below the oval road, which means that it would be 50 centimetres higher than the floor level of the Town Hall. So a heavy embankment is not really required; there can be a low embankment. Even if such an embankment were breached, the water from the Lake would simply disappear into the canyon behind the administrative area. There will be no need for life vests in the Town Hall.

At what stage are you in terms of involving the community in this process?

When we know the results of the mini test ponds, and will start with digging the larger test lake, we will have to sit with the community to see that the entire community supports this project – meaning the size of the Matrimandir Lake, the mechanism to transport the soil to the hill, the hill itself, and the two additional lakes. By that time we also hope to have obtained all the permissions for building the desalination plant. Right now, with the present water scarcity, it looks a bit bizarre to have such a large artificial water body; but if you have a desalination plant where you manufacture the water you require, the whole thing becomes a different ball game.

Do you foresee that the Matrimandir Lake, or any of the other two lakes, will play a role in the community water supply?

In the Auroville area, the water extraction is said to be six and a half times more than the natural recharge. So salinization of the aquifer will happen. This prediction has been made by water experts many years ago, and I think it is only a matter of time. But nobody can exactly predict what the consequences will be. I only hope that the desalination plant will be up and running by that time, so that desalinated water can also be used for drinking water purposes. The hill, of course, would be a good place for a centralised community water tower, from where the water distribution to Auroville could take place.

People have spoken about using purified rainwater for drinking water purposes when the city is built. As about 30% of the city area would be paved, there would be a huge runoff. This runoff could be harvested and collected, be cleaned and become part of a water management system for the whole of Auroville. But all this has to be studied, and as long as Auroville develops at its present pace, it is no more than a distant possibility.

If you look at the water balance, the Matrimandir Lake will lose more water through evaporation than what it collects. We'll have to feed it. So, in the end, the Matrimandir Lake will be a decorative body rather than a source of drinking water for the city – though, most probably, Mother had some deeper reasons which I hope we'll discover in due time.

In conversation with Carel

The Pool in the Garden of Consciousness

The pool in the Garden of Consciousness and its flowing cascade have become a bit of a biological adventure, due to a very high UV index and temperatures above 41 degrees Celsius that we experienced during the summer months of May and June.

All bodies of water, unless they are doped with strong chemicals, are living arenas, filled with microscopic plant and animal life. They feed on the minerals and organic compounds in the water and they are fed too by the life giving energy of the sun. Such bodies of water will very quickly become home to burgeoning populations of plant and animal life, and the first to come will be Algae. (Only natural ponds which are well shaded by trees and filled with aquatic plant life and fish can escape this green transformation!)

Within a few hours the beautiful clear freshly filled pond began to turn green, and within about four days it was covered with a brilliant green layer of very healthy algae. It looked good enough to eat, like Spirulina. We, of course, were expecting a development like this, as we knew that there were a lot of nutrients in the water for the algae to feast on which could give only this result as a preliminary stage in the pond's development.

We temporarily covered a third of the surface of the pond with Water Hyacinths to begin to absorb these nutrients and to help cool the water that was reaching a temperature of up to 38o Celsius under the hot sun of May-June. This double action of the Hyacinths began to make it harder for the algae to continue reproducing.

But our main combatant against the algae was a special mixture of microscopic beneficial Consortia Probiotics, composed of 16 strains of



PHOTO COURTESY MATRIMANDIR

microorganisms, were known to be effective against the spread of algae. We had prepared small sacks of clay-like balls ahead of time, inoculated them with the Probiotics and had then placed these sacks in the pond to act against the algae – but would they be a strong enough agent to reestablish the clarity of our previously pristine pond water?

On the morning of day five, we were amazed to find that the marvellous green layer of algae seen floating on top of the pond the evening before had mostly settled down to the bottom of the pond – this was due to the action of the Probiotics seeded in the small balls in the pond. The microorganisms in the Probiotics reduce the phosphorous and nitrogen available in the groundwater which had been used to fill the pond. These are the two main foods of the algae, and so, deprived of their nutrition, the algae die, and in dying they clump together and fall to the floor of the pond.

Over the next two weeks, the pond became more and more clear, until it returned to being

quite transparent, as on the day of the original filling. We had indeed hoped that this would be the case, but were very happy to see that the Probiotics introduced were powerful enough to produce this very fine result.

Follow up was then required: 200 small fish were introduced to consume more of the decaying plant life and deposited algae. And then, to really clean up the pond, we started to vacuum its floor. This is continued now once a week to remove any fallen plant matter along with the thin layer of

dead algae that accumulates there. Algae continues to grow because fresh

nutrients are introduced into the water of the pond regularly, either by rains (which we are thankful for!) or by the top-up water that we have to add to the pond to replace water lost constantly due to evaporation under the hot sun of Tamil Nadu.

Thus it is an ongoing cycle – some new algae is formed as it feeds on these nutrients – then this new algae too soon dies off because of the action of the Probiotics and after it falls to the bottom of the pond we vacuum it away to maintain the overall clarity of the water.

This life process has stabilized now, and as long as we keep up the supply of Consortia Probiotics organisms (adding a little bit each week to the water) and keep up with our vacuuming, we will have a wonderfully clear pond to enjoy in the Garden of Consciousness. And we await the marvellous day, soon to come, when our Lotus plant in the pool, now showing many new green leaves, will offer its first white bloom to the sun.

(This article first appeared in the Matrimandir Newsletter of August, 2014)



PHOTO COURTESY MATRIMANDIR

Education is the main way to change society

Auroville International Advisory Council (IAC) member Kabir Shaikh has had a long and distinguished career in education. He has taught in London and been a top educational administrator in the U.K. and in the Middle East. Until a few months ago, he was Interim Director of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development, the first UNESCO Category 1 Institute of Education in Asia and Pacific.

Auroville Today spoke to him when he came for the meeting of the IAC in August.

Do you see any logical development in your career from being a science teacher in London to being the recent Director of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute for Peace and Sustainable development?

I think it was to do with being in the right place at the right time. Actually, I am an 'accidental' teacher because, originally, I had no intention to teach. As one of the awardees of the Indian National Science Scholarships I went to the UK in 1963 to do a Ph.D. But the professor I was supposed to work with went off to America and I was left with no way of supporting myself.

At that time, there was a shortage of science teachers in London so I thought I would try to get a job. The Inner London Education Authority people interviewed me, and even though I had no teaching experience or training, they appointed me as a supply teacher.

That's when I got rooted in education. At that time in London schools there was a very strict 'streaming' system. Most of the children who were black, mainly West Indian, were put in the bottom stream or class, and once you were put in the bottom stream you never came out of it. These children went through school without taking any examinations and would leave without having any certificate. I felt very uncomfortable about this.

By the time the children in this bottom stream were 14 or 15 years old they were very difficult to handle. Just trying to teach them was a very stressful experience, which is why many of their regular teachers took frequent leave. Consequently, as a supply teacher I had to supervise these students for maths, English and science. The latter, in particular, was very challenging because at that time we used to keep acids in the laboratory and these students used to run around and throw things at each other.

At first, I didn't know what to do with them. But then I told them I would put them in for the science exam. And not only would I put them in for the exam, I would make sure they passed. At first they couldn't believe it, nobody had treated them like this before. But then they decided to work for it.

However, my decision created a big problem with the other staff. They said we can't have a supply teacher putting these students in for an exam because now they are harassing us and saying we should also put them in for other exams. More importantly, I was also accused of wasting public funds because the examination costs were paid by the education authority, not by the students. There was a big staff meeting about this. I said that if wasting public funds was the problem, they could take the cost of the examinations out of my salary and, if the students passed, they could reimburse me. They had no answer to that.

So I gave these kids extra lessons after school, and they showed a lot of commitment. But, still, I wasn't sure if they would turn up for the exam. In the week before the exam, I was ringing them up every day reminding them of the day and time. I even told them that if they couldn't get a bus to the exam centre, they should take a taxi and I would pay for it.

On the day of the exam, most of the other students turned up in casual clothes. But my kids all wore suits; it was as if they were going for a wedding. This was a big day for them: this was the first time they had ever sat for an exam.

And they passed! That did them good, but it also did me a lot of good because my name became quite well-known. Within two years I became head of department. Later I was asked to chair a national working group on multicultural science because black children were underperforming in English schools in science: in fact, they were completely switching off from sciences. The reason, we discovered, was that the sciences were being taught in a very Eurocentric way – the perception was that only Europe and America had contributed to the advancement of the sciences – and so there was a feeling in the black community that science was something foreign. Our working party published a number of books where we stressed the Arabic and African contributions to science, and now this approach is part of the general curriculum.

Do you see education as one of the key ways of transforming not only individuals but also of changing social attitudes?

Yes, I see education as the main conduit through which societies can be changed. I mean in terms of changing social and economic inequalities.

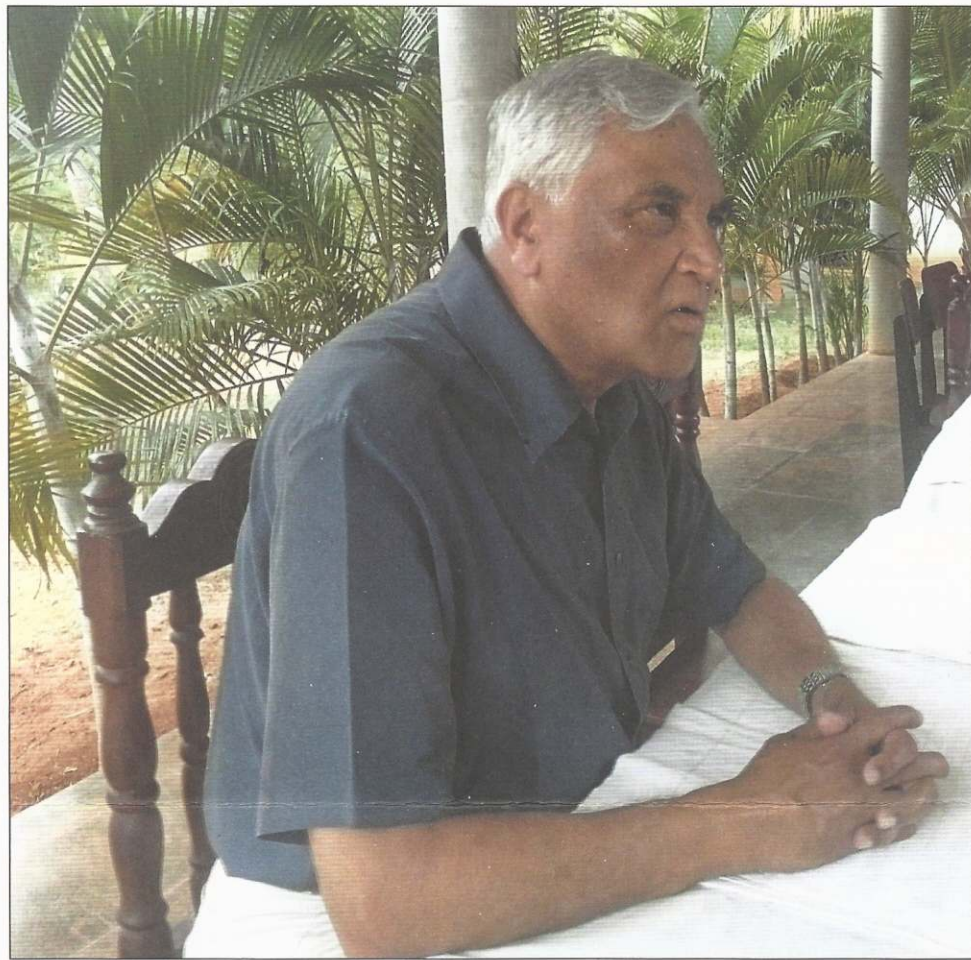
Bringing those students through to the exam was a very formative experience for me because I realized how many young people were being prevented from getting a proper education. Nobody was trying to include them; actually every effort was being made to keep them out. Initially I thought it was only a humanitarian issue but later on I changed my thinking. I realized it was also an economic issue because if these students were prevented from getting a good education, many of them would naturally gravitate towards crime – the jails

that education can bring change.

Do the Israelis teach their children a similar course?

No. When I asked them why not they said that their children already know their rights: the teachers do not see themselves in need of anything other than what they are doing at present. The Israelis accuse the Palestinians of intolerance and of being violent. The Israelis told me, we hear you're doing a very good job, so can you please tell these Palestinians not to be violent? But the Israelis teach their children no less violence, although they do it more subtly. And so the agony continues on both sides.

In the long run I think only education can solve this intractable conflict.



Dr. Kabir Shaikh

in England had a disproportionately high number of black children – so we were excluding a perfectly capable workforce from generating income for the country.

Later you became, until 2009, Director of Education for UNRWA/ UNESCO, which provides education for half a million Palestinian refugee children based in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Gaza and the West Bank. You were dealing with some of the most disadvantaged people on earth. How did your educational work help them?

I introduced a course called 'human rights, conflict resolution and tolerance' for the Palestinian children. The mullahs objected, saying it was 'Americanization' of their culture, and they told all the teachers not to teach this course. But I called a meeting of all concerned and explained that if the children did not know their rights, how could they stand up for them? And how could they do it in a way which would not lead to more conflict?

The mullahs did not attend the meeting, but the teachers agreed to teach the topic and it is now one of the best human rights programmes in the world. Of course, children do not change overnight, and it is difficult for these children to change profoundly unless you remove them from their present environment.

By this I mean that only when people have the basic securities of food, shelter and health does peace become possible. Economic stability will come through sustainability of the environment and resources, and peace will come when people's basic security needs are being met.

But changes did take place at the individual level. For example, in Lebanon some parents came to thank me for the human rights programme. One mother explained that she had always been having arguments with her daughter, but the conflict resolution class had completely changed their relationship. Now the father wanted the girl to get married but the girl had refused, saying she wanted to get a degree, and the mother was supporting her. So evidence like this shows

How did you become involved with the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development?

For some years there had been talk about building this institute in Delhi. It is a UNESCO Category 1 Institute. UNESCO has created seven such institutions all over the world, but this is the only one which carries the name of a person. The aim of the Institute is to contribute to peace education and the sustainable development research in countries in the Asia-Pacific region. The Government of India contributed \$40 million to this project.

UNESCO contacted me and said they wanted somebody who understands the Indian culture and who is an educationalist and administrator. I became the interim Director, initially for six months. But Dr. Karan Singh, who is India's representative on the Executive Board of UNESCO and who later became Chairman of the Board of the Directors of the Institute, kept saying he would like me to take the job permanently. I couldn't do this but I stayed for 18 months during which time I decided policy, vision, the staffing structure etc. Now they have appointed a new Director, Dr. Anantha Duraipappah, who is a very able man.

Peace and sustainable development are not always studied together.

Correct. There are a lot of organizations doing peace education, and many organizations focus on sustainability, but they are rarely studied together as a cohesive package. This will be the most important work of this Institute. Sustainability thus far tends to be championed by the environmental movement, but they largely ignore the human development side of sustainability – social inequality, injustice, poverty. Yet all these social evils are the main cause of the lack of peace.

It is important to note that the area covered by this Institute comprises 42 countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Two thirds of humanity live in this region, the largest number of conflicts occur in this

region and more than 50% of natural disasters happen here. So if any area needed conflict resolution and to learn how to become sustainable, which means, most importantly, the human development side of sustainability, then it is this area.

This is a huge task. How will the Institute set about it?

It is basically a policy formulation unit advising governments. One of its responsibilities is advocacy, creating a platform for debates about peace and sustainable development, and promoting education as the main vehicle for bringing about peace and sustainability within societies.

This implies a radical overhaul of traditional education.

Yes. The problem with the present system of education is that it is inadequate to deal with these issues. There is a recognition that something has to be done, but ministers of education tend to focus only on the five years between elections. Besides, they have a system of education that has been running for many years, that has millions of textbooks, and they don't want to unsettle that system. Therefore our approach has to be pragmatic, changing a little at a time.

Moreover, most ministries of education see education only or largely in terms of schools and colleges. But the change I am talking about – which is primarily a change of mind-set – has to happen through informal education and non-formal education as well, and throughout life.

But when you look at the challenges the world is facing today it doesn't seem there is much time to make these major changes.

There is not a lot of time to convert people into this way of thinking. For example, the consumption of natural resources by humans is at a very high level. This is why the Institute has to focus on college students as well as the primary sector: we cannot wait for the primary children to become adults.

As to the influence of education, people in my role have to be optimistic. Technological change happens fast, social transformation takes longer. This is why educationalists have to take a long perspective. Take the situation of the blacks or gays. At one time, nobody thought that slavery would be abolished or that gays would be accepted in society.

But there are moments when mindsets change, mutate, rapidly. England came close to a social mutation when Diana died. English people who never express their emotions were crying on the streets. The destruction of the Berlin Wall is another example. Nobody thought that that would disappear within 24 hours or that this would have such an impact on German society.

I think the main role of education is to expose people to formative experiences like this. You don't change people by *diktat*. Real change has to come from within, and the job of a good educationalist is to expose people to experiences that make them reflect and then change from within.

What part do you see Auroville playing in this?

The Institute is creating a database of all the good things that are happening around the world concerning peace and sustainable development. Many organizations like Auroville do small projects, and the intellectual property they create gets lost when the project is finished, so there needs to be a central depository of the best practices to inspire others.

In this line, I will meet the Director of the Institute and I will tell him about the uniqueness of Auroville; that this is an international community which has come together to build something for humanity. Auroville has the added dimension of spirituality. What I also find in Auroville is a kind of resurrection of the old methods of sustainability that are about human equality and people respecting nature.

Ultimately, Auroville has to be experienced. One of the key aspects of the Institute's work is engaging young people in sustainable activities. We have a special youth programme and I would like to involve Auroville in this. The Institute also offers scholarships for people from the 42 countries in this region to do research on peace or sustainability. I think they could be brought here for a week because Auroville will provide a very positive experience for them. They will see what is happening here and this will make them reflect on their thinking.

Is there a future for some of Auroville's beach communities?

A few weeks ago, announcements began appearing in the News and Notes inviting Aurovilians to weekend activities at the beach community of Repos. Aurovilians were welcomed to enjoy a talent show, photographic exhibition, beach volleyball and acupuncture, and invited to try the latest specialty from Repos' Nice Kitchen, Fruits Mela.

What's so unusual about this? you might ask. Well, one year ago Repos was in ruins, with the coastal fence and most of the houses destroyed by the invading sea [see *Auroville Today* # 280 and # 281, November and December 2012]. In fact, after an official announcement that Repos was closed and the main gate was locked, most Aurovilians thought the end was nigh for this formerly popular beach community.

Rejuvenating Repos

But a small group decided they were not going to give up so easily. G. Vasu, who continues to live in Repos, along with Boomi (Technica), Jayamoorthy (Ecoservice) and K. Vasu formed themselves into the Repos Beach Management Committee and began working on plans to protect and revive Repos. They were assisted by Jayant Chakrabarty and his team. Jayant is the director of MultiDimension, a media company based in Paris. He first visited Repos in the 1990s.

"When I visited Pondy this year, I was told that the situation in Repos was bad, so I made a visit," says Jayant. "I saw all this plastic lying around and ruined buildings; the whole place looked destitute, totally abandoned. I remembered how it used to be and I realized that if we didn't do something, this place would disappear within one year. So I thought, 'Let's try and do something'."

"I'm involving myself because I have faith in this community and because I'm very hopeful. After all, in the beginning Auroville managed to create a forest out of a desert. Now we have to make a similar effort to save this beach. This is Auroville's special gift, to give hope to people when everything seems to be falling apart."

One part of the strategy is to revive the energy at Repos. The first task of the Repos Management Team and MultiDimension was to clean up Repos, which had become a dumpsite for the local village. Then they built a small kitchen – 'Nice Kitchen' – where they prepare simple meals. "This is the beginning of our project called food and culture," says Jayant. "The plan is to do something special here every weekend. There will be beach volleyball, and next weekend we are organizing a children's sandcastle-making and balloon-flying day. There will be music at night, and Tanto will provide the pizzas. Future plans include rebuilding some of the guest capsules and creating simple facilities for homeopathy and acupuncture consultations."

This will all cost money. Where is it coming from? "At present," says Jayant, "it is a self-financed project because Auroville asked us to do it like this. Auroville gave some initial funding and provided help with rebuilding the fencing and cleaning up, which we very much appreciate. But we would like to generate an independent fund for the revival of Repos Beach."

But the main problem is the continued erosion caused by the waves. In September last year, Satprem and a team of volunteers used sand and rubble in bags (fixed on land with mesh) to try and protect Bhaga's, and Philippe and Sabine's houses from the ravages of the sea. Both the bags and the houses fell into the sea and now no protection is in place. "This is why," says Guy, "I keep telling the Repos team to keep things simple because without adequate erosion protection we don't know if, in two months, Repos will still be here or not. August and September is always the time of greatest erosion in Repos."

Jayant admits the seriousness of the situation. "At high tide the water comes right up to our fence," says Jayant. "It only needs a strong wind and a big wave to take out almost everything that is left."

Options for protection

So what is being planned to prevent further destruction? Jayant mentions that the Tamil Nadu Government has sanctioned a series of groynes in this area of the coast, but that an NGO, Coastal Action Network (CAN), has filed a court case and acquired a temporary injunction against them being constructed. Guy, one of the managers of Quiet Healing Center, which has also been seriously affected by erosion in the past, explains that these groynes are of a different design from the ones to the south which have caused so many problems. The new design is for a series of six and, instead of being at right angles to the coastline, they will reach out into the sea at an angle, tapering off in length as they go north. Such a design, it seems, would interfere less with the natural littoral drift while allowing protection against erosion.

The Auroville Foundation has impleaded in the ongoing court case, requesting that the construction of these groynes goes ahead, since "there is a lack of well-defined alternative solutions" and failure to complete the project will cause the situation to deteriorate even further.

The court involved, the National Green Tribunal, directed the Tamil Nadu Government to get environmental clearance for this scheme. The environmental clearance has now been given subject to certain conditions but, warns Guy, "the Tribunal may still keep the injunction as CAN has made several other objections to the scheme, including the environmentally-damaging aspect of groynes."

Jayant is unenthusiastic about the groynes solution. He is interested in an alternative option, which he refers to vaguely as a submerged seawall. AuroFilio of PondyCAN clarifies. The Puducherry Government is looking at creating an artificial 'reef' using textile geotubes filled with sand to protect its coast. These tubes, which would be located on the sea floor 200 metres offshore, would prevent the larger waves breaking on the shore but smaller waves and sand would still be able to reach the beaches. They are not a complete panacea because a sand trap is created behind the reef, which is why Filio favours a hybrid approach that combines geotubes with artificial sand nourishment of the beaches.

Of course, such a solution, if adopted, would be in the sea off Puducherry, not off Tamil Nadu where Repos beach and other Auroville beach communities are located.



The new Nice Kitchen at Repos – a doomed attempt?

And Filio admits that the geotubes experiment off Kovalam Beach in Kerala has been controversial. Some of the tubes have washed ashore, and the fishermen are not happy.

Before the last monsoon, another beach community, Quiet Healing Center, had been planning to erect a thick metal wall close to its fence, mainly to protect its reception and guest house area, at a total cost of about 20 lakhs. The wall would have been 80 metres long and the panels would have been sunk 5 metres deep into the sand, with one metre protruding above. "We even had the agreement of the fishermen, who had blocked the construction of a seawall in front of Quiet in the past," says Guy. As an experiment, two panels were inserted close to the fence before the monsoon, and these are still in place. However, as the erosion seems to have stabilised for the moment, the Center decided to wait with the project, expecting the government to build groynes. "Also, we prefer to go by faith and hope that the erosion at Quiet has reached its peak," says Guy.

Meanwhile the strategy of Jayant and the Repos Beach Management team is to alert as many people as possible to the gravity of the situation. The group wants to put on a film festival in Auroville next February, to publish a booklet and use the MultiDimension Facebook page to create an international campaign to save this stretch of beach.

The other threatened beach communities

Most Aurovilians would be surprised to learn that there are 11 Auroville beach communities, as well as other Auroville land in coastal villages. Not all of these communities are at present under threat from the sea. So far, Eternity and Sri Ma have not experienced serious erosion. The most affected communities are Waves, Repos, Fortuna, Gokulam, Mirra Youth Camp and Quiet.

In fact, the news from Quiet, for once, is good. Guy points out that last year, for the first time in five years, there was no erosion of their beachfront land. Before then, the beach had been disappearing at the rate of 20 metres a year. Why has the erosion stopped? One theory is that it was because of a particularly mild monsoon last year (the biggest erosion in Quiet takes place during the monsoon season). Another possibility is that the erosion has reached its natural limit. Guy shrugs: "Nobody knows."

The adjacent beach communities have not been so fortunate. Houses and land have been lost to the sea not only in Repos but also in Fortuna, Waves and Gokulam. Today, nobody (apart from Tanya in Waves) is living in the latter three communities, none of which has any adequate protection against the waves. "In all, seven homes have been destroyed so far in our beach communities due to erosion," says Joseba of the Housing Service. "Most of the people affected have been rehoused in Newcomer accommodation in Djaima."

Mirra Youth Camp, which is adjacent to Gokulam, is also deserted at present except for a solitary amma who looks after the place. The community kitchen and one or two capsules are perilously close to the sea. The border is unprotected from the sea except for the remnants of some sand-filled tubes.

Altogether it is a depressing sight. Guy points out that the volunteers who had lived here had made real efforts to combat the erosion. However, Donata, who lives in the neighbouring community, Samarpan, believes that a community under threat from the sea is not the right place for volunteers. "We need a permanent presence here, people whom the local villagers respect."

Donata herself is well-respected in the village, which is why she has so far managed to prevent encroachments and the dumping of village garbage in Gokulam and Mirra Youth Camp. But it's a daily battle. "It makes no sense," says Donata. "When a villager purchases a piece of land the first thing he does is put a big wall around it. But these pieces of Auroville land are not fully fenced: at present, anybody can walk in at any time. What kind of message are we sending?"

What should be done?

Auroville has given some assistance to the beach communities – Land Service has helped erect fences in Repos and Gokulam and recently Matrimandir workers helped clean up Gokulam – but Auroville is not willing to put much money into these beach communities as long as there is not adequate protection from the waves. And the only major protection initiative is blocked in the courts at present. But without protection, valuable beach land continues to disappear into the sea or is threatened by encroachment. This is the crux of the problem.

Some people suggest we should simply sell this land or exchange it for village land in the city centre or greenbelt. But while beach land is generally very valuable, who would be willing to buy or exchange land threatened by the sea? And we are not talking of losing just centimetres and inches. "I've lived by the beach for seven years now," says Donata, "and I've seen 30 metres of beach lost to erosion in just one month." Donata is fortunate: a seawall erected by the government some time ago to protect a neighbouring village also protects Samarpan against the waves.

So what is the solution? The present approach of doing nothing seems the worst option. This way, not only will Auroville continue to lose land but whatever is left will plummet in value. Moreover, these desolate beachside communities give a very bad impression of Auroville and what we stand for.

None of the 'soft' protective measures tried in the past – like tyres in the sea (at Quiet) and bags filled with sand (at Repos and Mirra Youth Camp) – have been successful. But why not continue the Quiet experiment and put a metal fence against the sea in our most vulnerable beach communities? It will cost perhaps a couple of crores and may not last forever. But, in the meantime, the court may free up a more effective protection option and, anyway, we are probably losing at least two crores worth of land to the sea annually through doing nothing.

The question is, are we willing to put money and energy into protecting our beach communities? Or shall we simply let them slip under the waves because it is too much trouble, too expensive, and, being outside the magic circles of the town and greenbelt, perhaps regarded by some as not being 'really Auroville'?

Alan



No beach protection at Mirra Youth Camp

What is happening at Bharat Nivas?

Is Bharat Nivas coming alive again? For some years the area, which houses the activities of the Indian pavilion, has seemed dormant, but today old structures are being demolished and new building projects underway. Is this project, which was so important to Mother herself, at last beginning to manifest its true form? And will it be an expression of India's true mission in the world as defined by the Mother?

O India, land of Light and spiritual knowledge, wake up to your true mission in the world. Show the way to union and harmony.

History

The International Zone, also described by The Mother as the Zone of Union, aims to manifest the essential unity of mankind amid the rich diversity of the world's distinctive cultures. As the host country, it was fitting that the Pavilion of India, Bharat Nivas, should have been the first construction in the International Zone. In fact, it was initiated by The Mother herself. Why did she find it so important?

The late Prem Malik, who for many years was part of the Bharat Nivas organizing group, remembered an interview he had with The Mother in 1970-71. He had asked her how the essential underlying unity would manifest in the different national pavilions, and she replied that the essential unity only manifests at the spiritual level. "And at this point, She made a statement that this was the reason why She wanted the Indian Pavilion to be the first to physically establish itself in the International Zone, as India was the one country which had an unbroken spiritual heritage and which could act as an example for the other pavilions to follow."

In 1970, a national competition was held to decide upon the design and a jury consisting of Auroville architects and other personalities was set up, with the Mother as its President. The brief given to the architects was to design the buildings as a symbolic representation of the soul of India, seeking inspiration from India's spiritual past, thought and character. The common zones as well as the sectors presenting the various Indian States were to be designed in such a way that they would bring out the essential unity of India in the midst of her rich diversity. Above all, the architecture should not be imitative of the past.

The Mother chose a design by Sri R. Chakrapani of Chennai because she felt it was the most flexible in terms of future



The small amphitheatre in the former the Auroville Library building

However, there was a problem. Auroville did not own the land allocated for Bharat Nivas. When Mother was informed, she simply rotated the existing Galaxy plan 50 degrees anti-clockwise so that Bharat Nivas could be constructed on land already purchased for Auroville.

Construction began in August 1971. Two years later, when the Auditorium and the adjacent round building of the restaurant and a few State pavilions were partially completed, the work came to a halt. The Sri Aurobindo Society subsequently located its Auroville office here.

In 1984 the Government of India handed over the unfinished complex to Auroville to utilise and to complete. The Centre for Research in Indian Culture was the first initiative to start in one of the unfinished pavilions and, soon after, the Centre of Indian Studies, both of which functioned together. As there were no comparable facilities elsewhere in Auroville at the time, many other Auroville groups began to use the facilities, which were gradually upgraded over time. They included the Auroville Library, the Laboratory of Evolution, Aurofuture, the Auroville Archives, the video team and SAIER. There was a small archeological museum and the offices of the Government Administrators, and later the Auroville Foundation,

During this period, which lasted some considerable time, the 650 seat Sri Aurobindo Auditorium was completed, the SAWCHU meeting space and Athiti Griha and Swagatam guest houses were constructed, and the restaurant building was converted into an arts and exhibition space called Kalakendra.

As facilities were created in other parts of Auroville, the groups started moving out again. When the Solar Kitchen was completed, the Bharat Nivas kitchen was no longer necessary. The construction of the Town Hall saw many administrative groups moving out, and the Foundation administration moved out when the Auroville Foundation building was completed. The Library now has its own purpose-built building on the Crown Road, while the recent completion of the SAIER building has seen the SAIER administration relocate there.

In the 1990s, a group was constituted to look again at the original design prepared by Chakrapani. They concluded that a lot of space would be wasted if the original design was followed. Roger Anger and other Auroville architects were consulted and a new proposal was agreed upon to complete Bharat Nivas without each State having a pavilion of its own.

Today

This led to another phase of construction. Today, the new building for the Centre of Indian Studies and Centre for Indian Culture, named *Bhavishyate*, is approaching completion. It has a conference room and flexible spaces to host classes, workshops and exhibitions, as well as facilities for researchers in residence. The first floor will house a library of Indian culture.

Once the Centre of Indian Culture and Studies moves into the new building, the 'White Hall' which houses it at present will become the central exhibition area. The first exhibition, which is already in place, marks the visionary union that led to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's work for humanity.

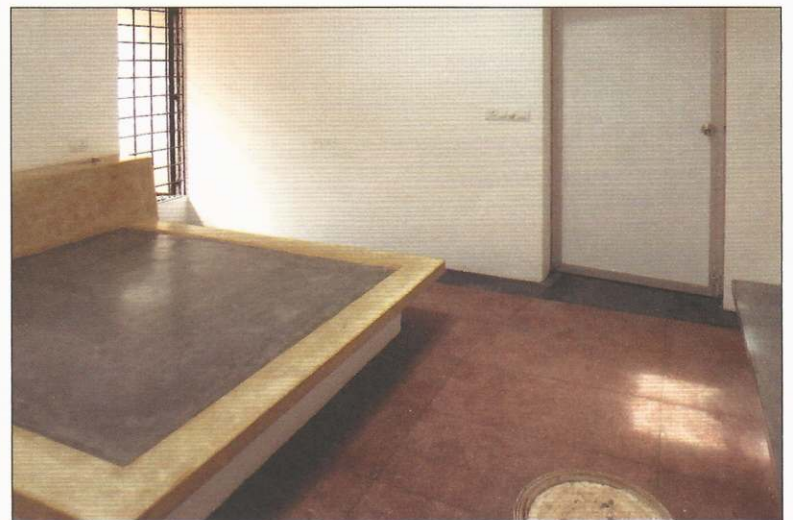
Another major project under construction is the Tamil Heritage Centre. Once completed, it will have exhibition, workshop and conference spaces, and areas for the kind of dance and music for which Tamil Nadu is known widely. It will also have cafeterias and guest facilities.

Meanwhile, a new temporary guest-cum-cultural facility is coming up in the area where the somewhat dilapidated State Pavilion buildings are situated. It is designed as a space for young artists and volunteers who come to work in Bharat

Nivas. It has five guest rooms, a space for workshops and even a small outdoor amphitheatre.

A sense of emptiness

Yet, for all this construction activity, the prevailing atmosphere in many of the buildings in Bharat Nivas is one of emptiness, of a lack of activity. Sitting in the office adjacent to the White Room, Anu, who is a member of the present Bharat Nivas management team, describes the difficulty. "Once the first units moved out, there was a sense of vacuum for a while. Things had to re-



One of the Bharat Nivas guest rooms

start, buildings completed, the work and activities of Bharat Nivas as a campus created, but it is difficult to get such things going with only a few people." In this context, she acknowledges what a wonderful work Aster has done over the years in almost single-handedly holding the dream and consciousness for the Centre for Indian Culture and Studies.

While there are now more vacant spaces in the Bharat Nivas complex, Anu feels it would be wrong to allocate them without carefully considering how different activities will contribute to the overarching purpose. "This place is intended for expressing, in a very dynamic way, the essential unity of India which underlies its rich diversity. I think if this space functions as it should do and is alive, if all the activities here contribute to this purpose, then the rest of the International Zone, which is rather stuck at the moment, will also come alive. The two go in tandem."

The recent creation of the Bharat Nivas Trust is important in this context. The Trust will coordinate the funding and different activities on the campus, and attempt to focus the activities of the several centres on the guidelines given by The Mother.

The future

One idea Anu mentions to dynamise this zone would be to hold a festival here every two or three years. "We have the Auditorium, Kalakendra and the central courtyard space, which could be the hub of events. It would be easy to link together, through small walking paths, the Unity Pavilion, the Tibetan Pavilion and International House, as well as Africa House, which is being constructed. All these places and the national pavilion groups could come together and see what kinds of programme we could come up with. The first festival could be in 2016."

Such ideas make it even more important that Bharat Nivas once more has restaurant facilities. While the Indus Valley eating experiment which was attached to Kalakendra is no longer functioning, there is a plan to convert the top part of this building into a restaurant.

Where does all the funding for these projects come from? Mother, it seems, refused private funding for the construction of Bharat Nivas and the other national pavilions. She wanted the money to come from governments as a form of symbolic participation in the building of Auroville. So far, a considerable amount of the money for the construction of Bharat Nivas has come from the Central Government. It is unlikely however, that each Indian State will be willing to finance its own pavilion, as was originally intended.

"Instead," says Anu, "the different States can be represented through temporary exhibitions or events. For example, there could be a Kerala event to coincide with the Onam festival in September. Dancers could be invited, there could be Kerala food, and perhaps we could invite prominent writers from that region."



Bhavishyate, the new building for the Centre of Indian Studies and Centre for Indian Culture

development. The original design was for an auditorium, a restaurant, a School of Linguistics, a guest house and pavilions for the different states of India. For this purpose, the Government of India granted an initial sum of nearly Rs. 90 lakhs.

were also located here. For many years, the restaurant served daily lunches and community meetings were held either in the basement of the restaurant or in the foyer of the Auditorium. In other words, Bharat Nivas became a central hub for Auroville.

"We would like to have at least two events connected with the States every year. The new space being constructed for artists and volunteers could be used for the arts and live performances, while the 'White Room' could house exhibitions of various States."

"There is plenty to be done," concludes Anu, "but we can only fund things step-by-step and we need people to come and work with us. One of the remaining projects has to do with the grounds. We would like to have herb gardens and groves of fruit trees and, as Mother said that each Pavilion should have its own, typical vegetation, it would be interesting to incorporate that idea too. But this is for the long-term."

So is Bharat Nivas about to manifest its true form? It is too soon to say. While the emphasis over recent years seems to have been upon construction, now is the time to make these buildings come alive with activities. And this needs people, commitment, creativity. Is Auroville ready, at last, to make the pavilion of its host country the beating heart of the International Zone?

Alan

Facing out, facing in: Auroville's Visitors' Center

Nicole, who has been part of the management team for the past 15 years talks about the function and challenges of running the Auroville Visitors' Center.

How would you define the prime purpose of the Visitors Center?

The primary purpose of the Visitors' Center is to try to give visitors a sense of what Auroville stands for in its essence. The first thing people should be exposed to is the *raison d'être* of this place, which is timeless. But as Auroville developed many activities over the years, we also expanded our core presentation to show what is being done in many different fields. So today, in addition to the Matrimandir exhibition, we also showcase exhibitions on the International Zone to highlight the international aspect of Auroville, on Auroville's work on the environmental level and on Auroville's best practices in alternative energy, social engagement, research work and much more.

We are also preparing an exhibition on Sri Aurobindo, The Mother and the advent of a new world. It will expose people to what they and the yoga represents – this incredible energy and push towards the future. The aim is to have this exhibition form a strong and peaceful centre in the middle of all the other activities that are happening here.

Has there not been an exhibition on Sri Aurobindo and The Mother at the Visitors Center before?

Information about The Mother and Sri Aurobindo has always been part of our Auroville exhibitions. However, when we made the present exhibition we decided not to have Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's picture on the walls – to have their photos and information on their lives and work on the reading tables – so that the first thing that people see when they arrive would not be the gurus. We did this to emphasize that Auroville is a universal city where anybody of goodwill can come. We decided to highlight The Dream and the key aspects of Auroville according to The Charter as the cornerstones for this exhibition.

There are so many different activities at the Visitors Center: exhibitions, boutiques, restaurants, an art gallery etc. How do you ensure that all these different activities present a unified picture to visitors of Auroville's ideals and aspiration for excellence?

We have a management group made up of everybody who does something here. It meets at least twice a year to look at issues like this. Among other things, we have worked quite extensively on guidelines for the boutiques. Recently, we had an issue regarding which products could be sold in the boutiques, and what constitutes an Auroville product, and we agreed



upon a document which defines this.

What about quality control in terms of the products that are sold in the boutiques?

So far this is been left to the boutique management because the people who run the boutiques are definitely very aware of the need to keep up a high standard in the products they offer. Of course, there are many different units in Auroville who would like to sell through the boutiques and the quality or relevance of their products can be variable. Sometimes, the boutique managers need help from the Visitors' Center management group to address the fact that certain products are not up to the mark and cannot be sold there. To help in this regard we now have a small group of Aurovilians to whom such cases can be referred so as to maintain high standard.

At the Visitors Center you also very aware of your responsibilities to the community.

Yes, the Visitors' Center is the interface between Auroville and the outside world. There is constant pressure from outside to turn Auroville into a tourist destination, so there is a constant challenge to respond to the interests that visitors have in a way that does not compromise our integrity and that impacts as little as possible on the life of the community. We receive on average as many visitors a day as the adult population of Auroville, so this needs to be managed. On a practical level, this includes maintaining and enhancing the pathway to Matrimandir – last year we put up an exhibition of painted stones along that path highlighting the twelve Qualities and their corresponding flowers – providing shuttles to Matrimandir for those who cannot walk and a free bus for those who do not wish to walk, back to the Visitors' Center. We also rent out cycles to visi-

tors and guests who want to see more of Auroville and we have created a pick up and drop vehicle service (City Transport) to help ferry guests to their guest houses when they arrive, as well as help people move around Auroville. (We do not allow visitors' vehicles to come into Auroville: all have to park at the Visitors' Center.)

Another way to respond to the needs of Auroville is to maximize the use of the infrastructure here in the evenings for the benefit of the community: this will be one of focuses this year. This means reviving the use of the video room, getting more things happening on stage in terms of art and music and, of course, creating Le Zephyr as a social space and low-cost restaurant for Aurovilians and volunteers. This is important as Auroville is becoming very expensive. We have gone towards the high-end market to maximise income yet, at the

same time, we keep saying we need more young people to come and join us, people who clearly cannot afford this lifestyle. Actually, neither can many of us...

I think as a community we are failing these people to a certain extent. Le Zephyr is a start towards creating affordable and lively places for social interaction and to cater to the needs of people who come to work and volunteer in Auroville. Failure to do so only boosts the economy around us.

The Visitors' Center seems to be a successful example of how productive units and services can work together. How did this happen?

I am a service person who finds herself being executive of two or three commercial units, so I have a foot in both worlds. We in the management team are very thankful for the fact that the commercial units have agreed to financially support the running of the Visitors' Center. I think they do this partly because they saw that I was here to stay and committed to looking after this space. I think

the commercial units look for that; they like to contribute to Auroville but they also like to see that their contribution gets 'held' responsibly.

It is also clear that even though the products of Auroville are known for their quality, the productive units recognise that people come to the Visitors' Center primarily to see Matrimandir and learn about Auroville, and that it is important for them to contribute so that the whole Center be as attractive and informative as possible.

The symbiosis between the productive units and the service sector at the Visitors' Center is very interesting and positive. We are building something together here and that's a very good feeling.

In fact, there is a lot of energy in this place: it is something that has carried me from the very beginning.

From an interview by Alan



Evening entertainment at Le Zephyr

HEALTH SERVICES

The Auroville Ambulance: Service in Action

Two years ago, the Auroville Ambulance was purchased with funds from the cyclone relief fund. Today, the ambulance steadily continues to serve the community. Having attended to 98 patients in this time, the ambulance, on average, transports someone to hospital once every six days. The majority of these people are Aurovilians, with only 20 out of 98 non-Aurovilians. While the male to female ratio is roughly even, 62 out of the 98 people were above 60 years old.

The ambulance service is more complex than one might think. It involves a dispatcher available 24 hours a day, who receives emergency phone calls and notes down critical information about the patient. The dispatcher then determines whether the ambulance is necessary. If so, she calls both the on-call doctor and the ambulance driver, both of whom then make their way to the scene. On average, the Auroville ambulance arrives on the scene within 30 minutes of the initial call, compared to outside ambulances that can take a minimum of one hour. The ambulance then transports the patient to the most appropriate medical facility, given the injury or ailment.



The ambulance team is bound together by commitment and dedication. The team of five, including two doctors, Ruslan and Alexi, two nurses, Auradha and Nisha, and the ambulance driver, Alok, arranges a detailed weekly schedule to determine who will be on-call. Their work with the Auroville Ambulance is additional to their other jobs in Auroville. The team is also committed to keeping their training current, and has attended medical workshops together. This allows

them to refresh and update their medical skills in specific areas, but also gives them a common language in which to communicate with each other more efficiently.

The Auroville Ambulance is largely self-supported. Its monthly budget is Rs 25,000, which includes ambulance maintenance and repair, petrol, and small maintenance for the team. Out of this, roughly Rs 19,000 is paid for by the ambulance service itself, which charges Rs 1500 to Aurovilians for a trip to the hospital, and Rs 5000 for guests. The Budget Coordination Committee provides an additional Rs 6,000-7,000 monthly to keep the service going.

The Auroville Ambulance team does face challenges, however, the largest one being its small team. The team is always seeking new team members who are reliable and have a deep, long-term commitment to the work. A medical background isn't necessary (though preferred), as training can be provided.

Medical equipment on the ambulance itself also needs to be improved. For instance, the ambulance does not currently hold an AED

(Automated External Defibrillator), a critical device that sends electrical shocks to patients whose hearts have stopped, allowing the heart to reestablish its rhythm. The cost, 2 lakhs for one device, is significant. Between the AED and other equipment needed, the total price tag comes to 3.5 lakh, so a fundraiser would be a welcome addition to the team.

Another challenge is the interface with the Auroville community. It is important, they say, for all Aurovilians to carry the Auroville Ambulance phone number on their phone (+91-9442224680). If you happen to be in a position where you're making an emergency call, it's critical that you try to answer all of the questions that the dispatcher is asking, as every piece of information is a clue to understanding the situation better.

In terms of feedback, the ambulance service receives positive feedback from the community. Appreciation goes a long way, they say, in making the work doable for the long term. The team is open to healthy dialogue about its services, and encourages any feedback to be sent to: ih@auroville.org.in

Ing-Marie

The challenges of filming Auroville



A still from the film 'Auroville: The City the Earth Needs'

Some months ago a new introductory film on Auroville, *Auroville: The City the Earth Needs*, was presented to the Aurovilians. The film, which begins with *The Dream* and ends with the *Auroville Charter*, gives a brief overview of the main projects and activities, including Auroville's outreach activities in the nearby villages. It also explains the importance of Auroville for the world as a place dedicated to a change in consciousness which, according to Sri Aurobindo, is the only solution to the present global crisis. Aurovilians identify the main challenges today and attempt to answer key questions like 'What is human unity?' and 'What is the importance of karma yoga in Auroville?'

The viewers' response was positive; the high quality of the filming and editing was particularly praised. But how do you go about making a film on Auroville? And is there more than one way to approach it? Olivier and Christine, who worked on the new film, give their views.

Auroville Today: There have been many films on Auroville. Why the need for another?

Olivier: The Visitors' Center requested a new introductory film to show visitors, as the last such film was made ten years ago. They wanted an update of the old movie, but I thought it would be more interesting to do something different.

What do you think are the most important things to communicate about Auroville in an introductory film?

Christine: I think it is important to show that it is a unique experiment in its high ideals and its goals. That is why *The Dream* and the *Auroville Charter* had to be included. Another thing we wanted to show is that Auroville is not only concerned with itself. It is an experiment that is important for the world and for the people living around. We also tried to emphasise that we haven't yet achieved our goals, that it is only an attempt.

Olivier: We wanted to show that Auroville exists in the context of a universal crisis and it is an attempt to find an alternative. A few Aurovilians said we were presenting *The Dream* as if it had already been achieved here, but that is not the case. The second part of the film makes it very clear that we are not there yet, but that every day we keep trying.

Over the years, there have been two approaches to presenting Auroville to the outside. One focuses on the prac-

tical aspects, on the here and now, the other approach is more idealistic and focuses on the ideals. Your latest film falls more in the second category. Why have you chosen this approach?

Christine: I remember a past brochure that tried to be more factual, down to earth, but the problem when you read or see something like this is that it is not inspiring. We need to touch people at a deeper level because then they might want to join Auroville or help in some way. But I agree that it would be interesting to try to make a synthesis of the two approaches.

Olivier: This film is an introduction, it just gives some hints of what Auroville is about. If we really wanted to make a more factual documentary about Auroville, we would need at least one and a half hours because Auroville is so complex. We were limited timewise – the film could be no more than 30 minutes – and by the fact that the people who come to the Visitors' Center are so diverse in education and culture. We had to make something that is easy to understand.

In this context, the text *The Dream* is very interesting because it doesn't compromise in terms of ideas or the level of what is expressed, but the form is very simple.

I found this film, from a technical and artistic point of view, the most successful introduction film yet. What I missed was something about the process behind the achievements: what it means, for example, to turn a barren land into a forest.

Christine: I agree. I wanted to

have more of this in the film because it conveys something important. But for Olivier the film had to be beautiful, and process can be messy.

What did you learn from making this film?

Christine: We made about 40 interviews. In all, we have between 20

When they speak, you feel it is really them speaking, and it comes from somewhere deep inside.

Given a free hand, what kind of film would you make for Aurovilians or for people who know Auroville well?

Olivier: It would definitely be very different from the one we just made.

Christine: I think it would have to be a militant film, to show what needs to be changed or challenged in our present situation.

Olivier: We would need to question our present economy, our organization and system of education, because we know the ideals and we know we are far from achieving them.

Christine: I also dream of making a film about Auroville where, at the beginning, nothing is said about the ideal. We would just follow the daily life of one person and then, progressively, show that this person is here for something different. This is a little bit the secret of Auroville. At first sight it looks ordinary, but there is something else going on.

Olivier: You could also start with somebody who comes to Auroville for the first time knowing nothing and slowly, through meetings with people, he or she discovers what Auroville is about. Auroville is a difficult place to understand. If you look at it from the point of view of its collective organi-

mysteries of Auroville, and it is definitely something I would like to show in a movie.

Christine: One thing that expresses for me the fact that Auroville is a place where people are motivated by something else is the way certain Aurovilians have faced their imminent death. They show courage, a faith, which is absolutely remarkable and extraordinary.

Olivier: It is essential to find a way of conveying these things because it shows there is a certain level of consciousness here. But how to talk about this in a movie?

What other aspects of Auroville are difficult to convey on film?

Christine: I think the inner difficulties, the inner struggle of Aurovilians to deal with the gap between the high ideals and the daily reality, is difficult to convey, although this is there in almost everyone.

Olivier: Auroville is difficult to talk about because it is such a complex adventure. It includes everything – there is spirituality but also all kinds of things that are apparently the total opposite. It would be very interesting to show how and why it is like this. But before doing this you have to understand it yourself, and perhaps nobody is able to do this at present.

All we can say is that Mother gave us a very high ideal but she gave



A still from the film

-30 hours of interviews and more than half of them are very interesting and touching, particularly the interviews of young people.

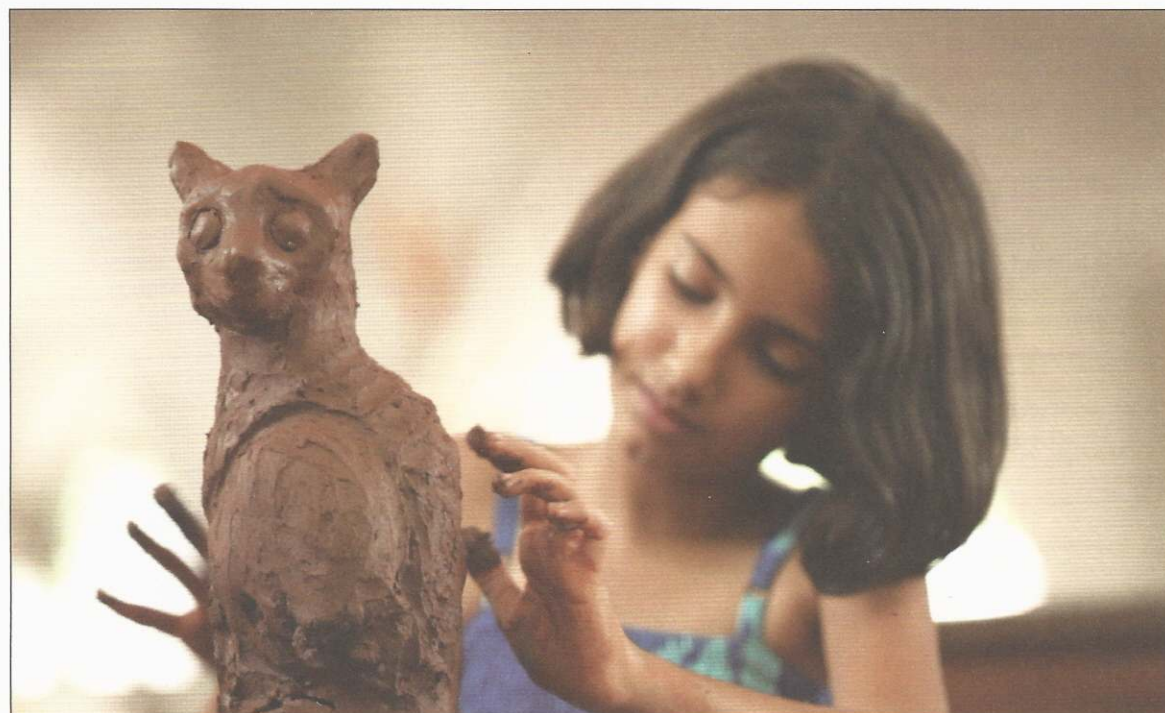
Olivier: What was interesting was to see that these young Aurovilians have a deep understanding; it's not something they have learned at school about The Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

zation, it is really chaotic. At the same time, it is a place where you have many interesting people making very interesting experiments: I don't think there's anywhere else in the world where so many things are happening in such a small community. This contrast between collective chaos and individual creativity is one of the

it to people who are not really ready yet to live these ideals. That's why we have to think of Auroville as a very long-term project. The other thing you can't ignore is our situation. Auroville could have been built somewhere in the mountains, but we are a suburb of Pondicherry surrounded by a few villages. It is interesting that Auroville, which is one of the most daring and experimental places in the world, is located in one of the most conservative of places. This could be the theme of another film. It could illustrate what Sri Aurobindo meant when he wrote 'All life is yoga'.

Christine: Another idea for a film would be to show how revolutionary Auroville is. Look how revolutionary Mother was even in her own time: the way she spoke about marriage and about there being no essential difference between a woman and a man. This is definitely not for the Visitors Center because it would need to be a film with an 'edge', a film that pushes people to consider their deepest beliefs, and I don't think the ordinary Indian public are ready for this.

I also think it would be great to make a comic film about Auroville, a film that touches real issues but in a comic way. Something like what the Genius Brothers do in their shows.



A still from the film

From an interview by Alan

Pushing the boundaries of theatre

Dubbed a 'Laboratory for Theatre Arts and Research', Adhishakti, an experimental theatre company located near Auroville, pushes boundaries and provokes through its work, whilst being relevant to contemporary audiences in India. The troupe's performances always embody strong concepts, an expansive imagination and high-standard execution, appealing to audiences that like to be challenged.

In this fresh theatre work, *The Ten Heads of Ravana* – the king of Lanka in the Ramayana epic – become a metaphor for the tension that exists between the individual and the collective. The tenth head does not fit symmetrically or psychologically with the other nine heads, and does not want to dumb down or become average in order to fit into the collective. This is a highly relevant topic for Auroville, considering its ongoing struggles with defining satisfactory decision-making processes and forms of governance.

As the tenth head, central actor Vinay Kumar carried the show with a compelling confidence. His strong physicality and accomplished mime skills ensured a powerful performance, and he expertly portrayed the character's bemused struggle with finding a way to express his unique thoughts – a process that ultimately transforms into a determination to craft an independent role for himself vis-à-vis the other nine heads.

With a sparse script, a stark set of plain screens and an edgy sound track, the piece relied on innovative concept and assured execution.

Each scene took a different approach to exposition and narrative style – perhaps reflecting a fragmented mind – cohering into a well-crafted narrative whole that sometimes incorporated gentle humour.

As an alternative narrative and stylistic element, video sequences were projected onto screens that portrayed the other nine heads. Animated to a high technical standard, the videos captured the over-bearing and bullying atmosphere that can arise in collectives towards thoughtful or fringe individuals who question the status quo.

While the support actors were dynamic, the show definitely belonged to Vinay. The fact that no audience member exited the steaming hot Bharat Nivas auditorium, despite the piece not always being comfortable viewing, is testament to his strength as a performer.

The play's obvious weakness was the ending. Despite the technical polish and heightened entertainment value of the final animation, the conclusion suffered from Vinay's absence, and therefore lacked for me a sense of "completion" of the narrative through the main character's eyes.

As we've come to expect from Adhishakti, this theatre piece was accomplished, provocative and relevant in its exploration of themes around ostracism. At a time when Tamil asylum seekers are being turned away by my country of birth, Australia, this piece



Ravana's Tenth Head in discussion with some of the other artists

offers insights into ways of thinking about difference and acceptance.

Adhishakti also debuted two other theatre pieces at Bharat Nivas on the same weekend, both

of which generated excellent reports. Auroville should appreciate its privileged position of being front-row witnesses to this unique arts laboratory's latest explorations in theatre. *Lesley*

IN BRIEF

Auroville Council start work

The Auroville Council, in its first interactive meeting with the community, reported a huge workload consisting of 17 personal issues, 6 policy mandate issues and 4 immediate community issues. The 6 policy issues are (1) Matrimandir executives and mandates, and issue of benches; (2) Housing Policy amendments for young people, volunteers and Newcomers; (3) amendments to the Friends of Auroville policy; (4) how to deal with Solar Kitchen Sludge; (5) the revised policy of the Funds and Asset Management Committee (FAMC); and (6) the mandate of the Residents' Assembly Service. The immediate community issues are: (1) the formation of the new WC; (2) the Auroville Security Budget; (3) Aurovilians not contributing to the Central Fund; and (4) the policy for workshops by non-Aurovilians in Auroville venues. The Council also announced that it is developing a Code of conduct/Work Ethics.

www.auroville.org renewed

A brand new public website for Auroville has now replaced the old one which has been in existence for 14 years. It's a fresh start with around 350 pages covering basic information on Auroville taken out of 3,000 pages from the old site. More pages will be added over the coming months.

Board of Services annual meeting

The Auroville Board of Services (BoS), in its annual gathering on August 13th, observed that service managers who rely on a community maintenance find this is too low to cover their basic needs, even with the provided in-kind component, which still does not cover expenses such as transport or housing. Currently it is hard to find people willing or able to take on a full-time responsibility running a service. Part-time work allows people the time to do other things to cover their material needs.

Many services are supported either with personal funding, fully or partly, or with additional funds generated from an income-generating part of the same, or another, activity. Centralised funding for equipment and infrastructure for services is missing in Auroville's economic planning.

Developing Sri Ma?

The Housing Board has informed the community that it believes that the development of Sri Ma as a beach resort, a large-scale income generating unit with a 50-rooms guest facility, is not developing as planned. The value of the land is 17.5 crores and the housing assets close to 1.5 crore. The Housing Board is concerned that Sri Ma serve the community in its

greatest priority of the moment which is income generation for both Aurovillian maintenances and the creation of housing assets. Moreover, since Repos Beach's recreational resort function has disappeared, more Aurovilians are using Sri Ma for their Sunday outings. The Housing Board has asked for community feedback on the issue.

Sri Aurobindo in Arabic

A 30 minutes video titled "Sri Aurobindo in Arabic" made by Zackaria Moursi, Jim Page, Lynda Lester and Nihal Rashinkar is now available on YouTube. It is intended to complement the website www.SriAurobindo-inArabic.com as a short introduction of Sri Aurobindo and Mother to Arabic viewers.

Standards for Auroville eggs

Auroville has a few farms and communities that keep chickens 'the natural way'. The largest is AuroOrchard, which is supplying approximately 5,000 eggs a week. Now a Poultry Group has been formed by several farmers intending to start egg farming for Auroville. The Group has started working on 'Standards for Auroville Eggs'. These are not quite as stringent as 'organic' or 'country' eggs, as it is presently difficult to guarantee 100% organic feed and a generous outdoor space of 5 square metre per hen; but they are a vast improvement on previous conditions.

One Asia 2014 Taipei

ONE ASIA 2014 in Taipei will take place from October 25th to November 5th with the participation of 28 artists from all over Asia. This is the third event of the ONE ASIA cultural programmes. The first took place in Auroville; the second at the India International Center in New Delhi. The purpose is to bring Asia together on one platform through Art and culture. Visit: <https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/one-asia-2014-in-taipei>.

Passing: R Kannan

Aurovillian R. Kannan, passed away on August 8th in his home at Meera Youth Camp at the age of 71. Kannan was one of the early Aurovilians. In 1970, he left Abhai Singh's workshop in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, and joined Auroville. Since then he has been living and working and fighting for Auroville, fasting under the Banyan Tree and going to prison for Auroville. Many people remember him as the driver in Auroville, especially in the early years of the Berjam Nature Camp. During his last years, Kannan was the caretaker of Meera Youth Camp, where he also lived. Kannan's body was cremated at the Kulapalayam mandappam.

LETTERS

Visits of Tamil Nadu Chief Ministers

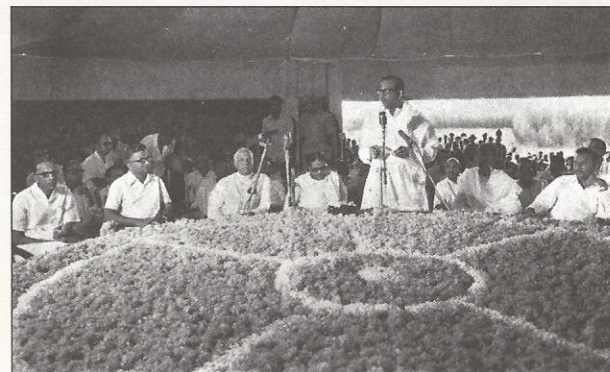
Dear Auroville Today Team,

In your interview with Shri N. Bala Baskar published in the August issue of Auroville Today, you wrote: "No Tamil Nadu Chief Minister has ever visited Auroville". This statement is incorrect.

Mid 1965, Thiru Bhaktavatsalam, the Chief Minister of the then Madras State, visited Auroville. A photo of him with Navajata at the site of Promesse (Bajata is on the left) was published in the August 1965 issue of the Bulletin.



On October 28th, 1973, Dr. Karunanidhi, Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, laid the foundation stone of the Tamil Nadu State Pavilion in the Bharat Nivas Complex at a function where Dr. Nedunchezian, Education Minister, presided. Earlier they had both gone around Auroville and were very highly impressed. Dr. Karunanidhi, in his speech, promised full cooperation and support to Auroville on behalf of the Government of Tamil Nadu and expressed the hope that Auroville would shine in the world as a rising sun.



Sadly, the foundation plaque is untraceable. The building is now occupied by the Laboratory of Evolution.

Warmly,
Gilles Guigan

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USA: Make checks payable to Auroville International USA and send to: AVI USA, P.O. Box 188158, Sacramento, CA 95818, tel. (831) 425-5620, email: info@aviusa.org or to Pondicherry, 12 Tinker Street, Woodstock, NY 12498, tel.: (1) 845-679-2926, email: info@pondi.biz
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