

Auroville Today

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Auroville's monthly news magazine since 1988

Auroville Today 25

At Auroville Today we are not very interested in anniversaries. So when we realized that this issue would mark our 25th year of publication, nobody got very excited. "I guess we should write something about it," was about the best we could do.

This is not false modesty. Rather, it's a reflection of the approach we have favoured from the very beginning – sober, rather matter-of-factual coverage of what is happening in Auroville – as befits our sober, matter-of-factual title. We've been criticized for this. We've been told we should write much more about the ideals, the vision, and the importance of Auroville to humanity – the "big issues" – and not bother so much about the failings of a fledgling community.

But we don't see it like that. Twenty five years ago we were answering to a specific need. The Auroville International centres were complaining that they were not getting regular news about what was happening in the community, so Auroville Today was an attempt to fill this vacuum. But the team also felt that Auroville's struggles to come up with a new economy, or with a town plan that unites rather than divides us, or with a caring relationship to the villages, or with a decision-making process that unites us and answers to our deepest aspirations (all issues we touched upon in our first six issues) were as important, if not more so, than to keep on informing the world how 'special' we are. Not that we have neglected the dreams and aspirations of Aurovilians, or the poetry, art and lighter side of life here. But focussing on the nitty-gritty of the here-and-now seemed to us true to the dynamic of this place, to our daily struggle with our egos and with matter, and our attempt to transform ourselves and matter through a new consciousness, which, when all is said and done, is the greatest adventure of all.

In the same vein, generally we haven't set out to 'explain', in the deeper sense, what is going on here. Partly, of course, because Mother had already described the larger template, but also because we felt it is impossible for any of us to detect the complex tectonics which underlie our daily preoccupations and activities. Instead, what we set out to do, in the words of our first editorial, was "to provide a forum, a meeting-place for different perspectives and views, and to open a window upon the diverse activities and dreams that are Auroville today".

We haven't always succeeded in this: some 'voices' were easier to hear and express than others, and the fact that we are read in government ministries has also influenced what we could cover. But what cannot be denied is that our past 291 issues represent a unique documentation of a particular era of Auroville, the "Foundation era".

And if, on the way, something of the deeper, truer Auroville has managed to peek through, then 25 years of recording and transcribing hundreds of interviews, of digging deeper for new insights, agonizing over phraseology, drinking office coffee, and of wrestling with our egos and malfunctioning computers have not been wasted.

Alan

The Auroville Singing Festival

Over a hundred singers from 26 countries participated in the Auroville Singing Festival at Kalabhummi on October 5th and 6th.

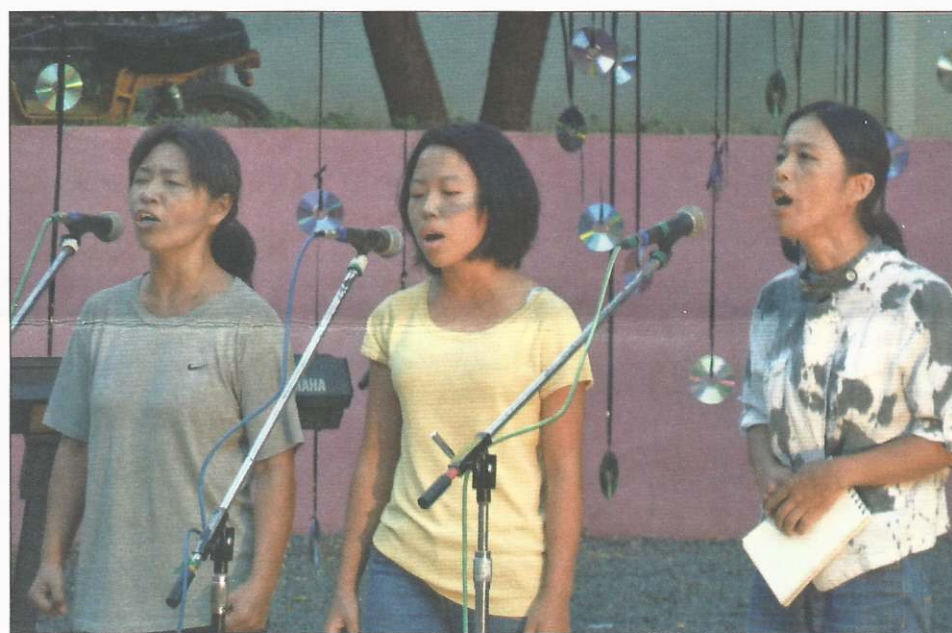
“What mattered was participating and sharing and listening and experiencing community,” says Minsun, defining the essence of the first Auroville Singing Festival. Ever since she joined Auroville more than a year ago, she has been working to promote the development of community culture. Her first success was organizing the Recycled Arts Event in 2012. This year, together with Gumsoon and Joy, she kicked-off a singing festival.

“In Korea, singing together is very common,” explains Gumsoon. “Everybody loves to sing – in churches, schools, social coming together and, [laughing] of course, in karaoke bars.” “India too has a rich singing tradition, even though with urbanization it may be somewhat less present than before,” adds Joy. “As music in Auroville has to find its own expression and place, we had high hopes that a singing festival would get a good response.”

They were not disappointed, though the pace was slow in picking up. “We first contacted the national pavilion groups, but we hardly got a response,” says Joy. “But when we published our plans in the *News & Notes* and on the Intranet, people got interested. More and more people joined, up to the last minute. We were forced to change our plans; instead of a one-evening festival, two evenings were required – and then we had to restrict the number of songs each person or group could sing.”



Neha, Murugesan, Joy and Tejaswini (India)



Gumsoon, Hye Yoon and Surya (Korea)

with drums. There were also students from Rwanda and a couple of Taiwanese women.”

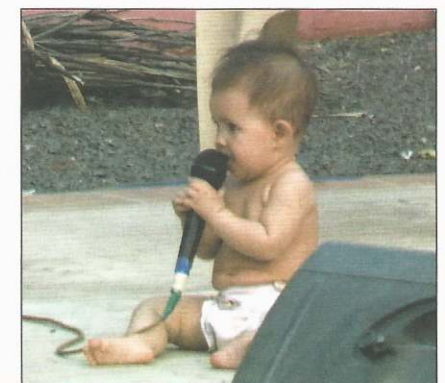
“Many people said that the festival was in the real ‘Auroville spirit’,” says Joy. “We organised it but we didn't feel we had the control. People came forward to help with the lights, with the stage-setting and the sound. Others helped accompanying singers with their songs when needed. And then there were the singers. I was so surprised to see some people singing not only songs of their own country but also from others. Some people I'd never heard singing before! It was an inspiring and unifying experience.”

“We received many thank-you's for bringing the Auroville Singing Festival into existence and for all the work to make it into a happy experience,” says Minsun. “Yet, we missed the participation of many countries. The Scandinavians, for example, were absent, and so were many others. I hope that they will overcome their shyness and participate next year. For the Auroville Singing Festival will become an annual event in the first week of October each year.”

She also plans a sing-along, a song in which the entire audience will participate. A famous example is the one that happened in London's Trafalgar Square in April 2009, where 13,500 people sang the Beatles' *Hey Jude*, with the song's lyrics displayed on an electronic board above the stage. “If it worked there, it should certainly work here,” she says.

Minsun has made her mark, and already people have expressed their intention to join next year's festival. “It will be bigger and better,” she promises.

Carel



The youngest participant



Michiko, Ananda and Yumi (Japan)

• Where are we as community? The views of:

- five Tamil Aurovilians: Rama, Rathinam, Dhandapani, Jothi and Ponnusamy
- five elder Aurovilians: Deepti, Jocelyn, Francis, Shankar and Claude

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• Potters make their mark: Rakhee in China, Supriya in Korea and Ange in New Delhi

- Where are we as community? The views of: Six adults born in Auroville: Akash, Muni, Anandamayi, Aurosyllé, Ribhu, and Satyen

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• Helmut on designing and townplanning in Auroville

- Aryamani on performing Sri Aurobindo's plays
- Who is in charge here?
- New Auroville calendar

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Received on 21 Oct 13

Where are we today as a community? What has gone wrong, what could go better? Is this place still 'special'? In this and the next page we present the views of five Aurovillians who joined Auroville as children from the local villages in the very early 1970s and of five long-term Aurovillians. On page 6 we present the views of six Aurovillians who were born here in the 1970s or early 1980s.

"We need to recreate community"

Rama, Rathinam, Dhandapani, Ponnusamy and Jothi all joined Auroville as children from the local villages in the very early 1970s. Today they are all highly-respected members of the Auroville community, playing key roles in administration, service and business. What was life like in those early years? And how do they view the present Auroville and its Tamil community?

What are your memories of those early days?

Ponnusamy: For me it was an escape from school. Also, there were a lot of foreigners here; it was a totally different scene from the village. In the village you went to school, you came back, took a bath, went to bed; that was it, basically. Not much happened in the village.

Rathinam: For me, there was always a lot of work to do at home. I had to take care of the goats, bring water, go to the shop. I remember very clearly I hated doing all that. I wanted to play.

So Auroville was a playground?

Rama: Yes. And when Mother was still alive, we would go and see her at times. Our whole family was taken to see her. She put her hand on my head and gave me a rose flower. We would also see her frequently at the balcony darshans. As long as she was there, things were okay. Then, when the conflict started with the Sri Aurobindo Society (SAS) things got worse. Many people and the Ashram teachers left Auroville and school stopped. Some of the integrated families went back to the village, because you had to take a side. It was a very sad moment. However, all of us were in sports so we got a place to stay in an Auroville community.

What did you do when school stopped?

Jothi: Initially we were just running around, being part of that whole fight with the Society. I remember making a human chain at Matrimandir when the Society people wanted to come in. We camped out there for three nights – kids were playing around, there was lots of music and singing; it was a lot of fun. When work resumed at Matrimandir, we were there to help; especially during concreting work both during the night and day. Working at Matrimandir was also a lot of fun. At other times, my friends and I would go hunting with our slingshots in the Forecomers and Utility canyons. On other days we would go to the beach. We spent a lot of time at the beach, swimming and pulling in nets with the fishermen.

Rathinam: When the educated parents saw the conflict, they took their children away from Auroville. But all of us come from the local villages and our parents were not educated, so they were happy that we got enough food to eat, shelter and good clothes in Auroville. They couldn't think further to put us in a proper school somewhere else.

Ponnusamy: My parents wanted to take me out of Auroville. They came and took me back once or twice because they said I had to finish my schooling, but I kept coming back. And then Meenakshi started Ilaigarkal School, and that's where I, Kaniappan, Parasuraman and others were educated.

Jothi: Initially we didn't miss school, but later we started feeling we needed to educate ourselves. Some of us got attracted to the machinery at Aureka, and when we asked Jean if we could learn to work with machines, he said that we had to know mathematics. So we said, "Okay teach us". He started with us right there on the floor of the workshop. So we picked up education here and there. We had maths with Jean, French with Croquette, English with Gordon and Jeanne.

Dhandapani: My father wanted me to get involved in the tea shop, but it was not very interesting so I kept running away and going to Forecomers. It was actually Bob and Deborah who put me in school; they brought me to Rod in Center Field. Then in 1971 the kindergarten



From left: Jothi, Dhandapani, Rathinam, Rama and Ponnusamy

started in Aspiration, and I started going there.

Jothi: Many of us would have drifted off to do other things if it hadn't been for sports: it was sports that really kept us together, in particular basketball.

Rathinam: Later, we were all working at Aurelec, but then we decided we were going to go back to school full-time. It was a big move for us because the one hundred rupees or more we had been earning was a very big thing in those days.

You have all been here for more than 40 years now. What do you feel are the major changes that have taken place over that time?

Dhandapani: We had the experience of helping Auroville grow; the present Aurovillians don't have that feeling. When I tell my children of all the difficulties we went through, they can't imagine how it was. Also people had loving hearts then. We could eat anywhere, sleep anywhere; everywhere we were accepted as family.

Jothi: There was a lot of brotherhood, open brotherhood, then. Now there is no feeling of community and the collective experiences are limited to gathering for festivities.

Ponnusamy: We shared a lot of things then. Now people are more possessive.

Rathinam: In those days whatever we did was for Auroville. You don't get that feeling with the new generation of Aurovillians – and I'm not just talking about the Tamils here. It seems as if they are here primarily for themselves, there isn't an aspiration to build Auroville.

Dhandapani: The most important thing then was to be true, transparent and to build Auroville in this barren land. This was taught to us by our teachers and I think Mother put this into the minds of all the early people. There was more truth in us in those days and we believed each other. We were not interested in making money from Auroville or buying land.

Rama: In some ways I don't blame the new people for the way they are because there is not this community atmosphere now. Wherever you go to work, it's more like a business. I don't know if there's any real opportunity of service left in Auroville.

Yet almost all of you are involved in the service sector. Is that something to do with the guidance you had in those early years?

Dhandapani: Very much so. We learned

this from our teachers. It was the golden time when we had teachers like Gordon and Jeanne and all these Ashramites. Now that guidance is not there for the new Aurovillians.

Rama: All we can tell you is that wherever you go in Auroville today, it's not how it was.

How did these changes happen?

Jothi: Right after the fight with the SAS we started reclaiming Auroville property, and people started creating 'survivalhood' units. Initially, they were contributing all of their profits to Auroville but gradually new people entered Auroville and many of them were not involved in physical work. As a result, those who were working and contributing started wondering why they should pay for these people who didn't work.

You are clearly talking of the whole of Auroville, not just one community. But you are also senior members of the Tamil community, which, in many respects, is the least known community by those outside it. Is there a feeling of unity in the Tamil community?

Rama: We are members of that community but nowadays many people have joined who we don't know and we don't know what they're doing. But the Tamils are not just one community; we have different classes, groupings, and we come from different regions.

Jothi: I was in the Entry Service for many years and many of the local people I've seen wanting to join do not educate themselves about Auroville a whole lot. It's like they are just seeking opportunities. For us, especially those who have been here from the early days, it is very difficult when we are identified with people like that, because we do not have the same mindset.

Rathinam: Sadly, maybe only one in ten understands something about the ideal. And then it is shocking that status is playing a big role now. To be an Aurovilian has a certain status in the local area because you get access to people like the Secretary, and there are opportunities to start a business and become an executive, even if you have only just become an Aurovilian. These people feel that as an Aurovilian they are equal to everybody else and should be given an equal chance. We don't know how to handle this...

Jothi: I think there are status issues among us Tamil Aurovillians; there are those that have and those that don't have, and these are looked

down upon, even by the villagers.

Rama: Many people say, what have you been doing all these years? How many acres of land have you acquired, how many cars?!

Jothi: With the development of India there are a lot of new universities and colleges now. This will improve the situation because these people will not necessarily feel that they have to join Auroville to better themselves. But this will take some years and today Auroville is still looked upon as a place of opportunity.

Do some people in the Tamil community feel they are not treated as equals? Is this why some of these people want to be in prominent positions in the community?

Rama: A handful of people are very concerned with status and power. This will not easily change because in the villages it is always like this.

Rathinam: But in the last 10 years this trend has definitely got stronger with some Tamil groupings in Auroville. There are groups who want to get control in major Auroville working groups. It is to do with classism, with the economic thing, with

status. A person who has been a gardener for 10 years now wants to be an executive. I don't think these people have an idea what they want to do with this power; they just want to have a chance to be in charge. And these people may not be qualified to be executives. A lot of the larger community's collective energy is being taken up by these things at the moment.

Fortunately the five of us are not pulled into any of those polarities. But I can see other guys definitely getting together for a particular issue, or to put someone in a group.

Jothi: It gives a very false impression that there's a lot of loyalty in the Tamil community, but there is not much loyalty in this. I think it is based more on an expected exchange of favours.

Rama: Why should we be loyal to a group when we want to work for Auroville? We should take that further step.

Rathinam: That's why those groups or individuals do not approach us, because ours is a different energy which they can't relate to. In Auroville, some Tamils are very rigid in re-creating village customs because they are missing them. But we don't miss those things.

What are the solutions?

Rathinam: I feel that Tamil Newcomers should be guided closely, they should experience community living and their integration should take longer. The present entry period is too short for the locals because it is very difficult for them to let go of that life which is just next door, across the fields.

Jothi: Speaking of Auroville as a whole, we need to recreate an atmosphere of support, of brotherhood and community. We need to get away from today's individualistic, money-making attitude and work with everyone, involve everyone in a common process. Only through these changes we can make a difference. At this point in time I think we have gone way far off the mark, because the individualized way of life is dominant now. We need to find a way to bring everybody together again.

You see many problems with the present Auroville, you are all talented enough to be successful anywhere, yet you are still here. Why?

Rama: We were all very lucky in our teachers. That little seed which they planted in us is what keeps us working for the true Auroville.

From an interview by Alan

"It's primarily an inner work"

Deepti is a teacher, as is Shankar who grew up in a local village. Jocelyn has been involved in services, and Francis and Claude have extensive experience of participating in Auroville groups and the Auroville 'process'.

Auroville Today: After 45 years, how are we doing as a community? This will inevitably be broad brush, but what would you put on the report card?

Shankar: I see us being like different pieces of a puzzle. The pieces are all there but the edges are sharp so they don't fit together well. They need to be rounded off.

Jocelyn: Clearly, in some ways we are a dysfunctional community.

In what ways?

Deepti: One of the things we have suffered from in this community is 'fixed ideas', a lack of plasticity. Time and again, on issues such as the kind of township we want or the location of a road, dogma has divided us. We then find a way to make those who disagree with us into 'the other', and this allows us to treat them in a ridiculously bad manner. It's what the human mind has always done, which is why Auroville is impossible on the level of the mind. Mother said "no exclusivity", something impossible for the mind, which is an instrument of duality.

Jocelyn: Another thing is that our bureaucracy has got completely out of hand. We have systemized everything in a very foolish way.

Francis: We have a bureaucracy which serves a particular function, but sometimes the bureaucrats forget they don't simply have a function; they think they are in charge. That is where it gets problematic. So you have this younger energy going on, which is quite creative, but the bureaucrats have a tendency to interfere with it in order to make it fit into their old system. They can't recognize that this is an energy that doesn't have to be systematized their way.

Claude: I think far too much energy goes into the bureaucratic aspect of Auroville compared to how much goes into production. And these committees are not good for people. When good people join them, they lose something, they become something different. So maybe we should do what Mao suggested during the Cultural Revolution: bombard the headquarters! (laughing)

Francis: They all end up behaving the same. We've had half a dozen town planning groups. Each one has said it wouldn't make the same mistakes as its predecessor, but each one has turned out to be just like all the others! My personal epiphany happened one day when, as a member of the Finance and Assets Management Committee, I looked round the table and I realized I knew what each person there was going to say. And if I knew what they were going to say, they certainly knew what I was going to say, too. That did it. I left.

Deepti: Working with younger people, one observes they are full of goodwill, they want to do something, but they feel they get blocked by the system.

Are we talking about unresolved issues of power and authority here?

Deepti: Of course. Mother said that human attachment to power will be one of the last to be transformed, so necessarily Auroville will have these problems of people seeking or clinging to power. I feel somewhat sorry for people who are caught up in this power syndrome. We are surrounded by this garden of delight and they miss it because they are obsessed with what is ultimately meaningless. But we're all to blame. We invest people with the mystique of power and then pay far too much attention to it.

Francis: My other concern is the Indian Government's involvement in Auroville and how it has changed Auroville. I think the Government has been very generous to Auroville, but I wonder if Auroville is becoming a welfare state because of the Government's largesse. Is this interfering with our initiative, our creativity? In the early days, we would throw all our energy and money out there for Auroville. Now people are holding their energy and money back. We're into this giving and taking thing, and everybody seems to be grousing about how little they are getting back. When exactly did we stop giving and start taking?

Does this reflect a loss of trust in Auroville?

Jocelyn: Yes. The other issue people are focusing on now is they do not feel they are being heard and things are being done by our major groups in the name of the community without checking out what the community feels. So the two basic problems are a loss of communication and a loss of trust.

You have all lived here for many years. When do you think things started going wrong?

Francis: At some point in the 1970s, after



From left: Shankar, Francis, Deepti, Jocelyn and Claude

Mother left, something descended and we all went crazy, a knee jerk reaction in different directions.

Shankar: I was really shocked when I was teaching in Last School when a paper was sent round which asked us how many hours we were working. The level of our maintenance was going to be assessed on the basis of how many hours we were working. I was shocked because I have given my life to Auroville, I never count the hours I work, yet now someone wanted to count them to assess my maintenance and to see if I was a 'good Aurovilian'.

Claude: When Abha came in 1978 she had no money but she was given a hut the first day. There was not at all this notion that she had to be 'productive'. But later there came a movement to link efficiency and production to how much one received in maintenance. This is where it all started to go wrong.

Jocelyn: I think everything changed when the maintenance system was introduced in the early 1980s.

Deepti: But we've always been in a mess, we've always been arguing with each other about something or other. It seems to me that in this yoga of transformation until you master the vital impulses, you will be forced to deal with their effects. And that's what we have been doing from the beginning – churning the vital soup in our collectivity.

So what can be done?

Deepti: It's primarily an inner work, an individual one. It's easy to see yourself a victim if things go badly. I have experienced moments of being stunned, as when Last School was closed in the early '90s, (a déjà vu of the '70s), and it can take you years to get your head out of these things. But one realizes these shocks are great shortcuts for self-development; when one meets such strong experiences they can, if you let them, push one more intensely inward. One can then contact a dimension where all touches of the world consciously come for one's growth. So I think that when people complain about not getting what they need it is a sign that they need to shift their dimension to something more true in themselves.

Shankar: I joined Auroville later and I'm full of admiration for people like all of you and the way you have faced the challenges over the years. But I don't know if all this is reaching the younger generation. Do they take your efforts as lessons to learn from? Or is it all just irrelevant history to them?

I understand what you mean about the importance of the inner dimension. But there are times when I am at the Samadhi that I find myself complaining to Mother that there was not enough salt in my porridge that morning! So now a third generation of Aurovilians are already growing up, and if they do not get the idea, if they do not understand what Auroville is really about, they, too are just going to pray for more salt in their porridge. So we need to educate the community as a whole about this, to make the whole community a learning community. Otherwise our children are

At this very moment, there is a platform meeting happening at which Aurovilians are discussing ways to change our entry and housing system. How many of you would have participated in this?

Jocelyn: I would have been there because I believe that we have to sit together to make that change. The groups are not interested in doing this. At these platform meetings we listen to what everybody has to say and we create task forces to look into things we want to see done. Nobody knows where it's going, but we try to work in a positive way that doesn't exclude anybody.

Francis: I would not have gone because I am not in the mood for aggravating myself. After banging my head against a wall for 30 years in these kind of community meetings I came to realize that it hurts, and I have learned more in the last decade that I stopped playing this game than I did in the previous 30. The problem is you might go into these meetings with the intention of changing the world for the better, but in no time the group consciousness takes hold of you and you slip down to the group's lowest common denominator. Somebody begins by reading the Auroville Charter but then we immediately fall into the opposite.

Deepti: I think it is great if people passionately put their energy into doing something like this but I wouldn't have gone to such a meeting, partly because of what Francis describes. It is The Charter which should literally organize the meetings. When you want to say something in such a meeting you should ask yourself, does this fit with The Charter? If it doesn't, be quiet. The collective space is sacred; it should be used as if it is a precious jewel. You should only put in the centre something that enriches it, not the lower nature.

Francis: When we came here we all brought our baggage with us, our thinking that had been regimented for decades. But we have lots of young blood here, 30 and 40 year old Aurovilians who grew up here. They don't have any previous baggage; they were born in Mother's world. So why are they not coming forward and taking the lead? Why are they not saying to us, "Thank you very much mom and dad, now you can go for a walk in the woods"? I feel a certain anger about their lack of participation in the Auroville process.

Jocelyn: I would invite them in now and give them their chance.

Claude: But they have baggage. When I listened to young Aurovilians on a recent video, I could hear the voices of their parents. That is their baggage.

Deepti: We should not be too hard on ourselves. When you look at the world, it's difficult everywhere: humanity doesn't have a system of governance that works. And look at the scale of what we are attempting here. In Auroville, it is as if the ethical veil has been removed and we are seeing the raw human difficulty, which is a millennial difficulty.

Claude: I remember an anthropologist, Jean Mallaurie, who visited in the early years of Auroville. He warned us that when we were more than 500 inhabitants, we would no longer know each other well. This would create a whole new set of problems, and new relations would have to be found between the members of this society. So maybe this is what we are struggling with now.

Jocelyn: And let's not forget our successes. For example, the fact that the land and the houses here do not belong to anybody in particular is a very solid grounding principle. We have the Matrimandir, we have an evolving service economy, and we have many individuals who are doing very interesting experiments.

Deepti: I think that, in spite of all our stupidities, Auroville has an atmosphere that is unique in the world. No doubt, we could have progressed faster. We chose the flatter, the lower road, but the possibility to change the trajectory exists here; there is no other place on earth where this opportunity exists. We are not doing very well, and perhaps we were arrogant when we thought we could create a new species so fast. But, for me, there is no alternative to Auroville, to being part of it, to being passionate about it. What else could you be doing with your life that would be as interesting as this?

Jocelyn: We came here to build a new world and we are as passionate about it as ever.

Francis: That's why we're here, to become something larger than ourselves. And Auroville, when all is said and done, is a constant miracle...

From an interview by Alan

Four Auroville potters – three women and one man – have made their mark in the world of ceramic arts. Rakhee and Adil created art for the Indian Pavilion of the Fuping Ceramic Art Museum in the Chinese city of Fuping; Supriya made art pieces for the Clayarch Gimhae Museum in the South Korean city of Gimhae; while Ange had her art works exhibited at the prestigious Habitat Centre in New Delhi. Auroville Today spoke to the three women potters.

"It's a matter of great satisfaction"

"Five years ago, Adil was in Australia for a symposium and was showing a slide show of contemporary Indian ceramics," explains Rakhee, when asked how it had happened that Auroville ceramic artists had been invited to exhibit their works at the Fuping Ceramic Art Museum in the Chinese city of Fuping. "That presentation was attended by a Dr. I Chi Hsu, a Chinese gentleman who is involved with the Fuping Museum. He told Adil, 'I am happy to have seen this, because I thought that in India, you only make ceramic elephants and horses. But now

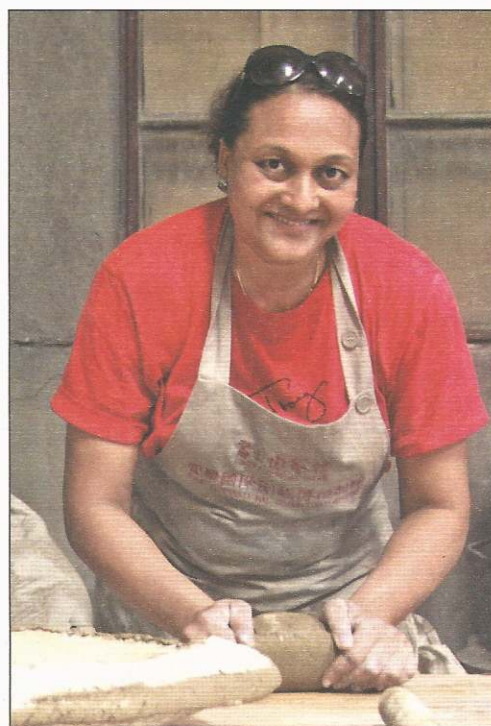
"Adil did not feel in a position to select artists: he went to Ray Meeker from the Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry, where many Auroville potters have been trained, and together they contacted around 45 contemporary Indian ceramic artists. The names of those who responded positively were sent to Fuping, and they then shortlisted 18 people: two from Auroville, three from the Golden Bridge Pottery and 13 from other places in India.

"In the first week of August, the 18 of us flew in from various corners of the globe – from New Mexico, Singapore, Bhopal, Indore, Delhi, Bombay, Bangalore and Auroville – and met in

the armies of Qin Shi Huang, the first Emperor of China. It is a form of funerary art, buried with the emperor in 210-209 BC, whose purpose was to protect the emperor in his afterlife. This imagery had a very strong impact on many of our works. Though we did not realize it at the time, it slowly came through as the days progressed. We also visited some other museums in nearby cities, studying traditional Chinese firing techniques and how they produced pottery thousands of years ago.

"We were given a large studio adjacent to a huge brick and tile factory. You can't imagine the volumes of clay they use every day and how many bricks and tiles are fired in huge tunnel kilns, where trolleys enter on one side, and 48 hours later, come out at the other end with the fired products. For them, providing our group with its requirement of 25 kilos of clay a day was nothing. To see that factory was unbelievable. I am trained as an industrial ceramics designer and I have worked in the ceramics industry for quite a number of years before joining Auroville, making moulds for table ware, sanitary ware and so on. But I have never seen anything of this scale.

"So we all set to work. I shared a studio space with Ray Meeker and Deborah Smith of Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry and with Adil. It was so very different from what we were used to! Working out of one's comfort zone and with unfamiliar materials – the colour palette and clay and porcelain compositions were different – required quite some adaptation in our way of working. It was a great learning experience. All of us were making works very different from one another. Some worked with clay, some, like me, with porcelain. Every now and then local Chinese people would come and look at us working and enquire about our work, sometimes even touching it. I realised that they have a very different concept of personal space in China.



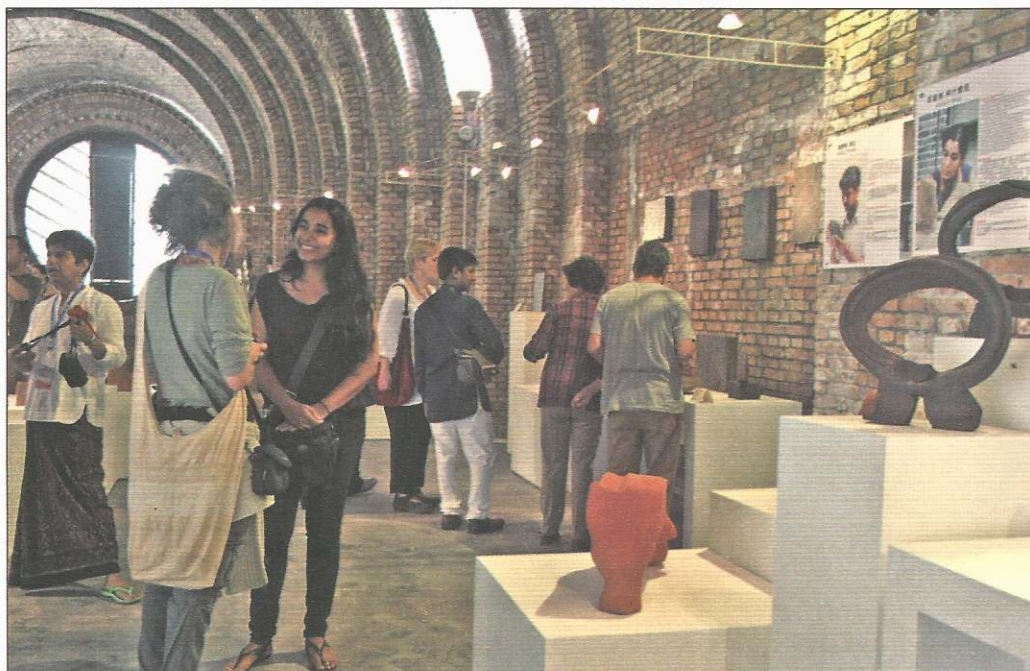
Rakhee

Our work and ways of working were also constantly documented by the museum officials for archival purposes.

"Fuping is one of those relatively new cities in China, where everything tries to look contemporary. But it looks faceless. So we spent most of our time working, trying to make 'museum quality' work in a period of five weeks – which, in fact, is quite an achievement.

The opening of our exhibition coincided with an international conference of ceramic magazine editors, so the place was buzzing with persons who are very influential in the world of clay. The energy of the works, how they interacted with each other, was projecting quite a statement. Later, we drifted around the museum comparing our works with the others. Was it at par? Definitely, I would say. The body of work the 18 of us created was as impressive, if not more so, as what we saw in the other sections of the museum. Team India did well."

In conversation with Carel



At the opening of the exhibition

that I have seen your presentation, I will one day invite you to China for the Indian section of the Museum.' Five years later, he invited Adil to put together a list of contemporary Indian ceramic artists who would be worthy of coming to Fuping and making works for the Indian Ceramic Art Museum."

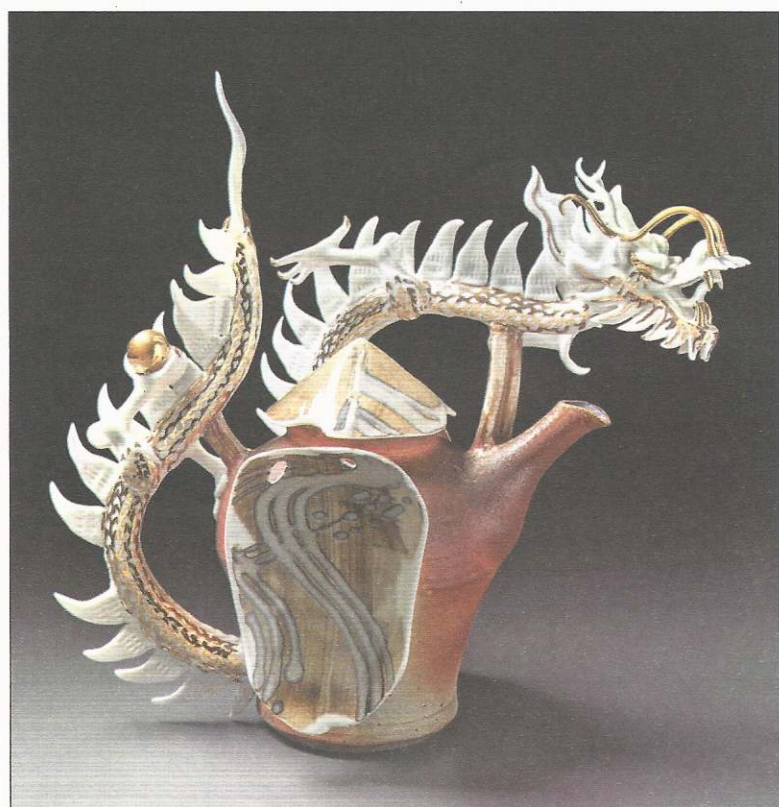
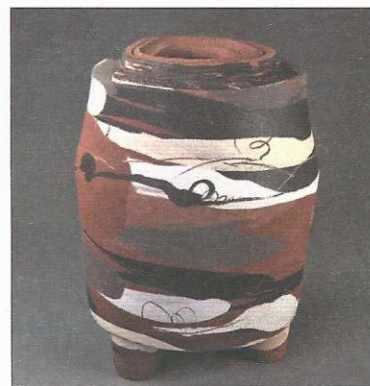
Fuping is a modern city in the middle of China, about an hours drive from Xian, where they found the famous terracotta warriors just a few decades ago. The Fuping Ceramic Art Museum started some ten years ago and has meanwhile become world-class with a staggering collection of ceramics from all over the world. It invites ceramic artists from all over the world to work there for six weeks or longer and then leave the works they have created behind at the museum. The organizers offer the required materials, working spaces and kilns, and board and lodging. "The only thing we had to pay was our airfare and, of course, our shopping," says Rakhee.

Fuping for the five week programme. It felt great to come together. I knew almost all these Indian potters, but I had never been in contact with them for such a long period, and neither had I seen them at work. Then there was the museum itself. For many years I had wanted to see ceramic art from other parts of the world and now I could visit the exhibition galleries every day. The experience was so overwhelming and there was such an incredible variety of styles that at some point in time my mind stopped processing the data flying so thick and fast at me.

"We also spent a day seeing the Terracotta Army in Xian, which is a collection of terracotta sculptures depicting



Three objects by Rakhee



Dragon on a jar

The Visual Arts Gallery of the Habitat Centre New Delhi hosted a rather unique exhibition from September 14-21. "I have never seen anything like this," exclaimed one of India's eminent ceramic collectors on visiting 'The Offering'. Was it the golden balls or the meticulously-made dragons that surprised him? Was it the unusual *Haiyu Slipware* technique used on the wall platters and the cups? During an evening presentation in Auroville, ceramist Ange explained her work to her friends.

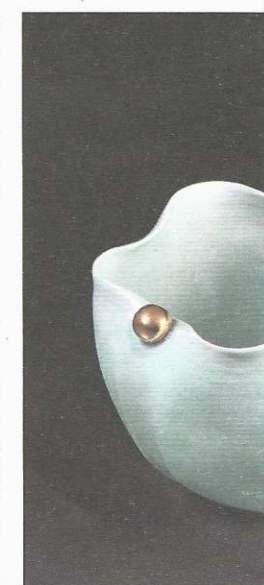
"This is my first solo show. All my potter colleagues have done it, and it was time for me to do it too. I started about a year and a half ago, making platters and cups, some upright art pieces and began work on the dragons-on-teapots. They became the star attraction of the show.

"The idea of the dragons came to me when I visited Taiwan. I saw them everywhere, studied them, photographed them, and fell in love with them. Their talons flying all over the place, manes streaming, eyes popping and the curves of their bodies as they wind their way in pursuit of the ever evasive fire-balls, just blew my mind. They balance beauty and ferociousness and playfulness.

"I decided to make dragons curled around a teapot or a jar. Putting them on these vessels is a symbolic statement of my work. To me, dragons represent the energy, the force of evolution, that breaks out of the static and pushes

us beyond our limitations. The teapot represents the conservative, conventional form of the craft I practice. It reflects discipline and functionality. The golden fire ball is a representation of the spirit that is present in all matter. So the dragon chasing the ball is a symbol of the force of evolution chasing the spirit and trying to catch it."

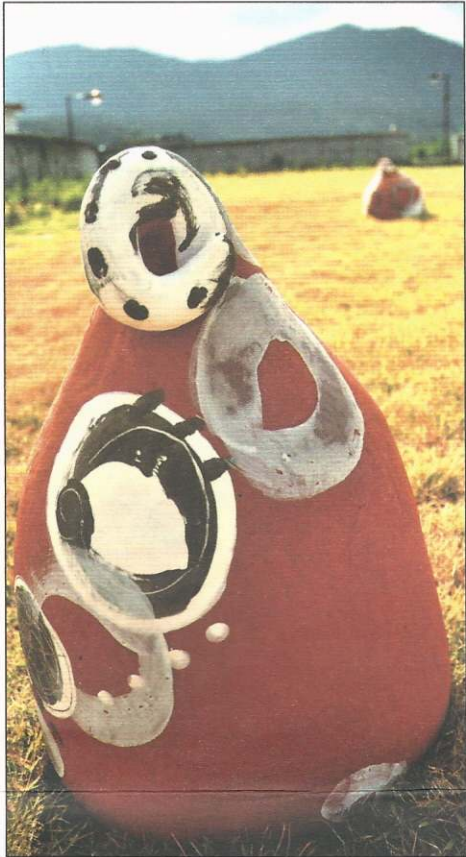
The ideas were not easy to manifest. "I work with porcelain and wood-fire my pieces – and any potter will tell you that wood firings are very difficult to control, and that porcelain is not an easy material to work with. And they are right. The dragons were really, really hard to make. I made all the body parts separately, let them dry and then joined them. But trying to fix one twirling moustache without accidentally touching another one or causing the tongue to break off is not so simple. Then there were the firing challenges: porcelain, like clay, shrinks in the firing. Supports had to be invented, so that their moustaches would not start twirling in the wrong direction and the



A cup from the bo

"A tremendously rewarding experience"

"Last year, the director of InKo, the Indian Korean Centre in Chennai, who had bought some of my works earlier, asked me if I would be interested to be part of a group of Indian ceramists who would visit Korea and work as artists-in-residence for five weeks at the Clayarch Gimhae museum in the city of Gimhae near Busan," says Supriya. "This project was conceived to honour 40 years of Korean-Indian diplomatic relations. The selection of the artists would be made by the Lalit Kala Akademi, the premier fine art institution of the Government of India, together with hosts ARKO, the Arts Council Korea, and InKo Centre, which together would carry all the costs. It sounded great and some months later I learned that, together with 4 others, I had been selected from a shortlist of 47 Indian ceramists."



One of the 'Seedpots', an outdoor piece

Supriya, who has been teaching pottery to beginners since some years, has had successful exhibitions in England in 2004 and 2005, but had not produced much work lately. "I had a studio on the beach but I was not comfortable there. I was pregnant with my second child and I found the beach not the best place to raise a family. Moreover, one day I had a premonitory dream that the house would go under water. We started looking for a place closer to the centre of Auroville and we managed to find one in Auromodèle, where my daughter was born. Shortly afterwards, around Christmas, I went to London for an exhibition. We still had not moved all the furniture and the pottery studio. Then the

tsunami happened – and the beach house indeed went under water. Friends managed to salvage some of our possessions, most importantly the studio equipment. But all the pots, of course, were broken."

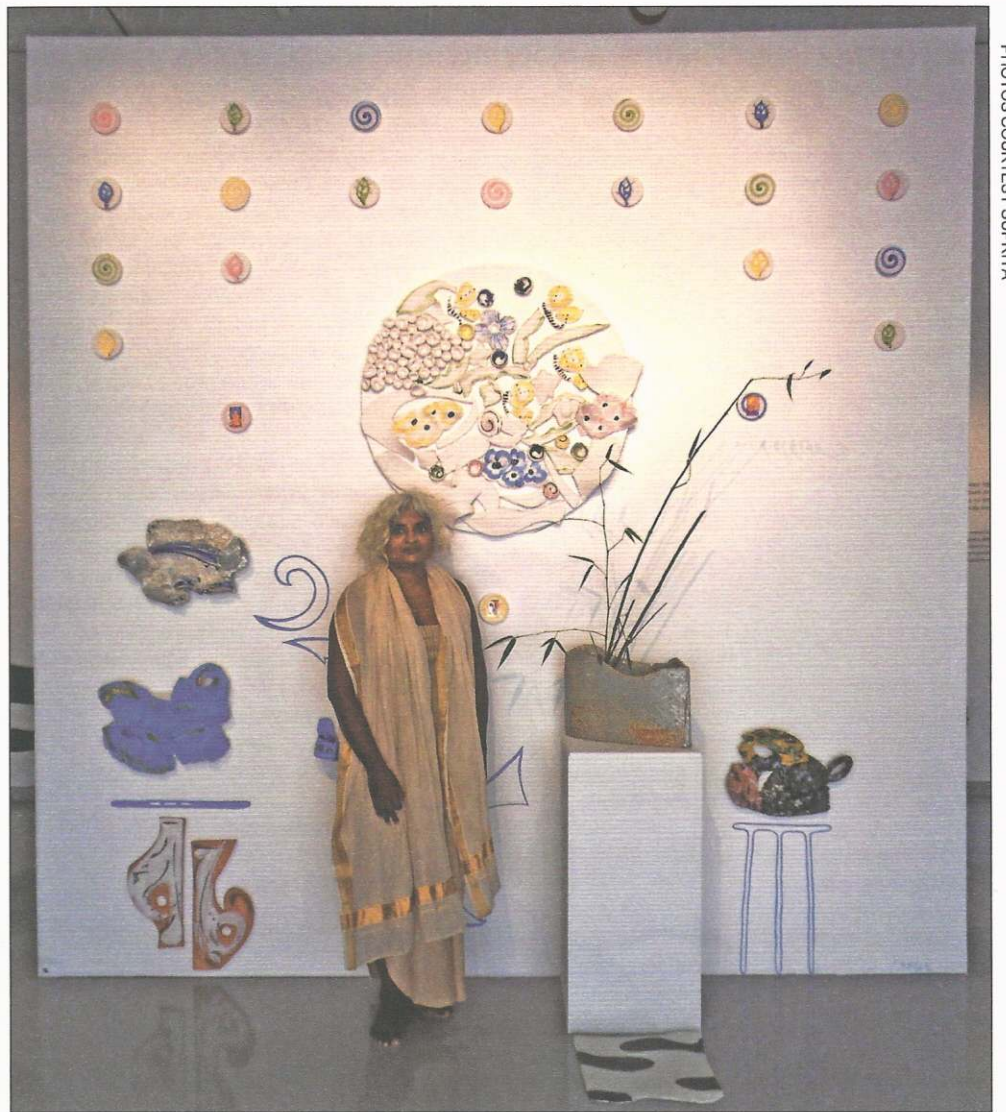
"Though I was far away when it happened, the tsunami affected me. It was not easy to come back to my normal rhythm. I still did my second one-person exhibition and participated in some others, but then I took a break for inward reflection. My attempts to rebuild my studio in Auromodèle had failed, as I was unable to get a 1.5 lakhs rupee loan from Auroville to finish the kiln. I started studying Ikebana, the Japanese system of flower arrangement, and am in the process of becoming a teacher. It gives a lot of peace to the mind. Unlike ceramics, Ikebana is temporary, wherein lies its beauty"

Yet, pottery was never far from her mind. "Pottery is something you want to do because you need to do it – for me, it is the best way to express myself," she says. Luckily, the experience was renewed in Korea. "After having been 'starved' for so many years here, I was very, very happy."

On July 14th, the five Indian ceramicists met in Hong Kong and all travelled together to Gimhae. "We learned about Korean hospitality, which seemed to be limitless. They pampered us. We were given the best studio spaces possible, with 2 gas and 3 electric kilns, which we shared with seven Korean ceramic artists who were there for a 10-month residency. They gave us everything we could require, and all we had to do was work. They asked us to create works both for outdoors and indoors. All of us made indoor pieces, two of us also outdoor work. I made a large wall piece called 'Sun to Me' using earthenware, stoneware and porcelain, and created some stoneware works for pedestals and two large pieces, 'Seedpots', for outside."

The 6 year old Gimhae Clayarch museum ('Clayarch' is a compound word of 'clay' and 'arch', which is an abbreviation of 'architecture') concentrates on the relationship between ceramics and architecture. The museum has a number of exhibition halls, one of which displayed the works of the Indian artists. The opening of the 'Nomadic Garden' of the Indian artists was attended by representatives of all the funding organizations, diplomats, well known Korean ceramists and executives of the Clayarch Gimhae Museum, along with television and newspaper people. While the outdoor works will be a permanent part of the museum collection, the indoor pieces will become part of the new Indian Cultural Centre in Busan.

Making art was only one side of the Korean experience. The artists also gave presentations on their work and background, toured around to visit a number of Korean museums, met with Korean potters, and learned about traditional Korean Pottery and the ancient relationship between India and Korea.



Supriya in front of her wall piece 'Sun to Me'

"We were told of the history of a Korean King Suro who married an Indian princess from Ayodhya, Heo Hwang-ok. She brought Buddhism to Korea. Their tombs are still maintained in Gimhae. This history is important to the Koreans. In 2008, a visiting Korean delegation inaugurated a memorial to their royal ancestor in Ayodhya in a ceremony that was attended by more than a hundred historians and government representatives. This partly explains the good relationship between India and Korea," she says.

For Supriya, the true eye-opener was Korean

pottery. "Korean pottery is very special, and much of it is brilliant and exquisite. We listened to lectures about ancient Korean pottery – which is a few thousand years old – and admired the aesthetic beauty of the early inlaid celadon wares." In this technique, the design is carved into the moist clay body, then filled in with a white or black substance before the vessel is glazed and fired. The design is clearly visible through the glaze. "These works have an incredible subtle beauty and elegant simplicity."

Another experience was the presentation on *Bun-cheong* ceramics by Professor Sung Jae Choi. "His work was of such a fabulous standard that we started feeling very insignificant," says Supriya. "Some of the Korean contemporary art I saw is way ahead of what we are doing here."

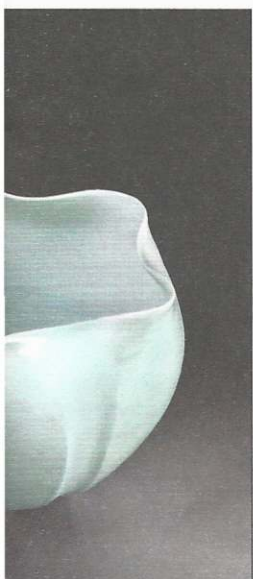
In all, it was a tremendously rewarding experience, says Supriya. "I learned a lot and now want to attempt to experiment with Korean celadon and *Bun-Cheong* techniques. This visit put me right back into doing ceramics."

In conversation with Carel



Three indoor pieces

ffering



body and soul series

In fact, it is always a surprise when something comes out of the kiln, for very often I expect a different result. Often they look like something I haven't made. The fire makes everything far more

dragon heads would not slump."

After experimenting with two prototypes, Ange made 11 dragons. Most of them were fixed on teapots or jars made of 'brown body' clay, which fired well together with the porcelain. One dragon was made emerging out of the ocean, a sculptural piece that presented its own problems, such as making the internal support structure for the ocean. For each piece, Ange designed a pedestal, an exhibition case in glass and a beautifully designed teak box for transport.

Apart from the dragon sculptures, Ange also made a series of pots called 'body and soul', each with a small golden ball, some upright pieces and a series of wall platters. "I had a really difficult time making the porcelain platters," she said. "In fact, from the first six I made, I lost five. One platter broke in my hands when it had dried. I started again, made another batch of seven pieces and this time it worked as I had discovered the technique to support them. They came out well."

beautiful."

She explained that on all her pieces she uses a little-known slip glazing technique called 'Haiyu Ash Glaze' which gives "incredibly rich colors ranging from a light golden ochre, through deep iron red, to green and pale blue." She learned how to make this glaze from Japanese master Shibata Masaaki with whom she apprenticed for six months. Back in Auroville, she adapted the technique using ash from the forest trees surrounding her pottery. "Purifying the ash and removing all alkaline elements is a long and arduous process," she says. "You need time to wash and purify it, before you even know if it will give you anything remarkable at all, and then you have to look for a transparent glaze that will allow the slip decoration to clearly show. But I don't use colouring stains or oxides, and certainly no readymade glazes bought at the store."

Though The Offering was a resounding success, with most



pieces sold, Ange is already looking to move on to the next venture. "I have mastered the technique to make the pieces that were exhibited, but there is something inside me that wants to break out from there, to try things that haven't been tried. What that is still awaits discovery."

Carel

"The present system will have to change."

Akash runs a software unit; Anandamayi works for the Security Service; Muniandi (known as Muni) is a graphic designer; Satyen works at Filaure, a clothing unit; Ribhu works at WasteLess – he tries to change the way people think about waste; and Aurosylle is part of Aurovelo, a cycle shop and café in Reve. They all were born in Auroville.

Auroville Today: What are your vivid memories of growing up here?

Ribhu: Leopards! Bernard got ripped off by some gypsies – they sold him cats painted like leopards – and I remember going as a kid and saying, these are not leopards!

Satyen: In those days everything was more open. There were no fences, you could walk from Certitude to Dana.

Muni: Kids were walking around at three or four o'clock in the morning, having bonfires.

So the adult world of the struggle with the Society etc. did not affect you?

Muni: We were told about the Society, we were told they were the bad guys.

Akash: I remember there was fighting in Revelation, there were *goondas* beating up people and I ran away. There were a few incidents like that.

Satyen: But it never really affected us. As a kid, you're more interested in other things.

Did the community treat you Auroville children as something special?

All: Yes!

Akash: People believed we were something special because we were born here. Personally it leaves me with the feeling that I made a conscious choice to be born here; whether I understand it or not, it feels like my soul has chosen to come to Auroville. More than that, I don't have any concrete idea what it means. But at that time you had this weight upon you, there were massive expectations on your head. Of course, if you messed up you were not special any more.

Muni: But you could become special again!

What are the big changes you've noticed in Auroville over the past 35-40 years?

Muni: There is less of a community atmosphere now.

Satyen: I remember as a kid that each community had its own separate feel to it, but now if you walk through the new communities, there's nothing there and you don't hear people. The other big change is the pressure from the outside, from India and the larger world, has increased tremendously and is influencing the way we live.

Ribhu: Auroville is not a centre of innovation anymore. We were experimenting with interesting technologies 20 years ago, but today we've created an environment which is not conducive to trying new things.

Satyen: At one point we were at the cutting edge, but we lost it because I think we got too caught up in our own little thing. We think because we are in Auroville we have to do things differently, so we don't want to look at what's happening outside and incorporate it. And when something works we keep doing the same thing; we stop innovating.

Ribhu: In the past, if you had something you wanted to do, you just went out and did it. Now you are supposed to get the permission from the Foundation, the ABC, the BCC etc.

Satyen: You always needed money to do something, but in the old days it was easy to start things. Now you have to set up your unit and present a business plan, even though the people you give it to don't even care about it. For them, it's just a matter of ticking boxes.

Akash: Everything has become very bureaucratic. If you want to do new things, Auroville should be there to help you, not make your life difficult and stifle that interest.

Satyen: We've created a system to control a few bad apples but actually it should be the other way around; we should be trying to encourage people. The problem is this is a small village where the bad apples tend to get more publicity than the good ones.

Muni: I think we should get rid of this no-cash economy story because the reality in Auroville today is that it all comes down to money.

Satyen: If you look at the basics of joining Auroville, now you have to buy an apartment for something like 30 lakhs, which is ridiculous. In the past you would just join a community, build your

capsule and start right in. The money thing stops a lot of people from joining Auroville now.

Aurosylle: But things are changing again. I just visited the *Sacred Groves* project, and it's back to basics – bamboo, mud and a mosquito net.

Anandamayi: But do people still want to live like that?

Ribhu: This obsession with the Master Plan which is not allowing temporary housing to come up is stifling instead of promoting growth.

Muni: I think we need a more organic plan. The idea that we first build the ideal city and then the Divine comes down makes no sense. It's the people who are the divine and things change, people change, so the plan should reflect this. We are trying to create a new society. But when you keep telling people you can't build here, where is the goodwill? There has to be another way.

Akash: The only people who actually do things today are those who just go ahead and do them. If you try to play the game, you just run up against a wall and you lose out.

Muni: There's a total separation between the community and the people in the groups in the Town Hall. The community can protest about what they are doing, it can bark and squeal, but nothing happens. These groups pay no attention.

any sense. Ultimately, the only reason you join one of these groups is because you feel you have to do something for Auroville. Nobody in their right mind would go and sit on one of these groups for any other reason because all you get is criticism. There is zero gratification for doing this work.

But all these things will not change by themselves. Why don't you guys step in and make a difference?

Anandamayi: The people in charge now will not step aside. I don't think they really trust us to do the job. We're too young, we're kids to them; we will always be kids to them.

Aurosylle: We care, that's why it hurts. It doesn't seem like the present system works.

Ribhu: I would find it very hard to sit in the Town Hall day after day. I much prefer to focus on something specific and do it well and try to represent whatever we are aspiring for in Auroville through that work. The older generation say they are waiting for the new generation to take over, but I think that is just lip service. All they want is for us to copy what they are doing now.

Akash: None of us wants to get involved with this system.



From left: Anandamayi, Ribhu, Satyen, Muni, Akash and Aurosylle

Anandamayi: These days I'm so cynical about the whole thing.

Akash: I tried politics, I joined the Council. I was supposed to be there for two years but I only managed six months. Basically you sit there the whole day trying to solve other people's problems – two people tell you different stories and you have to try and work out who is right. It's so uninteresting. You wonder why people are so difficult, so interested in petty things. It makes you bitter because you start to look at people in a different way. I left because I thought I could do other things with my time.

Anandamayi: And if ever these groups come to a decision, people don't respect it anyway. I did two years in the Council, two years in the Working Committee and two years in the Entry Service. It was terrible, depressing, because you learn a lot about the underbelly of Auroville. After my time in each group I had to go into hibernation for 6-9 months just to recover.

Muni: I joined the Council. I tried, out of love, to reason with people who had problems, to reason with them for hours and hours, but it just didn't work. It really broke me up. It took me a whole year to detox.

Satyen: At least in the past you got a resolution of problems faster. Now you go to the Council with a problem and it can drag on for two years and then nothing gets done. Membership in these groups is a popularity vote rather than being dependent on a skill set.

Muni: Politics has come in, people have support groups.

Akash: When I was on the Council we had members who could not read and write. How can you have a person on the Council who cannot read and write? We have created systems which try to be inclusive and fair to all but which don't make

But you could recreate it.

Akash: But you can't change anything, that's what we are saying.

Even if you don't think you could change it immediately, can you conceive of something better than the present set-up?

Muni: I think we have to work much harder on fostering the human unity part instead of creating division. We have to start caring more for each other. There is this huge group of Aurovilians who are aging now but we have no care system to take care of them.

Ribhu: The present system will have to change, it's inevitable. But the people who are running it now have to be willing to give it up and really try something new.

Aurosylle: We've gone a bit overboard with our internal bureaucracy.

Satyen: Let the old lot leave, let the chairs be empty for six months and then see what happens. Meanwhile, if you need to make a small decision you could have a vote on Auronet.

Akash: But if one person says they don't agree, the whole thing gets thrown out. We have to have a decision process upon which everybody agrees, whether it's a majority decision or one holy person who decides. Otherwise nothing is going to move.

Muni: Deterrence is what is missing in Auroville. Nobody can enforce decisions today.

Akash: We have so many people with so many skills in this community who are not interested in sitting on groups for years, but who would be willing to help temporarily. So let's have a group of experts in different fields who are called upon for particular things.

You identify many things that are wrong, but all of you are still here. In fact, many of you went out and came back. Why?

Ribhu: I always knew I wanted to be back, it was just a matter of choosing the time. At a certain point, the decision to return was very strong and it hasn't faded much since. I think what is beautiful in Auroville is if you want to do something, everything is here. There are loads of difficulties and lots of administrative hurdles, but it is still possible to do what you want to do. I think what Akash is doing, taking time to develop new software and hardware devices like his energy monitoring device, would be really difficult to do anywhere else. So here we have a system that still allows you some flexibility. And everything is not related directly to money, which is beautiful.

Satyen: Because we were born here we already have a certain set up to support us. If I didn't have this, if I was coming fresh from the West at the age of 25, I would never be able to survive here as it is today.

Akash: At the end of the day we have the freedom to do what we want to do, we are happy, we are innovating. You can do a job and become good at it without having any diploma or qualification, which in the West would be unheard of. Auroville has a reputation for being a place that still does innovative things and produces high-quality products and all those qualities are here in Auroville, regardless of our internal squabbles. The image of Auroville that many of us try to live up to is that we are genuinely honest and we work hard on the things that we believe in. That side of Auroville is very positive.

What about the ideals of Auroville? Are they important to you?

Ribhu: Absolutely.

Satyen: I think this is something more personal, I don't really want to trip on about my feelings here. For me, the part about Auroville being an experiment is enough. How many experiments are there like this in the world today? Yet after 40+ years we are still here and still trying. There are lots of negative aspects, but we are still here and we still want to be part of it.

Muni: I am still trying to figure out what the ideal is. What does The Dream mean? What is the message? I would have loved to have met The Mother. You hear about it from people who have met her, and when you look at them you see a kind of sparkle in their eyes. I'm trying to figure out what that is, what lies behind that. Is Auroville just about the environment or innovation? Or is it about something more than this, about human unity?

Akash: I try my best to understand what the vision of Auroville should be. Basically my understanding of doing the yoga is improving myself, that's where it all starts. If everyone starts working on themselves and not telling other people what to do, I think everybody would be much better off. The dream, the vision, is human unity but it is by working on yourself rather than looking at others that we will achieve it.

What kind of place would you like Auroville to be in ten years? What kind of society would you like your children to grow up in?

Ribhu: It would be great if we have more solidarity. We need to start creating frameworks where we can make decisions together rather than have different groups pushing their own agendas, and developing frameworks that encourage people to do things rather than frameworks that encourage people not to do. And we need to get more young people to come here.

Anandamayi: In ten years' time, I hope we will still have what we have now, the freedom to find ourselves and do things that we want to do. This is what is quite remarkable about this place.

Ribhu: And I hope we will all be segregating waste!

And what about your children? Is this still an interesting place for kids to grow up?

Ribhu: Without a doubt, this is the most amazing place for kids; a place where they can grow and develop themselves.

From an interview by Alan

Designing and building in Auroville

Helmut, an architect and city planner, discusses his 34 years of work in Auroville

Helmut came to live in Auroville in 1979, and with Shradhdhavan started the Grace community. They built two keet huts, drilled a well, and after an attack by villagers with knives, got a phone line brought in. Except for one solid house Helmut built for someone, everyone else in Grace lived in keet huts for the first ten years or so.

After a fire burned down one of the keet structures, Helmut thought it was time to start building more permanent houses. Instead of spread out single-standing houses, he arranged the houses closely together, generally with acoustical barriers between them, around a park in the centre of the community where children could play and the residents mingle. Five years ago he started constructing flats rather than houses as he had done in the previous phases. There are now about 65 people living in the community.

questions – ‘am I beautiful or not?’ – it should be like nature, where the designer is well-hidden in the background. To come closer to this is a very challenging but a very satisfying process. It is almost a part of yoga, because you have to step beyond your own perception as a designer. I may start as a designer, because I have to analyze and try out things, but then, all of sudden, I can leave all that, step back, and the right thing comes. I don’t know from where it comes, but suddenly it is there and I am absolutely sure that this is the right thing to do. It’s not really me; it’s magic.”

For Savitri Bhavan, Helmut planned a multi-functional space including provisions for a library, study, administration, research, residences, and there is even an outside amphitheatre. The plan was appreciated, but he was concerned that due to the financial necessity of building in stages over a long period, after 10 years people would have different ideas and requirements

carpenters expect everything from you, the architect. It is a vertical approach. The architect has to be able to go down to the grassroots and know whatever is happening there. This is a different kind of work; it also affects the design, because it has to be kept as simple as possible. Otherwise you know that you have to carry that complexity all the way through to execution.”

Planning the city

Helmut actually feels more at home as a city planner than as a designer of buildings. Although he didn’t plan cities in Germany, he designed university campuses, where the same kinds of complex issues of planning are in the foreground. “While planning campuses or cities, people never really know what will happen in the future. The famous architect Louis Kahn said that

the best one can do is to establish an ‘anchoring course of logic’, hoping that it will still be understood and accepted by future generations.”

When he first saw the Galaxy design, he thought, “How amusing, but you can’t build a city like that.” He explains that “normally a city cannot be designed like an object; the design of a city – stretching over decades – is rather the design of a process.” Then he met Aurovilians who had tremendous enthusiasm for the Galaxy design. He also met Roger. He explains that in those early years “We thought we could do everything, overcome everything. So I thought, ‘Maybe these people can make this city after all.’”

Helmut had many contacts with Roger over the years, and told him his views – that for a city you have to analyze all kinds of things – mobility patterns, the kind of life and the kinds of spaces desired there. “He didn’t listen, he mainly was interested in aesthetics and macro-form. I find it OK to have a great vision, but one shouldn’t lose contact with the ground realities on eye level. Visionaries and planners have to work together. I feel that if we start with the Galaxy and explore what it offers us, we could have a lot of new ideas which would help us develop the city in all its complexities. It would be quite an exciting process but until today this has never happened.”

He expands on his ideas. “We need to have public spaces where people can sit and meet, where children can play. Look at the benches around the garden at Savitri Bhavan, they are very nice: people enjoy sitting there, and people often meet each other there and talk together. Where else do we have this? Does anybody think about it? I think in Roger’s plan, public spaces where people naturally come together were not adequately considered. The Mother wanted a city, she didn’t want a village. In a village you don’t have many choices, you are much more suppressed. Einstein could only come from a city, because there he could find other people he could talk to and discuss his ideas. And a city allows institutions, and in Auroville there is such a potential for institutions, because of its world-wide recognition.”

A new approach

When it comes to town planning, Helmut feels that what is needed is a more professional and comprehensive approach. “You normally

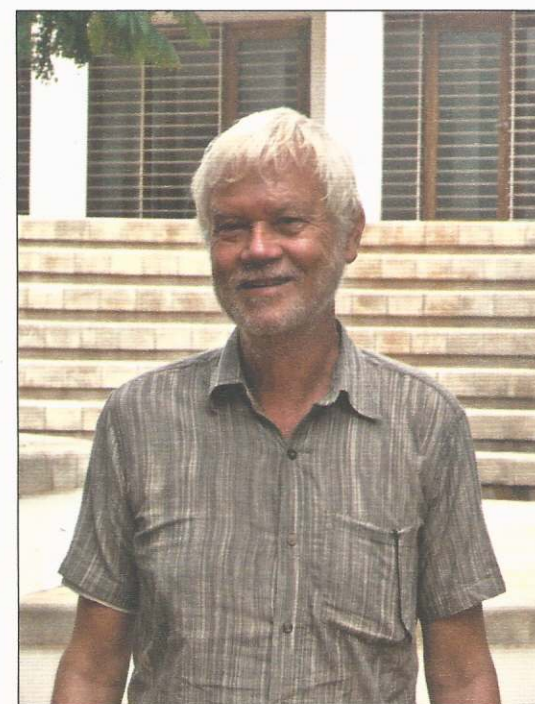


PHOTO LAKSHMI

Helmut

start by defining the basic aims we want to be fulfilled (see a proposal in box 1), which then can be disaggregated in detail. For example, what does it mean practically to have sustainability as an aim for the city, in what ways should that influence the city’s design? What are the systems the city needs, and the relationships between communities? How do the children go to school? How do we travel to our working places or to the solar kitchen? Do we use a car, a cycle, or walk? Then, when I go further into the details of planning, I can keep checking them against my aims. I can change my aims if I choose, but it is very good to plan within a certain agreed-on framework.

“Town planners are aware that the biggest threat to a city these days is traffic. In Auroville we don’t address this problem sufficiently. Instead we make a crown road where people are actually invited to drive fast. The danger of such a ring road is that it attracts traffic.”

In 2000, Helmut approached Hans Billinger, one of Germany’s leading traffic consultants who was attracted to the ideals of Auroville, to draw up a detailed mobility plan for Auroville [see *Auroville Today* June-July 2013 No. 287-288]. To date the plan has not been carefully considered.

“In Auroville, L’avenir never thought about establishing a planning department with some professional planners, designers and architects to work on certain scenarios. For me, the existing L’avenir team would be a very good client body standing between a planning department, probably consisting of hired professionals, and the general Residents Assembly. The client body would give the policies and control. For example, they would tell the planning department, ‘Work on



Savitri Bhavan, main entrance

Helmut explains that he aimed for neutrality in his house designs in Grace, but was willing to accommodate the prospective resident’s choices. Moreover, in the Grace community, he explains that the people who came typically did not have much money, so he was always trying to do things at low cost. “We were only concerned that people get a reasonable livable space which is relatively small and nothing opulent. Also, I was always thinking about how our low-cost innovations could be replicated and our experience passed on to others.”

Savitri Bhavan

Architecture, says Helmut, should elevate people. Savitri Bhavan was a project like this. “Nirodbaran came and said Savitri Bhavan should be the twin of Matrimandir. I felt challenged. How to do that?” He explains that for three quarters of a year he went through many designs. “At the end, don’t ask me how, it became pretty clear how it should be.”

The creative process is something which interests Helmut very much. He explains that many architects, especially students, leaf through magazines to get ideas. “Alternatively,” he says, “you can try to find the creativity within yourself. This is always a reliable source when approached in the right way.

“When looking at a building, one shouldn’t be immediately be conscious of the design”, he says, “Architecture is best when it doesn’t raise

about its design. He explains that architects normally deal with the problem of not being able to sufficiently assess the future with modularity, so that you can easily add something on. “But with the building I designed, which aims at a sculptural quality, that would have destroyed and fragmented it. You can’t just change it and say ‘make it a little bit bigger there.’” Fortunately no big changes were necessary. Only where now there is the art gallery for Huta’s paintings, Helmut had originally planned a courtyard, with the idea that at least this space could be used for something else if it was later needed.

Auroville Institute of Integral Health

Helmut also did the master plan for the Auroville Institute of Integral Health, which is now under construction. “The history of this is that one day I was invited to a meeting where somebody presented a new Kailash clinic building there on the Crown road next to Arka. It was proposed to put a building in the middle of the plot according to present requirements, without thinking much about future possible developments or considering Auroville’s growth.

“We wrote an architect’s brief, together with a possible space programme for the building for a future population of 25,000 people, which would be completed in stages, and offered it to interested Aurovilians with the aim to arrive at a master plan which would allow a certain future development. Though there was not much response, a small team came up with three alternative plans, from which my proposal was chosen.

“What you see coming up now is a first building. There is built-in flexibility with no load bearing walls, only dry walls inside which can easily be removed. So it will be easy one day, should it be necessary, to change this part which is close to the road into a dental clinic, for example, or even a cafeteria: we should try to avoid the picture of a hospital and make it more of a community space.”

Helmut explains that architectural planning is very different in India from the West. In the West the specialists abound and are typically better in their field than the head architect. He says that in Germany he wouldn’t design a window without first asking a master carpenter. “But in India the



PHOTO JOHN MANDEEN

Savitri Bhavan amphitheatre

this, and after three months present it to us.’ Then they could have discussions about it and either accept or change it or decide to try something else. Afterwards they could present the plan to the general assembly for a decision, explaining the history of the development of the idea, and why this or that proposal is preferred. That would be a structure one could work with.”

Helmut points out, “Even in spiritual development, Sri Aurobindo didn’t exclude reason, and an experimental approach. So why not apply them to city development?”

In conversation with Larry

Basic aims for city development and architecture of Auroville

- Mother’s Words
- Galaxy Plan
- 50,000 Inhabitants
- Unity in Diversity
- Beauty
- Health
- Health of the Planet – Sustainability
- Experimentation
- Simplicity
- Distinctiveness

Performing Sri Aurobindo's plays in Auroville

Aryamani has already directed three of Sri Aurobindo's plays in Auroville, and a fourth one will be performed in December. Why is she so dedicated to this work?

Sri Aurobindo wrote five complete plays. When Aryamani arrived in Auroville in 1980, she was surprised to learn that they had never been performed in the community. "As a devotee of Sri Aurobindo, I felt that something important was missing in Auroville's cultural landscape but my background was in dance, not theatre, and at that time my command of English was extremely poor."

In 1995, however, she took up the challenge to put on The Mother's play *The Ascent to Truth* for a seminar on The Mother's yoga: "I felt I had to do this." Since then, she has directed three plays of Sri Aurobindo – *Perseus the Deliverer*, *Eric* and *Rodogune* – and a fourth play – *The Viziers of Bassora* – will be performed this December.

Sri Aurobindo's plays are one of the less known aspects of his literary work. Yet Aryamani clearly feels they are important. Why? "I believe that whatever Sri Aurobindo wrote has a deep meaning. These plays are not mere exercises; they are based upon his own experience. You can find sentences in his early plays that show that many things that he developed fully much later were already there. My work, as a director, is to discover the meaning, the particular message, of each play and bring it out, firstly to the actor and afterwards to the audience."

So what does she think are the core messages of the three plays she has directed so far?

"*Perseus the Deliverer* is about evolution, about the luminous presence of The Mother, in the shape of the Goddess Athene, transforming a dark and primitive religion by bringing the psychic presence and light. *Eric* is about the importance of the Mother, in this case Nordic Freya, in the process of the hero's inner opening, and the evolution of an individual through the power of love, and the unification of nations, which, of course, is one of Sri



Aryamani at work

Aurobindo's visions. In *Rodogune* the theme has to do with human desires and egos, resulting in suffering and death. Those can be transformed and uplifted, giving back to us the sense of our own eternity. As for *The Viziers*, I think Sri Aurobindo wanted to present the values of the Arabian culture at a certain time, and the ethical standards of its religion. Again, this is shown through characters larger than life, the good and the bad Viziers.

But what about the challenge of staging these plays? It is surely not accidental that they had never been put on in Auroville before the 1990s. The reasons are fairly obvious. Most of the plays are long, the settings and language seems archaic, there are long monologues which are difficult to sustain theatrically, and, to the modern taste at least, Sri Aurobindo's characters lack complexity: they tend to be either black or white.

How does Aryamani deal with these challenges?

To begin with, she is not averse to editing the plays to make their length more manageable. *Perseus* in its full form runs for five and half hours but Aryamani cut it down to three and a half hours. "What you must ensure is that whatever you take out doesn't change the message. This is not as difficult as it seems as Sri Aurobindo was not specifically a writer of plays, so he could write things and create situations that can be reduced without losing the integrity of the whole."

"What I first do when I go through these plays is to

understand their historical context, and then I see what I can do to make the presentation richer. I like to have classical costumes, but I have musicians creating on stage and something more modern in the stage set, something sober, simple and beautiful, but always evoking the culture and historical background of the action. *Rodogune* was a particular challenge for me because it is Sri Aurobindo's only tragedy and I did not want to finish with the death of the hero. So I introduced the famous *mantra* at the end – lead us from falsehood to truth, from darkness to light, from death to immortality – because this is finally what Sri Aurobindo gives us, the certitude that the future is light, not death or darkness.

"The long monologues are a challenge, particularly in a play like *Eric*, but we work very hard with the actors to help them express the inner and outer conflicts through gesture, posture, and the use of

space. Here my background in dance proves very useful."

As to the lack of complexity of character in these plays, Aryamani does not agree. "Sri Aurobindo deals in archetypes, and because they are archetypes they are enlarged, they are larger than nature, to act as mirrors for us. Those people who come with a background in Shakespeare might be disappointed that there are, for example, no flawed heroes. But Sri Aurobindo is dealing with eternal themes; he is not simply telling us a story."

But does this mean that these plays can be presented outside, to an audience unfamiliar with Sri Aurobindo and The Mother?

"I have the impression that these plays are not meant to be played outside the context of Sri Aurobindo and Mother. For me they are very clearly something for us, they belong to our culture, the culture of Auroville, of the Ashram and the devotees. So it would be unfair to judge them from a different perspective."

"I remember long ago that Kireet Joshi said that we should 'rain' Sri Aurobindo in Auroville. This stuck in my mind. For me, Sri Aurobindo is primarily an action, so through putting on these plays I'm contributing in a small part to bringing down that action; it is my contribution to this 'rain' of Sri Aurobindo."

"Sri Aurobindo is my life. In addition to the plays, I have translated *The Life Divine* into Portuguese after many years of work, and we plan to publish it in Brazil after final revisions. And when you work so closely with the texts, it does something to you. It puts you in an atmosphere, a vibration, that is indescribable. To work with these texts is such a privilege."

"And I am so grateful for all the support and encouragement received over the years, from those who have been part of the plays, onstage and backstage, and the ones supporting in other ways. All of them have believed in the project. And they are part of it, just as much as myself."

From an interview by Alan

TONGUE-IN-CHEEK

Who is in charge here?

It's a question that is often posed by visitors desperate to understand the power structure of this place (or to sell Auroville a new software accounting programme). The answer may differ, depending on the individual and on his or her mood, but common responses include "The Divine", "The Secretary", "no one", and, of course, "all of us".

Actually, although we project ourselves as a very egalitarian community, we all know that a power structure exists in Auroville. So perhaps it is best for everyone, Aurovilians as well as visitors, that we make this power structure more apparent. Apart from anything else, it will prevent some of us getting exaggerated ideas about our own status, or wasting time listening to or trying persuade people who have zero influence.

In brief, in our present hierarchical power structure, four main classes of Aurovilians can be discerned. These reflect different stages of evolution. At the top are the *intuitives*, a little lower are the *mentalists*, lower still are the *vitalists*, and scraping the bottom are the *physicals*.

The *intuitives* are easily recognizable by their patrician air. They have a predisposition for grand plans, perfect circles and curves, as well as for anything very big, high, long and expensive. They are also quickest on the draw when it comes

to that popular Auroville parlour game, "Mother says". The *intuitives* rarely join groups themselves, preferring to overlook proceedings from above. Some years ago, it was discovered – don't ask me how – that there are at least 50 *intuitives* – people with an intuitive consciousness – living in Auroville.

A certain mental development fits the *mentalists* perfectly for tasks like administration. They have the ability to stare at computer screens for extended periods of time, to drink stewed tea, attend numerous meetings and to fall asleep with their eyes open and fixed smiles on their faces (a particular *siddhi* of the *mentalists*). The *mentalists* tend to congregate around the Town Hall and anywhere else where there are desks, computers and meeting rooms. The *mentalists* are not easy to understand since their particular language – bureaucratese – is laced with acronyms and archaic terms inherited from boggled clerks in the East India Company.

Whereas the *mentalists* always seem to be elderly, the *vitalists* tend to be young and full of energy, which they prefer to pour into high-end projects outside Auroville. While this class includes artists and designers, they are pre-eminently entrepreneurs, enjoying the cut and thrust and Machiavellian manoeuvres associated with business and the percentage of

profits they contribute to the Unity Fund. The *vitalists* tend to travel first class and stay at the best hotels in order, of course, to make the right contacts. It should be noted, however, that among the *vitalist class*, there are sub-divisions. At the top are those whose products are more immaterial, like the techies. At the bottom are those selling clothing and incense sticks.

At the bottom of the Auroville power pyramid are the *physicals*. Members of this unfortunate class, which are the most numerous, have little mental or vital development and are not much good for anything, poor things, except to be beasts of burden. They can be found pre-eminently working in the service sector and in the Greenbelt, where they can often be seen putting green things in holes.

So how can the distinctions between these four classes be made more apparent? One obvious way is to ensure that the classes dress differently. The Roman toga would clearly be most appropriate for the *intuitives*, preferably pure white with a purple edging, as the toga has that billowing yet ephemeral quality so characteristic of the *intuitives*. Of course, footwear would be optional as the *intuitives* rarely touch the earth.

The *mentalists* should wear neat uniforms of bureaucratic grey. The uniforms should have plenty of pockets to accommodate pens, chits, paper clips, spectacles and heart pills. The *vitalists* are happiest sporting brightly-coloured, zappy, up-to-the-minute fashion. As for the *physicals*,

they should wear shapeless coarse clothing in earth brown or coal black, as befits the nature of their occupations and primitive development.

Clearly, although some contact is unavoidable, there should be a minimum of admixture between the classes to avoid the lower classes polluting the higher ones, and the higher ones being reminded of the sordid depths of human nature. Just recently, for example, two *physicals* drifted into the planning section of the Town Hall, causing universal consternation.

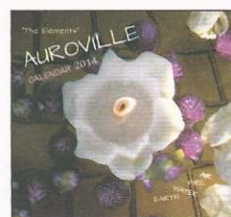
Consequently, from now on the different classes will live in different sectors. The *intuitives* will be housed in gated communities close to the Matrimandir (or Cote d'Azur); the *mentalists* in identical cubicles in the Administrative Zone; the *vitalists* in aluminium and glass structures near the six-lane Madras highway; and the *physicals* in mud huts and up trees in the Greenbelt.

But this will not be an uncompassionate society. For while the *intuitives* will clearly have all the power, they will ensure that the needs of the lower classes are well catered for. The *mentalists* will be allowed to form groups and write reports; the *vitalists* and those more vitally-disposed will be allowed their ritual venting at General Meetings; and the *physicals* will have their annual basketball tournaments and tribal celebrations on Earth Day.

All of which sounds to me like a recipe for a well-ordered society.

Alan

CALENDAR



The theme of the Auroville 2014 wall calendar is 'The Elements'. The calendar has been divided into four sections: Air, Fire, Water and Earth. For each element, three photos taken in Auroville illustrate some of their aspects. Size: 28 cm x 30.5 cm, spiral bound. All photos have been taken by Ireno. The calendar has moon phases indicated and has spaces to write notes for each day. It has two pages with quotations from *Savitri* and a text on the elements and their manifestation taken from Sri Aurobindo's *The Life Divine*. Price in India Rs. 275 excluding packing and postage. To order please email ireno@auroville.org.in

Subscription rates (including postage):

- ◆ One year subscription rates: India Rs. 450; other countries Rs. 2,000 equivalent.
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