

Auroville Today

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Auroville's monthly news magazine since 1988

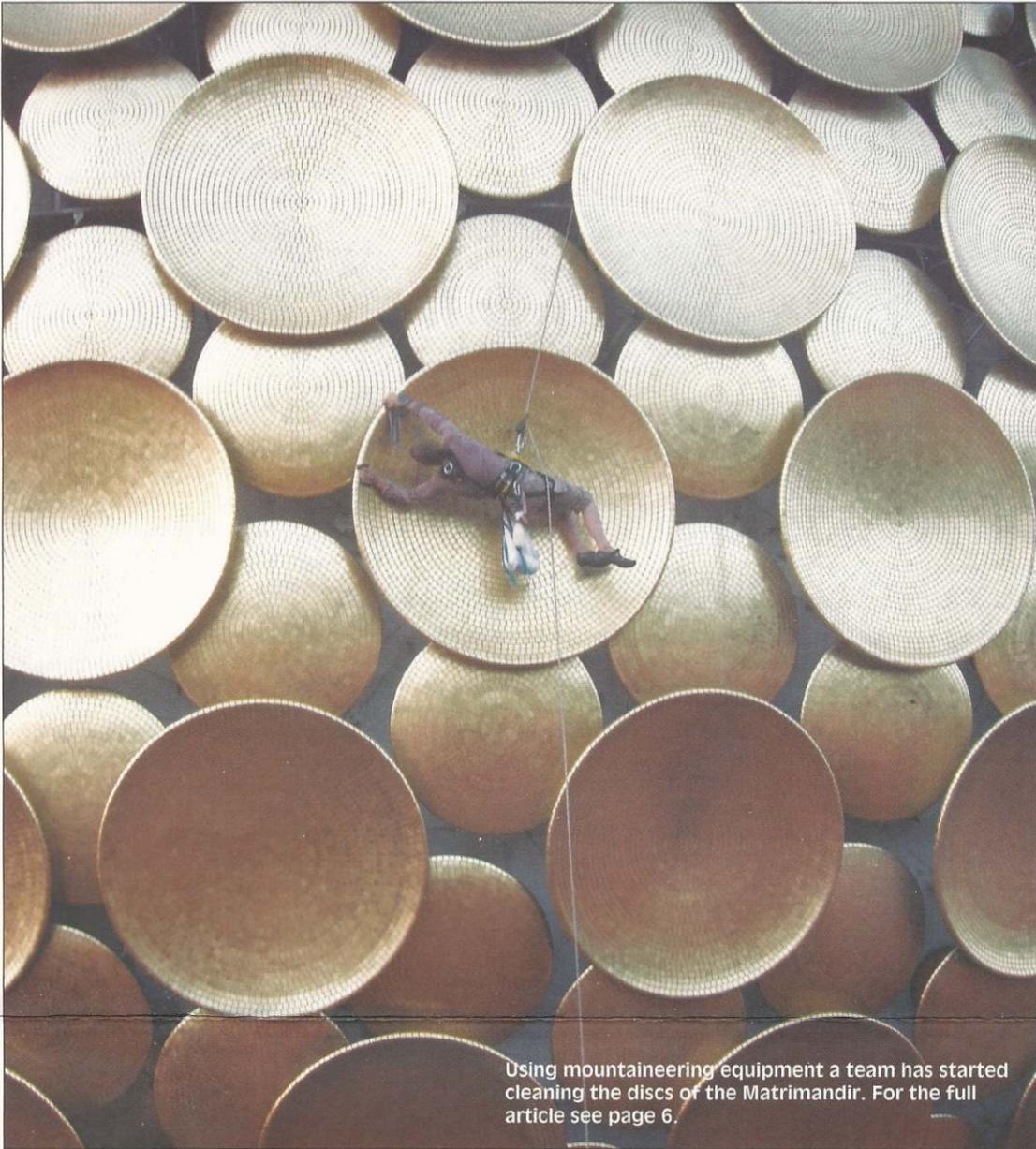


PHOTO FRANOIS

Using mountaineering equipment a team has started cleaning the discs of the Matrimandir. For the full article see page 6.

To our readers

There has been a long gap between the last issue you received – the one of March – and the present one. We regret the inconvenience this may have caused you. The reason was that the two senior editors had serious medical issues and two others were out of station. For these reasons it was impossible to continue the magazine. For the first time in almost 22 years Auroville Today had come to a halt.

But to paraphrase Mark Twain, the reports of Auroville Today's death are an exaggeration. True, there was a moment in May when the two senior editors, unwillingly laid low, considered shutting up shop and retiring to their hammocks, but better wisdom, as well as the pleas of those who wanted Auroville Today to continue, prevailed.

It has been a pleasant break. For the past few months, the Auroville Today editors almost qualified as ordinary people. We could walk the dog, shop, and eat at the Solar Kitchen without being accosted by outraged readers or eyed furtively from behind the nearest tree.

Meanwhile, our health has improved – if perhaps not yet 100% – and following many requests, we have decided to take up the gauntlet once again. As three or even four people are too few to give you in-depth information on Auroville, we are in the process of expanding the team. In this issue you will read the contributions of newcomer Louise from England and of Elaine from Canada. We hope to include more correspondents in future issues.

So here we are once again on the pothole-strewn path of journalism in Auroville. And, once again, we must get used to people turning pale or switching into self-promotional mode when we innocently enter the room. No doubt we will please some and infuriate others. We will be lauded for our even-handedness and willingness to criticize as well as praise what is happening here. And we will be accused of being 'unspiritual', of being too upbeat or too negative, of showing bias or being afraid to take positions, and of failing to cover the 'real' issues.

Since our readership is so varied, it's inevitable that we won't be able to please everybody all the time. But that was never our intention. If, however, something of the diversity, depth, idealism and sheer adventurousness of this place creeps through our postings from the front, then something will have been achieved.

We take the opportunity to thank you for your continuing and often warm support.

And, of course, the temporary interruption will not in any way affect your subscription as subscriptions are per issue and not per calendar year.

Alan, Carel

Auroville attempts to break a deep historical trend

Dr. Doudou Diène is a member of the International Advisory Council of the Auroville Foundation. Before that he had a distinguished career in UNESCO where, among other posts, he was Director of the Division of Inter-cultural Projects. Between 2002 and 2008 he was U.N. Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance. Auroville Today spoke with him during a private visit he was making to the community in February.

Auroville Today: In a talk during a previous visit to Auroville you mentioned that whenever we encounter somebody from a very different culture there is a "tension". And the way that individuals and societies deal with this tension determines whether there is a positive outcome, where diversity is embraced, or a negative outcome reflected in intolerance, discrimination, racism etc. What determines how an individual or society responds to this tension?

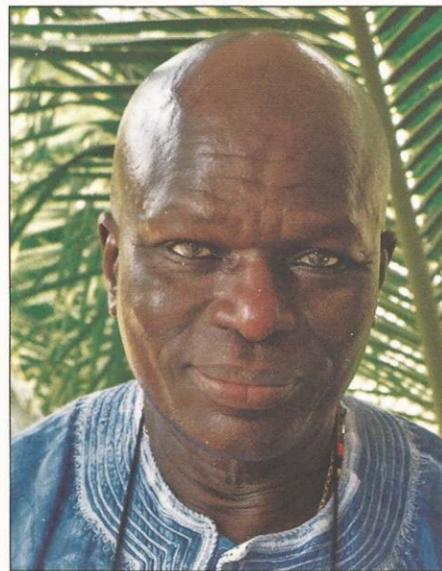
Doudou Diène: Every community or group constructs an identity for itself because people need to recognize themselves not only as individuals but also as members of a group. However, in this process of identity construction the negative dimension has always tended to predominate because, historically, identity is always constructed in a context of division or of war. In other words, the construction of an identity has always tended to be done against something or somebody else. Take the nation state. The process of constructing the nation state was done in a context where nations were warring among themselves. So the factor of fear, of the need to defend itself, preceded the construction of the state.

Political leaders have played a crucial role in creating such group identities because they have played on fear of other groupings to get

power and control. Historically, the basic ingredient of identity construction has been ethnicity, because this is the most obvious way that people differ from one another. Another factor which has played a very powerful role has been religion as every group has created beliefs, gods, spirits, to answer to the fundamental questions of life and death. Then the intellectual elite artificially put all these factors together using, in addition, archaeology, religion, philosophy, history etc., to give coherence and meaning to the idea that a particular group has a distinct identity.

The end result is the notion that we are a distinct group and the enemy is anybody who is different, ethnically, religiously or culturally, from us. In other words, diversity is interpreted as a threat.

However, in all communities you also find individuals or small groups who do not share this negative view of 'the other', either because they themselves have originally come from another culture or because they have reinterpreted the dominant tradition or legacy and have found another way of looking at others, a way which embraces difference rather than fears it. The basic point to understand here in the context of social evolution is whenever you have a negative you also have the seed of its contrary. And it is this inner tension which brings the deep evolution of any society.



Dr. Doudou Diène

Do you see Auroville as being such a 'seed', as a way of redefining diversity?

Yes, because Auroville is based on Sri Aurobindo's incredible vision of the unity of mankind behind its diversity. So it is clear that Auroville is an attempt to break or to reverse this very deep historical trend of interpreting diversity

as opposition, as something to be afraid of. It is clear that when people come here with the ideal that the other is not an enemy but my brother or sister, a part of me, they have to live and interact in a different way from other societies. At the same time, everybody carries within them also the legacy of their cultures, their education, their separateness and fears of 'the other': they see through the 'tinted lenses' they have inherited. So the tension in Auroville is between this very pure, profound reinterpretation of diversity and the legacy which everybody is carrying. And what is fascinating is that you are openly trying to confront this, you are not trying to deny it. You are conscious of your legacy but you are determined to do something else. This is not happening elsewhere, and it makes Auroville unique.

How well do you think Aurovilians are doing in transcending their legacy, in cleaning their culturally-tinted lenses?

It is impossible for me to make a judgment as I have not had the inner experience of Auroville, of the dynamic of trying to work out this tension which each of you is facing every day. But as someone who sympathizes with your ideals from the outside, I can share a few observations.

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Energizing the Residents' Assembly: an uphill battle

The Residents Assembly Service (RAS) is charged with organizing the meetings and decision making of the Residents' Assembly. But this is only part of what the RAS finds itself doing.

“Our community-approved mandate,” says Anita, “is linked to decision-making by the Residents Assembly (RA). It restricts the RAS to the role of meeting organizer and vote-counting machine. But this is only a small part of what we need to do.”

Indian Anita, together with American Don and French Rakhil, are the present members of the RAS. Having been in office for close to two years, they describe their main task as helping to energize and strengthen the RA and its say in the functioning and constitution of the various working groups. The expansion of their task was born out of necessity. Anita and Don – Rakhil was out of station when this interview was conducted – explain.

“Sadly, we have seen that the highest number of residents who voted in a RA decision was only 350,” says Don. “That is about 20% of the adult population, which leaves a large majority who do not express their views. There are several reasons for this low participation. Some people believe that voting is not how Auroville should reach decisions. They object to voting as they consider it an open door to politics. Others do not have faith in the outcome. And there are those who simply do not care! We believe that a major reason for non participation is that people are not sufficiently informed about a topic and/or their role as members of the RA.”

The Mother’s spoke about democracy not being the ideal form of governance for Auroville. Says Anita, “There is a kind of agreed-upon bottom line that in Auroville politics should be avoided at all costs. This has found expression in the way in which the new Working Committee (WC) and Auroville Council (AVC) as well as the town planning group, L’Avenir d’Auroville, were constituted.

“In the case of the WC and AVC, the RAS facilitated a study group to discuss and propose the modalities of selecting the new groups. The RA then was asked to choose one of three options: there were two ways of selecting the new members and there was the option to continue with the old WC and AVC.

“The RA voted for a new WC and AVC, the members of which were to be selected by former WC and AVC members from a list of people nominated by the residents. There was no direct election by the RA, in an attempt to avoid active politicking.”

“A somewhat similar process was followed for finding the new members of L’Avenir d’Auroville,” says Don. “In this case, at the request of the WC, the RAS facilitated a community process which involved collecting feedback and organising several general meetings as well as workshops and seminars on the topic of the structure and organisation L’Avenir d’Auroville. The new members were afterwards selected by a selection committee composed of members of the current WC and AVC, following a nomination process similar to that for the Working Committee. This selection was then accepted by the Governing Board. Politicking was again avoided as there was no direct election of the members by the RA.”

Anita: “But in both cases there have been objections to the process. In the case of the new WC and AVC, there were objections that the RA decision making process was not followed [see AVToday 244-245, June-July 2009 page 11]. In the case of L’Avenir d’Auroville, there have been objections that the process of selecting the names has led to exclusion and not to integration, that the WC and AVC have been using power arbitrarily, and that the RAS has not observed strict neutrality.”

Mistrust prevails

The RA decisions on constituting the new WC, AVC and L’Avenir d’Auroville have been accepted. But this has not been the case for the recent RA decisions on two Matrimandir issues.

Anita explains: “In April, following a petition, we organized an RA vote on two issues: if the newly placed granite benches and concrete pathways around the Banyan tree should be removed; and if all works in the Unity Garden should be stopped till an RA process of presentation and ratification of the design has been done. We had ballot forms in Tamil and English with



The benches and pathway around the Banyan tree, which the RA decided had to be removed.

the options to agree, not agree or abstain. More than 250 residents cast their choice. An overwhelming majority of 80% voted for the removal of the benches and pathways, while a similar number voted that the work on the Unity Garden be stopped till a community process was completed.

“Strangely enough, a few weeks after the vote, a petition signed by more than 300 Aurovilians opposed the RA vote and expressed that the work in the Unity Garden should proceed unchanged. It was unclear why the signatories of the petition had not participated in the RA vote. The AVC then did a detailed examination of the petition. It revealed that many names were duplicated and that it included names from under-age Aurovilians and from people who were not Aurovilian. It also found that the petition had

been generated through a door-to-door campaign that involved placing pressure on people to sign. The AVC labelled it ‘a manipulated document designed to counter the RA vote.’ Nevertheless, the Council considered that the petition could be evidence of a valid alternative body of opinion and it organized a series of meetings to further examine the situation. This is still ongoing.

“And then there was the position taken by the Matrimandir Executives: they chose to not honour the RA decisions, but instead asked for more time to better inform the community and asked that the RA should decide after a couple of years when the work is more complete.”

“We can only conclude,” says Don, “that in these cases the decisions of the RA have not been respected. The petition shows disrespect, as does the position taken by the Matrimandir

Executives. Also the WC and the Council failed the RA as they were not able to get the Executives to implement the RA decisions. Until now there has been a lot of discussion – but the votes of the RA have still not been implemented. This has increased the mistrust regarding our collective capacity to reach decisions and implement them.”

Attempts at transparency

“We do not see how to solve this impasse,” Don continues. “Trust should be reinstated, by whatever means possible. We from the RAS can only help the RA to come together, to discuss and debate and dialogue. This implies that full information has to be given to the RA and that working groups and units must be fully transparent in their dealings and decisions. Information is essential to motivate participation. Our challenge is to discover the way the RA can really be empowered so that individuals feel motivated to participate. So far we have not been very successful.”

“Next to transparency, there is the issue of accountability,” adds Anita. “The accountability of

Auroville’s working groups is another hot topic that often finds expression on the Auronet, Auroville’s internal website, mostly in the form of objections. Most working groups publish reports, but we do not have a system in place where their decisions are made through a participatory process involving the working groups and concerned residents.”

“Auroville is an experiment, and so is its system of governance,” says Don. “Given the lack of respect for the RA decisions by a section of the population, and the mistrust against working groups, there is a pressing need to find a way forward which has the consensus of the community. Auroville has no choice but to restudy its organisation and where necessary review its decision-making policies.”

In conversation with Carel

HUMAN UNITY

Auroville attempts to break a deep historical trend

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Firstly, let’s look at the context. One thing that fascinates me is that Mother did not call you here to pray together in an ashram. She called you to build a city, to engage in a yoga of action. So you are engaged in something which necessarily puts you together in such a way that constantly you have to invent solutions to the tension between inherited notions of diversity and the ideal set before you. And you are doing it in a way which I like very much because it is very human. You bring all your weaknesses and your strengths, you bring your passion. I have seen this when Aurovilians interact with each other. Sometimes very negative feelings, even hatred, have been expressed but I have realized, whenever I encounter such negativity among Aurovilians, that it is never very profound, never very deep, unlike the negativity I have encountered in other societies.

Why? Because the dynamic of creating Auroville has been a dual process – you are building the city but there is also the inner process of transformation. And clearly this inner process has produced something which allows Aurovilians, whenever this negativity comes out, to tap into something deeper. It’s like when you throw a stone in a pool. It makes ripples on the surface but soon some inner force wells up to make it calm again.

It is this inner thing, this inner force, which allows you, while being very human and expressing your passions in your daily life, to transform them. This is what has allowed you to persevere for so many years in dealing with so many challenges.

Take, for example, the governance dimension of Auroville. Mother said that she wanted something that goes beyond democracy. Here you don’t have any existing models to refer to, you are in a void and it’s very uncomfortable, yet you are trying to find

solutions. You go about it in a chaotic way, but this chaos is a creative chaos.

Sometimes we who come from outside, like the members of the International Advisory Council or the Governing Board, see the chaos and immediately we want to bring order. But this is an order which we carry within ourselves, it means the old solutions, the old ways, because we only know the old ways, we don’t know the new ways which are emerging here. So we have to be very modest and careful in the advice we give because we tend not to get inside the inner dynamic of what is going on here.

This is why the autonomy of Auroville is a fundamental principle which should be respected by everybody. Aurovilians should be their own light, working out their own solutions, because it is only here in Auroville that the external realization and the inner transformation are going on hand-in-hand.

This brings a different dimension to everything you do here. For example, I see that most of the scientific and technical breakthroughs you have made in Auroville are marked by the notion of service: they are there to serve others rather than simply to generate profits. Look at what Jacques has done in the villages. Seeing the poverty and the difficulty of providing dental care to these people, he set up outposts in the villages, using a simple table instead of a dentist’s chair and training the local people to do primary care. Or take Aquadyn. They developed a process to not only purify but also to dynamise water. A machine was invented, as would have happened in London or Paris, but because it was created here in Auroville the first thing done was not to sell these machines on the market but to install them in the local villages where, historically, water has not only been a life force but also a force of death.

I have visited these villages and seen what a difference it has made to provide, day after day, purified water to these people. This is incredible, fantastic, and I think that this kind of work is perhaps the high mark of Auroville for the time being.

These projects are also building bridges between the different communities.

Yes. If Auroville is to break the historical tendency of seeing diversity as opposition, it must go beyond the intercommunity tensions which have led in other countries to individual or institutional prejudice. And you are making real efforts; you are in the process of trying to clean your tinted lenses. Sometimes you are failing – there have been moments when those lenses were very dark, but now I think they are becoming much clearer. I see this not only in the diversity of cultures represented in your main working groups but also in the way that children from different cultures and background interact in your schools. I see it in the growing number of marriages between communities and in the way that Auroville, sometimes with difficulty, has been trying to get the local villagers on board.

Auroville has changed their lives, it is changing their lives. That factor is a very important one and maybe it will be the ultimate test of how successful you will be in shedding the old clothes of prejudice and emerging into something else, a more fertile concept of diversity. For, finally, you are constructing a new human tapestry where each thread, each individual, nationality, will retain its specificity, its beauty, while contributing to the tapestry as a whole. You are not there yet, this is the ultimate, but you are definitely on the way.

From an interview by Alan

Notes from the Catskills



A flute duet between Native American Tiokasin Ghosthorse (left) of the Cheyenne River Lakota (Sioux) Nation and Gordon Korstange during an interval at the AUM 2010 meeting.

It was a glorious three days for the group of 60-odd seekers gathered for the AUM Conference 2010 at the Menla Mountain retreat in the Catskills between July 8th and 11th. We had come together to explore the rather grand theme of 'Manifesting the Spiritual Destiny of America'.

The line-up of speakers could not have been more diverse – Native Americans, poets, scientists, artists, scholars, activists, healers, plus Ashramites and Aurovilians, past and present. It was as integral as it could get. Julian Lines, one of the organizers says, "This is the first time we've been so focused on a specific physical manifestation in an AUM conference. It was the obvious and natural choice because both in Auroville and in the US we are going to be building – the US Pavilion in Auroville, and a retreat and study centre at Matagiri Sri Aurobindo Center – and the question is 'What do we do next?' How do we manifest our nation soul? What is the process that we should go through?"

For Julian the approach was clear. "From seeing what the German AVI people did by looking at Fascism I was

convinced that we too have to look at our shadow. And that was brought forward by our Native American presenters, Tiokasin Ghosthorse and Judy Abbot, who had personal stories about the destruction of their culture and forced displacement. I had also wanted the Civil Rights movement and injustices against the blacks to be highlighted and was grateful when it came up in the talk on Emerson. Emerson was opposed to slavery, and is said to have been responsible for urging Lincoln to announce the Emancipation Proclamation which came out of the Civil War.

"Later, Mira Nakashima [daughter of George Nakashima, the architect of Golconde] described another first hand experience of our shadow when she shared the experiences of her family and herself of being held in U.S. internment camps during World War II and the racism and the racial profiling that existed then."

The 3-day schedule was packed with talks and activities, encompassing a rich assortment of topics. As Julian says, "This is the beauty of knowing everyone and having the threads weave together."

The Auroville presenters included

Loretta who spoke on 'The Psychic Being'; Mita of the Auroville Language Laboratory who shared the work of Alfred Tomatis – 'Listening with Body, Mind and Spirit'; and Aloka whose early morning sessions of Awareness Through the Body saw packed attendance.

From the Ashram, there was Richard Hartz of the Ashram Archives who shared his latest discovery, namely the connection of Reinhold Niebuhr of the Serenity Prayer fame to Sri Aurobindo. Niebuhr was one of the signatories of a letter addressed to world leaders, one of which was sent to Sri Aurobindo although after the latter's passing. Richard drew attention to the parallels between Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer and Sri Aurobindo's Yoga of Self Perfection and what it implies regarding cultural convergence in the modern world. For Niebuhr did not have a familiarity with the cultures or religions of Asia, and was unaware of Sri Aurobindo. The other Ashramite presenter was Narad who led Om choir sessions as well as Savitri readings. A third Ashramite connection came through Peter Heehs' book 'The

Lives of Sri Aurobindo', which was a designated lunch table discussion topic.

Other presenters covered a wide range of subjects: the opening talk by Wendy and Julian Lines was naturally on the future visions for the Matagiri Study and Retreat Centre, as well as the US Pavilion in the International Zone in Auroville. The Matagiri Board is evaluating a proposal by Tedd Benson Associates, a design/build firm pioneering in net zero and Passive House standards in the US.

Lynda Lester gave a brilliant power point presentation on 'The Union of Spirit and Matter: Science, Consciousness and a Life Divine', a truly integral audio-visual treat! Richard Geldard, an Emerson scholar, spoke on 'Emerson and the Dream of America', while John Robert Cornell introduced some of America's finest poets through a talk titled 'The Mythic Potency of Nature in America'.

'Old Aurovillian' Bryan Walton threw open the doors to the world of Frank Lloyd Wright, 'The Visionary of the American Spirit', while Dr. Martha Orton and Dr. Charles Flores shared their recent doctoral works on various aspects of the Integral Yoga – 'The Quest for Spiritual Knowledge' and 'Integral Activism' respectively.

The conference also included a visit to Matagiri at nearby Mount Tremper where a special consecration ceremony for the future building was conducted, most appropriately, by Tiokasin Ghosthorse of the Cheyenne River Lakota (Sioux) Nation. With an offering and blessing of tobacco, he

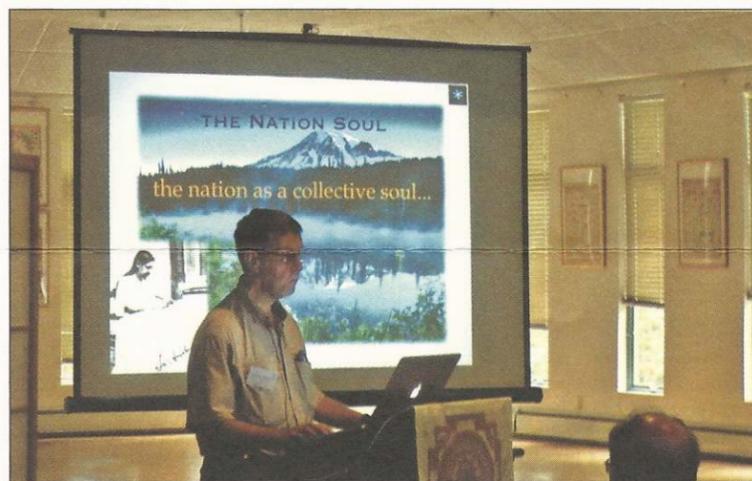
sought permission from the spirits of the ancestors of the land. This was followed by a flute duet between the Native American cedar flute played by himself and Gordon Korstange on the South Indian bamboo flute playing Carnatic music. Finally, in a beautiful healing ceremony, Tiokasin initiated a 'gratitude whorl' where each one personally 'thanked' each other person in the circle. It was, as Julian describes, "this wonderful sense of presence where you really feel the spirit."

For Julian, the only disappointment was the lack of youth participation. "We were hoping some of the Living Routes and other exchange students would want to join, but our outreach was not strong enough. I'm really glad Coren was here and a number of students attended 'Awareness Through the Body' with Ashaman and Aloka in Vermont."

"To feel so connected with Auroville from such a distance is such a gift to us. I think it is hard for Auroville to realize this. So I am beginning to think of our connection more in the way as Aloka describes it – she has a beautiful image of an elastic thread weaving multi-coloured cloth that stretches around the world. This is Teilhard de Chardin's image of the noosphere, this web of light. So it is about integrating the different levels – the Earth spirit with the psychic web and the practical thing, the internet!

Which reminds me, I still have to call Auroville, see if anyone is awake, and say Hi and include them in the circle for the closing..."

Priya Sundaravalli



John Robert Cornell talking about the Nation Soul

ENVIRONMENT

Coping with climate change

Marti Mueller attended the recent Copenhagen climate change conference as a UN delegate in the ECO-SOC programme. This accreditation came through her work with the Global Eco-villages Network (GEN).

Auroville Today: What was the extent of your involvement in the Copenhagen proceedings?

I actually gave a keynote speech. The main thrust of my talk was that if we've learned anything, from past conferences it is that we need citizens groups, communities, small coalitions of people, to drive the fundamental changes that need to happen if we are to mitigate and cope with climate change. We can't depend upon governments or large organizations like the UN or UNESCO. Governments get elected because they promise economic growth and traditional economic growth is the antithesis of ecological protection. Governments will be supportive when they see programmes that are viable, but we can't expect other people to do it for us. And small is beautiful. The UN is recognizing that small programmes are often more effective than large governmental ones.

Do you consider Copenhagen to have been a success or a failure?

I never expected much to come out of Copenhagen on the governmental level. For me Copenhagen was a success because it brought together like-minded people to discuss the issues and to form broader coalitions. That was the real purpose of Copenhagen.

At the same time I came out of Copenhagen depressed because, after sitting in on the climatologists' panels, I realized that the situation is far worse than the public understands. It's clear that for the experts there's no debate anymore about climate change: it's happening. Now the global

average temperature is .6°C above what it was 50 years ago, which has already changed the growing season in many parts of the world. If we move above 2°C it will be very serious. There's some debate about how long it will take for climate

change to start making a major impact, but we are not talking about 50 – 100 years. In fact, many experts are saying that within five to ten years we will see very visible signs. Among other things, this means more erratic and extreme weather conditions. Hot seasons will be hotter, monsoons may be wetter, wind and storm velocities will increase. If the Gulf Stream switches off or reverses direction, northern Europe may experience a mini Ice Age. Other areas will become both hotter and colder. This is why we talk of 'climate change' rather than 'global warming'.

In terms of India, satellite photos clearly show that the glaciers are melting in the Himalayas. Most of northern India is dependent upon rivers fed by these glaciers so this is bad news. The south of India may be less affected. Our climate may become more like that of Kerala – but we will have to face major problems like

over-population and the strain this puts upon available resources.

Will the world be able to cope with climate change? Optimists say we will manage somehow. Pessimists say that about 80% of the human population may not survive.

In actual fact, we are far deeper into a destruction scenario than the experts want to admit publicly.

Some people, however, are already taking action. At Copenhagen I met the CEO of a company that is providing wave energy for towns of up to 50,000 people. And the Australian government has asked permaculture experts to design a permaculture community for 200,000 people to house the entire population of the Maldives, which may soon be inundated by rising sea levels.

What about Auroville? What can we offer?

Our strength is that we can host educational conferences and workshops and that we are a demonstration site for technologies – such as solar energy and earth construction – which will be increasingly needed. Our programmes have a good outreach.

Do we need to do more in Auroville concerning climate change?

Certainly. We need to create a climate change Task Force, involving Auroville, the Pondicherry Government and other groups from the bioregion, to begin to prepare for serious climate change.

We have to put much more effort into finding out how to live outside the market economy, into becoming self-sufficient in food, living simply and strengthening community. Those who have studied these things say these are some of the ways that people manage to survive 'Dark Ages'. We need to design structures which will resist extreme climate conditions and large climate fluctuations and to explore new sources of power and ways of purifying water, like desalination. We could bring climate change experts here so they can study our area and suggest some other things we might look at.

On another level this is an amazing time. At Copenhagen I was also part of a spiritual delegation, and during our internal sessions it was pointed out that every major religion identifies this moment as critical, as a period of real change. I don't know if Sri Aurobindo knew that it would be the environment which would bring us to our knees, but this may be the lever for the transformation he talks about, for a mutation of the species. For it is clear that technology alone cannot solve this crisis.

This is the greatest challenge humankind has ever faced. Understanding and responding to climate change is probably the greatest adventure of consciousness that humanity will ever encounter.

From an interview by Alan



Marti



The 'Passage' Installation at the Pyramids

Passage

On 12th July, Shri Kapil Sibal, Minister for Human Resource Development, Government of India, came to Auroville to release the book 'Passage', a record of a particular exhibition and an introduction to the Free Progress system as practised in Last School.

In early 2009, four students of Last School – Aurevan, Shrishti, Anadi and Smiti – were presented with a challenge by their art teachers: to create an installation in The Pyramids art centre which would require each of them to explore different aspects of themselves while attempting to create some kind of group 'movement'. For weeks all other classes were cancelled while the students worked intensively – 8-10 hours a day for days on end – on conceptualising, creating and finally arranging their work in a very specific space.

The installation, which the students called 'Passage', was opened to the Aurovilian public in February, 2009. Walking through the different spaces and past the art works created by the students was to be challenged, puzzled and delighted in turn. In front of Aurevan's pen sketches of figures in different poses she had painted the question, "Why does man live to die?" Anadi's area was dominated by spirals, whorls and cylinders, while the floor of Smiti's red-suffused space was covered by the word 'quiddity' written in concentric circles. Shrishti's area, on the other hand, was cooler, quieter, her blue paper hangings evoking innerness and silence.

Each was clearly an individual statement, yet something linked them. The entire installation was pervaded by a light, whimsical playfulness and by a sense of form as something mutable and unconfined, as permeated by invisible forces. In fact, on that first open morning as the students improvised dance movements in front of their work, the feeling was not so much of attending an exhibition as of stepping into a very particular energy field.

Now a handsome book has been published, designed by Mirao and Lola, which tries to recapture the experience of that field. It does this through photos of the actual installation and by explaining something of what lay behind it. For the students, the

process was clearly as important as the final result. "I started out with the words 'Love' and 'Dream', explains Anadi, "but then discovered what interested me more was 'Time' and 'Dream' – for dreams transcend time and you enter an unlimited space of infinite possibilities... With this idea I tried to create my work: something systematic and logical for Time; and something light and layered for Dream."

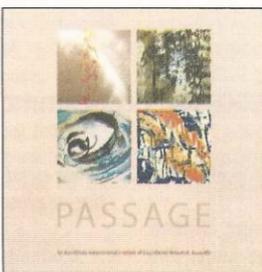
Shrishti, who decided to explore the concepts of 'Silence' and 'Sound' wrote, "The experience of preparing for the exhibition was to find my way of being suddenly extended to include more subtleties, more rhythms, more plays of light and colour."

"What this journey – working on this exhibition, the circumstances that made me surpass my limits, made me explore colour – has offered me is a new way of perceiving my surroundings which fills me with incredible joy," says Aurevan.

The book includes quotations which inspired the students. There's Sri Aurobindo and Mother, of course, but also Matsuo Basho – "Listen, a frog jumping into the silence of an ancient pond" – and Arthur O'Shaughnessy: "For each age is a dream that is dying/ Or one that is coming to birth". It also presents the larger aim of Last School and, indeed, of education in Auroville as indicated by Mother. Mother defined the Free Progress approach which guides the teachers and students of Last School as "a progress guided by the soul and not subject to habits, conventions or preconceived ideas". No doubt there is still a long way to go. But the freshness, spontaneity and depth of 'Passage' is surely an indication that they are on the right path.

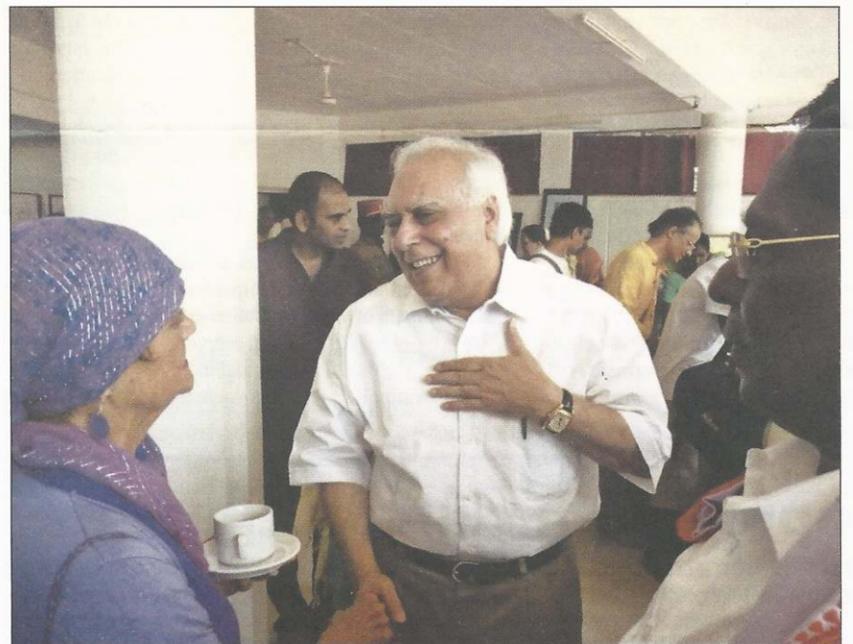
Alan

Passage. Published by Last School, Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research. Printed by Auroville Press, 2010. Available from www.Auroville.com, from Freeland bookshop or contact Deepti at lastschool@auroville.org.in



Extracts from Shri Kapil Sibal's speech

This is indeed a special experience for me. I have come to the cave of tapasya, and if I had an opportunity I would stay here. Auroville is larger than life, Auroville is much more than India, Auroville encompasses within itself the spirit of the world, the spirit of human beings. What you doing here is what I think the global community should be doing. But we live in an imperfect world. And perfection is what we strive towards when we look within ourselves, not outside. In the global community we talk about liberty, equality, fraternity. I think in Auroville you realize that too much liberty leads to inequality, and too much equality leads to the diminution of liberty, and what really needs to be brought within the flow of the universe is the spirit of fraternity. That is what is sought to be practiced in Auroville, that while you discover yourself in that process you discover your fellow human being. In that diversity you discover the unity of the human race.



Human Resource Minister Shri Kapil Sibal (middle) in informal conversation with Anadi during tea after the book release. Shri V. Narayanasamy, Union Minister of State for Planning Parliamentary Affairs and Culture, looks on.

Education, as we have understood over the years, is a formal structure to empower the child to understand the world beyond it. Education has never been based on empowering the child to understand him or herself. So the moment you move away from formal education towards an informal methodology to learn about yourself and in that process learn about the world you are talking about something that can only be done in places like Auroville. I wish it could be done in the rest of the country, but that cannot be done because in an imperfect world, in a commercial world, in a world where the market economy prevails, in a world where people look for salaries and jobs, and people look at aggrandisement, acquisition of wealth, you can't do away with formal education. I think what we need to do is, within the limitation of that formal education, help the child discover him or herself. Therefore, at the heart of any process of discovery is that element of choice. The child must be allowed to choose that which brings happiness to him or herself.

A thing of beauty is a joy forever. And what is beauty? Beauty is the discovery of truth. Which is why Truth is a joy forever. But the road to that discovery is not an easy one because we need to delve into the soul, into the *atman*, and figure out what we are here for. That's why this publication *Passage* is very emotive, because we are truly 'passagists'. In the formal sense there is an end and a beginning. In the informal sense, there is no end, and there is no beginning. For we are part of energy. So in education: in formal education, there is an end and a beginning. In informal education, there is no end or beginning. Because when you discover the *atman*, you discover yourself. What you do here symbolises what we should be doing around the world: bringing human beings of different cultures together, allowing them to mingle with each other and to discover each other and therefore the soul of the human being.

That's what we saw in the performance of these four wonderful kids [Anadi, Aurevan, Shrishti and Smiti had performed an improvisation on stage before he spoke, eds.] And I realised that in the way they moved there was a connectivity which they have established beyond themselves. I saw that in their movements, in their method of communication, and we saw on stage the unity of four human beings of different cultures and that is the celebration of Auroville. Let's all celebrate it and take it forward.



From left to right: Anadi, Shrishti, Aurevan and Smiti

Awareness through the body revisited

In February this year, the revised second edition of the book "Awareness through the Body" by Aurovillians Aloka Martí and Joan Sala was published.

“Awareness through the Body” is a comprehensive curriculum of exercises that aims to raise awareness and enable children – and adults as well – to become conscious of their own perceptions and abilities so that they may become self-aware, self-directed individuals,” explains the introduction to this book. More simply put, the goal is the expansion of consciousness, becoming aware of who one truly is; developing awareness of the various levels of the being: not only the physical, vital-emotional and mental levels, but also the level of the subtle-physical and that of the psychic.

The teachings of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother permeate and provide the general framework for the book. But the exercises have a wider base. Elements from dance, hatha yoga, Taoism, martial arts, physiotherapy, shiatsu, relaxation and breathing teachings have been incorporated. The authors particularly mention the inspiration they received from the work of Elfriede Hengstenberg, a German physical education teacher, who in the 1920-1980s developed techniques to help children free their body movements and become self-responsible.

Like most developments in Auroville, this book was born from a need. “Many years ago two teachers of Transition School asked us if we could do something about the bad posture of some of the children,” says Joan. “We initially thought that by doing a certain amount of exercises, the posture would be improved. But then we realised that pos-



Joan and Aloka

ture is not only a physical fact, but also the consequence of a mental and emotional status. So it became a bigger issue than just physical exercises.” Joan, a physical therapist, adds that working with children was a specific challenge. “I had been working with people over 40 who were suffering from specific problems. I wondered if it would be possible to teach children how to prevent such problems from coming up later in life. Why should they wait till 40 to learn how to be more sensitive within and without?”

“We found that the children needed to learn how to gather their attention, how to concentrate and take responsibility for themselves,” says Aloka. “They needed to understand their limits and capacities, and learn how to relax. There was a need for them to learn to observe themselves.” Aloka, who had been working with the body

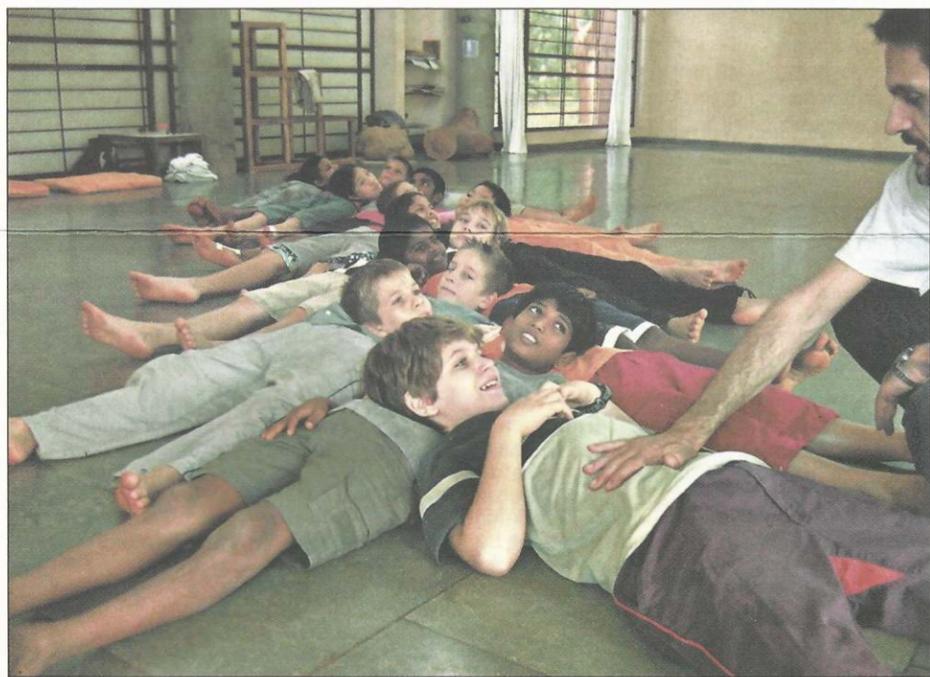
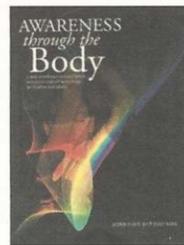
through dance, hatha yoga and tai chi, knew from experience that bodywork can lead one into oneself. “The bodywork made me grow inwardly, made me more aware of who I am, what I am and why I live. We realised that the children could also start learning that too and get to enter into themselves at an early age, there was no need not have to wait till later to discover that we are not made of a single piece, that our being is composed of different planes and we can learn how to recognise, explore and integrate them.”

What started as Body Awareness developed into classes where the body is the anchor to gain awareness at all levels of the being. “The exercises help to improve the ‘here and now’ consciousness, and also develop the ‘witness’ consciousness,” says Aloka. “That’s why we changed the name to Awareness through the Body: for we work with the integrality of the being, not only with the body itself.”

The work is widely appreciated, not only by children but also by adults. “We started workshops for teachers, so that they could meet together in a

without questioning or judging. For if we ask ourselves if we are imagining things, or if we have preconceived ideas of what to feel and what is good or bad, then, we are removing ourselves from the experience itself.” He adds that the mind is tricky. “The mind can distort an experience, for things are not what we think they are but can become what we think they are. That’s why we need to move beyond the ordinary mind and be open and ready to welcome the experience as it comes, to be open to something new to the mind. On the other hand, mind can be used as a help: for example, if we want to work on the skeleton we can start by imagining the skeleton. And then we start feeling it. In this case the mind is used as an antenna, the imagination is the door which ultimately leads to a physical sensation. Once we have that sensation, then we can stay with the experience and at that moment we know that is something real. Although very often, when we are attentive and open to what we are sensing in the moment, the experiences may come as a complete surprise. That too can be an indication of their genuineness.”

The book, the result of more than 14 years of experimentation, is beautifully illustrated. With its many exercises and activities for the physical and



Breathing exercise to create awareness of the diaphragm



Setting for the exploration of feet and balance

different way and not only talk about the running of the school. I think that helped them, both individually and collectively,” says Aloka. Other adult workshops soon followed.

“A particular problem with adults is the critical mind,” observes Joan. “We tell the participants to leave the critical mind at the door and pick it up again when they leave – if they want. When we want to sense, and notice changes in our sensations, we need to listen not to the analytical critical mind but to the part of the mind that observes

subtle-physical bodies, it will be a help to those who are working on the body and on sense awareness. To assist people to get more deeply acquainted with the book’s methods, the authors also give workshops outside Auroville, in India and abroad.

Carel

Awareness through the Body published by SAIER, Auroville. Available from www.auroville.com and at the Auroville Visitors Centre and Freeland bookshop.

EDUCATIONAL VISA

US Consulate visit

Mention the word ‘Visa’ to an Indian and you will see eyes rolling! For Indians, in general, obtaining a visa to visit any country is becoming more and more challenging and Indian Aurovillians have experienced this first-hand.

On July 12th, a delegation from the US Consulate of Chennai, led by Consul Tonya W. Gendin, made a rare visit to Auroville.

The main impetus for the meeting was to bring an awareness of the ever-growing problems which particularly Indian Aurovillians are facing, when applying for visas to travel to America on educational exchange programmes and scholarships. Auroville has spent decades building collaborations with US institutions in the educational arena, opening channels for local students to gain valuable insight and experience abroad. Most of those who have been fortunate enough to get through the process have returned to share their new-found knowledge, enriching not only their own lives but

also the lives of those around.

In addition, Auroville regularly welcomes friends, such as Heidi Watts (New England) and Jean Isely (Washington), who visit annually to impart teacher training. These ‘Friends of Auroville’ all come from reputed institutions. The teacher training exchanges in particular, which include home-stay, cultural integration and schools experience in the States, promote growth and motivate those participating.

Jill and Bill, both American Aurovillians, have been championing these exchanges for many years. Jill acts as coordinator for invitees, guiding applicants on the visa process, documentation requirements and interview process.

The main problem, as explained to the Consulate Team, seems to stem from the unique financial situation of those applying from Auroville. The visa process requires an applicant to provide a thorough overview, with supporting material, of their financial position. In Auroville, however, applicants don’t receive a salary.

Most benefit from Auroville’s monthly maintenance of Rs 6,000. This amount constitutes too low an income in the eyes of the authorities, certainly not sufficient to support a prolonged visit abroad. As the requirement to show financial independence is one of the key factors in the Consulate’s decision making process, it is a difficult hurdle for many, even if they can show full sponsorship and support for the period of their stay abroad.

Married individuals seem to pass easier through the process, although they have to provide additional supporting documentation relating to their families. Evidently a family man or woman is more trusted to return.

Jill explained to the Consulate Team that, while everyone fully supports their need to ensure that applicant’s intentions are legitimate, it can be disheartening for an applicant to be rejected based on technicalities which might have been avoided if the supporting documentation been fully appraised. On a positive note, 19 local Aurovillians have already successfully completed visits and returned to share their new skills and knowledge.

Thanjayan was one such success-

ful candidate. He spent 3 months in Arcosanti, Arizona, a twin community to Auroville. He told the Consulate Team that he had an enriching experience: not only did he learn a lot, but he was able to share his life experiences too, which facilitated growth all round.

Jill said to Tonya that, in the past, she was able to accompany the applicants to the Consulate. However, this has not been possible for the last 3-4 years because of increased security. Now she cannot even enter the building with them. Tonya replied that visa interviews can only be attended by the applicants themselves.

Tonya explained that because the United States is an open society, it, unlike many other countries, does not impose internal controls on most visitors, such as registration with local authorities. In order to enjoy the privilege of unencumbered travel in the United States, visitors have a responsibility to prove they are going to return to India. US immigration law requires consular officers to view every visa applicant as an intending immigrant until the applicant proves otherwise. In order to be approved for

a non-immigrant visa an applicant, therefore, must be able to demonstrate at the time of the visa interview that they possess strong economic, familial, and/or social ties to their place of permanent residence, in this case India. Tonya was fully empathetic to the plight of those who had had negative experiences at the Consulate and said that most of the staff is aware of the uniqueness of Auroville and its work. However, as staff and policies change on a regular basis, it would be an area that would benefit from regular reminders.

She further stressed the importance of the level of English communication of applicants. They are expected to be fully articulate in English during the interview as the Consulate needs to be confident that the candidate can competently communicate. Jill suggested that she would focus future efforts on conducting mock interviews with future candidates.

The meeting was useful to both parties to understand and acknowledge the areas requiring attention for the future.

Louise

Cleaning the discs

It is 4.30 in the morning. While dawn touches the tree tops, young men and women clip themselves into harnesses, attach ropes and then fearlessly descend the Matrimandir to clean the fronts and backs of the discs. Silence reigns, only interrupted by the click of metal, the slither of ropes and the hush of cloth over glass. By 10 am their work is over.

"The entire outside of the Matrimandir will be clean by August 15th", says Prasad. "That's a historic first, for the bottom rows and the backs of all the discs have never been cleaned since they were installed. The only discs that got cleaned were those from the top to one level below the equator, using the buggy from the crane on top."

Prasad first came to Auroville 21 years ago. After 6 years, he left for Australia, to study and later to teach. His last job was at a 'remote' school for Aboriginals – called 'remote' as they are in one of the remotest places on earth, with the nearest capital city 2500 km away – until Auroville called him home.

"I was offered a teaching job," he says. "But the appeal to work for the Matrimandir was stronger. Anand and I started cleaning the discs up to the equator, using a rope and harness, holding the rope with one hand and cleaning with the other. It wasn't ideal. So we contacted Julian, who trains people in rock-climbing. Julian introduced us to the 'descender', a friction brake device used in mountaineering for descending a rope. He also gave us some training. Now we can clean all the discs. People have been talking of purchasing another crane, which could take care of the cleaning of the bottom disks, but that's no longer necessary. The discs underneath the Matrimandir will be cleaned

while we are lying on a net. The crane on top will no longer be required for cleaning purposes; it will only be used for lifting heavy materials."

The best method of cleaning the discs is slowly being discovered. For cleaning the glass many methods were tried. "Accidentally we discovered that using jute cloth works best," says Prasad. "We experimented with other materials such as natural soap and different types of scouring pads and EM (effective micro-organisms) to clean some stains but they left scratch marks on the glass. Jute wipes away the dirt and polishes the discs at the same time."

"The backs of most of the disks below the equator are covered with black fungus; we scrape this off. We are also scraping the paint from the Kemperol below the equator." Kemperol is the water-proofing material which has been applied to the skin of the Matrimandir. While above the equator the material holds well, below it has come loose. "Neither the paint on the Kemperol, nor the Kemperol itself are holding," says Prasad.

Cleaning the Matrimandir is likely to become a full-time job. "I initially thought that we could clean for 3 months and leave the discs alone for the next three months. But that will not be possible. There is a lot of industrial pollution in the air, plus the dirt from the burning Pondicherry garbage dump

near Forecomers. Our aim is that twice a year, for Sri Aurobindo's birthday on August 15 and for The Mother's birthday on February 21, the Matrimandir will be fully clean." And he adds, "Incidentally, did you know that these birthdays are exactly 6 years, 6 months, and 6 days apart?"

The fact that his cleaning team consists largely of short-term volunteers is a concern for Prasad. "I invite anybody, Aurovilians, Newcomers and volunteers, to join," he says. For the volunteers he wants to create a scheme similar to

that which has been developed for the volunteers at Sadhana Forest. "We provide boarding, transportation and social connectivity, and in return they work the morning hours," he says. Social connectivity, in particular, is of the essence. "I would like the volunteers to have a sense of connection to all those who work for Auroville, regardless of their status. And it is important that they know about the spiritual ideals of Auroville and the work of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. For all are 'Mother's foot soldiers'."

In future, Prasad would like to have

the cleaning and maintenance work of the Matrimandir and the gardens finished by 6 am every day. "Somewhere I read in Mother's Agenda that she woke at 4 am. Those who served her had obviously to wake earlier. The Ashramites sweep not only around the Samadhi but even the roads around the Ashram in those early morning hours. Aurovilians should follow and discover the joy of coming at that time to the Matrimandir! And then, the Matrimandir can be left in peace for the rest of the day."

Carel



Sat Yaaji hanging in the harness underneath the Matrimandir

PHOTO FRANCIS

OUTREACH EDUCATION

A place of never ending education – for all!

All IT consciousness, compassion, love, the divine spirit or by any other name, IT clearly exists in Auroville.

Manoj Pokhrel is 15 years old; he was born in Nepal in the year 2054! No, that's not a typing error. The Nepali calendar is 53.75 years ahead of the Gregorian one. He's a bright kid, like most are; a little shy and with a smile that would warm the coldest of hearts (we all know there are some of those out there). He's creative, intuitive, adores all animals, cooks really well and loves to play sports. Manoj's only real barrier right now is communication. While he speaks Nepali fluently and can manage in Hindi, he speaks very little English and no Tamil.

Govind, Manoj's father, is my watchman. Like the many Nepalese working in the area he generally only gets to see his wife and children once a year. He decided to bring Manoj here to live with him following a recent visit home, after discovering that Manoj hadn't scored very well at school. Not surprising, really, when his class consisted of over 80 students! Govind hoped that his son would be able to join a local school in order to at least improve his language skills, in his eyes one of the major keys to a brighter future. Govind himself has little formal education and doesn't want his children to endure the hardships he has endured because of this.

In 2009, India took a huge step by introducing the Right to Education Act. This Act promises free and quality education to every single child in India, rich or poor. Could Manoj benefit from this we wondered?

I had approached a number of local English-medium schools about the possibility of admitting Manoj. Unfortunately, these attempts were unsuccessful, leaving Manoj



Manoj Pokhrel

without education, and his father wondering if he had made a grave and expensive error in bringing him here.

The situation was quite discouraging until, on a whim, I approached Shankar, principal of Aikiyam School, New Creation. Shankar, who believes that "all children are intelligent, mostly it's just the language which is a barrier," agreed to meet with Manoj. After the initial assessment with the 6th Standard teacher, it was established that Manoj's English skills were well behind those required for the class. However, the school has a team of five who run parallel classes for students requiring special attention. In consultation with Saskia, one of the special needs teachers, it was agreed that they would admit Manoj.

Manoj is overjoyed to have been accepted. He and his father are more than happy to forfeit one year's grades if it means that he can hone his language skills. That he has been given this opportunity is even more heart-warming.

Saskia introduced Manoj to the class in a special way. She explained to the children that Manoj knew little English and that he was obviously older than them, but, while he would need a lot of help from them with his English, there were probably many things which he could in turn help them with.

What really makes this story is that Manoj's father has to support his whole family – wife, two children and his mother – from a low salary. As the school does not charge any fee from the students and provides nutritious food daily, Aikiyam School, he says, is like a gift from God.

And Manoj, what does he have to say? "I am very happy. Thank you Auroville!"

Louise

Aikiyam School

Auroville Today has extensively reported on Aikiyam School (earlier known under the name New Creation Bilingual School). An update:

- ◆ Aikiyam provides free, English medium, holistic learning for under-privileged children from Kulapalayam and other nearby villages and is now home to 213 students, from Creche level up to 8th Grade.
- ◆ Class sizes are kept to a maximum of 20 children per teacher, facilitating a more personal learning environment. The ratio is actually more like 10:1 now that there are 23 teachers on board; 17 of them are Aurovillian, with the remaining staff made up of local certified teachers.
- ◆ The school has been working towards Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) certification and has been under provisional status for the last 3 years. The final review is due this year and they are hopeful of a satisfactory outcome which will stand testament to the work undertaken.
- ◆ Snacks and the daily hot meal are now prepared in-house as the palates of the local children did not really adapt to the salads and pasta initially provided by the Solar Kitchen, preferring more traditional rice and curry dishes. Kokila and Vasantlal, friends of Auroville from Pondicherry, sometimes bring additional homemade snacks for all the children.

- ◆ The grounds are currently under remodeling, which is aided by the children themselves as they cultivate their own garden. The garden serves not only as an educational tool, but produces vegetables and herbs for the kitchen.
- ◆ Last year one of the Weltwaerts volunteers helped the school develop its own waste management programme, assisted by the students who also became actively involved in the Litter-Free campaign in the area. In addition to this the children were responsible for planting some 700 trees in the bioregion.
- ◆ A new building, to the rear of the complex, was inaugurated on March 10th, 2010 by Mrs. Christiane Cranshaw-Wachholtz, the German Consul from Chennai. The funds for completion of this unit, which houses a library, a science lab and two classrooms, were provided by friends of Aikiyam and the Government of Germany, through AVI Germany.
- ◆ The middle school conducts vocational training classes in subjects such as tailoring, carpentry, clay work and embroidery. These are valuable skills, especially for the children who will hopefully take up a trade when they leave school.



The new Aikiyam building including the library, science lab and two classrooms.

- ◆ Aikiyam continues to receive 60% of its funding for running the daily programme from Auroville, while the remaining 40% relies on funding from various friends and well wishers, including global AVIs, local donations, and the contributions from the children.
- ◆ The school has its own website and produces three newsletters annually. For more information visit: www.auroville.org/education/village_schools/aikiyam_school.htm

What's news?

In the 'ordinary' world it's obvious, isn't it? 'News' is anything which has publicity value: disasters, wars, politics, a cure for cancer, what the famous are doing or thinking, major sporting achievements or a clairvoyant octopus.

But what about Auroville? What should we be reporting on here? Well, when we initiated Auroville Today way back in 1988 on behalf of the Auroville International Centres the answer was clear. By 'news' the Centres meant information about things like new and ongoing projects, Auroville's economy and governance system and the lives of individual Aurovilians. On the whole, I think Auroville Today has done a decent job here. And these are areas we should continue to feature. But three months of enforced rest have made me wonder if these are the only areas we should be covering...and when we do cover some topics, if we are always doing it in the right way.

Take one of the 'hot' items of the past few months – the controversy regarding the construction of benches underneath the Banyan at the centre of Auroville. We haven't covered this yet, partly because our tendency has been to allow hot topics to cool a little before we offer our reflections upon them. Nevertheless, our usual approach in cases like this would be to present the arguments from both sides while charting the progress of the controversy. But would this do justice to what is really going on? For it's clear that with a topic like this we are dealing with familiar battle-lines: the benches around the Banyan are just the latest episode in a long-running saga where what is often perceived to be 'imposed authority' is pitted against 'the will of the people'.

This, of course, is a crass oversimplification; apart from anything else, such controversies are also fuelled by petty power games and personal resentments. But it seems particularly important in a place like Auroville, where we try to understand the larger dimensions of our daily lives, that journalists practise using the wide-angle as well as the telephoto lens.

There's another area where I think Aurovillian journalists have a special responsibility. Often when we report upon controversies we simply repeat what the main protagonists are saying. But generally we don't examine how they arrive at these opinions and why they hold them so vociferously.

Most individuals caught up in disputes like the one concerning the Banyan believe they hold truths which are self-evident. "Roger designed these benches and he got his mandate from Mother", "The Mother would never have approved a design which threatens the health of the Banyan," and so on. But it is unlikely that all parties to these disputes received a blinding flash of insight direct from the Supreme. It's much more likely that individuals take positions on the basis of gut reactions, or because of the preferences or dislikes of friends, or because they feel deference to or dislike of an authority figure. None of these would qualify as freely-chosen, conscious choices. Many of them, like attitudes to authority, may have their roots in childhood experiences or in a particular cultural milieu.

No one, of course, ever admits this possibility publicly and, probably, not even to themselves. Perhaps many people are unaware of the roots of their own behaviour. But if, as Mother pointed out, the first condition of being a 'True Aurovillian' is to become aware that one is much more than the sum of one's cultural, racial and genetic inheritance, then any attempt, however modest, to recognise and lay aside these temporal trappings so that something truer can emerge should be celebrated as something very special.

Now, wouldn't this be news worthy of Auroville?

Alan

Safety and peace: at what price?

After the murder of a gang member from Kuilapalayam on May 24th and following the security problems that it created, about 100 people attended a meeting called by the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation and the Working Committee to discuss ways in which security could be improved. The district Collector and the Superintendent of Police (SP) were also present.

Immediately after the murder, business units and a school in Kuilapalayam were forced to close for over four days as bands of young men terrorized people in Auroville and the village. Some business units were asked for money. Streets were abandoned in fear of further escalation of violence and the level of anxiety was high. The Support Group of the Auroville Board of Commerce, in an open letter to the Governing Board and International Advisory Council of the Auroville Foundation and others, expressed their concern about the deteriorating law and order situation which affected the life and work of Aurovilians and their employees. The Support Group felt it not acceptable that these days had passed without any enforcement of law and order. It requested that, in view of the special status and significance of Auroville as an international project as well as the Auroville Foundation being directly supported by the Central Government, local authorities and the Secretary, Auroville Foundation deal effectively with such problems.

When the police found out about the murder and

anti-social activities they immediately took stern measures. The police arrested those involved and filed charges under the Goonda Act. Also a few Aurovilians were arrested. The police also strengthened their presence in the area for a couple of weeks. But the sight of police armed with AK47 rifles was uncomfortable.

In the meeting the question was raised if the arrested Aurovilians had not been framed, as they were not believed to be involved in gang activities. Pending the investigation, the SP was restricted to how much he could share. He warned that the people who are guilty will be going to jail for a long time. The SP was asked to release photographs of the accused so that people in Auroville will be aware who they are.

"We met separately with the Tamil Aurovilians," said the Secretary. "I made it clear to them that I know who they are and who they are related to. I also made it clear that they must make a choice; either they are first Aurovillian and they cut all ties to family members that are involved in gangs; or, if their choice is to remain loyal to their family or relations, then I want them out of Auroville. They should renounce their Aurovillian status and leave. The choice is up to them."

At this point the Secretary mentioned that there are plans to install a series of check-points at the entrances to Auroville to be staffed by the police. "Their physical presence will ensure a quick response to a crime scene." The Secretary explained that he would like to "tighten the comings and goings of out-

siders. The site for the Certitude post is now being cleared and soon we will begin constructing a building. We want to restore peace and tranquillity and police in the area will help create that feeling. We take this very seriously and we want to implement the plan immediately. The reality of the situation is Auroville is becoming a tourist destination bringing more people and increasing the risk of criminal activities." The police at the check-post would also deal with distress calls.

This brought up a series of concerns and questions like "What kind of powers do these officers have to restrict freedom of movement? Will they have the authority to stop anyone and what kind of enforcement is there?" The response was, "If their behaviour is anti-social, criminal or suspicious we will stop them and if needed arrest them whether they are Aurovillian or non-Aurovillian. Being in Auroville allows us to take immediate action," said the SP. Also the need to issue identification cards to members of Auroville was mentioned.

A special topic of discussion was how Auroville businesses should respond to being bullied for money. The SP advised that they send a complaint with the names of those attempting to extort money, and the police will take immediate action.

The Mother said back in 1966 that security in Auroville should be ensured by "a battalion of guards made of athletes and gymnasts." Sadly, this may not come to fruition any time soon.

Elaine

Breaking the silence

The Women's Safety Task Force (WSTF) was founded in May 2009 under the umbrella of the Auroville Health Services (AVHS). As Alice, one of the founders, pointed out "health and safety is a public health issue, therefore we need to address this subject." Women are increasingly becoming the target of sexual assault and harassment in and around Auroville and we "want to break the silence and provide a safe space for women to be heard and supported. It is important to report the crime but when women have been assaulted they generally feel more comfortable reporting and receiving support from other women.

"Early in 2009 a woman walked into AVHS very upset about a sexual assault that occurred to her while she was driving her moped. When we started to look into this, it became clear there were some programs and services missing in Auroville. We needed to make people aware that groping and sexual assault were happening at an alarming rate. WSTF wants to break the silence and put the issue out in the open. Women should not feel ashamed and blame themselves for the crime. Sexual assault is a crime punish-

able by a jail term. Women don't have to tolerate abusive sexual contact. If someone touches inappropriately, action should be taken against the perpetrator."

"The reason I was interested in becoming a member," said Rani, "is for as long as I have been living in Auroville, there have been incidents of violence on the roads. They have been met with silence. Victims often did not want to tell others about what happened to them because of trauma or shame. The issues were not discussed openly in the community nor were measures taken to help prevent them. I find this very frustrating". When the WSTF met with some of the working groups, "promises were made to install lights in the high risk areas and undertake other safety measures. These were agreements made over a year and half ago and we're still waiting."

The WSTF is growing in strength and membership. However, the Task Force is only a short term initiative to bring about change and improvement for the betterment of the community. WSTF wants to make people aware of the assaults through awareness programmes; identify and inform people about the types of violence taking place; implement preventative measures and inform about the risk factors: iden-

tify areas where there are repeated incidents; and dispel myths about why and how these acts take place.

The process is evolving. The group is addressing all issues around sexual assault. They have a 24/7 hotline, which is answered by a woman, and a website that informs people about where someone can go and report an incident. It's also a place to share ideas, read articles about the subject and pick up some safety tips. They are preparing another awareness campaign for Auroville that will include circulating an information sheet about the services to all the guest houses with contact numbers. The WSTF have collaborated with other women's groups including the Centre for Woman's Studies in Pondicherry and the Women Lawyer's Collective based in Bangalore.

Presently, AVHS are raising funds to purchase a vehicle that will be used for transporting women and seniors. They are trying to raise 9 lakhs.

For more information visit the website www.avtravelsafe.com

Elaine

P.S. During the last ten days of July four women were assaulted on Auroville roads, in some cases with violence.

Passings



Michael Mason

On April 20th early morning, Michael Mason of Samridhi passed away at the age of 56 after suffering from a tumor in the brain for more than a year. Michael, originally from U.K., came to Auroville in 1977 and was one of the pioneer greenbelters. He planted and then for many years looked after a large forest area in Samridhi with great dedication.

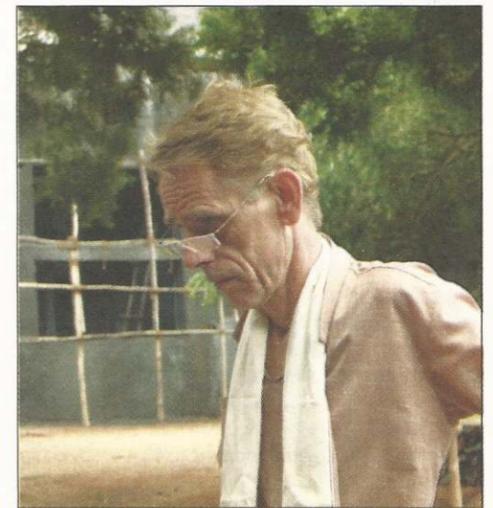
In his final months, many Aurovilians came together to care for him. As Biggie describes it, "Your need for us became a gift for us. Old and young from such different backgrounds, from such different nations formed a touching link and network of love. In fact, you made us manifest here in your forest home our dream of Auroville, the dream of Human Unity, that dream for which you stayed here from the day we met for the first time, some 32 years ago." His body was buried at Samridhi forest.



S. Vengadesh

On April 28th, S.Vengadesh, an Aurovillian from India since 1992, passed away in Arka, at the young age of 39. After taking care of Atithi Griha guesthouse for years, Vengadesh had the opportunity to join the British Navy and left for U.K. in 2006, together with his wife Banumathi and their daughters Priyadurga and Jayashree. [see AVToday # 211, Sept. 2006].

Nearly two years ago he was diagnosed with thyroid cancer and even though he had the best treatment on offer, it became apparent that it was terminal. Vengadesh and Banumathi travelled back to Auroville to meet with family and friends for the last time. Vengadesh's body was cremated on May 2nd. The Royal Naval attaché connected to the British High Commission in Chennai attended the ceremony and Veni's friends in the Royal Navy sent their warm appreciation of a "true friend and a very good worker".



Lloyd

On May 15th Lloyd (Luit Hofman) an Aurovillian since 1988, departed at the Health Centre at the age of 58. Lloyd, who came from The Netherlands, was diagnosed with cancer at the beginning of this year, which he faced courageously and with dignity when it became clear that it was terminal. His body was cremated on 20 April.

Lloyd loved literature. In 2007 he compiled an extensive anthology of poems by devotees of Sri Aurobindo. He also wrote poetry, collected in two books.

My aim was a few words to deal with knowing but light in coming across a small land fit for any use a small body of speech to be true to itself.

Centenary Celebration

Over several weeks in April, Auroville celebrated the centenary of the arrival of Sri Aurobindo in Pondicherry on April 4, 1910. The first event was an excellent dance performance by a Governing Board member Mallika Sarabhai and her ensemble. Several exhibitions on Sri Aurobindo's life and his manuscripts were shown, concerts were given, Aurovilians came together for a sharing, a sound installation on His arrival was made in various places in Auroville, Dr. Karan Singh gave a public talk on Sri Aurobindo's Five Dreams, and many children from Auroville Outreach schools were awarded prizes for their contributions to the celebrations. On the morning of the 4th of April the East door of the Matrimandir Chamber was opened for the sun's rays to come into the Chamber, the only day this is possible.

Ministerial visit

Shri Farooq Abdullah, Union Minister for New and Renewable Energy, honoured Auroville with a visit on March 23rd.

New L'Avenir d'Auroville

On the recommendation of the Working Committee, a new L'Avenir d'Auroville team has been constituted by the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation as a subcommittee of the Board. The team consists of a planning section, a development section, an administrative section and a communication platform whose task it is to interact with the community.

Auroville Green Portal

The beta version of Auroville green portal has been launched. Log in at www.auroco.org to contact the web-based knowledge resource of Auroville experiences in the areas of forest, agriculture, water, waste, habitat, energy and outreach. The site contains articles, interviews, audio and video clips. It also has a directory of units and experts and a list of internship opportunities.



Auroville exhibition in Tortosa

Auroville exhibitions

Exhibitions on Auroville were organised by AVI Germany in the city of Bernburg and by AVI Spain in Tortosa. The latter exhibition was in Spanish and Catalan.

Farms

One crore has been allocated to the Auroville Agriculture Fund to improve the efficiency of the Auroville Farms. A 5-year Auroville agriculture plan is being made. It includes contacts with farmers from the bio-region who recently paid a visit to Foodlink, the New Pour Tous, and the Solar Kitchen. Some

of these farmers are bringing their organic grains to Annapurna for processing. An education group has been set up and soil tests from all the farms are being organised. A discussion is ongoing on how to get more people interested in farming, both to take care of new lands as well as to take-over existing farms.

C.S.A.

Solitude farm is promoting the introduction of community-supported agriculture. In this system, individuals support a farm operation and growers and consumers share jointly the risks and benefits of food production. Consumers get weekly a box of organic vegetables and fruits.



The Al Medy Mosque in Riyadh

Award for Earth Institute

The Auroville Earth Institute received the 'Prince Sultan Bin Salman award for Urban Heritage' for the design of the Al Medy Mosque in Riyadh which was built under its supervision. The mosque of 457 square metres, entirely covered with vaults and domes and with a minaret 18.05 metre high was built in 7 weeks employing semi-skilled labour.

Visa news

The Ministry of Home Affairs has cleared the re-entry into Auroville of Boris, Dima and Chris, three of the seven Aurovilians who were expelled. The ban against the other four Aurovilians has not been lifted.

AVI Germany

The 2010 annual meeting of AVI Germany focused on bringing people together and tapping their common creative power, leading to many members expressing the wish to cooperate more closely in future. The meeting also decided to concentrate fundraising efforts on the creation of a volunteer's camp for the Auroville Volunteering, Internship and Studies Programme of AVI Germany in the International Zone.

Entry Service

The new Entry Service, which came into existence in November 2009, reported on its work in three distinct groups: the Administration and Coordination Core Group, the Newcomer Orientation Group and the Review and Assessment Committee.

The Administration and Coordination Core Group oversees the Newcomer process from beginning to end. Its functions include performing all the required administrative work such as correspondence, interviewing applicants and processing applications, reviewing information and feedback about the integration of the applicants, and recommending the entering of the name of Newcomers who completed successfully their probationary period into the Register of Residents. The Core

group is helped by a support group of some 20 Aurovilians that is called on occasionally as observers and/or translators during interviews.

The purpose of the Newcomer Orientation Group is to ensure a smooth integration of new people wanting to become Newcomers. It has run various Newcomer-orientation programmes over the past six months. The orientation programmes play a significant part in providing the needed background to applicants and newcomers.

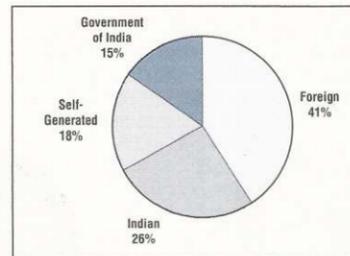
The Review and Assessment Committee acts as an appeal body, examines complex cases or situations brought to their attention by the Administrative and Coordination Group. Its functions are currently suspended. It was found that the mandate of the Review and Assessment Committee needs reviewing to better fit its purpose.

The group has issued 65 new letters of recommendation to foreigners who had successfully completed their 3 month guest period and wished to come back as newcomers. It has also answered approximately 300 e-mail enquiries from India and foreign countries from people interested in joining Auroville as guests or volunteers.

As per its latest figures, from November 2009 to May 2010, the Entry Service announced 57 Aurovilians, 49 newcomers, 5 returning Aurovilians, the departure of 13 newcomers, the cancellation of 7 newcomer processes and the extension of 11 newcomer processes by 6 months. Auroville currently has 164 Newcomers.

Tax issues

Two major taxation issues are facing Auroville. A recent amendment to the Finance Act has raised the possibility that the Auroville Foundation would lose the exemption from paying income tax. Another development is that in India, the Auroville Foundation can now only offer limited tax relief to Indian donors, contrary to the Auroville International associations in USA, UK, Germany and the Netherlands that can offer 100% tax exempt receipts to their donors for donations made to any Auroville activity. The matter is being taken up with the Indian Government.



Unity Fund income by source

Unity Fund

The Unity Fund annual report 2009-2010 showed a positive balance of Rs 1,124 lakhs by March 31st, 2010. The income of the Unity Fund came from foreign sources (Rs 1,684 lakhs - 41%), from Indian sources (Rs 1,089 lakhs - 26%), were self-generated within Auroville (Rs 729 lakhs - 18%) and from the Government of India (Rs 634 lakhs - 15%).

City Services

The annual report of the City Services shows that the financial year 2009-2010 ended with a posi-

tive balance of Rs 277 lakhs. 94% of the income was generated internally; 6% came from the Government of India for maintenance of researchers. Commercial units remained the most important source of income, accounting for 41% of the total income received. Services (largely the Financial Services) accounted for 25% of the income; Guests and Guest Houses, 14%; Aurovilians, Newcomers, and Friends, 14%. The income increase from Guest Houses resulted from changes in the contribution policies (from Rs 100/day for each guest to 20% of turnover). The increase from commercial units appears to result from an overall increase in net profits.

In 2009-10, City Services disbursed Rs 782.87 lakhs, an increase of 26% as compared to the previous financial year. In view of the uncertain income tax situation, which would have a major impact on the maintenance and development budgets, the City Services budget 2010-2011 is being kept at the current level with the exception of personal and children's maintenances which will be increased.



The new road near the Kindergarten

Road network extended

The paving of the road from Kindergarten to the Center Field junction with paver-blocks was completed mid-July. To continue the paving 5 trees will have to be cut for which the Green Group has given its permission.

Electricity subsidy

Varuna announced that it has now two wind generators connected to the grid which produce green energy for Auroville. Varuna has offered a monetary donation of approximately Rs 30 lakh a year to promote a money-free distribution of electricity. The donation is being made available to units and activities that are directly working for the community.

Auroville Legal Service

Under the guidance and support of the Working Committee, a new Auroville Legal Service activity has been launched. The service will start functioning on a small scale and will offer its services regarding legal procedures and processes to Auroville's Working Groups and activities.

Exceptional rainfall

Auroville Water Harvest reported that, though the year started with fairly dry four months, May and June gave nearly 28% of the average total rainfall which is normally 15% for these months. The month of June in particular had a lot of rainfall, 238.4 mm was measured which has happened only twice in the last 15 years.



Realisation in progress

Housing situation

The Housing Service reported that, even though many housing projects that started 18 months ago (*Arati III, Grace Phase 4, Realization, Luminosity, Maitreye, Surrender, Sailam II, Muyerchi, Inspiration, Citadine*) are reaching completion, offering a total of 120 apartments, this doesn't resolve the housing 'crunch'. As many as 100 individuals and families, many of whom are living in sub-standard housing and who do not have the necessary means to secure proper housing, are not being cared for.

The Housing Service observed that as these people have been accepted into the community, the community has the responsibility to help them.

From all ongoing housing projects, only two offer permanent 'free housing': *Inspiration*, which is being built from a Government of India donation; and *Citadine* which has been built from a few large private donations.

The fact that housing is depending on personal finances impacts Auroville's ability to attract people without financial means. The Housing Development Fund, managed by the Housing Service, has not received any funds from the Unity Fund or from any other Auroville resource.

The Housing Service proposes to sell far outlying Auroville lands that are not essential for the city or for the development of the green belt, and use the proceeds for both housing and for securing lands in the green belt.

The Housing Service request the new L'Avenir d'Auroville team and other Auroville working groups and all Aurovilians and Newcomers to consider housing as Auroville's first priority and dedicate more efforts to finding ways to resolve the situation.

Transport for Senior Aurovilians

Thanks to a donation, the *Seniors Helping Seniors* team of Auroville Health Services is now in a position to offer free, door-to-door transport for cultural events at Bharat Nivas, Visitors Centre and SAW-CHU, events, classes and lectures at Savitri Bhavan and Vérité, and movie nights at the Town Hall and at Aurelec.

Muyerchi Youth Housing

The Housing Service in collaboration with Surrender Community residents will allocate 7 rooms to single Auroville youth who are studying or working in Auroville and are between 20 and 27 years old. These rooms will be allocated on a temporary basis and may be either long-term (up to 7 years for someone aged 20) or short-term (for 1 year for someone aged 26). The Muyerchi Youth Housing project has been funded in part by a generous private donation, and with financial resources from the Housing Fund which receives income from housing asset transfers (the "fraternal contribution").

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◆ **U.K.:** Auroville International U.K., c/o Martin Littlewood, 30 The Green, Surlingham, Norwich NR14 7AG, tel. 01508-538300, fax 01508-537122, email: info@aviuk.org

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U.S.A (1): AVI USA, P.O. Box 1534, Lodi, CA 95241-1534, Tel: (831) 425-5620; email: info@aviusa.org; or to
U.S.A (2): Auroville Information Office, PO Box 676, Woodstock NY 12498, tel: (1) 845-679-5358, email: AVINY@aviusa.org

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