

Auroville Today

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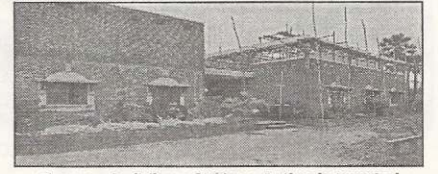


The Bommalyarpalayam Kindergarten

MAIN ISSUE: Auroville's village outreach work

- Auroville Village Action Arts
- Life education at the Life Education Centre
- A portrait of Indrani

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The new building of Village Action in Irumbal

Education through hard knocks

In February, the Auroville Village Action Group's main source of funding stopped: a major dispute with some of their workers ensued. What can be learned from this crisis?

Since the beginning of Auroville, a number of individuals and groups have worked closely with the villagers. By far the largest of these organizations, and the one with the most extensive and ambitious outreach programme, is Village Action (otherwise known as Auroville Village Action Group, or AVAG).

AVAG began in 1983. In the early years its small staff attempted to support individual and community initiatives emanating from the villages. AVAG also took over the running of Isaambalam School and set up the beginnings of a night school network. By 1988, however, the staff was beginning to re-evaluate its approach. There was a feeling that AVAG was too 'charity-based', that their programmes were creating dependency in the local population because there was insufficient participation from the side of the beneficiaries. Also, the wish to support any initiatives coming from the villagers meant that the quality of those proposals was often not properly assessed, leading to quite a high failure rate.

By 1991, and not without a struggle, AVAG had established itself upon a new basis. While it expanded its programme into areas

themselves. This financial empowerment was firmly based on the network of Women's Groups – groups of women who meet regularly and organize projects to improve their villages.

Village Action's programmes expanded almost exponentially during the 1990s as did their reach. By the end of the decade it was working in over 60 villages, covering a population of almost 70,000. It was engaged in various schemes for community development, infrastructure upgrading and supplementary education in almost 50 villages in the bioregion [see box on page 5]. While the philosophy of AVAG was that the villagers should take responsibility for and run the schemes themselves, help was needed in the initial stages. Consequently, AVAG took on and trained young men and women from the local villages as 'Development Workers'. Their responsibilities included not only supporting and advising Women's Groups and Men's Groups, but also liaising with NGOs and Government departments to get funds for village projects, assisting as 'animators' in local schools and helping set up parents-teachers associations and village councils. As a AVAG coordinator put it a few years ago, "The Development Workers are the backbone, the ears and eyes of Village Action in the villages."

The crisis

Reflecting the success and professionalism of its programmes, over the years AVAG received increasingly generous funding (in 1999, it had an annual budget of \$97,000). While the funding has come from a number of different donors, the main donor has been the Commonwealth Human Ecology Council

(CHEC), liaising with the British Overseas Development Agency (later DFID). DFID had always made it clear that they would not provide funding beyond the end of the current project in March 2004. However, there was optimism among the AVAG coordinators that other sources would be found to make up the gap. In 2003 AVI-UK sponsored the professional preparation of a large village development project which was submitted to the European Commission and in the same year Madanlal from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram agreed to donate one lakh rupees a month to AVAG.

In November 2003, however, it became clear that the European Commission would not fund the development proposal. Still, optimism in some quarters remained high. After all, AVAG had already successfully weathered a funding crisis in 1998-9 and Bhavana had gone to the U.S. with the expectation of raising additional funds there. By early 2004, however, Bhavana had not raised substantial funds in the U.S., nor was she able to convince



PHOTO COURTESY: VILLAGE ACTION

Village development workers receiving training in the new Village Action building

Madanlal to continue his financial support beyond January. Given this, one of AVAG's trustees told Moris and Anbu, the main coordinators of AVAG, that they had to prepare the Development Workers for redundancies (the office staff were not immediately affected as their salaries were covered for one more year by a grant from a German organization).

"Actually," says Anbu, "we had been warning the Development Workers since March 2003 that if we didn't find other sources of funding, Village Action might not be able to employ some of them after March, 2004. But nobody thought it would be them." Now Moris and Anbu met with the Development Workers and told them that some of them could no longer be employed after March, 2004 and that if no further funding was forthcoming the rest might lose their jobs at the end of the year. They promised to try to find all of them jobs with other Auroville groups.

At first the Development Workers seemed to accept the situation, but then some turned against AVAG. They involved other individuals with antipathy towards AVAG and/or Auroville and they invoked the caste issue by accusing AVAG of being 'pro-dalit' (the dalits are the former outcasts or 'untouchables'). They accused Moris and Anbu of failing to give them sufficient notice of job termination, they complained to the Working Committee about mismanagement (the Working Committee appointed a sub-group to look into it and a full audit of AVAG accounts is being made) and tried to persuade the Women's Groups to switch allegiance and stop depositing funds at the AVAG office. As the situation escalated, two AVAG employees were beaten up and individual trustees threatened. It was only after a meeting of all parties with the *tahsildar* (a local government official) that things cooled down.

In the circumstances, AVAG decided to terminate the employment of all the Development Workers, with the possibility that some of them might be re-employed if funds are forthcoming. At present no major funding is on the horizon. Meanwhile most of

the AVAG projects are, in Bhavana's words, "diminished but still running", an indication that many of them have attained a degree of self-sufficiency.

The lessons learned

Moris and Anbu were the ones in the centre of the storm. Trained social workers, since joining Village Action in 1988 they have developed and supervised many of the most important programmes, including the training of the Development Workers, the creation of Women's and Men's Groups and the supervi-



PHOTO COURTESY: VILLAGE ACTION

Anbu with Women's Federation members

like ecological farming and health and hygiene, it now required much more participation from the villagers in the implementation and maintenance of many of the projects. Also, it became more pro-active, identifying areas of concern – like the low status of women and the high drop-out rate from village schools – and creating projects to remedy this. The Life Education Centre, begun in 1992, was one such project. Perhaps the most successful of all the AVAG projects, however, grew out of the 'Trickle-Up' programme. This programme, funded by a U.S. foundation, offered grants to women in the villages who already had, or wanted to start up, small businesses. At first the scheme was not a success: most of the recipients closed down their businesses after receiving the grant. At this point Anbu, who was supervising the scheme, decided to make the grant conditional upon the women saving regularly over six months. The success of this led to the extension of the savings and loan programme, resulting in a kind of 'women's bank' and collective fund run by the women



PHOTO COURTESY: VILLAGE ACTION

Moris, Bhavana and Anbu

sion of microcredit schemes. What are the main lessons they've learned from the biggest crisis AVAG has ever faced?

They agree now that it was a mistake not to have drawn up clear contracts with the Development Workers when they joined the organization or to have officially recorded that they had warned the workers one year before of possible redundancies.

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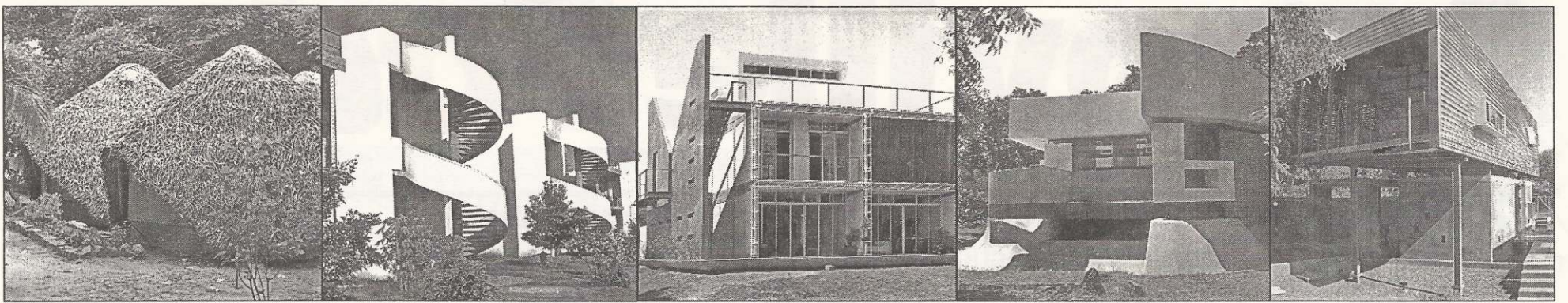
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left to right: keet capsule in Aspiration; Courage houses; Line of Force collective housing; two houses in Auromodèle

Problems of housing

Who will own the land and buildings of Auroville?
Mother's answer: The Supreme Lord.¹

“Auroville is only for the rich.” This bitter remark was made by a French visitor some time ago, when she realised that to live in Auroville one has to bring a lot of money to build a house – and then a house that will never belong to you. “How can Auroville expect you to put your savings in a house, and if you leave they say ‘goodbye and thank you very much?’ It is not possible.” The visitor left disillusioned. But though her comment was true, it did not contain the entire truth. For still people join Auroville who have no money and they manage, in the course of time, to find accommodation.

No ownership

The principle that individuals cannot own land or houses in Auroville dates back to the very beginning of Auroville. On The Mother's instruction, the first land for Auroville was bought by the Sri Aurobindo Society as early as 8 October 1964², four years before the official inauguration of Auroville in February 1968. In the brochures issued at the time it was explained that interested persons, once accepted by The Mother, could financially contribute towards a house in Auroville, but that they were only granted the right to live there with their family. Ownership of the house and land was never given, though from the leaflets issued by the Sri Aurobindo Society it may be inferred that the right to live in the house would be extended to the person's family after the demise of the person.

The principle of non-ownership of immoveable assets was subsequently laid down in the Charter of Auroville of February 28th, 1968. The first line of Auroville's Charter states explicitly:

Auroville belongs to nobody in particular.

Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole...

and Mother explains to Satprem: “So this is the material fact. Auroville belongs... I didn't put ‘to no nation’ because India would have been furious. I put ‘belongs to nobody’ – ‘nobody’ is a vague term which I used precisely so as not to say ‘to no human being’ or ‘to no nation’. And I put ‘Auroville belongs to humanity AS A WHOLE’, because it amounts to nothing! Since people can't agree together, the thing is impossible! I did it deliberately.”

Some people argue that the first line of Auroville's Charter refers to the ownership of the whole project and not to individual ownership of houses in Auroville. But this is a moot point. The fact is that no individual Aurovilians has ever

owned land or houses in Auroville. At first, land was legally owned by the Sri Aurobindo Society. Later the Auroville Trust and a specific land holding trust, the Auroville Resource Trust, were used to purchase land. Organisations and individuals would make donations towards these trusts, which in turn would buy available land. Houses, meanwhile, were built from Aurovilians' personal funds on Auroville land regardless of whether they were owned by the land trusts or by the Society.

When the Auroville Foundation Act was passed in September 1988, the Government of India became the temporary owner of all the land and houses, without paying compensation to either the Society or to individuals. The Government transferred the ownership of all these assets to the Auroville Foundation on April 1, 1992. In later years, the Auroville community, in its Housing Policy, designated how it envisions the legal ownership of the Foundation: “The Auroville Foundation will hold the ownership of all these assets in trust for humanity as a whole.”³

At present, all land required for Auroville is bought by the Auroville Foundation from donations made to Auroville Fund for this purpose. Individuals who wish to build a new house or move into an existing house in Auroville are also required to channel their funds through Auroville Fund. However, they will not own the house and if they leave Auroville they cannot sell it. The Auroville Land Policy and the Auroville Housing Policy, both documents made by the Funds and Assets Management Committee, specify the conditions under which Aurovilians have the right to use the immoveable assets.

The problem

Though the principle of no individual ownership of immoveable assets is undisputed, the observance of the rule is fraught with difficulties. The first difficulty is the one commented on by the French visitor: in the outside world, an individual can take a 20 or 30-year loan on condition that the house bought with that loan is mortgaged to the bank. In Auroville, loans are not available and an individual has to make a donation to the full value for the right to build and live in a house. Not many individuals will be prepared to make a large donation to Auroville – the indicative square meter price is at present Rs 10,000 (US \$ 225) – if they do not know for certain that Auroville will be their ultimate place of residence. The realisation that

Auroville is not one's place might come years after one has joined. Another risk is that the Government of India, for reasons of its own, might decide to cancel permission for a foreigner to remain in India.⁴ In neither case can the individual claim the value of the house back to start a life somewhere else.

Another consequence of the need to make a donation for a house is that it affects the balanced structure of Auroville's population. Few people in the age group of 25-35 join Auroville, as they normally have not yet been able to build-up a sufficient capital.

No places for rent

To solve the difficulty faced by Newcomers – people who are admitted on a probationary period of 2 years – Auroville has built a number of small Newcomer houses that are made available against the payment of a monthly rent for a maximum period of two years. Also the possibility has been created that Newcomers build their own house. In case the Newcomer period is terminated for whatever reason, 80% of the money invested by the Newcomer would be returned; but if the Newcomer becomes an Aurovillian, the investment will be considered a donation to Auroville.

The Housing Service recently reported the shortcomings of this scheme. The recent batch of Newcomers is unable, it appears, to make any full contribution and instead needs to rent places. But hardly any spaces for rent are available as some Newcomer units have gone to Aurovilians due to the housing shortage. For many Newcomers there is no other option than to take a room in a guest house, and go through a rigorous ordeal to try to secure housing for themselves.

A solution was proposed in an Entry Seminar last year, to rent housing for Newcomers in the surrounding villages. This would allow the villages the opportunity to develop this industry and so be of benefit to all parties. But this viewpoint met with the objection that such an industry would be purely materialistic and not be in any way connected with the ideals of integration and co-evolution of Auroville with the surrounding villages. A suburb of Auroville in the villages might be the result and in this way Auroville itself would not develop.

The problem was painfully illustrated when, over the last six months, there was an influx of potential Korean newcomers. They had seen a video about Auroville on Korean television and thought that they could rent a house in Auroville and experience Auroville, secure in the knowledge that if it did not work out, no major investment would be lost. The video had been shot by a Korean video team but had not been submitted to Auroville for prior editing – explaining the housing shortage. A visibly upset member of the Auroville Housing Group explained the difficulty: “They all are in

their mid-thirties, they are full of energy and we have to tell them that we have no newcomer houses empty. Then we tell them that they had better come with a substantial sum of money to build themselves a house, but if they leave after they have become Aurovillian, they have lost their donation. And they simply cannot afford this. India is a difficult country, Auroville is unknown and challenging, and they are not sure that even after two years they will be fully committed. So they leave. But if Auroville is to become a vibrant city, members of that age group need to be present in large numbers. It is ridiculous and unacceptable that young people are not welcome unless they bring cash.” Evidently, the people who now apply to become a newcomer are more cautious than the idealists who joined Auroville in the seventies and eighties.

Stagnating house exchanges

A third problem is that the no-ownership rule has created stagnation. Although individuals do not own the house they are occupying, they are *de facto* more attached to it than in the outside world, as they have no possibility to liquidate the asset and redeploy the funds for some other purpose. As a result, sometimes individuals are staying in houses that are much larger than their needs. It also leads to a growing number of under-the-table deals, where individuals grant others the right to live in the house against payment. As these deals are detrimental to Auroville's reputation and integrity, Auroville's Fund and Assets Management Committee recently issued a public warning against it.⁵

Solutions to all these problems have still to be found. One solution, often suggested to attract young people to Auroville, is that Auroville builds apartment buildings and rents them out. However, Auroville lacks the money to do so and frowns on borrowing. But there may be no other solution. For is it realistic to expect that benevolent outsiders will solve our problems by making large donations for this purpose?

Carel

¹ In early 1965, someone asked Mother a whole list of questions on Auroville, each of them with the answer he proposed. Only those questions for which Mother wrote her own answers were published in 1969. When she read the notation of 8 October 1969, she changed 2 answers. For this article the published version is followed.

² Source: Records of Auroville's Land Service

³ Auroville Housing Policy section 1a, as Approved by the FAMC on 28 July 2000 last modified on 22.2.2002

⁴ Under the Indian Foreigners Act, 1946, Aurovilians of non-Indian origin, like any other foreigner, can be evicted from India at any time without reasons, irrespective of the period they have lived in Auroville.

⁵ In its monthly report of July 2004

AUROVILLE ON TRIAL

Aurovilian truth on Monte Verita

In July of this year, a member of the Auroville International Association presented Auroville and its vision at a five-day meeting which was organized by the main protestant churches in Germany and Switzerland. Other invited guest speakers were members of six spiritual international and intentional communities like ‘Damanhur’ in Italy and ‘Zegg’ in Germany and Portugal.

The meeting took place at a famous European retreat centre, ‘Monte Verita’, an ancient hotel in the Swiss mountains, which hosted renowned spiritual and artistic pioneers at the beginning of last century. The list of attendees at those times included Carl Jung, Hermann Hesse, Rudolf Steiner, Thomas Mann,

Isadora Duncan and Mary Wigman.

The present event was organised by high-ranking church officers who “have a critical eye” on non-Christian spiritual groups. In fact, some of the about 50 church officers present had been responsible for creating in Germany a temporarily disastrous hysteria about cults in the recent past. One may be aware that, at the time, Auroville International Deutschland had to fight for the integrity of the Auroville vision in court.

While it was not said out loud during the Monte Verita meeting, it became obvious to the guest speakers that the hidden agenda of the gathering may have been for the participating church officers to generate negative arguments about “dangerous

spiritual groups”. There appeared to be not only the intention to use destructive and distorted arguments regarding these spiritual groups in churches, but also to feed these to sceptical and atheistic public media, scientific and political papers. This is the old Christian Europe, this is Germany today.

More or less in contrast to the other groups, Auroville and its Integral Yoga emerged rather gloriously from this post-inquisitorial attempt to picture them in a negative light. This was mainly due to that fact that the High Priest presiding over the meeting, a Swiss university professor, was well acquainted with and impressed by Sri Aurobindo's philosophy and theology and hence was

open to see Auroville in that light.

Also the showing of the rather sober Swiss-Italian TV documentary on Auroville, *From Utopia to Reality* turned out to be convincing and Wolfgang Schmidt-Reinecke, executive director of the Auroville International Association, keenly highlighted the widely respected secular dimensions of the Auroville vision during his one-hour presentation.

Last but not least, the power and inspiration of this somehow magical Monte Verita location was, and is, in favour of any sincere attempt conducive towards a new manifestation. In fact, between 1900 and 1930, countless communities, artists, spiritual adventurers and young enthusi-

asts in Germany had been aiming for a new and higher, future consciousness, integrating the ‘Subjective’ (as Sri Aurobindo named it) in modern time and frame. Monte Verita was one of the key places for thoughts and persons who nowadays could be seen as early birds of an Integral Age.

In July this year, the Integral Yoga and Auroville proved their sincerity and their ongoing appealing character for a German and Swiss-German audience.

It could not have been else. Monte Verita means ‘Mountain of Truth’.

Wolfgang Schmidt-Reinecke
executive director
Auroville International Association

Dr. Karan Singh visits Auroville



The Secretary and the Chairman of the Auroville Foundation in front of the Matrimandir: left Shri S.R. Sharma, right Dr. Karan Singh

“Welcome back sir!” was the most heard greeting when, within two weeks from having been nominated Chairman of the Governing Board, Dr. Karan Singh came down from New Delhi to apprise himself of the developments in Auroville. During his short visit he discussed the progress of the Matrimandir, the ongoing constructions at Bharat Nivas, the Pavilion of India, the concerns about visa and residential permits and land purchase issues. The meetings were attended by Board Members Aster Patel and Roger Anger; Mr. Sharma, the

Secretary of the Auroville Foundation; representatives of the various working groups concerned and the Working Committee and Executive Committee. Dr. Singh stressed the need to make access to the Matrimandir easier for elderly and handicapped people and finish the building as soon as possible. He emphasized the importance of obtaining the land through a mixed policy of purchase and land acquisition whenever purchase is not possible. Dr. Singh announced that the next meeting of the Governing Board probably will take place in February, 2005.

MATRIMANDIR

The Banyan: myths and facts

He,
the Powerful
and the Holy
holds straight this tree
in unsupported space.
Its rays,
whose roots
are high above,
stream downward.
Deep
may they sink
within us
and be
hidden.

This invocation from the Rig-Veda shows already that circa 2500 B.C the Banyan (*Ficus bengalensis*) was revered as a sacred tree. It is a tree with many stories and legends. Saints meditated under the banyan and it is said to have given protection to Krishna.

Pliny wrote: “There is in India a tree whose property it is to plant itself. It spreads out mighty arms to the earth, where in the space of a single year the arms take root and put forth anew.” This tree symbolizes the mystery of self-transformation, renewal, rebirth and immortality.

Ficus bengalensis is one of the six hundred *Ficus* species. Most are tropical evergreen trees, some attaining a huge size. The banyan in the Indian Botanic Gardens at Howrah, West Bengal, is one of the largest in the world: the crown covers over an acre. It has 1800 aerial roots and although its central trunk died many years ago (it is normal that the main trunk of a banyan will decay after many years) the branches are now being grafted to replace the original trunk to make it look natural again.

The name Banyan originated from the name *baniyas* or merchants, who sat in the shade of the tree conducting business. Even today we can see that

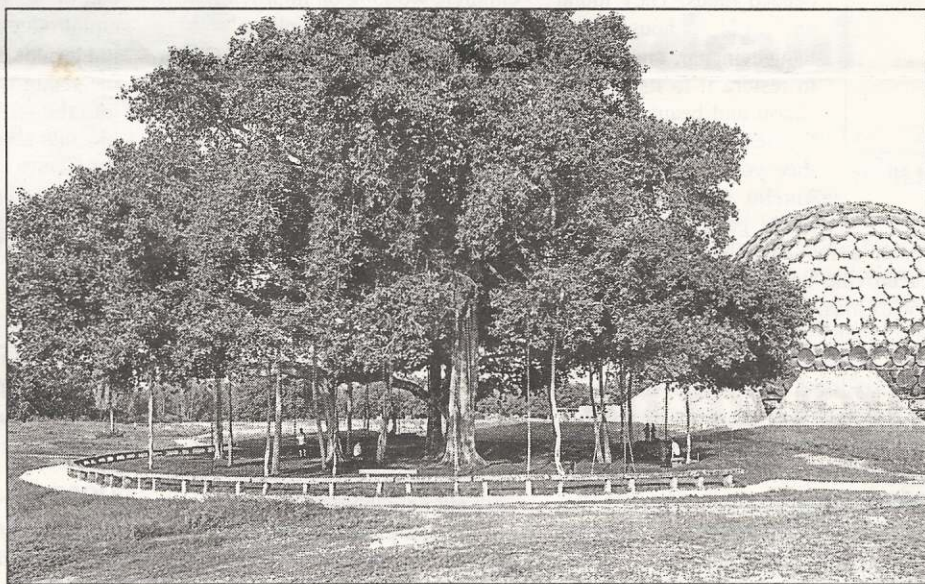
the tree is a gathering place for everybody from village elders to village children. This habit we have spontaneously taken over in Auroville. But maybe there is more to it than just a gathering place?

When Mother was looking for the location of Auroville, she finally chose the Banyan tree as the geographical centre of Auroville. Soon after Mother told Narad: “I would like you to begin with the Garden of Unity.” As the Garden of Unity is to be around the Banyan, it is obvious that the Banyan is the ‘Tree of Unity’.

As to the origin of the Matrimandir Banyan, “Sixty years ago a villager from Kottakarai, in a votive offering for an answered prayer to the god Murugan, planted a banyan tree to provide shade for a stand where the pilgrims paused to rest and refresh themselves. To this day the Banyan tree is still called *Tanipandalarram* – the watershed tree – in Tamil.” [Auroville Today, June 1994]

Normally banyans grow slowly. However, the Matrimandir Banyan grew very fast as the grass under it was watered regularly for many years. As the grass can survive many months without rain, we will no longer water it, except under very extreme circumstances (we will, however, continue to water the grass on the petals). The grass protects the tree and the shade of the tree protects the grass.

If the tree grows too fast the aesthetic balance between the Matrimandir, Amphitheatre and Banyan will be disturbed. That means some careful pruning will be needed in the future. Meanwhile we have given potassium to the tree in the form



of wood ash, magnesium (prickly nettle) and magnesium fluoride, and we also gave it Bach flower remedies (crabapple and hornbeam) for harmony and strength

We have also changed the path so that visitors to Matrimandir no longer walk straight across the grass underneath the Banyan. Now the path goes round the perimeter of the Banyan. Of

course, anyone wanting to go to the tree is welcome to do so. For this beautiful ‘Tree of Immortality and Unity’ gives shade and protects us during the full day against the sun. It is a place where we can sit and be inspired; contemplating the mystery of being old and young at the same time.

Kireet

COMMUNITY AFFAIRS

Auroville security is being re-organised

The Auroville Security Board warned that Auroville is facing constant security threats. Incidences are occurring every week. Thefts of motorbikes and house burglaries are regular, and harassment of people on the roads – stopping them on some pretext and snatching their belongings – is on the increase. Also in the past months, two keet houses burnt down, one of which was attributed to arson.

In an attempt to face the issues, the Auroville Security Board has reorganized the Day and Night guards. The Night Guard, equipped with motorbikes and cell phones, has been enlarged to three teams of two Aurovilians patrolling the main roads. The organization of the Day Guard, constituted of three teams of two guards who are hired from the Group 4A company in Pondicherry, is still evolving. The constant patrolling of Auroville roads has had already some effects, particularly on Sundays, when people displaying unwanted behaviour are challenged and discouraged. However, budgetary restraints prevent a further expansion of the Guards. Also a small security office is being built close to the new Telephone Exchange, which will be the key point of all security activities. It is expected to be operational soon.

The Security Board stated that Auroville will not be able to face and solve the growing security problems with only six persons on duty during the day and at night. The guards can provide back-up and support but they cannot deal alone with all the security issues we are facing. It is therefore necessary that the Local Area Security Teams (LASTs), are re-activated. These teams consist of responsible Aurovilians who will ensure the safety of the areas where they are living. The security of Auroville, warned the Security Board, is a matter that depends on all of us. The LASTs are an extremely important component of our security system and must be taken seriously.

Last but not least the Board stressed the importance of Aurovilians going to the police when necessary. “We are aware that many are reluctant to do so because it is time-consuming and can be a frustrating experience. Yet thieves and other criminals should not get the feeling that Auroville is an open field where their misdeeds get unreported and thus there are no consequences for them. We want to be able to establish here the reputation that it is risky to harm Aurovilians in any way,” wrote the Board in a message to Aurovilians.

from the Auroville weekly News & Notes

In brief

New Governing Board

The Government of India has appointed a new Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation for a period of four years from September 6th, 2004, onwards. The new Board is once again chaired by Dr. Karan Singh (MP, Rajya Sabha), who was Chairman of the Auroville Foundation from January 1991 to February 1997. Four former Governing Board members have been re-appointed: Dr. D.P. Chattopadhyaya, renowned scholar, former Governor of Rajasthan, former Union Minister and member of the previous Governing Board; Shri Ajoy Bagchi, member of the first Governing Board; Ms. Aster Patel, resident of Auroville, member of the first and second Governing Board; Roger Anger, Chief Architect of Auroville, member of the Governing Board since 1995; and ex-officio member Shri C. Balakrishnan, Joint Secretary Planning Ministry of Human Resource Development, member of the previous Governing Board. The new members are Ms. Malini Parthasarathy, Executive Editor of the newspaper The Hindu; Ms. Mallika Sarabhai, dancer, actress (she played Draupadi in Peter Brook’s version of the Mahabharata) and director of the Darpana Academy of Performing Arts; and ex-officio member Shri S.K. Ray, Joint Secretary and Financial Advisor, Ministry of Human Resource Development.

International Water Seminar

A three-day conference on sustainable water resource management for Auroville and its bioregion, organized by the Auroville Centre for Scientific Research (CSR), took place at the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture. The President of India, Dr. Abdul Kalam, in a message for this conference, said that Auroville is one of India’s spiritual gifts to the whole world. He expressed the hope that, in cooperation with other organizations, Auroville would be able to find a lasting solution to the water problem of the region. Stakeholders from the regions as well as other national and international experts presented their findings and engaged in discussions.

Additional Collectors’ workshop

Twenty-six Additional Collectors from the various districts in Tamil Nadu came together in Auroville for a workshop entitled “Towards a Sustainable Future for Rural Areas.”

Security Office

Next to the telephone exchange building on the Kulapalayam-Edayanchavadi road, hundred metres from the Certitude junction, a new Auroville Security Office was inaugurated on September 28th.

Teachers’ maintenance

The Funds and Assets Management Committee expressed concern about how to fund the teachers’ maintenances and education budget over the course of the next year as the normal funding from the Government of India has not yet materialized. The numbers of people involved in education are growing and for the last three years the budget for SAIER has not been raised in line with inflation and the increasing number of students.

COMMUNITY AFFAIRS

Free energy

As of August 2004, the community has started to make some of the Aurovilians’ basic needs available in kind instead of in cash. People using conventionally-generated electricity will be provided 125 units of electricity for free every two months; any excess has to be paid by the individual. With an emphasis on conscious energy use in Auroville, and a hope to encourage awareness in Aurovilians about what their needs are, Aurovilians are requested to convert to CFL lamps, which consume five times less electricity and last five times longer.

To encourage alternative energy use, Rs.200 per month per solar energy user will be donated by the Central Fund to the Solar Fund. This money will be used for monthly maintenance of an individual’s solar equipment and replacement of batteries and electrical parts such as inverters and chargers. After covering the costs of the maintenance service for all members, any remaining amount in the Solar Fund will be used to help Aurovilians further save energy: for example, to convert from the use of a geyser to that of a solar water heater.

Auroville Village Action Arts

Aurelio promotes arts and community in Sanjeevinagar

Aurelio lives in Verité and spreads his energy through many varying projects in Auroville. Over the years, his involvement with the Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG) and youth village projects led him down paths he had not previously planned. "I was sitting in my spiritual glass tower," says Aurelio, "when a time of great friction occurred between some Aurovilians and villagers, giving me an awakening call that made me realize something had to be done." Not knowing exactly where to begin, he joined up with AVAG and began training the development workers in communication, personality skills and English classes. But soon his passion for the arts began filtering in, until as one of the sub-projects of AVAG, Auroville Village Action of Arts was born.

It all began with a summer camp

dance and art. In the end they jointly created a huge canvas that was displayed in Auroville. It was my first experience of working with the village children which I found very inspiring." Shortly after the summer camp concluded, Aurelio received a donation through AVAG to do something connected with the arts. With this money, he started a Saturday art program in Isaiambalam. "This project ran for two years," Aurelio explained, "and it was very interesting because I pulled in some Tamil Aurovilian youth like Partha, Saroja, Selvam, and Ashok. These youth had been raised in Auroville schools and they felt it was great to be involved with village children again as they had somehow left the village behind. It was a very successful two years, though it did have its struggles as well."

In May, 2001, a youth group of young men, with Aurelio's help, took up the renovation of an old traditional house in Sanjeevinagar. "One day I had taken this youth group to visit Dakshinachitra, an open air heritage museum depicting the treasures, living expression and life style of the Tamil culture. On the way back some of the youth said, 'We have old houses in our village, can't we do something with that?'. Coincidentally, as the young people enthusiastically wrote out their proposal, an Aurovilian guest became inspired by their project and donated the needed funds. They found an old house in Sanjeevinagar, and set out to restore it to its original charm and beauty. During the next couple of months this youth group, whom Aurelio calls 'the gang', would gather at the house

after a full day's work in different Auroville units, and work until late with music and enthusiasm. "It is a

very special youth group," says Aurelio. "They are a group of old school friends who had a very interesting teacher in one of the government schools here. He told them that if they really wanted to do something and be successful in the future, they should stick together and do something different. Up to that point, AVAG had worked mainly with different colonies in individual villages. It was an interesting challenge for us to meet this youth group who are constituted of different castes and even come from different villages."

During the renovation period and upon its completion, 'the gang' and Aurelio brainstormed about different uses for their new centre, which they had named the Mohanam Cultural Centre. They began with activities such as creative art classes, readings from the classic epics, English classes for youth, workshops on traditional health care and it also became a meeting place for the local women's club. "Very soon," explained Aurelio, "it attracted the attention of activists and artists from the area and special programmes and day camps were held, like the Nilamudram poetry meeting, a traditional puppet show, an art camp for village children by college students, theatre shows by a contemporary group and a cultural festival with the participation of local talent."

Yet Aurelio was criticized by some people who felt he was wasting too much time on the 'luxury' of arts and should focus more on improving their English and computer skills. "But I think that only creative thinking and creative energy can bring change. So, I am basically investing in the children, working on improving their capacity for creative thinking."

The Mohanam Cultural Center has grown over the years. "A lot of energy," says Aurelio, "has come from visiting students. An example would be the toy-making project we have now. It was initiated by a student on German civil service who realized the kids had nothing to play with. So, he wrote to his father who runs a carpentry workshop and some money



The musical instruments' workshop at Mohanam Cultural Centre

was raised that enabled us to start. Now there are two young carpenters who regularly make toys with the children." Aurelio works with different groups such as the Geo students and European student abroad programs who come to Auroville. "Now we have this amazing new international field of students coming and working with us and doing internships for a few months, or sometimes even for a year. It is very inspiring to have the global connection in this local work. Without these students I could not manage and it is wonderful to see how they transform with the work. They love the contact with the local culture."

While appreciating the funds that have made the centre and the activities possible, Aurelio realized that to be self-sustainable is an important objective. With this in mind, Aurelio and some of the youth started giving village tours to Auroville guests two years ago. "Somehow this works very well because there are so many Auroville guests who only see the bad things in the villages. So I give an introduction in Verite to the visiting groups and then they go off with the young Tamils who take our guests into the village, show them the temple, talk about their lives, show them the Centre and the activities with the children, bring them through the fields and then serve a meal on a banana leaf."

One big problem in the villages is lack of employment. Aurelio

expressed how sometimes he felt like an employment agency as he tried to find jobs in Auroville for many of his village friends. But there are not enough jobs for everyone who needs one. So, with the help of some students he decided to start a crafts section in the village. "I knew how to make some musical instruments, and the students pushed me to teach them. Now we have a building and a team of 16 people who are successfully making musical instruments."

Finally, what is his take on the crisis which has hit AVAG? [Auroville Village Action Arts' activities are unaffected] "AVAG was a huge institution doing work in many villages and involving thousands of people, while in Mohanam we've focused on staying small and concentrating upon quality. However, I still stand for AVAG and the amazing work it has been doing. The immediate reason for their crisis was labour problems. However, one of the underlying problems it faced was that most of its schemes were based on people's participation, but this is very difficult now in the villages close to Auroville because they have become so individualized and divided among themselves. In fact in the local area we no longer have a situation of rural development - these villages are more like city suburbs - so the old approaches don't work any more. So the AVAG crisis is actually an opportunity for all of us to rethink how we deal with the local villages." **Sunaura**



Aurelio playing a tamera at a Bharat Nivas music performance

where Aurelio hosted the art projects. "We had around 600 village youth coming for the camp. We did theatre,

Education through hard knocks

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They also note that their wish to uplift people from the local villages rather than employ professionals resulted in them not finding anybody of the necessary calibre to assist them in the overall management of the projects. The result was that they were severely overburdened with work and had no time to develop new initiatives or to continue the Development Workers' education. "We were trapped by our success," says Anbu.

The work overload also meant that they had little opportunity to communicate with and develop relationships with other Aurovilians and groups working in the same field. This increased the gap that already existed between AVAG and the rest of Auroville. At first, Moris and Anbu did not necessarily perceive this to be a disadvantage - they had decided not to become Aurovilians themselves because they felt it would compromise their work with the villagers - but during the crisis Moris and Anbu realized that because many Aurovilians had no idea what AVAG was engaged in, they and the AVAG trustees were having to deal with the onslaught pretty much on their own. They also realized that lack of Aurovilian participation in AVAG was hampering development work in the villages ("if Aurovilians put as

much effort into solving social issues in the villages as they have put into afforestation, it could transform the local situation" Anbu said in 1997) and allowing certain politicians to create divisions between Auroville and the people of the bioregion. "We realize now," says Anbu, "that we have been concentrating on only one side of the equation - on the villages. Now we have to work with the Aurovilians, to convince them to help us in promoting, for example, sports activities and education in the villages, as a way of building bridges." "We'd like to run village tours for interested Aurovilians," adds Moris, "and invite villagers to visit Auroville communities." Bhavana puts it like this: "AVAG realizes that it had become rather isolated in its own success and busyness in the villages, and now wants to offer its professional skills and years of experience in the local area to the process of Auroville's town planning, since the Master Plan includes ten village communities."

The pooling of skills and learning between Auroville groups engaged in village work is long overdue. An attempt was made a few years ago to create a group which would do this, but it foundered upon egos and issues of territoriality. Now, spurred on by Sydo's murder, there is a new urgency in the community to

understand and improve relations with our neighbours. This has led not only to new efforts to share expertise among Aurovilians (Moris and Anbu, for example, now will assist Aurofuture part-time in the Town



The Thuruval Men's group constructing a new road

Hall) but also to an interest in forming an Auro-Village Platform. This is an idea seeded by Raman from the Auroville Planning and Development Council which is supported by several village-related groups and backed by the Auroville Council. It would be a central refer-

ence point for responding in a coordinated way to developmental requests coming from the villages.

Deeper Learning

How far has the crisis led Moris and Anbu to question their training programme and, beyond this, their fundamental faith in the villagers

The Development Workers told us, 'The villagers trust us, not you'. But then we saw that, even at the height of the crisis when some Development Workers were trying to turn the villagers against us, some of the Women's Groups continued to come to the AVAG office to deposit savings. This, along with the fact that a third of the Development Workers and all our office staff remained loyal and that many of the local panchayat presidents offered their support, made us realize that we are still trusted, and that our training, which emphasises qualities like honesty and being united, had had its effect. So, no, our faith in the capacities of individual villagers has not been shaken."

They note, however, that they should have acted more quickly when they observed that some of the Development Workers were unable to move beyond traditional attitudes to caste and gender and were beginning to approach their work as just another job. "Actually," notes Bhavana, "we lost touch with our original intention regarding the Development Workers."

"The original idea was that they would only be with AVAG temporarily. We would train them and then, after a few years, help them find a job or set up their own business in the village as a socially-conscious citizen who would make a difference."

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Learning for Life at the Life Education Centre

Teaching vocational and functional skills to young women from the village

Sitting together with Zerina and some of the other teachers at the Life Education Centre (LEC) on the outskirts of Kottakarai always feels somehow special, as if the connection between the team is more than just about a place, although it was a place that first drew everybody together.

An independent unit under the Village Action Group, and therefore unaffected by the recent AVAG crisis, LEC teaches vocational skills (tailoring, crochet, sewing, computing, typing etc) to young women from the surrounding villages, as well as functional skills (maths, Tamil, English). Perhaps most importantly, however, the school is a therapeutic learning environment, where young women are free to come into closer contact with themselves and each other through various learning activities and the acquisition of real life-skills. Raising self-confidence and self-esteem are intrinsic to the pulse of LEC; the school is not so much about the classes, although these are of course important given the local social context.

At the heart of this centre of learning is Zerina, the overall facilitator who has been running the centre for 10 years now. Patient, dependable and loving, she remains modest and down-to-earth. Switching between roles of

mother, sister, teacher, confidante, between 10-15 girls seek her counsel daily, to share experiences and to begin to find solutions to lives often filled with difficulties and trauma.

For Zerina, a large part of helping the girls to be responsible about themselves has to do with attention. Watching her with the girls and witnessing the respect she commands from them, it is clear to see the quality of attention the girls receive in her care. Zerina also conducts home visits to connect to the families and to understand more deeply the unique family circumstances that shape each girl's life. Together with individual counselling sessions, case-study work, journal writing and exploring possible reasons for various problems, her days are always full.

Zerina and I also co-facilitate weekly group discussion sessions, an experiential process of learning and self-discovery, covering a wide range of subjects, most of which are initiated by the girls' own interest and suggestions. The sharing of experiences helps the girls to find the courage to express their emotions as well as to support one another as they advise and listen to their peers. Previous discussions have included issues of alcoholism, dowries, physical and emo-

tional abuse as well as explorations about friendship, beauty and core inner qualities.

These sessions are intended to give support to the girls by encouraging them to be practical with their observations, as well as providing them with a handful of self-development tools. Space to experience their own inner strengths and powers through creative visualization, meditative exercises, role-play and creative arts is also given. Feedback from the girls suggests that the group discussions are an integral and unique part of the work towards self-empowerment at LEC, since most of them do not experience support from their own families; this type of work helps them to feel less alone.

Learning as a means to feel empowered is equally experienced in the maths class. Constantly seeking new, authentic and creative ways to teach maths to the group, their teacher Ulla says that it is in living the values you seek to share that the greatest learning takes place. A central objective of her class is to "learn how to learn", maths becoming both objective and tool simultaneously. As an objective, it means the acquisition of facts and as a tool, the strengthening of mental faculties like creative, logical, abstract and practical thinking. Maths classes are colourful, with enthusiastic participation from the girls who are full of unrestrained joy when a victory is won (a solution to a tough problem!) but who are also capable of complete concentration and silence.



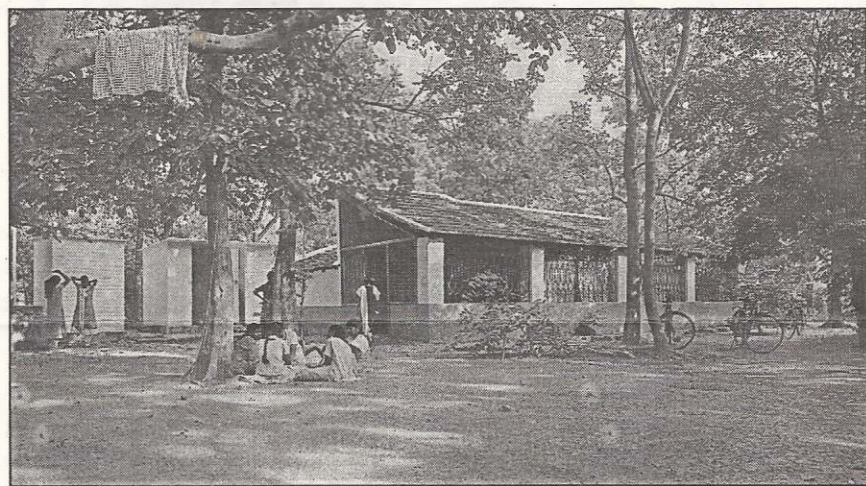
Tailoring classes at LEC

Whether taking computer classes or occasionally teaching Sanskrit *slokas*, Harini (who also supports Zerina with management capacities), feels that nourishment and contentment are connected to a deep state of being and a basic acceptance of whom you are. One of the ways this might translate in her classes is in how she encourages the girls to take responsibility for themselves to be neat and tidy, for no matter what their situations at home, nobody is going to force them to be dirty or disorganised. This also means being responsible for school materials, and taking care, for example, not to throw books around.

Perhaps the determining factor in shaping LEC is the intention to provide a space where happiness and cre-

ativity are the main resources, providing the girls with opportunities to be faithful to themselves in a way that they are able to develop their own ideas. LEC provides encouragement and stimulation for many young girls. The personalised attention and quality of presence, time, energy and joy that are shared there defines the space, but it is not the role of LEC to manipulate or shape the girls into something special or perfect. Only with self-awareness and clarity will the girls be able to discover many possibilities, not just in the classes, but in their future lives too. The intensely difficult work of making use of these possibilities in their own way, of course, remains up to them.

Priya Mahtani



The LEC building near Alankuppam

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"But as the funding increased and the scope and number of our activities expanded, we found we couldn't do the work without them. Moreover, as they were well-paid and enjoyed a lot of prestige in the villages, we made them somehow dependent upon us: this was a mistake."

What are the deeper personal lessons? "Bhavana calls me a mental person," says Anbu, "because I always try to work things out with my mind. But at the height of the crisis I really understood for the first time that many things are beyond my comprehension. I felt like a puppet, pushed and pulled by different forces. Suddenly I had nothing to fall back on. Then a friend suggested that I go to the Samadhi every day. I was a bit reluctant at first – the strongest influence in my upbringing was my father who is an atheist: I grew up feeling that caste and religion don't matter, only people's issues were important – but when Moris and I went we both felt this deep peace. Then I started to see a particular image of Mother at night and even at the office. Somehow or other I felt her presence in the office and at the entrance. Then I thought that maybe things won't collapse after all."

For Bhavana the theme of the whole thing is "how Mother educates us through hard knocks. I'm

interested how this 'catastrophe' spurs AVAG in particular, and Auroville in general, forward in the quest for the consciousness of human unity." In this context she notes how an evolutionary spiral of social consciousness has helped her make sense of what happened. "Spiral dynamics, like the integral yoga, emphasises the need to move beyond mind into a more holistic, inclusive consciousness. In this sense, I see the deep reason for the present crisis is to 'kick us over the line', to make us understand and act from a completely different perspective. For human unity is ultimately the result of a changed state of consciousness – a state which can encompass and embrace diversity, with a wide compassion and constant aspiration. For a long time I've wondered how dealing with the village people fits in the context of Auroville's aspiration for conscious evolution. Now I see that our next evolutionary step is into a consciousness which can embrace rather than disdain their level. It involves a deep acknowledgement that as we evolve we not only transcend but also include the previous stages in ourselves and in our society. AVAG's building of bridges between Auroville and the villages has been a part of the manifested transformation."

Alan

AVAG's major Grants, some other funding sources and major activities.

1983-85: SWISSAID, Secours Populaire Français, government programmes, and numerous other donations – social and educational development in the neighbouring villages, night schools, Isai Ambalam School.

1985-88: CHEC-ODA, Oxfam, Threshold Foundation, government programmes and numerous other donations – community development, ecological restoration, and health services for 10 villages around Auroville, night schools, Isai Ambalam.

1989-92: CHEC-ODA, Oxfam, Threshold Foundation, Secours Populaire Français, Social Welfare Board, SAIER, AVI-UK, government programmes and numerous other donations – community development, women's empowerment and savings and credit, ecological restoration and health services for 10-25 villages around Auroville, night schools and crèches, Isai Ambalam, Life Education Centre.

1993-98: CHEC-ODA, Rudolf Steiner Foundation, AVI Sweden, AVI Nederland, AVI-UK, government programmes and numerous other donations – community development of 30 villages and hamlets around Auroville with supplementary education in the schools, women's empowerment and savings and credit, Isai Ambalam, Life Education Centre.

1999-2004: CHEC-DFID, Infinity Foundation, Aditya Ahluwalia, Navarra Municipality, Rose Foundation, government programmes, and numerous other donations – community development of another 40 villages/hamlets of the bioregion, drinking water installations, women's empowerment and savings and credit, supplementary education in the schools, Isai Ambalam, Life Education Centre, Auroville Village Action Arts - cultural development.

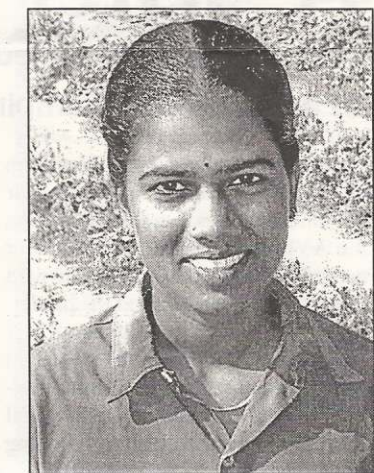
Indrani

A senior assistant at LEC, 23-year-old Indrani's disposition is sanguine and upbeat. Her words are powerful, not only because of her optimistic approach to life, but also because of the bold and practical steps she has taken in setting up an evening school which she runs voluntarily for the young children in her village:

"I learnt about Sri Aurobindo and The Mother at LEC in classes held by Subash and Harini, but I especially love The Mother and that's why I decided to call my school Mira Niketan – after her. It started 2 years ago and now I have 30 students (20 are girls) between 4-10 years old who come everyday between 5.30-8pm, although at one point when there were examinations I had 60 students. My sister (who also attends LEC) helps and we teach tuition in yoga, meditation, Sanskrit slokas, Tamil, English, Maths, Social Science and Science. But my real future plan is to convert the night school into a life education centre like LEC, just for girls. The learning process at LEC gave me another life – I remember a girl who once came from Germany with these angel cards – I picked the quality 'rebirth' and, yes, I am now another Indrani."

"It is funny, when I look back to when I first started at LEC, I was so shy and afraid of everything, but slowly because of so many classes, mainly group discussions and hearing so many ideas shared freely, I got a lot of confidence and support and now I know that I can do anything, even change the world. I used to think that other cultures were very free and very lucky, but many foreigners took part in group discussions at LEC and I realised that there are problems in all cultures as well as many things that are common."

"I started Mira Niketan to learn more myself and to help other young girls – I am lucky because I got encouragement from my parents who are not



Indrani

forcing me to marry. My father even spoke with the village head, the local panchayat leader and the teacher and the Headteacher from the local government school to get permission to use the space there in the evenings for Mira Niketan."

"I meditate every day, sometimes for long periods, especially if I have a problem. I want to encourage my students to use meditation and yoga to clear their minds and to remind them that this is the only time in their lives for them to feel really free, to play in their own way."

"Women have a lot of responsibility – both inside and outside the home. I am proud to be a woman, but feel that all girls should have this opportunity to become self-confident and that some place should be there for them to develop."

"In Edayanchavadi village, there are many young girls who work rolling incense who don't have the opportunity to go to school and do other things. They often stop me and ask me what I am doing at LEC and I feel sad that I am learning so many things and they are just working. It is my dream and hope that I can help them to have this chance and set up a life education centre in the evenings for them too."

From a talk with Priya Mahtani

Creations for our kids, our future

Ange has a plan for a 'conspiracy of togetherness'

Another fund-raising effort is ready to sweep through Auroville — just after completion of the 'outrageous' million dollar challenge for the Land Fund on July 20th 2004.

Ange from Forest Pottery Studio in Samridhi has decided to dedicate the next three months to work for an awareness building exhibition 'Creations for our kids our future.' Her inspiration came after talking with some of her friends who are teachers, who had expressed concern about some of the difficulties they are facing.

"The challenge is to raise Rupees 50 lakhs (US\$ 110,000) for a corpus fund that would act as an education basket for Auroville schools," begins Ange. "The corpus would be untouched, but the interest from it and any donation beyond the 50 lakh rupees would overflow into another fund — the teachers' prosperity fund. So it is not like running around and filling the holes in a bucket — which is what we are faced with now — but the idea is to generate a steady income." The prosperity fund, she envisions, would be a way of supporting teachers in Auroville (who she feels are a 'kind of minority group in Auroville with similar material conditions') either in 'kind' or through meeting emergency expenses.

'Creations for our kids our future', an art exhibition in February 2005 inviting works from potters, artists, and artisans of Auroville, would launch this fund-raising drive.

"This would be a serious art exhibition but it is not just for the professionals — I'd like everyone to create for this occasion and contribute, including friends and well-wishers of Auroville." The only request Ange makes of these creations is that they are made for this occasion — no seconds, no objects that have been made long back and are lying around, and no limit to the number of contributions. "I have also asked each school to submit up to five art pieces for this show — some of the best works of their students."

The idea came to Ange at her studio. "Every now and then I get inspired while on the wheel and I see something very clearly. Of course I often doubt myself and often the ideas stay in the pottery.... But this time, I thought, I am going to work for three months, and I'd really like to do this — let me ask Otto if it is feasible. So I talked to Otto and he gave it an enthusiastic thumbs-up!" Ange then circulated her idea in the Auroville schools as she did not want to 'interfere with their own fund-raising efforts' and the feedback she received was positive. "What had to be made clear is that the money we are fund-raising for is not going to be used for schools now and cannot be touched by anybody. So it is not really interesting right away. What's of interest is that this will create another account that can be used."

Ange's interest in education stems from her own experiences of growing up in Auroville. "We kids had a lot more involvement with the communi-

ty than is the case now. Our class would go to an area, do a clean-up, have tea and biscuits, meet and interact with the people living there, and come back. That sort of thing we are lacking now." Her idea for the exhibition of art work as the first step in this fund-raising drive is her way of getting everyone involved. Ange does not expect to raise the fifty lakhs with this exhibition. "I am just launching this project with this exhibition, and hoping that other people will find other ways of contributing either through small awareness deeds or little steps that will take us there. What is really important for me is that I don't want to pressurize anybody. It's an invitation for people to do something together. There has to be a lightness, and actually the best contribution you can give is a positive thought in that direction. Even that is already moving energy on a subtle level; if you can speak about it positively, then it's even better; and if you can find a small thing to do then that is even better still..."

She hopes that this effort would create awareness in the community and start a dialogue with the children



Ange (left) with students in her Friday clay workshop

of Auroville. "I strongly feel that our children are our future and they need to feel that we care about them." She shares, "A funny thing was when I said that to someone, they looked at me in a doubtful manner and said 'Are you sure our kids are our future...?' For me, it was as if that person was doubting if the sun would rise next morning! What I'd really like to say to the community or to my friends who have these doubts is not to forget that Auroville is not just a dream of creating a paradise, but a dream to create the ideal of human unity on a small scale. We don't need

to worry that these children will go out into the world and not stay back to help Auroville, because wherever they go they contribute to spreading that vibration and that atmosphere and that 'specialness' of Auroville."

Ange reflects, "The point is not to focus on our difficulties or deficiencies. What is important is that we get together and help ourselves come out of an emergency. This is the challenge: to make us look at ourselves and feel that we're part of the same thing — we are part of a conspiracy of togetherness!"

Priya Sundaravalli

AUROVILLE AND THE WORLD

A 'sister' city for Auroville?

Auroville has had project-based associations with several Western cities, like Paris, Venice and Treviso. Now there is a possibility of a link-up with Campinas in Brazil

I first saw Paola Charry Sierra on the bus to Retiro das Rosas, our fantastic seminar house during the AVI meeting in Brazil, one hour away from Belo Horizonte. The next day she was introduced to the participants and spoke briefly about her project in Campinas, mentioning that it had something to do with improving water resources and the local favelas (slums). I wasn't listening closely but my interest was caught when Paola produced some little paper things, the flaps of which could be opened and closed with the fingers, with nice words on the flaps. This one was called "cootie catcher". On the back it said, "Planting Peace on Earth reflects the sound of waters that blossom with the memory of the essential." Nice.

Inside was a division into four — Wisdom, Strength, Harmony, Perfection — with further subdivisions into twelve: Sincerity, Receptivity, Courage, Gratitude, Progress, Goodness, Humility, Generosity, Equality, Perseverance, Peace and Aspiration.

Heh? Was this an enumeration of Auroville communities? The non-profit project was called *Plantando Paz na Terra*, 'Planting Peace on Earth', that much Portuguese I could understand. But as for the rest I didn't pay much attention...

When some days later I had to decide whether to go to Brasilia with the German AVI members or to the waterfalls with Bindu and Tine, I chose a third option: I asked Paola where she lived and if I could come and visit her. Paola was excited: 'Wow, I bring an Aurovilian back home!' So we took the night bus to

Campinas, the second largest university town in Brazil which is one hour inland from Sao Paulo. I spent 10 days of my holidays in the house of her parents, learning a lot about Brazilians. How to mix a good Caipirinha and how to dance Capoeira. How in rich neighborhoods the property is watched by motorized night guards who are called by phone and who wait until one gets out of the

with her programme and this inspired Paola to keep on with her efforts.

The flyer for her project says: "Planting Peace on Earth is a program that focuses on ecology and the different aspects of reality, pushing towards personal, social, planetary and universal development, as the actual chaotic scenery needs new attitudes towards a more evolved consciousness."



Planting the Peace Tree in Campinas, Brazil

house and into the car or vice versa. How people spend money they don't really have in huge shopping malls bigger than Auroville. And how to be involved in helping to make this world a better one, which is how I learned more about 'The Project'.

In 2001 Paola visited Auroville as a part of her research on new ways of collective living. The concrete experience of this city strengthened the idea of a social-environmental programme which she had started in Campinas in 1999. She was very surprised to discover many similarities

To promote these, 12 essential attitudes are proposed, which are part of a process of conscious expansion, inspired by Mira Alfassa, The Mother.

The program Planting Peace on Earth has a social and environmental methodology that integrates seven themes: environment, landscape, urban development, health, social integration, integral vision and human unity."

In reality it looks like this. Paola has gathered like-minded people and captured the interest of some mem-

bers of the favelas in Campinas. In a degraded area they have started to build the first little bamboo house with a thatch roof, symbolizing their social and environmental objectives. They are thinking more in terms of a living learning centre ("International City of Peace") than a city like Auroville:

The International City of Peace (ICP) aims to be a place where the true meaning of humanity can manifest and where every citizen is invited to participate in a process of collective consciousness evolution. The organisation of the ICP will focus around the development of the integral education of the human being and relate to various urban aspects (environment, health, entertainment, economy, administration, government, education, culture, etc).

Paola and her helpers are trying to awaken public interest in the project. Some Aurovilians have already been there to help. The day Tine and Bindu were passing through on their way home from the waterfalls, we planted a Peace Tree — a *pomegranate* which The Mother called 'Divine Love spreading over the world'. The Auroville video "The Dream of the Divine" was shown and we answered a lot of questions from curious Brazilians. During that sunny afternoon the idea which had started with a little project grew into a much bigger idea — of a link, a 'sisterhood', between the cities of Campinas and Auroville.

This larger concept was initially brought up during a talk on Auroville given by Aryamani at the University of Campinas this summer. When

Aryamani invited Paola to the AVI meeting, the plan of sisterhood was announced. Then the non-profit Planting Peace on Earth started to organize a public presentation to work on this idea. Aryamani reports, "Paulo Bufalo, a representative of the municipal chamber, presented the sisterhood idea in the Town Hall of Campinas. He explained the history of Auroville and its importance to the world. In that sense, he said, it is of great relevance for Campinas to exchange experience and knowledge with Auroville, searching together for Human Unity as well as alternative ways of planting, sustaining and living. Campinas is already the sister city of Jericho in Israel, the most ancient human settlement. As Auroville is the most recent human laboratory for the realization of a new civilization, Campinas would acquire a new baby-sister."

Gilberto Gil, Brazil's Minister of Culture and world-famous musician, was very pleased to hear about the possibilities of this forthcoming partnership when he met the delegates and received CDs of music by Joy and Nadaka. Maybe soon our Aurovilian artists will be invited to perform in Brazil?

Now the project will be presented to the mayor of Campinas for approval. As far as I know Auroville has no such official procedure, which presumably means that anybody can twin Auroville with any other city if they feel like it...

One architect from Campinas already announced he will visit Auroville. I personally hope to see Paola again very soon and show her my Auroville as she has shown me her Campinas.

Julietta

The Urge of Doing

How a voice problem led Tina to new depths of understanding

Tina has come a long way from the little choir girl of 10 who, standing frozen in the midst of 2000 other children, mimed her way through her first public performance, terrified and innocently convinced that the entire audience was staring exclusively at her. Now she sits in front of me, relaxed, casual and contagiously jolly, loved by her students in Auroville and abroad.

"I began singing in my school choir in Nuremberg, Germany. After I was 10 my parents and I moved to a different town, and I went to a school which didn't have music. I then took to playing various instruments from guitar to harmonica and flute, until at 15 I joined a church choir and began singing once again. At this stage I started to realise that there was a problem with my voice."

Tina married very young; in her own words, "there was no artistic sense in that relationship". The following eight years meant a complete break from music. It wasn't until she split with her husband that Tina began again to relate to music and became deeply fascinated by the saxophone. A few months later she met Holger, and music was finally back

in her life. "I thought that now that my two children were in school, I could finally work on a career and at that time my desire was to be a saxophonist". She practiced the saxophone daily and went for classical voice training with the best teacher Munich had to offer. "My difficulties with my voice became more and more obvious, but there was this inner urge, despite everything, to sing."

And where did Auroville fit in? "When I came to Auroville with Holger and my three children in 1991 suddenly everything broke off. There were no music teachers. There was no music!" Tina laughingly remembers Caryl in the Entry Group telling Holger "Are you sure you want to stay here as a musician? You know that this is a cultural desert." Holger simply answered, "Then one has to bring water".

Just after arriving in Auroville a fourth child was born and Tina became immersed in setting up a home for her family. It took her a while to take up singing again and finally starting to perform. In December 1993 she staged a full singing performance at Last School,

which "was very well received, although," she jokingly adds, "the frogs were louder than me!"

Tina's vocal problem was getting more and more apparent as she worked on developing her voice. "I was very close to giving up singing completely because something just didn't work." In search of a solution she went to Germany to find a coach who could help her in her struggle. Luckily she found the person she needed, a woman who gave her particular exercises and a method of observing and exploring the voice. Tina then studied medical books on voice diseases and later learned more about voice therapy from speech therapists passing through Auroville. Her own desperation and urge to sing pushed her into further study and practising.

So how did she expand from self-exploration to teaching?

"Well, that's a funny story. I had just returned from Germany feeling very inspired, and was working regularly on my voice. Then an amateur opera singer overheard me by chance and asked me if I would teach him what I was doing. At first I was happy to have someone to give, but it always bugged me that I taught only because I couldn't make it as a singer. So I promised myself that I would not become a fully-fledged teacher until I lost this sense of failure. This was part of the reason why I made an album of my singing."

The album was produced by Sunshine Music, the recording studio which she and Holger built for this purpose in their house. For nearly one year all her energy and time went into the production of this album. "It was a unique experience of weeks and months of high energy and total focus. I called the album 'Thousand Miles' and when it was finished I fell into a vast empty space. There was nothing to do, I had nothing to identify with that made any sense to me. It



Tina

was only two years after completing the album that this paralysis faded and I started to trust again in my capacity as a coach. I knew then I could return to teaching."

In Germany last autumn Tina became involved in leading group seminars and courses focused on opening up the voice, and she will return again this October for six weeks of workshops and individual work. "As part of my development I am enjoying this opportunity to test and expand my ability".

As for the future? "My current plan is to create a small gospel choir in Auroville. I also want to create another album of my songs. I've seen Auroville's music culture making big leaps over the past years and hope to be extending this still further. However, my life changes so quickly that whenever I make plans I have no time to fulfill them. Life is overtaking them all the time. I'm now in a phase of exchange with the outer world, focused on reaching people who are searching for inner growth and opening. My way of teaching uses singing as a medium to improve self-observation and self-acceptance, thus building a bridge between the old life of suffering and despair and a new depth and understanding."

"I personally missed someone who could have taught me to sing a scale with the joy of singing a melody, a song. When I learnt, a scale was something boring I had to practice again and again as a duty. If I can give people the love of filling each note with life and energy by revealing some inner truth, then that makes my work worthwhile".

Impi

CULTURE

Classical western music performances

The Pitanga chamber music recitals of August



Suzanne and Pushkar

Lovers of Western classical music had reason to rejoice with two chamber concertos in a row. Who would ever have imagined that one of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos would be performed live in Auroville or that we would hear the world premiere performance of music for flute and piano? Once and for all the refrain that 'Auroville is a cultural desert' has been laid to rest.

Admittedly, few of the performers on the evening of the 23rd were Aurovilians - violinist Gunhild, cellist Suzanne and violinist Ladislav are connected to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram; the Russian violinist Ivett, the German flautist Suzanne, the American viola player Eric, and the Israeli violinist Wolfgang were visitors. Pianist Pushkar was the lone representative of Auroville.

With so many people 'from outside' involved, rehearsal time is always too short as guests have the unpleasant habit of leaving too early. This was most obvious in Schubert's string quartet, which would have benefitted from more practice. But the excerpts of Bach's Musical Offering and the piece for solo violin of the Israeli composer Ben Haim more than made up for it. Also Bach's Fifth Brandenburg Concerto

was a delight - even though, the pianist, who has an elaborate and at times virtuoso part to play, had to struggle both with the stodgy mechanics of the Pitanga grand piano and its ill-chosen location in front of a curtain. "It was like playing before a black hole," he said later.

Auroville cognoscenti were in for another treat when Suzanne and Pushkar gave a recital to traverse flute and piano on August 29th. To my taste, the best part was after the short break. Before, we listened to Bach's Second Sonata, and to Schubert's 'Variations on the song Dried flowers' - a rather bombastic work and certainly not one of Schubert's best. It was easily eclipsed by Poulenc's witty and elegant Sonata for Flute and Piano. The surprise came when Pushkar announced three of his own works. Two nocturnes for violin and piano, written when he was 19 years old, had been reworked for the present combination. The Fantasy for Flute and Piano was a more recent work, and the performance a world premiere. All three pieces were very well received. The pair concluded the evening with the elegiac nocturne for flute and piano by Lily Boulanger.

Caryl

LETTER

Auroville's 40th birthday celebration

I recently read an article in LAPIS, a very fine hardcopy (and on-line) magazine run by New York Open House. This article was about the 40th anniversary of the Findhorn community in Scotland, which had been accompanied by full-page articles in most national newspapers and a ten minute segment on the BBC's most prestigious news programme. Surprisingly, the coverage was almost all positive, given the mainstream media's well known scepticism about 'hippy' follies, alternative spirituality and the existence of any kind of higher reality. Clearly the community has gradually earned the respect of a suspicious outside world. It has even become a United Nations NGO actively involved in events like the recent Johannesburg Summit on Sustainability and the attempt to propagate the idea of the 21st century as an era when restoring the earth must become a leading international priority.

The work of Findhorn has spread into many corners of the world. Some members have written books on topics like leadership, sports psychology and organizational development.

Others got involved in developing organic farms in Brazil, working with aboriginal children in Australia, running holistic consulting firms in Holland, serving as officers of the Norwegian army in Bosnia and Kosovo, or conducting research at Edinburgh University on animal consciousness and the effects of factory farming. Findhorn has become a powerhouse of consciousness and love which has spread its seeds across the globe to produce countless transformational initiatives.

I feel there are similarities to the Auroville community. I propose that Auroville consider hosting its own 40th birthday celebration with invitations for a reunion of all past Aurovilians and Friends of Auroville. It would be inspiring for all of us to see how Auroville has acted as a creative force through the individuals that have gone out into other parts of the world. I am sure that Auroville could benefit from such a gathering as much as Findhorn did.

Wolfgang Schmidt-Reinecke
executive director
Auroville International Association

In brief

Janmashtami

Sri Krishna's Birthday, Janmashtami, was celebrated in a joyful gathering under the Pipal Tree outside the main entrance of the Bharat Nivas Auditorium.

Sri Ganesh Chaturthi

The birthday of Ganesh was celebrated as usual at the tiny temple to Sri Ganesh at the entrance of Auroville nearby the Hope community on September 18th.

Piano Concert

Hartmut von Lieres played his own compositions from his recently released CD as well as new pieces in a concert at Pitanga.

Snakes of India

Well-known snake-expert Romulus Whitaker launched his comprehensive 500 page field guide, 'Snakes of India' at the Pour Tous Snackbar on September 14th.

Thirukural

An exhibition on Thirukural, the great work by Saint Thiruvalluvar during the Tamil Sangam (2nd century CE) was held at the Tamil Heritage Centre in Bharat Nivas.

View of Pondicherry

An exhibition of watercolour paintings by two young artists from Pondicherry, D. Ejumale and A. Abel, was held at the Aurelec Cafeteria.

Unthreaded circumstance

Australian multimedia artists Rachel Peachy and Emily Robinson gave a presentation of their work in progress in the context of contemporary art in south-east Australia at the art gallery foyer of the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium.

Salon de Musique

The popular Salons de Musique have restarted at Salle Auropax in Auroville. Composer and conductor Eugene introduces with CD recordings and radio broadcasts Western classical music from the middle ages to the present day.

Michel Saloff-Coste

Michel Saloff-Coste, president of MSC Associates, France, shared his research into the evolution of civilizations with special focus on the future of societies and organizations and shared his views on the Auroville Economy at the Auroville Town Hall.

Chinese artists

The work of two contemporary Chinese artists from Yunnan province, Zhang Xiaochun and Ma Li, together with wood-block prints by classic Japanese artists was presented at the Aurelec cafeteria.

Muse and bloom

An exhibition of paintings by Stephanie was held at Pitanga.

Hindustani vocal concert

Nandita-di and her students, with Shri Somnath Nandi on tabla, presented different vocal forms like bhajan, tarana, thumri, dhrupad, folk songs, and Bengali sangeet at SAWCHU.

New Auroville CD

The AV Web team have brought out a CD-ROM of the comprehensive Auroville website, described as "a completely up-to-date 'book' of a lived experiment". The CD retails at Rs 200. Further information from: webmaster@auroville.org.in

Playing your way into Integral Yoga

Medhananda's Eternity Game gets a second lease of life



Tine and Toby at the Eternity Game workshop

PHOTO: FRANZ
such a beginning, it can't be wrong can it?" remarks Toby rhetorically. "So I believe that the Eternity Game is directly connected with the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo."

The game, made up of 64 numbered cards, can be described as a divination tool, each with a drawing at the centre symbolizing a 'psychological or cosmic power'. The cards are arranged into seven groups – the six ontological principles (self, two in one, three in one, Satchitananda), the four Mothers, the

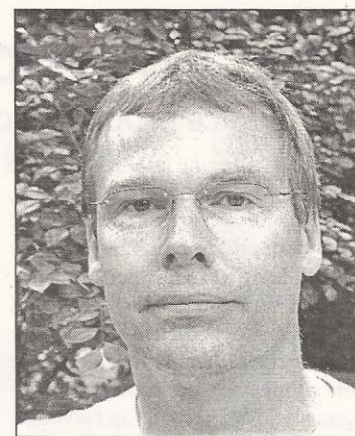
fifteen heavenly rulers, the twelve zodiac, the seven chakras, twelve helpers, and eight great meditations. Toby adds that there is a possibility for a 65th card which not too many people know about. He explains that this is a blank card where one can write the word 'Mother', or put a picture of The Mother. "Of course it is She who is behind all those cards, but if you draw this card, it can be very

powerful."

Toby describes the simplest way of playing the cards. "Let us say you want to know the nature of a particular day. You draw a card, observe the message it carries and set it aside. When the day is over you go back to the card, and ask yourself if you perceived that specific force field that day." He explains that, while in the beginning it may be hard to make a connection between the message that appears and the events that unfold, with practice and time one will eventually be able to interpret the cards.

For Toby, the game has not only a predictive utility, but it can also be used as a tool for growth of consciousness. He explains, "For me, the game was an entrance into *Savitri*, *The Life Divine*, and the other works of Sri Aurobindo. Say, for example, I get a card with the word 'individuality', I begin searching Sri Aurobindo's writings for what he has said about individuality – with the CD-ROM of the collected works of Sri Aurobindo, this search is just a keystroke away – and that takes me into a deeper understanding of his works." The cards have also guided Toby to other areas of exploration – the study of Tai Chi, occultism, and more recently into gnosis. Asked if such a dependence on the cards might not dictate one's life, Toby firmly denies it. "The game's just an instrument and nothing more, and it rather gives an enormous boost to one's intuition."

So why now, after all these years, is the game being resurrected? "I have been playing the game for over thirty years now," replies Toby. "My life has been guided by it all this time." This inner feeling of guidance inspired him two and a half years ago to start study sessions in The Netherlands on the Eternity Game. "A small group of us meet every two weeks to discuss the cards, and people



Toby Neuman

soon want a copy of the game for themselves." With none available on the market, he made several unsuccessful attempts to locate the publisher holding the rights to the Dutch version. "Finally in 2003, I saw a review of the books of Medhananda published by Prisma in *Auroville Today*." Toby contacted Franz of Prisma who, again to his disappointment, informed him that the game had been out of print for 30 years and that Prisma had no plans to publish it due to lack of funds. Toby asked if he could help financially and his offer was accepted, and "then things started to move." Permission was obtained from Yvonne Artaud who has the rights to the game. In July 2004, 500 copies of a brand-new second edition in English were released. While the guide maintains the original text, the cards are freshly designed with a three-colour *Kolam* pattern (mandala) on the outside. A few cards have also updated sketches. The entire set comes attractively packaged in a gift box. "I am in Auroville now to take 400 copies back with me to The Netherlands," says Toby. "The remainder will be sold in Auroville by Prisma." (for information, email prisma@auroville.org.in or checkout www.eternitygame.nl)

So did Toby ever ask the game about its own fate? "Yes. It indicated that it was time for it to reach a wider audience, but warned me that the path would not be easy!"

Priya Sundaravalli

Ever played a game almost daily for 30 years and are yet to tire of it? If you have answered no, meet Toby Neuman, current chairperson of Auroville International The Netherlands. Toby was recently in Auroville on a mission to promote the Eternity Game, which had been created by Medhananda in the early seventies and was recently re-issued.

"I remember the day in 1974

when I first saw it," recalls Toby. "It was on a table in Rijkswijk, Holland, and I had the distinct feeling that this was it." In particular, the first line from the guide that accompanied the game caught his eye: 'With a profound sense of obligation and reverence the author dedicates this game to his teachers Sri Aurobindo and The Mother in whose house he has lived for the past twenty-two years.' "With

A sample reading during the Eternity Game workshop

Question: Will the psychic being emerge collectively?

These five cards were drawn in the position shown above. We have here 3 helpers (Dwarf, Disciple and Sage), one 'great meditation' (Rebirth) and the zodiac sign Sagittarius in the centre. From left to right we can draw a time-line and from top to bottom we have the axis of the working forces in this moment of realisation.

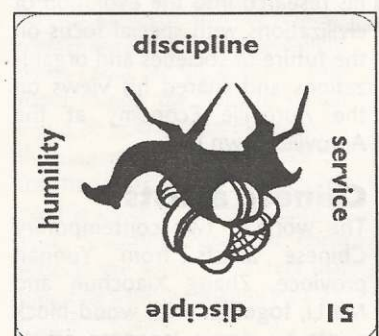
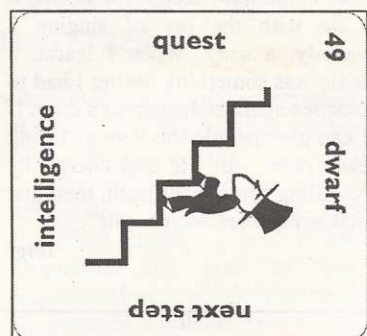
The interpretation is as follows: In the past, on the collective level, Auroville had given too little attention to the discipline needed to develop the collective soul. The helper card, 'The Disciple' is

be a collective aim setting in reaching the collective soul. We are told to do this by the archer, the Sagittarius. The position of this

sign is stable and clear. If we aim with our 'consciousness' we are already there. So by aiming collectively the realisation will take place. The Eternity Game says: let 'Om' be the bow and fly to the Divine. So things are changing for the better with a collective concentration on the collective soul.

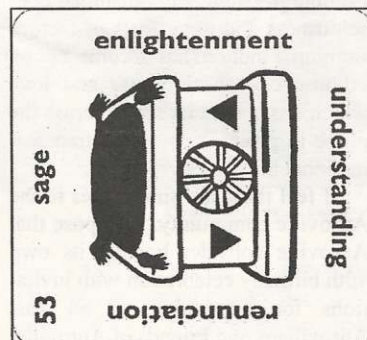
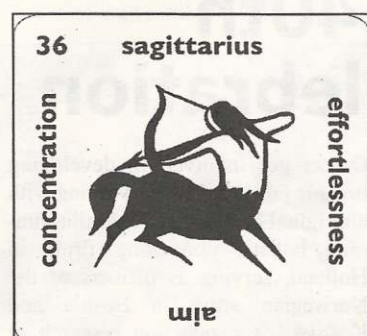
On the bottom we find 'Enlightenment' on its 'gifted' side. This means that a great force is working, is helping us. We will enlighten ourselves by setting the task of aiming.

So a rebirth will take place for us in the near future. A new world



upside down which means that the Arjuna-force had difficulties in reaching us. We were not open to its help. We have to focus more on the discipline needed. From above (Dwarf) we have to ask/call for a higher truth. Many steps have been taken but the final step has to be made. The Dwarf is telling us that by the right (mental) questioning we prepare the next step needed.

The next step is that there must



is coming at a rapid pace. The problem of the recent past of not being disciplined, will be replaced by the effort of setting the aim of finding the collective soul.

In the end the reconciliation card was drawn. It was number 19: Mars. This card is a major realisation ground and victory as its gift. Can it be more clear?

Toby

STATISTICS

Auroville Population as on August 15, 2004

(Aurovilians, newcomers and long term guests)

INDIAN	686	JAPANESE	3
FRENCH	300	TIBETAN	3
GERMAN	245	BRAZILIAN	2
DUTCH	84	DANISH	2
ITALIAN	82	ETHIOPIAN	2
AMERICAN	62	LATVIAN	2
BRITISH	53	NEW ZEALANDER	2
SWISS	42	SLOVENE	2
RUSSIAN	36	SOUTH AFRICAN	2
SPANISH	32	ALGERIAN	1
CANADIAN	25	BELORUSSIAN	1
KOREAN	25	BULGARIAN	1
BELGIAN	24	COLOMBIAN	1
UKRAINIAN	17		
SWEDISH	14	TOTAL	1807
AUSTRALIAN	13	ADULTS	1390
ISRAELI	13	MALES	741
ARGENTINIAN	9	FEMALES	649
AUSTRIAN	7	MINORS BELOW 18 YEARS	417
HUNGARIAN	4	MALES	223
SRI LANKAN	4	FEMALES	194

Subscription information

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