

Auroville Today

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MAIN ISSUE: Women of a changing world



Kamala



Lakshmi



Renuka



Banu



Vijaya



Raji



Usha



Grace



Tushitha

Aurovilian women come from all over the world. They are from varying backgrounds, embodying different belief systems and experiences. They have differing tastes, enjoy different past-times, have varied skin tones, live in different family structures and talk different languages. But, they all have one thing very much in common: they are women of Auroville whose aspirations have led them to this adventurous experiment. They are here to do something different for themselves, for their community and for their children's future.

This month Auroville Today looks at the life experiences of nine Tamil Aurovilian women. Some of them were born and grew up here. Others came into Auroville through marriage. Some came to work in Auroville and later joined the community. Regardless of how they came to be part of Auroville, their relationship with their own deeply-rooted culture and Auroville carries certain challenges. For they have to bridge their ancient culture and the newly-developing one. Many of the women who came to Auroville after their youth were raised in structured Tamil households, believing that their future held the same path as their female elders: to cook, clean, marry, obey the husband, take care of his family, and give birth to healthy children. Those who grew up within Auroville have perhaps seen more opportunities available for their future, but with their ancestral homes neighbouring their own they too face the challenge to balance two worlds.

Taking a look into the lives of these women was not always easy. Some are very reticent about sharing their opinions and feel the pressures of a society where 'outsoken women' are criticized. Others speak openly for all to hear. Regardless, they each carry with them a deep understanding of what it means to be a woman of Tamil origin who raises her children in a spiritual community which has ideals of human unity and the reality of a cultural masala.

Recently the Auroville Women's Group, was restarted. It is a hope that this group will grow to be a supportive structure for a deeper communication, understanding, and sisterhood between the women of Auroville.



The Auroville Women's Group provides a venue for women to come together to share and discuss their lives

If a woman had wings...

Banu shares her journey towards emancipation and independence

It was a killer *kaara kozhambu* with it multi-tentacled flavours that captured me, leading to an acquaintance with Banu, its creator. That was over a year and a half ago at the Aspiration dining hall and I still remember that it was a Wednesday, for I made it a point never to miss that day's lunch as long as I stayed there. But Banu is more than her culinary skills – with mischievous dancing eyes, an extrovert's sunny personality and a mass of the curliest hair that flies behind her as she speeds down the Auroville main road, she would be hard to miss anywhere. An embodiment of a free spirit, and she is aware of it.

"Maybe it was the way I was grown up," she grins disarmingly. "I was the seventh in my family, the littlest one. And I always got what I wanted." Being the youngest with the older siblings almost like parent figures, Banu was not included in the general family talks. "Basically I was like a lone child, not included in family discussions. Being always shooed away like 'Go... Play... What are you doing here?... Go sleep...' So I had my time thinking, thinking what I want, creating my own imaginary worlds, imagining why is this not possible, or that not possible..."

With both her parents coming from Edaiyanchavadi, Banu received her education at Udavi School until her 10th standard, and later went to Pondy for high school. "I wanted to study more, but the nearest college I could get into was in Tindivanam." Her two options were to do a 1 hour commute daily from Edaiyanchavadi or be a boarder in a women's hostel in Tindivanam. While she was ready for either, both options were ruled out by her family. This brought an end to her educational ambitions. "Had I gone to college, I'd have done Economics or Accountancy," she

muses softly. Almost twenty-eight years old now, she still hopes that one day she will be able to study and enhance her work skills. "I feel that I still have to improve myself a lot, and I'd love to do a course in management."

Following the abrupt break in her education, Banu began to work at the Visitors Centre, where she met her future husband who was an Aurovilian. Against all opposition from her family in the village, they got married and she moved into Auroville. Her 'action' allegedly affected the marriage prospects of her last unmarried brother, because of the gossip that 'a girl from this family had gone out.' "And for two years, they did not speak to me." Only when Banu became pregnant, the feelings thawed and she was welcomed back. She has this to say of the experience, "You know this is the problem of the middle class – they have their own cages with so much stress on prestige and pride. The women especially have to face a lot of problems. So much pressure that they can't live what they are; can't express what they feel; can't honestly say what they think!" Perhaps this is compounded by the Tamil vernacular not having the vocabulary to communicate certain feelings and emotions pertaining to modern times.

Banu is very critical of the quiet acceptance with which women put up with these 'cages'. "My sisters, for example, are really into it," she fumes. "Sometimes I am like, 'Don't be stupid. C'mon do something.' One of them has got so many options, especially with her husband encouraging her to do this course or that. But she always has the excuse of family duty – I have to cook, I have to clean, I have to take care of my children... and in my free time, I prefer to sleep!"

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Challenging taboos

Usha is a beautiful young Tamil Aurovilian woman, who smiles a lot and is not afraid to speak her mind

When she was three months old, Usha's family came from Pondicherry to settle in Auroville, where both her parents found a job. Usha grew up and studied in Auroville schools: New Creation School, where she became a boarding student at the age of eleven, Transition school and then Last School. After her studies, Usha worked for eight years in Pour Tous and then at the Financial Service. Then she joined Auroma, where she has been doing accounting for the past two years. "Ananda, whom I work with in Auroma, has been teaching me accounting," she explains. "It was actually a dream of mine, to become an accountant."

Usha got married at the age of eighteen. It was a love marriage, and as her husband to be was of a different caste, one side of her family objected to it, but the wedding took place nevertheless. Since the past two years, however, Usha has been living on her own with her six year old son Aditya.

"I got married and then separated from my husband," explains Usha. "In the village that just doesn't happen. Whatever problems may arise, a married couple remains together, a woman never leaves her husband... My family members keep trying to convince me to go back to my husband, even today. In the beginning, I was under a lot of pressure, from all sides, but today I think they realize that I've made up my mind."

There will always be those in society who criticize, talk badly of and slander those who have taken the bold decision to live outside the age old, accepted social norms.

"All these people can do is talk," says

Usha. "For example, if I'm hungry, they will not feed me. I have to take care of myself. Also, when they talk, they will always do so behind my back, they won't come and tell me what they think of me to my face. Sometimes, it is very difficult, and it really hurts, to hear what is being said about me. But I try not to care, not to let it affect me, to ignore it." Though there may have been a lot of people who disapproved of her, Usha has also received a lot of support and encouragement from a few close friends, who, although they may not necessarily have agreed with the decision she took, were always there for her when she needed them.

Dealing with social taboos wasn't the only challenge Usha had to face when she started living on her own.

"When I lived with my husband, I would only go out of the house to go to work, I never went anywhere else on my own. I didn't interact socially at all, I didn't even spend time with friends," she recalls. "So when I started living on my own in the beginning it was very difficult. I was very shy, very afraid and reluctant to talk to and face other people. Slowly, however, I worked on myself, forced myself to interact more with people, to overcome my shyness. I realized that I was on my own and I had to look after my child, so I had to be strong and confident. Now, as I talk to a lot more people I am also more informed and aware about everything that is happening in Auroville."

As a teenager, Usha used to play basketball, and enjoyed it a lot.

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Sisters of the Second Generation

Sunaura meets with two Aurovilian sisters who share their experiences and views of being a Tamil woman in Auroville.

Lakshmi and Renuka were born Aurovilian. Their parents, Krishna and Saroja, come from Kulapalayam and were some of the first local Tamils to join Auroville in the first years of its creation. However, Krishna and Saroja wanted their daughters to be fully integrated into the community and as they themselves still lived in Kulapalayam, they decided to send their girls to board at New Creation School. Thus, life began for these sisters with a lot of freedom and exploration of ways of life differing from those found in a traditional village upbringing.

I first met Lakshmi when I was 14. She was 11. I was hanging out in New Creation feeling very grown up for my young years and she was living there. One day I joined her and her young friends to help them make embroidery bracelets. Our contact quickly developed into an easy flowing friendship filled with curiosity for each others cultures. Seventeen years later as I sit with Lakshmi and her younger sister Renuka, I find that I feel like the youngest amongst us. Lakshmi married her husband Krishna at just fifteen years of age, settled into the New Creation Field community and had two daughters, Vennila (11) and Akila (4). Renuka also married young and now has a daughter Nila (6) and her baby son Bala. Along with motherhood, Lakshmi and Renuka both work for Auroville full time, ride about independently on bikes, speak fluent English as well as some French and carry with them a unique perspective from their mixed cultural lives.

Is it difficult to have your home village so close? What do your elders feel about you being part of Auroville?

"They are happy for us but it is not always easy," shares Lakshmi, "to have our native culture right next door and to live with both worlds. I get very frus-

trated when Aurovilians ask me why I feel the need to give money to my relatives in the villages, or to buy gold or put money into certain ceremonies. They are our family and they live right next to us. We choose to participate in the ceremonies and gatherings because it would be very impolite not to. Our elders want us to join them – it is one of the only times that we see everyone and they can see us and our children." "Also," adds Renuka, "Our ancestors have created these things because there must be something behind it."

How do you feel about marrying so young?

"I was very lucky to have married Krishna," Lakshmi says, "we have a very good relationship that has grown over the years. But, I want my daughter to wait longer. I think I was too young. I just got married because it seemed like the next thing to do but I realize that I missed out on many things by doing it at such a young age." Renuka lights up when she speaks about her husband Arun. "I just knew that he was the man I wanted to marry and I went straight for it. We both feel that we are very lucky. I cannot imagine what my life would be like if I had married another person." Both Lakshmi and Renuka had love marriages but followed many of the traditional procedures and ceremonies with both families in agreement. Having seen them with their husbands over the years, I have to admit that both sisters seem to be in healthy and positive partnerships with kind men.

But what about other Tamil Aurovilian women and their partnerships? Are they all this lucky?

"There are still women in Auroville who are treated like they were in the village," explains Renuka. "They are meant to serve and obey their husbands. In the village the husbands never do

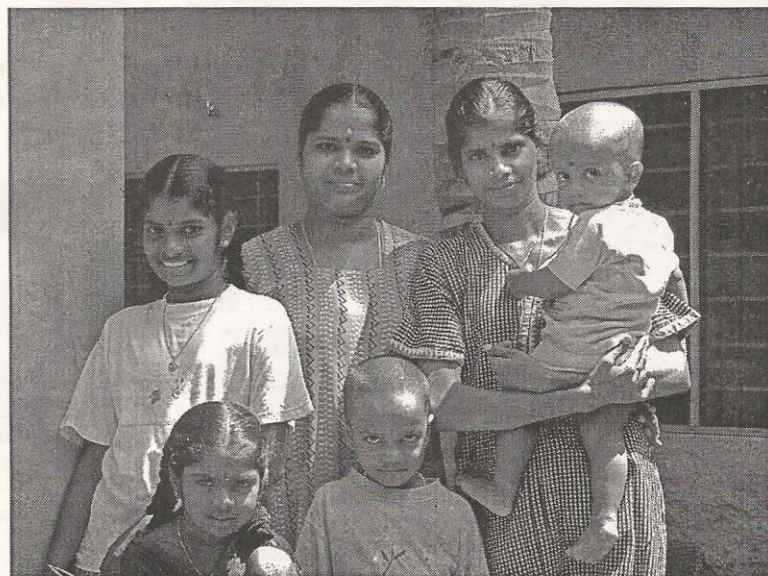
anything. The women are expected to do all the cleaning, cooking, and childcare." "And most women are working outside the house as well," adds Lakshmi. "I think many women in Auroville still have to get permission to do things. The majority still have to deal with traditional problems," continued Renuka. "I feel that if you are living in Auroville, you should make a change in your life and be a different way."

What about women who marry into Auroville? What problems do they face and who can help them get integrated?

"When you come into Auroville from the village, everything is very different and it is a bit hard to take," says Lakshmi. "Only slowly can they begin to understand it. Maybe some of the educated girls have already read about it. When they are educated and know some English, it is easier for them to come out of the house and mix with Auroville. But when they are not educated, they are very shy and it can take many years for them to come out. Also, getting a baby right away can make things more difficult. When a man here marries a woman from outside, he should give her at least one or two years to explore herself and Auroville and make friends. Then when you have a baby, you have friends coming to meet you and there is more opportunity to mix. But, if you just come and have a baby and stay at home it can be the same as everyday village life: you marry, you move in with your husband, you take care of the baby, you cook, you clean...finished! And all the time Auroville is going somewhere. Eventually they start taking steps to join in, but it can take years."

Do you think the husbands want their wives to stay at home?

"I think some of the men want their wives to go out and be independent like



From left to right: Top: Vennila, Lakshmi, Renuka, Bala
Front: Akila, Nila

other Tamil Aurovilian women and in such cases it would be good if the husbands encourage them to do this" says Lakshmi, "but the women also have to take responsibility. You see, if they suddenly stand up for themselves then the husband may not like it. He may think 'all these years she was like this and one day she stands up. She must be talking to her friends and getting bad ideas that now she is bringing to the family'. It has a lot to do with communication," continues Lakshmi, "If the husband and wife talk about everything together, over time they will learn to know each other and they can be happy."

Do you know about the Women's Group?

"Yes," smile both ladies at once. "We are part of it and think it is a very good thing. It is a good chance for the women in Auroville to get together and share about their lives. And it would be a good opportunity for the women who marry into Auroville to step out of their

homes and get to know Auroville and for us to get to know them."

And your daughters? Would you like them to have love marriages or would you prefer arranged marriages for them?

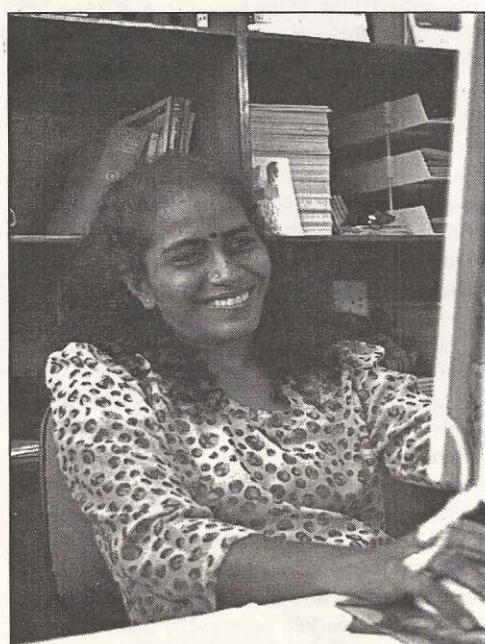
"Being in Auroville" explains Lakshmi, "I don't think we can arrange anything for them. Also, I would not feel happy if my daughter were to marry someone from outside Auroville and leave her home. I want her to be here in Auroville." "In our childhood," adds Renuka, "we never had anyone to guide us or see what we were doing. Our parents never asked us if we did our schoolwork or not. Maybe if we had had parents who were educated, they would have guided us more. I am very happy with the schools in Auroville and I see that our daughters have everything they need compared to when we were children."

Sunaura

If a woman had wings...

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This attitude frustrates Banu sometimes and makes her 'freak out'. However these frustrations have



Banu

also brought some learning to her. "I have begun to feel that people can't be made to understand what I think. Things have to be presented in such a way that they will be accepted." This lesson came to Banu as she was going through a major crisis in her own life when her marriage began to fall apart and she decided to separate from her husband. "From the beginning, when my separation started I was going on

my own. This is my theory, my experience, why should I make my parents understand..." But one day, while flicking through a woman's monthly magazine, a sentence caught Banu's eye and changed something for her. "It said, 'Everything is acceptable if it is presented in a way in which the others can accept.' And I thought, hey, maybe this is true; maybe this is how it works." She changed her attitude and approach, and was able to explain to her family that the decision she had taken to step out of her marriage was for her own good, and to her surprise, they listened. "Up until then, no one was even hearing me because I was breaking all the traditions and shaking the structure. But the moment I put myself differently, presented what I felt and explained how it works for me, things started happening!" It was a personal breakthrough, and a point that brought her deep understanding.

Banu has no regrets about the course her life has taken. Being an optimist, she always manages to find the positive in every situation. Of motherhood, she comments that her daughter is her speed-breaker. "Being of such a different personality from me, she slows me down and grounds

me. And made me much more responsible in the process."

When the positive is hard to find, she looks for humour. She shares her experience about coming back to live in Aspiration in her original hut. "I wanted to be in Aspi for my daughter as it is a great place for kids. But I had to face a lot of resistance, and then too, I was let in with so many restrictions." Banu narrates how she was sitting there in front of them, and they kept on speaking and laying one condition after another, and how she stopped listening to it. "I kept thinking of something else!" she grins.

Challenging taboos

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"It is very rare that married Tamil women take part in sports like basketball, it is mostly young, unmarried girls who do so," she explains.

"But in Auroville, there are quite a number of young Tamil women who continue playing basketball after having got married and their husbands greatly encourage them to do so." Her husband, however didn't like her to practice sports, so after her wedding, she stopped. But a year and half ago, Usha joined a team of young girls being coached by Ananda, who also teaches them French and Sanskrit on the court, and started playing basketball again.

"Playing basketball is very important for me," says Usha. "Our

"Then when they wanted to give me a smaller house, while I insisted that I get my original hut back, what tilted the decision in my favour was the belief that there was a bad energy in that house that keeps separating couples."

What supported her in these times were friends and colleagues. "Since then," she says, "I have started making friends also outside Aspiration. It is very important to have friends from different walks of life, and different backgrounds." Asked about cross-cultural issues and labels amongst Aurovilians that cre-

ate divisions – Indians, Westerners, North Indians, South Indians, locals – she confides that she does not like it, does not see people in such boxed categories and does not want to see people like that either.

Banu feels that Auroville is a very special place especially for women. "It really gives you the opportunities to see beyond your physicality. It widens your vision. If I were living outside, perhaps I would have made the same decisions that I am now making, but outside, it would have taken much more time."

Priya Sundaravalli

team practices every morning from 8 to 9.30 AM. We are all beginners, so we will have to work hard if we want to become good players. And that is one of my dreams: to become a really good basketball player." "Now I am free to make my own choices, to do what I want to do," continues Usha, determined, "And I am happy. I am different from the other girls, that is all..."

When asked about her son, Aditya, Usha's eyes light up, and she breaks into a smile. "He is a very open child, not shy and quiet like I was when I was in school. He studies at the kindergarten, and enjoys every single day there. I am so happy to have him, he is everything to me, and I will do anything I have to do for him."



Usha

The Solar Kitchen is my school

A snap-shot of Vijaya

"Hello? Solar kitchen here." The voice is warm, confident, exactly the voice you want to hear when you're telephoning to work out a knotty problem with meal bookings at the Solar Kitchen. And when you meet her, Vijaya is very much the smiling, open-hearted person predicted by the voice.

Vijaya was born in Auroville to Aurovilian parents. However, for her initial education her parents sent her to a primary school in Pondicherry. "Some of my Auroville friends were there with me, so it wasn't a problem. But then somebody said that Auroville children should be educated in Auroville, so our parents put us all in Transition School. That was really difficult at first. We didn't know English well and we were all so shy – for a long time I was too scared to even speak."

She went on to Last School but there her formal education abruptly ceased. "I was married to Dhanapal. It was a traditional arranged marriage: in those days we didn't think in any other way." However, she didn't immediately take the next traditional step for a young Tamil wife. "You're expected to get a child very soon: it's automatic. Even if young wives don't want this, they're often scared into it by pressure from their husband or their families. But our families didn't put any pressure on

me, and my husband has always been happy to let me do as I wish. Also Suzie, my teacher at Last School, said that as I was so young it might be good to wait so that I'd have a chance to do whatever work or activities I wanted to do first. I agreed and waited 8 years before my son was born."

Vijaya worked for some time as a supervisor at Auromics workshop, but it wasn't really what she was looking for. She began helping Dhanapal with the paperwork of his construction business. But then the business ran into major difficulties. "We were really suffering. So I felt I must find work elsewhere and get a maintenance."

Dhanapal and Vijaya had agreed that one of them would always try to work in the service sector of Auroville, so she went to work in the Solar Kitchen, preparing salads. After two years she became pregnant and took maternity leave. "When I returned there was a surprise waiting for me – Ilse asked me if I would like to look after the booking of meals. Without thinking I said 'Yes'." At first, it was like changing schools all over again. Vijaya lacked the computer knowledge needed and felt shy about having to deal with so many people she'd never met before. "But Ilse encouraged me a lot, and soon I felt happy to be learning new things every day and meeting new

people – the Solar Kitchen is my school. When you're at home, just looking after the house, you don't learn anything."

But isn't this the situation for some young Tamil wives who marry into Auroville? "Yes, and this has been happening for years. Maybe what's needed is a school where they can go every day for two hours a day and communicate with others while learning about Auroville and how to speak English because a lot of it's to do with lack of confidence. There are plenty of opportunities in Auroville, for women as well as for men, but you have to move out, you have to try for them, not stick in your own corner. This is one of the biggest lessons I've learned. If you want something, or if you want to clarify something, you have to go and speak with people directly."

Vijaya is very happy that young Tamil Aurovilians have none of the inhibitions her generation suffered from. "It's a total change. In our class most of the girls were shy. We'd never dare dance, for example, in front of the boys. But now the girls are very bold, very frank. They say and do exactly what they like." How do their parents feel about this? "The whole relationship is different:



Vijaya at the Solar Kitchen booking station

parents and children are more like friends now." So would she, for example, be happy to allow her son to marry whoever he pleases? She pauses, laughs. "It's a little too early to answer that question because my son is only four years old!"

What about the husband-wife relationship? Who takes the decisions in her family? "We take them together. This is typical of most Tamil families in Auroville." She thinks, however, that in the villages it's different. Here there have been changes – it's normal for even younger women to go out to work now, something which was unheard

of 20 years ago – "but the changes are outer. I don't think the basic attitudes regarding marriage or the relationship between men and women have changed. That's the difference: in Auroville the attitudes have changed."

"At the same time I think there is a real lack of understanding between different cultures in Auroville. It's important we learn to understand each other well, and working together is one of the best ways of doing this. There should be no divisions between us because we are one family, one soul."

Alan

Living her dreams

From a challenging past, Grace found Auroville and carries her dreams into its future

Grace grew up in a Gandhi orphanage in the Dindigul District where she and her brother had been left when she was just six years of age. There she was raised to live in simplicity. "We could only wear cotton," she describes, "had regular prayer time, simple meals and a structured discipline." Bold in her youth and curious about the world around her, it is not a surprise that at the age of seventeen she began to dream of other things. "I would go walking every day five kilometers to and from school. On the way I would see many women dressed in beautiful colored silk saris going to their jobs. Their lives seemed so independent and I thought I would like to be more like them." So, after completing the eleventh standard, Grace's 'mother' from the orphanage who was a doctor helped her to secure a job in a hospital where she worked in the records office for family planning while studying to become a nurse.

Two years later, Grace was re-acquainted with a friend, Sarasudevi, whom she used to dance with as a child. Sarasudevi was from Edaiyanchavadi, participated in Auroville activities and invited Grace to come and stay with her in this growing international city. Grace's curiosity guided her to make this adventurous step even though her orphanage mother went against her choice and told her that if she moved to Auroville, she could not return to the orphanage. Still bold in her actions, she packed up her meagre belongings and came to live in a keet roofed room in the community of Bliss. Living with Sarasudevi, she began to attend Last School where she was determined to work on her English, a subject that she had struggled in so far. "It was all so different," describes Grace, "I felt like I was living in a jungle, and there were all these different cultures and people around me. Then after just five months,

my friend Sarasudevi left the area for a job and I had to decide what to do as I was now living on my own in Bliss and the nights could become quite lonely and scary. It was at this time that I met my future husband, Nagappan. He was also studying and sometimes he would give me a ride home after school."

Regardless of the budding romance, Grace decided to return to the orphanage where her



Grace, a dynamic force in the women's group

mother said "I told you so" but helped her regain her job at the hospital. During the following two years, Grace spent her monthly allowance of Rs.50 on evening classes to learn typing and continued her romance with Nagappan through letters. Following the line of a good love story, Nagappan proposed mar-

riage and Grace had to decide between two worlds that she knew and cared for. She was offered a job in Auroville as a teacher at New Creation School. This helped her feel secure in her decision, pack her bag and once again disappoint her mother whose loving discipline could not stop this young woman from following her instinctively adventurous nature. Typical of young love, Grace remembers her return to Auroville with fondness. "Nagappan and I had not thought about anything," she laughs. "We did not think about how we would get a house or pay for food or anything. Nagappan was also in school and all we thought about was our love."

Today, after seventeen years of a happy marriage and two children, Grace, in the maturity of adulthood, still faces life courageously. She spends her days working at the Matrimandir, for the Water Service and running the Auroville Today office. Apart from her daily work though, Grace has a personal dream she has carried with her for years. It is to have a women's centre in Auroville where the women of Auroville can come together. Presently, Grace's participation in the active women's group gives hope for such a project in the future. "Two years ago," she explained, "I began to study why the women's group of Auroville had started and stopped so many times. Then some other women and I restarted the group while trying to keep in perspective why it had not worked before. This is a group for women who want to study more and learn. They want to go on outings maybe without their husbands and children and they want to get together for talking and sharing their feelings."

Grace presented her larger dream of a women's centre to the group recently and it was received well with many women saying they have had the same dream. Their dream is for a centre where all these activities and more can take place. "It would be a place where we can have a library, some computers, a meeting room, a space for dance and crafts and many other things. My dream also includes some rooms where women can come and stay for a night or a couple of days if they need where they are safe and comfortable. Also, there should be space for a caretaker." Grace also discussed how this venue would be ideal for

women who marry into Auroville, speak little or no English and feel a bit lost in their new environment.

Though the group is open to all the women of Auroville, it holds a unique opportunity for the Tamil Aurovilian women because their work and home lives do not provide many opportunities to get together with female peers, without being mothers or wives, and simply enjoy themselves. "In February we started the new women's group. In March, for Women's Day, we held a two day seminar where we danced, sang, took karate classes and discussed issues that are important to us. We also talked about making short plays to take to the villages where we would show how drinking and other abuses can affect us women and our families."

With each meeting the group is growing. At the most recent one, forty two women from Auroville came to share. "We decided to make a list of the things we would like to learn and do. Thirteen points were agreed upon such as embroidery, painting, yoga, tailoring, singing, dance and beautician work. Afterwards the coordinators of the women's group met to discuss what would be realistic to start now and we decided upon tailoring, singing, embroidery and painting." Thirteen women have started meeting twice a month to work on their embroidery and several get together for singing classes. A painting teacher has yet to be found but the women hope that t-shirt painting and their embroidery can bring in some funds to cover basic costs for small outings and such. The group now meets twice a month at varying central locations in Auroville.

Another aspect of the women's group which will be incorporated into the centre's program is readings and translations of the works of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo, as well as parts of the Auroville News and Notes and excerpts from the Auroville Web to be better informed about the community and its spiritual background. "I was thinking of what we can do here that is good for the whole of Auroville and I realized that more knowledge of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo would be good, not only for us, but because it will pass down to our children and that is what we are here to do – to build something new for us and for the future."

Sunaura

"I may look like mouse, but I am an elephant!"

Raji of the Residents' Service speaks her mind

She does look tiny and petite, but after a few words with her, one immediately perceives the determination and the steel-strong personality lying beneath. Talkative, spunky and totally disarming, Raji is a familiar figure to almost every newcomer and Aurovilian who has to go through the Residents Service. She is a picture of efficiency and out-spokenness.

Raji always pushed herself to be a winner. During her school days in Udavi, she was often the class topper. "If I happened to only get the 2nd rank, I used to cry and refuse to eat. I had to be number one in everything I did." She explains, "It was not about being greedy but to do the best one possibly could." At Udavi her favourite teacher was Mahalingam who encouraged her and sent her for typing classes. However all her academic ambitions tragically ground to a halt when she had to leave the English-medium Udavi School since it did not have class 11 and 12, and she got enrolled instead in a government-run Tamil medium school. "All because my parents couldn't afford to send me to an English medium school in Pondy," says Raji wistfully.

Born into an impoverished family from Edaiyanchavadi, Raji or Rajasoundari, (named by her father whose penchant for theatre made him pick the name of a famous fictional character, Queen Rajasoundari) was the fifth in a line of eight children. "My father was a gardener in Pitchandikulam

working with Joss, while my mother rolled agarbathies at home." In the new school, Raji found herself struggling because of the language problem. "Also the classes were huge with 70 students crammed in a room," she says. Finally after being caned by one of her teachers, Raji quit school and began to work at Service Farm. Raji joined Auroville in 1989.

"For me to reach a certain independence, it took a lot of talking and arguments with my mother. I had to tell her to let me be free and that I wanted to go away from the house. I also told her that if she always kept following me then I could not live my happy life." Her mother slowly came to terms with Raji's assertion for independence.

"From the beginning I was very bold," she says. "In my family, I was the only one who would ask questions." Raji shares an experience that she considers a watershed for her personal growth. Introduced by a friend to a group that called itself 'Emotional Anony-mous', she attended its meetings in Auroville and later in Pondicherry. "I went to that after a friend introduced me to it. No it is no more in existence, so I can talk to you about it! We had a saying, 'Whom you see here, what you hear here, when you leave here, let

it stay here.'" Raji seems to have a flair for these catchy phrases and quotes. She spills a few which are brilliant in their brevity. "We used to share our individual experiences. For 5 or 6 meetings I did not speak; I was just observing. And finally when I spoke, it all came out in tears and words." It was an emotionally cathartic experience for Raji that put her 'in touch with this new self'. "I was so much amazed to see that this was me," she says incredulously. "Even my

that comes her way. Encouraged by Joss of Pitchandikulam, she enrolled for computer classes with Ananda. While being fluent in English, she also managed to learn some French and pick up a little German from Walter. "Then I learnt karate so I can protect myself. I have also learnt video editing and shooting. In fact, Joss encouraged me to shoot the entire Temple festival that happens at Edaiyanchavadi." In addition, Raji has a passion for theatre like her

plays in the evening." Raji's most recent role on stage was at a performance in Morattandi where she played a dowry victim who is physically abused. "If this happened in real life, I would slap my father-in-law!" she says cheekily. It does not sound like an empty threat.

Raji's current involvement in Auroville is through the Residents Service. She started off on a part-time basis offering secretarial help to several services located in the Bharat Nivas complex. Slowly she found herself gravitating towards the Residents' Service, which takes care of the formal registration matters of the residents of Auroville. "It is a delicate job, one that involves a lot of liaison work with government officials. One has to be very patient and persistent, and diplomatic." She found herself having a flair for the work and enjoys it. Raji is well respected amongst the officials she interacts with. However Raji experiences some overt and not so overt discrimination in Auroville. "Some of those Aurovilians who come here seeking help, don't want to accept that a local Tamil woman can be in the office and know how things work." Raji is sometimes bypassed by non-Tamils in the office. "Now I have stopped being bothered by it and it only amuses me when I see this happen." Very soon, when these individuals realize what she knows and can offer as help, they change their attitude completely. "I may look like a mouse, but I am an elephant!"

Priya Sundaravalli



Raji

mom who saw this difference in me, thought maybe I'd turned mad because I was in Auroville!" she laughs.

Raji is a versatile woman who likes to utilize every opportunity

father. "My father comes from a long line of performers," she explains, "and I was deeply influenced by him. He used to grow his hair very long even while working as a gardener so that he could act in

"Each day should be full of joy!"

Kamala, who joined Auroville after her wedding, learned to love living in Auroville

When I arrive at Kamala's house in Centre Field for the interview, she is getting ready to go on an outing, and visibly excited about it. She will be going, together with a group of her friends from the Women's Group, to visit and offer a puja at a Shiva temple in Kalapet, and then they will all have dinner together. "We have already gone on such outings together,"

explains Kamala, who has been a very active member of the Women's Group. "We were only women, without even our children. Those gatherings are great fun, and we all enjoy ourselves so much, because normally we women never go out anywhere on our own, without our family. It's an opportunity for us to come together. We all get to know each other better, we share so much, we open up to each other and bond." For Kamala, this collective sharing amongst women is a very important aspect of the Women's group. "We are supporting, encouraging, and guiding each other," she explains.

"Since I've become so active in the Women's Group, I am receiving dozens of phone calls every day from different women, and we share our ideas, and hopes. We're communicating a lot." She goes on, "My husband keeps joking about it, and telling me: 'You've become so popular, are you the Prime Minister of the women's group to be receiving so many calls?' and we laugh about it together."

"I grew up as Auroville was growing," recalls Kamala, who was born in Kulapalayam in 1967, a few months before the inauguration of Auroville. And although I lived in the village, I was often in Auroville, mixing and interacting with the children and grown ups there, so I didn't see the village and Auroville as separate, for me there was no difference." She was one of the only girls in the village at that time to finish High School. When she did so, she started working at the garments unit Auromodel Atelier. Then, when she was seventeen

years old, her brother, who was already an Aurovilian, asked her if she wanted to marry an Aurovilian friend of his: Raman. "I said yes immediately," recalls Kamala with a smile. "I already knew Raman, though I had never imagined we would one day marry, and it was also a big dream of mine to join Auroville. This great chance was given to me, and I didn't want to miss it!" Within a month, the wedding was arranged and the ceremony took place. And that is when Kamala finally moved into Auroville.

In the beginning, it was a little difficult for Kamala to adjust to her new life in Auroville. She and Raman moved in to a relatively isolated house in Kottakarai. "I was brought up in the village, living a family life. The houses being so close together there, I was always surrounded by people. I wasn't used to living alone, so in the beginning it was difficult, I felt lonely, without any close neighbours." When Kamala gave birth to her first child, the family moved to Fertile, "...in the middle of the jungle...", then they moved on to Acceptance and some years later shifted to Centre Field, their present home. Kamala eventually adapted to her new life and now she enjoys being able to spend time on her own sometimes. "Living surrounded with people is a great experience, but so is living alone. When it is quiet, one can learn a lot about oneself. One also learns to enjoy nature, listening to the birds sing, watching the flowers bloom. At night, I sometimes bring my chair out in the garden and look up at the moon, and wonder at its beauty..."

Today, Kamala and Raman are the parents of two sons: Sunder and Kartik, aged twelve and five. When asked to talk of her family, Kamala's eyes light up: "My husband Raman has always inspired me, and encouraged me to do whatever it was I wanted to do. He understands me, and has helped me find my direction. He has taught me so much..."

When asked about her dreams for her children's future, Kamala goes on: "As we

live in Auroville, it's natural that our children go to Auroville schools. Each child has his own inner strengths and talents, and as parents, we have to guide them and encourage them to develop that which is inside them. We should not push them to do what we want them to do, we have to find out what it is they want. We should encourage them to go in whichever direction they have chosen themselves, and guide them, that is all."

"I came to Auroville as a simple girl, and it took me many years to really understand what it meant to live in Auroville," recounts Kamala. "Then I started to love this place, and to contribute to it what I could."

Since she joined Auroville, Kamala has chosen to work in services, which she feels play an important role in the collective life of Auroville. Over the years, she has worked at New Creation School, Transition School, the Visa Service, and at Auro-Future. Then, eight years ago, she started working at the Free Store, where she still works today, as well as working part time at the Entry Group.

"What I enjoy most about working in services, especially the Free Store, is interacting with people. Every day, I meet a lot of Aurovilians, and there is a lot of joy in offering them this service. We exchange smiles, greetings, at times share a few words, or have longer conversations. I get to know a lot of people, Aurovilians and also newcomers, who have just joined Auroville. And I feel it's important, living in Auroville, to get to know and communicate with people, and this work gives me the opportunity to do that. And it gives me great joy, interacting with people gives me new energy."

As the interview draws to an end, I ask Kamala what her dreams are for the future. "We have to learn to live in the present..." she answers, "Each day should be full of joy."

Emmanuelle



Kamala

Shattering the Glass Ceiling

Tushitha's leadership skills get acknowledged

It was over a year ago when a little announcement ran in the then Auroville News that a new executive had been appointed to the Solar Kitchen management team. It was Tushitha, a young Tamil Aurovilian originally from Kottakarai. Reading that bit of news was strangely gratifying, giving the feeling that things had to be okay in Auroville if a local woman could find herself amongst the highest echelons of responsibility – a shattering of the glass ceiling of sorts.

On meeting Tushitha, one can immediately see why she is an executive. Radiating a gentle quietude and a grounding aura, she appears wise beyond her 31 years. While her story may not be atypical of those of other young local women who came into contact with Auroville, embraced it, and were in turn welcomed into its fold, her life-story and circumstances set her apart.

Having lost her father as a young child, and following the remarriage of her mother, Tushitha moved out to live with her *ayah* (grandmother). "I grew up under *ayah's* care," she reminisces. "She was working as a groundskeeper at one of the Auroville farms, tending the tamarind trees on the property and collecting the fruits that dropped in summer." The period with her grandmother was a time for a carefree life full of happy memories. But when Tushitha reached her early teens, her grandmother passed away leaving her scrambling for a place to stay. Following a suggestion that she move to New Creation, she began to live semi-independently with other young girls.

There, Tushitha found a special mentor in Babu (Andre's wife) who took interest in her wellbeing, encouraging her in her studies and extracurricular activities. "While I was not at all interested in studies which I regret to this day, I really got into Bharatanatyam!" says Tushitha, her eyes lighting up. At that time, Krishnakumar was teaching classical dance to many Aurovilians. But soon she met Iyanar (see

Auroville Today # 182, March 2004) who was also living there, and the two fell in love and decided to make a life together.

Tushitha discontinued school and took a decision to work. She found a position in the catering unit in Bharat Nivas, an early avatar of the Solar Kitchen. Her task was to oversee lunch deliveries to the various schools, place kitchen orders for the following week and act as a translator and communicator between the Tamil workers and the English-speaking managers. "It was the only position that was open at that time," she says, "and they gave it to me even though I was quite young." This was over eleven years ago, and she has been with that job ever since. Tushitha shares that it has been her anchor during small and large crises in domestic life.

So how did she land up as one of the executives of Solar Kitchen? "The kitchen management team has always had a high turnover," she says. "Several executives have come in and left for various reasons. But the kitchen team always managed to have food ready for the Aurovilians." She narrates the time when during a critical internal crisis, all Aurovilians of the Solar Kitchen team decided together with the Auroville Council that Tushitha also becomes an executive of Solar Kitchen, together with Angelika and Gilles. It was felt it would be a good idea to have a Tamil Aurovilian as an executive because she would understand and be sensitive to the issues of the workers. While the appointment of a young, local Tamil woman in an administrative position of importance may be viewed as a major achievement, Angelika her colleague has this to say. "Tushitha was a natural choice because of the innate abilities she displayed right from the beginning – in communicating, mediating, translating and harmonizing." Tushitha is quick to offer a rejoinder and modestly declares that each and every one of the 50-strong Solar Kitchen Team is a valuable cog in the wheel. "It is only

because everyone of us contributes something special and unique that we are able to function effectively as a team, and do the job smoothly." It is indeed no mean task to have meals ready six days a week for over 800 people.

Tushitha also adds that she gets no special treatment for being an executive. "If anything, my work day has only become longer as I am one of the first to arrive and the last to leave!" She also bears much more responsibility and is answerable if things go wrong in the Kitchen. Following her appointment as executive, several changes have come about. "We recently began to assign separate tasks to the workers from the village and the Tamil Aurovilians," she shares. "This was necessary for a greater harmony between the two culturally different groups." However she also mentions the efforts being made to facilitate a greater integration and a healthier interaction between the two groups. "For example, we read excerpts from the Mother's Prayers and Meditations in Tamil every morning before work begins, or organize sightseeing trips to nearby locations on holidays."

So what does Tushitha do on her days off – meaning Sundays and the four other holidays in a year (Pongal, New Year, Saraswathi Pooja, and Deepavali) when the Solar Kitchen is closed? She laughs. "Oh, I spend time with my two boys, Guru and Anand, or help their dad in the farm. And since we all love traveling, we go out on short trips with a few of our friends from our New Creation days, who also have young families." Any special dreams for herself? "Well, I



Tushitha

want to pick up Bharatanatyam once again..." With her eyes dancing, Tushitha shares of her recent meeting with her original dance master Krishnakumar. "Sir had come back from Germany on a short trip, and was here at the Solar Kitchen one afternoon. Then he mentioned that he and his wife Geeta are going to return permanently by the end of this year, and then casually asked if I'd be interested in continuing and perhaps joining in a performance!" Tushitha's answer to him was of course a resounding 'yes'.

Priya Sundaravalli

ECONOMY

The Collective Puzzle

Towards an integral framework for social and economic development in Auroville

Auroville is an experimental field of action where people who aspire for a higher and better life are invited to collaborate. In the course of this experiment the community shall gradually ensure that everyone has, in the highest possible measure, the joy of work according to his/her own nature, and the leisure to grow inwardly, and of course, a pleasant life for all. The dynamic basis of Auroville starts with works i.e. sustained actions made as sincere and living expressions for progressive inner discovery and greater awareness.

Based on various directions given by Mother, we can extract some key principles to guide our development:

- ◆ Each person must want to make progress and be ready to give up moral and material gains;
- ◆ No exchange of money, no taxes. But everyone must contribute and perform everyday a work for the good of the collectivity;
- ◆ Participation to the wellness of the community is not calculated on an individual basis but rather in accordance with the means, the activity, and the possibilities of production.

In our attempt to reach this perfect state of common consciousness and common movement, our daily reality rather indicates some contradictions between where we are and what we ought to be. How can we reconcile these inconsistencies in order to come up with this magic mixture of a free and rich interchange between individuals able to develop to their full capacity while enabling the community to develop to its full expression?

For many among us it is clear that we have reached the point where

some kind of working structure and clear process should be defined and implemented. This document has been written in a spirit of bringing some ideas in our efforts to determine a clear direction toward the integral development of our many-sided potentialities.

One Goal

To be practical, we must first have a very clear vision of the goal to pursue. So let's first try to define a single overall goal before establishing practical means of realisation.

In theory, a conceptual and living framework for the collectivity should be seen to provide:

- ◆ Free and natural growth, not something mechanical;
- ◆ Means to discover the perfect movement, harmony, rhythm of a great spiritualised collective life and to determine perfectly our relation with each individual and all individuals;
- ◆ A leverage uplifting us out of the established groove;
- ◆ A flexible stability under which we can operate harmoniously all necessary changes for our ongoing development.

As for the individual beings who are part of the Auroville collectivity, it is understood that a suitable framework can only succeed when there is a free consent from each one to live in a society where the just freedom of his individuality will be recognized, but his labour and acquisitions will be used or given by him without protest for the common good under a natural cooperative and comradeship impulse. Therefore, translated into practical terms, one could say that a logical and comprehensive goal for

Auroville can in fact be "to find and truly live this perfect equilibrium between the joy of giving and the joy of receiving".

Obviously, this identified goal has two distinct outer movements (giving and receiving) done in a spirit of inner joyfulness by the same entity. They are the variables from which we have to discover nothing less than the secret of life: the supreme harmony between our unity and our diversity manifested in this simple equation of living.

The Joy of Giving

In this act of giving, individuals do not "obey" but rather move joyfully to the will of the collectivity. When doing so, we must freely accept the condition of our collective being and also respect, aid and be aided by the same unrestricted development in other. On an everyday basis, such movement takes the shape of daily coordinated efforts and activities – works, function, action – where a being can sum up in himself all its best and completest possibilities of action as a force for growth. The "joy of giving" also implies a giving not only of what we are through works but also of what we have – our possessions. But to achieve this totally, the collectivity must inspire complete faith, provide full and constant stability, and offer a creative environment.

The Joy of Receiving

The community has to gradually and systematically develop a collective economy, a financial, administrative and social organisation as well as a network for the production, distribution, consumption of goods and services which does not act by rule and

formula but as an enveloping and penetrating conscious presence that determines perfectly our relations with each other and with the collective. It is through such a framework of efficient community activities that each being in exchange for his work can gladly receive a basic minimum income and the necessary goods and services to meet apparent basic needs. This brings us to the "kind economy".

The Basis of a Kind Economy

Considering that the basis of the Auroville collective economy rests on the intensive work given by each and everyone involved, we must develop a system by which what has been given (work, money, ideas, etc.) is redistributed and shared in accordance with the essential needs expressed by its constituents and the community as a whole. The framework now prevailing in Auroville is done through an amalgam of services, commercial and non-commercial units. In my view Auroville's activities should be logically re-grouped in accordance with their essential purpose instead of the nature of the activities. This could be done if we rearrange all the activities in a more practical way – an adaptation of what in any given society is referred to as the four fields of economy with their related activities:

- ◆ education (teaching, sports, arts & culture)
- ◆ administration (municipal organisation & services, public places, village relations, research & technology, etc.)
- ◆ production (commercial units, agriculture & farming, food-processing, etc.)
- ◆ basic services (food, health, clothing, housing, electricity)

This framework would be more practical and allow the different activities "to compete" priority-wise with others which have the same intrinsic value and *raison d'être* and not in accordance with a classification with no firm basis for comparison.

"Basic Services" is probably the field which is affecting the most directly the life of individuals. All activities under that field should eventually and progressively be centrally supported by the Central Fund. It is at that level that "giving = receiving" takes its full meaning, that the required fulfillment by the collectivity of individual wants can little by little move towards an acceptable and harmonious quality of life for all.

Concluding Remarks

This paper is an attempt to realign spiritual aims with down-to-earth basic needs of individuals and the collective – the two pillars of the Auroville economy. Some of the characteristics of a more conscious and self-sufficient economy would be the elimination of the exchange of money inside of Auroville, the delinking of money and work, non-possession, transparency, and the availability of a basic minimum income and servicing activities for each contributing Aurovilian. It is evident that we have to move away from a conventional economy through workable and successive stages and the readiness of the common mind. But whatever we want to accomplish, we should remember that the Auroville economy will always evolve in accordance with the growth of consciousness within each and everyone.

Denis

The Matrimandir Lake

"It has been decided and will remain decided that the Matrimandir will be surrounded with water. However, water is not available just now and will be available only later, so it is decided to build the Matrimandir now and surround it with water only later, perhaps in a few years' time."

Mother to Huta on March 28, 1970

Mother's vision of a lake surrounding the Matrimandir dates back to June 1965. But the question whether the lake would be purely ornamental or have a function in the water management of Auroville was never answered. In the early 1970's, chief architect Roger Anger suggested to The Mother that the water be used for the city's water supply. This innovative idea remained unstudied till September 2001, when the office of water engineer Harald Kraft in Berlin was awarded the contract to prepare a pre-feasibility study for the water supply, stormwater management and wastewater management for the city of Auroville. This was through the Asia Urbs project which the European Commission had allocated to Auroville's Future.

Kraft's pre-feasibility study became available in February 2003. Observing the alarming salt-water intrusion into the aquifers around Auroville and the over-extraction of water from the aquifer used by Auroville and the surrounding villages, the idea that water should be obtained from other sources became a central issue. This only other available source was identified by Kraft to be rainwater. Assuming a population of 50,000 people, Kraft showed that rainwater harvesting from the rooftops of the buildings would only provide for one-third of the water supply required by the city. To meet the full demand and collect the remaining two thirds of the required water, it would be necessary to harvest the entire run-off from the city, which was estimated to be between 4 to 8 million cubic metres per year.

Kraft realised that the city, with its centre located on top of a hill with a gentle slope all around, offers ideal conditions for drainage. Large storage basins in the greenbelt were considered ideal to store the rain water before it could leave the city. Issues pertaining to the loss of this water by evaporation and the modes of storage of this water for future usage by the city remained. Kraft argued that the optimal place to store the harvested water would be underground, but to infiltrate it in the greenbelt at the outer limits of the township, would be of no use to the city.

The solution to the problem came

when the specific geology of the hill on which Auroville is located was further studied. The hill consists of a layer of sandstone that holds the first aquifer, beneath which there is a thick layer of so-called *Manaveli* clay underlying the entire city of Auroville. If the harvested rainwater could be stored in the first aquifer long enough so that it would not drain out into the sea, that aquifer would provide the most ideal water storage – above sea level, free from any risk of salt water intrusion, and completely under the control of Auroville. That left two questions to be answered: what would be the optimal location for the infiltration of the water into the sandstone, and how could that water be cleaned before infiltration?

"The answers to these questions came to me like a shock that one experiences when one touches a live electric wire," wrote Kraft dramatically in the Auroville News. He realised that a large lake – the larger, the better – would be ideal for purification purposes and that the location of such a lake at the centre of the city would be ideal. And that centre is the Matrimandir, around which Mother had foreseen a lake so many years ago. "I felt deeply embarrassed about my professional ignorance in being convinced that the Mother had made a wrong choice in the selection of the site for Auroville and the fact that it took me almost 20 years to realize that this location is a unique place and that all the disadvantages that I had perceived earlier were actually advantages" wrote Kraft. "By implementing this concept, not only does the township of Auroville become self-sustainable and self-sufficient, but also it does not need to draw from anybody else's water resources. On the contrary, it also ensures sufficient freshwater to its neighbouring environment." The retrieval of the harvested and infiltrated water as drinking water is, according to Kraft, to be achieved by setting up a gallery of wells (100 to 200) in the east of Auroville, at the border of the greenbelt.

Objections to the Kraft report

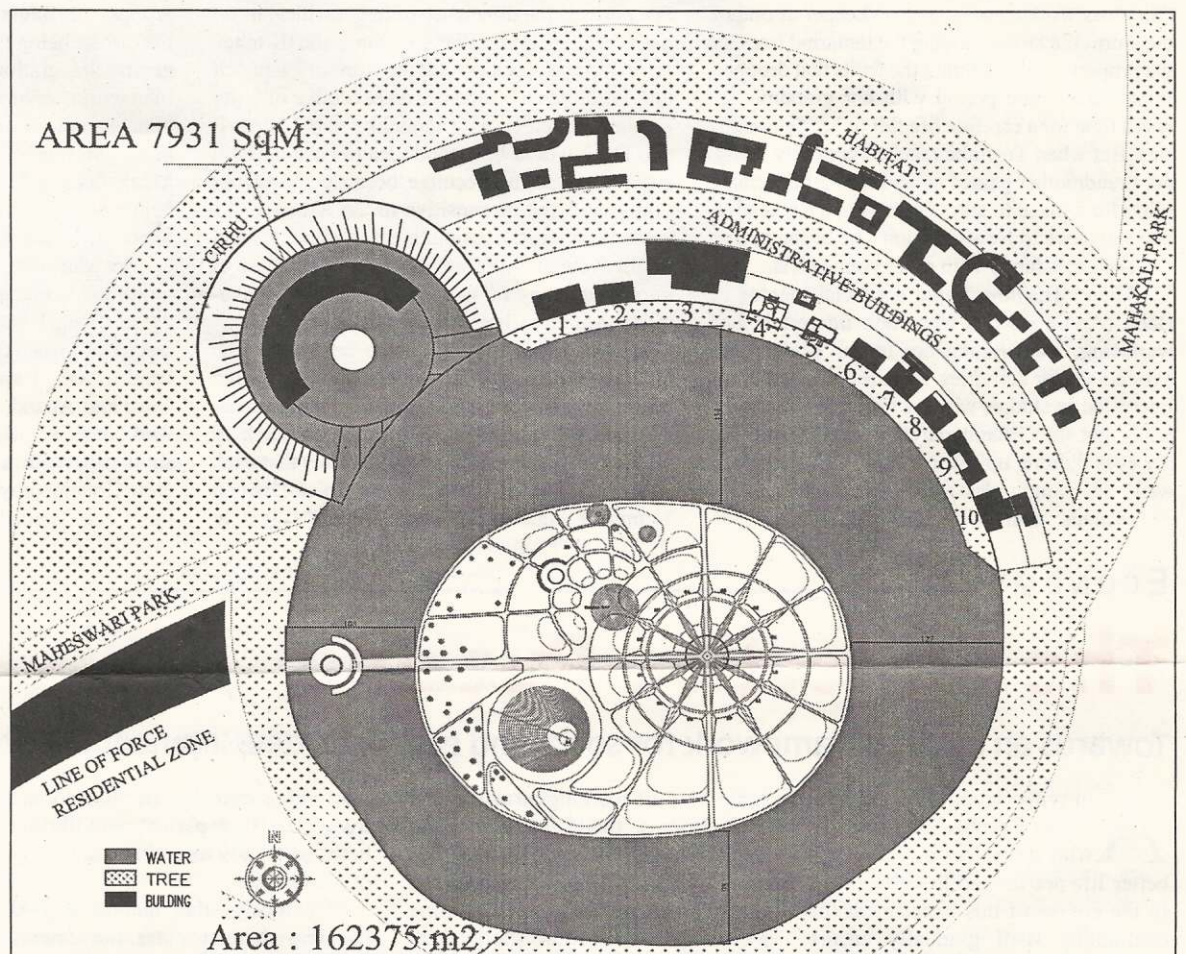
The reception of the Kraft report has not been as positive as some had hoped. Kraft's ideas had been floated as early as 1992, and ever since had been objected to. The pre-feasibility

study only added fuel to the fire. One of the objections was that the large lake – "the larger, the better" – would do away with the so-called outer gardens situated between the lake and the city, which Narad, at The Mother's request, had started in the early 1970's. "It was an extraordinary hour spent in the presence of massive, kingly trees, flowers and fragrances," wrote Narad of his visit to the outer gardens in January this year [see *Auroville Today* March 2004], remembering that many of them had grown in pits that had been dug by boys from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram who had come out at midnight to work by the light of lanterns.

the better" which implied the death of the outer gardens. For Kraft stated clearly that the size and depth of the proposed lake (in between 7.5 and 15 metres) would not even allow for large islands to be created to save the rare and beautiful trees planted by Narad – assuming that those trees could flourish on such islands.

There were other objections as well. One was to the costs of implementing the proposal, estimated by Kraft at US \$ 100 million. Even for a population of 50,000 people, many considered this amount obscenely excessive, particularly under Indian conditions. The argument that it would

come from groundwater resources were countered by Kraft as 'merely borrowing', stating that 'much more will be returned underground as long as Auroville and the lake exist when the lake is used as a component of the larger rainwater harvesting and water management system.' Similarly, the objection against excavating and moving 1.5 million cubic meters of earth that translates into 500,000 truck movements or 1 truck per minute for 12 hours a day over 7 days a week, for every day of 2 years, was rejected by Kraft who compared this figure to the truckloads of materials that would be needed to build a city of 50,000 people.



Latest design of the Matrimandir lake showing also the location of the future Centre for International Research for Human Unity and the Town Hall (buildings 4 and 5)

Roger Anger, however, was taken by the idea of a big lake. In 1999 he had the design of a large lake incorporated into the Auroville Master Plan. The then Matrimandir Coordination Group (MMCG) strongly objected. It led to the interference of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation whose member Dr. Subhash Kashyap was requested to mediate and find a solution. He came up with the pragmatic solution that a big lake could be created at the east side of the Matrimandir, where no gardens had yet been planted, and that the existing outer gardens would be separated from the oval by a small water body. "Both Roger and we have accepted this design," stated the MMCG in November 2001. However, Mr. Bala Baskar, the then Secretary of the Auroville Foundation, explained a few months later that this solution had an important condition: the actual dimensions of the lake would be as per the expert opinion obtained from engineers after a detailed study of the problem of water availability and storage feasibility. The Kraft study certainly qualified as an expert opinion. But his opponents could only respond with feelings of horror to Kraft's "the larger,

only amount to US \$ 2000/person over a population of 50,000 was countered by stating that Auroville's population at present only amounts to about 1,600 people and that the indications are that by the end of 2016 probably no more than 5,000 individuals will be living in Auroville, i.e. 10% of the targeted population of 50,000. To finance such a project now would be beyond the present means of Auroville, and if the slow development of Auroville's economy is taken into account, the future possibilities do not appear promising as well. Kraft countered this objection by pointing out that an assured water supply is vital for the City of the Future, and would only be a fraction of the costs of the other infrastructural requirements.

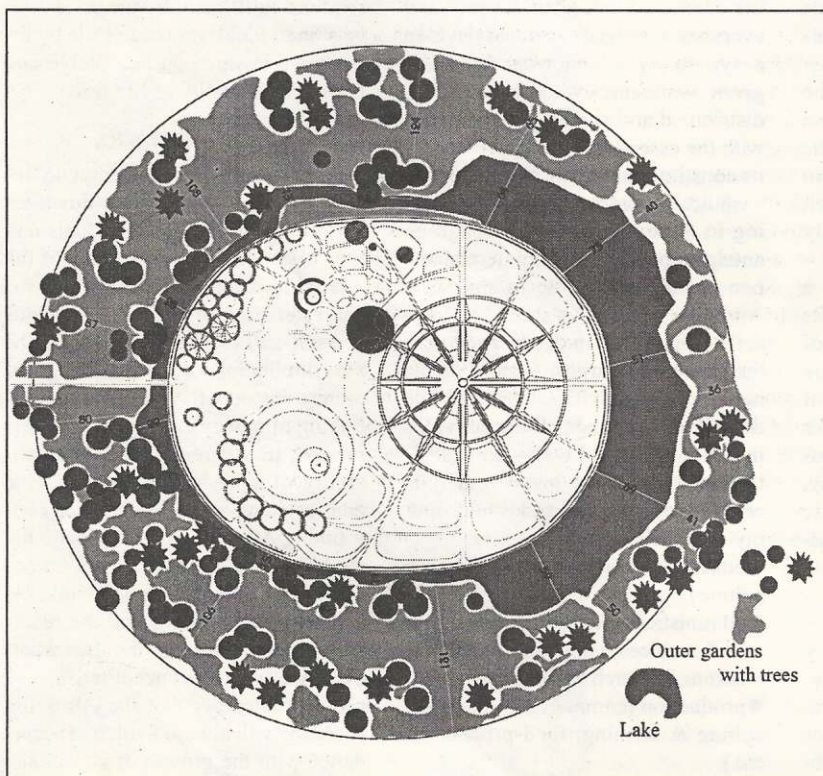
Others voiced that Auroville's neighbouring villages would not look kindly on Auroville if their traditional water catchments, such as Irumbai Lake and the kolams of Edayanchavadi, Kulapalayam and Alankuppam, would no longer be replenished but the run-off would be collected elsewhere, and warned of the political ramifications. Kraft's conclusion that his project would also ensure sufficient freshwater to its neighbouring environment was challenged.

The objections that the first filling of the lake, estimated at 1.3 million cubic meters of water, would need to

Last but not least there were objections to the assumptions on which the pre-feasibility study was based. The run-off, for example, has been calculated for a city of 50,000 people, while the present run-off is very little due to effective bunding and the creation of check dams. The use of the first aquifer for water storage was also questioned. In Auroville alone already over 100 bore wells interconnect the first, second and sometimes even the third aquifer; in the surrounding area there are many hundreds more. Water experts contend that, apart from the man-made leaks due to bore wells, other natural irregularities also exist in the strata between the aquifers, providing interconnections. In other words, while the sandstone would not exactly be a sieve, it would certainly contain less water than Kraft assumed. It was contended that Kraft's suggestion to decommission all of Auroville's existing bore wells and plug the resulting holes with clay, and subsequently dig about 200 new wells into the first aquifer, would not solve the problem. Moreover, the costs of such an operation were not incorporated in the projected costs of the Kraft proposal.

Views from Auroville's specialists

All these and other questions on the viability, accuracy, appropriateness



Design of the Matrimandir lake as agreed after mediation by Dr. Kashyap

Matrimandir

On May 1st, three members of the Working Committee met with members of the Governing Board in New Delhi to discuss difference of opinions on the decisions taken by the Governing Board in an informal meeting on February 17th in New Delhi, which have not yet been given effect by the Secretary of the Foundation. The meeting was reported as being harmonious.

Leave India notices

Leave India notices have been issued to two long-term Aurovilians. Bernard Borg, who has lived in Auroville for 36 years, has since left Auroville after having met with the Chief Immigration Officer in Chennai, who advised him to show his respect to India by leaving the country on his own accord. The Working Committee and Auroville Council, explaining the reasons given for the expulsion by the authorities, have made a public statement that "We are one body and each one of us is an indispensable element in spite of our difficulties without which Auroville cannot be whole. It is therefore important that Bernard comes back among us as soon as possible to fulfil Auroville's raison d'être as envisaged by The Mother". It called for letters of support to be written and sent to the Working Committee. The Leave India notice issued to the other Aurovillian has been temporarily withdrawn.

Unexpected rains

Thanks to a well-marked low pressure system which lay centred between the south east coast of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry received widespread rain. Auroville received 29.3 centimetres. The normal rainfall in May is 0.5 cm. According to the meteorological department, the last time Tamil Nadu received substantial rains during the summer months was in 1990. This amount of rain in May had not been registered in any year since 1984. The rain has helped to improve the ground water level, and many of the kolams in the area have been recharged.

New Kindergarten

The new kindergarten 'Nandanam' will begin in July 2004. It is located next to the existing Kindergarten and the Laxmi crèche in Center Field, so that there is a sharing of infrastructure.

Follow up economic seminar

Follow up meetings on the issue of increase of teachers' maintenance and others who depend on the community didn't turn out as hoped, as there weren't any volunteers to take up the dynamic work needed to make an impact.

European film festival

With the support of the Delegation of European Commission, New Delhi, three films were presented in the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium, Bharat Nivas: The Hundred Steps (Italian) directed by Marco Tullio Giordana; Blind Spot (Slovenian) directed by H.A. Wojcik Slak; and A Girl (Belgium) directed by D. Van Den Berghe.

Auroville railway station?

The Auroville Planning and Development Council reported its meeting with Pondicherry town planning authorities, who explained the expansion plans of Pondicherry and the idea to create a railway track to Mahabalipuram. Though the routing has not been defined, the track would in all likelihood cross Ravena and pass by New Creation.

and cost-effectiveness of the Kraft study were laid down by Auroville water specialists in a report of September 2003. But Kraft stated that none of the Aurovilians who raised the objections were sufficiently qualified to discuss the issues and that the topic could not be debated in public as it was technical in nature. Therefore Michael Bonke, a friend of Auroville, decided to ask the reputed German Landesgewerbanstalt Nürnberg (LGA) Institute for Environmental Geology and Residual Pollution to review the Kraft study. LGA critically assessed the study from an objective point of view. It approached the pre-feasibility study trying to identify those aspects that were not feasible or which needed improvement, so as to protect Auroville against accusations of acting irresponsibly and without regard for its humanitarian objectives, as by neglecting the needs of the neighbours or squandering funds.

The LGA study

The LGA study rejected the conclusions of the Kraft study. It stated that in several instances Kraft had proceeded from unrealistic assumptions, while concrete results based on investigations and measurements were missing. Insights gained from recent hydro-geological studies had to some extent not been taken into account. The central element of Kraft's study, the assumption of a leak-proof aquifer separated from lower lying formations by *Manaveli* clay, was considered untenable as the formation might not be continuous. The existence of natural 'holes' in the underground providing connectivity between the geological formations had already been shown in the Study of Groundwater Resources of Pondicherry and its Environs of 1987, made by the Geophysical Research Institute, Hyderabad. Moreover, LGA argued that a large number of wells in the greater area of Auroville also reach down to the second and perhaps even third aquifer. Even if all wells in the area under the control of Auroville could be completely and accurately dismantled as suggested by Kraft, a high number of bore-wells would remain in the neighbouring environs.

Besides having severe doubts about the utility of the lake for regeneration of the first aquifer, the LGA also regarded several aspects of the Kraft study regarding the lake's purifying abilities as unrealistic. Kraft's study assumed that the rainwater and surface water would be polluted and proposed eight large-scale and costly stages for treatment in order to protect the first aquifer. Of these eight stages of treatment, the lake was to be the seventh. LGA considered that the estimates of pollutant and nutrient loads of the Kraft study were insufficient and that the derived measures for treatment (the eight stages) were therefore baseless. LGA further argued that the secondary inflow of substances into the treated water of the lake – for example organic matter blown into it – could not be avoided.

A third view

Roger Anger, when faced with the strong and opposing views of Kraft and LGA, felt the need for a third view by an independent consultant. Dutch engineer Jeen Kootstra, a qualified hydrologist and geologist with extensive experience in geo-hydrology, employed by the reputed Royal Haskoning engineering office, was approached, and his involvement was approved by all parties – though Kraft felt that he lacked experience with rainwater harvesting. Jeen Kootstra was specifically asked to look at the Kraft study, the report made by the water experts from Auroville and the document produced by LGA, and was informed that if he would need to meet with Kraft or LGA, this would be arranged. Since some of these documents address environmental and socio economic issues, he also addressed these.

Prior to publication of the final report, Kootstra provided a preliminary report to both Kraft and LGA for comments. While LGA gave feedback on the draft, Kraft stated that he did not wish to waste his time on drafts, thereby disabling an opportunity for a dialogue prior to publication of the final report of Kootstra.

The Kootstra report in general agreed with the conclusions of LGA. It was also critical of the Kraft study for its lack of an exchange of views between authorities from Auroville and those from the surrounding villages who would be affected by the plans. "The concept has been worked out with little consideration for the social-cultural environment in which it has been carried out although the success of the concept in practice largely depends on this environment. There is no mention of an analysis of this social-cultural environment or its relevance for the design of the water management system as proposed."

Kootstra also found that the choice for a cen-

tralised system had not been justified as it does not allow for the staged development of Auroville, nor did it allow for intermediate adaptations but required a huge investment over a relatively short time frame. The Kraft concept was considered prone to failure as a whole as a result of the failure of one of its components, thus rendering the system almost unworkable. Finally the Kootstra study stated that the Matrimandir lake is not justified for the purpose of water purification. "There is insufficient justification for the size of the lake from the perspective of its function as a self-cleaning water body. For the need of purification there is no requirement of a lake and certainly not a lake of this magnitude...If the proposed size is required for reasons of architecture then the depth can be reduced."

Sadly, Kraft's response to the Kootstra report has been vicious. Kraft responded that the feasibility of its proposal had not been undertaken in a proper, scientific, logical, technically sound, unbiased and objective manner. Kootstra himself was accused of merely echoing the voices of Kraft's critics, lacking of objectivity as well as scientific temperament, and "therefore his conclusions are absolutely baseless." Last but not least Kraft stated that Kootstra's approach had been influenced by the persons who remunerated him – a statement which, apart from being insulting, is incorrect. But more unfortunate was that Kraft did not contribute much to the arguments of the matter in his review of the Kootstra report, but merely defended his own concept. "Having read Mr. Kootstra's proposals and recommendations we did not find any information that would lead us to reconsider our approach, concepts, calculations and designs. On the contrary, we found that our results and conclusions are well justified."

While the views of Roger Anger are still being awaited, a group of concerned Aurovilians met to

assess the situation. One idea that the group has come up with is to invite to Auroville, probably by early August, several eminent scientists from India and abroad for their advice on how to solve the existing water problem. Another idea is to request LGA to collaborate with specialists from India and come up with a detailed proposal to create one small section of the lake that would be large enough to evaluate the adequacy of the solutions proposed and the problems that may have to be solved. For in order to obtain a clear picture on the final size and dimensions of the lake, it will be necessary to have an understanding of all its implications.

Carel

AUROVILLE AND THE WORLD

Twins Re-united!

Born in 1968, two children of Mother and Sri Aurobindo who have grown up on opposite sides of the planet have met and will be getting together.

Auroville and the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) were both founded in 1968, based on the integral vision of Sri Aurobindo and Mother, Auroville near Pondicherry in India, and CIIS in San Francisco in the USA. Collaboration between the two organizations has always been floating around in the air, but it took the visit to Auroville of CIIS President Subbiondo in December 2003, and his enthusiastic reception by Aurovilians, to bring it to the ground. Struck by the presence of "the spirit of CIIS" even on the other side of the world, President Subbiondo said, "The two share the same founding mission and integral philosophy, and as a result both communities have similar values and aspirations. In Auroville you can't help but be keenly aware that the Institute is part of a much larger international vision."

He and the Aurovilians lost no time – at spontaneous meetings called by some of the Centre for International Research in Human Unity (CIRHU) team during his short visit, preliminary plans were

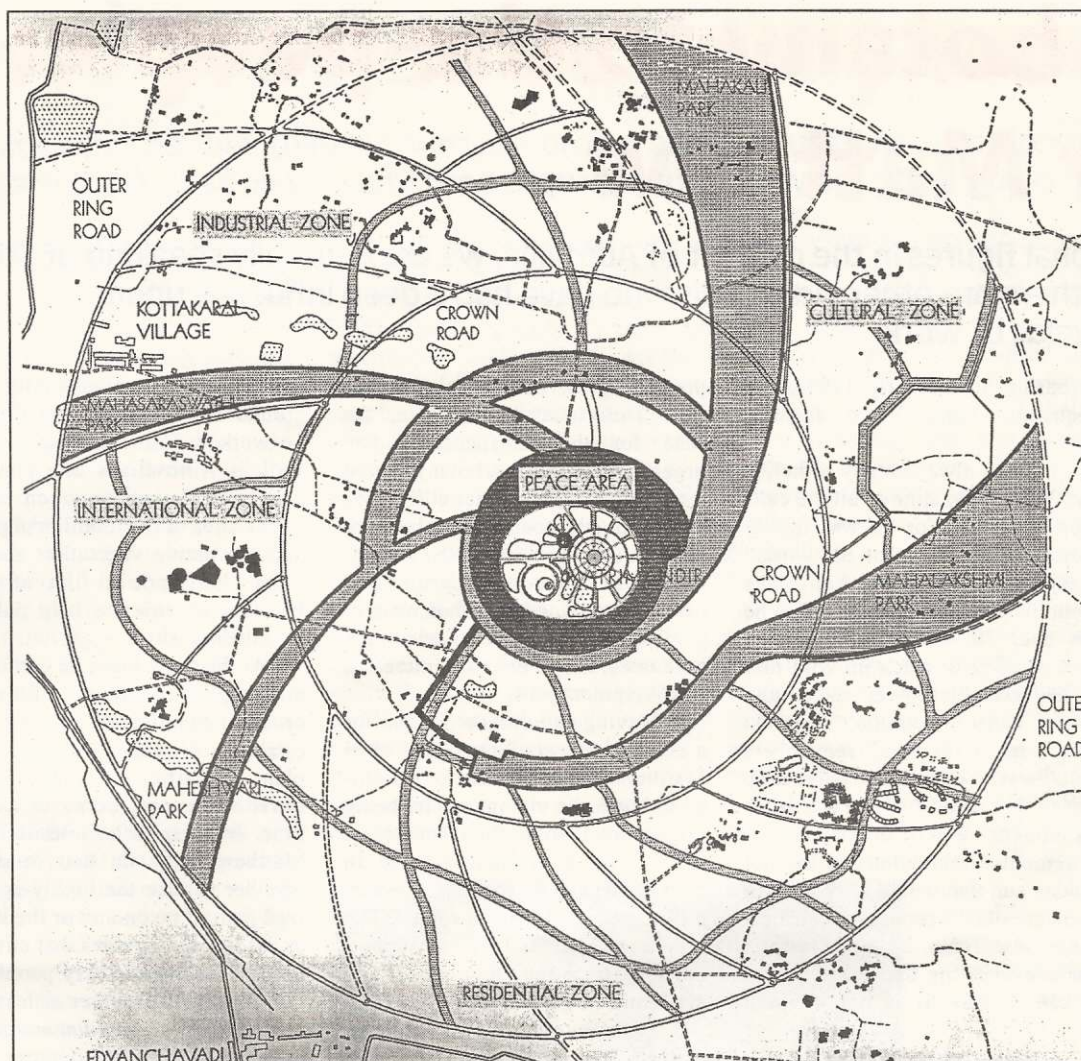
worked out. There were ideas for how CIIS and Auroville to combine their strengths: CIIS's academic organization and inquiry into the vision and Auroville's living experience and example. Meeting with enthusiastic

response among the CIIS staff and professors, the idea has already taken shape in the form of three CIIS trips to Auroville to be held in January 2005.

To make the network even more rich, the collaboration includes CIIS also working together with Ananda Reddy's Sri Aurobindo Centre for Advanced Research (SACAR) in Pondicherry to offer on-line in-depth courses in Sri Aurobindo's thought and expression.

On both sides of the planet, there is a rare enthusiasm and delight about this reunion. People see beyond the possibilities of improving and expanding their own programmes, and sense its potential to be a direct action for the supramental manifestation which is at the base of our lifework.

Bhavana



Map of the city area showing the four zones and the city centre with a big lake. The centre is called 'Peace area'

Bringing botany to the people: a portrait of Father Matthew

When we speak of inspirational figures in the context of Auroville, we are generally speaking of Sri Aurobindo and Mother. But there are other individuals who have had a deep influence upon Aurovilians in their chosen fields of work.

Father Matthew, who died recently at the age of 74, was one of the foremost botanists and environmental educationalists not only of Tamil Nadu (where he won the State's Best Teacher award in 1989) but of India. Based at St. Joseph's College in Trichy, for many years he was the Director of both The Rapinat Herbarium at the College and The Anglade Institute of Natural History at Shembaganur, near Kodaikanal; the former a research base in systematic botany, the latter its field and environmental station in the hills.

Aurovilians first came into contact with Father Matthew in the mid 1980s when greenworkers David and Jean were introduced to him at Shembaganur. Father Matthew had recently begun environmental awareness programmes at the Anglade Institute for teachers, members of NGOs and villagers. As Auroville was acquiring a growing reputation for environmental restoration, Father Matthew was delighted to present these Auroville greenworkers to his students: "I'm just classifying," he said modestly, "these people from Auroville are actually doing the work". In fact, he was often to contrast the efforts of overseas volunteers to preserve the Indian environment with the lethargy of the Indian establishment. Later he was to say that Auroville was the last hope for restoring the Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest in this part of the world.

It was to be the beginning of a long association based upon mutual admiration. "He loved Auroville," said David, "and we loved him. For many of us he was a real hero for his pioneering environmental efforts." "He was a heroic character whom I respected, admired and loved," says Paul, another Aurovillian who worked with him. "He was the warrior, experienced and calm in front of his tasks, I the novice clumsily trying to mount my horse and ride off in the right direction."

Over the past ten years Father Matthew made frequent visits to the community, which he used as a base for his botanical collecting activities both in Auroville itself and in the bioregion. Greenworkers like Jaap, Paul and Walter accompanied him on his field trips, showing him where to find remnants of the original forest in sacred groves and scattered remnants. Father Matthew also offered Walter invaluable advice on organizing a herbarium when Walter began setting up the Shakti

Herbarium in the early 1990s, and frequently helped him identify species.

"He was always ready to help," says Walter, "in spite of all the calls upon his time. For he was totally dedicated, he lived for his work." Everybody who knew him talks about his amazing energy. When he was over 70, much younger men were running to catch up with him as he scrambled over rocks and through dense vegetation. "To go on a field trip with him," remembers Paul, "was to experience a dynamic energy that could run and run without reference to food or rest, and yet he remained meticulous in the hot midday sun that would have many a younger botanist running for shade." "Real research," he once wrote, "takes everything that the ablest of us can deliver. It is not a union

preventing environmental destruction. "Unfortunately," he wrote, "the case for the indispensable and urgent role of tropical botany for the well-being of the planet still needs to be proved, especially in the tropics!" In fact, he felt that the state of botany in India was abysmal and often complained that botany students forgot their studies once they graduated: they were only interested in government jobs.

"Having endured the system for a couple of years," recalled Father Matthew many years later, "I decided to break the vicious circle: being young, and more foolish than now, I set out on a perilous voyage in stormy weather, meeting several unforeseen cyclones en route." The 'cyclones' included lack of support not only from the Government and academia in general but even from within his own college. "The writing on the wall was clear: plough the lonely furrow: there will be resistance from within and from without."

The key, as he saw it, to conserving the precious heritage of tropical biodiversity was to bring knowledge to the people. As he put it, "The knowledge of plants filtering down to ordinary people is the first step towards equipping them to be effective custodians of the environment." To this end he researched and brought out many publications, including simple field guides as well as the multi-volume *Illustrated Flora of the Tamilnadu Carnatic and The Flora of the Palni Hills*. At the time of his death he was working on *The Flora of North Tamilnad*, and he was about to publish a new version of the *Tamilnadu Carnatic* as well as a paper on *The Exotic Plants of the Coromandel Coast*. This would have included references to over 300 exotic species he had collected in Shakti, Matrimandir Gardens and Nursery and Pitchandikulam. "Such a publication would be very useful for us," says Walter, "but now I don't know if it will see the light of day: he had no obvious successors in this work."

He also edited an environmental newsletter – Shola – and ran monthly environmental awareness programmes for students, teachers and, most important, villagers for he felt that "in village-based, people-centred small projects lies the hope for the New Millennium". By February 2000, almost 50,000 trainees had passed through these programmes. "We are convinced," he wrote, "that the many places in south India from where the trainees come are centres of environmental sensitivity and potential ignition points for action."

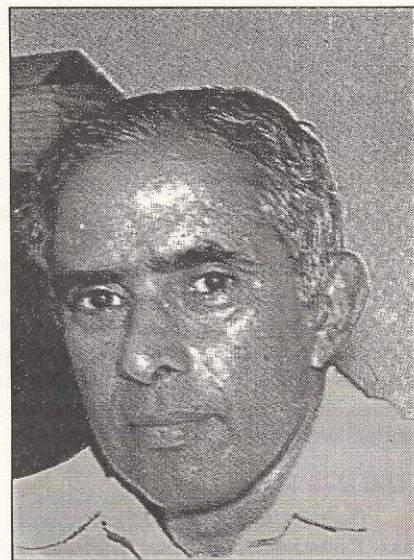
For many years he was also Vice-President of the Palni Hills Conservation Council (PLCC). The Palni Hills are part of the Western Ghats, one of about a dozen highly-threatened tropical forest 'hot spots' – unusually rich

storehouse of biodiversity – around the world. On the PLCC he worked with local people as well as Aurovilians like David, Jean and Navroz to green over 2,500 acres of the foothills to protect the native vegetation above (Joss also made a film of the PLCC's activities to help publicize their work).

At the same time, he continually emphasized the need for rigorous taxonomical studies to establish a sound foundation for plant classification. He himself never wrote one: he never had the time. In fact, as he tells it Father Matthew early on had to decide whether to take the highly-specialized path of taxonomy or the broader road of field guides that could be used to inform ordinary people. He did, however, discover at least one new species – *Jasminum matthewi* – at Oorani, about 20 kilometres to the north of Auroville.

"Although many will follow in his footsteps," says Paul, "no one person will be able to cover the breadth of ground that he did. He was truly unique, irreplaceable."

Father Matthew frequently clashed with authority (two of his published papers are titled 'How a new species was not described' and 'Is botany dying?'). In that sphere, "I have no friends, only enemies," he wryly recalled. Concerning wasted resources and projects ill-fitted to the uplift of the nation he wrote, "In a country where wildlife is rapidly getting decimated, there is one species that proliferates: the white elephant." "He had a great sense of humour," recalls David, "on field trips he was always telling anecdotes." "In spite of all the opposition and the immensity of the challenges



he wasn't at all bitter", says Walter. "If anything, he was an optimist."

Partly this was to do with the success of his training programmes, of which he was deservedly proud, partly with the utterly dedicated team which he had trained. The team included not only villagers who became highly-knowledgeable collectors, but also young and enthusiastic botanists. At the beginning of his 'mission' he wrote, "A new generation of tropical botanists, adequately trained, confident in themselves, with a clearly defined goal, should emerge." Years later he was to describe his team as "infectiously dedicated and committed young people who work daily over 8 hours at the desk and longer in the field. I have the utmost confidence that tropical botany is safe in the hands of such committed botanists."

His optimism may also have had something to do with his faith. None of the Aurovilians who worked with him ever thought of him as a Jesuit priest (he read widely and was very interested in *Mother's Flowers and Their Messages*). Yet he ended one of his prefaces by quoting Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit Order. "Those who are to come after the first companions will be better and do more."

AUROVILLE AND THE WORLD

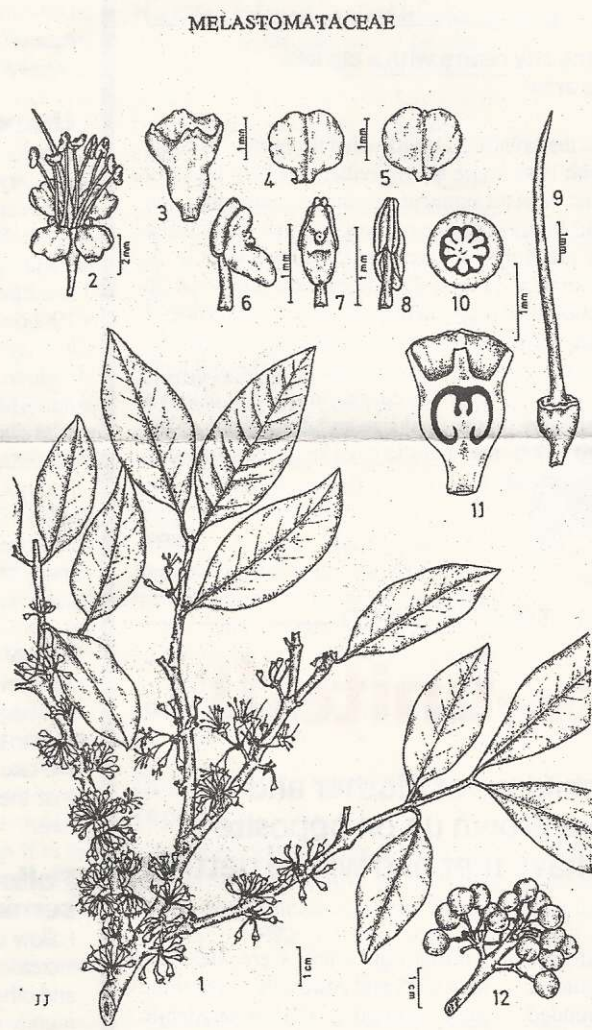
Botanical Barcelona

Auroville greenworker Paul Blanchflower attended the 2nd World Botanical Gardens Congress in Barcelona at the end of April. Here are his reflections on the event.

When the little fish swam over the dam and found a pond full of all sorts of fish – long, thin, small, fat, spiny, flat, big, yellow, pink, green and brown – it might have felt a little like an Auroville greenbelter walking into the 2nd World Botanical Gardens Congress. The definition of botanical gardens is wide and varied, and when 500 representatives from all of the world's gardens gather to discuss topics of common interest the result is an exotic mix by anyone's standards, even if you are accustomed to Auroville General Meetings or extraordinary sessions of the Forest Group's sub-committee on indigenous ecotypes. The whole spectrum was represented in Barcelona: the directors from old-established world-famous gardens rubbing shoulders with mad enthusiasts from the town gardens of Southern Australia, the aristocratic supporters of botanical garden charities meeting with activists working the earth in sub-Saharan Africa. It was an eclectic gathering.

Not all of it was up my street, and I

must admit to turning off the translation as the head of the Spanish network of germplasm conservation got midway through describing the 16,000 specimens he had collected and preserved at minus 40 degrees centigrade 30 feet below terra firma. But in general, the main speakers were captivating enough in talking of new and interesting developments in the global movement to conserve the planet's plant heritage. The main theme of the congress was the ecosystem approach to conservation which, as it turns out, is exactly the work that is going on in Auroville's greenbelt through the work in Pitchandikulam, Shakti and the Auroville Botanical Gardens. In fact, the presentation of our work was extremely well received and numerous people approached me afterwards to express support and interest for the work we are doing. It confirmed beyond doubt that the work we are involved with concerning the conservation of the Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest (TDEF) is at the cutting edge in the world of Plant Conservation and



Memecylon tinctorium or the Ironwood tree. Mother gave the name 'Miracle' and 'Air of Auroville' to the flowers. Drawing from illustrations on the *Flora of the Tamilnadu Carnatic* by K.M. Matthew. Published by The Rapinat Herbarium, Tiruchirapalli, 1982

schedule of 40 hours a week but a sweating proposition of 18 hours a day." He sounds like a man who was driven and, indeed, Father Matthew himself frequently used the word 'mission' to describe his work. What was that mission?

Father Matthew saw that tropical vegetation has a decisive role to play in the future of the globe as tropical forests are one of the great storehouses of biodiversity. But these forests are fast being destroyed through ignorance and greed. "There need be no rivalry," he wrote, "between the urgent work for the immediate subsistence needs of the Third World and the mediate one of improvement of the life support systems of the planet, which is what tropical botany is all about." Father Matthew believed that Indian botanists should play a key role in

How shall we provide our daily food?

What do Aurovilians want to eat? What do they think of Auroville grown and produced food compared to food grown and produced outside Auroville? What are the overall community food requirements? How are these going to change in the future?



Vegetable basket from Buddha's Garden

It was to try and answer some of these questions that the Auroville Food Survey was undertaken in January and February of this year. It was carried out as part of the Farm Assessment Research which was supported partly by the Government of India and partly by Stichting de Zaaier. The overall aim was to study the production and consumption of food in Auroville with the object of providing data from which plans could be made about the overall development of farms for the next five years.

A wide range of different sorts of information was obtained, both from individual Aurovilians and those involved with various kinds of food processing. The latter included those responsible for units making food items for sale, running restaurants/guest houses as well as those involved with community kitchens. Information from individual Aurovilians was obtained through a questionnaire which was distributed both on paper through various places in

Auroville and by email. Some 7% of the adult population (101 individuals) replied. Most of the individuals involved with food processing (usually the coordinator of a unit, restaurant, guest house or community kitchen) were personally interviewed. Where possible statistical information was obtained about their purchase of food. Further detailed statistical information was obtained from the two food distributors – Pour Tous and HERS – in order to obtain data about the volume and expenditure on different types of food consumed in Auroville over the last year.

However, the statistical information obtained was not of sufficient detail to provide the hoped for information about the overall size and value of the Auroville food market. It was also inadequate for making future predictions concerning the volume of food that was likely to be needed. While most food processors have computerised accounts, only one or two had computerised stock control. Pour Tous does not have an integrated statistical information system and although some data was obtained and analysed, this provided only a very partial view of some items. The information obtained was therefore very piecemeal and showed the need for an integrated information system so that reliable overall plans can be made.

Be Aurovillian, buy Aurovillian

The most striking result from both individual Aurovillian consumers and those involved with food processing, is the very strong loyalty displayed towards using Aurovillian-grown and produced food. Despite the perceived high price and unreliability of supply,

the organic and what are perceived as special 'Aurovillian/spiritual' qualities of Auroville produced food are greatly valued. Statements such as 'I prefer Auroville farmers to produce the food as it has a different energy to it somehow' explained why many consumers, both individuals and food processors, made a lot of effort to obtain and use this food, despite the difficulties they encountered by doing so. Several individuals thought that Auroville 'should become completely self-sufficient in food'. However, while this is a laudable aim, this would imply a vast change in food habits. Many of the vegetables and fruits which Aurovilians like to eat cannot be grown in this area, or only at certain times of the year.



Racks of Auroville-processed jams at Pour Tous

Although many respondents were aware of the individual benefits of eating organically-grown and produced food, the benefits to the environment as a whole were not always appreciated.

High prices

One of the problems with Auroville-grown and produced food is the high and inflexible prices. This was a particular problem for the restaurants, many of whom are under immense financial pressure to keep costs down so

that they can provide affordable meals. On average, Auroville's produce was estimated as being 50% more costly than in Pondicherry. For the food-producing units, paying high prices implies a high cost rice of their products, which make them only available to the very rich and therefore beyond the reach of most local people and many Aurovilians.

While many individuals (particularly those eating in community kitchens) are willing to spend more money on what they perceive as good food grown and produced in Auroville, questions were asked as to whether these high prices are really necessary. Some think there is profiteering going on, especially in the case of processed food items. The high price of Auroville-grown and produced food was felt most intensely by those Aurovilians entirely dependent on a (generally acknowledged as too low) maintenance provided by the community. As part of

this maintenance is made available on an account which can only be used in Auroville, these Aurovilians felt the added pressure of having to do most of their shopping in Pour Tous, where prices are generally higher than in the surrounding shops.

Reliable supply

Restaurants complain about the unreliable supply from Auroville farmers and solve this by using first the more available non-Auroville grown food and supplementing it with Auroville-grown food as and when it becomes available. 'Whenever farmers do come to offer their produce, I gladly take it because of the high quality and the feeling that I am supporting the Auroville community. However, the Auroville supply is unreliable, but once it is available I will gladly pay a little extra, and mention on the menu where the ingredients come from.'

Restaurants also observed their need for a 'one stop shopping' where they can be assured of obtaining all their food needs in one go.

Support for the farmers

There is awareness that Auroville does not have an economy that supports its farmers. While in many countries in the world farming is subsidized, in Auroville this is only done sporadically, mainly through the efforts of one of Auroville's commercial units and by obtaining outside funding, such as from the Dutch Stichting de Zaaier.

That Auroville produce is often too costly for the Aurovilians who depend on an Auroville maintenance hasn't escaped the general awareness. As

one of the restaurant executives observed: 'I think it's a crying shame that we have not been able to introduce a system by which the farms are encouraged to produce all the milk and that Aurovilians use it. When I see in the Auroville News that Aurovilians don't buy the Auroville milk because it's Rs2 more expensive than in the village then I think that's something absolutely wrong in the way we run our economy.'

It was also found that Auroville food could be promoted better in Pour Tous. It should be more clearly labelled as such and should have more information about the nature of the ingredients and where they come from.

What next?

In addition to the Auroville Food Survey, a Farm Assessment Process has been ongoing to review the entire Auroville farming. This survey was also supported by the Dutch Stichting de Zaaier, and its results are still being awaited. The outcome of this survey should ideally help farmers to know what needs to be done in order to produce sufficient food to meet as much of the demand for Auroville grown food as possible, reliably and at affordable prices.

Secondly, the marketing of Auroville food should be improved. This would include exploring how products could be better labelled and the standards with regard to how it was grown and produced clearly set out. Further information about the benefits of organic food, both for individuals and the environment, also needs to be made more widely available.

Thirdly, the Auroville statistical information needs to be greatly



Aurosoya's tofu at Pour Tous

improved with a computerised integrated information system, especially for Pour Tous which is the main distributor of food in Auroville. This would enable more precise planning as well as making it easier to respond to market changes more quickly.

Fourthly, any discussions about the Auroville economy must include an appreciation of the needs of the farms and farmers and how they can best be supported to produce food for Auroville.

These and other suggestions will be discussed in the light of the results from this survey and from the Farm Assessment Research. With this information a practical plan of action can be created and implemented so that the original aim – of helping Auroville become more sustainable in its food production – can be achieved.

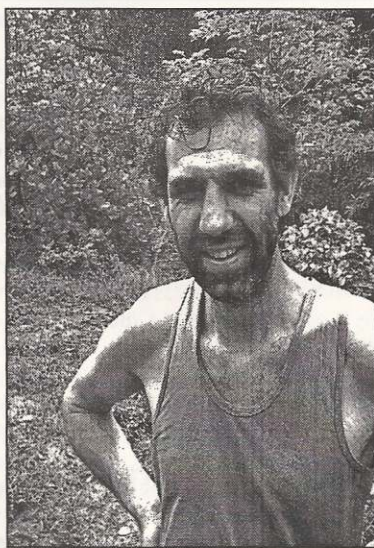
Priya Vincent

For further information contact Priya.priya@auroville.org.in

Restoration Ecology: Auroville is more firmly on the world stage now. It is up to us to continue this work through supporting each other in Auroville and offering ideas to the outside world as to how they can interact with us.

Equally as important as the main speakers were the parallel and poster sessions. These gave the chance to meet people with common interests, to network, socialize, share common interests and experiences, to discover that out there in the world there are many people who share similar aims in trying to preserve the world's genetic heritage. Botanical Gardens are in a wonderful position to contribute to this endeavour. Already the title 'Botanical Gardens' invokes a sense of order and respect, the expectation of beauty, a feeling of industry and diligence. Now more and more gardens are putting energy into education as they become aware of the need of society to be informed and of the potential of living landscapes to inspire and teach. The resources of botanical gardens are immense and the knowledge contained within them needs to be made accessible and relevant to the issues that are confronting society at this present juncture.

Auroville is no different; the experiences of the last thirty-five years have produced tangible results as well as a multitude of questions and possibilities that, given support, can be



Paul

developed further to produce workable solutions to major challenges. For example, the work with the TDEF can be developed to present solutions to water resource management, livelihood development and wasteland development.

So the message that for us emerged from the Congress is to keep going with our work to restore the TDEF and to continue to keep trying ways of reestablishing it outside the boundaries of the Auroville Township. We need to go right ahead with the development of the Auroville Botanical Gardens as a place of beauty and inspiration that can function on

all levels – local, national and global – promoting the needs of the environment, and offering solutions to people's needs. All of this will in turn lead to conserving the diversity of the planet while, at the same time, alleviating the poverty of the world's most disadvantaged people. High ideals, but when one is at a global event one is encouraged to think in these terms and Auroville is, without doubt, relevant at this level.

Of course, there was also the marvellous city of Barcelona. This city of amazing culture brings a smile to your face as you wander along the vibrant streets, observing the buildings of the past and the street artists of the present, the architecture of Gaudi alongside the medieval town hall (where the mayor invited us for champagne), the restaurants full of good food, the gardens with their marvels of Mediterranean flora. But perhaps I should wrap up here by answering the question, 'In a nutshell, what was it I brought back from Barcelona?' Well contacts, possibilities, encouragement, inspiration, confidence, enthusiasm and energy, all of which will be needed to carry out the hard task of manifesting some of these exciting ideas in the material world.

So we can say that the fish swam over the dam and found a wonderful collection of diverse fellows with whom it will be fun to swim with out to sea.

Paul

Dynamic neighbours – Adishakti

The well-known Laboratory for Theatre Art Research charts new territory in the performing arts.

“When you go from Auroville to the Tindivanam-Pondicherry main road, it is to your right, more or less opposite the Auroville community of Auro-Orchard,” says the soft voice in the telephone receiver. Following directions, I pass the rickety gate bearing the inconspicuous sign ‘Adishakti.’ Behind it are the grounds of the Adishakti Theatre Company, managed by Veenapani Chawla, the owner of the voice. We had asked for an interview to learn more about the neighbours that Auroville is attracting – in this particular case, about a neighbour who has been closely interacting with Auroville for many years.

Veenapani still being busy, actor Vinay

if I did things my way. Inwardly though, I feel I am part of both communities and in particular in the last decade, I have deeply interacted with both.” She feels that Auroville has given her much, having used its spaces for her performances and worked with Aurovilian actors and others. “All my premieres take place in Auroville,” she explains. “The Auroville audience, critical as it is, is an essential first test for anything new I have to offer. And I benefit from all the experiments going on in Auroville.”

As if to make her point, the sonorous sounds of a saxophone drift in through the window. Pascal, an Aurovilian, is training to accompany a new theatre piece. He has been working with Adishakti since 2001. Another Aurovilian who regularly interacts with Adishakti is lights designer Jean Legrand, in charge of Adishakti’s stage lighting and of the maintenance and upkeep of its performance spaces. “But one of the earliest connections,” says Veenapani, “was with Igor, a former Aurovilian who sold me this particular piece of land. In the 1980’s he once told me of his dream that I would build a theatre here. Then I shuddered, because it seemed such a huge responsibility involving so much energy. But in the 1990’s the situation changed. I had closed every chapter in Mumbai, and thought that theatre was over for me. But then my student Vinay Kumar and some others insisted that they wanted to continue working with me.” She reconsidered. “At the same time someone who had seen my work made a donation for the land, and that proved to be the beginning.” Other donors followed, such as the Department of Culture of the Government of India, the Bryan Guinness Charitable Trust, the Sir Ratan Tata Trust, the Times Foundation and the ‘Dinamalar Group of Publication.



Vinay Kumar beating rhythm in Ganapathi

Kumar shows us around. The plot houses a few residential buildings, a tastefully designed guesthouse centred around a small open courtyard and the recently inaugurated new theatre, an impressive structure constructed out of dressed lava rock. All buildings incorporate, in The Mother’s words, ‘beauty in simplicity’. Asked about it, Vinay explained that the entire Adishakti team has for years been doing research into construction technologies. The special lava rock, unique to Calicut, Kerala, was identified as the best material for the construction of the theatre. Its design is a fine blend of the classicism of ancient temple architecture borrowed from the traditional Koothambalam, the performance spaces in south-Indian temples, and of modern acoustic design technology. “And the quality of the finishing was obtained because of our personal supervision,” he laughs. Obviously, also a lot of non-theatre related hard physical work has gone into the build-up the Adishakti premises.

“So why haven’t you joined Auroville?” is the first question I fire at Veenapani, once we are comfortably seated in an alcove of her living room. She smiles and there is a kind of faraway look as if to relive a treasured memory. “I had met The Mother in 1969. Meeting her was like falling in love forever. But when I wrote to her for permission to join the Ashram, she told me that the time had not yet come. When she passed away in 1973, my reason for joining the Ashram dropped away, because I could not imagine being there for any other reason than for her physical presence. Now it doesn’t make sense to be part of an institution and give up my freedom.” It is this belief which has held Veenapani from joining Auroville. “I felt my work would go faster

The Adishakti Theatre Company is well-known for its experimental work in theatre. “Research is the driving force behind our work,” explains Veenapani. “We are not interested in performing in the traditional ways. Instead, we attempt to make connections between traditional and contemporary theatre.” Not confined to the academic and theoretical, Adishakti tries to learn from the tradition: for example the ways it uses space and time, the modes in which the actors communicate, not only through the spoken text but also through the images of the body; the particular kind of music to be used and how it is used. She explains, “If we consider movement, we ask ourselves why they are using those particular stances and what happens to the body if we change that stance. What is the reason that the

rich theatre tradition has a lot to offer. “The idea is not to imitate them,” she clarifies, “but to understand their reasons, and using those same reasons with different effect, create our own contemporary language.”

“At another level we study the connections with other disciplines, such as cinema, martial arts, dance and music with the objective to create an integrated piece of art where the boundaries of theatre are fading into something else.” Veenapani call this ‘the synaesthesia of art forms’, leading to what she believes is the most definitive art. “These art forms become ‘signifiers’.” She takes as an example her production of *Ganapati* in 2001. “Here, rhythm was the signifier. Four *Mizhavus*, – huge egg shaped drums normally used as an accompaniment in *Koodiyattam* (a ‘ritualistic’ Sanskrit drama performed in Kerala) – provided the dynamic text throughout the piece. But it did not stop at that. The external expression of the artist’s thought and emotion (stimulated by a pattern of rhythmic breathing) were expressed through images created by his body.” She goes on to explain how the story aspect of the play was used as a reference through minimal verbal text. “All the rest was done through the inferences made through rhythm.”

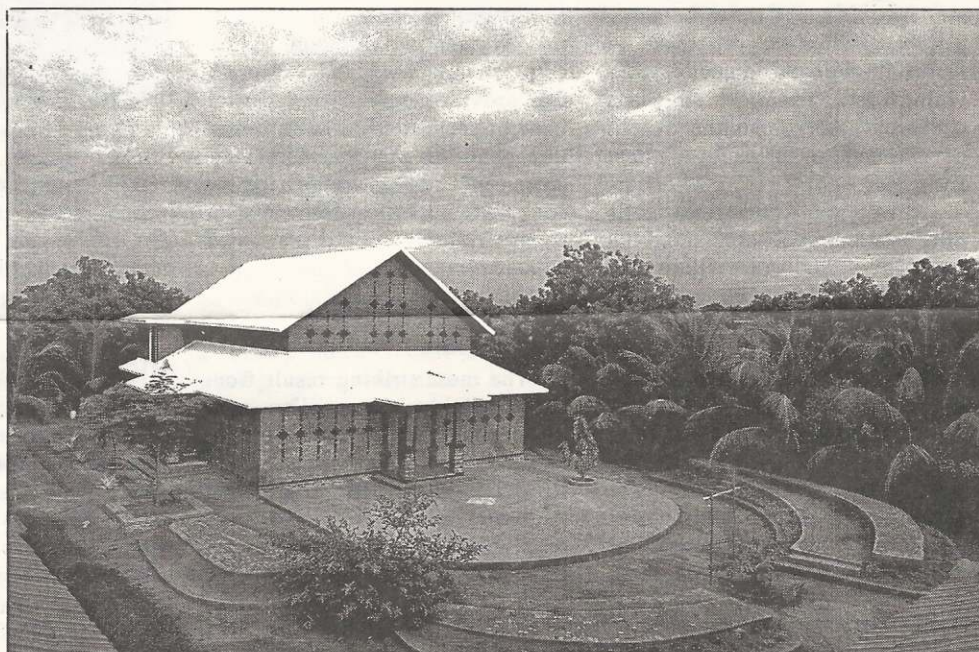
Adishakti’s research does not stop at the contemporary performing arts, but also extends to other disciplines. For her work *Brhannala*, Veenapani studied new physics to better understand traditional Indian figures such as Siva’s ‘*Ardhanaarisvara*’ form (half male and half



Veenapani Chawla

text, you have to give it very sparingly, you can’t have text in the same quantity as visual images. They have to balance each other.

“If I would work on a play of Sri Aurobindo, I would leave out many lines so as to retain a minimal terse and pregnant text.



Aerial view of the new theatre at Adishakti

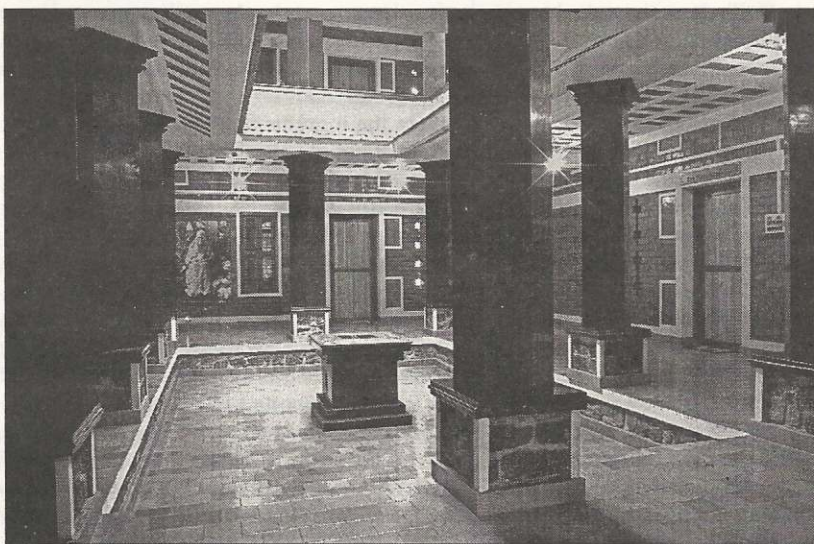
female) that represents the bipolar nature of the created world. She explains, “*Brhannala* is the name Arjuna, the principal warrior of the Mahabharata, takes when he becomes a woman during the 13th year of his exile. This role was enacted by Vinay Kumar, who was able to transform effortlessly from macho warrior to swaying danseuse in a moment.” A new area of research that Veenapani is currently busy with is about the relationship between mathematics and performance for Adishakti’s current work *The Hare and The Tortoise*.

With all that research, would there be some possibility to perform any of the sorely neglected plays of Sri Aurobindo? Veenapani thinks there is, but not in the form they are at present. “You see, film has created a very visually literate public. Those visual expectations are now extended to a work of theatre and the need for visual stimulus has become larger than the need for text. If you look at the plays that are being written today, you’ll see a different quality of literature, which I consider inferior because it is no longer heightened verse but very naturalistic. The sensibility has come down, there is no poetry. But the reason that this exists is that the public can no longer digest long dramatic texts. So if you give

When I did the play *Savitri*, using selections from Sri Aurobindo’s epic poem, I made it too long. It was a one-hour play, but there was too much text and the audience retreated. They were barely able to understand one line before the next one came. So for a play I would select the most pregnant lines, and deliver them as heightened verse should be delivered, allowing the text to resonate and speak for itself.”

Now that the new theatre of Adishakti is operational, expectations are that its role as training centre and laboratory for inter-disciplinary studies will intensify. In the winter of 2003 Adishakti took a first step in this direction when it initiated on its campus a month long workshop cum symposium cum performance festival. At the heart of this program was a dialogue between a Noh performer from Japan, a traditional Koodiyattam artiste from Kerala and Adishakti’s own team. Observing and participating in this endeavour were artists, film makers, writers, cultural psychologists, musicians, actors, academics and philosophers from India, Australia, Japan, the UK and USA. The workshop gave expression to Adishakti’s aspiration “to revitalize performance itself as a powerful bridging agent, as a route between disparate worlds and knowledge systems.”

“Do you believe that what you aspire to do has Mother’s blessings?” unable to resist, I ask Veenapani this parting question. “I hope so but, honestly, I do not know,” she replies candidly. “I can only say that whatever has happened to me, whatever I am, all the best is because of that meeting with Mother. If I hadn’t met Her I would have been a very different person,



The courtyard of the Adishakti guesthouse

tradition constantly breaks daily behaviour patterns, that the actors do not stand and walk like ordinary people do or use other gestures like we do in daily life?” Veenapani believes that these are very fundamental questions, and that India’s

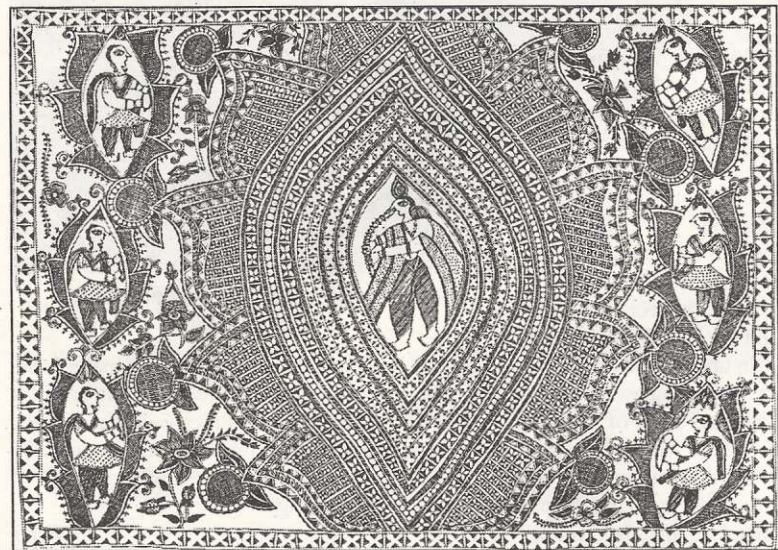
The art of Mithila

In May and June Aurelec cafeteria is hosting an extraordinary exhibition of paintings and designs made by the women of Mithila

Mithila was an ancient kingdom of eastern India. It was the birthplace of both Buddha and his contemporary, Mahavira, founder of Jainism. It was also the place, legend has it, where Rama married Sita. Today Mithila is part of Bihar, yet in a few remote villages the unique art of this culture, dating back at least 3,000 years, continues as an integral part of daily life.

Mithilan society is matriarchal. Only the

ovated regularly, even the beautiful Mithilan murals are regularly erased and have to be repainted. However, today there is an attempt to preserve the art and bring it to a larger audience through government grants and commissions: the former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had an old Mithilan lady paint the walls of her house and Mithilan women are today decorating the lobbies of prestigious hotels. What effect this will have upon the traditional art remains to be seen.



Krsihna appears here as the masculine principle filling up a yoni (the female genitals)

women are allowed to draw and paint pictures. There are regular gatherings of young men to which girls who want to marry come. A particular type of picture, a *khobar*, is used to indicate a girl's proposal of marriage to a young man she is interested in. The girl will first send gifts, wrapped in paper decorated with *khobars*, to her intended. A few days before the marriage itself, a large *khobar* mural will be painted on the wall of their bedroom.

The *khobar* is intended to evoke fertility. While it takes as its subject-matter exemplary love stories, like that of Siva and Sita or of Krishna and the gopis, the basic design is heavy with Tantric symbolism. The recurring image or reference is of the lingam, or phallus, penetrating the circular yoni (female genitals). In many Mithilan paintings and drawings this is transformed into Krishna playing a penile-looking flute in the middle of a lotus flower. Powerful female deities like Kali and Durga are also frequently depicted. The other form through which Mithilan art is expressed is the *aripana*. These are mandalas which, like south Indian *kolams*, are drawn on the ground to ward off evil and invoke prosperity.

This emphasizes the essential impermanent nature of traditional Mithilan art: floors are swept daily, and as the mud walls of the houses are ren-

Govardhana, surrounded by gopis and all manner of natural abundance; a semi-abstract representation of the cosmos as a grove of bamboo (bamboo is another symbol of fertility); a wonderfully dynamic 8-armed Durga defeating a demon; and a striking image of Kali decapitating herself and feeding off her own blood while a couple lies supine beneath her foot. Some of the drawings are drawn in black, in others the outlines are filled in with vibrant colours, often blue and red.

What makes this art even more remarkable is the simplicity of the means. The 'brush' is often no more than a rice straw, the black ink is soot mixed with cow-urine or water, the red was traditionally obtained from local clay, the yellow from carnation pollen. In other words, the Mithilan women artists are always intimately connected with the natural world which they celebrate through their drawings. At the same time, as the drawings are designed to invoke the presence of the gods it is understood that the women should not work upon a painting or drawing unless they are in a state of yogic surrender and devotion.

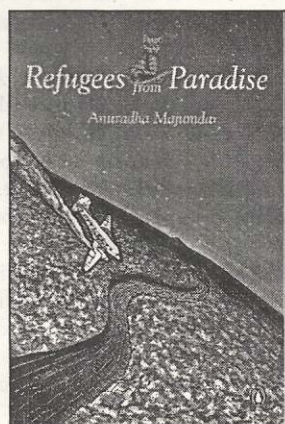
In this sense, the simple rural women of Mithila can be seen as the meeting-point not only of past and present, of the real and of symbolic, but also of humanity and the gods:

Alan

BOOK ANNOUNCEMENT

Refugees from Paradise

This second novel by Anuradha Majumdar is an account of everyday life. The paradise question is far from over. Does it still exist? What about those living outside it? Milton is still on the track, even if it means to reincarnate as a cat and take up lodgings at Casa Mira, an unusual house of tenants in London town. He adopts one of them as his protégé: Jonathan Ferry, an aspiring filmmaker, haunted by a story that he heard as a child. But when Anjali Mehra, a television journalist from New Delhi, arrives hunting after another one, Milton falls into unbiased adoration and adopts her at once. Spotting paradise is a complex affair. Jonathan and Anjali's stories merge inside an old man's eyes in a village fair in Bengal. All this because Krishnagopal, the great baul singer, once rescued a wounded pilot who fell out of the sky, and kept him alive. But when his co-pilot suddenly enters the story, everything splinters. Milton keeps track



of every sticky detail, and as tea and terror brush past his whiskers, he discovers a few remarkable things. The plot is spiced with Aurobindonian concepts and has highly amusing little aphorisms like 'Reality has a thin skin, but a very thick head.'

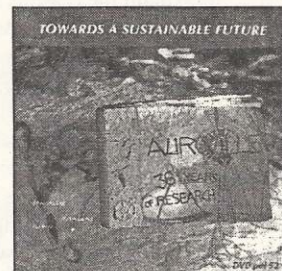
Excerpt:

If you are reading this, then of course, the story must be told. It's the one that tilts inside Jonathan's head, every morning, as he wakes up. He gets out of bed and shuffles off to the bathroom, splashes his face with water, eyes scrunched, eyelashes dripping rain. He shakes his head impatiently and looks up at the mirror. That is when the story gazes back at Jonathan from miles behind his eyes. It's been there since he was fifteen, perched inside his memory like a little blue egg waiting to hatch.

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www.penguinbooksindia.com
Price Rs 295

36 years environmental research on film

About 8 months ago, Auroville's Centre for Scientific Research received a grant from the Indian Space and Research Organisation for documenting in video format 36 years of environmental research in Auroville and its surroundings. On Tuesday, May 12 the 52 minutes long film, made by professional French cineastes who are also Aurovilians, Basile and Claudine, had its premiere at the Centre for Scientific Research. Entitled 'Towards a Sustainable Future', it shows Auroville's work on water harvesting and afforestation, with emphasis on the aim to replant the indigenous tropical dry evergreen forest. It also shows the systems of alternative energy promoted by Auroville: the windmills



for water pumping, ferro-cement technology and biogas generation; adobe construction and the earth-brick machines developed in Auroville; and Auroville's work in promoting solar energy technology in India. The video has made good use of photo and video material from the early days of Auroville, showing the development through a series of compelling images and talks. Central to the theme is the 'voice' of the Banyan, the tree at the centre of Auroville, which saw it all: the goodwill, the failures and the successes.

The video is highly recommended. Contact csr@auroville.org.in for more information.

Carel

TONGUE-IN-CHEEK

AVToday discovers its unique selling point

I hear you have an innovative idea to increase your income and subscriber base.

Absolutely. Modern books on management stress that for a product to be successful it should have a unique selling point (USP). So we in the Auroville Today team have been asking ourselves, 'What is the USP of Auroville Today?' Of course, we're the only publication covering events in Auroville for an international readership. But is that enough of a USP? Then it struck us. Why not offer our readership something absolutely unique, something no other newspaper or magazine in the whole world offers? Something that would really set us apart.

And what's that?

A double lifetime subscription.

Pardon?

You see, quite a number of periodicals offer their subscribers a lifetime subscription in return for a large one-time payment. But what happens when you pass on and subsequently reincarnate? In your next life the New York Herald Tribune or Embroiderers Monthly will no longer be dropping through your letter-box. You'll have to start subscribing all over again. Whereas, with our double lifetime subscription offer, in your next lifetime you will continue to receive Auroville Today as if nothing untoward had intervened.

How does that work?

We're still working out the details, but basically it's simple. First you send us a very substantial contribution (we're talking lakhs of rupees, serious dollars). In return, we will send you instructions ensuring that you continue to receive Auroville Today in your next incarnation.

What kind of instructions?

Obviously we're not going to disclose that to all and sundry. Suffice it to say that the instructions relate to the lights and other clues that you should follow through the various bardos (see *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*) to ensure that you are reborn at the right time and in a country with a reliable postal service.

But if I take out such a subscription, what guarantee is there that Auroville Today will still be a going concern in my next lifetime?

Good point. To guarantee a seamless continuity we are trying to ensure that the entire Auroville Today team reincarnates in the same place at the same time so that we can continue publication. This is one of the small details we haven't quite worked out, but that's just a matter of time. Of course, this doesn't mean that there won't be changes - Carel, for example, has expressed a strong wish not to write about the economy or organization in his next incarnation and I'd like to start a sports page - but, basically, with a double lifetime subscription you can be sure that in your next life you'll be reading the same writers who you've come to love and admire in this

one.

I don't quite understand the...maths. For example, not all your subscribers will pass on or reincarnate at the same time. Nor presumably, barring a tragic accident, will the present editorial team depart this life together. And even if the team manages to reincarnate at the same time and the same place, you'll need a few years before you're up and running again. So how can you ensure uninterrupted publication and delivery of Auroville Today through two lifetimes?

Another excellent point. Suffice it to say that the instructions you receive as a double lifetime subscriber will ensure that you reincarnate at precisely the right moment to enjoy our unique extended service.

But perhaps...

Yes?

Well, perhaps not all your present subscribers would want to receive Auroville Today in their next lifetime.

Pardon?

Well, I mean, you know...O.K. forget it.

So can I put you down for a double lifetime subscription? We accept all internationally-recognized credit cards.

Well...

Perhaps you'd prefer our twenty year subscription offer?

What's that?

Well, over the years many of our readers have come to look upon the editorial team as family, people whom they've grown to love and trust. We understand this, so we've come up with another unrepeatable offer. When you sign up for our twenty year subscription package, one of us will actually come to stay with you for three weeks. For three whole weeks we'll be part of your family! Every morning, there we'll be across your breakfast table, every evening we'll be sharing your dinner. Unbelievable, no? But it gets even better. For night after night, at no extra cost, we'll regale you with all the stories we were not allowed to print. You'll laugh, you'll cry, but I promise you, you won't be bored.

But...

What about when we leave? We've thought of that, too. To help you survive the grief of our departure we'll leave you, for a nominal charge, an inflatable image of ourselves caught in a characteristic pose.

Mm.

So shall I sign you up?

Perhaps next time. Now I really must be going.

Wait, wait, there's always our three issue offer...

Alan

Why Psychology?

Living in Auroville we are often confronted with queer idealistic statements about spirituality, the great feats of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, blah-blah-blah, you know how it is. As a child I have often wondered what this is all about, all this blablabla, all this importance attached to 2 people. After all, the environment was 'normal', the adults seemed quite 'normal', going about their business and we as children, well, we were 'normal' as well. Why is it then that everyone kept, and is, insisting on the fact that we were, and are, living in a unique and special place? After a while all this blah-blah-blah, all this special-being, it became so impregnated that we really just accepted it as a fact living our lives without being any wiser or bothered about that issue. However, when we grew up and started traveling to different places and abroad we became aware of the difference through our own experiences. The physical differences were the ones felt most strongly and were quite apparent (climate, environment, culture, etc). But upon some deeper contemplation that was not all that was different, but WHAT WAS IT THEN?

Through my schooling I was fortunate enough to come across the study of psychology, and its association with Auroville, and due to certain circumstances opted for the offered classes. I must add, that another factor

which drove me to join those classes was that when traveling I, and anyone accompanying me, was quite unable to explain the reasons and purpose of Auroville. We felt that it was, in a sense, only possible to understand it if one actually lived here and then it was only a feeling or 'vibe'. Well, to return to the matter, the 'psychology/reason-of Auroville class' has become the 1 class which has made me realize the largest number of things in the shortest timeframe, and with a lot less struggle, I might add, than other subjects.

There are two views of psychology (or more maybe). The 'western' view is, to my understanding, one largely associated with abnormal people, people who have gone 'crazy', in effect, a science with diplomas and degrees. The 'eastern' one is based upon understanding ones individuality, breaking down this aspect of individuality and then, in a metaphorical way, one is logged into a state of bliss (nirvana, or all the other names I could list). I must add that the 'eastern' view is more inviting to the general public. As India was one of the leading countries in this understanding there are many aspects of this knowledge incorporated in everyday life, although to a lesser extent with more and more people not understanding the reasons for their actions. Anyway, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother were working in the

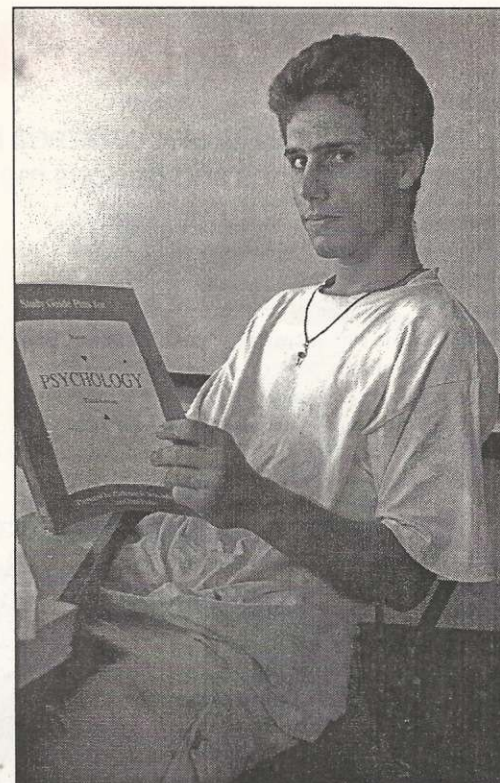
'eastern' realm.

As I've said, the 'eastern' view of psychology (I am going to simply refer to this as psychology since I find it abiding to a greater and truer universal law) deals with understanding/finding oneself. I may add that all that yoga and body awareness is, is "practical psychology". Well, the interesting part of psychology, for me, is that we are confronted with a whole new world, an abstract world, a world based upon forces, beings and a lot more, transparent to most humans, yet as real as you or I (this knowledge dates back 1000's of years, and is found in most ancient cultures). When we peel off our layers of ignorance we become aware of an ever increasing clarity, a clarity that lets us understand and truly know. This knowing is not like knowing that $2 + 2 = 4$, but a knowing that lets your body vibrate with consent. All this sounds very superficial and often it is advisable to take the stance of a 'non-believer' in order for each individual to find the truth it holds for them (one of my favorite roles). I'm sure some of you heard the saying: "The more you know, the more you know that you know nothing". This is true for most 'sciences' since science does not admit to the invisible beings and forces, largely due to them not being 'factually' proven. You may want to note that higher physicists are starting

to see this 'fact'. Well, the 'knowing' of psychology is not a knowing after which you know nothing. It is a knowing that permits us to become aware of the greater truths surrounding us. Ultimately, psychology deals with the ever present question: "What is the reason or purpose of life?"

Psychology aims to answer this question through the discovery of who we really are, what drives us, how we are affected by forces (mostly not even being aware of them) and so on, in this general direction. In effect, psychology aims at creating a heightened level of awareness or consciousness.

To answer the title and my initial question: It is in understanding psychology that I am becoming aware of the ideals, reasons and aims of Auroville, which I hopefully will be better able to convey to all those interested. And, it is the attempt at realizing the psychology of ourselves that is creating the difference between Auroville and other places. Hence, it is not the physical differences (the ones I had only



Peter, confronting Auroville through psychology

known) of Auroville that make it the special and unique place it is but a work in an abstract field based upon finding the reason behind our being through the old yet universal law of psychology.

Peter

Peter is 19 years old and studies at Future School, Auroville

Two poems



The survivors

Fatigue dripped from their hooves
Short, exhausted breaths puffed out from their nostrils
But their harsh riders spurred them on
And the coaches gave them nothing but lashes of long, thin whips
To get the best out of them
Before they would collapse and fall into a dreamless sleep

At the very beginning, when it started all fresh
They carried their feet and tail high like the fiery, desert-born Arabians full of pride
Some courageous ones fought against the spurs, whips and those who called themselves their masters
And tried to explain what it was like to be in their place

But all they got in return were sharp bits of metal digging into their sides, lashes of thin sticks and loud, frustrated 'Gee-haw's'
Yet no answer
Day by day, their bearing reins were shortened
Their once proud faces lost light and lowered
Their limbs moved low and motionlessly like those of an aged mare

But they had not lost hope, they hadn't given in, not just yet
There's always tomorrow, they believed
And that's why they managed to cross the mighty plains in such fatal conditions
We can't give up here, their eyes said
They struggled to live on with all their might
And they managed, not because they were forced to by their riders
But because they wanted to

It's not about whether you get knocked down,
It's about whether you get up again

Jiyeah is 13 years old and studies at the Lycée Français in Pondicherry

It begins:

We are born
We see the world
We grow
We laugh
We play
This time of our life we call childhood
Not yet knowing the dark side of the world
We run in dew grass, not thinking about what will later come
Pure and innocent as we are
We laugh
But the sun rises and sets
And the full moon will just be a thin line in no time
Things never last
As sunny days, windy and stormy ones do exist

As the days go by
The light and smile on our faces fade away
Darkness rears its ugly head on us like a wild mustang
Teenage, it is called
We rebel
We scream
Old friends swear to never look at each other again
New friends come
They come and go
So does everything else
So suddenly that sometimes we feel weak, lost and want to just give up

We may
Or may not fall in love
A dreamlike feeling
But if we do, I'm sorry to say
It does not, cannot last long
For we are yet young, still to learn the bitterness of life
Most of us are not yet mature enough to love truly
We still want to be loved and only know to be
We do not know the giving
Or if we do at all, to give enough

But remember my friend,
There's one thing on this lonely planet
Very strange
The more you give of it
More, doubled it is returned
It is
Love

Food for thought

PHOTO: JONAH



At fifteen I am disillusioned.

A child looks at the world, looks at injustice, and does not understand why. Cannot understand why nothing is done. Sees the misery of the world in its totality, with no foil before the eyes, and cannot understand WHY. As we grow up we are conditioned to shut our eyes, to abstain from judgment – the spark of truth, of will to change, of rebellion against what we do not believe in, dies out. And yet at this point we do still see what is wrong. We do see the poverty, we do see the famine, we do see injustice, racism, pain, hurt... we see it as unreachable. We possess the helplessness of that child – though in our hands lies the power to change the world we live in, for we have moulded it. Society has crippled feeling. A mind obscures a heart – and it lies behind a veil of thoughts. Society has taught us to think in the way we do, and yet to what Mother Nature has shared between us, we do not remain true. My whole life I've wished, dreamed I lived in another era – perhaps the time of the hippies or among bohemians, all they believed in was truth, beauty, love. Explosions of colour, a wish to change the world, change society. There are days when I wonder whether such a will still exists in our hearts. The true Will. The courage. The love. And if it is, why am I sitting here, as if hope was an illusion and rebellion impossible? I do not believe it is so. And even if it was, it wouldn't matter. We are not here to fear the 'impossible' or be fooled by it. If anything, we are here to fight. Fight against. What is this world we live in? Where a human being is nothing without a slip of paper – as far as governments are concerned, you are non-existent without a record. You hold no quality without a diploma. Who cares whether it is paper that rules the world and our lives if the essence of who and what we are is lost, forgotten? Often I believe we have lost our minds, yet that does not bother me so. What scares me is when I see the pain of the world, the injustice, and I wonder if we have lost the heart of that child.

Suryamayi

Suryamayi is 17 years old and studies at Future School, Auroville. This article was written in March 2003

Auroville's 'Black Cats'

In Europe many people cling to the belief that it's lucky to have a black cat cross your path. One wonders what such people would say about 14 of them prancing about in front of their eyes in the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium?

This is the third year that Auroville's 'Black Cats' aerobics team, trained by Bobby, has taken part in an annual Festival of Dance. Based at New Creation gym, the team – usually comprising around 14 members – is primarily made up of a highly diverse bunch of keep-fit enthusiasts, people who seem prepared to sweat buckets in Auroville's heat as they pound away on the gym floor twice a week to around 130-140 beats per minute musical numbers (guaranteed to get the pulse racing and the sweat pouring!) following routines which are new each month, therefore challenging to the mind also.

When Bobby first took up aerobics some 10 years ago, it was simply to keep fit while enjoying dance exercise. Then, one day, around 4-5 years ago, she stood in for an absent teacher, and realised she had the ability and motivation to handle a class herself. Now she is a fully qualified teacher with a UK-issued certificate, which can enable her to teach anywhere in the world. Typically she is doing 4 aerobics classes a week, 2 for beginners and 2 for advanced students, plus a circuit class on Sundays (her Cats are normally recruited from the advanced class, though it sometimes happens that enthusiastic beginners also join the team).

Why the Cats' name some may ask? The answer is that when the need for a team name arose in their first year, 'The Black Cats' was proposed as it seemed absolutely appropriate at the time, based on the fact that everyone was wearing all-black outfits and their movements were often cat-like in their agility, as they sprang about following Bobby's routine. Having given themselves the name they then kept it, as they liked the image it created. They also found it helped forge a strong group identity among the team, boosting morale. To be a Black Cat felt – and still feels – quite special, even though most of the team are not particularly talented, and there are plenty of people around Auroville who could do better if they tried. To further boost this sense of team identity members are given a laminated 'member' card and special cat-shaped key tag when they qualify as a Cat, which happens once they have taken part in a stage performance.

Of course it can be argued that there is a slight element of elitism in using such a name, but if that helps the team in their performance, why not? After all, it's no different in principle to India's elite VVIP protection squad also calling themselves 'Black Cats', or to the UK's famous aerobics team calling themselves 'Red Arrows'. Then there are also the Chicago Bulls, Detroit Lions and Atlanta Falcons for other examples of image building by way of animal group identity.

So who are these Cats? Well, there are 23 of them to date, 7 of whom have done all 3 performances. Gender-wise the females outnumber the tom-cats 4 to 1, which has meant that it's the females who mostly set the pace, sometimes obliging the men to wear semi-sparkling costumes or body glitter, which they would probably otherwise shun! (Asked about this imbalance, one of the men said he actually very much enjoys being surrounded by so much female energy, jokingly referring to

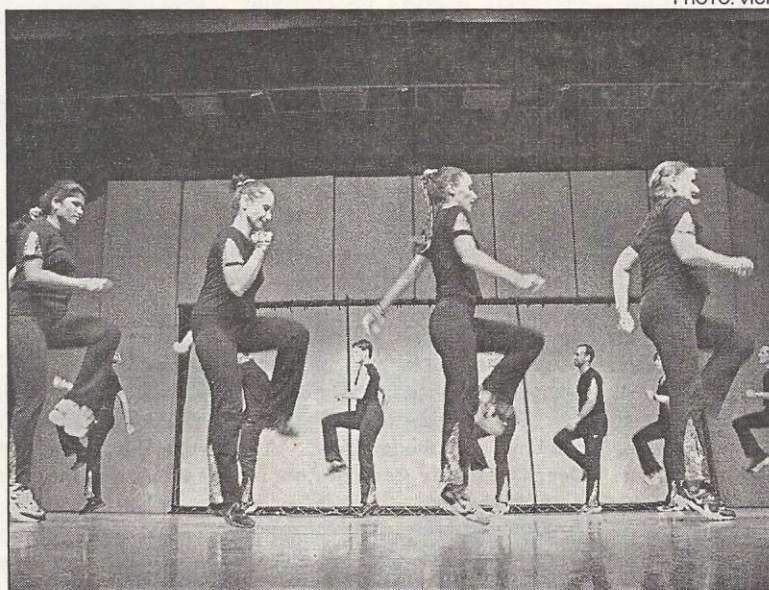


PHOTO: VICI

it as like being in a sort of 'shakti-loka'!) Nationality-wise they hail from 9 countries; have an average age of around 35; and include two non-Aurovilians, one from Pondy and one from Edayanchavadi. What they have in common is their enthusiasm and love of aerobics; their high morale and sense of fun; their willingness to work hard on the routines and turn up regularly to classes and practice sessions; and their overall respect and admiration for Bobby as a teacher, choreographer and leader. Not surprisingly, they all seem to be in good shape also, with no fat-cats – alias tubby-tabbies – among them, but that's not surprising when you consider that the temperatures in the gym can be up to 95F/35C in summer!

Asked about future plans for the Cats, Bobby says she has nothing special in mind. To develop the team further would require much more time and energy, and that would undermine her other passion, her Auromics business enterprise, which today provides employment for some 500 local women. As she put it, "The

Black Cats have now come into existence, and stand happily on their own two feet – or should it be four? – without need for extra ongoing input. It has been a lot of fun developing the team, and I hope we can continue to give enjoyable performances in Auroville for years to come, but beyond that I have no specific plans. Meanwhile, one thing that has delighted me this year is the emergence of a next-generation of aerobics enthusiasts in the form of the "Aerobic Kittens", trained by Savitri, who performed a week after us in the children's programme."

As to the Cats' own performance this year, it seemed to go down well, though within the team itself almost everyone was aware of small individual errors they made. It's a little disappointing after so many weeks of practice not to achieve perfection, but it's not all that counts. As Bobby puts it, "the main thing is to enjoy oneself while keeping fit, and that is exactly what we have been doing these past three years. If we can continue to do that, then I shall be perfectly happy."

Tim

OPEN FORUM

A land and its people have a soul

The International Zone Group has yet to arrive at a strategy for planning the International Zone. There is unanimous agreement to reach this through a process of dialogue. Two weeks ago architects Jana and Peter presented their planning concept. What gripped me about their proposal was their initial approach to development: to look at the needs of the land and the environment, rather than – what I had expected – start with location of buildings, infrastructure, density, roads and traffic etc.

This approach really makes sense to me because how can we start putting up national pavilions that are meant to reflect the soul of a particular nation, if we still have to discover what is meant by that? Although we intuit something of the importance of what Sri Aurobindo and Mother have placed on the nation soul, we do not have the consciousness yet to fully understand. Moreover, the International Zone is part of the University concept and so the Pavilions are ultimately connected to Human Unity.

The International Zone landscape has a special beauty of its own. It would be good to start with this beauty and explore how we can best enhance and conserve this very precious landscape. We know that there is a scarcity of water, and that solutions to the water problem are required before any development begins. The International Zone offers us a tremendous opportunity to study how best we can create with the landscape an efficient system of water management where there will be the least water run-off. Indigenous trees and plants, which can help water percolation, can be planted and lakes formed, before any buildings go up. The Zone has two canyons, one in the south starting in the Residential Zone and the other in

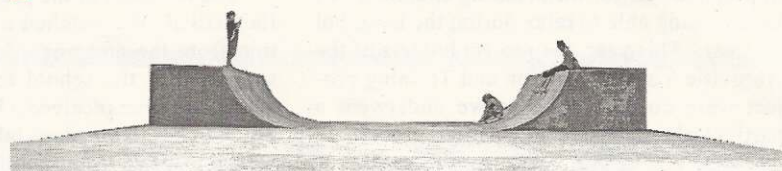
the north, the Industrial Zone. It is important to protect the edges of these canyons from further erosion by planting indigenous shrubs on them. These shrubberies could become a future haven for wild life too.

There was an enthusiastic response to the plans of Jana and Peter to begin developing the International Zone by creating a healthy sustainable landscape. The feeling of those present was that they wanted to get involved in the work, such as shrub planting on the edges of the canyons, planting trees and bunding. I think this would be a positive and creative way for Aurovilians to contribute to the growth of Auroville. After all why should we always pay for others to do our work, which we could actually enjoy doing ourselves? It could also put those volunteers in touch with the soul of the land and it's people.

The northern canyon runs through the village of Kottakarai, in fact there is a distance of only 800m between the Tibetan Pavilion and the first houses of the village. Hardly any sanitation exists in the village and a lot of waste is thrown into the canyon. Human and animal sewage is seeping through the ground to contaminate the groundwater that flows into Irumbai Tank, the main irrigation source of this area. Kottakarai presents us with serious implications for our future if the village is not integrated into the development plans of the International Zone.

The land has a history and a soul and so have the people who live on the land. They should be part of the International Zone research and need to be included as interdependent partners in the Zone planning. Auroville is as dependent on its neighbours as they are on us, the security of Auroville lies within the relationship we build with the sur-

At last a skater's paradise!



May 12th finally saw the inauguration of Auroville's skate park. Located in the cultural zone on an odd piece of land with four unequal sides, and wedged between Dana and Transition, this much awaited sports facility has finally manifested. "The credit has to go to many Auroville parents and kids who had been constantly

ball court and a ramp for the skateboarder which was built in a record time by Eric and his efficient team of Auzolan. "The surface is so smooth that it's a "dream place" for this sport" quips André who has culled a lot of design ideas from skate parks in France. Another serious player in this venture is Paco, a fellow skateboarder, who has much experience



asking about it – when is it coming, when is it coming?" says André, one of the pioneers of this effort who got involved over four years ago after succumbing to the roller-blade fever himself. "Now the terrace of the Solar Kitchen can be spared. It was dangerous as it is on the first floor of the building and the surface was uneven with sharp angled walls. Also the people in the Solar Cafe don't have to get freaked out by all the noise."

While the new skate park is far from complete, it is functional with a 'beautifully flat surface', the size of ½ a basket-

in building skateboard ramps in sunny California. "We like to extend the flat surface in the future and build a "bowl" next to the ramp," he says with a big smile.

The timing of this could not be more perfect, now that all Auroville schools are closed for summer and the youngsters who remain in Auroville are on the lookout for a place to chill-out and dabble in cool moves with in-line skates and skateboards.

Welcome to 'Whoosh' time!

Priya Sundaravalli

rounding villages. I believe our aim should be to create models in Auroville that are beneficial to India and can be replicated. India has enormous problems – not least of them being an expanding population and their expectations, on an environment that is becoming increasingly degraded, and where water is a critical issue. We should care more about India and her problems.

I believe we need a different relationship with the Indian Government because the present one is more of donor and recipient. This is not healthy and does not lead to respect. We must learn to manage our own affairs, and to be more mature and independent. This can only happen when we put our attention to our work and to developing Auroville in the right direction. Kottakarai could become a model village. When we are seen to be doing the right work we don't need to worry about money, the money will come. We have to be worthy to have people want to support us.

Pondicherry Town Planners also have their priorities, in the near future this area is going to experience a tremendous expansion. The people that will come to live here will have their needs and expectations. If we can convince Pondicherry that it is not just our development we want but also the development of the surrounding villages then they may give more importance to Auroville in their planning. Auroville should aim to be a model for sustainable development for this area.

The Mother said that Auroville would be a place for experiments. She said "I want to insist on the fact that this will be an experiment. It is for making experiments – experiments, researches, studies..." So I think we don't have to be orthodox in our approach to planning the International Zone of Auroville.

Anne

Standing tall and building bridges in the bioregion

Towards the end of March there is a definite shift of mood throughout India, as students everywhere busy themselves in preparations for forthcoming examinations before being able to relax during the long, hot summer. This year, the project holders of the Auroville Youth Education and Training project were no exception, as we underwent a particularly intensive evaluation process to mark the end of our 3-year contract with our co-funders, the European Commission (EC).

Our project managers, Auroville International United Kingdom (Martin Littlewood) in England, again sent us the formidable Greta, a development consultant who has helped to support our work during the last 3 years. An 10 day action-packed schedule followed.

The evaluation team consisted of Greta and myself, a guest, Naomi, who agreed to document the proceedings and our dear friend and Auroville resident Marijke, who has much knowledge and experience in the field of human resource development.

The aim of the project, which is essentially about human resource development, is to embed methods in all educational initiatives that build self-awareness, self-esteem and self-confidence, as well as improving the access, quality and effectiveness of educational opportunities across all age groups in the local villages.

On a Tuesday afternoon, after our evaluation process had come to its end, the project holders presented snapshots to the larger Auroville community of our last 3 years' work together as a first step in a dialogue about how we can better support one other.

Joy, self-confidence and a sense of pride in their accomplishments literally oozed out of the young village girls from the Life Education Centre (LEC) as they performed a simple Sanskrit sloka and then a circle dance. Indrani and Sivagami, senior assistants at LEC then shared some of their experiences at the school and the impact on their lives. Indrani aspires to set up her own centre one day and

vocational skills. Their achievement is all the more dramatic in the context of some of the daily adversities many face at home.

The next part of the presentation was from Ilaingnarkal. We watched a karate demonstration from the amazing Akila, who had been supported at the school to follow a path in karate and even received a black belt in recognition of her tremendous talent; an undulating, rhythmic dance from Kavitha balancing all the while a traditional pot on her head; and listened to the poised and elegant poetry of the quietly powerful Amudha. With such enthusiastic and sincere support from Meenakshi, the overall co-ordinator of the school, it is clear to see how such talents are able to flourish.

The impact of these young people's achievements is not to be underestimated. Akila has recently been asked to become a junior teacher in karate in a secondary school in nearby Kalapet, assisting the training of 100 young girls. It is precisely this type of affirmation and encouragement that helps local, young people take initiatives and to develop a real sense of responsibility and meaning about their place in the community.

Ilaingnarkal Tamil Cultural Heritage School has been around for nearly 30 years, although the co-funding monies from the EC project finally allowed the construction of new buildings on a new site, a model version of which (made out of mud bricks) was also on display.

Supported by the Pestalozzi Children's Village Trust in England, the AV/Pestalozzi Link is an Information Technology link enabling the sharing of a diverse range of activities across the curriculum between New Creation School, Auroville and Sedlescombe Primary School, England. A first year project on "Light" was presented by teacher Davaselvy and Mageshwari and Siva, 2 children from the 6th standard, who were involved with the "Celebrations" project of the 2nd year. They proudly recited a poem they had learnt and shared some classwork which they had developed around the festival of Raksha

Bhandan. This included pictures and drawings of "rakhis," symbolic bracelets of friendship and brotherhood that had been sent to their English counterparts. In a poignant moment at the end of the evaluation process, these same 2 children had commented of their English friends, "Now they are our friends, they will be in our hearts until we die."

Anbarasu (metal workshop), Thiagarajan (electrical workshop) Rajesh Kumar (carpentry) and Paneer Selvam (tailoring) each gave a brief description of the different trainings in vocational skills being provided at the New Creation Vocational Training Centre (NCVTC) in the areas of carpentry, tailoring, (currently only offered for the children of NC School,) electrical training and metal work. The beautiful displays of various wood-crafted toys standing alongside the young girls who proudly wore clothing they had made themselves again gave a glimpse into a typical day's work at this centre. Ponnusamy (an old Ilaingnarkal graduate as Meenakshi proudly reminds us)

from Auroville's Electrical Service already provides some mentoring support for the electrical training work and graduates from the first batch of training are working for this unit.

The NCVTC is the newest component of the overall project, and co-funding resources have enabled the construction of 4 well-designed and spacious workshops, serving a critical need to provide vocational opportuni-

ties for young people in order that they may improve their income-generating capacity and earn their livelihoods locally.

Recent discussions with the project holders revealed there are opportunities for gifted administrators who may like to help shape the direction of this centre, as well as liaising more closely with Auroville businesses and units to see how more active support of this centre can be encouraged.

The final part of our formal presentation came from Subash and his dedicated staff at Isaibambalam who are working with a variety of different teaching methodologies. A 3-year-old, Deepaka, boldly stood in front of an audience



Zerina, Harini and Priya Mathani presenting three years work to the community

teachers in the region has enabled Isaibambalam to touch 26,000 children during the course of co-funding from the EC.

During the evaluation, a visiting teacher from a primary school in Salem shared with us how she is adapting the child-centred Rishi Valley method to the demands of a government curriculum, making her own learning cards with diverse classroom activities. She had received her training from an earlier Isaibambalam workshop.

All in all, it is still hard to assess the total impact of the Auroville Youth Education and Training project. What is clear is that this project has enabled all the project's beneficiaries to move to a new level of personal growth and professional development. Maybe what we've really been doing is building bridges, in communication, awareness and understanding, both inwardly and with all those with whom we are connected.

It has not always been easy, struggling with the demands of report writing or building and developing management capacities, but what our group has realized now, at the close of a particular chapter in our growth, is that greater participation from the larger community will be the key to realising all our dreams as we stride boldly towards our future goals. The education project holders are proud to stand together, a little bit taller than 3 years ago, and optimistic that others too will be encouraged and inspired to come and take a closer look and to offer us much-needed support.

Priya Mahtani (Project Co-ordinator)

For further information contact priyadarshani@auroville.org.in



Kavitha demonstrating pot-dancing

of about 100 teachers, children and guests, calling out the words she recognised from a series of flash cards in English and Tamil, (the so-called Glen Doman method) as taught to her at home by her father. As a first generation learner, the impact on her, her father and indirectly the local village community is obviously huge. Developing teaching methodologies and crucially providing training to other

PASSING

Kusum Ben

Kusum Ben left her body on May 14th, in Ahmedabad, in her son's house after having fought valiantly through two major operations in a month-long struggle, first at the nursing-home of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, then in Cluny Hospital, Pondicherry, and finally in a hospital in Ahmedabad.

Kusum Ben was the wife of Chinubhai, an active freedom fighter who had been put in jail several times, and who was the right hand of Shri Sardar Vallabhabai Patel. Influenced by his revolutionary ideas, Kusum became a revolutionary herself, learned spinning, and opened her house as a camp for freedom fighters. Her role was to attend women's meetings and processions and encourage women to come out of their homes and fight for India's freedom.

When Chinubhai died in an accident in 1950, Kusum, then 26 years old, was left behind with two small children. She joined the women's section of the Congress Bhavan of Ahmedabad. In 1963 she left the Congress Bhavan and became

assistant manager of the Khadi Gram, the hand spinning institution inspired by Mahatma Gandhi.

In 1957 she met The Mother for the first time. In 1970, after having brought up her sons, she came to settle in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, becoming assistant to the doctors of Auroville's maternity department in Promesse. That is where she lived ever since. In 1972 Mother asked her to be the caretaker of the Ganesh temple on the junction of the Pondicherry-Tindivanam road and the road leading to Edayanchavadi, and many Aurovilians have witnessed her meticulous care and the joyful celebrations of Ganesh' birthday that she organised. Since 1994, Kusum Ben worked at the Matrimandir. In an interview published in Auroville Today in August 1997 she said: "The Mother has asked us 'Will you collaborate?' To me, working in Auroville is collaborating with the Divine work."

Carel



Meenakshi rouses a delighted audience

already has a satellite evening school in her home, in which she helps younger girls from her village to learn English.

The sheer dedication and commitment of Zerina, the overall co-ordinator at LEC, has been the key to providing a safe and trustworthy space for the girls, who are free to express and explore their innermost selves as well as having the opportunity to develop and learn

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