

Auroville Today

DECEMBER 2007, No.226

Auroville's monthly news magazine since 1988

Auroville's housing crisis: time to act!

"I am going to break into one of those big empty Auroville houses and occupy it." Ana from Brazil, till recently a swimming instructor in Auroville's swimming pool, La Piscine, is angry. She is one of the many newcomers to Auroville who have no house.

She and her seven year-old daughter are renting now, but they have to leave the place when the guest season begins. "I'm gonna make a big riot in Auroville," she warns.

There is a serious housing problem in Auroville. Of the 130 newcomers in Auroville, 60 are on a waiting list for a house. The 30 newcomer houses are all full, often with Aurovilians. They are stuck there, because construction seems to be at a complete standstill in Auroville. Ana wants a house, not rooms in a guesthouse, for she wants to be able to receive friends and schoolmates of daughter Jara. Others are facing the same problem. Newcomer Julie from France is one of them. She and her three year-old son Arie also have to vacate soon. "At the moment there are houses available in the villages around Auroville that nobody dares to rent, for it could be a reason for the Entry Group to revoke your newcomer status. What if the Housing Service rents these places and we rent from them? At least for some newcomers the problem can be solved."

Joseba from the Housing Service is sceptical. "I think that this idea can bring more problems than benefits. It is mentioned in the Housing Policy that people must live in Auroville. And also the visa that has been granted is only for living in Auroville. Relaxing these rules might cause an influx of people from the villages who only want to join Auroville for economic reasons. It will be more difficult to check on the behaviour of the newcomers."

Planned extensions of existing communities are: *Courage 3*, *Creativity 2*, *Sukhavati 2*, *Prarthna*, *Surrender*, *Invocation*, *Arati* and *Grace*. There are also some completely new projects on the drawing board: *Swayam* (near *Creativity*), *Maitreye* (near *Samasti*) and *Citadine 1* and *2* (behind the Town Hall).

Do it yourself

The present acute housing problem was on the agenda at a meeting held recently at Auroville's Centre for Scientific Research. A group of fifty, mostly newcomers, Aurovilians, no longer want to wait for the planners in the Town Hall. They have started a co-operative to build low-cost houses themselves, making use of compressed earth blocks. According to Satprem, the executive of the Auroville Earth Institute, it is possible to start building in a few months, once the bricks are ready. Several newcomers have already stopped the work they were doing in Auroville, to make compressed earth blocks instead.

"The houses will be twinned or grouped in four, with one or two floors," explains Satprem. The building costs are estimated at 5.1 lakhs rupees (about € 9,300) for a family house of 95 square metres, excluding infrastructure. The smaller houses will be cheaper. According to Satprem the first 8 houses can be ready before the 40th birthday of Auroville on February 28th, 2008.

"It is likely that there are more people than the 60 on the list who are in need of a house in Auroville," says Joseba, "but we have no reliable data. All attempts to get the figures have been



Newcomers and Aurovilians preparing mud bricks for house construction at the Auroville Earth Institute

unsuccessful. People move but do not tell us, or they are still on a waiting list, but already live somewhere else." Joseba admits that there are empty houses in Auroville that could be used, but many refuse to give information about these or have a vague story about why the house is not occupied. The present Housing Policy has never been implemented. People should tell the Housing Service that their house is empty when they are away for more than six months. The Housing Service will then find somebody to live in that house. But many Aurovilians, who can be away for five years and remain listed, want to control 'their' house themselves. "Perhaps the topic could be brought to a general meeting. We could also ask via the *News and Notes*, members of each community to give names of neighbours who leave their houses empty for months or years."

The why

Why is there a housing problem in Auroville? It turns out the architects, planners and developers have differences in their approach. One approach focuses on developing plans, but the plans are never implemented. The other is more pragmatic, and wants an organic growth for Auroville. Whenever the two orientations cannot reach an agreement, they study more. 'Paralysis from analysis' is the result. It also reflects the present state of Auroville's collective being and its residents' inability to find a creative and harmonious solutions.

But there are other reasons why the building of new houses have come to a complete standstill. And that is the Aurovilians themselves. Most communities do not want more houses. The residents are comfortable in their apartments or houses. They don't want a spacious environment to turn into the higher density of a city.

Planned developments

There are eight planned extensions of existing communities have not yet begun. And apart from the cooperative project, four new projects are on the drawing table [see box]. There seems to be no valid reason why most of these could not start immediately.

Of these projects, *Maitreye* is most likely to happen. The plan involves apartments for 250 –

280 people. The first phase of the project is due to start next January, when the masons can begin work. Five models of houses have been designed for *Maitreye*. The team that is responsible for the design and planning want to keep the costs as low as possible. But to avoid creating a ghetto, they offer more options than the cheapest one. A family house of 100 square metres will be available in the price range of 6 to 10 lakh rupees (about € 11,000-18,000), depending on the finish. An apartment for a single resident (40 sq.m) can be obtained from 3.5 lakh rupees (about € 7,000).

The new Housing Task Force

Now a Housing Task Force has been formed, consisting of members of L'Avenir d'Auroville, the Housing group, a few Auroville Architects, the FAMC and some others. The Task Force meets regularly and tries to speed up the tempo of building. The Satprem group could probably get a plot nearby *Vikas* and *Creativity*. Lalit from L'Avenir d'Auroville shows a blueprint: "The Housing Task Force aim to prepare a layout plan for the entire sector 2 of the Residential Zone, which is to house approximately 3500 residents. We have most of the land and better possibilities of connecting to the existing water infrastructure in that area. A detailed development plan is to be prepared for the area between *Prayatna* and *Sailam* and guidelines and parameters are to be given for new housing schemes. The 32 houses from Satprem's group can be part of that development." Once ready, such a devel-

opment plan could meet the housing demand for years to come.

Another challenge for the Housing Task Force is to think of other means of financing houses, as not everybody has the money that is needed. Sauro from the Task Force explains: "Basically we would like to associate the housing development with a kind of financial pooling that could involve housing projects for up to 300 persons. Based on the experience from abroad of cooperative housing, the idea is to create a common fund for grant contributions from Auroville, some external loans and contributions from house builders. It is a revolving fund. It should have the advantage of providing a personalized scheme to each applicant. It can include deferring the investment and the expenses for the house over a certain number of years or receiving a partial subsidy etc. However it will take some time to prepare a working proposal for such a scheme."

But many house-seekers need immediate solutions. That is why a group of desperate newcomers asked Aurovilians for help. Invite a newcomer to your house, was the request. Only one Aurovillian offered a room.

Guest-houses to help

Could the many guest-houses in Auroville help out and take a few newcomers for a year or two? For there are 300 registered guest-rooms in Auroville with more than 500 beds. Joseba thinks this might be an option. "The Housing Service has already started talks with the Auroville guest-houses. They will be asked to accommodate fewer guests in the coming season and instead offer rooms or units to newcomers in need. A group of guesthouses have shown interest in this proposal and want to co-operate. We are discussing the conditions and we have requested that the maximum charge should not exceed 5000 rupees per month."

Recently L'Avenir d'Auroville, the FAMC and the Housing Service issued a public declaration proposing to build 200 – 250 houses each year. There is goodwill, but can this unblock the situation? Lalit is hopeful: "If all the involved people and groups cooperate with a larger vision and actively focus on meeting the housing demand, there is a good possibility that we can create far more accommodation in the years to come."

Robert



We wish you a Happy New Year!

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"It's a stage in the evolution of education in Auroville"

Future School is one of Auroville's high schools. It began functioning in January, 2003 and today it has 54 students from 19 different nationalities.

Auroville Today: Future School grew out of the Centre for Further Learning (CFL). The aim of CFL was to provide high-quality further education within Auroville. Students could choose what they wanted to study: the methodology was individual study and tutorials. Does Future School continue the same approach?

Chali: The intention hasn't changed. At Future School, the student can make choices on many levels, and we respect and support those choices. One big difference from CFL, however, is that now there is more structure.

Rolf: In the first year, for example, the students are required to take English language and literature and maths and a second language. They are also introduced to economics, history, geography and the three sciences. In addition to that, they follow a core programme in topics which we think are particularly relevant to Auroville – Auroville philosophy, sustainability etc. – and they work in an Auroville service or commercial unit one morning a week for the first six months. They are also encouraged to take elective courses like robotics and cooking.

The choices offered also include the option to study for formal examinations?

Chali: Yes. Students can also study for International 'O' and 'A' levels as part of their programme.

Why don't you offer Indian qualifications?

Rolf: The syllabus of this international exam board gives us the freedom to organize the school in the way we want to – we are not dependent upon an outside board telling us how to teach and we can easily integrate 'O' and 'A' level studies into the other things we do here. Also 'O' and 'A' levels really demand an understanding of the subject from the student, unlike many of the Indian syllabi which rely primarily upon rote learning and memorization.

Chali: We did offer and implement a programme of study based on the National Indian Open School syllabus for a group of our students, but we're phasing it out because there's very little scope for making the study dynamic and new students were not choosing this programme.

Vikram: Of course, the Indian qualification is easier to get, but as our intention is to get students to think for themselves, we have chosen accordingly. Actually, many Indian schools with no foreign nationals also offer 'O' and 'A' levels.

Some local Aurovilians send their children to outside schools to study for Indian examinations. One of the reasons seems to be they believe that 'O' and 'A' levels only prepare students for entry to foreign universities and colleges.

Chali: 'O' and 'A' levels are accepted by Indian universities. We've been in communication with the Association of Indian Universities who have stated that if a student sends his or her results papers to them, they will validate the results and issue an equivalency certificate. With this the student can apply to an Indian university. Of course, each university and graduate school in India has its own entrance exam and these exams seem to be based almost exclusively on memorizing a vast amount of information. For this reason, it could be an advantage if one's previous education was with that particular approach. However, I believe that if a student has been taught to think and to be self-disciplined, and has the motivation and ambition it takes to want to get into these kinds of competitive programmes, they will manage to do whatever needs to be done.

Other reasons given by those Indian parents who send their children to schools outside is that studying for 'O' and 'A' levels is expensive and that it takes too long at Future School to acquire qualifications.

Chali: Parents of children at Future School have to pay the exam fees, and these are definitely more expensive than fees for Indian examination boards. However, tuition is free for Aurovillian students at Future School and the

Our society in general is not clear about what it values. On the one hand, we say that our children don't need qualifications, but then in a recent *News and Notes* the proposed coordinators for L'Avenir d'Auroville were announced with their qualifications. In this way, we promote double standards.

The only thing that we, as teachers, can do is to try to help the students discover what they really want to do. That's why we have a mentoring system at Future School.

Exams are a tool but they can also be a negative influence. We, the teachers, are battling against that: we are trying to find and maintain the balance.

Of course, the ideal would be if Future School developed something where the very fact of having attended the school would be equivalent to a certificate. In this way we would not be constrained by the demands of outer institutions. But we're not there yet. At present, we're trying to be a school that helps students stay in Auroville and get educated in something of the Auroville spirit.

But, ideally, you would like to evolve your own programme which would be accepted outside?

Chali: Yes. However, we've looked at accreditation institutions recently and we've decided for several reasons that this is not a direction we want to take. Getting accredited is extremely expensive and it's still very restrictive – you are subject to regular inspections, the teachers have to be certified, etc. I think it will happen in another way. Over the years, due to the further educational success of the students who have completed the programme, the Ashram school has gained recognition and I think the same thing will happen here.

Vikram: One option we are exploring is to see if our students' portfolios could be accepted by universities as an alternative to exams.



Vikram, Rolf, Chali and Sergei of Future School

students don't have to buy the textbooks they use. In most schools outside Auroville there are tuition fees and parents also have to pay for their children's textbooks, uniform and daily transport. One of our Indian parents added it all up and discovered there is little difference in cost between educating a student at Future School and other schools outside (except of course, places like the International School in Kodaikanal which are far more expensive than Future School). But at Future School the student has the added advantage not only of receiving a well-rounded education but also of being in the atmosphere of Auroville.

Vikram: Maybe some parents feel more secure sending their children for a conventional schooling outside Auroville. The teaching approach is more familiar to them, the exams are easier to pass and they may think that with an Indian qualification entry to higher education in India will be more straightforward.

Chali: Regarding the time factor, at Future School if students choose to do 'O' levels and three or more 'A' levels, it will take them five years. If we were only concentrating upon academics it could be done in four years, but we try to make our programme broad-based, which is more relevant to our situation and our ideals. Another misconception is that students in India must complete their 12th standard or equivalent ('A' levels) by the age of 17 if they want to enter university. In fact, the maximum age for entry to medical college or law school is 21, and for other university courses it is 23 or 24. So our students have plenty of time to finish the programme here.

Is there any compulsion to study for exams at Future School?

Chali: From our side there is absolutely no compulsion but most students end up studying for one or more of these exams, for various reasons.

Whose choice is it to study for exams? Theirs or their parents'?

Chali: It's hard to know the answer for sure, but because we know each other so well, we generally get a sense of what is coming from the student and what is coming from the parents.

Rolf: But the problem is not just with parents who want to push their child into taking exams.

So what is the purpose of education in Auroville?

Sergei: Very simply put, it is the perfection of the human being.

Do you see examinations as being an integral part of this? Some Aurovilians interpret The Dream as saying that exams have no place in Auroville.

Chali: I don't share that view. I understand Mother's words in The Dream to mean that exams should not be the aim of education in Auroville, they should not be the benchmark of success. But I believe exams can be a useful tool, one of many tools provided by our educational programme.

Sergei: Obviously the influence of exams is present in Future School. Students are affected by their exam results – they are not detached yogis.

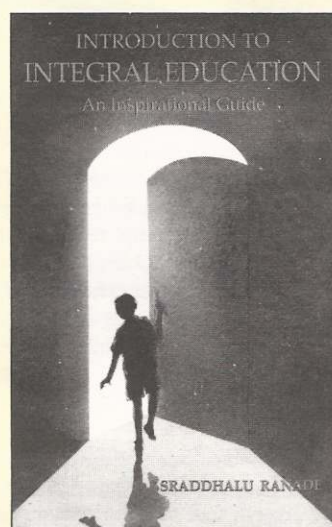
Sergei: Apart from examinations, there are problems even with the best conventional syllabus, particularly with subjects, like history, which are biased with the prejudices and ideology of present humanity. Clearly, we should try for something different because Auroville has its own road, humanity will have a new road, and what we teach and how we teach has to acquire this new spirit.

Chali: What we offer now is by no means the end of the line. It's a stage in the evolution of education in Auroville. The more evolved we become, the more evolved the programme and the school will be.

Sergei: This is not a task for the school alone but for the whole of Auroville, because without the support of the larger community, we cannot do it. Actually, the students are the most ready to accept new ideas; the most difficult to convince are the adults!

In conversation with Alan

NEW BOOK



Introduction to Integral Education: An inspirational guide by Sraddhalu Ranade

Sraddhalu's book is based on a series of teacher-training workshops on education he gave in Auroville and elsewhere. The aim of the book, he states, is "to offer a radically different way of experiencing education and our role in it as teachers and parents". Subtitled 'An inspirational guide,' the topic is dealt with in four broad categories: the principles, elements and the basics of integral education; the strategies to move away from the old ways of teaching; how integral education practices can be applied in the classroom; and the personal transformation required of the adults so that they can become the inspiring guides for the students.

In addition, Sraddhalu discusses why most attempts to change the Indian national educational system have failed. The reason, he argues, is that they have only aimed at changing the details of content and the techniques of education, rather than the root problem – the industrial mind-set of the education system. Here the child is seen as raw material to be moulded into a certain aspect of society.

The book looks in detail at the five-fold aspects of integral education – physical, mental, vital, spiritual and psychic. Techniques are offered on how each of them can be incorporated into the classroom. The book concludes with the idea that the move towards integral education cannot be achieved by the efforts of any individual teacher alone. There needs to be a collective aspiration from fellow educators as well as an active support and trust from the school's management.

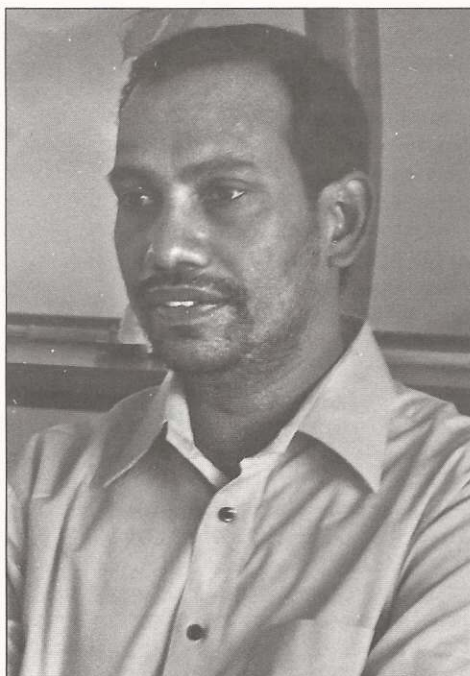
The book, richly illustrated with sketches by Lele, is available from SAIER, Bharat Nivas, Auroville. Price: Rs 350

Studying outside Auroville

An increasing number of Auroville children are doing their high school education outside Auroville. Among them is a growing contingent of Tamil children. In individual talks with *Auroville Today*, four fathers talk about the issue.

“I fought it. I am an Auroville-grown kid myself, and the whole idea of sending my sons to a school in Pondicherry was very unacceptable. It took me almost a year to get used to the idea.” Rathinam, one of the executives of Auroville Fund, is normally soft-spoken. But on this issue his emotions come through. “I agreed with my wife that our children should have the education that would give them access to any college in India or abroad, so that they could do what they wanted. This means that they need certificates. The only option in Auroville is Future School, but we are not happy with the British ‘O’ and ‘A’ levels they aim at. We prefer an Indian certification – firstly because we are here in India, and secondly no one knows for sure if the ‘A’ levels will be accepted for admission into Indian colleges as so far, no student from Auroville has attempted to join an Indian college with an ‘A’ level certification. I talked to friends to see if we couldn’t bring about a change in the Auroville educational system but we did not have the energy pull it through. Time was running out and my son Abhimanyu was on the point of leaving Transition middle school. When he finally said he wanted to go to a Pondy school, I gave in. My second son followed him a few years later.”

Rathinam is one of the increasing number of Tamil Aurovilian parents who opt to send their

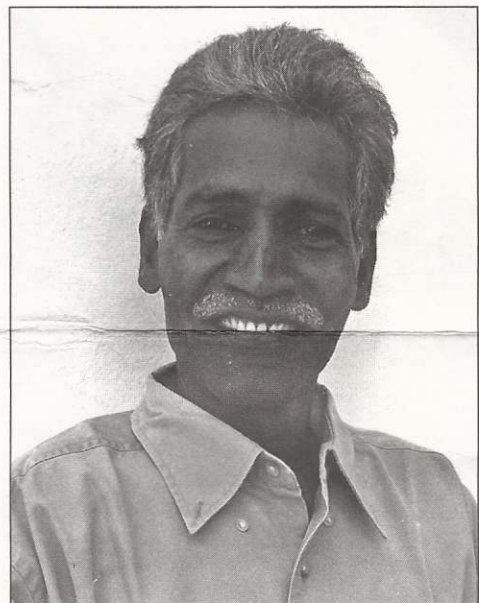


Rathinam

children because we cannot produce the required certificates.” They were lucky that Abhimanyu got admitted in one of the five top schools of Pondicherry, a school run by the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, where also other Tamil Auroville children are studying. Is Abhi happy? “He is, but we aren’t,” says Rathinam. “We are not happy with the school’s strictness – for example, the students are not allowed to ask questions in class – and we really had to get used to seeing our sons in a school uniform complete with necktie and shoes! But both my sons are doing well.”

Rathinam’s feelings are shared by Raman, who is a member of the Working Committee, and Bhoomi, who runs the Auroville Boutique in Pondicherry. “It’s all because of society pressure,” says Raman. “We decided to send our son Sundarananda to a Pondy school as we want him to pass exams to do further studies. We have seen that people who have a good education have more freedom, even in Auroville. We want him to be at par with everybody else. But the Pondy educational system is far from ideal. Sundar has to sit in a small space of 50 x 50 cm for the whole day. There is a lot of rote learning. Often he has extra classes, up to 8.00 or 8.30 in the evenings and on weekends. He comes home late and misses a lot of Auroville activities like sports. He does well academically, but I don’t think he is really happy.”

Bhoomi has a similar experience. “I was brought up in the Auroville education system, I was one of the ‘lost generation’ of kids that did not receive a full education when the schools closed, and I do not want that to happen to my children,” he says. “I want my kids to have a regular certificate – an Indian one, not ‘O’ or ‘A’ level.”



Raman

children to schools outside Auroville. While some Western Aurovilian parents send their child to the Lycée Français in Pondicherry or to the Kodaikanal International School in Kodaikanal, many Tamil Aurovilians prefer a ‘regular’ school in Pondicherry. “The choice is not that big,” says Rathinam. “Many schools do not accept Auroville

Bhoomi brings his two children every morning to the *Petite Seminaire* in Pondicherry, but, he says, he would bring them back to Auroville immediately if there were an educational set-up in Auroville which meets his demands. “I am not happy with the Pondy educational system, but I know my children are doing well so I go along with it. I want them to have the possibility to study what they like later on. The Pondy school will give them the school transfer certificate, which will allow them to take part in the admission exams of any college in India.” An additional advantage, says Bhoomi, is that the Pondicherry schools provide more supervision and less freedom to the children. “In Auroville,” he says, “the freedom is often too much.”

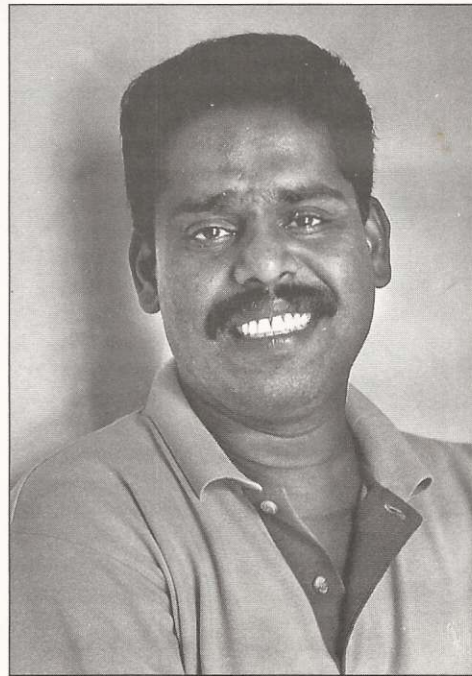
Shankar is head teacher at New Creation. Though his children are still at Transition, the time will soon come when he and his wife also have to take a decision about the children’s future. “The true difficulty is society pressure: there is a belief that children should have the possibility to travel, join firms, make money and generally have a much better job than their parents in Auroville,” he says, “so the parents opt to go for beaten paths. Education has become an earning tool. This is a new concept in Tamil Nadu. The result is that children are not educated to become cultured individuals who can think for themselves but they are pressurised to learn a particular skill that is connected with their future earning. That requires certification, diplomas, and very intensive stereotyped training.” Speaking about regular schools he says, “The schools want to show a 100% success rate. So they have an agreement with the parents: parents pay the fee, the school insists the child does what it says and is moulded into the required system. It is an agreement between the school and the parents and the child is the football between them. The child, unfortunately, has no say.”

Rathinam points to a positive side of outside education. “In Auroville, typical Tamil life styles and concepts are gradually merging into another type of society. Our children are now learning the typical Tamil ways and life. We can’t teach that in Auroville, as we are already mixed. That is an advantage.” Comparing Auroville children to their Pondicherry friends he says, “I did not know it, but it appears that the Auroville children are actually very bright. They are good in academics and their knowledge of English far exceeds that of any of their classmates. I’ve come to realize that Transition is a very good school indeed, offering a very high level of education. The academic level is excellent, and contrary to what we always believe in Auroville, the children behave well and have a lot of inner discipline.” It is a notion which Shankar supports. “We often hear that Auroville children lack discipline. But what type of discipline are we talking about? Is it about sitting quietly in the classroom and obediently doing the exam? Or is it a discipline that wells up from the being itself because it was properly educated? Auroville children may be rowdies at times, but they don’t lack inner discipline.”

Many Tamil Aurovilians are sore that Auroville does not help with the costs of outside education. “Education is free within Auroville, but outside we have to fend for ourselves,” says Raman. Fees differ widely. At the top is the Kodaikanal International boarding school with Rs. 4 to 5 lakhs a year (€ 7300-9100) – an impossibly high amount for most Aurovilians. About half a dozen Aurovilian children study there. Pondicherry education is comparatively cheap. “I pay on average Rs 32,000 a year,” says Raman. “This is a substantial amount if your income consists of a community maintenance of Rs 5,000 a month. My personal expenditure has come down, and I live now on a tight budget.” He regrets the limited vision that is prevalent in Auroville towards paying for outside education. “These are Auroville children. They are born here and spend their adolescence here. We should look at their development, not if that development happens in or outside Auroville. For they will come back to Auroville when their education is completed.”

All agree that Auroville should develop a schooling system so that Auroville children do not need to go to outside schools. One option was proposed by former Aurovilian Gordon Korstange three years ago [*AVToday* # 181, February 2004]. He suggested that Auroville develop its own high school curriculum, a course of studies that would be both uniquely Aurovilian as well as global. Once the student has completed it, he should be helped to prepare for the outside exams of his choice if he so wished. “The idea is very good,” says Shankar. “We could even follow the American credit system. Why is it necessary that a student is connected to a specific Auroville school? Can’t we design a system where the student, for example, learns humanities at Last School and science at Future School and another

topic from a private person somewhere else? This would help to break down those invisible walls that now separate the various schools and benefit all students.” Shankar hopes that the Auroville School Board will get such a curriculum together. “Believe me,” he says, “if that is done, no child will want to study outside Auroville.”



Bhoomi

“I would support that very much,” says Rathinam. “But there is also another initiative that just started. One of Auroville’s schools, the New Era School (formerly known as After School) has applied for affiliation with the Indian Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). The CBSE system offers the possibility to design one’s own curriculum and it aims at issuing certificates. When we talked to the Chairman of the Auroville Foundation, Dr. Karan Singh, about it some years ago, he was very positive about this move and encouraged us. New Era School is still an outreach school for non-Auroville children but we hope that in time Auroville children will also join. It will take three years before it is recognised. It has just started this year.”

A major problem, it appears, is educating the parents about the uniqueness of Auroville education. “The parents will need to be told what education truly means,” says Shankar. “This will take



Shankar

time. How many parents can think about education without thinking at the same time of earning opportunities?”

Finally Shankar points to another development in India where alternative schools are becoming popular. “There are many non-Aurovilian Indian parents who don’t like the regular Indian schools and who now have started to look at Auroville,” he says. “They wonder if their children can receive their higher education here. So far the Auroville schools have mostly refused. But there is a big demand. People are ready to make substantial contributions to have their children study in Auroville. But we aren’t yet ready. Once we have our act together, then we can easily open up to outsiders.”

“Going out is not the answer,” says Raman. “Many Tamil parents are waiting and watching. I hope that in the next few years we can find a solution to this problem.”

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NEW BOOK

Integral Education: A foundation for the future by Partho

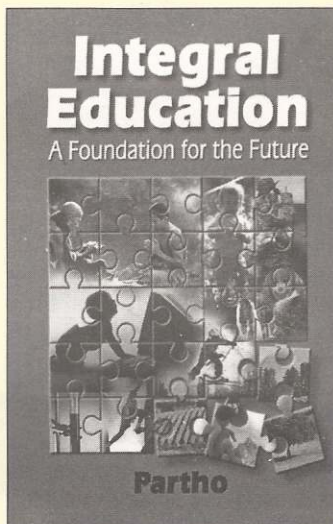
Partho’s book is about the nature of children and pedagogy. Approaching the subject through the Aurobindonian lens, he elaborates on how to awaken the psychic, and the perfection of the vital, mind and body. He also examines the various elements essential for creating an integral school, including the design of an integral school building and its classrooms which, he suggests, should be learner-centred, natural and beautiful.

This book is based on Partho’s own practice of integral education as a teacher and a teacher-educator. He does not repeat Sri Aurobindo’s and The Mother’s views on the subject (that, he says, can be found in other good books) but provides his own interpretation of integral education.

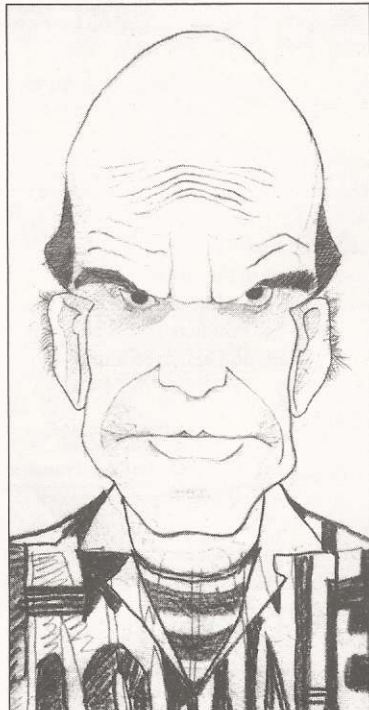
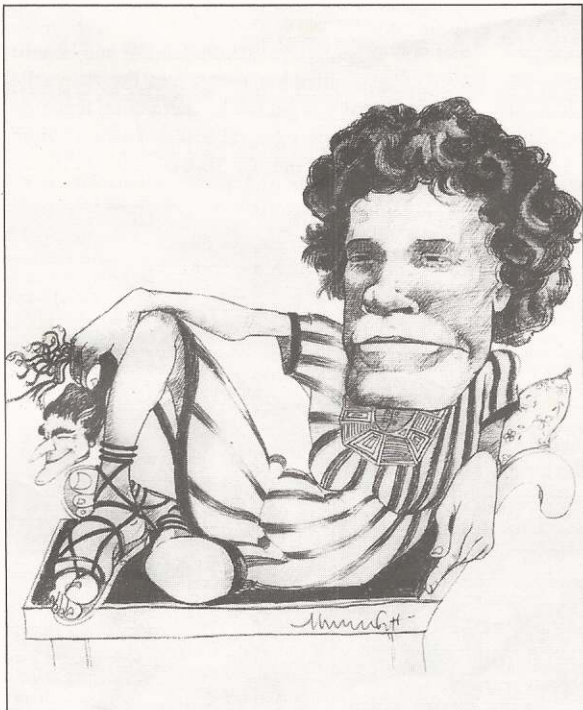
Partho introduces the new concept of ‘yogic education’ that is a level beyond integral education. “Yogic education,” says Partho, “is when education [...] converges wholly into the living of life”. He then attempts to answer what yogic education would mean in today’s world and how it could be practised.

The book, in a nutshell, explores the idea of an evolutionary education for a humanity evolving consciously towards its own inherent perfection in a future society.

Published by the Sri Aurobindo Society, Pondicherry, it is available at most bookstores. Price: Rs 255



Partho



Clockwise from top left: Aryamani, Ashatit, Boris, Serge, Carsten, Nergez, Ulli, Rolf, Alain Bernard, Jean-Marc, Shraddhavan, Aster



What a mob!

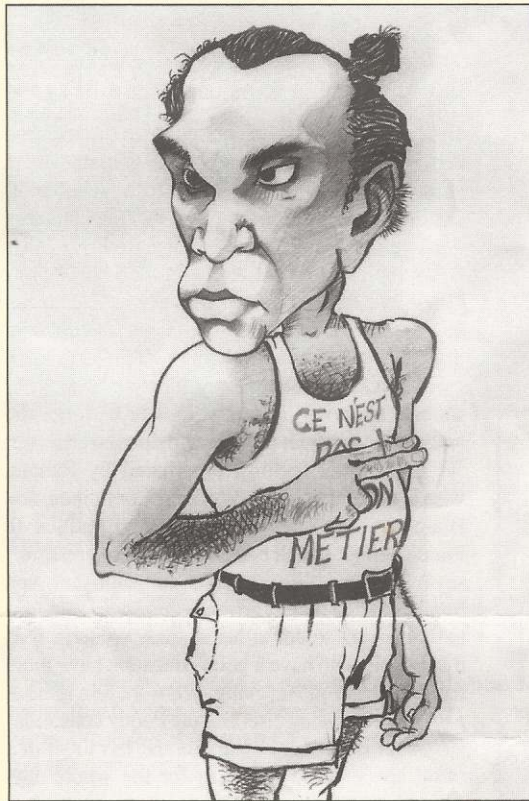
"Aurovilians take the business of human unity too seriously. We need to laugh at ourselves," says Charudatta.

The Deepwali celebrations at Bharat Nivas coincided with a rare exhibition of caricatures at Kala Kendra. Judging by the smiles and grins of those who visited it, the exhibition was a great success. Over 40 caricatures of well-known and lesser-known Aurovilians were made by the Auroville artist Charudatta, better known as Charu.

"Most people don't know that I am an artist," says Charu. "They see me mucking around at the Entry Service and think that I am one of the increasing bunch of Auroville bureaucrats." Not so. Charu studied painting at the Goa College of Art and at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda. His particular interest was modern art, particularly 'Indian' Modern art. "Drawing caricatures was not really encouraged there, unless you opted for illustration as your specialisation," says Charu. But that didn't stop him from drawing caricatures of professors and fellow students during student agitations or college elections. "I had fun," says Charu.

But why don't we see an exhibition of his serious works? "You may say it's because of Sri Aurobindo," replies Charu. "My approach to modern art got confused when I read what he wrote about the true role of art. He wrote about how art has degenerated, has become more intellectual and how the source of inspiration has declined. At the university we were taught to approach modern art almost with reverence and with an emphasis on 'hard and rocky' reality. Sri Aurobindo speaks about finding a deeper and a higher level of inspiration to justify the true purpose of art. This confused me, initially. Imagine, I had studied art for 7 years, and here was my spiritual guide, Sri Aurobindo, plainly implying that all I had studied was, basically, rubbish! Or at least, that it lacked the proper perspective."

Charu came to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1990. "It was a positive cultural shock," he reflects. "For being an artist in the Ashram requires a different kind of daring, perhaps because of the ambiance." He started Chinese painting in the so-called Chinese 'Spontaneous' Style. "I was doing flowers and bird paintings on cloth and handkerchiefs. They



Charu by himself

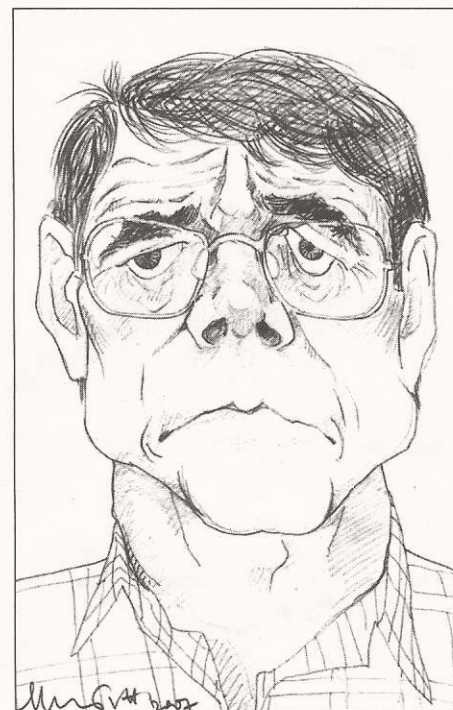
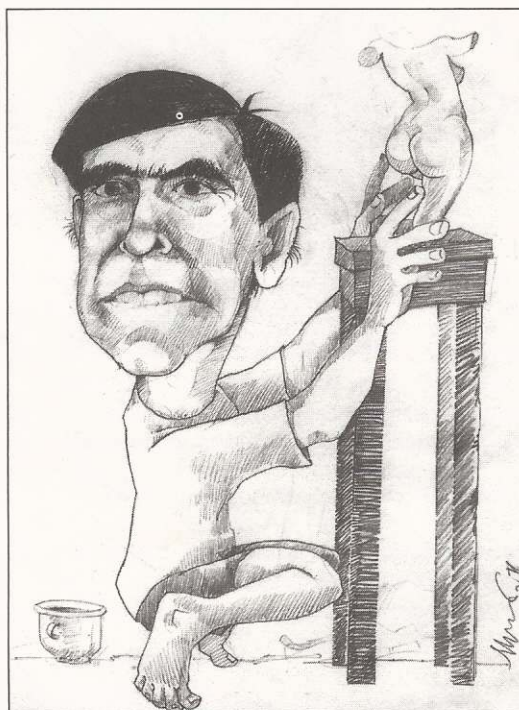
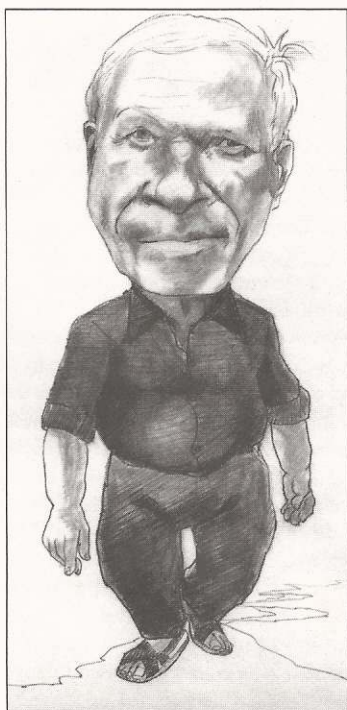
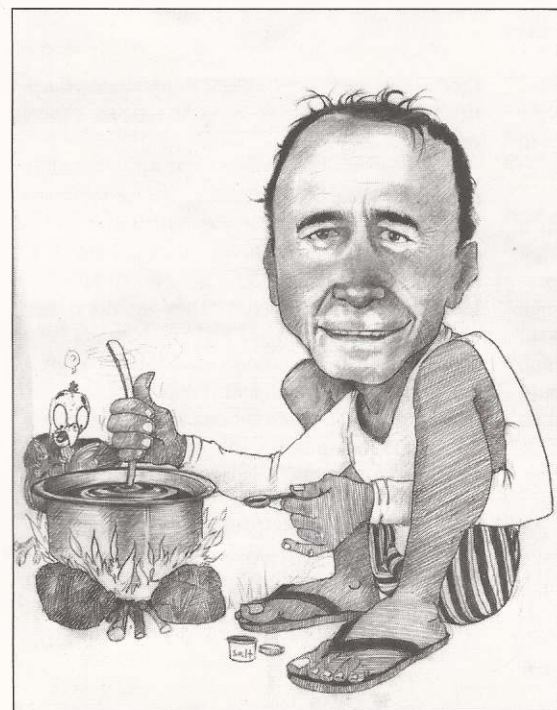
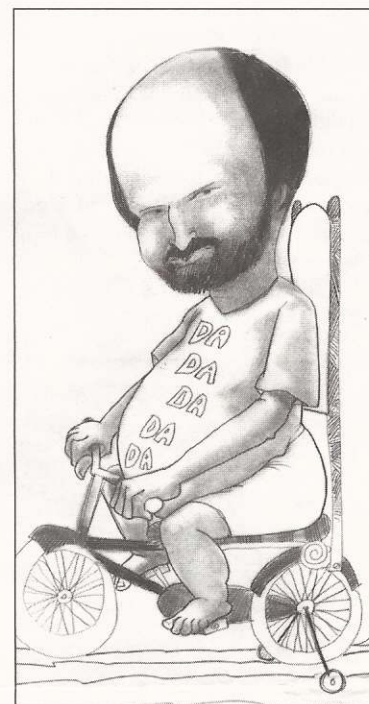
became quite popular. But after 8 years, I had had enough. So in 1998, I moved to Auroville. Here I met Paula, my partner."

Life took a different turn after the birth of Mir, their son. Paula encouraged him to take up painting again. Now Charu makes at least one pen and ink sketch everyday. In 2003, he began drawing caricatures of Aurovilians. "For fun," he says. "Some I drew from memory; I also received inspiration from the pictures published in *Auroville Today* – especially in the book *The Auroville Experience*. People saw my work and asked me to publish some of them in the *News and Notes*."

And what about the level of inspiration? "People tell me that in some drawings I've caught something of the person's inner being. Perhaps they are right," he says.

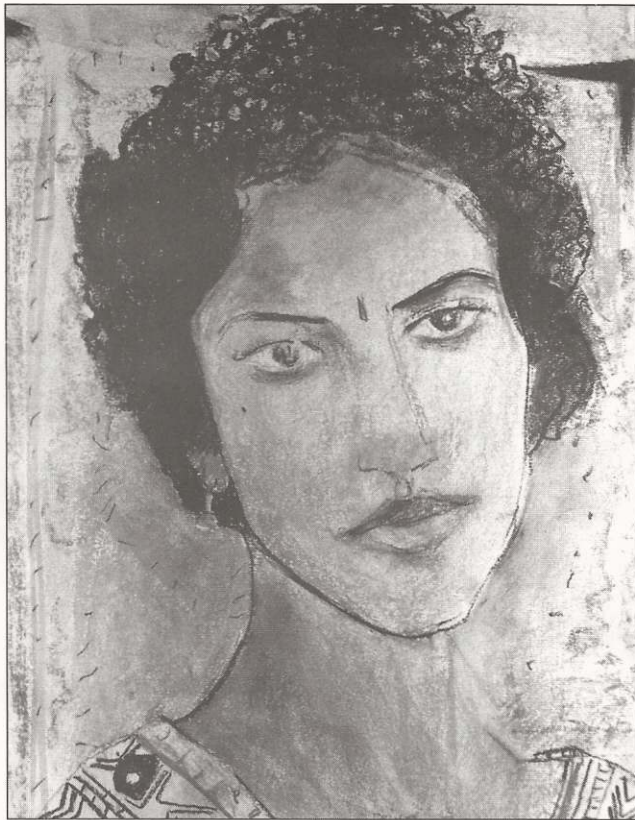
A book of collected caricatures might well be in the offing. An exhibition of Charu's more serious work is tentatively scheduled for the immediate future. Keep an eye open.

Carel





Joster – 'The man with two sides'

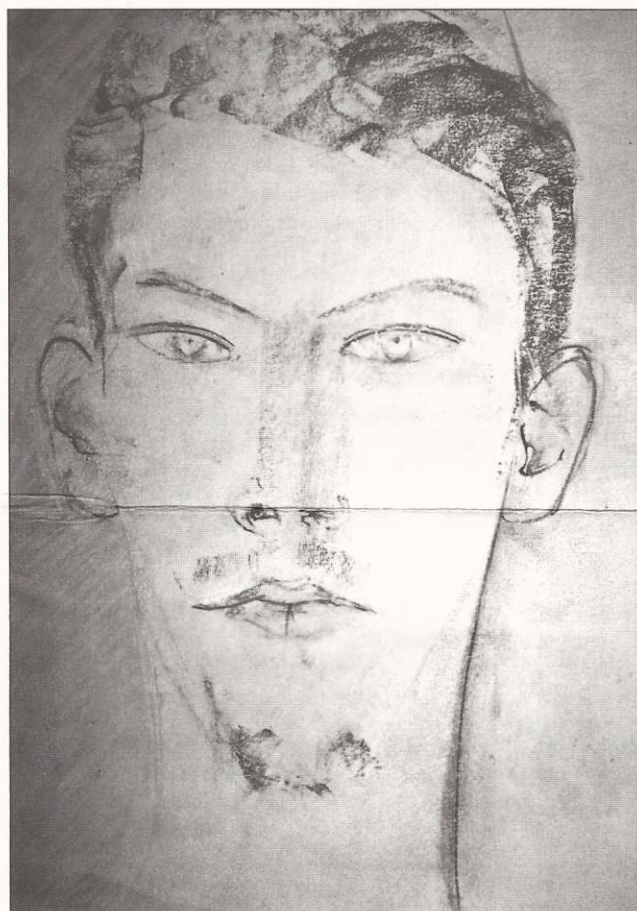


Priya – 'New generation'



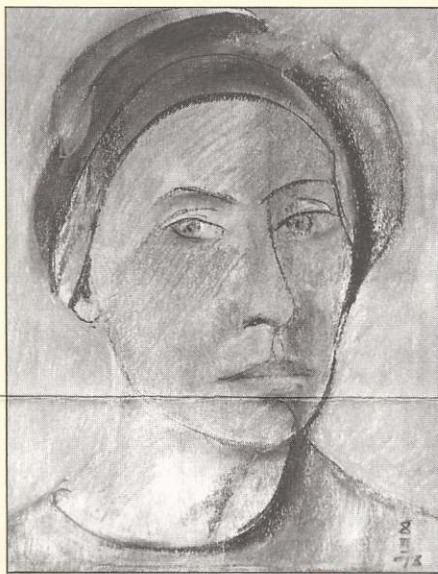
Pavitra – 'Reincarnated Greek poet'

ORIGINAL CAPTION BY SHANTA



Coriolan – 'Crystalline presence'

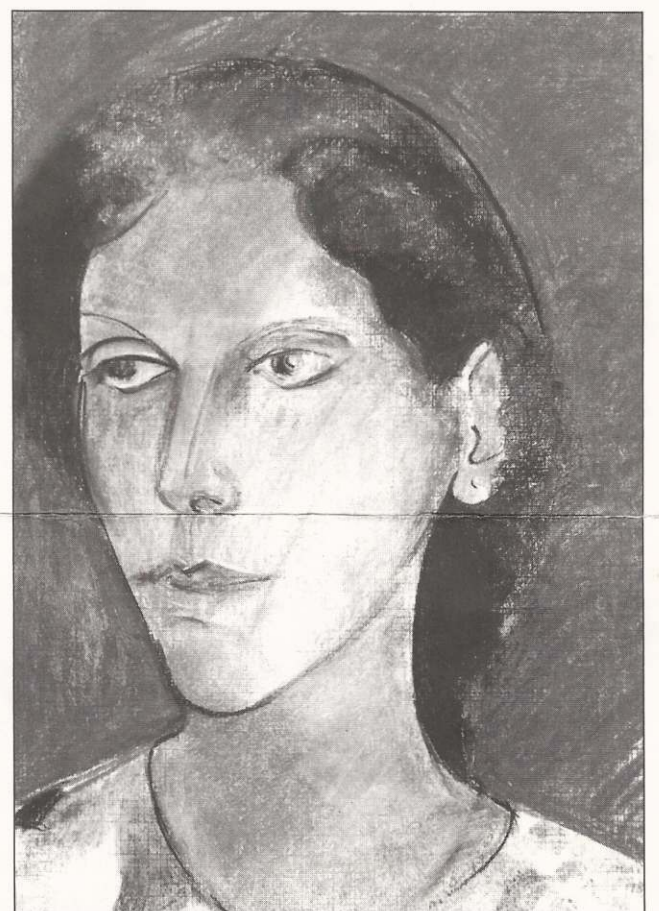
Beings unmasked



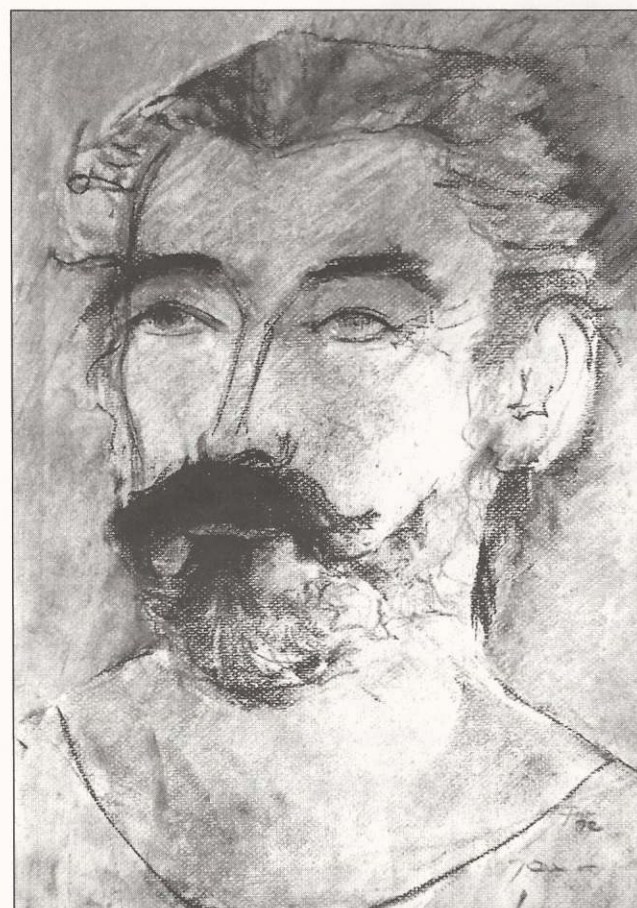
Shanta: self-portrait

“Since I arrived in Auroville in 1991, I have wholeheartedly thrown myself into doing work for the collective; offering my artistic capabilities,” says Shanta. “This left me with little time to do my own paintings. However, I was not prepared to let go of this work as it connects me to my inner being. So I began inviting Aurovilians to pose for their portraits.”

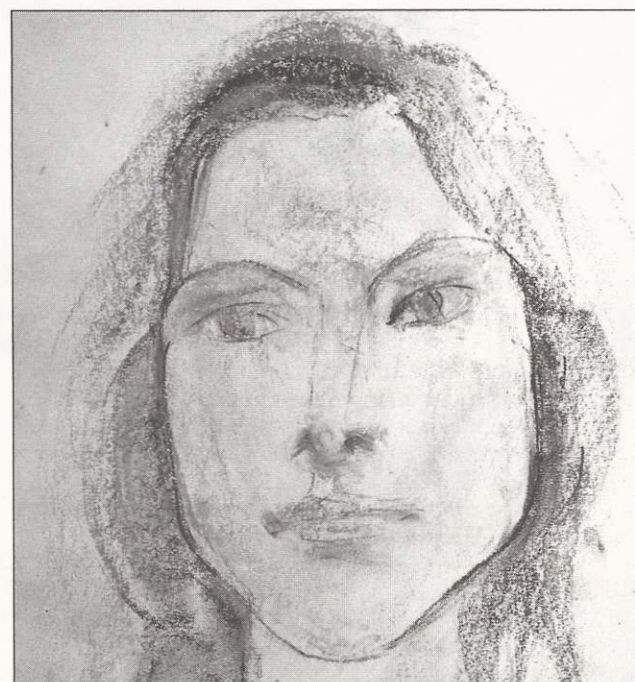
Sixteen years later more than a hundred portraits of Aurovilians and of people who work in Auroville rest on a shelf in her atelier in Auromodèle. An exhibition in the Town Hall, which comprised only twenty portraits, offered the first glimpse of her work. Asked what Shanta experienced when drawing the portraits, she says, “Each took on average two or three hours of concentrated work. But these were also privileged moments of depth and confidentiality, for in doing each portrait I met with a Being behind the masks and appearances. This was a deep experience.”



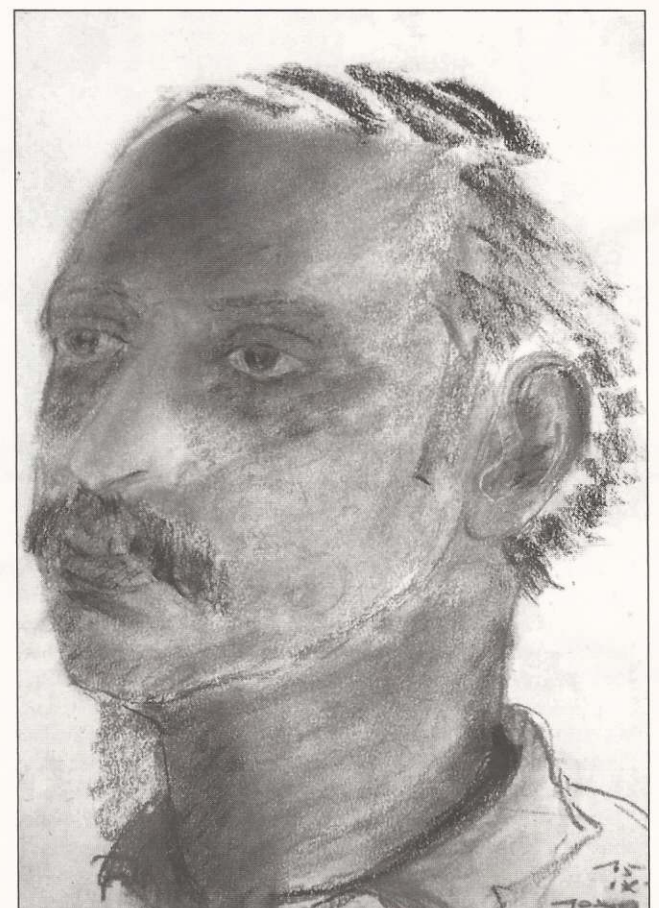
Srimoyi – 'Determination'



Marco – 'Remembrance of a revolutionary epoch'



Cecilia – 'The light of a young mother'



Sanjeev – 'Does the law invite you to the Peace?'

Experiencing Last School

It was about 2 ½ years ago that I joined Last School as a teacher. My connection began soon after I had a student from Last School come to attend the 'O' level biology class that I was then offering at Future School. She was one of the youngest in the group with a limited background in the sciences, but she quickly stood out with her curiosity and maturity. I remember I asked each student to come up with any question they would like to be discussed in class, and hers was unexpected – how does the mind work? She had me stumped and I had to go back and do some real homework!

Soon she dropped out as the logistics of travelling between the two schools, just to attend one class became unrealistic, but not before asking if I would come and teach at Last School. Perhaps more students would be interested, she said, as they did not have a teacher in the natural sciences.

And so I found myself teaching at Last School.

The School

The school building is a delightful design of Roger Anger – round and bubble-like with port-hole windows, and painted ochre and white. It feels welcoming and cosy in its unusually diminutive scale. Inside it is beautiful – an open courtyard with ferns and a cluster of tall areca-nut trees shooting straight up, a little pond with hyacinths popular with the dragonflies, and a stucco Ganesha amidst the greenery. The classrooms are laid out around this garden in an oval layout. Along the walls are delicate scrolls of calligraphy with Sri Aurobindo's mantras and The Mother's words. I was already sold. And the class had eight eager faces – four from Auroville, three from the village, and one from Pondicherry – together representing six nationalities. What was remarkable to me was their easy companionship and helpfulness towards each other. They seemed like a family.

Mission

Last School states its aims as being (1) to experiment with free progress so that the students progressively take over the responsibility for their own progress, (2) to unify the education of the instrumental nature (mind, life, and physical) around the aspiration of the soul, and (3) to design an Aurovilian syllabus, free from the pressures of the certificate systems.

It has taken a while for me to even begin to understand what this means. In my own class, I find the students mature beyond what I expect of someone of their age. Despite their limited exposure to the sciences – it is the arts and the humanities that are Last's School's strengths – their understanding is intuitive. Their questions are deep, observations pointed and everyone participates with ease, without shyness – something that I found refreshing. They seem a confident, grounded and happy bunch

Recently as my class was watching the movie *What the Bleep do we Know?* I noticed one student making notes in her journal as the scenes rolled – "It's for later reference," she said noticing my curious looks. Another made a remark after the bit on quantum physics. "That sounds just like what the *Kena Upanishad* says." A seventeen year old in the 21st century (and French) talking with ease about an ancient Indian text! I was stumped. When I shared this with Deepti who teaches Indian culture and philosophy at the school, she did not seem surprised. "If you asked them what the difference between the *Brahman* and *Ishwara* is they would, with some effort, probably be able to give you an answer."

The 'Freedom'

To suddenly find myself in such an atmosphere was liberating. No set syllabus to follow, no deadline to meet, no questions to ask and re-ask in preparation for exams, no information to summarize and spoon-feed, and no bored students to entertain.

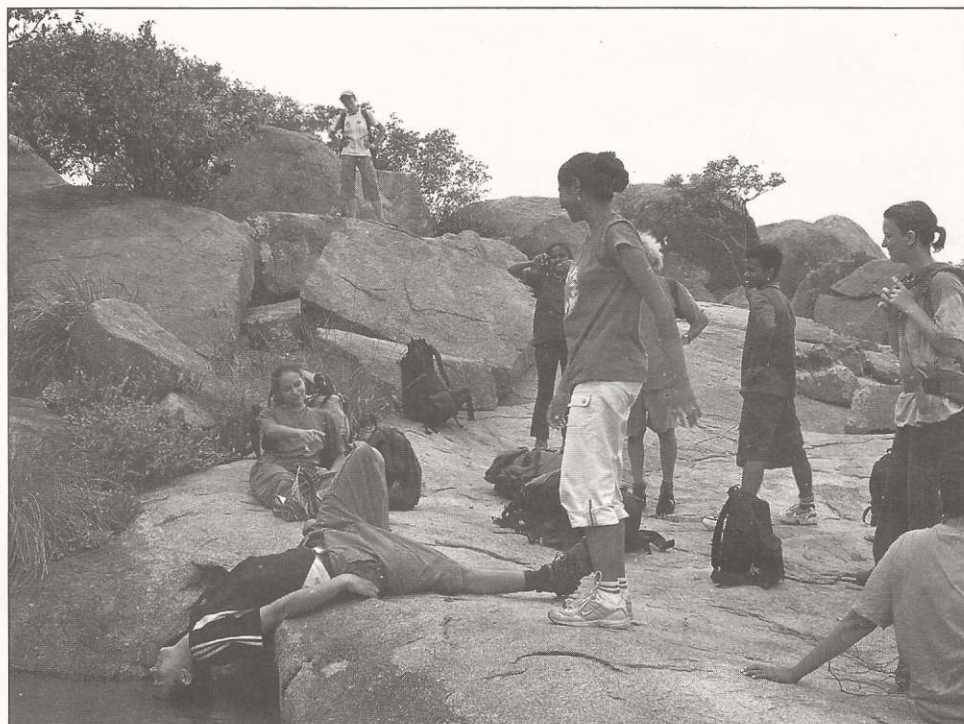
Looking back, perhaps I did turn a tad crazy over the first few weeks, but the students were tolerant and did not complain. We went on nature walks exploring the canyons behind Aspiration – clambering down the steep ridged walls, filling pockets with edible berries, examining termite mounds and tree fungi, collecting broken egg shells of unusual pastel hues... just immersed in the surrounding wilderness. I had not felt that alive in a long time or as excited about Auroville as I was then. There was always something new to explore in that wild green campus and beyond.

Later, our class began to meet at the Pitchandikulam forest to learn about tropical flora and medicinal plants. It was as if the greater Auroville, a live and teeming laboratory, was just waiting to reveal its mysteries. Was I prepared for it? Not really – because the material available is so vast. One could easily spend months just looking at one aspect of it and getting lost in that microcosmic world. Of course, in time we all settled down and formal classroom sessions also began where we studied human biology or discussed the emerging issues of biotechnology.

Time, as a resource

When I look back over my two brief years at the school, what stands out is the availability of time. No one seems to be rushed to 'complete portions' and move on. Time seems to be an abundant resource allowing one to explore any topic for as long as it takes, and as deeply as one wishes.

Sometimes I wonder what motivated these children to choose and remain in Last School. Aren't they afraid to face a future unarmed with certificates? Aren't they ambitious to leave Auroville and see the world? While the majority of their peers have opted to pursue more conventional pro-



The Last School children on a weekend trek to the Gingee hills

grammes, what gave these children the courage to step outside the box? Why were they unaffected by peer pressure?

I asked them if it was a hard decision to make. "Yes," said one. "In the beginning I was not sure if I'd miss out on something without a certificate. But very soon it didn't matter – I am very happy with my choice." She has been in Last School for over three years. Another boy, the only one from Transition School who joined the programme this year adds, "Certificates seem important mainly to get jobs – it doesn't mean learning. And in my opinion, one can get the job one wants as long as you know the right people and have the right connections!" But the real reason he chose Last School he says was the strong fine arts programme there offered through the Pyramids.

The programme

The school's strengths lie in philosophy, Indian culture, humanities, the languages, and the arts. Students at their own request have started studying Sri Aurobindo's *The Life Divine*. Specialized classes have also been given in the *Dhammapada*, Vedas, Upanishads, and Tantras. A lot of hours are dedicated to learning languages – everyone learns French, Tamil, Sanskrit and English. 'Current events' is a core subject to which much time is also devoted – "It keeps us in touch with the contemporary world," explains a teacher. Mathematics and natural science are also part of the programme. The arts (drawing, painting sculpture, crafts) are taught at the Pyramids Arts Centre, where art is pursued not for its own sake, but as an 'instrument for self-education in an aspiration to harmony'. All students

participate in the Dehashakti Sports Programme offered in the late afternoon every day.

But what I have still not understood is why this school, that seems to pursue the concept and spirit of Free progress as expressed by The Mother, is asked constantly to justify its existence. Just because only a few students have opted to study there, does it make it less valid? The teachers say that they all feel much joy in doing what they do. "We will continue to do our work as long as we have students," they say. "But the reality is that we may have to wind down. Auroville does not seem ready for this yet." Next year, two students have planned to leave for a year of travelling. "That will leave us with only four children, unless new ones join," they add. (The school does take in children of visitors and has a couple of Korean students who attend a few classes.)

Reflections

I remember the beginning of this school year. I had showed up on what I thought was my first teaching day, but the school was empty. Everyone is at the Pyramids, said the amma. And there they were, the entire school, teachers and students, all working side by side on art installations. "Didn't you get the message?" they asked. The first week of school had been set aside to get in touch with the inner creative. Everyone was involved – painting, drawing, constructing, creating. And that included the shy Tamil teacher who had made an enchanting strip of marching red dinosaurs...

If this is what school can be like, can I please be a student again?

Priya Sundaravalli

COMMUNITY

Fresh winds blow at Pour Tous in Aspiration

New freezers with glass window doors are some of the recent improvements that have made the Aspiration Pour Tous a much nicer shopping space. "They save electricity," explains executive Denis. "There is no need to open the door to see what is inside. Auroville donated them a few months ago, together with a van. Both were necessary improvements."

Denis, a Canadian Aurovilian, runs the place together with his partner, Sabine, 38 employees, 3 Aurovilians and 1 newcomer. In their case, the word 'run' can be taken literally. "Sabine and I are here from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. six days a week," he says. "The work is fulfilling, but mentally and physically exhausting. Every Sunday I am finished, as if I have been beaten with a big stick."

Sabine explains that after Denis got involved with Aspiration Pour Tous, a change in management style slowly manifested. "Denis has a way of working with people which perhaps best translates as 'kindness'. There is no longer a top-down approach, we do the work together," she says. "But we have continuously to set the example and pull the employees up to our rhythm of work. We help stack the goods in the shelves to make sure that the work is done nicely, with the labels facing the front. We help with the daily cleaning. We help unload the goods from the van. We supervise the accounts and prepare the orders with the purchase workers. The team is now taking collective responsibility and it is nice to hear from all sides that the atmosphere has changed."

Why did he choose to come to one of the most difficult work places in Auroville? "I needed



The new van at the entrance to the Aspiration Pour Tous stall

a concrete challenge," says Denis. "I had been discussing ideas around tables for too long. I wrote documents for groups such as Vision 2012, but then realized that the problems are not in 2012 but right here and now. So I agreed to join Pour Tous, knowing fully well that it wouldn't be easy. For here you deal with the basics: food. When that is not available, it tends to bring out the worst in people; they start behaving arrogantly or even aggressively."

With the guest season coming up, an increase in the workload can be expected. "Our normal turnover is Rs 30 lakhs a month," says Sabine. "But on the first Saturday of November we did Rs 2.1 lakhs of business in one day! The shop was full and

we couldn't get the shelves stocked-up fast enough." "We need more Aurovilians. Ideally, Aspiration Pour Tous should have two teams," says Denis. "But it isn't easy to find committed people. Most Aurovilians we talked to were only looking for a maintenance, not for a hard-working

service job. The first thing they ask when they apply is if there is time off. That work-ethic won't do here." The problem, he says, will become urgent in April when both he and Sabine have to leave temporarily to fulfil family obligations.

Contrary to the cooperative experiment of the Prosperity Pour Tous near the Solar Kitchen [see *AVToday* #218, April 2007], Aspiration Pour Tous is a self-supporting service. It is not subsidized by the community and has to cover all its overhead expenditure from a 10% charge on Auroville items and an average charge of 15% on products brought from outside Auroville. "We manage, but only just," says Denis. "With the recent introduction of Value Added Tax the, our margins on some products have been substantially reduced. As the law says that we can't reclaim sales tax paid in Pondicherry, we now shop more in Tindivanam, Villupuram and Chennai. We have also managed to become official distributor for a few products, so that we could cut-out the middleman and ensure that what you buy at the Aspiration Pour Tous is less expensive than in Pondicherry."

"It's a strange anomaly," says Sabine. "that Prosperity Pour Tous is community subsidized and

(continued on page 7)

Purchase break-down at Aspiration Pour Tous - July 2007

Description	Purchase in Rs.	%
Commercial Units, Guest Houses, Community Kitchens	802 555.00	30.6%
Guests	261 465.00	10.0%
Aurovilians not included in the Maintenance List	1 103 461.00	42.0%
Aurovilians included in the Maintenance List	457 412.00	17.4%
Total	2 624 893.00	100.0%

Coming together to protect the coast

Senior government officials, scientists and citizens' groups meet in Auroville to discuss how to restore and protect the local beaches.

Erosion of the coast close to Auroville is now catastrophic (see *AV Today* # 222 August, 2007). Almost thirty metres of Quiet beach have disappeared over the past six months and neighbouring fishing villages are also badly affected. Concerned by the scale of the erosion, which affects both the Pondicherry and Tamil Nadu shoreline, a local citizens' network (PondyCAN) organized a consultation meeting in Auroville that was attended by senior officials from both States, coastal management experts and non-governmental organizations working on the coast. The aim of the meeting, co-organized by the Auroville Coastal-Area Development Centre (ACDC), was to agree upon a plan to protect and restore the coast.

Natural or man-made?

The experts began by pointing out that on a coast like ours, where there are frequent storms, strong currents and oblique wave action, sand movement (known as 'littoral drift') is a natural phenomenon which can result in erosion. However, there seemed to be general agreement that building two breakwaters for a small harbour to the south of Pondicherry Town in the late 1980s had made matters much worse, as these had disrupted the littoral drift.

The results of this disruption soon became clear. Sand piled up to the south of these breakwaters, the Pondicherry beach disappeared and beaches further north eroded. The Puducherry administration responded by constructing sea walls and proposed to build a groyne field [groynes are structures extending perpendicularly out to sea] in an attempt to protect coastal villages which, having lost their protective beaches, were threatened by the waves. As the erosion moved north, the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu also began constructing sea walls and groynes along its shoreline.

"This cannot be a final solution," said Commander Puthur, a retired naval hydrographer, "because this coast is not a localised 'cell'. If you build seawalls and groynes in one place, you merely transfer the problem to another. We have to deal with the root of the problem, which is the blocking of littoral drift by

the breakwaters of Pondicherry harbour. Our first action, therefore, should be to replenish the sand on the northern beaches through dredging."

Tarapore, a highly-respected coastal management expert, pointed out that the Pondicherry harbour breakwaters and the groynes could be redesigned to minimise

line data (including a hydrographic survey) and extensive modelling of possible solutions. And once a programme is implemented it should be continuously



Aurofilio making a presentation at the coastal management meeting in Auroville

Not a new idea

In fact, the original design of the Pondicherry harbour anticipated the problem. The idea was to pump sand north to replenish the beaches. However, the pumping equipment was installed fully a year after the construction of the breakwaters, by which time there was so much silting the pumps couldn't cope.

But the replenishment option is feasible. This was shown in the late 1990s when, for a brief period, the Puducherry Government carried out limited dredging. The dredged sand was deposited north of the breakwaters and, suddenly, Pondicherry had a beach again.

In fact, Aurofilio of PondyCAN is convinced that adequate sand replenishment would mean there would be no need for groynes and sea-walls. Replenishment would involve not only initial 'capital' dredging to replace the sand lost over the years, but also long-term maintenance dredging and sand replenishment along the affected coastline. This would be costly. However, Dr.

interference with the natural littoral drift. If this were done, much less artificial replenishment would be needed.

'Hard' or 'soft' measures?

Not all the experts agreed that 'hard' measures like seawalls and groynes make the situation worse. Professor Sundar of the Department of Ocean Engineering at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Madras, believes that properly-designed groynes do not increase erosion, and that a combination of 'hard' and 'soft' measures are often the most effective way of combating coastal erosion. He admitted, however, that in this particular case the 'hard' measures had made the situation worse. In fact, while he had advised on the design of some of the local groynes, he dissociated himself from those that had been finally constructed.

The other point made by the experts was that, while protective measures may be necessary in the short term, a long-term solution requires good base-

monitored. The strong implication was that neither the Pondicherry harbour nor the subsequent attempts at coastal protection and erosion control had been adequately planned or monitored.

Obstacles to comprehensive action

Why not? The experts lamented that the crucial initial work of data collection and modelling is almost never adequately funded. Also, data collection and modelling take time, but when villagers are sitting on the East Coast Road demanding action to protect their homes from the sea, something more immediate is called for. Then there is the issue of awareness: the Chief Engineer of the Puducherry PWD/Water Resources Organization mentioned his constant struggle to make his administration understand the complexities of the problem. On top of all this, of course, are the many personal and political interests and pressures that shape decisions.

The local situation is further complicated by the fact that the Tamil Nadu and Puducherry governments have been working separately on coastal erosion control. This issue was addressed in the afternoon of the meeting by Mr. Anbarasu, I.A.S., Secretary of the PWD of the Puducherry Government. Acknowledging that action taken by the Puducherry Government should not adversely affect Tamil Nadu's coast, he agreed that a joint mechanism should be set up for coastal management. "For, if the erosion continues, it will erode the people's confidence in our governments."

Mr. C.V.Shankar, I.A.S., Officer on Special Duty, Relief and Rehabilitation to the Tamil Nadu Government, agreed and proposed a joint coastal management authority. This should be composed of government officials from Tamil Nadu and Puducherry, scientists and representatives of concerned citizens. He also mentioned that Tamil Nadu had decided not to construct any new harbours or ports without a thorough understanding of the ecology of the East Coast. The Danish Hydraulics Institute (DHI) was assisting them in drawing up an Integrated Coastal Zone Management Plan for the state. (The Puducherry PWD Secretary subsequently announced he would request the DHI to include Pondicherry in their detailed coastal study.)

Somewhat surprisingly, money does not seem to be a problem. In fact, the Collector of Villapuram, Mr. Brajendra Navnit, I.A.S., suggested that easy financing had resulted in the over-hasty adoption of 'hard' measures like

sea-walls and groynes. He suggested that softer and lighter measures, like beach replenishment, should be adopted first. Pointing out that, post-tsunami, many fishing communities had agreed to relocate, he calculated that a combination of soft measures and moving communities away from the shoreline without jeopardising their livelihood would be more cost-effective than constructing sea-walls and groyne fields.

All of this, of course, takes time. It's little comfort to those who, like the inhabitants of Quiet and the neighbouring villages, see the beach disappearing before their eyes. But one possible ray of light was provided by Mr. Anbarasu's announcement that the Puducherry Government is making 13-14 crore rupees available for a capital-dredging and beach-replenishment scheme.

Go the whole hog

Summing up, the Chairman, Dr. Tarapore, said he was reassured by the intention of the neighbouring States to work together and by the availability of funding. But he noted that people were still thinking in terms of the old administration/finance regime which made for long delays and poor implementation. "Let's go the whole hog and do everything necessary as one package across both States. Begin by reactivating the sand by-passing system at the harbour, then remodel the harbour entrance for natural by-passing. Off-shore sand deposits should also be investigated as a source for restoring eroded beaches. Funds should be provided for a comprehensive hydrographic survey of this particular environment and for modelling so that we can identify the best equipment and technologies."

"And put time limits on everything!"

A success?

Was the meeting a success? Probably not for those who wanted to see agreements being made about specific courses of action within specified time-frames. However, since it was billed as a 'consultation meet' this expectation may have been unrealistic. In fact, it was a considerable achievement to get the top people in both state administrations and in the scientific community to come together and discuss the problem. Local coastal erosion now has a much higher profile and, hopefully, there will be much more cooperation between the participants, leading to more informed decision-making.

Aurofilio of PondyCAN, for one, said he was "very satisfied" with the meeting. "It's the first time we succeeded in making local coastal erosion an inter-state issue, and it's very positive that the states have agreed to work together. It's also the first time that we, as a citizens' group, have been able to discuss matters with the scientific establishment which advises state governments. In this context, it's heartening that while the experts may have differed over the general usefulness of groynes and seawalls, the consensus was that, in this instance, the 'hard' solutions have not been implemented well and this has caused problems. And nobody objected to the sand replenishment option."

Filio cautions, however, about becoming over-optimistic. "There's still a long way to go. There is huge pressure upon the local authorities from beach communities to take quick action - which usually means quick-fixes. And there are vested interests, too."

His concern is well-founded. A few days after the consultation meeting, a Tamil newspaper reported that the Puducherry administration has decided to construct eleven new groynes to the north of Pondicherry Town...

Alan

Monthly expenditure of Aurovilians depending on a maintenance - July 2007

Purchase range	%	Average expenditure person / month (in Rs.)
Rs. 1 - 100	4.9%	42.47
Rs. 101 - 500	15.7%	257.90
Rs. 501 - 1000	17.0%	689.33
Rs. 1001 - 2000	31.5%	1 295.73
Rs. > 2000	30.8%	3 022.99
Total	100.0%	1 499.71

(continued from page 6)

doesn't need to add a percentage to cover its overheads. The Aurovilian who shops over there pays in effect less for some products than in Aspiration. As for the things they can't find, they simply come here to purchase what they need. These Aurovilians tell us that their prime motivation to go to Prosperity Pour Tous is either its proximity or the cheaper prices. Thus the present system allows a certain group of Aurovilians to take advantage of the best of both worlds. I find it quite unfair for the Aurovilians who can only afford or prefer going to Aspiration Pour Tous."

"In July 2007 we did an analysis of who is purchasing at Aspiration Pour Tous and how much money they spent," says Denis. The results [see box] indicate that almost 60% of our clientele are Aurovilians; 30% are Auroville commercial units, guesthouses and community kitchens, and only 10% are guests. We noticed that two-thirds of the Aurovilians who shop here are self-supporting, while about one third are maintained by the community. That third represents almost 81% of all Aurovilians maintained by the

community! The figures give compelling reasons to stop giving Aspiration Pour Tous the unequal treatment it is receiving as compared to Prosperity Pour Tous."

The comparison raises another issue. While the Prosperity Pour Tous benefits from a brand-new building, Aspiration Pour Tous is still struggling in premises that are now over 30 years old. "The building is falling down around our ears," says Denis, "and there is not much we can do. In fact, both the stall and the storerooms need to be completely pulled down and replaced by something more suitable. But we don't have the energy to even look into it. For it is not only a question of replacing a building. The main question is determining where the new Pour Tous should be built."

Denis refers to the fact that Auroville is split into two parts with Aspiration and a number of other Auroville settlements situated a few kilometres outside the city. While it is obvious that a shop needs to continue in Aspiration, it is not obvious there should be a Pour Tous shop in the city that operates on the same lines as Aspiration Pour Tous. "I have difficulty imagining there could be a City Pour Tous on the Crown road in competition with the Prosperity Pour Tous a few hundred metres further down," says Denis. "Perhaps it is unavoidable. But my preference is to find a third option since I do not believe that both systems can merge. The starting point should be that all Aurovilians should receive the basic goods at the same price. A certain range of essential products should be made available to everyone at cost price, while other products should be charged separately. If this could be agreed upon, then both locations could offer the basic range of goods and remain free as to what other products they put on their shelves."

Carel

Mitra: Auroville's youth hostel

Two years ago, Auroville's youth hostel *Mitra* was inaugurated. Now *Mitra*, which in Sanskrit means 'friend', is a vibrant and happy place bustling with students, interns and young volunteers from all over the world.

“When Sanjeev asked me if I would like to be the manager for the *Mitra* Youth Hostel I said, 'Give me a few days to think about it. But where is the hostel?' When he told me it was just behind the Town Hall and 200 metres from the Matrimandir I could not believe it.” Usha has been the manager of *Mitra* for five months now and loves her live-in job.

She is responsible for up to 48 students, (or more if they are willing to adjust, the brochure says). It provides comfortable budget accommodation for interns and long-term volunteers between 16 and 30 years.

One might expect a Youth Hostel to be a bleak space with overcrowded dormitories and grubby washrooms, but *Mitra* is really like a good Indian hotel – elegantly designed and simply furnished with quality materials. The reception area welcomes the guest with a bowl of Auroville flowers and a dark polished table with a built-in chess board. Architects Anupama and Sonali have designed a structure which with its gently-curving exterior wall and railed balconies above, is reminiscent of an ocean liner. The building is oriented in such a way that a constant breeze flows through each room.

“When I first started the job, I found it really difficult,” says Usha. “Although I had worked for 10 years in Pour Tous and 2 years in the Financial Services, this sort of work was completely new to me. I was given full responsibility for running the hostel and caring for a lot of youngsters.”

“In the beginning there were many students who had already been staying at *Mitra* for quite some time and they resented me wanting to change things. They used to cook their own food and make an awful mess of the kitchen – food was being wasted as well as gas, and then they'd cook fish that made the whole building smell bad. On top of that, the loud music and smoking were other problems that were difficult to change, but slowly all these naughty boys and girls left. So now I make sure the new ones who come in are very clear about the rules.”

Usha has spruced up the place. “I bought lots of new vessels for the kitchen and smartened up the bathrooms so the place is always clean now. The other day an American who stays here asked me if I had studied management as the place was so well run. I felt so proud!”

“By nature I have lots of energy and very clear ideas about things. This makes some Tamil people say I have a 'big head weight' (a 'big head' in English), as I often follow my own ideas. I

have always felt my opinion is as good as anyone else's, so why listen to others?” she asks. “In the beginning, the gardeners and workers didn't like taking orders from me as I am a woman, but I try to treat everyone in the same way and now they are beginning to see this.”

Usha points to a group of men digging outside. “We are putting up a fence to keep the cows out as I've got so tired of being woken up at 3 in morning and having to chase the animals out of our garden.” Eventually, she says, she would like to have a proper fence around the building with a guard who can sign the students in and out at night. “It is a big responsibility to care for these students. Some are only teenagers and it is their first time away from home, so I feel they are my children. Who else will look after them if I don't? Sometimes they knock on my door late at night complaining of mosquitoes and not having any repellent, but often I think they just want to see a friendly face.”

A big, bearded young man munching a large bag of chips passes by. “Hi, Usha, howzit goin'?” he bellows in an American accent. A tiny Korean girl wanders in asking for some pegs to hang her washing on the clothes-line. Ammas are busy sweeping the stone floor and chopping vegetables in the kitchen. There is an air of quiet and happy activity.

We walk up a flight of stairs past a spacious area with well-tended potted plants. There are a couple of single rooms but most are doubles with attached balconies. On the second floor are the dormitories. There are mattresses on the floor, a few guitars and rows of oversized shoes outside.

We go up to the terrace where I notice a scarlet punch-bag. Usha explains that a resident used to teach boxing and now classes happen twice a week. She shows me the roof where the students practice yoga and tai-chi and where they like to sleep in the summer. The view is stunning. Matrimandir twinkles from behind the Town Hall and there are trees on every side. “*Citadines*, the latest housing project, is going to be built on that field,” she says pointing to the right. “And I hear there are plans for a college over there; that is why the Hotel was built here.”



Usha, *Mitra* hostel's caring caretaker

Usha is called away so I go down and join some youngsters having a late breakfast. I ask them how it feels, living at *Mitra*. They are all enthusiastic about the place and full of praise for Usha and her caring ways. However they all complain about the cost. “When we first came the prices were low, and Usha tells us she raised them so that we can get a better quality service,” said one disgruntled long-term resident. And what is the price? “A single room is Rs 300 (€ 5.5); a double room, Rs 150 per person, and a mattress in the dormitory Rs 100 per day – and this only includes breakfast; plus there's no hot water.” This is too expensive they say, for those who are doing volunteer work for Auroville. Another adds, “We also have to pay the student guest contribution of 30 rupees a day, which is unfair.”

Otherwise they say, *Mitra* is a great place to stay as it is so central, quiet and safe, and brilliant for meeting young people from around the world. Indeed, there is an international feel about the place. “I see that this is a place where one can develop lasting friendships with people we meet here. It is wonderful really to be able to experience Auroville in this way,” adds a young woman.

As I said my goodbyes to the youngsters, I thought how privileged they are to be cared for by such a good soul as Usha and stay in such a lovely space when many newcomers, and even Aurovilians, have to live in much less pleasant surroundings.

Dianna

WORKSHOP

Towards the luminous and the free

Recently Sraddhalu Ranade gave a five day retreat at the Sri Aurobindo Nainital Centre in the Himalayas. Ten Aurovilians were among the participants.

The Ashram is at 7,550 feet, high above the glittering Naini Lake, and is a well-loved destination for many Aurovilians. It took a two-day train journey and a couple of long taxi rides to get there, but we looked upon the journey as a lengthy Indian pilgrimage. At the Ashram, we were surrounded by the steep Himalayan mountains with clouds rolling dramatically up the valleys in the evenings. There were twenty one of us, ten Aurovilians and eleven others, including a fourteen year old Indian girl whose clarity and discipline were inspirational.

Being early November, it was brisk and cold. In the great hall, I used to try to find a seat near the central candle for whatever warmth it could offer. In the beginning, Sraddhalu's precious words were often drowned by fits of coughing and sneezing so that at one point we, wrapped in our blankets, must have looked and sounded like a small sanatorium. But spirit overcame matter and no one ever missed a session. A few of us would get up in the brilliant Himalayan dawn to do *asanas* and the Indian ladies in the class who participated were very enthusiastic and told me that they had learned a lot of 'new tricks'.

Sraddhalu would sit cross-legged surrounded by his cell phone, laptop, batteries and volumes of Sri Aurobindo's books, speaking tirelessly for hours in his beautiful mellifluous voice. His first session ran unbroken for over three hours and our brains and knees got a little tired, so we plucked up courage to ask him for breaks.

Sraddhalu taught us by showing how to experience the different states of mind or levels of consciousness. He showed us how to gather our consciousness to become one-pointed, and then focus on the psychic being which is in the centre of the chest, the *chaitya purusha*. Or to focus our consciousness on the top of our heads, then on the space just above, and open ourselves to the Divine. The heart of the practice was to start with a pure deep core of aspiration. With sincere practice, he told us, we would

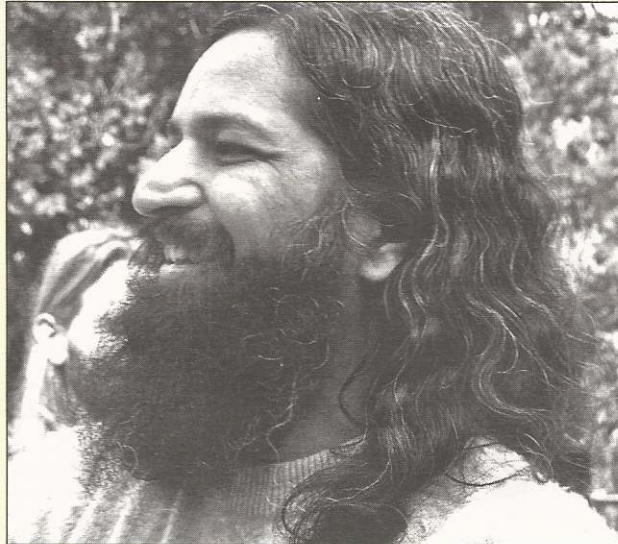


PHOTO JOHN ROBERT

Sraddhalu

become aware of the ego thinning out and then be able to be constantly centred. “You can then move out into the world as necessary without becoming fragmented, as is the usual habit.”

He explained the Divine *Shakti* and led us through the understanding that nothing can be done without that force, and that our purpose is to see this Divine Force flowing in everything. “If you can train yourselves to see that the aspiration in people stems from the Divine Aspiration, then you can see the Divine in people,” said Sraddhalu, “and not just be misled by their superficial personalities.”

He suggested that before we start to do anything we should first become aware of the core of aspiration within us and let it aspire upwards; this manner of just turning towards the Divine

will carry us a long way. Then by simply opening and directing the aspiration upwards we can expose the mind to a higher consciousness. It can take years of training to realize this clarity using other systems but Sraddhalu explained that this is a remarkably direct approach to attaining “the luminous reaches of spontaneous knowledge”. I personally did experience glimpses of this luminosity though, as Sraddhalu reminded us, very few people have the discipline necessary to cultivate and maintain it in their daily lives.

Question were far-ranging as the bright young Americans and an Israeli in the group recognized a brilliant and contemporary mind. They asked about technology. “Everything is an aspect of *Brahman*,” explained Sraddhalu. “Technology is the drawing out of a quality already inherent in a material; like iron that is melted in fire to become a liquid. All the qualities are waiting inside, it is just a play of new arrangements that draws out new qualities.” They wanted to know what caused political conflicts. “It is the massive upheaval of ways of thinking and their inevitable collisions. The outworn ideals of religions are being tested to their limits and being forced out into the open where they will metamorphose into something new, often through violence, as you see in the Arab-Israeli or the Indo-Pakistan conflict. These countries will eventually be forced to solve their problems on a higher level of consciousness; this is the only way forward.”

Someone asked: “What is the purpose of Auroville in all this?” His answer: “Auroville is based on an inspired foundation. Because Auroville exists human unity is possible. On an occult level it is of tremendous importance to the world.”

“What should be the purpose of my life?” a young American asked. “To live according to your highest aspiration.”

Sraddhalu showed us how to live life in a new way with the consciousness focused internally and the aspiration focussed up towards the Divine. I had read about this for years in Sri Aurobindo's books, but until I was gently led through the process over those five days in Nainital by an experienced and a very caring teacher, I really had little idea of the depth, yet simplicity of Sri Aurobindo's teachings.

I also realized I had never really known the meaning of ‘inner work’ before. As the workshop came to an end, I went up to thank Sraddhalu. “This is only the beginning,” he said.

Dianna

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Published by Carel Thieme on behalf of the Auroville Foundation. Printed by Brihat Consultants, Pondicherry, and published at Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India.

Auroville Today does not necessarily reflect the views of the community as a whole.