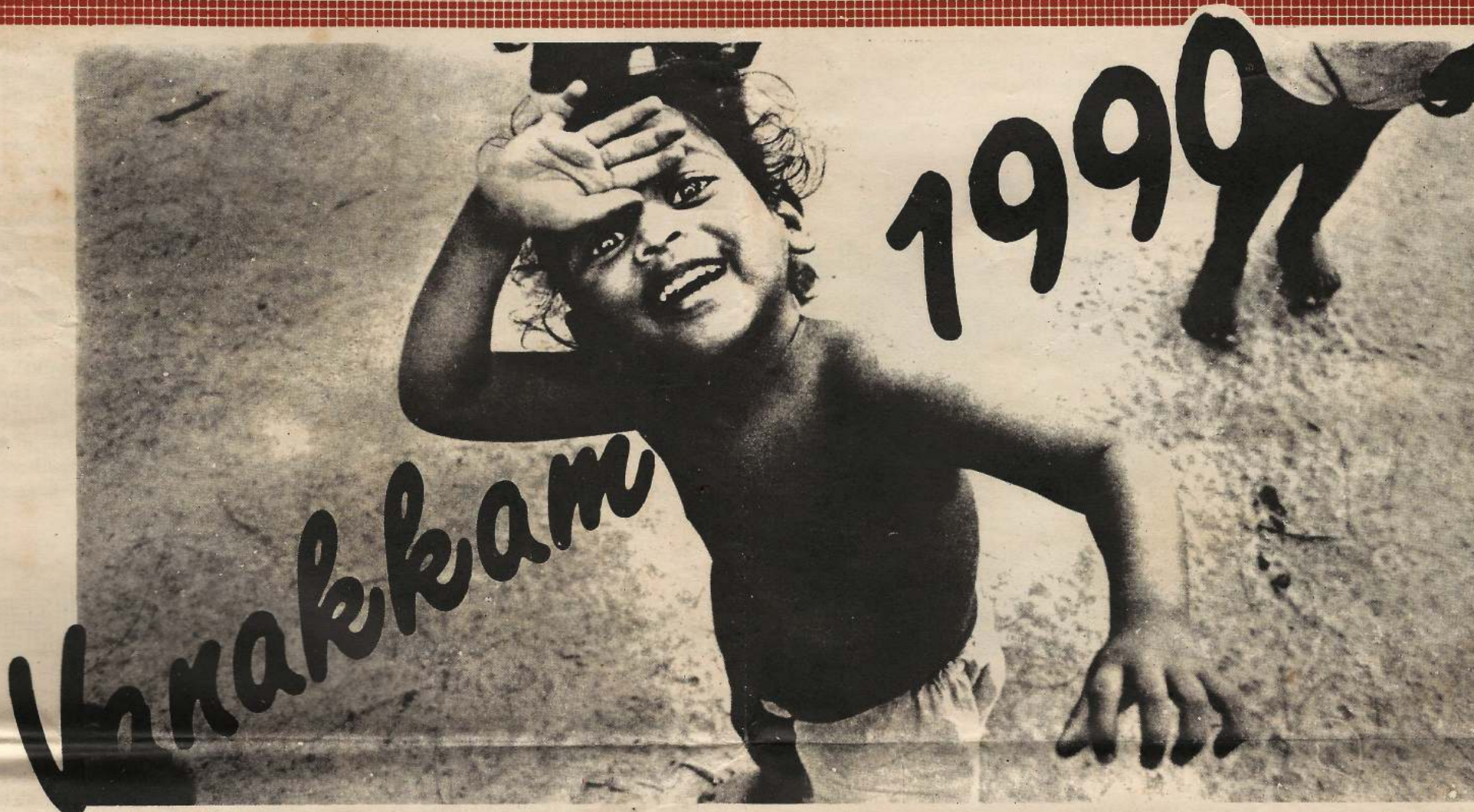


# AUROVILLE TODAY

January 1990

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Number Thirteen



'Vanakkam': Tamil greeting.

Photo: Sven

**W**e live among them, sharing with them a fragile corner of a fragile planet. Each day, we pass them on the roads or in the fields, we sit beside them in the teashop, we hear their music. Each day, two thousand of them come to work among us, helping build Auroville. Mother called them "the first Aurovilians..."

But, after 22 years, what do we really know about the villagers, beyond a few names, and one or two colourful customs? How many of us can even speak their language? The unknown land, terra incognita, is not just within us. It's also on our doorstep!

This issue of Auroville Today, among other things, provides a glimpse of a world whose destiny is inextricably linked with ours. As an Aurovilian put it recently, "If we can't make it together, we can't make it at all". They are, perhaps, both our greatest challenge and our greatest opportunity to demonstrate that human unity is not an empty catch-phrase. And that co-evolution is possible with a culture that, outwardly, is so different from ours.

The next issue of Auroville Today will deal with Auroville's response to the challenge, a challenge which is facing the world. 75% of the world's population still lives in villages. If our solutions do not include them, what is our future?

**T**HERE ARE 21 villages, big and small, in close proximity to Auroville. Three of them fall within the Auroville site area: Kottakarai (population 750), Edayanchavadi and Kulapalayam (both just under 3000). Some villages belong to Pondicherry State, the rest to Tamil Nadu. The total Tamil population around Auroville is about 36,500. They are mostly Gounder caste and harijans. They are small farmers, skilled and unskilled labourers, fishermen. The whole area has been certified "backward and in need of development" by the Collector of South Arcot District in 1984. "The Auroville-village situation", as Dee puts it in her *Auroville Village Communicator*, "is actually a microcosm of the global situation. Under 25% of the world's population benefits from modern civilization; the vast majority of our fellow humans are living in villages stripped of their natural resources of fields and forests by destructive agricultural practices and industrial exploitation, and stripped also of their brightest people who go to the cities to earn."

The villages have their own traditional, unelected leaders, as well as elected leaders from the political party system, the 'Pan-

chayat'. The traditional leaders are involved with local festivals and the management of the temple, which is a very important, central focus in the village. They play an important role in the social setup, approving marriages, divorces etc., and even, occasionally, excommunicating families or individuals from the village.

There are frequent disputes between the traditional, and the political leaders, and often the temple trustees form a third layer of management, being in charge of temple funds. This sometimes makes development work difficult.

There is no full caste system in every village. There is mostly one caste, and a separate harijan (untouchables) colony. Sometimes harijans from the colonies are not even allowed to walk into the main village. Many harijans have found work in Auroville and benefit by the absence of caste-restrictions here.

Food production is continuously going down. More and more lands around Auroville are used for cash crops, like casuarina (for firewood) and cashew. Traditional grains are disappearing.

## The villages around Auroville

□





The road to Mathur

Photo: Sven

## The Road to Mathur

The road to Mathur winds up from the beach road. It is long and sandy, and I looked at it for fifteen years before I took it. Most Aurovilians never go down this road, but many of them know it from the frequently reprinted photograph of a very tall palmyra tree that stands alone.

The greenbelters who employ people from Mathur are among the few familiar with this village. They said it had a certain charm because of its isolation, and the people were nice and it was quiet. Still, a few months ago, Mathur blew up. A man was shot dead, more than fifteen houses were burned, half the village fled their homes. Today some people from Mathur don't go down to Pillaichavadi to catch a bus to Pondicherry. They go in the opposite direction to Pettai because they are afraid of being attacked in Pillaichavadi.

I heard the story of the conflict, why and how it happened. It involved the social and political reality that exists in all the surrounding villages. The point for me was that I didn't want to know about it. The village situation seems too difficult. I avoid it. What to do with these thousands of 'first Aurovilians'? Can't Auroville's "Village Action" take care of them? They say they can't.

Yesterday I cycled down the road to Mathur for the first time. A few minutes

from Aurogreen I was stuck in the sand. Here and there are little paths that the villagers had created to bypass the sand by going into cashew fields or the eroded canyon. The approach to Mathur is bordered on both sides by thick hedges of gratitude flowers.

Mathur turned out to be much bigger than I ever expected. I tried to find a man who had lived his whole life in Mathur but the people I talked to had never heard of him. I didn't expect this, and continued to explore the village. On the east side is a picturesque little lake surrounded by tamarind trees. It was full of children laughing and splashing in the sun.

What did I find in Mathur? Evidence of the conflict was there, very little charm, the usual squalor and more questions about the future of Mathur. There are new roads to Mathur partly paved by the new Pondicherry University building on the doorstep of the village. The wall surrounding the University stretches for kilometres to separate it from the village. Why should Auroville or myself be concerned with this? I came home tired with no answers. How to assess the village situation as related to Auroville? I only knew that it will be an issue Auroville must face over and over again because it can only keep blowing up and disturbing our dream. — Bill

## To be poor in India...

— by Ardendhu —

IN THE SHADE of India's economic progress since independence are hidden the agony and hopelessness of the majority of Indians. Though much has been achieved to increase food production, many can still not afford two full meals a day. Though much has been achieved in industrial growth, the spin-off effects have not yet reached the millions of the poor, who still do not have a secure shelter over their heads and access to minimum services. To be poor in India means you have to live in fear; fear of not having work tomorrow, if you're lucky enough to have it today; fear of the moneylender; fear of those in authority, from a traffic policeman to the bank

from a private source pays 250 to 300% interest per annum; no wonder his debts keep mounting till he has to mortgage his land, or cattle, or even himself and his future generations.

Most agricultural workers and day labourers don't get even the minimum wages fixed by the Government, and though much time and money is wasted every year for collecting statistics and revising the cost of living index and poverty lines and deciding minimum wages, not a single person has ever been convicted for not paying minimum wages. Poor people have to send their children to schools where teachers don't come, where text books are not easy to get and

**"What does not benefit directly the poor and marginalized can't be in the interest of the nation..."**

manager, from the village headman to a member of parliament.

Every time a new development scheme is announced, the poor have to be alert that even what they have is not taken away. Poverty is maintained through inequitable access to resources and services and often outright injustice. The largest monopolies in India pay 20 to 25% annual interest on capital, a poor vegetable or fish vendor on the street pays that much interest every day. It's true they often don't pay municipal taxes, but the bribes they have to pay to local bosses and police are much higher than taxes, often claiming 5 to 10% of their daily income. A farmer who takes a seed loan

where to learn only the alphabet and basic arithmetic takes 6 to 8 years. In the public health centres, doctors and medicines are seldom available together. In the Government offices and banks, the really poor don't even dare to enter.

These are the ways in which the poor stay poor and become poorer, in a land which is rich in flora and fauna, rich in diversity of people, in culture, rich in energy and mineral resources. Or I should say 'was rich'. The market-oriented economic planning which has marginalized the poor and multiplied the number of destitutes, has also radually destroyed the resource base of India. Agricultural land, grazing land, forests, rivers and lakes are eroded,

**Ardendhu is an experienced social worker from Bengal and part of Auroville's Village Action team. He is, among other things, promoting organic farming in the local villages.**

destroyed or polluted. Behind the facade of development projects more and more resources have been diverted to develop a consumerism-oriented economy to satisfy the greed of a few. As a nation, borrowing to repay old loans, are we going to share now the feelings of a sharecropper and

vegetable vendor? What does not benefit directly the poor and marginalized can't be in the interest of the nation... If we've learned this lesson in the last four decades, that may be our only real achievement and now is the time to change... Time to rethink priorities and time to share what little we have. It's also time to reflect on what in life has true value. What is the use of riches, if the basic resources we all share—air, water, soil—are endangered and become unsafe for living? □



Photo: Sven



# "Auroville Keeps their Dreams Alive"

*Auroville Today: Did 'Peace Trees' have any impact in the U.S.?*

Savitra: Certainly on the youth that participated. One result was my interview by *In Context* magazine, where I was asked to speak about Auroville and the environmental restoration. The editors subsequently got responses which said that, while the other articles in that issue were talking about good ideas that needed to be done, Auroville came across as a place that is actually doing them.

That article helped establish Auroville's credibility in the areas of environment and Soviet-American exchange programmes, and helped open other doors for me in the U.S. In the larger sense, 'Peace Trees' helped Auroville relate to the world. It enabled it to be recognized by others as participating in a phenomenon that was sweeping the planet. And for people like the 'Peace Trees' kids who would not have come to Auroville without that bridge, here they were falling in love with the place. Some people can just step into Auroville. Others need a boat, a vehicle, an intermediary to bring them here. 'Peace Trees' was such a vehicle.

*How did you get invited to the Soviet Union?*

Savitra: The Russian poet, Valentin Sidorov, visited Auroville in 1989 with his translator, Natasha. I was introduced to her through Esalen in California, as an Aurovilian interested in developing Soviet-American relations. At the time, Sidorov was chairman of the Writers Union Commission that was organizing a conference to honour the artist and humanist Nicholas Roerich. At first I was to be included in an Esalen delegation to attend the conference, which didn't quite feel right. But suddenly I received a personal invitation, as an Aurovilian... on August 15th!

*Tell us more about the Conference.*

Savitra: Even before his passing, the art of Nicholas Roerich had been recognized. But with the coming of Gorbachev, Roerich's social and political thought which previously was banned, was seen as representing some of the highest ideals of perestroika—a kind of 'spiritual perestroika'. The theme of the Conference, based on Roerich's life, was 'Peace Through Culture', and the aim was both to honour Roerich and to try to spread his ideas throughout the world. The Conference took place over 8 days in Moscow and Leningrad. The delegates came from

Savitra, a long-time Auroville resident, helped organize 'Peace Trees' in December, 1988. (See *Auroville Today* no.2). He has spent much of the past year in the U.S. in a liaison role for Auroville, exploring collaborations with numerous organizations such as Esalen, and building credibility for Auroville within the avant-garde movements in America. Particularly as a result of initiatives taken with the US-USSR exchange networks, he was invited in October by the Writers Union of the USSR to attend a conference there on the theme, "Peace Through Culture", where his talk about Auroville was enthusiastically received. In the light of his three-week tour of the Soviet Union, *Auroville Today* interviewed him when he returned to Auroville recently.

the Soviet Union, the U.S., India, Australia, Mexico, Western Europe, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia and included the special representative of the Dalai Lama as well as the Archbishop of Moscow.

On the original invitation, I was asked if I'd like to give a talk. I didn't take it seriously. But on the opening day, I was asked to speak! I had prepared nothing. As the talks began, I tried scribbling notes, but nothing was coming together. Finally I decided not to write anything and just see what would happen. When it came to my turn, a very old man with white hair and a long silver beard, like some classic character from Russian novel, was suddenly brought forward and asked to speak. By midday, the speeches had become quite repetitive and droned on and on, but there was a quality in this man that was somehow different. At the end of his speech, which was spontaneous, it turned out that he was the grandson of Leo Tolstoy!

Then I got up, took a deep breath, and just let go. After all, these were only other human beings, just like myself. And that was how I spoke with them. As fellow human beings, not as sacrosanct delegates. I told them that my grandparents came from the Ukraine, that I have an American passport and that I've lived 21 years in India—and I asked them then, who I was, who we were... what passport do we really carry? And that brought me to Auroville... And then something happened; don't ask me what, but it worked! Everybody was suddenly alive again, and at the end, the Dalai Lama's representative came up and said, "We are with you"; the conference interpreter said, "Thank you. That's the first speech I enjoyed translating!"; and Sidorov said: "Now I'll get you interviewed about Auroville by Moscow Television and Leningrad Television" (and eventually by Moscow Radio, and various literary journals). And that's what happened. Later, when I visited Riga in Latvia where I was hosted by the Ecology Centre of the State University, we even received a front-page interview in the daily newspaper.

*How widely known is Auroville in the Soviet Union?*

I was amazed. People know more about Auroville in the Soviet Union than they do in the U.S. There are many levels of interest. There is an intense, grass-roots interest in spirituality and the occult. There is also the attraction to the environmental aspect of Auroville. (Environment is a banner that everybody can gather under in the Soviet Union as it's a safe, non-political issue). Others see us as a utopian social experiment that perhaps reminds them of their fading communist ideals.

At the moment in the Soviet Union, they are desperately looking for models, because nothing works. They need to believe in something and Auroville is something that they can look to. It's almost as if they want to believe it's already been built, for it represents a kind of urgent hope that they are missing in their own lives. Auroville keeps their dreams alive. And for those who have been here, it gives them courage because they see that certain things are possible. I met some of the 'Peace Trees' participants there. They told me, "I am living for Auroville". One of them gave me a candle and said, "whenever you light it, we will be together with you in Auroville!"

There is tremendous yearning for this Auroville. If we want one thousand, ten thousand Soviets to come to Auroville tomorrow, they will be on our doorstep.

*How can Auroville respond to this?*

Savitra: Exchanges are one possibility. Sending out information is another. But I

still feel that human to human contact is best. You may change less people this way, but the change will be deeper and more concrete. What makes Auroville interesting is that we are *doing* things, not just talking about them. And that is not just an issue for the Soviet Union but for the Earth.

*Now that you are back in Auroville after nine months, do you sense any changes?*

Savitra: I sense a shift in our polarities... At the same time as the walls are going down in Eastern Europe, the wall in and around Auroville are losing their rigidity. Those Auroville boundary markers seem to be appearing in Berkeley and Berlin. And like the rest of the world, Auroville is being asked, What will happen if you let the wall down? Will we be swamped, diluted? Or will we discover the same evolutionary force that is carrying Auroville meeting us everywhere?

I've met some remarkable people 'out there'. I've felt that they're all instruments of this evolutionary change. And the more I've come to understand Auroville's inner nature, the more I feel that it embraces the entire spectrum of this terrestrial adventure. Harmony is not exclusion. It is each thing in its right place. After 22 years, I believe it is possible for Auroville both to retain its uniqueness and balance, and to say 'Yes' to the world, to acknowledge that we are not here only for ourselves, but for the Earth. I see this as the essential and unavoidable next step. We have as much to receive as we have to give—but we won't be able to give if we don't know how to receive. Auroville today seems like a being that is just about to slough off its old skin. That old skin is still there, sticking, and there's some anxiety. If we lose it, perhaps we'll die. But perhaps we'll just get a membrane that breathes more freely, in and out...

*Interview by Alan, 21.12.89*

## Dear Auroville Today,

*(I have a few words to say—)*

*Often I find it hard to discern my feelings for India from those for Auroville. Maybe it's because their closeness is greater than would first appear. All this makes me wonder who I am to blame for this growing love...*

*She is my lover, and for this life we are entwined in a lengthy dance, that has yet to proceed past the first step in which she showed me her incredible beauty and all that she is. I know the next step, for she has given me the direction, but it feels as though I'm in mid stride, and we are both in expectation, waiting for me to land.*

*She is also my mother, I see this in all that she has given me, and all her caring, and all the abundance of her affection, and as a true son of hers I shall return all that to her, and all else that I ever have, so that she may live on past my years.*

Auroson was born and grew up in Auroville. He is presently studying in the USA.

*With love to all her people.  
Auroson.*



*Photo: Sven*



## DRESS

Although the village men often wear the minimum of clothing, the villagers still expect Westerners to be well-dressed, particularly when they attend functions like village weddings. 'Well-dressed' means covering the shoulders and legs.

## DON'T PRAISE THE BABY

Do not take photographs of (or stare at) a new born child, a pregnant woman or young, marriageable women, unless permission is given by the family. Do not photograph religious rituals—particularly in the inner temple—without permission. Also, do not praise the looks of a young baby—it's believed it may bring bad luck.

## HANDS

Only the right hand should be used for eating, for giving and receiving. The left hand is for 'unclean' functions. The villagers rarely hold hands—only young men who are friends or a father with a young daughter. Westerners holding hands may make them feel uneasy. And certainly Westerners should not kiss publicly in the village.

## SHOES

Should not be worn in the house or temple.

## SMOKING

In the Tamil family, only the eldest man may openly smoke. The younger men will not smoke in front of him. Many villagers are still disturbed or surprised by seeing a Western woman smoking. When visiting a village house, it is advisable not to smoke.

## EATING

If you visit the village, almost certainly you'll be asked to eat with a family. If you don't wish to, say you'll come next time. Otherwise, you can take something hot, like tea or coffee.

For the villager, guests are gods. So they will feed them and feed them, even if they have little for themselves. If you only want two 'dosai', say after the first that you've had enough—then you'll probably only have to eat four!

The hosts will never ask guests to leave. The guest must decide when to go.

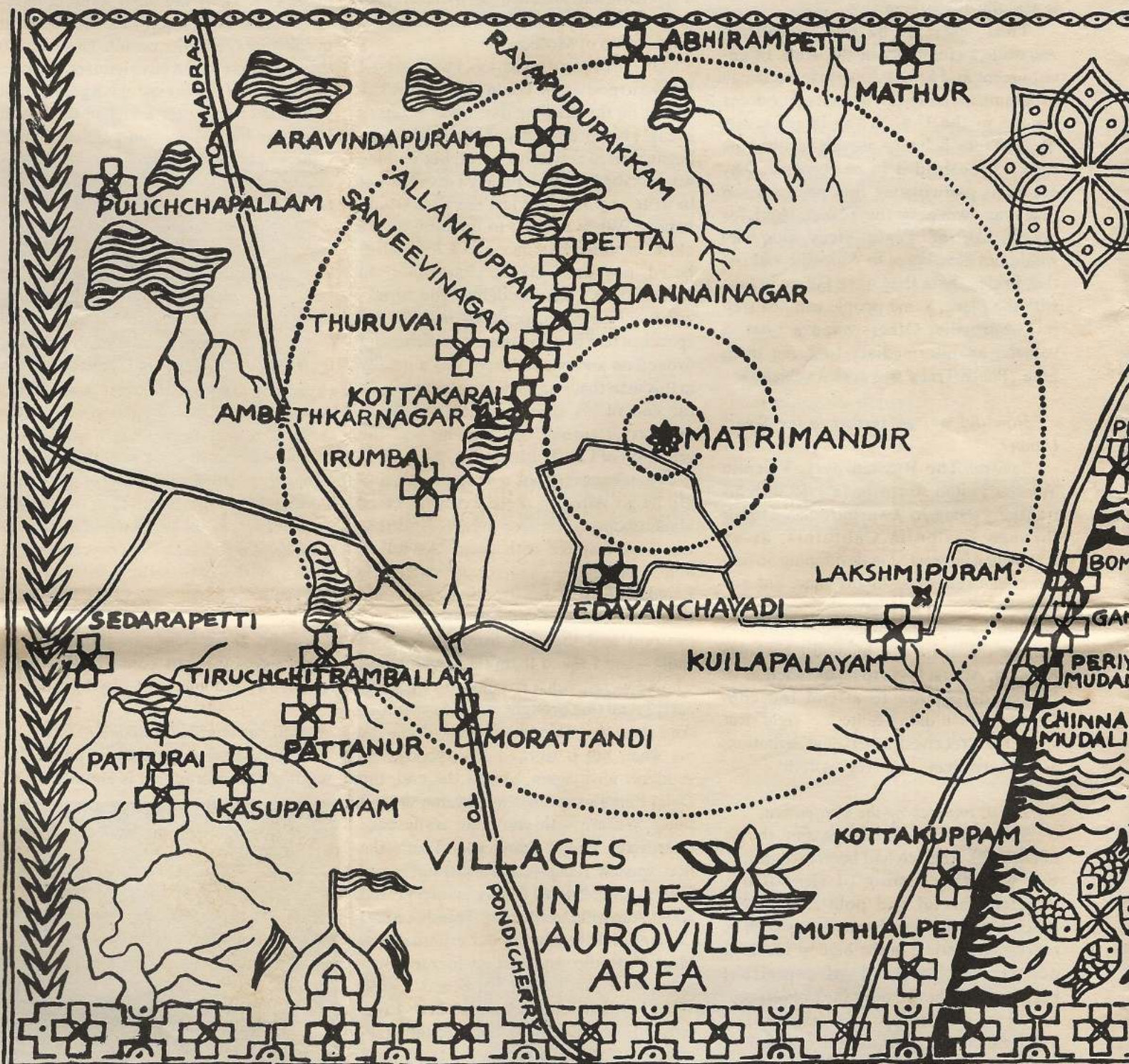
## PRESENTS

If you wish to give something, do not do it immediately after eating—it will feel like payment for the food. Give the gift either to a young child or to the eldest member of the family. The villagers will accept presents quietly, without profuse thanks. This does not mean gifts are not appreciated.

A man should never give a flower garland or a present directly to an unknown woman—it has a marriage significance. Similarly, women should not give to men

## SAMBALAM

The exchange of money has a sacred significance. When a worker receives his wages (sambalam), it is his 'Mahalakshmi'. Consequently, the money should be given consciously, and not while smoking drinking tea, listening to the radio etc. Try to give it on an equal level—don't let the worker stand while you sit. Some village men still find it difficult to accept money from a Western woman. One solution in this case is to put the money in an envelope and allow him to pick it up.







## Don't Praise the Baby!

The neighbouring villages have now grown used to Western Aurovilians, and are remarkably tolerant of their ways. But some behaviour can still cause offense.

How to prevent misunderstandings? Meenakshi has lived in Auroville since 1976. Apart from being a well-known poetess, she is an important bridge between Auroville and the villages, interpreting village culture and explaining to them our values and behaviour. Auroville Today spoke to her recently to get some guidance.



### TRAVEL

Tamil women normally sit separately from men. There are special seats reserved for them on buses. A Westerner should not sit with a villager of the opposite sex.

In the villages, there is a tradition that they do not travel in certain directions on certain days if the journey is for something important like a marriage or the purchase of land. This is why a worker may be away 3 days for a one day marriage!

### "SNAKE HOUR"

On the Tamil almanac, each day one and a half hours are marked as the 'snake hour'. Traditionally, this is a time for intense inward concentration. Consequently, during these hours (which vary each day on a weekly rota) a villager will not begin anything important like plowing, sowing seeds, marriage negotiation, etc. If an Aurovilian wants to talk important business with a villager, he should consult the calendar first!

### PUJAS

Pujas are ceremonies of very special thanks giving. When the villagers do them in their own home, they may have special rituals and outsiders will not be invited. However, the big festivals, like Deepavali and Pongal, are not really religious any more. And villagers are very happy if Westerners participate.

### TROUBLE

If a village child or man does something wrong, take them to the village headman or bring some elders from the village, as the village prefers to deal with such matters themselves. If a woman is caught doing something wrong, report her to the village. Do not touch her, as this can lead to a very emotional situation.

### RELATING

If your Tamil is not good, it is better to find a good interpreter and be accompanied by someone trusted when you visit the village. This will give the villagers confidence. Do not be disturbed if the villagers sit quietly for long periods, just watching you. They do not want you to go. They are merely familiarizing themselves with you. It's a different level of communication. The children will also come and look very openly at you and begin touching your things. Don't overreact. They are just being curious. In an unknown household, do not speak directly to the young women. Young women are not expected to speak in front of their husband and in-laws.

### GREETING

Don't offer to shake hands. Put the hands together, bow slightly, and say 'Vanakkam'. If you can speak even a few words of Tamil, the villagers are very happy.





# A Woman Who Helps Women

Saraswathi Devi lives in a traditional house in Edayanchavadi, one of the larger villages bordering on Auroville. She moved here a few years ago after working for many years as the principal of the Family Training Centre in Gandhigram Ashram. "By nature," she says, "I get rooted in communities". Now she is a contact person and energizer for Auroville's Village Action, working to raise the consciousness of women in the village. Fiery, straight-backed, independent, and with a laugh that crackles through the courtyards, she is gaining the respect of a village in which the traditional role of a woman is subservient, as is the case in most of India.

*Auroville Today: Tell us something about the typical day of a woman in the village.*

Saraswathi Devi: Now it is the time in the village for worshipping Ayyappa, and all the men who have taken a vow have to go to the temple early each morning. But first the women have to take their bath, clean the house and cook for the Ayyappa devotee. This means they get up at four o'clock in the morning. Then, if she has not stored water, the woman must go to the village tap. But as many people use the tap, the water supply soon runs out, and then there are quarrels and squabbles. If the husband is working, she must pack his food. After the men and children have eaten, she will eat. Then she has to wash all the family's clothes. The ration shop (which provides basic food at subsidized prices - eds) is in Kottakarai (a nearby village). Very often the women walk there and wait a long time and then find out that certain goods will not be distributed on that day. The women never dare ask why. They may have made 2 or 3 attempts before they can buy rice and sugar.

Everything to do with the house is the woman's responsibility. And when the boys and men come back, they expect her to have everything ready for them - and sometimes they even complain, "This curry is not good"!

of the women that they contribute very little. There is a Tamil word, which means "you are nothing". The men say, "You are just the cook. Once you marry, you have to obey me." It's like this everywhere. There are households where the husband drinks every day, or at the weekend when he gets his salary. Then he loses his sense and beats his wife.

Also marriage is a problem for the girl. Love marriages do take place but the freedom to choose a husband is not accepted in the village value system. One girl was even locked up in the house by her grandmother because she was loved by a man. Whenever she went out, her grandmother accompanied her. One day she escaped and ran away with her boyfriend. They hid in another village and then got married, and later she had a daughter. Now she is accepted by the grandmother, but her husband still feels guilty about making a love-marriage! He feels it was wrong.

*When a girl marries, how much information about sexuality does she receive from her mother?*

Saraswathi: Nothing. Absolutely nothing. It is a matter learned through experience, between husband and wife. A woman has no power over her body. She has to be available when the man wants her.



"Water is a women's issue... supply is erratic and insufficient."

Photo: Sven

*What if the woman has work in Auroville or in the fields?*

Saraswathi: She still has to do everything else! Some studies have been done in India. Women work, on average, 16 hours a day, men work 8 hours. The first one to get up is the woman, she is the last to go to bed. She eats last, she eats least.

*Auroville Today: What are the major problems for a woman in the village?*

Saraswathi: Water is a women's issue because they use it most, and in this village the supply is erratic and insufficient. Disputes at the tap are frequent and can spoil relationships.

Another problem is the way men treat the women in the family. Often the men say

This is India.

*It seems the village women suffer a great deal. Are there any cases where they have power?*

Saraswathi: There are exceptional cases. The woman opposite me owns a shop. She is an exceptional personality. She brings in the money and rules the family. Even her sons are submissive to her. Her daughters are not educated, but they also carry this power, this courage in them. Recently one of her daughters was to marry, but the mother refused because the bridegroom party wanted too much gold as dowry. In this village, the bridegrooms have started to ask for mopeds as part of the dowry, and marriages do stop for lack of adequate dowry. Formerly, among this



Saraswathi Devi

Photo: Sven

caste, it was the man who had to give money to the girl before marriage. Now it's the other way round.

One thing I've also noticed is that after many years of marriage, when the woman is no longer afraid that her husband will leave her, she starts taking power into her own hands.

*You've lived here for a few years now. How do you see your work, and what changes have you noticed in this time?*

Saraswathi: I give support to women who are in difficulty and out of place in their situation. I counsel them and get them to shed their inhibitions, to learn to have confidence in themselves. Then they become powerful examples for others. This house is a place where anybody can come and talk freely. A man once said of me, "She just wants women's rule". But I said, "No. I only want men to respect them, to treat them as equals and not to beat them". I also speak to young unmarried men. I tell them that men and women have different needs, and they have to learn to live happily together. Men are also oppressed. Society expects a lot of them that they can't fulfil. It's not their fault. We are all responsible. Now we have to work together to change society, to be different fathers, different mothers, different wives, different husbands.

Slowly, values are changing. The young

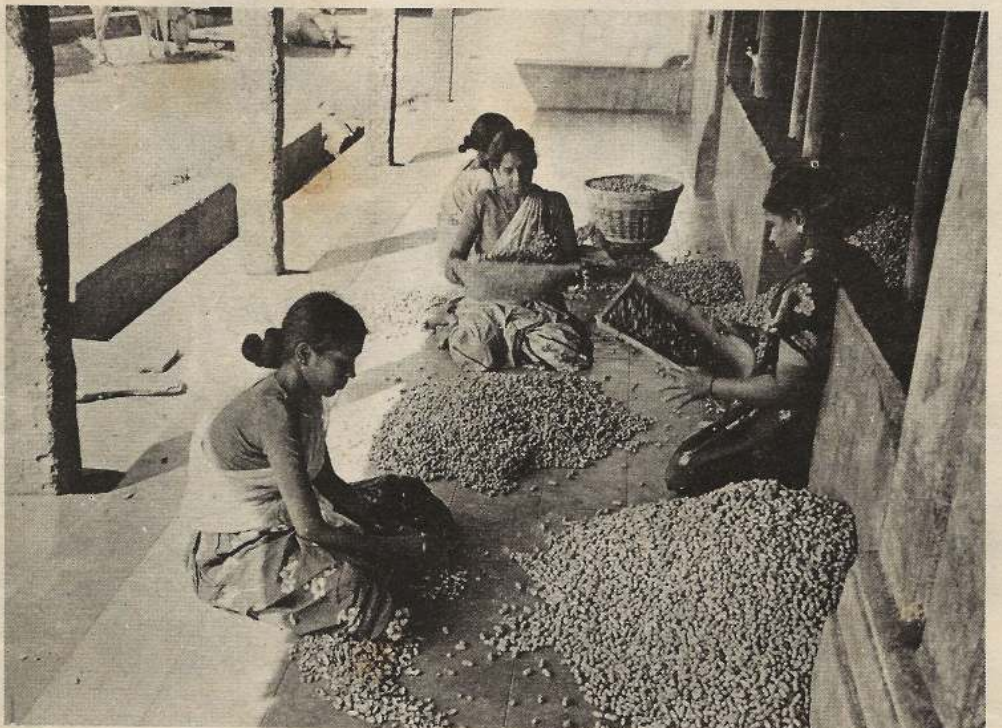
men I talk to don't mind marrying harijans (untouchables-eds.). When young men come here, I tell them, for example, to wash their cups. I do it consciously. And they don't hesitate. Now some help with the cooking at home. Also, either I am becoming insensitive, or the level of violence is going down in the village. I feel I'm a factor here, because everybody knows I don't approve of violence - whether of mothers to children or of men to women.

*Can Auroville do more to help you in your work?*

Saraswathi: One way Auroville can help is by referring any women who may be in trouble to me. Also, I need a bigger house where I can provide a refuge for more women who are in need. At the moment, the funding and resources are insufficient.

*Have you changed since you've been doing this work here?*

Saraswathi: I've learned to have less ego, not to consider myself such an important person. And I'm more happy. When I learned about the ideals of Auroville, I considered them to be the highest. I appreciate the efforts of those who try to live up to those ideals. I don't call myself a spiritual person. Vivekananda once said that service to people is service to God. I work on that principle. - Interview by Tineke and Alan.



Village women shelling peanuts.

Photo: Sven



The following story was told to Auroville Today by a woman from a neighbouring village. According to Saraswathi Devi of 'Village Action', the story is typical of a situation that many young village girls experience in India today.

## A young woman's story

"My father is an alcoholic and he is not useful. I studied to 9th standard in the school and then, at the age of 14, I was married. My father chose my husband, who I saw for the first time at the marriage. I didn't want marriage—I knew nothing about it. I told my mother this, but she could not do anything about it.

My husband was 20 years old. He told me that he could read and write, but soon I found he could not read, or even write his name. I was very shocked by him telling this lie. He worked in a silver shop in Madras and got Rs. 20 daily. But he did not go to work every day and so life was very difficult. He would go to the market and buy fish and mutton and vegetables—then next day the money would be finished. I would say, "Who will give us money?"

Often I would go to my mother's house. Only my mother supported me. My father would say to me, "Whatever happens, you'll have to put up with it. It's your fate."

One day my husband took me to my parents' house. The next morning, my husband was gone. Then my husband wrote to my parents, "Give me Rs. 20,000 and I will take back the girl. Otherwise you can keep her."

My parents refused and I lived for two years with them. Then I heard that my husband had remarried without my permission, which is illegal. I was very angry. I

went to the Madras police and finally they locked up my husband. The police told me to take him to court, but I felt I had nobody to support me. After one week, they released him. I told him to return my dresses, my jewels and my cooking vessels, but he never gave anything.

Afterwards, one day he came to my village. He said, "Come anytime to my house, it's open. Pardon me." I told him I wasn't coming back. I was very angry, and tore his shirt and pulled his hair. The next day, I received a letter from my brother. That's how I came here. I've now been here one and a half years and I've done some social work and some teaching. I'm learning English and I'm also part of a women's cooperative that stitches clothes for school children.

Now I see that marriage is only one part of life, and that there are also many other parts. I feel more free and strong now. I can ride a cycle (*it's still unconventional for women to ride a cycle in the village—eds*). I live a better life.

If I had a daughter, I'd give her a good education. It's the first important step in life. And if she loved someone, I'd let her marry him, whoever he was.

The most important thing is that men learn to respect women. That is what we want most.

□



Photo: Sven

## Blowing in the Wind

Recently, there blew into Auroville some new possibilities for renewable energy from the wind. In the air is a project based in Auroville and backed by Danish windmill specialists, the Human Ecology Centre of Edinburgh University (Scotland), the Commonwealth Human Ecology Council (London) and the Centre for Scientific Research (Auroville). Funding could come through the Danish and British governments.

There is an obvious need in India for clean, renewable energy sources and the wind is often overlooked and under utilized. Tom Read, an environmental specialist and former resident of Auroville, met with those in Auroville most directly

involved with wind energy. This meeting laid the groundwork for a project involving water-pumping windmills, electricity-generating windmills, biological water treatment and de-salination processes. The scale of the project is yet to be determined, because how much technical and administrative assistance Auroville can give for pilot and demonstration projects has not yet been assessed.

Is anybody interested in helping get these projects off the ground?

If so, contact Bill at CSR, Auroville, Kottakuppam 605104, India. There's a new wind blowing... □

Thousands of kingdoms  
within my body,

Thousands of ages  
within my living cells—

Am I a tiny bubble

Captured in a TAMIL casket?

Meenakshi

## "When that room is ready..."

HE FIRST TOURED India with a group of distinguished American philosophers. The Prime Minister had time to meet them but the "Pondicherry Mother" was too busy. He was told she was starting a new city called Auroville that would begin in a month.

William Netter and Auroville are now twenty-two years older. I sat with him on the terrace of Afsaneh and Nadaka's guest house and listened to the non-stop flow of stories of the "early years". Of course, William finally did meet Mother and never wanted to leave India. He got involved in designing the first Auroville exhibition in Pondicherry. He went on to begin "Auroville Designs" and got the commission for the State Bank of India building in Bombay. The funny part of this story is that when it burned down just after being finished, Mother laughed and said, "Now he can do it again." William thought that was impossible but he did do it again. He even built a house in Auroville in what is now Certitude and it was ceremoniously inaugurated on Sri Aurobindo's Centenary. The cyclone, numerous scorpions and a snake convinced him that six weeks was long enough to live in Auroville and he gave the house away.

The big blow came with Mother's passing in 1973. Eventually, with time, he understood Mother's legacy to be Matrimandir. This conviction led him to an involvement in the controversial story about how Matrimandir wasn't being built correctly and therefore had no meaning. Fortunately he recovered from that, and began to express his feelings for Matrimandir in poetry. Clearly, he says, "all my creative energy goes into poetry and Zod."

Zod is a poetic dance epic. This is what sustains him and not his design work in New York. He's critical and cynical about the consumer society he lives in: "There's nothing out there that anyone who has ever been here wants." What brings him here now is Matrimandir. "I've been talking about it for years but now I've actually worked there." He looks to Auroville to develop a 'spiritualized' society that works better than the consumer society. He sees it as a working out of Sri Aurobindo's ideal of Human Unity and beyond... How to do it is the question. Again William refers back to Matrimandir. "When that room is ready, the answers to the questions will be there."

Bill

## Dreams

Occasionally friends, among themselves, will relate what they saw in a dream. It is only rarely that dreams are written down to be shared by a larger audience, although they might be sometimes more interesting than the reports, news and views that we usually publish. Here's one.

I saw and felt myself galloping on a horse across open fields. It was like flying. We were coming from the beach side through the greenbelt of Auroville toward the setting sun. We galloped into the golden ball of the sunset. Then the golden ball changed into the structure of Matrimandir. As we flew closer and closer to Matrimandir, it suddenly opened like a flower into four petals. The crystal was the centre of the flower. The horse melted into the crystal and I was then inside the crystal. The crystal began to rise straight up above an Auroville already built.

The first thing that amazed me was the colours. A beautiful pattern of green and white was spread out under me. All the buildings were white interspersed by green gardens, trees and parks. I wondered why there were no red tile roofs. The houses had flat roofs and sloping walls and were interconnected and flowing into each other very harmoniously, and on the roofs and terraces were also lawns, gardens and plants. These roofs and terraces were connected by external staircases.

I had the feeling that I could see anything I wanted. I zoomed in between the houses where there was a street with a tram-like vehicle going along. The vehicle moved noiselessly along the ground and I watched to see if it was a monorail but it only travelled on the surface and underground. The vehicle could hold 15-20 people. It looked like the bottom of it was painted blue and it had a transparent dome as a roof.

I thought, "What does Hermitage look like?" I was above Bharat Nivas and could see Hermitage extending over the horizon like a huge forest or jungle. Then abruptly the pictures all stopped and I was left with a wonderful, joyous feeling that it was all true and how ridiculous were all our fights and worries about how to build Auroville. I was so happy I started to cry, and the feeling lasted for the rest of the day. □



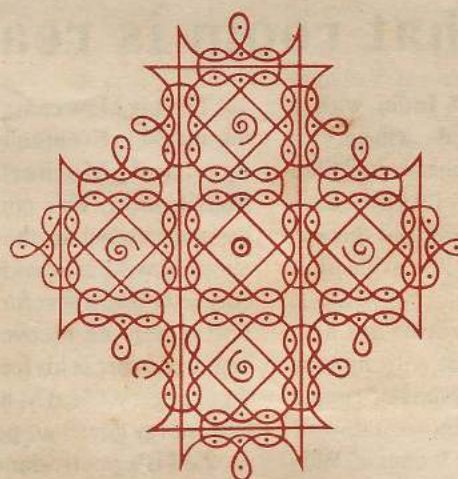
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# AUROVILLE TODAY

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January 1990 Number Thirteen

This month: Auro-villages; a visit to Russia; Aurolympics, etc.



Greetings to all our readers!

Photo: Sven

## AUROLYMPICS 1989

In preparation for the REAL THING, (which is now scheduled to take place in Auroville in approximately 2046 A.D.) the mixture of anarchy, humour, sweat and sportsmanship known as 'Aurolympics' happened once again, on 24th December in Certitude.

Conventional activities like volleyball, basketball, cycle racing and athletics were supplemented by a magic show, a karate demonstration and a mini-concert at lunchtime.

The highlights included the tactically bewildering performance of the *Auroville Today* team in basketball and volleyball; a powerful performance by the women's tug-of-war team, who almost pulled over the men (as the men became more and more embarrassed about losing to the women they screamed for assistance, and with reinforcements from all over the place they finally had some sort of sweaty dusty victory and sore hands); and the grand-finale... a high-class boxing contest between two of the world's leading lightweight contenders, where the I.Q. of a retarded bandicoot was matched against the I.Q. of a new-born gekko. Needless to say, the referee won!

Thanks Frederick and many others for organizing this fun get-together.

Auroville Today tries to appear monthly and is distributed to Aurovilians and friends of Auroville in India and abroad..

Editorial team: Alan, Annemarie, Bill, Carel, Roger, Susan, Tineke, Yanne. Desktop Publishing: Annemarie. Design: Prisma (Franz).

## QUARRELING GODS...

— and WHO pays the bill?

RIGHT! The human species. In a convincing performance on the 23rd of December the children of Transition school enacted parts of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey. We saw the festival on the occasion of Thetis and Peleus' marriage, in which the goddess Eris, wrathful that she had not been invited, threw the golden apple with the inscription "for the fairest". We witnessed how the sly Zeus, asked by his wife Hera to determine to whom this apple should belong ("You will certainly decide that it belongs to me, as I am more beautiful than Athena or Aphrodite, aren't I, dear husband?") decided to leave the decision to a mere mortal, Paris of Troy. Tempted by Hera with power, by Athene with knowledge, and by Aphrodite with love, he gave the apple to Aphrodite, thus invoking Hera's and Athene's vengeance, the Trojan War and Odysseus' years of wandering.

After Zeus had kicked a stray dog from the stage, we saw scenes from Odysseus' travels. His meeting with the Cyclops Polyphemus, who ate 6 of his men and was blinded with a wooden pole before Odysseus made his subsequent escape; his meeting with the sorceress Circe, who changed his companions into wild swine, but who agreed to change them again when she saw that Odysseus was protected by the god Hermes; his voyage past the Sirens; and finally his voyaging between Scylla, the monster with 6 heads, twelve claws and three rows of sharp teeth, and Charybdis, the surging whirlpool.

It was a great performance. Thanks, Transition kids! ☐

## Subscription renewal

Those of our readers who have not done so yet, are kindly requested to renew their subscription to *Auroville Today* by sending the coupon below either to the Auroville International Centre in their country or direct to Auroville. For details please see below. (Note that Auroville Trust is now Auroville Fund.)

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