

Auroville Today

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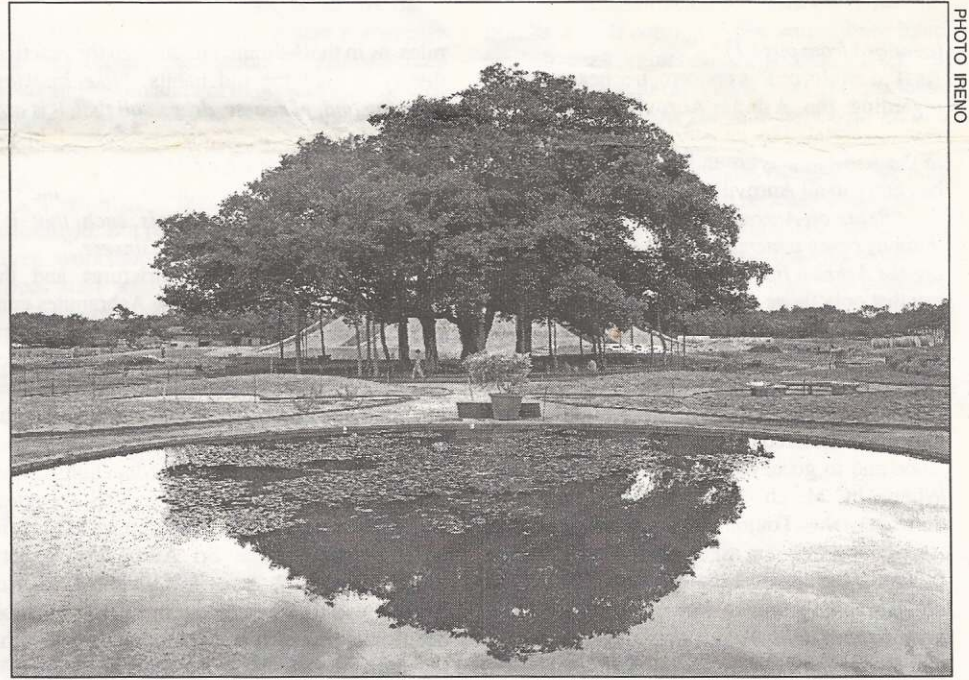
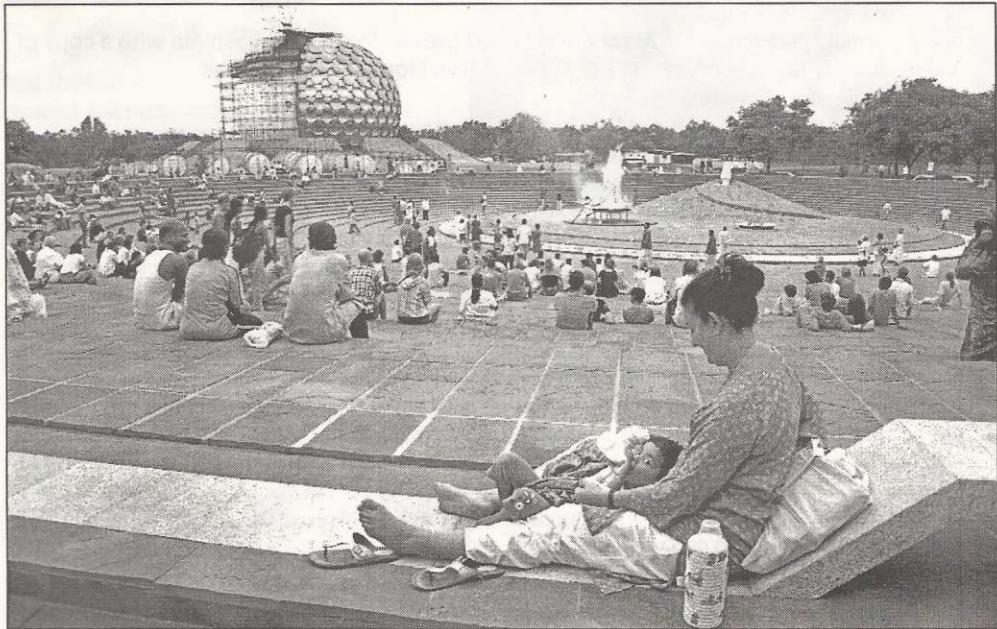
MAIN THEME: The Ashram - Auroville relationship

- Aster Patel ■ Shyam Sunder ■ Ashram students
- Kittu Reddy ■ Frederick ■ Aurovilians from the Ashram
- Hufreesh ■ Indrani

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"There is no fundamental difference"

An introduction to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram - Auroville relationship



Clockwise, from top left: Relaxing after the bonfire on August 15th, Sri Aurobindo's birthday; the Samadhi in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram; the Unity Pond with behind it the Banyan tree in Auroville; the covered staircase to The Mother's room on her birthday February 21st, a darshan day.

As Mother made clear, the Ashram and Auroville issued from the same high source of inspiration. However, she was often asked to clarify the relationship between the two. As early as her first detailed conversation about Auroville, in June 1965, she stated that neither she nor the Ashram would actually move to Auroville (although she might visit). Auroville, she explained, is "the contact with the outside world". A few months after the inauguration of Auroville she further clarified, "The Ashram will keep its true role of pioneer, inspirer and guide. Auroville is the attempt towards collective realization." Thus Mother stressed from the very beginning two of the characteristics which distinguish Auroville from the Ashram - the fact that it is more 'outward', more involved with the texture and challenges of the 'real' world,

and the emphasis upon collective action as opposed to the more individualistic yoga of the Ashram.

The first settlers in Auroville were predominantly Western, and many were strongly influenced by the anti-authoritarian attitudes of the 1960s. In appearance, attitude and behaviour they represented a totally different world from that of the highly-regulated, overwhelmingly Indian-populated Ashram in Pondicherry. Some Ashramites must have wondered who these strange people were, and why Mother was welcoming them without imposing on them the same admission conditions and discipline as prevailed in the Ashram. Was there, perhaps, a fundamental difference between the ideal of the Ashram and Auroville? Mother replied, "There is no fundamental difference in the attitude towards the future and towards the service of the Divine. But

the people of the Ashram are considered to have consecrated their lives to yoga (except, of course, the students...). Whereas in Auroville, the simple goodwill to make a collective experiment for the progress of humanity is sufficient to gain admittance."

In 1969, she wrote her fullest explication of the Ashram-Auroville relationship for a UNESCO committee.

"The task of giving a concrete form to Sri Aurobindo's vision was entrusted to The Mother. The creation of a new world, a new humanity, a new society expressing and embodying the new consciousness is the work she has undertaken. By the very nature of things, it is a collective ideal that calls for a collective effort so that it may be realized in terms of an integral human perfection.

The Ashram founded and built by

The Mother was the first step towards the accomplishment of this goal. The project of Auroville is the next step, more exterior, which seeks to widen the base of this attempt to establish harmony between soul and body, spirit and nature, heaven and earth, in the collective life of mankind."

And the next year she added, "The Ashram is the central consciousness, Auroville is one of the outward expressions. In both places equally the work is done for the Divine."

The latter sentence seemed particularly aimed at those who felt that the early Aurovilians were not at all the right material for hastening the advent of a new world. And this was not just the perception of certain Indian Ashramites. In a famous conversation of 10th January, 1970, Satprem reports an Italian disciple suggesting that the Ashramites should

join Aurovilians in building the Matrimandir, "because without the inner force of the people of the Ashram mingling with the Aurovilians, the people from Auroville will remain what they are." The Aurovilians, he explained, are not "receptive enough to do the work", they are "full of arrogance, of incomprehension, they only see the outside of things". He concluded that the "breach" between Auroville and the Ashram could only be healed if the Ashramites and Aurovilians worked together. However, to Satprem's obvious astonishment, Mother replies, "As for myself, I don't find it (the breach) wide enough...It isn't at all the same plane." And she goes on to explain that she didn't want Ashramites to be infected by the bad habits of some Aurovilians.

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Perspectives on unity

Aster Patel was one of the first students of the Ashram school. She grew up at the feet of The Mother, with Sri Aurobindo's presence in his rooms. She moved into the Auroville experience in its early days and is now one of the members of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation.

The work of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother started almost a hundred years back. The Ashram was the centre of the action of the Force They brought down, of the experiment they were making, of their work for a new step in evolution. The Ashram, in their words, was a laboratory of people gathered around them. I was amongst the first group of very young ones who joined the Centre of Education started by The Mother. With Her, we children had a personal contact several times a day. I had the immense grace to have Sri Aurobindo's darshan for several years.

As I grew up in the Ashram, I saw how Mother created each department and activity, how She was physically present in each place, and how meticulously She ensured the running of each department, getting daily reports. These departments were imbued with Her Presence and sense of perfection. Their outer activities developed slowly and gradually and as the inner fullness of experience of the people progressed, the outer activities did so as well.

The descent of the Supermind in 1956 was a very great turning point in our young lives. Not long afterwards, we saw tremendous changes in the world. The big upheaval of values, ideas and perspectives of Europe exploded in May 1968, when a whole world of young people looked for something new. A few months earlier Mother had founded Auroville, a spiritual environment, another quality of 'space', where the young could come and work and experiment with new structures of life. It was, perhaps, a pre-vision, an earlier action and it was amazing that the two

dates are so close.

Auroville was very fragile in those early days. Mother wanted it to find its own moorings. There were lots of problems – but they helped Auroville to find its own base. But how many times was Auroville nearly wiped out! And why, I wondered, did Mother create Auroville so close to the Ashram?

My answer to these questions is that the deep concentration of Force and spiritual energy that are present in the Ashram has sustained Auroville and helped it to grow. If the 'well' of Consciousness there was not so deep, Auroville could not have flourished. Auroville is an outflowing of what is held there in the Ashram. Without that source, Auroville could never have got started; and without that inner connection, Auroville could never have been sustained.

When I look at the world now, I see a tremendous change taking place due to the presence and the dynamism of a Supreme Action. People all over the world are looking for new ways to live, new ways to be, very much what we are trying to do in Auroville. For those who have read about Sri Aurobindo's work, the changes are obviously the result of the Supramental Action spreading over the world, due to the work of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. 'Evolution of consciousness' are no longer foreign words, they are being used everywhere now!

In Auroville, I witness an increasing stability since some time. I have a sense of fullness about the experiment. If we are facing a lot of problems on the surface, it is perhaps because

they were hidden and are now thrown up into the limelight because the time has come for things to change. Naturally one thinks about the need to become that 'willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness' mentioned in Auroville's Charter. It means that Aurovilians have to actively pursue 'freedom' in the spiritual sense: freedom from the ego, from desire, from one's own natural propensities, from one's mental preferences, and to intensify their understanding of why they are here. For Auroville to grow, it needs to turn its attention to the deeper consciousness within at the same time as it sends out widening ripples around the world. Only so can it effectively change its structures of life and move closer to the ideals expressed by The Mother.

The Ashram and Auroville are creations of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother – founded by them – to take evolution further. The Ashram has a solidity of inner consciousness and a deep reservoir of spiritual energy, so deep that it cannot be sounded. My experience of meditating near the Samadhi is of reaching out to that essence, which touches the psychic in you directly. The mighty Presence of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother seeps into one's being – as con-

cretely as can be.

In Auroville, Mother has created a world setting, a total setting of life in all its aspects, with an incredible diversity of people. Meditating in the Chamber has given me a different experience than at the Samadhi – there is a transparency of consciousness in which a certain action takes place.

The Ashram and Auroville complete one another at the level of consciousness, experience and action. The Ashram takes one to the depths, Auroville to the wideness. There is a 'sense of matter' in the air of Auroville, which is original. If totality is what one seeks, the path is incredibly rich – and one is deeply grateful.

Aster



Aster Patel (right) presenting Mira Nakashima with a copy of The Mother's self-portrait

PHOTO: COURTESY AUROVILLE INTERNATIONAL USA

"There is no fundamental difference"

(continued from page 1)

As if to reinforce this concern, her next message regarding the Ashram-Auroville relationship was precipitated by an Aurovilian misbehaving in the Ashram playground, resulting in a call to ban entry to all Aurovilians.

"Being an Aurovilian is not at all the same thing as being a member of the Ashram and living the Ashram life," she wrote, and went on to say that only those Aurovilians who had been in the Ashram before the birth of Auroville had the right to attend playground activities.

There followed what seemed to be a blizzard of messages from Mother to the Aurovilians on topics like the need to tell the truth, to avoid violence and to go beyond egotistical limitations. When, in March 1972, a fire completely destroyed the Toujours Mieux workshop in Aspirations, Satprem asked her if this was due to "a wrong attitude over there?" "Yes. Oh, they're all quarrelling among themselves! And some even disobey deliberately, they refuse to recognize any authority."

Interestingly, however, Mother stated that "I do not want to make rules for Auroville as I did for the Ashram." And even if she was forced to make one exception (regarding drugs), she continued to be, from the point of view of some Ashramites, extremely lenient in her attitude to some Aurovilians, allowing some of them chance after chance to reform their behaviour. She wanted, it seems, the Aurovilians to progress not through obedience to imposed

rules, as in the Ashram, but through the practical discovery that the old habits, "like smoking, drinking and, of course, drugs...all that, it is as if you were cutting pieces off your being." In any case, she said, there would be a natural weeding-out. "The power of the realization – of the sincerity of the realization – is such that it's unbearable to those who are insincere."

In spite of Mother's strictures and the increasing scepticism of a few Ashramites concerning the viability of the Auroville experiment, throughout these years many Ashramites and students from the Ashram School continued to come to Auroville. Some worked on the Matrimandir, others taught in Aspiration School or helped with physical education. After Mother's passing, however, there was a progressive worsening of the relationship with the main office-holders of the Sri Aurobindo Society (SAS) whom, it was felt, wanted to run Auroville as their personal project. The situation deteriorated to such an extent that, in 1980, the Government of India passed the Auroville (Emergency Provisions) Act, temporarily taking the management of the project out of the hands of the SAS.

The conflict was clearly with the SAS rather than with the Ashram, and throughout this difficult period many Aurovilians and Ashramites continued to visit each other just as before and maintained deep friendships. However, there were incidents which, for some individuals, weakened their links with the other community.

For example, the Ashram teachers working at Aspiration School were very distressed when, in the mid 1970s, they were put before an ultimatum which required them to either join Auroville or stop teaching there. Even though the reason had more to do with radical educational theories than opposition to Ashramites, the decision of the



Members of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram on their Sunday shift at the Matrimandir granite workshop

PHOTO: COURTESY SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM ARCHIVES

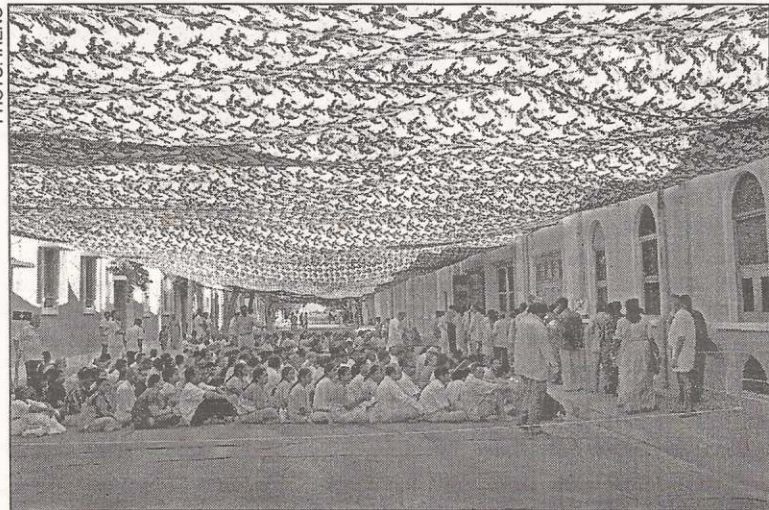
Ashram teachers to stop coming reflected their feeling that they were no longer welcome. On the other hand, when the Ashram trustees refused to support the Aurovilians, choosing to remain aloof from the conflict, some Aurovilians felt betrayed. Similarly, those Aurovilians close to Satprem were dismayed by the way they believed the Ashram authorities had mistreated him in pursuit of the Agenda tapes. The publication of Mother's Agenda, which contained strong comments on certain Ashramites and certain aspects of the Ashram, coupled with Satprem's pronouncement that the Ashram was dead, further reinforced a feeling in some Aurovilians that Auroville need have nothing to do with that institution.

In recent years, however, there has been much more interchange between the two communities. This is due to a number of factors. The passing of the Auroville Foundation Act in 1988, which finally took away the right of the SAS to manage Auroville and gave Auroville its own legal status, gave Aurovilians a renewed confidence in their independence and allowed many of the psychological battlements to be dismantled. Then the opening of the Chamber in August, 1991, resulted in a significant increase in the number of Ashramites visiting Matrimandir. A few years later, another bridge was put in place when Savitri Bhavan began

inviting Ashramites to give talks to Aurovilians on different aspects of the yoga: these have proved very popular. Alongside this there has been an increasing cultural interchange, of which the recent joint art exhibition is only the latest manifestation. And, of course, new people have joined Auroville who have little knowledge of or interest in the old stories, while former antagonists have gained greater understanding of each other's perspectives over the years.

Obviously, Mother created a very different ethos, or 'work environment', for the Ashram and Auroville, and sometimes the differences have been misunderstood or over-amplified. Ashramites, for example, have been stereotyped as over-devotional, hidebound by tradition and unwilling to experiment, while Aurovilians have been seen as 'vital', undisciplined and more interested in outer manifestation than inner development. Partly, this reflects different cultural centres of gravity in the two communities, as well as the failure to offload 'baggage' some of us have been carrying for many years, if not many lives. It's worth remembering, however, that when Mother talked of the need to be receptive to the new consciousness and to prepare the world for a new creation, she made absolutely no distinction between Auroville and the Ashram. For her, they are clearly one.

Alan



Aurovilians too await their turns for visiting Sri Aurobindo's and The Mother's rooms on darshans

PHOTO: IRENO

"We are members of the same larger family"

Kittu Reddy speaks about the increasing awareness of Sri Aurobindo's work in India and the respective roles the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, the Sri Aurobindo Society and Auroville, have to play.

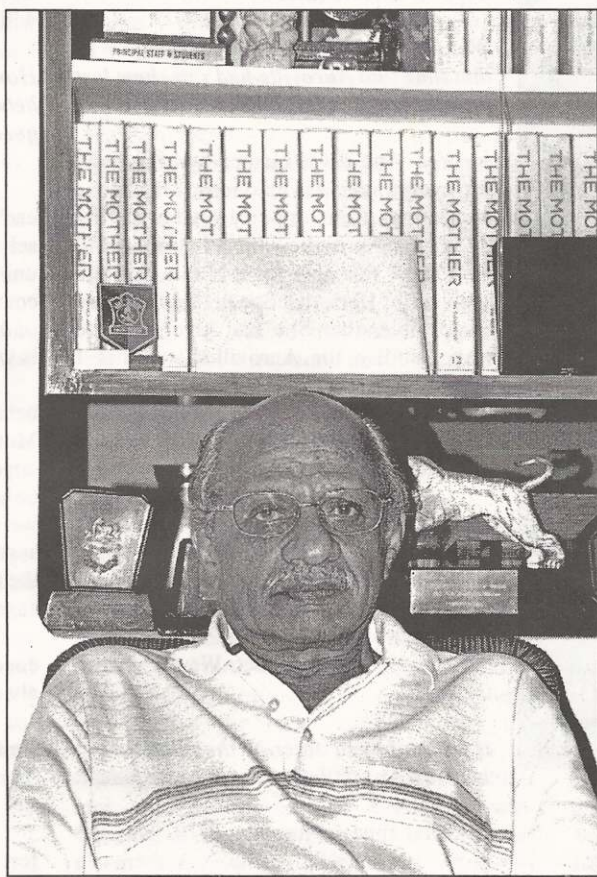
"The purpose of the recent exhibition, for me, was to bring Auroville and the Ashram devotees together in their artistic expressions on the theme of The Mother," says Kittu Reddy, who is in charge of the Art Gallery of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. "When Kirti came up with the idea of the joint exhibition, I readily agreed to host it."

Mother had entrusted Kittu with the responsibility for the Art Gallery in 1972. "At the time, I had asked Her if I could open it to art works from Aurovilians. She replied 'certainly' and added that it could also be used to exhibit works of those who are well-disposed towards Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. Her only condition was that the hall should not be used for commercial activities, or for propaganda, and that taking photos of the exhibitions needed prior permission from Pranab, who heads the department of physical education of the Ashram school. Accordingly, the Art Gallery has housed many Auroville exhibitions, and I was glad to open it this time for 'MAA'."

"The fact that Aurovilians and Ashramites exhibited together drew only a few muted negative comments," says Kittu. "On the whole, the Ashramites were happy." Asked if he was satisfied with the quality of the exhibits, he smiles, "I have no right and authority to judge the quality of the paintings and sculptures. I can't pretend I enjoyed all of them – I liked some and I was not touched by others, but that is a personal judgement. What mattered for me was to see the large diversity in those expressions on the concept of Mother and the opportunity to release the creative urges of so many artists. That was quite-satisfactory."

Kittu Reddy is relaxed in his armchair. He is just back from Leh in Ladakh, on the Indo-Chinese border, where "it was freezing cold – minus 7 degrees!" He had been invited by the commander of the Indian army stationed there to give lectures on spirituality to the officers, particularly on Sri Aurobindo's and The Mother's work and vision. "I spent ten absolutely exhilarating days," he says. "Many people in the Indian army are opening up to Sri Aurobindo and The Mother."

Kittu Reddy's vocation, teaching Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, came to him at a rather young age, when he had finished his studies at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education (SAICE) in the Ashram. "Once I had



Kittu Reddy

asked The Mother whether I should help others by teaching," he said. "Her answer was quite interesting: 'Whether it will help others I do not know, but it will help you enormously.'" He joined SAICE, teaching History and Social Sciences, and in recent years started giving lectures – on a slightly more intellectual level, he says – to Aurovilians at Savitri Bhavan. "I wanted to serve Sri Aurobindo by being a bridge between the Ashram and Auroville. Quite a few Ashramites have reservations regarding Auroville, but I have always felt that we are members of the same larger family. Perhaps they did not like my decision – if so, they have not cared to express it, and I probably wouldn't have cared either. But I thoroughly enjoy presenting Sri Aurobindo's The Human Cycle and The Ideal of Human Unity in Auroville."

Kittu believes that the resistance in certain Ashram quarters to having closer contacts with Auroville is based on the fear that it might damage some of the principles of the Ashram. "Our rules are very different from yours," he says. "Sex is forbidden here; in Auroville you are allowed to have your family. Smoking and alco-

hol are forbidden in the Ashram while that is not so in Auroville. Then there is the fear that people in Auroville are taking drugs and Ashram students should not be exposed to that." But he admits that the Ashram too has its share of problems. "The Ashram faces similar challenges. There has been a decline in the standards since Mother left her body. It was inevitable, perhaps, but that is what happened."

Kittu came to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram at the age of five, in 1941. "At the time the Ashram was very strict," he recalls. "It had a one-pointed aim, the fulfilment of the entire goal of the yoga. When children came in the early 1940s, a school was started and the focus widened to include them. After Sri Aurobindo left his body, SAICE was created, allowing people to come in who were not aiming at yoga. Step by step Mother expanded her work. After SAICE, the Sri Aurobindo Society was created, with the task of spreading Sri Aurobindo's message all over India and abroad. The Society also became instrumental in starting Auroville, manifesting a Dream of The Mother which was already present so many years earlier. And today we see that Sri Aurobindo's vision is increasingly accepted and known in India and abroad."

Kittu proves his point by talking about the Indian army. "Many years ago, and purely by chance, I was introduced to the then Chief of Staff of the Indian Army, General B.C. Joshi. He was interested in bringing spirituality to the armed forces, and asked me to give lectures to his officer corps which I have been doing ever since. They know, of course, about my background, but I am careful to present knowledge and only inform them about Sri Aurobindo's views and vision and not to present a devotional picture. Army people are essentially result-oriented; they want knowledge and the information how to use it in their daily lives. So for a long time I never even mentioned the name of Sri Aurobindo. But recently we in the Ashram have given workshops for members of the armed forces staff who came and stayed here for a week. Many of them tell me that it is changing their lives. Sri Aurobindo is now much more known and accepted than say 20 years ago."

Kittu Reddy has also written two books. "Mother once observed, when I met Her together with Kireet Joshi and Tanmaya, that we need our own history textbooks which are written in the light of Sri Aurobindo vision. She looked

directly at me when She said this, and it was clear what She expected. I struggled with it for a few years, and finally managed to finish it." The book, *History of India, A New Approach*, gives a very Aurobindonian angle to history. Instead of being a narration and interpretation of external historic events, it looks at the psychological and inner dimension, in an attempt to place in proper perspective the deeper psychological and spiritual elements in the outer life of the Indian nation.

The second, more recent book, entitled *A Vision of United India: Problems and Solutions*, deals with the partition of British India into Pakistan and India, and Sri Aurobindo's vision of a reunited India. Says Kittu, "Unification is my passion. In 1971 I wrote a letter to The Mother about it and She replied that the union of Pakistan and India is inevitable. Later She said that it will take the form of a confederation. Interestingly, the army has taken to the book and ordered a large number of copies. I believe that unification is necessary for world unity. I am totally convinced that until India and Pakistan are united, world unity will not take place."

"This," he continues, "is also what I am looking for in Auroville. Auroville is very important, because if you can show that people from all these nations can live together, in a higher consciousness, you release a tremendous occult force. Every time you in Auroville create a deeper understanding at a deeper level, a vibration is released without you being consciously aware of it. If you study the importance Mother gave to Auroville on the occult level, you will understand. Aurovilians need to address all the ideals Mother has set before them – like the no-exchange of money and the others – because even those attempts at realisation have their consequences. Aurovilians have to realise the tremendous task they have been given and have to raise their level of consciousness. We Ashramites have to help with all our goodwill for, after all, Auroville is Mother's Dream. The oppositions and challenges are part of the process. One has to be patient: ultimately we are changing human nature. The atmosphere between the three organisations, the Ashram, the Sri Aurobindo Society and Auroville is already more relaxed today. Definitely a lot of goodwill is prevalent, and I am sure that ultimately the three organisations will work harmoniously together and jointly contribute to 'The Aurobindonian Movement', as Dr. Karan Singh likes to call it."

Carel

"We should respect each other's point of view"

Hufreesh was a student in the Ashram School between 1982-9. Subsequently she considered joining the Ashram and worked there for two years. When she decided it was not for her, she stayed for a short time in Aspiration to see if she would like it. She joined Auroville in 1996.

Auroville Today: Did the Ashram teachers talk about Auroville to the students?

Not at all. Most students knew very little about this place. As a student, I visited Aurobindavan on weekends because I had a German friend whose mother lived there, but most students didn't visit or show any interest. This was partly because we had no time, our school schedule was so tight, but Auroville also had this image – there were the rumours about drugs, sex etc.

So there is something of a negative image?

It really depends on whom you talk to, what their personal experience is and how they interpret that experience – there's no one 'Ashram view' of Auroville. Many people in the Ashram are not at all exposed to Auroville, or if they come they come only to meditate at the Matrimandir, and that's all they know about.

Did anybody try to stop you going to Auroville?

No. When I was a student visiting Aurobindavan nobody tried to discourage me. Then, when I decided to try out Auroville, I spoke to Harikant, one of the former trustees, and he supported me. After I decided to join, I went to tell Pranab. I expected him to try to dissuade me, but he simply told me to try it.

What was your experience of living in Auroville?

My first month in Aspiration was wonderful. Later, when I joined Auroville and moved to Certitude, initially everybody was much colder and I missed the loving warmth of the Ashram family. But I never felt Auroville was in any way less 'spiritual' than the Ashram.

Why do you think so few Ashram students join Auroville?



Hufreesh in front of her painting 'Star Child', at the MAA exhibition

When you're in the Ashram school everything is very controlled. It's a small world and you're like the frog in the pond. So when they leave many of the students want to get out and experience the big wide world.

Do you think efforts should be made to improve the connection between the Ashram and Auroville? Should we make it easier, for example, for Ashram students to join?

I don't see any need to make a big effort to build bridges between

Auroville and the Ashram. The main thing is that each respects the other's point of view and direction. I don't think it's a big thing that Ashram students are not joining Auroville, and I certainly don't agree that ex-Ashram school students should be given any special help to join. We need people who believe in the ideals of Auroville, whether they be Ashram students or people from any other part of the world. My personal experience is that if you are meant to come to Auroville, things will work out: it doesn't depend on people or circumstances. Because something else is working here, and if you believe in the dream called Auroville, you will overcome the obstacles and develop.

What about making more information about Auroville available in the Ashram?

Yes, one could try!

Alan

"I will always have goodwill for Auroville"

Shyam Sundar played a central role in the unfolding of Auroville in the early years as Mother entrusted him with the responsibility for the project.

How did you come to take up that responsibility?

At the beginning of February, 1971, Poorna came and said that Mother wanted to tell me something very important. When I went to Her She immediately asked me, 'Are you ready to do what I say?' 'Yes, Mother.' Then She said that Auroville is not in good shape, there are difficulties there, and She wanted me to take up that very difficult work, although my health was not good. 'You will have lots of difficulties, but I will be with you,' She said. And then She added one sentence. She said She would hold me morally responsible from now on for what happened in Auroville.

I've never been able to fully understand what She meant by this, although I began to get an idea when She gave me a very good scolding some time later for something which had happened there but which was beyond my control. I began to understand that I had to be a medium for Her. She would see me daily with my report and problems and She would help.

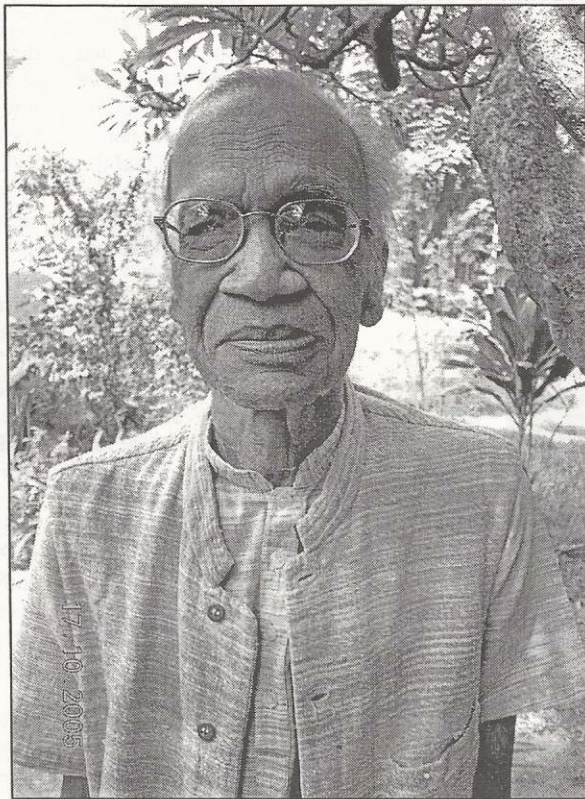
Practically, what did the work involve?

Everything! Everything came to me. I was sanctioning funds, channelling gifts and donations, in charge of transport, doing land purchase, office management and, of course, all the internal problems of the Aurovilians were being brought to me. They came with all sorts of ideas about freedom and anarchy which, while they had a basic truth, because of the Aurovilians' youth and inexperience were creating problems both for them and for Auroville. In my dealings with them I always tried to take a commonsense view.

There was also a necessity to bring some order into admissions to Auroville. At that time, anybody coming from abroad would get admission. So a proper entry procedure was instituted. Application forms were drawn up, a group was formed - comprising Andre (Mother's son), Roger, Navajata and myself - which met applicants, and then I would take the application sheet with our comments and a photograph of the applicant to Mother for Her decision.

Although She authorised you to do so, did you ever make a decision about admitting somebody or sending somebody away without reference to Mother?

No. My feeling was that it was a too complicated thing for me, or for any human being. Mother could see what I couldn't. We had met the actual man or woman but Mother, when She saw the photograph, looked at the soul of that person. She saw things as a whole, from so many points of view: the role of the individual,



Shyam Sundar

his soul position, the current situation of Auroville, how, if he's a so-called 'bad force', it could be useful to Auroville, how, if he is a so-called 'good force', Auroville may have to pay a price...

How good was the relationship between the Ashram and Auroville in the early years?

At the beginning it was first-class. All of us were interested in Auroville, and many of us went to the inauguration. And Ashramites were going there not only for functions but also to work for 3-4 hours on projects like Matrimandir. At the same time, if anybody from Auroville came with any request to an Ashram department, it was very cooperatively attended to.

In the early 1970s, however, Aurovilians were banned from entering the Ashram playground.

This is because the playground has been under the direction of Pranabda who is a strict disciplinarian and couldn't stand the bad behaviour of some Aurovilians. There was also a space problem. But it wasn't a blanket ban. If I and Madhav Pandit signed for them, then certain Aurovilians could still go in.

The real problems between Auroville, the Sri Aurobindo Society and the Ashram arose in 1975-6. Many things happened - it was all political - but the net effect was that Ashramites were completely stopped from

working in Auroville.

Was the general feeling in the Ashram at that time that Auroville had somehow lost its way?

Yes. And I was blamed by everybody for everything. All emotions, all actions emanating from by the Ashram, the Society or Auroville were all attributed to me. And I was only there because of that sentence of Hers, that She held me morally responsible, that She had given me the responsibility for Auroville, and that I should never give up that responsibility on the grounds of incapability. At that period, I was completely isolated, Mother was my only support.

Of course we all commit mistakes, I committed mistakes too, and I sometimes wonder that if I had acted differently could I have averted what happened? But then I see that even then we might have committed the same mistakes. The main thing is the spirit in which we act. We all have to try our best.

How would you describe the relationship between Auroville and the Ashram today?

That time in the late 1970s was the lowest point in our relationship. Now there is a definite change both in the Ashram and in Auroville. People are more positive, perhaps because a younger generation has come up which is more open. Personally, however, I feel we lost a golden chance at that time. There was a new current in Auroville in the early 1970s, and I always had an expectation that if the youth trained in the Ashram went to live in Auroville then Auroville would succeed.

Today students from the Ashram school are still not allowed to come to Auroville.

So far as I know this is the view of the Physical Education department. I have heard Pranabda explain the reasons and I understand them. However, the problem is not insoluble.

How can it be solved?

There needs to be more discipline in Auroville while, from the Ashram side, there should be a readiness to forget what happened yesterday. There is a further difficulty, however; the Ashram is not the same since Mother left Her body. This casts more responsibility on Auroville.

In what sense?

Mother said, as far as I can recollect, that the Ashram is the pioneer, the central consciousness, while Auroville is a more outward expression. However, in the 'divine drama'

which is going on, we don't know which body will play which role at which point of time.

How necessary is it that the relationship between Auroville and the Ashram should be good?

It is necessary because we can learn from each other. We can also wrestle among ourselves sometimes! However, to achieve greater unity we must first unite in our hearts. Of course, fresh problems will arise, fresh causes of disunity, but we have to deal with them. That is why we are here.

A good relationship is also necessary because both the Ashram and Auroville are Mother's creations. Mother appeared quite disappointed with Auroville in Her last years (whether She was any happier with the Ashram we can't say!). She was sending strong messages to Auroville about the need to always tell the truth etc. and once I asked Her if these messages also applied to Ashramites. 'Yes,' She said. In her consciousness there was no difference between the Ashram and Auroville. She always saw them as one.

And personally? What are your feelings about Auroville today?

I will always have goodwill for Auroville, for Mother's project. I always pray for Auroville and if there is anything I can do to help, in whatever way, I am willing. But, frankly speaking, I am not very happy with the present Auroville. Even if the Matrimandir is completed - and this is something I have looked forward to for many years - I wonder what it will mean if there is not also some inner development (points to his heart).

You feel that in Auroville today there is more outer manifestation than inner development?

Yes.

And what about your relationship with those Aurovilians with whom you were in conflict in the past? I hear that Frederick is again speaking with you...

A happy softening and understanding has been coming in several of us at Auroville. In Frederick too... (Laughs) It is Renu, his daughter, who pushed him. Actually, at one time Frederick and I had a very close relationship. That all changed, but now we are together again.

Do you ever talk about that difficult period together to understand what happened?

No. The less we speak about it the better, otherwise the story-telling will start again. Let us rise above it.

From an interview by Alan and Ancolie

"I don't know much about Auroville"

Ashram students speak about Auroville

"Auroville? I don't know much about Auroville, you better ask ex-students." That is the general reply Ashram students give when asked about Auroville. And aside, "Even if I did, I would not speak about it." Why, one wonders? The two organisations have so much in common, yet there is virtually no contact between their youths. Youth, the brush that will paint the Future. If the students are not allowed to interact how are even ex-students to know what Auroville is like?

Upon completion of your studies in the Ashram, would you like to join Auroville? "Maybe. But I doubt it is possible to sustain yourself without personal funds." The Ashram students love the nature and the peace that is sheltered in Auroville; but the people... "Auroville has been founded on certain ideals" they say, and ask, "Where are those ideals now?" Naturally the question arises: if you know so little how did you come to that conclusion? To this, most will agree that much of what they know is from hear-say; and from all the hyped-up stories that are circulated.

What they like about Auroville is the "progressiveness". That is clear even without them coming into much contact with Auroville. From the standard of Auroville's cultural programmes, it is quite obvious. In the Ashram the programmes are burdened by the devotional approach. The Ashram, they say, unlike Auroville is much more concerned with trying to preserve the "Good Old Days" and in that effort eliminates much of an individual's freedom. In Auroville, however, the limitless freedom is, now and then, misplaced and mishandled. In its approach, Auroville mentalises while the Ashram devotionalises.

There are unwritten rules forbidding Ashram students to visit Auroville. Does that mean they have never visited the Matrimandir? "Perhaps a couple of times." For them, The Matrimandir has an intensity, as if a whole new globe is emerging from the earth. It, however, does not compare to the overwhelming sweetness that they experience in the Ashram. "There a peace fills you right to the depths of your being."

Indrani

Looking at each other

A few Aurovilians who studied in the Ashram give their views on the two communities

"The Ashram is basically an Indian culture, whereas Auroville is a conglomerate of many different, primarily western, cultures. The Ashram is more a kind of monastery, where Mother created detailed structures. In the Ashram most Ashramites surrender their material possessions and live only to serve the Divine. In Auroville, the structures have to be built by the Aurovilians themselves and many have little awareness of what it means to serve the Divine. Ashramites and Aurovilians should not influence each other. But on the cultural and the sports level, there could be more exchange." Ange

"The Ashram and Auroville have a lot of prejudices and misconceptions about each other. Only a free intermingling between them can remove these." Srimoyi

"The Ashram offers a great protection to its students and a very concentrated environment. But it has the danger that they will start living in a crystal bowl with its limitations. It would be good if there would be exchanges in education." Samrat

"The Ashram and Auroville never fought!"

Frederick first came to the Ashram in 1960. From 1967 onwards he became involved with Auroville, and subsequently played a key part in its struggle for self-determination.

Auroville Today: Many people seem to think that the conflict in the 1970s and early 1980s was between the Ashram and Auroville.

The ones who fought were the Sri Aurobindo Society (SAS) and Auroville. The Ashram and Auroville never fought! The Ashram was always extremely helpful. We planted trees in Auroville together, my children went to the Ashram school, when we needed bread the Ashram bakery sent it... So many Aurovilians who came in the beginning have a very close relationship with the Ashram.

The belief that the fight was between the Ashram and Auroville is a confusion that many people have, partly because the main office-bearers and some of the members of the Society were Ashramites. Mother was the President of the Society and it was set up to propagate the works of Sri Aurobindo and Mother. At that time, Auroville had no legal basis but was 'facilitated' by the Society. The Mother initially did not want a legal form to be given to Auroville - She said when it was necessary it would be done - so, in the meantime, the SAS provided a legal service. All the money, all the donations, was channelled through the books of the Society, all the land and buildings were on their books.

When the Mother left her body in 1973, the Society, who had been providing this legal service to Auroville, suddenly considered itself the owner of the project. Legally they had a strong case because they could prove that they 'owned' all the assets. However, the Aurovilians said, 'No way! We did not come here to work on someone else's project. Mother said that Auroville belongs to nobody, so you cannot dictate to us what we can or cannot do'. Actually, the whole thing was triggered off by the Society saying they would only guarantee our visas if we agreed to do what the Society said. The first Aurovillian called before them rejected this. He told them that the only person he obeyed was the Mother, 'I listen to her and nobody else'.

The Aurovilians appealed to the trustees of the Ashram. We asked them, 'How can

you allow the Society to do this to a project of the Mother?' However, the trustees refused to become involved. From my point of view, this is where the Ashram failed. You can be a good sadhak, but when there is something wrong, you should stand up and object. But you can also say the Ashramites were not trained to do this. They just did their work in the bakery, the school etc - and maybe those were the kind of people Mother wanted at that time. But for Auroville she wanted something different. She made it clear while I was in the Ashram that she would give me directions about what to do. But when it came to Auroville I had to find out for myself what was right. She made a clear distinction between the Ashram and Auroville: she didn't want Auroville just to be a copy, but to be something new.

To cut a long story short, the conflict became a political thing. Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister, listened to us and felt that something was not correct. She set up a commission of enquiry and sent someone down here to find out what was going on. He discovered that things were not as they should be, and on the basis of his report the Government passed the Auroville (Emergency Provisions) Act in 1980 which took the management of Auroville away from the Society and placed it in the hands of an Administrator. The actual internal management, however, was in the hands of the Aurovilians. Then the SAS filed a case to try to stop the ordinance. The Government defended its right to pass the Ordinance and the Aurovilians were impleaded. Finally, the Supreme Court upheld the right of the Government to pass the Ordinance.

At that time in Auroville, however, there were also different groupings. There were those who were fighting against the SAS, there were the so-called 'neutrals' who didn't feel that going to the Government and the courts was in line with what Mother wanted, and there were those connected with the Society who felt the SAS should be allowed to manage Auroville. So even within Auroville there were problems. We, the ones fighting the SAS, were called the hard-core, 'Satpremian' group because Satprem was almost the only Ashramite who openly sup-

ported those who opposed the Society. He wrote us a letter telling us that we had to stand for what we felt was true.

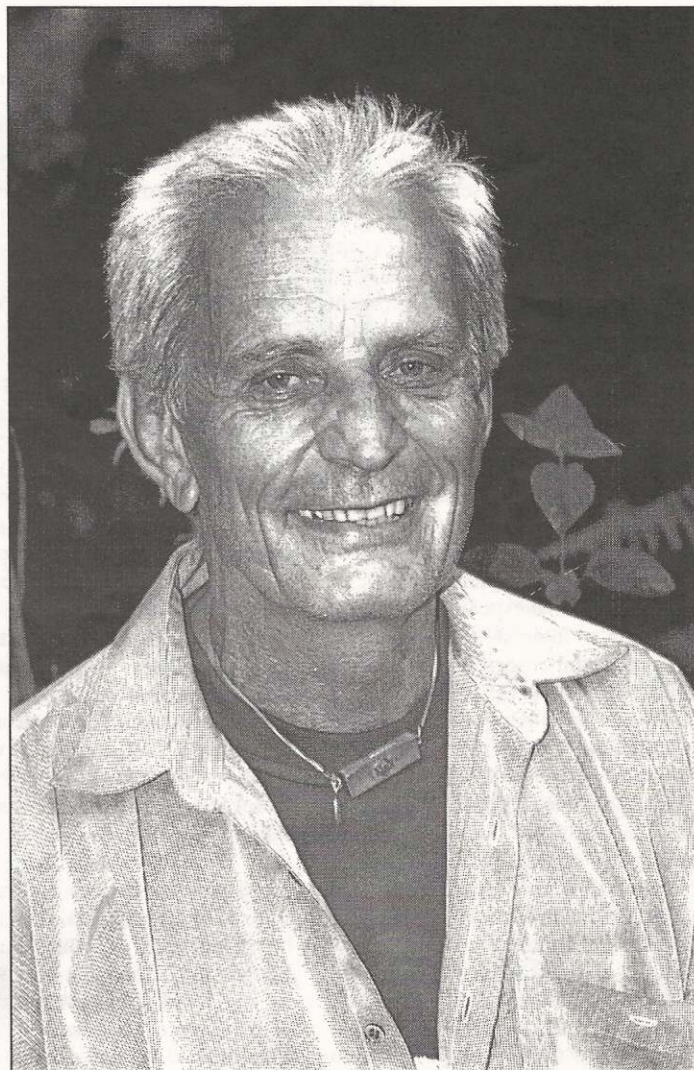
Was there a deeper reason for the conflict with the SAS?

I think that when we get too stagnant and can't seem to move, the Divine sometimes splits up what should be together into two parts in order to accelerate the progress. And in that force field of plus and minus, male and female, dark and light, we are propelled forward. That tension between opposites is, in fact, an opportunity to move forward faster. So we shouldn't get stuck in thinking how bad every conflict is.

Have there been any attempts at reconciling those who were on opposite sides in the conflict?

Last year some people initiated efforts to get together Aurovilians who had been in conflict at that time. This was a good thing as some people still felt hurt and misunderstood. We learned that those Aurovilians who we thought were supporting the Society had, in fact, had as many problems with the Society as we had. As for us so-called 'terrorists' - I am not saying that we were right, I'm saying that at that moment we felt we were doing the right thing. Retrospectively, I can see we could have done things better.

I have also gone and talked with Shyam



Frederick

Sunder a number of times over the years. I believe he has a role to play in Auroville. I find it unjust and unfortunate that certain Aurovilians are still objecting to having his name put on the Master List, as he has offered his help, particularly in relationship to Matrimandir. It would be a strong gesture of reconciliation if we could allow him to work alongside us once again.

From an interview by Ancolie

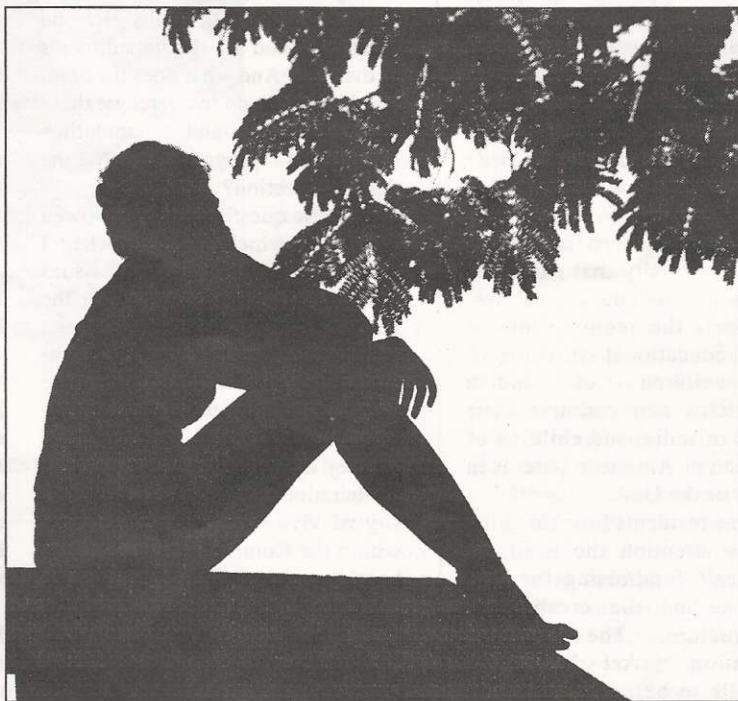
Spreading Wide Wings

An ex-student of the Ashram school, now in Auroville, reflects on the dilemma between the freedom to experience and the limits to experimentation.

Le Jardin D'enfants... Those three years in Kindergarten contain some of the most memorable moments for all who have been in the "Jardin D'enfants" of SAICE. "Learn through play" is the teaching technique which came from the Mother. And amidst all the fun, fundamental modes of conduct of life were constantly infused into us. From there, a sense of freedom is inculcated into the students - freedom of expression, freedom to explore and experiment in the universe around us, with not a care in the world.

I still remember, one rainy day, when some of my classmates wanted to play in the garden under the dripping sky. I was then new to "Jardin D'enfants" and not familiar with spontaneity. I was sitting quietly in a corner, for I had no wish to be scolded, which seemed to me to be the only outcome of this outrageous demand. To my surprise, they were stripped, and without any further ado let out in the rain. Soon, forgetting what my parents might have to say, I ran out to play with them.

We were taught to think for ourselves even while retaining respect for social trends, to respect all beings no less than we respect



Indrani

ourselves, to reflect our minds transparently in our speech, to stand for the truth, even though our friends might think differently. First and foremost we were taught to be "straightforward, frank, upright and honourable". Growing a little older, however, looking around curiously, eager to make mistakes, as

teenagers are wont, I found, quite paradoxically, that freedom was very restricted.

At a certain age, teachers were seen as cumbersome sentries to the world outside the classroom. And since it was not possible to evade them, they became the objects of innumerable pranks. I, observing the effects, usually could not hold back my giggling. Maybe my sense of humour was more tickled or my teeth more noticeable, but soon I was marked out as the disturbing element of the class. Mind you, I was not the prankster, not until much later, in any case.

After one such 'prank' I realised there was actually no freedom to experiment in my life. It happened like this. I was a volunteer for the Ecolake project for four years. One day the bus, which usually took us to the Lake, did not turn up. A friend and I decided to cycle down to

the first river to catch a breath of fresh air, then row up and down before returning, not giving anybody any trouble. On our return, our teacher subjected us to a long lecture about why Ashram girls are not to go cycling so far in shorts, "What will people think...?" The list of 'forbiddens' did not end there.

Even behind unyielding walls of endless rules, I, 'the rebel' dared to experiment in its shadows. And before long, discovered that I was not the person I thought I was, and that I needed, after all, the shelter within Mother's encircling arms. I realise now that this protection is extended to us all, wherever we may be, and am deeply grateful for it. So, a tiny bit wiser, I have stepped into Auroville - "Auroville, the freest place on earth". Had I been introduced to this Freedom earlier, I imagine, it could have been a disaster.

Now in Auroville, I find the freedom I had missed. But honestly I find it a little scary too. From the inside of an aquarium the vastness of the ocean is a remote and wonderful fantasy, but out there the little aquarium fish has a hard time with all the predators. I am not sure that I can handle all this freedom so suddenly, yet now older, I am at least aware of the conflicts in myself. I try now to use my new-found freedom as a tool to creatively mould my life.

What is exciting about Auroville is the general open-mindedness that one perceives. So many different cultures together in one amazing experiment. The possibilities of collective growth are explored alongside individual development. In this process, however, there remains the danger of the individual getting submerged. If the current is too strong and likely to sweep you off your feet, is it not better to stay out of the river? For the moment, I have taken the risk...

Indrani

Asking hard questions

"How far has the Community progressed on the path set by The Mother," wonders Governing Board member Shri Ajoy Bagchi

Ajoy Bagchi has a long-standing relationship with Auroville. "Auroville is always in my mind," says the soft-spoken former civil servant. "I first came to Auroville in 1992, on the occasion of a public hearing organised by The People's Commission on Environment and Development India. Shortly afterwards I joined the first Governing Board chaired by Dr. Karan Singh and was on it till 1995. In 2004, I was re-appointed to the Board and since then my interaction with Auroville has substantially increased and deepened."

Ajoy Bagchi comes from a teacher's family. His father, a professor of English literature and an expert on Shakespeare, awakened his son's interest in academics, teaching and research, particularly in the life sciences. But life took a different turn. Ajoy Bagchi joined the Indian Postal Service, one of the administrative services of India, where he worked for 35 years in diverse positions. On one occasion, purely by chance, he was tasked to escort Dr. Karan Singh, who had then just taken over as Minister for Health and Family Planning. "A few days later he asked me to join him as his special assistant in the Ministry. I accepted". He says, "The next 3 1/2 years I had the rare opportunity to watch and learn from close quarters how decisions are made at the highest levels. Perhaps nobody could be a better teacher than Dr. Karan Singh". In 1989, he retired from the Government. Dr Karan Singh once again asked him to work for him. "I readily accepted his invitation as I consider it a privilege to serve a person of such eminence and intellectual lustre. Whenever I hear him

speak, I am reminded of another great orator, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, [the President of India from 1962 to 1967, eds.] for, like him, he has this rare ability to discourse on many topics with such clarity and erudition."

At present Mr. Bagchi is the Executive Director of the People's Commission on Environment and Development (PCED) set up in 1990, of which Dr. Karan Singh is the president. The PCED is a non-governmental, not-for-profit association, which holds public hearings in the country to harvest people's perspectives on environmental and development issues to induct them into the government's decision-making process.

"When Dr. Karan Singh asked me to join the Auroville Foundation's Governing Board, I readily accepted, for I felt another opportunity had come my way to contribute in whatever small way to Auroville's development. Moreover, I know that for Dr. Karan Singh, who normally never accepts the same position twice, Auroville is something very special. For him, to be Chairman of the Auroville Foundation is not just another job; he considers it his karmic duty to help promote Sri Aurobindo's and The Mother's vision. He is not only a great devotee of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother but also perhaps the greatest exponent alive of their philosophy.

But as he has many responsibilities, I help him with Auroville affairs by being a kind of conduit between him and the Aurovilians. As such I have been privy to the complex issues that the Working Committee and other groups bring

to the Chairman's attention. This time, in Auroville, I have extended my stay to a week, so that I have the opportunity to meet with as many Aurovilians as possible." He adds that, meeting so many Aurovilians in their work settings and in meetings has helped to substantially widen his perspective.

While complimenting Auroville on the growth and developments of the last years – "the seed planted by The Mother is developing into a beautiful tree," he says poetically – he also asked hard questions about how that development is taking shape. "In early July I was inspired to write a letter to the community, which I sent through the Working Committee, for I had started to wonder

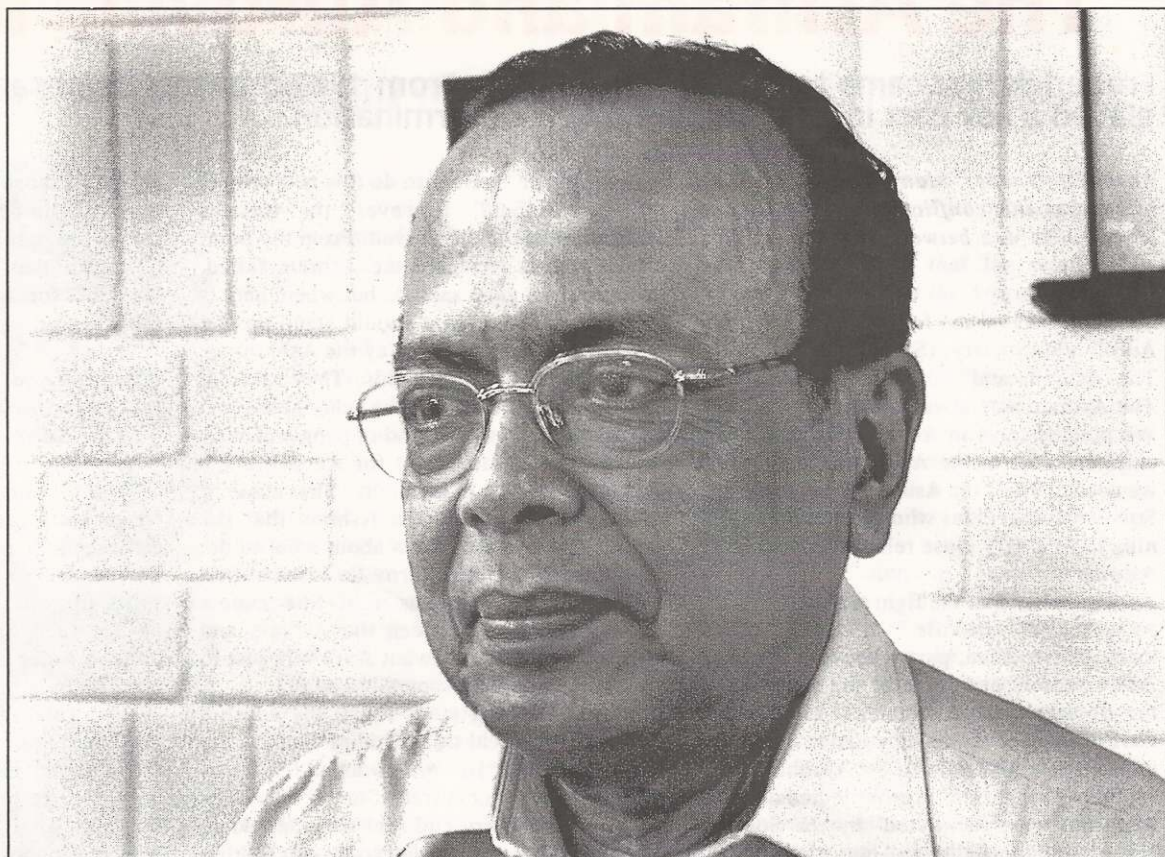
if we are nearing the end of the Auroville 'experiment.' In the beginning, Aurovilians joined, inspired by The Mother, and gave up everything to come to Auroville, to a climatically-difficult part of the country and live in relatively austere conditions. Today it appears to be different; I have heard that now people joining Auroville have many demands. I started to wonder to what extent people keep asking themselves what they are here for, whether they are steadfastly moving towards the Mother's vision or moving away from it. And that led to my first question. The Mother had a vision of an international conclave, which through its way of life and thought will foster human unity. She gave certain guidelines for the Auroville community to follow so that this experiment could evolve on the lines of Her vision. Has the community, as a collective, paused from its daily preoccupation to introspect, discuss and debate the present situation in the context of the Mother's benchmarks? Has any study been undertaken to determine whether Auroville is moving in the direction set by Her? How far it has progressed on the path set by Her and what were and are the impediments in the way? And what does the community need to do to overcome these impediments and smoothen Auroville's progression in the desired direction?

"These questions were followed by others, which came up when I was discussing a range of issues with various Aurovilians. Over the years, many institutions have been designed to facilitate the implementation of Auroville's vision. But are these institutions really representative of the Residents Assembly and do they adequately reflect, in their deliberations and actions, the diversity of views and focus that exist within the Community? Have there been conscious efforts by the Working Committee and the other working groups to regularly harvest, through acceptable mechanisms, the diversity of perceptions that exist within the community? And is there any perspective on how to make the interaction between the three bodies of the Auroville Foundation – the Governing Board, the International Advisory Council and the Residents' Assembly – more cohesive so that the decisions and advice these bodies tender are based on a synthesis of the entirety of the views?"

Lastly, Mr. Bagchi focused on Auroville's often-unfavourable image in some quarters of the country's administrative apparatus. "How this image came to be propagated is easy to understand. Every government collects information (also termed 'intelligence') about various matters, which it considers important for its decision-making process. In Auroville's case, it is apparent that the intelligence-gathering agencies have been funnelling up through their hierarchy the unfavourable impressions that their agents have been picking up from its immediate surroundings. It has to be accepted that a predominantly Western community with a different lifestyle and worldview is surrounded by a community that remains largely conservative and orthodox in its approach to life and the world. In other words, the socio-economic matrix of Auroville is at considerable variance with that in which the surrounding people find their roots. This mismatch between the ethos of two distinct communities makes for the deficit of understanding and trust in one about the other and contributes to the unhappy image. A collective and conscious effort is urgently indicated to devise steps that will help in creating an enabling climate of understanding and trust among the surrounding population towards Auroville, its mission and its residents." And he explained that, in his view, Auroville would need the positive support from those in the surrounding villages. "The villagers must feel that Auroville belongs as much to them, that it is not an imposition from outside. What is essential is to emotionally integrate them with Auroville, without doubt a difficult task. Auroville appears as an island amidst a sea of a conservative rural community, and unless there is a stronger emotional bond between the two, the problems will continue to surface.

"These are deeper questions and I am least qualified to search for answers. But they are important and need to be studied and addressed," said Mr. Bagchi in an open interaction with the community on September 29th, while discussing his letter and the responses to it from Aurovilians. "This exercise is one for the community and should not involve outsiders, not me, nor other Governing Board members. Though, of course, we will be ready to help if called upon by the community."

Carel



Ajoy Bagchi

The Governing Board meets

On September 28th, the Governing Board met in Auroville for its half-yearly meeting. In the evening of that day the Board interacted with community members.

The pouring rain and the last minute announcement notwithstanding, about 30 people gathered in the SAWCHU building to interact with the members of the Governing Board. Whilst enjoying the material reward for braving the elements – one or two or even more ice-creams sweetly offered by the Working Committee who had expected a larger attendance – the Aurovilians listened to Dr. Karan Singh giving a brief update on the process of the Board's meetings, first with members of the Working Committee, afterwards between themselves. The Board this time was represented by five of its members: Dr Karan Singh, Mr. Ajoy Bagchi, Mr. D.Sudhakaran, representing Mr. S.K.Ray, the Financial Advisor of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, and the Aurovilian board members Aster Patel and Roger Anger.

Immediately after the previous Governing Board meeting in February, Dr. Karan Singh had expressed to the community, at a gathering on the roof of the Solar Kitchen, his concerns about the visa situation, the blocked land purchase process and the delay in obtaining the income tax exemption for the Auroville Foundation. Now, six months

later, progress has been made on all these issues. A new visa policy for Auroville has come into force; a new structure will be put into place to enable the Foundation to restart acquiring land, preferably through purchase but through acquisition if necessary; and a proposal prepared to pool the profits of Auroville's commercial units in order to continue to avail of the income tax exemption [see the article Coming of Age, in AVToday October 2005]. The Board appreciated the progress made at the Matrimandir, and the information that the building, including the petals (but excluding the gardens), would be completed within one to two years.

Dr. Karan Singh then addressed a few of the Board's concerns. One is to what extent the ideals of Auroville are being supported by individuals and the community as a collectivity. In this respect he mentioned that the Residents' Assembly, a body recognized in the Auroville Foundation Act, has a usual attendance of less than a hundred people, which is less than 10% of Auroville's adult population. Does this show apathy, or residents being turned off from the community process? Can a meeting of a Residents' Assembly, which is only attended by, say,

5% of the residents, take decisions by majority vote? He asked the community to look into the matter, and regulate it properly, together with the Regulations for Entry and Exit which are in the process of being drafted. "The Auroville Foundation Act mentions what issues are to be regulated by the Board, and Auroville needs to act now," stated Dr. Karan Singh.

Another concern mentioned was the necessity that Auroville ensures that its educational system meets the requirements of India's educational structure, so that children of Indian Aurovilians can continue their studies in India, and children of European or American parents in Europe or the USA.

Some residents brought to the Board's attention the need for large-scale fundraising for land purchase and the creation of infrastructure. "The Auroville Foundation Act declares Auroville to be a township, but we never received financial assistance from the Indian Government for these pressing issues," stated one Aurovilian. Dr. Karan Singh promised to raise the issue with various high-level authorities in New Delhi.

The next meeting of the Board will take place at the end of February, 2006.



Book release

The release of the book "Pondicherry, the last months before India's Independence" by Claude Arpi. From left to right: Mr. Srinivasamurthy, Mr. Ajoy Bagchi, Mr. Roger Anger, Mr. Michèl Séguy, Dr. Karan Singh and Mrs. Aster Patel

It is not so well known that quite a few Aurovilians, apart from being engaged in their daily activities, also write books. Aurovilians, as a rule, do not have the reputation of being intellectuals or even scholars; but the display on September 29, 2005 gave another picture. Books on education, history, yoga, Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, environmental sciences, alternative technology, photo books and fiction, were exhibited at the Town Hall cafeteria on the occasion of the release of two publications of "The Pavilion Series," published by Auroville Press Publishers in collaboration with the French Pavilion group.

"Pondicherry, the last months before India's Independence," is written by Claude Arpi and gives the perspective of a British Consul General in Pondicherry on the forthcoming

event. "Unir des Hommes: Jean Monnet", by Christine Devin, a book written in French, highlights the remarkable life of Jean Monnet, who has not only been lauded as "the Father of Europe" but has been an instrument towards the manifestation of the vision of a world without borders. These two publications follow an earlier one in the Pavilion series, "La Politique Française de Nehru," by Claude Arpi, dealing with the end of the French Comptoirs in India.

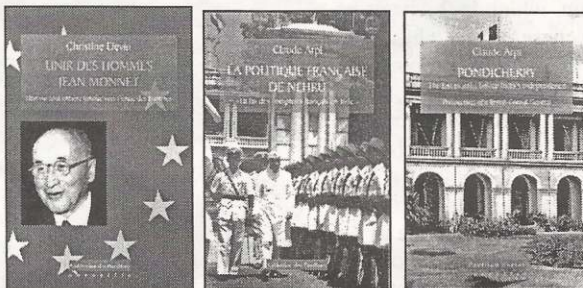
The Chief Guest on the occasion was Dr. Karan Singh, Chairman of the Auroville Foundation and recently appointed Chairman of the Indian

Council of Cultural Relations. The guest of honour was Michel Séguy, Consul General of France in Chennai and Pondicherry. "It's remarkable that

ordinary commitment of Aurovilians towards the manifestation of Auroville's ideals ever since he was appointed in Pondicherry a few years ago.

Dr. Karan Singh lauded the extraordinary diversity of Aurovilians, and envisaged a future where this diversity would vastly expand when the Matrimandir is finished. "The Matrimandir and Auroville are spiritually-linked, and once the Matrimandir is ready, this will have a significant impact on the growth of Auroville," said Dr. Karan Singh. He further took the opportunity to request the French Consul General to ensure that France would soon build its cultural pavilion in the International Zone.

Carel



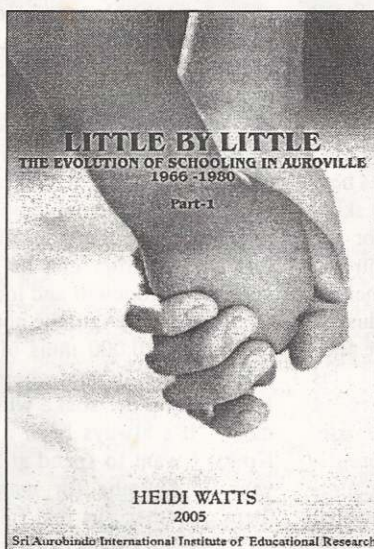
The three books of the French Pavilion series

such a tiny institution as Auroville produces such a variety and quality of books," observed Michel Séguy in his address to the participants, and added that he had been witnessing the extra-

Education in Auroville: "Little by little"

Over a year and a half ago, Heidi Watts, Professor at Antioch University and a regular visitor to Auroville, was invited by SAIER to take up a project to write the history of Auroville schools. The first part of this work, which in the author's own words is 'by no means complete', was recently published under the title Little by Little - The Evolution of Schooling in Auroville 1966-1980 Part I.

In this first part, Heidi has divided the history of schooling in Auroville into two periods - the first decade until when the school in Aspiration closed, from 1966 to 1976, and the following four years, a period she calls 'the educational hiatus', from 1977 until 1980. Heidi has taken up a tremendously challenging task and put together a fascinating narrative on how schooling evolved in Auroville. In her introduction, she gives a glimpse into the challenge she faced: "One difficulty that emerged as soon as I began looking for material on education was 'education' meant different things to different people. In Auroville, 'a place of unending education,' the emphasis on education as well as the ambiguity about what is meant by education is everywhere. For instance, I was quite excited to hear that there was a film entitled



"Education in Auroville" made in the 1970s, and made arrangements to see it - not an easy task, as the film is on 8-millimeter tape and the film service had to find a projector to give me a special showing. Imagine my chagrin at realizing that for the filmmakers, and perhaps for most of the Aurovilians of that time, "education" did indeed mean "life" - all of life - and not schooling in any specific way. I think in the whole film there was only one shot of children in what might be thought of as a class-like situation. Clearly I was not going to learn about schools in Auroville from this film."

The booklet was released in early September by General

Ashok Chatterji and Shradhhavan at a private ceremony hosted by SAIER. Teachers from all schools under the SAIER umbrella, both Auroville and outreach, were invited. What was unique about this event was that it brought together a diverse group of people who have been or are in some way connected to the schools in Auroville. Some of Auroville's early pioneers of education were also present - Mauna, Shradhhavan, Suzie, Johnny, and Croquette. A few of these individuals shared their feelings and observations on the early years of schooling in Auroville.

Shradhhavan who worked in Aspiration school from 16th December 1970 until the school folded on the 1st of November in 1976, remembers those 6 years as a time of total involvement. "The school was my life, and I feel really happy to see the renewed interest in those early experiments." She adds that in the last year alone, she had been interviewed by "four different people for four different purposes", and feels that "it would be worthwhile to go in more detail into those experiences of those early times." She also made an observation on the new school buildings slowly coming up in Auroville. "I am very happy to see these custom-built practical spaces that are appropriate accommodation for the children of Auroville. In those times we were housed in keet huts or in the magnificent buildings designed by Roger. These, which we considered some of the most beautiful buildings on the planet, were, however, not very practical for school work."

Johnny is another early adventurer who still remains connected with Auroville Schools. He takes on individual children and runs unconventional courses - like teaching mathematics through 3-D model-building for a teenager at Future School. He reminisces about "those good early days when the kids lived wholly-fulfilled lives and did not insist on moving about on motorbikes. Everybody walked everywhere and lived a much less organized life". He feels that there was more of an organic aspect to education in those early times. "Education was an encompassing experience, the children didn't just sit down and do lessons; they also helped in the fields, we went climbing mountains,

and did a lot of other things besides..." On the book itself, Johnny observes, "I am glad to see it is a humble publication. I was afraid it was going to be a hardcover, glossy sensational thing."

Suzie, who until very recently was involved with Last School and Deepanam, both 'free-progress' schools, takes a more philosophical view. "It is so hard to speak about those days because the situation now is so different and you can hear it only as a story. Looking from a longer perspective, I realize that each group of teachers, parents, and students had something to work out that was different. And this was carefully orchestrated, bringing together a combination of people with certain capacities. So each group has to discover its own truth. What we did 20 years ago or what might happen 10 years from now may be something different." She adds as a word of advice to the current crop of teachers that, "the thing for each of you to find is the joy, and it helps to remember that you all are brought together with the difficulties and the challenges that are specially designed for each one of us to progress in the maximum way possible."

The story of the first 14 years of education in Auroville has been seamlessly crafted by Heidi into a beautiful quilt of narratives. For anyone with even the slightest curiosity about education in Auroville, this booklet will be 'un-putdownable'.

Priya Sundaravalli

Little by Little - The Evolution of Schooling in Auroville 1966-1980, Heidi Watts 2005, Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research

In brief

Matrimandir Chamber

The Matrimandir Chamber will re-open at the end of October for Aurovilians only. As the twin spiral ramps aren't usable for the time being, a steep and uncomfortable temporary staircase is now in place.

Petal chambers

Three more meditation rooms in the petals Generosity, Goodness and Courage, have just been painted and will soon be ready to be visited.

Saaram

'Saaram', meaning "the essence, a passage, the crystal sap of an old tree and also a bird which lives upon eating the moon beams" is the name for a new community which includes both Ilaigarkal New School Campus and Ilaigarkal Hostel, situated north of the Matrimandir.

Cape Town meeting,

The yearly Auroville International meeting will take place in the Lynedoch Sustainability Institute near Stellenbosch, Cape Town, South Africa, from March 17 to 27, 2006. Contact for further info jasmin1@africa.com or tine@auroville.org.in

New murder

A member of one of the Kulapalayam gangs was murdered in broad daylight on the road to Kulapalayam. The police is investigating the matter.

New Film on Sanitation

Auroville Water Harvest, Yatra Multimedia Centre, Kulapalayam, and AuroAnnam have cooperated in making a new educational movie on the need for sanitation. It is in Tamil, with local actors. The release function was held in the context of a recently initiated project for integrated waste management and sanitation in Kottakarai.

Transition school extensions

Transition School has finished phase one of its expansion and three groups of children moved into their new classrooms at the beginning of the school year. The next phase of two more classrooms is now being initiated, as extra classroom space is needed for the children born in Auroville and for the children of Newcomers. About 24 lakhs is required. For more info contact Lyle@auroville.org.in

Communication workshops

The Organisational Development Group, which promotes courses on communication and collaboration for individuals and groups who would like to improve their interactive skills, organised five courses in October on personality development and communication skills and a five day workshop on understanding human behaviour, improving communication and problem-solving skills.

Menhirs for road signs

As any road sign made from metal or wood tends to disappear or be vandalized, the Auroville Planning and Development Group has approved an experiment to put road signs on menhirs (large boulders). Menhirs will also be experimented with for indicating directions at road crossings.

"You've got to involve the people in wildlife protection"

Rom Whitaker, one of India's foremost herpetologists, has a long-term connection with Auroville. He visits often, and Aurovilians have worked with him on projects like his Crocodile Farm near Mahabalipuram and tree-planting. Recently he showed some of his most recent films to appreciative audiences at Future School and the American Pavilion.

"I'm a snake tracker, not a collector. The last thing I want to do is hurt one. The thing I love most is to discover snakes in the wild," explains Rom. Did he really discover his vocation at the age of 5 years, as a recent article about him suggests? "Oh, yeah. At that age I was already collecting snakes in northern New York State. Fortunately I had a mother who backed my interest – maybe the fact that there were no venomous snakes in that part of the U.S. helped. When I was seven we moved to India, where I knew I could get killed much easier because of my hobby. But I never had any fear of snakes, just a healthy respect."

His first 'peers', as he calls them, were the snake-charmers of Bombay. "But I soon discovered they knew zilch about snakes, they just peddled misinformation. Actually, much of what I learned I taught myself through fieldwork. I did go to libraries when I got older, but what I found was academic and not well-illustrated. Years later I took a lot of that stuff, sifted it out, put it in popular format and then published it as 'Common Indian Snakes'. It's gone into 10 reprints and 12 Indian languages, so there must have been a lot of other people hungry for that knowledge. In fact, a big part of my work over the years has been to try to simplify science so people can understand what it's all about."

After graduating from Kodaikanal International School, Rom went to college in the U.S. to further his knowledge of wildlife management, but left after a year because he wasn't learning anything new ("26 years later I completed my degree – I'm applying to be included in the Guinness Book of Records!"). After taking various jobs, he stopped by at a snake park in Florida. "It was run by a guy, Bill Haast, whom I'd hero-worshipped since High School. I spent the next two years learning a lot from him about venom-extraction and maintaining that whole scene. Then I was drafted to Vietnam. They knew a non-combatant when they saw one, so they trained me as a medical technician, another invaluable experience. When that was over I really wanted to get back to India, so I went to Arizona and caught rattlesnakes and special snakes which I then sold to zoos to pay for my ticket."

India was where he grew up, where he felt most at home. "Also, while I had far more peers in my line in the U.S., I knew that whatever I did in India, given the lack of research here, would be path-breaking work." Initially there were plans to set up a snake park in Bombay, but that didn't work out. Meanwhile he'd encountered the Irula tribals of Tamil Nadu. "I realized that these were the guys who really knew their snakes, so I decided to go back to Madras."

The Irulas had been hunter-gatherers for generations. In the course of their digging activities they had acquired skills in dealing with snakes but they never killed them until the snakeskin industry developed in the last century. Subsequently they killed hundreds of thousands. At its peak 10 million snakes a year were being slaughtered in India, but in the mid 1970s the government banned the trade.

"So here were these guys who knew their snakes backwards and who were suddenly out of work. By then I'd started my own venom-extraction business but it made much more sense to get them involved and ultimately hand over to them. We formed a co-operative society in 1978 and today they supply most of the venom needed in India to make anti-venom serum – half a million doses a year. That's close on the number of snake bites a year here. Unfortunately, around 10,000 people still die from snake bites."

Why? "There's a lot of misinformation about. Before the anti-venom became available, there were desperate remedies. In the United States these included pouring gunpowder on the bite and lighting it, or splitting a chicken and putting its entrails on the site in the belief that they could draw out the poison! Now that the anti-venom is available there's no excuse, but there are still plenty of these beliefs about." What about the 'Black Stones' which are so popular in Auroville? Rom takes

a deep breath. "You know, all these so-called remedies have been subjected to tests and none hold up. The problem is that once the venom is in the blood – and one beat of the heart is enough to start pumping it round the body – none of these remedies is any use. To expect the poison to remain at the site of the blood so you can suck it out or put something on the bite is ridiculous. I call the guy in Kerala who is distributing the Black Stones a mass-murderer because those who believe him will either not go to hospital, or they will be delayed, which can be just as fatal. If you're bitten, there's no debate any longer about what you should do. No tourniquet, no pressure bandage, no cutting, no black stone, no sucking – just stay calm and get to hospital as soon as possible, because you've got to get something in the blood to counteract the poison. The anti-serum neutralises the venom of four common poisonous snakes – the Cobra, Common Krait, Saw-scaled Viper and Russell's Viper – all of which you have in Auroville. The only problem is that around 30% of the population (including myself) are allergic to horse serum, which is the basis of the anti-venom, so for these people it has to be given under the cover of antihistamines or anti-allergy drugs like steroids."

Rom sits back, having got something off his chest. "Maybe I don't love human beings as much as wildlife, but the way I look at it is that I'm fascinated by an animal that kills 10,000 people a year. So it behoves me to do something about this by disseminating knowledge and countering all the misinformation." Was this why he started a Snake Park in Madras? "Yes. For the first time the people were seeing snakes and getting the right information about them. It was an overnight success: in two years we had a million visitors. The income was phenomenal. Unfortunately so was the temptation – certain people started taking advantage while I was away on consultations. I finally cut the connection in 1984."

The Snake Park brings up the larger issue of wildlife protection and habitat conservation in India. Is enough being done? Rom shakes his head. "Everybody is frustrated by the government's apathy. We're at crisis point now: how is it that every tiger in the Project Tiger reserve at Sariska has been killed? The problem is that the people who make the decisions live in cities and are out of touch. They have to start listening to the scientists and responsible NGOs, they have to involve the people in protecting wildlife – this is the bottom line. At

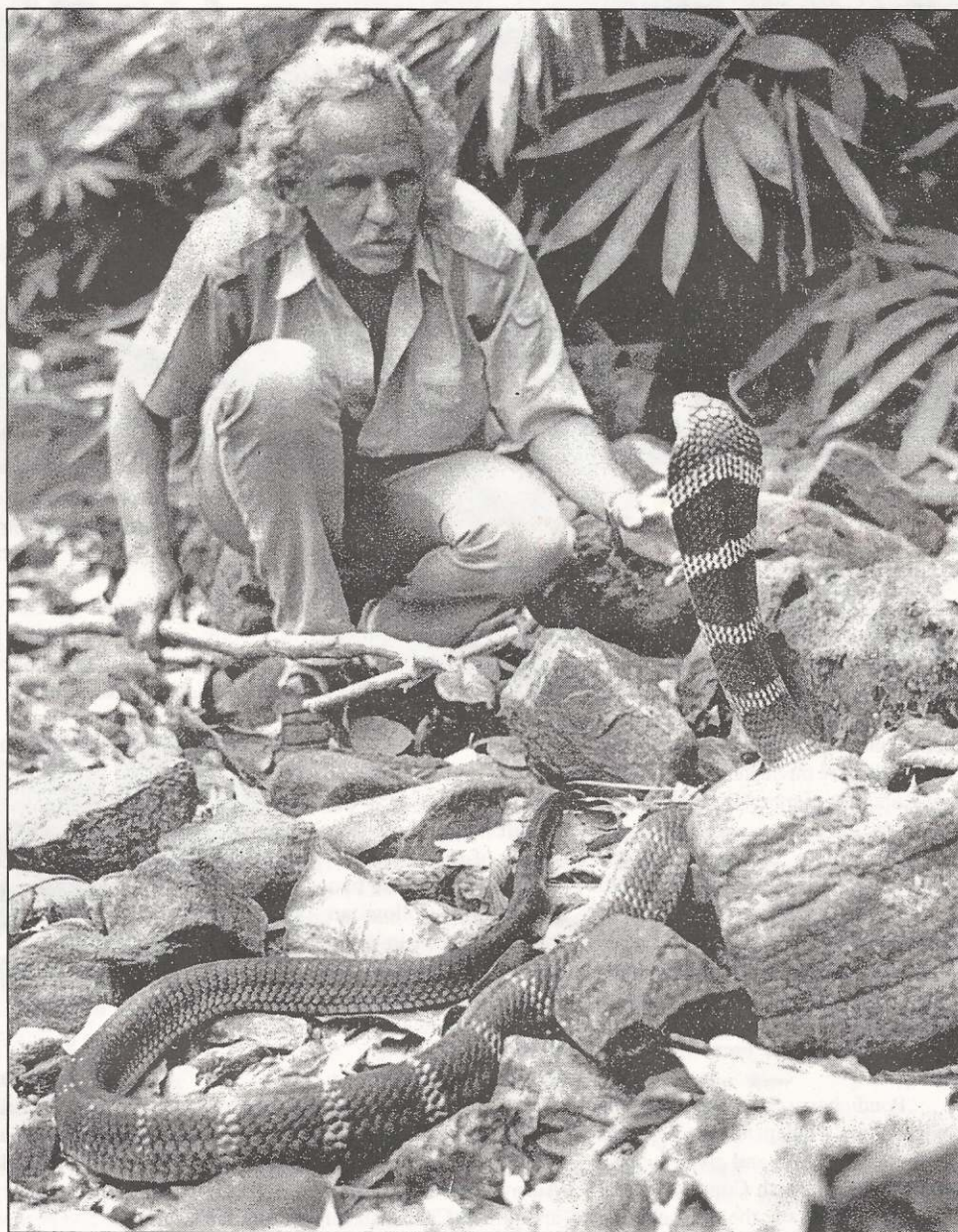
Where should Aurovilians go?

The anti-venom serum is stocked in PIMS, JIPMER and the Government Hospital in Pondicherry but not in the Ashram dispensary or the Auroville Health Centre. "It's a complex procedure to administer it," explains Peter from the Health Centre. "The patient has to be constantly monitored, and if they are allergic to the serum an antidote has to be administered. We don't have those capabilities here, so it's safer to send a snake-bite victim to JIPMER or another large hospital that has that capability." While Dr. Kiran of PIMS reports that there has not been one allergic reaction to the anti-venom serum in his hospital over the past four years, he confirms that they always test for such a reaction before they administer the serum, and that the necessary antidotes are available.

A new serum is now becoming available which, not being horse-based, would result in fewer allergic reactions. Unfortunately, it is not yet available in India.

the same time, the wildlife people have got to help them by coming up with imaginative solutions because each situation has a special set of circumstances which call for a different response."

What would those imaginative solutions look like? Rom points to the intention behind his Crocodile Bank project near Mahabalipuram. "While the Snake Farm was very much a conservation centre, the idea at



The King and I: Rom Whitaker meet his favourite snake, the king cobra

the Croc Bank was to rear the crocodiles for their skins while returning 5% back to the wild. This is a model which has been successfully tried in places like South Africa. While it's not every species which lends itself to this, if you choose those whose numbers are not threatened and which can survive when dropped in the wild, they can pay for the protection of many other species and habitats. 'Farm a croc and save the tiger!' I was never able to implement this at the Croc Bank as the Government banned what they saw as the exploitation of wildlife, but I'm convinced that this is the way of the future."

Rom also mentions Periyar, where local people who had been engaged in timber and wildlife smuggling are now nature guides for the tourists, with a vested interest in preserving the sanctity of the Reserve. "The idea here is that the people who already have the skills should be encouraged to use them for the preservation rather than destruction of wildlife. This is what we did when we helped the Irulas set up their anti-venom industry. This was the first example of sustainable anti-venom production in India as the Irulas release the snakes back into the wild after 3-4 'milking' rather than killing them after use, as was the norm before. The Irulas represent a superb example of what I call 'tribal technology'. They have incredible observational skills and knowledge of all forms of wildlife which should be put to more use. These guys should be part of any academic study course, the students and professors would learn so much from them. They're also very skilled rat-catchers. We did a project for the government which proved they are much cheaper and more effective than pesticides, so the next step is to help them set up a bio-control rodent control company. I guarantee they'll never be out of work! (The ultimate rodent predators, of course, are snakes, a powerful reason not to kill them or degrade their habitats.) All this is about getting back to basics, doing things right again, rather than running after oil-based and bioengineering solutions."

So how optimistic is he about the future of wildlife and habitat preservation in India? Rom spreads his hands. "On the macro scale,

a lot of good work is being done but the problems seem overwhelming. On the micro scale I'm very optimistic. I'm setting up a rainforest research station in Agumbe in the Western Ghats, and I know it will be a winner. Wet forests have not received much attention but, in Southern India, the Western Ghats are the source of all our rivers and they contain high species diversity. The problem with the rainforest, however, is it's so difficult to work there: never mind the leeches, you stay wet the whole time. So I want to set up a comfortable enough place where researchers can spend the whole year. Auroville is already helping a lot with construction, water-pumping and solar systems. We'll set up a Nature Net café run by local kids – if we get Broadband we'll give free hours to the village each day for medical, educational and farming stuff – we'll have non-stop films running and sell t-shirts on the side. The idea is to show that conservation can be sustainable while generating goodwill and local employment."

Rom chose Agumbe not only because it is rainforest (10,000 mms of rain a year!) but also because it was where he saw his first King Cobra, the snake which fascinates him most. "It's always been a famous place for Kings. I want to spend at least six months a year in Agumbe for many years studying them. Another girl just finished her Masters on fungi and two people are coming to study butterflies when the rains stop. I love having people from different fields working together, you learn so much from each other."

"I'm a lucky man. In going to the jungle I'm going back to my energy sources, to my roots. In the city I feel drained, but in the jungle I'm totally uplifted."

From an interview by Alan

Rom has published two guides – *Common Indian Snakes and Snakes of India: the field guide* – numerous technical papers, and booklets on reptiles that have been translated into all the major Indian languages. He has also made 20 documentary films and one children's feature film in Tamil. He recently received the prestigious Whitley Award for his work.

The day shall come ...

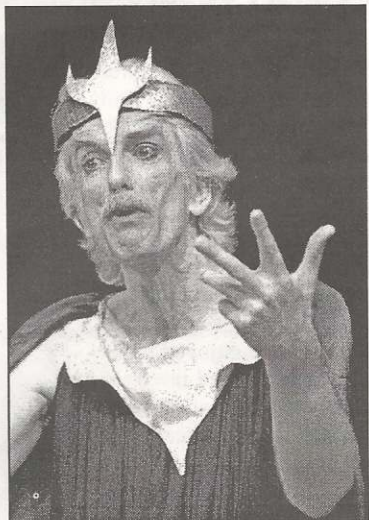
For the first time in Auroville's history a full-length play of Sri Aurobindo was performed.

It was a grand and ambitious production of *Perseus the Deliverer*, directed by Brazilian Aurovilian, Aryamani. With a sense of curiosity accompanied with awe I go to watch the opening night performance, a little daunted by the rumours about the inordinate long running time of 3 ½ hours – and that with cuts. The size of the cast, a whopping 50 players, is also overwhelming.

In the foyer of the Sri Aurobindo auditorium, poster boards of pre-production notes and images documenting the process are displayed showing the spirit of collaboration of diverse creative minds – scene-notes of the director, photos of early rehearsals, sketches of costume studies – and providing a behind-the-scenes look.

The programme sheet sums up the essence of the play – Pallas Athene, symbolizing light, love and benignity, and espousing the course of evolution, confronts Poseidon who is a mass of blind, self-willed power. Their dispute is settled by their spokesmen, Perseus and Polydaon. Almost throughout the play, one is constantly reminded that it is Sri Aurobindo's words that one hears from the mouths of the characters. This brings something strange into the air; it is as if two performances are simultaneously on, one apparent to the overt senses, the other intangible yet real. Hardly anyone stirs before the final curtain call...

A few characters stood out, including one who did not appear but whose dramatic voice left us in stunned attention – Poseidon, the king of the ocean. This spectacular vocalization was by Norman Miller, Auroville's very own ex-professional actor of British TV fame. Until the very end of the play, many fingers must have been crossed hoping for a



Top: Otto as the priest Polydaon; right: Srimoyi as Pallas Athene

brief emergence of the frothing sea god from the stormy waves off the coast of Syria.

The characters of *Andromeda* and *Polydaon* played respectively by Anandamayi and Otto captured the limelight hands down. Anandamayi as *Andromeda* was convincing as the young girl-woman embodying love, aspiration and hope, delightfully disarming with a vulnerable innocence that touches all who come in contact with her. *Polydaon*, the evil priest played by Otto, is her direct polemic. The priest's lean and gaunt frame epitomizes the negative vital force that he finally incarnates. Believing himself to have become Poseidon, he is transformed into a delusional and demoniacal being whose power-hungry ambitions leave no moral scruples.

Strangely the namesake of the play, *Perseus*, played by Samrat, did not come across as the main character. Did Sri Aurobindo intend it that way? With his half-God half-human origins,

his spectacular good looks (including the washboard abdomen) and the winged-sandals, plus Goddess *Athene's* support, it appeared as if the hero had it too easy. There also came across a certain cocky confidence of one who can never be vanquished. One scene in particular was irritable where, after vanquishing the sea monster, he comes to release *Andromeda* from the chains that bind her to the rocks. Instead of immediately attending to the task at hand, he prattles on like a vain hero before releasing the shackles. Did Sri Aurobindo really intend it this way?

Other memorable performances include *Praxilla* the acerbic head of the palace household in the woman's apartments, played by a bouncy and bustling *Meeta*, *Smerdas* the incessantly whining merchant played *Shankar*, and the semi-comic relief provided by *Charu* as *Perissus*, the cit-



izen butcher whose saucy belly thrusts drew laughs.

Loretta's costumes designs created by *Upasana* added authenticity to the period played. The eye for detail had also gone into the crafting of props – in particular the embellishments and the beaten gold jewelry of the royalty, and the 'golden' shield of Goddess *Athene* and *Perseus*, with its



Andromeda played by Anandamayi

clever use of *The Mother's* symbol in a relief motif.

This play has a message which is as relevant today as ever. As Sri Aurobindo comments, *In a romantic work of imagination of this type these outrages on history do not matter. Time there is more than Einsteinian in its relativity, the creative imagination is its sole disposer and arranger; fantasy reigns sovereign; the names of ancient countries and peoples are brought in only as fringes of a decorative background; anachronisms romp in wherever they can get an easy admittance, ideas and associations from all climes and epochs mingle; myth, romance and realism make up the single whole. For there the stage is the human mind of all times: the subject is an incident in its passage from a semi-primitive temperament surviving in a fairly advanced outward civilization to a brighter intellectualism and humanism – never quite safe against the resurgence of the dark or violent life-forces which are always there subdued or subordinated or somnolent in the make-up of civilized man – and the first promptings of the deeper and higher psychic and spiritual being which it is his ultimate destiny to become.*

Priya Sundaravalli

EDUCATION

The Blue Berry Library

The Blue Berry Library opened its doors to young children and their parents in August this year

"I thought it would be nice to have a quiet space where parents and young children could come together, while discovering the world of books," explains Claudia, herself the mother of a four year old child, Luna. "The population of young children in Auroville is growing, and for parents with young children, apart from the Certitude playground and now the swimming pool in New Creation, there are not many places one can go to. The activities offered are also very limited." Claudia felt the need to have more such spaces in Auroville, which would be exclusively for children. Encouraged by friends and other parents, she decided to go ahead and set up such a place herself.

The Blue Berry Library is situated in a small room at the back of the Kailash building. It is an ideal, very central location, opposite the Solar kitchen. The little room faces east and is surrounded by trees and greenery. It has big windows where the sunlight streams in, and is quiet and airy. The floor is a luminous blue, and the freshly white-washed walls are adorned with posters of elves and fairies. The books are neatly

arranged and displayed on shelves and in bright coloured boxes. There are mats and cushions on the floor, and then there's a corner where three little cane chairs are arranged around a low wooden table, apparently the children's favourite spot! The space is cozy, friendly and fun.

Parents have started coming to the Blue Berry library with their children in the afternoons after school, or during the weekends. They either borrow books to take home or read their children stories at the library itself. "When the children come here, they are happy," says Claudia, "They arrive, go straight for the shelves, pick up a book and start leafing through it. They are very quiet, and concentrated, at least for a while. If they find a friend, they get more animated, sometimes they take a book and look through it together." In the mornings, groups of children from the schools also come to visit the library with their teachers. "To have some fifteen small children come in at once is quite something!" Claudia smiles, "They're all so excited to be in a new place, so it's difficult to keep them calm. But they also understand that

it's not a playground, that they are here to look at books. They learn how to handle a book with respect, how to form a relationship with a book, how to go through it, page after page, to find out what it wants to tell them. It is important children get acquainted with books at a young age, that they realize books are 'friendly objects'."

Books help children build their vocabulary and encourage and inspire them to use their own imagination. Claudia feels books are also a great way for children to discover the world around them, as well as being a great tool for self-discovery. "There are some books in which the children can discover and recognize themselves," she says, "For example, if a child is learning how to ride a bicycle, and then comes across another child in a book who is also learning how to ride a bicycle. Or if a child is facing a fear, like the fear of darkness, or thunderstorms, and then sees that same fear is being experienced by a character in a book. It's about realizing that others go through similar experiences to the ones they are going

through, and that often the same learning process is there for everyone."

The Blue Berry Library has books in different languages, including English, French, German, Italian, and even a couple in Dutch and Japanese. "We have a section for very young children, about what they are living, about eating, sleeping. Then we have a lot of books about experiences, like experiences of going to school, or going to a hospital, or moving to a new house." There is a small collection of fairy tales, as well as quite a number of books on nature, a section of 'boys' interest' books, (on trains, airplanes, and how machines work) and a few story and music CDs and video CDs for young children.

"I also have a few books about pregnancy and on the

needs and education of the small child. I would like to develop this section further, so that when parents come here, they can also find something for themselves," says Claudia.

Claudia has a lot of dreams for the future. She doesn't want the Blue Berry Library to remain "just a library." "This is a first step," she says "Eventually, I see this place developing into a centre of sorts, where different activities for young children and parents could be offered on weekends, or during the school holidays. We could organise puppet shows, story telling evenings, or film and documentary projections. But all that will come in its own time..."

Emmanuelle

For more information contact: Claudia@auroville.org.in

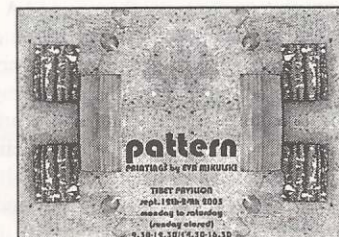


The entrance of the Blue Berry library in Kailash

In brief

Towards perfect health

An exhibition presenting selections from the works of *The Mother* and *Sri Aurobindo* on health, created by members of the *Sri Aurobindo Ashram* and organised by *Auroville Health Services*, was held at *Kala Kendra*, *Bharat Nivas*.



'Pattern'

The Pavilion of Tibetan Culture hosted a painting exhibition by *Eva Mikulski* titled *Pattern*.

SIRPI award

Meenakshi was awarded the *SIRPI* literary award at *Pollachi*, *Coimbatore* for her literary achievement in the field of *Tamil* poetry, creative writing and editing the *Auroville Grama Seydhamadal*, a *Tamil* journal. *Dr. Y.S. Rajan* a leading Indian scientist conferred the honour on *Meenakshi*. She received a plaque, certificate, cash award and a book of compliments about her work.

Herbal "stop smoking"

The herbal stop smoking tests done with a homeopathic preparation in *Quiet* have met with success. The means to enable a substantial percentage of people wishing to stop smoking or significantly reduce their use of tobacco can now be obtained from *Quiet* (quiet@auroville.org.in).

Israeli Festival

An Israeli food, film and fun festival took place at the *Visitors Centre*.

Dedication of Water Purifier

A water purifier cum bio-dynamizer was dedicated at the community water point in the *Aspiration-Last School* complex marking the completion of a three year project – *Safe Water for Auroville Communities* in collaboration with *AquaDyn-Sujalam* water unit.

Porcupine sighting

As confirmation that the *Auroville* forest provides a habitat for an ever-increasing population of animals, a porcupine appeared in *AuroAnnam Farm*. Apparently, the larger fauna is finding its way back into the expanding *Auroville* forests.

Organic milk?

Auroville farmers are concerned about the growing competition from village milk. *Auroville* producers have frozen the milk price for the past three years, but as input prices, particularly feed, have risen during that period, milk producers are operating at a loss. A move towards organic milk production might be one way forward, but would require a re-evaluation of dairy farming.

Children's Paintings

An exhibition of paintings by children and photos of 3- to 10-year-old children painting was held at *Pitanga Hall*, demonstrating the results of a teaching method combining *Arno Stern* and *Margaret Smithwhyte's* concepts.

Representing the Universal Mother in her myriad forms

Jointly organized by Dharmesh from Auroville and Kirty from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, the MAA exhibition was hosted at the Exhibition House of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry and at the Gallery Square Circle, Kala Kendra, in Auroville.

Late afternoon, October 6th. I am at the Gallery Square Circle in Kala Kendra. It is the opening of the MAA exhibition, and the halls are already bustling with guests. What drew me to this exhibition was its theme: MAA – the universal Mother, a theme which has been inspiring artists the world over since mankind's first forays into creative expression. The works of over fifty artists (painters being predominant) from Auroville, Pondicherry and the Sri Aurobindo Ashram are on display. All the artists have come together to express the Universal Mother in her diverse forms, human and divine: as woman, mother, nature, energy, Goddess...

After the guests have gone around and looked at the different art pieces, there is a collective invocation. Everyone sits in a circle in the central hall, while a young woman invokes the Universal Mother with Sanskrit chants, accompanied on the flute and sitar by live musicians. Then it is time for refreshments, and the guests discuss the various art pieces on display.

I decide to return to the exhibition a few days later, on Saraswati Puja, the day when the Goddess of learning and the arts is worshipped in India. What I find very interesting is that although there is unity in theme, there is diversity in form, in approach, in expression. The artists

participating have worked with and expressed themselves through different media – paint and canvas, glass, ceramic, wood, metal and fabric.

The diversity of the various artists' cultural backgrounds and sources of inspiration also shines through in many ways. Some of the pieces are classical, traditional even, in form and technique, others more modern, experimental; some are realist, others more abstract.

Certain pieces drew my attention more than others, and found an echo within me, a certain resonance. The paintings I most enjoyed looking at and which touched me were not necessarily the ones which were made with the greatest technical mastery or accuracy. It was a certain play, in colour, light and form, the suggestion of a certain mood or feeling that drew me to them.

Prabhat Biswas, in his acrylics on canvas, has drawn his inspiration from Hindu mythology. In his painting 'Ganesh on mother's lap', Ganesh, the elephant God, is portrayed as a young child, asleep and trusting, in the protective arms of his mother, whose love and tenderness shine through. In another of his paintings, 'Mahishasuramardini', he portrays the fierce aspect of the Mother. The Goddess is depicted slaying the buffalo demon, striking at it with her spear with strength and determination as well as poise and grace. A lot of force emanates from this painting.

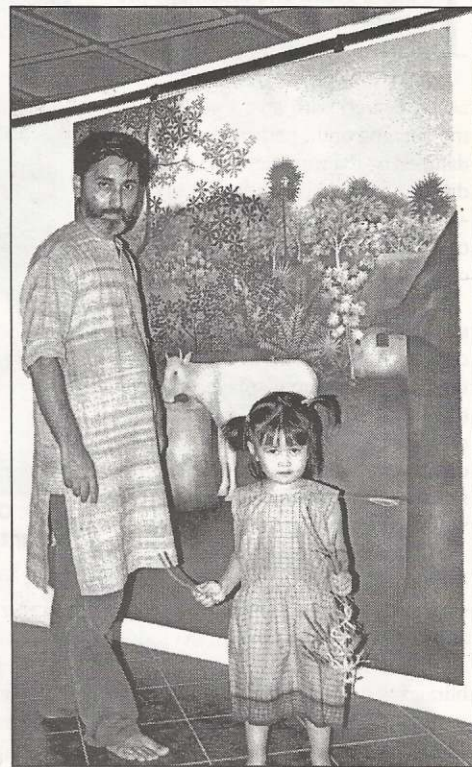
In Akmal Hussein's oils on canvas, scenes of village life are depicted. Women are at work in front of their huts while female cows are in the foreground. The surroundings are lush and green.

In fact, everything seems bathed in a green light – green the colour of nature and of fertility.

Stephanie has painted the sea and the horizon, in warm shades of turquoise and aquamarine. In the foreground, there is a mother and a child, in each other's arms: "Safe in your arms". Danasegar S.'s oil on canvas, "Huge Flower", is very powerful and is a great homage to woman's life giving power. In diffused shades of greens and oranges, a pregnant woman, naked, sits in a squatting position. Is she preparing to give birth?

I found Manoj Dixit's acrylics on sliced wood panels quite fascinating. There are three panels, where three mothers are depicted. There is "the mother of warmth and light", in reds and gold, suggesting day time and the sun; "the mother of grace and touch", in shades of turquoise, suggesting the evening, with the moon crescent in the background; and "the mother of dreams and fantasy" in deep blues, suggesting the night, with children in the foreground, the mother bringing on their dreams.

Hufreesh's "The star child" is mysterious



Akmal Hussein with his daughter in front of one of his paintings

and rich in movement. It portrays a mother and child in the cosmos, dancing in a night sky studded with constellations.

In Keiko Mima's "Mother's love for the child", a sleeping child is depicted in various positions and from different angles. He is oblivious to the world, peaceful and trusting. Though the mother is not depicted, one can feel her presence, her love, her protection.

Julietta's collage, "My mother", is a mosaic of predominantly black and white photographs of Julietta's mother at different times

in her life – as a little girl, an adolescent, a young woman, a wife, a mother, an elderly woman. It tells the story of the different stages in a woman's life, the different roles a woman takes on during her journey, that of daughter, sister, wife, mother... For me, this collage is about time, change and growing old.

There were also a number of pieces at the exhibition which I was not drawn to. Art speaks to different people differently, of course. I found some paintings too 'new age' in style, and certain depictions of the Mother a little too 'devotional' and 'religious'.

I also found the ceramic corner, where some art pieces in metal and some inlay

wood work were also displayed, a bit too bare. Though there were few pieces on display, I feel more work could have gone into the installation in that particular corner. Overall, though, I think the exhibition was a great success.

Creation being an essentially feminine process, what better way to present an offering to the Universal Mother than through art...?

Emmanuelle



Prabhat Biswas's acrylic on canvas: "Ganesh on mother's lap"

Calendars

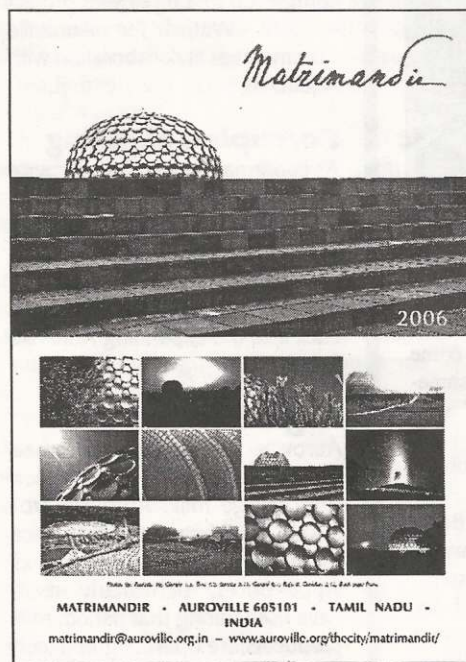
Matrimandir 2006

The theme for the Matrimandir calendar 2006 is "Gold and the Supramental" featuring 12 photos for each month and one large photo on the back cover.

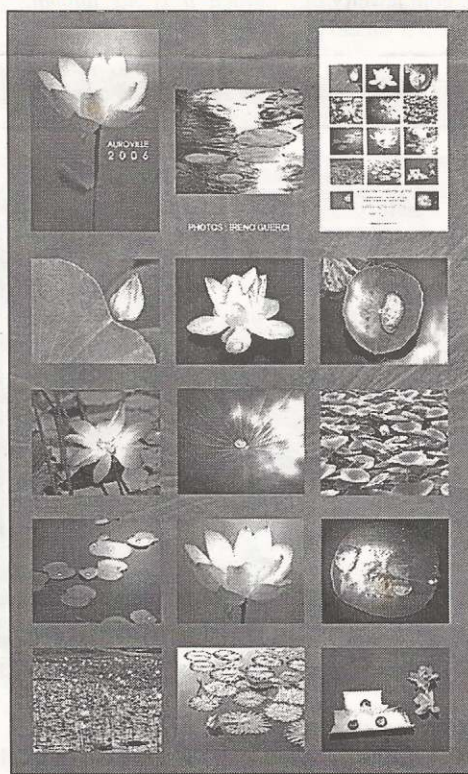
Quotations from Savitri were selected to fit the photos.

The calendar is a wall-hanging type size 12" x 17" or 30 x 43 centimetres.

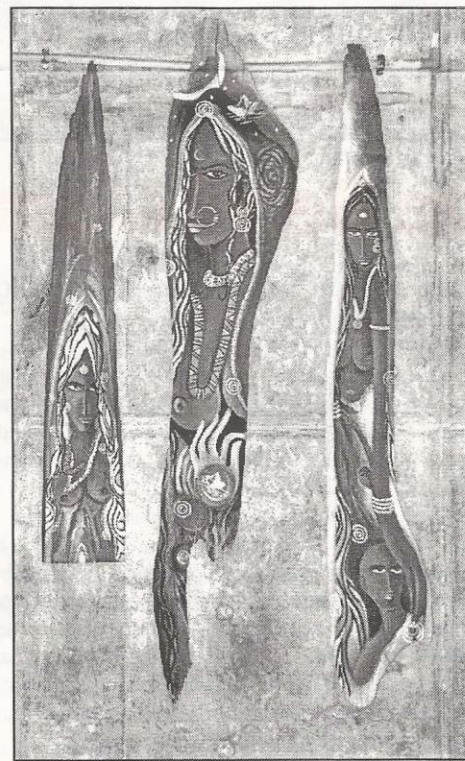
Price Rs 95 plus postage. The calendar can be ordered through the AVI center in your country or by emailing tine@auroville.org.in or matrimandir@auroville.org.in



Lotus Calendar



The theme of the 2006 calendar by Ireno Guerci is the lotus, presented through 13 fine art photographs shot in and around Auroville. The 13-month wall calendar (Dec 2005 – Dec 2006) has dimensions 11 x 17.5 inches (27.5 x 45 cm). Price in India Rs 200 plus postage, abroad US \$ 6, - € 5, which includes mailing costs. Half of the profits will support education and alternative public transport in Auroville. Order by sending a DD, post money order or cheque to Auroline, Sangha, Auroville 605101 or contact ireno@auroville.org.in or sundaravalli@auroville.org.in



Manoj Dixit's acrylics on sliced wood pannels

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