

A multi-cultural society

Auroville is sometimes described as a multicultural society. If 'multicultural' refers merely to a diversity of nationalities this is true, if not necessarily notable: almost any inner city school in London or New York contains more nationalities than Auroville. But if 'multicultural' implies not simply the coexistence of different cultures, but a society which celebrates and is enriched by the diversity of its cultures, we move on to more problematic terrain.

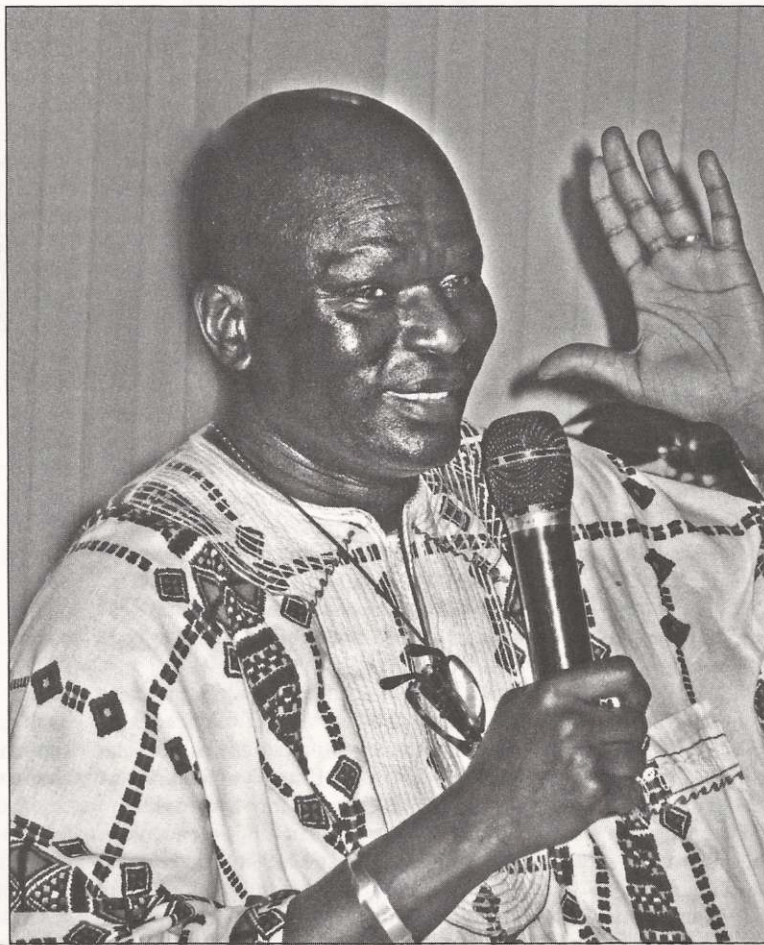
Because while Auroville is generally a success story in terms of the ability of its various cultures to live and work together, there are times when national or cultural fault lines suddenly seem to open up.

Why is this? The truth seems to be that many if not most Aurovilians continue to be influenced, to some extent at least, by the attitudes and perspectives of the culture in which they grew up. This is hard for us to accept – particularly as many of the people who are drawn to Auroville are attempting to reach beyond the limitations of nationality or caste – but unless we acknowledge this and start working creatively with it, both personally and as a community, it is likely that further difficulties will lie ahead and we will fail to utilise the true richness of our cultural diversity.

In this issue we try to throw some light on this sensitive issue. Doudou Diène speaks about his experience, as UN Special Rapporteur, of racism and discrimination in different countries of the world; two South Africans – one black, one white – who recently ran cultural sensitization programmes in Auroville talk about how they managed to transcend profound personal differences, and Aurovilians explore different cultural perspectives on issues which are central to the development of Auroville as a true community.

"We all wear tinted glasses"

Doudou Diène is UN Special Rapporteur on Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Intolerance. He is also a member of the International Advisory Council, and it was in that role that he visited Auroville in February. Here is an edited version of a talk he gave at the Town Hall.



Doudou Diène

In my capacity as UN Special Rapporteur I visit many countries. I'd like to share with you some of the conclusions which I have shared with various governments.

Firstly, the level that xenophobia and racism has reached worldwide is very worrying. Violence against foreigners or against different ethnic groups is increasing. What makes this even more disturbing is that some political parties, particularly the far right parties, are using racism to gain votes. Such parties are now setting the political agenda in some countries, using issues like immigration, asylum seekers and the threat of terrorism to promote their aims. In the process even the programmes of mainstream democratic parties are influenced by their ideology.

Another disturbing dimension is the intellectualisation of racism. We are now witnessing scholars from key institutions writing books and articles which openly or subtly legitimise racism and xenophobia. Recently, for example, a book was published in the US by a Harvard professor in which he argues that the increasing demographic presence of the Latinos in his country is a threat to the American identity.

So what should be done to combat these tendencies? I worked for UNESCO for twenty years on intercultural issues and I learned that simply denouncing racism and discrimination is not enough. You have to understand and analyse the complexi-

ty of the situation out of which racism arises. For all manifestations of racism have a long history and are the result of social, cultural, political, religious and philosophical processes. Racism has very deep roots.

National identity

Not only is it deep, it is also universal. All communities, nations, wear cultural glasses; they all look at other communities through lenses tinted by prejudice. And if you look at the worst examples of racism; genocide – in Nazi Germany, Rwanda or Bosnia – you realize that at the heart of these extreme manifestations of hostility is the issue of national identity. National identities are always artificially constructed. The dominant class uses archaeology, culture, philosophy and a much distorted version of a country's history – all history books are filled with prejudice – to define their national identity. In the process, national minorities or foreign cultures are often marginalised or demonised.

For example, how come in India the Muslim and Hindu communities fight each other? How do you explain the marginalization of the *dalits*? All these attitudes are engrained in the long-term construction of the Indian national identity. I hope one day there will be an exhibition in India of how the Indian psyche and mind has been constructed, and how Indians' attitudes to their minorities have been formed.

There is also the economic motive. In recent history, discrimination against black-skinned people can be traced back to the North Atlantic slave trade. The Europeans needed a workforce to exploit the New World and suddenly realized that Africa could provide the labour. So the export of slaves was industrialized and systematized. But then the European leaders and thinkers had a crisis of conscience – how could they, as Christians, capture and sell other human beings? It was then that philosophers like Voltaire came to their aid by propounding the theory that the blacks are the natural slaves of others. And this was further legitimised in the so-called 'Black Codes' which legally defined slaves as 'goods'.

You cannot combat racism by simply saying it is bad, inhuman. You have to begin by deconstructing it, by tracing it back to its roots, for all forms of racism are constructions. This begins at the personal level. We all have tinted glasses, but we are unaware of it. We need to look at how our national identity has impregnated the most subtle layers of our sensitivity, thinking and perception, and how it tints even the way Aurovilians look at each other in a place like Auroville, which has the high ideal of human unity.

Identity tensions

For I have come to see that whenever two communities – or even individuals – meet, by the mere fact of their differences there is an 'identity tension', and it's the way that this tension is handled that determines whether it translates into hostility and hatred or into attraction and love. This tension has to be worked on continually, and religion, philosophy, the media etc. play a key role in determining whether communities are marginalized or integrated. Unfortunately, the lesson of history is that, because of power issues, economic interests or religious ideology, diversity is generally instrumentalized into hostility and hatred rather than understanding and love.

But we must be clear what we mean by integration. The form of integration practised by many countries today is no more than 'striptease' integration. Immigrants are expected to 'undress' at the border, to undress themselves of any kind of specificity, whether it be religious, cultural or ethnic, and to put on the clothes of their new country. In other words, integration is not conceived as an interchange but as a forced giving-up of one's previous identity. Integration, practised in this way, is just another form of discrimination.

For diversity is a key concept in genuine integration. However, it's always a challenge for a nation to accept and promote the diversity of its

different communities for it fears for its unity. In fact, this tension between unity and diversity has not been solved by any country in the world.

A permanent fight

The fight against racism and discrimination is a permanent work because racism is a mutant – it is always changing its forms – and it's like an iceberg in that its visible manifestation is only a small part of the whole. My work as Special Rapporteur is even more complex since 9/11, because there has been this amalgamation of race, culture and religion as certain communities are now considered a threat to national identity and security.

So what should be done? Positive discrimination, also known as 'affirmative action', can be a useful tool when discrimination is profoundly rooted and institutionalised, and where the map of socioeconomic and political marginalisation coincides with ethnic maps. But while political and economic empowerment is important, it is only a first step. The next step is the complex process of weaving the different threads into one fabric, of promoting multiculturalism. There is an African proverb that says, "In the forest, while the branches of the trees are fighting each other, the roots are kissing". The branches are the visible diversity of religions, ethnicity etc. but the invisible roots are the universal values of love and compassion. So the challenge is not to cut the branches, because in that way you kill the tree, but to revitalize the branches, to make them strong, while linking them ever more closely to the trunk, to common core values. Society is like a garden, and gardens are beautiful only when each flower glows with its own light.

Be more universal

Auroville has this wonderful dream of human unity, of unity in diversity. I admire you tremendously for the efforts you are making. When you ask what more you can do to achieve human unity I say you should continue to live the Dream that brought you here. At the same time, Auroville needs to be more universal, to reflect more the diversity of the world, if it is to realize its basic values. But working on diversity does not mean working on the entire cosmos. The first step is to work on the way you interact with and empower the local inhabitants. This is the 'cleaning of one's bowl', the modest task that each of you can practise every day. It's not easy, but it's indispensable.

As to the larger work, all of us have inherited things which are negative and positive. As Jean-Paul Sartre put it, 'The important thing is not what history has made of us, but what we are making of what history made of us.'

Edited by Alan

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Providing prosperity

One year ago, the Pour Tous Distribution Centre (PTDC) was set up as a new step towards an Auroville economy where the material needs of all are provided in line with the ideals expressed by The Mother. The Economy Group, questioning the PTDC's development, called for a general meeting.



Jocelyn and Nicole at the Pour Tous Distribution Centre

“We’re getting there,” says Jocelyn happily. Nicole nods her agreement. A vast majority in the General Meeting on Wednesday March 7th expressed support for the ongoing Pour Tous Distribution Centre (PTDC) experiment of which the two are the enthusiastic executives. This meeting had been called by the Economy Group (EG). Responsible for the allocation of community budgets, the EG had cast a hard look at the Rs 38,000 a month it was counting out to PTDC while the experiment benefited ‘only’ 350 people. The vast majority of Aurovilians, argued the Economy Group, have not joined the scheme. Should the budget continue to be paid? If so, could the scheme be made accessible to more people? Taking this position, the Economy Group was in for some hard talk. Proponents pointed out that the scheme is a step towards the econ-

omy Mother wished for Auroville. The ideal Auroville economic model, they said, is not to turn Auroville into a market economy and make a business of everything but one in which the material needs of all would be provided for without money circulation. The EG members, instead of only thinking in terms of profit and productivity, should re-study Mother’s words and find ways to implement Mother’s economy. “Your mandate is to implement Mother’s Dream. What right do you have to change Her guidelines?” was one of the indignant responses to the EG members. Others pointed out that finally something is being done that many people feel really good about. “We feel great joy in this experiment – even though we have only made a little step. But why do you threaten to kill the baby?” “This PTDC is a way to get away from the money. I feel a fire of aspiration burning; there is hope for Auroville again. The money system has pulled us far away from where we are supposed to go.” “It is embarrassing to sit

here and argue about a mere Rs 38,000 while over 350 people benefit by this experiment. I invite the EG members to join the scheme and try it out for themselves. Perhaps then they’ll understand.” The EG members, far from being sitting ducks, responded with equal fervour. “When this EG came into existence about two years ago it was faced with a large deficit created by the uncertainty that government funding would be forthcoming. Our priorities were to continue free education and improve people’s maintenance which had remained unchanged for many years. Today, the single largest chunk of our expenditure goes to education and maintenances have increased from Rs 3,500 to Rs 5,000 a month. The EG is responsible for community funds benefiting as many Aurovilians as possible; that’s why we ask these questions.” These arguments did not convince the critics. They responded that while it was nice that the maintenances were increased, in fact an opportunity was lost. “Instead of making a step towards the ideal economy by providing more goods and services ‘in kind,’ you caved in to the arguments that Mother’s economic model cannot be imposed and that people should have a choice, and you decided to pay extra cash. And now again you threaten to disrupt a system which is clearly trying to be on the lines of Mother’s ideals.” Others pointed out that the EG was inconsistent. If it was so concerned about promoting equal rights for everyone, why hadn’t it addressed the inequality between the commercial and the service sector? “People working in the commercial sector can take whatever maintenance they

want. Those working in the service sector have to live on what the community provides. Why don’t you address this problem in a public meeting?” Not all those in the meeting supported the PTDC project. Tamil Aurovilians in particular expressed discontent with the scheme. “Our food expenses are less than those of Western Aurovilians. Also, we have special requirements that the PTDC doesn’t meet. For that reason we prefer to have more money in cash, so that we can do our own shopping and save.” Some Tamil Aurovilians referred to the school fees they have to pay because they have chosen to send their children to schools outside Auroville as these schools provide diplomas which Auroville schools do not. Others point at the substantial expenses they sometimes incur to meet social obligations. The PTDC executives acknowledged these problems, but explained that the experiment had just started. “It took us almost one year of study with a dedicated group of Aurovilians before we dared to make the step and started the PTDC. At first, only a hundred and sixty people joined. To our great joy, within the year the number of participants has more than doubled. But Auroville is still far from providing for all the needs of the Aurovilians. To pay maintenances in cash is not what Auroville should be doing – Auroville is supposed to provide for the basic needs of its members without exchange of money. We have to start somewhere – and that is what the PTDC has been doing. We feel a sense of urgency. Stopping this project would be a step backwards from Auroville’s ideals. If that happens, we would never be able to set the clock back.” The meeting concluded with a firm commitment from the PTDC executives to study how the scheme could include more people without compromising the experiment; how a second PTDC outlet could open in the Pour Tous store at Aspiration; and how a common purchasing service could benefit the whole of Auroville. They also announced that soon the scheme will be extended to become a Prosperity Service which would include more goods and services to be made available in kind as the next step towards a truer Auroville economy.

Carel

Auroville's services: how do they work?

Over the years, a gradual shift is being made from providing cash maintenances to providing a combination of cash and goods in kind. Completely ‘free’ (which means community-funded) are education, attendance of cultural events and puncture repair. For food and sundry items, participating individuals are still required to deposit a certain amount in the relevant common account, against which a number of goods are made available in kind. Ultimately, it is the intention that Auroville will provide to each Aurovillian all the needs required in kind, plus a certain amount in cash. This step is to be made soon.

The Pour Tous Distribution Centre scheme

Participants are required to deposit a monthly sum of Rs 2,100 in a common account. Food and sundry items are obtained from the Pour Tous Distribution Centre. Products available have been selected based on criteria such as demand, quality, costs and environmental impact. Special items not in stock can be ordered. The scheme also includes bread from the Auroville bakery; milk from Auroville dairies; gas bottles; and lunches and dinners from select Auroville kitchens and restaurants. Participants are not billed, though individual consumption patterns are tracked. People are made aware if they regularly ‘over-consume’ and a common understanding is then reached on how to solve the problem. Many participants experience great joy in sharing and giving. Some make donations of home-made food or bring excess produce from

their gardens. A common experience is that it no longer matters that there is only a limited choice of products. Participants often say that it feels quite liberating that one can obtain whatever is needed without having to worry about paying. PTDC purchases whatever Auroville’s farms supply, which includes jams and nut butters and also buys the reasonably priced products from Auroville’s food-processing units. The income and expenditure of the scheme is in balance. The community provides a budget of Rs 38,000 a month which covers the maintenances of four Aurovilians (another 6 Aurovilians are working without taking maintenance) and running expenses. Its turnover is Rs 6,00,000 a month. PTDC will soon start a food-processing unit that will process its surplus products.

The Nandini scheme

Nandini (meaning ‘the cow of plenty’ in Hindu culture) started in 1994 as part of a collective move towards an economy in kind. It provides basic clothing and household items to about 580 participants, half of whom are children and students. Adult participants donate Rs 300 a month into the Nandini account; the contribution for participating children and students is collected from their Children’s Maintenance the community provides. Participants are not billed, though individual accounts are maintained to guard against excessive consumption. The scheme’s monthly expense of approximately Rs 1,40,000, which includes the salaries of tailors, maintenance of Aurovilians, purchase of fabric, ready-made clothes and household furnishings, and the rent for the premises. All expenses are

fully funded by the participants. There is no community subsidy.

The energy subsidy scheme

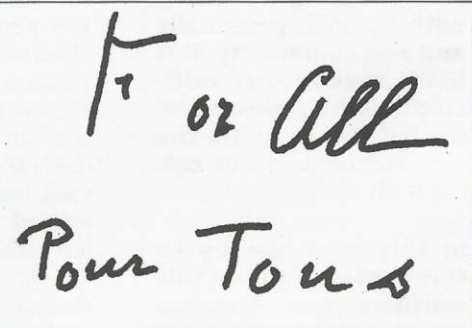
Auroville provides, from community funds, a basic volume of electricity ‘free of charge’ to all Aurovilians on the grid. Solar users benefit from a fund that covers the costs of maintenance and replacement of their equipment. The scheme, introduced two years ago, was recently revised as many Aurovilians use less energy than had been initially estimated. The next step to promote a decrease in electricity consumption will be the upgrading of old water pumps, which consume large amounts of electricity, plus a general check-up on leaking underground pipes. The latter would also substantially reduce water consumption.

The Free Store

The Free Store is a free exchange centre for second hand clothing and shoes for Aurovilians and newcomers. It receives donations from Aurovilians and sometimes from Auroville’s commercial units. It has a tailoring section to make alterations and repairs. Its monthly budget of Rs 9,000 is paid by the community.

Pour Tous

Pour Tous, Auroville’s purchasing and distribution service, provides a large variety of food and sundry items to Aurovilians, newcomers and guests through its retail outlet near Aspiration and through its ‘basket service’, a free home delivery service. It also operates a ‘shopping service’: any item available in Puducherry can be bought and home-delivered for a small sur-



Mother's handwritten note

charge. Pour Tous also operates the gas bottle service, located in the Service area, where empty bottles can be exchanged. Pour Tous is self-supporting and does not receive community subsidy. It employs 40 non-Aurovilians and 8 Aurovilians, and has a turnover of on average Rs 120 lakhs (Rs 1.2 million) a month. Its products are only sold to account holders; cash transactions are not possible.

The Prosperity Scheme: the next step

The Prosperity Scheme will combine the benefits of the PTDC, Nandini and the Energy scheme. Additionally, the costs of basic minimum phone usage and dental care will be covered. The scheme will also pay the participant’s contribution to Auroville’s Health Fund. The positive monthly balance of the scheme will be transferred to a ‘Caring Service,’ an account from which one-of-a-kind needs of participants will be met. In the Prosperity Scheme, those on community maintenance are required to contribute Rs 3,000 per month, others Rs 3,250. The scheme will start as soon as the Free Store and Nandini have moved to their new premises next to the PTDC.

Mother's balcony and terrace darshans



An exhibition of rare photographs of The Mother giving darshan from the balcony or terrace outside Her rooms was held at the Savitri Bhavan. Between 1932-1962, The Mother would appear every morning on the balcony of the first floor of the Meditation House. From 1963 till 1972, She would only appear on the terrace outside Her rooms on the second floor on darshan days (five or six times a year) and for special darshans.

This unique form of spiritual concordat between the Mother and her children began as an accident almost... It was the Mother's habit soon after her return to active work to come out early in the morning to the north balcony adjoining Pavitra's room... In course of time, a few sadhaks started assembling on the opposite pavement to have a glimpse of the Mother when she came out on the balcony. With the passage of a few weeks or months, this became a dawn-time experience of immeasurable importance equivalent to a sacramental beginning for the day's run of activities. Almost the entire Ashram would gather, the whole street would be packed with the expectant sadhaks, visitors and others, and the brief minutes of the darshan came to be invested with a daily renewed power and glory." "The Mother", says Sahana Devi, "after concentration for a few minutes used to sweep her eyes of benevolence over all who had come". It was believed by the assembled sadhaks and disciples that the Mother did individually see everyone within the range of her vision as her eyes moved in a vast semi-circle of grace and benediction.

K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar in *On The Mother* (Vol. 1, pp. 365, 366)

"In April, 1972, hundreds if not thousands of people filled the street under Mother's terrace when She came out for Darshan... The atmosphere in and around the Ashram was always wonderful, full of a beautiful light that seemed to fill the days. When Mother came out onto Her terrace, that beautiful atmosphere became even more light. As I stood in the deep quiet that descended when Mother appeared on Her terrace, there was always a moment when I was sure that She was looking at me. She was up on the second floor, and I was so far away that I could not really distinguish Her movements clearly, but I always knew when She was looking at me."

An Aurovilian remembers

BUILDING THE CITY

Water supply: are there solutions?

"A massive artificial recharge is the best solution to counter the groundwater depletion of the area," says Jeen Kootstra.

The February 2007 issue of *Auroville Today* carried an article on how to ensure an improved and continuous water supply for Auroville and its surrounding villages. A study made by Dutch specialist Eri Salomé, published in January, emphasized the need for a regional water management authority, responsible for the entire area – Auroville and the surrounding villages. It would handle water supply and distribution; prescribe appropriate solid waste and waste water systems to prevent ground water pollution; promote rain water harvesting and water re-use, and help install appropriate irrigation techniques to lessen water requirements for agriculture.

In February a second report was published, this time on available water resources. Dutch engineer Jeen Kootstra detailed a number of possibilities to secure the water supply for the region.

The groundwater situation: problematic

The groundwater situation in the area is problematic. As it is the only resource readily available at low cost, water is over-extracted. The yield from many wells has dropped considerably over the last few years. Auroville too suffers from less yield. As an intermediate solution, Kootstra proposes that water from the groundwater-rich Auromodèle area near the sea be pumped to Auroville's city centre. He warns however, that this source might only be reliable for a short period, probably no longer than five to ten years. "The hydrogeological formations below Auromodèle are not yet understood," he says. "We do not know why there is no seawater intrusion in the aquifer and how long the groundwater resources will last." The indications are not positive. Kireet, who has been building dams in the area to harvest rainwater, reports that the groundwater level has already decreased by 5 metres in the past five years due to increased pumping. The Bommaiarpalayam panchayat has recently dug two wells in the same aquifer to provide its coastal villages with water; the village of Kulapalayam relies on the same source, and many private individuals are also sinking wells. "It may be just a matter of time before all these wells pump saline water," says Kootstra. "But this would be a disaster, as seawater intrusion into the groundwater is an irreversible process."

Groundwater recharge

Can anything be done to solve the problem of excessive groundwater withdrawal in the wider region? Could the groundwater level be improved through artificial recharging? Kootstra considers this the best solution, but warns that "measures need to be substantive to have any meaningful effect." Luckily, a significant source is within reach. Kootstra proposes to study to what extent surface water can be drawn from the drainage network feeding Kaluvelly tank north of Auroville and be injected into the groundwater through recharge wells – wells that are similar to tube wells and which are used to "pump in" treated surface water.

"This area is one of the main 'natural recharge areas' of the region. Kaluvelly receives approxi-

mately six times more rainwater than it can store, and the excess goes to the sea. If part of this could be purified and infiltrated, it would be the best long-term solution." Kootstra estimates that the study into the feasibility of this option shouldn't take more than 5-6 months. "If the study proves that this option is feasible, the new water organisation should propose this to the concerned authorities of Tamil Nadu. It would be the best long-term solution for the entire region, Auroville included."

Rainwater harvesting

Apart from artificial recharge, Kootstra also stresses the need to greatly increase natural rainwater harvesting to improve the groundwater level. He proposes that a hydrogeological model be made to identify suitable infiltration areas in the region. Further he proposes that, as Auroville should be an example to the area, all houses in Auroville should have rainwater harvesting systems.

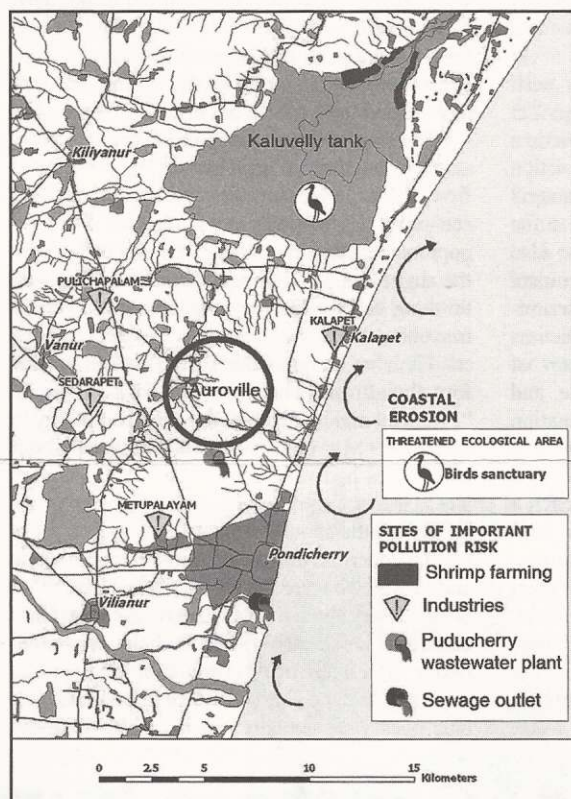
Waste water

The need for proper waste water management was also re-emphasized. In the actual and near-future conditions of Auroville, says Kootstra, decentralised waste water management is appropriate. Only at a later stage could a more centralised solution be implemented for a part of the city area. He recommends that all Auroville households have facilities for treating their waste water and re-use the effluent. Standards for safe effluents have to be set. Wastewater treatment systems have to be regularly checked for efficiency and effluent quality. The effluent needs to be safe for gardening or for recharge. "Groundwater can no longer be used for gardening," says Kootstra. "Instead, treated waste water and harvested rain water should be used. Gardens should be laid out in accordance with water availability and not according to the unsustainable ideas of Aurovilians." Kootstra hopes that, "with Auroville as a showcase, the surrounding villages will gradually follow suit."

Puducherry's waste water

Puducherry's wastewater reception plant is situated near the community of Forecomers. Daily, 13,000 million cubic metres of untreated waste water are released into the ground. "We don't know the underground flow pattern of all that water," says Kootstra. "Does it flow towards the sea? Which course does it take? Does it pollute the groundwater? Or is it possible that the polluted water and the ground water don't mix and that the groundwater flows more or less around that massive bulge of polluted water? A long-term study is required."

Another question is if Puducherry's wastewater could be cleaned and reused for irrigation or safe groundwater recharge. Auroville's Centre for Scientific Research has a long-term project, in cooperation with the Centre for Ecological Restoration of the Smithsonian Institute, to study appropriate treatment systems for Puducherry's wastewater. The ultimate objective would be to use treated water



Map showing the location of Auroville south of the drainage network feeding Kaluvelly tank.

for aquifer recharge and irrigation purposes, for the benefit of the whole area. This project, however, is still nascent. Another project aims to deal with Puducherry's solid waste dump next to the sewage farm. The French organisation ADEME (the French Agency for Environment and Energy Management) in collaboration with INTACH (the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage) Puducherry will start work on that aspect.

Desalinated sea water

Kootstra considers desalination of sea water only a long-term solution, as at present the costs are prohibitive. However, a potential location for a seawater desalination plant and a corridor for a transport pipeline to Auroville should be identified, for future eventualities.

Matrimandir gardens and lake

In all likelihood, a sufficient volume of excess rainwater from the Matrimandir oval – the area situated inside the Matrimandir Lake comprising the Matrimandir and its gardens – can be harvested and used to irrigate the gardens all year around. Groundwater will probably not be required.

Kootstra doesn't see a function for the Matrimandir Lake in the future city's water supply system. Instead, he considers that "the lake and its gardens complete the Matrimandir to form a pearl of serenity and beauty in the centre of Auroville." He proposes that the lake be designed from this perspective, be built in sections and that the first filling be done with rainwater. It's still unclear where the water will come from to keep the lake at the required level to counter the effects of evaporation.

Carel

In brief

Maintenance of public buildings

The Secretary of the Auroville Foundation informs that the Government of India has granted Rs. 27 lakhs for the maintenance of public buildings for the year 2006-07. The money will benefit the Solar Kitchen, six school buildings, the Health Centre and the Dehashakti Sport complex. This grant will recur yearly.

Checkposts

The Secretary of the Auroville Foundation in collaboration with the Working Committee has erected two guarded checkposts, one near the Visitors Reception Centre and another at the junction near Certitude, to control four wheeler access.

Bharat Nivas development

The next phase of the development in Bharat Nivas campus, new pathways and landscaping work are in progress. The work also includes pathway lighting, total water management, designated parking areas, and new sign boards. A major part of the campus will become parks and pedestrian areas.

Insight into Tamil heritage and culture

The Thamarai Learning and Cultural Centre, located in a traditional 133-year old restored Tamil house in Edaiyanchavadi village and home to many activities for women, youth and children, initiated a one-day experiential programme 'Insight into Tamil heritage and culture' to help Aurovilians understand more about life in the villages, Tamil culture and family life. The initiative came from the youth in the village.

Auroville research data base

The Centre for International Research in Human Unity (CIRHU) has called on all Aurovilians involved in original work and research which aspires to a higher level of consciousness to share data and create a database which documents the work and research activities. In this way a record of Auroville's research can be made available to Auroville and the world at large.

The Advent of The Truth

Inspired to convey what Auroville is all about, Lata Bhasin and Monty Gupta made a 40-minute documentary on Auroville called 'The Advent of The Truth'. It was shown at Cinema Paradiso.

New 'Auroville feeder'

On February 28th, Auroville's birthday, the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board inaugurated a new electrical power feeder named 'Auroville Feeder' from the Thiruchitrambalam sub-station. This power feeder will be for use by Auroville only, and consequently power interruptions are expected to be minimised.

Correction

The audio tapes of the workshop 'Awakening Creative Entrepreneurship' as reported in the March issue of *Auroville Today* are not available from Auroville Radio. Please contact the Entrepreneurship Laboratory for details at elab@auroville.org.in

Equality matters

In January and February, South-Africans Ginn Fourie and Letlapa Mphahlele came to Auroville. Ginn facilitated two 3-day workshops on the theme 'Equality matters – an experiential enquiry into our relation with power, race, culture and identity'.

The workshop was developed more for racially-divided societies like South Africa than for an international community like Auroville. However, as the trailer for the workshops put it, "the assumption we work with is that we all carry cultural lenses that we have been conditioned by and which, for the most part, are invisible or unconscious to us. These lenses heavily inform our behaviour, and in a multi-cultural environment can result in patterns of behaviour which are unwittingly offensive or perceived as undermining, and this can create the seeds of conflict and division."

Given the sensitivity of the issues we would be dealing with, the first necessity in the workshop was to create a space in which the participants felt safe to express themselves honestly. We were then invited to share stories about when we felt we had been the victims of some form of prejudice or discrimination and when we had been the perpetrators.

It was clarified that 'discrimination' refers to an act based on prejudice, and specifically to the systematic oppression of one group or individual by another based on factors like sex, race or class. "It begins with an assumption," explained Ginn, "which becomes a stereotype, then a prejudice and finally part of our deepest value system – and this is the hardest of all to change."

The victims lose much – services, self-esteem, opportunities to better themselves etc. Yet often, as was the case in South Africa, the victims are in the majority. So what allows discrimination to continue so long under these circumstances? Ginn explained that this is not only due to the institutionalisation of inequalities, it is also because the prejudices and values of the dominant class are internalised by those whom are discriminated against. In other words, many of the victims come to accept the dominant class's view of themselves and feel shamed, inadequate and angry. However, the victims of discrimination also 'cushion' themselves against the full force of these feelings through denial, withdrawal etc.

"This is why," explained Ginn, "to reach a deeper unity between different peoples we must first express our feelings in their rawest form – to go through the crucible – so that we can meet each other at our deepest value level. Discrimination is felt in the heart, so for change to happen the victims must acknowledge their feelings and the discriminators must experience what the oppressed feel."

Some of the personal stories shared on the first day of the workshop were very moving. A Tibetan, a Sri Lankan Tamil and an Israeli spoke of the discrimination they had experienced in their own country or elsewhere. But some questions remained. Why, for example, do groups and societies discriminate against others? Is discrimination as old as humanity itself? Or does it have to be inculcated?

In fact, on the second day we began to understand how powerful the early messages we receive are in making us think and act in the way we do. The group was divided into Westerners and non-Westerners. Then each group was asked to remember 'first stories' or cultural stereotypes they had imbibed as children which moulded their perception of their own culture. Afterwards they were asked to remember stories which had shaped their view of other cultures, either Western, Indian or indigenous.

The results were illuminating. The Westerners' early stories were overwhelmingly positive about their own culture – which they had learned to see as civilized, cultured, the defender of liberty etc. However, their early stories about indigenous cultures were largely negative. In contrast, while the non-Westerners' early stories about their own culture also tended to be positive, they also included negative elements. Interestingly, however, the non-Westerners' early stories about Western cultures also tended to be positive.

Those who had suffered or observed oppression were then asked what the victims had learned from the experience. Tolerance, endurance and self-reliance were mentioned. And what had the oppressors lost through being oppressors? Among the suggestions were openness to other ways of thinking and feeling, innocence, humility, and a true understanding of history.

Ginn has no doubt that such early stories profoundly influenced her behaviour for many years. "I wept all night when I realized my complicity in apartheid. My unconscious stereotypes about other races had radiated out into the collective. Yet it was so comfortable to be privileged that I had done little about the injustices."

To underline the malleability of young minds and hearts, we were shown 'A Class Divided', a documentary about a 2-day experiment in an Ohio classroom in the early 1960s. To help them experience the effects of discrimination, the teacher explained that the young children in her class with blue eyes were actually much smarter than the



Ginn Fourie and Letlapa Mphahlele

children with brown eyes, and she started giving the blue-eyed children special treatment, while discriminating against the brown-eyes. Within a very short time, the blue-eyed children were sailing through academic tests while the brown-eyed children were slumped over their desks. The next morning she reversed the discrimination so that now the brown-eyed children received all the attention. This time it was the brown-eyes who flew through the tests while the blue-eyes struggled with the tests they had performed with ease the previous day.

Ginn then introduced an alternative, non-discriminatory model of relating. This is based upon making one's values and attitudes conscious (instead of leaving them at an unconscious, 'default' level) and of 'negotiating' them with others.

On the final day we were invited to examine some of the main issues affecting us in Auroville. Participants mentioned, among other things, the role of youth, the pervasive influence of money and problems associated with 'tribalism' and groupism. We then broke up into groups to work on these issues, following a specific problem-solving technique which asked us to begin with articulating an ideal solution and then to work backward from there. Some of the ideas thrown up seemed promising, but we had insufficient time to report back to the larger group on anything but our process.

Concluding the workshop, Ginn was upbeat. "You Aurovilians seem to have so much of what it might take to achieve human unity in collabora-

tion with the Divine, and already you have achieved so much. Congratulations!" Her recommendations for future work included learning the principles of 'non-violent communication', exploring what Aurovilians and villagers experience as discriminatory practice, and setting up a grievance procedure for anybody who considers they are suffering prejudice or discrimination.

What did I learn from the workshop? I learned quite a lot about the ideology and methods of discrimination: how far it is powered by largely unconscious attitudes regarding 'the other', how quickly such an ideology can influence behaviour, and how difficult it is to change such beliefs once they become established. I also realized that while Auroville is not a discriminatory society in the sense that there is institutionalized suppression of one group by another on the grounds of race, sex or class, we do seem to have a lot of preconceptions or stereotypes about each other. And some, but by no means all, of these preconceptions may be influenced by our different 'cultural lenses' and behaviour. But I also learned that if we can be absolutely honest with each other, these simplistic views are often replaced by a larger understanding.

In fact, one of the hopes expressed at the beginning of the workshop was that it would "lead to a new phase of human unity in Auroville". This is probably too high-flown, but the fact that forty Aurovilians tried hard to understand their 'cultural lenses' as a first step towards transcending them is surely not without significance.

Alan

To forgive is to restore humanity: Ginn and Letlapa

Just after midnight of 30th December, 1993, Lyndi Fourie was enjoying a drink with friends in the Heidelberg Tavern in Cape Town. She was 23 years old, white, and was studying for an engineering degree. Suddenly three black men burst in, sprayed the room with bullets, and ran out. Lyndi and three others were killed.

The killers were soon caught. They were put on trial, found guilty and sentenced to long prison sentences. The criminal trial was attended by Ginn Fourie, the mother of Lyndi. After observing them for some time, she sent a message via the translator to the three defendants saying she forgave them if they were or felt guilty. Later she explained that she had developed empathy for the three young defendants and "I was comfortable forgiving them at that point because as a Christian I had the role model of Christ forgiving his murderers". But she also acknowledged that she was depending on the law to avenge her loss.

Three years later, the three men came before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). There was the possibility of an amnesty if they made a full and frank confession (they had refused to take the witness stand at the criminal trial). Ginn attended the hearing and reiterated that she still forgave them and that she would not oppose their request for amnesty. At the conclusion of the hearings, the three men asked to speak to her. They told her they would take her message of forgiveness, peace and hope to their communities and to their graves, whether they were granted amnesty or not. Ginn was touched, and listened to their stories of the hurt and pain they had suffered under apartheid (two of them had had family members killed by white men).

During the TRC hearings Ginn at last learned the name of their commander, the man who had given the order for the Heidelberg Tavern to be targeted that night. Letlapa Mphahlele had gone abroad when still young to train as a freedom fighter in the Azanian Peoples Liberation Army. Now he refused to request amnesty from the TRC, arguing that he and his comrades should not be put in the dock for fighting for justice and freedom. The South African courts subsequently absolved him of any criminal responsibility.

In 2002, Letlapa was launching his autobiography at a press conference. Ginn went and towards the end stood up and identified herself as the mother of the girl who had died on his orders. She asked him if he hadn't trivialized the TRC by refusing to apply for amnesty. He explained his position. At the end of the book launch, he came to her. He told her he wanted to meet with her and her family and would shift any of his engagements to make that possible.

"She had shown great courage in coming to the function," explained Letlapa, "and I felt she deserved more than the answer I had given her from the platform. She deserved to know my heart. I wanted a meeting where we could have a soul to soul conversation."

Ginn agreed to the meeting because "I was impressed by his integrity. It was at that meeting that I forgave him for what he had done. It was spontaneous, intuitive, but it also made sense in terms of what my ancestors had done to the indigenous Africans and how the current systems still marginalized them." She was also experiencing personal guilt. "I was learning to acknowledge my complicity in the whole oppressive apartheid system. I realized I had not contested it enough

because it was comfortable to be so privileged."

How did Letlapa receive that forgiveness? "When Ginn said she forgave me, which was something I had not sought, she gave me the greatest gift one human being can give to another: she restored my humanity." Ginn was later to write that "to forgive is as much about restoring humanity to oneself as to the other because otherwise there is this unresolved need for revenge."

Letlapa invited Ginn to come to his homecoming ceremony in his village and to give a speech. After some hesitation she accepted. At the ceremony she stood up and apologized to Letlapa's people for the shame and humiliation her ancestors had brought on them through slavery, colonialism and apartheid. She concluded, "We are all children of the soil. We have spilled each other's blood, now our sweat and tears will form the mortar to build a new country."

"We had never expected," said Letlapa, "that she would apologize for the sins of her forefathers. We had already given her an indigenous name, it was our way of saying sorry, but when she asked for forgiveness it came like a bolt of lightning, and it still reverberates in the hearts and minds of those who were there." Letlapa was so moved that he wrote and later presented to Ginn a beautiful poem addressed to her daughter (see page 5).

"At the homecoming I guess I'd already projected that Letlapa and I would work together," says Ginn, "although at that moment I had no idea how it was going to happen." Subsequently, the two of them formed a foundation – which Letlapa insisted should be called after Ginn's daughter so that her story should never be forgotten – to bring healing and conciliation to the former warring communities in South Africa. One of the ways

they planned to do this was through counselling: Ginn recalled that the young men who killed her daughter had told her after the TRC hearing that they welcomed counselling, particularly with the relations of their victims, in order for true reconciliation to take place. "Now we wanted the energy and enthusiasm which we had invested in war to be directed towards bridge-building," adds Letlapa. "If the two of us had seen the light, why should we leave our communities behind?"

But what about their own families? How supportive, how understanding, have they been? "Everybody in my family has welcomed our move towards conciliation," says Letlapa. "My mother has even adopted Ginn as a daughter." In Ginn's case it is less clear-cut.

While her eldest brother has been immensely supportive, her husband didn't want her to work with Letlapa – he still thinks Letlapa should be prosecuted in the courts – and her other brothers have reservations "because they have little understanding of what we are trying to do."

Nevertheless, on the tenth anniversary of her daughter's death Ginn took early retirement from her university job, "to devote what is left of my working life to promote in every way possible an understanding of the 'other' in South Africa." The 'other', she explains, also embraces the tragedy of the Boer War and its aftermath which has continued to poison relations between the English and Afrikaans. "I want to work, in my small way, for the restoration of justice, peace and conciliation for all the peoples of South Africa."

How successful has the Lyndi Fourie Foundation been in furthering that? Ginn admits that their work so far has only been with the former freedom fighters – most members of the

Cultural clashes – they often hurt

People from the West and from Tamil Nadu have vastly different cultural backgrounds. This sometimes gives rise to misunderstandings...

Shyama, originally from Sweden, has been living in Auroville for over thirty years. She remembers her first cultural clashes when she came here in 1968. "There was a crowd of people standing and staring open mouthed at me. To a Swede, this is a great invasion of privacy and the height of rudeness, and at first I found it extremely difficult to cope with." She had also great problems adapting to their way of thinking. "They seemed to have no sense of purpose or organization, and only to live for the minute. Whereas I had been brought up in a country where people plan for twenty-five years ahead, where they live according to the calendar and the clock, where time is money and one must not waste it. Here, time takes on a different dimension. It is flexible, flowing, open-ended, not at all rigid or to be used efficiently. I had to get used to that, and see that in Sweden they pay a high price for their interpretation of time; as if the human beings get lost in the rush for efficiency."

Like the awareness of time, many features of Tamil life are based on ancient ways of looking at the world. In Europe the attitude to the family, money, education, almost everything, changes every decade or two; but in South India, these attitudes are enshrined in centuries-old codes of behaviour.

In Tamil Nadu, the family is the core of the society and life revolves around it. When I told a young friend of mine, Ram Kumar, that in England about a quarter of the population lives alone, he could not believe it. "How selfish they must be," was his first response. "They must be very lonely", he added thoughtfully. When I told him that my ninety-three year old father was in an old-age home, he looked at me in positive disbelief and then horror. Facts like these confirm the Indian's belief that Westerners are uncaring. From the Western perspective, news about the prevalence of sex-selective abortion in India, or worse, female infanticide, demonstrates harshness – even though the Indian dowry system is still very much alive and the birth of a daughter forebodes future

poverty to a poor farmer.

I asked Ram Kumar what shocked him about the Westerners. "The exposed belly of some of the girls", was his immediate answer. "My grandmother had a phrase for this; 'as if they were stretching the handkerchief into a dress!'" I understand that it is not so much the bare skin which

here got more and more tense, and we realized that we were doing something terribly wrong. Only afterwards did we learn what our mistake was. In accordance with Western standards of behaviour, we had presented the women with their gifts first. But in Tamil society, you show respect by starting with the most 'senior' persons – perhaps those of the highest trade or caste."

The relationships between men and women are another source of misunderstanding. Westerners are amazed when they see Tamil women trailing behind their husbands, carrying heavy bags of shopping. The Tamil women's 'respectful attitude' towards men often repels modern Western women who are into training their 'new man' to change nappies and cook dinner. When they see their Indian sister serving the man's food – and often not starting eating till he has finished and remaining standing in his presence, they are shocked.

Indians on the other hand, easily regard Western women as having very low morals and being easily accessible. Also when they see couples living together out of wedlock, as is often the case in Auroville, they feel an immediate pity for the woman – now no one else will ever marry her. They think that if she has no children, the situation calls for even more sympathy. Tamils are also taken aback by the seemingly casualness of Western relationships. Public displays of affection between Western men and women are condemned; whereas the sight of two Indian men holding hands stupefies Westerners.

Wife-beating – a taboo in Western society – is still prevalent here. There is even a Tamil film song that goes, *adikkira kai thaana anaikkum*, 'it is the hand that beats that embraces'. One Tamil lady who has lived for several years in the USA described the frustration for Tamil men. "They feel inferior to the Westerners who have money, freedom and perhaps

education. On top of this, they see their children speaking English, their wives are independent and mobile, riding bicycles and mopeds and are comfortable working with *vellakaras* [white people]. These are threats to his 'manliness' and a continuous challenge to his self-worth. And the only way to re-establish this dominance is to boss over everyone at home, primarily the wife, or worse to beat her." But times are changing. Another lady told me that her friends hardly believe her when she told them her husband has never beaten her.

Arranged marriage is another mystery to the Westerner. It is based on compatibility of family and background, and not on the attraction of personality. Many Tamils strongly believe that love grows later with a shared life amongst the man's family. Sometimes it does, and sometimes it doesn't, just like in the West. When I read the matrimonial advertisements on the Sunday edition of *The Hindu*, I am amazed at their candour. But in the West, computer dating agencies are also flourishing and several of my friends have met this way. Are candlelit dinners any substitute for a parent's discernment?

One of the frustrations often heard of Westerners with India is why India is so dirty? An explanation was given by Sri Aurobindo who said that, for millennia, India has exclusively concerned itself with the spirit, and neglected matter, whereas the West did the opposite. Shankar from New Creation mentions his experience. "Only when I went to the United States and saw how it was possible to live in a clean and beautifully kept environment, did I realize how dirty my village was. Earlier I thought the whole world lived like that. Why didn't somebody tell me!"

But then again, see the beauty and shining brightness of a saree-clad Tamil woman with a string of flowers in her hair. How can she achieve such perfection without a washing machine, steam-iron, or five different kinds of hair products? It shows the Tamil's innate sense of refinement; it reveals itself in the beauty of their carriage, and their attention to detail and colour.

Dianna



Dianna (left) with women from Kullapalayam

shocks – after all, the Indian saree blouse also shows a bare navel – but the lack of 'cover' which is provided by the sari's *palloo*. "Also that they never take off their shoes when they come indoors," continues Ram Kumar. I was myself guilty of the latter. Sometimes I did walk in with my chapals, and I wondered why Ram Kumar had never brought it to my attention. Then I realized that to express such matters to a Westerner, and an older one who 'deserves respect,' would be very unbecoming to an Indian.

'Respect' is a big part of Tamil life. By using the 'polite form' of verbs in speech, one automatically shows respect to an elder or someone in authority. Alan told me how a few years back he and Annemarie wanted to show their appreciation to the workers who had built their house by presenting gifts. "The atmos-

PEOPLE

"Look up, not down!"

Approximately 14 years ago, I met Erica in a 3-day intensive self-inquiry workshop, 'Who are you'. She left a strong impression on me – in her golden-like robe with a big sun on it, looking straight into the core of one's being with piercing eyes that seemed to say, 'I am the sun.'

Erica was born in Germany on the 15th of March 1921, and always was a free spirit.

When the time came she got married and brought up a son. Her marriage was not the happiest one, but she never complained about that. It seems like everything life put on her path was a part of her *sad-hana*. She served and helped people as a nurse, with naturopathy and massage.

Spirituality was always an integral part of her life. The first time she visited India and Pondicherry in 1974, she was on her way to Australia. She never met The Mother, but was immediately attracted to Her presence in and around the Sri Aurobindo ashram.

After her husband died, she left Germany and moved to Pondicherry in 1978. There she became very busy, initiating and helping with many activities. Leading a movement and dance group, offering a meditation room in her flat where people could come to meditate, providing 'body-mind-soul' treatments with massage etc., working in the Ashram school, and in the 'early-morning flower shop', and arranging flowers three times daily in the Samadhi... "I was the first and the last inside the Samadhi," she would say with a laugh.

Erica finally moved to Auroville about fifteen years ago, at the age of 70. When she was asked by the Entry group at that time: 'Who will take care of you in a few years?' she answered, "And who will take care of you?" reminding everyone with her sharp spirit that the future is uncertain for each one of us.

In my view one of Erica's important contributions to our community and life was her communication – sharing her life experiences and insights and offering support both verbally or through the many letters she exchanged with people all over the world.

After two motorbike accidents a couple of years ago, she had to give up driving. It was not easy to lose her independence, and to have to order a taxi, or find a friend every time she needed to go somewhere. What she also missed were the long walks over fresh fields or along a beach,



Erica

which she had so much appreciated on her occasional visits to the coast of northern Germany.

Last December she phoned me and said she wanted to tell me 'the big news' herself before I heard it from someone else. I was very curious when I came to visit her. "Well," she began, "I am going to do something good for Auroville, for my family and for myself." My anticipation was rising. "I am leaving for Germany. I am going to the other paradise". Even now as I write this, I get goose bumps. I knew she meant it, and it felt right.

Everything worked out smoothly at the other end. Her son, to whom she had grown much closer since his visit to Auroville a couple of years ago, was urging her to come and live closer to him and

his family. The apartment she applied for, on the little island in North Germany where she spent some holidays, was given to her. An old lady returning from India after almost 30 years! (she was one of about 20 applicants for it!) A friend offered to either come over to Auroville to help with packing up, or to buy her a flight ticket back. Erica chose the second option as she felt deep inside that she needed to go through the ritual of wrapping up her Indian experience on her own. Another friend and a god-child offered her monthly monetary contributions. Simply wonderful.

Her ticket got misplaced just a few days before her departure creating some distress, before it was replaced with a new one. Friends who wanted to see her one last time before she left, called by.

We shared possibly our last ice cream together, and talked about raising children. She left Auroville the same evening, the last Sunday of January 2007.

In my last conversation with her, I asked her if she wished to share any secrets for a meaningful life. "If people have problems, they first need to find out what they are really missing, what they are longing for... we can't change problems... we've to wait for the solutions to come."

"Sometimes be alone. Spend some time alone!" "Go through life with the knowledge that whatever it is, it is, and know that this too will pass. But the cosmos, the beauty is always here for us..."

"Look up, not down!"

Dariya

South African defence forces are still in denial about what happened under apartheid. Encouragingly, some of the former freedom fighters who have been trained in releasing the past have now set up their own organization called 'Youth for Change'. "They are doing great work with young gang members from the townships," says Ginn, "and the Foundation is collaborating with them".

Are Ginn and Letlapa optimistic about the future of South Africa? "The biggest problem now is greed," says Letlapa, who recently was elected President of the Pan African Congress party. "Politics has now become a meal ticket for some of the former senior figures in the freedom movement and their power games are threatening to undo everything we have achieved since independence. Also true reconciliation requires fair play. We cannot reconcile on the one hand and pursue an economic system that produces a few millionaires and millions of destitute on the other."

Ginn agrees. "We still have apartheid in the sense that the present system continues to marginalize many black and poor people. Land redistribution remains a challenge and is taking place far too slowly. But both I and Letlapa are doing our little bit, which surely means we have hope for a better future."

From an interview by Alan

To Lyndi Fourie

Forgive our deafness
Our ears are modulated
To hear voices of the dead
Counselling us from your tomb
We leap at your still commands

Hands that unleashed thunder on you
Nine summers ago
This summer tremble before your throne

In the twilight of our age
The angry soldier breezed from the bush

Tried in vain to hate
Succeeded in hurting
Today the guerilla is foraging the bush

For herbs
To heal hearts swollen with grief
Show us

How to muffle the roar of our rage
How to dam the rivers of our tears
How to share laughter and land
Land and laughter

Forgive our idiocy
Our souls are tuned
To heed prophecy
By the graveside of the prophet
Whose blood we spilt
Whose teachings we ridiculed
When he walked among us

Letlapa Mphahlele

Exploring our differences: a round table discussion

Seven Aurovilians explore the effects of cultural conditioning to see if there are new ways of experiencing our diversity.

Shankar is the headmaster of New Creation School. Suryagandhi is an executive of the Auroville Dental Service. Both were born locally. Priya, who works for *Auroville Today*, was born in Pondicherry but studied and worked for 10 years in the U.S., while Thulasi who works at Matrimandir is a Tamil from Sri Lanka. Bhavana, who originally came from the U.S. and Aurelio, who is Austrian, have worked closely with the villagers on various projects for many years. Alan, who also works for *Auroville Today*, comes from England.

Communication difficulties

Everybody is culturally-conditioned, says Doudou Diène. Does this include Aurovilians? And do Aurovilians from different cultures see things in different ways? "Definitely", says Shankar. "In fact, the first big cultural shock I got was on the first day I went to teach in Last School and these young Western kids called me by my name. I was deeply shocked. In my culture, I was taught you never call anybody older by their name, and teachers were always 'Sir'. Although the students were doing nothing wrong, I was ready to leave the job because they were showing no respect."

"Another big shock came when I was late for an appointment with a Western Aurovillian. He shouted at me, 'Shankar, you're stupid, you told me you would come at 9 and you came at 10'. I didn't understand, I was only one hour late, why was he so upset? And the way he spoke to me – a Tamil would never speak like that; it would be much more indirect. I felt this man had become my enemy, but the next week he talked to me as if nothing had happened. So I learned that his anger was just to do with that incident, it wasn't personal. But it takes time to understand this. When somebody on the Entry Group says to a Tamil Newcomer 'I don't think you've understood Sri Aurobindo and Mother,' I'm sure they think, 'This person doesn't like me.'"

But this is not just the reaction of locally-born people. Priya had a similar experience with the Entry Group. "They asked me, 'Why are you here?'. It felt like a very brutal kind of question, as if they were saying 'Why are you Indians coming here?' I immediately wanted to respond, 'I'm educated, you can't ask me this.'"

Shankar points out that he is often misunderstood by Westerners. "They don't understand all the nuances of intonation or what we mean when we shake the head or say 'seri'. 'Seri' can mean many different things, like 'maybe' and 'I want to think about it', but Westerners usually interpret it as 'yes'. In Tamil there is more space for ambiguity."

The family and relationships

Are there other differences in perception between Westerners and Tamils? What, for example, about attitudes to the family? Most Westerners do not have their parents living with them. How is this perceived by the Tamil community? "For us," says Suryagandhi, "the family is like a banyan tree held up by the new roots and there is an expectation that children will look after their parents when they grow older." Thulasi recalls being asked by a village woman why she was staying in Auroville when her parents were living in Sri Lanka. "You have to look after them", she told me. It almost made me feel guilty, as if I should go back." Priya notes, however, that some Indians consider that the Westerners must really love India if



Left to right: Alan, Thulasi, Priya, Bhavana, Aurelio and Suryagandhi. Not in the picture: Shankar

they give up even their families to come and live here.

Priya herself admits to being "very confused" concerning where she fits in. "I was brought up in Tamil Nadu but spent ten years in America. I'm neither Indian nor Western, I'm somewhere halfway, struggling with both roles. So when my mother decided to come and live in Auroville, there was this expectation that she would eat with me and everything. But this hasn't happened much because I want to retain my independence. So even if I fall sick I won't tell her, although if she is unwell I will definitely go and look after her."

Then there is the issue of family loyalties and hierarchies. Shankar and Thulasi point out that they cannot call even elder members of their family by their names as that would be considered disrespectful. And while Suryagandhi asserts she has no problem in publicly disagreeing with her brothers-in-law if the occasion demands it, she seems to be an exception. Priya remembers from her days of living in Aspiration how the eldest Tamil brother is always deferred to by other members of his family.

Thulasi recalls that from childhood she rebelled – against her culture, her nationality, her religion, against marriage. "It was only when I came to Auroville that I found it easy to follow my own process and that was because of the distance between me and my family. So I wonder how easy it is for locally-born Aurovilians to really express themselves, to live out their full life here, when they know their family is looking on from the village next door."

And relationships? In a recent workshop on cultural differences, an educated Indian said that he'd been brought up to believe that Western women are 'free', available. No doubt this is reinforced by what is seen on Western television, but is there anything within Auroville culture which might support such a perception? Thulasi recalls an incident. Recently her partner, Wim, passed away. "When I told a Tamil lady who knew Wim what had happened she said, very gently, 'Don't have a friendship with another man.' She seemed to think that the trend in Auroville was for people to move on, to always find someone else, and she didn't want me to be disloyal."

Suryagandhi confirms that there's a perception in the village that Western Aurovilians change partners frequently. "This gives Auroville a bad reputation, certainly not a spiritual one. Then there's the situation at the beach. People come from all over at weekends to look at the Western women lying on the Auroville beach. The village elders ask, 'Why do they

do this? Why can't they cover themselves up a little?'"

"When I hear this I get so angry with Tamil culture," says Priya, "because Tamil men have no problem in going to see movies which are very suggestive and where the woman is dancing semi-naked. There's a double-standard here, and it's not fair to put the blame on Westerners."

Bhavana remembers that one of the biggest differences between Westerners and local people in the early days concerned their different ambitions and values. "A lot of the Westerners who came here were glutted with the superficiality and materialism of the West, they wanted to go back to the land and voluntary simplicity, whereas the villagers were aspiring to get out of poverty and to experience a more materialistic lifestyle. To a certain extent, we were going in opposite directions and this caused numerous misunderstandings."

Disrespect for Tamil culture?

But is there a tendency in Auroville for Tamil culture to be seen not only as different but also as inferior? Priya believes there is. "What I find unacceptable is that in the schools Tamil is only the third or fourth language. It feels so insulting; it gives it almost the status of an out-caste culture." She also notes how Western Aurovilians can be inadvertently culturally-insensitive. "A dear friend of mine once frankly expressed to me how I remind her of an 'amma' whenever she sees me wearing a sari! And this is someone who has lived here for a long time." "And how is it that after so many years most Westerners and north Indians cannot speak Tamil?" adds Suryagandhi.

Do the Tamils, then, feel discriminated against? On the whole, Suryagandhi feels not. But she remembers one incident. Her newcomer probation period was fixed as two years rather than the customary one year at that time because the Entry Group members believed that, as an unmarried Tamil woman, she might get married and be taken away by her husband to live somewhere else. "This wanting to watch me for two years made me mad. I'm an independent person, I make my own decisions and I was coming for Auroville, but they weren't looking at me as an individual. They definitely wouldn't have treated a Western woman in the same way."

"One thing I've noticed, and it horrifies me," says Bhavana, "is that responses to outer physical characteristics seem to go very deep. If brown-skinned people from the village have not done their work properly or stolen, I begin to have a prejudice, to

see everybody who looks like them in the same way." "But it's exactly the same for me," says Priya. "If a Tamil comes to my house who I don't know I am immediately on my guard."

Aurelio admits to having been in love with Tamil culture for many years, "but now I am going through a sobering phase. I've been in some very difficult situations with villagers in the past year and now I realize that as a reaction I have some prejudices. It's interesting because I always thought of myself as one of those Aurovilians who have deep understanding and solidarity with the local people, but now visiting Western students are reminding me that many of the problems I see are not to do with Tamils and their culture but are problems which can occur in any cross-cultural context in the world."

"So we shouldn't oversimplify. We have all these different layers of conditioning, of which culture is only one. I think we need to remember that our relationship to the local culture is often one of employer, and the problems associated with the employer/employee dynamic – which is the same everywhere – are definitely as strong as the cultural differences. Then again, I come from a working-class background with a strong socialistic influence, and I had a lot of problems when I first came to Auroville with what I perceived as the middle-class behaviour of some Western Aurovilians. So for me the class thing can be as strong as cultural differences. In fact, I first connected with the local Tamils very much on the level of class solidarity."

Another way of seeing it

Bhavana is disturbed by simplistic explanations which reduce everything to dualities, to Western versus Tamil culture. "When Shankar was shocked by the plain-speaking, I've had exactly the same experience with French people in Auroville! So there are real differences within and between Western cultures too. And even in the villages there are all these different groupings all of which have different points of view. So I think that rather than focussing on differences between cultures, it makes more sense to look at the different levels of consciousness that exist within all cultures."

Sri Aurobindo, she explains, said the Vedic seers identified four different layers or levels of consciousness which determine how one relates to one's society. The first layer is where your consciousness is limited to yourself and mere survival. In this layer you will do what you are told, you will need incentives not to go to sleep, and your values will be obedience, loyalty and hard work. The next layer is where the consciousness has

widened a little so that communication is valued and there is awareness that if certain things are put together it will increase their value and the product can be traded. Here the 'we' widens to include the whole clan, but the motivation is still quite selfish. The next, very thin layer comprehends the whole culture and tries to work out systems and laws so that the poor are protected and the strongest do not always have their way. Finally there's the thinnest, top layer which includes the teachers, priests, intellectuals and truth-seekers, whose role is to advise, guide and inspire.

"I find this analysis very helpful because when I understand which layer an individual comes from it makes it much easier for me to understand what motivates them and, in my capacity as a social worker, to help them achieve the goals that are important for them. It's also important to realize that there's a lot of good about the level of social consciousness where there are clear laws laid down by the elders or by religion: for people who need security, laws bring great peace. Yet we also know that these laws can be stifling for those who aspire for something else. So we need to develop the subtlety of mind which sees this, which has compassion for those who need security as well as for the rebels who are going to break the conventions in order to find out who they really are."

"If Auroville was a community, like one big family," says Suryagandhi, "we could talk everything through and begin to understand our differences. But we're not yet there." "I think dialogue is very important to increase awareness," adds Aurelio, "because only through dialogue can there be a higher synthesis. At the same time, many Aurovilians seem to feel that they do not need to be concerned with issues like basic human rights and fairness because Auroville has gone beyond this, but they are wrong: we are merely suppressing issues. We need to be careful now because in the villages a situation is building up. The young people have changed, their values are derived from television now rather than the Mahabharata, they are more aggressive, and if we don't work with them on understanding our differences we will have to face cross-cultural situations similar to other places in the world."

"I think what Sri Aurobindo and Mother are calling for," concludes Bhavana, "are people who understand and have compassion for the values of all the different levels in society while having an ongoing sense of evolution. That is the new consciousness that will make us into a true community."

Alan

God is waking up in us: encountering Michael Murphy

Michael Murphy is a new member of the International Advisory Council. He has a long association with the yoga and, among other things, was co-founder of Esalen, the centre on the Californian coast which pioneered so much of the 'human potential' movement.

I'm sitting across a table from Michael Murphy, trying to work out how to frame an interview with someone who seems to have explored so many different fields and who is something of an icon for a particular generation, when Michael leans forward and lets me off the hook. "You know, what I'd really like to talk about is my relation to Sri Aurobindo, The Mother and the Ashram and how they have shaped my work. I'd be delighted if you'd publish my critical as well as my loving stance on these matters, because I deeply believe that this is how I can be the best friend to this place."

Fine, particularly as the first question I'd wanted to ask him was why, having stayed in the Ashram in 1956-7, it had taken him so long to come back. But this, it seems, was not the beginning of the story. "My relation with Sri Aurobindo began when I was 19 and at Stanford University. I wandered by mistake into a class on comparative religion run by Frederic Spiegelberg. Spiegelberg was one of the leading scholars on oriental religion (he had met both Sri Aurobindo and Ramana Maharshi), and he also had enormous presence. That day he was lecturing on the Vedic hymns. At the beginning of the lecture he intoned 'The Brahman' in his extraordinarily sonorous voice. He ended with 'Atman'. That lecture blew me away. I said to myself, 'I'm never going to be the same.'"

Michael dropped out of his course on social psychology and continued with Spiegelberg. "At the end of the course he lectured on Sri Aurobindo and *The Life Divine*. I took the book home and read it that summer. I was like Alice in Wonderland: I felt I'd fallen down a rabbit-hole into a wonderful new world. Soon after that I took a vow that I was going to give my life to the Divine."

Michael quit his pre-med course and embarked upon an 'ecstasy' of directed reading. He also engaged in intense meditation – often for up to 8 hours a day.

The Sri Aurobindo Ashram

In the mid 1950s, Michael received an unmistakable inner directive to go to India. He arrived in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram not long after Mother announced the Supramental Descent. His 16 month stay there was to be a powerful, if mixed experience.

"The Ashram was where I burned all my bridges concerning leading a 'normal' life. I loved coaching sports and I felt fantastically blissful and alive. At the same time, I had to lock part of myself away. I learned, through my involvement in a particular incident, that there was zero appreciation in the Ashram of psychodynamics and, I felt, far too great a reliance on explanations involving black magic and the occult. But when I tried to talk about this, people backed away: there was a general lack of elasticity to talk about anything that was not somehow sanctioned.

"Interestingly, in my meetings with The Mother I found her much wider and down-to-earth than many of the sadhaks. But the other big problem I had was the huge cult formation that had grown up around Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. I'd already experienced something like this in a study group at Stanford when one of the participants wanted to become a guru. But in the Ashram it was on another scale altogether and I can't help feeling that Sri Aurobindo and The Mother did not do enough to prevent it. Anyway, by the time I left I had been vaccinated against cults forever."

Esalen

So much so that when Michael and Dick Price started Esalen in 1962 on property belonging to Michael's family, one of the founding principles was 'Nobody captures the flag': no gurus. "Not that people didn't try. But we wanted an open meeting-place, something like an extension of the college system, to explore what Aldous Huxley termed 'the human potential', our various psychophysical and spiritual untapped capacities. While we didn't have any specific blueprint, we sensed a new vision of human possibility that was trying to emerge around the world."

The timing was perfect. The conventional 1950s were giving way to the exploratory, experimental 60s, and luminaries like the historian Arnold Toynbee and the philosopher Paul Tillich were announcing the birth of a new age.

"Esalen was charged with an atmosphere of

discovery and suddenly I was becoming a vehicle, downloading all this interesting stuff. It was the time when all these transformative practices came on the scene – somatics like Rolfing, interpersonal therapies like gestalt and psychosynthesis, new approaches to creativity and imagination, and countless spiritual practices from both the East and the West. And soon it morphed from just talking about these things to experiencing them."

So the legend of Esalen was born. "It was like the Gold Rush," remembers Michael, "full of outlaws and saints, madmen and great professors." All the big names – Alan Watts, Gregory Bateson, Abraham Maslow, Paul Tillich, Fritz Perls, Aldous Huxley himself – came and participated. Great courses were run, seminal books were written, the psycho-cultural map of the West was never going to be the same again.

But the 60s was also the era of excess. "I was very much the in-house critic," says Michael, "so I was seen by many Esalen fundamentalists as a bad guy. For example, I'm not a true believer in the ultimate glory of catharsis. I mean, how many catharses do you need in a lifetime?! Also, Esalen was born in the 1960s when a lot of people were breaking out of their inhibitions and it concerned me that self-expression and self-actualization were becoming more important than compassion and solidarity with others."

The lessons of Esalen

In 1967 Michael started a centre in San Francisco and began what he calls his 'parallel journey' within the Institute (although he remained Chairman of the Esalen Board of Trustees and very much connected with Esalen's programme and research projects). So what, for him, were the main learnings from Esalen?

"One of them is a very old one: that there is a limit to every modality of growth and transformation. No virtue can stand alone; it has to be complemented, balanced, by others. In this sense, Esalen has had more than enough Freud and Fritz Perls and could do with a little more Ramana Maharshi! Then, if you're going to embrace an evolutionary vision, an Aurobindonian world-view, your practice must be integral – it must involve the body, emotions and mind as well as the soul.

"I also learned that we need to hold our dogmas lightly, and that you can disagree with someone without sacrificing kindness. Esalen had its taboos, the areas we didn't want to look at, like money and organization. We got to be like a centipede where each of its thousand legs has a mind of its own. And because the great god was consensus, frequently we were paralysed, unable to make decisions. Then there was all the interpersonal stuff. We were running great courses but behind the scenes the faculty were often at each other's throats.

"The myth was that being so crazy, so unto-gether, made us creative. But the reality was that we were creative in spite of these things.

"Anyway, over the years we've learned a lot from organizational dynamics and since 2006 Esalen has had a Chief Executive Officer and a Chief Financial Officer, and we have set ourselves specific goals which we review every 6 months. This has brought great peace and harmony, but it took us over 40 years to get here!"

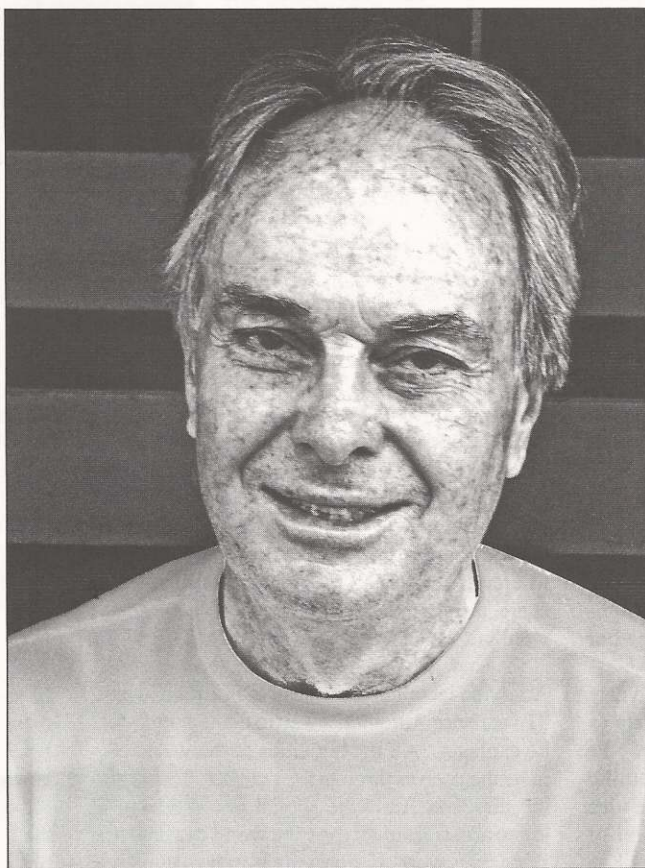
In 1971, Michael made his first visit to Russia – "basically looking for the same things we were exploring in Esalen" – and this was to be the beginning of a citizens' diplomacy adventure in which Michael's wife, Dulce, played a prominent role. Among other things, Esalen brought Boris Yeltsin over for his first visit to the U.S. in 1989.

A great adventure

In 1972, Michael's first work of fiction, *Golf in the Kingdom*, was published. This 'metaphysical comedy' features the golf pro and mystic philosopher, Shivas Irons, with whom Murphy plays a round which profoundly changes his perspective not only on golf but also on life. The book became a cult classic, selling over a million copies; it is soon to be released as a film. "I often say that I gave my family inheritance to God and God gave me back *Golf in the Kingdom*," says Michael. "The whole thing was conceived as a

thought-experiment. I'd never written a novel before, but when you really imagine something you can become a channel – 'you start taking dictation', as William Blake put it."

Michael's next book, *Jacob Atabet*, was inspired by Sri Aurobindo and is about a man who is engaged in the transformation of his body. Among his extraordinary abilities is the capacity to perceive matter on a microscopic scale, even down to the size of the atom – some-



Michael Murphy

thing known in Hindu philosophy as the *animan siddhi*.

"These books opened up a great adventure for me," says Michael, "because while they were fiction, suddenly people were telling me about the extraordinary experiences they had had, particularly while engaged in sport. They included a famous American footballer who revealed that in one game he knew every move before it happened, and a marksman who, when he was 'in the zone', would see a hand place his bullets precisely on the target. In fact, I began to see sport as an American equivalent of yoga because it was apparent from the stories I was hearing that, on the sports fields and golf courses, yogic *siddhis* were emerging."

He began collecting these stories, and today there is an archive of over 10,000 studies: "it's a kind of natural history of supernormal human functioning". The stories he heard led him to research into the latest scientific discoveries as well as traditional religions for clues about what was going on, and it culminated in his book *The Future of the Body*. "All the time I was looking for patterns, for ways of making sense of all this information, and finally I understood that all these extraordinary abilities – what the Hindus call *siddhis* and the Catholics *charisms* – can be seen as extensions of attributes that we all have, and which we have inherited from our animal ancestors. I began to see that these extraordinary experiences are like God waking up in us, progressively revealing or growing into a Greater Being that is pressing to manifest in us, and I decided to build a set of practices which would accelerate what was trying to emerge."

Coincidentally, at the same time the Ashram Archives began publishing for the first time extracts from Sri Aurobindo's *Record of Yoga*, which are a record of his rigorous yogic experimentation between 1909-1927. "When I first read it I was amazed. Here is a great contemplative who is also a radical empiricist, continually revising his ideas in the light of emerging experience. Moreover, what he was talking about then was exactly what some of us were beginning to explore."

Integral Transformative Practice

The 'some of us' included George Leonard who, along with Michael, drew up a programme for what they called Integral Transformative Practice (ITP). "The 'integral'", explains Michael, "came from our experience at Esalen

rather than from Sri Aurobindo, although Sri Aurobindo's integral evolutionary vision has been a lifelong inspiration for me." The ITP programme, which ran for two years, was a practice which sought to develop the potentials of body, mind, heart and soul. It involves, among other things, meditation, physical exercises, affirmations and transformational imaging. At the end of their two-year experiment, Leonard and Murphy wrote a book, *The Life We are Given*, as an explanation of the process and summary of what had been achieved.

Today, Michael leads an advanced group which continues to push their personal boundaries. "It's for those who are interested in pursuing a life-long practice rather than a short course. My sense is that as we evolve, what is disclosed to us is not just other planes – like the vital and mental – but rather what I call the 'larger earth'. It's a larger, freer, more energetic space which allows, among other things, a greater elasticity of movement and understanding."

Recalling his Ashram days, Michael feels that some of the sadhaks had a narrow vision of the integral yoga and its practice. "Some people were rejecting aspects of their experience, like *siddhis*, as distractions, whereas I was seeing them as the budding limbs of our future nature which needed to be cultivated. I also think there's a danger that an over-reliance on the psychic being and surrender to the Divine, as it is practised in the Ashram, can devolve into passivity. I'm a great believer in the adage that God helps those who help themselves."

But his critique goes deeper still. "My sense is that the yoga crystallised when Sri Aurobindo the great adventurer became Sri Aurobindo the community-builder, because to build community you need to simplify, to codify. This can be seen in the contrast between the *Record* and the *Letters on Yoga*. The result, I believe, is that in countless ways the practice got stuck and there is a need to open it up again through drawing upon some of the most important discoveries which have been made in recent years. For example, there is this great psychology of individuation in the West which has rarely been incorporated into the Aurobindonian canon."

Perspectives on Auroville

And Auroville? What are his perceptions of the place from his first brief visit here? "From the bottom up, this place looks great. You have first-rate schools and people who are doing world-class work, like the man who is developing the mud brick technology. However, from the top down this place is in certain ways awesomely dysfunctional. It's Hamlet all over again – nobody can make a decision. I think you need something like a Centre for Organizational Yoga where you can draw upon what has been learned elsewhere. This could include skills like not demonizing one another along with the art of decision-making and the art of feedback in relation to executive leadership. Because somebody has to lead, give direction. General Systems Theory teaches us that if any living system does not contain what is termed a 'decider', it dies!

"Unlike Esalen, you also have profound cultural differences here. These can be a source of strength, but they can also lead to conflict, which is why you may consider bringing in people skilled in ethnotherapy." [Ethnotherapy is an approach which addresses race, ethnicity, cultural values etc. as essential aspects of an individual's or group's psychology.]

"As for the yoga, my sense is that as it is practised here it can devolve too quickly into a sweet *karma yoga*. This is wonderful, but it is not the integral yoga, it's not the adventure I love in the *Record of Yoga*. I have not yet met anybody here who resembles some of the people in my advanced practice group in the U.S., so perhaps you could also set up some kind of centre here of advanced transformative work for those who want to amp up their practice.

"Having said that, you have the right vision, you have great people, you've got the material. So I'd say, just do it, just go for it!"

Alan

(*The Life We are Given* has just been published in India by Stonehill Press.)

Snapshots of a photographer

The photography exhibition 'Infinite' by Sebastian Cortès was held in Kala Kendra in February – March.

All the photographs show the wide open space where sea and sky meet; the sea is at rest, the sky has only remnants of turbulent cloud formations. The moment is October 26, 2005, a day after Hurricane Wilma had struck the U.S. mainland with ferocious intensity. Sebastian Cortès, in his own words, just happened to be present at the right place and right time, on the 24th floor of a building in Miami. Instead of photographing people in distress or collapsed buildings, his eye was drawn to the sea and sky, to its vastness, its silence, its immensity, and that indefinable sense of the infinite.

This is not an exhibition you can do in a hurry. It requires time, a quiet inner opening to experience what the photographer wished to communicate: the pervading sense of peace after the great storm. An installation elsewhere in the exhibition helps to enhance that experience. In a darkened room, a continuous play of images of sea and sky slowly overlap while the sound of waves and some ethereal music feature in the background.

Sebastian Cortès, an American national from a mixed Peruvian-Italian background, came to Auroville three years ago after having lived 'a life' in Italy – my soul country, he says – and another one in the USA. He took up photography at New York University film school, then moved to Italy where he worked as a fashion and lifestyle photographer and ran an advertising agency together with his wife Marcella.

Auroville came into the picture six years ago, after Marcella had returned from a trip to India. "She had spent a few weeks in Auroville and was enthusiastic. There was something magnetic the way she talked about it. The idea to get involved with the developing vision of Auroville attracted us enormously, as well as the philosophy behind it, the correlation of Western and Eastern thought. Lastly there was the magic of India itself. When we finally joined Auroville we realised that it was necessary to shift our ideas from pursuing high ideals to joining a laboratory – The Mother used that

word explicitly when talking about Auroville – in the sense of a place where things can very much go wrong. That helped us to deal with certain issues which did not work out," he says.

What was most important for them in their Newcomer period was to get time to search for something new, to reflect on the differences between life here and before. "The atmosphere of Auroville allows for a certain expansive investigation where you can search deeply with a strong concentration. That is one of the great gifts of Auroville for which Aurovilians should be immensely grateful: the joy of being allowed to experiment on oneself. All Newcomers should be given the time to reassess themselves, they should not be expected to continue their lives at the same speed they were used to before they joined. Since I started living in Auroville, I allow myself the joy of a certain contemplative existence, and there has been a deepening of awareness as a result. For me, just sitting on the roof and watching the trees was an exercise in 'freeing up' because thoughts came in a different way. Auroville awakened me to a certain silence – a gift which I wanted to share through these photos. Ten years ago, I wouldn't have been able to take them."

Asked what he wishes to bring to the Auroville laboratory, the answer is instantaneous. "To enhance Auroville's way of dialoguing." And he explains, "All the big cities of the world promote themselves through their culture. This is also the direction Auroville should go. We have to invite artists from all over the world to come and share their work. If Auroville is to be a universal township, then it is necessary that the community open itself to the artistic truth of many outsiders and, through that medium, experience the truth as they see it. All good art invites a response; the best allows one to experience the spiritual dimension of art. In return, these artists would experience



Sebastian at the Infinite exhibition in Gallery Square Circle

Auroville's 'truth'. It must become an attraction for the artistic world to have an artistic dialogue with Auroville. Ideally, this should happen in a proper exhibition space – a gallery or a museum – which we do not have yet. In the meantime we have to enhance what is available with professional exhibition facilities so that professionals can be invited to present their work. For the Infinite exhibition a small step was made, as we were able to install professional lighting equipment and add wall space to the inner circle of Kala Kendra."

Sebastian's projects for the immediate future include making a series of portraits of Aurovilians for Auroville's 40th birth anniversary. "I would like to show through these portraits the inner value of people, and at the same time highlight through the individuals what Auroville is all about: people." This project would be similar to that of the German photographer August Sander who, in the 1910-20s, documented German society by photographing over 1,000 citizens to get a sense of what his country was at the time.

"My project is on those lines," says Sebastian. "But I want to highlight the person's

'gaze,' the rapport each one has with him or herself, to see if common traits can be identified, some common vibration. The pictures will then be displayed in a location where all can go and, ideally, get a sense of the Auroville community by identifying the inner intent of the individuals." He acknowledges that it is a risky endeavour. "I am not talking about making a series of mug-shots. I would rather try to catch that 'inner something'; but all will depend on the people, as portraits are usually deeply honest and not necessarily flattering. To what extent would the Aurovilians be willing to open up and 'share' themselves? At a later stage, such a series of portraits could be published in a book which could be a part of what Auroville has to offer the world in its research on human development."

Photography, says Sebastian, can communicate on many levels. "I would be happy if someone would remember a photo of mine as having evoked something on a higher or more inner level." The Infinite exhibition was an attempt towards that.

In conversation with Caryl

YOUTH

Adventura: Auroville's new adventurers

Sunday afternoons at Sri Ma is generally a quiet time. But today, there is much happening on the beach. A game of tag is in progress. The sound of breakers crashing upon the shore barely drowns the squeals of excitement from the forty odd Auroville Adventurers. A toddler, absentmindedly playing with the sand, observes the game with her father by her side. They are all part of the new 'Adventura: Auroville Adventure Action', a club which came into existence on Auroville's birthday this year.

"The idea had been brewing for over twenty years," says Frederick who is the driving force behind this group. "In January, thirty five of these youngsters completed the sailing course conducted by the Tamil Nadu Sailing Association in Chennai; we felt very ready to create a society of adventurers."

The original idea, explains Fred, was initiated by the late J.R.D. Tata, Chairman of Auroville's first International Advisory Council. "Tata was intrigued by Auroville. Not in any spiritual sense, but because here was this old lady who called people from all over the world to come and live together, and they did! He was a very innovative and free spirit. He kept saying, 'Never lose the sense of adventure', and gave his full support and encouragement to anyone who embarked on the voyage of adventure," says Fred.



The Adventurers on the beach

"In Auroville, he wanted to support and encourage the spirit of Adventure, and he was going to establish the 'J.R.D. Tata Fellowship of Adventure'. Youngsters who demonstrated the finest qualities of Adventure would be recognized and awarded a prize. But Tata's long life ended before he could make this happen. In memory of this great man we have incorpo-

rated a line of his into our mission statement. It now reads, 'to act according to the ideals of sportsmanship, promote all values and actions of sports, games, studies, and live in harmony with nature and fellow beings' and we added his words 'to experience the thrill and sense of self-fulfilment obtained from living a little dangerously'.

The adventurers have come up with a list of activities that they would like to pursue as part of their activities. Bird watching, cycling, water sports, nature walks, rock climbing, horse riding, 'Auroville cleanup', nature camps, roller skating, hockey, singing, dancing... the list is endless. But for Fred, Adventura does not stop with physical adventure. "It will include the adventure of the mind, ideas, experiments, research, innovation, social and political change, and taking care of the environment. It is also the adventure of creation through art and literature. Ultimately of course it is about the adventure of the spirit that expresses man's highest aspiration to take part consciously in a progressive evolution. The Mother says it beautifully: 'the goal is certain victory, but the course is unknown'."

Membership of this group is not limited to children and youngsters of Auroville. Fred explains. "We invite anyone to be a member or to associate as a friend or as sponsor to help us build connections on a national or international level."

He expresses the hope that the group will soon become legally registered. "We have initiated it to become a chapter under the larger umbrella of Sri Aurobindo's Action," he says, "so that old barriers can be broken down and we can join forces together with people from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram."

Priya Sundaravalli

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