

Auroville Today

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PHOTO COURTESY PITCHANDIKULAM



Nadukuppam School's Environmental Education Centre is set in an organic orchard. Solar panels power its wastewater recycling plant which provides clean water to irrigate the garden.

Auroville publications often mention its outreach activities in the neighbouring villages and the surrounding region. However, they rarely assess the effectiveness of our programmes for village development, women's empowerment and ecosystem regeneration.

How sustainable are such programmes? Do they remain fully dependent upon Auroville for their continued existence or have they acquired their own impetus?

And what are the changes wrought by these programmes? Are they skin-deep or more permanent?

In this issue, we try to find out.

The work of Auroville in Nadukuppam

Aurovilians have been working 25 miles away in Nadukuppam High School and village. Why? What has been achieved?

“We became involved with Nadukuppam some years ago,” explains Lourdes, who coordinates the Pitchandikulam education programmes in the area. “We had been looking for an opportunity to try out in rural Tamil Nadu what we have been doing in Auroville regarding environmental awareness, new approaches to education and alternative technology. The main reason we decided to work here was because we had the strong support of the local people. Without this, we could not have succeeded.”

The school

And succeeded they have. “Six years ago Nadukuppam High School had no water, no toilets, no shade. It was hot and dusty everywhere,” says Mr.V.M.Shankar, the government teacher who teaches maths at the school. “We had two classrooms, three teachers for 550 students and the worst academic record in the whole of Tamil Nadu. Now we have water and toilets. It is so green and clean it's a pleasure to come here every day. There are more classrooms, teachers, we're learning new ways of teaching and our pass rate at Tenth Standard has improved dramatically. In fact, we've

become a model of what can be achieved with the support of local villagers, the Education Department and the project team.”

The environmental programme has been running five years now. All students, except those in the 10th Standard, receive weekly environmental classes where they learn about the local flora and fauna and the basic principles of ecology. 2,500 trees have been planted on the campus, there is a vegetable garden and medicinal garden with explanatory texts, as well as a recycling plant which organically cleans grey water from the toilets. The credit for this transformation goes to the students and teachers, along with the Pitchandikulam coordinators and the many other Aurovilians who have given their energy and inspiration to this project.

“The changes in the external environment are evident,” says Lourdes, “but the most important change is in their thinking. Now they are very clear about what ecology is, and what they should and should not do regarding the environment.”

Mr. Kannappan, presently Joint-Director of SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abiyan, 'Education for All') and former Chief Education Officer Villupuram district, became interested in what was happening in the school. He sanctioned new classrooms and

additional teachers. Later the State Government donated computers, so now the students have computer lessons. Teachers, students and women's group members are mapping the local area. A GIS (Geographic Information Systems) team was formed to get data about the village, such as water levels, population statistics, crop patterns, local healers etc. Students, farmers, villagers and women's groups will use this information for their development. At the same time, an educational loans programme and nutrition programme for poorer students has been instituted.

The students have been remarkable. “I've observed all the children over the last six years and I see how they have changed. When we first came here, many had no footwear and they were unhealthy. Now you can feel their presence – their eyes are bright and they have the confidence to say what they think.”

Evidence of this is provided by the neighbourhood 'Children's Parliament'. This concept, which originated in Kerala 15 years ago, is intended to make children aware of their rights. Every Friday in a small hut in Nadukuppam village the young 'ministers', who are elected by their peers, meet to discuss any problems brought to them. The Education Minister, for example, may have received a com-

plaint from another child about a teacher. The minister will go to the accused party and ask them to change. If they refuse, the minister will draw up a petition or letter of complaint and, with the support of the panchayat president, send it to a higher authority. “When the higher authorities receive the children's letters they immediately take action,” says Lourdes.

On their own initiative, this Children's Parliament also repaired a derelict hut for an old man who had no one to take care of him, contributing their own money as part of a fundraising initiative. “This shows their willingness to take care of their elders,” says Lourdes. Children in other neighbourhoods plan to start their own Children's Parliaments.

A small group of bright young ministers cluster round. What do they want to be? The answers tumble out. A computer engineer, a doctor, an Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer, a maths teacher... Does nobody want to teach environmental studies or be an ecologist? Lourdes explains: “They are the first in their families to have an education and for first-generation learners the economic motive – getting a high-status, well-paying job – is paramount.”

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Alan in discussion with young ministers of the Children's Parliament



A woman learns the Tamil alphabet in the literacy programmes



A gathering of the women's Self-Help Groups

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The work of Auroville in Nadukuppam

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Lourdes is very satisfied with the progress of the school. "However, this was just the beginning. To provide a model of integral environmental education we needed to look beyond the 550 students of Nadukuppam High School."



Somu Gounder, Nadukuppam's traditional head man and President of the Parents-Teachers Association

The first step was to send environmental teachers into other schools: at present, the outreach environmental programme takes in 21 schools in the bioregion. The next step was to work in the local villages.

Women's Groups

"We'd noticed in the school," says Lourdes, "that the girls were always the first to get involved in new projects. So it was logical to start in the village with the women." So far, 24 self-help women's groups have been set up in four local villages. There is also a Federation of women's groups, coordinated by Balamurugan and Parvathy. Each group sends two representatives to the Federation. Indrani, the Federation President, explains, "The self-help groups are a means of saving and providing loans. The Federation petitions the higher authorities when there is a problem. At present, for example, we are petitioning the Deputy Superintendent of Police to stop the alcohol supply in the village. For the future, we would like to plant more trees around the village and help the older people to get pensions. And we need to improve women's economic status by providing training and opportunities to start their own businesses."

"In the self-help group we get various trainings," says Jayalakshmi, the Federation treasurer. "We receive AIDS-awareness and gender-awareness classes. We've just begun a literacy project as half the women in these groups cannot read or write. But the main thing I've gained is confidence. Before, I was almost afraid to leave my house. I

would never have dreamed of visiting the police station or a bank, only the men did this. But now we women go to all these places; we even met the Collector."

Does she get support from her husband? Jayalakshmi pauses. "In the beginning, no. But when I received a loan from the group, he understood the economic benefit and he changed. Now he fully supports what I am doing."

Moving from the school to the village brought a whole new set of challenges. "Suddenly," said Lourdes, "we were having to deal with caste and power issues, as well as traditional village psychology. We find, for example, that when we bring something new to a village, 40% of the people immediately give support, 30% will sit on the fence and 30% will oppose it, mainly because they are afraid of losing power and influence. In our project, the 30% who were neutral joined us within one year, while the 30% who oppose us do not try to block us as their children and their wives are benefiting."

"The main thing we learned, however, was not to allow anybody to feel excluded. While the people who welcomed us to the village were higher caste, we do not neglect the lower castes and we have started women's groups in their areas. We have also begun groups for the men, as they were asking why only their wives were benefiting."

Farmers' Associations

The men's groups are called Farmers' Associations. These were initiated by Balamurugan, the project's community organizer. 150 men have joined, Madhavan among them. "Auroville gives trainings about new types of cultivation, including a system of rice intensification which uses less water and gives a better yield. Many of us switched to this. They also taught us about organic farming. I've been fully organic for two years."

Why did he change? "When you use chemicals, the soil becomes polluted. Good soil is a great benefit for the future." And how many other local farmers have gone organic? "About 20% so far, but slowly they are changing because they see how well I am doing."

"Actually the local Collector was so impressed by what's happening here he's announced this is a model village for paddy cultivation and organic agriculture," explains the farmers' education extension man. "Now villagers come from far and wide to see what is happening in these fields."

A few years ago, additional land was bought next to Nadukuppam High School. Here Kanniyappan and his team have established organic farming demonstration plots and an area of

Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest. "We can talk about these things, but the farmers need to see them with their own eyes," says Lourdes. The new land also hosts two enterprises that may point the way to future prosperity for the region: a spirulina project run by a women's self-help group and a compressed earth block (CEB) production unit.

The CEB programme is led by Padmanabhan and Kanniyappan. "CEBs are new to this area," says Lourdes. "The villagers were unsure about them at first, so we took them to Auroville and we showed them many compressed earth buildings. When they requested a new community hall, they agreed it should be constructed using CEBs. Actually this magnificent new hall, which has generated much interest among the higher authorities and in other villages, is a model of collaboration. To construct it, we first had to create the Nadukuppam Village Development Council. Auroville's Centre for Scientific Research and Building Centre are providing the expertise while the funding was provided by the government Block



Lourdes

Development Office, a local MP's fund, Pitchandikulam and the villagers themselves."

"I'm very proud that we have such a good school and village hall and I'm happy that so many changes are happening in this village," says Mr. Somu Gounder, the traditional head man. He is also President of the Parent-Teachers Association and a main source of support for the project in the village. What changes has he noticed over the past six years? "There's so much. I see it in the cleanliness of the houses, in the new community hall, in the greenery in the streets."

He was one of the first villagers to welcome the Aurovilians to Nadukuppam. He also donated three acres of his own land to the school. Why did he do that? "We old people didn't



An environmental education class at Nadukuppam High School

go to school. I didn't want our children to suffer in the same way."

Auroville's success in developing this village has led to the government asking it to be a Nodal Agency in the area. "This means that if they want to implement any new schemes in education or social welfare they will do it through us," explains Lourdes. What new projects would he like to see? "I'd like to see a Knowledge Centre in the village open to everybody. There would be GPS so farmers, for example, could find the best place to site their new borewell and internet would allow children to do distance learning."

So has it all been an unmitigated success? Lourdes pauses. "We have had many successes and they could not have been achieved without the vision of Pitchandikulam and its dedication to integrated, ecologically-sound village development. I could also feel the Mother's Force working behind the entire project. At the same time, we've had our failures, but these have helped us learn a lot. This includes the need to articulate our vision and incorporate the villagers' own ideas from the very beginning; to have clear-cut village management systems where everybody knows their roles and responsibilities; and to do the social mobilisation part before we begin the programmes—we did it the other way round, which makes it take much longer."

Sustainable?

But how sustainable is all this? What would happen if the Aurovilians withdrew? "This project is still fragile," admits

Lourdes. "Our funding is running out and, at any time, the senior government officials who have so much supported us can be replaced by less sympathetic ones. At the same time, it was never our intention to be here for ever."

Lourdes is confident that changes initiated in the High School won't be reversed as the school has such a high profile now. "As to the village activities, we should strengthen the existing groups—the women's groups, men's groups, the village Development Council and the Children's Parliament—so that they can monitor and run the existing programmes. Meanwhile the government could provide financial support. That way our effort is reduced and we would have more of a back-up role. This is how it should be. We are giving the villagers the tools to make their own decisions."

Lourdes admits his real ambition is to do the same for the villages around Auroville. "But Nadukuppam has been a marvellous experience. For now I know that Auroville has the ability and knowledge to transform the whole school system, and much more."

Alan



Young members of the eco-club planting a vegetable garden in their school grounds.

WEATHER

Cyclone Nisha creates havoc in Auroville

Tropical storm Nisha, which struck the coast near Auroville on November 27th ravaged the region. Hundreds of trees were uprooted and the electricity supply all over Auroville was disrupted for up to seven days due to broken electricity poles and snapped cables. Very heavy rains, accompanying the sometimes gale-force winds, transformed roads into streams and filled up ponds and lakes. Parts of nearby Pondicherry were also heavily flooded. Irumbai tank and Ousteri lake reached their maximum level for the first time since years.



Left: A broken electricity pole serves as a temporary clothes-line for the repair crew. Top: the tank at Kuilapalayam, full for the first time in years. Right: water flowing over a checkdam in a canyon near Quiet.



Pioneering a forest sanctuary

Tree-planting in Auroville is not over. One of the last barren pockets is Aranya Forest, a plateau gouged with canyons and ravines located outside the Auroville township area.

Aranalaya (which means 'sanctuary' in Sanskrit) or Aranya (forest) as it is better known, lies to the north east of Ousteri, one of the biggest lakes in the area, approximately 12 kilometres northwest of Pondicherry city. It is adjacent to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram's Lake Estate Farm of the and to Merveille, an afforestation project of the Ashram. Comprising about 100 acres, which partly include *poramboke* or public land, Aranya was a waste land for decades. An exception was a small sacred grove dedicated to the deities Muneeswaran and Veerappan where miniscule patches of the once widespread Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest (TDEF) survived.

Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada, over 36,000 indigenous pioneer trees were planted on about 100 acres of plateau over three years. Efforts were also made to raise the water table, prevent soil erosion, and involve the local stake-holders. Aranya became the epicentre for rain-fed reforestation programmes using indigenous species in this area.

The main player in this immense work is Saravanan. A native of Valayampatti village near Thiruvannamalai, he took an interest in afforestation and greenwork from an early age. His role model was his uncle who started the 'Save the Eastern Ghats' organisation. "I used to walk the forest areas around my village. In 1987, I participated in a

The work and results

Seeds were collected from sacred groves, nearby forests, hill ranges such as the Javadis, and even Point Calimere. Saravanan worked in close coordination with the local villagers and organised many workshops to sensitize the village elders and youth. It was this work, he believes, that has helped him succeed in protecting the land, and in being able to keep out trespassers, and wandering cattle. "Once this land was a haven for poachers and freely-grazing cattle," explains Saravanan, "but now both these activities have completely stopped."

With the help of bunds, rainwater conservation has been achieved and today the ground water table has risen



The ravaged terrain of Aranya

India's genetic resources. Local communities have been declared the primary stakeholders of biodiversity in their area, and their permission is now required for seed and plant collection. "I have informed the local panchayat of what I am doing in Aranya, where and how I collect seeds and how many kinds of plants I am planting," says Saravanan. "And they appreciate it."

Teaching children is another essential part of the work at Aranya. "Each year, we hold two or three camps with 40-50 children at a time," says Saravanan. "The children come from the government schools in nearby villages, from Pondicherry schools and even from Chennai. The children can do many things at Aranya - explore the land, help me plant trees, remove the invasive Australian wattle which is very harmful to the creatures in this environment, do bunding work, create fire-belts before the summer, and even join in educating the public about environmental issues."

Recently a cycle rally was organized by Saravanan with the help of students to raise awareness about the local environment.

"All these activities help the youngsters to appreciate nature and its conservation, and in the process learn to become future leaders and caretakers

of the environment. In fact some of the youth that have been through this programme are now involved with greenwork."

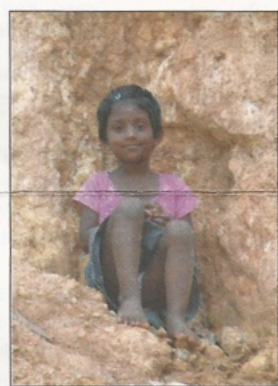
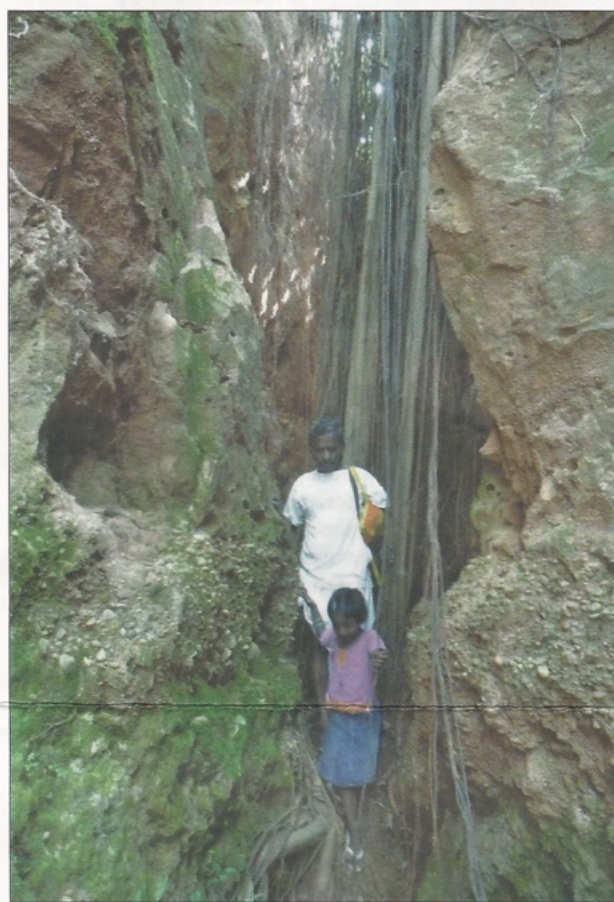
The future of Aranya

Saravanan's vision is to make the entire area a nature reserve. It's a long-term dream he says, but not an impossible one. "If we could include the 65 acres of Merveille, and the Auroville communities Aranya, Sadhana Forest, Hermitage and Aurobrindavan, then we would meet the minimum area criteria," he explains. "The Tamil Nadu government would have to pass a special act to make this happen." This, he says, would go well together with the movement to declare the entire Ousteri Lake area a protected zone. "The lake attracts thousands of migratory waterbirds, but it is increasingly polluted," he says. "I've filed a court case in my name to fight it."

In the meantime, what is of some immediate concern is to complete Aranya's unfinished buildings - a half-completed training centre, which would also offer accommodation to visiting environmentalists and researchers, plus a modest home for the family that now lives in a simple keet structure. Both projects await funds.

Not too far from their hut is a forest shrine. Standing under the shade of a palmyrah and a neem are the figures of Ganesh along with a Mother goddess dotted with turmeric and vermilion. "They were here before I came," says Saravanan. "Every now and then, the local people come to offer their prayers here." He has added his own touch of the sacred - a petrified log of an ancient *Dipterocarpus*. Their influence, perhaps, once again permeates the area.

Priya Sundaravalli



Images from a children's excursion in Aranya. Clockwise from left: Saravanan with his daughter Narchelvi; exploring the canyon; wading in the mud in Aranya's man-made pond; a niche in the canyon wall can provide good perch.

The plateau of Aranya is flanked by extensive ravines both to the north and south, gouged by the force of seasonal rivulets that empty into Ousteri lake. There is an abundance of stream-tumbled pebbles strewn across the land. Veins of pale clay rich in limestone thread the canyon walls. Studding the sandstone facade, skeletal remains of prehistoric sea creatures, and the moulds and petrified remnants of trees, such as the *Dipterocarpus*, a unique inhabitant of the Tropical Rainforest Ecosystem with winged seeds. Today the *Dipterocarpus* exist only along a narrow belt of the lowland rainforests of Malaysia, Borneo, and Sumatra.

An environmental disaster zone

In 1964, the Aranya lands were acquired with the aim of establishing Auroville in that area. It was later decided to shift the centre of the township to its present site 13 kilometres away. The Aranya lands were left as they were - severely degraded, and with virtually no vegetative cover. Designated 'waste lands' by government agencies, the desiccated plateau with its ravines remained ignored by everyone.

It was not until 1988 that one acre of this land was planted by some Auroville youth. But it would take another six years before a comprehensive plan was drawn up to restore the entire coastal Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest in the Auroville biosphere region. Aranya was one of the beneficiaries. With funding from the International Development

100 day Western Ghats march from Kanyakumari to Goa on the hill track. I was the only youth who completed the trek along with other eminent environmentalists. Afterwards I attended seminars and training camps to learn about afforestation," he says.

He later started an awareness campaign to save the scrub jungle, cycling 300 kilometres from Pondicherry to Salem, passing Auroville on the way. It was his first contact with Auroville. He decided to join in 1984, and in 1995, when Aranya needed a caretaker, Saravanan moved there. It was a rather scary place in the early days. Unfenced, and on the border of Pondicherry, the area was a hangout for violent criminals and on one occasion Saravanan even found a decapitated body. "It didn't really bother me," he says matter-of-factly. He started planting forest trees, and was told by the villagers that he was making a big mistake. "I was only planting for birds and other animals; and no fruit trees for humans".

Vatchala, his wife, joined him in the year 2003. Doesn't living so far away from Auroville without neighbours bother her? "In the beginning it wasn't easy to live so isolated here where the nearest human habitation is so far away," she says. "But now I have got used to it, and I appreciate the beauty and contrast of the two worlds I move in!" Every day Vatchala commutes 15 kilometres to Auroville to do translation and other work and bring their 4-year old daughter Narchelvi to the Auroville Kindergarten.

considerably. Soil erosion has been controlled by diverting the water runoff to ponds and reservoirs within Aranya. Saravanan has also raised 100,000 TDEF and indigenous species seedlings and supplied them to Forest Department of the Government of Puducherry.

Aranya's TDEF ecosystem is now a decade old - according to Saravanan, too short a time span to achieve climax status. "But the initial signs are very encouraging," he says. "The plateau is getting covered with more vegetation, a lot of indigenous plants are coming back, probably because the birds are returning, and there is evidence that many animals are re-colonizing." Recently Saravanan saw evidence of a porcupine. "I find many quills; and this is just the beginning".

Asked if he is keeping records of the afforestation work, Saravanan smiles wryly. "One of the weaknesses of Auroville's greenwork is the lack of record keeping. There are almost 45 forest communities in Auroville doing very good greenwork, but less than a handful keep records," he says. Is it particularly difficult? "No. One doesn't have to be a scientist; after a little training and one can do it oneself." Saravanan tries to be meticulous about documenting the work he does at Aranya. "When officials come, they always ask, 'where are your reports?' 'where are your publications?' And it is very helpful to be able to show these things."

Record-keeping has become particularly important now that the collection of seeds has become subject to the Indian Biodiversity Act 2002. The Act wants to prevent the exploitation of

Life in the canyon



SKETCH BY ERIC PITCHANDIKULAM

The canyons harbour wildlife of their own, some of which is in danger of extinction. Two pairs of Eagle Owl (*Bubo bubo bengalensis*) nest here and a wide variety of other creatures find sanctuary at Aranya. In some of the more inaccessible pockets, the plant life offers a breathtaking spectacle - ferns and moss in the moist cool depths; old stunted banyan trees like bonsai creations clinging to the rock face that is sometimes festooned with varied species of endemic climbers. Amongst them is the rare *Derris ovalifolia* - a species once thought extinct, but now about 350 mature individuals survive throughout a fragmented range, the bulk of which are in Aranya. The canyon walls are dotted with prehistoric worm holes, evidence of ancient invertebrate life. Now soil invertebrates inhabit the tunnels which remain moist even in the hottest months of summer. A variety of predatory arthropods feed on them and on the innumerable termites and orthopterans (grasshoppers and crickets). The most spectacular of these are the 8-inch long large black scorpions (*Heterometrus swammerdami*) and 10-inch long banded Tiger centipedes (*Scolopendra morsitans*), which are in turn preyed upon by the Eagle Owl.

The relevance of the work of Palmyra

For the last 18 years, *Palmyra* has been working in various places in the 800 square kilometre region surrounding Auroville. How successful has the work been and will it be sustained?

Jürgen, who (who together with Sabine and Associates) runs *Palmyra*, ponders the question. His office at Aurobrindavan is full of maps and books, many about water conservation, sustainable agriculture and microfinance, areas in which *Palmyra* has been particularly active. The atmosphere is quieter than usual as certain projects have been completed while new ones have not yet materialised. "We once had ten times the staff we have now," says Jürgen. "Since *Palmyra*'s beginning in 1990, we have run projects in more than 100 villages in this area. The projects ranged from 7 lakh to 10 crore rupees. Six projects are still ongoing; and with one exception, all the others have been successfully completed. We are now reflecting on our future course of action."

Water conservation

What exactly he means by 'successfully completed' becomes clear when he explains the unique way his latest projects manifested. "Our main work has been the rehabilitation and restoration of large water catchment-tanks (*erys*) and the cleaning up of their supply channels as well as building check dams and other facilities which harvest water. We work primarily in agricultural areas, where the amount of water in the tanks has a direct bearing on the farmers' income. So they are very interested."

In one of its projects, *Palmyra* contributed 70% and asked for 30% participation from the landholders. "We also asked them to create a water users Association. The money collected was deposited into a joint account, from which money could only be withdrawn with two signatures, one from us and one from the water association."

The approach proved to be successful. The Water Users Association was put in charge of negotiations with contractors and with fellow villagers who had encroached upon the supply channels. "They did a remarkable job,"

says Jürgen. "The encroachers were made to realise it was for the common good that they should move. The following monsoon showed the results. When farmers from the neighbouring villages saw the success of the project, they were motivated to do the same."

Meanwhile, in an open and participatory decision-making process, the Water Users Association evolved water-use strategies to ensure that all farmers had equal access to water. The project earned high marks from the India-Canada Environment Facility, the project's funding agency. "Regarding sustainability, we can be certain that the Water Users Association will now ensure that the supply channels and tanks will be well-maintained," says Jürgen.

The success of the outreach projects is of direct importance to Auroville as a large part of the region serves as Auroville's water catchment area.

This and other *Palmyra* projects, he says, have resulted in a big change in the attitude of the farmers. The tanks, some of which have been in existence since the 12th century, had always been maintained by the villages. During the time of the British, a stifling bureaucracy was introduced. The village panchayat had to seek permission to do repairs from the Public Works Department of the district, which meant a lot of travel, bureaucracy and a lot of money being siphoned off. The quality of the work was therefore bad.

When the British left, the system continued. The farmers, understandably, were not willing to put their own money into such a system and the tanks and supply channels silted up. "But in our project they had control. They saw that every paisa they invested came back many times, and that

there was absolutely no corruption," says Jürgen. "The farmers, through their own Water Users Association, are now taking full responsibility for the maintenance of the project. They are enjoying an increase of income as they have more water to grow their crops. At the same time, they have learned about the necessity and benefits of water conservation."

Other activities

More or less as a spin-off, *Palmyra* has also been active in introducing water-saving systems in agriculture. It promotes the SRI (System of Rice Intensification) type of paddy cultivation which requires 50% less water, less seed and gives up to 30% more yield. It also encourages farmers to use sprinkler systems for peanuts and flower cultivation and install underground pipe systems to reduce evaporation. "More and more farmers are willing to take this up," says Jürgen. "The revolution takes place by itself, they just see what their neighbour is doing and follow suit."

Related work is also carried out on improving the socio-economic standard of women, youth and landless persons by training them to master various skills so that their earning capacity increases. An example is the

Palmyra Women Self Help Group's Federation which provides training to 75 self-help groups in the Vanur and Marakanam area. "We concentrate on introducing micro-finance systems, creating educational infrastructure, providing health care and sanitation and starting youth sports clubs. These activities are now well-established. Even if *Palmyra* stopped functioning tomorrow, these activities would continue," says Jürgen.

The concept of Auroville's Green Belt should change and include areas that can secure the water resources for the future township.

Importance for Auroville

"When you asked the question about how successful these projects have been, you meant 'successful for the villages'. But the success of these projects also has a direct bearing on Auroville itself. I believe that this is less realised," says Jürgen.

"A large part of the bioregion serves in effect as Auroville's water catchment area, as monsoon rains filter into the groundwater which is later pumped up in Auroville and

elsewhere. Ideally, Auroville should be able to influence what happens in these areas. We do not need to own the lands, but we need to work hand-in-hand with district officials and village panchayats to ensure that there will be sufficient water for everybody in future. But we'll have to think far beyond Auroville's present Master Plan, particularly as we may never own about 40% of the planned Green Belt, the area from Edaiyanchavady village up to Kottakarai which includes three villages and a huge lake. Added to this is the fact that every drop of water harvested counters the possible effect of salination of our aquifers. This work needs not only to be better appreciated but in fact seen as a priority-activity in our city of the future.

"The city area should be secured as planned, but the concept of Auroville's Green Belt should change and include areas that can secure the water resources for the future township." Jürgen believes that this type of planning is quite feasible. "The Government of India is actively looking at solutions where urban and rural developments are merging. Auroville could be a prototype and I believe we can raise substantial funds to make this a reality."

In conversation with Carel

"Radical change in the villages will take many years"

Anbu and Moris are members of Village Action. For over twenty years their team has worked to effect change in the neighbouring villages. How successful have they been?

Auroville Today: What kind of change is Village Action trying to support in the villages?

Anbu: Firstly, particularly in the neighbouring villages, we are trying to better the understanding of Auroville. Secondly, we want to promote equality and justice for all. So we're talking about women's empowerment, children's rights, caste issues etc.

Take women. All women are, to some degree, marginalised in our society, whatever their caste. But single women like widows and those who have been deserted particularly suffer. For example, they are discriminated against during functions and rituals. Bereaved men don't have the same problem — there is not even a word in Tamil for 'widower'.

In terms of promoting equality and justice, what successes has Village Action had?

Anbu: In 1995 we began forming Women's Groups; each group has a



Anbu and Moris

maximum of 20 members and there are now 200 of them. The members can get loans through a revolving fund. We also help them understand issues of social inequality and what they can do to remedy them.

Through their participation in the groups, women have gained in confidence. There are now more women leaders and more women understand the problems of the marginalised. We tell the Women's Groups to give preference to widows, to include them in all club functions and let them become leaders. The same for caste discrimination. There

are many activities to bring better understanding between different caste groups.

For example, we have an exchange programme where two groups, made up of different castes, spend the day together. They spend the whole day together, eating together and learning from each other. This is a unique programme initiated by senior Women's Groups. No other NGO is doing this work.

Moris: We've worked with men for many years, organizing them into youth clubs. But the term 'youth' did not appeal to married men and stopped them

from joining. So we changed the name to Men's Club to enable everyone to feel welcome. The members of each Men's Group range from 18 — 45 years. Bringing men of different ages together is in itself an interesting experiment: we find that the elders can be a moderating influence on the emotionality of the younger men.

In the beginning we had a very tough time to inculcate the habit of saving and repaying loans as a group. This is one reason why, while all NGO's want to work with women, many of them don't want to work with men; and even those who do work with men find it difficult to continue. But we took it as a challenge. We told the men, the bankers don't trust you, the government doesn't trust you. We want you to prove to us that you are trustworthy, that you can work as well as the Women's Groups. Finally they got it and they began to cooperate. But it was hard work!

So far we have involved the Men's Groups in many developmental and service activities. Our next steps will be to unite men from different groups in working for a common cause and to take up activities to bring Women's and Men's Groups together.

Anbu: But already there have been successes. Normally, men and women don't work together. But recently we

had a Women's Group exchange programme in one village and the Men's Group members did the cooking and served the food. This is revolutionary.

One of the very hopeful signs is that as more Women's and Men's Groups form in the same village, more and more men and women from the same family are being sensitized to social issues.

How sustainable are these changes? If Village Action closed down tomorrow, would these initiatives survive?

Anbu: The groups are already financially independent: Village Action does not need to put any money into them. However, the bank still needs us to provide a guarantee when the groups want a loan.

I don't think the social empowerment activities could be sustained without Village Action. The women and other disadvantaged still need us for guidance and moral support.

Moris: In some ways, the challenges to what we are trying to achieve in the villages are increasing. Now caste-based politics is getting stronger in Tamil Nadu. Another new development is that the political parties are now trying to bring women's groups under their control. Parties start their own women's self-help

"One of our aims was to broaden their horizons"

The Auroville Coastal-area Development Centre (ACDC) has ceased its activities. Here members of the ACDC core group look back on their work.

Auroville Today: Which projects that your group has been involved with over the past few years in the villages have made a difference?

Alain: It's not always easy to say. Village work can be very frustrating – for many initiatives you do not see any immediate result, yet there may be a long-term effect. For example, in the past some organisations built collective toilets in some villages, but they never really worked. Now everybody wants individual toilets. It's a new wave, a big cultural evolution.

Meera: I think the youth are changing. There's a young men's self-help group called *Saral* in Edaiyanchavady which is full of enthusiasm and is always coming up with different activities, such as organising a cycle rally to Gingee to promote awareness about global warming and turning an old building into a library. They began as individuals and now they've learned to work together as a group.

Alain: I remember Moris being struck by the fact that, during the first meetings with the fishermen under the *Paalam* (Bridge) project, the fishermen began to look at themselves, to self-reflect, which was quite new for them. Now there are almost 60 Men's Groups in fishing communities, *dalit* communities and coastal villages, and this may indicate a more general change in awareness. What is clear is that the women in the Women's Self-Help Groups are definitely more self-confident and conscious of social issues.

Chandrah: In ACDC we recognised the need for a participatory approach, to ask people what they wanted rather than attempting to impose things upon them. At the same time, we encouraged them to think about the bigger picture by asking them, what does your community really need?

Santo: No single project, only a continuous intervention can make a difference. As far as ACDC is concerned our decision to become involved in projects at the village level, big or small, was always dependent upon us first making a thorough analysis. Before financing a project, we would examine its usefulness and see if it was fulfilling real community needs. Also, especially for the micro-projects, we had a set

of structured guidelines, such as photo documentation of the entire process and the need for the benefitting community to make a one third contribution in kind or cash.

Chandrah: One of our aims was to give the target population new ideas, to broaden their horizons, as well as giving them access to better information. For example, self-help groups did not know about various government schemes and funding that are available, and we assisted them in exploring these avenues. We also organized various seminars for youth informing them about different options for further education, scholarships, and skills training etc. A rural technology park was constructed that displays traditional and alternative building techniques. It is hoped that these techniques will be adopted by the local population to build houses.



One of the more than 60 men's groups set up by the ACDC

If Auroville closed down tomorrow, what would survive of its work in the local villages?

Alain: Village development. When Auroville first came here, the local villages were dark at night, they had no water, and the whole area was considered backward. We can't claim that the vast changes that have happened since are all due to Auroville, but Auroville's presence has been a huge accelerating factor in the villages' development.

Meera: The local populations' priorities have shifted. Now education is considered important, and they

groups and offer the members special schemes in return for their votes. But these groups don't touch the social aspect at all, and when one party gets into government it refuses to work with women's groups started by opposition parties.

Anbu: The tsunami also complicated things a lot for us. Normally Women's Groups received a Rs 10,000 subsidy for their revolving fund only after some years. But after the tsunami, the government said any new Women's Group would be eligible for a Rs 30,000 subsidy within 3-6 months. Suddenly, many new Women's Groups were formed by NGOs which had lax financial rules and which were not in the least interested in social issues.

So then the women in some of our groups started asking us, why do we have to come to social sensitization trainings as a condition of getting a loan when these other groups don't require this? At one point, it became so bad I thought we should stop working with the women and start concentrating on children. But in the end our groups stayed with us and many of the new groups collapsed when the NGOs moved out.

What can be done to lessen the dependence of the villagers upon Village Action?

Moris: We have set up a Federation consisting of members elected from dif-

ferent groups, both men and women. They meet once a month and discuss their problems and needs. Our idea is to help them take more responsibility in the future.

Anbu: Village Action has already decreased its role. We have a small staff now – only eight development workers – and the Federation and clubs are playing a more active part in the villages. This is a very healthy development. However, the Federation needs a neutral base, which is what Village Action provides.

Moris: In the future, we would also like to work with older school-children to give them more social awareness: they don't get any lessons about this at school.

Are you optimistic that radical change in the villages will happen soon?

Anbu: I think it will take many years before there are big changes in the villages. We're talking about changing a mindset which has been in existence for countless years. Maybe it will happen with the next generation if more children get education and additional children and adults are exposed to different alternatives. It's a hopeful sign that more and more Men's Groups and Women's Groups are forming because it means that new ways of thinking are gaining ground.

From an interview by Alan

all want to send their children to schools. And women now want their own means of livelihood, in order to be more independent. This is a big change and Auroville has played a role in developing and supporting this new awareness.

Chandrah: Before Auroville, the majority of the population were involved in rain-fed agriculture. Over the years, the populations surrounding Auroville have acquired a diversity of skills, some of which have been learned and this makes them more resilient.

ACDC will soon close down, but many Auroville groups will continue to work in the villages. Could that work be made more effective?

Alain: It will be more effective when all Aurovilians understand that Auroville cannot grow in any significant way unless it has a meaningful relationship with the villages around. Either we grow together or we perish together.

Meera: There's something missing. While ACDC was the coordination centre for the NGOs working in tsunami recovery, we do not have the equivalent for the different organizations within Auroville. It is important to have a centre in Auroville which disseminates information.

Santo: I believe ACDC could set an example



The ACDC core-group: from left to right Santo, Meera, Alain, Chandrah, Elke and Emmanuele

through the way it took decisions by consensus. To reach this it was sometimes necessary to step back from one's personal opinions.

Alain: Having been there from beginning to end, I can say that the whole experience from the Auroville Tsunami Relief and Rehabilitation Project (ATTRP) to ACDC has been very positive in terms of teamwork. While the size of the groups, the focus of the groups and the people involved changed over this period, the atmosphere has generally been one of happy cooperation with, of course, a few difficult moments, mostly at transition times. It is likely to remain a good memory for all those who participated. Overall, it was a very nice Auroville venture.

From an interview by Alan

The Auroville Coastal-area Development Centre



Coastal restoration work (left); A cycle rally to Gingee to promote awareness about global warming



ALL PHOTOS ACDC

When the tsunami struck on 26th December, 2004, the immediate need was for disaster relief for the coastal communities. Within hours, a relief team had formed in Auroville. For the first few days they provided food and clothing for the affected population. Over the next two months, they sent teams into the devastated areas of coastal villages to clean them up.

The next phase was rehabilitation. At this point, the Auroville Tsunami Relief and Rehabilitation Project (ATTRP) was established as a project under the Auroville Village Action Trust (AVAT). During this phase, which lasted for a little more than one year, programmes were put in place to restore dignity, homes, infrastructure and livelihoods to the affected people. Many other NGOs became involved in rehabilitation work in the area and the Auroville team spontaneously became a coordinating body, trying to ensure that duplication of activities didn't happen and that each affected village was taken care of. Later the Collector appointed Auroville as the official NGO coordination centre for Villupuram district and it received funding for this purpose from the United Nations Development Programme.

Later, as a result of the imbalances created between the coastal and inland populations of the bioregion by the large inflow of resources in the aftermath of the tsunami, the target population was enlarged to include inland villages as well. The Auroville Coastal-area Development Centre (ACDC), which started in October, 2006, reflected this change as well as a wish to work more professionally. Auroville organizations continued to work in the expanded target area, even after the government declared the tsunami rehabilitation phase over, so ACDC became a coordination hub for the many different Auroville projects happening in nearby coastal and inland villages. It financed many of these activities from donations received in the aftermath of the tsunami – after securing the

agreement of the main donors – and closely monitored their progress.

ACDC's efforts concentrated on long-term sustainable development projects for communities in the Auroville region. Areas of focus included:

- NGO coordination and knowledge-building
- Livelihood
- Environment
- Community institution building and micro-credit
- Shelter and infrastructure
- Health, hygiene and sanitation

As of October 31st, 2008, ACDC has officially concluded all of its activities, as the funds received have all been spent.

Another reason for this is that so far ACDC's function has essentially been that of an intermediary, monitoring the activities and the utilisation of funds of various projects. Some members of the team now want to continue working together, but in the field.



Training in handicrafts

Khemraj is a 22 year old Nepali who has been working in Auroville as a watchman. He came to Auroville six years ago after a four day train journey from Nepal. "One of my brothers was already working in Pondicherry and my other brother was in Hyderabad," he says. "My parents were farmers and sometimes there was not enough food to eat. So the only possibility for my brothers and myself was to leave and try to make money outside Nepal and send it home."

He believes there may be about 150 Nepalese living in and around Auroville. The number is difficult to ascertain as the Nepalese do not need a visa to come to India, and therefore there are no official figures. He says many have been here for years, and now have teenage children studying in high schools here.

"Nepal exports people," he adds rather sadly. "Everywhere you go in the world you can see Nepalese. Many go to Malaysia where a lot of Hindi is spoken, or even Pakistan and, of course, the Gulf States. The men come to India for six months, get a visa for other countries, then go to Kerala and find a cheap flight to the Gulf States or Malaysia. In Qatar alone, I hear there are over 300,000 Nepalese working."

Khemraj now feels very satisfied with his life here. At first he worked at the Town Hall. "The salary was low, only Rs. 2,300 a month, and out of that I had to pay Rs.400 for a room in Kulapalayam and another 100 rupees for electricity." He is now much happier as he is Savitri Bhavan's sole watchman and has his own brand-new keet hut where he can cook, wash and sleep.

"Yes, we're allowed to sleep for one or two hours during the night," he explains. "After 10.30 p.m. I go around once around every hour to check everything is okay."



Khemraj

"Sometimes people ask me why watchmen are always from Nepal, and I tell them that we have no fear in our blood. We are connected with the famous Gurkha soldiers whom everyone knows and respects. Tamil watch-

So far from home

A peep into the lives of Auroville's Nepali watchmen.

men tend to run away if there is any danger. For us the situation is very different as we have no pressures from having our families living here."

At first Khemraj did not speak either English or Tamil so he was often lonely. But now he speaks very good Tamil, has lots of Tamil friends, and speaks reasonably good English. It also took him some time to adjust to life in India. "There are no big rivers nearby," he said wistfully. "I particularly miss the rivers and mountains of my homeland. Once I went for a swim in the ocean, but there was too much salt and it burnt my eyes. Even the fish here is so salty that at first I could not eat it, but now I am used to it. Also the hot weather was not easy for me. Cold mountain air is much more healthy for the body."

"I have not gone back home since I came. I hope to go next year but I am sure everybody that I knew will be gone. Only the old people will still be there. Even the women are starting to leave now to work in the kitchens of Malaysia and the Gulf States."

Does he have any interest in Auroville, or does he do other things when he is not watching? "No, there is no time. We work all the time, including at night, and we only think of our job. Many may move to better paying jobs, so we do not have so much interest in Auroville. I know this is not good. For myself, I would like to learn computing at the Industrial School some day, but I don't see how that is possible at present. I hope someone will take an interest in me, and help and support me with these

dreams. Yet I am happy here."

Tikkaram Sharma's story is a little different. He is now 49 years old, and has been working at Aurelec for 28 years. He is one of six Nepali watchmen



Tikkaram Sharma

employed by Aurelec who live in rooms on the premises. They are smart in their dark green uniforms and seem happy with their situation.

"I first came to work in Chennai," says Tikkaram, "but it was terribly hot

in the city and the water was not good. Auroville is much cooler and I love the *shanti* (peace) here. My wife came to live with me and three of our five children were born here. Unfortunately, I could not afford to feed and school them here so they had to go back to Nepal. I send them 3,000 rupees a month from my salary of 4,000 rupees. I telephone them once a month and speak to my children, but all they seem to talk about is money, like teenagers everywhere. I tell them, "Don't worry, be happy, and God will look after you." But they don't seem to understand. Once every two years I make the long journey home to Nepal to see my family. The ticket costs RS.560 rupees."

"We work in eight hour shifts so our life is varied. We cook our own food as we still haven't got used to the spicy Tamil food, though I do like idli and dosai and the Indian sweets. Nepalese men very rarely marry Tamil girls as the girl's families are against it, though I do know of a few love marriages where they are happy. On my days off, I meet Nepali friends and we go to Pondicherry market or to the beach. Sometimes someone will have a Nepalese newspaper which I love to read. I don't watch television anymore."

"When I am 58 I will have to retire as this is the Indian law. I have managed to save about 500 rupees every month, plus I hope to get a monthly pension of 1,200 rupees. With this I will be able to live in Nepal with my family. But after all these years in South India I don't even know if I will be happy there. I think I have done well to come to this beautiful and peaceful place which is Auroville."

Dianna

WORKSHOP

Being well

Recently, a weekend retreat was run in the peaceful ambiance of Bharat Nivas by JV Avadhanulu - JV for short. Originally from Bangalore, JV is now a Newcomer. He has conducted eleven *pranayama* workshops for more than 150 people.

JV is a good example of an older man who has retired from professional life and is now using his 40 years of accumulated skills for the benefit of Auroville. Also he has created a new life for himself as a facilitator of *pranayama*, and has now run two *Being Well* workshops. His aim is to integrate *yoga* into the modern lifestyle of the 21st century.

The course *Being Well* was quite different from others I've attended. Over the weekend, we were shown gentle but effective meditation techniques to let go of stress, relax the body and mind, and visualize to create positive states of being. JV also helped us go deep inside to see our habitual ways of being and of reacting to the world.

There were simple exercises to deal with specific emotional challenges. For example, to demonstrate how the 'tightness' of emotional holding can be released, JV made us grasp a pen tightly in our hands, then release it suddenly, letting it drop to the ground. As we repeated the action, he invited us to become aware of any tightness in our minds and to "let go" of those hard emotions. The sense of this release was direct and remarkable.

JV used many such similar tools over the two days to illustrate the negative effects of blocked emotions. Some of them made a strong impact, and the beauty of this way of working was that once experienced, it seemed easy to practice it in one's daily life. We were also made to experience being able to choose an emotion instead of being a victim of it, to recognize what stimulates us into action and how not to react to it, how to separate facts from feelings, and how not to run our lives on our emotional dramas.

During the workshop, JV often

marvellous to see older Indians enjoying these so called 'New Age', but actually very ancient, tech-

ment programme with its roots in Zen that helps to develop confidence and understanding. I soon became a volunteer Seminar Leader, and after a few years hit a plateau - I felt I was not making any further personal progress. It was then I was introduced to meditation and a new world of possibilities opened up.

"In 2004 my wife and I decided to look for a completely different way of life and explored places we could settle - first we looked at Goa with its ocean and international scene, and then the Nilgiri hills with its beauty and calm. But we felt no attraction to either place. Then we visited Auroville, and it was love at first sight."

Two years ago when JV had turned 60, he started making plans for coming to live in Auroville. "But it was not easy for my wife," he says. JV's wife is a teacher who shares his passion for programmes to raise consciousness and together they have attended courses like

Compassionate Communication. "Compassionate

Communication helped us to bridge the gap in our understanding and reconnect closely. She

was able to share her doubts to me about starting a new life in Auroville and I am able to hear her with empathy. Before this, she had been a dutiful Indian wife and willing to suppressing her true feelings. Now she could tell me how she really felt about leaving Bangalore. The huge change of life seemed too much for her, which is very understandable, plus she has a lovely home where our two daughters come and stay. I am also now aware that I was taking it for granted about her joining me in Auroville. So I am happy that now we can talk about these things, and I am sure we will work out a mutually satisfying solution."

Besides the *Being Well*

workshops, JV, is also involved in a few other projects. He is involved with L'Avenir d'Auroville in planning the communications and information systems infrastructure. "My background is in communications and electronics engineering", he works with *Mission Tejas* at Aurore developing a low-cost battery-operated lamp to replace the traditional kerosene lamps of India, and he is also part of the 'One Laptop Per Child' project. "This is the most exciting project for me as it is about the future of education. I believe that simple laptops for children will open up the world to them, especially in India and in the countries in Africa where the infrastructure is poor. We have a small pilot project running out of Udavi School where we are trying to provide a laptop to every student in Class 6, and the *Digital Bridge Foundation* of India is partly funding the project."

"As you can see, my life in Auroville is full, challenging, and very worthwhile! It is truly a new life full of excitement and never ending education."

Dianna



JV (standing second from the left) at his first *Being Well* workshop.

quoted from The Mother and Sri Aurobindo to illustrate a point. This combination of their authority and our living experiences was not only interesting, but deeply affecting. For example, there was one statement by The Mother on the 'disequilibrium of the Being' that stood out for me - *Look for the inner causes of disharmony much more than the outer ones. It is the inside that governs the outside.*

This was the first *Being Well* course that JV had run, and so he had to be a little careful in his approach. "I did not know who would attend and therefore made sure not to introduce situations which some might find awkward or inhibiting."

Of the nine participants, four were over 60 - of these three were Indian Aurovilians and serious students of Sri Aurobindo - and the remaining were an assortment of Westerners. It was

niques. One Indian Aurovilian participant, later said that in her "forty years of retreat" in Auroville, this was her first continuous two-day retreat and that she will cherish the memories of it.

Like quite a few of us here, JV had a mid-life crisis which forced him to examine his way of life. For 20 years he had a position of authority in the Indian Navy, then in 1987 suddenly developed "incurable" ischemic heart disease. "My brother had the same problem and years later, still needed constant medication and operations," he explains. "I did not want to be in a similar position so I began to look at alternative ways of healing myself. This was the beginning of a new life for me."

"I took early retirement from the Navy, practiced *pranayama* and *yoga*, and completely cured myself of health problems. I then became involved with 'Landmark Education', a self-develop-

MATRIMANDIR

New visiting times for Matrimandir

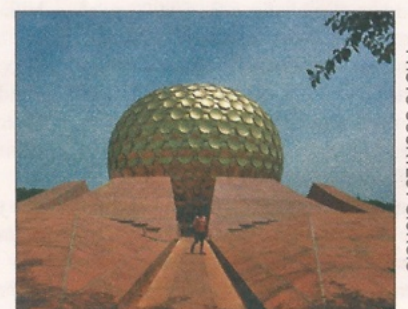


PHOTO COURTESY GIORGIO

The Matrimandir Access Group has announced changed visiting times. An introduction will be given to first time visitors from 9.45 am to 11 am, while the regular visitors hour is now from 9.30 am to 10.30 am. All visitors must book their visit for concentration preferably a few days in advance by calling (0413) 2622268 any day between 2 pm and 4 pm. Matrimandir viewing-point passes are issued at the Visitors' Centre as usual Monday-Saturday all day, and on Sunday mornings.

"All the answers I need are in this book"

Recently a young Chinese man visited Auroville. Chen Xubo had discovered Sri Aurobindo's *The Life Divine* in China and came to India wanting to learn more.

"From a young age, I have always been very hungry for knowledge. I always tried to learn by myself, to do my own reading, and not just to accept what my teachers told me. This is why, perhaps, my life now is so different from others of my generation in China. "Often I would ask questions to try and get at the truth. For example, in High School we had political lessons where we were told that the perfect society is the communist society. But, I asked, when communism has been achieved, when everything is done by machines and there is no further need to work, will it really be a new world? For there will still be many problems, like disease. Nobody could answer this question. From that moment I stopped believing in communism. "After High School I went to university and majored in business, but after one year I was sick of the course and began spending most of my time in the library. At first I read history. Later I explored psychology and philosophy, both Chinese and Western. I used my intuition, not my mind, and yet I understood a lot. Perhaps Plato is right when he says that knowledge is actually memory. "Meanwhile my outer life was not smooth because my way was so different from other students. I was isolated, I couldn't communicate with them. My teachers told me I would not get a diploma if I kept on doing my own reading. But I didn't mind. I had never wanted an ordinary life; I had always felt the most

important thing was to find out the meaning of the world and of life. "As time passed I found it easier and easier to withdraw into myself away from the outer world. I could retreat into my inner world and feel very happy – sometimes when I read certain books I felt an ecstasy, joy, a freedom which I had never felt before. When I opened a book and conversed with Plato or Buddha, I forgot everything else. "At the same time I could see the imperfection of the world. It was clear that if I stood back from the world I could get peace, but I wondered what meaning this would have if the rest of world is suffering and only I enjoy peace. So I continued to have many questions. "Four years ago I went into a bookshop and saw *The Life Divine*. It had been translated into Chinese by Hu Tsu, who used to live in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. China is now much more open than before. Religious and spiritual books are not banned: if a book does not touch upon political issues you are safe. "Anyway, I started reading it...that first paragraph is so beautiful, it made a very strong impression on me. Before I had had somewhat similar thoughts, but I realized the author was far above me because he was able to express things that had always been unclear to me and to answer my deepest questions about life. For example, he explains that we are all on the way to perfection, and that our task is first to make the



Chen Xubo

connection with the Divine and then bring That into the world. When I read that I changed from being a pessimist to being an optimist. At last I had found someone who could explain the meaning of life to me. "At that moment I felt very sure that the rest of my life would be tied in with this book. "However, understanding it is not easy. I read the first few chapters, but then I read something about the different planes of the being which I couldn't understand. I didn't have the experience, so I could not understand it. Also, I couldn't understand the psychic being at first because in Buddhism, the religion I am familiar with, there is no psychic being, no personal god. So maybe

until you find your true self and have a connection with the Divine it is difficult to understand everything Sri Aurobindo writes. Nevertheless, I feel that all the answers I need are in this book. "Interestingly, I found many similarities between Zhuangzi, the Taoist philosopher, and Sri Aurobindo. Taoism, for example, says that trying to live a spiritual life in solitude is a 'lower' path than living it in the city. The higher path is to live in the world but not be influenced by the world. Again, ancient Chinese culture believed in human immortality; Taoism believed the body could become immortal. "I never found anybody else in China who was reading Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. There's no group, no centre. This is one reason I wanted to visit the Ashram and Auroville, to find people who are more advanced in the Integral Yoga to advise me. Also, The Mother said that if you reach a certain state of development it is helpful to join people who are on the same path. "I visited the Ashram in Delhi, but everybody was too busy to help me. In Auroville the atmosphere is easier, more open, and there are many study groups here. Even my English has improved a lot in the short time I've been here. Maybe this is closer to the ideal society I've been seeking all my life. "Unfortunately, unless my visa can be extended, I will have to go back to China soon."

Alan

In brief

Crystal award



Governing Board member Dr. Mallika Sarabhai has been selected for the "Crystal award" for 2009, by the World Economic Forum for her two decades of work in the fields of women empowerment and social justice as well as arts and culture. The award will be presented during the summit meeting of the Forum in January in Davos, Switzerland. The award was instituted in 1995 to pay tribute to the "decisive role which culture and art play in the creation of global understanding and peace".

Entry seminar

In a seminar on entry issues the Entry Service detailed the difficulties the community faces in accepting more people. An increased number of Newcomers are in need of maintenance; many do not have the financial resources to contribute towards creating housing assets and cannot be helped by Auroville as it does not have the funds. Also Newcomers often have difficulty in finding regular, meaningful work that contributes to the development and growth of Auroville.

Maintenance costs

The Human Resource Team has stated that the present monthly costs of Aurovilians maintaining themselves, including their Central Fund, lunch, and health insurance contributions is Rs 8,000 for a single Aurovillian, Rs 14,000 for a single parent with a one child, and Rs 29,000 for a couple with two children.

Treacherous actions

The Funds and Assets Management Committee has said that it considers as "treacherous" the actions of Aurovilians who help outsiders to purchase land in the city and green belt area. Such actions seriously undermines the Auroville project.

New website for the Laboratory of Evolution

The Laboratory of Evolution Team has a new website www.laboratoryofevolution.net with information on topics concerning evolution, human unity, and the yoga of Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

Connections revived

Two long-time Aurovilians have restarted 'Connections', a service that aims at finding the right activity for each person according to his or her capacity, and to provide units (services and production) with the right people.

Scholarship Fund

A scholarship fund for Auroville youth has been set up to help open up a wider range of possibilities for their education and training both inside and outside of Auroville. All those who can offer help, in kind or in cash, are invited to contact chali@aurville.org.in

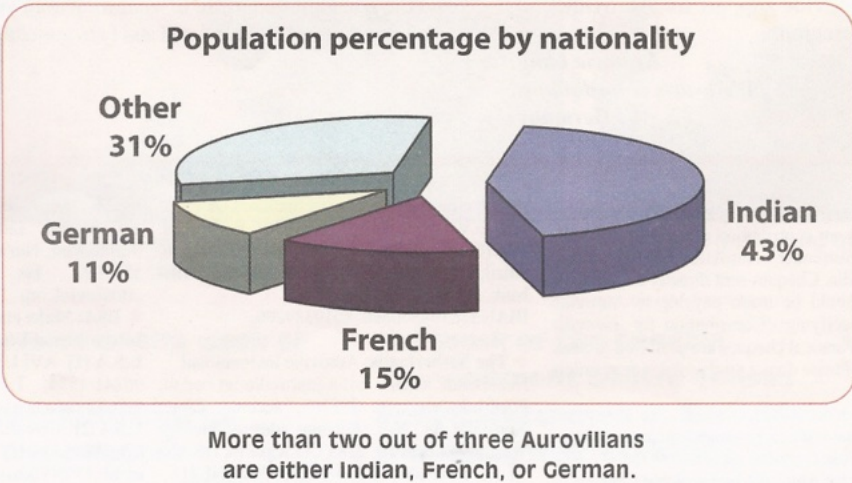
POPULATION STATISTICS

Auroville is growing

Auroville population overview by nationality					
Nationality	Aug. 04	Nov. 05	Nov. 06	Nov. 07	Nov. 08
Indian	686	736	760	799	876
French	300	261	279	290	303
German	245	226	232	226	228
Italian	82	85	89	93	100
Dutch	84	77	75	83	78
American	62	61	65	67	70
Swiss	42	42	50	53	52
British	53	50	51	45	49
Russian	36	40	41	45	46
Spanish	32	30	32	33	34
Korean	25	20	25	19	24
Canadian	25	23	23	24	23
Israeli	13	16	21	28	23
Belgian	24	17	19	19	18
Swedish	14	12	13	14	17
Ukrainian	17	15	16	16	16
Australian	13	12	12	12	12
Argentinian	9	8	7	7	7
Austrian	7	10	10	7	7
South African	2	1	1	6	7
Hungarian	4	3	3	4	6
Tibetan	3	7	6	7	6
Japanese	3	4	4	4	4
Nepali	1	1	1	3	4
Sloven	2	2	2	2	4
Sri Lankan	4	4	4	4	4
Brazilian	2	2	3	5	3
Belorussian	1	1	1	1	2
Bulgarian	1	2	2	2	2
Danish	2	3	3	3	2
Ethiopian	2	2	2	2	2
Icelandic	0	0	1	1	2
Irish	0	1	1	1	2
Latvian	2	2	2	2	2
Thai	0	0	1	2	2
Algerian	1	1	1	1	1
Colombian	1	1	2	1	1
Finnish	0	1	1	1	1
Kazakh	1	1	1	1	1
Lithuanian	0	2	2	1	1
New Zealander	2	1	1	1	1
Norwegian	0	0	0	1	1
Moldovan	0	0	0	0	1
Total	1803	1783	1865	1936	2045

Auroville population adults and minors by gender					
	Aug. 04	Nov. 05	Nov. 06	Nov. 07	Nov. 08
Adults	1390	1370	1464	1489	1587
males	741	728	786	788	836
females	649	642	678	701	751
Minors (< 18 years)	413	413	401	451	458
males	221	220	215	233	243
females	192	193	186	218	215
Total	1803	1783	1865	1936	2045

Perhaps the most significant statistic is that the Auroville population crossed the 2000 mark in April this year. By November 1st, 2008, the numbers had reached 2045, a growth of 5.3% as compared to 3.7% a year ago. There are now 43 nations represented, with Moldavia being the new entrant. The largest increase, as in the previous years, has been in the Indian population: 77. The Indians now account for almost 43% of Auroville's population. This represents a 3.8% rise over last year's when they recorded a 2% rise in population. The French and Germans remain at second and third place at 15% and 11% respectively. The population of Italian, American, Swiss and Russian nationals shows a steady increase, while the Germans, Dutch, Belgians and British are still not back to their 2004 level. Most other nationalities recorded relatively unchanged figures. The male/female ratio of 90 females to 100 males is virtually unchanged from last year. The ratio is similar for adults and minors. The ratio of adult to minor Aurovilians stands at 100:29 also a minimal change from 2007 when it was 100:30. Once again, with bated breath, we await the deep explication of these figures.



"I like cucumber sandwiches but I miss drumstick sambhar"

A Tamil family makes its home in an English suburb.

Would I recognize the Subramanian house I wondered, as I went to see them in Portsmouth,

England. Would there be obvious Tamil signs, like a Ganesh in the garden, or, I fantasized wildly, a bullock chewing grass? I spotted the home; for there was a row of neatly lined footwear outside the door. As I got closer, familiar spicy aromas wafted through the letter box – this was definitely the home of Tamils.

Banu and Vengadesh (Veni) Subramaniam and their two daughters, Priya and Jayashree aged 13 and 9, have been living in England for over a year now. They are here long-term as Veni is posted with the Royal Navy. They rent this house on a naval estate outside Portsmouth. I knew them in Auroville where Banu was the manager of Atithi Griha guest house, so I was interested to see how they were finding life in England.

Banu greeted me at the door looking 10 years younger, and considerably slimmer, in jeans and a red T-shirt. Her English had improved enormously and she appeared confident and happy. She made me a cup of tea and began telling me about her English life.

"I am very happy here, mainly because this is the first time that we have been able to live as a family," she began. "My father died when I was young, so since the age of 14 I have had to work and support my family. In Auroville I ran Atithi Griha guest house for nine years, and as I was the first Tamil, never mind the first Tamil lady to do this, I felt it to be a great responsibility. It was hard work, seven days a week, with no privacy as our living room was also the office. My daughters went to the Immaculate Heart School in Pondicherry, and stayed with my mother and sister there during

the week as I did not have time for them. Now I am very happy to be a '100 per cent' housewife and mum though I did have a part-time job in the navy cafeteria, and now work in a charity shop two afternoons a week. I like the job as I enjoy meeting people as well as learning to do window arrangements. But I am also looking forward to the time when the girls are settled in their schools, so that I can apply to our local college to do an accountancy course.

"What I miss most here are the Indian vegetables, especially snake gourd and drumstick, but I am learning to like cucumber sandwiches. The English seem to eat so much bread and packets of biscuits. I wore a *sari* at first but I felt very conspicuous, so I tried the *salwar kameez*, but then after six months I had the courage to wear jeans and they are so amazingly comfortable! Also they are good for riding my bike." She points proudly to a bicycle propped up in the hall.

All this time the TV has been blaring. "We subscribe to a Tamil TV channel on Sky and get live programmes 24 hours a day," she explains. "My justification is that it's so the girls don't forget Tamil, but actually I love watching Indian films."

Her older daughter, Priya, interrupts to tell me of her experience of England. "I love being here, and the only thing I really miss is the rest of our family. Here the streets are very clean and everyone walks on the pavement, not all over the road as they do in India. I like that. I can walk out on my own here, it feels safe. And the English people are very quiet and clean.

"The schools are much better as the teachers are so kind and friendly, and



The Spinnaker Tower, a Portsmouth landmark

don't try to scare you or beat you. Do you know that many Indian schools have a "stick" lady who loves using it! Here at break we are only allowed fruit; no chocolate or biscuits, and every day we have a different lunch, like on Tuesdays it's Chinese.

"On Saturday morning I go ice-skating with my friend Emma, and I love it, and afterwards we have chips and milkshake. I like going to her house as her parents are very nice to each other and look after their pets very well and give them good food. I love going to *Asda* supermarket and looking at their *George* brand of clothes – they are really cool!

Jayashree giggles when asked about her first impression of England. "I wondered where everyone was when we first came as the streets were empty. Now I know people stay indoors and watch TV. Everyone has a car here,

except us. I also couldn't believe that the houses had glass windows and there are carpets in every room except the kitchen. Nothing bites you here, so no mosquito mesh. If English people see one fly or spider in their house they go crazy and spray it to death. But all my friends have a cat or dog. I too want one but Dad says no. He doesn't want them inside the house. My friend lets her dog, Spotty, sleep on her bed!"

Veni's story is rather different. "I have been in England for three years now and I miss Auroville more and more. When I see the condition of many people's lives here I realize how important the vision of Auroville is. So far I have managed to go back to Auroville every year, but if air fares rise it will be difficult. It is very important for me that I do go back regularly as that is where I really want to be when this adventure is over.

"I entered the Navy as a steward; I am 36 so it is a miracle I was accepted, but I often feel isolated. I am surrounded by 18 and 20 year olds whose life experience is very narrow. I am amazed at the boys' lack of curiosity and their racial prejudices, and I try to take a stand if they go too far.

"When we are away on sea exercises for a month I find life even more difficult. We hardly see the sun or the sky on some of these trips. Last December, when we went to Norway, it was dark all the time and became very depressing. Also one has no privacy; I sleep in a dormitory with 32 young men.

"The English people are friendly and polite on the surface, but beneath they are reserved. It is difficult to make friends here. I also feel very

different from the others; I am very different from the others – I am much older, and I speak with an accent. They think I am a Muslim, as anyone with a dark skin is automatically labelled as that, and the newspapers talk about it every day. People are suspicious and feel threatened by immigrants and fear losing their jobs as the migrants work for less.

"I did not come here to make money the way that Indians go to the Gulf States to work. I came to broaden my mind and learn new skills, and am thankful that I have had this opportunity. I want to get promoted, but as my education is not up to par, I will have to take GCE examinations. This will be quite challenging for me. It really is an adventure on many levels.

"I definitely want to go back when my daughters can stand on their own feet. They are doing very well at school and the teachers are impressed with their general attitude and their ability to concentrate. The main reason I am here in England is to give my daughters the opportunity to have a good education and go to university."

Dianna



AVI GERMANY AND YOUTH

The Weltwärts programme

Over the last nine years Auroville International (AVI) Germany has sent up to eight young men each year to Auroville to do a year of social instead of military service. AVI Germany has been accredited by the German Ministry for Family, Seniors, Women and Youth to do this work.

This situation has recently changed. In January 2008, the German Ministry for Development and Economic Relations launched a new programme called 'Weltwärts' (World outreach) for youth of both genders wanting to go abroad for voluntary service. Contrary to the previous programme under which all costs (insurance, air fare, accommodation, food etc.) had to be covered by the volunteers or their families, this new programme offers generous subsidies. The special focus of the programme is on gender and social equality, which means that youth from less well-off families can afford a stay abroad to widen their horizons and expose themselves to a different culture. The programme also provides subsidies to those who employ the volunteers as well as to Auroville International Germany to run the project.

AVI Germany obtained the accreditation for the new programme in May

2008. Under it, 11 youth – five women and six men – were selected for voluntary service in Auroville. They arrived in Auroville between July and September where they joined seven youngsters who had come under the old programme. They all work in a wide range of projects that are village-related – in village schools, health and environmental services and cultural projects like *Svaram*. The volunteers have to comply with certain guidelines, like committing themselves to work at least for one year in the project of their choice for a minimum of 30 hours per week, writing regular reports, and learning Tamil for three hours a week.

The volunteers came well prepared. As part of the programme they had to participate in a 10-day introductory seminar in Germany, where the topics were not only the climate, health, clothing, and correct behaviour in a foreign culture, but also spirituality, the beginnings of Auroville and Integral Yoga.

Even though it means quite an effort to organize the volunteer programmes, it is part of AVI Germany's attempt to help strengthen networking and provide support for Auroville and its bioregion.

Eymarie Lang
Weltwärts co-ordinator,
AVI Germany

My year as a volunteer



Johannes with Dr. Lucas at a village school taking part in a tree-planting project

of sports activities, and so on. Right from the beginning I launched into several activities and quickly made good friends, which made the process of integration easy and enjoyable. I discovered that Auroville is a conglomerate of interesting people: Aurovilians with the craziest personal histories, travellers from all over the world, many students and, of course, the Tamil people.

Life in Auroville also has its shadow sides. You are confronted with your personal problems and unknown ones arise. They can be of a very practical nature, like finding a permanent place to stay, which has taken me seven relocations in two months. Also living in a community is not always sunshine and roses. You have to be very sensitive since people here are exceptional but also sometimes peculiar. I am well settled now, but there are three problems that still plague me: physical wounds that refuse to heal; the tendency to spend too much time in the "German bubble" – the group of German volunteers and German Aurovilians; and the constant departure of visitors whom you just have befriended.

Life here is truly exceptional and I am grateful for each day I am able to stay in Auroville.

Johannes Dörr
Weltwärts volunteer

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