

Auroville Today

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Auroville's monthly news magazine since 1988

Auroville is well-known for its involvement with alternative energy. It has more than 500 kW of solar photovoltaic panels installed and owns two windmills, located elsewhere in Tamil Nadu. In this issue we highlight the activities of Auroville to promote alternative energy elsewhere in India.

Behind the panels and pumps: the social side of Sunlit Future

Sunlit Future is an Auroville unit that provides services and expertise in the field of solar energy in Auroville as well as all over India. While the unit is active commercially, it is also developing a keen passion to make a sustainable difference in the lives of the rural Indian population, people who are deprived of access to the basic infrastructures such as electricity and water. "We, as a team, have chosen to focus on the rural sector in remote areas because no one wants to go there due to its inaccessibility," says Rishi, co-founder of Sunlit Future. "Over the past years we have reached out to a large number of rural villages, providing them with access to water and electricity using solar energy. It has not been easy, yet each team member is driven," he says. As the challenges arise they customise solutions.

Travelling to remote places like Spiti or Ladakh, for example, with delicate, heavy and expensive equipment has not only been gruelling but also risky. They have to load the gear on mules, walk for kilometres at a stretch, sleep in tents, travel on the top of buses and work for hours in extreme weather conditions. Once they lost a solar panel down a cliff. Not much can be done to ease these hurdles. However, the cooperation of local NGOs and the villagers turns out to be a saving grace and the indescribable scenery and the landscape is an extra.

All the projects Sunlit Future has done so far have been fully dependent on grants. However, raising funds gets challenging if it has to be done over and over again. The necessity to break free from the hassle of depending on grants has motivated the team to implement other solutions, like empowering the local people to contribute a percentage of the total funds needed. They enable them do this by establishing a livelihood

programme that has the potential to return the full amount over a few years. This way the same funds can be re-used to mobilise other similar projects. Rishi explains, "The women, who used to spend several back-breaking hours each day walking through unsafe terrain to carry 10 litres or more of water from a single remote well back to their homes, now have more time to be productive in ways that can generate an income and cover their contribution. We draw up a livelihood plan for them and train them so they can be productive."

Less than a year ago they implemented this system in Turla, a village in Balangir District, Orissa. This village had no electricity. An NGO called Vishwanidam runs a school there. Some women who were cast out of their villages also are given refuge in Vishwanidam. "Running an NGO like that is very tough in a place where basic amenities are missing," explains Rishi. "So when Vishwanidam approached us for help we decided to additionally help make the people self-sufficient." The project had funds to install solar lights, and with that facility in place the women there had an opportunity to make incense sticks as an income-generating activity. The incense is sold to the temples in the region. For training the women, Rishi got in touch with Pratap of Mereville in Auroville who sent two of his team members to the village to teach the process and skills of incense-making. The capital needed for this activity was provided by a group consisting of Sunlit Future and other like-minded organisations. Sunlit Future is now establishing linkages with clients outside the local market to help this NGO to sustain itself and pay the interest-free loan back to the common pool of funds over three years.

While implementing a livelihood plan is doable, following it up is very challenging. What can help the process is a network of supporting organisations and individuals. Over the years



PHOTO COURTESY SUNLIT FUTURE

Solar Panel installed for a hospital in Zanskar, Ladakh

Sunlit Future has built a strong network of people, corporate organisations, NGOs and service providers inside Auroville and outside. They want to be able to link that network to the rural sector of India in the hope that technology, renewable energy and out-of-the-box solutions can be made accessible to all.

What keeps them going through thick and thin

is the sense of joy and responsibility for the role they have naturally grown into – an alternative energy solution provider in the broadest terms. "We didn't choose this, but somehow we always find ourselves tackling difficult projects, and by The Mother's grace, we perform," says Rishi expressing his gratitude to everyone in the team.

Mandakini

The Ashden India Renewable Energy Collective



PHOTO FROM INTERNET

70% of India cooks on open fires, which creates a huge amount of indoor pollution and health problems

In 2004, Hemant, on behalf of his unit AuroRe, received the Ashden Award for Enterprise from HRH Prince Charles of England for the work on distributing reliable and cheap solar devices in 12 Indian states, benefitting about 80,000 people. Ever since, he says, he has kept contact with the organisation and with other Ashden awardees. This contributed to a deeper understanding of the problems of the Indian poor.

"There are an estimated 78 million homes in India that are not connected to the grid," he says. "You find them in the rural areas as well as in the urban slums. The people have no access to electricity and use kerosene for lighting. This problem is acute in eastern and central India, but it exists even in the states that claim to be fully electrified. Then, there is a second major problem: the exposure to smoke. 70% of India cooks on open fires, which creates a huge amount of indoor pollution, equal to smoking a packet of cigarettes a day. It has become the number one health issue for women and the reason for their reduced life-expectancy."

The Ashden awardees met for the first time in 2010 to see what they could do about it. "We discussed all these and other issues. The idea came up to form a collective to influence policies," says Hemant. "For if the government had suitable policies, with the financial resources available to it the outreach would be much larger than any of us would be able to command. Each of us deals with a component of the whole, but to scale it up to the entire country is beyond anybody's reach. We are looking for a kind of 'evolutionary fast forward' to get the poor clean energy for lighting and cooking."

The first meeting led to many more. Once the road map was laid out, a decision was made to set up a so-called Section 25 not-for-profit company. Its aim is to influence decision-making processes and policies, accelerate and direct the employment of resources, and develop suitable programmes. On 21st February this year, the Ashden India Renewable Energy Collective was born.

continued on page 2

- Tamil Nadu's Solar Energy Policy comes into effect
- Container houses

pages 2 – 3

- Matrimandir and the Park of Unity: a photo exhibition
- The Auroville Bamboo Centre

pages 4 – 6

- Interview with Balu
- Theresa Grantham on Auroville
- Dreamer's Café at Visitors' Centre

pages 6 – 7

- Reviews: Dick Batstone: *Passage to More than India*; Amal Kiran: *On Savitri Vol. 2*; Richard: *Mother and Flowers*

page 8

13 May

Tamil Nadu's Solar Energy Policy comes into effect

Tamil Nadu's Solar Energy Policy 2012 includes a provision for grid-connected rooftop solar. Auroville helped to make this a reality.

In January 2012, Toine (co-founder of Auroville Consulting) made a presentation about the potential of rooftop solar and distributed generation to a group of senior officers of the Tamil Nadu Government, which included the Vice Chairperson of the State Planning Commission, the Energy Secretary and the Chairman and Managing Director of the Tamil Nadu Energy Development Agency (TEDA). One of the outcomes of the meeting was that two pilot projects with grid-connected rooftop solar systems were carried out in Auroville in cooperation with the Tamil Nadu Government.

The two pilots were commissioned in early September 2012 and they perform as planned. During the inauguration function of these two projects, Mr. Sudeep Jain, the Chairman cum Managing Director of TEDA, expressed his

appreciation for the pioneering efforts of Auroville in the field of renewable energy in general and the grid-connected rooftop solar systems in particular. He felt that these pilot projects would go a long way to making rooftop solar an important component of the renewable energy sector in Tamil Nadu, and requested Auroville to do more such pilots.

Auroville Consulting then procured special bidirectional energy meters (that show import from the grid and export to the grid) to demonstrate net-metering. The government-owned distribution company, TANGEDCO, became convinced that there were no technical issues, which they had earlier feared. This contributed to grid-connected rooftop solar with net-metering getting included in the Tamil Nadu Solar Policy 2012 that was announced in October 2012.

Meanwhile another five pilot systems have been installed in Auroville by Sunlit Future, a solar energy unit of Auroville. As a result, Auroville has today more than 60 kW of grid-connected rooftop solar in addition to about 400 kW of stand-alone solar systems with batteries.

On 9th February 2013, the 15 kW solar plant on the roof of the Auroville Foundation office was inaugurated by Mrs. Santha Sheela Nair, Vice Chairperson of the Tamil Nadu State Planning Commission. During her brief speech, Mrs. Santha Sheela Nair appreciated the contribution that Auroville has made in making grid-connected rooftop solar a reality. "This was a dream and now you have made it a reality," she said, thanking Toine in particular for his perseverance and dedication. "I have lost count of how many times he came to Chennai to get this done. We are grateful to him and the team here for making this happen. Auroville is a place of innovation and incubation and I urge you to continue with these wonderful initiatives."

"The Tamil Nadu government is taking solar energy seriously," says Toine. "It is asking entre-



The 15 kW grid-connected solar photovoltaic plant on the roof of the Auroville Foundation building

preneurs to set-up solar power plants and sell the energy to TANGEDCO. This is a good development, even though the proposed sales prices are still too low to attract many entrepreneurs. The policy also allows for net-metering. This means that the export of solar energy to the grid is deducted from what is taken from the grid. So if, for example, your solar panels export 700 units to the grid and you draw 1,000 units from the grid, you would get billed for 300 units."

The solar policy also includes a so-called 'generation-based incentive' for domestic consumers who will receive Rs. 2.00 per unit of electricity generated during the first two years after installation, Rs 1.00 per unit for next two

years and Rs. 0.50 per unit for the subsequent 2 years. "These are still very small amounts of money in relation to the cost of solar energy, but in combination with net-metering this is a good first step," says Toine. "But we should go to a feed-in tariff mechanism (whereby the gross solar energy generated is compensated for at an appropriate tariff) if small-scale, decentralised solar is to take off in a big way. That will be on the agenda for our interaction with the Tamil Nadu Government in 2013-14."

And so the journey towards sustainable energy systems continues, with Auroville playing the role of an innovation and incubation centre.

Carel

Renewable energy in Tamil Nadu

As on 31st January this year, energy produced by solarvoltaic power plants account for only seven MW of the Tamil Nadu's total installed renewable energy capacity of 7,866 MW (wind - 7,115 MW; co-generation plants of sugar mills - 576 MW; and biomass power plants - 168 MW.) Tamil Nadu expects to add 3,000 megawatt (MW) through solar power by 2015, of which roof-top installations will account for 350 MW, which includes 50 MW from domestic consumers. The installed capacity of plants that use conventional sources of energy is 10,722.5 MW.

The Ashden India Renewable Energy Collective



Mother Changunabhai and daughter Patryacha Prada with the TLUD, a smokeless chulha

continued from page 1

Like many other Ashden awardees, Hemant is a member of various governmental and non-governmental advisory committees and regularly participates in round table discussions. "To be a representative of this Collective gives additional impact," he says. The Collective is now working on promoting the introduction of efficient cooking stoves, such as smokeless chulhas or biogas stoves, and of solar photovoltaic panels for basic home lighting and pumping water.

"We had discussions with officials of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare of the Government of India on how to introduce non-polluting cooking stoves," he says. "The question is, how can we help those who do not even have Rs 500 (US \$ 8) to pay for a smokeless chulha? Now India has many health care programmes, where people are given health cards with which they have a right to free hospitalization, vaccinations, and even transportation from home to the hospital or doctor. We proposed that a cooking stove becomes part of the package of the health card, so that each card-holder would become entitled to a stove. For the government, this would imply a very small cost outlay, as it would order thousands of systems. We are talking here about very large programmes."

The Health officials welcomed the idea, and proposed to explore giving smokeless chulhas to the 800,000 health workers that are employed in thousands of villages. They would demonstrate the benefits of the chulhas to the villagers, so that the system

gets accepted. Then, in the following phase, the scheme could be extended to include all village households. "We believe it would be a good starting point to build on," says Hemant. "Not only would it help the poor, but it would also generate a lot of employment opportunities. In addition we proposed that such a programme should also include the noon-meal schemes, the mid-day meals that are served in schools all over India where about 3,000 tonnes of meals are cooked each day, using mostly firewood as fuel." The Ministry of Human Resources Development officials are now also considering giving the schools smokeless chulhas.

On the lighting front the Collective is proposing something similar. Many State governments have schemes where the government provides subsidies for housing for the poor. But if that area of the country has no electricity, the houses are without light. "AuroRe was working with a consortium of NGOs called ODRC (Owner Driven Rehabilitation Collective) in Bihar where

we experimented first with this policy of house-linked light," says Hemant. People were given the incentive that if the houses are ready within a certain time frame, they will get one solar photovoltaic panel, a battery, three to four lights, and a socket for a radio and for the charging of their mobile phones for free. This kind of house-linked incentive can have a huge impact. As there are millions of houses that are constructed with the help of government subsidies, so copying this scheme to other parts of India is sure to work. We calculated that the additional burden for the government is less than Rs 5,000 (US \$ 80) per system, which is a small percentage of the house cost."

The Collective is also studying how to promote

solar systems as part of one of the many government employment generating schemes, such as under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. "This Act guarantees employment for everybody. The wages are paid through the local bank. This makes it possible to let the villagers take out small bank loans of Rs 5,000 to Rs 6,000 to pay for a solar system. The loan can be repaid in small automatic instalments, deducted from their wages," says Hemant.

The Ashden India Renewable Energy Collective has just started its work, and expectations are high. "We aim for a large impact," says Hemant.

In conversation with Carel

Smokeless chulhas

Smokeless cooking stoves come in many varieties. They use biomass as fuel, without causing harmful smoke and greenhouse gas emissions. The Top Lit Up Draft (TLUD) stove, in addition, produces charcoal, which can be used as soil amendment for gardening. This stove is available from EcoPro.



A meeting of the Ashden Renewable Energy Collective

Container housing: a construction revolution?

Manu is the Auroville architect who is most committed to using containers for living spaces. So far, he has made three different designs for container housing. The first two did not get off the ground, but his latest designs are being materialised in two houses being constructed in the International Zone.

Auroville Today: What are the advantages of using containers for housing?

Manu: In typical construction projects you have two big tasks. The first is to create a structure that withstands the elements, the second to finish it to the user's aesthetic satisfaction. The former typically takes about 75% of the project's time. The advantage of containers is that on day one, you have the first task nearly finished, especially if you are building a ground floor house. So all you need to do is to customize the structure.

One big advantage of using a container is the time saved, which translates into money saved. We estimate the new models which we are trying out in the International Zone will cost about Rs 9,500 a square metre, which is less than half the cost of conventional construction in Auroville. Overall, each of these container houses, which are about 90 square metres, will cost between 8 – 8.5 lakh rupees.

Then there is the aspect of mobility. In Auroville we often find people want to move from community to community. Housing becomes a major bottleneck because every time you move you have to convert it to a money value and find a 'buyer', which is also against the spirit of Auroville. This problem can be solved if the house itself is mobile. With containers, all you have



A container house under construction in the International Zone

to do is fold up the windows, put all your things inside and then put it on a truck. It is also a very secure structure if you are going away for some time.

Then again, there is the longevity factor. Because the steel is of such high quality, container homes will last up to 80 years if they are looked after properly, which compares very well with the 60 years' lifetime of conventional buildings. Of course, any additional steel used on the structure, for example, for making window

overhangs, would not be of the original Corten Steel and would be prone to corrosion and require to be painted every 4 years.

What do you have to do extra that you don't have to do with conventional buildings?

In conventional houses, the walls take care of insulation against the sun. Containers are very bad at doing that as the walls are metal and transmit the heat inside. So we need to take care of this by preferably insulating both the inside and the outside of the walls. In these houses we use recycled wood to clad the walls inside and outside and in between we use Thermocrete cement mix, which is a lightweight insulation.

Containers can be stacked vertically up to seven floors high to create a big boxlike structure. But if you want to create other forms we have found that containers are not so adaptable. So this is a drawback.

How different is your latest design from your earlier one for the Transit Lounge?

The Transit Lounge container house was 20 x 8 feet, and it sat on the ground with a similar-sized platform abutting it. For that size the cost was a bit too much: it worked out at about Rs.15,000 per square meter. Now we have lifted the container off the ground one storey by putting it on stilts, so at the ground level you get a stilted space. On top of the container we also put stilts and made a roof of Onduline sheets (recycled paper & cloth set in bitumen), so you also have a room above the container that works like a double roof to insulate against the sun. Also, the walls of the container are shaded by overhangs which go out 1.2 metres. In this way we have tripled the floor area of the house with the same size container, thereby bringing the cost down to about Rs. 9500 a square meter.

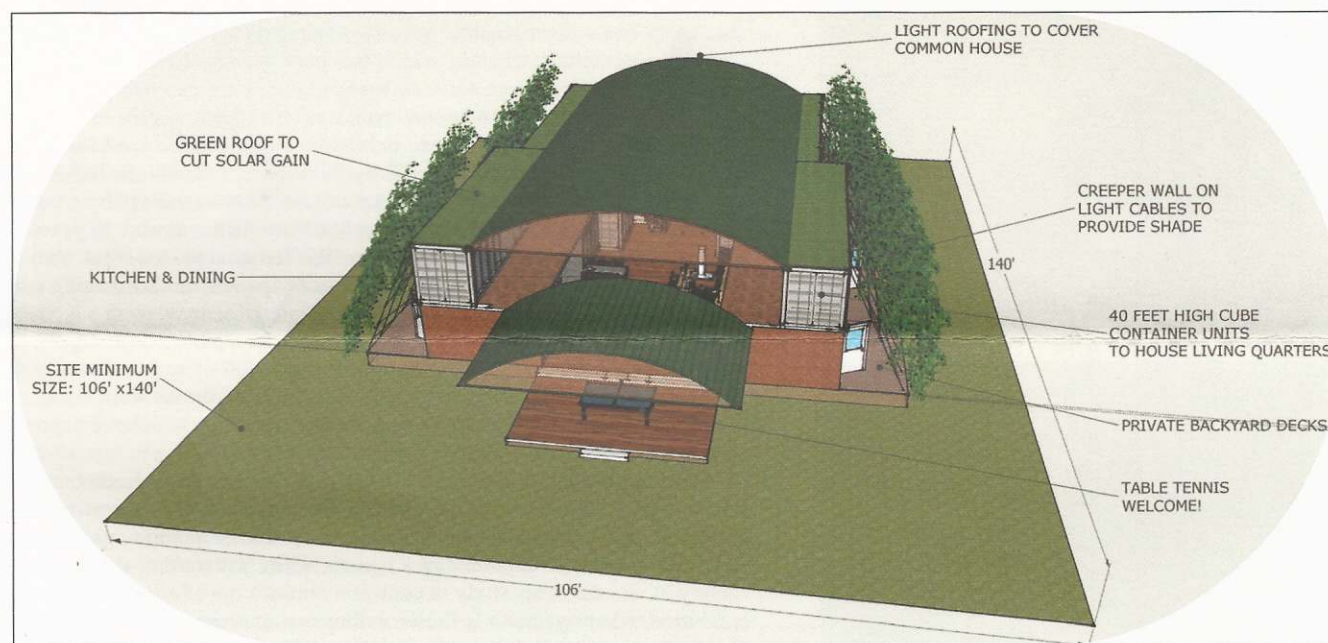
In India containers are being used for offices, but not for housing; these in Auroville are the first examples. Why?

In India the consciousness regarding insulated walls in housing is not developed enough to include them as a major factor in keeping your house cool in the summer. In the West, people believe that insulation can work!

If these two trial houses take off, do you see the possibility of doing many more in Auroville?

Yes. I am very happy that Krupa and Sumeet have taken this leap of faith when the Auroville system did not understand it. They deserve credit for this. They have already taken a lot of initiative to personalize their designs. Once people see this and realize that this is not just a metal box but it can be made into something like any other house, I think there will be a lot of people interested in following their example.

From an interview by Alan



Idea for a container community. Design: Manu

REFLECTION

Ecological, technological and magical thinking

Running beneath town planning and certain other issues which engage us in Auroville at present, at least three different kinds of thought processes can be detected. These are ecological, technological and magical thinking.

Ecological thinking is most obviously associated with the land and the biosystems in which we are embedded. The health and preservation of those biosystems is its core value, the yardstick by which our present lifestyle and proposed developments are to be judged. Technological thinking favours employing technology in a major way to improve our standard of living and to solve our problems. Obvious examples include projects like the proposed desalination plant and the ICICI proposal for a low-radiation grid.

Magical thinking requires us to behave and to develop Auroville according to particular belief systems which are not amenable to rational analysis but which may be in touch with a higher reality. Present examples would include the belief that the Galaxy Plan is a *yantra* and therefore that its main lines must be faithfully followed, and the conviction that we need to build the city quickly because,

once built, it will act as the means to transform our consciousness.

Each of these forms of thinking tends to be associated with a particular way of acting. Proponents of ecological thinking tend to favour small-scale, local solutions. Technological thinkers, on the other hand, favour large-scale projects and top-down decision-making because they dismiss the contributions of those who lack the required expertise. They also tend to be goal-oriented rather than interested in process, and very willing to change ground realities, like the landscape, to achieve their goals. Magical thinkers are more interested in the occult or supersensory dimension of Auroville. They disregard technological and ecological constraints which do not promote their vision, and they are also suspicious of the collective because it does not have the consciousness necessary to appreciate their belief systems.

Of course, the lines are not always so neatly drawn. Some technologists are also magical thinkers, and while a proposal like Gilles Boulicot's for solving the city's water needs is ecologically-based, it is also large-scale and would rely upon technology like GPS to make it workable. Then again, the famous Matrimandir Lake, which has aroused so much controversy over the years, today

unites in its support ecological, technological and magical thinkers, although each justifies it in their own way.

The water becomes muddy, however, when one mode of thinking masquerades as another. The original Galaxy Plan, for example, was heavily dependent upon technology to build its 15 storey megastructures and operate its moving sidewalks. Yet its proponents have always held it up as a prime example of a 'green city' because 50% of it is open space. Similarly, the proposed desalination plant, which is a prime example of technological thinking, is promoted as eco-friendly because its huge power needs are able to be supplied, at least partially, by wind turbines. Or, again, the magical thinkers for whom the Crown Road must form a perfect circle to maintain the township's *yantric* credentials sometimes justify this on the grounds that it makes for the more efficient laying of technological infrastructure.

The water is further muddied by people who opportunistically adopt one or the other perspective because it is convenient to promote or protect their self-interest. Thus, ecological arguments are often used by those who oppose development in their back yard, and technological 'quick fixes' are conve-

nient for those who distrust community process and want to force the pace and control the direction of community development.

In spite of the ambiguities, it's clear that these three distinct ways of looking at the world are often in collision. Michael Bonke's proposal to construct a hill from the earth excavated from the site of the Matrimandir lake and then put another lake on top is anathema to ecologists as it is seen as a typical technological top-down solution which takes no account of ground realities. They employ a similar argument to oppose the perfect city circles of the magical thinkers. Conversely, the ecologists' wish to retain as many trees as possible is seen as anti-development by the technologists and too earthbound and lacking in vision by the magical thinkers. For the latter, form should inspire, it should make us aware of other realities rather than being simply technologically-efficient or ecologically-correct. The Matrimandir and its sculpted environment is a prime example of this approach.

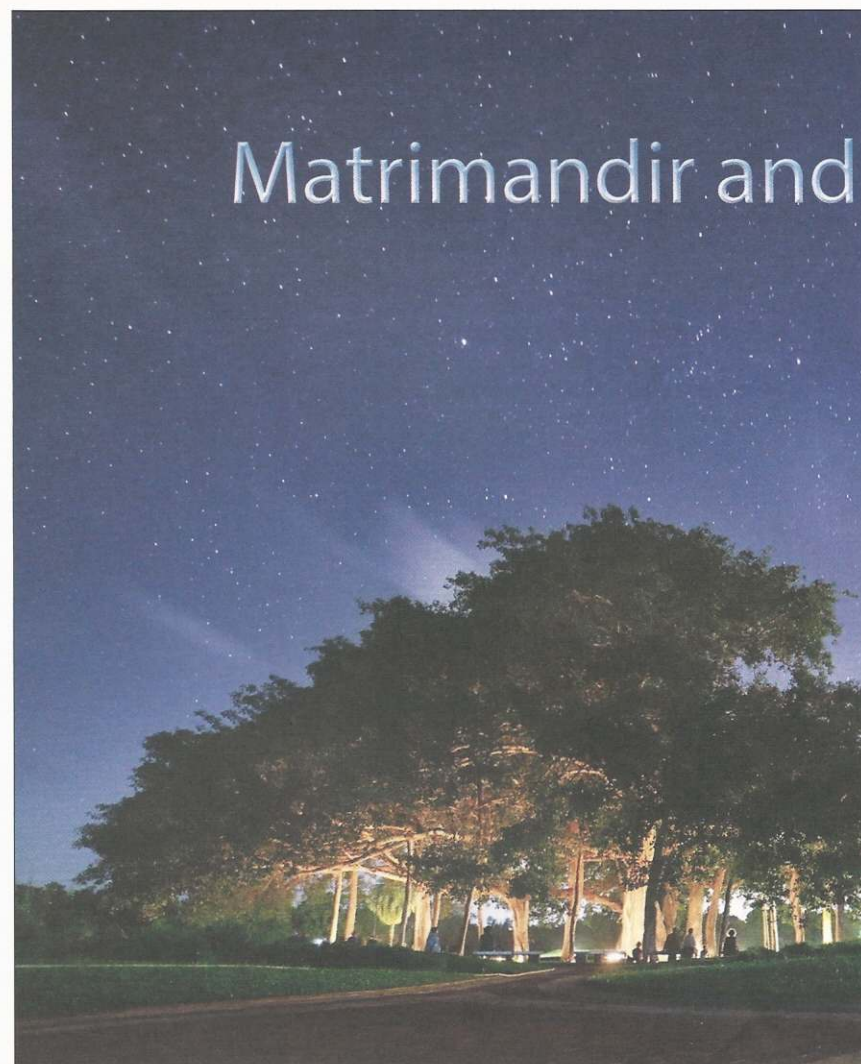
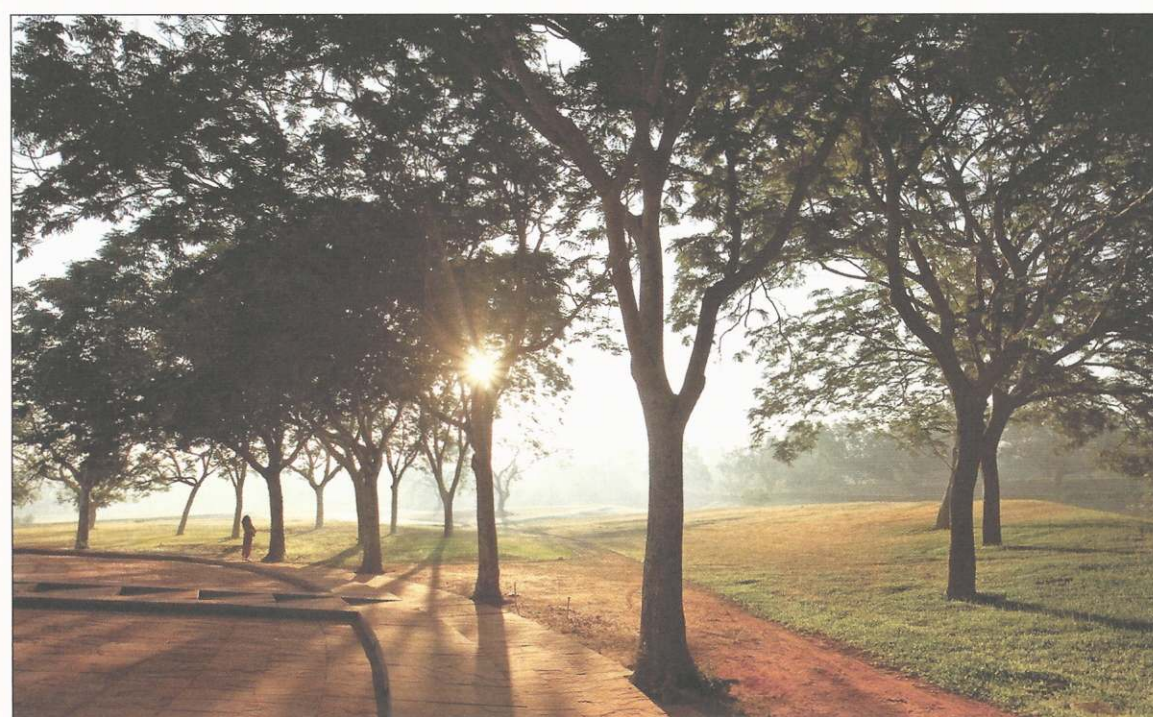
So how can we avoid the gridlock caused by the clash of these different perspectives? A beginning might be to see them in more relative terms. For my suspicion is that people are drawn to one

kind of thinking rather than another not because one is more objectively 'right' but because it is more right for them: it fits their personal dispositions. It is striking, for example, how many alpha-males are drawn to the technological perspective and how many ex-hippies can be found in the forests of Auroville. In other words, given our present level of consciousness in Auroville, what we are looking at here are differing tendencies, sensitivities, opinions, rather than absolute truths about how Auroville should develop.

I think that the most effective people in our community already realise this at some level and employ different perspectives as the need arises, rather than tying themselves exclusively to one or the other. I am certain that the Adyar project, for example, could not have succeeded if people like Joss had not been willing to meld ecology with technology and visionary thinking.

Hopefully, if we can move progressively from the separative mental consciousness towards a more integrative intuitive consciousness, this conflict of different perspectives will fall away, to be replaced by an inevitability of action best suited to the immediate situation, and to the deeper unfolding of Auroville.

Alan



As a photographer, how does one approach an iconic building like the Matrimandir which has been photographed so many times before? How does one avoid cliché? How can one help the viewer to see it and experience it afresh? This was the challenge for Ireno Guerri whose exhibition, *Matrimandir and the Park of Unity*, ran for some weeks in the Unity Pavilion last month. In fact, he does very well. This is partly due to the vast store of Matrimandir photos he could draw upon – he has been photographing Matrimandir for almost 30 years now, and over the last 12 years alone has taken 70,000 digital photos – but, above all, it is due to his ‘eye’, the way he perceives and experiences Matrimandir and its surroundings.

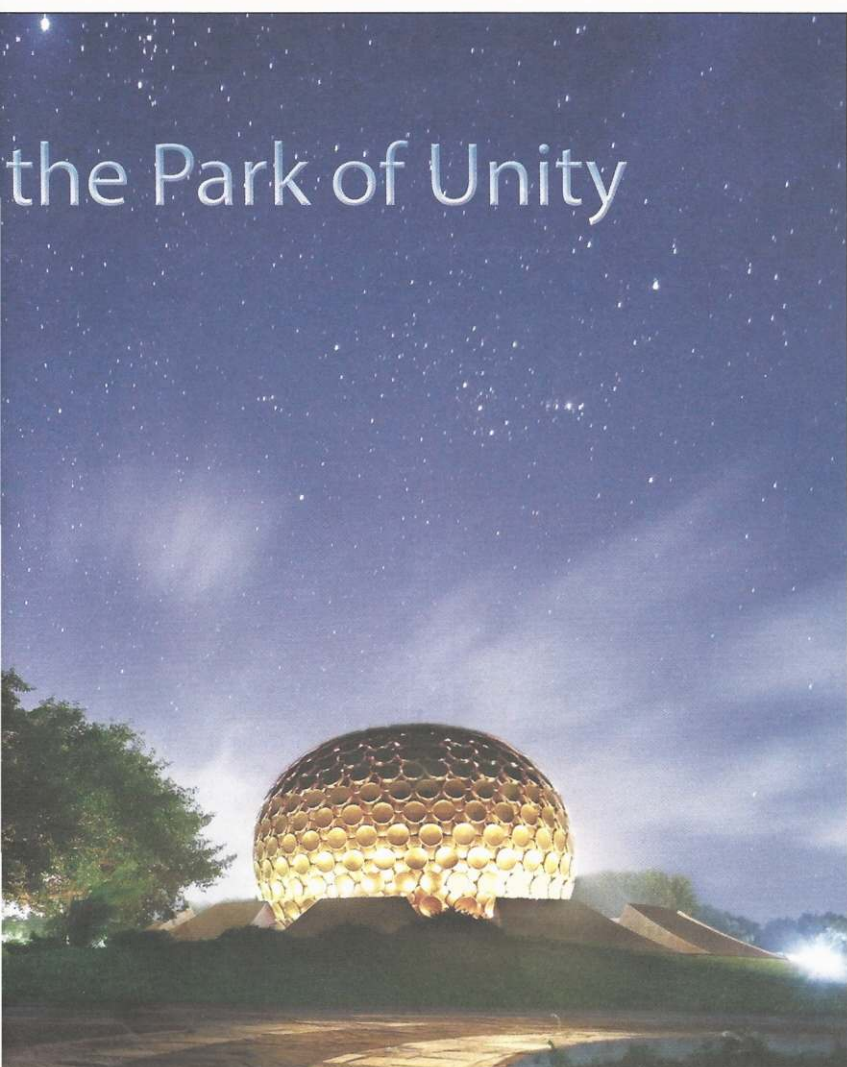
“I want to show that it’s an amazing place with a particular energy, a place which is always evolving, changing. Every day is full of new discoveries for a visual artist. Partly this is due to variations in the light, the weather, but it’s also because work is always going on, and the life situations which are happening around it are always different.”

One photo which shows this particularly well is a panoramic shot under the Banyan. Here numerous different stories are happening at the same time. One person is pressed against the trunk in deep contemplation while another descends a ladder after trimming a branch, while yet another stares up at the canopy in wonder. This study in contrasts reminds me of another photo in the exhibition, where a person is shown embracing an aerial root of the Banyan in deep concentration while a mother and her child playfully try to encircle another root with their arms. In fact, there’s a lot of humour in this exhibition, like the wonderful shot of the kids in the Amphitheatre forming a chain by holding on to each other’s t-shirts, the last one democratically holding out his hand to the dog which is running behind. Children, in fact, are everywhere: playing on the petals, crawling up the steps of the Matrimandir, dancing in the Park of Unity. “They are enjoying their own games,” says Ireno, “while, perhaps, the Matrimandir works on them at a level they are not aware of. For example, I never saw kids crying around the Matrimandir; it feels like they are really in harmony with something there.”

For children, the Matrimandir and the gardens are a wonderful playground – encapsulated in Ireno’s shot of the furry toys on top of the Urn or of the kids chasing each other across the rim of the Amphitheatre – rather than something



the Park of Unity



that has to be revered. This humanises what is often seen as a sacred space and helps us see it afresh. "I think Matrimandir is not just as an architectural monument; it's for humanity," explains Ireno. "I deliberately chose to exhibit many photos with children because I sympathize with the principle that in an ideal society the child should be placed at the very centre; every decision should take into consideration the wellbeing of the children. Honouring their presence at the Matrimandir is my small contribution toward that sentiment."

This is not to say that the 'transcendental' aspect is ignored in this exhibition – there are some extraordinary night shots of 'spaceship' Matrimandir as well as ethereal photos of the structure emerging through mist. However, the main emphasis is upon people – children, workers, tourists, VIPs, Aurovilians – each of whom approaches Matrimandir in their own way.

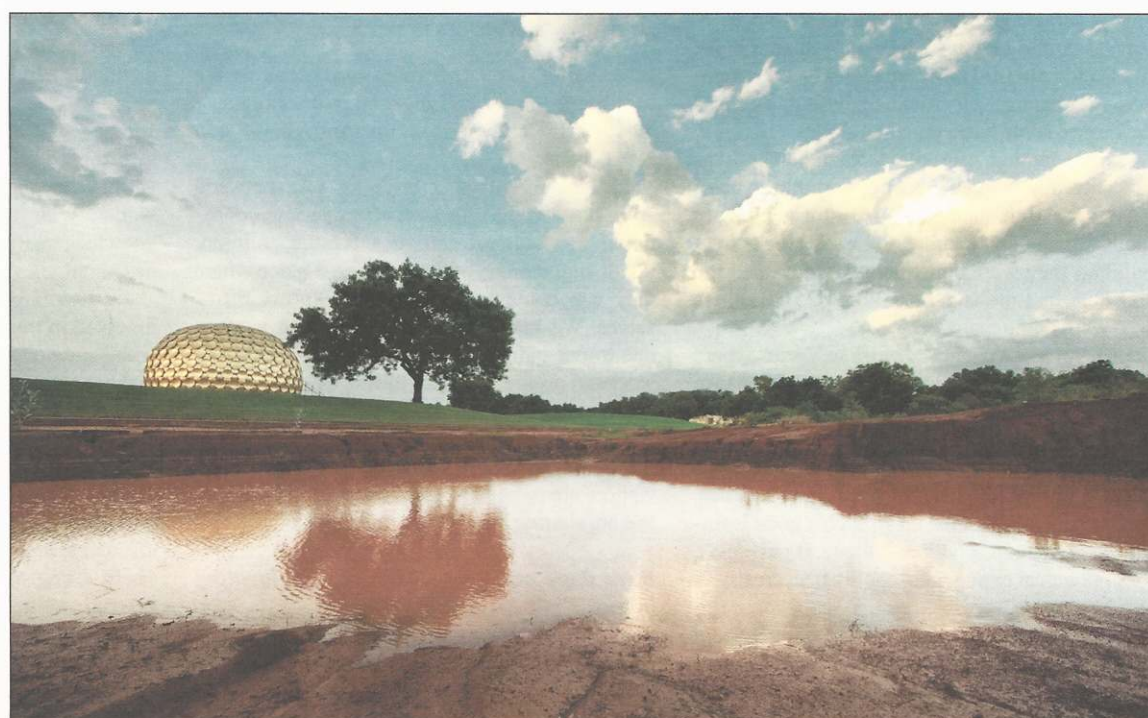
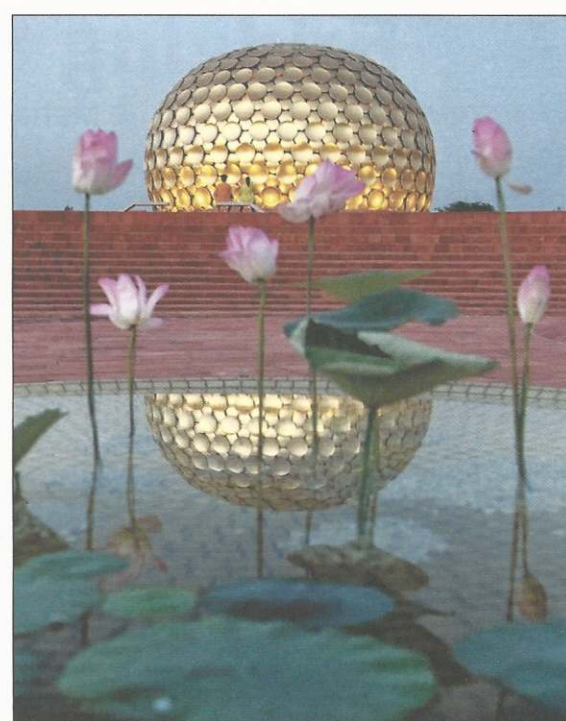
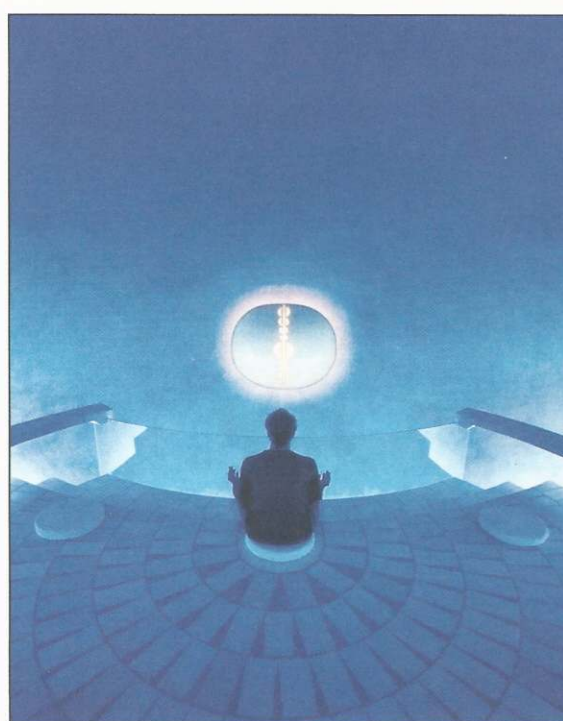
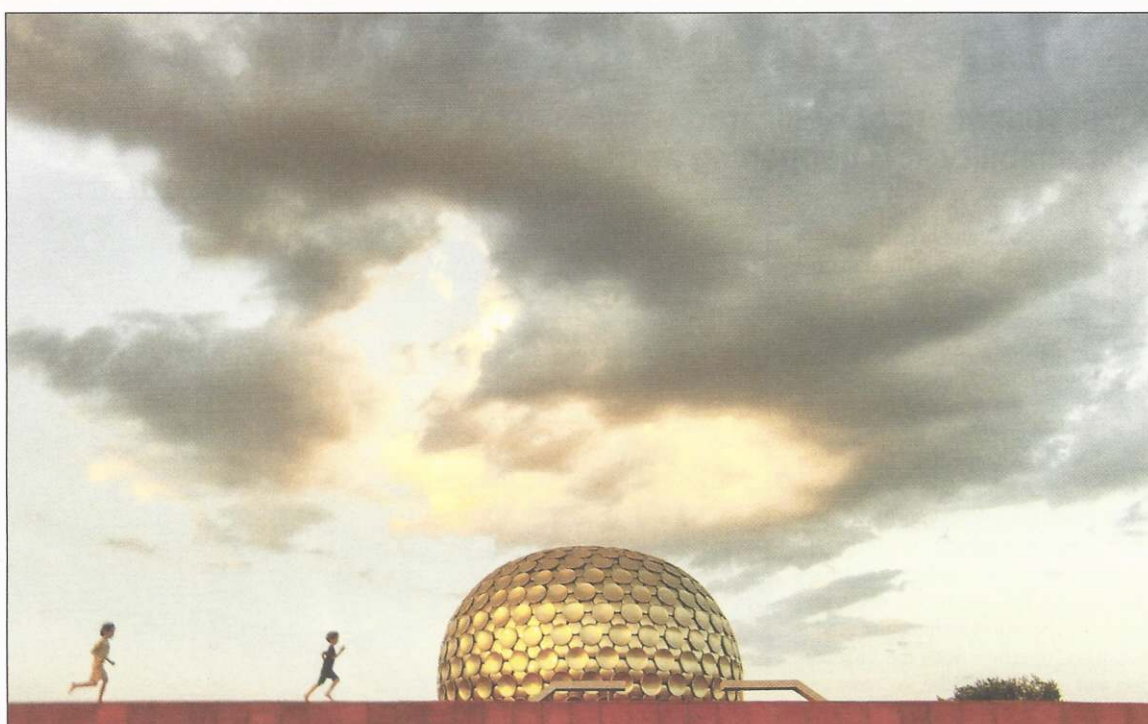
But Matrimandir also exists in a certain context. We are reminded of this by shots which show the golden globe seemingly emerging out of the primeval laterite, of photos taken through windows of the Town Hall and Matrimandir workshops, and of aerial views from the Town Hall and Citadines which recall the urban context: in the future, this will be the green and golden centre of a city. Then there are those photographs of the local workers which sometimes juxtapose two very different realities. One of my favourites is of a worker taking a nap on a golden disk. "He's a king," laughs Ireno, "because only a king sleeps on a golden bed."

In fact, as Ireno points out, the exhibition is also a homage to all those who have worked selflessly on the Matrimandir over the years, including the numerous local workers. "I know there have been conflicts around things like the design but I really believe everybody who is working there is trying their best. That is why, when I was making the selection for this exhibition, I chose those photos which show the most positive aspects of the Matrimandir – the beauty, the harmony and the unity between the people who work there and who visit the place."

From the overwhelmingly positive response to this exhibition it is clear that he has succeeded very well.

Alan

Many people have requested that a book be made out of this exhibition. If you would like more information about this project contact ireno@auroville.org.in



The Auroville Bamboo Centre finds its forte

After four years of dedicated work to establish a place in Auroville where bamboo can be acknowledged for its sustainability, it is happening at the Auroville Bamboo Centre.

It is a Sunday but the Auroville Bamboo Centre is buzzing with energy. It is the fifth and final day of the Centre's largest bamboo construction workshop to date. 88 students from the Mumbai D.Y. Patil College of Architecture are busy putting the finishing touches to their bamboo creations.

The Padmashree Dr. D.Y. Patil College of Architecture in Mumbai emphasises the integration of art, science and technology in order to advance students' understanding of architecture. The aim is to send out into India and the world architecture graduates who "overflow with the imagination and insatiable desire to create and play their crucial part in nation-building". Considering that the Auroville Bamboo Centre construction course fits well within the College aspirations, the faculty members proposed that the students visit Auroville and the Bamboo Centre to experience a setting completely different from that of their lives in Mumbai.

The students arrived in Auroville on February 13th, accompanied by four members of their college faculty. The first day's programme took place at the Auroville Visitors Centre, where the students were given an introduction to Auroville. They were also introduced to the architecture of Auroville by two of Auroville's architects, Suhasini and Manu. Over the next four days, the college students were put to work in six separate groups. With about 15 people in each group, each person was guided and allocated specific tasks by their group leader. These group leaders were made up of Aurovilians, Newcomers, volunteers and carpenters from the Auroville Bamboo Centre.

One group was guided by architect Peter



Students of the DY Patil College, Mumbai, in front of their geodesic bamboo dome

Anderschitz, who has been in Auroville since 1973. The bamboo construction workshop offered the opportunity for him to share his passion and knowledge of domes, which he sees as great spaces for small or large groups in Auroville. During the construction workshop, students had to overcome their initial resistance to the hugely demanding task of understanding the design, which is based on serious maths and geometry, but they did so beautifully and constructed a portable geodesic dome which can still be viewed at the Centre.

Another group was managed by the carpentry team of the Bamboo Centre, led by director Balu Ponnusamy and bamboo-carpenter Chandran.

Based on their initial idea, the students conceived an exquisite structure of a bamboo *mandir*, shaped like a terracotta water pot. The yurt team was led by volunteer Gerard, together with Newcomer Florent, who is part of the team at the Bamboo Centre. One of the resulting yurts is particularly interesting as it can be folded up and compressed for transporting. Furniture expert Walter, a Belgian Newcomer-to-be, helped with the construction of the yoga chair (which widens at the front to accommodate the lotus position).

Velu, a creative artist skilled in making bamboo instruments, together with Alessandro, a returning long-time volunteer and product designer from

Italy, guided another group to complete a large musical elephant. Valuable advice and support was given by Aurovillian architect Tony together with the team members Shiva, Ramesh and Murugan and Nick, another Newcomer-to-be who was coordinating the workshop.

The students were also treated to an evening at the Mohanam Cultural Centre in Sanjeevinagar and a bamboo percussion party for their last night at the Bamboo Centre. The students enjoyed every aspect of the experience – being in Auroville, working with bamboo and interacting with the Bamboo Centre team, especially with the carpenters and the women. This meeting of different cultures from within India may be said to be at the core of the spirit of the Centre. The students returned to Mumbai amazed that bamboo is not used more widely. The D.Y. Patil College of Architecture now plans to return with other groups of students on a regular basis.

This course is but one of the increasing number of requests, from within India as well as internationally, for the Bamboo Centre to give training. "Now the dream is to establish a bamboo forest in the Greenbelt for research and education so that Auroville could become part of the movement of the wonder grass bamboo. This is my deepest aspiration," says Balu, the co-founder of the Auroville Bamboo Centre.

The Bamboo Centre is finding its forte ...

Petra Mo

For enquiries please contact the Auroville Bamboo Centre, Kottakarai, Tamil Nadu 605111, India. or visit www.aurovillebamboocentre.org

PROFILE

Bridging Auroville and the local villages

An interview with Balu of the Mohanam Cultural Centre and the Bamboo Centre.

Auroville Today: How did you first become involved with Auroville?

Balu: I grew up in a village not far from Auroville, Sanjeevinagar. We were a farming family, but unfortunately I lost my father when I was a baby and never knew him. I felt some frustration that he left me alone, but at the same time, I feel that he is still behind me. I grew up with my grandfather in the same village; he was the man in my life. He worked in Auroville from a young age as a digger on the Matrimandir excavation. Eventually he had a team of 60-70 people working for him and worked on many projects in Auroville.

I came to Auroville for the first time when I was 12. My grandfather would start work very early because of the heat, and before school I walked from the village to the Matrimandir to bring him his lunch. I felt inspired by it. My grandfather would always tell me, "You don't have a father, you have to stand on your own legs." I would help him during my school holidays, and I also did other work – carpentry, nursery, gardening, electrical, painting – so I developed some basic practical skills.

Then another Aurovillian, Raman, who lives in Center Field, gave me an opportunity when I was in the 10th standard to help for about four months in making compressed earth blocks for a building they were constructing. He trained me and then had me supervise about 25-30 others who were doing that work.

Then I had a chance to work in Vérité, where I learned many things. I worked as a maintenance supervisor in the guest house for about three years, from about 1995-1998. Then I worked for about a year in Pitchandikulam forest with Joss, which was also a wonderful learning experience. I'm sure I would not have had such a good learning experience in school or college. It gave me a lot of practical experience, confidence, creativity and inspiration.

In 2000, Aurelio and I started both Svaram Music Centre and the Mohanam Cultural Centre in Sanjeevinagar. I worked with the Svaram Project for about 8 years, and was involved in all



its activities. Over five years ago, I took up the Mohanam project and have been developing it along with a good team of Aurovilians and Newcomers.

Mohanam plays a bridging role between Auroville and the village. It offers various educational and cultural activities for the children, youth, and women of the villages, a place where they can come to explore and express themselves. We have a kindergarten, which is more one-to-one individual care, and we have informal weekend programmes for music, singing, dance, theatre and other cultural activities. At the same time we try to inspire them to become involved in Auroville. Mohanam is also a place where many visitors are coming to learn about Tamil culture. We are sharing knowledge from both sides.

Were there other activities you were involved in?

I had the opportunity to travel to the United States a few times for the *International Youth Leadership Rites of Passage Program* developed

by Melissa Michaels. *Golden Bridge*, her Not-For-Profit organization, offers this work annually in Boulder, Colorado. That experience also made a big impact on my life. The one-month camp is a programme of healing and awakening through movement and dance. It is a process to find who you are on both spiritual and practical levels and it is offered to young people from all over the world every second year. This also gave me a lot of inspiration to learn about myself, express myself, to grow spiritually, to learn how to work together with other people. I have been working to bring this inspiration and some of these techniques, here to the Mohanam Centre to help the next generation.

Tell us about the Bamboo Centre.

The Auroville Bamboo Centre is an education and training centre. I started it first as a hobby, but then wanted to learn more about bamboo and started searching on the internet.

There were so many incredible things about bamboo! Auroville is about sustainability, and it seemed to me that bamboo could play a big role and be a part of the Auroville concept. I wanted to bring education about bamboo and brought various people together in Auroville who had worked with bamboo so they could share their knowledge with others. Now the Bamboo Centre has about six Aurovilians and Newcomers, and about 19 village people. About nine of them are involved in training and learning about working with bamboo for building construction, furniture-making, educational toys, and other products such as bamboo jewellery. We already have given training in bamboo construction to about 700 people from all over India as well as abroad.

We are still in an experimental phase, trying to find the right mix of materials and design for affordable housing. We have one building experiment going on here using bamboo with lime exterior walls and mud plastering inside. We have built a few bamboo houses in Auroville; we are always researching ways to improve the model and to do it in a more complete way. There is also a separate unit called 'Lively' which deals

with the commercial side of the furniture, toys and soap made from bamboo charcoal. We are also exploring making incense, and many other products can come out of this charcoal.

Now we are trying to find land as we would like to grow the bamboo we use in Auroville. It would be good to have the whole cycle here, from the seed to the timber to the product, so we would like to establish an educational bamboo forest and nursery.

There are great possibilities. What you see here has been done in about two years. I work about 10-12 hours a day, I am happy and enjoy my work. Every day I am learning more. There are valleys that you go through in the process, but I love it, and give thanks to the Mother and to Auroville for the opportunity to explore and create.

Are there other projects you are working on?

Together with a group of friends I am now trying to launch a youth magazine. We want to bring out the voice of the youth of the bioregion. I want it to be a magazine for sharing, not for complaining, about the influence that Auroville has had on the youth. I believe this would also help in bridging Auroville with the local population, develop mutual understanding, and find ways in which we can work and grow together. I want to give a better chance for the young people to become involved in Auroville, to encourage and inspire them.

From where do you get your inspiration?

I feel that the Mother is around me all the time, she is guiding me. Without her, I don't think I could do it. I have been given such wonderful opportunities, and I want to give others the same chance, to be one of her instruments to help others. There were many elder Aurovilians who have helped me, mentored me, and I give credit to them. In the same way I want to pass this on to others, so that Auroville too can receive their energy and grow through them.

Larry

Growing without and within

Theresa Grantham, a dynamic woman based in New Zealand, tells how she treasures her relation with Auroville.

A business woman by nature, Theresa has been in the fashion industry for 25 years. She has helped people run businesses and also supported young artists and musicians, marketing their products and showcasing their talent. Her work has always grown in synchronicity with her inner journey. Here she tells her story.

My first contact with Auroville

I decided to travel to India for the first time in 2003. It was the request of my father on his deathbed that I, being half-Indian, should visit India. As I prepared to organise my one-year trip I came across Auroville in a book. It said that Auroville was not a place for tourists. Although I thought of myself as a traveller rather than a tourist, I didn't put it on my wish list as a place to visit. And so I embarked on my journey.

During the last part of my trip I got on the wrong train and ended up in Pondicherry instead of Hyderabad. It was the most bizarre thing. The next morning I was walking down a street and I was literally guided to the Kalki store on Mission Street. I walked up the steps into Kalki and literally burst into tears because I was responding to some vibration. It wasn't even as I was seeing the products, but the feeling of the products.

A lovely gentleman patiently showed me around and I told him, "I want a containerload of all these products." He said it would be best to visit the units in Auroville directly. He put me into a 'tuk-tuk' and sent me to Maroma and Auroville Papers. I headed off, thinking Auroville was a little place, some sort of an ashram, and I would finish my business very quickly. But I didn't realise how big Auroville was.

Anyway, I was taken first to Maroma. I turned up without an appointment. While I waited I was reading about how their products are made and the



Theresa

philosophy of Auroville and Maroma. It sounded amazing. The atmosphere in Maroma was calm and gentle. Laura was absolutely lovely and showed me their comprehensive product range. It was hard to choose what to buy. I was beginning to get a sense of Auroville.

Then I went to Auroville Papers where I met Luisa. She had a yogic serenity and the beautiful work that they were doing was inspiring. They were working on creating a small notebook and everyone was involved, everyone's opinion seemed to count, which I thought was wonderful. I ordered many of their products.

This was my first visit to Auroville, very short, and very sweet. I felt I was guided to be there.

When I got back to New Zealand I read a lot

more about Auroville. The shipment had arrived and I put up a stall in a wonderful Saturday farmer's market. People were very enthusiastic and interested in the products and in Auroville. After that I kept coming back to Auroville practically every year and that's how my business of selling Auroville products started. However, after some 5 or 6 years of doing this it wasn't enough for me. I wanted to do something else. My relation with Auroville brought me to the point where I started a process of self-inquiry.

Self-inquiry

Firstly, I asked myself how can I do business differently, how can I be honest with everything I do? I wanted to create a different business model. Secondly, where did my food come from, in what soil is it grown, how is it grown? I wanted to know what I was putting into my body. Thirdly, since I have been heavily involved in the fashion industry for thirty years, I really wanted to know where my clothing came from. With cheaper and cheaper stuff becoming available in the market, I wondered at what cost the clothes had become so inexpensive. What had been sacrificed along the way?

During my visit to Auroville in 2009, I woke up one morning and got a very clear message – I knew it was from The Mother – a very clear message that I was not to stay in Auroville any longer. So I went to stay in Mother's House in Pondicherry for a month. There I met an extraordinary young man, Nishin Nathwani. I told him about my idea and he said he wanted to do the exactly same thing. We sat a whole month talking about ideas. We came up together with the name *Atma Vichara*. We talked a lot about The Mother and Sri Aurobindo. It was quite an inspirational month for me.

All of this was still at the concept level. More had to be brought down concretely. During my visit to Auroville in 2011, I met Gijs who knew all about the good and not so great aspects of the cotton

industry. We talked a lot since we shared common principles and interest in the field of clothing and textiles. He also wanted to bring sustainability to the people involved in the value chain of a product. So *Atma Vichara* grew more clear to all of us. We wanted to make products from organically and ethically-grown cotton and set up a business model that would be an example of business done consciously. Yet we still needed more grounding.

This is when I met Cindy, a volunteer in Auroville. This highly-skilled woman ripped all our ideas apart and shuffled them about. Now *Atma Vichara* is a non-profit organisation and it has a sales company called *Seed to Self*. The vision is to have a project which supports farmers, Auroville units and everybody involved in the supply chain. We want to partner with people like Gijs and units like Rangoli and we would love to work with the Auroville Village Action Group by supporting the women to make our garments for us. Everything has to be shared, including profits. The aim is to have total transparency in the business. Even our bank account will be up for scrutiny.

Auroville is a beautiful space. The beauty of the people, the architecture and the Matrimandir right in the middle is all incredibly special. I absolutely love the community lifestyle. What I would like to see happen is for Auroville to embrace people like me who need to be in Auroville but also in the outside world. People like us have a tremendous amount of experience which we can offer to the community and I think this would help in its organizational growth.

In 2001, I just knew that my life had to change. It was time to take responsibility for what was happening to me and I went on a search for truth. India was part of that journey. I had many experiences in extraordinary places and each of those places was sacred and taught me something. Auroville was one of them, a place where the divine led me.

In conversation with Mandakini

Dreamer's Café

The Visitors Centre is a busy place. But one corner is a little oasis of peace and quiet, a space where people sip their coffee meditatively at a long wooden counter while gazing out on frangipani and bamboos. Welcome to the recently-opened 'Dreamer's Café', a coffee shop with a difference.

"Nicole, who manages the Visitors' Centre, had requested us quite a long time ago to make a coffee shop here because the Visitors' Centre cafeteria was getting overloaded," explains 'Coffee Ideas' Marc, the manager and chief inspiration behind the project. "I had already worked there for one year at the Visitors' Center so I understood the set-up well and knew that a coffee shop would perfectly complement the present facilities."

But how to design it? Marc had plenty of experience of running coffee shops in Barcelona, but he wanted this one to be different. "When we started thinking about this project two years ago, there was a lot of talk about low-cost housing which could be dismantled and moved, and one of the ideas was to use containers." 'Container pollution' is a problem. Thousands of containers clutter up yards all over the world because containers have an expiry date, beyond which they cannot be used for transporting goods. But this doesn't mean that these containers are useless. Containers are made of special steel which is very hard and strong, yet easy to cut and weld. They are very secure, can be shifted easily, and it is much cheaper and faster to convert them into homes or offices than using conventional building methods.

So Marc and his team decided to 'upcycle' a used six metre long container which they purchased for one lakh rupees by turning it into a coffee shop. "We needed a lot of cross-ventilation so we opened up the two sides and also created a serving counter. Our main concern in this climate was insu-

lation, so we made sure the container was protected from direct sunlight by a roof, and we insulated the walls with 10 centimetres of thermocol and bison board."

The aluminium roof is not yet insulated. The café plans to be off the grid, so in the future solar panels will be fitted on the roof and this will create some insulation. "The idea behind reusing a container and being off the grid is to minimize our carbon footprint," says Marc. "For the same reason we use old kallimadu wood on the floor, old teak on the serving counter and our tables are partly made of recycled motorcycle parts. We also chose a coffee machine that uses far less energy than usual because there are no special electronic components – our coffee is made by hand – and we use energy-efficient LED lights." The environmentally-positive picture is completed by a rainwater harvesting system which ensures that all the water which falls on the roof is channelled to a nearby catchment pond.

But this, after all, is a coffee shop. So what's the coffee like? Well, there's quite a choice – South Indian, Italian espresso, 'French press', drip and, for the brave of heart, Turkish coffee. "It's an educational thing," says Marc, "we want to introduce people to types of coffee they wouldn't normally drink." He explains that each method of coffee-making gives a different taste and they have selected the best coffees for each different method they use. "It's

Fact file

Cost of the entire structure/interiors (48 sq. mts.) = Rs 12 lakh (approx. US \$ 20,000) Equipment = Rs 4 lakhs (approx. US \$ 6,500). To take it fully off the grid will cost Rs 5 – 6 lakhs. (approx. US \$ 8 -10,000) For more information: coffeeideas@auroville.org.in



Marc (left) and his team at Dreamer's Café

also very important to us that all our coffees are certified by UTZ, a Dutch organization that helps farmers move towards better sustainable practices."

Sustainability can also be seen in the way the café promotes local craftsmen and products. All the plates and cups are made by a local potter. "It was a challenge for him. For the espresso cups we needed very specific dimensions – there is a lot of science involved in making coffee – and it took him some time to understand this. Now people are so impressed by his cups and plates that we are selling them and he is doing well. All the croissants, cakes etc. are made by Auroville bakers and bakers – we have some amazing cooks – and, of course, we also sell our own coffee varieties."

But the most important thing for Marc is not the design or the products, not even the coffee; it is the creation of a certain atmosphere, ambience. "For me, the atmosphere is primary. People arrive here hot and tired, sometimes after a very long journey, so we want to create an environment where everybody can feel at home. That's why we have this long counter where people

can look out on a landscape which invites them to be quiet."

Once they are relaxed, they are more ready to talk and ask questions. "We spend a lot of time talking to visitors; it is a priority for us to answer all the queries that we get. We explain Auroville, but we also get feedback from them about their experiences here. These are not always positive: often people feel they have been treated in a way they feel is rough, impolite. So in the coffee shop we try to instil another way of dealing with people. I want the people who come here to feel very comfortable and well-treated."

Marc believes that while a lot of interesting things are happening in the 'new India', the investment in the human element is often missing. "People think that if they have the right equipment and location that's all they need for a successful coffee shop. But the way you deal with the customers is as important as the quality of the product. Here we have a fantastic team. Selvam, the manager, has been with me for many years, Amudha knows exactly how to handle the customers, and Victoria, the young Russian

barista, has a passion for coffee.

"So when people get inspired by this place – and a lot of people are interested in duplicating this idea – we offer them a package. We will train them here for a month in coffee-making and customer service while we construct a container coffee shop at their chosen location. When they return they are immediately in business."

Finally, what about that name, 'Dreamer's Café'. Where did it come from? "About six years ago we were out visiting in India and one morning our kids said they would organize breakfast for us. We went for a walk and when we came back there was this beautiful spread: the kids called it the 'Dreamer's Café'. I thought it was a beautiful name and it suits Auroville very well, because if you are not a dreamer here you can hardly survive in this environment. At the same time you can't just dream; you have to bring your ideas down to earth. So in our logo the word 'dreamers' is on top, but underneath is a very strong and down-to-earth cup of coffee!"

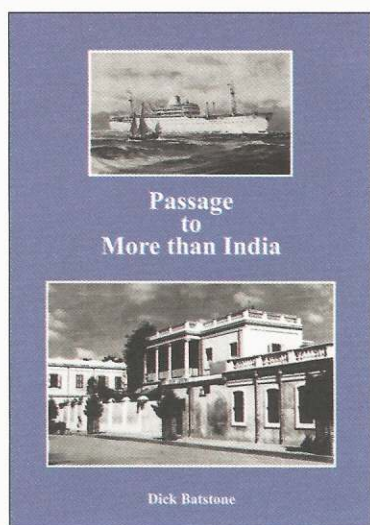
Alan

Passage to More than India

Sri Aurobindo, in reply to a would-be biographer, noted that "my life... has not been on the surface for men to see". The same could be said of Dick Batstone, the author of this book. For while Dick has been, among other things, a teacher, a bookseller and, indeed, a voyager to far-off lands, his real work has been a voyage within; a lifelong quest to discover himself, to discover his soul and the meaning of existence on earth.

In that quest, Dick's stay in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1959-60, which is the subject of this book, was a turning-point. For it was here that he met the Mother who, along with the works of Sri Aurobindo, became his doorway to greater knowledge.

Such accounts can be dry and of very limited interest. But Dick's book,



which is based upon a journal he kept during that visit, sparkles with wit and with minutely-observed portraits of the people he met on his adventurous voyage to India (travelling steerage in the bowels of a French ex-troop ship) and in the by-lanes of Pondicherry. It is also a beautifully-observed portrait of the Ashram at a certain moment in time, when the Mother was still relatively accessible and hopes were high for the imminent transformation of her body and of life on earth.

More than anything else, however, this journal is a wonderful account of what happens when an individual's psychic being begins to open in the most propitious circumstances; how, time after time, Dick meets the right person at the right moment to allay his doubts and deepen his understanding of a yoga

which has no readymade road-map. This, among other things, makes the book a fine introduction to some of the key aspects of the yoga.

But the book is also an account of an inner struggle. As Dick is increasingly drawn into the world of the Ashram and the Integral Yoga, he is confronted by a choice. Should he return to his family commitments in England or should he stay in the Ashram for the rest of his life, a possibility which the Mother opens to him. The book describes how, over a period of 15 months and with the help of the Mother, he discovers the answer.

The Epilogue brings the story up-to-date. Dick returns to England, but maintains his connection with the Ashram by becoming the U.K. distributor of Ashram publications and the Honorary Secretary of the Sri Aurobindo Centre in

London. Later, Auroville becomes more and more his prime focus. He sends a sample of earth to go in the urn at the inauguration of Auroville, he co-founds Auroville International U.K., and gives talks and organizes events to raise funds for the development of the community. He has subsequently visited a number of times.

If style is the man, then the quiet, limpid prose of this book says a lot about the writer. Read it not only to learn about the Integral Yoga and the Ashram during a certain era, but also to savour a style of writing and a sensibility which is fast going extinct.

Alan

Passage to More than India by Dick Batstone. Published by Prisma, 2013. Price in India Rs 300. Contact prisma@auroville.org.in

On Sri Aurobindo's Savitri Part Two

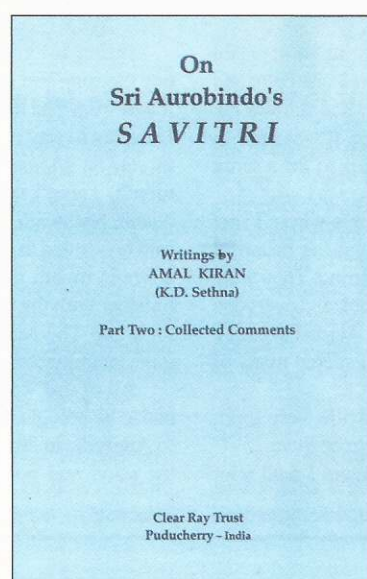
Volume one of this two-volume set of Amal Kiran's writings on *Savitri* consisted of completed essays. This second volume contains passages that have been extracted from various books, articles or letters. Compiled by Shradhdhavan, the writings are organized thematically in six sections: (1) Amal Kiran's relation with the poem; (2) how to read *Savitri*; (3) particular passages, lines, words; (4) general comments on *Savitri*; (5) talks and letters on poetry; and (6) miscellaneous. There is also a useful index of lines in *Savitri* on which the author has commented, as well as a general index.

I have found many jewels in this collection, which not only gave me deeper insights into *Savitri* but also enriched my *sadhana*. Amal was a master writer and poet and one of the most knowledgeable persons about *Savitri* – he had for a long time corresponded with Sri Aurobindo about it – so this collection provides the reader with rich insights into the poem and the nature of its poetry.

The first section discusses some of Amal's personal experiences relating to the poem and his work on it. We find some helpful hints about how one can use *Savitri* as a means of spiritual growth. There is also an interesting discussion of Amal's interactions with the Mother regarding his work

with proof-reading and editorial corrections relating to *Savitri*. We gain insights into not only Amal's editorial work with the poem, but also into the Mother's attitudes towards his work and her way of working with him. Perhaps most essentially, we get a feel for Amal's inner relation with Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, which in various ways was articulated by remarkable lines in the poem.

In section three, there are many helpful analyses of particular passages and lines. Here we find many of Amal's favorite lines in the poem, along with some inkling of what special significance he attributed to them. But what I enjoyed most was his analysis of the rhythm and sounds of particular lines, and while this is sometimes a bit technical, it can give a fuller appreciation of the poem. We also find in this section an explanation of some perplexing or easily misunderstood lines. In a supplement at the end of the section, there



is a useful reference to the passages in *Savitri* that bear on modern physics. One thing that there was surprisingly little of in this section, however, was explanations of the particular planes of consciousness with which certain lines were associated.

In the fourth section we find some commentary about the nature of *mantra* as it is exemplified in *Savitri*, as well as the standing of the poem in relation to other great epics such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. There is also some interesting discussion about the Indian writing of English poetry, and how it can powerfully convey to the world the mystical experience

and knowledge that India possesses.

In section five there is a long letter written to a critic of *Savitri* in which Amal responds to a series of criticisms. This letter helps us to better appreciate various qualities and characteristics of the poem. He deals with such issues as its massive length, its use

of epithets, its abstractness and the difficulty of comprehension. In other letters he compares lines in *Savitri* with some of the great Romantic poets.

In the last section I found some of the most valuable comments of the entire book, in part because they pertained more generally to the spiritual life than to specific aspects of *Savitri*. For example, in two different passages the author makes some comments about *sadhana* which were summed up by the line, "All can be done if the God-touch is there." Perhaps my favorite passage in the book is in answer to the question, "What is it to be an Aurobindonian?" Amal notes that it is one who "carries on the practice of the presence of Sri Aurobindo and aspires to catch as much as possible the traits which we discern as typical of him." Then, to catch the essence of those traits, he quotes the lines from *Savitri*: "A poised serenity of tranquil strength, / A wide unshaken look on time's unrest."

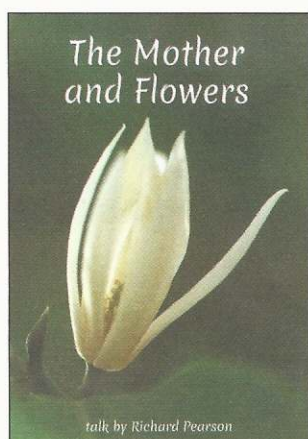
This is perhaps a book primarily for *Savitri* lovers, those who want to penetrate deeply into its inexhaustible store of wisdom and delight, but surely all who read it will be elevated by its treasures.

Larry

On Sri Aurobindo's Savitri Part Two is published by Clear Ray Trust, Pondicherry, and available at SABDA and at Savitri Bhavan. Price in India Rs. 380

The Mother and Flowers

This DVD recording of a talk given by Richard at Savitri Bhavan in 2008 presents stories and anecdotes of the Mother's experiences and work with flowers, including her personal interactions with Richard regarding the naming of the flowers for the Matrimandir Gardens. Richard, who joined the Ashram in 1946 when he was just 11 years old, studied Botany in the Ashram School, and later taught Nature History in the Ashram's Science Laboratory, a work he continues to this day. He has also been associated with Auroville since its inauguration. He was one of the principal compilers of the book, *Flowers and their Messages*, and worked together with Mother as she gave spiritual significances to many of the flowers for Auroville and the Matrimandir Gardens. While very modest, he is perhaps the best authority on the spiritual significances of flowers, with a botanical knowledge integrated with a deep experiential and inner contact with flowers and with nature generally. All of this experience is brought together and evident in this beautiful talk.



The presentation is for the most part made up of a series of short little stories that convey in a living way the inner contact with flowers that each one of us can develop, as well as the spiritual refinement, beauty and delight that this contact brings with it.

Richard speaks about the early years of Mother's work with flowers. He mentions an anecdote published in the book *Champakal Speaks*, in which in 1929 the Mother would play a game with several *sadhaks* of

forming sentences from the significances of various flowers. Already at that time she had named more than 100 flowers. He also mentions a French book published in 1955 that had the Mother's significances of more than 600 flowers and discusses Mother's work with Tara in which the Mother made commentaries on the significances of many of the flowers. Richard gives some examples of how these commentaries provide insights into the significances of the flowers that are missed and sometimes even misrepresented by the names alone, and reveal something

of Mother's humour and understanding of human frailties and everyday life.

Also discussed in this talk is Richard's work with Mother in naming and selecting the main flowers for the 12 gardens of the Matrimandir. He notes that the flowers that Mother named at that time were "absolutely linked with the growth of Auroville. It was a golden era... There were flowers which I have never seen afterwards. And Mother named each one for Auroville." He mentions several flowers which Mother would often give to people who were interested in or working for Auroville, such as "Godhead," and "Beauty of Supramental Love," and discusses various flowers which were named for Auroville. He notes that in the early 1970s, concerned that many people who would read the book *Flowers and Their Messages* would not be familiar with Auroville, she gave an alternative name for the flowers which had "Auroville" in their name, in most cases by replacing the word "Auroville" with "New Creation." These new names were then put in the first edition of the book, but both names have been included in the later colour photograph edition.

Richard relates other interesting anecdotes, such as two flowers whose significances were

proposed by Sri Aurobindo and later sanctioned by Mother – "Devotional attitude" and "Pure spiritual surrender" – and two interesting comments made by Sri Aurobindo about flowers, namely that "flowers are the moment's representation of things that are eternal," and that "flowers are very psychic, but they express it through silence and beauty."

Towards the end, Richard briefly goes through some of the flowers which had been plucked and arranged on the table before him, giving their significances, and a little explanation or anecdote related to the flower. His inner contact with the flowers and their spiritual meanings, together with his understanding of their physical characteristics – the plants on which they grow, their colours and markings and fragrances, their flowering seasons – help us to appreciate the beauty and significances of flowers which, as he explains, are states of consciousness, steps in our progress towards the Divine.

Larry

The DVD The Mother and Flowers is 78 minutes long and produced by Wisdom-Splendour, Auroville. It is available from wisdom-splendour.org, Auroville Boutique in Pondicherry and Freeland Bookshop in Auroville. Price in India Rs 399.

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