

# Auroville Today

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PHOTO PALETTE. EXHIBITED IN 'THE MYSTIC SOUL OF NATURE' AT PITANGA IN FEBRUARY 2011

## Is there anybody there?

Communication between our major working groups and the rest of the community is frequently insufficient and sometimes non-existent. Why? And what can be done about it?

Communication or, rather, the lack of it, is in the news again. Over the past weeks, some of our major working groups have been accused of withholding information on issues like the recent strike at Matrimandir and an escalating dispute in an Auroville community or, in the case of our town planning group, of presenting the community with a *fait accompli* regarding the next phase of road construction. The frustration expressed by many people over these issues is exacerbated by the fact that many working groups do not publish regular reports or hold regular public information meetings, and that emails sent to them are frequently not acknowledged.

In fact, our major working groups are increasingly seen as remote bureaucratic entities, making decisions behind closed doors to further the interests or perspective of a certain clique. This image, which is not necessarily true, generates both frustration and apathy in the larger community. "I think groups have become more removed from the collective so people are not participating that much. We have a lot to do to regain the trust of the community," says Renu, who is part of the communication platform of L'Avenir d'Auroville. "I feel this whole community and all the various groups need to go through a very intensive training in communication skills," noted another Aurovilian on Auronet.

Communication issues in Auroville are nothing new. In fact, in regard to our major working groups there seems to be a recurring pattern. When a new

group is appointed it states that, unlike its predecessor, it will be a transparent communication channel with the larger community. It starts well, but within a few months the reports start dropping off and within six months the line has frequently gone dead.

To be fair, this is not the case for all groups. The Budget Coordination Committee (BCC) publishes regular monthly updates on the community's financial status. Actually, during the week in which I am writing this article, there has been one public information meeting on housing involving presentations from four of our major working groups, and the Funds and Asset Management Committee (FAMC) broke a long information drought and published reports of their work in the *News & Notes*.

### What limits communication?

However, all the groups interviewed by Auroville Today acknowledge that they could do better, and sometimes a lot better, when it comes to communicating with the larger community. So what's the problem?

Jesse, a member of the Auroville Council, happens to have superb communication skills. During the early months of the group's tenure, he, Jean-Yves and Nicole published a number of informative and entertaining reports on their activities. Then...silence. What happened? "There are two things which limit communication. The first is that we don't have enough time and energy to do it. In this job you spend the first three months working

out what you are meant to be doing and after that you're so overwhelmed, saturated, by everything that you have to deal with that there's no time to write about it."

"We get between 50 and 60 e-mails a day addressed to L'Avenir," explains Renu, "and that's a lot to have to go through and prioritize. People like to complain about issues with their neighbours and they want us to deal with them, even though it's not our job. It takes the complainant about three minutes to send us an email, but if we decide to take up the matter it can take ten people several meetings and a lot of thought before we can adequately respond. This is a misuse of email and of our time."

"The other limiting factor," continues Jesse, "is the presence in the community of people who are waiting to attack and undermine whatever we try to do. It's a negative weakness which I'd never seen before. Dealing with these people is extremely difficult because they have no interest in doing the right thing, they're just following their own agenda, even if it's at the expense of Auroville."

"So when you enter the Council you are suddenly placed on the battlefield and you have to be very guarded in your communication. It's like walking into a room where you have many friends but one person hates you, so everything you do and say is done with that person in mind. This is what all the working groups are operating with. In addition, you cannot publicize very sensitive issues between Aurovilians, and you have to consider the

sensibilities of the government administration which are often quite different from those of a spiritually-oriented community. All of this does not make for clear and easy communication."

Chali from the Working Committee agrees with Jesse's assessment. And she adds, "When certain things are in process I think it is counterproductive to be communicating too much because things can change very quickly. Also, it can create a situation where everybody weighs in with their own opinion about what should be done and this creates more confusion in situations which are already confused and complicated enough."

The 'weighing in with opinions' often happens publicly on Auronet. Chali, like many other members of major working groups, no longer bothers to log in because she feels the level of discourse is often very low, uninformed and even insulting. Divya, another member of the Working Committee, points out that disgruntled people often use Auronet to attack major working groups, or they send them very aggressive emails, "and this breaks down all possibility of communication".

Part of the frustration vented at the major working groups derives from their perceived lack of accountability, partly it's because there is no body to which one can appeal their decisions, and partly it is based upon what they represent - a form of authority - rather than upon anything specific they have said or done, but it doesn't make it any easier to deal with.

*continued on page 2*

- Communications in the villages
- A hospice learning experience
- A new direction for the Life Education Centre

pages 2 - 3

- Towards a work, maintenance and contribution policy
- Who makes policies?
- Running a guesthouse

pages 4 - 5

- The Auroville marathon 2011
- The Eco Music festival
- Training women masons at the Institute of Applied Technology

pages 6 - 7

- Seeking the Auroville Sound: Svaram workshop exhibition at the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture

page 8



continued from page 1

In fact, it tends to create a fortress mentality in the groups attacked, which makes the petitioners even more frustrated. And so the cycle continues.

#### A grey line

Renu, however, has a somewhat different take on what's going on. "Some people don't necessarily have Auroville's best interests at heart, so some information is delicate to put out because it would be misused. But it's a very grey line and I'm often very conflicted about not communicating certain things which I think the community should know about. After all, if you don't say anything you are providing room for the spread of rumours and innuendo. Groups also tend to feel they can get a lot more done if they don't have to ask permission for everything, but it's not a very sound way to grow. So I have to constantly ask myself, do I want to get something done quickly or do I want to further the larger purpose of Auroville, which is all about cooperation and unity."

Renu is particularly sensitive on this score as the previous L'Avenir d'Auroville and its predecessors had acquired a reputation for forging ahead with their own ideological agenda without consulting the community. In fact, Renu is only too aware that information is power. "If I look around Auroville and even at my group, everybody's hanging on to a little bit of information because it gives them some form of power. It's very unhealthy."

#### What kind of information?

But it's not only the lack of regular information which people in the larger community complain about; it's also the kind of information which the groups provide. Most group reports, for example, simply list what has been done or decided, often in a very summary way. There is no explanation of how decisions were arrived at, or whether there were disagreements within the group concerning a course of action. And it's almost unheard of for a group to admit that they made a mistake.

The Working Committee members say they would have no problem in doing this. In fact, Chali recalls that they did apologise to the community early in their term for their hasty decision that the Secretary could publish an advertisement about land sale and exchange in the newspapers. But Renu believes that the general failure to admit to differences within the group or to making blunders is part of a growing trend in Auroville "where we in groups want to appear more professional than we really are. I think it's a big mistake because by doing this we really separate ourselves from the rest of the community. For example, recently there was some confusion in our group concerning the next phase of the Crown Road construction. I told the

group we should express our confusion, we should tell the community, but I was told we can't do that. People are frightened to look stupid."

However, information is not always withheld deliberately. The ability to write a comprehensive and comprehensible report on a group's activities involves a skill-set which is rare in Auroville. Annemarie, one of the moderators of Auronet, recalls that a few years ago the Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC) was putting out very regular reports which were well-written and informative. "But after that person left, communication with the community completely broke down because nobody else in the group had her communication skills. Only now does it seem to have found a replacement."

Manoj, the other moderator of Auronet, sees this as symptomatic of a larger situation. "As a community we have gone through the phase of purely physical development, then came the second phase of developing our vitality through our commercial activities and our finances. The mental layer is only forming now. So when it comes to the practical aspect of communication, which requires the mental ability to look at, analyse and express ideas, we lack people who can do this."

"At the same time, there is a growing pressure from the community for more communication and engagement. This reflects a larger shift in the world where the whole paradigm of communication is changing from one-way communication to engaging people in a conversation."

In this context, Renu notes that the working groups also have difficulties in processing community feedback. "We haven't yet found a way of understanding and translating what's been expressed by the larger community into a real response from the working groups. The result is that people in the larger community often stop giving feedback because they don't get a response or don't see the groups acting upon it."

#### Solutions

The challenge of improving communication between our major working groups and the community seems formidable. Can anything be done to improve the situation?

Some things are already happening. Chali of the Working Committee is aware that their reports often touch only the tip of the iceberg, but says that if somebody wants more information they can always contact them personally. (She also notes that every email sent to them receives a reply.) Meanwhile, Renu is putting all information relevant to town planning on a database which will be made available to all interested parties.

From an organizational point of view, it seems wise to include in each group's mandate the respon-

sibility to publish monthly reports in the *News & Notes*. But who will ensure that this will happen? And who will write them? At present, only L'Avenir has members whose responsibility is communication. Most other major groups, while acknowledging the need to improve communication, are unconvinced that someone in the group should be solely dedicated to this task, pointing out that they are already overworked. This, and the dearth of good communicators, suggests we need to set up a trained secretariat to assist the major groups in writing regular reports.

General meetings are often cited as being ineffective in terms of communicating information because the presentations are sometimes ill-prepared and the meetings are often hijacked by a few people intent on venting their grievances. But even when a meeting is run well, it's often difficult for participants to grasp all aspects of an issue and for a working group to extract information which can be translated into useful action: the feedback tends to be diffuse, contradictory or uninformed. To remedy this, Ulli of the FAMC suggests that general information meetings could be organized differently. "Before the meeting you could send out a one page information sheet on the topic. Then the actual meeting could begin with a 'fish-bowl' discussion where a few people with deep knowledge, but possibly different perspectives, debate the issue. Once people have listened to what they have said, they would get a chance to ask questions and make suggestions. Hopefully, this would result in the work group concerned expanding its understanding and performing better."

#### Can technology help?

People like Ulli and Manoj also believe that technology can assist in improving communication within the community. Manoj believes that the electronic media can help in the emergence of a collective understanding and consensus. While he acknowledges that the tone of postings on Auronet can sometimes be quite raw, he believes that groups like SOMA waste management are doing an excellent job by posting good educational materials and encouraging feedback. Ulli, who is at present supervising the migration to a new Google electronic mail programme, explains how, among other things, it will allow people in different locations to work on the same document and for group discussions to be more easily followed and archived.

Both Ulli and Manoj acknowledge, however, that while the tools are a help in improving communication, they are not the solution. For if people don't want to communicate, or fear communicating or don't see why they should, the finest electronic tools in the world are useless. As Manoj puts it, "The tools are there but they haven't made us into a communi-

cation culture. For that to happen, we need a paradigm shift in how we perceive and communicate with each other." He explains that one of the biggest changes brought about by the explosion of information technology in the larger world is that the mass public is now looked upon as a place where you can harness knowledge. "However, in Auroville the mass is still considered by some people as unintelligent, the lowest common denominator, a body which cannot be trusted with the 'purity' of certain ideas and ideals. We have to change this if communication is to improve. But how to do this? This is the question that we are facing daily at Auronet."

#### New approach needed

We are no longer an extended family of 500 people and it's much harder to know and feel part of a community of over 2,000 people. As Renu points out, this requires a new approach to communication, an approach which we have yet to discover. But this shouldn't stop us taking the first steps towards more conscious and respectful communication. The prerequisite is building, or rebuilding, the trust between us and dismantling the suspicion and fear which our present patterns of communication tend to amplify rather than reduce. How to do this?

On the one hand, this requires the working groups to be much more open with each other and with the community. They could do this through the simple courtesy of answering individuals' emails (a one-liner is sometimes enough to defuse a situation), and through sharing with the community not only their decisions but also the restraints they are labouring under, as well as their uncertainties and confusions. Making yourself vulnerable is never easy but this is a very powerful way of building community understanding and support. This also implies that the groups begin to perceive the larger community not as a threat, as a brake upon development or consciousness-lowering force but, potentially at least, as an intelligent body from which wisdom can be gleaned.

But this can only happen if individuals in the larger community take responsibility for informing themselves better before sounding-off on Auronet or bombarding working groups with aggressive emails; when they offer constructive support rather than criticism to groups struggling with intractable issues; and when they stop projecting their own problems with authority on to the groups.

Perhaps, one day, we will succeed in enlarging our consciousness to the point where there is no longer 'us' and 'them', no 'others', but simply many aspects of the self. Then communication will become as effortless, as natural, as breathing. One day ...

Alan

## New communications in the villages

**While internet and computer uptake still has much scope to grow in the villages, mobile phones have become an integrated part of daily life, transcending classes and education levels.**

India made international headlines last year when it was claimed that the country now has more people with mobile phones than toilets. An article had highlighted slums in Mumbai with no running water, but where families have four or five phones. How has the ready availability and affordability of communications technology affected life in the villages around Auroville?

Mobile phones have been readily embraced locally, and most adult family members will have their own phone. Shankar, from Edaiyanchavady village, says, "Even my mother, who is uneducated, has a phone. My brothers and I bought it for her, and showed her the on and off buttons. We can ring her to let her know when we are not coming home for dinner."

Shankar claims that mobile phones have been primarily a positive force for communication and village relationships. "When something bad, like a death, used to happen, we would have to find a person from the Dalit area, who would go around and tell all the people, because dalits do the distasteful jobs in our village. If I had gone to tell people, they would say 'it's bad you are coming'. Now, we can just call people on the mobile and tell them."

Village youths claim communication between lovers is one of the main profit-making avenues for mobile phone companies. "There is more romance now," says Shankar. "Girls and boys can communicate without their parents' knowledge." Lakshmi [name changed, eds.], a 19-year-old girl who lives in a nearby village and attends college in Pondicherry, says that 'almost all' the girls in her first

year class at college have phones that have been given to them by their boyfriends, including her. "Our boyfriends buy the phone and they pay for the recharge. We usually hide the phone from our parents. In the home, we will cover ourselves with a bedsheet and chat by SMS with our lover until it is late. Parents think we are sleeping. Some girls use their phones at college during the day, and then give it to a friend to mind in the evenings, so that their parents will not find it. The friend will bring it to college in the morning. I exchange about 200 messages per day with my boyfriend. It's mostly just 'Where are you? What did you eat? What do you like and don't like?' With my girlfriends, we clarify doubts about our studies during exam time and tell the page number of text books for information."

Previously, about four houses per street had a landline phone, but most households now have cancelled these phones because mobiles offer greater benefits and better value for money. Lakshmi says that her grandmother had a landline that her extended family used, but this is obsolete now. "For just Rs 1500, my father bought a mobile phone with a camera, bluetooth, memory card and free messaging. Even touch screen phones are now only about Rs 3,000."

Lakshmi says her family is typical in that all the family members over 16 years have a mobile phone. Her father gave his old phone to her mother, but

her mother only uses it to call her father if he is late. "My father thinks mobile phones are good. If I'm late from college, I have to call him and let him know. During monsoon time, the school can ring and let him know if it is closed due to flooding, so that my sisters should not go."

Lakshmi says that before getting a phone she only communicated with about five friends, but now she feels she has more friends because she messages regularly with 35 people. She explains that some girls even get new friends or boyfriends via a 'wrong call' - where young men will randomly call numbers in the hope of speaking with young women and making friends with them. "My friends do that - receive calls from boys they don't know. One young man rang me, and said 'your voice is so sweet' and said he liked my way of speaking. Another person rang me again and again. Eventually, my boyfriend took the phone and scolded them. My girlfriend also took a wrong call from a boy who said she had a sweet voice. He said he was a cinema actor in Chennai. She was speaking with him daily. He travelled to Pondy and they met. We told her at college 'This is not good. If your boyfriend finds out, you will be fighting.'"

Villagers generally take pre-paid phones and will spend about Rs 50-100 per month. Many men have two SIM cards - one each for official and personal purposes. Because SMS chatting is very popular with youths, they

will often buy a 'booster' - which means that for an extra Rs 27 per month, they can send 6000 free messages. Shankar points out that only literate people use this option, and they will tend to write in Tamil but with English letters. "We try to use up all the free messages each month, so we will forward a lot of messages to all our friends. We will share comedy jokes, and send important information about disasters abroad, swine flu, exercise tips, unhealthy food, or an appeal for blood. By forwarding, this information can get out to thousands of people within minutes. Also, messaging is very useful to send information to the cricket team about practice timings and matches. I usually use all of my 6000 free messages each month." Lakshmi says that girls use up most of their message allocation through 'wishing' messages that exhort the recipient to have a good day, or sweet dreams.

Shankar points out some of the drawbacks of mobile phones, such as unwanted calls from promotional companies, calls at inconvenient times, and the fact that 'terrorists are using them'. But he claims the positives far outweigh the negatives. "If there is a road accident, someone will pick up the injured person's phone and ring people in the contacts to notify the relatives. This happened to a friend, and the people rang me. The accident took place near his village which is some distance from me, but I rang the village and told them, and they went quickly to my

friend." He also points out that mobile phones more easily facilitate 'escapes' (elopements between lovers). "Before, the boy had to send messages through a friend about where he would wait for the girl. Now, the boy and girl coordinate via the phone. But the number of escapes is going down now, as families begin to accept love relationships and then turn them into arranged marriages."

Internet and email usage is less of a phenomenon in the villages. Only a few houses have a computer or internet connection. Lakshmi says that girls are not allowed to go to internet shops, as their parents are worried they are 'roaming' and will get a bad name. There are no computers for students in her college, so assignments are all hand-written. Shankar says he is probably typical of educated boys in his village, in that he got an email ID a few years ago, which was facilitated by his brother who was working in an office with internet access. "He would print out emails I had received and would bring them home. I would hand-write my responses, and then he would type and send them the next day. It was a good way for me to keep in contact with the foreigners who funded my postgraduate studies." Now that Shankar has an office job, he maintains his own email, and facilitates his girlfriend's email. He is often on Yahoo Chat, and occasionally on Facebook. "Only a few village mates are on Facebook. It's mostly friends from college or people I know through Auroville, no village girls."

All people feel a mobile phone is necessary," says Shankar. "It's a basic need now."

Lesley



## A hospice learning experience

At the end of January, forty three people participated in a three day workshop at Arka to learn about end of life care. This covered pain management, grieving and dying.

John, Fran and Flo had come, at their own expense, from San Francisco where they had set up Hospice Care homes. They had been invited to inform us about hospice management and end of life care, knowledge which Auroville badly needs.

The situation is worrying. Auroville has no regular ambulance service, no rooms for convalescent care, no coordinated health or visiting care and no quiet place where one can pass away peacefully. Yet there are 146 people over the age of 65 and the numbers will only increase.

Most Western and quite a few Indian Aurovilians have no family here and in time of need are dependent on whom they know in the community. If they are Newcomers, of a shy disposition, or maybe not very popular, their potential circle of helpers may be very small. It is time that caring for the sick and for those at the end of their lives is organized centrally.

In this context, the timing of this workshop seemed perfect and the response was heart-warming. On the first day, the feelings of the carer and the dying person were discussed, both of which could be extremely confusing and painful. The second day was a practical one, with demonstrations of how to feed, clean and move the sick person. The third day included information about the symptoms of impen-



Fran addressing the hospice workshop participants at Arka.

ing death and how to cope with the emotions it brings up in the carers. The making of a will was also discussed as such situations can be complicated in Auroville.

The workshop concluded with discussing the potential organization of a Carer's Group in Auroville. Many people offered their support.

At times during the three days the emotions that came up were intense, but the team leaders skilfully showed us how to handle them in a creative way. Audrey and Marlenka, who had organized the course, also said how

impressed they were with the leaders' ability to constantly communicate and share with each other. "We hope to bring this attitude to our caring in Auroville. Aurovilians need to be humble about what they don't know," said Audrey. One of the course leaders made an interesting comment. "I have never been anywhere with so much energy in the air. This may be a drawback as there could be too many chiefs here for the number of Indians."

The good news is that since last month the health care situation is changing. On February 21st, The

Mother's birthday, the foundation stone was laid of the first phase of a new Integral Health Centre located on the Crown Road opposite Surrender. The building will also have a nursing home. Another development is that as a result of this workshop, a dozen people signed-up for a basic practical course in care for the terminally-ill. And the Life Education staff from Kottakarai are setting up a nursing training course which will be tailored towards training full-time care attendants from the villages, as well as being open to Aurovilians.

Dianna

## New direction for the Life Education Center

The Life Education Centre is celebrating its 20th anniversary with a new focus. Marijke, Zerina and Harini explain.

The Life Education Centre (LEC), an independent unit under Village Action, was set up to teach vocational skills such as tailoring, crochet, sewing, computing, and typing to young women from the surrounding villages, as well as functional skills such as maths, Tamil, English and food-processing. The Centre, moreover, functions as a therapeutic learning environment for young women allowing them to come into closer contact with themselves and each other in dealing with life's problems. Raising self-esteem and self-confidence are intrinsic to the pulse of the LEC.

"In the villages the women are still treated badly, and the LEC fulfils a role in helping them," says Marijke. She explains: "The LEC has been working on core quality empowerment. Core quality is the quality you bring because the core is your heart. You can talk about education, about a lot of things which are coming to you, but your heart is what it is all about — with this heart and the qualities you have you can do something with your life." She enumerates some of these qualities: persistence, courage, sincerity, and the power of self-organizing. "These qualities are independent of formal education; when one has developed them, it helps one to get through the difficult stages in one's life."

Over the years, the LEC has increasingly concentrated on young women. "We started with mixed groups," says Zerina. "But the boys didn't come regularly and dropped out as soon as they got a small job, like painting or carpentry. Also they didn't like the group discussions that much: they found it difficult to open up. The girls, too, were not comfortable speaking up in front of the boys. So the focus shifted to girls. We thought



LEC students with teacher Zerina (standing third from left)

that this was an important development because girls have fewer opportunities. Boys can go back to school, or find jobs more easily."

"One of the problems is alcoholism in the family," says Zerina. "The father drinks and beats the mother, the mother runs off; the girls do not know what to do. We ask the girls to analyze the problem in group discussions and suggest solutions. We have seen that in those discussions many ideas come up. The sharing of problems also gives a lot of moral support. For those who do not want to talk in front of the group, we provide personal counselling sessions."

Another aspect of the LEC work is the mother-daughter project. "Often the girls talk about the difficulties they are having with their mothers. They feel they are not getting support from them. We realised we should be doing something in this area, for the mother's sup-

port is very important," says Marijke. "We began by interviewing the mothers; then we started conducting sessions, first with the daughters, later also with the mothers. At the beginning it was very difficult; the mothers were quick to find fault with their daughters, often humiliating them in front of the other mothers and the girls. It slowly began to improve; we asked them 'What are the qualities you like in your daughter. Who is stitching your clothes?' After a couple of sessions we were able to explain to them that they should allow their daughters to continue on to higher education and not take them out of school. This was something that they accepted," says Harini. Marijke added, "This took courage from the mothers because many of the fathers and brothers are against it. The encouragement came from these group meetings."

But over the years the number of students has dropped. "When I joined the LEC in 1994 there were about 30 students," says Zerina. "This year six girls are finishing their first year of our three year programme. We have been seeing this change happening over the years because the needs of the students are changing."

"It's a very positive development," says Harini. "Nowadays students are coming for what they need. They want a better life. We encourage the students to go for higher education and to start doing things for themselves and finding a suitable job. We are also looking for work opportunities in Auroville for them, at places where their input would be appreciated and honoured."

"One of those areas," says Marijke, "is home care. This is an undeveloped area in Auroville. If an Aurovillian falls ill, he or she has to depend on family, friends or volunteers for care. That may work for a few weeks, but we have experienced that the goodwill doesn't last much longer. Moreover, we observed that the volunteers lack professional skills. One elderly Aurovillian, who has a small pension from abroad, had no other option than to hire a professional nurse from outside Auroville for Rs 30,000 a month! Recently we conducted a survey and spoke to a few people with experience in healthcare. The overwhelming conclusion of the survey was that there is a huge need for people who can provide home care. Taking all these inputs into account, we decided to create a curriculum for home care training and we will make that a new focal point for the LEC. Once we have developed the programme, the training will be available to everyone, not just the village girls."

Elaine

## In brief

### Acquiring city lands

The Working Committee reported its frustration that Aurovilians who individually or whose family own land within the City area wish to sell it at prices or exchange it at rates of exchange that are as unreasonable as outsiders are asking. A positive example was set by a late member of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram who donated the land he owned in Auroville through a legacy to the Auroville Foundation.

### Police presence

A team of five special officers will patrol the main roads in the Auroville area from 11 pm to 5 am in view of the many unknown individuals and groups who use the roads especially at the weekends and holidays.

### New Roads

L'Avenir d'Auroville has decided to continue the paving of the Crown Road past Surrender and to pave the Vikas radial up to Creativity community. At the crossing of the Crown Road and the Vikas radial a roundabout will be built to reduce speed and sound pollution and improve security.

### Google migration

After extensive testing and an in-depth evaluation of the services offered by Google, and the overwhelming positive feedback received from the Auroville users, the Auronet Team has decided to switch over to Google Corporate Services. Auroville has been recognised by Google as an Educational Institution and therefore will be given access to these services at zero cost. The switch-over took place in February.

### Waste management

Eco-Service has found a new site for an Auroville landfill. L'Avenir d'Auroville has requested to use this site for a maximum of six months. Eco-Service is in discussion with companies in India to study the feasibility, costs and necessity for Auroville to operate a long-term sanitary landfill. During the previous six months period, Auroville produced on average 6,000 kg of waste per month.

### Varanasi weavers

An exhibition on the work of Upasana Design Studio in helping the Varanasi weavers' community to regain their livelihood by promoting responsible fashion and encouraging the rediscovery of a part of India's heritage was held at Maison Colombani in Pondicherry.

### New publications

Two new and updated publications are available at Auroville bookshops and from prisma@auroville.org.in. They are the new *Auroville Handbook* and the new *Auroville Architecture* book. Savitri Bhavan has published an updated reprint of the book 'Darshan, Remembering Sweet Mother and Sri Aurobindo,' containing personal stories about The Mother and the beginning of Auroville. Contact savitribhavan@auroville.org.in.

### Unending education portal

A beta version of the Unending Education Portal is online at [www.edu.aurovilleportal.org](http://www.edu.aurovilleportal.org). Its objective is to provide a virtual teacher's centre where teaching material and teachers experiences can be shared. The Portal aims at becoming a valuable resource for educators in Auroville and elsewhere.



# Towards a work, maintenance and contribution policy?

In November 2010, the Budget Coordination Committee (BCC) published the draft of a Work, Maintenance and Contribution Policy in the Auroville News. Auroville Today asked the BCC for an update. Divya and Lyle, two of its members, agreed to be interviewed but clarified that their views do not represent the BCC as a whole, as there is still no agreement on all proposals.

**Auroville Today: What is the Auroville maintenance situation today?**

**Lyle:** As of January 2011, Auroville City Services provides maintenances to 347 people working full-time and to 177 people working part-time. Calculating at what we call 'a full-time equivalent', this means that 437 people out of an adult Auroville population of about 1400 people, or 33%, are working full-time for City Services and receive a community maintenance. The others either work for other Auroville units or are self-supporting.

In January 2011, our budget for full and part-time maintenance was slightly over Rs 25 lakhs a month. On average the maintenance was Rs 5,800 a month. To be added to that are lunch and Pour Tous allowances, and payments we make to the Auroville Health Fund. If we take all this into account, the BCC pays around Rs 8,000 a month per person towards community maintenance.

**Divya:** In addition, the BCC pays children's and students' maintenance and funds a number of activities which are consequently 'free' for Aurovilians. For example, Aurovilians do not pay fees for Auroville schools or pay for access to cultural events. Security, access to a well-maintained forest environment, and quite a number of other services are free or accessible at a nominal fee.

**Professor Dr. Henk Thomas and chartered accountant Manuel Thomas mentioned in an interview with AVToday [see issue # 259, January 2011] that the Auroville maintenances have not kept up with the pace of inflation in India.**

**Divya:** That's true. The Indian Income Tax contains an income tax exemption limit which the government raises periodically because of inflation. Those whose income is below that limit do not pay tax. For the financial year 2010-2011, the limit was Rs 190,000 (for women) and Rs 160,000 (for men); for the year 2011-2012 it will be Rs 200,000 and Rs 180,000 respectively. This translates to Rs 15,000 a month (for men). The Auroville maintenance doesn't even approach this figure.

**Lyle:** The Government of India is effectively saying that Rs 15,000/month is a basic income. And we agree that this should be the basic income level for an Aurovillian. But there is no way we can pay this. In fact, we are eating into our reserves. In April 2010, our reserves were Rs 277 lakhs. If we do not now increase the budget, we expect the reserves to fall to Rs 244 lakhs by March 2011; they would further drop to 195 lakhs by March 2012. But if we now increase the budget by 10%, we project that our reserves will fall to Rs 111 lakhs by March 2012, unless our income increases more than last year. This is an untenable situation. Yet, it has become very difficult to live on a maintenance nowadays; you have to be incredibly frugal and give up all the small luxuries such as eating out, even at an Auroville restaurant.

**Divya:** There is another concern. Our reserves are invested and the interest – about 50 lakhs this year – form a substantial part of the income of the City Services. But if we need to use the reserves, for example for buying land, the interest will diminish or even disappear altogether. That will heavily impact the income and then we won't even be able to sustain the present budget. This is alarming!

**So what do you propose to do?**

**Lyle:** The community maintenance accounts for 60% of all the budgets allocated by the BCC. So here is the dilemma: if income does not increase and we increase the maintenance, we have to cut other budgets, cut into reserves, or substantially change our organisation. Cutting into reserves is not a sustainable solution.

**Two to three years ago, the BCC invited proposals for so-called 'capital grants', grants to purchase moveable assets. How can the BCC pay for such grants if there is insufficient money now for increase of maintenance?**

**Lyle:** We have given capital grants because at the time we had a surplus. This is no longer the case. The primary objective of the BCC is the maintenance of Auroville. As long as the maintenances are not sufficient, I do not see how we can justify paying any capital grants.

**Can you explain what you mean by 'substantially change our organisation'?**

**Lyle:** One aspect is the efficiency of Auroville's working groups. Would it make sense to reduce the number of working groups? Would it be possible to have working groups functioning more efficiently with fewer people, and more of

those working full-time? Working groups have traditionally been set-up on a representational, not on an operational basis where we say 'we need 'x' people with 'y' qualifications to do the job'. I have a feeling that some working groups could work as well with half the number of people.

Also Auroville's services should look into their functioning to see if the same amount of work can be done by less people. Take education, for example. In Auroville's educational set-up, there is often a ratio of one teacher to five children or less; in some cases the ratio is one to one. From the educational perspective, this is probably good; from the economic, it isn't.

**So if there are less people on the maintenance list, the others could get more?**

**Lyle:** Yes. Moreover, if we gave people a better maintenance, so that they could devote their entire energies to the job instead of doing other work to find additional income, they would be able to do a better job. If you teach during the day and in the evening you do translations to make extra money, you don't have time to prepare your next day classes and the quality of your teaching will suffer.

**Divya:** This seeking for extra income is happening increasingly. If one's maintenance is not enough, especially if one has a family with children, one is forced to seek income elsewhere. This may even lead people to only give a token presence at the job which pays the maintenance.

City Service's Maintenance		
* paid to individual	Full time 35 h/week minimum	Part time 15 h/week minimum
** paid to respective unit		
* Cash	2300	1160
* Kind	3500	1740
** Pour Tous	1000	500
** Lunch	860	860
** Health	280	280
** Electricity	150	150
Total	8090	4690

**You mentioned increasing the income as an alternative. Is this a realistic possibility?**

**Lyle:** In the financial year 2009-2010, all the commercial units together were giving about 50% of their net profits as declared on their balance sheets. In this financial year, 2010-2011, this will probably fall to 40%. It's good that as a group the commercial units exceed the minimum of 33% (because a few give much more than the minimum). But out of 150 units that made a profit, about 50 did not pay the minimum expected contribution.

**Is something being done about non-contributing units?**

**Divya:** The BCC went to the Auroville Board of Commerce (ABC) with the list of non-contributing units, but so far there has been no tangible result. But this is not a job for the BCC. We are not the Auroville income tax department!

**Lyle:** Two questions were asked in that meeting with the ABC. One was, how can we more effectively collect the 33% of the unit's net profit that is supposed to be contributed to City Services? The second was: what is a legitimate way for the unit to use the remaining 67%?

Regarding the 33%, the ABC has so far not come up with a sustainable, scalable solution. They simply suggested making phone calls to encourage those who have not given the minimum. But as Auroville grows, we have to put a system in place which makes it easier for us to collect what is due instead of the personalised approach. There's a misconception that a personalised approach is somehow more 'yogic'. If people consciously do not follow-up on their agreements, there has to be a system in place to do something about it, a clear set of actions. Not necessarily punitive, but allowing an intervention of sorts, such as the appointment of an advisory group to



Divya and Lyle at the Financial Service in the Town Hall

work with the executives, of an additional executive or of a group of guardians. We can't continue with the present system where people have to the 'massage' the defaulter through endless phone calls. Executives have to be conscious that they are not running 'their' business but that they have been entrusted to run a unit of the community.

**Divya:** The FAMC is the authority here. Perhaps they should re-study the Office Orders or Trust Deeds under which the units have been set-up to see how the position of the community can be strengthened.

**And the 67%?**

**Lyle:** The ABC and the BCC have agreed to set up a sub-group to address this. Let's see if anything comes of it.

**Can you explain the ideas behind your draft Work, Maintenance and Contribution Policy?**

**Divya:** The foremost need is to create transparency, make it clear to everybody what it means to receive a maintenance from the community and to clarify the expectations of what we want and can do.

**Lyle:** A lot of the policy is not new, it has been put together on the basis of past realities. But it has four new and contentious points.

The first one is that all Aurovilians who have an income exceeding Rs 13,000 a month would contribute 33% of that excess to a Fraternal Fund. So someone who would earn Rs 19,000 a month would contribute Rs. 2,000 (Rs 19,000 - Rs 13,000 = 6,000 x 33% = 2,000)

The second is that we propose that no Auroville unit will pay a maintenance larger than three times the community maintenance. We are still in the process of attempting to clarify if perks, such as a free telephone, the free use of the unit's car or the payment of house ammas or gardeners by the unit, are to be considered part of the executive's maintenance.

The third point is that those who live in Auroville but do not work for Auroville should pay a substantial monthly contribution into the Fraternal Fund.

**Divya:** The Fraternal Fund would supply additional maintenance required by those who are committed and dedicated full-time to Auroville and who cannot manage to live from their City Services maintenance.

**Lyle:** And the fourth point is that all Aurovilians should work for Auroville.

**Is the BCC in full agreement on these four issues?**

**Divya:** No, there are quite different viewpoints. Even the fourth point, that Aurovilians work for Auroville, which I believe is something that originates from The Mother herself, is not

accepted by everybody.

Here the situation is different for Indian nationals and foreigners. Foreigners receive a visa for living in and working for Auroville. If they work for an Auroville unit, they can, as employees of the unit, work outside Auroville. But they cannot get employed directly by an outside Indian company.

Indian nationals have no such restriction. We are aware that quite a few Indian Aurovilians are running their private businesses outside Auroville, or are being employed outside Auroville, while living in Auroville and receiving Auroville benefits such as free education for their children.

**Yet it is understandable that Aurovilians who receive an insufficient maintenance try to do other jobs to make ends meet.**

**Lyle:** Certainly. But it should not result in the Aurovillian no longer working for Auroville as his or her main activity. And there should be transparency and honesty. We propose to set up a 'human resource sharing' unit. The Aurovillian would work for the Auroville unit, which in turn would deploy that Aurovillian to an organisation outside Auroville. The deployment contract would be between the unit and the outside organisation. We haven't yet found Aurovilians to run this unit.

**Henk and Manuel Thomas also warned that Auroville should not become 'a retirement community' where Aurovilians, who do not depend on Auroville for their income, would only work for Auroville when they please.**

**Lyle:** We are aware that some people with private funds do not contribute to the community either through work or through donations. That's why we introduced the third point, that those who live in Auroville but do not work for Auroville should pay a substantial monthly contribution.

**What is the status of your draft policy?**

**Lyle:** We presented an early draft to the community in November last year, and received some very good feedback that we have incorporated into a new draft. We have sent this new draft to different working groups and so far have received some individual responses. We expect that some of the points may need to be modified, perhaps substantially so. But we are happy that the discussion has started. Some people feel that such a policy could be misused, and that it is not inspirational. It is true, it is not inspirational. It represents the lowest common denominator, a crutch, which cannot replace the level of consciousness that should prevail in Auroville. But we have experienced that the community is not at that level, so the crutch seems to be necessary. Once we achieve a higher level of consciousness, the crutch will not be needed; it will fall away naturally.

**Divya:** Without clarity about how to resolve issues, the BCC cannot properly function and will not be able to pay adequate maintenances. If the community can come to a basic understanding and agree on a public policy on the maintenance, work and contribution situation, we have the right to ask individuals and units to comply. This is not because we want to control or bureaucratize, but because we need to be fair to all Aurovilians who work for the manifestation of Auroville.

*In conversation with Carel*

## Draft Auroville Work Maintenance and Contribution Policy Main features and proposals

- 1) All Aurovilians, Indians and those of foreign origin, are expected to work for Auroville within the Auroville framework.
- 2) The draft contains a detailed description of maintenances payable to those who work for City Services, for children, to students and apprentices, to those who are temporarily out of work, to Aurovilians who are pregnant, and to those who can no longer work due to health reasons.
- 3) The calculation of the profit contribution of Auroville's commercial units and guesthouses is detailed.
- 4) Those whose income exceeds Rs 13,000 a month should contribute 33% of the difference to a Fraternal Fund.
- 5) Individuals who are able to work, but are not working for Auroville and have an adequate personal income should participate to the community development by providing a monthly contribution proportionate to their financial capacity but, at the very least equal to the total cost of the full maintenance of another Aurovillian.



# Running a guesthouse in Auroville.

There are 45 official guesthouses in Auroville. In mid-February, all the beds are taken. More guesthouses are needed as more guests visit Auroville each year.

A guesthouse is usually chosen on-line. The Auroville website shows pictures of the buildings and gives four comfort categories with details such as Indian or Western toilets, and four locations: central, forest, beach or residential. The website emphasizes that Auroville is not a tourist resort. Those who visit Auroville without a previous booking can contact the guest service at the Visitors' Centre, where bookings can be made as well.

Each guesthouse has developed its own personality and attractions and regular visitors come back to the same place every year as they feel 'at home' and meet up with friends they made over the previous years. New Creation guesthouse is next to the gym and swimming pool, near the village of Kuilapalayam and the pizza restaurant. Profits go towards a school for village

## Centre Guesthouse

Centre Guesthouse was one of the first guesthouses operating in Auroville and is held in great affection by many people. Over the years it has expanded and now provides 50 beds. Tineke has run the guesthouse for 25 years and now operates it with a staff of 15. "People like the central location of the guesthouse. Many guests arrive by early morning international flights so someone has to be here to greet them. For years I would wake up at the sound of a taxi but now my night watchman takes care of that. I am blessed that I have an excellent manager. He lives here with his family and I have become grandma to their little girl," Tineke says. She still goes to Pondicherry once a week to do the shopping. "It is necessary," she says "to keep an eye on things. For example, I have to keep checking the level of cleanliness."

Centre Guesthouse provides three



Thatched (keet) huts at Repos beach guesthouse

our services and set quality standards. Maintaining standards can be a little tricky in this country with its humid and dusty climate. For example, sometimes guests criticize the cleanliness of our sheets and we have to explain that here with the red soil which colours the feet it is impossible to maintain them in a whiter than white condition."

The Coordination Group is in the process of setting up a central booking system which would cut down a lot of administrative work. "But not everyone agrees with it. It would imply that we would become fully dependent on computers, which in India is not advisable as there are regular power-cuts. We are giving it a trial run, though this hectic period is not the best time for experimentation."

## Repos Guesthouse

Repos guesthouse on the beach has been run on and off by Bhaga for 25 years. She emphasizes strongly that the purpose of guesthouses is to allow visitors to experience Auroville, and not to make a profit. "If the main purpose would be making money, then Auroville will be finished. We are running a service, not a business, and we should have just enough to make ends meet." The maintenance of the guesthouse, which has a staff of six, is huge as it faces the sea. "The last monsoon destroyed nearly all our keet roofs and we had to go into debt to replace them."

ly have to remember and respect that, but I also want them to follow my standards. For example, the coir mattresses should be out in the sun for half an hour on each side, whenever possible. The ammas do not always do that, so I have to make sure it is done. Details like this take up a lot of time."

## Vérité Guesthouse

Vérité guesthouse is only one aspect of the Vérité project, which is now 25 years old. One of the main purposes of Vérité is to offer classes and treatments to Aurovilians and guests, for which it has built two large halls. The Vérité community focus on communal living, shared meals, integral learning, daily meditation, workshops and programmes, healing and bodywork. "The satisfaction from doing this makes everything worthwhile," says Bhavana who, together with Susan, is one of the five core team members of Vérité community. "The guesthouse is run to provide accommodation for guests, many of whom stay here because of an interest in our programmes. The core group shares the responsibilities which can become overwhelming in the busy season as we try to give the guests a lot of attention and personal care." Susan explains that the core group is supported by volunteers and long-term guests "who are gregarious people and love talking with the visitors. We all meet for lunch at our long tables and we try to interact with everybody and explain about Auroville and help them network and find ways to 'plug in'. We have a rule that the minimum stay is one week as we found that a constant turnover of people staying only for a few days was too exhausting for us. We also enjoy hosting groups which come with a teacher. We close for the month of May and re-open with a Vipassana meditation course, so we enter the season gently."



Guest rooms at Vérité

children situated in its grounds. Some guests help in the school year after year. Quiet guesthouse down by the ocean offers therapies, organic food and a high standard of comfort. Shanga guesthouse is situated in a mini forest, welcomes families, and offers Tai Chi in the mornings.

Auroville Today spoke to several guesthouse managers about their experience of running their guesthouse.

meals a day and a free bicycle. "We employ two men to take care of the cycles. Because of our reputation we get requests for cycles from all over Auroville which we have to refuse."

## The Coordination Group

Tineke is also a member of the Guest Facilities Coordination Group which organizes and coordinates the guesthouses. "We try and coordinate

## ECONOMY

# Who makes policies?

The initial response of the Auroville Council to the draft Maintenance, Work and Contribution Policy was not entirely positive. Three of its members, Lakshmi, Nicole and Jean-Yves, explain why.

This draft policy contains quite a few good elements. For example, it addresses the concern that Auroville should not become a retirement community. Quite a few people have joined Auroville with no intention of actively working for the city. They only pay their Rs 2,200 monthly contribution and do not participate. We do not think Mother would have wanted this. Also, we see Aurovilians running a business outside Auroville while living here. They earn a lot of money, manage to live a luxurious life, invest in land outside Auroville, but do not contribute to Auroville while they enjoy the free education for their children. We have to do something about this. Finalising a dialogue with the Auroville Board of Commerce on the formulation of guidelines for the maintenance of executives is also very necessary.

But at the same time, we have a number of problems with this draft policy. The first is with the tone of the document. If this policy is meant to be adhered to, we think it will miss its target. The 'feel' of the document is too 'square', too bureaucratic. It is also too long. It is not that we do not agree that details need to be spelled out, but this kind of policy could be formulated differently, perhaps in two parts, a shorter one to give the general lines, and a reference document.

A second consideration is that such policies have a tendency to change the 'flavour' of the community, its spirit. Policies that lay down the law rigidly sit uneasily with the type of society we have been called to create here. We also consider it a bad idea that the same group which controls an issue lays down the

rules for that issue. Policies, by their very nature, tend to become rigidly interpreted and bureaucratically implemented. We have seen that happen and it is something we would like to avoid. We are not just managing a community, we are building a new type of society, a society that encourages innovation and experimentation and this requires decentralisation and empowerment. We have a responsibility to ensure this.

New policies need to be preceded by a consultation with the community to give a chance for innovative grass roots solutions to emerge. We all know that the Residents' Assembly is not always the suitable forum to discuss, formulate and approve policies and this really needs improvement. What we see is that the community today feels, by and large, disempowered and we have to find ways to address this.

The Council has a proposal concerning how a 'community approval' could take place

We have been thinking that a group of long-term Aurovilians, who have a good standing in the community, should reflect on proposed policies and on their consequences to ensure that they are fostering the spirit of Auroville. Additionally this group could have the power to refer individual issues to the basic principles of Auroville. Direct communication needs to happen here, not only in accordance with approved policies, but also in consultation with the people and groups involved. We hear the BCC's difficulties in dealing with individual demands without the backing of a precise policy and believe that such a group to whom such cases could be referred would help.

*In conversation with Care!*



Mitra youth hostel

mama" says Bhaga. "We get lots of children who love being here and running wild. This is my spontaneous family and I love to see them happy."

## Gaia's Guesthouse

Kireet and Younge are running Gaia's Garden guesthouse. "I wanted to build a guesthouse with a large garden around it. I struggled during the first few years and had to spend a lot of money. But the guesthouse is now popular and due to the 'word of mouth' is usually fully booked," says Kireet. "We emphasize 'Rest, harmony and beauty' and the guests enjoy the beautiful garden." Kireet also offers expeditions to the local canyon and bioregion.

Kireet has been experimenting to find the best way to run the guesthouse. "I want to provide a quality service for visitors for whom Gaia's Garden is often their first contact with Auroville. I maintain high standards of cleanliness and have concluded it is better to employ only two ammas instead of a larger staff, and to work with them. They have their own way of doing things and I constant-

The room rates of Vérité guesthouse are on the high side, due to the high cost of using organically-grown food, and because of its focus on sustainability such as maintaining its solar energy and other 'green' systems. A brochure is available in each room to explain the ideals of the Vérité community and its place in Auroville.

## The guesthouses' economy

The economic aspect for all Auroville guesthouses are challenging. The larger guesthouses are expected to contribute 20% of their turnover to Auroville and this makes it difficult for some of them to do necessary renovations or make improvements. The Housing Service recently met with the Guest Facilities Coordination Group and suggested that guesthouses could experiment with allowing Newcomers to occupy some guest rooms. This could make economic sense for some guesthouses as there would be a year-round income and presence. But this idea has not yet been adopted.

*Dianna*



# The Auroville Marathon 2011

On 13th February, the fourth Auroville marathon was run. Aurovilians of all ages, Ashramites and people from all over India ran on a trail that wound through canyons, forests, and Auroville communities.

Around 1400 runners took part; about 25 from Auroville, 35 from the Ashram, 80 from the surrounding villages and around 1250 from the rest of India, including many from running clubs in Chennai and Bangalore. In addition there was an army of volunteers marking the course, cycling with the runners, manning aid stations and providing medical aid, transportation and food.

There were four races: the 5 K (organized separately by Michael and his team from Future School), the 10 K, the half-marathon and full marathon. More than 700 ran the half-marathon while 283 completed the full 42 kilometres course. They included three Aurovilians, Andy, Balaji and Paul. Balaji, along with Anand, was also one of the main coordinators of the event.

Here Balaji, Anand and Paul share their experience of this unique event.

## Getting it together

Balaji: We opened up online registration at the end of November. The registration fee was Rs 300 per runner for outsiders, the same as last year. We closed the registration on January 11.

Meanwhile Sourya and her team had started working out the route. We changed it from last year because we wanted to run as much as possible on trails rather than tarred roads. Accurate measurement is difficult with trail marathons but we used three cycle odometers and did a cross-check with the GPS to ensure that the full course was at least 42.195 kilometres, the official distance.

The actual marking of the trail was done by 'security' Ramesh and his team on the day before the run. They did a fine job: out of 1400 runners less than 10 runners got lost.

Anand: I was in charge of the transport. About 1,000 of the participants were staying in hotels in Pondicherry but we didn't want them hiring taxis or driving their cars here because this would have clogged up our roads. So we decided to pick everybody up and drop them back by bus. This was quite a logistical challenge since they were staying all over Pondy, but everything went like clockwork; nobody missed the bus.



Andy (left) and Paul finishing the marathon. Andrea from Auroville Radio catches the last gasps.

Balaji: The previous evening we distributed the running bibs at the Visitors Centre, which also provided an excellent pasta dinner. On the race day itself we set up eight aid stations round the course, coordinated by Sreevatsa and his team. Some were outside schools, some were in communities, giving a homely feeling to the entire event. The stations provided water, electrolytes, biscuits and bananas to the runners. The medical team was coordinated by Mita and supported by the doctors from the Kailash Clinic. PIMS assisted with doctors, nurses and an ambulance as a goodwill gesture. Fortunately there were only minor casualties; a few cases of dehydration and of people falling over. When you run a trail marathon you have to keep looking down!

There was also a team of 20 cyclists, led by Peter, to accompany the runners. We had a couple of lead

cyclists for each event, while all the other cyclists were on the trail full-time, seeing that everything was fine and nobody got lost. The Ashram people looked after the timing. Manually timing 1400 people running four different distances at the same time is tough, but they know how to do it.

The Auroville marathon is unique in India. The runners are attracted by the lovely trail through the forest but also by the spirit of the event. There are no prizes, no sponsors; we try to keep it simple, personal. Most marathons are organized around the winners: if you don't win, the organizers wonder why you bothered to turn up! But here everybody is a winner and feels included. The runners prefer to compete against themselves rather than others. At some stage it also moves into a team sport because you start running with your friends, and other friends are cycling with you and cheering you on. It's all about the joy of running and participating.

I was a bit of a reluctant runner this time. I ran the first round of 21 kilometres, just to make sure all the boards and the organization were in place, but I still felt good so I decided to do one more round and complete the full marathon. The first round was easy, I was chatting the whole time with friends, but the last ten kilometres were a bit tough...

The organizers, who are all unpaid volunteers, should enjoy the Auroville marathon as much as the runners, so we wanted to keep the event very simple. Most people can't imagine that a marathon can be organized without commercial sponsorship, but we covered all our expenses by the entrance fee plus a few donations.

I hope Auroville will inspire other people to organize marathons and other sports in an alternative way. Of course, they may not find surroundings like this so easily: basically, here you get back in touch with nature. So they should activate their communities to plant forests around wherever they live. Make it a forty-year plan to reforest India!

## Marathon Man

Paul: I got up at 3.30 that day and before leaving for the start had four idlis, curd, honey and bananas. It was a very cold morning and when I reached the start at the Visitors Centre, it was

totally dark. I looked for Andy, who I had decided to run with. He had already run two marathons and knew exactly at what pace he wanted to run. Originally I had wanted to run a bit faster, but then I thought I'd be sensible and just concentrate on getting round.

As we would be running the first hour in darkness, most of the other runners were given tiny torches. As we set off, we looked like a bunch of glow-worms. The Aurovilians knew the trail, but imagine how it must have been for people from Delhi and Bombay who were just running into the blackness.

The first three or four kilometres I was a bit tense as I could feel my calf muscles and had a bit of pain in my knee. But then, around five kilometres, I reached this amazing point where I started to feel great. We were running on a slight downhill through the Gaia forest, it was beautiful, all the birds were singing and I was just, like, flying.

This feeling lasted for about ten kilometres. However, as we approached the end of the first circuit of 21 kilometres I began to wonder if I really wanted to do another round: I thought, if I stop now I will already have done a good day's work. But then we had already turned the corner for the next circuit, the whole psychology thing had gone, and I continued to feel fine for the next five kilometres.

Then, at around 30 kilometres, I started hitting these waves of low energy, something I'd only heard about before. When you train you only run a maximum of 32 kilometres and everybody tells you there is a huge difference between running 32 and 42 kilometres. So I would hit a trough and I would struggle for some time, then it would get better before the next trough came. What was happening was my body had run out of glycogen, its store of instant energy, so now it was starting to burn fat which is much harder for it to do.

So the troughs, the down points, kept getting longer and longer until it was just hard, plodding work. Being with Andy was terrific because on the narrow paths I would fall behind him and just zone in on his feet and, on the wider stretches, I would look across at him and know that if he's not going to

stop, I wasn't going to stop either. I was just concentrating on being completely in the present; this step, then the next, then the next. If you start thinking about the next stretch, it's no good.

Then there is this other thing which I'd seen on television. They call it 'The Hammer' because it feels like somebody's whacked your legs out from underneath you. I had the beginnings of that sensation but it never came really close. The last three kilometres were really hard work, but by then we had six cyclists around us and somehow, deep down, I knew I could do it. And then we were running down the final hill into a huge crowd, I got a bit confused because I couldn't work out where the finish was, and then Andy and I crossed the line together: I was determined we would cross together.

I knew I should keep walking, but then my legs really started to get wobbly and I sat down. That's when I felt really wiped out. It's like when you're running you have this fire inside you, this engine which keeps you running, but when you stop suddenly nothing is left. And I needed water, I was looking around for water because I had been getting dehydrated. However, there was this terrific support. Everyone came over and asked what I wanted, someone got me some water, then Ange came and gave me a massage. My head was still swimming and I had pins and needles in my hands. Then Andy came over and gave me an energy bar, I drank a really sweet cup of tea, and immediately I could feel I was coming out of that space. After two more cups of tea I was pretty much under control again.

The next day my legs were a bit stiff but otherwise I felt fine. They tell you not to run for two weeks after the marathon takes so much out of the body. That's what makes it such an interesting physical experience: you are



Balaji (left) and Anand

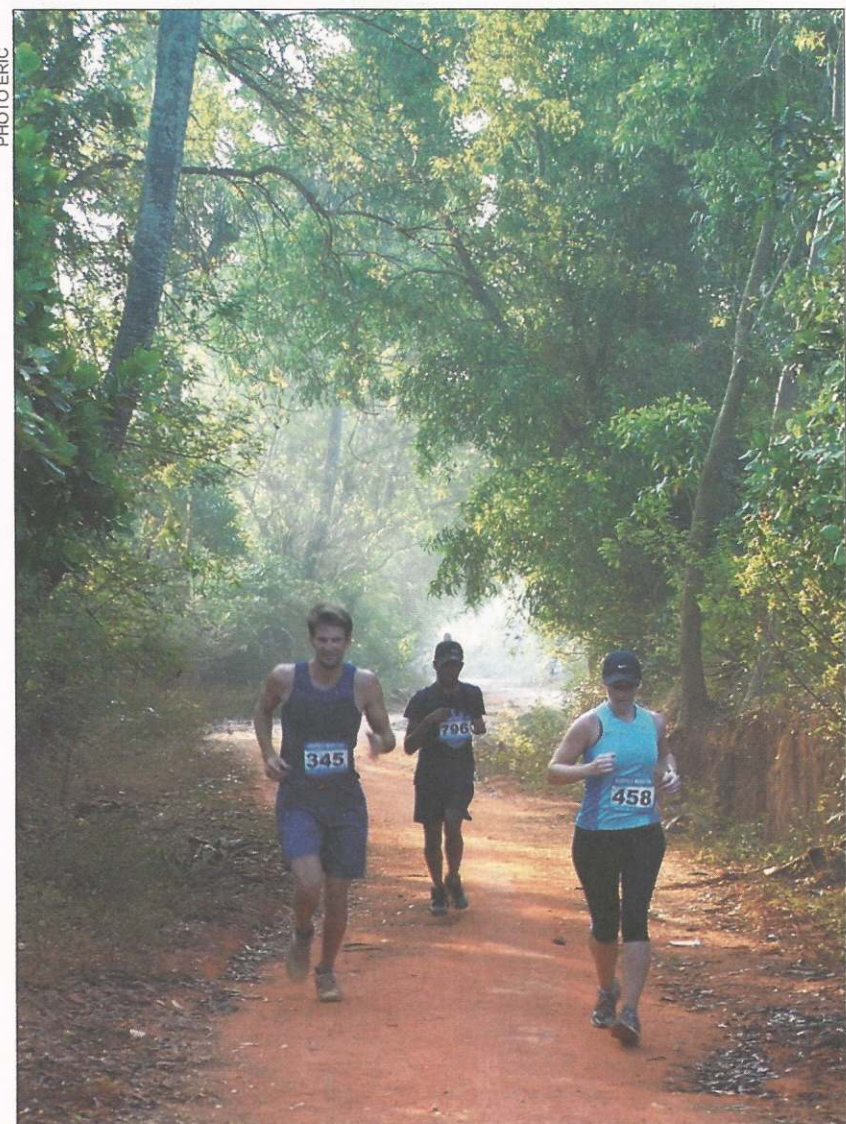
really running on that edge. The biggest gift it has given me is now I can go for a ten kilometres run and it is very easy, very enjoyable, it's like being a kid again. I used to run everywhere as a kid, I loved running.

And that's the reason I got involved because when I was a kid my mum would organize big amateur athletic events. The atmosphere was great, it was all voluntary, a real fraternity; English athletics is an amazing subculture. For me, the Auroville marathon has that ring to it. There's no prize money, you run for the love of running, and people come from everywhere – the Auroville marathon is a big thing in India now – to run or just to help out.

It's also such a great way for outside people to connect with Auroville and you realize how precious Auroville is because you are seeing it through their eyes. You get this incredible sense of pride running through the forest, it's like a rare jewel, and then there are all the feeding stations manned by these Auroville characters and kids who are cheering you on. It's such an incredible event.

Will I run it again next year? Sure. In fact, I have a plan. Within five years I'd like to run a sub-four hour marathon. But there's no need to rush as the journey is so enjoyable.

From interviews by Alan



The forest trail



## Training women masons

The Auroville Institute of Applied Technology, with a subsidy from the Tamil Nadu Government, has conducted a 45-day masonry training course – for 150 women.

Lavkamad, the director of the Auroville Institute of Applied Technology (AIAT), Silke, the programme coordinator, and project manager Iyanar looked a bit tired when I interviewed them. Evidently, organizing a training course for women in a work area which is a traditional male bastion doesn't go smoothly. "It is a big issue," admits Lavkamad.

Lavkamad explains the background of the project. The Government of Tamil Nadu has started a programme to replace mud huts with 'pucca' houses. Eligible persons will get a subsidy of Rs 75,000 in kind and cash. The government will provide the cement and steel, a drawing of a room and toilet, and pay some cash. But this is not sufficient to build a house, as the cost of labour exceeds the cash provided. However, if the beneficiaries could build the house themselves, they might be able to manage it. That's how the idea of training masons came up. The Government of Tamil Nadu, through the Corporation for Development of Women, subsidizes each participant with a stipend of Rs 100 per person each day and provides Rs 500 of masons' equipment on graduation.

The programme is run by the Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women, which asked AIAT to conduct the training courses. They were scheduled to start in August last year but AIAT wasn't able to find either teachers or students. "We advertised in the local newspapers and on the television, we put up banners, we approached Auroville Village Action, but no candidates showed up," says Lavkamad. "Only some experienced masons passed by who thought that this programme was a stepping-stone to a government job. Finally we invited the Panchayat Federation members and told them about the mason training. That worked. We got flooded with applications. Over 400 women, some from far-away villages, expressed interest. Many of these women were working as stone breakers



Right: Learning to build a wall. Bending iron is also part of the training (left)



at granite mining operations, earning Rs 70 a day. One of the mines closed and a number of women lost their jobs. They told us they could only eat once a day. Some wanted to take part in the course but couldn't afford to pay for the daily bus to and from Auroville. Ultimately, we started with women from Ottai village near Vanur. We selected women above 18 years who have a minimum of 5th standard education."

The course, involving 12 days of theory and 33 days of practice, took place at the AIAT centre in Irumbai. In all, five batches of 30 people – all women except two men who were part of the first batch – were trained. But the experience wasn't as positive as the organizers had hoped for. "It was as much a learning experience for us as for them," says Silke. "Most of the women appeared to have come only for the stipend, they didn't express too much of an interest in masonry. I believe they thought they would just sit in a classroom. Then we took them to a construc-

tion site. They didn't like lifting sand and stones and complained about the work being too heavy and about back pain in the evenings. We told them that this is only way they can learn," adds Lavkamad. "It was difficult to motivate them."

Another set-back was that the planned cooperation with the Auroville Earth Institute didn't materialize. "We planned to work with the Earth Institute because they are looking for trained masons for their earth block projects in Auroville. But for some reason it didn't work out. We hope we can take this up again in future," says Silke.

"It was also difficult for the trainer," says Iyanar. "We needed a person who had a lot of patience, which is essential if you want to train a batch of 30 women. One man left after 40 days. Then others came. But all complained that it is very difficult to work with 30 women! They are used to working with skilled people; working with women meant everything goes much slower."

The women were put to work on projects at AIAT, like renovating a building, building a fence and erecting a parking shed. "We didn't think it was a good idea to have them build a wall and then destroy it," says Silke. "From a motivational point of view it is better that they build something that can be of use and that they can feel proud about." "Also, when working on projects, practical problems will come up and they

learn to deal with it, like in real life situations," adds Lavkamad.

The first two batches have now been trained. "They all passed a test," says Iyanar. "They had to answer ten questions and demonstrate what they could do. During the course we kept track of the progress of each person. The trainer would note down who was motivated, who really wanted to work, who was interested in masonry and was asking questions. Some women stood out."

The prospects of the women being able to use their newly-learned skills are a bit uncertain. "The Tamil Nadu government said they will give them jobs, but we will have to wait and see," says Lavkamad. "Two contractors want to interview the women," says Silke. "They told me that they will pay the same salaries as for male masons. They insist, however, that the ladies wear a Punjabi, not the traditional saree, as this limits the type of work they can do." "The women are concerned that no one will hire them," says Lavkamad.

"That would really be a great pity, for Auroville will need many masons in the years to come. We would like to set up a cooperative. We've put an announcement in the *Auroville News and Notes* asking for a qualified manager but this has not yet met with a response. We hope that it will manifest. It is in the interest of the women from the villages and of Auroville."

*In conversation with Elaine*

### PASSING

#### Lucia

Lucia Mirra Reboul, one of Auroville's youngsters, daughter of Eric and Ane and sister of Samai and Juan, passed away on February 25th in the Government



Hospital of Ulundurpettai after a road accident on National Highway 45. Lucia was 20 years old. She was living in the youth community of Kailash and was working in the pre-crèche. Lucia was well-known for her sweet character and her love for children.

### FESTIVALS

## The Eco-Music Festival



Enjoying the festival

Auroville celebrated its first Lively Up Your Earth Eco-Music Festival at Solitude Farm on 29th January from 10am till 1a.m. the following day. Probably 1,000 folk wandered through the stalls, drank coconut milk, ate organic chocolate biscuits then collapsed on a chair under the shamania to listen to a band.

"This is a creative expression of everything that is going on in Solitude and Auroville," said Krishna, who is the turbaned-headed, lunghi-wearing energy behind Solitude Farm. "I want to get away from the 'eco-green' hype and show what is authentic and what Auroville excels in. We had KOFPU's organic food stall, Wellpaper's colourful baskets made by local village woman and about twenty other stalls

and hands-on activities. There were workshops of pottery, brick-making, natural dyeing, and farm-tours happening throughout the day.

"We did massive publicity on Facebook, YouTube and blogs, and people came from Bangalore and Bombay. We reckon at least 1,000 people showed up. A small panic set in when only three people turned up for our first meeting in January. Luckily some friends from Sunrise Festival in England where our band Emergence played last year came and helped us to get it together. In a way it is a natural extension of the Xmas Fair run by the Youth Centre. The young people were a tremendous help and got thoroughly involved.

"We emphasized a no alcohol policy and had a security man sitting at the gate. We had no trouble whatsoever with the hundreds of outsiders who turned up.

"We want it to be a yearly five day event with happenings and workshops spread over different parts of Auroville. We would all come together here at Solitude in the evenings for food and music and I hope to get some quality musicians here.

"We have been invited to take the festival to Bangalore and involve people there to encourage their own authentic creativity. This is new for India. I come from England where the summer green festivals over the years have had a profound change on society. People come away saying 'Why couldn't ordinary life be more like this?'"

"A few people – mainly the older ones and the ones who did not come to the Festival – are concerned that it will develop into a Glastonbury type festival. This can never happen; it will always be different as it is based on the authentic and vibrant Auroville experience which shines through the music and the workshops.

"The foundation of all this is my love and respect for nature which is the basis of Solitude Farm. I have so much gratitude to Auroville for

allowing me live my vision. I believe a revolution is possible by starting with our fundamental need for food and companionship. By comparison, other things seem ephemeral and intellectual, almost indulgent. Growing and eating food together unites people and when it is combined with music you have unity in one bite. The very word 'agri – culture' says it all.

*Dianna.*



Listening to the band under the shamiana.

PHOTO GIORGIO



# Seeking the Auroville sound

An exhibition of 'sound instruments' at the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture highlighted the achievements of eight years of craft development at Svaram workshop. Austrian-born Aurovillian Aurelio is the man behind the venture. Auroville Today asked him about the background to this work.

The great hall of the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture is filled with instruments: drums, xylophones, vibraphones, stringed instruments, flutes, clappers, gongs ... "Most of them are entry points into the world of music," says Aurelio. "They produce sounds; but they are not musical instruments in the traditional sense of the word." He lightly taps a drum, strokes his fingers along a wind chime, and demonstrates a psaltery, an ancient string instrument, all of which are made by Svaram. "One of the prime purposes of these simple instruments is to raise sound awareness, especially as part of a child's sensory training. The idea is not only to 'hear' but also to 'feel' the vibrations."

A group of children enters the exhibition. The teacher tells them to sit down. Then one of them hammers a large gong. The sound floods the pavilion and her classmates experience the vibrations with closed eyes, long after the sound has gone. Then they test the wind chimes, each of which is tuned differently. "Listen to the diatonic scale, and now to a pentatonic scale," says their well-informed teacher.

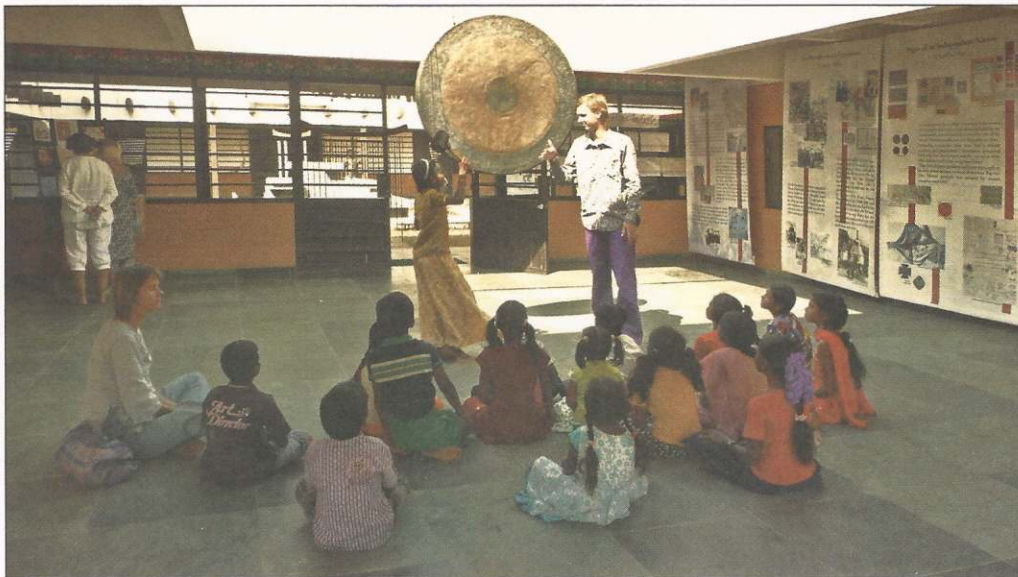


PHOTO GIORGIO

## Too loud!

in the South Pacific region: with Fijis, Aborigines, Maoris, Papuas and with tribals in Sulawesi – some of the people whom we consider to be still in the Stone Age. But for them, music is part of life. Whether they soothed their children or planted crops or were out fishing, there was always song, often accompanied by a simple drum or two-string lyre. Those people would ask me to sing music from my culture, and I painfully realised that I had nothing to offer. Our culture does not have songs like this. In our culture, we do not grow up with music as an intrinsic part of life!"

His travels brought him to China where he had a musical epiphany. "I was visiting the ancient town of Dali in southern China when, from a courtyard, I heard music. I peeked in and saw a funeral being conducted. The music was played on an Erhu, a Chinese two string fiddle. Though I was a complete stranger, I was invited in and seated in a corner. There, I burst into tears experiencing the intense mood and beauty of that music. It was a revelation and a confirmation that music was my



## Experiencing the gong

Aurelio. "The recipient hears and feels the tones and overtones; the vibrations penetrate every cell of the body." The instrument is in use at the Quiet Healing Centre. "Those who have experienced it often say they got into an altered and intensified state of awareness."

Aurelio's personal growth, he says, "got a bit cramped" with all that production and business. "I've wanted to run away a few times. But I have a responsibility to the unit, the team and to myself." About himself, he says, "Running away wouldn't have helped me. Since I am doing yoga, or at least I'm supposed to be doing it, I realised I have to go deeper. But how? Then one day an instrument builder from Holland asked if Auroville had a unique sound. That question startled me! Then I realised that there is a truth to be found."

often needed repair, and that's how a workshop at Mohanam Cultural Centre in Sanjeevinagar got started," he explains. "After a year we moved to the old Decauram Carpentry, where the Svaram development project began. We initiated a training course for a group of unemployed youth, who were eager to learn a new skill. I taught them basic tuning systems, Jan taught them carpentry skills and together we explored how to make the instruments. A few years later we got a grant from the Government of India, through SAIIR, to make instruments for a new music pedagogy. Two years ago we created the production unit, which now employs 25 people." Is it successful? "We have learned to make quality and very beautiful products. But we still have a lot to learn about commerce and marketing. We sell through the Auroville boutiques and in exclusive hotels and spas in India and through some overseas contacts. But there is a lot of scope for progress."

If most of Svaram's instruments are 'sound producers', an exception is the Sound Stones. Some years ago the German pianist and composer Professor Klaus Fessmann of the Mozarteum in Salzburg, visited Auroville. "Fessmann was looking for new sounds, for more organic musical forms. He was drawn to the idea of sounding stone," says Aurelio. "He had discovered through the work of a sculptor that by cutting suitable types of stone to a particular comb-like form he could draw a clear tone from the stone with the friction of a moistened finger. He called this instrument *Klangsteine*, meaning: 'Sound Stones'. We met and discovered that a particular type of granite local to this area produced the best tone. With good stone cutters and the team of Svaram in place it was agreed that Svaram should manufacture the instruments. The production is overseen by Fessmann's son Hannes. That's how Svaram started making Sound Stones."

Another of Svaram's experiments is the *Nidhranantar*, a 'sound bed'. This instrument, which looks like a massage table, is in fact a resonating box with about 50 strings attached below. The person receiving the 'sound massage' lies on the box while a trained therapist softly plays the strings. "The bed provides an experience," says



## Aurelio playing the Sound Stone

Does he find any support in the works of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother? "One of my main inspirations in regard to the 'sound-work' comes from Sri Aurobindo's writings on linguistics and Mother's premise that new forms are needed to manifest the new force. But we don't have much from them on music. A few years ago I tried with a few other people to make a compilation of all they have said on music, but this is still in the making. Someone else is working on a biography of the Ashram musician Sunil, which will contain his correspondence with The Mother on music which has never been published. I am eagerly awaiting the book."

And what about the unique Auroville sound? Aurelio smiles. "I am listening. Sometimes I receive a touch, a hint. It may take me another 20 years, but I have a feeling that this will be my life's work. I believe that it will require a different way of listening – rather 'sensing' pulsations, frequencies and energies, than 'hearing' sounds. To say it poetically, experiencing the sound behind the sound."

In conversation with Carel



## At the opening of the exhibition

"And now listen to how all these pipes sound together". Aurelio smiles. "These are the most common tunings. But we have quite a few chimes that have unusual tunings, such as those used by Indonesian gamelan orchestras or with 'harmonic just' intonations."

Aurelio grew up in Austria, where he received "some rather rigid classical guitar training". He didn't like it. "I felt I couldn't express myself. I would rather have played the Beatles' songs, or Cat Stevens, but they didn't teach me that." He dropped guitar studies, took up music ethnology, but dropped that as well as "it, too, was rigid and old." He then began a world journey. "For over 20 years I travelled, staying with indigenous people

path, my *svadharma*, food for my soul." When he came back to Austria he stayed some time in a simple farmhouse in the middle of the Carinthian Alps in the southern part of the country. "I reflected a lot and composed songs," he says. Did he learn to yodel? "No, I didn't learn yodelling – (laughing) actually I regret it, for I've been often asked to yodel!"

Aurelio joined Auroville in 1991. He worked at Adishakti with Veenapani Chawla, one of India's foremost experimental theatre exponents, providing 'soundscapes' – sound backgrounds – to her theatre productions. "The instruments



PHOTO COURTESY SVARAM

## Playing the Nidhranantar – the sound bed

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