

AUROVILLE TODAY

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Number Fifteen



At dawn, on the 28th February, fire, candle-light and floral arrangements usher in Auroville's 23rd year.

Photo: Sven

"Auroville is on the verge of an environmental disaster"

Tom Read (Shraddhalu) lived in Auroville for ten years and is now an environmental consultant in the U.K. This interview with him took place during his recent visit to Auroville.

AUROVILLE TODAY: How do you see the future of Auroville's development in terms of the environmental work you are doing in the West?

Tom: A radical change of perspective is essential for survival, without even speaking of development. Any planning must take into account environmental priorities that are changing all the time. Because of this, planning, for whatever purposes, must be flexible. Auroville at the moment, whether we like it or not, is on the verge of an environmental disaster. I don't want to be an alarmist. The problems we face here are symptomatic of climatic change worldwide which has been brought about by planning which failed to consider the environmental consequences. Urban and industrial planning have been a major contribution to en-

Tom: Through its greenwork, Auroville has demonstrated the reality of rescuing severely degraded land and putting it to productive use. This is a major achievement of international interest. You can't imagine how much people are inspired by this fact. However, this should not blind us to the other reality of how much more remains to be done. Without water, there is no life possible. Global pollution has upset weather patterns worldwide. This is an issue of urgent international concern. The monsoon has been insufficient for the past five years and there is no reason to believe that it will get better in the immediate future. Auroville faces a desperate water situation, like most of the world. This problem has solutions, but the problem must be recognized and addressed and influence

"The use of virgin water (i.e. water fresh from the ground) for irrigation is criminal in the present context of the water shortage in India."

vironmental decline because they depend on fossil fuels, private transport and high consumption. Are the planners in Auroville going to repeat these same mistakes?

A.T.: How do you see a way around this?

Tom: In Glasgow, which is Scotland's biggest city, a plan has been prepared for the U.K.'s first environmental business park where the interests of commercial and industrial development are balanced with the environmental impact.

A.T.: You mention a critical environmental situation in Auroville? What do you mean specifically?

our planning. There is, actually, enough water but it has to be managed properly. For example, water can be used in different ways before it is used for horticultural or agricultural purposes. The techniques are simple, efficient and proven.

This is just one area of environmental concern that Auroville's planners must explore. The use of virgin water (i.e. water fresh from the ground) for irrigation is criminal in the present context of the water shortage in India. For example, septic tanks and soak pits must become a thing of the past, because of the waste and the pollution

Everything Is Possible

THE DAY began at 5 o'clock in the morning by the urn. Many people took a small candle before finding a seat, and soon hundreds of little lights were gleaming through the darkness, making the Amphitheatre resplendent. The bonfire was lit, and all the flames were just one great aspiration towards unity, towards this consciousness that makes Auroville a reality "in spite of good or bad will".

Suddenly, in the silence, Mother's voice was heard reading the Auroville Charter in French; later it was read in Sanskrit, Tamil and English. There followed an inspired piece of music by Igor before Mother's mantra sounded in the first light of dawn. The concentration was intense. As I approached the Urn and discovered the Mother's symbol laid in flowers, I felt that EVERYTHING IS POSSIBLE.

A number of people left to walk the future ring road (the 'crown') as a kind of 'yantra' to call for the concrete realisation of the town. Other people had expressed their disagreement with this—we were back once more in matter, with all its challenges.

Later that morning there was a Matrimandir concreting. And around 10 o'clock Champaklal, the faithful attendant of both Mother and Sri Aurobindo who has retired into silence, was carried up to the Chamber by five Matrimandir workers. Surrounded by numerous Aurovilians, Champaklal sat down at the edge of Sri Aurobindo's symbol and we meditated together. We felt the beginning of a vibrant reality as the presence of the old disciple illuminated the Chamber.

Yanne

IN THIS issue we focus on that precious substance upon which our physical base depends—water. We introduce the dangers associated with over-extraction and pollution of this resource, and we mention some of the possible solutions—solutions in which Auroville could take a lead.

of the water table. Auroville could become a demonstration site for all these techniques which actually are in line with the ideals of Auroville.

A. T.: How to implement this kind of approach in Auroville?

Tom.: Well, I already mentioned test sites and demonstration areas.

A future possibility is that Auroville could commercialise these techniques and products for use here and in the rest of India.

There is a basis for this work already in the planned joint adventure of research and development between C.S.R and other organisations like the Centre for Human

Ecology in Edinburgh, Commonwealth Human Ecology Centre, the Danish Centre for Renewable Energy. We are looking at improved designs of wind-powered pumping systems coupled with effective water resource management. Another area of research is the manufacture of wind turbines for electrical generation for India.

Still another area of urgent importance for India is low energy desalination and detoxification processes using solar and wind. This could form the basis of the work for the industrial zone of Auroville. In this way Auroville would demonstrate its commitment to the future of the planet.

Interview by Bill

Planning for the Environment

by Luigi, coordinator of 'Aurofuture' (the Auroville town planning group)

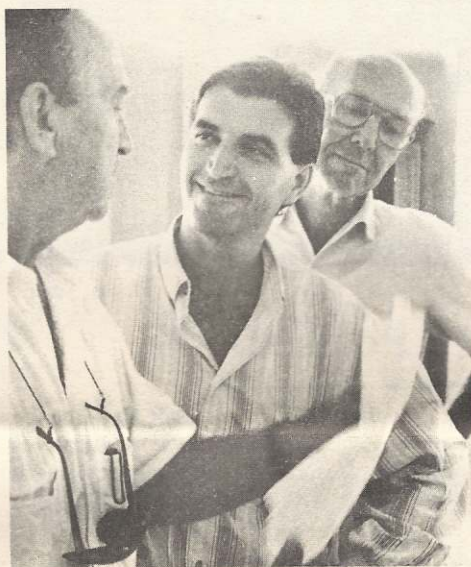
Is it possible today to envisage, for the next step of Auroville's development, a synthesis, a working unity, between planning and development?

At a first glance, the usual misunderstanding between urbanists, environmentalists, developers and conservationists is still here in its full splendour.

Like almost everywhere in the world, we find the same exclusive mental patterns, the same crystallized convictions of the truth holders and, in general terms, the negative extremes. The urbanists express rigidity, insensibility, arrogance, imposition; the environmentalists fanaticism, narrowness, traditionalism, apocalypticism. But, with their positive potentiality, they can both become active and conscious instruments in the hands of Evolution and manifest in Matter the spiritual growth of Men.

For there cannot be planning without environment and vice-versa. The two are interrelated.

We are not here just to make buildings and forests, meetings and projects. We are here to unfold the Future; to open ourselves to that possibility of Divine Life on Earth.



Roger, Luigi, Gerard

Photo: Sven

How to drop all our gross ideas on Auroville, and be connected with that subtle Auroville? How to manifest it concretely?

Today the dream and the 'reality' seem to get closer. For the environmentalists and the planners that means the opening up of many fields where they can work together. Let us mention a few of them:

- Application of alternative technologies (Solar energy, biological waste water recycling, biogas, natural thermo-regulation, wind energy, alternative building technology, etc.) for the proposed collective and individual housing projects.
- Experimentation, with creation of prototypes of electrical or solar vehicles for individual and collective transport in the city.
- Research into viable solutions for the non-polluting transport of building materials during the period of construction of the city.
- Consolidation of the interdependence between the green belt and the urban area through intensive afforestation, water erosion control, soil regeneration, water conservation and water distribution, as well as in other fields.
- Setting up an environmental service capable of helping the establishment of a non-polluting industrial zone.
- Concerted intervention in the surrounding villages.
- Inclusion of water harvesting technology in the architecture of the buildings and plans of the city. Starting work immediately on the landscaping, and on the parks and gardens in the 60% of the area available for this purpose in the city.

These are a few possibilities of interaction. There are many others, but to make them possible and workable, a simple and courageous movement is needed: to break the invisible hard walls of group-egos.

And to rediscover the joy of a deep concrete fraternity.

AUROVILLE OUTREACH

Afforesting the Palni Hills

— An interview with David —

David came to Auroville 14 years ago from the USA. He started growing trees and bunding against erosion in the Aurodam community. He did this for many years. In 1983 he participated in an afforestation programme funded by the Indian Department Of Environment (DOE), which made him more aware of the consequences of the large-scale deforestation going on in India. Three years ago he became involved — together with two other Aurovilians, Navroz and Jean — in a three-year afforestation programme around the Palni Hills. Consequently he has been travelling back and forth between Dindigul and Auroville for the past three years. The project has now been completed.

AUROVILLE TODAY: David, how did you get involved in the Palni Hills Conservation Council project?

DAVID: In 1985 I was organizing a camp for the Auroville children at Berijam in the Palni Hills. Frederick and I were doing this together with J.Karen, who is one of the founders of the Palni Hill Conservation Council. Frederick introduced him to Romulus Whittaker, a leading environmentalist, and as a result Jean, Navroz and I were invited to participate in this project, as we had long time experience (18 and 10 years) with afforestation in Auroville.

We decided that there should be a greenbelt around the Palni Hills, so that we could demonstrate what we have learned in Auroville, namely that the timber and firewood supply can come from the plains. This is essential if the lower foothills and the Upper Palni forests are to heal and become healthy again.

A.T.: You just finished the 3 years project. What are the results?

DAVID: Well, a lot! We planted 2,5 million trees (survival 80%) among which were 1.5 million Palmyras. We bunded and fenced 850 acres, and made checkdams etc. Moreover, we started receiving hundreds of visitors weekly. They were mostly farmers and people from educational institutions. Then we also trained supervisors to do field work and help communities with the management of their watersheds. And we trained twenty-five nursery workers, mostly women, who can now identify the Tamil and botanical names of the 138 species we planted and know about germination procedures and seedling care.

We are doing a scientific study, and keep figures for sample seeds regarding their date of collection, their mother trees, germination rate and growth rate over the years.

The Palni Hills Conservation Council was formed in Kodaikanal, South India, in 1985 by concerned citizens in order to stem the rapid environmental degradation in these hills. Because of the tremendous need for firewood and timber, the foothills are getting quickly deforested. An intensive afforestation programme to form a greenbelt of trees in the barren plains surrounding the Palni hills would help in preserving the remaining forest. The PHCC is setting up model tree planting centres in 5 different places in the foothills to encourage sustainable land use changes. This project, which involves planting 1.5 million trees over 400 hectares of land in 3 years, is funded by the Government of India.

We collected 54 tons of seeds from pioneer and indigenous drought resistant trees in Auroville as well as from the plains, and distributed 30 tons of seeds and seedlings of fruit firewoods, fence and timber trees.

A.T.: Are you planting only on wastelands?

DAVID: Yes, on public lands. Udaikom, our first centre, is on very important land as this area provides the drinking water for the Dindigul area. It could even be an educational demonstration plot to show that planting trees does raise the ground water level. And apparently we did so well that we got offered another drinking water area.

Then there is Nilakota, which is all private land. It is a model project in so far that the villagers have given their land to be afforested. They were poor farmers who had not been able to do any dry land farming on these plots for years. With this project, the farmers take charge of the land and obtain employment, while the young women do the work in the tree nurseries. There is a lot of information exchange between us and them about the kind of trees to be planted, and we're blending our experience with their knowledge of trees that use to grow in the area. The local people remember times when rivers and small streams were flowing 9 months a year. As a result of the deforestation this now happens only 2 days in a year. (*When trees are cut, the soil loses its spongy quality and can no longer absorb much moisture. The result is soil erosion, falling water tables and flash floods. Eds.*)

A.T.: Are the local people respecting the planted areas?

DAVID: Yes, very well! It has been much easier outside than in Auroville; I think it is because they are much more economically dependent on the land and have no possibilities of alternative income like the villagers around here, where they can get work in Auroville or Pondy.

A.T.: How do you relate to Auroville now?

DAVID: It is a very special and emotional thing for me. I did tree planting in Auroville for 10 years. I didn't at that time see that it had any relationship to the rest of the world and especially to India. But then we did this Department of Environment programme, and this made all the tree planters in Auroville more aware of the deforestation and the importance of learning to reafforest the wastelands. Then suddenly we had this project. Now the work I had learned to do

in Auroville has expanded to something much wider, and my knowledge of India and my knowledge of the work have increased. An example is that now we work with 162 species, whereas in the early days of Auroville we had only 20. Actually I learn from being in both places; Auroville is my base where I have learned much, and going out taught me much more. Now I can bring more knowledge in.

I am rather happy these days — I go out of Auroville full of energy and pick up more energy from working in the field. I bring groups of farmers back from the hills to Auroville and they are really impressed to see the bunding and tree-planting here. They leave convinced that, after three years, a shelter-belt can give 6 to 7 vandi-loads of firewood, just by cutting the side branches. This gives them great confidence in the tree planting programmes on their lands.

A.T.: You don't feel your connection with Auroville is weakened?

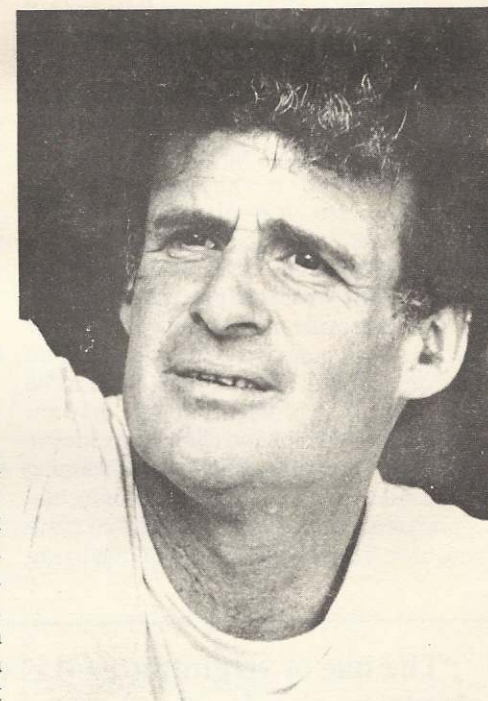
DAVID: No, not at all.

When I come home I usually arrive at five in the morning. Then I don't go to sleep, but I am out in the *topes* [fields] right away. What I feel then is that they can't pull me away from Auroville. Up there they are complaining when I stay here for a month, instead of a week as I was supposed to.

I have been here for fourteen years and have not been back to the West. So I feel very lucky to be able to get out of here and do tree planting in South India. And I think it helps me to relate better to Auroville; it has taken me out of this small-town thinking that I sometimes get into.

Now, when I come back I relate to all the positive sides of Auroville. I feel more in a position to give constructive criticism to my fellow treeplanters in Auroville — for instance to put more energy into making the forest more economically viable. This means keeping good records and seeing if the forest when better established can help pay for watchmen. And to introduce a bigger variety of species.

And I'd like to apply my new knowledge of the area by helping to make the Berijam camp more of an environmental awareness course for the Auroville kids. — *Sonja*



David

Photo: Sven

Food for Thought

"IF WE STUDY the geology we see that we are settled above a plateau that stretches from Pondy to Kalliveli tank over a deep layer of pebbles.

Auroville's industrial area is planned and starting to develop on top of the watershed where this pebble-layer exists. This is a layer where the transmissibility is high (the water penetrates 1-2 m a day).

So far it has not been possible anywhere to create an industrial area that is totally non-polluting, and therefore we stand a high risk of polluting our first aquifer in a short time. If we are planning an industrial area without running the risk of polluting the aquifer where most of Auroville's communities are taking their drinking water from, we will have to consider the geology of the watershed where we place industry."

Jean (long-term greenworker)

"The Preciousness of the Human Body"

—Dr. Tenzin Choedrak visits Auroville—

In response to an invitation from Auroville, the Dalai Lama's Ministry of Health decided to send Doctor Tenzin Choedrak, personal physician to the Dalai Lama, and doctors Dorjee Raptan and Lobsang Tsultrim to Auroville. They came accompanied by a medical team from Dharamsala and gave consultations and a series of conferences on Tibetan medicine for four days in November.

Dr. Choedrak was the personal physician of the Dalai Lama before 1959, but was taken prisoner by the Chinese in 1959 during the Lhasa uprising for having signed a document that affirmed Tibet's independence. Despite beatings and torture he refused to denounce the Dalai Lama or utter any lies. Exhausted and starving, he was shuttled from prison camp to prison camp and was to remain a prisoner of the Chinese for more than twenty years.

An unsuspecting Aurovilian, coming to the Secretariat before 10 a.m. might have been somewhat surprised on the 22nd of November to smell incense and hear the low rumble of the chanting of Tibetan mantras and invocations to the Buddha of healing and medicine coming from the Laboratory of Evolution. Some thirty

the Tibetan Medical Institute in Dharamsala.

On the 23rd of November, he gave a talk at the Centre of Indian Studies on the origins and nature of the Tibetan medical system. When asked for a definition of a healthy body, he answered, "Until and un-

The traditional origins of Tibetan medicine stretch back three thousand years. The founder of the Bonpo religion, Lord Sherab Mewo, taught the Tibetan medical system to his favourite son and disciple Chebutishe, who proceeded to write many commentaries on the subject. This system was to prevail for many years in Tibet until it came into contact with Ayurvedic medicine following a visit of two South Indian physicians to Tibet. In the 7th century A.D., an international conference was held in a Tibetan monastery during the reign of King Drisong Detsen, that was attended by physicians from India, China, Persia and Nepal.

During the 11th or 12 century the essence of all the different medical traditions was collected into a text called the "Four Great Tantras", which is still the main reference work for the Tibetan medical system.

Tibetan medicine is based on the notion of the interdependence of the five basic cosmophysical elements: earth, space, water, fire and air. As our bodies are composed of the same elements as our environment from where we draw sustenance, a disrupted environment can cause many diseases. A Tibetan prophecy from one of the medical tantras states that "there will be a time when material progress will be so great that the value of love and compassion as well as positive mental attitudes will be greatly diminished. There will be many conflicts between different ideas and ideologies. Because of material progress there will be great advances in science and technology but due to this, people will engage in the destruction of their own environment. The earth will be shaken and polluted, its ecology destroyed. Pollution of the environment will affect all forms of vegetation and the consumption of affected vegetation will weaken the organs and immune systems of the human body and give rise to a variety of fatal diseases."

To summarise the approach of Tibetan medicine one could say that the three 'humours' or energies—bile, phlegm and wind—have to be in a balanced state for the body to be in perfect health.

"Their minds are very busy. They are multi-minded, always thinking of doing many things, but there exists a lack of tolerance. There are certain heights which they want to reach, and when they cannot reach them, they become tense, depressed and over-anxious. This leads to a disturbance of the wind energy in the body."

When asked about the Dalai Lama's work and whether it relates in any way to Auroville he answered, "I see no difference between the Dalai Lama's work and the work that you are doing in Auroville. The aim of Auroville and that of the Dalai

Lama's teaching are almost the same. His Holiness is always trying to stress the fact that we are all members of one family of this earth. We are like brothers and sisters, and if that human relatedness is practised and realised, then there is bound to be an important relationship evolving between different centres and peoples of this earth, a relationship that can bring eternal peace to this world. I feel that in the near future there will be a gradual development of Auroville—a development that will be able to serve as a model for the outside world."

Roger/Yanne

"Until and unless one gets free from ignorance, one cannot free oneself from diseases. As the bird which flies in the sky is followed by its shadow—if you cannot free yourself from ignorance you will not free yourself from disorder."

people from Auroville and Pondy were gathered downstairs waiting for Dr. Choedrak and his team to start their consultations on the first morning of their three day visit to Auroville. The consultations proceeded till one o'clock. With barely a break for lunch, the team proceeded to the House of Mother's Agenda near Aspiration where a large gathering of Aurovilians and students of Last School had come to hear Dr. Choedrak give a talk on the preciousness of the human body. With moving simplicity, he spoke of his life, Tibet and Buddhism and how he managed to survive twenty years of imprisonment. He described how he had used certain visualization techniques to engender heat in his body to help him sustain the deprivation and hunger he was subject to. He also described visualizing the suffering he was undergoing as a cleansing rain that was purifying him of accumulated negative karma from previous lives. The question and answer session was punctuated by his laughter that contagiously spread amongst the high school kids.

Over the next few days more than a hundred and fifty Aurovilians with ailments imagined or otherwise filed through the Laboratory of Evolution in order to have their pulses read by Dr. Choedrak—who would then with an uncanny accuracy diagnose and pin-point the origins and nature of their various complaints. Tibetan pills were then prescribed. These pills consist of a variety of herbs and minerals that are picked each August in the Manali valley area, and in the other foothills of the Himalayas by teams of researchers from

less one gets free from ignorance, one cannot free oneself from diseases. As the bird which flies in the sky is followed by its shadow—if you cannot free yourself from ignorance you will not free yourself from disorder."

When we asked him how he was able to diagnose the pulse with such accuracy, he compared the doctor who listens to the pulse to a successful merchant, who, having travelled throughout the world knows which part of the world produces what goods and so is able to discern their quality and place of origin. The same way, the pulse when read at the radial artery can exhibit the conditions of the solid and hollow organs.

On his last day in Auroville Dr. Choedrak shared with us some of his impressions of Auroville as well as of the general energy level and (im)balance of the Aurovilians he treated.

He noticed two common imbalances. One concerned a loss of heat in the digestive system. This loss occurs amongst other things through sweat, relaxing under heavy fans, and imbibing ice-cold drinks. This leads to a tremendous loss of heat in the digestive system. He suggested that Aurovilians should drink boiled water to increase their digestive heat. This helps alleviate many different complications, including asthma, stomach pains, sneezing and allergies. Boiled hot water should be drunk before breakfast and boiled but cooled water throughout the day. If water is not boiled, even if it is filtered it can weaken the digestive system.

He also observed that many Aurovilians suffer from mental tension.

Photo: Claude



Photo: Sven

"Water is the driving force of all Nature"—Leonardo da Vinci

"WE MUST TAKE DRASTIC STEPS TO CONSERVE OUR WATER"

— Excerpts from an interview with Dr. V.M. Meher-Homji —

Dr. V.M. Meher-Homji is Dean of the Salim Ali School of Ecology, Pondicherry University, and Head of the Department of Biogeography and Bioclimatology, French Institute, Pondicherry. He is also a Fellow of the Indian National Science Academy, a Fellow of the Indian Academy of Sciences, and a Fellow of the National Academy of Sciences.

Dr. Meher-Homji has lived and worked in Pondicherry for over 30 years. For many years he has generously shared his expert knowledge of local vegetation with Auroville greenworkers.

AUROVILLE TODAY: What is the situation regarding the quality of water in Auroville and the surrounding area?

DR. MEHER-HOMJI: The quality of water in Auroville is potable. However, on Pondicherry University Campus (3 kilometres north of Auroville-Eds.), the water has a bitter taste. It is being analyzed at present. There is also some concern because permission has been granted to Chemfab (a caustic soda factory situated close to the University-Eds.) to extract 12% more water than they use at the moment — this may lead to intrusion of sea-water into the aquifers.

A.T.: Is there a danger of pesticides percolating into our groundwater?

DR. MEHER-HOMJI: There is a possibility, but I feel that the Auroville aquifers are deep enough for this not to be a problem.

A.T.: Pondicherry is urbanizing rapidly.

A.T.: How far has the example of Auroville in this work spread?

DR. MEHER-HOMJI: I'm afraid not far — except for the new Pondy Engineering College where they want to use some of your soil and water conservation methods. Also the Horticulture Committee of Pondicherry University would like to have an Aurovilian on their committee. I'd like the Pondicherry planners to pay more attention to the example of Auroville.

For years, I've been maintaining that Pondicherry should not go for industrialization because the real strength of Pondicherry has always been in education and agriculture. Now it's realized we must take drastic steps to conserve our water. Otherwise our aquifers will become saline. This is already happening in Kalapet (5 kilometers North of Auroville-Eds.).

Photo: Sven



"In this part of the world, there is a unique form of vegetation — it is not forest but scrub jungle."

What effect is this having upon the environment?

DR. MEHER-HOMJI: First we are losing much good agricultural land to factories. There is also a big increase in population so that more land is being used for housing. Secondly, the water recharge is reduced as more land is covered by cement.

A.T.: There was a traditional system of water storage in this part of India involving catchment tanks that were linked together. Is it still viable?

DR. MEHER-HOMJI: I can show you the map of Pondicherry, surveyed in 1911, and you will find many tanks. Today there are practically none. Consequently the recharge rate is much lower. At the University, we must ensure that water does not run-off into the sea, because the problem is not just soil erosion but also the necessity to trap rain to let it replenish our aquifers.

In this respect, Auroville has done very good work.

One way to reduce water usage is to shift from monoculture of rice to growing vegetables, which use less water. Japan has shown an interest in airlifting vegetables from India. The Pondicherry government could set up refrigeration plants and bottling units for tomato juice etc.

We could also go in for new products like Passion-flower fruits juice and Sapota juice. This would give the farmers a valuable extra income.

A.T.: How much has the forest cover in this part of the world been reduced over the years?

DR. MEHER-HOMJI: In 1957, the forest cover for India as a whole was something like 22%. In 1972 it came down to 16%; in 1982, 14%. The most recent figure must be something like 10%.

In this part of the world, there is a unique form of vegetation — it is not forest but scrub jungle. I've seen the area of this scrub

jungle decreasing year by year. It was the forest policy in the last two or three decades to introduce Eucalyptus and Teak over a certain area every year. So the natural scrub was cleared and Eucalyptus planted. This happened in Marakkanam in 1977, and we managed, with the help of Aurovilians, to stop its destruction.

But if you look at the Coromandel plains now, there is hardly any natural scrub cover left.

A.T.: What are the major consequences of this destruction?

DR. MEHER-HOMJI: The scrub jungles of the coastal plains of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh are unique in the whole world. And in these scrub jungles grow many plants that are not found elsewhere. There is, for example, the Red Sanders which is perhaps the most precious tree of India — it's imported by the Japanese to make musical instruments. Then there is a climber (vernacular name *Ehumboti*; Latin name *Ormocarpum sennoides*) that can be used for mending fractures. The leaf is made into a poultice with egg — it is reported to be very effective.

There is another plant, *Tylophora asthmatica*, that is useful in curing asthma. *Dioscoria* tubers contain steroids that are used in contraceptives.

Again, the wild-life was seriously depleted by the clearing of this scrub-jungle. And when the jackals and wolves lost their natural habitat, they started attacking villagers.

A.T.: And the effect of the destruction of forests?

DR. MEHER-HOMJI: Soil erosion accelerates and the temperature increases. Under forest cover in June, the temperature is about 35°C. In an open area, it can be 60-65°C!!

Finally there is the effect upon the rainfall. This is a very controversial issue. However, in S. America it is proven that forest cover affects convectional rainfall. The forest recycles moisture. If there is adequate forest — like in the Western Ghats — it may recycle the rainfall to a certain extent, as the trees transpire the moisture back into the air, even if the monsoon, a planetary phenomenon, is weak in a particular year. Also, the undulating canopy cover of a forest encourages the clouds to rise and to release their moisture.

In addition, microscopic organic debris floating in the air above the forest allows the formation of water particles around them at a much higher temperature than inorganic particles.

A.T.: How can environmental awareness be increased?

DR. MEHER-HOMJI: Some of our young enthusiastic school teachers are organizing training for other teachers and students in environmental awareness so that they can carry the message to the public. In Pondy University, the ecology students have formed a society called 'Roots' which is very active in protecting the environment. But we still have to educate our elders — the administrators and secretaries. And we need to launch a 'Save Pondicherry' programme.

Interview by Alan, Carel and Roger (1.3.90)

WHAT IS WHAT?

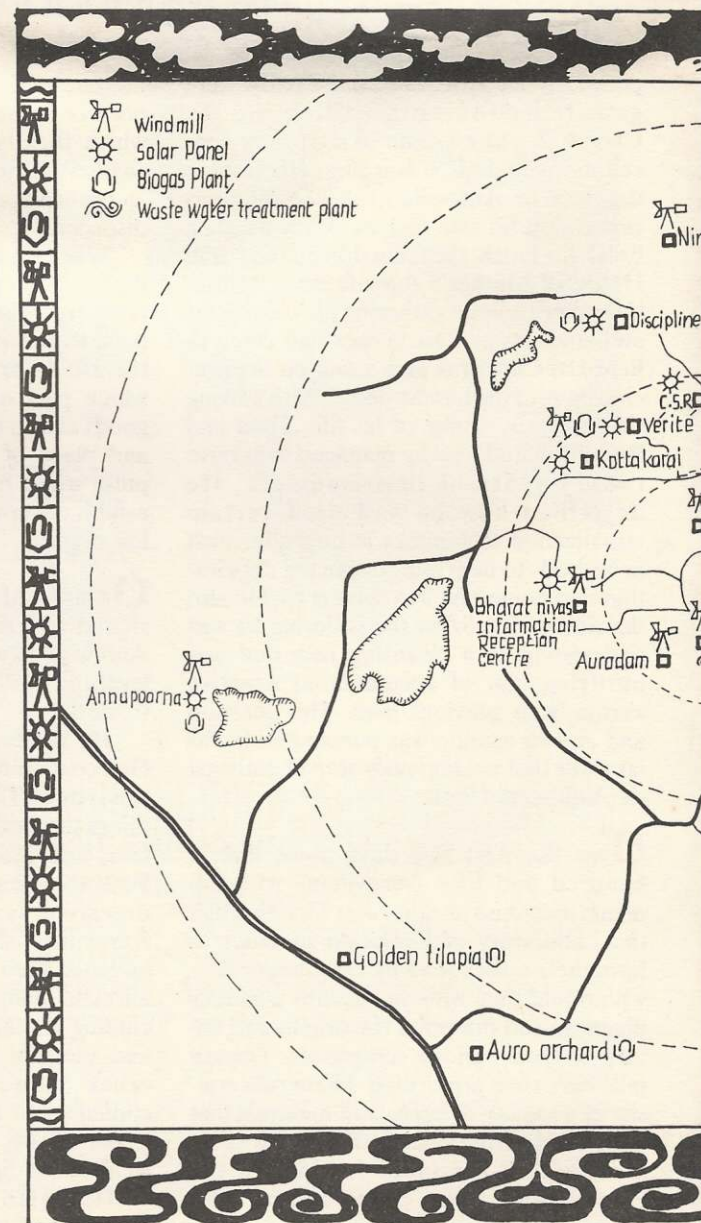
BIOGAS is mainly methane gas which is given off when vegetative matter breaks down. It can be contained by allowing it to 'digest' in a tank that has another tank 'floating' on top which pressurizes the gas for transmission to a stove, engine or lights. Some systems have a fixed top (Chinese type). Biogas is often called gobar gas in India.

WIND ENERGY uses the force of the wind to turn some kind of rotor or propeller connected to a water pump, electrical generator or machine.

SOLAR ENERGY uses the sunlight to generate an electrical current in a silicon cell and provide direct current electricity. Solar energy also refers to the use of the sun's heat to cook food by trapping and concentrating the heat in a cooker, or to heat water, or to generate steam which, in turn, can be used for mechanical applications. This is usually done by flat plate collectors which expose a large thin surface, containing a liquid, to the sun. The sun's heat can be intensified with lenses and mirrors and stored in salts and stones.

RENEWABLE ENERGY refers to energy sources like the sun, wind and others that are continuously available, as opposed to fossil fuels (coal, oil, etc.) and nuclear fuels which are limited in supply and are sources of pollution.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT refers to development activities based on the ability of the environment to survive the impact of this development over a long period of time without polluting or degrading the earth.



Earth Blood

THIS mysterious liquid is a combination of two gases. When it's cold it is solid, when hot it steams away.

Most of the time nobody notices water. However, if it doesn't come out of a tap, tastes terrible or kills the fish — well, that is the end of our story, our life. The water of the earth is the blood of the planet, and of course Auroville couldn't be here without it. The environment of Auroville is being restored by a careful process of regeneration, in which water plays a key part. Sometimes it is forgotten that all forms of water, in the ground, on the land and in the air, are connected. It is a closed system. There is no new water.

Therefore, dumping wastes in water, in other words diluting them, is no solution, but pollution. There is no such place as 'away'. There is no such thing as a safe level of pollution. The more pollution there is, the more it hurts human health and the health of the earth.

Reversing this process is a prerequisite, if the "city the earth needs" is to be worth its name. Or have I got it wrong?

Parts of India receive the largest quantity of rainfall in the world. India's most well-known meteorologist, Dr. P.R. Pisharoty says that we waste 60% of it. He gives us only ten more years to survive if there is no change. He recommends: "Collect whatever falls on your head. Bund every bit of land from all sides." (*Illustrated Weekly*, 24/9/89). Auroville might be 'famous' for its bunding of eroded lands, but there's still runoff and water is lost to the sea. Auroville has few rainfall reserves, but pumps it up from the water tables with everything from

hand-pumps to 25 H.P. electric submersible pumps. The management of this water is a serious issue that is not being looked at on a community-wide basis. Here are some of the processes we could be using more.

Biological purification of toilet water ('grey' water) is a well documented science. There is in Auroville an example of a household in which all the water used (toilet, kitchen, bathroom) goes into a single treatment system of sand and pebbles growing specific water-loving plants, that yields "safe" water suitable for irrigation and other purposes. Also biogas is being used to process toilet water, kitchen wastes and other bio-mass into usable gas and slurry for compost and other 'fertiliser' applications. Such systems can usually be installed for the same price as conventional septic tank systems. Septic tanks, requiring a sealed tank and a soak-pit, are a good example of something still recommended as a normal, safe and efficient disposal system. But in fact they are really a complete

'waste' as all this water, enriched by the food which has been nicely digested by a human being to break down into energy efficient fuel (biogas) and nutrients to fertilize the soil and grow plants, is lost in the soak pit. It is even possible that such systems pollute the ground water and nearby wells. The urban sewage systems are examples of large scale capital investment loss, and misuse of valuable resources. Such sewage systems have, at times, been proposed for the 'city' of Auroville. Such an Auroville has no future.

Aware individuals do sometimes manage to work out solutions, as can be seen in various communities. But when planning for a town, large systems have to be planned and developed for higher population densities.

Bill

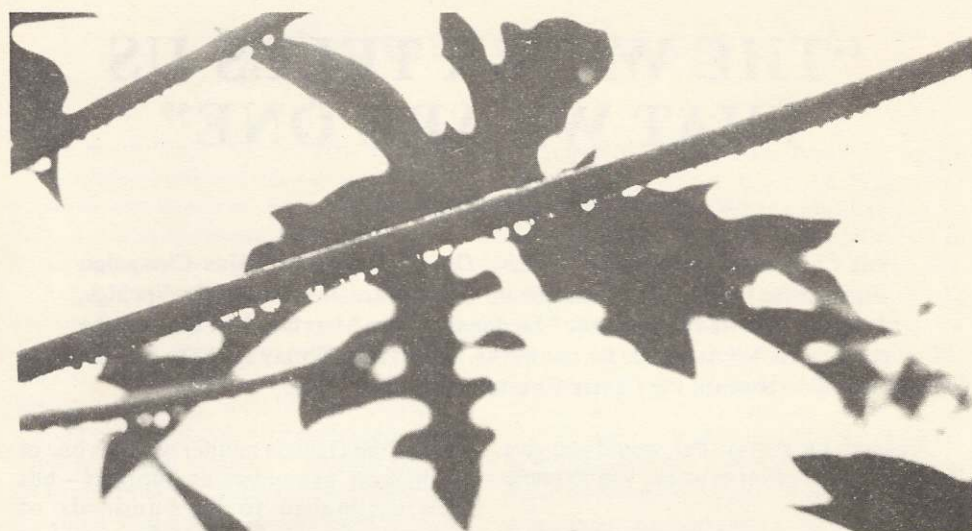
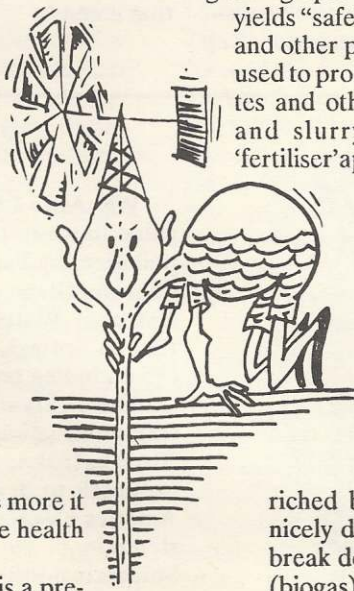


Photo: Sven

RECIPES FOR WATER

Levitated water

Levitated water is often called E-water (the E is for energized).

Invented by Wilfried Hacheney, it is created when ordinary water is subjected to high pressure turbulence in a special machine. Many special benefits are claimed. Cement improves when mixed with it, and so do plants and people who drink this potion. Auroville International Germany tried it out at the last Auroville International meeting and now market it for ten rupees a litre.

Flow Form Water

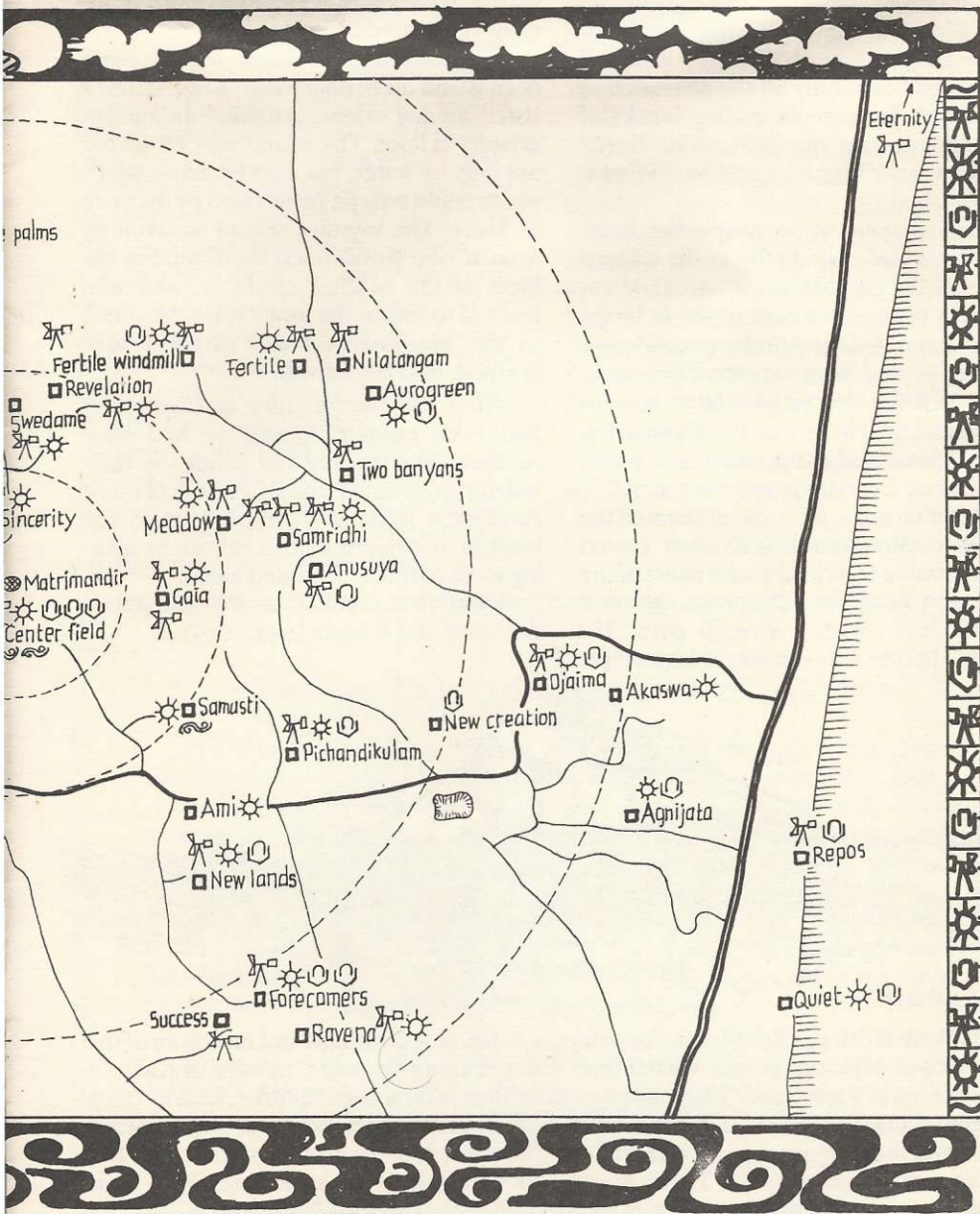
'Living Water', a Scottish charitable trust and consulting company, has recommended to Auroville 'flow forms'. These are specially contoured channels which create the natural turbulence of streams and rivers to purify and energize water. Later on they will perhaps be tried in the new Auroville Information/Reception Centre, which is now under construction.

Catalyst Altered Water.

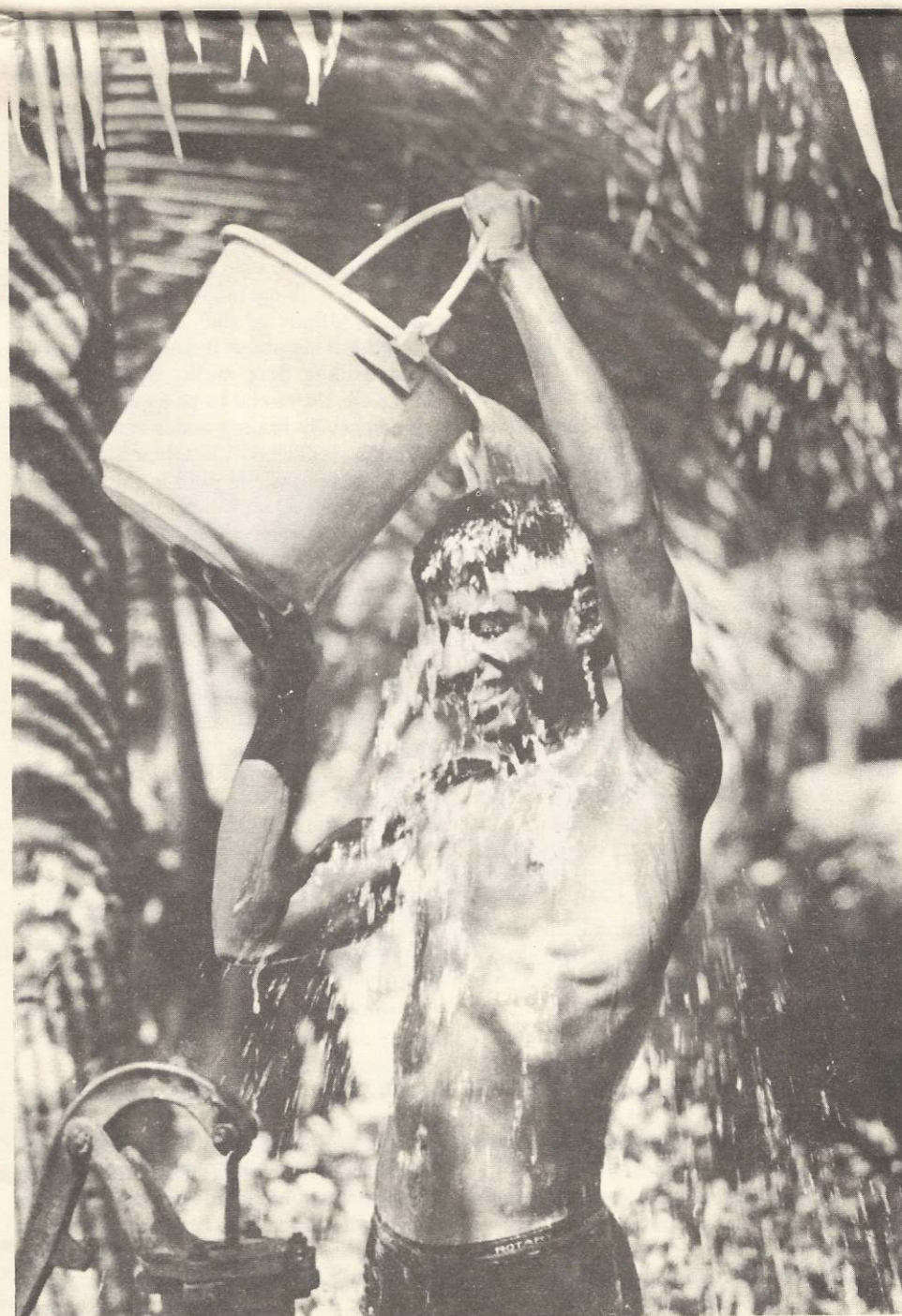
Catalyst altered water, also called "Willard Water" after its inventor, an American chemistry professor, is water mixed with castor oil, sodium silicate (water glass), calcium chloride and magnesium sulphate (Epsom salts). This water can be further activated by contact with lignite (the soft coal burned by TNEB to generate electricity for our local grid.) This water is reported to have very beneficial effects on plants and animals, including people. So far there haven't been any Auroville experiments.

There are many others, but this might wet your appetite...

Photo: Sven



Hans Weeda Primitive Design Studio Centre-Questhouse Auroville



"THE WATER TELLS US THAT WE ARE ONE"

A talk with Pat Costner

Pat Costner, author of *We All Live Downstream* and *Toxins Campaign* Director for the environmental group Greenpeace, lives in Eureka Springs, Arkansas. Invited by Suzanne Macdonald of the Merriam Hill Center, she recently visited Auroville for two weeks. AUROVILLE TODAY spoke to her one afternoon beneath the Centre Guesthouse Banyan Tree.

AUROVILLE TODAY: Pat, would you give us a brief description of where you've come from.

PAT: I've been with Greenpeace for 4 years now, and I'm Research Director for the toxins campaign for Greenpeace. I have focussed primarily on more technical issues such as hazardous disposal, public health and the environmental impacts of waste disposal by chemical industries, and of general toxicology information.

A.T.: Perhaps you could talk to us about what you've seen in and around Auroville and in the villages. What suggestions and warnings do you have concerning our future that relies totally on our water supply?

PAT: Water quantity is already an overriding issue not only for India but most other nations. In Auroville also, water is an overriding issue. It would seem that anything we can do here that would increase our awareness of the importance of water in everything we do, and at the same time reduce the quantity of water that we are using, and reduce the pollution that we are putting in the water would be all to the good. India has probably had more research done into alternative waste management systems than almost any other country. The pour flush toilet, which is relatively ubiquitous in this part of India, has been developed in an effort to improve sanitation and at the same time provide better protection for water quality.

A.T.: What type of systems should one eventually install in villages that, for instance, lack any type of sewage treatment?

PAT: The CSR here - Tency, Gilles and Bill - is already in the process of building pre-fab pour flush latrines and I believe they have a contract with the Government of Pondicherry to provide a certain number of these as an ongoing process. (Pour flush is a squat toilet in which you pour about a litre of water to carry your waste through a trap into a holding tank. The water in the trap provides a seal that blocks out bad odours). These toilets use less water than the standard European or U.S. flush toilets, which use about 5 gallons of water (20 litres) per flush.

A.T.: Water is a problem in Auroville. The government has banned drilling wells within 6 kilometers of the coastline. Yet the city wants to be built here one day. What should we do?

PAT: In addressing the water quantity issue, it is imperative that we set up a pattern not only in Auroville but throughout the world in which people use as little water as possible. I would like to quote John Trudell who said, "The water tells us that we are one". Water is our most important commonly shared resource. All the water on the earth is basically one water. There is a water cycle. Essentially every drop of water that was on the earth initially is still on the earth. Very little new water is being made, so it is a limited resource, and we have to deal with it accordingly.

Every watershed has a finite quality of water that is available to it. That quantity of water is the governing factor for everything that takes place in that watershed. It governs the quantity and quality of life that that watershed can support.

What we have done in modern times is basically mine our groundwater reserves in an effort to achieve development that is, essentially, artificially maintained.

In the US, the deeper groundwater - for

instance the Ogallala aquifer which is one of our biggest groundwater supplies - has been estimated to be hundreds of thousands of years old. These deep aquifers have a very slow recharge rate, so when you pump from an underground aquifer you are emptying that aquifer.

A.T.: What level are we talking about now? Something much deeper than the aquifers that are replenished if there is a monsoon?

PAT: Those are the surface aquifers. The deep aquifer in Auroville is running I think about 250-300 metres down. World-watch Institute in one of its reports said that in over one decade the water levels in Tamil Nadu dropped at a rate of 2.5-3 metres a year. Now Bernard at Annapurna is seeing the water level there drop 5 metres per year. At the same time, you have salt water intrusion near here. This is happening because of the depletion of the aquifers. As the fresh water is pulled out, the sea water is naturally pulled in.

A.T.: What should we be very conscious of in the years to come as the city develops?

PAT: It would seem that Auroville, like any other community that is growing should base its plans for growth on the available resources. Although monsoons are not always dependable historically, you used to have abundant rainfall here during the monsoon season. Years ago the native people had systems (underground cisterns and storage tanks with collection systems) built to trap and save the water from the monsoon because they didn't have the technologies to drill deep wells to the aquifers. And it would seem that augmenting these old technologies for saving rainwater might be the best way for looking at the water sources that Auroville can depend on. And I know by talking to people at the town planning office that they are aware of this and are talking about it. But they also talk about drilling deep wells. If people drill deep wells they need to be aware that they are essentially mining water reserves that will not be renewed within their lifetime. As food needs grow irrigation in this area will be the major use of water. I think that 70% of the water use now is agricultural. So you will be competing.

A.T.: Is there a chance of the pesticides being used by local farmers on cashews and crops eventually penetrating down and entering our groundwater supplies?

PAT: In the U.S. they are conducting studies that show that groundwater contaminated by pesticides in agricultural areas is pretty ubiquitous. The use of pesticides and of artificial fertilizers like ammonium nitrates are threats to groundwater in all cases.

It would be to everyone's advantage if everyone shared a common understanding of what their water resources are, what their options are for managing those water resources and in what their options are for managing the water quality so that the community as a whole can take a unified approach to water management.

A.T.: How could we share such information?

PAT: Well, one way would be a water centre for Auroville. There would be a library that would include general information on water and waste issues and information that is specific to India, specific to Tamil Nadu and more than that, specific to Auroville. And to have someone in charge

of such an Information Resource Centre who would also be in charge of carrying out the continual monitoring that needs to take place in order for Aurovilians to have a clear idea of what is happening with their water resources. There was a hydro-geological study done back in 1984. That made a number of recommendations, one of which was continuous monitoring not only of the depths of the water in the wells and of their capacities, but also of the water quality. Interestingly enough this report points out that shallow water aquifers - the ones that are recharged from rain water - have a lower salinity than the major deep

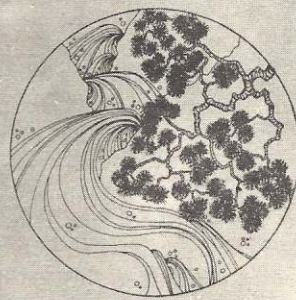
underground aquifer. And that the deep underground aquifer has a salinity that is already so high that it is marginal as far as being recommended for drinking water. But it is the shallow aquifers that are the most vulnerable to intrusion from pesticides as well as being vulnerable to droughts. These facts are basic for Auroville's development.

There is enough information for Auroville to know what steps to undertake as far as water is concerned. It is just that it hasn't received the support or the focus that it needs.

Interview by Roger

WE ALL LIVE DOWNSTREAM

A Guide to Waste Treatment That Stops Water Pollution.



THE NATIONAL WATER CENTER
Eureka Springs, Arkansas

By Pat Costner
with Holly Gettings and Glenna Booth

WE ALL LIVE DOWNSTREAM. A guide to waste treatment that stops water pollution, by Pat Costner with Holly Gettings and Glenna Booth. Available from the National Water Center, P.O. Box 264, Eureka Springs, AR 72632 USA. (US\$ 695 excluding postage and handling)

This eighty-nine page booklet is packed with information, facts, statistics, insights, illustrations, poems, cartoons and proposals to deal with the looming north-American water crisis. It chronicles the struggle of the community of Eureka Springs in north western Arkansas, to clean up the 66 natural springs in the city, that had become contaminated by sewage linked to water borne waste systems. It also catalogues dozens of alternative waste disposal systems that are already on the market, ranging from solar 'biolet' toilets to low-flush toilets, and provides a guide to building do-it-yourself toilets that range from the Multrum compost latrine (originally developed in Sweden) to the Vietnamese double vault composters. It is a book that presents a subject - that few of us spent much time thinking about - in an engaging yet practical way.

Of Mystery Schools, Mantras and Mists

All that was missing was stiff upperlips and bowler hats. For the rest, the inauguration and naming of the new guest house, financed by AVI U.K., went off quietly and beautifully on the afternoon of the 28th February - so ending weeks of speculation and un-Britishlike fierce debate over the burning question, "What is it to be called?"

That morning at an auspicious hour, Meenakshi had boiled milk in the eastern corner of the guest house to invoke abundance. In the western corner, she lit lamps for the major gods and *shaktis*; outside was a *kolam* inviting them to enter. The atmosphere, as Edith described it later, was "of total oneness. There was no division between heaven and earth, inner and outer, gods and us. Everything was here, now."

That afternoon, Meenakshi chanted the Ganesh mantra, and then Krishna Tewari stepped inside to write the new name of the U.K. guest house in rice spread out on a banana leaf - with a British coin! He emerged to reveal it - the worst-kept secret

of the month. "Avalon"! Spontaneous applause, mixed with a generous dose of incomprehension.

Soleil explained. 'Avalon' was the name of an island off Britain where King Arthur's sister, among others, attended an ancient mystery school. The island was protected not only by water, but also by dense mists, which could only be penetrated by the pure of heart. The mystery school was run by women who worshipped the Divine in the form of the Mother Goddess, and who learned to follow the inner voice. 'Avalon', as the quick-witted will already have grasped, also begins with AV!

After the chief builder and carpenter had been honoured, and we had sung Mother's mantra, Joy and Edith - in their indefatigable spirit true successors of those Avalonian initiates - returned us to the niceties of modern British culture by inviting us to partake of tea and cakes.

Later that evening, as the last guests departed, did it begin to get misty...?



'Greenwalk'

BETWEEN 5th and 8th March, for 4 days, a group of Aurovilians and members of the youth clubs of adjacent villages walked from Kalapet along the southern edge of Kalivelli tank, finishing at Koot Road. They talked to more than 3000 school children, held evening meetings, planted trees, recorded information from old people about the environment, talked about the dangers of pesticides, etc. etc. The event ended with a poet's meeting. The 'tour' was an opportunity for Tamil Aurovilians to speak to big gatherings from their Auroville greenwork experience. It was an action in preparation of Earth Day.

Letters

Ayyappa

Dear Friends,
"Blaring loudspeakers at 5:30 in the morning disturb the sleep of many Aurovilians at this time of the year — WHO IS AYYAPPA?"

The above quoted statement has disturbed me more than a few early morning hours of sleep lost by the Aurovilians. An early morning chant awakens my spiritual being and identifies me with LORD VISHNU. It is rather perplexing, that a chant, that explicitly states "SHARANAM AYYAPPA" or a total submission of one's own ego, to the blessing of "AYYAPPA" or the "NARAYANA" is disturbing to an Aurovillian.

It is possible that the loud noise through the blaring loudspeakers is disturbing. The loudspeaker chants are really medieval and crude. Behind the facade of their crude expression over the loudspeakers, is their deep faith and submission to chant about "SRI MAN NARAYAN", and obtain his blessing.

Worship of LORD AYYAPPA is definitely not a cultism. Hinduism conveys, in its variegated forms of worship, the spirituality in its faith and submission.

Mere intellectual conviction of the unity of Mankind in Auroville is insufficient by itself to subdue the tempest of Man's ego. Instead, an Aurovillian with a higher level of consciousness could spontaneously feel the vibrations of "SHARANAM AYYAPPA" within themselves and place Auroville in its everlasting spiritual leadership.

Sincerely,
Lakshmi Vadapatti, M.D.
Milltown, NJ, USA. (16.1.'90)

We omitted to mention that not only AYYAPPA songs, but also Tamil film music is broadcast by the loudspeakers. Eds.

Auroville And The Villages (1)

Dear Friends,
I am really happy to see the January 1990 issue of Auroville Today.

I want to congratulate the Editorial Team of Auroville Today for bringing out in details what the Auroville Village Action Team is trying to do in the surrounding 21 villages to help the local people improve their social, economic and cultural conditions. In my view, this was very necessary for the outside world to know that the Aurovilians are not only interested in their own welfare at Auroville but are equally concerned about the well-being of the local Tamil population, whom Mother rightly used to call "the first Aurovilians".

I wish to congratulate the CO-EVOLUTION Team for their perseverance and hard work, not only in trying to help the local Tamilians — particularly the Youth, Women and

Children under difficult conditions — but also in involving various Auroville individuals and groups in the task of CO-EVOLUTION. I have always believed that there is a definite felt need for such a process to start between the Aurovilians who have come from outside and "the first Aurovilians", because the Aurovilians who have come from all over the world have the Arts, Science and Technology for improving the environmental and economic conditions of the local people, while the Tamilians possess some of the ingredients of Indian Culture, which, if combined, could really become an ideal. You have rightly mentioned this two-way traffic as the greatest challenge and the greatest opportunity to move towards real human unity, for both the groups.

Let us all hope and pray that this process would not only continue but flourish, so that it could be a very good demonstration for the whole world. It would be a mini-experiment of the developed North meeting the challenges of the under-developed South at the global level, and the urban India meeting the challenges of rural Bharat at the national level. I wish you all my best wishes for a grand success.

Yours sincerely,
Suresh Suratwala, Rural Welfare Board, Sir Dorabji Tata Trust, Bombay, 12.2.'90

Auroville And The Villages (2)

How about an Auroville Today in Tamil, or just a column or two in the English edition, an international forum for village neighbours and/or workers? I love their poetry. There is a soaring, a freedom, a largeness, a freshness of metaphor and symbolism in it. With a 'translation' beside, for the rest of us.

Nice also for the many many Tamilians in Canada, U.K. etc. to have a little recognition of what their countrymen are teaching us, and contributing to Auroville in Auroville Today. I love the addition of something Tamilian in each issue.

Many thanks to Meenakshi for her helpful hints for visitors. She helps both visitors and visitees. I know it felt awful when I realised that the snack or meal which had been offered to me was often my host's family supper or something they'd very quietly gone and bought from the village shop, with a hastily arranged loan, and prepared for me, as if it were the usual Sunday brunch — a gift which I consumed, sometimes only not to risk offending, without the slightest idea of what Indian hospitality really meant.

Carol,
Montreal, Canada (17.2.'90)

Next Auroville International Meeting in France

AT THE END of the successful 1989 meeting of the Auroville International centres in an old farmhouse in Holland, Auroville International France offered to organize the 1990 AVI meeting. Though France abounds in old farm houses, AVI France decided to look for a place with more distinction. And they found one!

The château de Charbonnières, situated in an idyllic spot some 140 km south of Paris, will be the place for the next Auroville International meeting. The meeting will take place on the weekend of June 29 — July 1. The cost of the weekend is 600 FF, including lodging and food.

Those who wish to attend this meeting are invited to contact the Auroville International centre in their country or AVI France, c/o Marie-Noëlle Phlipponot, 14 Rue Nungesser et Coli, 75016 Paris, France. Tel: 1.46051660.

A Cultural Oasis

The week from 21st to 28th February provided a cultural oasis in an otherwise pretty desert-like year. We arrived at Last School, thirsty for music, poetry, drama, for laughter and, above all, contact.

So, where were you between the 21st and the 28th?

If you were not in Auroville, what a pity! It was a holy week for some, with or without humour; a holiday week for the children; a welcome-week for all visiting friends coming to get a little whiff of Auroville air; and for us, Aurovilians, a week of work, but with so much more joy, of encounters of all kinds, of preparation for the week's festivities and events.

But let us begin at the beginning.

The extraordinary and mysterious story of Savitri

The 21st February, Mother's birthday, was celebrated by everyone individually. In the evening, we all came together under the Banyan Tree near Matrimandir to listen to the story of Savitri, told to us and danced by Jean to music composed and played by Marcus. It was a real sensation to arrive at the Banyan Tree, under the magnificent tropical sky of a February night and under the protection of an illuminated Matrimandir. Little lamps converged from all sides, drawn towards that attractive central point. Pascal received us with an improvisation on synthesizer — a sound beyond all dimension. Then Jean told us Savitri's beautiful story and accompanied it with some dance movements. Her sober and passionate presence, the music as well as Marti's reading touched the hearts of almost 200 spectators. A non-spectacular spectacle. Weren't we, that evening of the 21st, like children listening quietly and full of admiration to the storyteller of the Auroville village, telling us the extraordinary and mysterious story of Savitri?

Auroville is fine. Thank god there's humour too!

On the 26th, we came together at Last School. Well in advance, the place was brimming over and many Aurovilians had to spend the evening standing.

The Waltzing Vandi Review had enchanted us already last year. We were therefore full of expectation, and we were not disappointed.

Larry, the host, introduced us to the different acts. What diversity! What richness! What vitality! What a good mood! So many nascent and shy possibilities! So much authentic talent and, above all, humour! A big thanks to Roger, to Paulo and his troupe and to the adolescents for having made us laugh at ourselves, for having offered us laughter that exorcised rancours and frustrations.

We can't possibly mention all the participants, and yet I would like to mention here a revelation — Pascal and his cello act à la Buster Keaton. We knew him already as a painter, and also as an actor and a perfect musician. Magicians, musician-singers, children dancing, singing, playing the violin, men and women dancers, poets — and a little tip of the hat to our team member, Roger. On top of his talent as an occasional singer of Irish ballads, he revealed to us his talent as a satirical songwriter.

The evening ended late, people danced on the stage and didn't want to leave. Thanks once more to all, even for the false notes and the wrong steps for it was us, in all simplicity and without artifice.

Nadaka gave a concert — on the evening of the 28th.

You may already know Nadaka from our article on him in issue no. 7.

This evening he brought with him the finest of musicians: a violinist and a tabla player from Madras and a young drummer from the USA. He told us that they had had only a few hours to practice together... And yet we were suddenly transported to another level of quality. We were at a concert. Nadaka, in his wisdom, had added extra seats to receive the numerous public. Except for some technical problems in the beginning, the concert was of high quality and we could once more appreciate a perfect 'fusion' of Indian ragas and western harmonies. In a calm and tranquil way, Nadaka took his musicians to the heights of instrumental perfection and offered us rare delight. The last piece was of an extreme delicacy. It is difficult to speak of Nadaka's talent — of the quality of his compositions. My only recommendation: you have to hear them.

Yanne,
28.2.90



'Lady' Jean,
reciting and
dancing the
story of Savitri

Photo: Sven

Clarification

In the article "A circle of Light" in the last issue of Auroville Today we omitted to mention that the day in Auroville was totally organized by the Auroville youth.

Acknowledgement

We thank Fried from Holland for all his work on the layout for the Auroville Today issue no.14.

AUROVILLE TODAY

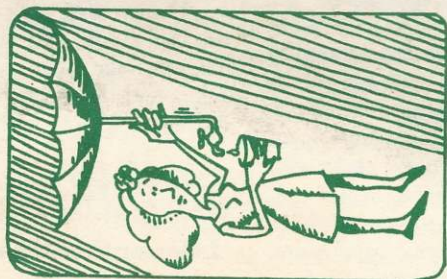
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March 1990 Number Fifteen

In this issue: Water; Tibetan medicine; Auroville's Birthday; etc.



L. BUTIQUE
D'AUROVILLE

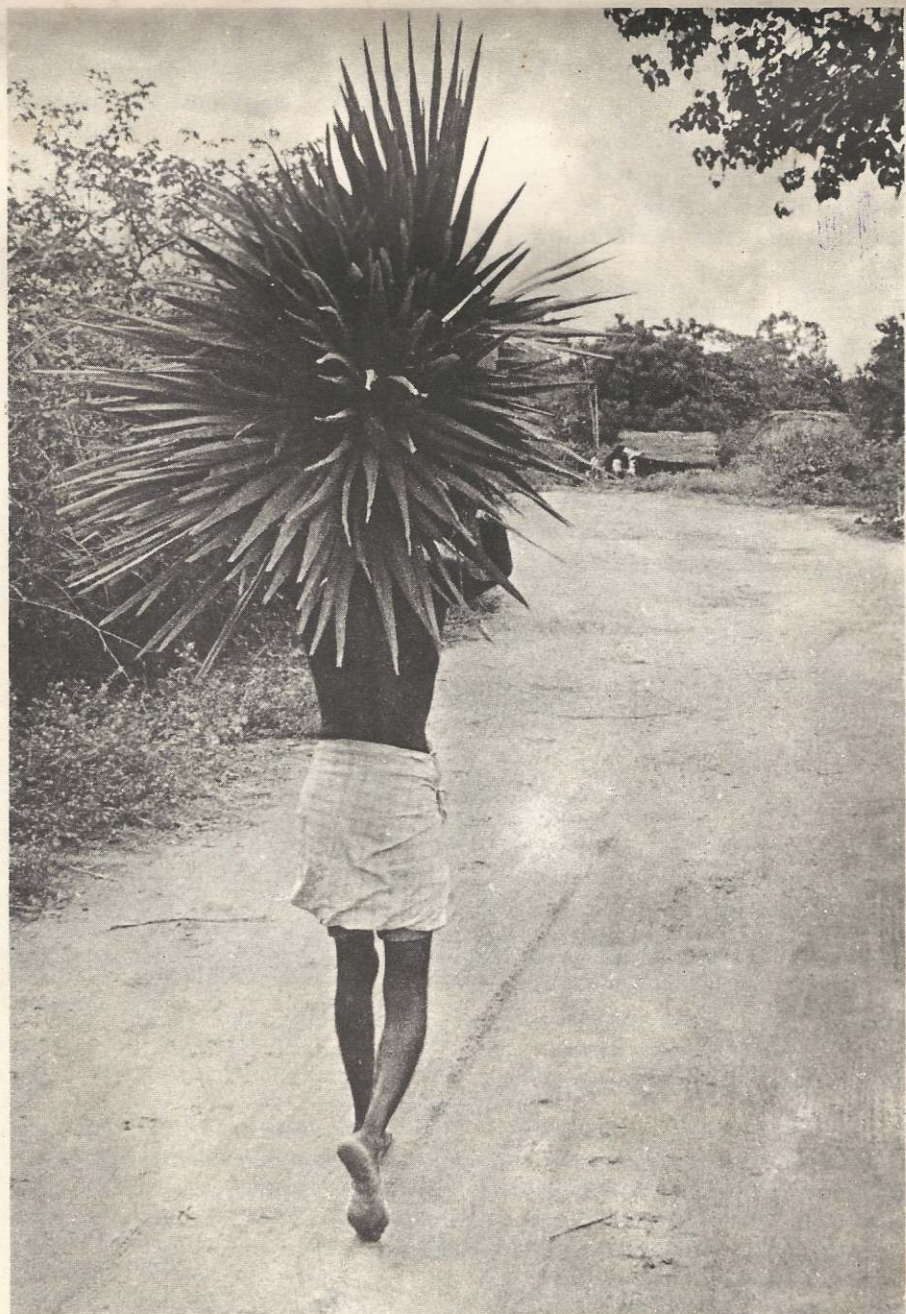


Photo: Sven

- A Cautionary Tale -

Now and again, Aurovilians — good, solid citizens of the City of Dawn — disappear for periods of between six months and two years. Upon anxious inquiry, their friends throw up their hands, roll their eyes and whisper in lugubrious tones, "They're building".

Recently, I was struck down by the same disease. It all began innocently enough with reflections like, "Wouldn't it be nice to have a roof that doesn't leak?" There followed cosy chats with Auroville construction impressarios, where we all sat round cups of Darjeeling tea and sketched out various architectural fantasies.

Nothing, then, prepared me for the fateful morning when the sylvan peace of Samriddhi was shattered by something that sounded like a medieval threshing machine having a bad day. I ran out to find a brick lorry artistically flattening my carefully planted fence. When I had finally manoeuvred this motorised juggernaut through fragile plantations of timber, and it had disgorged its dusty load, I began to realize that construction would not be quite such a breeze.

It soon became clear, for example, that building work cannot be done on the side. For once you get involved with brick lorries and construction crews, there's not much time for anything else! The days are spent in uplifting tasks like counting bricks, purchasing materials, writing chits and supplying endless cups of hot, sweet tea. Soon, the larger Auroville begins to seem like a mirage, a rumour, a beautiful dream from some far-distant past.

For construction is a world of its own. It has its own language — minimal, earthy — *wire stock ille, cash kudu* (there's no wire, give me money); its own select circle of people — Ramachandran, the bamboo merchant; cement works Mani; Cuppuswamy, hardware supplier extraordinaire; even its own disabilities — cement rash, 'lime foot', contractor's twitch. And in this world nothing (except the prices) ever seems to change. It revolves on its axis, eternal, immutable, while the walls come down in Europe and the whale is hunted to extinction. It waits patiently while the ambitious Aurovilian scales the giddy heights of administration or town planning, for it knows that one day, inevitably, that innocent will need to build. And then — tchuck! — that hapless individual slips helpless into the polished groove of brick lorries, construction crews and 'Ruby Dust' tea.

Those smitten with the building bug are immediately recognizable. On the rare occasions they escape the clutches of the site, they can be seen in Pondy, abstractedly striding down Nehru Street festooned in coils of wire, with *mumpti* (shovel) blades dangling precariously from unpractised fingers. They sit in snack bars (restaurants take too much time) arranging and rearranging cups and salt pots into interesting configurations. Or they burst unannounced into houses, brandishing tape measures and firing staccato questions like "Where did you buy these taps?" They become experts on prevailing winds, the life-cycle of the termite, on sewage disposal and bathroom fittings.

As their proud new residence rises, they go further into decline. Their eyes become blood-shot, their chins unshaven, their clothes increasingly of the colour and texture of cement dust. They become furtive, evasive, only gathering together in secret construction societies where they discuss arcane matters like loads and stresses, T-beams and mud mixes. Their guru, it is rumoured, is Christopher Alexander.

Finally, the house is ready, the site cleared, the teams of masons, carpenters, bar-benders gone. Slowly, painfully slowly, recovery sets in. Over the succeeding months, the Auroville constructor gradually emerges, emaciated, drawn, blinking, into the larger light of Auroville. Gradually the village intonations disappear; his language changes from the imperative tense to politer forms. He learns to leave his tape measure at home when he goes visiting and to refuse a third cup of coffee. He manages to resist the seductive charms of colour cards and venetian blind catalogues. And slowly, like a returning Prodigal Son, he is welcomed back into the arms of his larger family.

Is a complete cure possible? Many say no, for relapses are common. It may happen many years later, in the middle of a meeting. Suddenly friends will see a far-away look steal into his eyes, as if the grail had been sighted. In a moment he will be scribbling calculations on the back of a cigarette packet and examining the width of the roof beams. Lost, utterly lost! As a Lemurian proverb puts it, "Once you build, your life is filled!"

Alan

Note by the Eds: women are also frequently overseeing construction projects. □

Editorial Team: Alan, Annemarie, Bill, Carel, Roger, Sonja, Sven, Tineke, Yanne

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Auroville Today tries to appear monthly and is distributed to Aurovilians and friends of Auroville in India and abroad.

• • • To Receive Auroville Today • • •

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