

"Think global, act local"...

... exhorted the social activists of the 1980's.

But exactly what is "local"? One answer is "bioregion". Definitions vary, but broadly the term "bioregion" describes an area of land which has a distinct geographical and ecological identity, based upon such factors as shared watersheds, aquifers, vegetation, climate etc. In this sense, Auroville's immediate bioregion is defined by the sea to the east, Pondicherry Town to the south, Ousteri Lake to the west and Kaliveli tank to the north.

A region like this – which encompasses not only villages but also a major town – can be seen as a microcosm of what is happening in India, indeed in the world, as a whole. Typically, for example, Pondicherry town, as the urban centre, acts as a giant magnet, attracting people and resources from other part of the region through offers of employment, higher wages and a more exciting life-style. This creates a bioregional imbalance; good farming land is neglected and the villages are socially and culturally impoverished while Pondicherry Town, like a huge parasite, grows fat by sucking out the life blood of the region. It's a vicious circle. But it's also self-defeating; for as the exodus to the urban centre intensifies, Pondicherry's facilities are stretched to breaking-point, and the problems of pollution, over-population and water scarcity begin to become insurmountable. If nothing happens to change this, Pondicherry will soon be consumed by its own "success", as will much of the

bioregion upon which it is encroaching with its factories and exploitative life-style.

Auroville is threatened by this hungry and voracious animal. Already, we are partly surrounded by factories, and nearby land is being bought up by Pondicherry businessmen and speculators. Last year, a chemical company almost purchased land next to "Utility". We are vulnerable. Yet what are we doing about it? What part is Auroville playing in the bioregional dynamic? Are we contributing to the present entropic trend – which puts profits before care of the environment – or are we helping to reverse it?

Auroville's influence in the bioregion is potentially considerable. We are the major employer in many local villages; we are the biggest landowner; comparatively, we are rich in material resources and ideas; and we have the backing of the Central Government. We could be part of the answer to the impoverishment of the region – which had already been classified as "backward" over 40 years ago – by becoming a role model for sustainable development, for a way of life that relates development to the needs and health of the entire bioregion.

And, in some ways, we've begun well. While Pondicherry, for example, impoverishes the land, we have restored it. While it consumes energy, we've tried to create it through biomass. We promote "soft" technologies, the use of renewable energy and environmentally-friendly building methods like earth construction. We practise organic farming, we're becoming more con-

scious of the need to recycle waste. We've helped set up cooperatives and schools in the villages, and provide training for the villagers in skills ranging from high-tech electronics to handicrafts. All this has had an effect. Requests from the villagers for trees and bunding assistance on their fields exceeds our capacity to fulfil them. More and more local farmers are attending organic farming workshops. There is an increasing demand in the region for ferro-cement products like doors and shelves, which helps in the conservation of trees.

Yet... after 24 years, the influence of Auroville upon the region in terms of self-sustainable, healthy development is poor. Why? Firstly, we need to acknowledge our own failure. With our predominantly Western life-styles, our motorcycles, our taste for non-indigenous food, our wastefulness, we are far from being an example of sustainable living. In many ways, in fact, we are as dependent upon Pondicherry as the local villages. Again, our productive units are not benefitting the bioregion, except by offering employment. Generally, they import raw materials from elsewhere and export the finished products to the cities or the West. Even in terms of education – a potent force for change – we are not particularly successful. The majority of Auroville workers still receive no general education from Auroville, and acquire only basic skills. Instead of encouraging their individual development, we are perpetuating the master-employee relationship. Moreover, rather than en-

couraging and creating values appropriate to our ideals in our contact with the villagers, we tend to passively reflect those values which already predominate. For example, we continue to pay land workers much less than masons, and women much less than men.

Other factors are not so much under our control. Pondicherry remains such a magnet that often, for the brightest villagers, we serve merely as a stepping-stone, providing them with skills which they can sell at a higher price down the road. And there are still too few Aurovilians around to take up our bioregional responsibilities with the energy required.

Nevertheless, if self-sufficiency remains one of our aims, we should be clear that it cannot be achieved independently from, or at the expense of the bioregion. If Auroville is to become more than a privileged bubble in a desert of deprivation, if we are not to become another Pondicherry, we have to learn to think and to act bioregionally, to examine our present life-styles and planned development in the context of the larger area. To identify and become sensitive to its needs, its resources, its failures and strengths. To keep asking, as we buy our cornflakes, hire a new worker or design another building, "What will this do for the bioregion?"

As for sustainable development... even Pondicherry has a plan now. But where is ours?

Alan

Auroville and the bioregion: are we part of the solution or part of the problem?

Two Aurovilians who are particularly concerned with the impact of Auroville on the bioregion are Ed, who helps coordinate afforestation and landwork activities, and Ardhendu, who coordinates "Village Action". Auroville Today spoke to them recently:

AVT: What impact has Auroville had upon the surrounding area?

Ed: Auroville has provided employment to the surrounding villages for many years. As our construction programme accelerates, the employment opportunities also increase. Financially, this is our main contribution to the area.

Ardhendu: But not everybody in the area profits equally from the employment opportunities. Primarily, we've offered jobs in the physical labour sector, and this may mean that the poorest villagers have benefitted most. Auroville has also helped create and support a class of entrepreneurs, like lorry contractors and wood merchants. But we have not really created jobs that would benefit all levels of village society, like, for example, the larger landowners.

Ed: In areas like afforestation and landwork, our influence has not been very profound upon many villagers. Today, more are replicating what we are doing in Auroville by bunding their fields and planting certain species of trees, but still we are only scratching the surface. For example, the villagers are still engaged in widespread use of pesticides.

AVT: How far is Auroville trying to instill new values through offering employment, education etc.?

Ed: We are consciously trying to change values in certain areas, like trying to instill awareness of the environment – of the need to conserve soil and water.

Ardhendu: In the early days of Village

years, we were respected more, because we lived simply and seemed to be searching for something. Now we are seen more as managers than as co-workers.

Ed: It's not easy to change existing

of contract labour is that there's no security for the employee, and there's no need for the employer to invest in developing human potential.

Ed: But we should beware of generalising, and of missing the point: what, more than anything else, we are trying to bring into our daily lives in Auroville is quality. And it's this concern with quality which sometimes rubs off on others. When I was building my house, for example, I had a long talk one evening with one of the masons. I showed him small details I wanted improved, and told him that what most interested me was the quality of the work, a certain perfection in matter. He understood, our relationship was totally changed, and afterwards his work was always of the highest quality. In the same way, many of those villagers who have worked for a long time with Aurovilians are touched by what we are trying to live here, and have benefitted in less visible ways. In India, there will always be hungry mouths to feed. We cannot solve this, but we can see what we can do to make a difference in other ways. And we can make our relation with those we have contact with as real as possible, to base it on friendship and trust.

Ardhendu: One of the reasons why we have changed the value system so little in the area is that we are not consistent. We try to educate the villagers about the environment, but we water our gardens and lawns with good drinking water. We complain about pollution and don't want a cement factory in Auroville, but we are happy to build our houses with cement.

We complain about Pondicherry draining the best brains from the villages, but, in twenty years, we've done little to create interest-

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If we don't act intelligently now, we will be forced to change by disaster.

Action work, the values we encouraged were cooperation and collective action. We didn't pay enough attention to the quality of the activity itself. Now we insist that any new initiative in the village should be of a certain quality and benefit. This has had an effect. For example, 8 out of 10 loans given to begin small businesses today result in viable enterprises. Again, teachers in our village schools now have to attend regular trainings, and we agree with them upon certain minimum goals. Now we ask the parents to contribute a nominal sum for the schooling. If they are not satisfied with the school, they don't pay – and this gives us very direct feedback about how they value the different schools. In land work, we also require the villagers to take more responsibility. We'll provide the tree, if they provide the pit and the compost.

In certain areas, however, we haven't been able to change values. For example, we haven't been able to stop wife-beating in the villages, partly because they don't relate to our behavioural codes. Actually, in the early

values. You're pitted against a huge system. One year, for example, I gave the women who worked with me a bigger pay increase than the men. The men went on strike! In the end, I had to promise the men a bigger raise next time if they earned it – but it took weeks to work it all out. In order to manifest Auroville, we have to find appropriate ways of doing things – ways that fit here and that are not detrimental. It's not a matter of compromise, but of finding the most effective solutions given the value system that already exists.

AVT: How far has Auroville merely reinforced traditional value systems rather than changing them? Haven't we benefitted from some of them, like low wages for women?

Ardhendu: Yes. By accepting the traditional situation in things like this, we benefit from it.

Another example – probably half of our work force are contract labour. We are providing employment. But one of the results

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ing, alternative employment in the villages.

AVT: How can Auroville change this situation?

Ed: Education is the key. People's values are changed by raising their consciousness about certain situations and problems. The problem is that Aurovilians, while being slightly more conscious in some areas than other people, are also very ignorant about many things. For example, some Aurovilians have lived here for years, but they've never entered a village. So there's a lack of education and awareness on both sides.

Another thing to remember is that we still have far too few Aurovilians to do all the work, so we have to make choices about how to use our energies best.

Ardhendu: We have to be more consistent, to base our actions more upon our ideals. We can't change everything overnight, but the attitude is what is important. If every time we do something wrong, we remind ourselves that it is wrong, then we will try to find an alternative.

Practically, we have to reduce our dependence on contract labour, and encourage collective and communal enterprises that provide greater security and job satisfaction. Again, we need to analyse the price of each Auroville product – what percentage is material, what percentage profit, what percentage overhead etc. – and to evaluate anew how much should be returned to the person who is producing it. We must learn to see that it's in our interest, and crucial for our sustainable future, that we develop bioregional links. For if the economy of the West collapses, we'll be in the same situation as our immediate neighbours. So we should be assisting in the setting up of small industries in the neighbouring villages – like a ground-nut processing plant – in order that all the money and energy doesn't disappear to Pondicherry or Madras. Similarly, if Auroville was making things useful for the villagers, at prices they could afford, we would be building a more sustainable economy in the immediate region, as Auroville and the villages would be exchanging resources between them and benefitting each other. In the same way, if we are more conscious about what we consume, and choose those things that can be grown or produced in our region, we make it more attractive for the farmers to stay on the land, and for village enterprises to flourish. Above all, it's to do with changing consciousness. And for this it's important that the local people see we are trying to improve the region, because then they will be on our side. If we don't, why should they bother to help us? In fact, one day they may turn against us...

AVT: Wouldn't all these changes cause a lot of disruption in our life-style?

Ardhendu: If we look at it in the short-term, these changes will cause a lot of disruption. But if we don't act intelligently now, we will be forced to change by disaster. As to sustainability – we need to discriminate between what in our present life-style is sustainable, and what is non-sustainable. One way of finding out would be to imagine what would happen if, for one week, no Aurovillian would leave Auroville, and nobody from outside would come in.

The real question is whether we want to be a consumer or a conservator society, to create liabilities or to add to the capital of the region. And what values we really wish to promote in our everyday life. Because it is upon how we live that the local people will judge us.

Interview by Alan.

Sustainable Development for Pondicherry

An interview with His Excellency Dr. Har Swarup Singh, Lieutenant-Governor of Pondicherry

Auroville Today: You have written a paper entitled The Sustainable Development of Pondicherry. What is your personal interest in sustainable development?

Dr. Har Swarup Singh: Some years ago, when I was doing my Ph.D. in agricultural economics at North Carolina State University in the U.S., I read a book about the desecration of the Earth. It was called *Our Plundered Planet*. But what was said in the book did not register fully until I returned to India four years ago, after working for two decades with an international agency. For then, in my role as Vice-Chancellor of Haryana Agricultural University, I travelled around the country and saw catastrophic soil erosion, pollution and chemical poisoning of every kind. It led me to write papers and lead seminars on the topic, and to pursue the goals of ensuring a safe environment when I was a member of the Planning Commission between 1989-90. When I took up this present job, in December 1990, I immediately wanted to see what could be done about planning for sustainable development in Pondicherry State.

What are your main proposals, and what is happening at present?

We wish to create a model in Pondicherry for sustainable development in India and, perhaps, the rest of the world. The work has already begun. For example, in collaboration with the M.S. Swaminathan Foundation, we have initiated two bio-village projects in the State as laboratories for sustainable development. We have several bio-technology projects running, involving bio-fertilizers and pest management, and we are also working with the Planning Commission on an agro-climatic regional planning project, which will enable us to make the best use of available land, water and other resources. Thus, in water-deficient regions, we will plant crops that require less irrigation. We will also try to ensure that good agricultural land is not used for buildings, industrial sites, etc. I am very firm in not granting licenses for projects that will harm the environment. I will willingly forego revenues if, for example, our water table is threatened, because the long-term health of the environment is much more important than earning extra money now. Again, in the field of tourism, I do not want Pondicherry to become another travel destination for drug-addicts and AIDS carriers. I favour beach cottages rather than high-rise hotel developments, and I want to protect Pondicherry's rich heritage; the preservation of the character of the French section of the town is an important goal.

You've made two visits to Auroville. Do you sense how Auroville can help you in achieving sustainable development for Pondicherry?

Yes, in two ways. First, through sharing your afforestation expertise with us, and second, through your research at CSR into low-cost housing. This is crucial. After all, why do we need to use fired bricks which waste so much energy when we can use stabilized earth blocks in many cases? We waste so much energy in India—sometimes because our house designs are purely Western and inappropriate for Indian conditions. In the field of appropriate building

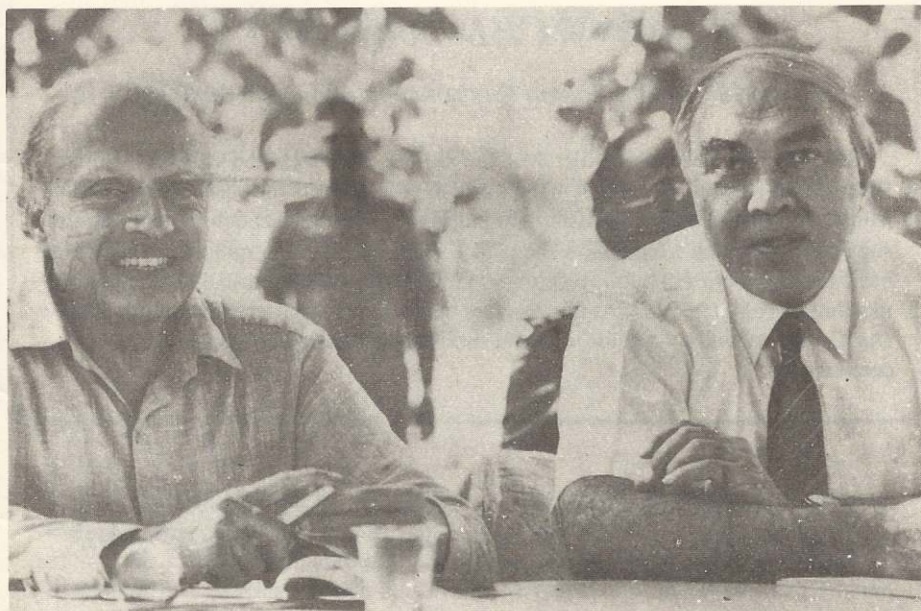


photo Sven

The Pondicherry Governor (right) and Dr. Swaminathan at the Auroville PCED Meeting (see overleaf)

technology your work can be very valuable.

In some respects, the Auroville experiment feels fragile. We feel threatened by the rapid industrialization of Pondicherry, which may lead, for example, to pollution, water shortages and land speculation. Dr. Karan Singh recently asked if Auroville could be made a protected area to make us less vulnerable. What do you think about this idea?

This can be done through careful zoning and sound land use policies. We can plan where our industries will be located, and ensure that we do not put something on your border that creates pollution. We certainly want to be good neighbours.

But we already have one or two such industries on our borders...

We can do two things. One is to ensure that this does not happen in future, because now we are definitely locating Pondicherry industries much more consciously. The second thing is to try to clean up what is already there. However, while some units at present are in the wrong place, these cannot be relocated because the cost would be too great.

If your plan is to succeed, it will have to work at grassroots level. How do you change the attitude towards the environment of the ordinary man in the street?

Of course, long-term plans have no meaning for the man in the street. They need fuel now, so they cut down trees. We must address their present needs and provide them with alternatives if we do not want them to harm the environment. Again, if I were explaining the problem to them, I would make it concrete. I would say, "Look, five people died in this factory because of carelessness in control of toxic substances". This is much more real to them than theories. It is also to do with values. I grew up on a farm, and I still feel the old values of my childhood are the best. Values taken from our old scriptures and mythologies like worshipping Mother Earth, nature and having respect for animals. Our traditional philosophy of life in India amounts to a sustainable way of life. We have

forgotten it, but since it is in our heritage, it shouldn't be difficult to motivate people to follow this path again.

Your plan for sustainable development requires action on a bio-regional level. In other words, it requires working with the Tamil Nadu government and Auroville if it is to succeed. How do you see this happening?

It is very important that we work together. If we try something in Pondicherry, and if Tamil Nadu and Auroville do not move in the same direction, it will not work. Since I've taken up office, relations with the Tamil Nadu government have been very cordial, and we already have one or two forums in which members of Auroville and individuals from Tamil Nadu have participated. In the future, I would like to formalise these arrangements much more, to have people from Auroville and Tamil Nadu working with us on matters of common concern.

How optimistic are you about reversing the recent trend of chaotic growth at the expense of the environment in Pondicherry?

Pondicherry has been, relatively speaking, in an economic boom, but with an annual population growth rate of 6% and the consequent pressure upon the environment, we will not be making fast economic advances for long. However, if we can begin going in the right direction now, and lay down rational principles that will guide development for the next 15-20 years, I think something worthwhile will result.

And what about possible new developments, like a free port for Pondicherry. How would this fit in with sustainable development?

If we are chosen to have a free port in Pondicherry, I would like it to be environment-friendly. In other words, no refineries or polluting industries, but industries like electronics, services and off-shore banking. However, if a free port meant ruining the environment, I would not have it. It would have to be in harmony with sustainable development.

Interview by Alan, Ed and Yanne

OUR COMMON

WCED Tokyo 87

(World Commission on Environment and Development)

In 1983, the Secretary-General of the United Nations asked Mrs Gro Harlem Brundtland—the only politician in the world to proceed from the post of Environment Minister to that of Prime Minister—to put together an independent commission to suggest ways which would allow the planet's rapidly growing population to meet its basic needs. A series of public meetings were held around the world, culminating in a meeting in Tokyo in 1987. At this meeting the Commission presented their report—*Our Common Future*—a guide to global survival, with sustainable development as its core concept.

Sustainable development, as it is defined in *Our Common Future*, is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Time is running out

We are only beginning to understand and identify the many individual threats to our environment and, thereby, to our survival. We know now that the future of our eco-system, and ultimately our children's lives, are inextricably linked to human and economic development on every level.

The time frame within which we can ensure survival is short.

We are losing ground

We have already lost millions of hectares of arable land and every year the world continues to lose 6 million hectares of farmland to the advancing deserts (that is twice the size of Albania, or three times that of Israel). We are creating deserts bigger than Austria or Belgium every 18 months.

Many animal and plant species are on their way to extinction. We are killing them. Even among the living, tens of millions of children and adults, their minds and bodies stunted by malnutrition in infancy, have been permanently robbed of the possibility of ever becoming full members of society. One child becomes blind every 60 seconds. And meanwhile mankind wastes its time on wars and conflicts belonging to another age instead of fighting for its survival.

The earth is ONE

One threat overrides all others—the possibility that those with the power to do something in the global village may fail to act together. “The earth is one, but the world is not”, the Brundtland Commission warns.

We have made a beginning

It is possible to work out a new strategy, to set global goals and to work together to attain them.

We have made progress and all is not lost.

- ☛ We already have stopped using phosphate-based detergents;
- ☛ Fish have reappeared in the Thames;
- ☛ The global infant mortality rate has been reduced 50% in thirty years;
- ☛ Global life expectancy has increased from 46 to 61 years.
- ☛ Today, 44% of families in the Third World have access to drinking water, the lack of which is one of the major causes of dysentery and debility in the Third World;
- ☛ 95% of children begin school;
- ☛ Four out of ten children are immunized against disease;

Our worst enemies

But, though there are reasons for hope, it is too early to rejoice. The equally devastating time-bombs of growing poverty and the narrow-visioned pursuit of short-term prosperity at any cost are still with us, and their fuses are not very long. We need to awaken public opinion which will translate into pressure on politicians of every country.

We can already identify our worst enemies:

The first is insufficient development—call it **poverty**. The second is mindless development—call it **pollution**. Both are economically untenable and unsustainable, and both are fatal in environmental and human terms.

In addition there is overpopulation, for which there is no magic formula—

“the world can sustain billions of human beings, but cannot sustain one more billion ignorant people”. (Commander Cousteau)

Education remains one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century.

The previous texts are extracts from: *Tribute... to Our Common Future*, a summary of the Brundtland report, prepared by the World Media Institute Inc.

PCED New Delhi 90

(People's Commission on Environment and Development)

The PCED was launched in September 1990 during the ECO 92 Public Forum at New Delhi, which was chaired by Mrs Gro Harlem Brundtland. The PCED is intended to stimulate debate, at all levels, on the environment in India, and to prepare proposals to be presented to the Earth Summit in Brazil in June, 1992. The Chairman is Dr Karan Singh, and the Secretary General is the well-known Indian environmentalist, Dr Ashok Khosla.

The PCED has received the support of numerous institutions and individuals who have as common goals the environment, development, women's and youth problems, work, peace and human rights. The PCED is a forum for the non-governmental organizations (NGO's) and offers a meeting place to all citizens concerned with ecology and socio-economic development. It has done this by organizing other conferences, seminars, symposia etc., to share ideas, suggestions and experiences with individuals as well as private organiza-

tions; by stimulating citizens to take action to solve environmental problems in their own community; to develop educational and communicative means to make citizens more aware of socio-cultural and ecological problems; by preparing written and audio-visual material in support of the environment, in order to diffuse it through the media, the national education system and other institutions in the country; and by undertaking actions to make the population aware of the conditions for human survival—birth control, reduction of poverty, literacy, respect for the quality of the environment.

PCED Auroville 1991

One of the PCED meetings in India took place in Auroville, in the presence of his Excellency Dr. Har Swarup Singh, Governor of Pondicherry; of Dr. Karan Singh, President of the PCED in India and Chairman of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation; of eminent scientists; and of Aurovilians concerned with current environmental issues.

Ed helped organize the PCED meeting in Auroville. Auroville Today asked him about the structure of the meeting and some of the important issues that were raised.

“It has to start with the individual”

“We wanted the theme of the PCED meeting in Auroville to be the need for an inner change for sustainable development. We organized the meeting to explore this issue on three different levels. Firstly, we looked at the personal level. Dr. Swaminathan gave a presentation on sustainable agriculture, on how the individual affects the environment and the environment affects the individual. He showed how the typical small farmer is now living on his land in a way that differs from the traditional pattern, since he has switched from growing basic food to growing cash crops.

“Secondly, we looked at sustainable development at the level of community, of groupings of villages, through Jean Pouyet's presentation on watershed management. Here the question is how to get people to work together on a larger scale to preserve the health of watersheds and larger areas.

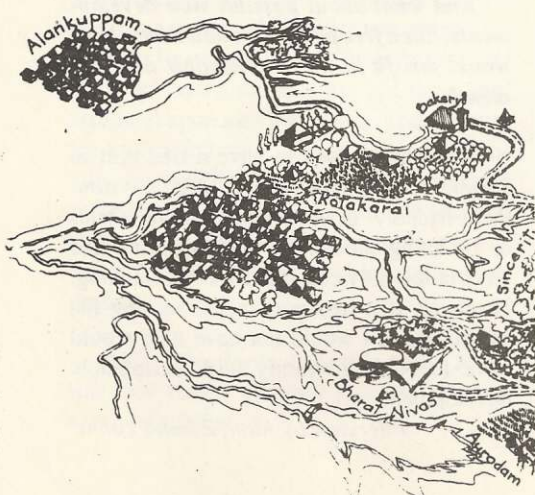
“The final level was the regional level, and in this context Dr. Meher-Homji gave a talk on regional bio-vulnerability and sensitivity, which may involve changes in the climate and the socio-economic situation of people living in a region. At this level, one

issue that was addressed was that of government policies and legislation; the kind of legislation needed to tackle regional and, ultimately, global issues.

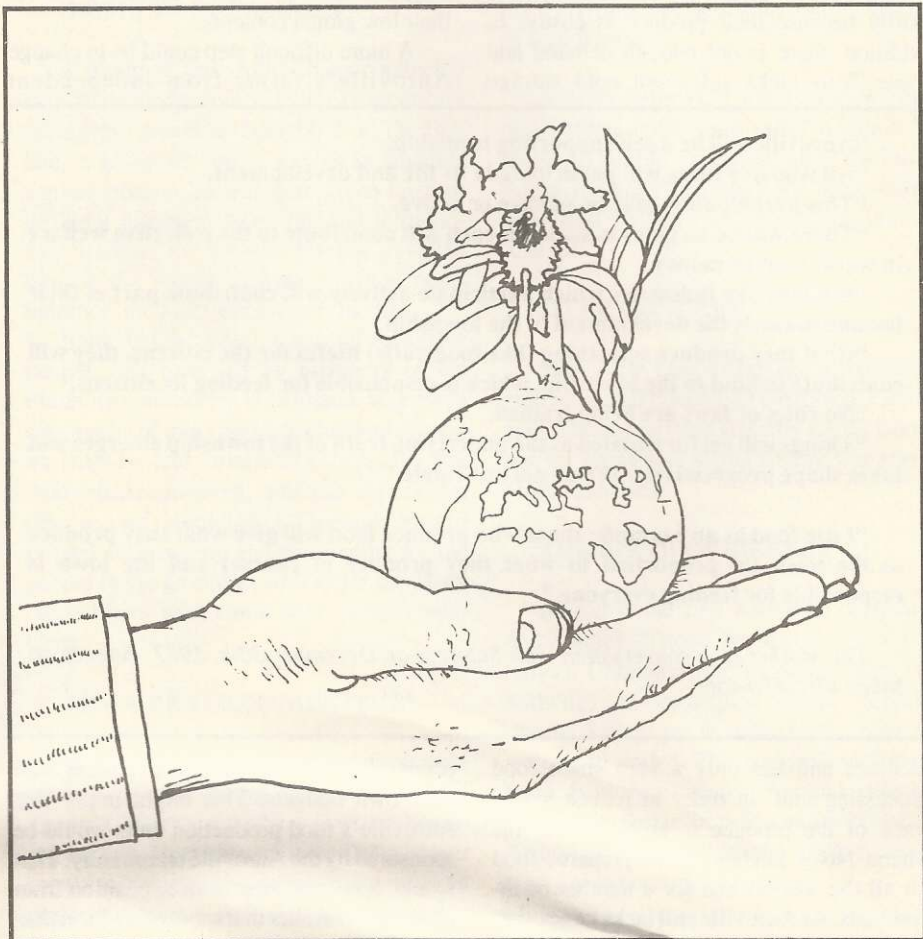
“I feel the key question is how the individual relates to these different levels. What can the individual do to make a difference? What is clear is that effective action has to start at the individual level, because no matter what laws are passed, if we don't want to change as individuals, nothing will change. And change means, for example, looking at what we eat and what repercussions this has upon the environment.

“In Auroville, despite the fact that we've planted so many trees, we are still far from being an example of a totally sustainable society. As individuals, we should see that our lifestyles are disconnecting us from nature. We speed round on our motorcycles, for example, and no longer see the trees or smell the flowers. As a community, our plans for the city of the future need a lot of scrutiny if we are not to make drastic environmental mistakes. In fact, I'd say that in Auroville at present we are only at the meagre beginnings of doing something different.

“And this is where having the PCED meeting here may have helped. Because people came who wouldn't normally be interested in the environment, and it gave a chance for concerned people to air their feelings. It's a good first step. Finally, sustainable development all boils down to motivating people in the right way.”



FUTURE



Drawing by Peio

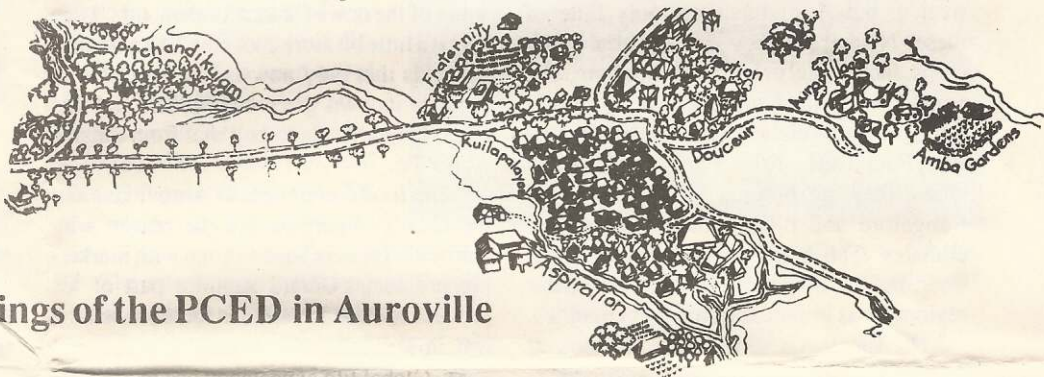
UNCED Rio de Janeiro 92

(United Nations Conference on Environment and Development)

This conference, also called *The Earth Summit*, will be a unique event in many respects. It will be the first time in history that all the governments of the world have gathered to find a common basis for action on issues of universal concern to all humanity. It will provide an opportunity, to governments, international organizations and all non-governmental organizations, to define a new way of living in harmony with the resources of the planet.

It is hoped that the conference will agree upon inter-governmental conventions on issues like climate change, bio-diversity and forestry. It also hoped to draw up an "Earth Charter" to guide mankind in developing in a manner that will ensure its common future, in both environmental and developmental terms.

In addition, it is intended to draw up "Agenda 21", a programme of action for the implementation of the principles expressed in the "Earth Charter". In other words, an enumeration of what governments must do to bring us into the 21st century on a sustainable path.



Extracts from the proceedings of the PCED in Auroville

Dr. Ramaujam, Associate of the Puducherry Iyarkkai Kazhagam:

"My point concerns the progressive decline of the land area for agriculture. There is an increasing tendency for conversion of agricultural land to housing purposes, for residential colonies. Whereas this problem has been experienced in all parts of the world, in the Union Territory of Pondicherry, which is very small, this problem is very acute. And at this rate of urbanization in another 10 to 15 years we may not have any land left for agriculture, and agriculture may cease to be a profession here."

Navroz Mody, Palani Hills Conservation Council:

"I think it is a mistake for us to expect that people who have been beaten back so badly, when every single inch and ounce of resources from which they have made their living for hundreds of years have been removed from them in the last 40 years, to expect these people to have any spirit left is very difficult. If we are posing alternatives for a better future, that future has to have an interest directly related to their way of life and to their systems of living now. To do the kind of work that we are talking about takes investment. The GOI is not willing to make this investment. We are talking about an investment in 80% of the population of this country which is so degraded that now we cannot expect any wonders and magic from them. Only 4% of all farmers in this country grow

sugarcane. That 4% of the farmers is responsible for 25% worth of all agricultural produce in this country. It also monopolizes the water.

"Now the investments that are going into rural areas are going to the big landowners of India. They are going to 10% of the entire population which holds the best land at the bottom of the watershed. There is no investment going into the other 90% of the country, and there hasn't been any during the past 40 years. The investment of 50,000 crores that went into rural India since Independence, in irrigation, has gone to that 10%. The investment of another 50,000 (crores) for subsidies for food and fertilizers has again gone to that 10%. So, when we are talking about this 80% or 90% that we have to activate, we have to remember that their actions must yield and bear results, and yet we are not willing to invest anything in them.

"This meeting was called to try and come up with suggestions from all over the world about the state of this planet's health. This planet's health is tied in with its poor. In the morning someone pointed to Agenda 21 - the first two points were taken from Mrs. Gandhi's speech in Geneva in 1972, which stressed that the first thing we have to deal with are the poor. There is nobody willing to make an investment, either nationally or internationally in this gamut of poverty and deprivation that we are talking about. That is going to have a multiple effect as it does on the economies of the Third World as a whole. We are going to become, through the IMF and the World Bank, even more deprived and poverty bound. What we have had over the last 40 years is not development but the planned underdevelopment of 80% of the population of the Third World."

Sriram Panchu:

"And finally, of course, as a last resort we have the courts. But again, courts can be used by lawyers if they have the benefit of technical assistance from members of the community. And courts, like everything else, respond to public opinion. The groundswell of all these efforts is public opinion. The more we get energized and talk about things that are going wrong and protest about them, and make it clear that we are not going to allow things to continue like this, that is when one is taken seriously. Because there are issues of the air, there is pollution from factories, pollution from trucks and a Pollution Control Board which I don't know what kind of air they breathe! There are issues of pollution in water ways, the dumping of hazardous wastes in water, the mixing up of drinking water lines and sewage lines. I don't know about Auroville, you are probably safe from noise pollution except for the loudspeakers at seminars. But come and live in Madras and you will see what noise pollution is like. There are civic issues which I think are environmental issues. If you don't clear garbage, it is an environmental issue. So, too, planning and zoning. One good thing about being part of NGO in India is that you have no shortage of issues. You don't have to look for them, they are just there."

Dr. Seshadri:

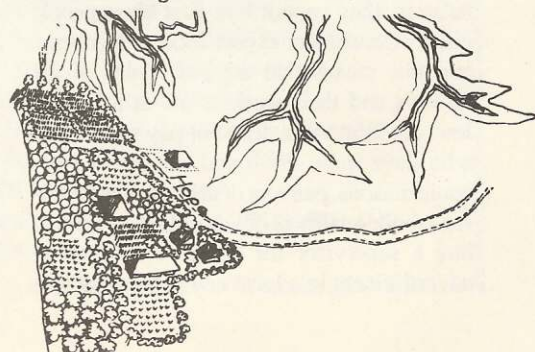
"Now, this is a problem. I work with fishermen and I know that the young fishermen are not being taught anymore to fish. I know that the young farmers are not being taught to farm. We put them in a high-school, make them unfit for anything, bring them

back to the farm and say, "Now, go to work on the farm".

"Our fishermen go out in their catamarans and they don't know how to navigate looking at St. Thomas Mount anymore. You know, a good fisherman can navigate by the seat of his pants depending on which way the wave hits him. He sees Cassiopeia over the horizon and then he knows where Madras is with reference to Villupuram, Cuddalore or any other place. Today they have lost that sense. The old fishermen used to tell me stories about which star they were looking at. Today, none of them are taught anything. So, where is our educational system going? It is neither numeric nor literate, nor useful, nor modern. So what do we do with it? Well, junk it! Be brave."

Professor Narayanan:

"If you go to Kanpur, you will find a huge board which says, 'Bathing in the Ganges is at your own risk'. If people bathe in the Ganges, hoping that their sins, their spiritual sins will be removed, they will come back with physical sins from upriver. The Ganga is not to be blamed, the only tragedy is that the pollution cannot go back to Shivaji for correction. It goes farther down."



AUROVILLE FARMING: A DOWNHILL BUSINESS

Auroville's self-sufficiency: a dream....?

'Farming in Auroville' is a topic which is definitely not in the forefront of the consciousness of the average Aurovilian. More accurately, it is not even in the back of that consciousness. Auroville's newly published Information Directory (A.I.D.) demonstrates the lack of interest. Its list of community profiles shows the low popularity rating of farms: only 5 are mentioned, against for example 30 greenwork communities.

The list is, however, not correct. Auroville has at least 12 farms. They have in common that they are not self-supporting, or only marginally so. Charlie, who manages Aurogreen, explains one of the reasons: the food patterns of Aurovilians. They prefer European types of vegetables that can only be grown between November and February. During the remaining months only the local vegetables—such as lady's fingers (okra), local types of beans, gourds and squashes, and some kinds of spinach—can be cultivated, but Aurovilians eat only little of these. Neither do they eat the local grain crops, such as ragi or kambu or sorghum. The vegetables desired are purchased—mostly through Auroville's food distribution service, Pour Tous—from nearby Pondicherry, where they are brought in by truck from Bangalore and other places with cooler climates. The bread is made from wheat flour, but the wheat also comes from colder regions, or is imported from other countries.

The picture is different if we look at Auroville's fruit production. Auroville is fairly self-sufficient in this area. All fruits produced are consumed in Auroville, save during the mango season, when the mango surplus is sold in the Pondicherry market. Mechtild, who manages Service Farm, a fruit orchard, has no problem finding a market for her guavas, papayas, lemons and coconuts. She stresses another problem of the Auroville farms: more Aurovilians are needed to run the farms, but the income from the farms is too small to justify the full-time presence of other Aurovilians. Gérard, who manages Aurorchard, says that he would have to close down his farm if he had to pay extra minimum maintenance for Aurovilians.

Principal farms in Auroville:

Annapurna, Anasuya, Aurogreen, Aurorchard, Discipline, Gratitude, Kottakarai, La Ferme, New Farm, Revelation, Service Farm, Udayan.

Main products:

Fruits, vegetables, eggs, milk, cheese, local grains, peanuts, rice, millet and dairy fodder.

Many other communities keep some cows and chickens or have their own vegetable and fruit gardens.

The problem is, however, not solved by hiring local workers. All the farmers complain that, as they cannot pay first class salaries, they cannot hire first class people either. Consumers expect food to be cheap, and this means that the pay scales of the farmers and their workers are at a bottom low. As farm work does not pay well, those who have more drive and intelligence become masons, painters or drivers. The resulting labour quality is obvious. Gérard tried to hire a supervisor for his farm and put an advertisement in a local newspaper that was

published even in Cuddalore, Villupuram and Tindivanam, but nobody even came to enquire!

As far as dairy and poultry products go, Auroville is also not self supporting, although the farms provide a large share of the community's needs. In poultry products they provide too little, and Pour Tous has to sell eggs purchased from Pondicherry as well. The milk production, however, suffers from local competition as the milk from the villages is about 1 to 2 Rs per litre cheaper, and can be home-delivered by the Aurovilian's *amma* or worker. An estimated 20% of Auroville's milk requirement now comes from the villages around Auroville. With the competition increasing and cold storage being unavailable—a centralized dairy industry remains a distant dream—some dairy farmers have reduced their livestock. Charlie, once the foremost producers of milk and cheese in Auroville, has started to sell off some of the cows for lack of demand. "I can take it a little bit more cool now", he explains, but adds that only now is his farm able to produce its own green cowfodder, and that he no longer needs to buy that from outside Auroville.

The food preferences of Aurovilians and the local competition are the reason why Auroville farmers have to cope with marketing problems. Gérard supplies part of his produce to Pour Tous, but is forced to sell the rest in Pondicherry whenever there is not sufficient demand from Pour Tous. "Whenever" tends to be (too) often—also due to the fact that many Aurovilians are absent during the summer months. Igor from Udayan has given up supplying Pour Tous, and supplies only his shop in Pondicherry. Other farmers have started to develop their own clientele within Auroville. Thomas and Dietra in Gratitude, for example, provide about 40 Aurovilians living in the neighbouring communities of Certitude and Samasti with vegetables, milk, and cheese. They do not believe in 'big farming' for vegetables because, says Thomas, "you have to put in so much work, care and love to be sufficient, you cannot leave it to your workers". Dietra sees intensive small-scale gardening—many

small vegetable gardens inside the city area—as a feasible solution for Auroville's self-sufficiency in this area. And she adds that small pockets of wildlife land inside the city area will contribute immensely to keeping the earth healthy, and providing the small bioregion necessary for a successful vegetable garden.

Otto from Pour Tous explains that only a marginal 5% of his monthly turnover—between Rs 400,000 to Rs 450,000 (US \$ 16,000 to US \$ 18,000), depending on the season—is supplied by the Auroville farms,

mainly in the form of fruits and vegetables. But he cannot purchase everything the farmers have to offer, partly because often their produce is not as good looking as that which is purchased from Pondicherry, and partly because their produce is costly. In addition, there is not enough demand and Pour Tous lacks sufficient cold storage

sorghum and wheat flour. However, the indigenously grown ragi and sorghum are more expensive than the (subsidized) wheat flour, and the addition of wheat flour to the ragi and sorghum breads remains necessary due to their low gluten contents.

A more difficult step could be to change Auroville's farms from independent

"Auroville will be a self supporting township.

"All who live there will participate in its life and development.

"This participation may be passive or active.

"There will be no taxes as such but each will contribute to the collective welfare in work, kind or money.

"Sections like industries which participate actively will contribute part of their income towards the development of the township.

"Or if they produce something (like foodstuffs) useful for the citizens, they will contribute in kind to the township, which is responsible for feeding its citizens.

"No rules or laws are being framed.

"Things will get formulated as the underlying truth of the township emerges and takes shape progressively. We do not anticipate."

"I use food as an example: those who produce food will give what they produce to the town (in proportion to what they produce of course) and the town is responsible for feeding everyone."

The Mother in a conversation with Satprem on December 30th, 1967, Agenda de Mère, VIII, 450-456

facilities and has only a very small food processing unit. In order to reduce waste, some of the produce is given free to the Bharat Nivas kitchen which prepares food for all the schools and for a number of individuals. As Auroville still lacks large community kitchens, however, food still goes waste.

Though the population of Auroville has increased, farming in Auroville has declined during the past 10 years, says Gérard. Lack of community policy, an 'administration' that believes that farms should be self-supporting, lack of professionalism, lack of coordination between farms, forced selling to clients outside Auroville, no proper return on investments, labour problems, economic hardships and increasing competition are some of the reasons why many have given up. Those who stick with it are caught in a downward spiral: decreasing income means a need to increase private investment. Lacking this, or the willingness to invest more private money, less and less development will take place. A bleak picture indeed, and if Aurovilians are not willing to change, Auroville's attempt to become a self-supporting township will remain what it is today: a beautiful dream.

But we can change, if we want to. It will, however, require a radical revolution in our way of thinking. A relatively easy beginning is to educate ourselves: to remind ourselves once again that the good-looking Pondicherry food is usually treated with pesticides and chemicals, and that there is nothing wrong with a few dark spots on the Auroville grown food. A further step would be not to sell Pondicherry food in Auroville, if there is enough similar Auroville-grown food available. Attempts could also be made to familiarize Aurovilians with the methods of preparing local vegetables and grains, for example, by the introduction of an Auroville Home-Grown Cookbook. For who, among the western Aurovilians, knows what to do with a kilo of ragi?

As part of the policy "Be Aurovilian, Buy Aurovilian, Eat Aurovilian Food", the Auroville Bakery might engage itself in some more active marketing to introduce bread produced with locally grown grains. At present experiments are carried out with sorghum and ragi: about 50 sorghum and 50 ragi breads a week are consumed in Auroville as well as pumpnickel, a bread made of ragi,

economic units into Auroville services with their own budgets. This might imply that Auroville's food production units would be sponsored by the Auroville community. That would, however, meet with opposition from those who consider that sponsoring farms has proven to be disastrous elsewhere in the world, and that the experiment should not be repeated in Auroville.

Any step forward, whichever way it goes, will require research into the best agricultural land use and a study of the food requirements of Auroville's population. On the basis of this research, what food can best be grown by each of Auroville's farms could be determined, as well as what agricultural areas could be made available for further agricultural research. This step, however, will only become possible when a sufficient income can be guaranteed to the farms, based on their budgets and against an agreed land use. The risk of 'Acts of God' and the resultant crop failure will, in this case, come to rest fully on the community. But the benefits too, one of which would be to grow into, and ultimately achieve Mother's vision of a self-supporting township.

Turning Auroville's farms into services may imply that more Auroville land will be used for farming, as well as the over-production of some food items that cannot be used in Auroville. At present such over-production is the individual farmer's concern. If the farms become services, then this over-production will have to become a collective's concern: Auroville will have to market the products as they are, or to set up larger commercial food processing units in order to process the produce into other types of consumables.

This may be of benefit not only to Auroville, but the surrounding villages as well, as Auroville will be able to sell a large part of its over-production to the local population, and probably at cheaper rates than those in Pondicherry. For a population that spends about 60% to 70% of its income on food, such a possibility would be very beneficial.

"Auroville will be a self supporting township", Mother said in 1967. In the 24 years of Auroville's existence we have still not been able to materialize this on the most obvious level, that of our food production. It has to change. It is time to begin.

Carel

BRIEF NEWS

GROUP PROGRAMMES

A group of four Aurovilians conducted two "Introduction to Auroville" programmes during the month of December. In the first one, a group of young American students arrived from Delhi and were given tours of different places in Auroville and introductory sessions for a week. Having travelled around the world visiting spiritual communities, they are here for two months.

Immediately after, a second group of people, this time led by members of the Findhorn community in Scotland, was given two weeks of tours and introductions. It was an intense and interesting time for the Aurovilians involved, and the experiment (the second involving a Findhorn group) proved encouraging and stimulating for the people in the groups as well as for the many Aurovilians who came into contact with them.

NEW CREATION CAFETERIA

On December 28th, all Aurovilians were invited for an evening meal at the newly opened Cafeteria at the New Creation boarding school. The cafeteria is part of a bigger newly-constructed complex containing children's rooms and office, and it looks promising. However, there is no regular catering as yet, except for the New Creation children, because the Cafeteria is waiting for a good cook to take up the challenge. We are filled with expectation...

MORE SPACE FOR HEALTH

The newly-polished natural stone floors and benches under the white vaulted roof give a sense of space and quiet. After two and a half years of partly building and partly renovating the Auroville Health Centre at Aspiration near Kuilapalayam village, the inauguration on Christmas Eve inaugurated a new episode for doctors and patients. Dr. Lucas is one of the three qualified doctors/medical practitioners who provide allopathic and homeopathic treatment to about 150 patients a day, among whom 10% are Aurovilians. Massage, acupuncture, lab tests and dispensary continue to be offered. Lucas is very happy with the vastly improved atmosphere, and mentioned also that an experimental root zone waste water recycling

plant is being installed at the Health Centre, as a pilot project.

Another project has just been started on a plot behind Pour Tous—staff quarters for about 20 people, including guest facilities. Funds for both projects have been mainly provided by the German organization 'Caritas'.

SITAR CONCERT

Early New Year's eve, over a 100 people enjoyed a sitar concert on the roof of Pitanga Hall. The concert was given by Kartik Kumar and his young son. Kartik Kumar was a pupil of Ravi Shankar.

THE BIRTH OF MERLIN

Merlin is the first Auroville baby born underwater. Those present—Lucas (the father), Chinmayi (the mother), Hilde (the midwife) and two helping friends—reported that he looked up at them from under the water, and smiled. This occurred on December 6, 1991. More than a thousand years ago it is also reported in the manuscripts of the Arthurian legends: "Merlin smiled, for he took joy in causing wonder".

LAISSEZ-FAIR

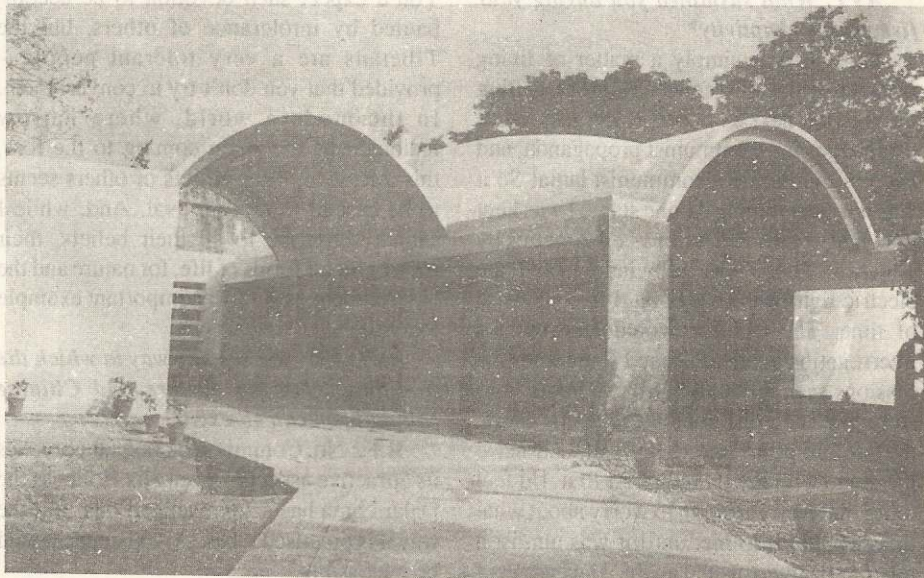
On the 4th of January, the annual fair was held at Last School Campus; this year it was meant to have a French flavour. Though it attracted many people from the village as well as from the deepest greenbelt recesses, it was a rather tame affair. *Laissez-aller!*

In the evening, the Last School children performed a play called 'Silver Jubilee', before a packed audience. Johnny and Auroson wrote it, and it was a medley of sketches with references to Auroville events and persons, interspersed with songs and music. The text was rather wordy at times, but compliments to the kids for their memorisation and nice acting.

THE WEATHER

Sub-normal temperatures were recorded throughout Tamil Nadu during the first two weeks of January. A record low of 16° C. degrees, according to a private measurement. The previous record low was 17° C.

photo John Mandeem



The Auroville Health Centre

"It reminded me of how we used to work together"

Last month, four Aurovilians piled into a van, drove to Nazareth and even met a Mr. Jesusdos. But to begin at the beginning...

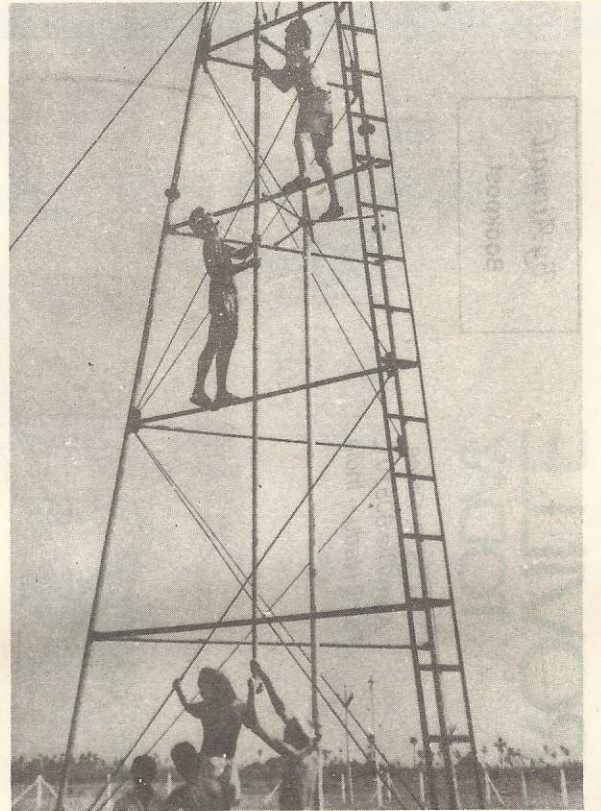
AV55 windmills, designed and manufactured in "Aureka" workshop, have been operating successfully in Auroville for some time now. But they are little known elsewhere and, relatively, expensive to purchase. Two good reasons why Robi of "Aureka" approached the Department of Non-Conventional Energy Sources (DNES) with a request for a "design approval" for the windmill. For a design approval would enable prospective purchasers to obtain a government subsidy to offset the cost. However, a design approval is only given after the DNES has field tested two of the products. One of them is already being monitored at the Visitors Reception Centre in Auroville. The second one, the DNES instructed, was to be erected way to the south, in Tirunelveli district, just outside a town called Nazareth. Which is why, one Monday afternoon, Robi, Diego, Theo, George and Parani clambered into the CSR van and drove off into the sunset.

The site was an existing well beside a Tamil Nadu Electricity Board sub-station.

"The locals couldn't understand what was going on", recalls Robi. "Here we were, four foreigners, all in shorts, working like demons with no obvious boss and laughing all the time. The energy was incredible. We began by ripping out the old well pipes by hand, and in three days we'd erected the tower, fixed the windmill head and had it pumping water. The whole thing just flowed."

"It was intuitive work", said Diego. "You'd automatically go where you were needed and do what was necessary. There was no need for any discussion."

Sometimes they had to go to Nazareth for supplies. "It was a predominantly Christian area, and the only white people they had seen before were missionaries", remembers Theo. "Each tea-shop we went to made a fortune, as everybody came over to have a look at us."



One time, a woman kept staring at George with his long, blond hair. I'm sure she thought he was Jesus!"

"At the end," says Robi, "I was tired but very happy. It all reminded me of how we used to work together in Auroville, something that has completely gone now. The joy on this trip was to work so intensely, but so harmoniously together." "When Aurovilians don't have to deal with all the details of daily life, they become different people," says Theo. "We shouldn't have to go out of Auroville to get these experiences."

And Mr. Jesusdos? He owned the photographic studio in Nazareth where they went to develop their glossy prints.

Alan

Auroville Today provides information about Auroville (an international township in South India) on a monthly basis and is distributed to Aurovilians and friends of Auroville in India and abroad. It does not necessarily reflect the views of the community as a whole.
Editorial team: Alan, Annemarie, Bill, Carel, Tineke, Roger, Yanne. Typesetting on computer: Brigitte. Barbara helps with proofreading; Franz (Prisma) assists with the final stage.

♦ ♦ ♦ To Receive Auroville Today ♦ ♦ ♦

The contribution for the next 12 issues of Auroville Today is for India Rs. 150, for abroad Rs. 650, Can. \$ 30, French F. 150, DM 47, It. Lira 35,500, D.Gl. 52, US \$ 25, U.K. £ 14. This includes the postage by airmail. Please send your contribution (or your supporting contribution of double the amount) either to the Auroville International centre in your country (add 10% for admin. and bank charges) or to Auroville Today, CSR Office, Auroville 605101. Cheques should be made payable to Auroville Fund, specifying: 'Contribution for Auroville Today'. You will receive the issues directly from Auroville. Personal cheques are preferred to bank cheques. Please avoid postal money orders. Subscribers will receive a reminder when their subscription is about to expire.

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Pongal festivities in Kuilapalayam village

Phodo Kusho, an Englishman in Tibet

In 1948, Robert Ford became the first foreigner to be employed by the government of Tibet. During the next two years, Phodo Kusho - as the Tibetans called him - installed Tibet's first radio communication system. In 1950, however, he was captured by the invading Chinese army and was held prisoner in China for 5 years. Subsequently, he published a book, "Captured in Tibet" (Oxford University Press, reprinted 1990), based upon these experiences.

This year, he has been talking about Tibet in various parts of the world as part of the international "Year of Tibet" programme. In November, he visited Auroville which, since the visit of the Dalai Lama in the early 1970's, has had strong links with the Tibetans. Mr. Ford spoke to a group of 60 Aurovilians one evening about the communist invasion, his captivity, and about pre-1950 Tibetan society; its religion, its customs, its relationship to the environment. Auroville Today interviewed him the next day over breakfast to get further details.

AVT: Last night, you pointed out that in pre-Communist Tibet mining was not allowed, as it was considered a desecration of the earth. Did this mean that there was a natural respect for the environment in Tibet?

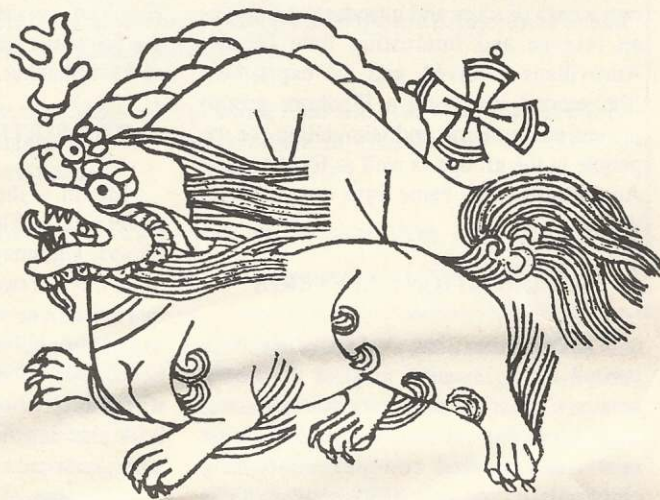
Robert Ford: Yes. One result of this was that, whenever I rode out on the plateau, I encountered a complete harmony between men and animals. You could ride between herds of gazelles and wild duck which seemed to have no fear of man. The deep respect of the Tibetans for nature, and particularly for high places, was shown by the way they would stop at the top of passes, utter a prayer, and add a stone to a mound of stones placed there by other travellers. And when Hilary and Tensing climbed Mount Everest (which is in Tibet) for the first time in 1953, they deliberately didn't stand on the summit. For Tibetans believe that the summit is the abode of the gods.

AVT: At one point in your book, you called yourself the loneliest Christian in the world. Why?

R.F.: In 1948, my closest English neighbour lived 400 miles away. But I didn't feel lonely as an Englishman - the Tibetan people made me very welcome. However, as a Christian I couldn't relate to the way the Tibetans placed their future entirely in the hands of their gods. For example, when the Chinese communists were invading, the Tibetans made no preparations to resist them. They were sure their gods would prevail. This made me feel very frustrated.

AVT: What sustained you during your five years in captivity?

R.F.: It was simply a matter of living from day to day, just concentrating on getting through the next 24 hours. I was accused of espionage, anti-communist propaganda, and even of murdering a communist lama! So it was not easy for me. At one stage, I was kept in solitary confinement in a cell 2 metres by 1 metre. There was no window, and the electric light was always on. I lost all sense of time. The Chinese would take me for interrogation at all hours, and sometimes the sessions seemed to go on for 36 hours non-stop. When I felt I couldn't take any more, they would return me to my cell, and leave me alone with my thoughts. At first, I'd feel relief, but then I'd begin to worry about what they would do to me, until it was almost a relief to be interrogated again. They are very skilful at these methods, and very thorough. The idea was to get me to confess to crimes,



The snow lion; emblem of Tibet

and then to put me through a process of what they termed "thought-purification". In the end, I gave them a little of what they wanted, while preserving my integrity.

AVT: What were the effects upon you of your captivity?

R.F.: I grew up in a lot of ways, and learned a lot about myself during those five years. I also learned to write Chinese, and through this I began to appreciate a great culture. I'm not at all anti-Chinese, only anti-Communist. And even Communism, in its theory, has its attractive aspects. It's just that the practice is so different.

AVT: Tibetan culture was for many years isolated from the world. What does the traditional Tibetan culture have to offer the modern world?

R.F.: Tibetan culture is dominated by their Buddhist religion and its earthly embodiment, His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, to whom the people are completely devoted. They make no division between their beliefs and ordinary lives; they live their religion in everything, down to the smallest details. You'd expect such devotion to be accompanied by intolerance of others, but the Tibetans are a very tolerant people - provided that you don't try to convert them. In the modern world, where narrow nationalisms are again coming to the fore, this tolerance of the beliefs of others seems to be crucial to our survival. And, while I cannot subscribe to all their beliefs, their respect for all forms of life, for nature and the environment, is surely an important example to us all.

AVT: Can you see any way in which the traditional Tibetan culture and Chinese communism can co-exist?

R.F.: No. Communism, in its theory, has its attractive aspects - even His Holiness the Dalai Lama has acknowledged this. But the way it is practised... No. Co-existence would be impossible.

Interview by Alan