

Auroville Today

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An extraordinarily complex individual

An important new biography, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, has just been published in the U.S. Written by Peter Heehs of the Ashram Archives, it is the product of many years of painstaking research. Auroville Today spoke to him about the challenges involved in writing about Sri Aurobindo.

Auroville Today: Why do we need yet another biography of Sri Aurobindo?

Peter Heehs: What justifies a new biography is new material or a new interpretation. Most biographies of Sri Aurobindo published before 1989 were based on his reminiscences, supplemented by an assortment of secondary sources. The idea that a historical work must be based on archival sources had apparently not occurred to the writers. It might not have occurred to me either if my first boss at the Ashram Archives, Jayantilal Parekh, had not suggested that I make a chronology of Aurobindo's life, basing it on "authentic documents". With his encouragement, I spent a few years working on and off in archives in Delhi, Calcutta and Baroda, and later in London and Paris. It wasn't always easy – the records of Baroda College were stored in gunny sacks covered with bat droppings, heaped up in an unused attic – but all this research provided me with a lot of new material.

When you do biographical research, you find out things about your subject by going to primary sources that state that such and such happened. But that's not the end of it. You have to compare various sources for each event because no single source gives the whole story. Sometimes there are contradictory accounts, and you have to figure out who you want to trust in any particular case. It's a very complex process of gradually getting to know the 'whole' of things.

The problems are aggravated when limits are set as to what can be said or thought about a subject. The person who advised me to search for "authentic documents" felt squeamish about using certain documentary accounts. One of the most detailed accounts of Aurobindo's life in school was written by a classmate who sent a report to the Government of India after Sri Aurobindo's arrest in the Alipore Bomb Case. It was clear from his language that he did not like Sri Aurobindo. My advisor thought that the document should not be published or even referred to. This obviously is not the right way for a historian to proceed.

When you finally sit down to write, you do it against the background of a general understanding, a conventional account of the subject. In effect what you're doing is correcting what's generally known about the subject. The result is a new interpretation that modifies or replaces the conventional account.

So what does your new biography contain? New facts or a new interpretation?

It would have been easy for me to fill a biography with hundreds of new facts, many of them relatively insignificant, but new all the same. But if I had shovelled every new bit of information I had ever found into the book, it would have become almost unreadable.

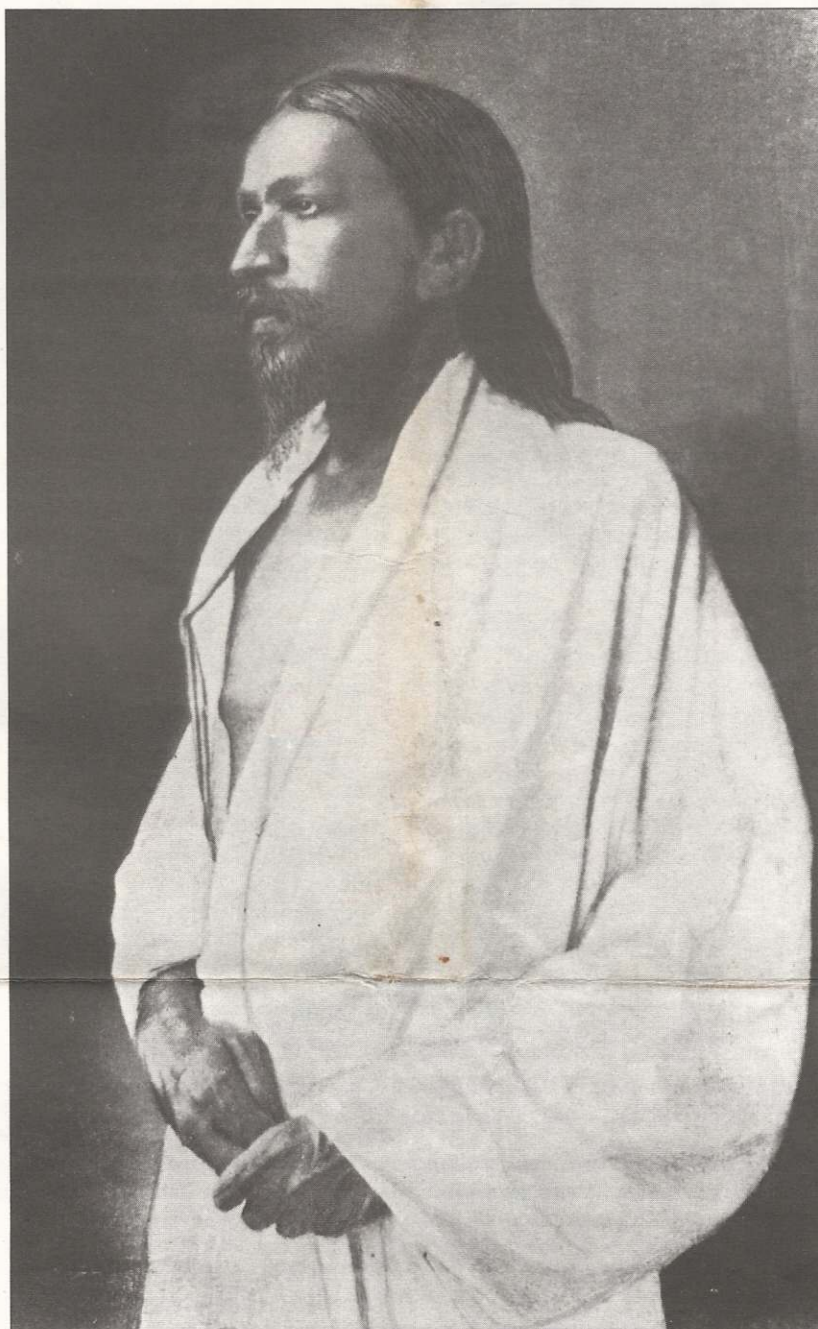
I believe what is significant about the new book is not the presence or absence of new facts – though there are plenty of them there – but rather the overall picture that emerges. I believe that the Sri Aurobindo that emerges from the new biography is much more life-like, more unpredictable, more complex, than the Sri Aurobindo of earlier biographical writing, including my own.

And when I say "emerges", I mean emerges in the mind of the reader, for I tried hard not to impose any specific point of view, but rather allowed the reader to use the material to construct his or her own Sri Aurobindo.

One of the problems you have with a figure like Sri Aurobindo is, as he put it, his life "has not been on the surface for men to see". How does a historian deal with his inner life?

We're fortunate in having quite a lot of documentary material about his inner life, mostly, of course, written by him. We have both contemporary accounts (in the *Record of Yoga*) and retrospective accounts (his letters etc.). Then there are accounts by others of similar experiences. If spiritual experience is something which is not merely subjective but represents a human capacity, one would expect to find such accounts. I made a study of comparative mysticism, and this informed what I wrote in the biography to some extent; but I did not go too far with this, because it wasn't the point of the book.

But, with the exception of the Mother, no one else seems to have experienced and worked with supermind. How does a historian deal with a 'singularity' for which no other accounts exist?



Sri Aurobindo, circa 1915.

At a certain point you have to say something like, "by his own account, this is what he was doing", and leave it at that. Because there's nothing more you can say.

Such an approach may be fine for devotees. But won't this lose you a wider readership?

When I began writing this book, I had to decide who I was addressing. Among people interested in Sri Aurobindo there are, first, the devotees. But there are also many people in the academic world who are interested in Sri Aurobindo not as a spiritual figure or object of devotion but because of his writings or because he was a revolutionary.

Both readerships have legitimate needs that have to be taken into consideration by a biographer. But both have limitations: there are topics they consider inappropriate, materials they don't want to hear about, preconceptions that they consider unquestionable verities.

For various reasons, I gave a certain priority to the academic approach. As a contributor to historical journals, I have developed an admiration for the scrupulousness and rigour of academic discourse. I feel comfortable with this approach, and feel uncomfortable with the loose, 'devotionalistic' or 'New Age' sort of expression that is popular among many people who write about spiritual figures.

On the other hand, I knew I had to write about Sri Aurobindo's spiritual life in a non-reductionist way. I didn't want to treat Sri Aurobindo's spiritual experiences as so much data for social scientific analysis, as many academics might have felt compelled to do. I am, after all, a practitioner of Sri Aurobindo's yoga, and I take what he has written about his own practice of yoga, and the yogic discipline he recommends to others, quite seriously.

My ideal reader is therefore a sort of composite of the devotee and the academic: a devotee willing to look at things in a new way, an academic open to the possibility of spiritual experience and transformation. I

don't expect any reader to agree with everything I say. What I am hoping is that each reader will use the book to enhance his or her understanding and appreciation of Sri Aurobindo in all his complexity.

But haven't you, at times, reduced that complexity by excluding certain information? For example, you treat Sri Aurobindo breaking his leg and, later, his death as simple physical facts. You exclude any occult explanation, even though the Mother referred to both happenings in these terms.

You correctly put your finger on a special difficulty of dealing with a life like Sri Aurobindo's. When, as historians, we speak of physical events, there's an established way of dealing with them, using documents to corroborate what we say. When we talk about a person's spiritual experiences, we have that person's own account of what took place. But when we talk about occult workings and effects, we are talking about spiritual things having an impact on physical events. But the influence of the inner world on the outer is not verifiable in ordinary terms. I could have used the Mother's accounts of his death etc. as she is certainly an authority in these matters; but the kind of the biography I wanted to write had to be based upon verifiable facts.

When I think about things like Sri Aurobindo's death, I certainly take what the Mother said about them into consideration. But I didn't put everything I think into this book.

Apart from basing yourself upon facts, you have also been willing, at times, to adopt a critical stance regarding your subject, for example when writing about his poetry.

It has to be acknowledged that many people have difficulty with Sri Aurobindo's poetry because it is written in a certain mode. Much of his poetry is quite remarkable, but people who think that everything Sri Aurobindo wrote from *Songs to Myrtilla* onwards was mantric and, therefore, beyond criticism, are doing no favours to his poetic reputation.

You also wonder if Sri Aurobindo and his colleagues, when they were trying to throw off British rule, could not have done more to include the Muslims.

Certain historians and political journalists insist that the rhetoric of Sri Aurobindo and his colleagues during the *Swadeshi* period was responsible for bringing about communal violence between Muslims and Hindus. I went back to his actual statements and read them as they would

have been read at the time, and concluded that such charges are unsustainable. At the same time, it is true that Sri Aurobindo didn't think that 'social problems', such as Hindu-Muslim tensions, needed to be dealt with then because India was engaged in a struggle with the colonial power and that had to take precedence. In retrospect, had more attempts been made at the time to create a united front, to engage in give-and-take with Muslim organizations, things might have worked out better.

All in all, Sri Aurobindo stands up very well to the critical approach. Devotees think they have to be protective of him, that any criticism will destroy him and all his work. This is ridiculous. His accomplishments in various fields are so strong and lasting that he emerges firmer and stronger from a critical treatment that deals squarely with difficult questions.

Writing a scholarly biography and practising sadhana are not generally seen as complementary. In your case, did the one assist the other?

I wouldn't recommend writing a biography as a means of *sadhana*. It may be that a simple devotional approach is best. But I don't think, given my personal temperament, that I could have gone very far with that. And, as it happened, this biographical work just fell into my lap.

My appreciation of Sri Aurobindo has definitely been enhanced by my study of his life. First, because I now know a lot more about him and, secondly, because as a biographer I had to critique my material, and Sri Aurobindo passed all the tests.

Sri Aurobindo was an extraordinarily complex individual. And over the years I've developed a complex attitude towards him: that of a person who follows his path but has moved beyond an unthinking appreciation to one informed by the results of scholarly research, which perhaps can better understand his complexity.

From an interview by Alan
Book review see page 7

• **Dr. Karan Singh: "Things are beginning to happen here"**

• **Interview with members of the International Advisory Council**

pages 2 – 3

• **Ageing gracefully**

• **The material problems of ageing**

• **Mahalingam: The 'I' is not the body**

pages 4 – 5

• **Shyam Sunder: Auroville should not become a retirement resort**

• **Serge Brelin: We are one being, living together!**

pages 5 – 6

• **The Lives of Sri Aurobindo**

• **The Kailash clinic**

• **Women's Day 2008**

• **Ain't it nice to be home again!**

pages 7 – 8

"Things are beginning to happen here"



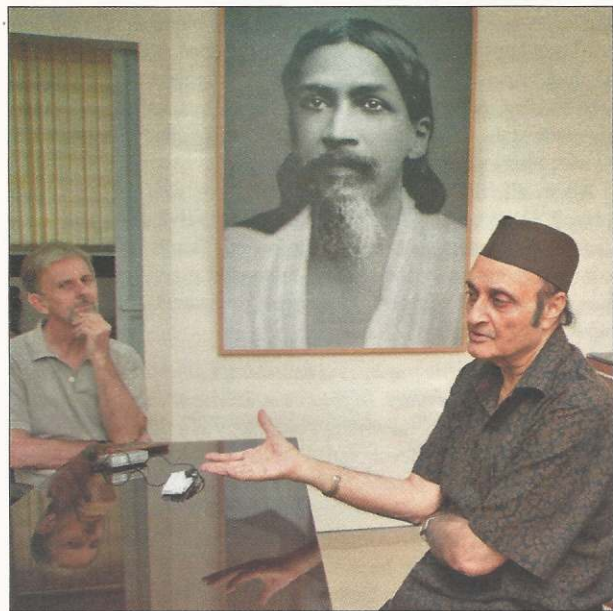
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Members of the Governing Board and International Advisory Council held meetings in Auroville at the end of July. These were their last meetings as their term of office is about to expire. From left to right: Mr. Ramaswamy, Secretary Auroville Foundation, Dr. Marc Luyckx Ghisi, Ms. Ameeta Mehra, Sir Mark Tully, Dr. Karan Singh, Mrs. Aster Patel, Ms. Mallika Sarabhai, Dr. Doudou Diène, Dr. Vishakha Desai, Mr. Ajoy Bagchi

Auroville Today asked Dr. Karan Singh, Chairman of the Auroville Foundation, for his thoughts on the present situation and on the nature of his relationship with the community.

Auroville Today: The last time you visited you talked about a new phase in Auroville's development.

Dr. Karan Singh: I had a very strong feeling that the completion of the Matrimandir and the erection of the Sri Aurobindo statue in Savitri Bhavan marked the end of one phase of Auroville and the beginning of another. This morning particularly I felt a demonstrable change of atmosphere and attitude in Auroville. Instead of the usual litany of woes and grievances, each working group that I met had something new that they wanted to do. The whole emphasis seems to have shifted to the next stage of Auroville's development, which is the building of the city. The setting up of *L'Avenir d'Auroville*, the town planning group, is a symbol of this shift. It represents a convergence of energy whereas before there were opposing camps.



Dr. Karan Singh answering Alan

You have been criticized for making many important working groups sub-committees of the Governing Board rather than of the Residents Assembly.

I think the Governing Board had to set up these committees, otherwise they would not have happened. As far as I'm aware, in the last forty years the Residents Assembly has never had a quorum – I consider 10% of the adult residents the absolute minimum. How can you leave decisions about setting up an important committee to an Assembly that sometimes numbers no

more than forty people and where twenty-five people can constitute a majority?

When a previous Secretary to the Governing Board took his leave, he said that he hoped Auroville would become increasingly autonomous and independent. He stressed that the Aurovilians should fulfil their rightful role and not see themselves as part of the Government of India.

I don't think the Aurovilians have ever been part of the Government of India. The Auroville Foundation has been set up by an Act of Parliament. To that extent you can say, in the broadest sense, it is part of the Indian structure. But there is no question of Auroville being part of the Government of India.

Regarding the issue of land consolidation, in a meeting today you made strong statements about the primacy of the inner city circle and the need for people who live outside that circle to be prepared to move there.

I never suggested that all those Aurovilians who live outside the city area should now consider moving inside; there's no question of herding everybody there. But what we have been told is that people who own land in the Auroville city area are no longer prepared to sell it; they want land exchange instead. Therefore, it follows that if we have 1,000 acres of land outside the inner circle and we need 150 acres inside the inner circle, we will have to start doing some kind of a land swap.

Broadly, the policy is that wherever possible we should try and disturb the least number of people and yet acquire the maximum amount of land. Now it's for the Land Consolidation Committee to sit down and prioritise which areas you can exchange with the least amount of disruption. But there may have to be sacrifices made by some people in order to consolidate Auroville: in any great endeavour there has to be some sacrifices from time to time.

However, we should provide facilities so that the transition is as painless as possible. I'm suggesting that a large donation from the Suzlon company, which was made specifically to purchase land, should be used instead to create housing for those who are relocating. We still have to put this to Suzlon, it is their decision, but I don't want to be in a position where if we can't buy any land – which is the case at present – we can't use the money.

Regarding what you term the 'Sri Aurobindo movement', a few years ago you mentioned

you saw it growing worldwide. Have your recent international travels and contacts confirmed this?

There have been many negative developments around the world in the last three to four years. In my view, the most negative development was the invasion of Iraq which was quite unjustified and which has cost the lives of one million Iraqis. This has thrown the whole world community out of gear.

However, along with this, I find there is a great craving everywhere for the inner life. This is not just connected to Sri Aurobindo – there's a lot of interest in yoga, in Zen Buddhism, in the teaching of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar etc. The Sri Aurobindo movement is not a mass movement, it is much more subtle, more personalised. To expect it to become a mass movement is wrong.

At the same time, I share the view expressed by several members of the International Advisory Council that Auroville has to get more involved in the world beyond its borders. I was very happy to hear that several projects involve Aurovilians doing work elsewhere in Tamil Nadu. But you have to go further, into India and beyond. Auroville is a laboratory where people are being trained in the art of holistic thinking and integral living and this message needs to be taken abroad because the world is going through a very deep crisis.

On a more personal note, some years ago you wrote a novel, 'The Mountain of Shiva', in which the protagonist gives up everything to pursue his inner development. How far does this reflect your own deepest wish?

True, Ashok, the protagonist of that novel, is my alter ego. He is more or less what I would have been if I had not been born into public life. But I had no choice in the matter.

Has that very public life been a hindrance or assistance in relationship to your personal sadhana?

Public life has been a great assistance to my inner development. It has given me an unprecedented experience of interaction with all sorts of people. At the same time, I have tried to shed outer responsibilities. The strange thing is, whenever I try to give something up....Take, for example, the question of whether I should continue to be the Chairman of the Auroville Foundation. I feel I've done it for ten years, that perhaps someone else should take it up now. But the moment I say that, everybody (including the people who may not have been so keen on me) says, "No, no, please stay." So how does one get out of these things?!

But you do have a deep connection with Auroville.

The whole Auroville experience has been a great learning experience for me. I remain indebted to Auroville because it has strengthened and deepened my psychic relationship with Sri Aurobindo and The Mother.

Quite frankly, the inner purpose of my visit this time was to assess whether I should continue as Chairman or not. And I must say that after this morning's meetings I'm going back with a more positive frame of mind. I really did feel for the first time that things are beginning to happen here.

Interview by Alan and Carel



Dr. Karan Singh taking a ride in an electric golfcart along a section of the planned Crown road

"The process of transformation is profound"

On the day after their final meeting, three members of this International Advisory Council (IAC) – Sir Mark Tully, Doudou Diène and Mark Luyckx Ghisi – who have served the full four years met Auroville Today. They looked back on their experience and identified some of the challenges and satisfactions of having been so deeply involved with Auroville's process.

Auroville Today: According to the wording of the Foundation Act, your mandate does not seem to be particularly strong. Yet many people feel that this has been the most committed and influential International Advisory Council Auroville has ever had. How have you carved out such a role?

Mark Tully: We have been influential because we have been privileged to have a Governing Board that listened to us and a community that asked for our advice and saw us as having value. We couldn't have done anything without such support.

Doudou Diène: Actually our mandate is very broad – to advise the community and the Governing Board and to defend the autonomy and independence of Auroville. This puts us at the heart of the functioning of Auroville.

I think we earned our credibility, firstly, by showing how determined we were to understand Auroville by listening to people. Beyond our formal meetings, we made a big effort to visit as many people and places as possible. Secondly, our recommendations have been substantive, balanced. We have been willing at times to take bold positions which may not have fully pleased either the Governing Board or the Aurovilians.

Mark Luyckx Ghisi: Every administration in the world has a tendency to want to 'digest', to control. The framers of the Foundation Act knew this, so they put in a group to protect the experiment from being 'gobbled up'. That's our role. That's why we kept stressing the need for devolution of power because this Act can be interpreted in a very administrative, top-down way. Without devolution, this experiment is finished.

Have you felt pulled between the different demands and expectations of the Governing Board and the Residents Assembly?

Mark T: Yes. It was difficult at times because some residents felt we were their representatives, they wanted us to wholly support their position when I felt we couldn't do this.

Doudou: We knew we would be under pressure but this was a very interesting stimulus for us. Our challenge was not to say 'no' to anybody who wanted to meet us – from either the side of the Governing Board or the residents – and yet, at the same time, to keep a critical distance.

What do you see as your main achievements over the last four years?

Mark L: I do not have impression that we have 'done' anything. We were more like a catalyst for a process which is continuing.

Doudou: I think in some areas we made a major contribution. Whenever there was a problem between the residents and the Foundation authorities, we called upon everybody concerned to keep in mind two essential realities. Firstly, the support of the government which makes Auroville possible and, secondly, the deep desire of Aurovilians to be independent, autonomous. In this way we've tried to consolidate the balance between the two bodies. But we've also gone further and proposed concrete solutions to everything which was brought to us.

We also kept reminding people about two major challenges Auroville is facing. One is the risk of a class divide that may destroy the values which are the basis of this experiment. We went so far as to elaborate criteria for housing, for example, to minimise this risk. Secondly, on the very sensitive issue of relations between locals and non-locals we stressed that a condition for the success of Auroville is that it must be both diverse and universal.

Mark T: To me a real achievement is that after four years we have apparently retained the trust and affection of both the Governing Board and the Aurovilians.

Doudou: Many Aurovilians attended the open meetings with us. While sitting there I felt it physically, this special kind of energy, because the Aurovilians were watching us, concentrating upon us, and in this concentration you felt some very profound hope that we could help them. It was very moving.

Have you any regrets, any important areas you didn't touch upon or issues you couldn't resolve?

Mark L: Yes. Auroville is a very difficult place to know. We've never had a door closed in our faces, we've been welcomed by everyone, on every visit we discovered new things, but there's still so much I don't know. We just didn't have enough time.

Should IAC members be invited to spend longer in Auroville? For example, each visit could be for 4-7 days.

Doudou: Yes, IAC members should be invited to stay longer.

Mark T: One of my regrets is that we got immersed in pressing issues, yet how many times have we been exposed to the thinking of Sri Aurobindo? I would like to have had many more conversations about what Sri Aurobindo means to Aurovilians, and what kind of spiritual development is taking place here.

Doudou: I regret that the young generation did not come and present their views. I also regret that nothing was organized so that the local villagers could come and talk to us about anything they felt important.

Do you feel that Auroville has 'blind spots', areas it has to work on more?

Mark L: Yes. Doudou mentioned some of them. Another blind spot involves the management of Auroville. Your managers are people of my age, people with grey hair. And most of them are

stone into water. At first there are big ripples, but deep down it gets worked out and soon the water becomes calm again. The process of transformation is going on very profoundly here and spiritual energy is being accumulated day after day.

Mark L: As a group we have been confronted with the most difficult part, which is the political and economic transformation of Auroville. Here we were lost. Yet, the more I reflect upon it, the more I am sure the supramental is coming. In the coming years I see a huge transformation worldwide, and those structures that are not transforming themselves will disappear.

At a deeper level, Dr. Karan Singh touched upon the most difficult question facing Auroville. Mentioning that the brightest light casts the darkest shadow, he said the most difficult thing in life is to confront your shadow. Auroville, both individually and collectively, has to confront its shadow. There's no easy way to do that, but this confrontation of the shadow is exactly the transformation the world is needing. And here you can do it because the level of energy is very high. It's Chartres plus seven!

Doudou: I feel what makes Auroville so different from other religious and spiritual places I've visited is that not only

are you involved in a very new experience which has no precedent, but you are also engaged in a yoga of action. You are trying to build a city and you are not doing it theoretically by sitting down and meditating or watching clouds. You are acting daily, and I think that concentrated action based upon certain values is the strongest spiritual force you have. Every step you take, each new realization, makes that action more spiritually meaningful.

I have no doubt that the completion of the Matrimandir is an indication of something that, as a community, you have achieved, integrated, within yourselves: it shows you are moving ahead. But the danger is to view it in isolation, to elevate it above the rest. For, at an intangible level, the latest experiment in the kindergarten is as important as this huge monument.

Many Aurovilians would like all of you to stay on as members of the next IAC if the Government offers this as an option. What are your plans?

Mark L: If I receive a letter from the Government and if the group they propose seems acceptable, I'm ready to serve another term.

Mark T: Before I came this time I decided I would not stand again. I have committed myself to writing another book and I find that having too many fixed points in my diary when I need to be flexible is problematic. But I do feel sad at the end of it all; so now I am a little less certain.

Doudou: I have not taken a decision yet. I will take things as they come and take my decision at that moment based upon different factors, but always trying to know if I can be of service. That, above all, will determine my decision.

But I will return, in whatever capacity, because I love this place.

Mark T: Take us as friends, as Aurovilians in heart. Whatever happens, we will never forget you.

Interview by Alan and Carel



The breakfast interview. From left to right Gillian Wright (partner of Sir Mark Tully) Alan, Sir Mark Tully, Hemant, Carel, Marc Luyckx Ghisi, Doudou Diène

men, in spite of the fact that one woman told me it would be easier to find a group of six wise women in Auroville than finding a group of six wise men. The world is entering a post-patriarchal era so many more women in Auroville should be taking up responsible positions.

Do you have a deeper sense now of what is really going on in Auroville?

Mark T: I would say more than when I first came, but still inadequate.

Doudou: It's easy to assess the material construction of the city: it's much harder to assess the spiritual transformation which is a huge part of what is going on here. At this deeper level, I strongly feel that something is happening. I think the reason why the Aurovilians have stayed here for many years in a place which, after all, is not a paradise, and why after every huge crisis they manage to move ahead, is that inside, in their inner beings, something has been developing; a kind of spiritual energy. It's like when you throw a

Closing remarks from the minutes of the IAC

We realize that this may be the last time we will come together as members of the International Advisory Committee. We would like to share a few observations that may be useful to the future members of IAC and indeed to the future growth of Auroville.

1. Auroville is a unique experiment that strives to bring together the spiritual dimensions of individual lives and the sustainable development of a communal spirit. In order for Auroville to reach its fullest potential, in spirit as well as in temporal space, all the participants in this path-breaking venture need to create a productive balance between individual aspirations and collective needs.
2. To this end, much greater emphasis should be placed on strengthening the community spirit internally and to project the collective vision of Auroville externally.
3. A number of initiatives can be undertaken relatively quickly to strengthen the collective spirit. A few examples follow:

- (a) Develop an organized structure to facilitate greater exchange of information, and collaboration and sharing of resources among different Auroville projects to promote innovative practices for the good of Auroville as well as for India and the world. The Indian Government,

through the Secretary and the Governing Board should play a major role in utilizing, supporting and maximizing the innovative practices of Auroville.

- (b) Use the Visitors Centre to promote some of the unique project of Auroville in diverse fields, such as environment, social innovations, education and the arts. These could be done in the form of brochures with consistent style to create a cohesive group. Such efforts could be undertaken by the outreach committee, strengthening its role.

- (c) Use select projects as model case studies to project their relevance to India and the rest of the world.

It has been a privilege to serve as members of IAC. All of us remain committed to helping Auroville realize its mission. We thank you for your encouragement, your support, and your friendship.

Mark TULLY,
Vishakha N. DESAI,
Doudou DIENE,
Marc LUYCKX GHISI

Auroville July 27, 2008.

Focus on Ageing

The average age of Aurovilians is increasing. There are now about 70 Aurovilians over 65 years. The average age of Newcomers is also increasing. How is Auroville coping with an ageing population?

Unlike in the West, where old age is signalled by compulsory retirement and the issue of free bus passes etc., age does not seem to be a factor in Auroville. Older Aurovilians do not think of themselves as being any different from the rest (neither do they receive free bus passes!). This is partly because many of them have an active inner life which transcends, or renders less unimportant, concerns about chronological age. It may also be that most older people in Auroville are vigorous and continue to work for as long as they are able to, influenced, no doubt, by the example of The Mother who founded the City of the Dawn when she was already eighty eight.

It was Mother, in fact, who noted that ageing has nothing to do with how long you have lived. *As soon as you stop advancing, as soon as you stop progressing, as soon as you cease to better yourself, cease to gain and grow, cease to transform yourself, you truly become old, that is to say, you go downhill towards disintegration. There are young people who are old and old people who are young.*

Having said this, it is true that, as one grows older, it is likely that one will be less physically active and will need more external support. How far does the present Auroville provide for this and, indeed, for anybody with physical disabilities? Not very well, it seems. Are we, in fact, still psychologically a young pioneering community and so unable or unwilling to look at such issues, even though the number of Aurovilians over seventy is increasing every year? Does Mother's description of Auroville as the 'cradle of the superman' make it harder for Aurovilians to face up to mundane realities, like the ageing of the body and mind?

These are some of the uncomfortable questions Auroville is increasingly being confronted with.

Ageing gracefully

An Ashramite speaks about ageing in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram

Sri Aurobindo spoke of the Ashram as a laboratory. One could extend the image and say that Auroville is the field experiment where the first results of the laboratory are being tested in the outer reality of the world. The experiment is being conducted upon many levels and in many fields of human experience. One such issue is the phenomenon of ageing.

The very first results that strike even a casual onlooker is the fact that ageing seems to slow down here in the Ashram. Initially, I felt prompted to believe that it was probably due to the rather stress-free and simple lifestyle and the emphasis given to physical education and, of course, the healthy and hygienic food given as *prasad* at the dining room. But a closer look revealed that while these may be contributory factors, the real cause is something deeper and subtle.

One obvious factor is that the concept of age somehow does not seem to exist here. Normally in life outside, the idea of age is constantly reinforced upon you from several quarters such as the various milestones of marriage, children and, most of all, retirement. None of these exist in the Ashram, at least for the majority.

Besides, life is not burdened with care, which happens when you have to earn a livelihood, please your boss, look after a family, plan for later years etc. These factors surely must be contributing in some

way to a delaying of the ageing process. Added to this is the fact that the Ashram has no age-specific norms, such as dress, custom or life-style, denoting an age group. The youngest can address the eldest simply by name or as a brother. These things may appear insignificant but often small things add up in our subconscious parts where the suggestions of old age accumulate.

One recalls how when a group of people wanted to celebrate Nolini-da's 80th birthday, the Mother forbade it, saying that it would spoil all Her work of trying to make Nolini forget his age. So much for the current obsession of celebrating one's 75th year, 90th year etc.

But there is a deeper factor as well. Many persons here, however they may appear in their outer nature, carry in their consciousness a childlike quality that comes from the inmost psychic and its way of relating to the Divine as a child would to its mother.

This single factor is enough to undo many suggestions of old age for it instantly connects us to that which is ageless and deathless within us. Also, there is nothing like an end-point here at which people can rest and say with vain satisfaction, — "Ah we have arrived and achieved!" There is always something more to do and strive for, inwardly if not outwardly. It is this sense of the Illimitable and the ever expanding frontiers of the Infinite that makes old age not only uninteresting but

almost vanish before this urge to progress that keeps us always full of hope and faith.

I am told that when someone asked the Mother what work a sadhak should do when he is no longer able to work and serve well with his body. The Mother said that if one is no longer able to work with the body then one should invoke the Grace. I have seen quite a few devotees who, during their last few months of life, lived in a state of constant Grace and even made unprecedented inner leaps. They got rid of long-standing habits of the outer nature, difficult attachments, through finding that part in us which is free.

Let me close with two brief anecdotes witnessed by me with regard to the youngest of the old, Amal-da. One was when a group of young Buddhist monks visited him and asked for a message. A brief pause and then came the reply: "Look forward, always look forward, never stop, keep moving forward." What an inspiring message from a man aged 102 plus to young men who were already looking at this world as illusion and hurrying to step out of the game as if wearied of the play! Another was on his birthday two years back when someone asked him the secret of his long, healthy and happy life. Amal immediately replied, "Love for the Mother." If only we could cultivate this flaming love and live always looking forward, ever forward.

Dr Alok Pandey

The material problems of ageing

Auroville is well ahead of most communities in its wide range of activities, spiritual, mental and physical which encourage well-being and personal growth.

But what happens when one can no longer ride a bike or drive a moped or scooter?

"I don't drive any more," says Kamala Tewari, who at 81 still works three mornings each week as a homeopathic doctor. "The seniors' bus takes me to work in the mornings and then brings me back home afterwards. I order food from Pour Tous and thrice a week they deliver a basket. We take a taxi if we want to go out at night, or to Pondy." Her husband, General Krishna Tewari, "85 years young", works five mornings a week in the Auroville Archives and also uses the seniors' bus service to get there and back.

However, social isolation can be a problem. Erica lived here for many years but in her eighties began to feel increasingly isolated and lonely as she found it difficult to move around and was becoming dependant on visitors. After a couple of exploratory visits to Germany, she decided to move back to her roots and live near her son. "Auroville is not a particularly friendly place. Most people do not speak your native language or can share your history. Many are new here and involved in establishing themselves. There is little social life or visiting, or just dropping in for a cup of tea. It often lacks heart," she says.

This issue seems to be more starkly evident when people have difficulty leaving their homes without assistance. There is a growing need in Auroville for more community-run transport, small vans or buses, not just to take seniors to work but also for social outings, shopping trips, medical visits, attending classes and courses and for getting around Auroville generally. Taxis are out of the price-range of many, although a flexible shared-taxi system could work at a lesser cost to users.

Continued participation in community life also requires that all those

with decreased mobility can still access important buildings.

But Auroville's most significant building and its soul, the Matrimandir, is virtually inaccessible to those who cannot climb its steep ramps. Concentration in the inner chamber is

have diminished, primarily because of funding problems and later due to lack of space. There is now only one room available for recovery or for use as a hospice, with 24-hour nursing and a doctor on call during consulting hours, mornings and afternoons.

health are virtually non-existent. An ageing population tends to have a specific range of mental health issues. How Auroville will provide services to patients, and backup and support, has not yet been addressed. So far, there has been limited success in coping with mental health problems, and sufferers have had to rely on the efforts of individuals.

Full-time care for the aged in a dedicated home is not yet available in Auroville. 92-year old Luisa who recently moved to Auroville and settled in the Vérité community says, "For the first time in my life, I am forced to learn to be more humble; and that's good for me. Moving about is the curse of the old, now that my legs have turned to rubber. I need a wheelchair and personal atten-

him as I am always talking about the future. He puts me on the back of his motorbike and whizzes me off to the Om choir on Tuesdays. Christiane rings for a taxi for me if I want to go to Pondicherry, though the bumpy roads play havoc with my bones."

Home care does not have to 'ghetto-ise' the old, a fear for many. Arka community, for example, focusses on the needs of the community's older members, while also offering services to younger people. Arka, meaning 'ray of sunlight' in Sanskrit, was the name given by The Mother to Umberto Costanza who opened the first Sri Aurobindo Centre in Milan in Italy. When he passed away, he left a bequest to meet a need not then addressed in Auroville, a service for the elderly. Arka was conceived in response to that need.

Today it consists of an as yet uncompleted main building and residential facilities that include five units which are designed for elderly or convalescents. Of these, one unit is designed specifically for a wheelchair-bound individual. When not being used, these rooms are let as guest accommodation. Four new units are scheduled for completion by the end of this summer. These are slated to meet Auroville's general housing needs for the next five years, after which they will be turned over to the Arka project. The Arka team also has plans to start hiring small buses to bring seniors to Arka for the day and for excursions, and to employ trained care-givers to assist those who need help in their own homes.

Finance is another crucial issue. The average age of both Newcomers and Aurovilians is increasing, implying increased pressures in the future on age-related resources. There is as yet insufficient recognition of the indirect costs that an ageing population brings, especially one that demands western-style services with high levels of skill and comfort.

While the challenges thrown up by Auroville's ageing population are real, they are not insurmountable. The cohort moving into older age is large; it has been through many testing times and it knows how to wrest success from difficult conditions.

Elle Rasink



Two views of Arka: Main building (top) and the wheelchair accessible courtyard (right)

closed to those less mobile or with heart conditions. Only the petal chambers remain available to them. For many, this is a sore loss.

Enabling older people to remain in their homes until they choose to leave them is another key element in their remaining independent. Providing help with chores that become too heavy, or helping with other activities of daily living such as shopping, cooking, showering and dressing may be all that is required. Many already pay *ammas* for these services. Others rely on family, friends and fellow Aurovilians. Some home care services have started and more are being planned.

For those who need more than this, be it physical or mental, the outlook is less promising. Medical services remain an area of some confusion. The Aspiration Health Centre offers access to doctors, but in-patient facilities which used to be provided



Charges are modest: currently Rs 750 a day. Although there are kitchen facilities, there is no cook and patients need to have special food provided from outside.

However, a new Health Service in Kailash has recently been set-up and promises a service dedicated to Aurovilians. [see article page 7, eds.]

If medical facilities for physical health are scarce, those for mental

tion, without which I cannot move about anymore. I have a ground level house behind Vérité community, and have a wonderful live-in helper called Christiane. She has cared for elderly people before, and knows how to indulge and challenge me in just the right proportion. I also have a very affectionate relationship with Aurelio whom I met in Japan in 1998 and who lives in Vérité too. He says I inspire

PHOTOS COURTESY GIORGIO

The real 'I' is not this ageing body!

Mahalingam, who is 88, speaks about ageing

Auroville Today: Has your spiritual aspiration intensified as you got older?

In the beginning, when I came into yoga, I gave myself 5 years to realize the Brahman, and threw myself intensely towards this goal! I was about 22 years young then – and I had no idea what spiritual life meant. Slowly I began to understand this is going to be a lifelong work, and it is not something so easily achieved.

Recently, I find that my aspiration has once again intensified, as it was in those early years. Perhaps it is from all the years of studying and a little more understanding?

The energy inside is like what it was when I was 30-40 years old. I don't feel tired at the end of the day. It is like my Ashram days, when after all the work was over and dinner completed, I would go to the Samadhi and spend a little time before returning to my room. For me, that felt like the best time of the day...

As I read more and more, I get the feeling that something is working inside; that Mother is doing something. Even though I don't fully understand or have any experiences to speak of, there is something happening.

I am very grateful for this aspiration, and that Mother has kept me free of outer desires or wants.

Is it because you have less external work that there is more time to dedicate to yoga? Have your interests changed with age?

My outer work has always been translation and that has not stopped.

For me, meditating for hours has never been possible. I have tried hard, but I cannot sit and meditate even for half an hour, let alone one or two hours as some are able to do.

My sadhana has been to do my work with a dedicated feeling. To date, I may have translated some 12,000 pages [Mahalingam has completed the translation of 15 volumes of *Mother's Collected Works* into Tamil, eds.]

To what extent do places such as Savitri Bhavan and the Matrimandir help in your spiritual quest?

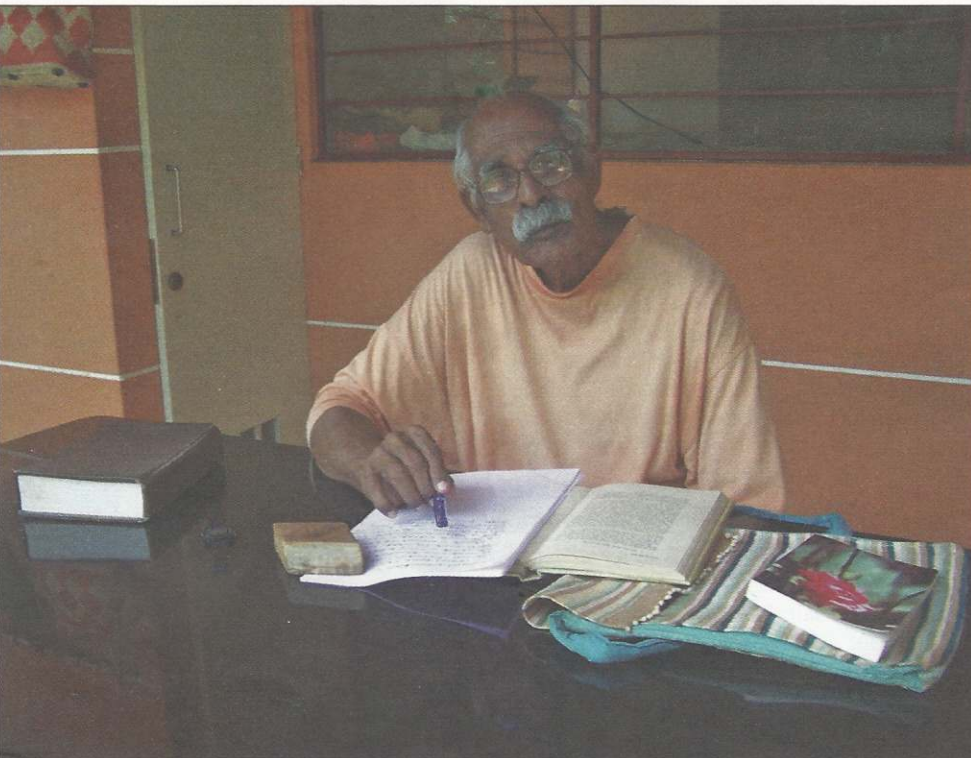
I think they are very helpful. When I go to the Savitri Bhavan, the atmosphere there is conducive to receiving spiritual thoughts. I don't go there particularly to read or to listen

to talks. I go there for the atmosphere. Even the people who come to Savitri Bhavan come with a spiritual aspiration.

This is the same in Matrimandir. And as Mother says, the land of Auroville itself is aspiring.

Do you go to these places regularly?

I go to Savitri Bhavan once a week on Thursday to listen to the talks. They have arranged transport and that makes it very convenient.



Mahalingam in Transition School, working on a translation

Matrimandir, however, is a little far away so even if I want to go more regularly, I have not been able to do so. Some Wednesdays, when the school bus goes to Pondy, I come in the early morning trip, and get dropped by the Matrimandir at 8.30 a.m. Then I have half an hour until 9 a.m. when the bus leaves for town. During this time I sit quietly under the banyan tree. But I have not seen the inside of the Matrimandir since it has been completed. There is no time for me to go up to the room.

Twice a week I take the bus to Pondy to visit the Ashram and the Samadhi. Not for shopping. Sometimes I also go to SABDA to follow-up on some translation work.

Sometimes when visitors come from the various Sri Aurobindo Centres, I accompany them to the Matrimandir. They pick me up in their vehicle and drop me off.

Do you feel the community that you live in is conducive to spiritual growth?

No, not really. Here where I live, in Fraternity, it has, one could say, the village atmosphere. So it is not ideal.

Of course it would be nice to move to the

another in the Ashram, that one should learn to overcome one's difficulties rather than escaping from them? So I leave it to Her!

Would you prefer another type of environment?

It would be nice, but I believe that if it is necessary, it will be arranged. Even this house where I live in came by itself.

Outer circumstances can of course help in the inner work – but it is the inner attitude that is most important.

Yesterday I was reading 'The Supreme' and there were these lines by The Mother that I prefer: "Mother knows everything, I should not worry about anything. She will arrange everything. Remain like this, without thinking of anything. Wait patiently and you will see that everything will be arranged as it should be without your mental or physical intervention."

Practically, what does ageing mean to you?

I would in general say that there is no big change. I may not be able to carry the kind of weights which I used to and I notice that 'balance' has become an issue now. But I am able to walk as always. I walk about 8 to 9 kilometres every day. It is part of my routine.

These days, after my evening walk, I come home at 6.00 or 6.30, take a shower and then sit in front of the photos of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo. That's the time I feel most youthful, as if I am thirty again.

In these moments, I sometimes get the strong indication that I am not my body but something else.

That's when you begin to understand and get a glimpse of who the real 'I' is. Not this ageing body! – the one who is inside is so youthful!!

Do you have any thoughts or fear about death and dying...

No, there is no fear of dying, only a slight sadness. I wonder about the people I am attached to, friends I have come to know and love, will I find them when I return? If I knew this is guaranteed, I would not worry – I would be happy to get a new body and come back! But I am not afraid of death.

Priya Sundaravalli

Auroville should not become a retirement resort!

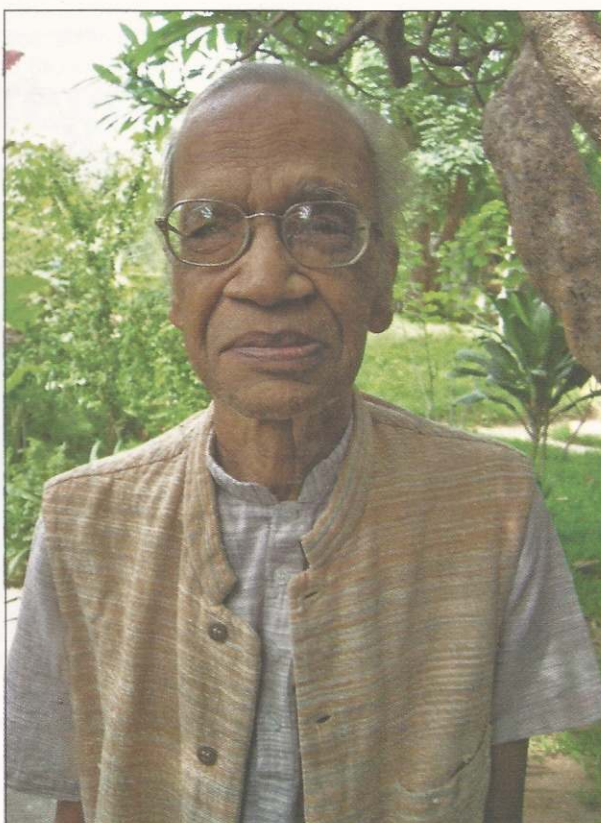
Shyam Sunder played a central role in the unfolding of Auroville in the early years when The Mother made him Her official liaison or contact person for the residents. Now, aged 82, he resides in Pondicherry.

His body has weakened due to prolonged illness. "The result of chikungunya," he says wryly. He caught the illness almost two years ago but has not been able to throw off the effects as yet. A result of old age? "I am now 82," he says, "and the body certainly finds it more difficult to cope. But mentally I am fine."

Shyam Sunder Jhunjhunwala is the author of the books *En Route*, which contains his correspondence with The Mother, and *Down Memory Lane* in which he reminisces about his life in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. It also contains notes about the guidance Mother gave him on Auroville. "Mother used to hold my hands tightly, and often I had a feeling that she was pumping her spiritual force into my body."

En Route contains descriptions of Shyam Sunder's spiritual aspiration and experiences. Have these increased as he grew older? "Yes," he replies matter-of-factly, but declines to go into details. Instead he talks about his present work. "Due to my illness I have not been able to dedicate as much time as before to my work as editor of the monthly *Sri Aurobindo's Action*. My last article was about access to the Matrimandir."

He explains that he is very concerned that the Matrimandir should not become a tourist attraction. "Hundreds of visitors come daily, but not everybody has the required level of consciousness to receive what is present in the Matrimandir. Only those people should be allowed who have a spiritual call, and the reception team should be able to distinguish these people from those who do not have that inner calling." This, he adds, makes the work of the Matrimandir reception team a heavy one. "Not everybody has the level of consciousness required," he says. And he points out what happened to The Mother. "When Mother was still in her body, many people used to visit her, often through the mediation of friends in the Ashram. But she would sometimes cry out in anguish about the falsehood that some of these people brought with them and threw on her body. Similarly, the reception team must take care not to allow the vibration of the Matrimandir to be spoiled."



Shyam Sunder Jhunjhunwala

Another project close to his heart is the improvement of the Pondicherry canal that divides the 'white' from the 'black' town. His age notwithstanding, environmental issues are as dear to his heart as to any Aurovilian. "Together with others I have developed a project

to turn the canal into a beautiful asset of Pondicherry. Our idea is to fill the canal with seawater, and create gardens and walkways along its banks. Public buildings such as libraries and museums would come up next to it. The Rs 30 crore project is slowly progressing through the corridors of the Pondicherry Government. The people in the Government are fascinated by the idea," he says and expresses the hope that the project will manifest in a not too distant future. "It almost passed, but then again there were some obstructions."

His illness made Shyam Sunder move from Auroville to Pondicherry. "The attention I need could not be given in Auroville," he says. Does he believe that Auroville should have old-age homes? "It is a good idea. All sorts of people will come to live in Auroville, and quite a few will be happy to get proper care when they require it." In this respect he observes that people in the West seem to be more prone to typical old-age diseases such as Alzheimer than people in India. "I have been thinking about this. Might it be due to the fact that in the West there is the policy of official retirement – making people feel redundant as they have nothing else to do – which does not exist in India? Statistically, Westerners live longer than Indians, but it does not necessarily imply that they live a healthier life. Here in India, elders continue to play a useful role, both within their family as well as in society."

But, he warns, "The basic requirement for joining Auroville is a spiritual aspiration. Without this, people have no place in Auroville. Particularly the elderly who have a decent pension may be tempted to come and join because of the beautiful environment. But this should not happen. Auroville should not become an old-age resort. The spiritual aspiration should be the primary motivation."

The Mother expressed in her many conversations on Auroville the high expectations She had. Does he feel that they may not materialize? Shyam Sunder replies, "No. Mother had great hopes from Auroville and She was sure that one day it will be fulfilled. I pray for that."

In conversation with Carel

"We are one being, feeling, thinking, living together"

On July 2nd Serge Brelín left his body at the age of 53. He had been suffering from a cancer of the liver. In an interview with Doris and Francis in March this year, he looked back on his life.

I first came to Auroville in 1975, from France. I was 18 years old. A friend of mine had told me about the silent mind and of a certain Sri Aurobindo. I was immediately hooked. A few weeks later I chanced on some books written by Sri Aurobindo. I did not understand anything I read, but I knew that this was what I was looking for. Shortly afterwards I came to know about a city called Auroville. Together with a friend I decided to go to India, and go to Auroville. When we arrived in India, immediately, I felt, oh, it's my home. A couple of weeks later we were in Pondicherry. I went to the Samadhi, and had a very powerful experience of that silent mind – something close to the silent mind I was reading about. The next day, we went to Auroville and stayed at Udavi for 6 months. And here, day after day, I had experiences. I would just sit down, have a cup of tea, relax, and I would have an experience. Those were perhaps the richest days of my spiritual life. Day after day, ready for anything, knowing nothing. The whole period I stayed at Udavi and didn't feel the need to visit the rest of Auroville – that happened only during the last two days. Then I left, went back to France for military service. It took me 6 years to come back.

At the end of those 6 years, it all came back to me one night. I was feeling lost, at the end of my rope – I used to live a very marginal life. At one point I couldn't take it anymore, and Auroville came back very powerfully, through books. Night after night I questioned my life. I felt an urge to go to a nearby city, which I usually wouldn't go to, and go to a bookshop. In that bookshop, I was led to a shelf where Satprem's books were stored. I bought three of them. One was *The Adventure of Consciousness*, and the other ones were the Trilogy on the Mother. I opened them and immediately it fell on me. The Presence. The next day I decided to pack and come back. That was in 1981.

The need to stop judging

I found a totally new situation in Auroville. My first instinct was to go to Udavi. But everything had changed due to what had happened [*the difficulties with the Sri Aurobindo Society, eds.*] I took sides. (*laughs*). I had seven very intense years. Very intense. And, yeah it is true, I think that I took a position that was, often, quite extreme. But I believed in it, very strongly. In this sense, I believe I was sincere. But at one point we had to leave, because actually we were living in a situation that was becoming inwardly impossible to bear. The perpetual tension of being in conflict with what you don't believe in, or what you thought is not right and not true, was actually becoming impossible to sustain. At that time I was living with Luisa. We took a break, in 1988.

We came back in 1991. When I was in France I sincerely tried to live my life there, live life as it is. Then I realized how much I was missing Auroville. I was missing... (*laughs*) oh, everything. I tried very hard to stay there, but whatever I tried to do failed. And in the meantime I reflected a lot. And I realized how my perception of Auroville, and the truth of Auroville and its ideals, were not exactly true. That something had to change, so that I could come back. And I realized that I could come back only on one condition: that I would stop judging. I felt very deeply that I had to have a positive attitude. Not in the sense of seeing everything as beautiful, but deeper than that, that the only positive thing is the divine, finally. And the rest is, well, what it is, and it can only be changed by the divine. We can contribute a bit, by lending ourselves to that consciousness and that force. But we have the tendency to make it worse by wanting to change others who do not conform to our view of the truth. I had to reflect on that very profoundly, and it became evident to me, and this is how I could come back. Otherwise I would not have come, because I could not come back and be my old self. That would not have been fair for the others, and for me. And, from the day I came back here, I have been trying to be somebody new. That has been hard work, and I'm not yet that new (*laughs*). There is still a long way to go.

Changing one's nature

I went through certain experiences lately, and certain challenges, which actually have confronted me with my need to change my

nature radically. It's not a question of a moral choice; it's just a question that if I don't change, I will not be able to make it. It's almost a question of life or death. Not necessarily physical death, though that might also happen. Two years ago, I just felt that, well, I had come to the end of a road. That I had exhausted all that I felt was right and true. I had always been obsessed by how to manifest these ideals, so when I came back, my approach was different from the first [*time*], but nevertheless I was still passionate about Auroville. I am a passionate man and I tried to make this Dream alive. But again, I realized that I was trying too hard and was missing the point. Whatever I felt was right and true didn't work, again. This Auroville; where is it? This consciousness; where is it? In myself, not in the others, because this I had understood. Where is it? Again at one point I was considering perhaps that I had to leave. Not because of Auroville, but because of my incapacity to progress. I want to progress. I am here for progress. If I cannot progress, maybe it is a sign that actually I have to go somewhere else, because you can also progress outside Auroville. I was thinking since I cannot progress here anymore, maybe I have to experience the world, again, but with a new perception.

"I wasn't practicing Sri Aurobindo's yoga"

We went to the Himalayas to try to get an answer and came back with another answer which was actually (*laughs*) the physical challenge... [*the discovery of cancer, eds.*] This has accelerated the process. And it has been, actually, a blessing. It has been wonderful because in a few weeks everything has been demolished. Everything. In a few months, I had to withdraw from my work and all the collective projects in which I was involved. And again I had a few solid months to reflect, you know. And it all became very, very clear. I realized that I have been living in the ignorance for actually my whole life, and even all the years I have lived in Auroville, have been lived in the ignorance. I thought, like everybody else, that part of me is in the truth and part of me is in the ignorance, and well, let's manage. (*laughs*) But I realized that I was completely in the ignorance and that, after all these years, I was not practicing Sri Aurobindo's yoga. It was a fake. If you want to truly change, and if you want to make it, you have to make a quantum leap. You cannot just be happy to live and just hope that someday something will happen. This came to me very powerfully these months.

Somewhere I thought that I understood what had to be done. What was finally for me an impossibility for so many years became extremely simple. Everything is here. It's not far away, behind. And not far away, above. And with a bit of effort, it is not that difficult, if we consent to keep quiet a bit. To be in contact with what truly can manifest Auroville. So, I'm not saying I'm doing it. I just say that during all these months it appeared to me that yes, it's possible, with a bit of effort, I can do it. And it came to me very powerfully that it was possible for all of us. Because during these months, I thought a great deal about everybody. Without exclusion. I felt very close to everybody. And I said, but we can make it. It's here. It, perhaps, doesn't require much.

The possibility of a collective individuality

At one time the Mother spoke of the need to realize the collective individual, or the individual collectivity, through a fact of consciousness. During these last months, I had the very strong perception that this collective individuality is a possibility. Meaning that suddenly, we are one. You and I and others. We are one being, feeling together, thinking together, living together. I felt the very strong possibility of it. I don't know what it requires from others. I think I understand a bit what it requires from me, to actually be in a state where we are truly one. Not up there, but in our life. Meeting, working, living together. I had this very strong perception, and my feeling is that, I don't know why, this year is a very important year. I feel it's the year of unity. Of true unity. The unity in which all the opposites will be reconciled. What has hurt me the most, what has almost killed me, is the fact that we are in this constant separation, in this constant opposition, in this constant state of conflict, whether we like it or not.

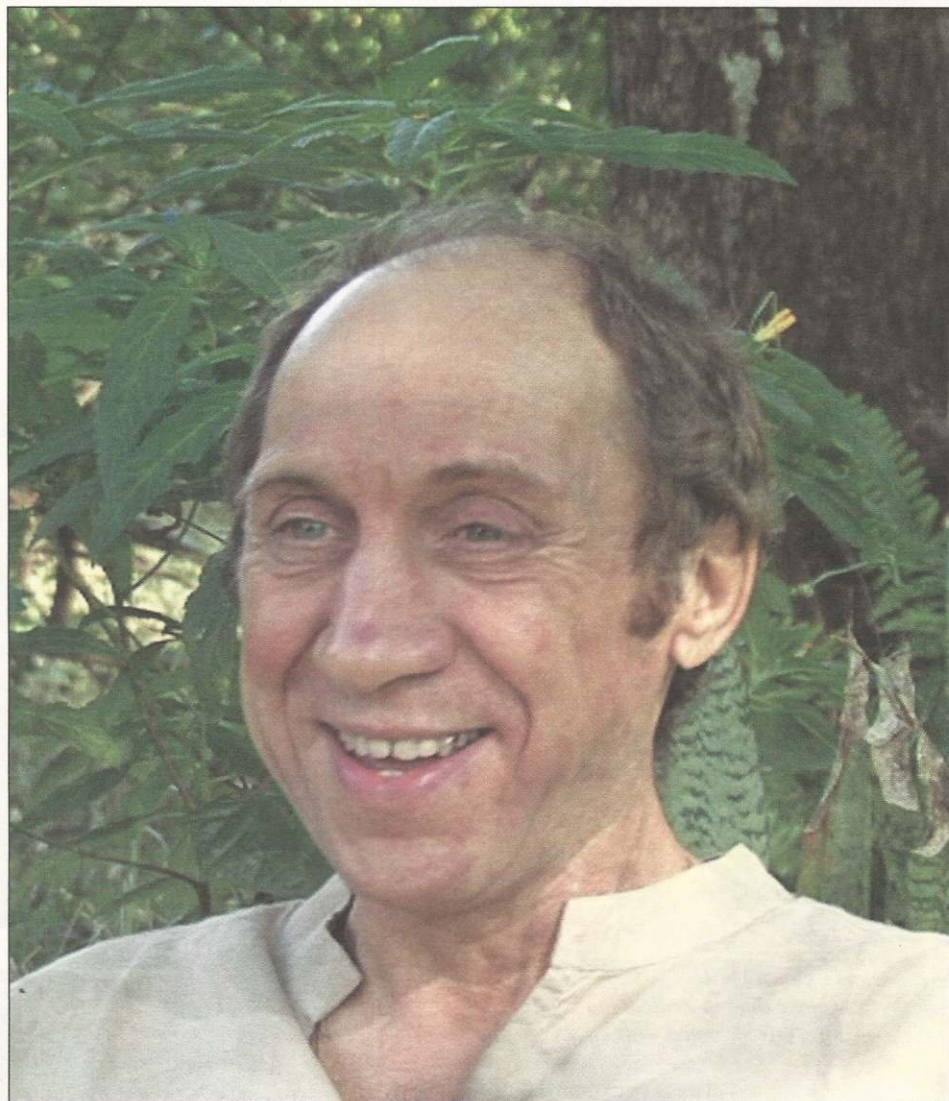


PHOTO COURTESY DORIS AND FRANCIS

Whenever you want to do something with other people, it becomes a nightmare. We all have come with the same aspiration, though maybe with a different perception and understanding. But as soon as it comes to collective organization or collective actions, we cannot make it. And this has been killing me.

I came to the conclusion that it is humanly impossible, that humans are not equipped, and need to become equipped with other tools, other organs, which will allow us to realize that unity. Our only power is the need to find that something else. Sri Aurobindo has given many names to that. But we need to make it a reality now. And my feeling is that now it is possible. Collectively.

Fulfilling Auroville's purpose

You know, the problem I had [*doubts about staying in Auroville, eds.*] is gone. And actually, whatever happened is not important. We are facing many problems nowadays. With our whole internal organization, with an increasing bureaucracy, with an increasing intervention of governmental agencies and governmental mindsets, but this doesn't matter to me anymore. I look at these things but don't want to react to them. I would like to call instead, each time I see these problems.

There is another thing which came to me very powerfully, and which, maybe is complementary. I realized that maybe the purpose of Auroville is not fully fulfilled. Individual work is one thing. Everyone is coming here to develop his or her personality more integrally and become more and more divine, and create a collectivity which provides a space for the individuals to grow into that higher truth. But it's perhaps not enough. Then I remembered why Mother had created Auroville. Firstly, she had this revelation of the condition of the world. She saw all nations, you know, growing on the basis of falsehood. And she saw that if they could actually come together and work together on something based on truth, that would create a human unity that would prevent another world war. Later, she had another revelation that India was a symbol of all the difficulties of the world, and that it was here in India that the cure actually could happen.

Need to recover world meaning

Lately, I've become acutely aware of the situation of the world – this question of global warming and all these things. And I saw that we were not actually the laboratory that was envisaged for Auroville where we could develop solutions to the challenges of humanity. I found that we were living in too small a village. I realized that unless we recover our world meaning, our true vocation of being an experimental field of

evolution for humanity, we would not be able to truly progress. Perhaps that is the reason why we have all these interferences from the outside. This is what I feel to communicate, actually, to everybody nowadays: the need that Auroville actually grow into its truly international and universal dimension. That all nations unite around the necessity to find the next step. Because if you don't find it, there is no more Auroville. There is no more a new humanity, a new world. That, I believe, could help us tremendously. That each of us feels part of a human effort to find the next step.

Divine Anarchy

You know what I truly dream... You know this expression: divine anarchy? This makes me dream... that we are all so much connected within our divine reality that we all spontaneously live a divine life, in which everybody, everything, is at his or its perfect place. This is what I dream of.

The good news is that quite a number of people I meet have had similar experiences. This gives me hope that something is happening at the level of our collective yoga, without us knowing it perhaps. What is important is a fire, an intensity. If there is fire, if there is intensity, passion, the response will be given to us. A living one, not only individually, but collectively.

We have not understood what a collective being is. Our understanding is mostly political, and that takes over. It should not. This is what I understood. A community, or a collectivity, is just a space for the individuals to grow, but in which they are all one, thus creating a being. But this being is not political. It is not something that can be expressed in institutions, in rules and regulations and all these things.

Sri Aurobindo used to say that he had repeatedly broken all that he believed was true and started afresh. Of course, we cannot undo what has been done on the ground. But we can certainly make our mindset blank. What makes us die is this constant repetition of all that we believe is true, all our habits. So if we would succeed, individually and collectively, just to make blank, to switch off, for a while, I believe that something will flow in. And that suddenly our relationship with all that is here will change, and that we will see new solutions, new ways of dealing with our so-called problems. And maybe, these problems will even vanish. But the machine has to stop. And I do believe that it has to stop first in our heads. If more and more individuals take it upon themselves to switch off the machine in themselves, something new will flow in.

Interview by Doris and Francis

An earlier interview with Serge titled "In relentless pursuit of Divine Anarchy" appeared in AVToday #176, September 2003

The Lives of Sri Aurobindo by Peter Heehs

As Peter Heehs put it in his previous short introduction to Sri Aurobindo's life and work, published in 1989, "No one has tried to deal evenly with all the different aspects of his life: domestic, scholastic, literary, political, revolutionary, philosophical, spiritual." The new fuller biography sets out to do justice to all these 'lives'.

Peter's approach is scholarly. Wherever possible he goes to primary sources. He also, on occasions, quotes different perspectives on events as well as on Sri Aurobindo himself. Some of these are unflattering, even antagonistic: this is far from being one-dimensional hagiography. Peter himself is not uncritical. He feels that Sri Aurobindo was "complacent" regarding the threat posed to Indian unity by the All-India Muslim League; he wonders whether Sri Aurobindo's political "intransigence" aided or hindered the formation of an effective political force to oppose the British; and, in the domestic sphere, he notes "Sri Aurobindo could hardly be called a good husband". (By the by, Peter is the first biographer to speculate, albeit briefly, about the nature of Sri Aurobindo's sexual experience.)

Unlike those devotee biographers who present Sri Aurobindo's life as an unfolding series of superlatives – a brilliant student, the most influential Indian politician of the early 1900s, a literary prodigy, the yogi who effortlessly attained the highest realisations etc. – Peter takes a more objective view. Thus the young Sri Aurobindo was weak and inept on the playing field and, in his own words, "a coward and a liar". As a student he was only really outstanding in Greek and Latin (although he was exceptionally widely-read). Sri Aurobindo was not a great public speaker. He had a shrill, high-pitched voice and generally spoke in English, ensuring that the majority of his audience could not understand him: Tilak emerges from this account as the more effective and influential politician. Sri Aurobindo's early poetry was derivative and even much of his later poetry is outmoded and today appreciated mainly by devotees – Sri Aurobindo never came to terms with the Modernist movement in literature. Even in the spiritual sphere, it is clear that Sri Aurobindo had to work very hard

before attaining most of his realizations, sometimes taking wrong turns, mistaking the nature of the experience or underestimating the difficulties involved.

To this reader at least, all of this makes Sri Aurobindo immensely more interesting and his achievements far more impressive.

Perhaps the most compelling sections of the first part of Peter's biography are provided by his description of Sri Aurobindo's role as a revolutionary in the early 1900s. Many previous biographers have played up his defiance of the authorities but skirted the issue of Sri Aurobindo's actual involvement in revolutionary activities. Peter makes it clear that while Sri Aurobindo did not believe that killing a few officials would overthrow the British Government, he did not oppose assassination and, while he may not have known in detail about Barin's – his brother's – and his associates' bomb-making and allied activities, he clearly had a general sense of what was going on. Asked in 1938 why he had not stood in the way of those plotting assassination, he replied, "It is not wise to check things when they have taken a strong shape, for something good may come out of them."

Sri Aurobindo later came out against assassination, but not on moral grounds. Rather, he judged it inexpedient given the efficiency of the British military machine and the scale of their reprisals.

Sri Aurobindo's real influence in the early years of the 20th century – and this was considerable – was as an inspirational journalist and political theorist. Sri Aurobindo was the first major figure to call for complete independence from Britain, and through his articles in the *Karmayogin* and *Bande Mataram* he succeeded in inculcating this demand in the popular mind. As a theorist, he laid out a distinct political agenda for the 'Extremists', the party or faction that opposed the 'Moderates' efforts to seek an accommodation with the British government. While his tendency during heated debates was to sit back or to work 'behind the scenes', he later admitted he had a fighter's temperament and derived "vital enjoyment and satisfaction" in the rough and tumble of political action.

Peter clarifies that Sri Aurobindo's 'lives' were not sequential but frequently overlapped or were



interwoven. Thus his political activity did not immediately stop or even abate after his first great spiritual experience. Indeed, Sri Aurobindo later understood that his subsequent imprisonment was forced upon him by a greater Power in order to make him sever contact with his outer work. Similarly, Sri Aurobindo's subsequent inner explorations and discoveries were only 'non-political' in a narrow sense of the word. For once he was inwardly assured independence would come, he turned his attention to what he hoped Indian independence would presage for humanity as a whole – a new species inhabiting a new world.

The second half of the book examines in some detail his personal sadhana, which aimed at bringing what he termed 'supermind' down into matter. It also deals with his major writings, almost all of which were written initially for the periodical the *Arya* between 1914-20. Peter's approach to Sri Aurobindo's inner work and realizations is "not to argue either for their veracity or for their delusiveness; I simply present some of the documented events of [Sri Aurobindo's] inner life and provide a framework for evaluating them."

Particularly important in this regard is his *Record of Yoga*, which records in scrupulous detail the results of his inner experimentation between 1912-20 and again in 1927. This is a difficult read but Peter offers an explanation of the arcane terminology. He is also very assured in his summaries of the major works.

Peter devotes less space to Sri Aurobindo's plays and poetry. This may reflect a personal preference but

it seems questionable for a biographer to pass so quickly over *Savitri*, the epic poem which Sri Aurobindo called his most important work and which contains some of the finest and most evocative descriptions of the 'inner territory'. Peter also seems less assured with the plays. At one point, abandoning his fine poise as an objective biographer, Peter surmises "if [Sri Aurobindo's] earlier plays suggest that he was searching for his ideal life partner, *Vasavadutta* seems to hint that he had found the woman he was seeking and was waiting for the moment when she would join him". Peter provides no evidence to substantiate this judgement, which seems to belong more to the Mills and Boon school of criticism than to a serious academic study.

Columbia University Press has also provided a confusing index to what is otherwise a handsome edition.

These are minor quibbles, however, more than offset by Peter's skill in analysing the Alipore bomb trial, or in rescuing Sri Aurobindo's *Uttarpara speech* from a narrow Hindutva interpretation, or in clarifying the complex political situation in India at the turn of the 20th century. Above all, it is evident in his clear exposition of the essential nature of Sri Aurobindo's yoga and the nature and significance of the inner work he was undertaking. Here, of course, biographers ultimately are confronted by a void. For while Sri Aurobindo documented certain aspects of his inner work and hinted at others, a huge amount of what he was doing was known only to himself and The Mother. As he famously put it, when trying to put off yet another prospective biographer, "The attempt [at biography] is bound to be a failure, because neither you nor anyone else knows anything at all of my life; it has not been on the surface for men to see".

Even though, by the nature of its subject, Peter's biography cannot claim to be all-embracing, all-explaining, it is a fine piece of scrupulous and intelligent research. It sets a new and very high standard by which biographers of Sri Aurobindo, both past and future, will be judged.

Alan

The Lives of Sri Aurobindo
by Peter Heehs.

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In brief

Report on business

A report of financial contributions by commercial units presented by Auroville's Board of Commerce shows that the 127 registered commercial units had in the year 2006-7 a total turnover of Rs 617 million, with total profit of Rs 65 million as compared to Rs 49.9 million for the financial year 2005-6. Rs 31 million was donated to Auroville, the balance profit remained with the units for development, expansion, stocks and reserves.

There are 1 large, 10 medium-big, 31 medium, 44 small, 15 tiny and 6 very tiny units. For the 65 small and tiny units, greater support needs to be provided in terms of accounting and administrative help. The 21 units with a turnover of under Rs 500,000 are functioning at a survival level.

The ABC observed that commercial units are not given a high degree of support in Auroville, contrary to that of services that are considered doing the "true work." Also, there are a disproportionate number of persons working in services as compared to those generating resources. These issues need to be addressed.

Auroville International School

The government of Germany has approved a donation of 129,000 Euros for adding three fully equipped laboratories to the Auroville International School at Trumbai. This will bring the capacity of the school to one hundred and sixty students. The total expansion cost will be 175,000 Euros. Auroville's Coastal Development Centre provided Rs 21 lakhs (about 36,000 Euro) as counterpart funding.

Child abuse prevention

In order to develop strategies for the prevention of child abuse in the bio-region, a group of 12 Aurovilians will receive a 2-day training in the prevention of child abuse by the specialized NGO Tulir in Chennai.

Cashew Harvest 2008

Notwithstanding unseasoned rains in March which led the Government of Tamil Nadu to pay compensation for loss of cashew harvest, the No More Pesticides team reported a good organic cashew harvest with 471 kilos from 49 trees as compared to 395 kilos from 50 trees in 2007 and 315 kilos from 60 trees in 2006. This shows a yield increase of about 20% compared to 2007 and an increase of almost 300% compared to the first yield in 2002. Contrary to the previous 6 years, this year no compost was used and the field was only once sprayed with Neem oil and half of the field with Panchagavya. The soil in the plot regenerates, resulting in stronger and healthier trees that can fight the pests by themselves.

HEALTH CARE

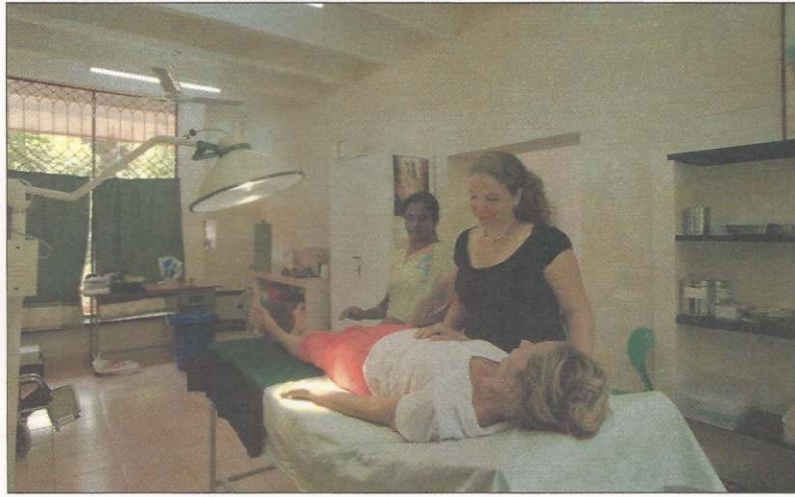
Kailash Clinic: an integral health care service

It was a rather modest announcement in the News and Notes that caught everyone's eye – the opening of Kailash Clinic, a new medical facility in the middle of the township open to Aurovilians, new comers and registered guests.

Located across the road from the Solar Kitchen at the back of Kailash, the home for Auroville teenagers, the new primary health care centre is the latest addition to the growing list of services establishing themselves in the area.

Ruslan, one of the two doctors working at the clinic and one of the original movers of the project has this to say: "Auroville has reached the point when it needs its own medical service which would provide quality health care, have good facilities, shorter queues, and be more centrally located."

"Over the years, a number of people in Auroville, including Jocelyn and myself, had been independently working on ideas for medical projects, but none of them



Nurses Thilagam and Auradha with a patient at Kailash Clinic

materialized. Then something changed in Auroville – a few of us just came together, and may be that's why we had better energy to realize something."

When Jean-François, who manages Kailash, offered two rooms at the back of the building, things finally fell in place. Within 3 months the Clinic team began functioning on July 14th.

Currently the 13-member team is comprised of Aurovilians and Newcomers. Services offered include medical consultation, wound dressings and various treatments, as well as naturopathy, homeopathy, craniosacral therapy, and physiotherapy. Plans are in the offing to welcome other health professionals across a variety of fields and specializations including Ayurveda, nutrition, etc.

Ruslan explains, "The direction we are moving towards is integrated health care where different disciplines work together so that every patient who comes to us gets the best possible care. As soon as we get a little more established and have enough people, we would also like to do home visits for those who cannot come to us. Today's urgent need is an ambulance."

As the team observes and learns from its pilot project, attention is also turning to the next stage. "L'Avenir D'Auroville has approved land for us near Arka to establish an Integral Health Park," says Auradha. "Our goal is now to begin fundraising efforts, get together a team of competent people and draw up plans so that we build this project within the next two years."

Mid-town Auroville has started to come alive as more services develop along Mother's vision of 'Pour Tous – For all' Prosperity, of which the new Kailash Clinic is a part.

Priya Sundaravalli

Women's Festival 2008

India is changing fast, and the Women's Festival I am going to attend also represents one of the big shifts. Turning into the Auroville Village Action Resource Centre, I follow the pitted road lined with huts and homes built in the new 'suburban plots' which surround it.

I join a trickle of women in bright coloured saris which soon becomes a stream, all heading for the Women's Festival, Auroville Village Action Group's major event of the year.

The women have paid for half the cost of this gathering; so much do they appreciate this rare day of carefree festivity in their lives. It is these women who are responsible for there even being an Auroville Village Action Group, four years after the crisis of 2004 when it came close to being shut down. Today they are celebrating their successes.

There's much to reflect on as I look out into the bevy of eager faces in the audience. The most obvious and most down-to-earth is the prosperity. When I came to Auroville in 1971 the poverty was gruelling. Village folk were skeletally lean, many children had the distended bellies of malnourishment, and most were dressed in shabby ill-fitting rags. In their low mud-walled huts there was no telephone, moped or television. Today the huts have been transformed into pucca houses, often built using Auroville-introduced technologies. The cheerful faces turned up to the stage are no longer gaunt, but wear beaming smiles from well-rounded cheeks. Although half these women cannot still read or write, their daughters do. When we started, illiteracy amongst women was 85%.

In the beginning, the women born and trained into submission for generations, unquestioningly believed (along with everyone else) that they were not only physically weaker than men, but also mentally weaker, and that they required the care and direction of men to survive. And this in spite of the fact that most men drank heavily and that running the household was the women's task.

Since 1990, Village Action has been encouraging women to join together into women's 'Self Help-Groups' (SHGs) where they would learn to meet, organise and take up projects for the develop-

ment of their village. Soon they were seen levelling roads, deepening wells, painting schools, visiting government offices to get street lights fixed and taps and doing everything which was earlier considered unthinkable for women to do. Perceptions began to alter. The village too began to think differently about women – they were invited to the *Grama Sabha* (village meeting), and sometimes were turned to for advice and direction. Now the women's voices are being heard.

It is this which is being celebrated today. In development language it is called "women's

empowerment" but it is more subtle than that. This women's power is not 'power-over' or 'power-against' anyone; it is a 'self-empowerment', and the confidence that comes from finding expression for the profoundly human wish for a better world for the children and for the future.

After the speeches, the women put on a show. And what a show! The first piece was a graceful choreography based on yoga postures set to Mother's music. It was by the group which has learnt to make designer-baskets out of newspaper, and simultaneously, was schooled in managing their business, while the Auroville-based unit, WELL Paper, markets their products. It is now well-known for its socially responsible business.

Lively Bollywood-influenced dances follow. In between the programmes, two feisty women from Pondicherry tell their sisters how they have become minibus-drivers despite all the discrimination, driven to stand up for themselves courageously due to early widowhood and the necessity of feeding their children. Today they speak for women's liberation in the job market.

And then back to art and beauty – a quartet of women from a far-off village swoop and lilt in Bharatanatyam poses. They are slim and svelte, the traditional Tamil type, but the modern prosperity is evident in their elegant saris, jewellery and make up – they are the princesses of the current day.

Bhavana Dee



PHOTO COURTESY GIORGIO

Over 3,500 women attended Village Action's Women's festival 2008

HUMOUR

Ain't it nice to be home again!

We arrived in our home in Auroville after a 22-hour journey from London, unpacked the minimum of things, and then collapsed exhausted into bed. The next morning the life of an Aurovilian housewife began in earnest. There had been heavy rain in the night and I had forgotten to close the windows or the blinds, so several small puddles had collected on the floor, and in one of them a small frog was croaking happily. I sleepily mopped up the water with a chewed-looking mop.

Then I heard a shout from upstairs. It was my husband, who, being on the squeamish side, had panicked as he opened a suitcase. We had foolishly left some chocolate brought for presents in the open suitcase and the ants were having a party. We did not know where to start with the swarming black mass – should we brush them out, mop them up, stamp on them, spray them with chemicals? The alternatives seemed many, but then maybe they would bite as they seemed very large, black and angry. Luckily a Tamil friend came to the door just then and dragged the whole heaving suitcase outside and turned it upside down, baggage, chocolate, ants and all, and let them get on with it. It was now just 7 a.m., but it seemed as if a lot had happened already.

We had slept very little. Our neighbour's dog had obviously come into heat and half a dozen love-sick village dogs had been howling and fighting over her affections all night. And at 4 a.m. the local temple had started, pounding blaring music across the fields.

Never mind, it was now time for a nice very early morning cup of tea. No gas! Our resident Newcomer houses-sitter had neglected to fill the gas bottle. At 9 a.m. I rang the Gas Service only to find it would be closed for two days due to the birthday of some divinity. A neighbour made us a tea, gave us the local gossip and it almost felt good to be back, though in an exhausted and frazzled sort of way.

One of my main pleasures in life is gardening, and it was wonderful to have a good-sized tropical garden, despite differences from my subdued London plot like the occasional snake. I went out to the garden shed to get a hosepipe to water a sad looking plant and rattled open the shed door. As I stepped into the gloom there were panicky sounds of scuttlings and rustlings, then something soft and heavy with a long leathery tail fell on my head and ran down my back. Welcome back, I thought, as the poor frightened rat ran down the path.

The only tool I could find was the crow-bar – the others seemed to "have been taken," a Tamil euphemism I had become very familiar with. How I

sometimes missed my London garden shed with its vast array of trowels and forks and spades, and boxes of powders and liquids for killing things.

I pushed my dilapidated TVS motorbike out of the shed but, of course, it wouldn't start. I revved the engine and



slammed my left foot down on the pedal, but it just coughed a little, then gave up. I was getting hot and sweaty and very irritable by now, and tried to stop myself from thinking how pleasant and civilised it had been to get into a clean, comfortable car parked outside one's house that whirled effortlessly into action at the gentle turn of a key.

Since we had no food in the house and were by now getting hungry, I decided to ring for a taxi to do a cart-load of shopping at Pour Tous. But of course, when I lifted the phone to call, it wasn't working! By now food was the

top priority and we decided to walk. Things picked up when we met lots of people we knew and were given big welcoming hugs, and we thought it's the people that matter, not the place.

It was good to see the big, white bullocks at the corner by the temple, and the little food stalls that have established themselves by the road are very convenient, so we paid with real money and filled our bags. Two bags full of food cost about the equivalent of a cup of coffee in London, but people were complaining about the price increases in food here.

We detoured back past the gent's half acre toilet towards that beautiful open space outside, New Creation where the raggedy palms symbolize Auroville for us. The sky was a brilliant blue and the earth that familiar burnt red and the smells of heat and dust and cow made me overjoyed to be back. A swishing sound on the ground made me turn my head, just in time to see a long green vine snake slither under a bush. I had the presence of mind not to call out as my husband has a pathological horror of snakes, and on our very first rather fragile day in Auroville it may have been just too much for him.

By now, jetlag was catching up fast so we unpacked the shopping, hid, sealed and secured it from the insects and had a siesta. When we woke up hours later we were in complete darkness; it was only 6.30 p.m. We were totally confused as we had got used to

the long summer dusks of England where it did not get dark till 10.30. We stumbled about trying to remember where the light switches were and hoping there was no power cut. Luckily there wasn't, and then we tried to remember where we had left everything in boxes and drawers, and where the keys were to the ones we had locked. Eventually, most of it was sorted out and we collapsed in a very hot and tired heap on the sofa.

We thought a little television would be relaxing, so after half an hour of fiddling about with wires and knobs in the poor light, the picture flickered on. My husband sat there with his carefully compiled list of channels, number 46 – football, number 22 – BBC News, etc. which he had spent hours organizing a few months before. Sadly, the channels had been completely changed. We remembered that the lads in Kuyilapalayam who operate the cable connections can alter the channels as they wish, and had completely upset his calculations. Bollywood film and cricket channels were scattered everywhere – a total disaster for him.

We decided to call it a day, go to sleep, and see what the morrow would bring. Nothing so simple, however, as the thousands of frogs in the pond started croaking, the dogs began barking, and the temple music blared along with special firework effects. Aaah, wasn't it nice to be home again!

Dianna

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