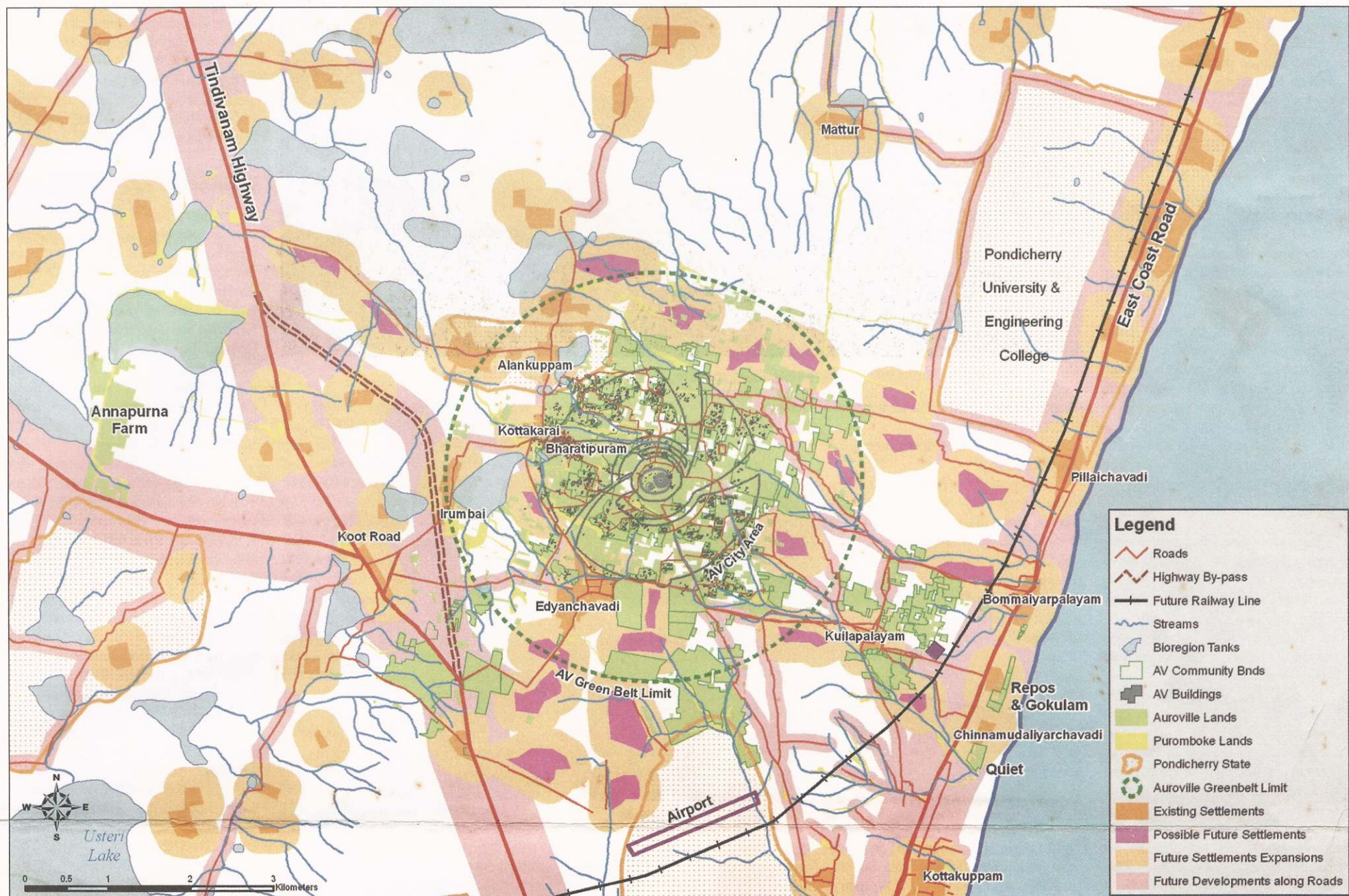


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MAP: PRASHANT

Development challenges for Auroville

“When you see this, it’s really scary,” says Mona, a member of L’Avenir d’Auroville, Auroville’s town planning body. She is looking at a map [see above] which shows actual and possible proposed developments by outside parties in and around Auroville. The map also identifies development trends in the larger bioregion. “We didn’t include industrial estates or educational institutions, only existing habitations and villages as well as developments along roads,” explains Prashant, who helped draw up the map with Mr. Doshi’s office during his work at L’Avenir. “The mapping is partly guesswork but it’s a very fair estimate of what we think will happen in the future. It makes clear that eventually, left to itself, most of the area around Auroville will be filled up with development.”

This development is already happening on all sides. From the south there is Pondicherry overspill, from the west expanding industrial areas, to the north there is village expansion and to the east and west of Auroville the two major roads linking Pondicherry with Chennai are magnets for development. In addition, a new bypass for the National Highway passes just to the west of Auroville’s greenbelt, Pondicherry airport – slated for expansion – is to the south, while a planned rail link may pass close to Kullapalayam village. Even within the designated Auroville township area developers have already bought land and landowners have built guesthouses, while the villages of Kottakuram and Bharatipuram are expanding fast, like all the other villages around Auroville.

“When I look at this map I see something that I already saw coming seven years ago,” says Sauro, another member of L’Avenir. “I was working on the Asia-Urbs project in Pondicherry and discussing future developments when somebody remarked that Auroville could become a suburb of Pondicherry one day. That was a turning point for me. I realized we had to accelerate the process of Auroville’s growth because the physical and economic growth outside Auroville was going to pick up very fast.”

We shouldn’t forget, however, that in June, 1965 Mother spoke to Satprem about a railway station and, “if possible”, an airfield in Auroville’s ‘intermediary zone for transport’, so not all these developments are necessarily counter to her vision for Auroville. The concern, of course, is uncontrolled and unconscious development.

So what can we do about it, if anything? “Development is going to happen, we can’t stop it. The only thing we can do is try to guide it,” says Prashant. “Development will have an impact upon key natural resources such as water, so guided development will include protecting the rivers, channels and water-catchment areas – like Kaliveli Tank to the north west of Auroville which feeds our aquifers – stopping pollution and ensuring enough green areas are preserved.”

Sustainable bioregional development

This kind of ‘guided’ development will need to happen not just locally but also on a bioregional scale. In fact, Prashant has been working with PondyCAN and INTACH and others on developing a regional plan for the area bounded by the towns of Pondicherry, Marakkanam, Tindivanam and

Villupuram. “What we’re looking at is a model of an urban-rural continuum where certain areas can be developed but others should be protected.” Their proposals include promoting sustainable tourism and knowledge-based industries rather than water-thirsty industry in Pondicherry, and a regional transport policy which would guide rather than reflect development trends. The overall aim is a more equitable development of the whole region. “This could become a sustainable region in terms of development,” says Prashant, “and a model for regional planning.”

Controlling unwanted development in Auroville

What about development threats within Auroville itself? Gilles Guigan, another member of L’Avenir, recently wrote a discussion paper entitled *Securing the Land for Auroville and Preventing Undesirable Development*. In it, he says our priorities should be to secure Auroville’s core area (the city area plus immediate greenbelt) as soon as possible to prevent anybody else from developing it. We should also try to retain the ‘green’ character of the outer greenbelt by preventing unwanted development there.

But how to achieve these objectives? There are different possibilities. Firstly, we need to continue buying or exchanging land. Over the last eighteen months, a total of 41 acres have been bought or exchanged in the city and greenbelt area and negotiations are ongoing to acquire more. But there are limits to this. We do not have so much desirable land to exchange and land prices are very high in certain sectors, like the south-west greenbelt area

where a new bypass for the National Highway passes close by. Gilles admits that while Auroville will continue to buy or exchange as much land as possible, it is unlikely we will try to buy in expensive areas like this. “Basically, the priority is to buy in the city area and greenbelt close to the city so that we can consolidate as much as possible.”

Another approach would involve Auroville gaining the power to control unwanted development in the area of the city and greenbelt. In 1994 the Governing Board approved the first Master Plan for Auroville. This was a land-use plan which specified what kind of activities could take place in the different zones of the city and in the greenbelt. A modified version of this plan, in the form of a 25 year development perspective, was approved by the Ministry of Human Resource Development of the Government of India in 2001.

In 2003 the Tamil Nadu Government passed a Government Order requiring that any development within the Master Plan area needed to receive a ‘No Objection’ certificate from the Auroville Foundation. Recently, the Auroville Foundation gazetted the Master Plan (‘gazetted’ means that the Master Plan has been published in the government’s official information organ). This may lend further weight to attempts to control unwanted development in the Master Plan area.

Time, however, is not on our side as the Auroville area has become attractive to developers and speculators. Furthermore, Gilles points out the Master Plan does not specify who can develop land in the city, only that development should be in accordance with the guidelines for each sector.

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"Given these factors," says Gilles, "we are considering compulsory acquisition as one option for acquiring some or all of the remaining land in the city area." The acquisition procedure can take a long time and has certain conditions attached. But once it is launched, the landowner is unable to develop his land or sell it for development. Recently the procedure was successfully used to purchase a prime piece of land next to Certitude community. However, it is a two-edged sword. Compulsory acquisition is unpopular with local people who wish to sell their land for the highest price. This is why, says Gilles, we should use it sparingly and mainly to deter would-be developers.

Sauro favours another approach. While he would like all the land within the city area to be secured for Auroville and admits that legislation has a role to play here, he feels that in the greenbelt, where much of the land is not owned by Auroville, we should give more attention to developing economic initiatives. For example, an agency could be created to purchase local crops at a premium rate if they have been grown organically or with a minimum of water. Such initiatives would encourage local landowners to continue using the land for agriculture rather than going in for construction.

The villages

The surrounding villages represent a special challenge for Auroville town planners. "The villages are growing much faster than us," says Mona, "partly because they don't have the planning rules which we follow. They will soon be dictating a lot of our trends, including roads and traffic flow."

In fact, one village, Kottakarai, straddles the Industrial Zone and Greenbelt while its extension, Bharatipuram, is located in both the Industrial and International Zones of the city, something which has been ignored by Aurovilian town planners for years. The presence of these villages is not even mentioned, for example, in the document *Auroville Universal Township - Master Plan (Perspective 2025)*. "I don't think any of the new L'Avenir team can relate to this approach," says Gilles. "These villagers are there and they need the space to develop."

This points up differences regarding the status and role of the villages in the city area. Some Aurovilians still feel it would be best if these villages were relocated, with their consent of course, to model settlements which Auroville would build outside the city area. Others are clear that the way forward is to find a way of integrating them into our development. One idea mooted some years ago by an Auroville planning study group was to expand the Industrial Zone so as to fully include the villages of Kottakarai and Bharatipuram. This would result in mixed land use in the Industrial Zone, with interspersed industrial and residential areas. Nothing has come of this suggestion so far partly, perhaps, because it is unclear how



An open planning meeting of L'Avenir d'Auroville

Auroville will deal with the future development of these villages.

But what kind of development are we anticipating?

"They might expand just like any other village," says Sauro, "or they may take a more urbanized form, or they might expand according to a pattern which we could help to generate. For example, we could promote ways of improving village housing which would not follow the conventional patterns of development. Also, we're trying to see if in certain areas of the city which border upon villages we could initiate projects which involve more interaction with the villages. These would go beyond the model of employee-employer relations and help develop, for example, village entrepreneurship."

Co-development initiatives

One example of this is the WELLpaper project where the buildings and land belong to Auroville but the activities are managed by a Women's Group from the adjacent Kottakarai village. Another example located on Auroville land in the same area and which is still in the planning stage, is the 'Indigo Bazaar' project. Mona, who is involved in this project, explains that this is an attempt to create a beautiful transition area between Auroville and the village. There will be high-quality infrastructure, offices and apartments, which she hopes will be rented by young Auroville entrepreneurs among others, but there will also be sports facilities for the villagers and possibly a multi-purpose hall as well as a weekly agrarian market where they can sell their produce.

These kind of initiatives will not necessarily prevent uncontrolled village development, but by improving the relationship between villagers and Aurovilians they may improve the chances of cooperation in future devel-

opment.

Another initiative designed to address this issue is Village Development Councils. The idea, explains Dhanapal, one of its proponents, is that Aurovilians and village representatives would sit together to solve common problems and to plan future development in areas where Auroville and the villages are contiguous. The first and only Village Development Council so far was set up in 2006 in conjunction with Edayanchavadi village. Its formation was delayed because of local issues, and while the Council managed to resolve a serious personal issue concerning a villager and an Aurovilian and to construct a new road with financial help from Auroville, since then sufficient funds have never been available for it to do any work. Consequently, the Council has been largely dormant for the past few years. The present Working Committee, however, is considering reviving it.

The big question

Underlying all these issues is the big question: what are we Aurovilians here for? Is it primarily to build a city to a pre-arranged plan? Or, as Gilles suggests, is the content of that city more important than the form? In other words, isn't the consciousness with which we build and the relationships we build with each other and with our neighbours more important than bricks and mortar? "We shouldn't forget," says Gilles, "that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother did a revolutionary evolutionary work in old colonial houses in what was then a sleepy seaside town, so maybe we should not be too fussy about the shape of the 'town of the future'."

However, as far as town planning is involved, the message we have tended to give out so far is that the form of the city is the most important thing. The Master Plan delineates the city and Greenbelt

areas by perfect circles and the designated Lines of Force and radial roads describe perfect curves. While there is a certain beauty to this, it ignores ground realities like natural features, water flow and the presence in the city area of two villages. Some members of the present L'Avenir want to change this, to break with what Mona describes as 'the divide between the perceived form of the Galaxy and the ground realities' in order to find win-win solutions for all concerned. "This takes more time," says Mona, "but it makes much more sense and it will be more inclusive." "It's not so much a matter of choosing between geometry and nature," clarifies Gilles, "but of finding a way to marry geometry with nature."

Redefining the Master Plan

One possible line of approach is to redefine the Master Plan to reflect these realities. Gilles observes that all Master Plans are subject to revision, so why not ours? He points out that the presence of Kottakarai-Bharatipuram, which has developed since the city boundary was established in February, 1968, implies a boundary modification; that neither the city or greenbelt boundaries need form perfect circles (actually, the presence of a pocket of Pondicherry land straddling the greenbelt boundary means it cannot describe a perfect circle); that the outer greenbelt may be defined as pockets of land rather than as an undivided area; and that land outside the present Master Plan area, like Auromodel, could be included in future Master Plans.

All of this is still very much in the preliminary discussion stage: nothing will happen soon. However, in terms of improving our relationship with our neighbours, there is no time to be lost. "Why are the local people asking such high prices when we want to buy their land and why are they so keen to sell to outside developers?" asks Prashant.

"How has it come to the stage that we need 'protection'? Of course, as Mother said, we shouldn't underestimate the power of greed, but if we had really done our job well and ensured we had a good partnership with the villages, probably a majority of the population would have been our partners in keeping outside developers away. Yet we are still talking about compulsory land acquisition, which will only widen the gap."

Mona feels this is too harsh. "There have been many successful attempts over the years to work with our neighbours. It's just that our numbers are so few."

Contacts with Tamil Nadu government

Building better relationships is not only a necessity with our immediate neighbours. There is also the matter of our relationship with the Tamil Nadu government. Any legislation regarding land or planning authority status for Auroville has to be enacted by the State Government. Yet, over the years, Auroville has related much more to the Central Government than to the State Government and we need to work much harder to build strong institutional bridges with the government in Chennai.

In fact, Auroville is sometimes perceived as being too preoccupied with its own development and neglectful of the larger region. Prashant feels that Auroville has been half-hearted in its efforts to work with the local people on development projects which may benefit both parties. "It's hard work, we have to be very persistent and patient and humble, but if we don't do this Auroville may be a gated community in a few years. As to government officials, they know we are doing good work here, but what really excites them is when we offer to take it out to other parts of the State and India, as we are doing now with the Adyar Poonga project in Chennai and as we did in the past when we worked with the Tamil Nadu government to do post-tsunami rehabilitation work."

'Gated community' is, perhaps, too strong. But there is a real risk that Auroville in the not-too-distant future will become an island of sustainable practices in the midst of uncontrolled development. Do we want this? Or doesn't our aspiration for a 'concrete human unity' require us to look outside our immediate borders and to work, respectfully and creatively, with our neighbours to ensure that this region develops in a way which is both environmentally-sustainable and to the benefit of everyone?

And there is another dimension we should not forget when it comes to dealing with development challenges. As Gilles points out, "Until now the protection enjoyed by Auroville has been absolutely extraordinary and there is no reason whatsoever to lose faith. On the contrary, we are blind and ungrateful when we fear. What we have to do is what Mother expected of us - to 'boldly spring towards the future'."

Alan

AUROVILLE FOUNDATION

Governing Board and International Advisory Council meet

The Governing Board and the International Advisory Council of the Auroville Foundation had their half-yearly meetings on November 26-28. Dr. Karan Singh, Shri Ajoy Bagchi, Dr. Malini Parthasarathy, Dr. Mallika Sarabhai and Dr. Aster Patel attended the Governing Board meeting. Dr. Marc Luyckx-Ghisi, Dr. Doudou Diène and Julian Lines were present for the International Advisory Council.

Dr. Karan Singh, addressing the Aurovilians during the community interaction on November 27th at the Centre of Indian Studies in Bharat Nivas, recalled that there are two aspects inherent to Auroville, an outer and an inner one. Concerning the outer aspect, he said that he and the other members of the Board and Council were extremely encouraged by the series of meetings they attended. "There is a new dynamism, a new momentum. The structure of building the township is beginning to take form." The Board, said Dr.

Karan Singh, has ensured that Master Plan of Auroville has been gazetted and will now proceed to create a Town Development Council which would take upon itself the task of building the city in a phased manner over the next years. "A lot of our discussions revolved around finances and how to raise the necessary funds to build the city and many valuable suggestions were made about how to approach various institutions for grants and interest private developers."

"The completion of the Matrimandir was a very important milestone; now the 2nd phase has started, to begin to concretize the township. If we have to reach the magic figure of 50,000 inhabitants that The Mother had envisaged for Auroville, it could take about another 40-45 years. But even if we increase the population to 5,000 people, we need more accommodation and work opportunities. Whatever is built in Auroville now should be very sustainable and forward-looking in its architecture. We should be a model for green develop-

ment, including in our buildings, using the latest technologies," said Dr. Karan Singh. "We have to maintain the spontaneity and creativity of the Aurovilians, but at the same time we will have to have form some structures to undertake the huge task of building the city."

Dr. Karan Singh specifically mentioned the need to acquire all the lands for the city area, either by way of land exchange, through purchase or through initiating acquisition proceedings. Within the inner circle, a 100 acres is still to be acquired. "We had a meeting with the Collector of Villapuram district and discussed with him how to acquire the lands for the city area, those owned privately as well as the *peramboke* lands. This has the highest priority. By the time we have our next meeting we will have further progressed."

Dr. Karan Singh also expressed that he was happy to hear about the educational work that is being done in Auroville, and to be made aware of the work done outside Auroville. "I was surprised

to learn about the extent of Auroville's outreach programmes," he said. "That was very impressive. I do not think many people outside of Auroville know that Auroville is making these kinds of contributions." He suggested that this work be documented, as the impression shouldn't be that Auroville is only looking inward and concerned with its own issues, "but that Auroville is also contributing to serve the region, state and nation."

Dr. Karan Singh then talked about the inner aspect of Auroville, how far Aurovilians are developing spiritually. Observing that Auroville offers an excellent ambience and fine opportunity for inner growth, he said, "I have no way of telling this; it is for each one of you to look into yourself with detachment and honesty. But I do want to make a point that building the outer Auroville is only one half of the project. The other half is building the Aurovilians, to develop their consciousness to become holistic human beings."

Carel

Quiet's wall crumbles into the sea

Coastal erosion is ruining the homes and livelihoods of Tamil Nadu fishing communities. It has also destroyed the compound wall of Quiet and is relentlessly moving north.

Until 2007 the fishing community of Chinnamudaliarchavadi and its neighbour, Auroville's Quiet Healing Center, were blessed with a gorgeous 70-metre wide beach which was used for drying fish, docking boats or recreation. Hardly three years later the beaches have completely gone, together with more than 25 homes in the village and the compound wall of the Healing Centre. Houses in Repos are now threatened. As the relentless coastal erosion moves up further north at an alarming rate, more fishing and beach communities in Tamil Nadu are critically affected.

What caused this disaster?

For thousands of years, huge amounts of sand have been released from the Cauvery Delta, south of Puducherry, into the Bay of Bengal. Left to its natural course, the Long Shore Drift – a self-regulating system of the waves moving sand up and down the beach – distributed the sand along the shoreline creating beautiful beaches and thriving fishing communities. The drift also established huge underwater sandbars that ran parallel to the coast and gave protection to the coast from tidal waves.

During the 9 months of the south-west monsoon, 600,000 cubic metres of sand move northwards. During the 3 months of the north-east monsoon, 100,000 cubic metres move from the north towards the south. The resulting net displacement of 500,000 cubic metres of sand per year is among the highest long shore drifts on the planet. This amounts to roughly the equivalent of 50,000 lorry loads of sand a year or 135 trucks full of sand every day!

Harbours block the movement of sand. They create massive accretion on one side and severe erosion on the other side of the breakwater. A perfect example is the famous Marina Beach in Chennai. The British build the Madras port at the northern end of the city which gave it the ever-widening Marina Beach; at the same time it caused continuing erosion north of the port. In those days there was not much habitation there; but today, people living north of Madras port suffer a lot due to heavy erosion and the resulting salinity of the groundwater.

Similarly, the Pondicherry harbour and its breakwater, constructed in 1989 at the southern end of the town, have blocked the stream of sand from the south. This has resulted in the erosion of the once beautiful and wide Pondicherry beaches. The amount of beach land lost because of this erosion has been calculated at 200 acres, a massive loss to the town of Pondicherry. This erosion was foreseen when the harbour was designed. A sand bypassing system was added to regularly shift the accumulated sand from the south to the north. But unfortunately, the required constant dredging and sand-bypassing was hardly ever done. Now it is even difficult for the fishermen to get into the harbour as it has silted-up. The construction of more groynes in the state of Puducherry and Tamil Nadu has brought erosion northwards. The results are devastating.

Solutions in sight?

A meeting of Aurovilians living in beach communities was held at Quiet in November. The Quiet team had invited PondyCAN! – Pondicherry Citizen's Action Network – with whom they have been working together for the last three years to see what can be done. PondyCAN!, which has been campaigning for the restoration of the Puducherry beaches for more than a decade, has lately intensified its efforts to find a satisfactory answer to this man-

BEACH EROSION PETITION

Members of the Residents' Assembly have signed a petition to the Governing Board and International Advisory Council members to persuade the Governments of Puducherry and Tamil Nadu to take speedy and adequate measures for restoring the beaches and protecting all affected areas.

made disaster. Recent developments give hope that a solution is within reach, if only the political will is there.

The National Institute of Ocean Technology and the Department of Ocean Management of the Anna University, Chennai, are presently studying the environmental impact along the Tamil Nadu coastline caused by the harbour and the construction of groynes and seawalls. Instead of the cur-



The beach in front of Quiet in August 2008. Left, in the distance, the Quiet compound wall.



The beach in front of Quiet in November 2010. The compound wall has crumbled.



The beach and houses in the village of Chinnamudaliarchavadi are disappearing

rent 'hard' solutions, which end-up either aggravating the already disturbed environment or moving the problem further up north, research institutes and government officials are nowadays increasingly thinking of 'soft' solutions, such as sand nourishment and geo-tubes.

Sand nourishment

Bringing the sand back is a realistic possibility. The Puducherry government, concerned that the harbour is silting up, has allocated Rs. 10 crores for dredging 2.7 million cubic metres of sand from the harbour mouth. This amounts to nearly 6 years' worth of sand which should have come northwards. Unfortunately, the Puducherry government plans to dump the dredged sand just adjacent to the harbour (on the northern side of the harbour mouth). If the Governments of Puducherry and Tamil Nadu can collaborate for the benefit of the people, by using a rainbow dredger or barges, this sand could be deposited in the critically-eroded and vulnerable areas, giving not only immediate relief to the affected coastal communities, but also laying the necessary base for further protection measures. Such a restoration project could become a pioneering model of beach protection for the whole of India, whose beaches and fishing communities are increasingly endangered. Sand nourishment is routinely

carried out in Europe, especially in Holland and Germany, by dredgers which work continuously. But this concept is not yet put into practice in India.

Geo-tubes

The second method is working with geo-tubes to combat erosion. This method, which is now being considered by the Tamil Nadu government, is similar to the one used at the Visakhapatnam Port. It uses huge geo-tubes of three metres diameter filled with sand, laid in rows along the shore over a stretch of one kilometre, which acts as an artificial reef that holds the sand in place.

The Pondicherry Government should act

"It is high time for the government of Puducherry to take up its responsibility for the environmental damage and human misery it has caused by blocking the natural flow of sand to Tamil Nadu," writes PondyCAN! in a press release. For unless urgent action is taken, the coastal villages and the Auroville beach communities may disappear soon.

Dianna

The problem of the disappearing beaches was earlier reported on in the November, 2002 and August 2007 issues of Auroville Today.

In brief

Mother's words on Auroville

A compilation of almost 500 pages of letters, messages and interviews with The Mother about Auroville from early 1960s to November 17th 1973 is now available on-line at <http://www.forall-pourtous.org/auroville-in-mothers-words/>

Health Board

A Health Board has been established to facilitate coordination and communication among healthcare providers, administrative staff and services in Auroville and to organize the registration and list of recognized healthcare practitioners of the community.

Housing

The collective housing project 'Inspiration', which is next to Citadines, was opened on November 28th by Dr. Karan Singh, who also laid that day the first stone for Maitreye 2, situated next to the ongoing housing project of Maitreye. This project will have 27 apartments (16 singles, 6 couples and 5 families) and common facilities. The work is expected to take two years. Both these projects are funded by Government of India grants.

L'Avenir reported that though many appeals for individual housing come to it, there is a reluctance to allocate land for individual housing because informed decisions cannot be made till the base maps are re-adjusted to match reality, and a global view for development (infrastructure, land use, economy and collective priorities) emerges which would allow opening areas for individual housings. To help alleviate the problem of individual housing, L'Avenir appeals to the existing communities to open up and accommodate more people.

Preventing land encroachment

The Land Resource Management Group has asked Aurovilians who are able to build temporary housing (with a keel roof that may last 2-5 years) to look after Auroville land that is being encroached.

International Zone

L'Avenir has agreed to restudy the International Zone Plan approved by the former L'Avenir team in December 2009 in consultation with the IZ Group, following a request from the International Advisory Council which objected to the space allocated for some of the continents. The new study will also take into account ground realities have not been formerly considered

Solid waste

As a piece of land behind the former AuroAnnam Farm that the Eco Service had been using for its landfill for the past six or seven years was exchanged landfilling has come to a standstill and mountains of landfill waste are piling up at the Eco Service sorting shed. There is an urgent need to identify a new piece of Auroville land that can be used for this purpose.

Violence against women

The Women's Safety Task Force is running a two-month campaign to address violence against women. Volunteers are visiting guesthouses, communities, restaurants and shops in the local area to sensitize people about the growing problem of violence against women on the roads in and around Auroville.

Correction

The books of Georges van Vrekhem are available in the Seagull bookshop in the Visitors' Centre in Auroville.

Auromode eyes the Indian market

Auromode specialises in manufacturing fashion garments and accessories made of silk, cotton, linen and natural viscose. But unlike many of Auroville's garment design units, Auromode's focus is on mass-production. "We provide work to 150 people, producing over 2,500 pieces a month," explains Prema, who has been running Auromode since 1986. "We work for clients in India and abroad. Most clients want their own designs executed; some like us to help finalize their designs." Auromode also designs its own products, which it sells in boutiques in Pondicherry, Auroville and Chennai.

"Quality and pricing are the main issues of today's international market," says Prema. "Quality demands have gone up. There is increasing competition, mainly from China. The quality of their raw materials, such as linen and silk, is often better and cheaper than that which is made in India. We were already undertaking a meticulous quality control of our raw materials and of our finished products, but we needed to intensify it. Things that were accepted in the past, such as a weaving mistake in

silk, are no longer acceptable today. The market has forced us to pay attention to every detail to ensure that our products meet the highest international standards.

"The European market has become challenging, with its stress on quality and its demand for low prices, and with the increasing competition. Our products are often seen as expensive, even though our pricing hasn't changed much over the last five years." The development is slightly worrying. "Our clients cannot increase their prices, so we cannot pass on the increase in our wages and raw material prices which are well over 20%. That cuts sharply into our profit margins," explains Prema.

For these reasons Auromode's market is gradually shifting to India, which on its way to becoming the world's fifth-largest consumer market. The Indian middle class, estimated to be 300 million people, is fast becoming used to Western culture. American-style shopping malls, built in all the main Indian cities, now offer high-couture western fashion brand products. "We used to export 70%, and sell about 30% of our products in India. But in the near future, the Indian markets will dominate," predicts Prema.

Aiming for the perfect paper product

"We want to express beauty. It was the main reason why we started Auroville Papers," says Luisa, one of the executives. "It was at a time, in 1995, that our parent company Auroville Press was looking to expand its work to create stability. My late partner Serge felt that manufacturing handmade paper would be a good complement. So we started making handmade paper, just like they do at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram."

"But we soon developed other products," says Hervé. "One day, a heart-shaped baubinia leaf fell down on the soft paper pulp. When we took it out, we noticed it had left a sharp imprint on the paper. That was the turning point. We started experimenting with other leaves, petals, stems, bark, grasses and seeds. And as no leaf is identical, each sheet of paper became unique. We then drifted away from making handmade paper to using this leaf-paper for stationary covers, coasters, mouse pads, bags, photo albums, and wrapping paper. We also started making large decorative sheets as posters for home decoration."

"We are all experimenting, working in different directions," says Christine. "At the beginning, of course, there was cotton, the base material of our environment-friendly paper. But other plant materials also got our attention. We perfected a method for making paper out of banana fibre. Once that was achieved and we were happy with the texture and shade of that paper, we experimented further with those same fibres. The result was a lace-like paper structure which can be used as home decoration. It is one of our best selling products. We also worked with bamboo and rosella stalks, but the results were not as satisfactory. Experiments, of course, are ongoing, for example in using organic cotton and natural dyes."

Hervé adds that not only the staff of Auroville Papers experiments, but also artists contribute to the unit's development. "A visitor taught us the techniques of papier-mâché. We experimented further; instead of using paper pulp, we used a mixture of cotton and paper pulp. Now we produce cotton mâché art objects such as *kujas*, photo frames, vases, even stools in a variety of colours. Another development is a line of cotton mâché bijouterie such as earrings, bangles and necklaces."

Maroma's sustainable products

Maroma, Auroville's oldest and largest commercial unit, is the undisputed leader in Auroville's aspiration to manufacture products of the highest quality. The unit's signature line is *Encens d'Auroville* with a range of 50 fragrances. Over the years, many more incense lines have been added, such as a *Kalki* line, the *Sumaya Spa* and *Maroma Spa* lines, *Veda Incense*, and the *Deva* and *Devi* ranges of 'divinely inspired aromatics'.

To ensure quality, stringent checks are made at every stage of production. All fragrances are formulated in accordance with the periodically updated guidelines of the International Fragrance Association, Brussels. In this way Maroma ensures that its products are safe to use.

Maroma has branched out into other fragrance products such as ambient perfumes and reed-diffusers – a recent trend to create a welcoming fragrant environment. Other scent-related products are insect-repellents that contain no chemical insecticides or toxic ingredients, natural anti-moth sachets to protect woollens, and scented candles.

Research led to further product diversification. The development of home fragrances was, in time, followed by a wide range of body-care products such as bath soaps, shampoos, conditioners, shower gels, body lotions, bath salts, and body and massage oils. Wherever

"We like it when Auroville artists come and experiment with our products," says Luisa. "We furnish the tools and the technical knowledge to help them in their creative expression." Hervé adds that Auroville Papers has also started to give paper-making workshops for schoolchildren. "The children have been happily pounding banana fibres to pulp, and made their own banana-paper sheets. After they dried, they went to the Press and printed their own calendar. As the pounding was hard work, we are now using an electric idli paste grinder to crush the fibre," he says.

So is Auroville Papers a production company? "Certainly not," says Luisa. "We are a company that promotes creative research and expression. We would not object to executing an order to produce say 10,000 sheets of paper, but then the client must be aware that what he gets its 10,000 unique and different papers, even though the concept is the same. We prefer doing exclusive products, in a limited production. If a client wishes to use the paper for printing purposes, such as wedding cards, we like to do the printing ourselves. We do not want to be seen as a provider of raw materials." Hervé adds that the company, which now employs over 50 employees and seven Aurovilians, has reached its size limit.

"Our concept is providing beauty and stimulating creativity," says Christine. "We would not want that to become secondary to production. Creation is the joy and life of Auroville Papers. It is a constant movement towards the future. Our portfolios are full of projects which could not yet go into production."

The products of Auroville Paper are sold in India and abroad. "Initially our biggest clients were in Europe and the bulk of our production was meant for export. But for a few years now the trend has changed and we work almost equally for Indian and foreign companies," says Luisa. "Our relation with our clients is also a privileged one," adds Christine. "Most of them have a deep contact with Auroville, they have fallen in love with our paper and they don't see us only as business partners. They are aware that we work for something more important than just our company. That makes the relationship special. And just as the solid reputation of Auroville handicrafts helps us in our marketing, so we are happy that the success of Auroville Papers contributes to the image of Auroville. It makes our work all the more meaningful."

possible they are made with natural products, using extracts from flowers that are grown in Auroville such as the hibiscus. There is even a *Maroma Men* product line.

What makes Maroma's products special is the striving towards sustainability. The ingredients used in the fabrication of the products are recyclable and contain no harmful or toxic ingredients. "Even the packaging is sustainable," says Namrita who has been Maroma's packaging designer for the last six years. "Almost all packaging is made from recycled handmade paper and another Auroville unit screen-prints it. Our packages now carry the by-line 'recycled paper, screen-printed by hand,' and people appreciate that." She is now designing minimal packaging. "The world is moving away from 'over-packaging'. Being in Auroville we should create an interesting and eye-catching packing, made with minimum waste."

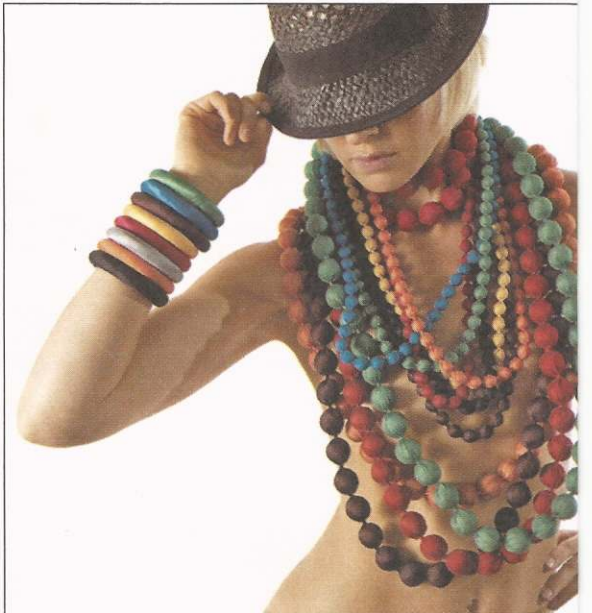
Though being primarily an export-oriented company, Maroma has now begun nurturing the Indian market. "Our incense and body-care products are doing very well within the country," says Roma, Maroma's general manager. "We have just opened a shop in the new Express Avenue Mall in Chennai and will soon be setting-up more shops across the country. The local market is developing strongly; it may soon change our present ratio of 90% export and 10% production for the Indian market."

STRIVING FOR

Auroville has a reputation in India and abroad for the quality of its craft products. They have been asked them about their way of doing business. Aiming at quality and striving



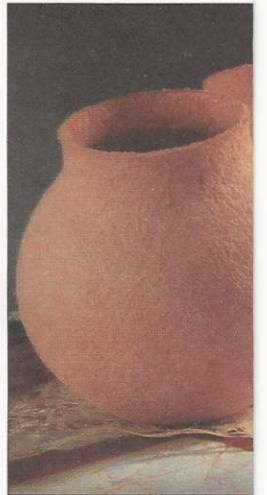
PHOTOS COURTESY AUROMODE



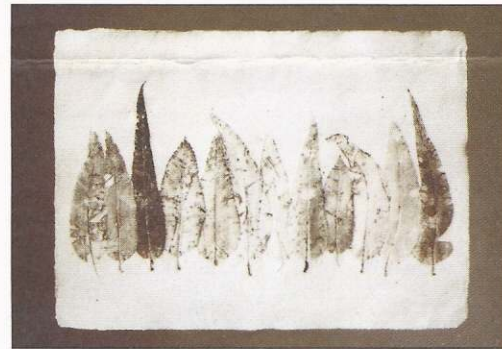
Two designs of Auromode: a hand-painted silk blouse and bead strings made from



PHOTOS COURTESY AUROVILLE PAPERS



Lace-like papers for home decoration, made from banana fibres. Kujas made from cotton



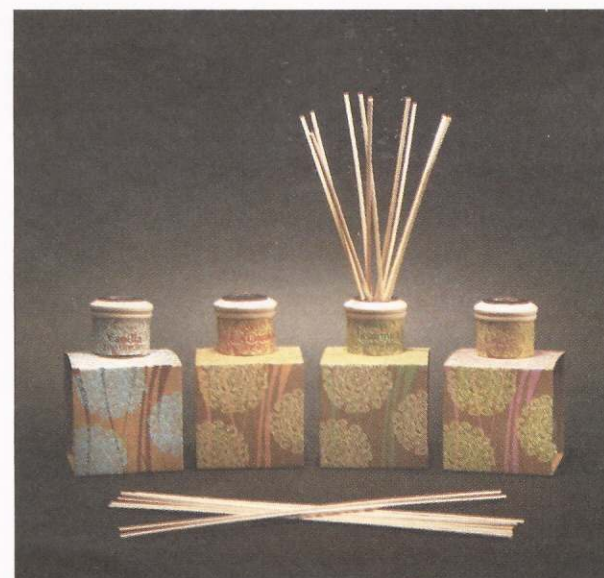
Leaf-imprinted paper is used for posters (left) as well as for other purposes



PHOTOS COURTESY MAROMA



Above left: bath soap from the *Maroma Men* line; above right: the *Devi* incense; below: the reed-diffusers



STRIVING FOR EXCELLENCE

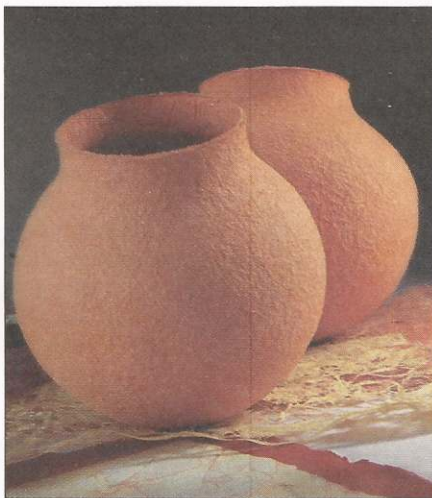
Auroville has a reputation in India and abroad for the quality of its craft products. Auroville Today randomly selected 6 of its over 200 commercial units and asked them about their way of doing business. Aiming at quality and striving for excellence, it emerges, are indeed the prime motivations.

PHOTOS COURTESY AUROMODE

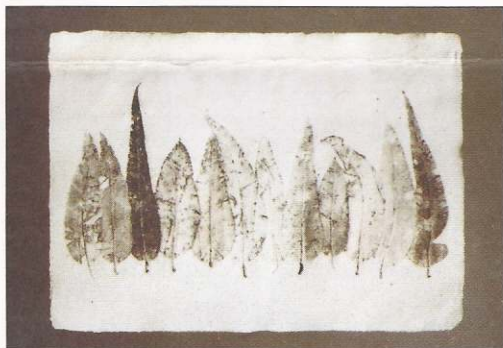


Two designs of Auromode: a hand-painted silk blouse and bead strings made from silk

PHOTOS COURTESY AUROVILLE PAPERS

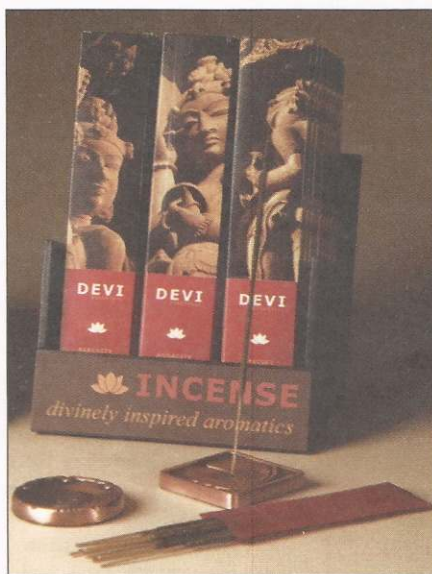


Lace-like papers for home decoration, made from banana fibres. Kujas made from cotton-maché

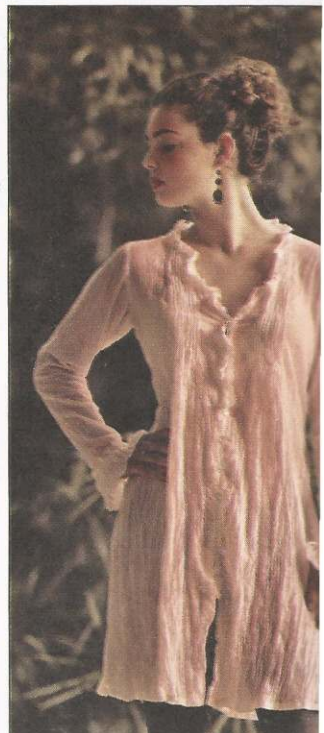
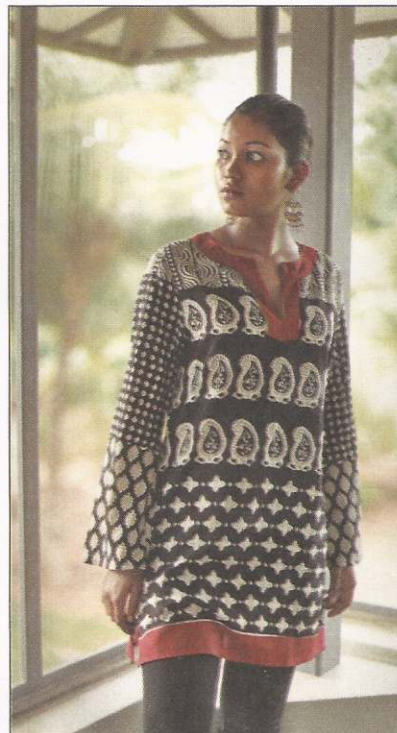


Leaf-imprinted paper is used for posters (left) as well as for other purposes

PHOTOS COURTESY MAROMA



Above left: bath soap from the *Maroma Men* line; above right: the *Devi* incense; below: the reed-diffusers



Two designs from Miniature: block-printed blouse (left) and a wrinkle-blouse (right).



The collection of Glimpse at the Kalki Boutique, Auroville Visitors' Centre. Below: three lampshades of Glimpse



Above: view of the Amano collection at Mira Boutique in the Auroville Visitors' Centre. Left: An Amano bag; careful handstitching

About Miniature

When I visit the workshop it's in the dark. "Power cut," says Liliana, sitting on the floor amidst a dozen girls, leafing through cloth samples. "The Tamil Nadu Electricity Board has announced a power outage today, and our generator is not working. It is one of the inconveniences of doing business in Auroville. But you get used to it."

Liliana, originally from Italy, is the executive and main designer of Miniature, a garment design unit. "Fabrics are in my blood," she says. "My father was a textile importer, so I grew up with fabrics from all over the world." Liliana opened her first workshop in Italy at a young age, designing not only garments, but also shoes, accessories and jewellery. In the 1980s she began specialising in textiles and materials from India, Indonesia and Pakistan, selling the products in Italy and throughout Europe. But since she came to Auroville in the mid 1990s, she has been working almost exclusively with Indian textiles and craftspeople.

"Indian textiles are uniquely beautiful," she says. "We work with silks and cottons woven in traditional weaves and patterns from all over India. Many are hand-woven, some are hand spun in the khadi tradition popularised by Mahatma Gandhi." Other sources of inspiration are the traditional embroidery and block-printing

techniques. "Miniature directly employs a few families of quality craftspeople in a village in Rajasthan to block-print cotton cloth with our own designs," she says. "They use natural vegetable or mineral dyes. We bring them new designs every 6 months." As an aside she mentions that she is happy to be able to support the livelihood of these artisans. Due to changing tastes and mass production their craft was almost wiped out.

Working with modern and traditional textiles takes Liliana all over India. "I travel at least four times a year," she says. "I source finely-made antique saris, blankets, kantha work, and other Indian textiles in striking colour combinations." They are used to create exquisite garments, which are a blend of Italian/Mediterranean chic and oriental/Indian flavour. We purchase sarees and cut them to make various garments; each saree is cut differently, each garment is made from a different part. In this way each piece is unique. All the little bits in-between are put together as jewellery, bags, and other accessories. Difficult to repeat, impossible to mass-produce. Because of this, the products of Miniature are created in small quantities.

With a staff of 30, Liliana prefers to stay within the 'miniature' scale. Many of products are exported, but she is increasingly producing for the Indian market.

The lampshades of Glimpse

Normally, thread is a device to hold garments together, but at Glimpse it's all about the thread itself. They twist and turn and twist and turn it. What comes out are beautiful lampshades with a very special look. Other lampshades are made of handmade, transparent paper wrapped around metal wire frames. "We now offer a large choice of high-quality lampshades of all possible colours and sizes: plain, round, oval, randomly shaped or tailor-made according to special request," says Txuma. "We don't use machinery, just people's energy. This makes every piece a uniquely-crafted artefact."

Txuma started Glimpse about three years ago. It was a turning point for the professional musician, who never had worked with lighting before. "I was a bass guitar player in Spain," he says. "My group specialised in funky jazz. With a repertoire of about 150 songs – we would add a new one each week – we performed all over the country. When I came to Auroville, I continued to perform, together with a number of good Aurovilian and Indian musicians. But after my friend Stefano passed away, my interest in jazz sort of faded. I now only play classical Spanish guitar, for my own and for my small son's

enjoyment."

The transition from musician to craftsman wasn't easy. "You see," he reflects, "when I play music I can touch and express something that I am not able to reach in any other way, something intangible, something fleeting. That gives a thrill of joy. I didn't expect that I would experience anything like that at Glimpse. Yet, it does happen, when I am creating new shapes, when I see something growing under my hands, when something, as it were, moulds itself. It is like a new baby coming up. That's the thrill of designing."

However, over the years the demands of Glimpse have put a damper on creative expression. "Production kills creativity," he says. "I am now responsible for a workshop that feeds 17 employees and my family. I have to do administration and deal with the Indian and Auroville bureaucracy, things I used to run away from. But that's how it is." Asked if he foresees a growth of Glimpse, he nods. "There is a large market in India. Auroville is getting more and more known for the quality of its products. There are many good craftsmen and craftswomen in Auroville, and bringing quality is inherent to being in Auroville."

The bags of Amano

Many people think that the name 'Amano' was chosen as it sounds like the well-known fashion brand 'Armani'. But 'a mano' in Spanish and Italian means 'by hand', which is how my leather bags are made," says André.

"I started leatherwork in the late 1960s in France, when I was living in a commune. This first exposure showed that I had a bit of talent for leather. Then I went to India and for ten years I didn't touch it. When I went back to Europe, I went to Spain. There I connected with someone in Ibiza who was making leather bags. I worked with him for three years.

"When I returned to Auroville for good, 21 years ago, I started a leather unit as I had to do something. I went to Madras and bought a few hides. I made a few bags and sold them all to friends. Rather proudly I went back to Madras and bought another six hides and I made more bags. This led to my first order from a customer in Mumbai. That's how it started.

"I had to get used to Indian raw materials. In the early days the material wasn't up to my standard, so I had to do some additional cleaning and dyeing by hand. Looking at my early products I can only say that the quality was rather rough – I still keep a museum piece from that period, for sentimental reasons.

"But India has developed into one of the biggest leather exporters in the world. Nowadays I just phone the supplier, and get first-quality leather home-delivered. I am aware that Indian tanneries produce a lot of environmental damage, but environmental awareness is definitely on the increase and quite a few tan-

ners have set up wastewater cleaning plants.

"Over the years my unit slowly developed. I now have 25 workers, whom I have trained myself. I do a lot of office work, but if we have big orders and are behind schedule, I work alongside my workers, cutting and stitching. I can do the whole process, and they know it: whenever there is a technical problem, they come to me. They know that I demand high-quality products.

"The beauty of Auroville is that there is a common aspiration to do better, both on the spiritual and on material levels. That common mindset is an unbelievable support. I follow it as much as I can, in my personal as well as in my business life. I try to get better leather, the right thickness, the correct softness. Instead of lining my bags with cloth, I use split lining leather. I use the best locks available and design my own buckles and have them bronze-cast by someone in Pondicherry. I source first-class zips that do not break or rust. I stitch my bags with thread that is so strong that it is not breakable by hand – I tell my customers that if they can break it by hand, they get the bag for free – so far nobody has managed. I think that I can honestly say that we make very good bags.

"Business is doing well. My production is about 300-350 bags a month. They are available in Auroville, Pondicherry, and at a few boutique shops elsewhere in India. About 40% of my production is exported.

"I could easily double or triple my production, but I do not want to. I do not have the aspiration or drive to start a factory. This is a conscious choice. I need my space. I prefer to remain small and concentrate on quality and good designs."

It's not the winning, but the finishing

Auroville has its own group of bicycle fanatics. Thrice a week they set-off to do a 100, 80 and a 40 kilometre tour. The cycle of choice is a mountain bike which is available today in India. It's now a fast growing sport.

"Patrick started it many years ago," says André. "He had transformed one of those sturdy local cycles into something resembling a mountain bike. It was rather hard going." Since that time, there has been no looking back. They all love it. "Let's be honest, the motivation is having fun," he says. "We are not talking about training the body or putting consciousness into the body or any of those lofty ideals, though of course that may happen in consequence. We just love going around, even if the East Coast road is not very much relaxing anymore with motorists shouting 'encouragements' or being outright dan-

gerous at times." He smiles. "After Marakkanam we turn left and then you come into rural India and that is beautiful, even though you have to dexterously avoid the potholes! We move around, see and meet people – cycling is truly fantastic! We always look for tracks and try to avoid roads and it takes you often to surprising places.

Not satisfied with cycling on the flat, in September 2009 André and Peter Clarence-Smith participated in the MTB Himachal race – the Mountain Bike Himachal Pradesh, India's premier Mountain Biking event advertised as 'a test of endurance, stamina and strength.'

"It was a 10-day event, with one day rest and nine days of racing over slightly more than 700 kilometres and up to 3,300 metres. We cycled mostly uphill, sometimes downhill, with little stretches of flatland in between. I came second, Peter third," says André, glowing.

The race, he explains, has stages,

sometimes as many as two or three a day, with brief rests and lunch and snacks in between. "Your time for each stage is calculated. Then all the times are added up, and that's how they get the winner." The organizers provided accommodation in small tents, a daily big bucket of hot water heated on a gas stove or on a wood fire by way of shower, and breakfast, lunch and dinner. "The day started at 6 am. By 9 pm – after having cleaned and oiled our cycles to be ready for the next day – we dropped into bed, completely exhausted. But the event was exhilarating."

After his return to Auroville, André went cycling on the flat as usual but then fell and broke his femur. "My prize money of Rs 40,000 went to the hospital to fix my leg," he says. "But they did a good job and after a few months I was back on the bike." The job, in fact, was



During the mountain bike race in Himachal Pradesh

done so well that André decided to once again participate in the MTB Himachal – this time a 7-day event of 525 kilometres.

"There were 70 people at the beginning, which was reduced to 46 at the end. A very strong young Nepalese man won the race," he says. At 57, I was the oldest cyclist in the group. But I man-

aged to win first prize in the Masters (seniors) category and came 19th overall." Is he proud? "Definitely. It feels good to be the winner. But it is not about winning the race, it's about finishing the course," he says. And next year? "Next year I'll go again!"

Carel

It's 5:45 a.m., time to begin my day with a series of asanas to loosen my stiff joints. The morning is cool and the roads are quiet and dry, ideal conditions for the morning's adventure. Soon I hear voices at the front door: "Mom are you ready?" Stepping outside, I see three fresh, smiling faces. Prakash, Sathish, and Pradap have arrived and are eager to start our weekly activity: roller-blading on the roads of Auroville.

Growing up in Canada, I learned to ice-skate at a young age, like many Canadian children. As a teen, I was a competitive speed skater and worked for the National Capital Commission as a skate patrol on the frozen canal in Ottawa, where hundreds of people would go to enjoy a few hours of ice skating on the longest skating rink in the world. Learning to roller-blade in my late 30s came naturally to me, an activity I grew to love. I missed blading when I moved to India, but then thought: 'Why can't I blade here, and teach the village kids to blade too?' I've been teaching six kids roller-blade hockey over the past two and a half years. All of them are from the village of Periyarmudaliarchavadi, where I lived for over five years.

Opening the garage door, we select our blades, and we're off. We cycle to Kulpalayam and when we arrive at Farm Fresh we park our bikes and strap on our inline roller blades. I plug into

my ipod and we begin our skate on the tar road through the villages to the Koot Road where we take a short break before returning to our starting point. The round trip takes about one hour and is divine.

I named Latha my "little tiger" years ago. It was when she played in the position of defense; no-one could get past her. Have no fear; she would go after anyone who threatened the goalie. I remember when I first put her in that position, thinking, "My goodness where does this side of her come from?" She completely transformed from a sweet 13 year old girl to a ferocious tiger.

She was my first student. She would see me skating in the early mornings and one day asked if I would teach her. I didn't have any skates for her so we went to Pondicherry and found a shop above the Goubert Market that had roller-skates and protective gear. The first lesson was to show her how to put on socks. The heels didn't seem to make sense to her and would often appear at



From left: Sathiya on skates, with Vetri, Latha, Prakash and Pratab on blades. Elaine is behind.

the top of her foot. The second lesson was tying up the skates. I don't think she or the others that followed have ever had shoes that required lacing up. The skates were black with four yellow wheels and they were heavy compared to inline roller-blades. She would come

to my house every day after school for her lesson on the tar roads in the village. After a fall she would pick herself up and try again, she's a real trooper. Within a short period of time the falls became fewer and her confidence increased.

The children in the village would watch in amazement and many asked me to teach them. My next student was Prakash, a 14 year old boy with a lot of drive and determination to show off to his friends and family. He certainly wasn't to be out done by Latha – a girl! Latha was ready to graduate to the inline blades and the black skates were transferred to Prakash. Eventually I had six

kids and not enough equipment or skates. The quality of the inline blades in Pondicherry were not up to my standard, so when I went back to Canada for a visit, I purchased seven pairs of K2 roller-blades along with all the protective gear.

Eventually we had a team of 6-7 kids ready to play hockey. Every Wednesday evening we would pile into an Innova van to play with Bobby's kids at the Indira Gandhi stadium in Pondicherry. Bobby is a National Skating coach from North India. In exchange for teaching some of his students, he would contribute to the cost of the taxi. Prema's daughter, Pravita, was a member of the team and provided the sticks and sometimes the occasional ride in one of their vehicles. The team was strong, confident and dedicated to each other and the practice.

Sadly, as time passed our group changed, Prakash wasn't able to commit due to his 10th standard studies. Vetri finished his studies and returned to his village to attend engineering college and little Sathiya's father forbade her from skating. The team was reducing in size and losing strength. And, it was around this time I joined Auroville and moved into a community. As a Bob Dylan song goes, "the times they are a changing", so now Sunday morning is our special time. The four of us glide along the tar road with the rising sun streaking through the trees. Motorbikes and cars slow down to gawk and the villagers busy with their morning activities stop and watch then give us a big smile. And I think to myself, what a wonderful way to begin a new day in the City of Dawn.

Elaine

Horsing around at Red Earth Riding School

Another rainy day in Auroville, it is after all the monsoon season. There's a heady scent of wet straw and manure. The slimy red mud glistens in the early evening sun, breaking through the clouds. Eight big brown eyes size me up as I approach the stables at the Red Earth Riding School for the first time. Very kindly they don't bite when I tentatively reach out to stroke their velvet noses.

Tuesday afternoon is the time when the Aurovilian children, with parents in tow, usually flock to the riding school for their free pony trek and horse riding lessons. Due to the adverse weather and slushy state of the roads there are not many here today. I'm told there can be anywhere up to thirty children on a good day.

A small girl, who says her name is Shanti, tells me when I ask which pony she will choose today, "I have ridden all of them, but Lightning is my favourite." Theresa, who is a volunteer instructor, is preparing the ponies. She has been here for two months and loves it. Closer to the tack room Nila, a small blonde bundle in green wellingtons and denim dungarees, toddles inside ordering her mum to get her a hat. She's only one and a half years old! Mum tells me that at home she sits by the computer asking her to bring up horse pictures from the net.

As I settle to watch the fun unfold, Veronique joins me. A small boy is showing a little resistance to being mounted on his patient steed and Veronique shouts to the helper not to push him, as a bemused parent looks on grinning. "I think sometimes it's the parents who want the child on the horse more than the child does," she says,

"but we shouldn't push them or else they simply become more apprehensive. Until the age of 6 we don't really give the children lessons. We just let them enjoy the guided ride, relax and get used to the feel of the ponies. The serious lessons don't begin until they are 10 years old." She adds, "The concept of horse riding is still relatively new to Indians and they are a little less adventurous."

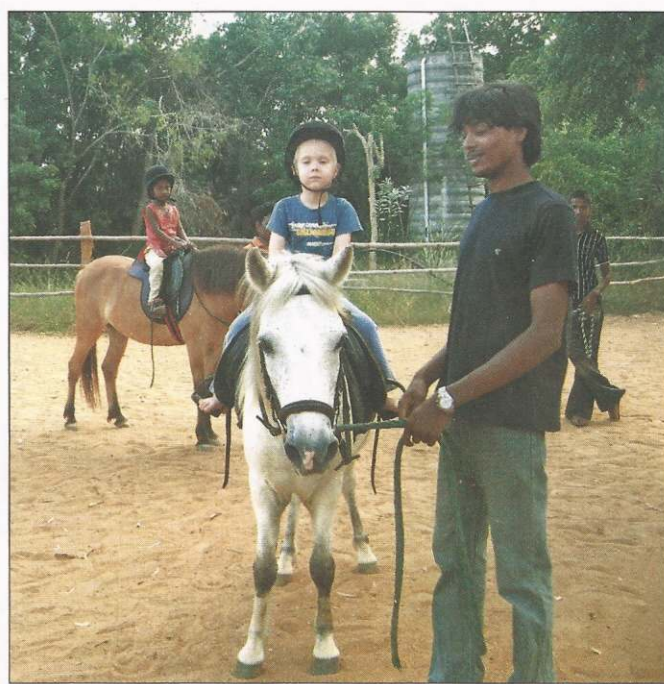
Close to the tack room is the stable area for the horses, which are more majestic and sleek than the cute ponies. Many of these are thoroughbreds and experienced show horses. They are obviously more temperamental than the ponies and only the more proficient riders are allowed to ride them. Kali is the Tamil speaking instructor, who also supervises the stable hands and helps take care of the horses. I ask if Lightning is the favourite pony for most of the kids, as I repeatedly hear the name being shouted when they are asked which pony they want to ride. He tells me that some girls prefer Phantom. "Because Phantom is white, the girls think he's a female," he says grinning. "The Tamilians often ask for Telepathy, because the name sounds local," he adds, "Everyone has a favourite." "Do all the horses get worked out regularly, after all there's quite a few of them?" I ask. "Yes," he replies, "all the ponies and horses get exercised daily. Nadeem and Laurence, the French instructors, are normally here to help."

The pony rides are almost over and the more experienced riders arrive, along with Ann, who has been a volunteer teacher at the school for a number of years now. It's obvious that the serious work is about to start. Ann is clearly in charge as she gives strict instructions for the newly-mount-

ed riders to take care with the horses and keep them away from the dressage area, where another horse is having a workout. As it's very muddy and slippery extra care is required to ensure that the horses don't get injured. "Minnie, don't stand behind the horses," Ann shouts to her fluffy little mongrel, who is barking her own orders to a muscular stallion.

Gal, a teenage Aurovilian, has been riding for 4 years now. She tells me that riding is a passion she hopes to continue throughout her life, even if it's only as a hobby. Her younger sister is here too. Ann reminds her to tie her hair back and commends another for wearing "a proper shirt". She is very experienced and has worked with horses most of her life, in Europe and India.

The riding school is also a popular venue for children's parties now, especially as they have a small children's swimming pool and a playground with swings, a slide and a trampoline. "The kids can really go wild," Ann says, "and the parents get to relax. There are pony rides as well. Plus, we can arrange the birthday cake and we have a snack bar where food can also be prepared."



Kali and a serious looking young rider

I've never been on a pony or horse, and I'm dying to get over my fear. My experience as a 6 year old, on the back of a donkey which decided it wanted to go for a gallop in a British seaside town was a real put-off. I feel quite envious and a little silly, especially after seeing young Nila smiling and giggling throughout her short trek. These creatures are so beautiful and seem so placid. Maybe next time.

Louise

Savitri: a soul for any age

An adaptation of Sri Aurobindo's Poem "Savitri" with text from the Mahabharata was performed by fourteen year old Tamil students.

One of Jill's dreams has been to work with Tamil schoolchildren and the dream came true. She has been working with the 9th standard children from Udavi school at Edayanchavadi village and written an interpretation of Sri Aurobindo's epic poem *Savitri*. The group was called the Young Flame Theatre Company and on November 6th at Bharat Nivas Auditorium they gave their first public stage performance.

Jill had boldly interpreted three Savitri figures as it would have been far too much for one girl to play Savitri alone. One Savitri was a contemporary schoolgirl, another the Savitri from the poem, and the third one the "Spirit of Savitri." Their stories are interwoven as the three girls search for love—both human and Divine.

WHAT THE CHILDREN LEARNED

"The demand for concentration in learning the lines helps me a lot with learning to concentrate on my studies. Because of the drama I can now be more concentrated in daily life with my family and friends and it helps me to deal with difficult situations by thinking and acting."

K. Sethupathi

"I was shy before drama, now I am not shy. I can now read and talk much better English as before I was afraid to open my mouth. I was weak in Maths, but when I have done drama I can remember Maths sums."

S. Jayalakshmi

The schoolgirl Savitri, whose mother has died, worries about her social life and being unattractive to boys. Her father, Aswapati, a maths teacher, tries to console her, but she seeks comfort with her auntie. She meets Satyavan, first glimpsed through a thicket hedge, and eventually all works out well as they fall in love.

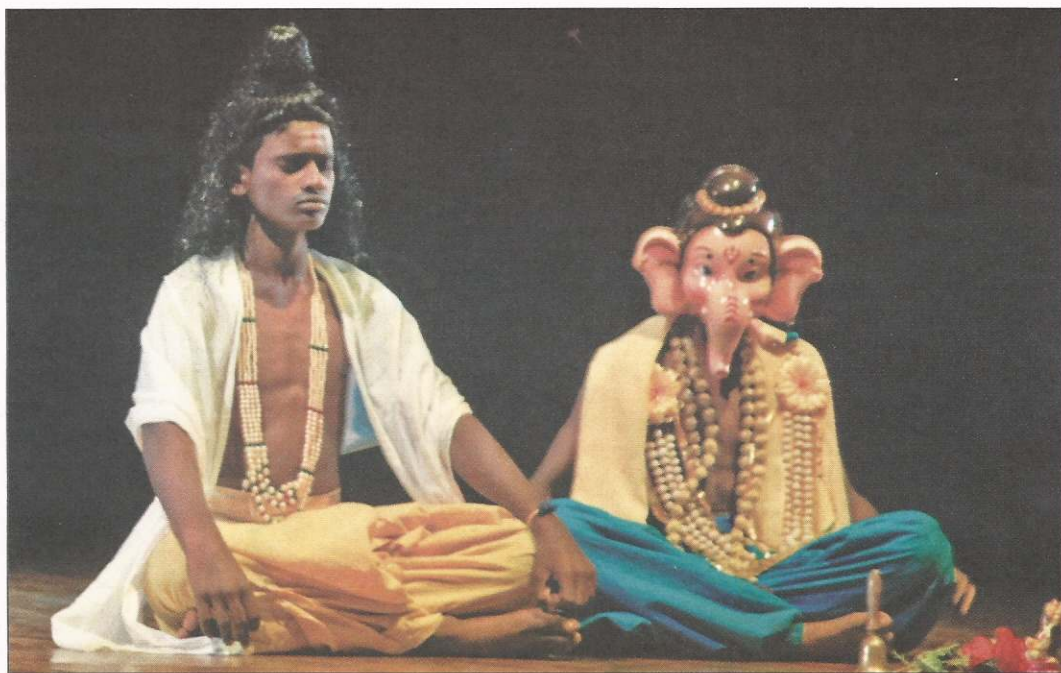
The Savitri from the poem seeks for truth and follows Yama, the God of Death, into the underworld. The spirit of Savitri weaves in and out between these two.

To hear familiar *Savitri* lines such as "And earthly life becomes the life Divine," spoken by these young Tamil people was very moving. Jill had given them the opportunity to immerse their minds in the beauty of *Savitri* over the six month rehearsal period.

The kids were understandably very nervous on that huge stage. The performance opened with each one introducing their character—then rushing off-stage as quickly as possible to the security of the darkness behind. Some had large chunks of *Savitri* to memorize, and English is not their first language. However, after a nervous start they began to relax and their diction was good.

Dressed in a long classic white dress Jill was the narrator. This gave coherence to the play and must have given a very welcome feeling of security to the young, inexperienced actors.

Jill later spoke of her experience of working with the children. "This is part of the Auroville Theatre Group outreach programme and thanks to their teacher, Parthasarathy, and funding from SAIER and the Central Fund, we can make a very important contribution. The main problem is that at this age they are pressured with examinations and so the school, understandably, does not give



Vyasa (Sethu) dictates the Mahabharata to Ganesh (Jevan) in "Savitri: A Soul for Any Age"

theatre work importance. We had to rehearse for one and a half hours, squeezed in on Tuesdays after lunch. Towards the end, we asked them to come after sports every day and they would rush in sweaty and tired. On these days, they had to get home before dark, especially the girls, so we had very little time. But they were so enthusiastic; they even gave up some of their vacation time to come to rehearsals!

"After the performance the children were adamant that the classes should continue. Now they call it a 'Theatre Club' to differentiate it from an ordinary class and to give it some status. I feel that school develops the mind and this theatre work develops the heart and feelings. We spent a lot of time discussing emotions and how to express them and afterwards they wrote about their experience. [see box] It was clearly life-changing for some of these teenagers."

"This brings me to my dream for these kids. One day, I would like to take their play to different schools in the Pondicherry area so children can actually see live theatre performed by people like themselves. The huge impact of television and film is obliterating theatre in South India as it is elsewhere in the world.

"Last year I had the marvellous experience of going to Thailand to work with the Moradokmai Theatre group. It organizes groups of fourteen to twenty year olds who give performances in schools all over the country. Five hundred schools are in the network and five different teams present plays and give acting workshops. I would love to replicate their programme with our Aurovilian and village children. It would be an example of Auroville's pioneering spirit in education and the arts."

Dianna

REFLECTIONS

Can puppets become collaborators?

We Aurovilians are an opinionated bunch. Give us half a chance and we will stake out positions on roads, trees, the Galaxy, mobile phones, bureaucracy, architects, the present maintenance system, cycle paths and, of course, Matrimandir and its immediate surroundings.

I've done it, I do it, myself. But some time ago I stumbled upon what seemed to be a useful lesson. And it concerns my perception of the Matrimandir.

For many years, I wrestled with the exterior of the Matrimandir. From an aesthetic sense I thought—actually, I still think—it is not a success. The structure is an ugly flattened sphere, the petals are stunted and out of proportion to the sphere, the materials employed—gold and red Agra stone—don't fit together and the patches of grass on the petals are, to put it politely, disappointing. As for all that gold, well, it's tacky.

I told you we were opinionated.

However some time ago, while I was gazing at the Matrimandir from the outer gardens, I suddenly became aware of an enormous presence, and an overwhelming sense that something had been completed, anchored, in a way that could never again be undone. At that moment Matrimandir was no more a failed aesthetic enterprise but a statement beyond time, the undeniable confirmation of the birth of something utterly new.

Later, I realized that in that moment I had crossed a line from the externalised, judging mind to the immediacy of direct experience. Of course, I was soon back to my judgements and opinion-forming about everything under the sun. Except...my relationship to the 'external' Matrimandir had profoundly changed.

It also left me with a question. I recalled that the later stages of the construction of the Matrimandir had been beset by numerous controversies: nobody could pretend that 'the Matrimandir process' has been anything but messy. In spite of this, that moment had convinced me that the Matrimandir embodied some eternal truth. How did that happen?

Well, I'm reminded of what Roger reported The Mother to have said in 1971 when he asked her if her Force would be specially concentrated in the Matrimandir.

Build Matrimandir, put my symbol in place and Sri Aurobindo's and the globe. I take it upon myself to make it into a very strong centre.

A few months later she added, *The Matrimandir is directly under the influence of the Divine and certainly He arranges things better than we could do ourselves.*

So it seems there's a 'parallel organization' to the one we put in place at Matrimandir to do the work. And a very much more effective one at that! But is this only true of the Matrimandir? It seems not. In 1969 Mother had already explained, *It [the city] will be built by what is invisible to you. The men who have to act as instruments will do so despite themselves. They are only puppets in the hands of larger Forces. Nothing depends on human beings—neither the planning nor the execution—nothing! That is why one can laugh.*

Frankly, that 'puppets' reference has always stuck in my throat. It raises the critical question—what exactly are we Aurovilians here for? If neither the planning nor the execution of Auroville depend upon us, why should we bother to work on improving our organization and decision-making process? Why should we agonize over building permissions or the most sustainable design for our new apartment buildings? Why, in fact, should we bother to do anything at all?!

I think one of the answers is contained in the former Matrimandir quote. Mother was still asking us to build the Matrimandir as a precondition for her making it a "very strong centre". It's as if she is asking us to manifest physical anchors into which her force can then be poured. This interpretation is supported by a recollection of Frederick. He describes how, on 21st February, 1968, Mother asked the Auroville pioneers to plant trees so that, as he recalls her putting it, "there could be living matter to receive my force".

But questions remain. Does this mean that whenever we manifest something in Auroville, however ugly or ill-conceived, She will step in, *deus ex machina*, and somehow rescue it by investing it with her Force? I don't think so. Actually, I hope not because I'm not sure I could live with some of our present architectural monstrosities, even if they were illuminated by her. No, my sense is she is perfectly willing to see our most cherished projects disappear once more into dust if they are not in some way furthering Auroville's evolutionary purpose.

So wouldn't it be nice if we could better understand that 'other organization' which pushes for the true manifestation of Auroville so we don't waste our time pursuing dead-ends?

Some people will say that Mother has already left us sufficient clues: all we need do is study

what she said or listen to people like Shyam Sunder who held many conversations with her. Actually, it's interesting to note that when it came to constructing the city, Mother only gave really detailed instructions about the inner chamber of Matrimandir. For the rest, while she talked about the four zones and the ideal economy, education system and organization, as well as the need for us to work harmoniously, she didn't map out precisely how the city would manifest. "We shall see, it will evolve as you evolve," seemed to be the gist of many of her replies to Aurovilians desperate for guidance.

All of which suggests that we may have a role to play after all. Perhaps it is not quite the grand role we envisage when we create all our committees and plot out areas for future development: poor things that we are, we like to feel we are 'doing' Auroville. No, our real role may be more akin to that age-old injunction *Gnothi seauton*, 'Know thyself', which Mother deepened and updated for us in 'To Be a True Aurovilian'.

The first necessity is the inner discovery in order to know what one truly is behind social, moral, cultural, racial and hereditary appearances. At the centre there is a being free, vast and knowing, who awaits our discovery and who ought to become the active centre of our being and our life in Auroville.

That's pretty strong stuff. Because what I understand her to be saying is that only when we contact that "free, vast and knowing" centre will we be able to participate as conscious agents in the evolution of Auroville. (It's significant that she remarked that "ideally" all prospective Aurovilians would have made the inner discovery before coming to Auroville!)

And until then? Well, I guess we will continue to blunder on, driven by that potent Aurovilian mixture of egotism and idealism. But, hopefully, as the years go by, we'll learn a little more humility and become a tiny bit less opinionated.

And learn to laugh along with Mother...

Alan

PASSING



Valeriy Kubarchuk, hailing from Ukraine and living in Prayatna, passed away on November 17th at the Auroville Health Centre after a long struggle with cancer. He was 64. Valeriy and his wife Galyna joined Auroville in 1992, after following their daughter Veera and son Aleksey who had arrived earlier. Having initially worked at Matrimandir, he was active as a sports teacher at Udavi. His body was cremated at the Adventure Farewell grounds on November 18th.



Ingo Wey, from Switzerland, passed away on November 23rd in Jipmer hospital, Pondicherry, after a struggle with aplastic anaemia. He was 58.

Ingo, who had a masters degree in psychology, joined Auroville in 2004. He started out in Certitude and was in the process of settling in Hope. After initially working with AquaDyn, he had been involved in his therapeutic Soma initiative, as well as in a great variety of projects, working groups and research pertaining to town planning, alternative energy and new farming techniques. Lately he also gave talks to visiting students in the framework of the University of Human Unity. His body was cremated at Adventure's Farewell grounds on November 25th.

The International House in the International Zone

Building sustainably is the driving motivation behind the expansion project of The International House. It will use discarded petrol hoses, recycled corrugated TetraPak panels and papier-mâché. The aim is to utilize 90% recycled materials in its construction.

A long-standing dispute finally was finally resolved when the US Pavilion Group, Auroville International USA, the International Zone Group, and L'Avenir d'Auroville town planners agreed that the US Students Dormitory, built as the first phase of the USA Pavilion in the International Zone, could become an international student dormitory and be expanded to accommodate more student groups and house the caretakers. The building was renamed 'The International House'. The USA Pavilion will now be built elsewhere in the International Zone, near Darkali and the Matrimandir Nursery.

International House was built in 2002-2003. Dr. Bill Leon from the Board of Auroville International USA helped arrange the building project through the University of Washington where he was teaching. The design was implemented by the Design/Build Mexico student team under the careful supervision of Sergio Palleroni, who was at that time a Research Fellow at the Centre for Sustainable Development, University of Texas, Austin and founding director of the BASIC

transport the rainwater, collected from the roof and channelled along massive guttering, into a large underground tank. From here the water is pumped up to the water tower. All water used here at present is originally harvested rainwater.

In the garden there is a reed bed, into which all the grey water from the kitchen and bathrooms is piped. The reed bed comprises layers of gravel and sand with plants on the surface. Once the grey water is filtered, a number of channels route the water to a banana plantation. Bananas are one of the plants which can survive on poorer quality water.

The toilets are all compost toilets which use very little water, are easy to maintain and provide high quality compost after approximately 6 months. All the power is solar-generated. 'B', another caretaker, says that the batteries used to store power are nearly four years old now and not as efficient as they should be. They have plans to incorporate some kind of hybrid wind/solar system to maximise on the available renewable energy resources.



The 'super roof', a steel structure covered in wood, protects the inner dorm rooms, bathrooms and office

plans had been there for some time. However, lack of funding, plus concerns relating to the identity of the Pavilion stalled progress. B says that it is important that the International House has a distinctive identity of a learning environment with dormitory facilities for students who come to participate in the sustainable development of the International Zone. It is not, as some people have termed it, a guest house. Garima tells us that the project is something which remains very dear to the hearts of all those involved.

Mogdha and Venu, both architects, came to Auroville three months ago to attend an architectural seminar. They became involved in the project and volunteered to help design and develop the new building. They show us the plans for the apex style framed structure and add that the project aims at utilizing 90% recycled materials in construction. Like the current structure, the dorm walls will be made from compressed earth bricks. 'B' confirms that they are looking to promote new ways of building at a lower cost. The team are undertaking research and experimenting with all kinds of rubbish, literally. 'Zero waste' is high on the list of priorities. The team has partnered with various departments within Auroville to utilize a lot of the waste which would ordinarily be sent to the landfill site. While the harder materials, such as broken stoneware, glass and pottery, are not good for roads as they are too sharp, they are ideal for foundation filling and as additives to concrete. One surprising ingredient they are hoping to utilize is Styrofoam. They have a growing collection which is being supplied by the Eco Service. This will be mixed with the cement instead of sand and stones.

They say that this has already been successfully used in construction elsewhere and is much lighter. The group has decided to hold back the start of construction until after the monsoon. By this time, the cost of the other materials required will also have reduced.

This brings us to the TetraPak roofing panels neatly stacked up in the bike shed.

TetraPaks are the milk and juice cartons we merrily throw away. They became an eco-nightmare because nobody could recycle them. But the Daman Ganga Company in Gujarat is doing just that. They recycle and compress used TetraPaks for making corrugated roofing sheets, which are silver grey with flecks of colour and a bit thicker than ordinary roofing sheets. While the sheets cost half that of traditional steel or GI roofing panels, most of the savings were offset by the transportation costs. Garima tells us that they have been able to supply some sheets for sheds in Auroville, including at the Visitors' Centre and Sadhana Forest. The durability of the sheets is yet to be put to the test in our extreme climate, so they have been looking at some kind of added protection for the roof.

Manu, who is also a resident caretaker, Garima explains, is the head of the architectural team of

which Mogdha and Venu are a part. Together with B, they have been investigating innovative ways to use waste materials for construction. It was Manu who came up with the idea to utilize discarded petrol hoses for the previously mentioned roof protection. Safety regulations require that these pipes are replaced regularly by petrol stations, but the used pipes are difficult to dispose of due to their highly hazardous nature. Manu discovered that the structural strength of these pipes is very good, and by filling them with lightweight Styrofoam cement mix, they can be precast into many shapes.

The final innovation for the new building will be a papier-mâché floor. Some of the Auroville textile units have already agreed to provide waste fabric as the mix is prepared using paper and fabric.

The team here seem to be taking recycling to another level. They even speak of zero waste as if it were somewhere part of the Auroville Charter. Is it possible that the housing crisis could be solved by the garbage crisis?

Louise

About the US Pavilion and the history of the dispute see AVToday #209-201, June-July 2006, and #222, November 2007.



Corrugated roof panels made from recycled TetraPaks

Initiative, an academic outreach programme. The challenge was to design and build a self-sustaining educational and residential facility in an area which had no infrastructural resources, such as power or water. They chose to use steel, ferro-cement, compressed earth bricks and mahogany in the construction. A 'super roof', an enormous steel structure covered in wood, protects the inner dorm rooms, bathrooms and office from the elements. The original architects were inspired by the banyan tree in their design. The dorm rooms represent the tree trunk and the pillars the distinctive rooting system of the great tree. Yet, not all of those supports are 'supports'. There are many surprises here.

Garima, one of the resident caretakers, tells us that the outer steel pipes

Clearly, sustainability is the driving force here. The new project underway is to build additional dorm facilities to the side of the current building. This is to house the 15+ students who come to Auroville under the umbrella of programmes like 'Living Routes' or through programmes sponsored by institutions like the University of Washington.

'B' explains that the extension



The composting toilets

SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION

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NEW BOOKS

The baubinia tree is also known as mountain ebony, purple orchid tree or simply orchid tree. *Baubinia, A tree who wanted to be an Orchid*, is a colouring book for children that tells the story of a baubinia tree which wished it had legs like Vladok, the bullock and could roam all over the place. Later, it spies Slava, the butterfly and wished it could fly. With every stage in its life, it wishes change, until one day, the tree realises it has no other wish than to be itself.

Baubinia, A tree who wanted to be an Orchid, by Marie. Published by Auroville Press Publishers/Series Poetree, Rs. 195.

