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'To read "Savitri" is indeed to practise Yoga, spiritual concentration; one can find here all that is needed to realise the Divine.' — The Mother

This month, the first permanent building of the Savitri Bhavan ('House of Savitri') complex near Bharat Nivas will be inaugurated.

In the process of finding out more about the project, we were led back to its focus—Sri Aurobindo's epic poem *Savitri*, which Mother called "the supreme revelation of Sri Aurobindo's vision".

Here we look at some aspects of the poem, and at how some Aurovilians are working with it as a source of inspiration.

Sri Aurobindo began writing his poem, *Savitri*, in August 1916: he was dictating new passages and correcting old ones until November, 1950, a few weeks before his death. During that time, the poem grew from being a few hundred lines to almost 24,000, making it the longest poem in the English language.

The story of *Savitri* is a brief interlude in the ancient Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*. It tells how Savitri falls in love with Satyavan, only to learn that he is fated to die on a particular day; and how, having decided to follow him, her purity and the intensity of her love charms Death into releasing him.

Sri Aurobindo's version of the legend differs in a number of ways from the original in the *Mahabharata*. Most significantly, Savitri's quest is now an inner, spiritual one, and the 'boon' that she gains is not simply the life of her husband, but a

pledge from the Supreme that, with her as the instrument of the transformation:

*"Nature shall live to manifest secret God,
The Spirit shall take up the human play,
This earthly life become the life divine."*

Sri Aurobindo had intended to write an extensive introduction to his poem. In the event, he only composed a brief 'Author's Note', but in this he explained something of the symbolic significance of the legend. Satyavan, for example, represents "the soul carrying the divine truth of being within itself but descended into the grip of death and ignorance"; Savitri is "the Divine Word, goddess of the supreme Truth who comes down and is born to save"; Aswapathi, her father, is the Lord of Tapasya, "the concentrated energy of spiritual endeavour that helps us to rise from the mortal to the immortal planes..."

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Savitri

What was Sri Aurobindo's purpose in writing *Savitri*? Whatever his original intention when he began it in 1916, by the mid-1930s he was explaining that "*Savitri* has not been regarded by me as a poem to be written and finished, but as a field of experimentation to see how far poetry could be written from one's own yogic consciousness and how that could be made creative..." and, "I used *Savitri* as a mode of ascension. I began with a certain mental level, each time I could reach a higher level I rewrote from that level." In the 1930s and 1940s he often used the term 'Overhead Poetry' to describe what he was attempting to realise. The term "overhead", as defined by Amal Kiran, (with whom Sri Aurobindo corresponded

at length regarding *Savitri*) is "the ranges of consciousness broadly envisaged by ancient Indian scriptures as lying hidden above the human and possessing an inherent light of knowledge and a natural experience of the infinite".

Savitri is the record of Sri Aurobindo's yoga, his willed descent into the Inconscient and his ascent through the planes of consciousness, culminating in a vision of the Supramental wcnly of his yoga for, as Mother pointed out, through the figure of Savitri her own spiritual journey and true identity are revealed ("...day after day, the experiences He read out to me in the morning were those I had had the previous night...").

But how to describe inner experiences

through the medium of poetry? "Identity (with the experience) brought spontaneously and inevitably the right language", Sri Aurobindo explained. In other words, the language of *Savitri* is not mere signification: it embodies the actual vibration, the essence of the different planes of consciousness which Sri Aurobindo and Mother experienced. The 'symbols' are real! This is why Mother describes each verse of the poem as "a revealed Mantra which surpasses all that man possessed by way of knowledge", and why "To read *Savitri* is indeed to practise Yoga, spiritual concentration; one can find here all that is needed to realise the Divine".

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However, Mother warned that very few will begin to understand the full import of the poem. "Savitri is occult knowledge and spiritual experience. Some part of it can be understood mentally—but much of it needs the same knowledge and experience for understanding it." Which means, she elucidated later, "one must have the knowledge to discover it all, the experience of the planes of consciousness, the experience of the Supermind, even the experience of the conquest of Death."

One of the key passages of the poem, a passage which Sri Aurobindo worked upon intensively for many years, is the opening

section of Canto One, The Symbol Dawn. "Here", he explains, "the physical night and physical dawn are, as the title of the canto clearly suggests, a symbol, although what may be called a real symbol of an inner reality, and the main purpose is to describe by suggestion the thing symbolised; here it is a relapse into Inconscience broken by a slow and difficult return of consciousness, followed by a brief but splendid and prophetic outbreak of spiritual light leaving behind it the 'day' of ordinary human consciousness in which the prophecy has to be worked out. The whole of *Savitri* is, according to the title of the poem, a legend that is a symbol and this opening chapter is, it may be said, a key beginning and announcement".

In the late 1960s Mother explained to Huta the occult significance of the first cantos of the poem. For example, she described the first line

It was the hour before the Gods awake

as a reference to the condition of the world before the creation of the gods, the gods being the Supreme's response to the "falling away" of his original emanations from their true principles of Light, Bliss, Life and Truth. She also explained that Sri Aurobindo's description of the first brilliant efflorescence of dawn

Then through the pallid rift that seemed at first

*Hardly enough for a trickle from the suns,
Outpoured the revelation and the flame.*

is a description of the Avatar coming down upon earth.

Savitri is occult knowledge. Yet as "mantric" poetry it clearly does not require full comprehension by the reader before it begins its work. Mother referred to its multi-layered action in a comment to a sadhak: "For the opening of the psychic, for the growth of consciousness and even for the improvement of English it is good to read one or two pages of *Savitri* each day".

Alan

The Symbol Dawn

*It was the hour before the Gods awake.
Across the path of the divine Event
The huge foreboding mind of Night, alone
In her unlit temple of eternity,
Lay stretched immobile upon Silence' marge.
Almost one felt, opaque, impenetrable,
In the sombre symbol of her eyeless muse
The abyss of the unbodied Infinite;
A fathomless zero occupied the world.
(...)*

*An unshaped consciousness desired light
And a blank prescience yearned towards distant change.
As if a childlike finger laid on a cheek
Reminded of the endless need in things
The heedless Mother of the universe,
An infant longing clutched the sombre Vast.
Insensibly somewhere a breach began:
A long lone line of hesitating hue
Like a vague smile tempting a desert heart
Troubled the far rim of life's obscure sleep
(...)*

*A wandering hand of pale enchanted light
That glowed along a fading moment's brink,
Fixed with gold panel and opalescent hinge
A gate of dreams ajar on mystery's verge.
One lucent corner windowing hidden things
Forced the world's blind immensity to sight.
The darkness failed and slipped like a falling cloak
From the reclining body of a god.
Then through the pallid rift that seemed at first
Hardly enough for a trickle from the suns,
Outpoured the revelation and the flame.*

(From: *Savitri*, Book One, Canto One)

The evolution of *Savitri's* opening passage

Sri Aurobindo frequently rewrote and expanded the first part of *Savitri*. Here is an edited transcript of a talk given by Richard Hartz at the Savitri Bhavan on Sunday, November 15th, 1998 in which he describes the evolution of the opening passage of the poem.

The 'First Fair Copy' of 1916, published in *Mother India* in 1981-2, began like this:

*In a huge forest where the listening Night
Heard lonely voices and in the large hush
Was conscious of the sigh and tread of things
That have no sound for the rich heart of day,
For now her phantom tribes were not abroad,
The panther's eyes glared not, the tiger slept
Prone in his lair of jungle and deep grass,
Startling the wide-eyed dreamer Dawn arose.*

There's not a single line in this that has anything to do with *Savitri* as we know it. There's only the idea of beginning the poem with the description of the dawn of the day of Satyavan's death. But at the end of this passage we have the line:

This was the day when Satyavan must die.

This line was there from the very beginning, and it is the only line in the whole passage which is identical to the final form.

For about seven or eight manuscripts, the poem remains very similar to this. The last manuscript of 'Canto 1-Love' starts a little differently:

In a dense forest under moonlit skies

With 'moonless' we are getting nearer to the feeling of the final version, and in fact 'moonless' seems to have suggested the line which we have at the beginning of the next version. The whole tone is now different:

*A starless hush prepared epiphany.
Near was the hour of the transfiguring gods.*

And so on. In fact everything has been changed, almost the whole opening passage as it

was before has been thrown out and something else has been substituted. So we have:

*Waiting upon the marge of silence sat
Mute with the expectation of her change*

These lines in some form remain a long time, although some of them were eventually altered beyond recognition or discarded completely, but the line

Near was the hour of the transfiguring gods

which is here the second line, after some time was shifted to become the first line. And having become the first line, it comes again in slightly different forms:

The hour was near of the transfiguring gods

then

It was an hour of the transfiguring gods.

This remains through several versions. Then we have

It was the hush of a transfiguring hour

which seems to relapse towards an earlier form. And then suddenly

It was the moment when the gods awake

And the first words have been crossed out and replaced by

It was the hour before the Gods awake.

So at last we have the first line in its final form. This is in the 21st manuscript of the opening passage.

"Each verse of *Savitri* is like a revealed Mantra which surpasses all that man possessed by way of knowledge ... the words are expressed and arranged in such a way that the sonority of the rhythm leads you to the origin of sound, which is OM ... Everything is there: mysticism, occultism, philosophy, the history of evolution, the history of man, of the gods, of creation, of Nature. How the universe was created, why, for what

purpose, what destiny—all is there ... All this is His own experience, and what is most surprising is that it is my own experience also ... It is... the picture of Our joint adventure into the unknown or rather into the Supermind ... *Savitri* is His whole Yoga of transformation, and this Yoga appears now for the first time in the earth-consciousness ... One needs spiritual experiences in order

to understand and assimilate it ... it is not in the mind or through the mind, it is in meditation that *Savitri* is revealed ... You know it is charged, fully charged with consciousness; as if *Savitri* were a being, a real Guide. I tell you, whoever, wanting to practise Yoga, tries sincerely and feels the necessity for it, will be able to climb with the help of *Savitri* to the highest rung of the ladder of Yoga, will be able to find the secret that

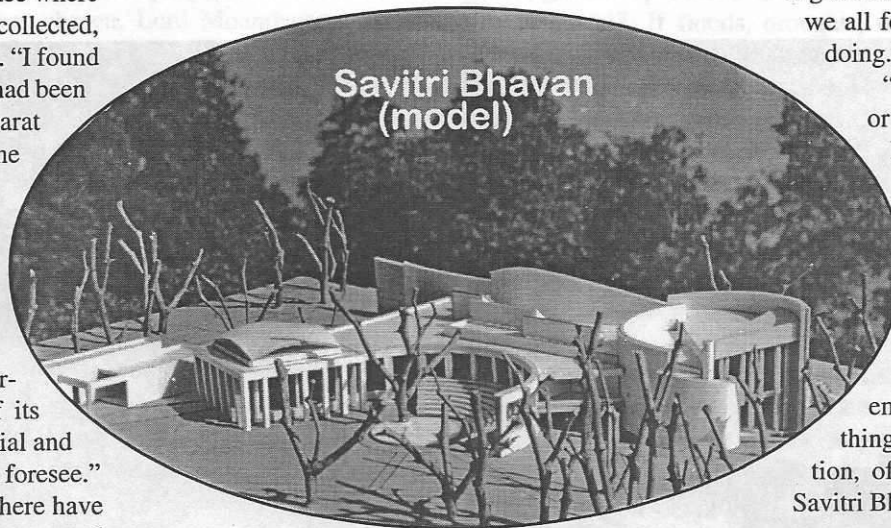
Savitri represents. And this without the help of a Guru. And he will be able to practise it anywhere ... *Savitri* has an extraordinary power, it gives out vibrations for him who can receive them, the true vibrations of each stage of consciousness. It is incomparable, it is truth in its plenitude, the Truth Sri Aurobindo brought down on the earth." (The Mother in *Sweet Mother*, *Harmonies of Light* by Mona Sarkar, pp. 23-33)

In August, Savitri Bhavan ('House of Savitri') will move into the first permanent building of its projected complex near Bharat Nivas. Shradhdhavan, who coordinates the activities, explained that while Dr. De became was Secretary of the Foundation, he initiated a Savitri study circle to which several guest speakers were invited. In the context of this initiative, Narayan from Matrimandir suggested that there should be a place where all the materials associated with *Savitri* could be collected, a place which breathed the atmosphere of *Savitri*. "I found this idea very inspiring, and in no time at all we had been allocated this beautiful plot of land between Bharat Nivas and Matrimandir for the Savitri Bhavan. The way it happened was just amazing."

On November 24th, 1995, Dr. Nirodbaran, Sri Aurobindo's scribe for *Savitri* during the 1940s, inaugurated the site. In an address he mentioned that, "This Savitri Bhavan project, now in its infant stage, is, if I may say so, a twin to the Matrimandir. The Matrimandir is much further developed and already showing some of its future glory; this new project has a great potential and will be growing up to an extent we cannot easily foresee."

Since then the study circle has continued. There have been background classes on the outline of the poem and the different planes of being which Sri Aurobindo refers to in the epic, and each month a special speaker is invited to speak on some aspect of *Savitri* or Sri Aurobindo's work. The Bhavan has also held slide and video shows of paintings by Huta Hindocha which were inspired by *Savitri*, and an exhibition of drawings made by the Mother while she worked with Huta on these paintings.

An Auroville home for Savitri



Savitri Bhavan (model)

So far the activities have taken place under trees or in a keet structure on site. However, the move to the first phase of the permanent construction will make a whole new range of activities possible. The second phase of the complex, which will require about 100 lakhs (approx.\$250,000) for its completion, will include a library, a hall for seminars and group study, exhibition

space and archives, as well as an open air amphitheatre for readings and performances.

But isn't there a danger of *Savitri* becoming institutionalised, a mere object of academic study? Shradhdhavan doesn't think so. "The poem is so rich, there are so many levels and ways in which it can be explored, that I don't think there is a danger of the academic perspective becoming dominant. In fact, our experience so far has been that we all feel immensely enriched by what we have been doing."

"We don't want to make the Bhavan into a shrine or a temple," she continues, "although it should have a certain atmosphere, the vibration of *Savitri*." How would she describe that? "There's that wonderful passage which begins, 'Thus will the masked transcendent mount his throne'. It relates how the soul will obey an ill-heard voice, that a hidden power will creep into the mind and, suddenly, a completely new power of beauty and sweetness will emerge which has the power to transform everything. According to me, this is the power, the vibration, of *Savitri*. And this is what we would like the Savitri Bhavan to radiate."

From a conversation with Alan

Since November 1998, Savitri Bhavan has been publishing a quarterly journal—Invocation—which is distributed free to donors and well-wishers. A video is also available. More details from: Savitri Bhavan, Auroville 605101, T.N., India

Closer to Savitri: Performing the epic

Otto, Srimoyi and Paulo on their experience of working with *Savitri*

"You always see it anew each time. Even in the last days, we would be discovering lines and meanings that we had never noticed before." Otto and Srimoyi are speaking about the year they spent with Ellen working on "The Debate of Love and Death" prior to performing it twice, once in Auroville and once in the Ashram. "We began by reading it over and over again, trying to understand the Forces at work and how to play them. Because it is not like understanding realistic characters," Otto says. "Death is a Force, and there were many ways to play him, because he has the Truth, but it is 'the Truth which slays,' the Truth with a twist. And Savitri, on her mission to save Satyavan, grows in power in order to face her foe, passing through three levels. Initially she is the very human woman; then she becomes the woman who has gained confidence in herself and who is ready to reveal herself; and, lastly, she speaks as the Universal Mother, with the overarching wisdom and power of

the Divine Being on earth." "Ellen said to play it very simply," adds Srimoyi, "I was the Divine Mother. Just be simple in the playing and see what happens."

Of course, "to be simple" meant, in addition to the inner work, lots of physical preparation beforehand—doing vocal exercises every day, building up the stamina, the endurance for the work. "We chose the most powerful lines," says Otto. "There was a very strong atmosphere sometimes," remembers Srimoyi. "I felt a presence which was enormous. I had to keep myself from crying at the end of a performance. The power of the text is so strong, so evocative." In fact, both Otto and Srimoyi felt the need to call for protection, to feel safe while playing such an intense and multi-dimensional scene.

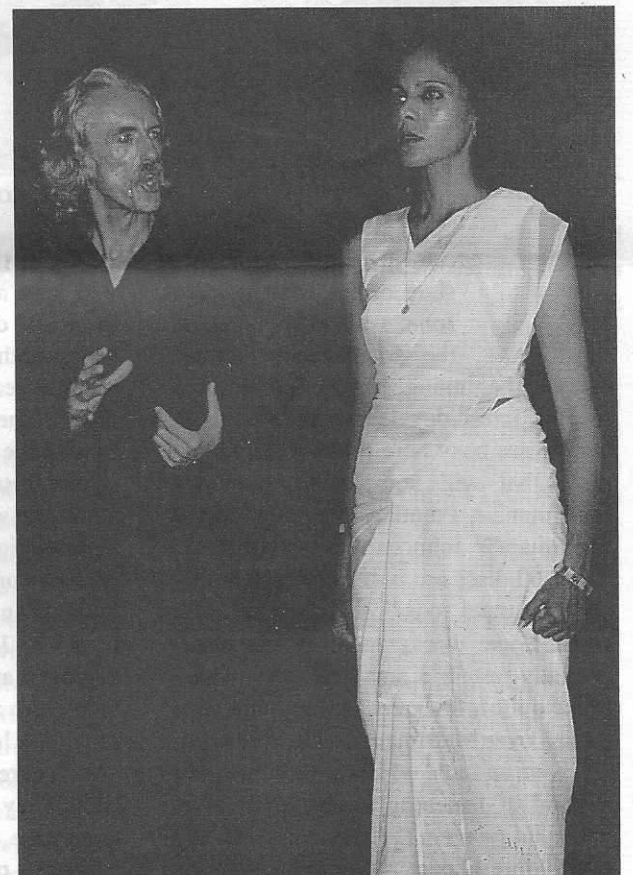
"The deeper you go, the more you can refine your understanding. At the end, you realise the whole thing is one movement. It was especially strong and demanding for me, playing Death," says Otto, "because Death feels himself on top at the beginning, fully in control. Then, gradually, he

has to acknowledge that there is a greater Power. The moment of reward in the playing of this Canto is when the Divine Death recognises the greater Power of the Divine Mother."

"With our audiences, we felt very protected and very nourished. When you have people out there who really want to understand, what you receive from them is so beautiful. I feel that this opportunity to play these roles was a special blessing granted to us," says Srimoyi. "It did something to me. I feel closer to Them than ever before."

Paulo also felt the presence of a great power and the need to do challenging inner work when working with a number of different sections of *Savitri* for a dance performance with Joy, using Sunil's music. "I was not interested in a logical or conscious understanding from the side of the public," Paulo says. "I was rather concerned that they get exposed to something that can move and nourish them from behind or from inside. I wanted to expose us all to the best material I know, that can help us in our search of ourselves, in our soul's pilgrimage. For me this is the meaning of Sri Aurobindo's vision in *Savitri*, of Mother's reading and of Sunil's compositions to accompany it."

"The text carries a meaning and it is a challenge not to get stuck in the logical content, but to penetrate into its deeper emotional and spiritual dimensions. Once



Otto and Srimoyi performing "The Debate of Love and Death"

this is touched the choreography becomes more spontaneous and direct. My intention was to expose ourselves, as performers, to the beauty and power of the material we were dealing with and let ourselves be transformed by it. Because I was convinced that, in the context of communicating *Savitri*, our inner attitude rather than our dance skills would speak to the audience. To make visible the similarities that exist between the process lived both by Aswapathi and Savitri in their inner journey, the process each of us has to go through when we are tossed onto this path, and the evolutionary process of the whole of humanity and earth: this is how I understand Sri Aurobindo's vision." Jill

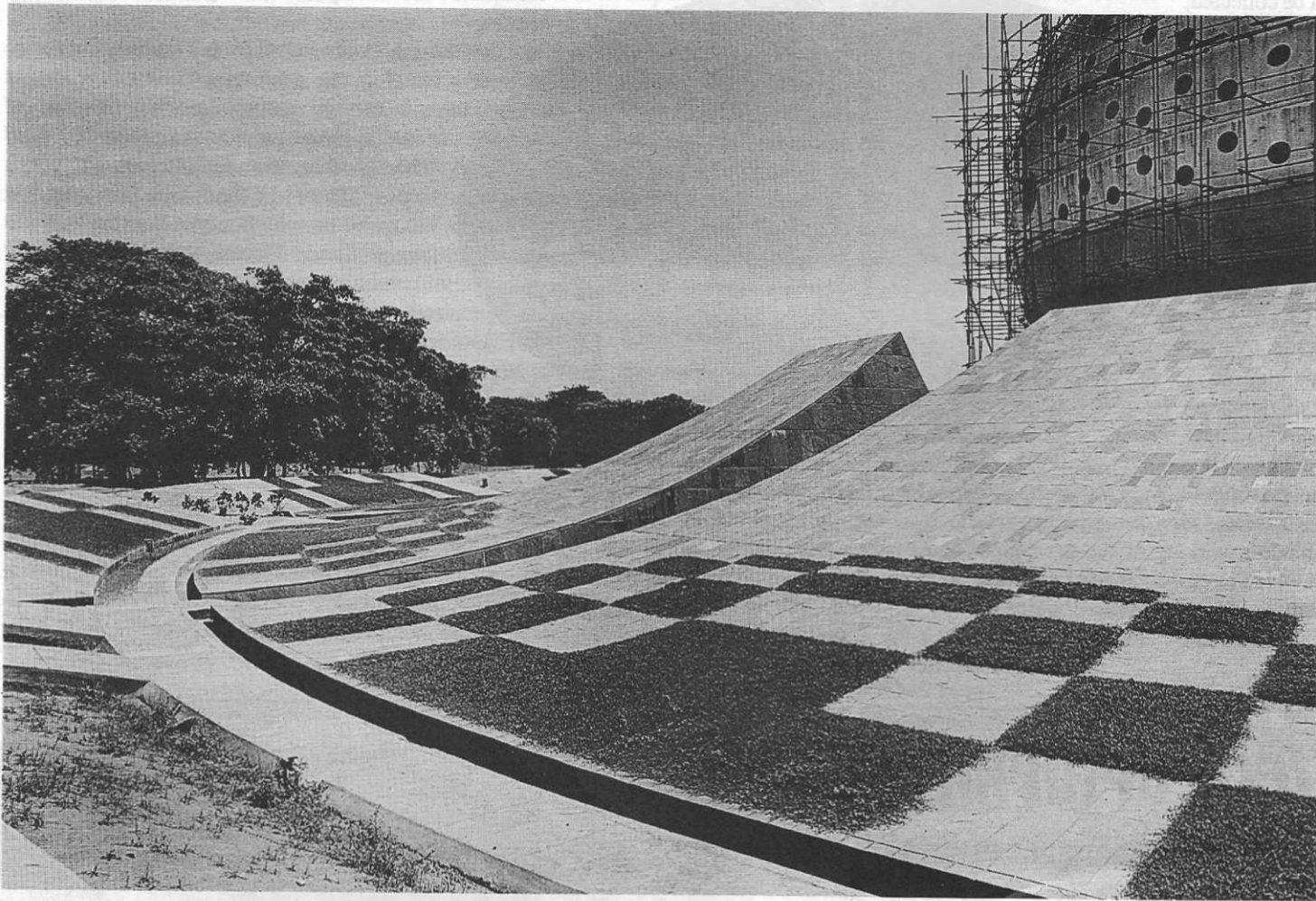
The Debate of Love and Death

In Book Nine, "The Book of Eternal Night", we read that Satyavan has died, and Savitri has followed him and confronted Death, who answers her, mocking her purpose: "Go, mortal, to thy small permitted sphere!" But Savitri answers, "World-spirit, I was thy equal spirit born./I am immortal in my mortality./... Out of thy shadow give me back again/Into earth's flowering spaces Satyavan..."

Death then preaches his gospel, trying to diminish the power of Love. But Savitri will not be dissuaded: "My love is not a hunger of the heart,/My love is not a craving of the flesh;/It came to me from God, to God returns." They debate back and forth and in Book Ten, Canto Three, The Debate of Love and Death, Savitri reveals herself as the mighty Mother. Death describes reality as a creation of the Mind: "The world is a myth that happened to come true..." Finally, Death challenges Savitri to reveal her power, "Lay bare thy spirit's force/Then will I give back to thee Satyavan." A "mighty transformation" then works through Savitri and, at last, Death knows "defeat inevitable" and Satyavan returns to Life.

Matrimandir 1999

FROM GOLDEN DISCS TO GARDENING



Grass and stone pattern on the outer petals

We are at the gold disc workshop of the Matrimandir. John, who has worked at the Matrimandir almost from its beginning, has agreed to show me the latest developments. About 45 people are busy here gilding the golden discs that will completely cover the Matrimandir. Pointing to the top of the Matrimandir John explains: "Up there, about 60 discs are permanently fixed by stainless steel rods." And they are well fixed. Some weeks ago this was unexpectedly tested: a small tornado, which broke quite a few trees in Auroville, also passed over Matrimandir. The discs didn't move an inch, which proves that their method of fastening is absolutely fine. What did go up in the air were about 100 scaffolding planks. They flew over the roof, and damaged a number of gold-glass tiles on some of the installed discs. But this was a minor problem, as each individual tile can be replaced on site. That repair work has meanwhile been done."

If you stand at ground level, the discs on top are barely visible. "You'll soon see more discs," promises John, "there are about 200 discs ready to be installed. We'll put them up row by row from the top down. What slows the process at the moment is that some of the six different sizes of discs that will cover Matrimandir are not yet ready. The stainless steel discs are manufactured in Poona near Mumbai, and the particular size discs we need at the top arrived late." What means 'soon'? I nudge. "Sort of difficult to say," replies John. "It takes the gilding workshop on average one day to cover a disc with the glass-gold sandwich tiles. In all, over

1400 discs will be needed, so the gilding will take about three years. We expect these 200 discs to be installed during the next months. But it will take another two to three years to have the full work completed. The crane on top will go as soon as we have reached the middle level, as it cannot be used to fix discs below it."

While we walk around the building, a flock of pigeons alights. "The pigeons are probably under the impression that we are building an apartment complex for them," observes John wryly. "We have birds perching and nesting all the time. And then there are the bees and the bats. The rock bees have proven impervious to our efforts to remove them; they keep coming back. They have demonstrated their ability to glue their hives onto any surface, even onto plain smooth glass. We continue to remove the hives with a vacuum cleaner at night, but it promises to be a long battle. And the bats have moved from the inside of the Matrimandir to the inside of the larger petals. We can only deal with them when the work on the petals is finished."

Work on the petals is continuing steadily. The main structures of all the large petals were finished a couple of years ago. The outsides of these petals are now being covered with red Agra stone and grass. The walls of the winding corridor that connect the meditation rooms in the petals are being covered with a mosaic of red Agra stone, with a different pattern in each petal. "Two of the egg-shaped meditation rooms remain to be built. One room, named Generosity, is in an advanced state of completion. Each room will have a different colour, in

accordance with indications given by Mother. The colour of Generosity is violet, and we attempt to obtain this colour by using successive layers of paint," explains John.

Work on the minor outer petals is also progressing speedily. "We can finish ten of the twelve small petals soon," says John. "The remaining two petals will have to wait, as the workshops are in their way. Work on them can only start in about three years from now."

Three years. It seems a long time. "But we will need the same amount of time for the inner skin," says John. "The glass colour of the inner skin is now realised. We have worked on samples to finalise it. Now it will be fused onto triangular pieces of glass, in the large gas-fired oven already built for the purpose. The pieces will be laminated for safety. We are also studying the texture of the glass, as Roger does not want a completely smooth finish."

There is also a lot of activity on the first and second levels of the Matrimandir. On the floor of the first level, a mosaic of grey and white marble is being laid. "The steps leading into Matrimandir will be executed in a greyish granite. Where one enters the building, the granite will blend into a greyish marble and then into a mosaic of white and grey marble." A rather narrow opening gives access to the staircase leading to the second level. "The staircase itself is being clad in pure white marble. On the second level one enters a large open space surrounded by the salmon-orange coloured glass of the inner skin,

with two ramps like a double helix leading to the Chamber. The symbolism is that of a progressive initiation and purification as you approach the chamber."

But there are more symbols on the second level. There is the symbol of the Mother, made in white marble in the centre of the staircase, on which a last detailed work is being done. In each of the four ribs is the symbol of Sri Aurobindo—though the lotus and the water in the square are still missing. Then there are the symbols of water and fire. "Roger's idea is that water will cascade into a small pool in each of the four ribs, and there will be a symbolic structure at the beginning of each ramp, which will always be lit from inside."

The view from the top of Matrimandir as always, is breathtaking. Stretches of the oval, the road that separates the inner gardens from 'the park' or outer gardens, are clearly visible. "There will be a small water channel between the oval and the park," says John, "and we will soon start some experiments. The inner gardens, by the way, are increasingly the focus of our attention these days. Final contouring is going on, and we are studying how to do the infrastructure: the drainage, the water supply, and the illumination, with an eye to making a sample garden in the not too distant future. Mother has said that the gardens are as important as the Matrimandir itself, but so far we have not put sufficient energy into them. The main reason is lack of funds. For the building, there is a more or less regular inflow of money. But for the gardens not enough significant funding has come. We esti-

The New York Times, June 10, 1999

"Scientists have discovered to their surprise that a haze of air pollution about the size of the United States covers the Indian Ocean in the wintertime, and they say it may have important implications for global climate and the regional environment of both Asia and the tropical ocean. The brownish haze is composed of several kinds of minute by-products from the burning of fossil fuels, for industry and transportation. The scientists say these elements, including soot and sulphur droplets, are blown out over the ocean from the Indian subcontinent, China and Southeast Asia during the winter monsoon, when prevailing winds sweep down from the Himalayas and out to sea. In the late spring and summer the winds revert as part of the summer monsoon and blow the haze black across the land, where it combines with monsoon rains and falls out of the atmosphere as acid rain."

* From an article by William K. Stevens "Enormous Haze found over Indian Ocean."

mate that for the completion of the project in its entirety another 15 to 20 crores (4 to 5 million US dollars) will be needed, of which 9 to 10 crores are needed for the gardens and surrounding park. This amount includes the building of a reception pavilion and houses for guardians."

Still standing near the crane, we notice the dirty streaks on the outer skin. "It is like a coat of black powdery particles spread over the top of the Matrimandir," explains John. "This is quite recent; it started about a year and a half ago. We thought at first it was a fungus, but the scientists in Germany to whom we sent some samples for analysis, told us that it is just plain air pollution. [See box on p.4.] Regular cleaning will be necessary and a system of high pressure water lines to the top will be installed. We had covered the ivory coloured Kemperol waterproofing material with a white polyurethane paint," continues John, "but this white paint, though smoother than the Kemperol, is not sufficiently easy to clean. So presently we are looking for a better paint which won't let the soot stick to it."

From the top we go down underneath Matrimandir, where a marble lotus pond is planned. Benches set into the four pillars will enable people to contemplate Matrimandir from below, as well as the lotus in the pond symbolising the Avatar. "This is the coolest place in all Auroville," says John.

Carel

The significance of August 15th

August 15th is Sri Aurobindo's birthday. It is also the day on which, in 1947, India achieved independence. But few people realise how this date was chosen. Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India, was charged with the task of handling the independence negotiations. In June 1947, after exhausting sessions at which the British Government's proposals were finally agreed to by all parties involved. Mountbatten called a news conference. During the course of it, an Indian journalist asked Mountbatten if he had decided upon the actual date of the transfer of power. "Yes," he replied, and paused. He then stated it would be 15th August.

The British Government as well as his own staff were horrified—he had not consulted them (or anybody else!) and they considered it impossible to pass all the necessary legislation in such a short time. But the British Prime Minister allowed the date to stand. When Mountbatten was asked why he had chosen this date, he said it came to him as if by inspiration. Later he explained this had been the day, in 1943, when he had been appointed Supreme Allied Commander in the Far East.

It wasn't only the British Government and all other parties to the negotiations whom Mountbatten failed to consult: he had also failed to consider the astrological perspective. When Indian astrologers looked

ahead, they discovered that that particular day in 1947 was very inauspicious. One of them wrote to him, "For the love of God don't give independence to India on 15th August, 1947. If floods, droughts, massacres and chaos ensue, it is because India will have been born on a day cursed by the stars." Mountbatten felt that "the astrologers are rather tiresome", but even the secular Nehru did not wish to offend them. Fortunately, it was discovered that midnight on the 14th August was astrologically suitable... which is why India officially became free at 00.00 hours on the 15th.

For Sri Aurobindo the fact that India's Independence Day fell on his birthday was meaningful. In the message he wrote for All India Radio which was broadcast on the 14th August, he remarked, "I take this coincidence (of dates), not as a fortuitous accident, but as the sanction and seal of the Divine Force that guides my steps on the work with which I began life, the beginning of its full fruition."

But August 15th has further significance. It is, for example, the day in 1940 that Hitler set himself for the final conquest of Europe. When he heard that Hitler had chosen 15th August as the date on which he would broadcast the collapse of Britain from Buckingham Palace, Sri Aurobindo responded, "That's a clear indication, if any indication was necessary, that he is the

enemy of our work." Sri Aurobindo had already remarked that Hitler was the instrument of an *asura* who was trying to prevent the supramental descent. A disciple therefore asked, "Is it that he (Hitler) fears that a descent might take place on August 15th which might make his work more difficult?" Sri Aurobindo replied, "This force does not believe in Divine descent, but it is a sort of challenge that, 'I will finish my first decisive victory before August 15th.' That shows the nature of the conflict."

Finally, Roman Catholics celebrate the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (the day on which Mary ascended in

her body into heaven) on 15th August. When Mother was asked if there was a connection between the Feast and the date of Sri Aurobindo's birth, she replied, "Yes. And he has also said it himself. The Assumption of the Virgin Mary is the divinisation of Matter. And this is the aim of the last Avatar."

Alan (with thanks to Gilles G. who provided the documentation)

Sources:

Entretiens (Talks by the Mother); *Mountbatten* by Philip Ziegler; *Freedom at Midnight* by Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre; *India and the World Scene* by Amal Kiran; *Evening Talks* by A.B.Purani

The Auroville International meeting this year took place in the Pestalozzi International Village, near Hastings in England from July 6th to 11th. The AVI U.K. team introduced the theme as follows: "The theme of this year's meeting is 'youth', and we particularly welcome our younger Auroville generation whose visions and ideas urgently need to be heard and heeded, since they are of utmost importance for the future of Auroville. We need to listen, and to learn, to encourage, and to be encouraged."

Attracted by the theme, a number of Auroville youth were present in the meeting: there were Auroville-born and raised AuroAngiras, AuroKripa, AuroTaranti, AuroVici, Durgaura and Sourya, all of whom participated actively. Here are excerpts from the daily email reports sent out during the meeting:

TUESDAY 6th: Mr. Maurice Philips, director of the Pestalozzi Village, gave us a dynamic introduction to this remarkable organisation, where three of the Auroville kids have resided while studying in nearby Hastings. After this the people present introduced themselves, and it was found that Joy Calvert, once the light and dynamic force of AVI U.K. and even of AVI in general, was sorely missed.

WEDNESDAY 7th: The morning session opened with a recording of Mother reading her 1969 New Year message and a long meditation. Barbara and Michael Bonke gave a technical and practical presentation of the Matrimandir focused on the developments of the last two years. In a side room they had set up a model of how the inner

skin will look so that we could get an idea. Later on, the subject of the Matrimandir was opened for discussion. The majority of the questions and comments centred on the relationship of the youth to Matrimandir. Barbara and Michael invited the community to become involved in the project, pointing out that there was plenty of work to be done in the gilding workshop.

In the afternoon, Lisbeth gave an overview of Auroville Schools. Now that there is a Board of Education, exchange programmes with the international community and various other educational projects will become more feasible. In the evening Paula Murphy gave us a story-telling performance which she did with great talent.

THURSDAY 8th: Another beautiful day greeted the assembled. The day began with a recording of Mother's voice reading from Sri Aurobindo's *The Mother*, and a powerful silence. Angiras then gave an update about the planned AV2000 gathering of Auroville Youth. Some 70 young people-out of the 250 who were contacted are making the attempt to come to Auroville from the last week of December through the new year. Many will gather at the Youth Center and Evergreen, in homes of Aurovilians, and in tents on top of the Visitor's Center: a welcome invasion to bring in the end of the 20th century and the beginning of a new millennium.

Auroville International meets in the U.K.

We then broke into small groups to discuss "Youth Topics". Each of these was chaired by one of the Auroville youth attending, who answered a number of questions with clarity and frankness. One of the ideas emerging out of the discussions was that of forming an Auroville Youth Council: Aurotaranti and Angiras are writing a detailed report and will publish it later. In the evening, a delightful unedited video by Mauna and Mario took the viewers through various new developments in Auroville. We also saw the excellent 'Body Awareness' video of the unique work done with the children of Transition School.

FRIDAY 9th: After the silent opening, there were further reports from the centres. An interesting development is that certain centres are considering setting up Advisory Boards of eminent citizens in their countries as a means of supporting the centres in their work and of making Auroville better known. The initiative was taken by AVI Germany, who recently inaugurated their Advisory Board. This session also formed a sub-group that will look into the creation of a website for the centres which will be linked to the Auroville site.

In the afternoon, AuroKripa, member of the Auroville Working Committee, made a presentation on the Master Plan and the Land Use Plan, and the different avenues explored to secure the land for

Auroville and its bio-region. Judith added up-to-date information. A great brain storming began, and quite a few good ideas came through.

SATURDAY 10th: During the morning session of this very interesting and intense day, the General Assembly met to vote in the new members of the AVI Association for the next two years. Warmly thanked for her inspired and skilful guidance, Mia Berden is stepping down from her position of Chairperson to be replaced by Wolfgang Schmidt-Reinecke of AVI Germany. Julian Lines (USA East) has taken Wolfgang's place as Vice-Chairman, Martin Littlewood (U.K.) has agreed to continue to be Secretary, while Alain Grandcolas (France) will continue to be Treasurer. Tine of Aurogreen is going to take Mauna's place as Auroville's representative (provided the Working Committee agrees), while Mauna will stay on as co-opted Board member for the first year while working in Tine. Several other members-at-large were taken on to the Board, so that presently a group of twelve is monitoring AVI's further development.

Next year's meeting will be hosted by AVI Germany, in the 'Lebensgarten' community in Steyerberg near Hannover. The Lebensgarten is an eco-village connected to the Global Eco-village Network (GEN). One suggestion for the theme of the meeting is 'international understanding'.

A more detailed report of this year's meeting and reports from the various AVI Centres and liaison addresses can be obtained from <avi@auroville.org.in>

A book of photographs called *Auroville: A Dream*, by Ireno Guerici, has recently been published. In black and white, Auroville's many moods are captured, or rather, as Alan says in the introduction, "suggested". Indeed, from the first surreal image of the Auroville forest at dawn to the last image of Lakshminarayan at a seminar, there is a dreamy quality to the use of light and shadow, of unintrusive middle distance, with hardly any close-ups. Every image is in context: with nature, with the group, with the community. Ireno has a gift for capturing that sense of participation... You feel from the photos that Aurovilians participate in each other's lives. Children appear in almost every shot, from the sports ground to the school bus, riding merrily along a forest road or simply being kids in a group of adults. We see parents and children in harmony, as if Auroville was a place

where adults and kids are full of energy, playfulness, concentration, fun. There is no anger, no violence, no sadness even: attention to work, and an equal attention to play seem to fill the lives of the people here. Is it a dream... or the reality? We know it is real because we can see the pictures. Ireno has succeeded in capturing the moment, but also something else: the dream behind that moment.

Jill

Auroville: A Dream, by Ireno Guerici. 124 photos, with explanatory text in English, French, German and Italian. Price: US \$30 (or the equivalent in other currencies) plus \$10 surface airmail. (From the sale of each book Rs 360 will be donated to the Land Fund.) Cheques should be made out to "Auroville Fund (Ireno's photo book)" and sent to Ireno's Photo Book, c/o CSR Office, Auroshilpam, Auroville 605101, India.



Auroville: A Dream

A BOOK OF PHOTOGRAPHS BY IRENO GUERCI



Echoes of Ramayana

I remember hot, summer afternoons, as a child, and my mother reading to me and my brothers, Valmiki's *Ramayana* from thirteen ponderous volumes. My brothers and I, wide-eyed at the exploits of valorous kings and beautiful, strong-willed maidens...

I remember community celebrations of Ramlila: the entire neighbourhood staying up for the night to continuously recite, or even enact, the *Ramayana* of Valmiki.

I remember the whole nation being held captive by a popular serialization of *Ramayana* on the television. Streets, market places, booking counters at the railway stations would empty out for that one hour each Sunday when everybody made a beeline for the nearest television set to watch the enactment of the story in Sankritised Hindi, complete with hymns from Valmiki.

And yet, this ancient epic, like much else of our heritage, is losing its hold on modern India where children and adults alike are glued to the vapid soap operas of the West currently screened on the idiot-box. The present urban generation of India is being moulded more by imported values from the West than by her age-old spiritual wisdom.

In this context, I find *The Legend of the Descent of the Ganges*, brought out this year by Editions Auroville Press International and the fifth book in their Vande Mataram series, a worthy attempt to revive the ancient wisdom of India and infuse it into our present culture.

Originally published in French as *La Legende de la Descente du Gange*, the story has been translated by Christine Devin from Valmiki's *Ramayana* which indeed, as mentioned in the editorial note, forms the fount of all other versions of the legend. The rock sculptures at Mahabalipuram in South India, executed in the mid-seventh century A.D., also include an immense panel in bas-relief depicting this historic story, and beautiful black and white pictures of this panel taken by Olivier Barot are used to illustrate the text. Scholars and laymen alike will find the "Notes" on Valmiki's *Ramayana*, appended at the end of the text, interesting and infor-

THE LEGEND OF THE DESCENT OF THE GANGES



FROM THE RAMAYANA OF VALMIKI

modern man, having "poisoned and polluted earth," longs for. But to me, the single-minded aspiration of Bhagiratha and the descent of heavenly Ganga directly exemplifies the "fixed and unfailing aspiration that calls from below and the supreme Grace from above that answers" that Sri Aurobindo speaks of in his book *The Mother*.

In general, the editors of the Vande Mataram series draw their inspiration from Sri Aurobindo. Recounting Sri Aurobindo's words: "India of the ages is not dead nor has she spoken her last creative word; she lives and has still something to do for herself and the human peoples," the editors take for their goal "to make known a number of texts inspired by a similar vision of new India." The editor's note to this particular text also points out that "to highlight the different aspects of the genius of India is one of the aims of this series, and a "boundless courage" as exemplified in the story of King Bhagiratha is certainly a characteristic feature of this genius." *The Legend of Descent of the Ganges* admirably fulfills both these aims. It has been beautifully brought out in a handy-sized hard-cover edition on quality paper.

The Legend of Descent of the Ganges

Translation from the French: Roger Harris
Editions Auroville Press International
Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India
Price: Rs. 99/-

mative.

Foreigners in India—casual tourists who make the perfunctory visit to the holy river of India without knowing why she is held sacred by Indians as well as Aurovilians accustomed to taking breaks in nearby Mahabalipuram and visiting the famous rock sculptures—will be delighted by this book which details the descent of the Ganges from heaven.

The legend itself, the story of Bhagiratha's tireless penance to bring down Ganga (as the Ganges is known in India) from her celestial abode to the deepest recesses of the Earth and to purify the ashes of the tempestuous sons of Sagar, is replete with layers of symbolic meaning. The editor, drawing inspiration from Rimbaud, chooses to focus on the symbol of the "regenerating waters of redemption" that

FROM SOPHOCLES TO SRI AUROBINDO

Satprem in his latest book to be translated into English, *The Tragedy of the Earth* (an extended essay on Sophocles and Sri Aurobindo, originally intended to be an introduction to his ongoing translation of *Savitri* into French) reflects on the nature of fate as experienced by the protagonists of Sophocles's plays. The same theme is then picked up again, as if following a hidden Vedic or Dionysian thread, but in a wider, deeper vein in *Savitri*. In Sophocles, fate is a lever for knowledge. It confronts his protagonists with the question that can prise open the closed doors of their awareness. Ajax, driven into madness by Athena, Goddess of Knowledge or awareness—"O darkness, that is my light"—seems to serve as a metaphor for our species pushed to a brink of unprecedented change. And if all that needs to change in us seems to become exacerbated—as if we were living in an evolutionary crucible of sorts—nonetheless through and beyond our conflicts, projections and personas, the awareness and touch of a larger, truer self and another reality at times is felt. Mother spoke of the need of a race without ego and likewise in *Savitri* the same great call is heard:

*"O Force-compelled, Fate-driven earth-born race,
O petty adventurers in an infinite world
And prisoners of a dwarf humanity,
How long will you tread the circling tracks of mind
Around your little self and petty things?
But not for a changeless littleness were you meant
Not for vain repetition were you built; (...)
Authors of earth's high change, to you it is given
To cross the dangerous spaces of the soul
And touch the mighty Mother stark awake
And meet the Omnipotent in this house of flesh
And make of life the million-bodied One."*

Bindu

Savitri is Sri Aurobindo's testament in which he has left us detailed descriptions of his own yogic experiences and a revelation of his vision of the luminous supramental future that awaits our earth. Satprem in discussing the sections of *Savitri* that deal with the descent into the unconscious—and the illusion that has to be undone for a new principle of matter to emerge—draws vivid parallels between some of the Vedic hymns and his own experiences. For example, what is described in the Vedas as "The Enfolder", he likens to a leaden cover, born of a collective mental unconscious that encases matter and which has to be chipped away, or melted from within, so that the true principle of matter may emerge and: "The imperishable burn through matter's screen Making this mortal body godhead's robe."

The Tragedy Of The Earth—From Sophocles To Sri Aurobindo, by Satprem, 1998; 215 pp; Rs 120
Available from: Mira Aditi, 62, 'Sriranga' 2nd Main, 1st Cross, T.K. Layout, Saraswathipuram, Mysore, 570009, India.

Roger

Auroville Today provides information about Auroville, an international township in South India, on a monthly basis and is distributed to Aurovilians and friends of Auroville in India and abroad. It does not necessarily reflect the views of the community as a whole.

A LETTER

"...I want to insist on the fact that this will be an experiment, it is for making experiments—experiments, researches, studies..."
The Mother, 30.12.1967

Dear friends from Auroville Today,

Having read Carel's article in your last issue ("School Closures, July '99), I would like to point out some statements made by him that need to be clarified. Regarding Miramukhi School for example: as the mother of a teenager who attended this school since age six, I had never been asked to sign any paper, and the team never assured that the school would go up until eighteen when they first began. However, it is only natural that any experiment envisages a continuity and development to achieve its ultimate aims. Regarding their so called "elitist" approach, it is understandable that to make an experiment like the one they have been trying, parents have to be identified with and confident in the process, and there is no question of "policy" when there is an individual case of a child not being accepted or being asked to leave the school. As for publicity, knowing what Sri Aurobindo says about it, it is rather a good point that they are not interested in publicizing their work, and why should any school in Auroville look for publicity?

The fact that Carel subscribes to this kind of criticism shows a lack of impartiality on the subject and confirms the present trend in Auroville to look more and more for security, and I dare

to say that most of the time security and experimentation do not go together, and the only criteria we can apply to evaluate the "success" or "failure" of an experiment is what it adds to bring Auroville closer to its higher ideals. If through experiments we are sincerely trying to call down realities that are in our dreams and aspirations, and if we accept that Auroville itself is an experiment for the materialisation of Mother's vision, why are we so entangled in the littleness of our lives, letting security and Tamas take hold of our beings?

The message conveyed by this article is that of a middle-aged society, carefully measuring its steps, and felling threatened by any attempt that call for radical changes.

But Auroville is something else, and deep in ourselves the flame is burning, and we can say with the ancient seers: "Men hold Agni in them as the increaser of strength"

With you, searching the Truth,
Aryamani
Auroville

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◆Germany: (N.B. new address!) AVI Deutschland, c/o Wolfgang J. Schmidt-Reinecke, Danziger Str. 121, D-10407 Berlin; tel. (0)30-42803150, fax (0)30-92091376; e-mail: wjsavid@aol.com ◆France: AVI France, 6, rue du Cail, 75010 Paris; tel/fax: (33)-1.40364367, email: avifrance@compuserve.com ◆The Netherlands: AVI Nederland, c/o Wim de Jong, Zwanewater 51, 2715 BH Zoetermeer; tel. (31)-79.3210671; email: wimdejong@girinet.nl ◆U.K.: AVI U.K., c/o Martin Littlewood, Canigou, Cot Lane, Chidham, W. Sussex PO18 8SP; tel. (44)-1243.574099; fax: (44)-1243.576792 email: aviuk@compuserve.com ◆U.S.A (1): AVI USA, P.O. Box 877, Santa Cruz CA 95061; tel. (1)-831 425 5620; email: aviusa@aol.com ◆U.S.A (2): Auroville Information Office, PO Box 676, Woodstock NY 12498, tel: (1)914.679.5358, fax: 5853; email: avinfo@aol.com

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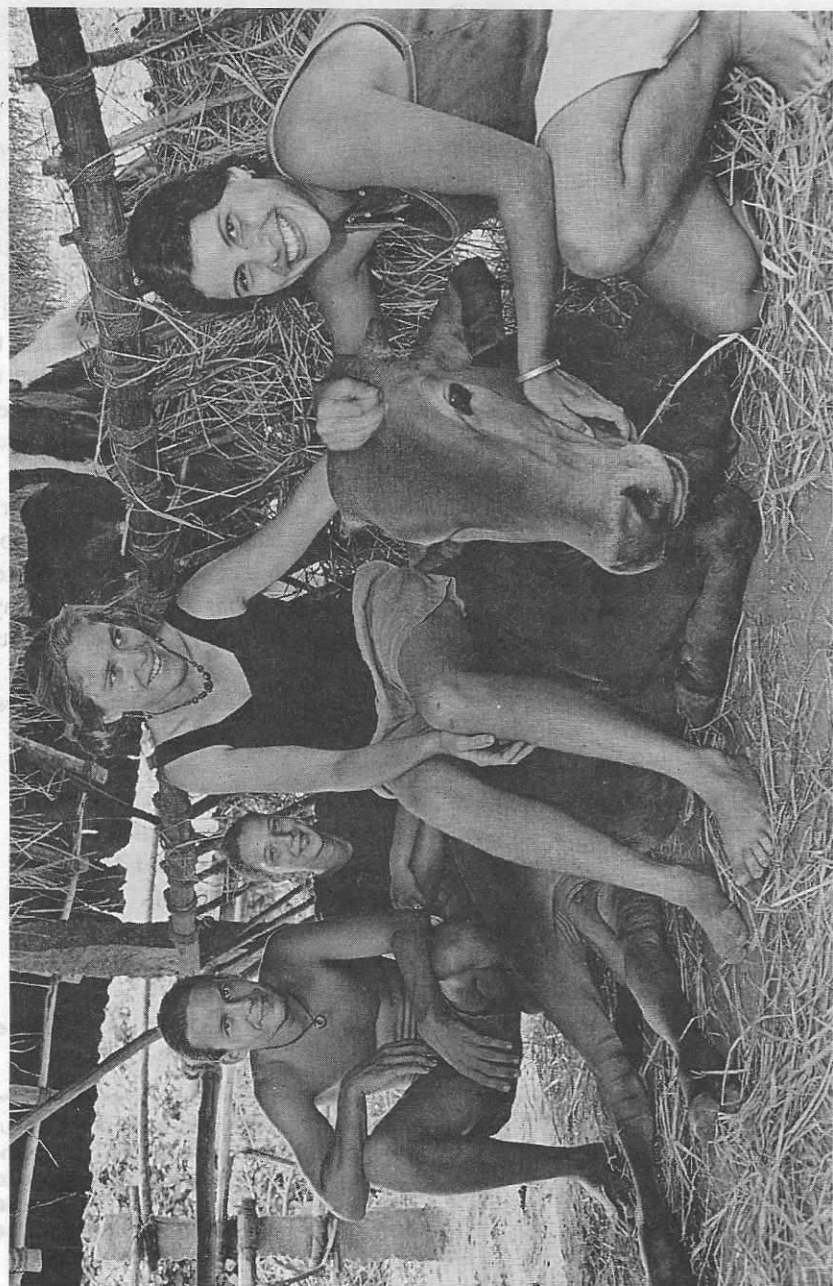
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Savitri

IN THIS ISSUE:

- SRI AUROBINDO'S SAVITRI
- MATRIMANDIR UPDATE
- BOOK REVIEWS
- EVERGREEN COMMUNITY

August 15th, 1999
Number 127



The Evergreenies. From left: Bas, Sara, Bettina, pet bull Kous-Kous and Ayesha

EVERGREEN Profile of a community

The tar road from Edayanchavadi to Kulapalayam is lined on both sides with cashew trees. I know that Evergreen is situated somewhere on the right side of that road near Adventure, but the only sign that you are entering a community is two granite pillars in the middle of cashew trees, with a small mailbox attached to one of them. A windmill sticks out above the trees. After another hundred metres, a cycle shed appears, opposite the open community kitchen. The sweet smell of cashew apples floats through the air, welcoming me.

Evergreen is one of Auroville's youngest communities. When 48 acres of cashew fields were purchased six years ago, Santo looked after them, planting indigenous trees. Last year Bas and Bettina, both in their mid-twenties, were given the opportunity to develop and take care of the land. "We were not so happy with the type of community life in Certitude, and we did not see any way to pursue our interests in farming and reforestation" says Bettina. "Being part of the Forest Group and Green Group, we became aware of the fact that a lot of Auroville land in the greenbelt needed not only work but also protection through creating a presence." Not long after, they were given the opportunity to start with this piece of land, which, due to its location near the planned Success Sanctuary allowed them to expand their vision: the larger half of the Evergreen plot towards the south is on its way to become part of this nature reserve.

"In the beginning it was really a challenge" remembers Bettina. "We put up a tent and a teepee and had to carry water in a jerrycan from Certitude. It was a beautiful experience of a very simple life-style. We were lucky to have the constant company of our faithful watchdogs, without whose help it might not have been so easy to set up camp in the middle of nowhere."

Although they did not have much money to start this community, they got help from several people. "My parents and some friends gave us money", says Bettina, "and in general people were very generous."

Miraculously, money came for drilling a well and then, through Aureka, a windmill was donated. "It is an experimental windmill, complete with meters to check the wind velocity and how much water it pumps."

The first permanent house to be started in Evergreen was Nevi's, but before it was finished she moved to another community with her new partner.

At present, besides five dogs, a puppy, two cats, four horses, and one bull, five young people aged between 17 and 27 are living there: Bas and Bettina, Sara, Ayesha, and Shiraz.

The main aims of the community members are land regeneration work and the development of a self-sustainable community. Daily activities include growing fruits and vegetables, and other daily chores involving the maintenance of the place and care of the animals. Evergreen also offers stabling facilities, horse and

"bull" riding classes, and other related activities. Being predominantly still a monoculture of cashew trees, a lot of the work revolves around the cashew tree—harvesting the nuts, de-nutting the fruits, pruning the trees, selling the wood, etc. Through the sale of cashew nuts and wood the land supports most of its own needs, like the workers' wages, fence repairs, tree planting, and other minor things. Most of the work in the area designated for the future sanctuary is supported by various bunding and indigenous tree planting projects under the forest group.

Sara, Bas, and Bettina were all born in Europe and came to Auroville when they were teenagers. Ayesha and Shiraz, who recently joined the community, first heard about Auroville when they attended Kodaikanal International School. "I was born and raised in Bombay, a concrete jungle, and when I first entered Auroville I was blown away by the greenness of the forest!" says Ayesha. "I love to live and work here, and I value very much the contact with the other community members. I like the fact that there is so much space, and because Evergreen is a new place, I can actively participate in its development rather than just plug into an existing place."

Sara, the youngest, joined because she likes to work with horses.

"All life is yoga—an inspirational philosophy," says Shiraz. "Auroville has provided me with a space, for now, to be able to experiment with expanding ideas of freedom through life."

Besides his responsibilities at Evergreen, Bas works as a software programmer. "I still have an office in our old house in Certitude, but we hope to be able to find the money for a solar system, so that I can work on my computer here. The new building is almost ready for it."

At that point they all start dreaming. What would they do if they received a large amount of money? "Build overflow tanks", says Bas. "Right now we have just a small tank which overflows when there is a lot of wind, and which is too small when there is not enough wind; for developing a place one needs sufficient water at all times." "Guest facilities", dreams Bettina. "Biogas!" adds Sarah. "A solar system. "And lots of good energy to materialize all this," laughs Ayesha.

After tea and freshly roasted peanuts, Bettina showed me around, while all the others grab hosepipes and watering cans, watering the tree nursery and vegetable plots. We tour the capsules, the horses, Nevi's half-finished house. "Maybe we can get some money through a project to finish it before the youth gathering at the end of this year. Then we can have around ten more people staying here at that time," says Bettina. "We are open to people joining and helping out because there is so much work to be done here."

Evergreen, a new community—still in a very primitive state, but beautiful in its ruggedness and very peaceful. When I drive away, two partridges cross my path, not scared by my presence. Then I hit the tar road and find myself back in the 'civilized' world.

Tineke