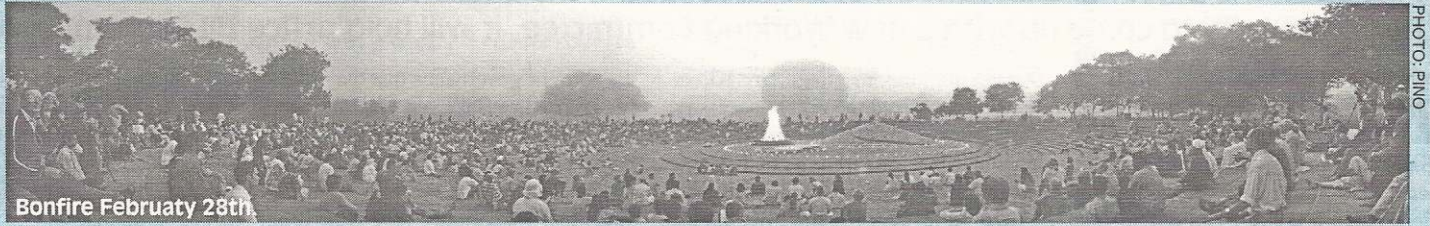


Auroville Today

APRIL 2002, No.159

MAIN THEME: Asia Urbs Conference pages 1, 4 and 5

- Partnerships for progress?
- A marriage agency
- Delegates' impressions
- Cities of consciousness



Bonfire February 28th

The Asia Urbs conference, "City-Networking for a Sustainable Future and Human Unity", which brought together thirty delegates from India and a similar number from Europe, was the first major international conference to happen in Auroville for over 17 years. As for the International Youth Year conference in 1985, Auroville rose to the occasion. Bharat Nivas, the Pavilion of India where the major part of the conference was to take place, was physically transformed for the event. The area was landscaped and beautified, the buildings were resurfaced and repainted and helpful road signs were put up. A

support team of over 100 Aurovilians wrote letters, answered telephones, prepared reports, organized transport and food and even a non-polluting transport demonstration (complete with elephant) among a thousand other things. Around Bharat Nivas exhibitions featured various cities from within and outside India, and a number of similar tented mini-pavilions showed some of Auroville's most significant achievements in different fields of interest and endeavour. Above all there was an atmosphere of warmth, friendliness and unity, created by the assembly of so many committed people from around the world, and

so many smiling faces.

As is normal, there were glitches and breakdowns in communication but, somehow, whatever the chaos and panic behind the curtain, everything continued smoothly out front – so much so that one delegate from the West, well seasoned in such affairs, stated that he'd never attended a better-organized conference. As an opportunity for Aurovilians who didn't know each other, or who didn't normally work together, to unite in a spirit of service the conference was a gift. But what of the background to Asia Urbs and what of the proceedings themselves? And how did the participants respond to their brief encounter with Auroville and the Aurovilians?

In this issue we provide a glimpse of a fascinating few days in late February...



POSTER: RAHUL

Partnerships for Progress?

During the last decade, new forms of international cooperation, aid and sustainable development have been experimented with. One of those experiments is Asia Urbs, an initiative of the European Commission. Asia Urbs is based upon the premise that cities and large towns have common or related problems but that often they don't share their experience or accumulated wisdom. Consequently, the Asia Urbs programme was set up to promote partnerships between cities in Europe and Asia which would lead to long-term cooperation in areas like energy generation, waste management, urban planning, environmental protection and heritage preservation. To date, forty-five partnerships exist between European and South or East Asian cities: ten of these partnerships are with Indian cities.

Many of these partners, both European and Indian, attended the Asia Urbs conference in Auroville, along with a number of other cities and towns which are actively seeking partners. What common themes emerged? One was the inability of governments and State Sector enterprises alone to cope with many of the maladies of modern urbanism – social disintegration, ethnic violence, drugs and crime, pollution, the destruction of the environment etc. A key response here was devolution – devolving power to local communities to allow them to make decisions about the issues which affect them most. This can take many forms. In Vyara, a town in Gujarat, the local citizens group (made up of 80% of the electorate) is represented on all important civic bodies. Under the influence of this participatory local government, only 22% of the total income of the town goes to staff expenses (45% is the norm in India), elected representatives pay

for their own travel and upkeep even while on city business, and tax recovery has averaged 95% over the past three years. All this has allowed this small town (population 36,000) to construct a swimming pool and health center open to all citizens, an old peoples' recreation center, and a 70-bed hospital. Last year, Gujarat was the scene of a massive earthquake. Sandeep Virmani used his presentation to demonstrate how people's power in Kutch has helped make the reconstruction process appropriate to local needs. In many villages, for example, the village committee (containing many women) surveys the housing needs, receives grants from the government, then purchases and distributes construction materials to the inhabitants, many of whom help in the design and construction of their own houses. In one village, 350 families chose five from among themselves to form a judicial 'Panch' which they empowered to settle all disputes.

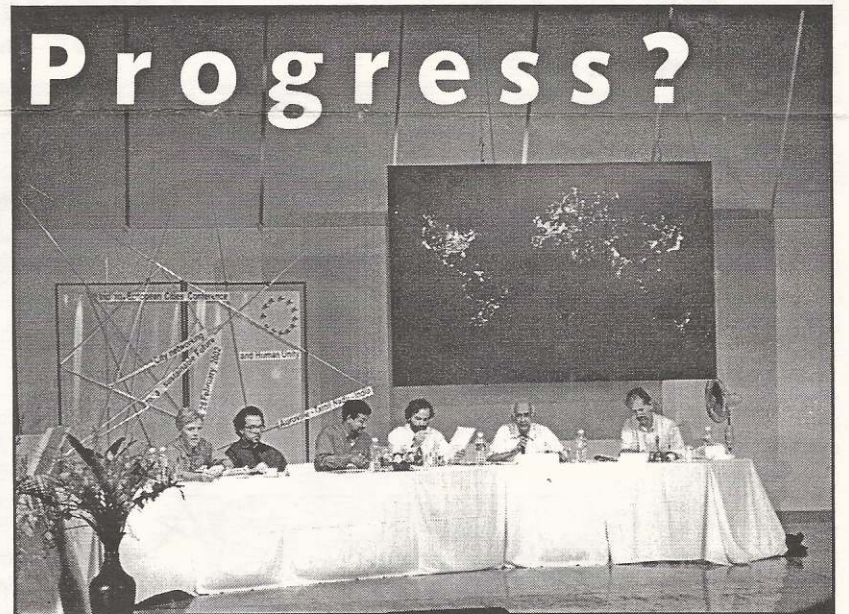
The process of devolution has been encouraged by the 74th Amendment to the Indian Constitution under which the government created, in 1994, a 'Third Tier' of local government inspired by the old 'Panchayat Raj' system. This has not only allowed municipalities more control over their own development, it also has encouraged some of them to devolve certain responsibilities to their citizens. Meanwhile, Hans Elemans, mayor of a suburb of Rotterdam in the Netherlands, has initiated a 'bottom-up' approach to solving racial tensions, high unemployment, poor housing and other social problems. The municipality actively elicits ideas from marginalized sections of the population about how their situation can be improved. It then tries to act upon them, like demolishing 30% of the old tenements and building affordable but more varied accommodation. For other European cities represented at the conference devolution was more about transfer-

ring State-run projects to the private sector.

The trend towards devolution has been accelerated by the revolution in Information Technology (I.T.). This has vastly increased the possibility of disseminating information and of on-line debate, thus allowing more people than ever before to feel they are 'plugged in'. Anna Lisa Boni from Brussels expanded upon this in her presentation on 'telecities'. This is an open electronic network through which over 120 European cities share experiences and help each other develop practical solutions to problems. I.T. is also going down big in India where the first step in urban renewal and development is often the computerization of existing records. In towns like Guntur, Ramagundam and Mirzapur this has facilitated the collection of taxes – a major concern for cash-starved urban centers. I.T. is also being used to increase munic-

ipal transparency: in the above towns, the progress of complaints, building permissions, municipal projects etc. can be tracked on the municipal website. Another major theme of the conference was sustainable development, or development which enhances rather than exploits the environment. In this context, Jan Dictus presented the 'Eco-Business Plan for Vienna'. The 240 participating companies learn about environmental audits, about how they can increase productivity and profitability through environmentally-sensitive practices, and they receive subsidies to assist them in the 'greening' of their businesses. So far the saving to Vienna Corporation has been 90,000 kg of non-hazardous waste, over 12,000 kg of carbon dioxide emissions and 27,000 hours of kilowatt energy. Chennai is Vienna's partner in this project. In Chennai some of the

► 5



Panel presentation in the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium of Bharat Nivas

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Chairman's push results in new Working Committee

It required the personal intervention of Dr. Kireet Joshi, the chairman of the Auroville Foundation, for the community to come up with a new Working Committee. It will hold office till September 10th.

For the last few months, Auroville's internal organization has come close to being dysfunctional: the Executive Committee had ceased to exist and the Working Committee had been reduced to one person. The community was waiting for a new internal organization to take shape to remedy the situation. But when, in a General Meeting on February 13th, the sixth draft of a proposal for a revised internal organization (*Towards a Divine Anarchy*), failed to achieve consensus, it became clear that the wait was not over. Would the dysfunctional situation continue as well? Dr. Kireet Joshi, the Chairman of the Auroville Foundation, strongly objected. He insisted that the community select a new Working Committee immediately. He therefore convened on February 22nd an extraordinary meeting of the Residents' Assembly. A subsequent public notice from the office of the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation allayed fears that the Chairman would intervene in the 'internal workings' of the community. Stressing that the current situation has risen to the level of an emergency, the object of the meeting was to encourage the Residents' Assembly to take up its responsibilities and form the Working Committee immediately, so that the process to come to a revised organizational structure could continue unimpeded.

Addressing the meeting, Dr. Kireet Joshi emphasized the urgent necessity for Auroville to get its act together. He reiterated that the Auroville Foundation Act, at the explicit request of the then Prime Minister of India Ms. Indira Gandhi, was drawn up in such a way that the Government does not control Auroville and that the members of Auroville are free to develop Auroville according to the Charter of Auroville. "There was," he recounted, "at the time a great pressure to provide in the Act for a committee of non-Aurovilians nominated by the Government to take decisions. I was able to resist this and explained to the Government that the residents of Auroville should be free to decide the manner in which they want to manage their affairs and that the Act should not contain any prescriptions that might curtail the freedom of the experimentation of Auroville. This is based on the ideals which the Sri Aurobindo has put forward in his book *The Human Cycle*, in the chapter *The Ideal Law of Social Development*. This law has never been implemented in world history, and Auroville should be the place where Sri Aurobindo's ideal can become implemented. The Government accepted this argument and that is why the Foundation Act specifies that the residents of Auroville are free to determine the process by which they want to constitute their Working Committee and to determine

the form of governance that they want for Auroville. But even after the Act was passed the attempts to control Auroville from the outside have not diminished. It is for this reason, in the years that I have been here with you, that I have been stressing that an appropriate internal organization should come up in Auroville as a result of which no group, no government pressure, no political party and nobody can have the power to disturb the freedom of the Residents Assembly. It was from this point of view that the Governing Board constituted a Unity Committee which recently produced the document *Towards a Divine Anarchy draft VI* which is now further being discussed by the community. For it has become urgent that the community has its internal organization in place, that it has a clear decision-making process, that decisions have legitimacy and can be implemented. There are many decisions that are not being taken, leading to injustices; there are many problems that remain without solutions; as no decisions are being taken, false developments happen in consequence. This cannot continue. If this situation would continue, the Governing Board will have no other option than one day to take the whole power in its own hands. This Governing Board would not like to do that, as it is very dedicated to this idea of freedom.

While the discussions to come to a suit-

able internal organization should continue, today's immediate need is to have a proper Working Committee in place which would hold office until the community has agreed on a new internal organization."

Dr. Kireet Joshi then made a proposal about how to select a new Working Committee. As voting, in his opinion, leads to polarization, he proposed that each Aurovillian nominates one person and that the persons who receive the highest nominations constitute from amongst themselves the new Working Committee. The Residents' Assembly, after some discussion, amended this proposal to the effect that each Aurovillian bring out two nominations, one for a woman and one for a man, and that the 30 highest nominees endeavor to constitute a gender-balanced Working Committee.

The nomination process started a week later. A total of 1056 forms were distributed to Aurovilians of 18 year and older, but less than 45% of them filled them in. More than 100 people were nominated; but only one person received over 90 nominations, and two persons received between 40 and 55 nominations. None of the others received a significant number of votes. It took two meetings for the top 37 people (position 30 was shared by 8 people) to select from amongst themselves a new Working Committee. Do we want experienced or new people? The



Dr. Kireet Joshi

final choice was a combination of both. The new Working Committee consists of two experienced Aurovilians and of five people new to the job. Four experienced former Working Committee members agreed to act as adjuncts. The other 26 nominated people accepted to act as a support group for the new Working Committee. It was also agreed that this Working Committee will hold office till September 10th, when a new organization should be in place.

Carel.

MATRIMANDIR Magic lights

Walking into the Matrimandir at the moment is like entering fairyland or a magical spaceship. All the small portholes are being covered with colour and then covered with opaque tracing paper. The result is stunning. For many years now, experiments have been going on to try to find the right colour and material of the 'inner skin' of the Matrimandir. The coloured fibreglass triangles of the early nineties were replaced by trials with lighting fixtures, orange-painted beams, and covering the portholes with different coloured materials. Finally it was decided to use coloured glass and a whole workshop was set up to produce the large sheets of orange fused glass (see also AVToday December 1999).

The latest idea is to put coloured glass in the portholes and then cover the inner face of the triangles formed by the beams of the space frame with pure white frosted glass. Methods of frosting the glass are being tested in Germany at present.

In order to get an idea of what the result might be, the portholes are covered with a sheet of spray painted plastic in various gradations of orange, and then covered with tracing paper. On one quarter of the sphere huge sheets of tracing paper have been fixed on the surface of the beams, while on the other three quarters only the portholes have been covered with this paper.

Even though things are still in the experimental stage, one can already get a glimpse of the play of light which one day will set the tone of the atmosphere through which one walk while ascending the ramp to the Inner Chamber.

Tineke

ENVIRONMENT

European Union supports TDEF project

It was 3 years ago that a project began to take shape, in the midst of much ongoing Auroville green-work, to secure major funding for extensive ecosystem management. A proposal was drafted and submitted to the EU, with the help of Martin Littlewood (Auroville International UK) and Greta Jensen (consultant), and has now been approved, with the funds ready and available for the beginnings of project implementation. The total project budget is euros 560,000 to be invested over 3 years,

representing euros 450,000 sanctioned and the rest to be found in additional matching funds. Joss and Anita of Pitchandikulam, Paul, Jaap, Walter, Glenn, Dirk, Mike, Gemma, now joined by Paula (a Newcomer to Auroville), will embody our own pool of human resources. This team from Auroville is enhanced by participation from Mr. Abdul Kareem of FRLHT Bangalore (Foundation for Revitalization of Local Health Traditions), Mr. A.N. Sharma, of the Institute of Rural Management, and Ms. Manjula whose work with Irula tribal women in the Chingleput area has proved very successful. The project is designed to support the planting of 75,000 trees within Auroville, fortifying AV forest gene banks in designated sanctuary areas to

the north and south of the City area, along with bunding and checkdam work needed to combat soil erosion and enhance groundwater percolation. Other aspects directly related to our



Statues of Iyanar, protector of the sacred groves

own development is the partial funding for the new herbarium, under Walter's direction, at the new Botanical Gardens site.

The project also focuses on work in the Auroville bioregion, specifically to the north of Kaluveli Tank and its watershed. The objective is to "bring back forests on forest land", in Joss' words. In the present environmental circumstances only very small pockets of natural TDEF remain in the coastal regions, in patches of reserved forest, sacred groves, and in hillside gullies to elevations of about 500 metres. These latter have survived intact primarily in riparian microclimates, where seasonal streams ensure seed dispersal and natural topography limits access to grazing, cultivation, and fuel wood harvesting. Already in colonial times,

only an estimated 0.1% of this TDEF ecosystem was in evidence. Joss hopes that in 50 years it will be possible to recreate climax tropical dry evergreen forest (TDEF) previously found predominantly along the coast of Tamil Nadu. In order to achieve this aim the project will coordinate and collaborate closely with Tamil Nadu State Forest Department officials. Auroville is already quite advanced in the work of identifying existing remnant species, with already 30 years of input, the most detailed in the last 10 years.

The project hopes to develop a strategy of shared forest management, concentrating efforts of reintroduction and proper management on government reserve lands, *paramboke* lands (common land), temple lands and tank bunds. Methodology will involve identifying the 50 most threatened forest species, continuing botanical surveys of existing species, listing which species are best for reintroduction, devising effective systems of monitoring and implementing approaches to participatory community management. A question that needs addressing is "why have other joint forestry management projects not been successful?" Joss feels that many such projects are too "donor motivated," and the role of good leaders on the local level is of prime importance, to convince local people of the intrinsic value of properly managed resources. Incentives to motivate committed participation take the form of micro projects for income generation: timber and fodder lots, cultivation and sale of medicinal plants, and possibly even eco-tourism.

Near to Marrakanam, adjacent to the village of Kurrupuram, there is an area

of 250 acres of government reserve forest. Nearby there was an additional 200 acres which the forest corporation cleared in 1973 for "commercial forestry", planting eucalyptus, acacia, and some cashew trees. Natural regrowth is significant in these plantations, and there is a possibility that it could become a medicinal plant development area. It is also envisioned to create nearby an "interpretation and training center", displaying aspects of the life sciences, a traditional medicine dispensary, and demonstration and ethno-medicinal gardens. In the nearby reserve forest, students could explore the rich diversity of the TDEF, for example, useful and interesting understory plants, carnivorous insect eating plants, wild ground orchids, and traditional medicinal plants such as elumbhuti, used to help set broken bones.

Jaap, who lives in and helps to manage Auroville's southern sanctuary area, is helping to coordinate the very technical application of global satellite imaging with help from ISRO (Indian Space Research Organization). With this sophisticated tool it will be possible to map the entire Kaluveli bioregion's vegetative and watershed patterns, and apply strategies for inputs taking into account the overall picture. This project component coincides with the interests and co-funding of the Asia Urbs joint cities development project, recently introduced through Auroville's planning office and Aurofuture.

The first step will be a CAMP (conservation assessment management plan) workshop at Pitchandikulam Bio-resource Centre in March, with FRLHT who already have much experience in prioritizing the threat status

of plant species in other south Indian ecosystems.

This Easter, at Findhorn in Scotland, Joss and Paul will present this project at the 'Restore the Earth!' conference hosted by Alan Watson (Trees for Life/ Caledonian forest restoration project).

They will be there to help inspire the world with their vision and dedication to the work of sensitive environmental restoration, locally and globally.

Isha

Pondicherry Heritage Summit 2002

Pondicherry, which over the centuries has been under many different influences, most notably that of the French who occupied the town for almost three hundred years, has retained a unique architectural character. The French colonial and traditional Tamil quarters, divided by the canal, kept their own identity while greatly influencing each other in a positive way, so that a new, intercultural, Franco-Tamil style was born, which remains distinct to this town. However, over the last decades, because of rapid development, real estate speculation, the rising population, commercial pressure, and changes in life styles, this architectural heritage has greatly suffered. Many buildings have been either brought down, abandoned and neglected, or turned into stores. The threat to the remaining architectural heritage of Pondicherry is great, as there still exists no legislation to protect it.

The Pondicherry Heritage Summit 2002, organised by the Pondicherry Government in association with INTACH, was held from the 20th to the 22nd February. The inaugural session significantly took place in the 'Hotel de Ville,' or Town Hall: a grand, public building, which dates back to the French revolution of 1789. The summit was inaugurated by Mr. Jagmohan, Union Minister of Tourism, who came down from Delhi for the occasion.

The focus of the summit was to identify the real issues, which confronted heritage preservation and conservation today. As

most speakers at the inaugural session agreed, the first step to heritage preservation was creating awareness of heritage. It was felt that the public, and also local bodies and the political elite had to be sensitized. Thus they could develop respect for heritage and see that it does not suffer from neglect or misuse. Awareness should start at the school level, so that school children can be mobilized. As Mr. S.K. Misra, INTACH's vice chairman, explained: "Heritage is a legacy of the past, from which we learn and draw inspiration. For the preservation of this rich legacy, the needs and views of the community must be taken into account. This will assure that the conservation and promotion of heritage is sustainable."

Without the government playing an active role, in drawing up measures, without legislation and regulations, the future of heritage looks bleak. There is a need for evolving a national resolution for heritage preservation and conservation and regulating development.

It was suggested that the Pondicherry Government set up a Heritage Committee headed by the Chief Minister, with the ministers and secretaries of tourism and art and culture, as well as experts from INTACH. In this way, the town's unique architectural heritage could be preserved for the sake of posterity. The committee would ideally be broad based and include architects, town planners, as well as citizens.

The possibilities and challenges of cultural and heritage tourism were also looked

into. It was felt that the boulevard city of Pondicherry had great potential, with its history, architecture, spiritual atmosphere and also its landscape and sea-coast.

This type of tourism, which should be promoted, can strengthen heritage preservation by providing funds for conservation. It also makes the local community stakeholders in preservation. Buildings, or parts of them, could be turned into hotels or boutiques, so that they are viable to maintain. Mr. Jagmohan said that the southern Indian states should work together to develop tourism.

It was also expressed that the very perception of heritage had to change. Not only architectural, but also cultural and natural heritage must be protected and promoted. The problems of funding for conservation were looked into. It was clear one could not depend solely on the government in this matter. Funds could be mobilized from the community, and business corporations could also be motivated to spend on restoration.

"Heritage belongs to all of us and provides us with our unique cultural identity. It makes us understand the nature of the past. Heritage is not just of local value, it belongs to all of mankind. Therefore it is the responsibility of all to preserve it," stressed Mrs. C. T. Misra, member secretary of INTACH.

On the last day of the summit, the Pondicherry minister for tourism said that restoration works on the heritage buildings under government control – the state being one of the biggest owners of old

real estate in Pondicherry – would be taken up.

Mr. Jagmohan said the central administration had charted a new policy, mainly to encourage tourism, which would be issued in parliament shortly. Speaking of Pondicherry, he said the territory had a great potential to attract tourists. He also stated that the Roman port town of Arikamedu would be further excavated and developed as a centre of past civilizations, enabling scholars and archaeologists to undertake research work.

"The Central Government will support heritage preservation and conservation. We will extend all our help", he said. "This is a challenge we all must face together."

Emmanuelle

The Pondicherry INTACH branch, set up in 1990 and headed by Aurovilian architect Ajith Koujalgi, has listed and documented some 1300 heritage buildings and zones in Pondicherry. Stretches of historic streets have been declared as heritage zones. INTACH tries to create public awareness through photographic exhibitions and seminars and provides a brochure with a map of the historical parts of the town. A conservation cell has been set-up to assist those who want to restore or redesign old buildings. INTACH promotes that building facades are preserved as well as street's character. The cell also advises how modern architecture can harmonize with the style of the town area.

COMMUNITY

The Grand Tour of Auroville

A personal take on the Auroville introduction tour by Danish guest editor Janne.

After having been in Auroville for 4 weeks, I – a Danish anthropology student who has decided to make Auroville the topic of my master's thesis – signed up for the Auroville introduction, anxious to find out more about Auroville, and to see how the community represents itself to curious guests. Paradoxically enough, and quite contrary to my other travelling experiences it seemed that in Auroville going on a "Tourist Tour" was the way to 'get into' the community, and the way to get a peek behind the scenes...

Slightly worried about the amount of bicycling I would be subjected to I reported at Centre Guesthouse 9 am Wednesday morning. Here I was met by Ross – our guide for the next 3 days, and 12 other inquisitive guests. He told us to "pat ourselves on the backs" for being among the few of the many guests of Auroville who go to the trouble (and the sweaty bicycle rides) to join "The Tour". After a series of frivolous name games (where Ross introduced himself as "Relax Ross" and I felt the peer pressure after not being able to come up with anything rhyming with Janne), it seemed that "joyful Jeff," "jumping Jigma," "powerful Pamela" "beautiful Bea" and the rest of us had been transformed into a group. This initiation left me a bit worried about the next 3 days, and not just because of the cycling...

"Tomorrow is a special day", Ross informed us: "Mother's birthday". So he suggested to us that we should go for Dharsan in the Ashram. This sounded like a good idea to most of us, including me, until it dawned on me that this meant getting up at 5:30 am with the prospect of spending about 2 hours (pre-breakfast) in a queue. Apparently consensus rules in Auroville, and we got on with the first days program. Ross told us his story and we watched a refreshingly good film on Auroville which emphasised the diversity and the difficult process of building the city rather than

offering a glossy promotion piece. The viewing of this film generated a general discussion on Auroville, people's impressions, and Ross answered questions patiently. Joseph joined us and delivered an insightful talk on integral yoga. Impressively he managed the rather difficult task of mediating the essence of the works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother without trivialising or over-simplifying it.

After lunch we went on the dreaded cycles – all nicely in a long line. I couldn't help but feeling slightly uncomfortable and acutely aware of my tourist status, but tried to realise that I needed to detach myself from my ego and pride. The cycle paths were lovely though, and before we reached the Bharat Nivas I felt almost liberated from my struggling ego. Ross showed us around, and we concluded the day with a tea in the Visitors' Centre. The first day had definitely given us a broader view of the different components of Auroville and had been a needed exercise in both cycling and sociability for me.

Thursday 5:30 am. Amazingly I was the first to arrive but not surprisingly the bus was late. It didn't make any difference as it turned out, because it seemed that half of Tamil Nadu had had the same clever idea of getting there "before everyone else" and we ended up waiting for 4 hours to spend 4 minutes walking in a line through the chambers. I must admit that strange noises from my stomach drowned any higher feelings of delayed Divine presence I might have had. The most rewarding aspect of the whole thing was the atmosphere and the fact that I actually stuck it out despite my initial temptation to escape to the Indian Coffee House for a delicious dosai when I realised what was in store. It felt good afterwards though, and I had a feeling that Ross was proud of me, and that it made up for my lack of enthusiasm and creativity in the name game.

So far so good.



"Relax Ross" guides the Auroville tour.

Darshan over, lunch in the Indian Coffee House (no more dosais though) and we headed back to Auroville. Next stop was a visit to Adventure community where we had tea and were shown around. It could have felt very much like visiting a human zoo. "Oohhh...so this is how they (Real Aurovilians) live. What do they eat? Can we feed them? Take pictures?" But in fact it was a nice experience. We were talking to the residents, and got a good impression of how communities differ within Auroville and of how the logistics of communal life are organised. My second day had been a bit of a trial of patience and endurance, but I felt that I passed, and that my understanding of Auroville had been broadened considerably.

Friday morning we visited the exhibit of the Matrimandir garden drawings. This led to talk about the disagreements over the Matrimandir issue and gave us an idea of the problems Auroville is facing. It seemed that small peeks behind the scenes, where the stage directors and actors were employing different props – and maybe even following different translations of the same manuscript, were replacing our innocent approach to Auroville slowly but surely. The beautiful orchids outside made a long lasting impression and to me they somehow glossed over the contradictions of Auroville, or at least made them seem

immaterial.

Afterwards we cycled up to Annadana Seed exchange where we spent some time packing seeds for Afghanistan. By this time there was a bit of sulking going on.... "Do we pay Rs 1,000 for a Tour of Auroville or to work or queue in Pondy?" Ross, staying appropriately relaxed, kindly offered to add Saturday to the program and everyone was happy. All issues resolved we visited the farm in Revelation and discussed the ecological work done in Auroville. In Swedam community we saw amazing houses and got an impression of a community life very different from the one we encountered in Adventure. After a lovely bicycle ride (I really got into this cycling after all) we enjoyed our lunch in Kottakarai Guest House. Unfortunately circumstances prevented me from following the group to Vérité, Ross' home, and to the Saturday tour of the communities around Solar Kitchen. Luckily I have the time to further explore Auroville, but I feel that, with the help of Relax Ross, the "Real Aurovilians" we met (the advert for the introduction is up to scratch) and the group of "joyful, beautiful, powerful and jumping etc." fellow tourists, I had been offered a promising beginning... as well as a sore bum.

In brief

Master Plan Progress

The Auroville Master Plan has been presented to the village Panchayats (councils) of Irumbai and Bommaiarpalayam. The Panchayats called for the creation of Auroville-Villages Joint Development Councils, to which Auroville has agreed, promising to put its expertise in the field of town planning at their service. The other Panchayats of the bioregion around Auroville will be invited for a presentation of the Master Plan soon.

Awareness cycle rally

Harvest and volunteers of the 'Pudhu Vanasantham Theatre Group' organised a two-day awareness cycle rally in the bioregion of Auroville to create awareness of the need for maintenance of the natural resources, village infrastructure, education and the importance of self-help groups in village development. The message was conveyed through pamphlets, group discussion and charts to about 3,000 people.

Women's day

Approximately 2000 women from over 100 women's clubs from the villages in the bio-region participated in the International Women's Day celebration on March 24th.

Economy presentation

Dr. Margrit Kennedy held a presentation on the latest economic developments in the world and on experiments to realize a different type of economy.

Seed-Savers Workshop

Annadana, Auroville's South Asian Network of Soil and Seed Savers, organised a 3-day seed savers workshop in Auroville.

Land speculation

Speculation in land within the Auroville area is continuing. An attempt is being made by a real estate agent to develop a plot of land nearby the Kulapalayam – Certitude road, on a plot which is within the greenbelt area.

Pour Tous 30th anniversary celebrated

After 30 years of service in temporary buildings, the new site for For All / Pour Tous, the first building of a planned multi-unit complex, was dedicated in a simple ceremony, at the west side of the Solar Kitchen.

Ilaignarkal new school buildings

New Ilaignarkal school buildings, funded by Gateway, the European Community and Auroville International UK, were inaugurated. The new campus is situated close to the junction CSR-Kottakarai-Transition.

Earth Day

To celebrate Earth Day (March 20th) a five days' earth consciousness-raising programme, featuring films, talks, presentations on a 'sustainable city' and other educational activities was organised.

Passing

Sita (Pascale J.H. Laitondal) passed away on February 27th from a fatal septicemia. Sita, who had been resident in Auroville from January 1998 till March 2000, had just returned for a visit together with a companion, who also suffered from the same disease but was saved after two days in coma. Sita was 27 years old.

"We are a marriage agency!"

Luigi and Sauro have been instrumental in linking Auroville to the Asia Urbs programme. Auroville Today spoke to them after the conference to find out more about Asia Urbs and the opportunities it opens up.

What exactly is Asia Urbs?

Sauro: Asia Urbs is a European Commission programme for promoting decentralized cooperation between cities in Europe and in Asia in areas like urban management and information exchange. These kinds of partnership are totally new and reflect



Luigi and Sauro

the realization that macro-projects quite often do not deliver the expected results. Consequently, there is a new emphasis upon small projects which involve local communities, and in this context cooperation between the cities of different countries is perceived as being potentially a very effective tool. In 1998-1999, Auroville first submitted a project which was primarily concerned with our own urban management. Last year Asia Urbs invited project submissions in a new area – information-sharing. We decided to apply in this category also because we'd already been trying to strengthen our contacts with other cities, but the funds we received under the first project were inadequate for this. So now Auroville has two projects running under Asia Urbs. Under the first one, which runs for two years from last March, we are partnered with the cities of Venice and Cologne. We receive funding for projects like the Town Hall annexe and expert assistance from both India and our European partners in formulating a more detailed Master Plan. We also undertake to organize workshops for local municipal officers to expose them to best practices elsewhere. The second project – which will run until October – includes the organization of the conference which has just taken place, and the creation of information tools like data bases of European and Indian cities and a website for cities to exchange information and discuss developments. The website, (www.citynetworking.net) which will be operational very soon, will initially be managed by one of Auroville's partner cities, Venice. Paris, another of our partners for the second project, is coordinating the data base of European cities.

Why did you want to link Auroville to the Asia Urbs programme?

Luigi: The whole thing started for us about 6-7 years ago. During a meeting about city development, Toine suggested that we ask cities around the world for support in creating an ideal city. The idea really resonated with me, and we decided to start approaching various cities with this in mind. To our surprise, we discovered that cities understood Auroville much better than other institutions, and many responded enthusiastically to our invitation. For example, the chief town planner of Venice told us, "In our cities it is hard to change something. But you still have everything open, and that is fascinating."

Sauro: For many years we'd been frustrated because all of our fund-raising efforts with big funding agencies came to nothing – either Auroville was too small for them, or our activities didn't fall within their parameters. So when the European Commission began talking about cooperation between cities we thought this might be a better way to find partners. Originally our motivation was to secure funding for our own development, but as we networked to achieve this objective we came to the idea of networking, of facilitating partnerships, for others also. Hence this conference.

A number of the delegates remarked that the success or otherwise of the conference will be determined by the number of practical projects which evolve out of it. Do you already know of any such projects?

Sauro: There are already a number of different ideas. For example, Udaipur has plans to link with Venice and Bruges in a project involving water and heritage preservation. And both Chandigarh and Dehra Dun have asked Auroville to find them European partners.

In other words, Auroville is becoming a marriage agency!

Luigi: Yes, something like that. It is increasingly being recognized that Auroville is in a unique position to bridge the gap between India/South Asia and Europe, and more and more cities are approaching us to find partners for them. For example, Pondicherry wanted assistance with a

heritage project, and we found partners for them in Urbino in Italy and Villeneuve-Sur-Lot in the south of France.

Two main themes for projects emerged out of the conference. One was heritage preservation and development, which is exemplified by the Pondicherry project. The other main theme was the promotion of the concept of "cities of dialogue". Historically certain cities, like Toledo in Spain, were meeting-points for some of the monotheistic religions of the world, and consequently places of tremendous cultural exchange. In the wake of September 11th there is a renewed interest in recreating such multicultural conditions in the cities which originally fostered them. So we suggested to Toledo that they explore this idea with similar cities elsewhere, and at present they are exploring partnerships with Bhubaneswar in Orissa and an association of cities in Greece. All of this is not only giving Auroville a much higher profile internationally. It is also demonstrating that we have the skills and capacity to take on this work, that we are concerned with more than just our own development, and that money spent in Auroville is well spent.

This sounds exciting. Yet there have been some questions raised in the community about Auroville's involvement in the Asia Urbs programme. For example, it has been suggested that Asia Urbs may be used by some Aurovilians to steer the development of Auroville in a certain direction, specifically in the direction of the Galaxy model.

Luigi: Like all other cities in the project, we have to provide some indication of how we want to develop. In our case this is the Auroville Master Plan. This was recommended by the Auroville residents after a long participatory process, endorsed by the Governing Board and approved by the Ministry of Urban Development. There is no question of imposing any plan but of evolving a sustainable township within the flexible framework of the Master Plan.

Sauro: At the time of making the project application we wondered if becoming involved with a project funded by an external agency like the European Commission might fix the lines of our future development, or create some lack of flexibility in our internal process. But the first point to make is that the European Commission is not sanctioning our present Master Plan: they are merely providing the financial means for us to

elaborate it in more detail so that we can make informed decisions about it. Secondly, the project we've submitted involves a long phase of community participation. The idea is that we collect data for 6-8 months (this phase is almost finished), then we elaborate a preliminary proposal, and then we dedicate 6-7 months for citizens' participation and discussion. We are already bringing together Aurovilians involved in activities like water management, energy and solid waste disposal to see how we can combine different perspectives and experience. Then, beginning August-September, we will have a series of one day workshops on town planning, transport,



energy, waste disposal and water management in which we can discuss our ideas among ourselves and with visiting experts.

Luigi: Interestingly, other cities involved with Asia Urbs have told us that it has often been very influential in getting departments of their municipalities to begin working collaboratively again. In this sense, Asia Urbs is not only linking us externally with cities around the world. It is also linking us within through forcing us to transcend our differences and work more closely with each other.

From an interview by Alan and Roger

Delegates' impressions

"We know the capability of Auroville. For that reason we were happy to be able to invite urban centres here to think together about how to strengthen networking associations and share information on the challenges and solutions cities might have found to their daily problems."

H.E. Mr. Michel Caillouët (Ambassador Head of the Delegation of the European Commission in India, Nepal and Bhutan)

"To have met together and learnt about India was the most important thing of the conference. Upon my return to Brussels I will raise the awareness of Auroville

amongst our members and look for partners for Indian cities."

Anna Lisa Boni (Brussels)

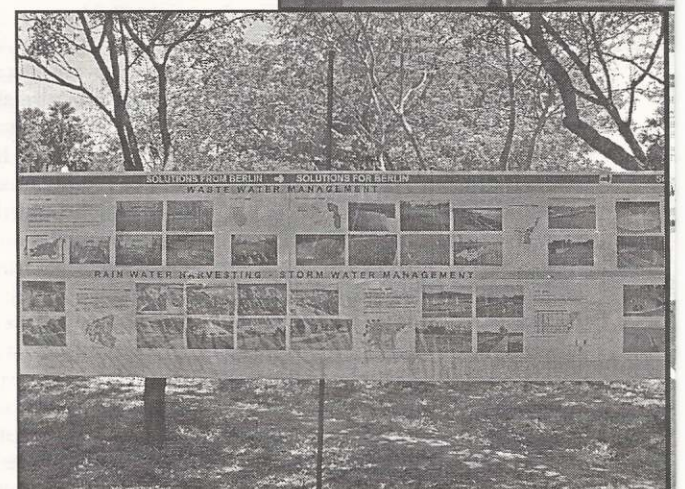
"Auroville is one of the more recent in a long line of utopian towns and settlements. It makes you think about it. My ancestors were also utopians who in a different time and situation also built towns to live in that would be in harmony. Auroville is more in harmony with humanity and nature whereas before it was religious. In the Matrimandir I was thinking of how important the whole theme and experience of networking is. The first step involves helping people imagine how to associate as many people

don't know it is possible and Auroville has a lot to offer in this regard."

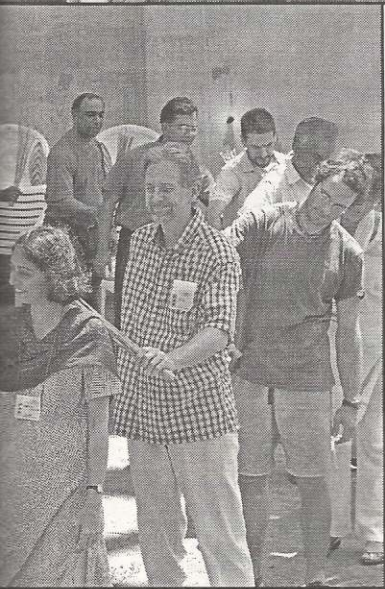
Scott Gibbons (Mirzapur)

"Auroville is just magic! We can connect with its dimension of human unity and the spiritual dimension is something we can connect to very deeply as well. When people think of Ireland they might think of a Christian nation but before we became a Christian country we were a Celtic nation with pagan and druidic influences. Our ancestors had a deep affinity and connection with nature as well as people which is what I feel and experience here."

Mark Sheehy (Dublin)



Centre : The Children's ch
Bottom left: The sustainable w
Bottom right The altern
Photos t



...oir greets the delegates
 ...water management exhibition
 ...renewable energy exhibition
 ...by Pino

Top left: The European
 Ambassador (2nd left) meets
 delegates.
 Top right: Delegates attending
 the open-air exhibition.
 Left: "Body-networking" during a
 break in proceedings.
 Below left: The non-polluting
 transport demonstration.
 Below right: enjoying the non-
 polluting vandi ride.

"I think we could avail of the expertise of Auroville. This forum is a concrete example of it in terms of bringing together Indian and European experiences. We were talking today a lot about urban development and we could use Auroville as a platform for several initiatives involving Italian cities interested in cooperating with Indian cities. We could use the philosophy and expertise of Auroville and there is an idea of a training centre with a focus on international cooperation."

Rosario Certolla (Director of the
 Development Corporation office of
 the Italian embassy in New Delhi)

"The identification of partners represents an unique opportunity for Indian and European local partnerships. The success of the conference will depend on its middle and long-term results. A step has been made in the knowledge of Asia-Urbs and decentralised cooperation. The moment is well chosen because of constitutional evolution in India and maybe a greater awareness of the opportunities created by decentralised cooperation has resulted"

Pierre Pougnaud (France)

"An extraordinary experience. The most important thing now is that people – representatives of cities start talking to each other and compare

experiences. In this way we come to understand through dialogue that the same difficulties are being confronted throughout the world "

Uberto di Remigio (Treviso)

"I got a feeling for India through this conference. We are quite westernised in Sri Lanka but in our slums we have an underprivileged area that needs to be improved but the officials are very reluctant to adapt local methods. What I admired in the Indian presentations was finding out how they are using local methods to solve such problems."

Mrs. N.I Azoor (Colombo)

Interviews by Sheryll.

Cities of Consciousness

For me a city is a state of mind. It's not about greenbelt vs. urban planners, high rises versus huts, the past clinging to old ideas or the future disregarding them. A city is a place in our hearts where we gather our energies to manifest that we are part of the same body and vision. In Auroville, it is a place to belong, to celebrate that we live as neighbors and friends and planetary beings that are open to the magic of life and our own evolution.

On that first morning of the conference, as the Asia Urbs delegates got off their buses at 9 AM, I noticed that they were already hot and sweaty. And we were nervous. A little more tape here. Smooth it down there. Watch out for the wind. Biggie and I were still hanging outdoor posters in true last minute Indian style. Then, when the final item was firmly in place, I was swept with this incredible feeling of excitement. We moved like jugglers and sages around colorful *kolams* and gathering crowds. Amidst a flurry of words and gestures, we listened not only to facts and figures, but caught glimpses of people's personal song lines, their own life experiences, what works and what doesn't. A heritage walk in Jaipur that starts at a Hindu temple and ends at a mosque. A bankrupt city in the Punjab that has recovered and empowered

itself. A host of new eco communities in urban settings. A successful earthquake restoration programme and the creation of new ecovillage models in Gujarat.

All this talk of cities took me back to the UN Habitat II conference in 1996 in Istanbul, a once quiet charming city of mosques that is now seriously congested by pollution and the tyranny of sheer numbers. We had as our unprecedented agenda, responding to the global problem of the growth and shadowy proliferation of megacities. At the time, I realized that we didn't have a clue about how to deal with the concrete problems. But networking over tea in Bharat Nivas recently with our Asia Urbs friends, I could see how far we've come on a smaller and more practical scale.

Today more than half of the world's population lives in cities. In many parts of the world, people stream into cities to escape poverty and wars. Their neighbors are often strangers. Where density breeds aggression, people risk their lives just walking under the stars at night. They observe the innocence of childhood evaporate into violence. They watch as old people cough and struggle with grey air and grey water. In such a world the needs for silence and solitude are never fulfilled.

Auroville, by definition, has an international dimension. It was meant to be a replicable model for the world. But more importantly, it was envisioned as a place on earth where all sincere human beings of good will might live freely as citizens of the world, and where children would be able to grow and develop integrally without losing contact with their souls.

The world is moving increasingly into cities. But who says cities have to be bad places to live? We have to create green cities and establish sound ecological communities and ecovillages within them. Sustainability is about not taking more from the environment than we put into it. Sustainability plus is about leaving a net increase, because our planet is already badly degraded.

On the very last day of the conference an Aurovilian pointed out that we also need to think about people sustainability, what sustains us in our inner beings. That's where Auroville's role as the city of dawn, a centre for human unity, and a living laboratory for evolution, comes into full play.

Auroville is the illusive galaxy of our own consciousness. We may still dispute the actual placement of the crown road, but in our hearts and minds, the city has already taken on a new dimension.

Marti

Partnerships for Progress?

1 threats to sustainability were listed as high waste and low efficiency in the delivery of electricity, high levels of soil, water and air pollution, poor sanitation, ground water depletion and a high incidence of poverty. An attempt is being made to remedy some of these through energy-efficiency programmes in industry and schools, through promoting renewable energy and 'water harvesting, through investigating the possibility of 'eco-earnings' – i.e. through using waste products as raw materials or turning organic garbage into compost – and through developing 'eco-enterprises' which will provide training and employment to the poor. The final thread woven through the conference was that of the necessity to preserve heritage. There was little disagreement that towns like Bruges in Belgium or Jaipur

in Rajasthan have a unique architectural and social fabric which should be preserved. But how? The usual route so far has been tourism, for this can fund preservation and restoration projects. However, tourism has the capacity to destroy as well as preserve local monuments and traditions. A complementary approach, therefore, focuses upon making the citizens more aware, and therefore more concerned about, their own heritage. In Jaipur this is done through the creation of a 'Heritage Walk' which takes people through some of the oldest and most beautiful parts of the city – the walk begins at a temple and ends at a mosque.

Question marks

Was the conference a success? On many levels, undoubtedly yes. One purpose was to bring together many different cities in an atmosphere where cross-fertilization and partnerships could evolve, and this, the participants agreed, was triumphantly achieved. Another was to demonstrate a variety of possible responses to the urban challenges of the 21st century. Here, also, many of the presentations embodied both a high degree of creativity and optimism.

However, to the extent that some of the presentations were intended to be examples of 'best practices' in

the areas of urban development certain reservations need to be expressed. For example, hardly anybody referred to the actual process by which best practices were implemented in their town. This left huge question marks. How many of the best practice objectives, for example, had actually been implemented? How successful have they been? How did the local work force respond to new approaches and, if there was resistance, how was it overcome? Is it possible to transfer practices that have worked well in the West to Indian towns and cities where the scale and nature of the problems may be quite different? How well, indeed, have the existing Asia Urbs partnerships worked?

In fact, listening to some of the presentations one could be forgiven for concluding that practices like e-governance or the computerization of records or the privatization of public works projects are a magic panacea, universally applicable and universally effective in hastening change. Yet from the only detailed presentation made – Scott Gibbons' explanation of the way in which the Mirzapur project was planned and implemented – it is evident that the magic ingredient, the "x" factor, in many of the successes presented is not I.T., nor even the amount of funding available, but the quality

and commitment of the people who are implementing the programme. But is this transferable? And if key people move on, will the structures and technologies put in place be sufficient to ensure that the momentum of the project is maintained? How far, in other words, can technology change psychology? Can corruption in India really be controlled or even nullified by providing for the possibility of on-line payment for telephone connections and taxes?

Finally there were the big terms that hung over the conference like a banner: "sustainable development", "human unity", "peoples' empowerment". What exactly do they mean? Do they require some fundamental change in the way we act and perceive the world, or are they merely stick-on labels which allow all of us to proceed much as before but with a mollified conscience?

The conference didn't address such fundamentals. No doubt, that was not its immediate goal. But if such questions are not asked at some point along the line, then the danger is that Asia Urbs, for all its idealism regarding strengthening the links between different cultures, will tend to perpetuate the underlying problems associated with modern development rather than offer radically new solutions.

Alan

UNITY PAVILION

Directly after the bonfire on the 28th was the foundation-laying ceremony for the Unity Pavilion. Piero displayed his model, brochures were handed out, a recording of the Mother speaking about the Unity of Nations

In the middle of all this activity the participants of the Asia Urbs Conference started arriving. Due to their non-polluting transport mode – elephant, horse riding, electric cars, cycles, bullock carts – they were late. But what a sight to behold!



Laying unity-bricks for the foundations of the Unity Pavilion

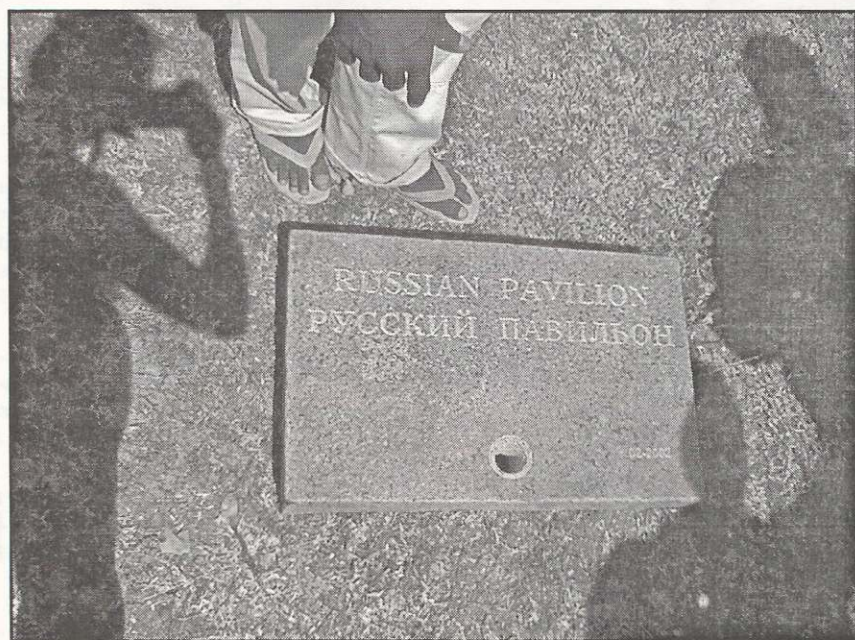
was played and inaugural speeches duly made. Then everyone was invited to lay a brick for the foundation. The bricks, splashed with turmeric and kumkum powder, looked gorgeous with the colours of terracotta, ochre yellow and deep red. The bricks were heaped with flowers-rose petals and New Creation flowers – and placed in the trench where 3 masons were busy cementing them in.

And then the elephant, Lakshmi, came up to the site to lay a brick, afterwards receiving her cashew sweet which she picked up nimbly in her trunk and ate. The air was full of happiness and laughter. From counting the bricks, it was discovered that about 800 bricks had been laid.

Jill and Jaya (Adapted from the International Zone Newsletter)

RUSSIAN PAVILION

On the morning of the 27th February, the foundation stone of the Russian Pavilion was laid in the presence of the Consul-General of Russia, Russian Aurovilians and many friends and well-wishers. These included a very special guest: the Russian ashramite Dimitry Mohrenschild, who turned 100 a few days later. Time recalled, "It was already fairly hot at 10:15 AM and Russian music was playing when we arrived. The atmosphere was very joyful. The Consul-General of Russia from Chennai read out a letter from the Russian Ambassador in Delhi, Alexander M. Kadakin, sending his greetings and promise to support the realization of the Russian pavilion. Some Russian guests and Aurovilians gave speeches on the history of Russia and its culture and the Russian pavilion in connection with Auroville. Everybody threw a portion of the earth taken from different parts of Russia and mixed together, in the foundation. Afterwards delicious refreshments were served and a Russian professional singer sang some Russian songs for us. We had more speeches and expression of gratitude, one boy recited a long poem by heart, and the whole get-together turned into a celebration with music, laughter, planting a tree, games for children and so on. Some ladies wore beautiful



The Foundation Stone of the Russian Pavilion

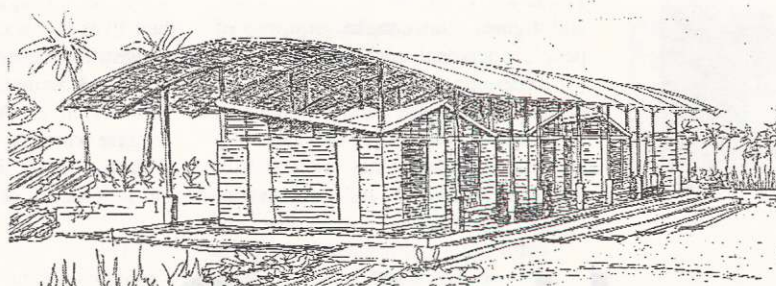
Russian dresses, made for the occasion, hand-printed and hand-painted, and some children had a specially prepared head-dress with beads and colourful ribbons." Valeri, one of the speakers, mentioned that the goals of the pavilion would be to "establish a contact between Russia's soul and Auroville, and to launch educational and cultural programs connected with our motherland's culture. The Russian pavilion project is captivating more and more minds and hearts. The project has brought Russians closer to each other and given our relationships a new dimension. We realized that we need each other since we are doing a common pro-

ject and this project is something each of us needs, and through us it will be beneficial to all Aurovilians. We Russians feel and understand that we are Russia's avante-garde in Auroville, and through us people will form their opinion of Russia in general. For a long time many nations had a somewhat negative image of the Russian people. It is one of the responsibilities of Russian Aurovilians, through the Russian Pavilion project, through our daily lives, through our communication with Aurovilians and through our spiritual work, to alter that image, to express the true Russian soul, which is kind, limitless, and generous."

AMERICAN PAVILION

"The Banyan tree was our inspiration"

Sergio Palleroni, the director of Basic Initiative, a University Of Washington programme in building sustainable communities, spoke to Auroville Today about overseeing the construction project of the American guest-house in Auroville.



Sketch of the dormitory building of the American Pavilion

Thirty two students from the University of Washington arrived on January 4th to design and build the first structure of the U.S. Pavilion site of the International Zone. The U.S. Student Guest House will have 4 rooms with a total of 12 beds and the latest in compost toilets, wastewater treatment plant, solar energy systems, landscape design, water cistern and tank, and a breeze catching "super roof" which will keep the whole structure cool and shaded. The goal of the 'Basic Initiative' programme is to engage students with real world problems. Previous projects have included building schools and hospitals in squatter communities in Central Mexico, clinics and orphanages for Aids affected communities in Kenya and Tanzania and straw bale housing on native American Indian reservations in Montana and South Dakota. Four hundred students have graduated from the programme since its inception ten years ago. The American guesthouse programme was initiated by Auroville International USA that had already been promoting university student exchanges over the years with Auroville.

"We were approached by Auroville International USA to do the project. We thought the Americas zone would be like a college campus. Instead of being about monumental architecture it would be about education. Last year students from the University of Washington worked on designing the campus as a whole and the building. The original design consisted of a dormitory, dining hall and a library. The dormitory was agreed upon in group discussions as being the most important. We all came with a very focussed way of working, born of long experience, here in Auroville. However the difficulty for us lay in understanding how Auroville works and in order to move faster on the site one of our greatest challenges

was obtaining permissions from the Auroville planning authorities. In Auroville everyone has something to say but no one has the final authority to give the final word on anything. The relationship between our team and the Tamil workers was very positive and the day we left they were crying and so were we. Our main disappointment lay in the fact that there was very little Auroville community participation compared to other projects we have been involved with. The site we lasted for two and a half months to build building in stages. A lot had to be redesigned and we want students to be influenced by what they see and we construct the building in terms of what's available here. You can't merely design, you have to build a space. The original design was to have been in reinforced mud bricks but we decided to switch to rammed earth because we wanted to learn from Auroville's experience and rammed earth seems to be more stable climatically and in terms of long-term sustainability. We made special frames for the corners of the building, adapting extant frames that had been designed and produced in Auroville but never applied. The main ideas that we have developed in our design sessions over the last two months have had Mother's banyan tree as their inspiration. We wanted the building to work like the great banyan tree by providing shade capturing the wind and absorbing water. The building generates its own energy and composts its own waste. The roof is made of aluminium with an imported birch plywood underside and is like an airplane wing reflecting the sun. The building is now 60% complete and should be ready by July 4th. It hasn't been the easiest experience but I think we've all walked away thinking it was highly worthwhile."

Roger

"Stay Open and Pay Attention"

Geoff Gay, an architectural student from the University of Washington, shares his experiences of participating in a 2-month programme to create dormitory space for students involved with the future U.S. pavilion.

"It has been a real challenge to be dropped off in the middle of a strange place and to have to work on a project completely from scratch.

"Hands-on study, actually putting something together and seeing where it works and where the problems are, makes you much more aware of how things have to happen. Learning how to deal with many different personalities and communicating with others who don't necessarily speak in the same terms, has also been invaluable, teaching both caution and a certain boldness, whichever is necessary to get the job done.

"Participating in this programme with hammer in hand, I can say that I have actually put this together and chipped out the walls. There's a lot that's happened here that's really surprised me – the relationships we have developed with our co-workers from the villages, for example, as well as having been able to experience construction on the other side of the world. I thought it would be pretty much the same, but some things were and some things were completely different. For example, I think they use a blow-torch and a hack-saw to cut steel in the States, whereas here they use a metal edge and a hammer... it's a little less efficient, but as far as the tools go, they're readily available.

"In Auroville, there are a lot of different technological innovations happening in one small area, which is unusual. Here people actually use compressed earth blocks or ferro-cement, water harvesting/pumping systems, composting toilets, as well as various solar panel systems.

"But the relationships with people have been the most incredible thing. I've always lived in Washington where relationships are defined by how you hit it off with a person, and language is a very important aspect of this. But here, just in working together and smiling and borrowing tools from one another, we really bonded on some level

or another with each other and all of the Tamil workers, without language being an issue. For me was an entirely new and fascinating experience.

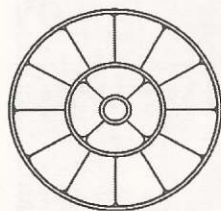
"I think staying with David in Aurodam also made a big difference. His relationship with his workers seems quite unique for this area – they are more like friends than an employer with his employees, which I suppose is more inherent in what I've seen elsewhere. There is definitely a division – Aurovilians do work here but most of the grunt labour is provided by the people in the villages, and most of the hiring/co-ordination work by people in Auroville. I don't think it's a matter of Aurovilians feeling they are too good for the work or anything; it's just how it's been for however long. But the more you cross over, the more you will start to create relationships, real friendships and happiness. From what I've read about this place, that's what it's aiming at, but I don't know that this is happening much yet.

"As an Aurovillian, you have an opportunity to live as an example to the surrounding communities. When somebody sees us riding around in a taxi or on a motorcycle as opposed to a bicycle, they may believe it is a better lifestyle, but looking at sustainability is really important. I mean, the workers came onto the site and looked at the composting toilets and thought 'Yeah, this is interesting, it is more than just a bowl and there is a whole system that goes along with it'. Some people just prefer western toilets and think that's modernising, but halfway around the world we are realising this also creates problems.

"The more you become involved and become a part of those communities, the more everybody is influenced. We learnt an incredible amount from the workers themselves, and this is part of a trade that happens. Pay attention to everything that is going on, because there is a lot happening out there."

Priya Mahtani

Putting the Mother's symbol to music



The Mother's symbol

On February 21st and 28th, the Auroville adult and children choirs, with a small group of instrumentalists, performed Pushkar's "The Mother's Symbol, Part 1, The Twelve Qualities."

PHOTO: IRENO



Members of the choirs and the orchestra taking the bows after a successful performance

It was a beautiful setting: the Bharat Nivas stage was clothed in white, the members of the choir were dressed in white, a small group of musicians were seated in front of the choir. Long semi-transparent foils hung from the ceiling, some of them with the mantra *Om Namo Bhagavathé* written on it many times. Mother's symbol, it should be explained, consists of three circles. The central circle represents the Divine Consciousness, the four petals in the second circle represent the four powers of the Mother called Maheshwari, Mahakali, Mahalakshmi and Mahasaraswati, and the twelve petals in the outer circle represent the twelve powers of the Mother manifested for Her work: Sincerity, Humility, Gratitude, Perseverance, Aspiration, Receptivity, Progress, Courage, Goodness, Generosity, Equality and Peace. These were the powers or qualities that Pushkar put to music.

It started in near silence and darkness, with a tampura, the drone instrument of Indian classical music, striking its first notes, and the pure high sound of a voice singing overtones. Then instruments and voice invoked the sound of 'MA'. A duo of violin and cello played the first prelude and the men's chorus sang Mother's text on Sincerity. Another orchestral prelude followed, this time between clarinet and violin, followed by the men's chorus singing the text on Humility. In this way the entire composition proceeded: each quality of The Mother's Symbol had an instrumental prelude and a vocal piece. Combinations of different instruments played the preludes, the vocal pieces were sometimes sung by the men, sometimes by the women, and sometimes jointly. The children

joined in for the last 4 pieces and for the ending entitled 'Recueillement'. As the piece began, so it ended, with the high sound of the overtones. How does one discover the melodic lines that correspond to each of these qualities? "It's not obvious," says Pushkar, "though Mother's symbol has fascinated me from my early twenties. I have used a very subjective system of composition to give an approximate translation of these qualities into music. But it could also have been very different. What I had were texts I chose from the Mother, which explain each of these 12 powers, and a text of Sri Aurobindo where he explained the colour scheme of the symbol. I meditated on the name of each quality together with the explanatory text and the colour. This was not simple. Though the inspiration for some melodic lines flowed easily, I had great difficulties with some of the qualities. Aspiration, for example, was in my case difficult to feel. I had to go down deep inside myself to find this quality. It was a hard piece to compose."

"Next to the melodic lines I used another musical element: the power of vowels, basing myself on the Sanskrit language, which I then related to the qualities of Mother's symbol. These vowels were stressed within the text itself or sung together with it. So the composition was layered, like an oil painting: the first layer being the melodic line, the second layer consisting of specific vowels, and the third layer the explanatory text. The vowels were to be sung strongly, the text remaining clear but in the background. All this aims at producing a music with a meditative and therapeutic quality, enhancing an indrawn

state for the listener. In a recorded version the listener is free to either hear the entire piece, or choose only to listen to the voice parts, or only to the instrumental pieces, selecting any piece.

As happens often in Auroville, things have a tendency to get modified due to circumstances. There was the pressure to do a performance, but lack of time for proper rehearsing, while construction work was going in Bharat Nivas which made things difficult. There were also a lot of last-minute works necessary to adjust the space acoustically. So I think it was something of a miracle that we manage to pull it off and that we were able to present this work for the already set dates."

Pushkar, born in Italy, grew up in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. He joined Auroville in 1991 and started the Auroville choir. Encouraged by visiting composer Param Vir, he left to study composition in Oberlin College in the USA, from where he graduated in 1999. Why did he come back to Auroville? "It was largely the influence of my early education which brought me back. It would have been possible with the Oberlin background to get good work opportunities in the USA. But I realised that I wasn't attracted by that, and I chose to return to a place where I knew I could re-establish an inner basis for

myself. Auroville was the obvious choice."

What are his main musical influences? "The Mother's organ music comes in the first place," he says reflectively. "The Mother's music is remarkable as I feel it as pure inspiration. I almost hear what she would have expressed if she had had a whole orchestra at her disposal. To receive an inspiration pure, without getting it deformed by the mind, is incredibly difficult. In my music I can mark out the passages where the mind came in and spoiled the purity. The painful thing is that when I tried to go back to the original inspiration and correct it, it didn't work anymore. Here professional education is both a help and a handicap. If I am able to keep myself open, it is ok. However, there is the tendency to compose music that just impresses: to transmit the purity of a music that comes from the heart is much more difficult."

"Another lasting influence comes from the fact that, while I received a western classical music education, I grew up in India and am in constant touch with its music. This has produced a kind of dissatisfaction both with Indian and Western music. I feel a need to merge both systems. Who knows what music I'll compose in a few years?"

In conversation with Carel

PASSINGS

Assumpta

Dr. Assumpta Casanovas joined Auroville in 1990. As an ENT specialist she had practiced in Spain for 19 years, and it was in that professional capacity that I first met her. I had a minor ear

infection. Wordlessly she shone light, probed, wrote a prescription and then, as an apparent afterthought, told me I should avoid swimming. "This month?" I enquired, lightly. "For ever." "For ever!?" I looked up, expecting a conspiratorial wink.

But one look convinced me that this was a lady not given to joking... "She was very straight, very clear and had very strong ideas," remembers Albert, who co-manages the Auroville Health Centre. "As such, she was not a lady with whom you could have an easy contact. I'd never worked with someone like that before - someone who knows what she wants and doesn't easily listen to other opinions - but I learned to appreciate her straightness, her honesty and, by the end, we were very close."

Those who did get close to her knew another

Assumpta. One whose no-nonsense nature veiled deep compassion and caring. One who read poetry, wrote novels...

For many years Dr. Assumpta, together with Dr. Lucas, looked after the management and organization of the Health Centre. She also became a very active and effective fund-raiser. However, her real love was for the extension work in the villages. "The villages were everything to her," recalls Albert. "To build sub-centres, construct toilets, improve the water supply, train health workers and make educational videos with Srinivasan - that was her aim, that was where she was most alive. She never really enjoyed treating Aurovilians. She found them too difficult!"

Some years ago she was diagnosed with bone cancer, a disease which can be agonizing and drawn-out. As a doctor she would have understood all the implications. "Yet to me the most amazing thing," recalls Peter, who is in charge of the X-ray equipment and organizes the Health Centre together with Albert, "is that

you never felt you were in front of a terminally-ill person. She never made anything of it, never had the slightest feeling of ill-pity, so much so that even when she was bed-ridden you always felt that at any moment she would just get up and walk away."

Even when partially paralyzed she continued working at the computer and discussing and advising upon the work in the villages. "However, the last year was very difficult for her," says Albert, "because she'd been such an independent person yet now she needed help with everything. We had long talks together about many things but still she was not able to express something. Then, just two hours before she died, she called me over and said, 'I love you. Thanks.' It was the first time..." Dr. Assumpta died on 3rd March. Her sister and close friends were beside her. "She had no fear, was very peaceful at the end," said Albert, "because she had a very strong belief in reincarnation. I'm hoping she'll keep helping us..."

Alan



Assumpta being garlanded after opening a village health sub-centre

In brief

TIPA again in Auroville

Twelve Years after their first visit to Auroville the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (The Dance and Opera Troop of His Holiness the Dalai Lama) gave a performance in Bharat Nivas. The Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA) was founded in India in August 1959, following the flight into exile of one hundred thousand Tibetan refugees escaping the Chinese occupation of their country.

Savitri Bhavan

Savitri Bhavan bustled with activities. Apart from the ongoing courses, the concluding session of the Savitri Study Camp was held at the Savitri Bhavan by Dr. Mangesh V. Nadkarni, Shraddhalu Ranade spoke about Savitri and Mahalingam conducted a special programme on the Mother's talks in Tamil.

Piano recital

Heninrch gave a concert of mostly modern western classical music in Salle Auroxap.

Painting Exhibition

Monique Patenaude exhibited her paintings "Few Invisible Cities and The Quest" in Pitanga.



Poetry and prose on the Web

Budding and full-fledged Auroville poets and prose writers can now publish their works on the Auroville web-site http://www.auroville.org/art&culture/literature/av_writers.htm

New Creation show

New Creation School performed a wonderful program at the Visitors Centre

Art Workshop

Sponsored by the Foundation for World Education, visiting Canadian artist Suzane Langlois offered a 6-day workshop on making kites and watercolour painting.

Indian Puppet Show

Dadi Padamji, one of India's best-known puppeteers, gave a lecture and demonstration on the history of Indian Puppetry at the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium, Bharat Nivas.



Slides on sculpture

Visiting Canadian-French artist Michel Archambault gave a slide projection on his sculpture work in Pitanga.

Speak Sanskrit Shibir

A two-hour a day eight-day Sanskrit workshop was conducted by Ramesh, a teacher from Samskrita Bharati, Chennai.

Nadaka CD

Nadaka and the Basavaraj brothers have brought out a new CD, "Living Colours", an all-acoustic fusion bringing together elements from traditional Hindustan and Carnatic with more jazzy modes.

Tuning the timber

Erisa, an impassioned wood-worker, crafts the Auroville guitar

It was the wood that got me started. It's wood that in its way fascinates me the most about Auroville. Mother and the Matrimandir, Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine* are in every way astonishing, but it's the lumber you can put your hands on. For lumber you need timber and today, at long last, it exists, and not just casuarina for capsule poles.

It's Auroville's forest that to a return visitor, indeed to almost anyone, is the community's most tangible success. The trees have made a devastated piece of the Earth habitable again. They are plentiful enough now that they can be called timber without that being a bad name. Perhaps my favorite tree is the one Mother named Work, *acacia auriculiformis*. It's from Australia, or Papua New Guinea (call it the eard-pod wattle if you like) and it grows wonderfully in Tamil Nadu, quickly and without much water, yielding wood that can be used for building houses or for making furniture, or for crafting musical instruments, like guitars.

For me it's something of a vice, the guitar, more than a toy, not quite an obsession. Up at Charlipalayam (ok, Aurogreen) there's a bunch of Work on the ground these days, numbered logs, ready for sale. Charlie said a guy named Erisa, who lives at Aurodam right near the Centre Guest House (my crib for the week), builds guitars and might be taking some of the wood. Charlie said Claire, who comes and buys Aurogreen milk, told him Erisa would like to meet me.

It was an easy trundle on Charlie's venerable and formidable yellow cycle to Aurodam, me

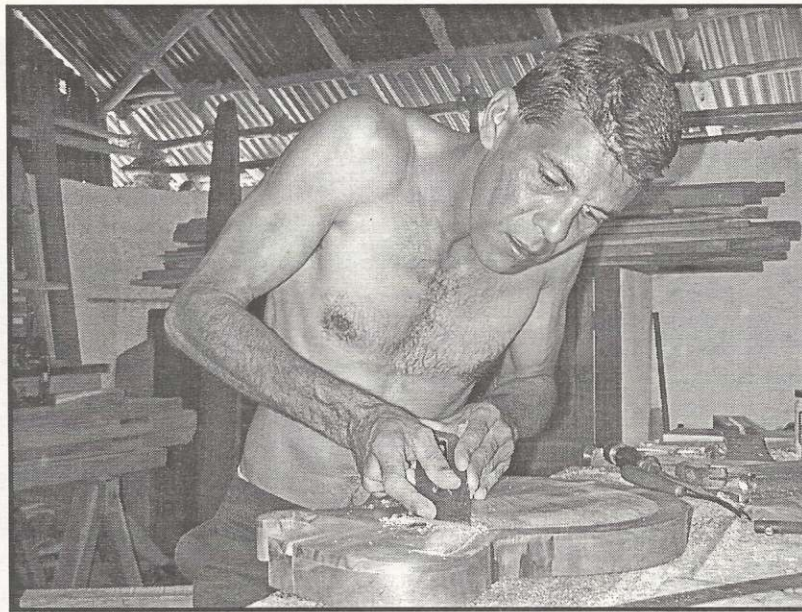
with faithful Carvin kit guitar (alder body and maple neck, I think, with rock-hard ebony fingerboard) in tow in gig-bag backpack. Erisa was terrifically welcoming and it turned out he spent years in Northern California, apprenticing at Santa Cruz Guitar and later living in Marin County, north of San Francisco. It even transpired that he knows a lot of the same people I know on the San Francisco blues scene, names like Johnny Nitro, Anthony Paul, Dave Workman and Chris Cobb, names that mean nothing in Auroville but plenty to me. He also had a most impressive old tube amplifier, a vintage Jim Kelley, exceedingly powerful, and he assured me that I could blast the Carvin through it pretty much as loud as I liked.

It became clear that Erisa was interested in building me a guitar and that the guitar could be made with Auroville wood. Not the logs from Charlipalayam, as those would take years to cure, even when milled into planks. But Erisa has wood he's collected from razed buildings, wood that even in the form of large beams has aged and dried for decades or even scores of years and so will make for a stable instrument. The botanical names flowed past me as I attempted to nod knowingly, but I think we agreed on some sort of terminalia for the body of the guitar, which will be shaped like a Fender Stratocaster, and he'll fashion a flamed Work top, which will be way cool as tops of any sort are unusual on a Strat. It'll be a hard-tail, meaning the strings will go through the body from the back rather than merely attaching to the bridge; at the same time the body will be somewhat hol-

lowed out to reduce weight. The neck will be...well frankly I forget, maybe that's where Erisa will use the terminalia (Erisa, is it limba? A.K.A terminalia superba? I found that on the web)

but the fingerboard I remember will be Sander's something-or-other, a gorgeous hard wood – I saw the plank he will use – Erisa said it is sometimes called, "red ebony." The neck will be fashioned in what for want of the correct terms, I'll call angled layers, for extra strength, a construction you don't get in a run-of-the-mill Fender. And the headstock will be tilted back (another thing Fender doesn't do, because it consumes more wood), which makes for a better angle for the strings as they pass over the nut. Another feature of a high-end instrument.

As for price, suffice it to say that by Western standards, the Erisacaster will be very, very reasonable, fantastically so for a custom guitar (I'm still to send precise measurements for the neck, in millimeters and fractions thereof). I paid a third up front, and Erisa said that would include shipping: possibly by DHL, more likely via



Erisa crafting the Auroville guitar

Renu, his sister, who'll be coming to California in June or thereabouts. And, typical of the wonderful generous surprises with which Auroville abounds, Erisa said if I don't like the guitar, then I don't have to pay the balance. He didn't say anything about returning it. I will like the guitar, I know.

As for its metal parts, like the bridge, tuning machines, pick-ups and switches and wiring, I'll take care of that here. Erisa's already suggested people who can help me choose them. He doesn't stock these parts, as they're expensive, and they don't keep well in the Auroville climate. I don't mind. Because, after all, the wood's what counts.

Rich

(Rich is an occasional visitor who has written for AVToday in the past)

FUNDRAISING

"He follows his heart...I follow him"

A ten-year old started a fund-raising campaign in the U.S. for Isaiambalam, a Tamil school in Auroville

Evan Leon, to look at him, is a normal ten-year old boy living in a suburb of Seattle. But there is a unique fire of creative love in him. I should know. I am his father. Recently, his shakti expressed itself in a funny and beautiful way that mirrors the spirit of Auroville.

The roots go back a few years. When he was four, sitting on my lap in preschool, listening to his teacher talk about fire safety he didn't hesitate to correct her. She said, "Safety is the most important thing." "Evan raised his hand and then said, "No, it isn't." Everyone turned to him in surprise and he explained, "Love is the most important thing!"

That same year, we were watching television when a commercial for some international aid to poor children came on. I reached to change the channel, but Evan said, "No wait." The announcer ended with, "And you can help them for pennies only." Evan said, "Can we?" I felt a little manipulated by the media, but what's a father (even a stingy one) to say? But since I was on the Board of Auroville International USA and knew Bhavana and her work with the Auroville Village Action Group, I had a flash. I told him we would contact her and make a pledge to a village school near Auroville. She put us in touch with Subash at Isai Ambalam and some of Evan's and my allowance went there monthly for several years.

Then in January 2001 we came to Auroville and visited third-grade stu-

dents (Evan's age group) of Isai Ambalam. We brought school supplies, candy, pictures of Evan's classmates, and other things. When Evan handed Subash the big bag of pencils he had brought for the students, he was told that he had to hand them out to each student personally. Subash explained to me, "When Evan gives them a pencil, he also gives them his energy." And so we saw. The kids surrounded him with interest and they started a ball game together. Evan forgot all about this upon his return to Nintendo land.

Then one weekend in August, out of the blue, he announced, "Hey, we need to raise some money and buy school supplies for those kids in Isai Ambalam." Picking up on his interest I said, "Ok, I'll be your helper. How do we do it?" "We'll make a poster," was the reply. And so we did, with pictures of the kids holding their pencils and lots of glitter.

"Now what do we do?" I asked. "We'll go to the stores" (a small mall near our house). I thought, "Well this will be a fun adventure, and we might even collect \$5 or \$10."

The Nintendo and video stores said, "No." But then Evan asked a student working the hamburger stand if he could help. He opened his wallet, saw

it had \$2 and gave it to Evan. Then Evan hit a groove. He went to nearly 2 dozen stores and in a halting, meek voice said, "Hi, uh, I'm Evan. I'm collecting money and school supplies for



Evan Leon

these kids at Isai Ambalam." Typically, the response was a puzzled look and "Why?" Evan just looked them in the eye and exclaimed, "Because they need it."

"Duh!" They must have thought, "I can see that!" But they gave: \$5, \$15, \$20, \$40, toys, school supplies and even 3 pounds of coffee! "What do we do with that?" I asked Evan. He just shrugged his shoulders and explained,

"We will sell it." So we did for \$32.

The fun thing to watch (and that's all I did) was Evan's attitude: Sometimes, people said "No," and he just politely replied, "Ok. Thanks anyway.

Goodbye." Sometimes, they said "Yes" and he said: "Ok. Thanks. Goodbye." I was witnessing the Zen approach to fundraising. I used to raise \$400,000 a year, but I was learning every minute.

The pizza place said we could put up a collection box. Another art project set up a steady stream of school supplies.

In two days we had around \$200. And it was time for Evan to go back to school. A friend suggested I inform the big Seattle newspapers. So I sent a couple of e-mails and got a call from a reporter. She liked the idea, and interviewed a very nervous and fidgety kid who explained his interest in video games, math and picking blackber-

ries. But she portrayed him accurately as a normal kid who just had an idea to do something useful and had to do it in his own way...even though others could clearly see that the task was impossible and that he was trying to do it the hard way, he was going to do it his way anyway. Sound like any Aurovilian you know? Her article was titled, "If we all had this kid's heart."

At 7 am, even before I had read the article, the phone rang and a man with an Indian accent said, "I want to speak to Evan." "He's asleep," I explained. "Ok," said the man. "Just tell him I read the article and I will send him \$100 for his project." Then a woman from a small foundation called. We went to visit, and they gave Evan a check for \$500.

By the time I arrived in Auroville this February (lugging a huge suitcase with 30 kilos of school supplies), Evan had raised and over \$1,000, and negotiated for me to pay the overhead to AVI-USA.

He couldn't accompany me this time. So I asked him what I should tell the teachers and students at Isai Ambalam. "I don't know", was the reply. "I hope they like the stuff we collected."

Indeed they did. But even more, they enjoyed his energy and play in this adventure.

Bill Leon

Editor's Note: Those wishing to participate in the continuation of this effort might want to know that Isai Ambalam is trying to raise \$20,000 to expand the scope of its efforts and touch more village schools around Auroville and India. Tax exempt donations can be sent to "Evan's Fund" c/o Auroville International-USA INSERT E-MAIL ADD. Or contact Evan via Bill at billleon@geoeducation.org.

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