

Auroville Today

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Adyar Poonga about to be opened

The work of Auroville's Pitchandikulam Forest Consultants comes to fruition.

The estuarine reach of the Adyar River in Chennai covers an area of roughly 358 acres. It extends from the Thiru-Vi-Ka Bridge to the sand bars at the edge of the sea. Part of it is called the Adyar Creek. Like the river, the estuary has been heavily polluted by the indiscriminate dumping of solid waste, by unchecked discharges of untreated industrial effluents and domestic sewage and by the extensive slum encroachments along the banks. Accumulating large volumes of organic sludge, the estuary has been both an eyesore and a source of disease in the city.

But for 58 acres of the Adyar Creek, this is now history. This area has now been transformed into a large Eco Park called the Adyar Poonga. The Poonga has estuarine wetlands, mudflats, mangrove forests and ponds, with plants and trees of the tropical dry evergreen type, the original flora of this area, and many birds and aquatic creatures.

Central to the manifestation of the Poonga is the admirable decision of the Government of Tamil Nadu to restore the Adyar river and estuary. In October 2006, the Government created the 'Adyar Poonga Trust', headed by the Chief Secretary, and transferred to it 58 acres of the Adyar Creek. It appointed the Chennai-based Tamil Nadu Urban Infrastructure Financial Services Limited (TNUIFSL) as the project's implementing agency. Subsequently, TNUIFSL appointed Auroville's Pitchandikulam Forest Consultants as the Lead Consultants for developing the Master Plan for the Adyar Poonga.

In March 2007, preparation of the Master Plan started. "The cooperation of the Government has been fantastic," says Joss, who heads Pitchandikulam Forest Consultants. "It instructed officials of the Chennai Corporation to remove encroachments around the Creek. The Slum Clearance Board was directed to provide alternative tenements for the approximately 300 families living there. The Public Works Department was instructed to clear encroachments in the entire estuary and remove debris. The Chennai Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board was instructed to ensure that all sewage and wastewater would be treated before being let into Adyar Creek. Most important of all, all departments and organisations that had plans that might impact the Adyar Poonga project or the estuary were requested to coordinate with the Master Plan."

The Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Dr. M. Karunanidhi, laid the foundation stone for the project in August 2007. In December 2008, agreement was reached on the content of the Master Plan with both government officials and various environmental groups, who had for many years fought in court against what they considered the area's inappropriate development. "The High Court validated the agreement and declared the revised



View of part of the Adyar Poonga

Master Plan dated January 1, 2008 for the Adyar Poonga as final. It also set up a monitoring committee for the project, consisting of members of the Adyar Poonga Trust and representatives of governmental and non-governmental organisations to monitor the implementation of the project on behalf of the Court," says Joss. Soon afterwards, TNUIFSL charged Pitchandikulam Forest Consultants with the implementation of the Master Plan for the Adyar Poonga.

Creating the Eco Park

"The first thing we did was to excavate 60,000 tonnes of construction debris and garbage from the site," says Joss. "It went to places where they were building roads or where they needed to fill in land. We created stormwater swales to channel stormwater

through the Creek into the estuary. We built overflows so that tidal water could flow back into the Creek. Then we made pathways, built wooden bridges and educational pavilions, and erected the education centre. We also created over 800 informative stone-slab boards with pictures of animals and plants with their scientific and local names. And then we brought the plants."

Most of the plants, more than 1,00,000 saplings of over 170 indigenous species, have been grown in Auroville nurseries where the required expertise has been refined over many years. Joss points at some trees and shrubs. "Look how they have grown! But nothing here is more than one and a half years old. The saplings have been planted to create a mangrove forest, medicinal garden, butterfly garden and simply to beautify the walkways.

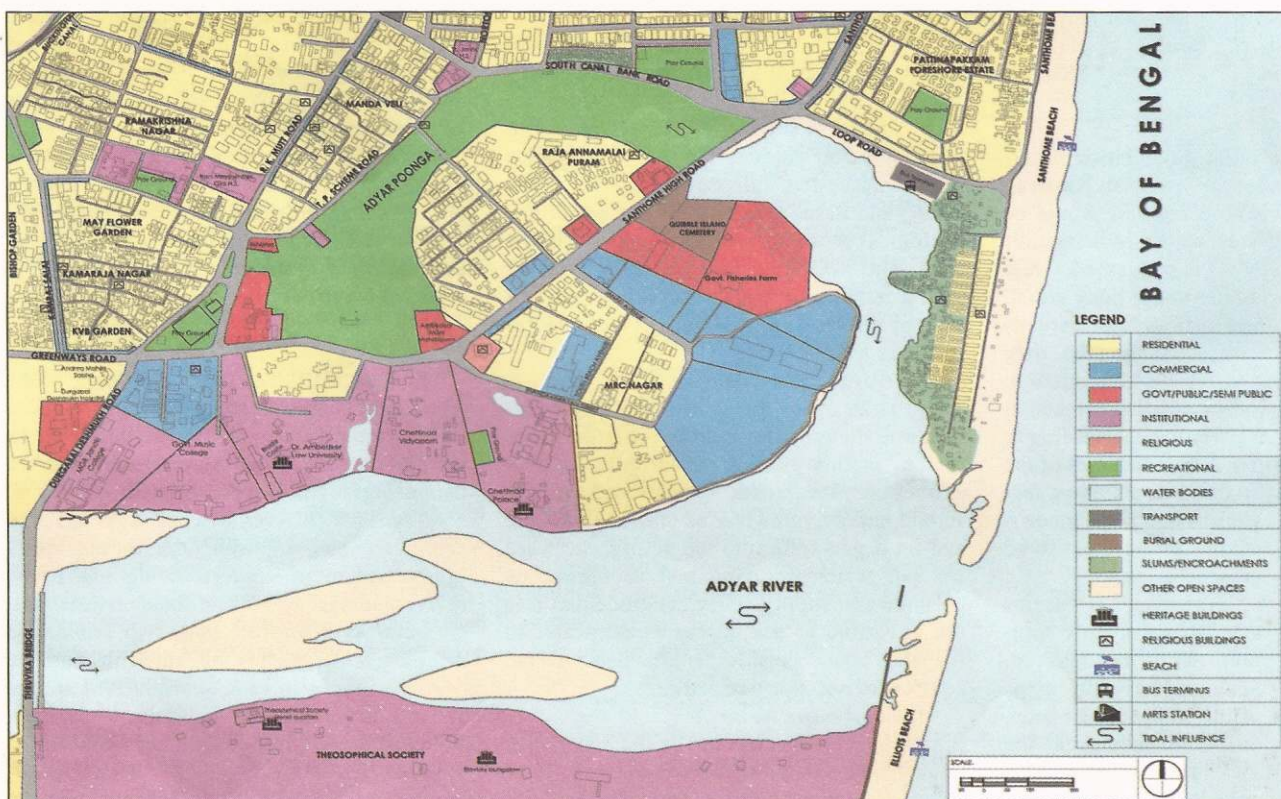
The fauna followed naturally. Says Joss, "The estuary now has diverse fish species and amphibians, reptiles, mammals and birds have been spotted all over the park. The white-bellied sea eagle has come back, and there have been sightings of black-winged stilts, painted storks and pelicans. The green pond frog, which is protected by Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act, has also been spotted here. Ornithologists have already counted 80 species of birds; entomologists talk about 29 species of dragonflies and a large variety of other insects; herpetologists say that the park abounds in snakes. It is an amazing development."

The saplings, it appears, are not the only things that Auroville has provided. "The wood for the bridges and the name boards has come from Auroville; most solar lights were provided by Auroville. Auroville architects designed the buildings and landscaping and Auroville engineers created a vortex fountain in one of the ponds. There is a windmill manufactured in Auroville. The solid waste and the wastewater management were designed by Auroville. Last but not least, most of the people working here have come from the villages around Auroville: carpenters, masons, electricians, stone workers, metal workers, painters, drivers, gardeners, and labourers – more than 70 people in all. The villages of Kuiliyapalayam, Kottakarai, Mathur, Allankuppam, Periyamudaliarchavadi, Edaiyanchavadi, Bommiarpalayam and Nadukuppam are all represented."

The Function of the Eco Park

The project not only aims to restore the fragile ecosystem of the Adyar Estuary and Creek but also to raise awareness amongst the general public regarding environmental issues. People will be invited to experience and interact with nature. There will be educational programmes for children and adults. In fact, the Adyar Poonga will provide a place for a lifelong learning in ecology, sustainability and environmental education for the citizens of Chennai.

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What's happening with the Matrimandir Lake?

In September 2008, L'Avenir d'Auroville published in the Auroville News and Notes its intention to give site approval for a Matrimandir Test Pond. It described it as a research project to find out how a lake can be constructed in accordance with the parameters laid down by Roger Anger and causing minimum environmental damage. What has happened since then?

Two months after the announcement, in November 2008, an elaborate Memorandum of Understanding was signed between L'Avenir d'Auroville and a Test Pond Project Team. It stipulated that L'Avenir d'Auroville would eventually commission the test pond; that a Test Pond Monitoring Group consisting of representatives of Auroville working groups and individual Aurovilians would advise on the project's direction; and that a Board of Experts of lake and water specialists would be appointed to provide advice and do independent technical auditing of the findings of the project.

The Memorandum also mentioned that three studies had to be delivered by the Test Pond Project Team: an environmental study, a Matrimandir Lake feasibility study, and a study of the Matrimandir Lake as an integral part of Auroville's water system. Three-monthly reports would be published on AV Net as 'the project asks for participation of the community.' The time frame of the test pond project was estimated to take between 3-5 years.

So far, so good. But what has happened since? No reports were published; the Monitoring Group has not started functioning; the Board of Experts was never appointed; work on the site never started; and the studies were not delivered.

Nevertheless, in August 2009 the Test Pond Project Team, ignoring the Memorandum, applied for building permission to start the test pond. L'Avenir d'Auroville, instead of rejecting the application out of hand as the three reports mentioned in the Memorandum had not been delivered, also ignored the Memorandum and instead formed a sub-group to study the matter. It also appointed an expert to look specifically into the possible functions of the lake. But building permission was never given, as the expert stated that a lake should be considered only in the context of a regional water plan. Moreover, he considered that there was insufficient information available to start the test pond of the size proposed.

All this suggests that the Memorandum was little more than a lame duck and that the promised community participation was ignored. The Test Pond Project Team, meanwhile, continued studying the issues.

The main person in the Team is Michael Bonke, a friend of Auroville who has been heavily involved with the construction of the Matrimandir. He wants to manifest the Matrimandir lake for the sole reason that Mother said that 'It has been decided and will remain decided that the Matrimandir will be surrounded with water'. For Michael, this is an imperative that indicates that without the lake, neither the Matrimandir nor the city of Auroville will be complete. Aware that the proposed lake has raised strong objections in sections of the community for ecological, environmental and logistical reasons, the Team explored solutions for three issues: to determine the function of the lake, determine the size of the lake, and, last but not least, solve the question of where the water for the lake will come from.

The function of the lake

More than six years ago, in the June-July

2004 issue [# 185-186], Auroville Today reported on three studies that had been done to ascertain if the Matrimandir lake could have a function in the water supply of the city. This idea was first mooted in the 1970s by chief architect Roger Anger, but was not actually researched till September 2003, when a pre-feasibility study by the office of water engineer Harald Kraft in Berlin showed that the lake, if it is large and sufficiently deep, could be part of the city's water supply.

Kraft's study, however, was heavily criticized by Auroville specialists. This led to a two further studies by experts in Germany and The Netherlands, sponsored by Michael, who all concluded that the lake has no function to serve in the city's water supply.

So what is its function? On June 2nd 2010, Harald and Michael met to discuss the lake and signed a statement. "We believe that the Mother's vision for a lake around the Matrimandir was not exclusively aiming at particular practical functions of the lake, but that more subtle functions like the calmness that a lake radiates, its strength and stability or other even more subtle functions which were more decisive than practicalities. In nearly all cities today we have at the centre a crowded place with hectic traffic. In Auroville, Mother wanted at the centre a place of silence and concentration. She gave the name 'Peace' to the central area. The lake which she envisaged is supposed to function as an isolating zone between the Auroville Township and the Matrimandir area." Few will disagree with this statement.

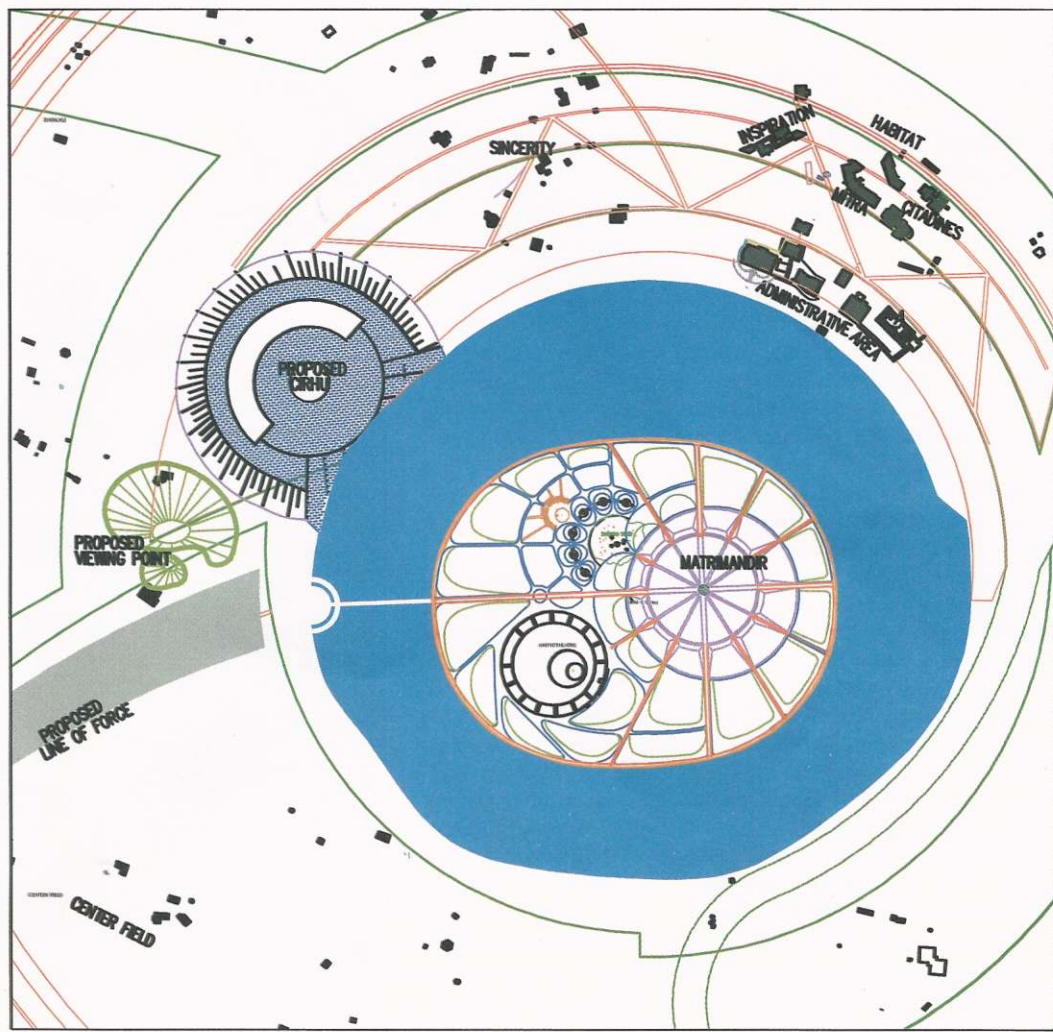
The size of the lake

The size of the lake has been the second issue of contention. In 1999, a few years before the Kraft study, Roger Anger had decided to incorporate a big lake into the Auroville Master Plan. This led to a ferocious dispute with the then Matrimandir Coordination Group. For a lake this size would do away with the outer gardens situated between the lake and the city, which Narad, at The Mother's request, had started in the early 1970s.

The Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation intervened. Board member Dr. Subhash Kashyap mediated an agreement: a big lake would be created to the east side of the Matrimandir where no gardens had yet been planted, while on the west side a smaller water body would be created so that the existing outer gardens could remain. Mr. Bala Baskar, the then Secretary of the Auroville Foundation, explained a few months later that the actual dimensions of the lake would be according to an expert opinion, after detailed studies of the problem of water availability and storage feasibility had been made – studies that are yet to be presented.

However, it seems that Dr. Kashyap's solution will be ignored. Scale-models and maps of the Matrimandir area, on public display at the Town Hall, show without exception the large-sized lake.

Harald and Michael also opt for the large lake. In their statement they write, "It is our duty to construct the lake in such a way that it can serve all possible functions in the best way."



The Matrimandir lake as envisaged by Roger Anger

One of the possible functions they mention is the lake being a component of Auroville's water supply system, Harald's original concept which had already been dismissed by the German and Dutch experts. Apparently, the wish to create a large lake has overruled expert opinion.

What is planned for the earth that needs to be excavated? Harald and Michael propose to use conveyor belts to move the earth from the lake bed to two sites so as to form two hills: a small one which will serve as a tourist viewing point [an idea The Mother once discussed with Satprem, eds.] and a big one in the greenbelt which could serve as an uphill power storage that interacts with the lake.

Where does the water come from?

There are four possible water sources for the lake: ground water, harvested rainwater; treated waste water; and desalinated water. For social and ecological reasons, groundwater will not be used. The Test Pond Project Team, together with a number of Indian specialists, studied each of the remaining options. Their conclusions are as follows:

Harvested rainwater

There is an acute threat of salt-water intrusion into the groundwater of Auroville's bio-region, mainly caused by agricultural over extraction. Specialists agree that Auroville should harvest rainwater as much as possible and let it penetrate into the aquifers to ward off salt water intrusion and so secure its groundwater supply. They conclude that it is not advisable to use harvested rainwater to fill the lake, as this would deprive the aquifers of necessary recharge.

Treated waste water

It was once suggested to fill the Lake with treated waste water as the Pondicherry waste water treatment plant almost borders on Auroville. The city of Singapore relies for 30% of its water supply on treated sewage which has been purified using dual-membrane and ultraviolet technologies, in addition to conventional water treatment processes. This treated waste water is used for non-potable applications.

The Test Pond Project Team has decided not to pursue this approach as it would imply

a long-term cooperation with the Pondicherry Government, which has to meet its own water requirements, as well as being a high-technology and costly affair.

Desalinated water

The Test Pond Project Team considers desalinated sea water as the best option to fill the lake as this would ensure a good water quality and allow the lake water level to remain constant in all seasons, one of the conditions laid down by Roger Anger. [The use of desalinated sea water, by the way, was also approved by The Mother in a discussion with Satprem, eds.].

Michael is convinced that desalination is the answer for the future, not only to fill the lake, but also to secure the drinking water supply of Auroville and its surrounding villages when salt water intrudes into the aquifers. Two years ago he set up a company for the exclusive benefit of Auroville, called Varuna Water and Energy Ltd., which has already bought two wind generators to produce green energy. While part of the proceeds are used to subsidize electricity in Auroville, another part will be used to offset the operational costs of a planned 1000 cubic meters a day desalination plant near the beach. The land for this plant has already been purchased and Varuna is in the process of obtaining the required permissions.

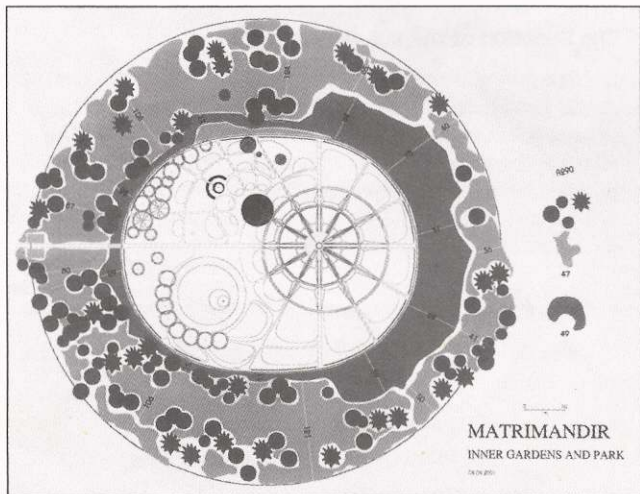
The views of L'Avenir d'Auroville

In June 2010, the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation appointed a new team to run L'Avenir d'Auroville. So far, this team has not discussed the future Matrimandir Lake nor the findings of the Test Pond Project Team.

The new L'Avenir team will have to decide if and to what extent the 2008 Memorandum of Understanding has to be revived. It must also take a stand on desalinated water as a feasible option to secure the drinking water supply of Auroville and the nearby villages in case aquifers turn saline; and if it can be used for the Matrimandir lake. If any of these questions are answered in the positive, L'Avenir will have to find ways, together with the Test Pond Project Team, to bring desalinated water from the coast to the centre of Auroville.

The discussion in Auroville is yet to begin. The lake has over the years been subject of much controversy. The work of the Test Pond Team, while not answering to all the concerns expressed, may be a basis for more informed discussions.

Carel



The Matrimandir lake as conceived by Dr. Kashyap

Whilst the Tamil Nadu government is responsible for the village tanks and bore wells, villagers say that government water management is entrenched in corruption and prioritises the needs of big businesses elsewhere in the state. They claim that the current water delivery system – bore well water pumped into the overhead holding tank, then delivered via underground pipe to three or four taps per street – is fraught with problems.

“The government sanctioned money for a quality pump from the bore well to the main tank in the village, but it broke down after one year,” says Balu, who lives in Edaiyanchavadi village and works in Auroville’s Financial Services. “The water usually comes from 4-6 a.m., and then again in the evening. People stand in line at the taps, and when someone jumps the line, there are fights. There was a murder 15 years ago over water.”

The people feel forced to take matters into their own hands, and have been known to illegally tap water by digging and placing a pump on the main line to siphon water to their own houses. Due to the proliferation of improvised pits and taps in the street, street waste leaches into the illegal connections and then contaminates the pipeline water, generating water and mosquito-borne diseases such as diarrhoea and chikungunya.

In order to address such issues, Auroville’s Water Harvest is implementing a project in the nearby villages of Kottakarai, Edyanchavadi and Sanjeevi Nagar to ensure equitable and hygienic water distribution, pond rehabilitation and tank de-silting, and to provide eco-san toilets and solid waste management. Undertaken with money from the Netherlands, the project has been implemented initially in Kottakarai because it has a sizeable population in a small area. Harvest worked with Kottakarai’s village development council and offered water connections for Rs1,000 per household, with the panchayat contributing 1 lakh rupees to the project against Harvest’s approximate 38 lakhs (Rs 3,800,000).

The water distribution project

Harvest’s Dhandapani says the Kottakarai villagers are pleased with the water distribution system. “The individual connections have made things easier,” says Sudarkar from Kottakarai. “For many years my village was in a difficult and unclean situation, with much water waste. Every morning there was fighting over who was first in the line [at the water tap]. Now, there is no shouting. It’s very quiet.”

Harvest now plans to implement a similar system in Edyanchavadi village, where it is sorely needed as the number of illegal tappings means that not a single drop reaches the public tap. Dhandapani says, “The purpose of the tank is zero! It’s a difficult project for us.”

Dhandapani points out that there is limited funding of approximately 32 lakh for the overall Edyanchavadi project, which includes salaries, rehabilitation of the five tanks and water supply to the whole

Water and waste in the villages

Against a background of villagers complaining that the government does not look after their water needs, Auroville is implementing a large water and waste project in three villages, with ‘people’s participation’.



Village ponds are an integral part of a village’s water supply system

village and colony. “People will get a connection within five metres of their house with ‘pukha pressure’. But Edyanchavadi’s contribution is important. If we provide connections for free, people won’t maintain the system. But the leaders are delaying their contribution. So far, they have only delivered 50% of the money.”

The reason for the delay seems to be that Edaiyanchavadi village leaders want a commitment from Harvest to connect all houses. If Harvest does not deliver water connections to all streets, then village fights might start.

Balu concedes that Edaiyanchavadi village is hard to work with. “People don’t think of the future. One family was using a rubber hose as an illegal pipe. They would stuff it with a stick to stop the water. When the pressure built up, the stick would shoot out, and the water would run onto the street for two hours. I told the family to stop wasting the water, but they said, ‘You put in a good tap for me’.”

In Sanjeevi Nagar village, Harvest has installed a reverse osmosis drinking water system, as the water there is undrinkable. This system can handle up to 10,000 litres per day. Each house pays Rs 50 per month to receive 20 litres of drinking water every alternate day. The system was also trialled in Kottakarai, but it failed there because no one kept collecting the money for maintenance once Harvest handed over the project to the village panchayat, and the system wasn’t properly maintained. “Some people resist cooperating with Auroville,” Dhandapani says. “There’s resentment over land issues. We get better cooperation from villages that are further away from Auroville.”

The other projects

Harvest’s large project initially also included installing eco-san toilets and solid waste management systems, but these aspects of the project failed. Dhandapani points out that the villagers in Kottakarai did not initially accept toilets and preferred defecating in the open. Harvest provided awareness programmes, training and offered a generous Rs1500/9500 split of cost for a toilet in the house. “Around the installation period, about 60% of the new toilets were being used,” he says. “Now, less than 5% are being used. What is needed is attitudinal change. It’s difficult to get people to use a normal toilet, and one with eco-san composting is even more difficult. They don’t believe that the ash will create compost.” Given the lack of success with toilets in Kottakarai, Harvest will only install a limited number in Edaiyanchavadi.

Similarly, the solid waste project has not been successful in Kottakarai. Harvest provided training in the separation of trash, two dustbins per house, and employed three people to collect dustbins and recycle bottles. Dhandapani says the model worked for two years, and included ‘giant

clean ups’ in the village. “When we handed the project over to the panchayat, it disintegrated. The awareness is not maintained. The end result is zero. We discuss with the staff why it’s not a success. We feel frustrated. In Tamil Nadu, sanitation projects are just not sustainable, so we are not focussing on it too much. However, the international funding agencies don’t accept the results.”

The third component of the project is pond rehabilitation and tank desilting. Public ponds are common in all villages in Tamil Nadu. In the past they provided water and were used also as a popular swimming hole. Nowadays, they are used for washing clothes, as an open toilet or to water the cattle. This aspect of the project has had mixed results. Harvest recently cleaned the Edyanchavadi pond, but the leaders claim that Harvest did not finish the job, for which the village gave one-third financial contribution. But Dhandapani refutes this criticism, saying, “Harvest did what it promised. The village didn’t provide funds for the extra work they asked for – fixing the steps around the pond.” Harvest also attempts to create awareness to keep the ponds and their environments clean and not to pollute the water, but this is a long-term process.

As the project moves through the various stages of implementation in the three villages, Dhandapani says he is confident the individual house water connections will make a difference, but says the lack of awareness around water and sanitation throws into doubt the long-term sustainability of other aspects of the project.

Lesley

PLANNING THE CITY

New Water Task Force

Questions on how to secure Auroville’s water supply and how to create and run one or more water distribution systems have been the subject of intensive research.

Since 1997, more than 10 studies have been executed by qualified Indian, international and Auroville experts. Yet, agreement on essential points seems still to be lacking as in November 2010, L’Avenir d’Auroville. Auroville’s town planning department, initiated yet another task force “to study the overall vision as to the future supply and distribution of water to the city”.

The studies which have been done so far are impressive. In 1997, an Auroville Water Board was formed which hired Mr. G.K. Bhat, an eminent hydrologist from The Action Research Unit (TARU) based in Delhi. The project, which cost 9 lakhs, studied in detail the water resources in Auroville and the immediate neighbourhood. The project was completed in two stages with a team of hydrologists, civil engineers, socio-economists and trained field workers from TARU.

In 2002, Auroville Water Harvest (AWH), in collaboration with several French scientists, studied the reasons for ground water contamination in the Kaluvelly watershed. In 2003, German engineer Harald Kraft from Berlin presented an ‘integrated water management plan for Auroville’ which gave a role to the Matrimandir Lake in the city’s water supply. The findings of this plan were later rejected in two other studies, one by the German engineering office of Landesgewerbanstalt Nurnberg (LGA), the second by Dutch engineer Jeen Koostra.

Subsequently, in June 2004, a group of concerned Aurovilians formed an ‘Auroville Water Group.’ The group organized an International Water Conference in Auroville with the theme ‘Sustainable Water Resource Management for Auroville and the Bioregion.’ The Conference con-

cluded that Auroville did not lack water, but lacked an appropriate water management plan and made a number of recommendations.

As a follow-up to the conference, a group of 15 Aurovilians and 5 international experts conducted an ‘Integral Pre-Feasibility Study’ that covered all aspects of water management and resources: rain, storm, ground, surface, waste and sea (desalination) water. The study included the surrounding villages, agricultural (irrigation and crop rotation) practices, household water-saving devices, industrial, water supply for fire-fighting and the sensitive topic of the proposed Matrimandir Lake. The study began in 2004 and was completed and presented to the Planning and Development Committee in 2007.

In that same year, Ms. Aude Vincent from France concluded her Ph.D. thesis, ‘Hydrological and Hydro-geological Study of the Coastal Sedimentary Basis of Kaluvelly, Pondicherry’. This thesis, which dealt with the Kaluvelly lake and its surroundings north of Auroville, has also important findings for the Auroville area.

Also in 2007, Eri Salome, a Dutch expert, presented a study, funded by Vitens, a Dutch water organisation, on how a water organization for Auroville, in conjunction with the surrounding villages, could take shape.

In 2008, Aurovillian Dirk Nagelschmidt, who runs the Auroville unit Aqua Engineers, presented a ‘Water Management and Infrastructure Master Plan for the Residential Zones 1 and 2’ with cost estimates. The Plan covers drinking water supply, wastewater treatment systems including sewage piping network; irrigation (garden water supply); rain-water harvesting; storm water management; and fire water supply for fire-fighting. This study was commissioned and financed by L’Avenir.

In the same year, Andrea Blauth, a student of the Faculty of Civil Engineering of the Cologne University of Applied Sciences, started her



CARTOON: LOUISE

Master’s Thesis “Drinking Water Concept 2012 – Phase C – Conceptual Strategy for the Water Supply System for Auroville and its Bioregion.” This project too was financed by L’Avenir d’Auroville, initiated and managed by Dirk from Aqua Engineers. The comprehensive study was completed and submitted to L’Avenir d’Auroville and AWH in May 2009.

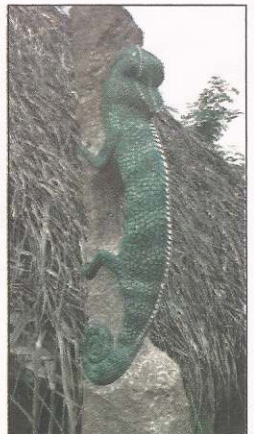
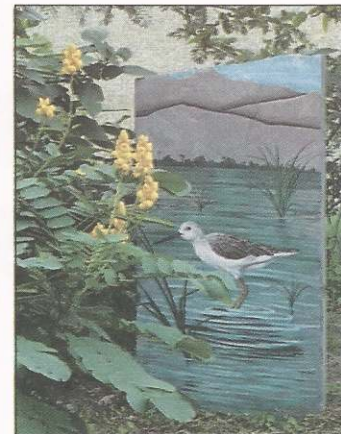
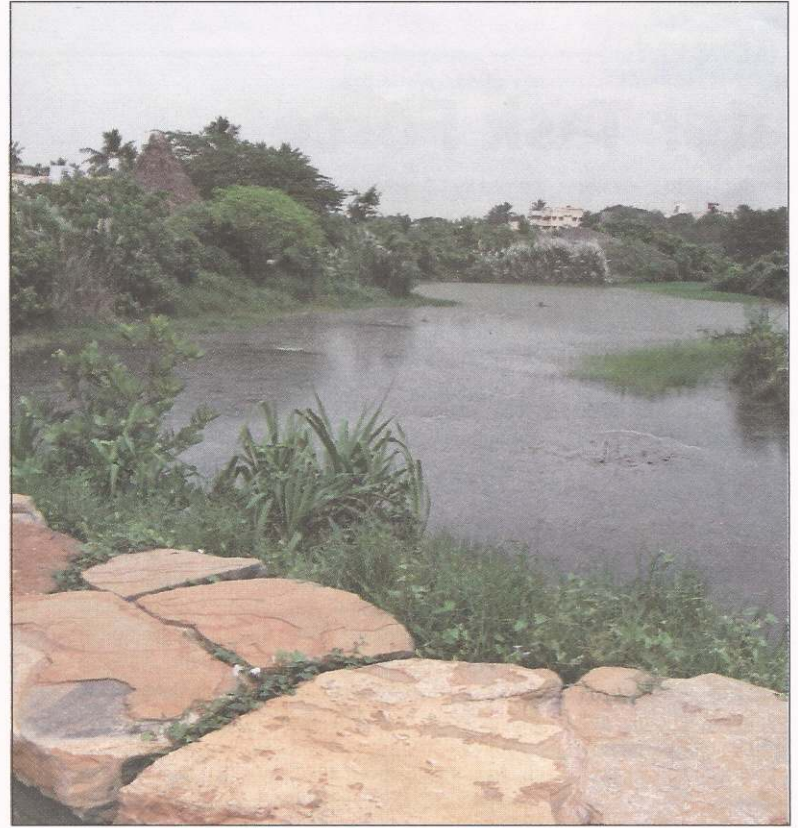
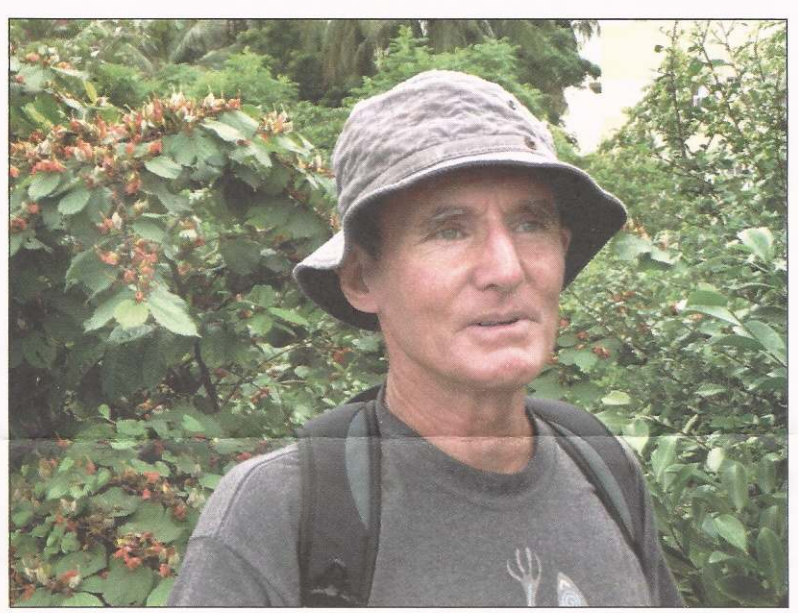
In 2009-2010, Auroville newcomers Aton and Batel designed and facilitated the Integrated Sustainability Platform (ISP) to assist Auroville in using the existing resources better through collaborative planning. [see *Avtoday*, September 2010 # 255]. One of the main recommendations was the necessity to create a Water Board in Auroville that deals with all aspects of water management. The work of the ISP, however, is not being reflected in

the constitution of the new water task force.

The most recent study, completed in December 2010 and partially financed by AWH, is a ‘Report on the Ground Water Surveys to Augment Water Supply at Auroville Township’. The study, which was conducted by Thrust Geoconsultant from Chennai, leaned heavily on the Ph.D. thesis of Ms. Vincent.

A massive amount of information has become available through these reports. The new Water Task Force, consisting of Aurovilians who in the past have not been able to agree, should now be able to find points of agreement and identify areas that require further study. Hopefully they can then finally formulate the long awaited integrated water management master plan for Auroville’s water infrastructure.

Elaine



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The Eco Park has several elements to sensitize visitors to the environment. There are four primary zones. The first is the Arrival and Orientation Zone, which provides arrival areas for visitors and at the same time ensures minimal disturbance to the rest of the park. The second is the Interactive Learning Zone with interpretive education gardens, learning areas and an Environmental Education Centre. The third zone is the Nature Interpretation Zone, which has a nature trail with viewing points for people to experience the various ecosystems of the Coromandel Coast. The largest zone is the Silent Zone, which is not accessible to the public.

The Environmental Education Centre is the focal point for the educational aspect of the Park. Exhibitions and group gatherings will take place here. The large hall has even a puppet theatre for the small ones. "We expect busloads of school children and large groups of adults to come here," says Joss. They will learn about ecological diversity and indigenous fauna and flora, and come to know the basic principles of ecology and watershed rehabilitation. They will become familiar with plants and animals native to Chennai and learn about their interrelationships and how human activities affect them. This, it is hoped, will raise awareness about local environment issues and inspire them to engage in the process of restoration and preservation of the environment. The eco-park will also be open to students with special research assignments and professional ecologists and scientists.

That the Poonga is well appreciated is shown by the creation of the Friends of Adyar Poonga Association. "A group of local citizens who live in houses close by or own shops in the area formed this Association and we have nurtured it," says Joss. "We host film shows, they come to the Park to do weeding or be otherwise engaged, and recently they conducted an essay competition for children. It is wonderful that a citizens' group has spontaneously formed to support and protect the Adyar Poonga!"

The rest of the estuary

Is the Adyar Poonga now almost finished? "No," says Joss. "We still have to convert a dilapidated government training centre into an organic restaurant and build a Watershed Research Institute. These projects were assigned to us later. Then there is the maintenance aspect. Pitchandikulam Forest Consultants will maintain the Park for two years after the opening to ensure, in collaboration with the Trust and the Monitoring Committee that the Park develops as planned.

And the rest of the estuary? "The master plan for the remaining 300 acres of the estuary has been prepared and we expect that work to start soon," says Joss. "It will include a Green Centre for creating awareness about ecology. But though we have given plans for the development of the rest of the estuary, Auroville is not involved in this work." He smiles. "Speaking for myself, this project has been a tremendous experience. The Poonga has laid the seeds for the cleaning of the other waterways of Chennai – it has demonstrated that it can be done. I once dreamed of a Chennai where children can again swim in the Cooum and Adyar rivers and boats can again float on a clear, clean Buckingham canal. I now believe this will happen."

Carel

Auroville Today reported earlier on Auroville's involvement in the ecological restoration of Chennai's Adyar Creek in its June-July issue 2008, # 232-233

Wildlife in the Adyar Poonga

The Adyar Poonga offers a suitable habitat and breeding ground for more than 10 species of mammals, 90 species of birds, 25 species of reptiles and amphibians, 30 varieties of fishes and 55 species of butterflies. Other invertebrates are yet to be catalogued. The number is expected to go up once the project is completed.

There are mammals like the grey mongoose, reptiles such as the common Indian bronzeback and saw-scaled viper; amphibians such as the Indian pond frog, skipper frog and the common Indian toad; butterflies including the rare painted lady and black raja; and fishes such as the Indian short-fin eel, spotted snakehead, and flatheaded mullet. The birds seen include the rare black bittern, the cinnamon bittern, the black-winged kite, the white-bellied sea eagle, the pied kingfisher, yellow wagtail, egret, chestnut-winged cuckoo and the black-winged stilt.

Nature has brought in her own unique set of plants and animals that thrive in the estuarine region: mangroves, *Salicornia*, *Suaeda*, sponges, jellyfish, *polychaetes*, molluscs and crabs abound.



First row: View of the Adyar Poonga from the Environmental Education Centre.

Second row, from left: View of the Poonga with an observation hut; Joss; view of the Children's Park

Third row from left: Two views of the Poonga; inside and outside the Environmental Education Centre

Fourth row from left: granite pillar at the entrance; making sign boards; a stone slab with a wading bird; granite pillar decorated with a chameleon; granite pillar decorated with a lizard; model of star tortoise; three insects carved in granite slabs; model of saltwater crocodile; mongoose sculptured in a broken grinding stone found at the site.





Monograph on 40 years Auroville economy announced

In April 2002, Professor Emeritus Dr. Henk Thomas from The Netherlands and Chartered Accountant Manuel Thomas from Chennai presented a White Paper on the Auroville Economy to an Auroville audience. On December 2nd 2010, they informed the Budget Coordination Committee about the work done in the last eight years and that their monograph on 40 years of the Auroville economy will be published in Autumn, 2011.

Auroville Today spoke to Henk and Manuel in Afsanah's Guesthouse in Kottakarai where they had joined forces to conclude their almost 12 years of research into the development of the Auroville economy from 1968 till 2008. "I worked like a cloistered monk," says Henk. "Normally I would spend time visiting friends in Auroville, but this time that went out of the window. Manuel came over and for two very long week-ends the two of us together with Harini went over all the materials. It is a staggering amount of work. But we are nearing completion."

Auroville Today reported on the origins of the research, which began in 1998, and on the resulting White Paper on the Auroville Economy in its June-July 2002 issue (#161-162). The White Paper was the result of Henk and Manuel's research into some key issues of Auroville's economy over 33 years, particularly concentrating on Auroville's commercial units. Now the work has expanded to cover 40 years, and includes Auroville's public funds. "The monograph will be a complete and definitive work on Auroville's economy," says Manuel. "It will contain a chapter on the ideological background of Auroville's economy; describe the 40-year development of Auroville's economy; and will have separate chapters covering subjects like the Auroville health system, the housing situation, the economic experiments undertaken, the role of the financial services, the functioning of the new Pour Tous, the development of the no-money economy, and the co-development of Auroville and its surrounding villages. In the concluding chapter we reflect on the founding ideals and give our views on the extent to which they have been followed."

Are they ready to share their new insights? "No," says Henk decidedly. "You have to wait till the monograph is published. But we can talk about some of our observations."

The Auroville commercial units

A main one is the change in the performance of Auroville's commercial units. In the White Paper they concluded that Auroville's commercial sector as a whole was far from healthy and that there was a negative attitude towards the commercial unit executives. But all this has changed. "Judging by the overall performance till 2008," says Henk, "we can now say that the commercial units and other projects have been doing a great job. Over four decades some units have expanded, while others have shrunk. But overall, the picture is positive. In the beginning, Auroville very much depended on outside income; now we see the community increasingly becoming self-reliant. The impact of the commercial sector has been considerable. Also the negative attitude in Auroville towards Auroville business has changed in a major way. That is very heartening."

Manuel adds that the commercial sector has also improved Auroville's product image.

"Quality appears to be inherent to Auroville's manifestation, whether it is of products, services or projects. For example, the Adyar Poonga project has firmly established Auroville's reputation in the area of ecology at the highest levels in the state and at the centre. Likewise, Auroville's commercial units have earned a name for their excellent product quality. Auroville is now contributing not only to Auroville and the bioregion, but also to India and the rest of the world both in



Manuel (left) and Henk Thomas

products and by sharing Auroville's technology and experience built-up over so many years."

So is Auroville's economic outlook a positive one? "In 2002 the outlook was quite gloomy," says Henk. "But things are changing. Auroville is beginning to move in the direction of a knowledge economy, which has a much greater potential than manufacturing handicrafts and textiles. In the monograph we will give some leads and indicate how Auroville could decisively move in that direction." Manuel adds a condition: "Auroville has to start thinking about effectuating some structural changes. Answers have to be found to such questions as how Auroville land can be used in partnership with non-Auroville units; in what way Auroville units can start joint-ventures; what the limits of your present management structure are; and how outsiders can be stimulated to participate in Auroville's development through injecting venture capital. You have to find creative solutions. You have to start thinking about that now, otherwise it will hit you when you do not expect it."

The maintenance situation

Auroville's maintenance situation is an area of concern. "In our White Paper we had used the term 'carrying capacity': we calculated what the yearly contribution of all commercial units was for each Aurovilian," says Henk. "It went down in the period 1993-1999, taking inflation and the population increase into account. We do not want to disclose what happened after 1999. But we have seen that Auroville's total income thus far has not been suffi-

cient to carry the necessary increase in Auroville's expenses. In particular Auroville maintenances have not kept up with the pace of inflation. Here we would like to draw a parallel with the situation in India, looking at the Indian Income Tax laws."

Manuel explains, "In India the Government does not tax those who earn less than Rs 13,300 a month, obviously because they consider that people need that amount to live on. But the maintenance that the average Aurovilian receives today is between Rs 6,000 to Rs 8,000 a month. Auroville has not been able to keep up with the trend, and that is extremely worrying. Moreover, a rather sharp contrast is developing with the villagers' income. Often they earn more than Auroville provides as maintenance."

Henk adds, "We have to do some fine-tuning here, as Auroville provides a number of services for free which you usually pay for in a normal market economy, such as education, entertainment, and access to sports (although we have heard that many Auroville activities have started to ask a contribution). Auroville still strives for a col-

lective and cooperative approach with equal access for all. But that does not substantially modify our observation regarding the insufficiency of the maintenance provided."

Henk points to the possibilities of Aurovilians starting to work outside the Auroville framework. "You will need to develop policies for those people to serve Auroville's ideals while at the same time giving them the freedom to do what they want. It is not a minor thing but a new trend, which might substantially change the Auroville lifestyle. If you do not find creative solutions, Auroville may become a residential resort for rich people who make a donation whenever they like."

Relationship with the villages

Regarding the relationship with the surrounding villages, the observations are positive. "A substantial flow of Auroville money goes to the villages, in the form of monthly wages or as donations for projects. Over the last 40 years, this flow has been immense," says Manuel. "It shows that Auroville is developing together with its surrounding villages, not at their cost. The two social surveys done by the Auroville Social Research Centre in 1986 and 1996 substantiate this finding. Though no survey was done in 2007-8, as Auroville could not get the required co-funding together, the trends are very clear."

Henk adds that Auroville's influence is stretching beyond its immediate neighbours to the more distant villages. "Of course, their development is not only due to Auroville. But there is no doubt that Auroville has had a major, multiplier effect on the development of the surrounding villages. This is almost a model of inclusive development. The money that goes into the villages, and the positive way in which Auroville treats its employees, have brought a lot of changes in the villages."

The monograph

"Auroville is a worthwhile phenomenon of communal living for over 40 years. The work we have done was to preserve its economic record, and make it accessible to future researchers," says Henk. "Our monograph is an outcome of this work. We hope that it will also serve as a model for future scientific monographs on issues such as water, education, environment and the relationship with the villages. Now it can be done as there are many people who still remember the origins and the early years."

Says Manuel, "The monograph will not be a traditional analysis such as one finds in economic textbooks, but it will be the story of the Auroville economy, how it started and developed. In the last chapter we will reflect on the founding ideals. We recommend that they be restudied and discussed. The world has changed many times over in the last 40 years, and perhaps a new understanding of Auroville's ideals has to be gained. We hope that the monograph will be not only be helpful in this discussion, but will be a tool for the further growth of Auroville."

In conversation with Carel

"Will that be cash, account or AuroCard?"

AuroCard is a smart card system that will gradually replace the guest card and guest account which have been used for many years. It's basically an e-wallet, similar to those used by financial institutions and retailers globally. Guests will be issued with a reusable card onto which an amount has been electronically pre-programmed, along with relevant information such as nationality, place of stay and departure date.

Auroville Today spoke with Akash from Cynergy Software, which is behind this new initiative.

"The idea for an electronic funds transfer system materialized several years ago," says Akash, "but, due to the complexities of transitioning from the paper system to an electronic one it lay dormant. Most people agreed that it was a good idea yet no-one wanted to take on the task - until last year."

The present system, which is used for both guests and Aurovilians, requires each unit and guest house to document sales on a blue sheet. Guests using services or purchasing goods or food within Auroville insert their account number and signature against an amount. Units then manually withdraw funds from the respective accounts on a daily basis through a web based system in most



cases, and in some cases this sheet is delivered to the Financial Services for manual uploading onto the system, and subsequent deduction from the guest's account.

One of the main reasons for looking at an alternative to this paper system was to try and eliminate some of the problems which were frequently encountered and to keep manual labour to a minimum. For example, on too many occasions a guest would use and sign for a service on the morning of their departure, too late for the details to be updated on their account when they went to settle their final bills or close their accounts. This often left Auroville with a negative balance and no way to recoup the loss. Auroville's 'trust' system was very much open to abuse. Also, many of the services who are not on-line had no way of knowing whether or not a guest had funds in their account. Quite often guests were unable to use their accounts for the last few days of their stay as some went

early to the Financial Services to settle and close their accounts in lieu of their departure.

In April 2010 the AuroCard project began to take shape. Initially a lot of effort was required to coordinate the set-up of the main system. "The Financial Service agreed to cover the main expenses of the project," says Akash, "which consisted mainly of the actual hardware set-up costs, including the purchase of the cards and hand-held card readers. The technology itself is fairly simple, but Auroville is still quite primitive in this respect. Some guest houses don't even have a computer system and quite a number of people dealing with guests have little or no computer skills."

On 1st December the test phase began, with 10 people travelling around Auroville testing out the system by making payments via their test card rather than through their usual account. For the guest houses in particular, implementation means a little extra work to begin with as they have to register the guest information on-line in order to configure the cards.

"The main server was in France but this wasn't feasible mainly due to link issues, so it's now housed at the Financial Service," says Akash. "The cards were officially launched for guests on 15th December and while there are

still a few snags to resolve it seems to be working well. We initially purchased 1,000 cards and have now ordered 1,000 more."

The card is similar to a plastic bank card in look and feel, but without a magnetic strip. The standard version comes without a photo, but the provision is there and in future these are going to be given to long-term guests or volunteers at the Town Hall Financial Services, which has card-printing facilities. The 'Auroville Guest' card obtained at the Financial Service is reusable and transferrable between guest houses in case a guest changes location, but most guest houses will issue a card managed by them with the name of the guest house printed on the card. Information stored includes the guest's name, nationality, a pre-programmed expiry date according to length of stay, the guest house name and contact details. An electronic wallet stores the current balance the guest has on the card, so it's easy for them to keep track of their spending. Once an amount is loaded by the guest, transactions carried out are immediately deducted from the balance on the card. This means that the guest knows exactly how much they have spent and what their remaining balance is. A refundable deposit of Rs.500 is payable at the time of issue.

As the system works both online and offline it is not necessary for units or

guest houses to have an internet connection online all the time. Those who are offline process transactions using a hand-held card reader from which the data can be downloaded to the main system via USB. "The hand-held readers can store up to 1,000 transactions, so the data can be transferred every few days," confirms Akash. "Because the card balance is within the card itself, payment is ensured."

For the Financial Services the new system has many other benefits as they now have more control over lost cards and, if necessary, they can blacklist guests. Their administration duties during the guest season will now be enormously reduced. The system has several layers of security to ensure that it cannot be hacked into.

All services and commercial activities that currently allow guests to pay by account will need to have this new system in place in order to continue serving guests.

So far, all major units, guest houses and services (over 60 in total) have adopted the new facility. The team is confident that many more will follow suit once they get feedback from those currently participating and can see the many advantages.

We are left wondering...could this be a step towards an Aurovilian identity card?

Louise

Exploring the square of integration

I have a theory that Mother couldn't find anybody in Auroville with an integral consciousness, so she distributed the elements of that consciousness among all of us. Her hope was that, one day, we would discover that each of us has a precious piece of the whole and at that moment we would stop trying to eliminate viewpoints with which we don't agree.

Harsh? Perhaps. And I don't suppose Aurovilians are any more argumentative than the average. But certain issues have divided us over the years, and these are like subterranean fault lines which, though always present, only manifest when certain topics are touched upon. One such topic is the present controversy concerning the construction of benches and the laying of new paths under the Banyan tree at the centre of Auroville. The issue raises many questions, including the role of authority figures, how we make decisions, the competence of the designers and the powers of the Residents Assembly, all of which, no doubt, will be debated ad infinitum. But this issue has also thrown into sharp relief a fundamental difference in perspective which has existed since Auroville's inception. And this is the tension between the 'organic' and the 'shaped' approach to development.

The organic approach is inspired by nature. It favours development solutions which are natural, which take into account and evolve out of ground realities like the natural features of the land and the particularities of the local culture. This approach is favoured, among others, by many tree-planters and farmers. Walking the land, they acquire a unique feel for the topography and 'personality' of different areas of Auroville; tending their seedlings, they become attuned to a slow pace of growth and the rhythm of the seasons.

But it isn't just tree-planters who favour the organic because this approach also elevates spontaneity over organization and a certain

unpredictability over the finished product, an attitude popular among Aurovilians of all stripes, particularly the remnants of the '68 generation. The abiding belief seems to be a trust in the wisdom of nature, in 'emergence', and a distrust of anything too 'mental', organized or artificial.

The other approach celebrates humanity's ability to shape its environment. It delights in searching for forms which don't merely reflect nature but also enhance it; untouched nature is not taken as the final authority. The 'shapers' are inspired by the search for beauty and by Mother's call for 'new forms for a new consciousness' and seek to create forms which are not only beautiful but which, at best, evoke new realities.

The shaped approach to development is represented in Auroville by the bold lines of the Galaxy model, by buildings like the futuristic Last School which emerged out of a barren landscape in the early 1970s and, of course, by the uncompromisingly 'unnatural' statement which is the Matrimandir.

The fact that both these approaches have attracted adherents, and sometimes quite fanatical ones, over so many years suggests that each embodies a truth; and that for any higher synthesis to be achieved, these truths have to be acknowledged and included.

So what is the deeper truth of these two approaches? Perhaps Sri Aurobindo's symbol, where the upward and downward-pointing interlaced triangles create a central square of integration, furnishes a clue. For the upward-pointing triangle can be seen to represent the organic approach. This draws upon the truth that nature herself is reaching upward, is aspiring for change, for transformation. However, it is in her own rhythm and in her own way: as Sri Aurobindo describes it, Nature pursues every by-way, she tries out every combination, for the sheer joy of experiencing diversity.

The downward-pointing triangle, on the

other hand, can be seen to represent the intervention of the Supreme, the descent of a new consciousness or of 'ideal' forms to be materialised here on Earth. Unlike the slow processes of nature, these interventions, according to Sri Aurobindo, can appear to be sudden, discontinuous, even though prepared for by aeons of invisible work. These interventions, to our eyes at least, are 'unnatural'. Like the appearance of the mental consciousness upon Earth, they appear to represent quantum jumps in evolution, something of a different order from everything that had gone before.

Now I think that some Aurovilians tend to attune more to one movement than to the other – the 'organicists' to the ascending triangle, the 'shapers' to the descending – and find it very difficult to concede the validity of the other. This doesn't mean that the 'organicists' and 'shapers' adopt their different perspectives on the basis of deep philosophical reflection or profound spiritual experience: personal propensities, loyalties and antipathies as well as cultural background also play a large part in deciding which approach they favour. Similarly, their opposition to the other perspective often seems more visceral than considered. The organicists, for example, condemn the shapers for arrogance in ignoring or attempting to shape nature to their needs and of being too 'mental' in their approach. The shapers stigmatize the organicists as being gravity-bound and resistant to any kind of change.

Give our present state of consciousness, they are probably both right to have these concerns. Yet it's also true that as long as these two approaches are perceived as being antagonistic and mutually exclusive, a great deal of the community's creative energy continues to be locked up in fruitless guerrilla warfare.

People are increasingly tired of this, which means that now, at last, we may be ready to focus on Sri Aurobindo's square of integration. For the two approaches may not be as far apart

as some believe. After all, the Galaxy model, which is execrated by some environmentalists, takes as its inspiration a natural form, and the Matrimandir, while constructed of 'unsustainable' cement and steel, can be seen to represent a transformed cell emerging from the body of the earth. Conversely, the forests of Auroville are also, in their own way, artificial constructs, for we shaped the land and we originally imported species which would never have grown here without our intervention. And, try as we do now to plant only indigenous species, we can never recreate the original forests which flourished here two hundred years ago.

At a far deeper level, as Sri Aurobindo points out, the intervention from above is a response to the call from below: the two movements are inextricably wedded. Ultimately, of course, there is no 'above' or 'below', merely different ways in which the omnipresent Divine manifests.

Even if the essentially complementary nature of the two approaches is not yet fully understood in Auroville, recently there has been a softening of the edges. For example, L'Avenir d'Auroville has brought together planners, architects and environmentalists – among whom there are representatives of both these approaches – to reassess the 'ideal' forms of the Master Plan in terms of the ground realities. As one of the participants put it, "It's not so much a matter of choosing between geometry and nature as of finding a way of marrying geometry with nature." The ultimate success of this effort and of attempts to resolve similar issues, like the Banyan controversy, will depend upon the extent to which the different approaches can comprehend, in both senses of the term, the truth of the other. And this, in turn, requires the courage to abandon dogma and embark upon individual journeys of inner discovery.

Alan

MONSOON MUSINGS

Water, water everywhere

This has been the wettest monsoon season in twenty years. The number of rainy days is 100% above average. It rained on and off throughout the summer, rained most nights from August to October and hardly stopped raining for three weeks in November.

Many of the early rice plantings in Tamil Nadu have been destroyed, the price of vegetables is rising at an alarming rate and dams and tanks are beginning to flood. It must be a hard and dreary time for the village people as they huddle in their doorways waiting for a break in the downpour. I see women searching for dry sticks to light a fire to cook their family's food. Greasy smoke belches from doorways and I hear coughing as smoke rises from the damp wood. Washing hangs sodden from trees, but in the morning the Indian miracle will somehow be performed again and the school children will emerge shining, in perfectly pressed clothes.

A few people have umbrellas and some wear raincoats, but the majority just get wet. They must be cold to the bone as the air is chill and there is a cold wind. Cows huddle under trees, water streaming down their sides and a flock of brown goats run madly down the middle of the road, seemingly panicked by the sudden gusts of wind.

The intensity of rain brings other problems. Electricity fails, computers crash, phone lines break, trees fall and roads get washed away. They will all eventually be repaired once again, and then stagger on until the next tropical onslaught.

Tourists huddle in cafés, pale and soggy. It is a sad thing to move around with a bag of smelly wet clothes. I am told one solution is provided by the ironing man who will steam the water out of them with his charcoal filled iron. A better one is to dump the clothes, then buy new ones in the first Kashmiri shop.

Then just stay in bed with a book till the rain stops.

The television shows us that northern Europe is now under snow. This is little consolation to the Western visitors on their three weeks' annual holiday who have spent it being wet and cold and are returning to Moscow or London with a sore throat.

It is also getting on my nerves. The humidity level is ninety eight percent which means that not only is water falling from the skies but the very air is saturated almost to capacity. As are my clothes, books and bed sheets. When I open a cupboard the smell of a fetid swamp hits me and a small frog leaps out. Two other frogs are living behind a picture of the Mother and one is in the toilet.

I light candles to brighten the room but supplies are running low and the price has increased fivefold. The matches were sodden when I bought them from the shop. I decide to catch up with my reading, so settle down against a smelly cushion but am immediately plunged into darkness as the power cuts. The official stopping time is from ten to twelve noon, but there are many unofficial cuts. You can feel quite powerless and victimized when you realize that so much of your life is dependent on electricity. No light, no computer, no television. You can't read. You just go to sleep, again.

And it is very noisy. There is a great commotion outside with a million variations of sounds as water falls from a

mile above us, violently hitting the various surfaces. It beats, drums and pounds. It thuds violently on the roof and the trees make angry flapping sounds as the wind and rain tear at them. The noise is relentless. It can go on for hours like this. In a lull I hear ominous trickles as the water runs down the back wall into an already overflowing pool. I can hear it seeping under the front door and silently, maliciously, accumulating

PASSING



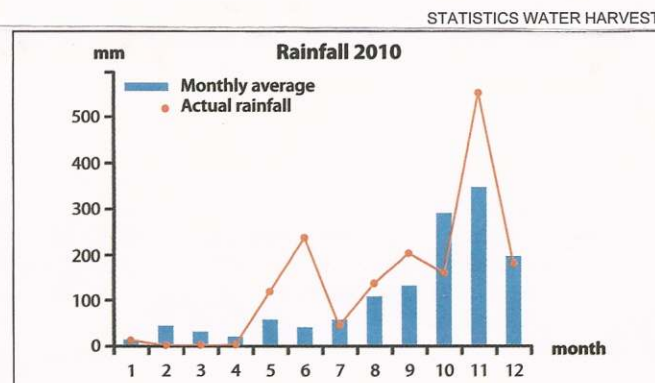
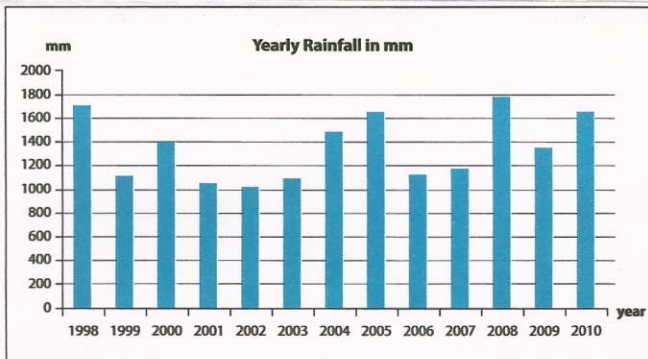
T.S. Mani

T.S. Mani of Fraternity, one of the Aurovilians of the first hour, passed away at the age of 66 on December 21st due to cardiac and respiratory problems.

T.S. Mani, who came from a village near Villupuram, was one of the people digging the hole from which the Matrimandir was to emerge in the early seventies. He joined the Matrimandir workers as one of the original carpenters and later, when his health deteriorated, continued a steady presence doing Chamber duty. He was a quiet, friendly man, totally devoted to Sri Aurobindo and Mother and steadfastly dedicating his life and work to them. The cremation took place at the Farewell Grounds in Adventure the same day.

Marije Romme

After a long and brave struggle with dermatosclerosis / raynaud, complicated by cancer, Marije Romme passed away in Amsterdam on December 24th, surrounded by her family. She was 64 years old and had chosen to forego further treatment. Marije joined Auroville in 1996, even while knowing that the harsh weather conditions would be tough on her fragile system. Determined to be part of the Auroville experiment, she managed to be here for half a year at the time, living in Sailam and working at the Auroville guest service. She is remembered for her delicate paintings and gracefully designed name plates for Matrimandir nursery plants and decorations for a variety of other Auroville items. Marije's remains were buried in Amsterdam on January 3rd.



ing under the sink.

A branch suddenly crashes down with a sharp tearing sound and roof tiles tinkle as they break under its weight. Then there is a heavy thud as a coconut falls on the plastic roof of my motorbike shed then bounces off. I think of my new electric bike huddled underneath it. Electrics and water do not go together.

It is a long and noisy night. I feel cold and irritable as doubtless several million people around me do, and the great majority of them are not lying in a bed, in a house with glass windows, and cupboards full of food. Tomorrow children will not go to school, women will search pathetically for dry wood again and the price of onions will rise another few rupees.

Dianna

Auroville as a field of dreams

Kathy talks about Community building, which has been the underlying theme of her life in Auroville.

I came here in 1997 and literally fell into the very beginning of Adventure community which was life-changing for me. It ignited this deep fascination with 'creating community' which has been 'my call' for the past nine years. I wanted to understand how our need for freedom and our longing for community can be reconciled, and what can be done to bring harmony amongst groups and individuals from very different cultural backgrounds within Auroville. Living and developing the community in Adventure put me right on the spot for this – I had never lived amongst such diversity. There was no walking away from the issues that arose, unless I admitted defeat and left the community. In retrospect, I learned many things to do with human relationships.

Not long after joining Auroville, I took up a job as secretary in the Housing Service. But instead of being the 'nice little office job' I imagined, I found myself in a swamp of demands and frustrations. It was very distressing for me to see people becoming so stressed because their basic need for a place to live could not be met. Some of their expectations were unreasonable, but it was often due to lack of clarity on both sides. The situation became so critical that in 2002 Auroville stopped accepting Newcomers until the housing crisis was resolved.

That state of emergency shocked me and I realized something had to be done. There was a need for new housing projects. That was when five women came together to give birth to Creativity – my next community building adventure. We all wanted a place where the richness of human diversity could express itself in a harmonious environment and this presented a new set of challenges. We soon discovered we had very diverse ideas about how it should be done and faced our own set of interpersonal issues in the process of trying to establish conditions for this new community. I worked on the project for three years and eventually withdrew as the community began to form.

Shortly after, I began to work on the SAIER development proposal. Kireet Joshi saw an opportunity to access funds from the Indian government to establish Auroville, under the umbrella of SAIER, as a learning centre or a University town, in the widest sense of the word. I found this very exciting as this was always one of Mother's main purposes for Auroville and one of Auroville's ideals that inspired me. This was a very satisfying experience that brought me into contact with many people and projects in Auroville. Through this work, Auroville received funds for projects such as Savitri Bhavan, the Botanical Garden, the Visitor's Centre and the Mitra Hostel.

It is still in early stages for the vision of a University City but I feel it is coming more and more into the collective consciousness. Last year we had about one thousand students from all over the world come to Auroville to study or work. Auroville has a great deal to offer, especially to young inquiring minds, and they have a lot to offer us with their energy and fresh points of view.

Since coming to Auroville, I have been fascinated with and worked for projects that addressed the global outreach dimension of Auroville. Yet in early 2005, circumstances forced me to take a closer look at what was happening right next door. A young man from Edaiyanchavadi village, which is at a five minute walk from Adventure, became a member of Adventure. I went away for the summer and when I returned, I discovered the residents of the community were embroiled in a complex conflict with the man. It pushed me to my edge of understanding what it takes to reconcile differences, especially when cultural views are so far apart. The conflict brought the matter of communities and communication back into my life in a very intense way. I realized the relationship between Auroville and its neighboring villages is fragile. I felt a lot of insecurity during that period and did a lot of soul-searching and deep reflection. If Mother had put Auroville in this place it must have



Kathy

been for a very good reason. It seemed to me that ultimately Auroville's survival would depend on our understanding and cooperation with the villagers who have lived here for generations and had very different attitudes to life. But, how to make this work?

This was the catalyst for the inspiration behind Thamarai – the community centre Bridget and I established in the heart of Edaiyanchavadi village. Part of the reason we established the centre was to foster tangible bridges between Auroville and the village. 'Thamarai' is the Tamil word for 'lotus'. It represents the quality of unfolding beauty and potential which is what we wanted to foster in a context where this is not normally encouraged, especially among women. It was not easy to engage the participation of women as they were always busy. Most of them worked in Auroville then went home and cared for their family, leaving them with no spare time. It was the children who responded enthusiastically. We also made good contacts with the village youth, many of whom had been educated in Auroville and they became our partners in developing the project.

Thamarai, now in its 5th year, sprouted a new programme in 2008 – the Edaiyanchavadi Healing Centre. This was a natural outgrowth due to the acceptance of the community centre and was inspired by the one really well attended programme that was hosted for women – a weekend training in energy healing offered by Ruth Lamb and her colleagues from Langara college in Western Canada.

The Healing Centre has been evolving steadily and during the summer an interesting situation developed. A recently-elected village leader came up with the idea that rent should be paid by the Healing Centre for the building. Over the past five years it was rent-free in exchange for the renovation of the building and provision of services to the villagers. The situation intensified to the point a lock was placed on the gate of the centre to prevent access until the rent was paid.

To our relief, when learning of this, the leaders of the youth club intervened and rallied support. They managed to gather over 100 village youth who were opposed to the action of the leader. They not only felt it contravened the agreement but interfered with a service to their community. It

ended with the youth courageously removing the lock themselves thus enabling the service to continue. While this might be perceived as an expression of support for Auroville or the Thamarai project, I felt it was a significant expression of the confidence the youth have to stand up for social justice on behalf of the people in their community and more importantly, not be intimidated by the leaders. This really felt like a turning point for Edaiyanchavadi's and Auroville's growing relationship.

Lately I have been involved in the emerging SEDAB project (Sustainable Enterprise Development for the Auroville Bioregion). This is a new project which is likely to receive funding support from the Ministry of Rural Development. The project offers the possibility to link Auroville's talent in enterprise creation with the further development of the bioregion through setting up village based production units. I find this very interesting as a potential vehicle for women's empowerment and village transformation. Over 12 years, I have undertaken a small scale production of women's re-usable cloth menstrual pads – a project that developed out of a personal concern for sanitary waste disposal. The creation of a social enterprise that offers an exciting opportunity for team-work, community building and, of course, steep learning curves is a new field for me.

I can easily get overloaded with my enthusiasm to get involved in so many interesting and inspiring projects and I have to learn how to ration my energy. I keep Sundays quiet and try to stick to my daily practice of meditation, bodywork and reading. Without this focus I am sure I would get overloaded and lose sense of my priorities.

I also try to go to Hampi twice a year for a retreat which I love – it is now like my second home and I come back refreshed and with a clear mind. I see Auroville as a "field of dreams" and feel wonderfully privileged to be able to put my energy into it.

Dianna

AWARDS

Award for Sadhana Forest

The Auroville community Sadhana Forest was recently awarded 3rd place at the 2010 International Humanitarian Water and Food Awards (HWFA) for their ongoing sustainability project in the Auroville Bioregion. The award ceremony took place on the 25th November, 2010 at LIFE, the Faculty of Life Sciences of Copenhagen.

The Humanitarian Water and Food Award highlights and rewards groundbreaking projects that are using effective solutions to conserve water and grow food sustainably. The purpose is to make the information/technology from these projects globally available for those communities that are struggling to provide clean water and healthy food for their people. Water and food are essential for mankind, yet more than 1 billion people starve everyday and 1.4 billion do not have access to clean water.

Aviram, from the Sadhana team, said that they had put in their nomination for the award last year. He adds, "This award is yet another international recognition of



the ecological and social work done by Auroville, and an acknowledgment of the growing power of volunteerism. It was exciting to celebrate the reception of the award with Shri Ashok Kumar Attri, the Ambassador of India to Denmark, and his wife Mrs. Usha Kiran Attri, who both honoured us by attending the award ceremony. We are also very happy to be

the Auroville International Liaison group in Haiti. We hope that this award will enhance our work both in India and Haiti." Auroville Today will be reporting on the Haiti project development in the near future.

The Association of the Humanitarian Water & Food Award is a member of United Nations Global Compact. Professor Alfred, a faculty member of LIFE said about Sadhana's entry, "Great ideas attract people. And today, looking at Sadhana Forest we see that volunteerism is not dead, but very much alive. Great ideas have the power to engage us to volunteer to help make the change towards sustainability."

Sadhana Forest celebrated its 7th birthday on 17th December, 2010.

Louise

CULTURAL ZONE

CRIPA nears completion



The first phase of the CRIPA (Centre for Research in the Performing Arts) building in the Cultural Zone is scheduled to be completed in early 2011. The 500 square meter rehearsal hall will be available for cultural events in dance, music and theatre.

The second phase of CRIPA will include a café, a library, accommodation space for visiting artists, offices, storage spaces, and three separate halls for the performances of music, dance and theatre as each group has its own specific requirements for sound, equipment and stage.

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Auroville Today does not necessarily reflect the views of the community as a whole.