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Social Outreach



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A break from the daily grind

Women's clubs are instrumental in changing conditions in the villages

Bindu, a part-time administrator of Auroville's Village Action Group, reports on one of its biggest achievements: women's empowerment.

It is the second day of a two-day women's seminar organized by Auroville's Village Action Group (AVAG) at Kalapet. It is not easy for village women to take two days off from their hectic schedule of work and family care to attend such seminars. It is a novel experience, a break from the daily grind. A story circulates around a woman falling out of her bed in the dormitory—she had never slept in a bed before! And the air is punctuated by giggles as the women participate in discussions, educational games and other activities arranged for them.

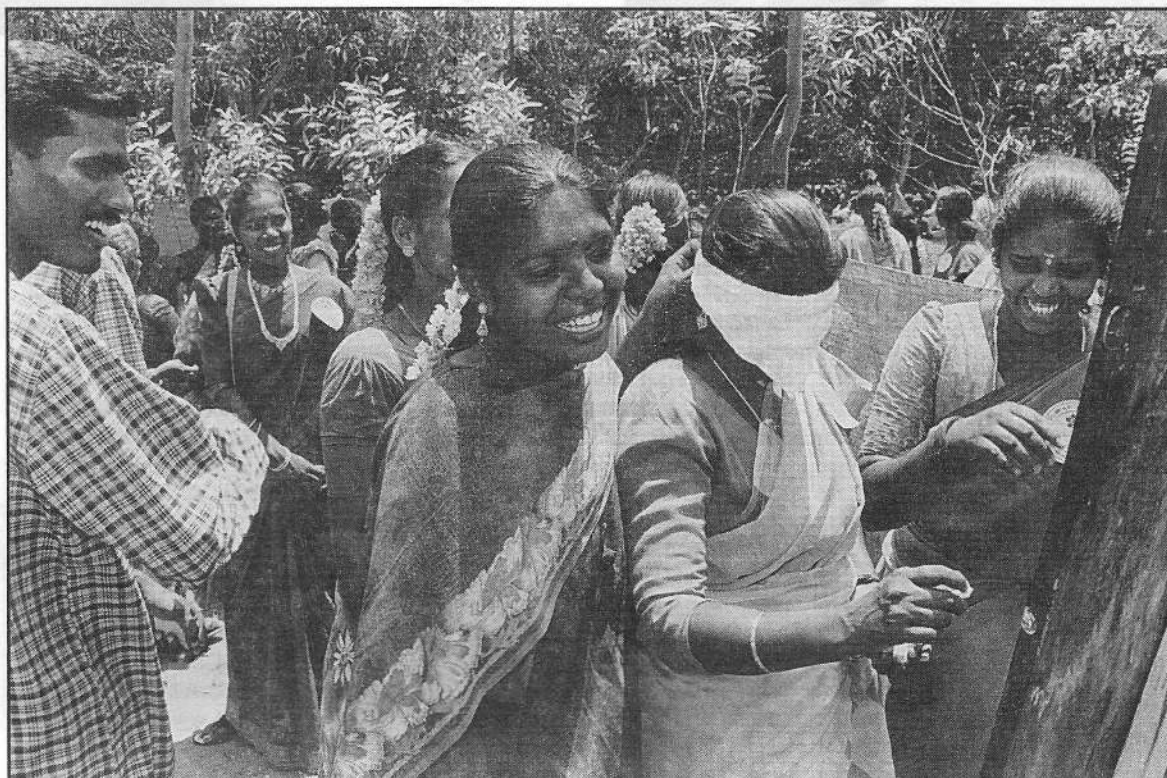
The resource person puts his hand up for silence and asks for a volunteer. One steps forward. Then he asks the remaining women to recite some local proverbs and sayings that discriminate against women. For each saying voiced by the women, the resource person takes a black ribbon and ties it round the volunteer, starting with her eyes. Soon the volunteer is wreathed in black ribbons from head to feet. Seeing this, a participant exclaims, "Oh, the poor thing! Set her free." At this, the resource person explains that this is what metaphorically happens in the society: women are bound by meaningless rituals and superstitions that are imposed on them by a male-dominated culture. The lesson hits home. All the women present promise never to utter any saying that denigrates women and also to prevent others

from doing so.

Anbu, the main architect of the women's empowerment programme, explains that, contrary to the working of most NGOs, AVAG believes that social change can be brought about among women without offering them the proverbial carrot of economic incentives. Accordingly, AVAG has set up 35 women's clubs that take part in workshops and seminars and undertake micro-projects to improve the habitat of their villages. The workshops deal with issues such as primary health care, the use of medicinal plants, etc. The seminars are an occasion to foster awareness of gender and caste issues. Exchange programmes are also undertaken between "dalit" (the so-called untouchable caste) clubs and non-dalit clubs.

Economic initiatives

Only after a club has participated in workshops, seminars and demonstrated its ability to work together as a team by implementing micro-projects is it introduced to the savings and credit scheme of AVAG. The savings and credit scheme of AVAG now involves 590 women in 26 clubs. By saving 25 rupees (about \$ 0.60) per month from their meagre salaries, in four years these women have accumulated savings totalling Rs. 300,000. These savings then circulate among the same women in the form of loans. The club, as a whole, stands as guar-



Having fun at Women's Day (more on page 4)

PHOTO: JOHN MANDEEN

Social outreach

"What is Auroville doing for the villages?" is a question commonly asked by visitors. Actually Auroville has been working in the villages from the very beginning. Two of the areas in which Aurovilians and villagers are working together to create radical change are health and women's empowerment. What has been achieved so far in terms of rural dentistry and the creation of women's groups may have profound consequences, not only for the local area, but also for India as a whole. *Editors*

antor to individual loans. The total amount loaned out to women so far is Rs. 8,22,000, 100% of which has been repaid—which is no mean achievement. These women, though illiterate, keep a close tally of their savings and loans through a system of symbols.

Often women borrow from AVAG's credit scheme to repay back loans to village money-lenders who charge exorbitant interest rates. Noting this, AVAG has recently undertaken a survey to study the indebtedness prevalent among village women. An interesting phenomenon is that while, initially, the women took loans for consumption purposes, such as a social celebration or house-repairs, they are now increasingly taking loans for business purposes, such as to set up a small shop, buy cattle, etc. To encourage such income-generating activities, AVAG plans to start a dairy scheme for 200 women with credit from banks. AVAG also collaborates with Harvest, an Auroville unit, to promote aquaculture—breeding

fish for consumption—in three villages.

Promoting solidarity

To build solidarity among the women, women's clubs, based on their geographical location, are organized into six clusters. By giving both support and promoting healthy competition cluster meetings have led to an improved performance of individual clubs.

At one such cluster meeting, the women's club of Puthurai voiced their frustration with the sale of illicit liquor in their village. Encouraged by the other clubs, the Puthurai women's club went en masse to the elected Government Official in that block, successfully sought his intervention and got the illicit liquor shops closed down. The women were threatened by the men-folk of their village for their action, but they showed remarkable solidarity by supporting one another. All this was accomplished without the intervention of AVAG staff, fully val-

idating the belief that people can be motivated to change themselves.

About Auroville's Village Action Group

Auroville's Village Action Group (AVAG) undertakes social development activities in about 35 villages with plans to expand to 20 more villages in the next five years.

AVAG's activities fall under three main categories: community development through the implementation of micro-projects; educational programmes for children in the form of crèches, night-schools and an innovative primary education project (PEP); and women's empowerment. AVAG ensures sustained people's participation in its activities through its staff of trained local development workers.

Land protection update

Recently, some Aurovilians travelled to Delhi to discuss modalities for a formal approval of the Auroville Master Plan by the Government of India. They met representatives of the Central Government and the Tamil Nadu Government, all of whom were supportive, but they were told that the Master Plan in its present form lacks certain essential information. The Land Use Coordination group is working to rectify this.

Independent of this development, early in May the Chief Town Planner of Delhi will be visiting Auroville, along with the Chief Town Planners of Chennai and Pondicherry. The proposal is that the authorities in Chennai and Pondicherry, with the assistance of Auroville, evolve an interstate bio-regional development plan for the region. The fact that such a plan is being considered may already help deter further land speculation in the Auroville area.

Building the City

Architect Anupama Kundoo created a multi-purpose hall for the World Centre.

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Environment

Environmentalist Minh wonders if Auroville needs a petrol station

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Organization

Discussions are ongoing about a new overview body: the Town Council.

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Auroville and the World

Aurovilians visit the Sarvodaya organization in Sri Lanka.

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People

The Koreans have discovered Auroville. Four women speak about the how and why.

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Simple and beautiful

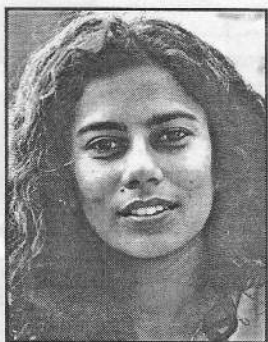
Creating the first part of the World Centre... in five months!

Architect Anupama Kundoo created a multi-purpose hall for the Sri Aurobindo World Centre for Human Unity (SAWCHU) at Bharat Nivas. Caryl spoke to her to get the details.

Architect Anupama Kundoo faced a challenge. She was asked to create a multi-purpose hall for the Sri Aurobindo World Centre for Human Unity within five months with a minimal budget of Rs 15 lakhs. Colleagues advised her against it as "it has never been done before, so it can't be done." But Anupama, who is not averse to doing things differently, took up the gauntlet and managed not only to create the building within the time and budget prescribed (the final cost was Rs 3,500 sq. metre against the going rate in Auroville of Rs 8,000 sq.m.), but also to leave a landmark of simple beauty at the entrance of Bharat Nivas.

The World Centre consists of a roofed circular open hall with a diameter of 16 metres. At the back, two rooms of 55 square meters each have been built. For the rest there are no walls. Outside there are tiers of seats, forming a low-rise amphitheatre. A glass-covered opening in the centre of the roof allows daylight to strike the lines of inlaid stainless steel that mark the pattern on the stone floor.

"This is my first large public building in Auroville," says Anupama as we walk around it, "and I have experienced a great joy in designing and building it. Actually, I felt quite inspired. Somehow I 'saw' the entire building. And what I saw was not something cheap in view of the time and money restraints, but a simple and beautiful structure that would accentuate the open space of the hall. After



Anupama

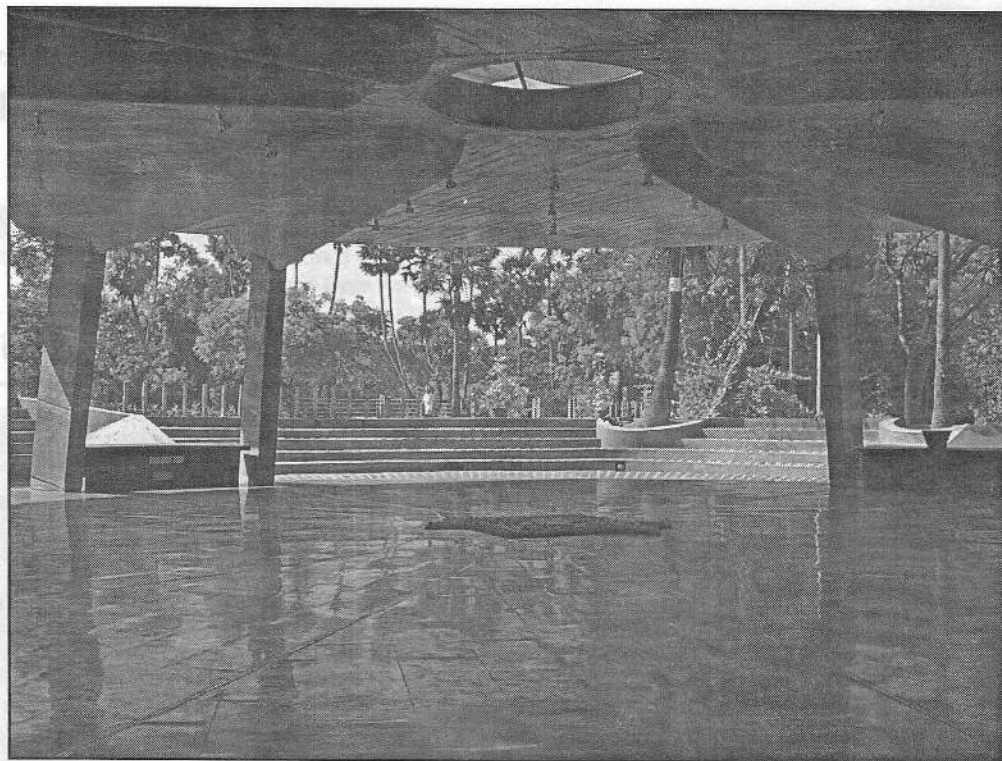
all, this building is for the Sri Aurobindo World Centre for Human Unity, and I couldn't possibly begin with trying to find the easy way out."

The design of the building draws upon *Vaastu*, the ancient Indian tradition that defines how a building should be constructed. "My use of *Vaastu* is not slavish—it's more intuitive—but I used some of its important elements. For example, *Vaastu* says that when you create a structure, it has a being called the *vaastu purusha*. This is usually represented as the shape of a man lying down, and it is important that one's design totally includes this shape rather than missing out parts of it. It is also important when people use or live in a building that their own being is in tune with the being of the building."

Anupama wanted the hall to be circular because she believes this shape emphasises unity. "When you sit in a circle everyone is focused on the centre, and this is where our point of unity lies." The amphitheatre elements are in the shape of a square. "This is a very strong holding shape, but the corners of the square are rounded, so you can imagine the inner circle of the hall continuing to expand outwards, reflecting that whatever happens here should expand outwards to the rest of the world."

Many people were involved in the project. "There were the members of Kolam, my team of architects, who

Inside the SAWCHU hall, showing the amphitheatre steps outside.



did the detailed design and took responsibility for the construction. There was the review board of Auroville architects who checked if my ideas were feasible within the limits of costs and time. I had help from Professor Ambalavanan of the Indian Institute of Technology in Madras, who did the structural calculations and encouraged me throughout. There was Shri Vishwanathda from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, who is in his nineties but nevertheless came several times to the site, together with Shri Sawardekar, to help me find the load carrying capacity of the soil and with the initial design. There was Dhanapal, the Auroville site manager whose exemplary dedication and site management were essential to manifest this structure. And last but not least there were the workers. They have been wonderful, working overtime whenever it was necessary, and showing a willingness to cooperate beyond the usual monetary motivation that I have rarely seen in Auroville."

The World Centre is on the site of the originally planned central reception building of the Bharat Nivas complex. "The future central reception may be built on top of the hall," explains Anupama. "A system of elevated walkways would then connect

the reception to the other buildings of the Bharat Nivas complex according to the original design."

Asked about her experience of the last five months, she laughs: "I love to

work at this pace. If you are under this pressure, it really forces you to think of ways to do it, and think fast. It has been a thrilling experience."

Matrimandir

The Nursery

Besides steel, concrete and cement, greenery is an essential part of the Matrimandir design. In the early seventies the Mother said that the Matrimandir should be finished first, and that the surrounding gardens were as important as the structure itself. For that reason a small nursery was started in January 1970. It was actually the first real project of the Matrimandir, since the construction had not yet begun. Narad was asked by the Mother to start the gardens, and he asked Amrit (who is now in charge of the nursery) to join him in this work. They started growing flowers in pots on a table top under a mango tree in an otherwise barren landscape. Their very first flower, a marigold, was given to the Mother. The first planting they did was of the flowering creeper *Portulaca*, which the Mother called "Sri Aurobindo's Compassion", all around the Amphitheatre.

Narad was a relentless, demanding worker. Work started at 8 a.m. with a ten-minute tea break, a short lunch, and then resumed. The aim of the nursery was to introduce and establish many varieties of trees and shrubs for the Matrimandir Gardens. Narad became known all over India for his horticultural work. He had a real love and feeling for plants and experimented to see what would grow here. That way he created a beautiful base for ornamentals in Auroville. The nursery also specialized in certain varieties of orchids, and more than 130 varieties of plumeria, the biggest collection outside of Hawaii. Now many of these varieties are growing in the rest of India.

One of the plants that will be grown in the inner gardens is the hibiscus. Originally from Hawaii, where the profuse precipitation is ideal for these plants, many hybrids were purchased in Bangalore. Mother gave them names like "Charm of the New Creation" or "Beauty of Tomorrow". Unfortunately, as the climate here is quite different from that of Bangalore or Hawaii, many of these hibiscus plants were lost over the years. The nursery is now trying to hybridize plants suitable for our climate. So far the results are promising.

In the early seventies there was a lot of work going on in the outer gardens: contour work, digging holes for trees, planting. Mother had indicated that she wanted to have large trees and palms around the outer gardens. It was hard work, but people were happy to do this work. However, if the proposal to replace the outer gardens with a big lake goes ahead, then all the tree planting work of the last thirty years will disappear!

Tineke



Reorganizing Auroville

News from the front line

It seems that Aurovilians are continually challenging and changing the way they organize themselves. The latest initiative involves a proposal for a Town Council and a new planning and development authority.

"I have the impression that the entire Auroville organization is going through a crisis", opined a senior Aurovilian during a recent meeting. So what's new? you might think. But this time the difficulties do seem to be of another order. Major working groups like the Working Committee, Executive Council and Development Group are routinely ignored by large sections of the community, the Representatives Group is struggling to keep going, and bodies like the Auroville Board of Commerce and the Green Group are widely seen as merely defending their own patches of turf. And still we have no consensus about how to make the Residents Assembly workable.

Attempts at reorganization are in the air, however. Last year a seminar was called to put the planning and development activities of the community on a more community-accountable and professional basis. The latter was particularly urgent because of the need for Auroville to evolve a credi-

ble Master Plan. One of the outcomes of the seminar was a suggestion from the Land Use Coordination Group (which was overseeing the reorganization process) that a new body be formed—called a Development Council—with overall responsibility for the planning and physical development of the township. One of the criticisms of the previous Development Group was that it concentrated too much power in too few hands. Consequently, the new proposal involved delinking the planning and monitoring functions from the decision-making function. This would be achieved through the creation of three separate groups—a Development Council, a Planning Service and a Monitoring Group—which would, however, work closely together.

A broader concept of development

But many participants at the seminar saw development as being much more than the physical construction of

the township. In particular, there was felt to be a need for an overview body to coordinate the activities of all the working groups, and to ensure that they are acting in accordance with the ideals of Auroville. The Executive Council and the Representatives Group felt that an overview body and a physical development group should be two separate entities, and they concentrated their efforts on the former, which they termed the Town Council.

In their view the Town Council, among other tasks, should help identify collective priorities regarding development, recommend the formation of new working groups, assist in developing guidelines for major working groups, and act as a communication hub for the community. The Town Council would work collaboratively with existing working groups, but would deal with the "big issues" which cross the boundaries or are outside the purview of those groups.

There is a clear attempt to ensure that the spirit of the new group is one

of harmonizing rather than of imposition, and that the people selected for it have the widest possible vision. But basic questions remain. How to attract the right people to take up this work? And even if you do attract them, why should these people be any more effective than previous groups in tackling the many blockages in our process?

In fact, what may be required at present is not another apex organization with numerous powers, but concerted efforts at the individual and

grassroots level to engage in the quieter, less visible work of breaking down the psychological and philosophical barriers which divide us. In this connection, perhaps it is time that we put less energy into creating groups, and more into creating "safe spaces" where all Aurovilians would feel able to express themselves freely and deeply, and be listened to with respect.

Now THAT might be a new beginning...

Alan



Connecting up the cells

New SAWCHU building inaugurated with a workshop

"Search and Research" was the name of a weekend workshop which was held in the new SAWCHU building at the beginning of April. Various Aurovilians presented the projects they are working on to an interested audience.

Anybody going to this workshop expecting rigorous presentations of classical research programmes would have been disappointed. But it was a marvellous opportunity to discover what different Aurovilians are working upon, what excites and motivates them, and how the challenges and insights of their individual journeys reflect and shed light upon our larger collective process.

Manfred's talk about his experiments in desalinating seawater was probably the closest brush with classical research all weekend. Beginning from the premise that seawater, because of its wide availability, is the best source for solving the world's drinking water shortage, he set about discovering a simple method by which to convert it into pure, drinking water. His experiments so far have resulted in a distiller, made of cheap, easily available materials, which allows him to distil thirty litres of pure water daily from a distillation area of six square metres.

Less is more

The strategy of seeking a simple approach to a seemingly complex problem had earlier been taken up by Tom of Harvest. He described how Harvest has trained two youth in each of forty villages in the bioregion to raise awareness about water in their villages. How? He gives them a rain gauge, a rope with a knot in it and a notebook, and tells them to record daily the rainfall and the depth of the village well. Then they write up the figures in a public space so all the villagers can see them. Rural education

was also one of the strands of Steve's presentation. Concerned by the present state of rural education in India, he sees the need to provide a complete education for those who live in this region. But to do this he recognises that first the core values of their tradition must be rediscovered, and then ways must be found of communicating them in a positive way which also takes into account the reality of a globalized technological culture.

Better education, better communication, was the aim of a number of the projects presented. The Auroville Press team described how they have put together two audio-visual shows—"The Genius of India" and "Sri Aurobindo and the Future of Man"—and shown them in many schools and colleges in India. The response of their audiences—most of whom were previously unaware of Sri Aurobindo's thought and vision—has been enthusiastic.

Another educational experience was presented by Nicolette, who runs the Pony Farm in Kottakarai. Almost fifty Aurovillian children are coming regularly to ride and look after the horses there. "Learning to look after horses, learning their language, is a way of learning about yourself," Nicolette explained. Her hope is that the Pony Farm will become part of the mainstream educational experience for all Auroville children, and not just for those who can afford it, as is the case at present.

Diving deep

One of the characteristics of many of the projects presented was that they dived deep: in other words, they

attempt to deal with root questions rather than with surface manifestations. For example, when Paul and Laura began talking about Maroma, the Auroville incense company they have built up from scratch, it sounded at first like just another success story. But then they explained that one of the keys to their success was discovering the 'laws' of how money works. These include being very clear to Mother about one's financial needs, not running after money but letting it come as a consequence of right action—which means, among other things, using it to open the door to creativity—and not having any vital attachment to it.

The Auroville Economy 2000 presentation also seemed at first to be primarily about money—or, rather, the elimination of money exchange in Auroville—but it soon emerged that the reason for this new experiment lay elsewhere. "To overcome the present fragmentation of Auroville", explained Alain, "we needed to find ways of linking people together again. And the economic link is a very powerful one." Some of the participants in this two-month old experiment then shared their experiences with us. As one of them put it, "I feel that my circle is a family, that through discussing our financial needs openly we are beginning to take responsibility for each other."

Managing energy

"The circle promotes unity", explained Anupama about her design for the World Centre building in which the meeting took place. She also mentioned that she had drawn

upon the Vaastu Shastra, which gives instructions about how to design buildings to harness natural and occult energies. This pointed to another recurring theme throughout the workshop—as Tom put it, "Research for me is learning how to handle the energy that comes through you when you live in this place." The two Michaels—Zelnick and Spector—were to pick this up forcefully in their presentation of the Quiet Healing Centre retreats. There have been about eight such retreats now—ten day residential courses in which participants are engaged in group work as well as receiving individual therapy—and the responses from the Aurovillian participants have been overwhelmingly positive. "But it's not so much to do with us, the therapists, as with the energy of Quiet", explained Michael Zelnick. "If we don't get too badly in the way of the Force, it works."

Over the years, they had also observed something else: that when a group is united, the healing energy flows much better. This was echoed in the final evaluation session when the participants in this Search and Research workshop considered what had really been going on over the past two days. "When people really listen attentively and respectfully, as we have done over the past two days to the presenters, then people open themselves," said Shraddhavan. "And when one person opens, it opens up others. As we exchange our experiences, it's as if we're creating connections between the cells of the Auroville body, creating new synapses in our collective brain."

Alan



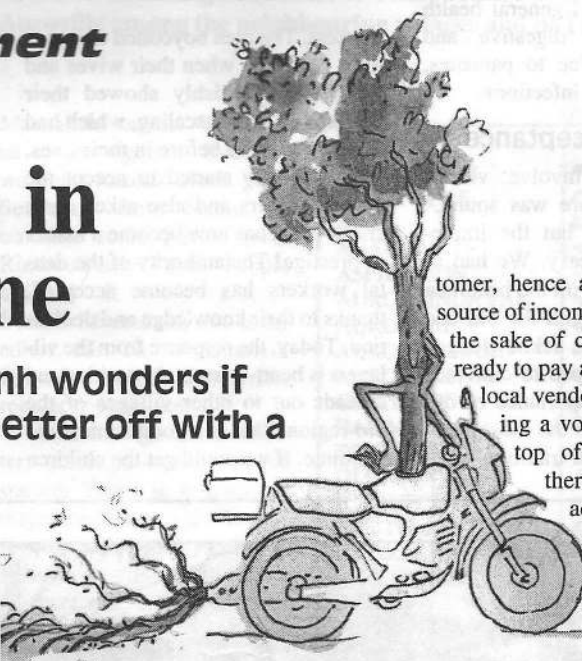
Put a tree in your engine

Environmentalist Minh wonders if Auroville would be better off with a petrol station.

Motorized vehicles are a nuisance to the environment. Everybody agrees. Yet most of us—including me—will not readily drop their use for as many reasons as there are plants in Pitchandikulam. Meanwhile, we rely partly on the roadside petrol vendors, who may not be selling ONLY petrol. The "apple-juice bottle" may also contain cheaper diesel or kerosene. And the oil in the aluminium cup may be waste engine oil, or simply cooking oil dyed with ink. No wonder the refreshing deep fry smell from the preceding vehicle on your way to Chamber duty. Adulterated petrol and oil damage the engine, leading to increased consumption, therefore pollution, more engine damage, more pollution... until one rainy day the Splendid Hero ends miserably at Mr. Happy-Smile's mechanical workshop.

One of the main root-problems is the lack of competitive alternatives.

Alternatives do exist but still need



some improvements: research, field testing, appropriateness and cost-effectiveness. Their development needs funds: for the developers to be freed from material anxieties, and for the end-product to be realistic and appropriate to the needs of the consumers.

As long as we all use petrol, we'll need a source of petrol

How can we change the above statement? How to turn "as long as" into "as short as"? How not to need petrol? We know petrol is not so good for the environment. But let's also look at the good side of it, and utilise it. Professionals in marketing would compare a petrol bank to a milk cow: a steady and essential item for the cus-

tomers, hence a good and reliable source of income. On top of this, for the sake of convenience, we are ready to pay a few more rupees to a local vendors. So, by maintaining a voluntary premium on top of the regular price, there is a potential for additional net profit.

Auroville could have its own petrol bank, like any other city in the world. But this could as

well be an expression of awareness. It could be the milk cow that feeds its own starvation: petrol sales to fund the development and implementation of alternative transport, and to fund/find the balance of an "ecological footprint". The sale of petrol could be accompanied by environmental information, packages or displays and pollution checks, information and promotion of alternative transport, public transport. The money could fund greenwork: green-belt land acquisition, afforestation, environmental

education, pollution control etc. It could also be placed under the purview of an environment-related group. This

would help to ensure that the income is channelled in a more eco-sensible way, and that the venture does not drift into its own unsustainable development dynamic.

To handle the powerful dynamic of petrol usage, getting it to nurture a future where it will become less predominant, does not yet work at the scale of a nation. Can we work it out on the scale of the City the Earth needs?

This is an edited version of an article that first appeared in the Auroville News.

Illustrations: Emanuele



Survey news

So far 2,300 workers have been interviewed as part of a socio-economic survey of all Auroville workers. At long last we shall know how many people are working for Auroville, and by learning about their present conditions, their career plans and their hopes for their children, we will see how far Auroville is meeting the aspirations of the local inhabitants. In future, it is intended to conduct such a survey every five to seven years.

New Working Committee sought

Ballots for voting have been distributed to all Aurovilians in an effort to constitute a new Working Committee. Only five new people have offered to serve on the group.

Savitri Bhavan

Savitri Bhavan continues its series of lectures and this month has added another regular activity: recorded talks of the Mother. Most of these talks, given in the Ashram playground in the 1950s, are in French, with copies of the French and English text provided.

Berijam Camp

Three groups of children are going to Berijam, near Kodaikanal, this summer. Berijam is a nature reserve in the Palani Hills where Auroville has held summer camps for the last twelve years. Trekking, rock climbing, walks in the forests and lakeside clean-ups are some of the activities in which the children participate.

Transition pre-creche opens

Around 20 children and their parents have begun to participate in a pre-creche. The older children (aged 2-2½ years) are introduced to a simple physical discipline around cleanliness and the care of the materials they use. Basic social skills will also be developed, giving children a chance to experience working harmoniously in a group.

Checking your PULSE

Pulse is a "new baby" launched by Avnet, Auroville's intranet. It is intended to be a feedback system for the collective body. When you log in you can see one or two questions that are based on current issues under discussion in Auroville and you can give your opinion by simply clicking on the vote button. Two questions already put up in Pulse are, "Should Auroville organize exhibitions outside Auroville", and "Should an entry fee be levied to visit the Matrimandir to cover the cost of adequate visitors' facilities?" Results: 33.8% felt Auroville should organize exhibitions outside Auroville, 49.9% were against it, the remaining 16.8% said they didn't know (65 people voted); 58.5% felt that no entrance fee should be levied to visit the Matrimandir, 37.4% were for it (123 people voted).

25,000 people and one dentist

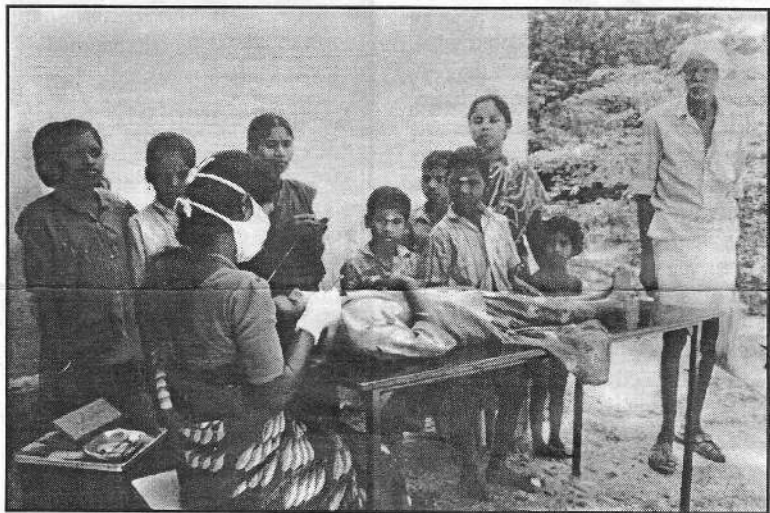
Uneducated village women learn to provide primary dental care in the villages surrounding Auroville.

Jacques came from France to join Auroville in 1981. He has been working ever since to improve the dental condition of the Aurovilians and of those who live in the surrounding villages. Together with Suryagandhi, an Indian Aurovilian health worker and nurse dedicated to the cause of Tamil women's health, Jacques decided to do something about the lack of preventive care in the villages. That "something" became very challenging.

"Say cheese, please," said the tourist, photographing a bunch of village children. He got the full set of brilliant teeth and radiant smiles. "The outside looks good, but the inside story is often different," observes Jacques wryly. "Most Aurovilians are well aware of the need of dental care, but that was not the case for the illiterate villagers. When I first came I was dumbfounded by their complete lack of interest in their teeth. They would only come to see me when a tooth dropped out, or

themselves, preferably women. But how? Can you expect uneducated women who would have to work in the most basic conditions, without electricity or running water and without specialized tools, to give dental treatment? It sounds impossible."

"We started an experiment in 1994," says Suryagandhi. "That year, the Auroville Health Centre opened its first sub-centre in the village of Edayanchavadi. A few village women responded spontaneously to the idea of becoming a dental worker. Using



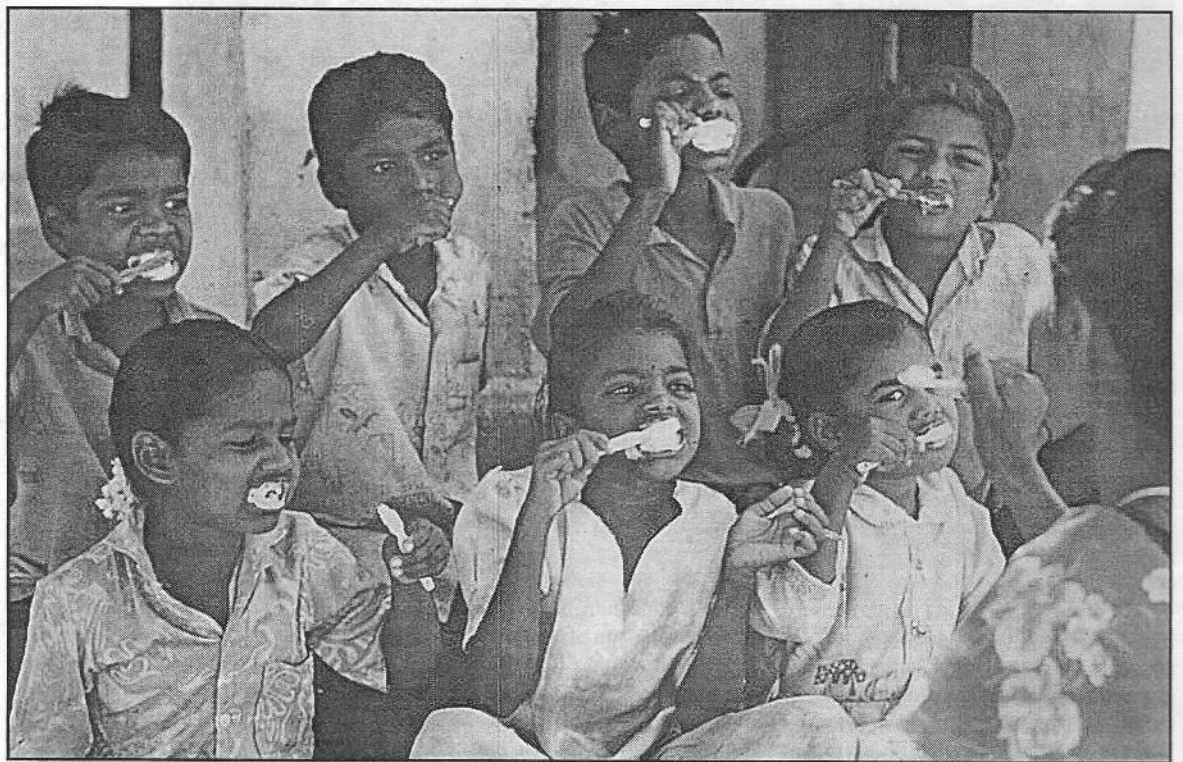
Village dental worker treating a patient, using the Zero Concept technique

when they were in acute pain. Preventive care was unknown."

Training female dental workers

There are more than 25,000 people living in the area that immediately surrounds Auroville, and there is only one dentist. Says Jacques: "It is impossible for the dentist to do all the work, so we have been wondering if we could not involve the local people

models, we taught them to do simple dental work such as check-ups, scaling and removal of calculus. We also taught them how to recognise the serious problems, which they then referred to the dentist. A Japanese technique - the Zero Concept - is used to teach them to co-ordinate their body movements, being seated behind the head of the patient who lies down on a flat support. The training worked. Gradually, we extended it to eleven



Village children learning about oral hygiene

other villages. Now we have trained 32 women as dental workers, some of whom have no more education than tenth standard."

In January 1999 Jacques added a technique of the future called ART, Atraumatic Restoration Treatment, promoted by the World Health Organisation, to the training. The women are also learning how to treat beginnings of caries and how to deal with pits, fissures and small cavities, filling them afterwards with a glass-ionomer, a Japanese cement which sticks to the tooth and releases a bit of fluoride which stops the caries from enlarging. The treatment is painless for the patient. This ART method is now being used in more than 90 developing countries. The advantages are obvious: halting caries at an early stage will avoid costly dental treatment in future, which anyhow is unaffordable for most of the villagers. And this dental care also prevents the occurrence of related general health problems such as digestive and intestinal troubles due to parasites, and low resistance to infections.

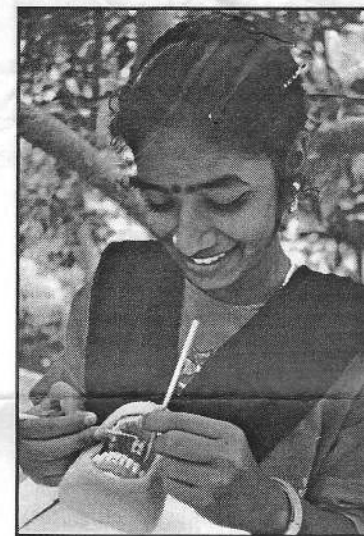
Problems of acceptance

"The idea to involve village women in dental care was sound," continues Jacques, "but the implementation was not easy. We had to prepare the ground with the headmen of the villages and with the old and wise women who are acknowledged as leaders. They helped to convince the people of the importance of our action. The men gave the most problems. According to tradition they

would only accept nurses coming from the city, as they are strangers. They could not accept the women or girls from their own villages as dental

caries-free, it would be a big achievement."

The dental workers not only provide basic dental care, but also give training in oral hygiene. They bi-annually check all the children between the ages of 2½ to 12 years who attend the local schools. They also run a "child-to-child programme" where children do check-ups on each other and learn about teeth and mouth hygiene with the help of stories and games. "The rural dental action project has become a success so far," says Jacques, "though the experiment will have to be strengthened in the coming five years for the villages to become self-sufficient. We have just started. Part of our work now is also to create awareness through posters, street drama with professional actors, puppet shows and video cassettes." Jacques also aims at informing the villagers on the need to improve their diets, in particular to replace the prestigious white sugar by organic jaggery, an unrefined cane sugar and natural food that maintains healthy caries-free teeth when eaten in association with other unrefined foods like whole rice and whole wheat.



Practising

workers. The men boycotted the work for a year. But when their wives and children coquettishly showed their shining teeth after scaling, which had never been done before in their lives, they gradually started to accept the dental workers and also asked for a check-up. It has now become a matter of prestige! The authority of the dental workers has become accepted, thanks to their knowledge and dedication. Today, the response from the villagers is heart-warmingly positive and spreads out to other villages of the bio-region. That is a good stimulus to continue. If we could get the children

Concludes Jacques, "Ultimately, this model of work and organization can be duplicated in other disadvantaged rural areas elsewhere in India. It is highly advantageous for the local population as it will bring a medium and long term reduction in the costs of dental and general health, especially for the children. We hope that the Auroville project can serve as an example."

Carel

Scenes from Women's Day

Over 1000 women came to Auroville to celebrate International Women's day, organized by Auroville's Village Action for the fifth year running. A special invitee was Jhansi Rani of the All India Democratic Women's Association, who spoke of the absence of freedom on all levels for women in rural societies.

Taking turns in speaking to the women (in photo below): Ulla, Anbu, Martha, Harini, Jhansi Rani, Swadandra Kumari, Bhavana and Zerina.



PHOTOS: JOHN MANDEEN

Making ends meet

Spotlight on the expanding Auroville Health Centre

The Auroville Health Centre traces its humble beginnings to 1969, when The Mother allocated Rs. 5,000 to start a dispensary in a thatched hut in the area now known as Douceur. The community of Aspiration was not yet built. There were hardly any Aurovilians living in the area and the dispensary was created primarily to serve the villagers from nearby Kulapalayam.

The dispensary expanded rapidly. By the end of 1973 a permanent structure designed by Piero had been built, with donations from a Parsi lady, Ms. Wadia, the Government of India and Auroville. Gradually the Health Centre extended its activities to other villages. Today, there are six sub-centres where daily wound dressing is done and where once a week a doctor from the Health Centre gives consultations. In 16 other villages, health workers trained in the Health Centre provide first aid, calling on the Health Centre in emergency cases. The Health Centre is also active in providing education. It makes high-quality documentary video films that inform the villagers on issues such as hygiene, waste disposal, AIDS and alcoholism, and stages plays under its programme "Health Education through Drama".

Many people have helped to develop the Health Centre, but three doctors deserve special mention: Dr. Kamla Tewari, Dr. Assumpta and Dr.

Lucas. Over the years they not only took charge of the running of the Centre, but also raised funds to expand its activities and extend the building. They also built the Health Centre staff quarters. Dr. Assumpta and Dr. Lucas have ceased to work at the Health Centre for personal reasons, leaving the day-to-day charge in the hands of a Dutchman, Albert, who joined Auroville in 1997 after having worked for 30 years as chief nurse in a hospital in The Netherlands.

A lost ambulance

"At present the Health Centre treats over 30,000 patients a year, 10% of whom are Aurovilians," says Albert. "It has become a major task to raise the funds to run it. Auroville's contribution is limited to paying the maintenances of a few people, in all Rs 30,000 a month, which is a drop in the ocean. All other expenses, about Rs 200,000 a month, are met from elsewhere, in particular by donations from Germany and Spain. In fact, it is a miracle, a grace, that we have so far received these donations, and always just in time. Without them this Health Centre would cease to function almost immediately. Outside donations are our primary source of revenue—that is, if they reach their destination." And he explains: "We seem to have lost a new ambulance donated by a Rotary Club in Spain. They sent a cheque to their head office in

Switzerland, which in turn sent the cheque to Delhi with instructions to purchase an ambulance for the Health Centre. Somehow or other, either the money or the ambulance disappeared. We have tried to get to the root of it, but so far we failed. This is very sad, for our existing rattletrap is barely fit to transport animals, let alone people. I am starting a campaign for another ambulance, this time with the stipulation that all cheques should be payable at Auroville only." And he laughs.

New facilities

Albert points out some of the good features of the Health Centre. "Last year, we opened four beautiful nursing rooms for Aurovilians and villagers, more beautiful than any you can find in the Nallam Clinic or in the East Coast Hospital in Pondicherry. There is a laboratory with all facilities, an X-ray machine, a small operation theatre, and there are qualified doctors available during working hours and a nurse on duty around the clock. We are often criticised for not offering 24-hour help, but it is not possible as only three Aurovillian doctors work for the Health Centre, and that part-time.



Sumithra (in photo) is sixteen years old. When she first came to the Health Centre, her left leg below the knee was bent at a 90 degree angle. The leg was straightened by surgery. Now the leg, which used to be about 25 cm shorter than her other leg, is slowly being lengthened with the help of metal rods. The body produces the cartilage to fill the gap between the bones as the leg gradually grows longer.

There are 11 Aurovilians who hold medical degrees, but the others have all said 'no' for personal reasons when asked to join the Health Centre. That means that we have to hire doctors from outside to have a doctor available between 8.30 a.m. and 5 p.m. and that only a qualified nurse is available during the other hours to give first aid. After 5 p.m., emergency cases have to go to a hospital in Pondicherry. That is a setback, but I

hope that in due time we will be able to improve this service."

Carel

More information on the Auroville Health Centre can be found in its newsletter Kuyil, which can be obtained by writing to the Auroville Health Centre, Aspiration, Auroville 605101.

A two-way flow

Outreach programmes keep villagers in touch with Auroville

Meenakshi talks about new initiatives aimed at raising awareness of Tamil culture in Auroville, and creating a better understanding of Auroville among the neighbouring villages and in Tamil Nadu as a whole.

Meenakshi is indefatigable. "Yes, I am doing lots of outreach programmes. Come and see me Monday between 3 and 4. One hour I can give for an interview. I have a group from Sri Lanka in the morning. Then, a group of young people from America will pass by. Then..."

Newsletters

"Auroville Grama Seydhi Madal (Auroville Village Newsletter) began in October 1998," Meenakshi says, offering me a cool drink on her veranda. "It has a circulation of 300 copies each month. With those 300 copies, we reach at least 3,000 people." The eight-page Tamil-language newsletter is full of information. It covers village life, celebrations in the schools; it gives short quotations from the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, and selections from Tamil epics on human unity and progress, plus stories about Tamil culture and heritage. It picks up items from the Auroville News, Zen koans, humour, ethics, folk tales and songs—writing that touches the heart and suggests the richness and universality of rural Indian life. "We also give reports of Residents Assembly and Governing Board meetings, and we answer common questions that visitors ask about Auroville all the time." The past ten issues have even included photos.

Looking through the December issue, I noticed a list of 34 Auroville communities with a translation of each name into Tamil. "It helps the villagers understand Auroville,"

Meenakshi smiles. "It brings us closer together. Recently we got a famous Tamil poet, Sundaram from Salem, to translate some poems from Rimbaud into Tamil. People enjoyed it very much." Besides Meenakshi, who is the editor, Mr. N. Ardhanari, a Gandhian and educator, writes regular contributions.

In addition to the newsletter, other publications have started. There is a student's magazine (Maanavar Murasu) for night school students, financed by the night school teachers themselves. And Kaluveli Nilam, the last few issues of which is published in Tamil and of which have also been translated into English, is the name of a quarterly publication on ecology and eco-science, giving particular importance to the Kaluveli region (the bio-region in which Auroville is situated). Its editors are Subash and Karpagavalli, both Aurovillian teachers, and Meenakshi contributes articles.

Survey of workers

"What else?" Meenakshi continues. "I want to tell you about the SEWA Survey. It is very important." SEWA (Small Employers Welfare Administration) is an Auroville conflict resolution forum, pension fund and employment service. With financial help from the Dutch foundation,

ABRI	சரணாவலம்
ACCEPTANCE	ஒப்பு
ADVENTURE	சாகசம்
AMI	நப்பு
ARANYA	அரண்யம்
ASPIRATION	ஆர்ண்
AUROBRINDAVAN	ஆரோபிந்தாவனம்
AURODAM	ஆரோஅணைக்கட்டு
AURO-ORCHARD	ஆரோபூத்தோட்டம்
AUROSILPAM	ஆரோசிலைகள்
CERTITUDE	உறுதிப்பாடு
DANA	கொடை
DISCIPLINE	ஒழுக்கம்
DJAJMA	அன்னக்கு வெற்றி
ETERNITY	நிரந்தரம்
EXISTENCE	கிடைத்தல்
FORECOMERS	முன்னோடிகள்
FRATERNITY	சகோதரத்துவம்
GRACE	அருள்
GRATITUDE	செய்தன்றி
HOPE	நம்பிக்கை
NEW CREATION	புதிய படைப்பு
PEACE	அமைதி
PITCHANDIKULAM	பிச்சாண்டிகுளம்
PRARTHANA	வேண்டுகோள்
PROMESSE	வாக்குறுதி
PROTECTION	பாதுகாப்பு
REVELATION	வெளிப்பாடு
SINCERITY	விரவாசம்
SRIMA	ஸ்ரீ அன்னை
SURRENDER	சரணாகதி

Stichting de Zaaier, and guidance from the Sociology Department of Pondicherry University, 12 post-graduates are conducting interviews with Auroville's many employees. Highly confidential, the report consolidates information on the social and economic situation of each worker, his or her home condition, present job, lifestyle, aspirations and what they think of their children's future. Meenakshi:



From the newsletters:
Above: a drawing of Iyyanar's horse in Kaluveli Nilam
Left: Tamil translation of community names in Auroville Grama Seydhi Madal
Below: A short item in Kaluveli Nilam (English version)

A farmer's diary note

Are there any insects which are useful for crops? Yes, there are. The useful insects eat the harmful insects. Harmful insects feed on our crops, damaging leaves, stems, tender shoots and roots. Spiders, dragon flies, beetles, butterflies, and bees are some examples of useful insects. They are destroyed if you spray chemical pesticides. Protect pro-crop insects!

Gnanasekhar. Thuruvali.

low-up. We can build a database, and continue research on this basis. It is very exciting, because Auroville is a place of unending education and research, isn't it?"

Tamil Heritage Centre

The Tamil Heritage Centre is another important project. "Nothing has been done to create a Tamil Centre in Auroville for 30 years," Meenakshi says. "Oh, from time to time it was spoken about, but now there's some real interest. A core group has been formed which includes Marti, Angad, Raman and myself. Land to build on has been assigned behind the pump-house, within the Bharat Nivas complex. A sacred grove of trees is already there. By adding a stone mandapam and a lotus pond we will create a space, an environment that will evoke the feeling of a typical Tamil village. We wanted to make it as simple as possible, and outdoors."

As a beginning, every Wednesday for the past two months in the Centre for Indian Culture, Tamil Heritage programmes have been presented. Visiting professors and scholars have talked on subjects like ancient and modern Tamil literature, and deciphering old Tamil scripts, and a local drama group has given a performance. "The programmes have been well attended by both Tamils and non-Tamils, and as they are bilingual everyone can understand. The question and answer sessions that follow these lectures are very interesting."

Jill

Deeply involved in the study of Tamil culture and history, Meenakshi, who came from Madurai, is a well-known Tamil poet and founder of Ilaigarkal Education Centre.

A learning experience

Is Tamil culture looked down upon? Report of a workshop

"India: unity and diversity, a seminar on a learning experience" was the title of a workshop held in the Centre for Indian Culture in late March. It generated a lot of interest among locally-born Aurovilians, and it threw up observations and ideas which need to be considered carefully.

Sometimes Auroville workshops are more fluff than substance. But this one was different. For it was not only a celebration of Tamil culture—with chanting, drama, poetry and the hymns of Saint Ramalingam—but a very honest look at what prevents us—Aurovilians and Aurovilians, and Aurovilians and villagers—working more closely together. The fact that the participants included a preponderance of not only locally-born Aurovilians, but also long-term friends and teachers from the local villages, gave these discussions added weight. It was also heartening that the entire programme was bi-lingual: everything was communicated in both Tamil and English.

Auroville workshops often have a certain rhythm or pattern. At first there is a certain shyness, tentativeness, a tendency to make "safe" generalizations. Then somebody pushes through to expose the knots and difficulties which, after much discussion, may be followed by a certain resolution. This workshop was no exception. It began with long-term Aurovilians talking about what had brought them to Auroville and what they felt we shared in common. "We all belong to Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's family," said one, "and we have known each other for centuries, perhaps even millennia." Another Aurovillian spoke of the real

but submerged unity between Aurovilians which only surfaces in moments of crisis.

What keeps us apart?

As soon as we broke into groups, however, people began to touch upon the difficulties. For example Giri, who comes from Benares but who has lived many years in Auroville, felt one of the main reasons we do not feel united today was because money has become the dominant factor in Auroville. "Auroville is becoming more and more a place for rich Westerners who, under the label of doing yoga, can enjoy a very comfortable lifestyle." He felt that it is time to slow down, to stop trying to apply technological fixes to everything, and to look at fulfilling our real needs. "There is a lot of inequality at present, both within Auroville and between Auroville and the villages. There will be fear and hatred if we have a society of haves and have-nots."

Selvaraj, a long-term Aurovillian who was born in Kulapalayam, also regretted that everything in Auroville seemed to have an economic dimension today. Noting that few Westerners speak Tamil, he felt this was mainly because "there is no economic benefit in learning Tamil". This brought him to his larger point: that the Auroville of today is a predominantly Westernized community.

He feels that the local culture is looked down upon because it is associated with the villages, which many Aurovilians see as only dirty and poor. "Many Western Aurovilians are scared that villagers only want to join Auroville for economic reasons. But everybody is benefitting in some way economically from being in Auroville, and more people from the villages would follow a spiritual life in Auroville than many of the Western Aurovilians who live here at present."

Bridging the gap

The final discussion sessions focussed upon possible solutions. A member of the Entry Group noted that the group would like non-Tamil Newcomers to attend intensive Tamil language classes in the first year. It was suggested to set up a first-class Tamil language laboratory for this purpose. A teacher at Isaiambalam School also offered to hold Tamil language classes in his school, using Rishi Valley methods to promote easy learning—"And our Tamil school-children can be the teachers!"

Giri noted that it was important that all Aurovilians learn Tamil, but "we have to create an environment where people want to learn Tamil. This means we must learn to understand the beauty of the culture." One suggestion was to hold annual Tamil

cultural festivals in Auroville, which would draw the great artists from all over Tamil Nadu and beyond. Another suggestion would be to organise trips for non-Tamil Aurovilians to experience important cultural and religious festivals in the state.

As to helping break down the division between Auroville and the villages—something which a number of speakers had remarked upon—it was suggested that newcomers should visit a village for a few days to get a better understanding of village culture, and Auroville should regularly invite the elders from the village to be with us, to visit Matrimandir and eat with us in the Solar Kitchen. "We are brothers and sisters, we have to learn to help each other."

The workshop ended with the feeling that such seminars should be held much more often in the future, and involve more people from the villages. Some of those friends from the village who attended the workshop were left feeling a little bemused, however. One of them, Mr. Kathavarayan, had taught in the first Aspiration School in 1969. "You talk a lot about your difficulties," he said afterwards, "but for me Auroville is wonderful. I feel great peace and harmony here, much more than exist in the world outside. It's particularly impressive to people like us who are involved in education to see Tamil children growing up fearless, without barriers of caste and sex, in places like New Creation School."

Alan

Culture Briefs

Changing Perceptions

Pitanga exhibited "Changing Perceptions", a collection by Ms. Aurogeeta Das of her lithographs, relief prints, sketches, paintings and intaglio prints. Born in Auroville, Aurogeeta was brought up in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and further educated in Kanoria Centre for Arts in Ahmedabad. In her introduction to the exhibition, Aurogeeta spoke about feeling "a little rootless because I was faced with a confusing cultural multiplicity. To turn this cultural multiplicity into an asset requires strength and a certain level of maturity I have yet to acquire... I believe holding an exhibition here, in Auroville, will help me locate my origins."

Sanskrit Offered

Several Sanskrit courses are now offered at the Centre for Indian Culture. These are Introduction to Indian Literature, Sanskrit Grammar, Sambhashana (Spoken Sanskrit), Chanting Mantras, Mantras and Songs and Chanting Bhagavadgita.

Books on self-knowledge

In mid-April, Kireet Joshi held a two-day workshop on the theme of preparing books in a series on self-knowledge. The next book will focus on vital education. The books are intended for use not only by Auroville schools but also by schools in India as a whole.

A Brazilian Concert

Another evening of bossa nova was presented at the Visitors Centre, to the delight of all. The group which performed consisted of Eliane (vocals), Rolf (guitar), Franco (bass), Suresh (drums), Rolf (percussion) and Matt (saxophone).

A Morning of Ragas

The Centre of Indian Culture hosted a morning of Indian ragas accompanied by violin and mridangam by Sri Othuvaa Sambandam, Officer Urban Coop Bank, Pondicherry. He specializes in devotional songs in ancient Tamil. He also sang hymns of the great saints of the Bhakti period.

Solo Piano Recital

A piano recital by Richard Hartz (Ashram) was enjoyed at Concerto Salle Aurovax, Shanta and Heinrich's studio in Auromodel. The works of Bach, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven were played.

"Voyage Exceptionnel"

A beautiful slide show with music was offered at Bharat Nivas in April. The pictures, taken by Carlos, were accompanied by a recording of new guitar music by Agni. It was an intense voyage through nature, representing the colourful seasonal changes in Geneva, Switzerland.

New CD released

Nadaka has released the third and final CD in his meditation series. Called *Cloud of Mercy*, it features the voice much more than the previous CDs. More details from: raintree@auroville.org.in

Nishta again

"Nishta, or the Strange Disappearance of Margaret Woodrow Wilson", a play by Seyril Schochen, was given an encore performance by the Auroville Theatre Group in April. Many people from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, who had missed the premiere in March, were in the audience.



Open Forum

The Emperor's New Clothes?

A commentary on the Economy 2000 experiment

The Auroville Economy 2000 experiment has been running for a few months now. Approximately 160 Aurovilians have joined circles that pool income and eliminate individual accounting. Lucas, who joined the experiment, sounds a warning note.

I joined because my partner—and joint holder of the same Financial Service account—wanted to join, not because I understood the meaning of the experiment. Now that I am part of it, I ask myself what it is all about. I have not yet come across very convincing answers, but I slowly understand what it is not about. A lot of meetings, sales talks and brochures printed at public expense went into Economy 2000. Considering all the energy and manpower that have gone and will have to go into the experiment, I hope that it will not just turn out to be an exercise in shuffling accounts, for the sake of pleasing the Chairman of the Governing Board. Or worse, an exercise in fooling ourselves into believing that a financial organization is able to produce the spirit of sharing, or human unity. Or worst of all, another exercise in further developing the well-developed Aurovillian sense of chosen-ness and superiority above the common man. One of the crucial issues is whether we want to build up centrally financed services—in the sense of state-communism which has collapsed—or to encourage individual entrepreneur-

ship—in the sense of capitalism which is thriving. As regards our own scenario, I am sure there are people in Auroville services who give all their time and energy without any expectations for financial benefits, and people in Auroville business who give all their time and energy without the motivation for personal enrichment. This is made possible, I believe, by the strength of character and the idealistic commitment of individuals, not by commitment to any system nor by the system.

If I understand Sri Aurobindo right, he is concerned with the spirit of brotherhood, not with economic systems. We therefore have to ask ourselves: do we believe that we have made any of the psychological steps required for an economy without money? Have we grown beyond feeling materially secure only in the presence of financial assurances and reserves? Beyond feeling individually free only if we are allowed individual pleasures and allowances? Beyond the need for remuneration as a recognition of our efforts? Or, beyond measuring spiritual progress by the degree of material frugality? Do we encourage sharing because we

know that there is the safety net of a buffer fund? And because we presume that behind the buffer there is the paying "commercial unit" within Auroville or the generous Indian or American or Russian uncle outside? Or is the circle experiment nothing but a means to learn about each other's needs and struggle to make ends meet? Can we build upon the existing strength to spontaneously share whenever needed? Or is it all about decentralizing the uncomfortable responsibility of judging others' needs and merits to be supported? Can we make it an exercise in humanizing again the game of mutual moral assessment? Can we make it an exercise in tolerance where we trust our fellow Aurovilians instead of judging whether they should give more and take less? Most importantly, I hope that joining "Economy 2000" does not become another boost for Aurovillian arrogance, another weapon against those who have "not yet" made it, another criterion for judgement and exclusion. Nor should it become a material criterion for joining Auroville. It is obviously not justified to force newcomers to join the circle economy when

Aurovilians are not forced to join. And it will never be justified to force anybody into joining the circle economy—neither by moral pressure nor by administrative force (visa!) nor by physical force—as centre-enforced communism can never create the spirit of brotherhood. Then, what is left? Can we focus on a pluralistic approach of individuals being responsible for their own actions? Can we create a system whereby somebody in genuine need is able to access necessary funds without being made to feel like a beggar and without removing the need for individual efforts and initiatives? Can we provide an environment where doing business for meeting one's material needs is not considered to be negative, but is instead encouraged? Can we help our fellow beings to stand on their feet instead of crippling their sense of individual responsibility and strangling their creativity and productivity? Let us hope that the experiment is not just cosmetics, or that it does not produce another set of The Emperor's Clothes, but something that is worth the trouble.

Grace, March 2000



Awakening the Community

Aurovilians visit the Sarvodaya organization in Sri Lanka

In March an exchange programme was held between Auroville and the Sarvodaya organization of Sri Lanka. Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne, founder of Sarvodaya, serves on the International Advisory Council of Auroville, and both organizations belong to the Global Eco-village Network. Bindu, one of the Auroville participants, reports on the experience of Sarvodaya.

The picks and the shovels are neatly arranged in rows, with the "chetties" (pans) piled up beside them. The sun, now peeping from a corner of the temple roof is edging up higher in the sky. I am impatient to start the work before the day gets really hot. The villagers seem quite content though to mill around in this clearing in front of the temple, until a Buddhist monk strides forward, and everyone gathers around in a respectful hushed circle. The monk intones hymns and leads us into a short meditation. Then, the flags are hoisted: first the Buddhist flag with its strips of colour; next the Sri Lankan flag with the lion as the emblem of the Sinhalese people; and lastly the Sarvodaya flag with its pink lotus and the rising sun symbolizing the awakening of the people. I am inspired by this opening ceremony. Now we are truly ready as a group to dedicate our work for the good of the collective. We spend the whole morning scrubbing the blackened temple walls, clearing a road of overgrowth, and planting a herbal garden for the whole village. In the afternoon there is a health check for the children and a fair, and the festivities continue till late in the evening with a bonfire and dances. This is "Shramadana", literally "an offering of one's work," but more an exercise in community building, which forms the core of the Sarvodaya movement.



Volunteers from different nations at a "Shramadana"

An insight into the movement

The first Shramadana took place in 1958 when a young schoolteacher, Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne, at the prestigious institution of Nalanda successfully led his high-school students to live and work in a poor backward village. Subsequent Shramadanas brought together people from different communities, religions and economic classes and gave birth to the Sarvodaya movement. This has now grown to become Sri Lanka's largest volunteer-based non-governmental

organization serving 11,000 villages. Dr. Ariyaratne, recipient of many major peace prizes including the Mahatma Gandhi Peace Prize in 1996, believes that a non-violent social transformation can be brought about by the cultivation of the Buddhist values of "Metta" (Respect for all life), "Karuna" (Compassionate action) and "Mudhita" (Impersonal joy). And what has made the movement a success is the integrity of its founder and his followers in practising these values. They believe that through the development and inner awakening of

the individual, the community can be awakened, literally translating to "sarvodaya"; through the awakening of the community, the nation can be awakened "desodaya;" and through the awakening of the nation, the world can be awakened "vishvodaya." Sarvodaya sees this awakening as having six major dimensions: spiritual, moral, cultural, social, economic and political.

Accordingly, Sarvodaya organizes over eighty different types of activities in the social, economic and technological sectors: the activities range from early childhood development programmes to Insight Meditation. Meditation retreats are also regularly offered at "Vishva Niketan," Sarvodaya's peace centre, for all Sarvodaya workers.

In the ten days that we were in Sri Lanka, we were exposed to different aspects of Sarvodaya's work. A group of us went south to study their educational programmes and their micro-financing scheme, another group went up to the mountains in central Sri Lanka to check out a reforestation programme, and a third group traveled up north to attend a health workshop and visit a refugee camp for people who had fled the war in the northernmost district of Jaffna.

Civil war

The over two decades long civil war between the Sinhalese and the Tamils raged in the background during our stay. There were constant security checks, gun-toting policemen everywhere, and a shoot-out between the terrorists and the army in

Colombo in that short span of ten days. The war, once localized to the Tamil district of Jaffna, has spread to other parts of the country with random bombings by terrorists. And this has only served to further alienate the Tamils from the Sinhalese, the majority community. The Tamilians in our group, seven in number, felt uneasy with the hostility expressed against Tamils by many Sinhalese villagers we met. Though Sarvodaya works in a number of Tamil villages in Jaffna, organizes peace rallies and meditations for the masses, and recruits Tamil volunteers, we felt that more should be done to foster peace and understanding between the two communities of Sri Lanka.

All in all, it was an intense learning experience. Auroville, we felt, could learn a lot from Sarvodaya especially in the fields of community building as exemplified by the "shramadana" work camps and living up to one's spiritual ideals.

As perhaps would be expected, discussions raged within our group about the differences between the spiritual ideals of Sarvodaya and Auroville. These discussions were all the more interesting since only half of our group was Aurovilian, the others being long-term employees of various Auroville units. It was recognized, for instance, that centralized management would be difficult to introduce, and perhaps even undesirable, in Auroville. For unlike Sarvodaya, which is an NGO with a single unified aim, Auroville is a growing town that simultaneously encompasses multiple facets of development. In the long run, Auroville's evolutionary aim is more far-reaching than just awakening individuals. Nevertheless it was felt that in the short-term, Auroville would benefit by charting its growth through clearly established objectives, as is being done in Sarvodaya.



Building the body

Carel went out to write an article and broke into a sweat...

Scene 1: Auroville Today meeting

"We should do an article on those body-building guys in the gym, those chaps with the melons in their muscles. Anybody?"

Silence.

"Could also have a nice photograph, 'Mr. Auroville 2000,' with swimming trunk, bulging biceps and the toothpaste grin. Roger, something for you?"

"Don't think so. Ask Carel."

"Could be fun," I agreed naively.

Scene 2: The gymnasium

The gym is a simple two-storey building in New Creation near the sports ground. It was built by Savitri, a French Aurovilian who, from an early age, has been passionate about sports and body development. When she re-joined Auroville a few years ago, she noticed a certain laid-back atmosphere. "The Aurovilians, at the time, were rather a lazy lot," she observed. "They were not really interested in developing their bodies. It has improved since, and the gymnasium has helped by providing a hall that is used for martial arts, hatha yoga and dance. The ground floor is for developing body awareness. The man you should speak to is the Basque Joséba."

When I enter the ground floor

Joséba is doing something tiring with a machine. I greet him cheerfully. "Hi, Joséba, I've come to do an article for Auroville Today on body-building and would like to talk to you and make a photograph, preferably the gorilla posture with oiled muscles. OK?"

Silence, just this side of frigid.

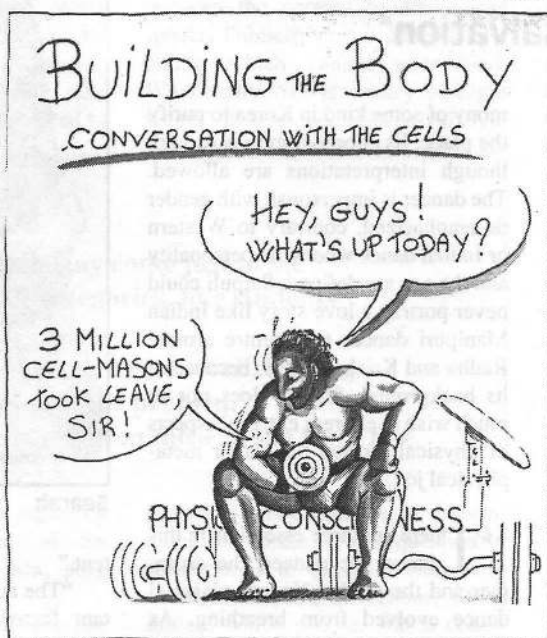
When he turns to face me, I see that he is not amused. I also see the truth of the story of bulging biceps, in particular when a forefinger imprints itself into my chest and he says, underlining each word with a jutting jaw: "We don't do body-building here. OK?"

There is no room for discussion, apparently.

"Aah," I manage.

"We build the body, which is something completely different. If you want to write something for that magazine, you join for a few months and build some understanding in your body. Your mind will follow. And then we'll talk. OK?"

Right. This is not going to be an easy article.



DRAWING BY EMANUELE

Scene 3: The gymnasium, a few months later...

Body-building is something of a teaser. You are never there. As soon as I manage to lift with a certain ease 20 kilograms up and down for the prescribed three runs of 10 to 12 times each, and start getting self-congratulatory, Joséba adds a few more kilos and encourages me to do it again. He also smiles. I don't. I sweat and groan and realise that my monthly maintenance of Auroville Today is dearly earned this time. Oops, wrong thinking. One doesn't earn one's living in

Auroville. One joyfully gives one's capacities. Or sweat, in this case.

Anandi, Joséba's lithe companion, interrupts my bitter thoughts and inquires after my progress. "What are you doing today? Chest, is it? Have you already done the dumbbells? No? I'll help you. You see, you take these, one in each hand, and then you move your arms like this. Very good exercise," she says warmly. She also smiles. Later that evening, when my arms feel like dropping off, the suspicious side of my nature surfaces...

While pumping my arms up and down in the prescribed motion, I watch Anandi's workout and admire the ease with which she exercises her body. I also observe a certain determined expression on her face. Obviously, she works-out more than her body. Looking around I witness a large presence of Development Group members. Ah well, each group should have its own way dealing with tension. I would like to relieve mine in an open talk with the person who suggested this article...Though, I must admit, I do feel good. Quite good, actually. Joséba, who keeps checking on his pupils, saunters past. "I have seen you exercising something of everything today," he says amicably, "the chest, arms, legs and abdomen." "Yes," I reply, eagerly waiting for the pat on the back. "Well, that's completely useless," he retorts, "you must develop each muscle separately and methodically." And he explains some of the science behind building the body.

Scene 4: The Talk

"A good body culture ideally consists of three different parts: force (through body-building exercises), cardio-vascular resistance (through aerobic exercises like running, cycling, etc), and flexibility (through stretching, hatha yoga, etc)," says Joséba. "But in this place the basic principle is that you develop your body as part of your yoga. We do not exercise here to get a beautiful body or simply to become fit. For us practitioners of yoga, exercising the body is a means to bring consciousness into the body. The body-building exercises are a concentration in the physical. By working on specific areas of the body, one becomes more aware, feels them, and wakes them up. It is like the mental concentration, but translated into the muscles. Mother expressed the reason why: Physical culture is the best way of developing the consciousness of the body, and the more the body is conscious, the more it is capable of receiving the divine forces that are at work to transform it and give birth to the new race.* The playgrounds are full of people who do sports in an unconscious way, developing only a part of their body and that without aspiration. That, for me, is insufficient. Whatever you do, it should be done with the awareness that the body enjoys the exercise. For if one has not yet discovered that, the exercise will remain imperfect." And he grins, "So better start enjoying your sweat."

*) Physical culture, *Collected Works of The Mother*, vol. 12, p. 285.

Eastern lights

Korea discovers Auroville

The number of South Koreans in Auroville has increased substantially. In 1999, five women, one man and four children joined as newcomers. There are also quite a few Koreans in the guesthouses. Why this sudden influx? Auroville Today asked four of them what brought them to Auroville.

"The inner reason why we are here," says **Younge** (pronounce Young-ae), "is the deeply ingrained spiritual need of the Korean people. That need surfaces at the merest pressure. The economic boom of Korea collapsed in 1997, and this helped to create an atmosphere of introspection, and people started looking for a more true life. It was around this time that a film on Auroville was shown on the Korean television. The film showed that it is possible to have a simple life combined with a spiritual search, that one can educate one's children less rigidly than is customary in Korean society. I was working as a Secretary for the Korean National Assembly, in charge of environmental matters. I came to Auroville first to see the miracle of its environmental regeneration. But I discovered that something else had driven me to come here."

Spirituality also drew **Sung Ae** and **Heeja** to Auroville. **Sung Ae**, who changed her name in Auroville to **Sarasija**, explains: "For many Koreans, in particular those who have a Buddhist background like myself, India is the Mother country and many want to visit the birthplace of the Lord Buddha. For me too, to come to India was to live a love story. I am a sculptor by profession. In 1991, I came to the Vishva Bharati University in Shantiniketan for advanced courses in

*Light from the East
In the golden age of Asia
Korea was one of its lamp-bearers
And that lamp is waiting
To be lighted once again
For the illumination in the East
Rabindranath Tagore, 1929*

sculpture and for five years I studied and worked in this place created by Rabindranath Tagore. Unlike Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, Tagore is very well known in Korea, and there are many Koreans living in Shantiniketan. When I was back in Korea last year I met an Aurovilian, Aurelio, who visited Korea on the invitation of a meditation group that I attended. Aurelio talked about Auroville and about Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in such a beautiful way that we were all touched. I decided to visit Auroville. Once here, I realized that, for me, Auroville is the next step after Shantiniketan. I came to Auroville for my inner discovery. In Korea, since I am over 40 years old, I am counted as 'elder.' For me this implies that I do not want to waste time on trivialities but that I live and work only for that discovery. Auroville is helping us, in Tagore's metaphor, to light the inner lamps of spiritual illumination."

Heeja (pronounce heeza) comes from a family of devout Christians.

"The search for God was always strong in my family," she says. "I followed a career in graphic design, after my university studies in Korea and the USA. When I saw the film on Auroville on Korean television, I suddenly realized that my future could well lie in Auroville, for there was something intrinsically comfortable about that place. I have been living here now for a few years. Auroville helps me to find my inner self, I feel happy and peaceful here. Now I am gradually discovering Sri Aurobindo and The Mother."

The film that introduced **Younge** and **Heeja** also brought **Sung Heui** (pronounce sung-he) to Auroville. "The film seemed to tally with my ideals, in particular on education. As a teacher I was confronted with the Korean system of education, which is rigid, and often I experienced that I couldn't truly help the children with their dreams of a society without wars and hatred. Instead I had to watch them growing up in a society whose values seemed only consumeristic, without any promise of a better future. I decided to come to Auroville, but I had to go through some very painful personal experiences before I could

come. Now I understand it was Mother's strong touch that brought me here against all the obstacles, and that the difficulties were simply part of the process to find my spiritual path."

Difficulties of relocation

Sung Heui's painful experiences of leaving Korea have been common to all of them. "We are a social people," says **Younge**, "and that explains perhaps why it is sometimes very difficult for us to separate and be far away from our families. My family criticised me for leaving Korea to live in 'such a poor country.' But when my mother visited me, she was deeply impressed. She wondered who on earth Sri Aurobindo and The Mother

I was a bit disappointed - but that changed." **Heeja** explains that many initial problems are due to the language: "For most Koreans the Indian English is very difficult to follow, and we have to get used to the different customs and body language."

"Koreans have a deep sense of compassion and a great willingness to always extend a helping hand," says **Younge**, who dreams of building a house in the classical Korean style with a true Korean atmosphere. Says **Sung Heui**, "Searah's dance made our hearts ache. To see Salpuli in Auroville reminded us all of Korea and our own culture. All of us would love to bring more of that to Auroville."

Carel



Clockwise from top left: Sung Heui, Younge, Heeja and Sarasija

Road to heaven

Searah: "Korean classical dance aims at salvation"

"We have a unique performance tonight. For the first time in the history of Auroville we present one of the traditional dances of Korea," said Aurelio on February 7th, introducing **Searah Guahk**. **Searah** studied Salpuli dance in Seoul for 12 years. She came to India to study Manipuri dance in Tagore's Shantiniketan, and there heard about Auroville as "a place where you can find something creative." Intrigued, she came, found indeed a creative atmosphere and gave a performance of Salpuli for a touched but largely uncomprehending Auroville audience. Auroville Today spoke to **Searah** to understand more about her dance and its strange drummed rhythms.

Salpuli

All-white. The dress, the shawl, the make up. The face smiles. The dancer is woman, but there is no femininity in the character. To the intricate drummed rhythms, the arms move, the shawl flows. The body seems a

fluid unit when it rises gently and lightly and moves gracefully over the wooden floor, arms held wide in a curvilinear shape. The voluminous silk costume and fluid movement make the dancer appear to float across the stage. We are witnessing Salpuli.

"Salpuli is one of the traditional classical dances of Korea," explains **Searah**. "Sal means karma, puli means salvation. The aim of Salpuli is salvation, as we believe that movement can dissolve karma. The dance originated from the worship ceremonies of Korea's ancient agricultural society, where one prayed for the blessings of Heaven, for sun, rain, and good harvest. But the ultimate purpose of prayer was to get liberated from the wheel of life, to leave the physical body and eventually become part again of pure divine spirit. The main theme of Korean philosophy is unity, which contains everything, from matter to spirit. Heaven is its symbol. Salpuli is essentially an expression of this aspiration for unity. It is danced whenever there is a big official cere-

mony of some kind in Korea to purify the place. Its choreography is formal, though interpretations are allowed. The dancer is impersonal, with gender de-emphasized, contrary to Western or Indian dance where the personality and the sex are defined. Salpuli could never portray a love story like Indian Manipuri dances that centre around Radha and Krishna. Also, because of its background, Salpuli does not so much wish to express external aspects of physical motion but rather metaphysical joy."

"There are three essentials in this dance, the dancer, the drummer and the public. Korean classical dance evolved from breathing. As each individual breathes differently, the rhythm of each dancer is different as well. The drummer has to follow this and must relate intimately to the dancer. So each master dancer has his or her own drummer. My guru says that if you dance to taped music, you get a dead dance. It also implies that group dances are virtually non-exis-



Searah

PHOTO: ANIRUDDHA KUDALKAR
ARTWORK: MATTHIA

tent."

"The audience is the third important factor. Unlike western dance, there is no separation between dancers and the audience, the relation is very close. In Korea the audience expresses its involvement by the moving of shoulders and heads to the rhythm. In Auroville nothing like that happened. That confused me in the beginning. But I soon felt that they interacted in another way, as it were in a movement

in silence, which was very pleasant. And most surprisingly, many came to me after the performance and said, "Thank you." I was so amazed! It was the first time I realized I can make people happy with my dance, that it was not only aesthetically pleasing or technically correct."

"Nowadays," continues **Searah**, "most Salpuli dancers perform to celebrate the beauty of expression and for the joy of performing. Much of the sense of the sacred and of the ancient symbolism has been lost. Perhaps this is inevitable. Tradition has to be respected, but every dancer has also to search for new forms. And that search is increasingly international and there is a mixture of all forms. There should be a jump towards the future, a millennium jump. I want to be a seed for that jump, aspiring to that one peak, the Divine."

"When I was a child," concludes **Searah**, "I was taught to give without condition, as everything is related, nothing is totally separate. For me the dance is a way of giving to the divine in the audience."

Carel