

Cover Story

Aurovilians on Renewal:

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Auroville

TODAY

Since 1988

Discovering the Dream

January 2000, no.132

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"Let the main act start!"

An interview with Frederick

Frederick was one of the very first people to work and live in Auroville. He has been very involved in some of the key movements in Auroville's past, including the struggle against the Sri Aurobindo Society and the coming into being of the Auroville Foundation. After withdrawing for some time from direct engagement in community affairs, he is now taking up a more active role again.

Here he talks about his relationship to the past, and the need for Auroville to begin a new phase based upon experimentation by freely chosen kinship groups.

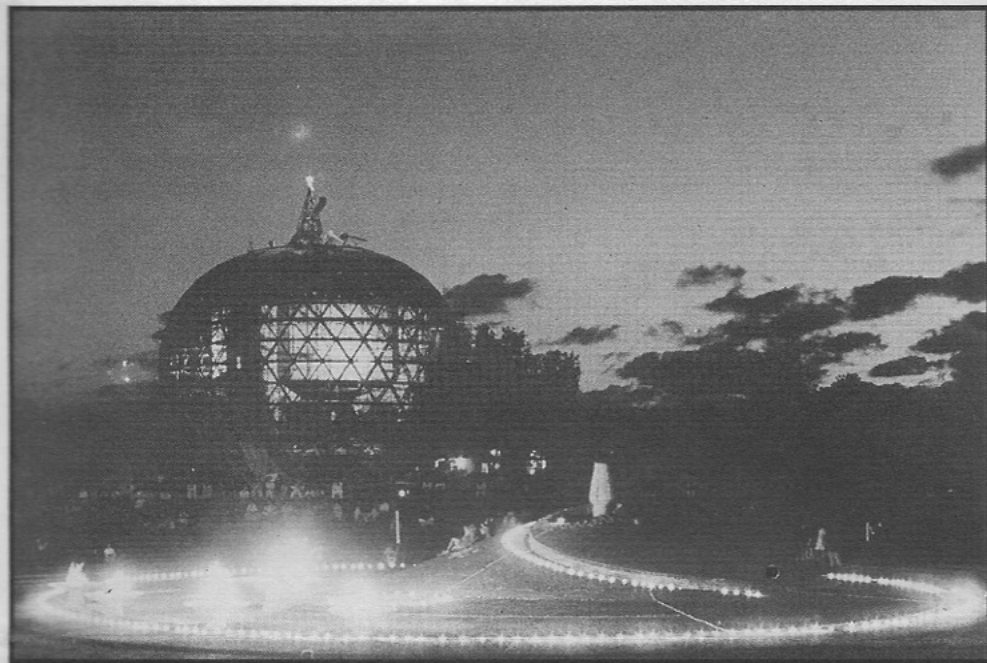


PHOTO: JOHN MANDEEN

"All the old stuff is rushing forward to be burnt..."
 Bonfires at the Amphitheatre, 1993

AVT: How does Auroville look to you at the end of the millennium?

Frederick: It gives me the impression that all the old stuff is rushing forward to be burnt in the fire. We are rattled on all fronts. My personal feeling is that we cannot go on like this any longer, and I am not alone. Particularly my generation does not want to dilly-dally any more. So please let the overture be over and the main act start! Let's not hang onto old forms because of our insecurity and fears. Let's have the courage to let go and allow something fresh to come in.

AVT: Some people feel the early days were better...

F: I get very allergic to people glorifying the past. It was the same as now—read the Mother's last messages and you'll see what problems she had to deal with. In the late 1970s we had a good solid enemy, and that helped to bring us together, and perhaps if we could manufacture another enemy it would help us to form a good community again! For now there are hundreds of little threats, but they have become internalized: they are within the community and within each one of us.

A helping hand

A personal account of distributing relief in cyclone-stricken Orissa

Orissa, a coastal state in eastern India, was hit by a killer cyclone last October. The Oriya people will take decades to come to terms with the consequences of this calamity. The 300-km wide cyclone created tidal waves as high as ten metres and wind speeds of 260 km per hour when, as reported by an Indian journal, "coconuts fly nearly as fast as bullets." The cyclone killed about 30,000 people and left 10 million, a third of Orissa's population, homeless. Over 350,000 head of cattle, two million tons of crops and seven million trees were destroyed

while 10,000 km of roads and 30,000 industries were damaged.

Relief poured in from all over the world. Aurovilians contributed over Rs. 50,000 to the relief fund set up by "Pondicherry Utkal Samaj" (an Orissa Association). Bindu, who comes from Orissa, accompanied a relief-distribution team to Orissa. As she put it: "The relief that we had brought, in comparison to the magnitude of the disaster, was a flickering candle-flame in a field of darkness."

Renewal



PHOTO: IRENO

A new era, a new year. And everywhere the winds of change are rising. In Auroville, too, much is being questioned so that the new can be born.

"Let the main act start," says an old-time Aurovilian, and in this issue several Aurovilians share their ideas and aspirations for the future Auroville. We also introduce two initiatives aimed at reorienting our economy, and profile a neighbouring school—Udavi—that has recently reopened under Auroville management.

Auroville Today in its twelfth year has a new look and structure. There is a broader range of articles that strives to capture the diversity and changes in the community.

We hope you enjoy it! *The editors*

A multitude of expressions

AVT: If the past holds no clues, where do we go from here?

F: I think that we should consider allowing various groups of kinship within Auroville to develop spontaneously, where people who feel good with each other experiment with new things. It could be something like Sri Aurobindo's gnostic society—a multitude of different expressions, experiments, by individuals and "free groupings" who live in full freedom together. We may have to change our present administrative structure to allow for this.

AVT: Those who want more a centralized structure would argue that Auroville is too individualized at present. Won't your proposal encourage an even greater disintegration of community?

F: If there is not deep within us a sense of brotherhood, then there is a danger of Auroville

splitting up into smaller pieces. But the experience we all have when we meet another Aurovilian outside Auroville is the sudden recognition of belonging to the same "clan". So there is bonding. And even if you have a vacuum at the centre, it might also be an active vacuum because maybe it would leave a space for something else to come through...

But perhaps we should also look again at that status of Aurovilian and non-Aurovilian. Many people do not realise that in the early days this distinction did not exist—that it only came in with the Emergency Provisions Act where it became necessary to distinguish in court between the Pour Tous group, "Neutrals", members of the Sri Aurobindo Society etc. Maybe now there is no external threat we can look at this again, and give space to people who do not wish to be Aurovilian but would like to stay here. Instead of offering only one package—the

Udavi School

Now under Auroville's management

Udavi school reopened in July 1999 after a year of closure. The school had gone through rough times, as Auroshikha Agarbathies, an incense factory that had sponsored the school since its inception, had become subject to agitation by a trade union. Guy Myotte, who manages the factory, explained that Auroshikha could not accept the demands of the union. As incidents of violence extended to the school, there had been no alternative but to close both the factory and the school.

Many people felt, however, that the children shouldn't be made victims of this conflict. Maggi, one of the Udavi School trustees, contact-

ed Sanjeev, the administrative head of Auroville's educational institution SAIER. Other concerned Aurovilians, such as Jürgen of Palmyra, a unit active in re-afforestation and village education work, also got involved. After protracted negotiations, SAIER accepted responsibility for the future management of Udavi and the school reopened.

Anuben, the headmistress of Udavi, comments that things have changed, but remarks how important it is that the children can continue their education. For after all, it was Mother who had started Udavi...

New Year Music 2000



Watching rehearsals for New Year's Eve event

see page 7

Remembering Prem



A tribute to Prem Malik

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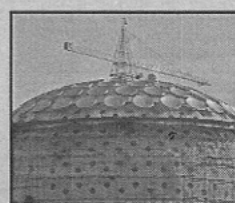
Overland to Europe



Aurosyllé and Sukrit's journey to Greece, in an old Citroën

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Matrimandir



Researching technical solutions for cleaning the skin.

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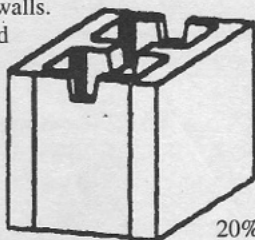


Working Together

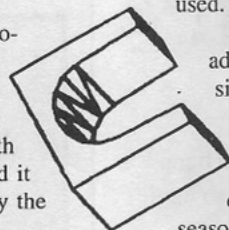
A new unit produces hollow blocks

Auzolan, which means "working together" in Basque, is a new unit that produces prefabricated materials made of mud with 5% to 7% cement. Auzolan's production line includes blocks for walls and floorings, partition walls, hollow blocks and T-beams for roofing.

The workshop is located in Rêve where one can see emerging from the ground a cement beam structure along with a few walls. Eric, the founder of the unit, had the idea of producing hollow blocks using mud not long after coming to Auroville in 1992. "With the help of a few friends, we first built a prototype of a press and moulds to produce the blocks, but only after three years of experiments could



we finally foresee the possibilities of producing hollow mud blocks. Now I have all the necessary hollow blocks to build the workshop. It will show what can be done with these prefabricated materials and it gives us the opportunity to study the strength, techniques and costs." From a cost point of view, although the cost of hollow blocks is approximately 20% greater than that of village bricks, prefabricated materials involve significant savings in two



areas: labour and the cost of cement. One block is the equivalent of nine and a half bricks, which means that it requires less time to make a wall. Also, since hollow blocks are empty, they require less than half of the cement used to raise a village brick wall. As a result, the foundations have 40% less weight of wall to support. Hollow blocks can be used for the first two floors of a construction while for stories above a conventional concrete frame can be used.

Hollow earth blocks have other advantages: they are more ecological since construction requires much less cement, and since the blocks are empty they provide good ventilation, better acoustic insulation and ensure a cooler house during the hot season.

A Service Unit

"It is important to realize," continues Eric, "that the idea behind Auzolan is larger than just a

prefabrication unit. Its fundamental aim is to become a construction service, which I hope will improve the existing construction system by making it more rational. The current situation in Auroville is the following: people are working in isolation and competition and, in order to survive, each one is pulling the blanket to his side of the bed. Everyone adds his margin—5% to 15%—while the whole construction industry is not coordinated and there is a lack of coordination for the workers on the construction sites. As a result, we either cannot produce quality, or we produce quality at astronomical prices.

"This is why I believe that we need to put our energies together using each one's prime expertise. We can improve the actual system and become even more creative if we coordinate the different aspects of construction and create a good construction infrastructure (engineering, finances, good tools, etc.). Working alone does not help to manifest what we want to express as a collectivity."

From an interview by Denis



Organization and Economy

"Getting back on track"

New attempts to foster community responsibility

Two new experiments—one at the Solar Kitchen, the other a common account—are underway or being considered as a means of counterbalancing the cash culture which has developed in Auroville.

Mother gave many messages for Auroville. We often quote them, but do we always try to understand why she gave them? For example, why did she say that there should be no exchange of money between Aurovilians? My sense is that this is because money is a prime means of exchange, and she wanted Auroville to be built on the principle of service rather than of exchange. In other words, Aurovilians are expected to dedicate themselves to the fulfilment of the ideal of Auroville without thought of recompense or reward. The community, on its part, is expected to provide the conditions for every Aurovilian to do that work.

In recent years, Auroville has departed more and more from this ideal. Money, and therefore the concept of exchange, has become a dominant part of our lives as almost everything—including so-called services—have had to be paid for. The consequences include a growing tendency for work to be viewed as a means of remuneration rather than as a means of inner progress, and a weakening of the non-transactional bonds which hold any genuine community together.

The Solar Kitchen experiment

Concern at these developments underlie two new initiatives, one of which is in operation and one under discussion. In the first one, the Solar Kitchen—in a change to its previous policy—is now providing lunches for any Aurovilian who wishes to eat there, irrespective of whether they can afford to pay for it or not. Participants are encouraged to make some kind of contribution, whether in cash or kind, but the basis is clearly not transactional. As the experiment has only been running a month, it is too early to evaluate the results. But early indications are that the experiment has not drawn many additional people to eat at the Kitchen, and that the majority of the Aurovilians who eat there continue to pay contributions at the previous rate.

Common account

The other new initiative came from the Economy Group. Their suggestion for the next step towards the elimination of money exchange

in Auroville involves the creation of a common account in which any Aurovilian can participate. If they decide to join, their maintenance will be paid direct into the Central Fund by their unit or work group or, if they are self-supporting, they are requested to contribute sufficient to the Fund to at least cover their expenses. Individual statements would simply record monthly expenditures: a separate cash account would hold funds for expenditure on items outside the specified parameters. Those parameters have yet to be agreed upon, but it is suggested that they should include food, clothing, health care, house and vehicle repairs, gifts, workers' wages, petrol and almost anything which can be accessed within

Auroville boutiques, stalls and units. Since a group of more than about thirty people is considered too unwieldy to be involved in the constant monitoring and feedback required, it was suggested that groups of this size should form and agree upon their own parameters and policies. However, all the

groups would be part of the one common account.

The open meeting called to discuss the proposal was generally supportive of the direction taken—"at last we are trying to get back on track" was one representative comment—but raised important concerns. Won't such an arrangement encourage participants to be irresponsible, to purchase or acquire items which they don't really need? Won't the proposed system be bureaucratic and put a lot of power in the hands of those who would administer it? One participant in the meeting was adamant: "We were bureaucrats already. This proposal feels much more like creating a family."

The major concern, however, was how it would all be paid for. A number of people stated that a realistic figure for individual maintenance today is between Rs 4,000-5,000 a month. If everybody in the new account draws this amount, where will the money come from? No clear answer came from the Economy Group, although suggestions from the floor included asking individuals and units to donate a set percentage of their income every month to support it, the need for simpler lifestyles, and the setting up of com-

On using money in Auroville

"Things are beginning to come for Auroville; there are many, many others, but there is above all the internal financial question: I would like there to be no money within Auroville (we would have to work out something), I would like money to be retained only for relations with outside."

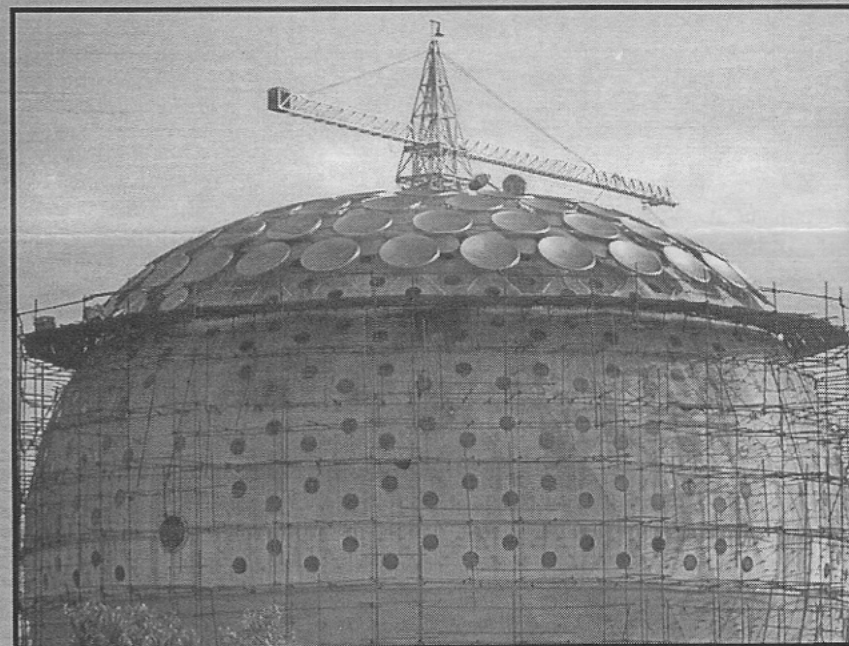
(The Mother in Mother's Agenda, 30th April, 1969)

Matrimandir

Cleaning the skin

Technical solutions are being researched.

PHOTO: CAREL



Matrimandir, with new rows of discs, December 1999

As the Matrimandir is nearing its completion, some long-standing practical problems need to be addressed. One of those is the question of how to remove the dirt that pigeons, bees and industrial pollutants deposit on the building. Given the round shape of the building, it is not very obvious how the cleaning is to be done. One idea is to fix sets of ladders between the outer skin and the golden disks. The first set will enable a descent from the top of the building to a catwalk at the equator level which will traverse the building. From there, a second set of four ladders will run down to the bottom of the building. As the lower hemisphere curves inward, one will walk facing the Matrimandir gardens on the lower ladders. A few metres above ground level, ropes will be available as a safety measure. All the ladders and the catwalk will be made out of stainless steel. A prototype of a section of two ladders and catwalk is being made at the workshop at the moment.

A water pipe will run alongside the catwalk to which flexible hose pipes can be connected. Research is also ongoing to find the best way of cleaning: one option is using a portable car wash machine, which not only supplies water but also soap when necessary. Another option is to use water from two pressurized water tanks (which have to be imported from Germany) whose pressure will be sufficient to reach the top of the Matrimandir.

Once the discs have reached the level of the equator and the catwalk is in place, the crane, which has been situated on top of the building since the early 1980s, will no longer be needed. Disassembling it will require building a special ramp on which the crane pieces will be brought down in smaller chunks. This will considerably change the appearance of the building. Recently, Transition school children made drawings of the Matrimandir as they thought it would look in the future: 80% of them still drew the crane on top!

Tineke

munity services for laundry, gardening etc. to lessen the financial burden on individuals.

Others felt that, in spite of present unclarity, we had to go wholeheartedly for the proposal because it is a step towards Mother's vision of Auroville and, as such, would draw the required energy and support.

Further meetings will be held to refine the initiative, and a number of Aurovilians has come together to coordinate the process. Interested

Aurovilians have formed groups which are already meeting to decide upon how they would like to function as part of the common account.

As to the eventual outcome of this initiative, those seeking auspicious signs might have noted that exactly 101 people attended the inaugural meeting...and in Indian culture, such a number is believed to guarantee that what has been initiated will continue to grow.

Alan



Udavi Joins Auroville

SAIIR takes responsibility for the Udavi School at Edayanchavadi

"I want to change this whole region," The Mother said to her Italian disciple Nata. She asked him to do something for Edayanchavadi, a village nearby Auroville.

The Mother gave the project in Edayanchavadi, at the time one of the poorest, most desperate villages in the region, the name "Udavi," which is the Tamil word for "help." Nata set up a small dispensary, provided a well, created a store for essential commodities and started a crèche for the "pathetic weebegone children." It was a first step. "We must follow them up," said The Mother, and it was decided to start "Auroshikha Agarbathies," an incense factory which provided the villagers with work and which used part of its profits to sponsor the Udavi project. "As long as it is done with selflessness and for the purposes it is meant for I shall put my Force behind it," said Mother. Soon the crèche was joined by a kindergarten, followed by a primary school.

When Nata passed away in 1985, Guy Myotte continued to manage Auroshikha. The school was carried on by Maggi and by Anuben, the headmistress of Udavi since the seventies. Says Anuben: "In the years that followed the school obtained government recognition, and with financial help from the Foundation for World Education and Italian donors, a new compound and a beautiful new school building, designed and built by Aurovilians Popo and Rolf, were added to the existing structures. The school has now about 250 children."

Problems

"The first ten years in Edayanchavadi," says Guy, "were a wonderful adventure. I lived in Udavi. The villages called on me for help in emergencies, also for private problems, and the working atmosphere was very harmonious. But a shadow was cast in the late eighties when it became increasingly difficult to meet the demands of a militant labour union. As threats of violence became normal, I had to leave Udavi in 1989. Nine years later, in 1998, the agitation reached its peak. Negotiations broke down, the factory staff was threatened, and in September 1998 one of my supervisors was beaten up. We had to lock the factory. As the school workers

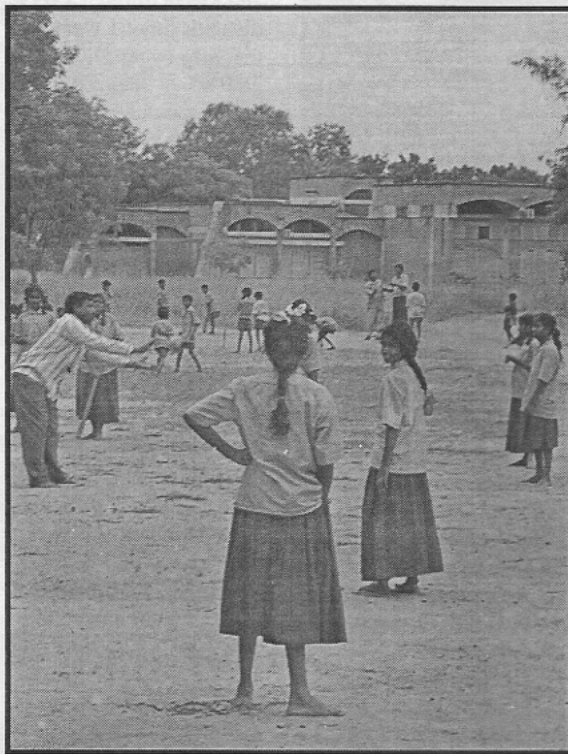


PHOTO: CAREL

At the playground of Udavi Gentillesse School

showed solidarity with the factory workers and as the safety of the teachers could not be ensured, the school closed as well. In January 1999, when protracted negotiations failed, it was finally decided to close down the factory. We petitioned the village panchayat and other officials many times to help us to re-open the school by guaranteeing the safety of the teachers, but there was no willingness to do so."

Searching for a solution

"A solution had to be found," recalls Maggi, "and I asked Sanjeev if Auroville would be interested to manage the school." It was the beginning of a series of long talks in which Jürgen of Palmyra also got involved. Says Jürgen: "We met

with Guy and some village elders and parents, and we were able to mediate. At last everybody agreed that the difficulty with Auroshikha should not be carried over to the school, and that the school could be reopened. But some teachers had meanwhile found other jobs. As the involvement of Auroville was acceptable to all, an agreement was reached that Auroville's SAIIR will manage the school, while the Sri Aurobindo Udyog Trust, to whom Auroshikha contributes its profits, will continue to bear the costs for some years."

"So the school re-opened in July this year," says Anuben, "and I am very happy for the children here are like my own children. But the situation has changed. We no longer provide uniforms and meals and the parents have to contribute more money for the education. But I think that they are happy, for Udavi remains a high quality school where nearly all children pass the matriculation exams in the English language. The parents have also come to accept that creative work (dance, drama and singing) and sports are included in

the curriculum. And we are considering including some vocational training for girls, such as tailoring."

Plans

The plans for the future? Says Sanjeev: "This school has a lot of potential. We aspire to make Udavi a model school for the environment, perhaps for the country, by introducing the educational concepts of Sri Aurobindo and Mother and in that way realising an integral education. The International School of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Delhi Branch, is already doing this. If we could do something similar here, it would be a great contribution from Auroville."

In conversations with Carel



A Learning Experience

Dr. Lucas Dengel speaks about his experience of promoting organic cashew cultivation.

All around Auroville, interspersed with Auroville land, are cashew plantations owned by local farmers. Cashew cultivation was introduced in this area about 30 years ago and soon became popular, for it is well-suited to the red laterite soil of this region, is less labour-intensive, and commands a significant cash value. The cyclical cashew phenomenon is part of the Auroville experience. In the balmy months from January to March, the air is first suffused with the sweet, heavy scent of cashew flowers, but then later as the fruit starts to grow, it is replaced by the nauseous smell of deadly chemical pesticides which are sprayed on the trees. The cashew fields around Auroville are also composted with unseparated urban waste from Pondicherry, leading to an increase in disease. Concerned by the detrimental health effects caused by the use of unsorted waste and chemical pesticides, Dr. Lucas Dengel, a medical doctor by profession, has been determinedly working, under the unit AuroAnnam (see Brief News Item), to persuade cashew farmers to use organic methods of cultivation.

Learning from the past

A few years ago, Lucas started out with a two-pronged aim: firstly, to collect, separate and produce organic waste; and secondly, to persuade Kailapalayam farmers to have a one-acre trial

plot in their cashew topes where they would use not chemical but botanical pesticides (See *AVToday* #112.) Today Lucas realizes that both the projects, while not exactly successes, were learning experiences. Says he, "despite my success in collecting, sorting and processing all the waste in the Kailapalayam area, I could produce only 200 tons of compost a year, but the Kailapalayam farmers alone use up to 2000 tons of compost. Now I realize that the problem lies not with the farmers importing the compost but with Pondicherry for failing to sort out its waste. For ideally, it is a natural cycle that food exported from the rural area to the cities comes back as compost for the fields. The only problem is that organic waste gets mixed with the inorganic, and worse still, medicinal waste, of the city."

"As for persuading the farmers not to use chemical pesticides, I realized I was going about it the wrong way. I was relying solely on creating awareness amongst them about the dangers of chemical pesticides. And as such, in terms of reducing the use of chemical pesticides, the project met with only marginal success. Today, I realize that as cashew cultivation is a significant income-generating venture for the farmers, I need to offer business incentives in order to persuade the farmers to go organic. So now I am trying to provide a market for organic cashews, and soon I

hope to be able to offer a contract to the farmers where I buy their entire produce if they do not use chemical pesticides. Ideally, in order to build trust, I would like to be able to pre-finance a part, say one-fourth of the value, of their harvest. I hope to be able to enter into such a contract with two or three farmers for the next harvest. In this pilot phase, I prefer to keep the numbers low to ensure better control. Also, given the magnitude of cashew production, there are not just enough organic inputs available in the market to introduce organic farming on a large scale.

"By collaborating closely with the farmers I will have a better chance of educating them about the benefits of organic compost and introducing other organic farming techniques."

"Cashew has acquired a bad name in Auroville as it is associated with money, monoculture, and pesticide use. Consequently, in Auroville, we neglect our cashew plantations and get only half of its potential yield, losing thousands of rupees in income each year. Cashew is ideal for this region and climate and can be grown organically in a mixed cultivation programme with companion fruit trees, fence plants and ground cover. At AuroAnnam we hope that we can slowly bring about a change in this negative attitude, and consequently promote organic farming."

Bindu



Awards for Aurovilian

AuroSatprem, who works with the Auroville Building Centre and specializes in earth construction, has received a number of awards recently. They include the 1999 gold medal of the India Trade Promotion Organization for a disaster-resistant house, the "Bharat Excellence Award" for services to the promotion of India-International co-operation, the "Nation's Vikas Jyoti Award" for individual achievement for the growth of the Indian economy, and the "Bharthiya Nirman Ratan Award", an excellence award for construction in India.

AuroAnnam

AuroAnnam, a unit set up by Dr. Lucas (see elsewhere on this page), has as its mission statement "to promote organic farming and sustainable management of natural resources, to provide high quality organic produce to consumers, and to offer fair trade practices where the profits are shared with the growers and for promotional activities."

AuroAnnam has recently started a 14-acre demonstration-plot at the northern end of Auro Orchard. It networks with local organic cashew growers, and seeks to improve their yield by introducing proven organic techniques. This year AuroAnnam provided market support to 17 organic cashew growers by buying their harvest, and introduced organic cashew nuts into the market in Mumbai and South India.

New CIRHU proposal

Dr. Kireet Joshi has sent a detailed concept paper to all Aurovilians concerning how he would like to see the Centre of International Research in Human Unity (CIRHU) develop. He sees CIRHU becoming the vehicle for university level education and international research based around the theme of human unity. There would be a central faculty which would take up research in evolution, the synthesis of knowledge, synthesis of culture, human unity and the next species. There would also be seven other faculties, including a Faculty of Indian Culture and Human Unity and a Faculty of Futuristic Sociology and Business Management.

The community has been invited to give feedback on this proposal.

Kaluvely Nilam

The bio-regional co-ordination group has been bringing out a newsletter called *Kaluvely Nilam* (the land of Kaluvely) and distributing it in local villages. The latest issue, which has both Tamil and English versions, contains poems, information on local trees and plants, a profile of Munnoor village, as well as simple introductions to Sri Aurobindo and The Mother.

Aurospirul goes vegetarian

Aurospirul, situated in the Auroville beach community 'Simplicity', produces an excellent form of spirulina, an edible micro algae. Some time ago, the Aurovilians manufacturing Aurospirul—spirulina capsules—were facing a problem. Their product was advertised as being 100% vegetarian, but the only capsules available in India were made from gelatine, which is definitely not vegetarian in origin. Hendrik of the Aurospirul unit appealed on the compat. forum for help and was overwhelmed by the response. For, through the help of an Aurovilian in the U.S., Aurospirul has managed to obtain 100,000 vegetarian capsules free. That's an awful lot of health...

Timely rains

A 25 cm rain over two days in mid-December allayed fears that the winter monsoon would be deficient this year. It brought the total rainfall for the year up to average—about 130 centimetres.

"Let the main act start!"

(continued from page 1)

one-year newcomer period—we could offer several different versions of how people could relate to Auroville. After all, when Mother speaks about people contributing to Auroville she says it can be in terms of work, money or yoga. What does this imply?

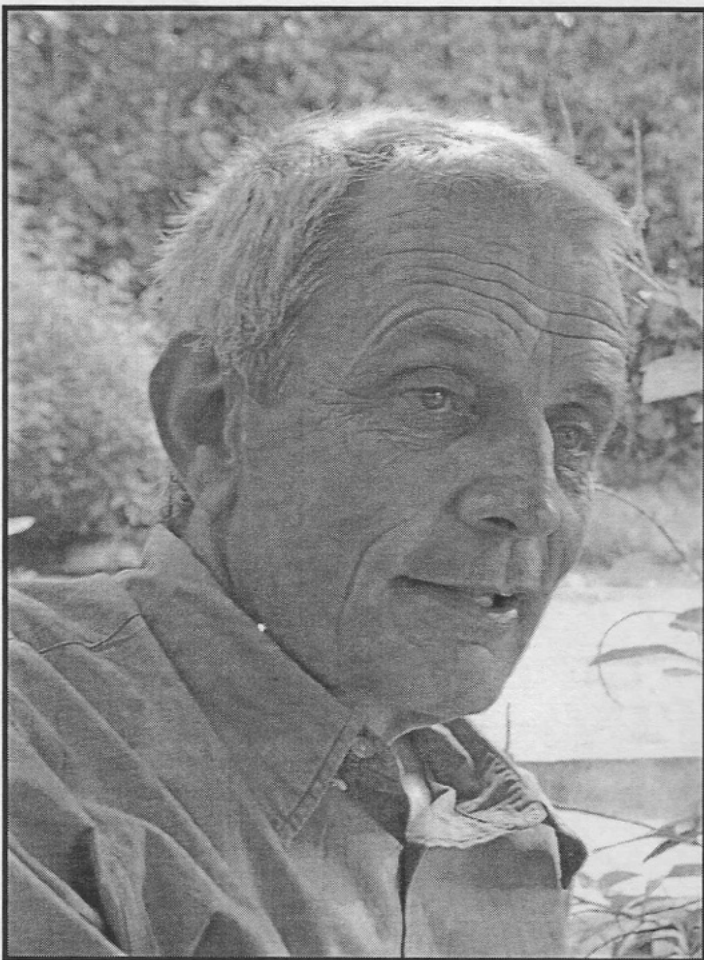
Letting go of the past

AVT: On a personal level, have you found it easy to let go of the past?

F: I think that in the particular conditioning of Auroville's past, some of us went into a fighting posture, and can't come out anymore. When I was in Russia I had a kind of vision. I saw an armada of ships gathering on the ocean, beyond the horizon, making ready to land in Auroville. Each of these ships had a long, high standing section of something which together gave the shape, like a silhouette, of the whole of Auroville. Someone was arranging the ships to land in the right order. And while they were being arranged, I could recognise that each one of our old enemies was a part of that, and I could even recognise some of them. When I came back to Auroville, I decided that no longer could I live conditioned by the past and I went and met nearly all my former enemies.

Another personal learning experience: in 1988, when the Auroville Foundation Act was being introduced in Parliament, I suddenly had the feeling that I was a totally free man and that this chapter of my Auroville life was closed. But

PHOTO: CAREL



many attachments and feelings of being important kept me associated with this political dimension. I should have acted on the call to change, but I did not listen carefully, and I went through a very difficult time: I went for the "slap by the Divine." I had never realized how persistent this identification of my own importance with projects is.

I do not think that in any life you can get away without getting into a battle, but if you can distill the real meaning of this battle into your life, then you can be a help in this community. A living love, that is what the older ones should be.

But there's another thing: the difference between the next generation and mine is more than just a generation gap. They are differently wired from me, they are free from many of the pains I have. And the next generation might be as different from their par-

ents again. So I cannot really tell a youngster "Do it like this". I can only see whether they are fully committed to what they do and say.

Find the centre

AVT: Why is commitment so important?

F: One thing I have experienced in extreme circumstances is the overwhelming feeling that "this has to be done" and then I have gone and done it, regardless: it is as if a dam bursts inside you. It happened when I had to see Rajiv Gandhi over problems with the Foundation Act. And it happened in Germany when I was having a heart operation. A blockage in an artery had to be opened by a wire, but the wire would not go through. I was watching it on a screen. When the surgeon suggested trying it again some other time, something in me shouted within "Sri Aurobindo!", and the wire went through. We call only in extreme cases. If only we could do it every moment of our lives...

For the time is ripe for something new. There will be a difficult transition period—our external forms have calcified and do not seem to move—but in Auroville we have an incredible bunch of individuals who are full of goodwill and aspiration, and there is a real support structure in the present Governing Board and the Government of India.

But if we really are to move, if we really are to find that centre which allows free groupings, we have to come back to the Matrimandir: there is no other solution. As Paulo Tomassi once said, pointing to it, "The future is being written there".

From an interview by Alan and Carel

The blessings of chaos

A chaotic organisation forces us to find guidance within. An interview with Barbara

Chaos is a science that studies patterns of disorder. It is also the epithet used by quite a few Aurovilians to describe Auroville's organisation. But is chaos necessarily negative? Barbara doesn't think so. She joined Auroville three and a half years ago after having worked as a psychosomatic therapist in Germany and Spain. Ever since she has been helping Aurovilians to solve their own personal patterns of disorder, on the bases of Sri Aurobindo's and The Mother's works. In the process, she has gained some insight into the organisational problems of Auroville. But contrary to popular opinion, she sees light at the end of the tunnel.

Barbara (laughing): "The label 'chaos' seems indeed to fit Auroville's organisation, for there is plenty of disorder! But I have observed that this chaos is integral, holistic; everything is related to everything else. When something breaks down, it has an effect on the whole. As a consequence, individual answers to isolated problems are no longer sufficient, they too must be integral, related to the whole.

"Auroville, as I see it, is in front of the Unknowable, the source from which everything comes each moment. Something is coming to an end; it does not mean that it is dying, but that it is in the process of transformation. Frozen energies have to be broken up and become free. Out of the unknown and out of the impossibility new possibilities will emerge.

"So I would define chaos as "restructuring by The Mother." For it is only She who builds the Organisation, there is none other. We should understand that we have come for the work of The Mother, that we do not have the answers, and that we have to go inside to the centre of our being, to receive true inspiration and true creativity. We have to realise that the work is being done through the Intervention and Grace of The Mother, through Her Force. We are not the doers, we only have to collaborate. The skills and talents of each and every one will come out and be used, as and when She needs them. The true organisation will come through Her, whether we understand it or not."

The need for the psychic discovery

"It is my experience," continues Barbara, "that many Aurovilians have accumulated a store of past hurts, fears and fixed conceptions, both in their individual lives as well as in regard to their trust in Auroville. Many have a difficulty or even unwillingness to 'let go' and be once again open to the unexpected. The outer chaos forces us to learn, adapt and transcend. As such, chaos is grace. For we should realise that when we stay fixed or remain in disharmonious or even bitter thoughts, we stay on the surface level and hold

ourselves back from making the next step. Sri Aurobindo and Mother have given many indications how to reject all this, and how to open to the discovery of the psychic being which solves the sense of separateness and brings the sense of love and the awareness of belonging to One family. Aspiration and surrender are the keys."

The importance of the Matrimandir

Mother spoke about the difficulties of the Auroville organisation in the early seventies, at the time of the so-called "Aspiration talks," and mentions how each of us pulls in his or her own direction.⁽¹⁾ "Since that time something has changed," says Barbara "and that is the gradual emergence of the Matrimandir. I believe that many in Auroville underestimate the importance of this building for their inner development.

When Mother mentioned that She would put Her force there, and that the sooner it would be ready the better it would be, in particular for the Aurovilians, She made a statement which is not yet sufficiently understood. Matrimandir is a powerhouse, though as yet vastly under-utilised. It is a tremendous help for learning to go within, into the centre of the creative Force, from where the real answers to our problems will come; for the Matrimandir is a living symbol of that which wants to come into consciousness and manifestation.

"So we live in a very beautiful moment. What seems to be a loss or chaos or confusion is only an opportunity for us to open, and to grow towards the next step."

In conversation with Carel

(1) Conversation on March 10, 1970.

PHOTO: CAREL



Chaos and renewal

A reflection

Rebirth, renewal. It's an image which is central to many religious and occult traditions, for it is a powerful representation of the transformative power of the spirit. Paradoxically India, for all its traditions, orthodoxies and casteism, embodies an enormous capacity for such renewal, whereas the West, for all its trumpeting of the virtues of change, seems stuck in a kind of cul-de-sac. The late Raghbir Singh, one of India's finest photographers, put it like this when asked why he worked only with colour. "The fundamental condition of the West is one of guilt, linked to death—from which black is inseparable. The fundamental condition of India, however, is the cycle of rebirth, in which colour is not just an essential element but also a deep inner resource ... the Indian view of life resonates with optimism, with sparkle, with illusion, with lively pictorialism and the bonding spirit of community."

Auroville, for all its occidental influences, is much closer to India than the West in this respect. I'm constantly astonished by the space we are given here to renew ourselves, to slough old skins and begin again. And it's not so much an outer space—we're far from being a truly tolerant society on the outer level—as an inner freedom to experiment, to change direction. To recreate ourselves in the image of something truer, something closer to the integral being which, inchoately, we sense deep within.

A characteristic of Auroville over the years is a certain degree of outer chaos and disorder. We are often criticised for this. Yet at some unconscious level perhaps we sense that structure, given the present state of our collective consciousness, is often merely a straight-jacket manufactured by the mind—the "mind-forg'd manacles" described by William Blake—for our richer faculties of imagination and intuition.

Perhaps this is why many of us continue to prefer the fruitful chaos of the East to the anaesthetised precincts of the West. And why Auroville's salvation may finally owe more to its inspired failures than to its respectable successes.

Alan

Pushed by a Higher Force

Interview with Srimoyi

Srimoyi, a Bengali Aurovilian, talks to Auroville Today about renewal in her personal life: her days in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, her life in the Green Belt, her perspectives on Auroville and her experience that there is a higher force that guides her steps...

"I came to the Aurobindo Ashram in 1969," Srimoyi begins. "That was a crucial year. It seems a lot of people came in '69. I arrived with my mother to join the school and I remember taking the application form to Kireet-bhai, [at present Chairman of the Governing Board and International Advisory Council of the Auroville Foundation, eds.] who was then the headmaster. 'But you must bring me a photo,' he said. And then he admired it, and said, 'What a sweet photo' and I felt he himself was very sweet."

Free

Srimoyi is a natural storyteller, punctuating her tale with laughter and self-deprecating humour. She uses everything—her hands, her eyes—to bring us closer to the nuance of the moment. "When I joined," she continues, "my whole life changed. Before, I was this scared kid who did very badly in exams and had no self-confidence. But when I came into the Ashram atmosphere something happened. I started doing really well in everything. I just loved it!"

After finishing her studies, Srimoyi decided to see the wide world, and left Pondicherry for Bombay, "because that's the place where there are no relatives. I was free! Otherwise, you have hordes of relatives trying to get you married. So I

just did all kinds of work and had a great old time. I also did a lot of interesting things, like theatre and dance, and I discovered that's really what interests me: the performing arts. And then I had enough of Bombay and all that, so in 1986 I came back to Pondicherry to live and work with Igor on Udayan farm, opposite Hope."

Time for a change

But after eight years of marriage and relative isolation in the greenbelt, it was time for a change. "I moved out of Udayan and came to live in Samasti, and soon afterwards took charge of the Samasti Guest-house. Often, the guests at the Guest-house ask me what makes me stay, because they're curious about how life is here. I tell them that it is Mother and Sri Aurobindo who make me stay, and that we Aurovilians are nothing special, only, that we have agreed to do something special. I would say that my move *bang* in the middle of Auroville was arranged by a higher force, which is always there."

Is this force she speaks about the Force that many Aurovilians feel is

behind Auroville?

"Yes, I think so, says Srimoyi. "It is this Force which is not only pushing me, but everybody here in Auroville, making use of our strengths and weaknesses alike, and which is always pushing us forwards towards the goal. It is because I know there is a Force behind the outer events that I can accept all these impossibilities that Auroville has at present. For Auroville is certainly not what it should be, or what Mother envisioned. We have to become more sincere, and I am convinced that if we all try, solutions will come. Because every good or bad step that we do in Auroville has a repercussion in the world outside. There is a sort of resonance. So we should be very conscious. The real problem is that we sometimes forget why we are here. If we could only remember we are here for the New World, and we have to work towards building the New World! I don't know exactly what it means, but I know there will be a New World, because without it life is not worth living."

"I would like to see our society make the children and the youngsters the centre of all our activities, as it is they who have to prepare and be ready for the new consciousness. We should plan everything, all our activities with this in mind. We must have the spirit of adventure, learn to give up our insecurities and take a jump whenever necessary. After all, if we are doing the right thing in all sincerity, the force is there to look after and protect us."

Interview by Jill and Roger

PHOTO: CAREL



"Let's keep breathing"

Marco Feira, executive of the Miniature furniture unit, on his hopes for the economy and a new spirit of business

The decision of the Entry Group to close its doors has had a considerable effect. Much has been called into question on a general level. Meetings have taken place, a number of them at Marco's place. Is a new orientation taking shape?

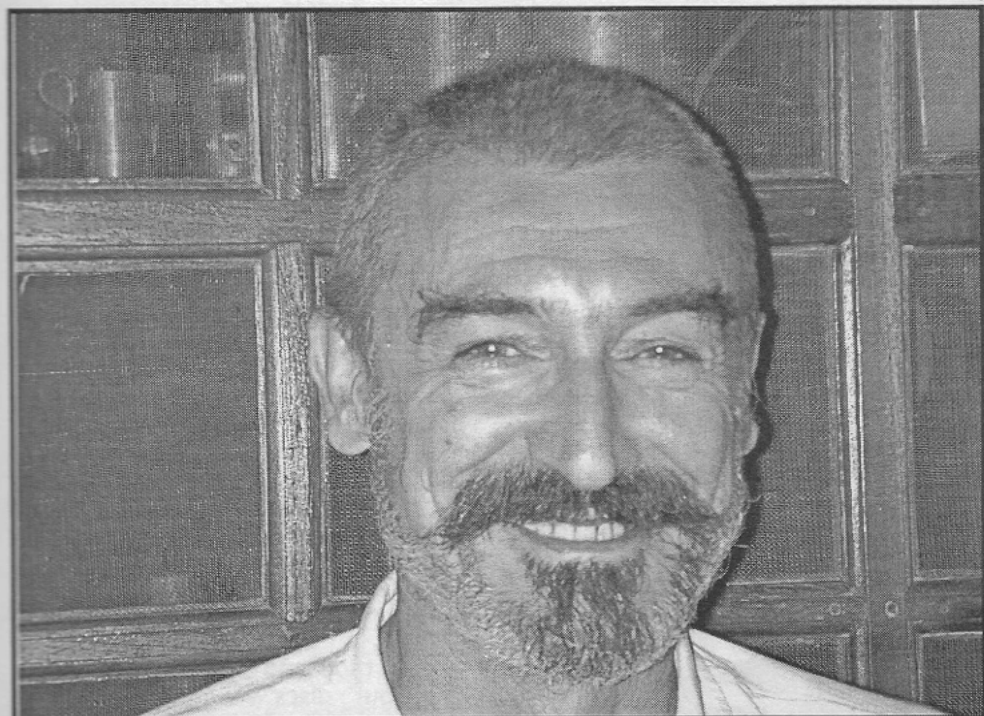
"When I learnt that the Entry Group had temporarily closed the doors to Newcomers to Auroville, my first reaction was one of shock: no, Auroville has to remain open! Then, after reflecting on it, it became clear to me that it was a good thing, a provocation of sorts that would call much into question. And that it certainly did. There was a lot of searching for solutions in the meetings that happened at the T'ai Chi Hall above my house, though it was strange to see that neither the people without proper housing, nor the architects or contractors, showed up. This does not mean that only a few people are concerned by the housing problem. The others may have resigned themselves to the impossibility of solving it, or simply are tired of meetings."

Difficulties for Newcomers

"It is clear that it not possible today to come to Auroville and participate in the dream without money. Newcomers have to come with enough money to cover their daily needs. Apart from that, they have to build a house. And the latter, in particular, is a big barrier. There have been a few magnificent exceptions, like the Hungarians Laszlo and Eva who came without money and, thanks to a lot of love and help, were able to stay. But this is the exception that confirms the rule. And everyone has to admit that it has nonetheless been very difficult for them."

"Another serious problem is that we have still not managed to provide everybody with a decent maintenance. People who have their own sources of income can normally afford a decent lifestyle."

PHOTO: EMILIE



But those who depend on the community are in a far more difficult position.

"I have the feeling that people are scared. For a dozen or so years many people have been building houses with an extra room or even an annex. These are rented out to guests, which allows Aurovilians to make ends meet at the month's end. How to let go of these forms of financial security? Are we ready to give the little that we have to build for those who are coming? I am afraid that the answer is 'no'."

Can commercial units help?

"During the meetings we also tried to understand the way our commercial units are functioning, and wondered if they could participate in financing new dwellings by using their reserves. It became clear that doing business in Auroville is far from easy. Business executives must deal with a range of administrative and bureaucratic headaches inherent to the Indian business context. On top of that, they have to deal with a negative image of business in Auroville which has grown up in the last years, and which has led business executives to close up psychologically. But this has to change. Aurovilians should start understanding the problems a unit is facing, and the units have to become more transparent. For example, the figures of the contributions of commercial units to Auroville's Central Fund that are published every month in the Auroville News do not give a true picture, as contributions to specific projects and contributions in kind are not mentioned. But the units themselves could help a great deal by establishing a climate of greater co-operation and openness."

"In the meetings the question was raised as to why the units feel the need to maintain sometimes large reserves. There are a few reasons. One is that Auroville units, unlike commercial units elsewhere, cannot get bank loans to finance their operations, as they do not own their buildings and cannot use them as collateral. So reserves need to be built up to finance ongoing

operations and finance future expansions. Another reason for a reserve is to act as security in case a problem arises. This is even more necessary as there is no support available elsewhere. There is no 'common fund' which can give this guarantee, and that is actually a set back. Auroville's commercial units should endeavour to create such a common fund. This would liberate money which could be used, for instance, for the construction of new houses, and in that way help us strengthen our faltering sense of unity. But we still have a long way to go for that to happen: here, everyone keeps things—including their problems—to themselves."

The commercial units have to learn to work together: there is, for example, a need for a centralized marketing office working for all commercial units. We could also make bulk purchases of raw materials collectively. We would need a centre with a paid and impartial staff able to help all the units with the administrative and bureaucratic problems they are facing. In short, if our business units could be more open, less competitive with each other and more collaborative, it would benefit the entire community."

Sensing a renewal?

"What's positive at present is the process, for we are not resigned. The fact that we are questioning ourselves proves that we are alive and kicking and that the community is advancing step by step. To continually question oneself is after all one of the reasons we are here. The solutions will come."

"Some proposals have already emerged from the meetings. For instance the fact that keet (*palm-leaf thatch—eds*) as a building material should be reinstated, and that each working group should ask itself how we could start receiving newcomers in a new way."

"There are a lot of things in the air. If Auroville is seen as a breathing entity—breathing in to become full and exhaling to become empty—we could say that at present we are breathing in. My hope is that we continue breathing."

From interviews by Denis and Emilie

What makes community?

Explorations together with members of communities from around the world.

During a gathering in Verite in late November, members and supporters of a number of communities and community organisations together with Aurovilians discussed the question of "What makes community?" and other questions. The communities represented in the workshop included The Farm, a long-established community in Tennessee, USA; Nature's Spirit, a new community in South Carolina, USA, inspired by Auroville; and Lebensgarten, which is based in a collective housing project in a German city. There were also supporters of Dr. Ariyaratne's Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka, representatives of the GEN network which links together eco-villages from around the world, and a coordinator of an on-line learning community in the U.S. Two organizers from Los Niños, an organization which helps poor children and families living on the Mexican/US border, also attended.

On the first afternoon notes were compared about what constitute the biggest challenges to the achievement of successful community. It turned out that different communities and organizations experience remarkably similar problems: how to empower youth? how to ensure that individual needs don't take precedence over community needs? how to ensure that everybody in the community has a chance to participate in policy-formulation and decision-making? how to make communities self-supporting and sustainable? how to retain the sense of unity when a community grows beyond a certain size?

Later participants split into three sub-groups to discuss governance, sustainability and the nature of a learning community. The latter group, in particular, came up with some interesting

ideas. For example, after an Aurovilian stated that we lack tools in Auroville to create and nurture community, a visitor described an intensive two-week course in building community which he had attended in Germany. He learned how easy it was to hide his feelings and project only a positive image for the first few days, but this became increasingly difficult as time wore on. Feelings of genuine community only grew when he and others dropped their defences and began being honest about their failings and fears.

Another participant in this group described a tool called "insight dialogue". The purpose of insight dialogue is to help people identify their underlying assumptions, and so understand how they have been conditioned. A non-controversial topic is chosen, and then participants observe, in a non-judgmental way, how others express themselves. They then suggest what their root assumptions appear to be. The eventual aim is for a group to help each other move beyond personal conditionings to arrive at a higher level of understanding.

Another tool with a similar aim was introduced on the second afternoon of the workshop. "Cultural synergy", explained a member of Nature's Spirit community, is an approach to conflict resolution. It involves first recognizing one's own view, then fully understanding the very different view of another. The final stage involves holding the integrity of each view, then moving backwards and forwards between them until a new possibility, a totally new perspective, intuitively emerges.

The focal point

Many of these techniques seem to work well

on a one-to-one basis, but how to unify larger groupings of people? One Aurovilian reminded us that this was one of the original intentions behind the construction of Matrimandir—to provide a focal point where Aurovilians, through working together, could transcend their differences. The Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka utilises a similar approach through its "Shramadana" work camps. These bring together everybody from a particular village or region to work on a practical project of common benefit. As the organizers of Los Niños pointed out, when people who have been in conflict work together on fulfilling a common need, they begin to experience each other as comrades rather than as enemies...and then a whole lot of other things become possible.

All this was interesting. But as the second afternoon wore on there was a sense that the workshop, which brought together people with so much experience and community wisdom, was not fulfilling its full potential. Granted, there had

been many interesting individual interactions, we had sung songs and meditated together. Yet certain things were missing. One was an exploration of how communities differ, and how Auroville, in particular, does not conform to any community stereotype. For here the emphasis is upon an inner discovery leading to inner identity with others, rather than upon the cultivation of outward forms of togetherness. What was also lacking was the living sense of what community is, and why people choose this way of life. Then Bico, a nineteen year old who was born and grew up on The Farm, spoke. "Why community? I'll tell you. I grew up in a place where I saw people feel love for their friends, and where we kids were told to listen to what is deep inside ourselves rather than others, and have the courage to act on that. That is real powerful learning. And then, living closely with so many special people on The Farm and seeing how they dealt with problems, I've had tremendous opportunities to grow." Jesse, a supporter and active participant in Nature's Spirit community, ended by offering an interesting redefinition of community which could well be a starting-point for future workshops. "Every one of us is community. If every part of us, every cell in our bodies, is always serving others and listening for a higher note, we ARE community wherever we are."



Inspiration: from Medhananda

A step beyond man

What is important in the experiment "Auroville" is not the possibility of discovering a clever new way of organising human communal life. It is the possibility of a first step beyond man. Even if this step is faltering, it does not matter. What matters is that for the first time man tries out whether evolution itself can evolve, or whether humanity and thinking and common sense are forever his final limitations.

A clever organisation, an illusory success of common life, would be the end of the experiment. As long as mental endeavours fail, there is hope.

There have been many pious communities in the past trying to build the city of God, who succeeded in living peacefully together for some time. A success of such a kind would be a catastrophe for Auroville. The oneness Sri Aurobindo explored was not to be imposed by rules and regulations, or even saintly behaviour.

Only a sudden mutation can take us beyond man. Auroville is such a force field for mutation. So don't expect to find here bigger potatoes!

(Medhananda, who left his body at the age of 86 in 1996, joined the Ashram in 1952. The Mother put him in charge of establishing and running the Sri Aurobindo Library. Medhananda lived in Auroville, in Fraternity, for a couple of years in the late 1970s. This passage was recently discovered in one of his notebooks, and probably dates from that time.)

Open Forum

Random Thoughts

"The twenty-first century will be spiritual or will not be ." (André Malraux)

Kurtz's revelation ("The horror, the horror!") at the end of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness could well serve as an epitaph for our now departed twentieth century. "A century of sophisticated savagery," opined Maurice Strong in Auroville recently. A century littered with the bloodied signposts of ideology. And yet its fields of death were also sown with the seeds of a new and formidable spiritual renaissance and awakening.

At present we live in accelerated times, and in only one century we have seen what was a revolutionary force in many parts of the world, nationalism, turn into something both archaic and retrograde. There have been quantum leaps in science and technology, but they have not been paralleled by any fundamental change in human nature, and "man unkind"—to quote E.E. Cummings—still rules. But luckily spirit—not man or even nature—controls the acceleration at work.

But the old gods of empire and conquest know how to transmigrate. Globalization, a concept that inspires some set on making the world, its markets and biological wealth safe for wholesale plunder if not take-over by multinationals, is a case in point. Yesterday's empires have become electronic. The global village, although no longer just a visionary concept, nonetheless remains more of a virtual than an embodied reality. Concepts and ideas that harbour a new truth are skilfully taken over by the powers that be and reduced to catchy advertising phrases or

cynical sound-bites.

The French author André Malraux once declared, with a certain Gallic grandiloquence, that the twenty-first century would be spiritual or not at all. Hopefully, the spiritual will be at least a growing strain and influence in the times to

come. At the dawning of the twenty-first century, the identities of individuals and communities have become increasingly multicultural and globally aware, if not spiritually inclined. Many no longer owe their allegiance to nation states but to the planet as a whole. We have begun to shed the

myth of our powerlessness to affect and initiate change. The work of many concerned individuals and NGOs is a result of this awareness. And it is frequently far more effective than that of the governments of nation states, whose conflicting priorities and interests do so much to render a global

body such as the UN—heralded with such hope at its inception only fifty years ago—a limping, stymied behemoth.

"Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past", observed George Orwell about dominant views of history. Yet parallel or alternative views of our history and evolutionary destiny are emerging. In some ways it would seem that our planet has become a colliding particle chamber of multiple realities, worlds, views and visions of the future (witness the recent mayhem in Seattle). No doubt what is established will carry on with its centuries-old momentum, while simultaneously, under cover of darkness, the new and subtle will infiltrate, inspire and subvert. As its epiphanies—delicate and minute—multiply and spread, as matter begins to vibrate at a higher frequency, and time collapses inward towards its source, will we see a sudden reversal and a new inrush of spiritual energies, breaking the dams of perception in a thousand sun-bursts of the soul? We live in interesting times.

Roger



"A thousand sun-bursts of the Soul": discs waiting to be installed at Matrimandir.

New Year Music 2000

Watching choir rehearsals for New Year's Eve

How many people does it take to move a grand piano? Three basses, two tenors, one pianist and one trumpeter are sufficient, I learned, watching them lift the unwieldy instrument to its place mid-stage in Bharat Nivas. Next to it, creating a semi circle, chairs are placed for the orchestra, and behind them is the place for the adults' and children's choirs.

I am watching the preparation for a rehearsal of "New Year Music 2000," written by Johannes Jansson, a Swedish composer⁽¹⁾ who took up Holger's challenge "to write something for this bunch of amateurs we have here for New Year's Eve 2000." In May last year, he surprised everyone by having the first part ready. He surprised them even more by announcing that he would arrive at the beginning of August "to give some direction" and he was clearly expecting results. That marked the start of a series of frantic rehearsals. Nuria, Auroville's choir director, took up the work with the adults' and children's choirs. Holger took responsibility for "the orchestra," a loose assembly of thirteen amateurs who had never before played with so many others. But the assiduous labour bore fruit. Johannes left Auroville in mid-August with the distinct feeling of having accomplished something. He also left Nuria, who had never stood in front of an orchestra before, to conduct the entire performance.

Tuning up

Harried Aurovilians arrive, some with instruments on their backs, obviously rushing from some meeting. Children play in the aisles; the first instruments are being tuned. "Too sharp," says Holger flatly, listening to a flautist. It takes quite some time before he is reasonably satisfied with the tuning. Then, like a true German Kapellmeister, he guides the orchestra through



Stefan, Stefano and Agni at a rehearsal

some obviously difficult passages. His criticism is patient, but very direct. "You know," he says, "sometimes we play out of time, sometimes we play out of tune, but sometimes we play out of feeling. Stay with the feeling. Stay with the piece, even when your instrument is at rest. Stay with the music." Meanwhile, the choirs are making warming up noises in the green rooms. And then all join on the stage of Bharat Nivas, 65 pairs of eyes concentrated on that lithe woman who so suddenly has been projected forward to conduct the New Year Music 2000. She concentrates, eyes closed. Then the baton rises, comes down and I hear the first 13 bars of music, quiet, rhythmic, and afterwards the choir's intense invocation, "Ma." Nuria had explained to me earlier that Johannes has dedicated the piece to Sunil, the late composer from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, and that the first thirteen bars had been taken from his

"Sri Aurobindo's Centenary" music. Then the music changes, and so does the text. "Tadetat Satyam Yathaa Sudiptaat" sings the choir: "This is That; The Truth of Things." The Sanskrit words come from the Mundaka Upanishad, parts

of which Johannes has used as the text for his music. But this is not the moment for quiet musical enjoyment. Nuria taps the baton. "Children, your voices sound too soft. Sing out!" Luckily the Sanskrit text flows smoothly, helped no doubt by the Sanskrit classes they are taking at school this term. The children giggle, but prompted by Nuria their second attempt is much better, and Nuria's concentration goes elsewhere. Her attention seems to be everywhere at once, as she urges each one to give of his or her best. The long and frequent rehearsals must be tiring, but I do not see any impatience. Instead

there is a light on the faces as everyone brings their attention to the moment. It is the energy of playing together, of being part of something beautiful, undoubtedly stimulated by that ancient text:

This is That, the Truth of things: as from one high-kindled fire thousands of different sparks are born and all have the same form of fire, so, O fair son, from the immutable manifold becoming are born and even into that they depart. (2)

"What we sing is what we are here for," said Nuria, "and that is why it is a joy to perform." It seems a fitting text for the start of a new millennium.

Jill and Carel

- (1) For an interview with Johannes, see AVToday # 111, April 1998
- (2) From *The Upanishads*, Chapter 2, Section 1. Translation by Sri Aurobindo

Auroville and India

A Helping Hand

A personal account of distributing relief in cyclone-stricken Orissa

Soon the pictures will blur and fade away—the bloated corpses lying sunken in the mud, the jagged trunks of uprooted trees, the electric poles bent like hairpins, the asbestos roofs splintered and tossed away, and the desperate helpless eyes of those who survived the wrath of the cyclone. Orissa, that for a brief spell commanded the world's attention, will soon be relegated to the realm of memories, to be written off, along with other natural disasters, with a shrug.

But those who were subject to the brute insensitive fury of nature for 36 long hours are not likely to ever forget the destruction it has caused in their lives. "What shall we do? How long can you continue to feed us?" a woman asked me when I visited her village.

I had no answers. The relief that we had brought, in comparison to the magnitude of the disaster, was a flickering candle-flame in a field of darkness. And she, she did not want our charity. There was a pride in her helplessness, a defiant questioning of the gods who had with one stroke deprived her of all her assets. Her home and her personal belongings had been washed away, her crops had rotted in the rain, her meagre livestock drowned, her fields rendered infertile by the intrusion of the sea. What help can one possibly offer? For there was not just one, but millions of such victims.

True, in man's proud and endless strife with nature, there are plans. Ambitious long-term plans by the government to procure and distribute seeds among the people, to bring in livestock, to

replant saplings where two and three hundred-year old trees have been uprooted. But, somehow, given the fact that after a month the government had not even secured the basic needs such as blankets against the cold and roofing-materials for the homeless, one does not invest much hope in the plans for long-term sustainability. One simply prays that the poor, the people rendered destitute by the cyclone, will somehow survive. As the poor in India have always survived.

Our first day in Orissa

It is this resilience of the poor and their immense humanity that amazes me. On our first day in Orissa, we were towed by a boat to a small hamlet, inaccessible by road, where no relief had as yet reached. Had it not been for the circumstances, the boat ride under pleasant skies would have been idyllic. The placid waters gave little clue that it had served as a grave to a few herds of cattle and some people. Only stray carcasses on the riverbank, picked over by dogs and vultures, served as a reminder of the disaster that had struck here. When we landed at the village however, women and men alike openly wept as they showed us their village. Or rather, what remained of it. Not a single hut was left untouched by the storm. Some had totally collapsed. Of others, there was only a skeleton of bamboo scaffolding of the walls and roof left. An old man recounted how he had survived clinging to scaffolding for two days as the tidal waves swept about him. Another woman, her tears glistening at the mem-

ory, recalled how she had made her children, one holding a 21-day old baby, stand on her sole wooden cot as the waters increasingly surged through her house. Still another was digging in the mud with bare hands to retrieve odd bits of utensils that had been buried when her house collapsed. The entire populace had stayed cold, wet and hungry for three days as the rains lashed. And yet, despite all this, despite the scant clothing, food and medicine we had to offer by way of relief, one woman took me by the hand and said, "You are our daughter to come so far and visit us in our misery."

The utmost one can do

Perhaps in the final reckoning, this is the utmost that one can do. To be there. Without pretense, without any ambition to save or to succour. But just to be there, to hold hands and relate with compassion to another's misery.

During our week-long tour of Orissa however, we were witness to a gamut of human emotions. There was anger amongst many about the government's apathy, disdain by some at the old clothes that we had brought. And there was greed. At all levels. From a young man's desire for a pair of jeans, to the kickbacks received by government officials in procuring polythene roofing for the homeless, and to a US power company's threat to triple the electricity rates in Orissa to make up for the losses that it had suffered.

This perhaps is the human condition: to be subject to the constant tug of elemental forces of good and bad. And, as a police officer in Orissa put it, it is through disasters of this magnitude that our human frailties are exposed. But also as the woman in that forsaken village taught me, they can serve as opportunities for individuals to exceed their petty selves.

Bindu

In brief

Youth 2000

The programme for youth 2000, which will welcome back Auroville youth from all over the world at the end of the year, is taking shape. Plans include a clean-up and show at Irumbai Temple, mural painting, Theatresports, an early morning boat trip, gardening at Matrimandir and, of course, an assortment of pizza dinners and parties. So far 84 youth have confirmed they will be attending the event. More about this in our next issue.

Harmony week

A long-time friend of Auroville has suggested that we celebrate the last week of the millennium in Auroville as Harmony Week: an opportunity to resolve all conflicts with others before the New Year. The Representatives Group have enthusiastically endorsed the idea and are looking for somebody to help organize it. Suggestions have included writing down all one's hang-ups and problems on paper, and then casting it into the New Year's bonfire...

Land use plan

At a recent Residents Assembly meeting, the group working on the plan introduced the latest draft, which has benefitted from the input of professional town planners. There was some discussion of the changes and of the reasons underlying the present land crisis. The plan will now go to the Governing Board when they visit Auroville in mid-December for their final approval.

General meetings on the Entry process

Meanwhile there have been a number of general meetings at which the decision of the Entry Group to temporarily "close" Auroville has been the main topic. A recent meeting agreed that the entry process should not be reinitiated until certain conditions were met. These included finding solutions to the housing crisis, and a move towards an "in kind" economy where people can offer what they have in return for housing, food and transport.

Dr. Devan Nair visits

Dr. Devan Nair, a well-known writer and speaker on Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, has been visiting Auroville. He gave two much-appreciated talks on "The revolutionary work of Mother and Sri Aurobindo" and "Savitri: a force in action". During a recent workshop on community, he also offered us his latest version of the Beatitudes: "Only oddballs will roll into the kingdom of heaven"...

Invocation

Savitri Bhavan has also just brought out its latest issue of Invocation: study notes and newsletter. Among other things, it contains a brief history of the Bhavan, Nirodbaran's address at the inauguration of the Bhavan in August and the text of a talk on Savitri's yoga, given by Dr. Mangesh Nadkarni.

If you would like to receive a copy, write to Savitri Bhavan, Auroville, 605101, TN. India. email:savitribhavan@auroville.org.in

Shuttle moves

Shuttle-Technology, which designs and develops system software and integrated circuits, will move in six months from its premises in Aurelec to Tidel Park, a new software park in Madras, where it will join its parent company SCM Microsystems India. According to its executive Ulli, the decision to move had to be taken because it became increasingly difficult to attract top-level professionals to this part of the world. Another problem was the impossibility to acquire the bandwidth necessary for Shuttle's international operations.

Remembering Prem

A tribute to Prem Malik

Prem Malik, Aurovilian from the early days, passed away on December 16th at the age of 79 after a prolonged illness following a stroke. That evening Aurovilians passed by at his house for a quiet concentration. On December 19th there was a morning concentration at the Banyan Tree, near Matrimandir.

Prem's first involvement with Auroville dated from its very beginning. He had come to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in the late fifties, in the wake of a spiritual quest which had taken him to all the sacred spiritual places of India. In the Ashram he taught "Management in the light of Sri Aurobindo" at the Centre of Education. Soon he became involved with the Auroville experiment, and Mother appointed him member of the Comité Administratif d'Auroville, Auroville's first administrative committee. Prem was one of the twelve persons who, Mother had insisted, should be present at the laying of the foundation stone for Matrimandir, a project he cherished dearly. The Mother gave him the responsibility for fundraising and for the first brochure on Matrimandir. Much later Prem also involved himself with physical work at Matrimandir.

In the early days of Auroville Prem was living in Pondicherry where all the Auroville offices

were situated. But after Mother's passing and when the difficulties with the Sri Aurobindo Society began, Prem took a landmark stand and chose to support Auroville. In 1978, he moved to live in Auromodèle, a community which was being created "to learn to live in Auroville" according to the Mother. Originally She had asked Prem to take charge of the social aspect of the development of this community. Since then, he has been involved in many of Auroville's activities. Best known was his involvement in what was called "the political issues". In the early days he participated in the struggle against the Sri Aurobindo Society. Later he worked to realize the Auroville Foundation Act, considered by him and many others as the only answer possible at that time. More recently, he was one of those who moved the Government of India to officially celebrate Sri Aurobindo's 125th Birth Anniversary and to create a Sri Aurobindo Centre, which later became the Sri Aurobindo World Centre for

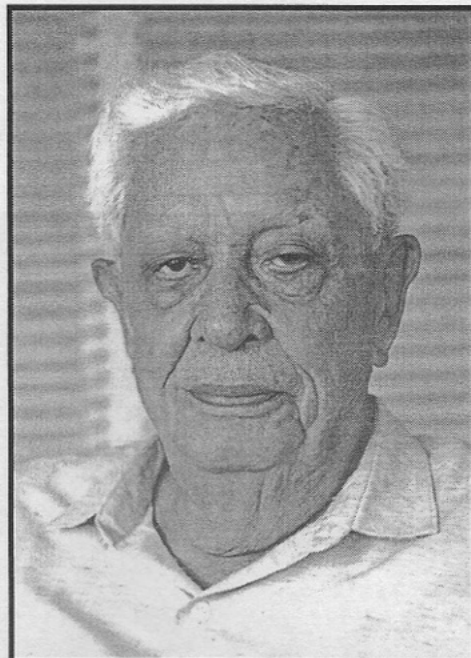


PHOTO: JOHN MANDEEN

Human Unity in Auroville. Many will also recall Prem's work on organisational matters, and his interest in manifesting Bharat Nivas, the Pavilion of India, and its Centre for Indian Culture. Prem also actively supported the creation of La Ferme Cheese and the Centre for Scientific Research. As trustee of Aurosarjan, he helped many young Tamil people in Auroville.

Prem's dedication to Auroville as a collective experience was complete, and he certainly did all he could to make this experiment successful. But he increasingly expressed his unhappiness with the way Auroville was developing in the last years. He felt that it had become too externalized and too materialistic, and did not concentrate sufficiently upon spiritual growth. But this did not affect his love for Auroville. When Alain Bernard and Christine came to visit him in the hospital, he asked them "give me some good news on Auroville," and said that he wanted to be active there again.

"What is not so well-known," says Aster, his long-term friend, "is that Prem had a very powerful inner presence. He was unwaveringly focused on 'transformation', which for him was something to be achieved. For Prem had definitely a living contact with his soul. During the last years of his life Prem withdrew increasingly on an inner quest, little of which he would reveal. About the really important things, the Prem who talked so much would say very little."

"In the last weeks in the Ashram Nursing Home many people visited Prem, amongst whom, a few days before he left his body, was Sri Nirodbaran. Nirod observed to me that 'Prem is working very hard.' When I met Nirod again the day after the cremation, I told him of my perception that Prem had done his work. Nirod responded with a simple 'yes'."

Carel

Overland to Europe

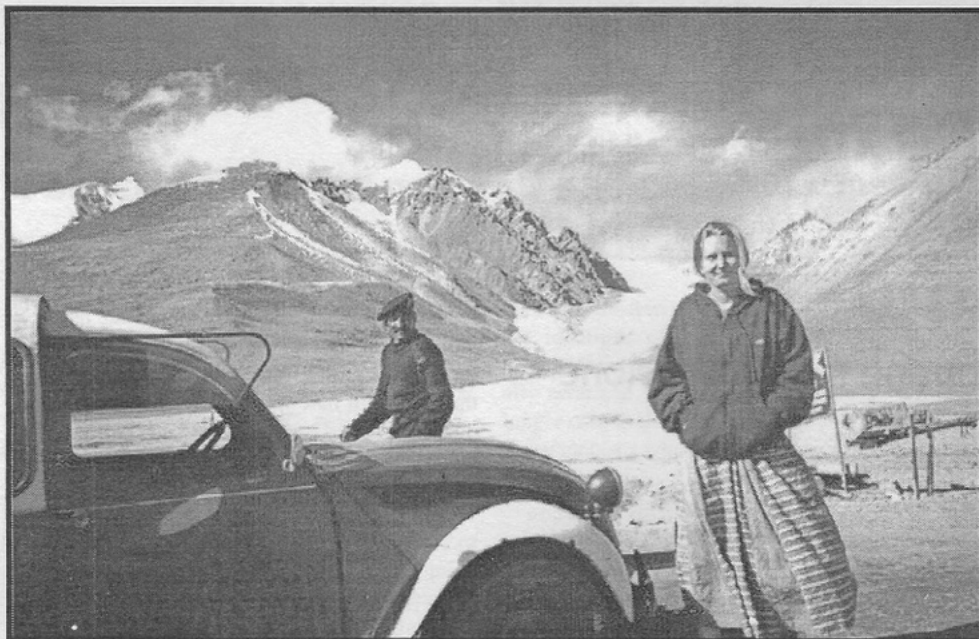
"It was a real rust bucket but we turned it into a great car"

Aurosyllle describes her recent round trip overland to Europe with her long time companion Sukrit (both of whom were born in Auroville in the 70's). A 32,000kms journey in a re-hauled second-hand Citroen 2CV...

"It all started," she softly laughs, "with Sukrit's interest in Citroen cars. He has about four of them now. He bought the one we travelled in in a scrap yard in Hyderabad and spent four months fixing it up. It was a real rust-bucket, but he turned it into a fantastic car! We drove from Auroville to Delhi where we stopped for a week to get our Pakistan visa. Then after the Pakistan border we'd only stop for the night. We drove from Lahore to Quetta and then on through Baluchistan. We had been warned not to linger in Baluchistan, as it is a tribal area where even the government admits it wields little control. We drove across it in one 15-hour stretch. All we saw were a few camels and the occasional village. We stopped once at a pump for water, and two guys wearing turbans, carrying guns and riding what looked like a Russian Rajdoot motorbike, approached us and stopped. I was wearing a headscarf, but even so, feeling a bit uneasy I said to Sukrit, 'Let's move on.'"

They finally arrived in Isfahan in Iran at 3 a.m. after driving all night. There they spent two days and Sukrit was able to find some spare parts for the car. "I don't know why, but Isfahan is the Citroen capital of Iran—one out of three cars there is a Jyane 2CV. Iran must have the most Citroen cars in the world! Iran feels strange—at least for a woman. But the people are also very friendly and hospitable—people would invite us into their homes. Once we went into a shop to buy muffins and the owner—no matter how much we tried—just refused to let us pay."

"In Turkey you finally see trees again—the parts of Iran and Pakistan we crossed were mostly desert—and the people are extremely friendly and helpful. Our car broke down twice there near Konya. We were out in the middle of the road of a small town taking the gearbox apart and people gathered around us to help. They took us to the mechanics they knew who helped us temporarily fix it with Turkish spare parts. The car broke

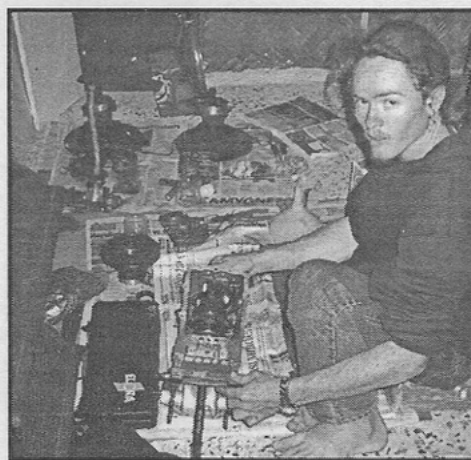


Aurosyllle on the Karakoram highway, Pakistan, near the Chinese border

down again 200 km later. It was getting dark and Sukrit, to my and the hotel owner's surprise, took the gear box to bed with him, where he finally finished fixing it."

The Citroen Rally

The worldwide network of Citroen 2CV owners and friends has an international gathering every two years. The thirteenth International Citroen 2CV gathering was held this year in Greece, on Skotina beach, South of Thessalonika. "One thousand five hundred 2CV owners came with their cars from all over—Europe, Australia, America. Kumbha [an Auroville-born youth presently studying business management in The Netherlands-eds] who works for a Citroen outlet in Holland, joined us with his colleagues for the



Sukrit repairing the 2CV's gearbox

gathering which lasted for a week. Every car was usually a unique specimen with its own color and personality. Of course I didn't see Sukrit all that much during the day as he was out examining each and every Citroen, but sometimes he'd bring a group of like-minded friends back to our car who couldn't believe that we had driven it from India. They'd take photographs of the Pondy license plate! In the morning we would go to the market to try and sell some Auroville products I'd brought along—Gillian's beaded purses, Bobby's hats and Li-Mei's beautiful hand painted T-shirts. We made enough money to pay for our week and even to buy a few spare parts."

After driving up through Italy, camping en route, they spent a week in Holland where they had a place to stay—thanks to Kumbha—and a Citroen garage where Sukrit worked for three weeks."

On our way back near Izmir we saw many collapsed buildings and refugee camps because of the earthquake, which was very depressing, and Iran seemed much more eastern. It was just after the coup in Pakistan and we noticed that people were doing their best to be honest. When we said we lived in India, people were—despite the recent border war—actually very curious and wanted to know what the people and living there are like. We drove up the Karakoram Highway and into the region of Hunza, which was extremely beautiful with its snow-capped mountains and the rivers beginning to freeze. The people there seemed more relaxed than elsewhere in Pakistan. Coming back into India was a bit of a shock: the roads are terrible, nothing seems to work, things are inefficient and the traffic is totally chaotic."

Return to Auroville

Returns bring reappraisals: "After coming back to Auroville I wanted to keep the freshness and momentum of travelling but it was as if the road ended here. After a few days you settle into a familiar sort of pattern, the old stories and gossip resurface, and things seem a bit stagnant. We met some overland travellers who are open and searching for a spiritual path. It gives you an idea about how people first came out here to Auroville and makes you wonder: are we fully using the freedom we have here to grow?"

From an interview by Roger