

Auroville Today

SEPTEMBER 2006, No.211

Remembering Nirod

“The end of an era” is an over-worked phrase. However, it seems an appropriate way to describe the passing, on the 17th of July, of Nirodbaran at the age of 102. Nirod, as he was affectionately known in Auroville, was the longest-lived of those almost legendary sadhaks – Nolini, Champaklal etc. – who attended upon Sri Aurobindo after he fractured his leg in 1938. Nirod’s *Twelve Years with Sri Aurobindo* is a record of those years and in his descriptions of how Sri Aurobindo spent the day – outwardly, at least – the book did much to ‘humanise’ Sri Aurobindo. It also gives an insight into Sri Aurobindo’s manner of composing *Savitri* (when Sri Aurobindo’s eyesight failed in the final years, Nirod became his amanuensis). Nirod also made notes on the evening conversations between Sri Aurobindo and his attendants. Nirod’s *Talks with Sri Aurobindo* reveal that, far from working exclusively upon the most rarified levels of consciousness, Sri Aurobindo was very aware of and engaged in world events. But perhaps the greatest revelation, for many sadhaks, was that Sri Aurobindo had a rare sense of humour.

This was no surprise to Nirod who, since February 1933, had been corresponding with Sri Aurobindo. That correspondence is unique in that Nirod, far from treating Sri Aurobindo as a forbidding Olympian presence, often challenged “the Lord” to make his work understandable to mere mortals. Sri Aurobindo responded with affection, humour and lovingly-directed blows. Nirod was the ‘wooden-head’ who wanted the Divine to correspond to his own logic, he was ‘Doghead’, ‘Mr. Gloom’. For Nirod had the tendency, noted Sri Aurobindo, to open himself to the influence of “the confounded Man of Sorrows”. “Knock him off, man, knock him off” was Sri Aurobindo’s robust advice, “for cheerfulness is the salt of existence.” Through the correspondence Sri Aurobindo ‘doctored the doctor’ (Nirod was a medical practitioner), developing in Nirod, among other things, a remarkable vein of ‘mystic-surrealist’ poetry. Above all, in these letters Sri Aurobindo gave Nirod a wonderfully detailed and practically-based explanation of his yoga. “The total effect of the entire correspondence,” wrote Nirod later, “can be summed up in Sri Aurobindo’s luminous sentence ‘But within there is a soul and above there is the Grace.’”

After getting Nirod to read the correspondence to her, Mother was to remark that Sri Aurobindo “has given you everything”. In fact, the letters revealed new aspects of Sri Aurobindo even to her. “I thought I knew him well, and then

when I hear this I realize that”(makes gesture as if to indicate a breaking of bounds). Among other things, Sri Aurobindo revealed to Nirod as early as 1935 that Mother’s body was more capable of transformation than his. And a few years before he died Sri Aurobindo confided that “I may take a fancy to leave my body before the supramental realisation”.

Nirod often visited the Matrimandir: it had a special place in his heart. As he put it, “The world has been presented with two divine epics. One is Sri Aurobindo’s *Savitri*, which is already in our midst. The other is the Mother’s epic still under construction, the Matrimandir.” He was later to recall that Mother had mentioned that “the completion of Matrimandir will be commensurate with the establishment of peace and harmony in the world”.

However, when he first started visiting the Matrimandir site in the 1980s the mood in the community was far from relaxed: there was dissension amongst Aurovilians and tension between Auroville and the Ashram. Perhaps the critical breakthrough in that latter relationship came on 14th August, 1993, when Nirod was invited to give a talk in Pitanga Hall on ‘Sri Aurobindo as I knew Him’. That afternoon the Hall was packed with Aurovilians of diverse ages and outlooks. Nirod walked in, very upright, sat down at a simple table under portraits of Sri Aurobindo and Mother, placed his stick carefully beside him and then, for one hour, in a very simple, unassuming way, (“simple English,” he once wrote, “is direct and consequently powerful”) spoke of his contact with Sri Aurobindo and Mother.

He ended: *Friends, brothers and sisters, you are indeed very lucky, I must say, to have come here to do Their work. Through Their force, through Their blessing, Matrimandir and Auroville are going to be something unique. There are many wonders, but I think this wonder will surpass all others – vital, physical, mental wonders: it will be spiritual. And you are the instruments. Somehow you have come; it must be the Force that has brought you here, and you are extremely fortunate to be aware that you are doing your work, sacrificing yourselves, your*



Nirod with the Auroville flower

PHOTO FRANZ

labour, all your goodwill, for the success of Mother’s work....

If you want to know his (Sri Aurobindo’s) spiritual content, his avatarhood, read Savitri. Read particularly about Aswapati’s yoga. Aswapati is none but Sri Aurobindo...all his own experiences he had given there in the name of Aswapati.

Namaste, brothers and sisters, till we meet again. You are making a bridge between West and East.

At that moment an Aurovilian spontaneously called out, to great applause, “Nirod-da today you have been the bridge between the Ashram and Auroville.”

“He was very insistent that Aurovilians read Sri Aurobindo,” says Franz, an Aurovilian who had a close contact with Nirod over the last ten years. “So Nirod was delighted to hear about a proposal to build in Auroville a place to study *Savitri* and all his other works, and he gave his complete support to the *Savitri Bhavan* project.” Nirod laid the first foundation stone on November 24th, 1995, saying “This *Savitri Bhavan* project, now in its infant stage, is, if I may say so, a twin to the Matrimandir. The Matrimandir is much further developed and already showing some of its future glory; this new project has a great potential and will be growing up to an extent we cannot easily foresee.”

As the *Savitri Bhavan* buildings came up, he was to visit frequently. He also visited many Aurovilians in their homes and workplaces. “He was interested in everything that was going on here,” says Franz. “If anybody invited him, he would come.” And he, in turn, once confided, after laying the foundation stone for Arka, (Nirod was much in demand as a foundation-stone layer) that he would never forget the love and devotion he had just experienced.

In spite of his somewhat forbidding exterior – it was said that when he practised as a doctor in the Ashram, some would-be patients stayed away because they were afraid of him – he was among the most modest of men. Once he wondered why Sri Aurobindo had chosen him as his

amanuensis for *Savitri* rather than more accomplished poets like K.D. Sethna or Dilip Kumar Roy. He concluded it was because Sri Aurobindo knew that Nirod, unlike the others, would never argue with him over his choice of words!

Even after all these years, the magic of that afternoon in Pitanga remains with me. It wasn’t so much what he said – most of that had already been covered in his books – as the power of that presence; very solid, as if founded on rock, yet very sweet. He used to say, “I have a magnet inside me.” “He always brought an atmosphere of peace,” says Franz, “something that suddenly changed the atmosphere and relaxed everybody, taking away tensions and bringing something very subtle.”

I suspect that his popularity in Auroville was also due to his refusal to act the grand sadhak or conform to the image of a senior Ashramite. He had little time for people who wanted to touch his feet (a somewhat unlikely occurrence in Auroville anyway) and he could be refreshingly unpredictable. At a recent memorial meeting in *Savitri Bhavan* one of his relations remembered asking him why he was so kind to others and so stern with his own relatives. “We’re frightened of you,” she admitted. “Good”, he retorted.

Alan

Sorry we’re late!

It will soon be three months since the last issue appeared. This has caused our readers some concern. So, just to allay any apprehensions: the June/July double issue came out in early June. Then, half the team was on station for the summer months. When we had our full complement of editors again, it was too late to hit our usual deadline for the August issue, which is why the August issue did not appear. Here then, we offer you the September issue. This, of course, will not affect your subscription which runs for 12 or 24 issues.



Nirod in conversation with children of Auroville’s Transition school

PHOTO FRANZ

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Entry Regulations

Few Aurovilians are comfortable with rules and regulations. Yet it is surprising how many, over the years, have been involved in the drafting of the Regulations for Entry and Exit of the Auroville Foundation.

Many Aurovilians are deeply unhappy with anything that resembles 'old world stuff' such as formal rules and regulations. Hadn't The Mother herself said 'No rules or laws are being framed. Things will get formulated as the underlying truth of the township emerges.'? Would regulations, once accepted, not infringe on our freedom? These and other concerns were repeatedly voiced when the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation exerted mild pressure on Auroville to present it with a proposal for regulations for entry and exit.

Let's review what happened over these last years. In 1997 Mr. N. Bala Baskar, then Secretary of the Auroville Foundation, formulated draft regulations for Auroville's internal organization in cooperation with a senior Aurovilian and members of the then Working Committee. They specified how the Residents' Assembly and the major working groups, the Working Committee, the Entry Group, the Evaluation Committee and the Funds and Assets Management Committee should function. However, an Auroville General Meeting described the draft regulations as 'old hat' that "do not testify to Auroville's aspiration to boldly spring towards future realizations". The meeting concluded that these regulations could not be submitted for approval to the Governing Board, but that the discussion on regulations should continue. That was in January 1998. The Governing Board, at the time, was chaired by Dr. Karan Singh.

Years passed. New Governing Boards came and went, but none expressed particular interest in the Regulations of the Auroville Foundation. Then, in September 2005, Dr Karan Singh once again became Chairman of the Auroville Foundation. He lost little time in reminding Aurovilians of their statement seven years earlier and asked for the whereabouts of the Regulations, particularly those relating to entry and exit and to the dealings and mode of decision making of the Residents' Assembly.

The Working Committee was not completely taken by surprise. In September 2004, concerned by the decision to send away three Aurovilians for improper behaviour, a group of Aurovilians had started preparing draft Regulations for Entry and Exit. The draft went

through 13 versions and consultations with lawyers before it was finalized in December 2004. However, in January 2005 the Auroville Council decided to reopen the issue and invited a new group to formulate regulations. The new group took great pains to solicit everybody's point of view and even opened a public counter for information and discussion at the town hall entrance. By the end of the year it presented its own version of entry and exit regulations. In February 2006, the Governing Board, confronted with two drafts which widely diverged at certain points, asked the Working Committee to harmonize them so that there would be one proposal agreed to by both groups. The Working Committee subsequently called on all involved to collaborate.

Meanwhile, the community became increasingly aware of the benefit of having regulations. Regulations would give the community legal power to make decisions on entry and exit; they would protect the community and individual members from arbitrary interference from outsiders; and they would clarify the conditions under which a person joins Auroville. Last but not least they would provide transparency to all and sundry by being publicly available on the Auroville website.

In April this year, after months of intensive work, a common proposal was presented to the community. However, to the surprise of many, it was once again rejected. Those who attended the Residents' Assembly called to ratify the proposal spoke about there being 'no need for regulations as we have the Charter of Auroville and that should be sufficient'; or attacked various points of the proposal. On the initiative of one of the participants the meeting was transformed from a Residents' Assembly meeting into a Platform meeting with a 'Talking Stick,' a device used by the Native Americans, which was held by each speaker to guarantee a safe hearing so that everyone else would know that it was their turn to listen. In the series of Platform Meetings that followed, the decision was reached to once again work on the drafts. Two new groups formed spontaneously. However, as they were unable to reach agreement, each group presented its own draft to the community a few months later.

On August 17, in a meeting of the Residents' Assembly specifically called for the

The Auroville Entry Regulations

The proposed Auroville Entry Regulations are in two parts: the Regulations proper which, after approval of the Governing Board are to be sent to the Ministry of Human Resource Development; and the Admission Policy which will only require the approval of the Governing Board. The Admission Policy can therefore be changed more easily as and when required. Mother's words about Entry to Auroville are part of the Admission Policy.

The Regulations prescribe the constitution and mandate of the Entry Service. It will be gender-balanced, consist of seven members from different age groups and nationalities (six old-timers and one person who recently became resident) and they will hold office for three years. They will endeavour to make decisions by consensus, but if that is not possible, a decision will be made by two third majority. An affected person can appeal against its decisions.

The Regulations further specify when a person ceases to be Aurovilian. To deal with complaints about a person's behaviour as being incompatible with Auroville's ideals, a Review and Assessment Service will be constituted which has the power to take measures against the person concerned, ranging from public warnings to deciding that a person has to leave Auroville for a certain period of time or permanently. Appeal against the decisions of this Review and Assessment Service is possible in most cases. The Regulations also deal with the Register of Residents and the Master List, and specifies what is to be done in case the Secretary of

the Auroville Foundation refuses the request to give his recommendation for a visa or residential permit.

The Admission Policy differentiates four categories of people living in Auroville: Aurovilians, Auroville Students; Relatives and Partners of Aurovilians; and Friends of Auroville. The Admission Policy specifies the conditions for joining Auroville under each of these four categories and details the work of the Entry Service in this regard.

A major change from the present admission policy is that the Newcomer probationary period has been reduced from two years to one year, though it can be extended by periods of six months if required. The new Policy also gives a special status to former Aurovilians who want to rejoin Auroville under the header 'Returning Aurovilian.'

The Auroville Students' section not only deals with children of Aurovilians below the age of 18, but also gives the conditions under which other persons below the age of 18 can study at Auroville schools, without being accompanied by their parents. This section will gain importance if Auroville schools decide to educate non-Auroville children.

The section on Relatives and Partners describes how ageing or ailing family members of Aurovilians who need to be near their Aurovilian relative, can live in Auroville. It also deals with spouses of Aurovilians who have not become Aurovilian.

The category Friends of Auroville clarifies how a person who regularly wishes to visit Auroville and live there for a limited period of time without becoming an Aurovilian can contribute to an apartment for temporary use in Auroville.

purpose, the two new proposals and the old one were voted upon by the 64 Aurovilians present. The old proposal received 24 votes; one of the new ones got 14 votes while the third one obtained no votes at all. The chairman, a member of the Working Committee, then declared the old proposal accepted and informed the community that it would be presented to the Governing Board. Those who later muttered that the 24 majority votes could hardly be called 'representing Auroville' were reminded of the many Aurovilians who, at some point of time, had participated in the drafting of one or other version of the proposals and that nobody had been prevented from attending this meeting. "If they don't want to come, it's their concern,"

concluded the chairman, who reminded the meeting that, as long as the community had not redefined the rules for decision making of the Residents' Assemblies, there were the rules of the game.

Case closed? Not really. Various Aurovilians have meanwhile proposed revisions of the accepted proposal. Apart from this, the proposal has yet to be accepted by the Governing Board, which may and most probably will make amendments, before it is sent to the Ministry of Human Resource Development who will lay it, in accordance with the Foundation Act, before each House of Parliament.

Carel

INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION

The UNESCO connection

Auroville's connection with UNESCO goes back to the mid 1960s. At that time some members of the Sri Aurobindo Society who were taking an active role in promoting Auroville wanted to approach UNESCO for an endorsement of the planned project. Their reasoning was that nobody would open their purse strings for such a project unless UNESCO endorsed it first.

When Mother heard of the plan she was scornful. "I said to those who look after Auroville, I told them 'Those people (UNESCO) are two hundred years behind the earth's march, so there's little hope they'll understand'." But, She added, "I didn't tell them not to deal with them—I don't give any advice."

The UNESCO link was duly made. In fact, so successful were Auroville's promoters that within the same year the General Assembly of UNESCO unanimously passed the first of four resolutions of support for Auroville, inviting "member states and international non-governmental organizations to participate in the development of Auroville as an international cultural township designed to bring together the values of different cultures and civilisations in a harmonious environment with integrated living standards which correspond to man's physical and spiritual needs."

Since then UNESCO has support-



Ms. Minja Yang, the new Director of UNESCO, New Delhi, during her visit to Auroville

ed Auroville in various ways. It has sponsored international conferences, it has provided financial support for specific projects and UNESCO's top people have continued to say nice things about us (two Director-Generals were also members of our International Advisory Council).

The question remains, however, how far are Auroville and UNESCO natural bed-fellows? Are the aims of the two organizations really consonant? Or is this merely a marriage of convenience?

Luigi of Auroville's Future is in no doubt. Quoting one of UNESCO's founding-fathers to the effect that "Lasting peace must first be born in the minds of Men", Luigi pointed out that Auroville's aims were almost identical, "except that here we are trying to create peace not only in the mind but also in the heart and body of Man." He was speaking on the occasion of the recent visit to Auroville of Ms. Minja Yang, the new Director of UNESCO, New Delhi.

Ms. Yang gave her take on the

relationship. "At UNESCO we are dealing with the grand politics of mission, but beautiful words can only be translated into action through very tangible actions such as those engaged in by you. So for UNESCO Auroville represents a dream. What you are trying to do here is a microcosm of all the things UNESCO is trying to defend at the global level."

UNESCO has been accused of being over-bureaucratic and of being an expensive talking-shop which is out of touch with the needs of those at the bottom of the pile. Ms. Yang accepted some of the criticisms, but noted they were sometimes based on a misunderstanding of UNESCO's role. "We are not a funding agency but a normative one." UNESCO's job is to engage in dialogue with governments to ensure that certain internationally agreed-upon norms are adhered to. While its guiding mission remains the promotion of world peace through education, social and cultural development, it is seeking innovative ways, she said, to promote gender equality, poverty alleviation and to foster alternative forms of development through making information technology available to all.

All very praiseworthy, if a tad jargonistic. What really brought Ms. Yang into focus, however, was when she described the educational difficulties of her dyslexic son. He was rejected by school after school until she found the right educational environ-

ment for him where, suddenly, he bloomed. The point she was making was close to Aurovilian hearts. "Examinations should not be used to eliminate those who trail behind. The important thing is the quality of education, not statistics about how many children are receiving schooling or taking examinations."

Ms. Yang is full of drive and of idealism. But she's also a pragmatist. When Luigi presented to her the idea of Auroville being designated a UNESCO Heritage Site of the Future, she said it would be very difficult to get such a status. She was interested, however, in Bhagawandas's proposal to set up village centres for the production and distribution of dynamised water. "But these are expensive projects. Can't you scale these machines down to the size of a household?" Ms. Yang received other presentations during her visit. They included Joss speaking about Nadukuppam High School, Gilles Boulicot on bioregional water management and Uma on the Tsunamika initiative.

So does UNESCO really understand what Auroville is about? Mother implied that it didn't, and perhaps never would. (When UNESCO refers to the need to "manage social transformation" it doesn't appear to have the supramental in mind.) But does that really matter as long as the tracks don't diverge too much?

Alan

The world's longest love letter

Indian and Pakistani children take an initiative to bring the countries together

Hemant Lamba, from Auroville, was one of three Indian nationals who travelled to Lahore, Pakistan earlier this year. The team had an unusual mission: to deliver The World's Largest Love Letter from the children of India to the children of Pakistan.

The event was hosted by Friends Without Borders, and is part of a much larger campaign that aims at getting the children of both nations to communicate and get to know each other by exchanging letters.

"The whole movement was initiated by two friends from the US, John Silliphant and Mark Jacobs," explains Hemant.

The World's Largest Letter, which was almost the size of a cricket stadium (86,400 square feet!) was made of tarpaulin, covered with drawings and had the following message written in Hindi, Urdu and English: "Dear Children of Pakistan, Let's join hearts in friendship. Together we can make a better world. —The Children of India"

Tarpaulin strips bearing the names and addresses of Indian schools and the signatures of thousands of children from across the country made up the border of the letter. Those were to be delivered to Pakistani schools. The idea was to link up schools from both sides of the border so the students from both countries could start to communicate on a regular basis.

Before arriving in Pakistan, the letter travelled to a number of big cities across India. "I was fortunate to be part of it from the beginning, and to be present for all the big stadium events," says Hemant. "Hundreds of children from different schools partic-



The world's longest love letter in the Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore

ipated in the letter's creation in Bangalore, with the assistance of artist John Devaraj. Then it was unveiled in Bombay's biggest cricket stadium. From there the letter travelled to Ahmedabad, where hundreds of children from different schools carried its border strips through the streets, walking to a church, a mosque, a synagogue, a temple, and then converging on the Gandhi Ashram." From there everything was packed in small trucks

which drove along the border between both countries "...releasing vibrations of love and goodwill in the area which witnessed one of the worst atrocities during Partition." The last stop in India was Amritsar, Jallianwalla bagh, and from there the letter was carried across the Wagah border into Pakistan.

On April 4th, some five thousand Pakistani students gathered at the Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore to receive the world's largest letter of love and friendship from the children of India, as well as a symbolic pen. "The atmosphere was vibrant, festive. It was a truly momentous event of friendship between the two countries," Hemant remembers. "In response to the letter, students from the Lahore Grammar School sang 'The Friendship Song', which they had composed for the children of India."

Along with the letter, the team brought them some 30,000 other letters written by children from schools in India to the children in Pakistan. And these children from schools in Pakistan will now write back to their new friends in India.

"The upsurge of goodwill and friendship amongst the children of both countries has been amazing," says Hemant, "When we were in Lahore, the local press came up with rave reviews of the event. Television

also made it big news."

Hemant, who grew up in Delhi, hails from a family with roots on the other side of the North West frontier. Visiting Pakistan had always been one of his greatest dreams. "Lahore is a vibrant city, with a very cosmopolitan look. Knowing I was from India, people were so open and friendly. I felt so welcome there. It was like being home," he remembers. He had taken with him a handful of soil from the Matrimandir which he deposited at Datasahib's Mazaar, one of the biggest mausoleums of a Sufi saint in the city. "I asked the people: which is the place for peace in Lahore? And they took me there."

Coming back to the mission that brought him to Pakistan, Hemant continues: "All the children in the world have the same dreams. The children of India and Pakistan are not interested in the past, not interested in conflict. They have very simple, common goals: they love sports, friendship, looking towards their future. We need not keep fighting to change the border between both countries. Instead we should work to open the hearts. As one of the kids who participated in the event expressed so beautifully: 'Borders are for geography not for the hearts'."

Emmanuele



A Pakistani girl (left) and an Indian girl prepare the love letter the night before it is displayed in the Stadium

READER'S QUESTIONS

Mother's bronze bust

In 1965, years before the Auroville inauguration ceremony, the Auroville office was in Roger and Purna's house in the corner building opposite the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. The main room upstairs had a big oval table around which meetings were held to decide how to organise the work — i.e. land purchase, Roger's plans, finance, transport, etc. These meetings, which used to take place about once a fortnight, were very inconclusive because of differing opinions, arguments, and clashes of personalities.

During one of these meetings, some time in 1966, the Mother suddenly sent a beautiful bronze bust of Herself — with a note to state that the disagreements arose because we had forgotten the most important thing — Her presence. From then on the Bronze Bust of the Mother was kept in front of Her place at the oval table. In fact the atmosphere improved no end and we were able to reach agreement on various plans of action.

When the Auroville office moved to the beach front, I lost sight of the bronze bust. The last time I

saw it was more than thirty years ago on the counter of the dining room of Promesse. I enquired about it from time to time, but was never able to trace it. Then, one day, I learned that the Mother's bust was in the meditation room of the village school in Promesse, run by Varadarajan.

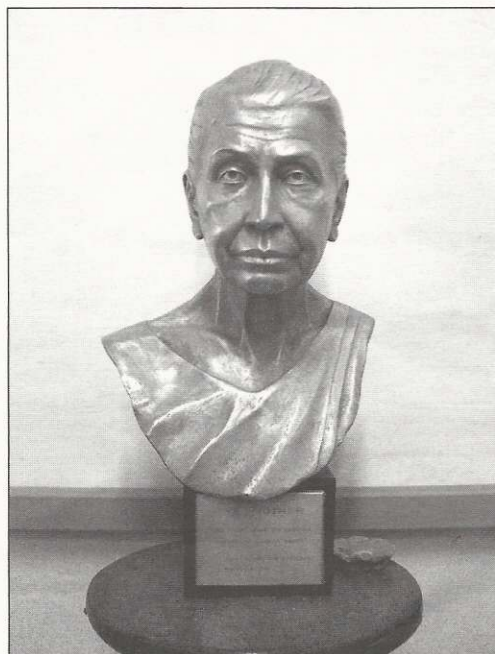
As I believe that Mother put Her force into this bust when She originally sent it to us, and as She has also mentioned that crystalline mineral substances keep their vibrations indefinitely, — I suppose bronze as well — I have been wondering if Mother's bronze bust shouldn't be present at Auroville meetings today to help true solutions to emerge?

Michael Neville,
Sri Aurobindo Ashram

Postscript

Several years ago, Varadarajan gave the bust to the Matrimandir office, where it had a prime place in the accounts office upstairs. When this office was moved downstairs, Mother's bronze bust followed. It is still there.

Gilles Guigan



Mother's bronze bust in the Matrimandir office

In brief

New IAC members

After the resignations of Dr. Ariyaratne and Dr. Diana Eck as members of the International Advisory Council (IAC), the Government of India on July 17th, 2006 nominated Dr. Vishakha N. Desai, President, Asia Society, New York USA, and Prof. Michael Murphy, California, USA as IAC members. Their term of office will be for the remaining term of the IAC, i.e. up to October 2008.

Land purchase restarted

After a gap of three years, the newly formed Land Consolidation Committee (LCC) has restarted purchasing land for Auroville. The LCC has asked all Aurovilians who have been engaged in private negotiations during this period to work with the LCC.

Economy Group

The Economy Group has asked for feedback on the question whether Auroville should have a uniform maintenance structure in which all Aurovilians working full time would get the same maintenance irrespective of the work they do. Or whether some differentiation could be made according to the work and funds available and individual aspirations and needs. At present, the Economy Group gives maintenance taking into account the number of hours worked, the person's responsibility and commitment, the years in work and in Auroville, the person's harmonious attitude in working and the non availability of any other resources. As basing the maintenance on such criteria might be seen as a deviation from the original guidelines given by the Mother, the Economy Group invites the larger community to provide feedback and proposed to hold a seminar on this issue.

Dreamcatching

After the previous exhibition of ideas about Entrance to Auroville, the Dreamcatchers made a second exhibition in Revelation on perceptions of the Greenbelt and other designated 'green' areas and their function within the overall scheme of Auroville. The Dreamcatchers' primary focus is on evolving new processes and forms of communication through learning to dream 'The Dream' together, rather than providing ready-made solutions.

Health Fund

After a few years of experimenting, the Funds and Assets Management Committee has decided to make participation in the Auroville Health Fund mandatory for all Aurovilians and Newcomers, except in cases where individuals sign a waiver taking full financial responsibility for their medical needs. The Health Fund is also investigating how to cover the costs of major operations.

No outside employment

The Acting Secretary, Auroville Foundation, has reminded Aurovilians of foreign origin that they cannot seek employment or offer consultancy with institutions that are not relatable to Auroville, as that is considered a violation of the conditions under which their Entry Visa is issued.

Next AVI meeting

Auroville International centres are organizing an additional 2006 AVI meeting in Formia (between Rome and Naples), Italy, from October 7 - 14th. For more info contact Kathy@auroville.org.in

More than Fair Trade

In Auroville, Fair Trade has been an issue since 2004. Here are some of the perceptions on Fair Trade.

Whenever you go shopping in the West you'll find a cheap orange juice on the same shelf as a more expensive one which carries the Fair Trade logo. The difference is not only the price. When you buy a Fair Trade product you are getting a guarantee that no people or environments were exploited to make the product you've bought, and that the producer gets a fair deal. Companies have begun to understand that they sell not only products but also the stories of the producers behind them. Taste and quality is no longer enough. Consumers want to have a clean conscience, too.

A cup of fair-trade coffee

Marc's coffee roasting centre is almost ready. He has selected an organic and Fair Trade coffee and is importing the machines. Auroville has been chosen as the location. Despite adverse climatic conditions (high humidity spoils roasted coffee) he and his partner have taken up the challenge. They count on direct interactions with the southern Indian farmers who will supply coffee beans. "We want to promote entrepreneurship by training farmers to grow and distribute", says Marc. "Not only access to the market is important, also empowerment".

Marc is the coffee project holder for the Mereville Trust and, together with Pratap Chatterjee, manages the overall operations of the Trust. His roasting centre is going to be the first Fair Trade food product initiative under Auroville's auspices. In Auroville so far mainly aromatherapy oils, incense and pottery have been sold with the Fair Trade mark. In 2004 the Mereville Trust, registered under the Auroville Foundation, became affiliated to IFAT, an international organization that supports the Fair Trade movement. As the roasting centre will operate under the Mereville Trust umbrella, it will automatically fall under IFAT's regulations.

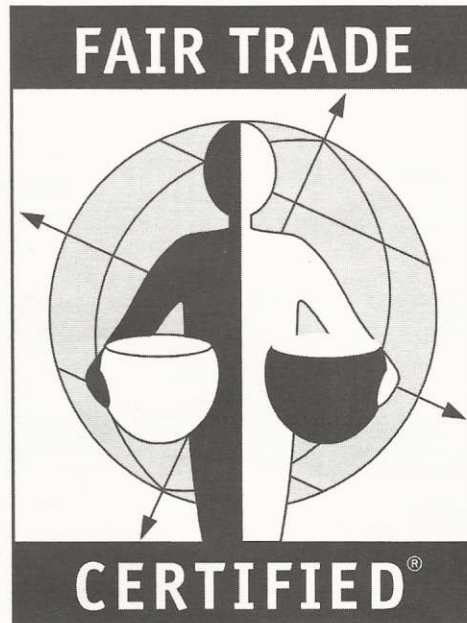
These regulations state that products that carry the Fair Trade mark must meet certain minimum standards. No child or forced labour, minimum health and safety as well as environmental standards must be complied with. Small scale farmers receive a fair and guaranteed price for their products and workers on plantations receive a fair wage. Long-term contracts are signed between the producer and the trading organisation to allow for planning over longer periods of time and sustainable production practices.

"IFAT will check the social aspects and make sure that the profit goes to certified Fair Trade projects", explains Marc. "The new activity will also have to prove that it has health care schemes for employees and that there are subsidies available for their education and training".

For most of the Indian coffee growers and plantation workers the reality is vastly different. In India five million people depend on coffee for

their livelihood. In Karnataka, Kerala and parts of Tamil Nadu the coffee industry is one of the largest employers. Most of the workers are adivasis (indigenous people) or dalits (socially backward) from the Nilgiri hill belt. 98% of the plantations are small holdings with less than 10 hectares, very vulnerable to price fluctuations. Since 1982 they have been victims of the deep crises which made coffee prices drop to a level below the cost of production.

Marc paints a gloomy picture of the coffee market. "When a broker knocks on the farmer's door with a deal, he says 'either you buy at my



The Fair Trade certified coffee logo

price or you don't sell at all,' so the farmers sell at a loss". The income is not enough to keep the farm going so they take up loans they are not able to repay. Children stop going to school and work along with parents. It's about life and death. The press provides updates on farmers' suicides.

Now the trend is slowly being reversed for coffee. The International Coffee Organization (under the UN) has already understood the need to re-regulate the coffee market and advocates roasting coffee in countries of origin so that the value addition remains in the country.

Fair Trade is gaining momentum. It seems that the concept, which is 30 years old and was a small movement in the beginning, has finally appealed to decision-makers. Marc is confident that Fair Trade coffee can be competitive. The competitive advantage is the low cost of marketing. "All you have to do is to go to the IFAT webpage and see who is on the list of suppliers and buyers. Now it's time for the Fair Trade volumes to pick up and shift from low to high quality. The challenge for Fair Trade is to encourage

the private conventional sector to establish Fair Trade product lines", explains Marc.

Imagination's Fair Trade

"We give fair wages to the employees, we keep transparent accounts, there's no child labour". The two fresh managers of Imagination, Harish and Kathir, explain what Fair Trade means for them in practice. Imagination is a textile handicraft company and the only Fair Trade certified unit in Auroville. "We do much more than that. There are afternoon activities and holidays for the employees. We have monthly meetings where they can discuss, share and complain".

Fair Trade membership benefits not only the employees. The network is a good channel for small struggling businesses to continue their operations. "As a Fair Trade member we have a lot of benefits", says Kathir. From the IFAT newsletter that circulates between the members, the Fair Trade buyers learn about the Fair Trade suppliers. "Our company is now on the list. Customers can contact us directly to inquire about the products."

What has changed after they got the Fair Trade certificate? "We have more expenses connected to the welfare of the employees but on the other hand we have more customers and we benefit from free training and assistance by IFAT's designers and marketing experts", explains Harish. "With that certificate our buyers are sure that we are treating our employees well. They don't have to ask all the small questions – the Fair Trade organization does enough ground work to answer their inquiries".

Unfair Fair Trade?

"It's all business, an outward show", says Ms. Lachman. "It has been distorted".

Ms. Lachman is an executive in the New School Crafts and one of the pioneers of Auroville. She came to stay Auroville in 1979. Her first encounter with the Fair Trade concept was in 1998, when a lady from an Italian fair-trade company paid a visit in the New School Crafts. She had a look at the company when Ms. Lachman was away and obviously liked what she saw. "She became friendly and asked many questions. Where does your profit go? Is it a private company? How are the workers treated? I told her that the business belonged to Auroville, and that all profit went to Auroville, as per Auroville's aims. I told her that I was working for the Divine and was supported by Auroville. In the New School Crafts we took care of our employees. We wanted to better their standard of living, educate their children, make their houses comfortable. She explained the Fair Trade principles to me. Then she purchased samples of our products and after a few months placed a big order. I was very happy to get involved in Fair Trade".

Today Ms. Lachman doesn't beat around the

bush when she's talking about Fair Trade. "In practice the purchasers themselves do not follow Fair Trade principles. They say they care about the workers. But they go where they can find cheaper products – now India, tomorrow Nepal, Bangladesh or Thailand."

"I had a buyer who claimed to be Fair Trade", says Uma, a founder of Upasana Studio, a fashion company in Auroville, and a design consultant in IFAT. "He presented me with a list of the Fair Trade standards that he follows, and then tried to force down my prices. Who is going to compromise in such a case?", she asks indignantly. "I'm not against Fair Trade, but myself I will not go for it. I believe in much higher ideas than the Fair Trade". For Uma talking about Fair Trade in Auroville is like bringing wood to a forest. "Fair Trade is the basis from which all business in Auroville has to begin", states Uma. "It was my very first step: if anything, I had to be Fair Trade! Auroville is far beyond that stage already. We ensure working conditions that exceed anything that is offered to employees in the rest of Tamil Nadu. I never even think of Fair Trade regulations".

"Auroville doesn't need Fair Trade", agrees Harish. "Auroville is a different project. There is no private property and people don't work for personal profits but to contribute to the development of the town. It's more than Fair Trade requires."

Joanna

CD RELEASE

The PAX project

In February the EACH ONE TEACH ONE Crew from Bremerhaven, Germany came to Auroville to team up with local musicians and the slowly developing local Hip-Hop scene to record a crossover Peace CD. Simultaneously an interested group of Aurovilians formed a gospel choir, conducted by German singer Vivian Glade. The Highlight of these two workshops was the PAX Concert in Kalabhumi in March, where the choir entertained with their fruits of fun and members of the EACH ONE TEACH ONE Crew performed German Hip-Hop songs, break-dance and many more enjoyable delicacies.

The results of this peace trip are now published on CD. The sleeve note says: "Music touches people's emotions and in connection with positive messages poetry may have a healing effect on one's soul, and it might help to make the world become the beautiful place it could be".

The PAX project CD can be downloaded at <http://www.work-on-peace.de/>

NEW TECHNOLOGIES

Effective Micro-organisms for sanitation

EM is increasingly being used in Tamil Nadu

Effective micro-organisms (EM) was discovered in Japan in the 1960s. It's a combination of lactic acid bacilli, photosynthetic bacteria, yeast and other organisms and it has been found to be very useful in, among other things, treating waste water, solid waste, in enhancing organic fertilizer and as a bio-pesticide. It was introduced in Auroville in late 1999. Dr. Lucas, manager of AuroAnnam, is one of its main proponents.

On December 29th 2004, three days after the tsunami, AuroAnnam was contacted by the Secretary of Rural Development of the Tamil Nadu Government who had just been put in charge of tsunami emergency relief. She wanted to know if EM technology could be used in public sanitation work along the affected coast. If so, she wanted a programme to be implemented immediately.

"It was a huge task," says Dr. Lucas. "But the state machinery was in place to help with the technology transfer, and officials from various coastal districts were put in touch with us." Within a week, AuroAnnam made a stock of activated EM available for relief organizations working in the affected areas. "But only a few NGOs in Cuddalore and Nagapattinam districts used EM in their public sanitation efforts. Most agencies preferred dusting with chlorinated bleaching powder or, even worse, spraying pesticides to control insects."

Lucas was not disheartened by the poor reception and application of EM. "In fact we were happy that EM got its foot into the door of public health," he says. "A few times, the local media reported on EM technology and the Secretary publicly stated that EM was successfully used in the immediate-tsunami hygiene efforts and so had



The new toilet block of the Visitors' Reception Centre, designed for daily use by 2000 people, will use EM technology

helped to prevent the outbreak of an epidemic."

The interest of the Department of Rural Development in AuroAnnam's EM technology has since continued. "The Secretary wants us to introduce EM technology in all districts of Tamil Nadu, preferably in every

block of Tamil Nadu. She wants to see EM being used in at least in one public toilet or sanitary complex and in one composting site. And then she wants feedback on its performance – what are the problems with using EM, does it work well, and if not, why not."

But even though AuroAnnam has done a few demonstrations at the district levels, it has not yet been able to convince the less senior officials to use it. Lucas says candidly, "The top level is fully convinced; but things do not move in the middle bureaucratic levels. The motivation to implement a technology that is cheap, cost-effective and interesting is, sadly, zero, and I haven't exactly understood why."

Meanwhile, AuroAnnam has started working on a smaller scale with local NGOs and, increasingly, within Auroville. "A demonstration site is just being finished in Auroville," says Lucas. He is referring to the new toilet building at the Visitors' Centre that uses EM Technology for hygiene and for sewage treatment. "Its success can be judged by every visitor to Auroville!" he declares.

Priya Sundaravalli

Vengadesh joins the Royal Navy

A young Tamil Aurovilian, hailing from Kulapalayam village, will join the British navy

Vengadesh, or "Veni" as we know him, jogged over to our Bristol house early one cold, English, spring morning. He had already run five miles and done fifty push-ups and was glowing with energy.

"A new life is beginning for me," he proudly told us. "In a few weeks I'll be off training in Portsmouth on the HMS Raleigh. I will really be in the Royal Navy then."

How did a Tamil village boy from Bommayarpalayam get to join the Royal Navy?

"Well, it has been a long journey and the last few years have been quite hard. My father died when I was very young, I don't remember him at all. He was a lungi weaver. When he passed away it was a struggle for my mother to support me and my brother. She would buy rice in Pondicherry, bring it back on a bullock cart and then I would go round to the fishermen, balancing the rice sacks on my head and try to sell it.

"My older brother eventually got a job as a gardener in Sri Ma and his employer was able to get me into André's new school in Fraternity, which later moved over to New Creation. Tamil boys who went to the school felt very privileged and excited and have very happy memories of that time.

"Francois Gautier, Frederick and André had taken the initiative of integrating Tamil boys into the Auroville schools. At first it was very difficult, but they gradually accepted us. These were the early days.

"I then went to Transition School and later Last School; then worked in the Free Store and trained in electronics in Aurelec. I felt proud of my achievements but I wanted more. I wanted to travel and see the world like the Western boys did. I felt an ambition within myself. I wanted 'to go for it.'

"In 1994 I went to Paris with a friend to start a business importing Auroville handicrafts, but I found France very difficult. My French was poor (how I wish I'd paid more attention in André's French classes!) and France was very foreign to me. My friend and I eventually parted and I realized I had to learn to stand on my own two feet and not be dependent on anyone. Back in India I replied to an advertisement in 'The Hindu' and got a job as a salesman which gave me experience in mar-



Veni in a relaxed mood

keting and meeting people and I began to develop some confidence.

"After two years though, I began to feel restless, as if I was not getting anywhere and I left that job and came back to Auroville. For years I felt I had been waiting for a magic person who would be able to understand me, to help me to begin my journey in life. I somehow trusted Mother would send this person to me.

"Then one day my wife Banu, who ran Atithi Griha Guest House, introduced me to Roger, an English man in his late sixties and my life changed. I felt he really cared about my spirit and my life. When I told him of my dream to go to England he immediately said, 'No problem!'

"I went to England with him in 2004 and felt much more at home there than in France. I loved being in Devon, in the beautiful English countryside, but after a month or so I felt uncomfortable as I could not find any work.

"One day Roger took me to meet an elderly friend of his whom he thought might be able to help me to find some work. We chatted for a while, and then out of the blue his friend said to me, 'Why don't you join the

Royal Navy?'

"Roger had been a Navy man and thought that was a possible option. So after a few phone calls I excitedly rushed off to London for an interview at the Royal Navy Recruitment Centre. I was so nervous I could hardly talk to the officer in his smart Naval uniform. The first thing they asked me was my age. I said, 'thirty three, nearly thirty four'. The officer said, 'The age limit used to be thirty three, but you are very lucky, last year they raised it to thirty seven.' I couldn't believe it!

"Then he asked me if I had been a resident in the UK for the last three years and of course I had to tell him I hadn't. I was devastated. I prayed to Mother in desperation: 'Dear Mother, I want to develop myself. I am trying so hard. Every time I take a step forward, a door shuts in my face. Please help me.'

"I rang Roger who refused to admit defeat. He had been in the Navy for years and knew that his opinion would be respected.

"He wrote a three page letter to the recruitment officer describing my character and ambition to serve in the Navy. It was successful. Within a week I went off to London again

to see Mr Brown, the warrant officer. Roger had even described Auroville to Mr. Brown and he was quite impressed. I was summoned to a second interview and the three year residency requirement was waived. I was ecstatic.

"I now had the hurdle of the examinations. My English was poor and my math was even worse. I pored over dozens of old exam papers which Roger had got for me. I had never seen anything like them before! I spent weeks studying algebra and geometry and found it very difficult as they were in English. I failed the exam.

"I remember running over the hills behind Roger's house crying out, 'What am I doing? Where am I going?' I felt I had let my friend down and the whole thing was ridiculous.

"But Roger had a new plan for me; I would go to Bristol and study in a college staying with his friend Gary. This actually turned out to be very good for me as I experienced life in England and developed some confidence again. I met very few English people however, as most of the students were from Somalia, Bangladesh or Poland and many were much older than me.

"On the day of the Navy exam I was the only foreigner there and that made me panic a little. I started with the written exam and then had the physical and medical test and nearly died with anxiety as I waited for the results.

"I passed!

"I have only one more hurdle to go and that is the ninth stage, the security clearance. If I pass that I will go Scotland for two weeks of training on the HMS Caledonia. If that is successful then my real life will begin in Portsmouth on the training ship HMS Raleigh.

"How do I see my future? Well, the adventure of seeing the world will now begin and I will be proud to serve the British nation in a peace-keeping force. As they say: 'Wherever there is an ocean, the Navy will be there.'

"I will be trained as a steward which involves caring for the officers and their guests and doing paramedic and first-aid work. I intend to work really hard for promotion and would eventually like to be a Warrant Officer.

"I now understand that absolutely nothing is impossible."

Diana

TSUNAMI AFTERMATH

Earth technology for coastal rehabilitation

The government of Tamil Nadu has asked for earthquake resistant constructions for rehabilitation of the tsunami affected population

It is well documented that earth technologies are the most appropriate for areas at risk of earthquakes or cyclones.

So when the Government of Tamil Nadu with support from United Nations Development Project invited building designs for rehabilitation of tsunami-hit houses, they demanded that the construction meet earthquake-resistant criteria. It followed naturally that Auroville's Earth Institute, with its extensive knowledge and expertise in disaster resistant building technologies, would apply.

"Building for tsunami-resistance is not much different from building for earthquake-resistance," says Satprem. "In both cases the foundation has to be strong. In the tsunami context, the earth blocks have to have the extra strength to deal with the potential presence of salt in the environment. We found this could be achieved by adding a little more cement to the soil mix."

For the post-tsunami reconstruction, the Auroville Earth Institute submitted five designs, all using Compressed Stabilized Earth Blocks (CSEBs). Two of these designs won awards, and it was decided to use them in demonstration buildings. "We have completed one demo house in Anumandai with a ferroce- ment channel roof, and another in Bommayarpalayam that uses a 'filler' slab roof."

With the two demonstration units in place, Satprem hopes that earth technology will find more favour and acceptance. "These technologies are appreciated by the top level manage-

ment, but the real challenge is finding support and acceptance where the work is being implemented."

"The main reason for the low popularity of CSEB technology is the labour-intensive nature of the work, and the process needs trained and skilled workers," explains Satprem. To train end-users in earth technology skills, the Earth Institute has since its beginning, been offering hands-on seminars and workshops. "To date, about 4200 people from all over the world have passed through our training programmes," says Satprem.

After the tsunami, this educational component has taken on an even greater importance. "We offer a variety of courses from two-day beginners' sessions, to ten-day intensives including refresher and specialized courses," says Satprem. "On the completion of each course, we give certificates to the participants. This formal recognition empowers many of our trainees."

A very satisfying experience for Satprem was a workshop with a group of twenty women from the Kottakuppam Village Self Help Group. "These ladies wanted to learn how to make CSEBs so that it could be an additional economic activity within their group. They bought an Auram Press for their group, attended the workshop, and very soon started making blocks. And now we hear that they are selling earth blocks to building sites. What more empowerment could we have hoped for!"

Priya Sundaravalli



The unique pyramid-shaped Karneshwara Nataraja temple by the beach at Keezhputupet in Pudukkuppam, built by the Chairman of the Auroville Foundation, Dr. Karan Singh, was the first building that the Earth Institute rebuilt for its post-tsunami rehabilitation work. "The force of the wave affected the foundation so we first had to strengthen it," says Satprem. The team used a metre deep base of earth blocks in the reconstruction work. The work is nearing completion.

Passage to India

What does it mean for those left behind when a family member moves to Auroville? This article, written a few years ago by Carol Kort, the sister of Roy from Aurodam, gives an indication.

This year, once again, I will be having a Hanukkah party that my brother Roy will not attend. When he was twenty, my brother dropped out of college and left his comfortable, middle-class surroundings in suburban New Jersey to live in an international community in India. As a student of music and art, Roy was propelled into the psychedelic drug culture popular in the early 1970s. Fortunately he didn't want to self-destruct, as a few of his friends had, and so when his Sanskrit teacher suggested he consider moving to Auroville, a spiritual community in southern India, he applied for a passport. Perhaps an even more salient reason for his sudden sojourn to India was his quest for a meaningful spiritual life.

Like many young assimilated Jews at that time, Roy was attracted to eastern religions, in part because of his disappointment with his own birth religion.

What did being Jewish mean to him? I suspect, for the most part, it meant attending Hebrew school three times weekly to learn a difficult, useless language that made no sense to him. And all that work was in preparation for a Bar Mitzvah (the ceremony in which one assumes the obligations and privileges of an adult Jew), to be followed by a big splashy party, neither of which he wanted! Not exactly the stuff of which spiritual fantasies are made.

When Roy left for Auroville, which describes itself as an experimental "universal town belonging to nobody in particular, where men and women from all countries are able to live in peace and progressive harmony, above all creeds, all politics and all nationalities," my parents were terribly alarmed. But they assumed that their prodigal son would return home once he had gotten the Indian *mishagas*

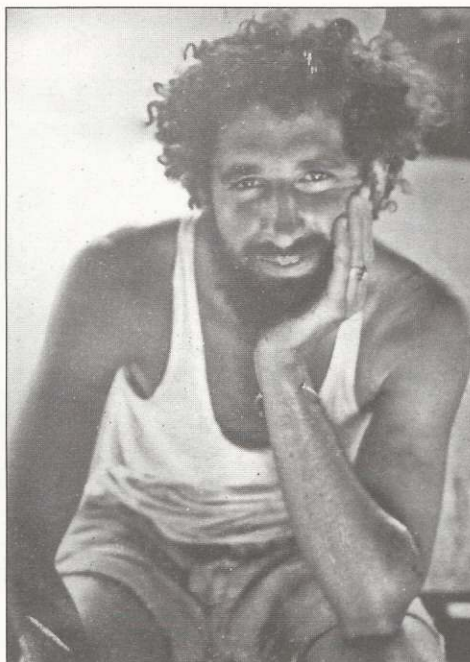
(craziness) out of his system.

That was thirty-two years ago. Roy still lives in Auroville, named after his guru and its founder, Sri Aurobindo, an Indian revolutionary who became a yogi, philosopher, poet, and mystic. Mirra Richard, also known as The Mother, founded Auroville as an international cultural township. Today, more than 1,800 Aurovilians live and work together in settlements surrounding the ashram. What they have in common is the "spiritual pursuit of a higher level of human existence".

At times it seemed that The Mother was more important to Roy than our mother – though he loved her very much as well. Instead of spending the holidays with his Jewish relatives in New Jersey or Florida, Roy has an extended family in Auroville, including his wife Gillian, a non-Jewish Australian craftswoman and astrologist.

Ironically, Roy is not the only one in our family to have experienced communal life, where residents contribute their skill and labour in return for room and board. My husband and I spent a year on a kibbutz near Haifa. I never expected living in Israel would affect me as much as it did. I returned to America with a profound appreciation of Israel and what it meant to be Jewish. Shortly thereafter I had children, and they, too, have strong Jewish identities. Although I attend a Reform temple, and only rarely, I am most definitely a Jew.

My brother's "kibbutz" in India has enabled him to feel he is helping to shape a new society, one in which spirituality plays a major role. I can see how valuable his stay in India has been: Roy has evolved from a frustrated, frenetic child – a lost soul – into a content, gentle adult. Through prayer, meditation,



Roy, ca 1973

and study, as well as a loving marriage to someone who shares his lifestyle and beliefs, Roy seems to have found inner peace and God. But he is most definitely not a Jew.

While I am happy for my brother, I sometimes have trouble with his repudiation of his Jewish roots. For one thing, we disagree strongly about Israel. In India, Roy gets most of his information from pro-Palestinian sources. Also, Roy has been separated from Jewishness – holidays, humour, food, history – for so long that when we do get together, I no longer relate to him as my "Jewish brother." His "otherness" feels odd and alienating.

For example, I know that Christmas is very important to his wife Gillian; as a couple they celebrate the holiday in a big way, but they do nothing to celebrate Hanukkah. I also know

Roy practices certain Native American traditions and rituals, in addition to prayers inspired by his guru. In other words, Roy's spirituality, at least in practice, seems to combine aspects of Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Native Americanism – but no Judaism.

I wish Roy could see that being a Jew now is very different from what he remembers at the stodgy, rigid Hebrew school he was forced to attend. He would like the healing services and the New Age aspects of Reform Judaism. I am sorry he didn't come to my daughters' Bat Mitzvahs: I think he would have enjoyed the personalized, multifaceted ceremonies that combined poetry, music, and family participation. In fact, at one of them, a friend stood on the bimah (podium) and read a passage by Sri Aurobindo in Roy's honour, and in his absence.

I am also sad that he has missed our jovial, modernized *seders* (ritual meals) and festive Hanukkah parties. I think he and his wife would have had fun, and that perhaps Roy might have embraced at least some aspects of his Jewish identity. But ... perhaps not. He is far away, physically and spiritually, and that often leaves me feeling like I don't really have a brother. Yet I admire his decision to aspire to a life of contemplation and self-development.

It hasn't always been easy, for him or for me, but he seems to have found his spiritual place on earth. It isn't centered in Jerusalem, "City of Gold," but rather in Auroville, which means "City of Dawn."

Carol Kort

Carol Kort co-edited two books on parenting and is the author of *American Women Writers* and co-author of *American Women in the Visual Arts*. She has also written books for the Boston Symphony Orchestra and articles for *The New York Times Education Life Magazine* and *The Boston Sunday Globe Magazine*.

LETTER

Is 'almost vegetarian' for a day enough?

When I received my latest edition of Auroville Today, I sat down with a cup of tea to enjoy the read. It is my quiet hour that connects me back to my spiritual home and I look forward to it every month. When I read about Auroville's Earth Day celebrations it made me smile until I read that almost all the restaurants of Auroville agreed, for one day, to serve vegetarian food only. I know this was supposed to make me think, 'Wow, that's great that they are making such an effort for Earth Day' but on the contrary it made me sad and, I have to admit, angry. Let's leave the spiritual implications of meat production and consumption out of it for a moment. Carel from Auroville Today stated that serving vegetarian food puts 'much less pressure on the environment than meat production'. Shouldn't a town that prides itself on its organic produce and eco-friendly ethics take this into consideration more than once a year? It really made me wonder whether Aurovilians are so attached to their meat that even giving it up for one day was too difficult as 'almost all' the Aurovillian restaurants served vegetarian food for Earth Day. What does 'almost' mean? As I was not there, I can only imagine that a meat haven was left on Earth Day for those Aurovilians who couldn't manage without their fix.

As you may have gathered, I am a vegetarian. But contrary to what you may think, I am not a militant vegetarian and I don't have a problem with meat consumption in moderation.

I do, however, think that it is over-consumed worldwide and disastrously affecting the environment. I did notice when I was last in Auroville that the menus of most of the restaurants or cafés were at least half-meat oriented if not leaning more towards meat dishes. In London, where I live, I have a much more eclectic and exciting array of vegetarian eateries available to me than in Auroville (a supposedly vegetarian-friendly town). In the UK more and more people are becoming vegetarian and every restaurant, pub and café (even in the most remote areas) has a vegetarian section or options. I thought that Auroville was supposed to be leading the way in eco-mindedness and conscious food production, not following the rest of the world. As an Auroville born child, I am fiercely proud of Auroville and what it has become and I do recognize the abundant innovations that have come out of Auroville. However it seems to me that in food preparation Auroville is at risk of being left behind by the rest of the world. Perhaps Auroville's wonderfully creative energy could be channeled towards making more appetizing, protein-rich and satisfying vegetarian meals so that more people will be enticed to choose vegetarian. Auroville is blessed with an abundance of fresh organic produce and products and could easily be a leader in delicious vegetarian food if more people demanded it.

I have to address the issue of consciousness as it applies to food. We all know that meat carries a heavy

vibration and Mother has said that when we consume meat, the energy of that animal can be transferred to us. Sadhana is a bumpy road at the best of times; I wonder why we choose to add to our troubles by constantly consuming lower vibrations? Are not Aurovilians supposed to be the champions of a new world, a more conscious society? I am afraid to even ask where the meat consumed in Auroville comes from. Is it killed in a conscious way, with respect and thanks to Mother Nature? Or does it carry with it the fear, anguish, pain and absolute terror of death?

I have one more comment about this issue. Auroville has many thousands of visitors each year, and most of them are eager to learn about a new and more conscious way of living. These visitors usually encounter only the Visitor's Center and may stay at one of Auroville's guest houses. During my recent stay in Auroville, I was struck by the comments of guests who were 'very surprised' to see meat served. Shouldn't Auroville provide a glimpse into the Ideal for guests? I was told that meat is served because guests request it. Of the many guests I spoke to, no one would have minded vegetarian food during their visit, in fact they expected it. When I am asked about Auroville, I sing its praises but I have to admit that when food comes in to the conversation, I find it difficult to keep up my enthusiasm.

Dr. Auromira Parks
Naturopathic Doctor
London

TRANSPORT

Pedals or petrol?

Two-wheelers are the most popular personal transport in Auroville. Even if people can afford four-wheelers financially, they are too costly in other ways and walking takes too long. That's easy but how do you choose between leg and engine power?

Let's contemplate the pros and cons. Compared with most towns, Auroville is ideal for cycling. We have no hills, little heavy traffic and it's only 5 km from one side of the Greenbelt to the other. A delightful network of quiet roads and cycle paths thread through sun-dappled green forest. Cyclists pedal peacefully in near silence, appreciating the scene that rolls by, sheltered from sun and wind. Time enough to enjoy inner silence and fresh air. Meanwhile the engine-powered brigade experience the engine's strident insistence, clatter of chain, smell of petrol, oil and hot exhaust – got to get there sooner!

As if these immediate sensations aren't enough, cyclists rest easy with their consciences by having minimal environmental impact, being humbler and creating less dust (so less surface wear). All that while being safer, healthier and saving money.

Despite the obvious pleasures and purity of pedals many people choose engines and not only the physically ailing who have little choice. Perhaps there's another way of looking at it ...

Throttle-twisters speed effortlessly on their way, covering distance quickly. Their engines take the load of heavy luggage and they cut an impressive dash, astride perhaps their *Caliber*, *Passion*, *Spirit* or *Splendour*. Aboard there's always a cooling breeze. Suspension smoothes the bumps for two or more as easily as



one. Headlamps cut through the dark. But who is this sorry figure coming the other way? The cyclist's gasping lungs breathe clouds of dust. Sweat drips from every pore and harsh surfaces jar the bones; blinded he pulls to the side.

It might be healthy to propel yourself but it's hard work, too. It's such hard work that it affects work and life choices. Not for the bicyclist a quick trip into Pondy before lunch at Ganesh Bakery then into the office at Aurelec followed by dance at Vérité, dinner at an ECR restaurant and back home to Aurodam.

Rising income, for those lucky enough to be enjoying it, has created the option of abandoning pedals for petrol. Increasingly people are opting for petrol and decreasingly this means the humble moped. This decision puts a higher value on personal freedom, convenience and "time saving" than it gives to the planet, ethics and "time-relishing".

Charles

Hitler and his God

"I cannot explain Hitler; I think the mystics have something to say in the question" reflected historian Alan Bullock. A new book takes the hint.

Whole libraries have been written about Hitler and Nazi Germany. Yet many of the best-known historians agree that he remains an enigma. How was this ex-soldier from the First World War – once even contemptuously compared to 'a worn-out stray dog looking for a master' – able to become, in a few years, the leader and messiah of the German people? How could a non-entity turn into a seer and a politician who accomplished feats deemed impossible, such as wiping out the humiliation of the Versailles Treaty, rebuilding a prostrate Germany, unifying the country in an efficient war machine and becoming known, if only temporarily, as a great statesman? How could a nobody unleash the most destructive and deadliest war humanity has ever known? How was it possible that a man considered evil and demonic even by his entourage could remain the head of the German state?

In *Hitler and his God - The Background to the Hitler Phenomenon*, author Georges van Vrekhem deals with these questions.

"I chose to write this book because of Sri Aurobindo's and The Mother's involvement in this war," says Van Vrekhem. "In my earlier book *Beyond Man - The Life and Work of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother*, I had written a chapter about it, but as the main theme was different, I had no opportunity to properly research this aspect of their work. But had I known what it would involve, I might have chosen a different topic." He refers to the 3½ years of study, the more than 500 books he read in five different languages, and the 1½ years he spent writing a text of more than 1500 pages and then reducing it to the present book's 700. Recalls Van Vrekhem, "This was one of the most difficult periods of my life, living day in day out in the presence of Hitler, of concentration camps and demonic deeds, of torture and war. In these five years I had many nightmares."

Hitler and his God has four themes. The first describes the conditions prevailing in Germany after its defeat in the First World War: the longing for a better world; the desperate search for a Leader; the German ambition and racism; the romantic movements such as the 'Order of the

Germanic people'; the history of the German Jews; the roots of Nazism; and the mushrooming of secret occult and spiritualist societies.

A second theme deals with Hitler himself – the development of his mediumistic capacities, the role of the Thule society and that of Hitler's mentor, Dietrich Eckhart – the anti-semite who was probably the only one who really knew what, or rather who, was driving his 'pupil' and who said, towards the end of his life: "Follow Hitler. He will dance, but it is I who wrote the tune. We have given him the means to communicate with Them."

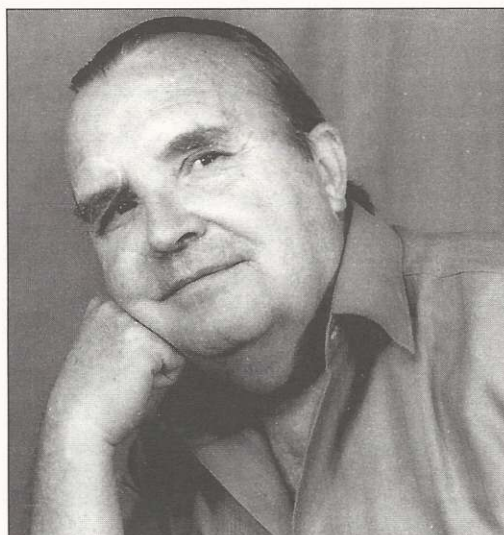
The third theme is Hitler's possession by a vital power, an 'Asuric' being which called itself 'The Lord of the Nations, Master of the Earth', and how meticulously he followed that being's inspirations – which Hitler had written down in *Mein Kampf*, the book that laid bare his thoughts and intentions.

The final theme deals with Sri Aurobindo and The Mother and shows that what they were saying and predicting during the Second World War far away in Pondicherry, with no other source of information than the BBC radio and their own spiritual powers, has proven to be historically correct.

"To write a book about the Second World War that highlights Sri Aurobindo's and The Mother's role and deals with the occult influence behind Hitler, is a daunting job," says Van Vrekhem. "You run the risk of being called an idiot. Usually, historians tend to ignore the occult aspects of historic phenomena, even though they can't give answers to the 'why'. In the case of Nazi Germany, the role of historians in this respect has been made extra difficult, as we know that during the post-war trials of the International Tribunal in Nuremberg much material related to the influence of esoteric thought on national Socialism and the Nazi hierarchy was deliberately suppressed and was subsequently 'lost'. Perhaps as a consequence, many of the existing books that try to give 'occult' explanations for the Hitler phenomenon are based on pure fantasy and disregard historical facts. For that reason I had to provide a very solid historical basis before I could point to the work of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother." He adds: "This was also necessary for the many devotees and disciples of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. Many of them know little about this war. They do not understand why Sri Aurobindo called it 'The Mother's War'; or why Sri Aurobindo and The Mother stated that they had to interrupt their own work for the entire duration of the war to prevent humanity falling back into an age of barbarism; or why Sri Aurobindo compared this war to the legendary Battle of Kurukshetra."

On the sidelines, *Hitler and his God* deals with the demonic work of Hitler's underlings under the diabolical influence of Hitler, or rather, of the Asura that possessed him. That Hitler was a demon was evident even to many in Hitler's entourage, but few people knew how to protect themselves and most followed him slavishly. Most illustrative is the eye-witness account of what happened after Hitler's suicide in his Berlin bunker: "A great and heavy cloud seemed to roll away from the spirits of the bunker-dwellers. There was dance. The mood had completely changed." The instrument stopped functioning, the spell dropped off; the asuric influence vanished.

Towards the end of the book two chapters highlight an opposition: one deals Hitler's vision, the other



In August this year the Governor of West Bengal announced that the prestigious *Sri Aurobindo Puraskar* 2006 for a work in the English language had been awarded to Georges van Vrekhem. The award, initiated in 1997 on the occasion of the 125th Birth Centenary of Sri Aurobindo by the Sri Aurobindo Bhavan, Calcutta, will be given in October.

one with Sri Aurobindo's. They show that Hitler's vision was the black shadow of Sri Aurobindo's.

Hitler saw himself as the announcer and initiator of a new era in human history. It was his intention to create a race of supermen who were to be the lords of a new world; their domination would be global; they would no longer be subject to feelings or emotions and act in a superior and ruthless way towards the lesser races. They would consider war as their element, death as a glorification, taking pride in violence and cruelty. Sri Aurobindo's vision was that of a new race initiating the transformation of the human race into a race of higher beings he also called 'supermen', but who would be conscious instruments of the Divine. His work consisted in realising a higher form of consciousness, 'The Supermind', and bringing it down into matter so that it might create a new, higher species. This was the work which was interrupted by the Second World War, and which came to fruition in 1956, when The Mother declared that 'A new world is born.'

In the book's concluding chapter, Van Vrekhem writes about the events immediately after the Second World War, when the fate of the world was still in the balance. He describes the Second World War as one phase of the Great Twentieth Century War, which itself was the result of the changes in humanity preparing to take it a leap forward in its evolution. "The world is now subject to an enormous confusion. The cause, however, is the fact that humanity is becoming one for the first time in its existence."

Carel

Georges van Vrekhem
Hitler & his God - The Background to the Hitler phenomenon. Rupa & Co, 700 pages, Rs 395
The book can be ordered from info@rupabooks.com, in the USA through aviny@aviusa.org



BOOK FAIR

Children's Book Fair

A society evolves first from a material stage of development, when it is concerned to fulfil the physical needs of the populace, to a vital stage of development where its preoccupation is fulfilling its social and emotional needs. After these two stages it enters a mental stage of development when there is a craving for knowledge. This stage could be seen at the recent Children's Book Fair at the Tamil Heritage Centre in Bharat Nivas where a large number of second generation students studying in the Tamil schools in Auroville and in the villages around it came to browse through and buy books.

Meenakshi organized the week-long Fair which exhibited books from twenty different publishers. She created a friendly and caring atmosphere. She provided chairs for children to sit and read, played recorded traditional instrumental music

and provided snacks and refreshments. She also recited poems by the famous Tamil poet, Bharathi, and explained their meaning.

Books costing from Rs.1 to Rs. 500 were on display; most of the Tamil books cost only Rs.6-8. Manivel from the primary section of Isai Ambalam School remarked, "Akka, all the 1330 Kural poems cost just Rs.6. How can the publishers afford such a low price?" A teacher from this school remarked: "Only yesterday we were talking about learning to create web pages and here is a book in Tamil explaining how to do it!"

An 11-year old student from Pavendar English Medium School in Alankuppam wanted to buy a 7-rupee book which he liked very much, but he had only five rupees. He approached Meenakshi with this problem. She asked him, "Is it possible to get these two rupees somehow?" He looked around and saw



Leafing through the books at the Children's Book Fair

that puffed rice was scattered over the floor. He took up a broom and tidied up. Of course, he got his 7-rupee book! A 9-year old girl in school uniform was buying a Tamil book with the title 'Love Letters'!

On noticing Meenakshi's curious look, she pointed to a 11-year old girl and shyly said: "I am going to present this book to the elder sister of that girl!"

Kavitha

In brief

Sri Aurobindo's path of yoga

An exhibition of both rare and well-known photographs of Sri Aurobindo was held at the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture. The exhibition followed the path of Sri Aurobindo's yoga as he described it in *Savitri*. Amongst the rare photographs were those taken by Cartier-Bresson in 1950 that were not made public. The exhibition was enhanced with a display of some of Sri Aurobindo's personal effects loaned by Srismriti, the Mother's Museum in the Ashram, and copies of some of Sri Aurobindo's writings loaned by the Ashram Archives.

Integral Yoga Retreat

A one-week Integral Yoga retreat was organized in Vérité in order to help participants contact an inner dimension. Fourteen Aurovilians, eight Ashramites and others who have been following the *Synthesis of Yoga* classes at Savitri Bhavan gathered with Sraddhalu in an atmosphere of concentration and consecration, and practised accessing the peace, vastness and love of the Divine.

Thamarai

"Thamarai" (meaning 'lotus' in Tamil) is the name given to the learning and cultural centre that, with help of the German Breuninger Foundation, is being established in Edayanchavady Village. Inspired by the Mohanam Cultural Centre in Sanjeev Nagar, Thamarai will be a place in the centre of Edayanchavady where women, children and families can come together to learn and develop themselves in multiple ways in a safe and enhancing environment. A traditional 130 year old Tamil house is being renovated to provide the base for the activities of this centre.

Future School Investment Group

With an initial contribution of Rs.10 lakh the Investment Group of Future School has been set up to learn how to fund small businesses and services. The group is advised by its teachers Ulli Blass and Vikram. The Group works on the basis of the Mother's statement that, "Money is not meant to bring money but to help the earth to prepare for the advent of the new creation." Any amounts provided are considered as grants from Auroville to the unit, enabling the unit to increase its contribution to Auroville in kind, cash, or by creating work-places for Aurovilians.

AurovilleArts.com

An AurovilleArts.com website is being created to improve international awareness of Auroville and its artists, promote the development of new art forms and create a more unified community of artists. The site will include online galleries for each artist, an auction site, a shopping cart for art purchases, an artists' forum and blog spaces, an event calendar, critiques, essays and more.

Nakashima's birth centenary

May 24th marked the 101st birthday of George Nakashima, the Japanese wood worker who crafted Peace Tables, one for each continent. On the occasion of Nakashima's birth centenary, AVI USA printed a brochure about the future home of the Peace Table for Asia in the Hall of Peace at the Unity Pavilion in Auroville. A copy can be ordered from aviny@aviusa.org

Govindappa Venkataswamy

On July 7th, 2006, eminent ophthalmologist Dr. Govindappa Venkataswamy passed away in Madurai following a brief illness. He was 87.

Dr. Venkataswamy was well-known in Auroville. As a devotee of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother he often came to meditate at the Matrimandir, and also promoted Auroville whenever possible. When the decision was taken to build a new eye hospital in Thavalakkuppam, halfway between Cuddalore and Pondicherry, he chose 'Auroservice d'Auroville' with Suhasini's collaboration to design the building and asked Auroville's Centre for Scientific Research to contribute to the design of its waste water treatment plant. This hospital was inaugurated by his long time friend Dr. Abdul Kalam, President of India. The entrance hall is marked by two marble statues, of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, and a beautifully crafted golden lotus – made with the same gold-glass tiles that have been used for the Matrimandir discs.

Dr. Venkataswamy's story is one of persistence in the face of great difficulties. He began his career as an obstetrician, but changed his medical speciality to ophthalmology after severe rheumatoid arthritis badly crippled his hands and body. Though for a year he was bedridden and could not hold anything nor sit up, he trained himself slowly to hold the knife and cut the eye for cataract operations – no mean feat as only his ring finger functioned normally and, as he said, "severe pain has been my companion since then and has never left

me." Despite this physical challenge, he found that he was capable of the delicate procedures required for eye surgery. Since he became an ophthalmologist, he performed more than 100,000 successful eye operations.

Dr. Venkataswamy served as a doctor in the Indian Army. Afterwards, he spent many years at the Madurai Medical College, a government school, where he eventually became head of the department of ophthalmology. In the course of his work he made many important discoveries about the health of the eye, and pioneered national programs to eradicate the blindness that is so prevalent throughout India. One of his most notable innovations has been the establishment of mobile eye camps that travel to rural villages to examine villagers' eyes, to diagnose and treat their diseases, and in many cases to distribute corrective eyeglasses right on the spot – all free of charge.

But his main contribution was in creating the Aravind Eye Hospitals that were built in many places in south India. In 1976 he had started a non-profit public charities trust with one lakh rupees of his own. Under this trust the Aravind Eye Hospital at Madurai was built in the name of Sri Aurobindo, initially with only ten beds. Today it has grown into the biggest eye hospital in the world. Its unique fee structure is arranged so that a third of its patients who can afford to pay for services subsidize the two-thirds who cannot. Over 250,000 major eye operations are done in a year, and over two-thirds of them are free for the poor. Poor villagers in the rural areas are screened in their villages by the hos-

pital doctors and technicians, and people who are in need of surgery are transported free of charge to the hospital, given free food, free operations, free spectacles and transported for free back to their homes.

In recent years more hospitals have been built, in Theni, Tirunelveli, Coimbatore and Thavalakkuppam. These hospitals rank among the most efficient eye-care institutions in the world and have been designated as Centres of Excellence by the World Health Organization. They offer observation and training facilities for medical residents and fellows from around the world, from the USA as well as from neighbouring countries. Additionally, Aravind helps neighbouring countries – Sri Lanka, Nepal, Maldives, Burma, Indonesia – by sending its senior staff there and by bringing their eye specialists to Aravind for training.

The name Aravind denotes the spiritual aspiration that was at the basis of Dr. Venkataswamy's work. He had darshan of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother on April 24, 1950. Though, as he recalled, "that day Sri Aurobindo did not make any sort of impact upon me worth remembering," he gradually became involved. He offered his services to the Mother as an eye doctor, treating many ashramites and became a devotee. Asked once about his tremendous energy notwithstanding his physical handicap, he replied that he felt "as if I'm being pushed and guided by the Mother." His personal experience combined with his spiritual aspiration guided the hospitals. As he said, "At Aravind we are deeply interested in getting people to pursue spiritual practices. The idea for the institute was that it would be an opportunity for us to bring about the happy marriage between spiritual consciousness and

modern technology – that is the challenge we face today." Leaders not only need to be well-trained in epidemiology, biostatistics, health planning, operations research, health education, and social marketing, but also need to have an interest in spiritual practice – the awakening to the inner reality of one's self so that one can turn into a new being.

Each Eye Hospital therefore has a meditation room; the one in Madurai has the Relics of Sri Aurobindo. Though there is no compulsion for anybody to use them, staff and patients regularly visit the meditation rooms. These meditation rooms, and the desire of Aravind's senior staff members for divine guidance, have created an atmosphere of spiritual influence in the hospitals.

Dr. Venkataswamy's leadership and compassionate spirit were recognized in his being awarded a number of honours, among them the

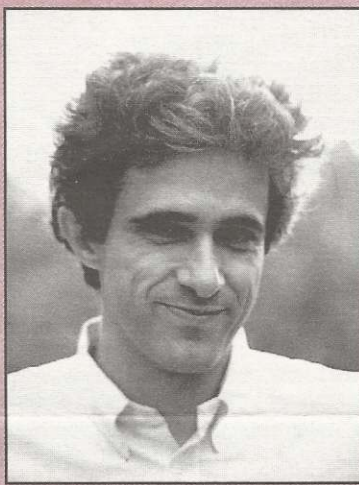


PHOTO COURTESY ARAVIND EYE HOSPITAL

Padma Sri Award from the Government of India, the Helen Keller International Award presented at the United Nations, the Time-Life Service Award from the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness and the Hall of Fame award from the American society of Cataract and Refractive Surgery.

Carel

Petit Patrice



Patrice in the 1980's

Patrice Marot, a Frenchman who lived some ten years in Auroville during its early days, died on June 29th in Paris. He was 50 years old. Patrice lived in Aspiration and later in Certitude with his partner Rose. They left Auroville towards the end of the eighties and moved to Mysore, where they worked for more than twenty years as representatives of Mira Aditi, the Indian affiliate of the French Institut de Recherches Évolutives, which sells the Agenda and other books of Satprem.

On July 11th, a small ceremony was held for him by his family and friends, in Langon, near Bordeaux.

PHOTO COURTESY FABIENNE

Wil van Vliet



ple around in early Auroville. Afterwards, even though relations between the Ashram and Auroville became strained for some years, her love and enthusiasm for Auroville never wavered. She closely followed the developments and was always happy to meet with Auroville friends over tea at Golconde, where she was living.

In later years Wil's energies shifted to translating work. Her translations of a selection of Sri Aurobindo's letters, of The Mother's Conversations 1929, 1950-1951 and 1953 and of Pavitra's The Future Evolution of Man were well-received by a small and grateful reading public in The Netherlands. She also played a major role in publishing "A Captive of Her Love", a book that contains the correspondence and paintings of the Polish Ashramite Janina Stoka.

In recent years Wil lived in virtual retirement. After residing in Golconde for countless years she moved to 'Care', a home for older Ashramites. It was increasingly difficult to communicate with her – as if, perhaps, problems of a past were being worked out. That she may have succeeded was felt by a close friend who visited Wil a few weeks before she left her body: 'Her face was luminous, her psychic was fully in front.'

Carel

R. Kovalan



PHOTO COURTESY KOVALAN'S FAMILY

Kovalan, 31, passed away in a road accident between Thiruvannamalai and Tindivanam, on June 9th.

Manoj recalls:

It was somewhere at the end of the year 2000 that I met Kovalan for the first time," writes Manoj. I was looking for a programmer to create the first interactive AVnet. Until then, AVnet was a simple static website providing information on various things, largely keeping up

with the AV News. When I was invited to design the first interactive AVnet I knew nothing about databases and programming and I had to find someone who was knowledgeable in these areas. At that time Kovalan was already working with AuroNet and I was told that he was learning programming. So I approached him, a shy, self-taught young man with a gentle smile, who showed great enthusiasm to take up the work. But there was one problem; he had never done work of that complexity. Nor did I know about how to design an interactive site. So we were a good match, typical of the Auroville adventure.

We worked for months to figure out the intricacies of the task ahead. My task was to define the functional requirements of the software and design the user interfaces while his was to make it all work.

I found Kovalan to be very receptive and open to experiment. He was an excellent team mate. At the time he had not joined Auroville but he already had a very deep devotion to the Mother. It was a great joy to see him consciously working for Her.

We launched the site on 1st of January 2002. What we thought to be the end proved to be the beginning. As people started 'interacting' with the website, many challenges came up. Kovalan stayed on red alert for months, ironing out troubles and dealing with the never-ending demand for new features.

The site Kovalan created lived for 18 months. It gave us invaluable experience for the next generation AVnet (the current one), which was created with the help of Turtle Technologies programmers using Open Source software.

Meanwhile Kovalan became a Newcomer, got married, and eventually left for France to learn more about life. But he kept in touch with Auroville through AVnet and occasionally gave me various suggestions for improvement.

These days my chat list shows Kovalan offline; he has not logged in. To think that he will no more pop up in my chat window is still difficult to believe.

I have to remove his entry from my list but the thought hurts and I resist.

Subscription information

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