

Auroville Today

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MAIN ISSUE: Auroville and its neighbours Pages 1 and 4 - 5

- Auroville workers surveyed
- Welcoming centres from Tamil Nadu
- The progress of Women's Clubs



Auroville's international affiliations may not always have gone hand-in-hand with its regional networking but for the past decade, due to the widening radius of the township's socio-economic initiatives and a deeper interest in Tamil language, traditions and culture, a newer, more mutually beneficial relationship between Auroville and its neighbours is coming into being.

In this issue we examine Auroville's relationship with one of the oldest living cultures of the world, we cover the recent seminar which introduced Auroville to Tamil devotees of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, we reveal preliminary results from a unique survey of Auroville workers, and we provide an update on the progress of Women's Group in the local villages - initiatives that are forging a stronger tie and a common destiny between Auroville and the people who helped it all happen.

Why Tamil Nadu?

Meenakshi talks about the special relationship between Auroville and its home State

The Tamil Nadu-Auroville dream is not new. Long ago, even before I came to Auroville, the Tamil Nadu State government had put some efforts into creating a Tamil Academy inside Bharat Nivas. The then Chief Minister, Mr. Karunanidhi, and the great Tamil Scholar Navalar Nedunchezhiyan were both behind this project that was going to benefit the international community in Auroville and provide a link with Tamil Nadu. At that time, there was an idea to have separate pavilions for the various States, and the present Laboratory of Evolution was the ex-Tamil pavilion. So this is the background we are starting from; and all we have done is to revive an idea by giving it a new shape and structure.

In 1993, on the 25th anniversary of Auroville, Varadarajan, Subhash and I got together and brought out the first brochure on Auroville in Tamil. That was a turning point - to bring Tamil publications from Auroville about Auroville by Aurovilians. This brochure was special in that it was an original work, not translated from English or French. It covered a wide variety of topics such as Sri Aurobindo, The Mother, Auroville and its Charter, India and Auroville, and Tamil Nadu and Auroville, and was shared in a public forum.

We have all done a lot of research on why Auroville is in Tamil Nadu. The Mother too, chose the physical site of Auroville with uncanny precision when so many other options were available that were more beautiful and bountiful. Maybe the reason is not given clearly, but from Sri Aurobindo's writings and the Mother's talks we realized that they often refer to the great work of the

Siddhas (wandering saints of Tamil Nadu) done in the land of the Tamils. Mother was fascinated by Saint Ramalinga Vallalar of Vadalur, who apparently achieved the transformation of the body. In Sri Aurobindo's time, Bhagawan Ramana was in Thiruvannamalai living in Arunachala, which was discovered to be geologically one of the oldest rocks on earth. So we are in the oldest land, surrounded by the works of the Siddhas, Alvars, and Nayanmars, many of whose works have been



Lighting lamps at the Tamil Heritage Centre

praised by Sri Aurobindo.

There is something very special about this place; otherwise Auroville could not have sprung up here. Poppo has discovered an ancient civilization right below us dating back 3000 years old. Materials from the excavations suggest that a pastoral community may have lived in this area, and they were probably the first settlers. Mother talks about the people native to this area as the 'first citizens' of Auroville. She also goes on to say that Auroville is not a Tamil village, and the residents of Auroville have to strive to be 'True Aurovilians'.

When I came here twenty five years ago, the feeling here and in Pondicherry was that the Tamil people are the working class, and that the Tamil lan-

guage belongs to the servants. So at the time, there was no existing medium to talk about the language of the people living here or about their culture. Slowly we gathered historical anecdotes relating to this geographical area, and over a period of years, we were able to tell the Tamil people about their rich heritage and culture.

Now there is much happening towards reaching out to the local Tamil people living in and around Auroville. A journal in Tamil has been in circulation within Auroville for the past six years, and Auroville News appears in Tamil. More recently, a Tamil Heritage Centre has also come into existence. Some may question the need for this Centre when there is already the Centre for Indian Culture. But Tamil culture is one of the oldest known living cultures, and there is the need to link the Tamil population living across the globe. There is an idea now to make Bharatipuram, which exists within the Auroville City region, into a living Tamil Heritage Village. Thus slowly we find meaning to our presence here and integrate with the people native to this area.

The Auroville-Tamil Nadu seminar (see below) has come about in this environment. Research at Auroville has to be taken both within and without, and a seminar such as this is only an extension of our initial efforts at reaching out. There is a great need for links and communications from Auroville with the people of Tamil Nadu. In this seminar, we invited people who were already familiar with the teachings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, and therefore invited people associated with the Sri Aurobindo Centres in various districts of Tamil Nadu. One of the aims of this seminar was to introduce Auroville and provide correct information about it, thereby clearing any misconceptions. A more philosophical goal of this seminar was to unify the different Sri-Aurobindo Centres, some of which have serious differences of opinions, and perhaps pave the way for a new unity or a Tamil Charter. Ultimately, our responsibility is to slowly make people realize that we are Karma Yogis here in Auroville, and that we give the utmost importance to our work.

Narrated to Priya Sundaravalli

Presenting Auroville to the Tamil People

Outreach efforts through a one day seminar

February 22nd, 2003 was a special day for a group of Tamilians visiting Auroville. For many of these visitors, it was their very first time in Auroville and for all of them it was their first close interaction with Aurovilians. They were attending a day long seminar on the topic of Auroville and Tamil Nadu.

The seminar was the brainchild of Syamala, and it came about when she was on a trip to the Baroda Maharaja's Palace in Udhagamandalam (Ooty), one of the few places that Sri Aurobindo had visited in Tamil Nadu. Syamala felt that on the 125th birth anniversary of the Mother, it would be special to gather like-minded people

from all across Tamil Nadu and present a seminar on Auroville in Auroville. This would be significant since many people outside Auroville experience bhakti (devotion) towards the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, but have little understanding of Auroville. The idea was enthusiastically received by others, and found support from the Centre of Indian Culture which sponsored the event.

The primary focus of this seminar was to introduce the people of Tamil Nadu to Auroville by presenting what Auroville is and what the residents are attempting to realize here.

A call for participants sent to the various Sri Aurobindo Centres across

Tamil Nadu drew a deluge of over 500 eager applicants. Varadarajan who was not surprised with this overwhelming response, says, "Many Indians perceive Auroville as the Mother's creation, and therefore it is seen as important and sacred. So there is already an inner relationship with Auroville." However, only 80 individuals could be hosted due to the inability to accommodate such a large group and the limited finances available.

Delegates came from big cities like Madurai, Thiruchirappalli, Erode, and small towns. They also came from Pondicherry and from within Auroville and the surrounding villages.

Participants gathered the evening before the seminar to attend an orientation and informally meet each other. "We arranged for them to stay at the Youth Hostel," says Auroyogi. "This gave them the opportunity to relate to each other before the events of the next day. Conversations went on very late into the night, with discussions on the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. Also ideas were exchanged about the functioning of the various Sri Aurobindo Centres with which they were associated."

The following day, the seminar had an auspicious beginning at the Tamil Heritage Centre with the lighting of 125 oil lamps to mark the birth anniversary of the Mother, followed

by a meditation and a silent consecration. The morning session was hosted at the Tibetan Pavilion where the delegates were introduced to Auroville by several Aurovilians. "For most of the delegates this was the first time they were listening to residents of Auroville speak about their work at Auroville, and what they are doing physically, psychologically, and mentally," says Meenakshi. "The fact that many of these speakers were Westerners was an eye-opener to them. They were impressed by that since they saw them as living examples or embodiments of the actual human unity mentioned in Auroville Charter."

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Following the seed

Annadana takes a new direction

The Annadana project, which occupies about four acres of the Botanical Gardens, was set up to promote the production, conservation and exchange of traditional varieties of vegetables. The initial intention was to 'broadcast' seeds of these varieties to organizations all over India to help, among other things, farmers regain access to genetic resources and to increase biodiversity as a means to eradicating malnutrition-but this was not a success. "Over the past two years," explains Stephane, the coordinator of Annadana, "we sent out around 100,000 packets of seeds to 40 different organizations, but while many people grew the vegetables, hardly anybody managed to save seeds, and this was the main purpose of the initiative."

Stephane realized that another approach was needed. "Many of the seeds we sent did not come to fruition, so I decided that this year, rather than just sending out many packets to many places, I would choose a few organizations and then follow the seed to ensure it was given the best chance."

Stephane chose four organizations-two organizations working in rural development in Tamil Nadu, and two Auroville organizations, Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG) and Pitchandikulam, which are working with villages in the Auroville bioregion. The idea was to provide workshops in Auroville which would train people from these organizations in bio-intensive farm-

ing, composting, sowing, transplantation and pollination, and bio-pest control. In addition, Stephane and his assistants visited the project sites several times to give hands-on advice.

"For most of the participants it was very new," says Stephane. "Our approach is to produce much more from a small plot. Basically we use the French bio-intensive method of cultivation with the addition of some local and traditional wisdom. The key

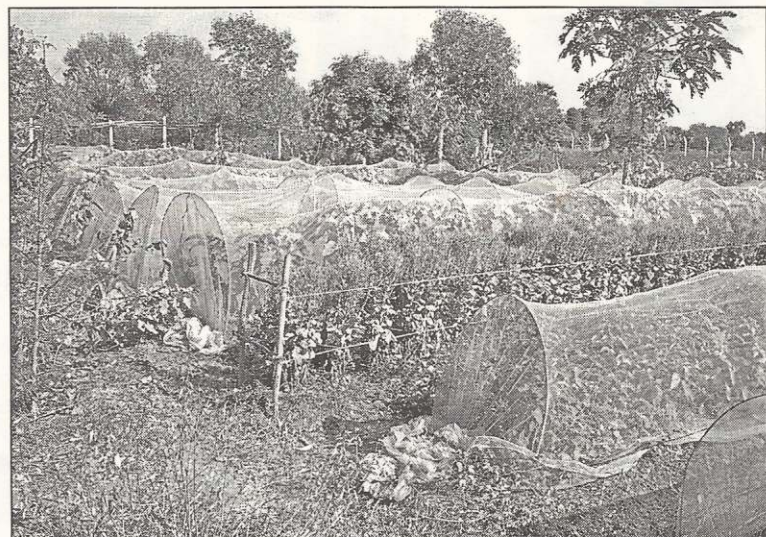
lic, onions, ginger) we use for pest control and the vermiwash (earthworm technology) which acts as a fertilizer. We also use Panchakavya, a preparation made from five products of the cow and known about since Vedic times, as a soil inoculant."

To begin with it's a lot of hard work. "Cultivating crops or vegetables is traumatic," explains Stephane, "because for some time there's little to show for all the effort: even when the crop is ready it can be wiped out by pests. And then, after harvesting, there is the challenge of restoring fertility to the soil." Stephane's solution to the latter problem is to scatter seeds of nitrogen and carbon-fixing crops (like millet, sorghum and leguminous plants like kulu) between the finished crop. The resulting biomass will be cut and returned to the soil to build up the fertility. "After a time there's no more digging. The plants do everything for you!"

Stephane plans to work with the four organizations for two more years. The second year will be spent in the intensive training of 1-2 technicians from each organization and in setting up model demonstration gardens and nurseries while, during the third year, the villagers covered by the projects will be encouraged to create their own home vegetable gardens.

But Auroville has not been neglected. This year Stephane has run similar workshops for Aurovilians and their workers, and there are now about ten highly-productive home gardens in Auroville.

In the past Stephane cultivated the Annadana plot with the intention of saving seed, but this year he also went



Part of the Annadana vegetable garden

into production. "By the end of this season I'll have sent about half a ton of tomatoes-of different varieties in all shapes and colours-to Pour Tous. That's between 20-30 kg a day, or about one third of the daily requirement. And all from a tiny plot. It shows that Auroville can easily be self-sufficient in vegetables for 5-6 months of the year. Next season, as a kind of demonstration, I want to put one acre under bio-intensive vegetable production. I reckon I'll be able to provide 80% of Auroville's tomato requirements for 2-3 months, all its capsicum and many other vegetables."

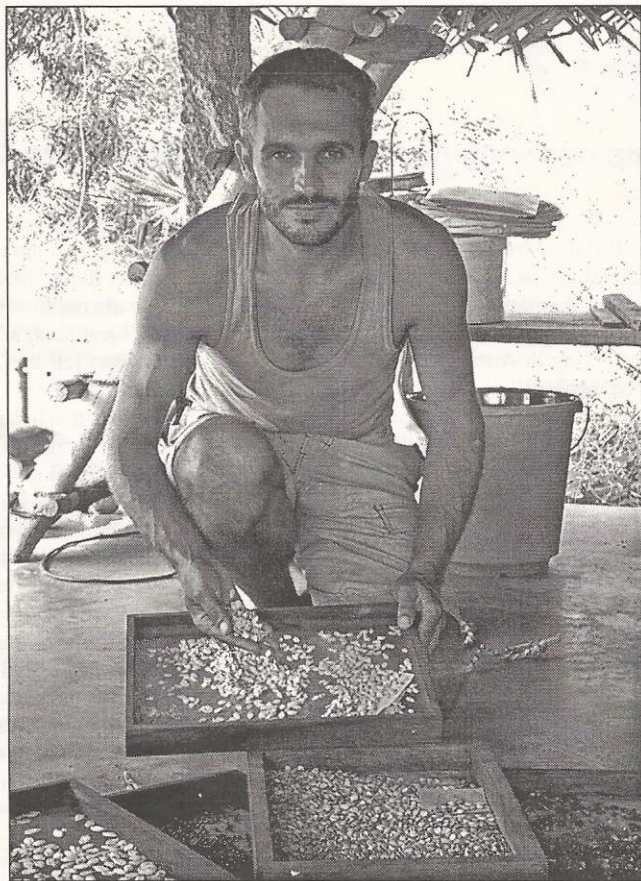
This sounds fine, but what about water usage? "The method we use produces between 4-6 times the usual crop while using four times less water. This is because our soil is rich in humus, and humus can hold seven times its weight in water. So the richer and deeper the soil the less water we require. According to available data, Aurovilians consume four times more water in irrigating their gardens than they do for household use. I estimate that for just a quarter of the water Aurovilians put on their ornamental plants Auroville can be self-sufficient in vegetables for six months of the year."

Auroville's enormous potential: it's a theme to which Stephane keeps returning. But last year he learned a hard lesson about how far we have yet to go in fulfilling it. "We decided to run a course in tropical agro-ecology

in Auroville. It's a fantastic idea: everything we need-the skills, knowledge, demonstration sites-is here. We enrolled ten foreign students, all post-graduates in agriculture. Yet, in spite of their enthusiasm, we ended up having to cut the course short. Why? Basically because, while Aurovilians undoubtedly have the knowledge, they have yet to put it in a form easily transferable to others. So sometimes the presentations were not clear enough or there was no back-up material to accompany them. Sometimes I couldn't even get hold of people who had promised to act as faculty! In other words, we just weren't ready. This has been a big lesson for me."

Stephane has now cut back his workforce to three Tamil workers and Mauricette, his faithful seed-banker. "The last two years most of the energy from Annadana has been flowing out of Auroville. This was the approach of Dominique-the founder of the organization, Kokopelli, which gave us huge financial support for the first two years-because he wanted the seeds of traditional varieties to be spread as quickly and as widely as possible. But it's a killing work if you receive so little in return. So now I feel a need to stand back, to first document our knowledge and help make Auroville self-sufficient in food, and to rebuild our seed stock. Once we've created a strong foundation - and if I can make it through the coming year financially! - we can start slowly spreading out again." *Alan*

Stephane with traditional varieties of seed



PERSONAL STORY

A new direction

Diane Bowler and her husband recently revisited Auroville, and made an important decision...

It must have been the smell of the night air at Chennai airport that did it for us; that dusty, dry, Indian aroma with hints of cow and spice and ash and fumes. And what clinched it was the sign held aloft, right in the middle of the heaving crowd, saying 'Norman and Diane-Mother's Travels-Auroville'. The gentle white Ambassador car drove us into the hot night for yet another 'holiday' in Auroville.

This was our third visit. On our previous visit, nine months before, we'd meditated in Matrimandir, listened to 'Savitri' in Savitri Bhavan and met many nice people, but we could not understand how Westerners could commit themselves to living here. Didn't they feel cut-off in this back of beyond? Didn't they miss the variety and comforts of Europe?

Anyway, here we were again and after a short, hot sleep on a hard bed with New Creation's howling dogs outside, after a hunt for Guest Passes and bicycles and after seeing a few familiar faces, we felt very happy. We were walking to Kulapalayam through the tamarind trees when my husband suddenly said, "Why don't we stay here for a long time? I feel

really good here." He is definitely not a creature of impulse so I quickly said, "Yes, yes, yes" and my heart jumped for joy.

Three months later we are Friends of Auroville and are discovering a new direction to our lives. We realize we've spent the last 45 years working and raising a family and now the last 20 years, God willing, can be spent creatively and spiritually in this sweet land. We'll keep our house in Bristol, England as we have four children, six grandchildren and elderly parents, and we'll probably continue to spend some time there every year. But I'd like to bring our children to Auroville some day and show them there's an alternative to scrambled lives in London and Los Angeles, that there are ideals and they can be lived out.

We first came to Auroville twenty five years ago on our bikes from Pondicherry and were deeply impressed with the red vastness and commitment of the Aurovilians. In Pondicherry we'd felt great peace at Mother's Samadhi and in the quiet streets of the Ashram. An American lady invited us to her flat overlooking the sea, gave us tea in white cups, and told us how she had come to live in

the Ashram. We were very impressed. Then we forgot about it. Twenty five years later my husband had a serious heart operation and was wondering about where to convalesce. Pondicherry popped up out of the great cosmic soup, we booked into Park Guest House with a room overlooking the sea, and daily he was restored to health.

Well, terracotta was always my favourite colour and now my feet are dyed forever. I love birds and awake to their canticles. I adore dogs and go for dawn walks with three of them. I make big pots from red earthenware clay, and here they are under my feet, enough to fill the world. I love cycling, even in the rain and congestion of Bristol, so to cycle here in the woods race down the road through the cashews is quite bliss. I enjoy variety in music and films and this evening I

have three different programmes to choose from - a French film, an outdoor slide show at Savitri Bhavan or a piano recital. But then again I might just sit on the verandah and eat

bananas under a full moon.

This, I realize, is a description of a great holiday and does not include the heat and the dust, the monsoon and the poochies, the pot-holed



roads, a daily diet of 'The Hindu' newspaper...and I'm sure the charm of shopping and dining in Kulapalayam will eventually wear thin. And how will it be to see the same faces day after day...?

But I am sure the beauty of the bright sky and the feel of bare feet on the red soil will never fail me. And, of course, the beautiful Tamil women in

their gorgeous colours with jasmine in their hair-how could I ever tire of looking at them?

Always, deep down, the inspiration and power behind all this abundance and creativity is Sri Aurobindo and Mother. There is never a room without their faces. Where else would I be constantly encouraged to educate myself, not to grow old, to re-invent myself? Where else could I have daily access to the magnificent impossibility of Matrimandir, the elegance of Savitri Bhavan, the eloquence of Shradhdhavan and Shradhdalu, the constant exposure to the beauty of Mother's thought and, of course, the dedication and inspiration of everyone who lives here? Everyone here must have taken a massive step of commitment, and surely this must open the door to grace and a new life in mind, body and spirit.

So here we are, three weeks before we return to England, one day panicking at our sudden decision to commit ourselves more fully to this place, the next day inspired and charmed by it all. We don't know how it will turn out. It is completely in Mother's hands and all we can do is trust Her. *Diane Bowler*

A mountain of mountain bikes

The Cornish connection

It's difficult to get decent mountain bikes in India. So when Andre D. was in Cornwall, U.K., earlier last year he bought a second-hand mountain bike cheaply, brought it back to Auroville and gave it to a friend. When he returned to Cornwall in September, he decided that this time he'd bring back two or three used mountain bikes and give them to some local Tamil boys.

He decided to begin his search at "Shiver Me Timbers", the shop of an old friend called Terry Gray. "Everybody in Cornwall knows 'Trader' Gray," says Andre. "His place is just amazing: you can find absolutely anything there. Anyway, when I told him I was looking for two or three second-hand bikes to take back to Auroville he told me, 'We can

Andre did the interview: the next day Andre's search for second-hand mountain bikes for Indian youth was front page news in 'The Cornishman'. It worked: within three weeks a mountain of mountain cycles-between 70-80 in all-had been donated. "I had no idea what I was getting into," said Andre, "but it was fun the way everything happened so spontaneously. Suddenly everybody in Cornwall knew about 'the French guy' who was looking for mountain bikes." Of course, not all of the donated cycles were in good condition. He and Trader selected the 46 best. Then came the matter of packing them for transport. "I went to Halfords, a big bicycle store in Penzance, and asked if they had any boxes for cycles. The man asked me how many I wanted.

with 'Andre, India' written on it. It was full of brand-new spare parts-tyres, forks, brakes etc. And he just handed them to me."

Andre and Trader spent three days packing up the bikes, then sent them to Avonmouth where they were put on a boat for Chennai. "All in all, it cost me quite a bit to get them to Auroville," says Andre, "which means that I've had to sell some of them to recover my expenses. As for the rest, I want to promote cycling in this area by making it possible for local people to enjoy it. So some bikes will be given to students of Udavi School-the school runs a cycle tour every two weeks but most students' bikes are old and heavy-and two will be donated to Tamil Aurovilians who are going to cycle around India on a 'peace ride'. A few more will be given to some local boys so they can join us Thursday afternoon cycle fanatics on our rides through the fields and canyons of Pondicherry and Tamil Nadu."

But what about spare parts? Aren't they a problem to obtain? "Not particularly," says Andre. "Many of the parts are available in India. As for the rest, the Auroville mountain bike enthusiasts have accumulated a stock of spares which can be used, and if there's something I can't get here, I'll buy it in a car-boot sale when I revisit Cornwall and bring it back with me."

Will he also be bringing back more bikes? "Trader is pushing me to do so, but I still haven't finished renovating the ones I brought last time. While it's my hobby and I really love doing it, I hadn't realized how much work it would turn out to be." Trader, who has just arrived in Auroville for a visit, cackles. "Don't worry, your

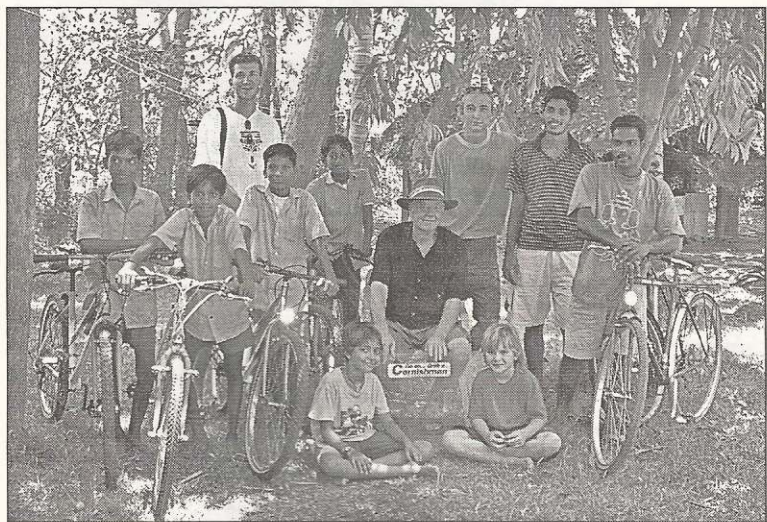


Trader (left) and Andre in Cornwall

place is assured in heaven. Actually," he explains, "there are far more bikes where those came from. Cornwall is not the easiest place for cycling-it's hills everywhere-so some of the bikes donated were unwanted presents. The rest probably belonged to students who had gone off to college. Almost everybody in Cornwall seems to have a bike stuck behind their shed that they want to get rid of."

Trader's connection to Auroville goes back to his first visit in 1977. "There wasn't much in the way of trees then, although I can remember the wells were full. Now there are trees everywhere, but the water level is way down. I've visited three times now and each time I've felt very good here. I want to share this with others so I'm interested in getting some kind of exchange going between Auroville and Cornwall. One possibility involves The Eden Project (an award-winning project in south Cornwall where different biomes-desert, tropical rain forest, temperate etc.-have been created under geodesic domes for purposes of research and education. eds.). I'd like some of the Auroville greenworkers to go there and share their expertise, and maybe get some of the young Eden Project helpers to come over here."

"And, of course, we want to keep sending bikes...if Andre feels up to it!" *From an interview by Alan*



Some of the lucky recipients: four boys from Udavi School (left), Velu and Segar (right), Matteo (bottom left) and Karim (bottom right)

do better than yet. Come back tomorrow. I'll get a reporter from the local paper over. Tell him your story and let's see what happens."

When I told him 46 he said, 'You must be Andre, the Frenchman from India. Come, come.' He took me to the storeroom and there was a big box

It's cool to cycle!

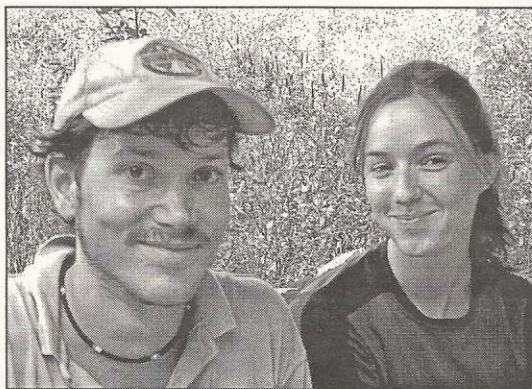
A very good human- powered zero-emission transport option, bicycles can even serve to bring people from Germany to Auroville

An ambience of unbridled idealism surrounds Mareike (24) and Amiram (29) when they talk about their cycle tour from Germany to India. "With this trip, we promote cycling as the ultimate zero-emission transport option," they state, pointing to the undeniable benefits that cycling offers. It is environmentally-friendly, causes no air-pollution, doesn't depend on fossil fuels and doesn't contribute to global warming. "We want to raise awareness that people should make a conscious decision of what is important to them. Many do not make the connection between their own habits and the environmental pollution we all face. They are not sufficiently conscious that their decision to take a plane, a car or motorbike contributes to the very pollution they object to. Our tour serves to make a point: transportation can and should be done differently."

Amiram holds a degree in electrical engineering from the University of applied science FH- Darmstadt, Germany, and from the University of Brighton, U.K.. Mareike studies Landscape and Environmental Planning at the Technical University in Berlin, Germany. They decided to cycle from Berlin to Auroville because they had heard that Auroville is one of the world's eco-cities. Mareike is combining the visit with a practical semester at Auroville's Future, where she helps in writing a report for the Indian Central Pollution Control Board on

Auroville as an example of an eco city. Amiram has joined Auroville Energy Products. "We took one year off," they explained. "It took us four months to get to India, traveling through 10 countries and being in the saddle for more than 7,000 kilometers. The only exception was Pakistan, where for safety reasons we went by train." They enjoyed the incredible hospitality they received along the way from countless individuals who offered free drinks, food and even accommodation. "People see that you work hard to get from one place to another, and somehow that creates trust," says Mareike, "though sometimes, the hospitality was almost too much." They'll stay for four months in Auroville, after which they plan to cycle back, this time through China, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Russia.

Being confirmed believers in cycling, Amiram and Mareike view Auroville's future traffic system as a necessary mix of public transport and bicycles. "If you don't want to get into the traffic mess of other cities, and if you truly believe in the need to combat pollution and global warming, there is no other option," they explain, quoting the experience of cities such as Copenhagen. "Cities that care about good traffic management all focus on



Amiram (left) and Mareike

cycle use. In Copenhagen, one third of all commuters now take the cycle. In cities in The Netherlands, cyclists predominate. There is no reason why Auroville can't follow those examples. We've heard the objection that it is too hot to cycle here, but the body can get used to it. After all, people in Denmark and Holland also got used to cycling through rain and in cold weather. What is required is a change in one's transportation habits. For small distances, say up to five kilometers, a bicycle should be used, and the day's schedule should be adjusted accordingly. For those who cannot cycle, public transport should be available. And for those who like to cycle but for whom the effort is too exhausting, there is the indigenously developed electro-bike from Auroville Energy Products."

"It's cool to cycle," says Amiram, "but it is definitely not cool to use your motorbike or car when actually you

could use your cycle. Indian cycle manufacturers, though still somewhat behind America and Europe in terms of development, are now also selling lightweight bicycles with front and back suspension and gears. Those who want the best can even bring their own cycle from abroad as many Aurovilians from the Auroville cycling club have done. Cycling is no longer an all-sweat business with heavy machines, anyone can do it."

"Last but not least," adds Mareike, "cycling keeps one fit and is cost saving. For those who are on the point of taking a holiday we have another tip: instead of visiting distant countries, go by train to some place in India and take your cycle along. You'll be astonished at the different perspective you get and how easily you make contacts with the population and other cyclists. As we have experienced, people, especially cyclists, love cyclists."

Plans for the future include a visit to other eco-cities in the world, such as Curitiba in Brazil, the Gaviotas community in Bolivia and Waitakere in New Zealand. "We are both Greenpeace activists, we are planning to publish our experience in the Greenpeace Magazine and in newspapers and hope that more people will follow the example. For cycling is good and it's lots of fun." *Carel*

For more information visit www.berlin-indien.de

In brief

Governing Board nominated

The Minister of Human Resource Development has nominated a new Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation for a period of four years. Except Shri Gajapati Maharaja Dibyasingha Deb, who has indicated that his energy will be needed elsewhere, all the former members have been re-nominated. Dr Kireet Joshi continues as Chairman, with members Dr D.P. Chattopadhyaya, Dr Subash C. Kashyap, Dr L.M. Singhvi, Mr. Roger Anger, Smt. Jyoti Madhok, Shri V.K. Pipersenia, IAS, and Shri C. Balakrishnan. Dr. Meera Srivastava has been nominated as the new member.

International Advisory Council

The Government of India has not yet re-constituted a new International Advisory Council. The term of office of the former members of the International Advisory Council ceased on December 16th, 2001.

AVI meeting this summer

The AVI meeting will take place at a chateau about 35 km from Paris between 10th-14th June. 2003. The theme will be 'human unity'. Contact Satyakam at devasmita@wanadoo.fr to register.

Water campaign

A six-month water campaign has been launched to reduce water consumption in Auroville. The focus will be on creating an educational manual to change water consumption patterns; to conduct information sharing and set up a permanent exhibition; and prepare a code of conduct policy with regard to water sharing.

Light chain for Peace

On March 24th, more than 250 people lit candles at the Solar Kitchen for peace.

Land Fund bonus

The Forest Group reported that for the next six months, all the money that goes into the Forest Fund from the sale of wood and cashews will be donated to the Land Fund.

Meanwhile another Farmer's market was held at the Youth Centre to raise further funds for the land.

Internet telephony

Long-distance phone calls using the internet are becoming a reality for Auroville. Those who have their own computer need to invest in some additional hardware and software, after which the price per minute is Rs 5 instead of Rs 25. Those without a computer at home can use this service at the public booth at New Creation Corner.

AVI website

Auroville International U.K. has opened a new website at www.aviuk.org

Tamil New Year

Tamil New Year was celebrated on 14th April with a puja in the grounds of the Tamil Heritage Centre. The almanac for the coming year was read out. Apparently it will be a prosperous year, although adverse weather conditions are also predicted.

Auroville employees have their say

The report on the socio-economic survey of 3,762 Auroville employees made in the year 2000 is reaching completion. There are some surprises...

From February to July 2000, a team of postgraduates in social science from Pondicherry University surveyed all of Auroville's employees, meaning those working for Auroville's units as well as those working for individual Aurovilians. The objective of the survey was to obtain a socio-economic profile of the employees in Auroville and to learn about the dynamics between Auroville and the villages that surround it. The questions asked delved deeply into the personal lives of the workers: they dealt with their income, their education, their food, their expectations for their children in terms of education and career, their domestic water supply and waste treatment, whether they own a house or land, whether they own a car, a tractor or a motorbike, what they are short of, if there are debts, and what they think about Auroville and their relationship to Auroville. Also data on alcohol consumption, smoking, and the expenditure on occasions like weddings and festivals were collected.

The data is not only useful for present planning, but will also be compared with data to be collected in the future—there are plans to repeat the survey every seven years—as a means to gauge the overall impact of Auroville on the bioregion. The answers of the employees also provide an insight about the living conditions of their spouses and children and other relatives living in the household.

The idea for the survey came from Meenakshi more than eight years ago, but there was no money to do it then. In 1999 the Dutch Foundation, Stichting de Zanier, decided to sponsor it. Auroville's Social Research Centre took charge of the work and invited the co-operation of Professor S. Gunasekaran, a specialist in demography, family formation and research methodology, who had worked, among other positions, as a consultant for the World Health Organisation before becoming Head of the Department of Sociology of the Pondicherry University. Professor Gunasekaran selected and trained a number of social science postgraduates to do the survey. Then, for about five months, they went out and interviewed almost every person employed in Auroville. They were well received. Nearly all Auroville units and Aurovilians co-operated and the employees themselves were very open to answering the questions. From a total of 4,179 persons approached, only 58 refused to partici-

pate. The next phase was to process the enormous amount of data that resulted from the survey. This was done by Professor Gunasekaran and two of his postgraduates. Unfortunately, Professor Gunasekaran was then involved in a traffic accident which resulted in the death of his wife and serious injuries to himself, and the publication of the report has been delayed because of this.

"Our first job was to find out who, from among the respondents was truly an Auroville employee. Eventually we came to a number of 3,762 persons employed in the period February - July 2000. The other interviewees were only incidentally working for Auroville. From these 3,762 people, 33% said they were employed permanently, 50% replied that they were employed temporary but full-time, 14% did not know their status, 2% were contract workers and 1% was working part-time. We found that the average age of those working in Auroville is young: 29.7 years. When we looked at the wages paid, we were amazed that they were lower than we had expected. The average income was Rs 1,545 a month. The total amount spent by Auroville on wages was about Rs 57.6 lakhs a month and we found that the 10% of the employees in the highest income bracket took

collected did not support our impression."

Professor Gunasekaran is quick to point out, however, that the outcome of this particular part of the survey has to be taken with a pinch of salt. He explains: "We have not compared the level of the wages quoted by the employees with the figures of the employers. The survey is purely based on the replies of the employees. And you can never expect, when doing a social survey, that all the answers will be in accordance with the truth, especially when you ask sensitive questions such as how much one earns, how much alcohol one consumes and so on. Another important factor to consider is the nature of the relationship between the interviewee and the interviewer. In this case, the social status of the interviewee was lower than that of the post-graduate interviewer, and this more often than not

leads to what we call 'social desirability responses' which are not truthful but are what the interviewee thinks the interviewer wants to hear.

A third factor may have been that the interviews took place during working hours. There was a 99% response to the survey. Did this indicate that the employees thought their bosses wanted them to answer the questions? In the West, a 30% response could be expected. It was also reported that in some cases the interviewee seemed a bit afraid to answer the questions, in particular when the employer was around, and that some respondents were rather secretive about their feelings regarding their work in Auroville.

Approximately 28% of the interviewees answered that they were dissatisfied with their salary. Why should so many employees be dissatisfied with their salary? "I think," says Professor Gunasekaran, "that it is a consequence of the fact that those working for Auroville are confronted daily with the vastly different life styles of the Aurovilians. They have become aware of the difference in consumption patterns, which



Auroville greenworkers

may breed some type of perceptions that, relative to the Aurovilians, they are not getting adequate compensation for their work. The same goes for the level of productivity. A mason in Pondicherry may put more bricks than his colleague in Auroville, but then the Pondicherry mason will not compare his working hours with those of the Aurovilians."

The survey does not show to what extent Auroville influences the lives of those living in the nearby villages. Says Professor Gunasekaran: "We could only answer such a question if we could compare our data with data collected elsewhere where conditions are more or less similar. But this data is simply not available. This survey is unique in India as it contains a lot of subjective, so-called 'soft' data - such as 'are you happy with your employer?' - which is extremely difficult to get. It is rare to have in India so much information available about so many families. This means that my report will be written in phases. The first report will give the bare data; further reports will deal with specific aspects of the survey. I can also foresee that many PhD. studies could result from this baseline study. This survey is a veritable gold mine for future researchers as areas of sociology, economics, demography, nutrition, to mention but a few, are all touched upon. The data will be made available to any researcher approved by a committee appointed by the Auroville Social Research Centre. My report will be made available in the next few months."

From an interview by Carel.

JOB SATISFACTION (by percentage)				
		GOOD	FAIR	POOR
1	WAGES	19.1	52.9	28.0
2	PROMOTION AVENUES	7.9	22.6	69.5
3	EMOTIONAL SUPPORT	42.6	34.7	22.7
4	REWARD SYSTEM	15.9	38.9	45.2
5	TRAINING	29.6	31.0	39.4
6	EMPLOYER/EMPLOYEE RELATIONSHIP	72.7	23.2	4.1
7	SUPPORT FROM CO-WORKERS	79.3	17.4	3.3
8	MEDICAL BENEFITS	26.9	40.5	32.6
9	INSURANCE	26.3	32.3	41.3
10	LEAVE FACILITIES	31.0	40.3	28.7
11	CREATIVITY	17.5	23.9	58.6
12	FURTHER LEARNING	11.0	16.1	72.8
13	CLEAN PLACE	77.7	19.3	3.0
14	SAFETY MEASURES	64.5	26.8	8.7

approximately 23% of the total wages, while the 25% in the lowest income bracket took only 10%. This points to a lopsided distribution. We had thought that Auroville employees are well off; they dress well and are obviously aware of different patterns of consumption. But the data

Presenting Auroville to the Tamil People

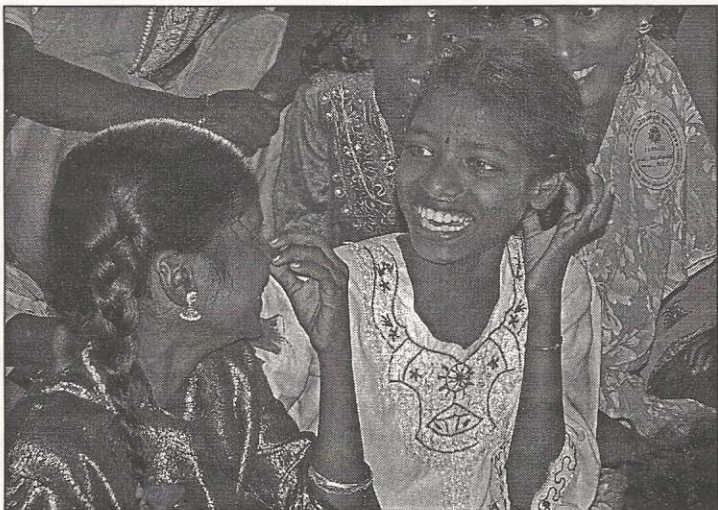
(continued from page 1)

Delegates were also given the opportunity to break into smaller groups that were led by Tamil Aurovilians, where a variety of topics on Auroville were explored. These sessions proved to be lively with enthusiastic participation by all. Issues that came up included how people from Tamil Nadu could be involved in Auroville, be informed about the various happenings here, and the procedure to volunteer their services or work for Auroville. Participants also articulated their concern at the practical difficulties faced by visitors to Auroville, such as poor transportation facilities to visit Auroville from Pondicherry. There was also a need expressed that Auroville should do more outreach towards people from Tamil Nadu and perhaps publish a monthly newsletter in Tamil that would be accessible to all.

The afternoon session at the Centre for Indian Culture (CIC) had octogenarian Mahalingam sharing his experiences of living

in Auroville. The delegates also had the opportunity to see the Walnut Peace Table by George Nakashima, view the photo exhibition

on the Mother at Savitri Bhavan, and visit the Matrimandir for meditation. The first Auroville-Tamil Nadu seminar concluded late



in the evening with a special dance drama of Sri Aurobindo's 'Savitri' performed by young dancers in the SAW-CHU building.

Asked if the seminar was a success, Varadarajan feels that a deep impact has undoubtedly been created both in the hearts of these first-time visitors and the Aurovilians who organized the seminar. "We have benefited too," says

Varadarajan. "We got to see how they are as much pioneers as we are in Auroville. For example in a remote part of Tamil Nadu like Vikramasingapuram, where there is no congregation of Mother's devotees or a spiritual community, a few people started a Sri Aurobindo Study Centre. Living within the surrounding religious atmosphere, they are all pioneers of the Mother's New Age. They are like us!"

Feedback continues to come in, stressing the values of outreach and networking. After the seminar, Meenakshi received an e-mail from a young man in Madurai, "Anbulla Akka (Dear sister), I want to serve Auroville any way I can. How can I volunteer after I finish my studies?", and another, from a couple in Neyveli, who came with their 5 year old daughter, "Please continue this programme in the future also. Perhaps you can do it yearly or better still twice a year, so that more people can attend?"

Priya Sundaravalli

Working for change

Women's Clubs from the Auroville bioregion celebrated their achievements at this year's International Women's Day celebrations in an explosion of colour

The 2000 women are participants in Auroville Village Action Group's (AVAG) WomanPower programme, which aims to empower and uplift the position of village women. Three years ago, AVToday reported that 600 women from 26 clubs were participating in the programme. Since then, the number of participants has tripled to 2000 women in 80 clubs, and the Federation established to represent the interests of all the women is becoming increasingly powerful.

Anbu and Moris have been the coordinators of Village Action since 1989. Anbu directs the WomanPower programme, which commenced in 1996 when they realised the need to specifically address gender issues in their work. She says, "Gender is one of the issues that affects all the local Tamil communities. In our culture, it is in the mind-set of both the men and the women to believe that women are not even secondary, but far below males."

Village Action initiated the clubs to build confidence in the women to play a role in developing the village, as they found that progress occurred much more quickly when people came together in groups. The clubs begin when village women hear about the programme, come forward and form a group to participate. Clubs of about twenty women meet twice a month, facilitated by a development worker from the region who has undergone a two year training period with AVAG. The women discuss topics such as dowry, gender, caste and village development issues - topics designed to raise awareness of systems of oppression and to demythologise assumptions that create divisions between people.

Another aspect of the clubs is that the women contribute Rs50 each month towards a savings/loan scheme, and begin to make loans to each other which are generally used for purposes like celebration expenses or school fees. They maintain their own record-keeping systems, and as many of the clubs consist of mostly illiterate women, the books are colourful affairs with symbols of local fruits and flowers used to represent different members. Anbu points out, "We have been running the savings and loan scheme for six years, and there's been no default, not even one!"

Clubs are also expected to initiate their own microprojects, where the group will take responsibility for an aspect of village improvement, such as installing a water tank or fixing the road. AVAG has taken the approach of 'people's participation', where villagers are treated as partners who are expected to participate equally, rather than beneficiaries. Anbu says, "When we started to promote this policy after 1989 there was opposition, because people expected a lot more of Auroville, thinking 'It's a rich place, why don't you give us this or that?' So it was difficult for us to break that tendency, but we were really consistent with our approach that a group must contribute a third of the cost. They face a lot of problems in the community when doing a micro-project, but once they're successful they get a very good name and the community appreciates it."

Anbu has noticed how the regard for women has changed in the villages since the project began. "Previously, men used to say, 'How come you women get organized and create all kinds of nuisance?', but now they listen patiently to their opinion. Many times the leaders and women will come together and discuss issues and sort things out. Now, in quite a few villages, women are even invited to take part in the Panchayat (local governance) meetings."

In fact, the Udhayam Women's Federation

supported 22 women in running for office in the last Panchayat elections in late 2001, and 17 women were successful, the first time women in the area have ever truly held such positions. Whilst the law stipulates that 33% of seats must be reserved for women, a long-standing practice in the area is for a man to run for election and carry out the functions of office in his wife's name. Amravarthy, the Federation president explains, "The woman's name and photo is used, but the husband is the one who goes to meetings and does the banking".

The recent wins in the elections have given the women confidence, and assisted in changing traditional attitudes regarding women holding high positions. Anbu says, "The women didn't bribe a single voter, they just told their achievements and won! A couple of years ago, they were not even prepared to contest for the post of Panchayat member, but after the election they said 'next time we will contest for the Presidentship or councillorship.'"

Caste and inter-caste relations continue to be a sensitive issue for Village Action, and the popularity of two strong caste-based political parties in the area reinforces pre-existing divisive thinking. Almost all of AVAG's clubs identify themselves as either dalit (untouchable) or non-dalit (caste), but Anbu points out how the programme aims to bring them together. "To promote caste

are generally incurred.

Another common issue that Village Action addresses is the taking of a second wife. Anbu explains, "The law prohibits it, but the culture and society accepts this practice. If a woman has only a girl child only, then the husband will justify himself by saying 'I am marrying for a second time because I want a boy.'" Anbu points to the absence of good role models regarding this issue. "In the cinema, the final message is always that a woman has to put up with it. There is always something to justify his act - the first wife is greedy or dull, and this vindicates his actions. Nobody in our culture says it's wrong so that gives them encouragement."

Federation President Amravarthy explains that the Federation is trying to change ideas about dowry, is encouraging girls to delay marriage until after 21, and will soon establish a scholarship fund for girls from impoverished families to continue studying. She discusses the changing nature of relationships between men and women in the villages. "The women enjoy being in the clubs, but when they go home they are expected to be silent and not upset the husband. The wife is trying to become equal, but many husbands are not interested. If they join a men's club, only then they become interested in improving the relationships between men and women."

Anbu's husband Moris coordinates the men's clubs, and he has noticed changes in recent years in the way that women and men work together. "Previously, the men were not mentally ready to work with the women and felt that all the credit should come to them, so they functioned separately. However, during the last year they've done joint microprojects and exchange programmes with the women's clubs, and slowly they are realising they're working together for the same purpose. One criteria for selecting the best men's club of the year is how well they work with the women's clubs!"

Anbu explains how the notion of people working together in groups is an essential part of the success of AVAG's programme. "One big difference between Western culture and our culture is we are social animals, not really individualistic like Westerners. So whatever we do we immediately think 'What will my family think about it? What will society think about it?' So, Village Action has found that to bring social change, organising people in groups helps them feel powerful and gives support."

Anbu's long-term goal is for the evolution of



Women's Day crowd

and we all have similar problems, but we need to work together to change this." She would also like to see further implementation of income generation projects (nine women's clubs have taken up government schemes to buy cattle), the consolidation of the legal and counselling centre, and the men's and women's federations working effectively together.

Reflecting on the success of this year's International Womens Day, Anbu points out some of the changes from the last few years. "Even three years ago, we could not expect women to give a cultural performance, particularly dance. Some were allowed to give a traditional dance (kumi) that involves only bending, stretching and clapping hands in a group. Even to do that was not culturally allowed for the married women. This year, many danced on stage, and there was even some competition amongst themselves to give the best performance, so that's a big change. Also a few women came forward to share their personal experiences about being cheated by men. I think that's a big step that shows they trust the rest of the women and the organisation."

"Two years back, a married woman gave a cultural performance for the women's day celebration with her club members. That night she was beaten up very badly by her husband. But the men from the neighbouring villages came to know that the woman danced well and that it was for a good song about national unity. The husband came to know about the recognition she gained, but he did not say sorry. But the next year when we were preparing, he said, 'If you want to dance, dance.' He watched the rehearsals and one day before the performance, he took her to Pondicherry and helped her purchase bangles, chains and flowers for her costume. He came to the performance and was quite proud in the end."

Women's Day each year brings different stories. This year, some members of a club returned early to the village from the ceremonies, so the husbands of remaining members

felt that their wives should also be home. Three women were punished by their husbands, and forced to sit outside the home for a few hours on their return. At the next club meeting, many women expressed their anger at the members who left early, and blamed them for causing trouble. Whilst the meeting was heated, a consensus was reached that they would all remain until the end of proceedings in future, as to do otherwise would 'spoil the name of the club'. This painful example demonstrates how groups can be an effective mode of operating for social change - by

insisting on solidarity, support for each other and certain codes of conduct, the group's cohesion was redefined and it resolved to act firmly as a collective force in the face of any opposition next year.

Lesley



equality AVAG has 'exchange programmes' where we expect a particular women's group to go and see another group, in the hope of giving them exposure to the other caste people. Some non-dalit groups still resist, but now the Federation members say, 'If you don't want to join together, then leave the Federation.'"

"Recently, there have been examples of dalits and non-dalits joining together to do micro-projects." One project was undertaken in February in a nearby village, where dalit and non-dalit women laboured together to fix rutted roads to shouts of encouragement from passing bus drivers. In addition, the women overcame traditional caste prejudices to prepare as well as eat lunch together. Such examples are becoming more common in AVAG's experience, and look set to continue in the future.

Dowry is another issue which affects the lives of village women. Although dowry is officially banned, dowry demands in the area have increased in the last decade, thanks to an increasingly material society and exposure to a wider world through readily accessible cable television in the villages. Girls are generally married before 21, and the average dowry demands consists of a new two-wheeler and 10-15 sovereigns of gold. This money is difficult to accumulate, given the high rate of male unemployment and the average monthly wage of Rs1000-2000, so large loans



Discussion group at Women's Day

a powerful women's movement in the area run by the women themselves. She says, "Women have become more powerful. They acknowledge the differences, such as caste, religion, different family backgrounds, literacy, poverty, but say 'the common line is that all of us are women

Golden Mumptis & million dollar challenge

A fun way to raise serious money

Forget the Oscars. The place to be on the evening of 1st April was the Visitors Centre for the presentation of the inaugural Golden Mumpti awards (motto: 'dig deeper yet'). Nominations had been invited for 11 categories, including Citizen of the Year, Greenbelter of the Year, Oldtimer of the Year, Couple of the Year and Community of the Year. Was it all just an April Fool? Nobody seemed very sure until the first winner (Ancolie, Youth of the Year) was announced and she came up to collect her award: a miniature golden mumpti (alias short-handled spade) tastefully embedded in a compressed earth block. Thereafter the evening bowed along with mumpti poems ("Humpty Dumpty had a mumpti"), mumpti sketches and mumpti puppetry, interspersed with more Golden Mumpti awards as well as three-minute videos-ranging from the Pythonesque to high-quality nature shorts-shot by Aurovilians on the theme of the million dollar challenge.

For the Golden Mumptis were yet another way of getting people thinking about how to raise one million dollars for the land by August 15th. "We made the evening as entertaining as possible," explains Paul Blanchflower, the originator of the concept, "so we could talk about the issue without people feeling threatened, without them feeling we were just after their money." In fact, as he sees it the million dollar challenge is not so much about raising money as getting people involved. "If everybody gets involved in some way and focuses upon the same objective, then it won't take six months, we can raise the money in six weeks. Six days even! Because once you take



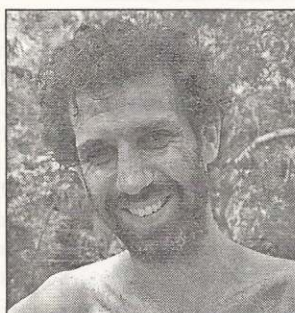
Nele receives her golden mumpti from Roy

on the challenge and hold it in the front of your mind it's extraordinary what kind of opportunities come along to put something in The Land Fund." Paul got the idea for the million dollar challenge early this year. "I knew we needed a million dollars to buy up a big piece of land adjacent to the Botanical Gardens, to acquire plots currently on offer in the city area and to reduce the credit line of the Land Fund. But a million dollars...! It's not even conceivable, the mind can't get itself round those kinds of numbers. So then I started wondering, what amount is conceivable? Finally I came to a thousand dollars as just about possible. And that's where the idea came from. Because a million dollars is doable if you split it up into a thousand pieces and you only have to be responsible for your share. Of course, you can also take up more than one if you want.

"I realized that it's not so much about money as about time. So I figured that if everyone manages to commit one day a month for six months to the challenge of acquiring the land then we are well on our way. What you do on that day is up to you-it could be making things, selling off unwanted possessions, writing articles, sticking stamps on appeals, talking to people, or even simply donating that day's income to the Land Fund. The main thing is the sense of equality, the sense that everybody is taking up responsibility for a common task which,

within six months, will result in us solving together one of Auroville's immediate problems."

This touches upon the deeper objective of the challenge. As Paul sees it, "basically Auroville is made up of different tribes, and these tribes don't always see eye-to-eye. When I looked at the land issue I thought it was probably the least divisive of Auroville's issues because we all agree on the need to purchase the land. So if groups that are often in conflict can work together on this, then perhaps it makes it easier for them afterwards to solve the issues which have been separating them. Of course, it's a cycle: people will come together, then split apart again. But once you've tasted the unity once it makes it easier to get there next time. That's why a lot of the events being organized at the moment for the Land Fund in Auroville are not explicitly about raising money.



Paul

They are more concerned with bringing people together in a nice way so that they can have fun." Paul believes the main challenge at present is to keep widening the circle, finding more ways for more people to join in. He's sent articles about the million dollar challenge for publication in the USA and UK, a website is planned, the Auroville International Centres are getting involved. "It's a lot to do with gaining momentum. For example, the idea of the art exhibition for the land last month started very small. Then suddenly more and more people wanted to donate their art work and the whole

The Golden Mumpti Awards 2003

Youth of the year: Ancolie

Newcomer of the year: Hans

Greenbelter of the year: Gemma

Artist of the year: Nele

Tamilian of the year: Bala

Community of the year: Youth Centre

AV product of the year: Annadana tomatoes

Therapist of the year: Afsaneh

Couple of the year: Paco and Renu

Oldtimer of the year: Menaig

Citizen of the year: Gillian

Video of the evening: Kripa and Bernard

thing took off. The day after the Golden Mumpti awards an Aurovilian phoned me and told me he was donating to the Land Fund the income from a course he had just given. So that's what we're looking for now-ways in which to build this creative momentum. Of course, the fact that we've already raised \$150,000 since January is also a tremendous boost: it shows the world that these Auroville people are really serious about this."

Paul is also fascinated by the particular challenge of fund-raising without fund-raising. Last year the Academic Genius Brothers, of which he is a member, organized an anti-fund-raising evening. "Everybody came expecting us to appeal for funds for the Music Studio. Instead, we gave everybody ten rupees, a sweet or a flower. They all sat there, waiting for the catch, but there wasn't one! It's fascinating. It's like the money is there in front of you but you can't just make a grab for it because that will kill something very precious. That's why the Golden Mumpti evening worked. It was fun, absurd, but it also had this other 'edge' to it. You plan as far as you can, but at a certain point you let go. Then, with a bit of luck, it becomes a kind of Zen koan, out there, floating, out of reach of the mind."

Alan

CULTURE

Sound Investment

Auroville's first music complex about to open its doors

Kalabhumis old music studio will soon be defunct. The new music complex which combines studio facilities with high-tech acoustically engineered performance space is due to reach completion in July and will replace the underground generator room which had been functioning as the makeshift (and noisy) studio for the past several years.

The idea for a new studio materialized when Franco, an Aurovilian from Italy, as the executive of Mereville Trust gave twenty lakh rupees (approximately 40,000 euros) in donation for the project. Convinced that "Music could draw people together in a way more congenial than any usual meeting or political issue," Franco wanted

Aurovilian musicians a decent place to practise and perform. The idea was welcomed and supported by all, particularly the Cultural Zone Group and the residents of Kalabhumis, a community dedicated to the arts, who will participate in the management of the complex once it starts functioning. Given his dedication to music, a young Kalabhumis resident, Matthew, has been appointed caretaker of the studio, with the support of Rolf, another resident musician.

The first sound-proof building of its kind in Auroville, the Kalabhumis music complex's spacious interior consists of a music studio for rehearsals, a dressing room, and an equipment storage room. From a practical point of view, the

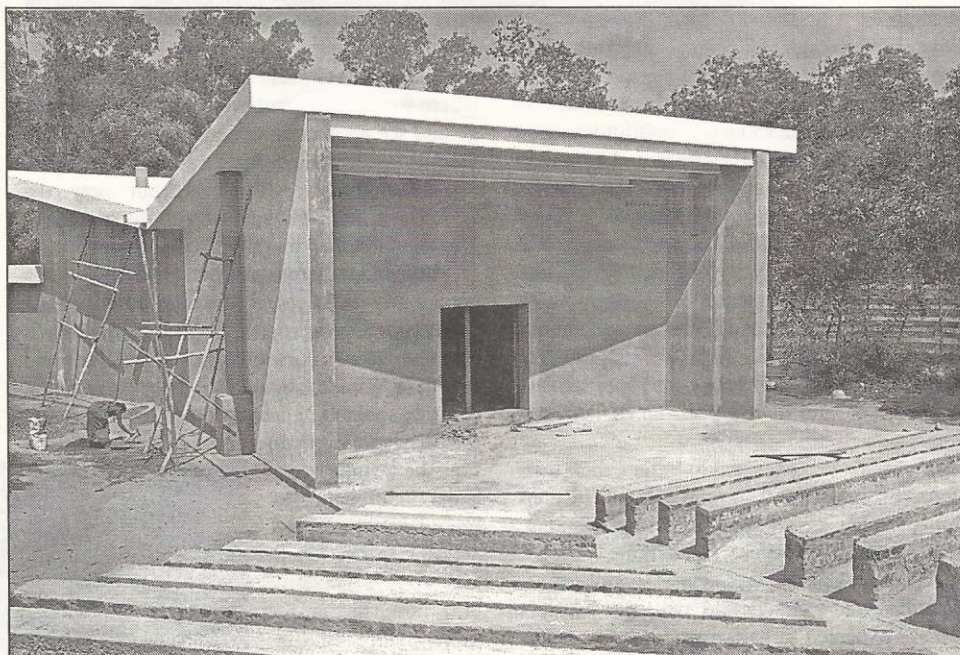
complex is innovative in its design and concept. By merely swinging open the twin doors at the back of the studio, musicians can enter a partially-covered stage facing an amphitheatre capable of seating almost 500 people. The transport of music equipment to per-



Matthia in session in the old rehearsal room

to offer Aurovilians an open-air auditorium for the enjoyment of music concerts or any other artistic performance and, at the same time, give

formance locations that had been a bothersome and sometimes dangerous proposition in the past can now be safely avoided. Weatherwise too, the



The back entrance and part of the amphitheatre

hall is versatile. During the monsoon, for instance, the wood-floored indoor space can be used as a small auditorium with a seating capacity of 150 people. While most activities at the hall will be music-related, the amphitheatre could also be used for staging dance performances, theatre, movies, and art exhibitions. Needless to say, visiting artists and guest musicians in Auroville would greatly benefit from the range of opportunities and facilities that the Kalabhumis music complex will offer.

Planned by architect Paolo Tommasi, and Didier, the sound engineer, the project aims to enter its second phase if finances allow. This part of the project will focus on a video-audio library exclusively relating to music, and a cafeteria that would, among other things, provide an informal social platform for musicians of all ages and backgrounds. The aesthetic landscaping of the surrounding area will be carried out as soon as

the first phase of the complex is ready.

But does the quaint old music studio with its rugged floors and graffiti-strewn walls really have to go? Matthia, a young drummer, strongly hopes not. For teenage Aurovilian musicians, the small, sunless studio, despite its humidity, is like their second home, a place where they hang out and practise. Furthermore, if the old studio is allowed to go on, more than one musical band could practice at any given time. On the other hand, the outward structure of the old studio badly needs a face-lift, and internally too, it is not wholly suitable for maintaining the condition of delicate musical instruments.

The final decision regarding the fate of the old studio lies with the Kalabhumis residents themselves. Possibly the two studios, a stone's throw from each other, will coexist and jointly benefit Auroville's diverse music fraternity.

Abha Prakash

Grace by name...

Aptly named by the Mother, a little girl went on to become a dancer

Grace grew up in both the Ashram and Auroville, and studied ballet and dance in both places. She was studying Bharat Natyam at Kalakshetra in Chennai at the age of twelve, when her family decided to return to Holland. "I had never been out - we were thoroughly Indianised and had no notion of what the West was like. I just had impressions from films of snow, cycles and chariots with horses - quite romantic!"

She was soon accepted into a ballet academy in Holland, but it was a difficult transition. "It

teenager. She found the experience enriching and it helped her to understand what she wanted to do on her return to Auroville.

She returned in 1988 and gave some workshops. "I tried to connect to the dancers here, but they seemed very closed, apprehensive, a bit fearful to share. I just started off sharing what I was able to give." She has now been living here since 1999, and as a qualified fitness instructor she conducts aerobics classes at the dance studio started at New Creation by Savitri. She points out that aerobics is an easy and accessible way to enter into dance. Whilst people may come for the physical benefit, they find themselves forgetting their daily troubles once their heart starts beating faster.

The other forms she teaches are ballet, jazz, modern and contemporary dance, release technique, kinaesthetic awareness and African dance. She says, "We all have the craving to lift off from gravity, and dance allows us that. It's like being a

child, being able to fall and roll and be light in the body. It's like a craving in us because we have been like that before."

Grace found teaching in Auroville to be very different from teaching in the West. She points out that children here have mostly only been exposed to Bharat Natyam and Odissi, and a little Bombay film culture. "I find the ways of moving the body in cheap Hindustani pop movies can be vulgar, but kids grab it because it is one of the most vital and dynamic forms of

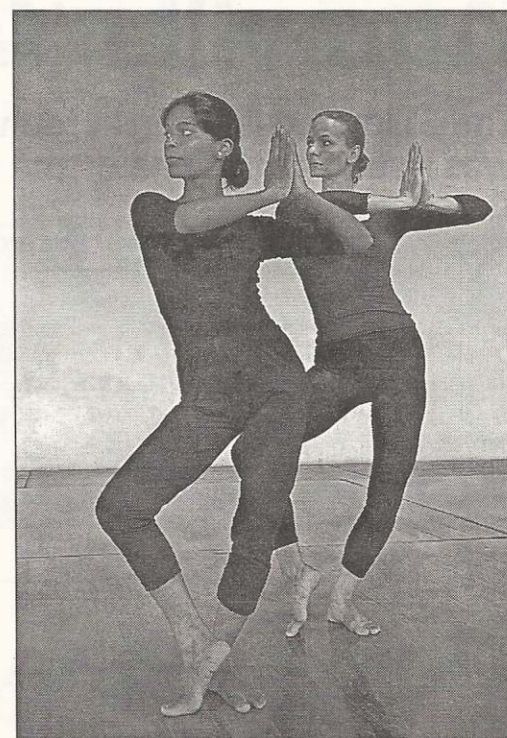
expressing themselves."

Grace sees it as her task to promote and encourage dance in Auroville. "There is a lot of dance happening in Auroville, but it's still not developed enough. We're not grounded in any discipline. I believe that every dance form has the right to be expressed fully here." She encourages performances by students, so they can learn to collaborate, create pieces together and overcome fears of expressing themselves. "When one performs, one really starts to concentrate more, one condenses what one has learnt."

Professional dancers from outside Auroville are also encouraged by Grace to come and perform here. "I try and get a lot of people from India - all the dance-related passers-by I try to engage to help us. It is not always easy, because Auroville does not have the financial means to pay such guests, but with passion and enthusiasm I try to motivate them!" Grace sees such performers as providing an opportunity for a necessary exchange to take place. "We need to have open doors. We need to learn from the outside, and the outside should be able to use our facilities to explore and create. If a dancer comes and asks, 'can I use the space to do something?' I say 'yes, the exchange is you have to give us a workshop.'"

She says the highlight for her this year was the many male dancers arriving in Auroville, performing in very different styles. "That motivates all the youth here. All these young boys here now want to dance."

And what motivates her to keep dancing? "The non-verbal. You don't have to talk, you can transmit so much in one movement. You can take the same movement and transmit something different with it each time. You discover a movement can be flat, full of passion, dynamic, slow or fast, very Indian or African, ballet-like... and that is all in our bodies, each one of us has it no matter where we come from."

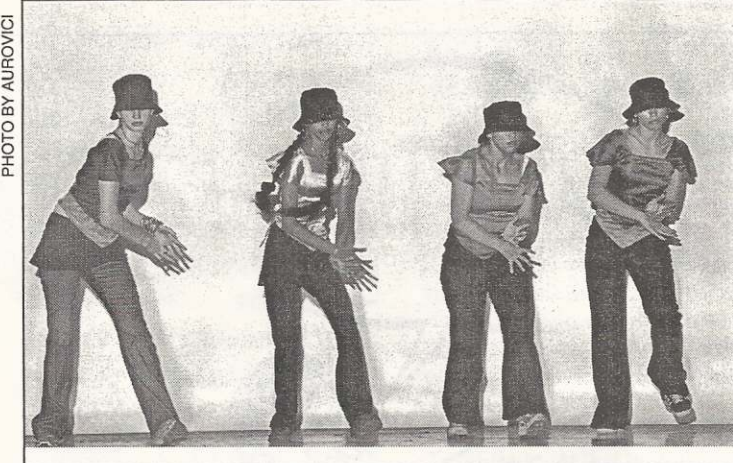


Grace (right) dancing with Kanchana

Grace's dream is to start a dance school in Auroville that brings together existing forms and provides research possibilities. "Anyone can use the lab to dance, create, manifest. I will just be the catalyst and help facilitate it. There is so much potential here. It's a need also for the audience. We had such an enthusiastic crowd at the recent performance - a platform is needed to share this joy and inspiration. The platform creates support for the dancer to go through the initiation of suddenly understanding the energy of dance, when they start to fly and forget everything around them."

"I think dance is essential for any community. It expresses joy, cultural differences and also the unity amongst us, the beauty and fun. When dancing I forget myself. That's the most important thing, forgetting oneself, turning into something bigger, being one with everything..."

Lesley



Hip-hoppers at the Auroville dance festival organized by Grace

was tough because I had never learned to be assertive, was always submissive and humble, and suddenly I had to communicate on a different level with my teachers. I didn't have the same kind of ambitions as the other students in the ballet school. Wearing such tight clothes, being so exposed physically and wearing shoes, was all very strange and made a huge impact on me."

Grace became a professional dancer, and joined her first ballet company whilst still a

"Calling to the Echoes of Spirit"

*The valley spirit never dies;
It is the woman, primal mother.
Her gateway is the root of Heaven and earth.
It is like a veil barely seen.
Use it; it will never fail.
-Tao Te Ching-*

The show "Calling to the Echoes of Spirit", choreographed and danced by Chris Valles, accompanied by Regine on the cello, Johan on flutes and Aurelio on various instruments, was performed at the Bharat Nivas auditorium on the 10th of April, the hundredth day of the year, the ones and zeroes being considered magical numbers. It was the night of the half moon (Hangetsu), which in the Japanese martial arts tradition symbolises the quality of moving from within to the outside.

The stage setting was simple. The usual black curtains were replaced by white cloth panels and a big gong stood in the centre of the stage.

The performance consisted of five parts, named after the five elements of Taoism: wood, fire, earth, metal and water. "Those are the five elements of Tao," explains Chris. "But it is also about the alchemy of elements: the transformation through which one feeds another, and destroys yet another..."

"I call Wood the first principle: it is about expansion..."

Chris is seated, cross-legged, his back to the audience. He rises slowly, uncovers the gong, hits it... The deep sound resonates... The music begins, slow, gentle. Chris moves through a series of hatha yoga inspired postures, his movements seeming effortless, while he displays a great sense of balance, and flexibility.

"The second part is Fire: the sacred symbol."

Dressed in reds, Chris embodies the fiery spirit of martial arts. The music picks up speed. Chris handles the Nunchaku weapon with great agility and incredible speed; making it spin in his hands, cross over his back and under his legs, while he is moving across the stage.

"The Earth is the awakening..."

Bare chested, Chris enters, kneels down, facing the audience, eyes closed. Once again, the spirit and power of the martial arts becomes palpable...the concentration, the focussing of energies...

Chris bows down, touches the earth with his forehead in salute.

And then one is awed by the intensity and power of his Karate inspired movements, punches, cuts, and flying kicks. He gains speed, the gong, which he has punched, resonates. He once again breaks into powerful kicks and punches, displaying a great mastery over movement, gaining in speed until, as the crescendo of power is reached, he shouts out, with such a voice it continues to vibrate into the silence which follows.

"Metal is fusion."

The musicians play. The instruments converse, it is a dialogue of sorts, where strains from the flute, melodies from the cello and percussion beats and bells call out to and answer each other.

"The last part is returning to the source: Water will always flow. It goes where nothing else can really go."

Now dressed in black, Chris' movements are ballet-inspired. Flowing movements, full of grace and fluidity, light and seemingly effortless. He glides across the floor, spinning and filling

the space with his sweeping gestures. His movements gain in speed and power, the spinning gets faster...He jumps up into the air, as if taking off into flight, then lightly falls back to the ground where he lies...

The performance ends as the powerful ring of the gong resonates once again.

The musicians stand up and face the gong.

Chris kneels down before it...a return to the source...to the beginning. Silence. The lights go off.

"Listening to the Echoes of Spirit" was a breathtaking performance, which left the audience spellbound. Chris, who, throughout the show displays an incredible mastery over the body, is an artist in the true sense.

Chris Valles, of Danish and Mexican Indian origins, was in Auroville for a period of four months.

He began his career in the martial arts-his Shotokan Karate practice-as a child of nine. That was

in the early eighties, and that is also when he began dancing, initiating, together with a group, the 'street dance scene' in Denmark. As a teenager, he began to concentrate solely on his martial arts practice.

He eventually became a member of the Denmark National Karate Team, a full time



Chris

commitment, where he had to devote forty to forty-five hours a week to practice. During that period, he participated in many competitions and championships, on the national, European, and international levels and received many awards and prizes.

One day, however, Chris withdrew from the competition circuit. "That was not why I practiced karate, to compete," he explains, "It had to do with the spirit of the martial arts, with the feeling I got from the practice. Martial arts is definitely a part of my art, of my life, and I will always continue to practice, but competitions, no, I had no desire to continue."

That is when he met Eske Holm, the pioneer of contemporary dance in Denmark. "Though he is from a classical ballet background, he has been very inspired by the martial arts and Taoism." Says Chris, "He has tried to delve into the wisdoms of the East and incorporate and combine that with his dance. It was he who brought me into dance..."

Chris then pursued classical and modern ballet at the 'Ballet Rambert School', in England and then at 'Rudra Bejart', a ballet school in Switzerland, studying under the famous French choreographer Maurice Bejart.

Since 1997, Chris has been working as a freelance dancer and choreographer performing all across Europe and also teaching.

Chris doesn't want to label his dance style. "We will just call it dance," he says,

"For me, the essence of dancing is music. Moving the body to music...In the original cultures, those of the native Americans and aborigines, for example, dance and sound were never separated. I practice classical ballet. For me, it is like an alphabet, which you can play with and break down. My base right now is the classical method of tuning, and I'm working with the body as an instrument, so this is how I tune it, it is like playing the scale. When I perform, I have my own style, into which I have incorporated, amongst other things, karate and the spirit of the martial arts."

Emmanuelle

Auroville 'fascinates' UNESCO

The following is a corrected version of a message sent recently by UNESCO to delegates all over the world. It was issued at the end of the exhibition on Auroville held in UNESCO's Paris headquarters recently.

Yesterday, the Director-General of UNESCO, Koïchiro Matsuura, participated in celebrations at UNESCO Headquarters marking the 35th anniversary of the founding of Auroville, a unique 'model city' near Pondicherry, India. Opening an exhibition on Auroville, Mr Matsuura said that, "As an intellectual and ethical organization, UNESCO cannot fail to be fascinated by this experience". Inspired by the great Indian spiritual master Sri Aurobindo, Auroville has developed into a full-fledged city of over 1500 inhabitants and enjoys close links with surrounding communities.

Noting that UNESCO had supported the foundation of Auroville and, over the years, has continued to show interest in the unfolding development, the Director-General stressed the similarities between UNESCO's ideals, values and principles and those underpinning this unusual community. He pointed to the way in which key aspects of the Auroville experiment resonate strongly with some of UNESCO's major priorities and concerns such as dialogue among civilizations, cultures and religions; cultural diversity and culture as a factor for development; poverty eradication; quality education and lifelong learning; and renew-

able energies.

The Director-General expressed his appreciation of the cooperation with the Indian Permanent Delegation in organizing the Auroville celebration at Headquarters.

(The exhibition was organised by Auroville's Future, Dr. Kireet Joshi and Dr. Singhvi from Auroville's Governing Board were among the speakers, and there were presentations by Gilles Guigan, Joss, Luigi and Meenakshi.)

HUMOUR

Going to the dogs

Auroville animals evolve?

We live in interesting times. Today I picked up the AVNews and read that cows have begun crossing cattle-grids in Auroville. This is amazing. Until March, 2003 no cow had ventured to set more than a hoof on any cattle-grid anywhere in the world, yet now, in a dusty corner of south India, that prohibition has been broken, presumably for all time. Soon, as the morphogenetic effects ripple out, no flower-bed, no demure garden party, no patch of prize leeks will be safe from the depredations of the cloven-hoofed horde. For the cows are coming home...

Actually, the signs of something untoward had been around for some time. A few weeks ago I was returning to my house through a canyon. It was late. As I rounded a bend my headlight picked out a mongoose in the centre of the track. I barely slowed, knowing he would scuttle up the bank in a flash. But he didn't move. At the last minute I braked and took avoiding action. At that moment he stood up on his hind legs and...well, look, I know it was dark and I was tired...but, I swear, he winked at me.

I arrived home shaken and obscurely embarrassed. I hurried to my computer, sought out the great god google.com and keyed in various combinations - 'mongoose' and 'wink', 'civet' and 'glad eye', even, and I admit this was a long shot, 'Herpestes' and 'facial tic'. No cigar. Not even close. Nobody, it seems, had ever heard of or encountered a mongoose on the make.

Of course, as the days went by and the winking wombat, or whatever he/she/it was, failed to reappear I convinced myself I'd been mistaken. But then came news of the grid-tripping cows followed, almost indecently quickly, by the breaking story of *saaman vaangura naai* or 'shopping dog'.

It all began innocently enough. An Aurovilian decided to train her dog to do her Pour Tous shopping. Perfectly understandable: that heaving mass of humanity round the vegetable counter is not everyone's cup of tea. The problem was, as she soon discovered, that even

the brightest of pooches has problems deciphering French accents. So she did the obvious thing. She wrote out a list, put it in a shopping bag, tied it round Huey's (the dog's name: don't ask me why) neck and sent him. Pour Touswards.

Her hunch was correct. In no time a friendly Aurovilian, finding Huey parked patiently outside the doors of Pour Tous, bent down to find out what the 'doggywoggy' had in his funny little doggy bag'. And when she found the list she decided that, just this once, she'd help out Huey and do the shopping for him. Then all he'd have to do would be to carry the bag full of shopping back to his owner.

And that's how it started. Huey always found someone who wanted to help the poor doggywoggy. But one day one of Huey's helpers turned round to find that he'd followed her into the store. She looked round guiltily, but nobody seemed to have noticed. She decided to let it be.

Soon shoppers grew used to the sight of Huey in the shopping aisles, faithfully following his shopper of the day. One afternoon, however, something unusual happened. Huey's assistant had just picked something off a shelf and dropped it in the basket. As she (somehow they were always shes) was turning to search for the rejuvenation cream she noticed that Huey was rummaging in the basket. Before she could stop him, he'd taken out the item she had just chosen,

placed it back on the shelf and was pulling another one towards him. Incredulous, she checked the list. Yup, she'd made a mistake and Huey had corrected her. Whooee Huey!

But that wasn't the end of it. A few weeks later another assistant saw Huey substitute one packet for another which she had just selected. She consulted the list: 'dog biscuits (Fido vegetarian)'. Yes, she was sure that that was what she'd taken. Bending down to look in the basket, however, she noticed that Huey had substituted 'Pedigree (chicken and liver)'. What was going on? Perhaps this was Huey's usual snack and his owner had simply forgotten. Or perhaps...no, no, too ridiculous.

In the weeks that followed, however, many of his shopping assistants noticed that when they got to the check-out the basket tended to be full of doggy delights not included on his owner's list. One or two of them began to protest, but Huey was developing a tendency to stand on his hind legs (presumably so he could get to the top shelves) and - did I mention it? - Huey was not exactly what you'd

call a small dog. So everybody went with that one, too.

The next thing Aurovilians noticed was that the range of products offered at Pour Tous had somewhat narrowed down. No more olive oil, no more pickled sturgeon, no more oysters in Muscadet. Instead the shelves began to fill up with Fido, Pedigree biscuits, Pooch Paradise, Canine Cutlets and Doggy Dainties ('for the dog in your life'). One or two people went to Sid and complained, but Sid spread his hands helplessly. 'Huey', he said. And, verily, they understood.

By now Huey had taken to bringing along some of his canine friends when he shopped (he'd long since abandoned the pretence of sticking to his owner's list). Soon the dogs began to outnumber the people in the stall. In desperation Otto tried blocking the accounts, but Huey and his horde simply dodged the check-outs (to tell the truth, it had always been a struggle to get them to sign their bills). Then Huey got up a petition campaign: 'Auroville should go to the dogs'. There were many, many signatures including, somewhat suspiciously, Cerberus, Baskerville and His Master's Voice.

The last I heard Huey was on the Entry Group. Now, I don't want to sound dogmatic...

Alan



AVToday and advertising

Recently the AV Today team has had prolonged discussions about how to improve the journal's finances. In brief, our present income is insufficient to cover our expenses and we find ourselves in the miserable condition described by Dickens' Mr. Micawber: "Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen pounds sixpence, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds and sixpence, result misery."

To achieve happiness once again we have been trying for some time to expand our subscriber base, without significant success. We have also looked at options like raising subscription rates, but we don't feel this would be fair or appropriate. Finally, after a great deal of heart-searching, we have decided to accept advertising from Auroville or Auroville-related businesses on an experimental basis.

If you would like to advertise in Auroville Today, please contact us at avtoday@auroville.org.in or phone 2622517/ 2622572 for more information.

Subscription information

- ◆ One year subscription rate: India Rs. 250; other countries Can \$51, € 37, US \$38, UK £25.
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Those for whom the subscription rate is an obstacle are invited to contact Auroville Today for information on reduced rates.

Auroville Today carries no advertisements nor does it receive any funds from Auroville. Your subscription (or your supporting contribution of double the amount) helps us to continue this work.

There are two ways to subscribe:

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