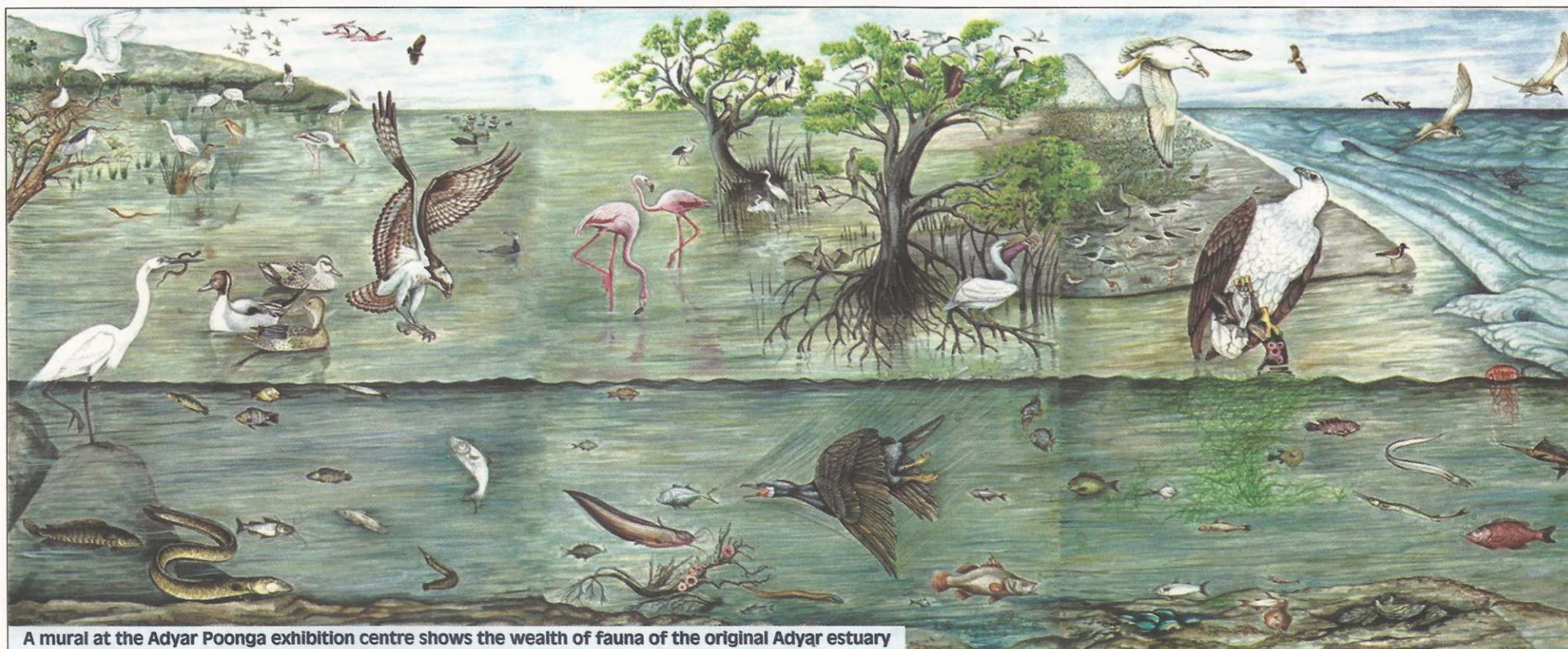


Auroville Today

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A mural at the Adyar Poonga exhibition centre shows the wealth of fauna of the original Adyar estuary

ALL IMAGES COURTESY PITCHANDIKULAM FOREST CONSULTANTS

The ecological restoration of Chennai's Adyar Creek

Auroville's Pitchandikulam Forest Consultants, a commercial unit of the Auroville Foundation, has been awarded the contract to make a Master Plan and to execute the work for the ecological restoration of the Adyar Creek in Chennai.

Chennai, the coastal metropolis of South India, has a network of six main waterways crossing the city. Two of them, the Adyar and the Cooum, are natural rivers flowing eastward and draining into the Bay of Bengal. The other waterways are man-made. One of them is the Buckingham Canal, which runs from Andhra Pradesh to Marakkanam, and cuts through Chennai from north to south, intersecting both rivers.

Once upon a time the Adyar and the Cooum were in pristine condition with balanced eco-systems and beautiful environments. As late as the 1960s people fished and bathed in the rivers. Today these waterways are heavily polluted by the indiscriminate dumping of solid waste, by unchecked discharges of untreated industrial effluents and domestic sewage and by the extensive slum encroachments along their banks. Accumulating large volumes of organic sludge, Chennai's polluted waterways have become both an eyesore and a source of disease in the city.

The Adyar estuary

A unique feature of the Adyar River is the estuary at its mouth. It covers an area of roughly 358 acres and extends from the Thru Vi Ka bridge to the sand bars at the edge of the sea. Part of it, an area of 58 acres, is called the Adyar Creek. This estuarine wetland, which is part

of the 'green lungs' of the city, provides a habitat for migratory birds and aquatic animals.

But like the river, the estuary too is heavily polluted and its banks have been encroached upon. The languid stream of the Adyar feeds the estuary with pollutants; and what flows out to sea returns with the tides. A large part of the Creek has moreover been filled-in with construction rubble. What could be a place of great natural beauty in central Chennai, located between two of the most-used public spaces in the city, the Marina and Elliot's Beach, is a site of neglect and decay.

The sorry state of Chennai's waterways has not gone unnoticed. In the mid 1990s, the Consumer Action Group, a city-based NGO, filed a public interest petition to maintain Adyar Creek as a wetland. The Government of Tamil Nadu also contemplated the situation. Merely dredging the estuary and the river had proven to be only make-shift solutions. The problems had to be tackled more drastically, in order to restore the health of the entire ecosystem of the Adyar.

Auroville's involvement

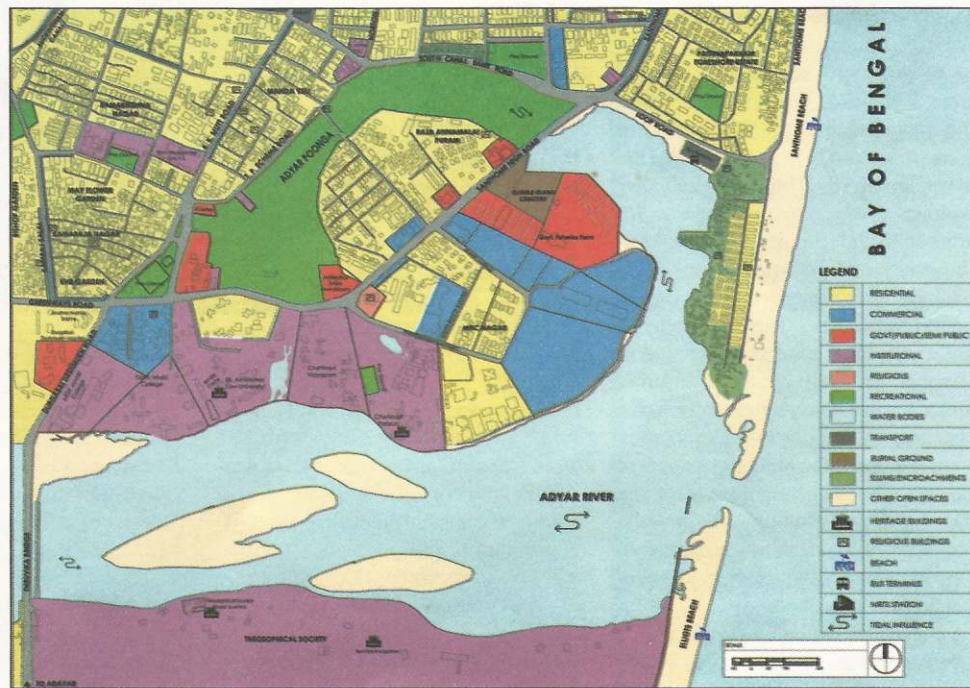
"Auroville got involved with this project in August 2004," says Joss who heads Pitchandikulam Forest Consultants. "A group of Aurovilians was approached by the former CEO of the Tamil Nadu Road Development Corporation, Mr. Rohit Modi, who was responsible for constructing the East Coast Road. Rohit knew about Auroville

and about our environmental work, but he felt that Auroville was 'a bit hidden behind the trees'. He said that he wanted Auroville to come to the middle of Chennai to help restore the estuary, starting with the Adyar Creek."

This was the beginning of developing ideas with a large number of Aurovilians which included representatives of Auroville's Future, Kolam, Pitchandikulam Forest and Aurofilio, an expert in coastal management. "The meetings soon involved Chennai city and Tamil Nadu state officials as well as members of environmental action groups and other private citizens who were concerned about the issue," says Joss. Before long they were exploring the idea of creating an Eco Park at the Creek, not only to restore a part of the estuary, but also to serve as a centre for environmental education.

"The Park was to be a showcase of the ecosystem of the Coromandel Coast with fresh water ponds, brackish areas, mangroves, mud flats, dunes, and islands. An information centre would invoke a 'watershed consciousness', reminding people that we all 'live downstream'. It would be a focal point for information showing technologies that could be used to clean-up Chennai's waterways and encouraging the public to become involved. Hoardings in and outside the park would show pictures of the original flora and fauna. It should be a place where children can come to watch the Creek's birds, turtles, reptiles and other animals.

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Satellite Image of the Adyar area (left) and the corresponding map showing land use (right). The Adyar Poonga area is marked in green.

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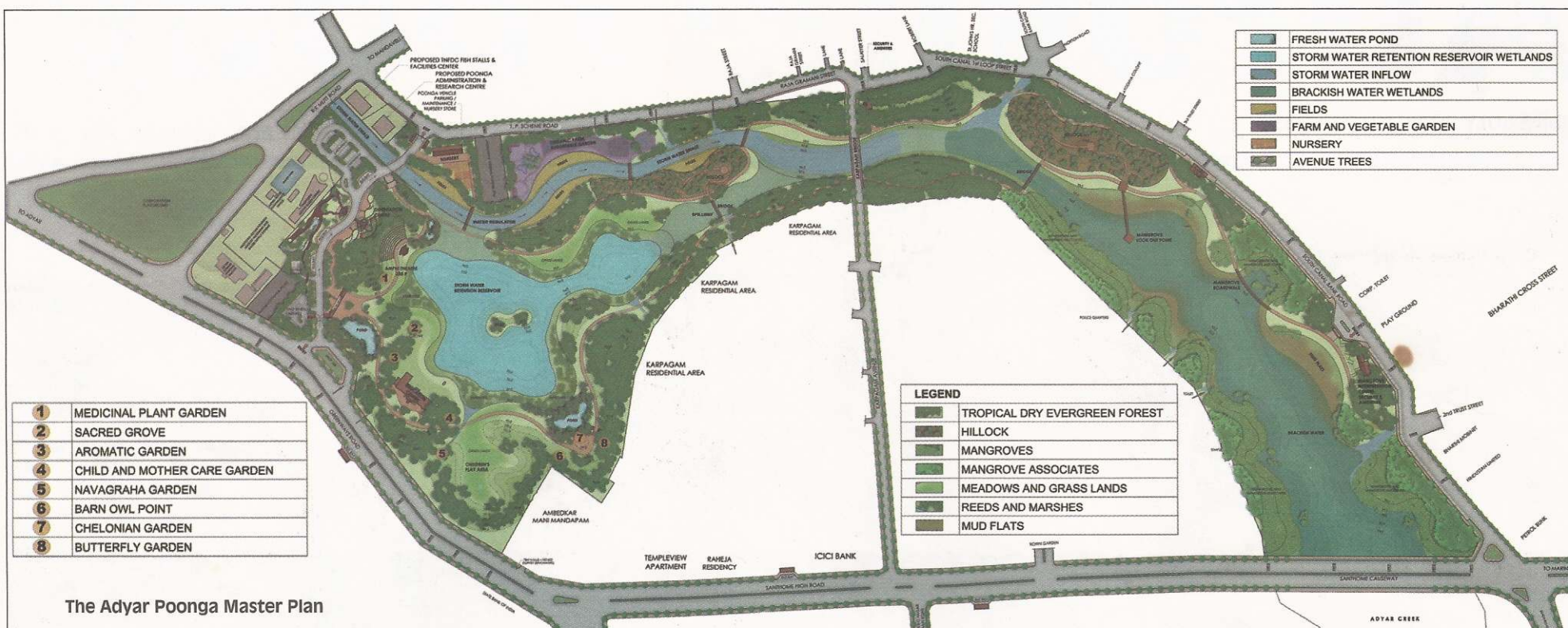
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The ecological restoration of Chennai's Adyar Creek



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The Eco Park would help creating ecological awareness in a city of more than 7 million people," says Joss.

The tsunami

But in December 2004, the tsunami struck. A large volume of sea water surged upriver, creating havoc in Chennai. Many dwellings surrounding the estuary were destroyed. The Government suddenly had pressing concerns, and the Adyar project was put on hold.

source; upriver. All of Chennai's waterways had to be cleaned up. The magnitude of the problem is staggering, as there are hundreds of thousands of people living on the banks."

Government approval

In July 2005, initial plans for the ecological restoration of the entire Adyar Creek were presented to the then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Ms. J. Jayalalitha, and other officials. The ideas were approved, and it was decided to create a special

The ball is set rolling

Subsequently, TNUIFSL appointed Pitchandikulam Forest Consultants as the Lead Consultants for developing the Master Plan of the 58-acres Adyar Creek. It specified what the Master Plan should contain: a feasibility study; the preparation of a detailed project plan; park usage patterns; a traffic plan; infrastructure linkage plans; water management plans; flora and fauna habitat mapping; the conceptual landscape and architectural designs; a communication and education strategy; a park maintenance plan; and the way in which the plan should be disseminated to all interested groups and stakeholders in Chennai so that their comment could be integrated into the final version of the Master Plan. After years of preparation, the ball was finally rolling.

Why Auroville? "We are neutral," says Joss. "The officials know that we have no vested interests, we are not doing it for the money, and we are not even seen as hard-core environmentalists who say 'no' to any development. Somehow we are trusted, and that trust is being enhanced by the long list of reputed specialists we consult and employ in the fields of water management, environmental education, flora and fauna habitat mapping, social impact studies, alternative and appropri-

ate technologies, architecture and landscaping." The list includes the Centre for Environmental Studies of the Anna University, Chennai; the Madras Christian College; the Zoological Survey of India; Idea Design (Cochin); House of Consultants (Bangalore); SCD India Ltd (Chennai); Ceres (Australia); and from Auroville Architects Ajit and Shama and AuroRe, Auroville Botanical Gardens, Auroville Earth Institute and Sound Wizard.

Opposition to the plans

But it was too early to rejoice. The Citizen, Consumer and Civic Action Group and other groups went to Court against the concept plans of the Adyar Poonga, stating that the project would adversely affect the estuarine wetland. "Instead of adopting sustainable methods to protect eco-sensitive areas, the Government has embarked upon an unsustainable project that will ensure the destruction of the Adyar Creek area," said the Action Groups. They also objected that the restoration should be restricted to one portion of the creek instead of including the entire estuary. What followed were four months of intense meetings with special committees of experts debating each aspect of the plan. "We reprinted the Master Plan five times, and presented it in the famous and extremely beautiful Court No. 1 before the Chief Justice. During this time, 15,000 people visited the exhibition of the Master Plan and the site itself including students from more than 50 schools," says Joss.

The Court asked the parties to come to an agreement. "That was reached on the last day of December 2007," says Joss. "The High Court then validated our agreement and declared the revised Master Plan dated January 1, 2008 for the Adyar Creek as final. It also set-up a monitoring committee for the project, consisting of members of the Adyar Poonga Trust and representatives of governmental and non-governmental organisations. This committee will monitor the implementation of the project on behalf of the Court.

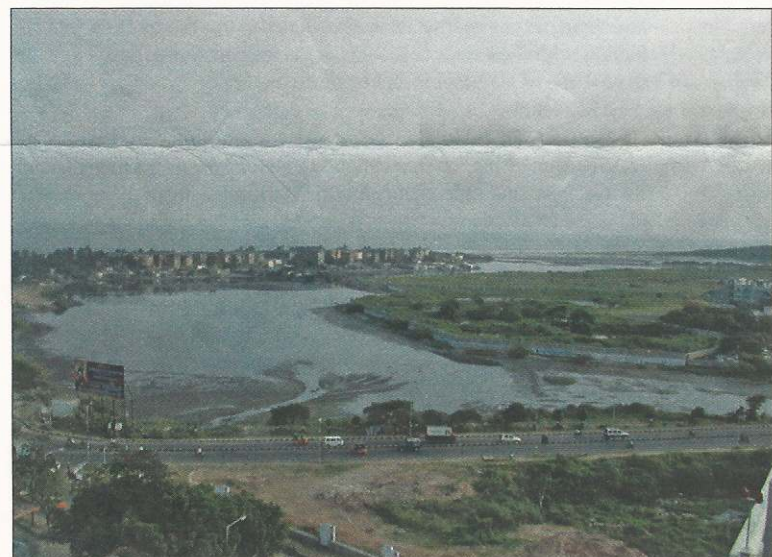
In April this year, TNUIFSL appointed Pitchandikulam Forest Consultants as the contractors to execute the Adyar Creek project. The works are scheduled to take 2½ years.

And now, to work

The Pitchandikulam team, understandably exhausted by the complexities of the process, feel relieved that this stage is over but are sobered by the reality that the actual work of transformation of a garbage dump and a cess pool into a beautiful garden and restored wetland must now begin.

"We often say it is a dream project in hell," says Joss. "It is a heavy responsibility to have not only been given the opportunity to draft the Master Plan for the Adyar Creek, but also to have been charged with its implementation, but we are encouraged that there is a real willingness to do something for the environment. In Europe, it has been possible to clean big rivers such as the Rhine and the Thames. The Tamil Nadu Government has now committed itself to clean out the Adyar. The cleaning of other waterways in Chennai is sure to follow. If we can keep up the enthusiasm from both the government and from the citizens, then this 'mission impossible' might well become a success."

Carel



Views of the Adyar Estuary and Creek (above and right)

"It was a difficult time," says Joss. "Auroville's Future, Kolam and Aurofilio withdrew from the project. We from Pitchandikulam Forest decided to get more acquainted with the ground realities. We walked the area and contacted individuals and institutions who could help us understand the issues involved. This included Dirk Walther of the Centre for Environmental Studies of the Anna University of Chennai, a specialist in water resource management; the firm of Godrej, which has extensive experience restoring a large mangrove wetland in Mumbai; as well as the Consumer Action Group which had recently won a case against the Chennai Corporation when it proposed to build a bus depot in the area. The Pitchandikulam team visited ecological restoration sites in India and abroad to establish professional support networks if the project was ever to manifest."

Slowly the incredible complexity of the issue became better understood, and with it, many questions arose. To build an Eco Park is a very attractive idea, but how could it be protected from the rampant pollution? Should it be cut-off from the rest of the estuary? If yes, how could it be a meaningful demonstration site? Could the Eco Park be made environmentally sustainable? A Master Plan for the entire estuary had to be developed, and the problems had to be tackled at the

trust for the project. However, state elections were looming in Tamil Nadu, and before the project could start, the Government changed.

In the middle of 2006, the new Government re-activated the project. "We made presentations to many officials, amongst whom the Chief Secretary, Mr. L.K. Tripathy, who is familiar with Auroville as he has been Secretary of the Auroville Foundation. Their response was overwhelmingly positive," says Joss. Meetings with Mr. M.K. Stalin, Minister for Local Administration, and with the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, Shri M. Karunanidhi, followed.

The government decided to give the project high priority. A decision was made to restore the entire Adyar estuary and to set aside an amount of Rs.100 crore (US \$ 25 million) for the work. In October 2006, the Government created the 'Adyar Poonga Trust', headed by the Chief Secretary, and transferred to it the 58 acres of the Adyar Creek. It appointed the Chennai based Tamil Nadu Urban Infrastructure Financial Services Limited (TNUIFSL) as the project's implementing agency.



ate technologies, architecture and landscaping." The list includes the Centre for Environmental Studies of the Anna University, Chennai; the Madras Christian College; the Zoological Survey of India; Idea Design (Cochin); House of Consultants (Bangalore); SCD India Ltd (Chennai); Ceres (Australia); and from Auroville Architects Ajit and Shama and AuroRe, Auroville Botanical Gardens, Auroville Earth Institute and Sound Wizard.

In March 2007, preparation of the Master Plan started. "The cooperation of the Government has been admirable," says Joss. It instructed officials of the Chennai Corporation to fence-off the area and remove encroachments around the Creek. The Slum Clearance Board was directed to provide alternative tenements for the approximately 300 families living



A wetland inside the Adyar Creek

Vision of the Eco Park

For the development of the Master Plan, the entire estuary area, including the mudflats and wetlands, has been considered as one ecological system integrating biological, physical and social factors.

The first step towards ecological restoration is to define and secure the perimeter of the Creek and estuary from the surrounding urban development. The best method to do so is to provide public access to this boundary. An urban walkway along the edges would serve this purpose and be an opportunity for people to enjoy the spectacular view of the Creek and Estuary.

Ecological restoration refers to the process whereby an entire ecosystem is brought back to health, by altering a degraded area in such a way as to reestablish an ecosystem's structure and function. In the present case, where the Estuary is located in the centre of a metropolis, concepts for sustainable ecological restoration must contain the presence of man.

An important aspect of the preservation is the water management plan. The Centre for Environmental Studies, Anna University, is conducting intensive studies on water management, taking into account the function of the estuary as storm water recharge and discharge zone and as a

flood sink in case of spring tides and cyclones. The aim of this study is to restore the ecology and prevent this area from future pollution.

Another component is the water resource system for the Eco Park. The park will generate its own water from storm water collection and treatment of sewage and grey water from surrounding urban areas using innovative engineering technology, effective micro organisms and special fountains that aerate and energize tired and polluted water. The purification and reactivating of this essential element of life will be a key principle of the park.

Restoration of the former biodiversity is another principle aim of the project. A flora plan will be created and vegetation found along the Coromandel Coast will be reintroduced. Clearing existing vegetation and planting species of original flora will be done in a phased manner, as the present vegetation provides a habitat for many bird species. Mangroves will be planted, wherever appropriate.

Another main issue is fauna survey and conservation. The intent is to create a habitat for typical fauna in coastal environments. However, the proximity of the city will determine the eventual equilibrium of the system.

The Eco Park will have several elements to sensitize visitors to the envi-



The temporary exhibition centre where the Master Plan is displayed

ronment. It will have four primary zones. The first is the Arrival and Orientation Zone, which will provide safe arrival areas for visitors and at the same time ensure minimal disturbance to the rest of the park. The second is the Interactive Learning Zone with interpretive education gardens, learning areas and an Environmental Education Centre. The third zone is the Nature Interpretation Zone, which has a natural trail with occasional viewing points for people to experience the various ecosystems of the Coromandel Coast. The largest zone is the Silent Zone, which is not accessible to the public.

The Environmental Education Centre is a focal point of the Eco Park. The Centre will have a large hall where an exhibition or group gatherings can take place and a class room for presentations to school groups. It will show visitors the wonder and importance of ecological diversity; communicate scientific studies and research into indigenous fauna and flora; raise awareness of

local environment issues; and inspire people to engage in the process of restoration and preservation of the environment. It will introduce visitors to the basic principles of ecology with an emphasis on coastal ecology and watershed rehabilitation. These programmes will help to nurture a deeper appreciation and reverence for living things and natural systems. Visitors will become familiar with plants and animals native to Chennai and learn about their interrelationships and how human activities affect them.

The park will use renewable energy sources such as solar panels to minimize dependence on the Tamil Nadu grid. Self powered street lights with independent solar panel, battery and auto switch controller will be installed wherever necessary. Water from collection tanks spread out in the park will be pumped using solar pumps.

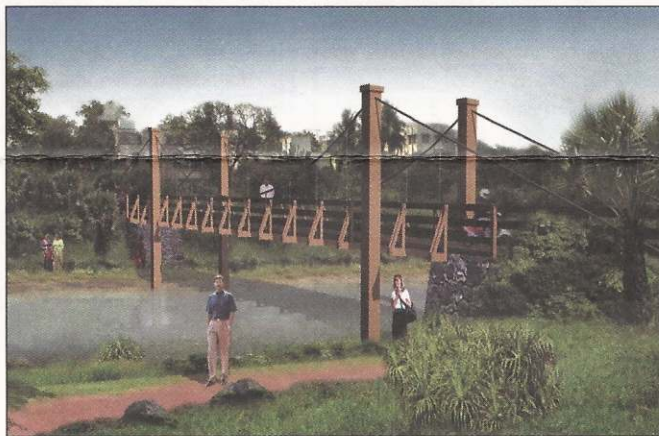
The Eco Park will be open to groups of school children, individual students with special assignments, general visitors and professional ecologists and scientists.



Artist renditions of aspects of the Adyar Poonga

Above: The Environmental Education Centre – the park's focal point.

Right: A planned walkway with foot bridges will allow visitors to experience the park through a walking tour.



Protecting and healing the Adyar Creek

The Adyar Creek's present reflecting condition is a reflection of the state and the consciousness of the city above and around it. This was the challenge that we have taken on with no naïve illusions that the task ahead will be easy; and conscious always that it could perhaps take decades to complete it. For as we consultants got more and more involved in the Adyar Creek Project, many people warned us against a 'mission impossible'.

We have approached the task of creating a Master Plan for the ecological restoration of the Adyar Creek and Estuary area with the confidence and faith that it can be done. We believe this process can involve the citizens of Chennai in an exer-

cise of self-reflection and practical action whereby, gradually, the conditions which have almost destroyed life in the river will be transformed and the city itself will celebrate its own cleanliness and well-being. Chennai has the knowledge, and with it the political will, to renew what has been wasted.

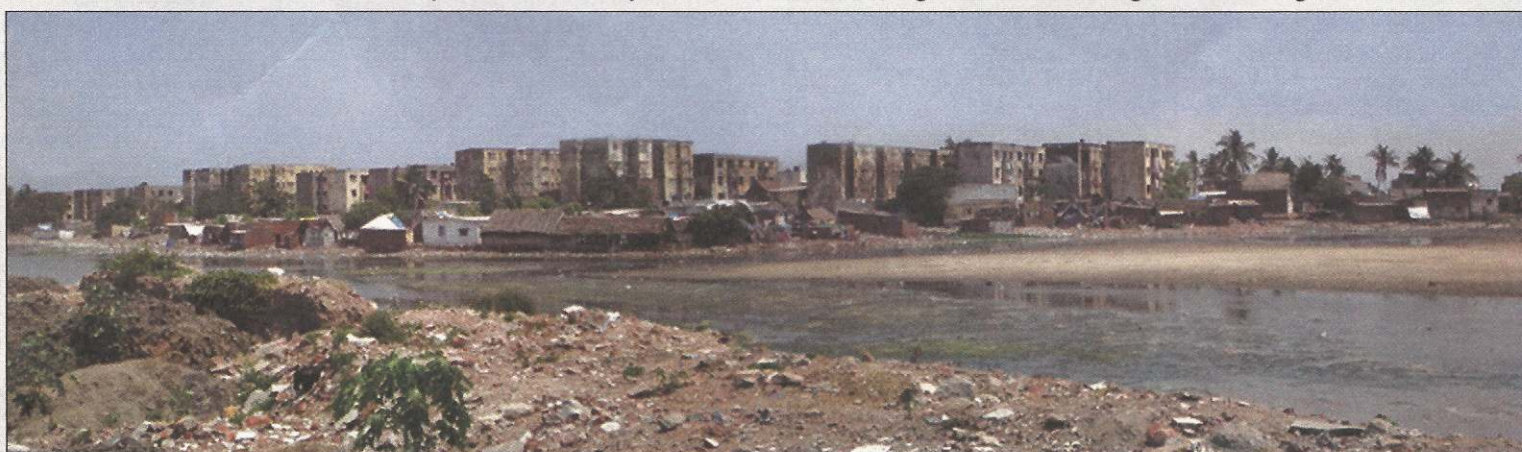
The wisdom, order, beauty and creativity displayed in nature are powers that each individual possesses. A place like the Adyar Poonga is meant to nurture these energies and we are calling on these qualities, to now engage in the huge task of protecting and healing this piece of the planet. As the consumer society has grown, a huge amount of damage to the environment has been done in a very short time and only because of

the extraordinary flexibility and we got away with it – so far.

All over the planet natural system renewal is emerging as the most important task to be done, a science of global healing. What is required is a thorough knowledge of how nature works, delicate and deep perceptions of specific sites, development of new and appropriate techniques and hard physical work, much of which cannot be done by machines and which should involve the community. The Adyar Poonga could be a place where people are trained for this essential task; a school for urban ecosystem renewal.

The Poonga is not about entertainment or making a profit. It is about making a difference – a big

difference. A place to dream up an eventual Chennai, where children can again swim in the Cooum and the Adyar and boats can again float on a clear, clean Buckingham canal. A Chennai where water is adequate, the air is clean and where streets are given back to the people. The Poonga could help people learn the essential skills that we need to survive the turbulent times ahead. What we are starting will take time. The complete cleansing of Chennai's waterways may not even happen in our lifetimes, but that is a good reason to start now, keeping in mind that there is only a small difference between the tiny seed and the majestic crown of the mighty banyan tree – that essentially they are part of the same abiding faith. *Joss*



View of Srinivasapuram showing the encroachments and polluted edges of the Creek

In brief

Aurovilians working outside

The Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC) has given its agreement in principle to a policy that people who are working in Auroville can be asked to contribute 10% of their income to the Central Fund. While reaffirming that all who live in Auroville should be fully dedicated to giving their full time and energy to the realization of Auroville, the FAMC recognized that in some cases people are engaged for a time in outside activities.

Matrimandir Crane

After nearly five years the work on the foldable stainless steel crane on top of the Matrimandir has been completed. The total height of the crane in foldable position is 65 cm, making it invisible from ground level. Unfolded, it is 4 metres high. Its telescopic arm stretches out 25 metres and can carry a load of 500 kg. Standing in a gondola suspended from the crane, maintenance workers will clean the 1450 golden discs every three months.

Survey of Auroville employees postponed

Plans of Auroville's Small Employees Welfare Association and Auroville's Social Research Centre to organise a second Socio-Economic Survey of Auroville Employees, covering all of Auroville's approximately 5,000 employees, have been put in cold storage due to lack of funds. The first survey in the year 2000 was funded by the Dutch Stichting De Zaaier. For the second survey De Zaaier was willing to fund 10,000 Euros on condition that Auroville co-fund the remaining 8,800 Euros. However, adequate financial support from within Auroville has not been forthcoming.

New glossary to Record of Yoga

A 214-page glossary to Sri Aurobindo's Record of Yoga, the diary Sri Aurobindo kept on his yoga between 1909 to 1927, is now available on <http://www.sri-aurobindoashram.org/research/glossary/>. Work on this glossary is still in progress. Some definitions are provisional and will be revised before the glossary is published. Most words other than English (primarily Sanskrit), and some English words used in special sense in the Record of Yoga are included.

Nomination to Sahitya Akademi

Meenakshi, Auroville's Tamil poet and writer, has been nominated by the Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, to serve in its Tamil Advisory Board till 2012. The Sahitya Akademi is a national organization that gives out literary awards to the best works in all the regional languages of India. It also helps to translate and publish great works in Indian literature.

New lunch scheme

Promoted by the FAMC, Auroville's Central Fund through its unit City Services has started a new scheme to pay for lunch for Aurovilians working full time at Matrimandir, education and other community services. Aurovilians under the Senior Fund, Maternity Fund and Bridging Fund will also be included in this scheme. Lunches will be served at the Solar Kitchen, Aspiration, Indus Valley, Visitors' Centre, Pour Tous Distribution Centre and New Creation Corner.

Auroville refutes BBC broadcast

Auroville has dismissed as 'an outrageous piece of tabloid journalism' a film broadcast on the BBC programme NewsNight and BBC World Service alleging that Auroville condones sexual exploitation of children by Aurovilians.

It started innocently. On March 19, 2008, OutreachMedia, the Auroville service set-up to look after the logistics of visiting journalists [see the article *Managing the Media in Auroville Today* # 231, May 2008] received an email from freelance journalist Ms. Rachel Wright. She wanted to do an eight-minute video on Auroville for NewsNight, the news and current affairs programme of BBC2 and for BBC World. "It would also go on BBC online and I would do a radio version for the World Service and domestic outlets so it would have a massive reach," wrote Ms. Wright. She stated that "the piece would be trying to explain the philosophy and idealism of Auroville – why it started and how it has developed in 40 years and how as an international township it is unique in the world. We would like to talk to some of the founding members as well as some of the younger members." Ms. Wright said she had been teaching journalism in Chennai for the past two months.

After an email exchange on possible shooting sites, Ms. Wright came in early April. OutreachMedia received her well. "We organised the interviews and accompanied her on the Saturday and the Monday she was filming in Auroville," says Ann, who runs OutreachMedia together with Mauna, Tim and others. "Then she left. Our work, we thought, was finished, and we were looking forward to seeing the result."

These expectations were rudely shattered when Ms. Wright emailed from England. "As you know I was recently filming in Auroville. While there I approached some locals and found that there was real dissatisfaction with Auroville. As I delved deeper I found that there were many people claiming that young people were being sexually abused by people who lived in or were visiting Auroville. Some had been abused while attending the New Creation school and some were being picked up on the beaches and in Pondicherry. They were being given money and treats in exchange for sex ... I also talked to social workers with a local NGO who work with sexually abused children who say that Auroville doesn't scrutinize its members or its visitors and that it is attracting the wrong sort of person and creating a sex industry in Pondicherry. A local politician told me that because of Auroville, Pondicherry is becoming the brothel of South India." Ms. Wright asked for an interview with Dr. Karan Singh or for a proper and detailed response from OutreachMedia.

"We were shocked," says Tim. "And we felt abused. Why on earth hadn't she discussed this with us when she was here in Auroville? We could have organized interviews with the Secretary or with members of the Working Committee and other senior Aurovilians and we could have shown her files."

Why indeed? "People had advised me against talking to Aurovilians about this issue as they would respond violently and I would receive death threats. I felt vulnerable," replied Ms. Wright in a telephone talk. But for a journalist who claims to have 'war-zone experience', this excuse was certainly not acceptable. "It's nonsense! In Auroville's entire 40-year history no Aurovillian has ever made any death-threat to anybody!" says Tim indignantly. "We started to wonder if Ms. Wright had arrived with an entirely clean slate."

Auroville and AVI UK replies

Yet, still trusting her integrity, OutreachMedia replied to Ms. Wright. "Sexual abuse, particularly when it involves children, is something for which there is no tolerance in Auroville. At the slightest hint of such abuse, the matter would be investigated and the person would be asked to leave." A copy of the Admission Policy was sent, showing that all persons have to go through a one-year

probationary period in order to be accepted as Aurovillian. And OutreachMedia explained that, following a case in 1995 when a Newcomer was made to leave Auroville for reasons of improper behaviour with children, all those who work with children are on the alert.

OutreachMedia's letter was soon followed by a letter from Auroville International UK, addressed to the editor of BBC NewsNight, Mr. Peter Barron. "We believe that the allegations made are unsubstantiated and false and have been made with the sole objective to discredit Auroville. We further believe that to broadcast these allegations would be extremely damaging, not only to the world-acclaimed work of Auroville, but to the very children which we would all wish to protect," wrote Martin Littlewood on behalf of AVI UK, explaining that the fundraising efforts of AVI UK for village education might be harmed by the broadcast.

Auroville's Working Committee wrote a few days later, when from the reply of Mr. Barron to AVI UK it became obvious that he was disregarding the concerns and was determined to broadcast the allegations. The Working Committee objected that no Auroville authority had been contacted by Ms. Wright to give Auroville's position. It requested the BBC to postpone the showing of the film and take up a more thorough and objective investigation, which could ensure that neither the reputation of the BBC or Auroville would be carelessly put at stake.

The BBC, possibly realising that Ms. Wright's story was obviously one-sided and that he was attacked as lacking due impartiality, finally agreed that an interview with a member of the Working Committee would be held after the broadcast and tagged on to it. After more pressure from the Working Committee, the BBC also agreed to send the transcript of the video.

The video transcript.

The transcript, which arrived less than 48 hours before the scheduled broadcast, confirmed the worst fears of OutreachMedia and the Working Committee. It showed sensationalism, alternating unsubstantiated allegations with malicious innuendo and peppered with plain misinformation. The interviewees, all non-Aurovilians except one, were biased. The words of the lone Aurovillian who appeared in the video had been taken out of context. The transcript showed an appalling lack of fairness and integrity on the part of the BBC.

The Working Committee wrote a 9-page rejoinder to the BBC, ending with a statement that the airing of this video would be completely unacceptable and below the level of an institution such as the BBC, with a request not to air the video. The request went unheeded. The BBC replied that it would change the transcript. However, it only corrected some mistakes, and broadcast the video nonetheless.

And the interview? At around 5 pm, the BBC phoned that the interview could not take place in Pondicherry, as had originally been scheduled, but had to take place in a studio in Chennai at midnight that same evening. Though this implied a good 7-hour drive to Chennai and back for a 3-minute interview, the Working Committee agreed. But when the Working Committee member was on the point of getting into the car, the BBC phoned again to say that it had also not been able to organize a studio in Chennai. It then proposed to do the interview on Skype. This seemingly unprofessional handling of the interview location created the distinct impression that the BBC tried to discourage the Working Committee from giving the interview.

After the broadcast

After the film had been aired, the Working Committee issued a public

statement on the Auroville website condemning the video as 'an outrageous piece of tabloid journalism'. It was followed by a detailed additional statement on the many distortions in the video. The Chairman of the Governing Board and the members of the International Advisory Council of the Auroville Foundation too sent letters of protest to the BBC, as did scores of people from all over the world, expressing their strong disapproval. "My belief in the BBC as a reliable source of news and information has been shattered, and I will now question the accuracy of future reports," wrote many people, and asked for a public apology.

Mr. Barron, meanwhile, has more or less standardised his answers to these complaints, stating that "Rachel Wright approached this subject with proper journalistic rigour and the project complied with the BBC's editorial guidelines of fairness and balance" and that he was confident that "the BBC approached the story in good faith and presented a fair and balanced report about this important issue." It is obvious that neither he, nor Ms. Wright, wanted to be convinced that the BBC failed to broadcast an honest, well-researched and impartial documentary. The many objections notwithstanding, the BBC proceeded to broadcast the video twice on BBC World Service.

Local authorities

As can be expected, local authorities visited Auroville soon after the broadcast. High-level officers of the police and Immigration Office were concerned, for if Auroville was indeed a place where paedophiles could indulge in criminal behaviour, how was it that they were unaware of it?

The Working Committee informed the Foreign Regional Registration Officer about the cases Auroville had been dealing with in the last 15 years: 3 Aurovilians had been asked to leave on the basis of suspected (but never proven) paedophile involvement; one Newcomer was found guilty and had his probationary status ended and the authorities were informed; one guest was found guilty, sent out, and the local authorities were informed; and the attention of the police had been drawn to two persons who were roaming the area and had been bothering minors. Auroville explained that a large number of guesthouses and home stays have come up around Auroville – the Repos community on the beach alone is surrounded by 163 (!) small guesthouses – and that Auroville cannot be held responsible for what happens there.

Why Auroville?

The question 'why' Ms. Wright decided to relate child abuse to Auroville remains as yet unanswered. Child abuse, according to a report in the daily newspaper The Hindu, of December 26, 2007, is rampant in Chennai. According to a survey conducted in 2007 by the Tulir Centre for the Prevention and Healing of Child Sexual Abuse, more than 40 per cent of the children in Chennai from all social strata report various forms of sexual abuse. Rumour has it that paedophilia also thrives in the tourist town of Mahabalipuram. Why did she concentrate on Auroville?

"I think she was out for a scoop," says Mauna. "Child abuse is a problem found everywhere in the world, including India. Ms. Wright tried to connect it to Auroville to show we allow it to happen and do not act against it; and in the process to denigrate Auroville's ideals and good name. She dismisses The Mother as 'a French woman'; she falsely states in the transcript that Auroville strives for Vatican status; she lies that Aurovilians don't pay tax; she misinforms that Auroville has no money, no rules and no leaders; and she portrays Aurovilians as arrogant Westerners who repress the poor local population and take

undue advantage of them which is another falsity – for only 60% of Auroville's population are foreigners. And if she would have compared the lives of people who have been associated with Auroville since the beginning with those of people outside our geographical area, she would have found how much Auroville has done for the surrounding villages."

Biased witnesses

OutreachMedia's views are corroborated by the fact that the video shows five so-called witnesses, four of whom seem to bear a grudge against Auroville.

Two of them cannot be identified as their faces have been blackened in the video. But one of them, an anonymous villager, states an absurdity. In the transcript sent to the Working Committee he mentions, speaking about New Creation School, that "one in five children are currently being abused". This allegation was removed from the video after the Working Committee commented to the BBC that no parent would send their child to a school with such a track record. (Strangely, the remark was not removed from the BBC radio programme.) Yet, this same witness was still allowed to say that "men come in and ask them [the children] to stay after school and then have sex with them."

The BBC obviously agreed that the first part of this witness' statement was patent nonsense and hence removed it – but why did it still broadcast the second part, when the witness's unreliability had already been confirmed? And why was this statement not followed up with the interview given by the principal of the school?

The Working Committee asked for the names of these two witnesses. The BBC replied that they could not be given, but that they would inform them about Auroville's interest to talk to them. From the fact that the two have never contacted Auroville or any Indian authority can be deduced that their testimony was probably false.

Another questionable 'witness report' comes from Mr. Ram Kumar Raj, who states in the video that "the sexual abuse issue has to be taken seriously by Auroville – they should scrutinize people coming here and say if you are coming we will be watching you ...".

This statement was preceded by Ms. Wright saying, "Local charities however, are reacting to the problem. This man teaches local children how to deal with unwanted advances from predatory adults. He has seen the nature of Auroville's members change over the years."

This introduction has proven to be a clear innuendo. Mr. Raj, who works for the Pondicherry Multipurpose Social Service Society (PMSSS) in the area of child abuse prevention, clarified to a member of the Working Committee "I made a general statement which applies to any organisation. Neither the PMSSS nor any other charitable organization I know considers Auroville to be a 'problem'." The PMSSS, he clarified, also does not teach self-defence classes against 'predatory adults from Auroville'. "I have a lot of respect for the work the Aurovilians are doing for the uplift of the surrounding villages," he said.

A third dubious 'witness' is Mr. Raj Batra, a person who stayed as a guest in Auroville for 2 years before his guest status was cancelled and he was asked to leave on account of making misrepresentations about his nationality, and because of complaints by residents of an Auroville community about his anti-social and destructive behaviour while living there. He therefore obviously has a grudge against Auroville.

Another ambiguous witness is Mr. Nandhivarmam, the 'local politician' from Pondicherry, who is most probably the person who made the ludicrous statement, mentioned in Ms. Wright's first

email, that "because of Auroville, Pondicherry is becoming the brothel of South India". Mr. Nandhivarmam hosts many websites. A posting on one of them, dated April 9, 2008, is called "My fight against Auroville soon in Televisions Options." In it, he refers to Sri Aurobindo as 'a failed godman' and to The Mother as 'a Frenchwoman ... who found the key to death but is now dead – perhaps she had lost that key.'

Auroville doesn't escape his ire either. "There exists a so-called international city, a dream of the Late Mira Richard, known as Mother of Aurobindo Ashram. That can be said to be the story of deceit. Right from the beginning their aim is to establish a Vatican type of autonomous state." Nandhivarmam continues to lambast Auroville for its lack of leadership and aspiration for Divine anarchy, which he sees as an attempt at creating a lawless society which is against the laws of the land. His website shows many similar curious statements, which makes one question his rationality.

But Ms. Wright doesn't seem to have been subject to such questioning. Many of the statements she makes in the video can be traced back to this particular website. The words 'Vatican status', which appeared in the transcript (though edited out in the video); the insolent reference to The Mother; the reference to Divine Anarchy – it's all there. In another attempt to tarnish the image of Auroville she talks in the video about new people being 'inducted' to Auroville. In the original transcript, the word used was 'initiation' – it was corrected by Auroville into 'probationary period' but deliberately not used, to create the impression, as one of Auroville's supporters wrote, that "Viewers who do not know Auroville, upon watching the documentary, may be led to think 'Ah, here again is one of those weird sects, deluded by some ideal or the other, but only living in dissolution and perversion'."

Internal website quotation

The journalist states that one 'disgruntled' Aurovillian – reasons not given – gave her access to Auroville's internal website. She then shows two texts. In the first almost five-year old posting an Aurovillian voiced concern about the possibility of sexual abuse and proposed that Auroville has clear laws about sexual offence. The second text that runs 'visa has been cancelled' was taken from a security report of 2008 which relates to a mentally unstable person who was neither a guest nor an Aurovillian, and who was seen wandering in the Auroville area.

The journalist takes the existence of these postings as proof of the existence of sexual abuse, instead of what they show: a community being vigilant to ensure the safety of all people in the area.

Lack of honesty

"Ms. Wright wasn't honest when she gave us the reasons for wanting to film in Auroville. There was a pre-planned agenda," says OutreachMedia. "Her contacts with her so-called witnesses were pre-booked, for it is not possible that in the course of 3 days in Auroville she would have found all five of them. There may have never been an intention to do a film on Auroville – the intention was to find a scoop on the currently best-selling theme of paedophilia, while at the same time denigrating Auroville and the Aurovilians."

The Working Committee is now lodging a formal complaint with the BBC, as the BBC has done great harm to Auroville's reputation and is insulting the Community. Yet, one Aurovillian commented otherwise. "I didn't find the piece particularly well conceived nor convincing in its scandal-mongering – not for any reasonably intelligent viewer, anyway. It seems more damaging to the credibility of the BBC than to that of Auroville."

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Statements on the BBC broadcast

From Dr. Karan Singh, Chairman, Governing Board

To: Mr Mark Thompson, Director General, BBC

Dear Mr Thompson,

I write to you about a TV clip on Auroville, which was produced by one Rachel Wright for BBC and was broadcast as a part of 'NewsNight' programme on BBC 2 on May 21, 2008 and on BBC World on May 24, 2008. The international cultural township of Auroville in south India is administered by the Auroville Foundation, an autonomous body set up under the Auroville Foundation Act, 1988, which is accountable to Parliament of India through India's Ministry of Human Resource Development. I am presently the Chairman of the Foundation's Governing Board constituted by the Government. I am enclosing, for your information, my brief biographical sketch.

I was gravely disturbed and distressed to see that the broadcast portrays Auroville as a place inhabited by an anarchic sect where paedophilia is rampant there. By broadcasting a report containing unsubstantiated allegations of a heinous nature without cross-checking them either with the Auroville Foundation or Aurovilians, BBC has damaged its long-standing credibility as a media wedded to truth. I have been Chairman of the

Governing Board once earlier. During my earlier and the present tenure as Chairman, I have frequently visited Auroville and have been closely involved in its activities and in constant touch with a wide cross-section of Aurovilians. Further, the Foundation's Secretary, a senior serving civil servant, has his headquarters within Auroville. If paedophilia were as widespread as alleged in your report, it could not have escaped our attention.

I gather that the Working Committee of Auroville Foundation's Residents' Assembly, a statutory body, is lodging a formal complaint with the BBC Trust. Therefore, without going into a detailed rebuttal, I will restrict my observations to certain salient points.

Auroville's founding is firmly anchored in the philosophy of human unity propounded by one of the outstanding spiritual thinkers of last century, Sri Aurobindo, and was given concrete shape 40 years back by his spiritual companion, the late Mirra Alfassa, who is universally venerated as 'The Mother'. Besides the Government of India, UNESCO unanimously welcomed and endorsed the founding of Auroville as a crucible of the experiment in human unity. On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of its founding earlier this year, UNESCO reiterated its support to the Auroville Experiment through another unanimous resolution of its Executive Board. I am enclosing certain doc-

uments that will give you some idea of Auroville, its aims and objectives.

I am unhappy that your report on Auroville does not mention Sri Aurobindo at all and dismisses the Mother as "a French woman", and creates an impression that is exactly opposite of what we are striving to achieve through Auroville. The report keeps on harping on the instances of paedophilia alleged by certain individuals whose credentials your reporter does not establish nor does she challenge the credibility of their statements. You will appreciate that the first task of a seasoned journalist, when faced with odious allegations, is to cross check them with appropriate sources before putting them out as gospel truth as she has done. I am told that Rachel Wright was a guest of Auroville community while she was filming there. It is all the more reprehensible on her part as a conscientious journalist of a responsible organisation like BBC to have blithely abused the generosity of her hosts by keeping them totally in dark and surreptitiously advancing her own agenda of maligning an institution that is considered unique in the world. When confronted later as to why she did not cross check the allegations with her hosts, she is reported to have said that she was advised against it and also felt 'vulnerable' because of the information, a defence that is specious and unacceptable. When confronted with gross inaccuracies in the report, as

a last ditch attempt, BBC has made an effort to insert a bit of praise about Auroville. But it is obviously so inconsistent with the entire trend of the report as to serve no purpose at all.

The Auroville cultural township has a population of around 1,900 adults and children drawn from 40 different countries including the UK. In a community with such a diversity of cultural backgrounds and a minimal of overseeing authority, the possibility of occasional deviant behaviour by one or two individuals cannot be ruled out. But those in Auroville's leadership position within the community and the Auroville Foundation's Governing Board are always alert about such unethical acts and have not failed to take prompt and effective action. Paedophilia is a crime under Indian Penal Code. If it were as rampant as portrayed in your report, the local Police would have surely taken recourse to action under the law.

Instead of promoting the cause of human unity that Auroville represents and the world is in dire need of, I regret to say that the BBC has done great harm to Auroville's reputation. A suitable apology from you on behalf of the BBC is the least that we would expect.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Karan Singh
Chairman, Governing Board,
Auroville Foundation

From the International Advisory Council of Auroville

Dear Mr. Barron,

We are the members of the International Advisory Council of Auroville, which is empowered under the Auroville Foundation Act to advise the Governing Board. At the same time we also advise Aurovilians and in particular the Working Committee of the Residents' Assembly. We also help Auroville with its international relations and help the separate organization Auroville International to promote knowledge of the township and what it stands for. To do this we meet twice a year in Auroville and we usually spend considerable time there. In this way we have come to know Auroville, its institutions, the way it works, and its activities well. We have developed a particular admiration for Auroville's educational activities. Hence we feel compelled to protest to you about the film you showed on May 21st in NewsNight and consequently on BBC World.

We know that Dr Karan Singh, the Chairman of Auroville's Governing Board, and one of India's longest serving and respected politicians, has written to the Director General about this film and that Auroville will be filing a formal complaint. We also know that you and the reporter, Rachel Wright, were made well aware of Auroville's views on the draft script and the version of the film before the final one. We will not therefore go into a detailed rebuttal of the film, but just make some salient points.

The description of Auroville contained many errors, and when the script was eventually sent to the Auroville Working Committee for their comments, they were pointed out, but by no means all of them were corrected.

The description of Auroville in the film nowhere near does justice to the philosophy, which led to its foundation, the philosophy of one of the most revered Indian thinkers of the 20th century Sri Aurobindo.

The Mother his spiritual collaborator, was highly regarded by statesmen such as J. Nehru and Indira Gandhi. She is dismissed as "a French Woman". Sri Aurobindo is not mentioned.

The magnificent meditation centre, known as the Matrimandir, which the Aurovilians built themselves, and which is widely acclaimed as an outstanding and original architectural achievement, is dismissed as "a giant gold sphere."

The reporter talks of 'induction' taking one year when it was pointed out to her that the year was a 'probationary period' and there was no 'induction' or 'initiation' whatsoever.

The impression purposefully given and left with the viewer is that Auroville is some peculiar sect, which is quite contrary to all it stands for.

The film also indicates that Auroville is anarchic. There is, as we have said, a Governing Body and an International Advisory Council. A senior Officer of the Indian Administrative Service of Joint Secretary level manages the office of the Auroville Foundation in Auroville. The Aurovilians themselves have a Resident's Assembly, a Working Committee, and several other bodies. The vigour with which the Auroville Working Committee has defended Auroville against your reporter's allegations is proof that Auroville's own institutions function effectively.

The film contains allegations against Auroville, which are not challenged in any way by the reporter. She simply accepts them as true. Her most important witness claims that he left Auroville, and that claim is not challenged. The Auroville records show that he was told to leave and had the reporter checked any of her facts with Auroville Outreach, the organization responsible for the township's relations with the press, she would have found details of the misdemeanours he committed. This was pointed out by the Working Committee when they read the script but still not reflected in the film transmitted.

In the film only one Aurovillian, Mr. Gilles Guigan, is given a chance to say something. He seems to have been a last minute inclusion after the lack of any Aurovillian interview in the film had been pointed out to the reporter by the Working Committee. Mr. Guigan's words have been crudely edited to make him appear to support the film, although the statement is so brief as to be almost meaningless. As we know Mr. Guigan well through his dedicated work in the construction of the unique meditation centre, we can't believe he intended to endorse the film. This was confirmed when we received a copy of his objection to the BBC stating that he felt betrayed by Mrs. Wright to whom he talked for over 45 minutes.

Several of the allegations were beyond belief. One, which was removed when Auroville pointed out its absurdity, stated that one in five children in an Auroville School were being abused. This allegation was made by an anonymous villager who didn't explain his connection with the school or how he had obtained this information. The villager was still

allowed to say that men came into the school and asked children to stay and have sex with them after school. This seems extraordinarily unlikely in a school most of whose staff are women and which has been approved by international donors who fund it. It is also inspected by the government of the State of Tamil Nadu. Another of your reporter's witnesses is a social worker. He is unidentified except by his name. Viewers are not told which organization he works for or what his experience is. His allegations are generalisations containing nothing specific. One victim does testify to having been abused by one Aurovillian but he does not appear to be a recent case although it is impossible to be sure about that because the journalism is so sloppy that no indication is given about when this occurred.

There is a deliberate attempt to imply that Auroville is in some way responsible for the unfortunate fact that the increasing popularity of the nearby town of Pondicherry as a tourist destination has attracted foreign paedophiles. In a piece to camera the reporter says she saw three men with boys on beach. The innuendo implied is that all three men were paedophiles and all from Auroville. But there is nothing to back this up and none of the men are shown on film. To strengthen the innuendo the reporter speaks of Auroville or Auro beaches. But all beaches in India are public.

The original script sent to Auroville concluded with the statement by the reporter, "Auroville does not seem to be operating in the spirit in which it was founded." In a last ditch attempt to make the film more balanced the conclusion was altered to include praise of Auroville but it is so obviously inconsistent with the whole trend of the film as to serve no purpose.

The film will inevitably create damaging and unwarranted suspicion about Auroville. It has already severely damaged the BBC's reputation for fair and balanced journalism among all those who know and admire Auroville. We believe it is only fitting that the BBC finds some way of acknowledging that the film does not live up to those standards, and ensuring that it is not shown again.

Yours sincerely,

Sir Mark Tully, Chairman,
Ms Vishakha Desai,
Dr Michael Murphy,
Dr Doudou Diène,
Dr Marc Luyckx Ghisi

From the Support Group New Creation Bilingual School

Ms Rachel Wright, the freelance journalist who came to NCBS, was not open about her intentions. We thought she was making a straightforward programme on the school and Auroville in general. Needless to say we are appalled and shocked that the BBC would present something so biased and poorly researched, and so damaging to the very children it claims it wants to protect.

When the present Support Group took up the management of NCBS in 2005, we were aware that there had been a few incidents of abuse before our time and that offenders had been asked to leave Auroville. Auroville did not turn a blind eye to such behaviour, as the BBC has implied, but in the early days the community may have been slow to respond because it was quite naive. It seemed unbelievable to Aurovilians then that volunteers working with children could take advantage of them in such a manner.

However, these unfortunate events are now behind us. Auroville has an unequivocal stand on these matters and does not condone any sexual misconduct. One of the first things the NCBS support group initiated in 2005 were educative talks with its staff on sexual abuse so as to alert them on signs of abuse, and we established clear guidelines for all staff and volunteers who work in the school. Volunteers have to provide credentials and sign and abide by a code of conduct which includes absolutely no physical intimacy between a teacher and his/her pupil. We also are watchful for any signs that something in a volunteer/child relationship is not correct.

Support Group,
New Creation Bilingual School
Auroville

From Shankar, Principal New Creation Bilingual School

As a long-term Tamil Aurovillian, and being the Principal of New Creation Bilingual School (NCBS), I was shattered to pieces when I saw what you have aired about Auroville and New Creation Bilingual School. I am one of the Tamil locals who was born in Kulapalayam Village (which was mentioned in the video) and grew up as a villager till I was 28 and joined Auroville. Afterwards I started realising why experimental communities like Auroville are most essential for the world at this crucial moment.

Our school is supported by the Auroville community, the Govt. of India and by others from all over the world. Imagine how excited I was when I heard about BBC coming to our school and filming our children. In fact, I was the only one whom your reporter Rachel Wright interviewed at school (for more than 10 minutes and it was not shown in the clip) and she also filmed some of our children. I thought Rachel Wright was an angel who came to help our more than 200 poor children from my village. But what I saw in the TV was not something like my thought but more like 'we Tamil teachers working at NCBS have been raping our own uncle's, brother's and aunt's children every day.' You people may not know the culture of South India, but I as a Tamil who has been working with some very dedicated, old-time western Aurovilians for the upliftment of my poor village children, my high ideas about Ms Wright and BBC were brutally slashed into pieces.

What we Tamils have been thinking about BBC has become a nightmare. I cannot understand the way you accept your reporter Rachel Wright. In Indian schools we learn a song "BBC is the media" (if you are interested, I can translate this Tamil children song about the glory of the BBC for you), but now I find myself thinking about forms of falsehood.

Please come to the screen and say "We BBC apologise for the video clip we showed about New Creation Bilingual School and Auroville". Or be happy about this assassination that your reporter did to my village children and keep talking about Children Development in your TV.

In deep and great sadness,
Aum....

Shankar
Principal,
New Creation Bilingual School, Auroville

Other responses to the BBC broadcast

From Heidi Wats

I am writing to express my concern about the slander and misrepresentation in your one sided report on sexual allegations in Auroville, which was aired in India on Saturday, May 24.

I am a professor at the Antioch University New England Graduate School in Keene, New Hampshire. For over 15 years our campus has been engaged in a partnership with Auroville, which facilitates informal exchanges between teachers and students in Auroville with teachers and students at Antioch University New England. These exchanges occur between all of the schools in Auroville, both those that are operated for members of the Auroville community and those sponsored by Aurovillians to serve the local village children.

New Creation Bilingual School has always been a part of this informal exchange program. As the liaison and chief representative of the Auroville/Antioch New England partnership I spend approximately three months a year in Auroville and have often spent weeks at a time living in the community of New Creation. I can say unequivocally that there is no tolerance for abuse

of any kind, sexual or otherwise in the Auroville communities. Auroville schools, in fact, are distinguished from the village schools because all physical punishment is forbidden.

The boundaries between Auroville and the villages are permeable, and indeed, hardly visible. It is quite possible for strangers who are not Aurovillians to make contact with children in or around the villages without being in any way visible or under the control of Auroville, and it may be that there is some abuse in these areas beyond Auroville jurisdiction, as there would be in any town or city in the world. Whenever there is any hint or allegation of sexual abuse within the jurisdiction of Auroville it is immediately investigated, and if the charges are substantiated the perpetrators are asked to leave the community and their behavior is reported to the police. There have been instances of vindictive and unsubstantiated charges, as in any society, and these have been dealt with appropriately.

It would be impossible for me or any other representatives from Antioch University to live and work in the New Creation Community, or any community in Auroville for that matter, without

being aware of sexual abuse on the scale that is described as fact in this video. Outsiders visiting New Creation invariably comment on the eagerness with which the children come to school, their broad smiles, laughter and air of security. This is not a description of children who are exploited or abused.

Quite the contrary. The schools in Auroville, which are run for the benefit of the village children, charge no fees and are completely supported by the charity of Aurovillians, international organizations and individuals.

Part of the mission of Auroville is to support and assist the native populations in the bioregion. Auroville Schools for village children are one response to this call. Social outreach into the villages in the form of preschools, women's self-help groups and health services are another. So also are the extraordinary experiments in sustainability; in reforestation, locally appropriate agriculture, water conservation, erosion control and alternative forms of energy for which Auroville is famous. This research is designed to be of service to the community, the bioregion, India and the planet. None of this work in Auroville for the common good is men-

tioned in the video. Auroville is depicted as a self-indulgent, isolationist community of foreigners "without rules or money". In the Auroville I know there are many every day rules, from consensual understanding about traffic patterns and urban development to the simple guidelines and regulations which make it possible to administer schools, dental and health services, a commissary, art and architecture programs, and public services. Many of the Aurovillians I know live on less than \$100. a month. To enable the society to function smoothly there are rules in Auroville and there is money, but the aspiration of Auroville is to create an intentional community without barriers of race, religion or creed which will allow each individual to develop to his or her full potential and at the same time to create a society dedicated to human unity and the common good. The depiction of Auroville as a hot bed of perversion and cultural insensitivity is a total travesty.

I hope that you will require your research team to substantiate the allegations which are made in this report, or to make a full and public retraction.

Sincerely yours,

*Heidi Wats, Ph.D.
Antioch University New England*

From Greta Jensen

I have been a regular Newsnight watcher for many years and have always trusted that the news is presented with the degree of integrity I have come to expect from the BBC.

I write to complain about the highly biased item on Auroville last night, as a result of which I feel I can no longer trust the integrity of the programme editor or the presenter, Jeremy Paxman.

The whole coast from Chennai down to Puducherry is known for child sex tourism, so I'm sure tourists go to Auroville too with evil intent, but its hard to know what Auroville can do other than to be vigilant and to ask any suspects to leave - which I understand they have done in the past. The big question is, what is the Indian Government and/or the local police doing about the allegations and indeed the wider child abuse problem related to popular tourist destinations?

What checks did Newsnight do on the reporter, the interviewee and the witnesses to check their motives and their credibility? Why was so much time given to them to put their case, while so little opportunity was given to Auroville to respond?

I am an independent international development consultant to a number of large and small UK-based INGOs. I have for the past 10+ years worked with various Auroville schools on education projects run specifically for the benefit for the local village children in the surrounding district. These projects have been co-financed by both DFID and the European Commission and as such have come under the scrutiny of a wide range of people during project evaluations, as well as the Education Department of the Govt. of Tamil Nadu and the Ministry of Human Resources of the Govt. of India. The latter as it subsidises Auroville's educational outreach programmes.

If child abuse were endemic in these schools then I am sure I would have been aware of it and indeed I am sure the various Govt. departments would have investigated, given that the ethical and operational expectations they hold of Auroville are very high.

I am also a UKCP registered psychotherapist with masters in psychotherapy. In this capacity I have worked with a number of clients who were victims of serious sexual abuse as children. I am therefore very sensitive to the need to be vigilant in all situations that involve

close adult-child interface. The allegations made against Auroville in Ms Wright's report are therefore deeply disturbing to me and indeed I have often discussed this matter with teachers of the Auroville outreach schools (i.e. those that serve the children of the surrounding villages) that were the beneficiaries of the EC co-financing to the education project that I was involved with, but felt reassured that monitoring systems were in place to prevent such abuse - indeed one of the components of this project was a very impressive training centre where young women from the villages, who had been the victims of abuse, were taught life skills within a nurturing therapeutic environment. The work of this centre has provided a much admired model for visiting staff from many European and US NGOs.

Apart from innovative education initiatives, Auroville has done an amazing amount of work to bring a range of livelihood opportunities to the region and has developed cutting edge environmental regeneration and appropriate technology methods for which they have won many national and international awards. Their response to the Tsunami was instant and effective because they knew those that were affected locally. Auroville is so much more than was presented last night. Did anyone ever stop to think of the damage this biased coverage would cause to all the excellent work that Auroville has done over a period of some 40 years?

And finally I must ask the question, would you deal with accusations of child abuse that occur in the UK in the same way? Coverage of the recent Jersey child abuse case has been very different because, quite rightly, allegations have to be substantiated with hard facts.

Why should journalistic standards drop when dealing with a developing country?

I have never registered a complaint about any TV programme before, but I am doing so now because I feel so strongly that Ms Wright's report was not a fair and balanced report about what I agree is indeed a very important issue. I in no way condone child abuse and do feel it needs to be investigated wherever there are suspicions. However, it does not serve the issue to put out biased and poorly researched reports that verge on the sensationalist.

Yours sincerely,

Greta Jensen, U.K.

From Laurent Sauerwein

As a former senior reporter on French national public television (France 2) and recent visitor to Auroville, I am writing to you to protest against the bias, manipulations and innuendoes contained in Rachel Wright's "report". I hesitate to use the term "report", as her sweeping accusations of paedophilia and other allegations constitute, I am sorry to say, a distasteful piece of sensationalist journalism unworthy of the BBC.

I am not a member of Auroville, but have just spent two sabbatical months there, as a paying guest, enough time to be more than a fleeting tourist. I have met many people, residents and villagers, often more than superficially. From the innumerable conversations I have had in the community and around it, with real people, not anonymous silhouettes on a screen, but face to face, eye to eye, I find Auroville to be a respectful and respectable, beautifully stimulating place. It is a rare social, spiritual, economic and ecological utopia, an open community composed of real people. It is composed of approximately 800 Indian members (by far the largest group, something which Ms. Wright carefully obliterates) and 1200 other men, women and children coming from over 40 countries of this problematic planet.

I went to Auroville with an open mind and a genuine curiosity. Coming from a very different cultural background, I was not particularly predisposed to its spiritual dimension, and I, still now, probably remain more sensitive to the human, social and ecological adventure which Auroville represents in my eyes. But I have also discovered that there is absolutely nothing coercive about Auroville's spirituality, and I recognize that the writings of Sri Aurobindo and of his spiritual collaborator known as The Mother compose an important founding element for the community. The yoga and meditation that some choose to engage in, strike me as activities more respectable than financial speculation or making war. Auroville's contribution to the development of the region and it's concrete action in the surrounding villages

can't easily be dismissed. Ms. Wright mentions them in passing, but only to smother it under an avalanche of dubious accusations, made by people whose motivations and credibility are less than clear.

Auroville has problems of course, economic, social and cultural, but the community does seem keen on confronting them. It does so, with lucidity and frankness, both in private and public, on its various websites, on the webcast Auroville radio and in print publications. As opposed to what is stated in the broadcast, Auroville is not without rules, and it goes about managing its internal problems firmly and in a human manner. Auroville is neither a sect nor a religious order. It is a community of humans and it has principles. They are open to debate, but debate is alas not what Ms. Wright had in mind.

It is particularly shocking to see how Ms. Wright extracts a perfectly reasonable sentence from the interview of a known member of the community in order to mobilize it as an element toward the fabrication of her pamphlet: "For an ideal society, you have to have ideal people, and we don't have ideal people," candidly says the interviewee, without suspecting what would be contrived around his innocent remark. The quote, taken out of context, was of course part of broader considerations on the general welfare and evolution of Auroville. Ms. Wright turned it around to make it fit her dubious agenda.

The rest of her "report" unravels like a text-book model of carefully crafted manipulation and abuse, complete with unsubstantiated assertions, loaded generalisations and disturbing innuendoes. Far from representing the "full investigation" that you claim on your website, the result is unethical and intellectually unacceptable.

Auroville deserves better than this brutal, libellous hatchet job. Sincerely yours,

Laurent Sauerwein, Paris, France

From Ambu and Moris

We have been working as social workers and program coordinators in the Auroville Village Action Trust for the past 20 years. Our main job is to stimulate activities and development in villages around Auroville mostly through self-help groups. So we can honestly say that we have a fairly good knowledge of what is going on in our area.

We were shocked to hear insinuations in your program as if there were large-scale children abuses by Aurovillians. We can testify that there is no such a thing, and that on the contrary Aurovilian authorities have taken swift action on the very few occasions when such misconduct came to light.

We should also add that Auroville has created and is managing many schools for the villages, which definitely

benefit the local population a great deal. To slander those institutions, as your documentary tried to do, is in effect to harm these villagers and their children.

Therefore we request you to stop airing this programme and to remove it from your website with immediate effect.

Regards,

*Ambu Siromani
A. Gerald Moris*

From Christine Rhone

The item on Auroville shown on NewsNight on 21 May was a highly biased and prejudiced story, unworthy of the BBC. To see so many misrepresentations and distortions in one news clip degrades the credibility of all BBC reporting. My view of its integrity has permanently changed.

The main point of your item was that Auroville does nothing to combat child abuse. And that is - quite simply - untrue. Like most communities, urban or rural, in the civilized world, Auroville does combat child abuse of every kind.

The reporter, Rachel Wright, must be at a point in her career where she wants to move up from stories about 'school trips in jeopardy', 'reassuring poorer students', and the fact that 'couples are usually made up of taller men and smaller women'. A good career boost would surely be to come up with a story something along the

lines of the recent FLDS child abuse allegations in Texas, unearthing as many similarities as possible.

Intent on producing such a story, she carefully chose only interviewees and witnesses who would support her stance. She did not attempt to provide a balanced picture. The only interview of an Aurovilian, Carel Thieme, was tacked onto the end of the clip like a concessionary afterthought, done long-distance. The quality of the sound was poor, and there was no footage of him. Perhaps your reporter thought it best to leave Auroville before interviewing anyone who knows it in depth.

It is one thing for an ambitious reporter to try to advance her career by misrepresentation, but quite another for an authority like the BBC to broadcast a lie to millions of people.

Yours truly,

*Christine Rhone
London, England*

From Alan Vickers

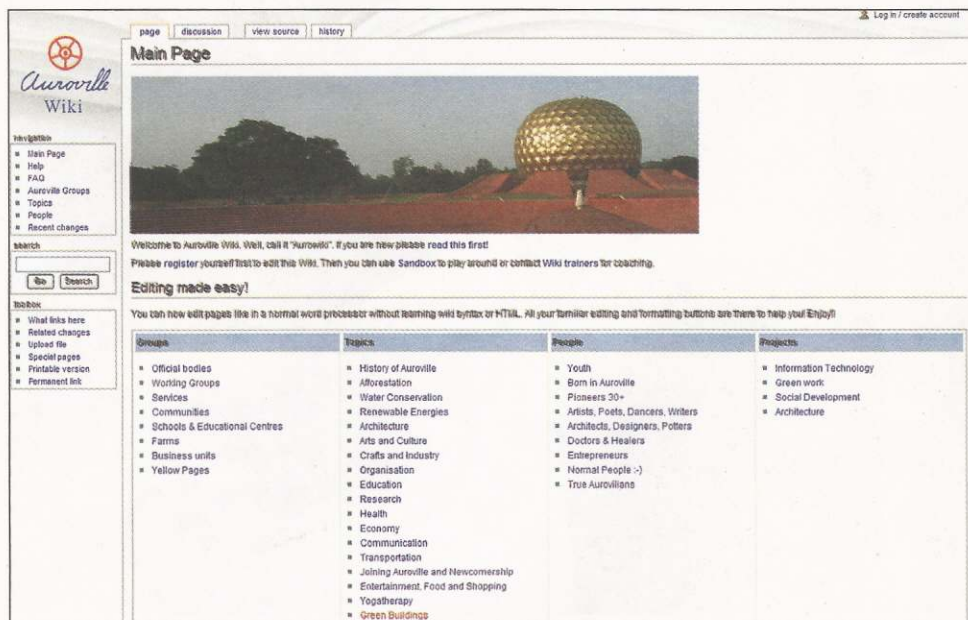
I am writing with regard to your response to my complaint. You come across as someone who knows he has made a mistake and is now acting to protect himself. Your lack of honesty in accepting that you made a mistake is further evidence that the integrity of the BBC has been undermined.

Auroville wants the truth more than anything. If there is anything that has been hidden or suppressed by the community let it be brought into the light. But if it is confirmed that the allegations were unfounded, let the BBC demonstrate sufficient integrity to apologise, or to show a programme that presents to the world a truer picture of Auroville, its aims and achievements.

*Alan Vickers
Sawbridgeworth, UK*

Social Software for Collaboration and Consensus

Early this year, Auroville was visited by Jonathan Stray from San Francisco, who is an expert on technology and society. He spent time in Auroville exploring the possibilities of setting up social software systems for the community, working with a small group of Aurovilians. His presentation "Tools for Collectives, Collaboration and Consensus in the 21st Century" was well-attended.



The new Auroville Wiki got launched on April 24th 2008

The World Wide Web is a completely new type of human communication medium, and is of much relevance to Auroville because the radically decentralized and consensus-based mode of operation of its tools which fits in perfectly with Auroville's charter.

Today's Auroville seems to run on primarily on big meetings. But nobody seems to like them or think that they are a truly good way to share information with the community or make important decisions. The problem is one of scale. When a community is very small, say, the original 35 Aurovilians, it is practical?

Various solutions to this problem have been proposed throughout history, most of which have revolved around the centralization of power, such as in a monarch or an elected government. But as Auroville is supposed to be governed by consensus, even democracy is not quite in line with this community's ideals.

The new medium of web-based communication however offers very practical possibilities to answer this problem. It is worth repeating that these possibilities are new. It is really only in the last ten years that the types of systems loosely termed as social software have come into existence.

Social software is software plus people. That is, it is the combination of a piece of online software and a set of community practices about how that software is to be used to forward the aims of a community.

Examples of Social Software

The most well-known of the social software is Wikipedia. Each article in Wikipedia is editable by anyone, and so experts and knowledgeable volunteers in many different fields have donated their time to create, edit, and revise the articles.

When Wikipedia was first proposed, many people thought it wouldn't work. Can a system so open, so trusting, so reliant on the goodwill of so many people who have never met each other, possibly result in good information? It turns out that it does work, and comparisons of Wikipedia to published encyclopedias show that both have about the same number of factual errors.

Wikipedia is not the only example of a Social Software. There are many others such as the exchange or trade lists, community-mediated discussions, blogs and community portals. Of these, the community portal combines the features of all of the above – wikipedia, trade listings, discussion forums, blogs, and more – all into a single web site. Logging into this site gives "at a glance" information about the goings on of the entire community. AVnet is such a community portal.

A case study

When I first arrived in Auroville, I became involved with the Auroville Environmental Exhibition project. The aim was to produce a series of panels describing Auroville's accomplishments in different fields (energy, land, water, waste, architecture, mobility, food). The deadline was tight, and the team was distributed through different offices in Auroville. Plus, many other people needed to be consulted about their individual fields of work.

I set up a mailing list and a wiki for this project. The mailing list was used for general coordination between all the parties to the project (researchers, writers, graphic designers,

mangers.) The wiki was used to create, store and manage the text of each panel.

The wiki was successful in that the latest revision of the text was always available to everyone – no more searching through old emails and trying to figure out if you had the right version. It also allowed anyone on the team to make their edits and revisions directly on the master copy of the text, and these edits could then be reviewed and tracked with the "history" feature. Finally, work could be performed anywhere with an internet connection. In fact, I finished my work on the project from an internet café in Sri Lanka.

This small experiment also uncovered several challenges for social software in Auroville. Lack of internet access and computer literacy meant not everyone could or did use the system. In addition, some people just weren't comfortable editing on the wiki, or even on a computer at all, and I had to manually integrate paper edits several times. Also, the web hosting company upgraded their servers and made the site crash for two days. In short, there are both infrastructure and cultural challenges for social software in Auroville.

Challenges for Social Software in Auroville

Ideally, there would be internet access everywhere, probably through wifi. L'Avenir is well aware of this problem and is preparing a network master plan. Meanwhile, the existing infrastructure could be improved in simple ways, such as by setting up a system of Auroville maintained wifi access points on existing landline connections.

In many areas of the developed world, computers are now seen as an essential, personal, and much-loved communication tool. But you don't see this in Auroville.

An oft-heard complaint of computers being expensive is a real issue in any attempt to put community processes online. However, it can be solved in several ways – by providing public access terminals (preferably free) at locations like the Solar Kitchen, the Town Hall, Bharat Nivas, etc. and perhaps in each community too. Then no one would be without convenient access to online tools.

Finally the issue of language being a barrier to the use of online systems within Auroville is real, especially within the Tamil community. There are also some technological solutions to this problem. First, automatic translation software is constantly improving and is now reasonably good. Second, computer-based language training is very effective, and anyone with a computer can learn on their own very quickly with software such as Rosetta Stone. For those who have difficulty reading or typing, there is now very good text-to-speech and speech-to-text software.

Humanity's need for Social Software

When a community is very small, everyone knows everyone else. Knowledge is, as usual, distributed throughout the people in the community, but everyone knows who to ask. Decisions can be made by consensus of all members of the community, just by getting together and talking.

As a community grows, informal sharing and decision-making break down. For eventually – when there are hundreds or thousands of people – it becomes impossible to know everyone personally. If knowledge is to be shared in such a situation it must be written down. Similarly, if decisions are to be made in a reasonable timeframe,

all-member meetings are no longer effective, because only one person can speak at a time and only one issue can be discussed at once.

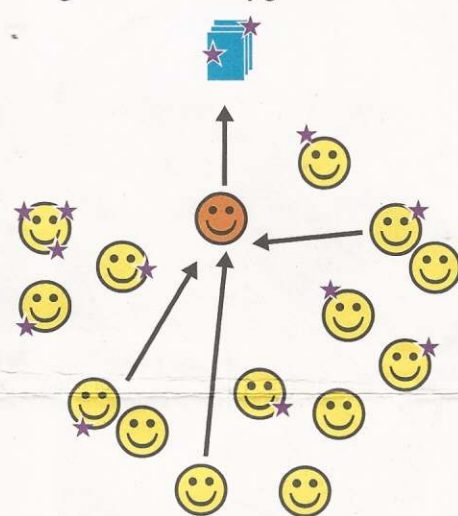
These are the practical considerations, and humans have traditionally responded to the communication challenges of large communities (such as entire countries) by centralization and hierarchy.

Centralization and hierarchy are antithetical to the Auroville ideals. Yet there has historically been no other option for large groups. Now the web offers a new and real chance to experiment with decentralizing both knowledge and decision-making.

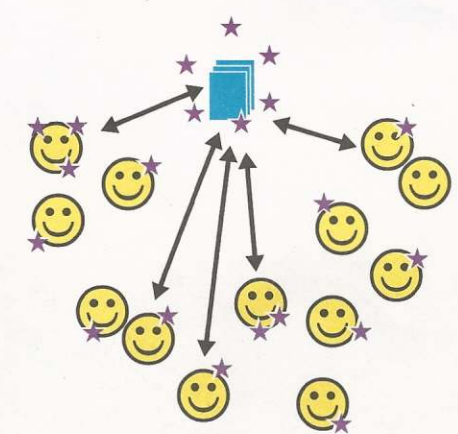
From Democracy to Consensus

In representative democracy, decisions are made by an elected representative on behalf of the people. Even if this representative is honest and competent, this system is not truly consensus. This is due to practical reasons: not every citizen can be expected to vote on every single issue, nor vote intelligently.

In the figure below, the central person in orange is the elected representative, and the blue document is the final decision. The stars represent the knowledge and judgment of members of the community. Only those in direct contact with the representative can influence the final decision, and most of the knowledge and ability scattered throughout the community goes unused.



With the appropriate online tool, the situation becomes different (see below). Imagine a wiki which contains the text of the decision to be made. Here each member of the community can interact directly with the text. Moreover, the interaction is bi-directional: that is each person editing the proposed text also reads all that has come before. Therefore the decision making process also becomes an educational process for the community.



Not only does more of the community's knowledge and judgment get applied to the final decision, but this knowledge becomes more widely shared as a matter of course.

Auroville Wiki

The current problem with AVnet is that most things can be in multiple places. I have spent some time with AVnet and now hold the opinion that almost all of the content on it could actually be accessed through a very small number of links. If Auroville is supposed to be a university for human unity, where are the results reported?

There's a lot of knowledge within Auroville, in very many fields, from organic farming to solar energy to spiritual awakening, to the current plans of the housing committee and this month's budget.

Most of it is not written down, and so it is unavailable to the general population of Auroville – at least if you don't know who to ask. It also gets correspondingly difficult for newcomers to

become informed. There have been attempts at fixing this problem, such as the publication of the booklet Auroville in a Nutshell, but such a booklet requires a dedicated editorial team, and will require continual updating.

An all-Auroville wiki is a simple and obvious choice. Each unit could write and maintain a page describing their activities, on their own schedule and according to need for or level of interest in communicating with the community. Anyone with knowledge would be free to add pages for other topics. Everyone would know where to find this information. Community knowledge, diversity of viewpoint, and transparency of decision-making would drastically improve.

Auroville could then decide to make certain portions of the AVwiki public, readable by the entire world. This would be a much more in-depth and up-to-date look at Auroville than the static web site currently available. Moreover, it is ridiculous that it is possible to read online about the latest, most cutting-edge research in every field of human endeavor, but one has to physically travel to Auroville to see what has been learned here.

The wiki could also be used for collaboration with those not physically present in Auroville, be they AVI members or just knowledgeable outsiders. Such people would be given write access to the wiki, allowing them to contribute to the Auroville discussion from afar. (Passwords, encrypted connections, and other tools could be used to deal with security concerns.)

Consensus Decision-Making System

Now we come to the most radical proposal. I am going to describe a hypothetical system for online community decision-making in Auroville. The process I am proposing has two parts. The first is a discussion forum and a wiki page is used to discover, clarify, and reach consensus on the major possible courses of action. The second, when consensus on the possibilities is achieved, a voting if more than one option remains.

This can be done fairly with "preference voting" (see figure below), where each person states their preference for first choice, second choice, and so on. Preference voting is far better at taking into account the wishes of the population than standard naming only a single candidate.

(Rank candidate in order of choice)	1st choice	2nd choice	3rd choice	4th choice	5th choice	6th choice
Candidate A	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Candidate B	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Candidate C	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Candidate D	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Candidate E	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Candidate F	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

No more than one oval per column No more than one oval per candidate

Would such a decision-making system work? I think that it will. We know from Wikipedia that a large group of diverse individuals, even people who have never met in person, can work together to overcome their difficulties and reach consensus on describing the major points of view on a topic.

While it may be too much to ask for everyone to agree all the time, a Wiki, with appropriate ground-rules, seems to be very good at evolving thorough and reasonable arguments for each side. After that, online voting is easy and does not cost much, and therefore very practical.

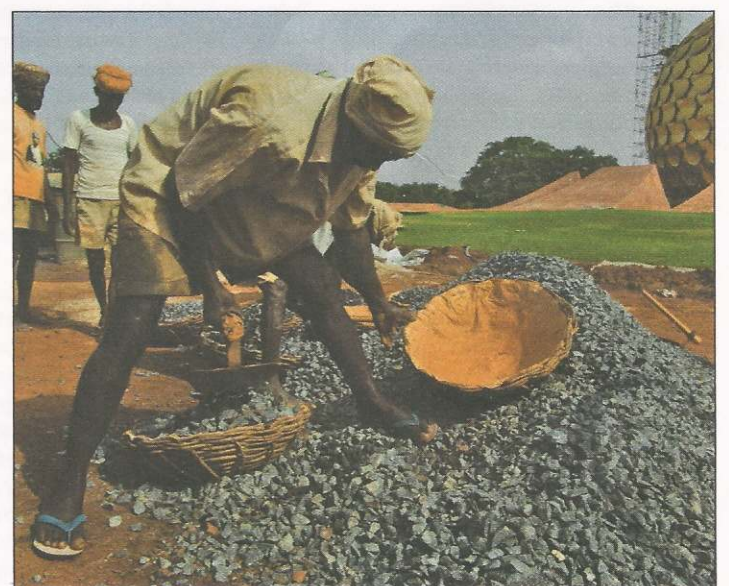
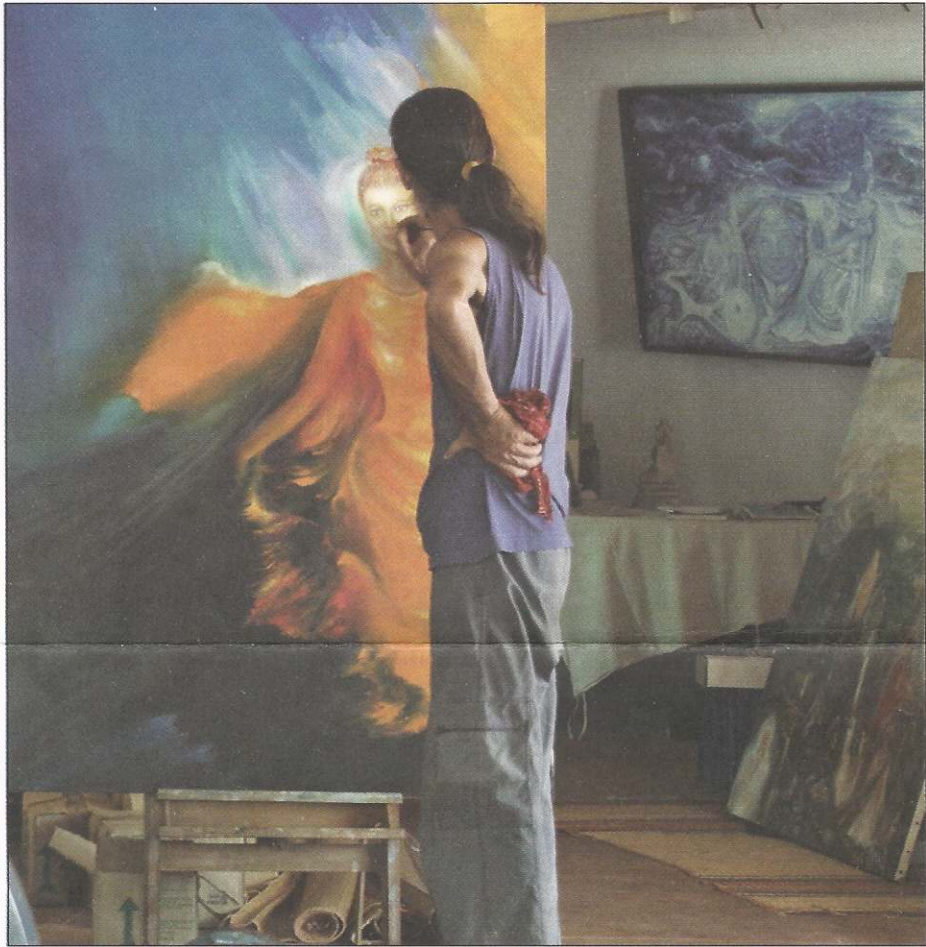
The question is not "Would this work?" but "would this work better than the current system of meetings and working groups?"

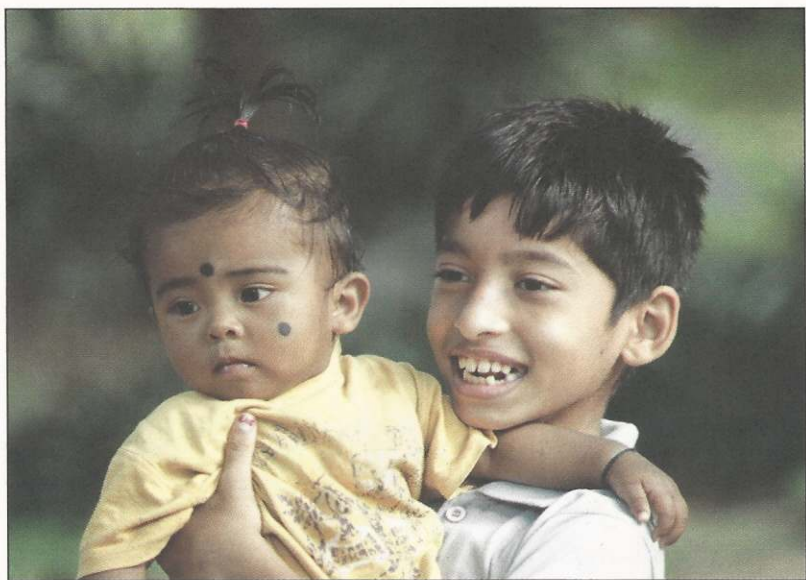
Would better information be brought to light? Would each person feel that they could participate easily if they want to, and find it easy to become educated about the nuances of any issue that concerns them? Would the citizens of Auroville feel themselves to be, and in actuality become, more empowered?

An Experiment in Human Unity

So far as I know, no large group anywhere in the world has attempted to make their decisions using radically decentralized online tools. Might this be a future, post-democratic model of government? Many people suspect so, but no one really knows. Certainly, no national government is willing to undertake such an experiment. Smaller successes are needed first, and Auroville seems to be the perfect place to make such an experiment. An experimentation might be of great value not only to Auroville, but to humanity.

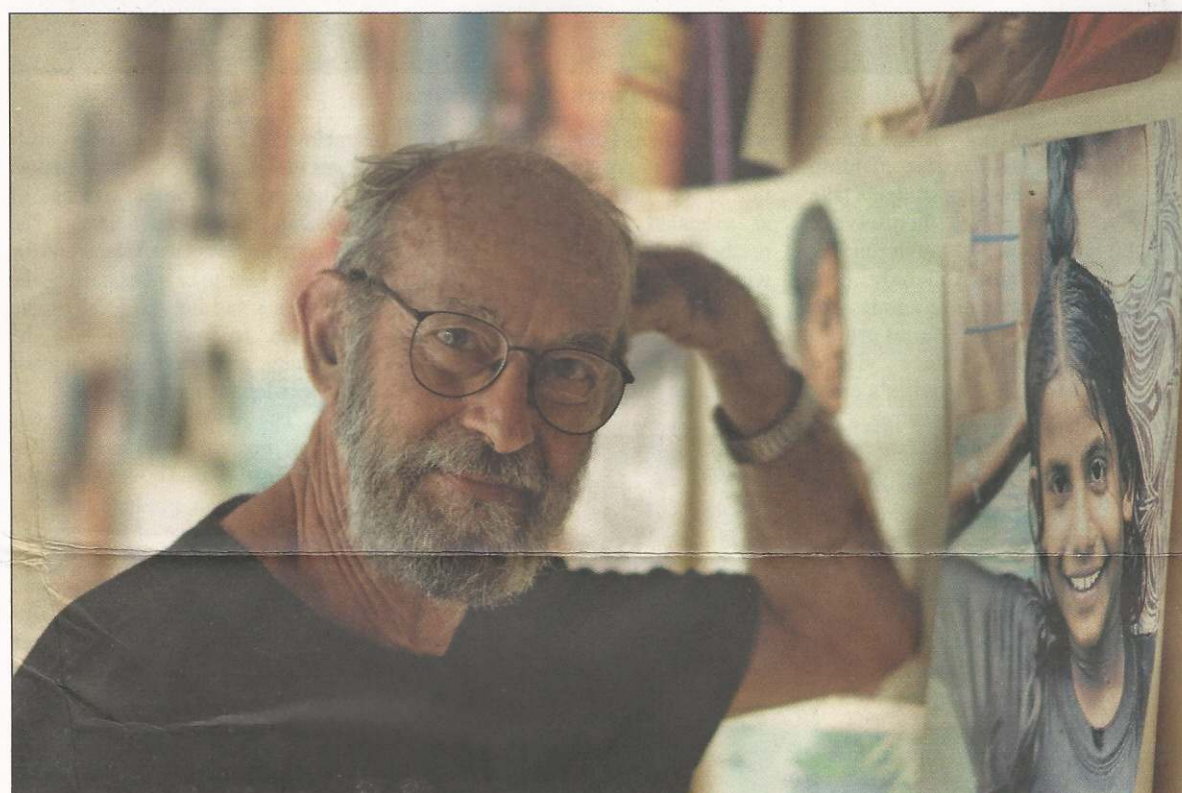
From a paper by Jonathan Stray





'Lightstory'

Giorgio Molinari's ebullient presence can be found in all events and celebrations whether it is within Auroville or in the festivities of our village neighbours. With wonder in his eyes, a spring in his step, and a trusted camera in tow, who is Giorgio and what's his story?



Giorgio

Seventy-two year old Giorgio Molinari has been living in Auroville since October of 2003. But it was almost thirty years ago, that Milan-based Giorgio first came upon Auroville – serendipitously, of course, as with most of us similarly led here by destiny.

As a photographer specializing in architecture, Giorgio had come to India to record Le Corbusier's buildings in Chandigarh. The year was 1979. At the insistence of his Indian host who advised him that if he "really wanted to see interesting architecture" he should go to Auroville, he found himself on a south-bound train to Chennai along with his photo equipment plus a bicycle.

Giorgio remembers being dropped off from a rickety bus in the middle of nowhere with vague directions on how to get to Auroville – instructions that involved a canyon and a banyan tree. When he finally made it, he was far from disappointed.

The strange buildings rising from the red earth in the barren plateau of Auroville of the late seventies captivated the Italian. "Matrimandir was so beautiful," he says, his eyes glazing over with the memory. "There was no outer shell and yet it towered above looking so huge and majestic." The image of that early Matrimandir he captured in a compelling black and white slide. Appearing almost heart-shaped, the solid hexagonal core of the inner chamber is surrounded by the rings of walkways floating up...

With his visit coinciding with the total solar eclipse of 1979 that was visible from South India, he felt doubly blessed – the rare natural phenomenon he of course caught on film from beneath the banyan. In all, it was a month of magic and the memory of that time never really left Giorgio. He returned to Italy with a complete set of Sri Aurobindo's and The Mother's works, which he "read cover to cover".

In the years that followed, Giorgio kept in touch with his Aurovilian friends, Piero and Gloria in particular. It was in 2003, after attending an exhibition on Auroville in Paris at the United Nations, that Giorgio suddenly felt the urge to visit Auroville again. "I felt the time had come for that." He spent six months as a guest and in the end, made the decision to permanently move to Auroville the following year. He bought himself a one-way ticket and he began wrapping up his life in Europe.

That was when tragedy struck – Giorgio was afflicted with a severe stroke that left the entire right side of his body paralyzed. He describes the moment as the beginning of a new life. "From one minute to the next, my life had changed." For it was then he says that he experienced "total silence"; and what welled up from within was a child's curiosity and wonder. "I wanted to understand what was happening to my mute and unresponsive body; and I could see it all with such detachment."

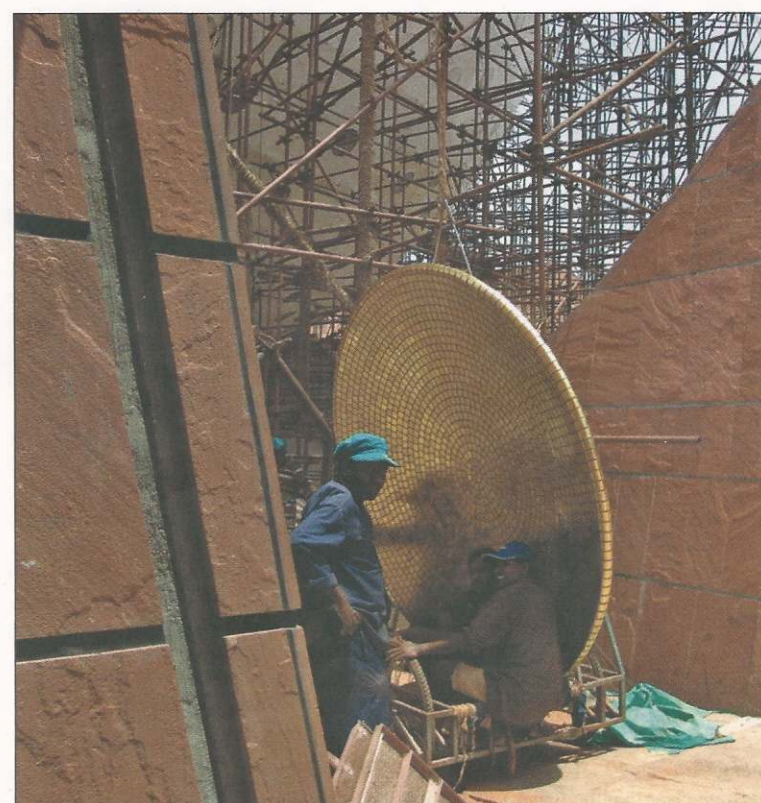
As someone had just presented him with a digital camera, he immediately began documenting all that was happening to him using his functioning left hand. A collage of stills followed of the subsequent weeks in hospital – a blur of the ER, nurses at their stations, a gurney attendant with a beatific expression on her face, life support machines, visiting friends with eyes full of worry, a cool and remote doctor, and many, many self-portraits of a bug-eyed Giorgio. All of these he later put together into a seamless poetic stream-of-consciousness-type short that he titled *New Moli*.

"It was a period of silence, a time to observe and just surrender," he says. "But there was no sadness." The stroke did not change his travel plans. "On the contrary, I was even more determined to get here." Giorgio put himself through grinding rehabilitation to be ready for the journey and life in Auroville. "I arrived as planned; the only difference was that I was in a wheelchair!"

It was the time that Arka was being built, and it was tailor-made for Giorgio's needs. He took up a wheelchair-accessible ground floor apartment, and supervised the construction of his first floor studio, confident he would be walking again. Indeed Giorgio recovered, regaining most control of his right side, and is busier than he ever remembers.

Always ready to offer himself for any photo shoot be it for the Matrimandir or the Savitri Bhavan – he has just completed scanning and printing 473 original paintings by Huta on *Savitri* – he has also become the unofficial staff photographer of Auroville schools, commercial units that need product shoots, and even working groups who want to capture their short period of togetherness. And all these images he shares freely with his trademark generosity. When asked about it, pat comes the answer, "Nothing is more fulfilling; I find great happiness when I can share." Finally, being over seventy, any comment about old age? "What old age!!"

Priya Sundaravalli



Coastal eco restoration: a work in progress

Following the tsunami of 2004, Auroville's Shakti Nursery has done important environmental work along the coast, and learnt some invaluable lessons in the process. The work continues with success and its unique challenges.

When Auroville's Tsunami relief efforts began in March 2005, eco restoration work was given high priority. The protective role of the coastal eco-systems against natural disasters and the damaging effects of climate change have long been known but were confirmed following the recent tsunami. Those areas with coastal forest cover and mangroves suffered far less damage than those with little vegetation. Thus the importance of sustainable and long-term protection of the coastline by resilient ecosystems like the Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest (TDEF) was recognized, and projects funded to carry out this work.

ECO RESTORATION

In Auroville, Shakti took up the eco restoration project in the coastal villages of the bioregion. The project had three primary objectives: to create a shelterbelt of vegetation along the Coromandel coastline through intensive re-forestation; to get people's participation through income-generating activities such as setup of plant nurseries; and finally to increase awareness of basic environmental issues amongst children and adults and thus

have the time to be involved both in the fish trade as well as managing the plantations. After deliberations, another solution was decided upon that the local Dalit communities – who are not involved in fishing – become involved in managing the eco restoration sites.

THE FIRST PLANTING

The first planting was carried out in two of the Northern-most coastal villages – Anumandhai Kuppam and Chetti Nagar. A total of about 10,000 saplings were planted over an area of approximately 25 acres (400 saplings to an acre). Members of the Self Help Groups (SHGs) assisted the Shakti team in the planting.

After six months of the planting, only 20% of the saplings were alive. Two factors were found to be responsible for this poor survival – unexpected coastal erosion that led to loss of the beach to the sea along with the 3 to 5 rows of plants standing on the land; and some species not taking to the challenging coastal habitat. By the end of the year, this dropped to 10%.

This additional loss was attributed to unexpected social factors. NGOs working in the same area had hired those employed to do the watering, by offering higher wages for other work. Also certain planting sites had been



ALL IMAGES COURTESY AUROVILLE COASTAL DEVELOPMENT CENTRE

Afforestation work on the beaches

Besides 'biofencing' of the school perimeter as well as tree planting within the campus (the students take care of the saplings themselves), Shakti has initiated, through funding from Trevisio and AVI-Italy, ecological awareness programmes for the school children. Several groups of students have since visited Shakti, as well as Auroville's other ecological education centres – the Auroville Botanical Garden, and the Pitchandikulam forest and bio reserve.

THE INTANGIBLES

This coastal eco restoration work by Shakti has not just been about the environment, it has had an impact on several levels many of which are intangible. Community building is one. The involvement of Dalit women in the planting work and management of plantation sites particularly calls for a mention, as village communities are strictly divided by caste lines or occupation. Such interaction and movement can only strengthen community bonds.

Women's empowerment is another. Over the three years, the project has provided employment to over fifty individuals, half of whom are women. It has also provided livelihood opportunities for two women SHGs in the Dalit hamlets of Koonimedu and Gangai Nagar, by setting up nurseries

where seedlings for planting can be raised. Shakti provided the infrastructure to start these enterprises, as well as extended loans. Both nurseries reached their full operational capacity within the first year. With about 25,000 seedlings between them, an arrangement has been reached that Shakti will buy all the nursery stock at fair market price.

However one of the major challenges to this work has been awareness building and establishing a sense of ownership in the beneficiaries. The existing attitude is that the plants and the bio-shields have to be maintained by the stakeholders and not the local people themselves, so maintaining both the community and stakeholder interest becomes a long-term challenge.

The slowness of endeavour does not make it easier. Re-establishing tree cover along the coastline is a gradual process; not only because of the speed at which trees grow, but also because the local culture and traditions surrounding the valuing and conservation of trees and forest cover need to be revived.

It is clear that forests, probably the TDEF kind existed along the Coromandel coast at some point in history; and the reason for their disappearance must have been connected to the disappearance of this culture towards the care and protection of natural resources. Reviving these values – which may have been lost probably over generations – will be a lengthy process.

In the meantime Shakti quietly continues with its work as it has over the last 28 years.

From annual reports of the Auroville Coastal-area Development Centre



Planting a seedling for the coastal eco restoration project

get the community involved in protecting its green cover and ecosystems.

Shakti's first task was to create a protective barrier or treeline along the coast. A mixed planting of indigenous TDEF and non-TDEF species along with some exotic (non native) species, such as *Coccoloba uvifera* and *Scaevola taccada*. The wisdom behind the mixed planting was that the faster growing non native species would provide the necessary cover and protection to the more slow growing indigenous varieties. Later as the latter established themselves, these exotic varieties would be phased out. The rationale was similar to that followed in Auroville's own early afforestation efforts.

THE PROJECT

The eco restoration work began in March 2005. Initial activities involved negotiating with the local panchayat leaders for coastal land on which to carry out the planting. With the help of Paalam members [Paalam which means bridge in Tamil was a group of three – an elder and two youth from the village – who communicated between Auroville Tsunami office and the village community] a series of surveys were organized in the villages and GIS maps created.

After extensive community dialogue, about 133.28 acres of land was secured. The initial plans saw the local fishing communities managing the plantation sites. However it soon became clear that the fisher folk do not

used to dry an exceptional catch of fish. In both cases, no watering happened for an extended period resulting in plant death.

LESSONS LEARNT

In the following year, the village of Nocchikuppam (south of Chetti Nagar) was identified for eco restoration with about 4000 saplings.

With a deeper understanding of the ground realities from the first experience, the team from Shakti took several remedial measures. For example, the species of choice for planting on the seafront end was the hardy casuarina. Also older and more mature saplings that had been well nurtured in the nursery were chosen for planting as they were found to survive the dry summer with little or no watering.

Another simple and innovative solution that the team came up with was to physically protect young saplings from the salty sea spray and grazing animals. Palm fronds were fashioned into a protective cover instead of using expensive fencing or conventional tree guards. Named the *Shakti guard*, these were placed around those species identified as most vulnerable. The *Shakti guards* performed well and there was a marked improvement in survival to approximately 70% of the new saplings.

EDUCATIONAL IMPACT

The work has also begun to create an impact on the children of the local schools in these three villages.



In the shade of a palmyra frond, a seedling takes root

THE CHALLENGES

There are many challenges to eco restoration work outside Auroville especially coastal eco restoration. Land speculation of beach area, salt water intrusion and subsequent beach erosion are some of them.

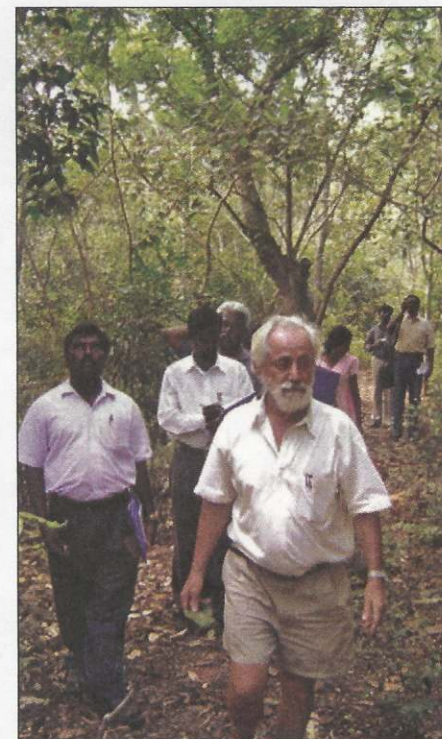
The Shakti nursery

When in 1983 we gave Shakti its name and laid out its borders it was hardly more than 30 acres of sand and dust, cut through by three gullies. It was a plot consisting of abandoned fields with a good layer of top soil. Apart from a line of thorny scrub along one of the gullies, there was only one lone palm tree in sight – a *Phoenix sylvestris*, rising from the middle of nowhere. That was the time of terrible dust storms in summer and heavy erosion during the monsoon rains.

The first year was spent in planting a living fence, bunding, and constructing three systems of tanks to collect all the rain water run-off coming from the higher-up places in Auroville. Towards the end of that same year, a 120 metre deep bore well was sunk and simultaneously an open reserve tank, with a capacity of 600 cubic metres was built on the high-

est point of the land. It was connected with an underground water distribution system so that all of Shakti could be watered by gravity. About 3 acres of land was set apart as residential zone and garden area.

Afforestation was taken up in the following year. A tree was planted at 2 metre intervals, mostly the exotic *Acacia auriculiformis*, since this species was readily available in a Forest Department nursery north of Auroville. A small plot was put under another exotic, *Acacia holosericea*, which was a fire-wood crop. We were told that they both thrive in any kind of soil, grow fast, and are drought resistant. Indeed it only took two years for these *Acacias* to put an end to the dust storms. At the same time they covered



Walter leading a walk through Shakti

Auroville is bit of a strange place. It aims towards the future but is filled with images of the past. Take this for example. *Here is a place that belongs to no prince, to no god, nobody owns it, this is everybody's place. The earth will find its joy in it. Hearts will be happy in it.* These are the words from 14th century B.C. at the entrance of the city of Akhenaton in Egypt. How could it be that a random pharaoh so long ago in history, thought of the exact same words which we have in our charter?

Another example the description of the how the foundation of Rome was laid. It says that they first outlined the city and divided it into four zones. Then they built a temple at the centre. Not just that, they also dug a hole into which a man from each region threw in a handful of earth.

In the first lines from *The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo says, "The earliest preoccupation of man in his awakened thoughts and, as it seems, his inevitable and ultimate preoccupation, - for it survives the longest periods of scepticism and returns after every banishment, - is also the highest which his thought can envisage. It manifests itself in the divination of Godhead, the impulse towards perfection, the search after pure Truth and unmixed Bliss, the sense of a secret immortality."

He talks of this aspiration of man which has been there since the beginning of time, and how if it becomes eclipsed, it always rears and always returns. This aspiration has tried to manifest itself in hundreds of different ways - as soon as man could see an opening to reach this 'perfection' he would take it.

Some men have thought that perhaps if one perfected the outer circumstances, it would help the inner perfection to emerge. These men thought of making models of the 'Ideal State'. This Ideal State is often referred to as *utopia*.

What caught me the most was Plato's *Republic*. It touches something which the others have not even come close to. It begins with the question - "What is Justice?" And "Is the just individual happier than the unjust?"

Plato answers that the structure of a society is analogous to the psychology of an individual, and so approaches the question by magnifying the qualities that the individual must have to those of the society. He analyzes the progress that the individual must make so that the society can grow better. And so through out the book, there is the comparison between individual and society.

What is striking about all these utopias is the fact that none of them have private property. They all seem to have understood that from this need of calling something one's own, grows self-love. More says that if self-love is taken away, there is only 'love for the State' left. Each in his own way, has tried to remove this attachment to material things. First through education and bringing up of the children of the city.

Education

Education is recognised as one of the most important aspects of society, as it is what creates the future of a society. Each of these utopias says that the children must be educated by the State, and each child, equally. In Plato's view children have to be taken away from their parents as soon as they are born. "No parent should know his child, nor the child his parent," he says. "For so many children are corrupted by the ways of their parents." He removes the children from their par-

On the trail of utopias

In late April, 17 year old Aurevan of Last School presented her end-of-year thesis titled '*A More Splendid World*'. The subject she had chosen to research was utopias through human history. Here is an edited version.



Aurevan

ents and educates them all together, irrespective of gender or heredity.

Each child is given twenty years of education. After these twenty years, there is a selection made. The ones not selected become the economic class - the farmers, the merchants, the businessmen - who own private property within limits. Because Plato's communism is not democratic, it is aristocratic. "For only the guardians can bear it," he says.

The ones who make it through the first test go on studying for ten more years after which another selection is made. The ones who do not make it this time become soldiers. The ones who are selected at this second stage continue studying until they are fifty. They learn the art of dialectic and are exposed to the 'reason of being'. After these fifty years, their education ends, and they are let loose to find their place in society and in turn asked to rule.

Ruling in Plato's republic is not looked upon as an honour but more as a duty to be discharged, and a responsibility to be taken up for the State.

By creating an educational system in three steps, Plato divides the society into three classes. The first, the economic class, are the ones who work to earn. They are asked to show competence. The second, the soldiers, are asked to be representatives of courage, and the third, the so-called philosophers, are asked to be the representatives of knowledge and wisdom.

These three classes in society, Plato says, are images of qualities within each individual. Depending on our psychological makeup, either competence, or courage, or knowledge must take hold of our being, and the individual is asked to bring one of these qualities above the rest.

In each of these so-called utopias, knowledge is at the head of the State in one form or

another. In Plato's case, the philosopher-king not only represents knowledge, or the best man who is to tell the others what to do, but is rather the guide who invites his people on a quest to find truth. He is a channel for Truth to come down and sweep up his people.

The trouble with this is that when the philosopher, an individual who accepts no formulas or regulations and who views knowledge as beyond these limits, is placed on the throne, the situation becomes quite dangerous. Dangerous because as he is beyond all rules - while the rest of the masses are still under it - if he keeps asking questions to his people, it can upset the whole balance of society.

Ideal versus the Practical

There are two aspects to Plato's republic, the ideal and the reality, and the conflict between them. The great puzzle in Plato's extensive work is the neglect he seems to show to the spirit of liberty. Though he asks each man capable of it to find out in himself his own strengths and abilities, and demands that each find his own truth, he does not seem to accord the freedom required to do so. Instead Plato installs guardians or mentors as he believes that in society, the average man is incapable of the honesty needed for this kind of work of self-analysis.

Thus out of fear, Plato may have suffocated the very spirit of his philosophy by institutionalizing a truth valid only for the individual.

Throughout the book, there appears to be a confusion as if two great minds are made to speak through one mouth, that of Plato and perhaps that of his master Socrates. Socrates standing for the seeker, the questioner, the philosopher in search for the ideal, and Plato representing the more rational man, not only

driven by love for knowledge but also by a great ambition to create this society.

It would almost appear as if Socrates, who was perhaps greater than Plato, could not have ruled because he is too 'lost' in the search for the Ideal. While Plato, though adopting the mind of Socrates, tends to institutionalize and bring to immediate reality this Ideal State.

Plato in a sense represents the end of the age of the mystics of Heraclitus and Pythagoras, and ushers in the age of reason. He is dazzled by his immense God 'Reason' and often gets lost in its dealings.

A Conflict

Will Durant in *The Life of Greece* says, "When liberty becomes license, dictatorship is near." When one looks at each of these utopian experiments, the ones who wrote them seem quite convinced that to create the outer conditions would solve the problem of the inner perfection. But just dive a little bit deeper, and one realises that they all have their doubts. And that is perhaps what makes them all the more special.

Plato writes "[...] we said that neither city nor constitution, no, nor yet an individual man, will ever be perfect. Until fortune grants that some necessity encompass the philosophers, [...]" so that whether they will or not they take charge of the city, and find the city obedient to them, or until those who hold the dominions and kingdoms or upon their sons some breath of heaven sends a true love of philosophy."

There are times, like in the lines quoted above, when Plato seems to catch something which tells him that it is not possible in the state at which things are now to bring about either this Ideal State or the inner perfection in man. He recognises the need for something from another plane - 'a breath of heaven' to come down and take us all up with it.

He calls out to humanity - past, present, and future - to realize this Ideal State. He implores the 'Muse of Philosophy' to make it come true. "But if some compulsion to take charge of the city has ever, in the infinite time that has passed, descended upon those who are pre-eminent in philosophy, or if it exists now in some barbarian region far removed from our vision, or if it ever rises in the future, then we are ready to contend in argument that the constitution we have described has risen, exists, and will arise when the Muse of Philosophy becomes mistress of a city. That she should do so is not impossible, nor are the things we describe impossible. But we admit they are hard."

The Present

Almost 2500 years later, Satprem echoes Plato. "And if one day these ten or fifty could build a single little pyramid of truth, whose every stone had been laid with the right note, the right vibration, a simple love, a clear look and call to the future, the whole city would actually be built, because they would have built the being of the future in themselves. And perhaps the whole earth would find itself changed by it, because there is only one body..."

All these experiments, all these aspirations were perhaps too early for their time. Now we have the opportunity in our city. And I think the time has come - we have put it off far too long - to realize this Ideal State that each of them dreamt of.

So let's do it!

Aurevan

the soil with leaf litter, checked erosion, and through their root system made the rainwater percolate and thus created a much more natural environment. And in just 10 years after planting, they began providing us with timber for our furniture.

Another activity that originated in Shakti was the publication of the 'Auroville Index Seminum'. The first one published in 1982 had a modest listing of 194 species, and in the last one which was sent to more than 500 Botanical Gardens and universities, 611 species were offered for exchange. It has been printed yearly till 1995 which was the year that the 'Biodiversity Act India' was enacted and which made it virtually impossible to send or receive plant material.

Through this Index we got access to seeds from all over the world and as a result many exotics were grown in our nursery. In 1985, we decided to try and establish a botanical garden in Shakti and from 1985 through 1988 we introduced 377 different species in the forest

area. But it proved to be too early in the history of Auroville to start a botanical garden, since the funds that came in were needed for more pressing needs, such as roads, housing, electricity etc. Added to that, our limited acreage was too small for the proper outlay of a botanical garden.

Slowly we began concentrating more and more on the introduction of indigenous species, until in 1994 we finally gave up on the idea of creating a botanical garden in Shakti and decided to transform all our available space into a plot of indigenous forest, the Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest (TDEF). For about two years we went, almost weekly, to a nearby sacred grove with a remnant of TDEF, and brought home seeds from every species we would find.

We had also received a grant from the Foundation for the Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions (FRLHT) to set up a nursery especially for the propagation of species of the TDEF. The nursery was run by Christina who maintained a data base on seed viability, pre-treatment

and germination, sun or shade requirements, and survival rates. By 1999 we had 125 different species of the TDEF in our nursery, totalling 53,500 seedlings.

The last missing TDEF species, *Ximenia americana*, was finally planted in 2007. By that time the natural regeneration was quite remarkable and the forest had actually become dense. Most of the exotic species from the early time had died out and apart from the *Acacia auriculiformis*, almost all the natural regeneration was by species from the TDEF. The *Acacias* were allowed to regenerate in some areas to provide timber, but are thinned out on a regular basis.

From 2004 onwards, students of botany from the Pondicherry University came to visit the forest for their field studies. Following that, contacts were made with the village schools around Auroville to try and find a way of making those young people aware of the richness and value of their indigenous forest. So a forest walk was laid out and labels, with local and botanical names, were attached to 245 trees and shrubs.

The Natural Regeneration Phenomenon

In 1990 when Shakti decided to conduct a survey of all the plants introduced till then, it found that 19 species had made their appearance without being introduced: 2 trees, 13 shrubs, 2 sub-shrubs and 2 vines. Two years later, another extensive survey on the natural regeneration of flowering plants in the same area found a total of 227 species from 57 families. Most of these had come naturally without any human interference, although quite a few introduced species had also multiplied. In 2003, when the survey of grasses and sedges was done, 30 species in the family *Poaceae* (grasses) were identified of which only 2 had been introduced. And of all the 10 species recorded from the *Cyperaceae* family (sedges), none had been introduced by humans!

In addition, a small booklet was printed giving information on 25 of the more important trees.

The FRLHT funding enabled us to construct the 'Auro Herbarium' whose purpose is to represent the TDEF with collections from the remaining pockets of that forest type from over its entire geographical distribution, i.e. Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. This was to also include a representation of the invading flora in disturbed, degraded and denuded areas.

However, the Auro Herbarium has grown in scope with funding from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Environmental Team (ANET) which added a considerable list of the island species to the inventory. Also, a few students of botany deposited their private collections in the Auro Herbarium.

Now the herbarium houses approximately 15,000 specimens in the main area, and about half as many in the duplicate section, totally consisting of 269 families and 3288 genera. **Shakti**

Sri Aurobindo: The Poet of Nature & other writings on Savitri

On all accounts, Sri Aurobindo's magnum opus *Savitri* is not easily accessible. It is, in Sri Aurobindo's words, '... a sort of poetic philosophy of the Spirit and of Life...covering most subjects of philosophical thought and vision and many aspects of spiritual experience...'. 'The philosophy of *Savitri* ... expresses or tries to express a total and many-sided vision and experience of all the planes of being and their action upon each other.' The poem has been written 'as a field of experimentation to see how far poetry could be written from one's own Yogic consciousness and how that could be made creative'.

"His poetry belongs to an entirely different genre of poetry, written from many realms of subtle supraphysical consciousness to which our approach is not responsive," explains author Asoka K. Ganguli, in his book *Sri Aurobindo: The Poet of Nature & other writings on Savitri*. "To read *Savitri* that it may delight and move us, we must discover in the poem the whole of Sri Aurobindo as much as that is within our capacity. This requires a widening of the consciousness, a thorough knowledge, not a mere a smattering here and there, of the basics of what Sri Aurobindo's numerous writings signify, and of course, love for and interest in poetry. For the poet writes of experiences that are, as Sri Aurobindo says, 'foreign to the ordinary mentality'."

The great achievement of Ganguli is that he has managed to make *Savitri* more accessible to all those, the undersigned included, who are still living in the ordinary mentality. The author explains Sri Aurobindo's philosophical concepts while highlighting the corresponding verses in *Savitri*. The first part of the book, 'The Poet of Nature', starts with an elaboration of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy on the mystery of creation followed by the lines from *Savitri* that feature it. In the same way the author deals with the domain of Nature which extends from the inconscient's 'black dragon base' to the 'golden countries of the Supermind'. Separate chapters deal with Sri Aurobindo's descriptions of Nature in Inconscience, Nature in Ignorance and Nature in the Transcendental planes.

The second part of the book deals with Imagery and Figures of Speech. Ganguli reminds the reader that *Savitri* is a symbolic poem, and its images too are symbolical in nature, 'expressing a vision, a spiritual contact or a knowledge which has come by entering into the thing itself, by identity,' as Sri Aurobindo explained. "*Savitri* is a new kind of mystic poetry and has therefore a new and different technique of imagery, similes and metaphors," writes Ganguli about the principles and processes of image making. "To Sri Aurobindo, image-making is and should be a natural expression of the truth of a particular plane of consciousness and not a 'detachable ornament' for its own sake." In this section of the book Ganguli shows the striking images used as for example in describ-

ing the planes of life and mind, the entry into the inner countries, finding the soul, realisation of the central being, opening of the chakras, and the nirvanic and cosmic consciousness stage.

The third part of the book deals with Sri Aurobindo's vision and concept of death. To confront death, to alter Nature's 'harsh economy' and efface it, forms the major theme of *Savitri*. Ganguli deals with Sri Aurobindo's vision on the mystery of life and death in four sections: the law of Existence and of the Cosmos; the law of Life; the law of Matter; and the law of Death. Each section is further divided into subsections which contain the corresponding verses from *Savitri*. The section 'the Law of Life', has no less than 13 subsections ranging from 'The Manifestation of Life - its Law and Causes' to 'Death - a process of Life'.

The sections The Law of Matter and The Law of Death are similarly subdivided. In the Law of Matter, there are sections on 'the characteristics of matter' and 'the ascending series of substance in the scale of matter'. In the section The Law of Death, a detailed overview is given of what death exactly is and of the five causes of physical death. The author then deals with the issue of conquering death and the process of supramentalisation and immortality.

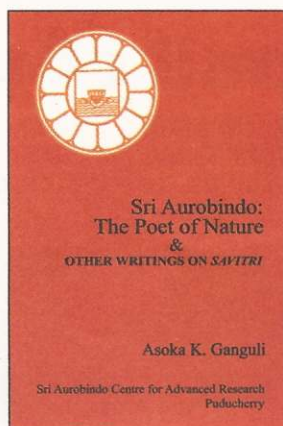
The last part of the book deals with Sri Aurobindo's treatment of sciences in *Savitri*. Ganguli gives a lengthy introduction to the fundamental laws of physical science and the perceived antagonism between science and spirituality. He discusses the limitations of physical science, and describes how and the reason why Sri Aurobindo has poetised the many discoveries and inventions of physical sciences. The book ends with explaining why Sri Aurobindo emphasizes the need that the law of physical science transcends to a higher law, shifting its field of work from the discovery of material truths to higher immaterial fields of consciousness. In Sri Aurobindo's integrated view of science, its true meaning is the discovery of all truths, whether from the material planes or from the planes beyond.

Carel

Sri Aurobindo: The Poet of Nature & other writings on Savitri
By Asoka K. Ganguli,

407 pages, price Rs 350.

Published by the Sri Aurobindo Centre for Advanced Research (SACAR), Pondicherry
Email sacar@auromail.net



Sri Aurobindo and the Future Psychology

In 2001 the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram published a book titled *A Greater Psychology - an introduction to the psychological thought of Sri Aurobindo*. The book, with a foreword by Ken Wilber, contains a comprehensive anthology of Sri Aurobindo's psychological writings followed by seven expository essays on Sri Aurobindo's psychological thought by the book's editor, A.S. Dalal.

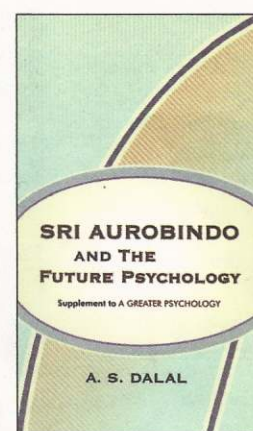
Dalal has now published a sequel to this book under the title *Sri Aurobindo and the Future Psychology*. It contains essays on more psychological topics. Like in *A Greater Psychology*, most of these essays too draw on Sri Aurobindo's words as well as those of The Mother. Apart from highlighting aspects of Sri Aurobindo's thought such as on cosmic consciousness, on the subliminal, on the unconsciousness, on planes and parts of the being and on the psychic, the book contains essays on transpersonal psychology and psychothera-

py. One essay provides a model for dealing with psychological disturbances based on Sri Aurobindo's Yoga. Other essays compare Sri Aurobindo with western thinkers such as William James, Carl G. Jung, Roberto Assagioli and Ken Wilber and, on the concept of the witness consciousness, with Eckhardt Tolle.

The book includes contributions by Brant Cortright, Michael Miovic and Alok Pandey, three practitioners who, as Dalal, have made and in-depth study of Sri Aurobindo psychological thought and who attempt to apply it in their clinical work.

Highly recommended.

Carel



Sri Aurobindo and the Future Psychology
by A.S. Dalal with contributions of
Brant Cortright, Michael Miovic &
Alok Pandey

408 pages, price Rs 125

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'The Mother on Auroville' in Tamil

ATamil translation of *The Mother on Auroville - References in Mother's Agenda* titled '*Auroville patri Sri Annai kooriyavai*' has come out. The publication of the 350-page book, translated by S. Mahalingam, was made possible by a grant from the Dutch Stichting de Zaaier. Mahalingam, who lived in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram before joining Auroville, has already translated several works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. He is also one of those fortunate to have met Sri Aurobindo. The Mother gave him her blessings to translate her works and those of Sri Aurobindo into Tamil. The first Tamil book, *On Auroville* was translated by him in 1983.

"This is a great opportunity for the Tamil community to read what the Mother said on Auroville in their language," says Thillai Ganapathi, a member of the publishing team. The book will be distributed to all Tamil families and individuals (Aurovilians and Newcomers), to all Auroville schools and Outreach Schools, village schools, youths and women clubs, and public libraries.

'Auroville patri Sri Annai kooriyavai'
Translated by S. Mahalingam
332 pages

Published by Auroville Press in association with Auro-Traductions. For information contact Thillai@auroville.org.in



HIDDEN AUROVILLE

A summer's harvest

Nothing beats the peace of Auroville on a Sunday in summer. It's late in the morning and sweating under a wide-brimmed hat, I am in the last stretch of an impulsive walk. The heat is searing and the light intensely bright. The earth radiates sizzling vapours creating watery mirages. All life seems to be aestivating at this hour. Only the smells of neem blossoms and crushed cashew flesh radiate in the mists of heat.

Agni Natchathiram has just set in, the season of the 'Fire star'.

Passing briskly by Arati, I hear a rustle in the underbrush. Across the *mullu* fence and under the shadows of a cashew tree, I see a figure moving about - a young woman picking the cashews off the ground. "*Vanakkum akka*," I call out. She pauses from her work and turns to greet me smiling shyly. "*Vandhu paakalaama?*" - Can I come and watch? I ask. She nods and points me the way.

It is a long walk, skirting the 'elephant' - the gargantuan water tower, and across a few other topes to get to where she is. Kamakshi, she tells me, is her name. She lives in Edaiyanchavadi with her husband Murugan. This season they have taken lease of two cashew fields from Auroville. The only 'condition' she says that was made of them is no maranthu or pesticides to be used.



Is she okay with that? Yes, the cashews go for a higher price, she explains and people are beginning to see the wisdom of that. The harvesting

began a week ago. And every day for the next month, she and her husband will be doing rounds of their plots to collect the fruits.

I sit on a low branch and observe her work silently. The sun casts mottling shadows on the leaf littered floor. "Aren't you afraid of scorpions or snakes?" I ask. "No, we do a pooja to the spirits of the land," she explains, "praying that all these creatures stay hidden from our eyes."

Striped forest mosquitoes hum by my ear. A cloud of fruit flies hover over the vapours of the rotting fruits, and large scorpion ants dart about their business. "Would you like to try a fruit?" she asks as she plucks off a shiny vermilion one from a branch nearby. She deftly removes the nut which she drops in the stainless steel container, then rubs its skin clean against the edge of her sari, and offers it to me.

I bite in. The flesh is spongy and bursting with juices, pungent and astringent, scratching the back of my throat; but its sweetness is refreshing.

Kamakshi's basket is piled high. It



Murugan and Kamakshi

is time to take it up to the front where Murugan sits with a growing pile of fruits, removing their nuts. It is a labour intensive work and hands and nails get stained black. But for the young couple this first entrepreneurial venture is exciting. "At the end of the morning we take our collection to Akash who will weigh

it and buys it for Auroville," they say.

Before I leave, Kamakshi insists that I try a tender green nut. With a sickle, she picks out the meat for me. "It's great cooked with eggs and eaten with hot rice!" she says, and proceeds to give me the recipe.

Priya Sundaravalli

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