

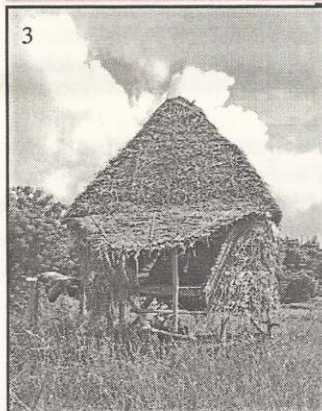
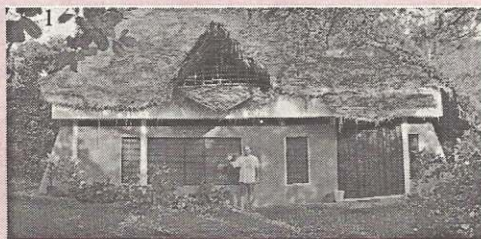
# Auroville Today

OCTOBER 2002, No.165

## MAIN THEME: A Housing Crisis?

- Affordable housing
- Changing attitudes to housing
- Noise is a problem
- Youth at a crossroads
- A home with a soul

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(1) Pino's house in Transformation, (2) Marc's and Matilde's house in Madhuca, (3) the Auroville keet capsule, (4) Roger and Jacqueline's house in Auromodèle, (5) Sigi's house in Gaia, (6) inside Gilles and Judith's house in Sri Ma, (7) guesthouse in Sve Dame, (8) side view of 'Progress' - part of the first Line of Force, (9) Biggie's house in Samridhi, (10) back view of Gilles' and Ajit and Ratna houses in Samasti, (11) top view on Robi and Regina's kitchen in New Lands. All photos by Pino.

## Towards undivine anarchy?

The Auroville housing situation

Practicality and imagination: these two strands informed Auroville's experiments with housing in the early years. The first settlers looked at what had already been done by the local inhabitants - huts with mud walls thatched with coconut leaves or straw - then tweaked it to accommodate their rather different needs. The result? The Auroville 'capsule', an airy, lightweight hut resting on granite pillars: it could even be moved from place to place.

Yet, from the very beginning, this 'indigenous' line of development was paralleled by a 'visionary' line. The sweeping concrete curves of Last School, the soaring cantilevered wing of the Bharat Nivas auditorium, the fluid forms of Auromodèle - all these, in their attempts to herald the new, the futuristic, paid little attention to traditional materials and conditions.

Today architecture has clearly shifted away from the visionary and towards the practical end of the spectrum. Most of our institutional architecture is bland, and many Aurovilians live in somewhat featureless houses and apartments. These changes reflected a number of factors: changes in occupation (computer work replacing land work), an increased desire for security, cleanliness and comfort, a new wave of Aurovilians arriving with different expectations and desires regarding housing. The 'gentrification' of the capsule was also an expression of Aurovilians' deeper connectedness to the land, the flip side of which was an increased sense of proprietorship: 'my house', 'my land'.

In the early days this didn't seem to matter. Land was scattered over an area of 20 square kilometers, so there was plenty to go round. Only land bought near the centre was left vacant or temporarily afforested: it was "for the future, when the city begins". In the early 1990s that moment arrived. In an effort to kick-start the urbanization of Auroville,

new land was bought and existing land made available in the Residential Zone for a number of new projects. Trees were felled, bunds leveled, roads laid, and settlements like Prarthna, Vikas, Arati, Surrender, Invocation and Prayatna mushroomed up.

Meanwhile the Development Group, concerned that the town plan would go by the board and realizing that Auroville would never reach 50,000 inhabitants if things didn't change, began drafting planning regulations. Temporary structures were banned in the city and minimum densities specified for different sectors. Newcomers were encouraged to buy into the new city housing projects. Not all of them jumped at the chance. The apartments were not cheap nor were they designed for children, while many of the new medium-density communities smacked too much of the urban landscapes newcomers were fleeing in the West. Suddenly the Greenbelt, which for years had been viewed by some Aurovilians as a kind of Punishment Park inhabited by the Red Foot tribe, became desirable real estate. Bemused greenbelters, clambering out of compost pits, were confronted by elegantly dressed apparitions in designer sunglasses enquiring about where they could build their dream houses. Often they narrowly avoided being composted themselves...

As the population increased, and the land available and the possibility of constructing one's own accommodation decreased - the greenbelters were the next to draw up guidelines, reaffirming the greenbelt was not for development and defining who could live there - the screw tightened further. At the mercy of rapidly increasing construction prices, bounced between the rather different agendas of the Entry Group, Housing Service, Development Group, architects, developers and Auroville communities, house-hunters could be seen wandering disconsolately backwards and forward like disembodied souls.

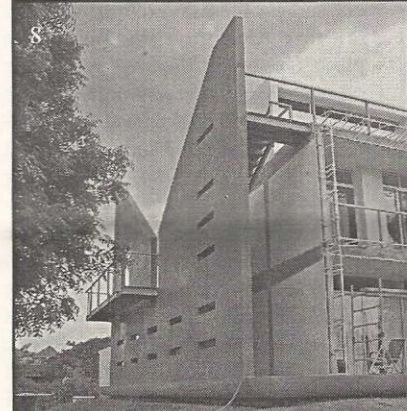
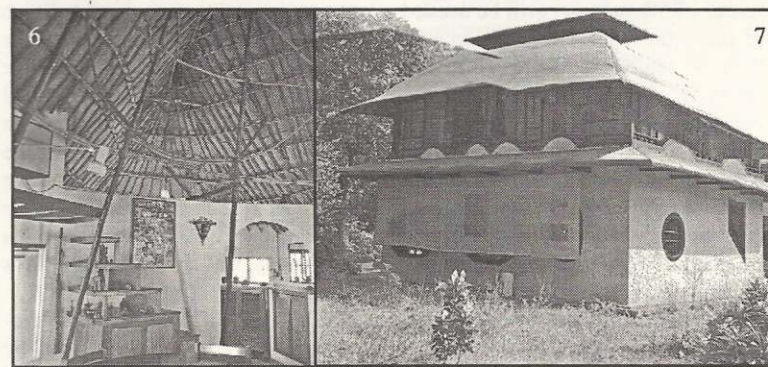
Some became perennial house-sitters, shifting their belongings every few months. Others found temporary accommodation with friends or in storerooms. Aurovilians in dire straits who had been allocated newcomer housing units refused to move out until alternative

accommodation could be found. Something had to give way. In the event what suffered was both the authority of the Development Group as a few unauthorized constructions crept up, and the ideal that accommodation in Auroville once constructed or purchased could not thereafter be sold or let. It began as a concession: newcomers to the community who moved into an Aurovillian's house could deposit the cost of that house in a special fund, so allowing that Aurovillian to build elsewhere in the community. However, as this did not allow an Aurovillian to be financially compensated if he or she left the community, this concession was soon overtaken by borderline or unofficial transactions which saw people (sometimes not even Aurovilians or newcomers) purchasing - at suspiciously high rates - the contents of a house (moveable assets, unlike fixed assets, are not the property of the Auroville Foundation), or simply the house itself. Meanwhile the renting out of rooms to newcomers (coded as "contributions towards accommodation") became another unofficial means of supplementing Aurovilians' income and easing the accommodation crisis.

The losers in all this are those who, like some Tamil Aurovilians and Auroville youth, have nothing to sell or rent and don't have the means to purchase or rent the accommodation on offer. The choice for them seems stark: stay here and live like a second-class citizen in sub-standard accommodation or leave to earn the necessary funds elsewhere. As for those young Indian students, full of energy and idealism, who would like to become newcomers, the message seems to be at present, 'Come back when you've made your millions'.

There have been attempts to eliminate the worst excesses of the present anarchic housing situation. The Funds and Assets Management Committee has drawn up the Auroville Housing Policy. This reaffirms that all houses, apartments and immovable assets created on Auroville land are owned by the Auroville Foundation and therefore there can be no private ownership of houses or apartments in the community. The Development Group, in its efforts to control spiraling prices and inequitable housing patterns, recommends

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# Signing off from the Working Committee

The members of the interim Working Committee show burnout symptoms after five months in office. What's wrong?

"This is a complete basket-case," opined Working Committee member Ulli, giving as trenchant a criticism as one could wish for. The question is, what was he talking about? Auroville in general? The work of the Working Committee? Other Aurovilians? After some probing it surfaced that he could well be meaning the entire lot. The mitigating circumstances are that Ulli has never before been part of any Auroville working group, but instead advised from the sidelines when he was working as a commercial unit executive. So he didn't really know what he was in for when he agreed to become part of the Working Committee in March this year.

Kathryn, though, was aware of the morass. But having received the highest number of nominations brought out for a woman during the community-wide nomination process, she felt she couldn't say no. And she didn't. And regretted it for a few months, until an illness painfully brought home the reality that this work wasn't hers. "There's just no job satisfaction. The work feels like a constant coping with the latest round of failures, both collective and individual," she said, when asked why she resigned.

"This work makes me shrink within," explains Frederick, whose track record of trying to clean Auroville's dirty laundry probably exceeds that of any other Aurovillian.

Present mindsets are worse than in the past, he feels. For Frederick too this is his first Working Committee. He used to operate outside the framework, coming in only when he deemed it useful or necessary. This time he too plays by the rules, being pulled into a wide variety of community problems, seeing a side of individuals which most of us would rather not.

Selvaraj is the lone survivor of the previous Working Committee, which he managed at its end more or less single-handedly, a feat for which he deserves a medal. Moreover, he agreed to continue in this Working Committee, which should gain him another medal if Auroville wasn't so stingy with its praise or proficient in fault-finding. "I like the work," he says, "but you have to forget about privacy and trying to plan your life. If there isn't an important visitor who suddenly needs to be greeted, it is a fellow Aurovillian who calls you at 6 a.m. to discuss a problem which could well have waited till 8. Also my partner objects." Selvaraj hails from Kuilapalayam village and intimately knows both the Auroville and the Tamil cultures. Critics speak of a certain partiality but that is unavoidable, human as we all are. He too, however, won't be available for a next Working Committee, having done this work for almost two years and "enough is enough, it's time for family and other matters." Jill, Aurovici and Isabelle, all three new to the work, also decid-

ed that this experience is quite sufficient, probably for this lifetime.

What's wrong? It takes on average two years before a working committee completely burns out – although usually quite a few members already quit mid-term – but this one managed it within 5 months. The answer lies not in the accumulation of work, which admittedly has become more intensive, but rather in the impossibility of ever solving anything. Back in March, when this Working Committee was nominated for a six months' period, it also assumed charge of the work of the Executive Council which had ceased to exist in December last year. Its first priority was to get community agreement on a new internal organization, to be in place by September 10th, the date the Working Committee was scheduled to resign. This work was taken up enthusiastically and a lot of progress was made (see below). Also normal WC work proceeded as per schedule. Unexpected, however, was the avalanche of unsolved and apparently unsolvable conflicts that were dropped into the lap of the WC. These conflicts ranged from problems with or within working groups such as the Matrimandir Team and the Interim Development Group, to interpersonal problems between Aurovilians. The frustration level of the Working Committee members trying to deal with all these issues can be measured from a note published by them in the

Auroville News, the weekly internal newsletter: "We really wonder sometimes what some of the people who live here have for life goals and spiritual aspirations," and calling for a more stringent entry process as well as an exit process.

Says Ulli: "The Working Committee, and this is the problem, has no power to kick ass." Kathryn explains: "It is supposed to help solve conflicts through mediation, trying to find consensus. But failing consensus – and this happens often – the Working Committee cannot impose its own solution on the parties, even when it is clear that not resolving the problem carries significant and negative implications for both Auroville and the parties themselves. This is what makes the frustration quotient of the work almost unbearable."

Frustration is also certain for at least one of the parties in conflict. The usual result of a failed conflict resolution is a continuation of the status quo to the chagrin of the party who wants that status quo to be changed. Angered parties sometimes ask the Working Committee to call a Residents' Assembly meeting in an attempt to get their views imposed. But if the Working Committee refuses, judging that such a meeting would not be productive, the only thing left for the aggrieved party is to collect the signatures of at least 50 people so that the Working Committee is bound to call a meeting of the Residents'

Assembly. However, such meetings are rarely effective.

The situation is even more problematic when an Aurovillian has been breaking the law. In cases of physical violence, for example, the Working Committee has no power to impose any sanctions such as the paying of compensation to the injured party. Though internal guidelines suggest that Aurovilians solve their problems amongst themselves, the practical reality is that there is no structure to ensure this happens. Small wonder then that frustrated Aurovilians sometimes feel that resorting to a police complaint is the only way out 'as Auroville doesn't do anything'.

The term of office of this Working Committee has meanwhile been extended till October 1<sup>st</sup> so that it can attend the meeting of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation on September 21<sup>st</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup>. But what happens afterwards?

An idea has been floated to make this Working Committee part of a larger Auroville Council, a group of 12 to 20 people, some of whom would be doing Working Committee work, the others taking care of community matters. However, as long as the community refuses to give this or any other group the authority to decide conflicts, it will be difficult to get qualified people. For this job gains no glory.

Carel

## Auroville Resource Group, Auroville Council and TORA approved for one year

A new organisation received the blessings from a Residents' Assembly.

Aurovilians are never satisfied with Auroville's organization. For those trusting in divine anarchy there is already far too much outward organization. Others are all too aware of the *lacunae* in our present structure which allow individuals or small groups to block the will of the larger community, or which allow no redress or court of appeal for individual grievances. And then there is the knotty matter of implementation. How does one implement decisions in a place where the traditional levers employed by the state – laws, police etc. – are lacking?

Over the past eighteen months both internal and external pressures have caused us to look once again at our organizational structure. A number of studies and proposals have been made, some of which have generated heated debate. Once again, the crux of the differences concerns the role played by the Residents' Assembly in community decision-making. For some, the ideal remains that of a democracy where everybody is able to participate at all stages of the process and where everybody's voice has equal weight in the final decision-making process. Others are concerned this will lead to the emergence of the lowest common denominator or gridlock in our attempts to reach decisions. The common factor motivating both positions appears to be fear: fear either of "mob rule" or of a self-serving oligarchy.

The arguments are familiar, so familiar in fact that many Aurovilians didn't bother to participate. This

reflects a drift over the years of capable and long-term Aurovilians away from direct civic involvement. The reasons are numerous, but the effect has been seen in the difficulty of filling key positions in key groups, as well as in the absence in our community discussions of a certain grounded wisdom which some of these individuals have acquired.

This has begun to change. The present interim Working Committee was selected from and by a group of about 35 Aurovilians who received the most votes in a community-wide exercise which asked each Aurovillian to name two others whom they most respected and trusted. The new Working Committee, nervously surveying the mountain of contentious topics which already threatened to bury them in an avalanche, asked the group of thirty to stay on and operate as a support group, so in other words as a discussion forum and resource base from which sub-groups could be formed to deal with specific issues. The latter didn't happen, but the Support Group and the Working Committee have been meeting weekly over the past months, focusing primarily upon the need for a new organization.

Today, two interrelated proposals have emerged as the first steps towards a new organization. One is for an 'Auroville Resource Group' (ARG). This is a body open to all Auroville residents who wish to actively assist the Residents Assembly in achieving self-governance for Auroville. It has no powers

as such – final approval continues to rest with the Residents Assembly – but it will facilitate the development of policies, propose mandates and terms of office for working groups and assist in conflict resolution. Among its immediate tasks will be to suggest a selection process for the next Working Committee.

The other proposal relates to community-level decision-making and conflict resolution. 'The Experiment'

tance, a 75% majority will be needed to carry the day. The decision will then be registered in the Auroville News. If, after two weeks, substantial objections have not been received, it will be considered ratified by the Residents Assembly. If such objections are forthcoming, a third round of meetings may be held, or there may be a community-wide referendum, or it may be decided that the time is just not ripe for resolution. The ARG will

months to work out, something which has bedeviled our organization in the past. Secondly, objections from the larger community to any proposal arrived at by the TORA need to be reasoned: a simple *niet* will not be accepted. The objectors will also have to number at least 50, or 50% of those attending the TORA meeting at which the proposal was agreed, whichever is higher.

The ARG and Experiment proposals have been approved by the community for a one year period, and the first ARG meetings have taken place. One of its tasks will be to tackle other gaps in the present organization: in particular there is a need for a conflict resolution group and a secretariat which will take responsibility for communicating information, organizing meetings and publishing the results. It is also felt that we need to look at enlarging the Working Committee as too much work is falling upon too few people at present.

Will the proposed changes make Auroville's organization a better tool for its inner and outer development? It's difficult to say. Certainly the new proposals are an interesting attempt to wed inclusiveness to effectiveness. However, the key to the success of any organization in Auroville is not the structure per se, but the quality of the people it attracts, the quality of their interactions with each other and the confidence and support afforded them by the larger community. In this respect it's all a step in the dark. But at least it's a step.

Alan

### Governing Board approval

The Governing Board, which met in Auroville on September 21<sup>st</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup>, approved of the new organization and expressed the hope that it would help Auroville in finding a solution for the problems at the Matrimandir. The Governing Board also approved of the decision that henceforth the seven person Working Committee would be part of a larger Auroville Council of about 15 people.

The Governing Board observed that the word 'TORA,' the acronym of Task Oriented Residents' Assembly, was not well-chosen and suggested it to be changed into TORC (Task Oriented Residents' Committee). Finally it advised that the deliberations of a TORC should be time-bound, e.g. restricted to a period of three to maximum six months.

proposal is that if an issue cannot be resolved by consensus after two Residents Assembly meetings, an ad hoc group, open to any resident, will be formed to deliberate upon and resolve it. This group, called the Task-Oriented Residents Assembly (TORA), will hold as many meetings and take as long as necessary to reach consensus. Should this prove impossible a vote will be taken within the TORA; for an issue of high impor-

play a key role in both participating in and overseeing The Experiment process.

The Experiment proposal includes two interesting innovations. Members of the TORA, which will dissolve once the issue is resolved, will be asked at the first meeting to commit themselves to the entire process: nobody will be allowed to come in at the final stage and block a process which may have taken



# School from scratch

Kireet has been instrumental in opening a new school

Kireet has been interested in education, yoga, and the environment from his early years. Before he came to Auroville he had been a teacher in The Netherlands for 23 years, was active in Auroville International, taught yoga, and developed a beautiful garden that was renowned throughout the region. The decision to settle in Auroville meant leaving his beloved pupils and garden behind, but his interests travelled with him. After his arrival he built up from scratch Gaia's Garden, a small community in the north-eastern part of Auroville near the coastal village of Bommayarpalayam. "It was a new experience for me. I had to get used to tropical plants and trees, to become sensitive to their needs of sun, soil, water. It was and still is a very rewarding process," he says. The cashew grove has been beautifully transformed over the past four years into a wonderful garden, which forms an ideal setting for the community guest house. The proceeds from the guesthouse enabled him to initiate an erosion control programme. During the last five years 35 check dams have been built in canyons, retaining up to 50,000 cubic meter of rain-water during a good monsoon.

Education has always had a special place in Kireet's heart. According to him, "Education is one of the best possible avenues to change the environment positively. That is why I wanted to explore ways to introduce a more progressive educational programme in Bommayarpalayam." The village was lacking a good school, unlike other vil-

lages in and around Auroville. Apart from that, Bommayarpalayam has a lower literacy level (60%) than the state average of Tamil Nadu (70%), and a high unemployment rate. He explored several possibilities to tie up with existing schools, but nothing materialised. Until one day, "I read an article in AV Today about the Kuyilapalayam School Trust (KST). It appeared a successful school, with classes up to 11th standard." Moreover, the students achieved more than average results (70%) in their examinations (the passing mark level in TN is 35%). He approached the Trust and in 2000 they came to an understanding that Bommayarpalayam School would be a branch, a sub-school of the KST. And the mother school agreed to take responsibility for the necessary administration, admission procedures and selection of human resources.

Again, funds were needed and again the proceeds from the Guest House proved indispensable. Also a number of well-wishers contributed smaller or larger sums. Even in Kireet's former village in Holland a small sum was raised.

The Auroville Land Service allotted a piece of land in an old idyllic mango grove, situated on a plateau with a majestic view over the Bay of Bengal in the vicinity of the village. The grove is an ideal backdrop for games, outdoor lessons, and performances. It provides a sense of solidity, care and intimacy. Werner, an architect who recently joined Auroville, dedicated his services free and designed a curved school building, which overlooks the sloping land towards the



The new Bommayarpalayam school

ocean and catches the refreshing sea breeze: an inspiring environment for children to grow and develop their creativity. The overall design provides space for nine classrooms and an administration building, as well as a small amphitheater. Each classroom is about 45 m<sup>2</sup> (405 sq ft) and the required sum for the first three classrooms and necessary infrastructure stood at Rs 12 lakhs (US \$24,700).

The construction work started in April 2001. The work proceeded smoothly (although the roof required some additional re-designing) and 14 months later the first phase was completed. On June 5<sup>th</sup> 2002, World Environment Day, the school opened with 2 teachers and 20 pupils. The choice of date was not merely a coincidence, but stressed Kireet's conviction that environmental awareness includes and commences with education. But that was only the beginning. Now, three months later, after a temporary fourth classroom with a palm leaf roof had been built in the mango grove, the school has grown into a Kindergarten with 120 children and 4 teachers.

"In order to bring the children from the surrounding villages and the mother school, a school bus seemed necessary. But we had no funds at hand, save a reserve of Rs. 2.5 lakhs (US \$5,100) to cover the running costs of the school, the salaries of the teachers and a pump. KST proposed that if we would provide this amount, Palmyra, the main sponsor of KST, would add another 6.5 lakhs (US

\$13,400) for the new school bus. It was a difficult decision for us. However, the school bus was purchased and we have faith that the running costs will be covered by additional donations".

The bright yellow school bus is indeed a prominent hallmark on the premises, and it enables dozens of children to come daily to their school in an idyllic environment. It is rewarding to see their smiling faces when under the trees or their serious expressions when learning their lessons or see them greet Kireet with joy and spontaneity.

"We have come a long way from the first idea of a progressive education project to the present realisation of the first phase of the school. Still a lot has to be done. Due to the sudden increase of children and teachers we are faced already with a lack of space. We would like to start with the construction of another three classrooms and a teachers' room. Ultimately, the school would accommodate both a Kindergarten and Primary school section."

Says Kireet: "I started with Gaia's Garden from scratch. However, not only the garden grew; it provided the financial support for the erosion control and educational projects. It is as if Gaia's Garden is seeding itself to help improve Auroville's environment."

Dirk

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## The Art of Healing

In cooperation with the Tibetan Medical and Astrological Institute, an exhibition of the Tibetan system of medicine was held in the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture.

Tibetan medicine, also known as *Sowa Rigpa*, or the Art of Healing, has been practiced for over 2,500 years. It uses different kinds of ingredients such as herbs, trees, rocks, resins, soils, precious metals and saps. About 95% of Tibetan medicine is based on herbs and precious metals which are used for the seven kinds of medicine known as "Precious Pills" or Rinchen Rilpu. Tibetan medicine can be good for all kinds of illness, but is particularly successful in the treatment of chronic diseases such as rheumatism, arthritis, ulcers, chronic digestive problems, asthma, hepatitis, eczema, liver problems,



sinus problems, anxiety and problems connected with the nervous system. Diagnosis in Tibetan medicine is done through physician-patient conversations, observation of the patient, examination of the urine (smell, colour, sediments etc), a detailed and subtle examination of the pulse and sometimes the examination of the mouth. The basis of Tibetan medical education has been codified in 'The Four Tantras' which originate from 800 CE. In the 17th century, the content of The Four Tantras was painted on 179 painted *thankas* (scrolls). This collection of *thankas* is known as the 'Atlas of Tibetan Medicine'.

At present, training in Tibetan medicine is conducted under the auspices of the Tibetan Medical and Astrological Institute (TMAI) in Dharamsala, North India which also manufactures the medicines. Students undergo a seven-year rigorous training with an internship of two years before qualifying as doctors. Tibetan physicians are also taught astrology and are expected to use astrology and astronomy in their daily clinical activities. The basis of the Tibetan astronomical system is the Sri Kalachakra Tantra, broadly divided into three main chapters – external Kalachakra (effects of cosmos, planets, five elements etc); internal Kalachakra (Chakras or energy channels within the body); and alternate Kalachakra (for meditation, yoga and higher spiritual attainment).

The concluding ceremony of the exhibition was presided by H.E. Shri K.R. Malkani, Lieutenant Governor of Pondicherry. Dr. Kireet Joshi and the Maharaja of Puri, members of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation, highly commended the exhibition. Carel

## MATRIMANDIR

# Shaping the meditation rooms

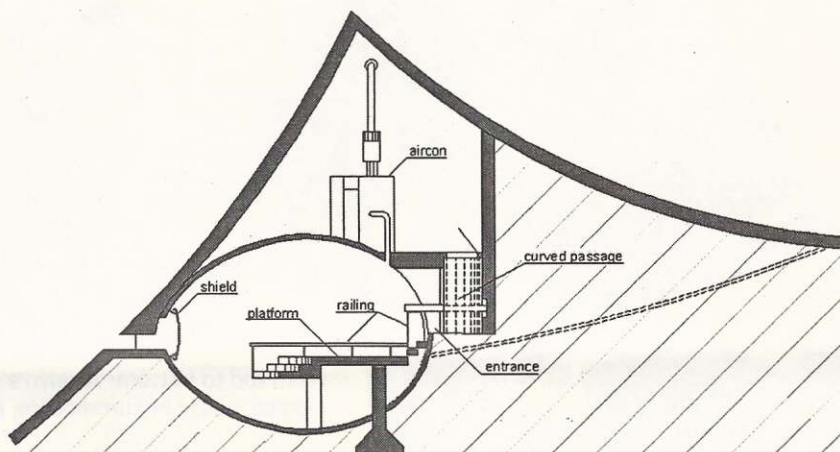
Many years ago construction of the meditation rooms inside the large petals, which surround the Matrimandir, was started. But in order to finish them, many technical problems had to be overcome. Finally this year, under the supervision of Carlos, a big leap towards the finalization of these meditation rooms has been made.

When you descend towards the main entrance of the Matrimandir, you walk between the impressive walls of two petals, which are covered with unpolished red Agra stone. Just about where you have to leave your shoes and sign the visitors book, openings in each wall giving access to curved corridors, each with a different geometrical design made out of small pieces of the same red Agra stone. Follow the corridor, and you arrive at the entrance of the spherical, partially egg shaped, meditation rooms. The meditation room which is most advanced has very light violet, rounded walls. At the far end there is an opening, covered with a gold coloured, almost translucent screen with circular designs. This is "Generosity".

It takes two steps to descend to a floating circular platform, which is not connected to the walls. To demar-

cate the sides of the platform, there are two benches or railings made of white marble. Their fiberglass, supports are nearly invisible, which creates the

stunning effect that the benches seem to be suspended in mid-air.



section through petal chamber (not to scale)

Three more steps, obviously intended for seating purposes, lead towards the end of the platform close to the translucent shield.

Each of the twelve rooms is meant to express one of the qualities given by the Mother: Sincerity, Humility, Gratitude, Perseverance, Aspiration, Receptivity, Progress, Courage, Goodness, Peace, Generosity and Equanimity. Each room will be painted in the appropriate colour indicated by

Mother for that particular quality. Experiments with different types of paint and pigments are continuing. A second room ("Peace") has been painted as a trial, using a very fine German pigment to create a deep shade of blue.

But before the rooms are ready for use, much research and work still has to be done. Carlos, a professional painter, is in charge of the finishing. As over the years many different teams have worked here under different supervisors, an overall uniformity of design has been lacking. For instance, some rooms have high entrances, some have lower ones, some rooms have a perfect spherical shape, others don't, or air-conditioning ducts are placed at different spots.

With his eye for perfection, Carlos is trying to streamline the finishing of all the rooms, thereby speeding up the work. For instance, special templates have been made to model the exact shape of the walls and roofs, and templates for the curvatures of the entrance doors are being designed.

The rooms will be cooled either with fresh air from outside which enters the room through ducts in the floor, or with air-conditioning. Working in the extreme heat under the ceiling of a petal on top of one of the rooms, Vladimir has been building a prototype of a soundproof air conditioner. As the rooms are made only out of stone plaster and marble, each sound reverberates, easily disturbing the peaceful, meditative atmosphere.

My psychological experience of being inside was positive. But I can well imagine that some people will feel unsafe, as the platform is not connected to any wall. Also, what is to be done if something, a lady's handbag for example, falls from the bench in between the platform and the wall? Another concern which has to be addressed is safety. Lacking natural lighting, the meditation rooms can only be used with artificial illumination. A power cut could create a feeling of suffocation, leading to somebody falling.

If all keeps on going well, we will soon get an idea of how these meditation rooms will be.

Tineke



# Affordable Housing

Can construction costs be brought down or is fundraising required?

Given the steadily rising costs of construction in Auroville, the need for affordable housing solutions is more urgent than ever. While the main cost of any building is related to the quality of construction expected by the house-occupant or architect, other major expenses relate to infrastructural and site development costs. According to the latest housing guidelines, the built-up area for an individual should be within 65 square metre (the Auroville Master Plan eventually calls for only 30 square metre space for each new resident in the high-density city area) and the end price of a housing unit should not exceed Rs 10,000 per square metre. For

centralized material procurement unit only would add an additional overhead on the material cost and it may result in the delay of actual construction process. Thirdly, Dharmesh suggests that architects and contractors should simply take a maintenance as he does, instead of charging their high percentages (see box).

Without collective-oriented housing solutions, finding any clear-cut solutions to reduce construction costs remains a challenge. The onus, whether in an individual or collective housing project, is on the individual architect or contractor to skillfully use materials and space in an innovative manner.

Designing affordable collective housing projects based on Auroville's ideals of integrated living will allow a large number of Aurovilians and Newcomers with little or no means to obtain a decent place to live. Yet Auroville is still far from being the self-sustainable "city the earth needs", and therefore resources for partially-funded housing schemes need to come from the "rest of humanity". Partly innovative, experimental and environmental projects like Maitreye and Creativity are two collective housing complexes that attempt to reduce costs through professional fund-raising efforts.

## The added percentages

This schedule is based on a basic construction cost (material plus labour), of Rs 6500 per square metre, an average for medium-density housing projects.

Particulars	Percentage	Amount	% on Basic
1. Basic construction cost	100% Rs.	Rs. 6500	100.00%
2. Infrastructure	20% of 1	Rs. 1300	20.00%
3. Architect's fees	5% of 1+2	Rs. 390	6.00%
4. Contractor fees	15% of 1+2	Rs. 1170	18.00%
5. Housing Service	10% of 1	Rs. 650	10.00%
6. Auroville Fund	2% of 1-4	Rs. 187	2.88%
Total		Rs. 10197	156.88%

most people in Auroville this price range is beyond their means, a fact that has been recognized by many architects and builders. There is presently a strong movement towards collective housing projects where semi-collective facilities allow for lower construction and running costs. Unfortunately, how to further reduce construction costs is a contested issue among various contractors and architects.

Finding the Rs 10,000 per square metre rate unacceptably high, Dharmesh, who works with the Development Group, asks, "Why does one need to spend so much on a house when a cheaper alternative can be built? Not everyone can afford granite floors or ceramic tiles. Traditional terracotta works just as well, and looks just as aesthetic." Paradoxically a new residential housing project coming up in Grace under architect Helmut precisely provides this type of finishing: plain white-washed walls inside, terracotta flooring and the use of country tiles on the roofs. Yet, the cost for these houses still exceeds the ceiling level. Another idea that Dharmesh proposes is that 5% of the overhead costs can be cut if the various project holders of big residential or office complexes sit together and work out a collective plan of buying the materials, and have a common team of supervisors to monitor the construction. However, Vijay, a contractor who recently joined Auroville, explains that he gets the materials at the same low price, and that a

Maitreye attempts to provide reduced-cost housing in a medium-density project. Costs will range between Rs. 2 to 2.5 lakhs for single resident dwellings not exceeding 45 sq. m. There are options for an extra floor in case of couples or families. To keep the costs low there will be efforts to approach different agencies for financial support for common facilities and infrastructure. Creativity, a project that professes to be "an experiment in intercultural, interactive community living for fifty people," has a similar approach. Presenting itself as "an integrated model of multiple eco-systems" (waste- water treatment plant, rainwater harvesting system and a solar energy system) and "an important Research and Development project" it has already succeeded in attracting 45% of the total estimated cost in grants and donations. This amount will cover the project's extremely high infrastructure costs and common facilities. The participants of the project have till now been able to raise only 25% of the remaining 56 % of construction cost. If successful, it may very well become a precedent for future collective housing projects. For affordable future housing in Auroville isn't merely a matter of cost reduction, but more and more a matter of policy, vision and fundraising.

Dirk and Abha

## Noise is a problem

Make sound planning part of town planning.

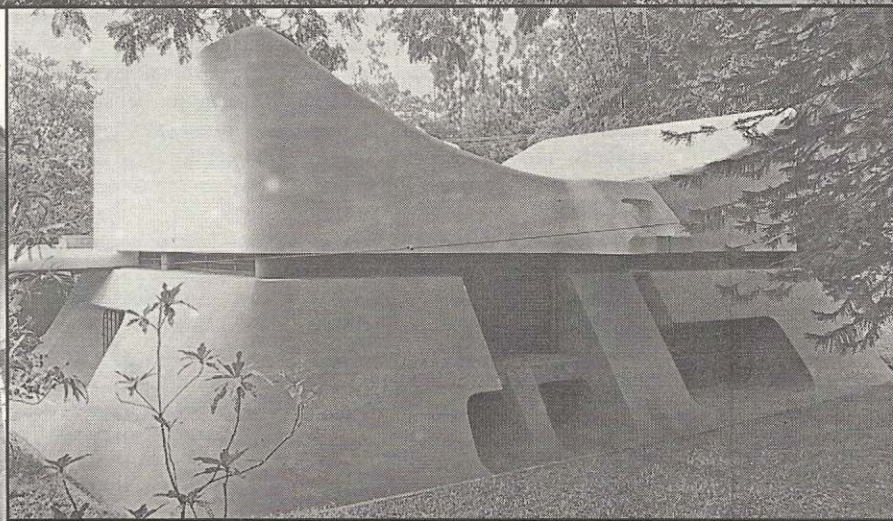
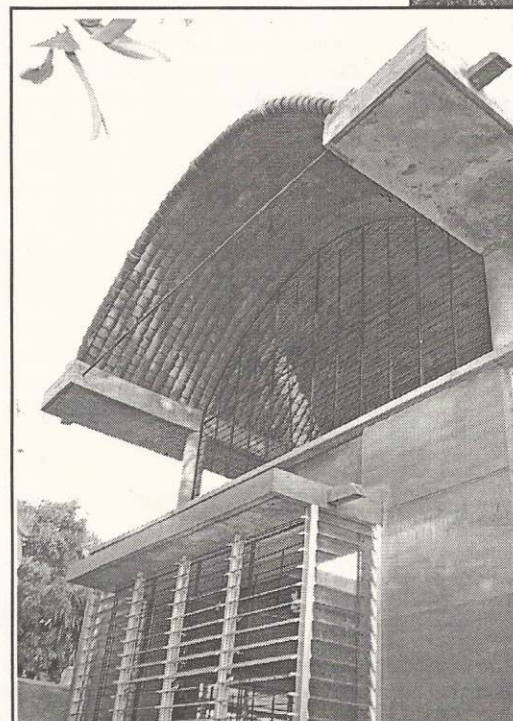
"Auroville's architects continue to design houses and plan multiple housing projects without considering the problems of sound pollution," says Auroville's sound expert Didier. Stating that "architects mainly focus on aesthetics and costs and give little or no thought to the fact that their clients have to live with the noise produced by their neighbors and road traffic," Didier suggests design reviews at an early stage of each design of houses and housing projects.

Didier is executive of Sound Wizard, a commercial unit that provides consultancy on the building of sound studios in India. Auroville architects, however, rarely ask for his expertise, and if they do happen to ask for it, they do it far too late, when the design is ready. "Till now, my advice has been ignored as it demands substantial changes in the house design or the lay-out of the complex. The architects were not ready to change their designs, it was too late. But the clients suffer the consequences," he says.

Sound pollution is a real problem in the tropics where open windows

are necessary for air-circulation and cooling. "The two go together. If you want to be 100% free from sound pollution and not emit too much noise yourself, you have to close all your windows and air-condition your house. But that is very costly and the energy consumption is unsustainable. The only answer is to design houses and plan collective housing projects in such a way that acoustical measures are incorporated and sound is channeled where it is not harmful to anyone," says Didier. The present situation shows how correct he is. Many people complain about noise caused by neighbors or road traffic. Development plans are increasingly objected to because noise pollution is not taken into account and no remedying measures are being proposed. Says Didier, "Noise is a problem, you can't ignore it. This aspect needs primary consideration when detailed development plans are drafted, and should be checked when requests for building permission are submitted. Without a minimum of 'sound planning,' a city with a density as projected for Auroville cannot be built."

Carel



From top to bottom: Jocelyn's house in Ami, dome houses in Samasti, houses in Grace, house in Auromodèle, house in Petite Ferme (left). All photos by Pino.

## A Home with a Soul

Is it possible for space to mould the being? To create habitations that consciously help in the growth of their residents? Aster Patel, a long-term resident of Auromodèle, says that is possible. Consciousness, space and form can manifest in matter to greatly enrich a person's experience of living in such a setting. She cites her own house, one of the five in a complex originally designed by Roger Anger in the 1970s, as an example. The round spaces in Aster's house – the outer walls rising organically from the earth and moulded into forms that form a 'whole' – these have brought her a

special meaning in inner and outer experience. "The inner and outer spaces in this house flow into the other, forming a totality of being and living. This totality in which one lives helps to recreate a similar flow within oneself – from the inner being to the outer personality." For Aster, the experience of living in a house where specific activities are not designated to closed areas and where the space exists in one continuum hasn't always been easy. She admits that "it takes time to learn to live in such a setting. The spaces are wide, with several large doors opening both ways leaving lit-

tle distinction between the inside and outside". Instead of the compartmentalized space one usually finds in a conventional house, the space in Aster's home is mobile, allowing the energy to flow, to act, to smooth out the angularities of the resident's personality into a more open, rounded form. A space that can be designed to act like a living force and help in one's growth is, according to her, "nothing short of a miracle that rightfully belongs to the experiment of Auroville".

Abha



# Changing attitudes to housing

Rolf manages Sumark, a service unit of Auroville Fund engaged in construction. At present Sumark is constructing apartments in Invocation and Arati.

**AVToday:** Do we have a housing crisis?

**Rolf:** I really don't know. There's no shortage of housing per se – there are plenty of new apartment projects in the Residential Zone – but there are a lot of people who can't afford it or don't want to invest in what's on offer. Actually if we do have a housing crisis I think it stems from a decision made by the Entry Group some years ago. Before that it was clear to everybody that if you came to live in Auroville you were expected to provide the means for your house. But that particular Entry Group suddenly shifted the responsibility from the individual on to the community through deciding that Auroville should provide housing for its inhabitants. This has created a situation where Aurovilians on the housing register simply wait for housing to be provided – which Auroville can't afford to do. At the same time if you are a newcomer and don't want to join a project in the Residential Zone it's definitely much harder today to find a place to build than it was in the early years.

**AVToday:** Is Auroville building affordable housing? Or are we only attracting the rich?

**Rolf:** Many of the new and ongoing projects in the Residential Zone claim to be medium-cost (between Rs 5,000-8,000 a square metre), although the final figures are not yet in. One of the problems when comparing quotations is that you are not comparing like with

like. When we give a quotation for apartments in Arati or Invocation we include not only the cost of construction and the architect's and contractor's fees, but also the infrastructure costs and other added percentages such as the 10% Housing Service contribution and the 2% charged by Auroville Fund on the total cost. These 'add-ons' are considerable: they can increase the overall cost of an apartment by between 30-40%. Other contractors may simply quote the cost of the unit. Also some contractors may quote for a rough finish, leaving the occupant to complete flooring, painting etc., while we include fittings – cupboards, lights, fans, etc. in the quoted price.

Having said this, construction costs are rising steeply in Auroville – at present they double every 5-6 years because labour costs increase by at least 10% per year and the overall cost of materials by about 15%.

**AVToday:** Is it more expensive to build in Auroville than Pondicherry?

**Rolf:** Not really because in Pondicherry you have to purchase the land, and the cost of this can exceed the costs of construction. Of course, in Pondicherry it's generally cheaper to link up to utilities and you don't have all the additional percentages to pay. Also our labour costs are not competitive – there they work a ten hour day, here it's seven hours at a more relaxed tempo – but I think for quality of construction you definitely get a better deal in Auroville.

**AVToday:** Can costs be brought down by experimenting with new construction materials?

**Rolf:** What I see happening now in Auroville is that most people go back to using conventional materials because the alternatives that we tried either didn't work out cheaper or because they are less reliable.

**AVToday:** What are the kinds of problem you face as an entrepreneur-contractor in Auroville?

**Rolf:** At the moment it seems few people willing to invest are coming. This may partly be because our apartments are not really for couples with children – and many families are coming to Auroville these days.

Also it's difficult to finance new projects without taking out a loan. If the clients are unknown – and people don't want to buy from plans these days, they want to see the finished product – you may have to pay costly interest charges until purchasers are found. This makes it a very risky proposition.

One solution we're exploring at present is the possibility of letting apartments out against monthly contributions. Sumark could borrow the money from the Financial Service or individuals to pre-finance the construction and then, if we couldn't sell units immediately, they could be rented out. This would take care of the interest charges on the loan and, in time, could provide the means to construct further apartments.

Renting is a controversial topic in Auroville. Yet it would open up a lot of possibilities. For example, many people have an income which, while being insufficient to construct a new house, would allow them to rent a nice place. Then you have the case of a young person without resources who is working in a unit. If the unit values this person it could pay the rent for him. Of course, renting is only one possibility. Another might be hire-purchase where somebody pays for the flat or house in installments over a period of years.

At present, while on the one hand some Aurovilians are waiting for the community to provide them with housing, on the other hand we seem to be attracting only newcomers who have a lot of money, as they are forced to invest a large sum of money into their home. This gap between the haves and have-nots will get bigger and bigger unless we allow something like renting which gives more people access to reasonable accommodation.

**AVToday:** Do we need to change our attitudes to housing?

**Rolf:** I think that many of us dream of a situation where we don't have to bother about things like housing and food; that they are provided so that we can concentrate on our work and our yoga. I've no idea how this dream may become a reality, but there are already some indications. For example, we see now that the apartments we've already constructed were sometimes bigger than the needs of their occupants. So now we are beginning to construct smaller apartments and studios which are easier and cheaper to look after: if you don't need an amma any more that cuts your living expenses. The studio option may well be attractive to those long-term Aurovilians whose children have moved away and who have had enough of the trip of looking after the big house with the land. And if they move to smaller apartments, they could free up accommodation for those newcomers with children who need more space because, clearly, the days of building new villas on acres of land are over.

**AVToday:** There seem to be plenty of headaches associated with construction in Auroville. What are the joys?

**Rolf:** One of the joys is sitting in front of a blank piece of paper, putting down ideas and then, two years later, seeing them standing in the landscape. On top of that, if I'm lucky, I'll even like what I see!

Alan

## Towards undivine anarchy?

1 a maximum construction price per square metre for all accommodation in the city, and specifies 65 square metres as the maximum space allowance for an individual (a couple are cosily allocated 100 square metres). Meanwhile the Housing Service attempts to supervise house exchanges, 'sales' and the allocation of houses which have been vacated. It uses the income from the 10% surcharge on all new constructions above four lakhs in Auroville to repair some sub-standard accommodation and even to allocate new accommodation free to a few fortunate individuals. The newly-formed Tamil Housing Fund is also trying to raise funds to provide housing for those with little means who are living in sub-standard or temporary accommodation (of the 25 or so most urgent cases, the vast majority are Tamil Aurovilians). The Housing Service also administers the newcomers housing project which provides some newcomers with temporary housing for the first two years against payment of a fairly substantial deposit or a monthly sum. As for the youth, two settlements have been constructed specifically for them (with the condition that they vacate their rooms at a certain age), while they may also benefit from housing projects in which those with more resources subsidize accommodation for those with less.

At the same time, a number of supposedly more affordable housing projects are coming up in the Residential Zone. The problem here is that 'affordable' sometimes means that the lucky occupant gets to pay for all kinds of unexpected extras not included in the basic price – like the finishing and infrastructure, contribution to the Housing Fund etc. – which markedly increase the final cost. [see box on page 4]

For many people, the ideal remains that accommodation of a reasonable quality should be available for all those

who genuinely want to live the experiment which is Auroville. At present we are far from achieving that. In the short term, then, it seems the emphasis should be upon ensuring that those Aurovilians in genuine need, and those with limited means who would like to join the community, have access to decent accommodation. And this implies, among other things, that the community needs to be more creative in its fund-raising, that architects more readily take up the challenge of wedding beauty to simplicity, practicality and affordability, and that resources are more efficiently used. Why, for example, can't more architects share common office facilities? Why isn't there a central bulk purchasing and storing service for building supplies? Why is supervision on Auroville construction sites so notoriously lax? Why is it so difficult for the layperson to get information about the real costs of construction and the advantages, disadvantages and costs of different building materials and methods?

And then, of course, there is the issue of density. So far the Development Group's attempts to legislate minimum densities for different sectors of the Residential Zone have resembled King Canute's vain attempts to turn back the waves. All too often, once the first houses spring up in a new project the new inhabitants suddenly discover they need more and more space around them. We all know about the neighbour from hell – and sound insulation in the tropics is a real challenge. But could it be, at some fundamental level, that our need for space and for the personalization of our environment is actually a refuge, a retreat, from the demands of the yoga, or from a community process in which we have lost trust? If this is so, the problem – and thus the solution – may ultimately lie more within than without.

Ah, there's the rub.

Alan

## Youth at a Crossroads

What choices are provided for Auroville youth when they require independent housing?

The community of Auroville provides a unique upbringing for its young residents with its small-town feeling of safety and its encouragement of individual expression and independence. As a result, some youth seek their own housing already when 14 years of age. In response to this, different housing projects for youth have developed over the years.

Ami, the first such official housing project, started in the 80's. Mostly living in capsules or under keel roofs, Ami's residents shared a community kitchen and chores. But over the years the youth grew up while remaining in the community, and the youth project became more of a community for adults building their permanent homes there.

The Auroville Youth Center was created six years ago to provide not only housing but also a place for creative activities. Unfortunately, as with Ami, the process of living and moving-on was lost and the acceptance of new arrivals became a struggle among peer groups.

A current project called Kailash takes a different approach and is successfully growing. Kailash is a youth housing project that opened in October, 2001. It has fourteen rooms, as well as a large kitchen, dining area and recreational space for the residents. Kailash houses youth between 16 and 21 years of age. The ideal of Kailash is not only to provide housing, but also to encourage community living, outside activities such as education or work, and peer group support.

As for the young adults who may be happy enough to travel and move about in their early twenties, there comes a time when a home on a more permanent basis is desired. Perhaps they are having children of their own, or they want to invest more energy in work and not worry about where they will sleep the next month. The

options available are often limited. Either they have parents who can provide housing, or they go abroad to earn or borrow money to build.

While waiting to create a more permanent situation, some young Aurovilians come together in a supporting collective group. An excellent example of this is WDK (We Don't Know) which is an organically created group housing for young adults. Residents share a large apartment with eight rooms and enjoy WDK as a stable home while working in the larger community.

In some cases the Housing Group and community allotted funds can assist. One example of this is a recently constructed community called Courage. Within Courage's sixteen apartments, four have been given for youth housing. Rajendran, a 26-year-old Aurovillian working as an architect for Auroville explained, "We are two to each apartment and are allowed to live in the apartments for three to four years. Without this opportunity I don't see that there would have been any other choice."

In another case, Auro Asha who was born and raised in Auroville, finds herself at 30 still looking for a place to call home. "In the last couple of years," she said, "I have moved eleven times." Asha is one of the many names on the housing service list and she currently lives in an apartment for a six-month term while continuing her full-time service work with Auroville's Entry Group.

Housing in Auroville is an issue for many individuals in every age group. For the children of Auroville, though, there is a unique need to not only supply housing but recognize that we can support our community and the children we bring into it.

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otos by Pino.

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Abha



# Waking up to toxics

Navroz warns of the environmental dangers and human cost of present lifestyles

"There are 100,000 chemicals in global use today, of which 15,000 are used widely. Of these only 50% have been tested, and of this 50% less than 2% have been tested for anything except carcinogenicity. In other words, the information available about the effects of chemicals on humans and the environment is very limited."

Navroz Mody first came to Auroville in 1978. Since then he has been involved in environmental projects both in the community and in the Palani Hills region of south India. For the past two years he has been working for the Greenpeace toxics campaign in India and this has given him new insights into the threats facing the environment. "In India the situation is particularly bad. During the past 10-15 years there has been a large increase in the chemicals produced in India, but most people are not aware of the problems posed by toxic chemicals. Even the State Pollution Control Boards are totally ineffective as is indicated by the fact that there is widespread dumping of toxic waste on roadsides, in fields and rivers."

The consequence? In areas like the heavily-industrialized Vapi-Baroda belt in Gujarat, or at the SIPCOT Industrial estate in Cuddalore, 30 kms. from Pondicherry, the hospitals are full of people suffering from the effects of living in such a poisoned environment. India has one of the highest concentrations of DDT found in breast milk, far higher than accept-

able limits set in the West. And then there are dioxins, which are among the most toxic chemicals known to man. The only study of dioxins in breast milk in India (from Perungudi, Chennai) show levels of dioxins comparable to those found in the highest exposure groups in the West.

Dioxins, which are widely dispersed in the environment, are highly carcinogenic. However, the greater concern with dioxins arises from their role as an endocrine disruptor: by interfering with the hormone system, dioxins target the basic building blocks of life – the central nervous system, the immune system and reproductive systems. There is no safe level at which dioxins will not harm living systems. Moreover it has been found that it is not the quantum, but the timing that is critical: exposure at eight weeks of pregnancy greatly impacts the development of the central nervous system of the foetus.

One of the major ways dioxins are formed is through the incineration of plastic. PVC is a particular problem here. The presence of chlorine is essential for the formation of dioxins, and PVC is composed of chlorine.

"Every day you can see plastic being burned in open waste dumps all over India. In fact, it's happening on our doorstep, at the Pondicherry municipal dumping-ground just across the canyon from Success. The largest source of dioxins produced in the Auroville region perhaps comes

from the incinerator at the Auroville Health Centre, where hospital waste has been incinerated for a number of years. According to the US Environmental Protection Agency, hospital waste is the highest contributor to dioxin formation since it contains the highest proportion of PVC of any waste. Studies from all over the world show that no incinerator, however high the temperatures generated, can deal with dioxins. Incineration is irresponsible, particularly as safe alternative methods, like autoclaving, microwaving or ozone treatment are available and fully documented [Health Centre employees have now been instructed to separate out and not incinerate PVC. eds].

There are other problems with PVC. Recent studies show that, under tropical conditions, PVC pipes leach lead under normal use conditions. They also contain phthalates, chemicals which give the pipes added flexibility. Under acidic conditions, such as those produced in waste dumps, phthalates (along with lead and cadmium) are released into the ground and water table and can then be ingested by humans where they disrupt the activities of the central nervous system. In fact, the problems associated with PVC are so serious that both the E.U. and the U.S. are reviewing their attitude towards it.

But what about Auroville where PVC is widely used for water pipes, shielding for electrical cables etc? Is there an alternative? "There are always alternatives. PVC is used because it is cheaper than other forms of plastic. However, while HDPE and PE pipes may be 20% more expensive, they last longer and contain a much smaller proportion of organochlorides. Other alternatives for pipes include steel, iron, cement, terracotta and ceramic pipes."

If there are always alternatives, why don't many Aurovilians know about them, and about the dangers associated with our daily lifestyle? "Partly, perhaps, because Aurovilians have become complacent, sitting back on the environmental laurels Auroville has earned for its afforestation work. But this ignorance is also a consequence of Auroville's distancing itself from many develop-



Pondicherry waste dumped near Utility canyon in Auroville

ments in the West. This is understandable – there are many undesirable developments – but it means that Aurovilians are not aware of many important lessons that the West has learnt in the last 30 years. In fact, I'd say that while in consumeristic terms Aurovilians may be becoming more westernized, in terms of understanding sustainability they are going backwards in comparison with what is happening in Europe and the U.S. My hope is that the young Aurovilians who have gone out will return with this awareness and take a different kind of approach to Auroville's development."

But what would this different approach involve? "The problem is much bigger than PVC in pipes. While Pour Tous has made a beginning in eliminating it, there is still a lot of plastic sold there and, beyond our use of plastics, we should be looking at things like the chemical colourings and dyes used by some of our commercial units. Once this toxic stuff gets into our underground water, we will never get it out. Then we need to look at the detergents and soaps we use – most detergents contain harmful phosphates, while body soap contains highly poisonous bactericides, all of which can end up in our ground water. Then again many of the Indian paints we use contain mercury, while varnishes contain organochlorides – the West banned this usage over 30 years ago. And then, of course, there is the matter of the vegetables, fruit and other food we import from other parts of India, much of which has been sprayed or treated with horrible chemicals."

"In the larger region, the most dangerous and long-lived toxic impacts on people and the environment comes from the spraying of pesticides on cashews. The problem today is that when Aurovilians go to the villagers and tell them about the dangers of endosulphan, they are not in a position to point to children who have been born with physical or mental deficiencies as a result of this."

That's why local epidemiologies are necessary to establish this link.

"We don't have control over all of these factors. But as a first step Auroville should aim at achieving a sustainable lifestyle, and here we're concerned with 'waste' as a whole, in energy, transport, housing. We should aim at zero waste, at not generating any waste which cannot be reused or naturally recycled. This means looking at the materials we use and rectifying or redesigning many of our processes. The kind of development and construction models followed today are untenable even for Auroville's integrity, let alone as an example to others. However, there is a great deal in Auroville's experience with land, rural energy, alternate construction materials, handicrafts, food processing etc. that is waiting to be manifest for Auroville's future if antiquated architectural-planning fancies can be put aside."

Navroz is deeply critical of planned developments in Auroville which he sees will compound our present unsustainable lifestyle. "Urbanization is intrinsically wasteful – the amount of energy and waste generated to sustain an urban situation is far greater than is needed for the same number of people living in a more dispersed and environmentally-conscious manner. Yet Aurovilians continue to plan for a city which will have high-rise apartment blocks with a density similar to areas of Bombay. This is silly. Aurovilians have shown that a small investment can change the fate of a piece of degraded land, and that this brings about changes which are the basis of healthy local development. An Auroville with a relatively dispersed population living on and healing large areas of land is the most replicable and useful model Auroville can provide for the rest of India. The last thing India and the world needs is another city..."

From an interview by Alan

For more information visit [ban.org](http://ban.org) or [greenpeace.org](http://greenpeace.org)

## Replacing plastics

Njal was for many years an active campaigner on environmental issues in Germany. Since settling in Auroville he has been involved in campaigns to eliminate the use of plastic in the community and to find alternatives to harmful pesticides for village farmers.

"Auroville has made some progress in recent years through replacing plastic by cloth and paper bags etc. Nevertheless Navroz is correct in saying Auroville could do much more to eliminate waste. The challenge of today is not to perfect the destruction of our waste but to find ways of avoiding generating it. And this implies living a much simpler lifestyle where we do not utilize things harmful to the environment."

"There is a great deal of misinformation about waste and waste management. For example, incinerators are not a solution. Incinerators in developing countries, and

even in the West, pollute through their smoke stacks and through the residues left in the bottom ash. Incineration is a technology of the past. Again, Auroville dumps some of its waste in what it calls 'land-fill'. But land-fills in the West have to be properly engineered to prevent the leaching out of heavy metals and the escape of toxic gases: here we don't seal the land-fill and there is no rain roof."

"Even Auroville Today is guilty of misinformation. You claim that the polypropylene (PP) bags in which you send the newspaper are not 'harmful to the environment'. However while PP is one of the less harmful plastics it can contain additives, like antioxidants and heat stabilizers, which are toxic and which can be released under certain conditions. And thousands of animals die each year through eating such plastic bags which litter the environment. The alternative? You could always pack it

## LAND ISSUES

# Painting for the land

Recently fifty acres of land in the greenbelt area next to the Botanical Gardens were purchased by an outside agency for development. The story is familiar: fences came up, the existing trees came down. This highlights once again the need for Auroville to purchase the land in the city and greenbelt. But, as always, the problem is insufficient funds.

Many avenues are being explored. In September two exhibitions were held in Auroville, the proceeds from which will go to the Land Fund. Elie exhibited hand-woven curtains and carpets in Pitanga while Axel, a long-time friend of

Auroville, exhibited his Japanese-influenced drawings in Savitri Bhavan.

"The greenbelt is a very important protection for the city. That is why we were so shocked to see the developers cutting the trees and putting up fences. This doesn't belong in Auroville," says Axel. "Auroville is like a beautiful green island in the midst of plastic and garbage. Pondicherry is growing like a cancer and more and more people unmoved

by the ideals of Auroville want to buy land here: it's a huge problem.

Perhaps it is already too late. But still we have to explore all ways of acquiring the remaining land."

"It's very difficult in Germany," admits his partner, Angelika. "When we talk about Auroville people are interested, but it's a big step from showing interest to actually giving money. Also, every day there are so many appeals on the television or

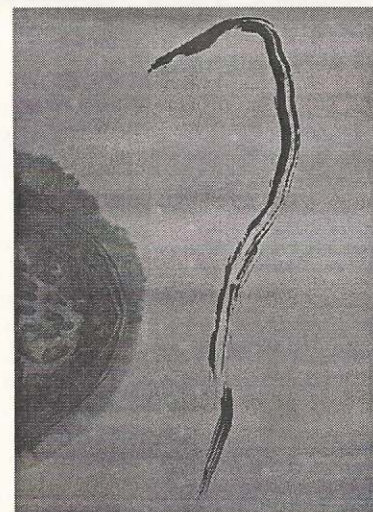


Axel and Angelika Kroeck

radio for disaster relief and other things like that. And then it's difficult to convince some people that Auroville is not a sect."

"When I first visited Auroville," says Axel, "I was stimulated as an artist by all the colours – the red/brown earth, the clothes of the local people. I tried to capture the rhythm and the feelings that I had about Auroville and India in watercolours. Now, for the first time, I've started using ink and rice paper. These compositions are inspired by Zen philosophy and ideas rather than Auroville itself, but they are my contribution for the land."

Alan



Moving Lines, a calligraphic painting by Axel



# "And Long And Dark Shall Be The Night"

In a new book Claude Arpi seeks to pinpoint the root causes of Tibet's present sufferings.

"Somehow the shining of our forehead had vanished at one point. Earlier there was some kind of ray, a force of good karma, or luck; it was not there anymore in the fifties. At the time India became independent in 1947, or even before, something went wrong." Thus wrote the Dalai Lama on the karma of Tibet.

Starting with reflections on Tibet's karma, taken from interviews with the Dalai Lama and other scholar-lamas while researching his most recent book 'The Fate of Tibet', the author then leads the reader back to the Tibet of the early 20th century. This was a Tibet that seemed completely isolated from any influences of the modern world and whose powerful clergy – despite the prophetic warnings of the 13th Dalai Lama in his last testament concerning the dangers of this isolationism – wanted it to remain so.

The 13th Dalai Lama had been forced into exile for a second time by the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1910, but he returned from India and officially proclaimed Tibet's independence in 1913. In his years in exile in India he had come to respect the organisational skills of the British. He established a close rapport with Sir Charles Bell, the British Political

Officer in Sikkim, who expressed the view that "Tibet should enjoy internal autonomy, free to live her life and her freedom, for this will be the best for the northern frontier of India". But the Dalai Lama's forward-looking attempts to modernise the country by creating a standing army to protect its borders, sending groups of young Tibetans to study in England, starting a British School in Gyantse, and even attempting to seek out ways to apply for membership in the fledgling League of Nations, were all foiled by the entrenched conservative clergy of the main monasteries. A rift was also to occur with the Panchen Lama, who objected to his monastery being subject to a central tax levied from Lhasa for the newly proposed border army, and who was to later flee into exile in Mongolia. Reflecting upon the modernising attempts of the 13th Dalai Lama the present Dalai Lama observes that "If the Thirteenth's attempts to introduce modern education into Tibet had not met with such intense resistance by traditionalists, our history might have taken quite a different turn."

In 1932, a year before he died, the 13th Dalai Lama issued a remarkable testament that warned the Tibetan

people of terrible times to come. "...In my lifetime conditions will be as they are now, peaceful and quiet. But the future holds darkness and misery...Monasteries shall be looted, properties shall be confiscated, and all living beings shall be destroyed. The memorable rule of the Three Guardian Kings of Tibet, the very institutions of the state and religion shall be banned and forgotten. The properties of the officials shall be confiscated; they shall be slaves of the conquerors, they shall roam the land in bondage. All souls shall be immersed in suffering and the night shall be dark and long...."

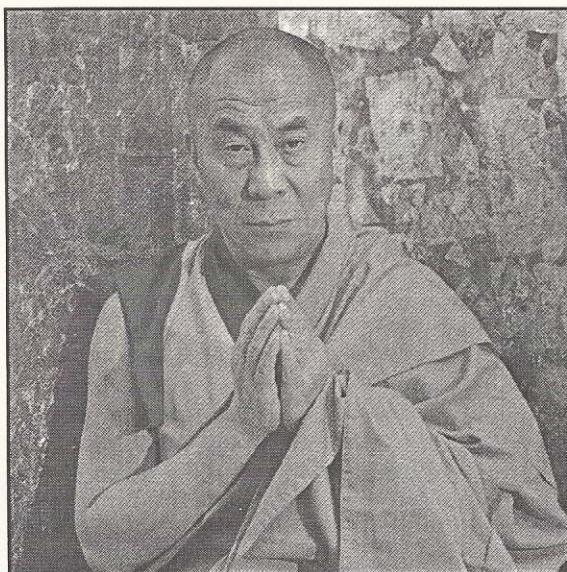
The thirties and forties, while the present Dalai Lama was still a growing boy, were years of political intrigue in Tibet with rivalries between successive regents and their factions from different monasteries contributing to a growing climate of division. Ironically, as the British Empire started dissolving and many countries gained independence after

many decades of nationalist struggle, Tibet having enjoyed forty years of independence and peaceful prosperity, began to pay a heavy price for its years of isolationism – a price that it is still paying today – as it had no one to turn to when Mao Tse-Tung's army invaded in 1950.

This book, written by someone who is a devoted supporter of the Tibetan cause and the initiator of the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture in Auroville, nonetheless casts a refreshingly critical eye on some of the root causes of Tibet's recent tragic history.

Roger

*And Long and Dark shall be the Night by Claude Arpi, Pavilion Series, Published by the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture, Auroville. 93 pages, 2002, price in India Rs 140.*



His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama

## PASSING

# Heading South like Ambrose Bierce

Remembering Kenneth

Dropping in on Kenneth, which I did every six weeks or so down the 20 years I knew him, would more often than not lead to an invitation to step inside, and a two to three-hour session in his small cluttered kitchen. Once we'd settled in and become relaxed with each other's company – 'How are you doing, don't give me the macho bullshit, the last few weeks it's just getting worse and worse' – our conversation, fuelled with brandy and cold coffee from his rusting fridge, would ricochet. Once he described a play he had started writing, called Roll On Shelley. Its characters included Rooftop Julie (a woman leaving on the bus for Iowa), a man with balloons, a prisoner and a guard coming out of a manhole who end up exchanging roles, a couple of wino derelicts and two lovers carrying a park bench around. I'd say this was fairly typical of his surreal and often ribald sense of humor. Our conversation could then range from Tennessee Williams and Marlon Brando's performance in a Streetcar Named Desire and On The Waterfront, to the Sumerians, Niburu (the rumoured twelfth planet of our solar system) and extra-terrestrials. It would be punctuated with relevant asides such as how Al Capone was a great fan of Louis Armstrong and used to go to his gigs in speakeasies in Chicago. Frequently he would reminisce about growing up in New York, his travels through the South and a youth spent in and out of jail. "I was in solitary confinement when the supramental came down," he liked to point out. He

travelled to Mexico, first as a young man and later with his wife Myrtle, and he would recount how, at a temple in the Yucatan, the temple priest invited him to sit on the throne of the jaguar. He had wondered why at

Aurovilians. He would mention the squat he and Supriya conducted of Navajata's unoccupied Aspiration hut during the "revolution" that led to a one-week stint in a local jail along with a number of other Aurovilians. His

half dozen or so poems he had written on the blank back pages of the Auroville News. After not writing for thirty years, his muse now had him by the throat, and over the next six years he published two collections of poetry in Auroville editions: Trek and Other Poems (1993) and Ark 11 and Grand Cru in Plastic Cups (1998).

A metaphysical realist, his poems, sustained by a playful word-craft, capture a wide variety of moods that range from the nostalgic to the surreal. His spirit, at times celebratory, frequently ironic, reflected a mind at work on many different levels. 'On any given day I'm living in several different worlds simultaneously, which are like different facets of a gemstone – different angles of light and darkness,' he once told me. But perhaps it is the whimsical humor that is the richest vein in his work. Drawing the reader in, with the equivalent of an accomplice's wink, it ranges from the iconoclastic to the self-mocking, from the bitterly ironic to the ribald and folksy.

In one of our lengthier sessions he had mentioned that he had been thinking of going back to the States and down to Mexico. He took me to the door, muttering, "Villon and Bierce, they're me," before wandering off into the undergrowth, chuckling to himself. I think I can still hear him chuckling.

Roger

*Kenneth Lavarne Fator joined Auroville on March 31, 1969. He passed away in the second week of August 2002 at the age of 69.*

## ARK II

*Into the abyss I fling my little  
echo of god's survival in language.*

*Plain I sing profanely song that's sometimes  
as absurd as bird's chirp, trill or tweet.  
Or, feverish as dardvishes twirling, coo-  
the starry over jade-dragon mountain  
while share-holders of the future somewhere  
ball-the-jack in corporative boardrooms.*

*Though, from the moon earth can clearly be seen,  
in tow, going, it would seem, nowhere  
with its assorted cargo of every -  
thing including a few pink dolphins.*

*Who risking venture may remind, it's not  
enough to survive, one must win, sometimes.*

Kenneth  
4.3.1996

the time, but then realized that he had the tattoos of an eagle and a jaguar on his arm. He travelled to India and Pondicherry with Myrtle in 1966. He would describe his meetings with the Mother, for whom he had a ferocious sense of devotion and love and about whom he would talk with tears in his eyes. There were the early years of Auroville: the beginning of the digging for the foundations of Matrimandir, in which he participated along with a handful of other early

gruff exterior belied a love for the world and sadness for its pain, for the cruelty and false-ness man was capable of. "The more conscious you are, the more you see of the darkness, the more things are exposed."

One afternoon in the early nineties, when he was living alone in Acceptance, he remarked to me that he would like, if he lived long enough, to open up the music room in his mind. When I next came by, a few weeks later, he showed me a

## In brief

### Governing Board

The Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation held its 26th meeting on September 21st - 22nd. Main topics discussed were Auroville's internal organisation, education, land situation and developments at the Matrimandir.

### New Secretary

Mr. Vengateswaran has declined the appointment as new Secretary of the Auroville Foundation.

### Political reform seminar

The Centre for Policy Research, Delhi, in conjunction with the Centre for International Research in Human Unity, Auroville and the Department of Political Science, Pondicherry University, held a seminar in Auroville on 19th September on the topic of Union-State Relations and Local Governments.

### Matrimandir

A series of general meetings have been held with the intention of finding ways to accelerate the work at Matrimandir and to solve the pending conflict between architect and site management.

### Inner Architecture

The International Forum of Young Architects held a workshop over two weeks focusing on the International Zone of Auroville. Six architects from different parts of the world interacted with Auroville architects and others in an attempt to link planning with spirit and inner sustainability.

### EM Village compost

A project to transform waste in the village of Kulapalayam into high quality compost has taken off successfully. The well-segregated compost is being fermented with EM (effective micro-organisms) which results in a compost with good smell and good texture, which repels dogs, flies and crows. The compost will be sold to generate funds for the Kulapalayam Village Compost Program.

### Odissi

Odissi dancer Sangeeta Dash from Pondicherry gave a performance at Bharat Nivas.

### Baul by Baul

The Bauls, wandering musicians from Bengal, gave a concert of their unique devotional music in the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium in September.

### New phone numbers

All telephone numbers are existing to a 7-digit format. The existing phone numbers in Auroville will be preceded by a 2. Mobile phone numbers will not change.

### Education budget in deficit

A donation made in November 1998 towards teachers' maintenance has been exhausted. The Auroville School Board is studying ways in which the deficits are to be met.

### 10 poems by Sri Aurobindo

ACD with 10 poems of Sri Aurobindo set to music by Holger and recited by Graeme Allwright has been released. Information: sunshinemusic@auroville.org.in

### Tamil women poets meet

On September 11th, the birth anniversary of the famous Tamil poet Subramaniam Bharati, nearly 20 women poets met in Auroville and later in the Bharati memorial house in Pondicherry.



# SOPHIE'S CLASS

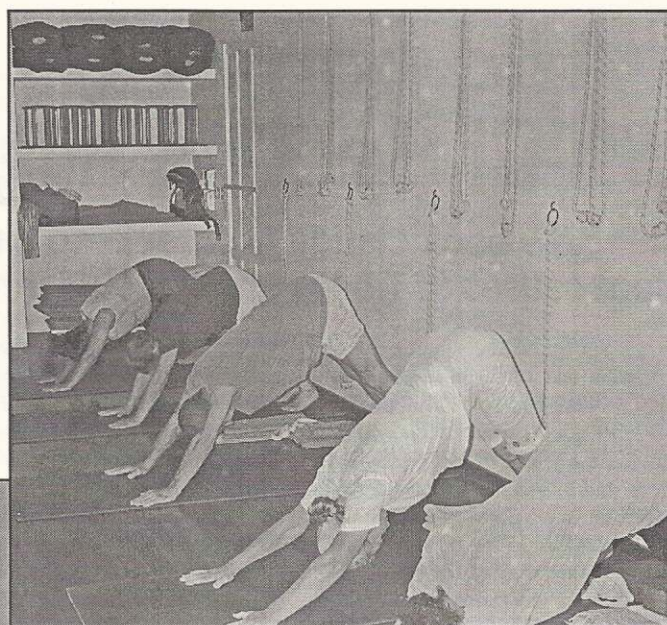
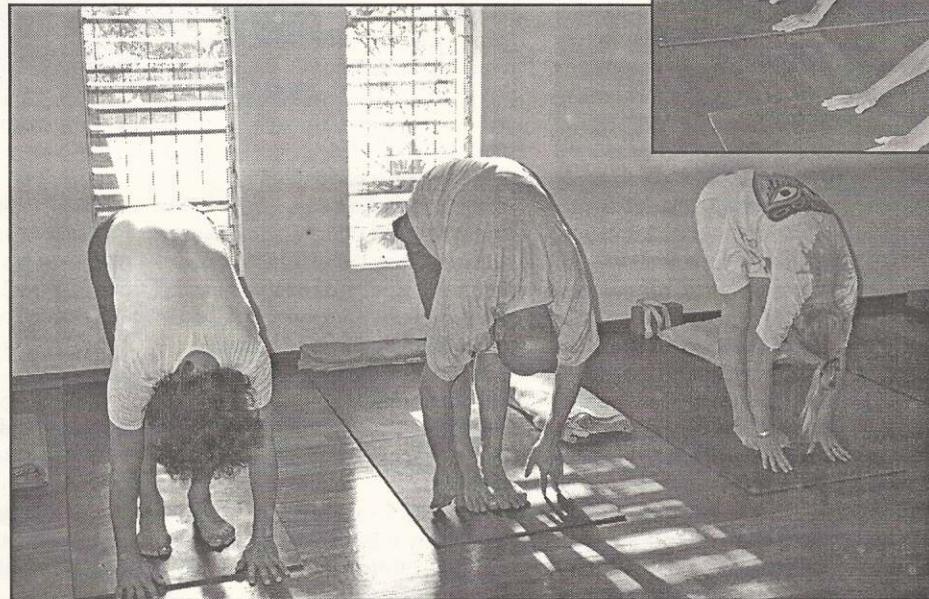
Eva, a newcomer from Germany, and I are a little late for Sophie's class on hatha yoga. As we hurry in, Eva's jute mat tightly rolled under her arm, twelve people of varying ages are already seated in the lotus position, watching us with veiled interest. This looks formidable until Sophie's generous smile puts us somewhat at ease. "Pick up a mat for yourself, also a wooden block and a belt", she motions toward the well-stocked shelves along the wall. I find myself dragging out the thick, black rubber mat between two people, one of who smiles at me. After I am seated, I spot Eva diagonal to where I am.

The class begins. On cue, legs stretch out, toes flex, hands reach towards the ceiling in unison. "Sit with your back straight. Feel your spine. Find your spine." Moving between the two rows like a sinuous cat, Sophie issues her instructions in clear, French-lilted English. She demonstrates each asana, each posture, with a flexibility that is as beautiful as it is daunting. Most of the people in the class are Aurovilians, well-versed in varying forms of yoga. The lady next to me, who looks about seventy, is going through the movements with the air of a no-nonsense acrobat. I strain and pull at my obstinate muscles and avoid glancing at my agile neighbour unless absolutely essential. In a space of just twenty minutes, my hair is plastered to my scalp in sweaty strands even with the fans working overhead. I wonder, my head resting upside down on a large wooden brick, if the class is really going to be one and half hours long. Across the room, from my inverted position I watch Eva's flushed face, her blue eyes

rounded with concentration, following Sophie's every move.

We come back to normal position. Before I can breathe again, come the next spray of instructions. "The following exercise is very good for the spine". Fourteen pairs of eyes swivel to the side where Sophie is poised to perform on the polished wooden floor. "Tuck your left leg under your left buttock, then cross your right leg over

diligent manoeuvring, finds himself in a tangle. I look at him encouragingly as Sophie comes and gently straightens him out into the right posture. "Deep breath, keep breathing" she commands the rest. I can hardly breathe in that cramped position but slowly it becomes easier and easier.



your left knee with the foot flat on the mat. Now bring your right arm over your right leg and clasp your right ankle, with your left hand behind your left buttock resting lightly on its tips." I silently muse over Sophie's delectable pronunciation of the word buttock with its soft 'b' and 't'. The lady next to me is twisted into the right shape within seconds, her face and her body turned resolutely towards the wall on her left. The friendly gentleman on my left, despite his

We move on to some more stretches, this time with belts and ropes against the wall. We hold out for longer, focusing on each inhalation and exhalation. Finally, Sophie allows us to lie back on the mats in the shavasana position. After all that straining and pushing, this seems a delicious torpor, a hard-earned rest that my body is longing to enjoy. I close my eyes, let my feet fall away from each other, and relax my hands, palms facing upwards. In the background Sophie's voice, now sonorous as a sub-

terranean spring, courses through my consciousness, speaking to each part of the body individually. "Let your forehead relax, your eyebrows . . . let your eyes relax . . . feel the weight of the eyelids drop . . . let your shoulders relax, . . . your arms sink into the floor, your buttocks, your thighs . . ." From the adjoining room come sounds of strenuous thumping of feet. Probably a dance class in progress. Sophie instructs us to notice the sound, and then to let it go unhampered on its way out of our beings, which seem now to be suspended, afloat in a space that is intangible, between worlds.

The class comes to a close with everyone, still on their backs, drawing their knees up to their chests, letting the body roll away from the centre to the right, and then coming back to the sitting position, with the hands folded in the prayer position. I look at Sophie smiling brightly, and decide to experience this adventure of the body and the spirit again.

Abha

## COMMUNITY

# Newcomer Meet & Dinner 2002

Held in September in Newlands, a relatively remote and beautiful greenbelt community situated south of Abri, this year's Newcomers' get-together was attended by about 60 newcomers of different origins and age groups. People sat in a circle enjoying the open air while the organising team, consisting of Marco, Liliane, Shivaya, Ambre, and Julietta, got things ready to roll. The evening opened with a note of welcome by Shivaya, a member of the Entry Group. After a moment of meditative calm for the spirit of Auroville, the organisers called for a round of newcomer introductions. Cheerful self-revelations quickly broke the ice, and the atmosphere livened up further with the next item on the informal agenda, which involved newcomers' expectations and concerns within the community. These included a request for a "discovery week" on various aspects of Aurovillian

life. It was felt that exploratory tours of different communities, talks on Auroville and its organisation, and an exposure to the local culture, language and customs, should be a part of every newcomer's entry into Auroville.

Most people also agreed to the necessity of a newcomers' forum, which could meet on a social level a few times in the year. Copies of the latest AVToday issue (which



deals with the theme of newcomer integration in Auroville) were circulated along with booklets detailing the "Aims of Auroville". The hottest part of the evening were the steaming plates of pizza slices, (dressed with garden fresh veggies and "real olives") that kept appearing on the table with remarkable speed and which kept the newcomers busy until late in the evening. The bon-

fire was deeply appreciated by all and Marco, the Italian chef, along with his team, received a standing ovation when they finally took their leave. The evening ended with a hunt for missing chappals and shoes which Shivaya's dalmation, and a couple of his friends, had happily left unpaired under the many bushes surrounding her lovely house. All in all a fun evening for everyone who came for the event!

Abha

### Subscription information:

Subscription rates for 12 issues of AUROVILLE TODAY are: for India Rs. 250; for other countries Rs.1500, Can \$51, € 37, US \$38, UK £25. This includes the postage by airmail.

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All photos, unless otherwise attributed, have been taken by the editors. DTP: Doris and Matthia.

Photo editing: Matthia. Printed and published by Carel Thieme on behalf of the Auroville Foundation, and printed at All India Press, Pondicherry, and published at Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India.

<http://www.auroville.org/journals&media/avtoday/avtoday.htm>

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