

# AUROVILLE TODAY

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## Language in Progress

"I have a spelling question to ask you!"

"Oh, my child, I make as many spelling mistakes as possible!" (Mother laughs)

"It's for those famous 'Aurovillians'..."

"I write it with only one 'I'."

"Deliberately?"

"Deliberately. (Laughing) It's not French: it's Aurovilian!"

## Tower of Babel in reverse

Speaking of writers, Emile Cioran remarked, "On n'habite pas un pays mais une langue"—"One lives not in a country but in a language." It's a phrase pregnant with meaning because it indicates not only how a writer filters and shapes experience through the medium of language, but also how language itself determines what we perceive. For each language, through its vocabulary, structure and syntax, carves out a slightly different window on the world.

What does it mean, then, to live in a country or a community where the dominant language is not one's own? Where the subtleties and nuances of one's own thoughts find no ready echo in the languages spoken around one? And what happens to different languages when they collide and embrace? An enrichment? A diminution? Or the beginnings of something completely new?

In this sense Auroville, with its 35 different nationalities and many different tongues, is a huge laboratory for the study of how language changes and evolves. Mother once described Auroville as the Tower of Babel in reverse, a place of unity rather than disunity, and to this end she specified that four languages should be studied in Aspiration School—Tamil, French, English and Sanskrit—as a basis for communication. Today, for various reasons, the status of these languages is quite different. Sanskrit is spoken and studied by very few Aurovillians; only a handful of Aurovillians other than those who were born here are fluent in Tamil; and French, while quite widely understood, tends to be spoken only between French nationals and at Mirramukhi School, the only French-medium school in Auroville. English, the native tongue of less than 10% Aurovillians, is the lingua franca of the community. But it is a species of English up with which the Queen would not put...

The poet Ezra Pound once remarked that the health of the language—its ability to comprehend complexity, to convey ideas concisely and to brush the sleeve of the incommunicable—is an index of the health of a society. From this perspective, how 'healthy' is Auroville? Clearly language here, after a period of frontier minimalism in which everybody's vocabulary seemed to have shrunk to about 50 words, is on the move. From "romba thanks" to "C'est trop loose" there is plenty of evidence of mixed linguistic marriages. The question is whether these pidgin forms really represent a greater linguistic dynamism, or an erosion, a dilution of the qualities of the original languages. Or all of the above!

Mother stressed—particularly in relationship to French—that certain languages should not be allowed to die out because they embody unique qualities, qualities which are important for the development of humanity as a whole. But she also foresaw that out of the linguistic melting pot of Auroville a new language would evolve.

Probably we are still too young as a community for

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such a language to emerge. In this light, the present generally unconscious experiments with language in Auroville—the fusions, neologisms, borrowings, distortions—are no more than the first stretchings of a new form awakening to life. Perhaps there are still too many linguistic crocodiles—those who, brought up in one culture, are too closely identified with its language to fully embrace others—in the undergrowth for the new species to emerge from the rushes. Perhaps the real hope is of the next generation of Aurovillians who, growing up in a genuinely mixed culture, have no narrow linguistic fidelities.

But what a hope! Think of a future Aurovilian language which can draw upon the imaginative and expressive range of high Tamil, the precision of French, the suppleness of English and the profundity of Sanskrit—to say nothing of all the other flavours represented here. *C'est far out!*

Alan

## French

### HOW FRANCOPHONE ARE WE?

On more than one occasion, Mother was asked why French was taught at the Ashram School. In 1965 She explained, "French will continue to be taught in the Ashram, at least as long as I am here, because Sri Aurobindo, who loved French very much and knew it very well, considered it to be an essential part of the knowledge of languages." Later, she added, "He (Sri Aurobindo) used to say it was a clear and precise language, whose use encouraged clarity of mind. From the point of view of the development of the consciousness, that is precious." (19.10.71) Another reason for encouraging fluency in the French language is that, "Sri Aurobindo should be read in English, and I should be read in French." (4.4.66)

Mother also wanted French to be one of the four languages to be studied in Aspiration School, presumably because these were the languages she wanted to be commonly used in the community. But what is the situation today? Although there are 264 French people in Auroville,

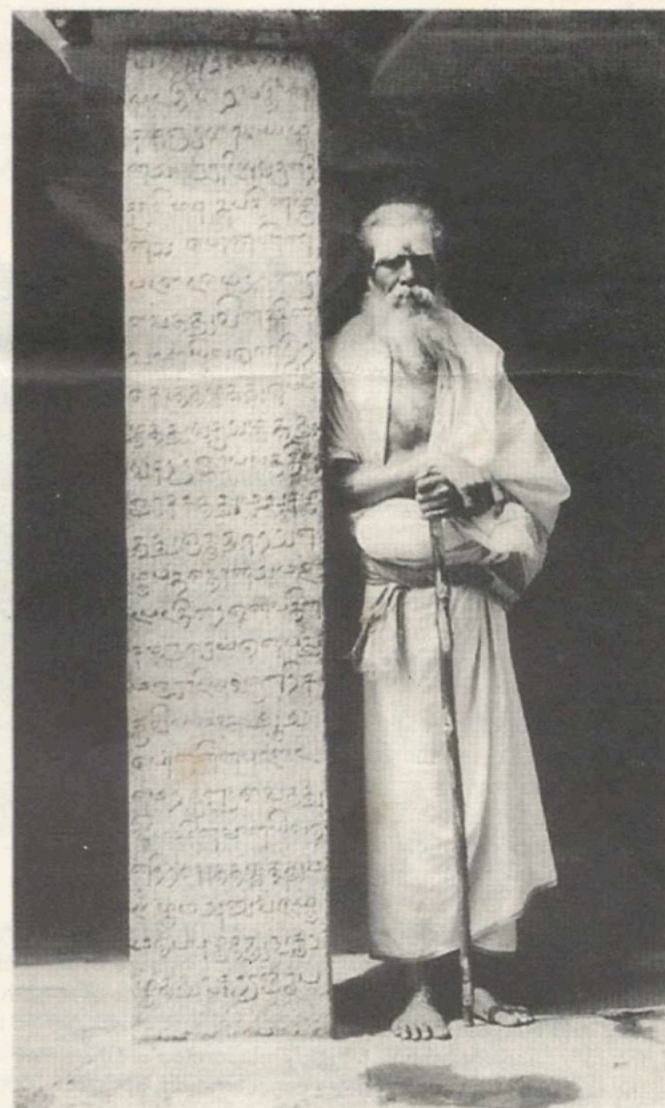


PHOTO: OLIVIER

Sadhu beside a pillar inscribed with old Tamil at the Brihadeswara Temple, Thanjavur. Photo: Olivier

making it the second largest nationality represented here, and although another 200 or so Aurovillians are relatively fluent in French and French is taught in all the schools, the lingua franca of Auroville, the language of our meetings and of our main organs of communication, is clearly English.

Why should this be? One reason, of course, is that English continues to be spoken widely as a common language in India. Another is that French may be rather more difficult to pick up and speak well than English because it demands such precision in the use of syntax and grammar. Yet another reason is the sheer pervasiveness of English as an international language of communication, commerce and entertainment. In this context, Raymond Thépot, an Aurovilian poet and translator, points out that even though the French have a certain pride in their language, for many of them the acquisition of English represents "a certain liberation, almost a 'promotion', because it offers access to

(continued on page 2)



(continued from page 1)

a larger world".

Many of the French in Auroville seem to accept the predominance of English. "English is a fact of life," says Adhara, "so it's up to us French to integrate this. Actually, the main thing is to make ourselves understood, and most Aurovilians can manage to do this." But not all. For example, a number of the Aurovilians whose mother tongue is French have virtually no proficiency in English. And even some of the French who are relatively fluent in English feel frustrated by the present situation. "I suffered enormously from the impossibility of making myself correctly understood or of expressing well all the complexity of what I felt or thought", writes Yanne Dimay, who lived for years in Auroville and now lives in Paris. "I had the impression that my voice had been confiscated. To be obliged to speak English while debating the future of Auroville was unbearable for me because I was not able to express the subtle nuances of my thoughts; and what I'm expressing here must also be valid for the Tamils and well as for other minority language groupings in Auroville."

Raymond points out that French is not only "very clear and luminous and living and expressive", as Sri Aurobindo described it, but that it is also an excellent tool for analysis. "For example, it is a superb language for teaching philosophy, a course of which would be very useful in

helping our students think more deeply about some of the big questions they have about life." On the other hand, Raymond acknowledges that French has its limitations. The price it pays for precision is a certain lack of nuance or suggestiveness. "It's very difficult to translate Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* into French because where French has a single arrow to hit the mark, English has a whole quiver full." Sri Aurobindo himself pointed out that "clear" languages like French and Bengali find it very difficult to express the inexpressible. "One has to go out of one's way to find it. Witness Mallarmé's wrestlings with the French language to find the symbolic expression..." For the same reason, Mother pointed out that while French is the most precise language, "from the spiritual point of view it is not ... the best language to use; for English has a suppleness, a fluidity which French does not have, and this suppleness is indispensable for not deforming what is vaster and more comprehensive in the experience than mental expressions can formulate".

In France the purity of the French language is rigorously guarded by L'Académie Française. "This strictness is killing the French language", believes Didier, although his partner Cecilia disagrees. "I appreciate any attempts to protect against the swamping power of English." Cecilia, who teaches in the kindergarten, is concerned that the French which is taught in Auroville should be the

best. "Otherwise Auroville students who visit or return to France will be handicapped in the present climate where there are hundreds of applications for every job." Unfortunately, she feels, some of the longer-term French Aurovilians are poor models since they no longer speak the language well, unconsciously translating English constructions into French and incorporating words from many different languages.

Tapas Desrousseaux, who has been teaching French to adults in Auroville for some time now, also feels that the French which is spoken in Auroville tends to be a degraded and slangy form. However, "There is a real interest from other nationalities in learning French. I have about 20 students, the maximum I can take at present. There are Tamils, north Indians, Russians, an Australian..." "I wanted to read Mother in her own language," says Mita, one of her students. "I find I can express certain things better in French than in English...and the fact that I know a little French now has changed my relationship with some of the French here. The connection is different now." In spite of stories like this, there is very little material support from the community for adult language education. "I don't know why this is," says Tapas. Perhaps there are just too many other priorities. But I've suffered because it is so difficult to get the basics together here."

She has finally managed to obtain a

multi-system TV and VCR, and she has just begun using a highly successful video programme which teaches French by the 'immersion method'. But her classroom is a corner of a room in her house which can barely accommodate six students. "A proper place for teaching French has now become an urgent necessity. This is why I have just written a project for constructing a French language laboratory in Auroville. A French language laboratory will be a sign that Auroville takes the teaching of French seriously."

"Education is clearly the key to keeping French alive in the community," says Raymond. "But French cannot simply be taught. It has to be taught with a 'flame' if it is to resist the pervasive influence of English. And it must be the lack of this flame which has resulted in its not being spoken so much in Auroville at present." Raymond's personal initiative was to start a small publishing house—Latin Pen—which promotes the Latin-based languages through publishing original work and translations in French, Spanish and Italian.

At the same time, Raymond wonders if concern about preserving existing languages is not beside the point. "A new millennium approaches, and this may bring an entirely different language with it. Already the Auroville children are creating something new in the way they mix together words and constructions from different languages..."

Alan

# Sanskrit

by Vladimir

"Sanskrit ought to be the national language of India" (*The Mother*, 1971)

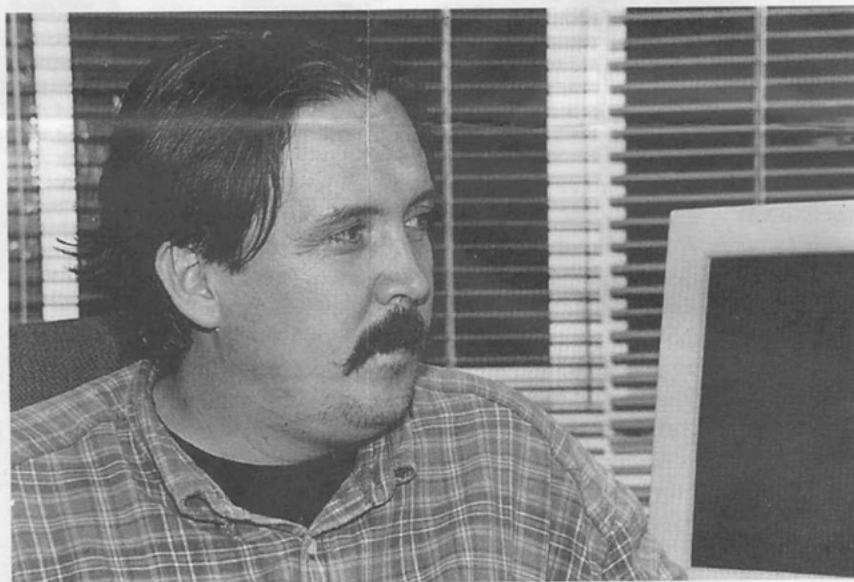
In order to develop further and to fulfill her mission in the world, India has to have one national language which truly corresponds to the spirit of the whole country—the Mother tongue. And it is Sanskrit.

If we take a brief look into the past then we will see that the language of the great revelations of the Vedic seers was spoken by all the people and not only by the higher castes. Later, and especially in the medieval period of India's history, Sanskrit was prakritised, giving birth to all the major Indian languages.

Usually Sanskrit was referred to as Arsha-Bhasha, the language of Rishis, or as Deva-Bhasha, the language of Gods. The word "samskrita" came later, from the time of Shikshas and Nityashastra, and it means "put together", "perfected", "accomplished", "highly elaborated". This was the language of a special inner concentration, developed and perfected during thousands of years, and not just by a natural selection through usage as normally happens with other languages.

Prakrit, on the contrary, means "natural", "artless", "ordinary". It was a natural outcome of the refined Sanskrit. Prakrit languages could be seen as a local adaptation (in time and space) of Sanskrit usage and also as an artificial device in the plays of Kalidasa (4th century A.D.) and others to show this adaptation in the most obvious and even humorous manner. From this time Sanskrit was considered to be the language of only Brahmanas and Kshatriyas. Discrimination went so far that in plays even a Queen or a Princess who belonged to the Kshatriya caste would speak only Prakrits, while the Kings and Brahmanas spoke Sanskrit. In this way Sanskrit remained detached from the changes occurring in ordinary life and was applied mainly to the scientific, poetic and religious aspects of society.

Thus by preserving its own pure existence for many millennia, Sanskrit generated the whole Indo-Aryan family of languages and continued to influence them from its



Vladimir

own detached state of existence. The world does not know of any similar phenomena in the history of human civilization!

Regarding Tamil and the other Dravidian languages, we can say that their deviation from the common source of Proto-Sanskrit started much earlier, in pre-Vedic times. So they can also be considered to be of the same origin, only they were developing in a natural way, while Sanskrit was fixed in its usage and development. This was due to the preservation of the original system of simple root-sounds from the very beginning of the language. It is a language which does not require any other language to explain its own derivations, etymology etc. Moreover, it has a clear and highly elaborated system of grammar, utilising the system of sound-ideas in the clearest and transparent way. This has made Sanskrit the most powerful instrument for the expression of the widest and deepest range of man's consciousness.

So, being the parent of the major modern languages of India, standing behind them, so to say, creating and watching their beginning, growth and development, Sanskrit can already be considered as the national language of India. The only thing to be done is to bring it to the front, and to make it more active and living again in general usage.

Vladimir is a scholar who studied Sanskrit at prestigious institutions in Russia and India.

## TEACHING SANSKRIT IN AUROVILLE: SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE

"Being aware of what Mother had said about Sanskrit in India and particularly in Auroville", says Vladimir, "I started teaching it after my arrival here six years ago. I have taught more than thirty adult students and about a dozen children. We tried different methods of teaching and learning: from learning spoken phrases by heart to studying grammar and reading and discussing the original texts. Now we learn firstly the spoken basics of Sanskrit—that is to be able to hear, to speak and to think in it, as a child does—and only later, after one and half

years, do we start writing. This method is unexpectedly successful. Within one year students can speak and even understand a new text by simply listening to it.

At present interest in Sanskrit among Aurovilians is growing. Regular courses for Aurovilians and newcomers are now taking place in Savitri Bhavan. I hope that these courses can be the basis for a wider and deeper understanding of what India is and what India will become."

Toshi is another Sanskrit teacher in Auroville. "There has been a more or less steady interest in Sanskrit from beginners, but with the exception of one or two people, the interest has not been sustained—there is no interest in further studies. Even in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram where Sanskrit is more or less compulsory, the children learn many things and sing hymns and talk amongst themselves in Sanskrit, but when they grow up, they seem to forget it."

Toshi has been living in Auroville for many years. She has been teaching Sanskrit (and Hindi) in Auroville "off and on", whenever any interest has been expressed. "But the interest is soon lost," she says. Has it to do with the difficulty of the language? "No," says Toshi. "The teaching method certainly needs improvement—even the system of Sanskrit teaching they use in the Ashram is outdated and not what Mother wanted—but the main reason is that there is no way you can use Sanskrit in your daily life."



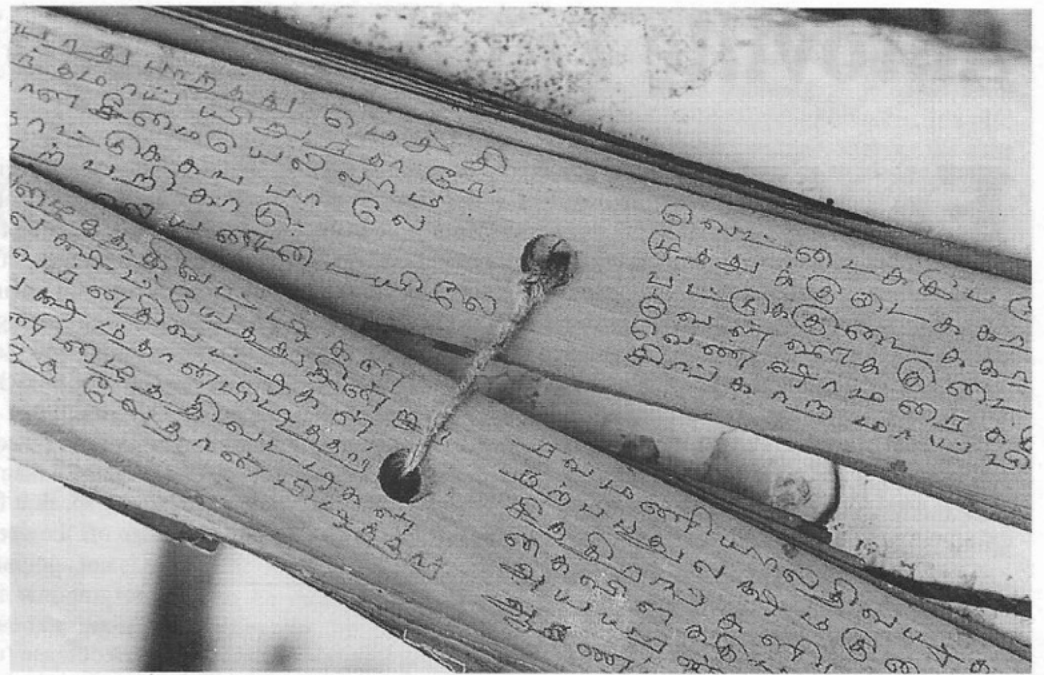
# Tamil

## MUSINGS ON AN ANCIENT LANGUAGE

**T**amil ranks amongst the oldest languages of the world. Tamil literature goes back to centuries before the Christian era, and historians have concluded that Tamil is as old as Sanskrit. "Tamil is essentially a philosophical language," muses Tamil poetess Meenakshi. "Every classical text starts with worshipping the whole of humanity. A peculiarity is that the 'I' is never strongly expressed; every prayer starts with 'we', referring to the collective, to humanity at large. This is always the concern of the Tamil people, there is no ego-centred selfishness. When a force and inspiration to put something in writing comes down, the author always says that it was received from the gods and is utilised it for the sake of humanity. Take for example the sentence 'All are our cities, all are our kith and kin' from a poem of Puranaanuru. Tamil has the quality to express philosophical and metaphysical concepts. The mood is always bliss, happiness. Not just physical happiness, but the psychological state of happiness, enjoyment of nature as it is; a balanced state of mind and spirit which realises bliss."

"Nowadays classical Tamil is still used for poetry and writing - though in my own poetry I mix it with modern Tamil. Spoken Tamil is very different, in particular the Tamil which is spoken around Auroville,

which is very simple. An example is the way in which respect is expressed. In Tamil there are many degrees of respect, but around Auroville usually only the first degree is known. I came to Auroville 23 years ago, from the ancient city of Madurai, where one of the earliest Tamil academies, the so-called Sangam, was established thousands of years ago. The Tamil spoken in Madurai is very rich. I was amazed to hear the people around Auroville speaking a very colloquial Tamil. This local language and the diction used sounded so very different. People used a limited vocabulary consisting of only a few hundred core words. But to my surprise, when I studied it in depth, I found that many pure Tamil words of high literary order were still in use. The language around here has since improved a lot, mainly due to formal schooling and literacy programmes, and the influence of radio, television and newspapers. A more sophisticated language is developing. In particular, the children from the surrounding villages are developing very well. But the same cannot be said of the Auroville Tamil children. The Tamil children born in Auroville speak *Tanglish*, a mixture of Tamil and English, using a mixed word order and word choice."



Tamil inscribed on a hundred year old palm leaf

"Language is an expression of the culture of a people. But the culture of the villages around Auroville could never be expressed in depth due to many socio-economic factors. For example, you don't see agricultural arts and crafts, which is normally one of the first products of a culture in India. The absence of an established ancient culture has, in fact, been an advantage for Auroville, because due to the lack of it, Auroville could more easily be established. It would have been far more problematic in Thanjavur or Madurai or any other of the agrarian or temple cities of Tamil Nadu.

As a negative consequence, perhaps,

Aurovilians have not taken much trouble to learn Tamil. Instead, the villagers take great pains to learn English as it will secure a better economic life. They even give secondary importance to their own mother tongue, and it appears that this is also the case elsewhere in Tamil Nadu. This is an unwelcome development and I hope it will change soon."

*Carel in conversation with Meenakshi*

*Meenakshi is Poet Laureate of Tamil Nadu. Her poems have appeared in many magazines and she has several works of poetry to her name.*

**W**hen foreigners usually pick up some Tamil pretty soon after joining Auroville. But it is—for most of us, isn't it?—a rudimentary mixture that doesn't seem to improve with age. If we don't do anything about increasing our fluency, we can get away with that, but we risk missing out on a certain basic understanding of the culture of the people amongst whom we live and work.

Shankar has been my much respected Tamil teacher during the past few years. During many weekly evening classes, held in the home of one of our small group of adult learners, he managed to make us speak Tamil somewhat more properly than we used to. Shankar never seems to tire of making us grasp the essence of how to form sentences the Tamil way, which sometimes requires us to think in quite a different manner.

Take for instance the "verb+-and"

## Learning about "Poi-va"

form, a unique way of forming a verb and joining it to another verb. "Poi-va" means more or less "bye-bye" and is one of the first things we foreigners learn to say, but what many don't know even after years in Auroville, is that this is a very common verb form in Tamil that has no equivalent in English or in other European languages. Its literal meaning is, "go and come back". Poi (go and...) is then the verb form that joins it to "va" (come).

What I learn I immediately practise with my second, informal, teacher, our household *amma*, who applauds enthusiastically each new addition to my vocabulary and with whom I have developed a certain fluency in discussing practical matters, like putting wax on floor tiles or how her little

son is doing at school.

Shankar has been teaching Tamil in Auroville for the past eight or nine years. He is from our local village of Kuilapalayam and majored first in Economics, and only later in Tamil literature. He initially had no experience in teaching Tamil as a second language, which is why, after several years in Auroville, he went and visited places of learning in South India and got some training in the USA. He ended up researching and developing his own teaching method, since a standard method which met the needs of the Auroville environment was not available. He has found that rather than working on increasing one's vocabulary, what is needed first is simple conversational skills. His classes are lively with students questioning each other and answering in short Tamil sentences. For those students who are courageous enough to tackle the 230-odd alphabetic signs and risk getting their conversational Tamil mixed up with the very different written language, he has acquired a computer with Tamil script, and prepares his reading lessons on it. He likes to make up simple typical Tamil folk stories that usually have a good dose of humour.

When I asked Shankar whether there was anything he felt strongly about, he said: "Aurovilians do not take enough time to practise Tamil. For example, if they come out of

their door, they have the chance to open their mouth in Tamil. But what to do, they just rush to their work! This a difficulty you have here as a teacher. Some people do use the opportunity, and are lucky to work with Tamil employees, and they pick up the language very easily.

"Another difficulty is that we do not have enough materials for teaching. Especially for spoken Tamil. People who know they will work with the local people want to learn the dialect that is spoken here. (By the way, I teach the Tamil which is spoken and understood around Madras and Pondicherry. There is no use teaching the Coimbatore or Tirunelveli dialect, for you wouldn't be able to make yourself understood here.) But there is very little available in the way of any complete teaching material for this purpose.

"In Singapore they have developed very good materials for teaching Tamil as a second language. It is one of the few countries in the world where they teach it. Another method has been developed for the French, called Vanakkam. In Mysore there is an institute for South Indian languages. And in Madras and in Pondicherry there are also institutes that have developed teaching methods. But those are mostly geared for government officers and the type of language they learn is attuned to their needs, with official terms, etc."

Shankar recently opened a classroom at Last School which functions as a Tamil language centre. He is glad to have all his teaching material in one place and no longer to have to move around from one place to another to give his classes. Now he can devote more time to teaching children as well as adults. After one month he has already 27 adult students of whom six or seven come three times a week. He hopes one day to house a library there to further Tamil culture.

*Annemarie*



Today's Tamil: film poster



# Auroville English: a creole of sorts

English, or an eroded variant of it, a creole of sorts, is the link language of Auroville. Mother's description of Auroville as a Tower of Babel in reverse seems more than fitting for an emerging township whose thousand-odd residents perhaps count a couple of dozen mother tongues among them. If certain well-represented nationalities such as the Germans and the Dutch do not seem to have too much difficulty in acquiring a basic oral fluency in English—and many of them already have it on arrival—for other nationalities the task of acquiring a similar level of spoken English can be much more difficult or even daunting, for a variety of different reasons.

The need for English courses for adults has perhaps grown in the nineties as many people have started coming to Auroville with

Classes range from beginner to upper intermediate, with mixed levels and abilities. Students join for different reasons. Some have spoken Auroville's variant of English for years but would like to improve their grammar, others want to develop their vocabulary and more nuance in their use of English, some usually new arrivals, are simply starting from scratch, and others with a proficient understanding and reading knowledge want to practise their spoken English. The French who are well represented in Auroville frequently share a number of problems in this regard. A common stumbling block with French students comes in some cases from a desire to understand a language perfectly before using it, or alternately a desire to speak it flawlessly or not at all. There is a hesitancy to plunge off the deep end when it comes to speaking, and it is not uncommon to have students who have studied the grammar for years and who will ply you with questions about the second conditional or the future perfect tense (usually in French) but who will block up and stall when it comes to uttering a sentence in the present simple tense. And of course the tiger-traps of the perfidious English pronunciation of those thousands of perfectly good French words in the English language don't help matters much. Group activities and classroom dynamics however can be a great help in clearing some of these psychological hurdles and

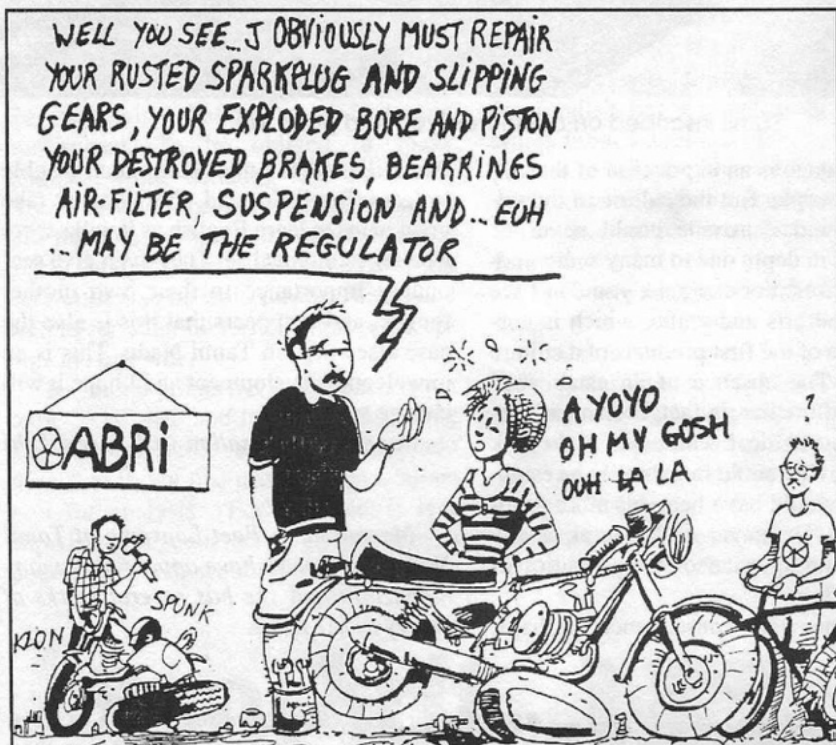
Auroville then provides ample opportunities for practice.

That English is a necessity for survival or at least integration into Auroville is a fact. And although a few teachers have done their best to provide group adult courses on a periodic basis to different levels of students over the last ten years, and despite the Entry Group's awareness and recent highlighting of the problem in the AV. News, no budget to speak of has ever been made available from the community for the teaching of English as a second language. As usual with our penchant for grandiose projects, our priorities seem slightly skewed. For instance I have nothing against the building of a Savitri Bhavan but I cannot see how someone could fully appreciate reading or listening to Savitri without a minimum of English. at their disposal. A well-equipped language centre for

the teaching of the different languages of Auroville seems to me an important need.

I've always been intrigued as to what the distinct accent of the young Aurovilians who've grown up here could resemble. Some years back on a train in Italy I found myself in conversation with a woman whose accent was strikingly similar to that heard amongst our youth. It transpired that she was a white Jamaican whose family had been settled on the island for generations. So what, if any, could be the common linguistic denominator between a Caribbean island and our emerging township?

Roger



From a fund-raising poster

little to no English, from counties and continents that had previously been barely represented such as Spain, Argentina, the ex-U.S.S.R. and, most recently, South Korea. The cultural mix of Auroville is usually well represented and a typical adult class can bring together Rimpoches, nomads and ex-truck drivers from Tibet, lawyers and airline pilots from Argentina, firemen from France, doctors from Russia, and Aurovilians of local origin as well as long-time Aurovilians. Classes therefore can also be a meeting point where old-timers and newcomers mix and get to know each other a bit better while they learn or improve their English.

**The Mother:** The question arises to know what the language of Auroville will be.

I have the impression it will be a language that... (laughing) It's the children who provide the example: they know several languages and they make sentences using words from all the languages and... it is very colourful. Little X knows Tamil, Italian, French and English; he's three years old, and so (laughing) it makes a hodgepodge...

Some people who speak Esperanto have written me an official letter to tell me how many of them there are (a considerable number) and to say that they would like their Esperanto to be the language of Auroville...

Satprem: But the language of Auroville will just have to be born spontaneously!

The Mother: Yes, spontaneously, naturally! Oh there is no need to interfere.

(L'Agenda de Mère XI, pp. 134-135, March 28, 1970)

## THE MOTHER ON THE LANGUAGE OF AUROVILLE

**"W**e know that we need, not an artificially new language, but something supple enough to be able to adapt to the needs of a new Consciousness; and that's probably how that language will emerge, from a number of older languages, through the disappearance of habits.

"What's specific to each language (apart from a few differences in words) is the order in which ideas are presented: the construction of sentences. The Japanese (and the Chinese even more so) have solved the problem by using only the sign of the idea. Now, under the influence from outside, they have added phonetic signs to build a sentence; but even now, the order in the construction of the ideas is differ-

ent. It's different in Japan and in China. And unless you FEEL this, you can never really know a foreign language well... The languages in countries like China and Japan, that use ideograms seem to be infinitely more supple than our own. They can express new ideas and things far more easily through juxtaposition of signs.

"But now, with the 'new logic' and 'new mathematics,' a whole set of new signs is beginning to be universal, that is to say, the same signs express the same ideas or the same things in all countries, whatever language is used in the country, quite independently.

These new thoughts and new experiences, this new logic and new mathematics, are now taught in the higher classes, but all the primary and secondary studies have remained in the old formula; so I have been very seriously thinking of opening primary and secondary schools in Auroville, based on the new system—as a trial.

(L'Agenda de Mère VIII, pp. 58-59, 18 February 1967)

## ENGLISH AS SHE IS WRIT

(IN THE AV NEWS)

The standard of English in the weekly AVNews seems to have improved out of all recognition recently, partly due to the fact that almost all the note-takers are now either native English speakers or competent in using the language. However, the occasional combination of imaginative typing and exotic expression still manages to throw up a few gems.

**"T**he vehicle repair service needs an emergency roof. We still require donations to repair in packaworking condition your instantaneous flat tyre and eternal loose chain. Your exploded bore and piston. Your classic morning initiation headache and short-circuited electrical system. Your never-ending brakes, bearing air-filter, suspension and regulator problem. In conclusion, your unwanted situations."

**"K**inder garten swimming pool needs floating material who can give: swimming rings, motorbike or cartubes small foam or plastic balls please phone. Thanks."

**"A** note asking if anyone knows of a natural or effective way of ridding creatures mostly cats and dogs of fleas or lice and if someone does to announce I in future AV News. Thanks."

**"M**r.S.K. is looking for a job, he has completed 10th standard, and worked as Turkey Towel water (sic!) at private Textile at Kalapet.

**"I** need someone to give me some lessons in using our new computer Windows 95 preferably but not indispensably after 4.30 p.m. for love I mean PLATONIC love even if you are a female, because now I am a married man..."

**"S**ince the last World Cup series transmission on the TV at the Visitors centre, we have had not TV since then. The TV users had burnt down the TV monitor and even today we had not been able to repair/replace the system."

**"F**eedback given to me did brought to my notice points that I was not knowing before. In order to incorporate these feedback and further elucidation on the subjects, it became necessary to revise the appeal."

**"I**f you do not take care of your waste the workers take home and sell everything's that the Eco Service needs to run: bottles, metals, cardboard, paper, plastic etc. Here is a list of places particularly uncooperative..."

**"O**ne of the attributes of the supermind is precision, exactness in detail." Sri Aurobindo (from memory not his exact words)"

(trawled by Alan)



# Whose Speaking English?

**W**e native speakers smile indulgently at the "funny English" sometimes heard in India, where the present progressive reigns ("I am having some land near the village" is a common construction). This Indianised English, like American English or Canadian English, is influenced by the rhythms of the native language of the speaker, creating rich and musical varieties. In the Auroville area, it's the lilt of Tamil which gets absorbed into the accent, influencing the European residents who take up the study of English in Auroville, producing a hybrid German-Tamil, Dutch-Tamil, French-Tamil English.

In India, there is a certain importance attached to learning English; it has a social weight that the native speaker from England, the United States, Australia, or

crystal, scattering reflections everywhere. Is it an imposition here? Is it a pleasure to teach and to learn a foreign language? Can it be fun?

There are as many stories about how a Newcomer or other acquired English as there are stories about "how I came to Auroville." In the early days, some learned it "on the road", acquiring it little by little as part of the transformation from West to East, picking it up, trying it on, and finally,

guistic ride is a little bumpier, abruptly dropping you into the soup, and making you speechless—all ears, as you struggle with sounds not noted in the textbook. It is part of the journey, part of the frustration, to curl your tongue around this language without rules.

An "a" is an "e" and an "e" is an "i" and...

It seems to be most difficult for the French and Russians, for different (and similar) reasons. National pride, history, what cannot be expressed, precision, a certain elegance—it's not the jitterbug or the lindy hop, it's ballroom dancing. What is this music, this jazz I must learn (not teach) my tongue to dance. Because here the English is (mostly) American English, with a sprinkling of "ay yo yos" and "merdes".

Reading is a refuge for the advanced student. You can take the time to escape into literature, with a dictionary handy, of course—but what to read? The *Hindu* newspaper or the *Short Stories of Edgar Allan Poe* provide you with very different experiences. In the classroom, I am often faced with grown-up people who at 30 or 40 or more don't want to do homework—again. "I cannot" is heard often: "It's impossible" follows quickly. Lacking time and concentration, few can actually practise as they should. Many simply keep to their own language group, not venturing

out much to practise their newly acquired language. Some students tell me they finally learn how to speak because they want to be understood, or to understand what is going on at meetings, where there is often no translation available. After several years of understanding the beginnings and ends of sentences, they get so frustrated that they "have to learn English". Others want to read Sri Aurobindo in the original, but can't manage without help.

Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri*, for example, presents a challenge, with its elegant, winding sentences and poetic syntax.

Luckily, it's a jungle with latinate signposts, not as daunting as it could be if you're a Latin language speaker. It's also simply beautiful to read, making the time pass quickly, as you get caught up in the drama, the challenge and the dream. You can use the text to polish your English like silver till it shines, but don't expect to use it directly in the daytime. It's a text for starlight and moonlight. During the day, a more mundane language is necessary, the language of amahs and workers and simple answers to simple questions: "Where is Matrimandir?", "Is this the road to Samasti?" "How long have you been in Auroville?" and then character and body language help a lot, also pointing, shrugging and laughing.

"I am losing my English. My vocabulary is shrinking," I often complain. When I hear an old, familiar word, like "sneakers" or "sweater" my heart beats faster and a far away look comes into my eyes, sort of. It's another experience of the alien—alienation from one's own language, and it can be frightening. It's not called "the mother tongue" for nothing, and plucking the babe from the breast can be traumatic. If you want to make the leap, you certainly need to find a good teacher.

A teacher needs to be flexible, firm, inspiring, forgiving, grateful, patient, portable, sincere, skilled, beguiling, easily pleased, persuasive, practical, appreciative, outlandish and never at a loss to explain the uses of the definite and indefinite article. Here you must also deal with unkempt schedules, sudden fevers, flat tires and the monsoon (or the heat).

With all these drawbacks, it's something wonderful that we can communicate as well as we do in this language. We are particularly tolerant of errors (read the *AV News*), and accept the inadequate grammar and misspellings. They are part of the fun, and some even see this transitional English as the beginnings of a new language—Auroville English, or Avlish, as it is called.

Seen positively, on the road to human unity English can be one more ingredient in the glue which binds us together. After all, "sixty countries now claim English as their mother—or at least their stepmother—tongue," says Pico Iyer, in his essay titled *Excusez-moi! Speakez-vous Franglais?* So "Do we speak the same language?" as a synonym for "Do we understand each other?" is perfect. *Certainement*, we can try.

Jill



Canada often does not understand. Educated Indians converse in English, even though their state language, their mother tongue, such as Telugu or Malayalam or one of the other 17 languages, can be readily understood locally. The use of the English language serves as a mark of social status, and has to be considered in this context, as an invisible border marking a person's power in the community.

With these elements in mind, the teaching of English in Auroville can be seen as through a glass, or rather, as through a

wearing it as one would some exotic article of clothing.

It grows on you. And it was a necessary acquisition if you came the slow way, via bus and train and hitchhiking up and down, from the familiar to the unfamiliar, across Turkey to Afghanistan, Pakistan—the old hippie route where you learned how to be independent while acquiring the "lingua franca" of the road. Others learned it by listening to rock and roll, making the entry into English through the song lyrics.

These days, when you come by plane you miss this travellers' initiation. The lin-

## SRI AUROBINDO ON LANGUAGE

**T**he legend of the Tower of Babel speaks of the diversity of tongues as a curse laid on the race; but whatever its disadvantages, and they tend more and more to be minimised by the growth of civilisation and increasing intercourse, it has been rather a blessing than a curse, a gift to mankind rather than a disability laid upon it. The purposeless exaggeration of anything is always an evil, and an excessive pullulation of varying tongues that serve no purpose in the expression of a real diversity of spirit and culture is certainly a stumbling-block rather than a help: but this excess, though it existed in the past, is hardly a possibility of the future. The tendency is rather in the opposite direction. In former times diversity of language helped to create a barrier to knowledge and sympathy, was often made the pretext even of an actual antipathy and tended to a too rigid

division. The lack of sufficient interpenetration kept up both a passive want of understanding and a fruitful crop of active misunderstandings. But this was an inevitable evil of a particular stage of growth, an exaggeration of the necessity that then existed for the vigorous development of strongly individualised group-souls in the human race. These disadvantages have not yet been abolished, but with closer intercourse and the growing desire of men and nations for the knowledge of each other's thought and spirit and personality, they have diminished and tend to diminish more and more and there is no reason why in the end they should not become inoperative. Diversity of language serves two important ends of the human spirit, a use of unification

and a use of variation. A language helps to bring those who speak it into a certain large unity of growing thought, formed temperament, ripening spirit. It is an intellectual, aesthetic and expressive bond which tempers division where division exists and strengthens unity where unity has been achieved. Especially it gives self-consciousness to national or racial unity and creates the bond of a common self-expression and a common record of achievement. On the other hand, it is a means of national differentiation and perhaps the most powerful of all, not a barren principle of division merely, but a fruitful and helpful differentiation. For each language is the sign and power of the soul of the people which naturally speaks it. Each develops

therefore its own peculiar spirit, thought-temperament, way of dealing with life and knowledge and experience. If it receives and welcomes the thought, the life-experience, the spiritual impact of other nations, still it transforms them into something new of its own and by that power of transmutation it enriches the life of humanity with its fruitful borrowings and does not merely repeat what had been gained elsewhere. Therefore it is of the utmost value to a nation, a human group-soul, to preserve its language and to make of it a strong and living cultural instrument. A nation, race or people which loses its language, cannot live its whole life or its real life. And this advantage to the national life is at the same time an advantage of the general life of the human race.

(Sri Aurobindo, Chapter 28, *The Ideal of Human Unity*.)



AV Today: Auroville's association with the Tibetans living in exile in India is a long one. Are you happy about the way it has developed? What are your hopes for the future?

Kalon Wangdi: Our relationship is indeed a long one, and over the years it has become closer. In a very practical sense, many of the developments in appropriate technology and renewable energy in the Tibetan settlements are the result of our people having come here and been trained by Aurovilians in these fields. We would like to intensify these contacts, not only because of our situation in exile but also because we feel these technologies are very relevant for the future Tibet. It is sometimes difficult to convince our people of the need for this path of development just by lectures. That's why it is so important they can come here, because then they see these technologies working and they know it can be done.

What for you is the importance of the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture now under construction here?

It's very important because, firstly, we would like Tibetan culture to be an active part both of Aurovillian life and also of the life of the world as a whole, and for this to happen there has to be a centre where the different aspects of our culture are represented and can be studied. Secondly, it will make it easier for our people to attend training programmes and participate in Auroville's development if they can come and stay at the Centre. Claude Arpi has worked very hard to materialise this

## "We would like to intensify these contacts"

An interview with Kalon Tashi Wangdi, Home Minister of the Tibetan Administration in Dharamsala, during his recent visit to Auroville



The Tibetan minister (2nd from right) in Auroville, visiting the Seed Museum

dream. Now we have to be more active in raising funds so that the Centre can be completed as soon as possible.

Can you explain His Holiness's idea for Tibet to become a Zone of Peace?

For centuries, Tibet was an important buffer zone between China and India.

Only after the Chinese invaded Tibet was there direct conflict between India and China. So His Holiness suggested, in the Strasbourg Proposal of 1988, that the whole of Tibet should once more act as a buffer through becoming a Zone of *ahimsa* (or non-violence). This would involve it being demilitarized, de-nuclearized, and for it to become an environmentally-pro-

tected area. This can only happen in the context of a political solution. To achieve this, His Holiness has said that the Tibetans have to compromise. So we are prepared to accept Tibet being part of China, but as a self-governing entity within the larger China.

What is the present status of the Strasbourg Proposal? Is it gaining more acceptance within China itself?

From the beginning there was a lot of mistrust and misunderstanding on the part of the Chinese leadership regarding the intentions behind the Proposal. We have not yet been able to have a dialogue with them to remove such apprehensions, and that's where we are stuck. However, there is now much more awareness among young Chinese intellectuals outside China of the Tibet issue, and the vast majority support the middle path solution of an autonomous Tibetan region within China. And in China itself a number of intellectuals are discussing the possibility of China adopting a federalist constitution which, among other things, would give a special status to Tibet and even, after twenty years, allow the Tibetans to secede if they so decided in a referendum.

Finally, what are your impressions on your first visit to Auroville?

I am very much impressed by what I have seen here. I had heard so much about Auroville, and have always wanted to come. Now I feel even more strongly that there's a great deal we can learn from you.

From an interview with Alan

## BOOK REVIEW

Paroles Tibetaïnes—Voices of women in exile (French) by Ann Riquier; 1998; pp.201

One of the goals of the Chinese occupation of Tibet has over the last forty years been the eradication of a culture, a country, a people. Tibetan women's movements had an important role in the March 1959 Lhasa uprising that was to lead to the Dalai Lama's flight into exile and despite brutal repression, the courage and unbroken spirit of countless Tibetan women down the years, and of young nuns in particular since 1987, have been key elements in sustaining the Tibetan cause, both from within and from outside Tibet. *Paroles Tibetaïnes*, by Ann Riquier, who has lived in South India for many years, honours their struggle and sacrifice. It profiles and presents the stories of three remarkable Tibetan women, who by telling their own stories also speak for those who never had a voice. Testimonies that lift just a little the curtain of silence that still drapes the roof of the world.

Rinchen Dolma Taring, whose invaluable work in exile has included the setting up of the first schools for Tibetan orphans and refugees, was born early this century into an aristocratic Tibetan family that had been in the civil service of the Dalai Lama's government for centuries. She provides a fascinating glimpse of a Tibet that is no more. The back-stabbing atmosphere of clergy-dominated Tibetan politics and their resistance to reform and change comes out vividly in her memories of her father—a minister appointed by the 13th Dalai Lama, who did what he could to

stave off Chinese influence during the former's exile in Mongolia and India, but was assassinated along with her brother by his political enemies. Undaunted by family tragedy she was to marry twice. Her first husband who was a reform-minded minister, was also her brother-in-law, married to her elder sister. Her experience provides the reader with interesting insights into the role of women as well as the customs of polyandry and polygamy and their rationale. She was to visit Peking and China a number of times in the 50s as a member of various Tibetan delegations and due to her fluency in English which she had learnt as a young girl in India was used by the Chinese as a translator, even though they always suspected her of being a spy. A vivid first-hand description of the atmosphere and build-up of events that, sparked by fears for the young Dalai Lama's safety, led to the three-day Lhasa uprising, is followed by a gripping account of her flight alone across the Himalayas into India and her subsequent experiences in exile.

The brave but doomed resistance of the Khampas of western Tibet to the Chinese occupation and their savage repression comes out in the remarkable story of Ama Adhe, a warrior who was to survive torture, starvation and 26 years in a series of Chinese prisons and labour camps before her release in 1986. Arrested in 1959 for her connections to the resistance, she describes the horror of the Chinese labour camps, where tens of thousands of Tibetans were starved and worked to death

in the early 1960's, as well as many instances of individual heroism. Amidst the indignities, the torture and humiliation she both witnessed and experienced, humour can still rise to the surface, as in the story she recounts of a black nomad's tent that appeared on the surface of a lake as she and a group of fellow prisoners were being marched through the countryside. The Tibetans were familiar with this type of phenomenon and took it as a good

her courage, endurance and, most remarkable of all, her undiminished spirit of compassion even for her enemies, are a moving and living example of the deepest values of Tibetan culture.

Pemala, who now runs a couple of Tibetan shops and a carpet business in Pondicherry, was born during the trek into exile, and as a child grew up breaking stones for highways in Northern India. She lays great emphasis on the importance of



The author, Ann Riquier, with Ama Adhe. Photo: Catherine Gentric

omen, but it disturbed their captors and when the tent turned into a lotus, the army desperately tried in vain to bomb it away.

Despite having had a child taken from her, whose fate she never knew, and despite all she has witnessed and suffered,

education so that the Tibetan culture is not lost, stresses the need for responsibility and self-reliance, and castigates the growing tendency within the exile community

(continued on next page)



# Finishing Bharat Nivas

PLANS FOR THE RESTRUCTURING AND COMPLETION OF THE INDIAN PAVILION ARE UNDERWAY

The buildings which together form Bharat Nivas, the Pavilion of India, are still unfinished. A few years ago, the Bharat Nivas working group invited a team of Indian architects and Roger Anger to give their views on how to restructure and complete the Bharat Nivas complex. Anupama and Raman, architects connected to Auroville's architectural unit 'Kolam', then re-designed the Bharat Nivas complex to a considerably smaller overall lay out than was originally planned. Recently, the Governing Board managed to secure the funds necessary to complete it in accordance with this design.

An outlay of Rs. 15 million (350,000 US \$) has been approved by the Central Government of India. The funding will be made available in yearly instalments, from 1999 onwards. Completion is expected in the year 2005.

The auditorium will be the first building to be completed. The next priority is the restaurant complex, which will consist of exhibition halls, a small restaurant, studios for visiting artists and artisans, and an amphitheatre with the Peace Table at its centre. Thereafter work will start on the three unfinished circular structures, in two of which we find at present the Centre for Indian Culture and the library. These structures will host a linguistics centre, the library, the Centre for Indian Culture and the archives. On the first floor the buildings will be inter-connected, and covered with a structure of flexible material. This space will be used for seminars and workshops. Finally a reception centre will be built which will house a permanent exhibition on the spiritual history of India, and a small open-air auditorium. The recently finished Bharat Nivas guest-house completes the complex.

The present location of the Secretary's

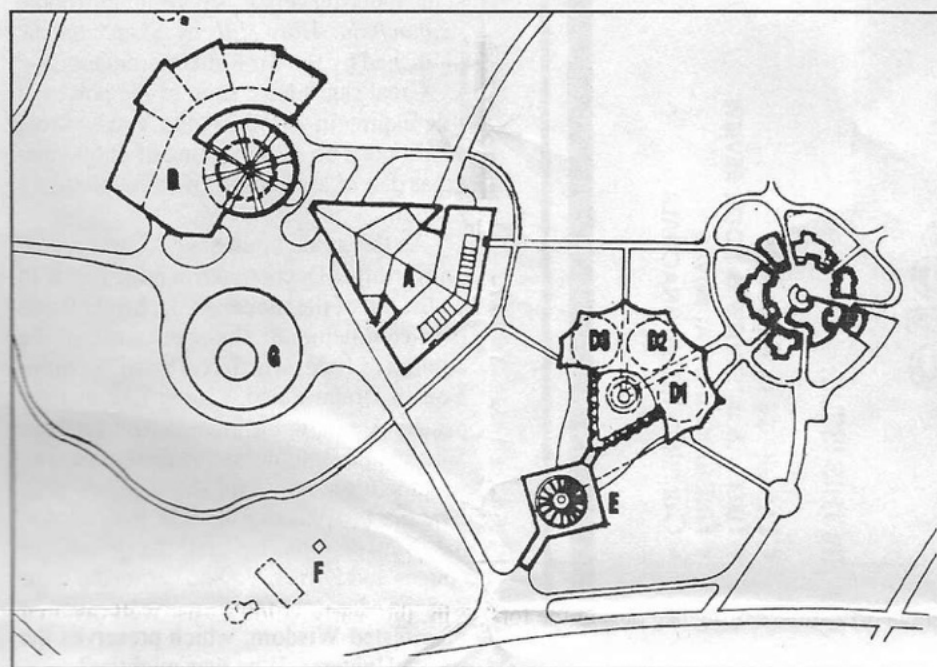
offices and Aurofuture will be converted into a large exhibition space. It is the intention that exhibitions on the various states and cultures and other aspects of India will be held here. The entry to Bharat Nivas will shift towards the Visitors Centre and open onto the planned Crown Road. In future, then, Bharat Nivas can host three different types of exhibitions: a permanent exhibition on the spiritual history of India in the Bharat Nivas Reception Centre; exhibitions on India in the main building; and arts and craft exhibitions in the restaurant complex. A fourth small exhibition space over the lobby at the entrance of the

Auditorium can be used as well.

Today, due to the lack of facilities and infrastructure within Auroville, the Bharat Nivas hosts as many as 28 diverse units within its complex. Says Ashok Chatterjee, one of the members of the Bharat Nivas working group: "To me this somehow symbolises that just as Matrimandir is the soul of Auroville, Bharat Nivas, the Pavilion of India, symbolises the heart of Auroville and the generosity of Mother India. Instead of all these units and services being scattered all over Auroville, Bharat Nivas has somehow given them space. But in future these units will progressively be shifted elsewhere."

Concludes Aster, another member of the working group: "Bharat Nivas is to be the place where Auroville can discover India's living spirit. Finishing Bharat Nivas is providing a new body of energy to this discovery."

Carel



New site plan for Bharat Nivas, the Pavilion of India

A=Sri Aurobindo Auditorium, B=restaurant; C=guest-house; D1=Centre for Indian Culture; D2=Linguistics, D3=Library & Archives; E=Reception, Information, Foundation Office & seminar space; F=caretaker house; G=open air theatre.

## Conference dedicated to Sri Aurobindo

As the closing event of the official nationwide commemorative celebrations for Sri Aurobindo's 125th Birth Anniversary, the National Council of Educational Research organised a four-day conference held at various venues in New Delhi dedicated to different aspects of Sri Aurobindo's vision and work. The conference was attended by some 600 teachers and individuals, and 24 papers were presented on different aspects of Sri Aurobindo's vision of India, education, yoga, and philosophy by scholars, writers, researchers and educationists.

"Sri Aurobindo and the World" was the

theme of the opening day on November 21st at the Indian Institute of Technology, at the end of which a slide show "The Genius of India," recently produced by a team of Aurovilians, was shown. Papers were presented by Alain Bernard and Deepti on educational experimentation and research in Auroville on the second day of the conference, the topic of which was "Education for Tomorrow in the Light of Sri Aurobindo." "The Philosophy and Yoga of Sri Aurobindo" was the theme of the third day of the conference held at the Rajendra Bhavan, and at the concluding function held at the National Museum on November 24th. Addresses were given by Dr. Karan Singh and Dr. Kireet Joshi,

while a commemorative two-rupee coin was released by the Human Resource Development Minister, Dr. M.M. Joshi.

## The Bremen court case

Auroville International Germany has won the court case against the German tax authorities, who had cancelled its tax exempt status, stating that Auroville represents a sect. The court in the city of Bremen in Northern Germany has judged that Auroville cannot be seen as a sect and has restored the tax exempt status of Auroville International Germany.

## Awards for Auroville Ceramists

The All India Studio Pottery Exhibition which was held in New Delhi in November featured the work of 67 potters. Five potters from Auroville participated and two received awards. Kratu received second prize for his sculptures, and Michel third prize for his pottery. According to Anamika, one of the Auroville potters, it was a very inspiring experience to meet so many artists and to get to know their style.

## BOOK REVIEW (continued)

of dependency on sponsorship and Western benevolence. She also foresees with clarity and realism the immense challenges to be faced upon an eventual return of the exiled Tibetan community to their homeland.

The return of the Tibetan diaspora from exile is a theme that threads through both the profiles and the aptly linking chapters of the book. These colourfully describe the March of Peace in '95 from Dharamsala to Delhi (originally planned to be a long march back to Lhasa), and the Kalachakra ceremony conducted by the Dalai Lama in 1996, within sight of his homeland, in the thousand-year-old monastery of Tabo, that was once part of an ancient kingdom of Tibet. Here the author captures the power of his charisma and compassion, and the strength with which he bears the burden of responsibility for his land and his people. Her empathy for the Tibetan cause does not blind her to the many problems the Tibetan community faces from within, nor to the challenges that lie ahead. A useful appendix brings together an important recent speech of the Dalai Lama as well as facts and statistics on the Chinese presence in Tibet. This is a book that deserves to be translated and read by all those concerned with the cause of Tibet.

Roger

## A LETTER

### Congratulations

I am taking the opportunity to pass on my congratulations to the Auroville Today team; your names are so familiar, Alan, Bindu, Carel, Jill, Roger and Tineke, each with a style of his/her own... I literally gobble down the *Today* a first time, and then relish it slowly on a second reading. Alan's humour is particularly contagious, and makes me smile on the greyest of days. What I appreciate most is that the *Today* with all your articles put together conveys the picture of an Auroville full of energy, fighting against all odds to move towards its future... Keep up the great job, and thanks once again for sharing Auroville with us. Lastly, cudos to the silent presences too, Annemarie and Barbara.

Warmest regards, from cold Paris—  
Vibha

### Rain

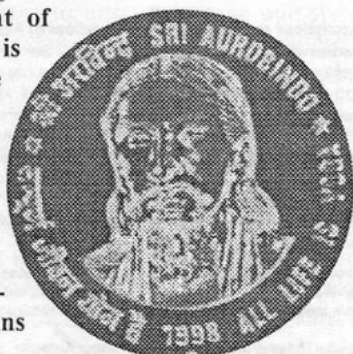
After a slowish start, the monsoon finally came good: in the first two weeks of December the recorded rainfall was over 60 cms.

Overall rainfall for the year was about 30% more than the average of 125 cms.

### Kerozen Live

Wet and bedraggled Aurovilians were more than happy for a chance to dance away the blues of an unusually heavy monsoon, as Auroville-Pondy rockband Kerozen performed for two consecutive evenings at Bharat Nivas. Lead singer Kerstin took the audience by storm with her powerful renditions of rock and roll and reggae classics.

A set of Indian rupee coins with the image of Sri Aurobindo was released by the Government of India on November 24th. The two-rupee coin is in nickel, and the same size as other two-rupee coins. One side shows Sri Aurobindo's face as in the 1920 picture which Mother has recommended as the best picture of Sri Aurobindo "looking towards the Future". Around the edge is written his well-known saying, "All Life is Yoga", in English as well as in Hindi. The coin is legal tender. There are also commemorative sets of 10, 20, 50, and 100-rupee coins which can be ordered from the Mumbai mint.



*We wish our readers all over the world  
a New Year of happiness and fulfilment.  
The editorial team*



BY AIRMAIL  
BOOK POST

# AUROVILLE

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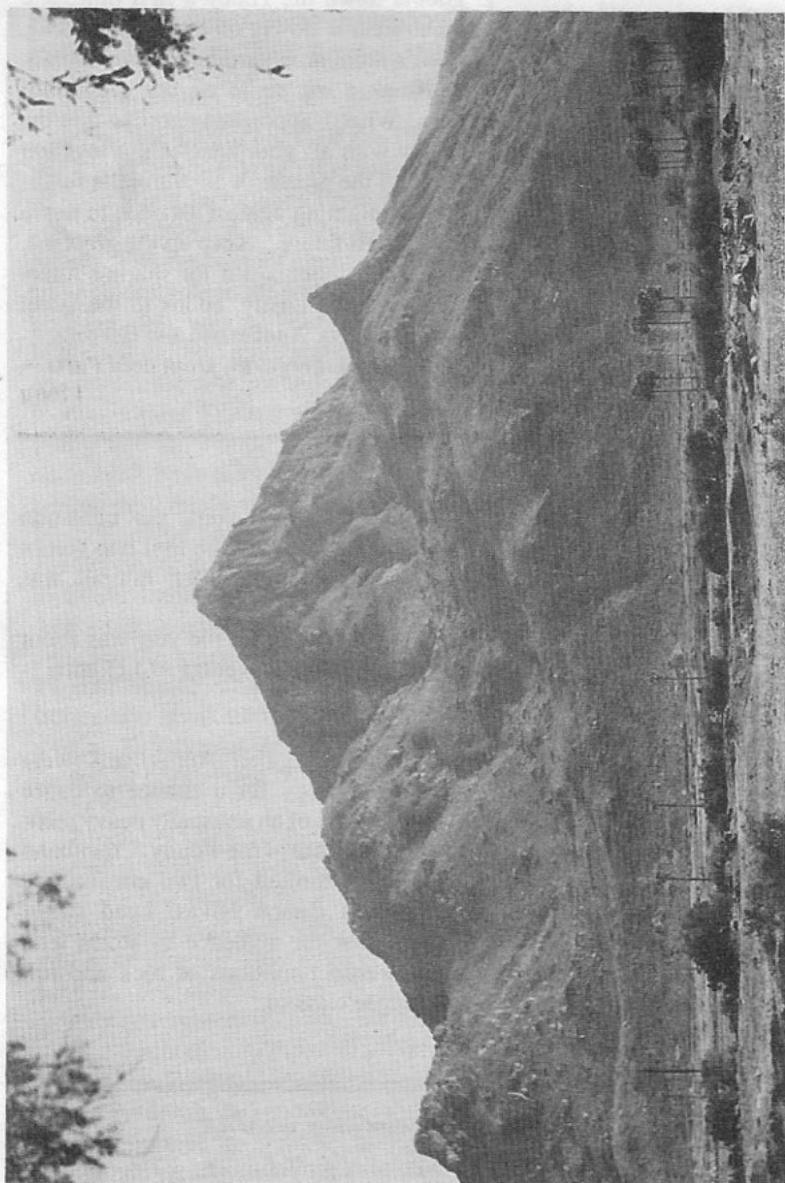
Auroville  
Tower of Babel  
in Reversal

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AUROVILLE ARCHIVES  
C/O KRISHNA T.  
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Arunachala, holy mountain, body of Shiva. Photo: Franz

## Climbing the body of Shiva

### A Pilgrimage

Wanting to see the sights around Auroville, we recently travelled to Tiruvannamalai, 110 km. northeast of Pondicherry. Only by chance did we discover we had chosen the very day when thousands of Hindu pilgrims were also making the journey. It was Deepam, the day when a great fire is lit on the top of Arunachala, the mountain nearby, which is said to be Lord Shiva Himself.

"Arunachala is the Holiest of Holy mountains, the *lingam* of light and joy. It is a megalithic monument which had been erected there from the beginning of time by a Titanic power. It is also the Axis of the World, in relation to the cosmos, like some fantastic aerial," says our guidebook, *Arunachala: Holy Hill*, by Skandananda, published by the Sri Ramanasramam.

Great sages have sung of the power of this mountain—Badarayana Vyasa wrote 37 chapters on it, consisting of 2060 verses, as part of his Sanskrit work, *Mahesvara Kanda*.

As the guide book says, "Once a year on Karthigai Deepam day a huge fire is lit on the top of the mountain. Its bright flame is to commemorate the appearance of the column of light, which had brought confusion in Brahma and Vishnu due to their pride." Actually, the great debate between Vishnu and Brahma was to determine who was the more powerful and absolute god. Brahma boasted that he was the Creator, the Master who created the World of Names and Forms. Vishnu claimed that he was the Master of the Universe because he manifested Wisdom, which preserves the whole Universe. Who was mightier?

Shiva intervened, manifesting a Column of Light which had neither summit nor base visible to worldly eyes. It was a terrifying form to Brahma and Vishnu, causing them to search for the end of it. Vishnu took the shape of a boar, to explore its depths and Brahma the shape of a swan, to scale its heights. But all their efforts were in vain. However, Brahma started boasting that he had found the end of the column of light, whereupon Shiva intervened, telling him that as a result of his lie, no one would worship him in any temple. With that threat, Brahma repented and Shiva said, "You will remain the Creator of the Universe," and allowed him to be worshipped in the Vedic sacrifices. Then Shiva diminished the pillar and, at the request of the gods, a temple was built to him at the foot of the Mountain. It is one of the biggest temples in South India.

On the festival of Deepam, pilgrims come to climb the mountain and to circumnavigate its base. The walk around Arunachala is about 13 km. long. According to tradition, one has to walk at a slow pace, similar to the way an expectant queen would walk!

The Ashram of Sri Ramana Maharshi Yogi is located in Tiruvannamalai. Ramana arrived in Tiruvannamalai in 1896. He stayed for some time in various places, in the big Sri Arunachaleswara Temple and in caves on the mountain. We walked up to Skandashram, the cave where Sri Ramana received a great number of devotees. He liked to stay under the trees in this spot on the mountain not far away from Virupaksha Cave. It is a refuge of profound peace and was worth the climb. Arunachala, it is said, grants the wishes of those who, throughout the centuries, have asked for favours. Devotees who are aware of the spiritual power of this spot are so changed by it that they no longer express any wishes and become free from desire.

After lunch, we could see the great crowds of people, like ants, scrambling up the mountain. Should we join them? Finding a path, we started the ascent. Immediately, we were surrounded by the feeling of a great task, and a great joy, too, as those in front and behind helped us, pointing out the best way to go, laughing, calling out encouragement. For two hours we were part of a movement as we crawled over rocks and boulders, using great clumps of lemon grass as handholds. I was particularly inspired by the sight of women in their sixties and older who were undertaking this arduous journey. Up and up we went, clutching, pulling, slipping a bit, but inevitably reaching the summit, or close enough (there was already a great crowd at the very peak). At around six, the fire was lit, and a huge cheer went up from the people. Small fires were lit here and there, and then, as it began to grow dark, down we went. In no time the nearly full moon was our only light. The lights of the city below were bright, especially at the Temple.

Slowly, inch by inch, it seemed, we made our way down the body of Shiva. To feel the energy of the crowd was a great help, even though we were all tired. Small children, old men, ladies in saris, we found the bottom three hours later, exhausted, but happy to have shared this tremendous day.

Jill & Swar

#### Subscription Information

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