

Auroville Today

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January 20th, 2009 was a special day. The United States of America witnessed the inauguration of its 44th President, Mr. Barack Obama. On the other side of the planet, His Holiness the Dalai Lama inaugurated the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture. He also addressed residents of Auroville and others on the theme of 'Human Unity and Universal Responsibility' at a public function behind the Pavilion.

His Holiness first visited Pondicherry and Auroville in 1973. On January 17, he met The Mother in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and the next day he visited the Auroville site. Twenty years later, on December 23 and 24, 1993, His Holiness paid his second visit to Auroville to lay the eight kilogramme foundation stone of the Pavilion – a brick that Aurovilian Claude Arpi had brought from Tibet.

On his latest visit, His Holiness was welcomed by Claude. "It is an immense privilege to receive you once again in Auroville after 15 years," said Claude. "At that time we promised you that we would build this Pavilion. It took a little bit more time but we have completed it."

The Pavilion of Tibetan Culture is the first pavilion to be completed in the International Zone of Auroville. This is of great significance – for the first pavilion belongs to a nation without a homeland.

Claude recalled that in 1966, The Mother had said that 'All countries are equal and essentially "one". Each of them represents an aspect of the One Supreme. In the terrestrial manifestation, they all have the same right to a free expression of themselves. From the spiritual point of view, the importance of a country does not depend on its size or its power, or its authority over other countries, but on its response to Truth and the degree of Truth it is capable of manifesting.' "Today Tibet has manifested its Truth through its Pavilion. We are deeply grateful that you have consented to inaugurate this pavilion," concluded Claude.

Claude's words of welcome were followed by girls of the Auroville Children's Choir, dressed in Tibetan costumes, singing four songs, one of which was in Tibetan. The Dalai Lama listened in rapt attention. He then joined eight monks of the Gyumed Tantric College in chanting prayers and performing a short Buddhist ritual. He lit a 60-cm tall perfumed candle decorated with the eight Tibetan auspicious signs, marking the formal inauguration of the Pavilion. He was then taken on a tour of the Pavilion, and interacted with Tibetan monks and Auroville students. Later that afternoon he visited The Matrimandir and then addressed a large crowd of people who had assembled behind the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture.

Pavilion of Tibetan Culture inaugurated

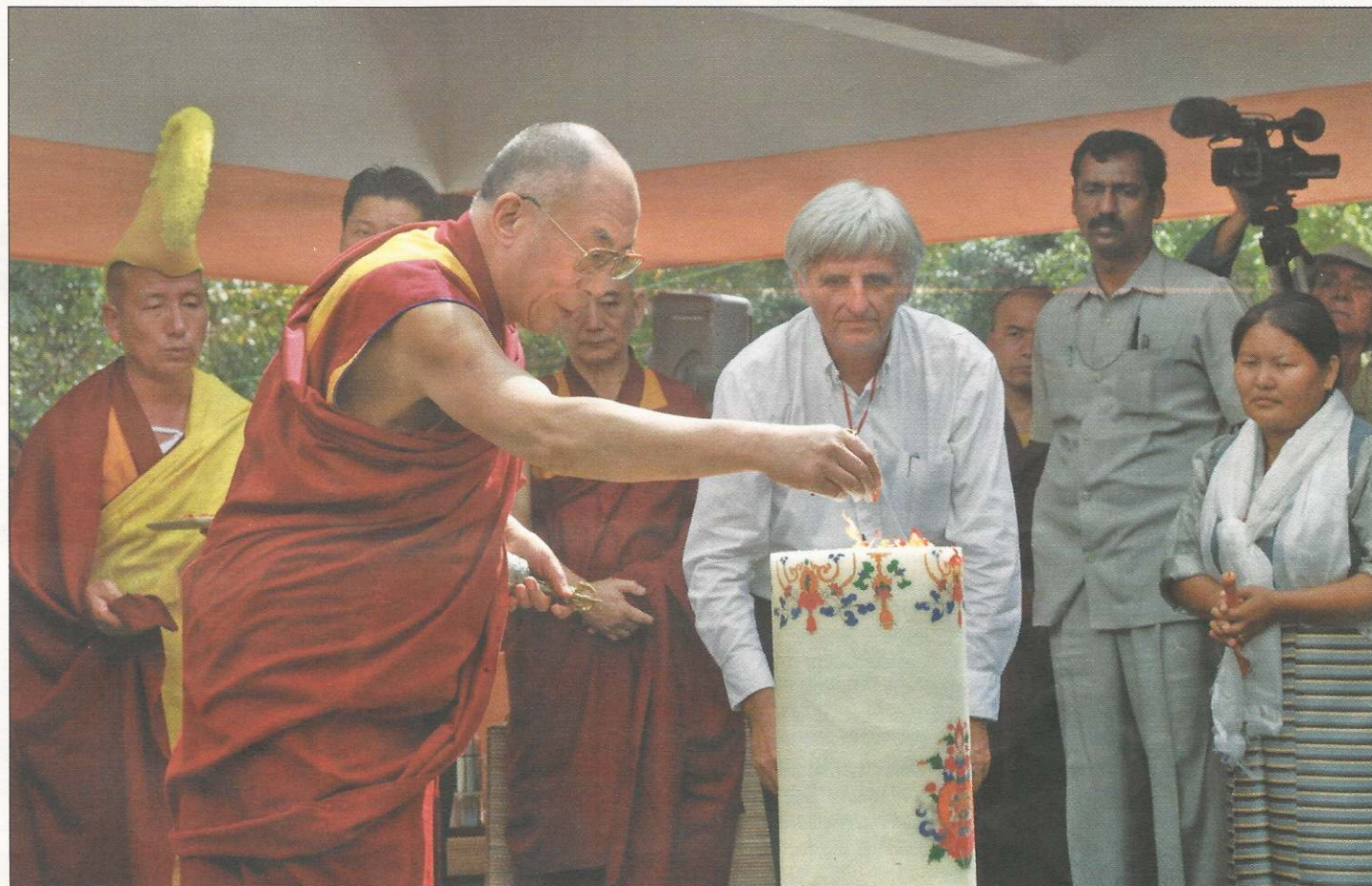


PHOTO OLIVIER

His Holiness the Dalai Lama lights the candle at the inauguration of the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture

The Dalai Lama's address

Speaking to a crowd of more than 3,000 people gathered under a *shamiana*, the Dalai Lama expressed his happiness that he was once again back in Auroville, this time to inaugurate the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture. "I feel it is a great honour. Every visit I come here I see more development, more progress. Sri Aurobindo's and The Mother's vision are being executed wholeheartedly, and that is very good. I want to express my deep appreciation and thank all of you who carry Their vision."

"I also want to thank you for the development of the Tibetan Pavilion for two reasons: one is that Tibetan culture, the culture of compassion and non-violence, will be shown here and preserved. That is very necessary in a time when terrorist forces are so difficult to control. Until the late 20th century there was a real danger of a nuclear holocaust. That is now history. However, terrorism is showing that, although material development with the help of technology and science is rapidly increasing, it is by itself insufficient and no guarantee for a peaceful human existence. We need some special effort to bring inner peace and a spirit of dialogue. For that reason, Tibetan culture, a more compassionate culture, is something useful to preserve."

"The second reason is that the Pavilion will preserve a very wonderful Tibetan cultural heritage which is in danger of extinction. This is not because Tibetan people no longer have interest in their culture but because for political reasons, mainly suspicion, that culture is deliberately being eliminated. When in April 1959 we became refugees, we realised that our top priority was the preservation of our culture, not through isolation, but through full modern education. We started Tibetan schools with full support from the Indian government helped by Shri Jawaharlal Nehru, so that in this way a better knowledge about Tibetan culture would persist."

"To the local people assembled here I want to express my greetings. More than 1000 years ago, Buddhism brought benefits to the Tibetan people. Buddhism is one of India's ancient religions, the Buddha was Indian. Also many Buddhists who

wrote in Sanskrit, like Nagarjuna, were Indian. Therefore we consider India our guru and we Tibetans feel like *chelas* or students. Actually I am a very ignorant human being but because of these great Indian masters I learned many things. Most of the great Buddhist *pandits* and logicians come from South India. So I am in fact a disciple of South India. Now, when I speak to people all over the world I express ancient Indian thoughts, like a messenger. But the real owner of these thoughts is you!" (laughter)

"Yesterday I paid a short visit to Gulbarga in Karnataka where a Buddhist Vihar is under construction. Over 100,000 people had gathered. I said to them that since Buddhism is your religion, it is interesting that some kind of renewed interest in Buddhism has started, it is as if you are developing a new interest in your own ancient possession."

Referring to The Matrimandir, the Dalai Lama

expressed his admiration for those who have materialised it. "The great Motherji's vision is wonderful. This spiritual centre will bring benefits to the local people also. For decades the local people who worked there have made immense contributions. I want to express to them my thanks."

The Dalai Lama then talked about the spirit of unity. "I found here in Auroville a real spirit of human unity. There are no differences of nationality, race or even faith. We are all the same human being."

Actually, 6 billion human beings are same human being. They have the same sort of condition, mentally, emotionally, and physically. We are truly brothers and sisters." Referring to sentiments of racial and national superiority that had prevailed at the beginning of the 20th century, he said "That kind of attitude and thinking now is completely gone. We have become much more equal. This is wonderful." He recalled his meeting with the late Queen Mother of England, when she was 96 years old. "I asked her, since she must have observed almost the whole of the 20th century, if the world had become better or had remained the same? 'Better!' she answered. Then she mentioned that when she was young, concepts such as the right of self-determination or human rights were non-existent. Now these have become valued as universal concepts."

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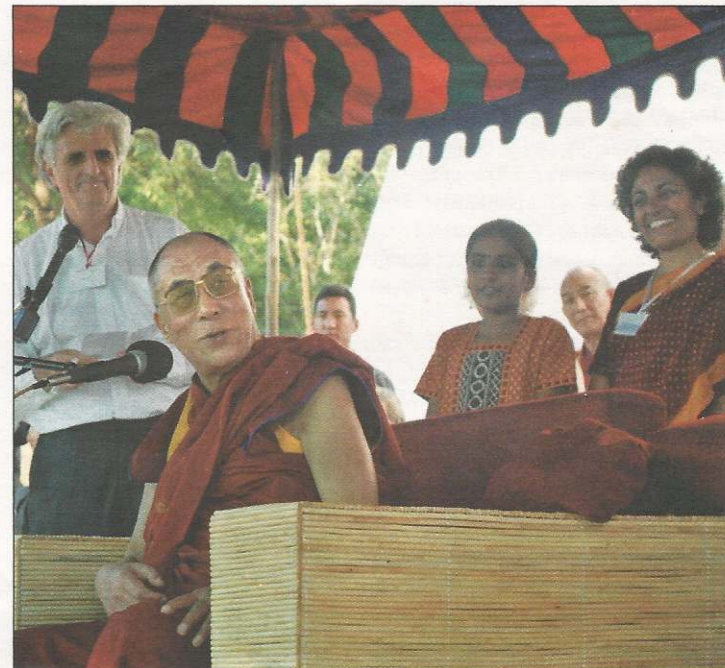


PHOTO OLIVIER

The Dalai Lama answers a question

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The Dalai Lama's address (continued)

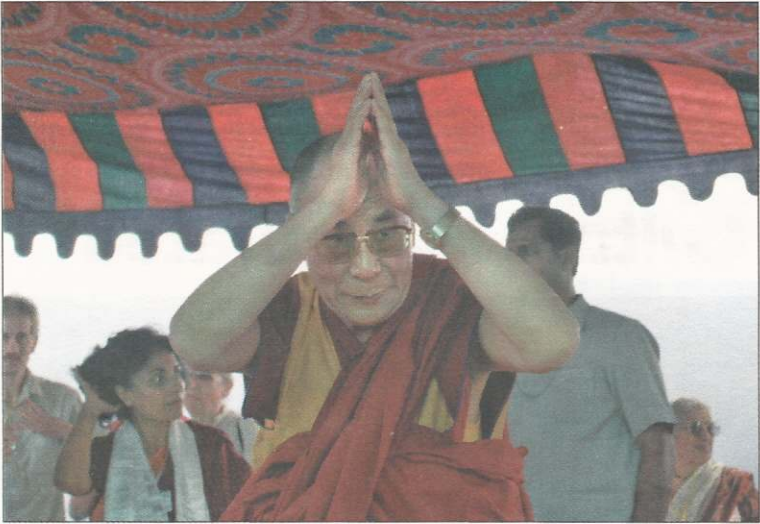


PHOTO OLIVIER

HH the Dalai Lama greets the crowds under the shamiana

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"I think it is very important to give the first priority to humanity, secondly to one's nation or community and thirdly to oneself. The rest of the world is more important than ourselves because we are social animals. Each individual's future or happiness depends on the rest of the community. Therefore, the well-being of the rest of the community is the best way to bring about the well-being of the individual. An extreme self-centred attitude is ultimately a sort of suffering. The majority of the problems we are facing are essentially man-made. This is due to wrong thinking. Thinking of oneself and not thinking of another is a problem."

He recalled that once a scientist had told him that when people develop hatred or strong anger, their negativity is 90% their own mental projection and not reality. Similarly, too much attachment is also a mental projection. "Because you are thinking very narrowly, you cannot see the true picture, because things are relative. Here the Buddhist concept of interrelatedness, interconnectedness and interdependency comes in. That concept brings the view that

one event cannot happen by one cause. There are a lot of causes and a lot of conditions. So that is the reality. And seeing that, we must open our minds and look in a more positive way. Accordingly, our approach becomes more realistic.

"How to bring the sense of concern for others' well-being, what we call compassion? Compassion makes us feel closeness. You should not mistake compassion for a feeling of pity. Pity implies that you are superior, that the other is lower. Genuine love respects others, even considers the other more important than oneself. Through that way one can develop a sense of concern."

The Dalai Lama mentioned that love and kindness and compassion towards relatives, friends and partners is biased, based on the feeling that their attitude towards you is very nice so you will love them in return. He called this type of love 'action-oriented'. It's a kind of love that cannot be extended to one's enemy.

"There is another genuine compassion or love which is not 'action-oriented', but 'being-oriented'. You develop

concern because they are similar sentient or human beings who, like us, want happiness and no suffering. On that basis you develop a sense of concern and affection. And that is unbiased. And then, regardless of what their attitude is towards you, you develop a sense of concern for their well-being. That's genuine compassion which can extend to all beings. That, however, does not come spontaneously. That only comes with further training or from further reasoning.

"I tell people there are three ways to promote compassion. The first is through theistic religion, through religions such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism, and many ancient Indian traditions. Ultimately, they believe in the Creator. That approach is very powerful. The second is through non-theistic religions such as Jainism and Buddhism. Their concept is the law of causality, cause and effect. That is also a very powerful approach. The third approach is the secular way, without any religious belief, through common-sense and experience. For example, the mother, as soon as we are born, has a tremendous affection towards her child. The child also develops a deep emotional connection with the mother. If there is no physical contact with the mother, the child becomes sick. Fortunate children who receive the maximum attention from their parents, particularly from the mother, develop healthy bodies and minds, much better than those who lack their mother's or family affection. It has been shown that children who grow up with no human affection grow up unable to show any affection. That is a tragedy.

"In addition to these there is a fourth way, which is through scientific findings. Scientists have found out that people who often use 'I', 'my', and words like that, have a greater risk of getting a heart attack. Those people are very much self-centred. Their mind

there is no point in preserving it. Another aspect is based mainly on Buddhism and the message of compassion. That aspect is very much related to the mind and to the emotions and is very helpful when we are passing through a difficult period. So it is worthwhile to preserve that.

I think the impact of modernity is mainly on lifestyle and hairstyle. Once I met a young Tibetan who had settled in Switzerland. His hairstyle was very strange, his trousers were also very strange; he looked like a Tibetan hippie. But as soon as he started talking about Tibet, he began to cry. So the hairstyle, the lifestyle, didn't matter. Inside he had a very strong Tibetan feeling. That's good.

Some Tibetans feel that any contact with the outside world is bad, that even learning English or French is dangerous. They feel that more contact with the outside world may damage their Tibetan culture heritage. I totally disagree. This way of trying to preserve one's own culture without learning about the value of other cultures is ignorant. The healthy way is to understand the value of other cultures while having a clear sense of the value of one's own tradition.

From your contact with world leaders, do you feel that the virtue of compassion is becoming more widespread?

H.H.: I think so. For example, on one occasion in Stockholm the Swedish Prime Minister wanted to meet me. He told me he had received a complete briefing from his foreign minister but now he wanted to discuss spirituality. He wanted to learn how to meditate and

Nobel Peace laureate

On December 1989, while his country was still under Martial Law, the Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. This momentous event brought about a new direction in his life. In his acceptance speech, he made clear that humanity was now central to his preoccupations: "No matter what part of the world we come from, we are all basically the same human beings. We all seek happiness and try to avoid suffering. We have the same basic human needs and concerns. All of us human beings want freedom and the right to determine our own destiny as individuals and as peoples. That is human nature."

becomes narrow and small problems concerning themselves become unbearable. But when you have developed genuine concern for a wider number of people your own problem becomes trivial. A positive attitude is very important. For example, in the present global economic crisis, people who are very much concerned about their money and who in their hopes and expectations totally rely on money, experience great suffering. But those for whom money is important, but not to this extent, can live through the crisis without so much suffering. What is important is peace of mind, or good friends, or other values and other sources of happiness. These people are blessed. They say, 'ok, there is a global crisis, my money goes up and down, but it's ok. I have good friends and also have the experience of inner peace'.

"So, much depends on our mental attitude. Scientists are even discovering that our physical well-being is very much related to our emotions. Even here, the mental attitude in dealing with them is very important. A small example is recently I had my gall bladder removed. Usually this operation takes 15-20 minutes, but in my case the doctor found pus and it took three hours. He told me if I had waited one more day, it would have burst. There were a lot of complications. But within one week, I was fully recovered and the doctor was very surprised. I told him my mental state seems to be happier, so I was better fast. That makes the difference. Hopefully ... (laughter)

"A scientist told me that hatred and

anger affect our immune system. A calm and compassionate mind strengthens and sustains our immune system. So our mental situation has a big effect on our biological health.

"This is what I call the secular way, without religion. By simply using commonsense, common experience and the latest scientific discoveries we make clear that our warm-heartedness is very important for our wellbeing and the wellbeing of our family. So irrespective of whether you are a believer or non-believer, the inner values matter.

"Yesterday, as I was saying, I inaugurated the temple of Buddhavi Hara. But ultimately we should develop the temple here, within ourselves. That's most important.

"If you feel these points contain something to take seriously then think more, and read more, and examine other people – are people who rely on alcohol without relying on inner values happy? And those people, who to some extent think of inner values including meditation, are they happy? Make comparisons, experiment by yourself. Those people who have not much interest in what I say can forget it."

After the talk, Claude thanked the Dalai Lama and shared an observation made by The Mother. "I was told that during your interview with The Mother in 1973, She had said that 'I and Sri Aurobindo would like you to go back to Tibet with full power and authority'. Claude concluded expressing "It is our dream that you go back to Tibet with full power and authority."

"A sign of maturity"

After inaugurating the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture, His Holiness the Dalai Lama gave an interview to *Auroville Today* and *La Revue d'Auroville*.

What is the importance to you of the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture?

H.H.: I usually describe Tibetan culture as a compassionate, peaceful culture. A compassionate, peaceful culture is very useful because many negative things are happening on our planet due to a lack of respect, of concern and a sense of compassion. By 'compassion' I mean a sense of responsibility to the community and to others. If that view is strong there is no room for violence, for war or exploitation. And, along with a sense of responsibility for the community and humanity, naturally there is concern about the environment.

On the other hand, if people just think of their own interests then the result is exploitation, limitless exploitation, both of nature's resources and of human beings. So I feel that when the world is experiencing lots of negative things because of a lack of sense of community and concern, it is important to preserve the compassionate Tibetan culture.

But that culture is facing a real threat. Some years ago, a Chinese communist party secretary mentioned that the Buddhist faith is the source of the threat of Tibet separating from mainland China. Accordingly, they have imposed many restrictions on Tibetan spirituality. Now there are very few monks left in Tibet. All major monasteries have many restric-

tions and now artificial monks, Chinese policemen dressed as monks, are also there. So in case you get an opportunity to visit Tibet and you meet a monk, ask them to chant. Then you will know if they are a true monk or not. (laughs)

In these ways the Chinese communists are deliberately trying to eliminate the Tibetan spirit, the Tibetans' unique cultural heritage. Any nation without its own identity or spirit is dead, so the Tibetan nation is facing something like a death sentence.

That is why the main concern of the refugees living outside Tibet is to preserve Tibetan culture and Tibetan spirituality. And this is why it is very good, very helpful, that the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture is here to remind the people who live here and the people who visit that a nation, a community, that has had a compassionate culture for the last thousand years is in danger.

Is it important that the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture is in Auroville?

H.H.: Of course. As I've said before, I find here a group of people with a genuine spirit of being brothers and sisters, regardless of nationality, faith or background. You live very much with the spirit of humanity.

You talk about preserving the essence of Tibetan culture. Has that culture changed through its contact with the West over the last 50 years?

H.H.: There are two aspects of Tibetan culture. One aspect is the habits, the ways of life, that have developed due to social conditioning or the environment. We can't preserve that part and

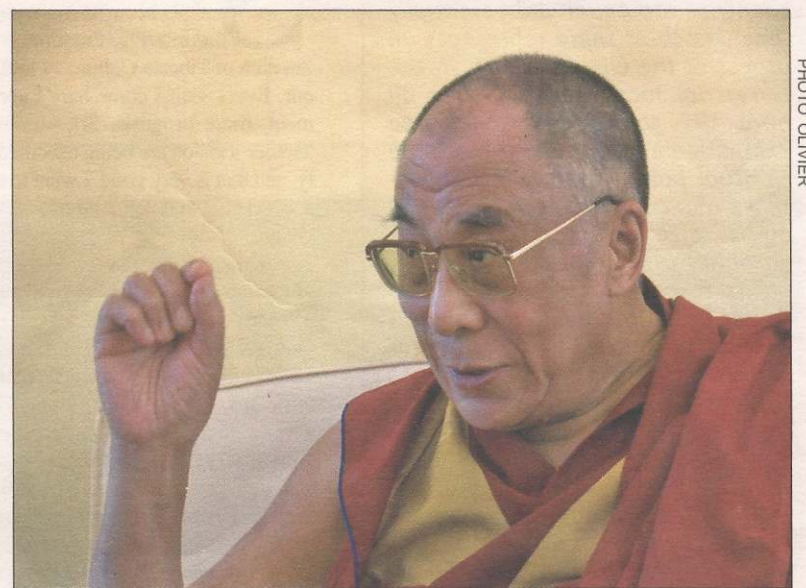


PHOTO OLIVIER

such things. I was surprised; these things are quite new.

Then again, nowadays the leaders and politicians occasionally use the word 'compassion'. Previously compassion, like non-violence, was associated with weakness, passivity – 'I'm going to eliminate our enemy', that's the way they usually spoke – but now I think that is changing. One clear example is Nelson Mandela. After he became President of South Africa, he strictly followed Mahatma Gandhi's principle of non-violence and reconciliation. And Archbishop Tutu also effectively implemented reconciliation.

Wonderful.

So these are indications. I feel that humanity is becoming more mature. In the early part of the 20th century, when the leaders of a nation declared war every citizen proudly, without question, joined the war effort. Since the Vietnam War there is no longer that kind of enthusiasm from the pub-

lic. When their government tells them to go to war, their own citizens ask 'Why?' Everybody knows that Saddam Hussein was a dictator and cruel to his own people, but when America and Britain wanted to go to war with Iraq millions of citizens expressed opposition to their government's decision.

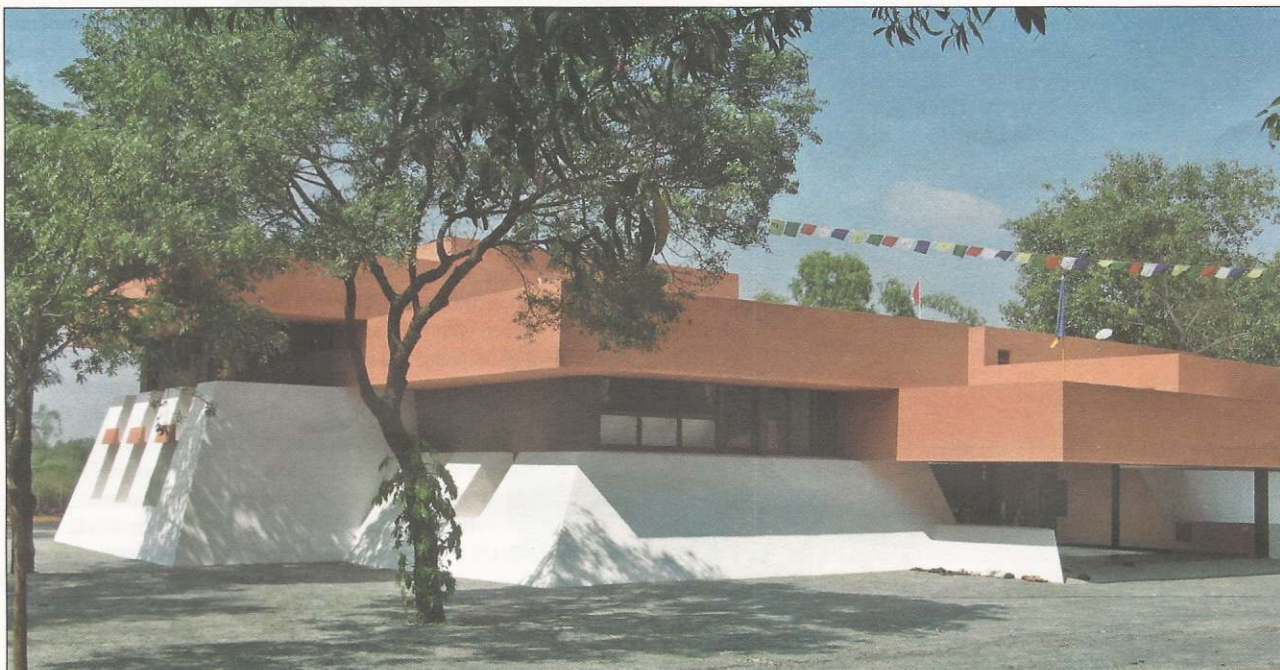
Also I think the concern about the environment is a healthy sign. It is a sign that people are becoming more concerned about long-term consequences.

Then again, the German Professor who taught me about quantum physics told me that when he was young every German saw the French as being their enemy, and the French felt the same. Nowadays that kind of attitude has completely gone. Now the French people and the German people are very close, they are part of the European Union. These are big changes, a sign of maturity and long-sightedness.

Alan and Christine

"This Pavilion has a unifying influence"

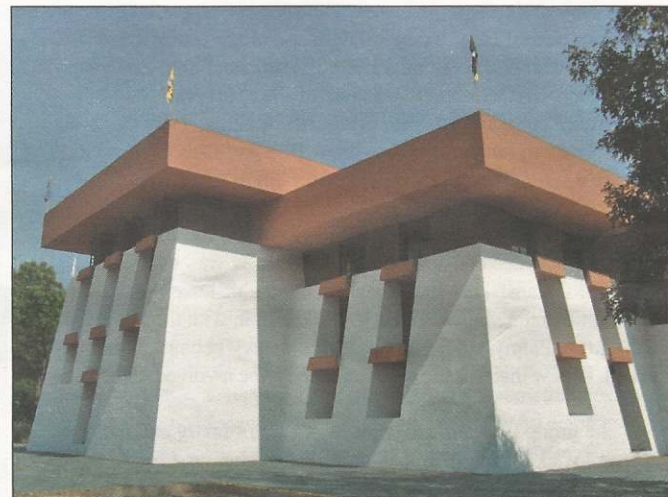
More than anybody else, Claude Arpi has held the vision and been responsible for the manifestation of the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture. Here he talks about the history and realisation of this extraordinary project.



Above and bottom right: views of the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture from the outside.
Top right: HH with the Auroville's Children's Choir.



PHOTO OLIVER



I already had the idea of a Tibetan Pavilion when I first arrived in Auroville in December 1974. I'd read Mother's Dream and her statements about the pavilions, and I already had a Tibetan connection: the previous year I had met the Dalai Lama's sister who had asked me to stay in Dharamsala and be the dentist at the Tibetan Children's Village.

In 1978 a group of us Aurovilians, including a few young Tibetans then living in Auroville, visited Dharamsala and met His Holiness. We told him that we wanted to build a Tibetan Pavilion in Auroville. He said, 'Yes, yes.' Actually Auroville at that time was not ready to embark on such a project but it remained in my mind.

In 1990 we started discussing the Pavilion again. We drew up a more elaborate project and started working with Greta Jensen who was running a trust in the U.K. called ApTibet or Appropriate Technology for Tibetans. She was already getting funds from the European Commission for environmental projects for Tibetan settlements and in 1993 she helped us write a proposal.

At that time we referred to it as the 'Pavilion of Tibet'. However, after the Chairman of Auroville Foundation referred the matter to the Ministry of External Affairs, we were told that we could not have a 'Pavilion of Tibet' in the International Zone as the Government of India is involved in Auroville and Tibet is then a politically-sensitive issue. Then Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, who was on the Governing Board at that time, suggested that we call it the 'Pavilion of Tibetan Culture'. Everybody agreed.

The foundation stone

In early 1993 we requested the Dalai Lama to lay the foundation stone of the project. By a very strange coincidence, I received a phone call from Dharamsala informing me that he had accepted on the day that I was leaving for a visit to Tibet. So in Tibet I kept thinking "I must do something special for the inauguration". Then, early one morning in Gyantse, Tibet's second largest town, I saw a huge pile of big mud bricks. I put one in my bag for our foundation stone. It was quite an experience at Lhasa airport – the Chinese customs officers were very suspicious and put the brick through their x-ray machine three or four times before they let it through.

After the Dalai Lama came in December, 1993 and laid it as the foundation stone of the Pavilion, the brick became somewhat reduced in volume. You see, it was doubly sacred to Tibetans – it had come from Tibet and the Dalai Lama had touched it – so

Tibetans started eating it as *prasada*! Eventually we had to put it behind glass.

Meanwhile, we were working on the design of the Pavilion. André Hababou had made a preliminary design which had the look of a Tibetan building. But when the Dalai Lama said the Pavilion should be environmentally-sensitive we decided to construct it using compressed earth blocks, and the only person in Auroville who could do

shouldn't expect him to give any money! His sister, Mrs Jetsun Pema, who had invited me to be a dentist in Dharamsala also donated funds, as did the Tibetan Government in exile. A lot of money came from the Government of India and, during the last year, we raised eight lakhs from units and individuals in Auroville.

At times we were not sure if we would ever complete the Pavilion, so

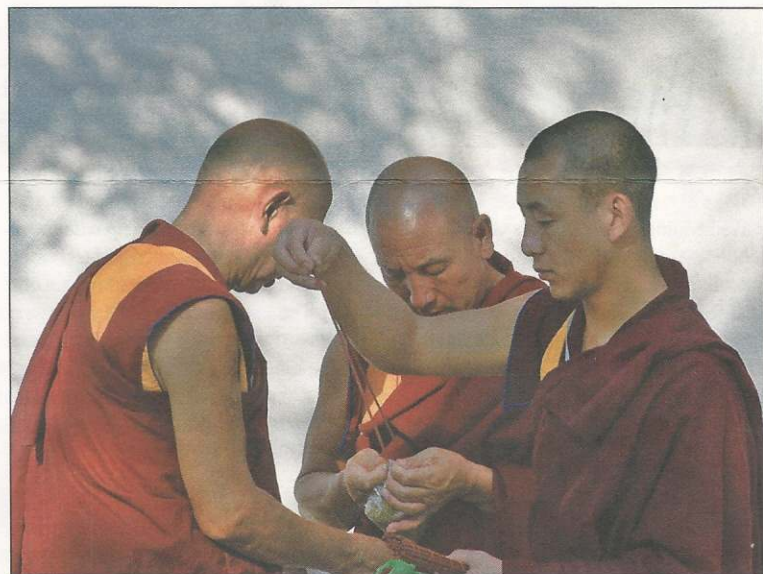


PHOTO GIORGIO

Monks preparing for the inauguration

this was Satprem. He took the project very seriously. He went cycling in the Himalayas to study Tibetan architecture and came back with the idea of designing the building according to the grid of the *kalachakra mandala*. This didn't fit with André's earlier plan and we had a clash between the two architects. Eventually, through Roger Anger's mediation, a third design emerged which was a combination of Satprem's grid with André's modern Tibetan look. The main building material was mud but there were also ferrocement beams designed by our Centre for Scientific Research (CSR).

The funding challenge

However, in the process of changing the design, the building got much larger and our budget exploded. The European Commission had agreed to fund 50% of an earlier design, but now this was only a small portion of the funds we needed and we had to look elsewhere. It wasn't easy. We never knew where the next funds would come from, and sometimes we ran out completely and the work would stop. This is why it took us so long to complete the Pavilion – we started the foundations in 1997 and only finished it just before the inauguration.

We had help from many quarters. The Dalai Lama himself was very generous, even though he had said, when agreeing to be our Patron, that we

we decided to do something with the rooms we had already constructed. In the exhibition hall we held shows not only of Tibetan artists but also of Indian and Aurovillian artists. Similarly our conference room is used for meetings on topics like conciliation which are somehow linked with the Dalai Lama's first commitment to universal responsibility. In this way we tried to communicate the concerns of the Dalai Lama and the spirit of Tibetan culture.

The first completed pavilion

The Pavilion of Tibetan Culture is the first pavilion to be completed in

Auroville. It probably happened because the Head of the State was fully behind it but it's also a statement about the strength and importance of Tibetan culture. In 1966 The Mother wrote that, *From the spiritual point of view, the importance of a country does not depend on its size or its power or its authority over other countries, but on its response to Truth and on the degree of Truth it is capable of manifesting.*

Somehow Mother's 1966 vision has taken shape and I'm happy to see that Auroville is one place on earth where the priorities are not upside-down. Many heads of state won't receive the Dalai Lama. Even our own Auroville Foundation didn't want to be officially associated with his visit (most of our present Governing Board members have never visited the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture). But we are fundamentally a cultural centre, we do nothing political, and the Government itself has always been supportive of the Pavilion. We have seen how helpful the State Government was in arranging the Dalai Lama's visit.

Tibetan culture has survived because it is so deeply-rooted. But while the purpose of the Pavilion is to help preserve that culture, we do not much emphasise the traditional rituals. Before the Dalai Lama's visit, a representative from one of the Tibetan settlements kept telling us that we were doing things the wrong way – the Dalai Lama's chair had to face in this direction etc. – but we told him we do things in our own way in Auroville, and if we do them sincerely, what's the problem? The Dalai Lama himself has said many times that the Pavilion is not a temple, not a monastery. But I'm afraid we will continue to get much pressure from the religious side....

Very genuine

The appeal of the Dalai Lama transcends religion. Everywhere

people are touched by him, his message of compassion and the oneness of the world and by the fact that he is the one world leader who puts the planet and not his own interests first. He is also very human, very genuine. When he stayed in Swagatham guest house, he went into the kitchen to meet the *ammās* who were preparing the food and he called the photographers to take a picture of him with them. He's like that, he talks to everyone; he makes no distinctions. There were 450 policemen in Auroville for his visit and they tried to keep a certain dis-

The importance of Auroville for the Tibetan cause

After the inauguration of the Pavilion the Dalai Lama met some young Aurovillian children. They asked him about the importance of Auroville to the Tibetan cause.

HH: What's important is not numbers or power but quality. The Tibetans are few, only six million people. For the last thousand years the snowy mountains protected the Tibetans' spirit, their compassionate cultural heritage, which I think is not just the heritage of all humans but something that all humanity needs. So that's why the pavilion is here, to remind people that although we Tibetans are a small part of humanity we have some useful cultural heritage."



PHOTO OLIVER

The Dalai Lama with Claude and Tency

tance between him and the crowd but he kept jumping over to chat with people. It is no wonder that he was recently voted the most popular person on Earth by several Western publications.

As to why it is important for Auroville to have the Pavilion here, the Dalai Lama spoke about this to the children (see box). But for me this Pavilion has had a unifying influence. So many people have worked on it or supported it. In fact, perhaps the most important consequence of his visit is that it brought a large number of Aurovilians to work together. For the last three months over 150 people, some of whom had not been on talking terms, worked together to make the visit a success. In Auroville we need more occasions like this.

From an interview by Alan

A conversation with Julian Lines

Julian Lines, the newest member of the International Advisory Council (IAC) of the Auroville Foundation and currently the chairman of Auroville International, speaks about his involvement with Auroville and his views on the work of the Council.

The *Who's Who of Aurobindonian Americans* doesn't exist. But if somebody is qualified to write it, it is Julian Lines. In an interview of less than one hour he casually drops the names of scores of Americans plus a handful of others from outside the States. He has met them all, learned from them, worked with them, or made close affiliations to help the work of The Mother. Who is Julian Lines? And how did he get involved with Auroville?

"It started at college," he says. "I studied at Colgate, a liberal arts college in central New York. It had a sociology professor, Warren Ramshaw, who had come on a Fulbright scholarship to Pondicherry with Robert McDermott [the author of *The Essential Aurobindo*]. McDermott collaborated with Marjorie Spalding (whom Mother named Sacheta) and early Aurovilians Bob and Deborah Lawlor to organise a summer immersion in Sri Aurobindo's philosophy and in the concept of Auroville. The year was 1972.

"I read that there would be a slide-show on the Indian city of Auroville, and decided to attend. I thought it was something on American-Indians! Then they showed Dominique Darr's photograph of that little granite block with AV written on it, with the red eroded earth, a few Palmyra trees and a stark blue sky behind. Something clicked. I knew this was the place I wanted to be involved with. I was 21.

"The group that came together was extraordinary and included Eugene 'Mickey' Finn from Boston, Prof. Jehangir Chubb, Adm. Rutledge Tompkins and Zena Daysch (the CHEC founder who had just returned from the Stockholm Conference on the Environment) and many others.

Turning points

"The wonderful thing that summer was to work together and learn from all these people: about Sri Aurobindo's philosophy, about *karma* and rebirth, organic gardening, about sacred geometry and a host of other topics. Bob also taught *hatha* yoga. He expected his students to hold an *asana* for a long time. In one such position I was looking at a photograph of The Mother, the one on the old balcony where She wears a dark dress. Something in me asked Her 'who are you'? And somehow, that was another turning point." It was soon followed by a third. "On August 15, there was a reading from *Savitri*. Deborah asked me to read the section where Aswapathi saw the *Omnipotent's flaming pioneers ... come crowding down the amber stairs of birth*. It was incredibly powerful. At the end of the summer we sold the buckwheat we had planted and sent the cheque to Rijuta, one of The Mother's secretaries, as our offering." The link had been made.

Julian had another year at college, but was now sure which way he wanted to go. When word came from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram that Udar Pinto would visit America in the autumn on the occasion of Sri Aurobindo's birth centenary year, Julian organised Udar's lectures at Syracuse University and at Colgate. "Udar came with Aurovillian Johnny Walker. He returned again in spring and summer 1973, for Mother had indicated to Roger Anger that Udar would collect the money to build Auroville. It was during that time that we created a Sri Aurobindo Centre in New York at West 58th Street. Muriel Spanier ran the office, I joined as a volunteer after finishing college in spring 1973."

Together with Udar, Julian met all kinds of people. One of them was Eleanor Montgomery, who in the past had created a foundation to channel funds to the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Udar persuaded Mrs. Montgomery to reactivate the foundation in order to help the newly founded Sri Aurobindo Center. Later the name of the foundation was changed to The Foundation for World Education (FWE).

Coming to Auroville

When The Mother passed away in November 1973, Julian had an inner experience. "It showed me beyond doubt that I was connected to Her and Her work. And exactly a year after Her passing I came to Her room." It was his first visit to India. He landed in Hyderabad to meet Prof. Madhusudhan Reddy, who he had helped tour the USA, then he came to the Ashram, and then to Auroville. "I stayed in a little capsule in Forecomers with Bob and Deborah. I stayed for 4 months. I helped them with the translation of the book of R.A. Schwaller de Lubicz on sacred geometry. I studied *The Life Divine* with Arabinda Basu in the Ashram library; I briefly met Nolini Kanta Gupta; and went out to Gloria Farm with Dhyumanbhai where I met Suzie Odell. All kinds of 'family' connections were developing. It was a magical time – but already I witnessed one of the early Auroville feuds, something about the use of water between those who were building the Matrimandir and the greenbelters."

Lindisfarne

Back in America Julian participated for a few years in the Lindisfarne Association in New York. "Lindisfarne was the place on the East Coast where many intellectuals met. The West Coast had Esalen with Michael Murphy; at Lindisfarne we had William Irwin Thompson, who also had had The Mother's darshan.

"Thompson's idea was to bring people together from all walks of life such as author E. F. Schumacher, the poets Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry, the astronaut Rusty Schweickart and the biologist Lewis Thomas. He invited theologians from various religious backgrounds for dialogues and managed to attract Baker Roshi from the Zen tradition, the Dominican monk David Brother David Steindl-Rast, and the Sufi Pir Vilayat Khan. You could meet Peter and Eileen Caddy from Findhorn and Paolo Soleri from Arcosanti. He also invited people connected to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram like M.P. Pandit and Madhusudan Reddy. Lindisfarne was instrumental in making people aware of Sri Aurobindo's vision. For Thompson, Auroville, Findhorn,

Arcosanti and the Zen Center in San Francisco represented the new spiritual communities of an evolving planetary culture."

Next, Julian got involved in teaching at a 'child-centered school' in Connecticut (later discovering that Heidi Watts had been a big influence on the founder). But he was still looking towards Auroville. "I was trying to find a way to get to India and thought I needed training in appropriate technology. I decided to attend courses at the New Alchemy Institute in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, to learn about the latest in fish farming so that I could bring that to Auroville.

Woodstock

"One weekend I found myself on the street with no place to stay. It was too expensive to find a place on the Cape, so I decided to stay with friends in Woodstock N.Y. That weekend everything came together.



Old friends wanted me to take over their house in Woodstock; Eric and Sam who had started Matagiri community were delighted that there would be someone nearby to help, and soon I was living in Woodstock. A year later I had a son and a few years after that I had taken over the distribution of the books of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother and the printing and mailing of the magazine *Collaboration*, which was edited by Gordon and Jean Korstange. Afterwards I started the shop 'Pondicherry' that also sells products from the Ashram and Auroville."

Joining Auroville: a clear indication

And what about joining Auroville? "I got a direct 'No!'" says Julian, and explains, "Once Champakal came to America. I had the most remarkable time with him. He no longer spoke. If you asked a question, he would point to a picture of Sri Aurobindo or The Mother or write one line and tear it up afterwards. But he never played the guru or gave advice. One day I was talking with Claude Brun about building a house in Auroville. Champakal overheard our talk and shook his finger, 'no'. I was shocked. Here was a man who was not giving advice to anybody and now he was telling me that I couldn't build a house in Auroville? I asked, 'Can I visit?' He gestured with his finger back and forth. The indication was clear. I was supposed to do networking, but not to move to Auroville."

This decision was somehow made easier by of what Julian calls 'the civil war' that had started between the Sri Aurobindo Society and Auroville. "I had friends in the Ashram as well as in Auroville so I suffered through those years. Many Americans left Auroville. Many unfortunate things happened in the USA connected to this fight as well. I didn't return to Auroville until 1988."

Throughout that time, his involvement with Auroville increased. "In 1983 Eleanor Montgomery passed away and left her entire estate to the FWE. I became a member of the Board and we started to channel money to many projects in Auroville. One of the nicest jobs was to help in the purchase of the crystal for the Matrimandir. In 1985 Piero, Ruud, Yoka, Carel and I met at the Auroville International meeting at Bologna, Italy, and afterwards drove up to Oberkochen in

Southern Germany to meet with people from Zeiss who manufactured the crystal. The FWE had agreed to guarantee the payment of the second instalment. It was a great privilege to participate in this."

Julian took also part in organising the AUM (All USA Meetings), and became involved with Auroville International and its branch organisation Auroville International USA, which June Maher had started in 1973 as The Auroville Association. "Many Aurovilians perhaps do not realize there are many people 'out there' who are as concerned for Auroville's welfare and success as the Aurovilians," says Julian. "People like June, Savitra, Constance and many others read the *News & Notes* and the Intranet and regularly 'take the pulse of Auroville'. Auroville is also our life, even though we live thousands of miles away."

One of the people Julian met and befriended was Dr. Karan Singh, the Chairman of the Auroville Foundation. "Through Lindisfarne there was a contact with Rev. James Parks Morton, the Dean of the Episcopal Cathedral St. John the Divine in New York City. Dean Morton was a member of the Temple of Understanding. Karan Singh too was involved with the Temple. Dean Morton invited Karan Singh to speak at the Cathedral and I attended that lecture. We later met again at Cornell University. When we talked, there was some music in the background. Karen said, 'Oh, that's Madonna, I really like that!' I was dumbstruck. Here was a sophisticated man, clearly not fitting in the mould of the stodgy Indian intellectual I had expected him to be, and hip in a charming way! Afterwards he became Indian Ambassador to the USA and we met again. Since then, whenever he comes to the USA I try to arrange for him to give some talks because he is an eloquent speaker."

The need for compassion

Working with people wasn't always easy. "I slowly came to understand that even people you have the least affinity with and don't get along with are somehow called to the work and have a critical role to play. I learned that you cannot fulfil your mission unless you have the compassion to deal with what upsets you the most in the other person. I once asked Champakal about how the parties in that 'civil war' between the SAS and Auroville could be reconciled. He made me understand that the only way is through love. I learned that I have to keep my mind and heart open to everyone and try to see and understand all the different perspectives. That has become my stance, which seems to become more widespread nowadays. The recognition is growing that a dialogue between polarities is essential. The Dalai Lama, for example, keeps talking about his love for the Chinese people. Obama has incorporated in his cabinet people with diverse viewpoints."

The role of the IAC

Asked about how he sees his role as an IAC member, he replies that it should preferably be that of a cheerleader and therapist. "Ideally Auroville should solve its problems internally, without reference to the IAC or even the Governing Board. For even though the IAC members are often well informed as they take the trouble to visit Auroville for longer periods and interact with many more people and groups, they still cannot keep up with the many developments. Auroville has become too complicated and too vast to understand it by looking in on the weekends or twice a year or even once a month. I see the IAC's function as holding up a mirror. As we have our psychic being which leads us to individual self-knowledge, there needs to be the collective psychic being that leads Auroville in its collective yoga and self-knowledge. The IAC can hold up a mirror to facilitate that process. We can also reflect and inform on what is going on in the outside world."

In conversation with Carel

"I feel the remarkable vibrations

"In my wildest dreams I would never have imagined I would be here, living in India, in Auroville," says Doris. "When I was a flight attendant with Lufthansa in the 1970's I refused to take on flights that meant me staying in India. I spent a few days here once and found the poverty overwhelming and I vowed I would never return. I even took flight routes that deliberately went the other way, like the North Atlantic to Alaska route. My horror of it was almost a joke with my friends.

"I loved my work with the airline, travelling to every corner of the world (except India) and seeing all sorts of people and the way they lived. The perks were great too. This was in the days before cheap flights were available and often my friend and I would take the first plane from Hamburg to London, spend all day in galleries and exhibitions and take the last flight back. This was all possible because both our husbands were pilots and we got the tickets for 10% of the normal fare.

"After too many years of this hectic life I decided it was time for me to leave life in the airlines as my husband and I hardly had time to see each other. My life took a completely different turn and I studied art history and anthropology at university, worked as a textile designer and later produced a textile magazine. Then, one day I went to a yoga class run by an ex-stewardess, and after

the class she casually mentioned that she was going to spend Christmas as usual in Auroville. Memories came flooding back. I remembered how several years earlier in the information room where all the flight crews used to meet, someone had an article on Auroville and read its Charter out to us. "Traumtaenzer, traumtaenzer" (Dream-



dancers), I laughed and immediately forgot it. But one thing did stick with me for years – Mother's reference to 'never-ending education'. I had always admired older people who continued learning and doing things instead of just sitting around, and that phrase caught my imagination. But over the years I forgot where I got it from.

"So Auroville did still exist! And somehow I knew I wanted to go to that place. 'Can I come with you?' I asked the teacher and she said 'Yes.' I rushed home and looked up Auroville on the web. If I deduct 50% of what they say about Auroville, I thought, then maybe I will get the reality.

"Looking back on my life I can see I was searching for a change. I had never been interested in spirituality, or always denied it was for me. I no longer wanted to pack my bag and travel around the world. I had done that for years, and seen and done almost everything possible, except maybe for bungee jumping. I could not imagine living a life of idleness and pleasure in Spain or on

Alain Antoine and Patricia Greer arrived separately in Auroville in early 1972. For the next 22 years they were active in various aspects of Auroville's life, latterly specialising in video production. In 1993 they left and are presently based in the U.S., although for one year they are working at the American University of Iraq-Sulaimaniya, in Iraqi Kurdistan. Last December they briefly revisited the community for the first time since their departure.

Why have you chosen to work in Iraq?

Patricia: When we were, unexpectedly, offered these positions it seemed like an adventure we couldn't refuse – not to mention a chance to perhaps do something positive for this ravaged country. I am teaching English Composition and History, Alain is setting up a media center and making promotional films about the University

What are the stand-out memories from those 22 years of living in Auroville?

Alain: I remember that in the early years a group of us were building what became the first Pour Tous. One day a visitor came by and, without a word being said, he put down his backpack and began helping us: we were working with such aspiration he had just been swept away. The first years were like that; collectively we were aflame and we worked like mad.

Patricia: I have powerful memories, both positive and negative. Probably my best time was working high up on the scaffolding of Matrimandir – people used to call us the 'bird people'. In those days Auroville was more than collective, it was communist. If my mum sent me a cheque I gave every rupee to the community, we shared everything. It was precious to be a part of that.

I also have very vivid memories of the fight with the Sri Aurobindo Society. It brought cohesion to the community, but afterwards I felt ashamed of some of the stupid things we did. I also got very involved in Auroville's political life – that was an awful experience. I went into that with high aspirations but people who get in those positions of power just get slammed. I remember being hurt a lot and thinking, why do we do this to each other?

Why did you leave in 1993?

Patricia: I had been feeling that I needed to leave, at least for a while. When I first came to India I was in middle of getting a Ph.D, and suddenly this incredible intellectual thirst returned. The early days of Auroville were marked by a certain anti-intellectualism – 'you're too mental' was a devastating put-down. But I needed to be mental. I wanted to read all the great books, to do this intensive thing, and I got a scholarship to this fine college in the U.S. to do that.

"Auroville is everywhere now"



Alain Antoine and Patricia Greer

I thought I'd be away for a year and a half, but after completing the first programme I knew I wanted to study more. I got a Ph.D in South Asian studies, which involved learning Sanskrit, then discovered a college that offered a Masters in Eastern Classics and they hired me to teach there.

It all felt very guided. What's very interesting is that at my college I can easily speak of Sri Aurobindo and his philosophy and there are faculty members who read him, not as devotees but because they find him tremendously inspiring

Alain: It was different for me. When Patricia wanted to leave Auroville, I was resisting. When I came to Auroville I had been on the road for four years, I'd never worked in my life and I had no education. I'd run away from my family at the age of seventeen. So Auroville was my home and the place where I had learned everything. But, as the years went by, I felt that the flame of aspiration which had sustained me for so long was gradually going. One day I looked at myself and I was just any Joe having an ordinary life, going to work, coming back: I was in a rut, a routine. That's what made me leave. I wasn't dissatisfied with Auroville but with myself.

It was scary to leave, to arrive in a world I didn't know and to feel so little prepared. But gradually I realized that Auroville had prepared me to face any challenge. I began as a waiter in French restaurant, then had various jobs teaching French, then I learned computers. My last job was a network analyst in a school where I was also teaching film.

Patricia: Auroville teaches you to just go for things, it's that youth that never ages.

Has your perspective on Auroville changed?

Alain: In my inner life there hasn't been a strong separation between living in Auroville and living in the West but Auroville has become more diffused for me, it's everywhere now. This is why I don't need to be living here. Maybe I've been very lucky, but working in education I've met exceptional people with deep aspirations. They may not use the same lingo, but I've met in many people out there the same dedication that sustained me in Auroville.

Patricia: I can't imagine working anywhere but in education. People don't do it for the money but out of dedication and aspiration. Of course, there's stuff in the West which we don't like. We have an aversion to this 'New Age' thing. I have Auroville which, for me, is not 'New Age'. I prefer people who just work devotedly towards an ideal but don't bring in all kinds of notions.

Alain: As far as I know, Sri Aurobindo is the only one to predict a new consciousness that is already at work, but there's a lot of eternal wisdom in all cultures. I've also done the Eastern Classics programme and it's been great to read all these great books and somehow lose this old arrogance that "Buddhism is inferior to the Integral Yoga because Buddhists don't believe in the transformation of the body". Baloney. Buddhist texts are tremendous when read with an open mind. I'd pay my respects to anybody who is on a sincere Buddhist path.

Patricia: When I was at the University of

Virginia I was reading not only primary texts but also lots of secondary material, and I realized how much bad scholarship is out there. These people read these great works but somehow not with their souls; they don't get it. I felt I could immediately discriminate in this way, that I could work in the academic world but keep that discrimination which, somehow, I got from reading Sri Aurobindo while I was in Auroville.

Do you carry away any overriding impressions of Auroville from this brief visit?

Alain: It's really too short to say, but the friends we met still seem to be full of ideals, of belief in Auroville, but collectively something seems to have been lost.

Patricia: The word that keeps coming to me is 'parallel'. I feel people here are living parallel lives. There's not that centripetal force that pulls you into the centre.

Auroville seems very prosperous now, it's amazing; some people seem to have become rich. But I wonder how this is for those who have dedicated themselves to something idealistic and are still just living on a basic maintenance? Inequality of resources has always been an issue, but perhaps it's an even bigger one now.

But, then again, the Chamber is ready. When you go and sit there you feel it's something extraordinary, a miracle for the earth; just by being there it has got to have an effect. So, somehow, I'm sure everything is going as it should.

Alain: None of us could have imagined that Kuyilapalayam would be full of shops. Physically Auroville is now more and more part of that larger world. In the past we had many discussions about Auroville's relationship to the rest of the world. Should it be a bubble of light in a world of ignorance? How would it retain its 'purity'? Well clearly, on a physical level, it hasn't.

The attempt to retain the 'purity' of Auroville, not only against the outside world but also against certain orientations within Auroville itself, was strong among some Aurovilians in the 1980s.

Patricia: I was very associated with that group: I thought I was 'pure'! Now when I look back I can see it was such a lot of nonsense. Why couldn't we have just worked it out between us? That was another reason I left. I was kind of suffocating and I needed privacy. There were many things I needed to think through for myself and I felt it would be very difficult to do that here; suddenly people would start thinking, 'She's changed'.

The Auroville of today seems more relaxed in that respect...

So maybe the challenge now for Auroville is to be more inclusive of different viewpoints but without losing that flame of aspiration.

From an interview by Alan

of this place"

the Florida Keys, the usual paradises, as I always loved to learn new things and involve myself in life by working. The website told me that Auroville is a place of no religion or special rituals and that it was up to the individual to find himself there. I remembered when I was a school child and I was always in trouble as I would not, or could not, conform. Auroville sounded the ideal place for me!

"When I climbed out of the taxi in the middle of the night at Centre Guesthouse and put my feet on Auroville's earth, I somehow knew I had arrived somewhere very special. In the second week I went to the Entry Group to apply to be a Newcomer. "Can't you wait the stipulated six weeks?" they asked. I went back to Germany, closed down my life there and packed my computer equipment in a container.

I had a wonderfully soft landing in Auroville. I decided to come in May to deliberately see how the heat affected me, but if I just went slowly it hardly seemed to matter. I rented a little office space in Aurelec, moved from house to house as a house sitter with my small bag and felt enormously free and happy. I started working at the Auroville website with Mauna and Manoj in their office at Aurelec and found it great to learn about this strange and wonderful new place. Then the tsunami happened. I was the 'messenger' between the tsunami office and the website, collecting photos and information and publishing them on the web. I felt that something new was happening to me by being exposed to this remarkable experience and that soon my life would take on a different direction.

"Meanwhile I moved into an apartment at Arati. Although it is very beautiful and my neigh-

bours are great, I must admit I feel a little "squeezed" as the apartments are quite close to each other and sounds travel easily here in the tropics. I have always had a house and a garden, and I do miss it, although I love the freedom from the responsibility of it all.

"Being part of the tsunami team brought me to my latest passion, making videos about Auroville. During meetings we would hear about the planned projects for the fishing villages and I said somebody should document this whole movement. Hemant, who was in charge at that time, said, "Why don't you do it?" I went to Chennai and bought a camera.

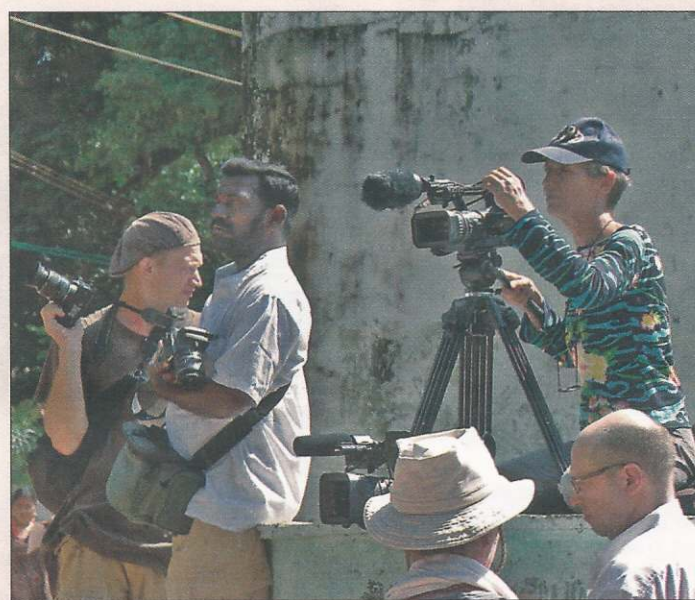
"I knew nothing about film-making but many people helped me and I was amazed at their generosity. I have always loved to learn and communicate, so with my new skill I found the perfect work. I had been shocked when I learned that so little of Auroville's history had been recorded so I knew that was where my path lay.

"I decided to make a film on the creation of the Matrimandir. I wanted to do it to keep the spirit of that time alive. When I looked at the inspired faces of the people on the old films who went through such hardships, I felt we needed to nurture, to keep alive that inspiration. Many of the oldtimers had met the Mother and had received that direct contact – we new people do not have that experience. Although everyone was helpful and enthusiastic in their dealings with me, it turned out to be a tremendous challenge for me. This was my first film and when it was finally shown I was terribly nervous. I had little experience of film-making and not much experience of Auroville and the combination could have been disastrous. However, at the end of the first showing, people clapped and cheered and I knew I had succeeded.

"We are now working on *The Second Generation*, a film about the children who came with their parents in the early seventies, children who were born here or those young people who came on their own. They are the people who will be running Auroville in the future and it is very beautiful to hear their opinions about Auroville and how their lives are developing. So far we have done over 50 interviews. It is, of course, much more work than I thought as the subject is incredibly broad, but there is no deadline here.

"Auroville is an experiment and it should be documented. Maybe it is because I studied anthropology at university that I have such a fascination with its development on every level. I want to concentrate on filming Auroville to show the world how it is developing. Matrimandir was the beginning and now other parts are developing fast and we are at a very exciting and crucial stage.

"I have now been here for six years and life gets better and better. People nowadays seem nicer and smile more. They are so many wonderful people if you talk to them one on one, but the only thing that doesn't work is the "unity" bit. If a small project is done that is fine, but with any large undertaking the different opinions and backlog of years of frustrations and resentments come in and cause havoc. I clearly saw how different



Shooting Pongal festivities at Kuyilapalayam

things could be at the time of the tsunami when we were all pulled together.

"My main regret is that I came here too late to see Mother. She and Sri Aurobindo are obviously still here however, and I feel the remarkable vibrations of this place. Living with these vibrations can turn everything upside down; sometimes everything turns out differently and that can be unsettling. If you really want something, it can happen here.

"I feel as if my old life is being stripped away. It is such a privilege to live here, especially as the world out there seems to be falling apart right now.

"What fascinates me is how all the strands of my life have come together so beautifully. I feel very blessed."

Dianna

PHOTO GIORGIO

The ancient shrine at Irumbai

Hidden on the road from Kottakarai to Koot Road lies the old forgotten temple of Irumbai. Its history is uncertain. Was it built by a Pandya or by a Chola king? It must have been built before 600 CE, for there are records that Thirugnana Sambandar, the Child Saint of Tamil Nadu who lived from 643 to 659 CE, visited the temple and sang there the glory of Lord Shiva and his spouse Parvati and found delight in the beauty of its gardens. Old temple inscriptions recount how in the centuries that followed other people donated towards the temple upkeep and renovations. More recently, the Nayaks, the landlords of the area, held sway over the temple, till they too left. The small, impoverished village of Irumbai had no means to maintain it, and slowly the temple fell into ruin.

In 1997 a few Aurovilians from the local area got interested in the temple and its history. They had grown up with the story of the temple. This was the place where the *lingam* of the Lord had exploded into three pieces and where the Kaluveli Siddhar had cursed the area to become arid and infertile. Two pieces of the *lingam* had been put together again, held by a silver band. The light of the rising sun falls on it once a year, on April 15th. The third piece, which had landed 80 kilometres away, is now honoured in the temple of Oliampattu.

"We are devotees of Shiva, poor people from this region," says Aurovilian Raman. "We first came to the temple to clean it. And then, one day, we thought about doing a festival there. We got some money together, and in 1998 we had our first celebration. We had chosen the day of *Thaipusam*, the full moon day in the Tamil month of *Thai*, which falls at the end of January or in the beginning of February. We also choose that day to celebrate

the fact that on 30 January 1874, the great Tamil yogi Swami Ramalingam (alias Vallalar) merged his body into the Divine. The Mother says that he had realised an aspect of the Supermind, what he called The Vast Grace Light."

The first celebration, with a thousand lights illuminating the ancient temple, was a great success. The people from Irumbai village asked Raman to have one each year. "We have been doing that," says Raman. "Our grandest celebration was in the year 2000, when many children born in Auroville came to celebrate. I had managed to raise some funds, and we organised a big dance festival with a famous dancer from Pondy."



The temple before renovation

The festivals led him to wonder if the temple could be renovated. "I took some measurements and also other Aurovilians got involved. We were all thinking of restoring the place to its ancient beauty. We got in contact with a former Chief Secretary of Pondicherry, Mr. Hema Chandra, who helped raise about Rs 4 lakhs from the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Administration Department of the Tamil Nadu government, which now supervises the administration of the

temple. He also invited Sri Ganapathi Stapati, one of the few contemporary experts on ancient temple architecture and sculpture, to visit the temple and give advice. We managed to raise another Rs 4 lakhs ourselves, and in 2004 we slowly started the work. But Auroville experts had warned that the work according to our designs would cost at least Rs 35 lakhs, an impossible sum for us to raise. Yet, we did what we could."

The scene changed with the appearance of an anonymous donor in about 2006. "This is a man of action who has the money to manifest things," says Raman. "His ideas went far beyond restoring the temple to its ancient beauty. He wanted to

make the temple a living glory of present day dedication to Shiva. Though he did not consult us much, he followed some of our concepts. He did a remarkable job that must have cost him more than a crore of rupees. In a sense, he brought light back into the temple." And Raman adds, "His decision to remain anonymous is truly exceptional, particularly at a time when most donors want to be praised for every rupee they give. We can only be grateful."

Are there regrets that the temple's ancient grace has gone? "Yes, to a certain extent," admits Raman. "But I am very happy with what the temple now manifests. It has a new beauty, it is clean and the pond has become lovely and unpolluted. It is now a joy to go there. Many Aurovilians and guests take the trouble to visit the temple in the evening for a quiet concentration."

Auroville's involvement in the temple's renovation was also important for its relationship with the villagers. "They have come to understand that



The cupola before restoration

we in Auroville are not only interested in manifesting our own city, but that we care for what is around us. It has now become easier to explain why Auroville is here, and what we want to do. For if they have a misconception about Auroville, you can forget about building Auroville," he explains.

Does Raman believe that Auroville has a role to play in the temple? "Definitely yes," he says. "Few people are aware that The Mother, when she spoke about the *raison d'être* of the International Zone, also spoke of places where the religions of the world could be studied. This place is very suitable." More immediately, Raman believes that Auroville should come forward to honour the commitment made by the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation to create a garden around the temple. "It shouldn't be too difficult to find Rs 5 lakhs and recreate that garden in its old splendour, using the original flora of the area. We have all the talents in-house - it's just a question of funds."

And his own involvement? Raman smiles. "I have promised the villagers that I will organize one festival every *Thaipusam*, and I intend to keep that promise. I need about Rs 5,000 each year, and we have opened an account at the Financial Service to make it possible.

In conversation with Carel

Renovating the temple

An anonymous donor explains why he undertook the renovation of the Irumbai temple.

"I grew up like all other boys, but with a difference: I was always thinking about Lord Shiva - not as a believer, but as someone who wanted to experience Him." The speaker is a wealthy business man from Pondicherry, "a self-made man with an education up to 5th standard," he says. "I could not read or write my mother tongue Tamil as my school was an English language medium." After he left school in 1971, he worked as a labourer earning Rs 1.50 a day. Today, he owns four industries in different parts of India with subsidiaries abroad.

"I've been extremely successful," he says, "but it is all due to the Grace of Lord Shiva and because I always choose the righteous path. I have never employed unlawful means. I believe that is the reason why my companies flourish and why my children have all been highly successful in their overseas careers." Elaborating on Lord Shiva he explains how slowly he started to sing in His praise and read poems of the ancient Tamil saints who sang the Lord's glory in the temples of Tamil Nadu in the 6th and 7th centuries CE.

Wealth brings its own problems and his experience was no exception. "Whenever I visited a Shiva temple to offer my salutations, I was invariably pushed to the front to be garlanded and treated as a special person," he says. He resented it and looked for a temple which was not crowded. He chanced on the Irumbai temple, which was "partly in ruins and with an atmosphere of complete neglect." But standing in front of the idol, he inwardly experienced Lord Shiva and started wondering if He wanted him to do something.

"I came to know that the former Chief Minister of Pondicherry, Mr. Rangaswamy, was very interested in the temple and had made a donation of

some 50 bags of cement and steel. I contacted Mr. Rangaswamy, who was enthusiastic about me getting involved in renovating the temple. But I was a bit doubtful. I went to the temple and asked inwardly, 'Lord, what if I run out of money? The villagers will be very angry.' But then I had another experience: a flash of light occurred behind



The courtyard surrounding the temple

my head. For me it was the sign of His sanction." This ultimately led not to the renovation, but to the complete rejuvenation of the Irumbai temple.

It started with the building of a compound wall. The old road, which ran close to the temple on temple land, was closed and another road opened outside the wall. This ensured the safety of the temple's visitors, particularly ladies who in the past had often been harassed while going to the temple. It also put an end to the pollution of the temple tank, which was incorporated into the temple complex.

The temple itself required major structural work before the beautification could start. It was decided to employ craftsmen from Kerala. Under

the guidance of master craftsman K.R. Babu the walls were decorated with friezes telling the story of the Kalavellu Siddhar. Another master craftsman, Mr. Karpaka Villas from Kumbakonam, created the embossed bas-reliefs that decorate the walls inside the temple. Within two years, the temple and its grounds were completely renovated.

"It all went very well," says the donor. "But then a problem came up. The *kumbabishekam* [the dedication of the renovated temple] would take place on July 10, 2008. Should my name be printed on the invitation card? I was very doubtful. I had no official

maintained.

"Though I asked the relevant temple authorities to give me some official status in the temple so that I can guard against corruption, this has not been given to me," says the donor. He attributes this to local politics. "It worries me a great deal. The temple requires a maintenance budget of Rs 60,000 a month, of which I contribute now about Rs 40-50,000. There are also the costs of the bi-monthly *palabishekam* [the feeding of about 1000 people] on the temple grounds. But my involvement with this temple will diminish in the future."

Does he see a solution? "I have proposed to the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation and to the Chairman, Dr. Karan Singh, that Auroville take official charge of the temple," he says. "They visited the temple and agreed with me that the grounds should once again become a beautiful

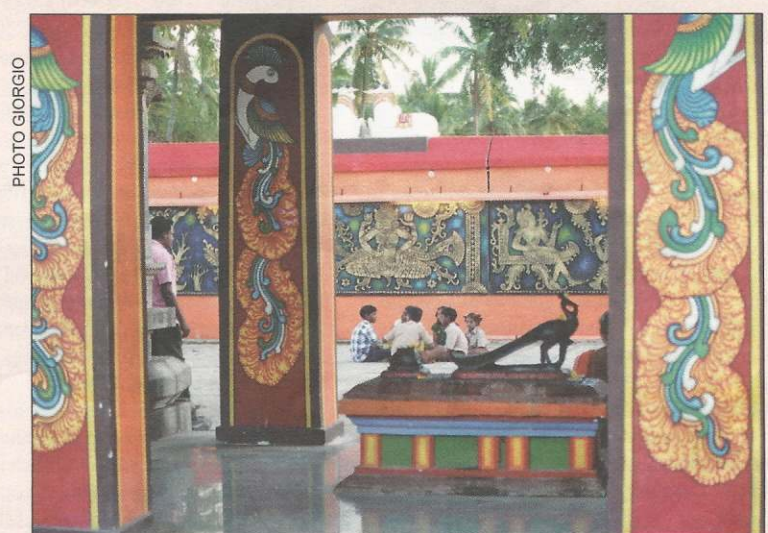


The renovated cupola over the main shrine

garden as it was in the ancient days. But there has been no follow-up on my suggestion. Still, I hope that Auroville will become involved. It would ensure that the temple will continue to show its majesty in the years to come."

Asked why he doesn't want to be known for his magnanimity, he says "I prefer to remain anonymous as otherwise people will pester me for donations. But there is another reason as well. All this work has been done for the Lord Shiva and was only possible because of His Grace."

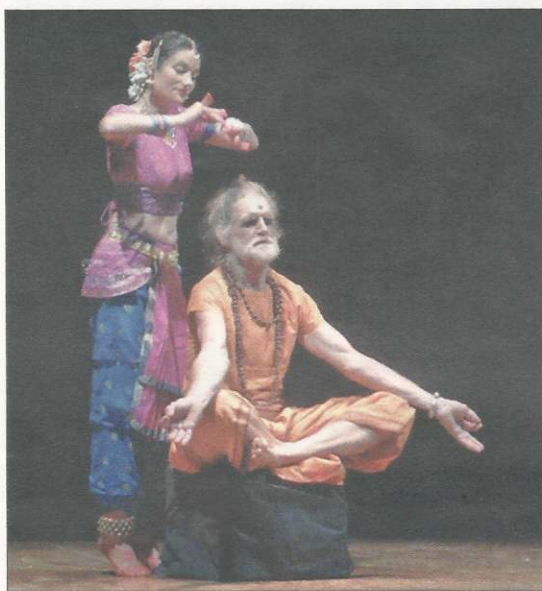
In conversation with Carel



Inside the temple with the Kerala style murals

Retelling the Siddhar's story

A musical dance drama based on the legend of the Kaluveli Siddhar was performed by students of the Krishna Kumar Dance academy, first in Bharat Nivas, then in the ancient temple of Irumbai where the legend was born.



Sundaravalli (Harini) feeding the Siddhar (Johnny)

The story of the Kaluveli Siddhar is well-known. Many Aurovilians have heard it and doubtless think it is a convenient way of justifying Auroville's presence in Tamil Nadu. But the Kaluveli Siddhar did exist. Some of his writings have survived, amongst which is a philosophical poem about the body being a pot which breaks so that the soul can be released.

The legend existed long before Auroville was conceived. Eighty-year old Murugesan, the Aurovilian Tamil poet, simply added the ending that people from far-away places will come to turn the desert into an oasis of green fields and forests. For that, he said, is what he has seen since Auroville began: the curse was lifted and the earth became green.

For Krishna Kumar and his wife Gita, the legend demanded to be sung and danced. In 2007, they composed and choreographed a pilot product and presented it in Bharat Nivas to great acclaim. This time they presented a far more in-depth project. This could be



Poet Murugesan felicitated by Krishna Kumar and Gita

seen from the intensity with which Krishna sang the story accompanied by the orchestra; from the exquisite way in which dancer Harini expressed Sundaravalli's anguish; and from the mature portrayals of the Siddhar by Johnny and of the benevolent Lord Shiva by Vijay. In fact, almost all the dancers, even some who had only recently started to learn Bharatanatyam, were able to express something deeper. It was as if something had penetrated inside – as if Bharat Nivas, for one evening, had turned into a temple shrine carrying a spiritual atmosphere. Was it a wonder that the night after the performance the clouds opened and unusually heavy downpours turned the earth into a quagmire?

The performance at the Irumbai Temple on *pradosham*, the day Lord Shiva removes negative karma, was in complete contrast. It took place in the covered temple annex. With a stage one-third the size of that at Bharat Nivas and an audience that expressed its admiration with raw enthusiasm, whistles and catcalls, the experience was different. Yet, something very powerful prevailed.

It revealed itself when the performance had come to an end. The musicians and dancers were all invited to come into the temple where 'the evil eye of too much admiration' was removed with flaming camphor – a ceremony common after a particularly successful performance.

What followed was unexpected. All were asked to come into the small room adjacent to the *garbha griha* that houses the cracked *lingam*. The priest performed a

*Mahaleesar o Mahaleesar
if my bhakti towards you is sincere
if my devotion to you holds even a grain of truth
then it is your duty to remove any obstacle
and offer me unconditional protection.*

Mahaleesar, another name for Lord Shiva, heard the desperate pleadings of the beautiful dancer Sundaravalli who had been instructed by her King to break the tapasya of the venerable Kaluveli Siddhar. He knew her pleadings to be sincere: for a terrible fate would be hers if the Siddhar's anger would turn on her. Yet the King's intent was genuine. The drought that plagued the lands was caused by the severe tapasya of the Siddhar. It generated so much heat that it prevented the rain-clouds from coming. The Lord appeared in Sundaravalli's dream: "Drop roasted appalams into the termite hill that has grown around the Siddhar. Unknowingly, he will eat it. In time, his tapasya will be broken."

Sundaravalli follows the instruction. Every day she patiently drops pieces of appalam into the ant-hill and soon enough, the unbelievable happens. The anthill cracks open and sunlight falls on the body of the Siddhar, awakening his senses. He sees the exquisite dancer and his tapasya is broken. The rains pour down.

To celebrate the returning of the rains, a thanksgiving takes place at the Irumbai temple with the court, the Siddhar and the townspeople in attendance. Sundaravalli dances. In the climax of her performance one of her anklets comes loose. The Siddhar spontaneously ties it back on again. Seeing this, the entire audience, including the king, burst into laughter, mocking the sage they believe to be love-struck.

The Siddhar is enraged. In his fury, he commands the Lord to break out of the lingam to prove that he is a realized yogi and he curses the land so that it should become barren again. The shivalingam explodes and Mahaleesar appears dancing his spectacular tandava. The Lord then gently placates the Siddhar and mitigates the curse: in the Kaliyuga people from far-away places will come to turn the desert again into an oasis of green fields and forests.



The bas-relief in brass of the Siddhar inside the Irumbai temple

special puja and sang for the deity. This was followed by *prasad* – cups with tamarind rice – being offered to all. As one of the performers put it, "It felt like the Lord himself had come to feed us."

Carel

Odissi Stirred

Malaysian artiste Ramli Ibrahim and the dancers of Sutra, his Dance Company based in Kuala Lumpur, presented an evening of Odissi. 'Odissi Stirred' explored the dance form's tribal and folk roots as well as neo-modern trends inspired by Odissi.

In a discussion that followed, Ramli expressed that the message that he hoped to convey was that of the timelessness of beauty, art, and culture. Sutra, apart from commissioning traditional works, also develops contempo-

rary projects. "There is a new 'contemporary-traditional' repertoire being created in Orissa, as well as 'contemporary-modern' works. Choreographers are redefining modernity on the basis of indigenous works. To do this well, they have to delve right into the depths of the culture to communicate and to commune with its spirit." He also commented that, like all art, dance too is transcending national barriers. "Trans-cultural and cross-cultural phenomena are now happening everywhere. This is one of the messages of Sutra. I am a Malay; some of my dancers are Chinese or Indian; so we feel that with globaliza-

tion there is something very positive that has come out that we can communicate through the arts or culture."

Ramli, who is a Muslim, expressed that it was challenging to dance Indian Classical dance in Malaysia depicting Hindu gods. "In the early 1970's Malaysia was just on the crest of a fundamental Islamic movement. I faced heavy criticism. But I stuck to Indian dance because I only saw dance as a metaphor for life. I was searching for the absolute metaphor of the body which I found in Indian Dance. I was also delving into comparative religion, philosophy, myth. I found in the Indian classics, in Mother India, the mother-lode of philosophy and spirituality of South Asia. I found in Indian classical dance the actualization of all that. Take, for example, the image of Nataraja, who dances the dance of joy, who dances the world into being, and all that kind of things. It is fantastic for a dancer".

Asked if he considered any of the major Indian dance forms superior, he says, "Bharatanatyam and Odissi are supreme vehicles for solo dancers. Bharatanatyam is very strongly Apollonian in its approach, logical, regimented, more predictable, more angular and sharp. Odissi has that Dionysian element



PHOTO LALIT VERMA

which leads to a kind of abandonment and lyricism. I think there is no comparison whether one or the other is better. One has to find one's own form."

Ramli trains his students in all three dance forms: Odissi, Bharatanatyam and modern dance. "I find no conflict: the techniques are neutral." For his dance company, Ramli looks for dancers who have both the required expressiveness in the body as well as the intelligence and sensitivity to be able to interpret the choreography. "I like to see a generosity of spirit also. For dance, besides expressing beauty, is also a kind of sharing. In these difficult times, where everyone is pulling each other down will all kinds of things, the message of the timeless beauty of art and culture brings all together."

Priya Sundaravalli

In brief

International Advisory Council

The Minister of Human Resource Development has reappointed Sir Mark Tully, Dr. Vishakha N. Desai, Dr. Doudou Diène and Dr. Marc Luyckx Ghisi of the former International Advisory Council to serve for another period of four years from January 19th, 2009. Mr. Julian Lines, currently chairperson of the Auroville International Association, has been appointed to replace Mr. Michael Murphy, who was not available for another term.

Visit Ashram Trustees

Trustees of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and other members visited Auroville at the initiative of the Working Committee and were given brief presentations on various developments.

New Last School

The foundation stone of the new Last School building next to Future School in the Cultural Zone was laid in a simple ceremony on January 25th.

Senior Aurovilians

A survey conducted by the Auroville Health Service amongst the 140 Aurovilians over 64 years old found that most people are quite healthy and happy in Auroville, are working, have social contacts, are integrated in the community and like to socialize in mixed age groups. The situation gets more difficult as people's health deteriorates. Problems noted are that there is no financial support available when they stop working and that many have no pension or health insurance. There is a need for accommodation for seniors who are no longer able to live on their own; for a good and safe transport system for those who can no longer drive a bike; for footpaths; for a home care service to provide escorts and help with shopping; and for a home health care service.

Newcomer reception

A Newcomer reception was held at Town Hall hosted by the Working Committee, L'Avenir d'Auroville and the Funds and Assets Management Committee. About 55 Newcomers out of 130 listened to brief presentations on the various working groups. From the subsequent Newcomers' discussions two critical needs emerged: a need for rental-based housing for Newcomers and a need for a placement service that connects them with the units for work.

Annual AVI Meeting

The annual Auroville International Meeting 2009 will take place in The Netherlands at Venwoude, "a centre for personal growth and reflection", from May 1st to May 8th. For more info contact avi@auroville.org.in

Clarification

The article 'Fertile Memories' by Jan Allen that appeared in the previous issue of *Auroville Today* (#239), is courtesy the Auroville website. The article first appeared on the website

Subscription increase

The colour version of *Auroville Today* has been much appreciated. Regrettably, because of increased costs, the subscription for India has been increased to Rs 450 / year. For abroad it has been fixed at Rs 2,000 / year equivalent.

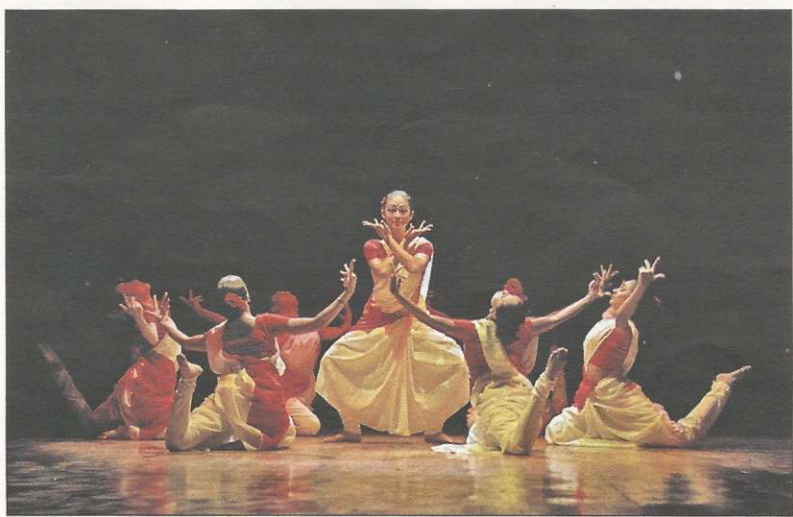


PHOTO LALIT VERMA

A library in crisis

The Auroville Library urgently needs a new building

When cyclone Nisha hit, one place in Auroville suffered severely — the Auroville Library at Bharat Nivas. The situation reached crisis point when water flooded the library, reaching the lowest shelves and soaking the books.

"There was nothing we could do as it rained heaviest at night," says Jürgen, who since 1997 has been running the place. He, along with his staff of three, moved the wet books to the technical section located on higher ground in another building, but the damage was done. "Many of those books are unsalvageable." This is the third time in ten years that the Auroville Library has been flooded.

The Auroville Library, which comes under the umbrella of SAIER (Sri Aurobindo Institute for Education and Research), has been occupying this particular spot in Bharat Nivas for over 20 years. "Right from the beginning, the space was unsuitable," says Jürgen. "There is no proper foundation and the floor is built lower than ground level. Since we're in an area where the water table is high, every monsoon we have water seeping through the floor. When the rains are heavy, we get flooded!"

An electric water pump was built into the floor, but "when it rains, there is often no power. No-one thought of that; and generators were impossible to come by during the cyclone — they were in such great demand." As the water could not be pumped out, Jürgen was forced to shut the library for three weeks, much to the consternation of its many patrons.

Several voices were heard on the weekly *News & Notes* as well as the Auroville Intranet. One person remarked: "The Auroville Library is a very important part of a village that aspires to be a place of unending education." The message was loud and

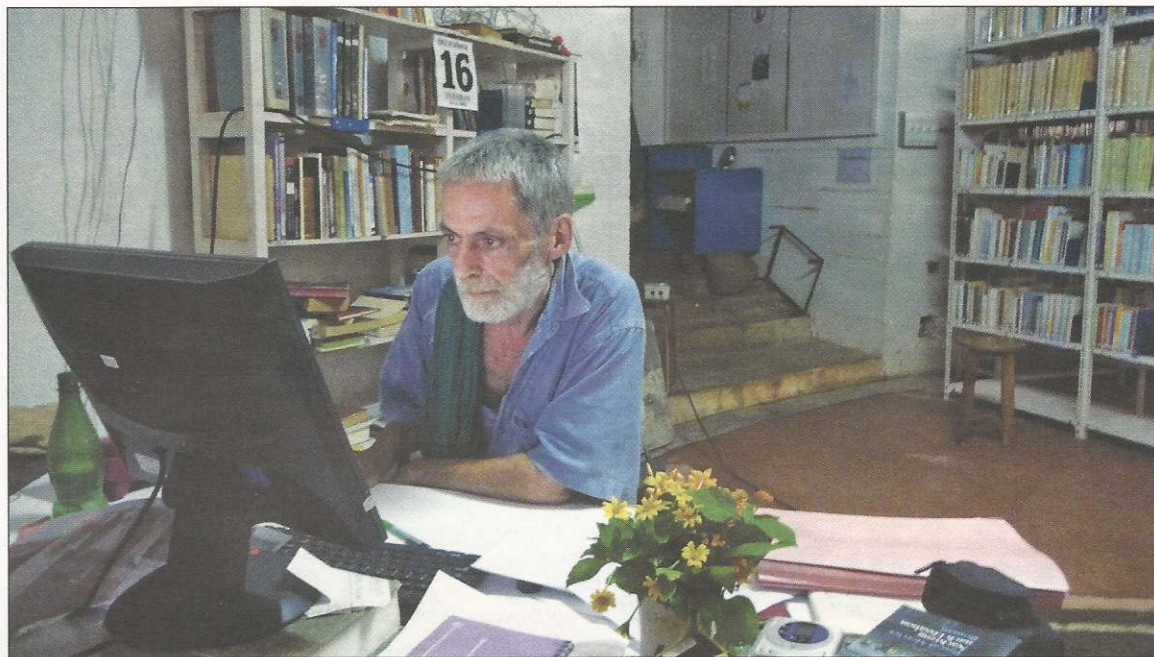
clear: why was there no interest in finding a better location for the library?

"It is not just the location," says Jürgen, "we also don't have the space to keep all the books." Currently, the Auroville Library holds over 27,000 books with about 2,500 additions every year. "The 170 square metres floor space is inadequate," says Jürgen. "Ideally, it should be one square metre for hundred books, so we should display only 17,000 books!" However Jürgen, like other typical pioneers in Auroville, has made the most out of these limitations and gone beyond. He has created not only an aesthetic space for book lovers, complete with floor cushions, fresh flowers and art, but also kept up with the latest developments in library science.

Today the Auroville Library which is free for Aurovilians, guests and workers, has bar-coded books, an electronic check-out, the modern OPAC (Online Public Access Catalogue) and books classified according to international standards using the Dewey Decimal system. The most recent development is a fully-functional web-based search engine that allows the database to be searched from anywhere in the world. As one visitor to Auroville recorded on his blog, "The [Auroville] Library has a brilliant collection and extraordinary categorization, one of the most extensive I've ever seen". And all this with a staff of three.

"No, it has not been easy to find anyone who wants to work here full-time," says Jürgen. He trains his staff who all come from the villages and have minimal education. "They assist me in the technical and maintenance sections," he says.

Jürgen himself is not trained in the library sciences — he studied philosophy. "I learnt along the way, and I am still learning." When Jürgen first came to Pondicherry, he was assigned the task of managing the little Auroville library then located in



Jürgen at the Auroville Library

Pondicherry overlooking the beach. "That was for a short time," he says, "but it was the first thing I was called to do." Later he moved on to other things. Eleven years ago, when Lloyd decided to stop working at the Library, Jürgen took over.

In some ways, Jürgen reminds one of a character from one of the books on his shelves, a philosopher-scholar-pioneer-librarian all rolled into one — quirky and sentimental when it comes to books, gruff and grumpy with patrons who break the unwritten codes of library etiquette but quickly forgiving too, and tech-savvy, unafraid to embrace the developments of 21st century library science. But managing and running the Library, he confesses, has been an uphill battle.

For over three years, he has been working to get a new site and building plans approved. "We found a location opposite the Solar Kitchen in what is called the city centre area. It would also house the existing audio and video libraries." He explains that Roger Anger had approved the building site before he passed away and L'Avenir d'Auroville also gave its support. But the project got stalled for lack of funds. At the moment Jürgen, with the help of architect Suhasini,

has resubmitted a revised and scaled-down proposal.

Jürgen has a grand vision of uniting the different libraries in Auroville under one virtual platform. In 2005, he initiated the 'All Auroville Library Project'. Its goal was to create an electronic database, linking all the libraries' databases, and to make this accessible from any location via the intranet. The idea found support from *Stichting de Zaaier* but the project could not fully manifest as not all the Auroville libraries wanted to participate. "The reason given was lack of manpower," says Jürgen. Yet he went ahead and demonstrated the viability of the idea using an open source software, NewGen Lib. Today the Auroville Library is online. Registered patrons can renew books electronically, place reservations, or even download e-books from this site. The Library's cataloguing and readers registration systems are now state-of-the-art.

Jürgen has managed the near-impossible, with an insufficient budget, a derelict building, lack of infrastructure and unqualified staff. The Auroville Library now needs a better building. Urgently.

Priya Sundaravalli

Library factsheet

- * Started in 1975; housed in Bharat Nivas since 1986.
- * Currently 667 Aurovilians, 112 long term guests, 380 guests, 17 Auroville employees, and 3 students use it.
- * Operates on a City Services budget of Rs.15,000 a month; deficit is partly offset by voluntary contributions by individual Aurovilians.
- * Major book collections in eight languages: English, German, French, Italian, Dutch, Russian, and Spanish, including a substantial section in Tamil.
- * Has a large youth and children's collection in several languages, including Tamil.
- * Average increase about 2400 books per year. Of these, over 90% are donations.
- * About 20 newspapers and magazines available at the library. Of these 12 (all Indian) are subscribed for by the library; the remaining, which includes foreign periodicals, are gift subscriptions by patrons.
- * In 2008, 10,800 books were checked out; in 2002, 16,996 books.

SPEAKING OUT

Fatal Attraction

Auroville is being overrun by seekers of many varieties. There are those who come with layered grunge clothing in Indian prints, startling blue-green tattoos highlighted with body piercing and an unbeatable combo of matted hair plus body odour accompanied by half-naked infants. They make up the crowds at performances and visiting VIP events. They join in winter workshops advertised on the last pages of the Auroville News & Notes and wander into our offices asking inane questions about sustainability and spirituality.

Then there are the Indian yuppies with disposable income who drive in with Japanese cars on weekends from Chennai, Bangalore and other booming cities to raise the dust in the City of Dawn. They crowd the local restaurants and Solar Kitchen and fill the beds in the guest houses. They are loud, demanding and pushy. Well, they did not get into the disposable income bracket by being discreet.

The next bunch is the group tourism that makes up the bulk of the day visitors who we see trudging to the Matrimandir. In the late 1980's, we used to

get about 25-30 of them a day and today we get 2000-3000 on a normal weekday and about 8000-9000 on festival holidays.

And finally, there is the regional testosterone. They zip around in packs with loud and flashy motorbikes, harass the women on the road and skulk in wooded areas to drink. They gate-crash our social happenings and get physically aggressive at any attempt to restrict their behaviour.

A part of Auroville is tuned in to them. The cash registers ring as guest houses and restaurants fill up, baked goods and handicrafts are sold out and New Age workshops find willing participants. Another section of Auroville's population is working to contain these waves of people with information desks, guided tours, video shows, passes, picking up the litter, maintaining pathways, posting guards and limiting traffic.

Maybe it's time to build an Auroville Theme Park where they can shop for Auroville products; have the 'get in touch with soul' conference facilities, tastefully combined with accommodation in that special atmosphere of Auroville guesthouses; picnic and amuse themselves; line-up at the multi-



The crowd on a weekday at the Visitors Centre

plexes that are showing the latest block-busters on Auroville green work, the Matrimandir, solar energy and such — in short, immerse them in the Auroville experience in a 'contained site' located somewhere on the main highway.

This may even free up our entry roads that are getting that 'Goa look' with all the Tibetan, Rajasthani and Kashmiri souvenir shops.

Suhasini

Subscription information:

- ◆ One year subscription rates: India Rs. 450; other countries Rs 2,000 equivalent
- ◆ Two year subscription rate: India Rs. 800; other countries Rs 3,700 equivalent.

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