

AUROVILLE TODAY

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Photo: JOHN MANDEEN

Inspired by silence and the closed eyes' sight
His force could work with a new luminous art
On the crude material from which all is made
And the refusal of Inertia's mass
And the grey front of the world's Ignorance
And nescient Matter and the huge error of life.
As a sculptor chisels a deity out of stone
He slowly chipped off the dark envelope,
Line of defence of Nature's ignorance,
The illusion and mystery of the Inconscient
In whose black pall the Eternal wraps his head
That he may act unknown in cosmic time.

(Savitri, I iii, II 517-528)

Summer in Auroville is not only the time when many people leave. It's also the time when the heat and silence seem to force upon us a heightened awareness of the material aspect of our lives here, a renewed focussing upon the details of our daily existence. It's appropriate, therefore, that this issue is very much focussed upon matter, including individual experiences in the yoga of life here, 'rockface' activities of Village Action... and one Aurovilian's experience of living in what seems to be a perpetual zoo!

Eds.

An invisible force . . .

One of the hardest things to capture and communicate to people living outside Auroville is the texture of life here; and particularly those irreducible moments which, sparked by the clash and rub of personalities, of laterite and idealism, of continual pressure and jagged resistance, offer insights or are turning points on the path of yoga. Yet these moments, just as much as the texts of Sri Aurobindo and Mother, are part of our shared language, resonating, when shared, longer and deeper than the actions and arguments which so often divide us.

Here, and on pages 4 and 5, you will find some Aurovilians' experiences, fragments of that music which, in spite of day-to-day wrong notes, makes us keep trying to strike the perfect chord.

Wrong Road?

In the early 1970's, I and my family made an extensive journey, by Land Rover, through many countries in Europe, Africa and the Middle and Far East. In Europe, we had been told by a close and perceptive friend that we must visit a place he called "the new vibrating Auroville". He had never been there, but his guidance spoke directly to something within us with such strength that, after arriving in Bombay, we headed south. After seemingly dozens of road diversions, increasing tiredness, and the general strain of driving in India, we felt like turning round and joining our friends in the north. But we decided first to visit a Canadian friend in Mungod, near Mysore, who turned out to be our second 'guide'.

For although she, too, had never been to Auroville, she swept our doubts aside. "You

should definitely see this place," she said with inspiring enthusiasm. And so, a few days later, we had just driven past JIPMER and were looking for a dirt track that would take us to the 'city'. We found the track, and then came kilometre after kilometre in the heat and dust, but still there was no sign of a city. Worse, something had begun to make an odd noise in the engine. Finally, we felt we had taken the wrong road as ahead lay what looked like a construction site adjacent to a lone Banyan tree, and nothing else. Just 50 metres from the site, there was a terrible noise from the engine, and we were forced to make an immediate halt in the midday sun.

Next thing, a European-looking man appeared from a hut and came over.

"Hi, I'm a mechanic. Do you need help?" said the man who introduced himself as Jack Alexander.

"We're looking for Auroville," I explained.

"This is Auroville."

"No," I went on, "I mean the CITY of Auroville."

"You're in the city," he replied. "Although it's not yet built, you're at the very heart of the city area called the Matrimandir."

25,000 kilometres of travel, and we had broken down for the first and only time just 50 metres from the centre of Auroville! Not only had we broken down with a severed fan belt, but then I found my petrol tank had begun to leak badly, and my daughter announced she was feeling sick! We had well and truly been brought to a halt...

"Never mind, you're obviously meant to be here," commented another Aurovilian who had joined us.

That was 15th March, 1973. Ten days later we were kneeling before the Mother in her room and receiving her blessings. It proved to be an incredible grace, because literally a few days later it was announced she would no longer see any new people.

When we arrived back in England, we had driven over 40,000 kilometres and had our passports stamped in 25 countries, but none of this seemed important compared to an infinitely more precious stamp in our hearts and psyche made by the Mother and Auroville. As we drove away from Auroville, I knew with certainty that even though we were heading for our comfortable house in England, we were leaving 'home'; a home to which I defi-

nately intended to return.

With the Mother's help, I finally did in 1977.

Plugging in

Energy is one of the ways in which I experience the spirit of this place. Some years ago, I'd felt very tired—both mentally and physically—and had gone to Pondicherry for a few days to recuperate. On the evening I cycled back to Auroville, still feeling wobbly and weak, I was looking forward to sitting quietly under a tree with a good book. But within minutes of arriving back, a friend came running over to tell me that I had to come quickly. A local farmer was threatening to cut our trees because he believed we had 'stolen' some of his land by constructing a new bund on the boundary between his land and ours. I remember stumbling over the ridges of a recently ploughed field, feeling totally disoriented and not up to anything. But when I arrived, I immediately got into a strong but increasingly good-natured discussion with the farmer, and we finally worked something out.

Walking back, I suddenly realized I was centred, full of energy again, as if I'd once again plugged in, or 'given' myself—albeit unconsciously—to Auroville, and the tremendous energy of this place had flooded back inside me. It's an experience I've had many times since.

“Does the fact that Village Action has a larger budget this year than it has ever had before mean that it's a success? Not necessarily. Rather, I'm concerned by this. For example, at the beginning Village Action was a small but homogeneous group. When we became more institutionalized, in the sense of applying for foreign funds, opening up new areas of work and employing more people, money and the power associated with it assumed a much more dominant role. And this, together with the fact that no Aurovilian is taking responsibility for overall coordination at present, has created tensions between the administration and the staff carrying out the projects.

The use of and the role of money is one of the great unresolved issues in Auroville, as is that of ownership, and Village Action reflects the unclarity in these areas. For example, we tried in Village Action to create productive units which would be a source of income for us. However, the experiment failed because the individual interests of the 'managers' proved more powerful than responsibility to the whole.

Martha:
We are
not doing
alternative
work

Martha came to Auroville over four years ago. She has experience of working in rural communities and urban slums, and teaching in Colombia: "For a quarter of a century I've been trying to combine social theory with field work in order to achieve an equilibrium between satisfying social needs and those of personal growth". With this perspective, she started the Life Education Centre three years ago as a project of Village Action.



Another thing that concerns me is the ideological implications of financial support received from NGO's. Every NGO has its target population, its own social interests, and they also have to respond to the dominant international issues—like children, women or the environment—which change year by year. Most of the time we can identify with these issues. But sometimes I have the feeling that the objectives and the approaches of the NGO's do not always match the village, and that there is a danger that we end up working for the NGO's rather than in the spirit of Auroville. Even now, although we are taking some progressive steps for this region, I don't think we are doing alternative work, anything different from other development agencies in this field: like them, we are donor dependent but local kings.

Of course, this raises the question of what kind of social work—if any—Auroville should be involved with. What other qualities could we, as Aurovilians involved in Village Action, bring to the work? How can we avoid repeating the mistakes associated with social development in underdeveloped countries over the past 50 years? I'm still looking for the answers. Maybe it's to do with doing less and listening more, tuning to the real needs of the people here, and helping create spaces where they can really be themselves. Because it's in the consciousness of self, and the contact of self with self that I think the real work of Village Action should take place, not in the training of social activists who may simply be creating new patterns of imposition in the villages.

What I mean by this is the way we transfer to the local poor and marginalized our values and institutions etc., to make them achieve what we term socio-economic development. At the same time, when I look at my own Auroville 'village' I see that it is sometimes very difficult to work on our own conflicts, to 'develop' ourselves in Auroville. Somehow, in our effort to change the villages, we've left ourselves out of the equation. In fact, this external work, by making us feel good, may even prevent us from doing the work upon ourselves. This work is difficult; it may take years. But if we can change ourselves, if we can BE something different, this will have more impact upon our work with the villagers than all the social theory in the world.

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Village Action:

A REPORT BY ALAN

From the very beginning of Auroville, there have been Aurovilians active in the field of village development in this area. Initially, the work took place under Mother's guidance. In 1973, the Tamil Fund for Rural Development was set up, and its programmes included road repair, education and assistance for small village businesses. During the period of the conflict with the Sri Aurobindo Society most of this work stopped, although individuals like Meenakshi, Ruud Lohman, Andre Tardeil and Ivar continued with their own programmes.

In 1983, recognizing the need for a more organized approach to the work for the area around Auroville, and with the help of funds from Swiss Aid, the Village Action Group was formed to focus on village development, with a special emphasis upon youth and the school drop-out population.

Over the years, the approach of the Village Action Group to the challenge of the villages has changed from being essentially charity-based to one based upon participation and co-development. This was in recognition of the fact that if the villagers do not take responsibility for their own and their village's development, an unhealthy dependency pattern will be created which will 'disempower' the villagers even further.

This year, Village Action has a budget of Rs. 29 lakhs (approx \$ 97,000), it runs numerous programmes, and there are approximately 80 full-time and 40 part-time staff working in 32 villages in the bioregion. Yet relatively few Aurovilians are involved in this work, and many others have only the faintest idea of what Village Action is and does. Why?

One reason for the relative lack of involvement may be that it is often hard and frustrating to work in such poor, uninspiring conditions and to be in contact with a culture which, for many Aurovilians, is difficult to understand and appreciate. And where nothing seems to happen fast: Martha, one of the Village Action coordinators, points out that the results of present efforts to improve the status of village girls who have dropped-out from school may not be seen for one or two generations, such is the resistance to change from certain groups in the village. Often the results of a programme are unquantifiable, sometimes ambiguous, sometimes invisible. Apart from all this, however, there seems to be genuine doubt in some Aurovilians' minds concerning the role of social work in relation to the yoga, to the purpose of Auroville: a minority even consider the work to be 'unspiritual'.

And yet... the issues involved—the relationship of privileged to underprivileged, the role of women, the challenge of the co-evolution of two very different cultures, the need for sustainably developing the bioregion—are not only globally relevant, but can clearly be taken as opportunities, leverage points, for immensely accelerating the yoga.

Here, then, is an overview of Village Action activities today. Also, in the light of Village Action's recent decision to radically reassess its organization, we present two differing views on the efficacy and aim of its present programmes.

Village Action classifies its present activities into five main categories: community culture, the innovative education programme, ecological agriculture and food processing, Auro Village Crafts, and its publishing and documentation service.

Community culture

This programme focusses upon the training of development workers and the formation of village organizations of young people and women. The development worker training grew out of the need for having properly qualified people living in the villages to assist in initiating and carrying out various development activities. So far, Village Action has trained 6 development workers, and another 9 are currently in training. Between them they have responsibility for 32 villages in the region. The development workers talk to the villagers, and help them form groups. These groups look at their villages, find out what they need, and then liaise with NGO's (Non-Governmental Organizations) or government agencies to try to get these needs fulfilled.

If no existing schemes exist for an identified need, Village Action may take up microprojects itself, but only on condition that the villagers make a contribution, either financially or with labour, to a minimum



of 35% of the project. The development workers are the backbone, the eyes and ears of Village Action in the villages, enabling the organization to support only those programmes that the villagers really want and are willing to maintain afterwards.

Another Village Action initiative has been to set up youth clubs and women's clubs in the villages. At present, there are youth clubs in 15 villages, which organize sports activities and community work programmes for their members. Most exciting, perhaps, is the growth of women's clubs in a culture which doesn't encourage female empowerment. Today, these clubs have been established in 15 villages, with the participation of approximately 400 women. Through savings schemes and discussions, they provide village women with greater awareness both of the problems they

face and the possible solutions to those problems. Anbu, coordinator of this programme, describes how it began:

"The idea for the women's clubs came from the women street vendors of a nearby village: Usually the motivation for villagers to set up organizations like this is to obtain loans from the government. When the loans arrive, the members generally share them out among themselves...and the organization is allowed to collapse! So we in Village Action told them we would support them only if they didn't ask for such loans first, but began by proving to their village that they could help get government money for improving the village infrastructure. The traditional male elders were sceptical. 'If you manage this, I'll shave off half my moustache', one of them told the women. But they were successful, and the elder was soon asking the

A look into Auroville's largest outreach organization

women for help in getting government assistance with other projects (needless to say, he didn't shave off his moustache!)."

Each month, representatives from the groups meet for a seminar, where they discuss and role-play problems and examine possible solutions. A major step forward was taken recently when all the women's clubs pledged support for an abused woman accused of murdering her husband, for it showed that these women were ready to care and to act beyond the boundaries of their own villages.

The youth clubs and women's clubs represent something of a new movement towards self-awareness and self-determination in the villages. But Village Action is aware that these initial attempts need constant support and follow-up at this stage if they are not to collapse.

In the past, village elders have sometimes felt bypassed by activities in the villages originating from Auroville. Now however, elders from 25 local villages meet periodically at Village Action. The idea is to introduce them to Auroville, but another effect is to improve inter-village and village-Auroville communication. One immediate consequence is that some elders have encouraged youth clubs and women's clubs to form in their villages, no longer seeing them as rivals but as resources.



Innovative education

The Isaiambalam School complex was one of Village Action's first projects. It was established because the incapacity of some village children and young adults to fit into the conventional school system meant that an alternative educational system was required to address their needs. The school provides education—academic, cultural and craft-based—for about 50 drop-outs between the ages of 9 and 14 years, preparing them to re-enter government schools or the Life Education Centre (see below). There is also a creche and a kindergarten, mainly for children of Auroville employees.

The Life Education Centre (LEC) was set up nearby Isaiambalam in 1991 in response to several crises. These included the high percentage of rural children dropping out from conventional schooling, the social and economic impoverishment of the villages, and the degradation of the environment. The aim of the project was to tackle these challenges by offering education to the children of the rural poor while giving them a grounding in the practices of sustainable development.

At present a group of 23 young people, mainly girls, is following a

two year programme which includes a foundation course in basic literacy, maths and socio-economic surveying skills, and training in occupations like typewriting, tailoring and food processing. The emphasis throughout is on teaching 'life skills' related to situations which the students encounter daily.

Originally, the project holders hoped that the LEC students would become youth leaders in their villages, helping to reintroduce values of community responsibility and environmental awareness. Has this happened? "Many of the girls are members of women's clubs in the villages", says Zerina, who is the main LEC teacher at present, "and they are very aware of the social problems in the villages, particularly as they relate to women." "However," adds Martha, who has coordinated the LEC project from the beginning, "that is as far as we can go at present because the girls run into many problems when they try something different in their villages. Two of our girls, for example, wanted to set up a stall in the village and sell pickles. Their families aid 'No way'—as unmarried women they were not supposed to set up something on their own. Another group wanted to set up a creche in the village, but because they were harijans (outcasts) they were not allowed to. In other words, the people in power in the villages don't mind our students cleaning up the streets or organizing nice functions, but as soon as they want to do something which seems to threaten the existing power structure, they are blocked. Nevertheless," says Martha, "I think we are doing a good job at a very basic human level with these students who, we shouldn't forget, are the poorest of the poor. They gain skills, knowledge and self-confidence, and are better able to articulate their needs. And for two years, at least, they escape from their crushingly boring life in the village. We're not creating a new force in the villages, just trying to create happy human beings."

A third component of the Village Action educational programme is the night schools. Currently there are 13 night schools, which are open 6 nights a week and provide education for drop-outs as well as supplementing the education of regular school goers. The teachers, who come from the villages, are trained every Sunday morning at Village Action, where they are taught a range of teaching skills according to the principles of Life Education.

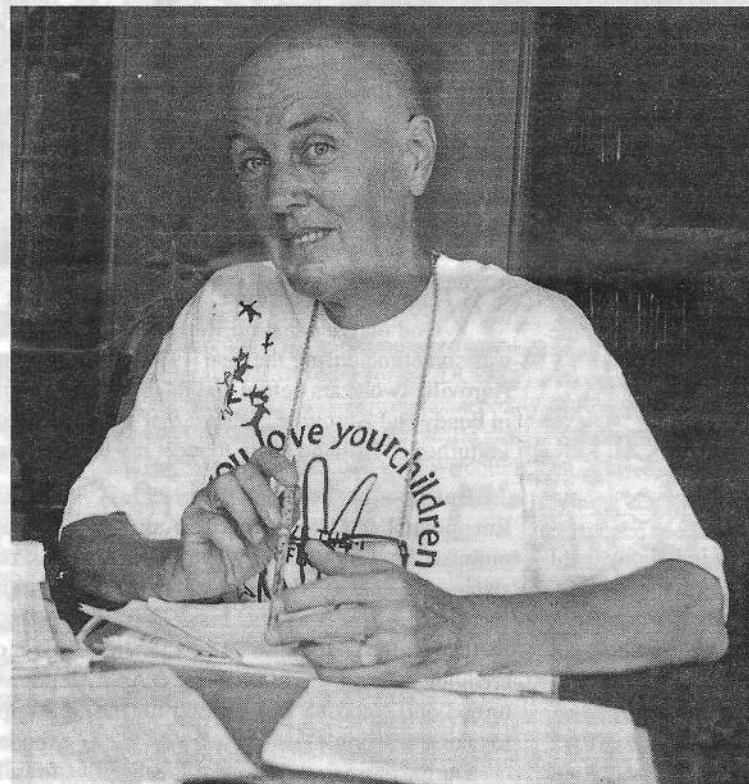
In another interesting development, over the past five months some Village Action development workers have been invited into the traditional village schools to teach subjects like cooperative games and environmental studies. The experiment has been very successful, not least because their methods are non-traditional.

Finally there are creches in two local villages, which are for the children of Auroville workers.



Ecological agriculture and food processing

Village Action trains local farmers in the theory and practice of organic farming. For the past three years, Kottakarai Farm, which was begun by Jaap in the early 1970's, has functioned as a demonstration site for 'natural' farming methods. Kumar, who runs the farm, confirms that his yields—using no-tillage methods and sowing directly into mulch—are comparable to yields achieved by village farmers who use inorganic fertilizers and pesticides, and that natural farming methods, once a certain soil fertility has been



obtained, are less labour-intensive. Yet even those farmers who have visited the demonstration farm and see that it works don't employ the same methods on their own fields. Why not? "They think there's something magical about the soil in Auroville!"

Ross, who coordinates the farming outreach aspect of Village Action, adds that there's also a very strong mind-set among the local farmers, reinforced by advice and advertisements on the radio and television, concerning the superiority of chemical farming. This is why a demonstration farm in Auroville is not enough: what is needed is for some village farmers to go 'organic' and thus provide working models for the others. With this in mind, Village Action has trained two local farmers to be outreach workers in the village.

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“Even though Village Action today has more activities and a larger budget than ever before, I still feel the work to be done is in its beginning stages, that what we're doing is only a drop in the bucket. The 'work' being the development of Auroville's hinterland, the villages and bioregion, rather than their exploitation, which is the typical relationship between urban centres and their rural surroundings elsewhere in the world: Auroville should be the heart and soul of the bioregion, not a black hole at its centre. For instance, Auroville could be training and supporting teachers who go out and teach special classes in all schools in the area, bringing novelty, play and diversity to the children, and so widening their intellectual and life horizons. In other words, helping them take the next step in consciousness which, for the villagers, is to become more individualized, more self-aware.

A big change I see happening now is that consciousness-raising exercises, such as role-play and group dynamics, are practised widely by development groups like Village Action. In this context, I'm grateful that donor organizations force us to look at global issues, like the role of women and destruction of the environment: it's the way I got educated in this work. For example, I would never have taken up the issue of women in the villages, knowing how difficult it is to deal with, if the funding possibilities hadn't made it unavoidable. At the same time, most funding agencies are flexible. When it comes down to it, it's your personal relationship with the organization's representative that determines what can or cannot be done. And our personal relationship with our two biggest funding agencies, OXFAM and CHEC, is excellent.

The work of Village Action has not been confined to the villages: we started out with projects in Auroville for workers. However, one of the reasons I think these have never become 'programmes' is that Auroville employers don't like us 'messing around' with their workers. As an employer an Aurovilian has different priorities, many of which are legitimate, but they don't mesh with what we 'development workers' want to offer the workers. At the same time, territoriality is strong in Auroville—in village work as much as anywhere else—and this blocks us from working together.

Bhavana: It's only a drop in the bucket

Bhavana came to Auroville in the early years, and has always been involved, in one way or another, with helping the villagers to become more self-sufficient and empowered. She coordinated Village Action during the formative years of its existence, and currently writes many of its project proposals.

For example, Village Action is by no means the only Auroville organization doing good work with the villagers. There's the Health Centre, the Auroville Greenwork Resource Centre, Aurobrindavan, the Auroville Building Centre, CSR, schools like Arul Vazhi, New Creation, Isaiambalam and Ilaigarkal, in addition to individual initiatives. If you put it all together, Auroville HAS a sustainable development programme for the bioregion. But we don't put it together because we all tend to hang on to our own territories, and this makes us hesitate before taking the obvious next step. In another way, however, even though Village Action outwardly does similar work to any other development organization in Tamil Nadu, something else is being communicated through individual contacts. It's not so much that we're 'presenting' the vision of Auroville to the villagers. Rather, it's that each Aurovilian working in Village Action is taking his or her understanding or vision of Auroville and expressing it through his or her actions. And something IS communicated: I know villagers who have been transformed by their relationship with Aurovilians who are, or have been, doing this work.

Ultimately, I know that Auroville offers the next step after the excellent work that is done by most development organizations, which are mainly concerned with repairing the crumbling structure of society, with focussing upon the poor and making them aware of their rights as human beings. For Auroville's idea of 'consciousness-raising' is for the whole Earth, and involves a terrestrial change of consciousness. And when I can sense that next thing just round the corner—and sometimes I can—then it's as if I'm in touch with a wave, a tide, which gives a totally different understanding and energy to my work.”

Matrimandir overflowing

It was at Vérité. I was meditating with the projects of the Village Action Group at the back of mind. Suddenly, I had a vision—no, not exactly a vision—it was more of an impression. An impression of Matrimandir overflowing with a green-and-gold light. The light, the energy was flowing out endlessly, billowing out in waves from the Matrimandir and pouring itself out, not just on Auroville, but on the whole of this bio-region.

There was a lush greenness everywhere. Everyone had enough to eat. Everyone was smiling and healthy. The children were developing beautifully, receiving an all-around integral education; the women were working together to make the villages a place of joy and beauty; the men did not have to leave the villages and go and work elsewhere in order to earn money—there was enough work and income being generated. All this, all these dreams that I have always cherished for the villagers... I received a strong impression that all this would be realized.

This vision marked a turning point in my life. All my life, I had been fighting for the under-privileged. I had been fighting against poverty. So much so that I even considered the grandiose plans for Matrimandir to be an unnecessary extravagance. But with this vision, I realised how crucial the presence of Matrimandir was, with all its grandeur, for the development of Auroville. And along with it, I realized that things do not really depend on me. I could continue my work at the Village Action, or I could sit and meditate under a tree. The energy, the money, the joy of health, beauty and harmony would flow into and out of Auroville, regardless of me or anyone else.

Changing Direction

Before coming to Auroville I worked as a librarian for over 10 years. After having done several jobs in Auroville I decided to go to the library to offer my professional skills. So one morning I got on my bicycle to go over there. But before I reached, someone stopped me on the road. "Hi, I was just looking for you. Could you help me with a little job?" I changed direction and went to work on something else.

When this happened a second time, I decided that my life as a librarian must be over. I had come to Auroville to do some new work.

Mother, I want to be safe

I had promised a friend in Felicity that I would drop by his place in the evening. But as I set off to his place, I noticed it had got late. I was taking the short-cut through the green belt from Dana to Utility, but I was unfamiliar with the road. Somewhere I must have taken a wrong turn...

Drat. Why did the dirt paths all look the same in the dark? And I didn't know there were so many to choose from... I had imagined it was a straight, well-beaten track to Utility. Half-an-hour later I was still wandering about, thoroughly lost.

I began to panic. That part of the greenbelt was not a safe place for women alone at night. There had been a couple of assaults on this very road to Utility... But I forced myself to calm down. Of what use would fear be?

I stopped my motorcycle and took a couple of deep breaths. Spontaneously, a prayer, welled up from the depths of my being, "Mother, I want to be safe."

Then I chose one of the dirt paths and decided to follow it till the end, to go wherever it would lead me to. Barely, five minutes later, I ran into two Aurovilians returning from a party.

Was it just a coincidence or was it really the answer to my prayer? I can't quite say, but I sure was glad to be safe.

Instant karma

I was angry. I was driving home on my motorcycle, muttering "Not even a dog would bite that witch." Seconds later, a huge dog came running at me. I still have the scars of its bite on my thigh...

When was it that I first came to know about the elephant-headed god Ganesha, God of Wisdom and Remover of Obstacles? I don't remember exactly, but it was sometime during the year 1977 when I was living in Pondicherry. I had been in Auroville two years before and this time I had come back to spend a six-week holiday in Pondy and Auroville. At least that's what I thought. In fact, six years went by before I returned to Holland again to meet my baffled family...

But now back to the year 1977. A European lady living in the Ashram promised me she would give me a small statue of Ganesha. Each time I saw her she spoke to me about it, but it wasn't forthcoming. It took so long that her credibility diminished in my eyes. As it turned out, Ganesha was waiting for me to take a decision.

During those first six weeks, I realized that I felt no need to go back and that I wanted to stay on in the laboratory among Sri Aurobindo and Mother's guinea-pigs. An Ashramite had convinced me, after the first month, to leave Auroville and stay in the Ashram for a while, to get to know more about the Yoga. After almost a year there, I ran into visa problems, and out of money. The Ashram had welcomed me and offered me shelter and work, but did not offer me help in obtaining a visa. Another Ashramite advised me to go back to Holland. Auroville was out there all the time, but somehow I was not ready to move back.

At last I was leaving. I went to Auroville to say goodbye. I felt a pang, seeing those familiar spots and people, and knew again that in my heart I did not want to leave. But the turning point came only when, at Matrimandir, Ruud Lohman (author of a Dutch book that brought me into contact with Auroville) said to me, "You don't want to leave? Well then,

It seemed just like an ordinary day. One of those odd days in summer where the sky can't quite make up its mind whether to scatter its stolen load of southwest monsoon raindrops or not. The air was muggy and hot, though night was fast approaching.

I was walking up to Matrimandir, after a chat with a friend, lost in my thoughts. As I crossed a clearing, the evening blazed out from the Western sky catching my attention. I looked up, almost too casually, to check out the sunset. And then stopped dead in my tracks.

The sky was swathed with colours. Not just the yellows and oranges of a summer sunset, but all the colours of the rainbow, surrounding a cloud that must have been dark and mean once, but was now aflame with the light from the sun. It was immense, this halo of a rainbow, hanging over Auroville from an edge of the western sky. I kept shaking my head in wonder as I made my way to the Banyan Tree to watch the sunset better, thinking, "If this doesn't make people believe in the birth

An Invisible Friend

don't! You can start tomorrow, chipping the ceiling of the Chamber..." I cycled back to Pondy, and everything fell into place. A tremendous energy surged in my whole being. The next day I walked out the front door of the house where I was staying, on my way to cancel my plane ticket. Stopping me dead in my tracks was a vendor who had two tiny Ganesha statues for sale. There! I thought. Auroculture (the lady who had promised me the statue) doesn't come up with it, but this feels like Ganesha coming to me after all! I bought the statues and proceeded to the travel agency. Cycling past the park, I saw Auroculture picking up Service flowers for her compost. She called out to me: Stop! The rest of the story can be guessed... Ganesha... Remover of obstacles. Well, that's what he did. I moved to Auroville, and obstacles to my being able to stay were removed, one after another. Don't tell me that gods don't exist! Although I must acknowledge here the generosity and forgiveness of my father (who doesn't look a bit like Ganesha) due to which the financial obstacles were removed.

During the following years in Auroville, Ganesha continued to play hide and seek with me. For long periods I would not be very conscious of his existence (I did not even know when his birthday was) until I was reminded of him again by being

of a new consciousness, what will?"

From the other direction, and still quite a few yards away, a Matrimandir worker was approaching. The only other person in those gardens. I knew who he was, but had never exchanged more than a couple of words with him.

Not sure if I had caught sight of the spectacle, he gesticulated for me to turn back and take a look. And then threw up his hands in amazement as if to say, "Who else has the power to dream of such shows?" I just looked at him and nodded in agreement, too drunk with the beauty of the evening to trust myself to speak. And he too must have felt the same for he just smiled when he crossed me and went his way.

Two strangers, not exchanging a word, but their hearts dancing to the same rhythm. Perhaps this scene could have taken place elsewhere in the world. But for some reason, as I lay beneath the Banyan tree, under that incredible rainbow sky, I felt deeply happy that I was in Auroville.

given yet another small Ganesha statue by one or the other friend. This coincided several times with for me important transitions in my life, like when I moved to a new place, 8 years ago, and when our new house was inaugurated. Of course he had a place on the construction site of the new house, and perhaps he had a hand in its very fast obstacle-free completion.

One little prank of his I found particularly endearing. One day, some years back, I had bought a clay version of him in the bazaar. This clay statue I had put in the garden of our house, fastened on a tree stump. It had been there for a few months, when suddenly I felt an impulse to clean it and adorn it. Being a Western lady, I was not used to do this and hadn't done it ever before. Anyway, after cleaning it I brought out a bottle of red nail polish, and carefully painted a *puttu* in the centre of its forehead, and the little beads of the *mala* (necklace) around its neck. The next day I learnt that it had been Ganesha's birthday and Pooja on that day!

My Way

At a certain point in my life in Auroville, after the painful ending of a relationship, I felt I had to get more in contact again with Sri Aurobindo and Mother by reading their books.

Soon after, I got into a new relationship. One evening when I looked into the eyes of my new partner I saw Mother's eyes shining through his. At that moment I realised that my way of looking for the Divine was not by reading books, but by being open to what happens around me.

One tree,

Rainbow Vision

many roots

Face in the globe

It was my friend's first visit to Auroville. She was rather sceptical about yoga, and didn't know much about Sri Aurobindo and Mother. Especially when people were talking about their spiritual experiences her left eyebrow would arch up—our little sign when we think someone is laying it on a bit too thick.

One day, as I was going to the Chamber, I asked her if she wanted to join me. "Yes," she said, "but don't expect me to fall on my knees in front of a glass globe."

She sat next to me. I tried to concentrate, but every now and then I looked at her. She looked normal. Suddenly I felt a nervous vibration coming from her. She had turned pale while staring at the crystal. She closed her eyes and looked again. This went on for quite a while, and then she became quiet again.

After we left, I asked her what had happened. At first, she didn't want to tell me. But then she said she had seen a face in the crystal: a young man with dark hair and a dark beard. She was puzzled because she had never seen him before.

A couple of days later we visited the Ashram and strolled through the library. Suddenly she almost screamed, "There. That's the face." She was pointing at a photo of Sri Aurobindo taken during his stay in Baroda.

A new icon

I was learning the computer programme 'Word for Windows'. One night, I had a dream. I was in front of a computer screen, but there was an unfamiliar icon on it. Someone was telling me: "Click there, that's for truth". But hard as I tried, I couldn't manage!

I had come to Auroville out of curiosity and because it was on my way down to Sri Lanka. Initially I had planned to stay just for five days. My travel companion was ready to move on South, but I hesitated to go. I was offered a small house in the greenbelt, a job as cashew picker and cook in one of the small settlements. I took the offer and my companion left. We decided to meet again in Auroville after five weeks.

Here I was, not knowing anything about this community, blank like a slate and therefore unprejudiced. The only question I had, the question I had left home with, was "Who am I and what do I live for"? Some of the women in my new community who happened to have the same nationality as I, told me about their spiritual path leading to Auroville. During our long talks they gave me an introduction

Building with the Higher Will

The Mother once said, "What people do not know about Auroville is that there is a pressure from the invisible. When men make projects they are often unsuccessful because it was not the right thing to do. When their projects are accepted (by the invisible) they get realised as the Higher Will decides. But when the Higher Will itself chooses, decides, then the thing has to succeed. It may seem to falter, but it is certain to succeed." I have found these particular words of the Mother to be very true in my experience of building in Auroville.

Take the example of the Auroville Building Centre. We had never really thought of putting up a building centre but we were led to do it. What we had in mind, in 1988, was to have a visitors' centre that would both provide information to visitors as well as act as a demonstration centre of the various building technologies and alternative energy sources that are in use in Auroville. We wanted to build the visitors' centre with the earth-blocks we were just beginning to experiment with then. I approached Julian Lines of the Foundation for World Education (FWE) and Yoka of the Stichting de Zaaier with this proposal. They both promised to help, but asked me to find another sponsor as well.

Meanwhile, Suhasini had just come back from a conference in mud technology and spoke enthusiastically about the work of V. Suresh, the General Director of Housing and Urban Development Corporation (HUDCO) whom she had met at the conference. She suggested that I get in touch with Suresh and present my proposal to HUDCO.

Just a day later, Suhasini and I attended an official tea-party in Bharat Nivas, and to our utter surprise, Suresh was present there. He had had some work in Pondicherry and had decided to pay a visit to Auroville. That afternoon, he was just vis-

iting Bharat Nivas when he was invited to join the party by General Tewari. Suresh was extremely keen on funding the Visitor's Centre project but he absolutely insisted on our putting up a Building Centre as well.

I discussed the idea about the Building Centre with Tency, and it turned out that he had just got some funds from the Overseas Development Agency (ODA) in the U.K. to build a training centre for ferrocement technology. We decided to join hands. Tency would focus on ferrocement technology while Suhasini and I would concentrate on mud technology. But neither Suhasini nor I had enough experience in earth technology to head this centre. Then, the very day the grant for the Building Centre came through from HUDCO, I received an unexpected fax from a French architect who is now called Auro-Satprem saying that he wanted to join Auroville. Satprem is specialised in earth technology. He had conducted training programmes in India for HUDCO in this very area and it was during such a programme that he had visited Auroville and had developed a connection to it. We could not have found a better person to help us out with the Building Centre.

Today, HUDCO is one of the biggest donors to Auroville, having contributed Rs. 45 lakhs to various projects.

Her Smiling Eyes

to this "yoga" of work and evolutionary consciousness. Although I hated it, I tried to daily sweep the floor with full consciousness, or cook a community meal with meagre means. One day, one of the women took me to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, where we meditated and sat around the Samadhi. Something in me got stirred, and for hours I floated on a very special energy.

By the time my travel companion returned from Sri Lanka, I no longer wanted to travel, but felt like staying on a bit longer in Auroville. My only problem was the approaching expiry date of my tourist visa. I was advised to try to extend my visa for one month, stating that I wished to experience life in Auroville a bit more. The Registration Officer looked at my application and told me to come back in 12 days.

The day I had to collect my passport and visa, I sat nervously in the office of the Regional Registration Officer. The walls in his office were lined with cupboards overflowing with dusty files. On the wall there hung an Ashram calendar with a photo of the Mother with twinkling eyes. The calendar was swaying in the wind, and it looked like Mother was nodding her head the way the Tamil people do when they want to say "yes". Was She telling me not to worry about my visa extension?

After a long silence I heard the words "Madam, you can stay another three months, if you wish". I looked again at the calendar while my heart skipped a few beats. I stumbled out of the office and went outside, almost dancing from joy.

I have never left Auroville since.

Inspired

At Village Action, we try to help the villagers indirectly, through social work and services. Instead of doing charity, we help the villagers to organize themselves better and to generate an income for themselves. But there was one man, one of the founding members of the Village Action Group, who acted as a rich, benevolent uncle. He always went out of his way to help the village boys and shower presents on them blindly. For instance, he put up swings in all the neighbouring villages so that children would be able to play, but he did not organize this through any school or institution; and as a result, the swings were not maintained properly and soon fell into disuse, broken.

To tell the truth, we did not really want him in the Village Action Group, for his actions were so contrary to our ideology. But then, just yesterday one of the twenty or so boys that he had adopted, and I dare say his favourite, came to me and, in his Tamil-English dialect, said: "I want to fix all the swings in the villages. I want to see the children swinging happily under the trees again. He taught me how to weld, and I can repair the swings, but the Village Action Group must help me to contact all the headmasters in the village schools so that now the swings can be looked after."

I listened to him in astonishment. And then, more softly, he continued, "I dreamt of him last night. I dreamt that he was back in Auroville, but he absolutely refused to see me. And I understand why. It is because I have not done anything to continue his work—I have not done anything for the people. He taught me all that I know today. He taught me to read, write, weld, play music... and now, thanks to him, I have a good job in Auroville and am happily married. But now, I must work for my people in the villages."

Carried away by his thoughts, the young man came up with another reminiscence of his teacher. He said, "The last time he was here, I went to meet him at his hotel in Pondicherry. I was dressed in my best clothes and I had pictures of my work and my family to show him. And then, in the middle of our talk, as he reached into the pocket of his shirt to give me an address or something, my photograph fell out from amongst his papers. I realized he always carried my picture, in his pocket, close to his heart... You know, till then I knew that he cared for my well-being. But at that moment I understood how much he actually loved me..."

Listening to the young man's story, I wondered once more about his teacher. I wondered if we were wrong... for what better social work is there than to inspire people to act, from their own initiative, with such love and joy?

FROM THE EDITORS

We as AUROVILLE TODAY would be happy to receive stories, experiences from our readers, both in and outside Auroville. This would enable us to publish a further collection in a future issue.

DRAWING: VAHULA

Documenting the experiment:

The Auroville Archives

"Auroville is what Mother called a living laboratory, a place where various experiments are being done on and by Aurovilians to build the city and to realize the unique Charter of Auroville. It's imperative that a progressive record of all the experiments—not just the successes, but, equally important, the failures and set-backs—is properly documented and preserved for prosperity. For the importance Mother accorded this project can be gauged from her remark that the purpose of Auroville is to prevent a Third World War."

The speaker is Krishna Tewari, who, since 1991, has coordinated the work of the Auroville Archives. Since we last reported on the Archives one year ago, many improvements have taken place. The warren of rooms and corridors occupied by the Archives beneath the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium has been further enlarged, an airconditioner has been purchased to complement the dehumidifier, and rubber matting has been laid on all floors to control moisture. In addition, the existing collection of reports and documents on Auroville's unfolding have been supplemented by material obtained from different sources. This material includes all the UNESCO resolutions relating to Auroville, the bronze medallion struck by UNESCO to commemorate Sri Aurobindo's Centenary, old maps from Aurofuture, and recordings of Mother's talks with some residents of 'Aspiration' in the early 1970's.

Meanwhile, Krishna has been struggling to get units and work groups in Auroville to send him information about their beginnings and their subsequent development. 'Struggling'

because the material has only been trickling in so far. Why is it so difficult to get Aurovilians to contribute to this project? "The main reason is that everybody is so busy they don't have the time for this work. That's why we need a team of roving reporters who can go round and elicit this information from Aurovilians. But another factor may be a certain anti-history feeling among some Aurovilians..."

And the future? "If we get more 'elbow room' here in Bharat Nivas when Aurofuture and the Secretary's secretariat move out, there would be no need to pursue the planned project of converting the incomplete Karnataka Pavilion for the use of the Archives. We are well-established here now. Our priority need at present, for which we seek donations, is for a computer system and scanner so that we can store all important materials on disk—the original idea to microfilm materials has been dropped. We also want to transfer our slides and audio cassettes onto compact disks, as this will allow us to store them much more effectively. The main thing, however, remains the need to collect more material—photos, reports, newspaper cuttings whatever—to plug the many gaps in our records, and we appeal to anybody who may have such material, or who may know of sources of it, to contact us. We'll be glad to receive anything, whatever its state of repair."

Krishna Tewari can be contacted at Auroville Archives, Bharat Nivas, Auroville.

Alan

Village Action continued from page 3

Village Action also runs a scheme by which it offers local farmers free seeds of indigenous crops like sesame, black gram, rice and groundnut, and then undertakes to purchase the crop at market rates. The understanding, of course, is that the farmers won't use chemicals on these crops. Is this the case?

Both Kumar and Ross are sceptical. And Segar, one of the outreach farmers, admits that, of the 70 farmers in 10 local villages with which he maintains contact, none has gone fully organic.

"So far," says Ross, "there's not enough follow-up, and we've tended to be too ready to subsidize without ensuring that the real work of shifting to organic farming is happening. What we need to do now is to focus all our energy on those few farmers who might be willing to go organic."

Another way of introducing the benefits of organic husbandry is through carefully planned kitchen gardens which can provide a family with good food from a small area of land. "This could be where we make our biggest breakthrough," says Ross, "as these gardens are looked after by the women in the family. And the women are the real force for change in the villages." So far there are demonstration kitchen gardens in 10 villages, in addition to one at AGRC, and 102 village gardens were completed in 1994.

With all this work to be done, Village Action's organic farming programme is experiencing major changes. At the end of June the team will reluctantly leave Kottakarai Farm ("because of community politics"). Yet Ross sees this as an opportunity, the beginning of a new movement. "We're called Village Action, so now we really have to act in the villages."

In addition to the organic farming programme, Village Action supports a food processing and research unit, Kottakarai Organic Food Processing Unit, and a shop which purchases and sells organic fruit and vegetables grown in the area. The Food Processing Unit provides nourishing snacks to the workers in some Auroville units, and experiments with solar drying foods and herbs for edible and medicinal purposes. A new building to house the food processing unit is approaching completion.

Village women have worked in the food processing unit for three years now. Is there any evidence that their own food habits have changed? "Not really," says Sharanam, who manages the unit. "But recently some village women wanted to donate blood. Anbu, from Village Action, came along and was tested along with them to see if they were eligible. Almost all of them were refused because they were anaemic, but Anbu was accepted. So they asked her, 'What's your secret?' 'I enjoy eating salads,' she replied. That really went home because their pride had been hurt!"



Auro Village Crafts

Village Action provides financial, design and marketing assistance to village craftsmen and artisans, thus providing employment and self-employment possibilities. Various Auroville shops act as local marketing outlets, although a significant proportion of the products go for export.

Publishing and documentation

This unit provides publishing and documentation services in both English and Tamil. The library has a collection of over a thousand volumes, and is currently developing a data bank related to village work. The recently opened Desk-top Publishing unit plans to publish material on environmental education, food processing, social research, and course material for the day and night schools. The intention is for the Unit to be self-sufficient, but at present they are barely covering their basic costs. However, the coordinator feels that once their training is complete they will be able to take on more work and so generate more income.

TO SUBSCRIBE

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SAVITRI PAINTINGS

Pitanga has hosted a number of painting exhibitions, but, surely, the one currently displayed is the most voluminous. The exhibition, titled "Namaste Savitri", consists of 206 water-colour paintings illustrating the 206 lines of Book I, Canto 2 of *Savitri*. The paintings, all done by one artist, Agni, are part of a much larger work of a set of 342 paintings that illustrate each line of the first Book of the epic. Ultimately, Agni plans to illustrate through water-colours each of the 24, 000 lines of *Savitri*. Agni (also known as Giovanni Tonioni) is the founder and leader of the Aurora community in Italy—a community of 20 people who draw their inspiration from *Savitri*, the supreme revelation of Sri Aurobindo's vision.

VISA TROUBLES

Recently a long-term Aurovillian was refused his routine request for the extension of his residential permit, and was subsequently issued with a Quit Notice (a notice given by the Government of India ordering someone to leave the country). A large community meeting expressed concern at the negative role played by the previous Secretary in creating this problem, and deputed a group of Aurovilians to personally present the community's views to the Prime Minister, with a request that the Quit Notice be lifted. The Prime Minister was contacted, and the Quit Notice was subsequently withdrawn.

There is also continued frustration within the community that the vast majority of Aurovilians have to renew their Residential Permits annually while visas valid for five years can be issued, as per Government instructions, to newcomers coming to Auroville.

LAND NEEDED

Another 415 acres of land needs to be purchased to complete the acquisition of land in the City area. The figure for the remainder to be purchased in the inner Green Belt is 366 acres; for the outer Green Belt 1,230 acres. At today's prices, acquiring these remaining plots within the City Area and inner Green Belt will cost 9 crores of rupees (\$ 3 million). An additional 19 crores of rupees (\$6,350,000) will be needed to purchase the remaining land in the outer Green Belt.

VIDEO RELEASE

The latest release from Auroville Video is *Troubled Waters* which was premiered in July at the Visitors Centre. *Troubled Waters* is an educational video about salt-water intrusion. Salt-water intrusion occurs due to the depletion of ground water by over-pumping. The film forms part of a larger DANIDA-sponsored programme to educate villagers about the problems of salinity. Using a dramatic plot about a couple carrying out marriage negotiations, the film discusses the causes of salinity, including the socio-economic problems it involves, as well as preventive measures and solutions. The film also documents traditional methods of extracting water for irrigation and includes interviews with people who suffer from the effects of salinity. Rod Downie, a long-term guest in Auroville, produced the film on the basis of a study he carried out in the Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu. The video has already won accolades from environmentalists and social workers in Auroville.

Troubled Waters (Tamil with English subtitles)
Auroville Video, Pitanga, Samasti, Auroville 605101.
Duration: 30 mins. Price (in India): Rs. 150

SUMMER CAMP

About 45 children from 8 different villages participated in the second summer camp at New Creation from June 1st to 21st. The camp, whose motto was "Children learn what they live, why not the best?" allowed kids from local villages to participate in Auroville. Due to the paucity of funds, the camp offered fewer activities and was much smaller than the one last year. Highlights of the camp were Marco and Eliana's painting and mask-making workshop, Abha and Subash's innovative workshop about The Dream of Auroville, and the exhibition, the special dinner and cultural programme on the final day.

AWARD FOR AUROVILLE

Auroville has been selected as one of the 50 exemplary communities for the "We the peoples: 50 Communities Awards" by Friends of the United Nations, a non-governmental organisation. Auroville was chosen for demonstrating success in activities related to the category of "Human Settlements." Two representatives of Auroville are invited to accept the award, to share their experiences and to participate in a study conference in New York in September 1995, the 50th anniversary of the United Nations.

For five nights running at the end of their summer holidays, the children's choir entertained Aurovilians with a fabulous extravaganza titled *Beyond Asleep and Awake*. To judge it, simply and briefly, *Beyond Asleep and Awake*, the first opera to be ever produced in Auroville, was a tremendous success. People flocking to the Bharat Nivas Auditorium to see it two or even three times were enchanted by the live music, the lilting songs, and the absolutely fantastical world that was created on stage with elaborate props, terrific lighting arrangements and beautifully designed costumes.

The opera was a synthesis of the work of so many artists, none of whom were professionals, that it would be a Herculean task to determine the value of each person's contribution. Holger however deserves to be singled out for accolades for this production. He was the mastermind behind the show: he conceived the idea, wrote the libretto (together with Jill), composed the music, and worked for months on end (with Pianist Carel and voice trainer Nuria) to perfect the singing of the choir.

The story of the opera (see AVT #78) revolves around the spiritual quest of three children, each different from the other by nature and upbringing, who receive help once they learn

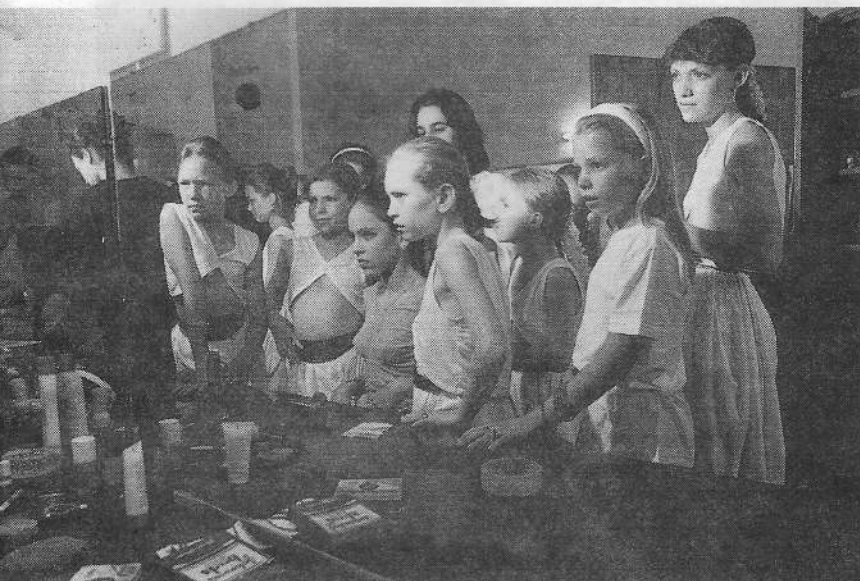
to unite. By joining hands with Maya and Moon, two other children who possess special powers, they journey through No-Land and Birdland to confront the evil Zero-Be. However, in the resolution of the conflict, the plot is strategically weak: the Accountant who sits behind the dummy monster Zero-Be has to resort to too many explanations about the nature of things; and Maya and Moon are given too important a part, upstaging thereby the three principal characters.

Dramatically, the two most powerful scenes are those of No-Land: in one, there is the excitement of action when twenty or more children climb over rocks and run across a darkened stage; and in the other, an eerie visual effect is created when on a dark stage, illuminated only by luminous scarfs of the children, the choir sing a song while hooded figures in black move menacingly around them. Ironically, though the setting is really beautiful, the scene in Birdland falls flat.

Of the songs, which are an impressive 41 in number, there are some which touch one to the core of the heart by their lyrics and music. My favourite ones are: "A tale of harmony" in the prologue; "This will be our way" at the end of the first act when the children all pledge to fight together; "Gently, gently" sung by the Birds of Paradise; "Light in the fairyland" which introduces Moon; and "Moving" the very last song which lends its lines for the title of the opera. Other songs which have the audience tapping their toes include "I never went that far," "I just can't make it," "No-World," "Blah blah" and "Five hundred years." Amongst the young artists, Anandamayi, Sean, Lila and Latifa deliver excellent solo numbers.



An evil force from No-Land



Before the show



In Birdland



The grand finale

For five nights a children's opera turned Auroville into a

Fantastical World

A large measure of the opera's success is due to the auxiliary support it has in the form of costumes, stage-setting and lighting. The castle of Zero-Be, strung high up in the air with lights flashing through diamond-shaped windows while the drooling, three-eyed monster peers out, is the most fascinating prop of all. And the two glowing discs, representing the inner beings of Maya and Moon, that slowly rise up to the castle also create a beautiful spectacle. The costumes, especially those of the birds, are well-designed and painstakingly made, complete to the last detail, with painted feathers of different colours. And, thanks to Didier, a sound technician who has recently joined Auroville, there were hanging microphones on the stage which rendered the voices of the children audible in the auditorium.

Acting is the one area where the opera fails to make the grade. Some of the kids were naturally suited to their roles: Marco puts up a creditable performance as Annibal, a poor news-boy from Buenos Aries and a fighter by nature; Sean is brilliant as Sharp, the cool, computer-whiz from New York; and little Latifa who plays sweet, innocent Moon, steals everyone's heart with her endearing performance. And amongst the adults, special mention must be made of Andrej whose acting capabilities were revealed for the first time and who had everyone roaring with laughter with new antics every night. But, by and large, emotions

such as anxiety, fear, disappointment, despair, astonishment, and even joy, were conveyed merely through the words of the text and not through actions. The props were not utilised to their full extent; and often when one of the characters delivered a song, others on stage would merely stand and watch. Siân, the stage-manager, who made her debut as director, relatively late in the performance-schedule deserves praise for what she accomplished in the two months of the children's summer vacation, the only time that was available for stage-rehearsals. But one feels that the children of Auroville could have been pushed to reach new heights in acting as they did in singing.

There are numerous other details that one could comment on. But in the final analysis, in Auroville, the criteria for judging a show are different from those normally employed. The quality of the production does not matter so much as the work that goes into producing it, the hidden capabilities that it draws forth from individuals and the goodwill that it generates. And on all these counts, the opera wins hands down. Judged from this angle, the climax of the opera occurs at the very end when the members of the orchestra, the voice trainer, the stage help, the prop and costume designers, and finally Holger with the choir troop out to join the actors on the stage, all singing the final titular song, "Beyond, beyond/Asleep or Awake/You're always here". The lyrics and the music bring tears to one's eyes and on seeing the veritable army of people that assemble on stage, one realizes how much time, energy and collaborative work has gone into the making of this production, and one feels proud and happy that such a work, beautiful both in its concept and production, has been produced in Auroville by Aurovilians.

Bindu

By Airmail
Bookpost

AUROVILLE TODAY

CSR Office,
Auroville 605101
Tamil Nadu, India

Exp. # 85

KRISHNA TEMARI
AURORDELE
AUROVILLE



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IN THIS ISSUE:
AUROVILIANS' STORIES; VILLAGE - ACTION; LIVING WITH NATURE



Landmarks of Auroville - the Palmyra forest

When I first came to Auroville with my family in 1973 we spent five weeks living in a somewhat dilapidated semi-open thatched hut in the Nursery. Being two adults and two children it felt quite crowded, but we soon discovered that we were also sharing it with numerous other occupants. Chief among them were some 18 toads, who lived under the kitchen cupboards and in various other cool spots around the house. When we first moved in we decided to shoo them all out, and with a concerted effort we almost succeeded, but as we scabbled around trying to get the last three or four to leave, we turned round to see the first dozen or more hopping back in again! Twice we tried, and twice they all came back within a space of ten minutes. Then we gave up, and settled down to our first experience of living in Auroville i.e. living with nature!

That hut was an unforgettable introduction to Auroville. Not only was it full of toads at ground level, but the roof was a veritable wildlife park. Frogs hid among the palm-leaf thatch, and snakes went up there to find them. A feeble cry from above usually heralded the end of a frog, but the snakes weren't always successful. Sometimes the frogs would escape by jumping down onto our beds—on one memorable occasion immediately followed by the snake, which fell onto a mosquito net I was putting up. There was a frozen moment of shocked confrontation, then we each leaped back in opposite directions!

There were also many other creatures up there, from cockroaches and lizards to ants and spiders, plus termites by the thousand. We had only to touch the roof and the whole structure 'rattled' with the latter's synchronous vibrations. When the time came for our departure after our five-week stay it was like saying goodbye to a familiar zoo.

When I finally came alone to Auroville in 1977, one of the first friendships I made was with Dietra. She's brilliant with injured and fledgling birds, caring for them and then releasing them back into the wild. She has also done something wonderful for Auroville over the past few years, by introducing peacocks into our environment after an intensive breeding programme using chickens as surrogate mothers. Now they are seen all over Auroville, and are breeding successfully in the forested areas. (Not long ago I had 14 walk across my garden in a single awesome parade!)

Nowadays Gratitude is like a multi-faceted barnyard, with cows, a bullock, peacocks, chickens, ducks, geese, guinea fowl, turkeys and dogs meandering around the place. But it continues to be the place where Aurovilians bring injured birds or abandoned fledglings. More recently a variant was also brought, in the form of a young Flying Fox (India's largest bat), which has a wingspan of up to four feet when fully grown. This one was an adolescent with wings still under two feet in spread, but he/she? (most thought 'he') was still large by most bat standards. The problem was that Dietra was overloaded at the time, with her Doberman bitch and nine puppies in her bathroom; her parrot, an owl and a woodpecker in her kitchen; the whole farmyard of animals outside requiring attention; and her own, Thomas', the workers' and visitors' needs also to think about. She decided to seek a 'Batman' for the two or three weeks she had been asked to look after him, and who more convenient than nearby nature-lover and friend you-know-who?

'Squeaky', as I called him, was fascinating. He was very puppy-like and curious;

chewed his 'blanket'; flipped himself upside down (right way up for us) to relieve himself; clambered around his hanging cloth day and night flapping his wings for exercise, or calling out in his high-pitched voice for the ripe fruit and little milk he lived on; had no odour about him; and loved having his velvety neck area or tummy tickled.

My worst experiences have been with scorpions: I've been stung four times now! We have no deadly species locally, but about 10 minutes after first being stung one might be excused for doubting that! I would describe the pain of the first six hours as 'excruciating', something like being plugged in to an electric current; the next six hours as 'extremely painful'; the following six as 'very painful'; and the last six, of what is normally a 24-hour period of trauma, as just 'painful'!

Worst was the time I trod on one just as I was getting into bed, too late to call anyone or do anything but lie sleeplessly all night sweating it out. The following morning brought some light relief, however, when a friend arrived and offered to stop the pain "the village way". This consisted of filling a bucket with water, placing a cycle dynamo's wires in the water, and then pedal charging the dynamo while the luckless victim held his throbbing limb in the water for a good neutralising shock. Somewhat to my relief, after what I thought was his rather-too-eager offer, we found that his dynamo was rusted and no charge came through! The laugh we had was a far better cure.

For a typical European, life in Auroville may seem a bit bizarre. There are even times when I think one must be a bit of a masochist to live here. But when I reflect on how I have delighted at the discovery of all-gold chrysalises hanging in trees or seeing so many beautiful butterflies; have marvelled at the splendour of peacocks in my garden, or birds like the Paradise Flycatcher or Golden Oriole flying past my window; have lain in bed at night enjoying the calls of crickets, frogs, owls and jackals; and have once watched spell-bound as skein after skein of wild duck has flown overhead in the pre-dawn semi-darkness, or seen flocks of flamingos in flight at Kaliveli Tank, I cannot help also thinking how lucky I am to have such an abundance of nature all around me.

To end this and justify the title, let me relate one final experience at Dietra's, involving a feisty young Spotted Owlet she was rearing named Cardigan (so called because he reminded us of Lord Cardigan of Light Brigade fame, charging ferociously at any food he was offered).

We were having lunch, when Cardigan, who was sitting on the table with us, spotted something of interest on the far side of the table and set out to investigate. He strode forward; reached the edge of my plate and stepped up onto the rim; walked straight through the lettuce and sliced tomato; circumnavigated two boiled potatoes; placed one foot in the mayonnaise and another on the far rim, and stepped down to continue to his destination. Dietra seemed completely unperturbed; I was dumbstruck!

That was 15 years ago. Nowadays, like Cardigan, I tend to take such things in my stride, realising as I do that it's a rich and wonderful world we live in, and there's much more to be enjoyed than dreaded here in the intimate contacts we have with nature!

Tim