

# AUROVILLE TODAY

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Last month, Auroville hosted an all-India organic agriculture conference. As one of the reasons for choosing Auroville was its growing reputation as a research and implementation site, not only in organic agriculture but other 'sustainable' technologies like renewable energy systems, we thought it would be interesting—in addition to reporting on the conference—to begin to examine how far the community lives up to this billing. What is happening on our farms? What is the significance of the new seed bank and of explorations into local indigenous knowledge? In what ways, in fact, can Auroville claim to be sustainable, and how can we do better? Read on... —Eds.

## ARISE 95

PROMOTING ORGANIC AGRICULTURE IN INDIA

A sustainable society, in the physical sense, is a society which protects and nurtures its environment. History provides us with examples of great civilizations, like the Mesopotamian, which failed not because of conquest or internal divisions, but because they neglected their fragile base, the few inches of topsoil which support crops and grasses and, therefore, all life.

Modern agriculture is not sustainable either, in spite of its short-term success in increasing yields of certain crops. Why not? Because of its heavy dependency upon increasingly scarce fossil fuels (from which many inorganic pesticides and fertilizers are manufactured); because heavy ploughing, the removal of hedges and the use of inorganics accelerates topsoil loss; and because the residues of inorganic pesticides and fertilizers poison the soil, the water, the air... and people.

Organic farming, which uses natural inputs and which attempts to build soil fertility while growing food, offers a sustainable way forward. For many years, however, organic farmers in many countries have been struggling against the agro-chemical industry and government policies which have promoted the growing of 'bio-engineered' hybrid crops—requiring large inputs of inorganic fertilizers and pesticides—as the only solution to the global food shortage. The recent GATT agreement, to which India and most other nations subscribe, will further increase the power of those transnational companies which already hold a virtual monopoly in certain areas of food production.

Ten years ago, organic farmers in India, concerned by the influence and largely-unreported failings of conventional agriculture, held the first All-India Organic Farmers Convention at Wardha. At that time the attempt to create a network and a more unified voice for those involved in organic agriculture in India failed. At a conference in Kerala two years ago, however, the idea surfaced again, and it was subsequently decided to hold another all-India organic farming conference. Auroville was chosen as the venue because it has been the site for various experiments in organic agriculture over the past 25 years.

And so, on 25th April, in a large tent tethered to a peepal tree behind Bharat Nivas auditorium, the ARISE (Agricultural Renewal in India for a Sustainable Environment) conference began. One hundred people from all over India—farmers, academics, activists—gathered to resurrect the ancient traditions of sustainability in India by sharing their experiences, listening to speakers like the author Vandana Shiva and research scientist Claude Bourguignon, visiting Auroville land projects and eating good organic food. Above all, the participants finally succeeded in coming up with the beginnings of a new alliance—ARISE—designed to give organic agriculture a powerful voice in India's future.

On the last morning, participants planted an endangered tree species, *Hildegardia populnaefolia*, just outside the conference tent. Hopefully, the ARISE alliance will also take root and flourish for many years to come... *Alan*



*Ganesh, the Hindu god who is the remover of obstacles, composed entirely of seeds for the ARISE conference.*

PHOTO: JOHN MANDEEN

## Excerpts from the conference

**Vandana Shiva (writer and activist): "Obstacles can be turned into opportunities."**

"Under the present global free trade system, there are four major obstacles to sustainable agriculture. The biggest obstacle is probably the removal of land security from the small farmer through the repealing of the Land Ceiling Act in many Indian States. As these Acts limited the amount of land that an individual can own, their repeal will allow big interests to buy out the small farmers. But huge agricultural concerns, because of their scale, cannot practise sustainability: they have to substitute chemicals and tractors for 'softer', more labour-intensive

methods.

"Another trend, closely linked to this, is the 'corporatization of agriculture', or the control of agriculture by big businesses which seek maximum profit. The consequence of this is that traditional sustenance farming is being displaced by monoculture, export-oriented agriculture which is vulnerable to fluctuations in world markets.

"This trend away from farming for local needs will be intensified by the recently signed GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) which will, among other things, encourage developed nations to dump food grains at very low prices in the Third World, thereby destroying local markets and making them dependent upon international markets and producers. At the same time,

GATT forces signatory nations (which include India) to pass patent legislation in the area of pharmaceuticals and agriculture. This allows, for example, people working for multinational corporations to visit tribals, learn about the properties of certain trees or plants, and then to isolate the genetic 'signature' of such properties in their sophisticated laboratories. Once they have done this, the company can obtain a patent upon this plant characteristic which forbids anybody else—including the tribals they pirated the information from—from using the plant in that way. (At present, there are already 34 patents on the use of the neem tree for dental care and biopesticides.) In this way the big corporations are attempting to privatize nature for private profit. For by patenting vital characteristics like drought-resistance in certain common species, the multinationals make it impossible for small farmers to farm autonomously: they will always be dependent upon big business for their seeds, fertilizers and pesticides. In fact, recent GATT-influenced legislation would make it illegal for farmers to exchange seeds with each other as this is seen, by the transnational companies, as unfair interference with their right to sell their products worldwide!

"One final obstacle is the new biotechnologies. Seventy per cent of all research in the field of genetic engineering in plants is devoted to breeding herbicide tolerance. If successful, this would result in even more chemicals being used on the land and on crops; and there is the added hazard that herbicide tolerance may spontaneously transfer to wild relatives of the species that has been bio-engineered, resulting in 'super weeds' which cannot be controlled. Moreover, animals and plants that have been bio-engineered are unstable and vulnerable to disease. One type of cow that has been bio-engineered to give more milk needs 42 drugs regularly if it is to survive!

"However, these obstacles can be turned into opportunities, impulses to hasten the movement towards sustainable agriculture. For

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example, in response to the threat of big companies buying out the small farmers, the new Panchayati Raj Act could be used to decentralise power and allow local communities to control land and water use in their area. This strategy is already being used in part of Tamil Nadu to ban intensive prawn culture on good agricultural land. Food security also needs to be put once more at the centre of agriculture. We need to redefine wealth as being the fertility of the soil and the independence of households and communities from global fluctuations: today, it's an imperative and not a choice to be self-provisioning.

"If direct links between organic producers and consumers could be established, the corporations and governments would have less control. There is also a need to move away from the one-dimensional logic that falsely made the Green Revolution seem productive, and to shift to diversity-based farming which avoids the risks of monoculture and bio-engineered crops.

"Finally, the establishment of community seed banks, and the recording of local community knowledge in a Community Register would make it very difficult for multinationals to claim patents on knowledge which is clearly in the public domain. Seed is the first link in the food chain, and community control over seeds is the first link in the transition to sustainable agriculture.

"Above all, we need to unite in keeping life, in all its beauty and integrity, evolving far into the future. This is the ethical, spiritual commitment which is our strength, and which is totally lacking on the part of those who want to commercialize nature. I give ourselves until the year 2000 to turn agriculture around. For then I hope to see all these obscenities—genetic engineering, patents on life and the commercialization of nature—sitting embarrassed in the dump-yard of history."

**Korah Mathen (activist):**  
**"Today everything is reduced to trade."**

"Modern technological agriculture is based on a scientific logic that we are expected to unquestioningly accept. Yet 'new' and 'scientific' doesn't necessarily mean better. A few years ago, I was attending a conference in central India. A group of American scientists were proudly showing us the latest in land-leveling technology, based upon the use of laser beams. At one point, an old farmer raised his hand. 'Would you like to know what we do in my area?' The scientists were interested. 'Well, we wait for the rains. Then we all go out and see which land is above water and which below...'

"The problem today is a tendency, on the part of governments and big corporations, to reduce everything to trade; and not to value anything that cannot be traded on

the open market. Even life itself—did you know that in Germany women are paid to provide fetuses for abortion? Why? Because the tissues of the fetuses are used for the facial regeneration of the super-rich!

"This taking over of natural processes by the corporate sector is already well-advanced in agriculture. For example, a Belgian company has patented a gene in certain plants which prevents them being openly-pollinated. The result? You have to go back every year to that company for your seeds. Seeds are big business. We are talking about a global market of 600 billion dollars if all farmers are forced to purchase their seeds from the big companies. So, of course, these companies are trying to enforce plant and gene technology patent laws in every country so that they can enjoy a monopoly. And here you have it: the transnationals want total freedom, open borders, for trade, yet they are simultaneously privatizing more and more of the space and activities of the traditional farmers.

"Global markets don't like diversity. And what we are seeing today is that our food base is getting narrower and narrower. It is estimated, for example, that during the hunter/gatherer era, humans ate about 10,000 different species of plants and animals. Today, 90% of the population eat less than 40 varieties of plants and animals as a result of monoculture and the extinction of many species. This is bad for the environment; it also makes us vulnerable to the possibility of disease ravaging some of these key crops. In fact, we've replaced biological diversity with chemical diversity in food. Today, about 7,000 chemicals are used to flavour and preserve food—and few of them have been adequately tested for their



effects upon the human body.

"One final point. Sustainable agriculture is not just to do with how things are grown. It's also to do with what we eat. If, for example, I want to eat fresh mangoes the whole year round, I am not supporting a sus-

tainable agricultural system. So our lifestyles also have to change..."

**Claude Bourguignon**  
**(cell biologist and researcher in tropical agriculture):**  
**"We have to follow nature's methods."**

"In the world today, there is only half an acre of arable land per person—and this is getting less all the time. So we should cultivate what little we have in the best way possible. But what is the reality? We are increasing the deserts by 20 mil-



lion hectares a year because of poor cultivation methods and deforestation. And we are reducing the quality of our food through genetic engineering and the application of chemicals. In France, for example, we grow a hybrid species of wheat which cannot be made into bread; we grow grapes which, because they are smothered in pesticides, cannot ferment; and some cows produce milk so full of antibiotics that it cannot be made into cheese! And, guess what? The same companies that produce the pesticides which make us ill also produce the pharmaceuticals which the doctor prescribes for our recovery. They can't lose!

"If we want a sustainable agriculture, we have to study nature and follow her methods. Why? Because tropical forests like those in the Amazon and Borneo are probably 30-40 million years old, and therefore truly sustainable, whereas mankind has only been cultivating—or miscultivating—the Earth for about 8,000 years. What do these great forests teach us? Firstly, they are diverse, rich in many species: 80% of the genetic treasure of the planet is found in the tropics. The soil of a

rain forest, for example, is one hundred times more porous, and therefore less liable to erosion, than soil under chemical cultivation because the forest soil is full of fauna—like termites—which aerate the soil. Chemicals kill these fauna. The best method in tropical countries is not to till the soil, but to put all organic matter—from the remains of the previous crop or other sources—on the soil (which should never be left bare), and then to sow seeds directly into this organic matter. Because fauna break down organic matter very quickly in the tropics, it is an area ideally suited for organic agriculture. The agro-chemical industry knows, and fears, this which is why they try to discourage organic farming. "Another lesson of the rain forests is the importance of trees for temperature maintenance. The problem of global warming is not due to increased carbon dioxide production but to the fact that the global deserts are getting bigger (the Sahara 'walks' south at the rate of 10 kilometres each year), causing higher temperatures and decreased rainfall in many areas.

"Finally, trees and plants grow so high in the relatively mineral-deficient soil of the tropical rain forests because 90% of the dry weight of plants is derived from the atmos-

"At the ARISE conference, we dedicated ourselves to preserve and rejuvenate the common resources that make sustainable agriculture and life possible. We resolved to collectively work on:

- ensuring access to land and water resources for security of food and livelihood;
- protecting biodiversity of flora and fauna in all its forms through the establishment of community seedbanks, promotion of organic agriculture, and watershed regeneration;
- promoting farmer-to-farmer interactions by forming cooperatives of organic farmers and establishing direct producer and consumer linkages, as well as facilitating the processes for certification and marketing;
- offering technological support relevant to sustainable agriculture from diverse individuals and organizations;
- arranging for legal support to ensure sustainability and justice;
- influencing official policy-making at all levels—local, national and international—to shift towards the promotion of sustainable agriculture;
- documenting and disseminating necessary information;
- increasing awareness of the impacts of unsustainable consumption patterns and the need for responsible and holistic life-styles...

We, the participants of ARISE, dedicate ourselves to the practice and promotion of sustainable life-styles that are imbued with reverence for life in all its myriad forms."

(Extract from the statement issued from the conference)

phere, not the soil. The amount of sun is all-important here, because it is required for photosynthesis. And that's another reason why the tropics are the best place in the world to grow food by natural means."

(Conference proceedings transcribed and edited by Alan)



Inside the conference tent, beneath the peepal tree

PHOTO: JOHN MANDEEN



# Farming in Auroville

The Farm Group brings much needed support to Auroville farmers

In 1971, when asked if chemical pesticides could be used in Auroville farms, the Mother emphatically replied in the negative, insisting that "Auroville should not fall back into old errors which belong to a past that is trying to revive." Thus, right from the outset, Auroville has relied largely on organic methods of farming. And today, as was confirmed by the participants of the recent ARISE conference, some of Auroville's experiments in organic farming are gaining wider recognition.

Auroville however, is far from achieving the Mother's dream of being self-sufficient in food. At present, by a rough estimate, Auroville produces only 2% of its total rice and grain requirements and less than 50% of its total fruit and vegetable requirements of Aurovilians. Poor soil, lack of adequate water, lack of adequate storage space and food-



PHOTO SVEN

processing knowledge to deal with surpluses, the harsh sub-tropical climate and adverse economic factors make farming in Auroville difficult and financially uncertain. Crop failures are not uncommon because the temperate growing season, from December to March, is short while the summer and the monsoon are extremely severe. And until recently, farmers were not guaranteed any financial security by the community against crop failure and had to individually bear the losses. The variety and the low prices of produce in the external market, even though it be based on socially exploitative practices and heavily dosed with chemicals, also attract many Aurovilians away from home-grown organic food.

The resurrection of the Farm Group last year however has already led to an improvement of the situation. This voluntary organization of farmers is a representative body of the community that takes collective responsibility for the management of the Auroville farms. The group works collectively to ensure that optimal use is made of the available assets, to solve financial and other problems, and to create policies for short and long term development of farming lands. One of its notable achievements has been to get farming recognized by the community as an aspect of the service sector. This step has provided some security to the farmers against financial losses. Another initiative by the group, in the area of finances, has been to operate collective funds for the farmers to help meet emergency shortfalls, small-scale and large-scale investments.

Yet another of the initiatives of the group has been to work in close collaboration with Pour Tous and with the food-processing units to deal, even more effectively, with fluctuations and surpluses in produce. Last but not least, the Farm Group has been promoting awareness of farming by making public the minutes of their monthly meetings and encouraging other people to take up farming. Here we present an overview of the ten farms which are currently part of the Farm Group:

**Anasuya:** A small Greenbelt homestead consisting of a small dairy, some cattle, orchards and vegetable gardens. Herbert, who runs Anasuya, does some additional farming in areas near Grace and in Revelation. Herbert has also volunteered the agricultural land, for rice or irrigated crops, that Auroville has recently purchased.

**Annapurna:** Annapurna is the largest but least developed farm of Auroville. The land was acquired by the Mother even before Auroville started, but lay neglected for a long time. Real development took place only in 1987. Annapurna has heavy black cotton soil and a total area of 135 acres. But only 15 acres are under cultivation. Dry land crops such as millets, oilseeds, pulses and upland rice paddy are the main produce of this farm. Some irrigated rice is also grown during the monsoon. While large tracts of land

are yet to be developed, most of it is covered by trees for firewood, regeneration fodder and forest. At present, only two Aurovilians, Andre and Tomas, manage the place. With additional help and investment however, 50 more acres of land can easily be cultivated for food.

**Aurogreen:** Started in 1975 and managed by Charlie, Aurogreen is situated on the north-east side of the city in the Greenbelt. The farm covers about 30 acres of land, 13 acres of which is under irrigation to grow citrus fruits, papaya, coconuts and cow fodder. An additional 6.5 acres are used for cultivating mango and cashew under dry crop cultivations. Besides fruits, small amounts of millets, peanuts and vegetables are also grown. In addition, the farm has a dairy of 14 cows and a poultry of 200 hens and provides Auroville with milk, cheese and eggs. The farm is in good condition and can meet most of its day-to-day running costs. Efforts are now being made to find the funds to replace traditional flood irrigation with drip and sprinkler systems.

**Auro-Orchard:** Auro-Orchard was one of the first pieces of land to be purchased by The Mother for Auroville in 1965. Development however was started only in 1969. Including the neighbouring community of Hope, some roads and buildings including a Ganesh temple, Auro-Orchard comprises 60 acres of land. At present, about 50 acres are cultivated—14 acres are irrigated to grow fruits, vegetables, fodder, peanuts, millets and pulses; 36 acres grow cashew, mango and regenerative forest. It also possesses some cattle and a poultry of



250 birds. Auro-Orchard which has always been highly productive, is now seeing a decline of profits for various reasons. And Gerard, who has been taking care of Auro-Orchard since the beginning, fears that "in a few years, Auro-Orchard may find it difficult to be fully self-supporting."

**Discipline:** Discipline was started by the residents of that community, some 15 years back, with intensive inputs in building the soil. A few years back, the farm started suffering from poor management but now with Jeff taking a turn for the better. The farm consists of 19 acres of land. One or two acres are used for growing irrigated crops, while 5.5 acres are used for local dryland crops, mainly mangoes; the rest is covered by forest. The farm also has a dairy and a small poultry. Future development plans under consideration include continuing to experiment with rainfed field crops, increasing the variety of fruit trees, and purchasing 6.5 acres of adjacent farm land for an overall expansion of crop potential. Discipline also needs more capital investment to upgrade its irrigation facilities.

**Djaima:** A 10-acre farm with very good topsoil. Kumar and Kala who look after the farm have an orchard, a seasonal vegetable garden and a small dairy. Kumar hopes to make the farm self-supporting by expanding the dairy and starting a poultry of 200 birds.

**Kottakarai Farm:** Centrally located and associated with agriculture since a long time, Kottakarai Farm is part of the Life Education Center and linked to its activities of research in food-processing and training. The farm which consists of 9 acres of good quality soil is looked after by Kumar and Ross. Crops grown are rice, millet, pulses, oilseeds and vegetables.

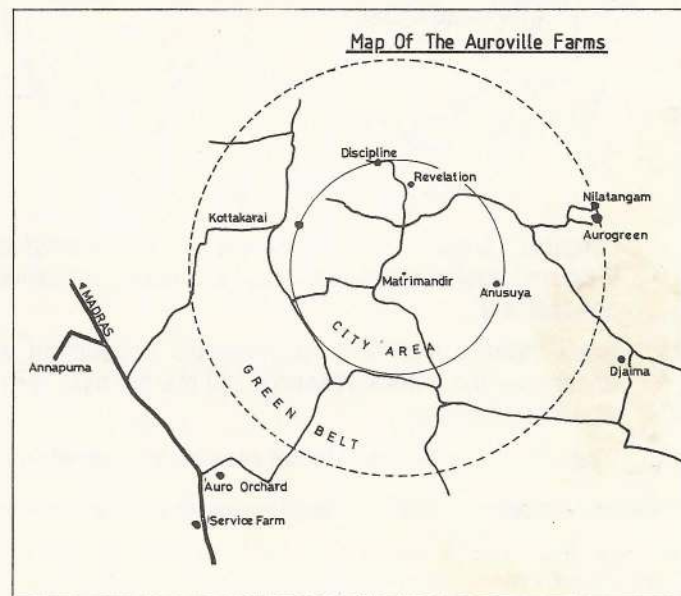
**Nilatangam:** A small farm, just next to Aurogreen in the Greenbelt. The soil, though somewhat sandy, is of a good quality. Rudiger and Ambre who run this farm have a small dairy, an orchard and a vegetable

garden. The rest of the area is under forest. Nilatangam is linked to the Aurogreen water supply and also needs a more efficient irrigation system.

**Revelation:** Revelation consists of 12 acres of red laterite soil. In the past, it was a productive farm with a dairy, poultry, orchard, vegetable garden, dryland crops, and a forest preserve. But, due to management problems, the farm deteriorated. Cristo, with the help of Herbert from Anasuya, now hopes to bring things back to sustainable productivity. At present, field crops are being planted on 3.5 acres of land. Revelation still has an orchard with a wide variety of fruit trees and a small dairy. Cristo plans to operate the farm at a minimal level with the existing infrastructure till he can find another person with farming experience and put in improvements.

**Service Farm:** Service Farm was also one of the earliest of the Mother's original land acquisitions. It comprises of 12 acres of sandy red soil. Mechtild, who took over the management of Service Farm in 1990, has planted a wide variety of fruit trees and plans to expand the project by growing vegetables and cultivating medicinal herbs. This farm uses the drip irrigation system which economizes the use of water. The fruit trees however are still too young to bear fruit and yield and return on the investment in the farm.

*Bindu  
(based on an interview with Lisa of  
the Farm Group)*







# SAVE OUR

**VANDANA SHIVA** is a writer and activist who is internationally known for her work in publicizing the plight of disadvantaged sectors of society, and the dangers associated with the commercialization of nature. She founded the Research Institute for Science, Technology, and Natural Resource Policy, which is based in Delhi, and her books include *Mono-cultures of the Mind* and *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*. Recently, she was a participant in the ARISE conference, during which she gave the keynote address and a workshop.

**AVT: From researcher in quantum physics to environmental activist is not an obvious transition!**

Vandana Shiva: And yet, I couldn't be doing the work I'm doing today without having had that experience. My real contributions to ecology have been at the level of perceiving connections, relationships, between different areas like the environment, public policy and economics. My academic background helped me here because quantum theory teaches you that it's relationships that make the world, not separate entities; it's qualities that make the world, not quantities; and it's potentials that make the world, not determined properties. Also, just the sheer persistence needed to complete a doctorate in a subject like quantum physics has taught me how to hang on, not to

expect immediate results.

**You are probably best known for publicizing the seed issue as an example of how huge business conglomerates today are attempting to enclose and commercialize nature. How did you come to focus upon that issue?**

It was in 1987. Before then, I had worked in science policy for the Indian Institute of Management in Delhi for three years, and then I set up an independent research foundation and did a number of studies, on topics like the Green Revolution and drought. These experiences made it clear to me that the root of many of our present problems lies in the environment: specifically, in the way that certain interests and mind-sets were making it increasingly difficult for the environment to regenerate

itself, and for many people—but particularly the marginalized—to gain access to natural resources. And at the moment I was being increasingly pushed into examining how corporations and governments control others, I was invited to a conference where thirty leading activist thinkers, drawn from different disciplines, were asked to address the issues of biotechnology and the patenting of life-forms. That interaction blew my mind, because I suddenly saw what the future could be in twenty years' time—what it would mean for nature and for people without power—if these new developments went unchecked.

After the conference, a journalist asked me, "Do you really think anything can be done?", and I answered, "I'm sure they must have felt like that in India sixty years ago. But then an old man, by means of the symbol of an obsolete spinning-wheel, mobilised a nation." And at that moment I realized that the seed had to be the new mobilizing symbol, a symbol of life in its biodiversity and innate creativity. And that was the day I said, "I don't care how much trouble or time it takes, I'll work on making this issue so well known that everybody can participate in protecting the seed and biodiversity from the commercial interests that threaten them."

**You are talking about a major paradigm shift here: a new, or renewed, way of relating to the environment. Eight years on, is that shift happening?**

Yes, very much so. The shift we are talking about is from a focus on manufacture and production which exploits our environment to a recognition of the amazing power and potential in the world as it unfolds, and to understanding our place in that creative process.

Five years ago, about five people were working on the patenting of life-forms issue: a handful more on the implications for other species of genetic engineering. And now these are matters for public discourse and major research—even though they remain largely unfunded. This is evidence that small, dedicated groups can make a difference.

## "It is a spiritual world view we are articulating"



PHOTO: JOHN MANDEEN

**During this ARISE conference, I didn't feel that the psychological and spiritual roots of sustainability and organic farming were addressed. Is it your belief that physical changes are the most important ones?**

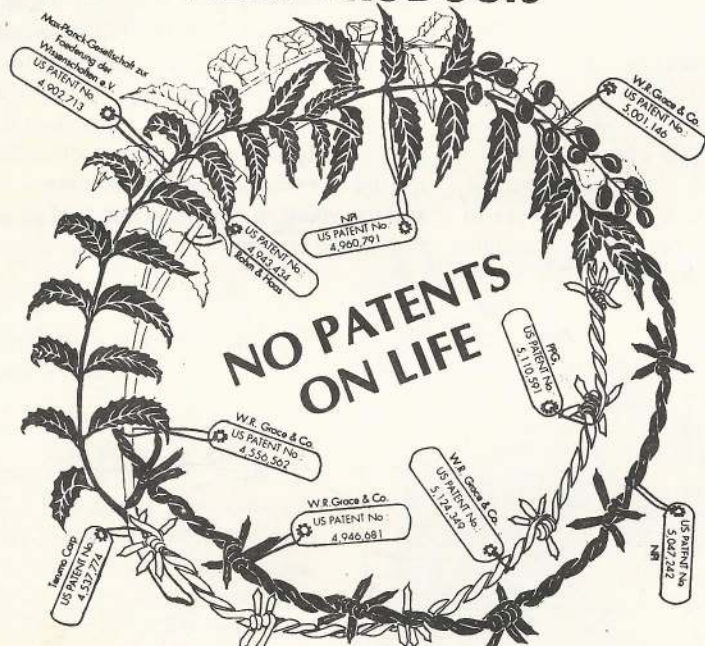
No. I believe that it's the deeper meanings that people hold in life that give the impulse to their outer actions; that these are the real propellers for change and transformation. But, traditionally in Indian society people shy away from communicating in terms of these deeper meanings, even though they are very present for them. In the West, too, there is this avoidance: I included this deeper dimension in my draft for *Eco-Feminism*, the book I co-authored with Maria Mies, but the publisher told me to take it out as it as it would interfere with communicating my main message. In spite of this, I think it's important to make clear that in our struggle against the

big seed companies, against biotechnology and Intellectual Property Rights as applied to nature, it is a spiritual world view that we are articulating, based upon reverence for other life-forms and the innate creativity of the natural world. In fact, the environmental activist movement has to embrace this spiritual dimension if it is to survive; if it remains exclusively in the setting of lobbying and advocacy, money and power can destroy it overnight.

What's really interesting now is that a certain reversal has taken place. A spiritual leaning used to mean total inactivity in the world, while activism tended to be associated with thoughtless violence. But suddenly the only people who seem to have the courage to act are the deeply spiritual—because it's only those who know that there is another world, another dimension, who are not intimidated by the world of organized power.

**Interviewer: Alan**

### NO PATENTS ON NEEM PRODUCTS



**Patents on neem products are based on a bias against non-Western knowledge systems which are treated as 'obvious' and 'natural'.**

**Such patents will lead to monopoly production and undermine the natural resource and market base for the small scale sector.**

**The neem patents are a blatant case of intellectual piracy.**

Poster by Research Institute for Science, Technology and Natural Resource Policy, Delhi.



# OUR SEEDS

Seeds are Nature's messages from the past: the cellular memory which hold the promise of life. They can be large or small, round or flat, multi-faceted, twisted, cone-shaped, spheroid or no bigger than a flea. And many of them, at this moment, are in danger of disappearing, like endangered species of animals, because people have been careless and destructive. That's why it is wonderful that there is a Seed Room or "Seed Bank" in Pitchandikulam, located in a beautiful new building—very sweet and round and welcoming, which is home to 320 species of seeds from plants that have medicinal properties, and all of them are from the Auroville area.

Joss, a long-time resident of Auroville and steward of the Pitchandikulam forest, calls it the Bio-Resource Research Room. The room can be especially useful to people who are interested in local traditional knowledge, skills and technology regarding medicinal plants. The extent to which traditional knowledge can be shared and with whom is a subject of hot debate right now, as traditional practitioners of herbal medicine, for example, are being lured by pharmaceutical companies to tell and sell all. The Seed Room seeks to revitalize

## Seeds: The Inside Story

the use of medicinal plants for non-commercial purposes. It is part of a research network linking Auroville with botanical studies being done by other groups in the three Southern states. The work is coordinated by the FRLHT (The Foundation for the Revitalization of Local Health Traditions) in Bangalore.

In this room, specimens of rare land/or local seeds are stored in beautifully crafted wooden cupboards. To open a drawer is to gaze upon a row of seeds of different sizes, shapes, colours and textures—it is like looking in a jeweller's case,



so precious, so varied a delight for the eye is this collection. The reason for collecting and preserving these seeds is that the few remaining pockets of indigenous vegetation are under severe threat. So thirty "in situ" sites in reserve forests representing different plant communities have been selected for protection and research. Six other "ex situ" sites have been chosen as ethno-botanical conservation gardens. Pitchandikulam and Shakti share this work in Auroville. The nurseries at Shakti, Pitchandikulam and Forecomers now grow thousands of indigenous plants for cultivation in Auroville and the surrounding area. As part of a primary health care initiative, 17 medicinal plants useful for combating common ailments have been chosen for distribution in local villages. The traditional knowledge about these plants being collected in the Seed Room will be passed on again by the Auroville Health Workers, linking the Health

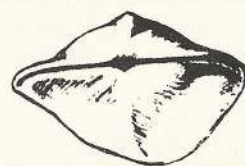
Centre and the Seed Room in this work of preserving and revitalizing the use of traditional health care.

Loganathan, together with another young botanist, Arumugam, is helping Joss with this work. Loganathan, one of the main coordinators of the Seed Bank, knows first-hand about medicinal plants: his father, from Olagapuram village near Kaliveli Tank, practises traditional medicine and still uses palm leaf manuscripts which are 400 years old. In his doctoral dissertation, Loganathan is documenting 700 plants in the bioregion. This region, of particular interest to Auroville, forms a triangle around the Kaliveli Tank with the three apexes at Tindivanam, Marrakanam and Pondicherry.

Another crucial task of the Seed Room is to gather information for the Village Level Community Register—a village census which attempts to preserve information about a community's precious resources, including plants, crafts, music, games, animals, people. Strategies for the revitalization of knowledge, techniques and resources are worked out using displays, workshops, booklets, plays and music involving local crafts-

people and artists. "This is not just a museum of the past", Joss insists, "but a living vital link to what has been lost or is in danger of being forgotten. Once the information is in the register, people can 'retrofit' the area, putting back what has been lost."

What we want is to bring the dignity back into the practice of traditional skills, including farming, and respect for local vegetation, including foodgrains. It's really knowledge about the curative and edible landscape", says Joss. "What happens if the trucks with food from Bangalore stop coming?" Joss's concern for self-sufficiency is crucial to the ongoing discussion of Auroville food sustainability. To respect and revive traditional knowledge, techniques and resources is to bring a sense of the oneness and inter-dependence of Auroville with the whole bioregion. And the Seed Room plays a vital role in this work.



Seeds drawn by Vahula

## Is Auroville Sustainable?

Sustainability' or, more commonly, 'sustainable development', is becoming the 'in' term of the 1990's, the new orthodoxy which few dare challenge. The reason is obvious: the world as we know it is facing unprecedented environmental, cultural and social challenges to its survival, and anything which promises to 'sustain' it is eagerly seized upon. But what exactly does the term 'sustainable' mean? The Brundtland Commission, in its seminal report 'Our Common Future', defined it as follows: "A sustainable society is one that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." This does identify a crucial concept like society's responsibility to the future. But, on closer examination, this definition promises more than it delivers. For what, exactly, are 'needs'? And are we talking here purely about physical factors, or also about cultural, psychological and spiritual ones? It's not clear. In fact, the more one examines the concept of sustainability as it is commonly used, the more com-

plex it becomes.

It seems worthwhile, then, to attempt to clarify and discuss some of the key ideas. At the same time, it's interesting to examine Auroville in the light of these concepts to see if its growing reputation as a demonstration site for sustainable alternatives is fully deserved.

### Environmental sustainability

The simplest version of sustainability theory and practice relates exclusively to the physical world. In this version, the key element is respect for the environment as the base of all life-forms on Earth, and the belief that all other activities should be subordinated to, or informed by, environmental needs and awareness. One would expect Auroville to score well here, not least because of the accelerated learning programme provided by the devastated condition of its plateau 25 years ago. And Aurovilians HAVE done magnificent work in restoring the fragile ecosystem of the soil through

bunding, afforestation and a variety of other organic practices. Nevertheless, gaps, key gaps, in our environmental knowledge and practices remain. One is our dangerous ignorance of the yield and recharge patterns of the aquifers underlying Auroville. Another one is the failure of the community, until very recently, to give adequate support to its organic farmers. Yet another relates to Auroville's failure to come up with an environmentally-sensitive land-use strategy which can be adopted by local village farmers, for whom ease of cultivation and profitability of crop remain the bottom line.

There are no easy solutions here. But, regarding the latter failure, at least part of the problem may lie in the tendency of many Aurovilians to be 'Auroville-centric' rather than to be aware of the needs of the larger bioregion. There may be good reasons for this. But in terms of sustainability theory, such a failure to hold the consciousness of the whole could be seen as another example of the 'monoculture of the mind' which, in its failure to under-

stand or respect larger social and environmental interconnections, is threatening civilization as we know it today.

But even when Aurovilians adopt what are generally recognized to be environmentally-friendly technologies, the effect may differ from the intention. According to an expert on solar energy systems, for example, many Indian solar panels do not generate in their lifetime the energy which went into their manufacture. Clearly, we are dealing in relativities here: solar panel manufacture remains less environmentally-threatening than the production of electricity from nuclear power or lignite, and the decision to use panels clearly indicates a commitment to 'softer' energy alternatives. But, still, it's a reminder that even when we try to act with environmental consciousness, our choices may be more limited, and less consequential, than we think. In fact, if Auroville is to qualify as a truly sustainable community in an environmental sense, it needs to do much more research upon the 'sustainability' of some of its supposedly

'soft' technologies; so that, for example, it would have a better idea about how long a steel windmill has to pump water, and how much, before it 'repays' its real production costs in fossil fuel extraction and industrial pollution. Indeed, if Auroville is to plan responsibly for the future, there is a need for a comprehensive, community-wide energy audit which would identify where all our energy comes from, how it is utilised, and at what benefit and cost to people and the environment.

### Economic sustainability

If the preservation and restoration of the environment is a central concern of sustainable practices and thinking, the existing world economy—which is powered by fossil fuel, consumerism and short-term profits—is clearly one of the prime causes of environmental devastation, and thus in urgent need of overhaul. Lester Milbraith, in his book

Continued on page 7



# SEWA: A Retirement Fund for Auroville workers

## Old age...

For most of India's 750 million strong lower class, which includes those living in the villages interspersed with Auroville, the future is not really something to look forward to. Pension funds, in the western sense of the word, are a luxury, available only for the middle and upper classes. For those who earn less than Rs 5,000 (US \$160) a month, the government has created a scheme called the Provident Fund. Participation in this fund is obligatory for enterprises that employ 20 or more workers. Employer and worker both contribute 10% of the worker's earnings to this fund, which secures the worker a pension when he or she retires. Notwithstanding bureaucratic jams which may cause long delays in the allocation of a pension, the Provident Fund is considered to be a success. But it does not cover those who work for undertakings that employ less than 20 people or those who work as gardeners, *ammass* (housekeepers), watchmen or farm helpers. Once they quit employment, their alternatives can be counted on the fingers of one hand: to depend on their land or their cattle, if they exist, or to do some village craft such as basket weaving. Many elderly people become dependent on their children or have to lean on their joint family—a tradition which is gradually breaking down due to many socio-economic and political factors as the village economy adapts to the wage-labour economic system and land is no more owned by the joint family or village community. Government support is scant. In some states of India a minimum pension of approximately Rs 200 a month (US \$ 6.5) is available for destitute old people who cannot rely on their family.

The plight of those who work in Auroville has been a concern for Meenakshi ever since she started 20 years ago, as she says, "doing something positive for them". In a small corner in Ilaingnarkal she started some educational programmes for the youth to help them improve their skills, their language and their understanding of their own roots and culture. "Nearly all those who work in Auroville were at that time totally illiterate," she recalls. Great changes have occurred since. Auroville has shown a tremendous interest. Many more places have been created where formal and informal education is given to the workers and there are night school programmes in each and every village around Auroville. "Many young people who come to work in Auroville now have passed the 8th or 10th standard at school. We even see people with a diploma in horti-

culture apply for a job in gardening. I am very happy with this development" she concludes.

Another of Meenakshi's ideals remained a dream for a long time: to secure some kind of pension for those workers of Auroville who are not covered by the Provident Fund. "We never really considered the possibility of creating our own pension fund for them. But this changed when Mrs. Mia Berden, a board member of the Dutch Foundation "De Zaaier", announced that a special donation would be forthcoming in memory of Yoka, an Aurovilian who died in 1993. We talked about creating a kind of retirement fund, and SEWA's Retirement Fund has been the result. (SEWA stands for Small Employers Welfare Administration). Dr. Henk Thomas, the chairman of this foundation who visited us in January this year, agreed with our proposed set up, and recently we received De Zaaier's donation of approximately Rs 7 lakhs (US \$ 23,500). The system started a few months ago."

There are quite a few remarkable things about SEWA. It is, firstly, a voluntary system. Any person working in Auroville, with the exception of Aurovilians, can join by paying 8.33% of his or her income, provided that his or her employer is also willing to contribute the same amount. If the worker moves to another employer within Auroville who also agrees to participate, the system continues uninterrupted. Secondly, SEWA's retirement fund envisages putting all the money thus collected into an interest bearing account in the name of the worker, and to pay the accumulated sum to the worker at the age of 60 or after 23 years of service in which s/he has contributed to the fund. In case the worker dies before this period, the entire amount will be paid to the heir or nominee. If the worker chooses to leave Auroville, s/he has the option to either leave the accumulated amount at SEWA and have it paid at reaching the age of 60 or to have it paid immediately. And lastly, SEWA intends to organise a personal accident insurance for these workers. The scheme sounds good.

But the immediate response to SEWA has been meagre. So far, only about 25 individual workers have joined, and few of Auroville's small employers have expressed an interest to participate. One reason might be the poor public relations: the information stencil published by SEWA was shabby and did not inspire confidence. "But the main reason is that we will need an individualised approach" says

Meenakshi. "A personal contact is necessary to have people respond, for there are still few *ammass*, gardeners, farm helpers, land caretakers and night and day watchmen

survey of the economic and labour conditions that prevail in Auroville; to function as an employment exchange centre where employers and employees can obtain information

to start a small business and lead a decent life. But some others would spend such a pension on alcohol; or it might be misused by someone's children. So we'll have to see every



PHOTO COURTESY OF JOY POSTCARDS

Meenakshi: "Auroville is responsible for all those workers who have for years given their energy to Auroville and who are now retiring, unable to carry on the physical work."

who can read and write sufficiently to understand the conditions and rules of SEWA. Someone will have to visit each of them to explain the advantages to participate. It would be ideal if we could address all the workers at a public occasion such as the Good Work Fair, which was organised two years ago, where all workers showed to each other and to the Aurovilians what products they made. But nobody seems to be interested to organise such a fair again, and we cannot wait". Who then is going to do this personal contact work? Meenakshi: "We, the four people who manage SEWA (Meenakshi, Nolly, Shankaraurora and Manou) do not have the capacities to do this work. We will need professional people, preferably post-graduate level, for example, someone from the Pondicherry University, to do this work".

But there is more to SEWA than its retirement fund. Under it, Meenakshi intends to do a detailed

about the availability of jobs and workers; and to function as a centre for research and information on all those who work for the many Auroville related undertakings and for private employers. It also intends to concern itself with workers' education and the education of the workers' children. Last but not least, SEWA intends looking after the interests of those who worked for years in Auroville but never saved for a pension. Says Meenakshi: "Auroville is responsible for all those workers who have for years given their energy to Auroville and who are now retiring, unable to carry on the physical work. We plan to grant those people who have worked for Auroville for at least 15 years a small pension. At present there are perhaps 10 to 15 people who would qualify. We will have to make a study of how many people there are, and in what way we should pay each of them a pension. Some of them could be granted a one time down payment, so that they can use it as seed money

individual by him or herself."

The aspirations of SEWA are high. A computerised office, professional researchers, administrative staff: all will be necessary. How is SEWA going to pay for all this? "We proposed to Foundation de Zaaier that the principle amount of De Zaaier's donation be put in a fixed deposit account with a bank. We will use part of the interest to meet the operating costs of the SEWA office. The other part of the yearly interest will be reinvested to give additional income, which will be used for meeting the needs of retired workers who never benefitted from any retirement programme" says Meenakshi.

Perhaps here lies the real difficulty for SEWA to become operational. The present interest rates of the Indian banks for long-term deposits hover around 10% a year, and it is hard to see how SEWA's operational expenses, including the purchase of office equipment and the hiring of professional researchers and administrative staff, could be paid from Rs 70,000 a year; let alone how there could be any balance left for reinvestment, in order to provide a pension to those who retire now. Some re-thinking about the use of De Zaaier's donation and the envisaged retirement policies might therefore be necessary in order to make SEWA's retirement fund the success it deserves to become.

Carel



## Is Auroville Sustainable?

(Continued from page 5)

'Revisioning the Future', defines an alternative, sustainable economic system as one which "preserves and enhances a well-functioning ecosystem; provides humans with essential goods and services; provides opportunities for fulfilling work; achieves and maintains economic justice; and utilizes resources at a sustainable rate."

How far does the present Auroville economy match up to this? On the face of it, not too badly; which may only be saying that the production aspect of our economy is not yet big enough to make a major adverse impact upon people and the environment. Yet there are dangers associated with how the present Auroville economy operates. If we examine three of our largest productive units, for example, we can see that, while they are unpolluting, human-scaled and employee-friendly, they are also almost exclusively dependent upon export orders for their survival. The productive units argue that only through exporting their products can they generate sufficient profits. But export-oriented production does not necessarily mobilise the intrinsic resources of the bioregion itself—like local food production for local needs—which could provide a certain security in the event of changes in, or the collapse of, international markets. For to make one's survival dependent upon exports is to tie oneself directly to the whims and uncertainties of a global economic system which is driven, primarily, by private interest and short-term goals.

This critique can be pushed further. For when one considers that a signifi-

cant proportion of Auroville's economy is run upon 'ghost' money—i.e. money which is not generated locally—one sees that Auroville is far from being economically self-sustaining, or, indeed, a model for anything radically new in the economic sphere.

And yet...when Mother spoke of an Auroville which would be, or tend to be, 'self-supporting', she emphasized that it did not mean insulating itself from the world; on the contrary, she emphasised that the whole world should participate in the building of Auroville. So, clearly other considerations need to be taken into account when we try to define sustainability in its most comprehensive sense. What could they be?

### Psychological sustainability

One school of thought emphasises not only physical factors but also psychological ones in determining what is or is not sustainable. This argument paraphrases Confucius: social stability or sustainability is finally only possible when individuals are inwardly at peace, harmonised, creative. Consequently, psychological sustainability implies, at the social level, justice, freedom, equality; at the individual level, security, creativity, a sense of selfhood and the means to give it expression.

Certain radical critics of present civilisation make a larger point. And that is that the present industrialized civilizations are ultimately self-destructive, unsustainable, because they are the product of a psychology which has become over-specialized, over-dependent upon the rational, analytical mode, so losing its intuitive understanding of the natural world. Undoubtedly, an over-dependence upon the mental mode—as evidenced in the past century's elevation of science and technology to the status of religion—is dangerous. But the world is more complex than such critics suggest: no one thing can claim to be the simple cause of another, nor can the consequences of any act be neatly labelled 'good' or 'bad'. For the period which such critics claim has seen the 'disastrous' triumph of the analytical mode of thought—i.e. Western civilization of the past 450 years—has also witnessed one of humanity's greatest cultural flowerings.

### Spiritual sustainability

Clearly, then, both the physical and psychological models of sustainability are inadequate, and need to be supplemented by something else. And this is where the spiritual perspective becomes all-important. For Sri Aurobindo emphasises that Man in his present condition is inherently unsustainable, since he is merely a 'transitional being' in the ongoing process of evolution:

"Even as the animal man has been largely converted into a mentalised and, at the top, a highly mentalised humanity, so too, now or

in the future, an evolution or conversion ...of the present type of humanity into a spiritualised humanity is the need of the race and surely the intention of Nature ..."

It is only through a spiritualized—or, rather, in Sri Aurobindo's more exact terminology—'supramentalized' consciousness that Mankind will become the instrument of a power and wisdom able to transform the world in its totality.

Sri Aurobindo's explication of the emergence of life and of human history as essentially a process of spiritual evolution is an important corrective to the simplistic critics of present scientific/technological society. For while he agrees with them that "the human mind has achieved in certain directions an enormous development while in others it stands arrested and bewildered...", he also sees that mankind's development of logical thought was an essential stage in its evolution; the means by which it swept away the superstitions and false dogma which at one time encrusted a spiritual truth, clearing the way, as he put it, for "a new departure and a surer advance".

How, then, does the present Auroville rate in terms of progress towards what might be termed spiritual sustainability? It's impossible to gauge. One thing is worth mentioning, however. And that is that certain aspects of our organization, when viewed from the perspective of spiritual evolution, acquire a new significance. For example, our loose network of work groups, each with its own way of operating and with

frequent changes of membership, must appear extremely unsustainable from a business-efficiency point of view. But the fact that they have lasted so long indicates that they are plugging into a deeper truth. Paradoxically, the key seems to lie in their very 'incompleteness', their lack of stable structure and fixed process, for this allows them to be open to change, to the subtle but infinitely powerful incursions of another Force. And it is in this sense—the fact that, as Mother put it, Auroville is already there, complete, in another dimension, and merely needs to be manifested in the physical—that Auroville can be said to be ultimately sustainable, whatever the eccentricities of its present condition.

One important question remains. If there are different aspects of sustainability, are there not times when one aspect may seem to contradict another? If we look at Matrimandir, for example, this seems to be the case. For, on the purely physical plane, Matrimandir appears to be horribly unsustainable, constructed as it is of tons of cement and steel (to say nothing of the enormous irrigation requirements of its gardens). Yet, in its role as spiritual focus and transmitter it surely plays a key role in sustaining and harmonizing forces on a scale we cannot conceive.

... All of which suggests that a lot more time and thought needs to be spent on the concept of sustainability before we can term it sustainable!

Alan

## Brief news Brief news Brief news Brief news

### SOLAR BOOST

Thanks to a generous government subsidy, 114 solar-powered pumps have been installed in various communities of Auroville during the past month in addition to the 5 pumps installed previously. This amounts to a 900% increase on the previously installed capacity of photovoltaics in Auroville, making a total now of 131 kilowatts.

### Minister visits Auroville

Mr. Madhav Rao Scindia, the Union Minister of India for Human Resources, whose portfolio includes Auroville, visited the community for the first time on 30th April. He was taken to see the Matrimandir and was given a short overview of the various activities of Auroville. The Working Committee intends to follow up this meeting by sending the Minister a more detailed report on Auroville.

### Nirodbaran visits again

Despite fears that his health would not permit him anymore to visit Auroville, Nirodbaran attended a meeting of the Savitri Study Circle in March. This time, Nirodbaran shared

with Aurovilians some memorable reminiscences of being Sri Aurobindo's scribe for the epic *Savitri*.

### Blue mountains

*Les montagnes bleues* is the title of a French novel written by Yanne Dimay ('our' Yanne, part of the AUROVILLE TODAY editorial team until recently) and published recently in France by Flammarion Publishing House. The story is set in the Kodai Hills, and the main character, a tree-planter of American origin, has lived there for many years and made India his home. Many elements of the story, based upon the writer's own experiences of 20 years in Auroville, will be recognizable for Aurovilians (not only treeplanters) and for all who have allowed themselves to be touched by the soul of India.

### Weather permitting

In south India, the hottest and driest month of the year is May. But this year, as we were

bracing ourselves for temperatures of over 35°C, the weather gods gave us a shiver of surprise. During the first week a depression in the Bay of Bengal brought us 36 hours of high winds and rain and a total rainfall of 20 cms.

The month is not yet over at the time of writing, but it has already been classified as one of the six wettest Mays in the past 70 years.

### Auroville artists exhibit abroad

A number of Auroville artists have exhibitions abroad this year. Franz Fassbender will be exhibiting screen-prints, drawings and quilt designs in Soest, Germany, between 7th July and 27th August; Pierre Legrand will be exhibiting his most recent work at the prestigious Fondation Arp, Paris, between 17th September and 12th November; and Mayaura will be travelling and exhibiting her paintings in the U.S. this summer.

### Cashew pest control

An article in a leading Indian newspaper, *The Hindu* of 10th May, opens with the following paragraph: "Field observations by scientists at the Auroville Green-work Resource Centre (AGRC)

have shown that the major pests of cashewnut could be effectively managed by ecological methods. 'The naturally occurring biological control agents such as the parasites and predators of crop enemies and

neem seed kernel extracts have proved to be effective in checking the major pests of cashewnut in this belt' said M. Thirumalai, a young entomologist at AGRC."

AUROVILLE TODAY provides information about Auroville, an international township in South-India, on a monthly basis and is distributed to Aurovilians and friends of Auroville in India and abroad. It does not necessarily reflect the views of the community as a whole.

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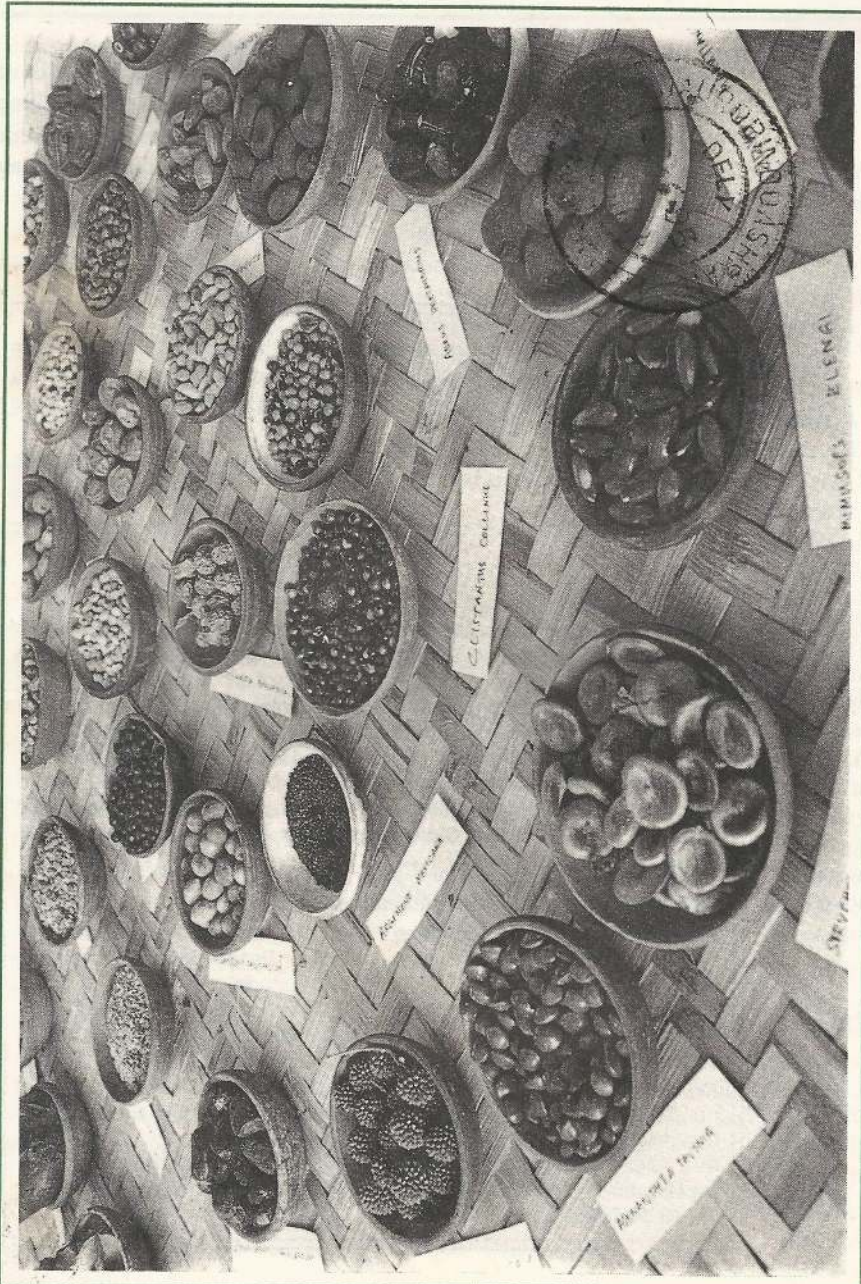
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Seed exhibition at the ARISE organic farming conference

PHOTO: JOHN MANDEEN

## Dreams on Silk

### A portrait of Firooza

Being familiar with the geometric shapes she has painted on T-shirts worn by several Aurovillians, and knowing her as a soprano singing in the Auroville Choir, the unimaginative title "Silk Art - Paintings by Firooza" intrigued me enough to have a look at the exhibition of her work in March at the Visitors Centre.

It was a surprise! Delicate paintings on small pieces of silk, beautifully framed by the artist herself, showed another dimension in her style of work. Curious about the woman behind the triangles and soft silk shapes, I cycled out to her house in Grace on a hot Sunday morning in April...

Tineke

Originally Firooza comes from Bombay. After completing her schooling, she followed courses in art, water-colours, still-life and textile design for a few months. "I did not complete the classes because I came to Auroville in the meantime." That was in 1973.

When Roger Anger, who was at that time the chief architect for Auroville, saw some of her art work, he asked her to come and work in Aurofuture, at that time the architects' office. That is where she learned model-making and became a draughtsman. "All that I did at that time comes to my aid right now, because I make all the *passe-partouts* (frames and mountings) for my paintings myself. I can do the complete job thanks to the earlier work experience."

She lived for four years in Aspiration and one year in the Nursery, after which she went to Germany. An intended one-year stay became twelve long years. She married, worked as a foreign language secretary and did drawing work for an engineering office. At the same time, she was an active member of the Berlin Philharmonic Choir for nine years. "I appreciated the German perfection and the discipline. After work, I had to rush to be on time. There would be 124 pairs of eyes looking at you reprovably if you were even one minute late! The rehearsals were hard work. But with the choir you could really present yourself with confidence. It was a good experience to do something at that level of perfection without any prior vocal training."

"But then the number of rehearsals per week increased, forcing me to discontinue. At that time, most of my office colleagues were painting silk scarves as a hobby. So I thought that it could be a nice change, particularly as it is not place- and time-bound. Instead of painting a scarf, however, I copied an oil painting by Monet. My first contact with silk was enough — I was hooked. Silk is a unique material, very special, with its shimmering texture which reflects the light. I painted in the evenings and on week-ends for one and a half years, until a friend talked me into showing the work to a gallery. It was quite amazing. I had five exhibitions in Berlin in the next eighteen months."

"I did a few 'realistic' paintings, but I can express myself best in the abstract-figurative style. This way of painting is contrary to my Virgo nature. When I paint my compulsion for order, precision and mental control take a welcome break. The paintings are usually multi-layered and until now I have experimented a lot with different types of paints and techniques. Some paintings take a few minutes, some several weeks, or even months. It is a very concentrated work which I enjoy immensely. Actually, in Germany I painted just to relax, a pleasant change after several hours of office work. I was not particularly interested in trying to communicate something to others. I just painted, and then I looked at the result. I got quite a few surprises, good and bad!"

When she returned to Auroville in 1990 it felt as if it was eleven years too late. And at the same time as if she had never left. "Since 1973 I've been an Aurovillian. Apparently I had to go through the German experience. This experience has proved invaluable for my expressions in art."

Back in Auroville, she started working as a librarian at Aurelec, where she also learned



PHOTO: JOHN MANDEEN

desk-top publishing. "After the German pace, working in the library at Aurelec was relaxing, a badly-needed break. I was also involved in other responsibilities — helping with sports, reading English to village children, participating in Kalamitra (the cultural co-ordination group). Until the house construction was completed, I could not start painting on silk due to the lack of proper space. In the meantime, however, I did some graphic designs and painting on T-shirts."

Besides painting, Firooza is also involved in the sports programme for the school children, together with her partner Yves. "A lot of my time and energy goes into the sports programme. It is far more than just that one and a half hour at the sports ground every day. I find the combination of sports-work and painting optimal."

This was her first exhibition in Auroville. "I wanted to introduce my research and work on silk painting to Aurovillians. It was a most gratifying experience. I rarely had to explain anything to Aurovillians. In Germany, it was more complex. People required mental theories and explanations. They persisted in analysing the paintings, although I kept saying: 'Just look at them. If they tell you something, fine!' This is not something you can tell a person in the West. I felt that the people here approached the paintings in a less mental way, more open to the subtlety of the work."

Our tea finished, we go to Firooza's studio where she shows more of her work. And then she lets me have a go at silk painting. Patiently she helps me with my first strokes. Before I realize it, I can't stop anymore. I'm also hooked!