

The Narikuravas of Karuvadikuppam: Gypsies, Garbage, and Globalization

As a kid, I remember my mother buying skeins of brightly colored wool from Tibetan women traders. She would wash and dry the wool, and then in those crisp, bright, winter mornings I would sit cross-legged, patiently trying to unravel those dense, knotted skeins and roll them into a tidy ball. It was tricky. It was all an interconnected mass, and you had to know which end to pull and which knot to untangle first. Otherwise, if you randomly picked at a strand, you would end up entangling it all even more.

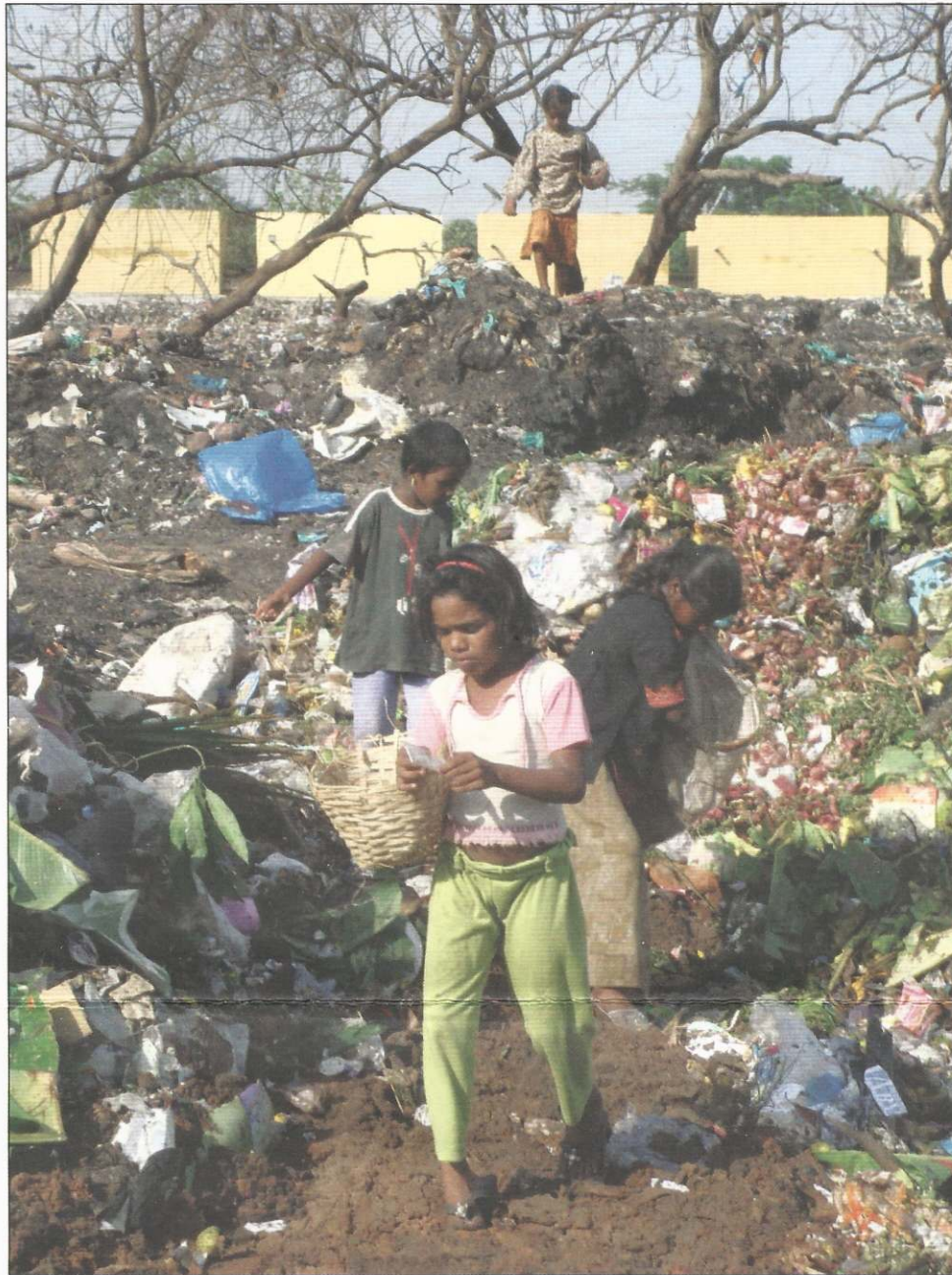
As a concerned citizen, interested in issues of environmental and social justice, I have come to see the morass of India's developmental challenges as a huge interconnected mess of issues. Like the entangled skeins of wool that I tried to straighten as a child, I find that every time I take up an environmental issue, I get mired in another environmental or social issue.

Waste management

The issue that I first got involved with, the first strand that I sought to pull, was waste management. One day, when walking in the Forecomers canyon, I suddenly saw big dense, clouds of smoke billowing out from the southern horizon. I started running, for I thought that the forest was on fire. And then I stopped – that sharp, acrid smell of burning plastic was unmistakable. It was not the forest, but the garbage in Karuvadikuppam, the dumpsite of the city of Pondicherry, which is about a km from Forecomers and 4 kms from Matrimandir, that was aflame.

The Karuvadikuppam dumpsite is probably as old as Auroville. But for the first few decades of its existence, no one was particularly bothered by the dumpsite. The problem, and here the string already starts to warp into a larger issue, was globalization. When the full force of globalization was unleashed by the World Trade Organization in the mid-nineties, the impact on India, which increasingly opened its doors to economic liberalization, was unmistakable. It seemed that India went overnight from a sleepy socialist country to a rapacious capitalist economy and consumerist society. Coupled with population explosion, which happened at the same time, the impact of globalization on India, measured in the quantity and quality of the waste it generated, was frightening.

Take the Karuvadikuppam dumpsite. In the early years of its existence, people were not particularly bothered by it because the waste being dumped was almost totally organic. Plastic, especially the ubiquitous plastic bags that are choking India's landscape now, simply did not exist. Today, of the reported 400 tons of municipal solid waste being dumped daily at Karuvadikuppam, 10% or 40 tons of it is plastic waste. When waste is unsegregated, then the organic matter decomposes and produces the highly inflammable gas methane, which auto-combusts and sets the plastic component of the waste aflame, producing toxic fumes. Open air burning of plastic creates some of the most deadly toxins known to science – dioxins, furans and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) – that are released into the air, soil, and water and ingested by all. That day at Forecomers, as I choked on the dark toxic fumes of burning plastic, I resolved to join the small group of Aurovilian volunteers who were working on this issue. Our efforts, coupled with efforts of residents in the villages and Pondicherry, seem to be finally bearing fruit – currently the National Green Tribunal has issued a court-stay order on further dumping at Karuvadikuppam till the matter is fully examined and resolved. This issue was



Narikurava children at the Karuvadikuppam dumpsite

being neatly wrapped up into a tidy ball. Well, almost...

The Narikuravas

There was always a loose end sticking out: The issue of the gypsies. To use the common appellation, "gypsies" for this group of wandering nomads, I realized later, was as problematic and misleading as early foreigners dubbing the residents south of the Sindhu river as Hindus. As with the Hindus, the gypsies are not a homogeneous group. This particular tribe, native to Tamil Nadu, were known more commonly as "Narikuravas." An amalgamation of the Tamil words "Nari" (fox) and "Kurava" (people), this tribe of hunters had earned the epithet "Narikuravas" or "fox-people" due to their adeptness in hunting and trapping foxes.

I remember, when I first moved to Auroville, I would occasionally see this tribe camped in the fields adjacent to the Kuyilapalayam pond. Even though I grew up in India, I had seldom seen people who were as impoverished as this tribe. The tents they pitched as homes were tattered rags thrown over a pole. They seemed a wretched lot – wild with unkempt hair, barefeet, and scantily dressed in black rags and beads. I was to later learn that the poverty of the Narikuravas was largely due to social injustice – they had been subject to discrimination and oppression for over a century. During the colonial rule, the British placed the Narikuravas under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 – a hugely repressive act by which the British sought to control and enslave the nomadic forest tribes of India. Even though, after Independence the Criminal Tribes Act was repealed, the law could not erase the social stigma of being branded and treated as "hereditary criminals" and routinely harassed by the police as such. Even today the Narikuravas live on the fringes of society, ostracized and exploited by more privileged social groups. Also, by not listing the Narikuravas under the list of Scheduled Tribes, the Government of India systematically deprived the tribe of social benefits that are given to officially recognized Scheduled Tribes.

As hunters, the bare-chested male members of the tribe often had a country rifle slung on their shoulders or homemade catapults in their hands. The gun seemed an incongruous accessory of their attire. And later, I learnt that some of the Narikuravas, in some bizarre twisted measure of affirmative action, had been personally granted a gun license by the erstwhile MGR, the popular and charismatic leader of Tamil Nadu.

I also remember that whenever the Narikuravas showed up, Aurovilians in the neighboring communities would complain about their pet cats disappearing. Later, I was to learn that the Narikuravas consider cat meat a delicacy. Cat biriyani is the main course at their wedding feasts and on other special occasions. Still, because of their migratory patterns, the impact of the Narikuravas on Auroville was minimal. They would pitch camp for a couple of weeks in Kuyilapalayam and would then be gone for months.

Trouble started, at least from my perspective as a resident of Forecomers, when this particular tribe of Narikuravas came across the Karuvadikuppam dumpsite and decided to settle there. Given their abject poverty, the dumpsite was a goldmine to this tribe. I am told that children forage through and eat from the dump (and this is a dump where we have found biomedical waste, e-waste and hazardous metal waste). The Narikuravas who had guns and catapults shot, killed, and ate the crows that constantly circled the dumpsite.

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And the more enterprising adults worked as rag-pickers – picking up and selling anything that had recyclable value. Metal waste was greatly prized, and this is where this strand of my story joins and knots the other issue of mismanagement of waste – the Narikuravas reportedly set the dump on fire to extract the metal waste more easily, unaware, of course, of the health hazards caused by burning plastic.

Poaching

A few years ago, when the region was flush with funds for development after the devastation caused by the tsunami, blind philanthropy in the form of a French NGO built concrete houses for the Narikuravas, turning their makeshift camp into a permanent settlement. For, in all likelihood, when Pondicherry stopped dumping municipal waste in Karuvadikuppam, the Narikuravas would have once again broken up camp and taken to the road. But now this migratory tribe was permanently settled. Also, ironically, and this was an issue that we brought up in court, by giving building permission for this settlement right inside the dumpyard, the Pondicherry Government violated the national law that a “buffer zone of no-development” should be maintained around a landfill site.

The long, checkered history of India’s development is routinely marked by such actions where the alleviation of one problem simultaneously aggravates another problem. By giving a gun license to the Narikuravas and legalizing their status as hunters, MGR was unwittingly encouraging the tribe to break the law. For as of 1972, apart from crows, practical-

ly all wildlife is under legal protection. And yet, as the Narikuravas quickly learnt, there was an illegal market and insatiable appetite in certain sections of the Tamil society for the meat of exotic species of both birds and animals. The meat of monitor lizards is in demand in bars, especially during festivals like Diwali. And water fowl, depending upon the species, fetch a price of Rs. 100-500 per kg. Rather than killing cats and crows for their own consumption, the Narikuravas took to poaching wildlife. At Forecomers, we rescued a kite with a bullet hole through its wing, we found severed heads of jackals, and each dawn was pockmarked by the sound of gunshots.

I found myself picking up another strand – another environmental issue to fight – that of poaching. A couple of young wildlife enthusiasts from Pondicherry helped us to try and curb poaching in the area. Earlier, the strategy was to go down to the canyon upon hearing gunshots or occasionally to set up an overnight camp in the hope to catch the Narikuravas red-handed in the act. One could get a conviction, only if a person was caught in the act of killing an endangered species. And despite all our stealth, this was almost impossible to achieve. Then one day, my friends set up a ruse where they approached the Narikuravas and said that they were willing to pay a good sum of money for exotic bird meat. To their surprise, instead of hunting in the Forecomers canyon, the Narikuravas took them to the Kaluvelli tank and started shooting migratory birds. The Narikuravas were immediately arrested, and their guns seized by the police. Later, we were to learn of the problems in the licensing of the guns. Since 2000, no new licens-

es have been issued by the Tamil Nadu Government, so licensed owners often lend or rent their guns to others. The Pondicherry Government has to a large extent revoked gun licenses, but the Narikuravas of Karuvadikuppam live in Pondicherry territory while holding guns that have a Tamil Nadu license.

There was a temporary respite from poaching in the area. A few months ago, however, when Pondicherry stopped dumping its municipal waste in Karuvadikuppam, poaching in the Forecomers canyon escalated to a new level, presumably because the Narikuravas had lost an important source of revenue from rag-picking. Apart from hearing gunshots, stewards in the area found long wire traps laid on the ground. Then last month, in the worst incident of all, Rik, the steward of Success, was walking his dog in this area, when suddenly he heard a loud explosion just a few meters from him. Looking back, he found that his pet dog was dead on the ground with its jaw blown off. The next day, a forest ranger came with his posse for an investigation. He confirmed that meat bombs, which detonate on contact, are a known means of poaching. The bombs are generally hidden in the undergrowth and thus hard to find. Apart from informing the Forest Departments and the media, there seemed little else that we could do on the issue.

More recently, however, we have established a contact with a non-governmental organization called Samugam that works with the Narikuravas of Karuvadikuppam. For, it is clear before I can wrap up all the loose ends and the inter-related issues of waste management and

increased poaching, one needs to have a systematic approach to educate as well as socially and economically rehabilitate the Narikuravas. The task is easier said than done, for given their long history of mistreatment by mainstream society, the Narikuravas are not an easy population to work with. Still, we are hoping to raise some capital to engage in the Narikuravas in other legal income-generating ventures.

In the larger picture, given the spread of urbanization and its attendant problems in India, I am aware that the fragile forest ecosystem that Auroville seeks to protect may soon be a lost battle. It took us forty years to change a barren landscape to a relatively healthy ecosystem, and I, for one, am aware that in the next forty years we may again see a reversal back to a denuded landscape due to the environmental impact of human beings. Recently, my partner and I were watching the sunset from our terrace – the sky illuminated with twilight colors and the trees silhouetted against the approaching dark. The serenity of the moment was made even more precious by the knowledge of its evanescence. I turned to my partner who has been involved with the reforestation of Forecomers area since a long time, and asked, “Knowing what you know now – that you may not be able to protect these forests you have helped re-forest – would you have still engaged in this task?” The answer was an unequivocal “yes”.

I realized that, despite the odds, despite the fact that there are no neat resolutions to developmental challenges, it is the effort of seeking to build a better world that imparts meaning to our transient lives.

Bindu

BUILDING THE CITY

Promesse RIP?

In April 2008, Auroville Today reported on the history of Promesse, one of Auroville’s earliest communities, and wondered if it would be able to survive or if Auroville Today’s next report would read ‘Promesse RIP’.

“Promesse RIP is perhaps the best next step. Because for us who are living here, there is no peace at all,” says Srinivasamurthy, the Finance and Administrative Officer of the Auroville Foundation who made Promesse his home in 1995. “Life in Promesse has only deteriorated over the last years. The community has been reduced in size, first because of encroachment by the nearby village, and then because part of the community was acquisitioned by the Highway Authorities for the new, four-lane, Villupuram-Pondicherry National Highway. Now we are living right next to a highway, with a daily-increasing level of traffic noise and truck parking. Then there is the constant vandalism from the nearby village. And if this isn’t enough, we are fighting an ownership claim by the Indian Customs. It’s time to move out.”

Promesse has 18 houses and is home to about 40 people. Fourteen houses are occupied by Aurovilians and four, built by the Auroville

Foundation, by members of its staff. The other houses are old and have asbestos-cement roofs. “Some people have been living here since Promesse started in 1965,” says Srinivasamurthy. “Then it was a beautiful place. Even today, with all the problems we are having, it is still very beautiful. The place has ‘a presence’, a high positive energy which is felt by many people. And quite a few have an emotional attachment to this place, as many Auroville children were born here.”

So what about the problems? The ownership claim of the Indian Customs is a minor issue, it seems. “One part of Promesse, about 3-4 acres with a few houses on it, was acquired from the Indian Customs in 1965. This is the part they now claim is theirs, as the transfer of ownership was never registered. About 10 years ago we tried to solve this and contacted the Customs for the original ownership documents which are required to register the transfer. But that document could not be traced as it dates back to the 1940s or 1950s. Only for that reason the official transfer never happened. So we have a



The new highway now borders Promesse (left) with trucks parked on the other side of the road.

We have a small place called “Promesse”, where there will be six or eight rooms, an office which will be Auroville’s first administrative office, and also a guest house with a few rooms, five or six rooms for visitors. It’s quite a small place, with a pretty garden and trees, on the Madras road. It’s on Auroville’s outer border.

The Mother to Satprem, 3 May 1967, Mother’s Agenda vol. VIII, p. 130

strong case and we are not worried about their claim,” he explains.

The contacts with the nearby village are much more of a problem. “The relationship is not good,” says Srinivasamurthy. “Right inside Promesse is a small piece of *perambokke* land (public land), and the villages use any opportunity to cause problems because of it. Then there was the problem of access to the village temple. The villagers have broken the fence of Promesse and split the community in two to make a passage. This particularly affected the Arul Vazhi School and the caretaker Aurovilian house. We agreed, hoping it would lead to an improved relationship. But now the passage has become a 20-foot wide dirt road, the temple is being enlarged and we have lost control over the smaller piece. Lacking a compound

wall around both parts of the community, vandalism is rife.”

Less than a kilometre from Promesse is Service Farm, one of the earliest farms bought for Auroville. It is a large piece of land of about 14 acres where two caretaker Aurovilian families are living. The farm is in a bad state. “We looked into the option of developing the farm, but it would require a huge investment without any meaningful returns. That fact, its location far from Auroville, and the high value of the land situated near the National Highway, led to the FAMC’s decision to mark it for sale or land exchange,” says Srinivasamurthy.

The best option, he feels, is to develop Promesse and Service Farm together, or jointly exchange them for land in the Auroville city and greenbelt area. “This is very valuable land and it is possible for outside entrepreneurs to develop Promesse and Service Farm in a business model where Promesse can house the part which needs to be close to the road and Service Farm the production units,” he says. “In case these lands are sold, part of the proceeds could be used to create housing.” Have any other uses for Promesse been discussed? “We have been talking of using it for an Auroville information centre with boutique, for the traffic coming from Pondicherry. But this would require substantial investment, which, in all probability, is not available,” he says.

Whatever the decision, Auroville should get ready to accommodate the Aurovilians living in Promesse and Service Farm, as well as the staff of the Auroville Foundation. “We are talking about 4 staff members with their families,” says Srinivasamurthy. “All of us have been working for Auroville for a long time, some for the last 30 years or so, and we feel equally committed to Auroville as many Aurovilians and Newcomers. Perhaps there would be no mismatch if these people would come and live inside an Auroville community.”

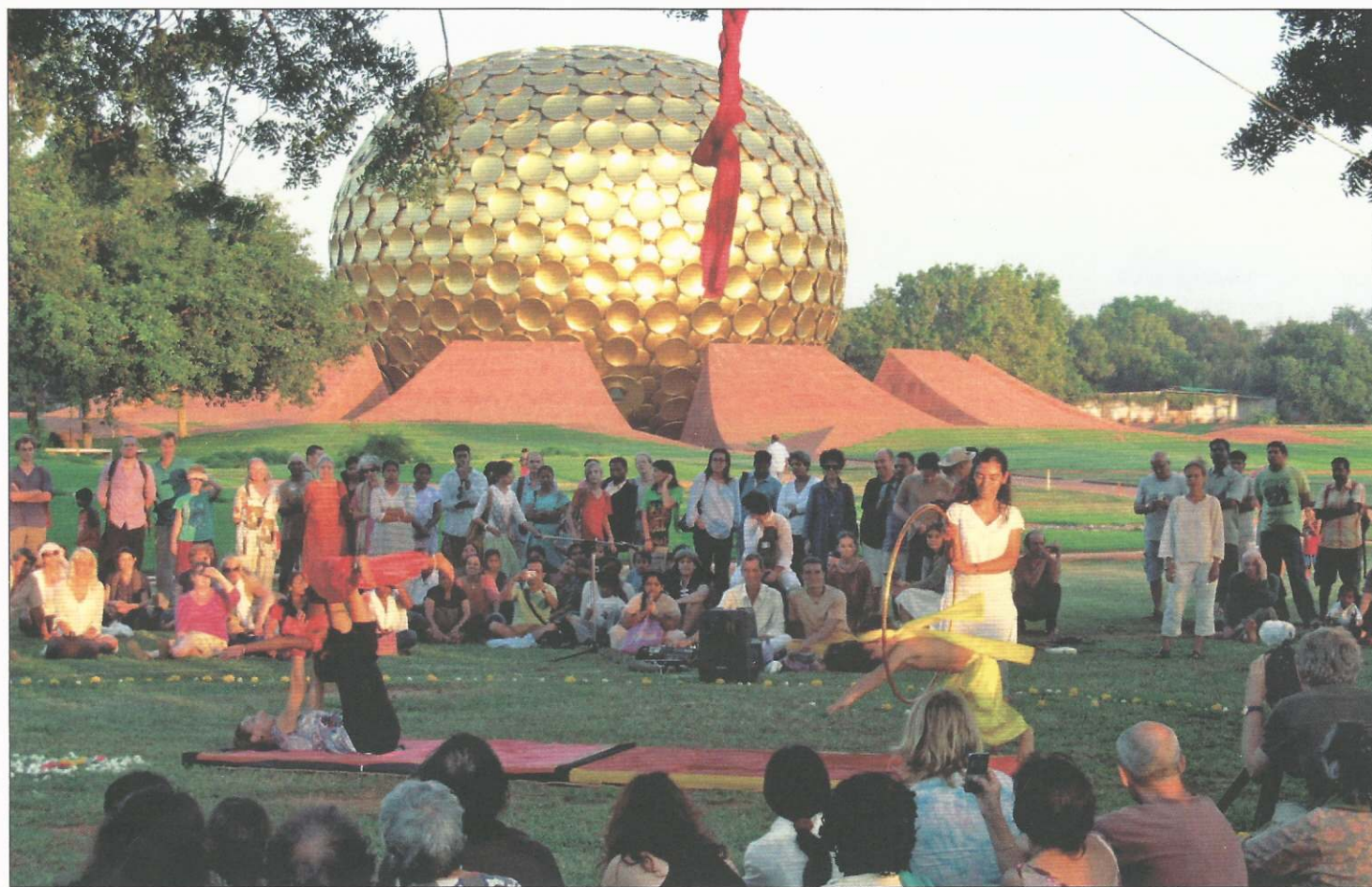
In conversation with Carel

In 1985 Arul Vazhi (‘the path of grace’), a school for Morattandi village children, was started in Promesse. Arul Vazhi School has five areas of activity: (1) a kindergarten group for 25 children aged 4 to 6 years; (2) a body awareness and cultural expression group for about 80 children aged 6 to 16 years, in the evenings; (3) a training programme for drop-out girls aged 16 to 18 years; (4) a Pudu Ulagam group of 25 children attending middle and high schools in the neighbourhood, aged 11 to 18 years; and (5) an unending education programme with the participation of Promesse community children and elders.

In November 1968 a progress report listed the buildings at Promesse: “4 hexagonal experimental huts, 12 patio apartments (six of which were created by renovating the existing customs houses), a dining room building, a post office, 2 coco-leaf [keet] huts for storage of building materials, 1 [keet] hut for workers, a guest house with space for six air-conditioned rooms and a large reception room (in construction). Most of the patio apartments became living quarters. The four hexagonal huts, experiments for first-phase building in the future, also functioned for some time as architectural offices and a small weekly school of architecture. Lack of funds prevented the completion of the guest house, which instead became the maternity clinic not only for Auroville, but for some Ashram babies as well. Babies born in Promesse were often named by the Mother, with Auroson, Aurofilio, Auronanda, Aurora, Junauro, Aura and Aurokumar leading the way. Altogether about 70 babies were named by the Mother, including some born to Aurovilians overseas. From 1972 onwards, other birthing facilities became available and progressively fewer births took place at the clinic in Promesse. They stopped completely after 1974.

Elle Rasink in ‘Showing Promise’, Auroville Today # 230, April 2008

The 12.12.12 programme



The 12-12-12 programme in the Matrimandir Gardens

The special date 12.12.12 was observed with a three-day programme at the Unity Pavilion, running from the 11th to the 13th. In a conversation of 10th November 1954, the Mother had said, "Twelve: that's the number of Aditi, of Mahashakti. So it applies to everything; all her action has twelve aspects... It is the symbol of manifestation, double perfection, in essence and in manifestation, in the creation." The Mother had said that the twelve outer petals of her symbol "represent the 12 powers of the Mother manifested for her work," and she named them "sincerity, humility, gratitude, perseverance, aspiration, receptivity, progress, courage, goodness, generosity, goodness, and peace." The programme, initiated by Jaya and Luigi, who were later joined by Genevieve and others from the CIRHU group, was funded with a grant from the Dutch Stichting de Zaaier. The event focused on inwardly experiencing these 12 powers or qualities more deeply, and considering how they may be applied to various areas of research and work for human unity within Auroville and beyond.

With a group size varying from 30-130 made up of Aurovilians, guests, and visitors, there was a nice mix of activities related to concentration in the body, meditations, small group discussions, and general presentations and performances. Each of the three days began with concentration in the body, led by Aloka and Aryamani. There was also an afternoon session on the 11th led by Anandi on Mudra-chi, utilizing movements or gestures to physically express several of the Mother's powers, and on the afternoon of the 12th a dance meditation led by Dariya. After the latter, for six minutes of which we danced slowly with another

participant while maintaining eye contact, the line from *Savitri* came strongly to mind: "All the grey inhibitions were torn off"! Various people reported that these physical activities helped them to open to and receive these spiritual powers in their inner consciousness and body, and were appreciated by them. The guided meditations that were a part of these activities, as well as several other meditations that occurred during the course of the programme all seemed especially powerful. They seemed to reach peaks during an OM choir led by Narad with approximately 130 participants on the evening of the 11th, the meditation around the Peace Table at noon on the 12th, and the general programme in the Matrimandir Gardens on the evening of the 12th coordinated by Aurelio and the Matrimandir team, in which approximately 650-800 people participated. This latter programme included Kalu from the Eluciole Circus school leading the children of Nandanam in acrobatics, followed by a playing of the Russian Peace Bells, readings from *Savitri*, and a candle lit meditation under the Banyan Tree.

A focus of the three-day programme was the small group work and discussions which considered how the 12 powers of the Mother could be applied to various areas of work and research. There were 12 areas selected, based on previous research of CIRHU:

1. Integral planning and development
2. New economy
3. Integral health and healing
4. Youth that never ages
5. Creative culture
6. Forest, farming, parks, and city in the green
7. Appropriate technologies

8. Unending education
9. Innovative architecture and cityscapes
10. Communication of the future and transformational networking
11. Human science and society of the future
12. Regional planning

Small groups were formed in the various areas, though due to the numbers of participants, not all of the areas were selected for discussion. These groups met on each of the three days, though on each day some new people came and others left or shifted to a different topic. The topic area was to be considered at the individual, collective, and universal levels, respectively, on the three successive days. On each day, several of the 12 powers of the Mother were selected for consideration of how they could be applied to the selected issue. Each person in the group was to inwardly reflect on the quality and how it was related to the area of application, and to write on post-it notes a word or sentence reflecting these connections. These were assembled on poster boards, sometimes in themes and sometimes randomly, and in follow-up sessions, presented in summary to the whole group.

For example, as a participant in the group on "unending education," I was intrigued by how interesting and informative the application of the Mother's qualities to education could be. Each quality could be related to the topic in different ways and on multiple levels. We also found interesting relations between the different qualities we had selected and how they interrelated in their application to education. Specifically, our selections revealed to us how the "courage" to face one's own limitations and to be open to new knowledge or ways of being was intrinsically intertwined with "receptivity" and making "progress," whether in formal educational settings or in life as a whole. This creative approach was particularly satisfying in that each person could contribute their ideas and perceptions in an open, uncompetitive way, without criticism or censure. It became clear that this creative, intuitive approach to development and problem solving, utilizing the 12 powers of the Mother, had great potential for future work on these and other issues, and there was a desire among various participants to carry this work forward.

Among the few oral presentations that were made, Genevieve Hirschler discussed the work of the Lila CIRHU group, which had been formed in 2008 inspired by the vision of Roger, as a plat-

form for researchers to work together towards human unity, for sharing of knowledge and education, and for transforming vision into action. We also learned from Shanta about her work on the Matrimandir Petals, including the selection of their colours and the creation of the mandalas. She explained a process in which the colours chose the way, not her, but at the same time, there were accommodations made to the tastes of the community, and challenges associated with the effects of the harsh environment on the colours. She also spoke about the intuitive process of creating the mandalas based on a few basic guidelines from Roger. In another presentation, Pushkar explained his process of creating music expressing the twelve qualities of the Mother, based on the physical properties of sound which resolve into twelve varieties, and combining these with qualities and varieties of the human voice. A fourth presentation by Uriel Deveaud focused on a CIRHU project to present an open source electronic interface for Auroville or Auroville-related researchers and research consumers to present and find information. It includes an interactive map based on the site for the research within Auroville, a questionnaire about the research that includes information about the relation of the research to several of the 12 qualities, and an archive of the research. It is expected to be functional and accessible within a few weeks at www.cirhu.org.

The programme included two cultural performances: a cute dance by a group of Tamil students from Arul Vazhi school, each representing a quality of the Mother's symbol, and songs from around the world by Anna and Tyago.

In another presentation, Dariya presented reflections on her work of organizing more than 260 people in and outside Auroville to concentrate on the 12 qualities, one each day, over 12 consecutive days. This was done during the last 12 days of November, again during the first 12 days of December, and is being done once again during the last 12 days of December. She read reflections of several of the participants, some experiencing a definite atmosphere for the day being established through their concentrations. She also reported on an experiment with the 8th grade class at the Transition School in which they wrote reflections on the 12 qualities. As Dariya expressed, some of them seemed as if they were written by the Mother herself, and perhaps were inspired by her [See box]. Finally, Dariya explained that she is continuing this work with collective concentrations on the 12 qualities during the new year, such that each month will be devoted to focusing on a particular quality.

The meaning of the 12 qualities.

Sincerity means not twist the truth to make things easier.
Humility means "Don't struggle to be noticed," let people notice you for the good that you are.
Gratitude means to be grateful to be alive and to be living in a place where there is no war, there is food, water and freedom in abundance.
With perseverance change will come.
Aspiration is to set goals to go forward with new ideas.
Progress: Life is a never ending progress. People are constantly progressing in every way possible.
Courage is to be scared but embrace that fear you have and use it as a source of power.
Goodness doesn't mean being goody goody. It means to be true, honest, and peaceful in your motives and actions.
Equality means that we are all the same inside, even if we are totally different on the outside.
Peace cannot be found on a journey, no matter how far you may search, for true peace is found within yourself.
Receptivity means to try to understand and listen to other points of view.
Generosity means giving without expecting anything in return – even though most of the time you do get something in return.

As explored by Transition School's 8th grade class "Horses"



The cultural programme: children from Nandanam

In the closing evaluation and reflection circle, many expressed a feeling of inner progress and unity being further established, and a wish to continue the exploration of applying the 12 qualities of the Mother to the practical challenges of Auroville and the world. As well as the monthly intention, the programme is set up to continue during 2013 with a monthly event focused on one of the 12 wide fields of Auroville research, using the same approach to explore how using the 12 qualities of the Mother can help us find agreement and roadmaps for Auroville's development.

Larry

"For me, Auroville and the Ashram are one"

Mirajyoti is a senior Aurovilian who has done editing and translations of books for Auroville and the Ashram

Auroville Today: When did you first come to India?

I first came at the end of 1973 for a month, and then came again at the end of 1974, I hoped for good. This was the time of the conflict with the Sri Aurobindo Society. I originally came not so much for the Ashram but for Auroville. I worked in the Matrimandir kitchen from January to the end of April 1975. I used to go on my bike to Pondicherry on the road through the canyons to buy food and come back to help with the cooking. I had the first bike in Auroville. Sometimes I would return only the next morning to Auroville. Norman Dowsett, an Ashramite, was directing a research group at the Sri Aurobindo Society which I found interesting and in the evening I would sometimes go to his meetings. Then, the lady who was running the kitchen at the Matrimandir said, "No, you must stay in Auroville," presumably due to the conflict, but as I had a very good connection with Norman's group I refused and decided to settle in the Ashram. It was at the meetings of this group that I met my second husband, Prem Sobel.

What was the group like?

I can only say it was like stepping on the threshold of the transformation process. Norman had been a British Druid, high up in the Druid hierarchy. Also he had spent some time in the Himalayas, but he would not talk about that. I had a lot of affinity with him. In fact, he told me that we had had several previous lives in common. His group would come at 6 in the morning for meditation, and then after breakfast and a break, come back at 9 a.m. for work. I did secretarial work and also a little editing. The Sri Aurobindo Society, with which Norman was affiliated at that time, had a recording room which we would also take care of. Then in the evenings we would read together Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's works, have discussions, and also meet with people who would come.

Norman really helped me to start my *sad-hana*. Also, during that time I was drawing like crazy. I would come home at 11 o'clock at night and still draw. I had never had any training, but the psychic being was opening in me and this art work came out quite spontaneously. Norman encouraged it and would give names to the drawings and paintings. Towards the end of this period I was mainly drawing *mandalas*. There

were three of us in Norman's group who were drawing at that time, and eventually the Sri Aurobindo Society put on an exhibition of our work. Recently, *News and Notes* and the journal *Collaboration* have been putting my drawings and paintings from this period on their covers. Manohar has made a film of the paintings set to Sunil's music which is available from me on a DVD.

I understand that you also lived in the US for some time. What did you do there?

In 1978 I was running out of money, and Prem Sobel had already gone back to the US. At that time, to get a US visa (I was from France) you needed an American sponsor. So he sponsored me so that I could come, and then in order that I could stay we agreed to get married. Of course, we were both in the Yoga so it was not an ordinary marriage. I used to come back to the Ashram every two or three years for a month or so. During that period, I also became involved with the Sri Aurobindo Center of Los Angeles run by Jyoti Priya. She had met Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, and was a Sanskrit and Vedic scholar as well as a dedicated disciple. Later, I became involved with a study group reading Sri Aurobindo and Mother's works in Silicon Valley in Northern California where my husband worked. During this period I worked with a temporary employment agency, working a few months here and a few months there. It was good because I learned different things and was able to save money and get a pension which helps to support me now. One of the interesting things that came out of this time in California was that my husband and I developed a compilation of Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's writings entitled *The Hierarchy of Minds*, which was published in 1984. At first I didn't think



Mirajyoti

people would be interested, but it has gone through many reprints and in 2007 I was asked by the Ashram Press to revise it and it was expanded a little.

When did you return to India, and what did you do?

I came back to India for good in 1989 and worked in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives. Bob Zwicker from the Archives said, "There are four books of the Mother's collected works which are not yet in French, would you like to translate them?" I agreed. These were volumes 13, 14, 15 and 17. I always had two or three people who were volunteers to help me. I also put into French seven books of A.S. Dalal's compilations of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's writings, and an eighth compilation that was put together by Bob and Peter Hechs: *The Integral Yoga: Sri Aurobindo's Teaching and Method of Practice*, first published in English in 1993.

These books are all quite popular.

Then, in 2001, I joined Auroville. It all worked out very smoothly. First I helped in the Laboratory of Evolution (LOE), then, one day, I met Shradhdhavan on the road and she said she needed somebody for the Reading Room at Savitri Bhavan. I worked there for eight years. In addition to watching over the reading room and keeping it organized, I would go to SABDA regularly to buy books. During most of this period I was also giving asana classes to slow music in my apartment here in Invocation, until 2009 when I had to undergo surgery for a knee problem.

It was at that time, as I was turning 80, that I felt that Mother wanted me to do something different. I worked on two projects, one of which is more or less completed – a compilation of what Mother and Sri Aurobindo and a few others have said about music. Recently, I gave to Aurelio (who had helped me) a big binder with this compilation, and he told me that they were

starting to put together a curriculum to teach music to children in Auroville, and wanted to include various things from the compilation. The second thing I began working on is editing the transcribed talks of Ananda Reddy on *Savitri* and *The Life Divine* to make them ready for publication in book form. Attending Ananda Reddy's talks in Auroville, I found them interesting, and with him I began this work which could also be useful for Auroville. Also for about a year and half, I helped in the French Section of the Ashram Press to translate Sri Aurobindo's poems for a new publication.

You seem to have a very deep connection to both the Ashram and Auroville.

Yes. You see for me, Auroville and the Ashram are one, they are both children of the Mother.

From an interview by Larry

COMMUNITY

Collective living in Auroville

Living collectively is the ideal of many of Auroville's communities. But in spite of many experiences and attempts to implement workable systems, community living remains a big challenge.

On 19th June 1967, the Mother declared that, "from the psychological point of view, the required conditions for living in Auroville are: (1) To be convinced of the essential unity of mankind and to have the will to collaborate for the material manifestation of that unity; and (2) To have the will to collaborate in all that furthers future realisations." And she added, "The material conditions will be worked out as the realisation proceeds." Now that Auroville is almost 45 years old, we can see that many of the material conditions have been agreed upon. But what is the status of the psychological ones?

The material conditions

The material conditions of most Auroville communities are well-established. Aspiring to be an ecologically-conscious town, Auroville has been implementing various green practices. Joseba from the Housing Service says, "Systems like waste water treatment, garbage segregation, and a common green area are now mandatory inclusions for every architect who wants to build a residential community. Other common facilities like laundry, parking, a community kitchen and dining space, a guest house and a common purpose hall are optional, while solar installations and energy-efficient products are for the future residents to decide."

All communities ask for a monthly contribution from the residents. Most communities 'run' with a management team of at least two residents who look after the daily affairs and manage the community finances. In Surrender community this is done by two, in Citadine by a team of three resi-

dents. For Creativity, a team of eight residents take care, while in Maitreye 3 residents is considered sufficient. The teams also organize community meetings whenever it is required to catch up and talk about ongoing issues.

Having community meals helps building interpersonal bonds. Eating often turns into an occasion filled with laughter, talk and vibrant energy. Aspiration provides three meals for its members, Citadine residents lunch together every day while other communities organise incidental potluck dinners. Vérité, which has a common kitchen, encourages residents to cook and eat together, as does Creativity weekly. But members of many communities prefer eating at the Solar Kitchen instead of within the community. For example, residents of Vikas, who were eating together every day, stopped this once the nearby Solar Kitchen started functioning.

The psychological conditions

While the material conditions of some communities are well-established, this does not mean that the required psychological conditions that The Mother spoke of are also present. The degree of harmony in the working of communities is dependent on the skills and integrity of its residents. For conflicts between residents exist in all communities. They arise from differences in nationalities, culture, upbringing, thinking, education and age. Some people do not know how to deal with them and shy away from a confrontation or avoid it because they believe it is too tiring to interact with the other. Others take the trouble to sit together and talk it out. Some need professional help to resolve their conflicts.

Challenges

Aspiration, one of the first communities in Auroville which started in the 1970s, offered rustic keet huts with very basic amenities. Today's residents, inspired by the comforts offered in newly-built houses and apartment blocks elsewhere in Auroville, attempt to also have more comfortable housing. "The change in thinking," says Jean-Marc, "brought in a shift in Aspiration. It is not as rustic as before and the motivation of collective living dissolved over time. But I'm quite happy because some trust is still there and we take care of each other's basic needs."

A greater need to live a more individualised life seems a common phenomenon in many communities. "Earlier, to me, community living meant eating collectively, sharing chores, being aware of each other's requirements and caring for each other," says Vani, a resident from Vikas, "but now we all are very individualistic." To control individual behaviour for the benefit of all, some communities have developed rules, such as no noise at night, no pets, no air conditioners, no cars, no TVs, and some, even, no children. But rigid rules rarely work in Auroville. "Expecting others to abide by rules makes it difficult to live together. We have no rules. Instead, everyone completes their own collective responsibilities out of choice and it all works out fine," says Agni, from Surrender.

Rewards

But there are also rewards to community living. Living together "is a sharing at all levels, an express mode, a huge opportunity for self-development," says Veronica, a resident of Creativity. "The cocktail of nationalities and cultures is very rich, and this can motivate you to develop your receptivity and understanding." "Most of the flats in Citadine were provided for free to the residents," says Aryamani. "This has contributed to developing a sense of gratitude, which has brought in a strong sense of common responsibility and togetherness," says Maurice.

Community life, it appears, can only come

Community	Started In	Monthly Contribution	Common Facilities
Aspiration	early 1970's	1,500.00	Solid waste management, guest house, kitchen, dining hall, parking
Vikas	early 1990's	150.00	Solid waste management, guest house, kitchen, dining hall, parking sheds, waste water treatment
Surrender	late 1990's	300.00	Solid waste segregation, parking, waste water treatment
Creativity	2004	600.00	Solid waste segregation, guest house, kitchen, exhibition hall, parking, filtered water system
Citadine	2006-7	2,200.00	Kitchen, dining hall, parking sheds, garbage, laundry, exhibition hall
Maitreye	2010	250.00	Parking, waste water treatment, garbage, laundry

"I am a developer by nature"

For many years Prema, who was born in Argentina, has managed Auromode, one of our largest commercial units. How did she come to Auroville, what challenges did she face both then and now, and what continues to motivate her today?

"From an early age I had always had questions about life but I couldn't formulate them properly, so it was difficult to find answers. One day, when I was 16 years old and working in a pharmacy, somebody came to the counter and told me 'This book is for you.' It was *Siddharta* by Herman Hesse. This was the first time I found something like an answer."

Then, at the age of 21, I started travelling and searching. It was 1967, there was an evolutionary push, and millions of us around the world were taking to the roads, looking for answers. Many years later, in 1979, I was flying from Mexico City to Paris. A lady approached me. She said she had been looking at me, and she asked, "What are you doing in life?" I said, "I'm searching." "And what are you searching for?" "I don't know, but I will know it if I find it." Then she said, "I know what you are searching for, you are searching for your place. And your place is Auroville."

She explained that Auroville was a community in South India. In fact, for some time I had been thinking of going to India, but I had always been allergic to ashrams. So I asked her, "Is it an ashram?" She said no, it is a community. Once we landed in Paris I followed her; I wanted to hear more about this place. She said she was very busy, but she gave me her telephone number and the address of Auroville International, France.

This lady was Yolande Lemoine, who was very close to The Mother. I went to the office of AVI France and there I saw Mother's photo. I recognized her; I knew immediately that I knew her. There was a small library there and I picked up a book called *The Mother* by Sri Aurobindo. I started reading the book that night. As soon as I read the first sentence – *There are two powers that alone can effect in their conjunction the great and difficult thing which is the aim of our endeavour; a fixed and unflinching aspiration that calls from below and a supreme grace from above that answers* – my world turned completely round. I continued reading and all the answers to the questions that I couldn't even formulate before were there in this small book. Finally I understood what I had been searching for.

It was 11.30 at night but I needed to speak to that lady. I phoned her and told her, "Madam, I need to see you, my life is completely changed. I have discovered why I was born." She was very practical. She said it is late, and if I came to her house I



Prema

wouldn't be able to get back to my lodging as the Metro would have stopped running. I told her I didn't mind, I could sleep in the street, but that I had to see her as I felt alone with my great discovery. Then she said, "You have found the Divine. And once you have found the Divine, you are never alone. Good night." And she put down the phone!

It took me nine months to get the Auroville. During that time I read whatever I could, mainly *The Agenda* and Satprem's books. Some friends of AVI France heard that I wanted to go to Auroville and they warned me, "You cannot go to Auroville just like that, you have to be prepared. There are supramental beings there."

This wasn't a surprise. I knew from *The Agenda* that Mother had said that the supramental had come down in 1956, and now it was 1979, so I assumed that the work was very well advanced. I just wanted to be part of it.

I arrived in December and it was a big shock. It was a very, very difficult time because the Aurovilians were fighting battles against the Sri Aurobindo Society and there was very little food. So the people were closed up and it was difficult to

integrate. Luckily, I met André Hababou. He had come in 1968, he had met Mother and he had a vast experience of Auroville. So he explained it all to me, I came to know the deep history, and this helped me a lot; without that I would have understood nothing.

I cannot say what made me want to stay here in spite of the shock. But one year later I was sitting in this house, which was still under construction, in Auromode. I was looking at the sea and, suddenly, at that moment, I felt I had found my place. So what Yolande had told me on the plane was true. My place was Auroville.

My first work was helping Narad, potting plants in the Matrimandir Nursery, then I worked on the scaffolding at Matrimandir. Later, I worked with Eliane in her garment workshop. When this didn't work out, I decided to open my own garment unit. Why? It was a deep need to express myself on a material plane. I also needed money to live because in those days you were on your own, there was no Bridging Fund, no help from the community. The only thing I really knew and liked was fashion design, in which I had been trained, but I was wondering how to begin. One day, Yanne and Croquette, who managed a small garment workshop in Douceur, decided to stop and concentrate upon theatre instead. They offered me the whole set-up – two tailors, two machines and a cutting table – and this is how I started.

I began by selling cushions, as these were the easiest to make. Then, as I started remembering how to make patterns, I began making garments. I sold them in André Tardeil's boutique in Pondicherry. One day, in 1983, Dilip Kapoor came to my hut with a German lady. She was a buyer for a German company, she had seen my garments in the boutique and she wanted to meet me. So I showed her what I was doing. She was delighted and immediately ordered 40 pieces. This was a challenge for our small unit, but we made them and sent them to Germany. A year later she came back and ordered 400, and, a few years' later, 4000... Today, more than 28 years later, we are still working together.

Each time it was a challenge to expand our operation, but I never felt I couldn't handle it: I always felt I could do anything. This is because I am a developer by nature, and a developer only stops developing if there is some powerful external blockage, like the present world economic crisis. Before, the profit margins were fantastic, the money was flowing. Today, we have the same turnover but we

have had to accept much lower margins.

However, I haven't for a moment considered laying off workers. They are wonderful – for 30 years they have taken care of me and I take care of them. The other thing I do now to cope with the global economic crisis is to sell more of our production in India – today approximately 50% goes for export, 50% is sold here – as the Indian market is becoming very strong. However, all those Auroville units which are heavily dependent upon exporting and which don't have a big financial backup are in serious trouble now.

It is a challenge to do business in this environment. It is not easy to maintain high standards in a country where the sense of perfection is forgotten, but what makes it harder is when you don't feel supported by your own community. Today, the feeling we business people get from Auroville is that it only wants the money we generate, while many people in positions of power feel that business is somehow dirty, not spiritual. They wouldn't dare say this to me, but they think like this.

Meanwhile, in the Auroville Board of Commerce, all our time is taken up with trying to solve problems, like one unit copying designs from another or units not presenting their balance sheets. We are totally submerged by these matters, so we never have time to talk about development.

So what has to change in Auroville? For me, it's very simple. Once and for all, we have to transcend the very ordinary consciousness in which we are drowning. It is the only solution both for us and for the planet.

In spite of all this, I remain optimistic about the future of Auroville and of the world. After all, Mother said Auroville is already there and it will manifest in spite of the Aurovilians – She knew human nature, how difficult it is to change. If she could have stayed in her body the progress would have been faster. Auroville was a point of concentration of the evolution, but we missed our opportunity and now everything goes much more slowly. When she and Sri Aurobindo left their bodies it was to make a wider transformation possible, so now it is happening on a wider scale, all over the world.

Of course, there are things happening in Auroville which I don't like, but while it is easy to criticize, it is very destructive. André told me of an experience he had in Aspiration in the late 1970s. There was a moment when all of them felt completely united by an invisible thread: it was a fantastic experience, the first time they had felt this inner unity. But one day, almost as a joke, they started gossiping, making fun of each other, and slowly that experience was destroyed. This is the real work of Auroville – to keep up a certain standard of behaviour, not to gossip or criticize but to try to love or, at the very least, be peaceful with each other. Otherwise we will all drown in the muck."

From an interview by Alan

REFLECTIONS

In praise of civility

Recently, I had a somewhat frustrating experience with one of my favourite Auroville units. When I asked them to come to my house to fix a technical problem, they failed on a number of occasions to keep appointments, and each time didn't inform me they were not coming. The unit finally solved the problem, for which I am grateful, but it started me thinking about civility in Auroville.

'Civility', there's an old-fashioned sound to the word. It conjures up tinkling teacups, cucumber sandwiches and maiden aunts of advanced years. Actually, it is related to words like 'civil' and 'civilization', which derive from the Latin word for 'city'. So originally 'civility' had to do with people living together in cities. Over time, the word acquired other meanings – like 'refinement', 'politeness', and 'consideration' – but all were related to forms of behaviour which enable people to live together well. So, perhaps the word is not so outdated after all...

What's certain is that it's not a word heard very often in the city of the future, perhaps because Auroville doesn't score very highly on the civility index. And here I'm not only talking about the failure to keep appointments. Aurovilians often fail to turn up on time for meetings, for example, and then compound this by neglecting to apologise or explain their tardiness. Some of our major groups never bother to reply to emails. And some Aurovilians seem unable to form the words 'Thank you' when somebody has done them a favour or performed a service for them – an inability witnessed daily at the serving counter of the Solar Kitchen where, in response to having one's plate loaded with goodies, a Neanderthal grunt seems to be *de rigueur*. And, then, of course, it's a cliché that Aurovilians are not particularly welcoming of visitors or Newcomers, and even among themselves often tend to adopt the most minimalist forms of greeting.

It's not as a bad as it used to be – when I first came to work at the Matrimandir in the late 1970s, nobody even acknowledged my presence for the first week. This wouldn't happen today. In fact, Aurovilians have even been known to smile at each other on the road. But why should a place which is aspiring for genuine human unity still rank so relatively low on the civility index?

There may be a number of reasons. One is a deep-seated distrust of pretence, of adopting polite forms of behaviour which are not genuine like the reflexive "Have a nice day". Hence the elevation, in the early days of Auroville, of a cult of spontaneity, or being yourself and saying what you thought, whatever the consequences. In such a society, rudeness becomes the token of your authenticity. The gruff, minimalist discourse may also be a hangover from those early pioneering days of Auroville when arduous work and long hours in the sun did not encourage more complex forms of communication – or people with fully-functioning brains.

And then there is the larger context. Auroville is inevitably influenced by Indian society and in the local culture, for example, it is considered uncivil to thank someone for giving you a present or doing something for you, as it implies that it was unexpected. So incivility is actually a form of compliment. It's a philosophy seemingly shared by many Pondy shopkeepers. And then, of course, there is the famed incivility, to use no stronger a term, of the Indian roads...

But I suspect that the larger reason for our relatively uncivil behaviour in Auroville, in addition to other factors like laziness and lack of personal refinement, is the feeling that we are 'not here for that', that civility, politeness are somehow 'old world', irrelevant to the pursuit of a higher consciousness in the city of the future.

In spite of all this, I recognize that a genuine camaraderie does exist between many Aurovilians; it simply doesn't adopt conventional outer forms. I like this, I like this very much. At the same time, I'm at a loss to understand why behaviour based upon genuine consideration and appreciation of others can somehow be seen to be unnecessary. On the contrary, in a fledgling multicultural community like ours, where the possibilities of daily fractious misunderstandings are high, the need to encourage genuine civility – those simple acts or words of respect and appreciation which calm hearts and soothe the waters – seems paramount.

Or have I missed something?

Alan

Contribution Includes	Meetings
Electricity, water, house cleaning, community workers' wages, all three meals	monthly
Community workers' wages, repairs, waste pick-up	only when needed
Gardener's wages, cycle repair, waste pick-up, composting	only when needed
Community workers' wages, waste pick-up, maintenance work	only when needed
Electricity, water, gas, house cleaning, community workers' wages, collective lunches, maintenance	only when needed
Electricity, water, common laundry, community workers' wages, waste pick-up	only when needed

through efforts made by all the residents to establish the psychological conditions which make a collectivity work. Foremost is the will to establish harmony, and if that cannot be found, the will to reach out to take help from experts. Here, Auroville can help by organizing workshops for individuals to overcome their challenges and by building a trusted team of mediators to help overcome divisiveness. For the psychological conditions are as important, if not more so, than the material ones and until these issues are being addressed, community living will continue to be a challenge.

Mandakini

Between the Lines: Nandita Das talks about her life and work

On December 21st, the film 'Firaaq' was shown in the Bharat Nivas auditorium in the presence of its director Nandita Das.

The audience breaks into applause as she enters. An elegant swish of wine-red silk as she walks down the aisle and takes the stage. For a moment, there is a hush of awe, and then the questions roll out. Nandita takes each of those questions, even those invariably silly ones that make you cringe in your seat, and answers them with an eloquent intelligence that I have seldom seen. Poised, graceful, and above all expressive – her eyes and hands speak volumes – Nandita talks candidly about her life as an actor, the influences in her life, and the ills of society. What comes across most is that she is a genuinely caring person with a lot of integrity. A rare trait, I am afraid, among public celebrities. Needless to say, I was delighted when my favorite woman actor consented to chat with me over a coffee (well a green tea actually), one afternoon in Auroville. Excerpts of our conversation.

The other day, after the screening of Maati Maayi, you talked about the dangers of "labelling" people. But strangers like me can only approach you through labels – my favorite woman actor, director, social activist etc. So what I would like to know is how do you see yourself as a person today, beyond all labels, even that of a daughter, wife, mother?

Nandita: Roles are something that are projected onto you by others, by their expectations or because of the responsibilities that you yourself take up. But to the extent possible, I try not to distinguish between my life and my work. I am whom I am, no matter what I am doing at the moment. Even in the filmi world with all its expectations and hierarchies and glamour, I try to stay true to myself. If I dress in certain ways, it is because I want to and not because I am expected to dress and behave in certain ways.

I am actually learning from my two-year old son, Vihaan, how to just be myself. Who I am as a person is being shaped by my interactions with Vihaan. Choosing to be a mother was a late decision in my life, and I know that not all women feel called to be mothers and bring up children. But for myself, all I can say is, it has been a life-defining decision. Children are so influential, so I am more conscious of my actions, for I know it influences my son. And through Vihaan, I remember who I was, before roles and responsibilities come into life. Children are so natural. The way they react to life's experiences is instinctive, primal, and very different from how adults respond. Watching Vihaan grow up, I am understanding how we evolve as persons.

The other day, we spoke a lot about the deformations of patriarchy, but that's only one of the challenges of India. From your experience, what factors – gender, caste, religious superstition, or economic inequality – accounts most for the social problems that India faces?

I feel India is really complex. More complex in its social structure than any other society that I have seen. I, however, feel that patriarchy is the main problem. Somehow or the other all these other categories are colored by patriarchy. Even so-called matrilineal societies of Kerala are dominated by men. How else to you explain the incest – the rape of daughters by

their father – that has recently come to light? Education, economic empowerment etc. does not easily eradicate the deep-rooted patriarchy that we have all been subject to. It just makes things more invisible. In the privileged upper class societies that we come from, things are not black and white. We don't hear of women getting beaten by their husbands. But what people don't see is that middle class women are expected by their families to fulfill both roles – that of working at a job and managing the household. Women drive themselves crazy trying to juggle the responsibilities of a career, running a household, bringing up kids etc. And men are com-

Kerala, I was really excited believing Kerala to be more advanced as a society in this regard. But then at the premiere, the audience was again primarily men, and worse still, I found them laughing and clapping at the "wrong" scenes. The scene, for instance, in which Shabana Azmi, is denigrated for her behaviour.

Or, I had journalists asking me if I was a lesbian. And I would react and sharply declare that my acting on screen doesn't translate to who I am as a person. But today, I realize that even my sharp defensive reaction, distancing myself from homosexuality, was also conditioned by the homophobia of our society. Or

in any field, is in response to what the man wants.

Through your work and because of who you are, you blur the distinctions between social work, acting, and art. I am curious to know how you define art.

I would say art is that which touches you. Which bypasses the mind and touches your heart or has a visceral impact on you. That is why art is highly subjective. And what an artistic piece means for the artist does not necessarily have to mean the same for the viewer. That is why my dad [the acclaimed painter Jatin Das] leaves most of

changed a person's life. Take *Firaaq*. So many people came forward saying that they could identify with Sameer [one of the Muslim characters in the film]. Also, shortly after its release, I got a long email from an Indo-Pakistani couple, who were very touched by the film. Because of the pressures from their families, because of the religious prejudices of society, they were thinking of separating, but they wrote that after watching *Firaaq*, they realized that if I had the courage to make such a movie, then they should have the courage to stay true to their love, despite all opposition. And just recently, I got a short email from them again saying that they are doing well in their relationship and they have a child now.

I was also surprised by the international response to *Firaaq*, for I had initially targeted only an Indian audience. But then I realized, the prejudice against 'the other' is the same, whether it is in Africa or Europe or Asia. There is always someone who is victimized because of their religious or racial identity. The same prejudices against 'the other' run strong in every society.

All that I seek to do in my work as a director or an actor is highlight an issue, voice concerns about something which I find troubling. And then if it impacts the audience, makes them think, I feel that a slight change has been accomplished. Again, take *Fire*; by making a film on homosexuality, a taboo subject in our society, it has led, down the years, to homosexuality being finally decriminalized by the government.

You are half-Gujarati and half-Odiya, and because of your work, you have come to know India really well. Is there a part of India that holds a special place in your heart? And is there anything, given India's diversity, that you would consider pan-Indian, somehow essential to the Indian identity?

I love the diversity of India. Each place is so different. There is still a lot I would like to see, especially the North-East. I would hesitate to try and define something as an Indian identity, for by doing so you take away from the diversity. I want to celebrate our differences.

Yet, I feel that there is something in common. Something special and intangible about India. Well actually not India, but the Indian sub-continent, for I feel it also in Pakistan, Nepal or Sri Lanka. It is something about the warmth of the people. A certain way of being. A quality of the heart.

Bindu



Nandita Das

pletely oblivious to this. It is more stressful than the traditional division of gender roles.

I know women who give up their careers or get divorced because they start earning more than their husband or are promoted to a higher post in the same office. And somehow in our society the sacrifice of women is taken for granted – both by men and women. Actually, it was to explore these invisible forces of patriarchal oppression, that I felt the need to write and direct my debut play *Between the Lines*.

I first saw you act in the movie 'Fire'. Well, first of all, what was disconcerting was the cinema theater was packed with just men – men had turned out for this movie about a homosexual relationship between two women – I just didn't get it. Anyway one of the images from the movie that stayed with me was you dancing in front of the mirror in your bedroom, wearing pants and a short sari-blouse. It was just such a powerful image of a woman exulting in her sensuality and sexuality, even if she is ignored by her husband. I see the repression of sexuality as one of the ways that Indian women are disempowered. Can you say something on the issue?

I can relate to your experience of *Fire*. I remember that when *Fire* premiered at a film festival in

why would there be a need to assert or defend my identity as a heterosexual person? The bigger question to be asked is, why can't we let others be? Accept all these different identities that individuals choose, rather than forcing them to some idealized norm of behavior.

As for sexuality and women's empowerment, sure we have a long way to go. Today, not just in India, but in most parts of the world, whether a woman wears a burqa or a sexy, sleeveless dress is determined by what is expected by our male-dominated societies. Sadly, by and large, the expression of a woman's sexuality, or actually her behaviour

his pieces untitled, to let viewers have their own interpretations.

Also on those lines, I would like to hear what role your films play in bringing social change, given the fact that the audience mainly comes from the privileged upper and middle classes.

I agree with what you are saying. The kinds of films I do, do not get a wide audience. I wish they did. As for their impact, I would say, it is very hard to judge for it is not something that one can quantify.

It is only now and then one gets a glimpse of how a film has

The critically acclaimed actor and film director Nandita Das has a fiery passion to make a difference and her choices bear witness to that. She is known to never shy away from controversial issues that, she feels, need to be told. Her directorial debut feature film *Firaaq*, for example, traces the impact of the sectarian violence in Gujarat in 2002 on the lives of ordinary people.

Firaaq is a work of fiction, but based on a thousand true stories. The ensemble film takes place over a 24-hour period, a month after the worst of the carnage is over. It traces the emotional journeys of the victims, the perpetrators and of those who watched silently. *Firaaq* explores their relationships as they experience many fierce and delicate emotions of fear and prejudice, guilt and revenge, trust and betrayal and a loss of innocence that wounds forever. Yet, in the midst of all this madness, there are some who still sing hopeful songs for better times.

Firaaq had its world premiere at the Toronto

International Film Festival in 2008 and then travelled to more than 50 International film festivals across the world, winning over 10 international and 13 Indian awards.

Nandita, who did her Masters in Social Work from the University of Delhi and worked with various NGOs, continues to advocate issues of social justice through various platforms and is a featured speaker at many reputed universities and social forums, both in India and abroad. She was a member of the jury at the Cannes Film Festival in 2005, the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in 2007 and the Marrakech International Film Festival in 2009. The French Government conferred her the *Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters (Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres)*, a prestigious civilian award. In 2011, Nandita Das was the first Indian to be inducted into the Hall of Fame of the International Women's Forum, Washington DC.

More info at www.nanditadas.com

Something from almost nothing

“I like to make something from nothing – that’s kind of my life,” says Aurovillian Ok [pronounce ‘oak’] Jeong Lee from Korea, whose exhibition Upcycling at Pitanga presents an impressive collection of bags, hats, toys and collages. They are all made of waste: waste tape, audio tape, video tape, film tape, gramophone records, and other e-waste. “I was a textile designer for more than 20 years in Korea and was good at what I was doing. But when I joined Auroville I decided to do something different. I wanted to show that something can be done with waste, and so, in a small way, help the environment. I experimented with various materials. Then I found waste tape. It stimulated my creativity, not only because it is recyclable but also because it is beautiful and useful.”

Ok showed her first products at the ‘Auroville trashion show’ in April 2010, where Auroville models walked the runway wearing dresses and accessories made from trash. “I contributed two handbags made with gramophone records and audio-cable shoulder straps,” says Ok. “This show really stimulated my interest in using waste. I started crocheting, knitting and weaving with waste tape, discovered that discarded headsets are great bag straps, and did some more experimentations with vinyl records.” She points at a bag which is made of waste tape and half a gramophone record. I just can read the label: Carl Nielsen Symphony No. 4 “The Inextinguishable”. Showing another bag, Ok explains that “this one is made of audio tapes with the recordings of *Savitri* book I and III.” “So quite a special bag?” I ask. “Only for the aficionados,” she responds, laughing.

As audio tape is rather weak, Ok crochets five or seven lines together. For dolls, she joins up to 19 lines. “Tape is a very light material but made in this way the bags, lined with cotton, are very strong and durable.” Meanwhile Ok is



Ok Jeong Lee playing with waste tape

employing a few ladies from the nearby village. “They are expert crocheters, but I have to guard the product quality as the bags are intended to last a lifetime.” Taking up an elephant made from crocheted video tape, Ok explains that her work is “100 percent litter free. Even the last bit of the waste goes into this elephant!” The plastic decks and other plastic items of a cassette are used in her collages.

The market, says Ok, is only just developing. “The young, in particular, are enthusiastic. I sell my products in a few outlets in Pondicherry, in Dune, an eco-beach resort on the East Coast Road, and at my studio. But selling isn’t really the issue. I have done that enough in the past. Now I rather look for finding my originality. For me, this is how I do my inner work. The bags are just by-products.”

So what brought her to Auroville? “The need to change our lives,” she says. “I was successful in my professional life and we were very happy in Korea; but then we came to know about India and Auroville. We studied the Auroville website, started to learn about Sri Aurobindo and The Mother and then, in 2008, my husband and I and our two children joined. In Korea we had reached a limit. We felt that Auroville would be the next stage for our development. My children have since moved out and now live their own lives elsewhere. But for my husband and me, the move to Auroville has been very good. We progressed a lot. An inner life started to take shape, and perhaps as a consequence, I have begun finding my originality, doing what I really want to and not following fashion trends or the desires of a customer. That’s the big change from the work in Korea.”

Are all her products unique? “Most of them,” she says. “A few bags are very popular, so I have started producing them in series. But all the others are one-of-a-kind. I continue innovating. In one of my bags I have incorporated a pair of old jeans. There is no end to creatively transforming waste.”

In conversation with Carel

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okjeonglee@gmail.com

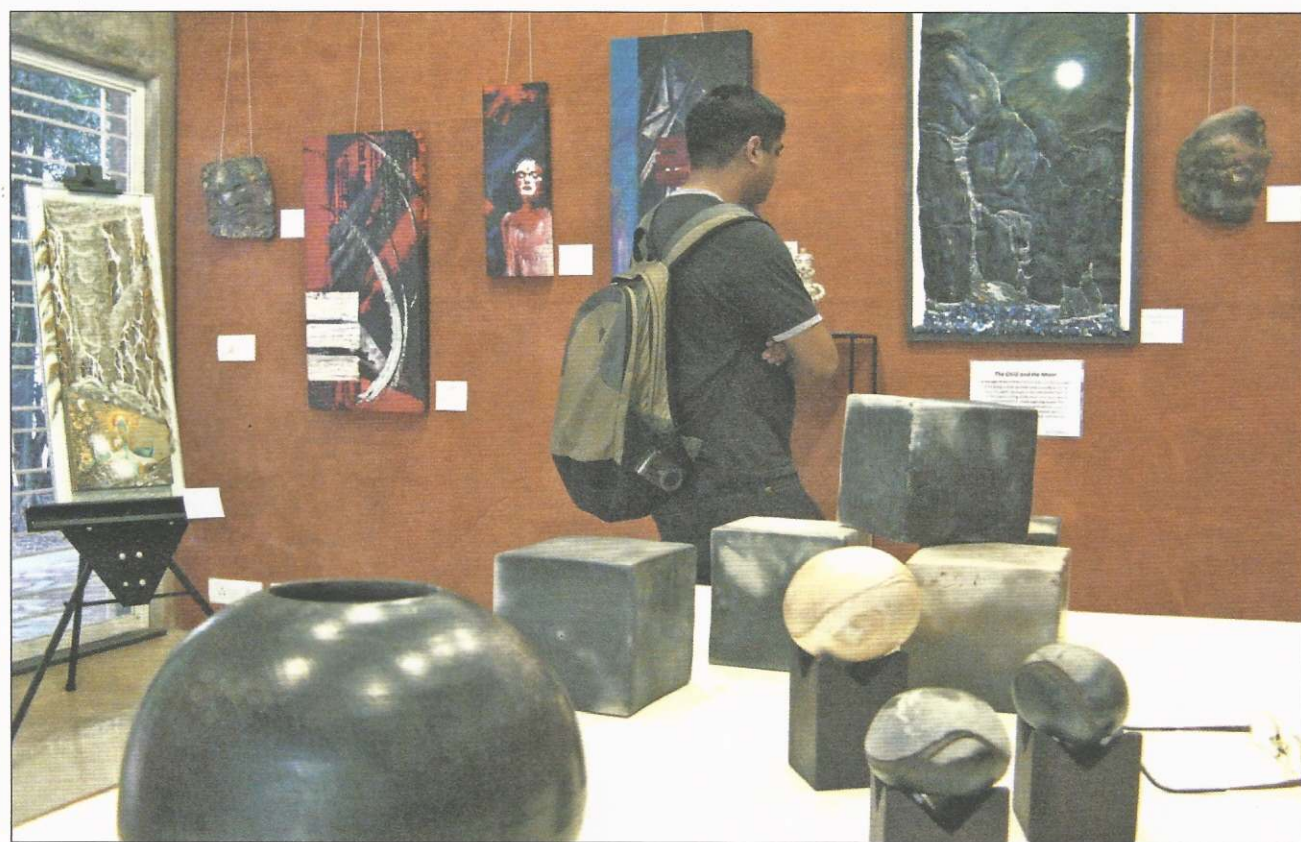


Handbags made from discarded tape, gramophone records and headsets



Bags made from discarded film tape

Fundraising for the Neelanjani Visual Arts Centre



A view of the temporary exhibition at the Visitors Centre

In a small room behind the Matrimandir information room at the Visitors Centre is a treasure: a temporary exhibition of the work of Auroville painters, photographer and sculptors. It’s a revelation not only for the general public but also for the artists themselves. As one of them put it, “I didn’t know half of the people exhibiting here were artists!”

“And that’s what I want to happen. I want us Auroville artists to get to know each other and to work together and to support each other,” says Audrey, one of the organizers of the show. At the same time, it is an opportunity for visitors to Auroville to assess the artistic scene and even take some of it away with them (all of the works are for sale).

Actually, the main reason for the exhibition is to raise money

for the proposed Neelanjani Visual Arts Centre. This will be a space where Auroville artists can exhibit their work to the world. “We are still in the planning stage,” says Audrey. “The space that was planned for us is not large and we want to enlarge it. We also want the art which we display to the outside world to be of a certain standard. So one idea is that we will have regular shows, perhaps once a month, and each show will be curated.”

“However, we will also have on a computer in the office a permanent selection of the works of all those artists who want to be included, as well as their biography, artist statement and contact details. So any visitor to the gallery can contact them directly.”

The idea is quite different from Sebastian’s, who wants to establish a world-class international art centre in Auroville. “That is

not our purpose,” says Audrey. “We will focus on Auroville artists; for we have not been supported by the community in the past nor have we taken responsibility together to serve our community.”

It is estimated that the Visual Arts Centre, which will be located above the Matrimandir information room at the Visitors Centre, will cost Rs 25 lakhs (US \$ 46,000). To light, furnish an office and sustain activities for a year will probably take another Rs 20 lakhs (approx. US \$ 37,000). So far, five lakhs has been raised.

For a detailed grant proposal, a video and/or more information contact neelanjani@auroville.org.in

Alan

PASSINGS

Vincenzo Maiolini

Former Aurovillian Vincenzo Maiolini left his body on December 28th in the critical care unit of Chennai’s Apollo Hospital, where he was taken for injuries following a small moped accident. He was 70 years old.

Vincenzo, who hailed from France

and had been in close contact with the Mother since the sixties, was one of Auroville’s true, adventurous and determined pioneers of the very early years. He built the urn in the amphitheatre and the Tournes Mieux workshop and, on the Mother’s injunction, went to Paris in 1969 and brought back the first caravan, travelling overland from Paris to Aspiration. After a spell of absence, during which he always remained in touch, Vincenzo presently was in the process of re-joining Auroville. Vincenzo’s body was buried at Adventure’s Farewell Grounds on December 31st with many of his old friends attending – for a short time bringing back some of the love, humour and comradeship of those early pioneering days.



Twelfth Night

In December, a production of *Twelfth Night* was presented in the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium on three successive nights by Auroville actors.

Twelfth Night is one of Shakespeare's most popular plays. It is not difficult to see why. It seems to contain everything – elements of farce, tragedy and romance, memorable characters like Sir Toby Belch and Malvolio, plot reversals, disguise and mistaken identity, sexual ambiguity, overweening pride brought low, love thwarted and finally celebrated, and, of course, wonderful poetry. The fact that it has been performed all over the world suggests that it is particularly suited to an international audience like ours: if you don't understand the language, the argument runs, you can always enjoy the visual comedy. This, however, may be a faulty conclusion....

So, how did the Auroville players do? In many respects, quite well. There were convincing performances from Otto as Sir Toby Belch, Carl as the clown, Krishna as Antonio, and Srimoyi as the scheming Maria. The simple settings and fine costumes were also a success (although, on her first appearance, Viola was dressed rather too immaculately for somebody who had just survived a shipwreck).

The problem is that almost all the strong performances came from characters in the sub-plot (although even this was somewhat weakened by an ineffectual Malvolio). The main plot, involving a complex love triangle between the Duke, the Countess and the disguised Viola, was less well presented, mainly, but not solely, because of the actors' difficulties with the language. This is not primarily a problem of accents – while none of the characters in the main plot were native English speakers, this play has been performed successfully all over the world – but more a problem of the actors failing to make the language their own; of convincing the audience, through the way they delivered the words and

their body language, that they understood the lines and that this was their natural mode of expression.

This failure is not unimportant. The most beautiful lines in the play are given to these characters and language, in Shakespeare, is primary – it is the means not only of setting the scene and presenting off-stage events, but also of presenting character and of expressing the most complex and subtle states of human emotion. Lose or misunderstand the lines and much of the meaning of the play is lost. The relative failure of these characters also unbalances the play's dynamic. We shouldn't just eagerly be awaiting the reappearance of the ebullient Sir Toby Belch and gang; we should also care deeply that the Countess' impetuous declaration of love should not lead to tragedy and that Viola should finally get her man.

In fact, Shakespeare's best plays, and this is one of them, work by a kind of alchemy. For two hours or more, the audience has been presented with many different versions of human nature and experienced, as they interact, many different emotions. In the final scene the different plot strands are individually resolved, but the overall resolution is the richer because it is a melding, a transmutation, of all the elements experienced during the course of the play. Take away one element and the play becomes more one-dimensional – farce or tragedy or comedy, not a rich amalgam.

Is it fair to expect amateur actors, and particularly those with limited English, to successfully carry off something as complex and ambitious as a Shakespeare play? Of course not. But then the question arises – Should Auroville, with its limited acting resources, be attempting Shakespeare? The justifications, presumably, are that



"Good Madam, give me leave to prove you a fool" – the clown Feste (Carl) to Countess Olivia (Elke)

Shakespeare's characters have a universal appeal, that his plays deal with universal themes, that it is good to expose actors and audiences to fine language, and that even a second-rate production of a Shakespeare play is more interesting than many modern plays.

But is this so? The language is fine but often, for modern audiences, somewhat opaque. Yet even this is not an insuperable difficulty – the magic of Shakespeare is that it manages to com-

municate, to adapt T.S. Eliot's formulation, "almost before it is understood". But the larger question for directors to consider is, theatrically, why try to run before you can walk? Because the result of working with inexperienced actors is, all too often, a much-reduced version of the original which does no justice to the play and may put some theatregoers off Shakespeare for ever.

Is this really what they want to achieve?

Alan

BRIEF NEWS

New Governing Board

Auroville's nodal ministry, the Human Resource Development Ministry, has appointed the new Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation. It consists of Dr. Karan Singh (Chairman), Dr. Aster Patel, Dr. Mallika Sarabhai, Dr. Malini Parthasarathy, Ms. Ameeta Mehra, Dr. B.V. Doshi, and two ex-officio members of the HRD Ministry. The name of the 9th Board member is still to be announced. The term of office of the Board is till October 28th, 2016.

Solar power for Town Hall

On 29th December, Mr. Bala Baskar, Secretary of the Auroville Foundation, inaugurated the new solar system in the generator room of the Town Hall. While the 10 kilowatt system will not supply all the electricity needed by the Town Hall, it will significantly decrease the monthly costs of diesel and electricity. The system cost approximately eleven lakh rupees (US \$ 20,000) and was supplied at cost price by one of Auroville's solar energy units, Sunlit Future. The inauguration took place on the anniversary of the Thane cyclone which devastated Auroville at the end of last year, cutting off electricity to the community for up to three weeks. The solar system represents a significant step forward in preparing Auroville for future extreme weather events.

Matrimandir power plant

The 36 kW solar power plant at Matrimandir, which has been functioning since 1997, is being expanded with another 15 kW, to be produced by 66 panels of 270 watts each. This will reduce the consumption of diesel and make Matrimandir less reliant on state electricity supply, which is turned off for as much as 14 hours each day.

Your smile is precious

On the occasion of its 30th year jubilee, the Auroville Dental Centre, Protection, hosted a one-week exhibition on the birth and development of the Dental Centre – from Jacques Verré's first arrival in Auroville and his starting the clinic, to his discovery in Japan of the Daryl Beach zero dentistry concept and its gradual introduction in Auroville and the wider region.

Invitation to AUM 2013

The All-USA 2013 conference, which will focus on



The solar power plant on the roof of the Town Hall's generator room

'Discovering the Soul of America – a step in Human Unity' will be held from June 20-23rd in Ashland, Oregon. The conference will have a special focus on re-integrating the contributions of Native peoples to the nation's soul. For more information visit www.collaboration.org/aum/2013

New building for Matagiri

To celebrate Matagiri's 45th birthday on August 2nd 2013, a fund raising campaign for a new building has started, so that Matagiri can continue being at the service of the integral yoga. Small and large donations are gratefully accepted. For more information contact info@matagiri.org or visit <https://www.facebook.com/MatagiriCenter>

Auroville diamonds

The diamond unit Mitra has been created as a unit of the Auroville Foundation. It is the successor of the unit 'Aurodia', set-up in the 1980s, which was relocated to Pondicherry due to internal conflicts. Operating under the name 'Aditi', this diamond polishing unit has ever since been instrumental in making large donations to the Matrimandir

Central Fund contribution review

The Budget Coordination Committee has started a review of all units and activities of Auroville that are not currently contributing to the Central Fund.

Films for Auroville Film Festival 2013

Films on the theme of human unity made after 2008 or suggestions on such films can be submitted for the Auroville Film Festival 2013. Email aurovillefilmfestival@auroville.org.in for information.

Auroville City Transport

An Auroville City Transport service has started operating a shuttle vehicle for pick up and drop trips in the city area, and on demand up to Aspiration, Auromodèle, Repos and Quiet. The service is against 'very reasonable' fare contributions.



A table made by Prakrit, a unit of Upasana

Cyclone Thane - one year after

An exhibition on effects of cyclone Thane, which hit Auroville on 28 December, 2011, was held at Citadine. It showed the disastrous effects of the cyclone on Auroville while also opening a discussion on the future of the forest and the use of its products by showcasing the art and design work done using wood from the trees fallen in the storm.

Subscription rates (including postage):

- ◆ One year subscription rates: India Rs. 450; other countries Rs. 2,000 equivalent.
- ◆ Two year subscription rate: India Rs. 800; other countries Rs. 3,700 equivalent. Those for whom the subscription rate is an obstacle are invited to contact *Auroville Today* for information on reduced rates. *Auroville Today* does not receive any funds from Auroville. Your subscription (or your supporting contribution of double the amount) helps us to continue this work.

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1. **Through our website:** Subscriptions can be ordered and paid on-line through www.auroville.com/auroville-today
2. **By sending your contribution directly to *Auroville Today*:** Surrender, Auroville - 65 101, Tamil Nadu, India. Cheques sent directly to *Auroville Today* should be made payable to Auroville Unity Fund, specifying: 'Contribution for *Auroville Today*'. Personal cheques are preferred to bank cheques. Please do not send postal money orders or cash.

3. By sending your contribution to:

- ◆ **U.K.:** Auroville International U.K., c/o Martin Littlewood, 30 The Green, Surlingham, Norwich NR 14 7AG. Tel.: 01508-538300, fax: 01508-537122, email: info@aviuk.org
- ◆ **USA:** Make checks payable to **Auroville International USA** and send to: USA: Pondicherry, 12 Tinker Street, Woodstock, NY 12498, tel.: (1) 845-679-2926, email: info@pondi.biz

- ◆ **Germany:** Auroville International Deutschland e.V. Solmsstrasse 6, 10961 Berlin, tel. (49) (0)30-42803150, fax: (49) (0) 30-92091376, email: info@auroville.de. GLS Gemeinschaftsbank, BIC: GENODEM1GLS IBAN: DE16430609678019389200.

- ◆ **The Netherlands and Belgium:** Auroville International Netherlands, Athlonestraat 77, 6524 BJ Nijmegen, Triodos Bank nr 1984.20.927, IBAN: NL26 TRIO 0198 4209 27, BIC code : TRIONL2U, email: penningmeester@avinl.org.

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