

Auroville Today

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Walking a tightrope

"We're in uncharted waters," "It's a fast-changing situation where we can't give hard and fast answers" – two observations that sum up the present situation regarding Auroville's tsunami rehabilitation efforts.

"Decision-making is much more complex now than in the immediate relief phase," explains Hemant, "because while the effects of what we do now will be long-reaching, there are so many factors beyond Auroville's control." These include government policy regarding compensation and allocation of land for the affected villagers, and which villages the local Collector will allocate to which NGOs for reconstruction. But from Auroville's point of view they also include questions about our ability to work on a scale never attempted before. "I've never experienced a situation where we could grow as big as we want to without having to worry about money," says Hemant. At the same time, if we raise expectations that we cannot fulfil we could do enormous damage to Auroville's relationship with the villages, local government and those NGOs with which we have begun to successfully work. We're walking a tightrope." "That's why," adds Hemant, "we need to take it step-by-step rather than rushing into making big decisions."

"We can't afford to get it wrong," underlines Bhavana, "because unlike the other NGOs, we cannot just leave: this is our home. This is why the team is so determined that our response will be needs-driven, that everything will be done in consultation with the people involved." Primarily, of course, this means the affected villagers, but for Hemant, Lata and Prashant this also involves frequent meetings with government officials and NGOs working in the tsunami-affected areas. "Most of our work at the moment is advocacy," explains Prashant. "Some of the NGOs made various policy recommendations and now we are trying to convince the Tamil Nadu

Government to adopt them. These include asking them to re-evaluate their Technical Committee's recommendations for new construction. In the interests of social and economic sustainability, we are also recommending that new fishing equipment should not be over-supplied in this area."

Another key aspect of their work is coordinating with other NGOs. Auroville's Regional Resource Centre is intended to do this through providing both a physical location and website where NGOs can exchange information and coordinate action. However, while the Auroville Centre is an invaluable source of technical information, it has been much less successful in coordinating action between the different organizations. The problem is that, while experienced local and international NGOs are very aware of the dangers of throwing money or materials at the victims, many new or newly-flush NGOs are action-oriented and want to see immediate results. Typically, this leads them to distribute cash and materials to the affected community without reference to the real needs or to the long-term consequences. Hemant's prognosis is gloomy. "I was recently told by a member of a long-established NGO that trying to educate these 'quick-fix' organizations is a losing battle, but we have to keep trying."

Livelihood initiatives

Hemant explains that during the next three months the Auroville tsunami team will be prototyping various initiatives in the livelihood sector. "If they work out, we might scale them up and run them for the next two years, with the possibility of longer term development thereafter. In fact, in the long-term we clearly need an integrated development plan for the whole biore-



Painting by Cecilla, a student from Transition Primary School on display at an exhibition of tsunami-inspired art by children from Auroville and local fishing villages held at the Aurelec Cafeteria

gion." The most obviously successful of the livelihood initiatives so far has been Uma Prajapati's 'Tsunamika' project, which aims at empowering local women and diversifying work opportunities in the area (see box). Another livelihood project for women is Abha's paper bag workshop, which teaches local women to make and market bags made of old newspapers and magazines (the bags are purchased by Pour Tous and other commercial units in Auroville). Meanwhile the Industrial School at Irumbai is running a 3-month computer course for young men and women from the fishing community, while the boat engine repair workshop – which has now repaired over 100 engines from tsunami-damaged boats and is considering moving on to boat repair – is providing training in mechanics. Welding and carpentry classes are also being offered in another location.

Some projects which, initially, were more relief-based may have a livelihood component in the future. For example, the new 'Cash for Work' project provides wages for fishing people who do clean-up work. "It's a great story," enthuses Bhavana. "Fifty people – one from each household – were selected each day to work for four hours in return for a wage. Many of them decided to work for six hours for the same money. Finally, group by group they got their whole village clean, and they really liked it, so they asked us for dustbins. But we could offer more: we contacted an Ashram group that has been running a solid waste separa-

tion scheme in Pondicherry and invited them to present its work to the villagers. The villagers were receptive, so now one street in Chinnamudaliarchavady has been selected for a pilot project. If it works, the same possibility will be offered to all the other villages which are cleaning themselves up. Potentially we're talking about 23 villages!"

Similar long-term employment could be offered by the eco-restoration project. Walter is one of the coordinators of this project, which aims to create an ecological barrier near the sea to break the force of tsunamis and cyclones. "So far we have been to six villages to find out what the villagers would like us to plant and where. Understandably, their preference is for a shelter-belt of cash crops: casuarina, coconut and cashew. Casuarina and coconut would probably work, but I'm not sure about the cashew. It would be interesting to try out other species which would do well, like pongamia and badam, but ultimately the choice is theirs. Once we know what they want and where we can plant, we can start nurseries. If we situate these in the villages, it could afford training and a long-term livelihood possibility for those who want to continue with this work."

While the villagers have shown some interest in these projects, their real need at present is for permanent housing and the replacement or repair of their boats and nets. But do they really want to return to fishing? "In the first two weeks after the tsunami," explains Village Action coordinator, Moris, "nobody wanted to go back to fishing: everybody was too afraid. Now everyone wants to fish again once the government has agreed adequate compensation. You see, there's a lot of unemployment in the area, and fishing still provides a good income for only a few hours of work a day. The fishermen also value being their own bosses.

That's why even those following alternative livelihood courses at present will probably return to fishing when it starts again."

The shelter project

"Auroville has decided not to get involved in replacing boats or fishing equipment," explains Hemant, "but the Auroville team is looking at the possibility of constructing houses in three local villages. Undoubtedly the shelter project would be both our biggest project and our biggest challenge." So far, Auroville architects have come up with nine different designs which have been presented, in model form, in a few villages. "The villagers seemed to like them," says Lata, who is coordinating this project at present. "Some of the feedback was that they did not want community toilets but preferred toilets attached to each house, and they wanted the houses to be expandable on the first floor." "Unlike other NGOs," says Prashant, who coordinates the Resource Centre, "we'd like to focus not only on individual houses but also on overall settlement design, incorporating community spaces as well as technologies which have been tried and tested in Auroville, like wastewater recycling and renewable energy. The Collector and other NGOs have acknowledged our expertise in this area."

"We have not recruited a full team for the shelter project yet," says Hemant, "because there are still too many unknowns. Firstly, we have to know if we have the resources and capability: this is unclear at present. Then we have to get the green light from the government about where we can build (so far no less than 35 NGOs are competing to build in the 19 affected villages in our area), as well as from the people who will provide the money: this is a 16 crore (US\$ 3,636,363) project! Then there has to be clarity regarding the specifications. continued on page 2

Tsunamika

Tsunamika is a tiny doll made of waste cloth, but she has become a symbol of how regeneration and hope can grow out of disaster. Auroville fashion-designer Uma Prajapati, who runs Upasana Studio, wanted to do something for the women of tsunami-affected villages and started training them to make small dolls from leftover cloth. Workshops were held in a number of villages – eventually over 1,000 women will be trained in seven villages – and the dolls turned out so nicely that Upasana began using them as a complementary item attached to their products. Word spread, and soon students from the National Institute for Fashion

Design in Chennai came to Auroville and used their creativity to come up with new product ideas and prototypes: these include CD covers, decorative pins, brooches and bracelets.

The larger purpose of the Tsunamika project is to empower disadvantaged women by

giving them the confidence to create and market their own products and train others. Uma hopes that, with sufficient support, self-sustaining women's cooperatives will be established, providing a chance for motivated women to earn a living.

Now she aims to create a comprehensively documented model based on the Tsunamika experience that could be easily replicated all over India.



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Recently, for example, the Chief Minister announced that the minimum size per unit is being increased from 25 square metres to 35 square metres and the cost from Rs 50,000 (US\$ 1,136) a unit to Rs 150,000 (US\$ 3,409) a unit." "The latter reflects the recommendations of a Technical Committee which, we think, are examples of over-engineering," says Prashant. "To put it in perspective, they recommend that we should build to even stronger standards than those laid down for post-earthquake construction in Bhuj, Gujarat!"

"Auroville will definitely be involved in some way in providing shelter," continues Prashant, "but the question remains if we do it on our own, or if we take a supporting role or go into partnership with others." "The villagers are definitely interested in having Auroville do the construction," says Bhavana. "In nearby Mudaliarkuppam, the only structures to survive the tsunami were ferro-cement doors made in Auroville, and this really impressed the villagers. They also trust us not to cheat them."

Expectations of the fishing community

So, what exactly are the villagers' post-tsunami expectations of Auroville? The key people to listen to here are Moris and Anbu. Post-tsunami, Anbu has continued to coordinate work in the villages where Village Action had already been active, while Moris has been focalising the dialogue with the leaders of tsunami-affected settlements through the weekly 'Paalam' (Tamil for 'bridge') meetings. "To dialogue with them you have first to understand them," he says, "and this is a very interesting experience for us because we've never had a full-fledged programme with fishing communities before." Moris explains that fishing communities differ from other village communities. "The fishing people are very cohesive, they



Helgard Zurmuehl, a visitor to Auroville, sculpted this piece, which she called 'Fisherman', three months after the tsunami struck. The severed arms and legs represent the way he has been cut off from his livelihood. "But look at his face," she says, "There is great determination there, and he is still walking forward. This is my tribute to the fishermen's indomitable spirit which I admire so much."

stick together, and the structure of these societies is patriarchal and hierarchical: the leaders' word is law. In one sense this makes working with them easier than working with other villages, because if you can convince the leaders of a course of action, everybody else will follow. However, because these are communities run by men, they do not welcome the empowerment of women or youth. If they allow Women's Groups to form at all it is only because it gives access to certain government schemes.

"The other complication, from a relief and compensation point of view, is that they share everything. So all the compensation money paid to individuals is immediately handed over to the leaders, who then share it out equally among the whole community, even if some families have suffered more than others. The desire that everybody should get the maximum benefit has led them to inflate the losses of boats and houses which, in turn, may delay government compensation. We managed to get them to understand that Auroville would not replace fishing equipment. However, there is an expectation that Auroville will provide housing. This is because an Aurovilian announced in an NGO meeting attended by the Collector that Auroville is planning to build houses in the three closest villages. So the other NGOs backed off, informing these villagers that their villages have been 'adopted' by Auroville and they were going to receive a lot of help from us. The villagers' big worry now is that if Auroville doesn't follow through with construction, they will lose out because the other NGOs will have gone elsewhere." Moris believes Auroville should deliver on the housing "because it's a great opportunity to prove our efficiency and capacity in the nearby villages, where it will be greatly appreciated."

The weekly *Paalam* meetings, involving representatives from 23 fishing villages, are, in many ways, the key to the success or failure of the entire Auroville tsunami rehabilitation project. "They are beginning to trust us," says Moris. "For example, when there was another tsunami scare recently, they immediately contacted me for information. Also, when another NGO was offering a generous

'Food for Work' package in a village where we were already involved, they sent the NGO away, saying 'We want to work only with Auroville because they have been helping us from the beginning'."

Friction with other communities

Actually, there are problems now with some of the non-fishing communities. In most of the seaside villages in this area, the tsunami struck the fishing community living on the beach but left untouched people living on the other side of the road. "There has always been tension between the fishing people and the other villagers," says Moris, "because the fishing people are very emotional – often they act without thinking – and their approach is rough and ready." The sight of NGOs queuing up to distribute 'free goodies' to the fishing communities has increased resentment. "Each of the affected fishing communities in this area has been visited by at least fifty NGOs," says Anbu. "Some households have already received as many as nine cooking stoves. Organizations have distributed things like blenders and suitcases, and now one of them wants to give a mobile phone to every fishing family. Meanwhile the poor and infirm *Dalits* or *Vanniyars* who live a few metres across the road receive nothing because they belong to a different community and the wave didn't reach them."

"The *Vanniyar* community in some villages is now saying that Auroville is interested in helping only the fishing families, that when there are problems in the *Vanniyar* community we never help them," says Moris. "This is not so; the reason that we concentrate on the fishing communities now is because they have suffered a real disaster." "However," adds Anbu, "it is important that Auroville is not seen to favour one community over another, so now we are trying to right the balance by distributing food and clothes to the *Vanniyar* community. Abha also agreed to begin her paper-bag workshop with *Vanniyar* women and Uma will include some members of this community in her Tsunami project."

"The real need here is to improve relations between the fishing and non-fishing communities," says Moris. "We are already planning summer camps, school-trips and sports events which would bring together children from both communities. Of course, if there is a conflict on the cricket pitch it will become a big issue and Auroville will get blamed!"

"There is never a situation in which you can do only good," concludes Hemant, "it's always mixed." "At the same time we should not underestimate ourselves," says Auralee, who helps coordinate the tsunami office. "This is the first time I've seen in action what Auroville can achieve when it puts its energies together. You feel, wow, we could do anything if we really put our hearts and minds behind it."

Alan

Auroville Tsunami Relief and Rehabilitation Report 25th March 2005

Villages and communities covered

Auroville has been – and continues to be – actively involved in relief and rehabilitation work in 24 coastal villages and communities, together with 9 Auroville beach communities, located in Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry Union Territory. The farthest village north is approximately 20 kilometres from Auroville, and the farthest village south is located 8 kilometres from Auroville. All work is being done in collaboration and coordination with the office of the regional Collector and various Government agencies and NGOs working in the area.

Numbers affected

In total 34,585 people are living in Auroville's area of concern. Of these people some 10,425 have been affected in one way or the other by the tsunami. The number of people who died as a result of the tsunami was 104. In total 3,910 houses, 2,320 boats and 16,563 nets have been damaged.

Donations received and utilised

At the time of this report, Rs. 2.9 crores (US\$ 659,090) had been received for village relief and rehabilitation work, of which 10% has come from Auroville residents, guests and visitors, 9% from elsewhere in India, and 81% from abroad. For the Auroville beach settlements, Rs. 44 lakhs (US\$ 100,800) has been received, of which 25% has come from Auroville residents, guests and visitors, 4% from elsewhere in India, and 71% from abroad. Of these sums, the breakdown in expenditure to date is as follows (to nearest rounded off figure):

Emergency relief camps 26th – 31st December, 2004: Rs 2,01,266 (US\$ 4,610)
Distribution of food and non-food items: Rs 30,05,535 (US\$ 68,855)
Cleaning by AV volunteers/Cash-for-Work project: Rs 7,97,458 (US\$ 18,269)
Trauma counseling and health: Rs 5,10,802 (US\$ 11,879)
AV beach communities relief: Rs 34,92,517 (US\$ 79,996)
Fishing boat engine repair Rs 2,75,731 (US\$ 6,319)
Tsunami Knowledge and Coordination Centre: Rs 55,997, (US\$ 1,283)
Youth training / Women's handicraft workshops: Rs 77,140, (US\$ 1,768)
Administration, communication, overheads: Rs 1,40,061, (US\$ 3,210)
Total: Rs 85,56,507 (US\$ 196,189)

Auroville Tsunami Rehabilitation Programme

Remaining and new funds will be allocated to the various projects aiming at rehabilitation of the affected villagers.

The Rehabilitation Programme consists of four distinct but very much interlinked projects:

(a) **Tsunami Knowledge and Coordination Centre:** Functioning as an interactive information platform for collecting and sharing all tsunami-related information, spreading of best practices, and development of consensus on rehabilitation strategies and implementation. A public tsunami-related website and a shelter prototype plot will be part of the Knowledge Centre.

(b) **Shelters and Infrastructure:** It is planned to build or help in the construction of new permanent shelters with accompanying infrastructure.

(c) **Ecological Restoration:** Trees will be planted on selected plots along the coast to protect the land, combat salt-water intrusion, and stop further degradation of the natural resources. Research, documentation and tree nurseries have started.

(d) **Livelihood Projects:**

- A wide range of vocational training programmes are being offered to about 100 fishermen and village youth, using Auroville's training facilities.
- Various handicraft workshops for women aiming at the establishment of self-sufficient women's-cooperatives are taking place in seven villages.
- Some 250 boat engines are being repaired in a special workshop.
- Cash-for-Work project offers wages to residents in return for cleaning their villages. Waste management programmes will be implemented to keep the villages clean.

Paalam-Coordination Structure

In order to ensure the input of the affected villagers and to guarantee a need-based approach for all Auroville's activities, a *Paalam* (Tamil for 'Bridge') structure has been set up, in which each village or community is represented by one Panchayat member, one woman, one youth, and possibly one teacher. The *Paalam*s meet every week and form an indispensable source of reflection and information on all projects.

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Rehabilitating Auroville's beach communities

To face the tragic consequences of the tsunami, a team was immediately constituted with the responsibility and task of working out solutions to the difficult situation in which many Aurovilians living in the Auroville beach communities were confronted.

The first actions taken by the team were to assess the situation in every community and to release the necessary funds to build temporary fences in order to secure Auroville land and property, and to restore water, electricity and telephone connections wherever necessary. The second priority was to assess the damage to the houses, to estimate the work that had to be done and to release the funds.

Another urgent priority was to evaluate the financial needs of those who had lost their means of income in the disaster. There were four families in this situation. It was decided to provide them with financial support for a period of three to six months or more, plus a certain amount of money in cash to allow them to deal with emergency needs.

The team also identified some business losses that had to be offset. They considered this an important initiative, particularly in the present economic situation of Auroville.

Today, infrastructure and house repairs, personal financial support and business losses have already been tackled and solutions have been worked out. The team is now working on the last part of the operation, which concerns personal losses. These were quite significant and will be covered according to the available funds.

The team would like to take this opportunity to thank all the donors for their generosity and invaluable support (Rs. 44 lakhs or \$ 100,800 has been donated for the Auroville beach communities). Thanks to them, we have been able to put all those who have suffered from the tsunami back on their feet and enabled them to rebuild their lives. We would also like to thank all the Aurovilians who have put so much energy and so much of themselves into this operation.

The Auroville Beach Community Relief and Rehabilitation Team

Women's Group meetings

Auroville's Mirra Women's Group went to Bangalore to learn from Vimochana, one of the largest organizations for women in India. Esther learns about their findings

The Mirra Women's Group was initiated by Kamala, Rajaveni, Kantha, Phoenix, Heti and Grace in February 2004 as a discussion and action forum for Tamil Aurovillian women. I met with several members of the group, two of whom have recently been on a three-day trip to Bangalore to meet another women's group called 'Vimochana'. This group is one of the biggest organizations for women in India; they take care of women from Bangalore and the surroundings. I interviewed Stella, a new but self-confident and charming member of the group, and Angama, who was shy and needed encouragement from the others. The others present there were Amutha, a very young member of 18 years, Vishva with her two children, and of course Grace, their "akka" (big sister), who is a dynamic force in the women's group.

Auroville Today: What experiences did you have in your discussion with the women's group organization in Bangalore?

Grace: "Many Tamil women in Auroville are living in a cocoon. It is magazines and newspapers only that

should do: her two children were suffering badly from their alcoholic father. So I advised her to put the children into New Creation Boarding School and to try to find a job, in order to get out of the situation. These kinds of problems exist also in Bangalore and so we could share experiences."

What are future projects of your group in Auroville?

Grace: "We can say that problems will be present all the time and everywhere, so we will always have a lot of work to do. But Auroville means something new. I believe that in the future women will study the spiritual teachings of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo. Then a lot of problems will be solved. This is my dream."

In an interview with Auroville Today last year you said you wished to have a Women's Centre in Auroville. How realistic is this?

Grace: "In March we raised funds and on March 6th our group celebrated Women's Day at Kalabhumi. Many of the men and children helped us, they took care of the stands serving tea, coffee, dosa and vadai. We

relaxed. Personally, I'm very happy to join this group, because I left Auroville fourteen years ago, I lived in Europe for some time, but I always had contact with Auroville. I think the Women's Group is also a really good opportunity for women from villages around Auroville who work here. In this group they have a possibility to share their problems. I'm so glad to do this social work, I want to help people and I like the work with women and children. The Women's Group works very well."

What are the common problems for a Tamil woman in Auroville who lives in both the worlds: the village with its traditions, and Auroville with its international lifestyle?

Grace: "The main problem for the women in our group is the language, to understand each other, and to express themselves. They have to learn and understand more to participate in the aims of Auroville. But they often find a way to handle the conflict between these totally different living styles. They follow both worlds. They speak Tamil and English or wear saris in the villages and more modern clothes in Auroville. We want to



From left to right: Amutha, Stella, Angama, Grace

show us all the problems faced by women in society (outside Auroville). We went to Bangalore to see how they try to solve these problems. We just listened to learn more. Some of them spoke about the issue of having female babies. There are people who kill babies because of their sex! In Auroville these kinds of problems do not exist. Outside, there are many women who on knowing that their foetus is female, decide to go for an abortion. I come from a place outside of Auroville, so I know these problems exist, not only from the magazines. But talking to these women was a new experience for us."

What are the differences between the problems of the women's group Vimochana and the Mirra Women's Group?

Grace: "Around Auroville there is a different awareness and that is what we also said to the women in Bangalore. They couldn't believe that we have such freedom, that we can meet with other women, and also work and go out. But drinking is also a problem in Auroville. A lot of families suffer from their drinking men. For example, one Aurovillian woman phoned me and asked me what she

made a profit of 1500 Rs. We still have the idea to establish a Women's Centre. We need a place of joy. Our women always want to learn more. Now we are learning tailoring, painting, singing classical songs and dancing. We teach each other a lot of things. Besides, some women want to learn computer skills. Many of the women paint well and sell their paintings, or they tailor and make their own clothes and bags. They are proud of their work and they come out of their oppressive background. The group always works together like a team. If someone has an idea we discuss how we could work it out. Of course there are problems sometimes, but we want nobody to be excluded from our discussions, so we try to make compromises."

Stella, what are your expectations?

Stella: "I am new in the group, but I know the members already for quite some time. In my opinion the most important thing is to have a permanent meeting place for us women. We are not at this point now; and we go from place to place for our meetings. If we had our own place to share our problems and to talk about personal issues, we could be more

always learn more, but at the same time we are also following Tamil traditions: we go to temples and have traditional marriages. We are always in contact with our tradition."

What were your reasons for becoming an Aurovillian?

Vishva: "I was born in Auroville, so it was not my personal decision. I'm very interested to know more about the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. Sometimes I join a Savitri reading at Savitri Bhavan, which is every Tuesday from 4 to 5 pm, and I want to learn more about computers and other languages. Tamil women normally don't have a computer in their houses. You see, Tamil women just work in places such as the Solar Kitchen, in cooking etc. I wish that Tamil women could also work in places like the working committee or the APDC, but that's really rare. So it would be good for us to have a place to learn."

Amutha: "I've been staying in Auroville since three and a half years. I think we can move something here. I read some books from the library about the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, and I believe they give us certain guidelines. I like it here in Auroville.



Esther

My education is minimal. I studied only up to eight standard. I want to learn more, and then I can see how I can be more useful for Auroville to achieve its goal. I have had many classes with Subash and in Meenakshi's School. That is how I came to learn about the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. I'm proud of Auroville, and I am happy to join this group. Personally, my passion is to write poems."

Angama: "I came here in 1989. I didn't know anything about Auroville, but through my husband I came to know something. At that time it was easier to join Auroville; lunch in the community was free and everybody was eating together. Now everyone is cooking separately. Before I joined the group there was a lot of tension in my life. It was always cooking, washing, taking care of the children, cleaning the house etc. I did not have any time for myself or to do anything else. Now, with the Women's Group, my life has changed and I have fun."

How would you describe a Tamil Aurovillian woman in a few words?

Stella: "Adjust, care, full of charm."

After the interview, I talked to Phoenix, a German member of the group. She shared her impressions about the trip to Bangalore and the work of the group: "The Bangalore women have been working with traumatized women all over India for the past 29 years. My collaboration with Vimochana is for five years. They work with women traumatized due to violence in the families, sexual abuse, physical abuse, dowry problems, or being married to men who already have another wife. There are also Aurovillian women who suffer from violence in their families, who suffer because of a husband who has married a second time, who suffer from the drinking of their men. These are problems of women all over the world. A few weeks before, we had to send a woman from a neighbouring village to Vimochana because even in Auroville there was no safe place for her. She still is in Bangalore with them and feels quite well and safe."

"This trip was a strong emotional experience for our women. We had organized a seminar in self-defense skills in March last year where more than forty women participated. Then, on International Women's Day, we performed a circle dance when we were charged with 'fighting' energy. 120 women came for meditative circle dances; it was a great success in a happy and deeply-touching atmosphere."

"We still need some space in Auroville, for programmes for women, for a frank exchange amongst women because without this women will not find the courage to express themselves and share their problems with others."

Esther

Esther is an 18-year old student from Germany who visited Auroville before starting her studies in journalism.

In brief

Matrimandir on radio

All-India Radio broadcast a radio programme on Matrimandir in Tamil on March 26th. The 27 minutes programme contained interviews with Mahalingam, Meenakshi, Varadharajan, Lourdes, and Matrimandir workers Gajendra, Selvam and Somu.

Visit of Home Ministry official

The Joint Secretary Foreign, Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi, visited Auroville together with the Chief Immigration Officer, Chennai, and other officials to discuss visa issues and the image of Auroville outside.

Expulsions from Auroville

A Review Committee, established by the Auroville Council to look into a case of abuse, has decided that three Aurovillians have to leave Auroville, two for a period of two years and one for a period of five years. Return to Auroville after this period is conditional.

Eye disease slide show

The Aravind Eye Hospital gave a slide show presentation at the Town Hall on early recognition of glaucoma and retinopathy in the context of some severe eye-disease patients from Auroville.

NIFT design workshop

As part of the Auroville tsunami relief work, Upasana Design Studio organized a three-day workshop with 100 design students at the National Institute of Fashion Technology, Chennai. The aim of the workshop was to explore creative ideas for developing handicraft products which can be made by the women from fishing communities.

House Tax

The Funds and Assets Management Committee has not agreed to a suggestion that Auroville applies for exemption from paying House Tax. The FAMC holds the view that paying House Tax is an important and beneficial contribution from Auroville to the surrounding villages as the village panchayats receive subsidies from the government based on the amount of House Tax collected.

New Pour Tous

As the opening date of the new Pour Tous building next to the Solar Kitchen approaches, discussions are ongoing as it is felt that the opportunity should be taken to bring Auroville closer to its ideals of providing more 'in kind' services to reach the 'no exchange of money' ideal instead of opening yet another supermarket. The group is still working on the policy guidelines.

Pesticides

The Working Committee has received many complaints about the use of chemical pesticides on cashew topes nearby Auroville which badly affect many people. It is looking into the legal aspects of how to prevent pesticide use in city areas.

Golconde furniture

Madhavi Ravela of the Mirabelle Corporation, having rediscovered the beauty of the Golconde furniture designed by late Georges Nakashima, is now manufacturing reproductions. All profits from the sale of the Golconde Furniture Collection will be donated to the Auroville Land Fund. Visit (www.mirabelle.com),

The making of *Creativity*

The ideals and problems of an award-winning collective housing project

In 1997 a severe housing shortage forced the Entry Group to 'close' Auroville, refusing to entertain new applicants. People came together to find solutions. Many expressed the need for affordable housing in a collective environment. Since the early days of Auroville, when the Aspiration and Matrimandir Camp communities had been built, no other large-scale collective housing project with a community focus had come up. One solution proffered was a housing project called 'Endurance' proposed by architect Anupama. "It would have shared common resources and alternative approaches to energy supply and water and wastewater management. But after a year of dialogue, and for all kinds of reasons, this project did not get built," she explains.

"At around the same time I had been

how many square metres of roof are needed in order to flush toilets with harvested rainwater without tapping into the groundwater. But I still needed to test these theoretical standards 'on site'."

The genesis of *Creativity*

Soon afterwards a design competition was floated by the Housing Group for a collective housing project. Initially the project holders aimed at a sprawling development, but soon became convinced that such land use was not sustainable and instead opted for a high density design. Kolam, Anupama's architect unit, was one of those invited to submit a proposal. Based on its experience with the *Endurance* project, it presented an innovative low-cost prototype 'Mangalam', a collective housing project with spaces for common facilities to

The project aimed at a healthy mix of singles, couples and families, and a Residents' Charter was drawn up and signed by all future residents as "a tool for alignment around the values of no personal ownership of spaces, sharing and contribution." It prescribed, amongst other things, that all residents, regardless of personal preference and private facilities, should take up work for the community. As an experiment in sustainable urban living, *Creativity* aimed at being a demonstration site for eco-technologies for urban projects. The community would use alternative forms of energy such as solar power, harvest rainwater for toilet flushing and use water from the wastewater treatment plant for gardening. Eco-friendly building materials were to be used. More than 50% of the area was to be green with a kitchen garden to grow organic food for consumption within the community.

As the need for this project arose at a time when Auroville was facing an acute shortage of housing, the project holders also planned to give special consideration to those Aurovilians who did not have the financial means to build a house. They realised that those without funds tended to find themselves grouped together in 'cheap-quality' housing, which was widely felt to be undesirable. Serious consideration was given as to whether the Housing Service could allocate spaces in the new project according to need, and not as per an individual's financial input. In other words, would it

be feasible that individuals make donations to the project as a whole instead of to their private apartment? If so, the project could offer a positive alternative to the trend of individually-funded private housing. But even if this could be realised, it was obvious that the total costs, estimated at 1.5 crores [at the time US \$ 325,000] would make fundraising necessary. It was agreed that neither the project holders nor the architect would charge a fee for their services and

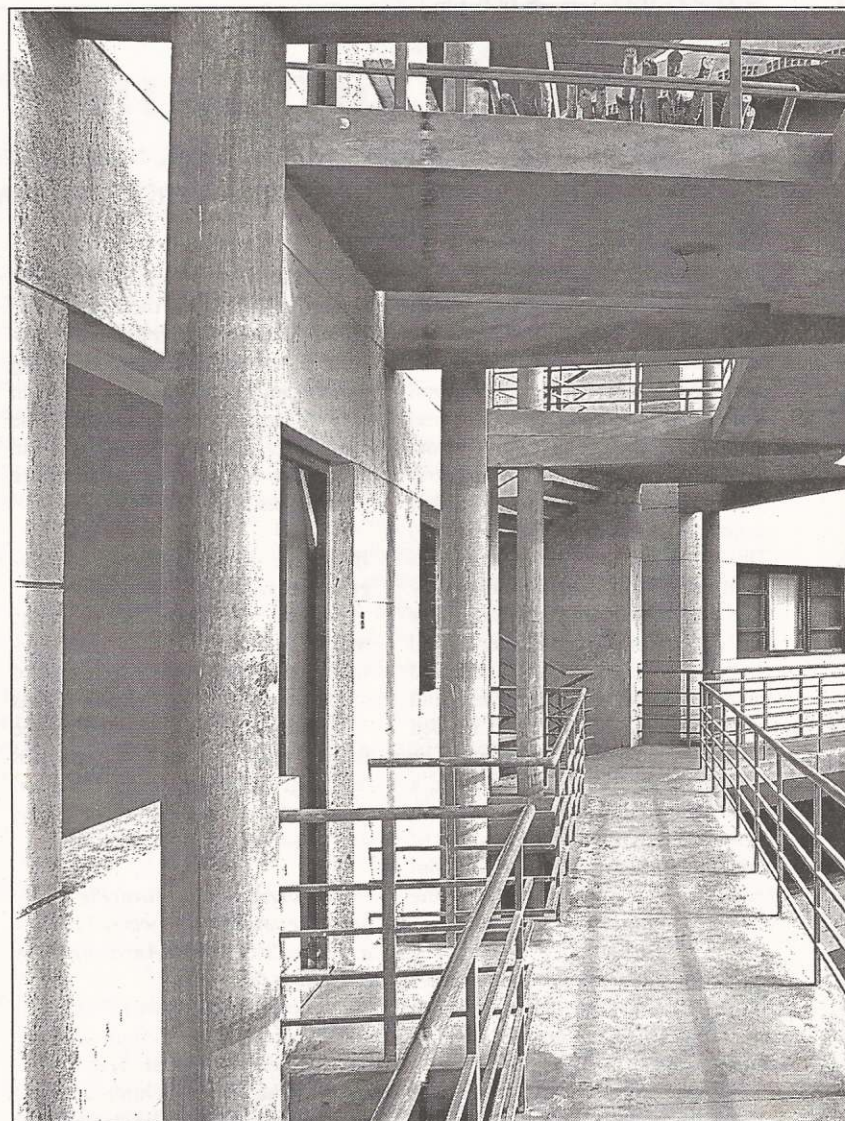
that Kolam would only bill for part-maintenance of the site architect, Sonali. The entire project was based on much idealism.

The project takes off

The planning of the project started in June 1999. Attempts were made to document every stage of the development of *Creativity*: each planning session, meeting, issue, and setback were to be recorded. On August 15th 2001, the first brick was laid in a ceremony attended by Dr. Chamanlal Gupta and the then Chairman of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation, Dr. Kireet Joshi.

At the beginning, the construction work proceeded so well that both architect and contractor optimistically predicted that the project would be completed within a year. However, that was not to be. One of the main reasons was that basic agreements about the roles and responsibilities of the architect, the contractor and the project holders were not made.

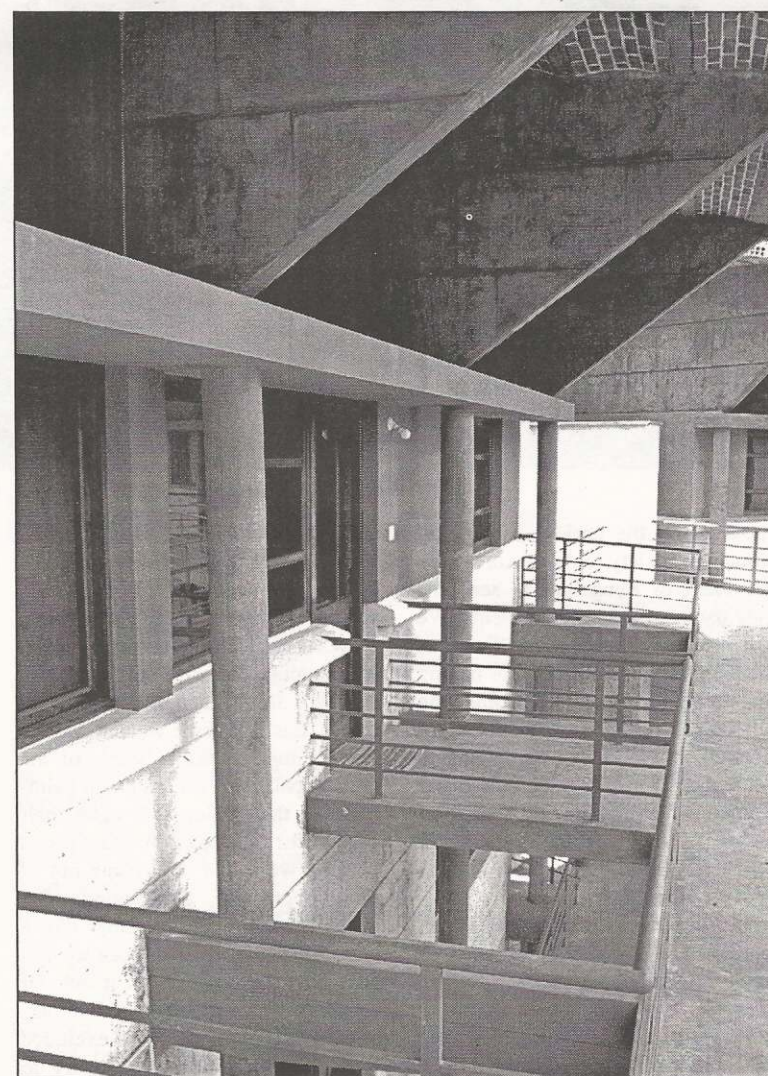
The project holders started to work with the architect and injected ideas and changed concepts that were felt to be inadequate. They substantially redesigned the internal layout: apartment designs and sizes of rooms were altered, staircases were re-located, heights of ceilings were increased and terraces were created for each apartment. They did not touch the external lay-out of the *Creativity* cluster and its housing blocks as they had agreed in the beginning that this would remain solely the architect's responsibility. This degree of involvement by the project holders, however,



was not always to the liking of the architect and gradually differences of opinion led to estrangement. The architect complained that the project holders had neither the architectural knowledge nor technical expertise to tackle large-scale constructions. "There was an increased interference with our work, original concepts were questioned and designs were changed after the project had taken off. Project holders became architects and

our work difficult."

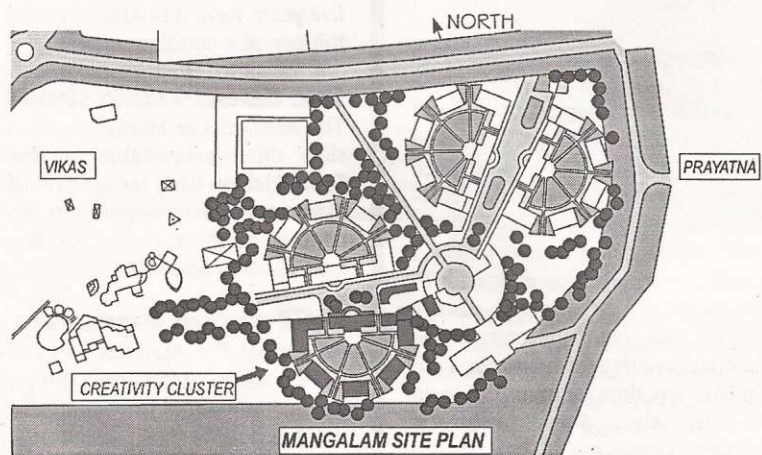
The project holders in turn were dissatisfied that some of their changes, which were discussed and agreed on before the final plans were made, were not being implemented if they did not meet with the approval of the architect, that they were never given copies of the complete working drawings, and that the working drawings that were given were often incomplete and not really under-



The walkways are at a distance from the walls, creating sound funnels

residents expressed their desires for their own tailor-made apartments. That took an increasing amount of time and design-energy and we got very discouraged. If they would have let us build what we had designed, the project would have been much cheaper," says Anupama. "Also the lack of harmony between the project holders and residents themselves made

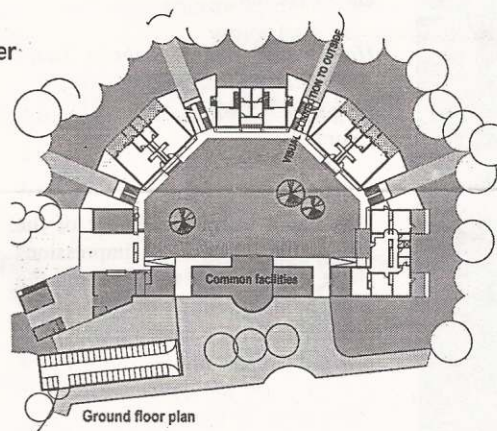
stood by them. The architects complained that as the project holders lacked technical experience they were made to prepare many versions of working drawings of every changing idea and that the project holders stopped the construction at times as they couldn't arrive at a decision unanimously. "This all led to months of delay and bitter exchanges,



Lay-out of Mangalam.

Right: Detail of the *Creativity* cluster

given a research fellowship from the Indian Vastu-Shilpa Foundation to do a study on an ideal urban eco-community. A lot of eco stuff had been happening in Auroville but on an individual scale. I wanted to find out if it would be possible to mainstream these models through building a housing prototype for urban areas. In this research I was guided by Chamanlal Gupta, the renewable energy expert from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. He stimulated me to not only do research, but also make sure that my work would be tested on site and be monitored for a period of five years, so that we could develop standards. My research work resulted in a paper: *Urban Eco community: Design and Analysis for Sustainability*. It contains theoretical standards for anyone designing in similar climatic conditions as Auroville. For example, there are calculations about



accommodate approximately 360 residents on an area of about 2.17 hectares. 'Creativity' would be the name of the first of its six clusters.

The Housing and the Planning Groups accepted Kolam's proposal and a site was allocated. Kolam was appointed as architect, *Endurance* was the model, and Auronirmatha became contractor.

Though the Housing Group was the de-facto client, the project was actually undertaken by Gillian and Kathy and later Jocelyn, Shyama and Jürgen. Gillian recalls how, in the early days, she was fired by the project's ideals. "More than anything else, the fact that so many strong women decided to participate in the project gave me the inner conviction that it had Mother's blessings. It was a true shakti project - the project holders and the architects were all female."

Ideals of *Creativity*

Unlike other collective housing projects, the project holders also sought to map out the sociological, economic and environmental objectives of *Creativity*. It was to become "a social research endeavour and a dynamic experiment in sustainable urban living for a culturally-diverse group of approximately 50 Aurovilians, Newcomers and guests, with an emphasis on shared common facilities such as kitchen and recreational areas".

Creativity fact sheet

Beginning of construction: August 2001
Expected date of completion: Autumn 2005

Work pending: doors and windows multi purpose room, courtyard landscaping.

No. of apartments: 13 single units, 6 units for couples without children, 2 family units, 5 single rooms with shared facilities, 2 guest rooms for singles, 3 guest rooms for couples.

Collective spaces: Kitchen, dining, multi-purpose room, atelier, office, laundry, motorbike parking, storeroom.

No of permanent inhabitants: 38

Nationality of inhabitants: Indian, German, Dutch, Italian, French, Australian, Colombian, Canadian, Spanish, English, American.

Average age of inhabitants: 50 years

Waste water treatment system: Root zone type, treated water is used for irrigation.

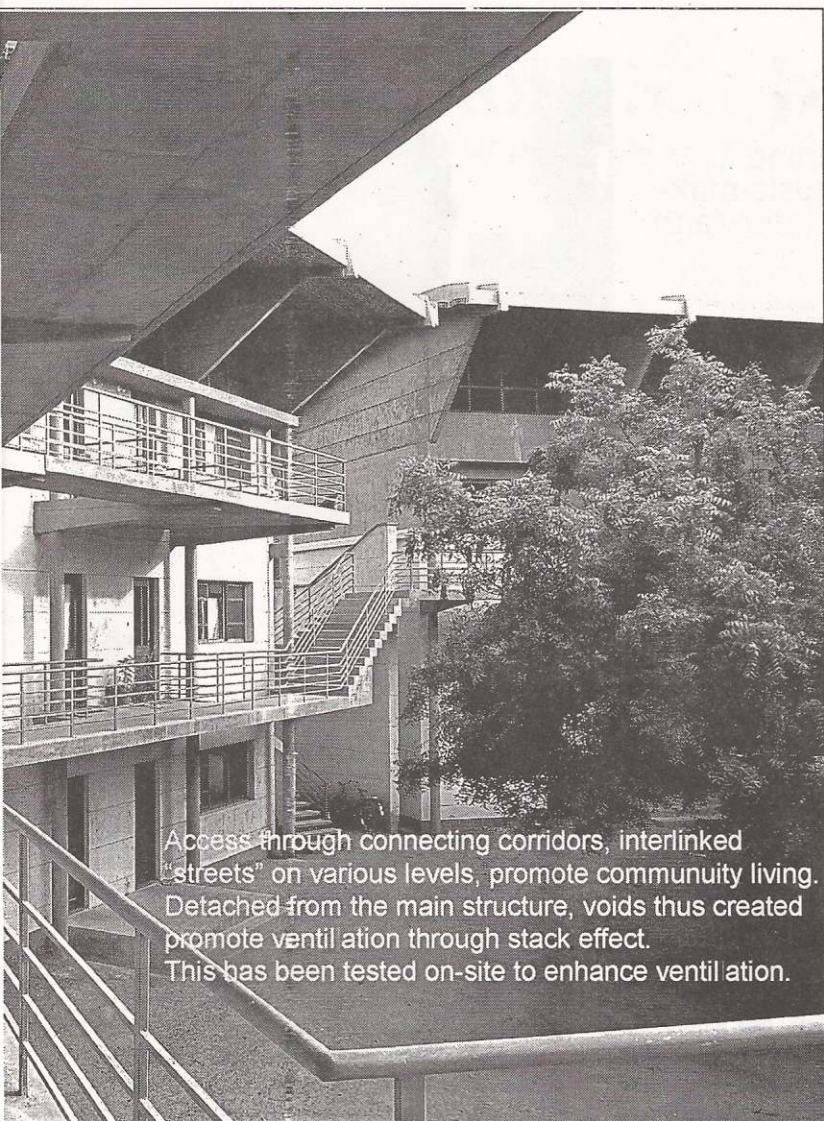
Total built-up area: 1715 sq.m.

Total costs: Rs 1.79 crores

Cost per square metre including collective spaces and infrastructure: Rs 10,500

Architect: Kolam

Contractor: Auronirmatha



Access through connecting corridors, interlinked "streets" on various levels, promote community living. Detached from the main structure, voids thus created promote ventilation through stack effect. This has been tested on-site to enhance ventilation.

PHOTO COURTESY: KOIAM

and added to the project's costs," observes Gillian. "Gradually, the pace of the project slowed down. We observed that working drawings were also not being provided in time to the contractor. He started to pull workers off the *Creativity* project to work on other projects of the same architect to the extent that we found that he was over-extending himself." Ultimately Anupama withdrew from the direct interaction with project holders after a gradual breakdown of the relationship with them. Her place was taken by Sonali who, however, in the opinion of the project holders, lacked sufficient experience. During her 4-months' maternity leave, a student draftsman took over the site supervision temporarily.

Project Financing

The fundraising proved a major challenge, in particular as about a third of the intended residents lacked personal means. A seed-donation from an anonymous donor of Rs 50 lakhs [US \$ 108,000] had launched the project. With the consent of all involved, this money was used for the common infrastructure, and not to sponsor housing for those without means. Says Gillian: "We asked the prospective residents to be committed to live in an intentional community and offer whatever finances they could. The ideal was you give what you can

regardless of the spaces you are going to occupy so that those without means can be sponsored. But this proved to be unrealistic. Ultimately, the donation to be made for each apartment was calculated on a square metre basis, and those without sufficient means were asked to arrange for a loan with Auroville's Financial Service, resulting in stress and personal hardships." A few people were subsidized, not by the project, but by a special fund of Auroville. The mood had changed from 'very off the ground' to 'very on the ground'.

Added to this was that the estimates submitted were based on an unrealistic time schedule of one year, whereas in reality it took three and half years, creating added expenses. The estimates also did not include the infrastructure costs, as the project holders and architect planned to seek funding for the rain water harvesting and the solar energy systems. This funding, however, never materialised. The project holders later blamed themselves for being naive and inexperienced, relying on the expertise of the architect and expecting a professional approach which would have included the complete infrastructure costs within the estimates. Nevertheless, the project was always adequately supported financially and construction never needed to be halted due to lack of funds.

The residents

Meanwhile, the residents waited and endured the seemingly interminable delays. They were, as per the original ideals, 'a healthy mix of different nationalities', though not of all age groups. "We noticed, a bit to our amazement, that younger people did not want to live here," says Gillian. "The average age is over 40; most people are over 50 years old. There is one family, one single parent with children, two couples and the rest are singles. But it is a very integrated group. They are facing the problems together and are committed to make *Creativity* work. Their goodwill and endurance to put up with a two and half years longer waiting than anticipated and meeting the substantial cost increases – neither the architect nor the contractor took financial responsibility for mistakes or delays – can only be commended."

Architect of the Year Award

Judging *Creativity* from an aesthetic point of view, the consensus is that it is attractive and inviting. It is perhaps small wonder that, in April 2005, the jury for the prestigious Indian Architects of the Year Award conferred a Commendation for Group Housing 2003 to Anupama for the *Creativity* project. It cited the experimental technical, social and environmental aspects of this housing project, and the quality of life which it provides – an interactive neighbourhood where each living space has the maximum possible greenery and open spaces. Says Anu: "The prize really should go to Sonali. Without her dedication and commitment we would not have materialised this project." Both are proud to have been associated with the project, the problems notwithstanding. For the residents of *Creativity*, the prize is an acknowledgment that their collective hard work has paid off, even if they have to find solutions to live with the results of some of the design failures.

Design flaws

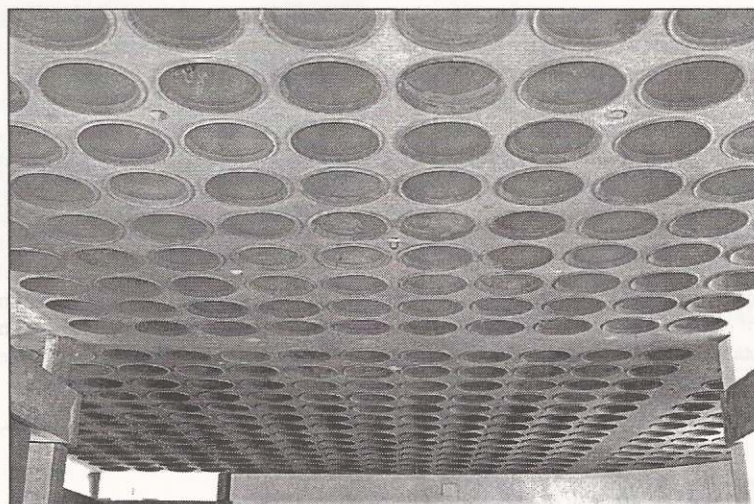
In fact, unique to Auroville, the residents of *Creativity* have written to the Auroville Planning and Development Council that building permission for *Citadines*, the second cluster of *Mangalam*, should be refused until the problems experienced by *Creativity* have been properly addressed. "We have made an objective evaluation of this project, both in terms of the building process and design errors," says Gillian, "so that the mistakes of *Creativity* are not repeated in *Citadines*." Asked about the design flaws of the project, Gillian mentions as major issues the noise pollu-

tion and the roof design. "From the beginning there were doubts if the layout of the housing blocks in a semi-circle wouldn't create sound pollution. The architect replied that a certain amount of noise has to be accepted, and that full noise-control can only be obtained by closing all windows and air-conditioning the rooms. At the time we consulted a sound specialist, and though his opinion on the design was negative, we let the issue rest in view of our agreement not to touch the external lay-out. We made the mistake not to insist on a proper sound evaluation of the structures. But as we feared, the semi-circular shape of the structure indeed creates sound vortices. What we did not realise was that two design elements would escalate the noise problem. One is that the large roof overhangs reflect sound so that those in the upper floors hear everything that is being said below. The other is that the elevated

roof heats up during the day and radiates the heat back at night. Painting the roof white has reduced the heat. But it added to the costs." Anupama, disagrees. "We think that the roof design was a success as the radiation is still far less than if we had built a conventional concrete roof." Another concept that did not work was 'the collective singles,' eight private rooms with shared bathrooms and kitchenettes. Says Gillian, "When the first floor was finished we realised that there were no takers for this idea and we changed the second floor into two separate apartments. Other mistakes are that access to some apartments is through the kitchenette or that entrance doors face bathroom doors."

Lessons learned

Asked what lessons have been learned, Anupama retorts "Not to work anymore with a group client. We will



Filler slabs using inverted terracotta pots: an energy-efficient slab and aesthetic undersurface without expensive investment in shuttering costs, plastering and painting.

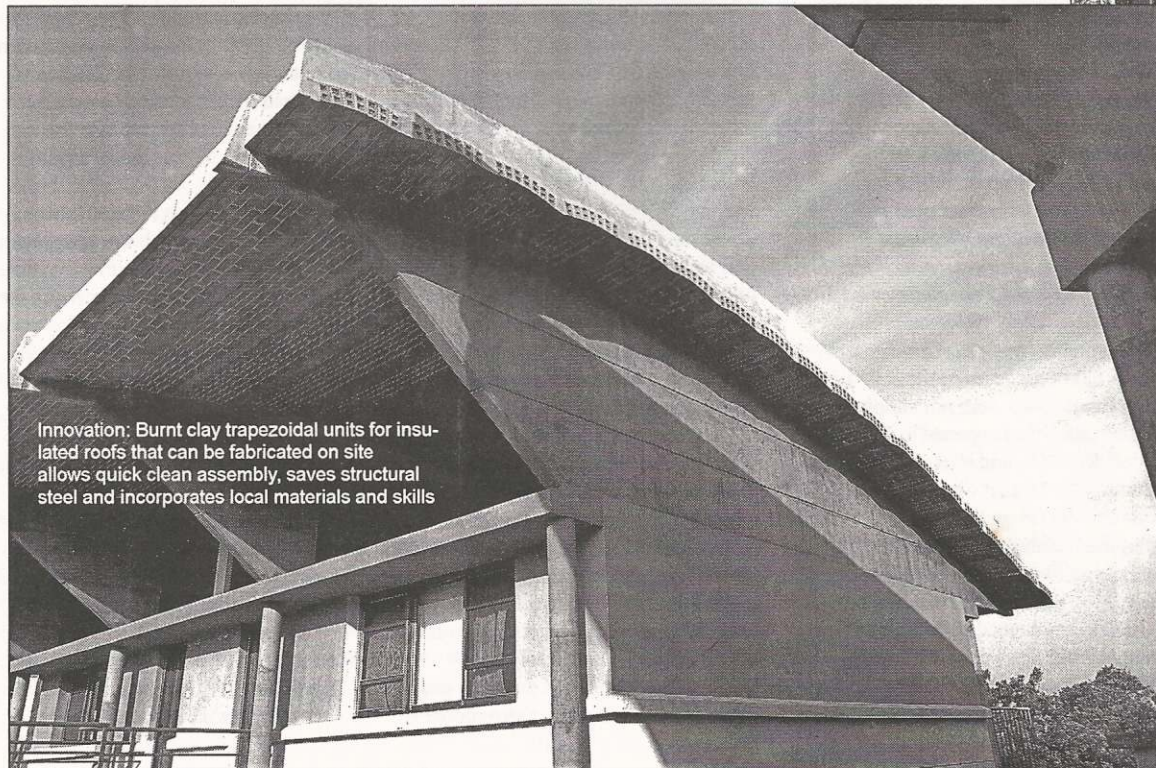
walkways are not connected to the apartments but are detached from the wall at a distance of over a metre. The idea was to increase air circulation but it funnels sound from the ground floor to the top

henceforth only deal with one person who represents the group. And if the group disagrees amongst themselves, we'll wait till they have reached consensus. Secondly, the parameters on who decides what will need to be clarified. Nowhere in the world does a future resident have anything to say about construction aspects of a collective housing project. In most places, he or she can only express a preference about the finishing details of his or her apartment. So perhaps I would propose a scheme with 6 or 7 options for finishing." The experiences of *Creativity* are now the basis for the design of *Citadines*. "In *Citadines* there are three or four project holders, each with a different task. But we only deal with one person. The idea is to provide fully-furnished flats, which will be allocated once they have been finished. And contrary to the *Creativity* project, we want to make sure that here all designs are ready before the first spade goes into the ground. We don't want to start before every detail is ready and the funding is fully secured." Looking back, the architects feel that *Creativity* has managed to achieve many technical aims, though on the social level much was left to be desired.

For the project holders too, the design and building experience of *Creativity* should not be repeated. Says Gillian: "Housing in Auroville is collective property, and Auroville must make sure that collective housing has the best standard possible. In future, a project like this must be assessed by a group of independent specialists to prevent mistakes and ensure that the project costs are realistic. The mistakes of *Creativity* must be lessons for future collective housing projects. After all, Auroville is about infusing consciousness into matter."

Gillian concludes "We all failed in that we are supposed to be doing a collective karma yoga here, which implies that we should not be attached to the results of our work, that we should be doing it with dedication and surrender. But it has been a hard path for all of us to tread."

Carel



Innovation: Burnt clay trapezoidal units for insulated roofs that can be fabricated on site allows quick clean assembly, saves structural steel and incorporates local materials and skills

PHOTO COURTESY: KOIAM

The Creativity roofs

floor. It also causes rain to fall on the windows. The community has solved the noise problem from audio or video devices by prescribing earphones. But conversations can still be overheard.

"The other failure is the roof design. It was intended to be a cool, insulated and energy-efficient roof, a model of solar passive architecture, but it was not properly researched. When the design was finally completed nearly a year into the construction, the costs were double the original estimate. We rejected the design, and insisted on a different roof. The roof is now built with hollow burnt clay units, using a minimum of steel. However, the

Searching for the golden sound

Following two highly-appreciated concerts in Auroville, renowned cellist, Michael Fitzpatrick, spoke to Auroville Today about the deeper purpose behind his music-making, and his involvement in *The Compassion Project*, a musical expression of inter-faith unity.

Auroville Today: You call yourself a 'musical diplomat'. What does that mean?

Michael: The cello, I've discovered, is an extremely useful diplomatic tool. It's allowed me to go into settings like the United Nations, where the predominant activity is words, and to use the instrument to 'tune' the audience and the space. Actually, even before I play the first note, I still my mind and go into silence, and to 'presence' the space with silence is already an extraordinary transformation of energy. And then to play the music into that space, to reach the cellular level – what I call 'searching for the golden sound' – has been my quest for the past twenty years. I would have these mystical experiences on stage when it would feel like golden light coming in, I would hear it change the sound of the instrument, I could feel it fold over the audience, and then this union experience would occur: something in the room would crystallize. Another way to put it is that the diplomat's responsibility is to communicate in such a way that everybody understands. And music is the universal lan-

guage of the cells; it is sound carrying the light.

How universal is music? Can Bach be understood by all cultures?

Yes, once you're in the domain of it. If you're not in that consciousness space, there is no shared field. Pablo Casals once remarked that generations of musicians have approached Bach as 'The Professor' and that, until the mind can break out of this concept, nothing is happening because the music isn't alive. That's why I think it's important to change people's perceptions of things, people get stuck in the labelling...

Is *The Compassion Project* which you've been so involved with intended to change perceptions?

Absolutely. The genesis of it goes back to 1968 and the historic meetings between the Dalai Lama and the Roman Catholic monk, the late Thomas Merton, in Dharamsala. Apparently when they met they had this profound sense of recognition. The Dalai Lama said, "I feel he is my spiritual brother"; Merton wrote, "There is a deep bond between us." During those meetings they made

plans to extend the dialogue and work together for world peace. However, very soon after Merton died in a tragic accident in Bangkok.

When His Holiness heard he was devastated and, I believe, he dedicated himself to fulfilling Merton's wish to bring East and West together in a project for peace and compassion. In 1993, at the Parliament of World Religions conference in Chicago, there was a meeting between the Dalai Lama and the Vatican's North American monastic Interfaith Council at which His Holiness said he felt the time was now right to have a convergence summit. It was decided to hold the summit in 1996 at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, where Merton had lived for 27 years as a monk.

I was living in Chicago then, and about to make my way to Hollywood with my electric cello. I was putting a rock band together, but then everything went badly wrong. I was at my wit's end when somebody called me up and said the Dalai Lama was coming to spend six days at the Abbey of Gethsemani. At that moment I saw fate lines crossed and, indeed, I received an invitation to provide the sacred music for the six day encounter between 25 Buddhist and 25 Catholic monks and nuns, an encounter which turned out to be a turning point in terms of a fusion of East-West consciousness. The music was intended only to be a minor part of the meeting – I played some Bach and Ravel and also did some improvisations – but the music started binding the consciousnesses, like firing them in a kiln, and it got to a point when, for an instant, it seemed as if all the worlds and all the heavens stopped turning, and then started again in a new direction. When the meeting finished, we all felt we'd been rearranged at a cellular level.

As the participants left, I was sitting with Geshe Lobsang Tenzin and Sister Mary Margaret Funk, Head of Religious and Monastic Dialogue, and somebody came over and said, "Is there going to be a recording of the music?" Both of them thought it was a great idea, but I wasn't so sure. I'd just been offered this fabulous opportunity to be involved in a Broadway musical, and I also knew that taking on this project would be a huge responsibility. I also knew that if I did take it on, it could not be done in a recording studio. At that moment, a vision flashed through my mind of Tibetan and Trappist monks chanting together inside Mammoth Cave, the largest cave in the world, deep beneath Kentucky, with torches lit like a scene from the Bible. So I said 'I'll do it on one condition – you have to let me record it inside Mammoth Cave'. And they both said, 'Let's do it'.

What we got was the musical expression of what had happened at the Summit, and we experienced this musical cellular awakening in the core of the earth during the last summer solstice of the old millennium. We were in some other universal time zone, and the sounds that came through reflected this.

You were seeking a new kind of music?

I didn't go down to the cave with a programme, we were not simply going to recreate what happened in the Abbey. I decided we would start with an improvisation for cello; it would be an invocation for world peace. When I started playing, the music that came through my cello was like when your soul is on the line, I just poured everything in there: as I finished, I plucked one string so hard I ripped it off! Then there was a flute solo, the monks chanted, and Brother Paul delivered this extraordinary invocation:

"Can there be any silence as deep as that in the heart of the earth, and out of that depth let there rise up a new hope, a new spirit of greater aspiration for peace, for justice, for compassion over the entire surface of the earth, from East to West."

All the way through we had spontaneous epiphanies like that, up to the moment when my logistics assistant gave the Tibetan monks soap bubbles, and these Buddhas were blowing these beautiful bubbles which looked like the cells, like musical harmonics, in the magical light of the cave. And the epiphanies, the magic, happened only because nothing was pre-planned, there was no safety-net: we had to keep flinging ourselves off a cliff and trust that we had the wings to carry us safely to the other side.

The subsequent studio work was very complex. I wanted the first sound on the CD to be something that nobody could recognize, something very hypnotic, and we finally settled on crystal toning bowls which have a beautiful OM-like sound. Then the Dalai Lama gives a special message, Merton gives his prophetic message at the end, and then the cave music goes through this wild weave of celestial Trappist chant plunging into primordial Tibetan chant, singing cello lines, heavenly flute, and finally ending with this one call that is the 'Golden Sound'. When I listen to it what happens is that it gradually moves through all my chakras, and when it gets to the last note, I feel the energy flow up from my base through the spine to my crown, and I go into a union state.

As soon as the CD was ready, I drove to the Abbey to present it to the Abbot, and then jumped on a plane and flew to San Francisco and presented it to His Holiness on the first anniversary of the cave recording. When he looked at the cover, which had photos of himself and Merton facing each other, I saw him journey back to 1968 and a tear came to his eye. After he'd finished listening he said, "Thank you for doing this. It will bring many people around the world the deep feeling of peace."

In fact, the response of people to the Compassion CD has been extraordinary; it became clear that not only had we had an extraordinary experience in making it but that experience was transferable to others. Now we are working on a film of the cave concert to bring it to an even larger audience. The film will be like a waking dream, beginning with gold-lit images inside the heart of this 350 million year old cave to give people a primal, ancestral memory experience.

The idea of seeking for a new music deep in a cave, in the heart of matter, is a very powerful one...

I wanted to break patterns, to take us out of our surface world. Ultimately, it was about not only going into the heart of the Earth to find the new sound, but to put it back into the Earth and so shift the morphogenetic field of the Earth into a higher vibratory rate, to allow for openings of consciousness and increasing love and compassion. That's really what was driving everything, with the larger plan of using this project as a model so



PHOTO COURTESY: MICHAEL FITZPATRICK

Michael Fitzpatrick

we could then take it, perhaps with Mayan musicians rather than Trappist and Tibetan monks to, say, The King's Chamber of the Great Pyramid. The idea, now that we've crystallized this vibration and we know we can intentionally call it forth, is to go to all the sacred Earth sites and temple structures and send it back into those stones, and see if we can get the planet vibrating a little more harmoniously.

So my fascination with the Matrimandir is in that line. The Matrimandir is radically important because it's a massive, energetic consciousness generator that has a key birthing role in this accelerating cycle that we're in now. So I would encourage everybody who goes there to focus on the pure music in the silence and let it sing.

What is it like to play traditional concert music after your experience in the cave? Are you rediscovering it?

To be able to come back to the music now is the ultimate reward, because I'd imagine what we went through in the cave was like a near-death experience. Once you've travelled to the light and come back, you know what it is, and everything afterwards is completely changed. You realize, for example, that all those guys I played the other night – Schubert, Bach, Saint-Saens – were tapped into the same thing. It's as if you've been listening to a Beethoven Symphony in black and white for your entire life – and it's already incredible – but then suddenly it's in full colour and in 3D or 5D: you start hearing how Beethoven was hearing the totality of creation: So then, as a performer, it's not about playing it 'right' – I wasted twenty years of my cello-playing education trying to do this – but about one's capacity to hold the frequency, to tune to the consciousness and to emanate the consciousness as purely as physically possible.

And then there is a phenomenon of spirit that happens with the instrument itself when it's almost as if an invisible filament or film gets created between the string and the bow. It's like riding on a beam of light, and when that happens, everything melts, goes golden, and you're far out, and far in. Ultimately, that's what it's all for.

From an interview by Alan

Michael Fitzpatrick is a recipient of the Prince Charles award for outstanding musicianship and has performed at the UN and at the opening ceremony of the Parliament of World Religions in Barcelona. More information on *The Compassion Project* can be found at voicesofcompassion.com

FILM REVIEW

'Black'

The film 'Black', introducing Ayesha Kapoor from Auroville, was screened at the Bharat Nivas Auditorium on the 4th of April.

Much-acclaimed director Sanjay Leela Bhansali's new film 'Black' stands out as very different from main-stream commercial Hindi cinema. One of the most obvious traits that set it apart is that throughout its two and a half hour length there is not a single song and dance sequence. The theme treated – the world of the blind, deaf and dumb, is also very far removed from the classic love story so common in Hindi cinema. Though some of the film's key dialogue is spoken in English, the majority is in Hindi and, unfortunately, there were no subtitles for the non-Hindi speaker.

The theme of "Black" is the unique and intense relationship that develops between the young deaf, dumb and blind Michelle, daughter of a wealthy Anglo Indian family in Simla, and Mr. Debraj her teacher (played by film icon Amitabh Bachchan). As a child, Michelle (played by Ayesha Kapoor), isolated in her dark, silent world is rebellious and destructive. When Mr. Debraj comes into her life, she begins by revolting against him. He is, however, determined to reach her and help her learn to communicate with the outside world. And he succeeds. After a lot of struggle, sometimes painful, he gets through to her, and



confident and determined young woman (played by Rani Mukherjee), while all the time being by her side, being there for her.

As Mr. Debraj grows older, he becomes blind, starts developing Alzheimer's disease, and eventually loses his mind. Michelle, however, is determined to reach him in his now dark and isolated inner world, and help him remember. She fights, with as much determination as he showed when she was a child, to help him regain a contact with the world around him.

Ayesha Kapoor's performance as the child Michelle is very intense and convincing. For a ten year old to have taken up such a difficult and demanding role and acted it out with such presence and skill must have required a great insight into the inner world and reality of the blind, deaf and dumb.

Amitabh Bachchan's performance is powerful, and Rani Mukherjee once again displays her great versatility and brings depth to Michelle's character as a young woman.

Though some of the scenes may be a little melodramatic, and, as some viewers argue, are just not realistic enough, overall the film is poignant and emotionally-charged. The cinematography is also incredibly artistic. "Black" is, without doubt, a great film, and as a viewer you are captivated and emotionally overpowered by its intensity.

Emmanuelle



Amitabh Bachchan and Ayesha Kapoor in a still from 'Black'

teaches her to communicate through sign language and express herself. He helps her grow up to become a

La Settimana Santa

The Auroville Cappella choir performs sacred Venetian and Roman music from the late Italian Renaissance

You don't normally see Aurovilians in church. But the Église Notre Dame des Anges in Pondicherry was jam-packed when the Auroville Renaissance Cappella gave its last concert of the season on March 28th. The occasion was La Settimana Santa, the Holy Week of Lent. Lent is the 40-day season of the Roman Catholic Church that begins on Ash Wednesday, climaxes during Holy Week with Maundy Thursday and Good Friday before concluding the Saturday before Easter. It is observed in many churches as a time to commemorate and enact the *Passion* or suffering and death of Jesus through various observances and services of worship.

Throughout the centuries countless composers have written music for this week. Masses, psalm accompaniments and hymns abound. A special place is taken by the composers of the Italian Renaissance, the era from the mid-15th to the end of the 16th century. The great composers from that period, such as Adriaan Willaert, Palestrina and Orlando di Lasso, are flanked by a large number of composers of only slightly lesser status. Their collective output is countless. "But thousands of compositions are still lying in dark corners of libraries and archives all over Europe," says conductor Eugene Liven d'Abelardo. "Perhaps only a tenth of it all has been published. But that one tenth shows the immense quality of these composers." He observes, a bit chauvinistically, that many of them came from what is now Flemish Belgium. "It was a status symbol to have a Flemish composer employed at one's court. Willaert, for example, was born in my native town of Roeselare."

Why an Auroville ensemble chose to perform this type of music is also for Eugene a bit of a mystery. "Last year we gave a concert of Spanish renaissance music. The language and aesthetics of renaissance music are apparently



Eugeen conducting the Auroville Capella Choir at the Église Notre Dame des Anges in Pondicherry

very acceptable, especially to the young Aurovilians. I do not think that many are concerned about the symbolism of the Latin texts." Talking about the Cappella's performance, Eugene just stops short of waxing lyrical. "It is now three years ago since this group started. The input and concentration the members have demonstrated is exceptional. They have made a lot of progress, particularly if you take into account that none of them have received much voice training." He points with pride at the performance of Gregorio Allegri's setting of Psalm 51 (Vulgate Psalm 50), the *Miserere mei*. This choral work, known for its haunting top C sung by sopranos Fanny and Anandamayi, was particularly well performed. "They can be proud, and so am I," says Eugene,

who however hastens to add that this work was not his favourite. "It's a hit," he says, "and very well-composed. But I prefer the music of Orlando di Lasso. His motet *Improperium expectavit cor meum* [My heart expected reproach and misery; and I looked for one that might grieve with me, but there was none; I sought for one who might comfort me, and I found none. And they gave me gall for my food, and in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink] is an immensely beautiful example of Lasso's writing on a modest scale." The performance, sung against the backdrop of a crucified Christ, was well-received.

Asked about next season's programme, Eugene replies that this time the music will be more worldly. "We will start with the love sonnets of

Francis Petrarch (Francesco Petrarca), inspired by the Lady whom Petrarch named Laura. Many composers have put some of these sonnets to music, such as Orlando di Lasso, Monteverdi, Arcadelt, and others. The music is more complicated and difficult to perform than what we did for the occasion of the Holy Week. But it will be equally inspiring." Asked if the Cappella will ever perform one of his own works, he smiles. "At present I am composing my *'Psalmi trinacriani'*, the seven penitential psalms for double choir and percussion. Once this is finished I would like to do something on a text of Sri Aurobindo or The Mother. It would only be natural that the Cappella would take this up."

Carel

"Mum – what is the matter with you?"

"You think it does 'em good when you run after 'em all the time, taking their orders as if you were the servant in the house? Never in all your life. Husbands, sons, daughters should be taking notice of wives and mothers, not giving 'em orders and treating 'em like dirt." The speaker is occultist Mrs. Fitzgerald, acted by Loretta, who tries rather vainly to pump a little courage into fearful housewife Mrs. Pearson, acted by a trembling Afsaneh. Exasperated at the unwillingness to change the domestic drudgery in her life, Mrs. Fitzgerald proposes to switch bodies with Mrs. Pearson. Mrs. Pearson reluctantly agrees and, after the change, becomes a 'super-bitch' and starts disciplining 'her' family. "The tea is not ready; I couldn't bother, please make it yourself, and when you are at it, you can do your ironing as well". She heartlessly opens the eyes of her daughter to the buckteeth of her boyfriend, cruelly deflates her pompous husband with a single remark about him being the standing joke of his club and not so kindly reminds her son that she, too, has been working eight hours a day. "And cooking in the weekend will henceforth be done as a favour, mind you." Meanwhile, new Mrs. Fitzgerald (former Mrs. Pearson) is wringing her hands in despair, and, fearing that the end of her family's harmony is near, beseeches Mrs. Pearson (the real Mrs. Fitzgerald) to change bodies again. Which she does, but not without a warning: "Just give



Mr. Pearson (Thomas) being told off by occultist Mrs. Fitzgerald in the body of Mrs. Pearson (Afsaneh)

'em a look – a tone of voice – now and again, to suggest you might be tough with 'em if you want to be." But whether the former 'house slave' will be able to retain her new persona for long remains an open question at the play's ending.

J.B. Priestley's *'Mother's Day'* was one of the two one-act plays performed on March 18 and 19 by an Auroville theatre ensemble directed by Ellen. The other one was W.W. Jacobs *'A Distant Relative'*, portraying con-man Augustus Sprigg (performed by Johnny) who, just released

from jail, tries to exploit his sister's family at a time when the daughter is about to marry a very proper young man. At the point of extorting money from the young couple, he is outwitted by his decent brother-in-law (acted by Thomas), and forced to leave at breakneck speed. Both plays met with much applause and appreciation from the audience for good entertainment and acting, although some felt the plays were lacking in substance and interest.

"I love one-act plays," says Ellen. "The message of the play has to be conveyed within a short span of time, slightly more than half an hour, which intensifies the denouement at the end of the play, and leaves the spectator with some realisation

what life is like." And with a twinkle in her eyes she adds "and it fits within the attention span of the Auroville public, which usually is limited to about an hour in the heat of the Sri Aurobindo auditorium!" Ellen, who was professionally involved in theatre and film back in Germany before she joined Auroville, has ever since been trying to boost Auroville's theatre endeavours. Working with amateurs instead of professionals gives a special tinge to the endeavour, though she admits that 'working with friends' is not always easy, particularly when

their other activities take precedence. But there is no fixed theatre group in Auroville. "When I find a play which interests me, I imagine which people could fit the various roles and see if they are interested. Normally, a production takes anything between five to six months with two rehearsals a week. For me the rehearsals are a challenge, as I have a tendency to be harsher on my friends than on the other actors because I need more commitment, not less. And they resent that." Asked if she prefers directing light-hearted subject matters, Ellen replies that she likes to feel good after a performance. "Years ago, I directed the existential play *Endgame* by Samuel Beckett. The play was not well received. For a month or more there was a discussion about the play's relevance for Auroville [see AVToday # 88, May 1996]. It made me depressed. Now people have asked me why I don't present more serious 'high-up' business. But I want to present something which people enjoy." Plans for the future are ambitious. "I would be delighted to do Bertold Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*, complete with the music of Kurt Weill. It is masterpiece of musical theatre and would give many Aurovilians the opportunity to participate."

Carel

Mother's Day and *A Distant Relative* were performed by Afsaneh, Anandamayi, Bobby, Guy, Johnny, Loretta and Thomas.

In brief

"For Love of Him"

On the occasion of the anniversary of Sri Aurobindo's arrival in Pondicherry on April 4th, 1910, an invocation chanting in Sanskrit and a video projection on Sri Aurobindo's Five Dreams took place at the Centre of Indian Studies, Bharat Nivas.

Tamil New Year

Celebrations of the Tamil New Year on April 14th took place at the Tamil Heritage Centre, Bharat Nivas and at the SAW-CHU building. There was sandpit play for children, a kolam drawing competition, songs by the Mirra Women's Group; various dance performances and dinner at the Solar Kitchen. The celebrations concluded with a screening of a Tamil Film.

Buddhadeb film festival

Aurofilm presented the Buddhadeb Dasgupta film festival, a retrospective of films by the internationally-acclaimed Bengali director, over three days in March at Kalabhumi. The programme was presented by film critic Saibal Chatterji who also gave a talk on Indian Cinema.

Norwegian cultural event

The Unity Pavilion was the venue for an evening with information about Norway and its beautiful scenery, Norwegian folksongs and music and some traditional folkdances, organized by the youth of the Vestopplands Folk high school who were visiting Auroville. Two films were screened – *Ni Liv* (Nine lives) directed by Arne Skouen and *Kristin Lavransdatter* directed by Liv Ullmann.

Kalabhumi Music Festival

A music concert by Ziskakan from the Reunion Island, in collaboration with Auroville musicians, took place at Kalabhumi.

Kathak meets Flamenco

Karine Saporta, a contemporary choreographer from France, presented a choreography *'La Force de l'Ame II'* containing elements of Kathak (a North Indian classical dance form) with Spanish Flamenco and Western modern and classical ballet. It was performed by Indian, French and Spanish artists at the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium on Tamil New Year.

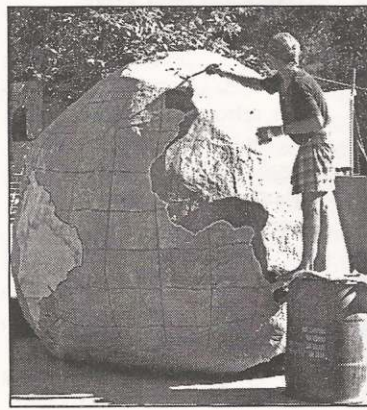
Auroville's Dancing 2005

A closely-packed audience enjoyed a non-stop sequence of all-Auroville dance acts by around 100 Auroville dancers in Bharat Nivas on April 2nd. A video of the event is available on VCD and DVD and can be ordered from Olivier@auroville.org.in.

Poetry readings

The Writers Forum Auroville organised an evening of poetry on the occasion of the launching of D.S. Murali's volume of poems *'Conversations with Children'* published by the Pondicherry Writer's Cooperative Society.

The British Pavilion Group organised a poetry evening with readings from *'The Hound of Heaven'* by Frances Thompson and other poems by Burns, Keats, Shelley, Byron, Wordsworth and Yeats. The poems were presented by a group of ex-students of the Ashram school.



Auroville's alternative transport. Clockwise from top: children's vandi; electric scooters; Reva India's first electric car; Billee the electric three-wheeler; Jos on Manfred's Bio-bullet; the old favourite bullock cart; Hilde with her horse; Suryamayi on unicycle supported by Svenja. And the earth painted by Johnny.

Earthing Auroville

Friday, 22nd April dawned quietly. The only sounds were bird-calls, the somnambulist buzz of bees and...an unfamiliar kind of puffing, wheezing, that was slowly growing in intensity. Suspecting something mechanical, I climbed the windmill but when I looked down, there, spread out below me, was a vision of Biblical proportions—hundreds of beet-red Aurovilians of all shapes, sizes and conditions furiously pumping cycles of all shapes, sizes and conditions. Of course! It must be Earth Day, 2005.

Earth Day, the day on which humanity acknowledges and celebrates its only home, Earth, has been celebrated worldwide since 1970, except, that is, in The City the Earth Needs. To be fair, Wim started jolting the collective consciousness a few years back by showing excellent environmental videos on this day, but until this year there has been no community-wide programme or involvement. Enter Jos, Lisbeth, Regina and a host of enthusiastic youngsters who decided that Auroville Earth Day, 2005 would be different.

"Auroville Motor-Less!" was the slogan for the day, hence the lack of dust, the bonhomie and the internal combustion-less silence, broken only by the crash of yet another geriatric cyclist on a mechanical fossil failing to negotiate one of Martanda's mountainous speed-breakers.

"Reclaim the Streets" was the theme of the morning. Three 'Earth Stations' were set up where schoolchildren conducted traffic surveys, played environmental games and companionably banged on saucepan lids whenever an misguided Aurovillian passed by on a motorcycle. Then on to lunch at the Solar Kitchen which was enlivened, as it desperately needed to be, by an alternative vehicle show: a live demo of electric vehicles and a chance to actually see what is normally as elusive as the Snow Leopard, the legendary Bio-Bullet. The Bio-Bullet runs on plant oil, hence the constant nasal promise, for those who ride it, of a tasty fried snack. Seriously, using plant oil rather than diesel reduces pollution by up to 50%, and plant oil is 'carbon neutral' so it doesn't contribute to global warming. One of our resident boffins, Manfred, has been running converted diesel engines on plant oil for three years and is convinced it is the fuel of the future. (In case you were wondering, he

estimates we would have to plant and harvest 50 hectares of oil-seed trees to replace the present diesel consumption in Auroville).

After lunch everybody cycled, staggered or limped to the Town Hall where we listened, among other things, to presentations on Auroville's sustainable mobility concept (seemingly still some years from materialization) and Pondicherry's alternatively-powered public transportation system. Here, a fleet of electrically-powered tempos is already plying the streets at a running cost of Rs 1 per kilometre, which is about 18% cheaper than conventionally-powered vehicles.

At 3 p.m. those who still had energy on what turned out to be one of the hottest days of the year could sneak off for a magical mystery tour of Auroville's cycle paths, led by 'Lance' Gillian. At 4 p.m. the rest of us, after rehydration therapy or, failing that, the administration of Last Rites, flung ourselves desperately towards Kalabhum for the Grand Finale. Here there was face-painting, a hot-air balloon launch (of the Working Committee, it is rumoured), story-telling, juggling, the Giant Globe, food, films, music, all climaxed by The Lorax. This was a delightfully-acted play about the Onceler who spends his time chopping down Truculer trees to make Thneeds (don't ask me). Only The Lorax protests against the destruction of the trees (but not, unaccountably, of the English language). Finally the Onceler learns the error of his ways and gives the last Truculer seed to a child to be planted as the beginning of a new forest.

At this point Jos, the Earth Day Supremo, was nudged on stage to say a few words. "Every day should be an Earth Day," he bravely cried to the exhausted bodies piled up in front of the stage. "Let's keep the ball rolling by making cycle paths more attractive and by providing a good, alternatively-powered public transport service for Auroville."

Later, as I puffed my way home-wards, my knees clicking like castanets, I realized that, after all, it had been a great day—plenty of laughter, plenty of play, spiced with good information about how we can redeem our relationship to the Earth.

Good on yer, Jos and all your helpers! Here's to next year.

Alan



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