

AUROVILLE TODAY

AUROVILLE
ARCHIVES

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WHAT THE GUIDE BOOKS SAY ABOUT AUROVILLE

"The town now consists of about 70 rural settlements inhabited by 500 families from all over the world, all living in bizarre self-designed houses ... The Matrimandir is an unfinished reminder of the 1960s and the Mother's unrealised vision of a world without religion, where all of humanity may do the yoga of work and roam free around India's shores while evolving into the next species." (*Let's Go: India and Nepal*, 1999)

"Day-trippers and casual tourists are not actively encouraged although visitors with a general interest will not be made unwelcome. As an Aurovilian put it, 'Auroville is very much an experiment and it is not meant at all to be a tourist attraction' ... The government has gone so far as to nationalise Auroville but the future of the place still seems unclear." (*India: a travel survival kit*, Lonely Planet, 1998)

"Matri Mandir, which was completed after the (government) commission sorted out the finances of Auroville, forms the centre of Auroville. It is spherical in shape and surrounded by lakes and gardens creating an atmosphere ideally conducive to meditation ... The residents of Auroville are ample proof that a life of arduous physical activity can go well with the discipline of spiritual exercise and with creativity. And the inaugurative (sic) architectural creations in Auroville will appeal to the aesthete in you." (*Pondicherry. A TTK Guidebook*, 1985. And still available)

"If you're seeking detailed information on the range of activities at Auroville, read their monthly magazine *Auroville Today*. Many of the articles are refreshingly honest in their analysis and discourse. They certainly transcend the sort of public relations blurb common to so many ashrams." (*South India*, Lonely Planet, 1996)

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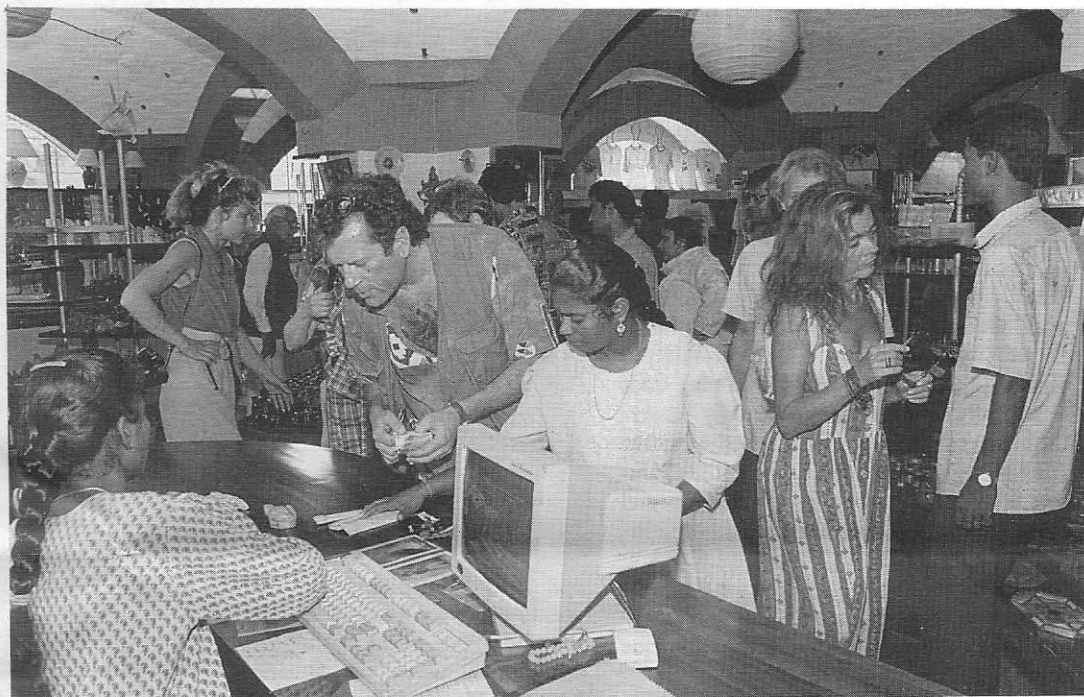
...ask tourists, visitors and guests who come in ever increasing numbers.

How does Auroville receive them? And what more could be done? A critical look at the situation today.

What is it like to live in a place which has become a tourist attraction? It means being pushed off the road by careering buses and taxis, interminable queues at the Pour Tous stall and Solar Kitchen (50 extra guests a day during the peak season), constant enquiries about your "good name", "native country" and "what is there to see?", discovering that the forest has become a picnic site for Pondy lovebirds with oversized stereo systems, and overhearing guests' preoccupations with exchange rates, malaria remedies and the best time to visit Sai Baba's Ashram. It means the mushrooming of souvenir shops, massage facilities, and of dubious-looking 'bistros' on the road into Auroville and in Kuilapalayam village. It means tensions at the Matrimandir as more and more people try to visit the Inner Chamber during the visitors' hour, tensions at the Visitors Centre restaurant as people complain about the prices, tensions at the beach as local and middle-class Indians from Pondy come to ogle expanses of white female flesh, tensions at the Christmas Fair and New Year party as they are invaded by unwelcome gatecrashers. At the height of the tourist season, with unfamiliar faces everywhere, it means the unmistakable sense of the dilution of community.

But it can also mean something else. A fresh injection of energy and idealism from those guests who roll up their sleeves and get involved and, for us Aurovilians, the contact with new ideas, new perspectives which can challenge our small-town preoccupations.

Visitors and guests. They come in all shapes, sizes and nationalities, and they come for many different reasons. There are the busloads on multi-stop temple tours who are disgorged for a brief halt at the Visitors



Brisk business at the Boutique d'Auroville

Centre and Matrimandir, the day-trippers from Madras or Pondy drawn by the greenery and foreign faces, the VIPs who insist upon visiting Matrimandir at any time of the day or night, students on exchange or extended study programmes, friends and family of Aurovilians, organised groups from the West using Auroville as an exotic backdrop to their programmes of therapy and consciousness-raising, film-makers, journalists, retirees looking for a new home, sun-worshippers, middle-aged hippies, communists. Seekers.

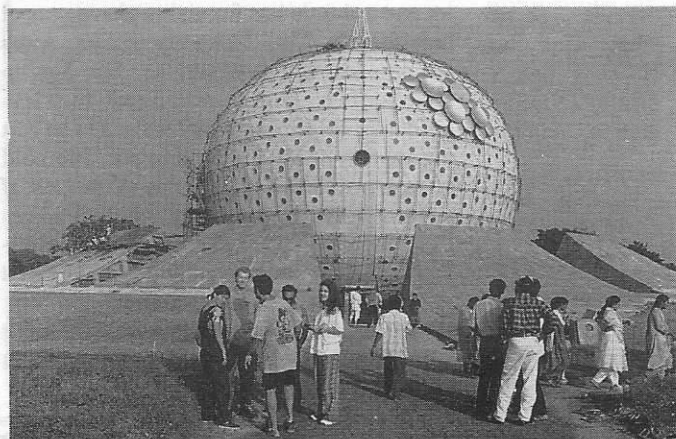
Twenty five years ago it was different. In those days if you turned up and wanted to lend a hand, you could usually find a bed and food at little or no expense. Of course in those days there were not many trees, water often had to be pumped manually and toilets were two planks over a hole in the ground. So there were not so many takers. Today, in addition to the Matrimandir, we have forests, guest-houses and rooms catering to almost all pockets, restaurants and snack bars, a boutique selling quality handicrafts, high-class cultural events, beach facilities, an assortment of health, healing and consciousness-raising therapies available at (compared to the West)

rock-bottom prices, and a fascinating hybrid of cultures. And just down the road is Pondy with its iced beer, silk shops and Indo-French ambience. So it's not exactly surprising that Auroville is firmly on the national and international tourist circuits.

What is surprising, however, is that we as a community have never come together to discuss what this means, what we want, and whether we can change things. It's as if we woke up one morning to find that the wave has swept over us and now we are struggling to cope with it. Responses differ. Some Aurovilians, preferring to keep visitors out completely resist putting up signposts and want to keep some of the roads in a permanent state of disrepair. Others see visitors and guests primarily as a source of income and hasten to set up all kinds of tourist-related ventures. Others again, wanting to help those who come with a real desire to understand what is going on, offer Introduction to Auroville weeks as well as work opportunities in various settlements for those who are interested (see box).

With so many contradictory attitudes prevalent, it's no wonder that our approach is unfocussed, that comparatively few Aurovilians want to take up visitor or guest-related work, and that visitors can't make out whether we love them or loathe them. How can we change all this? Perhaps we should begin by accepting that many different types of visitors will continue to be drawn here, whether we like it or not, and see how best to deal with them. One category are those on bus tours and other casual visitors who have little time, or inclination, to make more than

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Tourists at Matrimandir

(continued from page 1)

to make more than a superficial contact. Clearly, the Visitors Information Centre should be serving their needs. However, the Centre is at a low ebb at present, unable to get enough Aurovilians to help in the very challenging work of dealing with visitors, offering somewhat overpriced food in the cafeteria, and plagued by power problems which result in many visitors being welcomed to Auroville by the dulcet tones of a diesel generator. If Auroville realised that the Visitors Centre is our crucial first 'bund', preventing the run-off of casual visitors into other parts of the community, perhaps we would put more energy into making it perform the task for which it was intended: a quality one-stop introduction to Auroville for those who need no more.

Those who stay in Auroville as guests are another category. At present any guest is free (on purchase of a Guest Card) to stay in

almost any Auroville guest house, to use community services like the bus service to Pondicherry, and to attend community activities like seminars, cultural events, fairs and bonfires. However, if we as a community agreed that the kind of guests we would like to encourage would be genuine seekers and those prepared to give energy to the project rather than sun and exotica seekers, we should also be willing to construct additional bunds. For example, guests who want little more than sun, sea and food should not, perhaps, be able to avail themselves of all the community facilities, and they could be directed to guest houses on the periphery or outside the community. The more central places like Centre Guest House could then cater only for those who want to be more involved. As a concomitant to this, we should provide more opportunities for committed guests to involve themselves in community life and to learn about our spiritual foundations, and we should construct far

more accommodation at the lower end of the price scale for those—students and others on restricted budgets—for whom much of the present guest accommodation is too expensive. For at the moment Auroville tends to cater more for the guests who are relatively well-heeled than for those with energy and idealism but few financial resources.

The point behind such a proposal is simple: if we can encourage more of the type of visitor we really want, we may be willing to put more energy into making their stay worthwhile.

What chance is there of a discriminating guest policy being adopted? In the the current climate, very little. Some Aurovilians would object to anything that smacked of discrimination. (In fact, of course, we are already discriminating: we refuse to serve alcohol in our guest-houses, and many Aurovilians are quite choosy about whom they will accept as a guest.) Others would object that it would be too complicated, too

bureaucratic, to operate a two-tier guest system. Yet others would question how the motivations of guests could be assessed, although Verite's experience of specifying their guest house conditions seems to work well (see accompanying article). The main stumbling-block to the adopting of such a proposal, however, may well be the economic factor. Guests and visitors are a major source of income, and it's often pointed out that if we don't cater sufficiently to the general tourist trade, others living around us definitely will (and are already doing so), with a consequent loss of revenue to the community.

But what is the alternative? If Auroville is, above all, an experiment in consciousness, if it is as much an energy field, a collective soul as it is a material manifestation, then it makes little sense—and may be positively dangerous—to risk exposing the sensitive seedling to contact with those, albeit a minority at present, who may have no interest in Auroville's *raison d'être*.

Channelling the flood

THE SITUATION AT MATRIMANDIR

Since the completion of the Inner Chamber of the Matrimandir, there has been an increasing flow of day-visitors interested in going up into the unfinished structure to see the room and the crystal. They may come out of curiosity, or because their temple or sightseeing tour offers this visit as part of its itinerary, or perhaps because they are sincerely devoted to The Mother and consider a visit to the chamber as Her *darshan*. Every day special arrangements are made to receive these visitors and to allow them to have a brief look at the Chamber without entering inside. On Christmas Day last a record number of 2,030 people filed past the Chamber within one hour.

It has not been an easy matter for those dealing with the visitors to ensure that all goes well and that there are no untoward incidents. On working days there are considerably fewer people queuing up than on peak days, but there is always a risk of people misbehaving. Incidents of drunkenness and other untoward behaviour have occurred, forcing those in charge of guiding the visitors to be on the alert.

There have been complaints from some visitors about the strict discipline that is in force: visitors are not only asked to keep absolute silence when queuing up to enter the Matrimandir, they are also requested to leave their footwear, bags and cameras in safe keeping at a considerable distance from the entrance. The result is that they must walk along a gravel path for some 75 metres towards the building in single file, barefoot and in complete silence. When joining one of these queues, my experience was that one actually hears the silence and feels Peace descending, although this is not everybody's

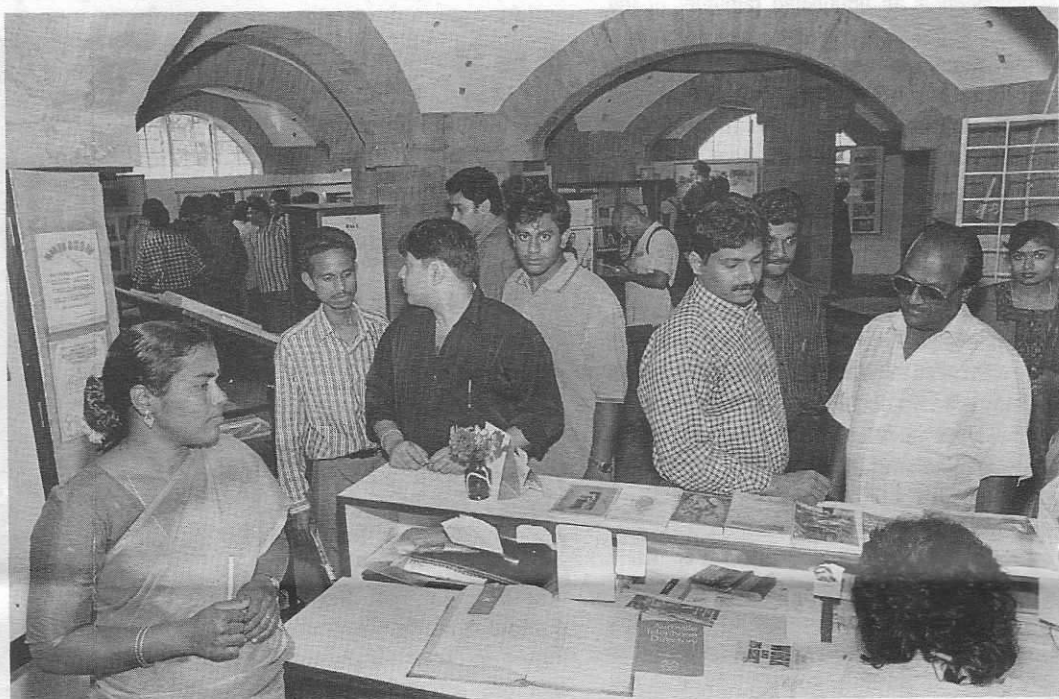
experience. A Dutch educationalist recently noted in the visitors book: "I've met blue-clad guards, barking at me. I was asked to leave my money/passport bag behind, which I did not. So I was not allowed to enter. People whom we asked for an explanation shied away." According to Amrit, one of those handling the stream of visitors every day, it is mostly Westerners and, among them, mainly French nationals who strongly object to the discipline of queuing up.

While the situation today seems to be under control, there may be a time in the not too distant future when the situation becomes impossible. The numbers speak for themselves. During January 1996 the number of people visiting the Chamber during the visitors' hour in the afternoon was 12,190. The number of visitors suddenly increased by more than 4,000 in January last year (1998) bringing the total to 16,744, and in December 1998 it had risen to 17,081. In January this year, 22,103 people came to see the Chamber!

Already there has been pressure from certain quarters to extend the visiting hour or to provide an additional hour in the morning. It has been possible to resist this pressure so far, by quoting Mother's own instructions and by ensuring strict discipline and organisation. But there is a great need to create more and better channels and reception points.

THE ROLE OF THE VISITORS CENTRE

At present most visitors to Matrimandir first come to the Visitors Centre. Here they can get an initial overview of what Auroville is. They find a display of information, photos



Crowds at the Visitors Centre getting a first overview of Auroville

and literature, and the staff is ready to answer questions. Free passes are issued to those wanting to visit Matrimandir. But all in all, the reception leaves much to be desired.

Auroville's Visitors Centre was completed in 1991. Already then it housed a reception and information section, a cafeteria and a branch of the Boutique d'Auroville, and there were more plans. The idea was to make it into a demonstration project where visitors to Auroville could get a taste of alternative energy and alternative building techniques, see videos introducing Auroville and Matrimandir and meet Aurovilians at the Cafeteria. There was the idea for a shuttle bus running between Matrimandir and the Visitors Centre.

However, while good videos on Auroville and Matrimandir exist, no videos are being screened there at present, for the monitor has been out of order for months. The reception room with the photographic display and models of the Galaxy town plan and the Matrimandir is on the small side, and some of the photographs badly need replacing. Plans for a money-generating parking lot and a shuttle bus for visitors have not yet manifested. The Cafeteria offers some snacks, tea and cool drinks, but had to increase their prices to inordinately high levels due to cold storage problems, and so it is avoided by most Indian tourists. The cold storage problem in turn is due to the lack of power. Why? Because the whole Visitors Centre was set up to run exclusively on alternative energy, and the funding to make this a reality has never been adequate.

A year ago, a group of Aurovilians got together to look after the Visitors Centre, but

the energy has dissipated since. At present the lack of competent and energetic people to tackle the many issues around the Visitors Centre seems to be the main problem.

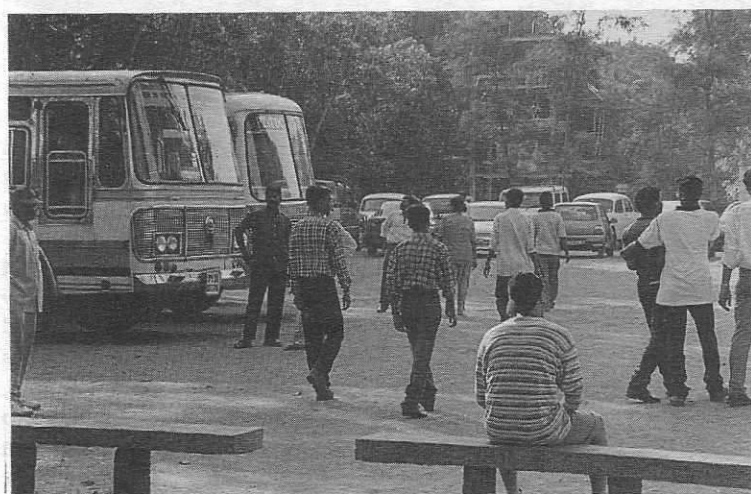
One of those issues is improving the communication and collaboration between the Matrimandir and the Visitors Centre. Entry into Auroville for visitors—who come in buses and by taxis, private cars and vans, motorbikes and cycles—needs to be better controlled. At present there are various points of entry into Auroville, and despite efforts to direct the main flow of traffic to the Visitors Centre via the Edayanchavadi village road, many try to access the Matrimandir directly via other routes, and some succeed.

But to be fair, things could be worse. The Auroville Visitors Centre with its arches and domes and light yellow earth brick is a magnificent place, with the scope and likelihood of becoming even more magnificent. The volunteers (wo)manning the information section are doing a good job dealing as they have to with busloads of tourists every day. Giving information to tourists who often hardly know the first thing about Auroville when they arrive here is not a much sought-after job.

If the situation seems to be stagnating at present, one positive development is that plans are underway to build several outlets for Auroville's commercial units at the Visitors Centre. This will definitely create a better Aurovillian presence and the money so generated should go towards improving the infrastructure.

Annemarie

(with thanks to Amrit and Gillian)



Matrimandir car park during the visitors' hour

HOW MANY GUESTS AND WHAT IS ON OFFER TO THEM?

To get an indication of how many guests were accommodated in Auroville during the guest season, we checked with the Financial Service. During the month of January 1999, 166 guest passes had been issued by them to guests staying in the community, either in guest-houses or at Aurovillians' homes. Last year between January and June a total of around 850 passes were issued. This gives an idea of the numbers, but not an accurate one. The number is likely to be higher, as not all guests staying in Auroville obtain a guest pass.

For the guest pass, a contribution of Rs.60 per day is requested, which helps to cover the maintenance costs of Auroville's infrastructure. Guest passes are issued for the duration of the visit. With it guests can, according to an accompanying leaflet, visit the Matrimandir, attend courses at Pitanga Hall, gain entry to Repos Beach as well as attend the various cultural events. A banking service is also offered—guests can deposit money at the Financial Service to cover expenses they incur from the use of various facilities such as Pour Tous stall and snack bar, restaurants and cafeteria, the Bakery, the Health Centre and Pharmacy, email and internet services, etc.

GETTING TO KNOW THE COMMUNITY

A good way for guests to get to know the community is to attend the Introduction to Auroville week which is offered regularly during the guest season. Another way is to help out in various work areas. This year, the following work was offered to guests:

- farm work at Annapurna, Aurogreen, Discipline, Fertile, Siddhartha Farm, Solitude and Windanz;
- food preparation at Auroville Food Processing, Ganesh Bakery, HERS and KOFPU;
- helping at Matrimandir: in the gardens, and with the laying of marble mosaic and other work;
- garden or greenwork at Pitchandikulam, Revelation and Adventure;
- teaching of handicrafts for Village Action.

COURSES

A real plethora of new-age type courses was on offer in January, on payment of a contribution, for guests who want to increase their awareness in various areas.

In addition to learning more about Circle Dance, Tai Chi, Reiki and Astrology, one could participate in workshops—often announced on colourful and creative looking posters—under the following headings:

- Quiet Mind, Open Heart, Radiant Body
- Spirituality and Family Reconstruction
- Ayurveda for All
- Self-healing and Cellular Consciousness
- "2013"—Reviewing our Myths about the Future
- Unfolding Awareness
- Deep Sharing
- Poly Relationship, Poly Family—shifting the "couple paradigm"
- Mantra, Music, Meditation
- Raga-Tala: An introduction to Indian Classical Music
- Earth Essence/Australian Healing Rocks, Gems and Stones
- Playful Self-Discovery

For relaxation and body-correction one could participate in a ten-day Retreat at Quiet Beach with various treatments and massage; join Hatha Yoga classes at Pitanga, New Creation and elsewhere; and get reflexology treatment with Arlette at Quintessence Podology.

Integrating guests into the community

Vérité, a small intentional community that promotes ecological living with renewable energy systems and organic gardens, works towards consciously integrating guests into the community life. "Sharing" is the key word in Verité's approach towards guests. The community collectively looks after the needs of the guests, and more importantly, share their meals with them. Guests, who generally have to stay for a minimum of one week, are asked to respect if not participate in the ideals of Vérité. At the basic level of physical comfort, this means that guests have to live with the uncertainties of renewable energy systems and experimental waste water recycling systems. They are also expected to join the community in doing daily duties such as helping out in the kitchen.

Vérité actively fosters educational development by giving priority to guests who are

either students desiring to learn from Auroville or teachers who are chosen for their ability to facilitate individuals, both Aurovillians and guests, in their path of integral development. The GeoCommons Group, who bring student interns from the USA to learn from the community of Auroville, is now hosted by Vérité twice a year for a total period of four months. In addition, many individual guests find their way to Vérité throughout the year and experience the supportive and healing environment it can offer to one's inner exploration and growth process.

The income earned from guests goes towards maintaining and improving community infrastructure as well as supporting Vérité's workers. The two halls of Vérité are among the facilities created to further both educational development and community processes, and every month a regular programme of training and workshops is



Others also cater for our visitors: a new restaurant on the road to Auroville

Inside India is a commercial unit that offers an introduction to Auroville and tours of South India to individuals and groups. The states covered by their tours include Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Goa.

"The idea to start such a service came about naturally" says Joster, the founding executive of Inside India. "In the early nineties I started the Auroville Guest Programme [see below]. I was then flooded with requests from visitors to Auroville for information regarding places to visit and hotels in South India. I found myself spending a lot of time and energy in providing them with this information as well as in some cases working out complete itineraries. Since the Auroville Guest Programme was a voluntary service that catered only to people visiting Auroville and already took up a lot of time, there was a clear need to create Inside India as a separate venture."

The services offered by Inside India spread by word of mouth, among Aurovillians as well as friends of Auroville. Travel agencies abroad were happy to discover the quality of the tours offered by Inside India, and to use them and recommend them to others. Many of the tour requests include a wish to explore Auroville. "I usually lead such groups, spending one or two days with them introducing the different aspects of Auroville. For groups who have more time, we con-

duct in-depth introduction seminars with the help of a number of Aurovillians. For our tours, which focus on a specific theme such as yoga, spirituality or Hinduism, we work with experienced tour guides. Joster's partner Shama, who in addition to her work as an architect began to assist Joster with the Guest Programme, soon discovered that she had a liking and aptitude for this work.

In the peak guest season from December to February, Inside India deals with as many as ten different groups, and several individual first-time travellers—a total of about 150 to 200 people. "Business is expanding," smiles Joster, "we are now concentrating on investing the profits into infrastructure. At the same time, I continue to maintain my links with the Auroville Guest Programme—Inside India pays for its maintenance and operational costs."

Inside India has recently put up its website on the Internet: www.inside-india-tours.com

The Auroville Guest Programme offers information and centralized booking of accommodation in Auroville's guest-houses. It also handles numerous email enquiries. Presently it is housed at the Solar Kitchen building, Auroville 605101, India. Ph. +91-413-622704.

Fax +91-413-622274.

E-mail: avguests@auroville.org.in

Bindu

VISITORS' COMMENTS

These are extracts from the Visitors book at the Visitors Centre information counter, gleaned from the past few months' entries. There were many positive comments, hardly any negative. Judging from the entries in the book, the day visitors looking at the exhibition are about 90% of Indian origin.

"It is very informative and will create international brotherhood." (Ram Kumar, Indian, Gen Secretary, SBI, Delhi)

"Just wandering around, big place, kinda lost, shall go on exploring." (Canadian photographer)

"Words cannot express the inner pleasure and peace we experienced. We are already feeling the unseen blessings of Sri MA, since the day we arrived in Pondy, i.e. 27th January. Hope we will come back again and again to this place. May Mother bless my family." (Devasis and Bindu, Indian)

"Alas I passed this way on Sunday - thus it still eludes me! (Scottish nurse)

"I saw the exhibition and found it quite interesting and useful. Very neatly maintained." (B. Rajkumar, Indian, Chennai)

I've seen lots and lots of expats happily driving on their cute bikes and scooters and many more Indians working all over the place. Funny place. I'd love to hear from you." (Tina Bruinsma, educational consultant, Holland.)

"The place is very well built, the ideal thought provoking and indeed a very good concept. Though it would no doubt take a lot to realise Mother's 'Dream'. I hope people realise that it is more than a little realisation away." (Indian)

"I find everything to the SOUL." (V.D.Somasundaram, Indian, business)

"It is a place which has quietness and peace of mind both of which are so rare. Hope the dream comes true." (Supriya Sen, Indian student from Vellore)

"I have been staying at Auroville for five days now, and have just begun to explore the development. I find it so peaceful here, that I want to take full advantage and do nothing. This is an incredibly inspiring place and I look forward to returning in the future. Om Namo Bhagavate." (Paul Eagle, Canadian student)

"To find peace in life one must visit Auroville! It's a wonderful place! Bridge between the god and human being!" (Vinodbhai J. Patel, Indian in business, from USA)

"I Am Impressed By Cleanliness Of Roads." (Dr. Rajshree S. Gaitonde, American doctor-physician, USA)

"This place gives hope for sustainability coming true." (Michael & Ingrid, engineer in agriculture, Austria.)

"The ideas of the Aurovillians is indeed of great significance for bringing back the integrity of our torn nation. Bravo! and all the best for fulfilling it." (Mr. R. Prabhakaran with 16 students, Indian teacher from Vellore)

"A quiet moment in India." (Jenny Elissen, Dutch Manager)

FOUR FOR FASHION

Clothing with beauty, dressing in simplicity, discovering the subtle splendours of draperies, working with the marvels of Indian cloth are some of the ideals of Auroville's designers. Here we profile four of them...

Uma of *Upasana*: Draping the Soul

For Uma, designing clothes is *upasana*—a way of loving and serving the Divine. "What I am aspiring for," says Uma, a young Indian graduate from the National Institute of Fashion Technology (a premier fashion design school in India), "is to drape the soul. For years, I had been trained in working with the 'vital statistics' of the body, the 34-26-38 dimensions of a woman's figure, but now I am beginning to experiment on how I can design clothes that will enhance the personality of an individual soul. The ancient sages of India had four different categories for classifying different types of women based on the body proportions and these categories were further subdivided on the basis of the predominant 'humour'—*vata*, *pitta*, or *kapha*—that determined the nature of an individual. It is a fascinating and endless study to discover the body as a temple of the soul and to dress it as such.

"It does not always work the way I want it though," she adds ruefully. "Last fall, I designed a whole range in white, with embroidery and with mirrors, for women. Women, especially in India, have always been decorating themselves in colour, and I wanted them to come back to the essential purity of white. And for the men, who tend to dress themselves in dark, sober colours, I designed *kurtas* (loose Indian shirts) and trousers in colourful cotton-prints from Rajasthan. But what happened was that the women bought and wore my men's collection! The white blouses and dresses were appreciated but they were perhaps too pure and unsuitable for the mud roads of Auroville."

Uma came to Auroville in 1996 to work for two weeks on a design project for the garment unit Auromode. But within a few days, she was so touched by the ideals and more so the force of Auroville that she stayed on. She worked for Auromode for a while, especially designing for their boutique Kalki in Pondicherry and the export market. But it was with the costumes she designed for two Auroville theatre productions, "Mantra" and "Savitri" that she shot into prominence in Auroville as a designer. So when she branched out on her own with a single tailor as the "Upasana design studio," diverse individuals lent her a hand. "Jesus offered me space to work at his dyeing unit, Colours of Nature, even converting his bedroom to a tailoring workshop during the day, and Miriam made space for my products in the Boutique d'Auroville. Later Prema of Auromode lent me money when I ran out of the initial working capital that I had borrowed from my brother," recalls Uma. "I am intensely grateful to all of them, and more so to the Mother for the way she arranges things."

Uma has not looked back since. Her first collection of blouses and dresses for women in hand-woven Kancheepuram cotton with an overlaying patch-work technique that is unique to Uttar Pradesh took Auroville by storm. The chic elegance of the colours, the ethnic motifs and the reasonable price were all highly appreciated. Within a year, Upasana proved to be the bestseller in the Auroville boutique. Currently Upasana offers women's clothing both Indian and Western in style, and Indian clothing for men. But Uma intends to soon move into designing Western casuals with an Indian touch.

"What I wanted to add and what was missing in this field in Auroville, is the rich heritage of India. Traditionally India has the widest range of fabrics, colours, weaving and printing techniques in the world. But it is only recently that Indian designers have come of age. I try to mould traditional designs and cuts to suit contemporary taste. I prefer nat-

ural and eco-friendly fabrics. At most, I will use viscose, for though it is a synthetic material, it is bio-degradable. And as far as possible, I try to use hand-woven cloth, natural dyes and hand-block prints for my clothes. During my years as a student, I came to discover master-craftsmen in this field all over India, and at present I work with some thirty of them based mostly in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. These men are truly artists. Their families have been practising this craft for centuries. And though they often work in appalling conditions, they work for the love of their craft and the beauty of their product and not for money. The dynamics of working with them is completely different from ordering your cloth from a mill. I can't order in bulk nor can I be sure that they will be able to carry out my requests for a particular colour or print. But I dream of creating a national network of all the traditional craftsmen that work with cloth and of expressing the whole range of Indian fabric, patterns and techniques, the best of each state from Kashmir to Kanyakumari."

Keeping her outfits affordable is another consideration for Uma. "I don't want to design only for the rich," says she. "If people truly like my clothes, I want them to be able to buy and wear them." Apart from the Auroville boutique, Uma also has an outlet for her clothes in New Delhi where her modestly-priced dresses are popular among college students, and in a boutique in Ahmedabad where she happens to be a guest faculty member in the NIFT branch.

At present Upasana operates out of the thatched hut that Uma shares with her partner Manoj in Bliss. The verandahs house Uma's designing table and serve as working space for the four tailors and four women she employs for hand-stitching. Inside, the little hut is stacked with woven cotton from Kancheepuram, hand-block prints from Rajasthan and *ikat* from Andhra Pradesh. She is building a studio in the Industrial Zone and plans to expand into the area of hand flat-knitting, opening a whole new range of creative possibilities.

Coco of *Aurorachana*: A bit playful

"Hope springs eternal in the human breast," says Alexander Pope, meaning that people always hope for the best, even in the face of adversity. 'Hope' is also the name of one of Auroville's outlying communities, close to the Tindivanam-Pondicherry road. "Hope is actually Auroville's second oldest community, after Promesse. The name had been given by Mother, who used to take Ashramites to this place for picnics under the Banyan tree," says Coco. In 1974, Shyam Sunder, who was then in charge of day-to-day affairs, asked Coco to take care of Hope. In 1980 she was joined by Clemens who became her partner. "Originally I hated the place," says Coco, "as it was so far from everywhere. But it became clear that this was really the place where Mother wanted me to be, so I accepted and we soon started to create a number of workshops." There was a food-processing unit called Delicacies, a garment unit called Aurorachana [the Sanskrit word for Aurocreation, the name given by the Mother for all of Auroville's handicrafts units], a fish farm called Golden Tilapia, and there is the recently created "Ambiente," a unit renovating old furniture. "Pope's proverb suits this community very well," says Coco, "for Delicacies has gone out of business, and the fish farm became a financial debacle which drained all our financial resources and created a big loss. But my tailoring unit is still in full swing, and our furniture renovation workshop has truly started to blossom. 'Hope' was indeed what



Shalwar-Kameez
(design by Uma)



Prize-winning
Elvis Presley costume
(design by Coco)

kept us moving, and in our case we have to add 'trust' as well," she laughs.

We are sitting in Coco's living room, in the presence of one cat (the 24 other ones are roaming around outside, I'm told), a dog and a whimsical collection of Indian furniture, objets d'art, etchings, a fish tank, bowls and mirrors: it looks like an antique shop. Coco, animated, a cigarette nearby in an ashtray, quite obviously enjoys the scene and doesn't mind the great wooden jumble of chairs, tables, and cupboards in all conditions piled in front of the house and awaiting storage in a decent storeroom which is being built.

How did Coco enter the field of design and garments? "In the fifties and early sixties I was a photographer in Germany," she recalls. "Then I went into modelling in Germany, Italy and France, where I earned the nickname Coco (my original name is Christiane) as someone told me I resembled Coco Chanel. With the money earned I started a fashion boutique in Munich. My first fashion show took place in Munich in 1963, and it was unique as the catwalks



Dress
(design by Ellen)

Transparent
coat
(design by
Susan)

Savitri troupe or for the Ashram dance school. I made evening dresses for the girls' graduation party in Kodaikanal school, and once I made some Elvis Presley costumes for a Swedish contest, which won a first prize!"

While Coco explains her work, the hammering and sawing at the upcoming repair shop and storeroom which will house her eclectic furniture collection continues unabated. "Garments are a seasonal thing. I wanted a business which I could run throughout the year, and I always wanted to have an antique shop. Once I had a dream that the whole garden was full of furniture, and now it is!" Her plans for the future? "I want to get better and better. That's the only thing!" Picking up her cigarette, she laughs a great, husky laugh. Hope and trust, indeed.

Susan of *Transparencies*: "Constructing" Fashion

Susan has always been known for the colourful wall hangings and transparent draperies that her unit "Transparencies" creates by artfully stitching together pieces of cloth in an intricate patchwork design. A few years back, she caused a revolution in fashion in Auroville by using the same principle to design clothes. Her clothes, usually made of soft, transparent cotton are artistic. Susan: "It was a natural process for me to move from designing wall-hangings and bed-covers to designing clothes. I wanted to find a way to wear what I created. My fashion design is like architecture: it is very 'constructed', full of hidden details but simple in looks. The utmost precision is needed to make it, and the process is very time consuming.

"I have no formal education in fashion. But I have always loved it and have been greatly encouraged by many people to take it up. My main interest is both in cloth and design, which of course affect each other. India, in this respect, is a designer's dream. This country has been known for centuries for the quality of its cloth. The cloth designs are often fabulous, the varieties of cloth immense. I have no particular preference for either *khadi* (hand woven cotton, eds.) cloth, or silk or cotton. It all depends on what garment I want to design and for whom. At present I am concentrating on coats which, I have discovered, are actually very difficult to make. A coat is the first impression anyone gets of you, you wear it on top of everything else, so it should be an expression of how you feel, and be able to be worn over whatever you feel like.

"Many of my clients are women from the affluent middle and upper classes of India. There was quite a challenge, initially—to design clothes that are suitable for this hot climate and to find the rules for dressing: how much of the body should be covered and so on. There is a cultural preference for certain styles of clothing, based on the saree and the *kurta* [a loose-fitting shirt worn over a *salwar*—a pair of loose, pleated

trousers tight at the ankles that are worn by women] I had to decide what boundaries to respect and what to throw out of the window. My designs are very liberal. Interestingly, it did not deter the Indian clientele. They are very open to new ideas, and as long as I make sure that a certain length of arm and neck is covered, and that there is a proper undergarment beneath the transparent clothing, they are always willing to try. That has broken my long-held conviction that Indian women are too scared or conservative to wear something daring."

Increasing success now forces Susan to expand her business, a process about which she has mixed feelings. "There are quite a number of clients who not only encourage me to design for them, but who also spread the word. I am actually surprised by the response to my creations for my initial motive in designing was one of joy and lightness. In fact," she laughs, "I had intended the transparent, floating kaftans I first created to be worn at home as they were comfortable and intimate, but was thrilled to see them being worn to din-

ners and dances. I am now preparing an exhibition of my garments in Mumbai in April, and the fashion magazine *Elle* wants to photograph and report on my work. At the same time, a different collection is ready for display in a boutique on Madison Avenue in New York City, who "absolutely have to have my garments in stock" and where I will participate in an established "Art to Wear" exhibition. All this promises to be a lot of work, but I refuse to become a factory. I am not working on something like a 'spring collection' which can be copied by the hundreds. I like to work with a few tailors on specific pieces."

Susan laughs when asked to describe herself. "None of these words—couturier, an exclusive designer—really fit at present. I would be most happy to be either but it simply does not feel 'true' as yet. Perhaps after a few years, when this work is more established. For some people, I am something like a couturier. They ask me to design something. They say, 'You know what I like, you know my favourite colour, so just go ahead and let me know when I should pass by to collect it.' That is a great freedom."

Ellen of *Cocoon*: Tailoring for Aurovilians

Cocoon is a design unit created by Ellen at Certitude in the early eighties as a means to earn her living. Ellen: "Before I came to Auroville from Germany in 1981, I was working in the world of drama and film, and one of my activities, apart from acting, was costume design. I had to acquire quite a lot of knowledge about the ways people dressed in the past, and of course I also became involved in contemporary garment design. With this background, it was a small step to start my own design and manufacturing unit." By 1984, Cocoon was a small garment export unit.

"In the course of time things changed," Ellen continues. "I always liked to work with a small team of tailors only, and it became too cumbersome to continue as an export unit. Now I employ only one tailor and I provide garments to the two Auroville boutiques in Auroville and Pondicherry to cover my maintenance. When, in addition, it became possible to serve the community, I was very happy. It started with working for Nandini, but before long the Central Fund made it possible for me to open my own Tailoring Service. This work I like very much. Some Aurovilians come to me with their own design, others choose from models that I have, and for some I design something specific. I also make ready-made garments for the Free Store, so that people can get new clothes there and don't always have to choose from second-hand stuff.

"What I particularly appreciate about the Tailoring Service is that Aurovilians don't have to pay me any more. It is a great freedom not to have to discuss money matters with people. If they have ordered a lot of clothes, I sometimes ask them to make a donation to the Tailoring Service, but that is all there is to it."

Is there a big difference between the work for Cocoon and the Tailoring Service? "Not at all," says Ellen. "The idea behind my designs has always been to dress in simplicity. My clothes have to be comfortable and be made from quality material. When I make clothes for Cocoon, I use silk and linen, but for the Tailoring Service these materials are too expensive, so we adapt the designs so they can be made, for example, from cotton or viscose. If someone really wants a special order, and they haven't come to me for new clothes in years, I can try to make something more costly."

The budget for the tailoring service comes from the Central Fund. Every month, an amount of Rs 11,000 is made available for tailors and materials. Is it enough? "For the time being it's ok," she says, "because not all Aurovilians use the Tailoring Service. If one wants to go all the way towards a no-money economy, providing the needs of each and every Aurovilian in kind, the amount would certainly not be sufficient. However, this Service is a step, and I'm happy that I could take it."

Bindu, Jill and Carel

were danced to beat music. In 1973, shortly after I came to Auroville, I started a crocheting unit in the community of Fraternity. Then a guest donated a sewing machine, and I started designing again. More and more customers came. Soon I was working with eleven tailors. I opened the shop "Sun and Fun" in Mamallapuram (Mahabalipuram) and another one called Auroshree in Pondicherry. These shops and the Auroville Boutiques are now my main outlets. And I design for Aurovilians and guests."

Does Aurorachana manufacture clothes for export? "No, not any more," says Coco. "I prefer to work on small orders, in my own style. I like details, for example to work with specially covered buttons. My clothes should be a bit playful, a bit feminine, though I design for men and women alike. I particularly like to work on designs which challenge me. When someone comes in with a difficult figure, I find a way to dress them inconspicuously. And then there is the design work I do for dancers, for example Bharat Natyam costumes, or dance costumes for groups such as Paulo's

The new International Advisory Council

Recently, the new members of the International Advisory Council were appointed by the Government of India. They are:

Dr. Amartya Sen, Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, and this year's Nobel Prize winner for Economics;

Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne, former winner of the Gandhi Peace Prize and founder and President of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement which is working in 12,000 villages in Sri Lanka.

Mary King, formerly head of the Peace Corps under President Carter, and now writer and resident scholar at the Centre for Global Peace at the American University in Washington, D.C.;

Dr. Kireet Joshi, former Registrar of the Sri Aurobindo International Centre for Education in the Ashram, ex-Educational Adviser to the Government of India, and the inspiration behind the setting up of the Sri Aurobindo International Institute for Educational Research in Auroville;

Dr. Norman Myers, well-known author and consultant in environment and development who is the Honorary Visiting Fellow at Green College, University of Oxford.



Mary King

wing of his movement for four years and my main specialisation is the theories and methods of non-violent resistance.

My latest book is about how the ideas and methods of such resistance codified (but not invented) by Gandhi have been transmitted over the past decades to places like the former East Germany and Czechoslovakia as well as Poland and Myanmar, and how they have influenced the movements for freedom there. Sometimes, as in East Germany, it was the Churches who took a lead in translating and propagating Gandhian methods, sometimes it was intellectuals or individuals with no religious or spiritual background. So one of my points is that you don't have to be religious or spiritual to be involved in the movement for non-violence. This is why, while I grew up in a deeply religious Christian community and I feel I have a very powerful spiritual dimension to my being, I do not normally stress this in my work. In fact, my main struggle has been to introduce these methods in a demystified, 'non-religious' way to well-meaning people who are following spiritual quests because I don't think this is enough in today's world: there has also to be an understanding of how to act in a non-violent way to eliminate injustice.

This century has seen mass slaughter, tribal warfare and ethnic cleansing. If ever there was a time to talk about human unity this is the moment. This is the time when whatever lessons you have learned here should be shared. This is the time when Auroville's light can really shine for the whole world."

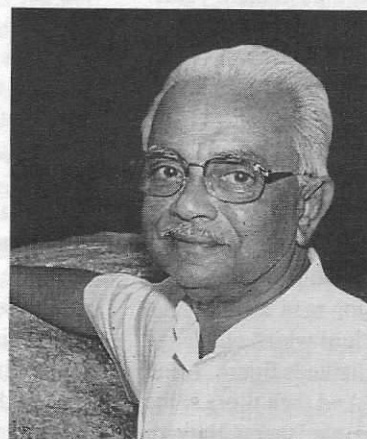
DR. ARIYARATNE

"The Sarvodaya movement has been working for 40 years now in Sri Lanka. It began with the aim of exposing university students to the realities of life by getting them to look at the needs of village people and to do some work with them. We started by following established development models, but as the movement expanded into more and more villages we discovered that 'development', as defined by institutions like the UN and the World Bank, is benefitting the

affluent, not the poor, and that the political parties in our country are not working for the common man. So our movement became a movement for the total transformation of society through non-violent change.

How to do this? We believe that the individual has to be awakened through a simple but vigorous spiritual discipline, that the family and traditional village structures should be strengthened through alternative economic development, education and self-governance, that nature should be healed and protected and that there should be environmentally-sustainable production. In this way we want to bypass modernity and go straight to a post-modern situation where the same mistakes are not committed. We feel this can be done if we can achieve a critical mass of spiritual consciousness, technologies and structures to support this new society which I call a 'right livelihood society'—and we are already on the way. Today we work in almost 12,000 villages, and we hold mass marches and meditations to change consciousness (later this month we hope to mobilise 200,000 people to march to our war zone as non-violent soldiers). We continue to attract idealistic youth from the cities because we provide them both with a vision and a way of translating it into action; members of the Sarvodaya movement outnumber the members of all the Sri Lankan political parties put together.

This is significant because the politicians have tried to destroy the movement. Why? Because we threaten their power. There are two kind of politics—the politics of power and political parties, and people's participatory politics. It is the latter we believe in because the ordinary people understand better than the academics, the politicians and the bureaucrats what they need and how to govern themselves. In other words, I don't believe there is any issue which needs to be dealt with in a national or supranational way. The way to save the world is to go to the people, awaken their spirituality and help them to get organised and link up with similar movements using the most modern technology, like computers and the Internet. This makes



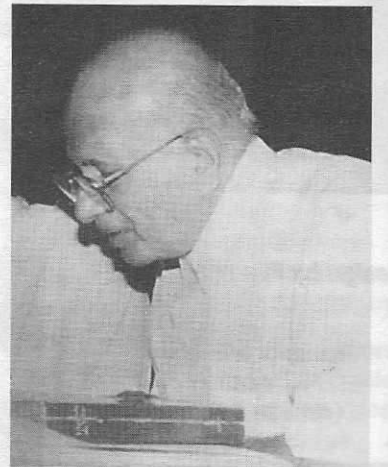
Dr. Ariyaratne

them as powerful as any government or World Bank.

Auroville as a spiritually-based community using the most modern technology could be such a centre for social transformation in the villages around. It could be like the centre of the lotus with the villages as petals. This is how I look at this place."

DR. KIREET JOSHI

As one of the inspirers of the Auroville Foundation Act, Kireet clarified the intended purpose of the International Advisory Council.



Dr. Kireet Joshi

The IAC is intended to guard against outside forces interfering with the freedom of the Aurovilians to conduct their own affairs according to the ideal. The Governing Board is basically an executive body, while Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi envisaged the IAC as representing the international community and therefore being in a position to advise the Governing Board.

The IAC can compare what is happening in Auroville today with the ideals with which it was started, and can help redirect the community towards its true purpose. Kireet noted a number of current concerns within the community—like the present money economy, the growing gap between the economic status of different Aurovilians, the growth of a property consciousness and the failure of the community consensus process—and felt these urgently had to be worked upon. The IAC could be a catalyst, could help create the right conditions for the Aurovilians to resolve these burning issues.

He stressed that Auroville is primarily a place that is to be the cradle of a new humanity. It is an educational city with three main aspects: permanent education, perpetual youth and the international dimension.

He is concerned that many Aurovilian parents don't want their children educated in Auroville and asked those involved in education to prepare a White Paper on why this is happening and what can be done about it.

Notes by Alan



DR. NORMAN MYERS

"When I visited Auroville for the first time last year, I was very struck by your accomplishment in afforesting this formerly barren land, and by your work on clean and renewable forms of energy. In terms of environmental initiatives world-wide, you are definitely at the sharp end of the pack. But two things impressed me even more. Firstly the spiritual aspect, the fact that people here are fully committed to the ideal of human unity and, secondly, your attempt to organise yourselves through a process which I have heard described as 'creative anarchy'. I'm struck by the way you discuss and discuss issues until a decision bubbles to the surface—you don't so much take a decision as see what emerges. This is interesting, and untypical of what happens elsewhere. Most people in most countries of the world have lost faith in their governments; they don't feel that their voices are heard by those in authority. But here everybody seems to feel that they can have a say in what is happening.

It's very important that authority is devolved to the grassroots level for many issues. However, if we look at the world situation there are certain problems—like those of

global warming and the thinning of the ozone layer—which cannot be dealt with at the local level. These issues can only be resolved by the nations of the world getting together and agreeing upon a common plan of action. Yet even if this happens, it will only work if millions of ordinary people decide to support it by changing daily actions which, cumulatively, threaten our environmental base.

Can this be done? It will be very difficult but, in terms of the UK, I see two possible ways of getting people to change. Firstly, economists have worked out that the UK is losing 4% of its GDP every year due to environmental problems like pollution and soil erosion. This is a massive amount and translates into higher interest rates, higher mortgage rates and higher unemployment—precisely the issues that the average Briton is most concerned about. If the environmentalists would make the connection between pollution and people's wallets I think it could help trigger a grassroots movement.

Secondly, I am astonished that the Churches realise that we are losing at least 50 species of fauna and flora every day, each a unique manifestation of creation, and they don't make a squeak about it. The only exception is the Eastern Orthodox Church which, only last year, made a statement that if you help cause species extinction that is a sin. Now that's quite a change! Think what an impact it could have if the other Churches, and other spiritual teachers, followed this example."

MARY KING

"Perhaps I should begin by stressing that I am no relation of Martin Luther King—I'm actually from the race of the 'oppressor'!—although I did work for the student

Cultural events

❖ Music:

Violin and piano sonatas from Beethoven, Debussy and Franck were very successfully performed in Pitanga Hall last January by the duo Ladislav Brozman and Richard Hartz from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

❖ Theatre:

Renate Kockeis, a theatre artist from Germany, returned to Auroville this season with a scintillating one-woman theatre production, *Sheherazade's Return*. The plot revolved around Sheherazade, the oriental story-teller of 1001 Arabian Nights, and her influence on Mrs. Nose, a contemporary Western story teller and comedian. With a couple of props that Renate used to maximum effect, the play explored the relationship between two women from two different cultures and time-periods as well as the experiences and emotions that a woman is confronted with. As part of the play was set in Auroville, Renate used the opportunity to make gentle fun of life in Auroville and the relationships between Aurovilians. She also skillfully included the audience in her production to explore the meaning of modern-day life. The play was in German and was scripted and directed by Anton Eckl, a famous stage director in Germany. (Review by Bindu)

Weekend Theatre Workshops

The same month saw theatre artists from South India and abroad coming together to share their work. Veena-

pani Chawla, Anita Ratnam, John Veckan and Jill Navarre (Aurovillian director) presented their research on the body of the actor and the influence of form on content. This event was organized by Kala Khoj.

❖ The Auroville Choirs:

The junior choir and the adult choir, together some fifty Aurovilians—men, women, youth, of different ages and colours, nationalities and backgrounds, recently gave three stirring performances of songs from different countries and from different centuries.

❖ Light Matter:

A multimedia art installation by Anu and Pierre Legrand was premiered at the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium from February 10-12.

An exploration of space, "a vibratory field which energises many levels": light, sound and form were blended together along with poetry by Anu and music. The structures by Pierre were panels of translucent paper and thin plastic sheets crafted in patterns shaped by the "aurionic script", a special alphabet, "derived, 10 years ago, from the study of the structure of Matrimandir's inner chamber", says the booklet which accompanied the show.

On the last evening, Holger, Stefano and Wolfgang (a visitor) created an evening of "sound structures"—a symphony which played off of the sculptures.

The feeling of the show was

described by some as "full of light", "an archaeological exploration of the history of mankind", or "explorations of a secret text". Installed on the stage in the auditorium, spectators could interact with the sculptures by passing in between the hanging pieces. The rhythm of movement became very much affected by the vibration of the pieces, and each spectator responded to the energy—some sat on the floor, others played with the light, some stayed in the audience and watched. Leaving the stage, one could encounter the pieces outside, under the stars, another interaction, another vibration, as the space expanded and the sky filled with stars.

The musical evening was very affecting—creating movements of chaos and order, a feeling of descending into darkness and finally ascending into the light. (Review by Jill)

IONS visit

Americans connected to this institute spent some time in Auroville in early January during a journey through India. Their journey focussed on an exploration of "consciousness, spirituality and yoga," and during their stay here the group had fruitful interactive discussions with a panel of Aurovilians who shared their views on yoga in the context of the community of Auroville.

Leading this group were Dr. Amit Goswami, an IONS fellow, author and quantum physicist and his wife, Dr. Uma

Krishnamoorthy, a child psychologist. Both the professors were well versed in Sri Aurobindo and gave inspiring talks that listed some of the ways in which quantum physics and modern psychology had come to accept the presence and role of an evolving consciousness in matter and mind.

IONS and Auroville hope to build their relationship by collaborating on long-term research projects that would focus on alternative healing and ways of mapping consciousness.

Bindu

Singing the praise of Lord Shiva

By the light of the full "blue" moon (the second full moon in one month), the Irumbai Temple came alive. One of our local legends, this beautiful ancient Shiva temple near Kottakarai seemed to be floating in candle and moonlight. The nearby lake was full of small oil lamps, each one cradled on pieces of banana stem. Lamplight also surrounded the temple grounds as villagers, Aurovilians and guests came to celebrate Thai Poosam, a Shiva puja (ritual of worship). All the inner sanctums of the temple (usually closed to non-Hindus) were open. For this auspicious occasion, the statues of gods and

goddesses had been washed in milk and ghee butter, decorated with flowers and gaily dressed. Huge banana stalks and leaves created a canopy at the entrance. The priests were busy officiating on this occasion, passing the fire through the crowd for blessing, handing out the ash which is used to mark the head and neck.

The combination of moonlight and Irumbai was enchanting; conversations were softly whispered, the devotional music offered by Thiru. P. Samantham Othuvai was sweet, and there were smiles all around. It was a lovely evening, put together by villagers as well as Aurovilians.

Jill

Brief News

In Memoriam

❖ **Jayantilal Parekh**, who set up and developed the Archives and Research section of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, passed away on January 25th, 1999. Jayantilal was the guiding force behind the publication of the Sri

Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library in 1972, and in 1995 initiated the publication of the Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo.

Jayantilal will be remembered by all who knew him as a self-effacing servant of the Mother and Sri

Aurobindo.

❖ **Françoise l'Hernault**, art historian at the École Française d'Extrême Orient (EFO), passed away on the 30th January at the Malar Hospital in Chennai at the age of 61. She was a friend to many Aurovilians and those of us who knew her will miss her bright smile and ever helpful disposition. She was also the brain behind the recent heritage exhibition on Pondicherry covered in the next issue.

AVI gathering

Auroville International will hold its annual gathering in the U.K. this year. The venue will be the Pestalozzi Children's Village at Seddlescombe, near Hastings in East Sussex. It will take place from July 6th till July 11th.

The Pestalozzi Children's Village is an international centre for young people, where four Auroville youth are presently studying. The proposed theme of this year's meeting is "Youth".

For further information contact AVI-UK: fax: (44)-1243 576792, email: aviuk@compuserve.com or avi@auroville.org.in

Gateway

The Governing Board, while welcoming a proposed donation of 11,000 shares (presently valued at US \$ 800,000) from Aurovillian Ulrich Blass, and acknowledging that a

donor's wishes about the specific purposes of projects to which his donation may be applied should always be respected, decided in its meeting on January 9th against Ulli's request to create a separate trust under the Auroville Foundation, called Gateway, to manage this donation. It stated that it would not be desirable to create a separate trust for every major donation for such decision making. Ulli had requested this separate trust as he is not confident that a mere working group of Aurovilians would have sufficient commitment to manage this donation, and would not be subject to pressure from other Auroville working groups or individuals. The creation of a separate trust had been recommended by the Working Committee, but had been opposed by other groups, amongst them the Auroville Board of Commerce, the Economy Group and the Matrimandir Coordination Group.

At present alternative ways of managing the donation are being considered, which may result in delays.

Prize for Pitchandikulam

The Pitchandikulam Bio Resource Centre won the first prize in the medicinal plants category at the annual Fruits, Flowers and Vegetables show, organized by the Dept. of Agriculture, Govt. of Pondicherry which was held recently at the Botanical Gardens.

Subscriptions to Auroville Today

Subscription rates for 12 issues of **AUROVILLE TODAY** are the following: for India Rs 250; for other countries Rs 1250, Can \$ 51, FF 195, DM 60, It. Lira 61,000, D.Gl. 65, US \$ 38, UK £25. This includes the postage by air-mail. Please send your contribution (or your supporting contribution of double the amount*) either to the Auroville International centre in your country (add 10% for admin. and bank charges) or directly to Auroville Today, CSR Office, Auroville 605101. **Cheques should be made payable to Auroville Fund, specifying: 'Contribution for Auroville Today'.** You will receive the issues directly from Auroville. Personal cheques are preferred to bank cheques. Please do not send postal money orders or cash. Subscribers will receive a reminder when their subscription is about to expire.

* *Auroville Today carries no advertisements and does not receive funds from Auroville. Your subscription helps us continue the work. We gratefully acknowledge the generosity of our supporting subscribers. Those for whom the subscription rates are an obstacle are invited to contact us for information on reduced rates.*

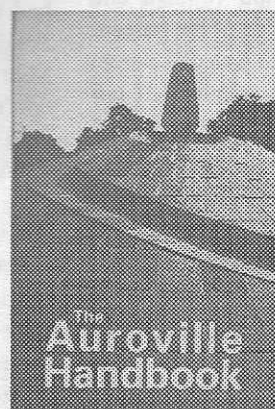
Auroville Today provides information about Auroville, an international township in South-India, on a monthly basis and is distributed to Aurovilians and friends of Auroville in India and abroad. It does not necessarily reflect the views of the community as a whole.

Editorial team: Tineke, Roger, Jill, Caryl, Bindu, Annemarie, Alan. All photos, unless otherwise attributed: John Mandeem. Layout & DTP: Annemarie. Proofreading: Barbara. Printed at All India Press.

The Auroville Handbook is out

The last edition of The Auroville Information Directory came out in early 1995. Now a new—professionally printed—version of the Directory, entitled *The Auroville Handbook*, has just been released. This 117-page publication is a treasure house of information about the community. It includes information about the working groups and services, the commercial units, the economy, guest-houses and visitors' facilities, afforestation and renewable energy activities, village development, donor agencies, videos and publications... and much, much more. Perhaps most important of all, it contains a completely new and up-to-date map of the community (the map is also being sold separately).

The Auroville Handbook is



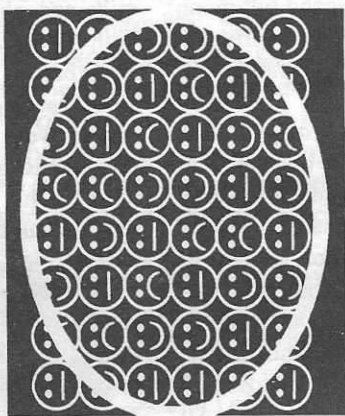
available at outlets in Auroville and Pondicherry for Rs 95. It is also available by post: send your cheque or DD (Rs. 95 in India, US \$5 abroad) to Guy at CSR Office, Auroville, 605101, or send an email to guy@auroville.org.in. N.B.: Cheques should be made out to **Auroville Fund**, specifying "The Auroville Handbook".

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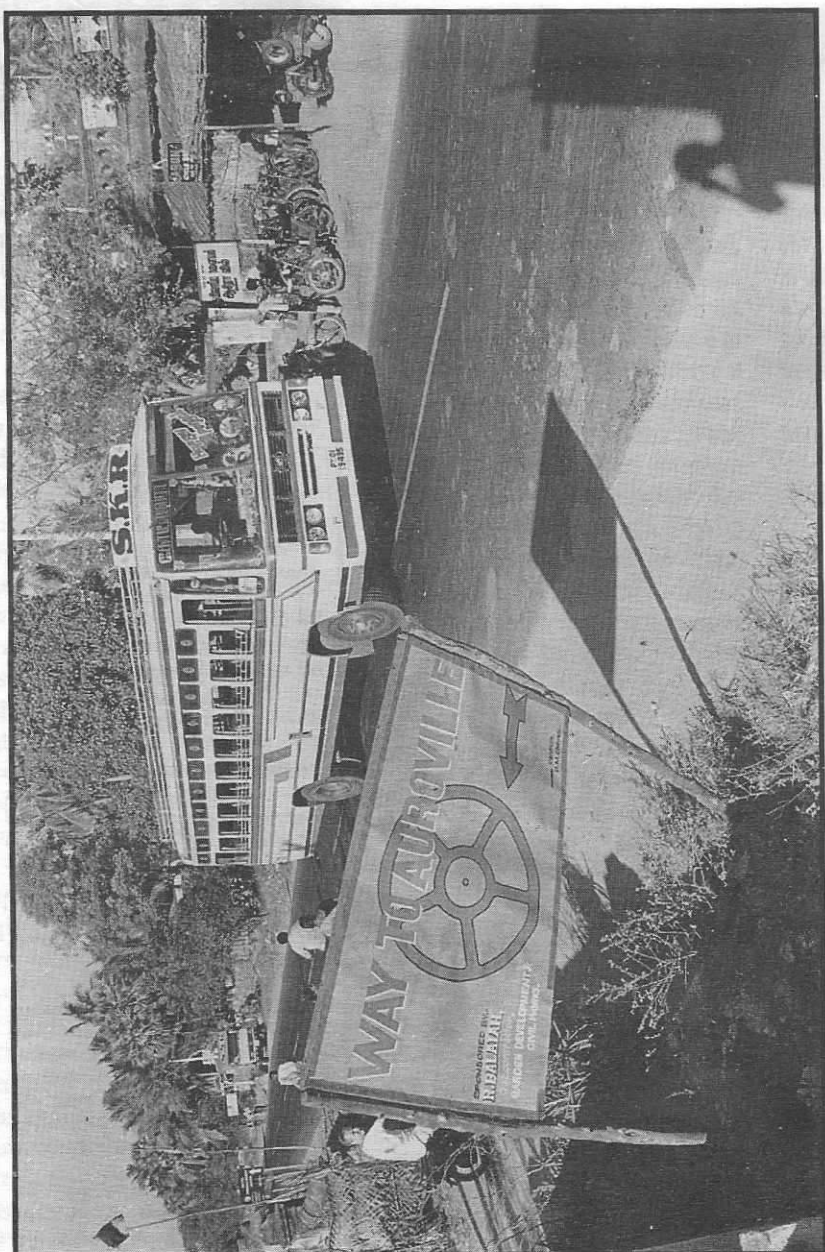
AUROVILLE ARCHIVES
C/O KRISHNA T.
BHARAT NIVAS
AUROVILLE



IN THIS ISSUE:

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- TAKING THE AUROVILLE TOUR

March 1999
Number 122



The beach road entrance to Auroville

"But, where is Auroville?"

Auroville by tour bus

After a meal on a banana leaf in a side-row eatery in Pondicherry I just had time for a quick coffee at the Indian Coffee House before making my way over to the Ashram Autocare Tourist Office by the canal. Here, two days before, I had bought a ticket costing 40 rupees for a round trip to Auroville and a visit to Matrimandir. I had been clearly informed by the gentleman on duty that no bags or cameras could be carried on the bus, and visits to Matrimandir were not guaranteed in case of rain. Upon inquiry he also said that they took between 50 and 150 visitors out to Auroville every day.

I arrived half an hour before departure at 2 p.m., and was directed across the canal to where a tour bus was parked on a sun-washed ashram street. I hauled myself aboard a once plush video coach complete with interior zinc panelling that had, like a hill station hotel, seen better days. It was already three-quarters full. The passengers, with the exception of two elderly English ladies, were all middle-class Indians. I appeared to be a slight object of curiosity for some as I made my way down the aisle to the back. Absolutely nothing happened for the next half hour as Hindi movie music came on the speakers and many dozed. Then suddenly a driver materialized, tickets were double checked, and with a coughing sputtering sound like a sea plane in need of repairs, we were off!

Palm-fringed rooftops and walls plastered with posters for politicians and films, temples, liquor and hardware stores soon gave way, as we left the busy outskirts of Pondy, to the thatched roadside huts of potters, door and scrap steel merchants, then mosques and coconut groves, as we gunned down the highway all horn and no brakes. After the Auroville turn-off, the climb to our once distinct plateau was through an ugly *nagar* with unfinished houses and souvenir shops with names like "Auriginal" and "Auroshakti" on either side. Signs for Auroville communities were briefly glimpsed in the village of Kuilapalayam—gateway to Auroville—along with lumbering bullocks, an ugly main drag of souvenir shops, piles of freshly stacked wood and rubbish and plastic bags. Although some of the passengers were desperately trying to catch sight of something out of the window of our speeding bus, there was nothing to see but cashew fields and forest.

After another village, some more countryside and a turn in the road we pulled into a parking lot. In the middle of nowhere we disembarked following our guide towards a large building with arched entrances. Our until now silent guide suddenly announced that this is the Auroville Information Centre. It seemed like a battle memorial in the middle of nowhere.

Here we were herded into the rather crowded information section of the building and gathered around a model of the Galaxy town plan for a brief talk. "Auroville belongs to everybody, Auroville belongs to nobody. Auroville is the future International City, there are four zones.... Nothing is there now, just a few

communities". Someone asks about the International zone. "It is the public zone." We move onto to the photo of the banyan tree. "Mother called it the divine tree. Its spirit went to Mother who saved it from being cut down and it promised to grow away from the temple. The urn of the nearby amphitheatre is the foundation pillar of Auroville. The Matrimandir seen from the air forms Mother's symbol." We were then left on our own for fifteen minutes. Many of the party peered with interest at the photo exhibit (I for one thought it would need fresh photos and captions in different Indian languages), while a few others wander off to the Boutique. After a short description of the Visitors Centre we headed back to the bus. Two other buses, four vans and a dozen cabs were already parked at the Matrimandir gate near the second banyan tree, which for all we know is the one we'd just been told about. "No going here or there," we were warned as our party of 51 lined up single file, and was waved through a gauntlet of gurdharas. The garden with its flowers and Royal palms looked beautiful. "They look like morning glories," I heard the English duo excitedly exclaim. As we turned the bend the impressive, white sphere of Matrimandir was suddenly seen at the end of a long straight path.

But where was everyone? With no one around except visitors and guards this was beginning to seem like a visit to the film-set of 2002—A Space Odyssey. We entered through the West pillar, then climbed the winding ramp as others came down, for an ever so brief *darshan* glimpse of inner chamber and the crystal—which is admittedly impressive, if not totally surreal. I noticed those before me in line lingering and looking back. On our way out an elderly Indian woman bowed, hands joined towards the structure. Visitors were lingering under the second banyan tree as we headed back to the bus, but there were no information panels on display for those who might be interested to know a bit more about what they'd just seen; just signs requesting silence. As the Scottish woman remarked to Alan who had taken the rival tour provided by the Pondicherry Govt.'s tourist office, "This Matrimandir seems totally incongruous—I don't think Auroville is for me but then it's hard to know."

As I sat reflecting a little later at sunset over a "special tea" on the rooftop of the Aristo, what struck me most about the experience was how the only other people we had seen in a two and a half hour tour were fellow visitors or guards and guides. Matrimandir provided evidence of the existence of Auroville, but not more than that. Our group seemed genuinely interested in our rumoured township, and more information on our activities should be provided at the Information centre by a series of short, continually running, five minute videos in different Indian languages as well as English on different aspects of Auroville and the activities going on here.

Roger