

Auroville Today

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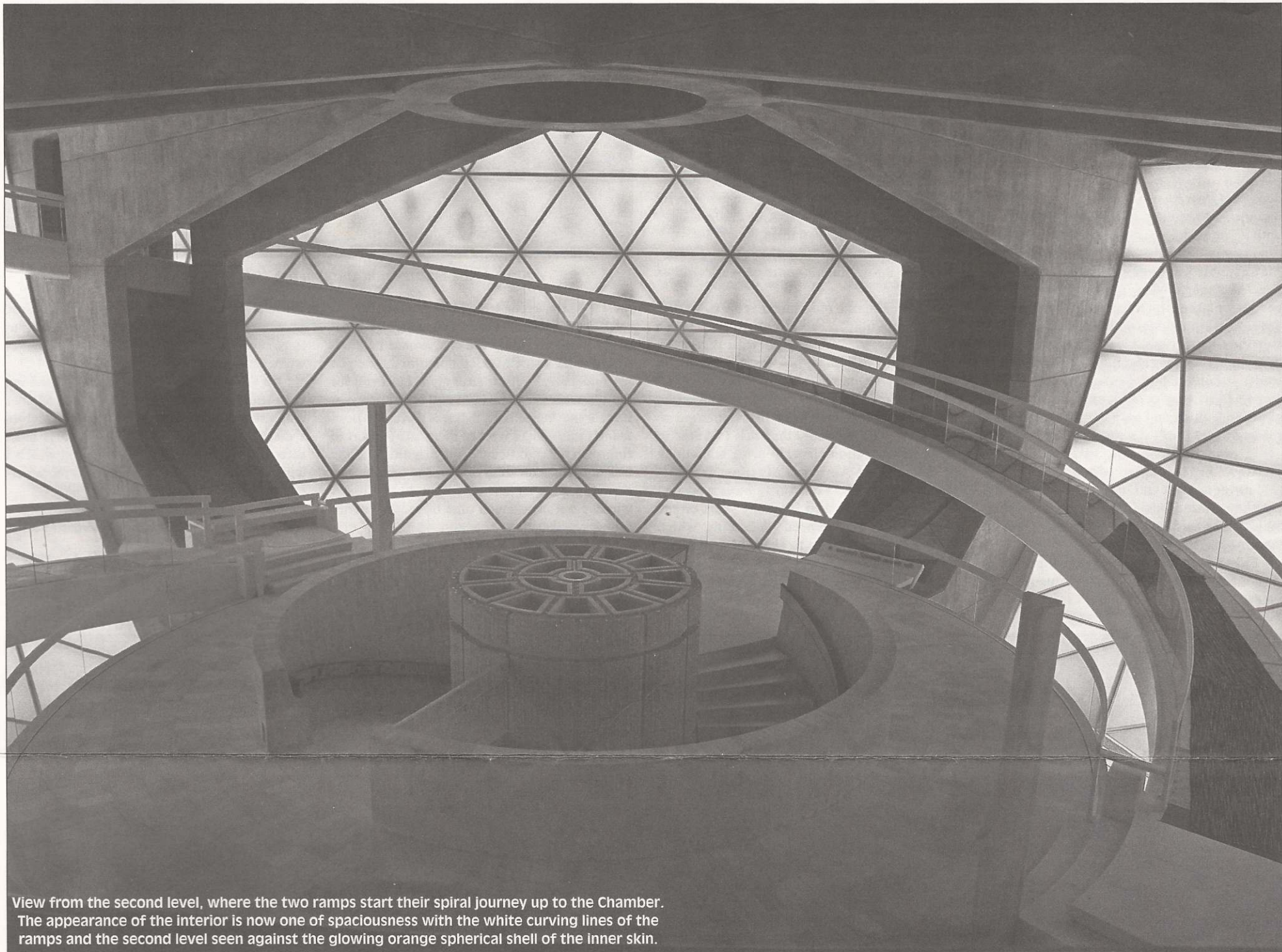


PHOTO GIORGIO

View from the second level, where the two ramps start their spiral journey up to the Chamber. The appearance of the interior is now one of spaciousness with the white curving lines of the ramps and the second level seen against the glowing orange spherical shell of the inner skin.

Reliving the magic of constructing Matrimandir

On August 15th Doris Van Kalker's new film, 'Building Matrimandir', was shown in Cinema Paradiso. Auroville Today spoke to Doris and to Francis, who assisted her, about the aim of the film and the challenges they encountered in making it.

"I want to emphasise that this is her project, she's done most of the work," begins Francis. "But," says Doris, "he knew all the stories behind the construction, as well as whom to address for what. And when it came to editing it was extremely important to have another pair of critical eyes."

So now that's been straightened out, how did it all begin? "During my early days in Auroville I was staying in Center Guest House," recalls Doris. "After lunch we had this coffee club of long-term Aurovilians. Most of the time it was gossip, but once in a while they told these stories about the time they worked on the Matrimandir. And the minute they started talking about it, their voices changed; all of a sudden they were in a totally different mode. This interested me. I began to realize there must be something special about this building."

"Some time later we were doing some filming in the inner chamber. As we were coming down I asked John Harper about the documentation of the ongoing work. Who was the regular Matrimandir videographer? When he told me that nobody had done it for the past ten years, I just couldn't believe it. So I decided there and then to make a video documenting the history of the construction."

"When Doris announced that we (we!) were going to make a video about the construction of the Matrimandir," says Francis, "she was totally ignorant of what it would entail. I knew immediately – which is why I kept quiet! But she has this unbelievable obsessiveness. Once she locks onto something, the thoroughness of her focus is amazing. It drives everybody crazy, but she gets what she's after."

"It's a personal thing," explains Doris. "Once I get into something, I want to start at the beginning and know everything." Getting to know everything (or almost everything) about the Matrimandir involved, among other things, speaking to numerous Aurovilians, reading every Matrimandir newsletter and delving deep into the Auroville archives for relevant photos and footage. "There was a very nice man there, Thambidorai," says Francis, "who helped her. And she needed it because basically all the Matrimandir material was just stuff on a shelf. It all had to be organized, categorized. Also, the old films, some of which were in a very bad state, had to be laboriously cleaned and copied on to DVD. Then she took all the old Matrimandir newsletters to Pondy to have them photocopied so she didn't have to work with the flimsy originals."

"We also got a lot of advice from our fellow-Aurovilians about whom we should talk to and what absolutely had to be in the film. And then everybody had their construction stories. The problem is that people's memories are defective, so they kept disagreeing about what had happened, when. Even the Matrimandir newsletters are not much help as they contradict themselves!"

Doris recalls overhearing two Aurovilians disagreeing about what was happening on the Matrimandir the moment Mother passed away in Pondicherry on 17th November, 1973. One said that was the moment the concreting of the beam joining the four pillars was completed. The other one said this was when the top of the final pillar was completed. Finally Alain Grandcolas said he would check in Ruud Lohman's Matrimandir diary: it confirmed that Mother's passing coincided with the completion of the tip of the final pillar. "And that's just one of the stories. We had to check out hundreds of them," says Francis.

The Matrimandir, to put it mildly, is no stranger to controversy. There have been major personal conflicts and strong disagreements concerning certain aspects of the design. Yet none of this finds its way into the film. Why?

"It was a conscious decision," says Doris. "Our goal was to give a historical overview of the construction, not to talk about the difficulties. I wanted very much to reunite Aurovilians through this film." In a small way, this may have begun. When Paulo Tommasi heard that the film was being made, he decided to visit the Matrimandir for the first time since his design for the Matrimandir gardens had been rejected. "I assumed that that had broken his heart," says Doris. "But the day he revisited, he was very touched: he said everything was so beautiful. That evening he gave me the original hand-drawn design of the Matrimandir he

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Seen KP 506



Doris and Francis

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had shown to Mother. 'You'll know what to do with it', he said."

Francis recalls how everybody at Matrimandir was very supportive of the project. "I thought this project wouldn't fly because of the protective shield which had developed around Matrimandir over the years. But they were very open. Whenever something important was about to happen, the team leader would phone Doris and tell her to come. Then they would explain what was going to happen and help her up on the scaffolding to get the best view."

"I was overwhelmed by the way the Matrimandir team accepted me," says Doris. "I'd never done anything like this before, and yet they trusted me. Later I asked Barbara, 'Why?' She said it was an experiment, but all the time she felt I could do it."

Even so, when it came to showing a rough-cut of part of the film to the Matrimandir old-timers, Doris was very nervous. "When the

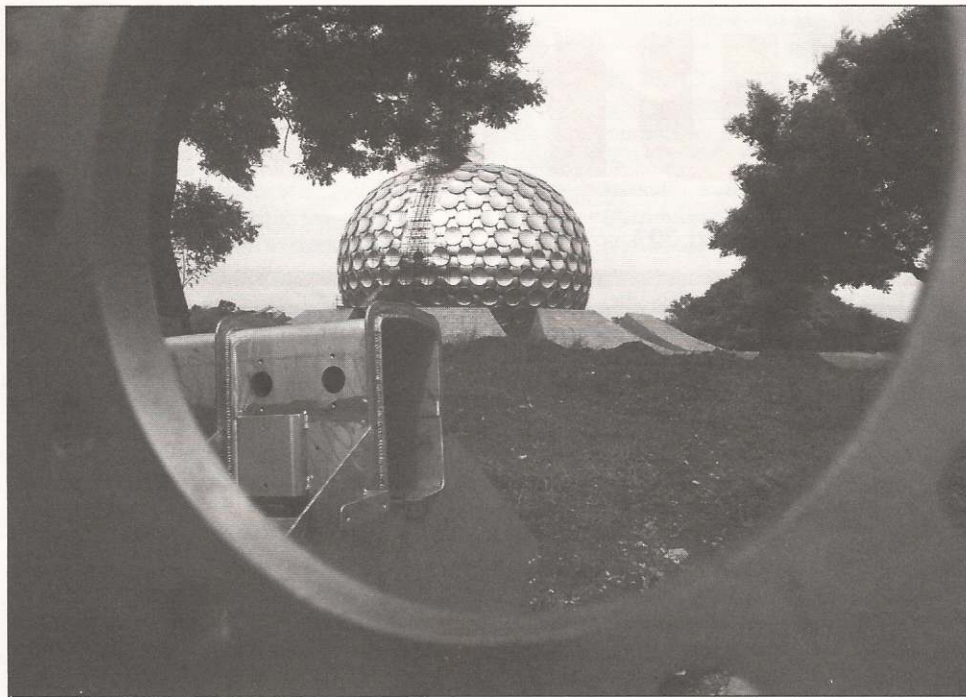
showing ended, there was silence in the room. Finally Barbara said, 'I thought you could do a lot but this is amazing.' In fact, everybody was positive, I couldn't believe it. It was then I knew I was on the right track."

"But it wasn't just the Matrimandir workers. Anybody I asked for something immediately said 'yes'," says Doris. "Hemant spent weeks making the animations, Giorgio provided photos, Holger supervised the sound recording, Joy felt 'honoured' when I asked her if we could use her voice on the soundtrack..."

In February this year the still-uncompleted film was shown to the Aurovilians. "When it ended," recalls Doris, "Savitra invited all those who had worked on the Matrimandir to stand. They stood up, they looked at each other and that special vibration was there. And suddenly, from the others, came this spontaneous applause. Afterwards, people came up and hugged me, they stopped me on the road and thanked me. And that's when I knew that we'd touched them."

Has making the film changed their perspective upon Matrimandir or Auroville as a whole?

"Watching the old Matrimandir films was very moving," says Doris. "Those Aurovilians worked so hard with their bare hands, they had such few resources, but in their faces you could see this belief, this joy, this passion to do the work. I wanted to remind them of what they had done and to say thank you. But more than this I wanted to keep that vibration alive, to bring something of that into the Auroville of today. We late-comers need this. You Aurovilians who met Mother or who worked for many years on the Matrimandir experienced something which we don't have. For us to share in something this vibration which the old Aurovilians had has to be kept alive, it has to be fed, nurtured. I got this through the making of the film."



View of the Matrimandir through the base plate of the crane.

"It's been a long trek," says Francis. "When I first came to Auroville I was convinced that everything, including the city, would be completed in 20 years. Making this film has helped me understand what a struggle it has been for the Matrimandir to be born and how important it is for the Aurovilians that it is there. It's been many years since I worked there and I'd sort of forgotten the significance, the magnitude of the task and the dedication of so many people. The structure itself emanated a vibration – that's why we put in so much time there, the energy was so rejuvenating."

"So when you see the old movies and you see how beautiful the Aurovilians were physically and in their dedication, it's very uplifting. It helps me in today's situation to keep the faith,

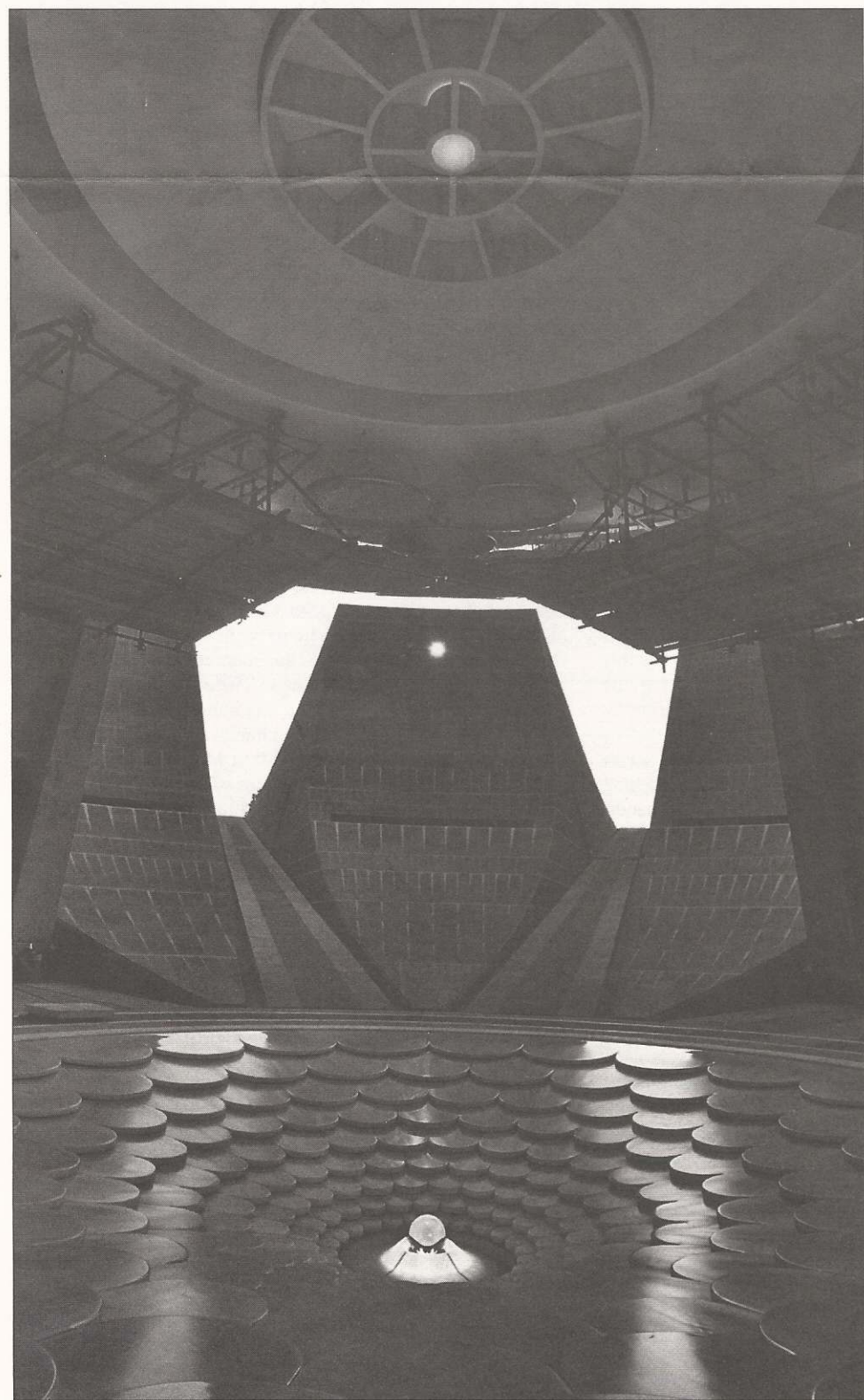
which is the most difficult thing to do. Because I feel there is slippage; we're becoming institutionalized, bourgeois. With our petty struggles we're getting left behind."

"Working on the Matrimandir helped me keep something that touched me when Mother touched me many years ago. This video revives a distant memory of a feeling which is most sacred to me. It emanates a vibration which I wish we could all carry with us on a more permanent level."

From an interview by Alan

The video is on sale at the Visitors Centre. Price Rs 400.

For more info: francis@auroville.org.in



The lotus pond beneath the Matrimandir with a crystal that receives the ray of sunlight that passes through the Chamber above.



Doris filming on top of the Matrimandir.

Matrimandir diary

June 25th 2007. This [...] was the day that the very last of the pipe scaffolding was removed from the interior of the Matrimandir. These pipes have occupied the interior space for more than twenty years. First to help support the precast concrete beams of the spherical space frame as it was being built; then as working platforms for many operations, from fixing the outer skin's ferrocement panels, to painting and finishing the two spiral ramps that link the second level to the two chamber doors; and recently to lift and install the more than 700 panels of the inner skin.

The transformation of the interior was very rapid and dramatic in late May and June when the south-west and northwest quarters of the inner skin were completed and the scaffolding removed. By late June, the work on the final quarter, the southeast, had come to a point where scaffolding was no longer needed.

A team of twelve young men undertook the job of removing the pipes – and they did it with gusto – enjoying the last chance to work with the scaffolding. By 2 p.m. that day, all pipes, planks, and clamps were down, lying in the first level of the building. And by 4 p.m. all this material was removed from the inside of the Matrimandir. It then took just four more days to install the lowest three rows of the inner skin panels so that by the last day in June the inner skin of the sphere was complete, revealing a marvellous space that feels light and very peaceful.

It was a wonderful moment, seeing it whole and complete for the very first time.

An excerpt from the Matrimandir newsletter – August '07

Residents' Assembly up and running

The residents of Auroville have decided to give new life to an institution many had given up on: the Residents' Assembly.

For the majority of the Aurovilians, attending meetings of the Auroville Residents' Assembly (RA) is a turn-off.

"It's always the same boring people," is the common complaint. Over time, RA meetings became poorly attended with an average participation of less than a 100 people. Its method of decision making became unclear, wavering from consensus to simple majority and at times to a 2/3rd majority vote. Those who did not attend the RA meeting had simply no say.

The new Working Committee (WC), which took office in April this year, decided to make the functioning of the RA one of its main priorities. In July it published its proposal. Its main theme is the principle of universal suffrage: each Aurovilian over 18 years has the right and privilege to participate in decision-making, but there is no compulsion. Those who want to participate should be

able to do so in the way most convenient to them: by email; through the ballot box; or in a meeting of the RA. As Auroville still lacks elaborate identification systems, the voting would be 'open': those counting the votes will know how everybody has voted. The WC further proposed a quorum of 10% of the total number of Auroville residents; and that decisions are taken by simple majority vote.

The WC's detailed proposal also contained a suggestion: that RAs are no longer organized by the WC, but by a separate RA Service – which will be the beginning of a permanent RA secretariat. This would help the RA to become Auroville's true 'legislative' body, to which all of Auroville's executive working groups and units would be ultimately accountable.

In its presentation, the WC stressed that decision-making through consensus instead of voting is the preferred Auroville method, as it

"is based on our spiritual aspiration, and on our endeavour to find a solution that can satisfy all." But the WC observed that this attempt has sometimes blocked situations from getting resolved. Stating that the problems of everyday life often have many possible solutions, some equally good and backed by equally valid arguments, the WC proposed that all views be given a full and fair hearing in one or more general meetings to be held before an RA takes place. But, said the WC, "if consensus cannot be found, a solution through voting is the only way out."

Encouraged by the absence of any negative responses, the WC in August put both proposals – the method of decision-making as well as the creation of an RA Service – before the RA for a decision. It also put to the RA another contentious question: whether the Secretary should be the compulsory co-signatory of the

Unity Fund [see *Auroville Today* # 222, August 2007].

The response was good. Of 1294 Auroville residents, 338 persons participated, or 26% of the population. A total of 183 votes were deposited in the ballot boxes; 109 votes were sent by email; and 46 votes were cast in the RA meeting of August 13th. Of the 338 votes, only three were invalid. An overwhelming majority of 82.7% of the voters agreed with the proposed method of decision-making; 78.5% of all the voters agreed to create a Residents' Assembly Service; and 92% of the voters disagreed with the compulsory co-signing.

In its final report to the residents the WC mentioned some of the difficulties it had encountered in the voting process. The main one was clarity of presentation: quite a few people had trouble understanding the issues, even though they had been explained before

in general meetings. The WC recommended that, in future, proposals be formulated in simple language, and that general meetings also be held in Tamil to help Tamil Aurovilians who have difficulty in understanding English.

A worrying observation was that a number of Aurovilians did not want to vote openly against co-signing by the Secretary for fear of being expelled from India. This is a serious issue which needs to be addressed by the Governing Board. Auroville can only further develop as an international township if foreigners are allowed to live and work here without such fears.

The method of decision-making of the Auroville Residents' Assembly has now been clearly defined. Its decisions can no longer be questioned by an Aurovilian or outsider because of a lack of a quorum or for other technicalities.

Carel

In brief

Crown Ways

Auroville's planning organisation L'Avenir d'Auroville has created a group called "Crown Ways" to look into all issues relating to the laying of the 4.3 kms long Crown Road for which initial funding of Rs 64 lakhs has been secured. Most of the work for marking the centre line of the Crown Road has been completed. The final road width and its details and phased implementation plan can only be arrived at after carrying out integrated studies such as larger mobility (transportation) studies, growth patterns, land use studies, water management aspects, road levels, green cover and sensitive areas.

Commercial contributions diminish

Over the last three years the contributions of the commercial units towards Auroville have diminished. Many commercial units are just breaking even, while only some are able to contribute to the collective. This development is in accordance with the forecast made in the White Paper on the Auroville Economy, in April 2002 [see *Auroville Today* # 161 of June 2002] that the Auroville commercial activities would contribute progressively less in the coming years.

DEW Institute started

The Institute for Design, Energy and Water (DEW) that aims at bringing together water, energy, and appropriate technologies, has started. DEW will offer programmes to undergraduate students, postgraduate and doctoral students, teachers and professionals from government agencies, NGOs, the corporate sector, etc. The Institute, which will issue its own certificates, will be situated on the Auroville Centre for Scientific Research campus. Promoters and project collaborating organisations are Development Consultants Limited (DCL), Kolkata; the Smithsonian Institute, Centre of Ecological Restoration, Washington, USA; the University of Delft, civil engineering department, Delft, Holland; and Vitens (Water board), Holland.

Education for the children of Auroville employees

A group number of children of people employed in Auroville pursue higher studies. However, many of the employees are not able to afford the fees. Auroville's Small Employees Welfare Association has issued a call for funds to start an education fund for these children so that Auroville will also become a place for unending education as envisaged by The Mother for these children. For information contact sewa@auroville.org.in

Grass trial results

The Matrimandir team has reported that two grass varieties have fared best under Auroville's harsh summer conditions. First place has gone to Calcutta Doob, closely followed by Auroville Bermuda. Efforts to propagate these two grasses are underway and the garden team plans to plant them on the many remaining border areas of the Matrimandir garden.

RESEARCH

Saline intrusion into the aquifers

French scientists warn of intrusion of salt water into the aquifers of the bioregion. This may well be the biggest environmental threat Auroville – and all the villages in the area – will ever have to face.

After years of monitoring, a study of the water use in the Kalivelli

region has been finalized. Several presentations were made to the residents of Auroville, major Auroville working groups and to the water-related government agencies of Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry and Central Government in April and May this year. The study, conducted jointly with national and international scientists, indicates that the aquifers in the whole area, including those below Auroville, are being emptied faster than they are being replenished. The withdrawal rate is about 4 times more than the recharge. The net deficit is estimated at 500 million cubic metres per year. Agriculture accounts for most of the ground water extraction. A large volume is also lost to the sea through uncollected run-off.

In some places, the water level in the aquifers has dropped far below sea level (up to 50 metres). This will have dramatic consequences. The study estimates that within a period of 5 years, the groundwater will turn saline and become unusable for human consumption and agricultural use. This would affect a population of approximately 400,000 people, including the Aurovilians.

The problem is not new. Seawater intrusion is already occurring in the southern areas of the bioregion along the coast. But can something be done to halt this aquifer depletion? Is it possible to reverse the process and, in the long run,



Desilting an Edaiyanchavadi tank.

maintain the water balance within the affected aquifers?

A group of concerned Aurovilians, the Water Group, believes it has a solution that does not damage the status of Kalivelli tank as a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention while being replicable in other threatened or affected areas. They propose to harvest the huge volumes of rain water that are now lost to the sea, and use it to recharge the groundwater level. At the same time, appropriate irrigation and agricultural practices have to be introduced.

The problem has to be tackled at four different levels. The first is to afforest the wastelands above the aquifers and along the water ways over an area of 1015 sq. kilometres. Forestation would slow down monsoon rain run-off, and enable the water to infiltrate into the ground and replenish the aquifers. The second work to be done is to build recharge structures to ensure that water reaches the aquifers; the third to repair the supply and drainage channels to the tanks in the area, so that bigger storage becomes available. And, lastly, a programme has to be imple-

mented to encourage the farmers in the region to convert to new methods of sugarcane and rice cultivation which use less water. This should be coupled with incentives to switch to water-saving practices and to organic agriculture.

The total cost of the project is estimated at Rs. 125 crores (US \$ 30 million), for which funds will have to be raised. The Water Group proposes that a body is created under the Auroville Foundation, chaired by the Secretary and endorsed by the Governing Board, to raise funds and then plan, implement and monitor this pro-

ject in coordination with the local authorities. This body can then apply to Indian Government agencies for securing funds.

Auroville can play a central role in this project, says the Water Group. Auroville is among the few organisations in India that has the technical expertise to contribute all these proposed inputs on the scale required. Once implemented, the project will be an excellent prototype for the rest of the Coromandel Coast, where similar depletion of coastal aquifers is taking place at an alarming rate.

Carel

Environmental Education Centre opens

Seven years after its creation, the Auroville Botanical Gardens achieved a new milestone; the completion of an environmental education centre. On August 10th it was inaugurated by the Lieutenant-Governor of Puducherry, Shri Mukut Mithi.

The main focus of the work at the Auroville Botanical Gardens is education," says Paul Blanchflower, the coordinator of the project. "This has been the intention from the beginning – to create an environment where love, respect and understanding of the natural world can be nurtured and developed." The programme targets school children and has an ambitious goal – to provide a basic environmental education facility for over 300 schools within a 30 kilometre radius of the gardens. Apart from botanical education, environmental issues such as conservation of biodiversity, global warming, water cycles, food security, and environmental monitoring will be taught. "Our second aim is to be a model of sustainability and to show what can be achieved with today's technologies," he adds. The Botanical Gardens depends on solar energy for powering its buildings, while wind and solar are used for pumping water.

The latest addition to the Gardens' infrastructure is the 400 sq.m. environmental education centre. Designed by Poonam, it is a light and airy building that will provide ample space for students for sit-down activities. "Very nec-

essary when it gets too hot in the day." The building also hosts a library and an office space, plus a water garden that is fed by the rain water collected from the roof. "Now our task is to equip the building with chairs and computers, and to install the kitchen where the lunch for the children can be prepared," says Paul. "But this will have to wait awhile until the next grant comes in, which hopefully will be fairly soon."

Lack of funds is also the reason why the original programme of teaching groups of children for 5 hours a day, including providing a nutritious mid-day meal, is still not fully implemented at present. "We run on a shoe-string budget, and the maximum we can do now is 2-hour programmes," says Paul. "A government grant helped us construct the building, and a small donation last year allowed us to pay for two educational assistants. But what we badly need now is a bus; that would be the key to the work we're

doing as we can go and pick up the kids from far-away schools and bring them to the Botanical Gardens." Paul hopes that he will find corporate support from businesses or industries to meet this need.

In the meantime, the Gardens is pursuing creative ways to generate income. Recently, the nursery has started selling not only small seedlings in plastic bags but also large trees in big tubs; "something that is becoming quite popular with hotels, educational institutions, and architects' offices." Another effort at revenue generation has been the setting up of nurseries for other NGOs. "Our nursery can take care of only 50,000 plants per year as we're limited in the water we can use," explains Paul. "So we're more than happy to share our knowledge with others, and to give out seeds and cuttings." More recently, the Botanical Gardens has also become involved with landscape consultancy, an activity that is financially well-rewarding. "Ultimately," says Paul, "the Gardens has to become self-sustainable."

Plans for the future include different types of 'teaching gardens'. Already an arboretum is in place with good specimen trees. "We also have a demonstration plot of a natural forest area where the flora is allowed to develop as it wishes," says Paul. Works are now under way for a butterfly meadow with TDEF flowering plants where children can appreciate the interaction between insects and plants. There are also plans for a palm garden having species from

all over India; an orchid garden; a bamboo and grass garden; and a garden of cacti. "Our intention is to take the children to a particular garden space and tell a story," explains Paul. "This way they can understand how living things evolve and interact and how humans can relate with nature and the environment."

As Paul explains the state of affairs, a group of school children neatly dressed in purple uniforms and with notebooks and pencils in hand spill out of a van. Their noisy chatter and

squeals of excitement breaks the still air. Their guide meets them by the gate and leads them off into the nursery. After a while the group streams out. Now their voices hushed and movements subdued, they head towards the arboretum. As the last one disappears down the bend, all sounds drop away – it's just the bird calls and the chirp of crickets filling the air.

It's another weekday morning at the Botanical Gardens.

Priya Sundaravalli



The new environmental education centre building at the Auroville Botanical Gardens.



The Lieutenant-Governor of Puducherry, Shri Mukut Mithi planting a tree. From left: Secretary M. Ramaswamy IAS, Paul Blanchflower, Mrs. Mithi

The Botanical Gardens

The Auroville Botanical Gardens was started in August 2000 on 50 acres of old cashew land rescued from the threat of real estate development. The Gardens has seen a dramatic growth since then. More than 250 tree species have been planted in the 25-acre arboretum; 5,500 specimens have been planted in the 10-acre conservation forest; and a TDEF plant nursery has been created, capable of producing 50,000 seedlings per year to promote the re-introduction of the indigenous flora of the region.

The Auroville Botanical Gardens has as its special mission to conserve and preserve the Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest (TDEF). This forest-type, unique to India's south-eastern sea-board and once extending from Vishakhapatnam in the north to Ramanathapuram in the south, has all but disappeared except for a few pockets around sacred groves. It is now reduced to less than 1% of its original area.

Since Auroville's inception, teams of green workers involved in the reforestation work of Auroville have been making trips to sacred groves to collect seeds of the native TDEF species. But a survey done by the Botanical Gardens two years ago has shown that sacred groves are rapidly shrinking in size. Encroachment is rampant. Fortunately with Auroville now having all the native TDEF species, seed collection happens within Auroville itself.

Fearlessly pursuing a dream

A profile of Adhi, manager of the Botanical Gardens' environmental education programme.

If there is a quality that can define Adhi, it could be 'fearlessness', for Adhi never hesitated in pursuing what he felt was the right thing to do. "Ever since I was a young kid I used to admire the Westerners planting trees around Aurodam canyon, across from my mother's house," says Adhi. "We boys would be foraging for wild fruit trees, and there was this one nava-pazham tree that we'd be under. And watching the Aurovilians, I felt like joining Auroville. I even expressed this wish to my mother, but she stopped me," he remembers. "And being a kid I couldn't protest."

"Auroville was always the dream. When I heard that Auroville had bought this plot of land and they were going to start a Botanical Gardens there, I was very excited because I saw this could be a way for me being connected to Auroville, and being a part of a project from the very beginning."

Adhi has been involved with the Auroville Botanical Gardens since the inception seven years ago, and now is a crucial element in the team. "I came in with little knowledge and skills, and over these seven years I have learnt much and taken up more and more responsibility," he says. "And the learning never stops!"

Now he looks after the Gardens' administration and accounts, coordinates volunteers, trains

and supervises workers, coordinates and facilitates the visits of school children and other visitors, and does the more hands-on work on the Gardens alongside Paul – working with seedlings in the nursery, and planting trees. "Recently, I've started to design and create dry landscapes both within and outside Auroville," he adds.

Adhi comes from the village of Edaiyanchavadi. He attended Udavi School. "But since it offered only up to 10th Standard, I moved to the government school on Koot Road. And what a contrast that was!" He smiles at the memory. But he achieved his high school diploma, and was ready for college. But fate would decide otherwise. "I had a place in a college in Cuddalore, but the bus fare of twenty rupees a day was just too expensive for my family. They told me to find another way to study, and take up a job instead." Adhi settled for a compromise. He signed up for a distance-learning programme offered by a nearby university, and simultaneously found work as a carpenter's assistant. With his skills in woodworking, Adhi was soon making more than anyone else in the family. "Within a year, I had my own team of carepenters."

"That's when I heard about the plans for the Auroville Botanical Gardens. And my old dream came back – to be involved with Auroville." Adhi immediately went to see Paul to ask him for a job.

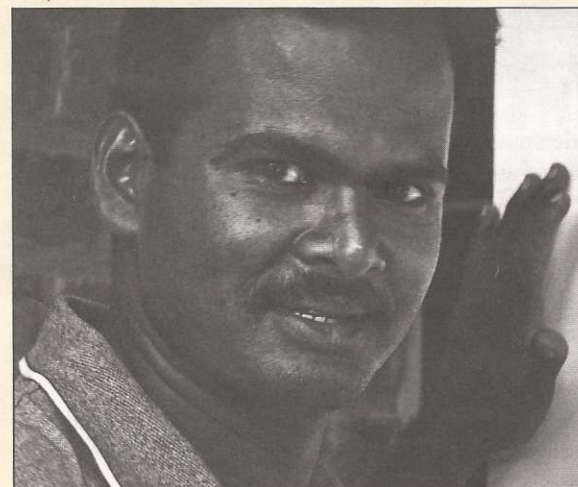
"It took much convincing, but Paul did hire me as a worker," says Adhi smiling widely.

The next few years were spent in helping Paul on the land with the planting of the Gardens. "I had no special knowledge of botany or ecology; just a love for trees and a belief in the dream of the Botanical Gardens. The learning happened as I worked."

In 2004, Adhi applied to become an Aurovilian, and was accepted. "About the same time, Paul offered me a space to build my house." With a team of his own, Adhi built a beautiful pucca tiled house that now stands amidst a personally landscaped garden.

How does he feel about losing out on formal education? "When people ask me if I am qualified, I tell them that I have learnt everything by doing. Of course I would've liked to have had a degree, but I sign-up for informal educational courses. For example, three years ago, I went to Bangalore and completed a certified village botanist course."

Recently, Adhi made a short trip to other botanical gardens along the east coast of India all the way up to the Sunderbans in West Bengal. "I wanted to visit these gardens to get ideas on how to



Adhi

develop the Auroville Botanical Gardens further," he says. "It was a fantastic experience meeting colleagues who are also passionate about the need for conservation and have dedicated their lives to Botanical gardens. It made me connect with the larger family."

"There is still a lot to be done in the Auroville Botanical Gardens," says Adhi. "I am just very happy to have been involved from the very beginning – in a place where one can see a transformation from nothing but a dream to a full reality."

Priya Sundaravalli and Manjot

Foodlink: Branding 'Auroville-grown'

Over the years, Foodlink has been responsible for marketing dry goods, such as rice and other local grains from Auroville farms. But now Foodlink has taken on the role of being the central collection and distribution service for all of Auroville's farm produce.

"It's thanks to Prosperity [Eds: Auroville's new distribution centre located by the Solar Kitchen], that we've finally up and running," says Marc of Foodlink, the central collection and distribution centre for the produce from Auroville's farms and forest communities. "They gave us space and offered to share infrastructure."

Foodlink is the latest addition to Auroville's services sector. It began to operate on July 1st. "No longer will the Auroville farmer have to sell his goods individually or the farms compete against each other. Now our farmers have to just concentrate on growing their crops and vegetables," explains Marc. "Everything else, we will handle."

Now Foodlink receives the daily harvest from Auroville's many farms, performs quality control and grades the items, and distributes them to the various consumers, shops and restaurants in Auroville.

Foodlink as a concept has been around since 1997, but it is only over the past two years that it has taken on new energy. This has much to do with Marc who joined Auroville in 2002. "When I came here, I was automatically drawn towards the food sector," he says. Perhaps this is natural

since Marc is a cook by training and was for years involved with the food business in his native Spain.

"To me, food sustainability is an issue which lies at the very heart of our health, our economy, and our local community," What he saw when he came to Auroville took him by surprise – Aurovilians buying from Puducherry, "when the farmers here were growing so many things organically!"

"The consumers were simply ignorant of what was being grown in Auroville. There was little marketing; and practically no brand image of 'Auroville grown'." Also the Auroville farmer was overworked and overstretched. They were so busy with the day-to-day activities – farming, harvesting, hopping on the bike, going to Pour Tous, making the bills, and later returning to pick up what was unsold. There was little time or the resources to get organized. And then often they had to compete with the pricing of the chemically-grown heavily-subsidized produce from outside."

Despite all this, Marc believes that what Auroville farmers have achieved so far is remarkable. And he offered his help. "Now with Foodlink, we hope to ensure that everything sold under this label meets certain stan-

dards of quality and production. We also will give a fair price."

The venture received encouragement from Auroville International which provided a seed grant for a branding and marketing exercise. "This helped tremendously," says Marc. In collaboration with the Farm Group, the Foodlink team worked to create and establish a brand awareness about 'Auroville grown' produce – that it is a healthier option, of superior quality, more sustainable of the environment, and with the lowest 'food miles', the distance a food travels to reach the consumer.

The Foodlink team comprises seven individuals; besides Marc, there is John from the Farm Group; Sumathi who does accounts; Lakshmi who packages the goods; Guna, who takes care of the delivery and marketing; and Tushita and Ajay, the two graphic designers. Currently the team is working on the label design to go with their dry goods packaging. "It will have details about which farm the item comes from, and whether they follow organic practices or not," says Marc. "There will also be instructions and recipes on the back so that consumers know how to make a *varagu tabbouleh* for example, or a *ragi gallette* or the sweet and delicious *samai rava kesari*!"

"Ultimately," says Marc, "Foodlink will be open to anyone who is growing food sustainably in Auroville." But this will take time. "Right now we are very careful to

make sure things are as they are described." The team makes regular visits to farms to see how the produce is being grown.

Currently 75% of the first quality produce that Foodlink receives goes to the Pour Tous shop at Aspiration where most Aurovilians buy their produce. The remainder is offered at Prosperity and to a few Auroville restaurants.

One of the challenges that Foodlink faces is competing with the lower prices of "chemically-grown" food that comes from Puducherry.

"The cost of organic produce is four to five times that of conventionally-grown produce," says Marc. "So the average Aurovillian just cannot afford it. But if Auroville can bear a percentage of the price at the time a product is sold, a system we call 'price-support', more consumers will be ready to buy Auroville-grown food, and farmers can have the security that what they grow will find a market. Eventually we can all move towards our ideal of being self-sufficient regarding food, as described by the Mother."

Priya Sundaravalli



What's on your plate?

According to Marc, the issues related to creating food awareness have wide ramifications. "The job does not end with branding and marketing, there is also the task of educating customers about what choices to make: both when they shop for produce, as well as when they order food at a restaurant. Auroville restaurants should offer healthy sustainable food options to their customers."

Some restaurants do seem to be paying attention to this message. The Visitor's Centre cafeteria for example, offers a 'healthy plate' on its lunch menu every day. Comprised of three dishes – a salad, a main course and a dessert – it is made with Auroville-grown produce, often organic, along with traditional local grains. "Now, we've also added a healthy plate option in the dinner menu," says Marc.

There are other initiatives simultaneously taking place in Auroville to help to educate people about the food choices they make. Homeopath Nandita Shah's 'Peas versus Pill' workshops, where participants learn techniques to change their eating as well as cooking habits, are offered several times a year. "To eat seasonal, organic, locally-grown vegan food is the best for everyone and for the planet," she says.

REFLECTIONS

Something to celebrate

I'm not exactly gung-ho about the 40th anniversary celebrations planned so far for next year. Not that I'm against celebrations, nor do I feel that Auroville has nothing to celebrate. It's just that I'm not sure we will be celebrating the right things.

Which raises the question, what really is going on in Auroville? Well, I'll stick my stupid neck out and say I think it's rather more than afforestation or village development or town planning, or any of the other wonderful things we put in our brochures. What I think is going on is a vastly complex process in which diverse individuals and cultures, in very different stages of development and with very different perspectives, collide, embrace, fracture and cross-fertilise as a 'softening up', a preparation, for some kind of change or transformation. And all this happens in a special field – call it Mother, the Divine, whatever you will – which exerts a constant pressure for change while somehow containing this highly-volatile reaction so that the Aurovilians do not blow themselves sky-high.

The sheer daring, the sublimity, of the Auroville experiment is often forgotten. Mother wanted no rules, no laws, no police, none of the props which are used to maintain order in conventional societies. The Aurovilians, while observing a communal discipline, were to be accorded the maximum freedom to discover their true centre and to make themselves the vessels of the new consciousness.

Now fast-forward to the Auroville of today. While there are many things to be proud of (as many of our articles testify), our economy, our style of living, our organization and decision-making process all seem to be the negation of the ideal. The lamentable level of our public communication and debate, the inequalities and the cultural tensions, the creeping materialism, the lack of recourse for those who have been mistreated, all these express our insecurities, our incoherence, our 'un-joined-upness'. As to the built environment, one has only to stroll round some of our communities and public spaces to see our lack of environmental, cultural and spatial sensitivity writ large.

The question is, does all this demonstrate the failure of the experiment, as was asserted recently by a columnist in an Indian newspaper? Does it represent a falling-off from the golden days of yore, as some long-term (possibly amnesiac) Aurovilians suggest? Or is it merely a stage in the journey?

Well – and I'll probably be certified for this – I believe it is part of the process. It's easy to

forget that while Auroville, chronologically, is entering middle age, in evolutionary terms it is still very young. We are, at best, clumsy adolescents, a generation in transition, suspended uneasily between our appetites and our ideals, struggling to shed the cultural and psychological baggage of centuries, if not millennia. Think how difficult it can be for even a loving couple to work through their blocks, their insecurities and lack of awareness, in order to reach a deeper level of understanding. Then consider what it takes for 1800 people from 40 different cultures to face in the same direction at the same time.

Looked at from this perspective, Auroville is pretty much what one would expect at this stage of our individual and communal development. In fact, if the prerequisite for transformation is bringing into light all our shadows, one could argue that Auroville is exactly as it should be.

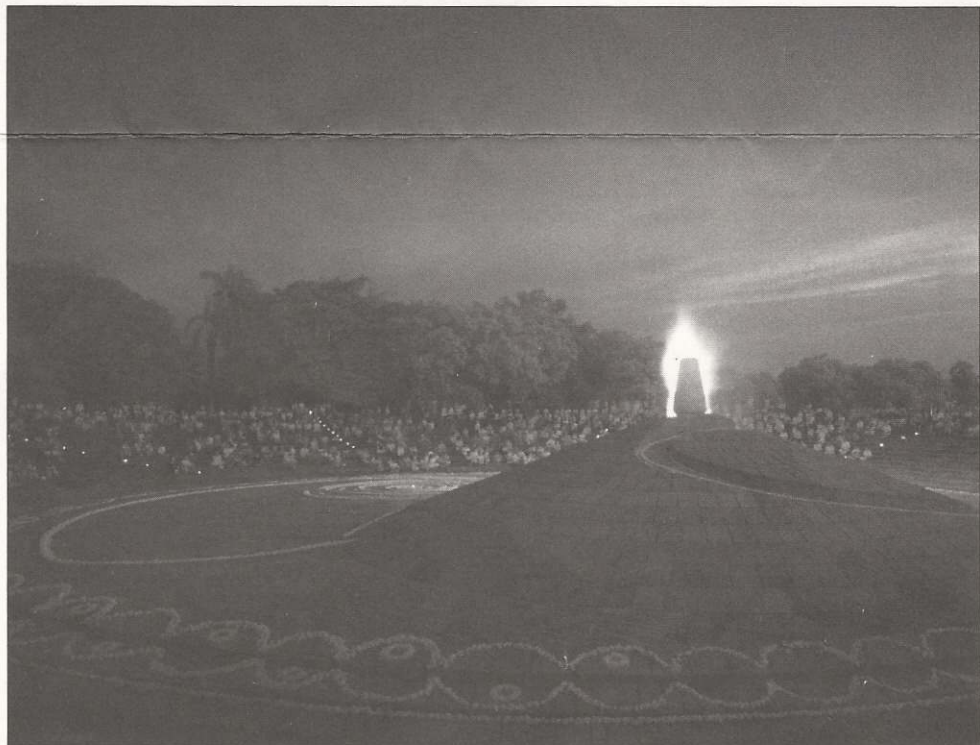
Yet, something is happening. Not in big letters, not under floodlights. But quietly, in the cracks between the PR paving, and perhaps as much a result of exhaustion as of insight, a realization is creeping in that the old habits – the knee-jerk reactions, the instant judgements, the jealousies and prejudices, the power trips, the blind kicking against authority – don't get us anywhere. That we need to choose for something else.

We're not talking supramental transformation here: in many ways, we are still struggling to establish the norms of a civilized society. But within, below, between our very ordinary lives, rippling out, perhaps, from that other space we call the Matrimandir chamber, another movement is slowly, invisibly, taking hold.

That 'l'autre chose' is far too subtle to be defined. It's not packagable, nor does it abide by mandates, guidelines or any other of our well-meaning attempts to put Auroville 'back on track'. Above all, it is not linear. Chaos today can be harmony tomorrow, just as the interior of Matrimandir, after all the disputes and failed experiments, stands suddenly revealed in its purity and essential coherence.

And this is what we should be celebrating, not just next year but constantly: the magic of Auroville, of a very fallible community which, almost in spite of itself, is touched by the wing of something else. And the unbelievable privilege of being part of this messy, heart-breaking, mind-numbing, finger-crushing, sublime experiment for humanity.

Alan



An infra-red photo of the bonfire on August 15th 2007.

Auroville still exists

I was somewhat amused by the note in last week's News and Notes that the Secretary was thinking of cancelling the 40th birthday celebration because 75 Aurovilians don't think there is anything to celebrate. And they are partially right – I don't see any supramentalised beings running around, but then I don't see many people nowadays, so they might be here. But for those of us who remember 1968 – and the great gnostic evolution of consciousness that year – there was a generation passing from childhood to adulthood with a new religion: "make love, not war." Intentional communities were very in vogue at that time – but few of the spiritual communities begun in 1968 still exist. Probably the biggest thing that happened to consciousness was that spirituality began to replace religion among many. The universal concept of follow your heart, find your inner truth suddenly emerged all over the western world. The traditions and teachers from Asia were suddenly there, opening doors to a concept quite different from the worship of God the Father; God within and eternal! In the midst of this enormous spiritual revolution were Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. When I met Mother in 1970 I found Her the most beautiful woman I had ever seen and the most human human, and I had never experienced anything nearly as wonderful as being in Her presence. Auroville was Her dream.

Perhaps Auroville today is not what She imagined it would be, but when I read Her words about structure and organisation I am certain that She believed in all possible worlds – and despite all our individual and collective shortcomings, Auroville exists. The Matrimandir exists. The miracle flowers are blooming – and though we undoubtedly fall far short of manifesting a true human unity, a youth that never ages, the city the Earth needs, something remains of those ideals in our lives here. Let us be grateful that Auroville has survived all the challenges of the past forty years – and hope we will have the strength to survive the challenges of the next forty years.

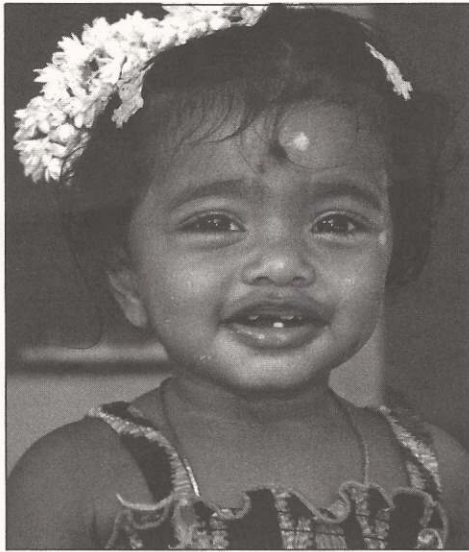
Jocelyn

Fresh start for the Auroville crèche

Pink, light-blue and light-green are the colours of Lilamayi crèche near Fertile Windmill community. Formerly this was known as Transition crèche, but since April it has been operating in a new set-up and under a new name. "Lilamayi means 'playful' in Sanskrit," explains coordinator Claudia. She did most of the painting and took charge of the much needed repair work of the buildings. This included dealing with a bee nest, a broken tap, a cut telephone line and a burst water pipe. To pay for all this, the school budget has gone into minus.

"Claudia really made the place beautiful," adds Marie Angèle, founder of the crèche. It was twenty years ago that Marie Angèle started a toddler group with the help of Shivaya; where she began teaching them without any formal experience. "I was a student myself. The only guideline I had was Sri Aurobindo and The Mother's teachings, which still provide the leading thread."

Seven years ago, Marie Angèle expanded the crèche to include a baby-group. "I real-



Hema at Lilamayi crèche

ized that many parents left their babies with their amma's when going to work. I felt this is not ideal."

PHOTO ROBERT

Today, the Lilamayi crèche counts five dedicated teachers and a coordinator, who take care of the 30 babies and toddlers. The very little ones are accompanied by a parent; the older children can do without a parental presence.

There is also a difference in the educational approach between the two groups. The babies are allowed to do what they want, according to their interest, development, and age, with facilities available for playing with water, sand, toys, or simple musical instruments. For the older group, the day begins with a circle for concentration in silence. "The children love it," says Marie Angèle. The activities for toddlers can vary from a splash in the pool to singing together.

Marie Angèle is tough on parents who accompany the babies, reminding them that the crèche is not the place for chit-chat. "Give only attention to the babies", is her credo. "When school is over, there is plenty of time for the parents to talk with each other," she says.

"It's important for the parents as well as the children to meet", adds Claudia for she knows from experience that parenting can be lonely in Auroville. "Living in an international community far from your home country, you don't have the support of grandparents or other relatives. And if you already have friends here, you eventually become boring for them. They are not interested to hear that you had a bad night because your baby did not sleep."

One of the mothers, Penny from Australia, recognises this. "It is so nice to meet other mothers, especially when you are new to Auroville". Long-term Auroville guest Jan from Germany comes twice a week to the baby group with his daughter Shanti who is fourteen months old. "Here Shanti can meet some other children, which gives my wife a chance to do something for herself".

But being an environmentalist Jan wonders at the lack of toys made from natural products. "I am also not so happy with the plastic toys," Marie Angèle replies, "but most items are given to us by parents, and our budget is very tight." Claudia adds that wooden toys are prone to be eaten by termites, especially since the crèche is open and exposed to the elements.

Robert

Towards integral education

An Auroville outreach high school embraces a new National curriculum that emphasises activity-based learning.



PHOTO COURTESY SELVARAJ

Learning by doing at the New Era Secondary School.

In 2005, India's national education board NCERT (National Council for Educational Research and Training), came up with a revolutionary educational reform titled the 'National Curriculum Framework 2005' or NCF. In the NCF system, the stress is upon 'activity-based learning' rather than upon the age-old model of rote memorization with fixed text books and syllabi.

After School, one of Auroville's earliest secondary schools that currently offers high-school education to teenagers from the surrounding areas, has embraced this new curriculum. Rechristening itself as

NESS or New Era Secondary School, the initiative is led by Rod Hemsell and Selvaraj, supported by a board of ten other Aurovilians.

NESS now has three grades - 9th, 10th and 11th - and serves about fifty students from 15 to 18. Most come from the New Creation Middle School which has also started to follow the NCF from grades 6 to 8.

In late July, the students of NESS had an Open House where residents of Auroville were invited to come and observe the work done over the past month. A good number of hands-on projects and student portfolios were on display.

NESS in its statement of purpose explains the reason for embracing this new model of education in its curriculum: "It has become a priority for us because an increasing number of students within Auroville and its surrounding villages are seeking higher education and new ways to participate in a rapidly changing society. This means that their years of primary and secondary schooling must prepare them to be 'enthusiastic learners' with inquiring minds and a well-organized awareness of themselves and the world around them. It also means that the schools which are still attached to the examination system, like most of the schools in rural areas, must reform their practices to meet new expectations."

While most primary and middle schools in Auroville apply the principles of activity-based learning and integral education in their curricula, this is the first time that an outreach high school in Auroville attempts to adapt integral education in accordance with the principles defined by The Mother, while enabling the student to secure a diploma that would allow entry into institutions of higher learning across India.

Hopefully this new initiative will also give an opportunity for the students from the greater area to experience the joy of learning while opening doors to higher education.

Priya Sundaravalli

Children's Book Fair

The annual Auroville Children's Book Fair is a much-anticipated event that draws both children and adults from the bioregion.

The Auroville Children's Book Fair 2007 was inaugurated by a little girl, Thirupavai, who celebrated her birthday with many other children on July 15th at Kalakendra. Nearly twenty-two publishers from Chennai, Madurai and Puducherry participated, providing more than 50,000 books on various subjects that would interest children, students, teachers and parents.



PHOTO COURTESY TAMIL HERITAGE CENTRE

Scene from the Children's Book Fair 2007

The attendance was overwhelming with about 2500 children and more than 800 adults turning up. The neighbouring villagers, people from Tindivanam, Villanur, Cuddalore, Chidambaram, and Puducherry came to the event. Besides the book exhibition, many children-oriented events took place simultaneously - activities like drawing, painting, paper-folding, group singing, story-telling, simple book publishing, and interacting with authors and poets.

There was also a photo exhibit on the Masi Magam festival [see Auroville Today #222], a display of Chola-style bronze art by the students of Bommaiarpalayam Metal Craft, and a unique collection of ancient coins from a numismatist from Kancheepuram.

A Young Reader's Circle of Auroville Region was inaugurated by Swami Om Bhavadharini of Chennai, to create interest in reading books other than text books among the children. Children from panchayat union schools and Government schools expressed their wish to have libraries in their schools. Most of them bought books for Rs.1.50 to Rs.5, mainly from the pool of books published by Sri Ramakrishna Mutt, Chennai. Many others books were also available at discounted prices.

This year a press meet organized before the opening of the book fair spread the word about the event and brought in many visitors.

Meenakshi and Varadharajan
Tamil Heritage Centre

NATURE

My animal friends

Witnessing the simple wonders of Auroville's natural environment.

A wave of deep encounters began two weeks ago with lots of noise and commotion under the Palmyra trees behind my home. A mongoose was quarrelling with a cobra, wrestling and biting, sporting and teasing till finally the cobra had had enough of it and made a quick escape into the termite hill.

Another morning, an unusual sound wakes me up. Looking down very quietly from my terrace, I observe a flock of five jackals strolling around, looking a little weary in this early hour of dawn, obviously hungry and searching for food. I wonder what they would actually find in our thin forest, and the next morning, the answer is revealed: a big hare nibbling away at

some fresh green in the underbrush and hopping about looking rather relaxed.

Then, later on the evening when I am preparing for the farewell for our young team leaving for the US, I see a young peacock in full regalia, very high up on the Vengai tree. It seemed like a blessing for the journey.

A few days later, walking on the new lands, a rather big bird flits across, landing on a nearby branch. It turns its head: a young owl with big round eyes, as if it is saying something...

Back in the house a few evenings later, there is a familiar heavy step in the brush: the monitor lizard has come up from the small canyon to pay his rather rare visit (twice or thrice a year). He freezes on the spot as soon as he hears me, and for a moment we both



Palm Civet or Toddy Cat

seem to hold our breaths together. Then as I slightly shift my position, he suddenly streaks away at what seems like lightning speed.

At sunset the cuckoo on the roof calls out to its mate about a kilometre

away. Tuning into the dialogue of the duo, I follow as they approach closer and closer till finally they land on neighboring trees and conclude their concerto in a grandiose duet: the pitch rising in sheer ecstasy. One morning

later, there is a much gentler cooing love play of a wild pigeon couple, indulging in their sweet calling till they meet on the same branch to rest contented side by side.

The other evening at last light the wind-chimes on the lower terrace are shaken rather wildly. Who's the intruder? I arrive just in time to catch a big civet cat giving me an innocent look before skilfully heaving itself over the granite pillar onto the tile roof. Matheo the house cat also appears alarmed by the sound.

Finally, like a poignant epilogue to this fable without words, a rare but dear companion makes a brief and fleeting appearance: the shikra. A native falcon, swift, courageous, stopping for a moment on a dry branch for an instant contemplation; a spark of light, the royal witness of the marvellous play of our animal nature.

Aurelio

The folk we leave behind

Caring for an aged parent back in our home country can be a difficult situation. Dianna asked some Aurovilians how they manage.

We all have parents, and as we get older, they get older too, and eventually need to be cared for. If we choose to live in Auroville and our parents are in Europe, Korea, USA, Iceland, etc, we leave them behind. Yet they have to be taken care of when they become incapable of looking after themselves. In the Indian tradition there is no problem of 'What to do with the old people'. The elderly come and live with the sons, usually the eldest, and are taken care of till their passing. For the westerners the situation is different. It is rare now for old people to live with their children. When they are unable to care for themselves they go (or are put), into a 'Residential Care Home', and then visited, often or occasionally. In England this is paid for usually by the sale of their home, and when the money is used up, the Social Services step in to provide.

My 94 year-old father stays in a 'Care Home' in my home town, Bristol in England. There are thirty over-nineties living there who are looked after by about thirty full and part-time staff; it is an intensive business. I go to see him for three months every year as I am his only living relative. When I am there, I visit him in the afternoons and play hymns on the piano, something that gives him great pleasure. My husband and I took the decision to come to Auroville when my father was 92. We were not sure if this was the right decision, but I figured he will probably live to be a hundred and I am now sixty eight – time was getting short and this seemed to be a good working compromise.

These are difficult decisions for many Aurovilians. Quite a few feel guilty if they put their parents in a 'Care Home' and leave for Auroville. Some feel angry and resentful when they are accused of selfishness for "abandoning" them. Siblings can particularly point fingers at you for "always running away" and leaving them with the responsibility. This can bring up a lot of old family dramas that you would often rather forget about.

Some Aurovilians have tried bringing their old parent here, with varying degrees of success. Ricardo's ninety two year-old mother was living with his brother's family in Argentina, but when he was diagnosed with cancer it was decided by the family that she would have to come and live with Ricardo in Auroville. Ricardo happens to live a kilometre down a narrow dirt path, the last bit of which is inaccessible by taxi, even precarious for a motor bike. This meant that his mother could rarely go out as she could not walk well. She did not speak a word of English and the amma who stayed with her while Ricardo was working, spoke no Spanish. Fortunately for everyone, a year later, the Argentinean brother made a miraculous recovery and the old lady returned to Argentina.

Shraddhavan and Judith are planning to bring their ninety four year-old mother, Winnie, to live with them in Auroville. Winnie is happy at the prospect as she has been visiting Auroville regularly every winter since 1974, and she feels she has many friends here. But because of her physical condition she will need air-conditioning and a lot of care and attention; and it will not be easy for any of them. Nevertheless, they feel

that this is the only way they can manage to provide Winnie with the help and support she needs.

It is a very difficult and often unsolvable situation. But does India not have old-age homes? As it quickly gets more westernized these facilities are beginning to appear, but do not offer a solution for the westerner.

One alternative is going back home for yearly visits. One Aurovilian woman describes her annual trip. "My old aunt lives in a typical suburb and is very much alone. A few friendly neighbours dutifully do her shopping and 'Home Helps' call in three times a week. But I am really the only person she has any contact with, so I try and go regularly. Because of the distance and expense it is no good visiting for a short period so I stay for six weeks, but this I find very difficult. She won't go out any more now and all we do is watch endless TV. At the end of it, I think I am going crazy; but I feel it is my duty, and if I didn't go, I would feel very bad."

What can be really distressing is when you travel thousands of kilometres and the old person does not recognize you as their memory is not good anymore. Or, they greet you with a grumble of how long it has been since you last came to see them. Then when the parent does pass away there is the need to go back for the funeral and perhaps take care of other things. Then there may be the additional agony that you weren't there with them at their end, but there is perhaps a kind of relief too that it is all over now. But the fact that you've lost a parent while you were away in Auroville still pains.

Dianna

CULTURE

Five Artists at the Cymroza gallery

The 'Unity in Diversity' exhibition features works of Auroville's newest five-artist collective.

At first sight the group of five artists showing together in September at the prestigious Cymroza gallery in Mumbai seem to have little in common. Nele from Germany, Anna-Maria from Italy, Agnus from Belgium and Hufreesh from India are the group's four women painters; Dutchman Henk, the lone male, is both sculptor and painter. What unites them is the fact that they all live and work in Auroville and that they have consciously decided to join forces.

The group is a year old. What started as a tentative exploration has now developed into a firm partnership where each feels not only inspired by the works of the others, but also responsible towards them. "For example, each of us feels duty-bound to come with new work every time we plan a new exhibition," says Agnus. Her new paintings are done on the patina-covered surfaces of aged steel boxes; they carry titles that could have been borrowed from books on spiritual literature such as 'Joy', 'Within', 'Aspire', 'Faith' and others.



The five-artist collective – from left to right: Hufreesh, Nele, Anna Maria, Henk, Agnus.

But this is no accident. "The basis of all our works is our aspiration to the Divine," explains Anna-Maria. "Art in Auroville is increasingly becoming spiritual. That's what we hope we will be able to communicate: that this art is produced in a place where the people search

for the essence. Just as you can get a window on a civilization by studying its artistic expressions, so people who see these works should get an inkling of what Auroville is truly about. And perhaps these artistic expressions could also serve as window to the viewer's own essence."

The works are as different as the personalities that created them. Henk's sculptures express pure geometries of form and invite the discovery of the properties of material substance; Hufreesh's works radiate an intense exuberance and light and give the impression of searching for an expression of cosmic harmony; Nele's creations are powerful in their colour densities and ask the viewer for a certain interiorization; Anna-Maria's intuitive paintings captures processes akin to fractals; while for Agnus, the stress is on expressing 'inward' material onto 'outward' material, and, in so doing, making these essential feelings more conscious. "If there is anything in common," says Henk, "is that all our work is abstract. We all know that the image is important, but what is behind the image is much more important. That's what we try to express."

While the group has not yet dared to create a truly collective work of art, cross-fertilization happens. Says Nele, "For me this is very strong. Earlier, I

wasn't paying close attention to the work of other Auroville artists but now that I've come to know these artists more personally, I have gained a deeper understanding of their work. This has helped me a lot in my art. For example, from Henk I learned order and clarity; his sculptures are perfect in their clarity. Hufreesh taught me about the air, the soul and the friendliness; Anna Maria helped me to better understand and appreciate her creations using my inner intuition. The fact that we came to know each other has changed my artistic views."

Of the five artists, three have experienced working in Auroville in fields other than art. "But somehow, we always drifted back to art," says Hufreesh. Their determination to make art their mainstay in Auroville is often challenged. "There is still a strong notion that people should be doing something 'useful' for Auroville, and it hasn't yet penetrated sufficiently that the artists contribute to Auroville as substantially as farmers or foresters or people in working groups or business executives." This notion, she hopes, is slowly changing.

The group of five still lacks a name. It will come, they all feel. Perhaps someone, on viewing their exhibition, will see a common denominator: 'quintessential' art?

Carel

PASSING

Gert Paschinger

Aurovilian Gert Paschinger, Austrian by birth, passed away in his sleep early on Sunday morning, August 26th, in his house in 'Ritam' in the north-western Greenbelt. He was 63. Gert had suffered from a heart problem for several years.

First and foremost a painter, Gert approached life and all he did with an artistic eye. It was in this way that he, and his wife Barbara, built up, landscaped, and cultivated the Ritam settlement from scratch with its gentle houses, park-like environment and harmoniously laid out flower, fruit and vegetable gardens and nursery. During the eleven years of his stay in Auroville, Gert was open to new-comer greenworkers, helping them finding their way with thoughtful advice and suggestions.

His quiet stature and way of living, eye for fine detail and depth of thought was characteristic and genuine.

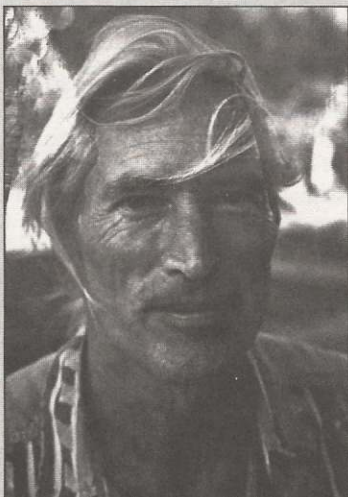


PHOTO COURTESY BARBARA

In brief

Uniting People: Jean Monnet

To mark the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome which established the European Economic Community and to recall the contribution to European unity made by the exceptional personality of Jean Monnet, an exhibition *Uniting People: Jean Monnet* was shown at the prestigious India International Centre in New Delhi in February, 2007. The same exhibition was held in August at the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture in Auroville. His Excellency Shri Mukut Mithi, Lt. Governor of Puducherry, inaugurated the exhibition.

GEN EDE

Auroville is running its first EDE (Eco-village Design Education) programme, sponsored by GEN, a federation of nearly 15,000 communities all over the world. Participants come from India, Thailand, Costa Rica, Holland, the USA, Portugal, and Senegal as well as Auroville. About 30 people from Auroville and abroad are presenting their experiences in the fields of worldview, social action, economics, and the environment.

Auroville Festival in Russia

A two-day Auroville festival took place near Moscow in Russia together with a 2-hour presentation at the Indian Embassy in Moscow. The festival was hosted by *Ethnomir*, whose head, Ruslan Bairamov, has been to Auroville several times. Twelve Aurovilians presented Auroville and the realities of the city today through films, lectures and interactive activities.

Sur les Sentiers Solaires

is the title of a book by Paul Vincent. In 'On the Solar Paths', he presents a glance at our antediluvian heritage and the history of Egypt, in particular of the Pharaoh, Akhenaton. Paul also focuses on the origins of the people of Israel, along with some details of India's history.

Spraying for disease control

A team of the Pure Water Project and the Auroville Language Lab with Margarita Correa have proposed a comprehensive disease control programme for prevention of mosquito-spread diseases in Auroville and Kuyilapalayam. It involves spraying all of Auroville with a special formulation of Efficient Micro-organisms. This same model of spraying has brought excellent results on tea plantations in West Bengal. In future this programme may extend to the nearby villages.

Auroville in Ethiopia

According to the Ethiopian calendar its 2000th year begins on September 11th 2007 and will be celebrated as the millennium celebrations for a full year. As this will coincide with the 40th anniversary of Auroville, an Ethiopian NGO named "Auroville International Africa Education Centre" has been established to present Auroville, and the vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother to the people of Africa. A gathering to represent Auroville is to be held in Addis Ababa. For more information contact, tekeste@auroville.org.in

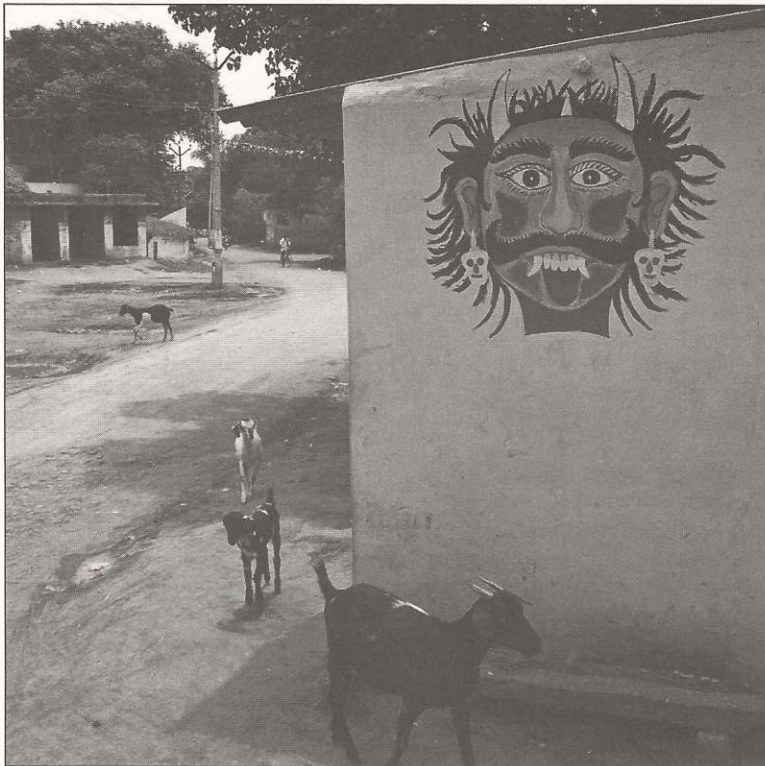
A village walkabout

Adhi and Mani show a group of foreigners around their village, and Tamarai, their new cultural and educational centre.

Dogs barked and little children came to gaze as thirty *vellakaras* walked around the village of Edaiyanchavadi guided by Adhi and Mani. These two boys are part of the Tamarai Learning and Cultural Centre and on their own initiative give day tours to visitors showing us their village way of life. It was fascinating to have details pointed out; how each house has a medicinal tree, how bad spirits are discouraged from entering the home by a stone hanging over the door; how a plant pot with red spots painted on it is stuck to a tree so that "the bad eye doesn't fall on the tree." At a little crossroad, Mani showed us a lovingly decorated statue of Ganesh placed on a wall to prevent accidents.

Mani tinkled a bell vigorously when he wanted his unruly group to listen to something particular as he guided us through the village. The bell rang insistently when he proudly showed us the new temple to Goddess Mariamma that is being built. There are already seven temples in the village, but for what sounded like very complicated reasons, a new one was necessary though it was taking a long time to build as funds had run out. *Puja* days fall on Tuesdays and Fridays, and on these days very loud music is played over the speakers at 4.30 a.m., "so that an early start can be made". In the month of *Margazhi*, the women and girls make kolams, beautifully decorated patterns outside their door using rice flour.

Mani told us Edaiyanchavadi is unique as everyone in that village belongs to the same caste. 'Edaiyan'



A face of a demon painted on the wall of a home in Edaiyanchavadi to ward off evil spirits.

means cattle-rearer, and 'chavadi', a place of rest – so it's a place of rest for cattle rearers! He took us to a very old stone building by the main road. "This is the beginning of our new library," he explained. "It is probably six hundred years old and we are very happy to be able to renovate it." Across the road something very interesting caught my eye. Up on the wall of a similarly old but derelict building was a plaque with very beautiful old Tamil writing. I

asked Mani what it said. "It is so ancient nobody can read it," he told me. "This is the building where the pilgrims used to rest for the night. A Canadian woman called Ruth said she would renovate it for us and make it into a health centre, but that was a few years ago."

Adhi told us that things are changing very fast in the village. "Fifteen years ago, when I was a boy, many villagers grew a lot of their own food, but now they buy all their food. Many still

own cashew topes, but in the last few years the price of cashew nuts has fallen dramatically and it has affected us. We hear that South Africa and China now export bigger, better and cheaper cashews. Farmers are selling their family lands at huge profits to Auroville then they go to live in the cities. People also go out to work. About 150 youths from this village now work in Kerala as they get much higher wages there. Then I know of one man who has even gone to work abroad. But not all change is bad as we now have our beautiful new Tamarai Centre which is doing wonderful work for our village."

Our group trooped back into the Centre for a meal the village ladies had prepared and we sat on the floor eating off banana leaves with our right hand. Even while we were eating Mani educated us, explaining the customs related to eating. "By eating with the fingers you feel the food; and your senses are stimulated. A fork has no feelings, does it?" and "The banana leaf has cleansing properties and when you have finished the meal, give it to the cows to eat." And "by sitting cross-legged on the floor you can easily tell when your stomach is full."

The Tamarai building is beautiful. It is a traditional Tamil house built around an open courtyard with little rooms around it. The roof is supported by a dozen magnificent wooden pillars and the place glows with love and lots of hard work. It is rented from a Puducherry business man, an Edaiyanchavadi native, who wants the house to be used for village activities. Village Action paid for the extensive renovation work and continues to help with funding for activities. Three Aurovilians also use the facility for village education and this also has become an excellent bridge between the two communities. A notice posted outside

gives an impressive list of activities – self-defence classes in karate, women's groups, play groups and after-school groups, theatre groups – the scope is remarkable. Once a month, Tamarai members take small groups of villagers around Auroville, and to the Matrimandir chamber. "This is probably the only time many villagers have been to Auroville," said Adhi. "It is only a kilometre down the road but is such another world. And these tours gives them an opportunity to visit and see for themselves."

Brigit, an Irish woman and one of the founders of the Tamarai told me of her plans. "The different activities are run by various teams, and this spreads the organizational load. The Youth Group has recently completed a 'dynamized water' project of which they are very proud. Every Thursday evening we have a meeting for workers and volunteers where we review what has happened in the week and discuss our future plans. We have a German girl coming next month to teach us how to make musical instruments."

"Tamarai is badly need volunteers for our many and varied activities, both village people and Aurovilians. And everyone will be made most welcome."

Dianna

LETTERS

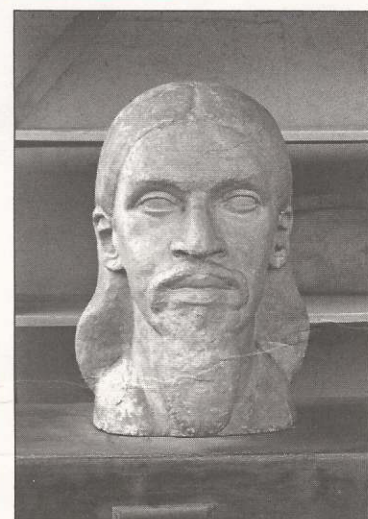


PHOTO COURTESY SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM

Dear Eds,

I noticed that you had a picture in your last issue of a bust of Sri Aurobindo, which was made by my mother Ruth Steiger, but was listed by you under 'Unknown artist'.

This bust was the first of three. It was finished while the Mother was still with us. So it was taken to her room for her to see. As her eyesight was failing, Mother asked Champaklal-ji what he thought of the resemblance. His reply was: if you put a label, you can recognise Sri Aurobindo. Everyone laughed.

The next bust was another trial of materials (mix of white cement and plaster of paris). And finally, Ruth made one out of wax with the idea of having a bronze made from it later. She worked on it for 30 years. And for the duration of that time it stood in the center hall of our house. She would reach the point where it was 'finished' over and over again. And over and over again Peter and I, and for that matter any guest passing through, would have to look at it and tell her what we thought. The photographs Ruth used were the young Sri Aurobindo. When it was finally finished, two bronzes were made from it. One is still at the house on the beach road. And the other one was sent to Germany, and is in the care of a devotee and friend.

Thank you,

Ange

A new meaning of beautiful

Experiencing the Women's Empowerment through Local Livelihood (WELL) project.



PHOTO COURTESY WELL PAPER

Working joyfully at the WELL paper company, a women's cooperative.

"Good morning! How are you?" I call when I step barefoot into the workshop every morning. "Good morning, Tayka!" the chorus of women's voices greets me. I then go and sit down; they try to offer me a straw mat and to turn on the fan which I always refuse. The defining interactions for the next three hours are the smiles that we constantly exchange.

My name is Tayka Hesselgrave. I am an American university undergraduate who came to Auroville on a study-abroad programme. I was assigned to WELL paper (Women's Empowerment through Local Livelihood) a project of the Auroville Village Action Trust.

Nineteen Tamil women are part of the WELL paper company; a small cooperative that recycles wastepaper and makes utilitarian products for sale. They come from three different villages to work together. To me they are the most beautiful women in the world.

Aurovilians Danny and Orly started this project. They taught two groups of women a variety of skills – making long paper rolls from newsprint, product development, lessons in spoken English, production management, yoga practice, health and hygiene, parenting classes, group discussion, and counselling. The company is

theirs and they make all decisions collectively. Now that the women have completed the training, the social programmes are fewer and the emphasis is more on running the company together. However, a woman from the Auroville Health Services still comes by every week to share information informally – like yesterday when she taught the women how to use their extra kitchen water to grow a home vegetable garden, how to compost waste, and the many uses for cow dung.

I have never met such a happy, playful, and light-hearted group of women who are in reality not all that care-free. Village life is a hard life. The women are always worried about how to afford their children's education, how to put together their daughters' dowries, how to care for their extended family, and how to get all they need to get done each day while sitting on the floor and bending over for hours. Some women even walk forty-five minutes each way just to come to work.

As we work, we talk and they teach me Tamil. I've learned a lot, but we still communicate in a mix of English, Tamil, hand gestures, actions, and drawings. They go about their business as usual, which makes me think I've done fairly well in fitting in. I just roll, and be present, listening and smiling all the while. Though I have only the most basic Tamil language skills, it is amazing how much I can pick up about their group dynamics from just watching who does what when, observing body language, and listening for the emotion in their words.

Our relationship deepened as they invited me to stay longer with them and join them for lunch, digging out of their own lunch pails or buying extra food to share. I began to bring photos of my family, and get cookies and cool drinks for snacking. My relationship to the group was finally cemented when I was invited to a wedding of a relative of one of the ladies. The experience was incredibly intimate and turned out so well.

At first I felt like an outsider but now I see myself just like a young child who doesn't quite understand all that's going on, but is very much loved and belongs.

The beauty, which I have found here, is the grace with which these women live despite everyday hardships. The beauty is in the friendship and sisterhood they have found in each other.

At the end of my stay, I spent time asking each of the women about the changes in their lives since they created the company; and my last question was what it is she most cherishes about the experience. The unanimous answer was "Being able to leave home and come to this loving group of women every day." And they are indeed full of love! Laughing, teasing, and singing everyday, they work hard to improve their lives, all the while living with an unshakable faith in god.

This is my new beauty.

Tayka

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