

# AUROVILLE TODAY

Number Eighty-Six March 1996

**"A** tree provides perhaps our most intimate contact with nature. A tree sits like an avatar, an embodiment of the immutable, far beyond the pains of man. There are specimens, like the Yaku sugi, a type of Japanese cedar, which in their single lives have spanned the entire history of civilised man. These specimens were already substantial trees when Mohenjo-Daro was in flower and Europe lived in caves.

Already in the living tree, the wood has died. Once it lived, and made the new ring of growth. Then the living parts of the cells died, leaving the cell walls as wood. When the whole tree dies, its usual fate is to rot, disintegrate, eventually to go back into soil.

We woodworkers have the audacity to shape timber from these noble trees. In a sense it is our Karma Yoga, the path of action we must take to lead to our union with the Divine. Each tree, each part of each tree, has its own particular destiny and its own special relationship to be fulfilled."

It was this understanding of trees and wood, this insight into the nature of things, that led George Nakashima, woodworker par excellence, to produce Altars for Peace to gift to each continent of the world. The idea to create altars (also more secularly referred to as tables) where people from all religions and faiths can gather together in prayer or silent meditation, came to him in a dream. And this dream found material expression in the richly grained, rare timber of two 300 year-old Eastern Black Walnut Trees.

**T**he trees were huge and extraordinary natural phenomena in the state of New York, something which, according to Nakashima, "occurs perhaps only once in the history of a nation." Their majesty called for a symbiosis of nature and man in the deepest spiritual sense, and Nakashima felt that "the only true destiny of these noble trees... is to be used in the full length and width." Out of these trees, he thus planned to fashion five Altars for Peace, each measuring approximately 3.6m by 3.6m, the largest objects ever to be produced in his woodwork unit.

The Altars, as with other woodwork pieces of Nakashima, display what has been termed an "organic naturalism". Each Altar consists

of two book-matched planks of approximately 7.5 cms thickness that fully express the texture, the natural shape and the free edges of the wood. The craftsmanship expresses Nakashima's philosophy that "the woodworker's responsibility is to the tree itself, which has been sacrificed to live again in the woodworker's hands."

The project for the Peace Altars was started in 1984, and the first Altar was dedicated in New York at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine on New Year's Eve of 1986 with a Concert for Peace conducted by Leonard Bernstein. Diplomats of many

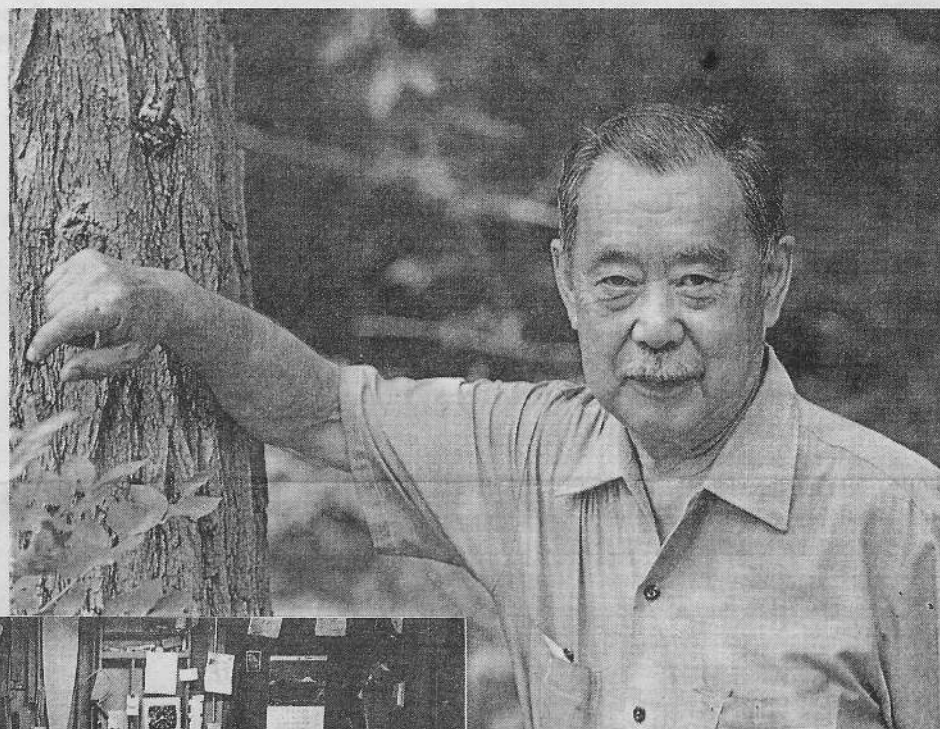
nations and representatives of many faiths from all over the world, attended this event. A second Peace Table, earmarked for Russia, was commemorated last year in the same cathedral during the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the United Nations (see AVT #84).

**T**he third Peace Table, intended for the continent of Asia, has now found a home in Auroville. An interesting feature of this table is that it contains a bullet which was obviously fired into the tree years ago. It was decided to keep this feature as a symbol of Mankind's assault upon nature. The

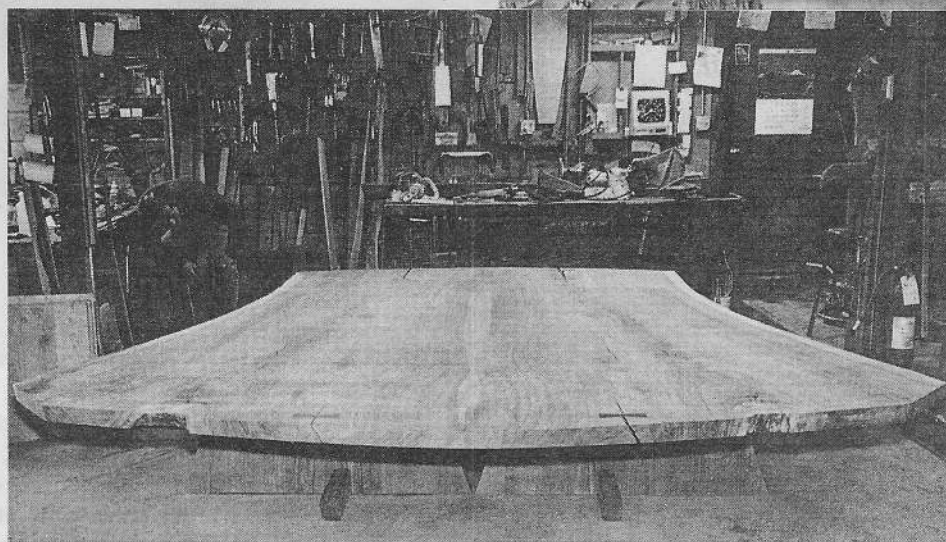
table was gifted to Auroville in a simple ceremony at the Centre for Indian Culture on the 29th of February, the Golden Day of Supramental Manifestation, with the hope that this Peace Table would be a living symbol of man's aspiration for peace: peace within oneself and between the peoples of India, Asia and the world. George Nakashima's dream for peace has found a place within the Dream of the Mother.

*Extracts taken from The Soul of a Tree: A Woodworker's Reflections by George Nakashima; Introduction by Dr. George Wald. Tokyo, Kodansha International Limited, 1981.*

## A DREAM WITHIN A DREAM



Above: George Nakashima, 1905 - 1990  
Left: A Peace Altar for Auroville



### George Nakashima: a Brief Biography

"My life is a long search across the tumbling scree on mountain slopes around the world to find small glowing points of truth."

How does one map the life of a great soul? For it is not necessarily the outer events of a person's life that speak of his greatness, but the undying spirit that dwells within, and now and then finds expression in matter.

So is it with George Nakashima.

All his achievements, all the titles and honours that have been heaped upon him, are but poor testaments to the merit of this artist and craftsman of wood. His genius lies in the simplicity of his furniture design, in the consciousness he imparts to the wood he carves, or perhaps in his act of revealing the consciousness that is hidden in the wood itself. And yet one can trace some of the lines that

give a clue to Nakashima's growth as "a true doer of the Divine works".

George Nakashima, a Japanese American of Samurai ancestry was born in 1905 in Washington State. He studied architecture at renowned American universities. Later travels took him to Europe where he participated in the Modernist movement in art and literature, and to Japan where he was brought into a deep and intimate contact with his own roots. While in Japan, he joined the firm of Antonin Raymond, a leading architect of the period.

And yet Nakashima yearned for something more, "something far beyond which I had to search for myself." Thus in 1937, when Raymond obtained the project to build Golconde, a multi-storied dormitory for the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, Nakashima volunteered to supervise the

design and construction of the building. Drawn to Sri Aurobindo's teachings, he soon felt that he was receiving more than he was able to give "the answer to all my searches, finally conferring meaning on my life" and he became a member of the Ashram. Of his life there, he says, "In a sense, I participated in life at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram during its golden age, when all the disciples were in close touch with both the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. It was, in a way, an ideal existence on earth, without a trace of rancour or harsh words, arguments, egotism, but with all in concert in search of a divine consciousness. The way of life in this haven was perhaps as close to heaven on earth as is possible."

However, in 1939, with the Second World War imminent, Nakashima felt the need to leave the security of the Ashram and venture

back into the world. He went back to USA via Japan and subsequently married Marion Okajima. Nakashima along with his wife and daughter were incarcerated in camps after the bombing of Pearl Harbour in 1941. Yet this seeming calamity was a blessing in disguise, for in those harsh conditions he met a traditionally-trained Japanese carpenter. The two became "each other's bosses," Nakashima says, the carpenter teaching about wood and the architect about design. Nakashima eventually settled in New Hope, Pennsylvania where he set up a woodwork unit and became one of the first modern woodworkers, producing exquisitely hand-crafted furnishings of enduring value and quality.

George Nakashima passed away in the summer of 1990. His legacy, bequeathed to his wife Marion and his two children Mira and Kevin, not only includes the continuation of his woodwork units, but also the fulfillment of his dream of Tables for Peace. Sri Aurobindo had aptly bestowed the name of Sundarananda, which in Sanskrit means "he who delights in beauty," on this master craftsman who once referred to his work as follows: "There was no other way for me but to go alone... seeking kinship with each piece of wood, eventually creating an inward mood for space, then bit by bit finding peace and joy in shaping timber into objects of utility, and perhaps when nature smiles, beauty."



*In this issue of 'Auroville Today' we take a look at business in Auroville. What is the purpose of business in Auroville? What makes someone take up business here? Is business in Auroville different from elsewhere? What are the challenges? And how far do Auroville business people feel supported by the community as a whole?*

*The answers to these questions bear not only upon the economic health of the community; they are crucial to our sense of why we are here, and what we are aspiring for.*

# AUROVILLE BUSINESSES

## Part of the problem ... or part of the solution?

### The global situation

These days, big business often gets a bad press. Everything, it seems, is laid at its door: the pollution of the environment, the squandering of scarce natural resources, the exploitation of minorities and the disempowered, the destabilization of the employment market, disinformation regarding product faults, price fixing, corruption and bribery, and the greed of the 'fat cats' at the top who cream off huge salaries and bonuses. And these concerns are intensified by the fact that the REALLY big boys—the multinational corporations, or MNC's—seem accountable to no one, capable of switching their funds, and even their operations, at almost a moment's notice from one country to another to avoid external controls. Indeed, the MNC's of today have been described as the 'shadow government of the world' because of the immense influence and resources they command.

These accusations are not without substance. The problem, however, is not so much that we are dealing with evil people as with a system which is dysfunctional, which rewards people for acting in ways which are inherently destructive of the environment, of others and, ultimately, of themselves.

For example? The philosophy of industrialism does not value nature or natural resources *per se*, but only insofar as they can be exploited for industrial production. The consequence is that we have spent the past 250 years or more depleting or polluting our natural capital—the resource systems upon which our very lives depend—in the name of industrial development. And this suicidal tendency is reinforced by the functioning of the global economic system, which sees nearly 1 trillion dollars daily washing around the money markets in pursuit of the biggest short-term profit. For this forces big corporations, in the struggle to remain attractive to investors, to seek out the cheapest labour force and utilize the minimum of costly environmental controls to retain a competitive edge in the market-place.

The conclusion, as Paul Hawken bluntly puts it in his book, 'The Ecology of Commerce', is that today's industrial societies are "inherently unsustainable" because "basically, the underlying principles of industrialism don't work".

What are the implications for those business people who don't want to perpetuate a system which promotes not only environmental destruction but also—through exploitative labour and extraction policies—social injustice? How to make commerce genuinely sustainable and socially just?

The task seems huge, but beginnings have been made in the business community itself. The insight, for example, that industry should try to imitate natural systems in their energy efficiency and lack of waste has resulted in widespread recycling, the use of safer, biodegradable materials and experiments in 'industrial symbiosis'—where the waste product of one process is used as the raw material for another. Some businesses now supplement their traditional balance sheets with audits detailing the effects of their activities on the environment, their workers and other affected people. Individual creativity in the workforce is fostered by 'quality circles', in-service training in lateral and systems thinking, and the dismantling of traditional hierarchies. And a new social consciousness among some business people is evidenced in the 'affirmative' employment of minorities, support of communities in which businesses are located, experiments in worker co-ownership, and schemes like the Indigenous Intellectual Property Rights agreement, pioneered by the Body Shop, which gives indigenous peoples the same rights to profit from their traditional knowledge as are reserved for multinational companies under the latest GATT agreement.

Interestingly, many businesses are discovering that such innovative practices are not only good for the conscience: in

societies where consumers are ecologically and socially conscious, they're also good for business.

### Business in Auroville

What has all this to do with business in Auroville? At first sight, very little. The vast majority of our businesses are small, both in manpower and turnover, and the raw materials used and the simple production methods generally involve the minimum of pollution. Indeed, by Indian standards, our businesses have much to be proud of. The working conditions, wages and benefits are good, and often there is a close relationship between the managers and the workers, particularly when they have built something up together over the years. The individual motivation for doing business in Auroville also differs from the norm elsewhere: Aurovilians

not only experiment with greater involvement of workers in decision-making and profit-sharing, but also involve themselves actively in local community building. A few Aurovilians have encouraged villagers to set up their own cooperatives, but it is hardly the norm, and the major decisions in most Auroville units—as far as one can tell—are made by Aurovilians without much consultation with the work force. This, of course, may change as the general level of education of the work force improves.

As to local community-building: the fact that some 4,000 villagers receive wages and training from Auroville clearly has an effect upon the local economy and life style. But quite a high proportion of this money seems to go into private consumption—mopeds, televisions etc.—rather than into projects which would benefit the villages as a whole. Some Auroville businesses have tried to remedy this by financing, for example, public toilets, creches and a new school in Kuilapalayam, but it appears that many Auroville business managers would prefer to pass on benefits directly to their workers rather than to something as amorphous as the village as a whole.

In this context, it's noticeable that almost no Auroville business unit is consciously producing anything which is of direct benefit to the local people—like organic pesticides or cheap, nutritious food—mainly, it seems, because business people in Auroville believe that it just 'wouldn't pay'. This raises again the question of whether we can afford to 'buck the system'. But how will we know if we don't try? And how can one put a value on the deepening respect and affection

which might accrue to Aurovilians from the local people through such an 'unbusinesslike' venture? Shouldn't Auroville, at the very least, be willing to subsidize one or two such experiments?

It's interesting to note, too, that many of the products of Auroville businesses are, in local terms, expensive up-market items. The high price tag is often a consequence of the pursuit of quality and the higher overheads that

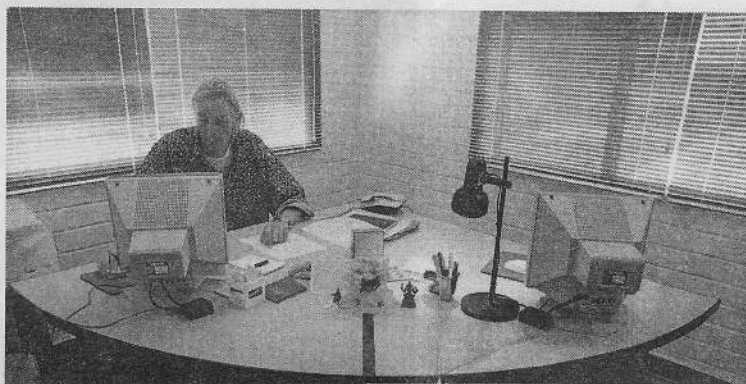
good working conditions occasion. But a number of Aurovilians, including one or two unit holders, have expressed concern not only that many Aurovilians cannot afford to buy their products, but also that many of Auroville's products are simply better versions of what already exists in the market; that they lack, in other words, a specifically Auroville 'imprint', something that speaks of the joy, aspiration and creativity that is Auroville.

All this seems, perhaps, unnecessarily hard upon Auroville managers who are doing the best they can for their workers and who, in the midst of tropical entropy, are trying above all to create quality products which communicate something of Auroville's vibration to the world outside. Clearly, the spirit and 'flavour' of business in Auroville is different from elsewhere.

At the same time, however, Auroville can learn something from the concerns and practices of those 'alternative' businesses in the West which are trying to introduce new values into the world of commerce. As Paul Hawken points out, "Business must yield to the longings of the human spirit. The most important contribution of the socially responsible business movement has little to do with recycling, or employing the homeless. Their gift to us is that they are leading by trying to do something, to risk, to take a chance, make a change."

Can Auroville businesses afford to do less?

Alan



Two faces of  
Auroville business.  
Above: Theo of  
Penta Services  
(software related)  
and the  
silk painting  
workshop  
of Auromode



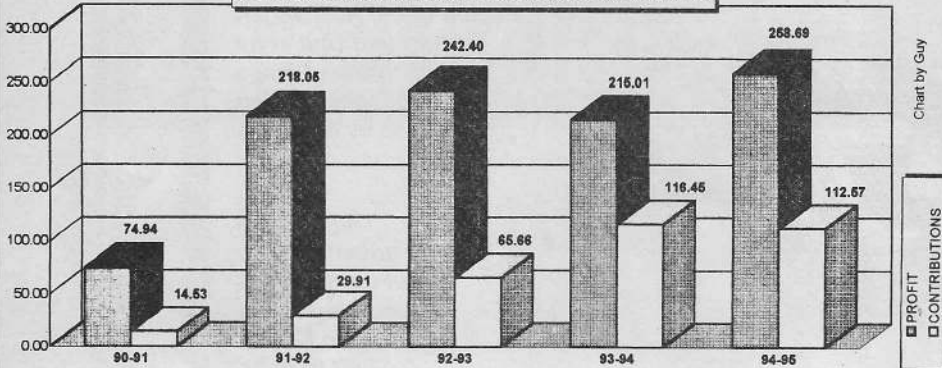
who manage businesses are often, primarily, artists attempting to create something of quality or beauty rather than hard-nosed business people for whom profits are everything. Moreover, Auroville businesses are not 'owned' by those who manage them but belong to Auroville, and this, along with Mother's statement that Auroville businesses are intended to assist the community as a whole in becoming self-sufficient, gives business in Auroville a totally different dimension.

Yet, inevitably, Auroville businesses are influenced by the larger Indian and global economic systems. A significant proportion of Auroville products, for example, are exported. In this way, not only are the units plugged firmly into that larger economic system, but they gain from it—just like any multinational—through reaping the benefits of cheap labour and low production costs. In some ways this comparison is simplistic and unfair—Auroville business managers are not cynical exploiters and a better profit margin often enables them to employ more workers under better conditions. Moreover, Aurovillian managers, unlike their counterparts in Western multinationals, do not derive much personal gain from this situation as a significant proportion of the profits of major Auroville businesses go towards the upkeep of the community. But the question remains: do we really want to generate money for Auroville through benefitting from a world economic system which, at root, is dysfunctional?

Again, some socially responsible businesses in the West



COMMERCIAL UNITS PROFIT CONTRIBUTIONS 1990 - 95



### Sri Aurobindo on business

*I may say, however, that I do not regard business as something evil or tainted, any more than it is so regarded in ancient spiritual India. ... Even if I myself had had the command to do business, as I had the command to do politics I would have done it without the least spiritual or moral compunction. All depends on the spirit in which a thing is done, the principles on which it is built and the use to which it is turned.*

Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself*, p. 129.

## One example:

# MAROMA

**M**aroma, started in 1977, is an Auroville production unit working towards perfection in matter, being one of the aspects of the yoga of Sri Aurobindo and Mother - says the leaflet inside a packet of Maroma incense. Maroma also happens to be one of Auroville's largest commercial units with a current annual turnover of approximately 30,000,000 Rupees (US \$ 900,000). Apart from producing incense, it also manufactures perfumed candles decorated with dried flowers, scented-flower pot-pourri, and an aromatherapy line. The quest for perfection in matter is reflected in many different ways in the unit—in the quality of its products, in the attractiveness of its packaging, in the meticulous order in the production area, in the cleanliness and pleasant atmosphere of the workers' area, and in the serenity of the small but beautiful garden that overlooks the ceo's office where we talk to Paul and Laura. They assumed responsibility for Maroma in 1984 and have nurtured its growth from a fledgling unit to an impressive commercial venture.

**Could you give some background about how Maroma started and how you and Laura came to be involved with it?**

Paul: "Encens d'Auroville" started under a thatched roof with the full support and goodwill of the entire community. Those were the times when we had problems with the Sri Aurobindo Society. There was a very strong flame and aspiration behind the unit. At that time I was only researching into perfumes, something which I still handle today, but other Aurovilians such as Claude Arpi and Patrice Marot looked after the production and administration.

Then in about 1980, after the working of the unit had more or less stabilised, I left it to try my hand at agriculture, but came back to it after about four years. Laura also joined me in this venture at the same time. And the others were happy to leave us the responsibility of the unit as they wanted to move out to do other things. We changed the name to Maroma, meaning "Fragrances from and for Mother."

The beginnings of Maroma were characterised by a general lack of money. Even the idea of making money was not our primary goal. We, like many others in businesses in Auroville, started a unit because we wanted to create a beautiful product; to express beauty in matter. We were pioneers in the world of Auroville business without any experience but we had no fear of the present, the future, or our lack of money.

Laura: When Paul and I started in 1984, I concentrated on marketing, trying to expand our export base while Paul managed the finances, developing among other things a system to save a percentage of each and every payment that came in. This policy, which we continue even today, has helped to finance the development of our unit, and has enabled us to contribute to Auroville regularly. It was slow and hard work but we both felt a very strong aspiration to make this unit come alive.

**Could you elaborate on the nature of your working relationship?**

Laura: Both of us have assumed different roles in the organisation, each in turn taking responsibility for the various managerial aspects of Maroma. But for Maroma to work well, for any new venture to succeed, both of us have to give our energy whole-heartedly.

Paul: Working closely with Laura for the last 12 years makes me realise that the real power of a woman is in manifesting ideas into

matter. It also has helped me to discover and manifest my feminine aspect. Our partnership has become strong and harmonious because of this.

**As people conducting business in Auroville, what is the ideal that you aspire for? What is the difference between doing business in Auroville as compared to elsewhere in the world?**

Paul: The biggest difference is that the business does not belong to us. At present, for instance, about 35 percent of our profits (this year about Rs 3,500,000 - US \$ 100,000) flow back into Auroville, most of it for the maintenance of Aurovilians and for village development. And then there is an aspiration for quality, a high standard of perfection of the product that one adheres to. Being in Auroville, this drive is very strong, stronger than anywhere else in the world perhaps. Our products have to be as perfect as we can imagine them. Our attitude is one of karma yoga, of aspiring and dedicating our work.

Laura: We are not working for the sake of profits; we are not working in order to make money. We are working only because we love our work. Money comes as a consequence of our work, it is not the motivation for our work.

Paul: The dedication to work is directly linked to the quality of our products. The profits are the consequence. The more profits we make, the more money we channel to Auroville as well as to village development.

**But are you doing anything different in conducting business in Auroville as compared to elsewhere? How do you respond to the perception of many people that Auroville businesses are profiting from cheap labour?**

Laura: We employ a lot of women from the surrounding villages who live in poor conditions. We do try to improve these conditions, but how to improve the conditions, how to inculcate better habits in them? These are very delicate matters. We sponsor projects such as building toilets in the Kuilapalayam

village, building and maintaining a crèche there, giving money for education. In co-ordination with the Health Centre we have organised short courses on hygiene for our workers. Among other things we have a nutrition and a small savings program. What is also important is that we provide our workers with a beautiful and clean working atmosphere. All these help them to see that life can be different. But the change in attitude has to come from them. When something touches them, it touches their lives, and then it has a snowballing effect. But we are not profiting from cheap labour any more than any other employer in Auroville.

**The major business units in Auroville are all geared towards the production of luxury items for export, unaffordable for Aurovilians with an average monthly maintenance of Rs 1,800 (US \$ 60). Should it not be a priority of business units to make Auroville sustainable by producing utilitarian goods that are needed here?**

Paul: We, as well as some other units, distribute some of our products for free at the Freestore. But that is of course only marginal



Paul and Laura, executives of Maroma

for Auroville's requirements. Auroville needs people to produce the basic necessities. Sustainability should be definitely achieved in agriculture. Many of the products we buy from elsewhere and consume are grown with the use of various pesticides. It is essential that Auroville increasingly produces its own food.

Laura: We are very unhappy about the average low level of the maintenances. The solution is complex. We feel that those Aurovilians who work full-time should get what they need. If their working places cannot afford to pay them what they require, Auroville as a whole should find a way to supplement their maintenances.

Paul: But also questions such as: "How is each one of us expressing ourselves in Auroville? How is each one contributing to Auroville?" should be asked. It is work, especially here in Auroville, that determines happiness or the quality of living. There are

people who, after years in Auroville, still lack a clear direction about the movement of their life, of what they want to do. If somebody, after some time, has not found his or her place in Auroville, then I think that there is something wrong and this reflects on the community. In economic terms, the person becomes a burden on the community. To give my own example, I have done a number of different things in Auroville but whatever I have done, be it baking bread, organising a library, agricultural experiments, running this unit, I have put myself fully into it.

The pioneering spirit which prevailed in Auroville in the early years seems to have disappeared in the last years; the sense of adventure seems to have gone from the people. People want to "settle down," to be assured of financial security. And this is ridiculous because if you don't have an inner security, you will never find security in terms of money.

**Do you feel then that there is a much larger potential for generating money in Auroville?**

Laura: Oh yes! We are continuously expanding but still we are forced to close the doors on many ways in which more money could come in.

Paul: Maroma could easily be developed to employ many more people. And if this is the potential of one Auroville unit, think about the potential of other units. But in order to expand to the dimensions that we are talking about, there needs to be a certain clarity and openness in the community.

Laura: As long as there is a hazy attitude towards money, as long as people fear it as something not clean, then you close your doors to money. The attitude should change, so that, increasingly, more money can flow into Auroville.

Paul: Commercial units are a channel for the flow of money. The attitude of dedication and hard work and surrender to the unknown allows the sense of possession of money to disappear while retaining the sense of responsibility towards money.

**Do you feel supported by the present external and internal organisational structure of Auroville?**

Paul: No. There is a strong tendency to want to control, and that type of desire to interfere comes from the Auroville Foundation as well as from a section of the community. It is absolutely wrong. Businesses that contribute to Auroville have to develop in freedom, as much as any other activity in Auroville.

We comply with the laws of the country but other constraints and controls above that should not be imposed, except regarding contributions to Auroville.

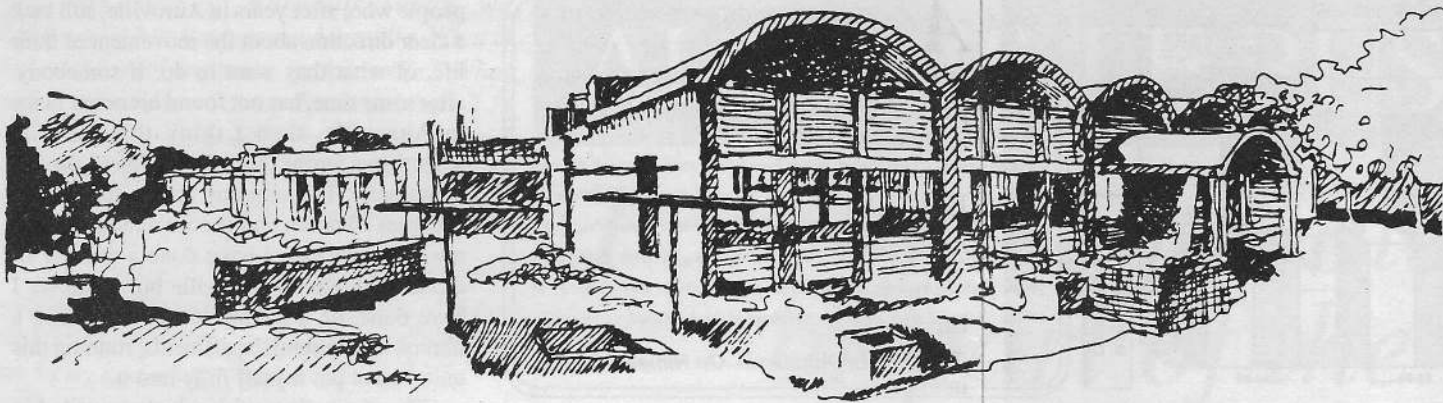
Laura: Even if the Auroville Foundation was functioning at its very best, which it is not, I believe that it is not the right thing for Auroville. What Auroville needs, and what I hope for, is that spiritually advanced people from Auroville, with the true consciousness, lead Auroville.

Paul: We need a very fluid but strong structure. I believe that some people are growing in their role as leaders. Others will come forward to fulfil the need of the moment. No external guru—except of course Sri Aurobindo and The Mother—is needed. We have to stand on our own feet, and do the work.

Carel and Bindu

More about business on page 6





Left:  
Sketch of the Aurosarjan  
Garment Unit at its  
present stage  
of construction  
Sketches by Anupama

Right:  
This is not a  
shirt advertisement  
but more or less  
a working scene  
in Kolam.  
Left to right:  
Darmesh, Raman,  
Anupama  
Photo by Andreas

# KOLAM: Design for the Divine

**K**olam calls itself a design unit. In the last two years this group has "spontaneously, without design" grown into what it is today: a team of nine people planning and defining the space between and around walls. The name of this new unit is perhaps a clue to how they want to work. Kolam is a Tamil word for the intricate patterns that are traditionally drawn in chalk by local women on the doorstep of their homes. The designs follow many seasonal, cultural and religious patterns. They are done as an offering to the earth, to the Divine, a design to take you beyond design. You often don't know where it starts or where it ends.

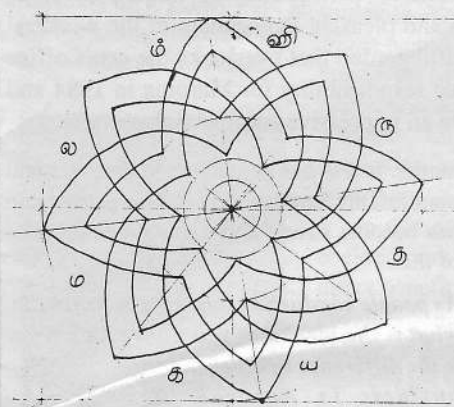
A thread that runs through Kolam begins with a wide-eyed youth, Raman, who worked with the first architects and designers in Auroville. Roger Anger, the French architect whom The Mother appointed to design Auroville, set up this town planning office in the community of Aspiration at the beginning of Auroville. That wide-eyed youth is still at it enthusiastically, but now Raman has some gray hair.

Meanwhile, Aurofuture has become "Auroville's Future", and architects have come and gone or set up their own units.

Development and Planning now each have their own committees. Kolam emerged by regrouping the old drafting tables and joining forces with the fresh blood of young people who had been trained in various architectural settings but dropped out of those places for lack of job satisfaction. Kindred spirits were discovered who couldn't find something to suit their hearts until Kolam jelled.

**D**armesh brings to the group his civil engineering background and the flourish of a calligrapher. Anupama has recently returned from Germany where she honed her architectural skills in professional and academic settings. With her considerable talents, she motivates Kolam toward learning and more creative expression. Andreas, her husband, is also a member of the team as a photo designer well-versed in computer graphics. The group is backed up by Aurovilians who are trained in drafting, model making and site supervision.

**K**olam has set up a construction unit called 'Vastu' to be able to ensure that their designs are built in the spirit in which they were conceived. Kolam's office space is located in the Bharat Nivas complex where they are or-



Kolam's kolam

ganizing the dismantling of the old ruins and the renovation of unusable structures.

## PERSPECTIVES FROM KOLAM

"Architecture like any other branch of design includes making experiments in order to find solutions that are more relevant to changing needs in a changing context. All good designers all over the world are also constantly experimenting.

But first of all we try to find solutions to specific needs for which we are approached, and don't seek to be different at all costs. We don't want to project ourselves under any trendy label like low-cost, ecological, environmental, alternative, appropriate, etc; nor do we have ready formulas like 'mud' or 'channels'. We let that emerge out of the requirement itself."

"In Auroville one constantly hears about working together. For us this is not just a topic of conversation, we actually like practising it. Working together has many advantages—the exchange forum atmosphere of open dialogue, also with designers from outside Auroville, keeps us from stagnation. And most important, we don't have to always wait till the house is built in order to see our mistakes. It helps to be surrounded by other minds."

"There is an acute housing problem. People are being encouraged to build in the city. But the existing lands are somehow locked up. Either they are being held by the early caretakers or reserved by the architects for building in their particular styles. We think this is too simplistic an understanding of achieving harmony. That still won't create a city atmosphere, but only several high-density villages in different styles. Are we not

## CURRENT PROJECTS:

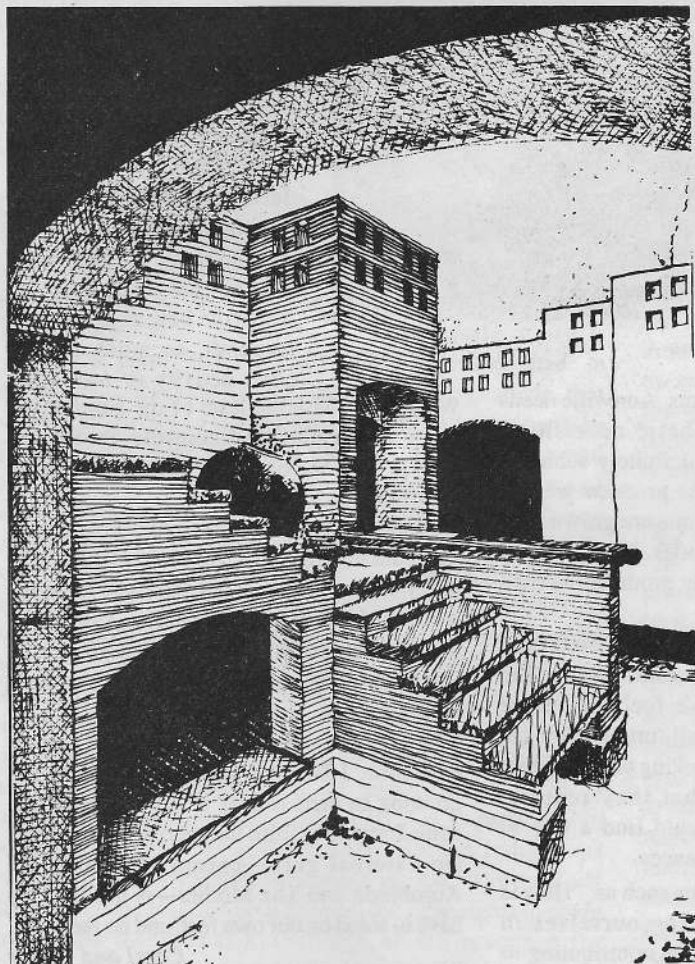
Aurosarjan Factory  
Mechanical Training Centre  
Food Processing Unit  
(Kopfu)  
Bharat Nivas Guest House  
Verite Hall  
Petite Ferme Housing  
Completion of  
Bharat Nivas Complex

## COMPLETED PROJECTS

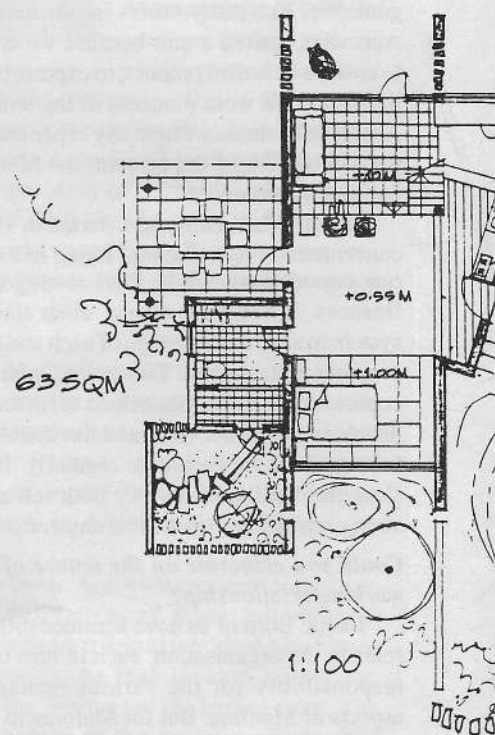
Mantra Pottery  
15 Houses (Auroville and  
Village)  
8 Schools (Village)  
Auromics Housing

interested in the broader sense of harmony?

**W**e have been approached by a group of people who would like to live in the city collectively but don't want the kind of housing that is being offered. We have also been asked to take up a leftover patch and to propose a project in our style. But we don't like this



The Kottakarai Organic Food Processing Unit (Kopfu) at its present stage of construction







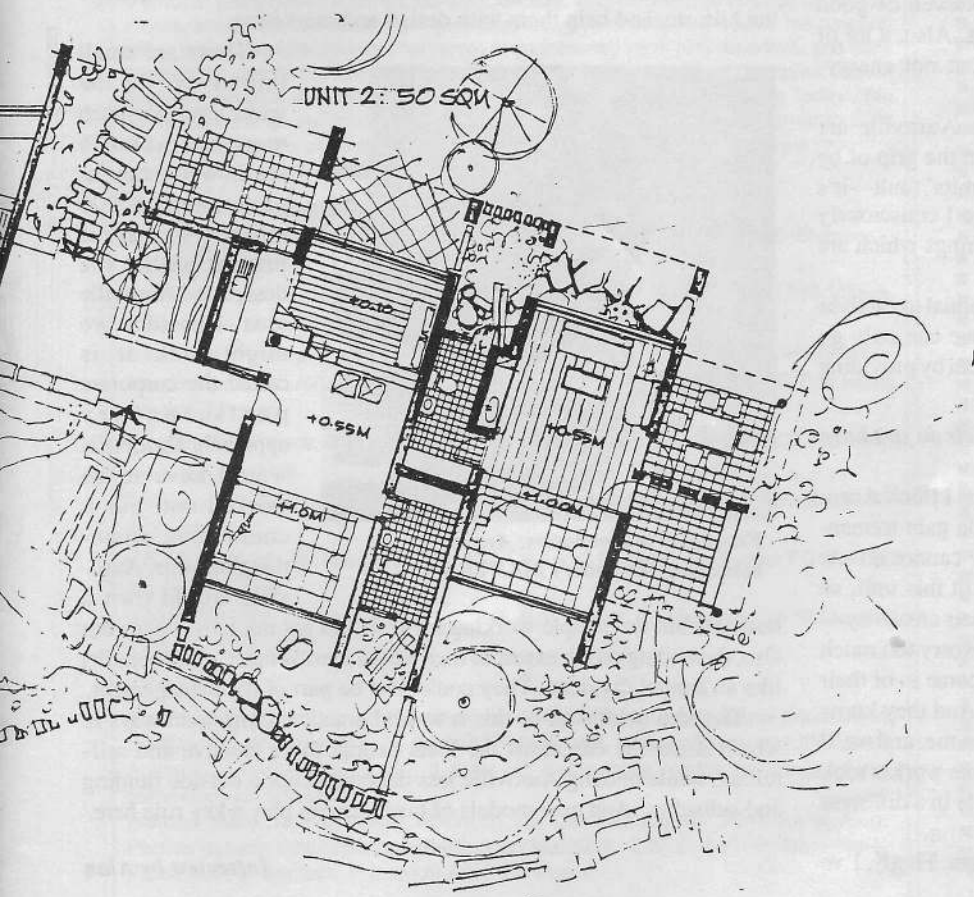
approach at all and we don't want to encourage the reserving of lands. We would prefer to have a set of guidelines and a layout worked out together which can then be offered to people who need housing."

"We keep using the word 'collective housing'. Actually what is being offered is more accurately described as 'identical housing' where people live on their own."

Sharing an amma, a wall, or a water system does not automatically make housing collective. What is the use if, after all the effort, our housing is collective but we are not?"

Bill

*Below: Sketch of the housing project in Petite Ferme*



**A** house is the most personal thing you can build. And the main problem of building houses is how to let the client express him/herself in the building." Helmut is speaking of his experience as an architect. The second phase of the Grace housing project is now being completed, and Helmut is thankful. "After two years of continuous construction here, I am very happy the project stops for five years." He pauses. Sighs. "Well, maybe a couple of common facilities could be added." He smiles. "We want to keep a green park in the middle. You see, it's hard to stop. Somewhere in my heart, I am always a developer," he says.

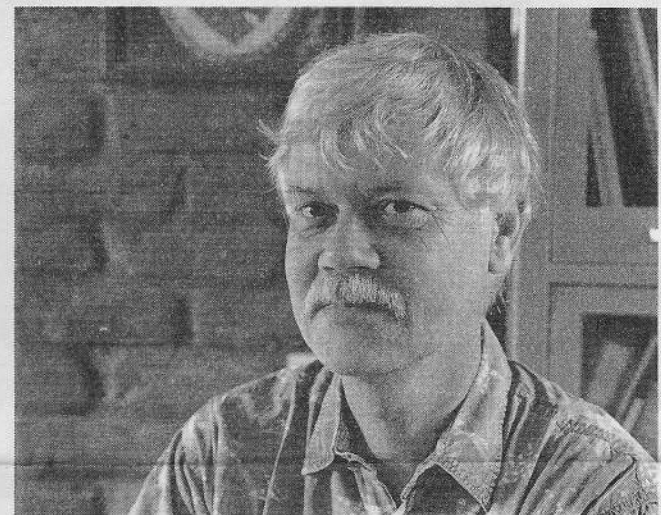
In Germany, in the sixties, he didn't feel happy with life, even though he was working in a big architect's office and the work was interesting. "The group I was working with was well organised and had incredible team spirit," Helmut remembers. "After working in Berlin for five years, I took a vacation. I had an interest in Tibetan art." This interest in Tibet led to a journey from Tibet to India, and in 1975 he came to Pondicherry. His first visit to the Ashram impressed him and he returned each year, until deciding to move to Auroville in 1979.

"I remember I was shown a field with one tall palmyra and a couple of young cashew trees. This is now Grace, but at that time there was no other vegetation, no water, no habitation, just an incredible landscape to walk through in the evening at dusk. We could see

**I**n the future, considering the increasing amount of housing to be provided in Auroville, I would like to concentrate on pre-financed projects. For the financing aspects, as well as the main contacts with the individual clients it needs a kind of 'promotor'—someone who acts as the 'client' for the architect, defining the objectives and coordinating everyone involved in an organised way. But of course this also has to be paid for, and might raise building costs even more. To allow more self-expression to the client, perhaps we will provide only the structure, exterior and services (sewage, water, electricity, telephone, roads), and leave the clients a free hand to finish their interiors themselves, if they like."

How does he describe his design? "I always want to provide simple, comfortable, usable accommodation with privacy and a lot

*Helmut:  
"A house  
is the most  
personal  
thing you  
can build."*



the sea from here. I had been to the Himalayas with Peter Holl and together we simply built a platform in a cashew tree (it's still there) and we slept there for three months while we built two keet huts and sank a well. Slowly we began to develop the land, put in the fencing, planted trees. We lived for ten years in keet huts, on the spot where Lucas' house is now. Then one house burned down and at that moment we said, 'Okay, now we have to do something.' Because after a time the roof starts to leak, and you want electricity. Then you have computers and these things have to be protected. In the beginning we didn't worry so much. A couple of times thieves came to steal our cooking pots. But it was a beautiful time—I even miss it."

**W**hat about the future? I ask Helmut about the city. "Do we stick to the idea of a city, or not?" he responds. "Many problems come up because there are still people who do not want development. But if the population continues to increase, of course we have to provide services. So we have to decide whether or not we are dedicated to Mother's idea of a city of 50,000. If we are, then the residential zone has to house a lot of people. There are still many who cannot accept that." Another big problem is that new people, fresh from the West, do not understand the problems of building here. "For example," Helmut says, "if there are plumbers, masons, carpenters, they need constant supervision—they are not trained; it's difficult to keep track of everyone. You can't be everywhere. And a big project with supervisors is even more complicated. But when there are problems, the clients come running to me—especially when I am living right here in the community. They don't realise it's not automatically the fault of the architect."

of ventilation. Row houses, for example, can allow greater density, with a lot of privacy and protection from noise, as well as cross-ventilation. At the same time, you can have a garden on both sides. Groups of row houses in green spaces seem to correspond to the stage of development we are in now in Auroville, giving the best use of the land available in the low density area of the residential zone. In a broader sense, one should aim at an architecture which doesn't reveal the effort of the designer. It should be timeless—fanciful houses do not age well. There are some buildings in Germany I can't look at anymore. I take another street to avoid confronting my youthful follies.

Actually, so far we have largely neglected the urban design aspect of Auroville. Many questions remain unanswered: 'How do I orient myself in a city? What do I see? What do I remember?' Many people cannot relate to the spiral galaxy design because there is a lack of orientation points. But, let's see. After all, building a city is a social process. And it will be built by the next generation. It grows through time and space."

**I**ask Helmut if he could think of a time when he stops working. "Work is important to me," he replies. "It's a means of finding some stability. I couldn't imagine being idle, but I am thinking about reducing the pressure a bit, having some free time to foster real inspiration."

Helmut laughs. "It's not an easy profession. It has consequences. After all, like Bertholdt Brecht said, 'You can kill a man with a house as with an axe.'"

Jill



## Talking about

# ... BUSINESS

### Why did you take up business in Auroville?

Karna: Many of my Tamil friends in Auroville wanted to do business but nobody gave them the chance to learn how to do it. So I decided I'd start a business from scratch as a kind of model and inspiration for them.



Karna of  
**DISCOVERY:**  
toys and  
handicrafts

Robi: We wanted a workshop in Auroville for research and maintenance work. But to build the workshop we had to take out a large loan from the bank, and the only way we could repay it, while providing a maintenance service for Aurovilians at cost price, was by selling products outside Auroville. We didn't get into business because we wanted to do business.

Suzanne: I'd always wanted to work in the silk-screen unit because this was the way I wanted to express myself. The business aspect is part of the package, but not the most important part.



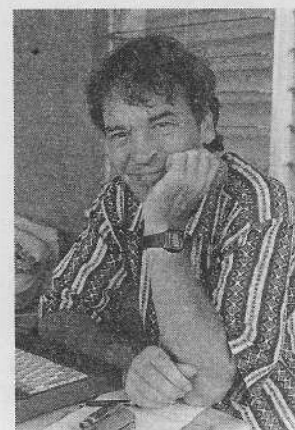
Suzanne of  
**LUMIÈRE:**  
silk-screen  
printing

Matthias: I'm not a businessman, I'm a technician, but I thought by creating Altecs I could use my skills to earn money for Auroville...but it hasn't turned out like that!

Kalyan: Doing business is part of my yoga and it stems from inner reasons and not from economic motives. And if I am able to make a significant contribution to Auroville, I would consider it as a Grace of the Divine.

### How does doing business in Auroville differ from elsewhere?

Karna: Doing business here is easier than outside because here you get a lot of help



Matthias of  
**ALTECS:**  
electronic  
components

from your friends, and making contacts is easier because so many people visit Auroville.

From the point of view of our workers, we expect much higher quality here than outside, and we also encourage them to be creative, to come up with their own ideas.

Robi: Generally, in Auroville the working conditions are better and the workload lighter than workers experience elsewhere: that's why workers come to us from Pondicherry even though they might earn more there. Also, we are not into mass-production. We try to create a balance between limited production runs and maintenance work for Aurovilians.

I'm not a businessman, so it's a great relief to me to feel that, by doing business in Auroville, it's not 'my' business' and they are not 'my' profits.



Kalyan of  
**AURO-  
MIRAYAN:**  
leather crafts



because, although we would like to earn money for Auroville, we're not driven by the individualistic spirit of free enterprise: we don't consider anything we create here as our private property. But the most important thing is the process, not the result, trying every moment to be more conscious of what we are doing: in other words, doing the yoga.

Kalyan: The work ethos in Auroville is definitely different from Pondicherry, where I recently moved from, or any other such industrialized city. I already feel that I want to do something more beautiful, to materialize more beautiful products because now I live in a community where the level of material perfection is very high.

### Should Auroville be producing not only items for export but also useful products for the local area?

Suzanne: We should produce the whole range.

Matthias: My first intention was not to produce for the local area. But as a result of developing certain products, I'm now preparing a project to put solar lights on the village streets and in village houses which don't have electricity. I feel that what's good for Auroville should ultimately be good for the region.

Left: Robi supervising lathe-work at  
**AUREKA**, the mechanical workshop

## New models for Auroville?

Angad manages 'Mantra', which is one of the largest potteries in Auroville. After receiving higher education in the West, he returned to India and rather than work for a foreign multinational, he took up pottery in Auroville because "I wanted to do something that was relevant to India".

### Do AV businesses represent a model which is relevant to India?

In some ways. India is a place where, if you make anything of excellent quality you can sell it, because India is starved of good products. And quality is one of Auroville's hallmarks. Also, a lot of our work is craft work which is labour-intensive but not energy-intensive. I think this is a great model.

In another sense, I think a lot of businesses in Auroville are furthering the economic colonialism which India is in the grip of by plugging into the export system. I don't think it's the units' fault—it's how the system works at present—but for some time I consciously didn't export because I felt India is starved of good things which are made here, and I wanted to do something about that.

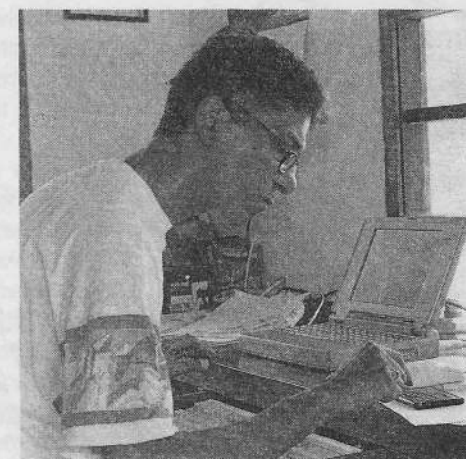
I think Auroville businesses have a tremendous potential to catalyse a new relationship with the people in our region if we can only go further than the attitude of "We're doing so much for them by providing employment".

### How could AV businesses go further? What new models do you have in mind?

One aspect is how managers relate to their workers. I think Auroville should develop ways which help the local people gain tremendously in self-respect, something which mere money cannot do. At the same time I feel that the workers do everything in this unit, so what can I do for them? One thing I do is encourage their creativity—I let them design products, for example. Then I never worry too much about punctuality, because I know some of them will come in of their own accord when important work has to be finished. And they know that if they have any kind of problem they can bring it to me, and we'll try to work it out. So it's not just a matter of money: one worker took a pay cut to join me because he knew I deal with people in a different way.

I'm also trying out two innovative schemes at present. Firstly, I've

introduced a profit-sharing scheme. None of my workers seems to be able to build up any savings for essentials, so each year, after all the usual bonuses and incentives have been paid, I calculate a dividend on the profits and it's given to one worker to enable them to rebuild their house. Secondly, to allow the workers more freedom to create and market their own products, and so to earn more, I'm experimenting with allowing them to run their own unit by using the Mantra workshop and facilities in the evenings. I'll make a nominal charge for the use of the kiln etc. and help them with design and marketing.



From clay to computers: Angad  
managing the pottery **MANTRA**

business but the people working for it would get not only wages but also, depending on the extent of their actual involvement, other benefits like an annual dividend. They could also be part of the management.

The idea behind all of this is to find practical, long-term ways in which Auroville can assist the local people to be creative and self-reliant, while making Auroville less dependent upon outside funding and subsidies. And new models of business can play a key role here.

These are small initiatives. On the wider level, it's much more important to see how we can include the 8,000 villagers who live at present within the designated Auroville area. One idea we might look at is called the corporate participatory approach. The details would have to be worked out, but it could look something like this: Auroville would own a

Interview by Alan



## CENTRE FOR FURTHER LEARNING

Out of the "ruins of the future"—a school construction site for the last twenty-five years which was referred to by the residents of nearby Aspiration as "les pots de yaourt" (the curd pots)—finally has arisen the Centre for Further Learning (CFL). These three round squat "pots" have been undergoing a transformation into something workable after serving as an undisturbed hostel for bats and rats and provoking a "what's that?" reaction from the tourists.

Well, now it is really something—shiny white and waxed. The grand opening on January 2<sup>nd</sup> could happen only after funding from two Auroville units supplemented an earlier grant from the Foundation for World Education, and especially because of the dedication of two full-time coordinators, Luc and Chali, both young Aurovilians.

What the CFL wants to offer has been a missing element in the light of the ideal of "unending education" mentioned in Auroville's Charter. Chali and Luc want it to function as a

resource centre offering a wide range of educational options. They start from the premise that Auroville possesses an incredible array of resources and the only thing standing in the way of a wonderful unending education is access to these resources. "Almost every Aurovilian has knowledge that could benefit other interested Aurovilians," they say, and drew up a list to prove it. The CFL would be the matchmaker between instructors, tutors, students, researchers, experimenters, and the rest. Students who think they want at some point to continue their education outside Auroville can also access existing syllabi like the British "O" and "A" level programmes, as well as the French Baccalaureate and the "Indian Open School" system. Luc and Chali anticipate that younger Aurovilians will require advice about organizing a comprehensive academic programme in consultation with their parents and advisors.

The Centre is meant for all ages and it is never too late to pick up another language or craft.

## ALL INDIA SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURAL NETWORK

Efforts to strengthen the ad hoc alliance of various organizations in India which promote sustainable agriculture continue through the ARISE (Agricultural Renewal in India for a Sustainable Environment) movement. In January '96, three representatives from Auroville went to Wardha (in central India) for a conference at Sevagram to follow-up the ARISE Workshop held in Auroville in April 95.

Representatives from the states of India as well as from Bangladesh and Sri Lanka met to report on their activities. Representatives from FAO and Bread for the World were present to assist in development projects. This meeting took place at the same spot where the first attempt to organize the organic farming movement in India occurred in 1984. It was noted that the increasing trend away from chemical agricultural is due to the costs of chemical inputs and the degradation of the land, rather than a growing awareness of the need for sustainable agricultural practices.

The effectiveness of such movements as ARISE in countering the prevailing global economic patterns of exploitation and environmental destruction cannot really be assessed. However, every attempt to save the earth for our children is a step to be supported, not just by concern but by action.

### Subscription rates

To cover our costs, the suggested new 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 56, It. Lira 61,000, D.Gl. 63, US \$ 38, UK £25. This includes the postage by airmail. 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. Subscribers will receive a reminder when their subscription is about to expire.

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

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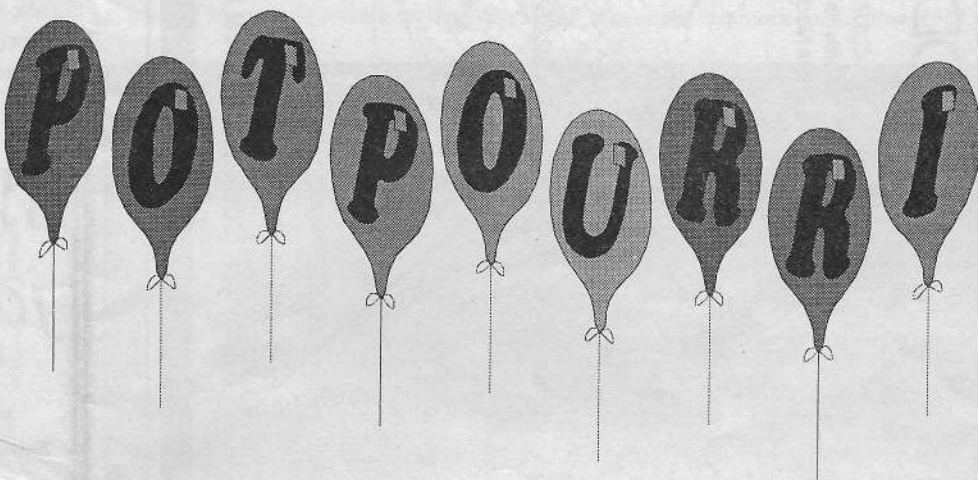
The national Miss India 1996 contest was preceded by a dance performance in which four Aurovilians participated. Srimoyee played the role of a goddess, Paulo was a clown, while Stefano and Wazo supplied the music. "Quite a funny atmosphere; we wondered what we were doing there," one of them remarked afterwards.

★★★

The Auroville dance group has once again performed "Crossroads", choreographed by Anu to music by Holger, in Bangalore. Another performance in New Delhi is planned for March.

★★★

All unfinished foundations near the Auroville secretariat are being demolished while an architect from New Delhi seeks a solution to integrate the unfinished Karnataka pavilion, the Centre for Indian Culture and the Library buildings into one harmonious whole. In a future phase, the buildings which now house the Auroville Secretariat and the Laboratory of Evolution will be torn down too.



★★★

Aurovilian starlets of all ages participated in silent roles in a French film about Pondicherry's history whose lead actor was Charles Aznavour. Determined not to be left behind, Otto (yes, the one from Vienna who now runs Pour Tous) and about twenty others will be waltzing (Viennese, no doubt) in another movie which is being filmed in Cochín.

★★★

And not to be outdone, Auroville Video is producing a series of documentary videos which include an introduction on Auroville, one on Matrimandir and a film for the Visitors Centre. The films are being directed by Giles, a film-maker from U.K., and Auroville International is partially helping to support the much needed introduction video on Auroville.

★★★

Last but not least, as regards films, a film-crew from Madras sought to recruit Giles (yes, our film-maker) to act as a policeman opposite Kamala Hasan, a famous Indian movie-star for a Tamil feature film. Giles declined but three other Aurovilians, including Roy from New Creation who is an ex-cop from U.K., signed up.

★★★

A warm night in late January at the Visitor's Centre was the setting for a high-quality vocal concert by Auroville artists. Eliane sang the lead with Veronique backing her up. Andy and Wazo were on guitars while Rolf handled the percussion. Matthew Littlewood, a young, talented musician from U.K., rounded out the sound on his saxophone.

★★★

The long awaited performance of

Beckett's "Endgame" has been postponed as Jackie broke his arm and isn't capable of pushing Otto around in a wheelchair. "Look for us on stage March 8 and 9", says Ellen, the director.

★★★

Pitanga Hall is currently displaying the costumes and photos of "Beyond Asleep and Awake", the children's opera performed last summer by the Auroville children's choir. Also in the making is a CD of the music.

★★★

The guest season, still in full swing at the moment of writing, has so far been a busy one. It is hard to say exactly how many visitors have passed through Auroville this season (as there are many guest-houses and guest-places, and many Aurovilians have relatives or friends staying in their houses) but an indication can be given by the number of temporary guest-accounts enabling guests to do their purchases at the Pour Tous store. According to a rough estimate, some 600 people deposited money in guest accounts at Pour Tous during the months of December and January.

On 28th January, 20 village youth clubs came together in Auroville to present displays about their villages and to propose small projects for village improvement. A panel of judges assessed the proposed projects on the basis of feasibility, the number of people who would benefit and planning for future maintenance. The top three projects, which will receive immediate funding, were a rainwater catchment project in Thuruvai, and drainage and water supply improvement projects in Irumbai and Apperumpattu.

The only disappointment on a day of presentations, songs, acting and good humour was that very few Aurovilians attended the event.

★★★

In mid-February an Italian puppet theatre, which has existed since 1947 and has a collection of 3000 puppets, enchanted many young and adult Aurovilians and hundreds of Tamil workers with a colourful multi-lingual (yes, the puppets even spoke in Tamil!) performance at Bharat Nivas.

★★★

According to the regular Entry Group report in the Auroville News, 13 adults and 4 children joined Auroville as newcomers during the month of January 1996. Six adults and 4 children were accepted as Aurovilians. One of Auroville's commercial units saw its bill of Rs 55,000 to a Bombay merchant paid in kind by one hundred and seventy kilos of strawberries. Too much to eat it all alone, said the executive who offered it for sale in a door to door action and at Pour Tous at the stiff price of Rs 320 (approx. US \$ 10) a kilo. Too much for the poor Aurovilians? No, greed overcame caution, and the special treat disappeared like snow under the sun for Rs 8 (US \$ 0.22) per strawberry.

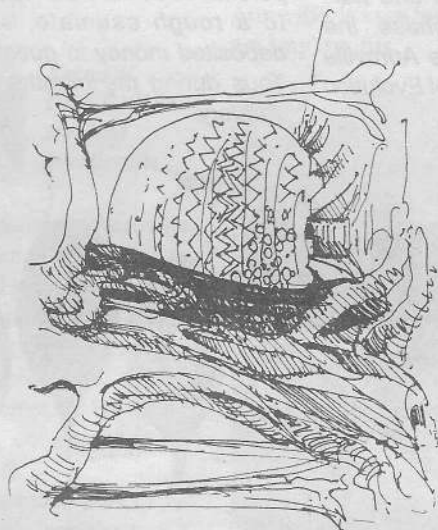
★★★



# AUROVILLE TODAY

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AUROVILLE

IN THIS ISSUE:

AUROVILLE BUSINESS; A NEW DESIGN UNIT; FOOD PROCESSING

March 1996  
Number Eighty-Six



*Clinging to the Divine*

They make sweet jam and tangy mar malade and juicy pickles and creamy peanut butter. They put them in jars, clean and round and stand them side by side on open racks—inside, where the floor is blue, a bright blue, and the walls are white and everything shines. You can breathe and laugh and smile inside. There is elbow room and sunlight. There is soap and water. The glass jars shine in the light and the women who work here are poised and solid and present.

Outside, in a small courtyard, they make tofu, and pickles are prepared in the sun. They dry the fruits in solar cookers and mix the preserves and boil them. They are careful to wear cotton saris instead of synthetic ones near the fire, so that they won't immediately go up in flames if there is an accident. This was Martina's idea. Martina and Martin and Paul and Samata and now Natalie manage different aspects of the Auroville Food Processing unit located in Bharat Nivas. They have eight ladies (ammas) from the village working with them.

Originally it was Martina, looking for "what needed to be done in Auroville", who was experiencing the difficult physical conditions of the Food Processing unit in Pour Tous and wanted to create an alternative. "We were working under a hot asbestos roof in primitive and impractical conditions, and it was often very tough." Martina looked for

eight now. For the time being, it's enough. The idea was not to make a big factory to make a lot of money. The idea was to give some village women pride in their work and a basic knowledge of cleanliness that they can take back to their family.

Several days later I spoke with Selvi, a Tamil woman who teaches at New Creation. She is Martin's wife and has observed the way things work. Selvi told me about some of the conflicts there have been. "One time, they resented having their salaries cut. They told me it was enough that they came from so far and work with fire, and that they shouldn't be penalized if they're a little slow." "I did cut their salary," responded Martina, "but not because they were slow, but because they made mistakes and spoiled things three times in a row. It was a mistake to cut their salary, I realised, because they got very upset. After that I started giving a production bonus and promised them that their basic salary (which is good) would never be cut again."

When you look at this place from outside, from a Western perspective for instance, it may not seem so radically innovative. In the West there are certain standards, especially when one works with food, and these standards are usually maintained and enforced by the Federal and State Departments of Health. But in India, while such standards may exist, they are not enforced and basic hygiene is a

## We're jammin'

From top left clockwise:  
Ramani, Martina, Alumela,  
Krishnaveni, Maller,  
Sumadi, Amsa, Valli



another location and took some loans to renovate a space in Bharat Nivas next to the kitchen. She persuaded one lady, Ramani, to join her. "It was a step we took together," Martina remembers.

Ramani lives in Kulapalayam and has three children. Before working in Bharat Nivas, Ramani had never used a bicycle. To come all the way from the village to her new work place, she had to learn to cycle.

"I make grape jam," Ramani tells me modestly. In reality, she helps to supervise the other ammas. They listen to her and trust her because she's been here the longest. "They rely on me," Ramani says. "It's true," Martina agrees. "If she's not here, the production goes down. She can keep many different things in her head—production numbers, and quantities of sugar, and weights and measures." When I ask Ramani about her previous work experience, she shakes her head. In fact, this is the only work she has ever done. "I like working in Martina's company," she says. "It's nice."

"They spend most of their waking hours here, so I tried to provide somethings," Martina adds. "When they come in they wash and change into their working saris. They have a shower, a full length mirror, soap and puttus {colourful appliques that women wear between their eyebrows}.

Martina had an idea, five years ago, to consciously create a place where people could work in a beautiful and clean environment. "Especially since we are handling food, it's important. You can see, there are no flies here." And in creating a clean place to work, she and the others have also created an atmosphere of caring about cleanliness, about orderliness. This attention to the environment is felt by everyone, and many people want to work here, but so far they have not expanded much. "I believe in keeping things small," Martina says. "We are

problem, because the laws are not followed, and even the rationale behind good hygiene habits is not understood. Often, if you visit workshops outside of Auroville, in the surrounding villages, small children are employed for 10 or 12 hours a day, making stone carvings, incense burners, and other items for export.

Martina has created a place where women feel empowered. They are conscious of the work and themselves in the work. Around this caring and concerned environment, a good working relationship between the village women and the Westerners has developed, because it is clear that everybody cares, everybody is concerned, everybody works. And they can work efficiently. "There is a continuous dialogue going on," Martina says. The women are able to come up with suggestions as well as complaints. Informal talks about hygiene, nutrition and topics related to women are held Saturday afternoons. The women ask me about good food for their children, about how to prevent worms and other diseases. When our loans are paid back I want to offer more and regular education during working hours. I like that they take what they learn back to the village, because I believe it is in everyone's interest. In this way, the village will improve and there won't be such a pressure to come to Auroville. This question is a complex one, of course. But I think there are so many things they can do to improve their life where they are, not abandoning the village, but transforming it. Making it a decent place to live."

Back at the Auroville Food Processing unit, it is 4:30 and the ladies are ready to leave now. The counter tops are cleaned, the floors washed, the jars stand neatly in a row. Martina smiles. "They have learned about order and hygiene, but I have learned about being grateful," she says.

Jill