

AUROVILLE TODAY

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Number Twelve

Where to Next?

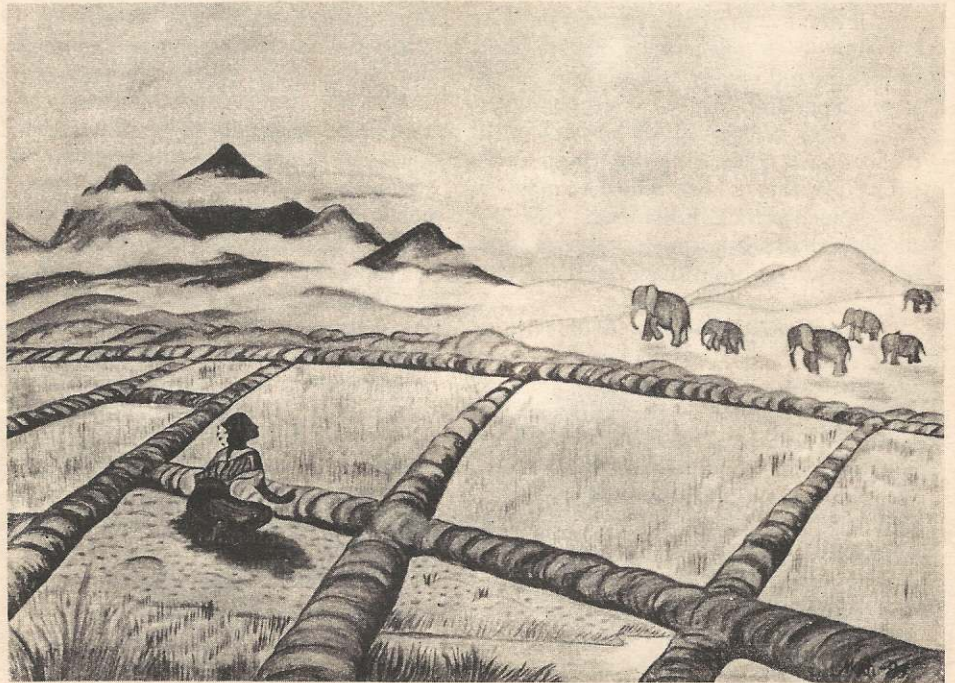
Auroville Today is one year old. What have we learned? Well, to the surprise of the pessimists who only gave us six months, we've learned that it is possible to produce a regular monthly newspaper in Auroville while retaining one's sanity—although we've been close to the edge on one or two occasions! And we've learned, too, of the extent of that need for information and contact that exists in the larger Auroville that stretches from Ontario to Adelaide.

As to our success in providing that 'window' on Auroville that our first editorial so breezily promised... Well, it's been much more difficult than any of us imagined to sense and interpret the subtle pulse of this place, where so much of what is important is invisible, or eludes straightforward presentation. And it's made doubly difficult by the fact that we are not detached observers but are participants in the process, caught up in its eddies and whirlpools, only occasionally managing to catch a foothold or to clamber dripping onto a rock to glimpse a larger view. In this sense at least, *Auroville Today* is Auroville today!

In trying to open that window on Auroville, we've opened windows on ourselves. We've learned that Auroville is like a vibrant web, and that to touch one point is often to touch many others. We learned, with some dismay, that even seemingly simple topics have many dimensions and implications, and we've understood the need for sensitivity and balance when dealing with them. And time and again, when confronted by the diversity of opinions and expression here, we've found ourselves reaching back to the source, to the words of Sri Aurobindo and Mother as a point of orientation and illumination. In this sense, in our attempt both to present the immediate facts of our lives and to keep in front of us our ideal, *Auroville Today* has embodied one of the fundamental creative tensions of this community—the tension between pragmatism and idealism, between the demands of the present and the call of the dream.

Auroville Today has survived the early storms, but if we are not to fall into a predictable groove, or get lost in a hall of mirrors where we meet no-one but ourselves, we have to move on. But where to?

Auroville itself faces the same question. For Auroville, too, has achieved a certain material stability and stands at a crossroads. There is a sense of a phase completed, of the beginnings of a shift, but not a clear view of the way ahead. It's a time, perhaps, to admit that we don't know the answers, and to be willing to explore, to make fools of ourselves, to scuff our knees and bang our heads as we keep pressing onwards. As Auroville takes this journey, *Auroville Today*, in addition to continuing to communicate the details of our daily existence, must participate in that process by encouraging and reporting the stammerings and discoveries, the tentative beginnings and sudden strides through the fog. We must try to explore as well as describe while Auroville, like the world, learns to dismantle its walls and step into the unknown.



Painting by Marti

Where To Next!

— An extract from Mother's Agenda —

Mother reads a disciple's notation of comments she made about her conception of Auroville.

- Auroville will be a self-supporting township.
- All who live there will participate in its life and development.
- This participation may be passive or active.
- There will be no taxes as such but each will contribute to the collective welfare in work, kind or money.
- Sections like industries which participate actively will contribute part of their income towards the development of the township. Or if they produce something (like foodstuffs) useful for the citizens, they will contribute in kind to the township, which is responsible for feeding its citizens.
- No rules or laws are being framed. Things will get formulated as the underlying truth of the township emerges and takes shape progressively. We do not anticipate."

I thought I had said more than that because I said a good deal about it, inwardly—on the organization, the food, etc. We are going to make experiments. (. . .)

And people don't pay for their food, but they should offer their work or their produce: those who have fields, for example, should give their products; or one gives one's labour in exchange for food.

That in itself eliminates much of the internal exchange of money. And for everything we would find things like this. Basically, it should be a city for study, for study and research into a way of life which is both simplified and in which the higher qualities will have more time to develop.

It is only a small beginning.

Mother goes through the text sentence by sentence.

"Auroville will be a self-supporting township."

I want to insist on the fact that it will be an experiment, it is for making experiments—experiments, research, study. Auroville will be a city that will try to be, or will tend to become, or attempt to be "self-supporting", that is to say...

Autonomous?

"Autonomous is understood to mean some kind of independence which breaks off relations with other, and that is not what I mean.

For example, those who produce food, like Aurofood—of course, when we are 50,000 it will be difficult to provide for all the needs, but for the moment we are only a few thousand at most—well, a factory always produces far too much, so it will sell outside and receive money. Aurofood for example wants to have a special relationship with the workers—not at all the old system, something which would be an improvement on the communist system, a more balanced organization than sovietism, that is, something which does not err too much on one side at the expense of the other.

There is one thing I wanted to say: the participation in the well-being and life of the town as a whole is not something calculated on an individual basis; that is, this individual should give so much, it is not like that. It is calculated according to the means, the activity, the capacity for production; it is not the democratic idea which cuts everything up into equal pieces,

Photographs of paintings in this issue are from the Exhibition of Auroville Artists held in Madras (December 4-7)

which is an absurd machinery. It is calculated according to one's means: one who has much gives much, one who has little gives little; one who is strong works hard, one who is not strong does something else. You see, it is something truer, deeper. That is why I make no attempt to explain now, because people will start to make all kinds of complaints. All this must come about automatically, so to speak, with the growth of the city, in the true spirit. That is why this note is extremely concise.

For example, this sentence:

"All who live there will participate in its life and development."

All who live there will participate in its life and development according to their capacities and means, not mechanically — so much per unit. That's it, it must be something living and true, not a mechanical thing; and according to each one's capacities: that is, one who has material means, such as those provided by a factory, should give in proportion to its production, not so much per individual, per head.

"The participation may be passive or active."

I do not understand what 'passive' means; I said it in French and it has been put into English. What could that mean, 'passive'?... It would be something more like planes or different levels of consciousness.

You meant that those who are wise, who work within, do not need to...

Yes, that's it. Those who have a higher knowledge do not need to work with their hands, that is what I meant.

"There will be no taxes as such, but each one will contribute to the collective welfare in work, kind or money."

So that is clear: there will be no taxes, but each one will have to contribute to the collective welfare by his work, in kind or in money. Those who have nothing but money will give money. But to tell the truth, 'work' can be inner work — but one cannot say that, because people are not honest enough. The work can be an occult, completely inner work; but for that, it must be absolutely sincere and true, and with the capacity for it: no pretension. But not necessarily a physical work.

"Sections like industries which participate actively will contribute part of their income towards the development of the township. Or if they produce something (like foodstuffs) useful for the citizens, they will contribute in kind to the township, which is responsible for feeding its citizens."

This is what we were just saying. The

industries will participate actively, they will contribute. If these industries produce articles which are not constantly needed and therefore in amounts or quantities that are too great to be used within the city but which will sell outside, they, of course, should participate with money. And I give food as an example; those who produce food will give what they produce to the town — in proportion to what they produce, of course — and the town is responsible for feeding everyone. That means that people will not need to buy food with money; but it must be earned.

It is a sort of adaptation of the communist system, but not in a spirit of levelling; according to the capacity, the position — not the psychological or intellectual, but the inner position of each one.

What is true is that materially every human being has the right — but it is not a 'right'... The organization should be such, should be so arranged, that the material needs of everyone are assured, not according to ideas of rights and equality, but on the basis of the minimum needs. And once that is established, each one should be free to organize his life according to — not according to his financial means, but his inner capacities.

"No rules or laws are being framed. Things will get formulated as the underlying truth of the township emerges and takes shape progressively. We do not anticipate."

What I mean is that usually — always so far, and now more and more — men lay down mental rules according to their conceptions and ideals, and then they apply them (*Mother brings down her fist to show the world in the grip of mind*), and that is absolutely false, it is arbitrary, unreal — and the result is that things revolt or wither and disappear... It is the experience of life itself that should slowly elaborate rules which are as flexible and wide as possible, to be always progressive. Nothing should be fixed.

That is the great error of governments; they make a framework and say, "There you are, we have set this up and now we must live by it", and so of course they crush life and prevent it from progressing. Life itself must develop more and more in a progression towards Light, Knowledge, Power, little by little establishing rules that are as general as possible, so that they can be extremely flexible and change with the need — and change as quickly as the needs and habits do.

(Silence)

The problem finally comes down to this: to replace the mental government of the intelligence by the government of a spiritualized consciousness.

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The House of Mother's Agenda

After being closed for a few months due to the departure of its founder members, 'Omaha' has reopened under its original name, 'The House of Mother's Agenda'. And 'house' seems to capture the atmosphere of the place. For, nestling behind a fence of Bougainvillea opposite the State Bank of India in Kulapalayam, it provides a space that is calm, clear and, above all, welcoming. In 'The House of Mother's Agenda' everybody has the opportunity to get to know better the work, the 'action', of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Here are their books. Here are tapes of Mother's Agenda. Here are the works of Satprem, which have introduced many people to Sri Aurobindo and Mother. Here are articles linking Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's transformational work to breakthroughs in modern science. Here is a still point in a bustling world, a chance to return to the source.

The House of Mother's Agenda is open daily. In addition, certain special activities have started. On Wednesday evenings, for example, there are open meetings at which all are welcome to talk about and explore the Agenda. And on Thursday evenings, some of the youth of Auroville meet with older Aurovilians to learn more about Sri Aurobindo and Mother. These are special occasions. For the thirst of the young people to know more calls upon other Aurovilians to open themselves, and to share their experience and understanding of the deeper dimension of Auroville. It is, perhaps, the beginning of a new effort of connectedness, of being together. The House of Mother's Agenda provides another opportunity for us to come together to nurture that fragile seed that we all want to grow. (30 December, 1967)

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Painting by Ireneo

THE AUROVILLE ECONOMY: TOWARDS THE ELIMINATION OF MONEY EXCHANGE.

Auroville Today of January this year published some articles concerning discussions in Auroville about changing the Auroville economy. As an outcome of this, a financial system was started in May, concentrating on the collective responsibility for collective expenditure. In Auroville Today number nine, we reported on the positive financial results of this system.

Financial results are definitely one parameter to measure the success of a new system. But in Auroville there are other parameters as well. For example, there is the pertinent question of what actually has been gained in terms of consciousness.

It can be said that what has been gained in these 6 months is an increasing individual and collective awareness of the nature of our collective responsibilities, and an increasing willingness to participate in the carrying of these responsibilities. However, many Aurovilians feel that this step, useful though it may be, is still too far from the ideals for which they have come to Auroville.

Recently, the services of Auroville — the food distributing unit Pour Tous, Auroville Electrical Service, Auroville Water Service and Auroville Health Care — have collectively issued a declaration, stating that they are no longer interested in providing their services against exchange of money. Their ideal: No individual billing for services. Concretely: For all Aurovilians food, electricity, water, health and dental care, would be paid for from a central fund.

This declaration goes back to words of The Mother: "There won't be any exchange of money in Auroville. It is only with the outside world that Auroville will have

money relations."

The declaration of the collective services was discussed in a general meeting of the 7th November. General meetings, although too large for quick decision making, are excellent instruments to take the pulse of community feelings. And that pulse was definitely in favour of a change in the direction indicated by the declaration of the services, though many people raised questions about the practical and financial implications of this step.

Consequently, a working group has been formed with explicit instructions to study the ideas of the services in great detail, and to come back to the general meeting with practical proposals for their implementation within the shortest period possible. The working group will have to provide answers to sticky and difficult questions. What is the meaning of 'free' services? To what extent can they be provided? What is the total amount necessary to provide free services? How is this amount to be collected? Do individual Aurovilians agree that part of their maintenance should be directly paid to a central fund, which pays in its turn all the services? Are all units prepared to contribute part of their profits and donations to this central fund for the provision of free services? Are units prepared to surrender their, as yet, unquestioned right to determine by themselves for what purposes their contributions should be used? How can we ensure that the services will operate as efficiently as possible? The working group is expected to come with practical proposals before the end of this year. *Auroville Today* will keep you informed.

Carel



"AT LAST THE SUN WILL SHINE AGAIN OVER TIBET"

Over the years, a strong connection between Auroville and Tibetan people has developed. In 1971, it had already been decided, in a meeting with Tibetan representatives, to build a Tibetan pavilion in Auroville, and that same year ten Tibetan children joined the community to study in the school. In February 1973, the Dalai Lama visited Pondicherry where he met Mother, who told him, "Sri Aurobindo and I want you to go back to Tibet with full authority and power". (17.1.1973) He also visited Auroville, and subsequently a number of Aurovilians visited Dharamsala and had an audience with him. In 1987, a Tibet-week was organized in Auroville, during which some Tibetan doctors from the Tibetan Medical Centre, Dharamsala, gave consultations and talks.

This November, Tenzin Choedak, the senior physician to the Dalai Lama, and other Tibetan doctors visited Auroville for a few days to give consultations and answer questions about Tibetan medicine, a visit that generated much interest both within and outside the community.

A few years ago, the Dalai Lama gave the following message to Auroville: "We are deeply impressed by the spiritual aim behind the building of an international city called Auroville. This importance of the effort to achieve human unity and international cooperation by the creation of such a city cannot be over-emphasized; nor can we neglect the benefit to be acquired from it. We are therefore very keen to be the first country to build a pavilion. We understand that this pavilion will be dedicated to the essence of Tibetan culture in an effort to show that out of the diversity of world cultures, these pavilions can help to create a new harmony towards world human unity." Presently, a project for the Tibetan Pavilion is being prepared, to be located in the International Zone.

The following article was written by an Aurovillian, who was in Dharamsala when the Dalai Lama returned from abroad. During his American tour it was announced that the Dalai Lama had been awarded the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize.

October the 5th isn't a day like any other in Dharamsala, a small Indian village at the foot of the Himalayas. In the afternoon, a telephone message from the news agency 'Reuters' in Delhi announces to the Information Office of the Tibetan Government in exile: "The Nobel Peace Prize 1989 has been granted to the political and religious leader of the Tibetan people, His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama." After initial disbelief, an outburst of joy! Finally the world recognizes the Dalai Lama.

In the communique, the Committee for the Nobel Prize explained its choice: "The Dalai Lama has in his battle for the liberation of the Tibetans constantly refused any use of violence and has on the contrary advocated peaceful solutions based on tolerance and mutual respect in view of preserving the historical and cultural heritage of his people."

In Dharamsala, excitement has reached its peak; even the very radical president of the youth congress, Lhasang Tsering, who believes only in an military solution, admits that the Nobel Prize 1989 represents the most important landmark for the Tibetan cause since 1959, when the world witnessed for the first time Tibet's struggle for liberation.

At that very moment in California, the Dalai Lama is lecturing on the Buddha. When informed of the nomination, he declares serenely, "I believe that my selection reaffirms the universal values of non-violence, peace and understanding among all the members of our great human family. We all want a more happy world, more human, more harmonious and I have always felt that practising love and compassion, tolerance and respect for others is the most efficient way to realize it."

While telegrams, telexes, and letters of congratulation rain down on the residence of the Dalai Lama in California, the news spreads fast in Dharamsala and Macleod Ganj, where the palace of His Holiness is situated.

Macleod Ganj, a small town situated at an altitude of 1850 metres and better known under the name "Little Lhasa", looks out over the Kangra valley. Very soon, 7000 Tibetans have filled the streets dressed in their most beautiful traditional clothes, and that was the beginning of a great festivity which would last two days. Until late, people dance in the streets—old, young, monks, nuns, Youth Congress radicals and pilgrims who had come from the far-off regions in the Himalayas. All sing and dance old popular songs about the Land of the Snows, Shambala, the mythical country hidden somewhere in Tibet

beyond the snowy peaks, their country which they thought lost. *Chang*, the Tibetan beer, flows freely and makes old memories surge up and loosens the tongues.

"At last the sun will shine again over Tibet", says an ageless Tibetan who had lost everything but hope, in between laughter and tears. A smile contains the sweetness and kindness of a people that has yet been so brutally wounded. To help understand them better, the Dalai Lama quotes a great Indian sage called Shantideva: "If there is a remedy for your problem, you have no reason to be unhappy. If there isn't, what is the use of being unhappy?"

Messages of congratulation keep coming in. Mr. Rajiv Gandhi, then prime minister of India and normally very reserved where Tibetan matters are concerned, writes: "The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to His Holiness the Dalai Lama is a homage to the spiritual and moral values which are symbolized by the Dalai Lama. This is a reason to rejoice in a time when those values are eroding fast in favour of the quest for material riches and economical domination." Following this came congratulations from the President and Vice President of India. Let us not forget that in 1959, Pandit Nehru had offered hospitality to Tibetan refugees fleeing from the Chinese people's liberation army (more than 10,000 have come), and given shelter to the Dalai Lama, thus allowing the original culture of his people to remain safeguarded.

On the 17th of October, the whole world bustles about in the small village of Macleod Ganj. Today, His Holiness returns from America. It is not the first time that their leader has returned to the country of their exile, but this time the Bodhisattva of Compassion returns with one of the highest distinctions of the world: the Nobel Peace Prize. And through him it is the Tibetan people with their just cause, their anxiety, their suffering, their martyrdom, (having lost more than one million Tibetans—one fifth of its population—under the oppression) who feel themselves at last recognized by the world.

From early morning the 3 kilometre long main street which leads to the palace is decorated with shining colours, flags, prayers and messages of congratulation, and is illuminated with thousands of little lights. The monks of Namgyal Datsang, the private monastery of the Dalai Lama, draw with coloured chalk the eight signs of good omen on the road; stones painted in white have been placed on each side of the road to chase away bad spirits.

The ministerial cabinet has fixed the protocol. His Holiness is received at

Jammu Airport, some 150 kilometres from Dharamsala, by the full cabinet, deputies from the people's parliament and members of the Indian-Tibetan Friendship Association. All along the route the representatives of the various communities, associations, and monasteries stop the procession, to present *khatas* (silk scarves) to the Dalai Lama.

When he finally arrives at Dharamsala, Mr. Norowjee, a Parsee shopkeeper, receives His Holiness as he had done 29 years earlier. Then another departure, this time for Macleod Ganj where a crowd of more than 5000 Tibetans awaits him to show him their

affection and devotion.

In the beige Mercedes, the Dalai Lama tries to bestow his smile and benedictions upon everybody. All hold in their hands the *khata* of welcome and bow down their heads when he passes, as a sign of deep respect. In their fervour to see and come near their religious and temporal leader, the Tibetan crowds along the route jostle each other, without losing their legendary good humour. The procession arrives at the palace where young dancers whirl around to the sound of traditional drums. The Dalai Lama retires into his private apartments to pray in his quiet Himalayan retreat. — Claude Arpi

"We have to seek a change by dialogue and mutual confidence. It is my prayer from the depth of my heart that the Tibetan problem is resolved in this way and that my country, the roof of the world, serves again as a sanctuary of peace, under spiritual inspiration, in the heart of Asia."

The Dalai Lama



The Dalai Lama receiving Sri Aurobindo's books, Pondicherry, 1973

Photo: Dominique Darr

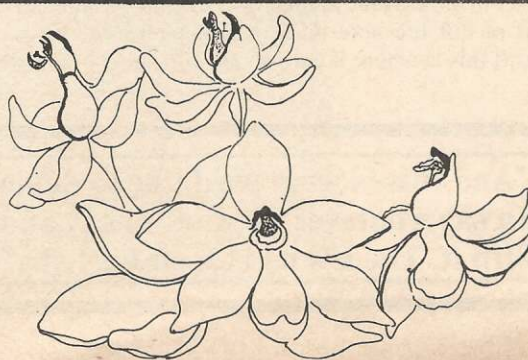
This poem by Pampatti (date unknown; probably around 12th century) is from a forthcoming collection of devotional poems and songs by the poet saints of Tamil Nadu. A number of Aurovilians have participated in this work, including Meenakshi who was the main translator.

Pampatti means 'snake charmer'. The snake referred to here is the Kundalini energy that rises up in response to yogic practices.

Let us delve deep within the heart
and know
the inner and the outer.
Let us gently start the fire
and guide it
into the waters of the avenue
condemning the cunning senses
gazing above the eyes and nose.

Seeking the clear, supreme light
We have found his feet--
--speak of this O snake and dance.

Pampatti Siddha





The 'Newsreal' team: Yanne, Francis

Photo: John Mandeem

Happy Birthday, Newsreal!

It may be too soon to talk about a communications revolution here. But like *Auroville Today*, Auroville Newsreal—the regular video news programme about events in the community—has just celebrated its first birthday. No mean feat, considering the state of their equipment, the periodic bad vibes and the pervasive Auroville entropy that they've had to battle against. Not to mention communication problems between the presenters themselves! But let's begin at the beginning.

When the *Auroville Today* team was formed, it was clear that *Auroville Today* would function primarily as an information source for those outside Auroville. Yanne, a member of that team, realized there was also a need for an internal news programme. "And since I thought it would be interesting to work with a camera, I got into video." Alain and Patricia, the video'pros', agreed to help, but there was a need for another presenter as Yanne (who is fluent in French but creative in English) wanted 'Newsreal' to be bi-lingual. But who would do it? Most Aurovilians are constitutionally camera shy and don't relish making fools of themselves. Eventually, somebody told Yanne, "Ask Francis. He's the only one crazy enough to accept".

"I immediately said no", says Francis. "But the more I thought about it, the more interesting it became. So one afternoon I went to Yanne to talk about it." "We spoke for one hour", recalls Yanne, "and at the end we realized we hadn't understood a word of what the other was saying! He couldn't understand French, and I couldn't understand... whatever he was speaking."

When they did manage to communicate, they decided that 'Newsreal' should try to tell Aurovilians what is happening in Auroville—in every corner, and covering every aspect and shade of opinion. The format would be a 12-15 minutes weekly video programme, some of which would be shot in the studio, and some shot 'on site', wherever that might be.

"We've gone everywhere in Auroville", says Yanne. "We've discovered many things, many places that I didn't know about before—and I've been here many years. We've helped Aurovilians discover Auroville."

But 'Newsreal' is more than straight news. It's also, as Francis puts it, "an attempt to poke fun at ourselves while identifying those aspects of our life here that need improving". And this is where it can

get hot! "I've lost a lot of friends in the last year", remarks Yanne. "The problem", says Francis, "is that any criticism we make is taken very personally. The heat usually descends a day or two after the 'Newsreal' is shown. I drive down the road and all these people are glaring at me—with love and brotherhood of course! Aurovilians lack humour. They take themselves too seriously."

But is 'Newsreal' too negative? Yanne points out that they often give credit for good work, but people don't notice. They only pick up on the criticism, which is a minor part of the programme. "We're not out to increase the difficulties", says Francis. "Some issues are still very delicate. In these cases, we first try to clear what we want to do with the people involved, to check if it would really be detrimental if we went ahead. Once or twice we've made something and then been asked not to show it. And we've agreed. But it's our decision. No big pressure has been applied".

Francis points out, "The biggest problem is that the camera changes whatever has been going on. To try to get people to open up in front of a camera is very difficult. People start dealing in mental ideas and concepts, and it gets dry and boring. Only after some time do they start speaking from the heart. And that's basically what we're after. In private conversations many Aurovilians are outspoken. But when I ask if I can interview them on camera, they refuse. They don't want heat from the community." "It's a fear", says Yanne. "People want to be loved, to be accepted by their fellow Aurovilians. It constantly surprises me that Aurovilians are so concerned with an image that they want to present to the community." "And this is what we'd like to demonstrate", says Francis. "That we can say whatever we want to say and get away with it. There's no reason for fear."

After one year, they've produced about 35 programmes. What they lightly assumed at the beginning would be a part time activity has turned into a heavy schedule of preparation, shooting and editing—5 days work for 15 minutes of 'Newsreal'!

What have they learned?

"That one of the most difficult things", says Yanne, "is to communicate our sense of humour, both to the community and to each other!" "And patience", says Francis. "You plan something, you set it up, you go out, you shoot—and when you get back to

the studio, the colour is wrong, or there's a buzz on the sound. Then you try to do it again—if the people are still willing!"

At the beginning, they were helped by Alain and Patricia, but when the professionals moved on to other things, Francis and Yanne had to learn everything from scratch. As Francis puts it, "at that moment, the technical quality of 'Newsreal', well, DROPPED! Now, while we're still unhappy with the level of our ability, what we're doing is basically insane because of the lack of the right equipment." It's a major problem. Their equipment is eight years old, and constantly breaking down. They need a new camera, two monitors and an editing controller.

And the future? "I feel that 'Newsreal' is just now entering the real Auroville",

says Yanne. "For the first 6 months we were very quiet. Now we are more challenging—showing what is and what is not working in Auroville. It's just the beginning." "We'd like to change our format", says Francis, "to include more Aurovilians both in the team and on camera. General meetings have not proved a good forum for exchanging views. If people who want to express something will come forward, we'll help them to get their message across. Our dream is to have an Auroville T.V. network—a video in each household—through which all the information about what's going on in Auroville and the world can be transmitted. You can sit in your chair and attend a general meeting! Just push a button if you find it boring!"

Alan

As Others See Us...

A few of the applicants for jobs at Aurelec, the Auroville computer company, know little or nothing about Auroville itself. The following is a selection of imaginative responses to the question "What do you know about Auroville?" which is asked on the job application form.

Question: "What do you know about Auroville?"

Answers:

- ° "A unit of Aurelec Trust."
- ° Birthplace of Sri Aurobindo."
- ° "It was ruled by French Government."
- ° "A divine place of Aurovilleners."
- ° "An industrial village—formed by two great French men."
- ° "Place where spontaneous arrest of any type of mind can be physically noticed."
- ° "They are running Aurobindo Ashram for the orphans and for old helpless people."

(These are extracts from an article that first appeared in 'The Aurelec Times'.)



The Auroville Today team today:
(from l. to r.) Carel, Bill, Alan, Tineke (back)
Roger, Annemarie, Yanne, Susan (front)

Photo: Sven

**Francis: "And this is what we'd like to demonstrate:
That we can say whatever we want to say and get away
with it. There's no reason for fear."**

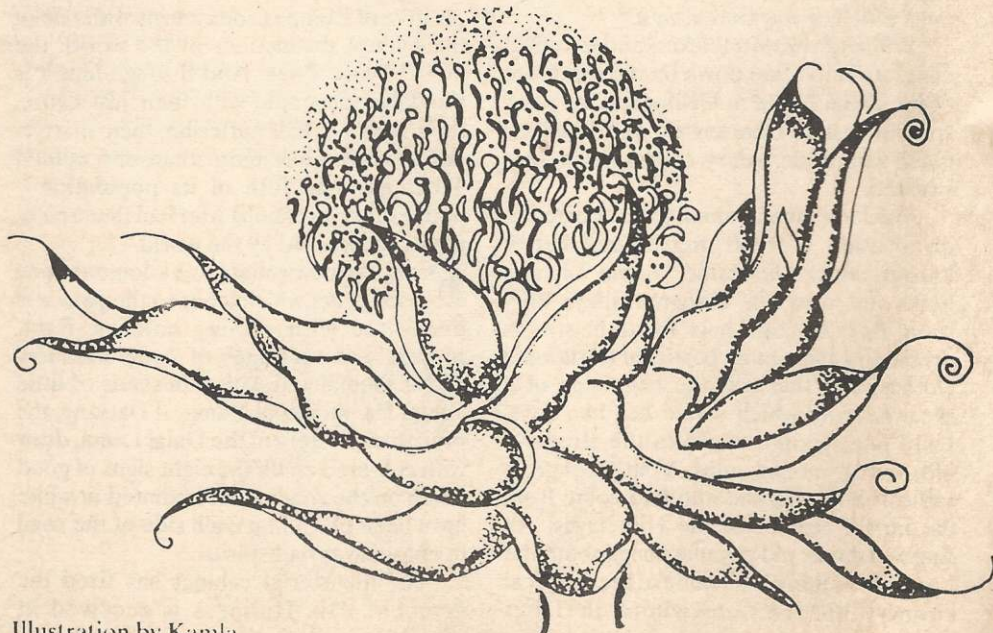


Illustration by Kamla

SWAMIYEE SHARANAM Ayyappa!!

Blaring loudspeakers at 5.30 in the morning disturb the sleep of many Aurovilians at this time of the year. The Ayyappa season has started again. What, or rather who is Ayyappa?

Though the Ayyappa cult is already some hundreds of years old, in the villages around Auroville the appearance of the Ayyappa cult is recent. In December and January we see them around, mostly men and mostly dressed in bright orange or deep blue clothes. And we know that the time for the pilgrimage to the temple of Ayyappa, in the Sabari Hills in Kerala, has come again. Some will begin paying for their ticket a year in advance. Many apply for one week's leave, and will ask for advances of a couple of hundred rupees. Some will just disappear. And then they will set off, in buses or open trucks, chanting "Swamiyee Sharanam Ayyappa". But who is Ayyappa?

Once upon a time there lived on earth an asura (demon) by the name of Mahisasura. Because of his wicked deeds, the gods decided to kill him, and evoked for that purpose the Kali aspect of their power, called Chandikadevi. She killed Mahisasura.

Mahishi, the wife of Mahisasura, wanted to take revenge on all the gods and other creatures. She made a great penance to propitiate Lord Brahma, and he appeared to her and granted her request that she would not meet her death at the hands of either Shiva or Vishnu.

Mahishi felt her life was safe. However, the gods implored Shiva and Vishnu to destroy Mahishi. In order to do this, Vishnu assumed his female form called Mohini, and together with Shiva created a son.

Rajashekara, the king of Panthala, had no children. Once, wandering in the forest near the river Pampa, his mind fixed on his desire to obtain a son, he found a baby with a golden bell around his neck. The king fell in love with the beautiful child and decided to adopt it. The child was called Manikantan, meaning "one with a bell around the neck", and grew up as a favourite of the king and his queen.

But the unexpected happened when Manikantan, at the age of 12 years, had just finished his schooling and was ready to become the crown prince. The queen gave birth to a son. Motivated by the fear that her new-born might not become the ruler of the country, the queen pretended to be ill and conspired with her minister and the court physician to send Manikantan to the forest to obtain tigress milk to cure her. Obedient to the instructions of the king, Manikantan went to the forest, and came into the domain of Mahishi. She came out and attacked him. After a fierce battle

Manikantan succeeded in killing her, and the heavens rained flowers on him. He had fulfilled the mission for which he had come to earth. The gods appeared before Manikantan, and, having assumed the forms of tigresses, went with him back to the city.

Meanwhile, the king, who was worried about the welfare of his adopted son, suddenly heard a voice from heaven proclaiming: "Manikantan is the Lord Himself". When Manikantan arrived in the city with his accompanying tigresses, the king and the queen fell at his feet, and Manikantan forgave them. Thereupon the King became the first devotee of Manikantan, and built a temple in his honour at the summit of the Sabari hills (in the Western Ghats, Kerala). Manikantan came to be popularly known as Ayyappa, "The Leading One". The thousands of devotees make their way to this temple calling out "Swamiyee Sharanam Ayyappa", meaning "take refuge in the Lord Ayyappa."

The rituals surrounding the pilgrimage to Sabari are many. Only men, girls below 12 and women above 50 years can visit the temple. Before doing this, a penance period of 40 days has to be observed, during which time they are not allowed to drink alcohol, smoke, eat outside their houses, have sexual intercourse, walk with leather shoes, tell lies, talk ill of others or wear white dresses. Loans have to be paid back before they travel, and formal leave has to be taken of all relatives and friends. During this period the devotees — who now are not called by their names but are called 'Saamy', meaning God — do group singing, and listen collectively to songs on the Lord Ayyappa.

(From information supplied by Meenakshi)

"Oh, this is American style!"

Three Tamil women, Amudha, Dhanalakshmi and Kamla, who have been living in Auroville for several years, were recently — on the invitation of a friend of Auroville — on a 6-week visit to a small community (Sirius) in America (see also Auroville Today # 9). For all of them this was the first time they had left their home environment. Amudha is married to a social worker, has two sons and teaches Tamil in the Auroville kindergarten; Dhanalakshmi has a son and a small daughter and works in the Matrimandir nursery — her husband Kaniappan visited the same community last summer; Kamla's husband went to the States a few years ago for three months — she learns typing, and is a talented painter; they have a small son.

Q: Do you feel different now, after having been in the States for six weeks?

Kamla: I don't think I feel different, but when I was there I felt a lot of freedom. I didn't have to cook or clean, I could do a lot of painting and I made many friends.

Q: How did you experience living in a small community?

Kamla: I was very happy to be in the Sirius community and to experience community life. I attracts me very much, people eating and working together. They meditate and do yoga together and share a lot. I was born in the village and was dreaming that one day I would join Auroville. I came to Auroville and suddenly I got this chance to go to America. I had read books about America but I never imagined that I was going to see those places. I never saw

such big buildings, they were touching the sky. I got a pain in my neck. I did not see many people working together, so how do they create such big buildings??? Everything is bigger and bigger and bigger in America. It was a big difference for me. I like the supermarket; everything is there and so many people can go there at the same time. But what I liked most was to see the trees with all those beautiful colours. I never saw anything so beautiful. I'm really happy about the opportunity we got. Thanks to everyone!

Dhanalakshmi: I'm happy to be back but I am also very happy that I saw that place. What I liked most was the community life. The people there were very nice and were so happy that we came. They speak very freely and asked us many ques-

tions about Auroville, like, "What is Auroville? Why did I come to Auroville? And why do I like to stay there?" I told them how I started working for Auroville, met my husband there and got married. They asked me if I can read and write and when I told them that I can't, they were surprised that I speak English quite well. I explained that I learned it by speaking to the people in Auroville.

We all stayed for some time with different families, which was very interesting because we could see that family life is different there. The woman cooks and the husband washes the dishes. If the same would happen here, then the woman would have free time to learn.

Amudha: I missed my children and my family and I am happy to be back, but it was a good experience for me. They asked so many questions, like about castes and so on. I am happy to talk, but here nobody asks me these kind of questions! I learned quite a lot about how to teach the children and I also did some teaching. I saw that the children have to raise their hand before asking a question. I like that and would like to introduce that in the school here. People asked questions about my own country. I only know my village and Pondicherry, not much about other places in India. So mostly I had to say, "I don't know, I've never been there". I felt really ashamed that I had to tell that. I had gone to America, but I don't know my own country.

Q: Do you feel that you learned things that can change your life here now?

Dhanalakshmi: When I was in America I saw Kamla and Amudha reading and writing and I felt very bad that I can't. I had to ask people to please write a letter for me. But that way I could not express what I felt

inside. Then I understood it was my mistake that I never had wanted to learn. I decided that when I am back that's the first thing I have to learn. I told my husband that I also want to share the housework like I saw over there, so that I have more time for myself to learn. First my husband reacted, "Oh, this is American style!", but now he understands me.

Amudha: I already know Tamil but now I want to learn more English. I want to become a good teacher and teach Tamil, not only to the Tamil children but also to the other children. What I would really like is to go for some time to the Ashram school in Delhi and do a teachers' training. And I want to know and see more about my own country. Also I would like to give my children more freedom. I liked the way families live in America. The children get more freedom. Here I always have to tell my children what they have to do, but my parents always told me too what to do. There it is not like that. The children do it themselves. I would like to give my children that kind of freedom too.

Q: What impressed you most?

Kamla: The autumn with all those coloured trees. And the experience of community life and to be able to talk with so many people.

Dhanalakshmi: I too will never forget the colours of the trees. And I liked the boat trip we made in New York. It was the first time that I was in a boat. But I think what I liked most was the fair. Even though it rained I felt as happy as on my wedding day. But I didn't like New York, it's just like Madras. I was shocked to see all those beggars and people sleeping on the street.

Amudha: I could never have imagined I would see a husband cleaning the floors.

After this interview with Tineke, the three women decided to start once a week 'pot-luck' dinners together, a first attempt to have some kind of community life which they are all missing in Auroville. They also discussed possibilities to alternate cooking duties in order to have more time for themselves for learning. They expressed their gratitude for having had this experience and were wondering about how to help other Tamil wives in Auroville, who are fully occupied with babies, to get more of a community feeling and opportunities to learn. A week later they started with their English classes, and a course in simple tailoring. Kamla will start drawing classes with a graphic designer.



Painting by Pascal

Council or Counsel?

—A portrait of the Auroville Council—

"Organization is a discipline of action, but for Auroville we aspire to go beyond arbitrary and artificial organization. We want an organization which is the expression of a higher consciousness working to manifest the truth of the future. An organization is needed for the work to be done—but the organization itself must remain flexible and plastic in order to progress always and to modify itself according to the need."

With these words, Mother clearly expressed the need for an internal organization of Auroville, and formulated Auroville's aspiration for the type of organization which would serve best the needs of the evolving township.

Auroville's internal organization has, through the years, taken different forms; sometimes the need came from within, at other times there was pressure from outside. Through various groups or bodies, under different names, Auroville has been trying to fulfil its aspiration for something "beyond arbitrary and artificial organizations". However, one element seems to have always been there: a small body of Aurovilians dealing with the day-to-day affairs of the community as a whole, and being responsible towards the community as a whole. And this is how it is to-day: a small body, called the 'Auroville Council', meets once a week to deal with the day-to-day affairs, and is responsible to the community at large. Of course, the story of Auroville's organization would be incomplete without mentioning the role of the great variety of work groups which are managing many different activities in Auroville. These work groups have always been fairly autonomous, and have referred to the councils or the general assembly only when their problems touched upon areas concerning the larger community.

Over the years, more and more Aurovilians have had the opportunity to participate in the effort of trying to organize the growing and developing township, and learnt what it meant—or did not mean. For, even when aspiring for something new, something of a higher order, it has never been very obvious what this something new or higher was supposed to look like. And none of the various bodies could ever enjoy the full support of the community at large.

From the beginning, certain problems seemed to recur. The community of Auroville had to come to terms with its own inner conflict regarding 'authority' and 'power'. Another problem for a small body dealing with sometimes sensitive matters concerning the community as a whole, was how to communicate the process by which certain decisions were made. And, a perpetual question remained: how, if at all, to 'implement' decisions? For without police, or other law-enforcing agencies, the only way out seemed to be simply to wait for everyone to cooperate out of free will.

With the start of the present 'Auroville Council' 18 months ago, a new concept entered and was there to stay: 'facilitation'. For the first time, two Aurovilians joined the Council especially to concentrate on the problem of how to make the functioning of the Council more efficient and to help its lengthy meetings run more smoothly. The challenge was to 'facilitate' the interaction, on the one hand between the Council members themselves, and on the other hand between the Council and the

community.

Recently, the Auroville Council has gone through some changes in membership, and has acquired new energy. At present there are nine members, from 9 different nationalities, 5 women and 4 men. Among them are Judith and Janet, who have been there from the start in May 1988, and Ananda, who joined 6 months ago.

Auroville Today had a conversation with these three Aurovilians, who intend to continue their work for the time being. From this conversation, we distilled some ideas about how the present Council sees itself.

"We meet every Wednesday from 9.45 a.m. till late afternoon. We write the agenda on the blackboard: ongoing topics, people we have invited to come, new problems that have come up. We have somebody to take notes, and someone to remind us of the time we have allotted to the various topics. We write the different viewpoints about each topic on the blackboard, and these are later incorporated in the minutes. During the week, many members remain involved in the Council work, which means sometimes attending other meetings, talking to people, etc.

We try to be available as much as possible. Though in general the meeting is not open to everybody, we have taken the stand that everyone who has an urgent topic can walk in and be listened to.

Sometimes we find ourselves compelled to make decisions, but most of the time we are coordinating, facilitating, trying to resolve knots in the community to enable the energy to flow better. We don't think of the Council as an authoritative body. Often we find ourselves trying to help individuals or groups to take decisions themselves, because if we impose a decision it won't work. But if we have to take a decision, we try to understand all aspects of the problem and to reach consensus, which makes it a bit more difficult, but also more challenging. Of course, sometimes we do not manage to come to an agreement. Many times the people around the table have different, if not opposing views. The Council process is first of all to listen patiently, even going around the table and giving everyone 5 or 10 minutes to express him/herself without being interrupted. For some people, those who tend to dominate and impose their views on everybody else, this is too much. They either change or withdraw from the Council.

The smaller the group, the easier it is to agree, but when that happened, we found ourselves getting isolated from the community. Now we are a bigger group again, so it is more difficult to reach consensus. We find that a group of 10-12 persons is the best forum to discuss a particular problem at length. In general meetings, or even in medium-sized groups of 20-30 people like the former 'core-group' (a group formed to discuss general policy matters and to make

Drawing by Franz

recommendations to the residents' assembly--Eds.), this is very difficult. Of course the small group must be sufficiently diverse and represent the different viewpoints.

If we feel that the topic is beyond the Council, it is our job to call general meetings or forums such as seminars for discussion—this is part of our communication with the community. However, we find it difficult to communicate to the community through general meetings, and we welcome feedback on how to communicate better!

One way we can judge the response to the work we do is to see how quickly people react to our invitation to come for a talk. If they do not respond, it shows us that we are not handling the topic properly. Generally speaking, most people come. Another indication is that the amount of work given to us goes up and up, so it shows that people think the Council is helpful.

How do we select new members? This Council was chosen by the former 'core-group', after a series of general meetings on the question of how to organize ourselves. Now that the core-group no longer exists, we have been choosing new members ourselves. We have of course criteria, like personal qualities etc., but also we look at how the balance is between male and female, we try to see that there is a sufficient diversity in nationalities, and that there is a sufficient representation of different viewpoints. All these things we take as much as possible into consideration. And in the end, after having done that exercise, there is a kind of collective intuition within the Council concerning the person who fits best to a certain

need.

We think that almost every Aurovillian could be in the Council. To answer your question whether we tend to look only for Aurovilians who are a 'conventional' type, quiet, wise, and so on, but without a certain 'craziness' or lack of originality which is needed in Auroville... you should bear in mind that the Council consists not only of 'permanent' members who are joining for one year, but also of all those who are invited and who come and help to sort out a problem. So we do have the opportunity, sometimes, to work together with very original people, and if we on occasion get the feeling that that particular person wants to join the Council on a more permanent basis, it can always happen.

To be in the Council is really an educational opportunity. In the 'normal' world one never thinks of power structures or things like that as being an education, or an experience, an enlargement or widening. We see the Council not so much as a 'powertrip' as an occasion to learn more, and in that sense it is quite normal that after some time, having learned something, people should withdraw and give their place to others to also enrich themselves. Also, if you want to be useful to the community, you have to be poised in the right place in yourself. It won't do to be caught in emotional reactions or mental rigidity; you have to be detached. It's a really challenging aspect of the yoga to work for the Council."

Yanne/Annemarie

"The best qualities for a Council member?

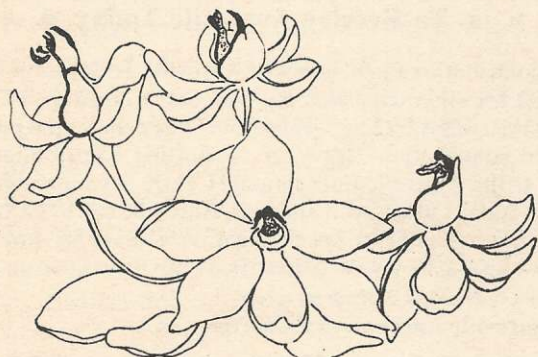
Patience. Even if you are not wide, if you are patient, you have an opportunity to widen. If you aren't, you miss the opportunity to change. And to be able to listen, to really listen to other people. To be able to surrender yourself to this work, and to have the dedication to give that much time to do it very regularly and keep on doing it."

THE AUROVILLE DEVELOPMENT PLAN, 1990-1995

A few weeks ago, a large and lavishly produced collection of project proposals thudded onto the desks of members of the Government-Planning Commission in Delhi — the Auroville Development Plan 1990-1995 had finally landed. But how was it assembled, and what was its flight-path? In mid 1989, Auroville sent to the Planning Commission projects for the future development of the township that it wished the government to consider for funding. This was the so-called 'Album'. (See Auroville Today no. 7 for details) The reply was predictable: "More details please." And so began an intensive, arduous, sometimes bizarre and often frustrating process that culminated in a print run at the Press that almost exhausted the stock of ink, as well as the energy of the Aurovilians involved. (Question: Why does it always have to be like this?) The first step in the process was to contact Aurovilians and work groups who had submitted project proposals for the original Album and to ask them to provide more information. This was not easy. Some were temporarily out of station, and others had the utmost difficulty in bringing the more generalized formulations of their original proposals down to earth in a practical, detailed form. A special project co-ordination group was convened to assist in this process and to exercise some kind of quality control. Once a revised project was accepted by the group, it was passed on to the Auroville project writing team to correct the frequently inventive English and to standardize the lay-out. The laser printing of the proposals completed the metamorphosis from rather vague concepts to the final 'pukka' presentation. The Auroville Development Plan, 1990-95, contains many of the projects in the original album but in a more detailed form. Almost every aspect of Auroville is covered. There are projects for creating and improving the basic infrastructure (roads, water, electricity, land purchase, housing); for expanding community facilities (education, sports, health, food processing and distribution, townplanning, information); for developing the neighbouring villages and building a new experimental village for Auroville workers; for extending afforestation and organic farming; for encouraging research in alternative energy, alternative transport and building technologies; for creating a centre of research devoted to human unity; and for taking a further step towards completing the Bharat Nivas complex. New projects, not included in the former album, are an Auroville communication centre, an

art workshop, an experimental housing for children project and 'Vanakkam', a proposal to create a small learning community for village and Auroville children. In all, there are 36 projects in the Plan, and the total amount requested from the government is almost Rs. 60 crores (approximately \$ 40 million). Like many major new initiatives in Auroville, the Auroville Development Plan is the subject of some controversy in the community. There is criticism that the procedure was too rushed (there was a deadline for the submission of proposals in Delhi), and did not allow adequate opportunity for discussing the basic criteria upon which the future development of Auroville should be based; that not all points of view were carefully considered; that project holders were sometimes given insufficient guidance about what was expected from them; and that the final Development Plan was not presented to the community as a whole before it was sent to Delhi, and hence had short-cut the community process. In terms of content, some people felt concern at the direction of development implied in large-scale, expensive projects and wondered if this was the model Auroville wants to present to the world. Others questioned the wisdom of asking so much money from one source, and of committing ourselves to a high level of recurring expenditure. Finally, there was the question of whether we have at present the human resources and expertise to carry out such a huge undertaking. Supporters of the Plan point out that this is only the beginning of the process, and that many changes will occur before anything starts happening with bricks and mortar; that we needed to take an opportunity offered to us to submit proposals while it was still available; that the process has, in fact, stretched over many months and involved many people in the community; and that the environment and alternative paths of development are well represented in the final submission. Above all, they believe that this Plan, however flawed, is a conscious effort to call the future and to take the first steps towards the concretization of the City. In fact, the issues underlying these differences have been with us for many years, and re-surface time and again in different contexts. They include issues of how we should develop (pragmatists versus idealists, organic growth versus planned development) and how we should allocate responsibility and take decisions in the context of a community process. At a deeper level still, these are issues of trust, of openness, of surrender.

□



A personal view

I participated in the process from beginning to end. I experienced different responses in myself, and I ran through a gamut of emotions that ranged from near despair, through boredom to excitement at the possibility of new beginnings. Each of the responses has, I believe, its place and validity. But what kept me there to the end was not a sense of it being a 'good' or a 'bad' plan for Auroville's development. It was a faith in that unique process of Auroville that so often confounds our fears, beliefs or desires by presenting us with an outcome that is neither 'this' nor 'that', but something

quite different and unexpected. And so often, to get to this somewhere else, we have to push through something that seems bizarre or nonsensical, we have to put ourselves on the line, to endure. In this sense, the Auroville Development Plan, despite all its flaws, is for me a potential catalyst, a lever to set in motion something new and, mercifully, unpredictable. It's an attempt to concretize some of our dreams, and to tap into the tremendous energy generated by connecting the 'polar' terminals of reality and vision, of earth and sky.

Alan

BOOK REVIEW

□ 'Sri Aurobindo and The Mother', by Kireet Joshi. Published by The Mother's Institute of Research, New Delhi, 1989.

"Glimpses of Their Experiments, Experiences and Realizations" is the sub-title of this overview of the life of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother and their work for the earth. This introduction presents some biographical background and a straightforward commentary to link the extensive quotations coherently, and it chronologically follows the experiential record. Formidable and decisive experiences of Mother are related:

"Suddenly in the night I woke up with the full awareness of what we could call the Yoga of the World. The Supreme Love was manifesting through big pulsations, and each pulsation was bringing the world further in its manifestation. It was the formidable pulsations of the eternal, stupendous Love, only Love; each pulsation of Love was carrying the universe further in its manifestation. And the certitude that what is to be done is done and the Supramental manifestation is realized.

Everything was personal, nothing was individual.

That was going on and on and on and on...

The certitude that what is to be done is DONE.

All the results of the Falsehood had disappeared: Death was an illusion, Sickness was an illusion, Ignorance was an illusion — something that had no reality, no existence... only Love, and Love, and Love and Love — immense, formidable, stupendous, carrying everything.

And how, how to express in the world? It was like an impossibility, because of the contradiction... But then it came: "You have accepted that this world should know the Supramental Truth... and it will be expressed totally, integrally."

Because the author, Kireet Joshi, worked many years under the direct guidance of Mother, and because of his friendship with Satprem, who recorded the conversations of Mother that became the thirteen volumes of Mother's Agenda, he has unique qualifications (in addition to his education in philosophy) to offer us an invitation to and a taste of the treasure that awaits the reader in the original texts. The care and erudition with which he presents and unfolds this marvellous account is evi-

dent, for example, in this passage of commentary:

Three simultaneous and inter-related processes were going on in Mother's body. Firstly, there was a progressive dissolution of the Inconscience at its utmost bottom. Secondly, there was the infiltration, permeation and invasion of the Supermind in the cellular consciousness and in the physical consciousness so as to counteract the Falsehood in Matter, Life and Mind. Thirdly, there was the gradual transformation of the body by means of the collaboration and change of the physical mind and by means of radical changes in various functionings of organs and faculties."

In the final chapter, "Towards the Transformed Body", the author continues to outline Mother's process of opening up "the consciousness of the cells by fixing the supramental consciousness in the body-consciousness." Mother continues: "It must be 'worked out' as one says, it has to be realized in all details..."

The working out of this change brings into focus many difficult questions. Will it take 300 years to totally transform the body? How dependent is the process upon the level of the surrounding consciousness? How was Mother building up in her body "a new body of the awakened cells where there is no 'life', no 'death', but 'overlife'?"

Other questions and also the circumstances of the last crucial years (1972-73) are all presented in the text.

Regarding the work of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, the author concludes:

"That work is on, and there is no obstacle. There is continuity; in that continuity all the bodies are involved; the body of each one of us is in the cauldron of transformation. This is the cosmic yoga, which none can escape, and in which salvation and realization are at once physical and collective."

The only slight flaws in the book are the typographical errors and poor quality of the photographs. These could readily be corrected in the publication of a paperback edition, which would make it more available to a wider public. The book deserves to be highly recommended. What is contained in this book is a flame we all need.

Bill

A LETTER TO THE EDITORS

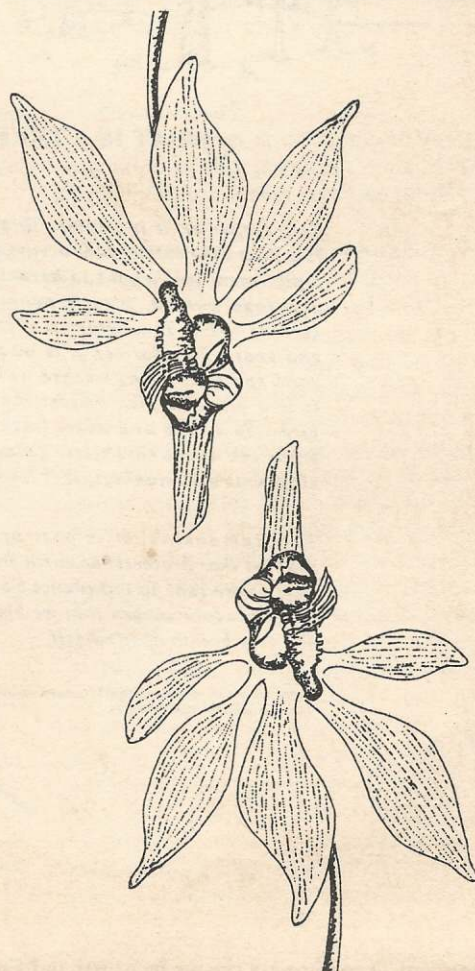
Recently, I have seen an article in your paper about China. Whereas I am distressed with what happened in Tiananmen Square, I feel we, in Auroville, should not allow ourselves the luxury of commenting on such happenings. If we do, then we would open ourselves to lots of controversial situations.

To give an example, I am much more concerned with what is happening in South Africa than anything else. It, therefore, pains me that Auroville Today does not feel like writing on Apartheid, which is a continuing shame for humanity, but gets very disturbed about the happenings in China. There seems to be some blind spot somewhere.

In view of this, it is best we stay away from commenting on such events or else be prepared to print all the 'sins against humanity' being committed all over.

I would be grateful if you publish this letter in your next issue.

Yours in Truth, P.P. Malik
Auroville



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Address Correction Requested

KRISHNA TEWARI
AUROVILLE
AUROVILLE

Number Twelve December 1989

This month: Ayappa; Economy; Council; Newsreal; Paintings...



WHAT IS A TREE?

To a carpenter, it is a table. To a fisherman, it is a boat that carries him across the waters. To a plowman, it is a yoke to harness his oxen. To a village woman, it is firewood to cook the evening's rice. To a herder, it is fodder for cows and goats. To a farmer, it is what prevents the good soil from being washed away. To a child, it is a place to play amidst the squirrels and birds. To a tired and weary traveler, it is shade from the sun and shelter from the rain. To elephants and monkeys, it is home.

For Humankind, it is part of a vast green blanket that protects the earth from the intense rays of the sun. To our planet Earth, it is lungs. Trees produce oxygen that we breathe. A tree is the very breath of life itself.

© 1989 CHILDREN AND TREES PROJECT, Shanta, Success Road, Auroville,
Kottakuppam 605 104, Tamil Nadu, India.



Children and Trees Project poster by Marti and Forrest (see Auroville Today #6 for project details)

Celebrating Celebration

"Nobody smiles". That's what many visitors said of Auroville a few years ago. Today, perhaps, the facial muscles are a little more relaxed, and one or two visitors even claim that Aurovilians have spoken to them! But have we changed as a community? Is there such a thing as a community smile? Have we learned to celebrate collectively? This season is traditionally the season of festivals as Hindus, Muslims, Christians and pagans celebrate, with light and laughter, the dance of the life force at the death of the year. And Aurovilians? Well, a few cluster in nuclear groupings around emaciated chickens on the 25th December. And on New Year's morning we sit shivering around a bonfire in the Amphitheatre, listening to the screams of children and being nudged periodically by stray dogs. And that, except for similar scenes on Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's birthday, is about it! Collectively, we're about as much fun as a plate of cold porridge. Why? Why can't the City of Dawn also be the City of Joy? Well, like good Aurovilians, we're never short of justifications. "We're not here for that, but for something else." "Celebration is just vital satisfaction." "Look at Auroville, look at the world. What have we got to celebrate?" And so on and so on, fortified for many of us by a Protestant ethic that smiles upon work and frowns upon pleasure. But wait a minute! If joy, if laughter, if celebration are suspect, what kind of Auroville are we creating? A puritanical fortress with a black market in jokes? Read Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Where do they exhort us to be joyless? On the contrary, Mother's laugh rings through the Agenda and Sri Aurobindo's dry, benevolent humour constantly punctures the solemnities of his followers. And it was Sri Aurobindo who, knowing of our ascetic, self-lacerating propensities, pointed out that sadhana did not have to be grim. For when the psychic becomes master of our whole being, "there is no or little subjective suffering and the objective (suffering) cannot affect either the soul or the other parts of the consciousness—the way is sunlit and a great joy and sweetness are the note of the whole sad-

hana." And here, of course, it the crux of it. Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's laughter always leads us into the heart of things, away from the conventional. Their laughter is deeply subversive. Our laughter is, well, sometimes pretty ordinary and low. We're trapped in a middle ground between the innocent delight of the village children and the sublime laughter of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. And in that middle ground, we're frequently caught between two tendencies. One is to shun all 'vital' pleasure; the other is to dive full-bloodedly into it as a reaction against cant and hypocrisy. But why throw the baby out with the bath water? Why make joy an outcast because the origins of it are sometimes suspect? Why not, rather, celebrate what is positive here and what draws us together at the deepest level? Because, believe it or not, there are things to celebrate! Like the treasures of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Like the opportunity to experiment with and discover oneself through diverse activities and styles of living. Like sharing a common language with 25 other nationalities. Like the taste of Otto's bread on a wet monsoon evening! And, to be fair, once or twice in the past we've managed it—to be joyful and true to our deeper purpose. There was, for example, that moving ceremony in the Amphitheatre a few years ago, when the delegates from the International Youth Year conference filed quietly in and placed clay bricks bearing the names of their countries around the urn... a potent echo and reconfirmation of Auroville's inauguration and purpose. And last year, 'Peace Trees' participants from Russia, America and India joined Aurovilians in circling the illuminated Banyan Tree in a silent symbol of oneness. Perhaps next time we won't need young people from 'outside' to show us what is valuable here and to weld us into a fragile fragment of joy. Perhaps we'll discover our own language of celebration that is both joyful and deeply appropriate. Perhaps, at last, the tiredness and the frustrations and the painful memories will fall away and we'll stumble upon the birth... of a community smile!

Alan

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