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The Town

In ancient times Pondicherry was a seat of Vedic learning and culture—its former name was Vedapuri—possibly initiated by the great sage Agastya whose ashram, legend has it, stood on the present site of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram main building.

Pondicherry has always been an important trading port. Some 2,000 years ago, the Romans established a settlement on the outskirts of Pondicherry, linking Rome with the Far Eastern trade in spices and silks. In the 16th century, the Portuguese built a factory in Puducherra, as it was then called, and in the late 17th century the French turned Pondicherry into their main trading port on the east coast of India.

Over the next 150 years, as the major European trading powers struggled for pre-eminence in India, Pondicherry changed hands many times, from the Dutch to the French to the English, finally reverting to the French in 1816. By that time, however, France had long since abandoned Dupleix's dream of making India part of the French Empire, and the French Government's interest in Pondicherry had waned considerably. In November 1954, over seven years after India's independence from British rule, Pondicherry (which includes a large area outside the town itself) finally became a Union Territory of the Indian Republic.

In the late 1960's, Pondy was a sleepy but somewhat unusual Indian town, divided between the so-called "White Town" on the seaward side of the main canal—where the old French colonial buildings and the Sri

Pondicherry

The City Auroville Needs...

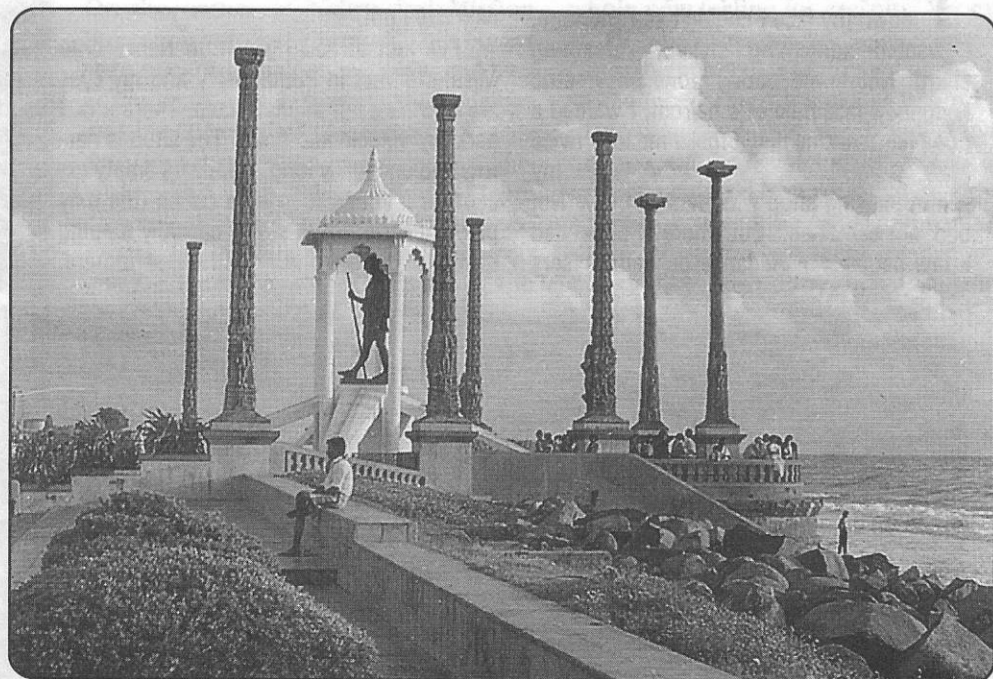


Above: Pondicherry, aerial view
(PHOTO: ASHATIT Poddar)

Right: Mahatma Gandhi Square
(PHOTO: DILIP MAHAPATRA)

Aurobindo Ashram stand—and the "Black Town" on the other, more typically Indian side. The first Aurovilian settlers, like so many after them, moved easily between these two parts. They would arrive, sweat-stained, on dusty cycles to do their shopping on Nehru Street—where pigs rooted in the gutters and sacks served as sunshades over the entrances of dark interiors—and then repair to the cool peace of the Samadhi or the reading table of the Ashram library, before returning, fortified by Ganpatram's "rocket" dosais and cardamom teas, up the beach road to the laterite wilderness beyond.

Today, Pondicherry is one of the fastest-growing towns in India. Much of the White Town remains as it was, but the pigs and sacks have long since disappeared from the main street where Western-style shops and boutiques, all glass and air-conditioning, are beginning to proliferate. However, some of the old shops still remain, places



which, over the years, have become embedded in the Auroville psyche as generations of Aurovilians have haggled, in dim interiors and balanced on precarious stools, over the price of G.I. wire, or chatted with proprietors over cups of South Indian coffee while ancient assistants plunged into dim labyrinths in search of another bolt or plastic tap for the City of Dawn.

SHOPPING in Pondicherry is what most Aurovilians do regularly, as there are no shops in Auroville yet to provide Aurovilians with things other than food and small sundry items. For mattresses, construction materials, clothing and shoes, you name it, Pondy is the place to go. Auroville Today takes a look at Pondy as a fast developing town, and at some of the Aurovilians' favourite or unavoidable haunts.

For this issue, in recognition of the umbilical cord which for so many years has linked Auroville and Pondicherry, the Auroville Today team decided to revisit some of these favourite—or unavoidable—Pondy haunts, while tasting the new flavours of a town which prides itself on being on the move.

Alan

Going to Pondy

The Auroville Today team goes to Pondy. Annemarie takes the bus.

It's 8:30 a.m., Saturday morning, and I am waiting by the roadside opposite the Solar Kitchen compound with my cycle safely parked inside. A few minutes later the small yellow Pondy Bus (actually an Auroville School Bus) stops to let me in. While boarding I quickly scan the situation inside. Will there be a place for me to sit? It's only the bus' second stop but you never know with the visitors season in full swing. I find there is just one place free and, relieved, I sit down. But what about all the others waiting further down the road? After a few more stops the bus is jam-packed, and I know there will be at least ten more people waiting to get on. At Kulapalayam, another yellow school bus appears. The drivers converse for a moment, then everybody who is standing rushes out and gets on the other bus. My bus goes on, past some more waiting ladies who appear to panic for they haven't yet seen the next bus coming and wonder why they have been ignored by the driver.

I'm going to Pondy to do shopping. I love going on the Pondy Bus for it's relaxing to be driven and you can chat with the person next to you whom you would never talk to normally. Driving the 12 kms. of ever busier road to Pondy on a motorcycle—with overcrowded buses speeding past you and leaving you in the ditch with their trail of dust and smoke bellowing into your face—may be faster, but it's no fun.

- Shopping list**
1. T-shirts
 2. Binding wire
 3. Plastic tap
 4. Haircut
 5. India Today
 6. Dog biscuits

The bus arrives at its final stop and parks in front of VAK bookstore. I get off and drop into the store to browse through the latest spiritual and art books. They have cookbooks too. I can't spend too much time though, for my shopping list is long...

The Indian Coffee House

The Indian Coffee House is an institution. With branches throughout India, you are likely to find one in all the major cities: we have our own version in Pondicherry. In the early days, it was the only place where Aurovilians could meet each other over a snack and a cup of coffee and be bitten by the bugs in the rattan chairs. Now there are many meeting places in Pondy, but the Indian Coffee House remains, endearingly, the same. It's big and crowded. A life-sized picture, dusty of course, of Mahatma Gandhi with his walking stick decorates

the back wall. There is a small back room for families; the large front room being mostly occupied by businessmen and travelers of all ages and sizes who sit and talk or simply gaze out the spacious front door at the passing crowd. Indeed, part of the allure of the Indian Coffee House is that you can sit so close to the street and yet be well protected from the dust and heat. But not from the noise.

The menu never changes. You can get masala dosai, chapattis, parottas, dhal, Bombay toast and, of course, coffee. Luckily, South India is famous for its coffee, even when it's served in small, chipped ceramic cups. For a short while, the owners switched to plastic cups—thin and horrible to hold—but there was such a protest from the clientele that they had to switch back. With all

the new shops and restaurants opening up recently, the Indian Coffee House remains a familiar, stable, reference point in the swirl of change that is engulfing Pondicherry.

Jill

Pipes and Valves

Dasaratty Chetty, the address for GI (galvanised iron) pipes and fittings, does not look like a store at all. You enter a narrow entrance, blocked by pipes, rolls of tar-felt paper, a toilet bowl and gunny sacks, leading you into a 'godown', the Indian version of a warehouse. There is hardly space for the three desks there: one for the shop owner, one for his assistant who writes the bills, and one for the only female person on the



The Indian Coffee House

"Stepcut"

There was no doubt about it—I needed a haircut. But where? The heavy straight locks of my fringe were so far down my face I couldn't see anymore. I wanted something stylish, something sharp. Not some poorly done asymmetric hedgehog-facsimile of a haircut, I wanted a good haircut. One that'd make me look twice at myself in passing shop windows and say "Not bad, not bad at all." But where? I consulted a few people for guidance on hairdressers

and received: "Just go to Muthu Step-cut."

Muthu Step-cut, Muthu Hairdressers or just plain Muthu, located in Pondy, known by many names and cuts hair. "But is he good?" I asked. "As long as you tell him exactly what you want, he's great." Fine. Decided. The next day I go.

I've just turned right from Nehru onto Mission street in Pondicherry and my eyes are scanning left as instructed. There it is. I park my vehicle and enter. The shop is narrow and unusually long. It appears empty except for a young man on a couch (the only piece of furniture in sight) casually flipping through a magazine. "Muthu?" I inquire.

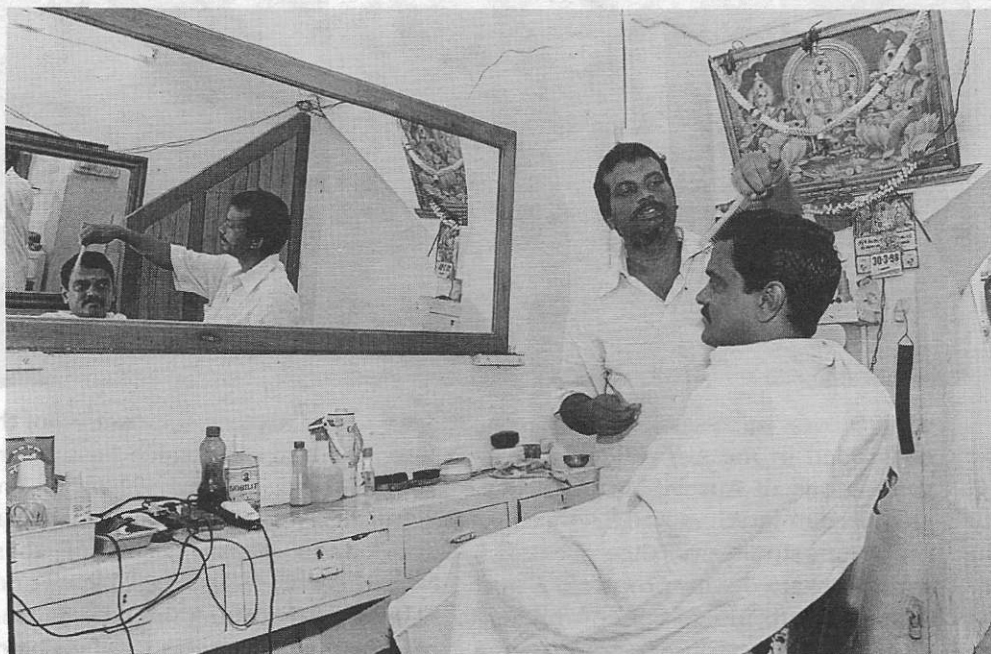
Magazine-man glances up briefly and motions toward a door in the rear of the room through which I pass. Inside is Muthu, a sturdy, serious-looking man standing before a padded vinyl barber's chair. He gestures and I sit facing the mirror. Without question I'm wrapped in a plastic cape. A second later Muthu's cutting my hair. "Hang on," I say and he stops. I remember: "Tell him exactly what you want..." I explain that I'd like a stylish haircut, that is: medium length on top and reasonably short on the sides. He nods, looks at my head and resumes cutting, casually shearing great handfuls of hair off my head with broad scissors. Although in my mind's eye I see medium length 'top-hair' blending invisibly into far shorter 'side-hair' creating an all-over easy yet sharp look, Muthu, now with what looks like a hedge-trimmer in one hand, completely shaves one side of my head. In my horror I attempt damage control and ask him to keep the rest medium-length. Driven however more by symmetry than my poorly expressed vision of a haircut, he proceeds to shave the hair off the other side of my head. I raise my hands in protest only to find them trapped beneath the copious folds of my cape.

The haircut apparently finished, Muthu begins to cover my face with shaving-cream. A shave I never asked for, but the opportunity for protest now a distant moment, I think, what the hell, we're half-way there already. My face, neck (all the way around)

and cheeks shaved, I am slapped with first a fragrant stinging fluid I take to be aftershave, then rubbed with a thick cream (lanolin, I think) then liberally dusted with white powder (talc?). I cough as Muthu fades from my peripheral vision behind me. The ordeal over, I relax into the chair. Suddenly my head is twisted at so severe an angle I can see the corner made by the left wall where it meets the ceiling. Muthu's expert hands continue to twist my chin until it points (no joke) towards the wall behind me and my neck releases a string of popping noises like twisted bubble-wrap (crick crack crick pop snap). A second later, my skull has regained its position and equilibrium and I'm just getting the hang of having my head back before it's being twisted the other way. Helplessly, I gape now at the right wall. Another series of explosive staccato pops and it's over. The room having righted itself, Muthu whips off the cape, removes stray hairs from the back of my neck with a stiff brush and I'm free to go.

I look like a guy with a crew-cut wearing a hairpiece seven sizes too small. There's not even a hint of the medium-length hair on top of my head blending into the fuzz on the sides of my head. The distinction is so sharp, the light gives my head a two-tone look. I look like a toilet-brush. (Who cares, it'll grow out, I tell myself miserably.) My face feels like I've just had the top layer of skin removed, but my neck, grossly manhandled and twisted out of shape, feels great. Would I do it again? Not in a million years. But I did.

Jesse



premises, the neatly dressed bookkeeper. This is THE place in town for all sizes of GI pipes. You give your order to the owner, who then shouts towards the back of the shop. After a minute or so, you hear the clank of feet on hollow pipes. "Size? How many lengths? How you take?" And before you've finished your answers to these cryptic questions, you see steel pipes zooming by your head, blocking the sidewalk for pedestrians. One wrong move, and you might be decapitated. The usual way of transporting goods from Pondy to Auroville is by bullock cart. But the bullock carts are no longer allowed to enter busy Nehru Street. This means that all the six-foot pipes have to be carried two streets around the corner where your cart is waiting for you. And hopefully nobody gets hit on the way.

Tineke

Hot Breads

Hot Breads is a recently opened shop/cafe in Pondicherry manufacturing and selling French-style pastries and bread. It also sells coffee and cool drinks. It is at the expensive end of the food market selling coffee and a croissant for seventeen rupees. Like any organic body, Hot Breads has its moods: sometimes it is surly and ungrateful and sometimes sweet and chatty in a surprisingly personable way. On a bad day you can arrive to find no less than twelve people standing behind the long counter ar-

should eat something else if you're going to grow up big and strong.

The croissants are good as long as they're eaten the day they're bought. Hot Breads makes some good vegetarian and non-vegetarian pastries which, if reheated, can make a tasty dinner. The coffees are not only expensive, they're microscopic. Each comes with two sugar cubes which if used raise the level of the beverage almost to the top of cup. One croissant will easily absorb the entire contents of one cup. Despite all this, the coffee is good, but at Rs 10 each, you'd certainly hope so.

Jesse

Hi-Fashion

Forget all the Van Heusen, Raymond and Lacoste shops that have mushroomed in the main shopping street, Jawaharlal Nehru Street in the last two years in Pondy. Forget those air-conditioned "Silk Houses" and the more ubiquitous small and pleasant-looking boutiques that stock formal and informal Indian clothing for women. If all you need is a T-shirt and a pair of comfortable shorts, the standard wear in Auroville, a visit to Hi-Fashion is in order. Located in a basement on Nehru Street and Mission Street "cutting," as they say in India, Hi-Fashion stocks T-shirts, shorts, skirts and Western dresses of all sizes and colours. Watch out though, as



The magazine stand at the corner

roadside stalls that sprout along Nehru Street in the evenings, with luck in the mornings, and on Sundays. These are more stylish in look but beware and inspect the clothing well: the dim streetlights can fool you about the colour and more often than not, there is some flaw in the item which had resulted in it not being exported. Other shops, not quite with as much range but with more space and better-lit than Hi-Fashion have come up in recent years. But, when all is said and done, Hi-Fashion continues to dictate the fashion statement in this city of dawn.

Bindu

The Magazine Stand

Only two Indian daily newspapers are delivered to your door: when you are lucky you will get the *Hindu* delivered at breakfast, and the *Indian Express* at coffee time. But if you want to keep up with the Indian and world news and don't have any subscriptions, you will have to go into town. On the corner of Nehru and Mission Street you will find a tiny stall, not bigger than two-and-a-half sq.m., managed by a young man with extremely thick glasses and his father. This place stocks a large assortment of Indian and foreign magazines and journals, ranging from *Newsweek* and *Time* to *Filmfare*, *PC Quest*, *Inside Outside*, *Indian Architect and Designer*, *National Geographic*, and lots of Tamil magazines. And when your nicotine urge gets too much, you can also get your favorite brand of cigarettes there. You either buy a pack, or you buy one single cigarette which you can then light with a piece of smouldering rope hanging alongside.

You have to be careful with making space for passers-by. If you take one step backwards while browsing through the magazines, you will end up in the black, smelly sludge of the gutter three feet below!

Tineke

Hotel Aristo

The roof garden restaurant at Hotel Aristo is one of the wonders of Pondicherry. You stagger, sun-struck, from frantic Nehru Street, up pre-

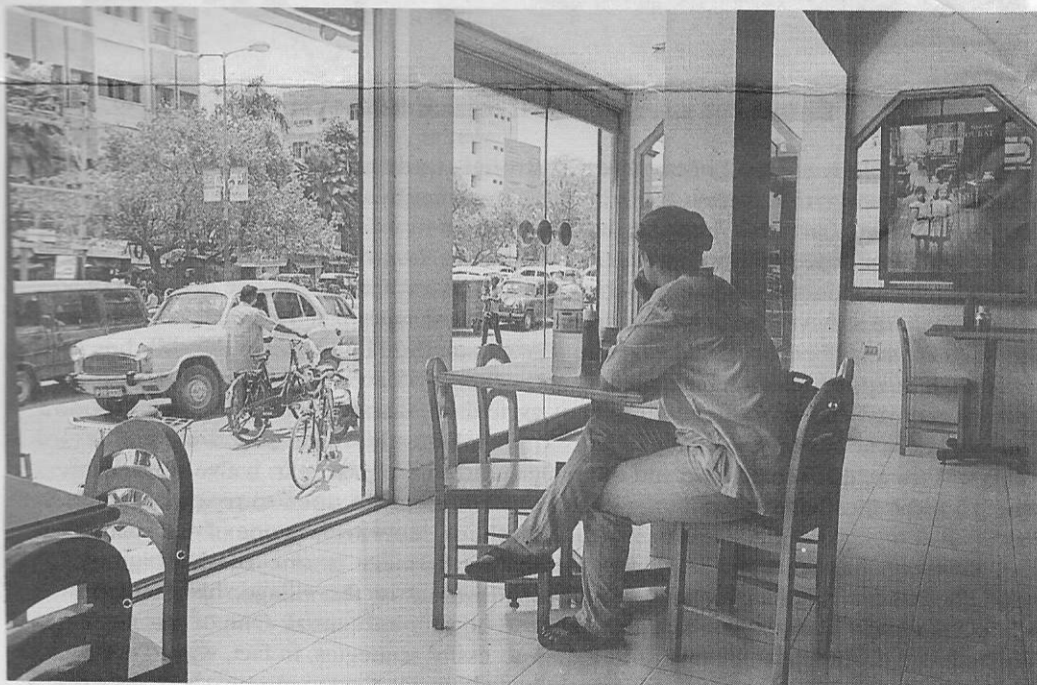
cipitous steps that smell of disinfectant, and suddenly you emerge into a different world. Everywhere there are plants, rows upon rows upon rows of them, many emerging surreally from the craniums of grinning porcelain jugs. There are birds, there are fish, there is an extravaganza of lamps which run the full gamut of styles from imitation art nouveau to Tamil Nadu temple. There are the waiters, specially trained in the loose-limbed flip-flop gait that is *de rigueur* at the Hotel Aristo. And there is the food: 207 items on the main menu alone, including such delicacies as brain masala, string hopper mutton biriyani, vegetable pagoda, "spanish" soup (which tastes suspiciously of spinach), chinese pan roll, and that glory of cross-cultural gastronomic cuisine, Western chicken. And then, of course, there is the "special tea", 5% proof, served out of white porcelain teapots into pottery mugs at just the right temperature (tepid) to delight the heart of every true-born Englishman.

Watching the waiters gossiping in the corner, or the son of the Muslim proprietor making his dignified promenade up and down between the tables, gives one a whole new feeling for eternity. Yet even at Hotel Aristo things have changed. Gone the avuncular maitre d'hotel, Pillai, who winced when I, still wet behind the ears, suggested that the hotel provide newspapers for the delectation of its customers, replaced by a young man with an ambitious wasteline and embroidered shirts: gone too are some of the great dishes like "fish ramikin" and "malai kurma", supplanted by finger chips and cheese toast; gone that wonderful view of the sun setting over Pondicherry rooftops, obscured now by the hideous shopping complex elbowing its way skyward next door.

Yet, after 26 years' service, sweet Joseph is still there, beaming out his "vanakkam, saukema?" as he shuffles past and helpfully turns on the huge aviator fan which pins your ears to the side of your head and sends false eyelashes and hairpieces cascading across the street. And still decidedly there is that feeling of laid-back welcome and faintly louche comfort (rather like pulling on an old pair of favourite slippers) which, along with the tasty food and generous portions, still makes Hotel Aristo the very best value in town.

Alan

(continued on page 6)



A cool moment at a/c Hot Breads

going loudly about who should be doing what whilst customers on the other side wait, some patiently, some not, pastries in hand. I arrive at the counter to pay and the man writing receipts and giving change has his head down and is muttering curses under his breath. Some perhaps for my benefit because in English he says, "I hate this place," then hands me my change without looking up. Bon appetit. On other days, Hot Bread is a picture of harmony. Upon entry a man behind the counter makes eye-contact and smiles, in the background others deftly manufacture exotic French pastries before your very eyes. You present your intended purchase, the man behind the counter looks at you with eyes wide and inquires in an almost paternal tone: "That's all you're getting?" as if you really

you descend into the shop through its narrow and dangerous flight of stairs. If you are not gripping the railing, an overzealous shopper can knock you down. As it is one has to fight with other shoppers for standing room in this little shop overflowing with clothing. The racks are so full that one cannot properly riffle through the dresses on display. And checking an item out is a must for the labels can be misleading: an "XL" can be smaller than a "S"; and imitations of Lacoste, Nike, Proline T-shirts abound. If you are really selective about what you wear and not prone to claustrophobia, the shop, surprisingly enough, offers 4 sq. ft. of space behind a door as a dressing-room.

Similar Western clothing in comfortable cotton can also be found on the

Towards sustainable solutions in agriculture

One devastating legacy of the so-called "Green Revolution" is the pressure on farmers, through the collusion of government and business, to misuse powerful chemicals for fertilizer and dangerous poisons for pest control. Most of India, after centuries of farming practices that were more sustainable but less efficient, believes now that the economy of farming demands expensive inputs of certain chemicals to increase yields. According to the Indian Agriculture Research Institute: "The use of pesticides on Indian soil has been increasing at a rate of 20%

per annum since 1989, though the agricultural production has not recorded any significant increase. More than half of these pesticides are globally banned." When there was an increase in production, it was impressive and persuasive, but the cost in terms of the ruin of the land and the health of the people was catastrophic. For example, local farmers are caught in the downward spiral of having to use more and more expensive and toxic inputs to maintain yields. Even though more than 60% of insects are predators (even in a monoculture situation), the poisons kills all the "good

guys" as well as the "bad guys" except those who become resistant. Then, heavier interventions are required until the eventual ruin of the land and toxic conditions for the people who do the work and for the people who eat the food become obvious.

Auroville set out from the beginning, first to restore the land and then to continue sustainable agricultural practices. The record is generally good, but far from perfect. While most Aurovilians agree in theory with health first, it is difficult to live with that menu in practice. The ordinary food habits of Aurovilians reflect ordi-

nary consumerist tendencies, and are not always geared to local, organic food, seasonal patterns or healthy diets.

Food habits are deep, culture-bound, psychological and very slow to evolve, as we all know. Food free from the toxic residues of "modern" farming is preferred in theory, but the hard work and support necessary to realize such food production is something most are not prepared to do—yet. However, there are exceptions and we are introducing some new initiatives which may help to reverse the tide.

An end to the poison fields?

"The background to the compost project we initiated with local farmers was the typhoid epidemic that happened in Auroville and the surrounding villages a few years ago," explains Dr. Lucas, the coordinator of various new initiatives involving local farmers and based upon organic farming methods. "The typhoid was spread by flies feeding off Pondicherry waste brought by local farmers to put on their fields as compost. As all other attempts to resolve this dangerous practice were failing, I decided to produce good quality compost for the farmers in order to discourage the import of this waste.

"However, this involved an educational component: I needed to explain to them the link between typhoid, the flies and the Pondicherry waste, and the need for good quality compost for the land. And this naturally led me on to talk about the problems associated with the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides upon which they depend. They understand this; they know that pesticides kill almost everything, which is why, in Kuilapalayam, they no longer allow farmers to wash out their pesticide barrels in the village pond. But the question they kept asking me was, "What is the alternative?" As yet, I didn't have one.

"Then I heard about an entomologist called Thirumalai who knew about biological pesticides. When Thirumalai agreed to guide the local farmers in their preparation and use, we had meetings with them which culminated, in March 1997, in 20 Kuilapalayam farmers entering into an agreement with us. They agreed not to spray chemicals on 20 acres of their cashew topes (in consolidated blocks of four to five acres) for the next year. In return, we provided them with good compost at a highly subsidised rate, we distributed green manure seeds, and we provide them with and show them how to use the bio-pesticides which Thirumalai makes up from local plants and trees.

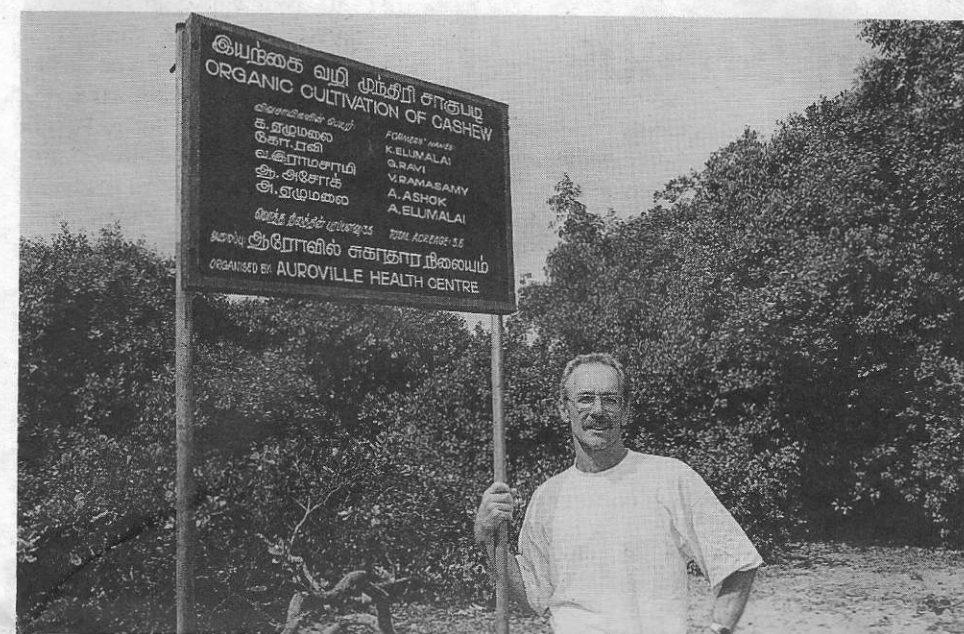
"Their question, of course, is 'Will we lose out by not using chemicals?' While we cannot, as yet, guarantee a market for their cashews, and while we are not offering to cover any losses due to smaller yields, I tell them it is not likely they will be worse off. Why? Because they will save so much by not having to purchase ex-

pensive pesticides (for which, in recent years, the Government has reduced subsidies). In other words, we don't talk to them about global problems of sustainability; we don't even point out—which has been proven in the laboratory—that the local pests are now so resistant to pesticides that they require those pesticides to be applied at 50 times the recommended dosages if they are to have any effect. Rather, we ask them to make simple price calculations and offer them an alternative which not only improves, through composting and the beginnings of polyculture, the health of the soil, but which also makes economic sense. The spraying season has now begun: very soon we shall know the results of this initial experiment.

"Having said this, I'm also aware that we cannot offer the local farmers any models of exemplary organic cashew cultivation in Auroville: the topes we look after are generally organic by default rather than consciously managed. So our next step was to arrange, in conjunction with Francis of the Land and Estate Management Group and the new farming community, Adventure, to carry out some trial experiments on cashew topes which have been recently acquired. Our aim is to ultimately demonstrate what are the optimum yields under organic cultivation methods. We are now marking out the different plots, and will use this year's yield—the result of unmanaged cultivation—as the baseline data for future experiments.

"One of the people who helped me plan these experiments was Jakes who runs an organic farming business near Kodaikanal. One day he surprised me by mentioning he uses only biodynamic methods. Biodynamic farming is a school of organic farming based upon lectures given by Rudolf Steiner in 1924. Without getting into the controversy about his spiritual background, it should be pointed out that people have been working with his methods for many years now, in all parts of the world, and a solid body of research and experience demonstrates that it works, however bizarre some of his methods may appear.

"When Jakes told me that he grew all the plants for the necessary preparations in the hills around Kodaikanal, and that between 80-100 farmers in his area were



Dr. Lucas on an experimental organic cashew plot

interested in biodynamics, I became very excited. Knowing that many Auroville farmers would share this interest, last July I organised a seminar on biodynamics in Auroville. Since then, a number of Auroville farms have started adopting these practices. Then I realised that the biodynamic approach also had tremendous potential for the village farmers, mainly because it is so practically-based. This was the real alternative I could offer them to chemical monoculture agriculture.

"Consequently, this January I organised the first biodynamic weekend workshop for village farmers. It was tough. I invited fifty, only thirteen came, and by the second day this was down to seven. But I learned that it's always like this at the beginning, and at least we had our initial core group. For of those who remained, five farmers (all of whom were already part of the biological pest control project) offered to use biodynamic methods on an additional 15 or more acres of their land.

"The next step was to train native Tamil speakers as guides for these farmers. So we sent Muthu from Edayanchavadi, Satyabalan from Kuilapalayam and another man from Pondicherry for a three weeks' course in Kodaikanal. They all came back enthusiastic, and now they meet the core group farmers each month to plan out the next month's work: for with biodynamics, there is something to do—making compost, preparing and spraying liquid fertilisers etc.—all year round. The one thing we emphasise very

strongly to them is that if they return to using chemicals on these fields they will immediately undo all the work they have done so far; the one-sided action of chemical fertilisers will wipe out most of the diverse microbial flora that the biodynamic method builds up in the soil.

"While 35 acres given over to organic agriculture doesn't seem a huge amount, psychologically we've gained incredible ground in the past year: we've seen that local farmers are open to trying organic methods. Moreover, as one of our participating farmers is one of the biggest landowners in the village, his example will be very influential. One of our most successful strategies, in fact, was to erect boards in all the organic cashew topes which tell everybody that these are organically-managed and by whom. It brings self-esteem to the participating farmers, but it also puts moral pressure upon them not to cheat: if they do, they know their name will be struck off the board and they will lose face in the village.

"The next step, if these initiatives really take off and we get more farmers participating, will be to set up a control system—a system of accreditation or certification that the produce is organic—and then to market the produce, either locally or abroad. So far we've managed to initiate the organic farming projects with Health Centre funds—i.e. money from a German development agency. While the sponsors are happy at the way we've

(continued on page 5)

Solutions on the Side of Pesticide

The Palmyra team establishes commercial outlets for bio-pesticides

Each year as the cashew flowers begin to bloom, the reality of pesticide spraying by local farmers and landowners who lease out the cashew fields, enters the eyes and noses of everyone. Usually there is some reaction about it, some blame is put on somebody, some impassioned speeches are made at meetings or written in the AVNews. And then? Nothing.

Every year the scenario is similar and this year is no exception. This is not to say that efforts have not been made by Village Action, the Farm Group, the Health Centre and others, and those continue. However, this year there is a development that has been many years in the making and is just starting to take off. The initiative for this work comes from Ravi and Gaspard. Ravi comes out of the graduate programme in ecology at Pondicherry University (1992). While referring to themselves as research ecologists, they approach their work with the dedication and commitment needed to make it happen at the village level. Ravi differs with some environmental activists about the green revolution. He describes it as "a range of agricultural technologies made possible through rigorous research of a very high quality. The bottom line for these technologies is to maximize productivity, not for the short term but for many generations. A lot of this research is today answering questions foremost on the minds of environmentalists."

Ravi and Anu, his wife (also an ecologist), have joined the Auroville-based Palmyra team in Aurobrindavan where office and laboratory facilities have been set up. He opts for a "sustainable" approach rather than a charity-based one, where the bio-pesticides they have developed are sold to the farmers by an entrepreneur so the project takes on a life of its own and will continue beyond the extent of the project funding. The funding is from the Ministry of Science and Technology through two grants and the most recent grant is called "The Evaluation of Locally Abundant Plants for Commercial Production of Botanical Pesticides".

Ravi and Gaspard have successfully established two commercial outlets for bio-pesticides. One is in the Auroville re-

lated village of Sanjeevanagar and the other is forty kms. away on the Villupuram Road.

Gnanasekhar is a farmer and the manager of the nearby unit. He makes the botanical pesticide using a household food grinder, using Ravi's input from his research on published studies about the efficacy of neem (Margosa) on different crops. Palani does the same thing at the other unit and Gaspard (who lives in Pondicherry) coordinates the work. Profits are split: 40% goes to the unit managers and 60% goes back into the project for more research, advertising and educational outreach. The Pondicherry University theatre group has contributed a very good traditional street drama as part of a general awareness campaign. In Auroville certain groups like Land and Estate Management have provided test plots; communities like Adventure have enthusiastically supported the research, and individuals like Dr. Lucas (see accompanying article) are also involved.

As is sometimes the case in Auroville, people have also made the work more difficult through misunderstandings and lack of proper communication. Some sites could not be used for research because it meant interventions unacceptable to the stewards of that land, a bio-pest control unit was sited on land designated as "sanctuary" and there was concern about development and traffic. Not being an Aurovilian, it has been frustrating for Ravi to try and work it out with the complexities of the Auroville scene.

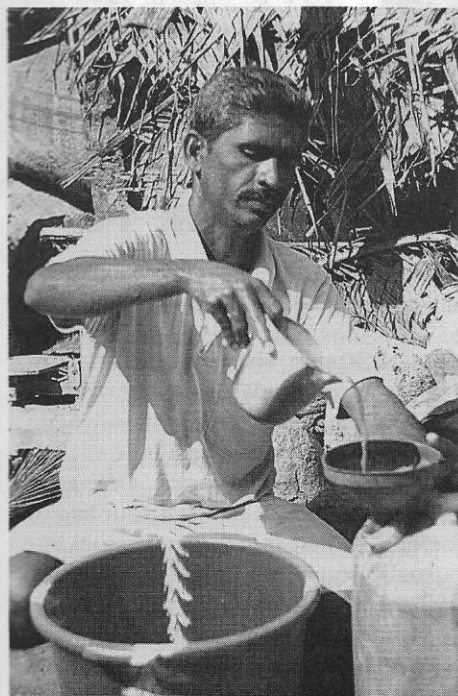
On top of all this, the research work is very demanding. To maintain all the sample plots, collect all the insects, do the surveys and studies in the field and in the lab, is a huge task. The sample plots are screened into sectors using the new bio-pesticide, conventional pesticides, and control plots to compare data. In the early mornings, insects need to be collected and then the counting and classifying of the more than a thousand different insects is required. In addition to the plant extracts, of which neem is the major product used, there is the experimental work of breeding and raising, under special laboratory conditions, predators of the pests which can be introduced as part of natural control.

Ravi meets with his team of five every week and their work is dovetailed into the Palmyra team of nine. Much of the research has not been done before and the conditions, for example, under which cashews in Tamil Nadu are grown, differ from those in Kerala state where most of the research has been done. They are also working toward setting up a web page and publishing booklets and training manuals.

In looking closely at the project, the conclusion seems to be that the work is a step in the direction which agriculture must go for us to survive. Mother Earth is the bottom line, whatever our philosophy or ideals. She sustains us—if we choose to sustain Her.

Bill

Gnanasekhar making neem pesticide



A village doctor

Muruganandam, from Bommayapalayam village near Auroville, practises siddha (or ayurvedic) and homeopathic medicine along with his father and brothers. When I first met him, he gave me some ayurvedic flower tea which he had just prepared. Intrigued, I wanted to know more...

"The recipe for this tea, which is made up of local flowers and roots, is very old. It is very good for strengthening bones and reducing blood pressure and, like all ayurvedic preparations, it has no side-effects. Not everybody in the village likes getting injections, which is what the conventional doctors do all the time, so they come to me for this 'softer' treatment: my pills taste nice!

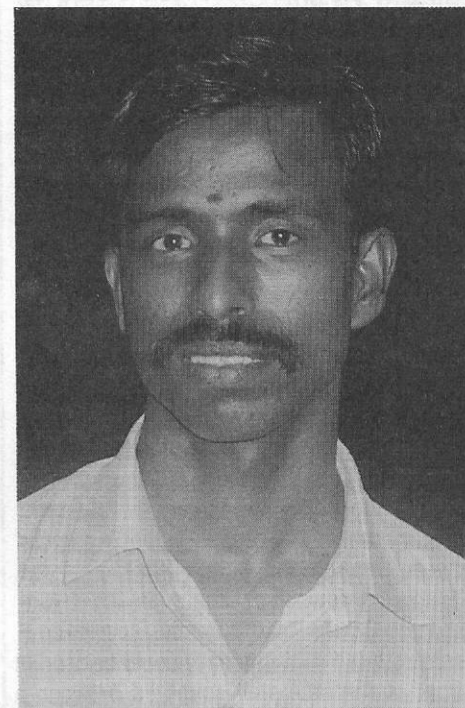
"I've always been interested in nature, and this led me to study natural medicine. My father helped me, but I also read a lot of books. I collect many flowers in the Auroville area, but some of the rarer constituents I purchase in the ayurveda shops in Pondicherry and then make them up at home.

"The young people in the village are not nearly as strong as the old people, nor will they live as long. Many people die now between 50-55, but before people often lived into their 80s. This is because the villagers no longer exercise their bodies nor eat much natural food. Thirty years ago, there were many varieties of six-month crops grown around here—rice, peanuts, ragi, tennai—and because the crops matured slowly, the food was strong, excellent for the body. Now everybody is either growing cashews which go for export, or three-month rice crops which need artificial fertilisers and pesticides. In other words, poisons. Hardly anybody grows food for themselves any more—they buy it from the shops—and white rice has replaced ragi in the diets of everybody except the very poor. And many people drink tea, coffee and things like Coca Cola, all of which contain chemicals which can give headaches and cause stomach troubles.

"At this time of the year, I often treat people who have been using pesticides. They have headaches, or stomach problems, or swollen eyes. I tell them they don't need to use pesticides to control the pests—I use a natural pesticide made up of neem oil and soap on my fields—but most don't want to hear. They don't look to the future, to what might happen to their bodies in a few years' time with all these poisons about. They just look at the need of the day itself. For them, more poison sprayed on their fields means fewer *poochies* (insects), and this means bigger profits. That's all that interests them.

"Another health problem in this area is due to all the factories which have been built nearby in Kalapet. They use immense amounts of water, which is causing salination of our wells, and they are poisoning the surroundings with chemicals. Two years ago, the local fishermen agitated against one factory which was pouring chemicals into the sea: it was killing all the fish. Now this factory simply pours it into a pit behind the factory! Many people who live or work in Kalapet have jaundice because of the poisons around.

"Even with all these difficulties it is possible to stay healthy if you take regular exercise and eat the right food. I always begin the day with half an hour of surya namaskar (a series of asanas or



Muruganandam

PHOTO ALAN

yoga postures), and then drink one and a half litres of water (in this climate you should drink five litres of water a day to keep the blood circulating well). On one day every week I eat only natural, uncooked food as cooked food loses much of its strength in the cooking. I also adjust my diet to the season. In the hot time, I eat cooling food like curd rice, lemons, cucumber and watermelon. I will only eat one mango a day because an excess of mangoes can cause skin problems and fever. In the cool months, I eat ragi in its more solid, sweetened form, and dosai made of tennai. An excellent food for all times of year is sprouts: sprouted ulundu (black gram), ragi and kumbu are best. Two spoonfuls a day are sufficient. And I never eat curd at night because this makes the head heavy and can lead to colds.

"Few people in the village really understand all of this. That's why I like to work with Auroville people—they are much more on this line."

From an interview by Alan.
Translator: Selvam.

Dr. Lucas (continued from page 4)

utilised the funds for this new development, it's clear that we have to find a specific sponsor now for the work of educating the farmers, building up an accreditation system and developing marketing.

"As to my organic development!... When I was 19, I worked on a biodynamic farm, and my first plan on leaving school was to study agriculture: only later did I decide to study medicine instead. So now I'm returning to that earlier interest. Actually, it fits perfectly—I'm still fully in touch with health, but now it is the health of the soil. I don't know what the future holds. But as long as I have a vision, and joy and enthusiasm in my work, I know I can pull people along with me."

From an interview by Alan

"Cone Ice" Age

The history of ice cream in Pondicherry requires volumes that may never be written. Here is merely the melted down version of one specialized feature known as "cone ice" which seems to be the Tamil idiom for ice cream cone. Before cone ice, cups of unusual frozen consistencies labelled ice cream, in tiny asymmetrical rounds of limp cardboard, came by train from Madras to select shops, but that is another story. Forever and ever and still, the Aristo Hotel has a little man with a hand crank connected into a long stainless steel freezer very slowly cranking out "glass Banella" which is vanilla ice cream in a tall thin glass. It assumed various styles and names over the years depending whether it contained bits of watermelon, coloured nuts, coloured gelatins and some unidentifiables, but if it contained all of them it was called the "Honeymoon Special" rather than "tutti frutti" or "peach melba"; but again, that is another story.

Our story begins one very sweaty summer in the mid-seventies when a rumour swept through the barren plateau of the "emerging township" about an ice cream shop on Gandhi Road in Pondy. Bicycles covered with red dust gradually could be seen in front of the little stall squeezed between a paper mart and an electrical repair shop (or was it a watch repair?). Each day, they made a different flavour, thought not all of the same quality. The chocolate ice cream was supramental orange in colour and the best. It did not taste at all like chocolate but after the long ride into Pondy etc., well, it was cool, wet,



and sweet. The cones were not leak-proof and of a strange consistency. A very small napkin was supplied to stop the dripping, but it was not sufficient, as the meltdown was nearly as rapid as the sweat dripping from your forehead. The green cone ice was known as "pista" which was supposed to connect it to pistachio, but this was doubtful. Yellow cone ice was inedible because of its horrid chemi-

The chocolate ice cream was supramental orange in colour and the best. It did not taste at all like chocolate but after the long ride into Pondy etc., well, it was cool, wet, and sweet.

cal taste, but I knew people who liked even this. They called it "pineapple". Pondy trips in those days were very risky because one could turn up at the shop and find it was a pineapple day since a random pattern of flavours was the habit, but still worse were all those days when one arrived only to hear "no current". Electrical supply being what it was, this happened often enough to make one realize that "all life is yoga". Then the shop disappeared to our great dismay, but happily it turned up on a side street where obviously the rent was lower. A great day dawned a few years later when Grace opened up next to Grand Bakery on Mission St. Still, the leaking cones and inevitable pineapple days, but a notch up in the quality of cone ice. Their "banella" was the best but they made it only once a week. Regrettably too, the machine in Grace broke down constantly. Weeks, sometimes months, would go by before it could be repaired. Alas,

the machine broke permanently, the shop moved down the street next to the Auto Parts Shop and now sells only lousy Kwality Cups from Madras, but the machine is still prominently displayed as some sort of immortal symbol. Maybe too, Arun Ice Cream opening across the street with an a/c that worked except on very hot days, had something to do with it. Arun sells fancy packaged items like Cassata, choco-bars, Spanish or Italian Delight. One has to be very careful not to confuse Spanish and Italian Delight because one of them is laced with red, yellow and green syrups that stick to your teeth but the other is more of a chocolate ripple with nuts—not bad. Next, opposite across Mission Street, Cadbury Dollops moved in with their super fancy flavours like Rum 'n Raisin where you got a miniscule scoop for a monumental price. They went bust, but opened up again with Wall's Ice Cream which has a similar line of flavours at the same price, but of lower quality. Just last year along came Richy Rich with what they call fresh Italian soft cone ice. It's not too bad and they use Dairy Queen napkins for the still leaking cones—but they give you two, one inside the other and it takes quite sometime to leak through two, but the cones are such a long tasteless chew that I get it in a cup now. I can come on the motorcycle too, vanilla is available everyday, and the current mostly stays on in Pondy now. The cone ice there is fifteen times the price of what I used to pay. Times have changed. Gone are the days I sat in Grace on a broken stool, sweating, slowly watching my cone ice magically flow out of a machine about to break down forever.

Bill

Kuppuswamy

The laundry line at Center Guest House has to be replaced by new G.I. (galvanized iron) non-rusting wire. There are several places in Pondy where one can buy the wire. But only one shop stocks the indispensable clamps: Kuppuswamy in Bharathi Street. You go around the corner of the market into Bharathi Street, past the two back entrances and then immediately on your left you see rolls of wire mesh, mumpies (shovel blades), scales and rounds of binding wire hanging in what looks like the front porch of an old house. This is Kuppusamy Hardware Stores, an amazing conglomerate of anything which has to do with hardware. I ask the owner, seated behind his tiny desk, pen in hand, for the G.I. clamps. He calls the stock keeper, a small, skinny and ageless man who stretches out his arm towards one of the jam-packed and, to a casual observer, extremely disorganized shelves. If one day this stock keeper is not there, I don't think anybody will be able to find his way among the maze of boxes stacked haphazardly and tightly on shelves that reach up to the ceiling. "Please sit down, Madam!" I sit down on a lone wobbly steel chair. I look around and smile at the owner. "Vous êtes d'Auroville, n'est-ce pas?" he asks. Some of the older Pondicherrians still speak French and love to take the opportunity to speak that language. In the meantime, the store-keeper managed to find the correct box which contains about twenty of the desired clamps. Luckily, there still are four of the size I need. "Anything else, Madam?" the friendly shop owner asks me. "No thank you, not right now". I look

at my watch and realize that I just spent three quarters of an hour buying four small clamps.

Tineke

Nilgiris

Nilgiris is the name of a small district in western Tamil Nadu located at the junction of the Eastern and Western Ghats mountain ranges. It is also the name of a department store chain that specialises in grocery articles, including the special ones which you normally can't get. In the early days, you wouldn't go to Madras without a visit to the Nilgiris shop there, even though your maintenance allowance would be highly insufficient to do a thorough shopping. Recently, a Nilgiris shop opened in Pondicherry. Though the problem of the insufficient maintenance has remained unchanged, a visit to the shop is great fun. Air-conditioned, well stocked, and equipped with bar-coded cash registers, Nilgiris seems a far cry from the days of the shabby Linda Store, where, on a not too clean stool, someone would use a rusty knife to cut your required quantity of Kodaikanal cheese. Linda has since disappeared, but the two other most frequently visited grocery shops in Pondicherry—Grinde and Sri B.N. & Sons—have kept that image of untidiness which is so common to Indian grocery shops. The merchandise is literally stacked on top of each other, accessible only with the help of the ever-present

employee who carefully dusts each article before giving it to you. But just as Hidesign years ago started an image change in Nehru street with its modern shop window, Nilgiris may now have set a new standard for grocery shopping. Perhaps also for the new Pour Tous?

Carel and Tineke



Sri Aurobindo Ashram building

The Samadhi

For quite a few Aurovilians, no trip to Pondy is complete without a visit to the Samadhi of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother.

The Samadhi is a busy place nowadays. "Pondicherry has discovered Sri Aurobindo," says an Ashramite. And not only Pondicherry... during the day busloads of tourists come to walk respectfully around the Samadhi. "Sri Aurobindo once said that a time will come when you won't be able to find a place to stand

here anymore," says Nirodbaran, a well-known Ashramite who looked after Sri Aurobindo as a doctor. And this prediction seems to be coming true.

But the evening hours are still relatively quiet... these hours are more or less restricted to Ashramites and a few others. People kneeling at the Samadhi touching the cool marble with their heads say a prayer, offer incense sticks, or simply sit quietly in concentration. To a Western mindset, much of this may appear to be "religiousness". To others, these are simply different ways of expressing one's devotion to the Divine. Whatever the meaning, to Aurovilians the Samadhi is a place to recharge oneself, physically and spiritually, after the hot, dusty, chaotic atmosphere of Pondicherry.

Carel

Back to Auroville

At 12.30 p.m. sharp, the bus departs for Auroville. We have been slowly cooking inside for a while—usually you board the waiting bus a little early to make sure you've got a seat. One good way to reserve a seat is to put your bag on it beforehand. This is Indian custom and is usually respected by all, though you may have to explain this fact occasionally to a visitor fresh from the West.

It will be one o'clock when I arrive at the Solar Kitchen; time for lunch.

NYMPHEA ART GALLERY

Mother said, "The will of the Divine is to manifest itself, not to retire in complete inaction, in absolute silence. If the Divine consciousness was really inactive and non-manifested Bliss, there would never have been a creation." (Conversations, 1929).

"Five years ago I started to think about this," says Louis. "Now we start to materialise the dream." The dream is a building project which Louis calls an artist's village, where sculptors, painters,

musicians—indeed everyone involved in the creation of beauty—can come to live and work together. It is being supported by a gallery called Nymphaea, which opened in "downtown" Kulapalayam on Auroville's birthday. The gallery contains painting, sculpture, ceramics, objets d'art from Gerard, Victor, Rajan and Louis. The idea is to use the money earned from the gallery to support the project.

"We created this project as an answer to an urgent need in Auroville to open and develop experimental places in which to share a creative and constructive work." The initial proposal is to build

in Sve Dam different little workshops, each one working on a wide range of materials. "It will be a place where research, study and creation will be the first preoccupation. The people involved will aim at a real sharing of inner and outer wealth." Like Kalabhumi, this project hopes to attract artists who can excite and inspire each other.

So far there are ten people involved. The first phase encompasses an area of 2,500 sq.m. "We will keep the cost at approximately 1,000 Rs. per sq. m., using light-weight materials. The building of dwellings and workshops in light-weight materials obliges us to compose and invent with different natural and synthetic materials available in India." At the moment, the water and electricity for this area of Auroville comes from Revelation, so the community will have to establish their infrastructure. For this they need money. A restaurant has been started at Sve Dam which serves delicious ayurvedic meals six times a week. "It's an experiment which is open to everyone. Auroville is in its essence a divine creation," says Louis. "And this creation (of the artists' village) is a step to reach the divine world. Our aim will be to find Her and offer to Her our most beautiful, luminous creations: a line, a piece of music, a painting, a sculpture, any object which is able by its idea to open some minds. This project when in place and in action could bring out the creativity that is latent in each human being, in particular the young Aurovilians."

Interview by Jill



Nymphaea art gallery, recently opened at Kulapalayam

Perspectives on Town Planning

A group of young German architecture students propose new models

Planning "the city the earth needs" has never been easy. Challenges such as the unavailability of all the land required for the city, the potential scarcity of water, the organic but haphazard development pattern that has persisted through the years, make town-planning of Auroville a difficult task. In this context, the innovative project of inviting twenty-five young architecture students from Aachen University to design a town plan, or as the Development Group put it, "to give a new approach on how to deal with the challenges of the town" seemed like manna from heaven. The students, assisted and supervised by Jana and Peter Anderschitz, produced, in groups of two and three, maps of Auroville showing ten different approaches to town planning.

In the first week of their project, the students freely drew sketches of their initial impressions of Auroville. They were quick to observe that the Matrimandir represented an active force and spiritual centre of the city; that Auroville was still primarily a rural zone with its residents being highly individualized in their approach and lifestyles; that the population density needed for creating a truly urban atmosphere was not yet present; that the traffic in Auroville was already excessive and chaotic given the present circuitous road system; and that while the so-far unregulated and organic growth of Auroville represented a certain creative dynamism, it was necessary to lay down some basic rules for devel-

opment for the proper growth of the city.

Such observations were reflected in the models suggested by the students. One model proposed a grid-like development of roads and infrastructure in the whole of Auroville with current development representing the outer lines of a grid with the space inside the grid being systematically filled up as the population grew. Some noted the current development along the tar road in Kulapalayam as having a certain dynamic urban character and proposed a "yin-yang" model for the city with the inner city area around Matrimandir being the concentrated, spiritual heart of the city, and Kulapalayam or even the fast-developing road to Repos beach being the material or service heart. They all were unanimous in recognizing that the villages in the Auroville area would continue to develop independently and that there was a need to brainstorm on how to integrate them with the rest of Auroville.

Though such ideas brought a breath of fresh air to the developmental plans of Auroville, practically speaking there were hardly any suggestions that could be immediately adopted to improve the current development pattern. This drawback was not a reflection on the students' ingenuity, but on the lack of preparation by their Auroville supervisors. This exercise in town planning would have been much more fruitful if the students had been given con-

crete details or physical parameters such as maps of the existing road network, the infrastructure and development in the existing zones, the soil profile, the watersheds and underground flow of the aquifers, etc.

A more exciting development in this field however is the potential for collaboration with the faculty of Aachen University for creating a state-of-the-art computer database of maps and information to help in the planning of the city. At a different presentation, separate from that of the students, the faculty members demonstrated the CD, "Aachen in Stichten" (Aachen in Layers) published by Aachen University that shows how maps depicting various physical data can be overlaid on one another with a Geographical Information System (GIS) software to create, with comparative ease, various town planning models. Already two visiting faculty members, Rainer Rudow and Thorsten Nikolai, have presented interested Aurovilians with copies of various maps of Auroville of the scale 1:5000 and 1:20,000 that they developed with the computer software Autocad 14 in Germany. While these maps can be improved upon in detail, this is the first time that Auroville possesses maps of this scale that are generated by the computer and not drawn by hand. Hopefully, the coming months will witness a technically sophisticated dimension added to our current hackneyed debates on town planning.

Bindu

ALICE

On April 2nd, Alice, wife of Navoditte, passed away at her house in Certitude after a long illness. She was 76.

Alice and Navoditte came from USA to Pondicherry before Auroville was inaugurated, and moved to Aspiration in the early years. Alice helped at the time with community maintenance, at the Bakery and was always there at early Matrimandir concretings.

As Jack Alexander described her in a recent email, "She had always some rather unusual point of view and analysis, usually was a bit from left field, that would be like a Zen sort of joke that made you wonder and think and laugh."

REVIEW: TWO PLAYS

The "New World" play, performed recently at Bharat Nivas, was a delightful, bilingual production by Auroville youth, both Tamil and Western. The text and direction were by Partha, who managed to keep seventeen young Aurovilians engaged in the production of this story whose theme was awakening—we must awaken to the destruction of the world around us and our part in it. We must try to create a New World from the old one, but better, more harmonious.

The group, with the help of Joy and Jean L., created a lively, funny, touching show, full of music and a wonderful, strong infectious energy, assisted by Murugesan's dance troupe from New Creation. The cast succeeded in entertaining and inspiring the audience.

Some weeks later, Mirramukhi school enacted two evenings of "Once upon a time", a play performed by the children of the school. Beautifully designed, the acting and movement lacked spontaneity, seeming to many to be a stilted, stylised performance which did not use the energy of the children to advantage.

Jill

EXHIBITION TO BE HELD IN PARIS

On 17th, 18th and 19th June 1998, at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, Auroville International France will hold a three-day event on the occasion of Auroville's 30th anniversary.

Yanne Dimay, who is the contact person with UNESCO, says that the authorisation has been given by Federico Mayor himself who liked the idea very much. Broadly, the programme will be:

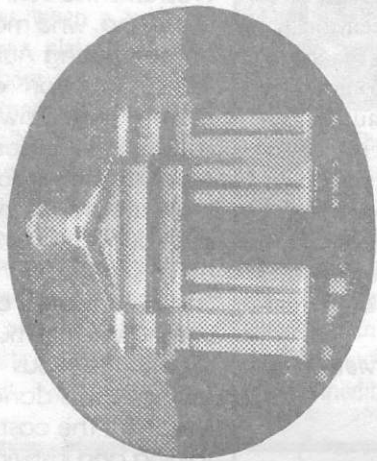
- An exhibition on Auroville, with a stand with books, leaflets, and presentation of some projects;
- Daily video shows on various subjects
- Showing of the slide show "Sri Aurobindo and the future of India";
- Conference, discussions with the public;
- Cultural evening, with a concert and dance. A small buffet will be offered at the opening.

AVI France itself will sponsor the event. As they put it, "We consider the 30th anniversary of Auroville an exceptional event, and it is an excellent occasion for us to do our job of information on Auroville."

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IN THIS ISSUE:

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May 1998
Number 112

An artist visits home

Vincent sat quietly leafing through a magazine while he waited for me before taking down his exhibition in Pitanga Hall. I would be the last one to see it, and he showed me each work and answered my questions very precisely. Early the next morning, he would be returning to France. Vincent lived in Auroville for eleven years during which he became known for his paintings of Western style landscapes, fashionable themes and elaborate futuristic studies.

Now that he lives in France, all his paintings are subjects from Auroville and South India. "I paint what is missing and what I am longing for," he explains. "When I lived in Auroville, I never even painted a single palm tree. Now I am becoming known in France as that guy

stuck. In Toulouse, I work to break-through to a higher level. I have ambition and now the quality is there, so it is only a matter of breaking through to the social scene and becoming known." He laughs. His main activity is painting, but he has strongly linked it with photography. He also studies music.

A major part of the exhibition in Pitanga was a photographic series he did in London at the beginning of this year. He stayed with Patrick Adamson, the potter who used to live in Auroville and is the father of Mirani, who may become more famous than her father. They went to a New Year party at the flat of Aurovici and Angiras who are also born in Auroville, but live in south London where they work and go to



Vici, Surya and Angiras in London (Photo by Vincent)

who paints India."

He paints in oil using a miniature canvas even for landscapes. His landscape of Ooty Lake shows the mastery of the technique. He conveys the sense through the light and large stones in a painting only slightly bigger than a jumbo postcard. The detail of a papaya leaf makes his miniature seem larger than life and from his lotus pond you sense the extent of the pond while being conscious of the water drop that beads on the leaf. The paintings are mostly of nature, but sometimes with still life combinations as in something he saw in Fertile, and then too, a detail of Lila in a swimming pool.

"I could have continued to live alone in the Green Belt, a simple life, but with no money, no scope for the artist... I got

school. About thirty people with connections to Auroville were there. Vincent photographed them, and painted in some tints on the photographs. Along with scenes of London, he exhibited some shots of the Auroville-born kids that he made during the party. He gave me an enlargement of each of them to give to the mother or father who are living in Auroville. Vincent's mother also lives in Auroville. He will return to France with six hundred photos of South India for developing in his dark room, for use as a data bank for painting what is "missing". He said he was happy to have shown the Auroville Community the evolution of his work—it was a way "to stay in touch".

Bill

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