

Auroville Today

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MAIN THEME: Planning the City

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- Accelerating Auroville's development
- The new International Zone concept plan

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AUROVILLE'S SEASONS

Auroville is bipolar. Not in the sense of manic-depressive – although we could discuss that one – but in the sense that it has two well-defined but contrasting seasons. The winter season is the time of bright young tourists, hippies past their sell-by date and somewhat bewildered parents who are desperately trying to work out why their offspring ended up here.

Winter is the time of new ideas or recycled ideas which are keenly re-espoused, of workshops on cosmic renewal, sustainable community and screaming your way to bliss (not really, I made that one up). It's the time when we reorganize our organization, when visiting speakers bring us up-to-speed with the latest in global transformation, when ex-Aurovilians visit and tell us where we're going wrong, when everybody's diary is stuffed full of events, appointments and reminders: "remember to breathe, remember to phone the eco-man, remember to tell myself I am the incarnation of unconditional love". Winter is green, green, every visitor wants to become an Aurovillian and retire to a little house in the greenbelt or to open a small workshop on the beach selling leather thongs and carved dolphins.

Summertime is different. Auroville is empty, tawny, the visitors – and many of the Aurovilians – burned away like so much tallow. Diaries are composted and the dense silence is broken only by the popping of copper-pod seeds, the light patter of pesticides falling on cashew leaves and the occasional motorcyclist. Summer is the time of impromptu, sweaty meetings outside Pour Tous, of brain-fried cyclists veering wildly across the road, of the pervasive red dust which settles on everyone and everything like a perverse benediction.

It's when Auroville goes minimalist, the almost courtly exchanges of the winter season replaced by atavistic grunts and growls. These are the days when undying enmities are created by someone jumping the queue at the fruit counter, when ten minute power-cuts evoke howls as if from the depths of Dante's Inferno. Summer is the time when most of the Services announce that "We're closed for the next two months. Have a nice day"; when fashion Auroville is supplanted by stained tee-shirts, battered chappals and not very much in-between; when the servers at the Solar Kitchen, starved of clients, try to involve you in long, intense conversations: "The onion raita is very good today. You don't like it? Why not? Didn't your mother breast-feed you? Wait, wait, you can tell me."

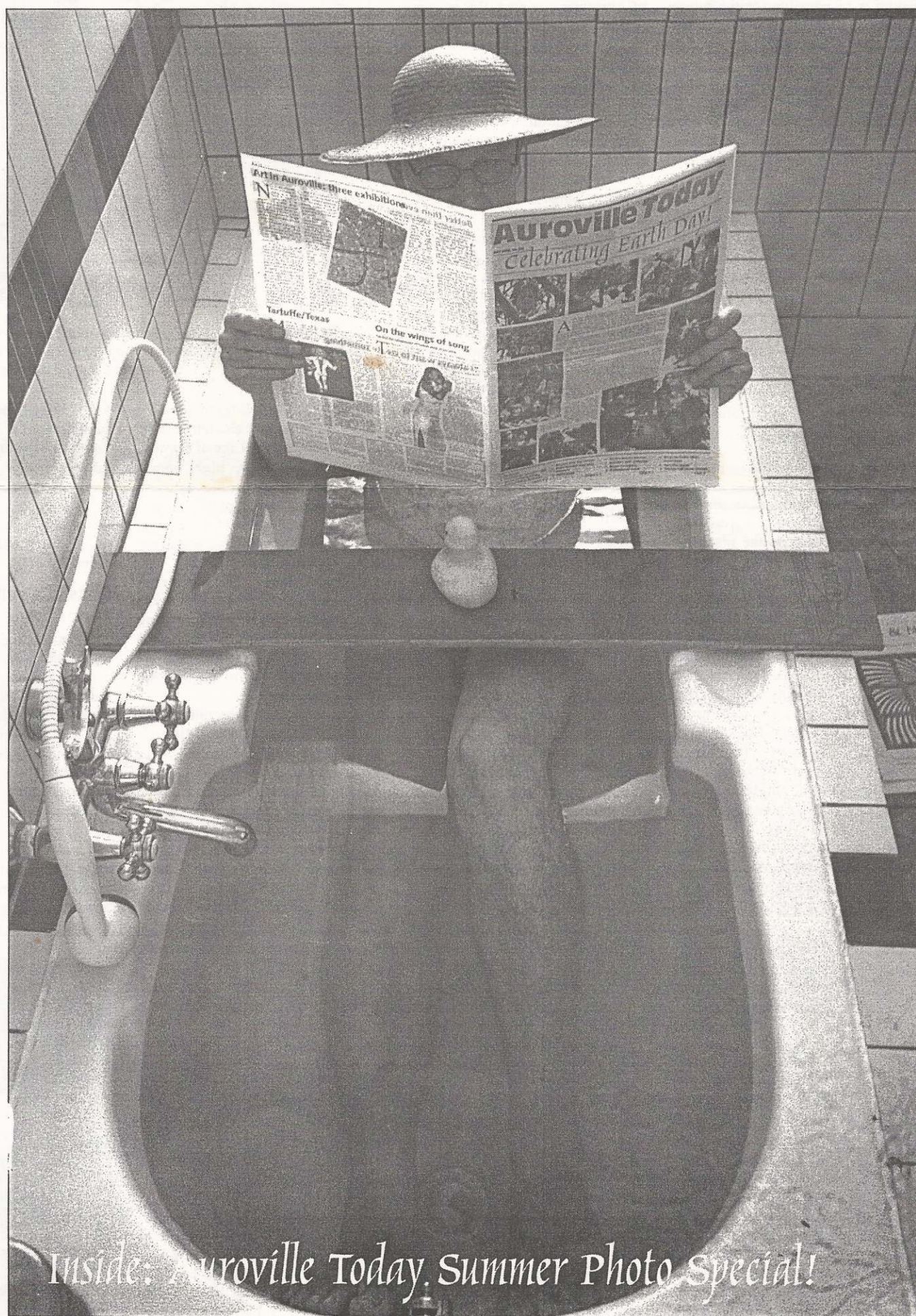
Yet, summer does have its uses. It's the ultimate testing-ground, so the projects and initiatives which are still running during June and July are likely to have deeper roots and harder leaves than the hot-house plants tenderly nurtured during the winter season. (Of course, there are always those groups which grind on, year after year, as if on auto-pilot, untouched by vulgar considerations like utility or relevance.)

Summer is the in-breath which balances the outgoing energy of winter, it's the fallow ground out of which unexpected shoots emerge. Summer is the time when there's a little bit more time – to talk to your neighbour (assuming you still have one), to read Proust, to watch the shadows inch lazily across your porch, to count the tiles on the ceiling as you lie spread-eagled on the cool floor of your shower.

Summer is ... alright, agreed, I'm off myself next week to cooler climes. But I know, I really know, there are a great many advantages to staying here during the heat.

If only I could think of them.

Alan



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PHOTO: CORILAN

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Interpreting the Galaxy

On April 29th, the Auroville Planning Group, a subgroup of the Auroville Planning and Development Council, presented its 'directions for interpreting the Galaxy'.

It was a lazy Saturday morning. Outside temperatures were hitting 38° C. Inside the conference room of the Town Hall, an audience carefully listened to the presentation of the Planning Group (PG). It was the result of six months of intensive work by PG members Toni, Gundolf, Peter Anderschitz, Lata, Prashant, and Suhasini, with feedback from Helmut, Gilles and Sheril.

Many people had come, representing widely diverging viewpoints: members of Auroville's Future, the Dreamcatchers [see Auroville Today April 2006] the Green Group and individuals with an interest in developing the city. 'Who is responsible for the future of Auroville?' was the question printed on the back of a mirror handed out during a Dreamcatchers' exhibition some weeks ago. Below that, the answer was given: 'Please turn over'. The large attendance testified to the interest of the common Aurovilian in their future city.

The PG's presentation was marked by its sober focus on ground realities in conjunction with the ideals of the Galaxy plan. "We don't want to sacrifice one for the other," explained Suhasini, one of the PG's presenters. "We only propose, based on the existing development and the socio-economic and environmental realities, to make some adjustments in the Master Plan."

The bioregional development

The presentation went from identifying developments in the bioregion that will affect Auroville in the near future, to the planning issues of Auroville itself. Regarding the bioregion, the PG said that within the next 10 years there will be sweeping developments. New railway lines are being planned, one of which will cross Auroville with possibly a railway station at Gorimedu and at the Pondicherry University in Kalapet. The 1,074 km long Buckingham Channel, a waterway for goods transport which runs from Kakinada in Andhra Pradesh to Marakkanam north of Pondicherry, may be extended to Ousteri Lake. The Pondicherry airport runway will soon be lengthened. And we can expect an increasing suburban and industrial development from

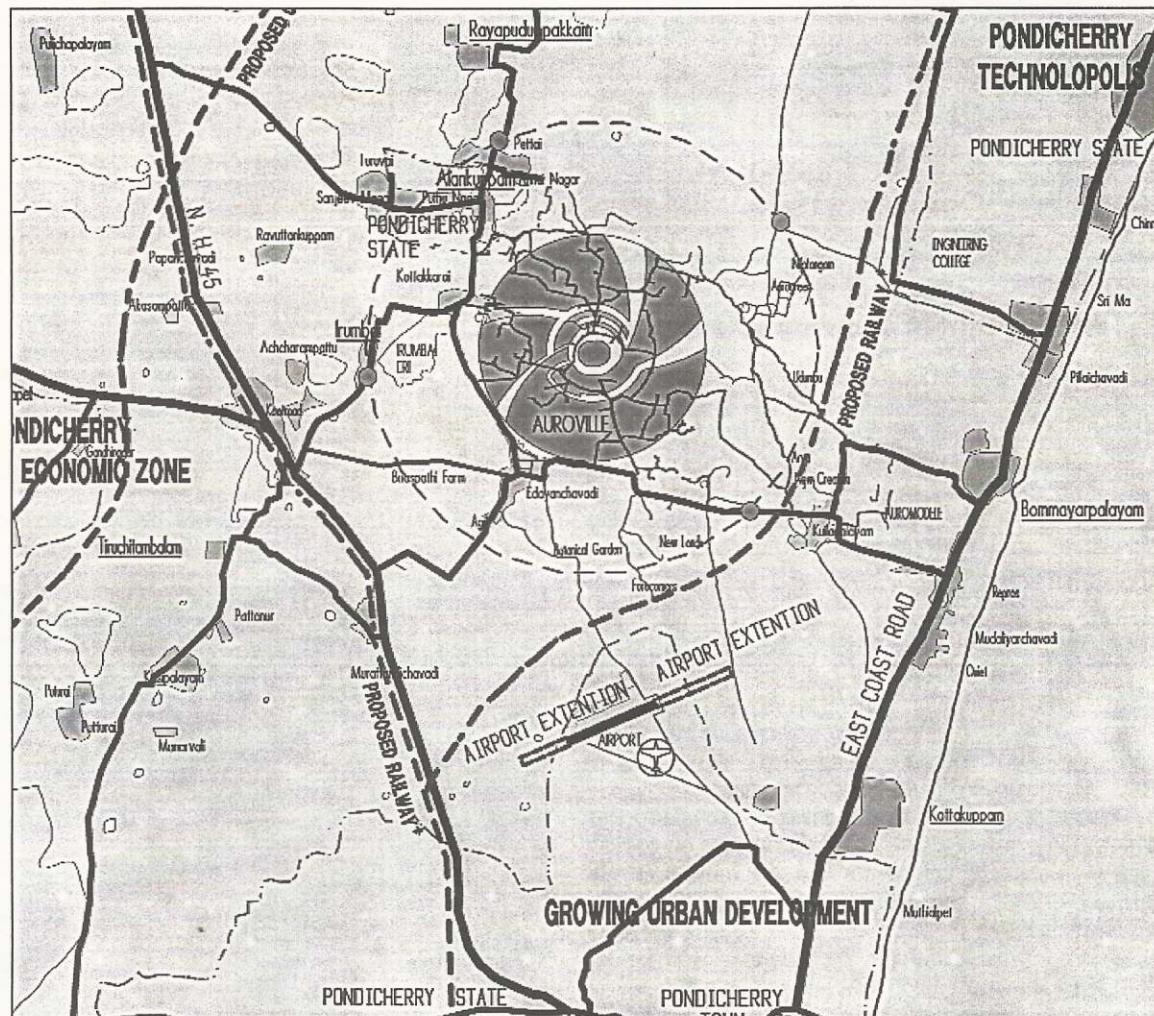
Pondicherry, Koot Road and along the East Coast Road. Where is Auroville in all this? An island under siege. "The action we propose," said Suhasini, "is that Auroville requests participation or representation in inter-state and local planning bodies, and that, together with the villages of this area, we create joint development programmes."

As a case in point the PG showed the road development in the area. Auroville is located between two major roads, the East Coast Road along the coast and the National Highway 45 from Tindivanam to Pondicherry. These roads are interconnected by two link roads, one north and one south of Auroville city area. But as every Aurovilian experiences daily, the road through Auroville itself is also being used as a link road. This usage, warned the PG, will increase now that a few months ago a new road has been built which links the village of Edayanchavadi to Kootroad. That road was the result of a spontaneous village initiative in which Auroville had no say. "We can only have a say if we become part of local development bodies, together with the villages around us, and so become a regional force to reckon with" said Suhasini. Such a local body could represent the area effectively. It could also deal with other joint concerns such as the availability and extraction of ground water. For Auroville is situated on top of the watershed of several local villages, and joint water-management plans will be required – Auroville cannot plan its water extraction and usage in isolation.

Challenges for the Auroville area

Superimposing Auroville's Master Plan on the existing situation, the PG noted some problems and suggested solutions.

One major challenge is to find solutions for the connected villages of Kottakarai and Bharatipuram. Kottakarai is situated in the Industrial Zone and in the Greenbelt; Bharatipuram is located in both the Industrial and International Zone and in the park between these zones. Since the International Zone, by its very function, will attract visitors from outside, it can be expected that the residents of these villages will seek to benefit from the visitors and start shops similar to those in



Auroville is located between two major roads: the East Coast Road along the coast, and the National Highway 45 from Tindivanam to Pondicherry. New railway lines are being planned, as well as an extension of the airport and an extension of the Buckingham Channel.

Kuilapalayam and Edayanchavadi.

A second major challenge is the 1.2 kilometre long Line of Force, a future high-density, high impact building planned over the Aurodam canyon. Here the PG pointed to two problems. The first is that Aurodam is a major watershed area which not only benefits Auroville but also several villages 'downstream'. Two-thirds of the water that feeds the Irumbai lake and surrounding areas comes from the Aurodam canyon. Auroville needs to exert extreme caution in managing this shared watershed.

The second is the vicinity of the village of Edayanchavadi. "If high density comes into contact with lower economic levels, slum development is the natural result. This can be seen in many cities in India. Auroville cannot allow a rich 'spiritual' society to develop alongside an impoverished typical Indian slum area," stated Suhasini.

Lastly, the PG mentioned that

the existing panchayat roads, which border about 1/3rd of the city area, have not been taken into account by the makers of the Master Plan. "Is it realistic that Auroville duplicate roads to control the users or should we simply adapt the Master Plan taking into account existing roads?" asked the PG.

Possible solutions for the zones

The PG proposed some interesting solutions.

One was to expand the Industrial Zone so as to fully include the villages of Kottakarai and Bharatipuram. This would result in a mixed land use of the Industrial Zone, with interspersed industrial and residential areas. The Industrial Zone would thus also contribute to a healthy development and a controlled growth of the villages. Instead of looking at the villages as an impediment, they would be integrated in Auroville's development.

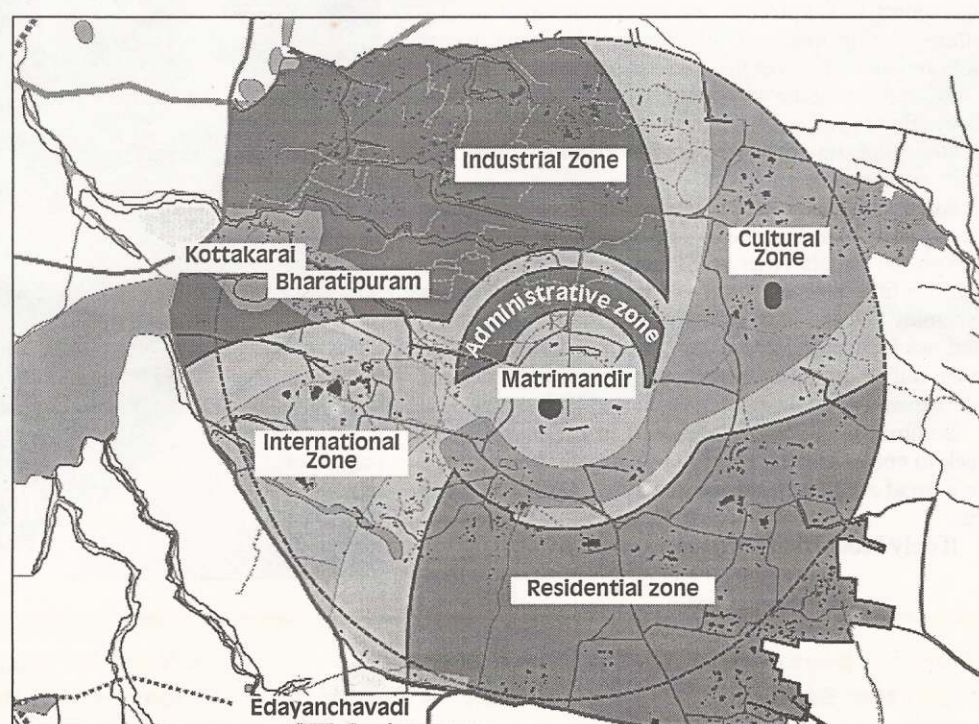
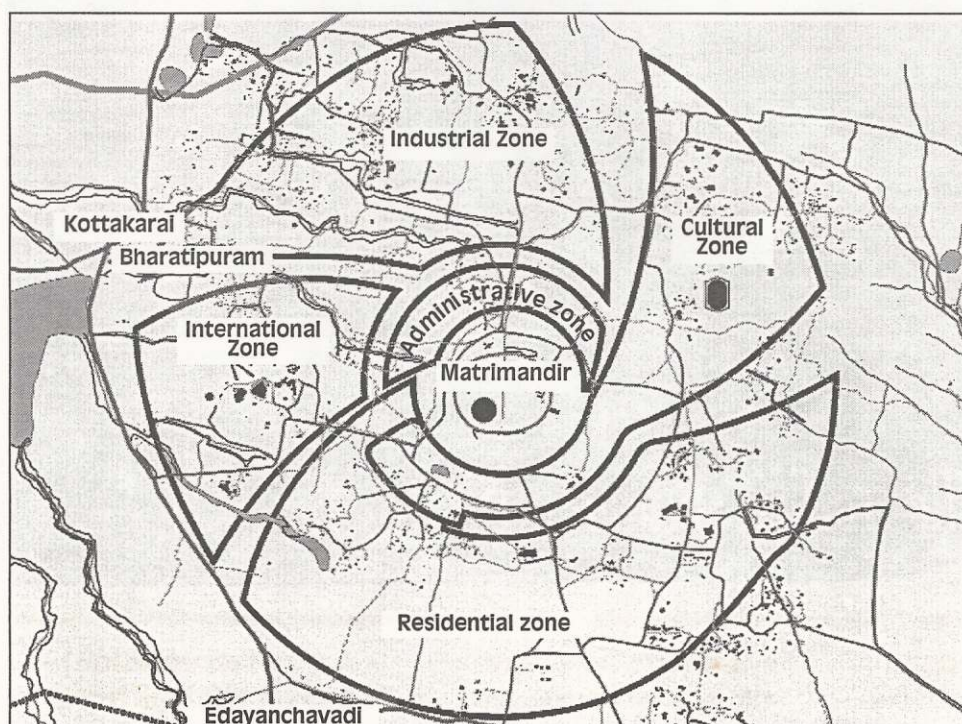
oment.

A second proposal was to include the parks north and south of the International Zone within that Zone and expand the Zone to include the Aurodam area. This proposal would solve the problems connected with the Line of Force, as the International Zone is planned as a low-rise, low impact zone. The parks, instead of being only buffers that separate one zone from the other, could be used as green spaces connected to the national pavilions.

But what about the Residential Zone? The proposals from the PG would diminish its size. "We believe that by reworking the density patterns of the residential zone and by moving part of the population to the residential areas of the Industrial Zone, the target population of 50,000 people can be achieved," said Suhasini.

Future road patterns

Regarding the outer ring road,



Possible solutions for the four zone. Left: The four zones as present in the Master Plan. Right: The modified zone locations as per the proposals of the Planning Group.

the PG proposed to make use of the panchayat road as the outer ring road wherever it exists. If possible, this road could be moved southwards below the Botanical Garden to prevent it separating the city from the green belt. The nature and routing of the outer ring road on the other side of the city requires further study.

Inside the city, the PG proposed that radial roads, the links between the Crown and the outer ring road, should only be created when required according to density and land usage patterns, and not be fixed at 12 as specified in the Master Plan.

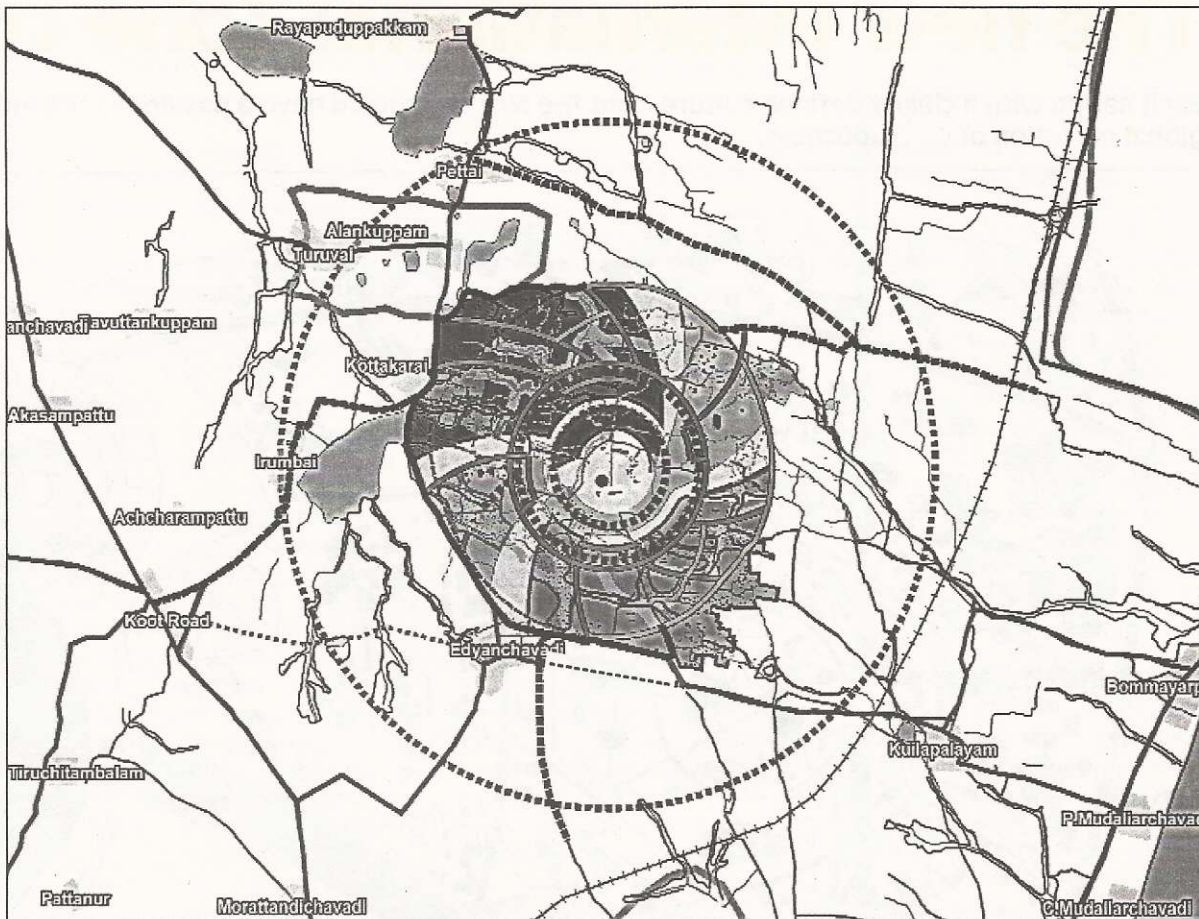
Regarding access to the city, the PG suggested that the planned access roads be restudied. "We do not see how Auroville can convince the authorities to cancel the existing panchayat road, so we might as well make optimum use of it," stated Suhasini. The PG also proposed that the routing of the future railway line north of Pondicherry airport be closely studied, for a road is planned to run next to it which may offer access to Auroville's International and Residential Zones. Lastly, the PG observed that

a few cycle and pedestrian tracks should be built from within the city to the beach, as well as around the Matrimandir.

"What we are offering are impressions at this moment," concluded Suhasini on behalf of the team. "Much has to be studied, but before starting any further work, we need to know if these ideas are acceptable. To whom can we propose changes and amendments to the Master Plan, and who is the final authority?" The questions kept hanging in the air while Luigi from Auroville's Future announced that he would make a presentation on the same topic one week later.

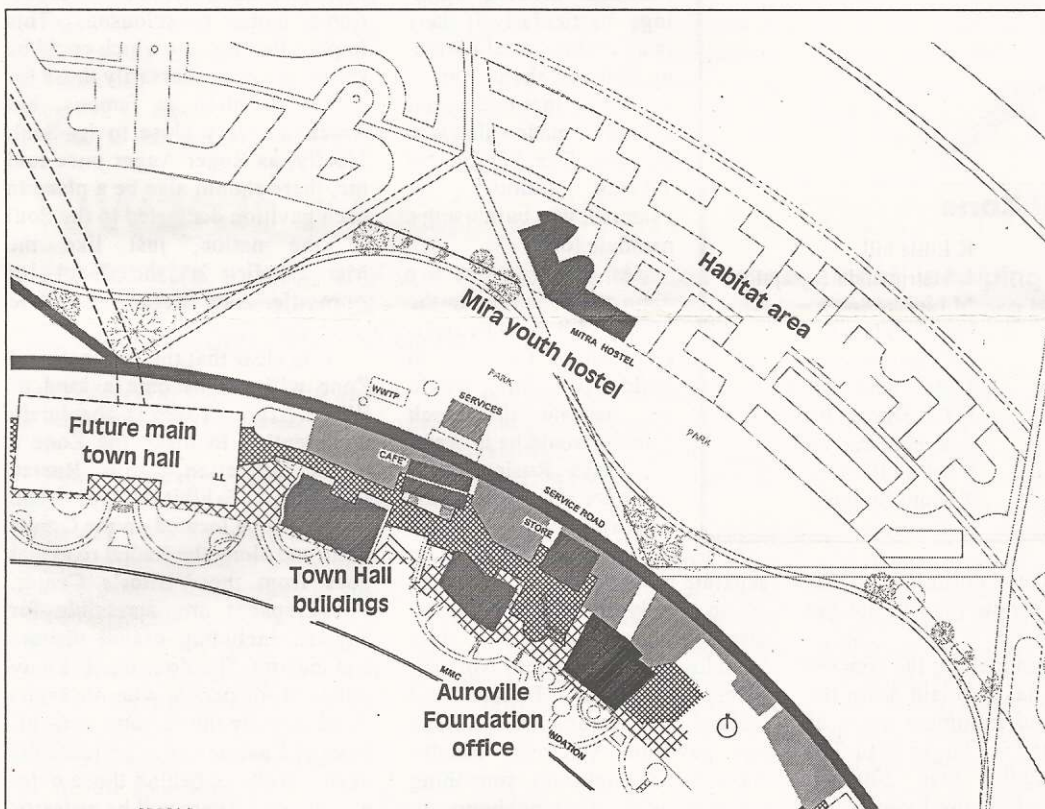
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Right: The traffic situation in and around Auroville. The road from P.Mudialarchavadi to Kulapalayam to Edayanchavadi will soon be extended to Koot Road, creating another bypass from the East Coast Road to NH 45 (the alternative road to Chennai).



Accelerating Auroville's development

On Saturday May 6th, Auroville's Future presented its perspectives on the development of the city. It was followed by a frank discussion.



Part of the Administrative Zone. The Habitat area is behind the Town Hall buildings

The presentation of Auroville's Future highlighted aspects of the Master Plan and its plans for the immediate future. A main focus is the Habitat area behind the town hall complex. Nearby the recently completed Mira youth hostel, a residential accommodation for 1,500 people is envisaged. Funding proposals have been submitted; one donor has already agreed to freeze the Citadines project, originally planned nearby the Creativity community, and instead donate the funds for building residences in this area. There will be collective services and utilities such as laundry, a small Pour Tous stall and perhaps a restaurant and sports facilities.

Auroville's Future also presented its solutions for the villages of Bharatipuram and Kottakarai in the Industrial and International Zones. One is to build an ideal model village for 2000 people on a plot of Auroville land in the Greenbelt, north of Kottakarai. A second solution would be that Auroville purchase plots of land in the Kootroad area, and offers these as replacement. A third option is to complete Sangamam, a model village nearby Utility, the first part of which was built some years ago, and motivate people to move there.

Quite a few members of the audience expressed doubts about the feasibility of such

solutions. They pointed out that a recent report of the Government of Tamil Nadu showed that the relocation of villages in the wake of the tsunami had failed. If this hasn't worked, why should a model village proposed by Auroville be a success? Moreover, not all those living in these villages are employees of Auroville. Many are economically independent self-employed entrepreneurs who might not be motivated to move.

The discussion then shifted to the content of the presentation, as it showed how little progress has been made to build the city. This, embarrassingly, has also often been noted by government and non-government officials who observe that Auroville continues to make the same type of presentations throughout the years. Another of their criticisms is that

Auroville doesn't follow what it preaches. For example, we say we want 'green buildings,' but we use a design language and building patterns which do not support that objective.

The major issue, it appeared, is another Auroville embarrassment: the inability to work together. Though all profess to want the Galaxy, opinions about how to build it differ deeply. Some consider that the Master Plan, the first version of which was seen and approved by The Mother, is sacrosanct; that any major change is basically unacceptable, and that the only thing to be done is to get organised for its implementation. Others consider the Master Plan an interpretation of Mother's indications and believe that changes can and must be made. The problem was summed up as follows: Is it a question of a divine mandate versus logical questioning? If that is so, then there is little common platform of discussion and then all suggestions to work together are basically futile.

The difficulties come to the front in the Auroville Planning and Development Council, a working group created by the community about three years ago with a rather extensive mandate. Though Auroville's Future is represented in this body, the two have not managed to work well together. Instead, a culture of mistrust has come into existence, which has paralysed possible cooperation. The APDC,

for example, was not consulted in determining the location of the new office of the Auroville Foundation, for which Dr. Karan Singh, the Chairman of the Governing Board, laid the foundation stone on March 30th. Neither was the APDC informed of Auroville's Future's plans for the Habitat centre and the extent of its fundraising efforts, until this presentation. Auroville's Future, from its side, is mistrustful of the work of the Planning Group, a subgroup of the APDC. Even though half of the Group's members are members of Auroville's Future, one of the executives explained that they do not, in fact, represent Auroville's Future.

Where do we go from here? It became the main topic of discussion. The divisive ways of functioning are frustrating to all. Is it possible to merge different viewpoints, would it be possible to come to one organisation? Can people sit together to discuss planning issues, looking at cost-benefit ratios and effects of proposed developments and so come to agreements? Is it possible that identified priority areas of development are identified and that major funding proposals are coordinated instead of sent out by one working group?

As one person said: "Unless we are open to debate, mistrust will simmer and fester, to the detriment of all and of Auroville as a whole. We must find a common direction." With this objective, a group of people holding opposing views have agreed to sit together to evaluate the modalities for working together.

Carel

UPDATE

Progress in the Sydo murder case

On May 3rd Steve Senesac gave his testimony in the murder case of Sydo van Loo through video conferencing from the USA. It was the first time in Tamil Nadu that a witness was allowed to give his testimony in this way. The judge, the public prosecutor and the counsel for the defence questioned Steve through the electronic medium.

Sydo, a Dutch national, and Steve were staying in Udumbu in Auroville. On August 19, 2003, some persons made a robbery attempt at Udumbu and injured

both of them. The police filed a case of attempted murder. During the investigation, Sydo identified the assailants. They were later released on bail. On January 31, 2004, Sydo was murdered. Later that year Steve left for the U.S.A.

Steve, who now lives in California, had asked to be allowed to testify through video conferencing as he feared for his life if he came to India. Judge K. Thayalan at the Tindivanam Fast Track Court-II upheld this contention and allowed video conferencing at the cost of the witness.

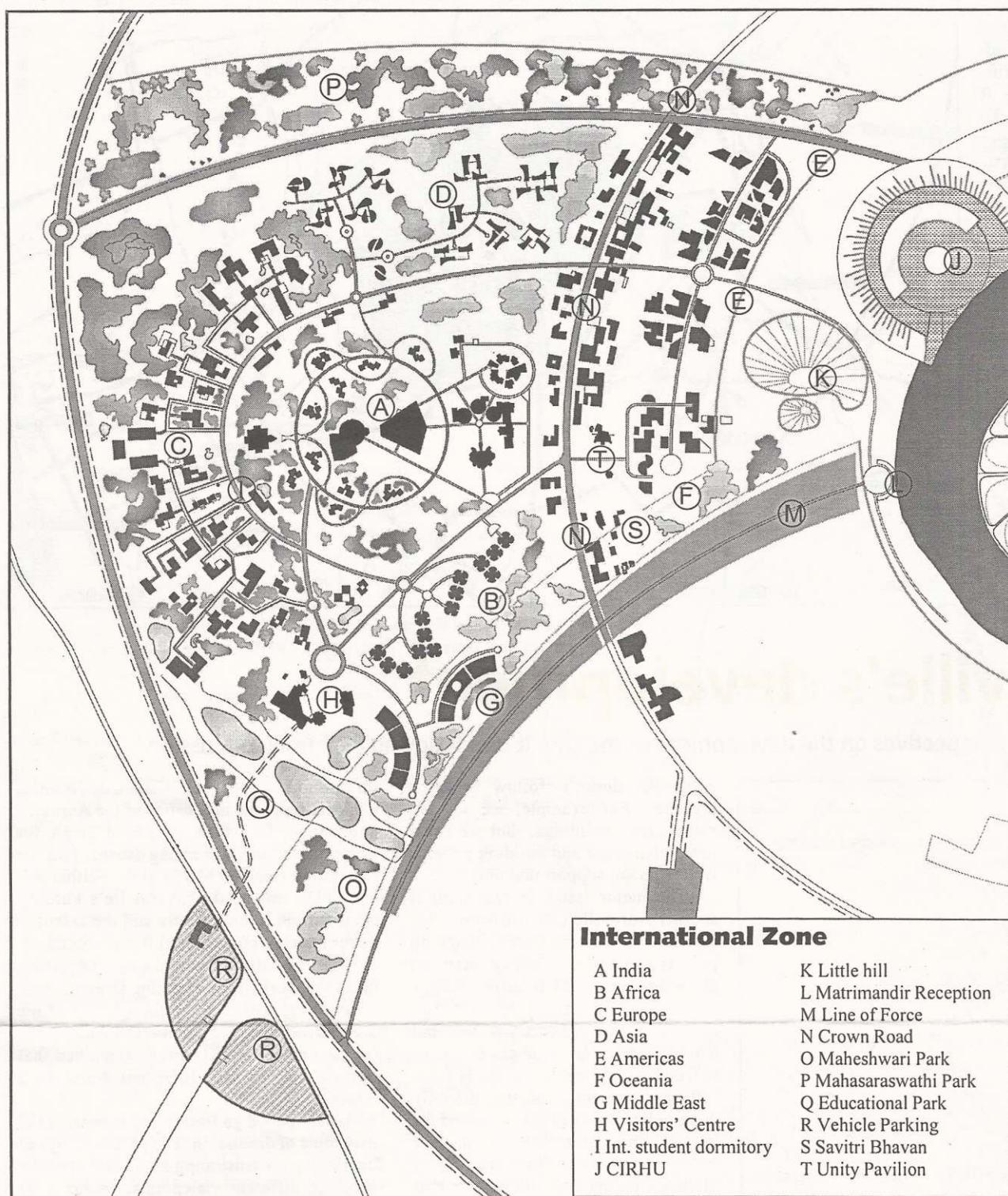
The hearing drew quite a few

dignitaries. The Consul-General for the Netherlands, Mr. Hans Ramaker, had flown in from Mumbai. The American Consulate in Chennai was represented by Ms. Ruth Lincoln. The Tamil Nadu police were represented by Additional Director-General Shri Balachandran, Inspector-General Shri Sekar and Additional Superintendent Shri Ramachandran. The event was widely covered on television and in the printed media.

The judge adjourned the case to May 22 for the examination of other witnesses.

The new International Zone concept plan

Each nation with a clearly defined culture, said The Mother, should have a pavilion in the International Zone to express what it has contributed to the global evolution of consciousness.



An architectural concept plan for the International Zone of Auroville, designed by Roger Anger, was recently approved in principle by the International Zone Group. The plan shows a grouping of countries by continent. One of the main differences from an earlier concept designed by Helmut is that the area on the east side of the Crown Road towards the Matrimandir Lake is now also envisaged to house national pavilions.

The grouping of countries by continent, logical as it may sound, was not unchallenged. Earlier, people such as Dr. Ananda Reddy had recommended a free grouping of nations on the basis Sri Aurobindo's writings in *The Ideal of Human Unity*. In a talk given to an Auroville International meeting in 2002, reported in Auroville Today of November 2002, he explained that distant nations like England and Australia might choose to build together, while nations that are neighbours, like Finland and Russia, might choose to stand apart. Sri Aurobindo described the dangers in the form of continental clashes that might occur if continental grouping became a reality. But in the Postscript Chapter of this book, written after the Second World War, Sri Aurobindo shows that this dangerous possibility has been removed by certain historical

developments. Consequently, the grouping by continents has been maintained.

In the new concept plan the centre is taken by the Pavilion of India. The Asian pavilions will be located in the North of the Zone, while the European pavilions will form a half circle to the West. The African and Middle Eastern pavilions are south. The pavilions of the Americas and Oceania are located east of the Crown Road in the area towards the Matrimandir Lake, with as neighbour the Centre for International Research in Human Unity (CIRHU), the future Auroville University. Buildings with shared facilities will be located along the Crown Road and also in each continental area.

The Zone is separated from the Industrial Zone in the north by the Mahasaraswathi Park and from the Residential Zone in the south by the Maheshwari Park. The huge Line of Force building south of the Maheshwari Park, with a road going through its centre, is part of the Residential Zone.

In accordance with Helmut's earlier plan, a US student dorm, the first phase of the USA pavilion, was built in the area now designated for the European pavilions.

Presently, there is a dialogue between Auroville's Future, Auroville International USA and the International Zone Group and an initial agreement to rename the US student dormitory as an interna-

tional student dormitory. This aspect of the new plan is not yet finalized.

Apart from making the concept plan, Roger has also laid down the maximum and minimum sizes of the pavilions (not larger than 700 and not smaller than 200 sq. metres) as well as the basic archi-

All countries are equal and essentially one; every one of them represents an aspect of the One Supreme. In the terrestrial manifestation they have all the same right to a free expression of themselves. From the spiritual point of view, the importance of a country does not depend on its size or its power or its authority among other countries, but on its response to Truth and the degree of Truth it is capable of manifesting.

The Mother

tectural parameters for the various continents. In order to achieve architectural harmony among the buildings of each continent, a basic geometrical form has been chosen for each continent. For Europe it is a square, for Africa a circle, for Asia a triangle, for the Americas a hexagon and for Oceania a mixture of a hexagon and a triangle. A common landscaping for the entire zone is envisaged, with variations specific to each continent around each pavilion.

Ruslan, a medical doctor by

profession from Kazakhstan, explains the new concept plan. "Ever since I joined Auroville in 2002, I was fascinated by the International Zone and the CIRHU concept," he says. As a member of the International Zone Group, he is now actively working for the Zone's manifestation.

"The basic geometrical forms are indicative guidelines for architects to work with," says Ruslan. "They are being further developed. Roger is working now on Europe." Is it a disadvantage that the outer shapes of the buildings will not indicate a particular architecture of a country? "I don't believe so," says Ruslan. "Take the Pavilion of India, for example. The Mother selected the one design which is not reminiscent of any Indian architecture. Yet it is a beautiful building. Similarly, the individual pavilions can be beautiful modern buildings, particularly if there is an architectural harmony between them. This is not to say that exceptions cannot be made - that is to be seen. The Pavilion of Tibetan Culture, for example, was built using a mandala form.

At present there are almost 200 nations in the world. Will there be sufficient space for each to build a pavilion? "We do not assume that each country would be interested," says Ruslan, "and there are also quite a few countries who would not be interested to create separate pavilions as their cultures are so closely linked. The proposal was made that the five Scandinavian countries Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Iceland, for example, could have one pavilion. My own country Kazakhstan might do something together with its neighbours in

are coming to the front. They have proposed that their Inuksuk, a stone monument in the shape of a man which the Inuit people from the north erect to mark a particular place, will be placed at the entrance of the American continents."

All this, however, does not mean that each group has already gained the profound understanding of what their country has contributed to the global evolution of humanity. "This is a major shift in our approach," says Ruslan. "Originally we believed that a pavilion group should have defined its ideas on the soul of each country and what each pavilion will represent before starting to build a pavilion. But we are no longer stuck with this idea. We accept that the inner sense of each pavilion, what it ultimately will express about a country, can be worked out once the pavilion has been built, or during the building process. The contents of each pavilion will depend on each nation; there is no clearly defined recipe one-and-for-all. It may be an exposition of a living culture or of the traditions, it may be a study centre, there may be a library, exhibitions, etc. What is important is to express what the nation has contributed to the evolution of human consciousness. This implies that aspects which could be shown are not necessarily those for which a nation is famous, but which are very close to its Soul. Ideally, as Roger Anger once told me, there should also be a place in each pavilion dedicated to the Soul of the nation, just like the Matrimandir is the Soul of Auroville. A lot of research will be required."

It is clear that the International Zone will not become a kind of World Expo. "There is absolutely no intention to make the Zone a tourist attraction," says Ruslan forcefully. "Exhibition spaces and shops will be located on the Crown Road and along the Radial road that goes from the Visitor's Centre. These spaces are accessible for anyone, including casual visitors and tourists. The Zone itself is only intended for people who are interested to study the customs and cultures of a nation and experience the deeper realities behind those outer expressions. There will be pedestrian and cycle paths and small roads for services and for electric cars for physically challenged visitors.

"The approval of this concept plan is a major step," says Ruslan. "It opens the doors to further planning and development." The immediate needs are to acquire the remaining lands, find a solution for the ecologically-sensitive areas within the Zone, find a solution for the village of the Bharatipuram which is partly located in the Zone, and develop the common basic infrastructure. Ruslan hopes that increasingly Aurovilians, members of Auroville International and others will come forward and join in the building of the Zone.

Carel

The International Zone Group has made an anthology of the writings from The Mother and Sri Aurobindo on culture, nationhood, human unity, evolution, and the International Zone. A brochure will soon be published. Email international_zone@auroville.org.in for more information.

Planning the International Zone – a faulty process?

However, not everybody from the International Zone Group is positive about how the new International Zone concept plan was manifested.

Since the middle of the 1990's the International Zone Group had worked on planning alternatives for the International Zone. A mandate and a special call of encouragement had also come from Auroville's Future who wanted to engage the Zonal Groups to help in Auroville Town Planning activities. The resulting proposals for the International Zone development have been widely discussed and regularly presented to meetings in Auroville and abroad on the Auroville International level as well as to Auroville's Future and Roger Anger. They also were regularly posted on the Auroville website or published in Auroville Today.

Amongst the alternatives the principles of "Continental Grouping" and "Development around Focal Points" became widely accepted and were incorporated into plans accordingly. In mid 2005 an African team of students visiting Auroville with the Head of the Department of Planning and Architecture of Addis Ababa University was encouraged to start a study for the African area on this basis.

In September 2005, a series of meetings took place between the members of the International Zone Group and different Pavilion Groups interested in starting the development of cultural pavilions in the International Zone of Auroville. There was an urgency since the Italians as well as the Russians had funds ready, amounting altogether to approx. 75 lakhs [US\$ 165,000] to start the pavilions of their

countries. During an extraordinary meeting on October 7th, 2005, the International Zone Group finally opted for the concept of the "European Agora". The minutes of this meeting conclude: "It was decided to approach Roger with a letter communicating the result of the process of the last years and our unanimous support to the concept at hand and ask him to give green light".

In a meeting five days later, Roger's request was to "refresh his memory" by providing him once again with all alternatives, for him to study and make his conclusions. A plan of action with a time line was drawn out for this purpose. However on January 24, 2006, the Group was presented with an entirely new layout by Roger, which everybody was asked to accept as final. All earlier development concepts had been ignored and discarded without any explanations. Some members were happy with the new plan because they felt that now they finally could move ahead. But others were shocked by the process.

One main problem of Roger's plan was the relocation of the area reserved for the Americas. The plan ignored the fact that the US Students Dormitory, part of the future USA pavilion, was had already been built on the site originally allocated to it with an official building permission from the Development Group. The decision to rename this dormitory 'International Student dormitory' amounted to a change of purpose of a building for which no prior permission from the

donors or from Auroville International USA, who were responsible for the fundraising, had been sought. On March 29, 2006 Auroville International, alarmed by the development, addressed a complaint to Working Committee with a copy to the Governing Board and International Advisory Council of the Auroville Foundation.

"When raising funds abroad, we have an ethical and legal obligation to see that funds committed for a project are used as designated. Indeed, once a project is approved by Auroville and funds are committed, we are bound in a relationship with the donors, the Centres and Auroville. Any change in that relationship would have to be mutually negotiated. It cannot be imposed. Otherwise we run the risk of losing the trust of our donors and facing the consequences of legal entanglements," wrote Sonia Dyne, president of Auroville International.

This situation has led to discouragement amongst some members of the International Zone Group and a loss of motivation to continue work. Architect Helmut, who has worked intensively on previous layouts, says "The work carried out over the last 10 years with Roger's full knowledge and apparent approval has just been discarded without a word of explanation and seemingly without concern for the difficulties this entails. I can't see how it will be possible to realise the City if the effort and enthusiasm, goodwill and hard work of so many people are disregarded and set aside in this way".

Tine, until recently Secretary of Auroville International and a member of the International Zone Group, expresses similar concerns. "Why were no explanations given, either for the new plan or for the rejection of the detailed proposals made by architects Helmut, Peter and Jana? Why have the Americans been given a privileged place within the crown road next to CIRHU? And why is the Russian pavilion situated in a canyon?"

Contrary to Helmut and Tine, Jaya, from Sweden, said that all the earlier work has not been wasted. She stressed the importance of Roger's new basic architectural parameters, such as the square form for the European area, and writes "It seems to me a fantastic challenge and can make for a very interesting architectural experience with a lot of freedom... this concept takes away the focus on the outer frills and moves the expression inwards. The new plan is an opportunity to move forward, to take the concept of Roger, and collaborate... The new plan is a challenge and these usually bring out the best in us. Put us to do something impossible and we will do our best, which seems to be something of a hallmark of the Aurovilian."

Meanwhile the International Zone Group is not in unison. With divided opinions and some members having left or leaving the group, it is difficult to see how in the near future work can proceed harmoniously. In this area as in many others in Auroville, clarity about the decision-making process is urgently required.

Carel

Towards a Water Management Master Plan

Jeen Kootstra, a Dutch engineer specialised in water management, is helping to prepare a water management master plan for Auroville and its bioregion. Here he answers questions from Auroville Today.

AVToday: Why does Auroville need a water management master plan?

Jeen: Auroville requires a water management master plan because Auroville's ambitions are very high and its water resources are limited. As Auroville is a laboratory of sustainable technology and publicly presents itself as an experiment, many Aurovilians as well as myself believe that it is Auroville's obligation to practice sustainable water resources management. As Auroville is not the sole water user in this area, such a sustainable management necessarily includes Auroville's neighbouring villages. Close cooperation is a must in order to survive.

Where did the idea of a water management master plan originate?

I believe the starting point was the reaction to a pre-feasibility study on Auroville's water management by the German firm of Kraft Associates. Both from within and without Auroville there was a lot of criticism of this report. It was subsequently submitted to the engineering office German Landesgewerbanstalt Nürnberg (LGA) which, after studying it, expressed profound disagreement with its contents. I did not know about Auroville at the time. One day a friend, who works for the same company in Holland as I, and who was a former Aurovilian, asked me if I would like to get involved

and give my opinion on both the Kraft and LGA reports. I consented and presented, a few months later, my findings which corroborated the LGA conclusions.

In September 2004, Auroville organized an international water conference in the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture. I was one of the speakers and participated in a discussion forum. The conference concluded that Auroville did not so much lack water as an appropriate water man-

agement. The study took off at the end of 2005. I was asked to coordinate the input from the different experts.

How is the study progressing?

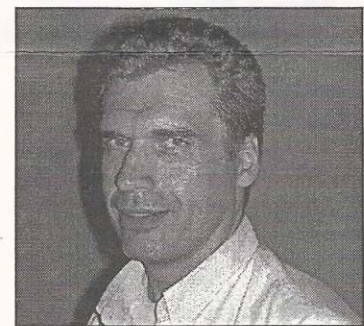
The pre-feasibility study is well under way and should be completed by September this year. The study will describe all available water resources, rainwater, storm water, groundwater, surface water, seawater, waste water, their interrelationship and how each resource can best be used in an effective water management. It will also identify the water needs of Auroville and the surrounding villages: agriculture, households, industry and the Matrimandir Lake. This analysis will identify the best options and recommend which of them need to be further studied in a feasibility study. At the same time, we are in discussions with international agencies to secure funding for the execution of these studies.

The Matrimandir lake concept by Roger Anger

In the aftermath of the conference, a group of Aurovilians and experts formulated an integral pre-feasibility study plan covering all aspects of water resources and water management of Auroville and its surrounding area. The pre-feasibility study includes the question of how the water provision for a lake around the Matrimandir could be secured. After sourcing sufficient financing,

You have already concluded your observations on the Matrimandir Lake

Yes. In October 2005, I met with Roger Anger and his staff, during which he explained his design parameters for the Matrimandir Lake. I studied these parameters, taking into account the ground water situation in Auroville and the climatic conditions, and the need for a sustainable water manage-



Jeen Kootstra

ment. In January 2006, I met with the Water Group. In this meeting it was concluded that my findings should be communicated to Roger and his staff and also to the Aurovilians for the sake of transparency.

Roger wishes to create a lake of about 160,000 m², in the middle of which is an island where the Matrimandir and its gardens are located. The lake would act as an isolation zone between the Matrimandir and the city centre, and be part of the city water supply system. The lake would be at least 2 metres deep, and have a uniform water level.

I found that these design parameters are not feasible and appropriate in the context of a sustainable water management. Natural evaporation is such that the lake would have to be replenished from either a buffer basin or from groundwater. I also could not see how the lake with a uniform and static water level could function in the water system of Auroville. I proposed instead that the lake be dynamic: the level could be allowed to fluctuate with incoming rainfall; the size of the lake could increase in size during the monsoon, while in the dry season the lake would be smaller. I have understood that my observations are being questioned by Roger's staff.

In conversation with Carel

In brief

Maintenance increase

The Economy Group has decided to increase the maintenances of Aurovilians who are working full-time to Rs 5,000 per month. In addition to this maintenance, a health care contribution and an electricity subsidy are provided. From this amount, Rs 2,000 will be credited to the cash account, Rs 2,500 to the kind account and Rs 500 to a food account, which can be used to cover the costs of lunches at an Auroville restaurant or community kitchen or in exchange for food and sundry items at the New Pour Tous distribution centre. The novelty of giving maintenance in three parts, cash, kind and food, follows the direction over the years to increasingly maintain Aurovilians through better run services rather than increasing cash maintenances.

Unsustainable traffic

Six visiting Living Routes (formerly known as Geo Commons) students conducted road surveys in Auroville in early March, 2006. Surveys were taken in front of the Matrimandir and at the Certitude tar-road intersection. Data showed that in both spots, 62% of traffic was motorbikes. Cycle use was restricted to 25%, of which on average 80% was non-Aurovilian. The students proposed laying a comprehensive cycle-footpath network to make cycling and walking more attractive; develop a public transport system, using small vehicles such as electric 3-wheelers that circulate on a high-frequency basis; and install traffic-calming measures to slow down traffic.

Nandanam Kindergarten update

Parents and teachers of Nandanam who have been raising funds for a new classroom and activity room via collective dinners and other activities, were happy to receive a grant of Rs 7 lakhs, leaving a balance of Rs 4 lakhs (US \$ 9,300) still to be covered. Contact Matilde at mandm@auroville.org.in for more information.

All USA Meeting

The All USA Meeting and Integral Psychology Conference will take place from July 1-5 at Menla Mountain Retreat in Phoenicia, NY. A pre-conference symposium will be held at the NY Open Centre in Manhattan on Thursday the 29th of June. For more information please visit www.matagiri.org/aum

Auroville Exhibit in Montreal

An exhibition on Auroville in the Cultural Centre of the city of Montreal, Canada, will take place from October 18 to November 26, 2006, with an official inauguration on October 24.

Bamboo flowers

The bamboo flowers once every 45 years. It recently happened in the neighbouring village of Kottakarai.

100% organic restaurant

Solitude Farm, wishing to share the enormous joy and benefit of eating home grown food in its rustic setting, has started to offer 100% organic lunches twice weekly.

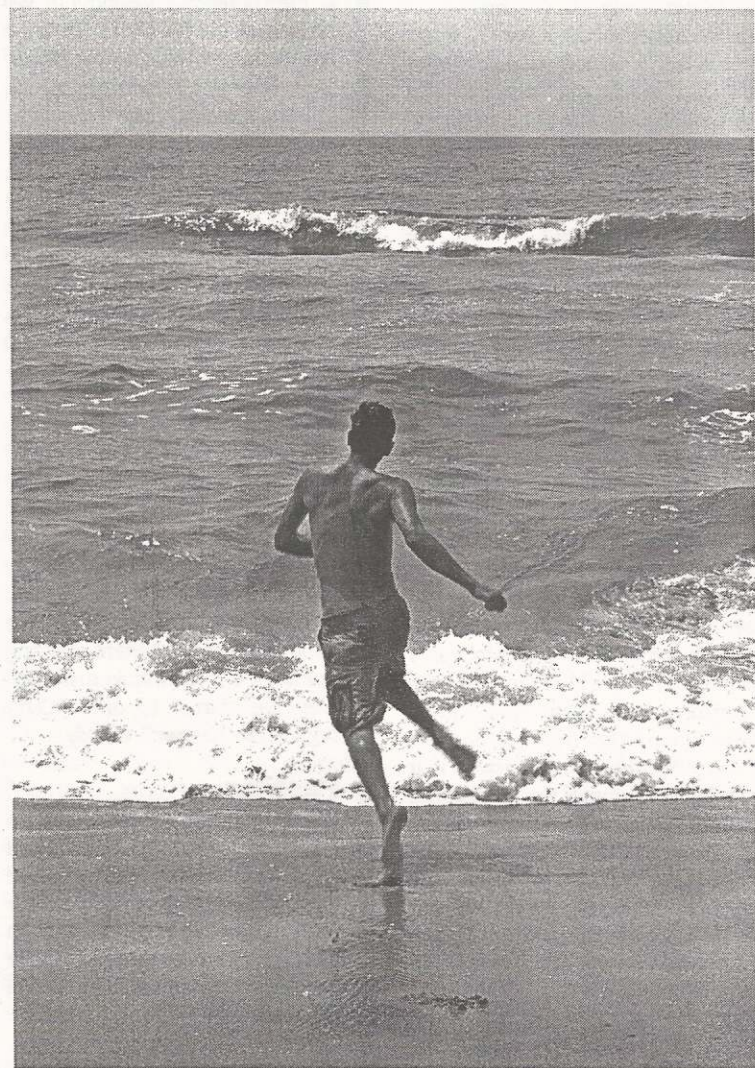
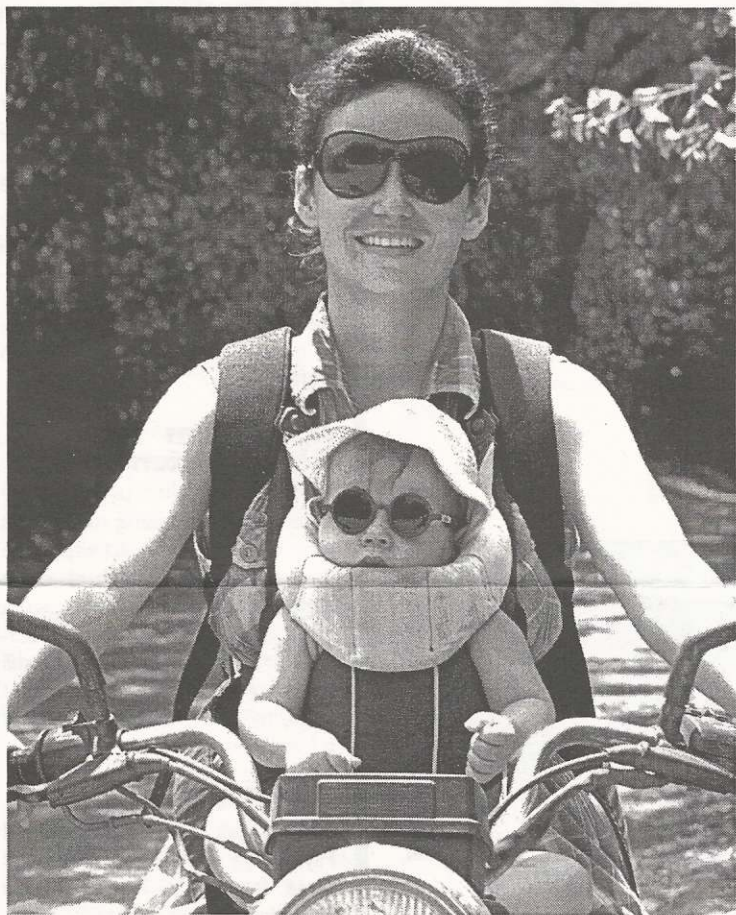
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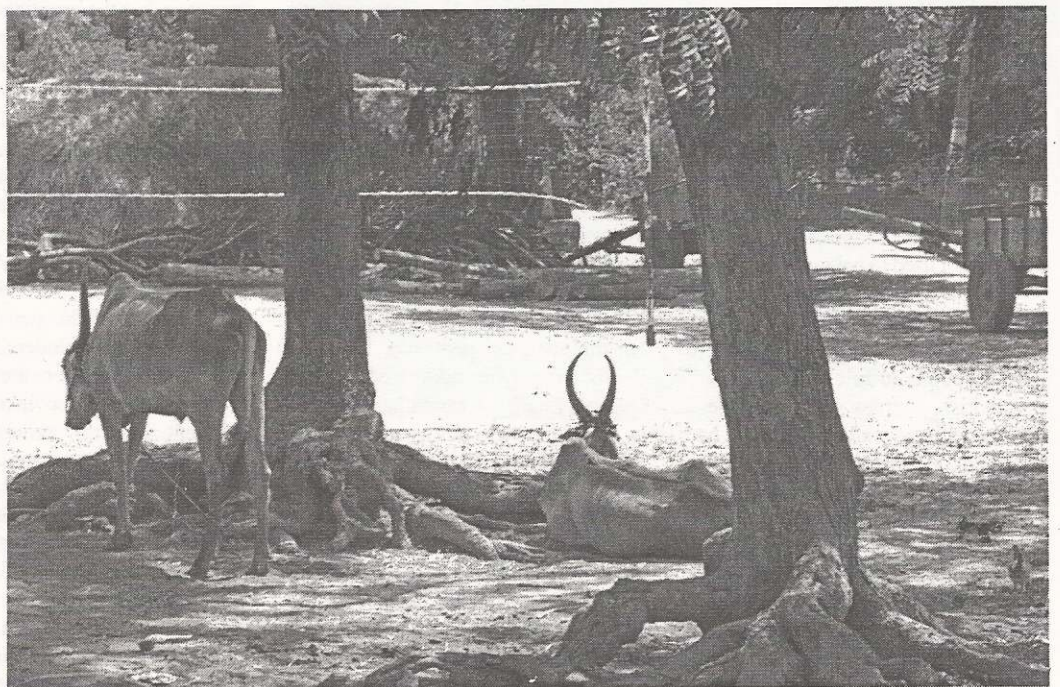
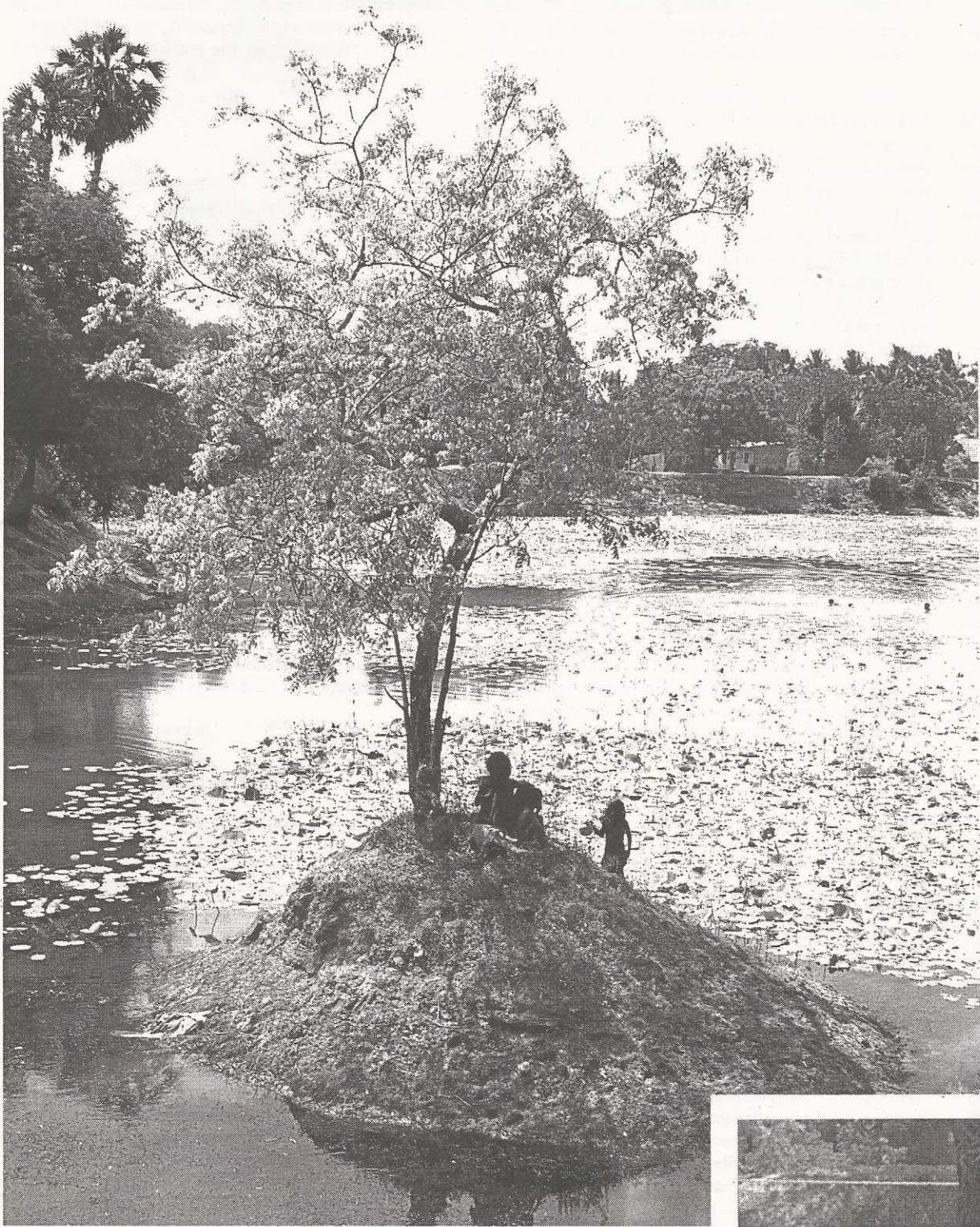
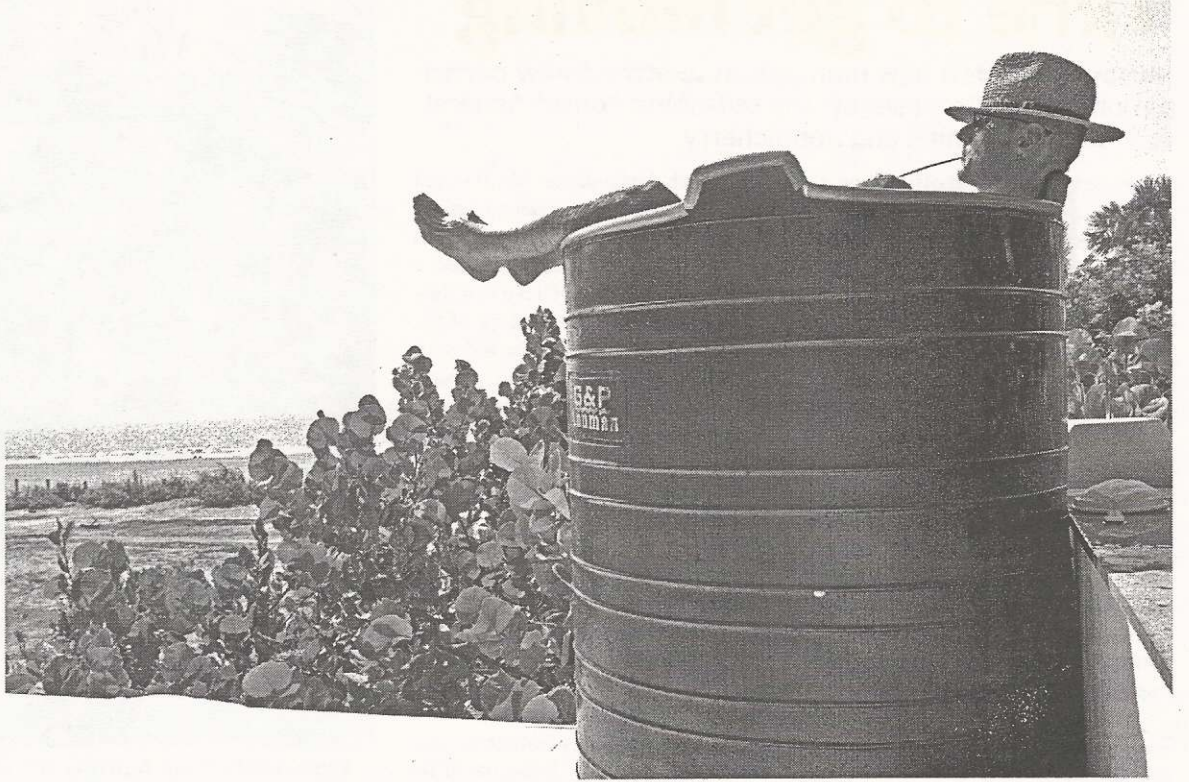
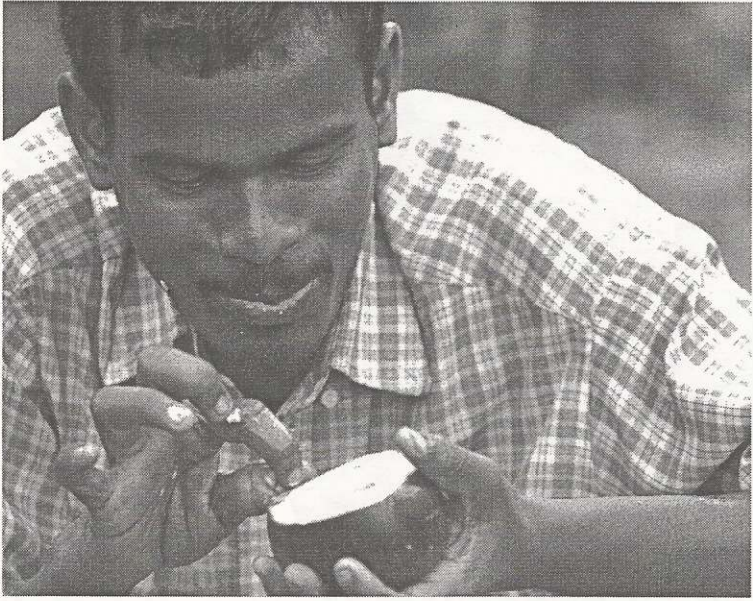
Gerard Cornec passed away in France on May 18th. Gerard joined Auroville in January 1982 and lived most of the time in Svedame. Four years ago he returned to France to fight lung cancer. He would have been 50 in September this year. He left peacefully.



AGNI NATCHATHIRAM*

photos by Shiraz & Coriolan





Time to get moving

"Auroville needs a new momentum to attract new participation," says Michel Séguy, the out-going Consul-General of France in Chennai and Pondicherry.

His term of office is nearly over. By the end of July this year, Michel Séguy will have completed four years as Consul-General of France in Pondicherry. In this time, he and his wife Martine Quentric Séguy developed an active interest in Auroville and participated in many of its events. While Martine gave evenings of story telling and exhibited her paintings, Michel was instrumental in making Auroville better known. It was in reply to his invitation, for example, that consuls from 14 nations visited Auroville in November 2004. Auroville Today asked him about his impressions of Auroville.

You and your wife have become much involved with Auroville.

Yes. We are very much interested by the experiments and the people; in what interests and motivates them. Fortunately we could meet many Aurovilians, including some who have been here from the very early years, dedicated individuals who have remained committed to the ideals of Auroville ever since they joined.

Were you aware of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother before you came here?

During my earlier posting in India I had heard about Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. Through Martine I came into contact with their writings. Martine has always been interested in Indian philosophies and had read some of Sri Aurobindo's books. We were less aware of The Mother, we discovered her only when we came to Pondicherry. In France, The Mother is not known as a famous Frenchwoman unlike Sri Aurobindo, who has an important status in India as freedom fighter and yogi.

How well known is Auroville in French diplomatic circles?

Pretty well, I would say. The for-

mer French Ambassador, Mr. Bernard de Monteferrand, was even a member of the International Advisory Council of the Auroville Foundation for a short while. I do not believe that during his membership a meeting of the Council was called, but he did visit Auroville. And so did the present ambassador, Mr. Dominique Girard. He visited Auroville recently and is in touch with quite a few French Aurovilians. Yet the understanding of Auroville could be better.

Rumour has it that some people consider Auroville a sect.

Not in the embassy. Auroville is the opposite of a sect! In France, a sect is described as something easy to enter, costly to stay in and not very easy to get out of. It is completely the contrary in Auroville! It is quite difficult to enter, life is not that expensive and it is very easy to leave.

Shortly after the murder of a Dutch citizen in Auroville in January 2005, you proposed an active involvement of the foreign missions in India. Could you explain your motivations for this proposal?

The 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations specifies in one of its first articles that a Consul's main duty is to protect the interests of his/her nationals. The murder of one of your nationals is one of the most drastic things that could happen. I was aware that the Dutch Embassy in New Delhi and the Consul-General in Mumbai got involved, but proposed that representatives of some other nations could also express their deep concern in order to boost the response of the Tamil Nadu authorities. Though we have no right to get involved in the internal affairs of a country, we do have the right to ask the government to solve the problem. But the Auroville authorities did not wish to put pressure on the Indian government and hence my proposal was not followed up.



From left to right: Auroville artist Shanta, Martine Quentric Séguy, wife of the Consul-General of France, Maud Girard-Geslan, wife of the French ambassador to India, and Michel Séguy, the French Consul General

It is part of the function of a Consul to interact with Indian government officials in case of problems with their nationals. Did you often have to intervene for Aurovilians?

Rarely. There have been a few cases where French Aurovilians were asked to leave the country forthwith, and that is always painful. Because of the Indian Foreigners Act all Aurovilians have a sword of Damocles hanging over their heads as they can be asked to leave India immediately at any time without any reasons. We have the feeling in the Consulate and the Embassy that the French in Auroville adopt the French saying 'pour vivre heureux, vivons cachés', which could be freely translated as 'to be happy in Auroville, let's lie low.' They behave like that even with the French Consulate. Many Aurovilians, for example, have not registered themselves with the Consulate, as it is not mandatory.

In September 2005, during a French book release function in Auroville, the Chairman of the

Governing Board, Dr. Karan Singh, asked you to encourage the building of the French cultural pavilion in the International Zone. What is the French position here?

I personally am convinced that the French Government will be very interested in being involved in the French Pavilion, because France is traditionally committed to the values of philosophy, spirituality and equality, and this is all there in the ideals of Auroville. But the French participation will be proportional to the investment of the Aurovilians, in other words it will depend on the visible commitment of Auroville. We have the feeling that Auroville has somehow stagnated or not grown as much as it can or should. Auroville's achievements are quite good, but it seems that Auroville is not moving on, that there is a declining growth curve.

Would France take the lead in stimulating other countries to build their pavilions?

Yes, but again the ball is in

Auroville's court. I believe that Auroville needs a new momentum to attract such participation. It is a matter of being stimulated by the Aurovilians with the active collaboration of the members of the Governing Board and International Advisory Council of the Auroville Foundation. That is absolutely mandatory.

Aurovilians should realize that most of Auroville's development problems are due to a lack of proper information on Auroville. For example, when my ambassador visited Auroville he had to discover everything himself. You need to provide up-to-date figures, names of committed people, projects, and so on. You have to inform about and sell the Auroville idea. Otherwise you won't get anywhere.

Have you a message for Auroville?

Move on, speak loud and clear, and make people aware of what you do and aim to do.

In conversation with Carel

OPEN FORUM

The first thing needed

When it came to advising Aurovilians, Mother didn't beat about the bush.

"The first thing needed is the inner discovery, to find out what one truly is behind social, moral, cultural, racial and hereditary appearances. At the centre there is a being, free and vast and knowing, who awaits our discovery and who should become the active centre of our being and our life in Auroville."

The problem, I suspect, is that while every Aurovillian sees other Aurovilians staggering under the weight of hang-ups and cultural conditionings, poor things, none of us seem to believe we're carrying any baggage ourselves. I used to believe this, until...

I'll tell you a story. I was educated at a school whose purpose, back in the 1850s when it was founded, was to train its pupils to rule and administer the British Empire. By the time I reached its ivied walls that Empire had vanished. However while we boys were no longer exhorted by winey-faced Colonels at the annual Speech Day to take up the 'white man's burden', in other, infinitely subtle, ways my school inculcated me with an image of the world and my place in it which reached back to that previous age.

There was still the unquestionable assumption, for example, that Britain (well England, actually) was best, and

that Queen's English was the only language one needed to master (apart, that is, from Latin and classical Greek) in order to master the world.

Now, fast forward to around 1980. I'm riding my cycle along a path near Utility canyon. A villager on a cycle approaches from the other direction. We meet. We stop. I ask him to move out of the way as the only navigable part of the sand at that point is on the left side of the path: I know my Highway Code. He refuses. I ask him, rather more strongly, to move out of the way. He refuses. We start pushing each other. Finally we have to be separated by a passing Aurovillian....

O.K. there were plenty of mitigating circumstances, there always are. But I ask myself - if the man I had met on that narrow path had been an Englishman who addressed me in Queen's English, would I have reacted in the same way, however unreasonable his behaviour? I think not. At some level, my public school conditioning had clicked in.

This sounds like something horribly akin to racism and I hope, I really hope, that I wouldn't behave in the same way today. In fact, I think there is very little conscious racism in today's Auroville. On the other hand, I think there's quite a lot of what I would term 'unconscious culturalism' - thought

patterns and behaviour influenced by unconscious attitudes and assumptions inherited from our cultural upbringing.

These assumptions may differ dramatically from culture to culture. So when a group of Aurovilians of different nationalities meet together, they may think they are speaking the same language, but the meaning they give to certain terms and the behaviour they find appropriate may be quite different. This, needless to say, can cause problems....

Take our 'apex' groups. Today, for the first time in Auroville's history, the Auroville Council and Working Committee include many Aurovilians born in the local villages. This is fine, indeed it's long overdue. However, the effectiveness of the two bodies was initially seriously hindered by, among other things (and there are always lots of other factors), a collision between different cultural assumptions and behaviours.

For example, the local Aurovilians on the Working Committee do not favour email communication when it comes to debating and deciding upon Working Committee issues. Their preference, as one of them put it, is for face-to-face contact. This is not always possible, so tensions have developed with some other Working Committee members who felt that the local

Aurovilians were irresponsible in not reading or responding electronically. The local Aurovilians, feeling that their competence was being called into question, point out that they do a great deal of important work in the villages which only they have the knowledge and aptitude for.

In fact, the real difference here is not in the level of commitment to Auroville, as some people unfairly insinuated. The difference is between a culture which places more emphasis upon heart values, upon knowledge and action through personal contact, and a culture which is more mind-based and so able to operate relatively 'impersonally'.

Another source of friction stems from the perception that, in public, the local Aurovilians tend to stand together rather than expressing themselves as individuals. This is undoubtedly overstated. But if there is a grain of truth in this it seems to reflect a culture which stresses the importance of family and clan relationships, a culture where the individual draws his or her sense of identity primarily from the group, as opposed to the Western model which elevates the virtues of individualism.

Now, when it comes to cultural assumptions, one is not necessarily 'better' than another. Individualism is an invaluable tool against indoctrination and superstition but it also can weaken the sense of responsibility to society at large. Family and clan loyalties help sustain community, but they can also lead to the neglect of the

greater good in the interests of one's family or clan.

In other words, when such unconscious cultural assumptions click in it is invariably the larger community, the larger ideal, which misses out. So is it any wonder that Mother was so insistent upon the Aurovilians getting beyond them?

Of course, that's not the end of it. In addition to cultural conditionings there extend far out behind us, like an invisible comet's trail, the unique individual experiences and memories which also help form and sustain whom we think we are. Yet even our responses to personal experiences are often culturally-conditioned.

What can we do about this? As a first step, maybe we can help each other, lovingly and without judgement, to discover our cultural assumptions and make them visible. For simply through speaking about them we can begin to disentangle ourselves from tentacles which stretch back over many generations and down, deep down into the depths of our unconscious.

This won't be unalloyed fun; it's never comfortable to discover that the truths one has grown up with are less than absolute. But what have we got to lose?

Nothing but ourselves. The transient and, let's face it, not terribly interesting selves which mask the "being, free and vast and knowing, who awaits our discovery".

Alan

The Kenji story

Art is born when the boundaries between the creator and his material disappear and become one. It is this one feels seeing Kenji's works in wood.

One look is sufficient. These are the works of a master craftsman. Burnished wood surfaces radiating a soft honey-glow, showing grain and growth rings, knots and gnarls. One begins to perceive the tree behind the work as the wood comes alive.

the entrance to sacred spaces in Japan, standing regally poised in front alongside a sunflower arrangement; and elsewhere, a low table, its dark wood like a swirl of molten chocolate, supports a frothy spray of dry flora.

Kenji's creations are complex and layered. Every piece is one-of-a-

brought it back to Auroville, and promptly incorporated it into a piece – it was from a coffee bush

Kenji who is originally from Japan, moved to Auroville in 2001 along with his Italian wife Valeria and their daughter Monica. His foray into woodcraft came through his association with the ocean and sailing. Growing up in the seaside town of Shikoku in Japan's South Island, the ocean was a part of Kenji's everyday life. "I soon developed an interest in diving and underwater photography, and both these activities brought me even closer to the sea."

But it was a trip to Australia by ship that led him to the adventure of a lifetime. "I wanted to sail around the world," he says. He got himself a 38 foot yacht, *Tradewind*, and left Japan at the age of 32 on a

media was there and even two helicopters," he reminisces with a smile. "When I sailed out, a special ship with water displays and fountains lead me out of the harbour."

The seven-year journey was, he says, his 'adventure of consciousness,' the subject for another story. Several life-changing events took place including meeting and falling in love with a fellow seafarer, the Italian Valeria, who later returned with him to Japan. Equally significant was a sudden hurricane off the coast of Australia early in the journey that almost sank *Tradewind*. "My boat turned over, the bulwark was destroyed and it was only by the grace of the Divine that I came out alive," says Kenji.

He docked in Australia to rebuild *Tradewind*. "It took almost a year; I remember it like yesterday," says Kenji. "The boat was so exposed and naked. Working on it was like working in the open guts of a living creature. And all my spirit went into the repair." It was then he discovered his love for wood.

Upon his return to Japan, Kenji joined a wood workshop to become a carpenter. "I wanted to learn professionally." His teacher was an elder craftsman, highly skilled in making fine traditional furniture. "The standards of quality demanded was of the highest order," says Kenji. "Every step has to be done by hand." He explains how in traditional Japanese furniture making, there is almost no use of nails or screws, and the perfect finish is achieved through fine joint work and seamless fittings. "So the work is time consuming, and requires a lot of patience and aspiration for perfection."

Kenji would spend the winter-time working and learning at the workshop, and in summer, together with Valeria, operate a charter boat taking tourists on excursions into the sea. But they soon realized that living as a Japanese-Italian couple in Japan was not easy. "Being in an interracial relationship, particularly when one partner is Japanese, was difficult socially." Kenji and Valeria

felt they needed to find a more 'neutral' place to live in, and it could not be either Italy or Japan. One of their subsequent travels abroad brought them to India and to Auroville where they found their perfect niche.

The transition to the Indian setting as a Japanese carpenter has been challenging. "To maintain high standards of quality is difficult here," he says. "Even if one item you work with is of low quality, like sandpaper for example, it pulls everything down." The other adjustment Kenji had to make was to work with new and unfamiliar wood varieties.

"In Japan, it is mostly soft woods, and the trees grow more straight and regular." In contrast, the trees from India he says are of the hard wood variety. "They also have more branches and grow quite unevenly." But what surprises him most is the presence of foreign inclusions within the wood. "I come across stones very frequently," he says. "It is as if when these trees grow, they always hold and keep something inside," he adds with a laugh. Kenji has cleverly 'borrowed' this idea and deliberately incorporates crystals or stones into some of his works, inlaying or embedding them into the wood surface.

Asked how, with all the difficulties here, he manages to bring the perfection and delicacy that seem to distinguish his works, he replies, "Little by little. When I work, I feel calm and so much joy comes from the hands."

Now, after his five years in Auroville, Kenji has an impressive body of work that is ready to be shown. Besides the flat trays, there is an assortment of high and low tables (jadaku), a shoji (rice paper) room divider, a Tansu (chest), and even a grand Yofukudansu (a classic garment cupboard). The Indo-Japanese Association in Bangalore has offered to host an exhibition of Kenji's works in late summer. "It will be the first time I will show my works outside Auroville," he says.

Hopefully this is just the beginning. **Priya Sundaravalli**

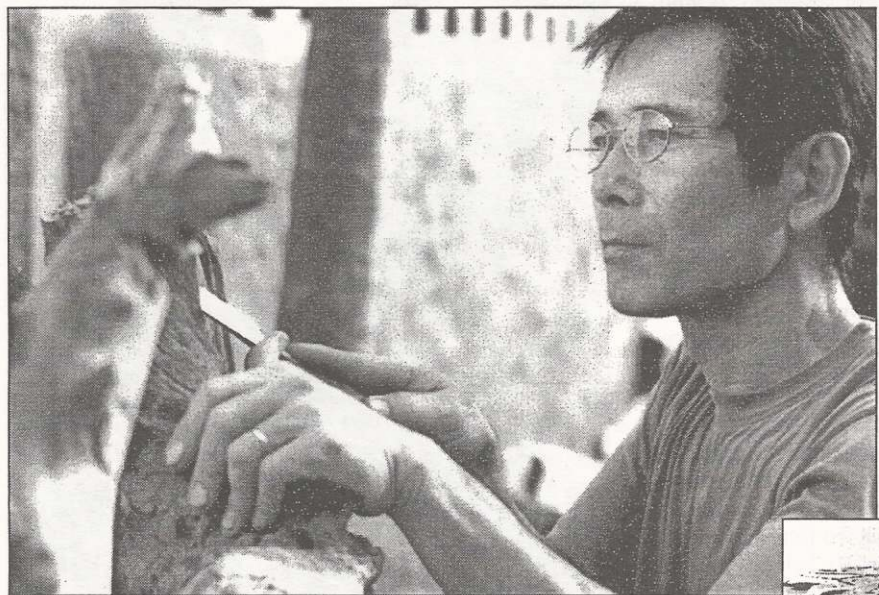


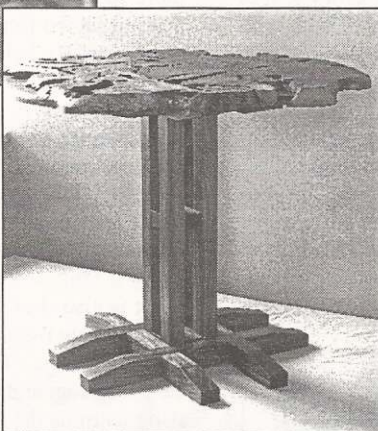
PHOTO: SEBASTIAN

Kenji working on an old tree root. Every Kenji creation is an heirloom piece. The table to the right is created with three different types of wood (work tree, transformation, and rosewood) sandwiched together to create a seamless unity.

"I feel I can communicate with wood," says Kenji almost shyly. This, obviously, is an understatement. His modesty also shows as he but rarely presents his works in Auroville, in Ikebana or pottery exhibitions. There they appear discretely as props or bases providing support to or accentuating other artists' creations. Only recently, in Valeria's Ikebana lecture, were a few works prominently displayed.

A majestic 'Guardian of Gods', a traditional doorway piece that marks

kind. "That's because every block of wood is different," says Kenji. He uses varieties of local timber, like the work tree, neem, transformation, jack, and uses the more rare woods, like rosewood, for accents or highlights. But like for a true artist, for him the material no longer is a limitation. "I keep my eyes open for any unusual wood," he says. "Once on a vacation in the Yercaud hills, I saw a beautiful piece of root discarded by the roadside." He tied up to the roof of the taxi,



trans-oceanic sailing adventure. Since circumnavigating the globe for fun on a sailboat is not the done-thing in Japan, Kenji's departure created quite a sensation. "There was a crowd of 500 to send me off; the

About the Youth Centre, mostly

When I arrive at the Youth Centre for our interview, Indra is deep in the forest, together with Esteban, a guest from Mexico, hacking through a thorny mass of branches tangled around a green bamboo grove. They are going to use the bamboo poles to build the frame for a large dome, which will be put up on the premises.

Spanish by birth, twenty-one year old Indra grew up in Auroville "... walking barefoot and climbing trees."

After his studies, he tried his hand at different jobs: working at the Auromode design studio, cutting marble tiles which would be used for the lotus pond at the Matrimandir, learning to prune trees with Spanish professional, Xavier.

Then he became caretaker of the Auroville Youth Centre. A year later, he left for Europe on a one-way ticket. "It's a whole different reality out there. But it was a great experience. It created in me a new awareness about work. It taught me how to focus my energies, how to discipline myself," he says.

After returning, Indra became caretaker of the Youth Centre once again. He also started pruning trees at the Matrimandir gardens and nursery a few mornings a week.

Though the designated caretaker of the Youth Centre, Indra insists on the fact that there is no leader at the

Youth Centre. "We are all part of the same team. We work at the Youth Centre together almost everyday." A lot of other people also come and go, help out, contribute their time and energy to the place.

Living and working at the Youth Centre, Indra feels he is learning a lot. "My work here involves so many different things: from cooking and cleaning up, to clearing dead branches in the forest, doing mechanics and fixing the electrical wiring. At the Youth Centre we try to do all that needs to be done ourselves, in order to keep the place running. It also involves learning how to live and work with others, as well as constantly working on myself."

There are no fixed rules, and people just come and take on different tasks and responsibilities. "It just happens; the right people are always here at the right time."

Though it is not residential, the caretaker being the only Aurovilian living on the premises, the Youth Centre definitely is a small community, in the true sense of the term.

Guests are also welcome to stay at the Youth Centre. They are asked to contribute whatever they can or wish to. "But we expect them to get involved in the Youth Centre, and help out with some work," explains Indra. "It's also so they can be part of us, part of this place, otherwise they would be a bit left out."

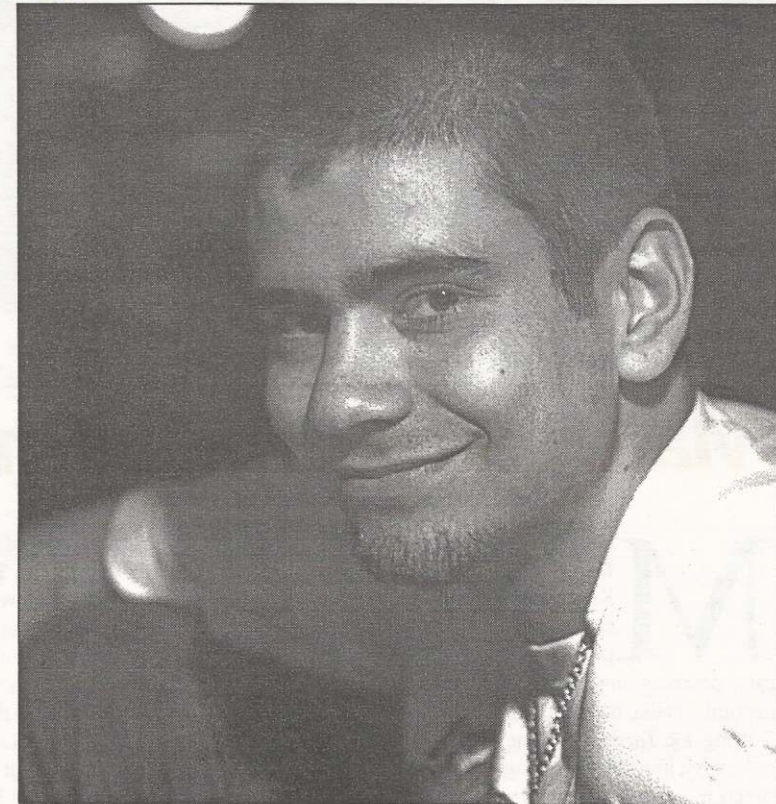
The Youth Centre has been hosting the yearly Auroville Christmas

Fair on its premises for quite a number of years now, as well as the odd organic market, different creative workshops, slide shows, film screenings and other public events.

They also offer two dinners a week: Tuesday Barbeque and Saturday Pizza, open to all. So people can come to the Youth Centre, have dinner, and then contribute what they like. People are not charged fixed rates, it's all about spontaneous exchange. Indra, who's quite a chef (his pizza is excellent!), is very much involved in preparing those dinners. This year, three special dinners were also organized: a real Mexican dinner prepared by Esteban; candle lit atmosphere dining on the 21st of February (Mother's birthday); and the 'Desert Paradise' on the 28th of February (Auroville's birthday), which proved very popular with the children.

"The work I do at the Youth Centre is my service to Auroville," says Indra. "I don't go to meetings, talk endlessly, and take decisions. Because when one talks too much, one ends up saying a lot of stupid things. But I do my best in my work, and that means a lot." He believes he will eventually get involved in the wider community.

But for now, the Youth Centre takes up all of Indra's time. "Everybody is welcome at the Youth Centre. Here, everybody has a voice and is heard. Without actually talking about it, we are trying to work



Indra

towards the aims of Auroville. Of course, we have lots of things to work out and work on, but it's this challenge that makes it so interesting."

"In the summer, it does get quieter, there are less people around. The rhythm of this place changes and one adapts to it. With the heat, one works a little less, one has a siesta

after lunch," he laughs. And then he becomes pensive. "The summer also brings with it a space for reflection and peace, and prepares one to get ready to go again."

In the future, Indra would also love to travel the world, discover new horizons. "But Auroville will remain my base camp, my home, my everything!" **Emmanuelle**

PHOTO: CORILAN

Bamboo Basketry

Hands gather speed and strips of bamboo weave in and out through a frame. Slowly and magically before the eyes, a basket flares out.

It is 10 a.m. on a Sunday morning. The May heat is just picking up but for the group of ladies, children and a lone gentleman gathered at SAWCHU, it is the magic of the basket weavers that has captured all attention.

Welcome to the bamboo basketry workshop hosted by Auroville's new Bamboo Centre and the Mirra women's group. The Auroville Bamboo Centre is the brain child of Velu, an Aurovilian from Kottakarai village, and Sundar, an architect who specialized in bamboo products at the Industrial Design Centre 'Bambu' Studio in Mumbai. "Our aim is to be the bridge between the traditional craftsman and Auroville," says Sundar.

For this workshop, the centre contacted a 'basket-weaver' couple who were selling their wares along the Tindivanam highway and invited them to Auroville to demonstrate and share their skills.

"We want to bring a renewed appreciation for a forgotten craft," says Velu. "Especially around here, where there are so many unemployed youth who don't know what to do with their lives and there is the danger of them going the wrong way." He believes that the Bamboo Centre will be one more viable option for self-employment and gaining self-esteem. "Plus there is plenty of bamboo around."

Sundar's focus is on product design and

finding new ways of using bamboo – he is also a staunch proponent of natural dyes and has taken up the educational component of the project. At the workshop, he demonstrates how to prepare coloured concoctions from material readily available in the Tamil kitchen to stain the bamboo – "turmeric for a fiery yellow; tea for a golden brown."

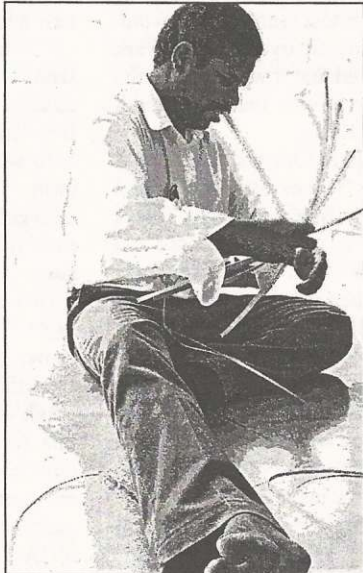
There is yet another person working with the duo. Anya, a Norwegian guest who is involved in the fundraising aspects. She documents the activities of the centre and makes presentations for audiences outside.

The group has hosted three workshops. Their first, was at Van Utsav forest festival at Sadhana Forest two months ago. The second was a product design session held at the American Pavilion for students from the USA. And now the programme with the Mirra women's group.

From the look of things, it is a very successful workshop. Baskets of all shapes and sizes emerge both with and without handles – square ones, tall ones, flared ones, hemispherical and curvaceous ones, wide-mouthed ones and even one with a rocking bottom. There is much bonhomie and laughter.

It is early afternoon by the time the programme finally wraps up and the participants are ready to leave; each one, the ladies, children and a lone gentleman lovingly cradling a bamboo basket.

Priya Sundaravalli



The lone gentleman weaving his basket.

PHOTO: PRIYA SUNDARAVALLI



Basketry in progress

PHOTO: PRIYA SUNDARAVALLI

LOCAL CULTURE

Maargazhi maasam

Maargazhi maasam is the favourite month of Lord Krishna and is marked by special pre-dawn worship in temples all over India. God-intoxicated devotees sing songs accompanied on simple instruments like hand drums, cymbals or the little 3-string *Ek Tara*. Everyone gets awakened by girls, who, like the *gopis*, sing and run through the streets to join the melee at the village temple.

But in recent decades, technology has introduced labour-saving loudspeakers and recorded music – now people don't spend their time singing, they just switch on the player. For miles around, everyone gets woken up by the loud blare of cinema-style devotional music.

This is also the situation in most villages around Auroville. The loud speakers are turned on by 5 a.m. or even 4 in the morning and are not switched off till 7 or 7:30 a.m., creating a continuous cacophony of sound.

But a turning point was reached in the village

of Raya Pettai, a village of about 500 houses located north of Auroville. There the residents started to realize that they were heading in the wrong direction and distorting an original form of worship. Especially the more educated newer generation that was aware and sensitive, came up with the idea of returning to the traditional ways of worshipping. Raya Pettai has gone back to celebrating *Maargazhi* without loud speakers or recorded music, and instead has people signing traditional and devotional songs in true bard-style.

How did this amazing change come about?

A few years ago, one early morning as the temple loud speakers began its usual blaring of music, a man of about 65 years old, totally put-off by the sound, marched up to the temple, switched off the loudspeaker and declared, "This will harm our students' lives and their future." He had noticed that the people were badly disturbed, particularly the students who were studying for their public exams.

It was the turning point for the village,

enabling it to turn its back on its misdirected modernity and return to its ancestral path. Since then, every year the village elders have organised a month-long celebration during *Maargazhi* during which known local singers along with the village youth, walk around the village in the pre-dawn hours chanting with *shruti pettis* (harmoniums) and cymbals, while being led by a boy carrying pictures of the gods.

Outside each house the women have drawn large and beautiful kolams on the threshold, and come out to worship the gods with brass plates bearing a flaming camphor and *tulsi* (holy basil) water. Each day a different house is assigned to make tea for the minstrels, and also prepare *prasad* (sweetmeats) for the whole crowd at the



Sketch by Jyoti Fusile from an archival copy of Auroville Today

temple at the end of its peregrination.

By the time dawn has lit up the streets, the group gathers at the temple to sing together and ring the bells. The atmosphere is convivial and ecstatic.

With Pettai setting an example, we may hope that the other villages will follow suit.

Ashok and Bhavana

The tale of terracotta

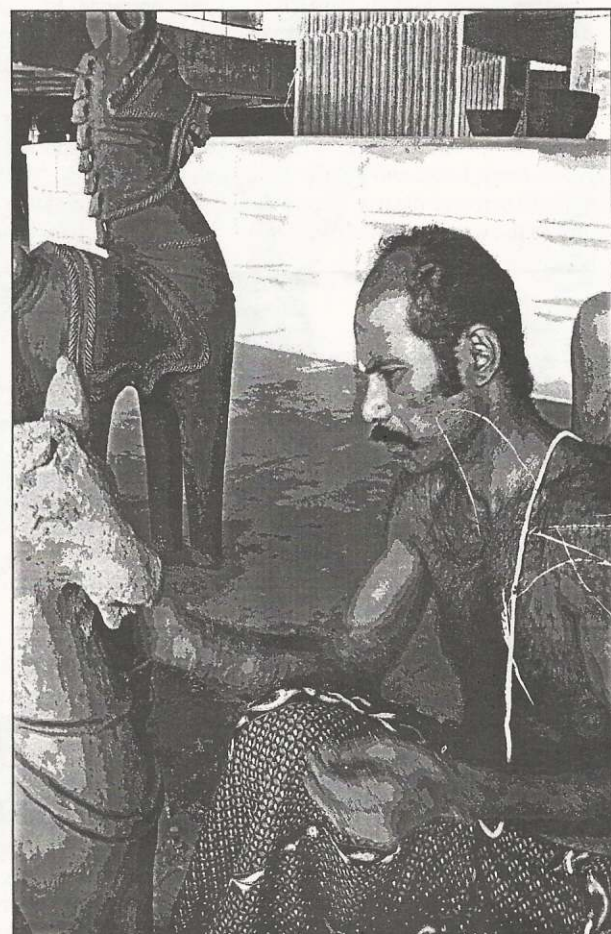
A new artist-in-residence programme has been initiated by Kala Kendra at Bharat Nivas. Recently master potter Palanisamy shared his skills with the residents of Auroville in a month-long workshop on the craft of traditional terracotta pottery.

Returning from the Free Store one morning, I hear a familiar voice call out my name from the confines of Kala Kendra. I walk in, and an unusual scene welcomes me. It is Anamika, from Auroville's Mandala pottery, sitting dwarfed behind a giant-size pot. Ribbons of clay trimmings lie around the wheel base. Catching the look of surprise on my face, she grins widely. "How come you aren't here?" she asks. "We have a master teaching us terracotta work!"

Palanisamy, who leads the workshop, comes from the potters' village of Thuvaramanai near the town of Aranthangi in Tamil Nadu. "There are sixty families in our village who make pots for cooking and storage," he says in his sing-song *Thanjavur* dialect of Tamil. He explains how four of these families have a more specialised responsibility – making sacred figurines and ritual objects. He belongs to one of them. "If the village wants a *mann kudhirai* (terracotta horse) or a *yaanai* (elephant) for the Ayyanar temple, they come to us," he says. Ayyanar is the fierce and powerful village guardian spirit, whose temple is usually located at the entrance to any Tamil village.

It is also these four families he says, that hold the sole rights to making images of gods and goddesses. "Pillaiyar (Ganesh) alone is the exception, and anyone can make him." He also mentions the unique practice of *mathalappillai* dedication, where an image of a child afflicted with some severe illness is made in clay, and offered to local Mother Goddess *Mariamman* who has healing powers.

For Palanisamy, terracotta is a living and breathing material, and the craft form is sacred. To make his clay body, he collects soil from over seven or eight locations that have a close association with water – "like *yeris* (reservoirs), *kolams* (ponds), and *kammals* (canals)". Cowdung and rice husk are also added to the mixture resulting in a strong smelling clay body. The belief is that mud collected from several spots, protects the work. For the Auroville workshop, the participants used clay brought from his own village. "Images of the gods or animals are believed to come alive after firing," he says. He explains how as the clay is raised to high temperatures, the vegetable matter burns away leaving behind pores in the clay. "It is through these holes that energy passes."



Palanisamy

Personal success or popularity in workshop circuit does not seem to satisfy Palanisamy. "What does it mean?" he asks with emotion. "That I am doing okay and able to survive is not the point. Modernity is squashing the livelihood of traditional potters." He speaks of the invasion of plastic and metal into most households. "No one cooks in mud pots anymore, or even uses pots to store water," he says. "Potter families cannot make ends meet, and more and more of my people are leaving the profession."

"It is only when well-to-do families begin to use clay pots in their homes that things can change." He goes a step further. "This means mud pots should be made available in shops and showrooms and not be sold by the roadside!"

He recollects the memorable time he spent in South Korea where he was invited as a guest artist. "In that country, potters are highly respected, and pottery is valued," he says. "It was so heartening to see that people there use so many objects of clay in their kitchens and homes."

Perhaps this initiative of Kala Kendra is just a starting point for the revival of other endangered folk craft-forms.

Priya Sundaravalli

Nadaka and the Basavaraj brothers go on tour

The acoustic guitar picks out the quick, sprung line. Pause. Then the crisp rhythms of the tabla break in as the violin takes up the melody.

So begins *Living Colours*, an album made by Nadaka and The Basavaraj Brothers some years ago. When it came out, the album introduced something new in its complex rhythms, elegant lines, nuanced percussion and effortless interlacing of Western jazz and Indian classical sounds and rhythms. Now, for the first time, Nadaka and The Basavaraj Brothers are taking *Living Colours* (plus some new pieces) on the road: in May and June they are giving over 25 concerts in France, Germany and Switzerland.

"I first met Raghavendra, the violinist," recalls Nadaka, "with the idea of creating a raga-based fusion where the classical and the not-so-classical would combine effortlessly. The outcome of our first encounter was somewhat magical, but the most surprising thing was that as each new rehearsal unfolded, one more brother would turn up and spontaneously join in with enthusiasm, thus adding a new colour to our musical venture." Hence *Living Colours*.

The Basavaraj Brothers – Balasai (flute), Raghavendra (vio-

lin), Sivaramakrishna (sitar), Ganesh (tabla) and the only one not related to the rest, Kesavan (mridangam) – are all soloists or much-in-demand accompanists. Their father, Sudharshana Rao Basavaraj, was a renowned flutist, and he wanted his children to be immersed in the great classical traditions – both Hindustani and Carnatic – of Indian music. So, while they were very young, he chose for each of them a different instrument which he wanted them to study and master. Did they ever ask him why he chose a particular instrument for a particular son? "No!" Balasai is shocked at the thought. "He is our father and our guru."

"The brothers combine northern and southern Indian classical traditions," explains Nadaka. While Ganesh on the tabla and Siva were trained in the Hindustani tradition, Raghavendra plays Carnatic violin. "So in our collaboration Siva will be playing the tabla in Hindustani style and then, suddenly, in the middle of a phrase, you'll get this Carnatic thing coming in."

There's actually a tradition of combining different classical styles in India. But there's no precedent for Nadaka's acoustic guitar and the

unique timbres and rhythms that he weaves in. What is it like to play with him? "It's very, very interesting," says Balasai. "He's a fascinating player because he can bring both the nuances of Indian classical music as well as jazz and Western classical. It adds a great dimension to the music." "We like his sincerity and dedication," adds Raghavendra.

trained sons playing such music? "He's very happy and supportive," says Balasai. "He's happy to listen to different kinds of music because in his day there was so little choice."

How easy is it to play such music when you are classically-trained? "Our classical training was very rigorous," says Raghavendra. "If you learn to play, say, Carnatic

music, can analyse and play new things very fast," says Nadaka. "I've seen these guys watching a Western music video. Somebody will say 'Stop the tape', and they'll play back full passages which they've only just heard for the first time."

But does playing fusion music influence their classical style in any way? "No," says Balasai, "we keep the two styles completely separate."

Balasai has just returned from a classical concert tour of Australia. In fact, each of the Brothers has travelled widely. "We were all into our individual work," says Ganesh, "but working with Nadaka has brought us together again." Is there ever a spirit of competition when they play together? "No," says Nadaka, "and this is the wonderful thing. Whenever they come here it's always homely and good. They're not the kind of musicians who take extra space, nobody tries to steal the show, either on stage or in life, and that makes it a very special experience for me."

So, if you want to enjoy music that "breaks, in all simplicity, the barriers between musical styles", as their website describes it, catch them on tour. Or buy the CD.

Alan

(For more information about the tour go to: www.nadaka.com)



Getting ready for their Europe Tour.

From left to right: Sivaramakrishna (sitar), Nadaka (acoustic guitar), Ganesh (tabla), Kesavan (mridangam), Balasai (flute), and Raghavendra (violin).

Living Colours is a style which is often described as 'fusion' ("I've also heard it called 'compost music'!" adds Ganesh). How does their father feel about his classically-

classical music and you are a good musician, you can play any kind of music."

"A good Indian musician, particularly one trained in Carnatic

REFLECTION

Flowers for Heine

The Auroville Children's Nature camp held annually in the wilderness of Kodaikanal offers cool respite from Auroville's summer heat. With its growing popularity each year, this innovative educational and recreational programme brings children and youth of all ages together, both from Auroville and the Outreach Schools. Here Boris, one of the adults present in the first camp (of three) this year, shares an entry from his journal.

"Die Luft ist kühl und es dunkelt, und ruhig fließt der Rhein, der Gipfel des Berges funkelt im Abendsonnenschein"

The air is cool and dusk is falling, and quietly flows the Rhine, the mountain crest gleams brightly in the evening's sunshine says Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) in his 'Song of Loreley'.

Njal said to me that he likes Heine and brought flowers to Heine's grave in Paris. If I would visit Paris, I would bring flowers to Heine's grave too, because he wrote about the cool mountains, exactly like in the Auroville summer camp.

Sometimes the day temperature in Auroville reaches 40 degrees but in Kodaikanal area it gets only 24. I was in the Auroville summer camp for the first time in 2003. German Dieter (a guest of Auroville at that time) participated in my group. He said: "The weather in this region is like in Germany." He lives in Germany near the Alps.

This year our camp is located in a new place; Kavungi, between forest and agricultural land. For a long time Aurovilians used the wilderness near Berijam lake. Of course people changed the nature in that region. They planted a lot of eucalyptus trees, pines and wattles



Happy faces at Kavungal in Kodaikanal

(Acacia). A little bit of the Shola (ancient ecological complex) is left now. Sholas keep the water from the rains; eucalyptus and pine make the soil dry. Berijam Lake is situated at an altitude of 2150 m, and it has an artificial origin. The altitude of the

new camp is approximately 1700 meters.

The first group for this year arrived in the camp on May 3. It was evening, and rain started after our dinner. There were twenty-nine children and eleven adults. I saw the symbolic words on their shirts: "Back to nature", "Live in nature".

The next morning the sun shone now and again. It was a great contrast to the weather in Auroville. Coolness stimulates physical activities. Already in the afternoon of the same day we were trekking to the nearest waterfalls. Vladimir is a nice guide and the landscapes near the waterfalls are wonderful. I'm not sure that Heine

saw such charming beauty; I would like to put on his grave some elegant flowers from that place – yellow Hypericum (St. John's Wort) and white Rhododendron.

Boris

(first published in News and Notes)

PASSING

Ilse Breijman

Please meet Ilse." The year is 1976, place Nourishment, a no longer existing Auroville coffee shop in Pondicherry. A friendly, middle aged woman smiled at Yoka and me, happy to meet other visiting Dutchmen in a foreign environment. We talk mostly about the Ashram and only a little about Auroville. The Mother had left her body three years earlier, and we all felt her presence strongly in the Ashram, while Auroville was mostly wild.

Little did we realize how much we would work together in the years to come, representing Auroville in The Netherlands.

Ilse invited us to visit her in Holland later that year. Her precise instructions how to get there were followed with 'If I'm not there just walk in, for the door is never locked.' For she was sure that only the initiated would be able to find the entrance to her house boat in Aalsmeer, the flower city of The Netherlands. The city has countless long glasshouses, one of which you had to traverse, careful not to disturb the hundreds of growing cyclamens, before you found the door to her floating mansion. A visit would rarely pass by without a trip on the nearby lake and the connecting canals. Here, Ilse was truly in her element, adroitly captaining her small motor boat through the winding waterways, past the artificial islands and the hundreds of special flowers that were grown there.

At the time Ilse was running a health food shop. Soon it also became a place from where she gave information on Auroville – another abiding love. Earlier, in 1973, she had met The Mother. "I met her only once, but that was enough," she used to say. "I still feel the little tap Mother gave on my head. It changed my life." But though Auroville had just started, she knew that her time

had not yet come when, in 1981, Auroville International The Netherlands was founded.

Ilse was to the fore, taking up the work with gusto, organising open days and answering to the many requests for information on Auroville. In 1986, she took over as chairperson, a function she held till 1996 when, as she said, "I got a clear indication 'from above' that it was time to come to



Ilse in her element

Auroville." She had prepared the move well. Agreement had been reached with Kireet that she would settle in Gaia's Garden, and Gloria had designed and built her house, powered by solar energy.

Though she joined Auroville at the age of 66, the question of 'well-deserved rest' really never came up. Even before she came, her name had already been circulated as one of the future coordinators of the Solar Kitchen – a job she took up as soon as she arrived. "Granny," as she was nicknamed, soon became respected and loved by all – except, of course, by the hapless Aurovillian who dared to walk in without a proper reservation and who had to be taught the rules of the game. And while her love for The Mother never wavered, she took up another interest in the writings of a Dutch mystic, Jozef Rulof, and she often

endeavoured to liken his experiences to those of Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

In due time she changed the labour-intensive work of the Solar Kitchen for the less-trying but no less difficult work of Keeper of the Auroville Master List, the data registry of all people living in Auroville. She shared the work with Raji and Uma, who, during the last months, increasingly lightened her burden. When I would walk into the Residents' Service, she would sometimes seem a bit listless – 'it's too hot' she would say, hiding the real problem,

a heart rhythm disturbance. As she could not stand the heat, she chose to return to Holland from April to September each year and reside on Skippy, the motor boat she had bought when she'd sold the house boat.

Ilse was well loved, both in Auroville where she quietly helped and assisted countless people, as well as in Aalsmeer, where everybody knew her and her boat. She died of heart failure in the afternoon of Friday, May 5th, while sitting with friends at the harbour, gazing out over the lake. Decidedly, it was the way Ilse wanted to go – no hospitalization, no bothering of friends, just off. As her brother wrote when he saw her for the last time, "She was lying there peacefully and very content that her task on earth had been fulfilled."

Wishing you good sailing, dear sister!

Carel

A quiet revolution?

There are one or two questions I dread being asked when I go to the West this summer. And right at the top of the list is that hardy perennial, "How is Auroville doing?"

It's well-meaning, of course, and often represents genuine concern for what's happening here. But it also assumes that Auroville is essentially "out there", that the community's progress can be accurately assessed on the basis of how well the major work groups are doing, how many new buildings are coming up, how much money is flowing into the Central Fund etc.

But think about it. Here we have over 1800 people drawn from 40 different nations. Each individual, if we are to believe Mother, has been drawn here for a special purpose, each is engaged, either consciously or unconsciously, on a very personal journey which also impacts upon and influences others – a bewildering web of interconnections. And work-

ing through all this is a Force, infinitely wise, which takes up now this element, now that one, moulding, excising, pressing, releasing, as the infinite complexity and richness of Auroville unfolds.

Given this, who but a fool would attempt to diagnose the state of Auroville's collective health?

And yet...sometimes through the haze we seem to glimpse something new, a realignment of energies which may ultimately lead to a fundamental shifting of the community's tectonic plates.

This summer, for example, there are a number of initiatives which share a different way of looking at things. There are the 'Dreamcatchers' who continue to meet on a different Auroville roof every Wednesday morning at 6 a.m. – a considerable achievement in itself, given that they recommend the cycle over the internal combustion engine as a means of transport. "In its essence," explains David the main organizer, "Dreamcatchers is an

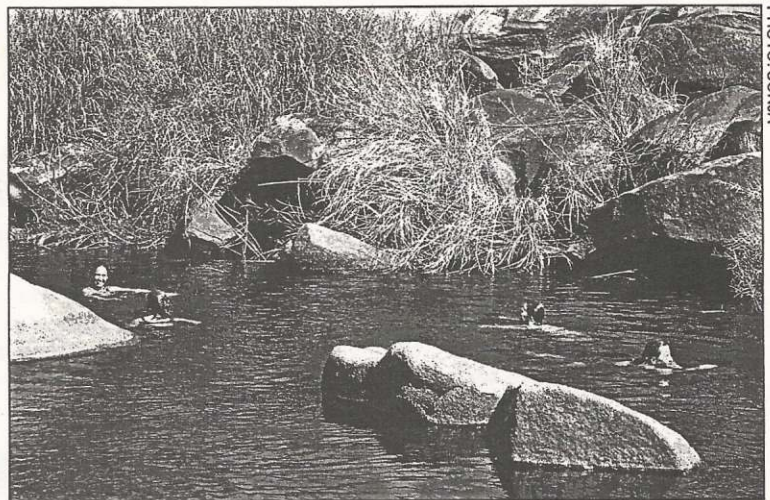
open forum for furthering the manifestation of Mother's Dream through the elaboration of the Galaxy Plan...the core focus at present is to call those relevant parameters (be they new or old, conservative or revolutionary, grounded or surreal) and to formulate pertinent questions regarding the architectural, planning, psychological and spiritual implications of the creation of a yogic city.

"Dreamcatchers aims to achieve this by reconnecting to that spirit and aspiration which called each one of us here, and hopefully through these efforts, begin to tease out those ideals and visions common to us all."

Meanwhile Ange has revived the 'Platform' concept as an alternative means of community discussion and decision-making. She explains that the platform idea diffuses power and control by empowering everybody who takes part. Participants are asked to bring their highest consciousness to the meetings and to stay with the process from beginning to end. They are also asked to speak from personal experience. A talking stick is used to ensure that whoever is speaking feels they can express themselves in their own way without interruption.

It's still early days, but Ange is already struck by how the Platform has already brought together Aurovilians who have not always seen eye-to-eye in an atmosphere of joyful collaboration.

In April, a small group of Aurovilians and friends made a 10 day retreat in Hampi. The purpose, in the words of their report, was "to explore the possibilities



The rock pools in Hampi offer yet another collective space for a group

and potential for creating fields of resonance between people. The impulse arose from a sense that there is so much more potential, richness and joy in working together in groups than we normally experience here in Auroville.... In the interest of becoming more truly able and joyful in our visioning and working toward Auroville's manifestation together, our intent was to create a space in which to explore the conditions that allow each individual to bring their full being, wisdom and creativity into the collective space."

Setting aside the rather new-age jargon, what was impressive in their feedback session was the evident affection and appreciation the retreat group felt for each other. However, it hadn't all been roses. The first three days had been particularly difficult as they worked on basic guidelines, but once these had been agreed – and one of the guidelines was to work with whatever issues came up – the group felt they reached a new level of understanding with each other which allowed each of them to be more fully themselves while generating a huge wave of collective energy. As one of them put it, "At that moment, we could have done anything."

Finally, and least publicly, a small group has continued to spend Tuesday afternoons listening to the life stories, dreams and daily concerns of individual Aurovilians. The 'listening group' is just that. It doesn't judge, argue or try to win debating points. It simply provides a safe space for Aurovilians to express themselves in any way they wish and be attentively listened to over a period of 2-3 hours, something that most Aurovilians have never experienced before. The sessions are sometimes moving, never less than interesting.

Four summer initiatives, each independent of the other yet displaying common features – the reaching for a higher consciousness, the creation of a safe space, the opportunity to speak one's personal truth and be listened to, respect for different perspectives – all premised upon trust in the individual, in the group process, and, ultimately, in the magic of this place.

Straws in the wind? Who knows? But, they might, just might, represent new blood – maybe even a new blood type – flowing through the veins of our organization which some of us feel is becoming increasingly thrombotic.

Alan



Tea time at Hampi

from left to right: Kathryn, Ulli, Shivaya, Briget, and Kathy

VISITING AUROVILLE

Spy on the bus from Pondy

How does Auroville appear to a day-tripper?

To answer this question I went incognito to the tourist information office in Pondy and bought a ticket for the City Tour with the Pondicherry Tourism and Transport Development Corporation. They made clear that the tour did not include entry to the Matrimandir.

Outside, the bus is waiting. Scenes from the tour adorn its sides with the Matrimandir in pride of place.

After a boat ride at Chunnambur Water Sports Complex we approach Auroville via Edayanchavadi.

We park opposite the Visitors Centre and our guide tells us, quick fire, that: Auroville is named as the City of the Dawn and after Sri Aurobindo; it was founded by Mirra Alfassa in 1968 as an international community intended for 3,000 inhabitants (*sic*) and currently with 1,500; the Matrimandir is a meditation chamber; we will be here 45 minutes and it is a 2 km walk to the Matrimandir and back.

We are ushered into the old Visitors Centre to view a video of the Matrimandir. We wait outside the Indian Renaissance exhibition for the video to begin but few take a peek. The 5 minute video is the most information we tourists get but the sound's indistinct.

Pausing only to retrieve a break-away group who have dashed off for retail therapy, we amble toward the Matrimandir.

The attendants are courteous and helpful. Covered walkways and trees give dappled shade. Nearing the viewing area there are flowers and landscaped areas that excite appreciation.

The viewing area is in the Amphitheatre, opposite the Matrimandir. There is a "Please keep silence" sign that is comprehensively ignored. Other tour guides are giving explanations and answering questions. The attendant in his smart blue uniform is chatting helpfully with visitors.

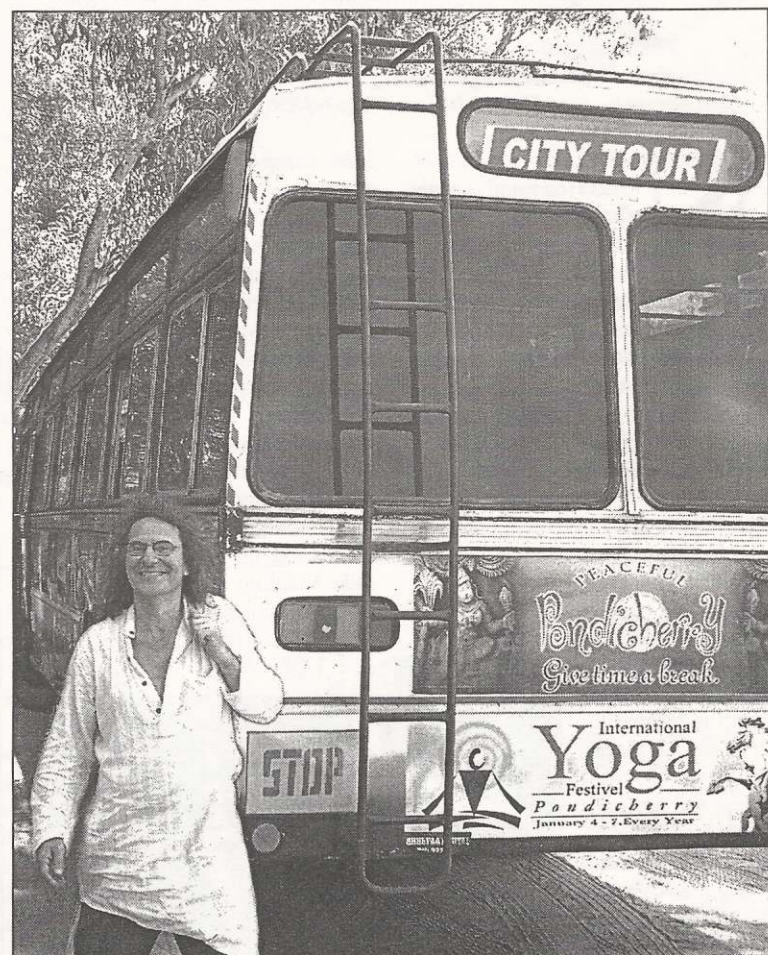
Overall I got the impression that visitors mildly enjoyed the experi-

ence but there was no "wow" factor and I could not draw anybody into conversation about the Matrimandir – contrary to the usual Indian garrulousness, curiosity and enthusiasm. Nice but low key? Weird – because my own first impression of the Matrimandir was of something surreal and extraordinarily futuristic for a "temple".

And how did Auroville, this "Universal Town in the Making", present itself to the day trippers? Hardly at all, in short. By approaching from Edayanchavadi we saw very little of Auroville on the way. At the Visitors Centre there was no Auroville exhibition: the old one had been removed and the new one is not yet ready. On the walk to the Matrimandir viewing area we saw forest and dusty roads; the only major building we passed was Savitri Bhavan nestling behind its hedge.

The secret is safe. Forget everything you've just read and eat this page. 005½ over and out.

Charles



Our undercover man

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