

Auroville Today

APRIL 2004, No.183



Part of the Discovery workshop

MAIN THEME: small commercial units

- Mereville
- Discovery
- Aurorachana
- Coffee Ideas
- Gecko!
- Aladdin
- CADD studio

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Packaging aroma oils at Mereville

"The development of Auroville's commercial sector is a cause for concern. It cannot sustain Auroville's current economic structure." These words of foreboding were written in May 2002 in the White Paper on the Auroville Economy, drafted by Professor Henk Thomas and chartered accountant Manuel Thomas (see AVToday, June-July 2002). They strongly suggested that Auroville chart out a new economic course, as "there is not a single commercial unit in Auroville, except Maroma, where one can speak of a strong economic and commercial position". Objecting to the prevailing negative attitude towards business in Auroville, they insisted that "businesses have to be recognized as providers of employment and economic value to the community", and that "Auroville must actively support and stimulate people to start business". The Paper made a number of recommendations on how to improve the situation.

Since then little has changed. Only about 40 commercial units out of a total of 120 make regular contributions from their profits to the community. The other 80 are either loss-making or only self-sustaining. Because of the limited income from the commercial units, the community has difficulty in providing sufficient maintenance to those who work in community services.

There are many reasons why units remain small. One is that the Auroville Foundation does not offer the ideal structure for doing business and that, as a consequence, many units have difficulty in getting loans. Another is that businesses which grow beyond a certain size have to deal with greatly increased bureaucracy. Some unit managers also prefer to remain small in order to preserve a sense of personal creativity and to avoid the pressures of large-scale production. In this issue we present the views and experiences of unit-holders in seven small businesses. At the time of going to press we learned that two initiatives to promote business are in the air. One is that the Auroville Board of Commerce, which expired a few years ago, will be revived. The other is a promise of a large donation to create a Business Development Fund. Hopefully, these initiatives will contribute to a change of perspective and help Auroville businesses move to another level.



Top: Hand-rolling incense sticks at Mereville
Bottom: Painting silk at Discovery

Discovery

"To survive, you have to constantly find something new"

Karna is on the brink of success. His long endeavour to make it with 'Discovery' is gradually bearing fruit. No, we are not talking about the popular TV channel, but about a garment unit that stumbled into being in 1992. "Garments? Frankly, I hadn't a clue," admits Karna disarmingly. He used to work for Altecs, assembling PL lamps. Then, after a trip to the USA, he got the idea to start his own unit. Helped by his friends, he started making fluffy toys, bags and other handicraft items. It was a part-time endeavour, with two or three ladies doing the production and Karna coming twice daily. The main income, for years, continued to come from Altecs where he continued to work.

For a few years nothing much happened. He became friends with the Auroville representative of the German 'Dritte Welt' [Third World]

organisation, but though she tried to get him some orders, it did not work out. "I sent them samples, but there was no response. Then, in 1994, I got a small Rs 80,000 garment order. It went well. In fact, Dritte Welt was so happy that they offered a 10 lakh follow-up order (US \$ 22,000) which was far beyond my capacity. But I accepted, and helped by a few friends, I managed to deliver on time."

That order gave him his first experience in garments, though no profits. But it led to more orders, and fluffy toys became playthings of the past. Today, Discovery's main product is garments, with a market in Germany and a smaller one in India. The latter, however, is gaining importance. Step by step, Karna is building up his Indian market, primarily in luxury outlets in Goa, Bangalore, Pune and other big cities.

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Mereville

Manufacturing 'food of the gods', as Mereville poetically calls its incense, has led to a healthy Auroville unit. But further growth can only happen if a change in perspective occurs in Auroville.

"Not so easy" says Franco guardedly when asked about the beginnings of Mereville. "I had finally settled in Auroville in 1991, and I had to find a means to sustain myself. In Italy, I owned a company that traded in ethnic-style garments from Nepal, Bhutan and South America. So it was natural for me to continue in the garments industry and I worked for some time in Aurosarjan. Gradually the idea to start an incense unit was born. I had studied pharmacology and had a background in herbs as an agronomist. I studied Ayurveda and aromatherapy. As there was no suitable location in Auroville, the Entry Group agreed that I could operate a unit from Pondicherry, and in 1994 Mereville (meaning 'Mother's City') started manufacturing and selling incense. But it did not take off. Like many other entrepreneurs in Auroville, I had put my personal money into the unit. And then came the moment when I looked at my last bundle of rupee notes and said to myself, 'This is it. Either this works, or it is the end.' From that time onwards, Mereville started to perform. It was a little miracle."

But Auroville was slow in accepting it. "Problems surfaced when I wanted to move into Auroville," recalls Franco. "There was a lot of resistance. I tried to go through the official channels, which included the then Auroville Board of Commerce, but there was mistrust, misinformation and misunderstanding. Though it was never really expressed, the basic problem was the uneasiness that another incense manufacturer would set-up business in Auroville. Finally the former Secretary of the Auroville Foundation, Mr. Bala Baskar, found a solution and in 1998 Mereville became part of the Auroville Foundation and sometime later moved into the Aurobhakti building in the Industrial Zone."

Is it now all water under the bridge? Franco smiles. "Almost," he says cheerfully. "But some questions still need to be addressed. One is that we are still not allowed to sell our products in the Auroville boutiques. I believe that all Auroville units should have the right to offer their products there for sale, that the fundamental role of the Auroville boutiques should be to represent all Auroville commercial units without discrimination. But so

far, this is not the case. The other issue is the creation of an Auroville logo for the products in order to demonstrate a specific identity and quality which should be consequently promoted in major national and international trade fairs. This would be a fantastic boost for our economy. Each Auroville commercial unit should not only have the automatic right to use that name and logo, but each unit should actively use it while maintaining the highest possible product quality. I hope that the Funds and Assets Management Committee will take up these issues and formulate an appropriate policy." Would this also affect the competition from local people who copy Auroville's products? Franco isn't worried. "Product copying happens in any open society. Instead of getting upset about it, we should take it as an incentive to improve the quality of our products and engage in product diversification. Seen from a wider context, the development of small handicraft units in the villages is a positive development towards mutual integration which contributes to reduce the economic, cultural and social gap between us."

With a turnover in the last financial year of 87 lakhs and net profits of 33%, Mereville is one of the successful Auroville units, fully self-made. For Mereville was never supported by the community. Says Franco, "The general community has never expressed either interest or opposition. They are only concerned that a unit contribute to Auroville, which in itself is correct. The units are supposed to work for the welfare of the community. In the past we had not been able to make regular donations to Auroville, but since we started growing, quite regular contributions have been given and even a large donation two years ago for the building of the music studio in Kalabhumi. This year much of our capital will be invested in the new factory building, so probably we won't be able to make any extra donations."

"But the community has not yet taken the step to actively promote and support commercial development. An example is our application to build our own factory building in the Industrial Zone. For more than a year now Mereville has been trying to get the approval. That is ridiculous."

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The Sangamam experience

Growing together in a model village

On the 29th February it was Open House at Sangamam, an experimental community begun three years ago near Utility. Later two of the trustees, Meenakshi and Joseba, talked about the purpose and progress of the project.

"The idea of a model village for Auroville employees has been in the air for a very long time," says Joseba. "The fact that Mother included a

been designed by Anupama "but we've already received promising designs from two other architects," says Joseba. "Ultimately we'd like to have ten different designs and to build 5-6 houses of each model."

The most interesting dimension of this new experiment, however, is the social dimension. "Most villages around Auroville have strong caste divisions," says Meenakshi. "There is

around Auroville. This is significant as there are often inter-village tensions and rivalries. However, there's no sign of this in Sangamam."

The selection process Meenakshi mentions is overseen by the Board of Trustees of the Sangamam Trust. Apart from Meenakshi, who has a vast knowledge of village relations, and Joseba (town planning), there is Ponnuswamy who manages the Auroville Electrical Service and Sanjeev who has a background in teaching and educational administration. "There are guidelines concerning who can join Sangamam," Meenakshi explains. "They should come from the neighbourhood, be long-time associates of Auroville - 'associates' means not only employees but people who have sold land to Auroville or assisted its growth in some other way. They cannot own their houses or rent them out, and they agree to abide by guidelines like not using loudspeakers, keeping the community clean and recycling waste. They also agree to make a monthly contribution of Rs 200 to cover the cost of community expenses."

This sounds like a big step from the villages. "They don't cut their connection completely," points out Meenakshi, "for example, they return for family rituals and village festivals. They do give up certain things - like the daily support of their extended family and the caste structure - when they move to Sangamam, but everybody who's moved here wants

the dominant Vanniyar caste, there is the shepherd caste, and then there are the Dalits who have always been made to live separately. In Auroville over the years we've managed to break down some of the caste distinctions through education, sports, and through the fact that employees from different castes work together and are treated the same by their employers. However, one challenge remained: how to get different castes to live together? That's how I became interested in the idea of a model village where all castes would live side by side. And that's why we called this particular project 'Sangamam', meaning 'confluence' or 'coming together'."

In fact, the six families (comprising 12 adults and 12 children) who live in Sangamam at present are drawn from all three castes. "We were very selective about whom we chose," says Meenakshi, "and the result is that, without any pressure on our part, they are happily living as one family, sharing resources and supporting each other. What's also striking is that these families come from eight different villages

to be closer to Auroville, to live more in an Auroville way, so it's not seen as a loss. In fact, the parents are very happy to have better educational possibilities for their children and to have escaped from the noise, fighting and drinking which is prevalent in the local villages. Another bonus is that we have included the Sangamam residents in our Tamil Heritage educational programme. This helps them learn more about their roots."

Is living in Sangamam a stepping-stone to becoming an Aurovilian? "It could be," says Joseba, "but it is also a place where our local collaborators - we're all of us collaborators in a common project - can experience a different way of living." But what if a resident no longer works in Auroville? Will he or she have to leave? "No," says Meenakshi. "They can stay as long as they wish as long as they respect the basic guidelines. You see, we're no longer talking about a labour colony but a model village, and such a village should have a diversity of backgrounds, skills and ages. If they do decide to leave, hopefully they will carry the Sangamam experience with them and be a force for change in the villages."

The diversity of the Sangamam experiment is about to be increased. The Housing Group has financed the construction of six units which will be made available on a temporary



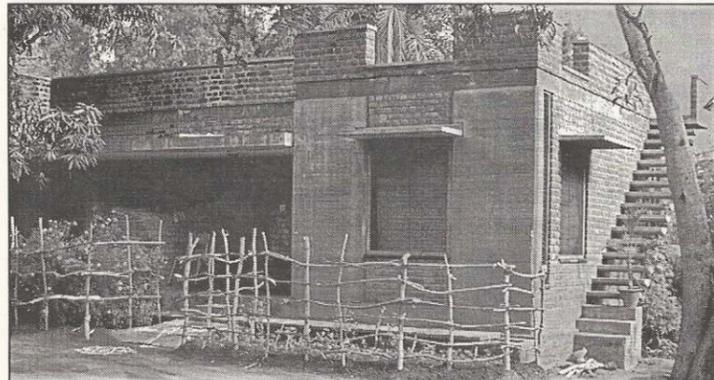
Meenakshi and Joseba discussing the model of Sangamam

basis to Aurovilians or newcomers experiencing housing difficulties. "The Board of Trustees will have the final decision about who comes," explains Meenakshi, "because we're very conscious of the need to preserve the very special atmosphere and sense of community which the present residents have built up. In fact, when it comes to sharing and living happily in close proximity I think the present residents are an example from which many Aurovilians can learn!"

"Everybody involved with this project, from Dhanapal, who is doing a fantastic job as contractor, to the residents and trustees is enthusiastic," says Joseba, "and everybody who passes by says it's a great idea. Unfortunately this doesn't translate into funds and, at present, the pot is empty. That's why I'd like to make a special appeal to Auroville's unit holders, some of whom would like Sangamam to house their long-term employees. After all, those employees have played a tremendous role in building up Auroville and Mother made it clear that, as our collaborators, we should take good care of them."

"As to the larger picture, I think this small experiment will give us lots of input for the future. In the long-term my dream is to offer, on the basis of this experience, our assistance to the neighbouring panchayats in building model large-scale housing settlements."

Alan

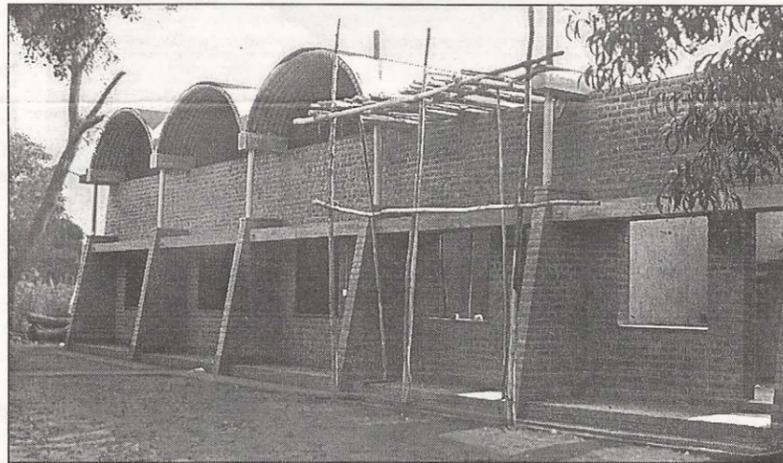


One of the existing houses at Sangamam

'Labour Colony' in one of her first plans for the township, and that She stressed that the employees should be provided with good facilities shows that it was central to her thinking." It was difficult to raise the funds for such a project, however, so over the years the focus shifted to improving the housing of individual employees in the villages. But Joseba and others never gave up the dream of a large-scale housing project which could be a model not just for Auroville but for the whole region.

The chance came when Joseba's home town of Navarra in Spain agreed at the end of 2000 to grant 24 lakh rupees (approximately \$53,000) to fund the first stage of just such a project. Auroville had already allocated land next to Utility. "In fact," explains Meenakshi, "we'd already begun a project there which we called Utility 2, but only one brave family had taken up the challenge to live there because it was far from the nearest village and shops, and even the water had to be piped in from another community." The Navarra grant allowed a new beginning. "We began by laying down a model infrastructure," explains Joseba. "As one of our targets is to minimize water usage we were fortunate that the Central Pollution Control Board agreed to finance an experimental fully-indigenous water treatment plant. This enabled us to put in a dual water system: the water from our new well is used for drinking and cooking while the recycled water will be used for irrigation and for toilets. The treatment plant will also generate biogas which will be used for cooking." Solar power is being considered for the future.

Anupama designed the overall layout of the settlement. There is a large community hall, groups of housing units will surround plazas, there will be orchards and kitchen gardens and a small green belt will buffer the settlement from a nearby road. "If this is to be a model for Indian villages it has to be high-density," points out Joseba, "so we plan to house 350 people on the 3.75 acres we have available." As to the design of the individual units, the idea is to open this up to all Auroville architects. The conditions are that all units should have an attached bathroom and toilet, kitchen and separate bedroom, and the cost per unit should not exceed two lakhs rupees (approximately \$4,400). So far six units have been constructed and six more are approaching completion. They have



The recently built block at Sangamam

COMMUNITY AFFAIRS

Improving security

Auroville takes steps to improve the safety of its residents and those of the surrounding area

Over the last few months, Auroville has been confronted with security issues in ways it never had to face before. Until recently, the Auroville security system was minimal. But in view of the deteriorating law and order situation in and around Auroville last fall the Auroville Council constituted a Security Board to tackle the very urgent and pressing issue of security at the grassroots levels. After a few weeks of meetings, the Board published its plan of action. Unfortunately, there was neither feedback nor financial support from the community, leaving the Security Board without means to improve the security and respond adequately to the situation. This changed drastically after the murder of Sydo.

Following this murder, security issues gained more attention. Amongst the decisions of the Security Board were the reorganization of the day and night guard with teams that will patrol

different areas of Auroville seven days a week, equipped with cycles, motorbikes and cell phones. Also an emer-

Auroville, the free international city.
No army, no police.
They are replaced by a battalion of guards made up of athletes and gymnasts.

September 1966, *Collected Works of The Mother* Vol 13 p. 267

gency desk is being created to receive calls. A third decision was to create Local Area Security Teams, a network of Aurovilians who will coordinate individual security in different areas of Auroville. For this purpose, Auroville was divided into eleven sectors; each sector is to be coordinated by two or

more individuals. Lastly, the Security Board is exploring the possibility to place notice-boards at all Auroville entrances stating that certain behaviour is not permitted in the Auroville area and informing Auroville guests about this matter. The Board also advised Aurovilians to be responsible for their own security by taking elementary security measures such as locking houses and motorcycles, and advising women to avoid cycling alone at dusk. Finally, the Board made an appeal for increase of its meagre security budget and will soon be constructing an office space in the Industrial Zone. It is working with security specialists on an overall security brief, in order to understand in detail what in Auroville has to be safeguarded and how to go about it.

In addition to the Security Board, the Auroville Council created a Task Force to deal with the issues of Sydo's

violent death. Task Force members have met with police official of Tamil Nadu at all levels. There have also been meetings with the Pondicherry police as some areas around Auroville are part of Pondicherry. One result of these contacts is likely to be the creation of a police outpost at Kuilapalayam. However, though Kuilapalayam is outside the Auroville city area, more than 80 Aurovilians signed a petition objecting to this as Mother had stated that there should be no police in Auroville, but instead a battalion of guards.

Another important function of the Task Force is to examine the root cause of the problems that Auroville is presently facing. The understanding of what has led to the gang wars and the murder of Sydo will hopefully reveal what long term action Auroville needs to undertake to find a true and lasting solution to the problem of security.

Sunaura and Carel

ARKA: Ray of Light

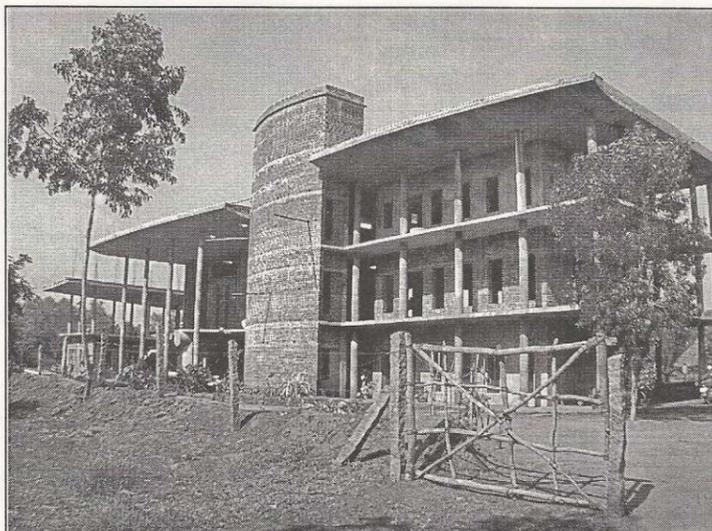
"Before 30, the energy goes out in a spendthrift way because of the play of impulses. After 30, there is a settling down and one is expected to have a plentitude of energy. At 50, blossoming begins. At 80, one becomes capable of full production." (Mother on eternal youth)

A light breeze carries the songs of birds through the otherwise silent room I stand in. It is a simple triangular space with low white washed walls and a keet roof. The only permanent presence is a statue of Ganesh, his trunk curved to the right, shining prosperity on the community being built before him. When I arrived an hour before to interview on the project of Arka, I thought I was going to write about the ins and outs of building a housing complex for senior citizens. To my great surprise, Arka is much more than a housing project. It is a research centre to discover through experience the needs of seniors. "Meaning 'ray of light' in Sanskrit, ARKA wants to become a self-sufficient centre for senior Aurovilians who wish to continue living an active, integral life in spite of possible physical challenges that may occur with age," says Arka's brochure.

Stepping outside Ganesh's meditation room, I find myself standing on a sunlit path that curves in and around the up-and-coming gardens. Though the gardens have just begun to show life with their small saplings and beginnings of green, they hold a pres-

lighting and computers.

The story of Arka goes like this: Arka was a man who visited The Mother and Sri Aurobindo Ashram regularly for many years. After he passed away, his wife, Ginevra, and long time Aurovillian Maria Grazia wanted to do something in his memory which would be in the long term interest of Auroville. While examining what already exists in Auroville, they realized that little thought had yet been given to the needs of the steadily increasing number of seniors in our community. They commissioned an architect and found a manager to oversee construction. A wonderful two acre plot, in walking distance from the Matrimandir, was allocated for the project which was inaugurated on January 1st, 2002. Krishnan Myer, another Aurovillian who managed a senior housing project in Chennai six times bigger than Arka, joined the management team of Arka in March last year. He met with SAIER, (Sri Aurobindo International Institute for Educational Research) and it was agreed that the project of Arka would come under the umbrella of SAIER which then took over the distribution of funds.



Front elevation of Arka

become an Aurovillian, Arka would be happy to house them permanently, if they prefer so.

I also learned that no Aurovilians have yet come forward to live in the residents' section, but that may be just a question of time. Resident or not, Arka invites all senior citizens to participate in its daily activities and will make a van available to pick up those who do not reside in Arka.

Being a person who does not typically become enthusiastic about unfinished buildings, I find that as I leave the gardens and enter the later phase of Arka's construction I can actually visualize what will come to be. The architectural aspect has been clearly planned with great care as one room sweeps into the next, each embodying unique qualities for the activities it will entertain. The buildings have been divided into different zones; private, semi-public and public. Among other things, the private zone will have the resident's quarters, a dining hall, a dispensary, a nursing centre, and a massage room. The semi-public zone includes a swimming pool, therapy and massage area, a beauty salon, a gymnasium, a first-aid shelter equipped with convalescent facilities, a library, guest rooms and a meditation hall. The public zone will have a restaurant and herbal tea room, an office, an internet centre, a boutique, a pharmacy, and a multi-purpose hall. Plans also include staff quarters, laundry facilities and parking areas.

Though residents of Arka should be over 65, numerous activities and programs encourage all ages to participate, whether it is through management, health care, workshops, garden

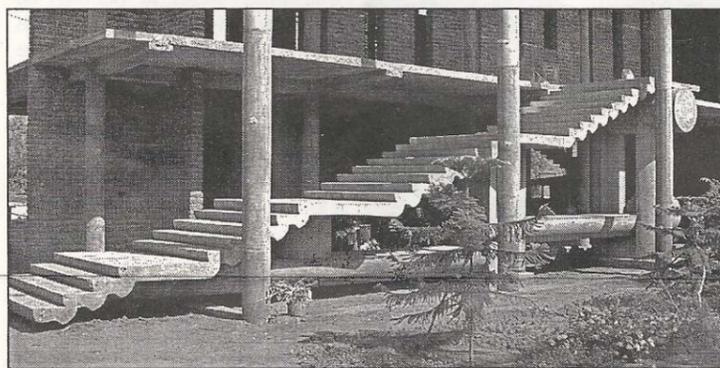
work, arts or children's theatre. The restaurant will provide healthy home-grown food. Ginevra works as a publicist and will be working with those who want to write and publish. There will be a place for pottery and other forms of artwork. The library and internet room will provide access to all forms of information. On a very practical level, great consideration to aging bodies has been given. Specially designed equipment meeting international standards has been purchased for bath and shower areas. All doors and walkways are designed to accommodate wheelchair access and ramps will connect one building to the next.

Yet what is it about Arka that makes it a special project? The Mother spoke about many aspects of youth and aging which have built the spiritual foundation for Arka. Amongst other things she says, "Old age does not come from a great number of years but from the incapacity or the refusal to continue to grow and progress. I have known old people of twenty and young people of seventy". Maria Grazia recounts "I had an experience with my father where he was old and very sick for ten years and I know what this means. I read about what Mother said on the topic and I could see that she wanted us to plan for something different in Auroville. At least we should try to do research." Krishnan tells of how the centre he worked for in Chennai tried to integrate different age groups by bringing in young children to interact with the seniors, but this did not work.

Arka is not a retirement home or a senior centre where staff will try to keep their clients entertained and occupied. Arka is a place of interaction and activity, of "unending education, of constant progress, and a youth that never ages". It will provide facilities for personal growth, both physical and spiritual, while recognizing and focusing on the lifestyle one might choose to live in later stages of life. As Maria Grazia put it, "When you reach a certain age in your life, you may not be interested in the material world or mundane tasks like balancing your cheque book, as you once were." Arka is an opportunity to take the years of gathered experience and knowledge and put one's energy toward exactly what one chooses.

The project of Arka was scheduled to become wholly operational by 2007, but through dedication and enthusiasm, those involved look forward to an early completion. Though only in my thirties, I find that as I leave the grounds I am filled with happiness that such a project is being added to the larger experiment of Auroville, and our future.

Sunaura



Main staircase of the public building

ence of their own. Babu, a long time Aurovillian, has dedicated himself to these gardens. When his wife Rosa passed away last year he thought he was destined to leave Auroville, but he was instead drawn to this work where his love and devotion do not go unnoticed. He has many plans for the trees and plants that will eventually provide food and shade for the community. As with each aspect of Arka, detailed attention has been given for sustainability. A waste water system will allow the gardens to flourish. Solar panels will generate sufficient electricity to run the pumps and other aspects of the community, such as

Questions from Auroville began to arise when it became known that some non-Aurovilians who have contributed to the project would be allowed to stay in Arka. Delicately approaching this topic I learned that, as per Auroville's Charter and the Housing Policy, no donor will have any claim on any of the fixed assets of the project. However, as a return gesture to donors who contributed to the building of the guest units, the Arka management would like to offer guest facilities to them during their visits to Auroville. Moreover, as and when a donor would join Auroville through its Entry Process, and

MATRIMANDIR

Matrimandir update

In our last issue we reported that the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation has been widely criticised for taking important decisions concerning the Matrimandir in an informal Board meeting held on February 17th, 2004 at New Delhi without any dialogue with community representatives. The Board had decided to cancel the order of the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation of October 13th, 2003 whereby, at the request of the Working Committee, four new executives for Matrimandir were appointed, and appointed instead a Steering Committee consisting of three Board members. It directed that the four current executives and one former executive "will assist the work" and that all issues regarding proposals or suggestions should be presented to the Steering Committee

which should take decisions on the basis of the consensus of all its members. The Governing Board will decide issues if there is dissatisfaction with any decision of the Steering Committee.

The Working Committee and the Auroville Council have expressed their sense of disappointment with the decisions, the fact that they are being imposed upon the community, and the unclarity of the relation between the Steering Committee and the five "assistants".

In order to "sufficiently demonstrate" that the decision of October 2003 to replace the then executives and start an entirely new phase was supported by a large number of Aurovilians, the Working Committee asked all who agree with the stand taken by them to sign a statement.

Over 700 residents of Auroville have signed this statement. A meeting of the Residents' Assembly on March 6th accepted a resolution in support of the Working Committee's request to the Governing Board to initiate a dialogue and withhold the implementation of the Governing Board directive. The resolution also noted the changed atmosphere of harmony and goodwill prevailing at Matrimandir since the replacement of the earlier management team and requested the Governing Board and the Chairman to reassure the Aurovilians, as has been done before by successive Boards and Chairmen, of their freedom to organize the activities related to Auroville.

Meanwhile, the Secretary has not yet given effect to the decision of the Governing Board of February 17th.

In brief

Sydo murder

Five persons have been arrested in connection with the murder of Sytze Douwe van Loo on January 31st, 2004. The authorities have been requested to ensure that the accused cannot avail of the possibility of bail and that they are produced before a fast-track court.

Exit policy

A meeting of the Residents' Assembly of March 11th approved an exit policy for Auroville, under which an Aurovillian can be removed from the Master List after a review of his/her case. The policy also envisages that a person can receive a strong warning or be asked to leave Auroville for a limited period of time or be subjected to another action decided upon by an ad-hoc Review Committee. The meeting also approved that the Working Committee/Auroville Council can call emergency meetings of the Residents' Assembly with less than two weeks' notice.

Auroville Council

The Auroville Council reported a breakdown in understanding and communication between the Working Committee and non-Working Committee members of the Auroville Council. The matter was discussed in two general meetings of the Residents' Assembly.

Working Committee

The Working Committee expressed the need to review the definition of its mandate as well as the process of its constitution. It has announced that it has set this process in motion and will make maximum efforts to have the community at large informed and participating.

Introspection days

Aurovilians and Newcomers gathered for two afternoons at the Unity Pavilion 'with the intent to meet each other at the level of our highest aspirations, to introspect and explore together the unity that will empower us to realize our dreams.'

Pour Tous 2

March 14 was the 32nd anniversary of 'For All - Pour Tous'. The Pour Tous 2 building, located close to the Solar Kitchen, is under construction and the present focus is on raising an amount of Rs 5 lakhs (US \$ 10,500) to complete the main structure. For more information contact Gillou@auroville.org.in

AVI Germany

The annual meeting of Auroville International Germany will take place in the Black Forest near the Swiss border from 20-23rd May with as theme 'Auroville as a project of all Humanity'. For information contact info@auroville.de

Land Fund website

The Land Fund has opened its own website at www.aurovillelandfund.org with the purpose to further spread the message about the Land Fund's mission.

Electric transport

The Visitors Reception Centre is looking into the possibility of acquiring an electrically-powered 9-seater van to provide a shuttle service from the Visitors Centre to Matrimandir, and also as a collective mode of transport for Aurovilians who find it difficult to move around. A government subsidy of Rs 75,000 is available to help cover the total cost of Rs 3,82,000, and Rs 50,000 has already been secured. For more information please contact peters@auroville.org.in

Aurorachana

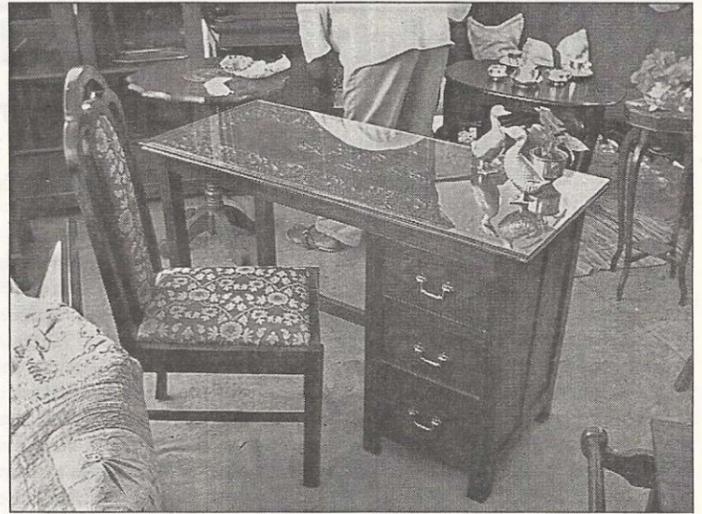
Giving a new lease of life: a unique Auroville unit restores old and abandoned furniture.

“They look so pitiful when they come in, but when they leave us, they are so bright, happy and really beautiful!” rhapsodizes Coco. She is referring to the wooden artefacts and furniture that find their way into Aurorachana, a 9-year old business that she and her husband Clemens operate out of their home in Hope. Both diehard entrepreneurs, they have behind them a chequered and colourful trail of attempted and partial successful businesses – a bakery, candle-making unit, fashion tailoring, creating cosmetics, with the last in the series being a fish-farm called Golden Tilapia [see *AVToday*, May 1989]. All this within a span of 30 years. While the fashion tailoring unit flourishes, they entered the new venture, that of furniture renovation, by accident. Being an ardent collector of antiques (her home feels like a curio shop-cum-museum), she was once approached by a seller of antique Indian figurines. “Then by chance I asked him if he could

teak or rosewood, these pieces are bought mainly from South India. Occasionally, unique pieces also come from far corners of the country for restoration in Aurorachana, like an elaborately carved Rajasthani Rice box. “We have our Tamil agents who do the travelling and scouting for us,” she says. “They buy from private homes where much of the old furniture lies forgotten and neglected. Young people want modern stuff and old furniture gets damaged. Since they don’t know how to make it nice again, they want to get rid of it.” She also adds that there is a growing trend amongst young urbanites from the major metropolises like Chennai or Bangalore who are beginning to appreciate antiques. “I am always very happy if things stay in Auroville or in India.” She shows a baby’s crib stand being made into a garment rack for an Aurovillian. The little cradle is on its way to becoming an end-table.

Success did not come easy. The lowest point in Aurorachana’s history immediately followed Sept. 11th, 2001. She recounts, “No customer showed up, no orders came, and we had no money to buy pieces to do work. Clemens and I even began to think of sending some of our people home because we couldn’t afford their wages. At this point, it was not Auroville that stepped in to bail us out, but the local bank. They gave us a 5 lakh rupees (US \$ 10,000) overdraft that was a lifesaver!” The money was used to buy a few pieces of furniture and start work again. “And miraculously on the last day of 2001, a customer stopped by and bought some pieces, and business quickly picked up again,” says Coco.

This experience left her feeling poorly supported by Auroville. So how can Auroville be supportive? Sharing is the obvious answer according to Coco; sharing work and resources in hard times, in addition to financial help from Auroville. “At present,” she explains,



Renovated furniture at an exhibition in Pondicherry

“if I need help, I go to friends; I do not expect anything from Auroville.” What does she think of the 1 crore rupee emergency standby fund for businesses that Ulli is proposing? “That would be fantastic! For us, a 5 to 10 lakh Rs credit line (US \$ 11,500-23,000) would make us more efficient.” In a business where expenses – price of pieces, raw material costs, worker wages, packing and mailing charges – are incurred well in advance before payment is realized, it is not uncommon to find oneself short of funds. “There are times when rare pieces come for sale but we don’t have the money,” says Coco. “Without cash in hand, the pieces get quickly sold to the next buyer. And then it is gone for ever!” Competition in the antique furniture market is stiff. “In the past, we were one of the few in this business, but now there are at least fifty or more

shops in this area alone.” Coco uses their presence to her advantage. For some of her regular customers, she assembles an assortment of pieces from other shops besides her own. “This gives them the freedom to not feel obliged to buy only from us,” she adds.

Aurorachana runs with a team of thirty – skilled carpenters and apprentices who are working their way up. Apart from Coco and Clemens, there are no other Aurovillians in the unit. “We tried, but our hours did not suit many. We work late; sometimes packing containers in the middle of the night from 2.30 am till 7 am. Most Aurovillians want regular hours. And this for us is almost impossible. There is no free day, not even Sunday, when we have the most visitors stopping on their way from Matrimandir.” She also describes herself and Clemens as ‘workaholics’ an attitude that has been



Clemens and Coco

also bring furniture, and he said that he could. So I gave him all the cash I had with me, just about Rs 5000, and said perhaps that he could get me something with that. And that night I had the strangest of dreams – our entire garden was full of furniture!” The agent came back with three pieces which she then restored, and these were immediately bought by friends. Slowly more pieces were obtained and business grew. “Now their garden indeed spills over with furniture at various stages of completion, and business is going strong.

The furniture that Aurorachana deals with is of the colonial era – English and Pondicherry French, with some of Chettinad style. Made of



Old furniture stacked outside await their turn for 'a second lease of life'

immensely useful in running the business. But more than that, Coco believes that furniture is her true calling. Having grown up in Germany with antique furniture, she had always dreamed of owning a furniture shop. “And when I first came to Pandy, I remember a very old French lady. Her name was Madame Pierre and she sold beautiful furniture. Most early Aurovillians bought their first pieces from her. I remember her sitting in the middle of all her wonderful furniture and I wanted to end up like that – and I guess I have!”

Priya Sundaravalli

Discovery

continued from page 1

He profits from the fact that the Indian clientele increasingly favours Western fashion styles. The Bangalore outlets give regular feedback about the customers’ comments, which has led to an increasing understanding of Indian taste, a corresponding sales increase and the introduction of Discovery’s products under its own label. Recently, he started another line of hand painted products, on viscose, cotton and silk. “If you want to survive, you have to constantly find something new,” says Karna. He uses the internet and life-style magazines to keep his inspiration flowing. “The painting designs are my own, and so are the colour selections.”

Discovery is working with its own capital and has no loans. This has its drawbacks, particularly as the Indian market mostly works on consignment basis and requires substantial investments. “I once applied for a loan, but it wasn’t a happy experience,” recalls Karna. “I got a 20 lakhs order and needed a 10 lakh loan. The Auroville Revolving Fund could only lend me 2 lakhs. The bank manager was willing to lend the rest if the Funds and Assets Management Committee would approve and guarantee. But that process would take a month and I would lose my order. Finally I got the loan from the Financial Service

with the guarantee of a few Aurovillians. The experience taught me how difficult it is to get to get working capital, without which Discovery can’t really grow. But if it has to depend on its own capital, it will be long before Discovery can become one of the larger Auroville



Karna shows one of Discovery’s silk garments

units. Today I can manage a 10 lakh order. But if I want to go three times as big, I would need a buffer, a kind of Auroville business development fund. Then I could go for bulk production, and ultimately contribute much more to Auroville. If

Auroville wishes its units to contribute more, it will need to support the units to execute their orders.”

Today Discovery has a turnover of 40-55 lakhs (US \$ 85,000 - \$120,000) a year and employs about 40 people, with extra labour in case of large orders. “There is a close relationship,” says Karna. “I treat them like family. They are basically from the surrounding villages, so we share the same background. They are of course aware that a substantial part of Discovery’s profits go to Auroville. But I also support a lot of village activities, and help the employees directly, for example by buying school books for their children, or helping out in difficult personal circumstances. And then, of course, there are the village cultural and sports activities which I encourage as much as possible.”

Is he affected by complaints about unit executives having a better lifestyle than others? “Those critics should understand that we are carrying a responsibility towards Auroville and towards our workers. It is easy to criticise the lifestyle of a business executive, but is there any understanding for the tension under which he has to perform? I can’t even sleep when I have problems in my work. I am frustrated if I see that people who criticise easily and freely themselves do not want to move. They should also take up responsibility and work hard. There is always a chance, but you have to work for it.”

Carel

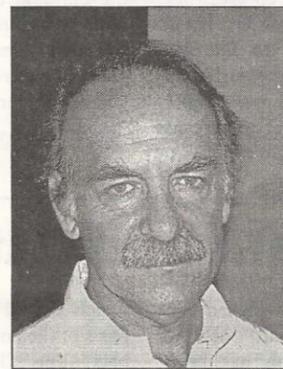
Mereville

continued from page 1

“When you run a business you need to move quickly, and you can’t be kept waiting. In our case, there were always questions and more questions, from the Green Group, the Industrial Zone Group, the Development Group, whatever. It seems that nobody really cares to promote business, and that only obstacles are being heaped. But the conditions for building in the Industrial Zone should be clear from the outset. We should have been allocated a place and the problems concerning that place should have been solved beforehand. And there should be a limit on the length of the application process, say not more than 2-3 months.”

Asked about his views on the future, Franco replies that the development of Mereville cannot be seen in isolation from the development of Auroville. “I expect that Mereville will grow gradually, unless a change in perspective occurs in Auroville and Auroville itself moves to another level. For

we need a different way of thinking, more professionalism, perhaps even new people who can overcome the old ways that are now prevalent.



Franco

Active, even proactive support for the units is an imperative. For instance, if a unit has finance management problems or manufactures a bad quality product, find ways to help the unit improve, don’t make another set of regulations aiming at additional administrative control. The previous

Auroville Board of Commerce collapsed because of a too narrow vision of its role, which did not contribute to creating trust. A revived Auroville Board of Commerce should be a cooperative decentralized body, that works from a professional perspective and actively promotes the cooperation between units. Lastly I hope that there will be an increase of transparency in order to avoid misunderstandings and mistrust, from units as well as from working groups. Auroville cannot expect to grow if this change of perspective does not manifest.”

Carel

Gecko!

"We need to build trust"

For Doty and Stephan, one of the reasons for starting a commercial unit was to enhance their relationship. If the unit blossomed, Auroville would benefit by sharing in the proceeds of another commercial unit. So, four years ago they pooled their savings, created Gecko, and started a product line unusual for India, linen garments.

"We like challenges," says Stephan cheerfully, "and to make garments with a relatively unknown material in India appealed to us. India processes cotton in abundance, but very little flax. Linen is imported from Ireland and other countries." "Linen has something special," adds Doty. "It was so even in antiquity. The priests of Isis wore linen because of its purity and the dead pharaohs were embalmed in it. The Israelites of the Old Testament too used linen for priestly vestments; and in the Book of Revelation of St. John in the New Testament you'll find that the garments of those chosen for eternal life and happiness will be of fine linen. We felt this material has a future."

Introducing a new product in the market was not easy. Linen is soft and comfortable on the skin, but it creases quite easily. "Linen-lovers do not mind that it creases, they know this shows they are wearing a quality product," says Stephan. "In Germany, the advertisements say 'Leinen knittert edel' (linen creases nobly). In India too, the advantages of linen had to be brought to the notice of the clients but now Gecko is known for its high-quality linen garments. For those who really don't like the creasing, we have created a garment line of a mixed linen-cotton material. Gradually, we started to export, and now we sell approximately 60% in India and 40% abroad." Today, Gecko employs 20 people, has a turnover of around Rs 20 lakhs (US \$ 42,000), and makes a small profit from which in the last financial year Rs 1.5 lakh was contributed to Auroville.

Gecko has now reached the point where it could either go full-blast, which might involve 50 to 60 employees, or remain a small unit. But the success notwithstanding, Doty and Stephan have made a conscious decision to opt for the latter for the time being. For Doty, a main reason is her interest in creating small select collections and her dislike of anything that resembles mass production. Stephan, on the other hand, points to the

problems that have to be resolved by those who wish to develop into larger units. "In the past years, our commercial units had to deal with a marked shift in attitude from the employees and the government. The employees now usually resort to legal help in case any problem arises. Ten years back, a disagreement with an employee used to be settled amicably. That has changed. Auroville's units now need their own legal advisors. Another development is that Indian authorities are approaching Auroville more and more. There is the Provident Fund, the Factory Inspectorate, the Employers State Insurance, excise issues, and whatever will come next. If your unit has not more than ten employees, and operates from a keet hut, there are not too many regulations to adhere to. The moment you become



Stephan and Doty

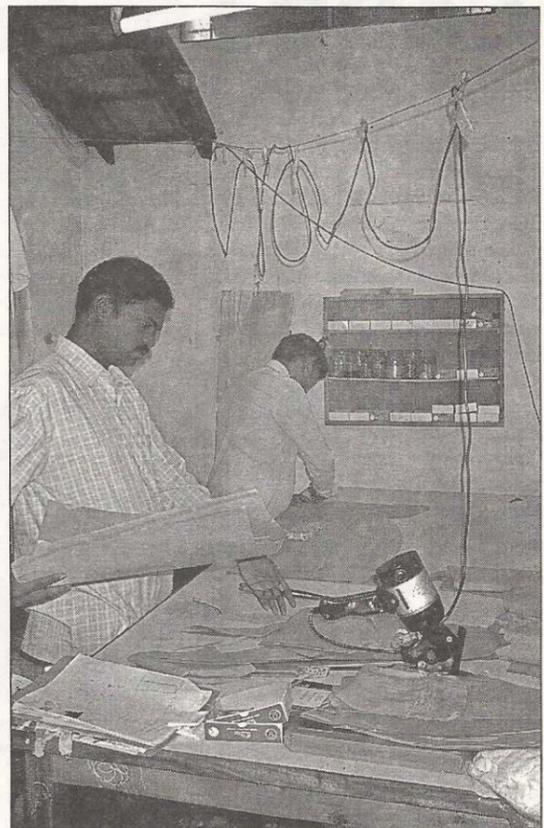
a medium size unit with say over 20 workers, you must adhere to many legal requirements. But the unit is too small to employ people who can deal with all the paperwork such as a production manager, a full-time accountant and so on. The ratio between overhead expenditure and production capacity becomes difficult to manage. So far, there is no set-up to collectively deal with all these issues or to provide support to individual entrepreneurs. Aurovilians who want to expand their business should be very properly advised what they are getting into: what happens if they become a factory; how can they make the transition; from what sources they can afford the costly middle management. These concerns are at present dealt with on an individual level but we would welcome a collective effort of Auroville units and are ready to participate."

Doty explains what 'doing business' means in terms of security. "Before, I worked in the Aurosarjan unit as a designer and my income and that of the workers was assured. But the moment we were on our own with Gecko, I noticed that the

energy I put into the unit was a lot higher than before. Because we never really had substantial resources, there is always a concern that we will not be able to pay the workers' salaries at the end of the month, and that we have sufficient orders to keep them occupied. These responsibilities are there all the time, and Stephan and I often discuss them out of office hours."

How does Gecko see the development of Auroville's units? "Cooperation between the units and the creation of joint administrative offices would be a possibility," admits Doty, "but there is a lot of mistrust between units which makes that nearly impossible. There are stories about stealing designs, about trying to get access to one's customers and about underhand deals with one's fabric suppliers in order to get the fabric you have an option on. That is very sad. We need a lot of talking to create trust. If we agree on joint production, for example, we should be certain that our orders are not delayed because a unit gives precedence to another order. But if we could grow to a better level of trust, much more would be possible: joint marketing, joint trade fair participation, even creating our own Auroville fashion shows. For we have the creative designers, we have the tailors, and we have the people who can model. What is lacking is trust."

Stephan proffers another point of view. "There are many large to very large garment manufacturers outside Auroville who over the years have dramatically improved the quality of their products and who have managed to keep their production costs at about half of Auroville's. To be price-competitive was never a strength of Auroville and it was never meant to be one. However, how big can the price gap between Auroville products and outside products become before we will face serious problems? Auroville's strength is in its creativity, in its customer knowledge, and in its marketing potential, but not in a price-competitive production. If we want to stimulate economic growth in Auroville we should distinguish units that are set up to be an expression of an Aurovillian — a handicraft unit, for example that was never meant to be a money generator — from those that have the potential and will to



Inside the Gecko! workshop

become 'money-makers.' A group of people with extensive knowledge in business should then identify proposals and the units that have the potential to become money generators and should help Aurovilians to manage these units.

"When I think about the future development of the Auroville economy I cannot see that the use of cheap, labour-intensive production will play a role. We have other strengths and opportunities which we should further develop."

In the immediate future, Gecko will continue as a small unit, but perhaps no longer as a linen specialist. "Linen has become fashionable and many industries in India now import linen yarn," says Doty. "Even in Auroville, a competition in linen has developed. So we are thinking of slowly getting out of linen and innovating with garments made of other fabrics, perhaps Indian handlooms or special silks."

Carel

Aladdin

"We received a lot of help from Auroville"

In the beginning, Eric took over the production of a small collection of lampshades, which Guy, from Radiance, had started and was no longer producing: most notably the basic globe, square and triangular lampshade models. He started in 1998 by employing a couple of people who worked from his home in Dana. Then slowly, because demand increased and bigger orders started coming in, the unit expanded, a small workshop was built in Sve-Dame and more employees were taken in. Eventually, Eric was offered a space in the Aurobhakti building. At present, the

Aladdin unit has fifteen employees, out of which twelve are women involved in production, and two are men, a supervisor and an accountant.

"Over the years," explains Eric, "we have gone on producing lampshades. Aside from the few models which we took over from Radiance, we have also created and developed many new ones. In the beginning we only produced hanging lampshades, but eventually we also developed and started to produce standing and table top lampshades. But the principle and concept remain the same: all our lampshades are foldable, and there-

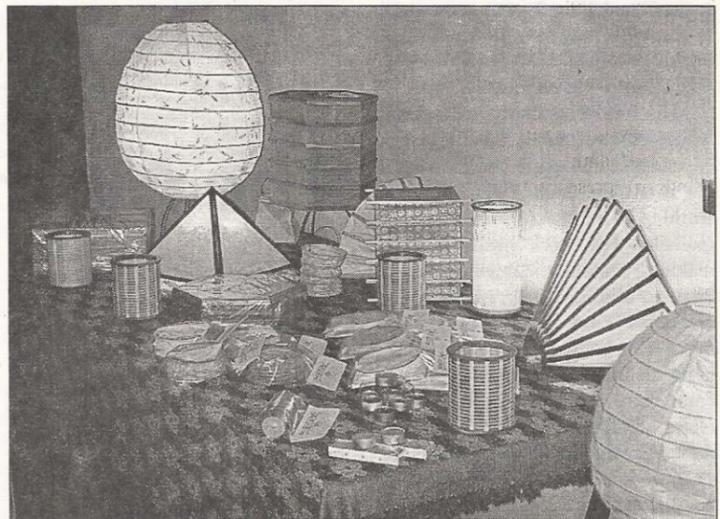
fore take up very little space when packed for transportation and export."

The materials used for the production of the lampshades are mostly silk paper and paper made from banana pulp or fiber. Most of the frames are made of red cedar wood, tinted with dry linseed oil or of bamboo, and the fittings and stands are made of copper and other metals.

The Aladdin products are sold at various outlets in southern India and their main export clients are in Germany, while some smaller orders are also exported to Switzerland, France and Ireland.

Asked whether any support was received from Auroville in setting up and running the unit, Eric doesn't stop to think: "Ever since we started, we have received a lot of help and support from the Auroville Central Fund. We really started with nothing. I took a loan from the Central Fund, which was initially difficult to pay back, because it became my capital, and all the profits we made over the first few years had to be reinvested. For the first five years we had many financial struggles, but whenever we were in need of funds to keep the company afloat and running, we received help."

Eric admits that running a commercial unit, however small, is really difficult. "During the first few years, we encountered a lot of problems. It was hard at the level of dealing with raw material suppliers, meeting deadlines, quality checking etc. Organising production was also difficult, and in the beginning we had a lot of rejects, some 20 to 25% of the lampshades we produced couldn't be sold," remembers Eric. "At that time, I was also managing the whole unit



A selection of Aladdin's lampshades

myself, including the accounts. Now I've got an accountant and a supervisor, and it's much easier. Now we also have a skilled team. The employees consider me as their boss, but the atmosphere is still very friendly. I let them manage their work and organize themselves without interfering too much. So it's the group that organizes itself, actually, and it works very well that way.

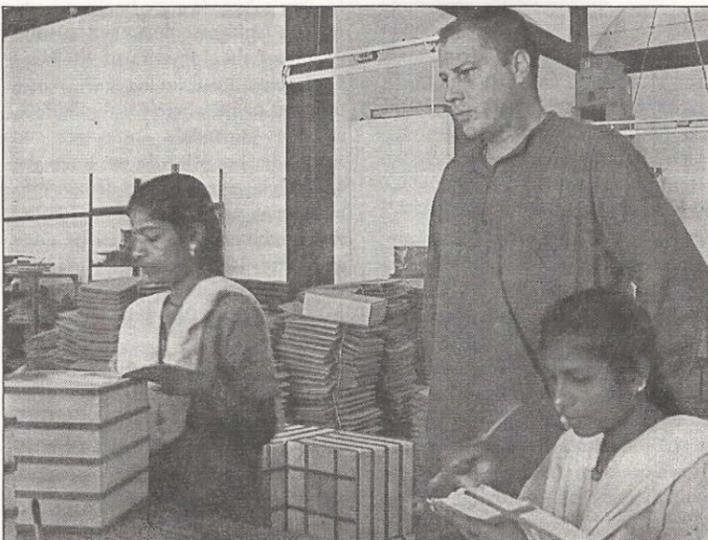
"Today, we have developed a structure and have gained the necessary know-how. Production is going much smoother, we have far less rejects, we are managing to keep our prices competitive and we've got regular orders."

Asked about his views on Auroville's request for financial contribution from commercial units, Eric explains: "I think that a small unit like Aladdin, which was started with very

little capital, needs many years before it has developed the necessary structure to earn a significant profit which doesn't need to be reinvested. At this point, we still have loans to pay back, and still need to invest in assets and stock."

To conclude, Eric shares his hopes for the future: "Though there is already quite a lot of collaboration between the various small units of Auroville, ideally there should be more. It would be great if we could all work together. We could work on getting common suppliers, transportation etc., which would greatly reduce our costs. We could also work on presenting and marketing Auroville products by creating a trade centre, and opening Auroville boutiques in other cities in India where our products could be sold."

Emmanuelle



Eric checking the production

CADD Studio

"Highly skilled work"

Dirk has a background in civil engineering. He began doing Computer-Aided Design (CAD) while he lived in the West. When he moved to the Ashram, over ten years ago, he offered his services to their construction departments. Then, with the advent of the internet, he did some private Computer-Aided Design work for a cousin in the same field in the Netherlands. He also visited websites of people whom he thought might be interested in his services and received a reply from a Dutch architect who gave him a project.

However, the possibilities to set up shop in Pondicherry were limited. "The Ashram is not interested in building up new units. On the other hand, if I started my own independent business I'd have to go out and return with a business visa, and I was sure I did not want to go in that direction. Then Auroville started beckoning me. I had some reservations but I also felt a lot of interesting new things, like the Gateway project and Asia Urbs, were happening here."

But then the question was, should he make his unit an Auroville unit or should he explore some other relationship with the community? "It was a time when people were re-examining business in Auroville and discussing alternatives - like partnerships between Auroville units and outside companies, or creating independent businesses which would share their profits with the community. I was urged to try something new as a kind of prototype but the atmosphere was not ready and, anyway, I came for Auroville. So I made my unit relatable to the Foundation. As soon as I moved to Auroville new possibilities opened up and now the CADD Studio consultancy is growing very nicely."

His original contact in Holland, whose architectural business has expanded, continues to be Dirk's main client. At present CADD Studio is working on a project for 76 houses in Holland. The work itself involves making computer drawings based upon an original design made by the architects. First of all drawings are needed for building application, then more detailed drawings which the contractors use to make their estimates, and finally large-scale working drawings which will be used on site. "The work is highly skilled and everybody I take on has to be trained not only in the specifics of CAD but also in Dutch building technology. This is why we can't expand our workforce quickly. But I definitely want to grow because I know there is a good market out there." In fact, Dirk expects to double the present workforce of five in the coming year.

Does he feel restricted by being part of the Auroville Foundation? "No. I don't need huge loans - the income is self-generating - and smaller loans would not be a problem for me." Dirk seems to have found a successful niche. On the other hand, he doesn't feel conditions in Auroville are conducive to business expansion in general. "There's a lot of confusion about business and money. For example, a new economy proposal suggests raising basic maintenances to a realistic level. But where will the extra money come from? As usual, the commercial units are asked to provide it. Yet business and money-making is

still looked down upon by quite a number of Aurovilians. The reality, as I see it, is that only business can make us self-sufficient in the long term, yet Auroville is not a business-friendly environment at present. Entrepreneurs are not attracted to set up businesses here and, as a consequence, more and



Dirk (second right) and his team examine a drawing

more people, particularly the young, leave every year to earn the money which they can't earn in the community.

"The other side of the picture is that consultancies like mine require professional, highly-committed people but most Aurovilians are not motivated to do 9-5 jobs: they want to work in their own time at their own pace. This also has to change if our businesses are to be competitive and if Aurovilians expect higher remunerations.

"I do feel things began to change after 9/11 because suddenly the tourists didn't come, there was a deficit in the community funds and people became more realistic. We shouldn't abandon the vision, but we have to realize that India and the world have changed enormously and we have to find creative ways of working with this to put the community on a much more solid economic foundation."

Alan

Coffee Ideas

"Auroville is in danger of missing the train"

When Marc returned to Barcelona in 1993 after his first visit to Auroville he had a specific purpose - to learn a skill so that he could bring it back to the community. "I'd always liked coffee very much, so we - myself, Mathilde and my family - decided to develop a new concept of coffee shops where people could enjoy a range of coffees from all over the world." They opened their first such coffee shop, the Catalans liked it, and within three years Marc and family were opening a second.

In 1997 Marc and Mathilde returned to Auroville. After trying different activities, they finally got the chance to utilize their skills when the Coffee Shop above the Solar Kitchen was born. By then Marc's interest in coffee had acquired another dimension. "In Barcelona we learned how to make a cup of coffee and how to evaluate the different types - each coffee has a different bouquet, it's very complex - but we'd never considered how the coffee was grown. It was only when I came to India and visited some estates that I learned how heavily the coffee plants are dosed with pesticides and other chemicals. I thought, 'My God, I don't want to be part of this.'" He started researching organic alternatives, which took him to a biodynamic coffee estate in the Palani Hills. "The taste of that coffee is superb, definitely better than any chemically-grown coffee, because it's grown naturally. Now we're seeing if we can improve it even further by introducing natural additives at the processing stage. Of course, the final touch is to ensure that every cup of coffee is made from freshly-ground coffee beans."

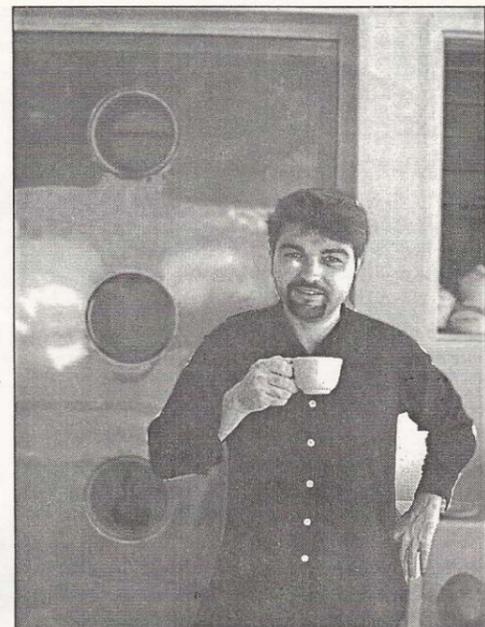
The Palani Hills coffee was introduced to the Coffee Shop and well-liked, but now Marc wanted to extend the concept of organic coffee

shops to the rest of India. The door soon opened. "A lady visited the Coffee Shop, loved it, and told me she had a big old house in Chennai where she wanted to do something similar. Would I help?" Marc agreed. He sourced the coffee, imported the equipment, trained the staff and today Sundar Mahal in the heart of Chennai is the preferred pit-stop for local coffee aficionados and visiting Aurovilians.

"The great thing about coffee is that it's a social drink, so it's a great way of introducing people to healthy organic food. On 14th February the Sundar Mahal team opened a second place in Chennai, called the 'eco-café', where we've taken the concept one stage further by ensuring that everything - tea, fruit, vegetables etc. - is organic. We want to provide an outlet for organic farmers who often have difficulty in finding a market, and to raise awareness about organic food in the general public."

Marc has big plans for the future. He'd like to expand into organic teas, chocolate drinks and, perhaps, the processing of organic foods. He also wants to promote Fair Trade practices. This involves, among other things, the growers getting a fair price for their crops and their workers receiving good wages and crèches and schools for their children. The question is, can Marc do all this within the present structure of the Auroville Foundation?

"The Foundation is fine for things like Asia-Urbs or consultancies, but once you need to create assets it gets complicated because you can't own them and so can't sell



Marc sipping a fine cup of organic coffee

PHOTO COURTESY: MARK

them. This makes doing business in Auroville very unattractive for entrepreneurs and makes it impossible for us to find business partners outside. If you're outside the Foundation you're much freer to operate and make quick decisions. Auroville is not business-friendly. When I worked at the Coffee Shop some people would say to me, 'You must be getting rich charging Rs 30 for sandwiches'. This hurts. Aurovilians need to understand that business doesn't mean capitalism. You can do ethics in business, no question, that's what Fair Trade practices are all about.

"I love Auroville: it's still my main reason for getting up every morning and going ahead. But I also feel Auroville is in danger of missing the train. India is a very good place for doing business now, and we have many talented people in the community. But unless something changes radically in our business environment, in 3-4 years there will be no entrepreneurs left and Auroville will be a retirement island dependent on funds from elsewhere. Is that really what we want?"

Alan

SEMINAR

The Mother and the Yoga of Evolution

Increasingly Auroville is becoming a venue for hosting seminars and courses which are attended by people from outside. Recently, a seminar titled 'The Mother and the Yoga of Evolution' was held between February 18th and 23rd, sponsored by three organizations - the Indian Council of Philosophical Research, the Centre of Study in Civilizations and the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies. It was attended by 67 Indian research fellows who had been selected by the three institutions, accompanied by six of their official representatives.

"Auroville has been created by The Mother as a laboratory of accelerated evolution and as the cradle for a new being and a new society. And we felt that there was no better occasion than the end of the 125th birth anniversary of the Mother to come together, seekers from all over India and the world, representative of the family of mankind, in a collective aspiration to understand better, with our mind, with our heart, with our body, the vision and experience of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and how we can collaborate consciously to our own evolution by the process of yoga. To this end, as an experiment, it has been felt to organize what could be called a "meditative" seminar. Our aspiration is not to explain but to communicate the various aspects pertain-



The Mother, painting by Shanta

PHOTO COURTESY: SERGE

ing to the 'Yoga of Evolution' such as experimented and applied by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, not through the usual readings of papers, but through a whole range of creative expressions flowing out of our experience in living in Auroville." This is how Serge, one of the organisers, presented the programme of the seminar. Though lectures were unavoidable, they were alternated with cultural events and power-point presentations.

Among the cultural highlights were the plays 'Ascent to Truth,' and 'The Great Secret' written by The Mother and performed and directed by Aurovilians. Another highlight, unfor-

tunately too short, was a presentation by Aurovillian high school kids, who read out what Mother had in mind for Auroville and its denizens. Also appreciated were the power-point presentations on 'The Mother and the Yoga of Evolution', the video films 'Auroville - A Dream of the Divine' and 'The Genius of India', and the astounding music of Mandolin Srinivas and his ensemble who delighted the audience with their masterly improvisations of ragas.

"The seminar itself went quite well," opines Frederick, the other organizer. "Many of the invitees had been studying Sri Aurobindo's works and a few were also aware of the context of The Mother's Agenda. We received feedback that participants felt entering a different dimension with an overwhelming spirit and energy. But we regret that there was hardly any participation of Aurovilians. We had sent out an invitation to 'make of that Seminar a collective meditation with our guests, a profound meditation on Mother's work of evolution and transformation.' We wanted the seminar to be an occasion for a re-pledge by the community to its ideals, and also an occasion where the community could meet India in Auroville. But we failed to inspire people to participate, though not for the lack of trying. We went to all the schools and also

appealed to many people individually. We made several public announcements, tried to raise the necessary extra funds but we got hardly any response. Only in the end there was some response, but not what we had hoped for. The reasons why Aurovilians have not participated have not yet been understood."

Frederick adds a personal observation: "For me, a rather important reason for holding the seminar was to ensure that the 13 volumes of The Mother's Agenda were finally accepted as a legitimate document, a valid record of the 15 years of Mother's yogic experiments in her body. And a time has come where we should look at the Agenda's relevance to Auroville. For why do we build the city? To have a nice time, demonstrating human unity, international living and brotherhood? That can be done anywhere else in the world. But in my view, and that of many others, Auroville should be living the 14th Agenda."

The Auroville organizers were generally content with the entire event, even though some programmes could have been better organised. Says Frederick "But it didn't matter. Something else, more beautiful, spontaneously came in place. In all, it was a great event."

Carel

The Kosmos Festival

One of the ritual highlights of Auroville's rather sparse cultural fare in the eighties was the annual showing of a film, usually Kurosawa's *The Seventh Samurai* at Bharat Nivas, and, if we were very lucky, the performance of a Marguerite Duras play as well. There was also a small café that lasted about a year. It opened on video nights upstairs at the Bharat Nivas auditorium. Already tuned into the pulse and mood of the community, the second issue of AVToday [December 1988] featured a round-table discussion entitled: Is Auroville a cultural desert?

Fast forward to the Kosmos Festival held at the SAWCHU building during the first three weeks of March and culminating on Earth Day 2004. The well-attended Festival featured daily showings of a variety of outstanding contemporary films and documentaries from different countries and cultures, all concerned with the

theme and issues of human unity and the expression of cultural diversity. There was a documentary on Noam Chomsky, as well as a documentary presented by its director on 9/11 and fifty years of American foreign policy. Films from Iran, New Zealand, Japan, Brazil, and the Inuit North, were combined with discussions on themes such as globalization and sustainability. There was a well-received poetry and prose reading by Aurovilians of the Beat writers with live musical accompaniment, as well as an evening dedicated to the poetry of Rumi. All this in a friendly, relaxed, and, come evening, candle-lit atmosphere. Compared to the Spartan fare of

yore, the Kosmos Festival was, for the Aurovilians who attended it, the cultural equivalent of a ten course Roman banquet. Starting with an event hosted on Earth Day three years ago, several one day Kosmos Festival events at the Visitors Centre have been organized by Wim over the last two years. Films shown have included Philip Glass' *Koyaanisqatsi* and *Genghis Blues*, a fascinating documentary on the visit to the town of Tuva in Mongolia of a blind American bluesman of Mongolian ancestry who is a master in the art of throat singing.

Auroville Today spoke to Wim, the organizer of the festival, about the need in the community that he has been seeking to fill over the last three years.

"Kosmos is a Greek term, first introduced by the Pythagorean philosophers, whose meaning was clearly defined as encompassing not only the physical universe (cosmos) but the living uni-

verse – the biosphere – and the noosphere that is the universe of the mind and anything else above. It comes the closest to a definition of the different planes of existence. I really liked that term and wanted to use it in order to imply that we are talking about the manifestation of existence not only on the physical level but on other levels of being as well. My idea was that the festival be an exploration of unity in diversity in a place where we can find a connection with each other on these different levels and which resonates with the aspect of unity, but where there is also a space for diversity. How are we today, living in a so-called global culture, able to find a common ground and

how to find within that common ground a diversity of expression?"

"I chose films coming from different cultures and countries – Europe, Brazil, Iran, that shared a theme that involves a journey of transformation precipitated by either a traumatic experience or an overt experience of rejection, or of not belonging, and then a resolution culminating in a transformation of consciousness that leads to an understanding of one's identity in life. For instance in the New Zealand film *The Whale Rider*, a generation of elders amongst the Maori people is seeking a new leader to carry on their traditions. They come into confrontation with a girl who knows from the beginning that she is meant to be the new leader but is not able to do that within the tribe's traditional framework. Her acceptance represents in a sense the force of evolution pushing against the force of tradition that represses or disempowers people.

"The debates and discussions on such topics as the effects of globalization on Auroville at the conversation café were less well attended at first than the films – many Aurovilians are busy between 5-7p.m. – but I liked it when people would arrive before the evening program and discuss what they had seen the previous day. Aurovilians are starved for cultural interaction and I feel people are happy to have a place where they can come and have a conversation that has some meaning in it. People can become isolated in so many ways here, and that's where the emphasis on the café lies, the food being offered is not only physical, but mental and spiritual as well. It's a very different experience watching a movie at home on your computer and watching it together with other people in a common collective space.

"Also we need to cultivate a space where people can meet and discuss topics other than those on the agendas of our meetings. I feel discussions in Auroville tend to the dogmatic and would like to contribute to an environment where free-thinking is encouraged. When we de-contextualize an idea or statement and then deify it, that's dogmatism. And that's quite common here. How can we keep the free flow of ideas alive in resonance with the inspirational ideas of Sri Aurobindo? For instance, the theme of one of the conversation cafés in the afternoon attended by some thirty Aurovilians and guests concerned the relationship of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's teachings to other experiences, teachings and traditions in the world, as well as the alue of the material programmed at the festival in terms of the integral yoga. Do they reflect and reinforce each other? One of the core intentions of the Festival was screening material that obliges people to rethink and reevaluate their own paths. *One Giant Leap*, a film which was shown on the final weekend of the festival, is a beautiful example of how one can be inspired by what is going on in the world in the realm of ideas and music and which is in resonance with what we are attempting here. It is becoming a more and more universal theme in the artistic and intellectual avant-garde of global culture. What I am showing is an example of what Sri Aurobindo predicted would occur."

The Kosmos Festival closed with an afternoon of live music and open-mike poetry performances on Earth Day March 21st, followed by the film *Winged Migrations*, a breathtaking documentary of bird migrations through forty countries. It invited the viewer to open his/her eyes to the wonders of the world and the miracle of existence. Because, for Wim, the ultimate aspiration for organizing the Kosmos Festival is to offer a context for Aurovilians and guests to celebrate the beauty, mystery and miracle of the world. Feedback to the festival has been overwhelmingly positive and many would like it to become a permanent feature with its own space. The challenge is, where and how? Wim feels that we would need a population of four thousand for it to be sustainable on a permanent basis, but hopes to continue hosting such events three to four times a year.

Roger

In brief

Painting and music event

On Sunday, February 29th, at Savitri Bhavan, Holger showed the result of a project done last year with the German painter Alfred Bast. On four consecutive days they met at noon on the roof of Holger's house. Alfred made drawings on a canvas using a magnifying glass to focus the sun's rays while Holger improvised simultaneously on the electric violin on the theme 'The four aspects of the Divine Mother' as described by Sri Aurobindo.

The Boys at Solar Café

Arshin and Armin, two Iranian students from Bangalore, gave a concert playing various musical styles at the Solar Café.

Ireland celebrates

March 17th saw Impi, Auroville's lone Irish resident, celebrating St. Patrick's Day with the lunchers at Solar Kitchen. Dressed gaily in green, she distributed clover-shaped good luck badges with messages like *Dia Dhuit* (hello) in Irish from the Emerald Isle. The bonhomie index visibly rose after her visit.

'Exploration of the new world'

During Mother's 126th birthday week, Mayaura, Veronique, Shanta, Adil, Franz and Marc exhibited paintings and drawings at the Bharat Nivas Auditorium's foyer.

Mother's sketches

A collection of 35 enlarged sketches made by The Mother were displayed at the Centre for Research in Indian Culture.

Tibetan Film Festival

The Pavilion of Tibetan Culture organised a Tibetan film festival featuring the films 'Himalaya' by Eric Valli and 'Oracles and Demons of Ladakh'. The latter was presented by Laurent Pordié, Dept. of Social Sciences, French Institute of Pondicherry.

New Space at Bharat Nivas

Four programmes were held in the new space of Bharat Nivas. Kittu Reddy spoke about 'A history of the Future: India shaping her destiny'. Manoj Das spoke of 'The Story of India: exploring the subcontinent's psyche through myth, legend and folklore'. 'Hymns to the Mystic Fire' by Sri Aurobindo was recited in English by Shumur-di and in Sanskrit by Chinmayi-di, and Pravir Malik spoke about 'Emerging Perspectives in Organisational Patterns'.

Milarepa

Martine Quentric Seguy recounted 'The Incredible Story of Jetsun Milarepa, the Man and the Yogi' at an evening of story telling in the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture.

Talks in Tamil

Dr. Prema Nandakumar, daughter of Prof. K.R.S. Iyengar, the first biographer of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, gave two special lectures in Tamil on 'Tamil Nadu's heritage of Human Unity' and 'The Truth – sayings of our Mother'.

Integral Yoga monograph

A 40-page monograph entitled 'Integral Yoga: The spiritual ideal of Auroville', written by former Auroville Today editor Bindu Mohanty, is available from Auroville Today at the price of Rs 100 (foreign) and Rs 55 (India).

Voice awareness

Former Aurovillian Danny Becher, who now lives in The Netherlands, gave a workshop on voice and sound awareness in Pitanga.

PHOTO COURTESY: WIM



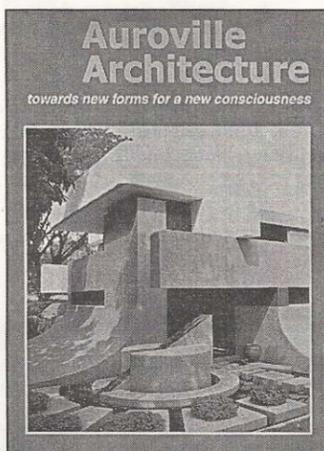
A medley of drums entralls an audience at an evening of Jazz

NEW PUBLICATION

Auroville Architecture

For years some of us have been talking about the need for a good brochure on Auroville's architecture. Now at last it has arrived. *Auroville Architecture: towards new forms for a new consciousness* introduces the concept of a model city and describes the many architectural experiments which have taken place over the years as that concept has evolved. There is also a very interesting section in which Auroville architects talk about their work and the sources of their inspiration (it emerges that, within Auroville, the work of Roger Anger and Piero and Gloria is the most admired).

The brochure is not a detailed analysis of Auroville's architecture – there are no architectural plans or drawings – but rather an introduction to the variety of constructions and, through



this, the exuberance of imagination, found in the community. In this sense, with its hundreds of photographs and informative text it is a resounding success. My only quibbles are that there are very few photographs of interiors, and the quality of the printing of the black and white photographs, which make up the bulk of the brochure, is rather disappointing.

But congratulations to Prisma, and Franz in particular, for finally bringing out the brochure which many of us have been waiting for.

Alan

Auroville Architecture: towards new forms for a new consciousness. Designed and produced by Prisma, 2004. Rs 200. Enquiries to prisma@auroville.org.in

Mammas and papas in the house

As surely as May and June sees the exodus of many Aurovilians, the months of January and February see the influx of a special kind of 'Friends of Auroville'. Many residents can be seen on their bikes with pillion riders above the age of fifty – the parents are taking over!

The visit, looked forward to so much on both sides, can be fun or it can turn out to be a nightmare. Julietta investigates.

The first shock

The parents of Aurovilians are a curious species. When you tell them that you are going to live in Auroville, most of them are terrified. Newcomer Michaela knows everything about it: "After I came back from my first visit to India, I confronted my parents with 3 new ideas:

1. I'm going to marry
2. We are planning to have a baby and
3. We are moving to Auroville.

They recovered only slowly. Then their interest grew. I knew that they would come and visit, but I wasn't expecting them so soon."

Grandchild Leo is now 13 months old and plays with Nanny Birgit and Granny Reinhold in the mud. "Dust and dirt were the only things they could speak about for two hours after they arrived from Chennai. Consciously I didn't pick them up at the airport to give them a chance to have their own first impressions. The traffic! For Germans this is very hard to digest. 'How can our poor, poor daughter survive in these circumstances?' They calmed down when they arrived at Afsaneh's Guest

House. They seemed to glimpse light at the end of the tunnel."

House or hut

Comfort is mostly lacking. When parents announce they are coming, the first question is where to put them? Should they share your one-room apartment or your keet hut? Are there any AC rooms available?

Says Adil: "My father always gets embarrassed when he has to tell his friends that his beloved son is living in a hut in Aspiration. They obviously do not have a clue what this 'hut' is all about. So last year I asked Raman to shoot a short video to show the family where, and how, I live and work." During his upcoming visit here, father Bomi will stay with Adil in this hut – comfortable, but under a 'living' keet roof, sharing a room with Wabi, his cat!"

Roswitha is also sharing her apartment in Prayatna. Her mother Karoline is 77 and is staying for 2 months. She helps in the house, cleans the dishes, irons the clothes and enjoys life. She only misses the shopping possibilities of her German hometown Karlsruhe. But this is compensated for when she accompanies her grandson Jan on his bike for a visit to his friends in the greenbelt.

Insects and other complaints

All the symptoms and illnesses that come with old age and a cold climate disappear in Auroville. In the December-February season the

weather is nice and cozy. Roswitha's mother gets rid of all her malfunctions and is even considering moving to Auroville for good. Parents still tend to complain a bit about the heat – they are sweating while we are freezing at temperatures around 25



A mamma on the dirt road

degrees. The only thing Adil's mother Piloo could remember from her first visit was the heat, as she came to Pondicherry during one of the hottest weeks of the decade.

Heat is one thing. The never-ending story of insects is another. Michaela: "A thousand times a day I answer the same questions about the same issues – which spiders are poi-

sonous, from what kind of mosquito can I get malaria, are scorpion and snakebites deadly, what do I do with the frog in my toilet bowl?"

People from the city are not used any more to living with small animals. But they are highly amused by the herds of cows and goats blocking the roads. What fun!

Lifestyles and more!

"My aunt Goolrose from the U.S. had a ball of a time. Upon arrival, she got on a bicycle for the first time in 35 years – her husband wouldn't let her do it in California. On the other hand, my mother's sole purpose in coming to Auroville was to find out what this place is all about, and why I have given up the 'good life' to be here – and after her questions were answered, she was happy to leave again." Adil is looking forward to his dad's first visit here this month, but knows he will have a hard time explaining to him how and why he is living out here as a potter, "...after they've invested so much in my education as an architect."

When Michaela's father realized that his daughter had settled down well, he became more concerned about food. The purely vegetarian diet at the Solar Kitchen was difficult for him. He sneaked out to the Visitors Centre to get his usual dose of meat. Karoline loved the beach and Matrimandir. She felt so good she didn't want to leave the Chamber. She was deeply touched by Mother's room on Darshan day and the atmosphere at the bonfire on 28th February.

My mother

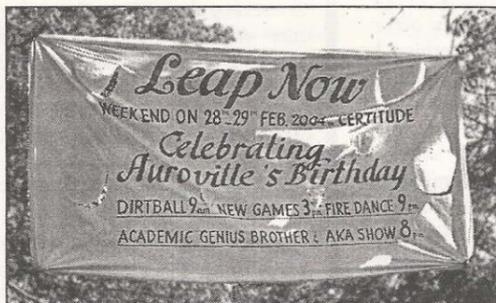
Sonja is 75 and does not speak English at all. She loves my apartment in Courage with its comfort, warm water and sunny balcony, because it seems to be in Hamburg rather than in India. She feels at home. The difference is that at home she has her car and goes wherever she wants, whenever she feels like it. Here she is dependent on my time schedules and my Honda motorbike. So she has to learn to trust in my driving abilities and keep the faith. And she succeeds – climbs onto the back seat like a professional, holds tightly onto my hips and jumps off without tumbling once. Brave woman.

She is very patient when I have appointments somewhere and I park her in unknown places with a book for entertainment. Most of the time she amuses herself strolling through the gardens, watching birds or picking flower shoots to try to make them grow in her garden at home. She also carries on eating if the conversation at the dinner table is taking place in a language which is a closed book to her. Everybody likes her.

I could sometimes strangle her, though. When you have to take care of your mother like she took care of you when you were a child, for 24 hours a day over four long weeks, at one point or another you lose your cool and wish she would just disappear. She doesn't – and I'm happy that she doesn't. I hope I can welcome her here for many more years and spend more precious time with her. Life is so short.

Julietta

CELEBRATIONS



February 28, 2004 Auroville celebrated its 36th birthday with the Leap Now festival.

The event followed a successful dawn bonfire, now firmly cemented as a community institution for many birthdays to come. The external-combustion powered dawn meditation gathered the usual Aurovilians, friends and some new guests, including a visiting Rainbow tribe, complete with flag.

Later, a brilliant new year sun rose over a Certitude reborn. The 'inner-city' afternoon sport Mecca now shone with repainted white volleyball court boundaries, and shamelessly flaunted three new basketball nets. Revised parking arrangements aimed to shepherd the daily gathered pool of two-wheelers away from sporting events, with only partial success.

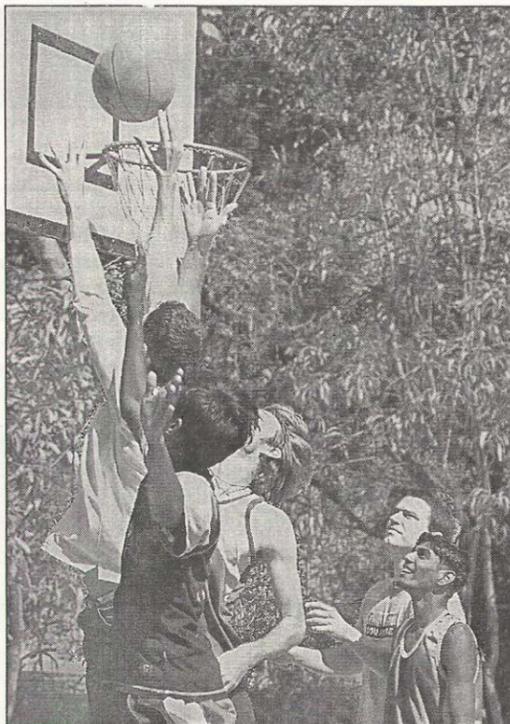
No sooner had doubters dismissed the event as unjustifiably dust-generating than Auroville's slick road team water-sprinkled the Solar Kitchen-Certitude Highway, guaranteeing breathable air, at least until lunch. Event organiser and father-to-be, Martanda, would allow no red clouds to spoil three weeks' preparation for the big day. For 't was a day destined for dust.

Dirtball constituted the focal activity of the

two-day festivities and culminated in a mighty clash of Auroville titans. Dirtball, this odd abbreviation of fully-grown basketball, saw teams of three compete in desperate, dirty, 20-minute half-court matches. Ragged and sweaty, players fell by the way over two days of elimination matches, to produce a nail-biting final between Team Auroson and Team Noeh. The victory left Noeh's Team benevolent and beamingly confident that points didn't really matter.

Saturday's program also tantalisingly advertised 'Games' at 3pm. With punctuality teachers only dream of, fifteen hysterical fun-hungry children explosively materialised at the published hour, under Certitude's acoustics-on-steroids concrete dome. There, a small crowd gathered to watch odd things take shape. Small, focused bodies wound their way through a hijacked soccer goalpost and string spider-web obstacle-course, complete with alarm. A small brass puja bell, held precariously between the taut strands, rang at the slightest nudge from five and 45-year old elbows alike.

As the sun dipped below punishing levels, a massive four-way tug-of-war mobilised all those who felt themselves insufficiently dusty, sweaty and manually-challenged. After two epic battles, a rope no shorter than a kilometre remedied their shortcomings. Four various sized but surprisingly well-matched teams of around ten, fought to gain barefoot traction in two inches of red dirt. They all aimed to drag the ropes' intersection beyond the borders of a large square drawn in the dust. In the end some did, but suddenly no one cared who.



Grit-infused and desperately thirsty, the rope-warriors had caught wind of watermelon. There, between a small mountain of coconuts and green melons, Ashok fed these desperate animals pink fruit and nut milk. Calm reigned until thirst-slaked camaraderie degenerated into watermelon peel war. Snipers took up positions and surgically dispatched unwitting targets with fructose projectiles. Ground troops returned fire while civilians ran for cover.

Visible through the day's dying embers, Ananda, Kalu and team lugged six thunderous speakers into place for the evening spectacular – the fire dance. The crowd that gathered to witness the feats of pyrotechnic acrobatics swore they saw fire dance that night.

On the other side of town a different kind of performance was being prepared. The Genius Brothers welcomed a new generation of performers to reincarnate as The Genius Family on the Visitors Centre stage. Boasting a five-year old cast of thousands, the evening's performance also introduced some visiting performers. The show interspersed the voice of Berlin musical singer Francesca with the talents of visiting Irish theatre graduate Katja, against a backdrop painted live by Sara during the two-hour show. The evening's freeform, scattered presentation was for an audience packed well beyond the Visitors Centre's seating capacity. Humanity occupied every inch of the amphitheatre's surrounding roofs, balcony, and even some of the stage.

Leap Now followed three weeks of planning and preparation that included a week of performance workshops for The Genius Family and days of work for all those who watered the roads and prepared Certitude for the party. The final Sunday gave way not only to the final stages of the, by then, competitively-enhanced dirtball, it also ushered in something else – a masterpiece of human unity. That day an inter-Auroville, inter-village volleyball match brought together many individuals for the first time and there, in the dust, under the sun, Auroville entered its 36th year.

Jesse

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