

AUROVILLE TODAY

Number Eighty-One October 1995



There is a remarkable progress at Matrimandir. A mosaic of white marble is beginning to decorate the first and second level of the structure: on the benches, where one will slip into socks before going upstairs, on the sides of the central staircase (photo bottom) and inside the four structural pillars. The inner skin is taking form: transparent rose-orange tinted glass fibre glass reinforced polyester (FRP) triangles are being fixed. Outside, work on the golden discs, the petals, the meditation rooms inside the petals, the gardens and the amphitheatre continues at an astonishing pace (photo top). In this issue we report on the miracle which is about to come true...

GOLD FOR THE SOUL

It shines, though not too brightly. Coming closer I see a small part shining more brilliantly than the rest. Closer yet, I see my reflection, like in a poor mirror, but in gold. "That's the half-polished part", she says. "The disc has actually to dry for three weeks before it can be polished, but as I'll leave tomorrow, I did a small part to test it out. Once it is fully polished, the entire disc will shine like a bright mirror. But drying times here are longer than at home due to the high humidity."

For Gine, 'home' is the city of Munich in south Germany. She is a master gilder as well as a master church painter, sent to Auroville by her company Mayerhofer to do a trial run and to prepare for the gilding of the approximately 1200 concave and convex discs that will decorate the outside of Matrimandir. At home she is primarily involved with restoration work, particularly in Baroque churches, restoring the gold on altars, wooden frames, plastered walls and paintings, but also on buildings such as the Lindenhoff castle and the Munich Residenz.

"This is the first time that I gild a fibreglass reinforced polyester disc," she says, but she obviously has no problem with it. "Gold can be applied on any base and though FRP as such is not a valuable material, the final product will certainly be." Gine's opinion counterbalances the views of some Aurovilians that Matrimandir will be cheapened with all that 'plastic' inside and outside of the

skin. "There is only 30 years of experience with FRP in India," says Toine, a member of the Matrimandir Coordination group, "though elsewhere in the world that experience is more than 60 years. We have been offered an isophthalic FRP resin from Austria, which is guaranteed for at least 75

"The Matrimandir will be the soul of Auroville, and the sooner it is there, the better it will be for everybody, especially the Aurovilians."

years. But the vinylester resin we use is technically better, so we are not sure we should change. The two products are now being researched at the Indian Institute of Technology in Madras as well as in Germany."

Gine points at the little squares that are still visible on the unpolished part of the disc, but have nearly disappeared on the

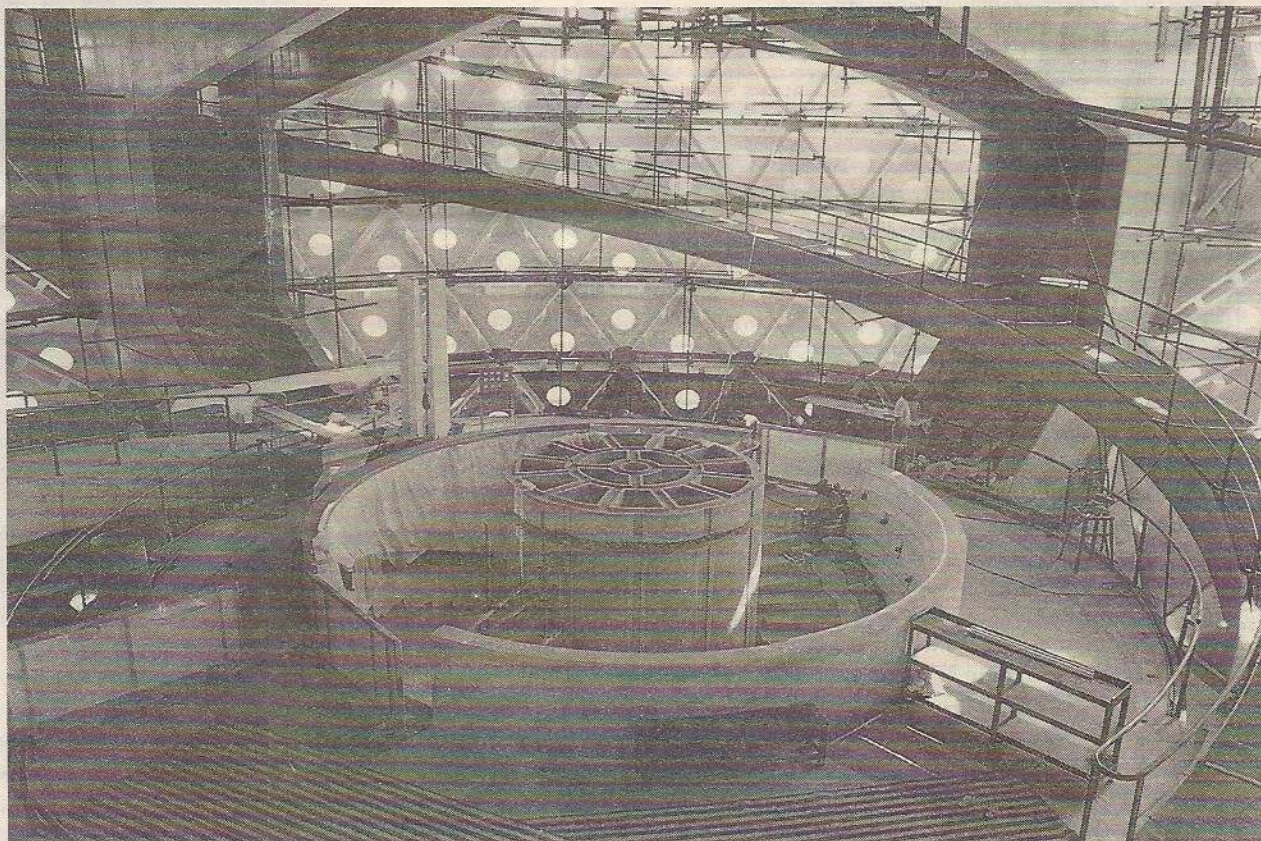
half-polished side. "We use gold leaf of 8.5 x 8.5 square centimetres. They are made of 24 carat gold alloyed with platinum. Each leaf is a fraction of a micron thick. Before it can be fixed, the disc has to be prepared. A specially engineered solution on a base of epoxy is applied and polished twice, followed by two layers of a two-

component lacquer. Then there follows a special mixture on a linseed oil base which is the direct carrier of the gold. The gold leaves themselves are supplied in a kind of notebook, each page being one leaf. We put each leaf on waxed paper, and then with a small pressure we apply it on the disc. There follows a drying period, and then the polishing which is done with a special brush made of squirrel hair. And that's all. No other

coating is necessary. Gold by itself is the best protection." She continues, "The production will start by the end of August when I will come back for about four weeks to supervise and teach the team of Aurovilians who will do the work. I estimate that, if all goes according to schedule, it could all be finished within a maximum of one year."

One year... It sounds incredible, but then, isn't the entire building incredible? Two decades back, when I first saw the raw structure of Matrimandir arising from the deep excavation, I fell in love with the building, and have loved it ever since, working for it, working on it or just going there and trying to let the atmosphere penetrate my being. Now, it provides easy access after a Sunday morning stroll through the beginnings of the gardens, through the construction of the rising petals,

continued on page 2



MATRIMANDIR (contd.)

through the unfinished interior into the nearly finished chamber where the cool atmosphere and the light on the crystal globe invites introspection and concentration. But in the future, what will it be like? Shining golden discs, reflecting the sunlight to blinding intensities—will we have to shade our eyes in order to see? How will we then approach the Mother's Shrine? In awe, as befits a building which She declared to be 'the Soul of Auroville, the living symbol of Auroville's aspiration for the Divine'? In joy, being allowed to live in this place and participate in its development?

Gine interrupts my musing. "The building will look just gorgeous," she says. "Originally I thought, my God, what is this! But with these golden discs, it will be fantastic, it will be super!" Walking around Matrimandir we look at the gilded discs which were fixed to Matrimandir some years ago. "Those discs are too dull," says Gine, "they have been produced in a different way [using a coating of zinc and tin] and have no shine. The new discs will make Matrimandir radiate beyond imagination."

A flock of pigeons draws our attention. "Now there you have a problem that you will have to attend to," says Gine. "I do not have a solution for it as yet. But I think that you have to put stainless steel pins or tiny pieces of broken glass on the places of the disc where they are likely to sit. For their claws and the acidity of their excrement will definitely spoil the discs."

"The Matrimandir wants to be the symbol of the Divine's answer to man's aspiration for perfection. Union with the Divine manifesting in a progressive human unity."

"And what about the rock bees who built a hanging nest on one of the gilded discs a year ago and have now five nests hanging on the structure?" I ask. "You cannot beat nature," Gine smiles, "so I think that vigilance and the vacuum cleaner are the only solutions here."

"Build Matrimandir, put my symbol in place and Sri Aurobindo's, and the globe. I take it upon myself to make it into a strong centre" said the Mother in 1971, and added "Only those who are capable will perceive it." Doubtless she was referring to the inner development required to perceive and be open to the spiritual force active in and around Matrimandir. But this radiating sun cannot be concealed and will draw visitors and tourists in ever greater numbers. Some of those probably will not be able to perceive anything but a building of breathtaking beauty, which they will compare to other marvellous structures. Others might 'feel' something, and be touched, consciously or unconsciously, by that which exceeds the outer beauty.

The recent decision to allow visitors access to Matrimandir for one hour a day up to the entrance of the inner Chamber, from where they can briefly see the interior without actually entering the Chamber (as was done earlier), and, through a pass system, to allow longer access to those visitors who really wish to concentrate, seems therefore to be a correct one for now. For none here knows or has the required level of consciousness to judge the effects a visit may have.

"The sooner Matrimandir is there, the better it will be for everybody and especially for the Aurovilians" is another of Mother's



Welding the discframe



Above: Inside the FRP workshop

Right: Applying gold leaf on the disc

Technical specifications of the discs

Discframe: Stainless Steel tubes
Disc Material: fibreglass reinforced polyester
Gold leaf: 28 grams of gold per 1000 leaves
Leaf size: 85 x 85 millimeter
Total number of discs: 1296.
Large concave discs: 864
Small convex discs : 432
Average diameter large discs: 2.3 meter
Average diameter small discs: 1.4 meter

sayings that is pregnant with meaning. For many years, the idea that Matrimandir could be 'there', could be finished, seemed a miracle. But money, energy and people have continued to flow in, in unexpected and often startling ways. The recent donations of almost 20 kilograms of gold for the gilding of the discs are cases in point. The miracle is happening.

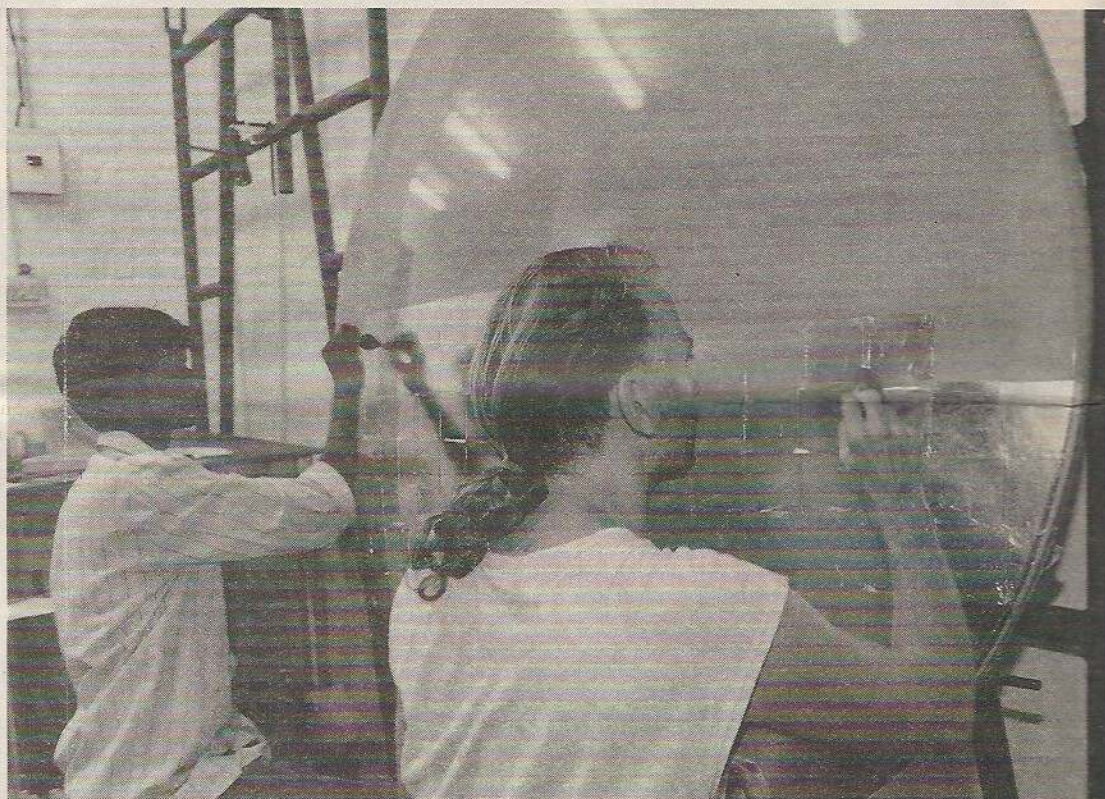
Optimism and high spirits also prevail with the members of the Matrimandir Coordination Group, though Toine and Arjun hasten to stress that Matrimandir is by far not ready. "People will easily think that, now that we have the gold for the gilding of the discs, Matrimandir is finished", says Toine, "but we are far from it. A tremendous amount of work still has to be done, and much, much money will still be needed to finish Matrimandir in its totality." (see box)

Walter, who is responsible for the Matrimandir gardens, cannot but agree. Though his budget is limited (as almost no specific donations for the Matrimandir gardens have been forthcoming) the work done in the gardens is impressive. "Soil movement,

WHAT IS STILL NEEDED

(Estimated costs)

	Indian Rupees	US Dollar
INSIDE THE MATRIMANDIR		
Chamber vestibules	150,000	5,000
Inner Chamber	150,000	5,000
Inner skin	4,000,000	135,000
Central staircase and ramps	3,000,000	100,000
Catwalks (maintenance access)	100,000	3,000
Interior electrification	500,000	17,000
Internal water supply	250,000	8,000
OUTSIDE THE MATRIMANDIR		
Service rooms in the pillars	250,000	8,000
Bottom tank area	800,000	27,000
Discs fabrication installation	20,000,000	670,000
Discs gilding	6,000,000	200,000
Petals, structure and cladding	15,000,000	500,000
Petals, meditation rooms	6,000,000	200,000
Small petals	3,000,000	100,000
Amphitheatre	1,800,000	60,000
Infrastructure	5,000,000	170,000
Gardens	25,000,000	800,000
Solar power plant	5,000,000	170,000
Total estimated costs	96,000,000	3,200,000



"The gardens are as important as the Matrimandir itself"

infrastructure development, modelling, shaping, contouring. That's about all what is going on here", he explains when we stroll around Matrimandir. "We cannot even begin to think about planting, except for a grass cover. It's basic, but it is all that can be done right now. But we proceed nicely. 'Light' has been done, the next one, over there, is 'Bliss'."

Light and Bliss. They are two of the names Mother gave for the 12 inner gardens around Matrimandir. "How do you design a garden which is supposed to represent Bliss?" I ask. "I have some perceptions" says Walter "but I am not thinking about it. The understanding will come when the time is there."

The twelve gardens, and the additional gardens of unity and the rose garden are all placed within the oval road which separates them from the outer gardens. The road will go straight through the present workshop ("noone thought about that when we built it", said Walter) and a new one is being built. Next to the oval path a water channel is designed, but it remains to be seen if the wells (one of which is operated by a solar pump) will be

able to provide sufficient water for both the gardens and the water channel. Two gardens will have small ponds: the garden of wealth, in which water lilies will blossom, and the garden of unity, where there will be a play of fountains.

We approach the Banyan Tree. Years ago a ring of granite slabs was placed around it, which served to demarcate the area and provided low benches for seating. They also helped to contain that special atmosphere which surrounds this tree. "The ring will go", says Walter. "Yes, it helped to contain that special atmosphere, but the time has come to build the garden of Unity which spreads from the Banyan Tree and connects it to the gardens of 'life' and 'power'."

"Unity in Auroville is definitely on the increase, and I feel that it emanates from Matrimandir, perhaps starting with the group working there. They are very together and have displayed a fantastic spirit of dedication to the work. And they have wonderful support. Take for example that Indian gentleman who has, since the beginning of Matrimandir, been involved with the purchase of stone. Recently he spent six months (!) in the desert of Rajasthan, sleeping out in the open or in a tent,

INNER GARDENS

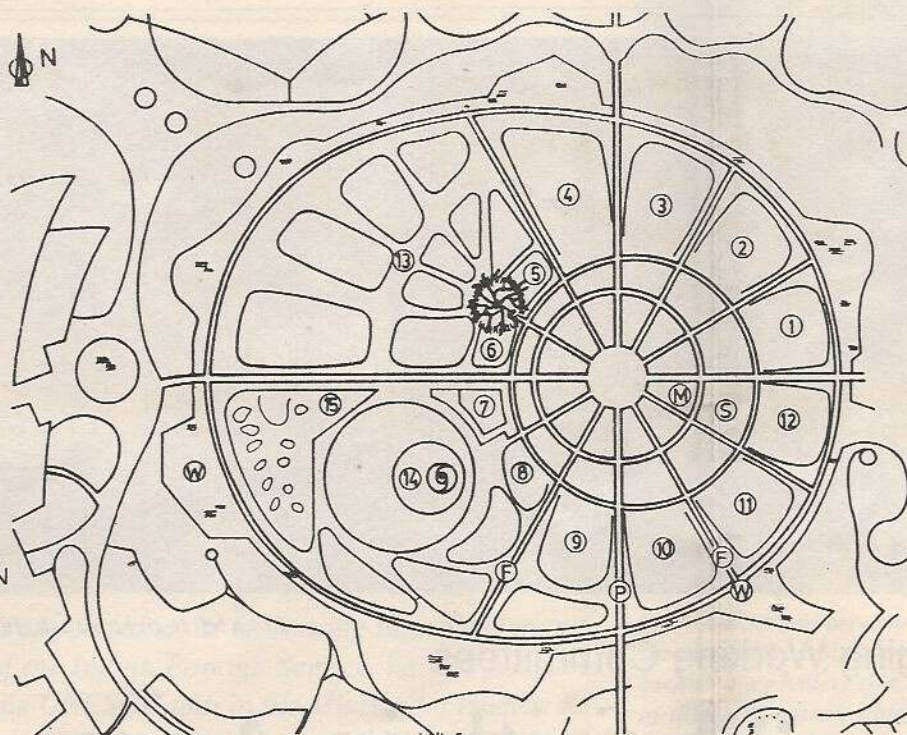
1. Existence
2. Consciousness
3. Bliss
4. Light
5. Life
6. Power
7. Wealth
8. Utility
9. Progress
10. Youth
11. Harmony
12. Perfection

13. GARDEN OF UNITY

14. AMPHITHEATER -URN

15. ROSE GARDEN

5. SMALL PETALS



visiting quarries to choose impeccable blocks of white marble to be placed at the entrance of the cone-shaped staircase which leads from the first to the second level. I have great respect for such dedication".

Roger Anger is speaking. Summarising the development of Matrimandir as "a miracle which is realising itself", Roger is now mainly concentrating on the interior of the Matrimandir, in particular on the second level

"... a place to find one's consciousness."

from where the ramps lead upward to the Inner Chamber, and on the shape and finishing of the 12 meditation rooms in the large petals surrounding Matrimandir.

"Won't those big blocks of marble make the entrance rather narrow?" I ask¹⁾. "Yes, but that is intended. You enter this place like a temple and that is not an entry for each and everyone" clarifies Roger, who continues to explain his plans for Matrimandir's interior and for the petals:

"On the second level I would like to have

¹⁾ *Designing while keeping the handicapped in mind has become common practice in most countries in Europe and the USA. Not so yet in Auroville. All public buildings are extremely unfriendly for elderly and physically handicapped people, and Matrimandir is alas no exception. Three flights of stairs and the narrow entrance of the cone shaped staircase make wheelchair access to the Inner Chamber a virtual impossibility. We hope that suitable modifications will be made so that Matrimandir can be genuinely accessible for all.*

a symbolic representation of the four elements. The element 'air' is indicated by the space itself, the element 'earth' by the structure. The element 'water' will find a place in each of the four pillars, which represent the 4 powers of The Mother: Maheshwari (south), Mahakali (north), Mahalakshmi (East) and Mahasaraswati (West). A marble mosaic is now being laid inside each pillar, symbolically indicating the descent and the ascent of the Force. From the level of the symbol of Sri Aurobindo in the Inner Chamber, water, the symbol of creation, (which you find also within the square of Sri Aurobindo's symbol) will flow down in each pillar. I am still studying how to do this water-flow without it becoming something spectacular or theatrical. At the bottom of each pillar small fountains might be placed.

The element 'fire' will find a place within two marble sculptures which will be placed at the beginning of each of the ramps which lead to the Chamber. The inside of the sculptures will be of gilded metal and in the rounded opening there will be a living flame."

Outside Matrimandir, one of the meditation rooms in one of the 12 large petals is taking shape. As with the gardens, these meditation rooms have names given by The Mother, representing the 12 powers of The Mother manifested for the work, such as Sincerity, Goodness and Courage. How does an architect express the power of, for example, Courage?

"It is very difficult. Mother has given all the names for each chamber, and defined all

the colours which each chamber should have. What is the nature of courage? What does this virtue mean for us in daily life?

"The meditation rooms have been designed in such a way that their shape is exactly that of the Matrimandir. So if you enter one of those rooms, you enter Matrimandir symbolically. There is one aperture in the Centre of the wall, which will be covered by a disc situated a small distance in front of it. The discs will be non-transparent, with the exception of some kind of design in its middle, which will be different for each chamber, expressing symbolically the quality of the room. We are still studying that. The incoming day light will be diffused around the disc and pass a coloured glass so as to give the colour to the room. The transparent design of each disc will provide a luminous concentration point. More light will come from below and all around the floor level (the floor of each room is placed on pillars), and will be reflected against pure white walls.

"It will be the 'Pavilion of the Mother' - but not this (Mother points to herself), the Mother, the true Mother, the principle of the Mother."

12. MEDITATION ROOMS IN THE LARGE PETALS

M Sincerity
Humility
Gratitude
Perseverance
Aspiration
Receptivity
Progress
Courage
Goodness
Generosity
Equality
Peace

P 4 MAIN PATHS
8 FOOT PATHS

W OVAL PATH AND
WATER CHANNEL

Slowly, during the last years, red Agra stone has been covering the steps. Now the stage and the cone at the base of the urn are slowly being covered. What upset many Aurovilians was a small notice in the Auroville News that the traditional bonfires could no longer be held as fire would crack the stones, and the discovery that the small tiles with the names of various countries, which had been cemented around the cone during the International Youth Year celebrations in 1985, were being covered up. Roger: "I had a meeting with a group of young Aurovilians. I have answered that the possibilities to have bonfires there should remain, but with a kind of mobile system which permits a liberty of expression. For example a system of basins which can be placed separately or grouped together to form one big bonfire. But I do not want to make bonfires directly on the red Agra stones. For me, personally, the bonfires represent a rather vital period and I am ready for something else. But for others that might be different." Does Roger see a future use for the amphitheatre? "Certainly. It should be usable for Aurovilians. Personally, I have no objection to the performance of sacred dance or classical music, as long as it remains on a level of spiritual vocation. But I would object to hard rock!"

"... no religion, no religious forms. Let it not become a religion, for heaven's sake!"

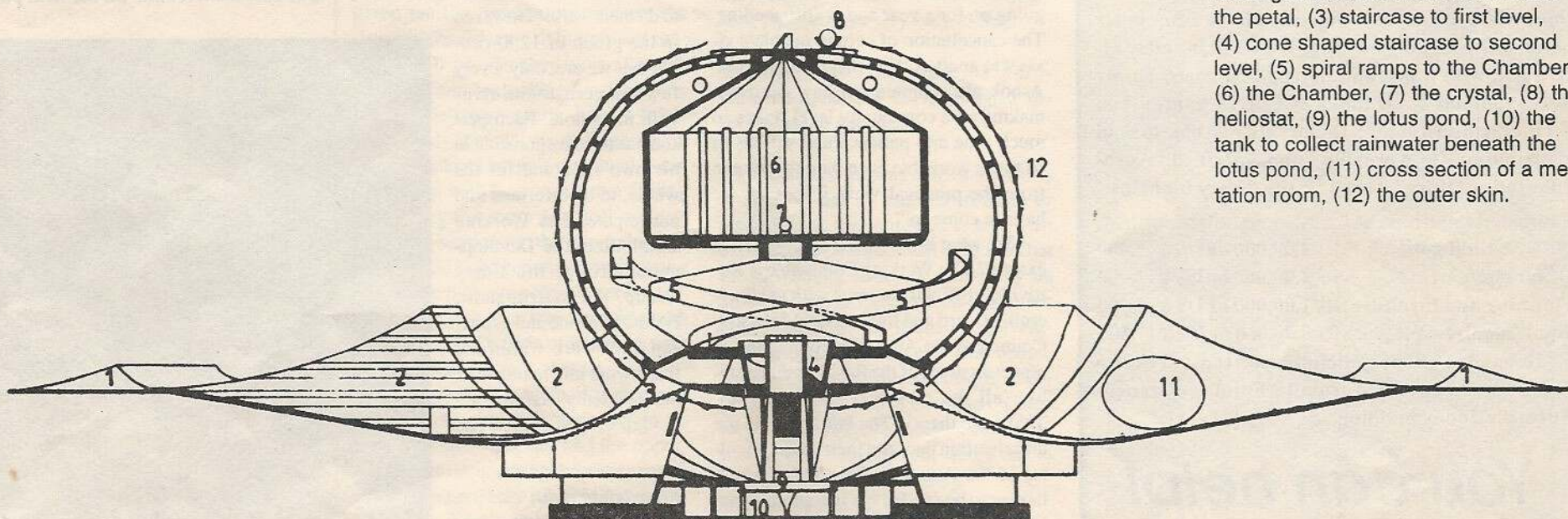
What about those small tiles with the names of the countries? "I do not have a problem with covering them. Actually, I find it interesting to cover them as a stratification of consciousness. But some Aurovilians have seen it as a kind of blasphemy. If they manage to chip them out without breaking them—otherwise we could ask Angad, [the potter who made them in 1985] to make them once again—we can have them placed at another place, for example on the rim of the amphitheatre, next to one of the 16 steps which lead up into it." So far Roger.

Looking back from the amphitheatre to see Matrimandir arising from the earth, I am reminded once again of the symbolism of the building, that "Matrimandir be the living symbol of Auroville's aspiration for the Divine". This miracle is about to become true... is that other Miracle becoming true as well?

Carel

Cross-section of Matrimandir, showing:

- (1) small petal, (2) large petal with door leading to the meditation room inside the petal, (3) staircase to first level, (4) cone shaped staircase to second level, (5) spiral ramps to the Chamber, (6) the Chamber, (7) the crystal, (8) the heliostat, (9) the lotus pond, (10) the tank to collect rainwater beneath the lotus pond, (11) cross section of a meditation room, (12) the outer skin.



After seven years

AUROVILLE TODAY needs an office

"We need an office."

Everyone looked up at Carel as he dashed for the drawer that held the glass coasters that protect his large, round, dining room table from splashes and spills of Tuesday-morning Auroville Today editorial meetings.

Carel is the latest victim of our attempt to meet cozily and often with a breezy *joie de vivre* which keeps the ammas hopping in and out with cups of coffee, tea or syrup drinks of various colours and flavours.

"We really need an office."

This echo is more plaintive than the original. We have decided that the team, in order to do the job right, must meet Tuesday and Friday mornings—once a week is just not enough. "Oh no," Carel moans, realising that his home will now be invaded twice as often as before, and twice as many tea cups will leave twice as many stains on the smooth, polished surface of what was once his dining room table, but which has now become our office work space.

Let us go back a bit in this tale of dire necessity, and review. We have been meeting, before Carel and after various other places during the past seven years, in the home of Annemarie and Alan in Samriddhi. Samriddhi is somewhere between Anasurya and New Creation (get your maps out, everyone) and this quiet Greenbelt location, far from the high-density living of Samasti, had its advantages—and disadvantages. Picture the Greenbelt. Picture the monsoon season. Put them together and what do you get? MUD! Lots and lots of MUD. Actually, "Slipping and Sliding to Samriddhi" never made it to the top ten charts, but it was a tune that turned up often around the table, every Tuesday. Yes, folks. Another dining room table. Another cup of coffee, no sugar, please.

So, we need an office.

We would like to continue to bring you the comprehensive, soul-searching, scintillating brand of Auroville Today journalism that you have grown accustomed to, but in order to keep you in this style... And we can't get one without financial help.

It is not castles in the air. Rather, we have the possibility of building at CSR a modest space of 8 x 8 m. which would accommodate a few computers, file cupboards, chairs, tables and be accessible at any time. Believe it or not, we have not managed, in all this time, to own one single piece of office equipment. Not only our computers, but even our mouse is borrowed!

Some of us are morning writers, some of us prefer to burn the midnight oil. Of course, we can't go barging into Carel's house in the middle of the night just because we've got a sudden inspiration to tap out something wonderful at the (his) computer. For those of us, like myself, who don't have a computer at home, it's doubly difficult. Here I sit, Sunday afternoon, with a pen and notepad balanced on my knees (Sunday is off limits at Carel's house). You get the picture, I'm sure. Donors are welcome to send contributions to Auroville Fund, specified "Auroville Today Office". Don't be shy. Every bit helps.

Estimated requirements:

Office building	Rs 2,00,000 or US \$ 7,000
Office equipment	Rs 2,00,000 or US \$ 7,000
Finishing and furniture	Rs 1,00,000 or US \$ 3,500
Total requirement	Rs 5,00,000 or US \$ 17,500

Donations will be gratefully received and can be made by cheque to Auroville Fund, reference: Auroville Today building.

You can help!



From left to right: Ashok, Jürgen, Rauf, Satyavan

Changing Working Committees

"A faith in Auroville that I never had before"

The fourth Working Committee of the Auroville Foundation prepares for a change of office and reflects on the last year.

"It took me one year just to understand the problems, and it'll take another to do anything about them," commented Jan after his year in the Working Committee. He and Jürgen would like to stay with the Committee for another year to maintain continuity on issues and processes. Ashok had been the link from the previous Working Committee, but now the plan is

that half the group stay on. The outgoing people are proposed to become part of a support group because, as Rauf put it, "This job is too big for this little group [They started with seven but lost one member]. You get everything from 'X' has poisoned my dog' to the big issues of audit and taxes. The bottom line on the work is the eventual realization that you have very little impact on anything at all." Still, they managed. Rauf could even say: "the experience has given me a faith in Auroville that I never had before."

Dealing with community issues that flare up because they become too hot for individuals or other working groups to deal with, is what the Committee calls 'fire fighting'. They need immediate attention and "occupy most of our attention and time," noted Ashok. For example, the case of the person who bought land in Auroville and refused to make it relatable to Auroville has been going on for a year and is still pending. The cancellation of certain people's visas was another 'fire' that is still not out. Ashok also pointed out how decision-making on a community level "takes so much time and patience and yet has to be made workable even though irksome from the practical view, it is what we have to come to."

So, what is the Working Committee exactly? The Working Committee is Auroville's official interface with the Governing Board and International Advisory Council of the Auroville Foundation as representatives of the Residents' Assembly (all the members of Auroville). That's the theory. The bottleneck is the clear relation between these various bodies of the Auroville Foundation which has yet to be spelled out in terms of what is known as 'the Rules and Regulations.'

These have been pending for the last few years and a final draft will need the approval of the Parliament of India. The last two Working Committees have been very much involved in this work and now a major step has been taken. The Governing Board has agreed that an experimental draft of the rules and regulations can go into effect for six months, until February, and then be discussed again. Jan explained: "Mr. Tayal [Board member] and Shriram [legal consultant from Madras] have contributed to make this possible. Once the roles of the groups in the Foundation is clearer, a lot of energy is freed to get into the real work. For the moment, I don't think we can come up with anything better than the Foundation."

On this issue, Ashok felt that "the Governing Board has acted as a catalytic agent for more interaction among the groups in Auroville, stimulated more discussion that led to more collective approaches to the problems. The Working Committee has been able to put across to the community certain 'working norms' which are basic agreements on how to do things. The Governing Board has to have faith that the community can regulate itself especially in the area of assets and commercial units. On our side, we have to insure that mismanagement cannot take place."

Jürgen stressed the point that all the working groups in Auroville dealing with community issues need a strong mandate from the Residents' Assembly to do their work: "However, in the group of 1200 people that we are, only a very few concern themselves with the whole. Each person has to be responsible in his own field and for the whole, to be informed and participate. The Working Committee, the Development Group, the Entry Group, the Matrimandir, FAMC [finance and assets] can only work within the framework and mandate of the Residents' Assembly."

Jan emphasized: "The

pioneer times are not over. The real Auroville has not yet started. Every person is needed in the 'brainstorming' to make the city happen. Even if the meetings are boring, tiring, or ugly, every person has to be aware and participate.

Shivaya was happy to contribute some feminine energy to the Working Committee. "We broke through some of the old formations that prevented people from participating, and this year many more people got involved in how to build the city. The Development Group and the Entry Group have reorganized for the better."

Rama found it interesting to be part of the Working Committee and to work on attempting to solve the problems of our rural area: "One big one was with Bommapalayam village about the garbage from Pondy that they were dumping for compost. Others were conflicts about land in the greenbelt area. We had a few meetings with the village leaders and we had positive talks with them which are still in process to be followed up. We could live in real harmony with them in the near future."

"Professionalism" is a key word for Rauf. In reference to an attempt to bottle mineral water in Auroville commercially: "You don't speak from hearsay about underground rivers of mineral water coming from Karnataka. And of course if people plant a few trees and then think of themselves as top notch ecologists - well! The greatest con-

contd. on the next page



From left to right:
Shivaya, Rama, Jan

Interview with Shri S.R.Tayal,
Member of the Gouverning Board

“I don’t understand this fear of government involvement”

Shri S.R.Tayal was appointed to the Governing Board in January, 1991. A member of the Indian Foreign Service, he was for many years Director of the UNESCO unit in the Ministry of Human Resource Development, which has special responsibility for Auroville. He recently attended his last meeting of the Governing Board before taking up his new appointment in South Africa.

AUROVILLE TODAY: *Dr. Karan Singh and yourself are the only members of the Governing Board to have attended every meeting since February, 1991. Yet you are probably less well-known by the Aurovilians than some of the other members. What has been your particular responsibility on the Governing Board?*

Tayal: I represent the Government of India on the Governing Board, and this has certain consequences. For example, my work—along with that of the Secretary—has tended to focus upon procedural matters. In other words, we have

Working Committee *contd.*

straint to our development is the water issue. Finally we have organized a proper scientific study which is now ready to go.

This Working Committee reached enthusiastic consensus on their need for a properly equipped office. Their universal frustration of meetings out of their ‘bags’ and having no office of their own and a budget one-third of their requirement came across very clearly. Still they “worked from the heart” and claimed “efficient sharing of the work” (after the first months) and lots of “growth.” They had a much-appreciated secretary/note-taker in Satyavan. “People kept asking me about the frustration and stress but it was a very interesting and educational year. Well worth my time.” Still, he says it was “enough.”

Tineke and Bill



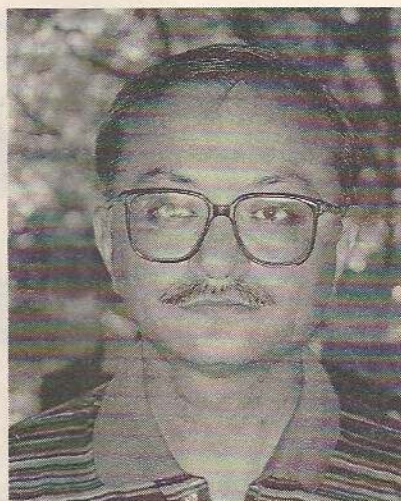
tried to find practical ways in which the Governing Board can satisfy itself, and demonstrate to the Government, that proper management of Auroville has been secured.

How successful have you been in this?

I have mixed feelings. On the one hand, as a government officer with particular responsibility for this area, I feel unhappy that, after 4 to 5 years of work, we have not been able to lay the Rules and Regulations of the Foundation—which specify, among other things, how the Foundation’s assets should be managed—before Parliament. There’s been a lot of understanding and goodwill from the Working Committees that I’ve worked with, and after every meeting we’ve been able to come to some agreement, but somehow it couldn’t be carried through the Residents Assembly because of objections from individual Aurovilians. Also, the membership of the Working Committees kept changing, so as soon as I had come to an understanding with one Committee, they were replaced and I had to start all over again! On the other hand, the fact that we have at last finalised a draft of the Rules and Regulations which, I believe, will satisfy the responsibilities of the Governing Board while allowing independence for the community, is a great achievement.

On another, more personal, level it’s been very worthwhile to have been part of this Governing Board. Its members are all very eminent people, and it’s also given me the opportunity to meet the Aurovilians, who are definitely not run-of-the-mill people: they have all made sacrifices and are looking for something beyond their own needs. I don’t know how much spiritual work is going on here—frankly, I haven’t seen much—but I go away with a very positive feeling concerning the many practical projects which are happening: these must be supported. And I’ve been struck by the sense of joy which is very palpable here—everybody is doing what they are doing with a sense of joy. Outside of meetings with the Governing Board, that is!

On a different level again, if in one’s official work—which is normally to do with files etc.—one has had the opportunity to do something, however small, for the vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother; it is truly God’s grace. On this level I’ve had the maximum satisfaction.



Some Aurovilians are concerned by the Government’s involvement in Auroville because they believe that the interests of the Government, which tend to be regulatory and supportive of the status quo, run counter to the needs of Auroville to be experimental. What do you think?

I’ve felt from the very beginning that both these aspects could be fully satisfied. There is no inherent contradiction in meeting all the regulatory requirements of the Foundation Act while ensuring full autonomy for the Aurovilians to do what they want.

Everybody on the Governing Board agrees that Auroville should be a self-managing community. At present, in fact, there is a conscious attempt by the Governing Board to transfer many responsibilities to committees of the Residents Assembly. And more can be transferred. But the community should be aware that it is taking a lot of responsibility upon itself. It means, for example, that some Aurovilians are going to have to put in a lot of work, and Aurovilians will have to have the self-discipline to comply with the requests of these committees if this system is going to work. And it HAS to work if you are going to be self-governing.

Actually, the Governing Board has always adopted a minimalist position in regard to its responsibilities under the Act. It has not interfered in the running of Auroville, but has only tried to facilitate the process, to help the Aurovilians manage themselves. Of course, if certain controversial issues are brought before the Board, it has to take cognizance of them. And on issues which involve the alienation of property or assets of the Foundation, the Board is accountable to Parliament, and therefore has to take some action. But the Board definitely does not want to impose anything that may destroy what has been built up here—it’s always very easy to destroy.

So there is no reason for the Aurovilians to fear the Government’s involvement in Auroville?

I don’t understand this fear. Auroville is unique—it has no parallel in India or abroad—and that Auroville is here is an expression of the goodwill of India. That the Governing Board is chaired by an eminent man of cabinet rank is another confirmation of the status the Government accords this project. That people from all nations have access to Auroville, that they can live here and do what they please, is surely another confirmation that the Government wants this to be an international township.

What more can the Government do?

Interview by Alan

COMMENTARY

Every society has a thousand-headed monster against which a holy, secret battle is fought, often by an elite who guard purity, morals and truth. Governments, religions, various powers utilise this phenomenon to divert people’s attention from the real problems, to prevent them from going too deep and discovering the real roots of their trouble.

Auroville too is a society with its own monsters. They are—by some people—considered as the cause of all our problems. Concentrating on them, we free ourselves from the frustrations and dilemmas born from the dichotomy between our dreams and our daily lives, between the ideal and the reality.

In the past we have named and fought the monsters which were outside us and locating them was easy. It appears that today’s monsters are inside us, among us, and depending on our particular bent of mind, there is a wide range of monsters to choose from. For example the dragon of Aurelec, for those who want to fight issues of (non-)ownership; or the ogre of the Auroville Foundation, for those who want to fight issues of outside control; or the sirens of the business units, for those who believe that business units should contribute all they earn; or the hydra of the Entry Group, for those who are new in the community; or the chimera of the Working Committee, for those who feel they do a bad job; or the Agenda or the Ashram or, or, or...

BEWARE OF MONSTERS!

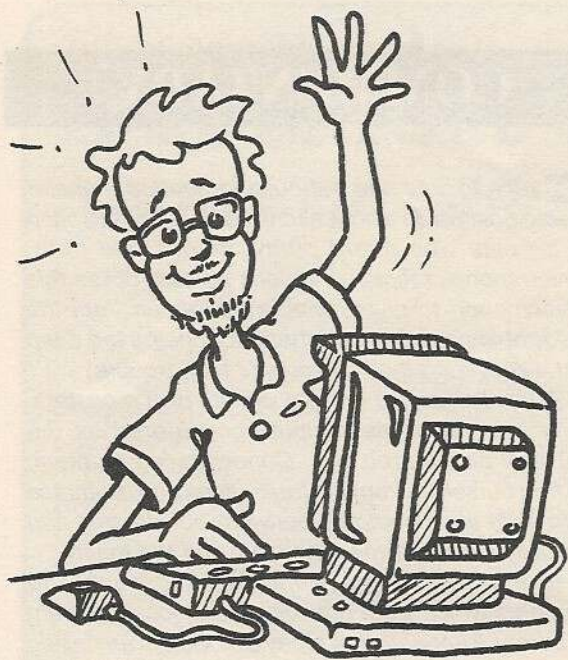
As soon as a problem is presented as a monster which is responsible for the evils in Auroville, it tends to inflate and starts, to a superficial observer, to divide the community. Malicious gossip, our penchant for drama, half truths and some kept secrets: they all serve to give the monster a life of its own, demanding our exclusive attention. And while we attack or defend the monster nothing is being solved and the subtle force that does not want Auroville to come closer to realising its Charter rejoices: “Yet another obstacle!” it says to itself, and it fuels the discord. We fight a monster, small ones, big ones or even a few monsters at a time, convinced of our ‘right’ and ‘purity’. Fighting the monsters, however, our own inner monster grows.

What are we doing, my friends? Haven’t we lived through this already and experienced how the force of destruction thwarted our efforts for cohesion by throwing bait to divert our attention? Do you too remember? Where did it land us then? And where do all those monsters land us today? Do we need to prolong their existence?

It is time to invent the means to deal with our problems from the inside out. That is more difficult than taking a stick and attacking the outsider. A kiss, says Charlie Brown, is a profound instrument to disarm the ‘opponent’, but are we ready to kiss the cheek of the ‘offender’? If so, we might be in for a startling discovery: for the softness of that cheek might link us to the inner side of the ‘accused’, an inner side which might be remarkably similar to our own. And once we tune to those inner chords of harmony which thrill both of us, we may become aware that the problem turned into a monster is just another challenge to create a harmony so profound that our limited understanding failed to observe it.

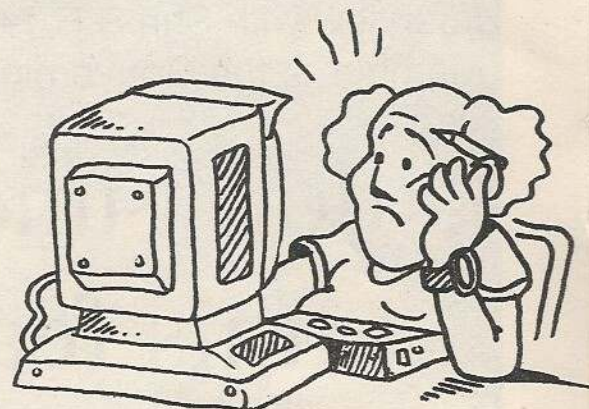
The starting point for this discovery is trust. Sure, trust in the Force guiding us and guiding Auroville. But also trust that that same Force guides our opponent. And that changes the appearance of all those monsters. Instead of being horrors to be trampled underfoot, they appear as stepping stones to a progressive harmony, to the unity of complexities which is Auroville.

Yanne and Carel



To BBS or not to BBS?

A new communication possibility
for Auroville



They say this place is about accelerated evolution. Well, maybe. But Auroville has undoubtedly managed, in some fields, to compress into its brief 27 years the equivalent of about 200 years of development in the West. Take communications, for example. The first Aurovilians lived in small communities linked by dust tracks which were virtually impassable in the monsoon. In the absence of a reliable messenger service or telephones, impromptu meetings and assignments took place on the roadside, at the beach, or wherever two or more Aurovilians collided in the midst of that laterite vastness.

In the mid-1970's, when the need arose for the Aurovilians to unite against a perceived external threat, regular community-wide meetings began to be held and a community newsletter began to circulate, the forerunner of the present 'Auroville News'. But it was only in the 1980's that something resembling a communications revolution began to take place. The improvement of some of the main roads, for example, accelerated a shift from the meditative cycle to the fiercely mobile motorcycle, and around that time a regular messenger service was instituted. It was also then that the first telephone lines began to snake through the cashews: by 1990 Auroville had almost 200 connections. At the same time, spurred by the presence in the community of a computer company, more and more Aurovilians began acquiring computers. At first, these two developments seemed unrelated. But then it was realized that the proximity of so many computers to so many telephones offered a new possibility: of computers being linked together through the phone lines to form an electronic Bulletin Board System (BBS).

So what exactly does the BBS offer? When two or more computers can 'talk' to each other, it allows various possibilities. Users of the BBS can communicate with each other through their computers on-line ('chat mode'): they can send electronic mail (E-mail) to each other: they can form interest groups and exchange information or hold discussions

('conferencing'): they can poll each other's views and hold electronic referenda: and the BBS can also operate as an archive and data base. In other words, the BBS offers in principle a dramatic augmentation of the community's communication possibilities. 'In principle' because the practical implementation of the idea proved to be a little...knotty. In fact, the first attempt to set up a BBS in Auroville, two years ago, failed due to the poor quality of the phone lines. Recently, however, an electronic telephone exchange has been installed and the lines within the community are now of international standard. And this development, coupled with a further big increase in the number of phone connections and computers in Auroville, emboldened the initiators of the previous attempt to try again. The result is AuroNET! which links—at present—40 computers and about 100 users in Aurovillian cyberspace.

Of course, teething troubles abound: the user-unfriendliness of AuroNET!'s present interface, combined with the apparent tendency of the whole system to dematerialize at regular intervals, has led to much wailing and gnashing of teeth. Yet there's a certain sense that this time it HAS to work, if only because a second failure would probably be irredeemable.

But before considering the potential of such a set-up for Auroville, it's worth trying to understand the 'feel' of this new system. What's it like to be 'plugged in'? Most Aurovilians have no experience but Rabiya, the Systems Operator of AuroNET!, was for some time one of the conference 'hosts' on the WELL (Whole Earth 'Electronic Link) in San Francisco, one of the longest-running electronic networks in the world. "It's a new form of communication, and people don't respond to it in the way they respond to other forms. There's something unique about being able to sit in front of a computer and send messages to anybody who is linked up. It combines the reflectivity of writing with the ease and speedy connectivity of the telephone." According to Ulli, another initiator of AuroNET! and enthusiastic Internet-surfer, 'BBS-space' invites communication not only because of its ease and speed, but also because it's a medium which feels more 'transient', less 'committing' than that, say, of the magazine or book. "And this makes it feel like a freer space in which to explore ideas or feelings."

BBS users have evolved their own language, conventions and expected standards of network behaviour ('Netiquette'). Interpersonal communications tend to be brief, laconic, and often employ abbreviations (RTFM = 'Read the F***** Manual'). And because electronic communication has none of the sound, expression and gesture cues of face-to-face communication, it has had to create its own cues—called

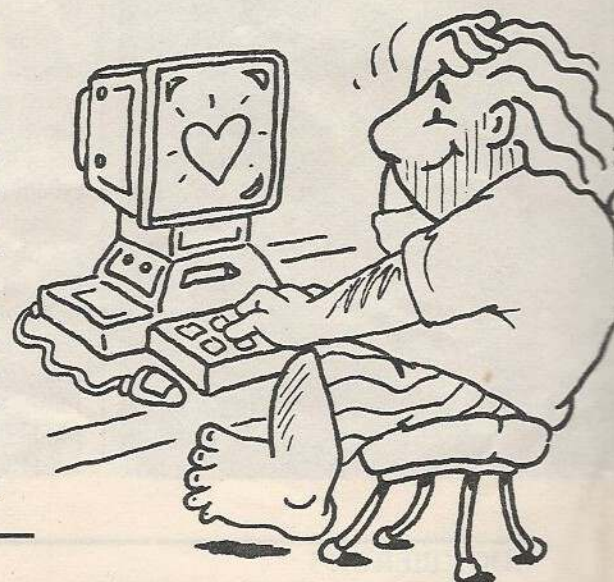
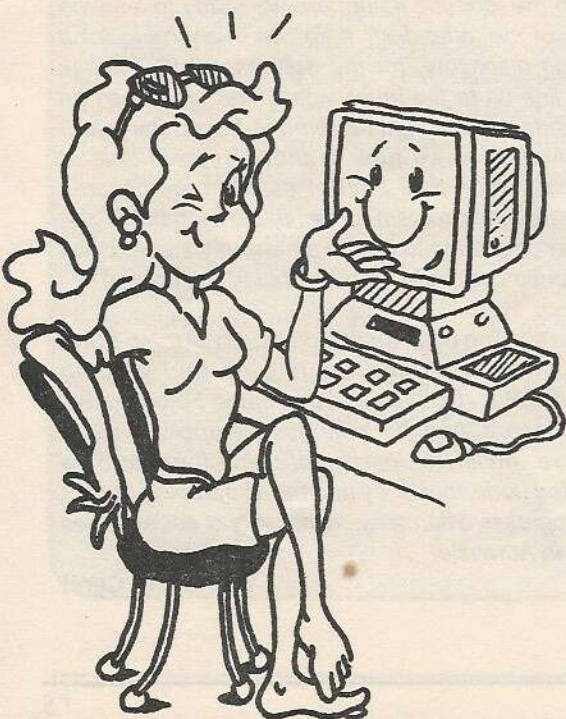
'emoticons'—which, when inserted in the text, indicate the mood in which the message is being sent. They don't always help. Research in the U.S., for example, indicates that participants in electronic discussions often take an extreme position more quickly than would be the case in face-to-face discussions, partly, no doubt, because of the lack of other communication cues. Misunderstandings on the BBS are also an indirect consequence of one of its virtues. For the speed and ease with which messages can be sent and responded to encourages people to send and respond more frequently, more rapidly. "Consequently," Ulli continues, "I often tend to spend less time examining what someone is really trying to tell me, and respond fast to just one aspect of the message. If I perceive this as negative, and shoot back immediately, this can result in 'Flame Wars' where each participant gets locked in a rapid escalation of emotion." In spite of (or because of) this, BBS's can become addictive. Witness the pasty-faced peanut butter kids in the U.S. who spend hours and hours surfing the daddy of them all, Internet.

So what can such a system offer Auroville? One of the main advantages is clearly that individuals linked through AuroNET! can work together without having to be in the same space. This is also true, of course, of the telephone, but the advantages of the BBS over telephonic communication is that it allows files, documents and visual images to be sent and—potentially, since it is a 'cooler' medium—it allows a more considered, more relaxed level of evaluation and response. The fact that individuals can access AuroNET! from their own space and in their own time is crucial, because it means that many Aurovilians who, for one reason or another, never attend meetings may be willing to give information or engage in electronic discussion, thus widening community participation in debate and decision-making. It's unlikely that the BBS would ever completely replace physical meetings—the latter will remain essential for feeling the 'pulse' and catching the subtle movements of an actual meeting—but it can play an important role in improving such meetings. For example, essential information about a particular issue could be put on the BBS and the main lines discussed there for some time before an actual meeting takes place, so allowing more time in the meeting to be spent on the process of decision-making. The fact that AuroNET! will be able to access Internet within a few months creates other interesting possibilities. It means, for example, that the huge store of information which is Internet will become available for us here in coastal Tamil Nadu, enabling us to down-load information on everything from construction to tree-planting, and opening up not only business but also academic possibilities, both for our own students and for visiting researchers:

through Internet, for example, all the major libraries of the world are available at the click of a mouse. And the further 'internationalization' of Auroville which will surely result from this will receive another boost from the fact that AuroNET! will be easily accessible outside Auroville, allowing, for example, Aurovilians and Auroville-connected people the world over to send us information and participate in some of our discussions.

So is AuroNET! the answer to many of our problems? Not necessarily. The example of Internet is illuminating. Today, Internet links 3 million computers and about 30 million users, and it boasts a vast store of information on every conceivable topic. But, since almost anybody can contribute to that store, it has also accumulated an awful lot of junk, misinformation, propaganda and pornography. In other words, a BBS cannot guarantee the quality of what's put on it. It's merely another channel for communicating what's already around, be it positive or harmful. This inevitably raises the question of control. Should we in Auroville control access to AuroNET! and determine guidelines for how it is to be used? Ulli is unconvinced. "The BBS gives us in Auroville the opportunity to have our own press with access and freedom for all. The influence of free communication can be enormous—witness what happened in the former East Germany, for example. So, although there are certain dangers associated with free communication, I don't think they warrant the creation of formal controls which may make communication less free. And the fact that we know each other in Auroville makes controls less necessary because it will be hard for someone to hide behind unsubstantiated accusations or statements on AuroNET!" Theo, another of the initiators of AuroNET!, points out that most electronic communities around the world have informally developed self-regulating controls: individuals misusing the Internet, for example, get their electronic mailbox bombarded with E-mail, putting it out of commission for some time. As for the concern, felt by some Aurovilians, that sensitive information on the AuroNET! may get into the wrong hands, Theo points out that we can control who can access information on our BBS. "This means,

Contd. on the next page



DRAWINGS: EMANUELE

BBS contd.

for example, that Aurovilians can access all information (apart from private E-mail) on AuroNET!, while some non-Aurovilians may only be able to access parts of it."

Both Ulli and Theo may be overly optimistic. The experience of Auroville is that it's virtually impossible to prevent certain kinds of information reaching the wrong places. And as for unsubstantiated information...well, the example of the 'Auroville News' doesn't support Ulli's point that it's more difficult to make misleading statements in a community where we know each other fairly well. Rabiya, in fact, points out that even the semi-anarchic WELL evolved certain ground rules that everyone was expected to observe. "Two of them were 'Don't attack people personally' and 'Everybody owns their own words'. In other words, nobody was allowed to quote someone else's words in print outside the network unless they had first got their permission. And while only one person, to my knowledge, was ever banned from the WELL, some were banned from participating in certain conferences."

Perhaps the most important question, however, is whether or not AuroNET! can strengthen and deepen our sense of community. Both Ulli and Rabiya are sure that it will. "My experience of using it in the U.S.," says Rabiya, "is that it definitely helps create community by getting people to communicate more". But certain reservations remain. Isn't there a danger, for example, that certain individuals may retreat from the challenges of 'real' into the safety of 'virtual' community? And in a multi-national community where a sizeable proportion of the members are still not 'computer-literate' (or English-literate) won't AuroNET! simply create a new communication elite? It's noticeable, for example, that few Tamil-speaking members of the community attend general meetings. Would they be any more likely to 'plug in' to AuroNET!? And, if not, won't this exacerbate rather than heal divisions that may already exist?

Theo has already conducted a number of classes introducing Aurovilians to this new medium. And he's aware that the present AuroNET! interface doesn't exactly encourage computer illiterates to plug in, "But what needs to be stressed is that the format of AuroNET! is not fixed. Hopefully, soon we'll be able to make AuroNET! more 'human' by changing the interface and allowing sketches and images to be sent along with printed information. And if, for example, some of our Tamil population would be unwilling to use it in its present form, we can also have a Tamil interface." Rabiya stresses the need for AuroNET! to be interconnected with other forms of information dissemination in Auroville to prevent some Aurovilians missing out on important information. "For example, a summary of the main exchanges on AuroNET! could be published each week in the 'Auroville News'."

Finally, however, there's nothing magical about the BBS. Information is power, and if someone doesn't wish to share it, there's nothing inherent within the BBS which can make them do so. In other words, AuroNET!, rather than being a transformative force per se merely offers us another tool: how we use it is up to us. But because one of the tendencies of networks is to amplify what is already there, one of the most powerful functions of AuroNET!—assuming that it becomes widely used in Auroville—may be that of a mirror in which we can view ourselves, warts and all, in a much more complete way than we have ever been able to before. Now, who knows what effect THAT might have?

Alan

Dutch Treat

Saylam is an interesting new community housing project. Located just off the main road near Vikas, Saylam (Tamil for "Let's do it") is the child of Anton, who wanted to offer Aurovilians a chance to move into simple quarters without having to pay for construction. Who is Anton? Anton Keulaers is from Holland and came to live in Auroville four years ago. He teaches Geography and Computer Science in Last School and Geography in After School. He also coaches volleyball and other sports at Certitude Sports Field.

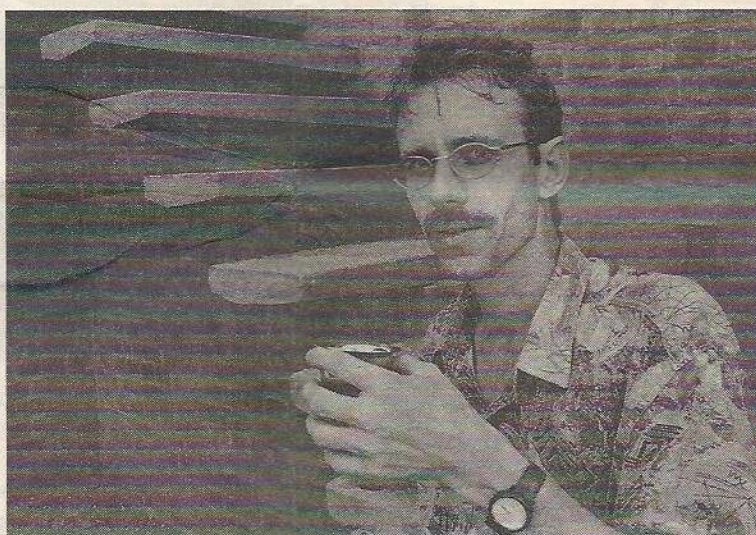
"We started building in September last year, but we were already thinking about it one year before," Anton tells me. The "we" includes Guna who lives in Aspiration with his wife Pushpah and their son Prithivi. Arumugam, also from Aspiration, will join them. Guna, who advises on the technical aspect, took over the supervision of the construction when Anton left for a vacation in Holland this summer. Guna knows prices and people, and Arumugam will help with the electrical system because of his work with Altecs. The units in Saylam are very simple: a living room, and bedroom separated by a standing, fixed set of shelves which acts like a partition, and a bathroom. There will be a community kitchen with seating area outside, so there will be no cooking facilities inside the apartments. In total, there will be seven units, including one for newcomers and one for guests. The family house is a bit bigger, with two bed-

rooms and a bathroom. With some luck, it should be finished and ready to move into by the end of December. The electricity will come a bit later.

The area around Matrimandir is rapidly filling up with residential housing. "It's definitely high-density," Anton agrees. "In fact, we are just 20 metres from Vikas and we can share their well." Anton has added some support to Vikas' windmill by installing a solar pump.

Anton sees Saylam as a practical solution for providing housing to those who have difficulty paying several lakhs for a place to live. He intends to spend below 9 lakhs (Rs. 900,000), including infrastructure, for the whole thing. "My idea is: keep it simple. Maybe it will not be to everyone's taste, because there's nothing fancy. We use brick and reinforced concrete. I was lucky to get some help from two Auroville architects, Aurosatprem and Helmut. And then I am there to supervise. If you supervise it well, it can be done cheaply. Of course, you have to be on site, every day—going back and forth to Pondy to buy materials, checking on the work. The availability of materials is very irregular. It depends on monsoons, strikes, God knows what." Anton shakes his head in disbelief. But he's happy because the end is in sight. "I will be glad to leave my thatched roof behind."

Jill



A man with skills and ideas: Anton

MIME WORKSHOP

Three wonderfully creative actors from France visited Auroville recently and offered a one-week workshop in mime and improvisation. Jean-Baptiste, Mariline and Dominique, on holiday from their children's theatre group in Paris, were happy to explore the art of mime with a group of 14 interested Aurovilians in Pitanga. Despite the limitations of simultaneous translation (from French to English) the group was pleased with the work and hungry for more. Hopefully, these friends can return next year.

SOLAR PUMP WORKSHOP

The Centre for Scientific Research (CSR) hosted a five-day national workshop on solar photovoltaic water pumping systems. The workshop was organized by the Indian Renewable Energy Development Agency (IREDA) and sponsored by the Ministry of Non-Conventional Energy Sources (MNES), New Delhi. The chiefs of both these organizations and a group of distinguished scientists came to Auroville for the occasion. Seminar discussions included everything from the World Bank perspectives to the nuts and bolts of installation and maintenance of the systems in the field. In Auroville there are 132 solar water pumping systems installed and operating. Altecs, Aureka and the Auroville Water Service as well as CSR were involved in assisting the participants of the Workshop.

OIL SURVEY

The Oil and Natural Gas Corporation of India (ONGC) has spent the last few weeks carrying out a seismic survey in the Auroville area to ascertain if there are any significant oil or gas deposits beneath us. Since the survey involved drilling numerous wells into our first water table and then detonating explosives at the bottom of the wells, often close to Auroville houses, there were widespread protests in the community against the survey. After a series of meetings, the ONGC representative has agreed to stop drilling and detonating charges within a 3 kilometre radius of Matrimandir.

ECO-VILLAGE CONFERENCE

Findhorn Community, Scotland, is sponsoring an international conference on eco-villages and sustainable patterns of living for the 21st century, and two Aurovilians will be representing our community.

To our subscribers

We regret having to announce an increase in AUROVILLE TODAY subscription rates, which we have been able to keep at the same level since January 1992. There is no way around it if we are to continue providing you with update information on developments in Auroville beyond next year. The reasons are many: costs of improved photoprinting (due to computerized scanning); increased paper costs (you may have noticed the inconstant paper quality which we are nevertheless forced to purchase at increasingly higher rates); substantial increases in the printing costs during the last few years; an extra bit of colour in some of our more recent issues; increased postage rates, and an average 20% rate of inflation which raises the cost of living and the basic maintenance payments for the members of the team.

We gratefully acknowledge the extra financial support and positive feedback we have always received from many of you, without which we would have had

to increase our subscription rates earlier. We hope you stay with us as we journey with Auroville into the future...

To cover our costs, the suggested new subscription rates for 12 issues of AUROVILLE TODAY are the following:

In India Rs 250, for other countries Rs 1250, Can \$ 51, FF 195, DM 56, Lt. Lira 61,000, D.Gl. 63, US \$ 38, UK £25. This includes the postage by airmail. Please send your contribution (or your supporting contribution of double the amount) either to the Auroville International centre in your country (add 10% for admin. and bank charges) or directly to Auroville Today, CSR Office, Auroville 605101. **Cheques should be made payable to Auroville Fund**, specifying: 'Contribution for Auroville Today'. You will receive the issues directly from Auroville. Personal cheques are preferred to bank cheques. Please do **not** send postal money orders. Subscribers will receive a reminder when their subscription is about to expire.

Addresses of Auroville International centres:

AVI **Deutschland**, c/o M. Soerensen, Bleicherstraße 60, 28203 Bremen, Germany.
AVI **España**, c/o Kitxu and Yolanda, Apartado de Correos 36, 31.610 Villava, Navarra, Spain
AVI **France** c/o Satyakam Karim, 14, rue du Colonel Grancey, 94500 Champigny Sur Marne, France.
AVI **Nederland**, c/o M. Berden, Lobelialaan 51, 2555 PC Den Haag, The Netherlands.
AVI **Canada**, c/o Denis Henley, 847 Chemin Perry, Aylmer (Quebec), J9H 5C9 Canada.
AVI **Sverige**, c/o Ulf Carlberg, Borgholm, Broddebø, S-59700 Atvidaberg, Sweden.
AVI **U.K.**, c/o M. Littlewood, Canigou, Cot Lane, Chidham, W.Sussex, PO18 8SP, U.K.
AVI **USA**, c/o Jack Alexander, P.O. Box 162489, Sacramento CA 95816, USA.

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

Editorial team: Tineke, Roger, Martin B., Jill, Carel, Bindu, Bill, Annemarie, Alan. All photos: John Mandeem. DTP: Annemarie, Martin B. Proofreading: Barbara. Printed at Auroville Press.

AUROVILLE TODAY

CSR Office,
Auroville 605101
Tamil Nadu, India

By Airmail
Bookpost

Exp. # 85

KRISHNA TEMARI
AUROVILLE
AUROVILLE

October 1995
Number Eighty-One

IN THIS ISSUE:
MATRIMANDIR; WORKING COMMITTEE; BBS; THE YELLOW BUS



A new marriage: Atlas of India pedals off with ZAP Power of USA. Another battery-powered electro-bicycle prototype from the Centre for Scientific Research in the fast lane to the future ...

Dawn was breaking out in the east when George pulled out of the driveway of Aurobrindavan. Diego, perhaps to please his passengers, put on some Tamil music. The big yellow left-hand drive German tourist bus with two "vellakara" drivers chauffeuring about twenty respectable lungi-clad Tamil farmers attracted considerable attention on the roads as it hurtled away from Auroville to the districts of Tirunelveli and Chidambarnar, some 500 km. to the south.

This bus load of farmers, green-workers and development officers were off on an Auroville Greenwork Resource Centre project to study the problems that arise in the coastal villages from salt-water intrusion due to the depletion of groundwater. The project was spearheaded by Rod Downie, a visitor from Scotland who has extensively studied these problems and documented them in a video titled *Troubled Waters* (see AVT #68 and #79). In the first phase of the project, the participants watched the video at Aurobrindavan and held discussions about the problem. The second phase of the project involved a visit to four coastal villages in the districts of Tirunelveli and Chidambarnar to learn, on a first-hand basis, about the problems of the villagers.

While each village added its own local twist or flavour, the problems in all the villages arising from the salination of the water supply were similar: there was a lack of steady supply of drinking water; the poor had to spend as much as 50% of their income on buying drinking water; agricultural yields had been vastly reduced over the years; there was a scarcity of fresh vegetables; cattle were being sent to slaughterhouses for lack of water; health problems such as urinary tract infections and kidney stones were common; farmers were forced out of their jobs as their lands became unproductive; and the menfolk, or even whole families, had migrated elsewhere. In Sriranganayanpuram, a village that was once known as "mini-Kerala" for its high coconut yields, two or three men from each household had left to seek a living elsewhere. And the lush coconut groves had turned to scrub land where only thorny bushes grew. In Kuttam, coconut groves still existed but the yields were greatly reduced.

A tree which once bore 40 to 45 coconuts now bore only 4 or 5. In Periarthalai, a fishing village, the supply of water through tankers was often hindered because of communal fights with other villages, and the fishermen could not properly clean and maintain the expensive outboard engines of their catamarans because of the lack of fresh water. There was an interesting phenomenon, regarded as a miracle by the villagers, in Manapad, a picturesque sea-side village. While all the wells in the village had turned saline, there was one well, right on the beach, inside a grotto, that still contained fresh water of an extremely good quality. The grotto had once been occupied by a Shaivaite saint and later on by St. Francis Xavier. It was the latter who dug the well and to whom the miracle was attributed.

The indiscriminate use of bore wells for irrigation is the single largest cause of salt-water intrusion. Bore wells fitted with powerful electric motors can easily extract 100,000 litres or more of water per day. The Tamil Nadu Government, in a bid to increase agricultural yield and to woo a powerful electoral lobby, provides free electricity to farmers. This means that farmers often leave their pumpsets running for 24 hours, over-irrigating their lands and wasting thousands of litres of wa-

ter per day. With the depletion of underground water, seawater seeps into the aquifer rendering it saline. The extent to which seawater intrudes into the aquifer depends on the structure of the underground rocks. Impervious rocks can effectively check the intrusion of seawater. This perhaps explains why the "miracle wells" on the beach of Manapad still contain fresh water, though all the other wells in the village are saline.

Apart from learning about the problems of salt-water intrusion, the trip proved to be educational in other ways too. To begin with, participants were touched by the hospitality of the villagers that they encountered. In Periarthalai, the nuns of a convent hosted such a sumptuous lunch and served it with such grace, that everyone instinctively bowed their heads to say grace before eating. The solidarity of the women in Periarthalai was also impressive. While the men were often involved in communal fights, the women had

got together and raised the money to buy their own water tanker so that the supply of fresh water could be ensured. In this context, Anbu, a development officer from the Village Action Group, observed that while Auroville was yet to command respect from the vil-

lages in its locality, the villagers of Periarthalai looked up to and accepted the guidance of the Church. The group was also impressed by the enthusiasm of the youth in those districts, who toured the villages in their locality presenting social and environmental issues through street plays. In the four days that the group spent travelling however, the "vellakaras" and the Tamil farmers got to know each other a bit better. Indeed by the time the bus headed back to Auroville, Diego had the farmers swaying to the rock-'n-roll rhythms of English music.

In discussions held in Auroville after the trip, it was found that none of the farmers had earlier been aware of the problems that can result from seawater intrusion, though some from the coastal villages of Kalapet, Bommayapalyam, Mudaliarchavadi and Kottakuppam had already seen their wells go saline. Some of the farmers who use bore wells promised to avoid over-pumping and reduce the water consumption. Others openly criticized the Government's policy of providing free electricity, as they felt that sea water intrusion could not be avoided unless there was a massive change in agricultural patterns in the whole region. Farmers and development workers associated with Ecological Agriculture of the Village Action Group in Auroville promised to integrate discussion about salt water into their current training programmes. Aurovilians who were present at the discussion admitted that more could be done in Auroville at an individual level to conserve water. Some voiced the opinion that more attention should be given to water conservation methods and if possible, village tanks should be desilted, rain-water should be harvested, and the ancient system of using kulams and eyeries (a system of integrated rain-water catchment ponds) for irrigation should be revived. One hopes that, in time, these ideas will spread and bear fruit. It is not easy to undo the mistakes that have been made in the past, but if the people themselves take the initiative, then perhaps, despite the lopsided policies of the Government, changes can be wrought in the future, and the beautiful coastal plains of Tamil Nadu remain green and fertile forever.

Bindu

AUROVILLE TODAY

CSR Office,
Auroville 605101
Tamil Nadu, India

By Airmail
Bookpost

Exp. # 85

KRISHNA TEMARI
AUROVILLE
AUROVILLE

October 1995
Number Eighty-One

IN THIS ISSUE:
MATRIMANDIR; WORKING COMMITTEE; BBS; THE YELLOW BUS



A new marriage: Atlas of India pedals off with ZAP Power of USA. Another battery-powered electro-bicycle prototype from the Centre for Scientific Research in the fast lane to the future ...

Dawn was breaking out in the east when George pulled out of the driveway of Aurobrindavan. Diego, perhaps to please his passengers, put on some Tamil music. The big yellow left-hand drive German tourist bus with two "vellakara" drivers chauffeuring about twenty respectable lungi-clad Tamil farmers attracted considerable attention on the roads as it hurtled away from Auroville to the districts of Tirunelveli and Chidambarnar, some 500 km. to the south.

This bus load of farmers, green-workers and development officers were off on an Auroville Greenwork Resource Centre project to study the problems that arise in the coastal villages from salt-water intrusion due to the depletion of groundwater. The project was spearheaded by Rod Downie, a visitor from Scotland who has extensively studied these problems and documented them in a video titled *Troubled Waters* (see AVT #68 and #79). In the first phase of the project, the participants watched the video at Aurobrindavan and held discussions about the problem. The second phase of the project involved a visit to four coastal villages in the districts of Tirunelveli and Chidambarnar to learn, on a first-hand basis, about the problems of the villagers.

While each village added its own local twist or flavour, the problems in all the villages arising from the salination of the water supply were similar: there was a lack of steady supply of drinking water; the poor had to spend as much as 50% of their income on buying drinking water; agricultural yields had been vastly reduced over the years; there was a scarcity of fresh vegetables; cattle were being sent to slaughterhouses for lack of water; health problems such as urinary tract infections and kidney stones were common; farmers were forced out of their jobs as their lands became unproductive; and the menfolk, or even whole families, had migrated elsewhere. In Sriranganayanpuram, a village that was once known as "mini-Kerala" for its high coconut yields, two or three men from each household had left to seek a living elsewhere. And the lush coconut groves had turned to scrub land where only thorny bushes grew. In Kuttam, coconut groves still existed but the yields were greatly reduced.

A tree which once bore 40 to 45 coconuts now bore only 4 or 5. In Periarthalai, a fishing village, the supply of water through tankers was often hindered because of communal fights with other villages, and the fishermen could not properly clean and maintain the expensive outboard engines of their catamarans because of the lack of fresh water. There was an interesting phenomenon, regarded as a miracle by the villagers, in Manapad, a picturesque sea-side village. While all the wells in the village had turned saline, there was one well, right on the beach, inside a grotto, that still contained fresh water of an extremely good quality. The grotto had once been occupied by a Shaivaite saint and later on by St. Francis Xavier. It was the latter who dug the well and to whom the miracle was attributed.

The indiscriminate use of bore wells for irrigation is the single largest cause of salt-water intrusion. Bore wells fitted with powerful electric motors can easily extract 100,000 litres or more of water per day. The Tamil Nadu Government, in a bid to increase agricultural yield and to woo a powerful electoral lobby, provides free electricity to farmers. This means that farmers often leave their pumpsets running for 24 hours, over-irrigating their lands and wasting thousands of litres of wa-

ter per day. With the depletion of underground water, seawater seeps into the aquifer rendering it saline. The extent to which seawater intrudes into the aquifer depends on the structure of the underground rocks. Impervious rocks can effectively check the intrusion of seawater. This perhaps explains why the "miracle wells" on the beach of Manapad still contain fresh water, though all the other wells in the village are saline.

Apart from learning about the problems of salt-water intrusion, the trip proved to be educational in other ways too. To begin with, participants were touched by the hospitality of the villagers that they encountered. In Periarthalai, the nuns of a convent hosted such a sumptuous lunch and served it with such grace, that everyone instinctively bowed their heads to say grace before eating. The solidarity of the women in Periarthalai was also impressive. While the men were often involved in communal fights, the women had

got together and raised the money to buy their own water tanker so that the supply of fresh water could be ensured. In this context, Anbu, a development officer from the Village Action Group, observed that while Auroville was yet to command respect from the vil-

lages in its locality, the villagers of Periarthalai looked up to and accepted the guidance of the Church. The group was also impressed by the enthusiasm of the youth in those districts, who toured the villages in their locality presenting social and environmental issues through street plays. In the four days that the group spent travelling however, the "vellakaras" and the Tamil farmers got to know each other a bit better. Indeed by the time the bus headed back to Auroville, Diego had the farmers swaying to the rock-'n-roll rhythms of English music.

In discussions held in Auroville after the trip, it was found that none of the farmers had earlier been aware of the problems that can result from seawater intrusion, though some from the coastal villages of Kalapet, Bommayapalyam, Mudaliarchavadi and Kottakuppam had already seen their wells go saline. Some of the farmers who use bore wells promised to avoid over-pumping and reduce the water consumption. Others openly criticized the Government's policy of providing free electricity, as they felt that sea water intrusion could not be avoided unless there was a massive change in agricultural patterns in the whole region. Farmers and development workers associated with Ecological Agriculture of the Village Action Group in Auroville promised to integrate discussion about salt water into their current training programmes. Aurovilians who were present at the discussion admitted that more could be done in Auroville at an individual level to conserve water. Some voiced the opinion that more attention should be given to water conservation methods and if possible, village tanks should be desilted, rain-water should be harvested, and the ancient system of using kulams and eyeries (a system of integrated rain-water catchment ponds) for irrigation should be revived. One hopes that, in time, these ideas will spread and bear fruit. It is not easy to undo the mistakes that have been made in the past, but if the people themselves take the initiative, then perhaps, despite the lopsided policies of the Government, changes can be wrought in the future, and the beautiful coastal plains of Tamil Nadu remain green and fertile forever.

Bindu