

Auroville Today

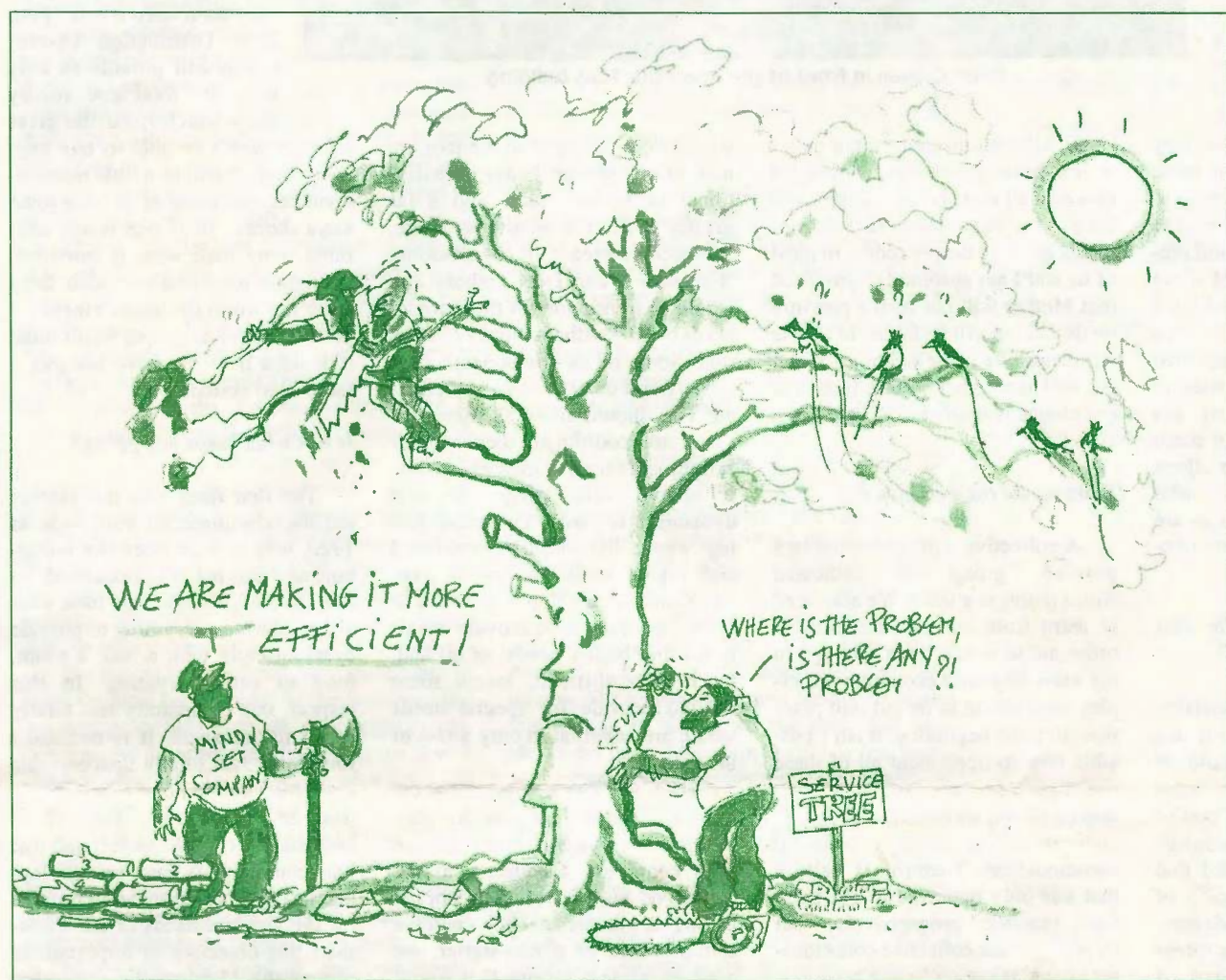
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MAIN THEME: Services In Auroville

- A brief history of Auroville's economy
- All is not well with the Health Centre
- An overview of Auroville's services
- Our vehicles don't run on water!
- Pour Tous Distribution Center

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Recovering the spirit of service



Whenever Aurovilians speak of 'the services' they generally refer to those activities that are directly involved with Auroville's infrastructure, such as education, road repair or the various organisational working groups.

In the early days of Auroville, services were received free according to the ideals articulated in The Mother's Dream. In recent years, however, community funds have been insufficient to cover the full needs of Auroville's services.

Consequently, they were asked to become fully or partly self-supporting, resulting in many of them having to charge. Some have managed the transition but there have also been casualties, and these may give us pause when we consider the wisdom of commercializing Auroville's service sector.

In this issue we highlight some of these cases, and we consider how Auroville can move towards a society in which, as Mother made clear, 'service' is both an offering and a flowering of the Self.

CARTOON: EMANUELE

"Fundamental principles ignored"

Gilles Guigan's views

There are several kinds of services: administrative, municipal, the services provided by SAIER and those services whose aim is to provide for the material needs of all individuals. I am concerned with the latter.

The Aurovilians are expected to offer their work and/or money to the community. If work should not indeed be 'a way to earn one's living', working hours can't be traded against some material advantage; they can only be offered. Similarly, if there is 'no circulation of money within Auroville', money won't be able to buy anything here, neither a house, nor a meal, nor anything. The only thing an Aurovillian should be able to do with 'his' or 'her' money is to offer it. In return for this offering, Auroville has to provide for his or her basic needs. This is one of Auroville's most fundamental principles.

This fundamental principle has been lost. The 'maintenance' we receive is in fact a salary as it is provided in money without any attempt to take into account our respective needs. For most people it amounts to three to four thousand rupees a month, but some people get much more. Why? It's not because their needs are greater and not even because their work is more valuable to our community; it is simply because the unit where they work can pay more money than others. That's the only reason. It is not only very unfair; it is in contradiction to our ideals. In 'A Dream',

Mother says that it is not because you are talented and capable of running a large business, for example, that you should enjoy more pleasures in life. On the contrary, those who have such capacities should take on more responsibilities. This is totally forgotten. She also says that the 'bodily needs would be equally provided for' and we don't do it either. There isn't enough brotherhood, there isn't enough sharing, there isn't enough trust, and not enough basic knowledge of what Mother has said, which is too often interpreted to our convenience. So it's the whole system which has to change.

Auroville Today: Was it like that in the early days?

No. At least people didn't dare to disregard so blatantly Mother's rules. People gave to the common pot, 'Pour Tous', and whatever was there was shared equitably. It worked well for several years but then the system fell apart – in my view for three reasons. Firstly, too many people were too lazy to contribute their thirty five hours of work per week for the collective. Secondly, desires and egoism got hold of many of those who had access to (personal or business) money; so they shared it more and more reluctantly, arguing that they did not want to sponsor laziness.

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"We came for something different"

Nicole on the challenges facing the services

Service in the context of the ideals of Auroville means that one feels one is being cared for. I think that the whole system on which Auroville is supposed to be built is a system where you give your energy to something that is useful for the community as a whole and, in exchange, Auroville takes care of you. It takes care of you in terms of food, of looking after your teeth, of driving you safely to Pondicherry, it takes care of you when your roof needs to be repaired; that's basically what services are there for. I would go even further. Take the Dental Service. It's a service that has been running for many years, and when you enter the Dental Centre you experience a certain atmosphere. You feel you are entering a space that is an Auroville space where there is a conscious effort to keep a certain vibration, to make it alive, and to translate that vibration into the quality of the work one is doing. I think that's a very important aspect of what a service in Auroville should be.

Auroville Today: Where is Auroville in relation to that ideal?

In the way that we are organized in Auroville today, if you run a service and want to rely on what the community can offer you it is very difficult. It is difficult because the Central Fund, or the Economy Group that overlooks the

Central Fund, does not have the means – it has only a small portion of the resources of Auroville at its disposal – and so the services are underfunded. Only a fraction, and I would say even a small fraction, of the money that is available in Auroville, either from units or from personal money, or from wherever, is pooled and decided upon by the community. So what has developed more and more is a system where if you have a particular need, you have to go and ask the units, or individuals, for money. And that, according to me, is one of the things we have to stop as soon as possible. We are forcing people to ask another Aurovillian for money, and that Aurovillian has the power over the money. Sometimes that person can be more conscious than a group, but Mother said something about the power of money, and that Auroville is a place where there shouldn't be that aspect.

Originally, the way Auroville was organized was in terms of free services for all, but what we have now is that many services are forced to charge, and it is not a pleasant picture.

How do you think that change came about?

My gut feeling or answer is it began the day we decided to give maintenances to people. Somehow, at that time, something changed.

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"Fundamental principles ignored"

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The final blow came from side effects of the battle with the Sri Aurobindo Society: serious shortage of money and rejection of all forms of authority. So 'Pour Tous' received less and less money and food items to distribute and many individuals felt they were left to fend for themselves. Then, in the mid eighties, the management of one of our most profitable units decided to give a salary to the Aurovilians working with them saying that it was for them, and not for this unit, to decide whether to share, or not, their salary with the community. Soon all other units followed suit and gave a 'maintenance' to those working with them. Being deprived of resources to share, 'Pour Tous' was thus forced to become a shop where Aurovilians spend 'their' money. Gone was the distribution centre of collective resources and the ideal behind it.

This is how our community switched from a sharing system aiming at the satisfaction of each one's basic needs to an ordinary salary system.

But how would a group decide what different people's basic needs are?

This is indeed where the main difficulty lies! Mother acknowledged it by saying that the difficulty of Her system was in the 'appraisal of the value of things'. The question is not whether one can allocate already Auroville's resources in a truly ideal way, but whether one can allocate them better than what is done now. In my view, the present system is so unfair that it should be easy to do much better. If one looks at the way Mother was taking care of the Ashramites, one gets an idea of what She meant by basic needs. Let's note that, unlike in the Ashram where 'Dining Room' food is the only option, She said that the Aurovilians would be given the choice between a variety of tastes and diets. This diversity of choice was probably not limited to food alone.

But she gave guidelines for how we should live here.

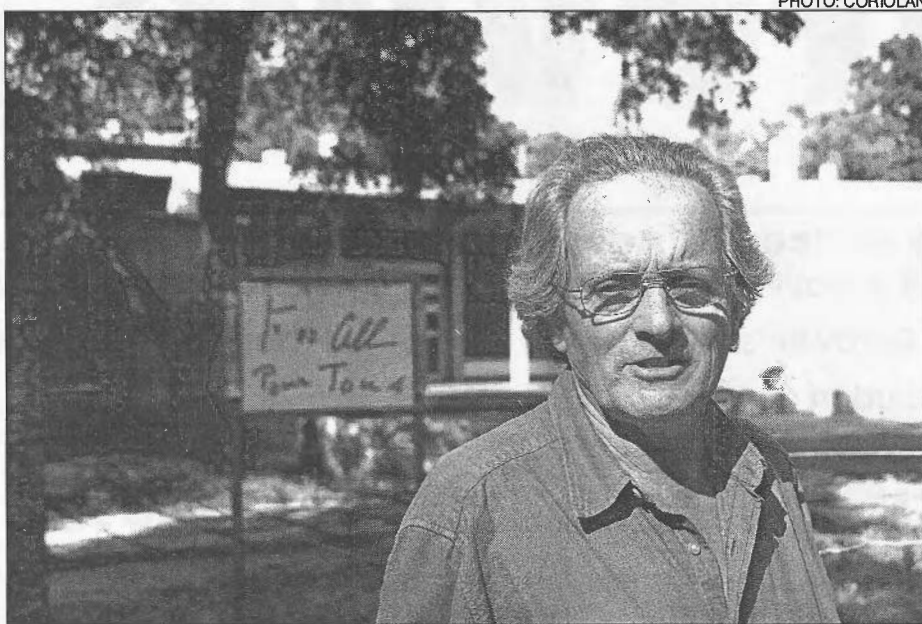
Yes, but some Aurovilians refuse

to abide by these rules arguing that Mother had said that 'as long as there are no rules there is hope' or that these are passé. It is indeed true that initially She did not want to impose on Auroville any of the 'Rules of Life' She had made for the Ashram (no smoking, no drugs, no alcohol, no sex and no politics), but the economic rules are exactly the same in both organisations: No private property, working thirty-five hours a week for the collective, no salary, no funding of desires, no circulation of money.

One thing I want to highlight: Sri Aurobindo and Mother did not believe that a system could by itself bring the change humanity so desperately needs. Hence these rules do not form the basis of some new 'ism'; in my view, they are mainly meant to prevent those who won't abide by such rules joining or remaining in Auroville. The application of these rules would create an automatic selection of those who have reached the required level of consciousness to live here. For example, those who are too attached to personal property won't want to live here. Unfortunately, by not putting into practice some of these rules, and by applying some others partly only, many persons who would not have joined otherwise are now 'Aurovilians' and they are likely to resist any change...

You believe that Auroville has become more individualistic?

That's the cancer of Auroville. There is too much individualism and materialism – although we claim we want to leave them behind us. Some say the only way to limit the cost of services is to put them in competition; whereas Mother insisted that collaboration is the 'true spirit of Auroville'. Some want more democracy as it allows their ego to express itself, whereas Mother insisted on the government by the highest consciousness available. In effect, we tend to reproduce the 'old world' here, and some of us don't even seem to realize it.



Gilles Guigan in front of the new Pour Tous building

But do not misunderstand me; it is not because we have failed till now that all hope is lost. On the contrary, my experience is that our ideals are very deeply rooted in most of us and I am absolutely convinced that Mother will put such a pressure on us that we will be forced to realise our ideals. We came here for that and we will remember in due time that our choice is limited to 'Truth or the abyss'.

What would the next step be?

A collective will, embodied in a growing group of dedicated Aurovilians, is a must. We also need to learn from our past mistakes in order not to repeat them. Though in my view Mother's economic principles were meant to be put into practice from the beginning, it isn't possible now to implement all of these overnight. In fact, for me, their degree of implementation gives the measure of our collective state of consciousness. Therefore I believe that our only option is to put them into practice progressively, but steadily, as our collective consciousness rises, as our collective organisation improves and as individual contributions improve.

Steps need to be taken to enable the collective to perform its task properly. In this respect, two things

which were not there in the past are now in our favour: better organisational skills and tools, and a far greater collective wealth to share. We need to create an organisation, 'For All – Pour Tous', whose aim would be to provide for the material needs of all – without money circulation. Some of its components exist already and others need to be created. This should allow all these services to coordinate better their actions and improve their efficiency. It should also trigger a new dynamism towards 'collective living' where 'life would be simplified and higher qualities would have more time to develop'. We need to organise ourselves to provide equally for the 'bodily needs' of all and, much more difficult, invent some way to provide for special needs which are essential to only a few of us.

Then, we have to ensure that the individuals play their part. All contributors need to feel that everyone does contribute adequately to the collective. Such is definitely not the feeling at present. As any coercive action would be a non-starter, we need to create a service that would help each one to find a work in which he can 'express himself and develop his capacities and possibilities while being of service to the community as a whole'. This may

suffice to change the atmosphere and put pressure on those who need to mend their ways.

Mother also insisted on the need for the Aurovilians to master their ego and desires. Can we do something about this? One should probably implement the rule that Auroville should not fund obvious desires. One could follow Mother's example and refuse to give any kind of maintenance to those self-maintained Aurovilians who enjoy living standards that are well above the average.

Very practically, we will very soon open a new "Pour Tous Distribution Centre" which will provide us only with the food and sundry items which Auroville gives

us. One won't be able to buy anything there. It will be a little inconvenient because many of us have some extra money, so if one wants anything more than what is provided, we'll have to go to a store also. But I think it's worth the inconvenience. I believe that most people won't mind if it does help us move towards a more ideal system.

Is this what keeps you going?

The first thing that the Mother did after she joined Sri Aurobindo, in 1920, was to look after His household as it was not at all organized. So She, like a good mother, took over and organized everything to provide every disciple with a bed, a room, food to eat, everything. In this respect, our community has totally failed its members. It is because I found this fact totally unacceptable that I took up the Solar Kitchen project and later the 'Pour Tous Distribution Centre' project and that I am committed to carry on developing the organisation that will provide for the material needs of all. I consider this objective as important as completing Matrimandir (my other commitment). As you can see, my task is far from being over. With Her help we will succeed!

Edited by Alan from an interview by Emmanuelle

"We came for something different"

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The emphasis shifted from the community looking after you to everybody having a personal account.

The Financial Service also came into being then. Before that we just had the envelopes, we all sat together every week and decided in which envelope the money would go. And when one particular area of work needed more money, we would put more money towards that. Everybody from the different areas was there, we would discuss the situation with each other, but this personal contact is something that we have lost now. Now it's more like you send an email, and you're lucky if you ever get an answer.

So for you, the day Aurovilians started receiving maintenances was the turning point?

Yes, it was the watershed.

And at that point, a lot of the services were already in place?

Yes. There was the Water Service run by Maurice, the Electrical Service run by Toine –



Nicole

the major services were already there. And they were all covering their running expenses from what the Central Fund was able to give them, the Aurovilians weren't being charged for these services.

When did they start to charge Aurovilians to run their services?

I'm not sure, but I know that at

one point, many years ago, the Electrical Service was asked to charge a certain tax on top of the bill in order to be able to run the Service, and this began a movement. In some respects it might have led to more efficiency, but the mode of functioning has changed completely, and that system of functioning was the uniqueness of Auroville on the economic level.

Now it is more like, "OK, you need something, you pay for it. If you don't have the money, too bad," and that is not particularly an interesting model to follow. We came for something different, and for a while we lived it with all its imperfections. Many of the people who lived it are nostalgic about it. It is a feeling of having lost something very precious.

So we are constantly pushed more and more to deal with our own scene, and it's something that encourages egocentrism: "Take care of yourself and the rest will take care of itself." Visitors are very surprised that Auroville is like that: that our common facilities – our roads, our public buildings – are fairly derelict compared with our 'own' villas.

What I also feel, talking to some people who run services, is that they have the impression that they are not heard, that they are not acknowledged when they point out that they need more money for the service to survive. Some of them perceive it as a kind of dismantling

of what they have been doing for many years. For example, the puncture-repair service still does not charge people who use it, but without adequate funding its assets are disappearing. Such services are being pauperized, and that's simply not right, that's not something you do to people who have been working for Auroville for many years in a perfectly nice way.

And I think for us to say as a community that we can't help them because there's no money is not true. The money is around, we're not paupers, but we are organizing our society in a very individualistic way.

So what should be the next step?

The way I understand we should function is that the money is given to central services and they, in turn, take care of the individuals. So when this new Pour Tous started to emerge, for me there was no question of saying I would not participate. It is the only practical move that I know of, since years and years, that tries to return us to the ideal.

Edited by Alan from an interview by Emmanuelle

A brief history of Auroville's economy

In the early days of Auroville there was Prosperity for those who could not support themselves: goods were made available according to one's requests, within a very limited range. The system was centralised, bureaucratic, insensitive and inadequate to meet the real needs of the people. But it was set up by Mother! We learned to surrender, we learned to be grateful, we learned how little one needed to be a servitor of the Divine. Prosperity was given both in cash and in kind. We used the cash for food but it was wholly inadequate to provide a healthy diet for people involved in manual work.

After the split with the Sri Aurobindo Society, Auroville was on its own. Even what little we had been receiving was taken away. We had to share to survive. Here is the origin of the Auroville common pot. Whatever you had you put in and whatever you needed you took out. It is easy to get nostalgic and romantic about that time. But we should not forget that the pot went bankrupt. All the fledgling units which had sprung up in response to the need of the hour lost all their money and all the people who had put in all they had, now had nothing.

This led, in the later seventies, to a lack of trust and confidence in centralised common pots. Then it was decided to use Mother's method of money management and divide the common pot into envelopes. There was an envelope meeting every month and whoever needed money attended and shared in the allocation of the funds. It was around this time that Nandini was born and received donations 'in kind' such as clothing from the commercial units and Aurovilians, for people to collect on a needs basis. It also developed a wing that collectively bought personal and household necessities, which were also distributed on a needs basis. Until that point everything was available for everyone, there was no distinction between those with means or those without.

But the means were still very inadequate to meet the most basic needs. As the envelopes did not manage to fulfil all needs, what began to happen was that those people who had means shared them less and less. They still took what little was available to them in the basket or Nandini but what was not available they would go and buy in Pondicherry and they put less and less in the envelopes. Shortages were so acute that people without means began building up small handicraft workshops to try to make ends meet.

Meanwhile, the food at the community kitchens was back to the same inadequate level as it had been under the Prosperity system. It was decided that the people with means who were buying in Pondicherry would instead give their money and orders to Pour Tous, and Pour Tous would buy and distribute their requirements to them. The rest of the money was used for those without means, who could also say what they needed, as was already happening in Nandini.

In 1984 Auroville got the first grant for main-

tenance from the Government of India for the Sri Aurobindo Institute for Educational Research (SAIER). At first this money was used for all, and this gave a great boost to the collective budget. But as people were able to specify their needs it very quickly became obvious that the means still did not match the needs. So it was decided that certain activities, especially commercial activities, should provide the means to meet the needs of the Aurovilians working there, as well as making general contributions. It was also decided that people working on projects funded by donations could and should have their needs covered by the project, as it made no sense to treat them as free labour. In this way the maintenance system was born, under which Aurovilians without personal means working for community services (such as schools, water service etc.) would be maintained by the community. However, the idea of receiving maintenance from one's unit or project was also born at this time as well.

In November, 1988, the community held an Economy Seminar. It was decided that yearly budgets for all community services and other collective responsibilities be drawn up and that all Aurovilians and Auroville units be asked to contribute monthly to these budgets. It was the beginning of the Central Fund. This system has prospered. It has brought nourishment, decent clothing, health and dental care and a wide range of goods and services to Auroville for all Aurovilians.

But the system also highlighted problems and inequalities. One of the persistent problems was that the community never had enough money to pay for the full budgets of all the services, let alone for the budget increases. So some years ago it was decided that some of the service units should charge appropriately for their services, and that their prices should include development costs so that they could determine their own growth. The services that most readily embraced this change in policy are the ones that have shown the most dynamism in the last two years, with substantial improvements in the quality of the service provided and in their working environment. The changed policy allowed these service executives the financial freedom to use their creativity, but the principle of 'free services' was lost.

As of today, the other main problem - that of providing adequate maintenance for those who are involved in community services - has not sufficiently been addressed. The difference in levels of maintenance has fostered a sense of 'You have to take care of yourself first'. The sense that we are all in it together, and that the brotherhood and sisterhood which underlies Auroville should lead to us sharing with each other, has been lost.

Judith

(extracts from an earlier Auroville Today)

The Pour Tous Distribution Centre pilot project

A pilot project of the new Pour Tous Distribution Centre will start for a period of four months with Aurovillian and Newcomer volunteers. The objective is to evolve a system that ultimately will take care of the essential needs of all Aurovilians. The system will not emphasize shopping, but receiving. What is available will be shared. Items to be distributed will be chosen for quality, their impact on health, ecological impact as well as costs. Auroville food and Auroville sundry products will be stocked wherever possible, provided they are contributed on a non-profit basis. Participants won't be able to purchase anything from the Centre.

The participants will be able to choose most of the raw ingredients or ready-made food from the shelves and counters, or could preferably order them for pick up or delivery. There will also be a fruit and vegetable counter where all Auroville farm products will be available and where Aurovilians will be able to help themselves. Under the scheme, participants will also be able to obtain items such as milk, bread, etc directly from their

Auroville producers. Certain special items that have been donated to the Distribution Centre outright or given at heavily discounted prices will be under limited quota and available only at a special counter. At a later phase, the system will include the offering of a wide variety of diets at a number of places in Auroville.

All items will be tracked and consumption is limited by a monthly cap, which will be the same for each participant. Participating Aurovilians and Newcomers will be expected to donate to the Pour Tous Distribution Centre around Rs 2,000/month per adult and an amount varying between Rs 500 to Rs 1500 for children, depending on their age. The rest of one's maintenance will remain available as cash. The new system will also not affect existing subsidies for health and electricity.

The pilot project will last 4 months to see what works and what doesn't. "Finding ways to put into practice Mother's principles promises to be a great adventure," said the Pour Tous Study Group in its invitation to join. "We look forward to having you on board."

An overview of Auroville's services

Service Unit	Activity Description	Budget Nov. 05	Beneficiary contribution	Comments
Abundance	Grant proposal writing and consultancy service	4,900	none	
Archaeology	Protecting the cultural heritage	2,000	none	Budget is minimal
Archives	Preservation of docs. and photos	11,800	* none	
Aurotraduction	Translating service for News and Notes	1,500	* none	Also a commercial unit
AV Electrical Service	Maintains electricity lines between pole and meter box	None	* 2% of electricity bill	Additional work is billed to the beneficiary
Auroville's Future/Development	City planning	10,000	* none	Docs separate fundraising
Auroville Outreach	Publicity and contacts with media	8,000	* none	
Auroville Security	Security in Auroville	72,500	* none	30% from specified donations**
AV Solar Service	Maintains solar panels and batteries	None	* Regular contribution required	Off-grid users get free service
AV Telephone Service	Maintains land lines and bill collection	None	* none	Covers its costs from bulk discount
AV Water Service	Services and installs wells and pumps	None	* Beneficiary pays	
Bharat Nivas Maintenance	Maintains Bharat Nivas compound	16,000	* none	Budget insufficient
Celebrations	Community festivities	4,000	* none	Additional funding required for each activity
Cultural Activities	Organizing cultural events	13,500	* none	Additional funding required for each activity
Cycle Paths	Creates and maintains cycle paths	None	none	Does its own fund raising
Dental Centre Treatment	Dental care	61,550	* sometimes	Free service for some Aurovilians
Education & Sports	All educational activities	486,812	* none	
Farms	Maintenance of farms	42,000	* none	70% from specified donations**
Financial Service	Provides banking service	none	* none, but no interest is paid on deposits	Funded by interest on the deposits
Forest Maintenance	Maintaining Auroville's forests	137,577	* none	Covers watchmen maintenance
Free Store	Exchange of clothing and household items	7,300	* none	Includes free tailoring service
Hairdressing	Hairstyling service	None	some providers request contributions	
Health Care	Various health services	119,500	* some providers request contributions	AV and Quiet Health centres have separate funding
Housing Repair Service	Maintaining houses	50,000	* sometimes personal contribution required	Additional funding required for each activity
Information Centre	Reception centre for guests and visitors	35,240	* none	Additional funding required for each activity
Library	Library services	19,000	* none	Does its own fund raising
Lifeguard	Provides safety at Repos Beach	4,290	none	Free service for some Aurovilians
Matrimandir	Spiritual centre	21,000	* none	
Nandini	Provides clothing and furnishing	8,500	* participants contribute	70% from specified donations**
News & Notes	Weekly newsletter	26,650	* none	Funded by interest on the deposits
Organisation	Various working groups	53,315	* none	Covers watchmen maintenance
Personal Emergency Fund	Meets individual's crisis situations	30,000	none	Includes free tailoring service
Pitanga	Activity and exhibition centre	4,000	* participants contribute	
Pony Farm	Riding farm for children	6,000	* participants contribute	AV and Quiet Health centres have separate funding
Repos Beach Maintenance	Maintains Auroville beach facility	5,000	* none	Free for some Aurovilians
Roads & Traffic	Maintains and repairs roads	21,500	* none	
Transport (Bus-Service)	Brings children to schools and transport to Pondicherry	78,700	* none except for special trips	
Vehicle Repair Service	Cycle and motorcycle repair workshop	4,315	* none	Labour is free
Video & Music Libraries	Lends out audio and video material	2,000	* participants contribute	
Waste Management	Collects waste and disposes it safely	13,550	* contribution required	55% from specified donations**
Youth Centre	Youth activities	8,000	* none	63% from specified donations**
Maintenance of Aurovilians	--	2,778,436	--	
Children's Maintenance	Provides children's allowance	335,130	none	
Children's Nutrition	Covers children's snacks and lunches at schools	375,200	none	
Electricity Subsidy	Basic subsidy to cover TNEB electricity bills of Aurovilians.	152,000	Beneficiary pays for usage over 250 units of electricity	First 250 units are paid by the community

* The maintenance of Aurovilians working in these activities is reflected in the budget called "Maintenance of Aurovilians".

**Specified means that the Central Fund has no discretion in allocating this amount. it is specified by the donors.

All is not well with the Health Centre

“We are in serious trouble,” says Albert, slumping down further in his chair. “Our funding has diminished, our nurses are leaving for better paying jobs elsewhere, and the motivation of many of our staff, ourselves included, is not anymore what it was.” Peter, one of the other executives, nods in agreement. “We have tendered our resignation – and after having worked here for over eight years, that’s saying something. The main reason is not the insecurity of our funding, or even the difficulty of finding replacements for staff that left, but the complete lack of support we have experienced and are still experiencing from the Auroville community.” A bird whistles in a tree nearby. It is early afternoon – but apart from an incidental passer-by, the place appears deserted. Silence rules in the formerly bustling Health Centre.

The Auroville Health Centre traces its humble beginnings to 1969 when The Mother allocated Rs. 5,000 to start a dispensary in a thatched hut in the area now known as Douceur. The community of Aspiration was not yet built. There were hardly any Aurovilians living in the area and the dispensary was created primarily to serve the villagers from nearby Kuilapalayam. It expanded rapidly. By the end of 1973, a permanent structure designed by Piero had been built, with donations from the Government of India, Auroville and Ms. Wadia, a Parsi lady. Gradually the Health Centre expanded and extended its activities to another 30 villages and hamlets. In eight of them it created sub-centres where daily wound-dressing is done and where once a week a doctor from the Health Centre is available for consultation. In the others, a village health worker trained by the Health Centre provides first-aid. The Health Centre has also been active in awareness-building and education, making high-quality documentary videos to inform the villagers about issues such as hygiene, waste disposal, alcoholism and AIDS, and staging plays under the programme “Health Education through Drama”. Through its newsletter, Kuyil, regular updates are given about its work.

“In its heyday, the Health Centre treated over 30,000 patients a year, 10% of whom were Aurovilians,” says Albert. “Our budget of about Rs 2.5 lakhs a month was covered from donations. Auroville’s contribution at the time was, and till today still is, limited to paying the maintenances of the Aurovilians working here, about Rs 25,000 a month. Donations from

outside are our primary source of revenue. They paid for building extensions, a small operation theatre, the nursing wards, an ambulance, a laboratory, an X-ray machine, the pharmacy, and, also the monthly maintenance costs of the place. Our

available to do night-duty, we had no money to pay a doctor from outside, and we had no nurses. The Kuilapalayam villagers protested, but there is no solution. We continue with the 24-hour ambulance service so that, if someone in the village or

Geographical Information Systems, in order to get a detailed view of the health situation and all its related aspects of each of the villages where we are involved. So far, two villages have been surveyed, and the survey of a third village is going on. The



Peter (left) and Albert with the Health Centre ambulance (file photo)

donors have been fantastic – for over 25 years they have ensured that this place could grow as it has done.”

Meanwhile the health situation in India has changed. Many new public and private hospitals have come into existence, old hospitals have been upgraded, and many private health practitioners have opened specialised clinics. In and around Pondicherry new hospitals have been built, such as the Nallam clinic and the Pondicherry Institute of Medical Science (PIMS).

“Nowadays fewer people are coming to the Health Centre due to the proximity of these new and excellent facilities,” adds Peter. “The afternoons at the Health Centre, in consequence, have become very quiet. Another effect of these new hospitals has been that we lost many of our nurses. We cannot match the salaries the government and private hospitals pay, so they gradually leave. In consequence we were forced, five or six months ago, to close the Health Centre at night. There were no Aurovillian doctors

Auroville has an accident in the evening or night, they can be brought to PIMS or another hospital.”

Asked for the reason for the fall in funding, Albert replies that many donor institutions now see India as a country with a booming economy that should take care of its own health issues. “We are approaching many foundations; we have a fantastic fund-raiser involved, but so far without any success. We can get funding for specific projects, but it is very difficult to get funding for the running of the Health Centre itself. So we are left with no option: we have to review our very existence. Does it make sense to continue with our present set-up? Should the Auroville Health Centre be open only in the mornings for doctor’s consultations and wound dressings? Should we close our in-patient ward? And what about our work in the villages around Auroville?”

Peter recalls the new projects the Health Centre has initiated around Auroville. “A year ago we started creating Village Health Maps using

preliminary results show that a lot of information can be derived from these village health maps, such as the prevalence of malnutrition, the access to water and the quality of the water and sanitation practices. Our tuberculosis project aims at preventing the spread of this disease in the surrounding villages, a work we do in cooperation with the Hemmeric Centre in Raunthakuppam, an NGO specializing in treating leprosy and TB. It is an important work – both for the villages as well as for Auroville which employs many villagers.”

“The decision about how to proceed will probably come as soon as the funding situation clarifies,” says Albert. “Our funds will last until June 2006. What comes afterwards we do not know. We can, of course, start charging the Aurovilians for consultations, which would give some additional income, but that would not be sufficient. For us it is very painful. We have worked long and hard to bring 24-hour health service to Aurovilians and the nearby villagers, and we are no longer able to do that.”

Is this the reason for tendering their resignation? It appears not. “We decided to resign because we experienced a complete lack of community support in dealing with two unfortunate happenings involving the Health Centre. And when we submitted our resignation, we were confronted with an unhelpful attitude for a third time. We proposed two other persons to replace us as executives, one of whom is a doctor who has been involved with the Health Centre for many years and has an extensive experience in managing hospitals. The proposal was rejected because this person is not an Aurovillian – even though there are other Auroville units who are co-managed by people who are not Aurovilians. Our resignations have been kept pending. We were advised that we should ensure the future smooth running of the Health Centre before we resign – as if this was the problem – and the unrealistic suggestion was made that a non-medical administrator should manage the Health Centre. This left us with the feeling that as soon as you approach certain Auroville working groups, they heap difficulties on you instead of helping you out.”

Albert explains how he experienced lack of community support. “There was a psychiatric case where the patient objected to an action that I took. I almost lost my residential permit as a consequence. I have worked for 30 years as chief nurse in a hospital in The Netherlands, and I acted as I would have done there. The Review Committee appointed by the community understood the issue very well and pointed-out – rightly – that the situations in India and Holland are different. But the mistrust and blame from that section of the community was really a blow – they ignored eight years of hard work in this Health Centre.” Adds Peter, “We experienced unrestrained abuse being hurled at us (even though I was not involved in the incident). The other frustration involved a newcomer whose dismissal from the Health Centre was objected to. It is now proven that he had been acting incorrectly, but the Entry Group still has not terminated his newcomership. On this issue too we were questioned as if we had been doing a criminal act. Is it any wonder that we feel unmotivated to continue?”

Albert sums it up. “The support in Auroville is limited to one’s circle of friends; and that’s about it. There is no support from our other ‘brothers and sisters’. The caring community, as such, doesn’t exist.”

Carel

SEMINAR

Launching Auroville Vision 2012

On 4th December, Auroville Vision 2012 was introduced. The upstairs room of the Tibetan Pavilion was overflowing with 150 Aurovilians and Newcomers as Serge, the coordinator, explained that the intention is “to formulate an action plan which will accelerate the manifestation of The Dream by giving a clear direction to the development of Auroville. We would like a participatory process which is comprehensive and inclusive. We invite the residents, the Governing Board, International Advisory Council and the Auroville International Associations to come together as equal partners to realize the Dream of Auroville for the benefit of humanity as a whole.”

The programme for this particular afternoon involved the participants splitting up into six groups, each of which would focus on one of the following themes – the city and the bioregion, organization, communication, education, the economy and beauty. Each group was asked to consider the following questions in relation to its theme: Where are we now in regard to the ideal? Where would we like to be in 2012? What steps would we need to take to get there?

Regarding the economy, the subgroup pointed out that the community is not providing for everybody’s basic needs, and that as Auroville drifts towards being a capitalist society it less and less resembles a caring

community. It was also noted that we are far from achieving self-sufficiency, partly because our productive units are given so little support by the larger community. The solutions suggested by the group included aiming at abundance for all in the bioregion, the creation of a business development cell and Business School in Auroville, the elimination of money exchange in the community, and the need to experiment with complementary currencies.

The education subgroup felt that much has been achieved: we already have a number of beautiful educational environments within which the children are helped to develop in an integral way. However, the perceived downside

includes a failure to encourage self-discipline among the students and to provide students with sufficient information about Sri Aurobindo and Mother and the ideals of Auroville, as well as a tendency to concentrate on outer growth at the expense of psychic development. It was also pointed out that there is a real shortage of teachers, which is clearly related to the low maintenance they receive. As to their vision for 2012, the group looked forward to there being an Auroville university, more exchange with Ashram schools and teachers and with reputed educational institutions in India and abroad, and the provision of internships, both within and outside Auroville, to enable students

to broaden their education.

The findings of the organization group were all too predictable. Our organization is a mess, they felt, because the Residents Assembly is ineffective, there is poor communication between the Work Groups, and there is no system which guarantees justice for individuals with genuine grievances. Their solutions included encouraging a more collective lifestyle, exploring more intuitive approaches to decision-making, and creating platforms where people with different perspectives could come and brainstorm together.

The communication group were more specific about the areas of communication breakdown.

continued on page 5

Our vehicles don't run on water!

Hari on the challenges of running the Auroville Transport Service

Hari's family joined Auroville in the very early years. Along with other Tamil boys like Jothi, Rathinam, Selvaraj and Rama, he lived in a community house in Aspiration under the benevolent eyes of Jean and Gordon Korstange. In the early 1980s his interest in vehicles and anything mechanical led to his involvement in community transport. "When SAI-IER started, four buses were bought and Hervé was put in charge of

weakened in the present Auroville."

Today the Auroville Transport Service maintains nine vehicles. Its main task is to transport children to and from the schools, but it also runs a free bus service to Pondicherry three times a week for anybody who wishes to use it. "We also provide transport for school and sports trips outside Auroville, and for picking up individuals and groups from Madras who are coming here for workshops or to help with education. But our

space was allocated to us. Even in the new space, we've had to raise the money for the buildings ourselves – and after two years we still don't have a water connection. No help comes

from SAI-IER for such things, although they do help with tools and furniture – and Sanjeev and Ashok always try their best to help us with their limited resources."

Why does he think his repeated requests for additional financial help

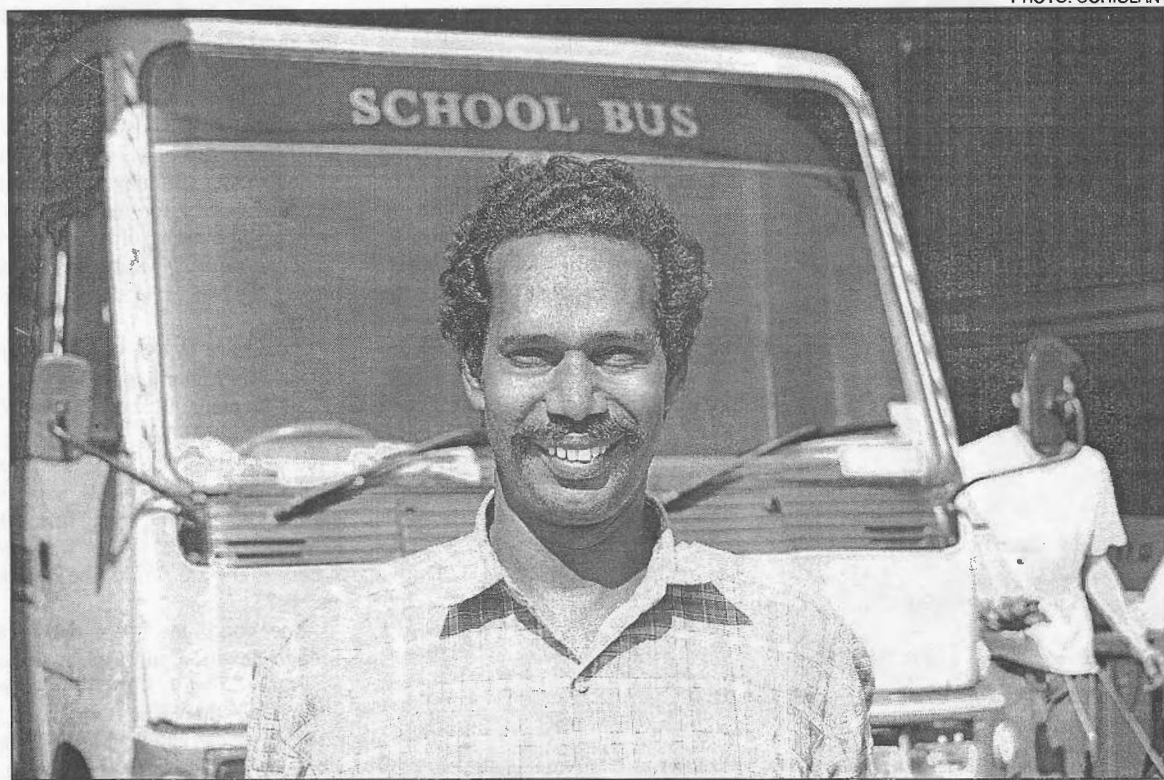
done, it depends upon whom you know on these groups. The Transport Service has very little power because most of the people who use us are children or are on maintenance and don't have any influence – and we're too soft, too nice, we don't push hard enough. Fortunately I have friends like Gordon and Jean in the U.S. who are willing to speak for me. But it's very disturbing when fellow Aurovilians don't seem to listen to you."

How does he manage if the Transport Service is underfunded? "Somehow we juggle. My policy is that if I take up a job I do it, no matter how difficult it is. But it will be very difficult to keep running to the end of the financial year."

Over the past 10-15 years there has been a sea-change in the service sector of Auroville. More and more of them have been required to become self-sufficient through charging for their services. Does Hari think this is a good idea? "No, it's a change in the wrong direction. I've always believed that Auroville services should be fully supported by the Central Fund so that users are not charged individually." One of the arguments used at the time was that many services were running inefficiently, and requiring them to charge would also require them to give better customer satisfaction. "That was the argument of business people, and business-minded people don't understand the actual picture. Those services were not running well because they'd never been adequately funded – that's one reason why so few Aurovilians work in the services, it's too frustrating. Take us, for example. Some people seem to think our vehicles run on water! In spite of that, whatever job we take up we do without fail and people are generally very satisfied. At the same time, we would like to expand our service – to run a daily bus to Pondicherry and to provide a public Transport Service within Auroville – but for this to happen we have to be supported practically, not just through nice words." 'Practically' means the immediate replacement of the two 18-year old vehicles, the purchase of an additional bus for internal transport, plus the means to maintain and run all the vehicles and to adequately recompense Hari's loyal team for their work.

It's time, in other words, for those who want a good community transport service, as well as a vibrant and egalitarian service sector in Auroville, to show where they stand.

Alan



Hari at the Transport Service workshop

them. I became his assistant. When Hervé left in the late 1980s some of us decided to run the Transport Service as a group. However, one by one the others dropped out and I was left."

Hari has now been working with the Auroville Transport Service for over twenty years. He's never worked, and never wanted to work, in an Auroville commercial unit. Why not? "I wanted to be free to do other activities, like sports, which would widen my knowledge, and I knew that working in a commercial unit would not allow me the time to do this. Also, I wanted to work for the community as a whole rather than for a particular unit. You see, from a very early age we boys were introduced to the idea of collective living and of working for the community, so even today if you ask us about our ideals we will only talk about doing things collectively. However, that spirit seems much

regular obligations always come first, and we don't do weddings or family outings!"

Does he charge for this? Hari takes a deep, unhappy breath. "There's a big gap between what we get from the Central Fund and our running expenses, so while the school service, some field trips, and all Pondicherry trips are free, we have to charge for special journeys. But we don't charge commercially, only to cover our expenses."

Hari thinks that the Transport Service is neglected – "You're the first person in twenty years who has come to find out what we're doing here." He also feels generally unsupported by the relevant groups in Auroville. "The Transport Service had been cramped for many years in Abri, so I requested the Development Group for another space but nobody came to look. It was only when I threatened to stop the Transport Service that a new

are not met? "The Economy Group tells me that there is not enough money but, frankly, I don't think they believed me when I described my difficulties." Hari points out that the Tamil Nadu road tax for buses has increased from Rs 2,000 a year to between Rs 18,000-22,000 a year. Then there's the insurance, the regular maintenance of buildings and vehicles, and the fact that the older vehicles need to be repaired and repainted annually to get their Fitness Certificates. In fact, two of the most-used vehicles are 18 years old now and finding spares for them is "just one more of the hidden hassles. Then we have to pay our drivers. One of them has been with us for fifteen years, he's had to put up with very difficult driving conditions and aggressive Aurovilians, and he's still only earning Rs 4,000 a month. I've sent the Economy Group all the figures but I don't think they really look at them. To get something

continued from page 4

They believed major communication gaps exist between adults and the youth, between Newcomers and 'old-timers', between those with easy access to computers and those without, and between Auroville and the surrounding villages. They also noted that much of the communication that does take place happens at a very superficial level, and that the more the external means of communication develop, the less there is inner contact between us. Their solutions included creating spaces where Aurovilians, and Aurovilians and villagers, can mingle together naturally, developing a culture where Aurovilians view each other as "souls with a shared vision", and learning specific communication skills, like speaking from the heart and deep listening.

The city sub-group did not spend much time on present problems.

Instead, they resolved to "Live in Joyville, not Dramaville", they wanted large housing projects – not financed by individuals – which would provide homes for hundreds of new Aurovilians, and agreement on an integrated development plan both for the township and for the bioregion. One participant remarked that it was time to shift attention from the specific form to the spirit of the Galaxy Plan in order to encourage new ways of thinking.

Finally, the 'beauty' group acknowledged that Auroville already has a beautiful natural environment. However, the built environment, in its emphasis upon practicality rather than beauty, leaves much to be desired. There was a call for Auroville architects not only to work together, but also to be much more open to input from talented individuals outside Auroville. "Beauty needs

to be present in everything", pointed out one participant, and this led to a call for artistic appreciation to be more actively taught in our schools. Another suggestion was that 'Auro Beauty' awards should be awarded publicly to deserving individuals and projects.

Clearly, the one and a half hours allocated was not long enough for the sub-groups to discuss any of these topics in depth, and there was a certain predictability about many of the responses – there was, for example, the familiar split between those who emphasised outer changes and those who focussed upon the need for changes in attitude and inner orientation. Yet this initial workshop was more about breaking the ice and building up a creative charge by getting Aurovilians interested in what Auroville could look like in the next few years. In that sense, the work-

shop was a success. As one inspired participant put it in the final feedback session, "Let's launch Auroville into the future by refocussing more on being together than we have ever done before. Mother said, 'If you are together, I can work.' So let's use our richness, our diversity, and put it at the Service of the Divine."

The next interactive dialogue will be held after the bonfire on 1st January. There will be an attempt to identify ways forward regarding Auroville's organization and the way we communicate with each other. The other themes – the city and the bioregion, the economy and beauty – will be looked at in more detail later. Subsequently the intention is to present some detailed proposals to the Residents Assembly, and thereafter to the Governing Board and the International Advisory Council.

Alan

In brief

Matrimandir Inner Chamber opens

The Inner Chamber of the Matrimandir re-opened for concentration on December 4th after the modification of the ceiling. The original cone at the apex of the ceiling through which the sun's ray descends on the crystal has been remodelled. It now accommodates the lens focusing the ray, also the artificial light to be used when there is no sun, and the air-conditioned inlets for cool air to enter the Chamber. The heliostat on top of the Matrimandir still awaits installation. For the moment access is limited to Aurovilians and Newcomers, since the makeshift staircase to the Inner Chamber is not considered safe for everyone.

Sri Aurobindo's Mahasamadhi

On the occasion of Sri Aurobindo's Mahasamadhi, the Women's Collaboration Group organized a collective meditation under the Banyan tree near the Matrimandir.

Pondicherry forms renewable energy agency

A renewable energy agency has been formed in Pondicherry to promote awareness, understanding and development of new and renewable non-conventional energy sources in Pondicherry and also to promote energy conservation activities in respect of conventional energy sources like oil and power. The agency would also formulate and propagate environment-friendly fuel for transportation in the union territory. The agency has a 11-member governing body under the chairmanship of the Chief Secretary. It includes two non-official members, Prof C L Gupta of Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Hemant Lamba of the Centre for Scientific Research in Auroville.

Remembering the tsunami

The tsunami of December 26th 2004 was remembered in Eternity together with the villagers on Monday, December 26th, with a puja and flowers sent out to sea. At Repos Beach there was a silent gathering.

Media Centre opens

The Media Centre, a big screen 120-seater air-conditioned auditorium located in the Town Hall complex, opened on December 20th. The Centre can be used for many purposes such as conferences, seminars, education, one-person shows, satellite TV etc. The Centre will be presenting 4 regular programmes: Italian movies, French movies, Cosmos Cafe, and a cine club.

Dental Clinic

The Auroville Dental Clinic team is conducting a survey to see if and to what extent Aurovilians and Newcomers are interested in making monthly donations to cover the costs of a limited range of dental work.

Auroville Health and Healing Resource Guide

A resource guide of health and healing arts practitioners in Auroville a directory to facilitate communication has been printed. The information in the guide has been compiled from surveys completed by the practitioners.

A coolie of the Mother

Claudine looks back on her adventure in Auroville

“Once you saw the Mother, you couldn’t leave.” – “You wanted to understand what was going on; what was that special atmosphere we were breathing in Pondicherry – that Force, that Supramental.” – “Then we were invited to build a town with the Matrimandir at the centre and start a collective experience with no circulation of money!” – “I wanted to experience all that. I wanted to be part of it.” Claudine eyes shine and dart with life while an enigmatic smile hovers around the corners of her mouth.

Claudine has been in Auroville almost from the very beginning. “I came in July ‘68 to the Ashram and to Auroville in September ‘69. I was 22 years old. I had asked the Mother for permission to go and live in Auroville on my birthday and Shyam Sundar gave me Her o.k. the next day.” Claudine’s journey to India was a search for peace and it was strangely tied up with Egypt. “I had no idea of coming to Pondicherry. I just wanted to be in some ashram, I did not want to meet people or see anyone. The small charter plane bringing us from France was delayed in Cairo for a week, we were put up in a big hotel and we started to talk to each other. There was Michele, Carmen Baron and her son Jean Marie. They were all coming to Pondicherry and they invited me to join them.” Thus Claudine not only discovered Egypt but also the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. “Michele was the pen-friend of Tulasi, the typist for Sujatadi and Satprem. When we got to the Ashram, the first person we saw was Satprem. Sujatadi was the one who took me to see the Mother for the first time. It was my spiritual birthday.

“I had been allotted a room in one of the Ashram buildings with three other girls. It had an asbestos roof with simple partitions for walls and like everyone else in the Ashram I had a bed, a cupboard, a chair and a desk. It was all I needed, the perfect cell. The Mother asked me if I was comfortable and of course I said, ‘yes’.”

During the first weeks at the Ashram, Claudine lost herself in the Mother’s Entretiens, alternating between her work at the dining hall and her books. “I could not put them down, it was all so captivating and they were made of such beautiful paper!” The beauty of the books moved Claudine to go to work at the Ashram Press. “I loved the smells of

zinc oxide and dispensed medicines. There was so much work to be done!” Claudine was so happy with the work that she asked the Mother if she could move to Auroville. She describes the feelings she experienced everyday on reaching the bottom hill of Auroville – “It was like I was inflamed with some special joy...”

PHOTO: CORIOLAN



Claudine

the paper and the ink. I learnt binding. It was a very inspiring work. It was a beautiful time.” Claudine’s affection for paper and books continues as she helps manage the rapidly growing library at Future School.

After a day’s work at the Press, she would join Dr. Sen’s team and travel to the new dispensary in Aspiration, working until 9 p.m. before returning to Pondicherry. “In those days, there was no drinking water in the village, the women had to carry water uphill in beautiful earthen kijas. In the dispensary my job was to attend to mothers and children with dry cracked skin and bad sores; I changed dressings, applied

“Life in Auroville was not easy,” reminisces Claudine. “When we had problems, we would ask the Mother. Once She told me, ‘If you want peace, Auroville is not the place’ and She sent me to Tiruvannamalai for a short rest. We were young, we were going to make it. In the community kitchen, food was poor and hardship was normal. The land was bare, walking to Pondy was common. We also walked to the villages for the local functions – it was so colourful – and being welcomed with such warm hospitality, we were discovering India.”

Work soon became a way to serve, the Matrimandir construction

was her next step. “Here, we wanted to be the coolies,” she says, “the coolies of The Divine Mother. We were all young, idealistic and working day and night, carrying cement, loading wheelbarrows, digging pits, doing whatever needed to be done. At night we would sit near the rising structure doing watchman duty, I remember being alone there, walking around the steelyard and the workshop in the cool air under the shining stars.” Claudine worked for 9 years at the Matrimandir, then she moved to other jobs, learning accounting in the process. “Every three years I would change my job. I wanted to mix with new people and be in a different environment.” A preference for working for Auroville services emerged.

“I have been working for 30 years from 8 to 4.30. How can I be here and not work for the Mother? She was so sweet to say: ‘Let the Aurovilians work at least 5 hours a day.’ So fulltime work in Auroville has come to mean 5 hours a day! What a joke! How human beings can play with words! Some people even think that it is enough to pay their Central Fund contribution and not work at all!”

Now, at the age of 60, Claudine has reduced her workload. “I now work at the school, still with my books and my accounts and there I find myself happy with our big kids.” She also baby-sits her granddaughter Asmara and does Matrimandir duties in the evenings. Explains Claudine, “Mother had said that if you are free and don’t know what to do, you go to the Matrimandir. So that’s it.”

Her work in the services has conditioned Claudine’s outlook towards a simple life. “When I was in the Ashram, I was one of the last Europeans whom the Mother put on Prosperity. Today I receive an Auroville maintenance.” Is it enough? “Well, I manage. I go to the free store for clothes and for entertainment, I attend every activity in Auroville, the meetings, exhibitions, movies, performances and seminars.

“But living on a maintenance has become very difficult, we have so many children and it is so lovely to

give birthday presents... Time to change the economy!” she adds with a grin.

In the last 36 years, Claudine has managed to travel to France four times to see her family, each time personally fund-raising for the tickets. “If there is one place I’d like to see, it would be Ulan Bator. I would travel by the Trans-Siberian Express and visit the empty spaces of Mongolia and Siberia...”

For Claudine, much has changed since the early days. What she finds the most worrying development is “that so few people seem to have trust in the inner protection... That the thing uppermost in people’s minds seems to be security and that means money. Money for building the city, money for individual projects....” She asks softly. “Tell me, what can happen? Mother never kept money in a bank, it was always circulating.

“We have to live in the present, all and everything happens now, forget all the planning and hoarding, we build the future now... After 37 years, I see us making the same mistakes. We still work too much with the brain, trying this and trying that. This is endless. There is no way out. Where is the adventure, the joy, the energy?”

She continues, “We don’t see enough devotion and aspiration and we do need that in Auroville. Do we understand that when we have a problem we can call the Mother? And when we call, we may start learning how to pray ...and then we can smile again...”

On her overall Auroville experience, Claudine has this to share, “Well, about the experience of the beginning, you want to keep that close to you – it’s your secret. Let’s just say that I was lucky to have been there at that time.

Today anyhow I feel better than 20 years ago, yes no more expectations! Is it the beauty of age ...? I am still learning to accept the present, who am I to understand what is going on? But I long to see people with big smiles...like before. I long for harmony!”

Priya Sundaravalli

Connecting Auroville

Coriolan’s work and vision

At the age of eight Coriolan came to Auroville with his parents, Shanta and Heinrich. “They asked me if I wanted to come to Auroville. I said, ‘Yes’. So it was for me a conscious decision, I immediately felt at home here”. Coriolan attended the Mirramukhi school. “I was there till 1995, and I think it helped me grow on an artistic and behavioural level. Nevertheless the school was slightly fanatical and that’s never good for children. When I was twelve I joined the Lycée Français de Pondicherry. I loved the Lycée; it gave me discipline and enabled me to go on for further studies in Germany.”

In 2001, he went for a five year course in Computer Programming at ‘die Technische Universität von Munchen’. “But I left the programme after three years because it was not meeting my needs. There were 1400 students in a class and that fascinated me, but I soon realized that no one was interested in computers the way I was – I still haven’t found such a person, maybe Akash in Auroville... Almost everyone was interested only in the money that a computer job pays, and, of course, football and

beer. That was not my approach at all. I was interested in the technical and practical aspects of computers, I wanted to do hands-on work.”

Coriolan returned to Auroville in 2004, and immediately started setting up a fibre optic network. From Aurelec, he connected around fifteen houses in Douceur, Petite Ferme, and Auromodel. The network has been up and running for a month now. “The advantage of fibre optics is their speed, reliability, long life and independence,” says Coriolan. “Right now I’m working for Aurofuture on developing an Auroville fibre-network that we can expand within the city and which would be managed only by us.”

Coriolan aims to create an entire network system in Auroville. “In the year 2004, Auroville spent around a million rupees making only internal calls within the community. This is money which should stay within Auroville. The idea is to provide a free service to the community, and this goes back to the ideal of Auroville. There would be free installations and free internal communication – the only costs would be for the maintenance of the network. The rest

of the service would be free”.

Besides being a computer geek, Coriolan considers himself an amateur photographer, and has contributed a few photos to the 2006 Matrimandir Calendar. He also assists Basil, who makes documentaries and films in Auroville.

For a 23 year-old, Coriolan has strong views about the spiritual and day-to-day life in Auroville. “I haven’t read Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in depth but what I’ve read corresponds absolutely to what I feel is right. The idea of not having laws anymore but a Divine Anarchy intrigues me.

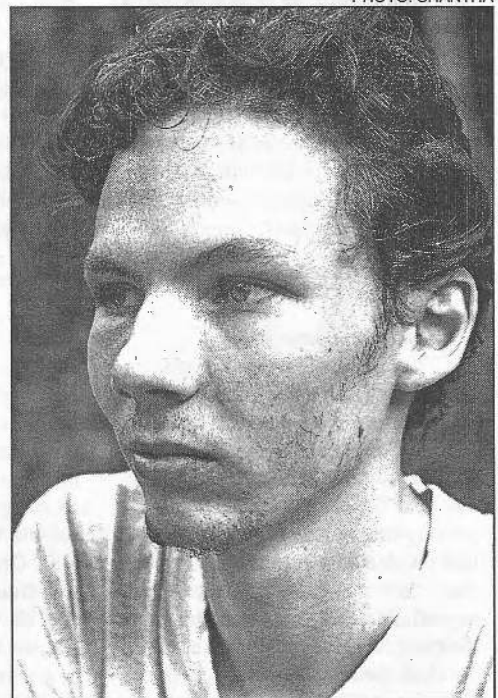
“There is still too much hidden. We need to speak about these things.” Coriolan feels that Auroville is afraid to confront the problems within the community. “I feel there is censoring of information here, and that is wrong. It goes against the sense of Auroville,” he declares. “Sometimes I think of Auroville as the Titanic,” he adds, “and all our obstacles are the icebergs. But unlike the Titanic we don’t have to bang into one and sink. We could avoid it; we have enough smart people here.”

As a young person, he feels that

the controversy about the lack of youth involvement in the community is unfounded. “Youth are involved!” he exclaims. “I know plenty of Auroville youth younger than me who are doing something positive in Auroville. Take the Youth Centre for example. There is so much happening there, and all done with their own effort!”

“But a lot of youth leave Auroville because they have to live very ascetically on an Auroville maintenance. It’s not enough. A lot of people work in Auroville for a maintenance, and then there is this other class of people, who already came here with money. While the former is struggling to survive the latter is making the rules because they have more time. This is unfair. Also, when you are in your teens or twenties, the political games in Auroville sometimes played by the ‘older and wiser’ generation is disturbing,” he says can-

PHOTO: SHANTHA



Coriolan

didly.

“I think the youth know this place is different. The youth have a voice and have visions. Let us unite and find solutions to the fundamental questions which keep on buzzing in our heads. Together we shall overcome, but only together.”

Ancolie

Helping the forecomers

Bernd Dreesmann, the founding Secretary-General of the Deutsche Welthungerhilfe / German Agro Action, talks about the organization's involvement in Auroville's early days

PHOTO: CAREL

It's story-telling time. Bernd Dreesmann relaxes comfortably in his chair in the Hotel de l'Orient in Pondicherry and eyes us benevolently over his cup of tea. He is reminiscing about the early days when, as Secretary General of the Deutsche Welthungerhilfe, he was asked to give money for an irrigation project to a place called Auroville. "Nobody had heard about it, so I wrote to the German Consul-General in Madras who replied that there was something vague going on near Pondicherry. The opportunity to visit the place arose in 1971, when I had to visit Madras for another project. I had arranged that a certain Mr. Frederick Schulze-Buxloh from Auroville would meet me at some function there. He walked into the room like 'Jung-Siegfried', as we say in German, [young Siegfried, the muscular impetuous hero of the mediaeval Nibelungen saga, eds.] handsome, smiling broadly, and very convincing in his attitude. When the function was over we took a car and drove down to Pondicherry, a trip which went via Chenglepet and Maduranthakan and took a good 4 hours. While driving Frederick told me that I was lucky, as it was The Mother's birthday that day. I thought he referred to his own mother, but that misunderstanding was soon corrected. Frederick

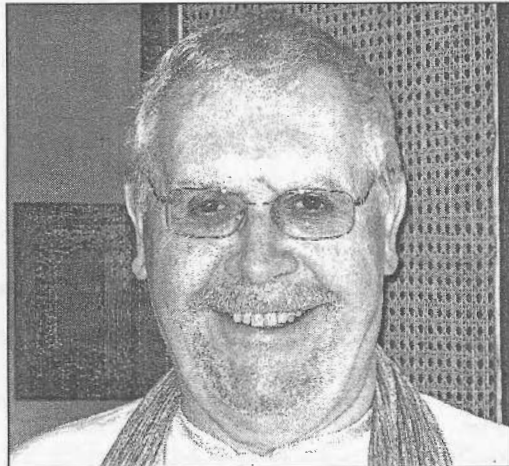
delivered a crash course on Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. Then he led me straight to Mother's Darshan – even before offering me a cup of tea. Mother was up on the balcony, surveying the crowds below. What I saw was a very old lady with a wonderful charismatic smile, something one couldn't forget. I never did.

"Those days I stayed in the Grand Hotel de l'Europe, some sort of a unique left-over from the former colonial days, which was managed by a certain Monsieur Magry.

The hotel was about the only decent place available in Pondicherry, with an excellent kitchen. During the next few days I was shown around in Auroville, but in 1971, there wasn't really all that much to see. I learned about Mother's ideals and her Dream, and I thought to myself that I had become witness to the naïve phase of Auroville. For The Mother had spoken about a community without money, about free education and no need for marriage. Now I have a Jewish background, and consequently I was very skeptical about all that idealism. I thought, 'Reality will assert itself.' For it is nice to talk about a city without money, and true, at the time there wasn't even money to buy a bus ticket to Madras. And 'no marriage'? Well, I learned that Auroville had developed its own

opment of those villages, with a spin-off effect for Auroville.

"My Board of Directors accepted the idea. This was also helped by the fact that the philosophical departments of the universities of Bonn and Heidelberg gave a positive judgment about Sri Aurobindo's philosophy. The most outspoken proponent was Professor Carl-Friedrich von Weizsäcker, who stated that Sri Aurobindo was probably one of the last great philosophers who in his conceptual thinking combined East and West. That, and the fact that a few people on the Board were India



Bernd Dreesmann

line of – preferably – pine trees. After 5 years the Board had to admit that it worked, and that Auroville's micro-climate had changed. It was one of the first big successes of Auroville.

We also gave funds to start small handicraft units in Fraternity – which were built with asbestos roofs, then an accepted building material – and supported Lisa's AuroCreation through our Third World Shops, which marketed the products all over Germany. At the time Indian products had the reputation of being rather shoddy. Lisa was aware of our requirement that her products needed to be colour fast. She had in her workshop about 200 jars of water each with a different coloured thread. She bought the threads in Hyderabad, and was testing them for their color fastness. The DW-Shop, by the way, is still today one of the major customers of some of Auroville's garment industries."

Over the years, the role of the Tamil Fund gradually lessened. Today its role has been taken over by other units such as Auroville's Village Action. Bernd's involvement with Auroville diminished as he became Secretary General of EuronAid, a European NGO consortium, which is active in food aid and food security programmes, particularly in Africa. "In between 1971-1991 I visited Auroville at least once a year, but in the period 1991-2001, I was only twice in India." He sometimes regrets not having built a house in Auroville. "At the time, I had no money, and when I had money, I had no time. But now that I am retired I visit every year to see old friends but above all, to sit quietly at the Samadhi – one of the two places in the world where I experience real peace – the other one is the Western Wall in Jerusalem."

Asked for his impressions of Auroville today, he isn't exactly full of praise. "There are a lot of interesting people around, but the Aurovilians must not forget the main goal of Mother's Dream for Auroville: creating something new in the world. My dear friend Dyuman talked about this topic with me many times. At present I experience quite a lot of human weaknesses here like anywhere else. I don't expect to meet a community of saints, but I would expect more commitment to the spiritual ideals – to The Mother's vision of a new community which eventually could be the base for bringing about a new being. But most probably, it will take more than one or two generations to realize Mother's Dream. Auroville's forecomers are perhaps like Moses in the Bible: allowed to see the Promised Land, but not to enter it."

In conversation with Ancolie and Carel



PHOTO COURTESY BERND DREESMANN

Aurogreen in the early 1970s

euphemism for a split-up. 'He or she has moved into another hut' was the going term at the time.

"But skeptical or not, there was something fascinating about the Dream, the project and the people I met. There was Poppo, who was building a Rs 1,000 house. We later sponsored a little booklet about this, which is still available in the Visitor's Centre. There was Lisa, who had just established AuroCreation, a unit producing wonderful, embroidered children-wear and kimonos. I still own one and regard it as some sort of 'antique treasure', a memory of my younger years. Another rising star was Joss from Pitchandikulam with his fantastic environment work. His dream to convert a desert-like plain into a lush forest has become a reality. All the people I met were idealistic and very persuasive. Yet, my organization was not ready to start helping Auroville. I felt that we could not help build some sort of Disneyland without looking after the nearby villages, which were in a really miserable state. In fact, we realized that the only possible way to help Auroville was to focus on the devel-

aficionados, gave me the freedom to act.

"So we created the Tamil Fund for Rural Development. This was easier said than done as Navajata, who was acting on behalf of the Sri Aurobindo Society, wished to have a large finger in the pie. The resulting statutes were full of sentences such as 'The Board of Directors will decide, unless The Mother decides otherwise.' This was OK with me. I went, guided by Dyuman, to The Mother to get Her blessings for these statutes, but during that visit She did not express great interest. It was 1972; She was already very much withdrawn, but I felt that She gave the Tamil Fund a benevolent nod. That evening during dinner we talked about the statutes. I mentioned that I had no objection to Mother being the ultimate decider, but would have an objection to giving such power to Navajata. And I asked what would happen if The Mother ... At that moment, Shyama, Frederick's partner, put down her eating utensils and said with great force, 'Bernd, do you want to suggest that Mother is going to pass away?' This led to a long and rather painful discussion. Nobody wanted to accept that possibility.

"But the Tamil Fund started. One of its first projects was to supply drinking water to Fraternity. We also sponsored one of Auroville's first windmills and a project to build a lime kiln nearby Forecomers. Over the years we did quite a number of projects. Reforestation was also part of it, though my German Board members predicted that Auroville's approach in planting mixed species would be a failure. German reforestation at that time was in the Prussian style – line after straight

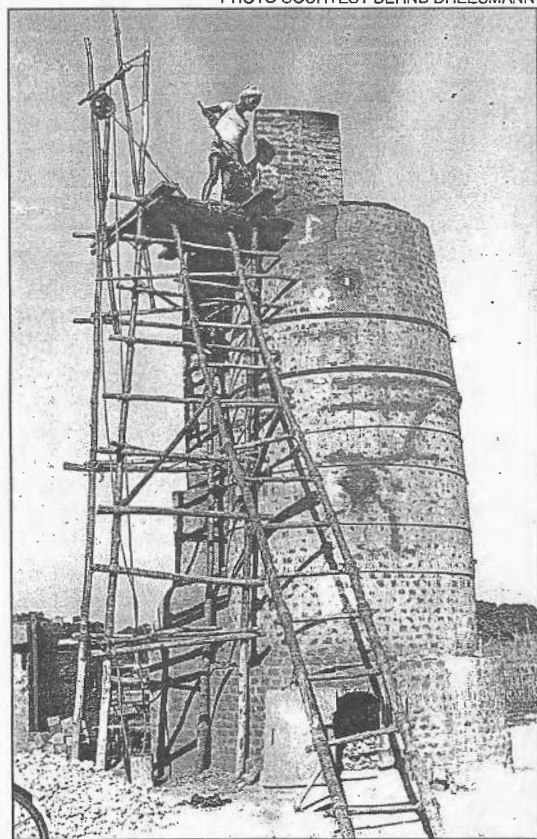


PHOTO COURTESY BERND DREESMANN

The lime-kiln on the road to the Forecomers community

In brief

Happee Caffee!

An all-Auroville evening entertainment, the Happee Caffee has opened once a week at the Solar Café. Participants are welcome to share their music, poetry, cushions and best smiles.

Calligraphic Artworks

Antarjyoti's calligraphic artworks were displayed at an exhibition at the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture, Bharat Nivas. The exhibition showed a variety of works ranging from European mediaeval compositions with gold illuminations, to classic formal pieces, modern informal (where the word, often illegible, is treated as an image) and pure graphic signs. The exhibition also featured a collaborative work between Antarjyoti and the Japanese calligrapher Jyoti – as an experimental calligraphic East-West exchange.

Silambu

Silambu, meaning 'The Anklet', a play in English directed by Partha, was performed by the New World Theatre Group at the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium. The play is based on the poem Silapathikaram, written by the Tamil poet Ilango Adigal during the Sangam period (between the third and seventh century M.E.).

Dance drama on Savitri

Canadian Renou Ray and her artists from Canada and India gave an interpretation of Sri Aurobindo's Savitri in the form of a dance drama at the Sri Aurobindo auditorium.

Honouring Amal Kiran

The Centre of Indian Studies organized a programme honouring Ashramite Amal Kiran, which included a recorded reading by Amal and an audio-visual presentation prepared by the Gnostic Centre, New Delhi.

Olde Dog John

The play 'Olde Dog John and the Case of Cuckoo's book', a dramatic interpretation by the Shamibolic theatre group, was performed at the Visitors' Centre.

A fine blending of opposites

A group show by photographers from Auroville, the Ashram and Pondicherry was held at Gallery Square Circle, Kala Kendra, Bharat Nivas.

Sacred Art 2006

An exhibition of paintings from the Janaka studio, made in the traditional Thanjavur style on sacred art themes from many traditions, was held at Pitanga.

CIRHU workshop

Michel Saloff-Coste gave an interactive workshop on Strategies of the Future at the Town Hall Conference Room.

"Glimpses of Auroville"

An exhibition of paintings and drawings by Rudolph Bauer on Auroville was held at the Centre Guest House.

Salle Auropax

Lovers of music could enjoy a piano recital by visitor Fabio Schinazi, playing works of Bach, Berg and Schubert, as well as a Jazz Bossa Nova concert by Eliane, Martin and Matthew.

60,000+ youngsters celebrate 60 years

The French organization Secours Populaires Français celebrated its 60th anniversary with children from all over the world, including some from the villages surrounding Auroville.

For most people, the thought of organising a 60th anniversary celebration involving 3,000 high-spirited, high-energy youngsters from some 66 countries around the world, together with 60,000 equally high-spirited French kids, would seem daunting, almost unimaginable, but that is what Secours Populaires Français (SPF) managed to do in the second half of last year.

SPF is a French charitable organisation working around the world, which some 15 years ago funded the construction of 10 schools for local Tamil villages in the Auroville area, thereby facilitating better education for some 700 children. For SPF's 60th anniversary, Amudha, who works at Auroville's Kindergarten, accompanied a group of 10 local children from these schools to France for an event intended to promote international solidarity and social awareness.

On August 10th, after intensive coaching in French for the selected children during the lead-up period, Amudha and the selected children met with another group of Indian children and their teachers in Chennai, and together they flew to Paris for the big gathering.

SCF's plan was not only to bring together underprivileged children from around the world with 60,000 French children, but to give them all a really enjoyable and interesting holiday in France, culminating in a massive event in the Stade Français in Paris on the last day. The organisation which went into the realization of this plan can only be described – in modern parlance – as mind-boggling!

Amudha's group found themselves matched with a party of 30 French children, with whom they then went off by camper-bus to the Champagne-Ardenne region. They began with 4 days in the city of Rheims,

where they visited a planetarium among other places, and went for a trip to the famous Caves de Champagne at Epemay (only the adults were offered a glass of the famous "bubbly"!). From Rheims, they went on for 4 days to a lakeside in a more mountainous area, before returning to Paris for the last 4 days. They went horse riding, swam, picnic'd, visited a zoo and a castle, toured museums of historic and environmental interest, took part in competitions, played lots of sports with professional coaches to train them, visited beauty spots, and went boating and trekking. In the evenings they did hatha yoga, danced, played organized games, did body awareness exercises, etc. Everywhere, they experienced lavish hospitality, enjoyed superb accommodation, and found their every need met, from clothes washing and ironing to specially prepared Indian food to ensure they felt 'at home' and could thoroughly enjoy their visit.

The final day in Paris saw a massive event in the Stade Français, with all 63,000 children participating in company with many VIPs and famous personalities from the worlds of sport and entertainment. There was a march-past of all the foreign students, with Amudha's group number two in the line-up, then dance performances, a magic show, singing, gymnastics, and various forms of entertainment.

What impact did all this have on the children in Amudha's group? First, one has to remember that most of them had never been further away from their village than the nearby town of Pondicherry, so the whole fantastic experience was totally new for them, from beginning to end. They learned about a totally different culture, about other countries whose participants they lived and interacted with and about themselves. None of the



Amudha, Sundaram and the children

group knew each other before, yet now they are so enthused they meet on a regular basis to remember all they did and to talk about the wider world they have become aware of.

Amudha mentions the many people who asked about Auroville, and their interest in its aims and ideals. But her main memories centre with pride on the children – how they rose to every occasion and new experience; how wonderfully they performed, winning

more 1st prizes in competitive events than any other overseas group; how well they cooperated and behaved wherever they went; and how much they were appreciated and enjoyed by all who met them. They were a shining example of all that Auroville hopes to achieve through its local schools, and of the human unity in diversity that the township aspires for.

Tim (courtesy Outreach Newsletter)

COMMUNICATION

A bridge across worlds

Andrea talks about AurovilleRadio

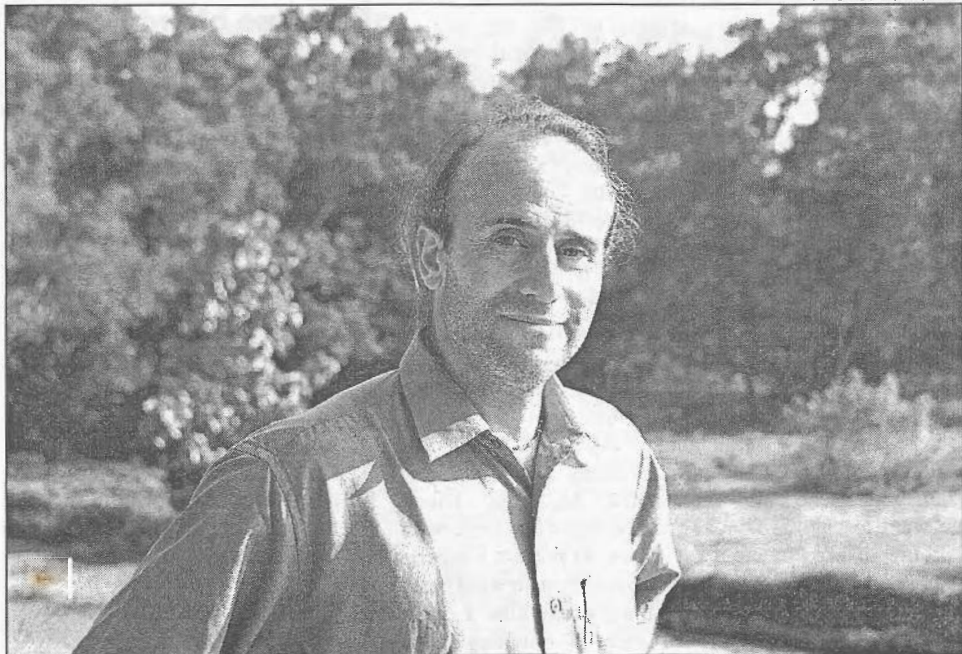
“When I was young I was very shy, and this shyness created walls between me and others. However when, at a young age, I discovered walkie-talkies [two-way radios eds.] and started using them with my friends it solved this problem: I'd discovered a way of being protected and in touch at the same time. This was the seed. Since then I've always been interested in communication.”

By the age of 18, Andrea had graduated from walkie-talkies to running a radio station broadcasting over a catchment area of 100 kilometres and one million people. He'd also developed an interest in computer software, but as the

surfing, not the sport, because surfing is something you do for yourself, not others: it is always you, on your own, talking to the sea. Of course, the sea is a reality you cannot control, it's always stronger than you. So out there you have to find your balance, to be quiet, open, not expecting too much – it's actually a yoga which not only helped shape my personality but was also a preparation for Auroville.”

Andrea and his wife visited Auroville for the first time in November, 1999. “My wife had seen a film about Auroville on Swiss T.V. and she had been impressed. I, on the other hand, arrived as a blank sheet: I had no idea about this place or Sri Aurobindo or Mother. We only

PHOTO: CORIOLAN



Andrea

local university didn't run a course in this he enrolled for maths instead. “It was a bad decision. I hated the course because it had nothing to do with matter, and I've always loved to work, to realize things, in matter. So, after university, I shifted my energy to something more practical: I opened a surf shop. I'd always loved surfing. At that time, there were no surf shops in Italy and little communication between the surfers, so I organized the Italian Surfing Association and started a small, four page newsletter. The idea was to promote the soul of

stayed a few days, it was the monsoon season and it rained all the time, but we met some nice people and I left with a big gift from Silvano – it was only a few words and a flower, but it came to me at just the right moment.”

Back in Italy they kept in touch with the community through Auroville Today. “Inside us the idea of Auroville was growing day by day, Auroville was calling us. We were very happy in Italy, but we missed something. It was becoming very important for us to be in touch with a deeper kind of reality.” They visited

again in 2003 to see if it was really their and, more particularly, their young son's place. “He was very happy to be here, so we decided to take the step.” They went back to Italy, Andrea handed over the management of SurfNews (which, by now, had become a 144 page bi-monthly colour magazine) to his friends – “I couldn't sell the company to people I'd enjoyed working with so much, it would have been like asking money from my sister for a kiss” – and within six months they'd returned to become Newcomers.

“I arrived with the idea of doing something connected with communication. For one year I did research to find out how Aurovilians actually communicate with each other. I followed discussions on Avnet, went to meetings, read News and Notes, listened to people talking. I discovered that Auroville is producing a lot of information, but people often don't have the skills to direct it to the people they want to reach. This is understandable in a community where there is no TV, no radio, no daily newspaper or regular meetings. Also, most people here are just too busy to take the time to communicate efficiently.”

Andrea set up AurovilleRadio to provide another means of communication within the community. “There are many advantages to radio. It is cheap and simple to set up a basic system. Also radio, unlike T.V., is not invasive, it doesn't require your whole attention, so you can be doing something else while you listen.” Andrea's first idea was to broadcast on FM so that anybody in Auroville or the villages with a basic Rs 150 radio would be able to tune in. However, it's difficult to get a license for educational purposes, and commercial FM licenses cost anything from 2-40 crores. At present, then, AurovilleRadio consists simply of two computers, a mixer and a microphone (all funded by Stichting de Zaaier) and only broadcasts on the internet and on SkyNet [Auroville's internal network eds].

“Actually, we're far from being a real radio station with real schedules. We only started in August broadcasting extracts from the weekly News and Notes in English, French and Tamil. Now our daily 12 hour schedule also includes music programmes and extracts from Auroville seminars and speeches which we have recorded. We have two channels – an internal and an international one – but in reality they only split on Saturday mornings when, for SkyNet listen-

ers, we may do something like streaming a meeting live.” Their biggest project so far was broadcasting the ‘Business and Evolution’ conference live for three days: 250 people listened in from places as far flung as China and Kazakhstan. Yet few people seem to be tuning in regularly, and this seems to reflect the rather uninteresting daily content. Partly, of course, this is due to technical limitations – the lack of a proper studio, for example – partly by human resources – for some time Andrea was a one man band, although now eight part-timers have joined the team. He looks forward to the time when all Aurovilians working in communication meet regularly to share ideas and pool resources. “When you sit together the ideas flow. They say that in Italy all the T.V. programmes are planned in a bar!”

But the real challenge, as Andrea sees it, is to find a way of doing AurovilleRadio in an Aurovilian way, without following the path of the West. “I don't know exactly what this means yet. It's something to do with remaining open to the reality, just trying to catch something through the microphone, day by day, which speaks of Auroville. It's about communicating the dream of Mother through showing, very honestly, how Aurovilians are attempting to live it in their lives. Perhaps, in time, AurovilleRadio could be like the flower, the hibiscus, I received from Silvano. He explained that whenever anybody was negative about me, I should put a flower in front of my heart because flowers are filters which change bad energy to good. So AurovilleRadio could be a flower that helps people, wherever they live, in transforming negativity and furthering their personal growth.”

Andrea dreams that one day AurovilleRadio will have its own transmitter so that people can switch on in Kullapalayam or Kottakarai and listen to programmes about the Matrimandir, Mother, or the dangers of pesticides. “Because if we are to be truly international, if we are to realize human unity, we have to create more and more connections between people. I don't say that AurovilleRadio will solve all communication problems, but it's one more step, another bridge between Auroville, the local villages and the world so that we can build more happiness, more prosperity for all.”

Alan

AurovilleRadio can be accessed at Aurovillerradio.org

In memory of C.V. Devan Nair

Former Singapore President CV Devan Nair, in office from 1981 to 1985, died in Canada on December 7th. He was 82 years old. Devan Nair was known as a reluctant President of the Republic of Singapore who, after his resignation, was forced to live out his remaining years abroad.

It has been said that it is largely due to the work of Devan Nair that Singapore came to know about Sri Aurobindo. The Life Divine profoundly impacted his thinking. Let us take up the story in his own words. For the 25th anniversary of the Sri Aurobindo Society of Singapore, of which he was a founder member, he contributed an article to its Newsletter, revealing the depth and sincerity of his commitment:

"I began as a revolutionary, first as a clandestine supporter of the anti-Japanese resistance, then as a member of the underground anti-British League (this, mind you, while helping to produce Shakespeare's plays for the stage as head of the Teacher's Repertory), and later in the first tumultuous throes of the birth, foundation and fantastic growth of independent Singapore. Sri Aurobindo did seem to have a soft spot for revolutionaries. For he himself began as one. And he went on to introduce us to the greatest revolution in earth history – a sweeping, radical secession against the entire existing natural order of things. His own words were: 'It is not a revolt against the British government, which anyone can easily do. It is in fact a revolt against the whole universal nature.' Be that as it may, at my still absurdly superficial intellectual level, The Life Divine was still largely a case of one great intellectual responding to another. But the time would come when the Mother would, in her infallible way, knock that laughably self important intellect silly....."

Meeting the Mother for the first time was, unsurprisingly, a turning point in Devan Nair's life. This happened in 1964 during a visit to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry. At that time, as he freely admits: "I had little patience for absurd Hindus falling over each other to touch the feet of some holy man." The story of his meeting with the Mother and its effect on him is a classic account of a soul realising its true destiny:

"Arriving in Pondicherry, they arranged for me to meet the Mother. I enquired about the formalities, and was told that I could, if I liked, offer her some flowers. That struck me as a very gentlemanly thing to do. So I asked for some flowers to offer. It was about ten in the morning when I found myself part of a line of about twenty people waiting in front of the Mother's room. I was slightly irritated, because nobody thought of inviting the V.I.P. to jump the queue! However, I had already rehearsed in my mind what I would do when introduced to the Mother. I would present her with the flowers, shake her hand, and say 'Good work, Mother! Congratulations!' or something to that effect.

"To this day I cannot really explain what happened when I stood in front of that frail old lady, seated humped in her chair. 'Poor old thing' was my first gentlemanly thought. Then my eyes fell on an extraordinari-

PHOTO: JULIAN LINES



Devan Nair in 2002 when he participated in the Savitri Dance Drama sponsored by the Sri Aurobindo Yoga Foundation of North America

ly radiant face, with a vibrant, golden glow. Words are totally, hopelessly inadequate to describe what happened next. I won't try to, for the good reason that I still don't know what transpired that morning. Something did happen. That day I passed a point of no return on a dateless path to 'the secret which all nature hides'."

In an address at the Savitri Solar Conference Dome at Crestone, Colorado in 1992 he confided another shattering experience: "Moments when the spirit moves among men' occur without any prior appointment, and in a totally unexpected context." (The context in this case was an official concert which he attended during his Presidency). "Suddenly, unaccountably, the face of Sri Aurobindo seemed to float in some inner vision, and a tremendous emotion surged up from within, wave upon mounting wave of a nameless rapture, which threatened to spill out. But, you see, an ecstatic outburst would have been shockingly un-presidential, especially if a poker-faced high court judge is sitting next to you!"

How would he himself, looking back over so many turbulent years, so many changes of fortune, have characterised his own life? There is a passage in a letter written to a close friend which gives a clue: "I consider my life to have been more than worthwhile, simply because I was infinitely privileged to come across his (Sri Aurobindo's) words of light, beauty, and incredibly liberating power. The most blessed day in my sixty-three years was, certainly, in 1957, when I first read 'The Life Divine' in my prison cell in Changi. It was the beginning of an adventure which no historian of Singapore will possess even the dimmest notion of. For the really momentous happening of our lives are 'not on the surface for men to see'..."

Devan Nair was an honorary member of the Sri Aurobindo Society of Singapore. We will continue to honour his memory.

Sonia Dyne

Tsunami fishermen help flooded farmers

The fishermen saw the suffering on the TV – all the poor rice farmers in southern Tamil Nadu deluged by one week of solid rain, the rivers overflowing their banks, people neck deep in water, the soaked clothing and collapsing mud walls. Having been through the fright and flood and loss of the tsunami, their hearts went out.

The Auroville Tsunami field staff and the fishermen from 17 teams, who have been meeting weekly since February, decided they must help. The field staff approached the Auroville Tsunami coordinators and asked that Auroville add food and shirts to the distribution, and they spent all night packing it all into 200 bags. BLESS, a friendly NGO working in the area, had told them of a particular village which had not yet received any relief.

The young fishermen went home and told their headmen, who hired loudspeakers and called all the people to bring any extra blankets or clothes to the temple. In 17 kuppams, blankets, bedsheets, sarees, dhotis and lungis piled up – brought together it filled a small truck.

The truck, along with a bus full of representative fisher youth from each team, and the Auroville Tsunami staff, set out on the morning of Monday, 5th December, down the East Coast Road. Past Cuddalore, the effects of the flood grew more and more evident – soaked fields, new lakes, ubiquitous puddles. Leaving the main road we made our way toward K-Adoor, our destined village, traversing rutted narrow tracks through green seas of rice fields, wet wet paddy extending to the horizon in every direction, and along the sides mud houses sinking into marsh.

The Panchayat President of K-Adoor, Mr. Sabesan, a mountain of a man who seemed to know all 4000 of his fellow villagers by name, took us to the Dalit colony which had been the worst affected, and there we found out that rather than 200 families, actually he had a list of 307 families who had lost everything in collapsing houses. How could we give to only two hundred?

We picked our way carefully between puddles and bog on a long walk through the battered villages. This is the Dalit colony, the place of the poorest of the poor, landless labourers. Everywhere mud huts were in disarray, walls washed away, roofs fallen in, with the thin but smiling people sorting and putting damp things back in order.

The fisher youth had never seen such poverty, they couldn't believe the low wages they worked for, or that people could live like this. They wished they'd brought more rice, regretted the expense on the bus ... and in the process of the walk it was agreed we'd repack in order to give one food bag per two families, and divide the clothing into women's and men's packages so everyone would get something.

We arrived at last at the main temple – a large impressive structure built long ago of very big granite stones, with ample space to put all the clothes and food behind large wooden doors, and a big staircase up which the petitioners came. With the staff and fishermen quickly repacking in the background, the Panchayat President and other fishermen stood at the door and doled out the relief to a very grateful crowd of people. It took hours – more than 600 people were given food, or clothes and blankets.

The sun had set before all was distributed and they said they were very happy and satisfied. Mr. Sabesan said thank you and goodbye, and trundling ourselves into the bus, off we went in the dark along the same narrow road which seemed much shorter on the return, back home to Auroville.

It was a world away. But we had crossed over the divide – actually over many divides – the caste divide between fishermen and dalits, the vocational divide between farmers and fishers, the class divide between rich and poor – the power of care and concern had broken down the boundaries, and again we felt the secret Oneness behind our individual lives.

Bhavana

OPEN FORUM

The sense of the sacred

Manoj explores the deeper meaning of some postings on Auroville's Intranet

Recently I noticed some emerging trends in the discussions on AVnet, Auroville's intranet. One posting regularly referring to the Mother as Mirra; another stating the importance of seeing Sri Aurobindo and the Mother as people who were leaders, and not as people who were somehow more divine; and yet another talking about 'Darshan' as being a religious ritual and ridiculing the whole concept. There is a common thread connecting them all, and I do not think this is an isolated set of opinions that happens to emerge randomly. There must be an underlying unease in the collective mind that has found its expression through these individuals. Auroville being a miniature version of the world, it is not surprising to find this unease.

We are living in a world that is dominated by modern science, which tells us that there is nothing sacred in this universe. At most, one can wonder at the mystery of the infinitely complex universe, but surely there is nothing sacred. The very word is meaningless and unnecessary. No one worships Einstein, no one worships mathematics or numbers. For the modern man who is brought up in the

mould of science, the electromagnetic spectrum is but a quantifiable set of vibrations without calling in vague terms like "sacred" and "the divine". These terms and attitudes belong to the pre-rational primitivity of mankind that one must carefully eradicate in order to be progressive. The age of reason has brought with it a great development of the collective mind, but with it also has come the loss of the sacred, the mythical, and the symbolic. With this loss has come the meaninglessness and emptiness of life amidst material opulence leading to an acute inner conflict and neurosis. C. J. Jung was perhaps the first Westerner to address this issue especially in terms of collective symbols and archetypal images. The dimension of the numinous, which the modern mind had lost track of, thus became the object of a great quest for those who rebelled against the meaninglessness of life, and the mystic East and India in particular became popular destinations for the pilgrims of the sacred.

Amidst this great search for something deeper and profoundly meaningful, Auroville was founded among an ancient civilization that still

retains its connection with the numinous through its symbols and rituals. After living in Auroville for more than 32 years, Paulette, an Aurovilian who may be considered as a representative of the pilgrim's inner conflicts, rebelliousness, confusion and untiring quest for the sacred, wrote, "Watching the Edayanchavadi and Sanjeevinagar festivals, for the first time after 32 years I came to the conclusion that so far I had not understood anything about our neighbours."

There is an inner conflict; the quest for the sacred has come into conflict with the use of symbols and names, which many people today suspect to be doors to organized religion. And religion remains a bitter memory somewhere deep in the subconscious. This is the predicament in which contemporary men and women find themselves. They have become self-aware in their minds and are now knocking at the doors to the numinous that strangely resemble everything they have discarded in the name of religious superstition. Symbols remain strange devices that they have no clue as to how to use without falling into the trap of religious

dogma, ritual and superstition. Buddha was perhaps the first man in human history to reject all religious symbols and rituals, but the irony of Buddhism is that Buddha himself became a symbol and doorway to the numinous, and the profusion of his statues all over the world attests to this simple fact. There is no way to run away from the symbols and their functions in our spiritual quest; in fact it is only when the material front reveals its symbolic depths that we enter the profound richness of meaning and come in touch with what is beyond.

Many buildings in Auroville have a statue of the Hindu god Ganesh regardless of the fact that Auroville is beyond all religion; one may not have placed him consciously or activated his dynamic power in one's own consciousness, nevertheless he is there sitting quietly watching Auroville unfold. Right at the centre of Auroville is Matrimandir, the temple of the Mother cast in a form that resembles no religious forms at all and yet grows into a spiritual magnet; a symbolic building becomes strangely endowed with immense power that governs the destiny of the people of

Auroville and beyond.

The doorways to the sacred are always present, the infinite surrounds the finite and every form is a doorway. A poet may see the universe in a grain of sand; that is what opens the doors of delight. However some forms and names do become special and dear to a collective to help it access what is beyond the surface. But at the same time we face the danger of these names and forms getting fossilized into a blind religion. When something tends towards religiosity, revolt follows naturally, and what is unfortunate about revolt is that it tends to throw away the baby with the bathwater, exactly as science blindly rejected everything religion stood for. The conflict between science and religion is an issue the world has yet to resolve, and this will not happen through one predominating over the other, but only through a deeper and higher synthesis.

What appear to be small details in our collective life have behind them vast depths that cover the entire human experience, and by becoming conscious of these issues we may be able to resolve them on a deeper and higher level.

The skipping cyclist

The roads in India are...busy. On the road to Pondicherry you will encounter cyclists, bullock-carts, tractors, formula one motorcyclists, cars both ancient and modern, buses leaning at impossible angles, smoking lorries, vague pedestrians, religious processions, chickens, four-footed dogs, three-footed dogs, nervy goats, quiescent cows, lethargic water buffaloes and numerous potholes. You may also encounter men with absurdly long ladders, forgotten piles of bricks and sand, people breaking up the road, people repairing the road, steam-rollers, demonstrations, greeting arches for visiting politicians, smashed water-melons, piles of straw laid out for drying, and men hammering away at twisty steel rods.

It's not surprising, then, that many Aurovilians choose to stay safely at home rather than purchase those half-inch bolts on Bharati Street. One man, however, is not fazed by any of this. In fact, he's even decided to up the ante. For not only does he cycle daily the 28 hellish kilometres from his home to Auroville and back, but he does it while skipping. You heard me, *skip-ping*.

This requires a little explanation. Hari Krishnan is a gardener in Surrender community. He's always been interested in keeping fit – he's run marathons, among other things – but one evening he had a kind of epiphany. "When people skip, they generally do it standing up. But then I thought, why not do it while riding a bicycle?" Why not,

indeed? So he began to practise. First he learned to cycle without using his hands (already impressive on our roads). Then he bought some cable wire, made a skipping rope and, voilà, he was off. Now I need to explain that 'skipping', in this context, does not mean that he somehow jumps the cycle up and down, or that he skips while standing on the saddle (which would be a mite ambitious even for him). Rather, he circles the skipping rope over his head and under the wheels as he whooshes along. Not that he managed it right away: "I fell down a few times and hit my head." Now you or I might take this for an unmistakable message, but Hari is made of sterner stuff. "I kept on practising, I improved, and now I skip all the time when I'm cycling."

But isn't it, well, dangerous? Isn't he scared of being mown down by a delinquent lorry or marauding cow? "No. I always feel calm, in absolute control." And how do other road users react when he comes skipping along? "Some people give me a big space, but others come close to see if they can make me fall down." Welcome to caring Pondicherry. But what about the traffic police? Don't they pull him up for dangerous...skipping? "No, they've never stopped me." Well, probably nobody ever thought of passing a law against it. There again, he probably provides the police with a little light relief from the unmitigated traffic chaos. But I can't help feeling that he may be leaving even more mayhem in his wake as pedestrians and drivers

stare slack-jawed at this apparition cycle-skipping by.

Anyway, Hari soon grew bored with skipping his way through Pondicherry. So he decided to skip along to Mahabalipuram, about 80 kilometres up the East Coast Road. Now cycle-skipping, as you've probably gathered, is not exactly low-energy: I got tired just watching all those limbs whirling around. In spite of this, Hari averaged a very respectable 20 kilometres an hour and skipped 12,000 times on his way to Mahabalipuram – miraculously, his arms were still attached on arrival. How on earth does he do it? "I've always looked after myself. I don't drink or smoke and I do exercises." And when he finally reached his destination, how did he feel? "The same as usual, maybe a little tired. I took a little water, no food, and then I skipped back." Well, of course, what else would you do?

Hari's Mahabalipuram feat saw him get into the Limca Book of Records. As far as he knows, he's the only skipping cyclist in India, perhaps in the world. There's a German (of course) who skips on a monocycle, "but he doesn't go anywhere, he just counts the number of skips," says Hari

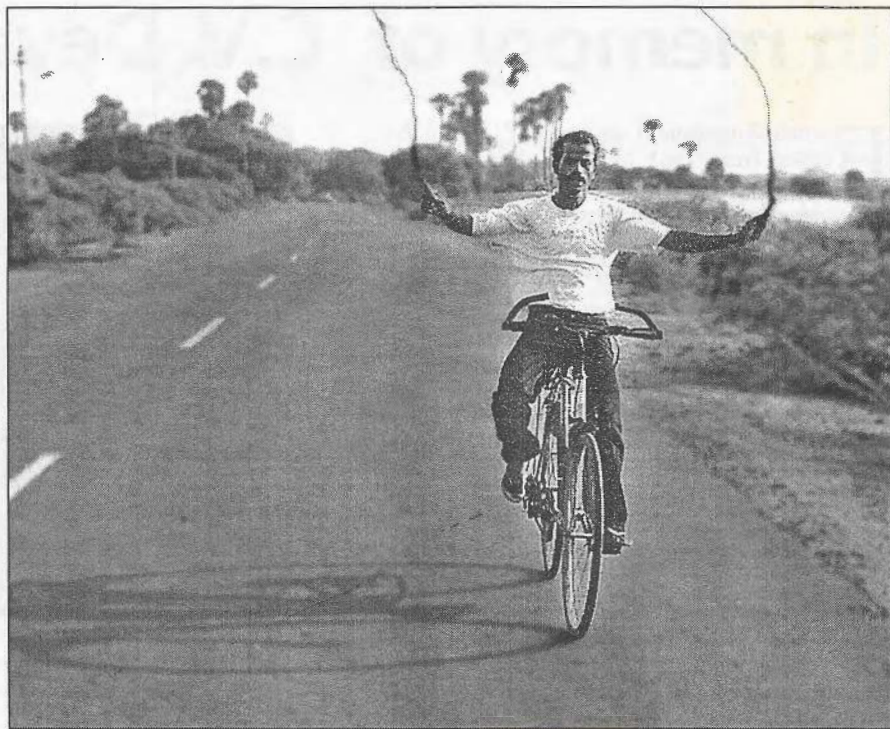


PHOTO COURTESY HARI

Hari skipping along the East-Coast Road

slightly contemptuously. Now Hari is eyeing an entry in the Guinness Book of World Records. For this he will have to cycle-skip 100 kilometres. (Why, you may ask, doesn't 80 kilometres, or even 8 metres, qualify as a world record if you are the only person doing it? Obviously the Guinness people want you to sweat for a coveted entry in their book.)

What next? "After I've got the cycle-skipping world record, I'm going to play bells for 50 hours non-stop. That will also be a record." Yes, but why? What motivates him to take up these somewhat, well, unusual pur-

suits? "I've always enjoyed challenges. I don't want to marry, marriage is no good. I'd rather be doing something that nobody else is doing or can do." But Hari also has a social conscience. He belongs to the Pondicherry AIDS Control Society and recently he spent 15 days cycle-skipping around the state to promote AIDS awareness. "I didn't get paid, but it was something I felt it was very important to do, not only for India but also for the world."

So here's to Hari, the man with a heart, great determination...and a genuinely unique curriculum vitae.

Alan

HUMOUR

Confessions of a C.K. follower

It was 2004. It wasn't easy. Believe me. I was single and desperately seeking Clarity. Suddenly like a bolt of lightning I realized that what I really needed was a pair of Calvin Klan boxer shorts! They were way beyond my budget but after a few years of slaving away for the machine I had managed to save enough money. I was now a new man! I felt cool, strong, sexy and very confident. I posed in the mirror admiring those tight, shiny, black boxer shorts with that famous Calvins Klan name tag above my masculinity. I thought to myself, there is not a girl in Auroville who would turn me down now! I let my Levis hang just loose enough so that they would all be able to see that superior label on my underwear.

Well that was the year when I first arrived in Auroville. And sure enough I did get it together with Clarity. But all was not what it seemed. Some months down the line she revealed to me that she was first attracted by my smile and that it had nothing to do with Calvin Klans. She added that she thought I looked quite ridiculous in those boxer shorts with those pigeon legs! She continued to tell me, 'It is not how you look or what you

wear on the outside that matters but it is what you are on the inside that counts!' It was another bolt of lightning. Truly a revelation. I could not

evening I made a firm resolution to become a revolutionary.

The next day I took a ride on The Royal Express to the nearest textile shop and bought some fabric.

With sketches in hand I walked into a tailor shop, and had my own unique individual boxer shorts made. Organic, light, airy and pink! I even had my own labels

made. On the inside I put 'Made in Auroville' and on the outside at the front I put my own name 'Nikolai'. Refusing to stand in front of the mirror I turned to the birds and the bees instead and declared out loud; 'No longer will I, Nikolai of Auroville, be a follower of mass consumer culture anymore. I am now a revolutionary! And today is the first day of the rest of my life!'

With time I realised that to be a revolutionary, I did not need to overthrow those in power who have long since passed their best before date. All I had to do was to listen to and follow my own heart.

In one small step I had saved money, the environment and my own soul.

Now I really was a new man.

Nikolai



CARTOON: EMANUELE

deny the truth of her words. I had been living an illusion! I had to admit that I had become a Calvin Klan follower. I was upset and more than a little angry with myself. That very

NEW CD

I'm a little bird...

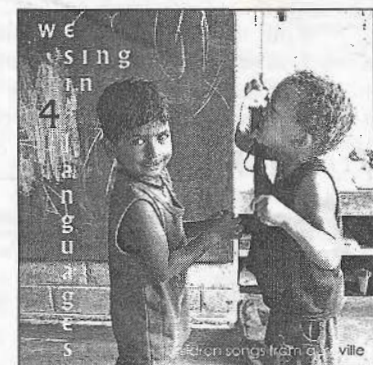
From time to time, you may remember children's songs you learned 0000000000ong ago. They are embedded in one's system and when they surface they make you smile, bringing you back to the place and culture you came from.

In multi-cultural Auroville we have no Aurovilian songs. In our schools we sing all kinds of songs from everywhere else, but we don't have any songs which have sprung up from our own budding Auroville culture.

This year, a group of Aurovilian singers and musicians decided to do something about it. Bringing together songs they had created for school kids or their own kids born here, or other little ditties that spontaneously welled up during the days or nights in our township, they started working together and came up with "We sing in four languages; children's songs from Auroville", a delightfully joyous audio CD that was informally produced here in the Kalabhumi Music Studio, sponsored by SAIER. The singers are Anandamayi, Jivatman (also on the flute), Joy, Kausalya, Swaha and Vennilla, accompanied by Rolf B. on guitar, and Suresh and Gino on percussion. The texts are from the singers themselves and other Aurovilians, and Meenakshi provided them with some Tamil songs that she had introduced years ago in schools in our bioregion.

The songs are in the languages

Mother wanted us to teach in Auroville schools, French, English, Tamil and Sanskrit, and all of them centre around impressions of our lives here. They sing about the planet and the stars, the sun and the rain, the water, trees, our bodies, the rainbow and the sweet smell of flowers,



the red soil, idlis and chutney, the casuarinas, birds and dewdrops, sweet Mother, fallen leaves, Krishna, Ganesh, seeds of light, and more... – in an amazingly fresh and dynamic way, with here and there pretty innovative little melodies that keep lingering...

*I'm a little bird
my brother is the wind
my father is the sky
my mother all the earth*

The team is travelling around the schools to get our children and teachers familiar with the songs. AurovilleRadio streams them at around 12.15 pm and 12:15 am local India time. Give it a try.

Mauna

Subscription information

◆ One year subscription rate: India Rs. 250; other countries Can \$51, EU € 37, US \$38, UK £25.
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