

# AUROVILLE TODAY

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*The individual in Auroville: supported? or dangling alone?*

Photo: Ireno

## A HARD LOOK AT COMMUNITY ISSUES

*Is there such a thing as the Auroville "community"? The word "community" implies sharing, participation, and fellowship. In other words, fraternity, brother- and sisterhood. Do those who live here have a sense of being taken care of by the community? Does Auroville care for the psychological and economic needs of its members? Auroville Today tries to find out. In this issue four counsellors speak about the need of counselling in Auroville, and individuals talk about the hardship of economic survival...*

**"F**or us it is evident that we are a community!" says Anne, and a flick of her hand makes it clear that she considers this actually a silly question. "We are all inter-connected and have a common aspiration and work. We even have a 'language' peculiar to Auroville. Eventually we are all participating in the same adventure, even if individual realisations differ for each of us, and sometimes seem contradictory. Each of us is a different part of the same body." Adds Mark: "If somebody faces difficulties we usually hear it from different sides within a couple of days. Would that be the case if there were no sense of brother- or sisterhood?" Anne has been living in Auroville for 8 years. Together with her partner Mark, who came from The Netherlands two years ago, she provides a 'counselling service' for adults and children - though she says she prefers not to use this word as "its substance is too occidental." Based on their experience, they are firm in

Auroville, and the awareness of being a collective and belonging to this community is, I would say, very strong even if it is not so easily visible to the outward eye."

Though their confidence is catching, not all would fully agree. Jean and Bob, for example, who joined Auroville less than six months ago as counsellors and therapists (Jean offers counselling and past life therapy, Bob offers Samalin manipulation and bio-magnetic therapy\*) put some question marks. They suspect that quite a few newcomers and some old Aurovilians experience a lack of support. Says Jean: "Most people in their places of origin get a lot of support from those who share their environment: neighbours, members of the extended family, work colleagues and society. But those who left their home places to come to Auroville have left those support structures. They have to come to terms with all that is India - the culture, the climate, the language (which may cause prob-

## THE NEED FOR COUNSELLING

their conviction that the community of Auroville is very much alive and kicking.

Was the sense of community stronger in "the good old days" as some old Aurovilians claim? "The sense of community has changed completely," replies Anne, "and that has to do with the growing up of a community, like a child grows up from childhood. But it doesn't necessarily mean that the community sense is weaker." Explains Mark: "In the early days the community was more homogeneous, because what was needed was the pioneering spirit. Nowadays people come with different backgrounds and work expectations, and the present heterogeneous society is the result. When Auroville was smaller, everything was decided in the primary circuit of the face-to-face exchange. This has now been replaced by the primary circuit of various group structures and of the organisation itself. The face-to-face exchange has become the secondary circuit, where all community issues are discussed, but where they are no longer decided. And then there is a tertiary circuit, the invisible link between people, the spiritual sense that people are connected. All together they constitute the community of

lems) - and the way of life in Auroville. Their family is not around, they are expected to find a job, there is perhaps a lack of money. For some Auroville is truly a 'closed' society. There can be a feeling of isolation sometimes, because, 'how do I talk to the guy next door? There's nobody in this community who speaks the same language as me!' Literally. Let alone on the more subtle levels. So, there can be isolation in many, many ways. And that can engender a great deal of stress, and a great deal of pressure." Adds Bob: "But I have also seen some individual support networks, and some very deep friendships." But there is no guarantee for that. In Auroville, you have to create your own support structures.

**T**he problem of the absence of a support network does not exist only for newcomers to Auroville. Some long-term Aurovilians also have problems maintaining their support structure. In Auroville, individuals are left very much to themselves, and no one seems to feel that they have a right to interfere, not even if someone develops severe psychologi-

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cal disorders. "There are," says Bob, "people here who would have great problems in the West in finding their place anywhere, other than in a therapeutic community or hospital. They need regular loving and caring." Anne: "The respect for someone's freedom sometimes borders on indifference. We have had a few cases in Auroville where an individual was left to him or herself, and where the community did not interfere in that person's life, because the person was said to be going through some type of spiritual experience. This cannot be acceptable behaviour from our community. Even if we are not able to judge spiritual affairs, we have to use our common sense and interfere whenever we see a person behaving irrationally and when such behaviour threatens that person's life. Being neutral is in any case interfering with events, for if you are conscious of an event, you are involved."

Are there many such problems? It appears not. "But," says Jean, "there are a number of people who are really very troubled. People come here because they have a particular aspiration, and they can become very self-critical of their own efforts and perhaps develop feelings of being unable to live up to their aspiration. Their expectations of themselves are very high. I haven't yet met an Aurovilian who isn't highly motivated, or who isn't, in some way, a high achiever. Auroville probably has a larger proportion than most places of people who on the whole know who they are, know where they're going or are in the process of finding out, and who have, for the most part, strong personalities. On the one hand, it can be easy to work with them, as intellectual concepts can easily be communicated. On the other hand, it also can be the reason for a barrier to be there in place."

Indeed, not all Aurovilians would agree to visit a therapist. Says Jean, "The main reason for this appears to be that seeking psychological help is seen as a weakness, and that there is a great fear of being judged. Most people are 'known' to a great many other people - there is a lot of gossip going on - and it appears to be difficult to keep things private in Auroville. Somehow everybody gets to know. And then, the person who needs help feels guilt and blame heaped onto whatever the basic problem happens to be. As a consequence, people feel too constrained to allow others to see that they need help, or even that they need some basic kindness. They become fearful, more and more introverted, even if they have previously not been so."



Anne and Mark

Added to that there is a certain mistrust of the very word 'therapy.' This is also Bob and Jean's experience: "Auroville has evidently gone through phases where certain areas of its perception have been very limited. Things that looked like being 'New Age' have been rejected, because of the label. Some people think that 'therapy' goes against the teaching of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother and feel that we can't have that sort of thing in Auroville," explains Bob. But he admits that this attitude seems to have changed, and that there is a growing tolerance and openness to therapy. He

continues: "Auroville is evolving from what was essentially a survival type environment, where things were physically hard, into a society where more subtle things are allowed to come in. Things like counselling, therapy, various healing arts, have more of a chance of survival now. Even past-life or re-incarnation therapy is increasingly accepted. And now it appears that there are not sufficient counsellors available!" Jean: "We recently took part in a one week workshop in Quiet. I was surprised to find how much such a counselling service is called for! I brought up at a subsequent meeting of the therapists that a counselling service is needed. As Bob and I have been running counselling training courses before, we decided to offer a ten-week, basic counselling course. It's not going to make anybody a qualified counsellor. But it's going to make sure that there is somebody sympathetic, caring, warm, who is willing and able to listen constructively, with the assurance of total confidentiality."

Anne and Mark's ideas go even far beyond this concept. Says Mark: "We would like to create a community. The idea for this community has evolved from the analysis of the needs expressed during our practice. Each time you are facing a difficult moment whether on the physical, mental or vital plane, you are ready to progress. This community wants to offer an optimal environment to realise this progress. People can come to live for some time, work, relax or recreate, in an environment adapted or limited according to the individual needs of the person in question. We envisage three different situations where this community might be of help: youth in conflict with their parents; couples that face relationship difficulties; and people who need time to put things in place in their life."

What are the type of problems that moti-

vate people to come for counselling? Jean: "They are not much different from what you would find anywhere else in the world. People come along with almost any kind of problem that you can mention. The ones that come to mind initially, of course, are relationship problems. Wherever there are people, there are relationship problems, whether it's between partners, or young people, children and parents, or between neighbours or work colleagues. What happens then is that the individual is allowed and given space to ventilate feelings, to look at them and get help with sorting them out. And say actually what they really want to say, maybe for the first time, knowing that it's safe."

Though the problems are not different, the attitude with which they are dealt with here is.



Jean and Bob

Bob attributes this to the fact that people who come to Auroville want and expect to change. Change, in Auroville, is encouraged. As such, it is unlike most places in the world, where people work in a 9 to 5 job and do not consciously recognise that they are changing, whether they like it or not. "Take for example the issue of partnerships," says Bob. "Many

people who live outside Auroville do not anticipate living in a constantly changing society, and it often comes as a surprise when one partner develops in a different way and at a different speed from the other. But this freedom to develop individually and then to break apart is accepted here. The kind of community expectations are very different, the kind of community support and even pressure to keep couples together, particularly when children are involved, is not the same here as in other societies, because it is recognised that we all develop at our own pace. It has to be a very, very deep bond that holds the people together to go through the problems that inevitably arise in Auroville." Adds Jean: "I suspect that for many people the days are over when it was expected that a relationship would last for life. Psychology can now demonstrate that sometimes the person who was right for you at the age of 20 when you married can be totally wrong for you when you reach the age of 35 or 40. I think that the whole marriage ethos (which is breaking down now almost everywhere in the world) was created with a view to protect children and the women, who simply wouldn't have survived without a man to provide for them. These values were formulated when 'to take

this man or woman for life' meant a possibility of no more than 20 or 25 years, because life expectancy was so much shorter. But those days are gone. We should re-evaluate what we want or expect of marriage."

That it is in a way easier to help Aurovilians overcome their psychological problems is also Anne's experience. "I have 16 years of practical experience in this field in France, where I worked with psychotherapy. But in Auroville I can work with a different set of parameters. The talks and writings of Sri Aurobindo and Mother offer a description of human nature on different levels of consciousness, its functioning, movement and disorders. This is done so precisely, clearly and completely that it revolutionises all psychology. On top of this, they show in an equally precise manner how to advance; how to do work; how to become conscious of oneself. Whenever I work with people from Pondicherry, I realise that I cannot do at all the same work that we are doing with the Aurovilians." That her 'Auroville methodology' works is proven in many cases, she says, as many times a healing which in France would take years, happens in Auroville in just a few months. "But that is not because of the quality of my work," laughs Anne. "It is rather because the people really want to work on themselves. I can tell them 'it is great that you come to talk about this problem, it's the opportunity to change' as Sri Aurobindo and Mother have said that, if you really decide for a positive change, you have the help. And that is like a grace. That is the difference."

Jill and Carel

\* Samalin is an ancient Japanese technique of skeletal manipulation which corrects spinal, joint, nerve and muscle problems. The manipulations are performed under local anaesthesia produced by acupuncture; the patient feeling minimal pain or discomfort.

Biomagnetic therapy is a "no-touch" energy massage and therapy which clears and balances the subtle bodies. It then goes a step further, energising the inner healing to take place. This healing process, initiated during the therapy, continues to work on, and within, the patient for a period of up to two months.

Reincarnation (past life) therapy is a therapy in which clairvoyant and clairaudient abilities are used to access past life situations and relationships that may still be causing difficulties, having been carried over into the present lifetime. New insights and understanding of this life may be revealed, with the possibility of solving problems and progressing further along the path of individual development.

## ONE FAMILY

On 31st December, 1969, Satprem told Mother about an "inspiration" from the Italian designer, Paolo Tommasi. Paolo's idea was that Auroville needed a centre, a symbolic structure, around which the scattered energies of the Aurovilians could unite. Mother was enthusiastic: "It's very good, that was the original idea..." Seven months later, she explained, "We have wanted to begin the Matrimandir so that everyone could work there. A person would have to say, 'No, I do not want to' and have his reasons. It is like the Force, the central Force of Auroville, the cohesive Force of Auroville."

Many Aurovilians who have worked on Matrimandir confirm that, in spite of the difficulties and disagreements, Matrimandir has been for many years a very powerful centre of unity through work. Now, however, while quite a number of Aurovilians continue to work there, the days of those collective concretings which tumbled in individuals from every corner of the community are long since gone. Gone, too, are many of those other occasions which drew Aurovilians together in the early days—mass tree-plantings, the erection of windmill towers, Sangamams and other celebratory events—while the present lack of an overt threat to Auroville's existence has removed yet another potent means of experiencing unity.

Perhaps we are now being challenged to realise unity in a completely different way. For when the external props or catalysts are removed, each of us is forced to go within, to dig deep in ourselves for the source of that which holds us together. It's as if we now are being asked to move from a primarily unconscious, tribal form of unity to one that is active, freely chosen, individually realised.

The dangers of such an enterprise are immense. Mother builds in more and more diversity while allowing each of us extraordinary freedom, as the present highly individualised state of the community makes

plain. But the potential gains are also enormous. For the richer the mixture, the more comprehensive the final unity. And who can believe that an 'actual' human unity can be achieved without the free and conscious consent of every individual?

This sounds like a project for eternity. For won't it take that long for each and every individual to give that consent? Perhaps not. For there remains another possibility: that of a core idea, a vision, to which all of us can resonate. One such idea—and one which I believe is a profound truth—is that those who live in or are intimately connected to Auroville and the Ashram are part of an eternal sangha or family, brought together time after time through the ages to work something out for the earth.

If we could carry this image with us always, wouldn't something change? Of course, it wouldn't magically abolish all our conflicts and misunderstandings. But, somehow, the context would have radically altered. So that whereas now, for example, our tendency in a conflict is to get locked into the personal dimension, we may be a little softer on each other if we learn to see disharmonies more as plays of forces which choose, at different times, different members of our family as their vehicles on the way to final resolution.

Each of us, perhaps, has played through the ages many parts in this family epic—sceptic, believer, coward, hero, rebel, saint. Each role had its personal and its wider utility at the time, yet none of these roles was definitively 'us'. So why should we get hung up on who is playing what in the present cast list?

Better we celebrate being part of this eternal family which, for all its momentary excesses and absurdities, is inextricably yoked together in pursuit of an evolving Truth.

Alan



# "We're on our own"

## Economic hardship in Auroville

According to the latest figures, about 400 adult Aurovilians are financially self-sufficient. Others who receive a 'maintenance'—which generally covers only very basic living expenses—from their unit or work group are able to supplement it with other sources of income. But what about those in real financial difficulty who are entirely dependent upon maintenance or don't receive any maintenance at all? Well, there is an Emergency Fund to assist with essential payments (medical expenses, passport and Residential Permit fees, repatriation expenses etc.), financial assistance is provided for those who are on maternity leave or between jobs, and food is available at a subsidized rate from the Solar Kitchen. Moreover, for the past nine months there has been a scheme which 'tops up', when necessary, the maintenances of those who are fully committed to working for the community but who are finding it difficult to make ends meet. Some 60 to 70 Aurovilians benefit from this at present, and the scheme may be extended in the near future. In addition, 'Prosperity' (formerly the Caring Service) allows the community as a whole to respond to individual requests for anything from an almirah to an air ticket, and the Free Stores are free exchange centres for clothes and many other goods.

### Money is never sufficient

Auroville units are required to make a Rs.750 monthly contribution to the Central Fund for each Aurovillian working there (self-supporting individuals are expected to pay this themselves) to support key community needs, including emergency financial support like that mentioned above. However, the money received by the Central Fund is never sufficient to cover all requests for assistance. Moreover, plans to make certain key Auroville services financially self-supporting will require Aurovilians to pay additional charges at a time when the cost of living in India, though still far below Western levels, is rising rapidly: inflation is currently around 8%. Food, transport, clothes and construction all cost much more than a few months ago, yet the maintenance received by many Aurovilians has not kept pace. At the same time, and for various reasons, the standard of living desired by many Aurovilians is much higher than 15 years before. Concomitantly, a tacit agreement against too conspicuous consumption that was once respected in the community has broken down. One result of this is that disparities between Aurovilians of different economic status are far more obvious today than was the case before: luxurious duplex apartments overlook low-cost constructions, shiny new four-wheelers edge die-hard cyclists off the roads. Frequently, these disparities are most obvious in the contrast between the lifestyles of many of those who have joined Auroville from the surrounding villages and those from a Western or north Indian.

The situation is complex. Some who joined Auroville from the nearby villages have dependents who are not necessarily interested in Auroville, who lack any specific skills, yet who expect to be supported by Auroville. Also, the fact that different individuals and groups have different priorities makes it impossible to make simple comparisons. Aurovilians from the local area, for example, will often eat and furnish their houses very simply, choosing to put their money instead into televisions, gold and land.

But how do the local Aurovilians with minimal income view the situation?

'Prayatna' is a low-cost housing development between Samasti and Arati. Built primarily with funds from HUDCO (Housing and Urban Development Corporation), it was originally intended as a relocation settlement for those who had to vacate the Matrimandir Camp so as to make space for the gardens. The units were made available to the former Camp inhabitants for free, while a few other units were subsequently sold to others to cover escalating construction costs. The majority of its present inhabitants come from the local villages. Many, like Gajendran ('Gaje') and Somu, have worked for many years at Matrimandir. Others, like Vinod (who was born in Andhra Pradesh), have small businesses or, like Partha, teach in Auroville schools.



Left to right: Gaje, Vinod, Partha, Somu

All of them feel that the Auroville of today is a very different place from the Auroville that they joined many years ago. "Now you have to pay for everything," says Gaje, "you can't move a brick today without having to pay someone. Yet when we came we were given a room in the Camp, food was provided, and we could put all our energy into building Matrimandir. When I think about it, it was like a paradise."

"Ninety per cent of local Aurovilians have to run all the time now just to survive," says Vinod. "We feel stuck. We want to do many other things, to contribute to Auroville in many ways, but at the moment we have no chance. And we're on our own—the community is giving us virtually no support."

### There are inequalities in Auroville

Partha feels there are inequalities in Auroville at present. "We feel we are in kind of slums here—people call them chicken-houses—surrounded by huge palaces, but many of those with big houses don't feel they need to help."

"Because we have so many relatives and friends living locally, we are often asked to attend functions," says Gaje. "But since we can't afford presents, we often don't go. And then our children are always asking, 'Can I have...?'"

"It's like a pretence," he continues. "I keep one nice shirt and trousers in my cupboard for when I visit people outside Auroville. People think it's very special to live here so I want to give a good impression."

Somu looks after the stores at Matrimandir.

His assistant (a non-Aurovillian) received Rs 600 a month when he began; now he gets Rs 3,500, almost double Somu's maintenance. "So how can you expect the workers to respect you?" "It's gone so far," adds Gaje, "that some Aurovilians at Matrimandir even borrow from the workers now". But don't they get any help from their families in the villages? "On special occasions they will help", he says, "but I don't like to keep asking. It doesn't feel correct."

### "I didn't come for this"

How, then, do they manage? "You'll never see us in restaurants," says Gaje, "and we'll only go to Pondy once a week to buy food because it's cheaper there. Every bigger purchase we have to make, like the chairs we are

been used to living on very little."

"The solution is very simple," says Vinod. "Everybody should work 5 hours a day for the community and, in return, the community should provide everybody with the basics: shelter, food and electricity. After that, it's up to each individual what they want to do with the rest of their time." Partha feels that other changes also have to take place. "There's a kind of double-standard in the community at present. It feels like, if you already have a nice house and a big motorcycle and you ask for more maintenance to maintain your lifestyle, you get it. But if I go and ask for help to buy a moped, I'm told 'Why do you need a moped? Then you will need petrol and your life will become expensive'. But anybody who gives their energy to the community and needs support should get it, whatever their lifestyle."

Again, if a rich person wants to start a house or a project and, say, the Development Group objects, he just goes ahead and does it, and the Development Group may eventually approve it. But if we try to do something—like Dorai's idea to set up a hardware store in Auroville—then the Development Group finds excuses to stop us. In the end, you feel the only way to get something done is to join one of these influential groups. Then they'll help you because you are one of them!"

"It comes down to this," says Vinod. "Just like in a family, it's the elders who show the way about how to behave. If the older Aurovilians set a bad example, they can't blame the younger ones for copying them. The main thing is that we realise that we are all brothers and sisters in Auroville and start helping each other. You can't force this—you have to feel it from within—but until this happens nothing is going to change."

"And I never forget," adds Gaje, "that many others in this world are much worse off than us. Auroville still is a very special place—the ideal is wonderful—and I feel very fortunate to be able to live here."

### Others are also struggling

But is it only local Aurovilians who are experiencing financial hardship? "Certainly not," says Vonne from Holland, who manages Angiras Garden, a fruit orchard in Kottakarai. "Quite a number of Westerners find it hard to survive here financially. Many of them have been here 15 years or more, they've put everything they had into Auroville and now that they are getting older they have nothing to fall back on. I really don't know how some of them manage. Somehow, they've been forgotten by the group responsible for ensuring that everybody has enough to live on." After struggling for some time on her own to keep Angiras Garden going, Vonne now gets Rs 2,000 a month from the Farms Group. "But it's not enough to maintain myself. So, in addition, I do some tailoring to get extra income. I feel constantly under stress because I have to work twelve hours a day just to keep my scene together. At a certain point you feel, why shouldn't I be able to live a good life, too? Why shouldn't I be able to afford a meal in Pondy or some new clothes when I want to? Why should my general level of life be so reduced just because I've no workshop or rich family to support me?"

Vonne feels that Aurovilians like her have nowhere to turn when they have a sudden large expense like having to repair their roof or re-

sitting on now, we buy on instalment. It's the only way. Then we all put a little money into a fund every month so that anybody who has an emergency can use it."

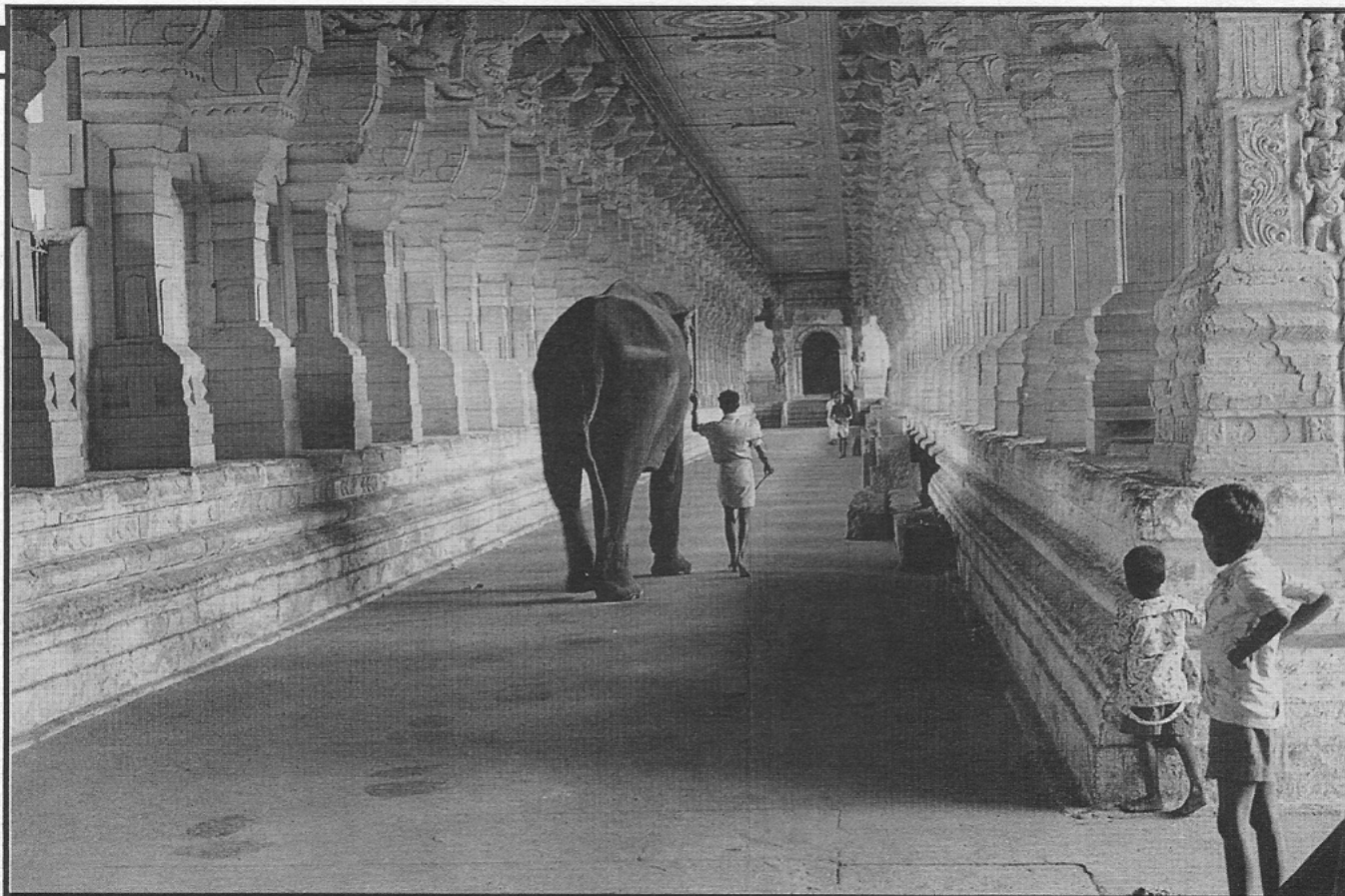
While we are talking, a smart-looking man on a scooter drives into Prayatna. "That's the man who gives us loans. He charges around 10% interest. He knows we are good customers. I don't want to use him, but I don't want to go to the Maintenance Group for help because at least one of the people on it is very unsympathetic to us."

The wives of local Aurovilians find it particularly difficult to find work. Many of them used to work at Matrimandir but, after taking maternity leave, were not able to return. When this happened to Gaje's wife, he went to various groups and units in Auroville to see if anybody could provide work for her. "Nobody did. You see, it is cheaper for Auroville units to employ village women—and the village women will never challenge the boss if they see something is wrong. So it's very difficult for our wives to get work."

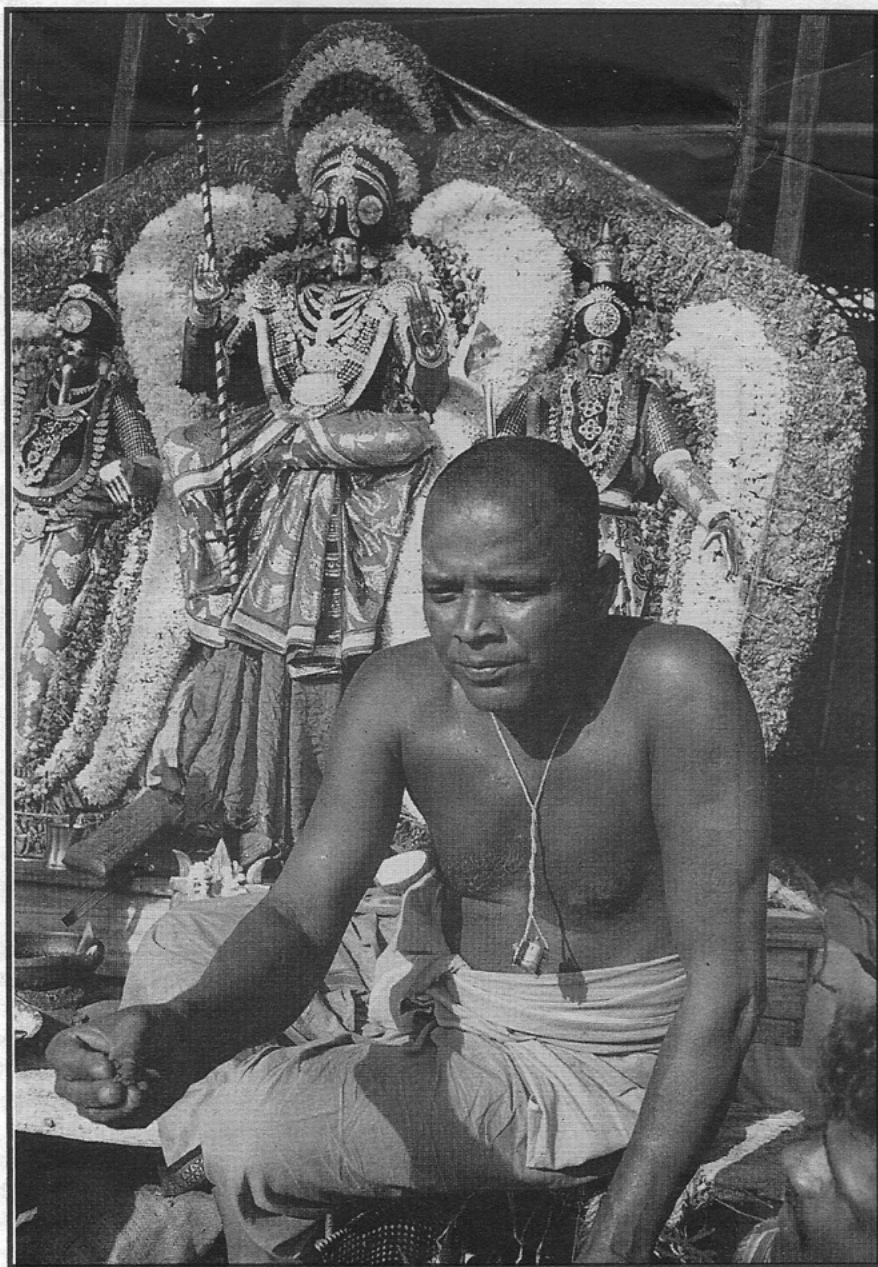
Gaje ended up taking loans from some Aurovilians to construct a small kitchen in the Industrial Zone. He now goes to Pondy market every morning before he starts his Matrimandir work to buy food which is cheaper and of better quality than that available at Pour Tous. His wife then cooks snacks in the kitchen for some of the Auroville units in the area. "We'll be repaying the loans for a long time, but one day I hope to start making a profit! But," he adds, "I didn't come to Auroville for this, to make business. I can do that anywhere. I came for Matrimandir. But at the moment there doesn't seem to be any alternative. We have to live. Luckily, from my childhood I've

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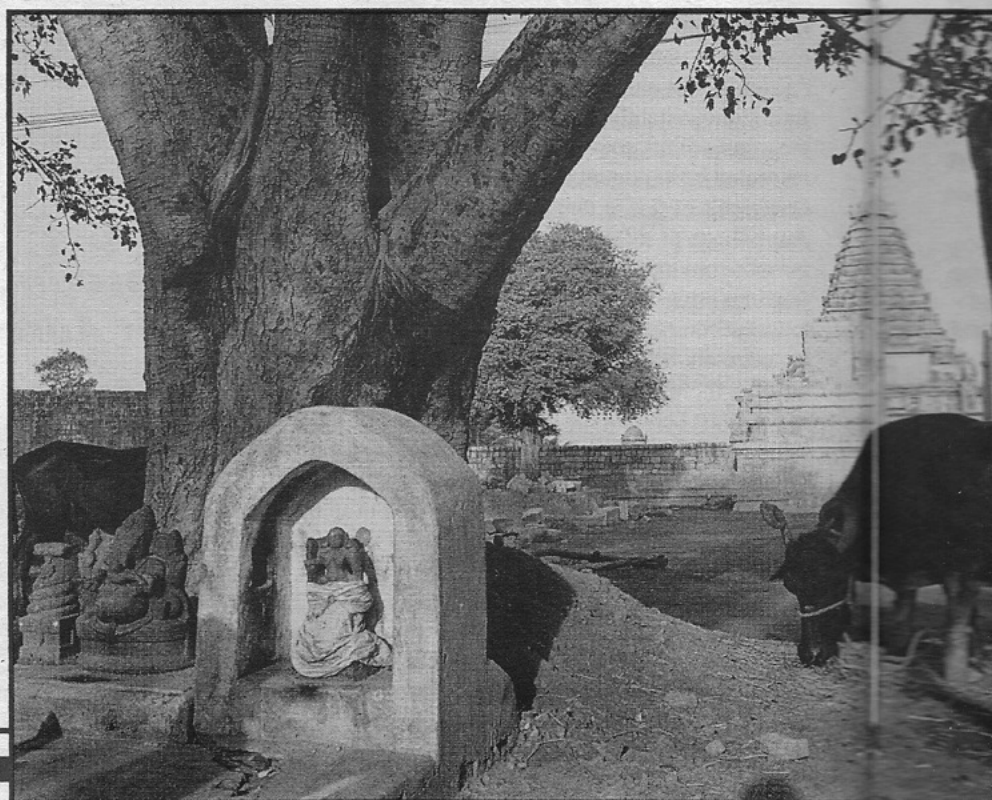
## SOUTH INDIAN SIGHTINGS



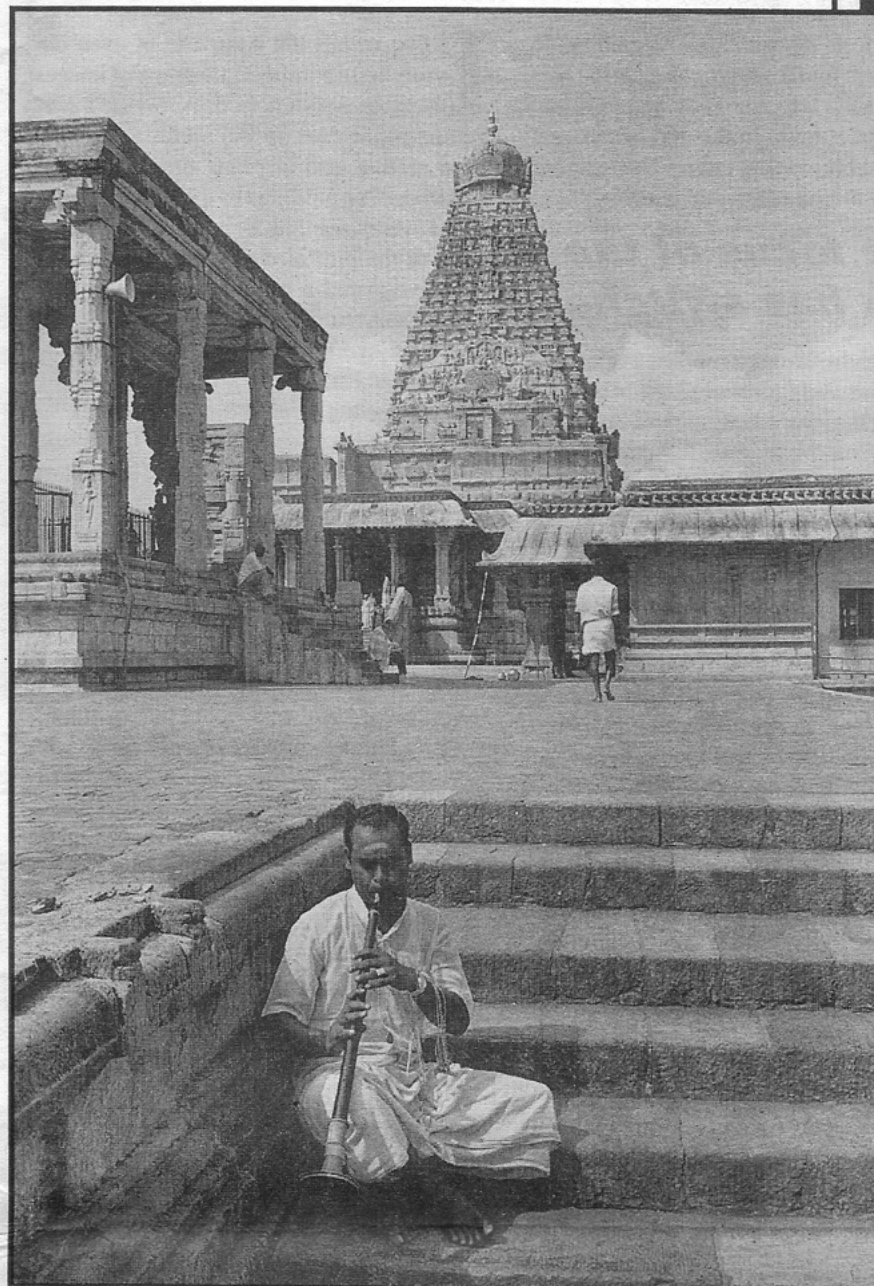
John Mandeem,  
our regular  
photographer, shares  
with us some of  
his work done  
outside Auroville.  
The photos on these  
pages were taken  
at different places  
in Tamil Nadu  
and Pondicherry.



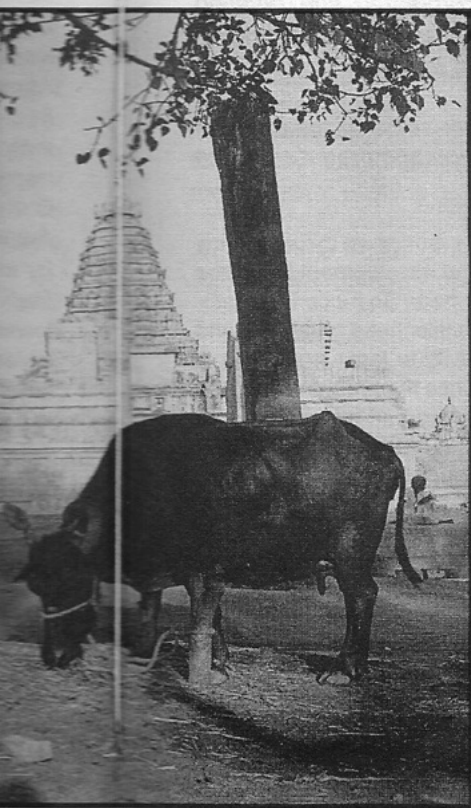
Above left: Corridor in Ramanathaswami Temple, Rameshwaram.  
Above middle: Sadhu, Rameshwaram.  
Above right: Brihadiswara Temple, Thanjavur.  
Below left: Priest giving prasadam, Madurai.  
Below middle: A shrine, just outside Gangaikondacholapuram.  
Below right: Boy with folk deities, Pondicherry.







Corridor in Ramanathaswami Temple,  
m.  
Sadhu, Rameshwaram.  
Brihadiswara Temple, Thanjavur.  
Festival giving prasada, Masimagam festival,  
A shrine, just outside  
Cholapuram.  
Boy with folk deities, Pudukottai district.





(continued from page 3)

place a moped. "If you go to the Housing Group you are told there is no money, and the Bridging Fund won't cover large expenses. Besides, it feels embarrassing, degrading, to have to appeal for money. You've put the best part of your life into Auroville and now you have to beg for help. In the end, someone I know had to borrow the money to repair her roof. But how is she going to repay it?"

### **The focus of the work has switched**

Nicolette, her daughter, manages the Pony Farm. "When Achilles and Gaya began the Pony Farm, the idea was to allow the children to ride for free. We appealed to the community for support and, though some people helped, there was never enough. So the only way we can manage today is by charging for lessons. Now, for the first time, we can cover our expenses but I feel so sad that the money thing has somehow replaced the children as the focus.

Sometimes I've thought about working somewhere else in Auroville, but my financial security is here now. If I stop I'll have to look for another well-paying job rather than taking up something I would really feel good doing. It's crazy!"

What do they feel is the solution? Initially, Vonne's reaction was to criticise the way people on key groups take their decisions. "They act too often from personal preferences. It makes me angry because they are in a position where they can really influence the life of someone else in a strong way, but they don't seem to understand the consequences of their decisions." However, a few days after the initial interview with Auroville Today, Vonne was confronted with an emergency: she needed Rs 20,000 immediately for medical care. "I went to the Financial Service, explained the situation, and was given the money without any questions being asked. Thinking about this later, I realised what an impossible position those people are in who have to allocate Central Fund funds to the budgets each month, and who also have to deal with people asking for extra money. Because, while they want to help, there is never enough money to go round. And this made me look again at the managers of big units in Auroville, some of whom have large sums at their disposal but who only give a small portion of their profits to the community. How can they justify that?"

### **There is only one thing to rely on**

Nicolette remembers what Gaya told her once. "She said it's no good focussing on the high ideals: sometimes that can just be a way of avoiding looking at reality. The thing to do is focus on the basic facts. And these are that some Aurovilians do not have the basic necessities: food, clothes, a decent shelter. So commonsense tells you that before you do anything else, you make sure that everybody is provided with these."

Have all the difficulties changed their commitment to Auroville? "No," says Vonne, "because my commitment was always towards Mother and not towards the other Aurovilians."

"Sometimes I feel that Auroville as a project has failed," says Nicolette, "but then I realize I have an incredible faith that, in some way, even the present situation is meant to be: there's some lesson it is teaching us, like the fact that you can't rely 100% on anybody. There's only one thing you can rely upon. In spite of everything, I still feel the real Auroville very strongly."

Alan

## *An Uncommon Ordinarity*

If one recalls the Auroville of even ten years ago a burnished afterglow of images from the sunset hour of Auroville's pioneering phase rises up and seems to evoke a more stirring, and inspiring time. Auroville which was then inhabited by a stubborn strong-willed ever quarrelling lot camped on the outskirts of the promised city, could well have been designated a tribal territory. The new world was a matter of principle, an article of faith, or a hymn from the heart for most. A rather rugged simplicity prevailed and along with it a feeling - perhaps illusory - that we shared more because we had less. Those epic contours now seem lost and with it a sense of vastness; the horizon has closed in on all sides and we are pushed inward to recover those spaces we knew.

Although I feel Auroville as an experiment has much relevance within the context of today's changing India, it doesn't seem from a Western perspective (despite what some of our pamphlets or brochures would like to claim) to be on the cutting edge of very much any more, whether in the fields of research, urbanism or economic organisation, to name but a few areas of our collective that come to mind. While pockets of voluntary non-monetary systems of service exchange exist and in some cases have been in operation for many years elsewhere in the world, we in Auroville no longer challenge what money has come to represent and let ourselves be overly influenced by our local exponents of a rather primi-

tive and retrograde capitalism. The jagged obsidian edge of a growing economic disparity cuts into our collective fabric, unravelling it at the seams. While services remain an important and essential component of our economy - and about all that makes it in any way interesting or semi-alternative - these are more and more threatened in an environment where jeeps, walls and cars proliferate, and "eat my dust" would seem to have become the emerging motto of many. Given the present state of our affairs and the accelerated evolution of progressive attitudes that seems to be at work world wide, I think it would be in our own interests to revise our old/new world dichotomies.

Nonetheless there is a vibrancy and subtle density to the Auroville atmosphere that remains tangible and strong even if its outer expression and manifestation remains sporadic, frequently blocked by mistrust and a chronic negativity that is born of an embattled idealism. And yet our identity as a community does filter through at times and find expression in our emerging dialect - a variant of English pollinated with cross-cultural borrowings from the remnants of other tongues, our shared references, or our spontaneous relaxed gatherings and happenings. One such gathering occurs once a week towards sunset in the Eucalyptus grove by the road where Paul sets up his ox-drawn mobile tea stand. Villagers play cricket in the distance and a small

motley crowd of Aurovilians of all ages talks in the shade, bicycles leaning against a tree as the jeeps go by on the road. I sip Paul's tea and look around at those gathered - people I know, some I don't - and the Forecomers kids who have now become teenagers; and the moment in its simplicity has a remarkable fullness to it that is born of the wealth of associations we share, for ours is a landscape laden with memories that we all carry with us, each in our own particular way.

For Auroville is in many ways a mobile continuum where past, present and future, as well as multiple worlds, converge in the strangest and sometimes most wonderful of ways. Early evening under the Banyan tree I connect with that ancient sense of abidingness, so particular to South India and which I feel the Banyan tree somehow represents; off to the right the Amphitheatre seems to represent the protean, ever shifting and dissolving energies of the present, while the Matrimandir stands as a reminder that the Inner Chamber with its crystal and its ray remains, and will remain for us, the symbol of future realisations. That the seeds of something new - a tree rooted in heaven - have been planted in Auroville, I have no doubt. How strong a tree grows from those seeds and how luxuriant its canopy becomes depends, however, on the vigilant care with which we protect it.

Roger

## **LEAD**ing to a sustainable future



Suhasini

The LEAD (Leadership in Environment and Development) programme was initiated by the Rockefeller Foundation in 1991. The aim is to identify the next generation of leaders in various countries, and to expose them to ideas and skills which will enable them to help their countries make the transition from present non-sustainable practices to those of sustainable development.

In 1996, Suhasini—an Auroville architect who designed the award-winning Visitors Centre and who uses appropriate building technology—was one of the 15 individuals selected from India to participate in the two-year programme. During the course of the programme, which she has just completed, she travelled to Costa Rica and Zimbabwe as well as attending workshops in different parts of India.

**AUROVILLE TODAY:** What were some of the most interesting insights and skills you acquired during the LEAD programme?

What became clear during the workshop in Costa Rica is that in terms of environment and development the same problems are encountered everywhere. So if a certain methodology could be worked out to tackle these problems, and if it could be applied with sensitivity to local conditions, it would be a great step forward. Since the problems are global, it's also clear that we have to work at a global level to solve them. And this was one of the main ideas behind the LEAD programme—to bring together people from different nationalities and cultures, as well as from different professions, so that they could learn how to communicate with each other, to work together to understand the problems and come up with solutions.

What I found very interesting was that it was a very holistic approach. We were encouraged to find the interconnections between us rather than the differences, and the emphasis was upon synthesis rather than analysis, and upon communicating concepts in such a way that everybody could understand and participate.

Along the way we acquired a number of tools. These included learning how to make decisions by consent rather than by consensus, and an introduction to systems analy-



## Celebrating the Birth Anniversary

The culmination of the 125th Birth Anniversary of Sri Aurobindo was marked by a week-long celebration in the first week of August. This was hosted by the Government of India in association with Sri Aurobindo Ashram and the Auroville Foundation. Highlights of the celebration were the special address by Dr. Karan Singh, the honouring of Nirodbaran, Amal Kiran and other associates of Sri Aurobindo, a photo exhibition on Sri Aurobindo, the screening of the slide show on Sri Aurobindo developed by the Auroville Press, and the staging of Love and Death, an episode from Savitri, by Auroville actors, Otto and Srimoyi.

## Exhibition on Medicinal Plants

The Foundation for Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions (FRLHT) brought a travelling exhibition on medicinal plants to Pondicherry in July which was sponsored by the Medicinal Plant Conservation Parks in Auroville—Pitchandikulam and Shakti. Part of the exhibition, on the Rain Forests of the world, came from the Netherlands. The exhibition, which included the sale of plants, books and other educational material, comprised over 65 well illustrated and highly informative panels that served to educate the general public about the tremendous wealth of traditional knowledge of medicinal plants.

## Reviving Koodiyattam

Koodiyattam is a traditional dance form of Kerala that is dying out due to other more readily available means of modern entertainment. Veenapani Chawla and her team, who shot to prominence in 1994 with their nationally acclaimed enactment of Savitri, have been actively working for the past year in reviving Koodiyattam for a contemporary audience. Their first production, Khandava Prastha Agnihooti, staged in Auroville in May, had a solo traditional Koodiyattam dancer narrate the story in English. Their latest production, Brhanalla, a solo performance by Vinay Kumar, explores the integration of the male and the female principles as exemplified by Brhanalla, who was the warrior Arjuna impersonating a female in the Mahabharata as well as other androgynous figures in Hindu mythology such as Ardhanareshwar and Savyasachin. Again, as in the earlier production, all the elements of the Koodiyattam such as the use of earthen pots for drumming music, the stylised expressions and theatrical gestures of the dancer, the interaction of the dancer with the musicians and the audience were present. The narration, through the voices of several characters, was somewhat disjointed, as it did not so much tell a

story as explore an abstract theme. But all in all, Vinay Kumar, who had earlier enthralled his audience as Yama in Savitri and as Bhima in a solo eponymous performance, held the audience captive by his powerful acting and impersonations of various figures such as a dog, a tiger, and of course the half-man, half-woman figure of Brhanalla.

## Pottery Exhibition

Within three days almost all the pottery exhibited in Pitanga had a 'SOLD' sign next to it, an indication of the success of Auroville's newest potter, Ange. Although she started pottery only a few years ago, her dexterity is remarkable. Innovative shapes like the three-spouted teapot, or the two-legged egg-holders, and the finely decorated glazes, create an expectation of a bright future for this talented artist.



## Organisational Transformation conference

For a week in July, about 30 participants from Holland, Switzerland, Belgium, Germany and India, many of them company consultants, attended an Organisational Transformation (OT) conference in Auroville. The term Organisational Transformation was coined by an American, Harrison Owen, who observed that the most interesting and fruitful parts of conventional conferences were the coffee breaks, because it was in that relaxed space that participants were able to share their real concerns with others. So he decided to run entire conferences as extended coffee

breaks, and the concept of 'Open Space' was born. The rules of Open Space, where participants gather to discuss whatever interests them, are simple. Whoever is there is the right person, whatever happens is the right thing to happen, whenever it starts it starts, and whenever it's over, it's over. Further, "follow the law of the two feet" means that if you are bored, you leave and if you want to drop in on another discussion, you drop in. Some of the Aurovilians who participated in the conference - which also involved participants offering a variety of workshops for each other - were inspired by the way in which these simple guidelines created a safe and creative space for discussion. And some of us can't wait to try out some of the OT tools in our general meetings - particularly the one which involves raising the hand when one feels that somebody is drifting off the topic or is talking for too long!

## Carnatic flute concert

On Saturday, 1st August, Gordon Korstange gave a flute concert of Carnatic (south Indian) music. Accompanied by a guest musician and Aurelio, Gordon delighted the Pitanga audience with his nimble playing and deep knowledge of Carnatic 'colours' and rhythms.

## Road Signs

Animated, energetic, enthusiastic, are a few of the adjectives that can be used to describe the dance-mime performers from Gallaudet University's Young Scholars Program who came to entertain us August 4th. Gallaudet is the world's only liberal arts college for the deaf and is located in Washington, D.C. USA. Their tour of India including the visit to Auroville was the result of a collaboration between Tim McCarty, Artistic Director at Gallaudet of Quest: Arts For Everyone Production Co; and Astad Deboo, dancer and choreographer who came in April to perform in Auroville. The delegation of 17 members, who travelled 6 Indian cities, gave 13 performances and 10 workshops, was welcomed by an overflowing auditorium of Aurovilians, guests, visitors from Pondy (including the Lieutenant Governor) and a group of children from the local school for deaf children. The programme itself, called Road Signs, was a lively mixture of solos, duets and group pieces. The themes varied from the folkloric tale of The Tiger, The Brahman and The Jackal, to the modern duo of dances called Conversation I and II, a study of the form and content of communication between the sexes. A priceless performance was offered by Miké Lamitola in his mime piece entitled The Seed, a comic look at the struggles and fate of a seed as it grows to maturity.

## Vocal Concert

Young-Mi, one of Auroville's most outstanding sopranos, just returned from a nine month training period in France. Together with her friend and alto Chantal, accompanied by Franpoise and Carel, they gave a delightful concert, ranging from the Baroque to modern pieces by Poulenc, Canteloube, Asperglis and Boris Vian. The powercut during the second half did not prevent the musicians from keeping up the high standard of performance by candle light.

## Database for Auroville Farms

The Auroville Farms have set up a computer system at the Solar Kitchen, and the designing of a special database has started. The new database will take records from the past four years along with current data, to compose reports on seasonal availability, price fluctuations, irrigation requirements and climatic suitability, availability of propagation material as well as comparative analysis of supply and demand for locally grown products. The project is being sponsored by the Foundation for World Education, USA.

## New Working Committee

In a Residents Assembly meeting held on July 16, 1998, it was formally announced that Jürgen, Kripa, Roy and Paul Vincent had received enough support from the community in a ballot to be ratified as members of the Working Committee. This ballot ends a protracted interim of almost six months, during which the community could not agree on the full membership of the new Working Committee. Together with Anna Maria and Mita, who were elected earlier, they will serve the community for a two year period. A total of 232 Aurovilians out of an adult population of about 850 participated in the ballot.

## Meeting of the Governing Board

The Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation held its bi-annual meeting this year on August 1, 1998. The Chairman, Dr. Swaminathan, members Dr. Karan Singh, Mr. Krishnan and Ashok Chatterjee attended the meeting. Members of the new Working Committee and various other groups met with the Governing Board members after their meeting.

## Auroville Exhibition in Stockholm

During the last months of this year Auroville will feature in an exhibition at the National Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm. This Swedish city has been declared "Europe's Capital of Culture for 1998." The exhibition has as its theme 'The City'. It will highlight the Inca-Maya culture, and from there onwards various cities, including Jerusalem and Varanasi, and, as a spiritual city of today, Auroville. An Auroville team has built a small scale model of the galaxy plan. John Mandeen has supplied photographs. AVI Sweden will give talks and show videos and slides. The exhibition opens on September 10.

sis which helped us understand how a system works in terms of positive and negative feedback loops. We were also involved in two negotiation/conflict resolution sessions where we learned to identify and involve all the "stake-holders" or interested parties in a dispute, and to come up with recommendations on the basis of their feedback.

**AVT: How far were the psychological and spiritual dimensions of sustainability touched upon?**

Very little. Most people involved with the programme did not feel comfortable talking about the spiritual perspective. The only person who really addressed the issue was the Zimbabwean Minister of Agriculture who pointed out that spiritual growth was essential for genuine material change to take place. When others talked about attitudinal change they were talking about change being brought about by economic or social pressures, not anything deeper. There was little understanding that changing a structure without changing the way we think and do things is not going to have much effect. At the same time, everybody was clear that humanity has reached a point of crisis because of our development patterns, and that radical global change has to take place. But I feel that it is concern for our own survival rather than concern for other species and the environment which is pushing us towards sustainability.

**AVT: Did the LEAD programme give you any insights into the situation in Auroville?**

Yes. I realised that while Auroville has done many things in many fields, there is still much that we can learn from elsewhere.

For example, in Goa we saw how a multinational mining company is working together with local people to regenerate the local economy. One of their initiatives is to plant trees, some of which are then cut for firewood by the local women and sold to people who operate wood gasifiers. These, in turn, make electricity for the surrounding villages, allowing micro-enterprises to start up, sell their products in the market, and reinvest the money in the local economy. It's a closed loop which benefits everybody. In contrast, we in Auroville are not making economic viability an important criteria in our land regeneration projects.

Another thing that struck me after experiencing this programme is our lack of interconnectedness in Auroville. Many interesting things are happening, but there's not enough awareness among us of what others are doing and, related

to that, not enough respect for other people's work. I feel that if we could establish an outreach programme where we worked together to present out most interesting activities to the outside—rather like the Sustainable Awareness courses CSR used to run—and if Aurovilians themselves attended the courses, then we'd learn much more about what each of us is doing and find ways to co-ordinate our activities better.

The other point which emerged very strongly during the LEAD programme relates to lifestyle. During the final session in Zimbabwe, Dennis Meadows made it clear that the only way to deal with the negative feedback loop of industrial pollution is for people—particularly in the developed world—to cut down on consumption. But how can you ensure that people are not fearful of their standard of living plunging when you ask them to reduce consumption?

Actually, the answer which emerges from many investigations is that, for many people, a better lifestyle is not more goods or material prosperity but a better way of working and living together. Auroville should be an example of this; yet there are signs that we, too, are replicating unsustainable patterns, like blocking new initiatives rather than co-operating with each other. Another example of the development of an unsustainable trend in Auroville is the increasing tendency for Aurovilians to disperse their energies through living in one place and working in another.

Here again we can learn from what has been done elsewhere. For example, from attempts to regenerate inner city areas in Europe and the U.S.A. by diversifying and intensifying the activities that take place there: in other words, by allowing business, urban farms and residences to share the same area. In fact, this kind of mix is how it used to be in some of the old cities, cities which had a much richer cultural and social life than one finds in modern, rigidly-zoned developments.

Ultimately, whether we like it or not, we are all being forced to change by the seriousness of the problems facing humanity. But change can be scary. So the challenge is to manage change in such a way that everybody can move with it. Auroville is very well placed to help in this. We could create a Centre for Sustainability here which could communicate to others what we have learned, while offering Auroville as a testing-ground for those who want to experiment with sustainable solutions.

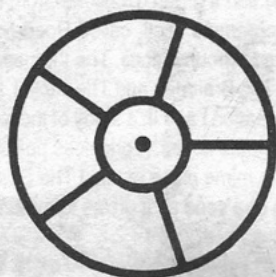
*From an interview with Alan*



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AUROVILLE



Angiras

## Bringing them home

Angiras on Auroville 2000

Of all the kids who I have been in contact with over the years here, few have been so interesting to watch as Angiras. When I first met her, she was living in Aspiration with Radhakrishnan (Radha) and trying to finish her British A level exams. A tall, lanky, blond haired girl, she was usually to be seen in the kitchen, eating quietly and seeming to contemplate with equanimity the scene around her — it was perhaps this aura of quiet contemplation that attracted me to her. She is also interested in learning, which was delightful. Dogged and determined, she has persisted in her goal, even when she had to finance her own education, unlike some Aurovilian youth whose parents can more easily send their children off to study abroad.

For the past two years Angiras has been in London at the Roehampton Institute, finishing her undergraduate degree in Sociology and Education. No more a gawky girl, Angiras as a woman is more self-possessed and solidly present. Her smile is still a quiet one and her inner strength and determination have become even stronger. Recently, I spoke to her over a cup of coffee at New Creation Corner.

She was looking back at her experiences in Auroville, especially at the different attitudes towards work and schooling here and abroad. "I am much more motivated in London to finish my education. And it has not been easy," Angiras told me. "First I took a job at McDonald's. Not much fun for a vegetarian but after a day in the kitchen they put me out serving the customers.

After two months I got a job at an acupuncture clinic doing odd jobs. This seemed a bit closer to my interests. At the moment I am working in a marketing research company and, ironically, I am mostly doing marketing research for McDonald's!"

I asked Angiras to compare her schooling in Auroville and abroad. "What I find most striking is the difference in the way I am encouraged in my activities. For example, when

I was in Auroville playing basketball we used to have to do push-ups whenever we missed a lay up, so I was afraid of making mistakes and lacked confidence. When I play on my university team we clap for every lay up made and my game has improved tremendously. It seems in Auroville we spend a lot of time criticising each other, and that does nobody any good. We should be more supportive and spend less time finding fault."

At the moment, Angiras and other young people in London have teamed up with their friends in Auroville in order to work on a project for the year 2000. "Auroville 2000 was an idea that was apparently first voiced in Ami but took three weeks to telepathically get to London. In London four of us from Auroville (Angiras, Aurovici, Sunaura, Lunaura) gathered at an Indian restaurant and the idea to meet in Sydney for the Olympics was brought up and this led to the idea of having this gathering in Auroville. It would be a reunion of all the people (young and not so young anymore) who have spent a part of their youth in Auroville. We would like to bring them "home" and find out what's happened to them. This question sparked an idea to send out an invitation to those who have kept Auroville in their hearts, but who have not come back for whatever reason." At this moment, the structure is still being worked out, although Angiras doesn't yet know if it will happen or not. "But I think it would be important because Auroville has changed so much over the past few years.

What I feel, coming back here after two years, is that people have lost their energy. Maybe it was the summer heat, but everyone looks tired. I think it is time to bring in a new energy." Certainly listening to her talk about this event, I get a sense that she hasn't lost any of her enthusiasm for what Auroville can be.

Jill

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